

Talent

Life's but a walking shadow

— says the Bard — but this

Player was heard forever!

IT is perhaps a pity that nothing is known of Andrew Benson's parents.

The same reasons which prompted them to leave him as a foundling on the steps of the St. Andrews Orphanage also caused them to maintain a discreet anonymity. The event occurred on the morning of March 3rd, 1943—the war era, as you probably recall—so, in a way, the child may be regarded as a wartime casualty. Similar occurrences

were by no means rare during those days, even in Pasadena, where the Orphanage was located.

After the usual tentative and fruitless inquiries, the good sisters took him in. It was there that he acquired his first name, from the patron and patronymic saint of the establishment. The "Benson" was added some years later, by the couple who eventually adopted him.

It is difficult, at this late

date, to determine what sort of a child Andrew was. Orphanage records are sketchy, at best, and Sister Rosemarie, who acted as supervisor of the boys' dormitory, is long since dead. Sister Albertine, the primary grades teacher of the Orphanage School, is now—to put it as delicately as possible—in her senility, and her testimony is necessarily colored by knowledge of subsequent events.

That Andrew never learned to talk until he was almost seven years old seems almost incredible. The forced gregariousness and the conspicuous lack of individual attention characteristic of orphanage upbringing would make it appear as though the ability to speak is necessary for actual survival in such an environment. Scarcely more credible is Sister Albertine's theory that Andrew *knew* how to talk but merely refused to do so.

For what it is worth, she remembers him as an unusually precocious youngster, who appeared to possess an intelligence and understanding far beyond his years. Instead of employing speech, however, he relied on pantomime, an art at which he was so brilliantly adept (if Sister Albertine is to be believed) that his muteness was hardly noticed.

"He could imitate anybody," she declares. "The other children, the Sisters, even the Mother Superior. Of course I

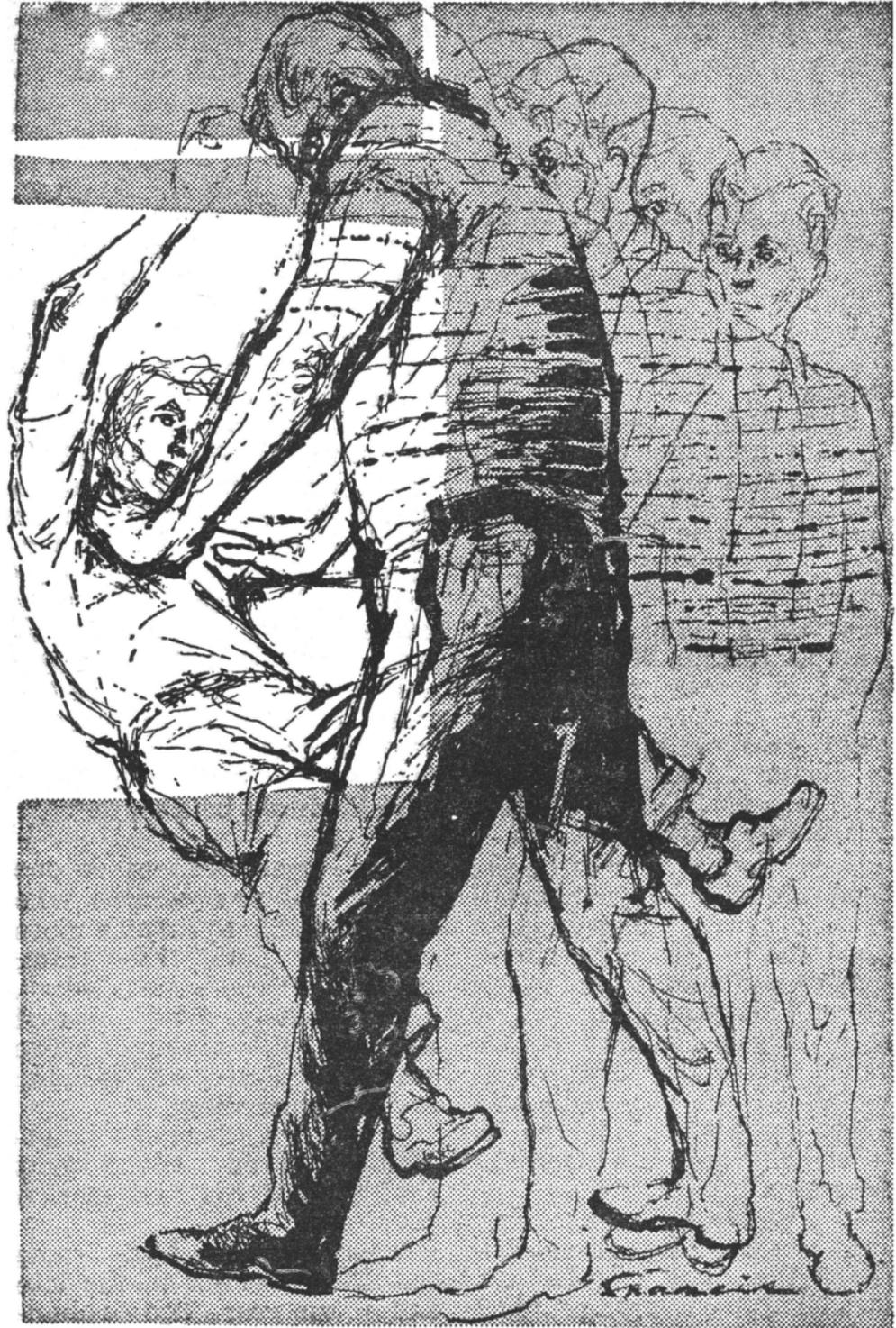
had to punish him for *that*. But it was remarkable, the way he was able to pick up all the little mannerisms and facial expressions of another person, just at a glance. And that's all it took for Andrew. Just a glance.

