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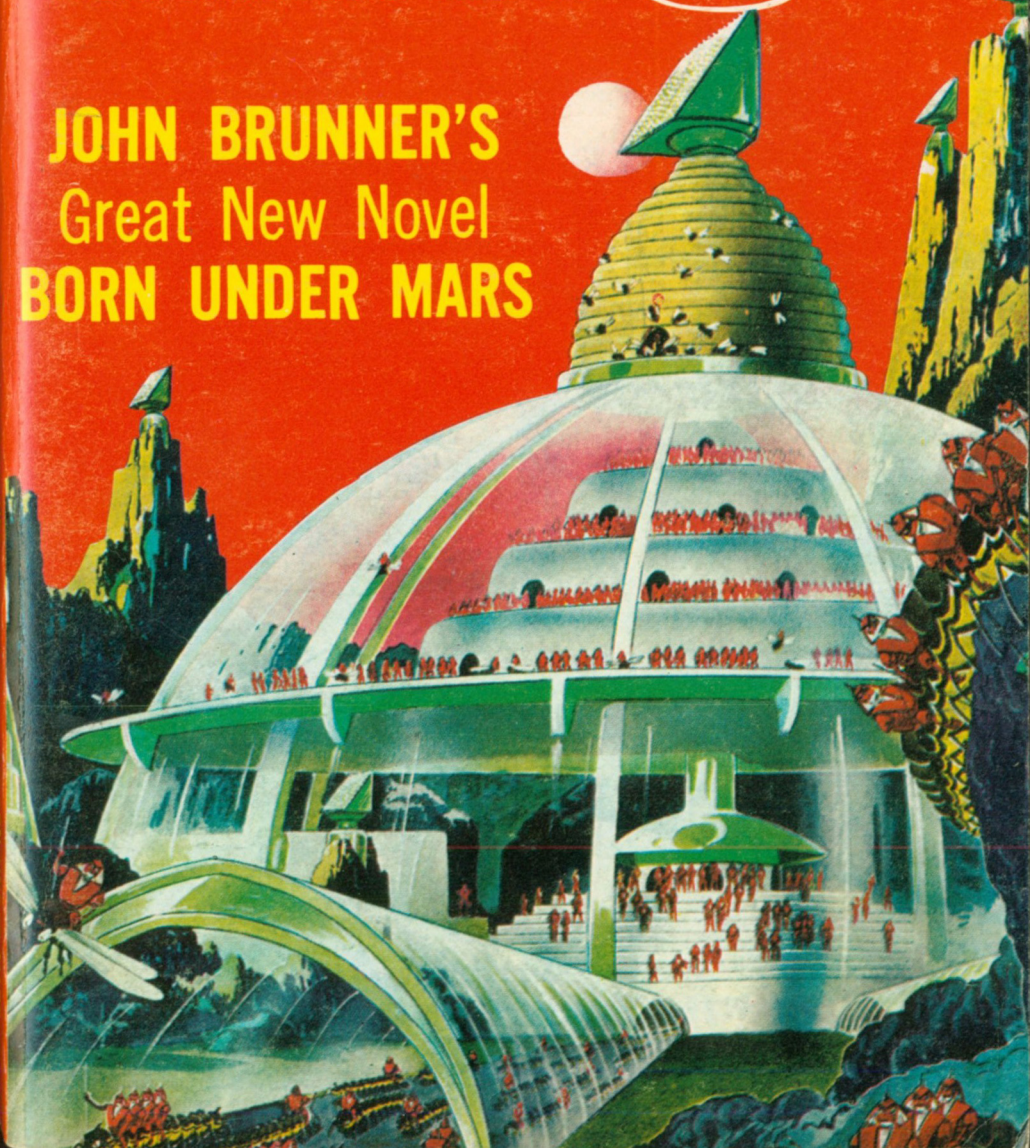
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December, 1966

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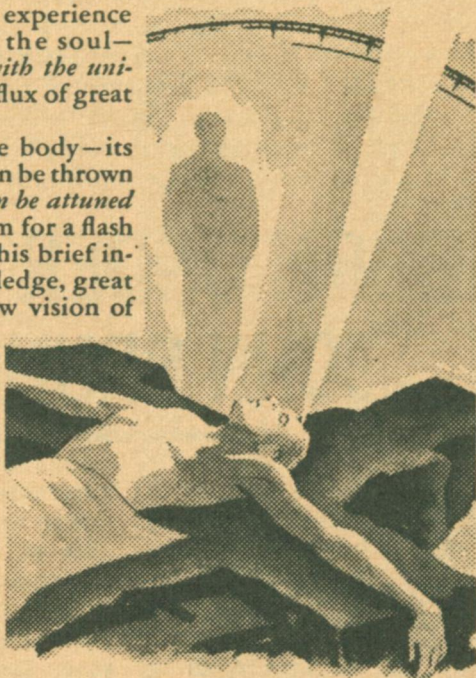
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BORN UNDER MARS

JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

I would tell it as it happened to me. But I am no longer as I was when it happened. At least though, I can remember when the change began—to the hour, almost to the minute.

There was the bare room lit by a single, high, fluorescent yellowed with age. It held some chairs. One of them was of stone, hand-carved, weighing about a quarter of a ton. They had lashed me to it because even in Martian gravity no one could have moved dragging such a load. To me, as a Martian, it was the weight of death itself.

I was thinking a lot of death

because of what Thoder had taught me—what I was learning after so many years was of importance. I was afraid of the last thing he said, in his rusty hollow voice: "There is always an escape, Ray, even if it is only through the wall at the end of life."

But this escape I did not wish to take. Had there been a reason, had I known why these men were doing to me—what they were doing—I might have put his lesson into effect.

The lack of a reason brought to mind an earlier teaching of Thoder's, when he said: "Consolation

is armour." I had such consolation. I knew that whatever it was my interrogators wanted from me they weren't getting it. But it was a fragile shield against a nerve-whip. I could claim small credit for not giving information I didn't possess.

Still, I leaned on that support for all I was worth. I wanted to recall this time. The four who were torturing me were wearing privacy screens and their voices were filtered. If I sought clues to their identity—and I did, with all the blazing raw agony of my nerves—I must miss nothing.

I had weakened at the beginning and thought of another teaching Thodor had showed me with his little bead-on-a-string—how to let time go lax and speed the ball of consciousness towards the future. This was easy—after all, it was the process of sleep. Enduring, I had come on the frail staff of my sole consolation to considering the reverse; the tautening of time so that the bead stopped, the *now* froze. Yet I burned so, I burned so under my skin!

If I live, I will find Thodor and beg forgiveness . . .

No, I could not summon the mental resources to slow time. Accordingly I could seize only the intervals between blasts of agony to look, listen, smell, feel and remember these men.

At first I had thought "slav-

BORN UNDER MARS



ers!" In spite of every official denial rumours about kidnapping for slavery went on spreading. Most of the accusations were against the Tyranny of Centaurus, of course. Officially, only Earthmen had views individually. While Earth was nonpartisan, most Earthmen's sympathies lay with the Bears.

Ironical! Me, Ray Mallin, brought to a typical Earthman's attitude!

My mind was wandering. I had wasted irreplaceable seconds. I snatched it back to the knowledge that the interval since the last nerve-whipping was exceptionally long, and I had a chance to concentrate again.

Accents? They speak Anglic fluently. But I speak the lingua spatia of both Centaurs and Bears with equally good accent and vocabulary, so these people could be . . .

Pointless. Listen instead to what is said, I told myself as though I were Thoder.

The man in the middle chair of the group of three facing me snapped, "One more time, I said!"

The man apart from the others, holding the nerve-whip, raised his instrument. I tensed, but the leader shook his head. "Try it without the whip," he directed. "The pain may be keying in a hypnotic cover-story."

I tried not to show relief, as the

last of the men turned to face me—at least, the shapeless mass of his privacy screen hunched to suggest the action—and said in his cajoling voice, "Ray Mallin! Your last voyage! Think back and tell us how it began!"

Should I tell it this time more fully, supplying extra details? I rejected the temptation. I was near to convincing these people I was speaking truth, near to victory, near to escape and to revenge. To waste the advantage was futile. Anyhow, what difference did elaboration make? The substance was still the unvarnished truth.

My last voyage but one had taken me as far as Durrith. I had never travelled much in Centaur space before, but I'd seen most of the interesting worlds in the Bear sphere of influence, and I'd finally grown sick of the discrepancy between Earth's official neutrality propaganda and what everyone knew to be the preference underlying it. I was afraid to fall into the stereotyped assumptions that would make people think I was what my papers called me—an Earth citizen.

Not that I thought of it in terms of "being afraid" until after, when I'd grown more honest.

I learned the very hard way that I'd swallowed much of that propaganda, despite my resentment of it. It implied things were

much the same whether you went north or south of the Old System. They weren't. The third time I was cocky with the Chief Officer of the tub I was aboard—family connections with the Tyrant himself—I was dumped on Durrith. If a Centaur crewman had done the same thing he would probably have been dumped without the courtesy of having a planet put under his feet first, but for the only time in my life that I could recall I was grateful for my official nationality. An advantage of being an Earthman was that in whichever sphere of influence you were you knew that the other side was temporarily supporting you. Not that I could thank Earth's scheming politicians for this incidental benefit—it resulted merely from the strategic location of the Old System between two great power-blocs.

However, for whatever reason, the Centaur officer had been constrained to show me the lock on a habitable planet. I was on Durrith, with half a trip's pay and no prospects.

At first I wasn't particularly alarmed. I headed for Traffic Control at Durrith Main Port, and invested part of my ready cash in getting drinking-acquainted with the port controllers. This technique had worked for me before, on Goldstar. That time, I was unofficially notified of an en-

gineer's post on a freighter, and the only drawback was that if I showed my nose on Goldstar again the local crewmen's fraternity would chop it off. Not that I cared. The fraternity hadn't copied the progressive unions closer to the Old System and recognized Martian nationality. Until they did . . .

Anyhow, this was irrelevant. On Durrith, as on other worlds south of Sol in Centaur space, they didn't have fraternities. But they did have patronage.

Three weeks on Durrith, no sign of a berth, I was debating whether to buy passage home—which smacked of defeat—or take the cheaper course, against all my principles, and have the local Earth consul ship me home DTS (Distressed Terrestrial Subject), with the injury-worsening insult of having to spend a year in government service on my return to work off the dead horse. To work, without pay, for *Earth!* The idea revolted me.

I'd spun out my cash as far as I could by helping in a bar on the port—discovering that what went over with the Bears failed miserably here—when Lugath turned up.

Lugath was so unlike the Centaur officers I'd met until then that, had he not been commanding a ship under Centaur registry, I'd hardly have credited his claim to citizenship in this sector. For

one thing, he showed harassment, which Centaurs regarded as undignified. For another, he addressed me as a fellow man. And he came rapidly to the point.

"They tell me you can handle four-space drivers."

I produced my certificates. Of course, the fact that they were heavily overstamped with Bear merit endorsements had weighed against me in Centaur space. Still, they were what I had—and they were good.

I half-expected Lugath to curl his lip and walk away on seeing so many Bear stamps. Instead, he merely commented, "You've served mostly in Bear space, I see."

I shrugged and nodded—as Thoder would have said, to no point.

"What brings you this side?"

"A four-space freezer!" I snapped, and immediately regretted it. That was the kind of answer I'd given the Chief Officer of that same freezer once too often, and if I didn't watch my tongue I'd lose another job the same way before it was offered.

Lugath frowned impatiently. "What was that?"

"A Spica-class refrigeration ship—sir." The last word followed late. "They dumped me because I was too ready to talk back to the Chief. But I can handle any four-space drivers you show me."

Lugath hesitated, but not for the reason I was anticipating. He said at length, "In that case you may not wish to return so quickly to the Old System—"

I leaned forward. This was miraculous! Right then I wanted out of Centaur space, and I didn't care if I never came back. "Earth?" I demanded. "Or Mars?"

He gave me a strange look, at the back of which was something I only identified a long time later as alarm. He said, "Mars, naturally!"

And "naturally" was right. Earth was far too wary to allow foreign vessels to broach the air of the home planet. I was afraid my spur-of-the-moment error would put him off, but he gave me the job.

His ship was as far out of the ordinary as her master. She was a conversion job. The hull was that of a Deneb-class ladyboat, half freighter and half liner, but the engines were cruiser-type, stripped to essentials to cram them into the available space. With a hull of such low mass to shift, they gave a velocity equal to a crack luxury liner's. To forestall my inevitable curiosity Lugath had made an offhand reference to picking them up cheap out of a wreck. That yarn rang hollow, but I was too afraid for my job to pester him with questions.

Most of the time the engines threatened to leave the hull behind. I spent the voyage literally sleeping with them, a stress-alarm rigged by my hammock to wake me if anything went wrong. It did, frequently, and I came to wonder whether Lugath's regular engineer had suffered a breakdown from the strain, but I didn't ask after him, either. —

We made Mars without disaster, and Lugath paid me off with a bonus, something else I'd not have expected from a Centaur.

Aside from the anomalous drivers and Lugath's cordiality, for a Centaur—if he'd been Bear or even Earthborn I'd have classed him as pompous and haughty—the trip was unremarkable.

And that was what was troubling my interrogators.

My words died in silence. I waited. Finally the leader of the four gave a veiled shrug and gestured to the whipper. As the control of the weapon was thumbed to maximum, I strove to do as Thoder had shown me and make time accelerate, make my private "now" outrun the onset of the agony.

I was too slow, but in any case I hardly felt the pain. It was so violent I blacked out. My last conscious thought was a memory of Thoder's gentle *tsk-tsk* over a

disappointing pupil.

Chapter 2

Suffocating . . .

I struggled against the reflex of fright, attempting to look back on this moment of waking from a calmer period ahead, explaining to myself what was terrifying me. It is the effect experienced in dreams when one thinks, "I drown, swimming with my face below water," and knows simultaneously that the flow of air is stopped by a soft pillow, so that the head rolls and the dream passes.

Not that I, a Martian, had ever actually swum in water.

I thought at first it was dust choking me—my mouth and throat were harsh-dry with soreness like sand-strangulation. But this was wrong. What lay weighty and oppressive on me, smothering my face and crowding my lungs, was thick damp air. I was giddy from hyperoxia. The remedy was to cease breathing for a while. Why had I been breathing so deeply? I looked to the soreness of my throat and found the dying tensions of strained muscles. I had been shouting, perhaps screaming, from terror.

Thoder would say: "A man binds time over millions of years—are you then to be frightened of Timurlane, Tibbetts and Tovar-enko?"

Not breathing, I felt, measured, analyzed. The air, first. Wherever I was, it was a rich and foreign place. The measure of air on Mars is by altitude-feet of Earth-normal, taking units of a thousand from sea-level to one hundred, or Martian ground-normal. Arbitrary, but close enough. I was used to breathing at ten, like all Martians. Here, the pressure and humidity combined to make an estimate difficult, but I reckoned two, or three at the most. No wonder I had thought of suffocation. No wonder I felt oxygen-nausea as well as the fading agony of the nerve-whippings I'd endured.

Also the place I lay. A bed. I moved, testing my assumptions, and found the answer "yes." A bed with nulgee flotation instead of springs. I had been in one once, at an expensive house of ill fame on Charigol. I lay on it naked, on my back, one arm on my belly, one outflung at right angles to my shoulder and still not reaching the edge. Wide, this bed. Like all Martians I am lank and tall.

I breathed once more, slowly, ventilating a quarter of my lungs, and opened my eyes. I saw two people. They—and I—were in a room of water-green and gold, its one-way windows letting in the sun of early morning or late afternoon. I knew an east-west axis,

therefore. My spirits rose. The place was decorated with great vases full of bronze-petaled sand-flowers, whose outermost fronds stirred in the upward draught of the dry air-cushions guarding them from deliquescence in an Earth-moist environment. The walls were panelled with hand-woven sandreeds, glistening a little because they too had to be protected against moisture and were sealed in a thin coat of plastic.

So—even before looking at the two people, I knew something of them—if this place were their own, or chosen by them from other possible places. Though no one could have mistaken them for Martians, still they accepted where they were, and did not try to disguise reality with masks.

A tentative deduction followed. They were kindly disposed to me. In plainer terms, rescuers . . . ?

Closer to me, at the edge of the bed, a girl. She was like a dwarf to me, as were most Earthfolk, but not stunted as they usually seemed—only miniaturized by the fierce gravity. She was graceful, with dark hair tied on the nape of her neck. Her face was golden, a trifle broader than oval, and from it eyes like jet stabbed out to each mine. She wore something the colour of the sand-flower petals—shimmering bronze—and it rustled silkily as she bent forward.

Behind her, at her shoulder, a man. They would say *tall* on Earth, but to me he was squat and almost bloated. Hair light in colour, pressed down into compact spiral curls above his square pale face. He wore Earthside clothing of dark blue and black. One big spade-fingered hand rested on the arm of the girl, and to me it was like the jaws of a mechanical shovel gripping soft flesh.

"He's awake, Peter," the girl said in a voice like violins. It was curious to notice how much deeper, more thrilling, the sound was here in a densely pressurized room than what I was used to. But I would never be seduced by environmental accidents. It was the first step to the lie about women in the dark. People are alike, but never "all the same."

The man hunched as she had done, his other great hand spread on the high-line of the bed's nudge frame, supported oddly in mid-air—and yet not so oddly to me, thinking of this air as a dense medium such as they tell me one finds in an ocean—and asked, "Are you well enough to talk now?"

I nodded.

"Do you remember what happened?"

I would remember until my dying day. But Thoder had advised, "Questions imply answers. The interrogator gives away as much

as he learns." So I chose to shake my head.

"You're in the penthouse of Grand Canal Apartments," the man Peter told me. "You've been here the better part of a day. We found you lying in the dust on a street-corner near the Old Temple, almost drowned. You'd been nerve-whipped.

How did they know? Were *these* tow of my interrogators? Hearing all four speak, I'd thought none was a woman, but filters, sound-shifters . . . I thought of my nakedness, and how Thoder had explained the way to read a lie in the tautening of a muscle remote from the face. But I asked how they knew.

"At first we thought you were drunk," the girl said. "You weren't. Then we thought you might have Larchman's disease. But you had no fever."

"Sober, unconscious, no fever," Peter said. "No visible injuries, yet you could hardly bear to be touched. You'd been nerve-whipped, all right."

"Drowning?" I said.

Peter's quick answer told me that despite being no Martian he understood life's harshness on my planet. He said, "Not maskless. But dust had sifted into the exhalation pipe and leaked past the valve. We heard you coughing from it."

"And you?" I said.

They exchanged glances, as if

they had hoped I would reveal something else before I challenged them—cursed my attackers, perhaps, and given a clue to their identity. To understand fully why I did not waste the energy, they'd have needed to be born on Mars—or, I should say, *under* it, for our last shackle to Earth consists in the oxygen demands of the developing embryo, and pregnancy must be passed in an environment pressurized to zero or even minus one. There are few of us; perhaps the compulsion to spend three-sevenths of a year suffocating underground partly explains that fact.

But their acceptance of things as they were followed fast. The man said, "This is Lilith Choy, and I'm Peter Nizam. From Earth, of course."

"Of course." There was more irony in my response than I'd intended. "And you know who I am?"

Once more, the exchange of glances. Peter said finally, "If the papers you were carrying are your own, you're Ray Mallin. You're a four-space drive engineer, and we rather gather that you've been around enough to have acquired enemies."

"So you didn't think it strange to find me left for dead on the corner of a street?"

The reaction was unmistakable. They had hoped, for some rea-

son, that I would take longer to regain all my faculties, and they were put out to find me putting keen-edged questions to them already. Lilith answered in a distracted fashion.

"Well—we are strangers on Mars."

"You informed the police?"

She drew back. Peter said sharply, "Are you afraid that we did? Are you a criminal?"

"No. But as my body has told you, even if my papers do not, I'm a Martian, and we have our own ways of arranging matters."

It was a trouble-saver that the screened interrogators had not taken or destroyed my papers. I could have got others easily, but they would have lacked the many merit stamps the Bears had added lately.

"Yes," Lilith said. "We—uh—we'd been told so. That was why we didn't notify the police."

"No one but us," Peter supplemented, "knows that you're here."

"I acknowledge obligation," I said reluctantly. I had to—it was custom, and they had saved my life and not done the thing I did not wish—but I hoped sternly they had not also been told the constraint under which the acknowledgment put me. To shift the focus of attention, I sat up and looked my body over quickly before sliding to the bed's edge and then to the floor. From the

true commanding height of a Martian stature I looked down on them, dwarfs closer to the stunting gravity-sink of Sol.

"May I have my clothes? And my belongings?"

The girl looked all the way up to my head, as though she had not integrated my length stretched on the bed with the soon-to-be-seen vertical equivalent of it, and her eyes widened a little. She said, "Yes, of course. I'll fetch them."

As she went, quick and graceful across the reedmat floor, to open a closet in an adjacent room and bring my gear, the man said hesitantly, "Will you take food? Will you not rest a while? The whipping must have been savage to make you unconscious."

"Thank you, but I have business to attend to," I said.

"With the—people—who gave you your whipping?" he suggested.

"On Mars one does not make such inquiries," I rebuked him. He flushed a little.

"Yes, I'm sorry. We were told that too, and I forgot. A tradition stemming from the early days, isn't it? When the only thing a man had to call his own might be a secret."

"Has anyone anywhere ever owned more than that?" I said.

The girl came back with my clothes, and I got into them. They had been laundered, and

smelt fresh and clean despite the heavy damp air. Talking, I had drawn more breaths than I should have done. I made the actions of dressing vigorous to wash out the excess oxygen in my blood.

The girl Lilith made the same proposals as Peter had—to rest longer, to eat with them. I shook my head, checking my papers, looking over my mask before going on the road. They had serviced it for me, which was a kindness, and the meter on the reservoir stood hard over to "full." I felt weary from the exhaustion that followed the whipping, but I had rested well and in another day or two would be recovered.

"You're leaving straight away?" Peter said.

"Yes." I buckled the mask, held the facepiece ready to put on when I left the pressurized volume, and looked at him.

"Wait." He was almost embarrassed. "Ah—a moment ago you said you were obligated to us, didn't you?"

Someone had told him the custom. My nape prickled. He was going on, despite a warning nudge from Lilith. "Well, I don't like to take advantage, you understand, but it so happens that there is something you might do to help us in return, and by saying that, you—you sort of committed yourself. Isn't that the Martian tradition?"

I could not deny the truth of

this. It would be to cut my throat as a Martian. All turned now on whether the thing he wanted me to do was relevant or random. I hoped vainly for something petty and routine. A request to smuggle, possibly. Often, I'd been asked to bring in perfumes and cosmetics of which only ersatz versions were cheaply available on Mars, and this girl Lilith was beautiful for all her tininess, and—

And living in the penthouse of Grand Canal Apartments, with pressurization at two thousand feet Earth-normal, they could pay the duty on anything they chose.

