

FEBRUARY
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CAST OF CHARACTERS by E. K. Jarvis

fantastic

ANC

ADVENTURES



The fate of the walking dead hung upon a...

MIRACLE AT THE COUNTY by Mallory Storm

MEN BEHIND *fantastic* ADVENTURES



MALLORY STORM

OFFICIALLY, and for more hours than there are in a week, I'm a stage designer for TV and the theater. In my *spare* time I write westerns and science fiction and French poetry. Which leaves me only a *little* time for reading and listening to my thousands

of classical records and collecting things and entertaining friends. It is no wonder, I am told, that at age forty-five I am still a bachelor.

As for my background—I was born in Los Angeles, grew up in San Fran-
(Continued on page 127)

The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

IT STRIKES me that the big problem of the mechanized and atomic age is going to be neither machines nor atoms—but people. It begins to appear that flesh, blood, and human mental resistance are just not strong enough to stand the increasing pressure. When pressures become too great, the weakest link of resistance has to give.

It would appear that the weakest link in this picture, is Man.

ONE OF THE main problems facing the space-flight planners even now, is whether or not the human animal can stand up to the awful adventure of invading the cosmos. They call it space medicine and it could conceivably knock the whole deal into the waste basket if it isn't solved.

But we can come even closer to home and to the immediate present in observing this thing. The pressures of our everyday living in this year of our Lord, 1952 can be likened to a steam boiler filled to capacity with no safety valve.

THE DAILY papers give us a clue where the weak link is in our overall chain. Homo Sapiens. A little investigation shows him giving in to the pressure in wholesale lots. He takes a gun and goes out and kills a few people on the street. He puts down his newspaper and begins yelling on the subway and the boys in the white coats come and get him. He shoots his wife because supper is late. She shoots her husband because he comes home late for supper. Homo Sapiens Junior gets piqued because Dad won't give him the car and ends Dad's earthly career with one quick stroke of a hatchet. Then Junior, feeling Mom will be lonesome without Dad, arranges a double funeral with another blow of his little ax.

THE ABOVE examples are not fiction. They are fact, gleaned from head-

lines published during a single week.

The apologists for the times say so what? Death and violence have always been with us. That's true, but not on today's vast scale. Nor have our insane asylums ever been as full. Never have our psychiatrists been so busy.

IT SEEMS to me that the underlying cause of all this abnormality is FEAR. If that is true, from whence springs this fear?

It is claimed by some that the possibility of global war generates it. Granting this, we are still faced with the fact that the dread concept of the next war rests directly upon the Machine Age and the atom.

PEOPLE did not cringe at thought of the American Revolution—that is, they didn't become glassy-eyed neurosis collectors. Even World War One was faced with far more righteous anger than fear.

So it is not beyond reason to claim that man stands, now, in deathly fear of the progress men have looked forward to and yearned for through the ages.

This is no doubt true because he knows he must adjudge this new progress upon the basis of his own weaknesses.

HE IS WELL aware of his shortcomings—his instinctive urge to turn all things to his own benefit no matter what brutal methods are necessary to do this.

In short, Man is losing his marbles trying to persevere something that does not exist in this man world of today.

Safety. Security. The old methods of protecting one's own could be lived with. The new methods—the present concept of warfare, are too horrible to contemplate. So Mankind finds flesh and mind caving before the concept of the future.

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$$1 + 1 = 0$$

By Charles Recour

NO PHASE of fundamental physics makes a more fascinating subject for study than the familiar branch known as optics. Because the nature of light is so intimately connected with the structure of matter, the composition of atoms, optics is assuming a new importance, quite distinct from the commonplace "geometric" optics of lenses and focal points. Physical optics, as the science is called, is at the very heart and core of quantum theory, since it is from this source that our knowledge of things and events derives.

The most impressive statement to be made about familiar physical optics concerns the phenomenon of interference. Everyone has seen the alternate black and white lines visible when two flat pieces of glass are placed together, or the colored diffuseness of a soap bubble or an oil slick. These things are due to interference, and it is here that some interesting questions come up.

Light is a wave motion. The books say that if you take two beams of light of the same frequency and mix them so that the waves are out of phase, they cancel. Too often they don't point out clearly that the waves must come from the identical light source for this to happen. It is thus an amazing and surprising fact that two light beams add to produce nothing!

Off-hand this sounds like a violation of the theory of the conservation of energy; as if something is awry. How can you add two energy spots and get nothing. The energy had to go somewhere! It is there that quantum theory receives another boost. Light is *not* simply a wave motion. It is also a particle thing, a substance of tiny "photon" bullets which, in some inexplicable way, are related and combined with each other. Both quantum effects and wave effects remain together.

Recently it has been clarified that, for interference effects to occur, the light source must be common to the two waves—usually obtained by reflection. Therefore, within the total system itself, energy is preserved and no physical laws are violated. This thorny problem has bothered many an observer.

Optics is one of the oldest of the exact sciences. At the same time, it is one of the newest. The spectroscope, with its analytical ability, has brought to optical science an infinite richness, not yet done with. The future of optics is "bright" indeed, since it is so intimately connected with what happens in the interior of atoms. After all, that's where light originally comes from.

TV *Around The Globe*

By Sam Dewey

TV WAVES have a limited range and must be wafted from tower to tower even over a few hundred miles. How, then, can the future see a world-wide net of TV linking one country with the other?

Visionaries have proposed airplanes hovering overhead, with built-in TV relays, others have thought in terms of bouncing the waves off the Moon, using our nearest neighbor as a sort of relay. Others have visualized permanent satellite stations in space serving as relays.

None of these ideas is fantastic. None of them is beyond eventual execution. But, technologically, they're tough propositions, awaiting considerably more money and research and know-how than we now have.

Brigadier General Sarnoff, a famous name in applied electronic engineering, is becoming impatient. He wants to see a world linked by TV as it now is by radio. He wants a little village in Israel, or a tiny hut in South Africa, or a small town in the Argentine, to be as closely linked by TV with, say, New York or Chicago as it is now by radio and telephone. From a technical standpoint this is entirely possible and practical. About the only barriers are politics and money—and the last-named is not a real barrier.

Sarnoff's proposal is common sense itself. He suggests linking the world by a series of thirty-mile TV relay stations exactly like those used to link the Pacific coast of the United States to the Atlantic, with all the intermediate connections! He visualizes a chain of TV relay towers reaching north through Canada, through Alaska, across the narrow Bering Strait down Manchuria into Asia and across into Europe and Africa. Similarly a chain would reach Southward through Mexico and Central America to South America.

This proposal is not a fantasy, nor the blaring of a publicity seeker, nor the vague idea of an idealist. Rather it is the cold-blooded, scientific, sensible plan of a thinking engineer not limited in perspective by petty considerations of political limitations. Some plan, Sarnoff knows, eventually will be devised to unite the world by TV. Why wait, he asks—do it now, now, now! The means are at hand; there is no reason other than nationalism stopping us. Unfortunately, probably the nationalism of the Soviets would prevent the Asiatic link, but surely some other means could be found to tie in Europe and Africa even if it necessitated going across the wastes of Greenland and the Arctic, thence through Sweden to Northern Europe.

ARE THESE MISTAKES HOLDING YOU BACK?

If you're not getting ahead as fast as you'd like, check these possible reasons.

Find out why you're not a success and what you can do about it.

ES NO

- Do you put things off? To get anywhere you have to make a start.
- Do you really want to succeed? Isn't there something you want enough to work for it? Marriage, a new home, money for your family—all depend on your advancement.
- Are you unwilling to give up temporary pleasures? Some people think more of a good time now than of promotion and higher pay later on.
- Are you too lazy to plan ahead? You've got to manage your life, plan for success and stick to it.
- Are you afraid of responsibility? In a bigger job you'll have to make decisions, act, be somebody.
- Are you short on courage? It takes grit and determination to set a course and stick to it.
- Is your education limited? The good jobs go to men who know—men with sound training in their field. I. C. S. offers you that training.
- Do you think you can't afford specialized training? College may be too expensive, but home study lets you earn while you learn, at 1/10 the cost.
- Do you hesitate to find out where to get training? If you shy off from taking the first step, you'll never achieve success.

One out of three who read this page and check their shortcomings will do something about it. Two will stay in the rut. One will plan for self-improvement and stay with it till he gets there. Are you the one?

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 He was a small boy without background or experience. Yet, when the Grim Reaper crossed his path, he waved a hand and held death at bay

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Cover painting by William Slade

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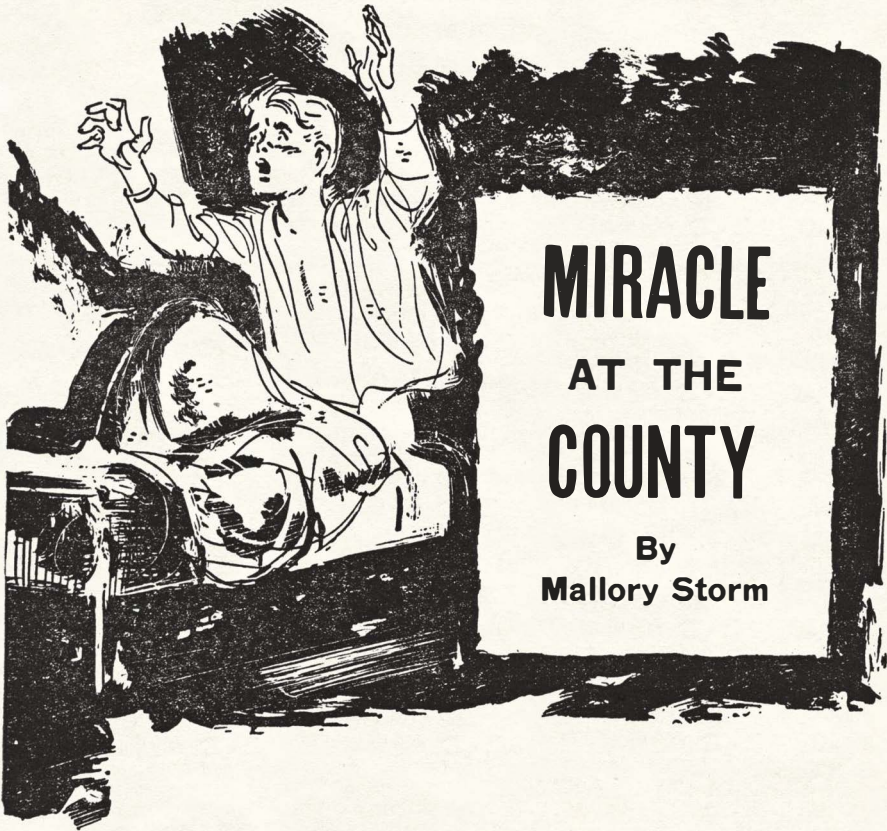
And death said, "Your time has come at last."

**He was a child who knew nothing of living
or dying. Yet, when they met at last, face
to face, even death was forced to obey him**

ITS FULL NAME is the Hospital of the County of Cook of the State of Illinois. It is the largest and possibly the busiest hospital in the world and no one has the time to call it by its full name. So it is known far and wide as The County, with the added identification of Hospital tacked on at times; but not often.

The County is one of the world's

greatest monuments to both medical science and the art of swift, efficient administration. It is made up of many departments, the most spectacular of which is probably Emergency. Twenty-four hours a day the ambulances and the police wagons bring them in—the slashed and the mangled and the broken. The County takes them as they come, puts them to-



MIRACLE AT THE COUNTY

By
Mallory Storm

gether and spews them back into the streets to be smashed up all over again.

But the County is a hospital, not the Grotto of Lourdes. It wins and it loses and in case of either result the men of the County know why. They know death is inevitable. And they know their percentage of wins goes up in exact ratio with their ever-increasing medical knowledge.

But there is a time on record when none of these rules held true—when the County seemingly had a miracle on its hands.

The operator said, "I will connect you with the Third Floor."

Rodney Sales, Assistant District Attorney, snubbed out his cigarette and waited for, "Third Floor. West Wing." The voice was the voice of the County—aloof, remote—suggesting clean, cool sheets, rubber soles, quiet halls; suggesting no interest in affairs beyond its walls.

"Is Skeets Morton dead yet?"

A moment of flat silence. "Who is calling, please?"

Rodney Sales frowned in annoyance. "This is the D-A's office. What about Morton?"

"Mr. Morton's condition is as good as can be expected at this time." It was a stock answer, one they could have put on a record, but it told Sales what he wanted to know.

"Is the cop still on Morton's door?"

"There is a police officer on duty in the hall. Would you care to speak to him?"

"Yes—no—no, never mind." Sales cradled the phone and clawed a fresh cigarette from his pack. It had been a wasted call, really. If Morton had died, the office would have been immediately informed. Also if he regained consciousness. Sales scowled. Nothing could be done about Whitney

unless Morton came out of it. "That hood must have iron guts," Sales muttered, and lit his cigarette.

Through the night and into the next day, came dozens of calls over the County wires. The voices of women; sexy and otherwise. The voices of men; both frightened and curious. And always the same reply:

"Mr. Morton's condition is as good as can be expected. . . ."

But no one on the outside had the facts. Only within the walls of the County was the truth known.

A miracle on the Third Floor.

On Thursday, the orphans came to the County from the Good Shepherd Home to visit the sick. It was a touching and worthy arrangement, thought of and put into practice by House Mother Florence Daly. On each Thursday afternoon, a dozen children appeared at the call-desk with small bouquets, hand-made trinkets, and words of cheer dutifully memorized in return for afternoons away from the Home.

With true County efficiency, a student nurse spread them thinly through the hospital and gathered them up again later with the help of a record sheet showing their various locations.

Thus it was that a small, solemn-eyed boy carrying a clutch of be-draggled daisies in his fist, presented himself to plainclothesman Doyle in the hall of Third Floor, West Wing.

Doyle grinned. "Hello, sonny."

The boy did not smile; yet his reply was friendly. "My name is Tommy White."

"I'm glad to know you, Tommy."

"Are you a policeman?"

"Well—yes—"

"You're guarding that door, aren't you?"

"Well—in a way, I guess I am. You got somebody sick in the hospital?"

"Lots of people. We come every Thursday. We're the orphans."

"Say! That's nice. Remembering the sick."

"Skeets Morton is in that room, isn't he?"

"That's right. But you better get along and visit your sick people. They'll be waiting for you."

The solemn dark eyes held like magnets on Doyle's face. "I'd like to visit Skeets Morton."

"Nobody's allowed to go in there."

"Just to give him these flowers?"

"He wouldn't appreciate them. He's asleep. Now you run along and find somebody that's awake—maybe sitting up. It's my job to keep people out of this room."

"I'd like to go in for just a minute if you'd let me."

Children weren't exactly Doyle's forte. He was a tough cop and preferred, while on duty, to meet people you could send away with a twisted arm. He scratched his jaw and looked up the hall toward the starched nurse at the reception desk.

But aid came quietly, on rubber heels, from the opposite direction. Doyle turned in obvious relief. "Hey, Doc—will you take this kid somewhere else? He's getting to be kind of a bother. He wants to go in Morton's room."

"I'm not a doctor," the young man replied. "I'm an interne." He spoke to Doyle while keeping his eyes firmly upon Tommy White. And he corrected Doyle probably more from habit than importance. A moment of silence punctuated his words before he said, "Hello, son."

"I'm Tommy White."

"Yes, I know. I came here looking

for you. Let's have a talk, Tommy."

"I wanted to give my flowers to Skeets Morton."

"It's against the rules to go into his room."

"Why were you looking for me?"

The question, somewhat out of tempo, caught the interne at a loss. That and the complete self-possession with which the boy spoke. "I—because I thought you might be here and I want to talk to you. Let's go down to the waiting room."

THE INTERNE reached out to lay a cupped hand behind Tommy White's head and thus urge him into movement. But the hand didn't quite touch. "I'll be glad to go with you," Tommy said gravely. "The one on this floor?"

"Why—yes," and the interne found himself following the boy along the corridor toward a small curtained room at the far end. The room was vacant. Tommy sat down on a backless bench, laid the daisies down, folded his hands, and spoke with the composure of a court justice hearing a case.

"What do you want to talk about?"

The interne pulled up a chair and sat facing the boy. For a full minute he studied the deep, dark eyes, the pale, composed, little-boy features. His stare was returned with sober interest. Suddenly the interne smiled.

"My name is Joe Satterly."

"I'm very glad to know you."

"I work here. I'm studying to be a doctor."

"I know—an interne."

"Ah—yes. How old are you, Tommy?"

"I'll be nine in September."

"Do you like to visit here at the hospital?"

This required a little thought.

"Yes." The word was spoken low.

"What do you like best about it?"

"The ride from the Home in the station wagon."

"How many times have you been here?"

"Seven times."

Joe Satterly took a memo, folded once, from his jacket pocket. He studied the memo for a moment, then opened his mouth. But instead of speaking he got abruptly up from his chair, took three long steps, pulled a hand roughly along his jaw, and muttered, "Oh, nuts!"

An amused voice answered, "I agree. And just what is this? Are you third-degreering children now?"

Joe's motion of turning was in the nature of a guilty start. He said, "Oh, Miss Webb. You startled me."

The girl was a brunette; cool inside the armour of her crisp white uniform; and pretty enough to make almost any man resent her aura of impersonal efficiency. "Sorry. I'm rounding up the infants. It took information from the police to find this one."

"We were having a little talk. You'd better go along with Miss Webb, Tommy. We'll get together again." The almost sullen frustration in the interne's tone was perfectly matched by that in his manner. Miss Webb smiled. "Come, Tommy. The bus is waiting."

"It's a station wagon," the child said gravely.

"That's right. The station wagon. You go ahead. I'll catch up with you."

She brushed the child through the curtains, glancing up and down the hall as she did so. Then she turned to find Joe Satterly already close. She went into his arms.

"Miss Webb," he whispered.

"Mr. Satterly. Careful—my uniform—my lip—"

"Baby."

"How would you like to get kicked out of County?"

"You're a bitch. You'd stand at the window and laugh."

"We're a pair of fools. Why can't we get our biology in the dissecting rooms?" Her kiss was warm and avid. When they drew apart, she asked, "What goes with this entertaining children?"

Joe's manner changed somewhat—although her question had acted as a catalyst. "I've got to talk to you. What time are you off?"

"I get three hours—from seven to ten."

"The apartment's clear. I'll wait for you there."

She studied him for a moment—puzzled. Then she smiled. "You're sure it's for—talking?"

"Yes. Either I've stumbled onto the biggest thing yet—or I'm ready for the psycho ward. I've got to tell you about it. I'd rather have you call me crazy than anybody else."

"Are you ready, Miss Webb?"

They whirled to see Tommy White standing with the pushed-back curtain in his hand, his great dark eyes regarding them gravely.

"YOU'RE CRAZY, Joe. Stark raving mad."

It was a small one-room apartment several of the internes rented jointly without the knowledge of the hospital authorities. They took turns using the place for various bits of personal business.

Alma Webb had found complete comfort in an easy chair, one leg hung casually over an arm. She no longer looked distant or efficient. She watched Joe Satterly pace the floor; watched him with a mixture of amusement and languor. Joe stopped his pacing and turned to stare at her with

some exasperation. "Alma! I don't think you've been listening."

She smiled. "I'm too disappointed. You really did want to talk. Think of my wounded ego."

"Damn your ego!"

Her smile was motherly now. "Well, it was quite broken up, really. Even if I'd been concentrating—"

"I'll go over it again—slowly."

"Please do, darling. I got this much: that that hoodlum in 309 should be dead but he isn't. It's quite the sensation of the hospital."

"It's more than that, Alma."

"Darling, aren't you taking it too seriously? Remember the wonders of modern medicine and surgery."

"Listen—will you take *me* seriously?"

Alma sighed. Three hours was such a short time. "Yes, darling. Tell it from the beginning."

"There are things you don't know about Skeets Morton—things I'm in a position to find out."

"I heard there were twenty-four machine gun slugs—"

"Thirty-six. Two directly through the heart; eighteen in the pelvic regions; lungs riddled. The result should have been instant death."

"But they sutured the heart."

"Of course they did, but they shouldn't have had the chance. He was mowed down on the street from a passing sedan at approximately four o'clock Monday afternoon. He lay on the sidewalk for twenty minutes. All the blood should have gone out of him by then but he didn't bleed much—didn't bleed through holes large enough for a man's fist.

"They got him to the hospital in about fifteen minutes and were a little slow in pushing him through to surgery because nobody would believe it. They removed his left kidney in two pieces. His intestines looked

like something out of a swiss cheese factory so they left them alone. I was watching in the theater and they opened the pleural cavity strictly from curiosity. They wanted to see a heart that kept on beating after a man was dead."

NURSE WEBB'S professional interest had come to the fore. "It *was* a remarkable case."

"*Remarkable?* I saw that heart, Alma. It looked like a tattered red rag with a mouse jumping around inside it. Even after suturing you could have driven a truck through the holes. And yet the man lived. He's alive now when every known law of God and man says he should be dead!"

Alma Webb laid a cool hand against Joe's taut neck muscles, massaged expertly. "Darling, don't tighten up so. You don't have to sell me. I'm sold. It's a freak or a miracle or anything you say but don't get so worked up. Let's keep on living."

Joe smiled at her.

"You're sweet," Alma said.

"But that's not all."

"I know—you're more than sweet."

"I mean that isn't the only miracle in the hospital."

She withdrew her hand, "There are others?"

"Yes, there are four other cases that have the whole medical staff gibbering in their beer. Two accident cases almost as bad as Morton with no right whatsoever to be alive. A carcinoma with practically everything gone but life. Also a broken hip that went into pneumonia. She's been alive for six days at the peak of crisis. One hundred and eight temp. She should have burned to death by now but she still lies there wheezing like a blast furnace. I tell you she *can't die*."

The buzzer sounded. Joe got up

from the lounge and went to the tube by the door. After a few moments he spoke into it. "You two go back and get another beer, Mac. It's not ten yet." He returned to the lounge.

"If these things are as you say—" Alma mused.

"They *are* as I say."

"But the staff. Men like—"

"They're only doctors! What the hell can they do but gape at each other?"

Alma shrugged. "Can *you* do anything more, darling?"

"That's what I've been getting around to. I *have* done something. I checked the visiting sheets on those Good Shepherd orphans who come to the hospital every Thursday."

Alma Webb frowned. "Joe! Just a minute now—or you'll really have me worried."

He pressed on, eagerly. "It was a fluke that put me onto it. One of those things anyone else would probably have ignored even if they'd stumbled across it."

"I should hope so!"

Joe's jaws set suddenly and firmly together. With deliberate restraint he took one of Alma's hands into his own. "Angel, I'm going to ask you one question—only one: Do you believe in the possible manifestation of a thing or things we could visualize and yet not begin to explain—a thing or things for which there *is* no explanation?"

She stared at him levelly. "If I say no, the interview is ended—right?"

"Right."

"I'd much rather you kissed me, but the answer is yes. Tell me about the orphans."

Joe dropped her hand in order to emphasize with a gesture. "I'll cut it shorter by not going into how I came onto the orphan thing. It was by association. And I was interested in only one of them—a boy named Tommy

White. A quiet, soft-spoken boy."

"HE WAS the one you traced through the sheets?"

"Yes. I found out a boy called Tommy White visited the broken hip six weeks ago. He left her a little bouquet of flowers."

"Joe—please!"

He hurried on. "The boy made six visits before today."

"And you're going to tell me he visited the carcinoma and the—"

"Yes."

"But the accident cases wouldn't have been on the visiting list."

"They weren't. That took sleuthing. I asked questions and found in both cases Tommy White followed the cart into their rooms. He had to be chased out both times. Then, today, I went looking for the kid. I thought I knew exactly where to find him and my hunch was right. Trying to get into Morton's room."

Joe lit a cigarette while Alma Webb sat pondering. Speaking through a cloud of smoke, she said gently, "Darling. It's full of holes."

"I'll grant you that."

"I won't concede anything but we'll take some points for granted. We'll say a little snub-nosed boy is running around the hospital keeping our patients alive. We'll concede for want of more evidence that he has only to look at them in order to forestall death. Do you follow me?"

"I'm ahead of you."

"The joker is in 309. The boy wasn't in the hospital when Morton was brought in. He didn't get into Morton's room. And Morton is our top-drawer miracle."

"But—"

Alma Webb put out her arms. Her voice was plaintive. "Joe, it's late. We've only got ten minutes."

The kiss was a long one, after which she snuggled her chin on his shoulder. He said, "I didn't give you the clincher, honey."

"Is there a clincher?"

"Uh-huh. The place Skeets Morton was shot. The corner of Eight Street and South Avenue."

"So—"

"Right against the picket fence around the Good Shepherd Home for Children."

Alma drew back slowly. "You know of more ways to spoil a kiss!" she said.

Rodney Sales, Assistant D.A., picked up the phone on his desk and dialed the County. He asked for Third Floor, West Wing, and got it. "What's with Morton, honey? He dead yet?"

"Mr. Morton's condition is—"

"Good Christ! What's keeping him alive?"

"If he regains consciousness I'll notify you immediately. That's all I can do, Mr. Sales."

"How did you know my name?"

"You must have mentioned it at one time or another."

"Maybe I did. Do you get a day off?"

The line went dead. Sales hung up. "I've heard of iron men in my time," he muttered, "but Skeets takes the prize."

Merk Whitney owned a lot of old tires. They were stacked sky-high in a two-acre lot where Merk stayed most of the time. He bought them in ones and twos and threes and now and again he sold a truckload, but not very often. He liked to have the tires around because they camouflaged a number of other businesses he engaged in. But certain alert individuals spotted these other businesses at times and

caused Merk great concern. So, as often as not, these individuals had to be dealt with—gently or harshly, as the occasion demanded. When extreme harshness was in order, Merk farmed out the assignments as jobs of work; farmed them out, usually, to laborers from other cities who came well recommended.

Sam Dance was such a laborer. He sat in a chair in the shed where Merk had his office. He was slight, icy, expressionless—a miser with words.

Merk sat behind a huge battered desk that went well with his huge lard-filled body. A man with a permanently reminiscent expression, as though always thinking about yesterday. Merk studied Sam Dance and said, "I was looking for that note. I can't find it."

Sam Dance said nothing.

"The note from Nick. Memphis. You brought it when you came."

"St. Louie."

"Yeah, St. Louie. I always get them mixed." Merk's eyes were vague with thought. He opened a drawer and pawed among the papers therein. He closed the drawer, fumbled in the pockets of his dirty gray suit. "Thirty-odd slugs and he don't die," Merk pondered. He looked at Sam Dance. Sam Dance looked at the wall and said nothing.

"Tell me about the kid. The kid in the bushes."

"I told you."

"I know. Tell me again. It's worth listening to."

"I park to wait for Skeets. The kid is playing in the bushes inside the fence."

"He saw you?"

"He saw me. Skeets comes out about four. He walks to the fence and chews with the kid. He gives him something. I drive around the block

and come back slow. Skeets starts to walk. When he's out of line with the kid, I get him."

"The kid saw you."

"I said he saw me."

MERK SIGHED and studied Sam Dance. His face showed no resentment but rather a certain respect; respect as for a rattlesnake coiled on the desk. "Thirty slugs," Merk mused.

Sam Dance said nothing.

"The kid interests me," Merk said with vague eyes. He spoke as though it had all been long ago and far away. He watched Sam Dance and said, "Orphans should have fun. They should have things like picnics. Did you ever go to a picnic?"

Sam Dance did not answer.

"We'll rent Lakeview Park for an afternoon." Sam looked down at the desk; he pawed at his jacket pockets. "I wish I could find that note—the note from Nick."

Sam Dance looked at the wall and said nothing.

Inside the shed there was silence. Outside, there were two acres piled high with old tires.

After a while, Sam Dance got up and left the shed. Merk Whitney sighed again and looked happier; happy as a man with a rattlesnake back in the box.

They moved Mrs. Andrews into a private room; one of the very special ones reserved for the important politicians who get sick and come to the County. Mrs. Andrews wasn't a politician but they thought she rated the room because she was doing something no politician had ever done. She was continuing to live day after day under conditions that would have killed a bull.

Mrs. Andrews was very old—over **seventy**—and she'd fallen and broken

her hip. As often happens in such cases, pneumonia had set in. Mrs. Andrews' condition was not such as to resist pneumonia for any length of time. Her condition was not such as to resist even a mild breeze.

There were four persons in the room; Mrs. Andrews and three specialists. One of the specialists was running down Mrs. Andrews' chart. There was a look of helplessness in his eyes.

Monday—temp—108°. Tuesday—temp—108°. Wednesday—Thursday—Friday—Saturday—Sunday—temp—108°.

"It's absolutely preposterous."

Heat radiated from the bed upon which Mrs. Andrews lay; arose in waves from her frail body. One of the specialists lifted her wrist, felt the steady thump-thump-thump of her heart. He relinquished the wrist with all the appearance of relief.

"Life for this length of time is an impossibility."

"Absolutely impossible."

Mrs. Andrews stirred and turned her head to peer at the little bunch of dried-out daisies on the bed-table. She'd insisted they remain. She said, "I've lost my glasses. I must find them—I must find my glasses." Heat waves curled around her words, checking them off.

One of the specialists bent down to peer under the bed. There were no spectacles there but he found a certain release in looking for them.

"I don't think she had any glasses," the third specialist said.

After a while they went out of the room; away from the presence of life so tenacious and vengeful as to frighten them.

"Something must be done," one of the specialists said.

"Yes," replied another. "Something *must* be done."

But they went away, down the hall,

without doing anything at all.

FLORENCE DALY was a woman of huge capacities; a woman worthy of something more than fighting scarcities, human callousness, and fund shortages year in and year out. She had gray hair, an ample bosom, and a skein of small wrinkles spread over a kindly face. She said, "Were you interested in adopting the child?"

Joe Satterly repaired the already-perfect dent in his gray fedora. Alma Webb smiled as though over some secret.

"We aren't married," Joe said, "but we're interested in the boy. We've seen him at the hospital several times."

Florence Daly looked a trifle worried. "I shouldn't let him go there but he enjoys it so much. You see his health isn't what it should be."

"I noticed he was very pale," Alma said.

"A tendency toward anemia."

"Is he around now?" Joe asked.

"This is playtime—out-of-doors in good weather. He's in the yard somewhere."

Florence Daly started to arise. Joe motioned her down. "Never mind."

"Why are you inquiring about the child, Doctor Satterly?"

"Not a doctor yet," Joe said from force of habit. "I'm still an interne." After that he mired down a little. "It's—it's just that I—we're interested in him."

Alma scooped up the fumble and continued running. "Do your rules prohibit our knowing more about him?"

"Definitely yes. We even discourage thorough investigation by prospective adopters. We feel that if a couple really wants a child, they should both start from—from scratch so to speak."

"His real name is not Tommy White, is it?" Alma asked quickly.

"No."

"Suppose we asked to take Tommy with us for a day of fun—entertainment?" Alma asked the question, knowing she and Joe had played their cards in wrong sequence.

Florence Daly regarded both of them with the wisdom of years. "Are you planning matrimony?"

"Not for a long time, I'm afraid," Joe said with lameness.

"It's a matter of money," Alma added.

The house mother continued to reflect. "I could grant your request—partially. One of the town's more thoughtful citizens is giving the children a holiday next Friday at Lakeview park. I will need supervisors."

"We'd be glad to help," Joe said.

"If we can arrange for the time."

"We'll let you know."

Florence Daly smiled. "You're a very nice couple," she said abruptly. "I'm sure you'll manage the money somehow."

Sam Dance idled against a tree on South Avenue across the street from the Good Shepherd Home. He looked up into the sky and took a deep breath and seemed to be enjoying the weather.

From across the street came the sound of children playing in the Good Shepherd yard. Sam watched the children; the ones he could see above the bushes along the fence. He lit a cigarette and held it in front of his expressionless mask of a face and looked at it. He watched the smoke curl, then threw the cigarette down and started across the street because he'd seen a movement over there in the bushes. He went to the place where the bushes moved.

He stopped and said, "Hello."

Tommy White was gravely planting a dead twig in the hard earth. He looked up and said, "Hello."

"What are you doing?"

"Planting a tree."

"It won't grow."

"Maybe it will."

Sam Dance squinted into the leaves above. "You don't need another one. You've got lots of trees."

Tommy White regarded the high branches fixedly. "When it gets cold they'll be covered with snow."

Sam Dance said, "You haven't been out for a while."

"Have you been around?"

"Uh-huh."

"We're going on a picnic."

"I know."

"How did you know?"

"I work for the guy."

"I think I'll like a picnic. Will you be there?"

"Uh-huh. I'll be there."

"It's a Mr. Whitney, Mrs. Daly said. A thoughtful citizen."

Sam Dance took a cigarette from his pack. It was bent. He straightened it. "Merk's thoughtful," he conceded.

"How did you happen to work for him?"

"I brought a note from Nick—a man in St. Louis."

"That's in Missouri. Did you work in St. Louis long?"

Tommy uncovered the twig to see if it was still there. It was. He covered it up again.

"A while."

"And other places?"

"Uh-huh. New York, Pittsburgh. All over."

Tommy regarded Sam Dance with fixity. "Where did you go after—two years ago?"

"After that? I hung around a while. Then I went to Portland may-

be. I don't know." He brought his eyes around sharply. "You shouldn't do it, kid."

"But I like to do it. Why shouldn't I?"

"You're too young. You don't know any of the answers. And it don't do nobody no good."

"I think it does."

"You're too young to know."

"You think I'll feel different when I grow up?"

"It was only a fluke. Once in a million years."

"I didn't know at first," Tommy said grave'y.

"I know you didn't."

"I found out later. You should have told me."

"It was a big blunder. Why should I make it bigger?"

Tommy took a fence picket in each hand. His eyes followed the smoke tendrils of Sam Dance's cigarette. He asked, "Why did I hate my father?"

"Your father? I don't know. Maybe he was mean. It's natural for kids to hate people mean to them."

"Did you hate him?"

"No."

Tommy thought this over. "It's funny—how things go sometimes. I wouldn't want to die."

"You didn't want to be born either."

"Didn't I?"

"Nobody does."

"I've got to go now."

"So have I."

"Good-bye."

"So long."

Sam Dance turned. "Hey, kid!"

"What?"

"Have I changed any?"

"No." The boy seemed puzzled.

"I haven't changed a bit in two years?"

Tommy White made a critical in-

spection before he shook his head.
"You haven't changed."

"Okay. I was just asking. So long."
"So long."

RODNEY SALES picked up the phone and dialed County. They put him through the Third Floor, West Wing. "Hello."

"Oh—Rod? How are you feeling?"

"Like stale beer. Murder! I'm not used to covering the night belts."

The nurse on duty laughed. "It was fun. I was surprised—really."

"At what?"

"Well—my good luck. Blind dates are—dangerous sometimes."

"What did you expect?"

"It's not that. It's what I usually get. Bald—fat—prosperous."

"I'm prosperous—moderately so, that is."

"Were you satisfied?"

"You didn't hear any complaints did you?"

"I've got to hang up now."

"I'll see you. Wait—how is he?"

"They decided he must be getting hungry. Shot him full of glucose."

"I don't get it. Damn it—I don't get it at all."

"You and the County Hospital. Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

The report from the detective agency cost Joe Satterly twenty dollars. Ten was for the job; the other ten for prompt service. An operative brought it around to the apartment in person.

"The boy's name is LeRoy Barnes. He came to the attention of the authorities as the result of a murder on the West Side two years ago. The boy's father, Frankie Barnes, was a disreputable and vicious character. It was only through oversight that the

child was not taken away from him before his death.

"He was discovered, early one morning, with the dead body of his father in a cheap furnished room where they had been living. The father had been savagely choked to death. His killer was never apprehended.

"The child, obviously in a state of shock, appeared to have been attacked also, but it was never established whether the killer was responsible for this or the boy's own father. The boy was of no value to the police.

"Later the boy was placed in the Good Shepherd Home for Orphans, an accredited—"

"Never mind about that," Joe said. "Will you send me a written copy?"

"Certainly."

The agent left. Joe said, "Twenty bucks I'm one up on the Chicago Po—" "I'm glad I made you get it that way," Alma Webb said. "So long as you had to have it. Imagine cross-examining a child about a past like that!"

"We're going to question him though. About something else."

"About what?"

"I've got a terrific hunch he's the key to Skeets Morton's killer."

"Why Joe—"

"Maybe I wouldn't make a bad detective at that. I'll bet you twenty bucks I'm one up on the Chicago Police Department already."

"How so?"

"You take a hunch and a suspicion and a fact. You mix them together this way: Hunch—that Tommy saw Skeets killed. Suspicion—they think that big-time hoodlum, Merk Whitney, had something to do with the murder. The D. A. keeps the County wire hot asking if Skeets has come to yet. Fact—Merk Whitney is throwing a

picnic for the Good Shepherd orphans at Lakeview Friday afternoon."

"That's quite a mixture."

Merk Whitney, of course, wouldn't do his own killings. He'd hire a man. I'm betting you twenty bucks Whitney either thinks or knows one of the orphans saw the murder."

"Even Merk Whitney wouldn't kill a little boy. You've been reading again."

JOE CONTINUED with his puzzle. "Whitney can't merely *think* one of them saw it. In that case the picnic wouldn't do him any good. There'd be no point in it. He *knows* one of them saw it and he wants to get at the witness before the police."

"But the police would have inquired at the Home. That's routine. They'd have gone in and asked."

"Of course they did. And they drew a blank. The witness didn't step up."

"I repeat—Merk Whitney—if he is involved in this, which I don't concede—wouldn't dare kill a child."

"I'm not saying he intends to kill him. But he means to find out exactly what the situation is. He's going to question the child and find out what he really knows. In order for him to do that, the killer will have to point the kid out to Merk."

"It's silly—for two reasons."

"What are they?"

"In the first place you've built a beautiful case on wild theory—"

"We won't go into that. What's the second reason?"

"Merk Whitney going to all that trouble just to ask a child a few questions. A couple of thousand dollars for an amusement park—"

"That line of thinking is what will keep you from being a big-time gangster. When something important comes up, they don't pinch pennies." Joe Satterly grinned and reached for Alma

Webb. He kissed her. "If you were on the lam with a million bucks, you'd get caught walking out of town to save carfare."

Alma Webb kissed him back. After the kiss was over, Joe sobered. "I still say I've got an inside track with the police. All we have to do is ask Tommy if he saw Skeets killed. Nobody has asked him in so many words."

"There are over two hundred orphans at Good Shepherd. What makes you so sure Tommy is the one?"

"A hunch, angel. Just a hunch."

Alma Webb looked at her watch. "One thing makes me happy," she said.

"What?"

"All this stuff about the murder may be cockeyed, but at least it's sane. You were getting positively weird with that other line."

Joe grinned with perceptible sheepishness. "I guess so." He stared at the wall for a long moment. "But why in the hell can't those poor devils die?"

Sam Dance said, "I want my money."

Merk Whitney regarded Sam vaguely. He reached into his pocket and brought out a bill. "Here's fifty."

"I didn't say bus fare. I want my money."

The bill dropped to the table. Merk put a big hand on it. He looked down at the hand with cloudy eyes. He said, "Damn! I wish to Christ I had that note."

"The hell with the note."

"Uh-uh. There are some other things missing—not important—but they're gone along with the note from Nick."

"I want my money."

"I've got a feeling they snooped the joint. I think maybe they got the note. That ties me up with you. If

they got it and anybody talks—like that kid—”

“What about Skeets?”

Merk shrugged. “Nothing I can do about that, but if there’s two holes and you can only plug one, you plug it anyway. That’s good sense.”

“What about my money?”

Merk looked at Sam with an expression of half-fear, half-bravado. The look of a beginner getting ready to milk a rattlesnake; a milking that had to be done.

“Money for what?”

“The dough for the job on Skeets.”

“The deal was to kill him. He’s still alive.”

Sam Dance looked at the wall with the pieces of ice he had for eyes. “It’s a point.”

“Besides, you’ve got to stay around for the picnic.”

“I don’t like picnics.”

“You’ve got to show me the kid. I’ve got to talk to him—find out.”

“You don’t have to worry about the kid.”

“You said he saw you.”

“He saw me, but he hasn’t said anything. Even if he did say something, you don’t have to worry.”

Merk flopped a hand helplessly over his jacket pockets. “That’s why guys like me get ahead and guys like you live from job to job.”

“Why?”

“Because guys like you got no brains; not sense enough to know a tough spot when you walk into it. Stupid.” Merk watched as though fascinated; as though waiting for the snake to strike.

