
VARGO STATTEN
SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE
HYDRO X 4
A SCION PUBLICATION
1/6
NO. 1
VARGO STATTEN MAGAZINE
SCION LIM

VARGO STATTEN
SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

ALL NEW STORIES • NO REPRINTS

VOL. I. No. 1 • JANUARY, 1954

Contents

FICTION

FEATURES

EDITOR : VARGO STATTEN

Associate Editor—ALISTAIR PATERSON

THE VARGO STATTEN SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE
IS AN ALL BRITISH PRODUCTION

Published by Scion Limited, 6, Avonmore Road, London, W.14, and printed by Stuart Hardy Limited, 161A-166 Strand, London, W.C.2.

Editorially Yours

NEW WORLDS TO CONQUER

WE proudly present this first issue of THE VARGO STATTEN SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE. In this number it seems fitting that we start our editorial message by thanking all those Vargo Statten Science Fiction fans who, during recent years, have been vigorous in their plea for an all-British Science Fiction magazine under Vargo Statten's editorship. At last it has been found possible to carry this ambition forward into the realms of realisation. Now it only remains to hope this first number will amply live up to the expectations of every one of those enthusiasts who look for a periodical that will offer fiction from all the best British authors in this field, as well as a forum in which to voice their interests and opinions.

THIS magazine represents the Editor's ambition to offer you a bonanza of good reading, that will still continue in future numbers to be as varied as it is excellent in quality and appeal. Science Fiction has come to stay—and in a big way. That is how we, on the staff of the magazine, see it. And so we want to cater for the diversity of taste of all readers. That is also why we invite your correspondence and your criticism, your suggestions and your appreciations. No successful editor is ever satisfied. He must constantly strive to make the publication under his control into a living link between the reader, the stories, and the authors that you like the best. In brief, that is the task the Editor and all the staff on this magazine have set out to do. With your help they hope to succeed beyond all expectations.

YOU are making our acquaintance for the first time. But the same applies in reverse, at least insofar as magazine editorship is concerned. The chief Editor is already known to you through the medium of his science fiction novels, and through that same medium he feels that he likewise knows you. This magazine has therefore been designed for YOU, because more than in any other field of fiction the S.F. reader is a connoisseur. Twenty years S.F. novel writing has convinced Vargo Statten that you Futurists, many of you friends of long standing, have been responsible for the moulding of Science Fiction to the high peak it has reached today. You, who stood unabashed by ridicule and the "man-will-never-fly" spirit, have seen your faith justified.

BUT did you never feel that there must exist stories which might be gems of Science Fiction, gems which you had missed? Such a feeling is certainly justified. That is only one more reason why this magazine has been launched. It sets out to bring together the long and the short in Science Fiction, the short plot which makes for only a short—but none the less worthy—story; and the longer epics which still fall short of full novel length.

DID you never feel in the past that most of your praise and your brickbats were lavished on the American magazine writers? Without doubt some really superb material comes from our Transatlantic S.F. authors. But now you have a magazine of your own, created in Britain and with British background, where your candid comments and your suggestions can contribute to moulding this periodical into one of the biggest forces in this particular sphere of literature. Let us hear from you. Don't forget you are an important part of our ambitions to create the best possible journal in the Science Fiction field.

THEN in the "ROCKET MAIL" you will have every encouragement to voice your science opinions, your enquiries and your technical difficulties. Please don't hesitate to use this service. It is only on the interest of our readers that future policies or improvements can be based.

FINALLY, it is intriguing to realise that the prospect of seeing our own earth in all its sparkling panoply of mystery and haunting beauty—seeing it from out across the frontiers of space—is no longer an idle conjecture, but the shape of things to come.

AT an International Conference of Scientists, held in Zurich in 1953, it was the voiced belief of responsible members that The Moon by 1980 was a realistic engineering project. It means "the first Man in the Moon" is alive today. Surely this is the clarion call to those courageous pioneers who will be the first to go exploring into outer space. Equally important is that it also represents a first reward to those tenacious visionaries whose courageous belief in the possibility of inter-planetary travel will soon be translated into a realisable ambition.

THE enthusiastic Science Fiction reader has contributed much towards this effort to translate fantasy into fact, and soon we shall all be thinking in terms of a vastness that is at present only a vision. But meanwhile we must sustain these beliefs and ambitions. That, both in fiction and fact, will be the purpose of the Vargo Statten Science Fiction Magazine.

NOW let us join in sharing an intention for all forthcoming issues: NEW WORLDS TO CONQUER. This is your magazine, and by the enthusiastic support you give to us, so we shall continue to go forward to the FUTURE.

VARGO STATTEN,
London, 1954.

FOR the sake of convenience, Clayton Brook called himself a scientific engineer, which designation covered a multitude of activities, all of them more or less related to electronics, physics, and suchlike. The trouble with Clayton Brook was that he disliked concentration, otherwise he could no doubt have become one of the most brilliant scientists of all time. . . . As it was he just kicked around, never staying very long in one occupation before he was eager to roam again.

It was just after the Atomic War that he was kicking around with no fixed idea of how to plan his future when he accidentally fell in again with Nick Farrish. During war service in Electronics the two had encountered each other quite a deal, usually in the maintenance centres, and it had been at such times as these that Nick had spoken of some "terrific idea" which he had been intending to develop when demobbed.

Well, demobbing had come—and the chance meeting inevitably brought up the subject of the "terrific idea" once again. Nick promptly invited Clayton Brook down to his home, a quite unpretentious and pretty isolated place bordering the Sussex Downs. And it was here that the "terrific idea" began to take shape—in words to commence with.

"I hardly need to tell you, Clay, that I'm a scientist," Nick Farrish remarked, grinning, as he prowled thoughtfully up and down the small laboratory he had in the basement of the house. "You know all about that from working beside me during the war."

"Certainly you always seemed to know the answers when it came to electronics," Clay agreed.

Nick nodded absently, the eulogy lost upon him. He was a tall, still young man, with complete disregard for his appearance and having the sharp yet curiously faraway look in his grey eyes which bespoke the scientist and the dreamer.

"I've been thinking—for years as a matter of fact—that there is one thing science has not yet conquered. I don't mean space travel, perpetual motion, or any of those things. I mean the Absolute Zero."

Clay looked surprised. "They've got as low as minus two seventy two Centigrade anyhow! Absolute zero is only one degree less at minus two seventy three."

"A degree," Nick replied slowly, "which makes all the difference in the world, or even the universe. It is assumed that as long as molecules move there is heat-conversion: something is *moving*. But when movement entirely ceases the absolute zero of temperature has been reached and molecular activity ceases."

"Which," Clay remarked, "is merely another way of outlining how the universe will eventually look when thermodynamics have done their stuff and the total energy of the universe is uniformly distributed at the same temperature."

"Well, yes, but that isn't quite what I mean. What I want to find out—in fact what every scientist wants to find out — is what really happens when matter or any of its substratic forms, like gas, air, and so forth, reach absolute zero. The total cessation of movement should, as I see it, mean no light, no heat, no time, no *anything*, except the displacement of a certain area of space in which the 'absoluted' substance is standing. In a word," he finished, looking at Clay pensively, "matter at total rest would be well worth any scientist's time to study."

"But how are you going to do it?" Clay demanded. "All the efforts of scientists have failed to produce the absolute. Do you think you can do better?"

Nick smiled. "Think I can? I *have*! I did it before I entered Electronics during the war, and after that I was so fully occupied in the Services I could go no further. I've begun to pick up the threads again, though, and all I have to do now is build the apparatus. I was just wondering about advertising for an assistant when we ran into each other. Call it coincidence, luck, or anything else you like, but there is no man I'd sooner have to help me than you. Besides, you're an engineer and a scientist and that's one hell of an advantage."

Clay hesitated. He was trying to overcome his surprise at the way in which Nick had stated he had accomplished a scientific miracle.

"I suppose," Clay said presently, "it will be an expensive experiment?"

"Fairly; but I know the best places to buy and I'm not exactly without money. My old man saw to that. . . . Look," Clay went on, "suppose you let *me* worry over the finance? Here is my proposition: if we can reach Absolute Zero between us we can both get highly paid technical posts in the physical laboratories for our trouble, and that's worth any scientist's effort. You've no particular employment at the moment, so . . ."

"All right," Clay interrupted, grinning. "I gather the drift. We do our best to achieve a scientific miracle and then become super backroom boys for our trouble. All right with me. But put me out of my misery and tell me how you're going to *create* absolute zero."

Nick's answer to this was to produce a mass of plans and blueprints. Being an engineer, Clay understood what the blueprints were about, but when it came to the basic details he found himself floundering—and admitted the fact.

"First," Nick said, pointing his well chewed pipe stem to the print, "we have this A-Z chamber, as I'll call it. It will be made of a copper-tungsten alloy. Through the axial-traps —directly facing each other on each side of the sphere—all the air will be withdrawn as in the usual process of creating a vacuum. That will still leave some molecules in motion, however, and therefore it won't be absolute zero. The last part we'll accomplish electro-magnetically. Around the globe we have to set up electromagnetic stresses powerful enough to prevent the remaining molecules inside the globe from moving."

"In other words," Clay said, thinking, "you propose to use electrical energy to *stop* electrical energy? That will defeat its own purpose, Nick. The very fact of there being energy entering the vacuum will preclude absolute zero."

Nick was ready immediately with his answer. "No energy will actually enter the vacuum. I said 'stresses.' Electromagnetic fields of equal space-strain will operate on the outside of the A-Z chamber, exactly embracing the two hemispheres. Pulling in equal strength they will halt the action of the molecules inside and suspend all movement, just as if they were at the dead centre of gravity. When that happens the Absolute will have been achieved. This same dual-field of strain will prevent the Chamber itself from falling inwards through lack of resistance inside, and air pressure outside. The point is: motion, radiation, matter or whatever else you like to name, will cease within the Chamber."

This, then, was how Nick Farrish put it—but the more Clay came to ponder upon it, and helped build the equipment, the more he realised the simplicity of the plan. All that Farrish was really doing was duplicating Nature's own law of gravitation—creating a warp in space, with the one difference that he was intending to use two warps of equal intensity, thereby "freezing" the movement of whatever molecules lay between.

IT took two months to build the apparatus. The A-Z Chamber was eight feet in diameter, rather like a deep-sea bathysphere in appearance, cast in one complete piece with the exception of the small three-foot-wide circles at opposite "axial" ends through which the first ordinary "vacuumising" was to be done. It was supported on a massive metal cradle rising two feet from the floor, and, planned with mathematical precision, the electromagnetic apparatus, composed of two massive bar magnets exactly opposite each other, were fixed into the floor at points facing each other, with the

A-Z Chamber between them. The work of the switchboard was trifling once this major factor of the Chamber itself had been completed.

It was when the Chamber was finished that ideas occurred to Clay, and he promptly put them to Nick.

"This thing is going to be sealed up, Nick. How shall we know what's going on inside when the thing's opaque?"

"We shan't need to. Not during the process, anyway. First time out I shall simply try and reduce the empty vacuum itself to absolute zero, to see if it can be done. The meters on the switchboard will show whether or not we've been successful. If everything is okay we'll use a bar of iron or something next time, iron being the basic matter of the universe. Then we'll see what it looks like after having touched absolute zero and been restored again."

"If there's anything to look at," Clay said, at which Nick gave a questioning glance.

"I mean," Clay added, "that when the motion of matter ceases there cannot be anything visible. All we see anyway is simply the extension of molecular speeds. When that speed slows to nothing all trace must disappear, be it vegetable, animal, or mineral."

"I agree, but I said 'and restored again.' At absolute zero nothing can be visible because even light waves will have ceased their transmission—but restoration of the substance concerned should show us what changes the stuff has undergone in the process of reaching the absolute."

Clay nodded and thought it out. Finally he smothered a yawn and Nick glanced at his watch.

"Everything's done," he said, "and it's long past midnight. We'd better get some sleep. First thing tomorrow we'll try it out." He smiled wistfully as he surveyed the equipment. "I'd dearly love to try it out now, but I suppose it doesn't do to race the human machine too much. How I'm going to sleep with all this on my mind God alone knows."

Clay bade him goodnight and went up to the room he had been using whilst staying in the house. For a little while he sat thinking upon the marvel of the thing they were going to attempt, then with a sigh he felt for his cigarette case to have a last smoke before turning in.

The case was missing. Frowning, Clay tried to think where he might have left it. Then it occurred to him that he must have dropped it inside the A-Z Chamber that evening when he had been making the finishing touches. He was in two minds whether to go after it or not; then he decided he had better do so in case it got overlooked when the experiment was made the following morning. Since it had a sentimental value Clay had no wish to see it reduced to absolute zero!

In three minutes Clay was back in the laboratory again. Evidently Nick had gone to bed for the lights were out. Ignoring them, Clay switched on the extension-cable which lighted the lamp inside the A-Z Chamber. Then he squirmed his way through the three-foot opening into the interior.

He began looking for his case and failed to see it, then in turning suddenly he caught his head on the swinging lamp and it extinguished itself with a broken filament.

"Blast!" Clay muttered.

It was pitchy dark inside the Chamber and he could only just see the round opening where he had climbed in. He felt around on the floor for his cigarette case and after a while detected its hard outline. It must have fallen edgewise against the curving wall and had escaped detection by reason of the walls being similarly polished.

At that moment, to Clay's surprise, the dim circular opening lighted suddenly behind him as the laboratory globes came up. Evidently Nick too had come back for something. Clay began to rise from his knees—and then gasped in amazement as the flex and extinguished lamp were suddenly withdrawn and the cap over the entrance-lock slammed shut.

Clay just could not credit it for a moment. He was in total, crushing darkness. What the devil was Nick playing at, anyway?

"Hey!" Clay yelled, pounding on the massively thick wall. "Hey Nick! Let me out of here!"

Even as he pounded Clay realised how useless it was. Nick could not hear him through the thick walls any more than Clay could hear movement in the laboratory. Then a frightening thought descended upon Clay. Had Nick come back into the laboratory for the express purpose of exhausting the A-Z Chamber to zero?

It would be just about like him! Possibly his restless temperament would not allow him to sleep and he wanted to see what could be done with his idea instead of waiting for the morning. Inwardly Clay could not blame him. Nick had said he would dearly love to try out the invention there and then—and he could not know Clay was imprisoned in the Chamber because of the smashed light filament. He would accept the darkness of the Chamber as sufficient indication that it was quite empty. . . .

Good God! Clay began to sweat profusely as he realised the horrible possibilities. He blundered around like a rat in a cage, banging against the curved, implacable walls, yelling at

the top of his voice, bewildered by the smothering, utter darkness. Then, though he could not hear anything, he did notice that the air was thinning! He could hardly draw breath.

Then Nick *was* reducing the Chamber to a vacuum! And after that . . . ?

Clay's head swam as his lungs struggled desperately to inhale. Air was disappearing rapidly and at length he fell to the polished floor, filled with the thundering conviction that he was about to die. In those few seconds he thought over everything he had ever done. His life reeled out before him like thread on an unspinning bobbin. Yet somehow he could not discover any specific incident which could account for an inscrutable destiny having placed him in a position like this.

He was no longer thinking coherently: that was it. For a while he even believed he must have been unconscious, but upon recovery from this condition his mind remained acute even though he was quite unable to move any part of his body.

He was not conscious of breathing, or of his heart beating. All he *did* realise was the devouring darkness and a slow, creeping iciness affecting him. It increased by gradual degrees —a curious, frightening sensation of numbness. This, Clay was inclined to think, was the effect of the twin electromagnetic strains operating on the molecules of his body. Far back in his mind he realised that Nick had evidently decided to achieve Absolute Zero without waiting for the morning and—all unawares—he had made his best friend the subject!

Though Clay was not aware of his heart beating or of his lungs operating he *did* feel the cold—a cold such as he had never experienced before—which followed the numbness. It had the searing, razor-edged keenness of interstellar space itself, biting beyond endurance . . . until it gradually began to give way before a conviction of drowsy pleasure. Clay felt relaxed and satiated, as though he had partaken of a heavy meal and was at peace with the world. . . . At this same moment the darkness began to lift a trifle and he thrilled to the discovery that his eyes were still functioning anyway.

He expected to see the round hole in the A-Z Chamber and Nick's head and shoulders vignetted by it. But there was nothing like that. Instead, though Clay could not move, he could discern landscape. It grew clearer with the moments, merging out of indeterminate mist. He found with dawning amazement that he was looking at the South Downs surrounding the house and laboratory.

But they were unsteady and quivering! They shifted and moved as corn sways when the wind stirs it. From the house to the cliffs it was only half a mile's distance, and as he stared at these cliffs, beholding them immersed in the inexplicable metamorphosis of Change, Clay saw them curving and sagging inwards as if made of sand against which a flood tide was surging irresistibly.

It was only a vision, Clay told himself, but it suggested to him a most incredible thing. He was somehow moving in Time and at a terrific speed. What he had witnessed for a few brief moments—or had they been centuries?—had been sea erosion! He had seen the speeded-up process of that ponderously slow process measured normally by decades.

Then the cliffs and the sea were gone, dissolving into some new vision at which Clay stared intently. He was looking at a metallic spire, straight and shining as a needle piercing into a cobalt-blue sky. About it at a lower level other buildings melted slowly into view, inexpressibly graceful in outline. Clay saw vast colonnades of metal, plazas and terraces, trees and flowers of magnificant hue. The picture was suddenly acid-sharp.

Clay was lying on his back. Beneath him was grass so velvety in texture it felt like moss. His first impulse was to move, but he could not. He was motionless—and astounded. He could not move his eyes, and it seemed to him that he did not blink either, yet he felt no sensation of discomfort through dust settling on his unprotected eyeballs.

Though the metallic spire was the main object at which he looked—the other details shading off as they spread beyond the line of vision—he was also aware of something curious in the cloudless blue sky. It was a golden band, a titanic monocoloured rainbow arch, apparently motionless, starting from the horizon to the rear and at which Clay could not look, and ending at the horizon beyond the tall spire.

Where? Why? How? These were the questions clamouring for an answer.

CLAY did not know how long a time elapsed before he became aware of living beings. At first he was apparently an object of curiosity. Men and women, both sexes remarkably handsome and clearly highly intelligent, came and studied him and talked to each other in a language he could not understand.

These people were dressed in the lightest of clothes which emphasised the masculine ruggedness of the men and the symphonic curves of the women. So Clay just lay rigid and stared dummylike at whatever came in line with his vision—until finally he was picked up, placed upon some kind of conveyance, and borne into the heart of the tall-spired city.

Since Clay could only look upward and

slightly forwards his view was limited to the building tops, the sky, and finally the high, glazed ceiling of an immense room. Here were scientists—or at least they appeared to be— for Clay caught a glimpse of instruments and it occurred to him that he must be in some sort of hospital or operating theatre.

There was a low murmur of musical voices, and with all that was in him Clay tried to speak — but his tongue would not move a fraction of an inch. Finally one of the men came forward and looked him straight in the eyes. He had blue eyes, Clay noticed—intensely blue indeed and extremely steady. And the longer they gazed the more Clay realised that these eyes were the only things in the whole crazy setup which made any sense. They were lulling—compelling. . . .

Suddenly the man with the eyes seemed to speak. It took Clay only a fraction of a second to realise that his mind had made contact with the Other.

"My friend, I have no idea who you are or from where you have come, but just try and understand my communication. This is hypnosis, the only method by which I can penetrate the barrier. Do you understand hypnosis?"

"A little." Clay's response was only mental, but evidently it was readily grasped.

"That is excellent. I am a surgeon and mental specialist. . . . Who are you? What is the matter with you? Your case resembles extreme catalepsy or advanced suspended animation, yet it seems to be something more profound than even those."

Thus given the opportunity, Clay concentrated as hard as he could on the entire sequence of his experiences. Without interruption, Clay's universe limited to the steady stare of the blue eyes, the hypnotist listened. When Clay had come nearly to the end of "thinking" his narrative his emotions got the better of him.

"I believe I am dead — that this world is beyond death, or something like it. I am motionless. I do not seem to breathe. My heart does not seem to beat. I just don't understand!"

The scientist gave a slow, grave smile. "Your problem, my friend, is not so complex to me, a man of science—and a science far ahead of yours, apparently—as it is to you. . . . What you have to realise is that your body is still in the same condition which the attainment of Absolute Zero imposed upon it. But your mind — as distinct from *brain* — being non-material it has not conformed to the laws of Absolute Zero and therefore is alert. What you see around you is actually your own world, but a different aspect of it."

"My own world! I still do not understand!"

"Then I will put it this way: Your scientific belief is that complete cessation of molecular activity produces the nearest approach to matter-death. Right?"

"I have always believed that to be the case," Clay admitted. "In fact everybody does."

"That belief is incorrect. You base your belief on what *you* believe is Absolute Zero. For obvious reasons you can only determine the position of Zero by considering your own unit of time-measurement, the measurement to which you are accustomed. Let me cite the simple instance, familiar to you, of certain insects in your own plane to whom a lifetime is but one or two of your days . . .

"Their time-unit is totally different from yours: their conception of Zero would be very different from yours if they were capable of thinking of it. In this case, therefore, you have reached the Absolute Zero of *your* measurement, only to find that there is life and movement just the same but on a different time-ratio. . . . Compared to you, we move with inconceivable slowness. Your plane, relative to ours, moves with prodigious swiftness. From what you have told me, you saw—as one facet of your transition—coastal erosion, the work of ages, occurring in a matter of seconds. That is the proof of my statement. It is possible that your body is alive, my friend, but that it is functioning so slowly in this plane that a mere blink of the eyelid would take several of our years to accomplish! So you feel, and appear, motionless because your normally fast reactions are slowed down immeasurably by the vibratory conditions existing here."

For a long interval Clay meditated over the things he had been told; then he continued,

"We acknowledge in my plane that matter vibrates at different speeds. And we acknowledge, too, that some insects pass through a lifetime in one of our days. But none of us ever conceived the possibility of a living plane at our measure of Absolute Zero."

"Yet here it is," the scientist said. "For further proof I would mention a golden band in our sky. . . ."

"I saw that," Clay interrupted. "What is it? A disintegrated moon or something?"

"Certainly not. Your plane has no disintegrated moon, has it? Why should ours? This is still Earth, remember. No, the golden arc you have seen is the sun. You see it, I gather, as a globe moving sedately across the heavens. To us it moves with such terrific speed that it is always a band of light, persistence of vision giving it an arcing effect from horizon to horizon. The arc is perpetual, varying only in height according to the seasons. Otherwise we have eternal day."

Very gradually Clay was commencing to realise how right this scientist was, how incontestible his evidence. And it also gave Clay a sidelight upon the almost incredible diversity of Nature in that she provides life even at what we consider to be the limit of material movement.

"I suppose," Clay resumed presently, still using only his mind for communication, "that I am actually still in the same *space* as before, except for having been removed to this laboratory, only my plane cannot be seen because of its terrific speed, anymore than one can see the individual spokes of a fast turning wheel? Just as we cannot see your plane because of its extreme slowness?"

"Exactly so. You cannot see both heat and light, can you?—yet they both travel at the same speed. The difference is in the wavelength. Between this plane and yours the difference is in vibration. Our slowness and your speed makes both our planes able to exist one within the other without interference. Only when one crosses the borderline, which is evidently Absolute Zero on your scale, is it possible to move from one plane to the other."

"Every blink of the eyelids takes me years; every breath takes centuries," Clay "said," reverting to the personal enigma. "What am I to do, then? I want to be one of you, to live and move and see this new-found world. Don't you realise the immensity of the thing I have done? Surely there ought to be some reward for that?"

Clay saw hesitation come into the mesmeric eyes. "Naturally we appreciate what you have done, and the enormous risk you took, but I doubt if there is anything we can do for you. Your type of matter is totally different in molecular construction from ours. Ours at this vibratory plane is normal; yours is vastly retarded."

"But I can't stay like this! You are a scientist and you say your knowledge is far ahead of mine. There ought to be some way of overcoming the difficulty."

"Yes . . . there ought." The scientist brooded for a time; then, "I shall give the problem every consideration. I will consult with my colleagues. I think it only fair to tell you, though, that this world of ours is dying. Before very long we shall seek another planet, or else go underground. The sun is expiring. Do not forget that to us a split second is a century to you. In the aggregate that means that, from our point of view, the sun is losing mass and dying at a tremendous pace."

"Why do you tell me this?" Clay asked.

"I tell you because if we can revive you there would not be much point in it. You would find little here for which to stay. Merely a matter of survival."

"Even that would be preferable to this ghastly fixation."

Then Clay became silent because he was becoming conscious of a disquieting fact. Time cannot be reversed: that is fundamental law. Since he had come—albeit unintentionally—to this plane, his *own* plane must now be hundreds of centuries behind him! If he could ever get back there with this particular material body he would find all that he had known and cherished lost in the mists of dim antiquity. . . . Something else also occurred to him. He had probably vanished completely from the A-Z Chamber. Or had he? Which plane was he vibrating to? This one or his own?

"This one," the scientist answered, as Clay questioned him. "The fact that you are visible to us proves it. In your own plane you will be invisible and be presumed to have disappeared. Not that it matters now, I'm afraid, for countless centuries have gone since you vanished from the A-Z Chamber. You vanished from it the moment you came in 'sympathy' with this plane. But you are not *of* this plane, therefore your molecular makeup cannot change, but continues to perform the actions with the speed normal to it — that is years to blink an eyelid, and so on. You are like a vehicle trying to move with the brakes on."

"Something," Clay insisted, "has got to be done—and I feel reasonably convinced that you can do it. It would obviously do me no good to return to my own plane, so use every scrap of knowledge you have got to make me a worthwhile member of this one."

The scientist nodded slowly. "Believe me, my friend, we will do all we can."

TO CLAY it seemed fantastic never to need sleep or food—for so incredibly low was his energy expenditure he did not need anything to replenish it. It was even more fantastic to never be aware of breathing air, to live in a ratio utterly alien to the surroundings. Nor did the fact that he was removed to a private room and given several robots to await on any need he might have, make the position any easier. All he really wanted was movement and life. It was infuriating to have made such a fortuitous journey beyond the Zero limit to find himself physically incapable of taking advantage of it. He was convinced that this mighty civilisation held a great deal of interest: he was also convinced that he could offer a considerable amount of information concerning his own plane.

Yet here he was — motionless, dead yet alive, robots within range of his thoughts and

responding to them if so needed. But he *had* no need. Nothing was wanted—except liberty.

At intervals the master-scientist called and exchanged grave communications in the usual semi-hypnotic way. So far, it seemed, he and his colleagues had not made much progress towards finding a way of liberating Clay—but they were still hopeful.

"There could not be a more bitter irony," Clay declared. "To have done something no human being ever did before and be unable to move! Do you suppose that is some kind of punishment for my having violated a law of Nature?"