"What do you wish?" I said.

"Well, you're a spaceman, so presumably"—a vague gesture—"you go to the port here, you chat with other spacemen . . ."

A sense of doom grew in my mind.

"About three days ago a Centaur ship put in from Durrith. She's still on the port, or was this morning. She's called the *Hippodamia*, and she looks like a ladyboat but very probably isn't. We'd appreciate being told of any scandal, rumours, gossip—*anything*—about her which the people around the port are giving out with."

Chapter 3

During the next few seconds, I came within radar-range of break-

ing faith with myself as a Martian.

Peter had said, "We'd appreciate being told of scandal, rumours, gossip, the people around the spaceport are giving out with." I was not "a person around the port"—I was a space engineer. Also since my landing, my homecoming, I'd not been around the port at all—it smacked too much of intrusion from elsewhere, especially of intrusion from Earth. For ninety-nine out of every living hundred of our species, Mars signified "interstellar terminal of Old System" and not a planet with its own citizens, its own culture, traditions, and effective force of law. So I'd not spoken with anybody about Lugath's ship since I signed off and headed into the city, thankful to be clear of Centaur jurisdiction.

But Peter and Lilith had seen my papers. They must have noticed the Centaur stamps concluding the long line of Bear stamps, page after page. They must have realized that the date/time of planetfall after my last trip coincided precisely with that of the ship in which they were interested, even if they hadn't recognized Lugath's signature scrawled almost illegibly in perm-ink across the base of the discharge block.

I studied the face of both man and girl, and wrote my best es-

timate of their thoughts under those faces, like captions on pictures in a personality test such as Thoder used to administer to me. I assigned to the girl: *Peter, we know he was on that ship! Why are you telling him straight out that we want information?* And to Peter: *I've heard about the fierce honour of Martians. Their honour is something which they claim sets them above Centaurs, Bears and Earthfolk alike. I'm gambling on it.*

I said finally, "Tell me one thing before I answer you. Was it sheer chance that led you to find me, drowning in the dust of the street?"

There was an interval of indecision. During it, Lilith took a smokehale from a pocket of her robe and set it to her finely shaped lips. I had to conquer my Martian reaction to the gesture, reminding myself there was oxygen here enough to support a bonfire if someone decided to light it. But now I knew she smoked, I lost much of my original sense of being attracted to her physically. It was so irresponsible a habit even with inexhaustible natural oxygen at hand.

"It was partly chance," Peter said when he had chosen his words. "We had been told that a Martian was aboard the ship in which we're interested. The Old

Temple is at the heart of the city. We—"

The girl chimed in in a clear, decision-taken tone. She said, "We were looking for you, but we didn't know it was you we were looking for."

"Oh—what she means is," Peter began, "that we—"

"What she means is what she says." I gave him a puzzled glance. Thoder had once had a pupil so proud of his precocity he kept jumping in with needless glosses on plain statements, and this was what I was reminded of.

How they oscillated, these two! Closer to my home they might be, in space at least, but in attitude they were further removed than any Centaur or Bear I'd ever met. Moments ago, I'd imagined the girl to be the more muddle-minded of the pair. Now here was Peter appearing to be far less clear-headed than she.

I gave up my attempts to resolve that particular paradox, and made a one-handed gesture of invitation to them that they should continue with any questions they wished.

For all that he had acted so as to indicate his trust in Martian honesty, Peter was now the hesitant one. It irritated me, I confess. I might so easily have taken refuge in Earth-type casuistry, walked out about my own business behind the screening

half-truth that I knew no gossip about the Centaur ship from anyone at the port—and yet this also was only half a truth. For the fact that the screened interrogators of last night and Peter and Lilith too were so concerned with my last voyage hinted at enormous matters beyond my scope.

I would have to be watchful and suspicious. That they had found me soon enough to save my life shadowed a possible link between them and the four men of last night; it could be direct, or else a fortuitous result of a common quest. I might have a quest in common with these two myself, now, or alternatively I might have set myself a mission of vengeance against them. I must be very cautious.

I must, in short, learn from them as much as they already knew about my last voyage, because certainly it was something I had not noticed, being preoccupied with engines which threatened to break loose from the hull. Then I must choose a path for action.

Lilith said composedly, "Shall we sit down? If the matter is going to come into the open, it'll take some while to talk it through properly."

"There's no question of talking it through," Peter countered. "I'm merely taking advantage—unfairly or not—of what our friend committed himself to."

"He wants to know why we're inquiring about this particular ship."

"And I'm not proposing to tell him." Peter pushed his thick powerful fingers through his dense hair. "There's no set scale for discharge of obligations here, as far as I'm aware, but saving a man's life might be expected to count for a lot. Am I right?" He shot a glance at me.

"Earthmen have a random scale of values," I answered. "You have prized things that can't be eaten, breathed or worn."

"That's true enough," he conceded. "On Earth, a man's life is likely to be traded for something absurd, like a nugget of gold. Here, you're more likely to kill for a cylinder of oxygen or a flask of water."

Who said anything about killing?" Lilith demanded, seeming frightened at the directness of the challenge. Once more they were playing this role-reversal game, leader becoming subordinate. I wondered if it was a deliberate pattern, designed to confuse an ignorant provincial like myself with a smokescreen of Earthside sophistication, hinting at influences too subtle for me to detect.

If it were, it wouldn't work.

"Shall we come to the point?" Peter suggested. "For reasons not connected with the obligation you've acknowledged, we have

saved your life. We didn't know you were the Martian who had shipped with the vessel we're investigating until we found your papers and saw the last discharge stamp. Knowing, now, we are being blunt about asking, in the hope that you'll comply with your planetary traditions."

"I'll tell you what I can," I said.

When I'd finished, there was a pause.

"There's nothing in what he's said to make somebody nerve-whip him," Lilith commented eventually.

"We don't know that the whipping was connected," Peter countered, and turned to me. "Was it?"

"You asked about the voyage," I said stonily.

Lilith snapped her tiny fingers, the sound enormously loud in the heavy air. "If the whipping is connected, then the important thing is what became of the man he replaced?" She was shaking with sudden tension.

Peter saw implications that escaped me, though I expected I would figure them out later. He jolted forward on his chair.

"Do you know what happened to him?" he demanded.

"I was told he'd fallen sick," I said. I was getting tired of this. I was also hungry, and there was a hint of annoyance at the back of

my mind that I should have bound myself to this interrogation, no less difficult to bear than last night's—even if the nerve-whip was lacking.

"An astonishing coincidence," Lilith said coldly, getting to her feet. "Peter, I think you leaned too hard on this theoretical Martian honesty."

"It falls rather patly, I agree." His eyes were on me, showing worry. They were pale blue, as I hadn't previously ascertained.

"In that case. . ." Lilith took another smokehale and drew on it nervously.

"In that case, who whipped him?" Peter supplied.

"There are two possibilities, aren't there?" she muttered. I tensed a little. They were skillful at parrying my own probes, but now they were under strain from some source I could only guess at—thinking, I imagined, that they had revealed their involvement to someone who was telling lies and in fact did know whatever secret surrounded the last voyage of Lugath's ship. I might get a glimpse past their screens.

But neither of them referred more directly to the "two possibilities," and after a brief wait I spoke loudly.

"I consider I've done what you asked for, and the obligation is discharged."

"Not so fast," Peter said, rising

with a grim expression. Standing, the girl was only at head-height to me in my chair, but he was—as I have said—tall by Earthside standards, and now he scowled down at me.

"This is the trouble with fixed rules of conduct, isn't it?" he said. "Absolute honesty, absolute honour— Along with them, one absorbs clues to the breach of them. I don't possess the clues you've learned since childhood, so without them I can only provoke you to test your consistency. You admit you were aboard that ship of— what's his name?— of Captain Lugath's. Since you came home, someone's captured you and nerve-whipped you, then left you for dead. The usual aftermath of a routine voyage? I think not. You must know there was something extraordinary about the ship—its crew, its cargo, or its passengers. All the way from Durrith to Earth you had a chance to observe what was going on, yet you maintain you noticed nothing peculiar apart from the exceptionally powerful drivers you were given to nurse. You'll pardon my Earthside boorishness, but I find that hard to credit. You're not a stupid man according to your trade certificates. Also it strikes me as improbably convenient that when Lugath's engineer—ah—*fell sick* on Durrith he should find waiting and available a qualified substitute,

not a Centaur national as one would expect, but an Earth national."

"A Martian!" I snapped.

"Yes, I'm sorry." His eyes narrowed fractionally. I read this as triumph at having breached my defenses, and cursed my touchiness. "*A Martian!*"

"But there's nothing much we can do if he is lying," Lilith said.

"No, of course there isn't," Peter rapped. "We don't want to degrade ourselves, take the risk of insulting a genuinely honourable man, and perhaps make an enemy needlessly. So we offer him thanks for his co-operation and—and raise one more point before we part from him."

"Which is?" I muttered.

"You said you considered the obligation discharged. Correction. What I asked you to do was bring us gossip from the port. There were others in the crew besides yourself, who may have been both more observant and less close-mouthed. What you have described of your own experience aboard the ship is welcome, but *not* what I asked for in the first place."

Casuistical is an Earthside word, I thought, and resigned myself to the truth of what he said and the stupidity that had trapped me.

He said, beginning to smile, "Another drawback of absolute

codes, I think. They're like levers for those who don't subscribe to them. I look forward to seeing you again and talking further about this."

I rose and stood scowling at him, wondering how in the cosmos I could both avoid picking up gossip which I'd be compelled to bring back to him and carry out a search for the screened interrogators who had whipped me last night. It was then, as he hunted for and handed to me a slip of card bearing his name, address and comweb code, that I finally connected up an anomalous pattern-breaking fact I'd had jingling about in memory ever since Durrith.

By a slip of attention I'd happened to ask Lugath whether he was bound for Eart or Mars—when I knew perfectly well no ship under Centauran registry would be allowed to broach Earth's air.

Ships under Earth registry, of course, *were* allowed to.

No wonder Lugath's face had betrayed that spasm of what I now realized to have been alarm! No wonder he behaved unlike any Centaur officer I'd previously served with! (Though I had to grant my experience was limited to a single voyage.)

Lugath had been afraid that I had recognized him for what he was; an Earthman posing as a Centaur, commanding a ship that



was not what it seemed in some fashion more important than simply having cruiser's engines in a Deneb hull.

Chapter 4

But this was not the thought which filled my mind as I emerged from Grand Canal Apartments, snugging my mask to my face against the thin natural air and the dry bitter wind of evening. It was a faint peevish resentment at the drag of obsolete habit; the notion of calibrating oxygen partial pressure in terms of another planet's atmosphere after literally centuries. In times when the heralds claimed to be able to trace upwards of twelve Martian-born generations within a single continuing family, we might have trimmed it to a bare number—two, five, ten—but the old qualification still stood in black symbols across the face of every pressure meter on the planet: "Thousands of feet above sea-level."

And how many millions of miles from any sea?

Gradually, as I adjusted to conditions more normal for my metabolism, I freed myself of this irritating obsession. I began to be able to reason and plan. I also became increasingly aware how silly I had been to decline Peter and Lilith's offer of food and longer rest. I was terribly weak even though the whipping I had

sustained was almost a whole day in the past. My guts rumbled, giving back swallowed air from the apartment I had left, forcing me to bulge my cheeks and divert five or six burps into the exhalation tube of my mask. Thus futilely occupied for a moment, I surveyed my surroundings.

Not even I would call my planet beautiful. Rolling red-brown plains, shifting dunes, hills hardly higher than the dunes, darkling sky, the moons petty blinking lights, the native plants majestic rather than handsome—even the famous sandflowers—the winds weak but harsh like much-diluted acid, half the people disliking or even detesting the remainder.

Yet I would never call it ugly, either. Stark. Plain. What would one call knotted hands scarred by the preference for love over beauty?

I had a private word, chosen when it occurred to me that Thoder was like Mars himself. I said "old-wise," and found sustaining comfort in the term.

I had begun to move townwards, mechanically, lost in this series of reflections as in opposed mirrors. The thought struck me that here and now I could test one statement of Peter and Lilith's—that they had brought me here unobserved. Did it check? I saw no reason why not. Their penthouse gave direct to main-

surface. There was a beaten track leading away toward the town—the one I was following right now—and it was good enough for wheeled traffic. The rest of the apartment building, of course, was sunk into the side of the rift valley called "canal" millions of miles away and still known by that absurd wet name. There was no convenient point of vantage from which I could look down to see the track between the low levels of town and the base of the apartment block where the main entrance was, but in my weakened state I would not have tackled a long sand-scramble anyhow, so it was vain to regret the lack.

Assume, though, they had spoken truly. I was not retracing the course I had followed, unconscious. In some closed vehicle they could have brought me in secret to the doorway I had passed out of. Check, yes. And the line of this track, from where it lapsed towards the canal floor, bore only ten degrees compass off the direct line to the Old Temple, where they claimed to have found me.

Beyond the Old Temple, my destination, my home, my refuge—and perhaps my teacher.

Peter and Lilith would logically have made inquiries at the spaceport, over there to my left as I approached the setting sun. Learning that a Martian had been

in the crew of Lugath's ship, they would have headed next for my own quarter of the city. Their route homeward—yes, it would bring them to the Old Temple.

I felt a little better, even though Thoder would doubtless have warned me not to place too much faith in external evidence. I could almost hear his old croaking voice as he advised: "There are two reasons why a story may be consonant with the observable facts; it may have dictated them, or it may have been dictated by them."

How much more good sense had he taught me, that I dismissed at the time because I was bored, or hankered after the glossy possessions of Earthfolk, Centaurs and Bears? Why had it taken a night of nerve-whipping to show me the value of his teaching?

Because I was a fool.

Peter had said, "You're not a stupid man, according to your trade certificates." But those certificates didn't define the parameters of a man, only of a set of acquired skills.

I came to the tilt of the road, where I could see down the steep slope towards the bottom of the canal. The road, inevitably, hair-pinned back and forth. On foot, it was a waste of effort to do the same. I left the beaten solidity of the ground intended for vehicles and trudged straight ahead and downward, with the big fam-

iliar strides halfway between a leap and a run made possible by light gravity.

One day they would make gravity cheap enough to do more than pressurize apartments like the one I'd left. Already there were such luxuries as nulgee beds, though of course the area affected by the field was comparatively small, and it would cost fantastically to apply the principle to whole buildings. Yet that would probably come sooner or later.

And with it the real crunch. Then, the loyalties would be nakedly exposed. I could stand a few weeks on a world like Dur-rith, or Goldstar, or Charigol, closer to Earth's gravity and air than Mars was, but I had to walk slowly, conserve energy, eat much more than usual, exercise flat on my back every night to encourage the habit of carrying my own weight. Only when I came home did I feel truly able to relax. On Mars my seven feet and four inches stretched out like a growing sandreed. My legs loped down dunesides as now do in the canal slope and my small hands, fragile-fingered, could pleat a sandflower petal into a dozen folds before it deliquesced through contact with too great an area of moist skin. (That had been a symbol of delicacy of touch for me since I was three—Mars years. Say five going on six, Earth-style.) Compelled to

live permanently under Earthside conditions, I would die of exhaustion before I was middle-aged.

And there were others like me, though as I had thought a little while ago not very many. On the whole planet, as many as a million, in fifteen or twenty towns and settlements.

Of which not one could be called truly Martian. Behind me, I had just left a piece of Earth. It was clearly labelled Grand Canal Apartments, a piece of hollow plaque-service to this foreign world. Lacking Earth-fierce gravity, life in such surroundings would not kill me very quickly, but it would make me deliquesce like a sandflower in an unguarded vase.

Had I been wrong, or stupid, to choose a spaceside career? In some sense, perhaps. There were a high proportion of Martians in spacecrew compared with the population of the home world, so I had much to excuse my choice. It was a point of honour on certain worlds in Bear space—not including Goldstar, of course—for crewmen's fraternities and other labour organizations to recognize Martian as a nationality, and this had impressed me before I realized it was an ancient human habit to enshrine old prejudices in what had formerly been progressive, liberal, even radical groups. It was plaque-service again, lip-

service engraved in metal, and could be traced back to the days when Bears and Centaurs were repeating the decolonization process, familiar from the history of Earth, and declaring their independence.

But I'd been genuinely impressed, as also by the idea that the way to make a mark as a Martian was to do something a little dangerous, a little notable. Spacecrewing offered itself. Or one could stay on Mars and *be* a Martian—convincing himself, possibly, but whom else?

I got the rest of the way to the canal floor without much further thinking. The going was tough, each step sinking my feet deep in finely pulverized sand, and I had to concentrate. Standing on firm ground once more, I glanced left and right. Here, the sun had set long ago, of course, and lights were coming on. Just where the canal bent to disappear from view, the huge gleaming signs of the Centaur Embassy dazzled me—another non-Martian intrusion. From the same direction a couple of late-running trucks rumbled, still sifting down the dust collected during their traverse of the desert between here and Mariner. (How many more of these ridiculous fossilized terms? "Mariner" on a planet without seas! It had some explanation in terms of pre-space history, but . . . ?)

I had been intending to go into one of the sidewalks; out here it was shadowy, and inside the big square tunnels there was light. Likewise free air—I checked the pressure meter at the nearest entry lock, recognizing the familiar 10 on the dial.

But I hesitated, glancing at the wall of the sidewalk. The upper half, from about waist-height—my waist—was of glass, and meant to be perfectly transparent. This section wasn't. Sand and age and solar radiation had conspired to abrade, discolour and opaque it.

It'll do! This is only Mars, after all!

Shabby things. Worn-out things. Second-best things. That was the status of my home world. And sooner or later . . . full artificial gravity, whether we Martians cared for it or not.

Beyond the half-transparent wall of the sidewalk I saw someone approaching who still had on his mask. I couldn't tell for sure whether it was a Centaur, a Bear or an Earthsider—indeed, whether it was a man or a woman, for his/her body was thickly wrapped in warm clothes. But someone who couldn't even stand to breath at pressure ten was a stranger, foreigner, trespasser. I turned quickly away from the sidewalk and began to stride along the road instead, keeping well out of the way of traffic

and ensuring that my silhouette was displayed against the sidewalk lighting.

Was this corner the one where I'd been left for dead? I bent to stare at the drifted dust close under the embrasure of the Old Temple wall, wondering if the shallow indentation in its upper surface was due to my dumped body, or the result of chance. There was nothing to persuade me one way or the other. Straightening, I surveyed the temple, ground to top, feeling the same curious trembling that had overcome me as a child.

"Temple"? Another Earthside preconception, more than likely. Yet there was something stately about it, awe-inspiring even to adopted Martians who could make no better guess at its function than tourists from Earth. It was immense, but plain, like Martian deserts. It rose almost a hundred feet, and had been taller, but along the top edges of its four stone walls time had gnawed rat-fashion, till one could no longer deduce its original height. It had been a lidless box full of sand when it was found. Now, it was emptied, the fifteen inexplicable artifacts discovered during the clearing of the sand were on display in the interior, and visitors came up into it through a tunnel from the sidewalk opposite, to exclaim in disappoint-

ment: "Why, it's nothing! *Nah-thing!*"

It might not even have been built by Martians, as such. It might have been made by visitors from another star, when men were grunting in caves. Who cared? It said so much, even roofless and dilapidated: "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"

I considered going inside. At this time of evening it would probably be empty of tourists. And to my shame I'd not been in for years—not, indeed, since before I first shipped into space. The most potent symbol of the uniqueness of Mars in existence, and I'd neglected it.

But I had other urgent errands to perform, someone to find whom I had neglected still worse. I resolved to come back to the Old Temple tomorrow, or at any rate before my next spaceflight.

The resolution was part of the same process of change which had been working in my mind like a ferment—while I was unconscious, perhaps, for it had gone such a long way in a single day. I thought back. Its inception had been when I recalled Thoder's teachings, under the lashing of the nerve-whip. Ever since, I'd been feeling a bubble of fresh awareness expanding in my head, bringing a sort of clarity to my assessment of myself.

Bluntly, I realized as I gazed up

at the Old Temple, what I'd done was betray a heritage. I'd dismissed Thoder's sound sense as irrelevant rubbish; I'd preferred four-space analysis and driver theory.

Yet that latter was dealing with machines. Thoder was dealing with men and women. I needed both kinds of learning before I could tackle the task I'd set myself, the discover of the mystery underlying my last voyage.

I didn't have to wonder which way to take to find Thoder. It was like stepping on to the path which led back to my childhood . . . and beyond that, whither?

Chapter 5

At first, whenever I came back to Mars after a long space-trip, I immediately used to head for this quarter of town, the district where I had spent so much of my youth and acquired what small learning I could lay claim to. Lately I'd lost the habit; now I reflected on the point; it seemed to me I'd grown disheartened with the way things never changed unless for the worse. Pass this way now, and again in a year—the only difference, a door leaning a little more crazily in its frame, another coat of drab paint failing to disguise cracks in the cast concrete, the sand-etchings deeper on the glass windows of the sidewalks . . .

There was one minor conso-

lation, though. The people here were Martians. I turned my head to look after a girl who passed. She was only about six foot nine, but she was clearly my kind, my kin, where Lilith—exquisitely and miniaturely beautiful though she might be—was not.

People were mostly in their homes. It was the time of the evening meal. The thought struck me that I should eat too, as I had no way of knowing Thoder's present circumstances, and to have to offer a meal to a returned expupil who arrived without warning after not having eaten since yesterday might be a strain on his purse.

There used to be a restaurant near here . . . I entered the sidewalk by a lock whose pressure meter had a star across the glass of its dial. The lights were on, but no one was to be seen. Half-suspecting that the meter's reading of 10 might be a leftover from the time of breakage, I cracked my mask with care. The air was stale, but the pressure was okay. I walked to the next junction, then turned sharply left.

Here, the town edged back into a narrow canyon—a tributary fault of the main canal—and after a hundred yards the two sidewalks merged into a single roofed-over volume. I'd played Bears and Centaurs up and down the rusty steel pylons supporting that roof when I was five or six. I was

amazed to see how badly bowed the pylons had become nowadays. If enough sand had been allowed to drift over the roof to cause that, it must be almost dark by day down here!

Three kids, two boys and a girl already over five feet tall, were playing some foolish game under a thin trickle of sand from a leak. That shocked me further. If the hole was large enough for sand to fall through against the pressure below, it needed to be repaired, and quickly.

Seeing me, they remembered with a start of guilt what they ought to be doing and seized shovels and brooms to clear away the pile of sand, now heaping two feet high.

If no one else has reported that leak, I ought to!

I was too hungry now that I'd started to consider food, though, to take any immediate action. If I recalled aright, the restaurant I was looking for was just around the next curve—

There was a restaurant there, its frontage still decorated with old red paint and failing fluorescents, but the name was changed. It had been . . . let me see . . . the Barmecide Feast—a mocking reference to the scarcity of surplus food-stocks such as might enable a restaurant to offer a proper menu. Those days were a century or more in the past, and one could eat here as well as

anywhere, but it was still a shock to see a new name up: "Edisu's."

