

JEFF ALLEN pressed his nose against the door and steamed the glass with an angry snort. "A bomb would do it," he said. "Something big enough to make a nice bang and clean out the office, but not big enough to knock over the building. Ann, where can we get a bomb?"

His wife looked up from her typewriter and smiled. "Don't be ridiculous. You're getting all riled up over nothing."

Allen whirled and stomped over to the counter. "Nothing, you call it? You know very well that Centralia is just not big enough to support *two* travel agencies. We were doing pretty well, but cut our business in half and we'll starve to death."

"Business hasn't fallen off

since he opened up. In fact, it's improved."

"Ann, you know that's a temporary fluke. It's bound to fall off. Any business he does has to cut into our business. There's no other place for it to come from. So where can I get a bomb?"

She laughed, and he leaned over to kiss her before he went gloomily back to his desk. Things had probably been going too smoothly, he told himself, what with the boom brought on by the travel-now-pay-later plans. He was just fifteen hundred dollars short of a down payment on that rambling California redwood ten-room ranch house with a rustic lake view, and he and Ann had been working and planning ever since their marriage

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three years before—working hard—to build the business to a point where she could retire from her role as clerk and personal secretary and concentrate on being a housewife with perhaps a robust crop of little Allens.

AND now the whole picture was wrecked by a villainous-looking man with a brownish-red beard and a spectacularly bald head, who had appeared suddenly in Centralia and opened a new travel agency directly across the street from Allen's Globe Travel Agency. And he'd had the infernal nerve to name his business the Gloob Travel Agency.

"What did the Chamber of Commerce say?" Ann asked.

"They're puzzled," said Al-

len. "Gloob seems to be an obvious infringement on Globe. On the other hand, he says his name is Gloob, so how can we keep him from using his own name? They're going to investigate. And I stopped by for a brief conversation with Mr. Gloob. He was deliriously happy to meet me and certain we will get along fine together. He even promised to send me any business he can't handle himself, which convinces me that he has a fiendish sense of humor." He shook his head. "I suppose we might as well let Doris go—give her notice, anyway."

"But business hasn't fallen off. Let's wait and see what happens. There'll be plenty of time . . ."

A tiny, gray-haired old lady pushed open the door and

*How backward can people be?
If you really want to know,
take a . . .*

PIRT DNUOR

By LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

stepped briskly to the counter. "I wish immediate accommodations for Sirap," she said.

Ann frowned. "For—what was the place?"

"Sirap."

"What country is that in?"

The old lady cocked her head to one side and cast puzzled glances about the office. "Oh, I'm sorry!" she said suddenly. "I must have the wrong . . ."

She stepped briskly out and the door whipped shut behind her, cutting off the blast of warm air from the street.

Ann's golden head bent studiously over an atlas. "There's a Siret in Rumania," she said. "But it's a river."

"I thought there was something fishy about her," Allen said.

He went to the window and watched her cross the street and walk confidently into the Gloop Travel Agency. She did not emerge, but as he watched a portly gentleman came out and crossed the street to the Globe Travel Agency. He paused inside the door, sniffed deeply at the air conditioning and gave a deep sigh of appreciation.

"Feels good in here," he announced. He walked to the counter and smiled down at Ann. "I'd like to arrange an extended tour of the United States. Could you handle it for me?"

Ann caught her breath. "Yes, *sir*."

"This is what I'd like to do. Start out with a week in Detroit and then go to Cleveland . . ."

His voice rumbled on and Ann took notes feverishly. "It will take a little time to arrange this," she said. "Where can we reach you?"

"At the Centralia Hotel."

"All right, Mr.—"

"Smith. John Smith."

"Mr. Smith. We'll get to work on it immediately."

"Excuse me," Allen said, "but didn't I see you coming out of the Gloop Travel Agency?"

The gentleman turned and beamed at him. "Indeed you did. The man there recommended you."

Allen returned to his desk, leaned back in his chair, and gnawed fretfully on a pencil.

THERE was a brawny, bald-headed man who drawled with a foreign-sounding accent and seemed nervously anxious to get to Nilreb with much haste. There was a sedate, middle-aged woman who hovered in the background while two teen-aged girls inquired with assorted giggles as to whether Dnalsi Yenoc was actually anywhere near Kroywen, and whether they could go direct, or by way of Nylkoorb. And there were others.

Eventually Ann stopped fumbling with the atlas, and in time she even grew weary

of explanations. She contented herself with pointing, and when people with odd destinations sighted along her wavering finger and glimpsed Mr. Gloop's sign, they invariably bounded away with unconcealed enthusiasm.

In between these visitations, the Globe Travel Agency's business boomed past all rational proportions. Allen made the down payment on the ranch house, and when Ann insisted that they were too busy for her to consider taking up housekeeping, he hired two new office girls. And the boom continued.

"Have you noticed," he said to Ann two weeks later, "that more than eighty per cent of our customers are not residents of Centralia?"

"I've been wondering about that," she said.

"And have you noticed that we're getting fewer inquiries from people with cockeyed destinations?"