The snake almost smiled but not quite. “You got a point that Skeets isn’t dead yet. Give me the fifty.”

Merk took his hand off the bill. “Be here Friday noon. You can ride out with me.”

“Okay.”

“It’s protection for you as well as me, for crissake! Can’t you get that through your head?”

“Yeah. Big deal. So long.”

ONE OF the specialists was watching Mrs. Andrews’ blast-furnace breathing when Joe Satterly came into the room with Tommy White. Alma Webb followed them, closed the door and stood against it. Joe quietly urged the boy toward the sickbed.

The specialist looked up and stopped tapping a finger with his thermometer case. “A relative?” he asked softly.

“Yes—yes, a relative.”

Tommy looked gravely up at Joe and said nothing. Then at the agonized Mrs. Andrews. Joe and Alma were watching the child closely. Joe bent down and whispered, “She’s suffering a great deal. She’s tired—very very tired. She wants to die.”

“No one wants to die,” Tommy White said. “I wouldn’t want to die.”

“But she’s very old. And she’s suffering.”

Mrs. Andrews turned a skull-like head. She muttered fevered words. Tommy raised his eyes to Joe Satterly; sober, serious eyes. “She wants her glasses. If they put some on the pillow for her to find, wouldn’t that help?”

Joe said, “It would help if she could find them, but the ones she wants are in the next world—where God is. If she could go there and find them, she would be very happy. Why don’t you let—”

He was cut off as Alma Webb pinched his arm cruelly. “It’s time to go,” she said.

The specialist did not look up as they left the room. Outside, Alma whispered. “I just kept you out of the nut house, you idiot! A doctor stand-

ing there! If you ask that boy any silly questions, I'll brain you!"

Joe muttered, "Okay. Fine pal you are." He took Tommy's hand, "Let's go into the waiting room and talk."

They checked three waiting rooms before they found an empty one. Once inside, Alma said, "Hurry it up. I sneaked away."

"Maybe you'd better go back."

"And leave you at the mercy of this child? Not on your life."

Joe sat Tommy down and stood facing him. "Tommy, did you ever see Skeets Morton?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Quite a few times. He lived down Eighth Street from the Home—"

"No—he had an office there."

"Well, an office. Anyhow, he used to go by and see me playing by the fence. He said hello and I said hello. That was at first. Then he gave me a package of gum one day and after that candy and once a toy pistol."

Joe glanced at Alma Webb. There was a smirk of triumph in his eyes. "You liked Skeets Morton?"

Tommy White thought for a moment. "Yes. I liked him all right. He was a nice man."

"Enough so you didn't want to see him killed?"

"Of course. I wouldn't want to see anybody killed."

Alma's eyes hardened a trifle. They caught those of Joe Satterly. Her eyes said, *Watch it, my love!* Joe took a quick breath and looked sullen. He turned back to Tommy White.

"Did you see the man who killed Skeets Morton, Tommy?"

THE GRAVE eyes regarded him, "Skeets Morton isn't dead."

"How do you know?"

"Because—he just isn't."

"Suppose I told you Skeets died a

half an hour ago?"

"You wouldn't tell me that."

"Why?"

"Because Mrs. Andrews isn't dead."

While Joe hunted for a word, Alma said, "It's getting a little cloudy in here."

Joe couldn't find the words he wanted. He used different ones. "Did you see the man who shot Skeets Morton?"

"Yes. I saw him."

"Could you describe him?"

"Of course I could."

Alma Webb pushed Joe aside and took up the questioning. "Tommy, did the police come to the Home after Skeets was shot?"

"Yes—right after."

"Why didn't you tell them you'd seen the murder?"

"They didn't ask me."

"But—"

"They talked to Mrs. Daly. She told them no one had seen the man shoot Skeets Morton because all the children were in the east basement for cookies and milk."

"But you saw it."

"I sneaked out. Skeets Morton had promised me bubble gum. Mrs. Daly didn't know I wasn't in the basement. You see there are a lot of orphans in—"

"I know, Tommy—I know. But if the police asked you now, would you tell them what the man looked like?"

"I'd tell them—of course."

"You run along now, Tommy," Alma Webb ordered. "It's about time for the station wagon."

Joe Satterly said, "Wait a minute—"

"Run along Tommy. That's a good boy."

Tommy White got up and went gravely out through the curtained doorway. Joe Satterly scowled. "What's the idea of—"

"Quiet, darling. Sit down and relax. You've had a big day."

"That boy must be taken to the police."

"Sit down."

Joe sat down beside Alma Webb. She ran a fond hand through his hair. "There is credit due, my darling, and I'm not one to withhold laurels. Your hunches were so amazingly right it scares me."

"Okay—okay. So things worked out. But let's get on with it."

"We shall, but let's do it right. You've got a hot potato and it must be handled carefully."

"The next step is the police."

"But not until tomorrow. All your reasoning was so beautiful and so perfect—why ignore it now?"

"Quit talking in riddles!"

"It's no riddle. We can depend on Merk Whitney and the killer being at the park tomorrow. The killer will point Tommy out to Merk Whitney. That's the time to have our police around for some counter-pointing."

Joe thought it over. "I guess you're right." Joe reached over and took Alma gently by the nose, pulled her face across, kissed her. Then he let go of her nose. "But baby—there's more to this than just a murder. So much it will make your hair stand on end if we ever find out. Remember that."

Alma gazed on him fondly. "You're so stupid and so brilliant and so wonderful—and I love you so much."

The next touch of his hand was quite personal and she got to her feet. "I love you so much and now I've got to go and give an old man a—"

"Don't say it. It's vulgar."

"I won't."

Joe looked at her—then through her. "But why don't they *die*?" he asked.

THE CARCINOMA case had—mercifully—lost consciousness. He lay quietly, with closed eyes, a paradox of living death. The special nurse stared, fascinated. Beside her stood Joe Satterly, looking also at the unconscious man.

The special nurse said, "It gives you the creeps."

Joe muttered, "Why doesn't he die?"

"I was just wondering—thinking—"

"What about?"

"Well—they all know he should be dead. And with cancer there's a lot of leeway—a lot is up to the judgement of the doctor."

"So—?"

"There's hardly anything left of the heart. Just a fragment beating like mad. Suppose—suppose they decided the thing to do was take it out. Or—well, more of it. I'll bet every doctor in the hospital has itched to know how much of that heart could be taken away and still—"

"Have you gone crazy, Miss Allison?"

The special nurse flushed, then turned defiant. "I only said out loud what everybody is thinking. It would be a blessing if the poor creature was relieved of his pain."

"He isn't in any pain—now."

The nurse continued to stare. Joe turned toward the door. "And if they removed the heart completely, I don't think it would make any difference." Joe left the room.

The phone on Rodney Sales' desk rang sharply. He picked it up. "Hello."

"Hello. District Attorney's office?"

"Right. Sales speaking."

"My name is Joe Satterly. I'm an interne at the County."

"You calling about Skeets Morton?"

"That's right. I got your name from Miss Allison—one of the nurses here. I saw you talking to her a couple of times and I understand you're waiting for Skeets Morton to wake up."

"That's right. Is he coming out of it?"

"No, but I think I can show you his killer. There was another witness—besides Morton."

"Another witness? Who?"

"A boy in the orphanage near where Skeets was shot."

"Hell—the police checked there. All the kids were inside."

"All but one. I've heard you'd like to tie Merk Whitney up with this."

"We've got him tied up with it. He—how did you wiggle into this thing?"

"Maybe I'd better go to the police."

"Relax—take it easy. I was just asking. We found a note to Whitney from a man in St. Louis introducing a killer named Sam Dance. The note's dated two days before the shooting of Morton. If we could put Sam Dance on the scene."

"Whitney's giving a picnic for the Good Shepherd orphans at Lakeview Park tomorrow. I think he wants to talk to the witness. Why don't you meet me there?"

"What time?"

"Two o'clock. I'll have the kid in tow."

"I'll be there. Thanks."

WHEN MERK WHITNEY did a thing, he did it right. Lakeview Park was wide open and ready for business. Water poured down the boat-chute, with now and again a test boat rocketing down the slide. The slower boats of The Old Mill went in and out of the dark passageways, carried along by a slow current. The high coasters were manned and waiting.

Attendants stood waiting to serve hot-dogs, pop, and cotton candy. The orphans of Good Shepherd would love Merk Whitney for a long time.

Joe Satterly introduced Sales to Alma Webb and pointed to Tommy White. Tommy was getting a cone of cotton candy along with a group of other orphans. "That's the boy who witnessed the murder. I wonder if Merk Whitney is here yet?"

"I saw him twenty minutes ago over by the Old Mill. He's got Sam Dance with him."

"We'll ease the kids down that way."

Alma Webb had grown uneasy. "I don't know about this. It seemed a good idea yesterday but an amusement park can be a dangerous place. Maybe this should be done at headquarters."

Sales said, "Nothing can happen. Whitney is no fool. He's not going to try to kill a child."

"You think it's all right then?" Joe asked. He also seemed a little worried.

"I'm thinking in terms of building a case. It would be just that much stronger if we could prove Whitney is trying to contact the boy; that he arranged this party for that purpose. Let's give him a little rope."

They were in charge of a dozen children and it took half an hour to arrive at the Old Mill.

"There he is," Alma said, "standing with that small, dark man. I'm scared. I guess I forgot these are dangerous people to fence with."

"It will be all right."

"But you said yourself Whitney is no fool. Suppose he has some kind of a plan to—"

Merk Whitney probably did have a plan—and a good one. But it was never revealed.

Whitney stood beside Sam Dance

by the Old Mill. The two men watched the orphanage party approach the concession. "Now here's the idea," Whitney said. "There's a crosscut passage inside behind a wooden gate off the main passage. I'll ride in the—"

"I think you're slipping, Merk. I think you're slipping bad."

"What are you talking about?"

There was a musing note in Sam Dance's voice. "Comes a time when guys like you start running away from shadows. You start getting cute then—tripping over your feet. I got a hunch you're coming to the end of your string, Merk."

"Why, you goddam—"

"This whole thing's a bunch of shadows, Merk. Ten years ago you'd have took it in your stride. I told you you've got no cause to worry about the kid."

The veins on Whitney's neck thickened.

Sam Dance said, "Hello, kid."

Tommy White looked at the killer gravely. "Hello. These are my friends. I'd like you to meet them."

Dance selected Rodney Sales for particular attention. "You're from the D. A.'s office, aren't you?"

"That's right. How long have you been out of jail?"

"You've got me mixed up. I've never been in jail. You know Merk Whitney?"

"I know Merk."

Whitney looked vaguely at Rodney Sales, nodded.

Sam Dance said, "Did you come out here to finger me?"

Sales laid a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Have you ever seen this man before, Tommy?"

Alma was holding Tommy's hand too tightly. He withdrew it and gazed at Sam Dance. "You look tired. Very tired."

"I am tired, kid. Did you ever see me before?"

"Of course."

"Did you see me maybe in the street when Skeets Morton was shot?"

"That's right."

"And where else have you seen me?"

"The night you killed my father."

Merk Whitney had never done a job of his own, but now he saw himself being framed—framed by a gun punk. That was about the only law along the crooked road he traveled. Nobody framed anybody else and got away with it. Merk had a gun in his pocket. A tiny little gun that wasn't much good over ten feet. But Sam Dance was closer than that. The little gun spit like an annoyed cat and a hole appeared in the cloth over Merk's pocket. A hole also appeared in Sam Dance's shirt.

Sam said, "They start getting cute and that's the finish." He took a .45 from his pocket and blew out some of Merk's brains. Merk's eyes rolled. He went down.

All over the park, orphans and supervisors froze. Then the supervisors began getting the orphans out of sight.

Sam looked down at the little hole in his shirt. A slight sneer appeared on his face. Then the sneer was gone. Again he was expressionless. He said, "Ever see me any place else, Tommy?"

"In the hospital when I made you leave Mrs. Andrews alone—and the other people."

"It was the wrong thing to do, Tommy. They wanted to die."

"You're hurt. Mr. Whitney shot you."

"Only a scratch. Tommy—what do I look like? Tell the D. A. Tell your friends."

Tommy regarded Sam Dance with deep sobriety. "You're tall and you've

got on the same black nightgown, and you've got no face. You're the same as that night when you put the shiny cone over my father's head."

"Why did you let me do that, Tommy?"

"I didn't like my father. Besides—I didn't know then I could stop you."

"When did you find out you could stop me?"

"In the hospital, when I grabbed the bright cone you were putting on Mrs. Andrews' face. She was a nice old lady. I didn't want her to die."

MERK WHITNEY lay on the ground. The boats of the Old Mill went in and out. Frightened eyes watched from vantage points around the park. Nobody in the group noticed any of these things. Merk Whitney's chest still rose and fell, but none of them noticed that either.

"It was wrong, Tommy. The time comes and people want to die."

"What goes on here?" The Assistant District Attorney gulped.

"A fingering," Sam Dance said.

It seemed incredible that a thing such as this could be talked about. But it was here. It had to be met. "Let's get back to earth," Sales croaked. "Let's cut out the act and have some reality."

"Reality and illusion," Sam Dance said. "Large words. Hot deal." He was talking to everyone and no one.

Alma Webb's voice was a choked whisper. "How did you know this child saw you as Death?"

"I'm a hired gunman. I live by killing people. I make my living by bucking the big law. The hell with the little laws—the ones in paper books. The big laws aren't written down. I knew about the kid when he was there and Skeets didn't die. You get that way. Sharp in your line."

"How did you know what he saw in you? How could you know?"

"All I got to do is look in the mirror. Maybe I don't even remember the little dark guy any more. Maybe I don't remember what it is to have a face. Maybe I'm way over on the other side."

Nobody thought of anything to say. Sam went on; talking to the past; the future; the present. "Way up in the sky in a black nightgown riding a machinegun. And the end of the rope coming into sight."

Sam Dance looked down at Tommy. "I didn't kill the kid's father. I was never in the County. Not the little dark guy. But the kid met Mr. Death in a cheesy two-dollar room and never forgot him. It must take the right kind of eyes; the right mixture of a lot of things nobody knows about. But when it's there, it's there, and you can't fool it with a twenty-dollar shirt and forty-dollar shoes."

Rodney Sales was breathing heavily. Sam Dance touched Tommy's shoulder and pointed to Whitney. "He wants to die, kid. He's tired of dodging shadows. He wants to die."

Tommy shook his head. "He's a nice man. A thoughtful man, Mrs. Daly said. I wouldn't want to die. I'm sure he doesn't either."

"If I proved it to you?"

Tommy said nothing. Sam drew him close to Merk Whitney; pressed him to his knees. Whitney looked up with eyes full of torture; full of understanding. Sam Dance said, "Say it, Merk. Just a couple of words. Get them out."

Merk's lips fluttered. "Please—kid."

Tommy got to his feet. "He wants to die!" Words of surprise.

"Sure. And the other ones. You aren't helping Skeets. You're all wrong

about it. Give them a break."

Tommy swallowed heavily. His eyes rolled. "I'm—sick."

Sam Dance caught him as he slumped; put him in Alma's arms. Then Sam knelt beside Merk Whitney. At that moment a string of cars roared down the spiral track of a high coaster and, somehow, that seemed to start the world turning again. When Sam Dance got up, he was a cold-eyed, expressionless little man with a red stain on his shirt—nothing more. He said, "Merk got too cute. They all get cute in the end."

NURSE ALLISON was talking over the phone. "I've been trying to get you. It's all over. Skeets is dead, but it's certainly one for the medical books. Probably one of the brass will write it up and make a year's salary on it."

Rodney Sales didn't answer.

"Am I going to see you tonight?"

"Not 'til late. I've got an appointment. I'll call you at home."

One of the student nurses who had yet to have the sentimentality drained from her soul, put it rather sweetly. She said, "Poor Mrs. Andrews. She finally found her glasses."

The deaths of the two accident cases was scarcely noted in any but routine channels.

And that was that.

Rodney Sales, a man who was fairly prosperous, brought two bottles of excellent Scotch to the apartment. He and Joe and Alma emptied the first one swiftly and almost silently. Fresh into the second one, they began dawdling.

"It was all so damned silly," Sales observed.

Joe was thoughtful. "When I get time I'm going to look into this mass hypnotism thing. There must be something to it."

Alma asked, "Could there be such a thing as a dozen coincidences all functioning at the same time?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's all so easy to explain, really. Four extraordinary cases at one time in the County. I'll bet there's really a precedent for every one of them if we'd take the trouble to look."

"That's right," Sales said with growing confidence. "And what else have we got—a child with indigestion from hot dogs and cotton candy who was obviously a psychotic, shocked into abnormalcy by witnessing violent death while too young to stand up under it. And a congenital killer no psychiatrist in the country would call sane."

Joe Satterly was staring at the Scotch bottle. "And Merk Whitney living with a bullet in his head. I can give you plenty of precedent for that. Some such victims have even recovered."

There was a time of silence before Joe asked, "What was the latest on Sam Dance?"

"Superficial wound. He'll live to die for killing Merk Whitney. A lovely case. We're dropping the Morton killing of course."

"And now that the brain-brass have got a line on Tommy White, they'll straighten him out in no time."

"Of course," Alma said. Then, "Joe, I wish you'd hurry up and get into practice so we could afford liquor like this."

After that there was laughter. Somewhat tight perhaps; a trifle strained. But nonetheless, laughter.

THE END

CAST OF CHARACTERS

By

E. K. JARVIS

THE PHONE rang at three P.M. Four shorts indicating Lee Bond's number on the country line. Bond got downstairs from his study in an amazingly short time because this would probably be the call he'd been waiting for.

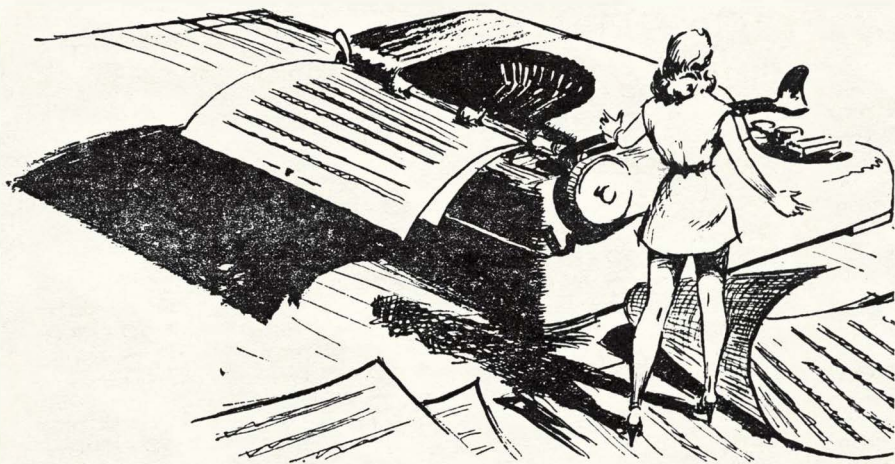
It was. Over the wire came the rich hearty tones of Sam Kane. Kane of Fiction Publications. The Great

God Kane to the free-lance fiction writer. Kane said:

"Hello, Lee. How's the weather up in the wilderness?"

Lee Bond breathed a prayer of thankfulness. Kane's cordial tone seemed favorable. "Rain. Lord, how it rains up in these hills! How's Manhattan?"

"Cold down here. The wife and



Lee had never been held responsible for the characters in his stories. But that was before he created a stunning blonde



"Well, what did you expect? You created me."

kids okay?"

"Yeah—yeah—fine."

Damn the man. Why didn't he get to it and quit playing cat and mouse.

Kane got to it. "Your yarn came in yesterday. Just finished reading it."

Bond held his breath. It had cost like the very devil to move from Chicago to New York; living in a hotel with Lorry and the two kids while house-hunting. Then the stove, the refrigerator, the gas installation.

"How'd you like it?"

A long pause while Lee aged a couple of years.

"I didn't like it, Lee."

Bond glanced guiltily over his shoulder as though he expected to see a creditor peeking in the window.

"You didn't like it?" Sickly.

"I tried to. Honestly—but I couldn't."

"What was wrong with it? The plot?"

"Well—no. I guess the plot was all right." Doubtful.

"Then—"

"Your characters, Lee." Intense. "Your people. The prison—"

"Now wait a minute. That prison is authentic. It really exists. Grayhaven. Right up here in the hills. You drive along a winding mountain road with a feeling that there isn't a soul within ten thousand miles. Then you go around a bend and—wham! There it is, rearing up out of the tree like some lost city out of a forgotten dream. A giant gray wall that you take first to be a dam of some sort, holding back hidden waters. Then you see the watch tower at the corners and you can make out the guards patrolling along the top of the wall—"

"Yeah—yeah—yeah. I read your description, but you cut me off. I wasn't saying I didn't like the prison. It's the characters. Now that priest for instance—Father Gara. He's—well—"

"Well what?"

"He's sinister, Lee. Priests just aren't that way. I think what happened is that you got your story mood mixed up with your characters. You've got a wild, creepy setting for the story, and that's good—very good—but you've built your characters to fit it regardless of what their personal tendencies would have been."

LEE BOND writhed in silent frustration. Double talk! He needed money like the devil needs lost souls and this dreamy-eyed editor was talking in vague generalities. It was maddening.

"But characters have to fit the scene—the mood—"

"I'd say rather—the scene and the mood have to fit the characters, Lee. You've got to remember that first and foremost you're writing about *people*. The public buys our magazines to read about *people*. What they do—how they think—the troubles they get into—"

"But, good Lord, man—"

"Now you take Faith Talbot. You've drawn her as a practical, rather sexy, wealthy girl. Then you march her over the hills during a rain storm, lugging this priest along, so she can kneel in the mud outside the prison and pray for her convicted sweetheart while he's being electrocuted."

"Is that bad? I didn't think so. It was pure drama. When I read it back I got a lump in my throat."

"Sure. It was—all right. I said the plot was okay—but the characters, Lee—they don't seem alive. They do the wrong things. They're puppets."

Lee Bond was thinking about the rent—due last week. His mental upset was akin to panic. Also, he was getting mad.

Kane was droning on. "I'm afraid

you don't know people, Lee—that you don't know them the way an author should."

"I do know people!" Lee barked. "I've sold a lot of copy in my time. I've made a lot of money as a freelance writer, so I've got to know people."

"I'm afraid—"

"At least I know you, Kane," Lee raged. "You're an overstuffed, sanctimonious tin god sitting up on a throne with a lot of writers crawling in on their knees for an audience! You talk about knowing people! What the hell do you know about them yourself? Have you ever lived? Have you ever had one bit of trouble or worry during your whole lifetime? Every Friday they come in and lay a check on your desk. All your life you've made a salary and gone along in your smug little groove. No sorrows—no troubles—"

Lee Bond stopped for lack of breath. But somehow, he now felt better. It was as though an overcharged condition of his battery had been alleviated. What right had Sam Kane to tell *him* how to write a story—tell *him* about character?

Strangely, Kane didn't get mad. There was a long pause, then his voice came back. Pensive. A trifle sad. "No worries? Never any trouble? I had a brother, Lee. I had a brother who—"

Kane cut off sharply. A low mirthless laugh. "Tell you what you do, son. Take a walk around the block and cool off a little. Then sit down and try a rewrite. I've got a hunch you'll hit it the second try."

"Rewrite that story? Not in a million years! Not for you or anybody else. As far as I'm concerned, you can all go fry. I won't—"

Did you wish to place a call?"

Feminine, pleasant, mechanical.

"No—no operator. Skip it."

Lee slammed down the phone. So he'd hung up! So the great Sam Kane couldn't take it! Well, the hell with *him*! The hell with all the stuffed shirts who couldn't write themselves and thus automatically got jobs as editors. They could all sit down and try to write their own stories.

That was it! A writer's union. Send out the word and in a few days the submissions would dry up and—and—

Lorry and the two kids could starve to death.

QUIT THINKING silly rot, Lee told himself as he paced the living room. Cut it out. But suddenly he was weary of the whole thing. The frustrations, the disappointments, the rejects.

"I'm going to quit," he said. "I'm all done with it as of now—this minute."

"What was that, dear? Were you calling me?" From the kitchen; then light footsteps and Lorry in the room, smiling.

"I'm going to quit writing."

"That's good. You've done enough for today."

"I don't mean today. I mean for good. Kane rejected that last story I sent down."

Lorry's eyes widened. "Rejected it? Good heavens! How will we pay the rent?"

"I'll go to work. After all, I'm able-bodied. I'll hire out digging ditches."

"Of course, darling," Lorry said doubtfully, "but do you know anyone who wants a ditch dug?"

Lee crossed the room swiftly; put his hands on Lorry's shoulders. "Angel. You want me to be happy don't you? Wouldn't you rather I made five dollars a day doing what I want to ~~than~~

a fortune at what amounts to slavery?"

"But I always thought you liked to write. Goodness knows you've worked hard enough at it."

"But in the beginning editors didn't tear me down—they encouraged me."

"Darling, why don't you take a little walk—out in the woods. After all, we came here to get away from dirty city streets. A brisk walk and you'll be able to lick that story."

Lee sighed. "I meant what I said, Lorry. But if my absence will make you feel better—"

"Darling, you *are* cross. Skat—off with you."

A dozen steps from the front door and Lee was standing in the center of the black-top road. Beyond lay the densely wooded hill that did such a good job of cutting off television reception.

The rain had stopped now, but the sky was still rich in the melancholy of dark clouds. Lee pulled his new Nor'wester hat down over his forehead and started off up the winding road.

As he walked, he scowled ahead at the wet tunnel of trees hanging over the road. A hell of a country! What he'd have given just then for the homey sights and smells of Chicago's near North Side!

It was great weather to feel sorry for one's self and Lee indulged in the luxury for two solid miles. Then he came out of his somber reverie to realize it had grown dark. Also the rain was coming down again.

He did an about face to head for home. Night descended swiftly as he slogged along; a night of deep, jet-blackness that pressed against his eyeballs and seemed to drift down into his lungs. Why the devil hadn't they put up street lights around here? he wondered. Then—why in Tophet didn't cars dim their lights when they

came head-on that way?

The car was quite a distance away. As it approached, Lee had time to wonder how he was going to pay the rent. He veered over to his right and walked along the edge of the road. The car came on in a blaze of white light.

A shaft of fear shot through Lee as he realized the car was traveling far over on the wrong side of the road. He jumped as the vehicle roared close, landed to his knees in soft earth and rotting vegetation.

THEN THE car was gone, too fast to be injured by the curse he flung after it. Again darkness.

Lee slogged on. He was tired now—very tired—but all the facets of his troubles kept milling about in his brain. No money—rejects. Paper characters.

The lights of home shining yellow—growing larger. Lorry there—Dedee—Paula. The warmth swelling within him pushed Kane's face far into the background.

The porch light was lit, guiding Lee to the door. He kicked off his rubbers, removed the wet hat and raincoat, and looked to see Dedee's blonde head in the glass panel of the upper door.

But the head was not there; nor the blue eyes that always just managed to reach the bottom of the glass. Lorry had probably put the kids to bed, Lee thought. He went inside and hung up his coat and hat.

Lorry wasn't in the kitchen. He'd have heard her. He came within an ace of calling out—then checked himself. The kids would be waiting for just such an excuse to get up. Lee walked into the living room.

A man and a woman sat on the lounge. The girl was dark, a sexy creature wearing a dress that cost two

hundred dollars if it cost a dime. She was holding a Martini glass in her long, slim fingers and was just in the act of putting the rim to her lips.

The man had a stern, intelligent face. Beneath his strong chin, a white, reversed collar shown spotless in the subdued light of the indirect lamp. He sat so that his cassock revealed the outline of strong, stocky legs. Beneath the cassock's hem were the toes of two well-shined shoes. The man frowned and said,

"What sort of an intrusion is this?"

He spoke to the girl rather than to Lee. She set down her glass and replied, "I'm sure I don't know." She surveyed Lee through bold, beautiful eyes. "Just who are you? And why do you come barging in this way?"

The man recovered from his surprise swiftly. He smiled and reversed his attitude like a cat turning on a dime. "Faith! My dear! Is that any way to greet a stranger on a dark rainy night? The poor man must have gotten lost."

"He could still have knocked."

The man realized the truth of this and turned a look of gentle censure upon Lee. "That's true, my boy. It is rather unconventional to—"

Lee found his voice. The room was still spinning about him but he became articulate. "Faith Talbot! And Father Gara! Wait—wait a minute! There's something wrong with me! Something wrong—"

Father Gara had turned swiftly to Faith Talbot with a look of surprise amounting almost to consternation. "Why he knows us—knows our names!" Then, at Lee's last words, he got quickly to his feet to put an arm around Lee's shoulders. "What is it, son? Tell us what's wrong?"

"Where is Lorry? Where is my wife? My children?"

"I'm sure I don't know. At your home I suppose. If you'll tell us where you live—"

"I live here. Where's Lorry?"

Father Gara was pressing Lee gently down to the lounge. "Relax, my son. Everything will be all right, I assure you." He reached over and took Faith Talbot's glass from her stiff fingers. "Here—drink this. It will do you good. Then we will talk."

AUTOMATICALLY Lee tossed off the Martini, set down the glass. Such mental shock as this he had never experienced. Something within told him he should resort to physical violence—throttle someone; beat the truth out of these intruders. But that seemed childish.

"Where," he again demanded, "is Lorry?"

"Your wife?"

"Of course Lorry is my wife!"

Father Gara's attitude was that which he would use with a mental incompetent. "I'm sure she is all right. And probably worried about you. If you'll give us your home phone number we'll be glad to call her—"

Faith Talbot's frown cut him off. She spoke sharply. "There is no phone here. You know that!"

"Oh, of course not. Stupid of me."

"What do you mean there's no phone here?" Lee demanded. "I had to put up a fifteen-buck deposit to get it installed."

"In this house?"

"Where else? This is my home. My wife is somewhere around. My children are asleep upstairs."

Faith Talbot looked at Father Gara. "He's crazier than—"

Father Gara smiled. "Easy, my dear. There are ways of handling situations such as this." To Lee: "Young man, we don't wish to be unreasonable but we must find some

firm basis upon which we can get together intelligently. Now you say this is your home—that your wife and children are here. I'd suggest you look about and try to locate them. That should put us on a realistic foundation."

Lee stared into the man's face. Father Gara had—it seemed to him—the clearest eyes he had ever found in a person; dark—yet the pupils were clearly outlined. The astute brain was revealed behind them. Lee got to his feet and headed for the stairway.

A few minutes later, he reappeared. He came down the stairs like a man on wooden legs. He headed for the lounge as though not sure he'd make it. He sat down.

"Did you find them?" Father Gara asked gently.

"No—no. Not Lorry—or the kids. There isn't even a nursery—"

"I should hope not," Faith Talbot said. "That's something I'd certainly have no use for."

"And you still feel that this is your home?" Father Gara pursued.

"I guess maybe not. I—I must have made some kind of a mistake. Maybe I live down the street—the road."

"No doubt. A natural error. Possibly you are new in this locality."

"That's true. I am. But—"

"But what, my son?"

Lee gazed about like a punch-drunk fighter looking for his opponent. "How could two houses be entirely the same—the layout—the rooms?"

"You must live close by. Possibly the same contractor built them both."

Lee considered. Then shook his head. "There's no house anywhere near us like ours. A small white cottage a few blocks—or a few hundred yards down the road. Nothing else near us—"

"I assure you," the girl said, coldly. "this house was vacant when I rented

it. The owner furnished it completely—"

"I'll grant you none of this stuff is ours. We didn't bring much furniture from Chicago. This is all carpeted. We only had a couple of rugs."

FAITH TALBOT seemed relieved. "As Father Gara said, a natural mistake, Mr—?"

"Bond—Lee Bond. I'm a writer. Fiction mostly."

"How interesting. And now I'm sure you'll want to be on your way. If your wife and children are waiting—"

The gentle, yet suave tones of Father Gara: "Just one moment, my dear. There's a point you overlooked. Mr. Lee—tell me—how did you know our names when you walked in here? You addressed me, correctly, as Father Gara, and the young lady as Faith Talbot."

"How did I know? Because I just got through writing about you. You're—you're—my characters. Why wouldn't I know you?"

The girl's face hardened. "This is insulting!"

"It is? You should talk to Sam Kane. Then you'd have reason to be insulted. He says you're nothing but cardboard."

Father Gara's eyes narrowed. "Sam Kane? Who is he?"

"An editor I write for who—"

Lee stopped, the words frozen on his lips. His eyes widened as he stared into a darker corner of the room. He catapulted from the lounge, skidded into the corner and came up with a bedraggled green object.

"Dedee's cap. The one that goes with her green snow-suit! She always put it on backwards and—where is she? What the hell have you done with her?"

Father Gara was on his feet. "Are you accusing us of murder? Do you

believe we have done away with your family?"

Lee did not answer immediately. He stood fondling the little cap, twisting it in his hands, pushing a finger through a tear in the crown. Suddenly he laughed with a touch of hysteria.

"No. I'm not accusing you of anything because none of this is real. You aren't real—either of you. I created you today, sweating over a hot typewriter. You aren't alive—you aren't flesh and blood. This is some sort of a nightmare."

Faith Talbot looked at her frocked companion with genuine concern in her eyes. "This lad's really for the birds. If they'd told me characters like him—"

"He does seem utterly insane," Father Gara replied, and it occurred to Lee that they'd begun discussing him like some inanimate thing—or, if animate, as though he couldn't understand them. He laughed again and strolled over to the lounge. He sat down, leaned back and smiled.

"You just go right ahead. Don't mind me. This is a rare privilege indeed. It isn't often an author gets the chance to observe his cast of characters in action. You act and I'll criticize."

"You'll get out of here," Faith Talbot flared, "or I'll see you in jail!"

Father Gara raised a restraining hand. "My dear. Control yourself. You know we can't contact the police. We—"

The competently beautiful girl seemed to catch and restrain herself. "Oh, certainly not. I forgot we have—no phone."

The last words trailed off somewhat lamely and had a synthetic ring as though they'd been hastily substituted for others.

LEE HAD begun to enjoy himself in a giddy lightheaded way he could not analyze or understand. Not that he particularly cared to. "Of course you can't call the police. You see, I know the plot. I wrote it. You don't care to have the police here when you plan to snoop around Grayhaven Prison tonight. Even though your activities will be basically innocent—"

Both the girl and Father Gara had suffered a simultaneous drooping of the lower jaw.

Father Gara said, "What do you know about Grayhaven Prison?"

Faith Talbot said, "What do you mean basically innocent?" Then she caught the furious glance of Father Gara and bit her carmined lip.

"I think you'd better keep your mouth shut," he snapped. "You're putting too many feet in it!"

"Oh, don't mind me," Lee chuckled, then cocked an appraising eye at Father Gara. "You know—I think Sam Kane was right. Sinister really is the word for you. You don't look like a priest and you don't act like one."

Father Gara took a step forward.

"No, that's not quite right," Lee went on. "You act like one but that's all it is. Acting. And a very unconvincing act at that." He turned his head to let his eyes stare vacantly at the wall. "Yes, I did do badly on that story. These two are nothing but cardboard."

Father Gara reached down and took Lee by his shirt-front. He had an iron hand attached to a steel arm. He drew Lee up until they were nose to nose—eye to eye. His voice was soft, gentle. "My dear young man—you're going to do a vast amount of talking in a very short time. You're going to explain a great deal or there will be a widow and some orphans on the road very quickly."

The arm pistoned out and Lee flew across the room. He back-pedalled desperately, but not fast enough to keep his head from hitting the wall with a terrific thump. A skyful of shooting stars went on display before his eyes and he was no longer among those present.

Lee came to and heard the voice of Faith Talbot, a complaining voice. "I wish you hadn't laid him there. He's bleeding all over the lounge."

"The flow is almost stopped," Father Gara said. "This clumsy fool has to be dealt with, Faith. I don't know—I really don't know. Of all the fantastic—"

"What do we do—kill him?"

Lee's eyes were still closed, but he could imagine Father Gara's frown. "Killing is dangerous," the cleric said. "Especially when we don't know the score. We know far too little about this character to eliminate him—at least at this time."

Lee could feel the blood oozing down the side of his head. He felt as though he'd been clouted with an anvil but he could still think.

He thought about Father Gara. Cleric indeed. Gara was no more of a priest than Geronimo! Just what Kane had said, Lee pondered. Too sinister. No priest. Then he'd have to have a new name—something suggestive. How about bloody Joe Boots? No. Too pulpy. Brack then? Sure. That was a good hard name. And something the gang called him. Hmmm. What else than Holy Joe? Perfect, Holy Joe Brack.

Faith Talbot had answered Brack's last words: "But that's the point—time. We haven't got much of it. We've got to be moving—and soon."

Brack replied, "Then we've got to take him with us. We wouldn't want to kill him here anyhow. We'll see what Steve says. We'll leave it up to

Steve to decide what's to be done."

A CHILL ran down Lee's spine. Steve? Who was Steve? Lee hadn't created any character named Steve! Lee heard the beating of the rain upon the house. He raised his hand to touch, gingerly, the gash across his temple. He opened his eyes. He said,

"Listen here, Brack—"

The frocked man reached out like lightning and jerked Lee to his feet. The man's eyes were black, shining gimlet points. "Listen you—talk and talk fast! How did you know I was using the name of Father Gara? How did you know my real name is Brack?"

"Holy Joe Brack?"

"How did you know that?"

"Because I just made it up. I decided you were out of character and needed another name. It sounded like a good one."

"A comedian, huh?" Brack appeared to be choking to death. Blood rushed to his face. A maniacal expression was glued tight around his mouth as he set his fingers into Lee's throat.

Lee clawed desperately at the hands seeking to stop his breath for good. He had no chance at all against the powerful Brack. Darkness began again to close in. Then he heard Faith Talbot's voice.

"No, Joe! You can't do it. You said yourself we didn't know enough about him. He must have New York connections. What he's said proves it—"

The voice faded out, but only for a moment. Lee's world cleared. Brack was still holding him by the collar. Brack said, "All right, spill it! Who do you know in New York City?"

"Ah—ah, Sam Kane. Editor at Fiction Publications."

"Is he any relation to Six-Finger Kane in Chicago?"

"N-not that I know of."

Brack raised his hot eyes to Faith Talbot. "You ever heard of a New York mob called Fiction Publications?"

"No."

"Ever hear of this creep he yapped about—Sam Kane?"

In a sudden gesture of disgust, Brack hurled Lee back onto the sofa. He doubled his fists and began pounding his knuckles together.

"Maybe I'm slipping but I don't get any of this. Damn it all to Hell! We're going along nice—just like clockwork. Then this nob-head pops in out of nowhere and begins pulling gags. I don't like it."

"But we can't stop now. We've got to take him with us and it's getting late. I'll change and we'll get going."

Using that for an exit line, Faith Talbot disappeared up the stairs while Holy Joe Brack took something out of his pocket. He pointed it at Lee.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Certainly. It's a gun."

Brack sneered heavily. "I thought maybe they might call it a popsicle in that Never Never Land you must have come from. Well, it ain't. It shoots bullets and I'll use it on you if you get out of line. I may use it anyhow."

"I'll be glad to stay in line," Lee assured him.

A few minutes later Faith Talbot came downstairs, apparently dressed for a hike in the country. Brack looked her over sourly and handed her the gun.

"Cover this monkey. I'll put on my boots."

HE STALKED from the room. When he returned, he had the lower part of his cassock tied up around his hips like an apron. He wore a leather hunting jacket and knee-high boots. He carried a sub-machine gun

under one arm. Three automatic pistols stuck out of various pockets.

Lee had been sitting on the lounge. He sprang to his feet. "Now wait a minute! This isn't right. What do you need those guns for? They aren't in the plot. Faith is only going up there to pray."

The girl stared at Lee. Then she turned her eyes, filled with sheer consternation, upon Brack. "Is there a nut house in this area somewhere?"

Brack, in turn was staring at Lee. "There must be," he muttered. "This coot is either a damn good actor or he's fresh out of a padded cell. Maybe I'd better tie his hands."

"That won't be necessary," Lee said with dignity. "I'll go with you. I'm looking forward to it. I want to see my story played out to the end. This girl kneeling in the rain praying for her sweetheart. Even though I wrote the story, I can't believe it. I've got to see it."

Brack shook his head slowly. When he spoke it was to no one in particular. "Wait 'til Steve gets a gander at this screw-ball. Steve'll unscrew him part by part to see what makes him work."

Faith Talbot came out of her bemusement. "Come on. We're late. Let's get started."

"By all means," Lee said. "I'm at your service."

Ten minutes later they had crossed the road and were moving into the deep woods beyond.