It was a worse shock still to see four Centaur spacemen as the only customers, complaining loudly in their own dialect about the dishes on offer.

I stood for long seconds in the door, half decided to go elsewhere, but then a man whom I took to be the proprietor spotted me and came over with such a pleading look that I accepted his offer of a table. This man was an immigrant from Earth, I judged; a near-pure negro eighteen inches under my height, still weighed down with Earthside muscles and his big chest still maladjusted to air at pressure 10.

His only waiter was patiently conforming to his title, standing by until the Centaurs finished showing off with all their grouses and chose their meal.

"What are they doing here?" I demanded of the negro, on an impulse.

"The—uh—the gentlemen off the Centauran ship?" He swallowed largely, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "We see a lot of them around here these days."

"Do you indeed?" I contemplated the menu. I had been away a long time—far longer than I'd realized. I'd moved to a small apartment on the other side of town, to be close to the spaceport, as I imagined, but in truth

because I wanted to escape the nagging sense that I was betraying the heritage . . . or what there was left of it—neglect, decay drifted sand on the roof, a broken glass over a pressure meter dial, a new name on a restaurant . . .

"Do you happen to know a man called Thoder?" I finally asked. "A teacher, who lives around here?"

"I'm afraid not," the negro said. "I've only been here two years, and—and people are inclined to keep themselves to themselves in this area."

Granted. I chose whipped frozen avocado pulp from Mariner to begin my meal, Sun Lake gravied chicken, and a Phobos salad. The chicken was dressed with some hot spicy African sauce instead of the promised gravy, but the Centaurs had stretched their list of complaints so long I hadn't the heart to register one myself.

Besides, it tasted pretty good in its own right.

I hurried over the meal because I could feel the spurious tiredness due to the nerve-whipping creeping up on me. I'd never been whipped before except by police picking me out of a bar-brawl, and then they confined their attack to putting the arguers into spasm, but I knew that some time tonight—prob-

ably within two or three hours—a wave of tiredness would sweep over me like a sandstorm and blot me out. By then I meant to be at home and in bed.

Sensibly, I should go straight there. I wasn't feeling sensible.

It so happened that despite my eating quickly, the Centaurs concluded their meal a minute before I did, paid their bill and started to gather their gear with loud comments on the standard of Martian food. I thought it best to let them get clear of the place before I left myself, for fear I might be tempted to dispute their views, and that was how I came to see the two Bears arrive; not to eat, but to call for beer and an *oware* set. The negro had one, of course. I saw him pick it up from behind the counter, and the pebbles to go with it.

I snapped my fingers to attract his attention. He glanced at the waiting Bears, decided a moment's delay wouldn't harm anyone, and came to me.

"And dice," I said.

"What?" He blinked at me. "They asked for *oware*, and—"

"So you don't get many Bears in here? Not as many as Centaurs?"

"Why, no. But—"

"Bears gamble. They play *oware* with the order of moves determined by a round of dice, not in sequence as most people do."

"Ah—thanks for informing me." He gave a sudden weary smile. "I've had enough complaints about the quality of my place's service for one evening."

"You're pro-Bear?"

"Well . . ." He stiffened, warily making sure that the Centaurs were out of earshot. They were; they'd already left the restaurant before the Bears entered, which was as well, or there might have been an exchange of words. "I find them easier customers, to be frank."

"So do I," I admitted.

I waited till he had delivered oware and dice to them, thinking how, until my recent experience in Centaur space, I'd clung dogmatically to the principle that no Martian should take sides between Centaur and Bear, especially not to copy the standard Earthside prejudice; how I'd assigned my own preponderant preference for working in Bear space to the Bears' own greater willingness to hire Old System crewmen. It was doubtless true that all human beings were human, but how they behaved made a hell of a lot of difference. Bears tended to be happy-go-lucky, individualistic, great improvisers, and keen gamblers. Centaurs were formal, disciplined, great organizers, and used even their leisure time to improve themselves, studying or engaging in elaborate well-analyzed games designed to encour-

age and nurture intellection.

I wondered what Centaur girls were like in bed. While on Dur-rith I'd had neither the spare time nor the spare funds to find out.

When I emerged on to the sidewalk, the Centaurs were nowhere to be seen. Grateful for that, I headed in the direction of Thoder's place, the shadows of youth closing around me, memories springing from every house and open space I passed. Lost in musing reminiscence, I was startled to be shouted at less than a quarter-mile from my goal.

"Hey, you there!"

The same four Centaurs I'd seen in the restaurant were gathered in an uncertain knot ahead of me. Their rank-insignia labelled them as a junior purser, two spacehands and an air, technician all low on the Centaur totempole. It could have been worse. I'd found the officers intolerable, but some of the lower grades were willing to accept Old Systemers as equals.

It was the purser who's addressed me. He held a slip of card with some scribbled writing on it—probably an address they were trying to find. My guess was confirmed on his next words.

"Do you know this district? We can't find this place we want to get to."

"I was raised here," I said shortly, and approached them. The air technician, who was what

one would call short even by Earthside standards, blinked up at me shyly and displayed un-Centaur-like awe at my seven-four. Stupid! With one-gee muscle on him, he could have broken an arm off me like the wing of a chicken.

"Let me see," I said, and took the card. Reading it, I had the greatest shock of this shock-filled evening.

I knew that address better than my own name. But what in the entire Galaxy would four lowly Centaur spacemen want at the home of an obscure Martian teacher, rejected even by some of his own old pupils?

I covered my astonishment and gave the card back with a nod. "As it happens, I'm going that way," I said.

I didn't speak an offer to guide them; they didn't utter thanks for guidance. Silent, we trudged the last few hundred yards, while my mind spun busily, random as a roulette-wheel.

The possible explanations I threw up didn't include the true one. It took confrontation with my goal to enlighten me, and when I saw it, I felt a pang of nausea.

Thoder was no longer where he had been. There were new garish signs on the old house I'd known so well, transparent plaques in the shape of escutcheons, on to which were projected

from behind coloured representations of famous arms. I'd never taken much stock of heraldry myself, but before venturing into Centaur space I'd had to pick up enough of the rudiments to blazon all the commoner devices, as Centaurs took the whole business very seriously. Party per pale, first a field sable seme of stars and comets argent, second vert a tiger's head erased proper gardant—that was the Tyrant of Centaurus's own bearing, obviously a come-on for the promising clients. It faded, and was replaced by another I didn't recognize, probably a recent invention; quarterly battled-embattled azure and argent.

Around me the Centaurs began to chatter. As always, they hated to be at a loss, for it made them feel vaguely inferior. Now they were in sight of where they were going, they resumed their customary affectation of arrogance.

They strode towards the door flanked by the escutcheons, and I trailed after them unwillingly until I was close enough to read the signboard between the dazzling lights. It said: *MARTIAN COLLEGE OF HERALDS — Zond King of Arms.*

An awful possibility occurred to me. This "King of Arms" . . . could it actually *be* Thoder? Deserted by so many of his pupils, as I had deserted him, driven at

last to this mockery of learning, this arid study of pretentious ancestries?

Let it not be so!

The door opened, revealing a fawning stranger who practically hunched forward in his attempt to avoid dominating the "distinguished patron's" with his Martian stature. He was seven-six at least. It shamed me to see him struggling to disguise that noble tallness. I hesitated until the Centaurs had gone inside, waited yet a moment or two longer, then in my turn strode over to bang on the door.

Chapter 6

"Thoder?" the man said sharply, studying me with keen attention. "No, he hasn't been here for a long time now. Who are you, anyway?"

He wasn't stooping for me, which was a marked improvement. To encourage continued verticality I was making the most of my own height.

Before answering, I made a quick survey of the vestibule where we were standing. It was dizzily disorienting to recognize familiar shapes, familiar items of furniture, among the superficial differences: the artificially faded facsimiles of ancient Earthside arms, the stacked piles of various *Journals of Genealogy*, outwardly gaudy with colorful devices and

inwardly mock-scientific with their pokerfaced analyses of complicated family relationships.

In a room over to the left I could hear the Centaurs' voices. Typically, though they had been here literally three minutes, they were already complaining of being kept waiting.

I said at length, "I'm a former pupil of his. I—ah—I wanted to look him up, that's all. He's still alive, isn't he?"

Somehow I'd never considered the chance of his having died in the long interim, but now, surrounded by visible testimony of the passage of time, I felt the idea real and oppressive.

"What is it, Yuma?"

The interruption came from a brisk woman—Martian, stately without being at all beautiful—who had emerged from a room on the right. She wore a curious long coat hanging in straight panels to below her knees, striped in the full range of heraldic colours even to being trimmed with vair and counter-vair at the cuffs of the sleeves, ermine and counter-ermine at the hem.

"An inquiry for Thoder," the man said. "He's a former disciple, he says."

Disciple? An odd word. Thoder had never termed his students anything but "pupil". But I had not time to think about that—the woman had immediately confronted me.

"I can probably tell you where to find him," she said after a scrutiny of my appearance seemed to satisfy her. "Is it a long time since you saw him, though? Yes, it must be, or you'd not have come to this house."

"Why do you ask?" I parried.

"No special reason — merely that he's retired from active work and I hear he's . . ."

"Sick?"

"I don't believe so. Just retired, and turning his attention to other matters. What's your name?"

I hesitated. "Ray Mallin," I said at last, not finding any rational grounds for withholding it.

The woman glanced at Yuma, who closed his eyes briefly as if examining an imaginary list. He said rapidly, "That's a sound Martian familial! Ah—four, five, *six* generations native. Last Earthside branch-in was the great-great-grandmother paternal-lateral right. Hmmm . . . Interesting!" He regarded me with patent curiosity.

His curiosity was nothing to my astonishment. Despite my habitual disapproval of heraldry, I was shaken to hear this complete stranger displaying a knowledge of my descent more exact than my own. I said, "How do you know that? I've never had my genealogy traced!"

"Yuma is an eidetic," the woman said. "An invaluable skill in

our profession. Presumably you have cousins or some other relatives elsewhere, who've consulted us." She gave Yuma an inquiring glance.

"That's odd," the eidetic said with a frown. "I hadn't thought of it before, but. . ." He bit his lip. "Normally I wouldn't carry cousin-degree data so close to the top of my mind, so—oh, of course!" His expression lightened. "It was only a couple of days ago that somebody was making inquiries about the Mallin strain."

Little warning lights began to flash inside my skull. I said in a carefully controlled voice, "Really? One of these—ah—cousins from elsewhere, perhaps?"

"Precisely. A Centaur officer, a certain Major Housk, from Leovang." Yuma was nodding repeatedly as if pleased with the accuracy of his recollection. "We gave him an extremely detailed list of the collaterals. No doubt he'll be trying to get in touch with you. He was particularly eager to track down the Mallins."

I was dreadfully tired—the aftermath of the nerve-whipping catching up with me—but that didn't prevent me seeing a high-order probability under my nose; that this Centaur major had *already* been in touch with me. Last night.

"Fascinating," I said with all the warmth I could muster. "I

begin to see why people enthuse about heraldry these days when it can be the means of reuniting far-flung branches of one's family. Did you by any chance learn where Major Housk is staying? Perhaps I could contact him."

"I'm afraid he didn't say," Yuma shrugged.

Too bad. Still, at least I had one valid clue to be going on with.

The Centaurs in the other room were beginning to get noisy. Yuma caught the woman's attention and jerked his head towards the source of the row. She sighed and returned to my original inquiry.

"Thoder's current address . . . Yuma can give it to you. If you'll excuse me, I must attend to my clients."

"Are *you* 'Zond King of Arms'?" I demanded.

"Why not? Would you expect me to be called 'queen'?" She gave a curious twisted smile. "A most un-heraldic term, my friend! Like a chairman, a King of Arms is a King regardless of physical gender!"

That way led to another of Thoder's favourite precepts; the term is not the thing named. And abruptly I was in a hurry to be gone and continue my search.

The address Yuma gave me took me aback. I had a vague recollection of the district in

which it lay, more than a mile distant. It was an area I preferred to avoid, being much favoured by offworld visitors and having accordingly the majority of its sidewalks pressurized to six or five . . . An irritating insight struck me—I resented that at least partly because tolerant or not people of other planets tended to regard me as a freak for my tallness, and it was good to be at home while they were struggling for breath.

Not that a pressure of 10 ought to inconvenience Earthsiders, really. Allegedly, primitive mountain-climbers had reached twenty (some said twenty-five) without artificial aids, and whole communities existed as high as twelve, in the Andes where some of my own ancestors hailed from.

I reviewed the layout of the city in my mind. I would have to continue from here by cab. Time was running short, my tiredness was growing, and I needed a clear mind to talk to Thoder.

I paused automatically at the pressurizer adjacent to the sidewalk lock I first came to, fumbling for coins to pay for the recharge of my mask. I'd worn the mask a lot since coming away from Grand Canal Apartments because of that irrational impulse to stay on the open street instead of going into the sidewalk. But Peter and Lilith had been generous when they had it serv-

iced. Seeing that I'd used barely a quarter of the reservoir, I decided I could recharge it later.

I used more, trudging in search of a cab, but I finally spotted one and instructed it to take me to Thoder's.

Folded awkwardly on the padded seat, I wondered about my mysterious Centaur "relative". Perhaps it hadn't struck Yuma and his employer that it was strange a man should ask about kinfolk whose closest possible link was five generations past. No, why should it? Centaurs were like that. I remembered the Chief Officer who'd dumped me on Dur-rith, with his vaunted "family connection" linking him to the Tyrant himself. I didn't know how close the relationship was, but it certainly couldn't have been very direct, or he'd have been at least captain rather than Chief.

Housk? Did that name mean anything to me? Of course not. I'd never been a heraldry bug, and I probably couldn't even have remembered the birthname of my mother's mother. She hadn't been around to tell us.

Nor, come to that, had my mother. She'd died bearing me. It still could happen. And my father was a sad tired old man around the planet in somewhere like Voyager, or perhaps by this time he'd moved on again . . .

I didn't like thinking about my family much. What there was of

it. Thoder had been half a father to me, as well as a teacher, and my natural father had been glad to leave me to his care.

Customarily I would think of my isolation as a form of self-sufficiency, a really Martian pattern of behaviour. Legally Earth citizens, we were in a sense rejected by everyone; why not suit deeds to circumstances and accept loneliness?

I was beginning to discover why not.

In any case, I told myself as I resumed my earlier train of thought, Housk might well not be the man's own name. It could have been borrowed to lend plausibility to his inquiry after a member of the Mallin strain. If it was genuine then I'd learned something surprising about my own background. Though on principle I'd not have admitted it, I'd have expected my collateral forebears to have opted for Bearspace rather than Centaur.

For this assumption I had no grounds whatever, I now realized. The types of Bear and Centaur must have evolved over several generations, only recently becoming so sharply defined that one could make blanket statements of the kind, "Centaurs are rigid and authoritarian, Bears informal and given to gambling."

Yet for all this, I retained the obscure feeling that the roots of the archetypes must go deep, as

though from the very earliest days of interstellar colonization one character had looked towards Ursa Major, the other towards Centaurus. Long before the succession of economic disasters which had caused them to revive the ancient institution of a "tyrant"—a dictator *pro tem* until the crisis passed—and then to organize their lives on a permanent impending-catastrophe basis, the Centaurs must have foreshadowed in little their present condition. So too with the Bears, although their random habits and lack of system made it hard to pin down exact starting-points for any change.

I suddenly found myself thinking of a girl I'd known on Charigol. I'd come halfway to falling in love with her, the only time I ever considered marrying and raising children anywhere but on Mars. I wondered if that was why I'd pictured my ancestors heading Ursawards.

Better for me to have been born generations earlier, at the time when—as Yuma had put it—the last non-native "branch-in" occurred in my family. In those days, there was no question of independent power-blocs enclosing the Old System. The colonies were quasi-federal dependent states and the first seeds of Martian pride, Martian traditions and Martian physique were sprouting excitingly. In my time,

in this depressing modern age, it seemed to me that Old System was roofed-in against the sands of space, and there were leaks.

My head spun. I was almost worn out, sleep dragging at my eyelids like Earth-normal gravity, intolerably heavy. But I concentrated on the idea of seeing Thoder again. I must say to him something of these confusing new ideas plaguing me, ask his opinion and guidance about them . . .

Getting very close now. The cab nosed to the sidewalk lock nearest to the actual address. I masked up for the few paces I'd have to go to reach it, slid payment into the fare slot, and unfolded myself out of the vehicle. Yet one more irritation! Why did these things have to be scaled to dwarfs of a mere six-six or so?

Because the people on Mars who mostly used cabs were from higher-gravity worlds like Earth. Damn them.

I blinked at the facade of my destination. I was glad to see that in moving away from strictly Martian surroundings Thoder had apparently gone up the ladder of prosperity several rungs. This house was kept in good order, freshly painted and carefully repaired. I only hoped that to secure this well-earned benefit in his retirement he hadn't had to betray his Martian principles.

So much, so much had changed! And I'd been too wrap-

ped up in my own selfish affairs to notice what was going on.

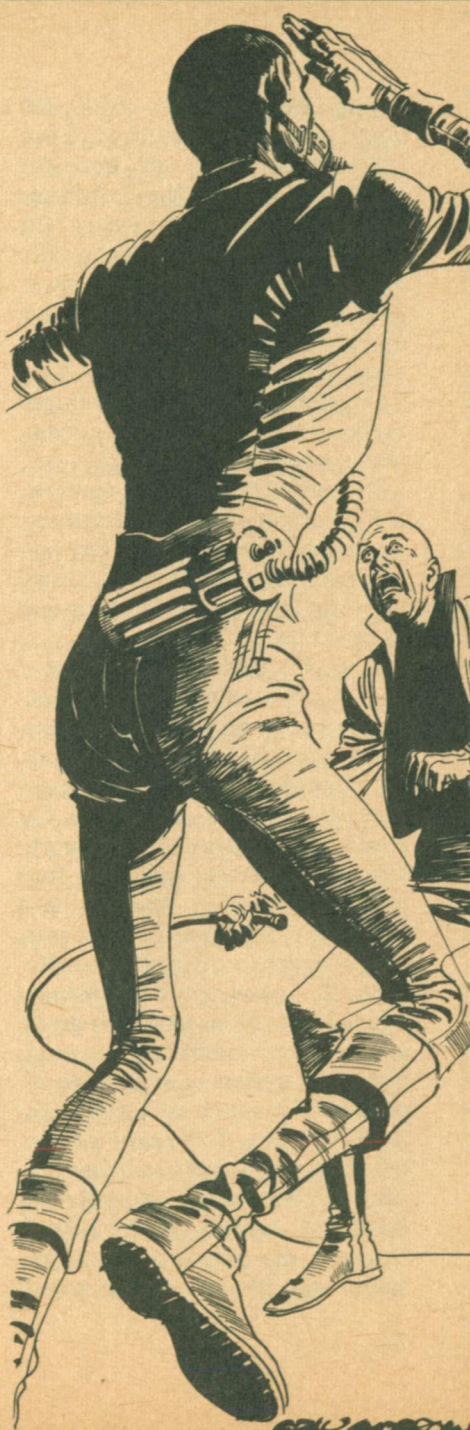
Chapter 7

But Thoder hadn't changed. Oh, outwardly yes—the lean frame more stooped, the white hair thinner, the eyes buried more deeply in a close net of wrinkles. Inwardly, where it counts, he hadn't altered a jot.

I'd planned a long apology by way of introduction, and it was unnecessary. He recognized me, greeted me as if I'd left him days ago rather than years, made me welcome and seated me in a large, cluttered room like a cross-section of a lifetime. Diagrams, charts and racked bookspools lined the walls. Every available shelf or flat surface bore items such as he had used to teach unwilling me and my companions the elements of life-knowledge. Beads on strings struck a familiar chord in my memory, but there were new objects I didn't recognize: Tibetan prayerwheels, a group of Bear statuettes representing Apprehension, Hope and Certainty, a Centaur game-board of a type I'd seen in use on Durith but lacked the lifetime habituation needed to play upon . . .

Thoder wasn't a schoolteacher, of course. I'd had the regular schooling of any Martian child, or else I'd never have been able to qualify in four-space engin-

BORN UNDER MARS



eering. He was more—well, I'd heard some of his adult admirers call him a guru, and once I'd sneaked a look at the definition of that term in his dictionary. I'd already been of an age to be self-assertive and cocky, so I felt it demeaning to have to ask him directly for an explanation of the word. I'd found something like: "An instructor in spiritual values, especially in the precepts of ancient Indian mystical teachings."

I'd never heard of a starship being driven by prayerwheels, so that information had also reinforced my intention of breaking with Thoder and shipping out to the stars.

It wasn't that I didn't *like* the guy. I—you might say I loved him, because he was closer to me than my father had been during my later childhood. It was simply that, for all the analogies he could draw between the stark Martian landscape and the formation of a truly Martian personality, I regarded his precepts as irrelevant to modern times. He spoke in terms of the individual; I looked at the news of the great power-blocs, numbering scores of planetary systems and billions of people. He spoke of fulfillment as a Martian; I thought of the legalistic gesture of contempt implied by my being officially an Earthside citizen, even though I would die young if I had to spend my life on my so-called

"home" world. And I had simply drifted off.

Now he brought me refreshment—little nutty biscuits, cups of local coffee—and seated himself with slow care in a large chair facing me.

"You look very tired," he said abruptly.

"Well . . ." I sought a tactful way to phrase the reason for my visit. With characteristic sharpness, he slashed aside the veils of prevarication.

"Ray! I don't have to be told, that only some extraordinary event would bring you back to me! I'd guess that something has happened to you which has made you see that a fuller understanding of what I used to try and drive through your armoured pate might guide you to a solution of—of whatever problem confronts you. If that's so, then I don't need apologies or excuses, I planted a seed of awareness in you, and now it's blooming. What more reward should a man ask?"

"I'm sorry," I muttered. "It was a kind of insult to think otherwise." I sipped the coffee he had given me. "What's happened, as briefly as I can summarize it, is—"

I told him about the four men in privacy screens who had waylaid me last night as I wandered through the canal-floor city. I told him what they had demanded of me, how I had failed to tell

them what they wanted to know, how I had been rescued on the verge of dust-drowning by two strangers from Earth, how my quest for him had led me to the woman who called herself Zond King of Arms and how her assistant Yuma had unwittingly given me a clue to my assailants in the shape of a name which might or might not be genuine, that of Major Housk the Centaur officer.

He listened with utter attention, scarcely moving except to take his long slow chest-filling Martian breaths. When I came to the end of my story, he was silent for the space of three further breaths—I counted them—and then drew himself further back to the present from whatever reach of extended time he had retired to in order to re-examine my tale.

He said, "Give me more details of the voyage. The name of the ship?"

"The *Hippodamia*."

He rubbed his chin. "Do you know what that means?"

I started. "No! Is it significant?"