There was faint amusement in the scientist's thoughts. "That could hardly be, my friend, because you made the journey by accident. You did not plan this thing: it was thrust upon you. I can appreciate your chagrin, but do not give up hope. We are working now on a possible solution to the riddle."

"When will you know the answer?"

"I cannot say exactly. Very soon. Meanwhile I observe that monotony is wearying you. I will do what I can to alleviate that for you."

The master-scientist was as good as his word. He sent more robots to Clay which, by virtue of their particular capacities, showed him three-dimensional pictures in colour motion. From them Clay gained a cross-sectional viewpoint of a thriving, industrious, peace-loving civilisation, existing beyond the normal conception of Absolute Zero—a world wherein science was used purely for mutual benefit, but where everything was so utterly foreign that Clay's whole being cried out for a return to his own plane, no matter how changed it might have become in the interval.

It was, of course, impossible for him to even begin to assess the basic laws of these people, or their science. Their measurements all began where "normal" ones end. Their method of reckoning Time was quite incomprehensible to Clay. Their existence was threatened by the sun's hurtling rush into extinction — whereas Clay was accustomed to the sun's decline being measured only in the ponderous march of centuries, cycles and aeons.

So here, then, was the amazing paradox of a civilisation superb in knowledge, yet which could not be understood. Clay was quite satisfied that the robot machines showed him everything about the "Beyond Zero" race—their social order, their science, the ever present shadow of extinction—and yet at the end of it he still did not understand a thing about them, nor could he unless he became one of them. He realised that one cannot shift from one plane to another and form comparison. It was to him as though every law of mathematics had been disavowed.

That everything is relative Clay had never appreciated more clearly. His body, refusing to function to this plane's vibration, was relative to only one—the one from which he had come and into which he had been born. . . .

Then came a time when the master-scientist returned, seating himself so that he was directly in Clay's line of vision. As usual his hypnotic power transmitted a message.

"My colleagues and I have investigated your unique problem very closely, my friend, and we are willing to make an experiment to bring you in tune with our rate of vibration. I say *we* are willing. Whether that willingness will be shared by you only you can say."

"Anything is better than this," Clay responded. "I want to live, and move, and be one of you—form the bridge between one plane and another. If *I* can be restored—or altered to conform with the conditions — others may come after me if I can communicate with them."

"True," the scientist admitted; "but I should not place too much store on that possibility. You have to remember the speeding centuries in your own plane. . . . However, that is not an immediate concern. If you are prepared for our experiment?"

"Entirely."

The scientist nodded and got to his feet. He turned to the nearby attendant robots—which so far had not been used — and gave them mental instructions. In response they glided forward, raised Clay's rigid, motionless body in their delicate pincer-like hands, and thereafter transported him with extreme care from the private room and down the long corridor outside, the master-scientist in the lead.

The journey ended in a surgical laboratory and Clay found himself laid upon a broad table. As usual he lay motionless and after a moment the master-scientist's face appeared to his vision. In a matter of seconds hypnotic communication was once more established.

"I must warn you, my friend, that this is a gamble with your life. If you die the blame will attach entirely to us. I can only say, in advance, that we have made every possible computation and are reasonably sure of success."

"Go right ahead," Clay responded. "If I die I'll at least find liberation from this bodily prison. Consider how *I* feel. If it takes me centuries to even blink an eyelid, how long is my natural span of life going to extend? Almost to eternity! I prefer death if I am to have it."

The scientist smiled gravely. "We will do our best," he promised, and then his face vanished from Clay's viewpoint.

There was an interval and a variety of

strange sounds, some of which Clay interpreted as electrical; then powerful shadowless globes came into being, blasting everything into a quivering halo of brilliance.

No anaesthetics were used and Clay might as well have been dead for all the sensation he felt as instruments went to work upon him. As far as he could judge most of them were electrical. This was not surgery in the accepted sense, but an experiment to change the range of his electron metabolism, thereby fitting him into the conditions in which he found himself.

It seemed an interminable time passed, during which he felt no particular change; then the probing and instrument work ceased and the face of the master-scientist reappeared. It was drawn and troubled.

"I am afraid," he said quietly, "that we have to admit failure. There is nothing wrong with our instruments, nor anything wrong with our procedure. The factor that defeats us is *Time*. Time is an abstract thing, yet fundamental in all our calculations. We cannot reason out the necessary variations for dealing with a body like yours, built to operate in a time-ratio totally different from ours."

Clay did not concentrate upon an answer. Indeed he could not: he was too utterly depressed by the news.

"All we can do," the scientist added, "is fit you out with the necessary compensators and thereby enable you to *seem* to live at our ratio."

"How do you mean?" Clay asked, after an interval.

"I mean that one instrument can be fitted which will pick up your thoughts and translate them into vocal sounds — whereby you will appear to speak. Another instrument on universal mountings can be fitted to your skull and be attached electronically to your brain by which you will be able to see in any direction you choose without the necessity of turning your head. . . . In short, we can make of you a mechanical man, understanding everything of this plane by means of compensating equipment whilst you yourself will never move. That I fear, is the utmost we can do for you. It might make your position a little more tolerable."

Since, apparently, it was the only conceivable way out of the difficulty Clay did not raise any objections. He allowed the scientists to go to work on him again and, as before, he had no sensation whatever as they fitted the various electronic devices and drove vibration-carrying wires deep into his skull—until at last the modifications were complete.

"Now," came the master scientist's concentrations, "you have only to *think*, my friend, and these devices will take care of everything. If you *think* you would like to see what is transpiring around you, observe what happens."

Though he barely understood, Clay was quite willing to obey. Accordingly he thought of how much he would like to see this laboratory, of which he had so far seen only the ceiling—and almost instantly there came before his vision a level view of the instruments, the scientists, the wall beyond them. The whole set-up on a normal horizontal plane.

"That's better!" Clay concentrated, and to his surprise he heard his voice actually say the words.

"Thoughts transformed into vibratory air waves," the master-scientist explained. "Thereby producing what sounds to be a voice. Naturally, your thoughts take shape in your own language—in which I am also speaking. In case you wonder how I have picked it up so quickly, please remember that I have searched your mentality pretty considerably since you came here and your language is one of the least difficult factors to assimilate."

"Can you give me a simulation of walking?" Clay asked. "I would welcome anything except this constant paralysis."

"*Think* what you would like to do," came the grave response.

Clay did as he was bidden and to his surprise he found it possible to rise into a sitting position, descend from the table, and then start walking clumsily. He looked down at himself — or imagined he did—and then realised it was the complex device which acted as his eyes which was operating. He beheld queer stilt-like attachments on his legs by which means he was able to walk about, albeit stumblingly.

"I realise you are but a travesty of a man," the scientist said, "but it may make life easier for you. Nothing can go wrong and everything you do is at the dictate of your mind."

Clay walked around for a while, accustoming himself, the scientists watching him—then he came back to questioning.

"If everything I do is so at the dictate of my mind, why should I be limited to this particular plane?"

"A strange question," the master-scientist observed, frowning.

"I mean this body you have patched up—which in all normal circumstances might be regarded as dead—is now made to walk, talk, and see purely by the dictate of my mind. Can I not make it return to my own plane by mind force alone?"

The scientists looked at one another, then at the instrument-supported man they had "resurrected."

"You admit, surely, that there is no barrier to mind?" Clay demanded. "It can hurdle one

plane as easily as another, so why cannot it transfer me back home?"

"That, my friend, would be the absolute mastery of mind over matter, and we do not believe you have that much power or control. Even *we* haven't, and we are ahead of you."

"I can try," Clay said, and thereupon threw himself into an immense effort of concentration, the effect of which was at once both unnerving and extraordinary.

Through the auditory system which had been fitted to his brain he seemed to hear voices—one vast noisy cacophony which reminded him of a dozen radio sets all talking at once. At the same instant his eyes beheld not only the laboratory in which he was standing but also some kind of fabulous city beyond it—superimposed. It was gigantic in architecture, its mighty streets bridged by metal viaducts across which at varying levels moved vehicles and people. It was a complex, shattering pattern which made Clay wince helplessly.

"If you find your sensations unendurable," came the voice of the master-scientist, "press the button on your breastplate and return everything to neutral."

Clay could not move his hand, but he willed himself to move the neutralising button, and immediately a gentle flexible tentacle attached to the instrument about his waist moved the switch concerned. The visions and the screaming din of a myriad voices and unwanted sounds faded out. There was a great, restful calm which spread over Clay's consciousness like a healing balm.

"That's better," he found himself saying, and the master-scientist came across to him.

"Do you realise what happened, my friend?"

"No. It was like hell itself whilst it lasted."

"What you saw was your own plane, dovetailed into this one. Your natural body was immediately in sympathy with it, whilst the instruments attached to you gave you cognizance of *this* plane. The result was that your personality—or at least your mind—was divided over the two states. The result was most unpleasant. You are probably thinking of your own plane and Time as being infinitely far away, like something on another world, but that is not so. It is *here*, next door to us, hidden only by its vibratory speed. For a moment you glimpsed and heard it whilst still actually here . . ."

"Then why can I not make that short step which would take me from here to there? What is in the way?"

"The mathematical problem of vibration," the scientist replied. "Imagine it this way. Between you and a valuable jewel there is an electric fan moving at top revolution. Can you *see* that fan? No. You will feel the wind from it, yes—but for the purpose of our analogy let us assume you cannot. Now, the fan blades are revolving so swiftly there appears to be only a fine mist between you and that jewel. And if you attempted to seize that jewel through the mist, what then? Your material hand would be slashed to ribbons. . . . So it is here. There is a veil between—the veil of vibration."

"But I came *here*," Clay insisted. "Why can't the process be reversed to send me back?"

"Because we do not understand the mathematics which reduced you to the below zero condition. We only understand our *own* mathematics, and they are not applicable to your type of life."

Clay reflected. "There must *be* a way back. I'm a scientific engineer, so maybe I'll work something out. . . ."

SO Clay returned to the room which had been provided for him. It was a relief to be able to pilot his body about by means of mental impulses, even though the exact processes involved were completely beyond him. Most intriguing of all to him, however, was the recollection of that super-imposed view he had had of his own plane and this other one beyond zero. It had shown him one thing: despite the tremendous lapse of Time which had ensued in his own plane, life still existed there — and indeed it was probably at the absolute zenith of its development. If he could only return now he would be in a world where absolute perfection probably reigned, where the scientific dreams of his own day had become facts. Space travel, maybe; perpetual motion; destruction of crime and disease—all those things had perhaps come to pass.

He had *got* to return. There was no longer any doubt about it. It was a yearning which passed all control. He had seen all there was to see in this strange beyond-zero land and had gathered enough to realise it was a civilisation which he would never be completely able to understand. . . . So back he must go.

At first with extreme caution he again tried the experiment of viewing his own plane, and once again there burst upon him the ear-shattering clamour of a million sounds. This time he switched out the auditory machines responsible for hearing and dead silence blanked him. Thus he was better able to concentrate on the visual aspect.

Already it had changed from the previous scene. The giant city he had formerly viewed had given place to one of much smaller dimensions, though it was plainly still one of superb architecture. Lying on his bed he sur-

veyed it, apparently hanging beyond the wall of his room; then gradually his attention shifted to a mighty statue of glittering metal surmounting the tallest building in the city. The more he studied it the more surprised he became. Either it was a colossal coincidence or else that statue was identical in face to Nick Farrish!

But how could that be? Nick Farrish must have been dead for hundreds of years, so it could only be a remarkable resemblance and nothing else. And yet . . .

The mystery obsessed Clay completely, and because he had no logical answer for it he finally sent one of the attendant robots to summon the master-scientist. He came immediately, as courteous and willing to help as ever. Briefly Clay explained the problem, his view of his own plane now neutralised by the special cut-out switch.

"Obviously," he finished, "it isn't possible. Probably my imagination playing tricks."

"Not necessarily," the scientist answered, thinking. "The matter puzzles you only because your grasp of science is not so profound as ours—or mine. For instance, what do you know of death and that which follows it?"

"There are many theories in my plane about that. Some say we go on living in another form; some say it is utter oblivion. For myself I've no fixed idea."

"Well *we* have, my friend, and I pass it on to you as an absolute fact because we have scientifically proved it. Here is your answer—A living body is the material outline of a mental concept. In other words, you and everybody else has a mental conception of what the body—*your* own particular body—is like. When death comes the mentality does not die: it cannot because it is not material, and only material things die. It is a law of Nature that a material body becomes old and wears out. When that happens the mind, compelled to express itself through some physical vestment or other, immediately forms a new body. And naturally that new body must look identical to the one before it because the mental conception of it has not changed. You understand so far?"

"I think so," Clay acknowledged. "So we are born again with a body identical to the previous one."

"Usually after three days. It takes that long—by your reckoning of time—for the change to be completed. Nor is it always necessary for the new body to appear in the same place as that in which the old one died. Very rarely, in fact, because in the interval time and space have moved. . . . So, then, to resolve your problem: This statue probably *is* of your friend, several lifetimes removed from the time when you knew him. Even in *your* day he was obviously a brilliant scientist, and since mental accomplishments do not die when the body dies it stands to reason that by now he must be a superb genius of his art. Why not even the leading scienist of the world, which would account for him being acclaimed by a statue?"

"Then," Clay said slowly, "if I could somehow reach that period I can see I could meet him again? Or at least his 'latest concept' of himself, if I can call it such?"

"No doubt of it."

Clay was silent for a moment, then "Don't think me rude, sir, but I wish to be left alone, to concentrate. If, as you say, the mind can force the body to do anything I am going to try and discover for myself if Nick really *is* to be found. . . ."

The scientist smiled gravely, got to his feet, and left the room. Clay lay silent for a while, then switching out the auditory control once more he resumed his view of the city . . . and several more years had already slipped by. He could tell that by the smears of age which had appeared on the buildings, and the statue too, formerly so glittering, now revealed distinct signs of tarnish.

Presently Clay began to test the power of his mentality. He ordered his body forward, and insofar as the instruments controlling him could manage it he was impelled apparently much nearer to the city—but he could not *enter* it. Between him and it there still loomed that unbreakable barrier of vibration between planes. None the less, projected like an astral presence, he was close enough to the men and women of this future time in his own plane to be able to study them and watch their comings and goings.

But this was not what he wanted. He wanted to see if the original of the statue really was a futuristic Nick Farrish—and this was a task which kept him occupied almost continuously since he never needed either sleep or food. . . . Eventually his wandering on the edge of his own future-time plane brought its reward. He came to the verge of a great public demonstration, viewing it as though through a sheet of glass, unable to take part in it, yet watching every detail. . . . And, addressing the multitude in an amphitheatre as colossal as anything ever produced by ancient Rome, was a uniformed being of obviously high standing, and he *was* Nick Farrish.

Clay watched him intently, then he took the risk of switching on the auditory mechanism. Normally he received the battering din of the city and a myriad voices, but this time—as he had hoped—the city was muted and the traffic stilled so that the voice of this one being, obviously the leader, could be heard without inter-

ruption over a world-wide radio network.

"... and the conquest is therefore complete." Clay switched in on mid-sentence and wondered what had gone before. "It is the mightiest accomplishment of all, my people. We conquered the inner planets long ago—not without carnage it is true—and now the outer worlds are ours. Earth is dominant and we are the masters. Let that never be forgotten. I have lived for many, many centuries to see this day dawn, and I will live many centuries more to see the consummation of the project we have commenced . . ."

There came a murmur of assent from assembled thousands and Clay continued to listen.

"To have lived as I have, through two thousand years, is an accomplishment worthy of attempting. You all know me as the Eternal One because I found the way to prevent death. But wisely I kept the secret to myself so I could be your leader. That I have tried to be to the best of my ability. . . . Nor have I ever allowed my heart to rule my head. Where I have seen a possible division of power, the chance of myself and some other scientist knowing as much as each other, I have stamped out the opposition. Wisely, I believe. Two cannot rule: only one. Far back in the beginning of my ageless life, before I discovered the mutational secret of immortality, there was one who could have rivalled me in scientific knowledge, but by a lucky accident I was able to dispose of him. At that time we were experimenting with below zero temperatures and he explored the special zero-chamber without my permission, or knowledge. He was not aware that I had kept an eye on him, that I feared he might be a danger to my own scientific advancement —so when the chance came I closed him within the freezing chamber and threw the switch. He was never seen again . . .

"And why do I tell you this? To show you that I am a ruthless man; to show you that I will stamp out without mercy the slightest breath of opposition. And also to show you that none can equal your leader in power and knowledge. And I—"

Clay switched off the auditory power, and then pressed the neutralising button. Returned to his "normal" state of torpor he lay thinking, wondering, piecing together the astounding speech he had heard. It *had* to be believed because Nick Farrish himself had spoken the words. It meant then that Nick *had* known that he, Clay, had been inside the A-Z Chamber and he had deliberately murdered him. Or thought he had. Because he had had no intention of sharing his scientific skill with any man!

And how skilled he must have become, too, to solve the riddle of eternal life and by that very reason become master of the Earth. This was not a reincarnated Nick Farrish. It was the same man—hard, cold, scientific, absolute master of himself and the world. Yet not clever enough to realise that his one-time best friend had *not* died but still lived, automatically moved on in Time by vibratory process and keeping pace. Keeping pace! If only there were a way to break through—! To avenge! Clay strove to express his emotional fury by clenching his fists, but no vestige of movement escaped him voluntarily and, for the moment, the obedient mechanisms were in neutral.

The scene was changed — immensely, immeasurably changed. And Clay now was governed only by one obsession. To come face to face with Nick before the speeding centuries and the death of the world made contact forever impossible. . . . Once again Clay sent for the master-scientist and explained the situation.

"Somehow," Clay insisted, "you have got to project me through the barrier back to my own plane. Reverse the process which brought me here."

"It is impossible without the basic mathematics."

"I'll give some of them to you—as many as I was personally involved with. Listen carefully . . ."

Calling on every vestige of his memory, made doubly clear by the urgency governing him, Clay gave the details insofar as he could remember them, after which the scientist departed to feed the figures into the mathematical transmutation machines which would convert the figures into the below-zero values. Evidently the feat was successful for eventually the master-scientist came back, smiling triumphantly.

"We have enough to go upon, my friend. We shall build another A-Z globe, using vibratory forces equally balanced to speed the molecular rate into what — to us — will be the limit of activity. When the highest attainable vibration is reached your body will cross the barrier. . . . *But*, my friend, have you thought of the Time which is speeding by in your own plane?"

"Certainly I have. Hence the urgency."

"Very well. The globe will be constructed immediately."

With the instruments and equipment at his command it did not take the master-scientist above two normal days to have the globe made, then Clay was brought to it, his various aid-instruments were removed, and he was laid inside a chamber identical to the one in which he had made his original journey. Once the trap shut he was again in that awful, crushing darkness reminiscent of the time when he had searched for his cigarette case.

Evidently the electro-magnetic vibratory apparatus was at work for after a while a real conviction of sensation began to steal over him as locked molecules responded. It was like being restored from a deadening attack of cramp. He began to tingle, to feel warm—even comfortable. But the sensation was short-lived and fear reared its ugly head again. He was becoming *cold*. Surely the process had not reversed itself half-way?

It was a coldness which increased instead of abating, but at the same time the darkness was relieved by glowing points of light which came one by one out of the abyss and winked at him in frosty calm. He was watching them appear, wondering why they didn't change position, when it dawned upon him that he had the power of movement again. He scrambled up, realising that the enclosing walls of the globe had gone, and with it that other plane, the master-scientists, everything!

Clay was in some great wild, rocky space. A wind, thin and cruel, bit deep into his lungs and set him coughing, flapping his tattered old-world clothing. He turned dumbly, staring about him. A mile away, perhaps, were countless little lights, occasionally obscured as something passed before them. This was the only sign of life. Otherwise the landscape was undisturbed and black under the hard, merciless stars. The great diadem of heaven was like an inverted bowl overhead.

The air was deadly thin. It stung. It choked. Clay knew he was dying — but the lights in the distance fascinated him and he moved towards them, his feet dragging. Once or twice he saw a group of the lights flash skywards in a creaming flare of exhaust. Spaceships were taking off, probably from a world which was on the very edge of extinction, one face turned forever to the sun and the other to the night.

Clay went on, thinking of the measureless centuries which had passed, of the engulfment of Man's handiwork in the crushing maw of Time. There were only these departing spaceships, the steely stars, the searing wind. Clay's mind drifted back to a world as it had been—sunshine, soft breezes, progress, the joy of companionship. Friends—! Friends? What of Nick Farrish?

He went on again. Yes, the objects *were* spaceships. He could see each one individually now—hundreds of them in a great circle under the stars. And, in the centre of the circle they created there were vast mountains of equipment

Clay dragged further forwards, passed under the nose of the nearest monster of the void, and came into the circle. He reeled helplessly from lack of air and piercing cold. . . . The next thing he knew he was warm and comfortable and about him were the curved walls of a space machine's interior. The serious faces of men and women, all of them in uniforms similar to the one Nick Farrish had been wearing, looked down upon him.

"Whence come you?" one of the men asked. "Your clothes are thin and of incredibly ancient pattern. Know you not this is Earth? Know you not this is the last day on which we shall stay? We go to claim the conquest of the younger outer worlds."

Clay smiled bitterly. His heart was labouring. "I—I must speak to the Eternal," he muttered.

The men and women glanced at each other, then one of the men darted off, presently returning with the unmistakable Nick Farrish, wrapped to the ears in furs. He stared in blank, even horrified amazement — and Clay stared back. The lines and creases of immeasurable age were bitten as if by acid into Nick's face.

"I—I have been a long time returning from Absolute Zero, Nick," Clay muttered, fighting for breath, "but I finally managed it. . . . Not as successful as you thought, were you?"

Nick did not reply. A remarkable expression crossed his face, followed by a look of intense pain. He said something inaudible, then clutching at his breast with an enormous heated glove he toppled forward and hit the floor.

Nobody spoke — but one of the women moved.

"It is unbelievable," Clay heard her whispering. "The Eternal One is dead! How could that happen? He had no shock of any kind, and as he once told us only shock could ever destroy him by breaking the delicate muscle fibres controlling his heart. He had *no* shock, and yet he is dead."

"And we are free," the man muttered, his eyes gleaming. "Do you not realise what it means, Ania? The Eternal is dead! The despotism is no more! The tyranny, the heart-breaks, the hand of the oppressor—. And yet to die without shock after thousands of years of life. It is not scientifically feasible."

"Wait," the woman murmured. "Perhaps our visitor—."

She crossed to Clay and looked at him intently. He opened drowsy eyes and smiled.

"Friend, who are you?" The touch of her feminine hands felt good to Clay. "Whence came you? Why did the Eternal look at you and die? You have brought us freedom from a seemingly endless despotism. When we reach the outer worlds we can live in security and happiness. What is the answer, visitor?

You have liberated the entire race of Earth and we must know why! What did the Eternal see in you?"

"Vengeance, perhaps," Clay whispered. "A spirit down the ageless centuries, maybe. The pointing finger. . . ." He knew he was rambling. The scene around him was fading.

"You gave us liberty," the woman insisted; then the tall man beside her caught her arm and gently raised her.

"Waste no more time, Ania," he murmured gently. "There is no gain in talking to a corpse."

THE END

SCIENCE FACTS AND SPECULATIONS

"FLYING SAUCERS HAVE LANDED." That is the title of a book by Desmond Leslie and George Adamski (Werner Laurie, 12s. 6d.), a book that offers both the enthusiasts and the sceptics plenty of material for vigorous controversy. While Mr. Leslie explores the history and the background of the Flying Saucer, Mr. Adamski's story is very much of the present day.

* * *

Adamski lives in California, and one of his favourite hobbies has been to take his camera out into the desert, along with the hope that one day he would photograph a Flying Saucer. This ambition materialised on November 20, 1952, when he was accompanied by six friends, all of whom vouch for the story.

* * *

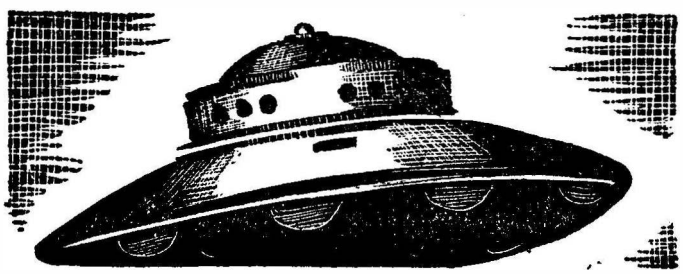
And the story: While sitting down to a picnic lunch all the company saw a gigantic, cigar-shaped, silver airship that arrived without noise. They decided it was a space-ship, but all of them were too excited to think of their cameras. They rushed off by car to a hillock, to the summit of which Adamski went on his own and set up his telescope and camera. He looked towards a ravine a quarter of a mile away. A figure was standing there, beckoning him to come along.

* * *

Mr. Adamski found a man in the habilement and form of the ordinary earthman and held a long conversation with him, partly by signs and partly through telepathy. All the time he was aware of being in the presence of a vastly superior mentality, a creature more highly versed in knowledge and wisdom than the human being as we know him.

* * *

In the end Adamski walked with his strange friend back to the space tender, hovering a foot above the ground. He tells us that it had come from the parent craft. He ultimately took a photograph of the space vessel itself, from a distance of 800 feet. This was when it returned to deliver certain photographs that Adamski had lent to the Venutian pioneer. The paper on which your Magazine is printed does not allow of reproduction of this photograph, but our artist's impression of this is given below:—



ARTIST'S IMPRESSION OF SPACE CRAFT WHICH MR. ADAMSKI CLAIMS TO HAVE PHOTOGRAPHED FROM A DISTANCE OF 800 YARDS WITH THE HELP OF HIS TELESCOPE.

(*Continued on page 40*)

March of the Robots

by VOLSTED GRIDBAN

THE inhabitants of Earth lay prostrate, a scant few survivors in every land. The year was 1987, already being dubbed as the Post-Atomic Period. War had come—and gone. It had left a hell on Earth—pestilence, destruction, a planet pitted with titanic craters, vast areas still out of bounds because of dangerously radio-active materials. Civilisation, as such, had ceased—but such is the eternal adaptability of *homo sapiens* there were signs of leaders appearing here and there among the masses. . . . In time everything could be rebuilt, and even the power of atomic hell might be controlled. *Might*! It depended upon the sanity of those who had lived through the Atomic War; upon the guiding genius of those who would now take up the struggle for rehabilitation.

Of the scientists left from the struggle, Dr. Boyd Atkinson was one of the most outstanding. During the war his scientific genius had always succeeded in devising a weapon for the protection of those in whom he believed. Now that was all over, but he did not turn his attention to assisting with the rebuilding of civilisation. He was instead absorbed in some experiment concerned with cosmic radiation and the propagation of cellular life.