"You walk ahead, creep," Brack growled. "I'll mark a path with this flashlight. Try to step out of the beam and I'll cut you down like a dog."

"Did Faith bring her rosary?"

The girl's voice came—haunted, almost fearful. "I tell you, Joe, we got a goon on our hands. He's beginning to get me. What would I want of a

rosary? Would you tell me that?"

"Are you trying to tell me I don't know my own plot?" Lee asked. "Well, I do—most of it anyhow," he added doubtfully, then fell flat on his face, scratching himself and grinding mud into his mouth while cold rain drove down the back of his neck.

"Let him have it!" Faith pleaded. "Let him have it right now! He's going to wreck the whole play. I feel it in my bones."

"Not 'til Steve gives the word. Get up, you—and watch your big feet."

Lee scrambled erect and moved on through the forest, breaking a path for the other two. After a while he called back: "Listen, is this necessary? In the story you went most of the way by car up a lonely mountain road with the moon peeping out at intervals from behind dark clouds. And it wasn't raining either."

"One more yap out of you and I won't wait for Steve."

"That's a good idea," Faith urged. "Don't wait. Give it to him now."

"We've got to wait."

Lee said, "You're going to look awfully funny, Faith—"

"What do you mean awfully funny? Funny doing what?"

"Kneeling down in the woods praying for your lover in the death-cell. Why I'll bet you don't even know a prayer."

LEE FELT the barrel of the Tommy gun pressing into his back but he couldn't forebear another question: "We *are* heading for Grayhaven, aren't we?"

Faith's voice was fearful now. "Brack! How did he know that?"

"The fool said he wrote the story, didn't he?"

"Talk sense."

"Okay. We're walking north through

the woods from the Pine Road. Where else could we be going but to Grayhaven? He'd know that even if he is nuts."

"By the way—there's an execution scheduled for tonight isn't there?"

"They haven't even got a chair at Sing Sing. Shut up and keep walking."

This was disturbing indeed to Lee. His characters had proved unconvincing and now his plot was showing holes. Inaccuracy in detail. That was unpardonable. He sighed. Probably he'd be better off in the long run digging ditches. How could you have a girl praying for a lover walking the last mile in a prison where they didn't even execute people? Inexcusable. Lee's head hurt like the very devil and he was beginning to tire.

"How much farther do we have to go?"

"This is it. Shut up or I'll knock you cold."

Now Lee saw the high, forbidding wall dead ahead. Above, and on either side, were search lights swinging continuously in monotonous arcs. But in the driving rain they made hardly a dent in the stifling darkness.

"Okay," Brack whispered. "This is it."

"What do we do?" Lee asked.

"We sit tight."

"But—"

"Shut up!" The words were a vicious snarl that chilled Lee. He stood there in the cold driving rain. Waiting—wondering.

But not for long. Soon a scraping noise rose up through the droning patter of the rain; grew louder; a form materialized nearby, above them.

A choked whisper from Faith: "Steve! Steve! My darling!"

Strangely, Lee found room in his fear and wonder for the thought: I

wasn't entirely wrong. She *is* human—capable of love. She's not entirely cardboard. She loves this Steve—whoever he is.

Lee was soon to see. A pale cruel face loomed close—a twisted mouth; a shaven pate; a form in prison garb; a voice like steel grating on steel. "What goes on? Who's this jerk?"

"He stumbled in on us. Had to bring him along. I'll explain later." This from Brack who thrust the Tommy gun into Steve's hands.

Then Brack pulled two of his other guns and motioned to Lee. "Get going, you—back the way we came."

Blindly, Lee stumbled off through the gloom. From behind him he heard the conversation.

The harsh voice of Steve. "Did everything go okay? How did the priest's rig work?"

"Swell, darling," Faith said. "And we've got a house over on Pine Road with a car waiting. Canada isn't so far. We'll be there soon."

Brack said, "I'll tell you about this creep we've got with us. You'll probably want to knock him off. Me—I wasn't sure."

AT THAT moment a sound like a dozen sirens split the air. Lights appeared on the wall. Giant lights that had not been working before. They looked about like the eyes of mad giants seeking a victim. Lead whined through the air.

Lee thought: The hell with this. It isn't my story any more. He yelled to the searching guards, "This way! Over here! Over this way!"

Brack and Steve cursed luridly and Lee flung himself to the ground. Then Lee heard Steve's agonized voice as a hazy cloud came up all around them.

"Gas! Look out! The bastards are trying to gas us to death!"

The stuff bit into Lee's throat and lungs. Darkness seeped into his brain.



The gas was eating deeper and deeper; choking, strangling stuff. Lee coughed and opened his eyes. He was lying on the lounge with Lorry standing over him holding an ammonia bottle in her hands.

She drew it back and the anxiety in her face turned to relief. "He's coming to," she said. "Thank heaven."

Behind her, Lee saw a leather-faced rustic individual he took for a native. He'd seen plenty of them walking and riding—stiff-faced and tight-lipped—up and down the roads. This one smiled.

"Sure Mizz Bond. He's all right. He's comin' fine."

"What happened?" Lee asked feebly.

"Darling, Mr. Larch found you lying by the road with a gash across your temple. What happened? Did a car hit you?"

"No. It was Father Gara—I mean Holy Joe Brack. He threw me across the room and—"

Lorry glanced quickly at Mr. Larch. "He sounds delirious. Do you think—?"

Larch shook his head. "Naw! He's all right. Just a little fuddlement."

Lee closed his eyes tight, then opened them. "Oh yes—there was a car, but it went by. It didn't hit me—at least I didn't know it hit me."

"After you got bopped, son, you wouldn't be in a position to know much one way or another. Put him to bed, Mizz Bond, and watch him. If he don't get no worse I wouldn't waste any money on a doctor."



The next morning Lee hobbled to

the phone. He put in a call and soon Sam Kane was on the wire. Kane's voice was as cheerful and hearty as usual.

"Hello, Lee. Been working on that yarn?"

"No—yes—well not exactly—yet. There's a question I'd like to ask you."

"Shoot."

"About that brother of yours. I've got a vague recollection you told me about him once."

"Maybe I did."

"Was he by any chance a—a convict? Did he ever break out of jail?"

"Hell, no."

"Well, then, did he get mixed up with the Chicago underworld under the name of Six-Finger Kane?"

"Underworld? Of course not. We called him Six Finger because he was one of those guys who got an idea every ten minutes. I put money into more of his damn schemes—"

"But he wasn't a crook?"

Kane's tone became a trifle cold. "I said he wasn't. We called him Six-Finger because he had his fingers in so many pies at once—never less than a dozen. By the way—you aren't drunk this early in the day, are you?"

"No—no. I'm just plotting. Trying to jog my memory."

"Well, keep my family out of your yarns. And how about getting that rewrite in?"

"Will do."

A few minutes later Lorry came in with a cup of coffee. She said, "Darling, drink this and then we'll see if you're strong enough to go out."

"Out where?"

"Why, to find some excavating work. Isn't that what you planned?"

"Don't be silly. I don't even know how to hold a shovel. When the mail comes, let me know. I'll be upstairs."

THE END

BIG JOB ON LUNA

ALL WE have to do is get to the moon. Once there, our work is all set up for us. According to Dr. Dinsmore Alter, director of the Griffith Observatory at Los Angeles, astronomers working on the moon will be able to probe twice as far into space from that point than they possibly could working from Earth, even with far larger instruments.

The Earth has a disturbing atmosphere that blurs our view of other planets, and even gives an impression of stars twinkling. Also, the light emitted from the blue sky fogs the photographic plates. This will be entirely eliminated using the black sky of the moon as background. The black sky will also offer contrast so that other galaxies will show up more plainly.

Even our own sun will look entirely different to us from the moon's viewpoint. It will be observable all through the lunar daytime, under much better conditions than are offered on Earth during even a total eclipse.

—E. Bruce Yakes

SPACE MEDICINE

A WHOLLY FASCINATING picture of interplanetary travel and the seriousness with which it is now being considered, is revealed by the most interesting little pamphlet yet released by university presses, a booklet called "Space Medicine". It is really a collection of papers and essays by technicians and scientists who are connected with the "Department of Space Medicine" in Randolph Field, Texas! Can you imagine the existence of such a place and name a mere ten years ago?

Here, in cold-blooded mathematical and symbolic terms, a group of scientists (most of them rocket men who escaped the Russians) analyze the physiological problems which men are likely to encounter in seeking interplanetary travel. The famous von Braun opens the symposium with a discussion of the first step into space—the building of a three-stage chemical-powered rocket to enable a space station to be constructed as a stepping stone to later trips to the Moon and the nearer planets. He doesn't quibble about the facts; money is the only present requirement, he says. Technology is ready.

—Merritt Linn

How To Land Your Space Ship

By JON BARRY

PRACTICALLY every conceivable aspect of interplanetary flight has been weighed and considered by the engineers—and nothing appears to be impossible. One unusual and rarely considered side of rocket flight is the matter of atmospheric heating—and now that has been attended to.

Astronomers have calculated what happens to a freely falling body coming in toward Earth from great distances. The answer—obviously judged from experience with meteorites as well as from theory—is that the object becomes intensely hot, hot enough in many cases to melt and even vaporize. Even such a light little thing as a chicken feather falling freely toward Earth from a height of a thousand miles would reach a temperature of six hundred degrees due to thin atmospheric friction!

Any objects dropped from rockets in free fall would similarly reach such extravagant temperatures. Were a rocket to fall freely that way, its skin would simply melt. Even at altitudes where the air is so rarefied, there is enough friction at such speeds to cause intense heating. Obviously this requires a re-examination of some familiar ideas.

One of the possible techniques for landing a space ship involves using the atmosphere as a "brake". A ship coming in from the Moon would assume an elliptical orbit around the Earth, dipping in and out of the atmosphere and dissipating its energy of fall as heat against the atmosphere. This technique is very fine and logical and would work out in practice. But one thing must be watched. The temperature of the ship's outer skin must never be allowed to reach the dangerous melting point and, since the main way in which it might lose such heat is through radiation, the process is certain to be inordinately time-consuming. But it is perfectly feasible.

The favorite trick of fictional space-ships' using the Earth as a brake, then, must be modified. Sure, they can do it, but at a very slow rate, carefully controlled so as to prevent overheating. There is no zip-plunge permissible—the orbit must be a long, thin cigar-like ellipse and the heat dissipation must be as slow as molasses. Space ships melt too easily!

HAZARDS OF SPACE

By Paul Jate

SCIENCE-FICTION writers and amateur engineers who are concerned so seriously with space travel, rarely investigate the concepts of living conditions within rockets, satellites or space suits. A little reflection on this business of acclimatizing to the strange conditions produces some interesting results.

For example, there is the matter of temperature. For a long while, people had the hoary idea that "freezing in the absolute zero of space" was a genuine problem. Fortunately this thought is pretty well dissipated by now because it is generally understood that, in the vacuum of space, temperature *per se* is meaningless. In a rocket or a spacesuit you can only lose your heat energy by radiation or, for that matter, you gain most of it in the same way. As a result, the problem is rather one of getting rid of too much heat. In a rocket or spacesuit you can prevent that by silvering the exterior, which of course would then reflect the incident heat and light energy, but any human being is literally a "chemical furnace", and the body is continually giving off large amounts of heat. These must be removed or a human can literally roast in his own juices!

That some kind of refrigerating mechanism can be designed is of course to be expected. Probably it will be little more than a large-surfaced condenser through which the warm air is passed and to which it gives up its heat.

Another captivating idea that is rarely considered in discussions of life aboard spaceships is the fact that, when the ship is not accelerating, no convection of air within it takes place, and the result is that each person moves about in an aura of stationary exhaled gases, disturbed only by his motion. A sleeping man might suffocate in his own exhaled carbon dioxide and water vapor! Furthermore, the constituent gases of the ship's atmosphere might easily separate into their respective layers!

This problem is easily solved, of course. It requires nothing more than an electric fan or series of fans to stir and rouse up the stagnant air, keeping it in constant random circulation.



They lived their lives, unaware of prying eyes

GODS

UNDER

GLASS

By GUY

ARCHETTE

The microscope showed a tiny world filled

with tiny people. They seemed helpless.

So how could they wield such awful power?

RAL DUCKED under the jagged arch of the white stone archway and entered the smoothed-out room. The man who rose to greet him was old. His description agreed with that which Orn had given for Grul, the superintendent.

"I'm Ral, Kan Grul," he said, extending the identification card.

"Good, Kan Ral," the older man said. "We're shorthanded. You'll start your duties at once. We can go through the formalities later. Follow me." He accepted the identification card and tossed it on the glazed stone desk, then went to another arched opening, his stride quick and nervous. "We aren't saving enough of them," he said over his shoulder to Ral.

The two men came out onto an exposed field of roughened stone. It covered an area of several acres. The surface was of pinkish coloration, honeycombed with openings, spaced irregularly, but seldom less than two feet apart and seldom more than five.

Ral noticed many men scattered over the area, some motionless, others running with small objects in their arms. He started to ask Grul about them.

"Here!" Grul exclaimed suddenly, dropping to his knees beside one of the ragged holes. "Watch now. This will be a good one to break you in on."

Ral glanced curiously into the hole. Greenish soapy water filled it to within an inch or two of the top. The in-

terior widened out roomily.

There was movement in the depths, just under the water's surface. Something living, though Ral had never seen anything alive except a human.

Suddenly interested, he dropped down beside Grul. The queer creature under the water was not humanoid in any respect. It was slightly larger in bulk, a whitish bulge from which extended a thick long tube that weaved about in a suggestion of searching.

The thick tube was trying to turn down and contact the bulbous body. A wound in the body was growing slowly, opening like a mouth.

"It may be like its parent," Grul was explaining. "If so, leave it alone."

Something emerged from the wound-like opening. It looked remarkably like a hand. A human hand.

"No!" Grul said. "Now watch! It has to be gotten out of the water in a matter of seconds or it'll die."

The wound abruptly became a gaping hole, and from it struggled a freakish looking form. Ral watched Grul's hands dip in the water, reaching down, until his fingers gripped the human and drew it to the surface. A long slender strand from the human's belly draped down into the wound of the strange creature.

"Watch closely," Grul said sharply.

Holding the human with one hand, he pinched the cord with thumb and fingernail. The severed end dropped into the water and drew back into the wound, which was already growing smaller.

"Now," Grul grunted. He rose from his knees and squatted, laying the small human on his lap, then tying the severed cord into a tight knot.

This done, he turned the human over on its belly and brought the flat of his hand down on its rump sharply but lightly. Nothing happened. He repeated the slap. And suddenly the hu-

man was emitting strange sounds.

"THERE you are," Grul said, rising to his feet with the human in his hands. "A baby."

"A what, Kan Grul?" Ral asked politely.

"A baby!" Grul repeated. "What all humans start out as. You were like this once. So was I."

"You mean," Ral said unbelievingly, "that this is the way I—*began*?"

"Of course," Grul said. "We all did. I hope you see what I mean by shorthanded. As our numbers increase we'll have more of us rescuing the babies before their mothers eat them or they drown. Now come with me. And watch your step so that you don't fall. The openings are sharp. You'd cut yourself badly. Die, maybe."

"Die?" Ral echoed.

"Cease to live," Grul said. "Go to sleep and never wake up."

"Oh," Ral said, his head spinning from this rush of new ideas and things.

He followed Grul to a far side of the large area. Other humans were rushing in the same direction, converging upon them, and almost everyone carried what Grul had called a baby.

Ral could make out the destination now. It was a rather large opening into a raised mound of white stone, and there other humans were taking the babies from the humans who rushed forward, and were then rushing through the large opening with them, carrying them to some unknown destination.

"You came this way when you were a baby," Grul said. From his tone he was evidently getting great satisfaction from the series of surprises he was springing on Ral.

Grul left the baby with a waiting stranger and turned back without

pause to the business at hand.

"You saw what I did, Ral," he said. "Do the same. Run from hole to hole. When you see one of the Vairns developing the birth opening wait—until you gain the experience to estimate the time—and rescue the baby if it is one. If it's just an infant Vairn forget about it. I've got to get back to the entrance and be there when the next recruit shows up."

"Wait!" Ral called after him. "For how long must I do this?"

But Grul didn't seem to hear him.

"Until the overseer tells you to quit for the day," a voice beside him said musically.

HE JERKED his head in the direction of the sound. It was another human, but shaped differently from himself or any of the others he had grown up with. He studied the differences with a mixture of feelings he couldn't analyze.

"Are you human?" he asked.

"Yes," the creature said, smiling. "I belong to the other type of human. You'll get used to me. My name is Lahl. What's yours?"

"Ral," he said, still staring.

"I like my shape better than I would yours," Lahl said. "I wonder why there are two different shapes. It seems odd."

"Your shape is—different," Ral said. "I like it—but I'm glad you have it, not me."

Lahl's skin turned pink. She turned and ran, shouting over her shoulder, "I'll see you at rest period."

Ral watched her run away, frowning at the strange feelings he was experiencing. Then, remembering Grul's instructions, he hurried in a different direction.

He paused at a nearby opening. A shout made him look up. It was another human shaped like himself, wav-

ing him on and telling him to find an area of his own.

He ran on until he was well away from all the others, then started peering down into hole after hole. At the tenth he spied the telltale birth opening appearing on the Vairn. He squatted and watched.

After a long time the opening expanded. A ropelike thing appeared. It followed by a slightly bulging end. It was a small replica of the Vairn.

He watched it for several moments as it wiggled around the pool. Its parent sensed its presence and began exploring for it with its thick elongation. Instinctively the baby evaded it, and finally the baby darted through a small opening in the floor of the pool and vanished.

Ral stood up and went to another hole. There was a human baby. It was clamped by suction to the end of the thick trunk of its parent. It was dead.

He watched in fascination as the Vairn slowly swallowed it. It was, he saw, shaped something like Lahl, though its chest was more like his own.

Now, suddenly, he realized that if he had been running from hole to hole as Grul told him to he might have discovered it in time to rescue it.

He began running rapidly from hole to hole. He found a Vairn with a small birth opening. He made a mental note of the hole and dashed on. After a quick look at several pools without finding another he returned to the Vairn about to give birth, and waited.

Finally a tiny hand appeared. A few moments later he had safely rescued the baby. It was shaped like himself, in the differences between the two types of humans.

He ran with it to the place where he was supposed to take it. When he neared it he looked around for Lahl.

It wasn't until after he had given up his cargo that he spied her bringing in one of her own.

He waited for her. After she had given up the baby she had brought in she came to him.

"I got one too, Lahl," Ral said proudly.

"That's good," she said.

A loud shout sounded.

"That's the signal for the rest period, Ral," Lahl said.

"Then we can rest together," he said eagerly. "I want to study why we are different. Where will we go?"

"You will follow those of your own kind," Lahl said. "It isn't permitted for the two types to be together."

"Why?" Ral asked.

"If you must know," Lahl said, "your type has been known to chase after my type. There's no telling whether your type would kill my type or not, but they certainly chased us."

"That must be true," Ral said. "I myself feel an urge to chase and catch you, though whether I would kill you if I caught you I don't know."

"Then why don't you?" Lahl taunted.

Ral took a quick step toward her. She ran swiftly away, looking back over her shoulder at him in alarm. There was fear also, and something else. And suddenly Ral realized her face mirrored the same feelings he himself was experiencing. It slowly dawned on him, uncomfortably, that he was finding it harder to keep from chasing Lahl.

"I wonder why I want to do that?" he muttered.

RAL QUICKLY caught onto the finer points of his task of rescuing babies before they had a chance to drown. There was a reason for this. With each baby he had an excuse to

run to the receiving station. The more he ran to the receiving station the more opportunities he had to see Lahl.

But somehow she never seemed to be there when he was. And each disappointment added another log to the fire consuming him.

He tried to understand this strange inner fire. If he had had the concept of insanity in his meager collection of ideas he might have put it down to that.

"Why do I want to chase and catch Lahl?" he asked himself over and over again. Each time he asked himself that, the visualization of running after her and reaching her possessed him, sending shivers up his back and causing perspiration to erupt on his forehead.

"Do I want to kill her?" he asked himself. And in the visualization of catching her all he could picture was encircling her with his arms and dragging her to the ground while she struggled against him, that strange expression on her face. An expression that revealed the same inner tension and fire that raged within his own being.

The work periods and rest periods passed slowly. And finally a gradual change came about in the world. The ever present Light began to fade. It became harder to see into the depths of the pools where the Vairn mothers rested. The translucence of the white rock structure of the world lessened until it became a dead white.

It became necessary to go slower. More and more other workers were having accidents, becoming incapacitated with badly cut legs or even dying while their blood fled from their body through open gashes. At the same time there was an ever-growing influx of new humans so that it became necessary to cover fewer and fewer of the pools in the constant patrol to find babies being born.

At last the waning Light reached a stable low and remained there. It was no longer possible to see clearly as far as the receiving station, but it was possible still to see into the pools well enough to determine if birth was about to take place, and be there to rescue the human if the offspring happened to be human.

Ral's inner fire had also settled into a stable low in intensity. For long periods he didn't even think of Lahl. Instead, his thoughts concerned the babies. In the rest periods he learned more and more of the whole setup of things. The babies were taken to nurseries where they were fed and taken care of until they could learn to take care of themselves. Then they were allowed to grow up, which they did quickly. Ral could remember enough of his youth to know what happened from then on. Life became a continual game. And eventually the growing humans were taken from their group and sent to areas where they would perform tasks such as the one he had been assigned to.

RAL BECAME curious about it all. One day during a rest period he went back to the room where he had first met Grul. Grul didn't remember him at first.

"Oh, yes, Ral," he said when memory returned. "I remember you now. What brings you to visit me?"

"I want to know more about things," Ral said. "What is the purpose of things? How did things begin? Why are our mothers so different from us? Why aren't all their offspring human? Why are there two types of humans?"

"Wait a minute!" Grul laughed. "One question at a time. You're like all the rest, asking questions that have no answers. I've asked them myself, without finding an answer."

"Oh," Ral said, disappointed.

"But I've found what I thought might be some of the answers," Grul went on. "I'll tell them to you, Kan Ral. You may believe them or not, as you please."

"I'll believe them, Kan Grul," Ral said eagerly.

"We'll see," Grul said tolerantly. "The beginning is not too far back, so far as I can find out. I was told that once, though he is dead now, there was one human all alone. Where he came from he didn't know, but one day he watched a human being born. He saw it gasp and drown. After that he watched for others, and finally managed to rescue several. He took care of them, and as they grew up he saw the similarity between them and himself, and realized that he had begun in the same way.

"But when they grew to full size trouble developed. They began to have trouble between the two types, and finally he separated them, keeping them apart and setting up police groups within each group to keep them separated.

"And all the time the principal task was to rescue the new humans from being drowned.

"As to the why of things, we've built up a theory that life progresses in stages. The form that gives birth to us is the lesser stage. Some day it will vanish. And someday we will go on to a still higher form of life, the new creature springing from our side just as we sprang from the side of the Vairn. Though how that will come about and when it will begin there is no way of knowing."

Ral's eyes were round with awe and fascination at the grand conception being unfolded by Grul's words.

"I wonder what the Vairn sprang from?" he said.

"We don't know," Grul said.

"There are other forms of life. We've seen them from time to time. Some even think that the food we eat is alive. It's somewhat similar to the Vairn, though much smaller and without a long neck. But it's the same food the Vairn consumes, so perhaps it isn't alive."

"Why do the two types of humans fear each other?" Ral asked.

"Each other?" Grul asked. "It's mostly that the other type fears us. I don't know why that is. I myself have felt the urge to chase the other type, and have never been able to discover why."

"Has any of us ever caught one of the others?" Ral asked eagerly.

"Yes," Grul said. "They had big fights, and each type came to the rescue of its fellow, separating them. Afterwards they didn't know why they did it, and were too ashamed to talk about it."

"I—" Ral began. But he stopped. How could he confess he felt the same urge? Grul would laugh at him, or even worse, take him away from where he could occasionally see Lahl as she paused, watching him warily, ready to flee if he took a step toward her. . .

THE LIGHT was growing stronger.

Slowly but noticeably. Ral could remember that a few rest periods ago it was less strong than now. He reached down into the pool and expertly scooped up the newborn human, noting idly that it was of the other type, and placed it on his lap while he cut the cord and tied it into a knot. Then the turning over of the infant and administering of a quick slap to start it to making its sounds. It squalled.

Ral started to rise to his feet, then paused, startled into motionlessness. Lahl stood not more than ten feet from him, her eyes large and round,

her nostrils flickering from rapid breathing.

What was she doing here, deliberately courting trouble?

Ral slowly laid the new human on the rock floor beside him and stood up, careful to make no sudden movement that might send Lahl into precipitate flight. The fire that had smouldered for so long was rising within him like a blazing inferno, but with supreme control he remained calm outwardly, not even speaking.

His eyes dared to leave Lahl for brief glances over the surrounding field. None of the other humans seemed to notice them. They were all intent on their tasks.

Slowly Ral took a step toward Lahl. Except for an increase in her trembling she didn't move.

Did she *want* him to catch her? He viewed the question with amazement. It had been unthinkable, yet now it seemed a possibility. Did she want to die? The idea dismissed itself as being even more incredible than the reality.

He took another step toward her, no longer aware of his surroundings, aware only of Lahl, her large round eyes staring at him, her trembling body.

Another step, and Lahl was sinking to her knees, her breath coming in audible sobs that spoke of fear and inability to flee, and in some indescribable way of something beyond experience, a drawing toward what she couldn't flee from.

Another step, and she was on her knees, her arms held up to ward him off, her body arched backward in an effort to keep as far from him as possible. She planted her knees farther apart, drawing back from him, whimpering, her red lips open in an oval.

Another step, and he was bending over her, weakness taking his own

body. Weakness and a fire at white heat.

He dropped to his knees, hearing his own breath in its heavy gasping as it bellowed through his mouth in gusts too fierce for his nostrils. Lahl drew back further as he leaned toward her, reached for her.

Minutes or hours or eternities later as he lay exhausted by the miracle of discovery her soft laugh came to his ears. He lifted his head from her soft breast to see the cause of her laugh. Her eyes were no longer round and filled with fear. They were alive with a strange light that held no hint of fear.

Her hand playfully rumbled his hair. He stared in surprise for a second, then grinned and tried to rise. Lahl pulled him down, forcing his head to rest against her breast again. When he let it lie there she stroked his hair slowly, absently. When he stole a look upward at her face her eyes were closed as though she were asleep.

But he knew she wasn't.

A long time later she said almost inaudibly, "Ral..."

"Yes?" he said, not moving from the comfort of his position.

"We must tell the others."

"No!" Ral said, lifting his head in alarm. "They would separate us."

"No they wouldn't," Lahl said, her voice dreamy but supremely confident. "Nothing will ever separate us. I will never run from you again and you will never chase me, for I will come to you. Often."

She spoke slowly, dreamy contentment in every inflection of her voice. A contentment that Ral felt within himself. Different from anything he had felt before, just as everything in the world seemed different now.

Suddenly a sound startled him. His head jerked up. He looked about him, aware of his surroundings for the first

time in a very long time.

Every way he looked there was a close wall of humans standing there, watching...

He sprang to his feet with a grunt of alarm. Lahl was on her feet also, and his arm went about her, drawing her against his side, his eyes staring challenge and defiance.

But no one stepped forward to answer his challenge. The faces that stared back at him were peculiarly expressionless. One after another started to turn away under his continued stare. The crowd began to move off about its business again.

WITHOUT thinking, Ral and Lahl began hunting for signs of impending birth together. They bent to stare into the pools at the lazily moving Vairn, staying so close that their sides touched. When they chanced upon a new human just being born it was Lahl who reached down to bring it out of the water, and it was Ral who expertly severed and tied the birth cord.

As soon as the cord was tied Lahl turned the infant over and spanked it sharply. It cried. Lahl glanced up from her task, her eyes meeting Ral's. For no accountable reason they laughed together. Then they were running toward the reception station together, a strangely natural intimacy holding them together.

After they had handed the baby over to one of the waiting attendants they started back toward the general area where they had been, trotting smoothly side by side.

Someone ran past them very swiftly, closely pursued by another. Ral noted that the one being pursued was of the other type, while the one after her was of his own type.

He and Lahl had stopped. They looked at each other now and laughed

knowingly, then hurried forward again, hand in hand. Screams came from off to the side, frantic, then dying off abruptly.

Lahl frowned in alarm and started toward the direction of the sound. Ral restrained her.

"Let them alone," he said. "They're discovering why there are the chasers and the chased."

REST PERIOD and work period followed each other in rapid succession. They were no longer as they had been before. More and more of the two types were pairing off and working as pairs.

Ral and Lahl paid little attention to the others. They were finding something new to explore in their life as a pair with each rest period and work period. Where before they had been accustomed to sleeping completely alone, they learned that they found greater comfort even in sleep when close together.

They found in each other an appreciative audience for their own thoughts, a more sympathetic audience for their single fears and problems.

And often they explored the miracle that they had been the first to discover.

Even when they disagreed on what they planned on doing at any time, such as when Ral wished to go one direction and Lahl wished to go a different one, they argued about it without considering the possibility of separating and each going a different direction.

There came the day when another of the same type as Ral tried to chase Lahl...

"Ral!" Lahl screamed, dodging behind him.

But Ral didn't even hear her. A new something possessed him, controlling him far more violently than had

the emotions of that first discovery with Lahl.

Even as Lahl screamed and dodged behind him Ral was leaping toward the human, his hands and knees pounding on the surprised and somewhat stupefied man.

The man made no attempt to defend himself. Instead, when he recovered from his surprise he beat a hasty retreat, blood staining his skin from scratches inflicted by Ral's fingernails.

Ral stared after him, letting him go, and amazed at the intensity of his attack. Suddenly he was realizing that he would rather die than allow Lahl to be shared by another.

"Why?" he asked, turning questioning eyes to Lahl.

But she was in no mood to analyze his feelings. She came to him and huddled close to him, feeling strangely subdued. The fear that had possessed her was replaced by a feeling of security in Ral's presence.

Suddenly she felt dizzy. She swayed and would have fallen if Ral hadn't caught her and lowered her gently.

"What's the matter, Lahl?" he asked anxiously.

"I—I don't know," she whispered, looking up at him with large eyes.

They huddled together for a long time, until Lahl felt better. Finally she felt herself again. They rose and went to hunt for new babies again.

THE WORK and rest periods continued their progression. At times Lahl became irritable for no reason. Ral studied her with disquiet, trying to understand what possessed her.

Then one day as they were coming back from having delivered a baby to the receiving station he stopped suddenly. Lahl noticed he had stopped and came back. He was staring at her with surprise.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"You're different, Lahl," he said wonderingly. "Have you noticed you're getting big in the middle?"

"No!" she said, surprised. She looked down at herself, twisting her body to get different views of herself. "Why—I believe I am!" She gasped. "What's the matter with me?"

Ral had no answer. And gradually they grew less alarmed about it. When they discovered that many others of the same human type as Lahl were also growing big in the middle they were much relieved.

It was shortly after this that they met Grul as he was returning from having brought another new worker.

"Kan Grul!" Ral called happily.

"Oh, hello, Kan Ral," Grul said, stopping. He looked at Lahl curiously.

"Remember, Kan Grul," Ral said, a note of gloating in his voice, "when I came to you with so many questions you couldn't answer? We, Lahl and I, have discovered one answer—why there are two types of humans. It is so that they can find greater pleasure together than could either alone."

"I've observed that, Kan Ral," Grul said.

Ral frowned suddenly. "But," he said hesitatingly, "in finding that out we have found another mystery to get an answer to. Why are the others like Lahl getting big? At times it scares us."

"Have you noticed," Grul said slowly, "the resemblance the new shape has to the shape of the Vairn? I've been wondering if perhaps this new shape is not the first preparation of our life form for the birth of the next?"

He looked at the expression of dawning surprise on Ral's face, then turned and hurried on.

"THAT CAN'T be so!" Ral exclaimed, staring at Grul's departing back. "It—it's never happened before. It can't happen."

He waited for Lahl to answer. When she remained silent he turned his head to look at her.

"It isn't so!" he shouted. "Tell me you agree with me!"

"No, Ral," Lahl said. "I'm afraid it is so. Already I feel the movement of another life inside. It's so—and I'm afraid!"

"Then if it's so," Ral gulped, "it's so. But don't be afraid. I'll be with you all the time. I wonder what it will look like. Will it be as different from us as we are from the Vairn? Probably."

"Probably," Lahl echoed miserably.

"It should be interesting to see what it's like when it comes," Ral said. "And the others. An awful lot of your type is getting big now, and every one will produce one. Then maybe they'll keep running around taking them away from us so we won't eat them, like we do with the babies of the Vairns."

"Some of the Vairn babies are Vairns," Lahl said. "I hope—" She stopped, biting her lips.

"I hope it isn't like us," Ral said. He frowned. "Or do I? What would we care if it was like us? I want to be the new type of life."

"I don't," Lahl said. "I want it to be just like you, Ral."

"Like me?" Ral said incredulously. "But how could it? I don't have anything to do with it."

"That's true," Lahl agreed. "Only—you're the only human I really like and I think I will like this one, so I want it to look like you."

"We'll have to keep watch for it," Ral said. "The minute an opening appears in your side you must lie

down and be very quiet so you won't hurt. If it hurts you I'll kill it no matter what it is." He frowned threateningly at her enlarged middle.

"You will not," Lahl said firmly. "After all, you have hurt me yourself and it only drew us together."

"This isn't the same," Ral said.

"It is," Lahl said. . . .

GRUL'S WORDS spread rapidly. An air of excitement settled. Everywhere humans were pausing in their work to discuss the coming new race and speculate on what its shape would be, and how it would affect the rather stable state of life that existed at present.

No one doubted that the new form would be infinitely superior to the human. As superior as the human was to the Vairn.

And everyone waited tensely for the first sign of birth, the opening of a wound in the side of one of the enlarged humans.

Lahl enlarged more and more. Ral worried about it.

"Maybe you will burst," he said.

"I don't think so," Lahl said serenely. Then, to turn his thoughts into safer channels, "Have you noticed, Ral, that the only ones to get big in the middle are my type of human?"

"No!" Ral said. "I'm sure you're wrong. Not long ago I'm sure I saw one of my type that way. In fact—" He became silent, brooding.

"What's the matter now?" Lahl asked after this had gone on some time.

"I wonder if I'm going to get big too," Ral said. "I don't think I'd like it."

Lahl laughed, shaking all over with her mirth.

"What are you laughing at?" Ral scowled.

"I was trying to picture you getting big in the middle," Lahl gasped. "I—I can't even imagine it."

Ral looked speculatively at his middle.

"I think I'm getting a little big already," he said.

"It's only my type that's big," Lahl insisted.

"I'll find one of my type that's big and prove you're wrong," Ral said.

But he searched in vain and finally had to admit grudgingly that Lahl was right. All the humans with big middles were of her type of human.

And though he studied his middle wistfully, it didn't enlarge.

The rest periods and work periods passed by. Lahl found it more and more tiring to keep up with Ral. She didn't complain, but he noticed her lagging behind, and slowed his pace to match her own.

Their teamwork in rescuing newly born babies slowly changed until he was again doing it all by himself except for one task. Lahl cut the cord with her fingernails and tied the knot in it.

Other than that she merely followed him around or kept within a few steps of him while he darted from pool to pool without wandering away from her.

THEN ONE day while he was bent over reaching for a newly born baby he heard her scream. Thinking it was another of his type chasing her he dropped the baby back into the water to drown and leaped to his feet. But she was alone.

He rushed to her. "What is it?" he demanded anxiously.

"I don't know," she groaned. "It was pain. Terrible pain. Here." She pointed to her bulge.

"I'll slap it and make it stop hurting

you," Ral said, raising his hand.

"No!" Lahl said sharply. "You'll do nothing of the kind."

She gasped suddenly and ground her teeth together with a sound that sent shudders down Ral's spine. He stared helplessly.

When she swayed weakly and would have fallen, he caught her and lowered her gently. She lay gasping in lungful of air, her chest heaving spasmodically. Finally the pain stopped. She smiled weakly up at him.

"I think the new creature is going to be born," she whispered.

"No," Ral said, looking at the tightly stretched skin of the bulge. "I can't see any wound opening up so—"

He gasped audibly, then shouted at the top of his voice. Others ran toward him, gathering around and watching curiously...

Mysteriously, Grul appeared through the crowd and came forward to take charge. Ral glanced at him gratefully, then concentrated on comforting Lahl. He held one of her hands, patting her cheek clumsily with his free hand, and wiping the perspiration from her forehead when it flowed into her eyes.

He heard Grul's interested hmms and grunts, but after a brief glance at what was happening he didn't have the courage to look again. His thoughts were full of self recrimination and self torture, for, though he didn't understand the how or why, he now knew that in some way he was responsible for what was happening to Lahl.

Finally her features relaxed. She was so still that Ral thought she must be dead. Then she opened her eyes and smiled at him weakly.

Seeing the misery reflected on his face her smile changed to tender

pity. With tears blinding him he smiled at her, trying to match her courage.

Abruptly their attention was diverted by the familiar squall of a baby. Lahl half lifted her head and Ral jerked around in the direction of the sound. Grul stood there grinning at them, a perfectly normal baby in his hands.

Lahl held out her arms, an intense yearning shining from her eyes. An impulse that he later puzzled over made Grul stoop down and gently place the baby in her arms.

He stood up, watching Lahl hug the baby close, a tenderness in her features that had never before been on the face of any human.

And abruptly, from high above, an intense light bathed the plane, causing everything to stand out in stark brightness. As one, every eye turned upward toward the source of the light.

It was far away and incredibly large. Larger than all the known world. It held their attention for a long silent minute, then as their eyes adjusted to the light they turned their heads away from it to something even more startling.

A sagging surface of transparent luminosity hung suspended over them, smoother than anything they had ever before seen. Behind it, inverted so that it seemed to hang upside down far above the strange film, was a world similar to their own.

And in back of that, seemingly at the very end of space itself, holding within its depths, its bright blue depths, a light of supreme intelligence, was a solitary eye...

LOOK AT this!"

"Get that fat head of yours away from the field microscope so I can then, Jim," Dick Blanchard said

goodnatureedly. "Let me see."

Jim Archer kept his eye glued to the low-powered instrument another few seconds, then reluctantly drew back to make room for his companion.

Dick placed his eye over the lense. Almost instantly he drew in his breath sharply in surprise.

"People!" he grunted. Then he straightened up and turned to Jim. "I get it now," he said. "It's a nice trick. For a minute I thought I saw human beings in that bit of coral."

"It's no trick," Jim Archer said. "Believe me, it isn't. If that isn't people of microscopic size down there I'll eat the whole damn atoll."

Dick took another look. The view was equivalent to that of looking down at normal-sized people from a height of about three hundred feet. There the similarity ended, however, because the movements of the people he was watching were jerky and too swift to follow.

He did a bit of mental arithmetic and came to the conclusion that people as small as these must be would be living at a speed inversely proportional to their size, roughly, and would therefore move that way.

He lifted his head from the eyepiece more than a trifle dazed. Jim nervously brushed him aside and peered through the microscope again.

"I was right," he said excitedly. "Did you notice how fast they move? Just like little bugs!"

"Yes, I noticed, Jim," Dick said. "Keep your eye on them, and for God's sake don't move that microscope even a hair. If you do we might never find them again. I'm going back to base and get more equipment. Another field microscope like this one, and the camera attachment so that we can get some pictures." He started away, then paused. "I just thought of

something horrible," he said. "Suppose this whole reef is covered by these little people. Maybe I'm killing millions of them with every step."

But Jim Archer didn't hear him. His entire attention was focused on the girl in the center of the image of the microscope. She alone of all the people stood out in complete detail, because only she lay flat on her back.

Hugged to her breast was a newborn baby, glowing pinkly in the light from the microscope object light. From her position and her condition it was obvious the baby had just been born.

Her face was beautiful. More beautiful, Jim decided, than that of any woman he had ever seen. Or was it that way because she was holding her child in her arms and had just come through the painful ordeal of childbirth? Maybe that was it, he decided. Memory came to his mind's eye of the ethereal beauty of a girl he had once known who was dying of tuberculosis.

The cluster of people about her began abruptly to move away, the individual dots jerking in erratic paths across the image, and almost immediately there was only the girl and her baby, and two other dots that were unmistakably top views of people.

"No clothes," Jim muttered. "But where the hell would they get them?" He chuckled. It was the chuckle of a man who has, at last, seen everything under the sun.

"IT'S ABOUT time you got back, Dick," Jim growled impatiently. "That baby that was born when you left is full grown now."