"There was only one yesterday," Ann said, "and not any today."

She paused as a white-haired, scholarly-looking man stopped on the sidewalk outside, scrutinized them doubtfully through the window, and finally entered to ask for reservations to Kroywen. Ann pointed at the Gloop sign and he left, muttering apologies.

"Kroywen," Allen mused. "I've heard that one before."

"Same here," said Ann.

"I've got to get to the bottom of this. Mr. Gloop goes out to lunch at twelve-thirty. About a quarter to one I'm going over to the Gloop Travel Agency and see if I can arrange a fast trip to Kroywen."

"Not without me, you aren't," Ann said.

They left the mystified Doris with instructions to carry on if they should be delayed, bank the money, and sign any necessary checks with a limited power of attorney. They marched across Main Street, invaded the Gloop Travel Agency, and were met by Mr. Gloop's smiling assistant.

"Kroywen," Allen said. "Make it snappy."

"Two for Kroywen," the young man said complacently. "That will be sixty-two dollars and fifty cents."

Allen counted it out.

"Do you have any money to exchange?"

"Why—ah—no," Allen said.

"No luggage?"

"No. You see . . ."

"I quite understand. It's best that way. Now if you will receipt these papers . . ."

With one deft motion he took Allen's right hand, inked his thumb, rolled a print onto the paper, and wiped the thumb clean. "And yours, please," he said to Ann. "Thank you. Have a nice tour."

"Thank you."

"You may find the people a bit backward."

Allen said cheerfully, "We don't mind."

"Most people don't. Right this way, please."

They followed him through a rear door, rode an escalator down to the basement, and paused in front of a metal bulge in the wall. He opened it.

"Be seated, please," he said. "Remain seated until the door opens."

AFTER they sat down, he smiled and told them to come again. The door closed. They were in a tubelike chamber which had six rows of seats dipping across the curved floor.

"It's like a carnival," Ann said. "Twenty-five cents for a tour of the Chamber of Horrors. Or maybe it's a subway car."

"Yeah. But what is it doing in Centralia, Ohio? I wonder if the Interstate Commerce Commission knows about this."

There was a jerk, so insignificant that they would not have noticed it had they not been tensed in anticipation of—something. A light flashed red and faded slowly. They looked blankly at each other as the door opened. Another young man was peering in at them.

"Some ride," Allen growled.

"Destination," the young man said. "Kroywen terminal. All out, please."

They stepped out and followed him.

"Right this way to Customs," he said.

They paused at a desk marked "Customs" and a young lady noted their lack of baggage, glanced in a cursory manner at the contents of Ann's purse and waved them past. They walked out into what was obviously the concourse of a transportation terminal. There were ticket windows, travelers wandering about with bags, and a large schedule, listing arrivals and departures from and to tongue-twisting places. Allen looked back at the door they had just emerged from, and saw a large sign.

BOOLG, INCORPORATED Specialists in Travel Curiosities

"That's no lie," he said.

They settled themselves on uncomfortable seats at the far end of the concourse and looked around. Allen stared at a clock.

"Screwy time they have here," he said. "That clock says five after eleven. My watch says five to one. How about yours?"

"Five to one," Ann said.

"What should we do? I guess we've proved there is such a place as Kroywen. Shall we go back?"

"It might look funny if we went back right away."

"True. So we've proved there is a Kroywen, but where is it? I'd like to know. . . . What's the matter?"

Ann's elbow had dug sharply at his ribs. "The second hand on that clock is running backwards," she said.

Allen studied it. "So is the minute hand." And a few minutes later, "So is the hour hand."

Ann looked at her watch. "Then when we have one o'clock, they have eleven o'clock. And when we have . . ."

"Two, they have ten. And so on. It's just like our time, only in reverse."

Ann was studying the Boolg, Incorporated, sign. "Boolg," she said. "Now if you spell that backwards . . ."

Allen did so, mouthing it slowly. He turned to Ann. "Gloob! The Gloob Travel Agency!"

"And this town. Kroywen. Could that be . . ."

"New York!"

"It must be."

"It's somebody's idea of a joke."

"We're here, aren't we?"

"But *where* are we?" Allen said. "Something like twenty seconds from Centralia, and New York is nearly six hundred miles. And which way did we go? East, or west, or straight down?"

"I was just thinking of something Gloob's assistant said. Remember? He said we

may find the people a bit backward."

Allen shrugged. "Shall we take a quick look at the town?"

"We might as well. I've never been to New York."

"You *still* haven't been to New York."

They rode an escalator up three stories and found an exit. A uniformed man called out, "Taxi?" as they went out the door.

"They speak English," Allen said.

"And not in reverse," said Ann. "That's a blessing."

THE street was a brightly illuminated tunnel, with a high, arching ceiling. There were throngs of people on the walks, and throngs of vehicles in the street.

"The underside," Ann said. "Maybe like reflections in the water. Maybe somewhere straight up is the real New York."

