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# SCIENCE FICTION <sup>K</sup>

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## I. O. U.

By EDWARD WELLEN

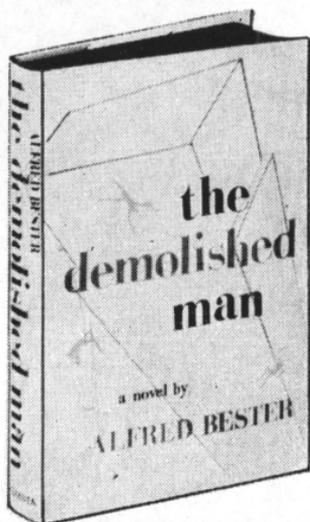


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### NOVELETTES

IOU *by Edward Wellen 6*

Minotaur *by Gordon R. Dickson 52*

The Well of the Deep Wish *by Lloyd Biggle, Jr. 112*

### SHORT STORIES

February Strawberries *by Jim Harmon 45*

Young Man from Elsewhen *by Sylvia Jacobs 72*

The Fastest Gun Dead *by Julian F. Grow 85*

In the Garden *by R. A. Lafferty 102*

### SHORT-SHORT STORY

The Seeder *by Max Williams 99*

### FEATURES

Science Briefs 68

IFun 71

SF Is When 96

COVER *by Paul E. Wenzel: "Big Game Hunters of Tomorrow"*  
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# IOU

BY EDWARD WELLEN

Illustrated by Gaughan

*Eternity is not so very long.*

*A few moments can span it—*

*a second can destroy it forever!*

## End-Around Carry

A STRIPED paranoiac awning flapped and billowed, deluding itself it was a Viking sail. Shadow and sunlight streaked across the face of the dying man. His eyes barely flickered awareness of the shifting. A priest looked sadly on; the IOU obit key the man wore prevented the priest from attending him.

A traffic administrator, his authority an invisible extension of the radius of his arm, wiped the shoppers back in a semi-circle to provide landing space on the Mall. The pulse-band on the dying man's wrist, having started sending the

moment the pulse began to weaken, seemed to be beeping with greater urgency.

A hum of vanes aloft evoked a hum of speculation below. Then the bystanders made out the insignia. The IOU last-aid man, beating out the ambulance as usual.

The usual zealot howled "Blasphemer!" as the IOU man grounded and knelt beside the dying man.

The IOU man ignored the howling of the zealot, the sighing of the priest, and the caught breaths of the rest. He eyed the traffic administrator.

The t.a. shrugged. "Just keeled over. Heart attack, I think."

The IOU man unzipped his kit, pulled out his brainmeter and touched it to the skull of the dying man. He watched the indicator and at the same time kept half an eye out, not fretfully, for the ambulance. He could go ahead on his own discretion. He did.

He took out his spray injector and jetted a burst of transistorized particles through an ear into the brain; then he thrust the dying man's obit key, which hung from a gold chain about the neck, into the portable call box.

At IOU headquarters the great computer snatched the dying man's obit from the necrofile and transmitted the pattern to the transistorized particles in the man's brain.

The weather bureau had freshened the breeze and a scrap of stale newspaper rustled along like a leaf. An old headline — IOU DECLARES BIGGEST DIVIDEND YET — molded itself to the man's face. A gasp from the squeamish, but the last-aider, concentrating on his readings, failed to take notice. The t.a.'s eye silenced all.

The last-aider looked up and smiled around. The dead man had made his heaven.

The crowd sighed, all but priest and zealot in relief. The t.a. sighed. The IOU man sighed. All but priest and zealot were IOU subscribers.

Now the IOU man saw the scrap of paper and reached to

remove it. But the wash of the slightly late ambulance tore it away, with what seemed to the squeamish a rip.

## I

ON his way home Rush Tumulty dropped his last credit in a slot and reaped a bouquet of roses. His life jingle-jangled with spurs of the moment.

Home. The real estate agent, God pity his soul, had told them it was quaint and neighborly. At the touch of Rush's key the door opened with a quaint creaking. (It made it easy for the neighbors to keep tabs on comings and goings.)

Margaret had her eyes on the screen. She was reaching behind for the box of sweets on the table. Smiling, Rush put the roses into her groping hand.

"Ouch!"

The roses scattered. Margaret sucked her thumb. But no one could look at Rush and stay mad.

The preset was switching channels.

"Not another debate?" Another investigation in the making; the networks were on a public-service kick.