"Is it?—Ray, I'd thought that you paid more heed to my instruction than *that*. At least you can't have forgotten the origin of the term Centaur?"

I frowned. Tiredness was gnawing at the foundations of my consciousness, eroding it like a sand-

bank before the wind. "A race in ancient mythology, half horse, half human, supposed to have been an ignorant primitive tribe's impression of their first contact with men riding horseback."

"A gross oversimplification, but let it suffice. *Hippodamia* means 'tamer of horses'—hence by association tamer of Centaurs. There is much to be learned regarding the process of human intelligence from studying ancient lore. It enshrines what people themselves thought worth singling out from their day-to-day experience in an age before the advent of psychology and scientific self-analysis."

He gave me a searching stare. "Would you rather I delayed this—this attempt to sort out your muddled information? There is far more of it available to you than you seem to realize, but perhaps it's only your exhaustion hampering you. Tomorrow you may arrive at the right answers yourself."

"No, please." I blinked away the weight of sleep on my eyelids. "I do need your help, and quickly too."

"Hah! In the state you're in, how much of it will you absorb? I speak in riddles, or so you once accused me—still, let the past lie where it falls. I'll go on for a short while, at least."

His eyes shifted to focus blankly beyond the wall at my back.

"You maintain you spent the entire voyage attending to excessively powerful engines, likely to separate themselves from the hull if they weren't continually supervised. But you must have made the acquaintance of your colleagues?"

"Half of them I never knew by name. I ate and slept in the driver compartment."

"What was the purpose of the ship's voyage?"

"Purpose? Why—ah—she was carrying cargo, and about a dozen or so passengers, none of whom I met. I didn't inquire. I'd been soured on travel under Centaur command during my trip to Durith. Coming back, I was satisfied that I was on the way home, and the fact that Captain Lugath was easier to serve under than any other Centaur I'd ever run across was a kind of bonus."

"It sounds as though you let your mind be turned off by unpleasant experience, instead of profiting from it."

"It's all very well to sit here on Mars and preach!" I snapped. "You hadn't been stranded on a high-gravity world for weeks and weeks, afraid you'd have to come back DTS and lose a year of your lifeserving a foreign government!"

"It can't have been all that unbearable," Thoder murmured, "or you'd have gambled an intolerable now against an indefinable future."

I hadn't meant to snap at him. I mumbled an apology. He took no notice.

"Speaking of gambling and 'un-Bear-able,' that reminds me. Did you know that bears, apart from man's closest relatives among Earthside fauna such as apes, are the only creatures we've ever discovered with a sense of humour well enough developed to allow them to play jokes on each other? And did you also know that the most disciplined body of men in all our history were the horsemen of the Mongol Khans, who said, 'Our home is on horseback,' and lived in the saddle for days together, not even descending to answer Nature's call?"

I couldn't fathom the relevance of that. He waited to be sure I was floundering, then chuckled.

"Speaking in riddles again, am I? Well, back to the subject. What *else* did you think was unusual about Captain Lugath?"

I tensed. This was more like the Thoder I recalled! I'd said nothing about the inspiration that had come to me when I was leaving Peter and Lilith—my moment of insight into Lugath's reaction when I heedlessly asked if his ship was bound direct for Earth, which I'd glossed as suggesting that he was not in fact Centaur, but an Earthman, and afraid his pose had been penetrated. Now I revealed this and Thoder nodded.

"Do you begin to accept that you really have far more data than you can currently organize into a pattern? Insights like these lead to more and more comprehension."

I had the absurd feeling that he was stalling. The idea seemed to have come to me from nowhere. I held my breath and tried to perform another of the actions he had long ago shown me, reviewing the steps by which the present had been reached to determine any overlooked turning-point.

Had he not shifted the direction of his gaze for a moment, a minute or two ago? I glanced around to see what he might have been looking at, and saw only a wall-chronometer in the area he'd scanned. That couldn't make him deliberately elusive, surely. Say—oh, say he was expecting a visitor at some early time, he'd have been direct enough to tell me; "Ray, you come without warning, and I have an appointment. Forgive me, but you must return tomorrow."

I said, "Thoder, I'd always rather take a direct path than a roundabout one. I had time to examine my captors of last night. Despite their privacy screens and disguised voices, I must have observed many things which could help me to identify them. You used to teach that pain was a

keen reinforcement of learning to all aware beings—I had pain enough to last me for life in the space of a few hours. I want you to help me recover in detail all the things I saw, heard, smelt and felt while they were questioning me."

He breathed twice while debating how to reply. At last he shrugged.

"Ray, in your present condition you'd lose what you learned almost at once. Go home. Rest. Come back to me when you're recovered, and we'll consider your suggestion."

"No!" I was on my feet without realizing I'd moved. "By tomorrow—even, possibly, by now—they may be aboard a Centaur spaceship and out of reach for good!"

"If I told you here and now that they were on their way to the port to make their escape, you couldn't do anything to prevent it. Be reasonable, boy!" He also was creaking off his chair. "Do as I say and go hom to rest."

"You're trying to get rid of me," I accused. "Why?"

"Someone is coming to see me," he said. "He's due at any moment."

"But he's not yet here," I pointed out. "I came to call on you without notice, I grant that, but I remember what you used to say when someone was late for a study appointment, in the

days when I was a pupil of yours too. You'd always refuse to sit simply waiting, saying it was foolish to waste a gift of time!"

I was not on the verge of passing out from the consequences of my whipping, and but for my impression that he was not being open with me, I'd have accepted his orders to go and rest. As it was, I was desperate to get to the bottom of this petty mystery.

Before he could contrive a persuasive reply, however, a figure passed across the window beside me, the one looking direct on to the sidewalk, and I jolted my head around in time to recognize who it was. For seconds I refused to frame the name to myself; not till the sound of knocking at the door made the association inescapable did I let myself think, "His visitor—it's Lugath! It's Lugath of all the billions in the galaxy!"

That was too much for me. I had a wild picture of a conspiracy enclosing me, of cages barring me in, of traps in an innocent-looking pathway into which I was about to fall. The shock weakened my grip on awareness, and I toppled into the void of darkness which had been threatening to engulf me these past three hours.

Thoder . . .

Lugath . . .

Sense of humour . . . the most

disciplined body of, of. . .

Nothing.

Chapter 8

Before opening my eyes, I stretched luxuriously with all my joints cracking, thinking how wonderful it was to be back in my own bed, scaled to my length of limb. On how many worlds, aboard how many ships between those worlds, had I had to make do with the hammock I carried rolled in with my regular duffel, because there wasn't a bed to be had on which I could get a night's sleep without waking cramped and stiff?

And the comfort of nulgee flotation—

The intrusion of that thought startled me. I blinked fully awake, momentarily imagining that I wouldn't see what I expected to see—the bedroom of my tiny apartment close to the spaceport.

Yes, the surroundings were absolutely familiar. In which case—why that ridiculous fleeting notion that I owned a nulgee bed? Even if I'd been able to afford one on which a seven foot four inch sleeper could enjoy his rest, the last place I'd want to put it would be here on my home planet. Martian gravity was light, and suited me fine. If I went to Earth I'd not only want one, I'd have to get one—

For the second time, I brought

my mind up short with all forward jets. Go to Earth? Go to *Earth*? I never intended in my whole life to go there! I could picture myself among Earthside crowds, a hunched, gangling, awkward giant, a figure of fun, a spectacle for children to gawk at—

A dream, possibly, was responsible for these misplaced notions. I frowned, worrying backwards into the vacuum of sleep, and convinced myself that I'd been dreaming about real events in my past life. For example, it wouldn't be surprising if my subconscious interpreted my forced stay on Durrith, prisoner of circumstances and unable to escape from the tiring drag of extra weight, as a sort of physical analogue to my resentment of being legally an Earth citizen. And I'd been in a nulgee bed, rare though such things were except on that decadently luxurious planet I had no wish to visit. On Charigol, wasn't it? Yes, there'd been this Bear girl—tall for her kind, which was why I'd picked her out.

"Of course she was tall!" I said aloud, suddenly frightened for no apparent reason.

My mind had delivered me a picture of her as *tiny*.

Well not exactly a picture. A compound of sense-impressions combining the recollection of her face upturned to mine from a long way below, plus a feeling of

having to bend right down to be close, plus the ever-present tug of gravity which she didn't feel . . .

No, of course she was tall, that girl with whom I'd shared a nulgee bed. Determined to prove it, I leaned across to the drawer of the storage unit in which I tossed odds, and ends, like souvenirs of people I never expected to see again.

My eye was caught, as I turned, by the chronometer on the bedside locker. It showed a few minutes before noon.

If I'd slept *that* long, no wonder my mind was fuzzy. I was almost always up by an hour after dawn when I was home on Mars. Only the weariness of fighting a high-gee planet could knock me out for a morning as well as a night. By reflex I checked the other dialed instruments standing there—pressure meter steady at 10, humidity meter up a little, temperature around 21°, on the warm side.

I'd been sweating in my sleep. The fact had only just occurred to me. The sheet in which I was wrapped was a trifle clammy. With the heat high, the humidity likewise, that was nothing too remarkable. Yet there was also this mental confusion. . .

Fever?

The sensible thing was to check myself right away and make sure I hadn't picked up a virus. But

the nagging impression of the nulgee bed, which I couldn't account for, refused to let me do the sensible thing. I had to locate a particular solido cube in among my junk, and verify the question about this girl on Charigol. She *had* been tall, I was absolutely sure. Not Mars-tall, naturally, but exceptional for her kind, something like six-five, with golden skin, black hair, a touch of almond about the eyes. Very attractive. And I'd had a solido taken of us that afternoon during carnival week, by the garden entrance of the house where they rented out nulgee beds to merry-makers, Ah—there! the shiny upper side by side on level ground, with my arm draped around her shoulder. But she wasn't black-haired, gold-skinned, almond-eyed. She was a dark-blonde Scand with one-eighth Watusi responsible for her extra inches, her brown eyes and the faint cocoa dusting of her skin.

For long seconds I stared disbelievingly at the solido. Then I hurled it violently back in the drawer and strode to the bath cabinet. Bath—another Earthside term like “canal” and the name of the town Mariner. Martians had better uses for water in multi-gallon quantities than heating it, lounging in it and throwing it away. Sprays of air-borne detergent were much *more* efficient

at both cleansing and deodorizing. Also they didn't involve the extra fuss of having to get dry afterwards, whether with towels that expended clothing-quality fibre or air-ducts that took up excessive room.

I had a good range of medical preparations and devices in here. Travelling to so many different worlds, and dependent for continued employment on a clean health-certificate, all spacemen got into the habit of watching their immunities. I gave myself the most thorough working-over I'd ever attempted, marked up my emergencies—on a Scale K diagnosis card, and set it against the back-lighted screen of the reader.

Symptoms: sweating in the night, oversleeping, irrational perceptions, confusion of memory. I'd added tension, not knowing if this was natural reaction to discovering my condition, or whether it was part of a syndrome.

Diagnoses possible: Larchman's disease, Group III fevers, combination of mental disorder—not for self-medication—with a Group II fever, or shock reaction. A reassuringly short list. Scale K cards were up to hospital standard; the next thing beyond involved computers.

The possibility of Larchman's disease worried me. Contraction of it meant automatic quarantine and a therapy lasting three months if you were lucky. I

soaked the appropriate reaction-wafer in saliva and waited half a minute to see if it turned green.

It stayed white.

Fevers? None that I had tests for, anyway. My body-temperature was about .15 of a degree above my usual waking level, but the day was far advanced and I was probably into the first swing of my evening cyclic rise.

Shock reaction in certain personality types . . . I scanned the list and located myself in the second sub-section.

What kind of shock could I possibly have had that so upset my normal calm mind? I struggled to recall the events of last evening. I'd gone out on the town—I'd eaten in a small restaurant where there were some Centaurs, or possibly Bears . . .

Worse than ever! I couldn't confuse a Centaur and a Bear on the dark side of Pluto! Yet here I was unable to decide which had been in the restaurant at the same time as I was.

Both? The idea seemed reasonable. I accepted it because I had no better alternative, and worked my foggy way forward.

Because of finding so many off worlders in what I'd thought of as being a mainly Martian district, I'd decided to do something which as a Martian I ought to do pretty often, but had neglected for years. I'd gone to the Old Temple to look around.

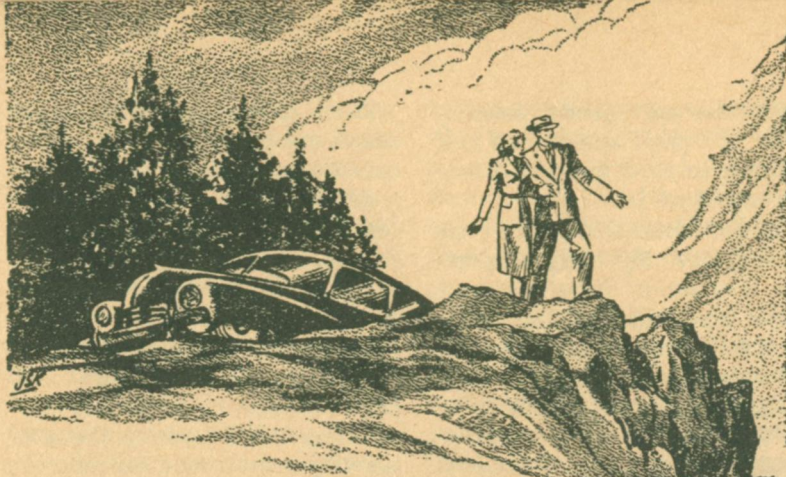
Then there was something about my ancestry, and the so-called "science" of heraldry. I could understand feeling an excess of pride at my purely Martian extraction—it fitted my usual patterns of thinking, and moreover there weren't all that many families which has been native for six generations. Some, the heralds said, went back for twelve or more, but I'd always thought heraldry was a load of spacedust—

I put my hands to my temples. Where was all this leading me? To a psychiatrist, for urgent treatment? There were two completely contradictory concepts fighting to dominate my mind: one, the familiar dismissal of heraldry as nonsense, and two, the sense that there must be something vital in it, coloured by this pride in my ancestry.

I steadied my mind by degrees. Back to Square One. I'd been out on the town, I'd gone to the Old Temple, I'd . . .

No use. I slapped my hands on my thighs and went to get dressed and order breakfast. There was only one conclusion that fitted the facts—someone had slipped me a Finn. For what purpose, I couldn't imagine. Dressing, I satisfied myself that all my belongings were where they ought to be, including the only item of real value to a robber, my engineer's papers.

Funny. It still didn't explain
(Continued on page 149)



VANGUARD of the LOST

by
John D. MacDonald

One of these days some enterprising publisher is going to remember that besides being able to turn out the very popular Travis McGee detective novels for Fawcett's Gold Medal Books, John D. MacDonald can also write excellent science fiction whenever he puts his mind to it. Then we'll be seeing collections of his earlier work and—hopefully—some new science fiction from the author of "Cosmetics" and "A Child Is Crying." In a way, though, we're glad that hasn't happened just yet. Otherwise we might not have been able to bring you the following strong MacDonald novelet—in which Earth is "invaded by several hundred gigantic space-ships, each of them looking eons older than the great pyramids of Egypt!"

A few hundred thousand people in New York saw the early video-news and thus immediately set themselves up as experts, having seen the New Delhi shots of the vast, hoary, slab-sided ships that floated like so many ridiculous balloons over the brown circus-ground landscape of India.

The early editions carried the telephotos and the newspapers were not at all reticent in their surmises. NEW RUSSIAN WEAPON, said one. INVADERS FROM SPACE, said another. MARTIANS ARRIVE, screamed the News.

It was a situation so altogether trite to the vast international clique of science fiction fandom,

remembered from the opening paragraphs of half a thousand stories, that it gave most of them the feeling that they were reliving a dream.

And it gave fandom a chance to check reality against the surmises of the unhappy writers who had been forced to proceed entirely on assumptions.

But this was reality. Even as the atomic bomb had outlawed cataclysm in science fiction, this invasion from space threatened the demise of the space opera, since the more accurately fantasy anticipates actuality, the more carefully it signs its eventual death warrant.

Larry Graim, disconsolate statistician by day, avid author of



science fiction by night, read the headlines, hit himself smartly in the forehead several times with the heel of his hand to make certain he was awake, and phoned news of a headache to his office. This was too great a day to be wasted in computing mean and median relationships.

Estimates of the number of ships varied wildly. With shoes not yet laced, Graim trotted down to the corner, took back editions of all the papers to his furnished room on Eighty-ninth Street.

The lowest estimate he read said seven hundred ships. He swallowed hard. In his epics there had only been three or at the most five ships from space. He felt better when he turned on the radio and heard that emergency meetings were being called involving the heads of governments. That, at least, followed his story lines.

Late bulletins reported small groups of the ships over the West Coast, over Europe, over South Africa, even over Australia. They traveled at an average height of three thousand feet. They were expected over New York in a matter of hours, or maybe minutes.

Graim lifted the pot off the electric coil, poured himself another cup of coffee. Then he thought of the roof. Forgetting the coffee he left his room, ran up the stairs and came out onto

the flat roof of the five story building. The morning haze was lifting, was drifting east out to sea.

After searching every inch of the sky, taut with anticipation, seeing nothing, he looked around him. A dozen feet away a girl stood, looking at him with amusement. He had seen her many times on the stairs, had wondered and wondered how he could skillfully open a conversation with her. The heroes of his stories were always adequate for such situations. They were suave and worldly. Their conversations were sparkling and urbane.

"Uh . . . hello," said Larry Graim.

"Hello yourself. Looking for Martians?" Her voice was low, warm, full of that secret amusement. The morning wind blew a strand of dark hair across her forehead. He wondered why he hadn't made the heroines of his stories look like her. Or maybe he had. He grew conscious of his unlaced shoes, uncombed hair, unshaven jaw and shirt with button missing.

"They won't be Martians," he said firmly.

She raised one eyebrow. "Oh? Secret sources of information?"

"Martians are old hat. Canals are optical illusions."

She laughed. "You'd better tell all these others. They're looking for Martians." She waved a hand

lightly at the other roofs. Hundreds of people watched the sky.

He was suddenly annoyed with her attitude. "Don't you know, young woman, that this may be the most important event in recorded history?"

"Of course! That's why I want to see it. That's why I'm taking the day off. And don't call me young woman. My name is Alice Fiddler."

"Larry Graim," he said weakly. The faint flick of her anger had stung.

She frowned. "Graim. Graim. Oh of course! Sideways in Space. Loom of Lural. Jenyeb, the Elder."

And light dawned for him. "Alice Fiddler! You write . . . those letters! Those ghastly letters!"

"Of course. And I pan you, Graim, every chance I get. I'm the one who called you the poor man's Kuttner and the cretin's Van Vogt."

He forgot the very attractive package the letter writer came in. He moved to within three feet of her, fists clenched and said, "I promised myself that if I ever met up with you I'd . . ."

She smiled warmly up at him. "You'd what, little man? Lay one of those lean brown paws on me and I'll toss you off the roof. I couldn't render a better service to my fellow readers."

"Even Bradbury couldn't make

a decent heroine out of you!"

"And they pay you two cents a word! Imagine. I've seen better words written on fences."

He heard distant shouts from the other roofs and a flick of movement half seen made him turn his head and look toward the west.

He saw them. His lean jaw sagged and his eyes blued glassily. He made a wet sound, deep in the throat.

"See!" Alice Fiddler said. "See! Shiny and symmetric space ships! Indeed, Mr. Graim. Roaring jets! Indeed!"

He continued to gawp. There were nine of them and they were not in formation. They came blundering up from the horizon with the same splendid disregard for order as brown cows drifting across a pasture. They were not shiny. They were made of a rough mottled dirty-looking substance. Jets did not roar. They wavered stubbornly and silently along, like escapees from Macy's Christmas parade. And they were not symmetric. They were shaped as thought a not quite-bright child had labored to form vast fat cigars out of mud. Lumpy protruberances, like mammoth warts, protruded from their sides.

Yet certain things about them did impress him. Their speed was considerable, in spite of the yawing movements they made. And they gave the impression

of enormous weight and incalculable age. There was a loose discipline about their movement.

They came abreast, about a mile between each one, went on out to sea, wheeled back and, once again over land, went blundering on up the coast.

"What next, genius?" Alice Fiddler asked.

Graim straightened. At least he was certain of his ground there. He knew how the plot would unfold. "Attempts will be continued until they make some overt move, cause some damage. And then the airforce will attack. And, of course, all of our weapons will be powerless. But some young inventor will be working on something which, in the nick of time will drive them away."

She clapped her hands. "Bravo! What'll we name this yarn from the immortal pen of Lawrence Graim? Sideways in Space? You wrote that one already. Remember?"

"Oh, hush!" he said wearily. "Come on down and have some coffee and we'll listen to the radio."

She rested her hand on his arm for a moment. "Cheer up, Graim. After this you'll have to find a new plot. I'm not as rough as I sound Where's your coffee?"

In his room they sat and listened to the excited tenor yelpings of the news analyst: "At this moment it has been decided

that the space ships did not originate anywhere on this planet. No one knows where they came from or what they want. Folks, they seem to be looking us over. All continents at once. A complete census is difficult because they all look alike and they stay in motion. But it is estimated that there are somewhere between two and three thousand of them, each one a good quarter mile long! There doesn't seem to be any pattern in their movements. They stay at about three thousand feet and keep moving around in groups. We are awaiting a statement from the president. Ah, here it is. And I quote. 'There is no cause for panic or alarm. Some intelligence is behind all this, and if they were unfriendly, we'd have known it by now. We are trying to communicate with them. The American public will be kept advised of our progress.'

Alice Fiddler walked over and twisted the dial to turn the set off. "We know as much as they do, Graim. Good coffee, this."

"This is a moment of enormous consequence. You can't turn off our source of information like that and drink coffee. It isn't part of the story line."

"With a little practice, Graim, you could bore me good. Now hush up and have some more coffee. I'll turn it back on to junior in a little while."

"A story has to keep moving," he said.

"But lambie, this isn't a story! This is it."

He looked at her. She sat comfortably in his best chair, one leg tucked under her. She looked at him over the rim of the cup and winked. He blushed.

"Shy, eh?" she said.

"Nobody would ever accuse you of that, Miss Fiddler."

"For goodness sake, Graim, stop being stuffy. Apparently you took the day off too. Truce. What do you say?"

He grinned at her. "Truce, Alice."

"That's better. You look almost human now. Go comb your hair and shave. When you get through we'll see what's new."

As he looked at his long, sober face in the mirror, as he hacked at the beard, he tried vainly to disassociate himself with the fictions he had written and the reality of the present. It was useless. He had lived for so long in so many dream worlds of fantasy that he could not look on reality except as another figment of fantasy, another story line to be plotted to a happy conclusion.

"That's better," she said as he came back into the room. "Now we'll see." She turned on the radio and they soon had two new facts. One, that another ship, similar to the others, but enormously larger was in orbit around

the earth at the equator at an estimated height of three hundred miles. Two, that the smaller ships were conscientiously covering every kilometer of the land surface of the earth.