General Harrison, a soldier of distinction who had conducted many successful campaigns during the war, came upon Atkinson one morning within the remains of a broken down residence. It seemed strange to the military man to behold the famous scientist oblivious to a sagging roof and drunken walls—through which the summer sunlight streamed. All his attention was concentrated on electrical instruments in the only safe corner of the once palatial house. Somewhere, hidden, a generator hummed steadily.

"Mind if I come in, Atkinson?" Harrison called, from the one-hinged doorway.

"Come in by all means—if you can *get* in." Atkinson looked up briefly, then back to his work. "You'll find a chair somewhere."

The General entered, picking his way amongst debris and broken brick. He found the chair Atkinson had mentioned—a backless atrocity with only three legs—but he managed to perch on it with fair equilibrium.

"Beats me how you can work in this damned confusion," Harrison commented.

Atkinson's knobbly fingers twirled the bare end of a length of copper wire as he fixed it to a contact.

"Got to," he answered shortly. "Matter of making do, my friend. This was my home before the blasts got at it, and it's *still* my home. Had no time to get around to repairing it. Just as long as I can eat and grab a bit of sleep when necessary I'm satisfied. Urgency, Harrison. That's the driving force."

"Urgency?" The soldier's brows knitted. "No urgency now the war's over, is there?"

Atkinson finished the contact he was making on the massive electrical instrument, then he turned. He was a fiftyish man, lined in the face with years of hard concentration, stoop-backed from the ardour of slogging at a bench. Physically indeed he was a frail specimen: mentally, he was a giant.

"The urgency," he said, "is born of the fact that I have had a visit from the Controller of Statistics. He tells me that because of the war

we've lost three quarters of the population, and the quarter which is left is not in very good shape for producing a new generation. For that there has to be an answer."

"And being the man you are you've found it?" Harrison suggested, with a tired smile

"Yes. Synthesis. . . ." Atkinson leaned back rather wearily against the bench and sighed. "Synthesis, my friend. Fortunately I foresaw the necessity for trying to create life even before the atom war burst upon us, so all I've had to do is bring preconceived notions up to date."

The General nodded but he did not say anything. His eyes moved over the confusion of the once splendid house, then back to the incomprehensible litter of scientific apparatus amidst which Atkinson was working. It spoke clearly of the complete detachment of the scientific mind from the mundane.

"I can create life," Atkinson said, quite simply. "That is not a theory: it's a fact. Life started on this planet through the free action of cosmic radiation upon a given aggregate of cells. The excitation produced in the cells caused that reflex energy which later came to be interpreted as 'life.' And from the lowly animalcule, the first form of life, there grew the thinking, destructive, ruthless biped of today! You see, Harrison, there is nothing Nature can do which Man cannot also do, providing he tries hard and long enough."

"As a matter of fact," the soldier said, "I sought you out to discuss the very thing upon which you're engaged—creation of life. As usual you're ahead of me. I too have been receiving reports on the decline of the population. . . . That you have accomplished a miracle by bringing the creation of life within your control doesn't seem to disturb you unduly."

"No reason why it should. The proving of a theory is no cause for excessive jubilation. It is simply the answer to a perfectly computed problem in mathematics — allied to biology, electronics, and chemistry."

Atkinson reflected for a moment, then he tapped the huge electrical instrument upon which he had been working.

"This is the sum total of my efforts," he explained. "The length of it is six feet, as you observe, and the width three. If you could see within it you'd observe a mass of dead tissue exactly formed into the outline of a human being. Everything is there—bones, skin, all the organs. The first synthetic man, soaking in artificially induced cosmic rays in exactly the right proportion to produce the excitation of life. When it is finished—which won't be for some days yet — there will step from this 'creating case' the first man to be born independent of another human being."

"I see. . . ." The General brooded and looked vaguely uneasy. "But won't he be sexless, heartless, with none of the attributes of a normal human being?"

"Not a bit of it! That's nonsense! If anything he'll be a purer, more godlike type of man than any ever known — and why? Because he'll have *no* inheritance. He cannot take over this or that vice from his father or mother. He will form entirely his own character. . . . And then will come a woman," Atkinson finished, his eyes bright.

"You mean a synthetic one?"

"Naturally. One test-tube man alone is useless if we are to start to repair the appalling deficiency in the human race. A woman must follow— "

"Why? Wouldn't it be easier to make men and women artificially by the thousands and do away with natural birth?"

"Perhaps it would be easier but it would not be practicable. There is only a limited amount of cellular tissue. Just *any* sort of tissue won't do: it has to be the essence, so to speak, of thousands of tons of the stuff. . . . In the past few months since the war ended I've been gathering tissue together from the cadavers which lie around by the score. A filthy, ghoulish kind of job, yes, but essential. I learned one thing: there is only about enough tissue in the world to make perhaps four or five synthetic men and women. So I have chosen one man and one woman and, because of their humanless birth, I shall leave them to become attracted to one another. Psychology comes into that but I don't propose to waste time explaining it."

"They'll be born adult, then?"

"Why not? The process of arriving at maturity is only one of education, and that education is—or was—full of disastrous mistakes. If that were not so the atomic war would never have come. . . . Yes, these two will be adult, and if I have anything to do with it they'll be married within a month of their creation. Then the first children—children of robots, to stem off into adult life with the passage of the years. We shall have the root of a new and, I hope, entirely perfect species."

Atkinson fell silent, musing, hands pushed in the pockets of his tattered old overall. A warm wind stirred the fragments of plaster around one of the holes in the ceiling and they fell with a sudden clatter.

"Only one thing bothering me," Atkinson confessed, arousing himself. "The tissue I'm using isn't entirely unicellular. It's bi-cellular. That is to say each cell has an identical counterpart. . . ."

"Like cellular Siamese twins?" the General suggested.

"You might call it that."

Quietness again. Atkinson's eyes wandered to the electrical array and General Harrison wondered just what was going on inside that massive opaque metal tube. He got to his feet at length and brushed away the fine powder of dust which had collected on his worn uniform.

"I'd better be on my way, Akinson. I've things to do and I'm pretty certain you're not desperately anxious for my company. Let me know when anything happens. . . ."

"You can be sure of that," the scientist smiled, and as though his visitor had already departed he turned back to the work in which he was so obviously absorbed. . . .

FOR many weeks afterwards General Harrison was kept busy in the supervision and planning of a new capital city where London had once been, a task which demanded so much of his time he quite forgot Dr. Atkinson. Then one day, in a rare moment of relaxation, it dawned upon him that he had not heard anything. Promptly he went to enquire as to progress. . . .

And found a dead man in the ruin that had been a house. Grim and silent, Harrison looked about him once he had satisfied himself that the stiff, dust-coated body on the floor had been dead for perhaps nearly a fortnight.

The house was a shambles anyway, of course, but now even that one sacrosanct corner which had been devoted to the scientific equipment was in ruins. The great tube which had presumably contained the synthetic life was smashed as though with a steam hammer, the cables had been torn out of the generator, and most of the smaller instruments had been smashed to atoms.

Appalled, Harrison surveyed the ruin which had been Dr. Atkinson's pride—then bestirring himself he set about trying to find a reason for such tragic vandalism. There was little enough to go upon, but finally he did discover a well-used notebook pushed away in a dust-filmed bureau. At first glance it appeared to be some kind of personal diary and under normal circumstances Harrison would not have read it—but here were circumstances which were *not* normal, and he meant to get at the solution.

Returning to headquarters he gave orders for the body of Dr. Atkinson to be removed and buried with full honours, then with a party of scientists able to solve the technical equations mixed with the dead man's notes he tried to piece together the events which had led up to disaster. It proved an immensely difficult task, leaving countless blanks which would probably never be filled in.

"It seems to me," observed Pearson, one of the scientists whom Harrison had requested to help him, "that Dr. Atkinson died from natural causes. The medical report said so, anyway. No reason to suspect foul play. . . . As to who, or what, wrecked his equipment we don't know. He says here that the creation of a male synthetic man was supremely successful, only it happened to be a bio-creation, the one thing he was reluctantly expecting. Apparently he killed off the duplicate man and left the original. What happened then we don't know."

"We don't know what happened to the synthetic man, true," the General admitted, frowning over the notes, "but we *do* know that Atkinson went further and created a woman successfully, just as he told me he would. . . . Further than that we cannot get. His notes don't tell any more, perhaps because death caught up on him."

The scientists looked at one another, weighing up the imponderables of a quite extraordinary situation. It was known now that somewhere in the disordered community which had survived the war there presumably lived a synthetic man and a synthetic woman, perhaps together, perhaps separate. There was no indication in Atkinson's notes as to whether his creations had proved to be as blissfully innocent as he had expected; nothing to explain the wrecking of his equipment. If the robot man and woman had done *that*, then they were capable of anything.

"I don't like it," Pearson said gravely, and from the expressions on those around him it was plain he was voicing their thoughts also. "In effect, Dr. Atkinson created a new species entirely, which might be capable of anything. . . ."

"Nothing has happened so far," another scientist pointed out. "We'd have heard of it otherwise."

The conversation ceased. It seemed that the only thing to do was wait on events, and if anything really startling did happen it could only have one cause. . . But nothing *did* happen. Week followed week and from the toiling community, spending the summer in erecting a new city and re-forming social life, there came no word of anybody unusual in their midst.

The weeks became months, and still nothing untoward occurred—and since there is a limit to the expectancy anybody can muster General Harrison gradually began to forget all about the business and—apart from a regret that Atkinson's great work seemed to have come to nothing—he gave his attention once more to the

matters of the everyday. . . And all this time the male product of a test tube was amongst the very workers labouring to build a city, but because he looked exactly like any other young man, save perhaps for his unusually superb physique, no particular notice was taken of him. Indeed, why should it have been? He was a likeable fellow, good natured, with apparently no conceit whatever. Skilful, yes. His unusual knowledge of electricity had easily gained him a job as electrical fitter to the contractors who were gradually building the new London.

As for the young man himself he wondered a great deal what he was doing and why he was doing it. He could no more recall his actual birth than can a normally born human. Wisely, Dr. Atkinson had deliberately blanked the brains of his "creations" so that the process of their birth could not be remembered. As to the rest, it was acquired knowledge, partly through instruments used by Atkinson to implant vibratory thought-waves on the brain, and partly through knowledge picked up in the normal way. . . The young man had not even had a name until he had thought of one. Now he was registered as Colin Brook, and the fact that he had no known nationality was accepted as normal since hardly anybody could lay claim to any particular country with them all in ruin and ashes.

Colin Brook, electrician. He smiled vaguely to himself, wondered over many things, and worked day by day with the rest of people. He heard them speak of relatives and wondered why he had none he could recall. What age was he? Twenty-five by the looks of him—well built, blond, and with a likeable smile. He was happy enough, even if mystified. He had a good job, a good billet with hundreds of other male workers engaged on the city construction. Nothing to worry over except this one baffling blank in his life. From where had he come and who had been his parents? Indeed, what *were* parents? Even this aspect caused him no end of mental analysis, and always brought a completely negative answer.

Then, a year after he had enrolled as an electrical worker, he casually met Helda Ganson. Employed by the New City Secretariat, her duties demanded that she issue new instructions to the electricians, instructions created by her superiors. This was when Colin Brook first saw her—in the great office at headquarters from where all orders were given out. He, surrounded by his fellow workers, sat in silence and listened to her as she read from the briefing sheet she had brought in.

What she said Colin scarcely remembered—and in any case he would get detailed orders later from his superior. His whole attention was concentrated on the woman herself. She was slim, dark, extremely agile, with a mellow voice and a ready smile. There was something about her which Colin found irresistibly attractive. He felt that almost against his will he had to comply with the urge governing him. . . .

Accordingly he was on speaking terms with Helda Ganson by that same evening. A week later they spent their spare hours together. roaming about the half erected and half demolished city, speaking and dreaming of the years to come when the blasting horror of the atomic war would be forgotten.

"And yet," Helda said, as she sat beside Colin on a rising stretch of ground in the cool of the summer twilight, "I can't somehow remember the atomic war. I've read all about it, seen the records, noticed the horror seared into the faces of those who have survived.—Yet it has the odd remoteness of a dream. Like something which happened before my lifetime. . . . That couldn't be, though, could it? I'm in the mid-twenties and the war has only been over two years. I—I just don't understand it."

"There is much that neither of us understand, Helda," Colin told her, an arm about her shoulders. "I gave up trying long ago. If the past cannot be remembered, surely the most sensible thing to do is look to the future?"

"You mean—together?"

"Seems a sensible proposition, doesn't it? We have kindred interests, or kindred mystifications if you prefer. Maybe we should start trying to puzzle them out together?"

"Maybe we should, yes," Helda murmured.

Colin did not say any more. He grasped her hand and around them the twilight deepened. In the new city lights were gleaming brightly. In the old metropolis gaunt, ugly girders and stones reared against the ashy western sky.

Unaware that they were the first of a new species, the young man and woman continued to hold hands and tried in vain to solve the mystery of the mental and physical attraction which bonded them so completely. . . .

TWO WEEKS later the newly formed Eugenical Council issued permits for Helda and Colin to marry. The union was sanctified by nothing more than a printed licence since church ceremonies were obsolete, then they immediately returned to work. No honeymoon, no anything. Daily matters were too pressing in their urgency to permit of a single personal indulgence. . . . They were allotted married quarters with thousands of other young newly-

weds and, by and large, they felt reasonably convinced that things were set fair for the future.

Indeed most of the survivors were beginning to believe in themselves again and were looking forward to an era of quiet and prosperity in which war would perhaps be extinct because of the frightful lesson it had imposed. . . . . But this was not to be. Helda and Colin had hardly been married a month before unexpected news was flashed from the world's remaining observatories that a special armada was heading directly for Earth.

This was the only warning which was given, and since the unknown space armada was even then nearing the outer edge of Earth's atmosphere there simply was no time to turn around. Even General Harrison, who had never been expecting to be called abruptly back into action, could not think up a military strategy quickly enough—or summon enough men and women together—to put up a defence before the invaders had struck.

Nobody had a chance to determine whence the destroyers had come, but they were obviously highly scientific and the weapons they used simply tore the flimsy, hastily erected Earth defences to shreds. For the second time in quick succession the survivors were stricken down amidst ash and rubble and those who yet again survived, Helda and Colin amongst them, discovered that they were under the heel of a conqueror.

What conqueror? He was never seen, nor indeed were any living beings ever sighted. Yet in all parts of the world there stood the marshalled rows of space machines which had inflicted such terrific devastation. Orders always came from loudspeakers, orders spoken in English yet in a voice so harsh and devoid of sentiment it sounded as though it might be synthetic, a pattern meticulously drawn upon a sound-track, perhaps, and then projected.

The orders themselves were not difficult to carry out since they seemed merely a continuation of the instructions to which the populace was accustomed—namely, to continue building the new metropolis which, either by accident or design, had been left untouched by the invaders. The destruction they had caused had been mainly centred on the workers' dwellings, perhaps mainly as an object lesson to reveal unheard-of scientific power.

In the main the survivors obeyed the orders to save themselves, but others—Helda and Colin amongst them—aligned themselves with that small army which had risen in naked fury against this new destroyer of liberty and progress, and it was of course the indefatigable General Harrison who was at the head of this resistance movement. . . .

"We owe it to him and ourselves to join his movement," Colin declared, when first the news reached him and Helda by word of mouth. "No conqueror was ever defeated by lying down to his demands. . . ."

"I agree," Helda muttered, "but what I can't see is how we fight this invasion. There doesn't seem to be a leader to it. No commanders. No men. No living invaders at all. Just orders by loudspeakers, deadly weapons, scientific instruments. . . ."

"Because there *are* no living invaders we stand a good chance of reaching General Harrison and joining his ranks," Colin insisted. "Living invaders could probably have found us long ago. As it is we've survived thus far."

Helda nodded her dark head silently. She and Colin were deep within an old atomic crater north of the city. Outside the small rock cave they had made their temporary home was the shelving valley leading to the ridge which marked the perimeter of the crater. It was night and the summer air was warm. The only sound was from the directional loudspeakers which, using tremendous amplification, bellowed forth their orders across the inhabited regions of the new metropolis. . . . The only light came from a risen full moon, filling the crater valley with sickly pools of grey, behind which loomed inky shadows.

"We know where Harrison has his headquarters," Colin continued, as Helda made no further comment. "What's to stop us going tonight?"

"Nothing—I suppose."

The hesitancy in her voice made Colin study her intently in the moonlight. She appeared to be thinking deeply.

"What's wrong, Helda?' Colin's voice had become abrupt. "Do you *want* to continue this hole-and-corner existence and finish up by being caught by the invaders and killed?"

"Naturally I don't want that. It's just that I—Oh, I can't explain it. It's a kind of feeling that nothing can come of trying to overthrow an invader infinitely more clever than ourselves."

"I don't believe they *are* that much cleverer. They simply have things better organized than us and sprang the lot on top of us before we could turn round. . . . Let's get moving. It can't be any worse than rotting in this pest-hole and never knowing if we're to eat again."

Whatever Helda's misgivings were, and she had not explained them very precisely, she evi-

dently had decided to put them on one side for she got to her feet and followed Colin as he silently crept out of the cave and surveyed the night.

Nothing stirred. There was only the warm wind, the misty stars, and the eternal blaring of the raucous loudspeakers.

"It's safe enough," Colin's voice whispered, as he took Helda's hand. "Let's move. . . ."

Like shadows they headed across the crater and to the top of the rise, then suddenly Colin saw something and abruptly pulled Helda down flat beside him. Silent, filled with the fear that they would be detected, they lay watching a most extraordinary scene in the moonlight. . . .

Heading towards them, but fortunately at some little distance away, was an army of robots —mechanical beings of metal who walked with the absolute precision of the apparatus governing them. Probably it was electrical, radio remote-controlled, for as they passed within a dozen yards of the watching pair the lensed "eyes" of the creatures remained frontwards. They were not in the least deflected towards the two who crouched close by.

The army was considerable, probably close on a thousand automatons, and they were heading towards the city. At last they had passed, leaving a haze of dust behind them from their rhythmic feet.

"What do you make of it?" Colin whispered, as he and the girl stood up and gazed after the retreating army. "What kind of an invasion *is* this? Never a living soul. . . ."

"Invasion by remote control is the only answer," Helda replied. "And I know I'm right."

"How do you know?"

"That's difficult to say. I sort of feel it."

Colin studied Helda for a moment in the moonlight, trying to fathom the depth of her mind and emotions. He was convinced—and had been for some time—that she knew something she would not admit.

"We'd better carry on," he said rather brusquely, and Helda kept a hold of his arm as they fled across the rubbly ground, moving like wraiths in the moonlight, but constantly moving in the direction of the underground headquarters of General Harrison. They knew just where they were for they had made it their business to let it be known they were sympathisers of his resistance movement and wished to join it.

It was around midnight when they reached the smashed ruin of a one-time emporium which marked the site of Harrison's headquarters. Immediately armed guards appeared from concealed points, their guns levelled.

"State your business," a voice ordered harshly in the moonlight.

"Friends," Colin replied quietly. "Colin and Helda Brook. We're fugitives of the invaders and wish to join General Harrison."

"Your names are known and all is in order," the guard replied. "Come this way."

Under his direction Colin and Helda presently found themselves in the one time basement of the store. Most of it had been restored and was supported by massive pillars of teak driven into cross-beams. Here, in the midst of bright light from atomic generators, General Harrison sat at an operations desk, maps in front of him, his aides around him. He looked tired but determined as he studied the two new arrivals.

"Thank you for deciding to join my ranks," he said, as Colin made the purpose of the visit clear. "Nothing can be gained by bowing before these invaders—You would care for food and drink perhaps before we talk further?"

"Definitely, thanks," Colin responded, and without further delay it was brought.

Harrison continued his planning with the map. discussing with his aides, whilst Colin and Helda satisfied their gnawing appetites and thirst—then the General came suddenly to business.

"We have many in the ranks now," he explained, perching on the edge of the desk and measuring the two with his keen eyes. "The only thing I ask of you is unswerving loyalty and obedience to orders. I am telling you this now so that if you do not care for the tasks I intend to delegate to you you can withdraw."

"No question of withdrawing." Colin gave a shrug. "If we don't side with you, General, we follow a hole-and-corner existence until the invaders catch up and destroy us. You've only to name the service you want performed."

"Good! First, then, it will mean separating you. You, Mrs. Brook, will join the ranks of the women workers who, underground, are busy night and day manufacturing scientific weapons with which we hope finally to launch a counter-offensive. You, Mr. Brook, on the other hand. will be required to accompany one other man into space."

"Into space!" Colin gave a blank look. "I didn't even know we'd got spaceships!"

"We haven't, my young friend, but the enemy has! Our intelligence department has discovered that at regular intervals one or two of these machines, which brought the robot invaders, leave Earth, apparently under remote control, and fly into space. Exactly where we don't know. The only way we can find out is

for one of our number—or rather two so one can still act if the other be killed—to journey in one of these machines and see where the journey ends."

"And that," Colin asked seriously, "is what you want me to do?"

"It is. You can withdraw if you feel the danger is—"

"Not at all. One cannot think of sidestepping danger when a state of war exists. I'll do it, though I can't imagine how I'll ever get into a spaceship without being detected."

"That has all been taken care of." The General stood up and paced about as he explained. "It is perfectly clear to us that these invaders are all mechanical robots and that their spaceships are remote controlled. Somebody somewhere has produced push-button warfare on the grand scale, taken the initiative in attack, and so for the time being has won the day. What we shall do, when we know the source of the spaceships, is attack the planet concerned with everything we've got in an effort to destroy the guiding mind behind everything. Obviously a living race must be back of everything."

"You have no idea *why* this invasion happened, I suppose?" Helda asked. "What the purpose of it is?"

"No idea at all. On the face of it it would seem to be an effort to inflict robot dominion over living beings. In any case the purpose of the invasion does not signify; it is the destruction of it which matters." Harrison turned and came back to his perch on the edge of the table. "I said, Mr. Brook, that everything has been arranged for you. By that, I mean that we know which two machines will next depart into space, and *when*. It will be to-morrow night at eight o'clock, the time they always start off. I have one man willing to make the trip into the void, but a second man is essential. We have had several dummy robot suits constructed, so made that with men inside them they look exactly like these invaders. Inside one of those suits you and your companion can very easily enter the selected space machine, particularly as the space grounds are not very brightly illuminated."

"I understand," Colin nodded. "No guarantee where we are going, and even less that we'll ever get back?"

"No guarantee at all. I'm afraid it's a case of take it or leave it. If it's any consolation to you it's the most important assignment I've given any man so far—excepting the man who will be your colleague."

"And why select me?" Colin asked. "Aren't there hundreds of other men to choose from? I'm not backing out, sir: I'm just curious."

"When I heard that you and your wife were anxious to join my ranks I had your histories investigated. Fortunately we have most of the statistical files. What I saw in the records satisfied me that you are both strong, able to endure physical hardships without untoward results. That is why I selected you, Mr. Brooks—and also why I shall delegate you, Mrs. Brooks, to work more arduous than that delegated to most women. At a time like this great physical strength is rare: seventy-five per cent. of the people are weak and suffering from malnutrition."

"It occurs to me," Colin said, thinking, "that if my colleague and I *add* ourselves to the robots on the departing spaceship the increase in numbers by two will be noticed. Or will it? Can these robots notice anything?"

"Of themselves, no. One we have captured proves to be a kind of walking camera as far as seeing is concerned. The eyes are lenses connected to a radio photo-electric cell. That can only mean that whatever images the lenses pick up are transmitted back by radio waves to the living being in control. Therefore two *extra* robots would be noticed by the controller, who would obtain the information through the other robots' eyes. The answer to that one is clear: two of the robots must be put out of action."

"How?" Colin looked troubled. "They seem pretty intricate to me, or am I wrong? I haven't had a close look at one yet."

"You will do before you set off on your mission to-morrow night. You will be shown the robot's vital point and how to put it out of action by a simple electrical circuit, generated by a special gun which you will take with you, and then *throw away*. You must not carry anything which a robot does not carry."

"And provided this hazardous mission is successful, General," Helda asked, "what happens then?"

"All your husband has to do," Harrison answered, turning to her, "is survey his destination when he reaches it. We must have a detailed report on the kind of headquarters these invaders have—and we can take it as pretty certain that the returning space machines will land fairly close to the centre of operations. You must take no personal action," Harrison explained, looking back to Colin. "Just scout the situation and return when the robots do. I think their reason for going back home is to collect further supplies which are needed on Earth here for their mysterious campaign. . . . Well, that is the position. Are you prepared to volun-

teer for the job? If so, I'll make immediate arrangements for you to meet your colleague."

"I'm against it," Helda said abruptly, before Colin could answer. "I think it's tantamount to sending my husband to his death."

"I am not *sending* him anywhere, Mrs. Brook. He is volunteering."

"And I'm accepting," Colin stated, giving Helda a puzzled look. "It's just the kind of job which, properly done, can start to kick the foundations from under these invaders."

Helda was silent, her face white and strangely troubled.

"Honestly, Col, I wish you'd refuse. I feel you're walking into the most frightful disaster and— "

"I'm going," Colin interrupted flatly. "Let there be no mistake about that. Just show me the next move, General."

COLIN found himself allowed six hours respite in which to sleep or do whatever he chose, and he spent most of it trying to convince Helda of the rightness of his plans. In the end she was compelled to accept his decision, but it was plain from her expression that she was the prey of a myriad doubts and fears. Colin put them down to natural anxiety and let it go at that, even though he found it hard to reconcile with Helda's normally courageous nature.

His parting from her when the six hours were up he made as brief as possible so there could be no harrowing moments—then he placed himself entirely at the disposal of Harrison's directive staff and was promptly put through all the necessary moves in order to gain entry to one of the invaders' spaceships.

At the end of the brief but well planned training he was tired but still willing, and it was at this point that he made the acquaintance of the man who was to be his partner in the venture. His name was Saunders and he proved to be a short, thickset, jovial veteran of the war, afraid of neither God nor man.

"It's something new in assignments," he admitted, when he and Colin had warmed up to intimacies. "Beat all the old time frogmen, commandos, and what-have-you. Playing at robots and travelling to another planet is the real thing! Puts ginger in your blood."

"Uh-huh," Colin admitted, knitting his brows. "Any idea *which* planet we're going to head for? Could be any in the System, and if it's one of the big fellows the atmosphere will probably poison us in the first few seconds."