Margaret spluttered indignant chocolate. "Not just another. There'll be Neal McGillicuddy Cloy! He's real good. You know?"

"Ig."

Neal McGillicuddy Cloy, professional optimist, doctor of business ethics, etc. Sickening. But Cloy was a sales engineer of a sort. Might as well stick it out. Might garner a few tips. Sales engineers had to learn to suppress distaste for certain types. The most unpromising prospects sometimes proved the most rewarding clients. That was good business ethics.

But then they announced the subject: Birth control.

*Avoid the issue.* Rush dreamed of his big break and became aware of the program again only when it was ending.

Whatever his stand had been, Cloy sat beaming at the fadeout. Why not? More people, bigger audience; fewer people, more elbow room for the chosen few. Pro and con, the world was getting better and better—for Cloy.

Margaret was glowing. Rush started to say something, but the commercial was so cute she shushed him. Then she turned to him. He tensed.

"When're we going to begin begetting? A boy and a girl. You know? How does that strike you?"

"Strike"—aggressive word. You feel unconscious hostility toward me."

Margaret said through her teeth, "I do not."

"See? Quarreling again. Bad atmosphere to raise kids in."

They sat apart, eyes unseeing on the screen, until a phone rang next door.

Margaret stirred. "Like some punch?"

HE gave a nod, but it was automatic. He eyed her as she swayed to the kitchenette on spike heels. Ringing was stimulus, response was "punch." He smiled; the linking was clear. Bell . . . ring . . . come out fighting . . . punch. His smile faded. She was feeling hostile. He couldn't blame her. He put on the smile as spike heels returned. They sat sipping.

Rush was no good at fighting silence with silence. He fidgeted, emptied the glass in a gulp, banged it down, sprang to his feet and stomped out muttering not to wait up.

He strode blindly, aware he was again precipitating a crisis by refusing to face a crisis. No, he was conquering his fear of rejection by rejecting the other first. No, he wasn't rejecting Margaret but a way of life, the kind his father had led, resenting wife and child. No, it wasn't so much resentment at them as at Fate; early photos showed a man alert for a different drumming, later—a man who'd committed himself to the humdrum. No, he had to, or where would he be? Where the race, if everyone ran off chasing the sound of their own pulsing?

No. Survival, even of the race, wasn't enough. A man had to find meaning in being . . . or what's an earth for anyway?

Out of the tail of an eye Rush saw a gesture. Bill collector? He put purpose on his face and made the vanishing point his goal. Then he stopped. Will Wishart! No; Will, rest his kindly soul, had passed on. A family likeness, then; Will Wishart's kid brother—what was the name? —Ken.

"Hi-ya, Ken."

"You remember me?"

"Will I ever forget?"

They shook hands. Rush remembered Ken dogging the heels of the big boys, always in the way unless the big boys wanted him to run an errand or retrieve a ball from a ferocious yard or decoy while they stole fruit. Now Ken was a man and taller than himself. It made him feel old. It was funny to see Kenny, prosperity on the outside and intelligence shining through, suddenly becoming the hero-worshiping kid again. Rush straightened.

"You haven't changed, Rush."

"You sure have, Kenny."

"What're you doing these days?"

"I'm a missionary." Really he was only a sales engineer, though he had once hoped to study for missionary work—breaking the ice for new prod-

ucts. And really only a jobless sales engineer at the moment. He was glad he'd always remembered the importance of dressing well.

"I knew you'd go places, Rush."

God! What he'd wanted, and what places he was going!

"Uh, you know, Rush, I wish I had a guy like you working with me."

**R**USH'S whole shortcoming had always seemed to him inability to maintain a delicate balance—not answering too soon, not hesitating too long. He sucked in. "What do you have in mind, Ken?" He hoped he'd struck the note of casual interest.

"It goes back. I run a chain of geriatrica and I came to know this senior citizen, Jackie. Quite senile, childishly disobedient, but everyone's favorite."

Ohmigaud. Rush hated to hear about old people.

"He would cry out in a kind of rote fear, 'Save my soul . . . save my soul . . . save my soul from the fires of hell.' And sometimes, 'Gabriel! Gabriel! Gabriel!'" Ken smiled. "I can see him trying to pick up noodles on his fork and getting angry. 'Why do they cut it so short?'" Ken shook himself. "Well, the last time I saw Jackie he wasn't baby-pink but gray. Vitamins and dextrose met in a Y of plastic tubing and trickled into his

veins. A thready pulse in the stringy arm. I was glad he was going quietly into the long sleep, as we call it."