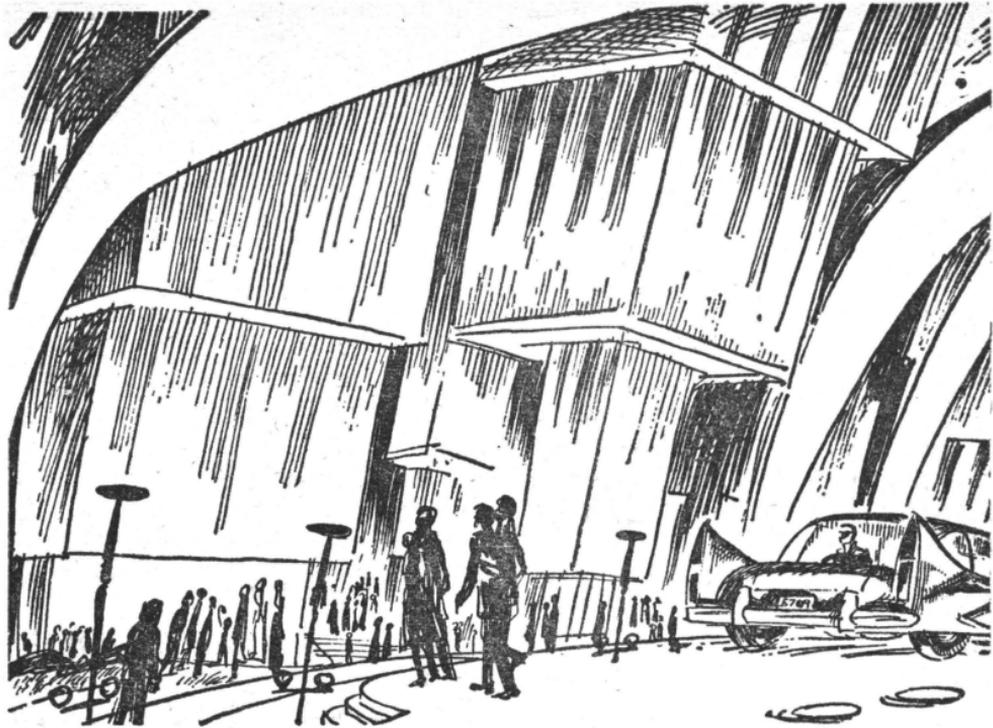
Allen had stopped to watch passengers boarding a bus.

"We can't take it," Ann said. "You didn't get any money changed."

"How was I to know what we'd find here? Anyway, I was just looking. The traffic moves on the left side and the bus drivers sit in the rear. How can they see where they're going?"

"Maybe they have front-view mirrors."

They turned away as the



bus rumbled off. They walked for what seemed to be miles along the tunneled streets, wandering about aimlessly, spelling the names of buildings and places and streets backwards, and finding some that they recognized. They found Broadway, and Fifth Avenue, and the Etats Eripme Building, the deepest building in the world. They resisted the temptation to visit its observation gallery, remembering at the last moment that they had no money.

"It's just another big city," Ann said. "Too many people, and too crowded, and too much noise."

"And no blue sky," Allen

said. "They must have some sky somewhere. Where do you suppose they keep it?"

When they next thought about the time it was after five—or before seven, Kroywen time. And they were definitely ready to leave. They found their way back to the terminal and rode the escalator down to the concourse. Ann turned suddenly and clutched Allen's arm. "How are you going to buy tickets?"

"I've got plenty of money."

"Dollars. But you didn't get any money changed. What if they won't take dollars?"

"Anyone will take dollars. They took dollars at the other end, didn't they? And if they



won't, there should be somewhere we can get them changed."

"I hope you're right," Ann said. "Thinking backwards is all right for one afternoon, but I'm too old to do it permanently."

Allen grinned down at the young face she called old, and they walked hand in hand across the concourse to Boolg, Incorporated. At the door they stopped in consternation. Boolg, Incorporated, was closed. "Hours 3 to 7" read the sign on the door.

"Well!" Ann said.

A LLEN counted on his fingers. "Which means nine

to five. My watch says five-twenty."

"So what do we do now?" asked Ann. "Sit in the station all night?"

"Certainly not. We'll go to a hotel."

"How are you going to pay the hotel bill?"

"I can get some money changed in the morning."

"All right," she said.

They advanced self-consciously to the registration desk of the Reltats Hotel and faced the suspicious scrutiny of the room clerk. He looked them over, noted their lack of luggage, and said with a sneer, "Married, no doubt?"

Allen spoke indignantly.

"Of course we're married. We've been married for three years."

He was not prepared for the clerk's reaction. The man's face reddened and he sputtered and waved his hands menacingly. Two more clerks came to his aid. The first clerk pointed a finger at them. "Married!" he blurted out.

"You mean they *admit* it?"

"The idea—at a first-class hotel, too. What do they think we are?"

"Call the police."

Allen grabbed Ann's arm and ran. Outside the door a bellhop caught up with them, scribbled something on a piece of paper and handed it to Allen.

"Try this place," he said. "It isn't a bad hotel and they aren't so particular. But it'd be best not to tell them you're married. It doesn't matter what they think, but when you come right out and say it . . ."