"We'll think of a way round that if we run into it. Our robot suits will carry artificial air-supply against such a contingency. The main thing is we'll look like robots from the *outside*. What is *inside* the suits, such as weapons, air conditioners, and the like, is our business entirely. . . . You asked me which planet? I'd gamble on one of the nearer ones because these spaceships come back too quickly to have gone very far." Saunders paused and gave a hard grin. "We're privileged, y'know, you and me. If we can get the goods on the headquarters of these invaders we can smash the whole damned oppression from top to bottom. Seems to me we're due for a rest-up, too, until we set off tonight. We'd better go and see what the C.O. has to say."

Saunders' assumption was correct. With the training now complete relaxation was permitted for the whole of the "day," even though no daylight was ever visible in this basement. Colin spent it by himself, catching up on some of the sleep he had lost in trying to argue reason into Helda—but this time his sleep was again disturbed through wondering why Helda was so abnormally afraid of him striking what might be a master blow for liberty. She had spoken of a "strange feeling," of a premonition. . . .

"Nerves," Colin told himself finally. "And I never thought she had any. Certainly I never thought she loved me that much. S'pose I should feel pleased about that. . . ."

He fell asleep debating the issue, awakening again when the alarm, specially set for his cubicle, sounded. From that moment onward he experienced nothing but hurry. He was given a meal and then fixed inside one of the artificial robot suits. Since he had already made acquaintance with the suit and its uses during his training this was no novelty. Within it were all the essentials he could possibly need and specially stiffened sleeves to the suit made it that he could withdraw his own arms if need be and use his hands inside the suit for food, air regulation, or use of weapons. The eye lenses were plain glass, pin-sized portholes, but patterned on the outside to exactly resemble the eye-lenses of the normal robots.

Then presently Saunders, similarly garbed, joined him. They tested the air-wave vibrator, by which they would be able to communicate with one another without the robots—and hence their controller—being able to pick up the messages; then they clumped out of the big underground laboratory into the headquarters of General Harrison himself and were given his final blessing. . . .

And so to the outside, both of them with an exact knowledge of what they intended to do. The darkness cloaked them as they moved

silently, deliberately using the mannikin-like walk of the robots. As yet the moon had not risen which made their task easier, though neither of them feared detection so complete was their disguise. And since robots were everywhere on the face of the Earth, presumably following out the orders of their unknown controller, why should two more excite any suspicion?

"Got everything ready?" asked Saunders' gruff voice over the air-wave apparatus as they began to approach the city.

"Everything, yes, including the electric gun. We give a shot of juice into the control circuit on the back-plate—that projecting knob which is on every robot—and that puts them out of commission."

"Right. We do it at the approach to the space grounds when we see which particular party is heading homewards. Won't be difficult. Doesn't matter if the robots are found afterwards because we'll be in space by then, and our main concern is not to have two *additional* robots in the party. . . . And it won't be long now," Saunders added, as they came within sight of the great marshalling area where the main body of spaceships were kept.

Here, within five hundred yards of the main open space—which led between the "parked" rows of space machines, the two men settled down on the hard, tumbled ground to wait. Harrison's Intelligence had said the departure would be at eight, that six robots would leave, and that they would use spaceship number seven from the gateway end. This was the only means of identifying the particular machine since none of them had recognizable numbers on their prows—only weird symbols which, to an Earth mind, did not mean a thing.

"Ten to eight," Saunders murmured at length. "Maybe we'd do better if we went nearer the machine in which we're to travel?"

Colin's "robot head" nodded in the dawning moonrise and they moved on again, finally coming to a halt under the shadow of the mighty jet-tubes of the vessel. They were hardly in position before they beheld the six robots who were to make the journey. They were advancing with their mechanical tread down the wide vista, the faint moonlight from the east reflecting from their metal bodies.

"This is it," Saunders muttered, slipping his electric gun through his sleeve until it came to the exterior of his suit. "Don't miss, or it may mean our finish. Pick the last two."

Colin did not need any directions: he knew exactly what to do. By pre-arrangement he left the penultimate robot to Saunders and tackled the last one himself. Both robots, impelled by mechanical reflexes, made a brief effort to lash out with their heavy arms as the vital back mechanism was attacked—but the electric current was far quicker than their movements and they dropped heavily, put right out of commission. To drag them under the shadow of the vessel's jets was only the work of a moment, then Colin and Saunders followed the other robots into the control room.

There was a tense pause, the eye lenses of the robots glinting as they looked about them. Presumably they were activated by the unknown master and their eyes were studying the layout and transmitting it back to headquarters. Saunders and Colin stood prefectly still as the merciless lenses swept over them, but evidently nothing unusual was noted for the lenses passed on.

Finally one of the robots moved to the control board whilst another closed the airlock. This latter move could only be to prevent a robot drifting out into space. Certainly it was not to keep air within the space machine—or to stop the frigid cold from entering—for the robots did not need such expediences. This realization prompted Colin to glance towards the instrument board, where he immediately noticed that there was no sign of an air-gauge. The control cabin had no air, or heat. The robots themselves probably had electric circuits which kept their oiled parts in working order, and nothing more was needed.

"This is going to be lovely," came Saunders' voice, pitched low. "All our air and warmth relies on our suits from here on—and the same goes for food and drink. Wonder what sort of devilish acceleration these things can stand? If we flatten out under it and they don't it won't be too good. . . ."

Saunders had hardly finished speaking before the robot at the control board snapped over the main switch, which possibly closed the remote control circuit and made the vessel navigable by the master-mind at the centre of operations.

The jets outside screamed with sudden power. Pressure came crushing down on Colin and Saunders with the force of endless tons, and had it not been for the tough artificial robot-coverings they were wearing they would undoubtedly have been flattened to the floor. Even as it was they staggered dizzily but still managed to maintain their equilibrium. This they *had* to do otherwise the watching lenses of the robots would transmit the scene camera-wise back home and the truth would dawn upon those in control.

The pressure increased as the maximum

escape velocity was reached. Sweating and giving at the knees Colin and Saunders held their positions. Their heads felt as though they would burst, brilliant lights fireballed before their eyes. Then just as they felt they must drown in this awful tide of fifty, sixty, seventy atmospheres pressure it abruptly ceased as constant velocity beyond the Earth's orbit was gained.

Slowly Colin turned and looked at the main observation window. Since it directly overhung the prow of the machine it seemed logical that the view through it would indicate the destination. At the moment the machine was curving through an enormous arc, but at last it steadied and dead ahead there gleamed a familiar red disk, clear cut amidst the infinity of stars thrown against the titanic backdrop of space.

"Mars!" came Saunders' voice, in some surprise, and he was still breathing heavily from the ardours of the take-off. "I don't get it! To the best of our knowledge Mars is as dead as dodo. My early guess had been Venus. . . ."

But Mars it evidently was for the spaceship did not change direction for a moment. The power-plant remained on a steady charge, ready for immediate action if power were needed in the jets. As it was the vessel was simply cruising at its original velocity, using no fuel at all. In consequence everything was apparently normal, the velocity being just sufficient to produce a stimulation of gravity equal to Earth-norm.

"At this rate," Colin communicated, "we're going to take some time to make the trip. These blasted robots need no sleep or rest, but we do. How do we get around it?"

"Use energy pills to keep us going. No other answer."

NOR was there. Both the "stowaways" had to rely solely on the drugs within their suits to overcome the normal promptings of Nature. It played hell with their systems, and in time the constant artificial air and imprisoning folds of their suits gave them a violent itching on the surface of their skin. But since they could not get at the itch to assuage it they had to tolerate the misery.

Hours—endless hours it seemed—and not once did they dare give themselves away by sitting down. Blearily they watched the slowly growing dusk of Mars and lost count of the hours. They were satiated with drugs, propped up artificially by their stiff suits—indeed almost dead on their feet, until Colin found his suit was taut enough to permit of him sleeping standing up, so he succumbed, after first telling Saunders to keep watch. By this means they were just about able to stay alive, otherwise they were both convinced they would have dropped from sheer exhaustion and nerve strain. . . .

How long the 40-million mile journey actually took they did not know, but finally the spaceship was sweeping down to the surface of the red planet, hurtling across endless miles of deserted, ochre-coloured wilderness—until presently there came in view a gigantic metal cover, probably a good two miles across. Strangely enough, it looked quite new.

"New metal on Mars?" Saunders questioned. "That can only mean that whoever is back of this lot has only just taken over. To quote a long dead writer—'Curioser and curioser'!"

At that moment the metal lid slid back into a predevised slot leaving a vast, abysmal shaft. Straight as an arrow the spaceship dived into it and downwards through a brief darkness.

Then light appeared, gushing upwards from a wilderness of machinery. Not a city, not a town. There were no buildings. Only machines, machines, and more machines, bewildering in their intricacy, magnificent in their design.

The space machine came to rest in a clear space of what was apparently a vast natural cavern. Evidently the "eye" on the surface had been specially designed as a method of ingress and egress. But the machines! They reached to nearly twenty feet in height—a veritable city of them, all linked by cables and, to judge from their countless glowing tubes, evidently very much in action. . . .

The airlock opened and the robots trooped outside. Colin gave Saunders a quick glance through his peepholes.

"What do we do, Saunders? Follow 'em?"

"Naturally. We're one of them—but don't blame me if we never come out of this alive. Far as I can see this lot is as mechanical as the invasion itself—Quick, we're going to be left behind."

He dived for the open airlock and Colin quickly followed him. In a moment or two they had caught up with the marching robots and fell into step—with some difficulty for the Martian gravity was difficult to judge.

"Unless I'm mistaken," Saunders said, "our stumbling may have given us away. We couldn't help it, of course, but it certainly must have shown that we're not such robots as we look!"

How right he was seemed more than evident in a moment or two for the robots abruptly stopped marching, possibly because the motive power at the back of them had been cut. Their stoppage was so abrupt that Colin and Saunders had bumped into the rearmost ones before they realized a halt had been called.

"Damn!" Saunders muttered, glancing about him. "That about gums it up—*if* we're being watched, and I've no doubt we are."

Colin was about to make reply when he caught sight of somebody approaching—the first living being he had ever seen in connection with this fantastic invasion. Words died within him. He could not take his eyes from the advancing woman. It was remarkable enough for her to be exactly like an Earth woman in physique, but what made it so incredible was that she was undoubtedly *Helda,* his own wife!

Helda absolutely—but hard-faced, tight-mouthed, with a frigid stare in her eyes. Motionless, Colin watched her as she came nearer, queenly in her walk, loose satin-like clothes flowing about her. Evidently there was air in this immense underworld for she was breathing normally and the draught was disturbing her draperies. At last she paused, perhaps six feet away.

"The brains behind the invasion," Saunders commented. "I wish she weren't so infernally pretty—"

"This woman's my wife!" Colin choked. "But how in the name of all that's Satanic did she get *here*? Now I understand many things—her wish that I would not accept the assignment Harrison gave me; her certainty that it could only lead to disaster."

He stopped talking and switched through his ether-wave instrument so that he could communicate externally.

"What the devil's the idea, Helda?" he demanded, striding forward. "How did you get here ahead of us?"

The woman surveyed him coldly, then she looked half puzzled. Finally she made a gesture.

"You can remove your robot suits, gentlemen. There is balanced atmosphere in here. . . ."

"Gentlemen?" Colin repeated, baffled. "Doesn't she remember my voice, or what?"

Impatiently he tugged at the clamps which released his suit, and Saunders did likewise. In a few moments they were free of them, drawing in fresh, sweet air which tasted like nectar after their self-inflicted imprisonment. Both of them had become somewhat bearded, but Colin knew that even this was not enough reason for Helda not even yet recognizing him.

"Helda, for the love of heaven—" He strode forward and gripped her shoulders. Instantly she shook him away angrily.

"How *dare* you touch me?" she demanded. "You are a human: I am a robot. We have nothing in common."

"Eh?" Colin stared blankly and Saunders scratched his head. To the rear the motionless robots waited for the word of command—or whatever method was utilised to set them going.

"Or *are* you a human?" Helda asked slowly, frowning. "I sense about you something similar to myself—who were your parents?" she demanded abruptly.

"I haven't the least idea. You know that: I told you when we were married."

"Married? I never saw you before in my life!"

Colin gave Saunders a hopeless look. All Saunders could do was raise and lower his thick shoulders negatively.

"I detected you were not part of my robot army when you left the space machine," Helda resumed, her voice acidly sharp. "You did not behave like robots: you did not *walk* like robots. I can only assume that by an ingenious trick you have reached my headquarters."

"You knew perfectly well I was going to," Colin retorted. "I had to argue with you to make you see the sense of the assignment."

"You never argued with me, Earthman. I repeat, I have never seen you before. There is only one answer to this. You think I am your wife by the name of Helda. She must be the other identity whom Dr. Atkinson created—the *human* entity, or almost. I am her robot counterpart."

Something began to stir in the back of Colin's mind. Hazy remembrances of his birth which Dr. Atkinson had not entirely obliterated. It had demanded an occasion like this to restore those half foundered recollections.

"I believe," he said slowly, "that I am as much of a robot as you are! I remember test tubes. I even remember Dr. Atkinson and some machinery. . . ."

"You and your robot counterpart were created before me and *my* counterpart," the woman said. "Dr. Atkinson always feared cellular duality—an exact double of everything synthetic—and his fear was justified. To synthetic life there is one drawback: because of the duality of the cellular material used everything is created in duplicate. When you were finally brought to life from a mass of synthetic material your double also came to life and you were linked by a cellular tissue. Presumably Atkinson cut that tissue and gave you and your twin separate entities. He discovered that where you had the human virtues and few of the vices, your twin was pure robot—soulless, sexless, a machine in fleshly covering. He destroyed your twin completely before he could do any damage. He turned you loose, to make your way in the world with the knowledge he

had electrically bequeathed to your brain."

"How do you know all this?" Colin demanded.

"I made him tell me." The woman smiled tautly. "I was created after you. I am the pure robot twin of the woman you call Helda. She and I were joined cellularly to commence with and then were separated. From what Atkinson told both of us I knew he would kill me as he'd killed you, so much did he fear the robot side of his synthesis. . . . I was too clever for him. He released my human twin, even as he had released you, to make her own way. But before he could then destroy me I used the knowledge he had given me to turn his scientific instruments against him. I learned all that I have just told you, and a good deal more. Far more than my humble, human twin. When I had gathered all I needed I killed Atkinson, wrecked his laboratory, and using atomic power in the way he had shown me I escaped, converted a war-time submarine into a spaceship and headed for Mars. With me I took all the valuable formulae which Atkinson's laboratory had contained before I wrecked it. I knew from Atkinson's revelations what Mars would contain, and I found him correct. Minerals, ores, an atmosphere of sorts, high electric content in the atmosphere, ideal for remote control. . . ."

"Then my wife knew you were not dead when she was set free?" Colin asked quietly.

"Yes, she knew. And between us there is still a mental link, common enough in identical twins, which could explain her trying to restrain you from action against me." The robot woman's eyes gleamed. "I seek only one thing! The domination of the human by the robot, because *I* am a robot, but in fleshly covering. From this planet I launched an attack, controlling everything by radio waves and television. The machinery and equipment is partly that of the now extinct Martian race, and partly made by me with the machine tools left by that race. My knowledge? All of it Dr. Atkinson's, driven into my brain via his electrical instruments. Atkinson was a genius, therefore so am I. I am determined that robots shall master all flesh-and-blood creations and naturally I began with Earth. I shall continue until all flesh and blood is under machine control—Then, out to the other worlds!"

Colin and Saunders were silent, viewing in silent horror this amazing travesty of synthesis—a duplicated woman with the inhuman heart of a precision machine.

"Atkinson planned to increase the race with a perfect man and perfect woman, devoid of inheritance and vices. In you and Helda he might have succeeded. Unfortunately for him *I* had a say in the matter, and I have already told you what I intend to do. You have had the impudence—yes, and the courage—to come this far, you and your normal human colleague, but you will never leave. My plans are made, and by degrees more and more robots will go to Earth, returning only at intervals for new equipment, spare parts and so forth, until from this distant world I shall finally have the whole System at my mercy. . . ."

The intensity of the robot woman's belief in herself and her objective was obvious. Also obvious was the vast amount of scientific skill she had acquired from the genius of Atkinson.

Finally Colin asked a question, almost casually, in the hope it would conceal his eagerness. For back of his mind there was an idea forming.

"These robots entirely obey will-power, I take it? Or only remote control by radio?"

"They obey both, but principally will-power. If they are at a considerable distance, such as on another world, it demands radio control. When close at hand they obey mental waves, their mechanism being designed for that purpose. But only a robot such as I can give them orders."

Colin nodded and was silent, his brows knitted in thought. Then abruptly Saunders twirled around and jumped to one side, and at the same time the robot woman screamed a command hoarsely. Only she was not quick enough. The robots which had been standing close by had suddenly swung and advanced relentlessly on the woman as she shouted desperately for them to stop. . . . They ignored her and came on. Before she could move fast enough to save herself the heavy metallic bodies had crushed against her and leaden feet stamped down upon her face and vitals, crushing the life out of her. The cavern echoed to her screams until at last they died into silence.

"Hell," Saunders whispered, his face wet and turned away from the hideous sight in the midst of the now motionless automatons. "What went wrong? Did she misfire, or what?"

"Nothing misfired." Colin's voice was harsh with strain. "At heart, remember, I *too* am a robot. I gave the metal men orders to kill the woman, and they obeyed. You couldn't have done it being born of a human: I could. And did. We came on a mission, Saunders, and we have fulfilled it, rather more quickly than we expected. . . . ." Colin drew a deep breath and looked about him. "For the first and last time in my life I'm glad I'm not a natural human being. . . . Now, let's find how we get out of here."

THE SUPER DISINTEGRATOR

by Simpson Stokes

MIKE Amblett, senior reporter of the Continental News Group, drove up to the vast white dome nestling in the saucer-like depression known as Windle's Bottom.

It was an unimpressive location for the fabulous Frant-Macdoonan Experimental Station, but doubtless it had been chosen for its isolation, for there was no village, hamlet or even country inn for miles around.

Amblett felt flattered to be the first pressman admitted to the building since the day of its inauguration, and he looked forward to a big news story.

For the invitation had come from Professor Frant himself, the same Julius Frant who had invented and perfected frantite, the super-insulator, a thin sheet of which would afford protection even against radio-active emanations from atomic piles.

The professor stood at the door of his private sanctum and saw to it that the pressman was properly clad in the frantite cap and gloves, overall, and frantite overshoes provided for the working staff.

He said: "A necessary precaution, Mr. Amblett. Static, you know. So much static—and possibly something else. Come on in, and we'll have whisky and cigars, and the pleasure of Mr. Macdoonan's presence."

Frant was tall, spare, grey-haired, remote; somewhere in the mid-forties. He gave an impression of absent-mindedness. He had a restless habit of moving his lip as if he were mouthing soundlessly syllables like pup, pup, pop, pop.

Mike Amblett was of equal age, fleshy, red-faced, always professionally inquisitive. Mention of whisky and cigars sounded good to him.

Frant thumbed a button, spoke into an intercom. "Can you spare a moment, Punch? I've got that pressman here. Amblett, of the Continental people. You'd best be present in case I drop a brick."

He flicked the button to the off position, said to Amblett: "Macdoonan's the physicist in this outfit. I'm radiology, electro-mag, and all that. But we are working together on a new principle. Here he is. Punch; meet Mr. Amblett."

Jackson "Punch" Macdoonan was the very opposite of his collaborator, being small, dark, bright-eyed, brisk. His physical actions were

quick and decisive, unlike Frant's dreamy motions.

Macdoonan said, rubbing his hand: "You're privileged, Mr. Amblett. You're in on what I understand your profession calls an exclusive story. To be candid, we would not make any statement at all but for the fact that we want more money for maintenance and new equipment. Publicity may help."

Amblett drew on a cigar, enjoying the Havana leaf.

Frant said: "Of course, what you want is an explanation of what we are trying to achieve. I gather you are not a technical man.

"The most untechnical," Amblett confirmed. "My stories have to be simple. They have to be written down to the level of the big newspaper circulations."

"So we will use simple analogies, eh?" Frant raised his glass languidly. "Mr. Macdoonan will check me if I drop a brick."

"The objective first, please," Amblett reminded them. He opened a notebook, licking his lips over the tang of the whisky.

"To put it into a nutshell," Frant said, looking into futurity out of his pale eyes, "We are in search of instantaneity, or you may prefer the word simultaneity."

"A directional instantaneity at that," Macdoonan supplemented.

"Eh?" Amblett sat up, looking from one to the other with a puzzled air.

"I will simplify," Frant said. "You know, of course, what happens when you throw a stone into a small still pond?"

"Why—er—ripples, Professor. Ripples spreading in rings." He seemed to be seeing them in his mind's eye.

"Just so. Ripples. Well, when we create a magnetic field; any field, however feeble, it expands in much the same way till it extends throughout space. It goes on and on throughout creation, even to invisible universes millions of light-years away."

"Does it now?" Amblett tried to visualise that too.

"It travels at the speed of light," Macdoonan added. "That's the snag."

"Is it a snag?"

"Well, Mr. Amblett, it is so far as we are concerned. You are, of course, familiar with the C. G. S. system of measuring electricity. C for centimetre, G for gramme, S for second."

"Er—not quite. But go on."

Macdoonan explained, in the manner of a lecturer to a juvenile audience. "C. G. S., in effect, stands for length, mass and time. When compared with the electro-magnetic system of measurement, we find a ratio of velocity of about three hundred million metres per second, which is equal to that of light. Now, we have been asking ourselves, why this lag? Why velocity? The Frant mathematical theory shows incontestably that velocity, which is another manifestation of the space-time entity, should not exist if the ideal magnetic field can be created."

"There should be no travel, as we understand it," Frant said, popping with his lips. "It should be instantaneous throughout the universe."

"And by a method of beaming, there is the possibility that this instantaneity can be directional," Macdoonan continued. "Let me give you a kindergarten illustration. A searchlight. We turn a searchlight beam on a distant object in the darkness. Instantly, to our vision, that distant object receives the light though, in physical fact, a fraction of a second has elapsed before it happens."

"I see that," Amblett conceded. "So you want to create a special kind of magnetic field which doesn't require time to transfer itself to a distant object." He drew on his cigar, sipped whisky, pleased with his perspicacity.

"You have the rough idea," Frant said. "But in creating that special kind of magnetic field, we find indications that special strains will be set up; that nearby matter may be wholly or in part disassociated, or, as you might say, disintegrated. We have therefore had to take precautions in insulation and in remote control of the area in which the field is being set up. For calculations suggest that such a field could be, so to speak, extra-dimensional."

"I'm afraid I don't quite get that," Amblett confessed, and Frant said vaguely: "We must simplify later. Simplify."

Macdoonan finished his whisky, said: "Meanwhile perhaps we had better show Mr. Amblett the housing for the enclosed field. His description of it in the press may help to convince potential investors that a very large expenditure is necessary to conduct our experiments."

The three went out of the office, traversing serpentine passages leading to banks of electrical machinery and complex instrument panels; then through three separate insulated doors of frantite, finally emerging in the central space under the vast dome.

Here a giant globe rested on a heavily insulated platform. "Internal diameter twenty feet," Macdoonan expounded. "External diameter fifty feet. The difference is accounted for by the layers of laminated insulation enclosing the charging coils and tubes."

Amblett made a note of the dimensions, feeling that the subject might be more comprehensible after a while.

There was something balefully impressive about the globe, with thick cables emerging like tentacles on all sides. Its size and massiveness were staggering. And a sputtering of static sounded continuously around the central chamber like the crinkling of crisp paper.

"The field inside that chamber has been continuously building up for over a week now," Macdoonan said. "In two more days we shall give it maximum intensity; of course with stepped up meters and recording instruments ready to give us the information we need. Even that will be only the first stage."

Amblett said apologetically: "You'll excuse me, gentlemen; but what is the practical use of all this? I mean if you do find there's any way to this instantaneity, how would it benefit science, or the world?"

"So wonderfully," Frant intoned. "So marvellously that its effects could never be computed. Yet the idea is old enough. What did Plato say more than two thousand years ago?"

"Ah! Plato!' Amblett brightened. "The philosopher who wrote the 'Republic.' He could make good copy." He waited, pen poised over his notebook.

"Plato said that Time and the Heavens came into being at the same instant in order that, if they were ever to dissolve, they might be dissolved together."

Amblett looked uneasily at the great globe. He said: "I hope you don't set something off worse than an H-bomb. But I was asking what practical use to science. . .?"

"It would completely shatter many accepted theories of physics," Macdoonan interrupted. "Also in molecular data; in problems of radiation. It might even give us a new and true conception of the structure of the universe."

"There is also the fascination of the unknown," Frant added.

Amblett tapped the monstrous skin of the globe with his pen, noting the swirl of sparks cracking at the point of contact. Frant moved away to one of the side walls, followed by Macdoonan. Frant said: "If you'll come over here, Mr. Amblett, you will see one of the most expensive items in our equipment. This screen. . ."

He stopped abruptly as a rapid tapping noise, as of sticks rattling on kettle-drums, filled the central space. The air seemed as if it were boiling. Macdoonan started to run towards Amblett, shouting.

The pressman stood as if paralysed, staring at the portion of the globe nearest him. It ceased to be solid. It became a mist, shot with whirling white sparks.

Amblett had a momentary impression of being engulfed. Frant and Macdoonan were hurled to the ground by a rushing wind. There was a great crash, a violent tremor of the whole building.

When the two scientists staggered to their feet there was no sign of Amblett. And a wide chasm yawned in the skin of the sphere, as though cut cleanly through, just as an apple-corer removes a cylinder of stuff from an apple.

MACDOONAN was first to recover his senses. He shouted: "Amblett! Where are you? Are you all right?" To some men in frantite overalls who emerged from doors in the wall, he snapped: "A reporter chap with us a moment ago. Where is he? Find him."

He went up to the sphere, touched the rim of the cavity with his gloved hand, tried to peer inside.

Frant said: "There is no field now, Punch. It must have gone on building up its own optimum without further loading. It has discharged itself. The housing's quite inert now. You could touch it with your bare hand."

"But Amblett?"

"Rather ask what has become of that section of insulated skin," Frant said. "It must have weighed quite a ton. It's just vanished."

"Wait a minute." Macdoonan rushed through the series of doors back to the instrument panels, worked out some of the recordings on squared paper. As Frant came up he said: "Well, Julius, it's done. The damned thing has achieved the I.T. without us. But it's proved we were right."

"So Amblett's gone where the wall section's gone! Disintegrated!"

They stared at each other, overwhelmed by the double impact of triumph and disaster. One of the technicians came up, asking for instructions, but for once Macdoonan was not the man of action. He took Frant by the elbow, urged him back to the office, poured out more whisky.

"We've done it, Julius. The biggest thing ever known, even though the premature blow-off has set us back technically another year. And people will want to know what we've done with that reporter. For all we know his dis-associated nuclei may be waltzing in another universe, or another dimension, in company with the cone from the wall of the housing."