He coughed and hurried on as Rush shifted weight.

"His eyelids lifted; bleared whites showed, then thin crescents. He groaned. And I could see Jackie falling into the fires he feared." Ken shivered. "I found myself saying, 'It's all right, Jackie. This is Gabriel. Your soul is safe from the fires of hell. I'm taking you to God.'"

Rush stared. "Did it work?"

"I think so. I hope so. If it'd been not a voice in the ear but a vision within, I'd be sure. Since then I've worked out the way." He went into jargon beyond Rush—even if Rush had listened.

Rush was seeing visions and dreaming dreams.

He grew aware of a questioning silence. "Um-hum."

Rush had edged around and Ken was facing an autobar. Ken thought of standing them a container of cognac.

Ken grew expansive as alcohol expanded his capillaries. "Rush, this is a thing I'm burning to promote. Not for the money, though I s'pose it might come to quite a bit. Thanks—" as his cup was refilled. "But for the satisfaction." His face shone with earnestness and sweat.

Rush frowned, but not too heavily. "Fine, Kenny, but you have to think this through.

More than a mere matter of life and death—everything is that. This would let a human mind settle its accounts for all eternity."

Ken brandished his cup. "Kind of talk I need. Man I need. What say, Rush?" He waggled a finger as Rush opened his mouth. "Don't expect you to make up your mind all at once. Have to think things through."

Rush strove to strike a balance between indecent haste and insulting slowness.

And so—Instant Obituaries Unlimited.

While casting about for some sound sentiment worthy of the moment, Rush belched.

## II

**R**USH had already given the printer the go-ahead, but thought it only fitting to let Ken see the prospectus.

Ken frowned over the layout and copy.

"Kenny, you have to realize people don't buy preventives, they buy cures. We're selling the ultimate cure."

Ken read on.

A devilish Before leered at the prospect, asking:

Are you fearful of old age and the wasting away of your powers?

Are you bitter about having chosen the wrong career, the wrong mate?

Do you foresee doom without being able to alter it?

Do you desire without hope

of attaining the thing you desire?

Are you remorseful for having squandered your talents, missed opportunities, deprived or mistreated others?

Do you feel rejected or wronged?

Are you unprepared to meet your Maker?

Here an angelic After, the letters IOU penned on its feathers, put the devilish Before behind it and beckoned the prospect. It said:

It isn't too late! When you close the books on life the IOU way, your personalized obit guarantees you satisfaction in the long sleep. If the body requires touching up just to lie on view, how much more does the dimming mind need the light of reassurance to enable it to pass on without faltering into eternal darkness!

Your personalized obit reassures you that you haven't lived your life in vain, that you have realized your potentialities to the full, that you have gratified your dearest and most secret desires. Your personalized obit justifies your misdeeds, remits your sins of omission and commission. Your personalized obit convinces you that you are entering Paradise, harvesting the fruits of Heaven, standing before the Throne—receiving comfort in the Presence.

Plot your lot in life easily, the amazing new IOU way. Simply speak into the scientifically designed Inscraper. This highly sensitive mechanism, developed by IOU's brilliant research staff—

Ken turned brilliant red and coughed.

—and exclusive with IOU, automatically translates your word-pictures of your version of the Hereafter into magnetic characters, permanently registering your personalized obit.

In minutes, you are ready for eternity, come what may. You live out the rest of your life, carefree in the assurance that, when your Time comes, efficient IOU emergency service springs into immediate action, transmitting the tape of your personalized obit to your brain. The magnetic characters return electronic signals that evoke the original eidetic imagery. But now, thanks to the fact that the power to reason and resist is failing, the vividness and reality of your vision of the Hereafter has increased manifold!

Be among the first to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that you will enter into everlasting bliss! Dial O and ask to speak to your IOU representative today!

“Well?”

“I didn't know you'd make it quite that—”

“We *have* to make it strong! I did think twice about saying, back there, that one might even sit on the Throne; I figured that would raise too much hell. But don't let the religious angle trouble you. God has all eternity to set things right.”

“That's right.”

“Meanwhile, we put the fear of God and/or the Devil into them. Damned few have the moral courage to face up to the consequences of their weaknesses without weaseling, whining, or wishful

thinking. That's where we come in."

"I guess you can go ahead."

"Fine."

"And when that's done?"

"We sit back and wait."