"In just two hours?" Dick Blanchard said in surprise. Then he interpreted the grin on his companion's face correctly. "I imagine their life span is only a few days, though," he

said. "This makes me nervous. Do you realize that at high tide they could be destroyed by one wave washing over onto this side of the reef?"

"I doubt it," Jim Archer said. "Surface tension, you know. In fact, now that I think of it, I wonder how the human shape could be possible in anything so small. Surface tension plays a pretty dominant part in the makeup of microscopic things."

"Theory is theory and fact is fact," Dick said.

"And it's an axiom of science that seldom the twain shall meet," Jim added. "Let's get that other field microscope set up and find out how widespread the population is around here. Who knows? We might find a city, complete with microbe-sized model T's roaming the coral highways."

"Too bad all humans aren't their size," Dick said, opening a varnished plywood case and bringing out a duplicate of the instrument already sitting on the coral. "Then the critical mass for an atom bomb would be, relatively, a few billion tons."

"On the other hand," Jim said, watching Dick set up the field microscope, "the disruption of just one atom would be a few billion times more dangerous to us than it is now."

Dick merely grunted in answer. He worked swiftly until he had the instrument placed and adjusted, then looked through it.

"Nothing here but the coral bugs," he said finally.

"Then let's not waste time," Jim said. "Let's get the camera hooked on to this instrument and start taking pictures. High-speed ones so that we can slow them down a bit and get the movements a little more our norm. Not so fast and jerky."

"Okay, Jim," Dick said. "We'd better be more careful than any man ever was before in all history. One slip and we might lose it."

It was half an hour before the movie camera was connected to the field microscope. The prism-filtered light-beam from the small lamp was turned to full brightness as the film clicked swiftly in its light-proof receptacle. Ten minutes and the roll of film had been run through.

"Think we dare leave them long enough to develop and run this film on the screen?" Jim asked.

"I don't know," Dick said slowly. "Still, tide won't be high for several hours yet. We can leave everything the way it is for now. Before high tide we'd better figure some way of protecting this spot, though."

"THE PICTURE is perfect," Jim said. "Look at that. The coloring is almost too realistic. I never realized before that a screen could show translucence that way."

"Shut up," Dick said. "I want to concentrate on it. This is better than the direct stuff. Larger, and slowed down quite a bit too, though still way too fast."

"Shut up yourself," Jim said, chuckling.

Both men became silent, watching the unfoldment of the varied activities on the large screen. Heads were definitely heads instead of dots. Shoulders were two inches across. The terrain was coral, honeycombed with small holes.

The girl with the baby was not in evidence, but there were an estimated couple of hundred people. Even as they watched a figure became prone while others gathered around it. In five minutes of film she had given birth to a baby and risen, to walk out of the

picture carrying the child in her arms.

But neither man noticed this particularly. Their attention was concentrated on another phase of behavior of these miniature people. They watched figure after figure dart from one coral hole to another, pause briefly at each, and then stoop down and apparently bring a human baby out of one of the holes, then dart away with it in a common direction off the screen.

"What do you make of that?" Jim asked.

"I'd hate to say what I think," Dick said. "It's insane."

"Maybe some of the women are in those coral pockets," Jim suggested. "Maybe the ones outside can't find a vacant one to go into."

"Maybe," Dick said. "But look in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. There's a perfect view of the inside of one those coral pockets, and that isn't a human being in there."

"It isn't the usual type of coral bug either," Jim said. "But watch. Something's happening."

They watched as the creature gave birth to a human baby. There was no one near to rescue it. It gasped for a moment, flailing its arms feebly, then became still. In another few seconds its parent was attacking it. Another few seconds and it was gone. One of the humans came to the hole and obscured the scene briefly, then went on to another, unaware of the silent drama that had just been completed.

"God!" Jim muttered. "Has nature gone insane?"

"Maybe it has," Dick said slowly. "Or maybe it's just in the process of recovering its sanity after a few billions of years of madness. That's really beside the point, though. We've got a job ahead of us."

"What do you have in mind?" Jim asked.

"We've got to cut that piece of coral out," Dick said, "or at least build up a protective shelter for it. Then we've got to figure out some system of communication with them."

"Communication?" Jim exclaimed. "How?"

"Simple enough in theory," Dick said. "A movie projector that reduces an image to their size and speeds it up to their speed. And also a sound projecting system that multiplies frequencies the right number of times so that it comes within their hearing range."

"Then we'd better get in some Navy sound technicians," Jim said. "And how about the other direction? Picking up sounds they make and slowing them down to our audio range. For direct view all we need to do is get field microscopes with about double the power of the ones we have."

"I don't know whether we should let this thing out yet," Dick said thoughtfully. "Maybe you don't realize what we have. We have a race of human beings who live far faster than we, but probably can think and develop faster too. We could teach them all the human race knows. A few days of our time would be a few generations of their time. Think of it... we could give them a problem to solve, and in a day they would have worked on it the equivalent of years of our time!"

"Sounds useful," Jim mused.

"Yeah," Dick grunted. "But what I'm wondering—how did it happen? Sure, there are plenty of new mutations here at Bikini. More all the time. But a jump from coral bugs to humans is too much, unless—"

"Yes," Jim said softly. "Unless the

human gene pattern was dormant in the coral bug's. That would mean—"

"It would mean that our conception of evolution is all wrong," Dick interrupted. "It would mean that the ancestor of the coral bug was human, and that the nuclear substances contaminating this area brought out throwbacks to the original strain."

"I'm glad *you* said it," Jim said. "It's insane, and its obvious implication is even more insane."

"I know it," Dick said. "But damn it, *all* life can't have evolved from the human. That's impossible."

"Is it?" Jim asked. "Is it?"

"We'd better notify the Navy," Dick said uncomfortably. "I don't want to take the responsibility for a whole race of people on my shoulders."

RAL PUT his arm protectively around Lahl's shoulder. Their child, longer limbed and more graceful in carriage than his parents, crouched nearby. On either side and in back of them others huddled together. And all eyes were fixed on the ancient figure of Grul, standing apart and facing them, his long beard wagging as he spoke.

"I tell you," he shouted, "this thing is a punishment against us for what you have done. Look at you. Look at me, who have not lain with a woman. I, even I, bear the strain. Even my skin is darkened. And the womb of creation, the Vairn, are dying in their pools, while the pools dry up, leaving only the bleached bones of their shell structure. We must go from this place before we too die."

"He's right," a rumble of voices agreed. "We must leave this place."

"But where will we go?" a voice shouted.

The crowd became quiet, waiting for Grul to speak again. Ral knew

from his talks with Grul that the old man was a genius at theorizing from what he saw. But he had been right so many times that there were many who insisted Grul couldn't have figured everything out by himself.

They pointed out the miracle of the eye and the vision in the sky that came with the star that had appeared so miraculously when Gar, the first manchild born of woman, had lain in his mother's arms.

That star still hovered in the sky, and the mirage was still there, though the eye was gone. It had been gone for many many work periods and rest periods. But the star remained, its rays slowly searing into the rock, drying out the pools, killing off the Vairn.

"Where will we go?" the voice in the crowd demanded again.

"I don't know," Grul said. "All I know is that we must start out. If you will all follow I will lead the way, and hope that it's the right way."

"Let's go then!" several voices shouted. "We no longer need the Vairn anyway. Our women bear our children now."

"Then follow me!" Grul shouted, taken up with zeal and eager to get started.

He turned away from the crowd and started walking. The crowd hesitated. Then in a concerted movement they followed him, slowly stretching out into a line.

Man walked beside woman, and children followed their parents closely, afraid to venture far from them.

Ral took Lahl's hand and went along, with their son Gar skipping along beside them.

"I hope Grul knows what he's doing," Ral muttered so that only Lahl could hear.

"I doubt it," Lahl said. "He's just

a man, you know, and all men like to pretend they know what they're doing when they don't." She smiled impudently, her eyes darting sideways at Ral's expression of protest. "But," she added hastily, "he will probably be lucky in his guess—as most men usually are."

Ral's protest died on his lips. He looked at Lahl and grinned. Then both of them became silent, conserving their strength for the long journey ahead of them.

Three rest periods later the star in the sky was far behind. Its rays had been concentrated in a small area, and though the star could still be seen its effect was gone.

Once again the stone was filled with iridescence and translucent fires of white and pink and red. Once again the Vairn lay idly in their pools. But inspection showed that none of them gave birth to human babies. And after a while they entered an area where the Vairn were replaced by other creatures that seemed to be similar to the Vairn in some ways, but much different in others.

For forty work periods and forty rest periods the journey continued, until at last Grul came to a halt at the edge of a precipice. The others came up with him. Stretching below and to a far cliff was a land of incredible beauty. At their feet began a way by which they could safely descend from the plateau where they stood.

"See!" Grul exclaimed triumphant-ly. "I came to the very spot where we can go down. Look to the right and the left. Is there another such spot? No!"

"Lucky," Lahl murmured to Ral, who grinned but made no reply.

His bearded head held cockily erect, Grul boldly began the descent. The

others followed.

Abruptly they came to a new kind of land. It was no longer stone, but made of intricately held-together honeycombs of a new substance.

Grul didn't hesitate. In his inner thoughts he had become convinced that some greater power was directing him. He leaped onto the new land and began climbing. Higher and higher, his followers staying close behind him as though fearing that without him they would be lost.

Not until the very last of them had climbed high onto the new land did the flood come that lifted them and bore them away, floating into the vastness of the ocean. . .

"DAMN!" DICK muttered. "We forgot to shut off the light. I hope it didn't cook our little people."

He leaped out of the boat and ran to the field microscope. A few seconds later he groaned loudly.

He stepped back, a bleak expression on his face. The navy officer took his place at the microscope and stared into it for a long time.

"Well," he said when he straightened up, "I must say you did a good job of it. Now there's nothing but the film to prove they existed. I suppose they all died from exposure to the light?"

"Maybe," Dick said. "Or maybe they moved away from it. We'll have to look for them. They can't have gone far."

A sailor kicked loose a piece of coral and threw it at a stick floating away in the foamy water.

"Stop that!" Dick snarled. "And be careful where you walk. All of you. There're people around here some-place. People too small for you to even see with the naked eye."

"You have a film to prove it," the navy officer said, "but if I were you

I'd go easy on broadcasting it until you find them again."

Dick stared at the officer, then turned away. He bent down over the field microscope and slowly moved it, inch by inch, searching....

THE NAVAL officer took the steps of the ladder two at a time, leaping over the rail onto the deck of the ship. White-faced, he hurried to the bridge and into the officers' quarters. "Any luck yet?" It was one of several civilian-dressed men who asked.

In answer the officer took a small object from his pocket. It was wrapped in oiled cloth. With shaking fingers he unwrapped it, rolling the object out.

There was a gasp of horror and surprise as the civilians drew closer to get a better look at it.

"We found it in a small pool," the officer said.

It was the body of a newborn babe. Dead. It was three inches long.

"But I thought you said they were microscopic in size!" one of the civilians exclaimed. "This—this is neither large enough for a normal-sized baby, nor small enough to be microscopic."

"I know," the officer said.

"Then," the civilian said, "it must have come from some other—"

There was a long silence.

"Well," one of the civilians said sharply. "This is all the evidence we need. There's only one thing to do—out of mercy. We must bomb the whole thing out of existence. It doesn't make sense anyway, and God knows there's little enough sense for man to cling to in this world."

"Clear the reef," one of the civilians said. "Get the ship safely away. Then bomb the hell out of it. We don't want one square inch of coral sticking out of the water around here."

A Naval officer who had been seated to one side stood up and left the

room. One by one the civilians turned their eyes away from the pathetic thing lying so inert on the metal table.

The officer who had brought the dead infant returned to the launch. Shortly it was cutting the waves toward the low lying reef. An hour later it returned. Grim and silent figures climbed the ladder.

The ship began to move. It picked up speed, leaving the reef, which sank lower and lower into the water until it was over the horizon.

Overhead, planes sped toward the reef. They swept down toward it and then climbed skyward, while puffs of smoke exploded and drifted up after them.

Dick and Jim leaned morosely against the rail at the stern of the ship.

"That's that," Dick said finally. "I guess it was for the best, though. This would be a hell of a world for such little people. But that girl—she was the most beautiful creature I could ever hope to see...."

"Hey!" Jim said, pointing. "There's a twig floating over there. Just like Noah's Ark. Bet it'll float into the harbor of one of these islands someplace in a few weeks."

"There's another," Dick said. "Too bad our little friends aren't on one of them, but—no such luck, I'm afraid."

"Probably not," Jim agreed.

The twig he had first spied caught in the wake of the ship and dipped pertly, as though waving a farewell.

"I wish I had nerve enough to ask the skipper to stop the boat and let us look at that twig under the field microscope," Dick said suddenly. "I've got a hunch."

"Forget it, Dick," Jim said gruffly.

"Okay," he said. He sighed deeply. "Okay."



There was a lure in her eyes—a deadly promise

HE WAS sitting at the bar. I took a last look at the dusty excuse for a street. The sun was hot on it, and a hundred feet away a sleepy bit of breeze disinterestedly made a small whirlwind. I pushed open the swinging doors and went in. It was cooler inside because of the thick adobe walls. Even the flies liked it better.

The native barkeep's wide face became even wider in a smile. "*Que quiere, senor?*" he asked.

I sat down two stools from the bush pilot and growled, "Beer." Under the camouflage of lighting a cigarette I studied my man.

He was small. Perhaps five feet two. Weight a hundred and ten. A mixture of several races, with razor-thin

features that could become as merciless as an unsheathed blade. Right now he wore a contented expression. If my information about him was correct, I knew the reason.

I pretended I couldn't find a match and asked him for a light.

"Of course!" he said, bringing out an expensive lighter. His small black eyes studied me with open frankness as he held the lighter to my cigarette.

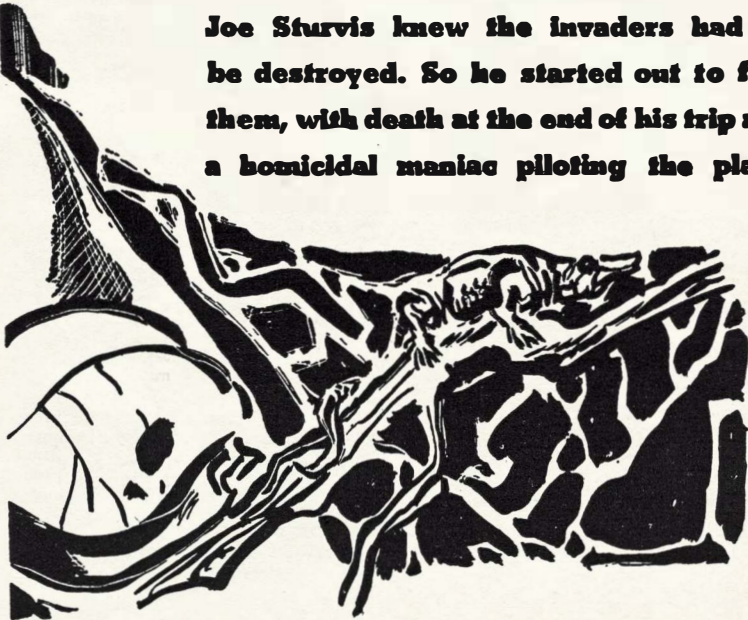
I returned his stare with one of equal frankness. "Pilot?" I murmured, sucking deeply. He nodded. The barkeep set the perspiring bottle in front of me. And a glass that had streaks in it.

I ignored the glass and drank deeply from the bottle, letting the cold brew moisten my mouth.

THE MENACE

By **ROG PHILLIPS**

Joe Sturvis knew the invaders had to be destroyed. So he started out to find them, with death at the end of his trip and a homicidal maniac piloting the plane



"You need a plane, perhaps?"

"Maybe," I grunted. I sized him up again and decided to gamble. "I got left behind by some friends of mine. I want to catch up with them."

"Oh?" He arched one eyebrow.

I grinned at him as though he were a kindred spirit. "I'll give you five hundred to take me where—you took them."

"Me?" He pointed at himself and retreated in innocence. "Me, I no take anybody anyplace. Who was it?"

It was time to raise the pot and I didn't have the cards. I had no idea who it was I was after. So I raised with my shoulders. A shrug.

He hesitated, so I anted up another hundred on my bribe. I was feeling fairly safe now. He hadn't had too many customers, and I could tell by his manner that he already surmised the ones I meant.

He ordered another beer for himself. While it was coming I took out my wallet and extracted a five hundred dollar bill and two fifties, being careful to hide the fact there was plenty more in such a way that he could see there was. Little glow lights lit up in his little black eyes. I could read his mind right then.

"All right," he said amiably, taking the six hundred. "Let me finish my beer and I'll fly you to where I took them."

I put a pleased expression on my face and hid the knowledge that he had made up his mind to kill me for my money. Greedy. Or maybe he had a poor old mother who needed an operation. He reached inside his flight jacket slowly and scratched himself—and I knew where he kept his knife. I was set now. I could write the script myself.

And I was right. His plane was a six-passenger job.

"You sit by me, no?" he invited. "More jovial with company."

"Sure," I said.

I ALMOST got it. I had expected him to wait until he was in the air, but he didn't. The blade stabbed into his thigh instead of into me. He let go of it. His little black eyes jumped back and forth from it to me.

I just smiled. But my heart was a hammer under my ribs.

Little lights came into his little black eyes again. This time they were of fear. He got control of himself and said with great dignity, "What shall we do? I have no first aid kit in the plane."

I reached down swiftly and pulled out the knife. I used it to slit his trousers so I could look at the cut. Very little blood was coming from it. "It'll scab over," I said. "Tell me all you know about these people."

"You want your money back?" he coaxed. "We forget the whole thing? No?"

I stabbed the knife into his leg again, said, "No," and pulled it out. I was bluffing. I couldn't have done that again. He didn't know that. He turned a sickly shade of brownish green.

"Start flying," I said. "You can talk while you take me there."

He did.

We were looking down at the Rio Grande from an elevation of fifteen thousand feet before he spoke. His voice was bitter.

"I don't know who they were," he said. "Not German. Not English. Not anything which I know. Very beautiful girls. The man had a round head. Bald. They paid in gold nuggets. I know a market."

"How big?" I asked.

"Twenty ounces—oh. Bigger than me, smaller than you. So so."

"They could pass on the street?"

"Oh sure. The man no one notice. The girls—ah!"

"How were they dressed?"

"That's a funny thing. They wear native clothes and have no bags. In—where we go now—Pedro have to go out and buy them some things. Levis and a second-hand Chevrolet."

We circled over Tucumcarie at a thousand feet, went south a few miles, then climbed to ten thousand and went north, back over the town, dropping to a landing fifteen miles out in the wasteland.

"Just make sure Pedro is going to tell me whatever I want to know," I said, "and you can take off and go back."

He nodded, a mixture of emotions on his wedge-shaped face. He hated to let go without revenge for the knife wounds, but he couldn't see anything to do. It would bother him the rest of his life. Someday he might see me somewhere. Then he could follow me and stick the knife in my ribs from behind. I didn't take my eyes off him from the time Pedro came up in his ancient Ford until the plane took off.

Then I looked at Pedro. He looked like the barkeep's brother. And on the way to town he told me everything I asked him.

Instead of going to his place we went to the lot where he had bought the Chevrolet. It didn't take long to get the license number.

I saw a three-year-old Dodge on the lot and bought it, then started toward the west on Sixty-Six, the route Pedro was certain they had taken.

I WASN'T hopeful. But I used my head, some. A tank of gas would take them two hundred miles more or less. I drove a hundred and fifty, then started asking. At the fifth place I got more than I'd hoped for. They'd

bought gas there and asked questions. They had made up their minds to go to California. And somehow they'd gotten some money.

It took twenty-six hours for me to reach the California border station. I was nearly dead from lack of sleep by now. I gave the officers a vague story and the license number. I promised the one that spotted the car twenty bucks. Then I curled up in the back seat and went to sleep.

I dreamed of a man with a bald round head and large eyes. He was pushing himself free from a cocoon. He stepped out of it and stood up.

Then something was shaking me. I opened my eyes. It was one of the border inspectors. I looked past him. There was a Chevrolet of ancient vintage under the roof being searched. The man behind the wheel had a round head and was bald. I looked at the inspector and wordlessly took out my wallet and peeled off two twenties. "One for each of you," I said. "And keep quiet."

I started my motor and waited. When the Chevy pulled out I followed it. I was banking on the fact that they were unfamiliar with being hunted. It was a mistake. Ten miles of it and the man pulled over to the side of the highway and got out quickly.

I debated what to do, and decided to drive on and wait for them. He stepped into the highway and flagged me down. I fell for it and stopped.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Motor trouble," he said, his voice sounding very much like the little pilot's had. "You know how to fix? No?"

"Maybe," I said. I climbed out. Another car was coming. I looked at it, debating whether I should flag it down. There would be safety in numbers.

Then it was zooming past—and lights were exploding inside my head.

WHEN I awakened I was sore all over. My side ached. I was tingling in every muscle the way you get when you fall asleep in a car. The car wasn't moving, though.

In a couple of minutes I had oriented myself. I was on the floor in front of the back seat of a car, my wrists tied behind me, my legs tied and pulled back, anchored to my wrists. Some light covering was over me.

I worked at the cloth with my head until I had it pulled back enough to see. It was dark. In the distance I could hear cars speeding on a highway. Around me was silence.

"Hey!" I said, not too loud.

Almost instantly a light went on near the car. A door opened. There was footsteps on concrete. A shadow appeared on the door glass. Someone opened the car door.

"You're awake?" a tired voice said. It was once again the bushpilot's voice, but in the higher pitch of a girl. Pleasant.

"Yes," I said.

"I tried to get you out of the car so you'd be more comfortable, but your legs caught."

"You could have untied me," I said.

"I didn't know what to do," she said. "How far did you follow us?"

"Get me out of here," I said.

There was a long silence. Then I felt her hands exploring. After a while I was free of the ropes. It took even longer to get out of the car. Then I couldn't stand.

I saw the door. I guessed rightly that this was a garage of a motel room. Then I turned over painfully on my back and looked up at the girl, gritting my teeth at the sharp stabs of pain from returning circulation.

"Why didn't you kill me?" I asked curiously. "You should have, you know."

"Kill?" she said. "What's that?"

"Skip it," I grunted. "Help me get up."

Even in the gloom her anxious smile revealed flashing white teeth. Beautiful was a word invented for Earth girls. They'd have to coin a new term. . . .

She was just as tall as I was, or almost. I would be able to tell better when I was able to stand straight. I found I could stay upright by myself, but decided not to. She was pleasant to have holding me up.

We made it into the room. She helped me to the bed, then stood back, looking at me worriedly. Unself-conscious, she let me study her.

The dress could be replaced by something made for her. Her hair could get a permanent, so that it's almost true golden color would glisten in luxurious waves. Those things didn't matter.

Her skin was flawless and a rich white with just a shade of tan. Her eyes were wide apart and large, deep blue. Her nose was perfect. Her lips—I could have spent a lifetime just looking at them. Her forehead was a shade too high and her head a shade too wide above the delicately molded ear.

Her shoulders were neither too wide nor too narrow. Her breasts were not meant for the shapeless covering that concealed them.

I marveled. It was impossible.

"Come here," I ordered.

SHE CAME obediently. I took her hand and pulled until she sat beside me. I took her hair in one fist and pulled her head down. Still holding her hair, I jerked gently at one of her ears, her nose, her chin. I poked

at her lips until she opened her mouth. I examined her teeth.

I was tempted to carry my exploration farther. I didn't.

"I can't believe it," I said. "You're human. And yet you can't be!"

The anxious smile trembled on her lips. She nodded her head, then shook it, in answer to my remarks.

"I saw the cocoons you and the others came out of," I said. "I followed your trail. Why. . ." I looked at her shapeless clothes and envisioned what was underneath. "I would almost believe you and I could have children—impossible though that must be."

"It isn't impossible," she said. She looked into my eyes, and I couldn't tell what emotion, if any, lurked in hers.

I jerked my eyes away from hers, acutely conscious of the emotion in mine. "Where are the others?" I asked.

"That's what I am to tell you," she said. "You musn't look for them. They left me with you."

"I don't get it," I said. "What are you driving at?"

"You musn't try to find them," she said. "Even if you do try, you won't. They've separated."

"I got a look at them," I said. "I'm going to tell the government about it now."

"Please," she pleaded. "What would it do? Would they send us away?"

"Damn it!" I exploded. "You're aliens. You aren't even human. You can't be, in spite of your shape. No human could be born by metamorphosis."

"What does that mean?" she asked, then knew. She nodded. "I understand what you think," she added. "There is so much you don't yet know."

"What's your name?" I asked.

She smiled her smile. "What would you like to call me?"

"I thought maybe you had a name," I said.

"No. We found no need for names yet. We have been out of the cocoon only a short time."

"That's right!" I breathed. "Six weeks!" I shook my head in unbelief. "It still doesn't seem possible. You should be a helpless babe, yet you have learned our language well enough to get by anywhere."

"What would you like to call me?" she asked wistfully. Her lip trembled. She hid it by smiling broadly.

A FLOOD of pity welled up within me. "You poor kid," I groaned. "Here you are on a strange world, hardly born, although you seem to have been born full grown—and I treat you like a criminal."

"You will stay with me?" she asked hopefully.

I looked around the room, down at the bed. A lump formed in my throat. I looked back up at her. She was every beautiful girl I had ever seen. And I was a man. Didn't she know what that invitation would lead to? Of course she didn't. How could she!

Or perhaps she did. She knew so much. . . .

"Okay—Betty," I said.

"Betty. . ." she said. Then she nodded. "What's your name?"

"Joe," I said. "Joe Sturvis." I grinned. "Just call me Joe."

"Joe. . . Betty. . ." She flashed one of her smiles and nodded.

I was feeling better now. I got up off the bed and walked back and forth until my muscles responded normally. She remained seated on the bed, watching me.

"I'm hungry," I said abruptly. "Is there any place to eat around here?"

There was. A hamburger joint in

front of the motel. She was hungry too. It was midnight, and no other customers were in the place. The cook was too busy with his thoughts to notice us much.

There was a newspaper only two days old. I picked it up and started to skim through it. Betty watched me with great interest.

"What is that?" she asked finally.

I explained it to her. She got the idea of letters' representing sounds. I picked out the different letters and showed how they made words. Finally I let her take the paper. She began to study it.

I ate another hamburger and watched her.

Her lips formed words. After a while she glanced sideways at me and smiled. "This," she said, pointing to a line. "Does it read, 'the cause of the accident was a,' on this line?"

I nodded, while a sick little worry inched around in my stomach. How high an I.Q. would the experts say she had? She had pronounced 'cause' like 'cows', but she had pronounced 'of' right, and all the other words. It had taken her maybe five minutes to figure out that one line, but she had coordinated it with her knowledge of spoken words gained in six weeks, and narrowed down each combination to the right—or almost the right—pronunciation.

"Let's go back to the room," I said. The cook lost his abstraction long enough to take my money. We went outside.

IT WAS a nice night. Cool, like it gets on the eastern California deserts at night. The sky was cloudless, the stars bright and large. Unconsciously I had stopped walking when I looked up at them. I became aware that Betty was looking up at them too. Without thinking, I said, "I won-

der which of them you came from."

"From—" she said, and stopped. An instant later she laughed. "How should I know?" she said.

"That's right," I said. "How could you know? You were born here. I was a little kid of five or six when those thistle-like pods drifted down from space."

"Did you see them?" she asked breathlessly.

"See them?" I snorted. "I caught one before it touched the ground. I peeled off the long down so that I had just the pod. About the size of a golfball. Maybe a little smaller. I played with it. Then I floated it in Hangman Creek. I saw it was dissolving, so I took it out of the water. Then a little tadpole-like thing wriggled out of it and slipped through my fingers into the water. I saw it swim away." I looked at her beautiful human face, visible in the light from the stars. "Maybe it was you," I said softly. "They estimated that over forty billion of them fell from the sky. Pretty slim odds, forty billion to one. But it could have been you."

"Uh..." I heard her say. Whatever it was, she didn't say it.

"That was twenty-five years ago next month," I added.

Her eyes were blue fires even in the weak starshine. Her face was so beautiful. It was easier to believe it was all my imagination than to believe what I knew to be true—that that tadpole that wriggled through the stubby fingers of a six-year-old—me—was the same in shape as the one that had developed in a quarter of a century into—Betty.

But I liked that idea better than the others: that she had a year or so later become one of the countless horde of eyeless lizard-like creatures that nearly decimated the oceans of all life before the combined world fleet

had systematically wiped them out down to an elusive few million: that twelve years after the tadpole stage she had climbed out of the Amazon five hundred miles upstream and shed her lizard form, then as large as a full grown crocodile and twice as vicious, to become a giant yellow-haired worm which slipped away into the Amazon wilderness to spin a cocoon and sleep until she became what she was now.

I looked at her and knew the whole thing hadn't happened. It couldn't have.

I looked at her, and knew it must have happened. She wasn't human. She was the Ideal the human race would never attain. The Ideal it made into the idea of an Angel.

Her eyes were looking at me, sparkling and alive. "Joe," she said coaxingly. "Let's go to bed." Just like that. And I knew the only thought in her head was sleep.

"Okay," I said. And I was glad it was dark. I didn't want her to know what a grown man thinks about. At least not yet...

HER HAND bumped into mine as we walked. She took my hand and put my arm around her slim waist, holding it there. I was conscious that her head was turned toward me.

Our cabin was number seven, just ahead. My knees were of water, my blood liquid fire. I didn't dare let her see my eyes. Her hip was firm against mine as we took slow step after slow step. Her slim waist fitted into my curved arm. Her hand held mine at her side so confidently possessive.

The next instant I had turned to her and pulled her against me, both my arms around her. Her face was still half upturned. My lips found hers, intending to crush them, bruise them,

in that wonder she knew nothing about—a kiss.

But through the madness of my passion I became aware her lips had met mine with equal fierceness. Met them and responded to them. Her body was not held against mine, but pressing, hungry. No human girl, however experienced in love, however starved for it, could have matched her response, a dark corner of my thoughts whispered.

And instantly, in a convulsive mental and physical backward leap, I had freed myself and flung her away from me. She half stumbled, then caught her balance.

"Joe!" she cried, and came toward me, arms outstretched.

A million little things were clicking into place now. A million little things that added up to just one thing. I knew now with what I was dealing.

I let her come toward me. I even half held out my arms to invite her. And when she was close enough I brought my fist up in a swift arc against her beautiful chin with almost everything I had.

She was out. The lights in her blue eyes dimmed. I caught her as she fell. She felt hot against me, and I knew it was only because I was cold as ice.

I glanced quickly around. No one was in sight. I picked Betty up and carried her the few remaining steps to the cabin. Inside, I laid her on the bed, then went into the garage and retrieved the ropes that had previously bound me.

I had the shakes so bad it was difficult to tie her up. I was scared. I had a right to be. I wasn't dealing with what I had thought I was dealing with, dangerous though that had seemed.

NO, I WASN'T dealing with just an incredibly beautiful girl with incredibly high intelligence that had

marched in giant strides in a brief six weeks of sensory intake. Instead, I was dealing with an alien mind already shaped by inherited memory! I knew that, now. And it made the incredible invasion from space make sense.

It hadn't made sense before. Not to anyone. Twenty-five years ago billions of little balls had floated down from outer space, their fall made gentle by long down that gripped the air. In each had been a live creature shaped like a small tadpole. Those that landed in water dissolved, freeing the live creature. In the oceans they had survived to become schools of eyeless lizard creatures that preyed on everything else from shrimps to whales and sharks.

Only man's ability at systematic destruction had reduced their numbers to the point where native ocean life could survive. Without civilization, without hundreds of fast ships and dozens of perfected instruments of destruction, he couldn't have achieved that.

Twelve years in the water. Then the lizard creatures had crawled up on beaches and apparently died. But inside them were the worms. Or caterpillars. Millions of them, in spite of the previous decimation. Only the combined airfleets of the world, using flaming gasoline jelly and machine guns in coordinated patrol of every mile of coastline all over the world had killed them off.

In the theoretical invasion there would have been billions of them. Enough to destroy every land creature from a fieldmouse to an elephant. That's the way it was supposed to have gone. It didn't.

For every lizard hulk a caterpillar had been killed—except for two hundred and eighty-one empty lizard husks later found five hundred miles

up from the mouth of the Amazon.

Two hundred and eighty-one out of that many billions of original invaders. Their trail was easily followed up to a point. A slaughtered herd of cattle here, gnawed bones of animals there. The trail vanished.

Everyone believed the caterpillar was only another stage, and from it would come the final stage, the full-formed alien. I had been certain of that myself. Others had spent years searching for the cocoons besides me. We had met on the trail and visited for a day or two, discussing our dream of finding the cocoons, discussing what we thought the third-stage alien would be like. A giant butterfly? A weird monster? Our conjectures all had one thing in common. The third stage invader would have intelligence.

BUT EVEN in our wildest conjectures none of us had dreamed the end product would be human.

I looked down at Betty, still unconscious, looking so helpless, so harmless, with the ropes binding her wrists and ankles.

Her eyes! The thought of their opening scared me. I got a towel from the bathroom and blindfolded her.

I was the one who had found the cocoons. Even I wouldn't have, but they were open. Out of the two hundred and eighty-one, only five of them had developed. The others had been found and killed by tropical ants and small animals.

But in one of the unopened cocoons I had found a corpse hardly three days old. A human corpse. And the incredible truth had been forced upon me.

I had followed the trail of the five aliens. . . .

I smoked one cigarette after another, and waited.

I never knew when she recovered

consciousness. "Why did you tie me and cover my eyes, Joe?" she asked quietly. "I had thought—" She bit her lip.

"We have intelligence too," I said. "Not much, but some. I suddenly realized what you were doing. And what you are."

"What do you mean?"

"You have inherited memory," I said.

"Of course!" She sounded surprised. "Don't you?"

"I didn't realize that before," I said, ignoring the question. "When I realized it I knew what I—what the world is up against. I knew, suddenly, we didn't stand a chance. The five of you—even one of you—could rule the world by sheer intelligence alone. But with inherited memory you could contact and call down more of your kind, and complete the job you failed to do when you were lizards and caterpillars."

"It isn't true, Joe," she said. "We have no designs against you. I have inherited memory, of course. I won't go into that right now. But you must believe none of us has any desire to rule the world or even gain any sort of power."

"Nuts," I said. "Are you trying to tell me you just came for the ride? Why are you here? To settle down and become just another member of the human race? That would be as silly as for some country to invade the United States in order to attend the country fair somewhere."

"Nevertheless," she said, "it's true."

"That's why I hit you," I said. "That's why you're tied up. I believe you. I want to believe you. I do believe you. And it can't be so."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep you tied up. I'm going to pick up the trail of the oth-

ers. When I get all of you together, then I will decide."

"Decide what?" she asked.

I LIT ANOTHER cigarette. I had the shakes again. "Decide," I said, "whether to kill all of you or not. I think that will have to be it. I doubt if I could even make the government believe you were dangerous enough to destroy."

"What is kill?" she asked. She had asked that before.

Was it a blind spot in her mind? When these five aliens had had me in their power it would have been far more sensible for them to have killed me. Then no one would have known their true origin. Instead, they had left me with Betty and gone on. It didn't seem logical. Maybe she had fallen in love with me. Girls had done that. Maybe she had talked them into it, hoping she could make me fall in love with her and become her ally.

"One thing I can't understand," I said slowly, "is why you stayed with me and the others went on."

"Because I wanted you, Joe," she said.

"Why?"

"Because you followed us. Because you knew about us. Because I hoped you would understand. The others must find someone who doesn't know, and never tell them." Her lips smiled dreamily. "The other girls wanted you too, but I got you."

"What did you do?" I snorted. "Draw straws?"

"The man thought of a number. I guessed the closest."

"That makes it perfect," I said. But somehow it didn't affect me that way. It was too human. I could see them doing it, laughing, entirely human. The memory of Betty in my arms came strong. I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything.

"Will you let me tell you about us, Joe?" she asked.

"Why not?" I said.

"Would you take the covering off my eyes?" she asked. "I would like to look at you."

"No," I said.

She was silent a long moment. Then...

"I understand now that you don't have inherited memory. I'll tell you about my memory of things. I thought it was natural. It seemed that way. Perhaps it isn't. So much isn't natural. The way we came here..."

"YOU SEE, we *are* human. The various stages we went through were not development of one creature, but three. The lizard creature you mention, growing from a tadpole, without eyes—it is a simple species by itself. It thrives on a world that has giant underground seas. In its normal environment it produces by egg-laying. The eggs become tadpoles, grow into lizards, reproduce. The tadpoles were desexed by mass-production surgery so that the lizard species couldn't reproduce and remain as a menace to the humans.

"And in the tadpole was planted the fertilized egg of the caterpillar, to lie dormant until the adult stage of the lizard. Then the caterpillar started to grow, and it too is an independent species from still another world. Normally it follows the same cycle as those on earth, becoming a winged insect. That's why it was chosen. Because of its instinct to build a cocoon. But it too had been altered by micro-cell surgery, to destroy the butterfly gene pattern. And the fertilized human egg was treated and planted in the tadpole, so that when the caterpillar built its cocoon and its body began secreting the chemicals that

would normally start the butterfly growing, the human would start to grow.

"The tadpole was encased in an artificial protective ball and frozen so that it would remain in suspended animation. A ball designed to fall gently through atmosphere. And the universe was seeded with them.

"When did this happen? It could have been a short time ago, or millions or billions of years ago. Your first ancestors came from that seeding. Our coming? Chance. In spite of the random distribution of the seeding, perhaps it was inevitable that this planet get more than one seeding.

"You see, Joe, our purpose in being here isn't to conquer your world. We were supposed to populate a world without human life. We knew that. So when we came out of the cocoon and made our first contact with man, we realized that we weren't needed on this planet.

"But it was too late to go elsewhere, and there was no reason to go elsewhere. So all we can do is—find someone—and have children. That's all we want. That's all we want to do. Just join in. Just live."

She stopped talking. Her lips were closed. She revealed no sign of her inner thoughts or emotions. My head wasn't spinning. It was numb. I was trying not to believe her.

I was trying not to believe her because I knew it was a trap. I could see it now. I had the whole picture. For some reason they were blind to the idea of killing.

BETTY WANTED me to believe what she had told me. She would marry me, be my wife, bear children. I would be lulled, I would keep my mouth shut. And the others could go ahead without her in their plans.

They would succeed, too.

They would anyway. I suddenly realized that. Would anyone believe me if I caught the other four and turned them over to the police with a story that they were dangerous invaders from space?

Hah! The police wouldn't believe it even if the five confessed! And what if I caught them and killed them myself?

Even as I thought it I knew I wasn't capable of that. Not Betty, at least.

I was licked. I had been licked from the start. I realized that now. What had made me realize it? I didn't know. Something she had said?

I tried to think it out. The memory of Betty in my arms grew stronger.

Maybe she was telling the truth. Certainly there was something about her that no other girl I had ever known possessed. Something basic. Not animal. Closer to the divine spark of Creation. Something alive in the race at the beginning when it was a live force climbing from the slime toward the stars, and the world was young.

I wanted her. Maybe they had known I would. Maybe she was a bribe to keep me quiet. A bribe they thought I couldn't resist. They couldn't have bought me with money. I had plenty of that. Enough to buy Betty nice clothes and pay her bill at the beauty shop, and give her a car...

I dropped my cigarette on the floor and ground it out with the toe of my shoe.

They were offering me something they thought I couldn't turn down—for my silence. They wanted to buy my silence while they took over. The trouble with that kind of a deal was

that the blackmailer never calls it quits until he's dead.

Abruptly I bent over and slipped the towel off. She blinked at the light until her eyes adjusted, then looked up at me, a little smile of hope tugging at the corners of her mouth.

HER EYES were so blue. I looked at them, into them. My heart was pounding again. I wanted to turn away. I couldn't. I looked into the depths of her eyes—and saw the whole future unfolding. Our future. Beaches where we lay side by side in the sun. Blue pools where we dived and swam. All the things that life companions share together, live together.

Everything I wanted. And every man has his price.

I twisted my face into a smile. Her own smile brightened, reflecting alternate hope and doubt, but mostly hope.

My fingers fumbled at the knots in the ropes. I helped her straighten out her cramped arms. I lifted her gently to her feet.

She looked up into my face, still questioning. I nodded. It took even her quick mind a moment to comprehend the meaning of that nod.