"Visitor's Day was Sunday. Naturally, Andrew never had any visitors, but he liked to hang around the corridor and watch them come in. And afterwards, in the dormitory at night, he'd put on a regular performance for the other boys. He could impersonate every single man, woman or child who'd come to the Orphanage that day—the way they walked, the way they moved, every action and gesture. Even though he never said a word, nobody made the mistake of thinking Andrew was mentally deficient. For a while, Dr. Clement had the idea he might be a mute."

DR. Roger Clement is one of the few persons who might be able to furnish more objective data concerning Andrew Benson's early years. Unfortunately, he passed away in 1954; victim of a fire which also destroyed his home and his office files.

It was Dr. Clement who attended Andrew on the night that he saw his first motion picture.

The date was 1949, some Saturday evening in the late fall of the year. The Orphan-



age received and showed one film a week, and only children of school age were permitted to attend. Andrew's inability—or unwillingness—to speak had caused some difficulty when he entered primary grades that September, and several months went by before he was allowed to join his classmates in the auditorium for the Saturday night screenings. But it is known that he eventually did so.

The picture was the last (and probably the least) of the Marx Brothers movies. Its title was *Love Happy*, and if it is remembered by the general public at all today, that is due to the fact that the film contained a brief walk-on appearance by a then-unknown blonde bit player named Marilyn Monroe.

But the Orphanage audience had other reasons for regarding it as memorable, for *Love Happy* was the picture that sent Andrew Benson into his trance.

Long after the lights came up again in the auditorium, the child sat there, immobile, his eyes staring glassily at the blank screen. When his companions noticed and sought to arouse him he did not respond. One of the Sisters (possibly Sister Rosemarie) shook him. He promptly collapsed in a dead faint. Dr. Clement was summoned, and he administered to the patient. Andrew Benson did not recover con-

sciousness until the following morning.

And it was then that he talked.

He talked immediately, he talked perfectly, he talked fluently—but he did not talk in the manner of a six-year-old child. The voice that issued from his lips was that of a middle-aged man. It was a nasal, rasping voice, and even without the accompanying grimaces and facial expressions it was instantly and unmistakably recognizable as the voice of Groucho Marx.

Andrew Benson mimicked Groucho in his *Sam Grunion* role to perfection, word for word. Then he “did” Chico Marx. After that he relapsed into silence again. For a moment it was thought he had reverted to his mute phase. But it was an eloquent silence, and soon it was understood. He was imitating Harpo. In rapid succession, Andrew created recognizable vocal and visual portraits of Raymond Burr, Melville Cooper, Eric Blore and the other actors who played small roles in the picture. His impersonations seemed uncanny to his companions. Even the Sisters were impressed.

“Why, he even *looked* like Groucho,” Sister Albertine insists.

IGNORING the question of how a towheaded moppet of six can achieve a physical

resemblance to Groucho Marx without makeup, it is nevertheless an established fact that Andrew Benson gained immediate celebrity as the official mimic of the Orphanage.