Ken sat on the edge of his chair and eyed the furnishings. They represented all his savings and mortgagings. But Rush had been sure front was more important than the equipment that made IOU feasible and that Ken had stuck together out of second-hand parts.

Rush went out whistling.

### III

*"There will be a nominal charge for orchestrating..."*  
—IOU contract form.

UMBRELLA hooked on his arm, Otto Trever neared the IOU building, gateway to a better world.

He would live not in the past with its wilted hopes and smoldering regrets, not on the forever-crumbling edge of the present, but in a heaving future.

He sidled off the autowalk. With the awkward agility of the non-jostler he made his way to the entrance. He found himself nodding to the robot doorkeeper; then, though he knew this made as little sense, scowled at it. It was in the shape of an angel. It handed him a numbered card.

Full of comings and goings,

but not at all like a terminal, the waiting room struck a balance between solemnity and sprightliness. Murals showed lion and lamb in loving togetherness.

Otto Trever sat watching numbers light up. His eyes followed figures springing or creaking to their feet and vanishing down corridors. His number came up. He himself came up, force of response compensating for slight delay, and eyes followed him.

He came to a door. He showed his card and the door admitted him. He stood wondering what to do with hat, umbrella, and himself. A voice murmured and Trever found himself deep in a chair, pouring out his heart to an intercom. He found himself agreeing he needed orchestrating of his obit. The voice ushered him into a recording room.

The blank-faced technician was re-filling sound effects. Labels indicated ringing hoofs, creaking leather, clashing swords; the preceding client had wanted to believe, when his time should come, he was dying in battle, in the flower, untimely pluck'd, of ancient knighthood.

Trever nodded. That was a way to go. Still, wasn't it safer to go in your sleep, not knowing you were going? No, the best way was awarely—with editing.

But maybe the manner of his own going ought to have

a bit more thought. Maybe—

The technician was glancing up from ticker tape notations the computer relayed from the consulting rooms.

Too late to back out now. Trever postured eagerness.

"Won't take long, sir. I see this calls for just a girl's voice." The tech turned to his mixing knobs.

Not just a girl's voice. The voice of Hannah O'Dea. Trever glared at the IOU-lettered back. Hannah had a breathtaking voice electronic tones couldn't hope to match.

But he listened to scales of syllables and heard himself saying, "There! That's it!" whenever sound chimed with memory.

Then the tech was saying, "There, that's it."

And it was so. Trever could close his eyes and see Hannah; he almost laughed to hear her lilt meaningless syllables.

Joy switched to panic. The tech was going to leave him to himself—and to Hannah.

"Say anything you want into this mike. Press this, it'll come out in your voice. Press that, it'll come out in the young lady's. This is for the playback."

His finger over a button, Trever was alone, staring at the mike. He was afraid. For without that button there was no Hannah, not for him. Hannah had never given him steady encouragement. Still it

was a shock when she laughed in his face. His face burned. His finger stabbed down.

This time, Hannah was charmingly confused. The honor Otto was conferring overwhelmed her, unworthy being that she felt herself to be. She could only murmur, "Oh, darling, darling!" How tenderly masterful Trever was, whispering comfort with counterpoint of passion.

He gazed around, part of himself lingering in that event. He pulled himself together. Why, he hadn't done badly.

At that sweet seizure, he switched on the playback. He sat listening to a transvestite act.

He'd pressed the buttons in the wrong order.

All to do over again.

**R**USH entered Ken's office whistling the IOU theme. Without turning from the bank of closed-circuit screens, Ken put up a palm. Rush smiled, but silenced. He listened a moment then moved to the window. He viewed the streaming in and out. He heard a sigh and a switching off, then Ken was at his side.

Rush gestured. "And we're just beginning."

"But it's never-ending. We'll never ease all the pain and sorrow."

"Don't worry, Ken. Iron and bamboo curtains won't stop us. I promise you."

Ken put a hand on Rush's shoulder.

Their eyes lifted to the sunset the weather bureau was projecting.

Ken smiled. "What a life, when even loveliness brings sadness for its evanescence."

Loveliness. Rush remembered Margaret and felt for the clasp he had bought. No special occasion; just that he enjoyed drawing down big money and spending it.

He looked down on the streaming in and out and whistled the IOU theme.

#### IV

*"Persons wishing to spend eternity together may under clause (w) open a joint checking-out account."*—IOU contract form.

**Q**UICK as they laid Pat Conover in his grave his widow Norah began to fail. There was nothing mournful about her pining away. She was merely in a hurry to share Pat's repose.