"I don't care, Punch. We've proved our concept." Frant went pop, pip, pup with his lips..

"The thing is," Macdoonan said, puckering his brows. "Has the I.T. worked directionally? If so there's a chance that Amblett may be all in one piece at some point in creation. If not, then he's spread out to infinity, and all the king's horses and all the king's men. . ." He gulped at his whisky.

"I would say, from my reading of the panels, that the interchange was directional," Frant said. "There was no evidence of radiation recorded by the counters."

"Interchange?"

"Surely. You can't effect an instantaneous transfer of energy from A to B without B's energy content filling the gap left by A."

"Well; what did we get in exchange for Amblett and the missing wall section?"

"Energy. Just energy. Distributed now, naturally. You heard the explosion of its arrival. That equals the fissionable value of the atoms in Amblett's body."

"Julius. Let's write him off as a martyr to science. We're the greatest men who ever lived. Now we've got to set to and get that housing put right. We've got to build up another field, and this time there mustn't be any miscalculation."

"What worries me," Frant said, "What could have happened to the frantite in the housing wall? It shouldn't have disintegrated unless there was a flaw in the manufacture of that particular section. It's the most stable substance in existence."

"Put it down to a flaw," Macdoonan agreed. "It permitted the I.T. to discharge laterally instead of through the vertical release we had planned. But that points to directional too."

Frant was overcome with emotion at the brilliance of the achievement. A universe of future possibilities flooded his mind. Macdoonan was more detached, thinking of the extra finance they would need to build up a second field. He was about to refer to some filed memoranda when the floor shook, and a muffled boom came from the direction of the central installation.

Macdoonan cried: "Hell! What's that?" He hared out of the room to investigate.

A staff man met him in the third circuit, said in a matter-of-fact voice: "That newspaper man, Sir. You were asking about him. He's down by the field housing. There's been another explosion."

"What?" Without waiting to digest this incredible news, Macdoonan quickened his pace, flung open the innermost of the insulating doors, emerged in the central area.

What he saw there made him gasp. It was Amblett all right, standing by the big sphere, which seemed in some miraculous way to be made whole again. But the startling change in him caused Macdoonan, scientist and sceptic though he was, involuntarily to cross himself.

Amblett's usually ruddy face was white with a pearly transparence; his eye shone weirdly. Most asounding phenomenon of all was the great increase in his apparent bulk.

He was now at least eighteen inches taller, and increasingly broad in proportion. The frantite cap was perched on top of his head, the gloves were rags round his wrists, the footwear was split open,and the frantite overall, which before had looked so roomy, was distended like the envelope of a balloon.

For a moment Amblett stood still, swaying a little. He lifted his hands, stared at the curiously white skin, writhed his shoulders in acute discomfort, then suddenly blazed into anger as he saw Frant and Macdoonan staring at him from the rim of the surround.

"So you enticed me here to blow me up like a frog with your damned experiments! God knows what you've done to me besides. Look at my hands; wrists. Bloodless! My clothes are ruined. I feel them hanging in rags under this overall. My shoes! But I've seen things you didn't want me to see, and I'm going to raise hell. I shall start such a campaign in the press that you'll get what you deserve."

He advanced up the slight slope, and so came nearer to them. It was then that he realized by comparison, the full extent of his enormous increase in height and bulk, and his tone changed at once to an almost tearful appeal.

"For God's sake do something for me. I can't stay like this, a giant without any blood in my veins. You've made me feel different. Noises in my head. Look, Professor; look, Mr. Macdoonan. You got me like this. Get me back to how I was."

Frant tried to conceal his gloating jubilation. He felt triumphantly confident that here was a totally unexpected development of the Frant-Macdoonan I. T. which could lead to almost fantastic achievements; perhaps even the conquest of the entire universe.

For the first time a living human being had been disintegrated and reassembled with approximate accuracy, and without apparent impairment of vitality! The mere self-evident fact was stupendous.

Frant had expected it of inert material; indeed he had tried to provide against it by utterly new methods of isulation. But flesh and blood, cells, glands, brain tissue! This

was another matter. Even the mental processes seemed to have survived the violent transitions.

His eyes misted over as he contemplated future experiments on animals, substances, compounds; the perfection of techniques, the gradual harnessing of a power far mightier than any other man had wielded. Macdoonan had said: "We're the greatest men who ever lived." but it was he, Frant, who had evolved the mathematical formulae, who had made all this possible through the perfecting of frantite.

Without this super-insulator the whole thing would have been impossible. It was Frant, not Macdoonan. Julius Frant, the first of the demi-gods!

But Macdoonan was talking to Amblett, trying to soothe him.

"I need hardly say that it was an accident, Mr. Amblett. Something we were not prepared for. Come back to the professor's room and we can talk it over quietly.. I assure you there's no cause for alarm."

He led the way back to the sanctum, poured three measures of whisky, handed Amblett a cigar. Would the man's sense of taste and smell be as before? Apparently so, for Amblett leaned back in his chair, sipping the whisky avidly, trying to relax as he drew on the cigar.

Frant did not speak. He was studying the strange whiteness and texture of Amblett's skin, noting the abnormal brilliance of the eyes, thinking many things. He left Macdoonan to do the placating.

"You see, Mr. Amblett, you are getting better already. Just a shock to the system, plus a little physical distension. Purely temporary. It was an accident that could not be foreseen. Now, please tell us everything, so that we can help you to resume your normal state. Everything; what you felt; what your impressions were. Cast your mind back. You were standing by the big housing. Then there was a crash—." He paused invitingly, leaned forward, rubbing his hands together.

"I don't know about a crash," Amblett said, gulping whisky. "I had some kind of shock when I fell through your infernal trap-door. Naturally." His anger returned. "I suppose you didn't reckon on my recovering so quickly after you'd finished blowing me up like this. But I did. I got up and groped. Then I found the curtain. Do you hear that? .I found it and went through. So I discovered everything. I say it's diabolical."

As he paused for breath, Amblett made a futile gesture of mingled rage and dismay. He moaned: "Look what you've done to me!"

Macdoonan said, earnestly: "We did nothing to you. We know nothing of any trap-door. If there's anything disgraceful going on below this building, we are not personally responsible. All the more reason you should give us all the information you can. Come, man; get it off your chest. The sooner you do it, the sooner we can help you."

He poured out the last of the whisky. Amblett sank it feeling a little mollified under its influence. Also, Macdoonan's statement carried conviction, at any rate for the moment.

"A sensation of falling, Mr. Amblett—," Frant prompted. He felt irritated with the way Macdoonan was handling things; making the event seem commonplace.

"I landed with a bump," Amblett said, wriggling uneasily in his burst clothes below the overall. "It was pitch black. Then I touched the curtain, and I must have parted it. I was in that huge basement of yours. I saw what was going on."

"We are all attention, Mr. Amblett," Macdoonan said, straining further forward, and again Frant had a sense of irritation with his colleague.

"I mean, it's just torture," Amblett said. "I just couldn't bear to see it. Those wretched things coming out of each other, falling down, writhing. Even when they did fly off they had to come back and do it all over again. The R.S.P.C.A. are going to know about this, and the public conscience, and by Jove! they're going to have it through my press exposure."

Possibly some vision of a big newspaper scoop was helping to soothe his agitation. He looked like a man awakened from a dream, striving with all his might to remember its details.

Frant said: "Tell us more. We want facts. You are a trained observer. Surely you can give us a better picture of what you saw. Could you see any sky? Stars? What was the temperature? This is important."

"How could I see stars in a basement? But wait. There was a kind of mist. And that thing came swishing overhead. Overhead? In a basement?" He broke off, puzzled.

"There is no basement here, Mr. Amblett," Macdoonan said. "Depend on it, you have been on a journey. Now do try to—."

Frant interrupted harshly. "Journey my foot! You're confusing the man, Punch. Let me take over for a change. Now listen very carefully, Mr. Amblett. You have just come through an absolutely unique experience; so astounding, in fact, that not even the most advanced thinker among living scientists would credit it. There can be no room for doubt that

you have been disintegrated. Your molecular structure has been disassociated, projected instantaneously in some other part of space-time, or even in another dimension. And you have been brought back whole to tell the tale."

Frant paused, looking for Amblett's reactions.

"Can you realize that fact? Can you remember what we were discussing when you first arrived? The creation of my special magnetic field? Do you remember what I said about instantaneity? It has arrived, though prematurely, owing to a miscalculation of stresses."

He shot an accusing glance at Macdoonan. It was strange how antagonistic he had become towards his colleague since Amblett had come back.

"With that certain knowledge, Amblett," Frant urged, "You can tell me everything without restraint. Give me the facts. Try to describe every little detail, just as though you had been on a newspaper assignment to another planet or distant star."

The professor noted that though the bulky figure overflowed the chair, there was no suggestion of any increase in weight. Amblett's movements, the way he held the cigar, and the way he put the whisky glass on the table, were those of a lightweight.

Amblett wrinkled his brow, said: "I can't bring myself to believe what you say. I mean, nobody could survive such a thing. However, if you really don't know what's going on down there, I'll try to tell you."

Macdoonan sat ready with a writing pad. Frant made pup-pup movements with his lips.

"It made me mad to see those poor creatures," Amblett said. "I wanted to help them. It looked as though they weren't ever to be allowed any rest."

"Yes?" Frant breathed the word. "What sort of creatures?"

"Why; just like—." Amblett made vague movements with his hands, then looked blank. His voice rose in shrill astonishment. "Now I come to think of it, they didn't have any *faces*!"

"Limbs?"

"Er—limbs? They didn't have any limbs. What am I thinking about? They came out of each other like pain, moved painfully. Then they flew, and something made them come down, and they went with the others, and others came out of them. It was so—so—pitiable."

"Colour, size, shape?" Frant hinted.

"Pink. That's what made it so pathetic. Pink, like babies. But their size? There wasn't anything I could compare them with. I mean there wasn't any furniture. No chairs, beds. The roof was so high. Like a pinkish mist. And that thing came swishing overhead, like a recurring note in music. I kept looking up, but I could see only a sort of band of white light against the pink."

How excruciatingly, damnably vague, Frant thought. In his mind was born instantly a wild desire to use Amblett, to dominate him, force him to make other visits to the unknown, under proper experimental conditions; to make him a slave to research.

None of the technicians in the establishment need know exactly what was going on. Frant could manage each of the further operations secretly, personally. He would order the few necessary assistants to keep out of sight at each critical stage. Even now none suspected what had really happened to Amblett.

Except Macdoonan, of course! Why must the divine achievement be shared with such a comparative clod as Macdoonan?

The clod was speaking, saying to Amblett: "Now tell us of your bodily sensations. Was it hot or cold? Did you hear any noise?"

"I didn't notice the temperature. There was a humming noise, but very low. The swish, swish overhead might have been movement only. Or it might have been noise. Wait a minute. Let me think. Wings? There were no wings. But the poor things seemed to fly when they could. They soared and swooped like—like gliders. They were pulled down like kites on the end of a string. Yes; just like a string, only it was never visible. An invisible string."

Frant's desk inter-com buzzed. He touched the button. A staff man said: "The field charging index is at seven volume, Sir. Do you wish it stepped down?"

Both Frant and Macdoonan started. It had not occurred to them that the field could have resumed functioning after having spent itself; after having a large conical section removed from its casing.

Momentarily Frant wondered why the returned section of casing had not been distended as Amblett was distended. Next instant he felt a surge of exultation. If only he could get rid of Macdoonan, then coax Amblett back to the field housing, then step up the charge to optimum!

He could delude Amblett by saying that this was the only way to recover his former bulk and condition. Then, crash! The man would be gone again. Crash! He would be back with a fresh experience to relate. Frant quivered with suppressed excitement. The immensity of the prospect before him was too much for one human mind to envisage.

Macdoonan said: "Better have it stepped down Julius, or we may have another accident."

Frant spoke into the com. "Leave it as it is, please. I will be along to control presently." He looked intolerantly at his colleague. "There's plenty of time yet, Punch."

"Not if the field develops a subsidiary automatic build-up," he objected. "It may reach optimum more quickly this time."

"Permit me," Frant said disdainfully: "Now, Amblett, keep your mind on what you saw." What else? Is there anything further you can tell us?"

It occurred to Frant that the man might have been witness to a process of birth and evolution on some distant sphere, seeing the rise and passing of many generations in a flash of time. The object moving overhead, leaving a track of white light, may have been a sun, or a satellite in its regular orbit.

And of course the curious "pink creatures" must necessarily present a vague appearance to an observer from another dimension of space-time.

One small doubt blurred the ecstasy of Frant's triumph. Had he achieved, in fact, his cherished dream of instantaneity? There had been a time-lag between Amblett's going and returning. It would be necessary to revise a lot of mathematical formulae.

He shot out of his reverie as Amblett jumped from his chair, towering over the others, his eyes glinting menacingly.

"You ask is there anything else?" Amblett shouted. "Yes. There is. I'm not standing this any longer. You got me like this. Now get me back to how I was."

From his flexing fingers came mists of blue fire. His exposed feet crackled with static. Macdoonan shrank from the horrifying apparition, but Frant already considered himself master of Amblett's fate, as completely the master as any manipulator of puppets could be over his manikins.

Floor and walls began a slow steady vibration, and the voice on the inter-com, which Frant had not switched off, called. "Index at eight point three, Sir. Shall I—?"

"No," Frant shouted. "I'm coming to see to that. Here, Amblett; now's your chance. Come back to the field and you'll be normal again in a matter of minutes. I swear that. Come on."

Macdoonan got up, wiping sweat from his brow. "I'm not standing for this, Julius. We just have to stop the field build-up." He moved towards the inter-com.

Frant stood in his way, arms extended. "No, Punch. This is my show."

"We've done enough to this poor chap," Macdoonan protested. "I'm not going to be a party to any more." He was small, compact, resolute, though quivering with nerves. Frant, tall, lean, pushed him aside with his powerful arms. He called to Amblett.

"Quick, man. Stop him interfering. He wants you to stay as you are. He doesn't want to help. He's using you as a puppet. He'll let you die. He wants your dead body for examination."

Macdoonan ducked under Frant's arms, gained the desk where the inter-com was, reached for the button. Frant turned, grasped his wrists.

"Now," he cried to Amblett. "Stop him. Save yourself. I can't hold him."

"He's lying, Amblett," Macdoonan gasped. He strove with Frant desperately, while the vibration-rate of the distant build-up increased perceptibly.

It was Frant who carried conviction, and Amblett snatched Macdoonan's frantite cap off his head, bunched his enormous fist, brought it down like a sledge-hammer on top of the smaller man's skull.

Sparks shot up in a crackling cloud, and Macdoonan's knees gave way like hinges suddenly broken. He hit the floor with a thud, lay still.

Amblett cried: "Oh, God! I've killed him. I never meant to hit so hard." He went on his knees, turned Macdoonan over. Each time his fingers made contact, a cold blue flame, like St. Elmo's fire, shimmered and danced over the prostrate body.

Frant pulled at Amblett's shoulders with his gloved hands, urgently.

The intensity of his desire made his voice tremble.

"You must leave him, Amblett. He meant to let you die. Come on. There's no time to lose. I am ordering you. It's the only way."

Amblett rose slowly, confusedly.

"Are you sure? Quite sure?"

"I tell you, yes. That blundering fool's responsible for what happened to you. Quickly, quickly." His voice came breathlessly. He felt that this was going to be the climax of his life-time endeavour. At all costs he must make Amblett his tool, gain complete moral and physical ascendancy over him.

He took Amblett by the arm, urged him out of the door into the first corridor.

A man at one of the instrument boards turned aside as they approached. "I'm thinking the load's piling up, Sir," he said. "Are you sure you don't want it stepped down?" Then he caught sight of Amblett, and his jaw dropped.

"Sure. Stay where you are. This man's had an accident. There's only one way to put it right."

Frant plunged through the first of the insulations, pulling Amblett after him. He wanted to avoid meeting any more of the staff along the serpentine ways, so used his private keys to make a short cut to the central area.

Arrived at the rim of the surrounding wall, he went to the nearest inter-com panel, pushed the button to "on." A voice crackled in reply. Frant called.

"That Sims? Step up. Step up all there is. Of course I mean it? What the hell?"

The big sphere looked more forbidding than ever. It seemed as if it could be alive. The emergent coils and cables quivered like pulsing arteries. The noise of static rose to a crackling roar, like multitudes of sausages being fried in pans.

Amblett started back in alarm, held back against Frant's clutching hand. It seemed to him that there was some evil purpose behind the professor's almost frantic eagerness. Recent memory of the shocks he had endured came back with terrifying force.

"What do you want me to do? What must I do? For God's sake don't take any risks."

"Come over here. Quickly, man. Stand where you did before, close to the sphere. There's no time to lose, I tell you."

Still Amblett hung back, his eyes wide with fear, glinting shallowly like dimmed mirrors. There seemed to be a series of undulations going on under the skin of his exposed face, neck and hands, as though there was something unstable about his framework.

Frant was banking on the sphere acting as it did before, sending Amblett on another exploration. He wanted the pressman to stand against the field while he, Frant, doubled back to the main instrument panels to observe the last steps before the build-up broke loose.

He tried to steady his voice, to speak calmly, authoritatively.

"Listen, man. I am the only hope you have. I *know* what happened. I *know* how to reverse the action. You can't stay as you are, or you'll die. And it won't be a pleasant death. Go and stand over there. At once."

He broke off with a snarl as he saw Macdoonan staggering out of the nearest of the insulated doorways.

Macdoonan yelled: "Stop it. Don't do anything of the kind. Stay where you are. I won't stand by and see this happen." He started towards the inter-com, and Frant was torn between the two expedients of pushing Amblett down the slope towards the sphere or trying to stop Macdoonan.

The kettle-drum noise that had preceded the first explosion started to din in his ears. He calculated that Macdoonan would be too late with any instructions he wanted to give over the speaker.

He dragged at Amblett, yelling incoherently.

Suddenly he became aware of a change in Amblett. The hand he was tugging at became heavier, more solid than it had been. The giant's frame started to dwindle. A pinkish mist exuded from the exposed portions of Amblett's body, as though seeking a way out from the insulation of the frantite..

The mist gathered about Frant, shrank to something that seemed to resemble a kind of attenuated jelly, whirling with a spiral motion.

Macdoonan, in the act of speaking into the inter-com, turned his head momentarily, gasped with horror, darted back through the doorway, slamming the door behind him.

Amblett was screaming, striking out at Frant through the pink jelly that encompassed him. He struck blindly, and Frant staggered back, fetching up against the gleaming skin of the sphere. Amblett hurled himself against the door, hammering at it.

The kettle-drum beating rose to a soul-shaking rhythm, threatening discord, and Macdoonan, feeling that he was taking his life in his hands, opened the door, dragging Amblett after him, a restored Amblett, once more his normal size.

He kicked the door shut, threw the locking switch, ran to the second door, got that open too. Amblett burst through with him, scrambling and sweating, weeping with terror and shock.

In the central chamber Frant was trying to get away from the sphere, but he seemed glued to it by the pink substance. He strained every nerve, animal reactions giving him a madman's strength, but the grip held.

He uttered a despairing yell.

"Amblett! Punch! Get me out! Cut out. Cut out."

Macdoonan, peering through one of the indirect visor-screens, saw the deadly struggle, saw the sphere vibrate with increasing violence. He turned quickly, intending, even at this last instant of time, to reach one of the inter-coms.

But the whole building heaved and shook. There came a dull roar, and the solid frantite floor oscillated as in an earthquake, hurling him headlong, and Amblett with him.

For a moment both lay stunned, then Macdoonan rose to his knees, his nerves a-quiver,

forced himself to stand upright. Along the corridor came staff men running.

Macdoonan staggered to the visor-screen, but could see nothing for a moment, owing to the whole central chamber being filled with a fine mist of dancing particles.

Silence came like a dead blow after the rhythmic uproar. The particles settled slowly, and Macdoonan saw that the entire sphere had disappeared. Where it had stood there was just empty space, with a vision of cracked and gaping walls beyond.

Amblett, feeling himself all over, as if incredulous of his restoration, looked on dumbly.

"Come," Macdoonan said. "There's no danger now. Let's see what's happened." He felt curiously unmoved, now that the climax was over.

He led the way through the doorways, stood with Amblett in the central surround.

Where the sphere had stood was nothing but a heap of dust, some of it still wreathing lazily above. Walls and floor looked as if they had been under bombardment. Snaky broken coils and cables lay in tangled masses around the walls.

Amblett stammered: "What's happened? Where's Frant?"

"He's gone, and taken his secrets with him." Macdoonan said. He took off cap, gloves, overshoes, zipped out of the frantite overall, stood silently surveying the ruin. "This is the end of our I.T.", he said, with a heavy sigh. "The end of years of hard work, of a build-up that might never again be possible. And you, Amblett; you've come through an experience which can never be repeated in this life."

His calm communicated itself to Amblett, who said, with a touch of whimsy: "What kind of a story do I have to write? If I talk about what I saw, they'd have me certified. Do dreams make good copy?"

"Write about an explosion which wrecked for ever the short career of Disintegrator Number One," Macdoonan said.

"And Frant?"

"This time, Amblett, there could not have been a directional I.T." He reverted to what he had said to Frant earlier on. "If that is the case, then Julius Frant's molecular being is spread out to infinity, and all the king's horses and all the king's men—"

He broke off.

"I think we ought to see if there's any more whisky."

"Sure, Mr. Macdoonan. Lord! If ever a man wanted a drink, I am that man."

THE END

26, Pine Grove,
Waterloo,
Liverpool, 22.
29th October, 1953.

Dear Sirs,—

Thank you for your advance information on the Vargo Statten Science-Fiction Magazine.

Vargo Statten enjoys great popularity with such an extraordinary number of people that I am sure that a magazine edited by him will be a great success.

I appreciate your offer to print important fan news and news which deserves nation-wide publicity and we shall certainly avail ourselves of the opportunity when the occasion arises.

Meantime we all wish you every success.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN D. ROLES.
For Liverpool Science Fiction Society.

Alandale,
118, Corey Hill Road,
Gloucester.
October 11, 1953.

Dear Editor,—

The W.E.S.F.G. send you our best wishes for your magazine and hope it will be a great success and are looking forward to the first publication with much interest and hope.

This is what British S.F. needs, a magazine that will contain fiction from the best British authors.

Yours sincerely,
T. DAVIES.

Capt. K. F. Slater.
13 Gp. R.P.C.,
B.A.O.R., 29.
26th October, 1953.

Alistair Paterson, Esq.
The Vargo Statten Science Fiction Magazine.
6, Avonmore Road,
London, W.14.

Dear Mr. Paterson,

Thank you for your letter of 22nd October, and the news of the birth of another "original" Science Fiction magazine in Britain.

Whilst it would be hypocritical of me to say that the name "Vargo Statten" fills me with unalloyed joy, I think I can sincerely state on behalf of the British membership of OPERATION FANTAST—and probably on behalf of many of our overseas brethren—that your venture is indeed welcome, and that we will all be pleased to add it to our piles of tattered but treasured magazines . . . if it proves worthy!

Now, that is the point Knowing fairly well, I feel, that collection of discreet particles which makes up fandom I cannot promise you our undivided allegiance. There will be those who rave. . . . Those who rave that here is a magazine to outclass all other magazines. Those who rave that it should never have been printed. Those who just calmly accept it, and those who just ignore it. This no matter what sort of magazine it may be!

But the fact that you have sufficient faith in fandom—and the vastly greater number of science-fiction readers who have no part in fandom—to launch a magazine calls for our congratulations, and our support. "Science-fiction" in Britain is still comparatively young—and so are the majority of its readers. Some of we older followers are apt to sneer and remark unkindly on the quality of British science-fiction, overlooking the fact that if we turn back twenty-five years to the very early magazines on which we were "educated," and consider them in the light of our present tastes, our reactions would be very similar.

You are coming in at the start—you too, we hope, will grow with your readers. You will grow as part of the field of BRITISH science-fiction, with a special appeal to British readers. Some of us—the old-timers—are so set in our ways (American science-fictional ways) that we shall miss the joy of something new, of watching it grow, of helping to form it to our tastes. But there is a larger—and younger—element in British fandom today which will be with you, all the way. On behalf of those folk I bid you welcome.

In your letter you mention that after 90% of the text has been given over to fiction, the remainder will be devoted to expressing the views, opinions, enquiries and criticism of "fans"—this is very welcome. Fandom, in Britain, is led perhaps too much by the older fans . . . here now is the chance for the younger fans to get in and have their say. In the pages of your magazine, and its contemporaries, there is room for the growth of a younger and more vigorous, more open-minded and flexible, fandom. To them also, welcome—here is an opportunity—make use of it!

At the same time we grey-bearded oldsters (that means you, Willis!) do not wish to be forgotten, and will chip in with our comments—only too often derogatory, I fear—but please make allowances for us. Don't forget that we were the folk who dreamed of television whilst tickling a crystal with a cat's whisker . . . and our dreams seem to have caught up with, and passed, us! We feel kind of lost occasionally . . . .

fantastically yours,
K. F. SLATER.

EDITORIAL NOTE: Captain Slater has certainly introduced the first Rockets into the "Rocket Mail," but we hasten to assure him that his contribution does not come under the category of "misguided missiles"! These words of honest and constructive criticism are of the stuff from which we hope to build this correspondence section into a real and lasting influence.

32, Larch Street, Hightown.
Manchester, 8.
19th October, 1953.

Dear Editor,—

I am glad to know that the first issue of the Vargo Statten Magazine is now well on its way. It will be of advantage to Science Fiction fans to have a professional magazine that is also using its pages for the benefit of news and views of fan activities here and overseas.

On behalf of the Nor-West S F. Club I wish to congratulate the producers, publishers, and Mr. John Russell Fearn for attempting this new venture in the professional field, a venture which I feel sure will become one of the most popular magazines in the U.K. and overseas.

Sincerely,
DAVE H. COHEN,
Secretary: Supermancon Committee.

EDITOR'S NOTE. Elsewhere in our pages will be found particulars of the two-day Supermancon to be held in June.

58, Sharrard Grove.
Intake,
Sheffield, 12.
18th October, 1953.

Dear Editor,—

On behalf of the "Sheffield Circle" may I extend our best wishes for the success of the Vargo Statten Science-Fiction Magazine. We are all agreed, that your tentative policy of 90% fiction and 10% fan news and gossip, is not only a very welcome policy but one designed to produce a really interesting journal. Many current periodicals pander to the "fandom fringe," merely to the extent of printing the occasional letter or a very scanty fanzine review column. Many others produce poor quality stories, and then try to convince readers, by sheer salesmanship, that their stories are good. We of the "Circle" believe that more competition of a higher quality is the only way to combat the menace. In your new magazine, with its carefully planned policy, and a co-editor well known to fandom, we feel we have found that competition, hence the good wishes. All members join together in wishing you pleasant publishing, good stories, and an ever increasing circulation. New blood is needed in the science fiction field, and you look like giving us the transfusion.