"Thanks," Allen said.

"Don't mention it, fellow. I was married once myself."

The hotel was small, clean, almost primly respectable in atmosphere. The room clerk snickered when Allen signed the register, but said nothing. Allen told him they would be staying one night, and fifteen rallods seemed a proper price, and the clerk turned them over to a cheerful-looking bellhop. They entered an elevator and dropped.

"It seems all right," Ann whispered. "What's the matter?"

"I'm trying to figure out how to tip the bellhop."

That worthy escorted them to their room, took a quick turn around it to see that everything was in order, and as Allen self-consciously turned his back to him, he thrust something into Allen's hand on the way out.

"Of all the insults!" Allen exploded as the door closed. "I didn't make any move to tip him, so *he* tipped *me* three rallods!"

Ann took one of the bills. "Pretty good picture of Notgnihsaw," she said. "Do you think this would buy us a meal?"

"Probably not—not a good meal, anyway. And I'm hungry. We could have something sent up and put it on our bill. Maybe there's a menu around here somewhere."

Their food arrived, accompanied by the same grinning bellhop. Allen cringed in embarrassment at the thought of offering the man his own three rallods as a tip, but the bellhop gave him no opportunity. He deftly slipped some currency onto one tray and hurried out.

"He tipped me again!" Allen yelled. "This time it's five rallods!"

"Don't complain," Ann said. "Maybe we can work up enough to pay our hotel bill."

"Nothing doing. Here, I'll put it all on the tray. The least I can do is offer him his money back."

When the bellhop came for the trays, he carefully removed the money and placed it on the desk. And when Allen picked it up later, there were no longer eight rallods, but eleven.

THE day had been exhausting and they slept well. It was after nine when they awoke—not quite three, Kroywen time—and they ate breakfast in the hotel dining room to avoid further insults from the bellhop, having the check transferred to their hotel bill. Then Ann returned to their room, and Allen strolled down to the terminal to change some money and arrange their return to Centralia.

The young man at Boolg, Incorporated, was sympathetic. "The rules are strict," he said, "and we cannot permit any exceptions. Dollars must be changed into rallods at the other end, so I'm afraid I can't help you."

Allen found himself a chair and sat down slowly.

The travel agent was puzzled at his stricken expression. "If it's as important as all that to get rid of the dollars," he said, "why don't you take another trip and spend them?"

Allen brightened. "Yes.

That's the thing to do. How many dollars for two tickets to Centralia?"

"As I told you," the young man said patiently, "foreign currency is handled only by our foreign terminals. Here we deal only in rallods. One thousand rallods for two tickets. When would you like to leave?"

"I'll think about it," Allen said.

Back in the hotel room, Allen and Ann sat staring at each other.

"Thanks to the bellhop, I have eleven rallods," Allen said. "Our hotel bill will be fifteen, plus the price of two meals. Twenty-five, at least. And we need a thousand to get back. Got any ideas?"

She shook her head. "It looks as if we'll have a long stay here. And it's not going to be any honeymoon. We'll have to work and earn the money."

"We might as well go up and check out and confess to the manager," Allen said. "Maybe he'll give me some help in getting a job."

"Couldn't we just stay here?"

"Too expensive. Over a hundred rallods a week for the room, and that doesn't include meals. And we'll need clothes. I haven't any idea of how much people are able to earn in this crazy world."

Grimly they descended on the room clerk. "Checking out,

I see," he said. "Accounts settled at that window."

A young lady itemized their bill and read off the items. "Room, one day, fifteen ralloods. Dinner, by room service, eleven ralloods." Allen winced. "Breakfast, three ralloods, Total, twenty-nine ralloods. Please receipt this bill."

"How was that again?" Allen asked.

BEFORE he quite knew what was happening, his right thumb had been inked, impressed, and wiped clean. Ann contributed her print, and as Allen was struggling for words to explain that he had only eleven ralloods, the young lady briskly counted bills out across the counter to him.

"Twenty, twenty-five, twenty-nine. Thanks very much, sir. I hope you'll stop with us the next time you're in town."

They staggered away from the window, left the hotel, and walked half a block before either of them spoke.

"They paid us," Allen said.

Ann said nothing.

"And the bellhop tipped me."

Ann stopped and pointed at a shop. "Women's apparel. I need a change of underwear."

They entered the shop. Ann made a few modest purchases. The clerk paid her six ralloods. They went out.

"Another hotel?" Allen asked.

"Yes. We'll get the most expensive room we can find."

"We might ask for the bridal suite."

"You'd shock them. They might think we were married."

"Isn't there anything more expensive than a hotel suite? Let's find some kind of rental agent and see."

They found a rental agent. He arranged a week's sublease on a luxurious apartment, rent four hundred ralloods, paid to them in advance. He also paid them his commission, which was forty ralloods. He engaged a maid and a cook for them, and the two servants happily handed their week's wages to Ann when they reported for work.

Allen and Ann went on a reckless shopping tour. They bought luggage, for which they left their thumbprints and were paid a hundred and fifty ralloods.