From that moment on, he talked regularly, if not freely. That is to say, he replied to direct questions. He recited his lessons in the classroom. He responded with the outward forms of politeness required by Orphanage discipline. But he was never loquacious, or even *communicative*, in the ordinary sense. The only time he became spontaneously articulate was immediately following the showing of the weekly movie.

There was no recurrence of his initial seizure, but each Saturday night show brought in its wake a complete dramatic recapitulation by the gifted youngster. During the fall of '49 and the winter of '50, Andrew Benson saw many movies. There was *Sorrowful Jones*, with Bob Hope; *Tarzan's Magic Fountain*; *The Fighting O'Flynn*; *The Life of Riley*; *Little Women*, and a number of other films, current and older. Naturally, these pictures were subject to approval by the Sisters before being shown. Movies emphasizing violence were not included. Still, several westerns reached the Orphanage screen, and it is significant that Andrew Benson reacted in what

was to become a characteristic fashion.

"Funny thing," declares Albert Dominguez, who attended the Orphanage during the same period as Andrew Benson and is one of the few persons located who is willing to admit, let alone discuss, the fact. "At first Andy imitated everybody—all the men, that is. He never imitated none of the women. But after he started to see Westerns, it got so he was choosey, like. He just imitated the villains. I don't mean like when us guys was *playing* cowboys—you know, when one guy is the sheriff and one is a gun-slinger. I mean, he imitated villains all the time. He could talk like 'em, he could even *look* like 'em. We use to razz hell out of him, you know?"

It is probably as a result of the "razzing" that Andrew Benson, on the evening of May 17th, 1950, attempted to slit the throat of Frank Phillips with a table-knife. Still, Albert Dominguez claims that the older boy offered no provocation. His view is that Andrew Benson was exactly duplicating the screen role of a western desperado in an old Charles Starrett movie.

The incident was hushed up and no action taken.

We have little information on Andrew Benson's growth and development between the summer of 1950 and the autumn of 1955. Dominguez left

the Orphanage, nobody else appears willing to testify, and Sister Albertine had retired to a rest-home. As a result, there is nothing available concerning what may well have been Andrew's crucial, formative years. The meager records of his classwork seem satisfactory enough, and there is nothing to indicate that he was a disciplinary problem to his instructors. In June of 1955 he was photographed with the rest of his classmates upon the occasion of graduation from Eighth Grade.

His face is a mere blur, an almost blank smudge in a sea of pre-adolescent countenances. What he actually looked like at that age is hard to tell.

The Bensons thought that he resembled their son, David.

LITTLE David Benson had died of polio in 1953. Two years later his parents came to St. Andrews Orphanage seeking to adopt a boy. They had David's picture with them. They were frank to state that they sought a physical resemblance as a guide to making their choice.

Did Andrew Benson see that photograph? Did—as has been subsequently theorized by certain irresponsible alarmists—he see certain *home movies* which the Bensons had taken of their child?

We must confine ourselves to the known facts; which are,

simply, that Mr. and Mrs. Louis Benson, of Pasadena, California, legally adopted Andrew Benson, aged 12, on December 9th, 1955.

Andrew Benson went to live in their home, as their son. He entered the public high school. He became the owner of a bicycle. He received an allowance of one dollar a week. And he went to the movies.

Andrew Benson went to the movies, and there were no restrictions at all. For several months, that is. During this period he saw comedies, dramas, westerns, musicals, melodramas. He *must* have seen melodramas. Was there a film, released early in 1956, in which an actor played the role of a gangster who pushed a victim out of a second-story window?

Knowing what we do today, we must suspect that there must have been. But at the time, when the actual incident occurred, Andrew Benson was exonerated. He and the other boy had been "scuffling" in a classroom after school, and the boy had "accidentally fallen." At least, this is the *official* version of the affair. The boy—now Pvt. Raymond Schuyler, USMC—maintains to this day that Benson deliberately tried to kill him.

"He was spooky, that kid," Schuyler insists. "None of us ever really got close to him. It was like there was nothing to get close to, you know? I

mean, he kept changing off. From one day to the next you could never figure out what he was going to be like. Of course, we all knew he imitated these movie actors. He was only a freshman but already he was a big shot in the dramatic club. But he imitated *all* the time. One minute he'd be real quiet, and the next, wham! You know that story, the one about Jekyll and Hyde? Well, that was Andrew Benson. Afternoon he grabbed me, we weren't even talking to each other. He just came up to me at the window and I swear to God he changed right before my eyes. It was as if he all of a sudden got about a foot taller and fifty pounds heavier, and his face was real wild. He pushed me out of the window, without one word. Of course, I was scared spitless, and maybe I just *thought* he changed. I mean, nobody can actually do a thing like that, can they?"