Declining to look after her wellbeing, she quickened the process long invalidism had begun. Bedridden, she had entrusted Pat with taping the one obit for the two of them.

As this was a joint account, the computer hadn't erased the tape but stored it against further falling due. With efficiency the IOU man administered last-aid.

Norah's face began to compose—then jolted to horror, disbelief, rage. With a galvanic lazarising, she sat up as you'd crook a finger and glared at the ghost-white IOU man. . .

Ken burst into Rush's office waving a teleprint. "They served me by visiphone!"

Rush had to admire his own calm. "Mrs. Conover?"

Ken nodded.

"She has no case. Where's the harm in shock, when it's shock that revived her?"

"She wanted to die! But that misses the point. She's suing not on her own behalf but for her husband's estate."

"Same thing."

"She claims he got the wrong obit and should collect damages."

"What damages? He died happy."

"How do we know that?"

Sometimes Rush felt like shaking Ken. "Prima-facie evidence. Smile of the beatific."

"Or grimace of pain," said Ken.

"Or gas. Sure. Why are you trying to undermine yourself?"

"Might be kinder to allow we goofed. Ease the poor woman's mind."

"Want our other clients to lose, through apprehension, the full effect of their obit?"

"No-o."

"Wouldn't surprise me, Kenny, if the 'poor woman' is a zealot-sympathizer trying to

discredit our whole operation."

**NORAH CONOVER** told the arbitrator that even in her distress she didn't feel IOU had done it deliberately. If IOU would own up to its mistake she'd be of a mind to forgive.

She waved her cane. That obscene obit was none of Pat's doing. "All those lascivious dancing-girls! All that drinking and carousing! Oh no, that wasn't the heaven my Pat planned for us. I lived with the man forty years and I know Pat Conover never made that obit."

The arbitrator turned. "Mr. Tumulty?"

Rush handed in data strips. "Here's proof that Pat Conover made and paid for the obit in question."

The cane flailed. "Some other Pat Conover!"

"Sorry, madam, but according to our computer it has serviced no other Pat Conover."

"Then your computer is loony!"

The arbitrator said, "I understand your agitation, Mrs. Conover, but let's not get personal."

Rush was handing in more data strips. "Service records prove our computer in perfect operating condition since activation."

Norah tightened her lips as the arbitrator took in the

data. Rush studied the ceiling.

The arbitrator said, "Unless you can show me some proof, Mrs. Conover, I'm afraid—"

Norah broke down. The cane clattered.

The arbitrator printed up its decision. It wondered why a breakdown always embarrassed not the one breaking down but those looking on. . .

(When Ken ran off the transcript of the proceedings, he felt that embarrassment. But Rush was right. They had scaled the heights of a higher justice. . .)

Otto Trever neared the IOU building. Knowing IOU to be infallible, he disregarded the catcalling of the zealot pickets.

"Better unbought unhappiness than bought, unearned pleasure!"

"You have chased after sin!"

"Say farewell to your immortal soul!"

On second thought, it would be better to begin with an aloof Hannah O'Dea. The triumph would be greater when she wound up a passionate slave.

Unaware his dreamy smile was maddening, Trever passed through traffic administrators holding back the zealots.

## V

*"IOU undertakes to deliver the obit at all hazards."*—*IOU contract form.*

**T**HE weather bureau was projecting an outsize moon. It was the least the government could do now the Russians had made the real moon constant, stationing it over Moscow. But it added to the hazards George Cavendish had to overcome.

It forced him to make for the wall furthest from the beam, to keep from silhouetting himself. The main gate was in that wall, and so was the heaviest guard.

The vane lofting him whirred softly, loud to his ears. He cupped an eye to the glow of his watch. 1924 hours. Good job of timing. *Now.*

He sucked in air and prepared to cant himself into the yard. There was a stir in the tower emplacement and his guts writhed.

But the discs that were the faces of the guards had phased toward the insubstantial moon. It was blinking.

Cavendish guessed IOU had tapped the projector's power line and was oscillating the juice. Rush Tumulty had promised a diversion at the right instant and was delivering. Even in the dark, Cavendish smiled inwardly; no flashing of teeth to betray him.

He landed, slipped into a workshop, and stashed the vane and a guard's uniform. His spray injector he stowed under the jacket of the trusty's uniform he wore. He

hid behind a mountain of license plates and sat waiting.