"Mapping," he said.

She frowned. "For the first time, you make sense, Larry. Constant speed, constant height. All the land surface. For what?"

"Exploration party?"

"No. Too many of them."

"Colonization?"

They stared at each other and the first cool touch of fear was on them. She lowered her voice as she said, "I hope not. I have a hunch that would be a bad, bad thing."

They had lunch together in a white enamel restaurant on the corner. She insisted on paying for her own. At three o'clock in the afternoon there was more news. The ships all stopped where they were. A survey indicated that there was no town or hamlet, however, small, over which the ships had not been seen. Technicians searching the air waves had found that one end of the band was blanketed with shrill high screams. They had recorded these screams, slowed them down, found that they were signals, some sort of a communication code. The best linguists and code men had been assigned to work on the problem. But there was little hope of it

being broken. One expert stated that, from the general structure of the code signals he was willing to venture a guess that it concerned mathematical measurements, but having no knowledge of the mathematical structure being used, he failed to see how it could be broken down.

Alice said, "Brother! It sounds like a Graim epic. But where's the fearless hero who cracks both code and invader?"

"I thought we said truce," Larry grumbled.

They listened to the news cast. No ships could be seen from metropolitan New York. The other ships were stationary. Two news services were broadcasting from aircraft circling the silent ships.

Alice changed to another program. An excited voice said, "This is Mal McKay, folks. It's a bright sunny afternoon up here at three thousand feet. Our copter is hovering over one of these monsters from space. It looks like the back of some huge prehistoric beast. I've given the pilot the word, folks. We're settling toward it. Closer, closer. We've landed! You of the radio audience can no longer hear our motors. Folks, it's quiet up here, what I mean quiet. And we'll have to get a new word to indicate how still and motionless this space ship is. It is as though it were welded to a big pole that extends down the center of the earth. I'll

have to admit that it gives me the shakes, folks. You can probably hear it in my voice."

"The darn fool!" Alice muttered. She scowled.

The bright, eager voice continued. "Now for the hide of this beast, folks. It seems to be metallic and yet it has the look of old rock. It seems corroded. I stamp my heel and it's like stamping on a boulder. Now I'm touching it with my hand. There is a bit of warmth to it, but no more than you'd expect as the results of this late afternoon sunshine. I can see the other ships to the north and to the west. They're just as steady and inert as this one. When we came up we saw the thin lines against the sides of the beast indicating doors or ports or whatever. There's something or somebody inside this thing I'm standing on, folks, and it would be interesting to know what it or they are, hey? I have a stethoscope with me. You know, one of those things the doc checks your heart with? There'll be a few moments of air silence while I listen through the hide of this monster."

"He'll be giving it a nickname," Graim said with disgust.

"The human race," Alice said, "is a big puppy that goes charging and yapping and wagging its tail at everything new."

There was new excitement in the announcer's voice. "Well,

I've heard it or them. Sounds like a busy office. A bunch of clickings down in there. Click, clack, click, clack. And that's all."

"Relays," Graim said. "Why couldn't they have put a scientist on top of that thing instead of a human airdale?"

"Now, folks, I am taking out of my pocket a Willow's file. You've heard of Willow's files. 'Sharpest steel teeth in the world.' With this file I am going to scrape off a sample of the hide of this thing from space. There is a little flaked bit here sticking up like an enormous pock mark, as though something hit it a blow and bounced off after damaging the hide. Listen and you'll hear me filing on it."

Over the radio came a tiny grating sound. It continued on and on. Then it stopped. The announcer laughed nervously. "Well, I guess that the sharpest steel teeth in the world aren't quite sharp enough for this baby. I seem to be wearing the teeth off the file and I haven't even made a mark on the thin edge I was sawing on. I see by my Sweething Watch—time when you need it—that my air time is running out. This is Mal McKay, folks, your things-of-the-day reporter, signing off from a brand new spot, the top of one of the spaceships near Cleveland. Until this same time tomorrow . . ."

The network cut in with station

identification and a spot commercial. This time Graim switched off the set.

He clenched his fists and glared down at the rug. "No dignity," he muttered. "No respect. No awe. Just as if those ships were two-headed calves in a side-show."

"But don't you see?" Alice said. "That's been the trouble with your stories. Your people in fiction have been loaded with awe and respect and dignity. And so they weren't people. They are all little cardboard annies that you yank around with strings."

He looked at her bleakly. "There are supposed to be riots tonight. Fear all over the world. Sidewalk orators talking about the end of the world."

"Nuts, my boy. Joe Citizen is going home after a hard day in the shop. He pecks at the wife, snarls at the kids, stretches out on the couch, unfolds the paper and says, 'Whaddya know? Space ships!' Then he reads the bowling league scores."

"But some people are alarmed!"

"You and I are alarmed, Larry. And responsible heads of governments. And chronic worriers. A lot of smart men in a lot of labs all over the world are doing some constructive thought on what makes those brutes stay up in the air and where they could have come from and what they want and how to get in

touch with them and what to—”

“I want to do something,” he said.

Her tone was soft. “Sure you do, Larry. You’re identifying yourself with the heroic young men of your stories. You want to go steaming out and solve the great problem. Have you got a bank account?”

He gave her a puzzled stare. “A few hundred. Why?”

“Those ships are coming down somewhere. I have a beatup coupe in a garage around the corner. You’ll be miserable the rest of your life unless you get a good look at them. When they come down we’ll go take a look. Okay?”

He was suddenly excited. “That sounds wonderful!” Then he frowned. “But why do you care?”

“Have you ever had a woman give you an answer that gave herself away? Have you ever met a shameless woman?”

He swallowed hard. “I . . . I don’t know.”

She smiled. “Here’s your answer, lad. I care because you care.”

She stood up quickly and before he could make a sound she had left the room and closed the door behind her.

After giving her answer due consideration, Lawrence Graitm stood up, arched his chest, squared his shoulders and walked pompously around his room un-

til he found that he was running into furniture. Then he sat down, wearing a wide, fatuous indelible smile.

At eight the next morning he was knocking on her door. She opened her door and he was so impressed with how good she could look in the morning that he forgot what he was about to say.

She said, “I heard it too, Larry. I’ll be down to your room in ten minutes. And then we’ll go. Make some of that coffee of yours. You’re going to make some happy girl a good wife.” She shut the door.

He went one floor past his room, walked back up. By the time the coffee was perking she came in carrying a small suitcase, a topcoat over her arm.

Over her coffee she said, “Every thrill seeker in Manhattan will be boiling out to take a look at the spot where they landed. We’ll have to avoid the crowd. They’re about eight miles northwest of Nyack. Everybody will be steaming up the parkway and crossing at the G. Washington Bridge. So we’ll take the tunnel and circle around and come in from the back. I know the back roads in that area. Okay?”

“Fine with me. But why the suitcase?”

“This might be just a little more than a jaunt, Larry.” He looked into her eyes and for a

moment he shared her fear.

* * *

After the fourth back road they tried was blocked with a jammed stream of yapping cars, a crescendo of klaxons, they gave up. Larry turned back, found a place where the ditch was shallow and pulled well off into a clump of brush. They locked the car, leaving the bags inside. He walked behind her up the road, by the double line of cars, noting that she wore flat-heeled shoes, also noting that her walk was, to him, as intriguing as would be an intricate dance by any other woman.

Others were doing as they had done, and soon they were part of a long stream of pedestrians. Weary sweating men wearing self-consciously indifferent looks while their wives shepherded the kids. "Mommy, where's the Martians?" "Just a little way further, honey."

The feet stirred up dust from the shoulder. A little old lady sat with austere dignity in the back seat of a huge black sedan, trapped by lesser cars. A man set up his pitch beside the road. "Getcher Martian balloons here! Balloons for the kiddies, lady? Watchem fly."

Peanuts and popcorn and balloons and ice cream. Holiday atmosphere. It could have been the

National Air Races, or the P.G.A. Tournament, or the big day at Indianapolis, or Barnum and Bailey come to town.

Alice said, "For goodness sake get the look off your face, as though you smelled something bad. Now you know what really happens when spaceships land."

Troopers on motorcycles idled up through the crowds, motors thudding heavily, weary voices saying, "Stay in line. Stay in line."

It was a two-mile walk to where the ships had landed. And when Alice and Larry got there, they could see nothing but the backs of the multitude. People standing and talking and laughing and holding the children on high. "See the Martians, honey?"

The ships had landed in a vast open stretch where there were only a few lightly wooded hummocks.

Larry pushed Alice sideways through the crowd. He whispered, "Over on the left there is a hill where we can see something."

The hill turned out to be steeper than it had looked. They went up the back of the hill and it was necessary to grab at the small trees, clutch at roots. Alice went down onto the shale, taking the knees out of both stockings and staining her dress.

At last they came through the fringe of brush at the top and they could see the wide sunlit

area, the vast crowd on the right in a huge semicircle. There were nine ships and they had landed in the form of a nine pointed star, but with a clear area in the center of the star about a half mile across. They were the fat, clumsy spokes of a vast wheel with an enormous hub. Larry once again got the impression of age so vast, so incredible, that the mere thought of it was dizzying.

He remembered something of the same feeling from an army stopover in Cairo, when he had gone out and looked at the pyramids. But this was intensified.

They were not mathematically spaced, but were subtly out of line, in keeping with their clumsiness in the air.

The bolder members of the crowd were right up next to the ships, shaded by the bulging overhand.

"I don't like their being so close," Alice said. "It makes me feel as though something were going to happen."

"I don't get it. They've landed in groups like this all over the world according to the radio. They've picked relatively level places. Like . . . well, like big slugs settling down on a ripe fruit."

Alice shivered. "That's almost too good, Gram. Save it for your next epic."

"Want to go down there?"

"Uh uh. I like it here. I like

it very, very much here."

He moved to the side, found a grassy bank. They sat and smoked and looked at the thickening crowd, at the silent ships.

When a cloud moved across the face of the sun, Alice moved closer to Larry. It made him feel masculine and protective. He was tasting the delights of this new feeling when the side ports of the ships opened. They were rectangular sections, thirty yards wide, possibly fifty yards high. They were hinged along the bottom edge and the method of their opening was that they fell open. They were enormously thick and so heavy that when they fell against the soil, the top edge was embedded deeply.

And, of course, the spectators who had been standing there were instantly smashed into the ground.

There was an instant of silence, and then an enormous roaring scream of fear from the huge crowd. Except for a few dazed and hardy souls who had the vague idea of extricating their loved ones from the pulped soil and who clawed at the fallen ports as effectually as ants struggling with a boulder, every man, woman and child turned and fled, wide-eyed, gasping with fear, trampling the weak and the slow.

Within two minutes the ships had the vast area to themselves. Bodies lay where they had been

trampled. A few moved feebly like half-crushed insects. The trampled grass was a litter of gum wrappers, empty cigarette packs, half-eaten sandwiches. Several toy balloons drifted forlornly toward the clouded sky.

Larry and Alice stood back from the grassy bank. His arm was around her waist and he felt the trembling of her body. "All those people," she whispered. "All those people."

"It wasn't on purpose," he said. "They were just in the way. It wasn't on purpose."

"That won't help the dead ones. And a few million people are going to be screaming for the bombers."

The ports were down. The sun came out but it cast little illumination into the interior of the ship they could see most clearly.

There was a distant clattering. From the dark interior of the ships corroded snouts were pushed out into the sunshine. They were very obviously machines. They teetered at the top of the ramp, then with a clattering of treads, they rolled down the ramps, out onto the grass. They seemed to be made of the same substance as the ships. Though they had rounded backs like beetles, there was an odd familiarity about them. Five came from each ship nearest them, and he counted four that came from one of the far ships. From two ships

nothing at all came forth.

When they began to work Larry snapped his fingers and said, "Of course! Bulldozers."

There was a thin slanted blade at the front of each one, with the dark mouth of a narrow hopper above the blade. Each machine was roughly the size of a freight car. They lumbered into loose formation with some outside the circle of ships, others inside the circle. The blades dropped and they began to scrape the uneven soil.

They were amazingly efficient in their clumsiness. Larry watched in fascination, Alice completely forgotten. The dirt peeled up the edge of the blade into the hopper. And disappeared. There was no residue, no smoke, no elimination of any sort.

One of them went directly at a high mound and, with no reduction in speed, ate its way completely through the mound. The top of the mound collapsed onto the rounded back, fell off in chunks. The next scraper ate up the chunks and, in a few minutes the hill was no more.

He saw one of the scrapers heading toward where several bodies were silent, a few more trying desperately to crawl away. He gagged and turned his head as the flesh slid up the blade into oblivion.

It was efficient, and yet clumsy. He saw two of the scrapers

meet on a converging track, nudge each other and go off at a crazy angle. One of them headed directly into the side of one of the big ships. The treads continued to revolve as it dug itself down into the ground.

When the hub of the vast wheel was level and clear, all of the ships moved toward the center and the scrapers worked on the area where the ships had been, on the rounded depressions where the mammoth weight of the ships had smashed the earth.

The scraper that had dug itself into the ground was overturned when the ship moved. It lay on its side, treads still turning, moving it around and around, much like a beetle trying to get back onto its legs.

Some few of the throng, mostly men, had drifted back. They watched from a very respectful distance.

As though on some signal, all of the scrapers except two turned back to the ships, crawled up the ramps and disappeared inside. After they were in, the treads on the overturned one stopped. One scraper was left outside the circle, standing silently. Larry saw the scar on its side and knew that it was the one which had had the collision.

"You want to go?" he asked Alice.

Her face was pale, her jaw set. "We stay," she said.

He looked at the cleared area. The scrapers had missed patches here and there. Not many. Just a few. Where they had worked, the ground was scraped raw, scraped level.

Two military aircraft appeared over the trees, slowly circled the area, light observation planes.

Other machines came down the ramp. If the others had looked like beetles, these looked like tall spiders, with wheels at the end of each leg. From the small body of the spider tubes pointed downward at the ground. They lined up in loose formation and suddenly the tubes erupted with a blue-white glare, a roar of flame that rendered both Larry and Alice temporarily blind.

When they could see again, they found that it was impossible to look down at the area. The flames made an almost metallic roar. The sound lasted for a full half hour and, even with their backs turned to it, they felt the heat, saw the ghastly illumination on the leaves in front of them.

He thought of the possibility of radiation burns, and they went over the crest of the hill. When the sound was gone they returned.

The raw dirt had been transformed to a flat, silvery floor. It looked oddly like a lake of silver. The last of the spider things was disappearing into the nearest

ship. Where the scrapers had done their job poorly, there were humps in the silver lake. The overturned scraper was half melted. A spider thing lay on its side beside the scraper. The other scraper stood, unharmed, outside the wide silver area. He saw that the ships had moved again to permit the place where they rested to be silvered over.

The area still radiated heat. The ships were silent. Larry said, "If they're going to do more, they're going to have to wait for it to dry."

Alice glanced at the fading day. "We better find the car."

A hundred yards down the road they met the military guard. "Restricted area," he said flatly. "Get out and stay out."

"What goes on?" Larry asked.

"The airforce is going to give those killers a taste of some two-ton bombs."

"But they didn't kill anybody on purpose," Larry said.

The guard spat, tucked his thumb in his belt and leaned toward Larry. "Mister, are you with us or against us? There's a lot of you crack-pot Martian lovers crawling out of the woodwork."

Alice tugged at his arm. "Come on, Larry."

"Do like the lady says, bud, or I'll drop on you like the door on a space ship."

Larry went down the road with

her. It was dusk. They got in the car and turned on the radio.

". . . martial law declared to cover those areas within the continental United States where the enemy ships have landed. Our observers report that the enemy ships are setting up defense areas, clearing the ground, paving it. It will be many days before the complete casualty figures are available, but the best estimates state that, in the sixty-three known places within our borders where the enemy has landed, average casualties were one hundred. Thus, nearly seven thousand have already died. This is the first time in the history of modern warfare that there have been civilian deaths within the borders of the United States. All attempts to communicate with the invader have failed. This Wednesday will go down in our history as the day when a great nation girded itself for a battle to the death against. . ."

Alice turned it off. "It's beginning to sound like one of your yarns, Larry."

"Thanks," he said dryly.

"But did you get the impression I did? I mean about their efficiency?"

He frowned as he started the motor, backed the car out. "Yes. The people from space should be horribly efficient and deadly. Those gimmicks of theirs are effective enough, but they use

them the way a child would play with a ten-ton truck. The whole picture seems to be sort of out of focus."

"What do you think about the air force?"

"I think their bombs will rattle off those hulls like peas off a plate glass window. I think they'll have to break out the atomic bomb."

"That would be an approved part of the plot, eh?"

He slowed the car, gave her an odd look and said, "Alice, this may sound silly, but would you please pinch me? Hard."

She reached over and got a fold of flesh just above his knee between finger and thumb.

"Hey!" he yelled.

"Feel better?"

"I could still have been working too hard. Maybe when you're in a mental institution and you imagine you get pinched, it hurts."

"Stop the car."

He did so.

"Now come here."

He did so.

Thirty seconds later he moved back behind the wheel, said in a hoarse and shaking voice, "Okay. Those ships are sitting out there behind us and you are sitting beside me and I haven't had a breakdown."

Alice sat back in the corner of the seat, a wise and secret smile on her lips.

At ten o'clock they sat in his room and watched the photographs reproduced on the television screen. The first one showed the flare picture of the nine ships taken from five thousand feet, before the raid.

The second picture showed the same nine ships after seventy tons of high explosive had been dumped on them. Except for a few dark stains on the silver surface of what had been grassy fields, the picture showed no change whatsoever.

On the following morning they found that the enemy had been at work during the night. All encampments were in the same stage of development. Squat, rectangular structures were beginning to take shape within the central area. These structures were being built of silvery blocks which were being dug out of a central hole by an automatic digger. The procedure was to dig up a loose hopper of dirt and crushed rock which, on the video screen with the cameras run by a daring operator, seemed to be a half cubic yard. This dirt and rock went into a central compressor, was reduced startlingly to a small silver colored block or brick, placed in position by articulated arms and fingers which bore grotesque resemblance to a bricklayer hopped up with too much benzedrine.

Alice said, "Oh, I'm a gay little

lass with brittle remarks for every contingency, but this I fail to like. I'm getting close to screams. This, Larry, is colonization, clumsy though it may be."

At eleven the video networks combined to show the status of construction at ten sites. One of them had been subjected to direct artillery fire. The artillery fire had disabled some of the brick-laying machines. One of them had Alice close to hysteria. The metallic fingers had been crushed and the machine continued the building of an invisible wall while the silver bricks piled up at the end of the chute from the compressor.

At the Cleveland site the scrapers had done poor work. The walls were going up at grotesque out-of-focus angles, as though seen through a distorting lense.

At a site near Portsmouth in the southern tip of Ohio, a tank column roared in onto the silver floor. Flame throwers splattered the equipment with sticky gobs of fire. Shells ricocheted off the dull armor of the equipment. The machines worked stubbornly on like picnickers undismayed by an invasion of beetles. The tanks looked oddly dwarfed by the massive hulls of the ships. When the ammunition was exhausted, the column retreated, having partially disabled two bricklayers and completely disabled three more by direct hits on the articulated

fingers. The few score others worked on, raising the silver walls of the rectangular buildings and the disabled machines went through the motions, accomplishing nothing.

Statesmen made brave speeches. The public was told to be brave and steadfast. Bombs thumped into the sites. Near Keokuk a reckless construction worker, without authority, became a national hero by taking his big shovel, clattering up to the invader housing project and rattling off with one of the silver bricks in the teeth of the shovel. It was found to be quite warm, giving off no radioactivity, in weight about eight hundred pounds. Scientists guessed that its extreme weight and hardness came from a partial crushing of the atomic structure of the earth and rock. In all hardness tests, Rockwell, Brinell and others, it recorded off the scale. A high-speed diamond drill failed to scratch it. The brick was flown to Pittsburg where the most massive equipment of the steel industry failed to distort it.

Keith Embuscado, klaxon-voiced commentator, said, in a special program, "Even now they are inside those ships, sneering at our efforts, believing that we have no deadlier weapon which we can use against them. I say that now is the time to use our weapon, the world's greatest wea-

pon. Let's put an end to this."

Alice said, "Very neat. Now when they use The Bomb, ole Keith can take the credit."

The site in Northern Wisconsin was selected for the use of the bomb, and all persons within a twenty mile radius were moved out late that day. Dawn was set for the trial use of the bomb.

Alice and Larry listened to the radio and watched the screen far into the night. They decided to stay up and wait for the reports of the bomb.

The grey dawn had taken on a rosy cast in the windows of Larry's room when the cold voice of the air observer came over the radio.

"Approaching target area to observe damage. The mushroom cloud has broken up. The bomb was exploded fifty feet in the air directly over the center of the site. I see the silvery area ahead of us. The ships are still in the same pattern. Now I can see the area clearly. All invader construction has been flattened. The center of the area is a tumbled mass of the silver bricks. Their equipment has been scattered. The ships unimpaired. The blast depressed the center of the silver area turning it into a shallow bowl." Suddenly there was a bit of excitement in the cold voice. "I see movement down there. Yes, movement. The scattered equipment is still in motion. Aim-

less, as though confused. Yes, going through the same motions as prior to the blast."

The commercial newscasters came on, a vanguard of analysts, and then a series of analyses of the analysts.

They climbed up one side of the subject and down the other, gradually making clear the facts that, except for the initial opening of the doors of the ships, no lives had been taken, that the atomic bomb was fine way off there in Wisconsin, but what would happen where the sites were close to cities, that already there were near panics over the depressed property values near the sites.

One newscaster stated that the Russians were rumored to have made contact with the invader and had enlisted air and support in spreading, by force of arms, the communist doctrine.

Larry was baffled and confused. The invasion from space refused to fit into the accepted story lines, the approved plots, the standard situations. According to his training in the writing of science fiction, one of two things should have happened. One, the bomb should have brought direct retaliation, or two, it should have been harmless. This was the absurd third possibility. The bomb had wrecked one site and yet there was no retaliation.

This made it absolutely essen-

tial for him to devise a plot situation, a reason for this absurdity. Either that or go quietly mad.

"Why?" he asked thinly. "Why?"

Alice went over to him and pushed a vagrant lock of hair off his forehead. "It isn't going according to the books, is it darling?"

"How can I even go back to work? I couldn't even extrapolate a trend. I couldn't even statistically predict an election."

He stood up and began to pace back and forth. He thought aloud. "The plot isn't going anywhere. The alien is efficient in many ways, absurd in others. It isn't a self-respecting invasion. It's more like a mechanical toy that . . ."

He stopped in midstride and gave Alice a long look. However, it was a look that went through her and beyond her. Then he grinned delightedly, grabbed her and swung her around in a grotesque dance.

When she got her breath she said, "What? How?"

"Baby, get your hat. We're going calling on the invader."