Allen selected a fine new suit and the beaming clerk took his thumbprint and paid him ninety-five ralloods. They outfitted themselves completely and returned to their apartment.

"We have our thousand ralloods," Allen said. "We can leave any time."

Ann looked about the dazzling living room and gazed sadly at the fountain that bubbled in a far corner. "Yes, I suppose we can."

"We really should be get-

ting back. Doris will have her hands full."

"Yes, I suppose she will."

Allen seized her roughly. "Hang Doris! We never had a proper honeymoon. Let's have it now. Sue can handle things for a week. She won't like it, but she can do it."

"Let's," Ann said happily. "Who can say when we'll be able to afford anything like this again?"

Allen embraced her fondly. "Paradise!"

"No," Ann said. "Esidarap."

THEY made it a week to remember. They flitted from nightclub to nightclub. They ran up staggering bills and exchanged their thumbprints for cash when they left. The waiters tipped them lavishly. They attended the theater and received cash along with their tickets. They shopped, after the first sensation of awe wore off, only for compact expensive items that they could carry back with them. They almost became accustomed to starting a meal with dessert and finishing up with an appetizer. They gradually got used to backward-running clocks, a calendar that worked in reverse, and riding down to their forty-fifth floor. It was, indeed, Esidarap.

At the end of the week they were still in a mood of unrestrained happiness, but reluctantly ready to return to

their normal world and go back to work. And on the fateful seventh day a fist descended rudely upon their door, followed by two heavy-set official-looking men who brushed their frightened maid aside and stood looking them over coolly.

"I.B.F.," one of them said, showing his credentials. "We have been reliably informed that you two are unemployed. Is that correct?"

"Yes, we're unemployed," said Allen.

"We've come to talk to you about your employment compensation."

Ann giggled foolishly, and Allen muttered, "All this, and Esidarap too!"

"We are in the process of checking your past record to see if you are paid up to date. But we've established that the compensation is unpaid for the past week and we are here to collect that now. For the two of you, that amounts to seven thousand ralloods. Cash or a certified check, please."

Allen choked suddenly on nothing at all and glanced at Ann's white face. "You mean we owe . . ."

"Every now and then people try to slip away and cheat the government," the I.B.F. agent said. "But they soon find out that it's rather expensive not to work. If you'll take my advice, you'll go back to wherever it is you came from, and go to work, and pay

your wages like a good citizen. Right now I want seven thousand ralloods."

"My gawd!" Allen groaned. "I wonder what the income tax amounts to!"

The agent was momentarily flustered. "Well, now—that would take some time to check. Better just pay us and let the income tax wait."

Allen got out his wallet and counted. "I have four thousand, five hundred and twenty ralloods," he said miserably. "Ann?"

SHE was searching through her purse. "Twenty-one hundred ralloods," she said.

"Leaving you three hundred and eighty short," the I.B.F. man said.

"If you'll come with us," Allen told him, "we'll make a couple of purchases and pay you off."

They bought a diamond ring for Ann—her third—and paid the I.B.F. men. Dependently they returned to their apartment, and found the rental agent waiting for them. A quiet, white-haired, fatherly sort of man, his face was mournful.

"You two have disappointed me," he said.

"How so?" Allen asked.

"I hoped you would be able to take this place for the summer. But now . . ." He shook his head. "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Live so recklessly. I don't know what sort of wages you pay in your normal occupation, but even if it is above average, you've used up your luxury and entertainment allowances for years. You'd have been stopped, of course, if you hadn't done it so fast. But all in one week! The reports are tabulated now and I must ask you to leave."

"How do you know all about it?" Allen demanded.

"My dear young man, why do you suppose your thumbprint is taken with every purchase? All bills go to central accounting and a full statement of purchases is compiled as often as the volume merits it. With due estimates, naturally, for such unreceipted items as tips and the like. Surely you knew that."

"Yeah," Allen said. "Surely I knew that."

"So—you must leave. You'll be living at a mere subsistence level for a long time. But—" he shrugged—"when you get your credit back, come and see me again. Perhaps I can arrange something just as nice as this—if you promise to conduct yourselves reasonably." He left, mumbling over his shoulder that they were to be out by noon.

"There goes four hundred ralloods a week," Ann said.

"Yes, and it's a long way to a thousand," said Allen. "We should have left when we had it."

"I hate to think so," Ann said, "but I guess we should have. It has been fun, though."

"What do we do now?"

The answer came in the form of a performance by the beautifully toned door chimes. It was a detective with a summons. An hour later they were in court. An hour and fifteen minutes later they were tried, convicted and lectured soundly by the judge.

The judge's lecture gave them some insight into what Allen called Backward Economics. They were, the judge informed them, a blight poised to strike at the roots of the entire economy and bring it toppling down. Their offense seemed to be: first, that they had received more for purchases than they were spending in wages; and second, that they were unemployed, and therefore not spending anything in wages.

Allen had a sudden inspiration. "But, Your Honor," he protested, "I couldn't find a job."