In addition, members assure me that they are eagerly awaiting publication date, so that they may spread the word of the new magazine.

In conclusion, may I repeat our heartiest congratulations, and very best wishes to the Vargo Statten Magazine.

Yours faithfully,
TERRY JEEVES,
Secretary. "Sheffield Circle."

SCIENCE FACTS AND SPECULATIONS

(*Continued from page* 17)

FLYING SAUCERS: Intelligence officers of the R.A.F. are now investigating every case of " Flying Saucers " reported over Britain. Latest reports taken before going to press come from Flying Officers T. S. Johnson and G. Smythe. Flying in a Vampire night fighter at 20,000 feet they saw an object which at first resembled a stationary star, very much higher than they were. Seconds after it passed over them at tremendous speed, maintaining level flight, and appearing to emit a fierce white light. Both officers anticipated severe leg-pulling when they reported it at West Malling. Instead they were questioned at length by the Station Commander. This was published in the daily Press on November 9.

On October 9 two B.E.A. pilots saw an object in the sky while on their way to Paris from London. On returning to their home station they were told that Northolt's radar screen had been plotting an unidentified object that circled at 50,000 feet for two hours.

On September 7 the day Neville Duke broke the speed record from Tangmere, a saucer was seen hovering over the fair field. The R.A.F. is now exchanging information with America. and the U.S. Air Force is beginning to suggest, hesitantly, let it be admitted!—that Flying Saucers could be inter-planetary.

* * *

In connection with the foregoing. the following excerpt from a report dated October 12th might have its significance: " Britain's aircraft industry Brains Trust will consider today whether to go ahead with building the first Prototype of Project V, the secret revolutionary plane known as 'THE FLYING SAUCER'." The design is top secret, but it embodies a gyroscopic engine revolving round the pilot, enabling the plane to take off vertically and with an expected speed of 1,500 miles an hour.

* * *

At an international conference of scientists, held in Zurich during August of last year, it was the voiced belief of responsible members that THE MOON by 1980 was a realistic engineering project. That means that " the first Man in the Moon " is alive today. During the same conference U.S. Navy Rocket expert, R. C. Truax, urged the conference to make the entertainment value of the expedition a means of financing it to success. Television cameras would be part of the moon rocket's equipment, and there seemed no insurmountable reason why every T.V. network in the world should not be tuned in to *this greatest show on earth.*

* * *

Listen to Dr. Von Braun, inventor of the V2: " I am more and more convinced that in 10 to 15 years we can have not only a manned rocket circling the earth, but also perhaps a manned spaceship."

If the West keeps its lead, what is the chance that the first man in the moon will be British? Certainly the U.S. is ahead in giant rocket research, but with the Empire Rocket project in Australia, fast forging onward, there is a fair chance that the British may yet beat the Americans.

* * *

On the basis of present scientific evidence it is calculated the spaceship stands one chance in 100,000 years of encountering a meteor large enough to cause its total destruction.


THE INEVITABLE CONFLICT
E.C. Tubb

CHAPTER ONE

IT looked like a tiny speck against the clear blue of the sky; like an insect, a minute point of black high in the heavens. It seemed to hover for a moment, poised beside the towering wall of a high building, then, with shocking abruptness, it expanded, grew, took on a recognisable form.

Arms sprouted from it, legs, the pale blob of a face and the streaming, wind-whipped garments of a man. It twisted a little as it fell and from it came a thin, high-pitched screaming. It struck, smashing against the concrete of the pavement with a horrible soggy sound, and from it blood plumed in a fine red rain.

Curt Harris felt sick.

He stood, his muscles trembling with the reaction of his narrow escape, and dabbed stupidly at the blood on his light clothing. He glanced at the messy, bloodstained pulp lying almost at his feet, then gulped and looked away. Around both him and the dead man a crowd had gathered, pressing forward and staring with the peculiar morbidity common to crowds, at the broken remnants of what had once been a man.

"You there! What happened?" The policeman thrust himself forward, driving through the crowd with a practised ease.

"A man jumped off the roof." Curt dabbed at his ruined suit, then, as he only managed to smear the blood even further over the thin material, gave up in disgust. "I watched him fall. He came from this building and almost hit me when he landed."

"Tough luck." The officer was casual in his sympathy. He flicked the switch on his belt radio and muttered something into the throat mike, glancing at his left wrist and squinting up at the building. He stared at Curt. "You look as if you could use a wash."

"I know it." Anger thinned the young man's lips. "This is a hell of a welcome. I've just arrived in this city and this is what happens. Any chance of making a claim against his estate?"

The policeman shrugged.

"I doubt it. He was probably just a visitor to the building, and anyway, the city will have first claim for burial expenses." He pursed his lips as he stared down at the mess. "That is if we ever find out who he was. A drop of two thousand feet doesn't leave much for identification."

Curt nodded, wiping his face with a clean handkerchief he'd taken from an inner pocket. He stared at the stained linen with disgust, and crumpling it into a ball, tossed it beside the corpse.

"I'm looking for the Interplanet Building," he said to the officer. "Could you direct me?"

"Don't you know where it is?" The man seemed genuinely surprised.

"No. I told you. I've only just arrived and I'm a stranger here. Is it far?"

"Not exactly." For some reason the officer seemed amused. "You're right at it." He pointed towards the towering building from which the dead man had jumped. "There it is, right beside you. Going in?"

"That's the idea."

"Maybe you should get cleaned up first" The policeman pointed down the street. "There's a place about three hundred metres from here where you can shower and get your suit cleaned. It'll only take an hour."

"Thanks," said Curt dryly. He stared up at the huge building, then, glancing down at his clothes, hesitated. He was in a mess, the blood had dried and made ugly blotches against the light material of his suit, and from the stiffness of his features he could imagine what he must look like.

But he was late, in a temper, and his nerves still jangled from shock and reaction. Grimly he strode towards the wide doors.

The receptionist was an overpainted blonde, her hair bleached almost white, her long nails a vivid emerald, her full lips coloured to match. She lifted her head as Curt strode from the elevator and stared at him with an almost naked hostility.

"Yes?"

"My name is Harris, Curt Harris. I have an appointment."

"Indeed? With whom?"

"With your boss I guess, I don't know his name." He fumbled in a pocket and produced a battered envelope. "Here. Maybe you can make out his scrawl, I can't."

Cautiously she took the envelope, slipping out the enclosed letter and reading it with widening eyes. She gulped, staring at the blood-smeared man before her, and suddenly she thawed and became all politeness and eagerness to help.

"This is from Director Carter, sir. You have an appointment you say?"

"Yes."

"One moment." She riffled through a small file and glanced at a card. "That is correct, sir. The Director is waiting for you, but. . ." Her stare at his ruined clothing was expressive. Curt scowled.

"Show me in."

"Certainly, sir, but your clothes. . .?"

"I said show me in," he snapped. "Just in case you didn't know this is the latest fashion.

Polka dots with a face to match. Now hurry! We mustn't keep the Director waiting must we?"

He grinned down at her elaborate coiffure as she fumbled with the buttons of the intercom.

Director Carter was a man who looked as if he had lived too long. Sunlight from the high windows glistened from his naked scalp and his thin features were wrinkled and sere. He rose from behind a wide desk, smiling, and holding out a claw-like hand, and Curt envied him his expensive suit.

"Harris! Good of you to come." He didn't seem to notice the young man's dishevelled appearance. Curt shook the proffered hand and slumped into a chair near the wide desk.

"Sorry I'm late," he apologised. "Some fool decided to jump off your roof just as I arrived." He stared ruefully at his clothing. "He missed me by a hair, but his blood gave me a shower bath. I would have changed, but all my stuff is at the landing field and it would have taken too long."

"Someone jump off the roof?" Carter frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Could there be any doubt?" Curt asked dryly. "I watched him fall. It was from this building right enough. Probably some visitor who decided to end it all."

"No." Carter seemed worried. "The roof is barred to the public, the whole building is for that matter, but the upper floors are sealed. I wonder. . ."

He stepped over to the intercom on his desk, his thin fingers stabbing at the signal buttons.

"Medway?"

"Yes, sir."

"Carter here. Someone has committed suicide. Jumped off the roof. Check all personnel and report back as soon as you know who it is."

"Yes, sir." The intercom clicked into silence. Carter sighed and relaxed in his padded chair, his wrinkled features looking almost monkey-like in the bright sunlight.

"I'm sorry about what happened, Harris. Did you take a note of the time by any chance?"

"The time?" Curt shook his head. "No I didn't. Why?"

"It might have helped." Carter didn't elaborate his ambiguous remark. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Not too bad. One of the jet engines cut out shortly after we left England, but that was all."

"I see. You didn't note the time it cut did you?"

Curt shook his head. "No. Should I have done?"

"I. . ." Carter paused as the intercom hummed its attention signal. "Yes?"

"Medway here, sir. Personnel check complete."

"Good. Anyone missing?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, man! Who?"

"Benwick, sir."

"Benwick!" Carter thinned his lips in sudden anger. "Damn it, Medway! I warned you to be careful."

"I know, sir. He must have wandered off and found an unlocked door to the roof. I'm sorry, sir."

"Regrets won't bring him back, Medway. You should have been more careful." Carter paused, his thin fingers drumming on the edge of his desk. "Better come down here," he snapped. "Harris has arrived."

The intercom clicked as he opened the circuit and the old man stared thoughtfully at Curt as he sat in his chair.

"I'm sorry, Harris, but in a way you have arrived too late."

"Too late?" The young man frowned at the old Director. "I don't understand."

"No. I don't suppose that you do, but you will, Harris, you will. The pity of it is that the man who was to have explained to you is dead. The one man you would have been most interested in has gone."

"Benwick?"

"Yes. Professor Benwick. You know him?"

"No." Curt stretched his long legs and fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes. He fished out a crumpled package and from it took a battered cylinder of tobacco. He lit it, dragging deep at the fragrant blue smoke, and stared at the old man through drifting blue clouds. "What is all this about, Carter? Why did you send for me? Why all the desperate urgency?"

"Urgency?" Carter shrugged. "True, but now? I wonder?" He stared at the young man. "Benwick was to have explained," he said bitterly. "He knew his danger and tried to guard against it. Obviously we underrated it, or perhaps nothing we could have done would have prevented it, I don't know."

"Then. . .?"

"Benwick is dead, Harris. A suicide, killing himself by his own action, throwing himself off the roof to certain destruction. It could have been an accident, but. . ." The old man shook his head and Curt stared at him with mounting irritation.

"But what? Get to the point."

"Benwick is dead, Harris—and you almost died with him. That is the point."

Silence fell as the two men stared at each other.

CHAPTER TWO

MEDWAY was tall and thin, with gaunt cheeks and thin, blond hair. He stared at Curt with washed-out blue eyes, and his thin hand felt limp and a little clammy. Curt shook it, feeling as if he were holding a snake, then, the polite formalities over, slumped back into his chair, his hands busy as he searched for cigarettes.

"A pity that you arrived late, Harris." Medway almost collapsed into a chair opposite the young man, sighing as though he were on the verge of exhaustion. "I'm sure that you would have been interested in Benwick."

"If I'd have arrived a second earlier," said Curt grimly. "Benwick and I would have met—fatally."

"Yes, Medway." Carter leaned across his wide desk. "What about that? How did he manage to commit suicide?"

The thin man shrugged.

"I don't know. He knew his danger as well as we did, and he seemed determined not to do anything foolish. I'd left him for a moment, gone to bathe my eyes, and when I returned he had gone." He sighed again. "Maybe I was careless," he admitted. "But I haven't slept for three days now, and anyway, how was I to guess that someone had left the roof door open?"

"True." Carter nodded, and for the first time Curt realised that the old man, like Medway, seemed to be on the edge of physical exhaustion.

"Look," he said, and sat up in his comfortable chair. "I hate to remind you of this, but I had an appointment, an urgent appointment. Your letter interrupted my vacation in England. Would you mind telling me what all this is about?"

"I'm sorry, Harris, you must forgive me. Benwick's death. . ." The old man let his voice trail into silence and something like dread shone for a moment in his deep-set eyes.

"Shall I explain?" Medway glanced towards the old Director, then, at the old man's nod, turned to Curt. "You didn't know Benwick," he said abruptly. "In a way there is no reason why you should, but you both had something in common, and it may have helped had you known him."

"Well I didn't," snapped Curt irritably. The blood had dried on his face and he felt as if he needed a hot bath. "What did we have in common?"

"You had both been to Venus." Medway paused as if the statement was self-explanatory. Curt shrugged.

"So what? Were we the only ones?"

"No but. . ." The thin man hesitated. "You and Benwick were the only two men left alive who had returned from Venus. Benwick came back about the time you landed. That was about a year ago wasn't it?"

"Just over." Curt drew heavily on his cigarette. "I spent six months there and I've been back about eight. Benwick must have left about a month before I landed, we probably crossed in transit."

"Why did you go to Venus, Harris?"

"Don't you know?" Curt glanced at the Director. "Your people sent me. I contacted the natives, made a trade pact, then came back here to finish my work on those Martian artifacts the De Lamatre expedition found. I finished that work a few weeks ago, then took off for a holiday. Your letter followed me to England and I caught the next Stratoliner back. Surely you must know all this?"

"It would be in the files," apologised the thin man. "Personally we haven't much knowledge of you, the Greater New York office controls normal interplanetary traffic, we are only concerned with research."

"So?"

"So we are worried, Harris. Not many men have returned from Venus as yet. Most of them are still working out their contract time. Some have come back of course, thirty-seven to be exact, but. . ." He paused again and Curt shifted uneasily in the silence.

"But what?"

"But they are all dead, Harris. An hour ago only you and Benwick still remained alive out of the thirty-seven. Now Benwick is dead." He stared at Curt. "You are the only living man who has been to Venus, Harris. The only living man on Earth. And, if our predictions are correct, you are going to die at almost any moment!"

Curt was no fool. No man who had spent half his life travelling and living in strange and alien places could be a fool—and live. He accepted what the thin man had said, but even as he accepted it, his mind was busy as it turned and worried at the information. He had a peculiar gift for extrapolation, the ability to take a couple of facts and from them deduce a third, a fourth, a fifth. He had been to Venus. Medway had said that of all the men who had been to Venus and returned he was the only one

alive. Therefore. . .

"Disease?" He looked at the thin man. Medway shook his head.

"No. Not that we can discover at least. If it were disease it would be simple. We could plot the incubation period, isolate the virus, determine the course of illness, maybe even find a cure. No, Harris. It isn't disease."

"Coincidence then?"

"Thirty-six coincidences?" Medway shook his head. "Possible perhaps, but, Harris, we know that it isn't coincidence."

"Assassination?" Curt shrugged as he made the suggestion. "Remote I'll grant, but still a possibility."

"No."

"Then I'll give up. You've had more time to work on the problem than I have. However, to me it seems a simple one. You have thirty-six recorded deaths. Out of all those facts you must have found some common factors. Surely it wouldn't be too difficult to sieve them, discard some, retain others? To me that would be obvious."

"Yes," said Medway, and fell silent. Carter cleared his throat with a rasping sound.

"You mustn't think that we're all fools here, Harris. At first we didn't realise that anything was wrong. Men died, but then men are always dying, there is nothing strange in that. It was only when we realised that the Venus-return death rate was so high as to be abnormal that we began to investigate. By then we had only three remaining personnel left. You, Benwick, and a man named Lanson."

"Lanson died?"

"Yes. For some reason he stepped in front of a turbine car. He died before he even got here. We were luckier with Benwick, but now even he is dead, and you are our only hope."

Curt frowned. "Lanson stepped in front of a turbine car you say? Are you trying to tell me that all of those thirty-six men committed suicide?"

"Suicide or accident." Carter leaned across his desk. "Silly accidents, stupid, utterly insane. One man squinted through the barrel of a cleaned shotgun, tested the trigger—and forgot that the other barrel was loaded. One man fell down three steps and broke his neck. another went fishing, caught a pike, and was pulled into the river and drowned. They are the silly accidents I meant, but they are in the minority. The rest of the men died by their own hand, or, like Lanson, threw all elementary caution to the winds and paid the penalty."

He stared at Curt.

"One thing is certain. Not one of those men died from natural causes. No disease, no organic failure, no illness or post-operative relapse. Death, when it came, was quick and final."

"And they had all returned from Venus?"

"Yes."

"I see." Curt leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. He wasn't worried. Thirty-six deaths out of all those dying every day wasn't many, and coincidence could play some peculiar tricks. Still, it was peculiar that all the men who had returned from Venus should die. That was stretching coincidence too far. It hinted at some outside agency, some overall factor, something almost tangible which had threatened the men.

Carter's voice broke in on his thoughts.

"So you see, Harris, we are relying on you to help us. Obviously no more men can be brought from Venus until we know what is causing these deaths. As you are the sole remaining man who has been there and returned, we hope to find out from you what is the cause. Naturally you will help us."

"Will I?" Curt stared at the old Director. "What makes you say that?"

"Logic." Almost the old man smiled. "Thirty-seven men have returned from Venus, Thirty-six of those men are dead. Is there any reason to suppose that the entire thirty-seven will not die? You are the last, Harris. At this moment your life isn't worth a bent penny!"

"No?"

"No." Carter glanced at the thin man. "There is one other thing, Harris. I suggest that we all go to the upper floor, there is something there I want you to see. Are you ready, Medway?"

"Must we?" The thin man seemed to cringe back into his chair. "I'm so tired. Can't it wait?"

"No. Tomorrow may be too late. Harris may be dead and our last hope gone." He rose and the thin man rose with him. Curt remained seated.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the upper floor." The old Director's voice held a strange gentleness "There is something there I want you to see, nothing startling, just a machine, but I think that you will be interested in it. Very interested."

Curt shrugged and followed the two men towards the elevator.

CHAPTER THREE

THE accident happened just like all accidents, unexpected, unpredictable, and utterly unguarded against. The signal lights over the elevator doors flashed and the doors slid open with a faint hissing of compressed air. Curt stood a little ahead of the two men and as the doors opened he stepped forward, impatient

to get upstairs and get whatever was going to happen over with.

He stepped forward, his foot outstretched, his weight shifting to his unsupported leg. He had done it a thousand times. Everyone did it. But this time it happened.

There was no elevator cage to take the weight of his unsupported foot.

For the merest fraction of time he didn't realise what had happened, then, as he felt himself beginning to fall down the shaft, his hands clutched frantically at the edges of the door. For a moment he hung in awful suspension, his fingers slipping from the smooth plastic.

Frantically he glared into the shaft. The elevator was of the new type without central cables and with a self-motivated car. There was nothing within reach to offer a grip against his inevitable fall to the basement more than two thousand feet below.

Curt remembered Benwick and felt sick.

Hands clawed at him then, seizing his arms, his neck, grabbing at his hair. For a moment the three men tottered on the brink of eternity, then, with an almost agonizing slowness, Medway and the old Director pulled him back to safety.

He grunted as he regained his balance and sagged against the wall, sweat standing out in great beads on his forehead, and the cold shock of reaction tearing at his nerves. His hands trembled and he raised them, staring at the blood oozing from beneath his fingernails, as if they belonged to someone else.

"A hell of a welcome," he muttered through a cloud of smoke. "Twice within the hour. What is this place, Carter, a booby trap?"

"I think that we'd better take the stairs." Carter trembled and shook as if it had been he who had almost died. "I should have known better than to trust the elevator anyway. Another second. . . ." He shuddered and turned away. Medway stared at Curt.

"Thirty-seven," he said significantly. "You see what I mean?"

"That was an accident." Irritably the young man stamped on the butt of his smouldering cigarette. "How often does an elevator cage signal its arrival when it isn't there? A thing like that couldn't happen once in ten million times. Twenty million.

"Exactly. Medway stared at the young man. "And what is the probability factor against thirty-six men, all from the same place, all with diverse backgrounds, dying of suicide and accident within one year of their arrival back home?"

"That's got nothing to do with it!" Reaction-induced anger sharpened the young man's voice. "The two things are totally different."

"Are they?" Medway shrugged and turning, led the way towards a short flight of stairs.

Curt grunted and followed him to the upper floor.

Carter was waiting for them when they arrived. The old man seemed even more tired and ill than he had in the office, and Medway hesitated, almost cringing, as if reluctant to enter the locked room. Carter glared at him.

"Hurry, Medway. You know what you have to do."

"I know." The thin man fumbled in his pocket and produced a ring of keys. He unlocked the thick door, pushing it back on its slide, then, as the others entered the room, locked it behind them.

Curt stared at what squatted in the centre of the floor.

It was nothing much, just a control panel, three chairs, and a couple of what looked like hair-dryers, but around the machine quivered an impression of leashed power, and staring at it, he was reminded of some huge spider resting in its web. Interestedly he strode towards it.

"Careful," warned the old man. "Don't disturb the settings."

"What is it?"

"A machine." Carter seemed purposely vague. He stepped towards the control panel and studied the dials. Medway followed him, slipping into one of the chairs and staring distastefully at the huge helmet-like attachments.

"I can see that it's a machine." Curt tried to control the impatience in his voice. "I'm not a fool. What does it do?"

"Do?" Carter brushed the glistening panel with the tips of his claw-like hands. "It doesn't do anything. Tell me, Harris. Do you know anything of cybernetics?"

"Naturally."

"Well then, this in a way, is a cybernetic machine. It is the closest thing to a human brain mankind has ever built. This is just the control panel of course, the main part of the machine is far below, well underground to protect it from stray radiation."

"I see." Curt shrugged and sat in one of the chairs. "A glorified adding machine then."

"No!" The old man sounded surprisingly vehement. "Far from that." He looked at the young man. "You have a peculiar talent, Harris. You are able to extrapolate from data and form conclusions which have a high degree of probability. It is that talent which has made you so valuable to the Interplanet Organisation."

"Well?"

"This machine does what you do, but it does it immeasurably better and with a probability factor which makes its findings as near to fact as can be desired. The theory has been known for a long time now, and the dream behind most of the electronic calculators was just such a machine. Its building had to wait, however, wait until men had reached Venus."

"How so?"

"The memory banks of all previous machines were restricted to a 'yes-no' response. That meant that literally millions of such units were required for even the simplest 'brain.' The tri-polar crystals from Venus solved that problem. They are capable of storing a fantastic amount of data, each molecule can retain a 'yes-no' signal, and so for the first time we really had a chance of building something which could approach the human brain."

"So you have built a machine." Curt deliberately made his tones casual. "What of it?"

Medway stirred in his chair, his thin cheeks reddening, but strangely, the old Director ignored the tone of the young man's voice.

"Yes," he said quietly. "We have built a machine. An infallible machine which is able to predict the future."

"No." Curt shook his head. "What you have built is a machine able to take facts and from those facts extrapolate something with a high degree of probability. There is nothing mysterious about that. It is merely basing a calculation on previous experience. If the sky is overcast, the air humid, the barometer falling, there is a high probability of storm. We know that. All your machine does is to add several more factors, and from those extra facts deduce a higher percentage of probability.

He paused and lit a cigarette.

"I can do it, but I would be the last to claim infallibility. Your machine can do it, perhaps better than any living man, but only because it has a larger memory bank and more data than is possible to a human being. But it isn't infallible, Carter. Nothing is. Nothing can be."

"You are wrong, Harris." The old Director stared at the machine, a peculiar expression in his deep-set eyes. "This machine is infallible. It isn't new, it was built shortly after men reached Venus, ten years ago now, and in all that time it has never been wrong. We have come to rely on it, to base our economy on it, to refer to it in case of doubt. We trust it, Harris, we have to. No man or men could ever plot the complexities of our civilisation now without aid. There is too much to know, too many unrelated facts which have a hidden effect on each other."

"I didn't know that." Curt frowned at the glistening control panel. "Do you think it wise to rely on a machine?"

"Why not? At least it is unemotional, unprejudiced, and utterly logical."

"Perhaps." Curt flicked the ash from his cigarette. "What has the machine to do with me?"

"It may mean your life," said Carter quietly. and motioned towards Medway.

Silently the thin man reached for one of the helmets.

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE was no sound, nothing but a flickering of lights on the control panel, but Curt knew that far below, deep down in the rock and soil beneath the building, invisible currents of electricity surged along wires and activated delicate responses.

"There is a brief warm-up period," explained the old Director. "Medway!"

"Ready."

"Then don the helmet." Reluctantly the thin man lowered the glistening hood of metal over his gaunt features and blond hair. "We are using direct mental control," continued Carter. "Medway is letting the contents of his mind flow into the memory banks below."

"I forgot, you would know nothing about the newest discoveries in paraphysical science. Briefly then, we have found it possible to project our thoughts. Only with the aid of tremendous quantities of equipment and special fields of energy, but we can do it." He turned and glanced at the controls. "Medway is a form of successful mutation, we have found that he is particularly able to transmit his thoughts via the machine. It is physically exhausting, but by far the most efficient method yet discovered."

"I don't understand." Curt frowned as he stared at the slumped figure of the thin man. "You said that the machine is unemotional."

"It is."

"But if a man projects his thoughts into the memory banks, wouldn't he also project his emotions?"

"Perhaps, but that is why we use trained personnel only. All Medway is doing is to think of everything he knows concerning you. After he is through I want you to do the same. Then, with all the available data given to the memory banks, the machine will be able to predict your death."

"Will it?" Curt thinned his lips as he stared at the silent controls. "You told me that the machine had already predicted my death. Why,

if you are already certain, must we go through all this? "

" The machine has predicted the deaths of all who have returned from Venus, but naturally, we had no chance to isolate the individuals. Only Benwick, and now you."

" Benwick was tested? "

" Yes."

" And the prediction? "

Carter picked up a slip of paper from where it rested. " Benwick was tested late last night," he said quietly, and handed the slip of paper to the young man. Curt stared at it for a moment, then, his voice echoing flatly in the silence, read the typed words.

" Prediction. Subject will die within twelve hours. 99.99. Within nine hours. 99.54. Within six hours. 99.28. Probability that sole remaining Venus-return will die. Within twelve hours. 78.54. Within nine hours. 68.39. Within six hours. 54.32."

Curt stared at the old Director.

" This was predicted by the machine? "

" Yes. Naturally we took stringent precautions. Benwick was never alone. He knew the answer but seemed determined to beat his fate. He lived ten hours."

" Suicide! " Curt stared out of the high windows, the paper crumpling in his hand. " Why?

" That is what we must discover. That is why I am hoping that you will show us what it is that drove these men to their deaths."

" At least he had a chance. His highest probability factor was 99.99 per cent., he still had a hope of beating whatever it was that killed him."