The doubt vanished from her expression. For an instant she looked at me, incredibly happy.

Then she did a womanly thing. She cried.

I held her close.

And I didn't care if those other four conquered the world. So far as I was concerned, they could do what they damn well pleased.

Maybe I had been bought. Or maybe I believed her. Or maybe it was something of both.

It didn't really matter.

THE END

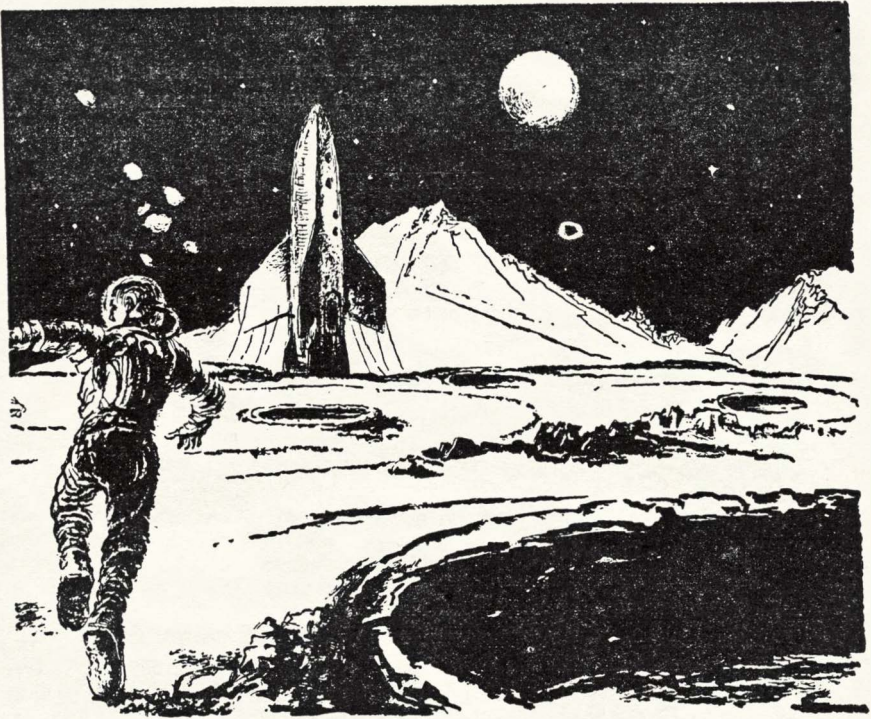


The explosion rocked the land around them

A MAN CALLED METEOR

By
ALEXANDER BLADE

He was a hell-for-leather swashbuckler of the spaceways. Nothing could stop him — until he crossed swords with the scourge called Vango and his blonde lure



“GET READY, Jon! Here he comes.”

The hoarse whisper broke the silence on the roof garage, and Jon, the burly Venusian, shifted his huge body nervously.

“My aim will be sure, Grat,” he said. “Paul Elton will never know what hit him.”

The two Venusians tensed in the shadows. Jon’s clawed hand slid down to his holstered gas gun and drew it to the ready. His scaly, seven-foot reptilian form hunched forward, ready for action.

A low drone drifted down the night air. In another moment Paul Elton landed his small gyroplane upon the roof. He peered around warily for a few seconds, then clambered stiffly

from the cockpit. Two steps he took—

Jon leaped forward, and his weapon sprayed its stupifying contents directly into Elton’s face. For a split second Elton swayed, surprise upon his features. Then he slumped down without a sound.

“By Jarng! This was easier than I thought,” grunted Jon.

“We haven’t finished yet,” reminded Grat sarcastically. “Come, let’s carry him to the ship. We’ve no time to waste.”

Hissing softly, the two lifted Elton’s unconscious figure and carried him to their waiting ship, which they had concealed several yards from the house. They prepared to load him into the cabin.

“Drop him!” said a voice. The

tones were as cold as interstellar space.

One moment the patch of moonlight at the nose of the Venusians' ship was empty. The next it was darkened with an ominous shadow. The Meteor stood there on widespread legs, surveying the two Venusians grimly. His powerful body was garbed from head to foot in a tight-fitting, black *plastolex* suit. A black-metal helmet concealed his features. Through the visor steely eyes glittered. Holstered flame pistols of ominous size swung at his hips.

Recovering from their initial shock, the two Venusians allowed their limp burden to sink to the ground. But at the same moment their taloned fingers stabbed down to the weapons in their belts!

There was only a flicker of movement from the moon-bathed form of the Meteor. The two big flame pistols were in his hands. They bucked and roared, and the little clearing became lurid with stabbing flashes of light.

The two bodies hit the ground almost simultaneously. The Meteor bent forward, poised watchfully. Grats let out a dying groan. Instantly, the Meteor was at his side.

"Who sent you?" he rapped urgently. "Tell me or the blessings of Afterlife will never be yours!"

The Venusian stirred at the threat. "Vango," he replied, his voice thin with approaching death.

The Meteor nodded his helmeted head in satisfaction. "I thought so!" he breathed. He rolled the two bodies into the bushes. Then, shouldering Elton's husky form without effort, he started toward the house looming in the darkness. The house was Elton's home and laboratory combined.

THE METEOR gained entrance with a ring of keys which he found in one of Elton's pockets. He switched

on the lights and deposited the young scientist upon a couch. After a short search through the building, he found the unconscious bodies of a girl and an old man, who, like Elton, had been gassed by the Venusians. Taking one under each arm, the Meteor carried them into the room where he had left Elton.

"Must be *virgon* gas," muttered the Meteor, eyeing the unconscious trio. "It'll be hours before they come around. Can't wait that long."

He went back into the interior of the house and began opening doors until he located Elton's laboratory. The ring of keys enabled him to gain access to the cabinets where the chemicals were stored. The Meteor then mixed a chemical preparation which would overcome the effects of the gas. He filled a hypodermic syringe with it. Returning, he injected each of the three.

While waiting for them to regain consciousness, the Meteor seated himself in the shadows which cloaked one portion of the room. He seemed as immobile and inscrutable as a statue of stone. But that was only the habitual motionless pose he took in moments of rest. In actuality he was quite alert, for his keen eyes never ceased roving and his ears were attuned to the slightest of sounds.

The girl was the first to revive. She stirred, raised a hand to her head, and moaned. As full consciousness came back to her, she looked around wildly her gaze settling upon the still figures of her two companions.

"Those damned Venusians!" she gritted. Somehow, the oath suited her. She had ash-blond hair, green eyes, and a liberal sprinkling of freckles. She looked at once pretty and capable. "Quite true!" said the Meteor, emerging from the shadows.

The girl gasped in astonishment. "Why, who—"

Just then the other two showed signs of recovery. Several moments later, three pairs of wide eyes were fixed upon the fantastic form of the Meteor.

The Meteor made an airy bow. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am generally known as the Meteor. But men—particularly bad men—are apt to call me other things. I rescued you, Paul Elton, from the two Venusians who had attacked and gassed you. And you two I found lying unconscious in the house."

Elton grinned. "I thought you were a myth of the spaceways," he said. "Glad to know I'm wrong. This"—he indicated the girl—"is Eloise Pitward, my fiancée. And this is Enderby, an old family retainer. How in the world did you happen to be around? It's quite a shock to learn that the almost legendary Meteor has been aware of me."

"I'm fortunate enough to be ahead of events," replied the Meteor. "As two and two make four, I knew that the attacks upon ships equipped with the Elton Uranium-X combustion chamber would lead to other things."

"Then you suspected that the ships were being destroyed, too?"

"More than that. I happen to know that there are several people who want your invention very badly—especially this mysterious crook who calls himself Vango."

ELTON'S JAW dropped in amazement. "What in space *don't* you know?"

"Several things," replied the Meteor easily. "I do know that the ships equipped with your invention have been blown up in space, and that you've been negotiating with the government to sell the exclusive rights to

the invention. But that's as far as I've got. Would you mind telling me the whole story?"

Elton nodded. "Your help would be invaluable, and I assure you that I need it." Elton had no hesitancy in telling his story to the Meteor. There was that in the Meteor's lithe form and calm bearing which commanded trust and respect. And from what he had heard of the Meteor, Elton knew that the lonewolf adventurer of the spaceways would give him all the aid that was possible.

"Well," began Elton, "I brought my invention to completion just a few months ago. In order to determine just how great an improvement it was over the old type of combustion unit, I had it installed in a limited number of ships. It was successful—more successful than I had hoped. When the news got around, I was deluged by offers to sell."

"Overwhelmed is more correct," interrupted Eloise, with a little laugh. "In fact, my father threatened to forbid our marriage unless Paul sold him the invention."

"I believe that you mean Nathan Pitward, owner of the Dwarf Star Lines," said the Meteor.

"Yes," admitted the girl. "My father. I don't think he needs Paul's invention as badly as he wants to make sure that Horace Rankin doesn't get it. Rankin, as you know, is the owner of the Comet Lines. He and my father dislike each other intensely."

"So you can see," resumed Elton, "that I was between the devil and the deep blue sea. If I sold my invention to Rankin, I'd more than likely have to be a bachelor. And if I sold it to Eloise's father, Rankin would never rest until he had my blood.

"But, when I received an offer from the government desiring to purchase

the exclusive rights to my invention, I immediately withdrew my consideration from all other offers. It was a considerable relief where Eloise's father and Rankin were concerned. Besides, I am intensely loyal to America and, in view of her recent great losses in the Venusian Redlands Uprising, I knew that she needed my invention more than the others did. I thought that Pitward and Rankin would feel that way, too."

ELOISE laughed. "Not Father! He still considers your invention and myself as fair units of exchange."

"I'm afraid so," said Elton ruefully. "Anyway, shortly after I informed the government of my willingness to sell, the ships I had equipped with my invention began to blow up in space. I began to hear of rumors that my Uranium-X combustion chamber was faulty. Then the government decided to withdraw its offer, thinking, no doubt, that it was buying junk.

"But I knew that there could be nothing wrong with my invention. The principle upon which it works may be a trifle complicated, but the process is simplicity itself. Just to make sure, I checked and rechecked all my formulae and went over every step of the combustion process. I could find nothing wrong.

"A suspicion that there was a plot against me began to form in my mind. For why should my invention, functioning perfectly for weeks, so suddenly develop flaws?

"This afternoon I hastened to Washington and put all the facts before the proper officials. It took me the entire day to convince them that it was something else and not my invention which was at fault. Special agents are working on the case now, and in a few days I expect to hear the decision of the

committee which is investigating my invention for purchase."

Elton rubbed his aching head. "As I landed my gyroplane upon returning, I was attacked. I guess some rejected purchaser decided to knock the plans out of me."

"You're wrong there," said the Meteor. "I have every reason to believe that you were going to be kidnapped. And I doubt whether Vango could be called a purchaser. He was behind the attack."

"Just who is this Vango anyway?" asked Eloise.

The Meteor spread his hands. "I'd give a lot to know that myself. But I do know that Vango is the most successful interplanetary crook within years. By murdering, robbing, plundering and blackmailing, he has amassed an almost incredible fortune. He also had a hand in the Venusian uprising, which proves, I think, that he'd like to add the Solar System to the rest of his loot."

"But that's insane!" protested Elton.

"Not to Vango. He's had just enough luck to make him get dreams of empire. It's crazy, but that doesn't stop him from being dangerous."

In the moment of quiet that followed the Meteor suddenly tensed. His keen ears had caught the sound of a motor starting up.

There was no other dwelling within miles. Elton's home was completely isolated. That motor could only mean someone had been near the house, and was now making a getaway. They had been spied upon!

Or perhaps—

"Remain here!" snapped the Meteor, rising. "On no condition leave the house. Elton! See if your plans are safe!"

WITHOUT another word, the Meteor dashed into the night. Powerful legs working like the pistons of a rocket freighter, he ran toward his own gyroplane hidden in the shadows of a deep gully. The small but powerful atomic motor roared into instant life, and the Meteor's ship split the night in pursuit.

Steely eyes narrowed, the Meteor could just make out the red dot far ahead that was the exhaust of the fugitive. Behind his helmet, the Meteor's lips thinned. A deft hand shoved the throttle forward. The little ship clove the air like a bullet shot into the void.

Elton did not know it, but his invention could not have made the Meteor's ship any faster than it was.

"How nice it will be if that's Vango," murmured the Meteor. He touched the butts of his massive flame guns.

Scarcely a mile separated the two ships now. The Meteor's incredibly fast speedster was swiftly eating up the distance between them. The moon peered out from a rift of cloud. The light was just bright enough to enable the Meteor to see the man in the cabin of the ship ahead.

The fleeing ship ducked and swerved in an attempt to throw the Meteor off the trail. But, like the nemesis he was, he could not be shaken off. His ship steadily drew nearer.

Ahead the waters of a large lake began to glisten.

Only fifty yards separated the two ships now. Then half that—and half that again. The fleeing ship went into a series of frantic rolls, dives, and turns. Doggedly, the Meteor clung on. He was nearly abreast now.

In a whirl of sudden action, the Meteor adjusted the robot pilot. Then he leaped to the door of the cabin. He

flung it open. His was a grim, mad p'an, but he could not risk the destruction of his ship nor the other's. It was vitally necessary that he capture the fugitive alive.

A wing was just below him. Hundreds of times farther below him was the racing ground. The Meteor leaped into the air.

Before the fugitive could grasp the Meteor's p'an and swerve away, the Meteor had grasped a wing. Overbalanced, the racing ship tipped over. Ground, black sky, and moon whirled in a crazy circle. The Meteor's head banged into the wing with thudding solidness. For a moment he was dazed, and bright lights cascaded inside his head. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he slowly and grimly began to climb to the cabin.

The man inside the cabin was wearing a black mask. It was difficult to make out any distinguishing feature of his figure.

The masked man threw his ship into desperate loops in an attempt to shake the oncoming Meteor from the wing. Suddenly he switched on the robot pilot. A mad glitter in his eyes, he pulled a gas gun from his coat and went to the door of the cabin. With fear-lashed daring, he crossed from strut to strut!

The Meteor saw him coming. He sought to rise, reach his flame pistols. But the battering he had taken had made him disastrously weak. Putting every possible surge of will into the effort, he grabbed for his weapons. But he was too spent to make it in time. One after the other, the charges of the gas gun exploded into his face!

The Meteor's grasp on the strut weakened—slid off! His black-clad body made a graceful arch, then fell plummeting through the air—limply.

The man in the mask let out a tri-

umphant chuckle. "Good-bye, Meteor!" he called derisively.

"**T**HANK GOD!" cried Elton, as he examined the sheaf of blue papers in his hand. "The plans are here. For a moment I was afraid that whoever it was outside had stolen them."

"Do you think it was—Vango?" asked Eloise breathlessly. Her green eyes glistened bright with excitement, and her freckles were nearly hidden by the flush of her face.

"I hope so," replied Elton. "And I hope the Meteor catches him—whoever he is. I'd like nothing better than to get to the bottom of this whole mess."

"Me, too, Paul. But when it's over there's still Father to reckon with."

"Don't remind me."

And then the doorbell buzzed. They heard old Enderby shuffle off to answer it. A moment later, there came the sound of a booming voice.

"Father!" gasped Eloise.

Elton nodded somberly. "This means nothing good. Come on, might as well face the music."

"What in the name of a blundering asteroid are you doing here?" thundered Nathan Pitward as he saw his daughter enter the room with Elton. "I thought I told you to keep away from this young snip of an obstinate fool!"

"You did, Father, dear," she replied sweetly. "But I just couldn't keep away. Paul is *so* attractive."

Pitward's features went dark and inchoate sounds bubbled in his throat. The sounds would have scathed the calloused hide of a meteor miner. Pitward was tall and thin. The dark clothes he wore heightened the funereal aspect of his face.

"Young woman, if you dare to mock

my parental authority, I—I'll—"

Sweetly contrite, Eloise took his arm. "Now please, daddy, don't be angry. You know you are acting just as foolish as you say Paul is. Here, let me take your hat. Enderby, would you mind throwing together a drink? Daddy's famished for one."

"I'm not!" growled Pitward, allowing himself to be led into a chair.

"Is there anything I can do for you, sir?" asked Elton. He knew what Pitward wanted well enough, but he felt that he had to say something.

Pitward became angry again. Eloise had only temporarily diverted him. "You know darn well what I want!" he shouted. "Paul, I've come for the last time. I want your invention. I've begged myself to scrape together every cent I had. I've liquidated all my holdings until the stock of Dwarf Star has fallen like a stone dropped on Jupiter. Man, I'm offering you a huge fortune. You can't possibly refuse."

ELTON SHOOK his head somberly. "I'm sorry, sir. I'm not considering the question of money. I don't care who bids the highest, but I won't sell to anyone but the government."

"Can't you realize what a dolt you're being? Why, Paul, you'll be a pauper!"

"I've told you before that I'm not considering the question of money. Patriotism has its own rewards. With the malcontents in the colonies getting bolder all the time, America needs my invention badly."

"Bah! If you sold me the invention, I'd be glad to sell the government any number of combustion units it might desire to purchase." Pitward's tones became pleading. "Paul, consider—"

The buzz of the doorbell cut him

off. Enderby went to answer it.

Elton rose expectantly, thinking that the Meteor had returned. But the man who entered the room was not the Meteor.

"Rankin!" exploded Pitward.

"You!" gasped Rankin, the pleasant smile vanishing from his ruddy features. "What are you doing here?" He whirled to Elton. "How much has this miser offered you?"

"Two million cash!" snapped Pitward. "And I'm no miser, you low-down, back-biting—"

"I'll give you three million!" cried Rankin. He drew himself up, grinning triumphantly at the expression of consternation which came over Pitward's bony face.

"Paul," quavered Pitward, "surely you wouldn't sell to this—this..."

"I'm not selling to either of you!" Elton ground out savagely.

"If anyone's going to get my invention, it'll be the government. And now, Mr. Rankin, will you please leave to avoid further unpleasantness?"

"Is this final?" asked Rankin stiffly.

Elton nodded. "Positively."

Without another word, Rankin turned on his heel and stalked out.

Face stony, Pitward reached for his hat. "Come, Eloise, I believe this dismissal applies to us also. As for you, you stubborn young pup, I forbid you ever to see my daughter again."

Suddenly the room began to echo to a frantic pounding on the door. Elton leaped forward and tore it open.

Rankin staggered in. His face was wild. "Quick!" he gasped. "Thugs—attacking the house!"

His warning was verified. From the darkness came the sound of pounding feet, growls, and shouts.

BEFORE Elton could get the barrier shut, Rankin catapulted into him

from a push by a brawny space rat who came shouldering in. A motley mixture of Venusians, vicious little Martians, and renegade Earthmen crowded behind him.

"Okay, get 'em up, all of yuh!" rasped the space rat. "We mean business, see?"

Elton shoved Rankin to one side, and lashed out with a balled fist. Blood spurting from a smashed nose, the thug reeled back into his companions. The incoming attackers were pressed so tightly together that there was no room for them to use their weapons.

Taking advantage of the temporary halt which he had created, Elton retreated. "There's too many of them!" he called to the others. "Come on—into the laboratory."

But, as they started to dash from the room, a group of the attackers suddenly appeared before them. Their escape was cut off! And then the lights went out.

Like all the others of the twenty-third century, the house was built of plastics and glassex. But it was mostly glassex. With the illumination of the moon pouring in, there was just enough light to enable them to make out the shapes of the attackers.

That was how Elton saw the masked man.

The masked man was roaring out commands.

"Hurry up, you fools! Use your gas guns!"

Elton was swinging a metal chair with devastating effect. A growing huddle of dead and unconscious thugs lay around him. Suddenly he changed his tactics. With all his remaining strength, he hurled the chair at a group of attackers who were inching forward with leveled weapons. Then he charged toward the man in the mask!

Elton knew that the only hope left to him was to capture the masked leader. He built up on that hope with savage fury. For he knew with a fiercely triumphant certainty that the man was Vango!

The wide muzzle of a gas gun suddenly loomed in his face. Elton dropped the little Martian behind it with a smashing fist. The noxious charge hissed past his ear. Then he was battering his way through two more opposing thugs.

Elton was the only one of the little company who remained. Enderby had been knocked unconscious in the kitchen. Pitward had received a stupefying charge from the gun of one of the thugs. Eloise had managed to throw a few vases and lamps before she, too, was gassed. Rankin was nowhere to be seen. He had evidently gone down early in the attack.

Elton saw that the other thugs were closing in on him. He redoubled his efforts to reach Vango, digging into the mass of barring flesh with thudding blows.

Vango realized the direction that Elton's maneuvers were taking. "Get him!" he shouted.

Elton was weakening fast. More than once he had caught the paralyzing fumes of a gas gun. And then a blow from the butt of a weapon caught him on the side of the head. There was a flash of brilliance that vanished as he sank into blackness.

"Good work!" said Vango. "Get them into the ships. Pick up the boys and let's get moving." Vango rubbed his hands. "What luck!" he gloated. "First the Meteor, and now the invention. Nothing's going to stop me now."

The master criminal paused only long enough to supervise the handling of the captives. Then he followed after his men.

THE METEOR struck the water of the large lake with a resounding splash. Weak and half conscious, he sank deep into its depths. But the icy liquid enabled him to throw off his stupor, and when he broke surface he was able to keep himself afloat. In a short time he was strong enough to swim. He struck out for the shore.

The Meteor drew himself up on the sand and relaxed, his huge chest laboring. Then he got to his feet and examined a compact instrument resembling a watch which was strapped to his wrist. The tiny radio sender had not been injured by its contact with the water.

There were times when it was vitally necessary for the Meteor to have his ship in a hurry. At these times it might be too far away for him to reach quickly. He had merely added a device to the robot pilot which could be activated by the radio sender, bringing the ship to any place he might be.

The Meteor sent the signals winging into the air. He waited. The ship, which had been circling in the night high above, now came in answer. Vanes revolving in a diminishing whirl, it thumped to the sand. The Meteor climbed into the cabin, and a moment later was shooting back to the house.

Something was wrong, he realized, as he approached the house. No lights glowed from beyond the glass walls. What had happened while he was gone?

The Meteor circled the house, keen eyes raking the grounds. There was a gyroplane on the roof, near the garage. There was another on the lawn, a few yards from the house. He knew that the gyroplane on the roof was Elton's. But whose was the other?

The Meteor landed his ship. He holstered fresh flame pistols. Then he

stalked warily toward the strange gyroplane.

The waning moon revealed a figure before the controls. It was Pitward's chauffeur, slumped in death.

STEEL eyes glittering in sudden apprehension, the Meteor raced to the house, flame pistols gripped tightly in his fists.

The living room was a shambles of overturned and broken furniture. Elton was gone!

Cautiously, the Meteor searched through the rest of the dwelling. In the kitchen he found old Enderby. There was a large swelling on the old man's head. A vigorous application of slaps and rubbing brought the old man around.

"What happened?" rapped the Meteor. "Quick, man, there is no time to lose!"

Brokenly, Enderby told what he knew of the events that had taken place.

It was enough for the Meteor. "This is Vango's work, of course. The question now is—where has he taken them? But I think I'll find that out easily enough. He must have paid off his henchmen for this night's work. And there are dives near the space-portal—"

His sharp ears caught a faint rapping.

Weapon in hand, he padded to the door. The rapping came again and with it a voice.

"Help!"

The Meteor tore the portal open. Clinging weakly to the jamb was Horace Rankin. His hat was gone, his clothing was torn, and his dishevelled hair hung over a dirtied face.

Rankin was staring at the Meteor. "You—you're the Meteor?" he gasped out.

"I am," was the reply. "And you're Horace Rankin. You were here when the attack came?"

"Yes. I put up a fight, but they got me. They left me behind when they took the others. I revived just now." He paused for breath. "We've got to save the others. I know where they have been taken. I came to while the scoundrels were taking them to their ships. I overheard something of what they were saying, before they knocked me out."

"You know where they are, then? Good! That's just what I intended to find out from other sources."

"They've been taken to a hideout on darkside on the Moon. I heard one of them say it was near Finston's Landing. I suggest we go and search at once. I can have one of my company rocket ships fueled for the trip."

"That will not be necessary," said the Meteor. "I have my own, which is much faster than anything which you might have."

In his incredibly fast gyroplane, the Meteor drove Rankin to an abandoned stretch of farmland.

"Wait here for me," he said. "I'll be back shortly."

RANKIN sat down upon an outcropping of rock and waited. He attempted to put his clothes into some semblance of order. Less than a quarter of an hour later there came a deep roar, and Rankin looked up to see a rocket ship landing on its underjets. He stumbled across the dark field to the lock.

"Hold tight," said the Meteor. "Here we go."

Flame blasted into the ground once more, and the rocket shot into the sky.

Rankin had wanted to buy Elton's invention because it would make rock-

ets faster than they were. The Meteor's ship was the fastest he had ever seen.

"How much do you want for this ship?" asked Rankin eagerly.

"No sale," said the Meteor briefly.

It's difficult to argue with a man in a black helmet, so Rankin sat down in a padded chair and rubbed his jaw. The Meteor said nothing, but devoted his attention to the course he had plotted. The Earth melted away behind them, and they seemed to hang motionless in a star-speckled blackness. The moon grew to a bulging immensity.

And then the crater-dotted surface was beneath them. Shortly after the ship plunged into the ebony shadow of the darkside. With a night glass, Rankin searched for the towering rock pinnacle that marked the site of Finston's Landing.

"Look—over there, to the west!" Rankin suddenly shouted. "Isn't that a ship?"

The Meteor took the glass, peered briefly. "It is," he reported. "The hideout must be near it. Get into a spacesuit."

The Meteor brought the ship down on its cushioning underjets. He got into a bulky metal suit, then took two explosive-pellet rifles from a rack on the wall. He handed one to Rankin, and, with the latter following, left the ship through the lock.

They cautiously skirted the other ship, but its portholes were dark and there was no sign of life about it. The Meteor moved forward slowly, keen eyes probing the sable shadows that lay about the rocky terrain, the explosive-pellet rifle gripped tightly in the metal hands of his suit.

Then he stopped short, and placed a metal hand on Rankin's suit. His voice carried to the other by conduction.

"There's an opening about two hundred yards to the right. Looks like the entrance to one of the subterranean cities of the ancient Selenites. Be careful. If there's anyone in there, they'll shoot first and ask questions only when you're dead."

Rankin nodded. Together they began to creep toward the opening. The Meteor took advantage of every rock and shadow. He did not approach the entrance directly, but angled off toward one side so that he could close in without being seen by any guard who might be stationed within it.

There was a guard inside. The guard was seated upon a rock with a rifle thrown across the metal knees of his suit. For a full three seconds he stared at the muzzle of the rifle which the Meteor was pressing against his glassex helmet. Then, realizing resistance was useless, he raised his hands.

Watching the guard closely, the Meteor pressed a hand against his shoulder. "Lead us inside," he commanded. "And no tricks, or I'll blow that helmet from your head. You know what that would mean."

The guard did. He led them surlily down the passageway, which descended at an angle beneath the surface of the Moon. At the other end a metal wall had been constructed. In the wall was an airlock similar to those used on rocket ships. The guard opened the lock, his two captors following after him.

VANGO'S lair on the Moon was a series of vast subterranean caverns, interconnected by passages. The caverns had once been inhabited by a race of Selenites, but were now abandoned. They had been filled with air so that wearing spacesuits while in them was unnecessary.

The lock opened into one of these

large caverns. Several passageways opened into it. As the Meteor, Rankin, and the prisoner crossed the floor of the cavern, a horde of men suddenly poured from each of the passageways!

It was a trap!

Hot slugs began to criss-cross the room toward the Meteor. Brutish voices lifted in eagerness for the kill. Wave after wave of renegades poured toward the Meteor, shooting as they came!

The Meteor's hair-trigger nerves reacted instantly. He had been expecting a trap all along, and had been a trifle worried by the fact that it was taking so long to be sprung. Whirling around, he leaped toward the nearest of the openings, rifle coughing as he ran. His raking fire crumpled down the thugs who were racing at him.

In another moment the passageway was cleared, and the Meteor was leaping down it. He had to exert all his strength to move swiftly in the cumbersome spacesuit. Bullets whined past him and clanged off the metal of the suit, as the renegades leaped to the chase.

Someone was shouting orders behind him. "After him! Don't let him get away! Extra money to the man who brings the Meteor down!"

The Meteor's lips were thinned out, and his steely eyes were glittering. He was loosening the fastenings of his suit as he ran. A side passage suddenly presented itself. The Meteor whirled into it, pausing only long enough to discard his suit. Then he was moving again.

He was at a serious disadvantage, he knew, in that he was not familiar with the innumerable passageways and caverns. He doubted that the thugs knew them all themselves. Certainly,

they would inhabit only that portion nearest the lock.

More than once he had to double back on his tracks and flatten against the walls as searching thugs pounded past. But, whereas they were spreading out and probing deeper and deeper into the subterranean hideout, the wily Meteor was moving back toward the lock! He knew that they would not expect him to remain so close to headquarters.

Only the caverns nearest the lock were illuminated. The passageways, lighted only by the illumination that filtered in from the caverns, were filled with a murky gloom. In his black suit, the Meteor was almost indistinguishable. He glided along like a ghost.

THE PASSAGEWAY which he had taken led into an unlighted cavern. The Meteor moved into it. By feeling his way along the walls, he became aware that the cavern was filled with a great number of boxes, barrels, and crates, some of which were piled high above his head. He listened intently for a moment, then pulled a small flashlight from his belt. He flashed it about briefly. The place was a storeroom. It was stocked to overflowing with the loot which Vango had garnered during his brief career.

Still feeling his way about, the Meteor moved toward the farthest end of the storeroom. When he felt that a sufficient number of obstructions lay between him and the entrance, he used his flashlight. He found an empty crate. He crawled into it, pulled the cover shut, and waited for the search to die down.

Once a group of thugs entered. They probed half-heartedly among the boxes and crates with their lamps, then left.

When there was no further hint of

activity, the Meteor climbed from the crate. Using the flashlight cautiously, he began to search among the stored articles. A plan was rushing to completion in his mind.

The fact that most of the crates were marked as to what they contained made the search easier for the Meteor. In a short time he found a metal case of tridetonite, an extremely powerful explosive which had doubtlessly been stolen from a mining supply ship. It was not exactly what the Meteor wanted, but it would do. A radio receiver which he dismantled from a television set, a handful of fuses, and a spool of wire made up the rest of his supplies. Crouched in the glow of his flashlight, he began to make something. It was a very simple something—but it was going to be very deadly.

At last it was finished. The Meteor carried it carefully to the entrance and set it down again. He peered into the dim passageway. There was a sentry stationed about a hundred feet down. Vango had doubled the guard.

In his black-gloved hand the Meteor balanced a capsule of tridetonite with attached fuse. He gripped a projection in the wall so that, in the feeble gravity of the Moon, he would not hurl himself from his feet. Then he threw the capsule into the gloom, far down the passageway. He lifted the box again—waited.

Brrro-o-om! The terrific explosion was deafening.

The subterranean hideout shook with it.

The guard had been knocked off his feet. He got up again. "The Meteor! The Meteor!" he yelled. "The Meteor! Help!" He began running toward the scene of the explosion.

THERE was a grim smile on the Meteor's lips as he watched the

thugs go thundering past. His plan was working! He slipped into the passageway and went swiftly to the main cavern. It was completely deserted. In a shadowed crevice near the airlock he deposited the box he had made. Then he began searching for the prisoners.

"What happened?" he heard someone call. It was Elton's voice!

The Meteor leaped toward the source. It had come from behind a metal door, one of several in the main cavern. He shot the lock away. In a smaller cavern, which had been partitioned off by metal screens, he found Elton, Pitward, and Eloise.

With a glad cry, Elton ran forward. "I knew you'd come!"

"Quick!" rapped the Meteor. "There's no time to lose. We've got to get out of here before they return. Find spacesuits!"

"Follow me," said Elton. "I've seen where they keep the suits."

"Hurry, then."

They streamed out of the room. Elton opened one of the adjacent metal doors. There, hanging on hooks from the wall, were a number of metal spacesuits. Feverishly, they climbed into them.

At that moment several of the renegades came running back into the main cavern. They had gotten suspicious. They saw the others getting into the spacesuits.

"Into the airlock!" snapped the Meteor. "Run for my ship. I'll hold them off."

The thugs opened fire, shouting as they came.

"The Meteor! Here he is, boys. He's making a getaway!"

Eyes glittering, the Meteor began methodically to pump shots at the oncoming thugs with one hand, while he screwed up the fastenings of his suit with the other. Then he moved to-

ward the door of the airlock, firing as he went. Suddenly he noticed that Elton and the others had not left as he had told them to do. There had been rifles in the room along with the spacesuits. Elton, the girl, and Pitward were giving an excellent account of themselves. Their concerted fire enabled the Meteor to reach the airlock.

Vango was almost insane with rage. His black mask was puffing out with curses. "After them!" he was screaming. "After them! If they get away, I'll murder the lot of you!"

Slugs spanged futilely from the metal door of the airlock as the Meteor pulled it shut in the faces of the thugs. Then the second door was open and they were in the passageway that led up to the surface.

"Hurry!" urged the Meteor, speaking by conduction. "They'll be after us soon."

Exhausted by the brisk race up the rough passageway, they stumbled out on the surface. Not daring to pause, they continued their desperate escape.

"My ship is over there," the Meteor told Elton. "Go on ahead. There's something I have to do."

HE WATCHED Elton move toward the ship. Then he pulled his arms from the metal sleeves of his suit. Working in the tight confines of the body, he began making adjustments upon the tiny radio sender strapped to his wrist.

Then signals from that sender were winging through the Moon's airless atmosphere. The signals spread out like the ripples made by dropping a stone into a still pool of water. They spread out—and reached the something that the Meteor had made and then hidden near the airlock in the main cavern of the outlaw hideout.

A portion of the Moon's surface leaped up into space. Vango's subter-

ranean lair had been beneath it. Had there been any air, the gigantic explosion might have been heard all around the Moon.

"How did you do it?" asked Elton, as the Meteor entered the ship and began climbing from his suit. "That blast must have knocked every trace of air out of there. Not a soul must be left alive!"

"It was simple," replied the Meteor. "I merely touched off a case of tridetonite by radio."

"This writes finis to Vango's career," said Elton. "Too bad we never learned who he was."

"On the contrary, I have learned who he is—or was," stated the Meteor.

"Who?" they gasped out simultaneously.

"Rankin, of course." The Meteor told them how he had encountered Rankin upon his return to Elton's home. "That's how I suspected him," he concluded. "What was he doing there without a gyroplane? It isn't conceivable that he had walked. The only answer is that he came with the criminals."

"But what was Rankin doing at my home after we had been taken away?" asked Elton.

"He came back for the plans, no doubt. Seeing me, he had to change his tactics. He led me to a trap here on the Moon. I managed to escape because I had already guessed that he was Vango, and was expecting a trap."

Pitward shook his head wonderingly. "I've never liked Rankin, but I'd never have believed that he was a crook. What were his motives, anyway?"

"Money," said the Meteor. "His rocket line was steadily losing money. On a promise of rich rewards from the revolutionists, Rankin helped finance

the Venusian Redlands Uprising. When America put that down, he was destitute. Stark necessity forced him into crime, and with his business brains he made a good job of it. He wanted Elton's invention. If he couldn't buy it as Rankin, he decided to steal it as Vango."

A thoughtful silence descended upon the cabin that was broken only by the roar of the rockets.

Later on the Meteor would call the Interplanetary Rangers and give them the details of his latest triumph. They would not be very glad to hear about it. Since the Meteor had begun his campaign on crime, the Rangers had become little more than a mop-up squad for the lonewolf adventurer.

"You know," said Elton suddenly, "I was just thinking that, instead of selling the government the complete rights to my invention, I could insert a clause in the contract which would enable other men to have its benefits

also. That would strike a better balance."

"I agree with you," remarked the Meteor. "Secrets can be learned, you know—even from the government. It wouldn't be long before half the ships in space were equipped with combustion chambers curiously like your own. You deserve something for the work you did on it. Might as well make a profit while men are still willing to buy from you—not from someone else."

A load of gloom had fallen from Pitward's shoulders. His funereal countenance was split by a huge grin. "Paul, I knew you wouldn't fail me. You see, I didn't want to admit it before, but my company was losing income almost as fast as Rankin's. Your invention was the only hope I had left. Well—something tells me you're going to make a splendid son-in-law!"

Behind his helmet the Meteor's lips twitched.

THE END

NO MORE CLUTCH

IT WON'T be long before the word "clutch" will pass out of the vocabulary of the everyday person except as a reference to what Johnnie and his girl friend do at the drive-in! But that doesn't mean clutches are no longer with us. Even though most new cars come equipped with fantastically robotic automatic drives, they still have some sort of clutch no matter under what name it may be disguised, "Floopermatic" or "Supermatic. . ."

It remains a basic problem in engineering that, when you wish to couple an engine which can't be slowed down to zero or started from zero, to a driven member, you have to use some sort of clutch. While until recently the commonest one was the dry-plate job which just brought two discs together by friction, the host of newer clutches use fluid connections, connections of iron particles in liquids, magnetic fields, and what have you. All of these new clutches have their uses and many of them are products of the famed Bureau of Standards, which spends a lot of time developing clutches because they

are extremely useful and necessary in computing machines—as well as automobiles.

The latest clutching mechanism to issue from this organization uses another unique principle. It depends upon the piezo-electric effect in which a crystal changes its dimensions when an electric charge is placed upon it. The two-disc method is used, one connected to the rotating shaft, the other to the driven shaft, but crystals are mounted on one disc. To operate the clutching effect, a little "juice" is fed the gadget, and the crystals lock together. That's all there is to it, but it happens rapidly which is what the scientists want because they want to stop and start computing mechanisms almost instantly. The crystal clutch can do just that.

While this apparatus will be restricted in its use to computers, the famous magnetic-fluid clutch of the Bureau of Standards will eventually make its appearance in automobiles (it has already done so in an experimental case) and it is only the laggardly conservatism of the automobile industry that has prevented its wider use thus far.

—John Weston

How They'll Do It Tomorrow

By JUNE LURIE

"THE ROOM was made of stainless steel. Long and low, it appeared to stretch on endlessly. And in row on endless row along the glistening refrigerated walls were tall cylinders of glass filled with nutrient solutions; hoses and wires ran from these containers through ducts into the complex laboratories behind the walls. The Breeding-Rooms were remote and perfect, seemingly sterile except for one awful fact—in each glass cylinder was a human embryo, in varying stages of growth from cell to completed individual. The technicians handled the cylinders very carefully for the State was severe. The Breeding-Rooms were sacred..."

A hundred—several hundred science-fiction novels and social satires have used the theme exemplified by the passage above. Artificial insemination and gestation of human beings has always been an imaginative dream of scientists, a dream usually—and better—regarded as a nightmare. Whatever it is, however, it is not factless fantasy. In fact, it is surprisingly close to the possibility of realization!

Biologists have, for years, been able to take fertilized eggs from various animal mothers, transplant them to other mothers and have succeeded in producing perfectly normal offspring in creatures ranging from amoebas to rabbits. Artificial insemination is widely used by a great many farmers as a method of improving their stock. These matters are an old story. But various genetic organizations have really devised a technique which in its implications is breath-taking. They have successfully transplanted calves still in the cellular stage from one cow to another! And the resultant animals have grown just as healthy as if they'd remained in their original chambers. In fact the whole purpose of the experimenting is to make poorly formed scrub cows serve as sort of synthetic mothers to the offspring of quality cows. Again fact outraces imagination.

The only bearing this animal experimentation has on human beings, aside from the general medical information it supplies, is the suggestion of the possibility of saving the children of mothers who have been severely injured during pregnancy. This, of course, remains a remote dream. It is one thing to handle an animal, another to deal with the hyper-quality organization of brain and bone and tissue that constitute a human being. But the fact that a highly organized mammal like the cow can be treated so mechanically from a biological standpoint, is encouraging indeed.

BETTER ROBOTS

By
OMAR BOOTH

THAT ROBOTS are here to stay is not news. Perhaps the robots aren't the highly imaginative creations we've come to consider them—human shapes in metal—but they exist nevertheless. Thermostats in refrigerators and heating equipment, relays for this and that, electric motors everywhere—these are the true robots. With the advent of calculating machines they've come to take over even mental chores. There is only one trouble with robots of the variety we use now—most of them don't recognize failure and are not so constructed to repair that fault.