This question, if it arose at all at the time, remained unanswered. We do know that Andrew Benson was brought to the attention of Dr. Hans Fahringer, child psychiatrist and part-time guidance counselor at the school, and that his initial examination disclosed no apparent abnormalities of personality or behavior-patterns. Dr. Fahringer did, however, have several long talks with the Bensons. As a result Andrew was for-

bidden to attend motion pictures. The following year, Dr. Fahringer voluntarily offered to examine young Andrew. Undoubtedly his interest had been aroused by the amazing dramatic abilities the boy was showing in his extra-curricular activities at the school.

ONLY one such interview ever took place, and it is to be regretted that Dr. Fahringer neither committed his findings to paper nor communicated them to the Bensons before his sudden, shocking death at the hands of an unknown assailant. It is believed (or was believed by the police, at the time) that one of his former patients, committed to an institution as a psychotic and subsequently escaped, may have been guilty of the crime.

All that we know is that it occurred some short while following a local re-run of *Man in the Attic*. In this film Jack Palance essayed the role of Jack the Ripper.

It is interesting, today, to examine some of the so-called "horror movies" of those years, including the re-runs of earlier vehicles starring Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, Peter Lorre and a number of other actors.

We cannot say with any certainty, of course, that Andrew Benson was violating the wishes of his foster-parents and secretly attending motion pictures. But *if* he did, it is

quite likely that he would frequent the smaller neighborhood houses, many of which specialized in re-runs. And we do know, from the remarks of fellow-classmates during those high-school years, that "Andy" was familiar—almost omnisciently so—with the mannerisms of these performers.

The evidence is often conflicting. Joan Charters, for example, is willing to "swear on a stack of Bibles" that Andrew Benson, at the age of 15, was "a dead ringer for Peter Lorre—the same bug eyes and everything." Whereas Nick Dossinger, who attended classes with Benson a year later, insists that he "looked just like Boris Karloff."

Granted that adolescence may bring about a considerable increase in height during the period of a year, it is nevertheless difficult to imagine how a "dead ringer for Peter Lorre" could metamorphize into an asthenic Karloff type.

A mass of testimony is available concerning Andrew Benson during those years, but almost all of it deals with his phenomenal histrionic talent and his startling skill at "ad lib" impersonation of motion picture actors. Apparently he had given up mimicking his associates and contemporaries almost entirely.

"He said he liked to do actors better, because they were bigger," said Don Brady, who

appeared with him in the Senior Play. "I asked him what he meant by 'bigger' and he said it was just that. Actors were *bigger* on the screen. Sometimes they were twenty feet tall. He said, 'Why bother with little people when you can be big?' He was a real offbeat character, that one."

The phrases recur. "Oddball." "Screwball." "Real gone." They are picturesque, but hardly enlightening. And there seems to be little recollection of Andrew Benson as a friend or classmate, in the ordinary roles of adolescence. It's the imitator who is remembered, with admiration and, frequently, with distaste bordering on actual apprehension.

"He was so good he scared you. But that's when he was doing those impersonations, of course. The rest of the time, you scarcely knew he was around."

"Classes? I guess he did all right. I didn't notice him much."

"Andrew was a fair student. He could recite when called upon, but he never volunteered. His marks were average. I got the impression he was rather withdrawn."

"No, he never dated much. Come to think of it, I don't think he went out with girls at all. I never paid much attention to him, except when he was on stage, of course."

"I wasn't really what you

call close to Andy. I don't know anybody who seemed to be friends with him. He was so quiet, outside of the dramatics. And when he got up there, it was like he was a different person. He was real great, you know? We all figured he'd end up at the Pasadena Playhouse."

THE reminiscences of his contemporaries are frequently apt to touch upon matters which did not directly involve Andrew Benson. The years 1956 and 1957 are still remembered, by high school students of the area in particular, as the years of the curfew. It was a voluntary curfew, of course, but it was nevertheless strictly observed by most of the female students during the period of the "werewolf murders"—that series of savage, still-unsolved crimes which terrorized the community for well over a year. Certain cannibalistic aspects of the slaying of the five young women led to the "werewolf" appellation on the part of the sensation-mongering press. The *Wolf Man* series made by Universal had been revived, and perhaps this had something to do with the association.