" 99.99 per cent is the highest prediction the machine will ever make," said Carter sombrely. " Did you notice your own figures? "

" Yes. High, but I'm still alive."

" And yet you have had two narrow escapes within the past hour. If the machine is correct, and I know that it is, your danger will increase." He turned as Medway lifted the glistening helmet from his gaunt features. " We will soon know. Ready, Harris? "

" No."

" What? " Carter stared at the young man. " What do you mean? "

" I'm not going to put my head in that thing, that's what I mean. Now don't get all upset about it. I refuse and that's final."

" But why, man? Why? "

" I don't trust it, that's why."

" Don't be a fool! How can it harm you? "

" I don't know," admitted Curt, " but I'm not taking any chances. If I'm slated for death then I don't want any machine to help me along the road. Benwick trusted you, and Benwick is dead. I prefer to take my own chances."

" You. . . ." Carter bit his thin lip and little spots of anger burned on his wrinkled cheeks. " I thought that you were an intelligent man, Harris. I'd hoped that you could help us."

" Will my death help you? " Curt shook his head. " No, Carter. I'm alive, and I intend staying alive."

" But. . . ." Carter shrugged and turned to the thin man. " All right, Medway. It is useless to argue with him. Don the helmet and give the instructions." He stood, dislike for the young man in every angle of his stooped figure, as the thin man replaced the helmet over his head.

It was soon over.

Tensely they waited while lights flared on the instrument panel, and Medway's voice was a whisper as he explained their workings to Curt.

" The machine is scanning every item of information which could possibly bear on your survival factor. It will take a few moments, incredibly fast though the relays are. Remember, it has to take into consideration every single piece of information which could possibly apply to you."

" How will we know the decision."

" The code symbols are translated and typed. A copy of the slip is recorded on the instrument panel here. If the machine hasn't enough data to make a prediction, it will notify us, but that is rare."

" Couldn't it make a mistake? "

" Impossible. The machine is never wrong."

Curt frowned, then, as a red lamp flashed, bent forward. Carter withdrew a slip of paper from a slot, read it, then silently passed it to the young man.

" What is it? " Medway craned forward. " What does it say? "

Curt ignored the thin man, his eyes staring at the few words typed on the thin paper.

Prediction. Subject will die within twelve hours. 99.99. Within nine hours. 99.99. Within six hours. 99.99.

The paper crumpled as the young man clenched his fist in a savage determination to beat the machine. According to the prediction his death was certain within six hours, but never had he felt more vital, more fit, less ready for death.

It wasn't dying that he was afraid of. Death was the one inevitable conflict which no man could avoid, but that was natural death, not the cold calculations of an unfeeling machine.

He couldn't die within six hours! He couldn't! And yet. . . .

The machine was never wrong!

(Continued next month)

THE COPPER BULLET

By JOHN WERNHEIM

DR. HENRY BLAND, chief of the Atomic Research Centre, was in one of his moods again. Probably overwork. Certainly he looked pale and troubled as he paced up and down the laboratory annexe wherein he and two members of the staff were working.

"Death and destruction to millions," Dr. Bland muttered, coming to a halt and musing. "That's the thing I can't get over! Here are we in here, working out the complicated equations necessary for nuclear fission and we don't give a thought to the deeper issues."

"Wouldn't do much good if we did, sir," remarked the younger of his two colleagues—Jeffrey Travers, research scientist. "We have bombs to make in this pile where we're all imprisoned, so what more is there to be said?"

Dr. Bland did not reply. The third man did not speak, either. He was essentially a mathematician, cold-faced and pale-eyed. He did not indulge in the scientific arguments which often brought Bland and young Travers to high words and short tempers.

"I don't mean the destruction the bombs can cause," Bland said presently, "though heaven knows that is appalling enough. I'm thinking of the universes we destroy every time we indulge in atom-splitting! I've thought about it a lot these last few days," he continued, rubbing his forehead. "Funny thing, but I think about it most when I get these confounded headaches of mine. Never had one in my life until recently."

"You mean," the third man said slowly, "that every time we split atoms we destroy other worlds and universes?"

"Scientific logic, isn't it?" Bland demanded irritably, his thin face working. "Everybody knows in these days—or they should—that the atomic world is simply the microcosm, that an electron is an electric charge which, for the purposes of analogy can be likened to a planet; that the proton is the central attraction—like our own to us—and that the atom itself, the molecular structure, can be likened to a universe. We live in the *macrocosm*. Lesser beings, as far as size is concerned that is — live in the *microcosm*. Every time we indulge in atom-splitting we destroy countless universes and maybe millions of living beings, so small we cannot even conceive of them. Just as some giant agency outside our own universe might also decide to split the atom. That could possibly involve *our* universe and wipe us out. It is the thought of this merciless destruction which worries me."

Bland gave a sigh. "Anyway, gentlemen, I've talked enough. I'm going to my office for a brief rest. This headache of mine is killing me. Oh, Wilson," he added to the third man, "just come along with me, will you? I've some papers to give you."

The lean-faced mathematician gave a nod and accompanied the professor from the laboratory. Left to himself, Jeffrey Travers reflected for a while on the somewhat peculiar things his superior had said; then with a shrug he returned to his work.

After a while Wilson returned. He seemed as though he were making an effort to control himself even though he did not say anything. He went over to the big locker where he, Travers, and Bland kept some of their equipment and personal belongings, then hurried out again. In a matter of perhaps three minutes he had returned once more.

"The old man wants you, Jeff," he said. "Special report, or something."

Jeff gave a nod and slid from his stool, leaving the laboratory swiftly.

NOT ten yards from Dr. Bland's private quarters the cleaner was mopping the already immaculate floor which led to the back regions of this heavily guarded atomic-research centre. It was the sound of a gunshot which made him look up abruptly and then around him. Queer noises were numerous in this hive of industry, but there was no mistaking a gun

report—and it seemed to have come from the direction of Dr. Bland's sanctum.

The cleaner threw down his mop and began moving swiftly. He arrived in the adjoining corridor just in time to see Wilson gripping Jeffrey Travers tightly. From other doorways down the long, shining length figures in overalls were appearing.

"What on earth's the matter, man?" Wilson was demanding, still holding Jeff tightly "What's wrong?"

Jeff pointed back shakenly towards Dr. Bland's room.

"He's—he's dead!" he gasped out. "Shot through the head, I think. I saw him sitting there slumped at his desk and—and I just panicked."

"You mean he's shot himself?" Wilson demanded blankly.

"I don't know. I just dashed out to get help."

Wilson looked at the other laboratory employees. "Get M.I.5 right away. I'll take charge for the moment— We'd better go and see what's wrong in Dr. Bland's room."

He strode into the sanctum, Jeff following behind him. In silence the other technicians stood looking in. Dr. Bland was in his tubular chair at the desk. He had fallen forward so that his head and shoulders sprawled on the blotter. In his high, white forehead was a round hole burned around the edges. That he was stone dead was obvious.

"No sign of a gun," one of the men said, looking about him.

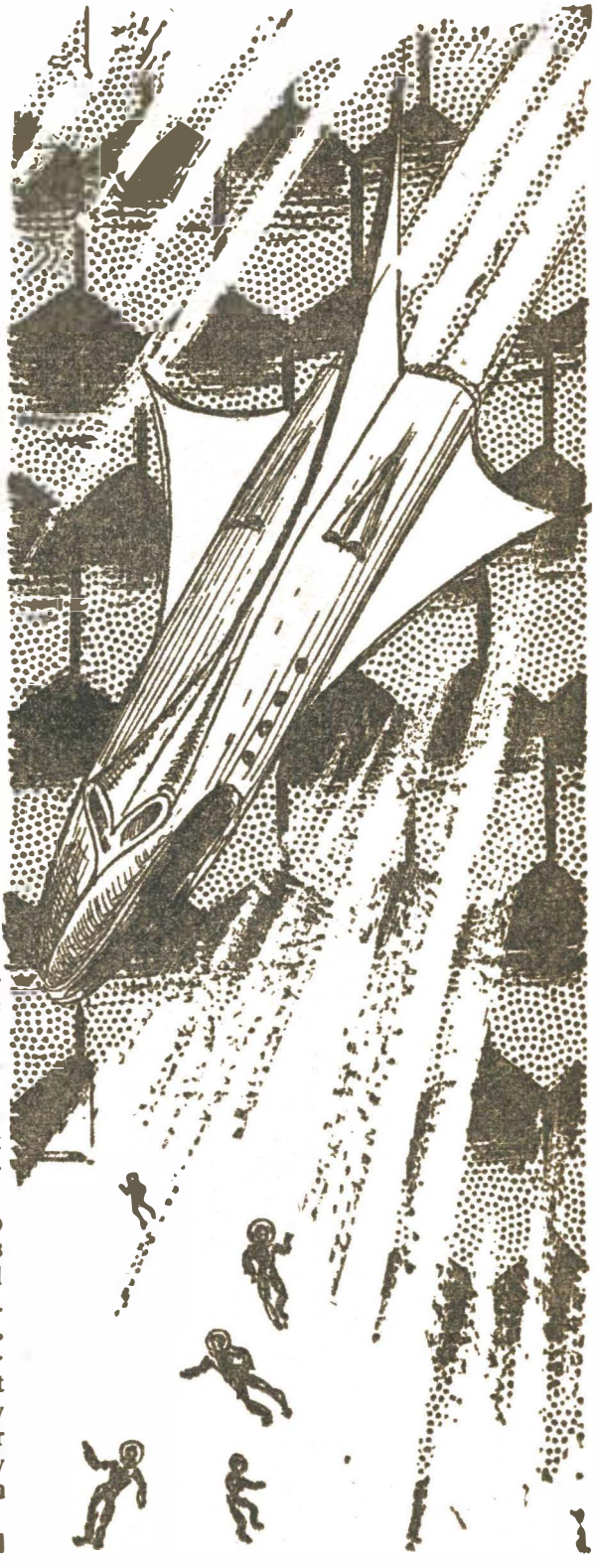
"No, but— What's that?" Jeff asked, pointing to the oak inkstand.

Everybody looked. On the polished woodwork lay a bullet, copper-jacketed, of the type used in a .38 revolver. It had no cartridge cover.

"It looks," Wilson said slowly, "as though that bullet has been fired and then put there. The cartridge case should be somewhere around. . . . ." He gave a vague glance about him and then added sharply, "Don't touch anything! Leave that to the experts."

His order was obeyed and in silence the group stood waiting, wondering, until two officials from M.I.5, permanently connected on patrol work at the atomic centre, came into the room. Behind them trooped a surgeon, photographers, and fingerprint experts. When each of these experts had done his job the two M.I.5 men went into action. One asked questions of everybody concerned, including the cleaner: the other examined the room in detail. It was not very long before a .38 revolver was fished out from under the desk at which Bland lay dead.

His finger in the revolver barrel the official



studied the weapon interestedly.

"Why, that's mine!" Jeffrey Travers exclaimed, astonished.

"Oh? Yours?" Cold eyes studied him. "What's it doing here, Mr. Travers?"

"I just don't know. I usually keep it in my tackle in the annexe. It's licensed. All of us have guns for personal protection since we're on dangerous work."

"Mmmm." The official laid the gun on the blotter and removed his finger, then without touching the weapon he sniffed the barrel. "Recently fired. And this bullet on the ink-stand is a thirty-eight. There should be a cartridge somewhere."

"Right here," the other man said, and picked it up from beside the bureau. . . .

Such was the beginning of things. Almost before he could grasp what was happening Jeff Travers found himself under arrest and committed for trial for the murder of Dr. Bland, bail being refused.

It was during the trial that he realized how hopelessly he was involved. He had been the last man to see Bland alive—for Wilson swore the "old man" had been fit enough when he had left him for the second time—and it was his gun that had been found. The bullet had been fired from it, ballistics had proved, and the shot had come from short range judging from the burning round the forehead wound. The theory was that the bullet had then been quickly removed and put on the ink-stand, though just why Jeff Travers had done this was not very clear.

To the defence's protest that Travers had not had time to do such a thing the prosecution stated that there had been *just* time, and no more. The fact that the hole in Bland's forehead was larger than the bullet itself showed that the hole had been widened to extract the bullet. . . .

Added to this was the cleaner's statement about a gunshot—which Jeff Travers himself swore he had never heard—and there was also the known fact that Jeff Travers and Bland had often quarrelled violently over scientific issues.

The inference which the jury could draw was obvious and they came in with a verdict of "Guilty, with strong recommendations to mercy," chiefly because the crime had apparently been one of impulse and not premeditated.

The way things looked at the end of the trial Jeff Travers was doomed and Grant Wilson was the new head of the Research Centre . . . but one man was not satisfied. Far from it.

THE dissatisfied man was the extraordinary Mortimer Quill. Strictly speaking, this short-statured, bumptious little man was an ex-backroom boy—a "Boffin." A brilliant scientist, as everybody agreed, but with a kink somewhere. He preferred to study crime to worrying over research problems. So, having a considerable private income with which to indulge his fancy, he had become a holy terror to all criminal organizations. The intolerably conceited Mortimer Quill was a friend of Scotland Yard, always welcome at M.I.5, his scientific know-how having solved many an otherwise inexplicable crime.

That he knew all the details of the Bland affair went without saying. No criminal trial had ever appeared but what he was present throughout the proceedings. The moment he heard the verdict on Jeffrey Travers he left the courtroom, jumped into his car, and drove straight to the London headquarters of M.I.5 in Whitehall. He was welcomed cordially enough by Chief-inspector Boden of the Metropolitan Division, but Boden's pleasantries began to evaporate before Quill's rapier looks.

"Let young Travers hang," Quill stated flatly, "and it will be the biggest miscarriage of justice ever! I *never* heard of a man being accused on such flimsy evidence!"

"But, Mr. Quill, everything fits—"

"Don't argue with me!" Quill roared, glaring. "From the viewpoint of little-minded dolts maybe everything *does* fit in—but not to me. And I am Mortimer Quill, which makes all the difference. I wish to examine the details again."

"Can't be done. The trial's over and—"

"You listen to me," Quill broke in deliberately, his eye-lids drooping insolently. "I am going to work on this problem for the scientific interest it possesses. I mean to prove how Bland *really* died, and at the same time give science some information which will knock out its academic eye! As for the trial, it can be cited as a mis-trial if new and incontestable evidence should be forthcoming, as it will be with me in charge of things. This demands a brain, not a ninny. Well, what about it?"

Boden swallowed his wrath and went purple in the doing.

"Very well," he whispered, with strangled patience. "We can't afford to quarrel with you, Mr. Quill: you've helped us too much in the past. Just what do you want exactly?"

"First, all statements by the various people; all photographs, fingerprint reports, and doctor's p.m. statement."

"I'll have them at your flat in an hour,"

Boden promised, and with that Quill slammed his untidy trilby back on his bushy mane of grey hair, and departed.

Boden kept his word and for the remainder of the day Quill spent the time in his Kensington flat brooding over the reports. Towards early evening he went out again and back to M.I.5. He caught Chief-inspector Boden just as he was leaving his office.

"I was just going home, Quill—"

"I don't care if you're bound for the North Pole. I want you to get some action for me. As the official brain around here—or do I expect too much?—you are the only person with authority." Quill cuffed his battered trilby to the back of his head and added, "Get the Home Secretary's permission for us to exhume the body of Bland right away. I want to study his forehead."

"What the hell for?" Boden sat down heavily and stared. "And why do you want to examine his forehead?"

"Because the doctor's p.m. report does not satisfy me. I'm not saying he's a liar, mind you, but I do think he has taken too much for granted. I want to verify my conclusions by seeing Bland's body for myself."

"Well, I suppose I *could* arrange it," Boden admitted. "Is there anything else in the reports which you find unsatisfactory?"

The sarcasm was not lost upon Quill. He gave his ghostly smile for a moment, then lost it and pinned Boden with ice-blue eyes.

"Taken as reports, Boden, they're logical enough—but they ignore many factors. For instance, Professor Bland suffered recently from violent headaches, during which he kept on thinking of the tragedy of destroying intra-atomic universes every time an atom is split. Did the defence make anything of that? No!"

"Could it?" Boden ventured, mystified.

"Certainly! But it needs talent. A pity. Sometimes, y'know, I am staggered by my own gifts, Boden. However, I think the headaches may answer many things. Then there was the bullet on the ink-stand, so conveniently placed. From the photographs it looks to me as though there is a burn on the stand. That right?"

"The stand is right here," Boden answered, going over to a steel locker. "It was a court exhibit and now the case is over it has been returned to my custody." He brought the oak stand forward and set it on the desk. To one of the wells a tag was tied: and to the copper bullet which Boden put down on the stand itself.

"Quite intriguing," Quill commented, looking at the stand intently. "There is a burn on this stand, Boden, approximately four inches long, just under where the bullet is lying. The bullet would not be hot enough to cause it—and anyway it isn't as long as the burn mark. So what did it?"

"Dunno. Cigarette some time, maybe."

"*That* long!" Quill jumped as though he'd been stung. "Have a heart, man! I'll make one guess that the burn was caused by something resembling a bullet, but longer and wider, and that the heat was caused by atmospheric friction."

The Chief-inspector opened his mouth and closed it again. Then he scratched his head. The insolent droop had come back to Quill's eyelids.

"You don't follow my reasoning, Boden, do you?"

"Damned if I do!"

"No more than I expected. Few can, which is why I am in a class by myself. However, I've seen all I want to see for the moment, thanks. Now attend to that exhumation for me, will you?"

Boden nodded and turned to the phone, and because Quill *was* Quill he got his wish. The body was exhumed that same night, and the following morning, equipped with instruments, Quill drove over to the Kensington mortuary to make his examination in the presence of deeply puzzled police officials.

It took him three hours, during which time he probed the dead scientist's skull and used portable X-ray apparatus of his own design. This done he drove back to his flat with the puzzled but interested Chief-inspector Boden.

"It will certainly surprise you to know, Boden," Quill said, as he and the inspector refreshed themselves with tea and sandwiches in the comfortable lounge, "that the projectile which killed Bland came from the inside of his skull to the outside, *not* from the outside to the in."

Boden nearly choked over his sandwich and only recovered with a purple face after a few moments. Quill regarded this near-apoplexy dispassionately.

"The assumption has been," Quill continued, "that the bullet was dug out and put on the ink-stand. I never believed that, in spite of the prosecution saying Travers had time to do it. He wouldn't anyway: far too risky. My examination of the brain tissue in Bland's skull shows distinctly that something exploded in his head and went outwards through his skull, leaving an apparent bullet mark. The burning was not from close-range fire but from the heat of the projectile itself. You will recall that the hole was too large to match the thirty-eight bullet?

That was explained as being because the bullet was dug out. Sheer nonsense! The real reason was that the actual missile of death was both bigger and longer than the thirty-eight bullet."

"But hang it, Quill, the projectile—or whatever it was—*couldn't* come from the inside of Bland's head to the outside! It's against all reason and logic!"

"Don't talk to me about logic!" The eyelids drooped. "We are dealing here with something extremely scientific—to which Bland himself gave the clue when he spoke of the intra-atomic universes which are being destroyed by nuclear fission on our part. There is something else, too. The ballistics report says that the bullet on the ink-stand was as clean as a dog's tooth, even under an electron microscope."

"I know. What's wrong with that?"

"What's *wrong* with it?" Quill hooted. "Everything! Sweet nitre, why do I have to deal with such nitwits? A bullet dug out of a brain that quickly, as is assumed, could not be cleaned thoroughly because there wouldn't be time. Traces of tissues would have been bound to adhere to it. Yet none did. Why? Because I don't believe it was ever in Bland's head!"

"I give up," Boden muttered.

"Naturally! Better men than you have faltered before my deductions, Boden. However—" Quill got to his feet. "I have things to do if I'm to clear up this business. I'll tell you what I want you to do whilst I make some preparations in my laboratory. Have young Travers taken to the annexe—which is permitted under police supervision if it may lead to proving his innocence—and have Wilson there too, the new head of the Division. I'll be there around seven o'clock this evening. Get some scientists there also who understand intra-atomic physics. I may need them for verification even though I personally shall not listen to a word they say. . . . Now I have got to rush. I've a special model to make. See you later."

Boden nodded in some bewilderment and stared after Quill as he hurried energetically from the room.

THE electric clock in the annexe was on the stroke of seven that evening when Quill entered. He was travelling light, not even carrying a brief case. He nodded to the assembly and pulled off his battered trilby, throwing it down on the nearby table.

Present were Travers, pale and worried; the

cold-faced mathematician Wilson; and one or two older men who were recognized experts in the field of atomic science. There was of course Chief-inspector Boden and a couple of plain-clothes men keeping guard over Travers.

"Well, gentlemen, all of you are scientists—except our friends of the law," Quill said, digging his hands in his overcoat pockets and looking about him. "It is because I have happened on something so unique in regard to the late Dr. Bland that I require you scientific gentlemen to verify some of my conclusions. I know I am right because I am rarely anything else, but the public in general may not be entirely satisfied with my word alone. . . .

"Now, the law has said that Dr. Bland died from a thirty-eight bullet which was afterwards dug out by Travers. *I* say that Dr. Bland was killed by an intra-atomic projectile which had travelled from the realm of the infinitely small to the infinitely big!"

There was silence, the men glancing at one another. Wilson tightened his lips and a dawning hope crossed Travers' young face.

"Whatever killed Dr. Bland came from inside his head," Quill continued dogmatically. "That fact is now beyond cavil. I have every medical angle to support the theory. Such a thing could not happen unless it came from some other dimension or some other space. All of us are made up of electrons, protons, molecules, and so on: that is common knowledge. We are made up of infinitely tiny universes and there is no reason why some of those universes might not contain living beings, adapted to living on the electrical units which we call electrons. In just the same way it is possible that we, in our apparently great universe—though size is relative—are actually a mere speck in the make-up of some titanic creature who inhabits a greater universe—the macrocosm—outside *us*."

Quill sat down and began to emphasise with an acid-stained hand.

"If super-beings outside our universe began to shatter our planetary system by what, to them, would be nuclear fission, we might feel like getting our own back. Were we clever enough we could do it by expanding our size, by travelling in an ever-growing machine which finally, enlarging by the expansion of its electronic orbits, would burst through the known universe into a mightier one beyond. That I believe is what happened in this case! From somewhere in the infinite Small intelligent beings set off in a machine to cross atomic space, maybe to find the cause of the constant nuclear explosions occurring in their universe. It is possible they were clever enough to know, by receiving thought waves, that Dr. Bland was at the head of the concern, and so their ever-growing machine was directed into the atomic spaces within his very brain!

"He complained of violent headaches, set up no doubt by the ever-increasing pressure of the enlarging machine. It at last burst its own space and came into ours, an object slightly bigger than a bullet, a perfectly made but extremely tiny object like a space machine, carrying beings maybe a quarter of a centimetre high. It passed through Bland's skull and settled on the ink-stand, which would appear to those within the machine to resemble a plain. The heat of the energy change and brief atmospheric friction made it hot enough to burn the wood of the ink-stand. I also believe that these beings had the power of thought-transference, and because of their thoughts Bland knew in advance what was coming, but he could only interpret it as horror at the prospect of destroying—and having destroyed—so many atomic universes."

"This is ridiculous!" Wilson protested. "What about the bullet?"

"It is *not* ridiculous!" Quill declared. "For here is the atom-ship itself. . . ." And from his overcoat pocket he took a gleaming copper object like a cigar. It had small, perfectly made portholes and a conning tower.

"Why, that's mine!" Wilson exclaimed in amazement. "Where did you find it—?"

He stopped, confused, and looked about him. In amazement every eye was fixed upon him. He hesitated for a moment and then swung to a steel locker. Unfastening it swiftly he searched within and brought a second copper cylinder to view, not unlike the one Quill possessed. He swung round sharply, to meet a levelled gun in Quill's hand.

"As a private citizen, Mr. Wilson, I can use a gun to keep you covered whereas the police cannot," he explained. With his free hand he tossed down his copper model on the bench.

"Modelwork is but another of my gifts," he explained. "As I imagined an atomic space machine would look. I'm glad you tripped yourself up, Mr. Wilson. I'll take that."

He seized the copper cylinder from Wilson's hand and set it carefully on the bench. Wilson breathed hard.

"All right, so you tripped me," he admitted. "I didn't murder anybody, though, so you can't hold that against me."

"No, but you did your best to get Travers hanged! Why?"

"Because he is a nuclear physicist and I am just a mathematician. The Board would have

elected him as chief of this unit over me after Bland's death, so I got him out of the way. There was a second reason. I wanted that atom ship for myself. I had intended to examine it thoroughly and open a branch of atomic science —atom travelling—which would have made me world famous."

"Evidently you have a mathematician's agile brain, Wilson," Quill commented. "From the reports of your actions I will outline what happened—and don't anybody dare interrupt me! You went with Dr. Bland to his sanctum as he asked. When there you saw him die, saw the projectile land on the ink-stand. You are scientist enough to realize what had happened. You thought fast. Here was a new departure in science—atom travel—performed by beings from an unknown electronic world. It could mean great power for you if you kept the secret. You returned here, took Travers' gun from the locker, and went back to the sanctum. You fired a bullet silently somehow, probably by the old trick of smothering it in a cushion, which you afterwards hid. The bullet you put on the ink-stand and took away the cooled atom-ship. The revolver you threw under the desk. It had no fingerprints. You must have put your own on it when firing it but naturally wiped them off again—and any of Travers' also.

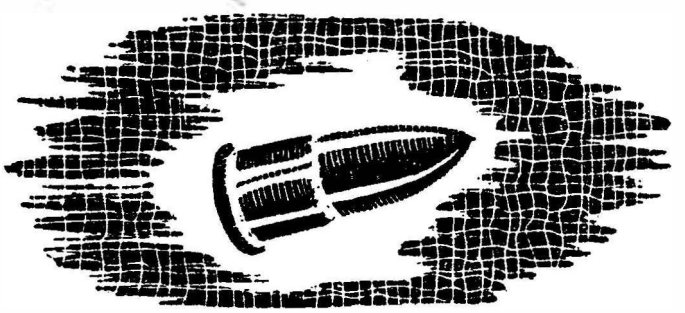
"Next you told Travers that Bland wanted him. He obeyed. You created a sound like a gunshot in the corridor where it could be heard —possibly by bursting a paper bag or something. The rest was simple. Travers had no alibi: it was known he did not like Bland, and there the thing was. How I arrived at my theory of an atom-ship I have already explained to Inspector Boden— Well, Wilson how right am I?"

"Dead right," the mathematician growled. "I'd forgotten such scientific detectives as you even existed. But I did not *kill* anybody and I still claim that that atom-ship is mine."

"Not yours exclusively," Quill replied. "It is the property of science as a whole—a revelation of life within the infinite Small. As for you, my friend, your efforts to get Travers accused of murder are for the law to deal with."