"Have you gone out of your mind?"

"Completely. This is the only answer that will sell the story."

"Story? Sell?"

"I keep forgetting that this is happening. We have some phone calls to make."

At dawn they were on the familiar grassy bank where they had been before. Alice said, "You are grouchy in the morning, Larry."

"That's because I don't like it this way. I wanted it to be official. They thought I was a nut. So I have to get us smuggled in here by a newspaper that wants an exclusive. Did you see the look on their faces? They think we're never coming out."

"They're not alone," Alice said.

"You don't have to come with me."

"I don't want to, but I have to. Look! What are they doing now?"

It was barely bright enough to see. A new group of machines were at work. All of the ships had moved outside the silvery platform. The new machines were plasterers. The rectangular buildings were completed. The new machines were in a vast circle around the entire area. Their myriad mechanical arms terminated in flat fingerless hands the size of the top of a small table. Each machine was roughly the shape of a sitting Buddha, with, in place of the stomach, an open cauldron effect. The flat hands dipped into the cauldron, scooping out what looked like molten glass. They patted it into a growing transparent wall. As the wall increased in height the machines, with every evidence of weight-

lessness floated up with the wall.

"Damn!" Larry said. "Now we can't get to the buildings. No. Wait! Do you see what I see?"

A third of the way around the circle one of the plastering machines worked busily, but with an empty cauldron. Thus the wall it was building existed only in its mechanical reflexes.

He took Alice by the wrists and hurried her down onto the floor. As they neared the floating machine she dug her heels in. She gasped, "Do you really know what this is all . . ."

"Just trust me. Come on." He gave one timid look up at the machine which floated fifteen feet in the air. He ducked instinctively as he ran under it. The silver floor was firm and hard underfoot. The morning sun, just appearing in the east, cast long rays across the compound.

The first building was fifty feet distant. There was a door in the side of it, a door but four and a half feet high. "Little guys," he said.

They ducked and went in. Her hand was like ice in his. He gave her a reassuring smile. "Standard attribute of intelligence. Desire for privacy and shelter. Probably true everywhere."

"They won't mind us poking around, friend?"

"Mind? Of course not."

The windows were oval and set very low, unglassed. The in-

terior of the building was one room with a ceiling ten feet high. One corner of the room leaned crazily and some of the bricks lay on the inside floor, an open crack extending to the ceiling.

In a far corner was a larger cube, two feet on a side. The top of it glowed softly. Larry approached it, held his hand out, smiled at Alice. "Desire for warmth. Maybe also a constant. Could cook on this thing. I guess that all primitives start civilization by learning about combustion. Lightning did it here on earth. Wonder what did it on their world?"

"Do you have to act like a man renting an apartment?"

"No furniture," he said. "Hmmm. Notice the softness of the floor in here. Seems to be a sort of rubbery film. Sprayed on, maybe. Luxury, eh?"

"May we please get out of here now before something bricks up that doorway?"

He shrugged. "No chance of their doing that. I want a look at the central building, the big

The doors were larger leading to the big building. It was silent, deserted, and but half constructed. There were many rooms, all empty. On the north side the wall was missing and the unsupported ceiling sagged dangerously at that point.

"Could you break down and start talking sense?"

"This all makes sense," Larry said firmly. "I'll let you figure it out."

The floating machine was a good ten feet higher when they left the area. It worked busily on the empty air, slapping, patting, smoothing. They could see that the transparent walls, a good yard thick at the base, were tapering slightly and leaning toward the center.

"It's going to be a big dome," he said. "Pressure affair. Controlled atmosphere."

"Oh, fine!"

"Come on. We'll visit that one over there."

"Alright."

They went to the foot of the ramp. Larry pulled the two flashlights out of his jacket pocket, handed her one. She looked fearfully up into the dark interior of the ship. He said, "Now act the same way you would crossing 42nd Street in the middle of the block at five thirty in the afternoon. When anything starts moving toward you, just get out of the way."

"I don't want anything moving toward me."

"Come on. There's nothing in here that wants to hurt you."

She took a deep breath. "Lead on."

The ramp led up into a room so vast that their lights barely illuminated the far wall. The floor was pitted and worn.

Larry walked slowly, speaking with the relaxed manner of a licensed guide. "Here, as you can see is the main equipment room. Those arches at either end probably lead to equipment storage. Let's take a look. Ah, yes. Those jobs over there. They're the scrapers."

He led her over. He looked closely and with curiosity at the worn condition of the treads, the pitted blade, the hopper over the slanted blade.

A wide ramp led down from one side of the second room. Below they found the spider creatures which had silvered the raw earth.

Gradually she began to lose her fear. They could not decide the use of some of the equipment. Everything had a look of age, of hard use, of countless centuries of blind toil.

Some of the more delicate machines, made of a different class of metal had crumpled where they stood. He picked up a bit of metal, flaked it between his fingers. "This was a poor specification," he said.

Back in the main room where the daylight shone in, he stopped, looked all around and said, "Over here. The little ramp."

They had missed it before. It went up the side wall to a small door at the top. It was but two feet wide and the door at the

top was less than five feet high.

Halfway up the ramp she hung back as she heard the busy clacking coming from the little room.

"It's them!" she gasped.

"I hardly think so," he said. "You can wait here."

"No, I'll come along if. . . if you're really going in there."

The room was but twenty feet square, the walls solid with odd wiring, transparent tubular relays, duplicated in the boards which were erected from the floor in the middle of the room. The clacking came from one of the panel boards. Larry walked over, held his light on the tiny relays.

In his occupation, Larry had become familiar with mechanical accounting and computing equipment. Though the material were alien, the wiring a nightmare, there was yet a comfortable familiarity about the panel boards. Alice clung with both hands to his left arm, her fingers digging in just above his elbow.

"Sounds like a knitting contest in here," she said, a shake in her voice.

Larry threw his shoulders back and said resonantly, "Aha!"

Her grip loosened and she stepped back. "Oh, come now! You're cribbing lines. That's what the fictional hero says when at last he outwits the invader. Aren't you getting a shade ahead of yourself?"

Larry gave her a superior smile.

He enveloped her in his long thin arms and attempted to kiss her roughly. The kiss landed next to her ear. A high heel thudded against his chin, an elbow drove most of the wind out of him and her forehead thumped him smartly under the eye.

"Now look. . ." he said indignantly.

"Not like that," she whispered. "Like this!"

The merry little panel boards clicked and clucked and Larry Grait had the unmistakable sensation that the ship had taken off in the general direction of Alpha Centauri. When the too brief moments ended, he was surprised to find that the space ship was at rest.

He said, "I guess I was feeling masterful or something. You see, for once I'm the hero of my own yarn and I've figured the plot line out. It has to be this way. It will give the newspaper that hired me to sneak in here a tremendous scoop, and it will make me rich and famous and I can marry you."

"After you ask me, maybe. But tell me what this is all about."

"You see, darling, mankind has had an enormous fear of these things, but actually the truth of the matter is that. . ."

"Bud, would you kindly move the love scene over into that corner out of the way?" a strange voice said.

Larry turned quickly, and saw a weary-looking man in a white smock and a tool apron standing just inside the doorway.

"Now see here!" Larry said. The man ignored him. He turned and shouted down the ramp. "Hey, Al!" he yelled. "Tell Joe and Charlie to keep an eye on those potbellies on the north side."

The weary one brushed by Larry and Alice, setting his gasoline lantern down, pulling a pair of pliers out of his tool apron. With the pliers he deftly opened the four scimitar-shaped knife switches, wedged little strips of bakelite across the contact points so that the switches could not close.

There was a distant shout. The weary one went to the doorway. "What's that? Did the trick? Okay, tell Mr. Sweeney that I'm deactivating the whole works."

The weary one went back to the board and whistled softly between his teeth as he blocked the major control switches across the top of the panels. Slowly the clicking died out. The room became silent.

"May I ask the meaning of this?" Larry inquired with all the dignity he could muster.

"How'd you two get in here? Didn't you see the signs?"

"I am employed by the Express Courier and, at the risk of my life, sir, I came in here to. . ."

The weary one chuckled. "Sweeney catch you in here and it will be at the risk of your life, bud. How about shoving off and taking your dolly with you, eh?"

"We've been in here for over an hour and. . ."

"Oh, I guess the signs weren't up then. Take a look at them on your way out."

Woodenly Larry Gaim ducked under the low door frame and went down the ramp, Alice following him. She made an odd sound in her throat. He glared furiously at her and she worked so hard to keep her face straight that she nearly strangled. They stood at the top of the ramp that led out to the ground. All activity had ceased. The pot bellied plasterers had stopped applying the transparent liquid. They sat in a ragged circle, their spatulate hands folded.

Four trucks stood near the partially complete dome. A jeep roared over and skidded to a stop. An oversized man with crimson hair and a face like broken concrete piled out and roared, "Can't you read? Git offa the area, you two."

Larry pulled himself up. "Sir, I want to have it known that I..."

"Do you git or do I take the slack of your pants and see how far I can throw you?"

Alice tugged at Larry. He walked along with her, half dazed.

A hundred feet beyond the ships that formed the spokes of a huge wheel, with the dome as the hub, they found the perimeter signs.

RESTRICTED AREA
KEEP OUT
Samson Construction

"They can't do this to me," Larry said. "It spoils the plot!"

Again she had to pull him along. The Express Courier representative was gone. They went, in Alice's car, down to the newspaper building. Together, they went up to the news room. The city editor was roaring at copy boys, at the reporters, at the switch-board girl. The slot man on the copy desk was roaring at the men on the rim.

After twelve minutes the city editor notice Larry Graim. "Well, whadda *you* want? Who are you?"

"I'm Lawrence Graim and I was hired to. . ."

"Graim? Oh sure, Graim. Look, kid. It just didn't pan out, see? Tell you what you do. Hack out a feature. Maybe we can use it in a few days. We'll pay space rates. Come back Tuesday."

"Could you please tell me what has happened?"

"Buy a paper, kid. It's all in there."

* * * *

Larry Graim and Alice sat in his room. She had her shoes off, her legs tucked under her. "You make the *best* darn coffee, honey," she said.

"Intrepid young hero's claim to fame," he said with bitterness.

"Good coffee is something useful."

"Oh, dandy. I was such a smart guy. And all the time the Samson organization had figured it out and they were quietly buying up the land where the ships had taken over before they moved in. Now they've turned one complete installation over to the government, just as a public relations gesture. They're working on the control devices and within a few weeks they hope to have that automatic equipment doing anything they tell it to. See their ads? They'll pave so cheap that they'll be low bidder on every road contract they want. Yeah, I was a real smart guy."

"Who were they, Larry?" she asked softly. "The ones who started it all?"

He shrugged. "We'll probably never know. Maybe they're all dead by now. Some wise old race at the other end of the universe. They were expanding. They needed new planets. So they set up a fleet for completely automatic preparation. The brain ship—that big baby in orbit around us—led the others like a hen with several thousand baby

chicks. Find the planet, map it, pick the spots, build the domes, and the buildings and move along. Then when the actual bosses arrived, there were the housing projects all set for them. But that fleet has been going a million years too long. Or a billion. We don't even know that. It must have been a frighteningly efficient project at first. Now it is just blundering along. And so long as there is one ship left, it will keep on going. We could have stopped it if we could have grabbed the brain ship."

The soft radio music stopped and a man began to speak with excitement in his tone. Larry turned it higher.

". . .that's right, folks. Every ship all over the world that hasn't been immobilized lifted about nine minutes ago. Already, on the sunny side of the earth, they are so high that they can't be seen. A report has come in that, in Egypt, there are two domes, complete and perfect in every respect. The United States, with a head start, contains the greatest number of immobilized ships. And, believe me, we're going to find out all the secrets of those ships. The President today said that the world should be thankful for this technological gift from some unknown. . ."

Larry clicked the radio off. "Gone," he said dolefully.

"Gone to find a new planet.

The ten thousandth planet, or the hundred thousandth," she said. "When we get to Mars, we'll probably find there the domes that they built."

He looked at her and smiled. It wasn't much of a smile. "And so tomorrow I go back to the method of least squares and the geometric graph paper. How thrilling! There I was, with the plot all figured out. . ."

She came over to him and curled into his lap, warm and soft as a kitten. She kissed the angle of his jaw. "You've still got the gal, darling."

"Yes, but. . ." he said.

She stopped his lips in an entertaining manner.

"Yes, but. . ." he said again.

Again she rendered speech improbable.

"I begin to see what you mean," he said shakily.

She sighed. "Besides, Lambie, you need me. You need a fresh viewpoint. You've been writing the same tired old story for years. Now, of course, space ships are out, the same as the atomic bomb. In the next story we write, how about a theme based on a culture where. . ."

He stared at her. "The next story *we* write?"

"Of course! I'm marrying you because it is the duty of every fan to help improve the level of science fiction."

The End

Revolt of the Pedestrians

DAVID H. KELLER, M.D.

Illustrated by FRANK R. PAUL



At an age when many of us might begin anticipating that long winter's sleep, David H. Keller, M.D.—author of "The Thing in the Cellar," "The Sign of the Burning Hart," "A Piece of Linoleum," and "The Devil and the Doctor"—sold his first science-fiction story to Amazing. That was way back in 1928. Keller was then 47, Amazing only in its second year, but that first happy collaboration led to many more "Kelleryarns," some of the best of which we have revived for you in recent issues. Now, however, that long and memorable association has finally ended, for on July 13th last Col. Keller, at the age of 86, died of heart failure following a serious operation that asked too much of him. In his memory, then, we offer you the first of the famous "Kelleryarns," a fitting monument to mark the beginning and the end of a great career in science fiction.

A young pedestrian mother was walking slowly down a country road holding her little son by her hand. They were both beautiful examples of pedestrians though tired and dusty from long days spent on their journey from Ohio to Arkansas, where the pitiful remnant of the doomed species were gathering for the final struggle. For several days these two had walked the roads westward, escaping instant death again and again by repeated miracles. Yet this afternoon, tired, hungry and hypnotized by the setting sun in her face, the woman slept even as she walked and only woke screaming, when she realized that escape was impossible. She succeeded in pushing her son safely in the gutter, and then died in-

stantly beneath the wheels of a skillfully driven car, going at sixty miles an hour.

The lady in the sedan was annoyed at the jolt and spoke rather sharply to the chauffeur through the speaking tube.

"What was that jar, William?"

"Madam, we have just run over a pedestrian."

"Oh, is that all? Well, at least you should be careful."

"There is only one way to hit a pedestrian safely, Madam, when one is going sixty miles an hour and that is to hit him hard."

"William is such a careful driver," said the Lady to her little daughter. "He just ran over a pedestrian and there was only the slightest jar."

The little girl looked with pride

on her new dress. It was her eighth birthday and they were going to her grandmother's for the day. Her twisted atrophied legs moved in slow rhythmic movements. It was her mother's pride to say that her little daughter had never tried to walk. She could think, however, and something was evidently worrying her.

"Mother!" she asked. "Do pedestrians feel pain the way we do?"

"Why, of course not, Darling," said the mother. "They are not like us, in fact some say they are not human beings at all."

"Are they like monkeys?"

"Well, perhaps higher than apes, but much lower than automobilists."

The machine sped on.

Miles behind a terror-stricken lad lay sobbing on the bleeding body of his mother, which he somehow had found strength to drag to the side of the road. He remained there till another day dawned and then left her and walked slowly up the hills into the forest. He was hungry and tired, sleepy and heartbroken but he paused for a moment on the crest of the hill and shook his fist in inarticulate rage.

That day, a deep hatred was formed in his soul.

The world had gone automobile wild. Traffic cops had no time for snail-like movements of walkers—they were a menace to civ-

ilization—a drawback to progress—a defiance to the development of science. Nothing mattered in a man's body but his brains.

Gradually machinery had replaced muscle as a means of attaining man's desire on earth. Life consisted only of a series of explosions of gasoline or alcohol—air mixtures or steam expansion in hollow cylinders and turbines, and this caused ingeniously placed pistons to push violently against shafts which caused power to be applied wherever the mind of man dictated. All mankind was accomplishing their desires by mechanical energy made in small amounts for individual purposes, and in large amounts transmitted over wires as electricity for the use of vast centers of population.

The sky always had its planes; the higher levels for the intercity express service, the lower for individual suburban traffic—the roads, all of reinforced concrete, were often one-way roads, exacted by the number of machines in order to avoid continual collisions. While part of the world had taken readily to the skies, the vast proportion had been forced by insufficient development of the semi-circular canals, to remain on earth.

The automobile had developed as legs had atrophied. No longer content to use it constantly out-

doors, the successors of Ford had perfected the smaller individual machine for use indoors, all steps being replaced by curving ascending passages. Men thus came to live within metal bodies, which they left only for sleep. Gradually, partly through necessity and partly through inclination, the automobile was used in sport as well as in play. Special types were developed for golf; children seated in autocars rolled hoops through shady parks; lazily, prostrate on one, a maiden drifted through the tropical waters of a Florida resort. Mankind had ceased to use their lower limbs.

With disuse came atrophy; with atrophy came progressive and definite changes in the shapes of mankind: with these changes came new conceptions of beauty-feminine. All this happened not in one generation, nor in ten, but gradually in the course of centuries.

Customs changed so laws changed. No longer were laws for everyone's good but only for the benefit of the automobilist. The roads, formerly for the benefit of all, were finally restricted to those in machines. At first it was merely dangerous to walk on the highways; later it became a crime. Like all changes, this came slowly. First came a law restricting certain roads to automobilists; then came a law prohibiting pedestrians from the use of roads;

then a law giving them no legal recourse if injured while walking on a public highway; later it became a felony to do so.

Then came the final law providing for the legal murder of all pedestrians on the highway; wherever or whenever they could be hit by an auto.

No one was content to go slowly—all the world was crazed by a desire for speed. There was also a desire, no matter where an automobilist was, to go to some other city. Thus Sundays and holidays were distinguished by thousands and millions of automobilists going "somewhere," none being content to spend the hours of leisure quietly where they were. Rural landscapes consisted of long lines of machines passing between walls of advertisements at the rate of 60 miles an hour, pausing now and then at gasoline filling stations, at road houses or to strip an occasional tree of its blooms. The air was filled with vapors from the exhausts of machinery and the raucous noise of countless horns of all descriptions. No one saw anything; no one wanted to see anything; the desire of each driver was to drive faster than the car ahead of his. It was called in the vernacular of the day—"A quiet Sunday in the country."

There were no pedestrians; that is, almost none. Even in the rural districts mankind was on wheels

mechanically propelled. Such farming as was done was done by machinery. Here and there, clinging like mountain sheep to inaccessible mountain-sides remained a few pedestrians who, partly from choice, but mainly from necessity, had retained the desire to use their legs. These people were always poor. At first the laws had no terror for them. Every state had some families who had never ceased to be pedestrians. On these the automobilists looked first with amusement and then with alarm. No one realized the tremendous depth of the chasm between the two groups of the Genus Homo till the national law was passed forbidding the use of all highways to pedestrians. At once, all over the United States, the revolt of the Walkers began. Although Bunker Hill was hundreds of years away, the spirit of Bunker Hill survived, and the prohibition of walking on the roads only increased the desire to do so. More pedestrians than ever were accidentally killed. Their families retaliated by using every effort to make automobilizing unpleasant and dangerous—nails, tacks, glass, logs, barbed wire, huge rocks were used as weapons. In the Ozarks, backwoodsmen took delight in breaking windshields and puncturing tires with well-directed rifle shots. Others walked the roads and defied the automo-

bilists. Had the odds been equal, a condition of anarchy would have resulted, being unequal, the pedestrians were simply a nuisance. Class-consciousness reached its acme when Senator Glass of New York rose in the Senate Chambers and said in part:

“A race that cease’s to develop must die out. For centuries mankind has been on wheels, and thus has advanced towards a state of mechanical perfection. The pedestrian, careless of his inherent right to ride, has persisted not only in walking, but even has gone so far as to claim equal rights with the higher type of automobilists. Patience has ceased to be a virtue. Nothing more can be done for these miserable degenerates of our race. The kindest thing to do now is to inaugurate a process of extermination. Only thus can we prevent a continuation of the disorders which have marked the otherwise uniform peaceful history of our fair land. There is, therefore, nothing for me to do save to urge the passage of the ‘Pedestrian Extermination Act.’ This as you know provides for the instant death of all pedestrians wherever and whenever they are found by the Constabulary of each State. The last census shows there are only about ten thousand left and these are mostly in a few of the mid-western states. I am proud to state that my own constituency,

which up to yesterday had only one pedestrian, an old man over 90 years of age, has now a clear record. A telegram just received states that fortunately he tottered on a public road in a senile effort to visit his wife's grave and was instantly killed by an automobilist. But though New York has at present none of these vile degenerates, we are anxious to aid our less fortunate states."

The law was instantly passed, being oposed only by the Senators from Kentucky, Tennessee and Arkansas. To promote interest, a bounty was placed on each pedestrian killed. A silver star was given to each county reporting complete success. A gold star to each state containing only autoists. The pedestrian, like the carrier pigeon, was doomed.

It is not to be expected that the extermination was immediate or complete. There was some unexpected resistance. It had been in effect one year when the pedestrian child swore vengeance on the mechanical means of destroying humanity.

Sunday afternoon a hundred years later, the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia was filled with the usual throng of pleasure seekers, each in his own auto-car. Noiselessly, on rubber-tired wheels, they journeyed down the long aisles, pausing now and then before this exhibit or that which attracted their

individual attention. A father was taking his little boy through and each was greatly interested: the boy in the new world of wonders, the father in the boy's intelligent questions and observations. Finally the boy stopped his autocar in front of a glass case.

"What is that, Father? They look as we do, only what peculiar shapes."

"That, my son, is a family of pedestrians. It was long ago it all happened and I know of it only because my mother told me about them. This family was shot in the Ozark Mountains. It is believed they were the last in the world."

"I am sorry," said the boy, slowly. "If there were more, I would like you to get a little one for me to play with."

"There are no more," said the father. "They are all dead."

The man thought he was telling the truth to his son. In fact, he prided himself on always being truthful to children. Yet he was wrong. For a few pedestrians remained, and their leader, in fact, their very brains, was the great-grandson of the little boy, who had stood up on the hill with hatred in his heart long before.

Irrespective of climatic conditions, environment and all varieties of enemies, man has always been able to exist. With the race of Pedestrians it was in

very truth the survival of the fittest. Only the most agile, intelligent and sturdy were able to survive the systematic attempt made to exterminate them. Though reduced in numbers they survived; though deprived of all the so-called benefits of modern civilization, they existed. Forced to defend not only their individual existence, but also the very life of their race, they gained the cunning of their backwoodsmen ancestors and kept alive. They lived, hunted, loved, and died and for two generations the civilized world was unaware of their very existence. They had their political organization, their courts of law. Justice, based on Blackstone and the Constitution ruled. Always a Miller ruled: first the little boy with hatred in his heart, grown to manhood; then his son, trained from childhood to the sole task of hatred of all things mechanical; then the grandson wise, cunning, a dream-builder; and finally the great-grandson, Abraham Miller, prepared by three generations for the ultimate revenge.