But to return to Andrew Benson: he grew up, went to school, and lived the normal life of a dutiful step-son. If his foster-parents were a bit strict, he made no complaints.

If they punished him because they suspected he sometimes slipped out of his room at night, he made no complaints or denials. If they seemed apprehensive lest he be disobeying their set injunctions not to attend the movies, he offered no overt defiance.

The only known clash between Andrew Benson and his family came about as a result of their flat refusal to allow a television set in their home. Whether or not they were concerned about the possible encouragement of Andrew's mimicry or whether they had merely developed an allergy to Lawrence Welk is difficult to determine. Nevertheless, they balked at the acquisition of a TV receiver. Andrew begged and pleaded, pointing out that he "needed" television as an aid to a future dramatic career. His argument had some justification for, in his senior year, Andrew had indeed been "scouted" by the famous Pasadena Playhouse, and there was even some talk of a future professional career without the necessity of formal training.

But the Bensons were adamant on the television question; they remained adamant right up to the day of their death.

This unfortunate circumstance occurred at Balboa, where the Bensons owned a small cottage and maintained a little cabin-cruiser. The

elder Bensons and Andrew were heading for Catalina Channel when it overturned in choppy waters. Andrew managed to cling to the craft until rescued, but his foster-parents were gone. It was a common enough accident; you've probably seen something just like it in the movies a dozen times.

Andrew, just turned eighteen, was left an orphan once more—but an orphan in full possession of a lovely home, and with the expectation of coming into a sizable inheritance when he reached twenty-one. The Benson estate was administered by the family attorney, Justin L. Fowler, and he placed young Andrew on an allowance of forty dollars a week—an amount sufficient for a recent graduate of high school to survive on, but hardly enough to maintain him in luxury.

IT is to be feared that violent scenes were precipitated between the young man and his attorney. There is no point in recapitulating them here, or in condemning Fowler for what may seem—on the surface—to be the development of a fixation.

But up until the night that he was struck down by a hit-and-run driver in the street before his house, Attorney Fowler seemed almost obsessed with the desire to prove that the Benson lad was legal-

ly incompetent, or worse. Indeed, it was his investigations which led to the uncovering of what few facts are presently available concerning the life of Andrew Benson.

Certain other hypotheses—one hesitates to dignify them with the term, "conclusions"—he apparently extrapolated from these meager findings, or fabricated out of thin air. Unless, of course, he did manage to discover details which he never actually disclosed. Without the support of such details there is no way of authenticating what seem to be fantastic conjectures.

A random sampling, as remembered from various conversations Fowler had with the authorities, will suffice.

"I don't think the kid is even human, for that matter. Just because he showed up on those orphanage steps, you call him a foundling. Changeling might be a better word for it. Yes, I know they don't believe in such things any more. And if you talk about life-forms from other planets, they laugh at you and tell you to join the Fortean Society. So happens I'm a member in good standing.

"Changeling? It's probably a more accurate term than the narrow meaning implies. I'm talking about the way he *changes* when he sees these movies. No, don't take my word for it—ask anyone who's ever seen him act. Better still,

ask those who never saw him on a stage, but just watched him imitate movie performers in private. You'll find out he did a lot more than just *imitate*. He *became* the actor. Yes, I mean he underwent an actual physical transformation. Chameleon. Or some other form of life. Who can say?

"No, I don't pretend to understand it. I know it's not 'scientific' according to the way *you* define science. But that doesn't mean it's impossible. There are a lot of life-forms in the universe, and we can only guess at some of them. Why shouldn't there be one that's abnormally sensitive to mimicry?

"You know what effect the movies can have on so-called 'normal' human beings, under certain conditions. It's a hypnotic state, this movie-viewing, and you can ask the psychologists for confirmation. Darkness, concentration, suggestion—all the elements are present. And there's post-hypnotic suggestion, too. Again, psychiatrists will back me up on that. Most people tend to identify with various characters on the screen. That's where our hero-worship comes in, that's why we have western-movie fans, and detective fans, and all the rest. Supposedly ordinary people come out of the theatre and fantasy themselves as the heroes and heroines they saw

up there on the screen; imitate them, too.