He shivered. It was the chill of the raw hours. He wondered if Mort Greene saw the blinking from his cell in death row.

Mort had robbed and killed to get the credits to buy his obit. Then the law caught up with him and fixed the day to die. The IOU computer registered this bit of information and prepared to make good. But the law held Mort couldn't benefit by his crimes, or what good would capital punishment be as a deterrent? It denied obit.

IOU and its subscribers held that society might have the right to deprive the body of life, but not to deprive the mind of comfort—however paid for. The law and the zealots held that body and mind were one and that one suit of punishment had to fit the whole crime.

Cavendish didn't feel deeply about it pro or con. But he felt deeply about making good. Rush Tumulty had sent him off with a firm handshake and a frank smile and something about IOU having a moral duty to test the case, to defy the law, to deliver the goods. It would be criminally foolish to pass up the chance to make this manifest to those who had joined up, and to those hesitating. Cavendish wondered if Ken Wishart had the Chief's sense of obligation.

Wishart kept himself too much to himself.

CAVENDISH wished the Chief had told him just who the inside contact would be. But the Chief was right. Suppose the law were to intercept Cavendish—and drag the name of the inside man out of him? It would stop dead all further attempts to reach Mort Greene in time. Still, he couldn't help wondering. The warden? An arresting thought, but Cavendish shook his head; better suspend judgment, not commit the folly of committing oneself beforehand. He'd have to keep mind open and body alert if he were to acquit himself well. . .

He must've dropped off, no blinking the fact. The world was cold gray. Inmates were marching to breakfast.

Soon, many of them, with their guards, would be trooping into the shops, including the one where he sat hiding.

He was to slip out and mingle with the cons when they took their break in the yard. He was to stay inconspicuous; the contact would know him by the number — 10010101 — on his jacket. The contact would take it from there.

Cavendish sweated out close shaves. It was hard to hear footsteps in the din and he jumped in his skin whenever a voice sounded near. But his luck held.

And it was time to knock

off work, and sudden silence fell . . . save for the eerie lipless talking of the cons and the silencing shouts of the guards. Cavendish slipped out and made himself part of the milling.

He thought he was being inconspicuous but he found cons eyeing him and commenting coarsely. He remembered he'd sat all night on a stack of license plates; he must've impressed a number on his seat. He kept his back straight and bent his knees as he strolled, hoping his jacket would cover. But he attracted the gaze of a tower guard, hardlooking.

The guard winked. His heart thumped his ribcage. The inside contact. He returned the wink. The guard turned away—swung back, and winked. Cavendish shot glances around, then winked. He knew he ought to move on before others noted. But the guard's gaze held him. The guard winked. Cavendish groaned—hadn't there been office enough?—but he winked.

The guard raised his gun and blazed away at Cavendish.

CAVENDISH came to in the prison hospital. He had only flesh wounds; he supposed he should feel grateful. But there are soul wounds.

Knowing it useless, he felt for the spray injector. Gone. They couldn't have missed it when they stripped him to

tend his wounds of the flesh.

He'd done his best, but he defended himself without conviction. It was painful even to wonder what went wrong. Maybe the guard was a zealot, laughing to himself at the thought of crossing up the IOU agent.

A figure leaned over him. A trusty-orderly. The man would have the freedom of the place. If he jumped the man, got his naked flesh into those clothes, he'd have a fighting chance. . .

He caught the man in a hammerlock.

The man broke it and pushed him down. "Mercy me, 10010101, you *are* screwy. You're lucky to be living. Zwicker's touchy about his tic. Why'd you have to make fun of it? Lucky I got to you first and glommed the injector. They figure Zwicker went stir crazy."

Cavendish found his voice. "Will the spray injector get to Greene in time?"

The con nodded. "Sure." Then frowned. "Need his key?"

"No. The computer will send the obit at execution time. They're not moving it up?"

The con shook his head. "Not that it would be any trouble to get Greene's key. It's in the warden's safe."

"You mean he's in this with us?"

"Mercy no. Account of all

the pete men in here, the warden don't bother locking it. Now we have to think how to get you out."

Cavendish told him of the cache.

The trusty had hardly left when Cavendish remembered the vane. His heart thumped. Would the con take off, leaving Cavendish to face the rap?

Cavendish waited. When he heard footsteps he feared to turn.

It was the trusty. Empty-handed.

The trusty unwound a guard's uniform, cummerbunded under his jacket. Cavendish dressed with haste.

He tried to think guard as the con escorted him past eyes to the dark workshop.