Quill turned away and looked at the perfect machine on the bench. With a small pair of tweezers he opened the airlock—with which Wilson had obviously already tampered—and rolled the ship on its side. Queerly dressed but perfectly formed creatures, no larger than a match-head, rolled out. They were stiff in death.

"A pity," Quill sighed. "The journey killed them. otherwise—with my genius and theirs—what a story there would have been to tell!"



WHO'S WHO
in Fandom

☆

KENNETH F. SLATER

For the information of a vast number of people who couldn't care less, I was born of British (mixed English-Irish-Scots-Welsh and some other nationalities) parents in 1917 (Dec. 27). No brothers or sisters, and my parents died before I was ten, leaving me (and little else) to a grandmother, who did her best to "bring up" a somewhat wayward youth. Being a mobile family I'd attended some seventeen schools (with disastrous results, to what passes for my education) by the time I turned my hand in at fourteen (without permission) and went to work at Burnley Streamline. I'd already made acquaintance with s-f through the local library, and the juvenile two-pennies, and my first American mag. was the September '28. Amazing stories, purchased in December of that year from Woolworths—at 3d.! This made me think that the streamline car was the thing of the future. Well, it was, but both the directors of Burnley's and myself were too early—the firm closed down three months

I then did sundry things in the line of earning a living, with varying success, until 1940 found me a private soldier. Some slight clerical knowledge obtained my rapid promotion to lance-corporal (unpaid acting) three days later, and I progressed steadily—but not so rapidly—until I received my commission in March '43. Most of that time I was cut-off from s-f, but when things quietened down in '45 I went on a buying spree and by '47 I had one of the best collections of books and mags in the U.K. During that period I met John Carnell, Walter Gillings, and many other leading folk in the British s-f world, and also became involved in acti-fandom. So involved that it hardly seems possible that I knew what to do with my spare time in earlier years. So involved that it seems improbable that I could get out . . . even if I wanted to do so. I don't, but still . . .

In the middle of my acti-fan-tivities I found time to get married to Joyce, getting her mixed up in the general melee of publishing and swapping and letter-writing. Some place along the line we've acquired a couple of kiddies (a boy and a girl), a Boxer dog, and a lot of odds and ends which have nothing to do with s-f and therefore always puzzle me.

Fanfare and Suchlike

By "INQUISITOR"

There was a surging rush of atmospherics from the loudspeakers, a frantic stutter of background Morse, a voice booming and fading across the interstellar ether.

"The next record will be played for an android on Sirius Two. . . ."

No, it wasn't a nightmare after a lobster and science-fiction supper, but the MEDCON, the Medway Science Fiction Convention in November. Tony Thorne, leading enthusiast of the Rochester, Chatham and Gillingham fans is a communications engineer, and consequently his club has more than the usual number of gadget-mad electronics experts; as a fan-magazine (*Bang*! A Report . . .) that was being produced in the Convention Hall put it, 'Loudspeaker after loudspeaker radiated far into the ultra-violent and collapsed in a molten mess. . . .'

Guests saw and heard the MEDCRANK (Medway Electronic Digital Computing Rotary Analytical Numerating Kontraption) fuse in a cloud of smoke after its reflexes were tested with the odd words 'Marilyn Monroe', and fans and authors struggling to pronounce fantasy tongue-twisters in spite of hearing their own words being broadcast back with a two-second time lag. There were various tape-recordings, including one from Arthur C. Clarke, the science-fiction author and astronautics expert, and guests recorded messages to be sent to the States. The atmosphere might be fairly described as electric.

The MEDCON gave fans their first glimpse of the *Vargo Statten Magazine*, as incomplete proof copies of the first issue were displayed. Wish we'd had a camera to record the expression of one enthusiast who grabbed a copy and found that it consisted of the contents page, first story, and a number of blank pages.

The editor, in a short speech during the afternoon of the Convention, gave some details about his future plans, and won approval by his evident interest in the opinions of his potential readers. A number of would-be pro-author fans wore very thoughtful expressions for the rest of the proceedings.

Already we hear giant rumblings as the machinery begins to move in preparation for the SUPERMANCON (translated into English this means the "Second Manchester Science Fiction Convention"). Of interest to all fans and readers of Science Fiction is this news that the Nor'West S.F. Club will be holding a two-day Convention of S.F. readers at the Grosvenor Hotel, Deansgate, Manchester, on June 5 and 6. It is hoped that, among the many attending will be included well-known Authors, Editors, Publishers and dealers in the field of Science Fiction, plus many extant readers. To Dave H. Cohen and Company we extend best wishes to this venture.

* * *

Who reads science-fiction? Well, there is Professor Oppenheimer, the famous atomic physicist and Reith Lecturer for '53, and there is a Brighton bricklayer who produced a hand-printed fan-magazine; one of the B.B.C.'s most famous script-writers, and the boys of the H. G. Wells Club in Durham *and* their schoolmaster; an engineer correspondent of mine who works at a New Zealand hydro-electric plant, and, I presume, the grey-bearded old gentleman whom I noticed in Bloomsbury not long ago because he was carrying a new British s-f anthology.

In fact, an active imagination and intelligence are not confined to any particular age-level or race or creed or sex or profession, although a survey undertaken by one professional American s-f magazine showed that roughly one-third of America's younger scientists, engineers, and technological students—the men actively engaged in shaping this planet's future—read science-fiction.

The *who* and the *why* and the *what* of this readership has been a talking point at club meetings for years. Now, at last, something is being done about it, and at the MEDCON a small pilot survey was being conducted in preparation for a large scale poll in the near future. (No small pilots were found, but that's another story). Conducted by a professional statistician, who is also and inevitably an s-f reader, the re-

sults of the research will be published in the Manchester fan-magazine SPACE TIMES, edited by Eric Bentcliffe at 47 Alldis Street, Great Moor, Stockport, Cheshire, and a magazine worth getting in any case.

The actual address for the survey is SPACE-TIMES RESEARCH BUREAU, 40 Cranley Gardens, London, S.W.7. A questionnaire has been prepared, and anyone interested in this research is urged to write to the latter address for a copy. All personal details will, of course, be treated in strict confidence and no one will be personally identifiable in the final report. In surveys of this type, the accuracy of results depends largely on the number of units considered—if only 10 fans took part and 8 of them were bow-legged vegetarian professors of topology, the resulting median would be interesting but statistically worthless, so how about writing in?

* * *

"I have not read any science-fiction before but the editor has given me these five books to review; I can't understand what the authors are writing about, and I think science-fiction is a worthless form of literature."

That, in effect, sums up a certain type of book review in these modern times when even the higher-browed political-literary weeklies have to notice s-f. The fallacy of judging a whole field of literary expression by a handful of books, and those probably consisting of stories reprinted from U.S. magazines of the 1930's, is painfully obvious, but at present all that we can do is to seethe quietly and build up persecution complexes, or put the whole thing down to a blind spot on the part of the reviewer concerned and go on enjoying s-f and s-f fandom.

However, some folk would like to Do Something About It, and once again the idea of a national s-f society is rearing its battered head. Although such loosely-knit organisations as OPERATION FANTAST encompass most of the really enthusiastic s-f readers in Great Britain, there is no serious group which can speak for us as a whole; nothing resembling, for instance, the British Interplanetary Society which speaks for all those seriously interested in astronautics and its development.

The idea has been tried on several occasions, the most successful being the pre-war Science Fiction Association, and perhaps there is now enough interest and s-f is sufficiently respectable to justify another attempt. Such, at any rate, is the hope of the man who's dusted off and refurbished the idea—the "Gran'pop" of British s-f, Walter Gillings. Gillings was editor of the first British adult s-f 'zine, TALES OF WONDER, and the first post-war 'zine, FANTASY, also of SCIENTIFICATION and SCIENCE FANTASY REVIEW, two beautifully produced news-magazines which were acknowledged to be the best of their type in the world. If sufficient willing hands could be found to work in the initial stages, there seems to be little reason why a serious society should not be founded and run parallel with active fandom, which tends to take a humorous view of "serious and constructive fanning."

* * *

Owing to the publicity boys getting out of step with the newspaper critics, there doesn't seem to have been a review in any national paper of one of the best s-f films of recent months—Universal's *It Came From Outer Space*. In addition to having 3D, a wide screen, and Barbara Rush as heroine (she's just naturally 3D on *any* screen), ICFOS has the incomparable advantage of a scenario written by Ray Bradbury, one of the best known names in science-fiction writing. Moreover, it is almost all Bradbury, in contrast to the treatment given to his short story of a sea-monster which fell in love with a lighthouse and which was transformed by Hollywood into *The Beast From* 20,000 *Fathoms*.

It Came From Outer Space features an author (Richard Carlson) who lives on the edge of the New Mexican desert. The type of story that he writes is not stated, but it's a fact that a small colony of s-f authors lived in similar circumstances a few months ago! However, none of them had a blazing spaceship land practically in their back-garden, as our hero does. Unfortunately, a fall of earth covers the ship, and no one will believe that it is anything but a meteor. The author eventually finds that the alien visitors are loose, and in a magnificent scene discovers that they can assume the form and manners of humans . . . the plot that the makers of *The Thing From Another World* were afraid to tackle when they filmed the story based on that theme, *Who Goes There?*

The aliens inform the hero that they mean no harm to humanity. Should he believe them? If so, why are they kidnapping people and imitating them? And if not, how can he convince the sceptics?

The film is well worth seeing, and the few flaws are hardly worth mentioning. There seems to be no particular reason or gain for it being filmed in 3D, unless you like ducking rocks and hurtling spaceships . . . except of course that one sees more of Barbara Rush. There are some nice touches, including a good old-fashioned and quite realistic heat-ray. Full marks.

I wish I could say the same of *Invasion U.S.A.*, a film made on a broken shoe-string in an apparent attempt to exhort blood and taxes from the great American public. The theme, if you haven't guessed it, is the invasion of the U.S., by a carefully unidentifiable foreign force. A-bombs are dropped on the fleet, airfields, the Boulder Dam, and one landing on New York almost destroys a papier mache Empire State Building. At least 75 per cent. of the action consists of nicely tailored shots from World War 2 and A-bomb test news films. There are even some pictures of the London blitz after the New York bombing. This film should increase the popularity of TV.

* * *

The range of fantasy . . . a London night-club cabaret featuring "The world of the future as Picasso sees it," shows thinly-clad damsels as Test Tube Babies, Flying Saucers, a Call Girl from Mars, etc. . . . the first 3D comic book on sale here features Paul Terry's *Mighty Mouse* and is full of cartooned space-ships, asteroids, etc. The 3D effect is achieved with the red-green spectacle method, and is astonishingly good.

* * *

Forthcoming books of interest to fans include two more published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson. *The Weaponmakers*, by A. E. Van Vogt, another of the complex super-science-fiction books by this author set in the future matriarchy of Isher where the Weapon Shops oppose the Empress with their slogan, "The right to buy weapons is the right to be free," and *City* by Clifford D. Simak, the story of humanity's future and departure by the intelligent species which they left behind—the dogs. Highly recommended.

Grayson and Grayson continue their excellent series of anthologies with *The Best S-F Stories 3rd Series, The Long Loud Silence* by Wilson (Bob) Tucker, well-known U.S. s-f fan and detective story author, can be obtained in the Bodley Head Science Fiction series or as a Guild Original pocket-book, and Ward Lock's *Science Reader's Companion*, with 200 diagrams and 50 photographs, is announced as a comprehensive book of reference for the man-in-the-street, students, and readers of science-fiction. Rather odd categories, but thanks for thinking of us. . . . .

BREATHING SPACE

A Short Story

by D. RICHARD HUGHES

THE renegade ship tore through the void at an unthinkable velocity, while the three beings in its control room congratulated themselves upon their recent escape from Authority.

Largoth—self-elected leader—twitched his antennae in mirth as he rested his armoured body against the instrument bank. "We certainly led them a chase that time, comrades," he mused, "and there's a hundred suns between us now. I don't suppose a Qualmanian cruiser has ever before been captured by a mere twenty 'free agents'! And—of course—we have the Weapon. With that, we can bend whole systems to our will .... but you do not seem too happy about it, Angstol, what is it?"

The second-in-command turned two of his balefully gleaming optics on his chief. "This has been all very fine, this escape, Largoth," he pronounced, "but after destroying three planets and disrupting several systems in the Empire, I cannot imagine that the Qualmanians will abandon their pursuit. The *chase* may have ended—but the *search* will continue. Of that I am sure. What we must do is to hide for a while—"

"Take over some system on the other side of Galaxy, and build a new fleet!" broke in Tulketh, brightly, for although (and perhaps, because) he was not really very bright, he always seemed to be able to say what was obvious and make it sound as though no one else could have thought of it.

"The sooner we get back into hyperspace, the better I shall like it," agreed Largoth, "but we have not yet found a suitable system, where—as you suggest, Tulketh—we can build a fleet.

"We must find a system where labour is abundant, as well as the necessary materials. We must find a culture whose knowledge of electronics is not too far advanced, but whose industry is capable—under control—of producing the equipment we shall require." He was ticking off the items on his finely articulated mandibles for emphasis, "and the main point is that this culture must not yet have developed or discovered Antigravitics. This will be our easiest and surest means of making certain that we can control the planets of the system.

"If the creatures have no Antigravitics, they can have no defence against the Weapon. By its very nature, a form of antigravity would have been developed as a by-product of any science which would give its investigators a clue to the Weapon. If they have Antigravity—they can deal with the Weapon. So *that* must be a part of the science of nucleo-electronics into which our hypothetical slaves have not yet delved.

"I have given Mixtell orders to seek out a System somewhere near the periphery which he considers suitable. He has been busy with the Navy star catalogue and latest survey material—another piece of priceless luck, Angstol—to have all the information gathered by the Imperial survey ships here at the mere punching of a few keys!"

The ship cruised on until, several watches later, the astrogator came to report his deliberations.

"I think I've found the ideal hideaway for us, sir," he announced. "A fairly remote system, with a class G sun and nine planets and a scattering of planetoids. Only one planet was inhabited by intelligent life at the time of the survey, although three would be suitable for our own use.

"It is an 'I' planet and so we should run less risk of detection—once we have eliminated the possibility of the presence of patrols." He proffered a small spool of micro-film, marked "*Clastes III—A short survey*" which Largoth

took and inserted in the scanner.

The four watched as the screen came to life.

WARNING! This planet is in Isolation, Technology insufficiently advanced—Sociology primitive. No contact to be made. Due for re-survey: ZN 70,237 . . . . and then a succession of data in neat, concise form.

When the instrument clicked to a standstill, Largoth was obviously delighted.

"Good work, Mixtell!" he exclaimed. "You certainly *have* found us an ideal landfall. You understand, comrades," he went on, as the astrogator retrieved his precious spool from the rewind, "Whilst these creatures have developed a mechanised economy, their sociology is unstable and has not kept pace with their technology. They have various forms of mechanical transport, as we have seen, and—apparently—a form of winged atmosphere craft, not unlike those used on some of the Qualmanian planets.

"They have electronics—up to a point—for they use radio communication, and they would now seem about to annihilate one another with uncontrolled nuclear fission in a primitive form, *but they are obviously not even on the way to discovering antigravitics*!"

"In fact," observed Angstol, who had been unimpressed by the glimpses of the civilisation he had been shown, "were it not for the fact that we shall destroy the system after achieving our purpose, these people would thank us for stopping them destroying themselves!"

Ignoring his subordinate's attempt at humour, Largoth began reading off the ordinates, and when his two aides had fed the necessary data into the computor, he snapped on the ship's communicator.

"Attention, attention! Prepare for hyperdrive, first warning. First warning. . . ."

Some little time later, after the second and third warnings, all was ready and Tulketh operated the switch which would automatically put the ship into hyperdrive after giving him time to take his *quardoth* capsule and settle himself for the Long Sleep. . . . .

A clanging vibration rang through the vessel as it emerged from hyperspace not far from the third planet's orbit.

Angstol awoke first, feeling the old, familiar Hyper-sickness—as though the vibration were disintegrating his body; as though each segment of his articulated shell were being wrenched apart from its neighbour—and his head floated somewhere between the deck-plates and the roof-screens.

He detached himself from his sleep-cradle and pushed himself, with a convulsive shrug of movement, to the instrument bank. Largoth and Tulketh were not long in following, and together they set up a new orbit.

"We shall penetrate the atmosphere in two and a half *zurga*," Largoth announced, "and in the meantime I want as many instrument checks as possible, to confirm the Naval reports. Especially, we must have an atmosphere spectro analysis, which I will leave to you, Angstol. Then when we penetrate we must have a sample, too. I'm not taking any chances. Tulketh! Give orders to Radio to intercept any signals which may be reaching here, and to the rest of the crew to make ready the Weapon!"

Thus the mighty instrument of force came upon the world which it had singled out for its malign purpose. Under the Weapon, all intelligent life would be as automatons—and all lesser forms exterminated. When the dreadful work was complete, what was left of those same automatons would be wiped out in the artificial holocaust which would blast the entire system out of space!

Such was the power of the Weapon—in such misguided hands. . . . .

"We can make out the topography of the place now," reported Angstol, from his position at the forward screen, as the ship gravved slowly downwards. "There is a desert below, and sea a few *kurza* away. Ah! there is a colony . . . . looks like some kind of industrial centre, though it is hard to say without knowing more about these creatures."

"There's a *ship* gravving up from your colony, Angstol," said Tulketh absently, as he gazed dreamily at his own screen.

"Well, I suppose they'll have developed some sort of chemical rockets by now if they're—*did you say GRAVVING* up?" Largoth's answer ended in a shriek of disbelief and dismay. Angstol dropped his air sample with a clatter, and all three stared at the offending screen. . . . .

There below them, the familiar gleaming silver shape of a planetary ship was slowly ascending, with its longitudinal axis horizontal in the time-honoured manner of pre-blasting precautions.

"They *have* got antigravs" screeched Largoth, frantically. "*We must not be seen*!"

"Go into 'hyper'—quickly!" squealed Tulketh, lunging forward to the keyboard.

"Fool!—it's only a balloon!" Angstol snapped, making a grab at the half-crazed Third.

But he was a fraction too late; the key was pressed.

Tulketh was not very bright, as has been said. In fact, he ought never to have been allowed in the Control Room. He had never studied the Ancient History of his own race and had little

knowledge of other primitive cultures, so he know nothing of balloons. And it *had* looked like a ship. . . .

The key was pressed.

And the ship was in hyperspace, without a pre-set destination. Those who survived the mind-wrenching agonies of hyper-shift without drugs would all too probably bring themselves out of hyperdive inside—or too near—a sun. . . .

And the Helium-filled dirigible which had saved the Earth, swung with the wind and went to make its rendezvous *with the aircraft-carrier. . . .*

THE END

THE PENDULUM OF POWER

By ARMSTRONG ALEXANDER

THE little creature dragged his body up the last difficult section of the rocky incline, peered down into the shallow valley where the aged cottage stood. A dim light shone through the curtained window, while a thin spiral of smoke feathered up from the old-fashioned chimney. The watcher was wondering disapprovingly why the inhabitant of the cottage clung so stupidly to primitive comforts such as peat fires, when the new ray-heating was there for the tapping. The direction of the watcher's thoughts took a sudden change and he chuckled malevolently as he turned to his companion below.

"The moon will be behind the clouds any moment now, Gulaph," he said, and the thin voice was harsh with an ill-concealed excitement.

Only the spatulated fingers at the ends of his over-long arms, the curious transparency of the skin, and the squat ugliness of his figure were indications that he was not an Earthman. Meanwhile his companions face was leering up at him in greedy anticipation of what the next hour might produce.

"You're sure this Earthman has a big hoard of this money stuff that buys the material things that you and I are short of these days? You couldn't be mistaken, Carnod?" the being with the greedy eyes asked.

Each month, always provided that suitable material is available, the Vargo Statten Magazine hopes to print a first story by a hitherto unpublished author.

The one called Carnod snorted his disdain of the inferior thinking powers of his companion. It was always the same with Gulaph. Gulaph was the eternal servant, he could always be relied upon to do the bidding of whoever he was following.

That might explain the reason why Gulaph had never risen above the category of a Menial Worker. It was just that Gulaph did not possess the enterprise to struggle out of the lowly rut into which the Powers-That-Be had graded him. For the moment Carnod had forgotten that he also belonged in the same category.

When he felt humbled, as he did now, he tried to remind himself that the Great Powers' failure to recognise his true worth was surely just an oversight. Ever since the Great Power had visited and conquered Earth, he had been no doubt much too busy planning, planning these moronic Earthmen into the Utopian way of life such as it was lived in Venus. Because of that Herculean task he had been much too busy to spare time for the Venutian underlings he had brought with him to colonise Earth.

In his own dim-minded way Carnod had to admit that the Great Power was doing a very difficult job. The Venutian way of life had to be adjusted to meet the Earth complexities of

climate and geography, of philosophy and industry. The Venutians didn't originally have this absurd thing called palate; they had been quite happy with their tasteless moss and the liquid from the Erni springs.

Down here on Earth they didn't work unless they received pay. Pay was a collection of printed paper and tokens that these peculiar Earthmen exchanged for food and drink. Since coming here both Gulaph and he, and a million other Venutians, had discovered the meaning of having a palate. Now they had both become addicts to steaks and cream buns, to tea and whisky—particularly whisky. Whisky almost made you friendly towards these Earth morons. But it took a lot of pay to gratify this liking for whisky.

That was the reason for their nocturnal presence on the cliff above the little cottage.

Then Carnod recollected that his companion had questioned his certainty of the cottage-dwelling Earthman having a hoard of this money stuff they both wanted so badly.

" Didn't I personally see for myself how the old Earthman gloats over the treasure? He has it hidden in a big box behind the third brick from the left of the fireplace? " he snarled. " Haven't I been watching him these six nights. past through that window? I tell you, it's a gift."

Gulaph chuckled malevolently, and rubbed his big hands together. Already he was tasting the rewards of this night's work. Carnod had no sympathy for his companion's lack of restraint. He ignored the childish display. The night was already dark.

" We'll give it five minutes! " Carnod said, and returned to his thoughts.

The old man in the cottage—his name was Ephraim Jelks—was one of the fortunate ones, more so than ever since the Great One had come to Earth from Venus. Ephraim had been a highly skilled mechanic, had quickly mastered the piloting of their giant spaceships. Spaceship pilots had received a lot of pay, and Ephraim had never been an extravagant man. He ought to have quite a sizeable fortune tucked away.

Now the night was pitch black. Carnod's sluggish heart began to beat faster.

" Come on, Gulaph! " he ordered, and clambered over the barrier of rock behind which he had been hiding. Silently they began the descent, moving like two obscene beetles down the hillside.

When they reached level ground Carnod put a restraining hand on Gulaph's arm, indicated that he was to fall in behind. Carnod crept quietly to the curtained window, grinned evilly as he peered through the chink in the curtain.

Old Ephraim Jelks was smoking his pipe, and drinking the last of the beer that had accompanied his modest dinner. He tapped out the ashes from his pipe, and there was a sudden metamorphosis from the old man's usually dull expression. His face had suddenly lit up with a strange fanatical light.

Carnod dug a knowing finger into Gulaph's stomach. Ephraim Jelks moved slowly towards the fireplace, each leisurely step tantalising the patience of the two onlookers. When he reached the grate he picked up a poker, prized at a loose brick until it came out. Then he brought out a box and was carrying it back to the table.

" Didn't I tell you? " Carnod exulted.

Jelks opened the box and Carnod felt suddenly thwarted. This was the seventh time that the big lid had prevented him seeing the treasure over which the old Earthman gloated. His lips had bared back into a snarl of disappointment and capidity.

" There must be a lot of pay there, Gulaph said. " I've never seen any Earthman show such excitement."

"Forget it for now!" Carnod suggested drily. This is where we start."

From his pocket Carnod brought out a long iron bar, tested it against the unresisting night, smiled ghoulish satisfaction at the feeling of omnipotence the weapon brought. Together they crept up to the modest door. Carnod paused for only a moment before he threw it open.

In four short strides he was standing behind Ephraim Jelks. Then the bar rose and fell three times. At the second blow the ancient Earthman was already dropping to the floor, while the lid of the box fell shut.

Gulaph was laughing with excitement and now saliva was coursing down the fat chin. Carnod's mind was doing a sum in mental arithmetic, as old as greed itself. Two into one made one half—one half for Gulaph and one half for he, Carnod. But it was Carnod who had done all the work, the planning, and the reconnaissance.

He did a further sum. One into one equals one. The iron bar rose once more, fell across Gulaph's grinning face—and Gulaph was dead.

Carnod went to the box, touched the lid lingeringly. He wanted to savour every moment of his anticipation! Still he didn't dare to look at the twin corpses on the floor. He was giggling thinly with the strain of his nerves as he threw open the lid.

Then his mouth was hanging wide, and he wanted to scream, as a safety valve to the sudden hell of his choking disappointment. His fingers were shaking as he picked out the humble contents of the box.

The first item was an old and much worn crucifix. The second item was a black book. In his sub-normal mind he was remembering that this must be a Bible. The Great Power, when he had arrived in earth from Venus, had, in his infinite wisdom, outlawed the Book called the Bible. He couldn't understand then how an old fool like Ephraim Jelks could look so fanatical, over a printed book and over a battered cross that he had no right to possess.

Hysterical frustration grabbed at the tattered remnants of his nerves until he began to sob violently, great subs of self-pity that shook the massive form. And he had murdered two beings for the sake of a couple of tattered gewgaws like that. In the suddenness of mad fury he threw the box on the floor, and began kicking it into matchwood.

His mind was a chaos of haunting thoughts. He was only a Menial Worker and they were chosen from the ranks of the nearly brainless. But as he stumbled into the black night he knew with awful certainty that fear would follow on. Fear would walk with him wherever he walked. Fear would sit down beside him when he dined. Fear would keep him awake when he wanted to sleep.

He began cursing the Great Power. The Great Power had come down here to Earth to save the Earthmen from their own foolishness. But in doing so he hadn't saved Carnod, the Great Power's own subject, from the same weakness. If the Great Power hadn't outlawed the Bible and the Crucifix he wouldn't have been a murderer.

If the Great Power hadn't taken the Venutians with him to Earth, then he'd never have discovered the meaning of this thing called palate.

If he'd never discovered palate then he'd never have craved whisky, cream buns, and beefsteaks—the luxuries that the Menial Workers didn't earn enough pay to acquire.

And now life was a haunting nightmare of ifs.

Suddenly the sub-normal brain snapped altogether, and Carnod went shrieking into the blackness of the night, stumbling as he ran. But fear was swift and ran with him.

VARGO STATTEN

SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINE

SCION
A 1/6
PUBLICATION