Abraham Miller was the hereditary president of the Colony of Pedestrians hidden in the Ozark Mountains. They were isolated, but not ignorant; few in number but adaptive. The first fugitives had many brilliant men: inventors, college professors, patriots and even a learned jurist. These

men kept their knowledge and transmitted it. They dug in the fields, hunted in the woods, fished in the streams, and builded in their laboratories. They even had automobiles, and now and then, with limbs tied close to their bodies, would travel as spies into the land of the enemy. Certain of the children were trained from childhood to act in this capacity. There is even evidence that for some years one of these spies lived in St. Louis.

It was a colony with a single ambition—a union of individuals for one purpose only; the young folks whispered it to each other in the moonlight; in the laboratories it was carved on every wall; the senile gathered their children around and swore them to it; every action of the colony was bent toward one end—

“We will go back.”

They were paranoid in their hatred. Without exception, all of their ancestors had been hunted like wild beasts, exterminated without mercy—like vermin. It was not revenge they desired, but liberty—the right to live as they wished, to go and come as they pleased.

For three generations the colony had preserved the secret of their existence. Year by year as a unit they had lived, worked and died for a single ambition. Now the time had come for the execution of their plans, the fulfillment

of their desires. Meanwhile the world of automobilists lived on, materialistic, mechanical, selfish. Socialism had provided comfort for the masses but had singularly failed to provide happiness. All lived, everyone had an income, no one but was provided with a home, food and clothes. But the homes were of concrete; they were uniform, poured out by the million; the furniture was concrete, poured with the houses. The clothing was paper, water-proofed; it was all in one design and was furnished—four suits a year to each person. The food was sold in bricks, each brick containing all the elements necessary for the continuation of life; on every brick was stamped the number of calories. For centuries, inventors had invented till finally life became uniform and work a matter of push buttons. Yet the world of the autoists was an unhappy one, for no one worked with muscles. In summer time it was, of course, necessary to perspire, but for generations no one had sweated. The words "toil," "labor," "work" were marked obsolete in the dictionaries.

Yet no one was happy because it was found to be a mechanical impossibility to invent an automobile that would travel over one hundred and twenty miles an hour and stay on the ordinary country road. The automobilists could not go as fast as they

wanted to. Space could not be annihilated; time could not be destroyed.

Besides, everyone was toxic. The air was filled with the dangerous vapors generated by the combustion of millions of gallons of gasoline and its substitutes, even though many machines were electricified. The greatest factor contributing to this toxemia, however, was the greatly reduced excretion of toxins through the skin and the almost negative production of energy through muscular contraction. The automobilists had ceased to work, using the term in its purely archaic form, and having ceased to work, they had ceased to sweat. A few hours a day on a chair in a factory or at a desk was sufficient to earn the necessaries of life. The automobilist never being tired, nature demanded a lesser number of hours spent in sleep. The remaining hours were spent in automobiles, going somewhere; it mattered not where they went so long as they went fast. Babies were raised in machines; in fact, all life was lived in them. The American Home had disappeared—it was replaced by the automobile.

The automobilists were going somewhere but were not sure where. The pedestrians were confident of where they were going.

Society in its modern sense was socialistic. This implied that

all classes were comfortable. Crime as such, had ceased to exist some generations previous, following the putting into force of Bryant's theory that all crime was due to 2 percent of the population and that if these were segregated and sterilized, crime would cease in one generation. When Bryant first promulgated his thesis, it was received with some scepticism, but its practical application was hailed with delight by everyone who was not directly affected.

Yet even in this apparently perfect society there were defects. Though everyone had all the necessities of life, it was not true of luxuries. In other words, there were still rich men and poor men, and the wealthy still dominated the government and made the laws.

Among the rich there were none more exclusive, aristocratic and dominant than the Heislers. Their estate on the Hudson was enclosed by thirty miles of twelve-foot iron fence. Few could boast of having visited there, of having week-ended in the stone palace surrounded by a forest of pine, beach and hemlock. They were so powerful that none of the family had ever held a public office. They made Presidents, but never cared to have one in the family. Their enemies said that their wealth came from fortunate marriages with the Ford

and Rockefeller families but, no doubt, this was a falsehood based on jealousy. The Heislers had banks and real estate; they owned factories and office buildings. It was definitely stated that they owned the President of the United States and the Judges of the Supreme Court. One of their possessions was rarely spoken of, or mentioned in the newspapers. The only child of the ruling branch of the family walked.

William Henry Heisler was an unusual millionaire. When told that his wife had presented him with a daughter he promised his gods (though he was not certain who they were) that he would spend at least an hour a day with this child supervising her care.

For some months nothing unusual was noticed about this little baby, though at once all the nurses commented on her ugly legs. Her father simply considered that probably all baby legs were ugly.

At the age of one year, the baby tried to stand and take a step. Even this was passed over, as the pediatricians were united in the opinion that all children tried to use their legs for a few months, but it was a bad habit usually easily broken up like thumb-sucking. They gave the usual advice to the nurses which would have been followed had it not been for her father who merely stated, "Every child has a personality.

Let her alone, see what she will do." And in order to insure obedience, he selected one of his private secretaries, who was to be in constant attendance and make daily written reports.

The child grew. There came the time when she was no longer called "baby" but dignified by the name of "Margaretta." As she grew, her legs grew. The more she walked, the stronger they became. There was no one to help her, for none of the adults had ever walked, nor had they seen anyone walk. She not only walked but she objected in her own baby way to mechanical locomotion. She screamed like a baby wild cat at her first introduction to an automobile and never could become reconciled even to the autocars for the house use.

When it was too late, her father consulted everyone who could possibly know anything about the situation and its remedy. Heisler wanted his child to develop her own personality, but he did not want her to be odd. He therefore gathered in consultation, neurologists, anatomists, educators, psychologists, students of child behavior and obtained no satisfaction from them. All agreed that it was a pitiful case of atavism, a throw-back. As for a cure, there were a thousand suggestions from psychoanalysis to the brutal splinting and bandaging of the little girl's

lower extremities. Finally, in disgust, Heisler paid them all for their trouble and bribed them all for their silence and told them sharply to go to Hell. He had no idea where this place was, or just what he meant, but found some relief in saying it.

They all left promptly except one who, in addition to his other vocations, followed genealogy as an avocation. He was an old man and they made an interesting contrast as they sat facing each other in their autocars. Heisler was middle aged, vigorous, real leader of men, gigantic, save for his shrunken legs. The other man was old, gray haired, withered, a dreamer. They were alone in the room, save for the child who played happily in the sunshine of the large bay windows.

"I thought I told you to go to Hell with the rest," growled the leader of men.

"How can I?" was the mild reply. "Those others did not obey you. They imply autoed out of your home. I am waiting for you to tell me how to go there. Where is this Hell you order us to? Our submarines have explored the ocean bed five miles below sea level. Our aeroplanes have gone some miles toward the stars. Mount Everest has been conquered. I read all these journeyings, but nowhere do I read of a Hell. Some centuries ago theologians said it was a place that

sinner went to when they died, but there has been no sin since Bryant's two per cent were identified and sterilized. You with your millions and limitless power are as near Hell as you will ever be, when you look at your abnormal child."

"But she is bright mentally, Professor," protested Heisler; "only seven years old but tested ten years by the Simon-Binet Scale. If only she would stop this damned walking. Oh! I am proud of her but I want her to be like other girls. Who will want to marry her? It's positively indecent. Look at her. What is she doing?"

"Why, bless me!" exclaimed the old man. "I read of that in a book three hundred years old just the other day. Lots of children used to do that."

"But what is it?"

"Why, it used to be called 'turning somersaults'."

"But what does it mean? Why does she do it?"

Heisler wiped the sweat off his face.

"It will all make us ridiculous if it becomes known."

"Oh, well, with your power you can keep it quiet—but have you studied your family history? Do you know what blood strains are in her?"

"No. I never was interested. Of course, I belong to the Sons of the American Revolution, and

all that sort of thing. They brought me the papers and I signed on the dotted line. I never read them though I paid well to have a book published about it all."

"So you had a Revolutionary ancestor? Where's the book?"

Heisler rang for his private secretary, who autoed in, received his curt orders and soon returned with the Heisler family history which the old man opened eagerly. Save for the noise made by the child, who was playing with a small stuffed bear, the room was deadly still. Suddenly the old man laughed.

"It is all as plain as can be. Your Revolutionary ancestor was a Miller; Abraham Miller of Hamilton Township. His mother was captured and killed by Indians. They were pedestrians of the most pronounced strain; of course, every one was a pedestrian in those days. The Millers and the Heislers intermarried. That was some hundred years ago. Your Great Grandfather Heisler, had a sister who married a Miller. She is spoken of here on page 330. Let me read it to you.

"Margaretta Heisler was the only sister of William Heisler. Independent and odd in many ways, she committed the folly of marrying a farmer by the name of Abraham Miller, who was one of the most noted leaders in the pedestrian riots of Pennsylvania.

Following his death, his widow and only child, a boy eight years old, disappeared and no doubt were destroyed in the general process of pedestrian extermination. An old letter written by her to her brother, prior to her marriage, contained the boast that she never had ridden in an automobile and never would; that God had given her legs and she intended to use them and that she was fortunate in finally finding a man who also had legs and the desire to live on them, as God had planned men and women to do.'

"There is the secret of this child of yours. She is a reversal to the sister of your great grandfather. That lady died a hundred years ago rather than follow the fashion. You say yourself that this little one nearly died from convulsions when the attempt was made to put her in an automobile. It is a clear case of heredity. If you try to break the shield of the habit, you will probably kill her. The only thing to do is to leave her alone. Let her develop as she wishes. She is your daughter. Her will is your will. The probability is that neither can change the other. Let her use her legs. She probably will climb trees, run, swim, wander where she will."

"So that is the way of it," sighed Heisler. "That means the end of our family. No one would

want to marry a monkey no matter how intelligent she is. So you think she will some day climb a tree? If there is a Hell, this is mine, as you suggest."

"But she is happy!"

"Yes, if laughter is an index. But will she be as she grows older? She will be different. How can she have associates? Of course they won't apply that extermination law in her case; my position will prevent that. I could even have it repealed. But she will be lonely—so lonely!"

"Perhaps she will learn to read—then she won't be lonely."

They both looked at the child.

"What is she doing now?" demanded Heisler. "You seem to know more than anyone I ever met about such things."

"Why, she is hopping. Is not that remarkable? She never saw anyone hop and yet she is doing it. I never saw a child do it and yet I can identify it and give it a name. In Kate Greenaway's illustrations, I have seen pictures of children hopping."

"Confound the Millers anyway!" growled Heisler.

After that conversation, Heisler engaged the old man, whose sole duty was to investigate the subject of pedestrian children and find how they played and used their legs. Having investigated this, he was to instruct the little girl.

The entire matter of her exer-

cise was left to him. Thus from that day on a curious spectator from an aeroplane might have seen an old man sitting on the lawn showing a golden-haired child pictures from very old books and talking together about the same pictures. Then the child would do things that no child had done for a hundred years—bounce a ball, skip rope, dance folk dances and jump over a bamboo stick supported by two upright bars. Long hours were spent in reading and always the old man would begin by saying:

"Now this is the way they used to do."

Ocasionaly a party would be given for her and other little girls from the neighboring rich would come and spend the day. They were polite—so was Margaretta Heisler—but the parties were not a success. The company could not move except in their autocars, and they looked on their hostess with curiosity and scorn. They had nothing in common with the curious walking child, and these parties always left Margaretta in tears.

"Why can't I be like other girls?" she demanded of her father. "Is it always going to be this way? Do you know that girls laugh at me because I walk?"

Heisler was a good father. He held to his vow to devote one hour a day to his daughter, and during that time gave of his in-

telligence as eagerly and earnestly as he did to his business in the other hours. Often he talked to Margaretta as though she were his equal, an adult with full mental development.

"You have your own personality," he would say to her. "The mere fact that you are different from other people does not of necessity mean that they are right and you are wrong. Perhaps you are both right—at least you are both following out your natural proclivities. You are different in desires and physique from the rest of us, but perhaps you are more normal than we are. The professor shows us pictures of ancient peoples and they all had legs developed like yours. How can I tell whether man has degenerated or improved. At times when I see you run and jump, I envy you. I and all of us are tied down to earth—dependent on a machine for every part of our daily life. You can go where you please. You can do this and all you need is food and sleep. In some ways this is an advantage. On the other hand the professor tells me that you can only go about four miles an hour while I can go over one hundred."

"But why should I want to go so fast when I do not want to go anywhere?"

"That is just the astonishing thing. Why don't you want to go? It seems that not only your

body but also your mind, your personality, your desires are old-fashioned, hundreds of years old-fashioned. I try to be here in the house or garden every day—at least an hour—with you, but during the other waking hours I want to go. You do the strangest things. The professor tells me about it all. There is your bow and arrow, for instance. I bought you the finest firearms and you never use them, but you get a bow and arrow from some museum and finally succeed in killing a duck, and the professor said you built a fire out of wood and roasted it and ate it. You even made him eat some.”

“But it was good, father—much better than the synthetic food. Even the professor said the juice made him feel younger.”

Heisler laughed, “You are a savage—nothing more than a savage.”

“But I can read and write!”

“I admit that. Well, go ahead and enjoy yourself. I only wish I could find another savage for you to play with, but there are no more.”

“Are you sure?”

“As much so as I can be. In fact, for the last five years my agents have been scouring the civilized world for a pedestrian colony. There are a few in Siberia and the Tartar Plateau, but they are impossible. I would rather have you associate with

apes.”

“I dream of one, father,” whispered the girl shyly. “He is a nice boy and he can do everything I can. Do dreams ever come true?”

Heisler smiled. “I trust this one will, and now I must hurry back to New York. Can I do anything for you?”

“Yes—find some one who can teach me how to make candles.”

“Candles? Why, what are they?”

She ran and brought an old book and read it to him. It was called, “The Gentle Pirate,” and the hero always read in bed by candle light.

“I understand,” he finally said as he closed the book. “I remember now that I once read of their having something like that in the Catholic Churches. So you want to make some? See the professor and order what you need. Hum—candles—why, they would be handy at night if the electricity failed, but then it never does.”

“But I don’t want electricity. I want candles and matches to light them with.”

“Matches?”

“Oh, father! In some ways you are ignorant. I know lots of words you don’t, even though you are so rich.”

“I admit it. I will admit anything and we will find how to make your candles. Shall I send you some ducks?”

"Oh, no. It is so much more fun to shoot them."

"You are a real barbarian!"

"And you are a dear ignoramus."

So it came to pass that Margareta Heisler reached her seventeenth birthday, tall, strong, agile, brown from constant exposure to wind and sun, able to run, jump, shoot accurately with bow and arrow, an eater of meat, a reader of books by candle light, a weaver of carpets and a lover of nature. Her associates had been mainly elderly men: only occasionally would she see the ladies of the neighborhood. She tolerated the servants, the maids and housekeeper. The love she gave her father she also gave to the old professor, but he had taught her all she knew and the years had made him senile and sleepy.

There came to her finally the urge to travel. She wanted to see New York with its twenty million automobilists; its hundred story office buildings; its smokeless factories; its standardized houses. There were difficulties in the way of such a trip, and no one knew these better than her father. The roads were impossible and all of New York was now either streets or houses. There being no pedestrians, there was no need of sidewalks. Besides, even Heisler's wealth would not be able to prevent the riot sure to result from the presence in a large city of

such a curiosity as a pedestrian. Heisler was powerful, but he dreaded the result of allowing his daughter the freedom of New York. Furthermore, up to this time, her deformity was known only to a few. Once she was in New York, the city papers would publish his disgrace to the world.

Several of the office buildings in New York City were one hundred stories high. There were no stairways but as a safety precaution circular spiral ramps had been built in each structure for the use of autocars in case the elevators failed to work. This, however, never happened, and few of the tenants ever knew of their existence. They were used at night by the scrub women busily autocaring from one floor to another cleaning up. The higher the floor the purer was the air and the more costly was the yearly rental. Below, in the canyon and the street, an ozone machine was necessary every few feet to purify the air and make unnecessary the use of gas masks. On the upper floors, however, there were pure breezes from off the Atlantic. Noticeable was the absence of flies and mosquitos; pigeons built their nests in the crevices, and on the highest roof a pair of American eagles nested year after year in haughty defiance of the mechanical autos, a thousand feet below.

It was in the newest building

in New York and on the very highest floor that a new office was opened. On the door was the customary gilded sign, "New York Electrical Co." Boxes had been left there, decorators had embellished the largest room, the final result being that it was simply a standardized office. A stenographer had been installed and sat at a noiseless machine, answering, if need be, the automatic telephone.

To this roomy suite one day in June came, by invitation, a dozen of the leaders of industry. They came, each thinking he was the only one invited to the conference. Surprise as well as suspicion was the marked feature of the meeting. There were three men there who were secretly and independently trying to undermine Heisler and tear him from his financial throne. Heisler himself was there apparently quiet, but inwardly a seething flame of repressed electricity. The stenographer seated them, as they arrived, in order around a long table. They remained in their autocars. No one used chairs. One or two of the men joked with each other. All nodded to Heisler, but none spoke to him.

The furniture, surroundings, stenographer were all part of the standard office in the business section. Only one small portion of the room aroused their curiosity. At the head of the table

was an arm chair. None of the men around the table had ever used a chair; none had seen one save in the Metropolitan Museum. The autocar had replaced the chair even as the automobile had replaced the human leg.

The chimes in the tower nearly rang out the two o'clock message. All of the twelve looked at their watches. One man frowned. His watch was some minutes late. In another minute all were frowning. They had a two o'clock appointment with this stranger and he had not kept it. To them, time was valuable.

Then a door opened and the man walked in. That was the first astonishing thing—and then they marveled at the size and shape of him. There was something uncanny about it—peculiar, weird.

Then the man sat down—in the chair. He did not seem much larger now than the other men, though he was younger than any of them, and he had a brown complexion which contrasted peculiarly with the dead gray-white pallor of the others. Then, gravely, almost mechanically, with clear distinct enunciation, he began to speak.

"I see, gentlemen, that you have all honored me by accepting my invitation to be present this afternoon. You will pardon my not informing any of you that the others were also invited. Had

I done so, several of you would have refused to come and without any one of you the meeting would not be as successful as I intended it to be.

"The name of this company is the 'New York Electrical Co'. That is just a name assumed as a mask. In reality, there is no company. I am the representative of the nation of Pedestrians. In fact I am their president and my name is Abraham Miller. Four generations ago, as, no doubt, you know, Congress passed the Pedestrian Extermination Act. Following that, those who continued to walk were hunted like wild animals, slaughtered without mercy. My great-grandfather, Abraham Miller, was killed in Pennssylvania; his wife was run down on the public highway in Ohio as she was attempting to join the other pedestrians in the Ozarks. There were no battles, there was no conflict. At that time there were only ten thousand pedestrians in all the United States. Within a few years there were none—at least so your ancestors thought. The race of Pedestrians, however, survived. We lived on. The trials of those early years are written in our histories and taught to our children. We formed a colony and continued our existence although we disappeared from the world as you know it.

"Year by year we lived on

until now we number over two hundred persons in our Republic. We are not, in fact never have been ignorant. Always we worked for one purpose and that was the right to return to the world. Our motto for one hundred years has been:

'We will go back.'

"So I have come to New York and called you into conference. While you were selected for your influence, wealth and ability, there was present in every instance another important reason. Each of you is a lineal decendant of a United States Senator who voted for the Pedestrian Extermination Act. You can readily see the significance of that. You have the power to undo a great injustice done to a branch of American citizens. Will you let us come back? We want to come back as pedestrians, to come and go as we please, safely. Some of us can drive automobiles and aeroplanes, but we don't want to. We want to walk, and if a mood strikes us to walk in the highway, we want to do it without constant danger of death. We do not hate you, we pity you. There is no desire to antagonize you; rather we want to cooperate with you.

"We believe in work—muscle work. No matter what our young people are trained for, they are

taught to work—to do manual work. We understand machinery, but do not like to use it. The only help we accept is from domestic animals, horses, and oxen. In several places we use water power to run our grist mills and saw our timbers. For pleasure we hunt, fish, play tennis, swim in our mountain lake. We keep our bodies clean and try to do the same with our minds. Our boys marry at 21—our girls at 18. Occasionally a child grows up to be abnormal—degenerate. I frankly say that such children disappear. We eat meat and vegetables, fish, and grain raised in our valley. The time has come when we cannot care for a continued increase in population. The time has come when we must come back into the world. What we desire is a guarantee of safety. I will now leave you in conference for fifteen minutes, and at the end of such time I will return for an answer. If you have any questions, I will answer them then.”

He left the room. One of the men rolled over to the telephone, found the wire cut; another went over to the door and found it locked. The stenographer had disappeared. There followed sharp discussion marked by temper and lack of logic. One man only kept silent. Heisler sat motionless: so much so that the cigar, clenched between his teeth, went out.

Then Miller came back. A dozen questions were hurled at him. One man swore at him. Finally there was silence.

“Well!” questioned Miller.

“Give us time—a week in which to discuss it—to ascertain public opinion,” urged one of them.

“No,” said Heisler, “let us give our answer now.”

“Oh, of course,” sneered one of his bitter opponents. “Your reason for giving a decision is plain, though it has never been in the newspapers.”

“For that,” said Hisler, “I am going to get you. You are a cur and you know it or you would not drag my family into this.”

“Oh, H—! Heisler—you can’t bluff me any more!”

Miller hit the table with his fist—

“What’s your answer?”

One of the men held up his hand for an audience.

“We all know the history of Pedestrianism: the two groups represented here cannot live together. There are two hundred million of us and two hundred of them. Let them stay in their valley. That is what I think. If this man is their leader, we can judge what the colony is like. They are ignorant anarchists. There is no telling what they would demand if we listened to them. I think we should have this man arrested. He is a menace to societ.”

That broke the ice. One after an-

other they spoke, and when they finished, it was plain that all save Heisler were hostile, antagonistic and merciless. Miller turned to him—

“What is your verdict?”

“I am going to keep quiet. These men know it all. You have heard them. They are a unit. What I would say can make no difference. In fact, I don't care. For some time I have ceased to care about anything.”

Miller turned in his swivel chair and looked out over the city. In some ways it was a pretty city, if one liked such a place. Under him, in the city streets, in the beehives, over twenty million automobilists spent their lives on wheels. Not one in a million had a desire beyond the city limits; the roads connecting the metropolis with other cities were but urban arteries wherein the automobiles passed like corpuscles, the auto-trucks proceeded like plasma. Miller feared the city, but he pitied the legless pigmies inhabiting it.

Then he turned again and asked for silence.