Vane strapped on and whirring, Cavendish asked, "Why didn't you take this and escape?"

"Mercy. You happen to set your eyes on all the license plates? More each year. Think I'd throw away the break of being safe from vane traffic?"

Time to go. All eyes, including those of the trusty, who failed to see him wave, were on a shadow-stained window. As he went over the wall he thought he saw lights dim.

**B**OTH Mort Greene and the trusty-barber seemed embarrassed that the hairshaving was a superfluous gesture. But under cover of it the barber used the injector the

orderly had slipped him to shoot the transistorized particles into Mort Greene's brain.

Mort did not hear the hissing of the electric charge. He heard ringing hoofs, creaking leather, clashing swords. . .

Cavendish smoothed down his hair; knowing the Chief's flair for publicity, he felt it likely he'd be walking into a telepress conference. He entered the Chief's office, steeling himself against glare and noise.

Rush was alone. He sprang up and clapped Cavendish on the back. "Wonderful work, George. Too bad we can't publicize it. But I've been kicking it around. If people learned Greene got away with it, wouldn't it tempt many to emulate him? No, the well-being of Society comes foremost. It's only good business ethics. We have to refund stolen money, so it would be not only without honor but without profit."

Cavendish knew letdown as Rush saw him out. Then handshake and smile made it all right. . .

Otto Trever took a card from the doorangel. He smiled at the robot and then, realizing the folly of expending feeling on a machine, deepened smile. It felt good to know he was dealing with a law-abiding concern. He didn't keep up with the news these days, but some pros and cons of the Mort Greene case

had got through to him. Knowing IOU had restrained itself, shown itself on the side of law and order, he could disregard the Zealot pickets, who, though they had lost talking point, had not lost voice.

He entered the IOU building sure he had it now.

Hannah O'Dea would be the mistress of that rogue Otto Trever. She was one of a succession, and knew it. A pretty plaything but fast fading, she lived in dread of Otto's discarding her for a fresher plaything.

## VI

*"IOU agrees to serve as ante-mortem executor and will carry out the express wishes of the client."*—IOU contract form.

TIME had thrown her features out of focus, but as Ken looked at her, a nudge of memory resolved the face into that of his onetime favorite star, Cara Lovelace.

It was hard to believe this wasn't another telecast with Cara Lovelace playing the lead. Ken viewed her with a protecting tenderness that forgave bad makeup, quavering voice, wringing of bejeweled hands.

The first thing she looked for when she entered the consulting booth was a mirror. The shining surface of the

intercom, designed to induce a semi-hypnotic state in which inhibitions would lessen, served. She felt melancholy. Her reflection informed her she looked soulful. She brightened—then tried to recall that shade of melancholy. She wanted to recapture that soulful look.

The intercom broke in softly with its gentle probing.

An audience! Cara responded. She spotlighted her rise in the theater, told of co-starring with Lane Pierce, then of going on to solo greatness, spoke trippingly of her tours.

Ken started at another memory. Lane Pierce had taped an obit only a few months before. Rush had noted it with special interest because someone not Lane Pierce had already taped an obit assuring himself he was the one and only Lane Pierce. The man could imagine no greater bliss than to die believing he had been that nova of Casanovas.

"Now," Cara said with a dramatic sigh, "I've reached a point in the road where I can see where I am and what I have and can expect." The mirroring surface gave back soulfully. "And I ask myself, 'Was it all for this?'"

Ken saw she couldn't believe that. She clung to youth, squeezed into it; shoes and girdle extruded Cara.

"Not that I think it's all

over, or that it hasn't been worth while. But there's one thing I want to take care of at the curtain."

She stopped. Ken, feeling this was not a dramatic device but a pause before a plunge, willed her not to tape the sort of obit Lane Pierce had taped. Stiff hands unpursed a letter, still sealed.

It would show blank when you held it to light; static electricity when you stripped off the flap brought out the writing. The letter was old, but there was only the start of a tear.

Ken strained to hear.

"This goes back to when I and Lane appeared together."

Together not only onscreen but off. But her best friend, Ada Moffat, had fun teasing her. "You're not dating *him*!?" He stuttered offscreen. Ada mocked. "It seems a cocoon's age since I saw you last night!"

Cara was mad about his deep voice bespeaking depths of meaning, his deep eyes depths of feeling. But Ada would whisper, "What a lovely Jejune moon; it makes me crave the baboon of a kiss!" Ada was competent enough actress to capture Lane. Cara would blush and go cold. Ada said Lane was a bore and groaned amusingly at sight of him. Cara tried to fight misgivings. But she saw less and less of Lane. And of Ada.