HIS HONOR flushed angrily and shattered his gavel with one vicious stroke. "This court will not tolerate such a fiction! You know perfectly well that any citizen who is unable to find employment privately can pay wages to the government."

Allen considered informing His Honor that they were not

citizens, and thought better of it.

But their sentence did not seem unduly severe. His Honor placed them on probation, banged a fresh gavel, and called for the next case.

A burly police officer let them out of the courtroom and into the small anteroom, where white-robed technicians took charge of them, got them seated at a table, and before they quite knew what was happening had their right thumbs clamped in a small boxlike device.

"The judge said probation," Allen said in indignation. "He didn't say anything about thumb screws."

"Quite a card, aren't you?" the police officer sneered.

Allen felt a sudden stab of pain, nothing more. At the same time Ann winced and looked over at him, puzzled.

"All right," the police officer said. "You can go now." He chuckled. "And don't do it again."

On the steps of the courthouse they stopped to examine their thumbs. Neatly engraved on each was a small P.

"I'll be damned," Allen said. "They've branded us."

They went to the office of their rental agent and that gentleman greeted them with obvious displeasure. "What do you want now?"

"We'll have to live somewhere," Allen said. "We thought perhaps you . . ."

"I don't handle rentals in your class."

"Could you refer us to someone?"

The man sighed and buzzed his secretary. "These people are on probation," he said. "See if you can find them something."

The secretary departed, giving them contemptuous glances over her shoulder.

"This may sound like an odd question," Allen said, holding up his thumb, "but would you mind explaining this probation business?"

"Try and buy something," the rental agent said. "You'll understand it soon enough. You can't make a purchase without receipting it with your right thumbprint. A probation print is not acceptable unless accompanied by a waiver of probation officially certified by the court."

"What do they want to do?" Allen said hotly. "Starve us?"

"Oh, you can buy essentials—the bare essentials. You must register at one store and make all your food purchases there. You can buy clothing, but only such clothing as is necessary for your work, and your employer must furnish a requisition. I don't know the exact amount of your excess, of course, but if you behave yourselves for a few years, the court may take your good behavior into consideration."

"I see," Allen said. "Tell me one thing. Are there any lend-

ing institutions around here?"

"I don't understand."

"Banks, loan companies..."

"Oh. You mean *borrowing* institutions. Certainly—there are plenty of them around. Why do you ask?"

"I'd like to borrow a thousand ralloods."

"My dear young man! Were you born yesterday? You don't borrow money from those institutions. You lend them money!"

"Why, yes, of course," Allen said. "Naturally."

The secretary returned and handed Allen a slip of paper. "There's the address," she said. "It isn't much. Just a furnished room. The neighborhood is poor and it's a walk-down, but I don't think you can do any better than that."

"Thank you," Allen said, "for everything. Does the government confiscate the things we bought?"

"Certainly not," the rental agent said. "The government merely keeps you from buying more until you have retired the excess."

THEY attempted to transport their belongings by taxi, but the driver took one look at the "P" that registered neatly in the center of Allen's thumbprint and drove off without them. They made four trips by bus, and learned later that they had used up their week's quota. Their new

landlady was fat, owlish-looking, and hideously suspicious.

"One of those, eh?" she said, studying Allen's thumbprint. "Well, all right. But I'll have you know this is a decent house, and if the police start nosing around here, out you go." She paid him for a week in advance—six ralloods.

They got settled in their cramped room and Allen sat in the lone chair, feeling miserable, while Ann stretched out on the bed and sobbed.

"We'd better get something to eat," Allen said finally.

"I'm not hungry."

"We'll still have to buy some food. If we don't, we won't have any money to pay our wages with, and we can't go to work. And if we don't go to work, we'll have to pay another seven thousand ralloods in unemployment compensation at the end of the week. And where will we get seven thousand ralloods?"

She got up wearily. "All right. We'll buy some food, but I won't eat it. And we ought to start looking for jobs."

They registered at a neighborhood grocery store and bought their entire week's allowance of groceries, concentrating on canned goods that would not require cooking. They took their groceries, and seventeen ralloods, back to their room.

"Now we have twenty-three ralloods," Allen said. "That

means we can't afford jobs that cost more than eleven and a half ralloods."

"You take thirteen," Ann said, "and I'll take ten."

They found an employment agency and went their separate ways for interviews and classification. Allen's interviewer scowled at the blemished thumbprint, scowled at Allen, and shrugged disgustedly.

"Hardly worth the trouble, bothering with one like you," he said. "You need the lowest-paying job you can find. Some kind of a sales job might do it. You pay a small guaranteed salary and a commission on what you sell. If you don't sell much, you might get along. It better be something that isn't expensive, because one big sale a week would ruin you. This might do it—cemetery plots. Here's the address. And here—" he handed Allen five ralloods—"is the agency fee. I hope we won't see you again."

ANN was already back at the room when Allen returned that evening. She was lying face down on the bed and she did not look up when he came in. He seated himself in the chair and put his feet up on the bed.