"That's what Andrew Benson did, of course. Only suppose he could carry it one step further? Suppose he was capable of *being* what he saw portrayed? And he chose to *be* the villains? I tell you, it's time to investigate those killings of a few years back, all of them. Not just the murder of those girls, but the murder of the two doctors who examined Benson when he was a child, and the death of his foster-parents, too. I don't think any of these things were accidents. I think some people got too close to the secret, and Benson put them out of the way.

"Why? How should I know why? Any more than I know what he's looking for when he watches the movies. But he's looking for something, I can guarantee that. Who knows what purpose such a life-form can have, or what he intends to do with his power? All I can do is warn you."

IT IS easy to dismiss Atorney Fowler as a paranoid type, though perhaps it is unfair, in that we cannot evaluate the reasons for his outburst. That he knew (or believed he knew) something is self-evident. As a matter of fact, on the very evening of his death he was apparently about to set down his findings on paper.

Deplorably, all that he ever set down was a preamble. It is a quotation from Eric Voegelin, concerning rigid pragmatic attitudes of "scientism", so-called:

"The assumption (1) that the mathematized science of natural phenomena is a model science to which all other sciences ought to conform; (2) that all realms of being are accessible to the methods of sciences of phenomena; and (3) that all reality which is not accessible to sciences of phenomena is either irrelevant or, in the more radical form of the dogma, illusionary."

But Attorney Fowler is dead, and we must deal with the living.

With Max Schick, for example. He is the motion picture and television agent who visited Andrew Benson at his home shortly after the death of the elder Bensons, and offered him an immediate contract.

"You're a natural," Schick declared. "Never mind with the Pasadena Playhouse bit. I can spot you right now, believe me! With what you got, we'll back Brando right off the map! Of course, we gotta start small, but I know just the gimmick. Main thing is to establish you in a starring slot right away. None of this stock-contract jazz, get me? The studios aren't handing 'em out in the first place, and

even if you landed one, you'd end up on Cloud Nowhere. No, the deal is to get you a lead and billing right off the bat. And like I said, I got the angle.

"We go to a small indie producer, get it? Must be a dozen of 'em operating right now, and all of 'em making the same thing. Only one kind of picture that combines low budgets with big grosses, and that's a science fiction movie. You've seen them.

"Yeah, you heard me, a science fiction movie. Whad-dya mean, you never saw one? Are you kidding? How *about* that? You mean you never saw any science fiction pictures at *all*?

"Oh, your folks, eh? Had to sneak out? And they only show that kind of stuff at the downtown houses?

"Well look, kid, it's about time, that's all I can say. It's about time! Hey, just so's you know what we're talking about, you better get on the ball and take in one right away.

"Sure, I'm positive, there must be one playing a downtown first run now. Why don't you go this afternoon? I got some work to finish up here at the office—run you down in my car, you can go on to the show, meet me back there when you get out.

"Sure, you can take the car after you drop me off. Be my guest."

SO Andrew Benson saw his first science fiction movie. He drove there and back in Max Schick's car. Coincidentally enough, it was the late afternoon of the day when Attorney Fowler became a hit-and-run victim. Schick has good reason to remember Andrew Benson's reappearance at his office just after dusk.

"He had a look on his face that was out of this world," Schick says.

"How'd you like the picture?" I ask him.

"It was wonderful," he tells me. "Just what I've been looking for all these years. And to think I didn't know."

"Didn't know what?" I ask. But he isn't talking to me any more. You can see that. He's talking to himself."

"I thought there must be something like that," he says. "Something better than Dracula, or Frankenstein's monster, or all the rest. Something bigger, more powerful. Something I could really be. And now I know. And now I'm going to."

Max Schick is unable to maintain coherency from this point on. But his direct account is not necessary. We are, unfortunately, all too well aware of what happened next.

Max Schick sat there in his chair and watched Andrew Benson *change*.

He watched him *grow*. He watched him put forth the eyes, the stalks, the writhing tentacles. He watched him twist and tower, filling the room and then *overflowing* until the flimsy stucco walls collapsed and there was nothing but the green, gigantic horror, the sixty-foot-high monstrosity that may have been born in a screenwriter's brain or have been spawned beyond the stars, but certainly existed and drew nourishment from realms far from a three-dimensional world or three-dimensional concepts of sanity.

Max Schick will never forget that night and neither, of course, will anybody else.

That was the night the monster destroyed Los Angeles.

END

In The Next Issue . . .

KANGAROO COURT

A Short Novel by Daniel F. Galouye

Blake's future was dark. He had murdered his friend—his life was forfeit—and now he had to break the news to the corpse!