**O**N the eve of the wedding of Lane Pierce and Ada Moffat, Cara received the letter. Her first impulse was to tear it to bits; her next, to tear it open.

Why was Lane writing *now*—unless to confess he regretted having decided to marry Ada? He repented before it was too late; Cara was his love; he and Cara—if she still cared for him—would elope. Cara started to rip the flap. Latent writing showed faint.

She stopped. Suppose Lane hoped she wouldn't judge him harshly; suppose, singing praises of Ada, he asked Cara to wish them well.

Latent writing remained too faint to make out. Fearing the finality of *knowing*, she shut the letter away. At long intervals she took the stationery from its resting place and with half-averted eyes tried to make out the writing. Sometimes it seemed to spell out one big "Yes," sometimes "No."

Now it was up to IOU to do for her what she lacked the will to do herself. She touched her neck. She was leaving the letter for the computer to open and scan and record. Whatever the message, it would be her obit.

IOU assured her it would carry out her orders to the letter. Having deposited that letter in the scan slot, she rose, performed a bow, and,

uptilting her chin, exited.

Now the booth was void of both dead letter and living spirit, and still. And yet it held Ken's gaze and thought. Sometimes life seemed like a dress rehearsal. Opening night was upcoming, but not yet. In moments like this, he felt he and the world of his senses were not really *on*.

Another client entered the booth and broke the spell. Ken switched off, then realized the client had been Otto Trever. Ken smiled, left the switch off, and returned to his work.

But he found himself returning to Cara Lovelace. And Lane Pierce. How the deduce could you figure a guy like that? In Pierce's obit there was no dialogue, no reciting of his triumphs on-screen and off, no word-picture of heavenly scenery. Only the thunder of canned applause.

Lane Pierce and his vacuum-packed obit; Cara Lovelace and her sealed letter; the man identifying himself with the outer Lane Pierce—which had the best of it? Ken turned back with a sigh, for he didn't know what, to the 1's and 0's of the IOU computer's current report.

**O**TTO TREVER sat down in the booth, still a bit out of breath. He had laid about him tellingly with his umbrella.

If the hassle had started when he was leaving, obit in order, he might've resigned himself to being struck down, maybe even welcomed dying. But he would let nothing stop him before he could revise his obit.

What made it hard on his umbrella was that the Zealots picked him as prime target. By now, they probably took him for a staff member of IOU. But that was behind him and he put it out of his mind.

The living Hannah O'Dea had gone away with her lover. Trever had never heard from Hannah. Whatever he heard was of her happiness; it only added to his unhappiness. The new obit would alter that.

He would encounter an old, life-beaten Hannah. She would turn away. Then, seeing no way of averting the meeting, she would face him. "If I had it to do all over again—Oh, Otto, if I only had it to do over again!"

## VII

**G**RIFFIN MANNING'S chest tightened. He sat eyeing the intercom much as the astrogator of the first starship sat at her controls. In his own mind the comparison was more down to earth; he was a moron aspiring to migraine. Not that heaven was a headache. The headache was trying to conceive a heaven.

"I simply lack imagination."

The intercom consoled him.

The recording tech was waiting with a suitable range of prepackaged heavens. "Whenever you hear one you like, sir, press this. Later, you'll make your final selection."

Out of sight in the control room the tech rolled the tape and listened in, yawning. After three solid hours of ethereality the tech saw Manning was hard to please.

Not one abode of bliss—not Sumeru or T'ien or Swarga or Aaru or Gan Eden or Olam ha-Ba or Elysium or Ching-tu or Jodo or Gokuraku or Asgard or Flatheanas or Albordy or Tuma of the Valley of the Assassins or Mictlan or Xibalba or Sibao or Tegri or Shipapu or Ponemah or Ilahee or Tir na n-Og or Hy Brasil or Avalon or Sukhavati or Langi or Untola or Dilum or Bolotoo or Hesunanin or Xanadu—had moved Manning's finger.

Moslems were threatening to enjoin IOU from allowing infidels to enjoy Jennet 'Adn. Turning his gaze toward the Throne of the Compassionate, the tech slipped Jennet 'Adn in.

No paradise. He quickly reprogrammed. But nothing drew response—not the sensation of immersion in amniotic fluid; not Nirvana, where all desire is wanting; not a