"I'm a salesman," he said. "I'm selling cemetery plots. They cost a hundred and fifty ralloods each—or, rather, the person that buys one is paid a

hundred and fifty ralloods. I'm on salary and commission. I pay the boss fifteen ralloods a week, and I pay the customer fifteen ralloods of that hundred and fifty for every plot I sell. I don't intend to sell any."

She spoke with her face muffled in the pillow. "I'm a filing clerk. It was the best I could do, and it's twenty-five ralloods a week. I didn't have the twenty-five, and I have to bring the rest tomorrow or I'm out of a job. All I had was fifteen—ten from the groceries and five from the employment agency. I almost got fired anyway, because using the alphabet backwards confuses me."

"Did you try the new clothes angle?"

She sat up. "What's that?"

"I told my boss this was the only suit I had. He thought it looked pretty good—it ought to, since it cost two hundred ralloods—but he agreed that a salesman should have more than one suit. He gave me a requisition and I bought a new suit for forty ralloods. That's the most expensive one they'd let me have. So it gives us a little margin. You can pay your other ten ralloods tomorrow and then . . ."

"We're getting six ralloods a week for this room," Ann said tonelessly. "We're allowed seventeen for groceries. That's twenty-three. And I have to pay twenty-five in wages and you have to pay

fifteen. How can we save a thousand ralloods, if we go in the hole seventeen every week?"

"You see if your boss will give you a requisition for some clothes and I'll check around. Maybe I can think of some angles. Maybe they'll let me take a prospect out to dinner now and then. I could pick up a few ralloods that way. And maybe something will turn up."

Catastrophe struck the next day, when Allen sold a cemetery plot. "Practically took the thing away from me," he moaned. "I tried insulting him, and knocking the location, and everything else I could think of, but I couldn't get out of it. So there go fifteen ralloods."

"I bought twenty-five ralloods worth of clothing," Ann said, "so we're still a little ahead. My wages are paid for next week. But you'd better not sell any more."

"I won't," Allen promised. "I'll turn and run first."

They started the second week with their wages honorably paid, and enough surplus to carry them a third week, providing Allen sold no plots. Beyond that lay blank despair.

Allen returned to their room in a fretful mood. He had narrowly avoided making a sale that morning. His evasion tactics were so obvious that the prospective customer complained to his boss. The

boss had studied Allen's sales record, which was not impressive, and threatened to discharge him. Allen was tired, discouraged, and nauseated at the thought of another cold meal out of cans. He was homesick for a glimpse of blue sky.

He lurched through the door and halted in amazement.

Ann had a visitor—a bulky, bearded, bald-headed visitor who leaned back in the rickety chair and regarded him quizzically. It was Mr. Gloop, of the Gloop Travel Agency.

Mr. Gloop pointed an accusing finger. "You shouldn't have done it!"

"You're telling me!" said Allen.

Ann leaped up excitedly. "We just got here. I saw him on the street and he almost got away from me. I must have chased him two blocks."

"Three blocks," Mr. Gloop said. "My mother warned me not to pay any attention to strange women, so I tried to ignore her. Unsuccessfully, I might add. I didn't recognize her. But you shouldn't have done it. Do you realize the confusion you've created in our accounting department? Two return trips with no outgoing prints to match with them. The directors have held three emergency meetings and the problem seemed utterly incapable of solution. You'll have to go back, you know.

You must promise absolute secrecy and leave at once. I won't have it any other way."

"Neither would I," Ann said fervently.

GLOOP was studying the room critically. "Why are you living in such a queer place? I've often wondered what people from your world would do in our civilization, but this is not at all what I imagined."

"It isn't what we imagined, either," Allen said, and briefly described their week of reckless living, and the depths to which they had fallen.

Gloop raised his arms in horror. "My word! But why did you let them put you on probation and try to live like this? This is terrible! Why didn't you just go back to Centralia?"

"How could we?" Allen demanded. "The I.B.F. men took every bit of our money. We didn't have the thousand rallods for tickets."

Gloop rose slowly to his feet. "My dear friend Allen! Surely you couldn't live in our civilization for over two weeks and have so little understanding of our ways. You do not pay a thousand rallods for tickets. We pay *you* the thousand rallods!"

"But I thought . . ." Allen began weakly. "I mean, you charged at Centralia, and I paid you, so naturally . . ."

"I'll start packing," Ann said.

"I'll help you," Allen told her.

Gloob held up his hand. "Just a moment now. Not so fast. This thing is more serious than you realize. You could have gone back at any time before you were put on probation, just by presenting yourself and giving us a receipt. But now you can't give us a receipt. You've used up your allowance of luxuries and it will be a long time before your thumbprints can be honored."

"You mean we're stuck here?"

"That's exactly what I mean. You have no understanding of our economy, of course, or you wouldn't have gotten into trouble. People keep a very careful record of their purchases. If they want some special luxury, like a Boolg tour, they conserve their allowance ahead of time, or they reduce their luxury expenditures drastically after they return. Conduct such as yours is rare. It's considered a serious crime, which is why the punishment is so severe."

There was a long silence while Allen glared at Gloob and Ann looked quietly at the floor.