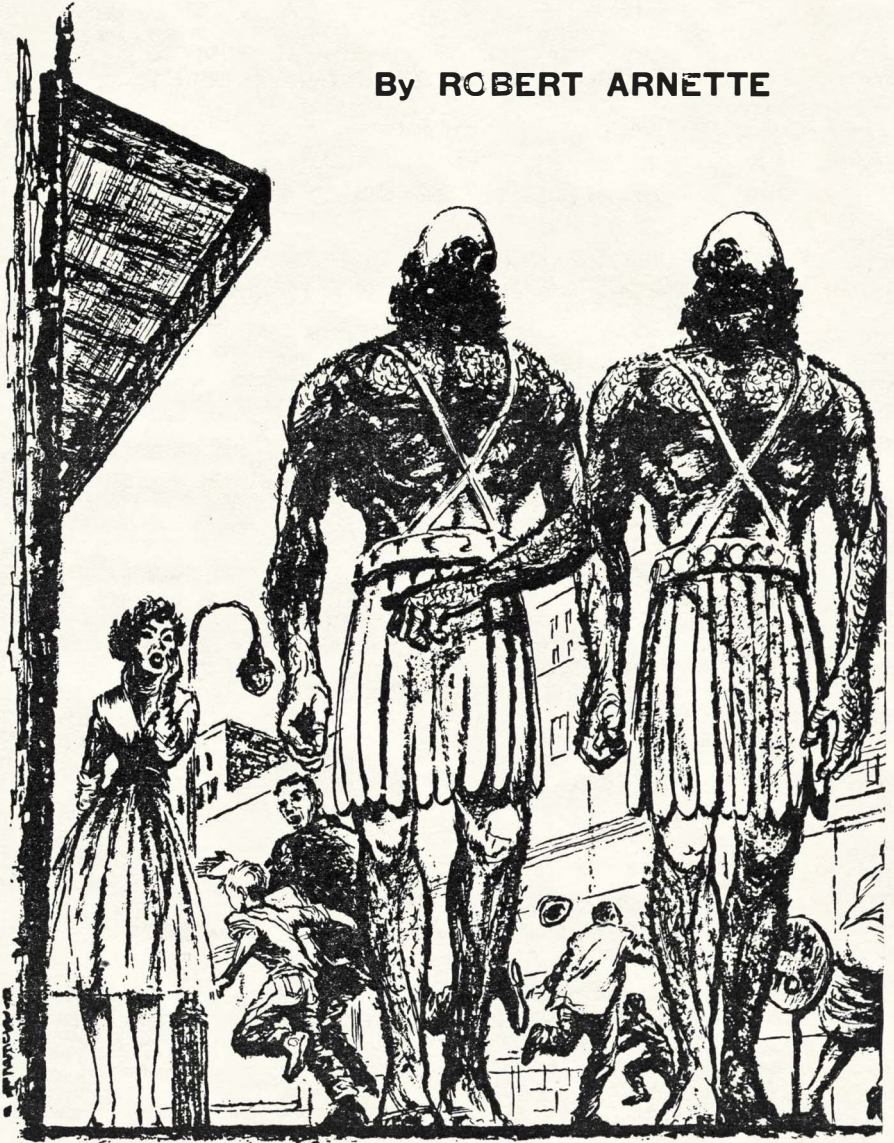
This is the main difference probably between a human operator and a robot. But that's changing too. Engineers have begun to realize that a robot must be made even more reliable than a human operator. The question is how?

There are a number of approaches. You can build in the equipment alarms, flashing lights and ringing bells, which will warn humans that something is wrong—"Fix the oil-burner, Jake!" Or you can use duplicate equipment and in this critical application that is often done. You want to be sure that your gadget works every time?—it's a cinch—simply build two of everything so that in the improbable case that something goes wrong with number one, number two takes over right away without a single interruption. This latter method is being applied widely to all sorts of technical apparatus in planes, household equipment and the like. Wherever electrical equipment is used including electronic equipment, it is possible to utilize duplicate circuits and duplicate elements such as vacuum tubes to guarantee that the robot will always work.

This method is being used with such success that more and more remote-controlled radio stations, electrical power distributing stations, engines and what have you, see humans only once every six months or a year when the maintenance men come around for a check-up. It's like a human running to the doctor for his yearly examination. As yet we're still on the threshold of the robotic age but it's creeping up rapidly—and safety and reliability are coming along with it!

THE INVOLUNTARY ENEMY

By ROBERT ARNETTE



Wherever they walked, panic followed them

Nothing like these creatures had ever been seen on Earth before. They came as friends. But their brand of friendship was deadly

HERE was awe and dim apprehension in the bulging, large-pupilled eyes of Subbol as he turned to his companion in the spacecraft.

"We've landed!" he said soberly. "Landed on Ommkul, the mysterious third planet!"

Garnn flicked off the power lever with a nervousness he had not shown all during the long voyage. He sat back in his pilot chair and drew a long, shuddering breath. He was exhausted. But he didn't allow his body to relax, for he was filled with a burning, feverish anxiety that knew no rest.

"Yes," he whispered. "It's done. We of Kullgor, the fourth planet, have finally managed to reach Ommkul. But the hardest part still lies before us, Subbol. We are not yet finished—"

"No." Subbol's voice quivered. "We must still find life, Garnn. Intelligent life. Oh, I wish that we were certain that we shall find it here. We've speculated so much during the long *kons* in space—"

"There must be life!" Garnn retorted harshly. He rose half out of his chair, his body taut with emotion. Then he sank back, eyes dulling as a swift tide of despair washed over them. "If there isn't—if there isn't, Subbol—then death to our race. Even now the plague must be gaining headway."

That thought brought a black cloud of silence. Into the eyes of the two came a vast fear.

Subbol rose from his chair as though



he had acquired a sudden distaste for it. He stared into nothingness, fists clenched. He was as tall as the average Earthman, and he had two arms and two legs. But there the resemblance ended. For his chest was grotesquely huge, and his head was a large, purple dome in which only his eyes were visible. Nose, mouth, and ears were hidden in the thick beard that began just below the eyes. His body was covered with thick, purple-black hair, protection against the cold, keen winds that blew over the deserts of Mars. Like Garnn, he wore a metallic skirt that fell half-way to his knees. This was supported by a criss-crossing harness from which hung a large variety of metal objects.

GARNN SPOKE. His tone was sad and bitter.

"We've lost so much of the old knowledge, the old glory— We've become degenerate. In the old days, a mere plague wouldn't have baffled us, sent us scurrying to another world and another race for assistance."

"But the Blue Death is not an ordinary plague." Subbol shuddered. For a moment he became lost in a crowd of awful memories. Once again he walked beside solemn doctors in the crowded wards of the Hospital of Contagious Diseases back in ancient Thoron. And once again he saw those pain-contorted bodies from which every last vestige of hair had fallen, the skin a nauseous, mottled blue. In his ears rang chilling echoes of the tortured cries he had heard. The Blue Death! Nothing like it had ever been seen on Mars before.

Subbol wrenched himself back to reality.

"If there is intelligent life here, Garnn, do you think they would be able to help us?"

"They must!" the other gritted.

"They must. They are the only chance our race has left. We can't fail now that we've overcome the obstacle of space."

"Yes, it is agony to think that our final supreme effort might be of no avail. To have conquered space at last— But in our hour of dire necessity we succeeded. The Desert Gods were good." Subbol's beard quivered. "And the secret lay ignored before us for six thousand *garls*. They laughed at us when we told them that the ancient Ong Kruu principle dealing with gravitic lines of force could be used to cross space. But we proved that we were right. Strange to think that something so simple has succeeded where complex methods have failed. Why, a mere child could run our space-sphere."

Garnn nodded. "Yes, the operation is simple. But enough of this. We have come for aid. We must seek cities, intelligent beings. Due to our struggle with the stronger gravity of this planet, we were unable to undertake a trip of exploration before landing. But a reshift of the warp factors will take care of that, now.

"Reseat yourself, Subbol. We are taking off."

WHISPERS RENDON and his men were listening fascinatedly to the radio. The only sound in the room was the excited, slightly incoherent voice of the newscaster.

The radio was tuned in very softly, so that the men had to strain forward to catch every sentence. Whispers Rendon liked it that way because he hated harsh noises. But, more, he didn't want to attract any attention, for the police might become interested. Whispers Rendon wanted to have as little to do with the police as possible. For the police would have given their eye-teeth to get their hands on Whispers

Rendon. He was that bad, and the reward on his sleek head was that large.

The newscaster on the radio was saying:

"It's true, ladies and gentlemen! It's true, I tell you! The two strange beings from the metal sphere that landed yesterday in Central Park are from Mars! They are Martians!

"This is the latest bit of information that the group of scientists endeavoring to communicate with the two weird visitors have managed to learn thus far. Shown diagrams of the Solar System, the beings pointed unhesitatingly to Mars, the fourth planet. Besides this, we know very little. Communication with them is very difficult, consisting mainly of signs and drawings. Most of the time each group has to guess what idea the other is trying to put over.

"But it seems clear that the two Martians haven't come for a mere good-will visit. They're trying desperately to tell our scientists something. What it is isn't clear yet, but it looks as though there is something wrong on Mars.

"One of the two aliens gave a demonstration of one of the gadgets which hang from their metal suspenders. It was like a flashlight in shape, and when turned on, it bored a hole right through one of the walls. The scientists were very much excited and called the device a disintegrator. It cuts right into anything, even several feet of steel. The other objects are a lot like the things we carry around with ourselves every day. The Martians haven't any pockets, so they just hang them up on their suspender-like skirt supports. They—"

Whispers Rendon leaned forward and snapped off the radio. He rose to his feet, lighted a cigarette, and began to pace the floor. His men watched

him uneasily. For something had come over Whispers Rendon. His hands were trembling, and his eyes glowed like tiny mirrors.

Whispers Rendon paced the floor for some time. With each passing minute the light in his eyes grew brighter. His men fidgeted nervously. They were slit-eyed, thin-lipped desperadoes—hard. But all their degrees of hardness put together would hardly have matched that of Whispers Rendon. They watched him, and were afraid.

Suddenly, Whispers Rendon whirled around.

"You fools!" he said gently. "Don't you see it yet?" His voice was soft, hardly above a whisper. But it was very cold and very deadly.

His men gulped. Their heads shook in unison.

Whispers Rendon looked as though he had expected that. The granite-set lines of his face twisted in a sneer.

"Didn't you hear what the guy over the radio said about that disintegrator thing? Can't you see all the possibilities it opens up? Why, we've got a can-opener that'll bust any crib in the country! But we've got to play this right. I've got a plan that'll tear your heads off. Listen."

IT WOULD have surprised a good many people to see Professor Johann Mund listening to a radio. For they knew him as an old-fashioned, absent-minded old soul who never did anything but mumble over obscure experiments in his disorderly laboratory. But in the present instance they wouldn't have been so startled, for Professor Johann Mund was listening to the latest news about the two Martians who had landed in Central Park the previous day. That was enough to interest anyone.

Professor Johann Mund was short

and plump, with thick-lensed spectacles over baby-blue eyes, and white hair that framed a cherubic face. With a Tyrolean hat on his head and a stein in his hand, he could have posed for a beer advertisement. People liked him for everything that he appeared to be on the surface.

For they didn't know what was beneath that surface. Professor Johann Mund claimed to be a refugee from "dot terrible Stalin." But he was in actuality the head of a vast fifth-column and espionage group that had its deadly tenacles spread over half the country. If it would have helped the Soviet, Professor Johann Mund would have murdered a dozen widows and orphans with as little emotion as he expended in cleaning a test-tube.

The newscaster on the radio had become slightly more intelligible since the several hours past that Whispers Rendon had listened to him. He was saying:

"A group of eminent scientists who have lately arrived from the Pacific Coast are tackling the problem of devising a more efficient method of communication with the Martians than the one being used at present. One investigator has mentioned the devising of a thought-helmet or something of the sort, but the general consensus of opinion seems to be that such devices are at present possible only in fantastic fiction. Just how long it will take us to understand the two Martians clearly, and they us, is problematical. The scientists hope for an early solution. At present communication between both parties is mostly guesswork.

"A consistently disturbing fact is that the two Martians are anxiously trying to tell us something. Our understanding of what this might be is too vague even to make a guess. But it must be something terrible.

"Investigation of the spherical space-ship in which the Martians landed shows it to be very simple in principle, operation and construction. We don't know what makes it go, and probably won't until the two Martians are able to explain it to us. However, engineers from one of our largest technical institutes are confident that they will soon solve the secret."

PROFESSOR Johann Mund snapped off the radio. Something about what he had heard had transformed him into a cherubic Satan. His blue eyes glittered like chips of glacial ice, and his full lips were contorted in a soundless snarl. There was something immensely pleased, triumphant in that snarl.

Professor Johann Mund began to pace the floor of his study. He made a fist of one pudgy hand and slowly smacked this into the palm of the other, as though that added impact to every step of the diabolic plan that was taking shape in his mind. His smile took on something of unholy glee.

Finally he went to the door.

"Engle!" he called. "Horst!"

Shortly, two men appeared. They slid into the study and the door closed softly behind them. They stood at rigid attention before Professor Johann Mund.

Engle and Horst were very little different from Whispers Rendon's men, except that a fanatical light burned in their eyes. People knew them as Professor Johann Mund's laboratory assistants. But a discerning eye would have seen that their ramrod backs were accustomed to military uniforms instead of the smocks of scientific workers.

"Tonight we strike a great blow for the Cause!" Professor Johann Mund announced. "Tonight this cursed

country ceases to be an obstacle to the plans of our Leader. You have been listening to the news over the radio regarding the two men from Mars?"

"Yes, your excellency," Engle and Horst replied together.

Professor Johann Mund leaned towards them. His voice trembled with emotion.

"The space-ship, you dolts, the space-ship! Can't you see the tremendous possibilities it opens up? Think what an irresistible weapon it would make for the Fatherland! A ship that needs no fuel, no bases. A ship that can go around the world in a night. And in addition, its construction and operation is simplicity itself. Why, our factories could turn out dozens of them in a month!

"I have a plan. Listen, you thick-heads, listen!"

TWO O'CLOCK in the morning is ordinarily a very dull hour in the detective division of Police Headquarters. Nick Warde, who ran the night detail, had his feet propped up on his desk, and was trying desperately to keep awake by gazing fixedly at the front cover of a tattered copy of the Police Gazette. His door was opened invitingly for company, but Grabner, who worked out of the Missing Persons Bureau, and who usually shared dull mornings like this with him, was probably locked fast in the arms of Morpheus. Through the opening drifted the clicking of teletypes, and once in a while a distant telephone rang.

Nick Warde tossed the magazine aside disgustedly, and decided to let nature take its course, when Murchison, a civil clerk on the night staff, burst into the room. Murchison looked as though he had just been hit over the head.

Murchison gulped his voice into action.

"Warde, you—you know those two Martians? A call just came in. They're gone—and so is their space-ship!"

Murchison whirled around and galloped for the office of Acting Night Chief Nielsen. Nick Warde leaped after him.

Nielsen digested the news in stolid silence for several seconds. Then he burst to his feet.

"Hell's bells! Call out the squad!"

Hearing the sudden commotion, a group of drowsy-eyed reporters boiled out of the press room. They were streaking from the building even before Murchison had finished explaining.

Warde and Nielsen ran for the elevators and shot down to the garage. Warde slid behind the wheel of a squad car and kicked the motor into furious life. He and Nielsen were the first ones up the ramp and into the street, siren wailing.

The two Martians had been quartered in one of New York's largest hotels, more as an advertising stunt than a gesture of generosity on the part of the owners. Business for the hotel had boomed amazingly, and day and night crowds filled its lobby and thronged before its ornate doors. It was so, now.

Warde and Nielsen, a squad of unformed officers following at their heels, pushed their way through the crowd and entered the hotel. An elevator was waiting for them. They shot up to the floor where the two Martians had been living, the second highest in the hotel.

THE NIGHT manager was wringing his hands and looking like a man who has just lost a goose that lays golden eggs. Behind him stood a harassed-faced house detective.

"They're gone!" the manager wailed. "Gone!"

"How'd it happen?" Nielsen barked.

"I—I don't know. One of your men gave the alarm."

A pale-faced plainclothes man stepped forward. He saluted.

"I was the one who found out about it, sir. I was on duty before the door with Richardson, over there. We—we were both pretty nervous keeping watch over a couple of nightmares like that—er—excuse me, sir. But we were both pretty nervous. About one-thirty we heard a noise in the room—several noises, in fact, as though they were doing something. But we didn't investigate at once, because we just had orders to stand at the door, and sorta keep them in the room.

"But after a while it got real quiet—too quiet, and me and Richardson got to wondering. We decided it would be a good idea to kind of look in and see what was what. I did—and—and they were gone, sir!"

"If anything comes of this, it's back to pounding a beat for both of you!" Nielsen snarled.

Warde saw a door ajar across the room. He went to it, and found himself gazing into a bedroom. But the thing that caught and held his attention was an open window that gave out to a fire escape.

Warde shouted and reached the window in three leaps. He gazed downward. Sprawled in the illuminated courtyard far below were three limp figures. Even at this height he could make out the blue of their uniforms. Another thing he noticed was that the courtyard gave out to a service alley.

Nielsen charged into the room with an excited, "What is it?" The others peered cautiously through the open door.

Warde pointed to the fire escape.

"Window was open. Two and two make four."

Nielsen stuck his head out the win-

dow. He saw the figures in the courtyard.

"Hell's bells! Flaherty, Wronski, you two go down there and see what's the matter."

Several minutes later, the two designated officers returned. Their faces were green and their eyes had a haunted, terrified gleam.

"They're dead, sir!" Wronski husked. "All of 'em are dead. Heads bashed in."

Warde's eyes narrowed to slits and muscles tautened in his face.

"It looks," Nielsen said very softly, "like we were playing host to a couple of Frankensteins. Better get the Commissioner, the Mayor, and the State Militia in on this. Come on, Warde, we're going to Central Park."

CENTRAL PARK had been filled with crowds of curious who had come to ogle the Martian space-ship. The walks had teemed with life, and there had been the noise of excited voices and moving feet. The animals in the zoo had caught some of the contagion and had roared incessantly.

But now it was quiet. Very quiet. It had become a place of the dead.

Or so it seemed to Warde and Nielsen, the men who had come with them, and all the others who had been drawn to the park by the news and the excitement. For, sprawled in all positions and everywhere one looked, were hundreds of still figures. It was as though everyone in Central Park had suddenly become tired, lain down, and gone to sleep.

The cause of the sleep, as a small army of doctors later determined, was some form of anaesthetic gas which had knocked everyone in the park unconscious as quickly as a man bats an eyelid.

But the most startling part of it all

was the disappearance of the spaceship. Only a depression in the sward remained to show where it had stood. The cordon of police who had stood guard about the sphere was as unconscious as the rest.

Nick Warde stared into the night. His voice was low, ominous.

"It's clear. It's all clear. They left the hotel by means of the fire escape, killing the three guards at the bottom. Then they came here and somehow knocked out everyone in the park. They took their ship and left. They wouldn't have done that if they were friendly."

"You're right," Nielsen said slowly. "There's going to be trouble. If what I'm thinking is true, there's going to be a war that'll make the last one look like a dog-fight in comparison."

With a strong sense of impending disaster, Warde found himself thinking along the same lines. The old fantasy of Earth's being invaded by Martians wasn't a fantasy any more.

IT WAS DARK in the basement, and it was cold and damp. Occasionally the dismal hoot of a river boat drifted in.

"I do not understand," Subbol said. "I really do not understand."

Garnn stirred. The ropes which bound him were very tight.

"They have given us very little to understand," he replied.

In the dank gloom the tones of their voices were infinitely sad.

"I thought these people of Ommkul had finally understood us, and were going to give us their aid. When two of them appeared at one of the little transparent doors in the wall and took us down the long metal stairway, I was very glad, for I thought our appeals were being answered at last. But they turned strange weapons on us,

put us in one of their mobile machines, and brought us here. They tied us up with strong ropes, like men who have done wrong. Now we are prisoners. I cannot imagine that this is their way of helping us." Subbol shook his head.

"No, they cannot be helping us," Garnn decided. His voice choked. "We must do something, Subbol! We cannot remain here. Our people are dying. The plague must be increasing in force and fury all the time." The thoughts accompanying his words had aroused a frenzied desperation. He hurled himself furiously against his bonds. But he had no strength in Ommkul's heavier gravity. Listlessly, he slumped back against the mattress.

"There is nothing we can do," Subbol said, with bitter weariness. "We and our people are doomed."

ACTING Night Chief Nielsen had a radio in his office. He, Warde, and Grabner were listening to it. With them was Jimmy Mackay.

Jimmy Mackay was a reporter on the *Express*. In fact he was the *Express*' star reporter. Those who knew him said he had a nose that could scent news a mile away, even before it happened. He was surprisingly young in view of all the honors he had reaped during his short career.

The newscaster on the radio was excited again.

"—and during these two months following the disappearance of the Martians strange things have been occurring here in New York. Banks have been robbed, jewelry houses looted. No safe or vault however strong has been able to withstand these mysterious assaults. In every case, the metal seems to have been cut through as a knife cuts through butter. There seems to be little doubt in the minds

of everyone that the disintegrator devices which the two Martians possessed are responsible.

"Are the Martians behind these incredible burglaries? That seems to be the only answer. But the question is why? Why, ladies and gentlemen? Of what possible use to the Martians could be Earthly monetary units of exchange, stocks, bonds, securities?"

"Or is there some deeper significance behind all this? Something which we can't see at present?"

"What was it that the two Martians had been trying so desperately to tell us? Could it be a warning of invasion? Then why—"

Nielsen shut the radio off with angered suddenness.

"The damn fool! He'll be starting a panic pretty soon. Lord knows, things are bad enough already."

"Right," Warde replied. "Those Martians started something. Business falling off, people moving out into the country, crowds watching the sky—"

Jimmy Mackay stood up. He began to button his coat. There was a troubled light in his eyes.

"Going out on a hunch?" Warde asked. He asked this jokingly, but his gaze was without humor. For Jimmy Mackay was always having hunches—stranges hunches which had more than once proved to be correct. This propensity went deeper than mere intuition. It was somehow as if Jimmy Mackay *knew* where, when, and how things were going to happen.

"Yeah," said Jimmy Mackay. "I have a powerful hunch about something. See you later." He grinned, waved a hand, and left.

JIMMY MACKAY got into his car and headed for the River. He had been killing time at Headquarters, had been waiting for the night to deepen.

For he intended to do something that required darkness and deserted streets.

He was acting on a hunch again—an extraordinarily powerful hunch this time. Something was wrong, and Jimmy was going to investigate it. He didn't know what it was. All he knew was that he had been driving his car through a particularly run-down section of river neighborhood when he had received an appeal for help so strong that it had caused him to jam on his brakes.

It had been earlier in the day. Jimmy had sat in his car and looked around and listened. He hadn't heard anything, nor had he seen anything. But that weird appeal for help had still been there. It had taken him several minutes to realize that the call for help had been in his *mind*.

Hunches had come to him before. But this flash of something deeper than intuition had bothered him. The newspaper business had bred caution into Jimmy Mackay. He decided to wait until night before he did any investigating. For the neighborhood of his intended operations was an unsavory district, inhabited by shifty humans who lived one jump ahead of the Law. There would be danger.

When Jimmy Mackay reached the street that was his objective, he cut the speed of his car down to a slow cruise. His eyes were wide and his mouth was pressed into a thin line. He kept his mind open and taut for any outside message.

Houses drifted by one by one. And then—and then he had it! It was the same appeal for help, but weaker now, dimmer in intensity. Jimmy's heart leaped.

He stopped the car, shoved a short chisel and a flashlight into his pockets. Then he got out and looked

around. He kept in the shadows as he looked.

A fog had drifted in from the river and surrounded the houses with a dim grey veil. Streetlights glistened murky. The houses looked like squat spectres.

The mental appeal was like a ghost moaning in Jimmy's mind. He sought desperately among the houses. From which was it coming?

He began walking, following the direction from which the appeal came strongest. Presently, he found himself standing before a building which seemed a bit more slovenly than the others. That the message was coming from here, he felt certain.

Jimmy glanced swiftly up and down the street, then ducked into the alleyway which led to the rear of the house. He found a sagging basement window and got the chisel to work. The wood was rotten from years of continual moisture. He soon had the window open with little noise, and slid into the dank, dark interior of a cellar.

Jimmy was breathing fast. The palms of his hands were clammy with perspiration. He got out the flashlight and turned it on.

He almost screamed as the white beam came to rest on the bound figures of Garnn and Subbol.

NICK WARDE and the others whirled around, then stared in incredulous disbelief as Jimmy Mackay entered Headquarters in tow of the blanket-wrapped figures of Garnn and Subbol. They hadn't said anything at first, because they weren't able to. But now hoarse gasps arose.

"Speak of the devil!" Nielsen husked. "Where—where did you get 'em, Mackay? I thought—"

Jimmy Mackay explained so fast that his words tripped and tumbled over each other.

"I told you I had a hunch—a strong hunch. I thought I'd find something interesting in one of the houses down in the river district. I did. I found these two. They were lying tied up down in the cellar—prisoners. Some gang kidnaped them so they could get the disintegrator devices which the Martians had. This gang, whoever it is, used the disintegrators to go in for wholesale burglary. They kept the Martians hidden so that people would get the idea that they were doing it."

Jimmy Mackay had expected his news to create a furor. But he realized now that it hadn't registered upon his listeners. He was bewildered.

"What—what's the matter?" Jimmy Mackay sensed it now, as his own excitement died away. His susceptibility to the thoughts and emotions of others told him that something was vastly wrong here in Headquarters. There was a tension, a vast fear.

Phones were ringing one after the other in a sort of alarmed haste, staccato and harsh. The teletypes were clicking madly as if they had little time in which to complete the messages they were sending. Sirens were wailing as car after car roared away from Headquarters and out into the streets. There was excitement, confusion—and fear.

Jimmy Mackay's eyes were wide.

"What—"

"You've explained one thing very nicely," Nick Warde snapped. "But you haven't explained this!" He thrust a sheaf of reports into Jimmy Mackay's face. "How do you explain the fleet of Martian space-ships which have just bombed San Francisco—which are now bombing Chicago?"

JIMMY MACKAY glanced at the reports, his face turning slack and white. It was true. Metal spheres

identical to the one in which Garnn and Subbol had landed, were now bombing Chicago. It was night, but the ships had been seen against the stars, with the reflected gleam of the city lights on their metal hulls.

There was excitement and fear in Headquarters, because the ships could soon be over New York.

Jimmy Mackay whirled to Garnn and Subbol. His thoughts leaped out to them, concentrated and forceful by the urgency that was in his mind.

"Ships—space-ships just like yours—are attacking our cities. Are your people invading our planet?"

Garnn answering thoughts were hurt, bewildered.

"But that is impossible! It—it cannot be! I have already explained to you that we have come to your world to seek your help in combating a terrible plague which is ravaging our planet. My people are dying. They would have no thought of invasion. They would be interested only in saving their own lives, not taking the lives of others."

This was as logical as it was true, Jimmy Mackay felt. He relayed Garnn's thought verbally to the others.

Nielsen shook his head. His face was hard.

"They're pulling the wool over your eyes, Mackay. They're from another world. We don't know anything about them—can't trust them. They escaped from the hotel, killing three guards. They took their ship and went back to their world and told their people what pushovers we were. Then they came back here. They let you find them. They got something up their sleeves." Nielsen's voice became hard and flat.

"Get out of the way, Mackay. They're our prisoners—prisoners of

war. They're going to be handed over to higher authorities."

"But you can't do this!" Jimmy Mackay cried. "You don't understand, they're not responsible for the attack, they're the only ones who can do anything to stop it. They built the sphere originally. By imprisoning them you're dooming America!"

"You're a dupe, Mackay!" Nielsen snarled. "Get out of the way, I tell you, or—"

Then Jimmy Mackay did the only thing that could be done if America was to be saved from destruction. His hand darted to the gun hanging limp in the fist of a bewildered patrolman. A swift jerk, and it was in his own.

"Stand back!" he gritted, crouching, eyes blazing. "Stand back, I tell you! I'll shoot! I can't let your stupidity destroy this country." Herding the two Martians behind him, he began to move for the door. He got clear, because chaos had descended everywhere upon the city.

Space-ships were gleaming in the sky, and bombs were beginning to crash and thunder.

WHISPERS RENDON locked his grip and looked around with a wolfish smile.

"Well, that's that. I'm leaving for South America. I don't care what the rest of the guys do. You all got enough dough to be able to take care of yourselves. We sucked the burg dry with those Martian can-openers.

"And that reminds me. Slig, you go down in the basement and bump off those two horrors. We don't need them anymore. Their disintegrator-things are burned out anyway."

Slig nodded, took out his gun, and left the room. He returned with haste.

"They're gone, Chief! They got away. Somebody cut their ropes!"

"The hell!" Whispers Rendon snarled. "Oh, well, we're leaving now anyway."

But as Whispers Rendon finished speaking, a bomb from one of Professor Johann Mund's pseudo-Martian space-ship fleet dropped squarely on the house and blew him and his men into a thousand pieces of blasted flesh, strewing them over an area of hundreds of yards. It was hardly Fate that had a hand in this, for Professor Johann Mund had rigged up an ingenious bomb-placing contrivance on the spheres that did a very efficient and complete job of destruction.

PROFESSOR Johann Mund was high above the rest of the destroying spheres, directing operations. He was immensely pleased with the way things were beginning to burn in several parts of the city.

"A few minutes more, and we move on to Washington," he said. "We do not wish to destroy too completely a country which is soon to be ours. The chief purpose of this raid is to show the pigs our power."

Engle and Horst nodded. They were wearing uniforms, now.

Professor Johann Mund smiled greedily.

"The Leader will not overlook the parts we have played in this. Our rewards will be large—very large."

And then, suddenly, Professor Johann Mund gasped and his eyes bulged. For the spherical ships of his fleet were dropping, falling through the air to burst like over-ripe melons on the streets of the city far below.

Professor Johann Mund experienced a sudden, sickening sensation. He screamed in terror. His sphere was falling, too—

GARNN lowered the strange apparatus which he had been pointing at the sky. He sighed in exhaustion.

"It is over," his thought whispered. "The last of them are down."

Jimmy Mackay sat down on the curb and put his head on his arm and cried. His thin body shook with great sobs. Garnn and Subbol stood by uncomfortably, because they did not quite understand. Keyed to the breaking point during the last half-hour, Jimmy Mackay was finding relief from the terrific nervous tension under which he had been laboring.

It had been a nightmare for him. After his escape from Headquarters with the two Martians, they had skulked through dark alleys to avoid the shrieking, panic-stricken mobs which milled in chaotic confusion in the streets. He had helped the two Martians assemble the materials for the device which had brought down the spheres. With the aid of the flashlight which he had somehow kept with him, he had gathered bits of broken glass, string, and discarded metal. He had rifled a deserted hardware store for the rest. Then, in the shelter of the bottom of a deep cellar stairway, he had held the dimming flashlight while Garnn and Subbol feverishly assembled the device.

Garnn had pointed the crude thing at the spheres in the sky, and it had worked. The spheres had come crashing down to earth.

It was all over now. Jimmy Mackay remembered this and stood up. He pointed to the device which Garnn held.

"You haven't told me what it does or how it works," he reminded.

Garnn nodded.

"This apparatus is similar to one in our space sphere, a unit which enables us to ascend or descend. In a gravita-

tional pull, the ship warps the lines of force, bending them around itself to form a sort of supporting cushion. This is done by a field, which I cannot explain to you except in complex mathematical symbols. Altering the field of the ship, alters the strength of its supporting cushion of forces. Thus it ascends or descends, moves forward or backward. This device is so constructed as to nullify completely the effects of the field. With nothing to

support them, the spheres dropped."

Jimmy Mackay's eyes gleamed.

"Hang on to that thing," he said. "We might need it later."

"But the plague—" Subbol cried. "Will your people now help us combat the plague?"

"They will," Jim Mackay answered. "After we get things straightened out, they'll be glad to. Come on, we'll go to Headquarters and start explaining right now."

THE END

The Stars Are Still Boss

By Charles Recour

EVEN THOUGH modern sea and aerial navigation is enormously aided by radio and radar, the ultimate judge of position is reference to the stars. Astrogation is the positive and absolute way of locating position and the ship's captain or the aircraft pilot takes his "shot of the Sun" with a sextant when he wants to know *exactly* where he is. It is not generally realized that positional astronomy is a very important subject indeed. In addition the five outer planets and their positions, along with the positions of the Moons of Jupiter, form a network to which astronomical positional reference is frequently made.

The positions of the outer planets are compiled in a famous almanac computed decades ago. Few tasks are more tedious than the computation of such an almanac and, because of the difficulty, errors are prone to crop up. The tables giving planetary positions are frequently corrected and checked, but human beings, especially computers, are not infallible. In addition, with the tables computed so long ago, the years which are coming up demonstrate

cumulative errors which will be very harsh on a user. Evidently, then, these navigational and planetary position tables are in need of a complete overhauling.

Thanks to the modern miracle of electronic calculating machines, the tables of stellar and planetary positions are going to get just that, a complete recalculation and overhaul, which will correct and revise the tables to the point where they will be good for the next few centuries!

The electronic calculator makes it possible to do all this work almost automatically and with the assurance of practically no error at all, to as many decimal places as are desired. When you figure that the entries in the tables require hundreds of thousands of laborious computations, which normally, as they have in the past, would take many years to compile, it is wonderful to see a mechanical "brain" doing the entire job in a matter of weeks—and doing it in an infinitely more reliable fashion!

While the errors in planetary position have been gradually cropping up, the matter hasn't really been too serious. However, in the next few decades it would become so. And above all, if rocketry and interplanetary flight come within these approaching decades—as they certainly must—then accurate astrogational tables are a necessity. Fortunately they're ready.

Contrary to some opinion, it is likely that radio and radar guides in interplanetary flight, especially in the beginning, will be rare. The most reliable guide just as it is in navigation, will be astrogational observation. You find your interplanetary position by taking angular shots of the Sun and of the planets. Then trigonometry gives you your position down to a fraction of a mile. Several universities already offer regular courses in interplanetary astrogation and the theory is all worked out along with the practice! Astrogation is no mystery....

TAKE-OFF

By HUGO BRANT

"HEY, JOHNSON!" Somebody's got me by the shoulder and is shaking me violently. I come out of the fog and open my sleep-drugged eyes. It's McReady. He grins. "Come on, get out of the sack. Number Two's not pushing out any current. Let's go."

"O. K." I say, dragging myself to my feet, "I'm coming." I glance through the bull's-eye quartz port at the barren Lunar "terrain" and I shiver. If ever there was a misnomer, "Luna City" was it. We're occupying aluminum huts and holes in the ground and we call it a city.

I slip into a space suit, all except the helmet, and walk down the forty-foot corridor into mess. Clancy's got the pot on and hot coffee knocks the sleep right out of me. McReady's at the drawing board doing some computations. There are only eight of us establishing man's first Lunar base and we're always busy. There's always something to do. Because I'm the electrical expert in charge of power, light and communications, I'm always going and I'm a little proud of the fact that in a way I'm the second most important man on the expedition. Only Clancy is more important—and not because he's cook either. It's because he's in charge of hydroponics and he makes our air. Weinberg, the surgeon, helps, but Clancy's the big boy there.

Maybe I better give you a picture of how we've laid out things. After we put down the first rocket—and that was *the* trip!—every two months a supply rocket comes in and unloads more and more stuff. So far we've had one—we've been on Luna four months. In that time, in spite of my kidding, we've built a base. It isn't much as bases go, but for a first extraterrestrial base it's terrific. We've four aluminum huts linked together with aluminum tunnels, everything insulated, and we're boring holes into the side of the mountain against which we've located. It's a dense limestone, nonporous, and we're cutting in galleries, perfectly insulated, air-tight and prototypes for future living on the Moon. Hydroponics and the closed-cycle give us air and water. While we live on canned food, we'll eventually get around to raising our own—already Clancy has given us pumpkin pie—from the hydroponics garden which we've located in the first gallery. All in all, Luna City is taking shape considering how few men are shaping her.

Ten more will come on the next rocket and we've been arranging for living quarters. But life is a struggle, with the environment so completely artificial. The Moon supplies absolutely nothing except insulation and space. Everything else is man-made, though sometime, maybe, we'll be able to work with the raw material of the surface—if chemistry and nuclear physics ever get to such a practical stage. In the meantime, we're here to build a base and we're doing that.

Power comes from sunlight—as does heat. I've set up the system and it's working like a charm. I've got two thirty-foot parabolic mirrors set in tilttable mounts. They look flimsy but in the vacuum of the Moon they'll last forever. They focus on two DeLaval turbo-generators, using mercury vapor—actually they focus on the boilers while the generators are in Hut number one. They produce one hundred and twenty volts A.C.—twenty kilowatts each. Not much by Terran standards, but enough with judicious handling to supply us with light, heat, and power for the tools. We need more power, of course, and the next ship is going to bring five more of the units. That'll make all the difference in the world, because then McReady won't have to watch that every light is used carefully!

We run the A.C. through selenium rectifiers so that we can store our juice in a battery system. This is an annoyance, but also a necessity, since we miss out on sunlight for four days out of each month—even in our ideal location. At that time work stops because we can't afford the power.

I got to work on the DeLaval right away. Because of the danger of mercury vapor we've kept the generators in a separate hut. The trouble turned out to be a dirty relay and it wasn't difficult to fix.

I went back to mess and had a regular breakfast while I talked with McReady.

"What's our major problem, Johnson?" he asked me almost rhetorically, but I answered before he could.

"Transportation."

"Right," he nodded absent-mindedly as if he were thinking out loud. "And that's where you come in. Soon we're going to have power to spare—including batteries. Using that as a clue—" he grinned—"I want you to build something that'll roll on that scraggly surface." He gestured

(continued on page 120)

THE WANDERING GRAVEYARD



He pledged vengeance with his very life in the balance

I AM THE most unfortunate of men," Mournful Moggs remarked disconsolately. "My enemies surround me on every hand, never overlooking the slightest opportunity to add more dirt to my already sullied name. Look at what they're trying to do to me this time—blame me for starting the war between Earth and Uranus all over again."

He sighed hugely. "They'll get me this time, Jupe. The entire Earth Fleet will be after me. I'd start ordering my tombstone right now, if I could only think of a suitable epitaph."

Jupe Holt, reclining on a cot across

the tiny room, grinned delightedly. He wasn't deceived. It was quite apparent to him that Mournful Moggs was thinking up something which would prove particularly irritating to his enemies.

"How's this for an epitaph, Chief?" Jupe Holt boomed. "Every man's hand was against him, yet he bit those hands not, but fed them kindly and generously'."

Mournful Moggs replied drily, "As a composer of epitaphs, Jupe, you're an excellent navigator." He got out of his chair and began to pace the metal floor. Tall and lanky, he walked with a slight stoop. His long face wore its usual expression of deep gloom, and his brown eyes were melancholy. Incongruously enough, he was garbed in a dashing, colorful space uniform, cut according to the latest dictates of Twenty-third Century fashion.

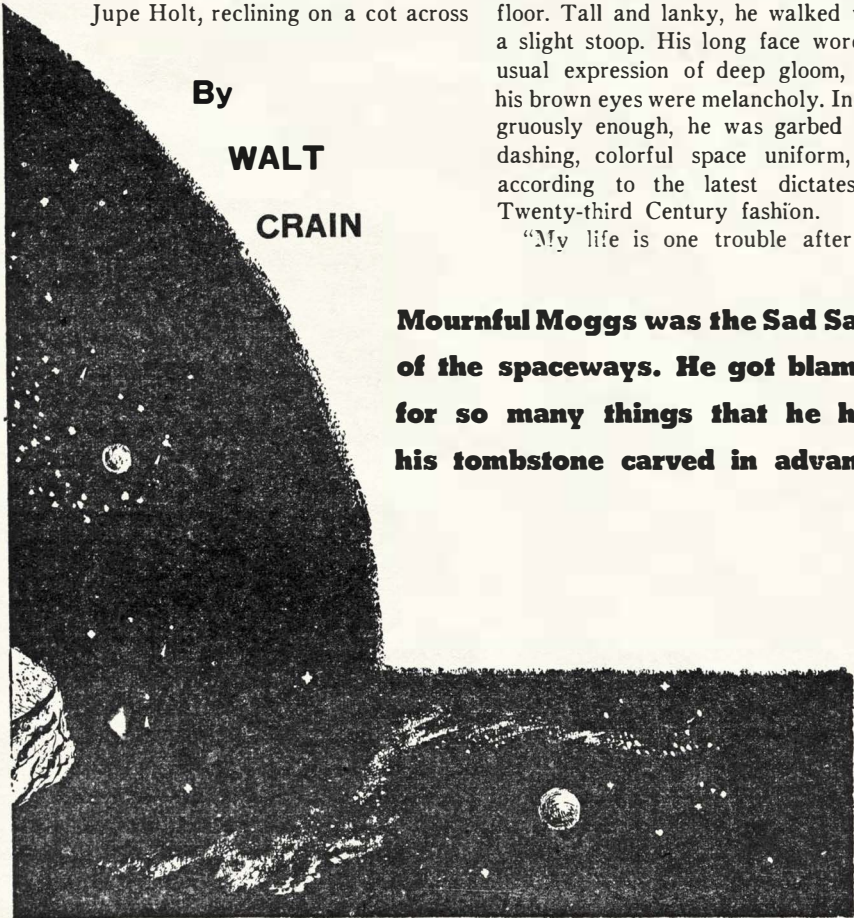
"My life is one trouble after an-

By

WALT

CRAIN

Mournful Moggs was the Sad Sack of the spaceways. He got blamed for so many things that he had his tombstone carved in advance



other," Mournful said somberly. "While the war was going on, I got blamed for looting an Earth army transport ship of its cargo, when you, I, and the rest of the men knew very well that the cargo was munitions being sent to the Uranians by unscrupulous manufacturers on Earth. If the Uranians had gotten that cargo of munitions, Earth would have been defeated in the battle of Callisto.