"All right," Allen said. "Ann, this nonsense has gone far enough. We'll go down to the authorities the first thing in the morning and tell them

what happened and ask them to get us away from here."

"Oh, I say!" Gloob exclaimed. "You can't do that. There'd be all kinds of unfavorable publicity for Boolg, Incorporated. We might lose our franchise. We specifically agreed that our operations would be kept secret in your world."

"Tough," Allen said. "If you'll excuse us, Mr. Gloob, we have some packing to do."

"Look, now. Things are developing nicely and we are getting new terminals set up in Europe and South America. You'd spoil everything. At best we'd have to shut down our United States terminals, and that's the most popular place for tours. You have no idea what those tours mean to our people. To pay a hotel bill instead of being paid, to pay for transportation, to pay for food, to work and have the employer pay them—why, it's positively . . ."

"It's a dirty shame," Allen agreed. "Now if you'll excuse us . . ."

Gloob sighed. "All right. I'll manage it some way. Go ahead and pack."

ALLEN reached for a suitcase. "I don't see why you make such a problem out of it. All you have to do is smuggle us away from here. You don't have to pay a thousand raldods to us. What would we do with them?"

"Mmm—yes," said Gloop. "Perhaps it can be done without any official record made of it. We'll see."

A heavy fist rattled their door and the landlady's rancorous voice called, "Phone call for Mr. Allen!"

Allen started. "I don't know anybody here. Who'd be calling?"

"Why don't you answer it and find out?" said Ann.

Allen plodded up three flights of stairs and apprehensively picked up the telephone. "Hello."

"This is Agent Senoj of the I.B.F. You'll remember our discussion a week or so ago on unemployment taxes."

"For your information," Allen said, "I am now employed."

"I know. At that time you mentioned income tax. We've conducted an investigation and we find that you have received no income taxes for the past five years. The statute of limitations permits no claims of more than five years to be made against the government, but as long as we've definitely established this five-year delinquency, we would like to make a settlement with you."

"Well, that's nice of you," Allen murmured.

"We don't know how this could have happened, but it did happen, and I'd like to have you sign the necessary papers and accept a check in final payment."

"How large a check?"

"With interest and penalties, it comes to twenty-five thousand ralloods."

"You don't say. Give me your office address and I'll look you up in the morning."

"What's wrong with this evening?" the agent said.

"I'm busy right now," Allen said. "Meal time, you know."

"How about an hour from now?"

"Make it two hours." Allen glanced at his watch and counted on his fingers. "Four o'clock."

"That's a little late, but— all right, expect me at four."

Allen hurried back down the stairway. "I.B.F.," he said. "They want to give us twenty-five thousand ralloods in back income tax."

"Good heavens!" Gloop breathed. "You aren't serious?"

"Absolutely. He's coming at four."

"We'll have to get you out of here. If the government gives you that much money, it will also have to give you jobs to let you spend it, and that means high executive positions, and you'll never get away. Here, I'll help you pack."

They left in a rush, dashing up the stairs and waiting on the porch while Gloop hurried out into the street to hail a taxi. The landlady charged out of a hallway.

"Just what I expected of

scum like you!" she shrieked. "Trying to sneak out on me. Just what I expected. But I been keeping my eyes open, I have. Here—one week's rent for leaving without notice."

She handed Allen six ralloids.

THEY returned to Centralia, and the Globe Travel Agency, and the rambling California redwood ten-room ranch house with a rustic lake view, and settled down to a peaceful existence. They never bothered to explain their mysterious absence, and in time their friends tired of asking. And if their friends thought it odd that they named their son Kroywen, none of them mentioned it within their hearing. Not even the boy's godfather, Mr. Gloop.

The business of the Globe Travel Agency expanded at a rate that was absolutely indecent. Allen chartered buses, trains and planes, planned guided tours, and applied all of his ingenuity in the arrangement of colorful itineraries for visitors from another world. Centralia accepted the tourist boom philosophically and credited it to Allen's genius for travel management.

There were no more visitations from strangers requesting accommodations for tongue-twisting places. Mr. Gloop explained that this un-

fortunate confusion resulted when travelers already on tour attempted to locate the new Centralia terminal and were misled by the similarity in names.

A warm friendship developed between Mr. Gloop and the Allens. Mr. Gloop was frequently a visitor in their home and they had delightful conversations upon all subjects except the world of Mr. Gloop's origin. Only once did Allen tactfully refer to his and Ann's strange pilgrimage.

"I wondered when I was there," he said, "but I never got around to investigating. But the Empire State Building—you call it just the opposite, of course, but I won't try to pronounce that—is a hundred and two stories deep, and yet there's an observation gallery at the bottom."

Gloop, rocking peacefully, smoking his pipe, and watching his godson kick fretfully in a playpen, nodded. "Why, yes, I believe there is."

"Just what do people observe from that observation gallery?"

"They observe more or less the same thing people observe when they look out the windows of the buildings."

"But there weren't any windows in the buildings!"

Merriment flashed in Gloop's eyes. "Weren't there?" he said.

END