"And now that the war is over, I'm being blamed for trying to get it started again. A ship disguised as an Earth Fleet vessel attacked the Uranian envoy ship while it was en route to Earth to sign the armistice—and our old friend, Inspector Welton of the Interplanetary Rangers, laid it to me quicker than you can blink an eye. The hot-tempered Uranians were satisfied, and they're signing the armistice right now. But whoever it was behind the attack will try again. Somebody wants to prevent peace between Earth and Uranus, and is trying to keep the war going. If Fuzzy and Dino don't learn something, I'll go to my grave without an epitaph or a tombstone."

JUPE HOLT stirred his ponderous bulk on the cot. He dwarfed other men just as his namesake Jupiter dwarfs its sister planets. Crisp blond hair tumbled about his massive head. His nose spoke of numerous spaceport saloon brawls, and a scar across his left cheek showed where a heat beam had seared at some time in the past. He said slowly:

"You're right, Chief. Somebody wants the war to go on, all right. If we knew who it was—but hell, who'd believe us? Even if we—" He broke off. A green light on one wall had flashed a signal. "Hey, chief! Looks like Fuzzy and Dino are back."

Mournful nodded quickly and strode to the airlock, where he pulled the

opening levers. A spacesuited form nearly as large as Jupe entered. Behind it came a smaller one. The two began divesting themselves of the heavy, cumbersome garments.

Koltar Ong—or "Fuzzy", as he was known to the others—got out of his suit first. He was a gnome-like little Martian. Little could be seen of him for the thick black pelt that covered him from head to foot.

Fuzzy squeaked, "Chief! There's trouble brewin'! Hell's goin' to pop! Chief—"

"Put the little ape in a corner until he calms down," the high, acid voice of Tolog Xath broke in. Purposely, he allowed his limp spacesuit to fall over Fuzzy's small form, hiding the little Martian almost completely.

Fuzzy squealed in rage. "You overgrown lizard! I'll hit you on top of your skull so hard that you'll be pickin' toenails out of your teeth!"

"Hah!" said Tolog Xath. "Try it, and I'll peel you like a banana." The huge, scale-covered Venusian was better known as Dino, which was short for Dinosaur, an appellation spitefully hung on him by Fuzzy, since Tolog Xath had sprung from reptile ancestors. Dino had one main passion, and that was eating bananas. He indulged in one now, peeling it with a meaningful eye fixed on Fuzzy.

Fuzzy snapped, "That's right! Eat that thing and keep quiet." He turned excitedly to Mournful. "Chief, there's bad weather ahead! Me an' Dino got to Mars without a hitch, an' went right to Thoron City. Disguisin' as meteor miners an' usin' that little derelict minin' boat sure was a good idea. We visited every dive in the city an' kept our ears wide open. Nobody believes you were behind the attack on that Uranian ship, Chief. Someone else was behind it—who, nobody knows. But,

Chief, from what we heard it's easy to guess that another attack is gonna be made—and now! The Uranians'll be leavin' Earth any minute now!"

"Check!" said Dino around a mouthful of banana. "But Fuzzy left something out. I heard a couple of guys say that Mars itself might be back of it all. That new dictator, Wor-gil Han, has been reading history books, and he's pretty ambitious."

"Pickin' on Mars, huh?" Fuzzy yelped. "What about Venus for that matter? You know darn well that the Venusian Confederation's been howlin' for more colonies ever since it was formed! If the Uranians had won, Venus would've gotten those colonies."

MOURNFUL MOGGS broke in, "You two will be the death of me yet. I sent you out for information, and what do you learn? Practically nothing. We still don't know who was behind the attack—Venus, Mars, Saturn, or even a group of Earthmen."

"But we found out that another attack was going to be made on the Uranian envoy ship, didn't we?" Fuzzy asked defensively.

"Two and two make four," Mournful said. "I guessed that already."

"What're we going to do, Chief?" Jupe Holt wanted to know. "If war results from the next attack on the Uranian ship, and if we get the blame for it, every ship on Earth will be after us."

Mournful Moggs' face lengthened, and a sad, wistful light entered his eyes. He rapped out:

"Fuzzy! Tell the men to prepare for expedition. Dino! See to the guns. Jupe! Take over the controls. The Uranians don't know it, but they're going to get an escort."

Mournful Moggs' hideout rang with sudden activity. It was a unique place,

and Inspector Welton of the Interplanetary Rangers would have given its hollowed-out center were situated. For several reasons, however, the knowledge would have done him little good. The hideout was an asteroid a little under four hundred yards in diameter, which hurtled among its companions in the Asteroid Belt. In its hollowed-out center were situated the living quarters, storerooms, and hangars. And added to this a series of ingenious mechanisms invented by Fuzzy, which ringed the asteroid, bent around it all approaching lightrays, thus making it quite invisible. Another set of mechanisms formed a repellent screen, which prevented collision with other asteroids.

As far as Inspector Welton's present knowledge went, Mournful Moggs' hideout was hidden on one of the nearer stars.

Perhaps as unique as the asteroid hideout itself was the little band of men it sheltered. Outcasts from each of their respective societies, branded for crimes they hadn't committed, they were each of them experts in some field of ability. Fuzzy was a clever scientist, though he certainly didn't look like one, and could make any gadget or compound at a moment's notice. A refugee from the terrible blood purges which followed the tragic fall of the Grong dynasty, he had since then received many offers to be reinstated in his old position at the Martian Technological Institute. But the blood-quickenning drug of adventure was too strong in his blood, and he had developed a strong dislike for dictators and tyrants in general.

Dino was a specialist in space ballistics, and it was said of him—in great awe—that he could fuse a two-inch meteor from any distance up to ten miles with an electrobolt cannon.

While this was probably an exaggeration, he could, nevertheless, shoot circles around any gunner in space. Unjustly convicted of treason during the Venusian Redlands Uprising, he had since then become a member of Mournful Moggs' little band.

Jupe Holt was a navigator par excellence, and could make a ship talk just as soon as he sat down before the controls. His only drawback was that he loved a good fight, and this was indirectly the cause of his joining up with Mournful Moggs. After a most satisfying saloon brawl, he found that he had been accused of raying two men, though he had not been armed at the time.

The most classic case of all was perhaps that of Mournful Moggs himself. Once a rising young business man, he had bid fair with his knowledge and shrewdness to gain control of more than one-half the freighting industry of that time. But a group of jealous competitors brought against him a charge of piracy, bringing forth as evidence several portions of cargo from a plundered vessel, which they had insisted had been found in one of the ships belonging to his freighting line. After a long and bitter court battle, Mournful Moggs had fled into the haven of space rather than remain and serve sentence for a crime of which he was guiltless. It was Mournful's cunning brain and tireless energy that kept his little band from the blind but righteous hands of the law.

Though hunted as ruthless and blood-thirsty pirates, Mournful's organization was not a piratical one. Moggs was, in fact, still a business man—only his methods were not those sanctioned by law. He stole only from those men who committed their crimes through legal means—the callous and mercenary exploiters of planetary re-

sources, the oppressors of planetary colonists and natives, the tyrants who crushed their competitors through sheer wealth. A champion fighting beyond the law, he meted out justice to those human wolves who committed injustice within the law. And true pirates, stealing for gain rather than sustenance, were his bitterest enemies. Many of the crimes committed by them were laid to Mournful Moggs. In fact, it had become a habit for the authorities to blame him for every crime that showed the least bit of cleverness or daring.

FUZZY announced, "Mars point oh oh two off port bow, Chief. If we go any farther, we'll be right in the path of the Uranian envoy ship an' its Earth escorts."

"Check," Moggs answered. "Put the ship in an orbit, Jupe. Now listen, or we're all dead men. The escort won't go any farther than the Asteroid Belt. From then on, we follow the Uranians. If we can catch the attackers just as they strike, we might be able to find out who they are and what's behind it all."

"Just wait till I line my sights up on those guys!" Dino threatened grimly. "Lot of nerve they have trying to get us in a worse pickle than we're in already."

"That's it! Get your blood-lust up!" Fuzzy snapped sardonically from his position beside a viewport. "You Venusians kin smell blood a parsec away."

"Listen to the little hank of hair!" Dino appealed to Jupe. "He talks as though we're out for murder. You know we're only supposed to disable those guys."

Jupe retorted disgustedly, "You two are always out for murder as far as I'm concerned."

They glared at him, and Jupe looked

smugly satisfied. Dino reached into one of the pockets of his baggy uniform for a banana. Fuzzy returned to squinting out of the viewport. Neither of them liked the aspersion about murder. Moggs' men tried to avoid taking lives at all times.

Mournful looked up from the vision screen. "Here they come!"

Jupe's giant bulk tensed before the controls. Dino swallowed the remains of his banana with a convulsive gulp. The atmosphere of the control room grew oppressive with tension.

Within the vision screen the escort ships were seen as a majestic triangular formation of moving lights. In the center of the triangle was the vessel of the Uranian envoys. Undoubtedly, the armistice had been successfully concluded.

Mournful said, "Hold to the orbit, Jupe, until I tell you to open the jets. Those are Interplanetary Ranger and Earth Fleet ships. If they should spot us with our zero acceleration, there won't be enough of us left to put tombstones over."

Taut seconds dragged away while the triangular formation of vessels soared over and past them. A few seconds more, until the glow of their jets began dwindling. Mournful snapped:

"After them, Jupe!"

THE LOOT III, Mournful's flagship, jumped forward under the thrust of the drive jets. Low and to the left it sped, following in the wake of the escort fleet. Something of the sadness had left Mournful's face. He was bent tensely over the vision screen, his eyes narrowed, little bunches of muscle standing out at his jaws.

Slowly the minutes crept away. Piled up into hours. The escort fleet was now past the Asteroid Belt. Half-way to Jupiter, the triangle parted, each

wing swinging around to meet the other. They formed a line of fiery light against the blackness of space. The Uranian envoy ship sped ahead on its long journey home.

Jupe said, "Chief, it'll be suicide to try and get past the line of lawmen. They'll see us sure. We better wait until they start for home."

"No!" Mournful barked. "Can't you see? If an attack is going to be made, it's going to be made right now—directly before that line of Earth ships! It's vitally necessary to the plans of the attackers to have the Earth ships in the formation they're in now when they attack. That'll make the Uranians think it's the Earth ships who are attacking them! Cut power, Jupe, and coast forward. When we get past the Earth ships, open up wide."

Like a lifeless derelict, the *Loot* floated dark and silent under the line of combined Interplanetary Ranger and Earth Fleet ships—ships of potential death. For at the slightest sign of a ship where a ship shouldn't be, they would leap forward with spitting weapons. And in doing so, they would be playing directly into the hands of the attackers. To the Uranians, an unexpected attack upon their vessel and sight of the Earth ships hurtling forward would mean only one thing—war!

Fuzzy, who was squinting into the vision screen, shrieked abruptly: "Chief! Look—I just saw a dim flash! Unless I'm mistaken, some ship's coasting toward the Uranians!"

"Open the jets, Jupe!" Mournful rapped. "Full speed ahead! Dino—line up your sights!"

Mournful swayed under the sudden thrust of acceleration. Grimly he hung to a shock-strap, his gaze riveted to the vision screen. The blast from the rear tubes of the Uranian envoy ves-

sel leaped into size like an exploding nova. And then, suddenly, a ship was leaping down upon it! Not just one—two more darted into visibility as their jets were opened.

"Chief—those ships are wearing the insignia of the Interplanetary Rangers!" Fuzzy yelled.

"That's part of the trick," Mournful said. "Jupe—attacking maneuvers! Dino—"

But the Venusian already had his electro-bolt cannon in action. Mournful leaped to the weapon niche on the other side of the ship. In a moment he had the guns spitting, aiming for the rear jet tubes of the attackers. Now that action had taken the place of the tense hours of watching and waiting, Mournful's face wore a doleful look. Which meant that he was in his element.

THE ATTACKING ships had leaped forward with a rashness inspired by confidence in their plans. The sudden appearance of the *Loot* was not only unexpected but very disconcerting. The plans of the attackers had not included action against a possible attack by Mournful Moggs.

The *Loot* seemed to be all over space at once, the charges of its guns licking in every direction. Startled into panicky confusion, the attacking ships milled about purposelessly. Another several seconds would have been fatal, for already the rear tubes of the unknown vessels were glowing brightly from repeated hits by Mournful and Dino. Only the highly refractory metal with which the tubes were lined prevented them from melting long before.

By the time the attacking vessels got themselves into some semblance of order, it was too late to do anything. The Interplanetary Ranger and Earth Fleet ships were coming to the

rescue of the Uranians, their guns stabbing out warning bursts. Foiled utterly, the three unknown ships departed with haste.

"We did it!" Dino crowed. "The Uranians weren't even touched."

Mournful nodded somberly. "Yeah, we've managed to avert another war all right—but at the same time we've been digging our own graves." He pointed to the vision screen. In war formation, the Interplanetary Ranger and Earth Fleet ships were hurtling upon the *Loot*.

"Home, Jupe," said Mournful.

The huge navigator looked at the onrushing armada and swallowed. "I'll try at least," he said. "Hang on!"

They hung on.

But so did the I.R. and E.F. ships. They were grim about it.

The outcome, though not apparent at once to Mournful and the others, was inevitable. Jupe proved again that he was a peer among navigators. He shook the pursuers off just beyond the Asteroid Belt.

But just before he did so, Inspector Welton in the I.P. flagship *Perserverence* made contact with Mournful. His face in the communication grid was a brilliant mauve. For several moments the good Inspector had difficulty in speaking—he was sorting the good words from the bad ones. And the reluctance with which he did so showed that he had a strong tendency to use the bad ones. Bald-headed, he was half a man tall and two men wide.

"Come, come, Inspector," Mournful prompted. "I'm a busy man. What's on your mind? Not water, as I've always suspected?"

Welton spluttered, "Moggs, damn your black soul, I'll get you if it's the last thing I do! You've gone too far this time! Your cowardly attack upon the Uranians was a deliberate attempt

to involve the Earth in another war with Uranus. Fortunately, I was there to prevent you. If it wasn't for—"

"Inspector, you're wrong as usual," Mournful broke in. "I was the one who prevented the attack."

"Don't try to deny the facts, Moggs!" Welton bellowed. "You were seen by the entire fleet. All Earth will be up in arms against you for this. I'll see to it personally that every I.R. and E.F. ship we have scours the space-lanes for you with orders to kill on sight! I'll starve you out of your rat-hole. For once you've over-reached yourself. You're washed up—finished!"

Mournful yawned hugely. "Yeah? You frighten me horribly, Inspector. Got anything more to say?"

Welton did. For a moment his image in the communication grid seemed to strangle. Then the floodgates broke. A stream of blue seemed actually to issue from the transmitter.

"And I thought I could swear!" Jupe muttered in awe.

Mournful was actually grinning his delight. "Why, Inspector, that's beautiful! For once you don't bore me as you usually do. No, no, don't stop!"

But Welton had become incoherent. Furiously, he broke contact.

BACK IN the hideout, Mournful said, "I know what kind of a tombstone I want, but the lack of an epitaph bothers me." His face was long and his eyes were melancholy. "I wish I knew where I was when the luck was passed around. Death is staring me right in the face, and here I am—without an epitaph."

"Things certainly are bad," Dino nodded, tossing away an empty banana skin. "Porky Welton sure means to do us in this time. Why, from now on we won't be able to make a move without bumping into an I.R. or E.F. ship!"

"What're we gonna do, Chief?" Fuzzy wanted to know, his gnome's face screwed up in a frown. "Welton can do what he says—starve us out. He doesn't know where we are, of course, but he knows that in a short time our supplies of food and water will be exhausted an' we'll have to come out of hiding to get any more. Then his men will jump us."

Mournful said, "Well, we have one consolation anyway. If he forces us to keep in hiding, the attackers will strike at Uranus again, and war will result for sure. Then Welton will be too busy to pay us much attention. But—we'll get the blame for the war, and when it's over every ship on Earth—if no every ship in the System—will be after us."

Jupe groaned. "If we ever get a tombstone, it's going to be the *Loot*."

There was an interval of silence. Presently Mournful said:

"It may mean going to my death without a suitable epitaph, but we'll have to prevent another attack on Uranus."

"But, Chief—that's impossible!" Fuzzy wailed. "All space is filled with ships after us. An'—an' besides we don't know who the attackers are."

"That," Mournful replied, "is something we're going to find out. Jupe, we still have that model D-60 cruiser, haven't we? Unless I'm wrong, it has almost exactly the lines of an I.R. ship."

"Yeah, but why—"

"Is it in working condition?"

"Sure, but—"

"Then all we have to do is paint on an I.R. insignia, and we're ready to go. Fuzzy, you and Dino dust off those imitation I.R. uniforms we've been saving."

The light dawned upon them.

"Sweet satellite!" Jupe exclaimed.

"We're going to be snooty I.R. officers—looking for ourselves!"

SEVERAL hours later, the redeco-rated model D-60 cruiser knifed through the invisibility field of the asteroid hideout. Unless viewed from close range, it was hard to distinguish from a genuine I.R. cruiser. But Mournful didn't intend to let anyone get too close.

Mournful's men carried themselves with unconscious dignity in their resplendent green and gold uniforms. Fuzzy was the only one who looked uncomfortable. The reason, when his heavy black pelt was taken into consideration, was immediately apparent. It itched. Like all Martians, Fuzzy was accustomed to wearing only a metal loin cloth and a thick belt, from which, in lieu of pockets, hung the things he carried around.

Dino said cuttingly: "Just look at the little ape scratch! His lice are howling for air."

"Who's got lice?" Fuzzy demanded wrathfully. Then he grinned wickedly. "Lice are parasites, aren't they? Well, then you're a louse yourself, you banana parasite!"

"Why, you animated fur carpet, I'll deodorize you with a flame gun!"

"Just try it, an' I'll hit you so hard you'll find yourself back in your fish tank with gills!"

Mournful broke in: "I should have ordered my tombstone before I left base. Here comes an I.R. ship—and it looks as if it was headed right for us."

Dino and Fuzzy leaped to the vision screen, their eyes fastening to the sleek, silver shape wearing an I.R. insignia which was approaching them at an angle. Fuzzy yelped:

"Chief—what if it asks for a password or something like that? What if

it demands an examination of our ship? If it finds out that we aren't I.R. officers, we're sunk!"

The I.R. ship grew large in the vision screen. Mournful and the others waited tensely for the signal light above the communication grid to flash. In their minds was a single thought—if their pretense was discovered, the entire plan would fall through. War would be inevitable.

They held their breaths. The other vessel was less than a mile away. But no challenge came. For suddenly its lateral jets blasted flame and it whirled like a silver flash, shooting away into the void.

Dino muttered, "Well, can you beat that!"

"After that ship, Jupe!" Mournful barked. "It isn't an I.R. ship any more than our own is! Otherwise it would have challenged us. A good guess would be that it's one of the three ships which attacked the Uranians!"

UNDER JUPE'S skillful hands, the cruiser leaped forward, soon overtaking the other vessel. Seeing that further flight was useless, the attackers opened fire. The cruiser rocked from two direct hits.

"Attacking maneuvers, Jupe!" Mournful rapped. "We've got to capture that ship!"

Dino was already at his gun niche. Fuzzy had taken over the other. They worked together in perfect synchronization, making three hits to one of the other. With Jupe's masterful handling, the cruiser made a difficult target to hit.

During a momentary lull, Mournful crossed to the communication grid and signalled for contact with the other vessel. Shortly the signal light blinked an answer, and the grid lighted up,

showing a defiant, bearded Martian face. Mournful said:

"This is Mournful Moggs speaking."

"Mournful Moggs!" The other gulped visibly.

"Right. I want you to lay to, and open your airlocks for a boarding party. Refuse, and I'll have your ship put out of working commission entirely. The Interplanetary Rangers would be very interested to know what you're doing in a ship disguised as an I.R. vessel."

The face withdrew for consultation with others not visible in the grid. Presently it returned.

"What do you want?"

"You heard me the first time," Mournful retorted. "Lay to, and open your airlocks."

The Martian's face grew very apprehensive. "Standing by to receive your boarding party."

Mournful did not break contact at once, but eyed the other gloomily. "Once," he said, "I was boarding a ship when the crew fired into my ship from close range and tried to break away. It made me so sad. Do you know what I did? I had every one of them get into spacesuits and then jump out into space. Then I used them for target practice."

Which wasn't true, of course, but it impressed the Martian. He shuddered. "There will be no tricks," he said.

In spacesuits, Mournful and a picked group of his crew crossed over to the other vessel. Jupe, Dino, and Fuzzy were standing by for action. But the others made no attempt at trickery, and soon after Mournful had gone the communication grid carried his voice to the men in the cruiser.

"Everything in hand. Abandon ship. We're taking over this one."

Only when Dino, Fuzzy, Jupe, and the others of his crew were safely in-

side the captured vessel did Mournful relax his wary vigil. He began questioning the captive Martian commander. All the crew of the captured ship were Martians, for that matter. The identity of the attackers of the Uranian envoy ship was now quite clear to Mournful. But he desired to know the why's and wherefore's behind everything.

AFTER MORE than an hour's quizzing of the sullen and reluctant Martian commander—with some help in the form of prompting by Fuzzy and Dino—Mournful got a fairly complete picture of the persons and motives behind the attacks. He summed it up:

"Mars is back of it all—or more correctly the dictator, Worgil Han, is. Seems as how Worgil thinks he's the dictator to end all dictators, and wants to conquer the Solar System to prove it. He couldn't get anywhere with Earth and Uranus in the way, of course. They're too strong for him. He's the one who started the war between Earth and Uranus in the first place, hoping that they would expend their strength to such an extent that they would be pushovers for the army he had prepared in secret. But the war ended too soon, and Worgil's now trying to get it started all over again. He failed twice, but he means business this time. Several ships of his fleet, disguised as I.R. and E.F. vessel, are massing off Saturn for an attack on Cygthus City on Uranus. And Worgil is going to superintend the attack himself."

"Check!" said Fuzzy. "Now we know what's what."

"May I ask what you intend to do with me and my men?" the Martian commander wanted to know.

Mournful eyed him with sad thoughtfulness. Then he turned to

Jupe. "You and Dino go back to the cruiser and kind of see to it that the communication grid and rear jets go out of order. When that's finished, our friends here can have it. I want to make sure they can neither warn Worgil nor get to Mars before we reach Uranus."

"You mean we're goin' to Uranus?" Fuzzy squeaked.

"I'm afraid so," Mournful answered. To the Martian he said, "Take off your uniform. Fuzzy here is going to need it more than you will."

HOURS LATER, the battered Martian vessel was speeding past the orbit of Jupiter, bound for Uranus. In the control room Mournful was explaining his plan of action to Jupe, Dino, and Fuzzy.

"The reason I took this ship," he said, "instead of using our own disguised cruiser was to avoid arousing any suspicions among Worgil and his men when we joined them. They'd be sure to recognize the cruiser as not being one of their own. Besides, this ship is suitably banged up and will bear out the story Fuzzy is going to tell Worgil."

"What do you mean, Chief?" Fuzzy asked.

"I mean that you're going to see Worgil in person. That's why I had you exchange uniforms. The success of the entire plan depends upon you getting into Worgil's ship. Because when you do, you're going to stick a heat gun under his nose."

Fuzzy rubbed his hands gleefully. "I'm goin' to like that, Chief! Worgil Han was one of the guys who wanted to have me and the other scientists bumped off back in '54. That was before he got the idea of bumping off the other revolutionists an' making himself dictator. But what do I do after I've got him covered?"

"Then," Mournful answered, "you convince Worgil's men that his life depends on how fast they obey your orders. Naturally, Worgil will be glad to co-operate. Me and the rest of the boys will then enter Worgil's ship and return to base. Without Worgil, the attack on Uranus will be postponed."

"Great!" Dino exclaimed. "Chief, you're a genius!"

"Yeah, but I have to do all the work," Fuzzy grumbled.

Jupe, seated before the controls, shouted abruptly: "Chief—four I.R. ships are bearing down on us from port!"

Mournful leaped to the control-board viewport. It was horribly true. Four sleek silver ships were hurtling towards them!

"We can't take a chance on running for it," Mournful rapped. "Our whole plan will be ruined. I've got to try and convince them that we're part of the search party." He crossed to the communication grid, straightening his natty I.R. uniform.

The grid lighted up. A face leaped into view. Mournful's face became very, very sad.

He was gazing into the beefy red features of Inspector Welton!

"So those Martians weren't lying after all!" Welton boomed triumphantly. "At first I didn't believe them when they said they were Worgil Han's men, and that Worgil Han was going to attack Uranus in phony I.R. ships. But it's a good thing I decided to investigate when they said you were mixed up in it." His face took on an expression of smug delight.

"I know what it's all about now! You and Worgil Han are in cahoots! You two are trying to get Earth and Uranus involved in another war! But not while I'm here to prevent it! My name's going to go down in history for this!

"Surrender, Moggs! You haven't got a chance. At this moment, the entire I.R. and E.F. armada is converging upon Uranus."

MOURNFUL peered through the viewport, glancing about swiftly. The four I.R. ships had his own vessel surrounded, and were closing in. The protruding snouts of their weapons were aimed with ominous readiness. With a cold chill along his spine, he realized that he was caught. Even if he managed to escape from Welton, the I.R. and E.F. ships speeding toward Uranus would be an overwhelming obstacle to his plans.

In moments like this, Mournful Moggs' keen brain functioned like some splendid machine speeded up to its highest peak of efficiency. It was working now. At top speed.

"You haven't got the slightest of chances, Moggs," Welton repeated. "I'm giving you five more seconds to surrender. Remember that I'm seven-eighths inclined to kill you anyway."

"We ain't gonna surrender, are we, Chief?" Fuzzy whispered fiercely. "We'll fight until the last one of us is down!"

But Mournful shook his head. "It's no use. Welton has got us. Very well, Inspector," he said wearily. "We surrender. . . ."

Dino, Jupe, and Fuzzy stared at him in stunned dismay. Slowly, like air escaping from a balloon, their tense bodies began to sag. The fire died out of their eyes, and they stared at Mournful in hurt bewilderment.

From the communication transmitter Welton's voice boomed: "You've got sense, Moggs. I'm coming across with my men to take over. No tricks, mind you! My men are prepared to blast you at the slightest untoward action. Now lay to and open your airlocks." Welton broke contact.

And then Mournful Moggs went into action!

"Stay here!" he barked at his men. "Don't leave the room!" He whirled and dashed from the control room as though his very life depended on it—which it undoubtedly did. Dino, Fuzzy, and Jupe looked blankly at one another. They shrugged hopelessly and slumped in utter dejection. Five minutes passed. Then Mournful was back.

"Come on!" he snapped. "I've already got the men assembled in the airlock foyer. We're going to show Welton that we can surrender with grace." For some reason, he looked very melancholy.

Presently, the signal light above the inner door of the airlock blinked. It opened. In spacesuits, Inspector Welton of the Interplanetary Rangers and a half dozen of his men shouldered into the foyer. Eagerly, Welton threw back his helmet, revealing his ruddy, fat face and hairless head.

"Well, well, well! At last the darling Mournful Moggs comes to the end of his trail!" he gloated. "This is the happiest day of my life, Moggs. When they hang you, I'm—I—I—I'm going to be there with—with bells—on!" This last came with considerable effort, for Inspector Welton had begun laughing. Deep chuckles rumbled up from out of his chest. They crowded up on one another like the roaring of a volcano that is getting ready to erupt. His thick lips stretched from ear to ear as he thundered with mirth. He bent double, clutching his sides, and tears of hysterical joy began rolling down his cheeks.

BY THIS time, Welton's men were on the floor, rolling about like epileptics in a seizure. They were shrieking with unrestrained mirth.

And strangely enough, Mournful

Moggs and his men were also laughing. Dino was screaming at the top of his lungs, Fuzzy cackling like a hen that had just laid an egg as big as a house. Jupe was grasping a stanchion, hooting like a foghorn on a spree. Mournful was howling gleefully.

But there was method to his madness. In spite of the spasms that wracked his lanky frame, he managed to sidle up to the atmosphere-regulator valves which projected from the wall to the left of the inner door of the airlock. He did things to the valves, and then did other things to the air-conditioning unit control. Still laughing, he inched up to where Welton and his men rocked on the floor and took away their weapons. Then, chuckling heartily, he sat down and waited. The only thing to show that he had not gone completely berserk were the two huge flame guns he grasped in his fists.

The airlock foyer sounded like an aria taken from bedlam. The walls vibrated to the sounds of bellowing mirth. Shortly, the laughter began to die. Presently, it was gone altogether. Weak and sick, lawmen and outlaws alike lay sprawled about on the floor.

But not Mournful. The guns in his hands were now held with rock-like steadiness.

With the return of strength, Welton and his men struggled to their feet. Dazedly, they eyed the weapons Mournful held. Their hands fluttered at their empty holsters. Welton's face, already the color of a raw steak, turned a livid purple. He screamed:

"Moggs—you lying, tricky, two-faced, murdering, son of a sun-spot! Oh, I'll get you for this! Your life won't be worth a cracked asteroid when this is over! I'll get you, so help me! Oh, you—you damn—"

Mournful's face was stretched pain-

fully in a gigantic grin. That was the best he could do to show his appreciation. All the laughter had been emptied out of him.

Fuzzy squeaked thinly: "Chief, what happened to us? Why did we go off laughing like that?" Then he stared in sudden realization. "Hey! It was—"

"Right!" Mournful said. "Laughing gas. As you know, on spaceships nitrogen is mixed with oxygen to offset the exhilarating effects of breathing the pure gas. All ships are equipped with atmosphere-regulators, so that the proportions of the two gases can be changed to meet any changes in atmospheric conditions. Before Welton and his men arrived, I ran in here and adjusted the atmosphere-regulator valves so that the proportion of nitrogen and oxygen which flowed into the inner lock would be two to one. That is, two of nitrogen to one of oxygen, a combination which gives nitrous oxide, or, as it is better known, laughing gas. I saw to it also that the door leading out remained closed, so that the gas would be concentrated here in the airlock foyer. Naturally, we weren't affected until Welton opened the inner lock."

Mournful's face hardened. "But we've wasted enough time! We're already long overdue for our little date with Worgil Han. I don't want to scare him off by delaying any longer.

"Dino! Fuzzy! You tie up Welton's men. As for you, Inspector, you're going to assure your men in the other ships that you have everything under control. Tell them also that, due to your great affection for me, you're going to remain here, and that they should return to Earth—or wherever you Rangers return."

"Like hell I am!" Welton roared.

"Oh, yes you are!" Mournful snapped, steely lights glittering in his

eyes. "Remember, Inspector, I have ways and means of forcing you. I'm not going to allow your obstinacy to jeopardize the peace of two worlds."

Welton thrust out his jaw. "Are you trying to make me believe that you're out to prevent Worgil Han from attacking Uranus?"

"Take it or leave it—but you better do as I told you."

"All right. You hold the whiphand now, Moggs. But don't forget—from now on your life isn't worth a plugged meteor."

Under Mournful's watchful eye, Welton contacted the four I.R. ships, and told them that, due to necessity—which he didn't attempt to explain—he was remaining aboard Moggs' vessel. Neither did he attempt to explain why he wanted them to return to their Lunar base.

Somewhat reluctantly, the four I.R. ships departed.

"Good!" Mournful approved. To Dino and Fuzzy he said: "Please escort the Inspector to a nice, strong stateroom. And you might lock the door securely so that he won't be disturbed."

With exaggerated politeness, the two did so.

"To Uranus, Jupe!" Mournful barked. "Full speed ahead. If you've ever piloted a ship, do it now."

HOURS AND hours of blasting followed. Hours and hours of frightful, seam-straining acceleration. When Jupe was physically unable to remain at the controls any longer, Mournful took over. Though he had only had brief snatches of sleep during the whole time, his indomitable driving power and seemingly inexhaustible fund of energy kept him going.

Finally Uranus was a huge disk in the vision screen, and Jupe, who had resumed his place at the controls, be-

gan to decelerate. A short search revealed the disguised Martian war ships hovering just off Oberon, a moon of Uranus. They had obviously noticed Mournful's ship approaching, and had lain to.

"All right, Fuzzy, go into your act," Mournful said. "And, remember, it's got to be good. Explain that we were delayed because we were discovered by an I.R. ship."

Fuzzy nodded grimly. Straightening his borrowed uniform, he strode to the communication grid.

Worgil Han was angry only as a dictator with over-exaggerated opinions of himself can be. He was small for a Martian, and his white and silver uniform put to shame anything worn by anyone in space. Cruel red lights gleamed in his sunken eyes. The eyes of a hungry rat.

"Commander Valdongh, do you realize that you are several hours late?" Worgil Han screeched. "You have kept me waiting."

"It was unavoidable, your excellency," Fuzzy soothed, with all the due and proper humility. "Just off Jupiter, we were discovered and attacked by a fleet of I.R. and E.F. ships. In the ensuing battle, we were forced off course, and nearly lost our lives."

"Discovered?" Worgil Han whispered in horror. "Do you mean to tell me that our great and noble cause has been discovered?"

Fuzzy nodded. "Unfortunately, your excellency, we have been betrayed."

"By the gods of Mars!" the dictator screamed. "Betrayed! By whom, Commander Valdongh? Tell me, who has betrayed us!"

"The information is for your ears alone, excellency," Fuzzy replied, glancing about with a secretive air. "I must see you in private."

"The permission is granted. Come at once! Delay two seconds, and you become a satellite of this accursed planet!" The communication grid snapped off.

"Phew!" Fuzzy breathed. "What a nice guy Worgil's turned out to be!"

"We're depending on you, Fuzzy," Mournful said. "Don't fail us. We'll be standing by, and as soon as we receive your signal that everything's under control, we'll be right over."

Fuzzy nodded grimly, tucking a small heat gun under his uniform cape. "I'll bring home the bacon, Chief, don't you worry," he said.

Dino growled, "You dang little ape, if that dictator guy hurts you I'll take him apart hair by hair."

"Aw, go on, you overgrown lizard," Fuzzy muttered in rough affection. Then he was gone.

TENSELY, Mournful, Dino, and Jupe gathered beside the vision screen. They saw Fuzzy's spacesuited form emerge from the airlock, and, propelled by hand reaction tubes, shoot across the intervening space to the vessel of Worgil Han. He disappeared inside.

Mournful pressed his tightly clenched fists into his thighs. Fuzzy was in that other ship among enemy Martians. The slightest slip in word or action might give him away before he could get his gun out and cover Worgil. In that eventuality, Fuzzy would be killed at once, and the guns of a dozen and more disguised Martian warships would be brought to bear upon the vessel from which he had come. War between Earth and Uranus would then be a certainty, and Worgil Han's evil scheme of conquest might yet be realized.

His lips pressed to a white line, Mournful watched the signal light

above the communication grid. Long minutes passed.

And then the light blinked. A single thought leaped into Mournful's mind. Had Fuzzy succeeded—or had he been discovered? He had hardly completed this thought when he was across the room and at the communication grid. He snapped the contact button, his eyes narrowed with tautness.

Fuzzy's face steadied into view. "Everything—under control—Chief! Come an' get it while—while it's hot!"

"He's hurt!" Dino roared. "Wait till I get my hands on that rat who calls himself a dictator! 'Your excellency'? It'll be your grease-spot when I'm through with him!"

"Get into spacesuits!" Mournful snapped. "See to Welton and his men. We're abandoning this ship, taking over Worgil's."

IN THE dictator's vessel, Mournful found the crew gathered about the door of the control room. The Martians were holding weapons, but they weren't using them. After a short examination the answer was immediately apparent.

Fuzzy was backed against the farther wall of the control room. One of his arms was around the neck of Worgil Han, and the other was pressing a heat gun into his back. Obviously, Worgil Han's fear for his life had kept his men from action.

Mournful took over briskly. Worgil Han was only too glad to co-operate. The Martians were disarmed, and soon were leaving the vessel in a steady stream of spacesuited figures.

Fuzzy sagged weakly. His shoulder was blood-soaked from a bullet wound.

Dino started wrathfully for the cowering form of Worgil Han. But Mournful's curt command brought him up

short from his intended plan of bodily dismemberment.

"Lay to, Jupe!" Mournful said. "Worgil is worth good money to us. When Earth and Uranus find out that he was the one who started the war between them the first time, and the one who was trying to get it restarted, they'll be only too glad to pay for the pleasure of taking him apart themselves. So I want him in one piece. We'll get a fortune for him easily."

"So Worgil Han actually was the one behind the attacks on the Uranians!" Welton muttered in reluctant realization.

Mournful nodded wearily. "I tried to tell you that before, Inspector, didn't I? If you wish to be convinced further, I'll be glad to have Worgil give you a full confession. You'll do that for us, won't you, your excellency?"

Worgil Han eyed Dino's ominous form. He gulped, nodding enthusiastically.

"Don't bother," Welton growled. "What do you intend to do with me, Moggs?"

Mournful's face lengthened with sadness, and a gleam of melancholy stole into his eyes.

"Oh, oh!" said Jupe, who was covering Welton and his men with a pneumatic.

Mournful asked, "Inspector, what is the current reward for my luckless carcass?"

"A thousand credits, dead or alive!" Welton snapped. "But what has that got to do with—"

"Then," Mournful broke in, "the ransom for you will be a thousand credits—though I doubt that the Earth authorities will think that you're valuable enough to pay it. But they might, if you beg them nicely and tell them how positively fiendish my tortures are. You've caused me a lot of trouble, Inspector. And since my time is valuable, I expect to get paid for it."

Welton choked with rage, his heavy features turning purple. "Why, you—you. . . ." he spluttered.

"Take him away, Jupe," Mournful said.

Worgil Han, and Inspector Welton and his men were locked in separate cabins. Fuzzy's wounded shoulder was being taken care of by a solicitous Dino. Worgil Han's men had been picked up by others of the disguised Martian warships. The Martians were obviously quite glad to be rid of the dictator, for they assembled with alacrity, and sped home blithely.

Mournful Moggs' features expressed a sad satisfaction. "Another job done," he said. "But if we expect to buy tombstones with that reward money, we'd better be getting out of here. The I.R. and E.F. ships might be arriving any minute. Too bad—they're late again."

He yawned hugely. "As for me, I'm going to sleep until we get back to base, and dream of the tombstone I'm going to buy with my share of the reward money. Brothers, what a tombstone it's going to be! But—dog-gone it—I still can't think of a suitable epitaph!"

THE END

READ THE BEST —

READ AMAZING

READER'S PAGE

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Hi LES!

Awful me! I promised you a letter after the September FA, didn't I. And here I just let you pine away all summer. Fie on me! But you see it wasn't entirely my fault, because the way I hopped around hither and thither I didn't even have time to write a note to the milkman, let alone a fan letter to my favorite stf mag. Before the September issue even came I was at a Presbyterian youth conference on our MIGHTY St. Lawrence River. Then I had just bought your mag when I was whisked away to the mountains for a stay on Big Moose Lake. I even took FA along in hopes of catching up on some back reading, but that plan collapsed when I left you locked in the car on the other side of the lake!

Then to Malone for a week with some friends. Well, by the time I'd gotten through running around the October ish was already out and it was almost time to go back to school. So during the past week I feverishly covered both the September and October numbers, and—here I is!

First, the September:

Honest, LES, you get better all the time. This one was really swell! You sure do make it tough for your fan to rate the stories.

- 1) "Terror from the Abyss". Tops. I usually like your lead novels best, anyhow.
- 2) "I'll See You in My Dreams". It wasn't science-fiction, but it was so good I rated it second.
- 3) "Coffins to Mars". A close third. Full of suspense.
- 4) "Tough Guy" and "The Slave Makers". Both fair stories.
- 5) "The Hollow World". Not so good, I thought. Maybe my mind isn't fully developed yet as to time and space, but to tell you the absolute truth, I just don't get it! The idea doesn't seem rational. Try again, though, Mr. Walton. I like your writing style.

COVER: SO-SO.

Favorite letter: Douglas Howe.

And now, the October:

Hurray! I said last month's issue was "swell"! Using the same standards, this one is excellent.

COVER: Wow! Double wow! This is decidedly the best we have ever seen from Mr. Popp. If this is a sample of Walt's "disgusting" naked wimmen, well, then, Mr. Summers, LET US HAVE MORE

NAKED WIMMEN! (By the way, Walter, didn't you know that SHORT hair is the latest fashion? Keep up with the times, sir. Anyway, congratulations on a fine job.)

STORIES:

1) "Is This the Way Home?" This was really my ideal story. It's ones like these that keep me reading s-f. A delightful mixture of humor, weirdness, and plain unadulterated sex. Bravo!

2) All the rest of the stories (i.e., "In a Day of Victory". What an ending! "The Talking Cube"—another good ending. I like that theme; it was vaguely reminiscent of Max Ehrlich's "The Big Eye", but vaguely enough to be original. "Death Is Never Final". Another of my favorite "overcome humanity" stories. "It's in the Cards". Powerfully dramatic. "Doom Jungle"—by J. Jakes, so it has to be good. "I'll Meet You Yesterday"—a real "George" story!

Now please note, LES, that these last stories were listed in title-page order, because my weary little brain just could not decide which was better than which. I'm afraid I'm not a very good critic, or maybe I'm just lazy, but all I can say is that every yarn in the October issue was A-Number 1 as far as I'm concerned.

O., yes. Upon examining the October numbers of both FA and AS, I was delighted to find that in both were contained SEVEN whole stories. Yippee! You are people after my own heart.

Well, I've bored you enough, so I'll end this epistle here and now. By the way, I'll be chewing my nails until September 9th, when the third ish of "you-know-what" comes out. Can't wait to dig my teeth into Mickey Spillane's story.

Bill Wilson
825 Jay Street
Ogdensburg, New York

REQUEST

Dear LES:

Please print this letter in your magazine as it is a request to your readers.

Fellow science-fiction fans: if you want the radio stations to return their sf programs to the air, bombard them with letters saying so.

To Les: keep up the good work, beautiful. Bring us more Robert Arnette and Paul W. Fairman stories.

Douglas O. C. Clark
Pacific
Missouri

P.S. Les, how about sending some of your mags to the drugstores in Pacific, Missouri?

WHAT HAPPENED TO ALEX?

Dear LES:

Some time ago, one or two years—I do not remember when—I picked up a copy of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES in a second-hand store for lack of anything else to do. The lead story was "Medusa Was a Lady", and, after reading it, I told myself, "Wow! What a story!" That one story sold me completely on science-fantasy. Some years previous, I had been reading AMAZING. I thought it was just for science-fiction and nothing else. Only until I read your mag did I realize how closely linked were science fiction and science-fantasy. Now I love them both.

AS and FA are two of my favorites, although I have subscriptions to ASF and IMAGINATION, and I read OW and GALAXY regularly. I have some comments to make. Although your stories are very good, I do not like the covers too well. This month's cover (October issue) was so daring that I had to shove the mag in my pocket as I walked home. I'm only thirteen. What will people think?

You ought to get covers like ASF. You know what a success that mag makes. I would also like to ask you this. What happened to Alexander Blade? Some months ago, I was buying back issues of sf mags, and I came across an issue of AMAZING. It had an novel by Blade titled "The Brain" and, so help me, that was the BEST sf story I ever read yet. From now on, I hope to see more such masterpieces. By the way, do you have the second part of Elade's "Eye of the World"? I only got the first part. I am willing to pay up to \$2.00 for it.

Keep up the good work, and I will always be a faithful reader of your fine mag.

Barry Miller
580 McAllister Street
San Francisco, California

P.S. If this gets published, I would like to have any fan aged 11 up communicate with me. (I started reading sf at age 11.)

Alex is very much around. You'll be reading his story in this issue. —Ed.

NEW READER

Dear Editor:

Just for the first time picked up a copy of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and that was only because of the cover. I was a little surprised when I read it that it is as good and sometimes even better than the other sf mags I have been reading.

Of course I enjoyed "Is This the Way Home", but, being a poker fiend, I really enjoyed Rog Phillips.

You probably won't have room to print

this, but if you can there's a story I read several years ago, "Five Steps to Tomorrow"—I don't remember the author, or the name of the mag, except that it was sf—I would like to have that mag.

The gal on the October cover is cute, but looks sorta funny with horns and wings; some may like that, but I think the women look better if you leave them as they were meant to be, and make the monsters out of the men.

I wonder what a girl could like about seeing themselves butchered up like that?

Bill Peek
Post Office Box 784
Asheville, North Carolina

OLD READER

Dear Sir:

I have been reading AS and FA magazines for just over a year, in fact since they were first published over here. I've been reading sf since I was nine; I'm fifteen now, and your magazines are the best that I've read.

The thing I like about both magazines is that you always have a variety of stories and I've never been disappointed with any of them from No. 1 to the present copy of British reprints. I have never read any of the American copies but, judging from reader's letters, I guess they were pretty hot.

The latest AS I've got is a smasher, the two best stories being "The Glory That Was Rome" and "The Star Grabbers". Other stories in back issues that were good in my opinion were "All Heroes Are Hated"—that story was a classic. "The Galaxy Raiders"—plenty of action, "Mistress of Djinn" and "Where the World Tottered".

The last copy I had of FA, in which the best story was "Secret of the Flaming Ring", followed by "Master Ego", had a colorful cover and the guy with the tin skull made the book-buyer curious as to what he was—robot or human. I found the answer in the story. On the subject of covers, your best one, in the British reprints, was the Colossus of Rhodes; in fact, it's the best cover I've seen in any magazine.

Folks around my place say I'm sf-mad, which I suppose all sf readers have been told. I read an average of 10 to 15 books per week, when I can get them, I've even tried my hand at writing stories. I've got dozens of models which I've made of spaceships, planet landscapes and alien monsters. Science fiction is still in its infancy, but as the years go by it is becoming more and more popular.

Who's your hero over there? Here it's Dan Dare, ever heard of him? Well, he was the first guy to land on Venus, and he saved the earth from destruction once or twice, now he's marooned on Mercury. How is Flash Gordon these days? Anybody replace him yet?

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toward a port.

"I've got that in mind already, Chief," I said. "I've been thinking about it for weeks. Our radius of action is so limited now by space suits and walking, that I've been thinking of practical transportation." "Got ideas?"

"Sure. We'll use a tractor—battery-powered, that's all with some sort of a jury-rigged cabin. We'll be able to go hundreds of miles with it. Eventually we can have them build some exact jobs to our specifications on Terra, and then have them brought up."

"But we're not going to have much time. I just got Fleming and Porter on the radio. Fleming's in bad shape from a rock-fall and Porter has a broken leg. They're not coming back unless we get to them and they've got oxygen for eleven hours. That means something has to be done."

I nearly fell off the stool at the news.

I rigged a vehicle of course—unpowered. It was just a cart or wagon, but it had large-diameter wheels and sort of jimrick-sha pulling handles. I used hose and tubing of synthetic rubber for a tire of sorts, but it wasn't important. We needed some sort of mobile pallet and I knocked one together. It worked.

McReady, Weinberg and myself made the trip, slowed down of course by the vehicle—we couldn't take advantage of the leaping jumps that Luna's gravity permits, not burdened by the cart, but on the other hand we could carry spare oxygen, which was the important thing.

We got to Fleming and Porter and not too soon. Their oxygen was going and both men were in bad shape, but in the crude cabined wagon we managed—I mean Weinberg managed—to get them in a soporific state with injections so that they amounted just to dead weight. We got back to Luna City in time.

That's all there was to it. And that's the way it's going to be for a long time. McReady is fond of showing me, from our library, the predictions of what establishing a base on the Moon would be like according to the science fictionists. They did pretty well at that, some of them, except that they didn't figure what a miserable, commonplace, back-breaking job it would be. Luna life is work of the hardest, most dangerous, most unimaginative kind, requiring attention to trivia and detail, just like the simple fact of requiring some sort of vehicle, even a cart, to carry hurt men.

We've learned, though, and we're getting power. With the next rocket or two we'll have mobility. We'll be using mobile tractors powered by electric motors and storage batteries.

Arctic Assignment

By

LEE OWEN

BARRY RANDALL squirmed into a little more comfortable position in the instrument-packed cockpit of the jet interceptor. Some interceptor, he thought to himself. This thing handles more like a balloon. I'd be a sitting duck for a surprise. They shouldn't have put such big wing tanks on her.

He glanced over his wing tip and, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but Arctic desolation and waste, a blinding white world of ice and snow. He knew that was deceptive, though, since there was lots of pine here below him, but heavily blanketed by weighty recent snowfalls.

Barry lit a cigarette and settled back, enjoying the high-pitched whine of the engine. This wasn't the worst possible life, he thought. When he'd drawn the Arctic assignment, he'd pictured things a lot more primitive than they were, but Air Force Field Lookout had all the comforts of home. The chain of bases extending across Northern Canada and even into the Arctic circle would soon be impregnable, and Joe's boys would never stand a chance of striking across the Pole.

These routine flights were boring. Ordinarily he would have had a wing man to keep him company, since it was standard practice to send out patrol's in pairs. That way, if one was forced down, the other could pinpoint him and call for help. But Johnson was out with the flu and the Colonel insisted that Barry do it alone. Men were short. Well, Barry thought, I don't anticipate trouble, but I'd feel more comfortable with Johnson a few hundred yards to my left.

He swung the jet toward the left and dropped to two thousand feet. The terrain was still flat and snow-covered and Barry knew there was plenty of forest beneath him. Was he seeing things? He'd have sworn there was something moving down there.

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By God, there was! Sure enough, he could clearly see snow tracks, lots of them, leading into a dead end which of course must be woods. What the devil, did the Army have a patrol maneuver out here? Barry hastily examined his "orders of the day" but there was no mention of military activity at this point.

He flicked his transmitter switch. Better call Base Lookout and take no chances. They'd straighten him out as to what was going on down there.

He opened his mouth to speak into the throat mike.... The jet suddenly shuddered like a stricken animal—and Barry saw his left wing all but vanish. At the same time, white puffs arose round him, and he knew that anti-aircraft had spotted and nailed him perfectly. The transmitter was dead, and the jet already was hurling Earthward. Barry loosed his disconnects and pressed the ejector stud.

Cockpit and seat puffed out with a bang as the explosive charge threw him free. One moment he was seated comfortably in a warm jet plane, the next he was catapulted into the icy air outside.

The wind carried him quite a bit South of the point at which he'd been hit. The parachute seemed to drop him ever so slowly. Barry cursed. At this rate they'd spot his landing point and pick him up. That could mean only one thing. The Soviets had put down a base and were secretly supplying it. He'd stumbled on it by accident and they'd carefully ranged him. If he'd let out the slightest bleat of radio pulses before, they wouldn't have dared to shoot. But with his long silence they'd knocked him down in time. They'd pick up his plane or snow-cover it, nab him, and it would be just "one more pilot missing".

He hit lightly and rolled in the powdered snow. It was a moment's work to slip out of the parachute shrouds and make himself free. The forest was heavy pine, snow-buried, and he floundered toward it, knowing that he'd have to hide. For how long, he could only guess. The Soviets right now were going to pick him up and he knew he didn't stand too much of a chance. He was warmly dressed but only his strapped-on emergency kit provided him with any security. He couldn't survive long without shelter and the Soviets would see that he didn't get that!

Fortunately there was enough of a wind to obliterate his tracks as fast as they formed, so that the patrols would really have to hunt. Given time, he could have found the plane, made a makeshift transmitter of some sort and slugged out a warning signal. But the Soviets would be on the plane, perhaps by now.

Suddenly Barry got an idea. Why not

head straight into the Soviet camp? He was fairly clearly oriented and they'd never expect him to head for their base. It was getting dark and he'd stand a good chance of making it.

And he did.

It was only an hour later; he was exhausted from the floundering and plowing through the drifted snow, but he came upon the lights. Carefully he eased himself closer. The huts were crude and simple but perfectly adequate for the base. Most important, he spotted the radio shack instantly. He was surprised at the number of vehicles. Snow scooters, tracked cars, helicopters, stood around in profusion. The hangars for jets, however, he couldn't see. They must be perfectly camouflaged.

The radio shack was guarded by a single sentry. Tired and weak as he was, it was a moment's work for Barry to sneak up on him and knock him loose from his marbles with a blow of the forty-five. The sentry dropped and Barry sprinted for the hut.

He glanced through a window, saw a lone operator. Without hesitating he went through the door and with another blow dropped the surprised Russian from his seat.

Radio equipment is universally clear. Barry picked out a frequency he knew was constantly monitored and within seconds he was in contact with Base Lookout. As fast as he could talk he poured out the details of his discovery and his position.

"...I'm heading back into the woods," he concluded, "pick me up after you've done the job...."

The whole affair had taken no more than five minutes. He got out of the shack after taking an overcoat and donning it. He took the unconscious guard's rifle, actually an automatic job, and some sort of knapsack which must hold some iron rations of one kind or another, and in a minute he was back in the woods from which he'd come.

He cleared away from the camp, as far as he could drive his exhausted body. With branches and rubbed underbrush he managed to build a shelter and a hidden fire. The smoke couldn't be seen at night and he was safe. He'd bet money that the patrols would be recalled in short order just as soon as the radio shack was discovered.

It took seven hours. In alternate fits of dozing and trying to keep awake, finally Barry was fully awakened by the thundering sound of jet engines overhead and then the night became brilliant with flares, illuminated like the day. Gunfire began and the battle was closed.

Barry heaped pine on the fire in his cosy shelter and watched the fleeing Soviets.

(continued from page 119)

By the way, before I finish, if you happen to print this I'd like an sf fan to write to me and exchange news, views and books. Final last words—KEEP ON PRINTING AS and FA.

Don Allen
3, Arkle Street
Gateshead. 8
Co. Durham, England

NEW READER

Dear Sirs:

I am a 20-year-old English girl and have just read my first FANTASTIC ADVENTURES.

I have tried in many bookshops in England (London) but have not been able to purchase any back numbers, and am told that current issues are very very scarce.

It seems so unfair that such a good book should be so hard to come by—can't you possibly arrange for more copies for England?

The book has been a great success to all my friends, including some in hospital.

If any of your readers can possibly supply us with back or current numbers of this FANTASTIC book, we shall all be more than pleased and will try in some way to repay them either by sending the money for the books or sending English books in return.

If there is a chance, I would also like to write to one or two readers.

Doreen Izard
36 Christie Road
S. Hackney, E.9, London
England

ANOTHER FOR BLADE

Dear Sir:

I saw in a letter in the December issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES that FA might fold. Please don't let it happen. I like FA much better than FANTASTIC and if one has to fold, let it be FANTASTIC.

What ever happened to Alexander Blade? He was my favorite author.

I am 14 and I wish somebody would write me some letters. All letters will be answered promptly.

Byron England
4213 Memphis Street
El Paso, Texas

WE TAKE A DARE

Dear Howard:

How many letters have you received saying "I dare you to print this"? (And of course they always see print, as HB is afraid to pass up a dare.) This is different. I dare you not only to print the letter, but to specifically answer the questions

put forth in it. And before I forget, here they are:

1) Why do you refrain from commenting on letters lately?

2) When will FA fold, and when will it merge with the new?

3) When will AS go slick? Or will it?

4) What was the "big announcement" LES said would be made in the October Z-D mags and was never made? (She said that in the September FA.)

5) What happened to that thriller, "Master of the Universe"?

Guess I have put my foot in your mouth enough for that. Before I go, however, I will mention that, since Palmer left AS, while most of the stories have been pretty good, there has been a gradual drop in the over-all quality of AS. As a matter of fact, the only thing that saves the Z-D reputation is the new FANTASTIC. (Which, if it keeps up for long as it now, will have people calling WEIRD TALES the "Poor Man's FANTASTIC.")

Before this goes into File 13, I would like to tell Ray Thompson he was wrong. Not just "No comment", but...nothing.

And once more, I dare you, Howard Browne, to print this letter with specific answers to the questions I have set forth herein.

Val J. Golding
San Francisco
California

FINLAY FAN

Dear Mr. Browne:

Thanks for the Finlay illo in the November issue of FA, even if it was put in by mistake. Was it?

The stories in this ish were pretty good; I pick "I'll Follow You to Hell" as the best. It had some real suspense toward the end. Usually I don't like these cop and private eye stories in science fiction, but this one had a different twist to it. "It Happened Tomorrow" was a story. "When Better Budgies Are Built" and "Needle Me Not" were both good, especially the latter. "The Man Who Could Not Die" wasn't bad, but this is an old theme. "Dragon Army" was good in spots, but most of it was very slow. It said on the cover that the seeds were sown from the sky. Couldn't find that in the story.

NOW! What the hell is going on in the letter department? Not quite a page and a half, and only three letters! Is that all you get? If you like I could knock out five or six dozen a month for you. Look at any of the Thrilling mags or OW. There is some very interesting reading to be found in the letter columns of these mags, and always a few chuckles. The letters might take up the room of an article or two, but from the economic point of view they are cheaper. FA seems to be getting

a better variety of stories lately, and the cover and artwork are looking up too. So how about it, Howard, have a little more on the reader's page.

Thanks for publishing my letter in AMAZING.

Harry Calnek
516 West Mary Street
Fort William, Ontario, Canada

ALL ABOUT CYRUS PIMPLEHEAD

Dear LES:

Out of the depths of space came the flying discs of the invader. Rapidly they fanned out in formation, and flew over the face of the earth. Invisible force beams radiated from the narrow ports of the discs and where those beams touched, nothing remained. The planes, the anti-aircraft guns, and all the armaments of earth, were powerless against these aggressors. They landed, and the hordes of men, who were not men, poured out over the Capitol grounds of all the nations of the world. Within twenty-four hours the world of men belonged to the invader. The men themselves became their slaves and the women their concubines.

In a small town, the village idiot, Cyrus Pimplehead, became the saviour of mankind. Behind a house where lived Professor Antibody and his beautiful daughter, he found a discarded bit of silver wire and some flakes of crystal. Now Cyrus spent lots of time behind the Professor's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of the lovely Torsette Antibody, the Professor's daughter. He, as well as all the young men of the town, was in love with her. Her long black hair hung down her back in silken ebony tresses. Her eyes were the deepest night, her skin the envy of every woman who saw her. Her curves defied description. Men panted and their hearts went "boinnnnnnng!" whenever she passed.

Cyrus was not as simple as he seemed, but by acting so he was able to learn many things and could watch Torsette with impunity.

Fooling with the wire and crystals caused a field of "countermittent rays to be developed which acted on his plasmoidal intelligitia", thus creating a superman who bulged at the muscles, and whose brain worked at lightning speed and was twice the greatness of a super genius.

One of the invaders saw Torsette and captured her for the head knocker, who would elevate him in rank for bringing in such a delectable dish.

Cyrus was mad, and gathering a few friends, dosed them with the crystal rays and, using these men as a nucleus in the larger cities of the world, Cyrus and his men formed an army of supermen and began the systematic destruction of the aliens.

During the time Cyrus was busy, Torsette virtuously fought to retain her virginity. A spy from Cyrus gave her the knowledge that Cyrus loved her and would soon rescue her from the villains of outer space. Heartened by this, she used her womanly wiles and know-how to keep herself pure for Cyrus.

The bigwig, impatient at the delay, forced himself upon Torsette. Stripping the thin material she was draped in, he hungrily set about claiming Torsette. "CRASH!" The door splintered. Lo and behold, there stood Cyrus in all his splendor of newfound brain and muscle. Grabbing the hotshot by the throat, he began to throttle him. He modestly clad the now nude Torsette in his cloak, and, holding her close, planted a kiss upon her rosebud lips, and panted for the promise of things to come from that torrid smooch.

-finis-

Would you pay me 2½¢ a word for that drivel, Les, even if I dressed it up with a few fancy scenes of debauchery and bloodshed? I have been an avid reader of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and AMAZING STORIES, since 1939, but, brother, the December issue of FA has made me ask am I reading romance or science fiction. I also have the December AS, but I fear to crack the cover, for I may be as disappointed as I was in FA.

Is Science Fiction such old hat that writers have to turn to sex and trickery to make circulation quotas? Remember paper-backed shoot-em-ups? The drawling hero conquered a passel of bad 'uns, then rode away into the sunset and never sullied the heroine's lips. They are on the road to oblivion. They added sex, but did it make the story different? The old old harps were strummed again, but one hand of the hero held the heroine behind him while he blew the noggins off the badmen, and, instead of riding off to freedom, the poor hero became a ball and chain worshipper in a cozy shack with gingham curtains. Plausible? Please make my stories so and you will have my undying thanks, for I am addicted to FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and do not want to change. So long, and do not let my bombast upset you too much, for I know you have thousands of other readers to please and, if they prefer science fiction that way, then I and others must take it so, or change our tastes.

S. D. Nicholson, Jr.
611 North 54th Street
Philadelphia 31, Pennsylvania

P.S. I have a pile of different sf publications that I have gathered since March, and would like to either give away or trade. Will some reader that is close to my address contact me and take them off my hands?

"TINY TIM"

COMES THROUGH

By Sandy Miller

HOW TIMOTHY BLANE became communications officer of the Patrol cruiser *Neander* was a mystery to everyone. That he was a competent technician of course had something to do with it, but as for every other quality demanded by the Patrol—he lacked them all. He was tall and gangling, carrot-thatched, a caricature of the too-rapidly-bloomed adolescent, and it was inevitable that he should become "Tiny Tim" at once—and not too much effort was made to conceal that name behind his back.

He had a penchant for secretiveness, it seemed, probably more shyness than anything, for his relations with his fellow officers were fleeting, casual, and confined strictly to duty. The bull sessions in the mess weren't for him, and when he wasn't on duty in Comshack, he was in his tiny cubicle with projector or book. An omnivorous reader and student, his nose was forever buried in technical treatises of one kind or another, mostly heavily mathematical.

Portside, he was never seen roistering with the gang—not that he might not have, but simply because his personality seemed so negative that his shipmates were rarely aware of his existence. Captain Brenstrom observed privately "that there must have been a shortage of Com officers the day he was commissioned", but the Captain never had any occasion to criticize Tiny Tim's work.

In short, Tiny Tim was everything that a Patrol officer ordinarily isn't.

He was, however, everything that an officer should be with tools and symbols, and consequently he was an asset. Brenstrom didn't carry free-loaders—he shot more than one right back to Base faster than he'd arrived aboard.

The *Neander* was on conventional Titanian greater planets orbital when the message was brought into mess by the assistant Com officer. Brenstrom read it aloud:

"*Neander*...acknowledge and act... O.N.747773...passenger ship *Clairault*, forty aboard down on Saturn...coordinates below...last pulse call received 2440 SST..."

Brenstrom glanced around at his silent officers.

"Well," he said finally, "we've got to do something suggestions."

"I suggest taking down a radar rescue

boat," Tiny Tim's voice broke the silence. "I'd put everything on search with a good chance of finding them. If they're not locked in methane I'd jam the boat full. There'd be room enough for a sardine pack if the extra accumulators were torn out of the number two boat, the biggest."

"I see," Captain Brenstrom said. "Thank you. I'm glad we have a thinking officer," he added a bit sarcastically.

"Attention, gentlemen," he said. "This has to be a one-man proposition. What can two or three do better than one? In addition, I don't propose to pour half my crew into the planet. You know Regulations."

Tiny Tim took the number two boat a half hour later after everything loose had been torn from the cabin. Radar was checked and he blasted immediately Saturnwards.

The automatic pulser aboard the *Clairault* would put out a strong pulse as long as power held out, although it would be sadly enfeebled by the energy-absorbing atmosphere of "icy-hell", as Saturn was commonly known among spacemen. Tiny Tim's job would be to cruise around, avoiding the freeze waves and hoping to catch a feeble beat of the pulser in his direction-finding equipment. Once he picked up a pulse he could ride the beam down and thus locate the ship.

He fought the number two boat through like a racer. It is impossible to conceive of the almost living enmity of Saturnian depths. The boat was tossed and battered like a chip on a fogged ocean. Its immense power was nothing before the tremendous blasts of four-hundred-mile-an-hour winds carrying solids chunks of carbon dioxide.

Tiny Tim fought it though. He played the control console like a master organist and his fingers and feet were in motion constantly correcting here, blasting there. His eyes remained glued to the screens, his ears tuned to the speakers.

For eleven hours, without respite, without pause, he struggled in that Saturnian ice-hell, with power beyond human endurance it seemed, and then he caught it. Theoretically he'd had the coordinates of the downed ship, but dispersion and diffraction had so warped the radio waves that the ship actually was two hundred kilometers from the supposed position; Tiny Tim found it and locked to it.

Coolly he brought the terrified passengers and crew aboard, jammed them literally like sardines in the tiny number two boat and started to bring the craft out.

It was another four-hour fight to rise above the incredible ferocity of the blasting gusts of liquid air and methane, the reverberating blows of solidified gasses. Tiny Tim did it.

He's still Com officer aboard the *Neander*, and it isn't surprising that he's the most popular man aboard!

VOYAGE INTO DANGER

By *Martin Dean*

IF YOU'D believe the Sunday supplements or the video flashes, you'd think space travel was the most dangerous thing conceivable. Every now and then—as now—the editors will drag out some hoary old chestnut, polish it off, and present it as “the danger of the year”. Lately, since the Martian-colonies run has been put on a regular basis with the building of the *Tellus*, the sob-sisters have been moaning about the inherent dangers of meteors “which are certain to hole the ship at some time or another”.

Balony!

My name is Charles Jackson and, in addition to being Exec on the *Tellus* (I was with her from the day they laid her first plate on the Satellite Station), I'm so-called “damage control officer”. Going to Phobos or Deimos, the Martian satellites which serve as space stations for the Red Planet, is as simple and non-dangerous a trip as going to the corner grocery store. Take a look at our last trip and you'll see what I mean.

So far the *Tellus* has made seven round trips—and in all that time no real danger has been encountered, either when in flight or when landing. As for meteors—well, we were holed, and we're still alive to tell about it. We'll be holed again, I'm sure, and we'll live through that, too!

The *Tellus* is really not much to look at in terms of “sleek, stream-lined, glistening rockets” but, looked at through the eye of a technician, it's an engineering miracle. And of course every nut and bolt, every sheet of metal and every instrument, was brought up from Earth on the shuttle rockets and assembled near the Space Station.

The *Tellus* is a cylinder four hundred feet long. The last one hundred feet of this ship have not been seen by men since it was built save through the video eyes, internally, for of course it's here that the atomic pile is located. Any repairs—if they ever must be made—must be effected by remote robotic control. The rear end of the *Tellus* is forever forbidden to human beings. However, the atomic pile is basically so simple, and was constructed with such a large safety factor, that it is anticipated that the engines will never need repair. Feed anything to them and they vaporize and eject the stuff in a gas which provides the thrust. The thrust ex-

(continued on page 126)

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haust, however, is virulently radioactive and that, of course, is another reason—besides the huge bulk of the ship—for the *Tellus*' never landing either on Earth or on Mars.

The Terran shuttle rockets bring the stuff up to the space station from which it's loaded aboard the *Tellus*. We bring it to Deimos usually, although we can unload at Phobos, which has a small station besides the radio beacon, where shuttle rockets bring it down to the Martian surface. And, since the colonies are flourishing, lots of stuff goes Marsward.

It's a fifty-day trip to Deimos and after you've made it a few times even the most starry-eyed idealist begins to think of it as boring. There are only eight of us aboard, but that's more than enough to handle the routines of computing, operation, control, etc. Most of the time we spend either reading, watching the canned entertainment, sitting in on the perpetual poker game that exists in the messroom, or studying. That last is good too. If space travel always requires such great amounts of time, study will be the main occupation of spacemen and, at the rate they're going, most crew members will be Ph.D.'s before they're much older! Ever since Jack Leonard took his Master's in radio engineering for which most of the studying had been done aboard the *Tellus*, it's been a standing gag that the ship is really a flying university.

I was in Control with Barry (C.O.). He was making a routine navigational "compute" and taking radio bearings on the pulse transmitter. He made the minor corrections necessary and we were on course.

"Air all right?" he asked.

I glanced toward the differential pressure indicator.

"Hey, Skipper, look!" I said loudly. The needle on the gauge was dropping quickly, then abruptly it stopped and slowly started to rise. The drop was small enough not to cause any physical discomfort, but it was sort of eerie to watch the needle, since you knew it meant air was going too!

Barry grinned. "We've been holed, Charlie," he said. "Evidently be a big one this time. You better get to work." He glanced at the compartment panel. "Number Four bulkhead's sealed," he said indicating the red light. "At least you know where it is."

I went midships and got on a space suit. Through a connection to the sealed chamber I ran a Helium line which let a little gas leak into the room whose air had vanished through the hole caused by the meteor. No one was in Number Four, of course. The leaking Helium would pass through the hole, wherever it was, and I'd go out and find it with an ionic leak detector.

I went through the lock and circled the hull, keeping my eyes on the gauge of the leak detector. It took a little while—there's lots of air to even one bulkhead section of the *Tellus*—but eventually I found it.

The leak was no bigger than a pencil in diameter. Plugging it was simple, of course. I selected a plastic plug and cement, filled it in and marked it with red paint. Back at the Lunar space station they'd weld it shut, though to all intents and purposes this patch was good enough forever.

Back in the ship, they opened the bulkhead door and put up the pressure. The ship was as good as new.

"Charlie," Barry said, "I wonder if you realize what a rarity this is? This is the first time we've ever been holed by anything that big!—if you want to call a pea-sized meteor big."

"I know," I said, "we're pitted with enough dust, but this is big by meteoric standards. All we have to worry about is something the size of a football or a bushel basket, smashing into us."

"We won't worry about that," Barry acknowledged, "because we won't have time. With the kinetic energy that a meteor that size would have, I'm afraid the *Tellus* would be vaporized—or at least pretty badly smashed. The probability of

(continued on page 129)

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 4, 1937, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF *Fantastic Adventures*, published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1952.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; Editor, Howard Browne, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Managing editor, L. E. Slater, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.; Business manager, G. E. Carney, 366 Madison Ave., New York 17, N. Y.

2. The owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses, as well as that of each individual member, must be given.) Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; William B. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; B. G. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; A. Ziff, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.; S. Davis, 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) Modern Women of America, Rock Island, Illinois.

4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner.

5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, semiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

G. E. Carney
Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of September, 1952.
(SEAL) Irving L. Jacobson

Notary Public

(My commission expires March 30, 1953)

(cont'd from inside cover)

came east to attend Cornell University, did graduate work in anthropology at Columbia, and decided that New York would be my home ever after. I live in a large cluttered apartment overlooking the East River. For years I've been meaning to do an ambitious decorating job on it, but I've been so preoccupied creating make-believe apartments for make-believe people in plays that there just hasn't been time. Now and again I tell myself that next week I'll paint the walls black and buy some white carpets and go on from there, but something always comes up to prevent that.

My reading tastes are varied and no doubt inconsistent. A boyhood predilection for westerns is responsible for my writing them in adult life, and early interests in astronomy and adventure thrillers combined to turn me into a science-fiction addict. *Candide* is my favorite French novel, Thackeray my favorite English author, Horace my favorite poet of all place and time. I think Havelock Ellis is more interesting than Kinsey, Spinoza much meatier than James, and Franz Kafka superior to James Joyce. And I have lengthy dissertations at the tip of my tongue to support my preferences. I am a very pedantic fellow.

From the point of view of accomplishment, I am a musical dolt. I do not play or sing anything. But I can follow the score of a symphony, understand the French or German or Italian libretto of an opera, and listen correctly to a fugue. I like Bach and Beethoven better than all other composers. but think the "Grand Canyon Suite" is a gem. Some days I like to listen to Toscanini and some days I prefer to tune in "The Chamber Music Society of Lower Basin Street". I am a very paradoxical fellow.

My favorite play is Shaw's *Man*

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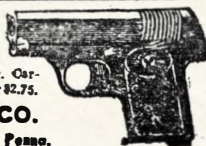
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and Superman, but a long-standing love for the theater makes me a sucker for any production, from an up-to-date version of *Antigone* to an unabashed variety review. I am also known as (the word gives me the chills) a balletomane. Here I prefer Nora Kaye's dancing of the "Fall River Legend" to a Ballet Russe approach to "Swan Lake". It is impossible for me to watch fine ballet without wishing I were onstage taking the leaps—and the bows.

I like to collect coins and stamps and playbills and Toby jugs. Also old Wedgwood (not the neo-classical Canadian kind) and good Sheffield. And an occasional Picasso and Braque and Klee.

Zoos have always fascinated me, although I've precious little time to devote to poking peanuts into the trunks of elephants, and circuses appeal even more. The Museum of Natural History in New York was at one time my second home, and I like the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art almost as well.

I think foreign dishes are infinitely superior to good plain American cooking and would rather consume a casserole of curry than a cut of coconut custard any time. Cooking is another of my hobbies—I enjoy rustling up dinners for my friends, and flatter myself that I'm rather good at it.

In sum, there's only one thing I don't like—talking about myself.

The thing I like best is writing about other people. I think I've gotten more pleasure out of writing my stories than anyone could possibly have gotten reading them. I know that leaves me wide open to a clever comeback, but the pleasure of writing is something I look forward to, and I hope to do better work as time goes on.

its happening is so ridiculously low that we don't even have to think about it."

And that's all there was to it. As meteors go, the pea-sized baby which had us actually was quite large and it was a rare event to be struck by such a thing. Most of the debris that the *Tellus* sweeps up in flight is incredibly small, of the order of dust-sized particles which expend their energy against the ship's hull, and which leave it with a sort of slightly pitted appearance. But they constitute no danger at all.

The chances of a ship's being struck by a meteor are astronomically small—that is, by a meteor capable of damaging the vessel. But of course some day it will probably happen and there'll be shrieks and cries of "danger" down on Earth that'll echo all the way to Mars. Naturally spacemen will ignore the cries. After all it doesn't take much nerve to learn to live with a danger whose chances are measured in terms of hundreds of millions!

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WAYNE DELANO

NOBODY could accuse J.B. of not being modern. In an age when the first Lunar rocket had been sent, J.B. had contributed a million and a half dollars to its construction. He'd backed a half dozen space power plants in Arizona, he was already getting interested in private atomics; if it was new and automatic, J.B. was for it. He was dynamic and ruthless, a gigantic industrial tycoon whose activities fitted beautifully into an age which worshipped the machine.

J.B. directed activities of his sprawling empire from a huge glass and steel pile on the Hudson. In this large building were concentrated the office facilities so necessary to handle the mountains of paperwork entailed by industrial holdings as big as some foreign governments in their operations.

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J.B. would drop into his office occasionally.

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plant. Think we oughtta give 'em the go ahead, Wesley?"

Or: "Just got priority on a Mark-XII filer. They'll put it in tomorrow...no more o' that damned record-loser, eh, boy?"

J.B. was happy and Wesley Johnson became less happy in proportion to the increasing mechanization. Once he ventured to speak to J.B. about the "soulessness"—he called it that with an embarrassed grin—of the whole organization. J.B. didn't understand what he was talking about and Wesley didn't pursue it further.

Matters went on for a few months perfectly normally. Wesley's work had by now degenerated into little more than acting as an office boy. He sat in his office, read reports, submitted them to J.B., occasionally watched the computer technicians do their maintenance—"replace 6JL8's in memory bank K-48 every hundred hours of operation as indicated on recorder F-42"—and he was unhappy.

Carl Olson of maintenance saw it finally happen.

He was on duty, watching the time-meters of the input unit, a panelled, mazed confusion of tubes and wiring, essentially the directive brain of the first-floor computers, when Wesley Johnson came in. It was about ten o'clock at night.

As Carl Olson told it, Johnson came in without speaking. This struck Olson as a bit odd because normally Johnson was quite friendly. Johnson stood in front of the director unit for almost an hour and a half. Several times Olson tried to strike up a conversation, even going so far as to ask if Johnson were sick. The executive said nothing, merely continued to stare at the input director.

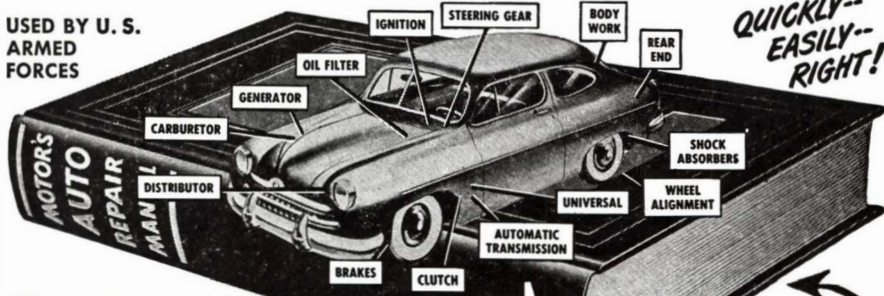
Olson didn't see Wesley actually throw the grenade—it must have been that—but while his back was turned, he heard a tremendous explosion. He whirled—and found himself staring at a completely mangled, hopelessly battered input director. Johnson was still standing, observing the now-wrecked machine, and there was a little smile on his face. It was a miracle that he had not been hit by a flying piece of metal or glass.

Johnson was well taken care of and J.B. pressed no charges. Johnson is in a "rest home" and appears to be doing quite well. Very often he launches into impromptu, intelligent lectures on computing mechanisms, but invariably he finishes his remarks with one special one: "Computers have no souls". When asked to amplify this thesis, Johnson just shakes his head and smiles as if to say, "You won't understand anyway."

Meanwhile J.B. is going in for bigger and better mechanization, and there's a standard gag at the Union League Club to the effect that he'll eventually get a computer to replace himself!

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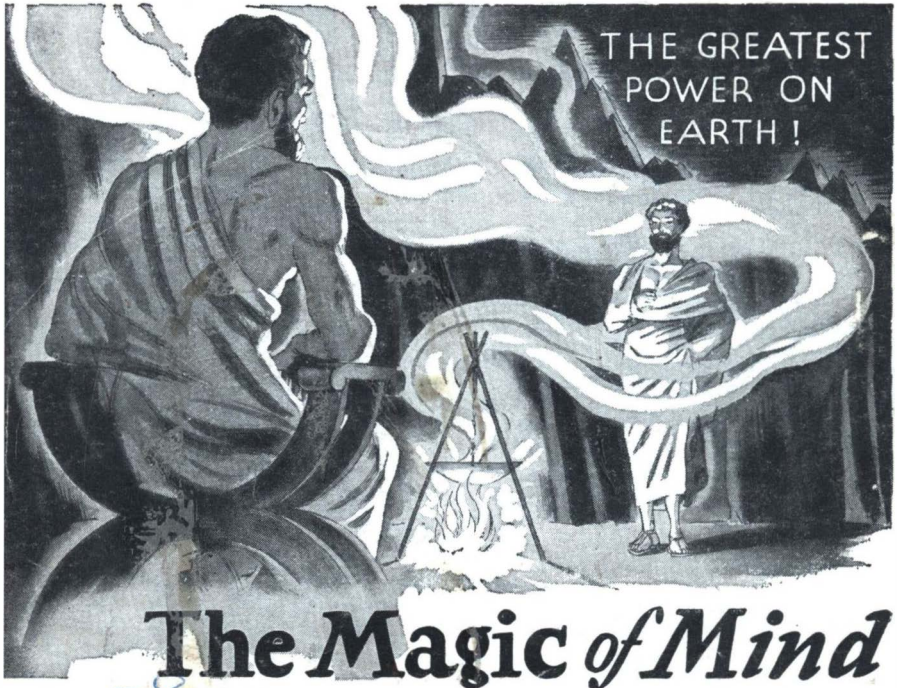
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