“I wanted to make a peaceful adjustment. We desire no more bloodshed, no more internecine strife. You who lead public sentiment have by your recent talk shown me that the pedestrian can expect no mercy at the hands of the present Government. You know and I know that this is no

longer a nation where the people rule. You rule. You elect whom you please for senators, for presidents; you snap your whip and they dance. That is why I came to you men, instead of making a direct appeal to the Government. Feeling confident what your action would be, I have prepared this short paper which I will ask you to sign. It contains a single statement:

‘The Pedestrians cannot return.’

“When you have all signed this, I will explain to you just what we will do.”

“Why sign it?” said the first man, the one seated to the right of Miller. “Now my idea is this!” and he crumpled the paper to a tight ball and threw it under the table. His conduct was at once followed by applause. Only Heisler sat still. Miller looked out the window till all was quiet.

Finally he spoke again: “In our colony we have perfected a new electro-dynamic principle. Released, it at once separates the atomic energy which makes possible all movement, save muscle movement. We have tested this out with smaller machines in limited space and know exactly what we can do. We do not know how to restore the energy in any territory where we have once destroyed it. Our electricians are

waiting for my signal transmitted by radio. In fact, they have been listening to all this conversation, and I will now give them the signal to throw the switch. The signal is our motto,

"We will come back."

"So that is the signal?" sneered one of the men. "What happened?"

"Nothing much," replied Heisler, "at least I see no difference. What was supposed to happen, Abraham Miller?"

"Nothing much," said Miller, "only the destruction of all mankind except the pedestrians. We tried to imagine what would happen when our electricians threw the switch and released this new principle, but even our sociologists could not fully imagine what would be the result. We do not know whether you can live or die—whether any of you can survive. No doubt the city dwellers will die speedily in their artificial bee-hives. Some in the country may survive."

"Hello, hello!" exclaimed a multi-millionaire, "I feel no different. You are a dreamer of dreams. I am leaving and will report you at once to the police. Open your damn door and let us out!"

Miller opened the door.

Most of the men pressed their starting button and took hold of

the steering rod. Not a machine moved. The others, startled, tried to leave. Their autocars were dead. Then one, with a hysterical curse, raised an automatic at Miller and pulled the trigger. There was a click—and nothing more.

Miller pulled out his watch.

"It is now 2:40 P.M. The automobilists are beginning to die. They do not know it yet. When they do, there will be a panic. We cannot give any relief. There are only a few hundred of us and we cannot feed and care for hundreds of millions of cripples. Fortunately there is a circular inclined plane or ramp in this building and your autocars are all equipped with brakes. I will push you one at a time to the plane, if you will steer your cars. Obviously you do not care to remain here and equally obviously the elevators are not running. I will call on my stenographer to help me. Perhaps you suspected before that he was a pedestrian trained from boyhood to take female parts. He is one of our most efficient spies. And now we will say goodbye. A century ago you knowingly and willingly tried to exterminate us. We survived. We do not want to exterminate you, but I fear for your future."

Thereupon he went behind one of the autocars and started pushing it towards the doorway. The stenographer, who had reappeared as a pedestrian, and in

trousers, took hold of another car. Soon only Heisler was left. He held up his hand in protest.

"Would you mind pushing me over to that window?"

Miller did so. The automobilist looked out curiously.

"There are no aeroplanes in the sky. There should be hundreds."

"No doubt," replied Miller, "they have all planed down to earth. You see they have no power."

"Then everything has stopped?"

"Almost. There is still muscle power. There is still power produced by the bending of wood as in a bow and arrow—also that produced by a metal coil like the main spring in a watch. You notice your watch is still running. Of course, domestic animals can still produce power—that is just a form of muscle power. In our valley we have grist mills and saw mills running by water power. We can see no reason why they should not keep on; all other power is destroyed. Do you realize it? There is no electricity, no steam, no explosions of any kind. All those machines are dead." Heisler pulled out a handkerchief, slowly, automatically and wiped the sweat from his face as he said:

"I can hear a murmur from the city. It rises up to this window like distant surf beating rhythmically against a sandy shore.

I can hear no other noise, only this murmur. It recalls to my mind the sound of a swarm of bees leaving their old hive and flying compactly through the air with their queen in the center, trying to find a new home. There is a sameness to the noise like a distant waterfall. What does it mean? I think I know, but I cannot bear to say it with words."

"It means," said Miller, "that below us and around us twenty million people are beginning to die in office buildings, stores and homes; in subways, elevators and trains; in tubes and ferry boats; on the street, and in the restaurant twenty million people suddenly realize that they cannot move. No one can help them. Some have left their cars and are trying to pull themselves along on their hands, their withered legs helplessly trailing behind them. They are calling to each other for help, but even now they cannot know the full extent of the disaster. By tomorrow each man will be a primitive animal. In a few days there will be no food, no water. I hope they will die quickly—before they eat each other. The nation will die and no one will know about it, for there will be no newspapers, no telephones, no wireless. I will communicate with my people by carrier pigeons. It will be months before I can rejoin them. Meanwhile I can live.

I can go from place to place. The sound you hear from the city is the cry of a soul in despair."

Heisler grabbed Miller's hand convulsively. "But you made it stop, you can make it start?"

"No—we stopped it with electricity. There is now no more electricity. I presume our own machines were at once put out of power."

"So we are going to die?"

"I believe so. Perhaps your scientists can invent a remedy. We did a hundred years ago. We lived. Your nation tried by every known scientific art to destroy us, but we lived. Perhaps you can. How can I tell? We wanted to arbitrate. All we asked for was equality. You saw how those other men voted and how they thought. If they had had the power, they would instantly have destroyed my little colony. What we did was simply done in self-protection."

Heisler tried to light his cigar. The electric lighter would not work, so he held it dry in his mouth, in one corner, chewing it.

"You say your name is Abraham Miller? I believe we are cousins of some sort. I have a book that tells about it."

"I know all about that. Your great-grandfather and my great-grandmother were brother and sister."

"I believe that is what the pro-

fessor said, except that at that time, we did not know about you. What I want to talk about, however, is my daughter."

The two men talked on and on. The murmur continued to mount from the city, unceasing, incessant, full of notes new to the present generation. Yet at the distance—from the earth below to the hundredth story above, it was all one sound. Though composed of millions of variants, it blended into unity. Miller finally began walking up and down, from one office wall to the window and back again.

"I thought no one more free from nerves than I was. My whole life has been schooled in preparation for this moment. We had right, justice, even our forgotten God on our side. I still can see no other way, no other way, but this makes me sick, Heisler; it nauseates me. When I was a boy I found a mouse caught in a barn door, almost torn in two. I tried to help it and the tortured animal bit my finger so I simply had to break its neck. It couldn't live—and when I tried to help it, it bit me, so I had to kill it. Do you understand? I had to, but, though I was justified, I grew deadly sick; I vomited on the barn floor. Something like that is going on below there. Twenty million deformed bodies all around us are beginning to die. They might

have been men and women like those we have in the colony but they became obsessed with the idea of mechanical devices of all kinds. If I tried to help—went into the street now—they would kill me. I couldn't keep them off me—I couldn't kill them fast enough. We were justified—man—we were justified, but it makes me sick."

"It does not affect me that way," replied Heisler. "I am accustomed to crushing out my opponents. I had to or they would crush me. I look on all this as a wonderful experiment. For years I have thought about our civilization—on account of my daughter. I have lost interest. In many ways I have lost my fighting spirit. I don't seem to care what happens, but I would like to follow that cur down the circular spiral plane and wrap my hands around his neck. I don't want him to die of hunger."

"No. You stay here. I want you to write a history of it all—just how it happened. We want an accurate record to justify our action. You stay here and work with my stenographer. I am going to find your daughter. We cannot let a pedestrian suffer. We will take you back with us. With suitable apparatus you could learn to ride a horse."

"You want me to live?"

"Yes, but not for yourself. There a dozen reasons. For the

next twenty years you can lecture to our young people. You can tell them what happened when the world ceased to work, to sweat, when they deliberately exchanged the home for the automobile and toil and labor for machinery. You can tell them that and they will believe you."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Heisler. "I have made Presidents and now I become a legless example for a new world."

"You will attain fame. You will be the last automobilist."

"Let's start," urged Heisler. "Call your stenographer!"

The stenographer had been in New York one month prior to the meeting of Miller and the representatives of the automobilists. During that time, thanks to his early training in mimicry as a spy, he had been absolutely successful in deceiving all he came in contact with. In his autocar, dressed as a stenographer, his face perfumed and painted, and rings on his fingers, he passed unnoticed amid the other thousands of similar women. He went to their restaurants and to their theatres. He even visited them in their homes. He was the perfect spy; but he was a man.

He had been trained to the work of a spy. For years he had been imbued with loyalty to an enthusiasm for his republic of pedestrians. He had sworn to the oath—that the republic should

come first. Abraham Miller had selected him because he could trust him. The spy was young, with hardly a down on his cheeks. He was celibate. He was patriotic.

But for the first time in his life, he was in a big city. The firm on the floor below employed a stenographer. She was a very efficient worker in more ways than one and there was that about the new stenographer that excited her interest. They met and arranged to meet again. They talked about love, the new love between women. The spy did not understand this, having never heard of such a passion, but he did understand eventually, the caresses and kisses. She proposed that they room together, but he naturally found objections. However, they had spent much of their spare time together. More than once the pedestrian had been on the point of confiding to her, not only concerning the impending calamity, but also his real sex and his true love.

In such cases where a man falls in love with a woman the explanation is hard to find. It is always hard to find. Here there was something twisted, a pathological perversion. It was a monstrous thing that he should fall in love with a legless woman when he might by waiting, have married a woman with columns of ivory and knees of alabaster. Instead, he loved and desired a woman

who lived in a machine. It was equally pathological that she should love a woman. Each was sick—soul-sick, and each to continue the intimacy deceived the other. Now with the city dying beneath him, the stenographer felt a deep desire to save this legless woman. He felt that a way could be found, somehow, to persuade Abraham Miller to let him marry this stenographer—at least let him save her from the debacle.

So in soft shirt and knee trousers he cast a glance at Miller and Heisler engaged in earnest conversation and then tiptoed out the door and down the inclined plane to the floor below. Here all was confusion. Boldly striding into the room where the stenographer had her desk, he leaned over her and started to talk. He told her that he was a man, a pedestrian. Rapidly came the story of what it all meant, the cries from below, the motionless autocars, the useless elevators, the silent telephones. He told her that the world of automobilists would die because of this and that, but that she would live because of his love for her. All he asked was the legal right to care for her, to protect her. They would go somewhere and live, out in the country. He would roll her around the meadows. She could have geese, babygeese that would come to her chair when

she cried, "Weete, weete, weete."

The legless woman listened. What pallor there might be in her cheeks was skillfully covered with rouge. She listened and looked at him, a man, a man with legs, walking. He said he loved her, but the person she had loved was a woman; a woman with dangling, shrunken, beautiful legs like her own, not muscular monstrosities.

She laughed hysterically, said she would marry him, go wherever he wanted her to go, and then she clasped him to her and kissed him full on the mouth, and then kissed his neck over the jugular veins, and he died, bleeding into her mouth, and the blood mingled with rouge made her face a vivid carmine. She died some days later from hunger.

Miller never knew where his stenographer died. Had he time he might have hunted for him, but he began to share Heisler's anxiety about the pedestrian girl isolated and alone amid a world of dying automobilists. To the father she was a daughter, the only child, the remaining and sole branch of his family. To Miller, however, she was a symbol. She was a sign of nature's revolt, an indication of her last spasmodic effort to restore mankind to his former place in the world. Her father wanted her saved because she was his daughter, the

pedestrian because she was one of them, one of the race of pedestrians.

On that hundredth floor kegs of water, stores of food had been provided. Every provision had been made to sustain life in the midst of death. Heisler was shown all these. He was made comfortable and then Miller, with some provisions, a canteen of water, a road map, and a stout club in his grasp, left that place of peace and quiet and started down the spiral stairway. At the best it was simply difficult walking, the spirals being wide enough to prevent dizziness. What Miller feared was the obstruction of the entire passage at some point by a tangled mass of autocars, but evidently all cars which had managed to reach the plane had been able to descend. He paused now and then at this floor or that, shuddered at the cries he heard and then went on, down, down into the street.

Here it was even worse than he expected. On the second the electro-dynamic energy had been released from the Ozark valley—on that very second all machinery had ceased. In New York City twenty million people were in automobiles or autocars at that particular second. Some were working at desks, in shops; some were eating in restaurants, loafing at their clubs; others were going somewhere. Suddenly everyone was forced to stay where

he was. There was no communication save within the limits of each one's voice: the phone, radio, newspapers were useless. Every autocar stopped; every automobile ceased to move. Each man and woman was dependent on his own body for existence; no one could help the other, no one could help himself. Transportation died and no one knew it had happened save in his own circle, as far as the eye could see or the ear could hear, because communication had died with the death of transportation. Each automobilist stayed where he happened to be at that particular moment.

Then slowly as the thought came to them that movement was impossible, there came fear and with fear, panic. But it was a new kind of panic. All previous panics consisted in the sudden movement of large numbers of people in the same direction, fleeing from a real or an imaginary fear. This panic was motionless and for a day the average New Yorker, while gripped with fear, crying with fright, remained within his car. Then came mass movement but not the movement of previous panics. It was the slow tortuous movement of crippled animals dragging legless bodies forward by arms unused to muscular exercise. It was not the rapid wind-like movement of the frenzied panic stricken mob, but

a slow, convulsive, worm-like panic. Word was passed from one to another in hoarse whisperings that the city was a place of death, would become a morgue, that in a few days there would be no food. While no one knew what had happened everyone knew that the city could not live long unless food came regularly from the country, and the country suddenly became more than long cement roads between sign-boards. It was a place where food could be procured and water. The city had become dry. The mammoth pump throwing millions of gallons of water to a careless population had ceased to pump. There was no more water save in the rivers encircling the city and these were filthy, man-polluted. In the country there must be water somewhere.

So, on the second day began the flight from New York—a flight of cripples, not of eagles; a passage of humanity shaped like war-maimed soldiers. Their speed was not uniform, but the fastest could only crawl less than a mile an hour. Philosophers would have stayed where they were and died. Animals, thus tortured, would quietly wait the end, but these automobilists were neither philosophers nor animals, and they had to move. All their life they had been moving. The bridges were the first spaces to show congestion. On all of them were

some automobiles, but traffic is not heavy at 2 in the afternoon. Gradually, by noon of the second day, these river highways were black with people crawling to get away from the city. There came congestion, and with congestion, stasis, simply a writhing without progression. Then on top of this stationary layer of humanity crawled another layer which in its turn reached congestion, and on top of the second layer a third layer. A dozen streets led to each bridge but each bridge was only as wide as a street. Gradually the outer rows of the upper layer began falling into the river beneath. Ultimately many sought this termination. From the bridges came, ultimately, a roar like surf beating against a rock-bound shore. In it was the beginnings of desperate madness. Men died quickly on the bridges, but before they died they started to bite each other. Within the city certain places showed the same congestion. Restaurants and cafes became filled with bodies almost to the ceiling. There was food here but no one could reach it save those next to it and these were crushed to death before they could profit by their good fortune, and dying, blocked with bodies, those who remained alive and able to eat.

Within twenty-four hours mankind has lost its religion, its humanity, its high ideals. Every one

tried to keep himself alive even though by doing so he brought death sooner to others. Yet in isolated instances, individuals rose to heights of heroism. In the hospitals an occasional nurse remained with her patients, giving them food till she with them died of hunger. In one of the maternity wards a mother gave birth to a child. Deserted by everyone else she placed the child to her breast and kept it there till hunger pulled down her lifeless arms.

It was into this world of horror that Miller walked as he emerged from the office building. He had provided himself with a stout club but hardly any of the crawling automobilists noticed him. So he walked slowly over to Fifth Avenue and then headed north, and as he walked he prayed, though on that first day he saw but little of what he was to see later on.

On and on he went till he came to water and that he swam and then again he went on and by night he was out in the country where he ceased to pray continuously. Here he met an occasional automobilist, who was simply annoyed at his machine breaking down. No one in the country realized at first what had really happened; no one ever fully realized before he died in his farm house, just what it all meant. It was only the city dwellers that

knew, and they did not understand.

The next day Miller rose early from the grass and started again, after carefully consulting the road map. He avoided the towns, circling them. He had learned the desire, constant, incessant, inescapable, to share his provisions with those starving cripples and he had to keep his strength and save food for her, that pedestrian girl, alone among helpless servants, within an iron fence thirty miles long. It was near the close of the second day of his walk. For some miles he had seen no one. The sun low in the forest of oaks threw fantastic shadows over the concrete road.

Down the road, ever nearing him came a strange caravan. There were three horses tied to each other. On the backs of two were bundles and jugs of water fastened stoutly but clumsily. On the third horse an old man rested in a chair-like saddle and at this time he slept, his chin resting on his chest, his hands clutching, even in sleep, the sides of the chair. Leading the first horse walked a woman, tall, strong, lovely in her strength, striding with easy pace along the cement road. On her back was slung a bow with a quiver of arrows and in her right hand she carried a heavy cane. She walked on fearlessly, confidently; filled with power and pride.

Miller paused in the middle of the road. The caravan came near him. Then it stopped in front of him.

"Well," said the woman, and her voice blended curiously with the sunlit shadows and the flickering leaves.

"Well! Who are you and why do you block our way?"

"Why, I am Abraham Miller and you are Margaretta Heisler. I am hunting for you. Your father is safe and he sent me for you."

"And you are a pedestrian?"

"Just as truly as you are!" and so on and on—

The professor woke from his nap. He looked down on the young man and woman, standing talking, already forgetting that there was anything else in the world.

"Now, that is the way it was in the old days," mused the professor to himself.

It was a Sunday afternoon some hundred years later. A father and his son were sightseeing in the Museum of Natural Sciences in the reconstructed city of New York. The whole city was now simply a vast museum. Folks went there to see it but no one wanted to live there. In fact, no one wanted to live in such a place as a city when he could live on a farm.

It was a part of every child's education to spend a day or more

in an automobilist's city, so on this Sunday afternoon the father and his little son walked slowly through the large buildings. They saw the mastodon, the bison, the pterodactyl. They paused for some time before a glass case containing a wigwam of the American Indian with a typical Indian family. Finally they came to a large wagon, on four rubber wheels, but there was no shaft and no way that horses or oxen could be harnessed to it. In the

wagon on seats were men, women and little children. The boy looked at them curiously and pulled at his father's sleeve.

"Look, daddy. What are that wagon and those funny people without legs. What does it mean?"

"That my son is a family of automobilists," and there and then he paused and gave his son the little talk that all pedestrian fathers are required by law to give to their children. The End

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In Science-Fiction Handbook (Hermitage, 1953) L. Sprague de Camp, his long-time friend and collaborator, quotes the late Fletcher Pratt—author of "The Blue Star"—as believing that science fiction should not violate established fact "except where the violation itself constitutes the basis of the story and a plausible explanation is furnished." A credo he clearly followed in this eerie account of a hapless Pinkerton detective, an enzyme called "Theta"—and three small gelatine capsules discovered in a dark corner of...



DR. GRIMSHAW'S SANITARIUM FLETCHER PRATT

Illustrated by MOREY

NOTE by the editors: The following manuscript is one of the results of the famous Grimshaw Sanitarium scandal, an event which in its day, made a

tremendous stir, cost a state superintendent of hospitals his post, and turned the course of an election. But every state has its scandals of this type. It is seldom that their reverberations extend beyond the immediate locality; and for the benefit of those who have not heard of or do not remember the Grimshaw case, we will briefly rehearse the known facts.

Dr. Adelbert Grimshaw, a physician of German extraction, opened a private sanitarium for nervous cases at Gowanda, near the grounds occupied by the State Hospital for the Insane. It was a very select institution, catering to the wealthiest patients, and the high fees Dr. Grimshaw secured from them enabled him to establish a charity ward in which, with admirable public spirit, he labored to improve the condition of the indigent feeble-minded.

Dr. Grimshaw appears to have effected some remarkable cures in insanity cases; several well-attested instances of complete recovery from paranoia are recorded under his ministrations. At the same time it was noted that a good many patients died at his sanitarium, and later investigation revealed that these belonged to two classes—wealthy patients whose relatives were at a great distance, and both poor and wealthy patients who had no relatives at all.

It was the case of Harlan Ward that led to the scandal. This unfortunate young man, the son of the famous automobile manufacturer, was committed to Grimshaw's sanitarium by his parents and wife in the autumn of 1927 in an effort to cure him of the liquor habit. He was duly discharged as cured some eight months later, but about a year after his discharge it was discovered that he had begun to take drugs, and he was returned to the institution. Some time after this, while his wife and parents were in Europe they received a cablegram from Dr. Grimshaw announcing the death of the young man. They at once returned to the United States and made arrangements for the removal of the body from the place where it had been temporarily interred at the Trinity (Episcopal) Chapel of Gowanda to the family vault at Short Hill, Long Island. While passing through New York City, the hearse carrying the casket was struck by another car. The hearse was overturned and the casket broken. It proved to contain, instead of the body of Harlan Ward, a dummy dressed in his clothes and stuffed with sand, the face being represented by an ingenious wax mask.

There was an immediate investigation, in the course of which many facts came to light. The most striking of these was that in nearly every case of patients,

whose death at the sanitarium had been reported by Dr. Grimshaw, the body was similarly missing, and a sand-stuffed dummy was substituted in the coffin. None of these bodies has ever been discovered. The death certificates had all been signed by Dr. Grimshaw himself.

This sensational discovery was followed by the arrest of Dr. Benjamin Voyna, Grimshaw's chief assistant. Papers found in the safe of the Grimshaw Sanitarium showed beyond doubt that it had been made the headquarters of a gang engaged in distributing narcotics, and that both Dr. Grimshaw and Dr. Voyna were deeply engaged in the traffic. It was undoubtedly at the sanitarium itself that Harlan Ward had contracted the drug habit that proved his ruin.

Of the other facts uncovered by the police there were two of such singular character that the present manuscript appears to afford the only adequate explanation for them, however fantastic it may seem. One of these was that while running a sanitarium and a drug ring, Dr. Grimshaw apparently found time for the breeding of large numbers of cats. Over thirty were found in and about the premises by the State Police when they raided the place. The other, and more extraordinary fact, was that Dr. Grimshaw, through a chain of agents, seems to have been engaged in the pe-

culiar business of supplying circuses and vaudeville impressarios with dwarfs.

Most of these midgets (as is not unusual) were morons, and many of them were both drug-users and drug-peddlers.

Dr. Voyna ultimately received a jail sentence of five years; the heaviest allowable for dope peddling under the laws of the United States. Grimshaw was never apprehended. Warned no doubt by the first newspaper accounts of the bursting of the Ward casket, he took to flight and has not been found since. If he is ever arrested it is doubtful whether any charge but drug-peddling will lie against him. The laws of New York require that a body shall be produced before a charge of murder can be substantiated, the *corpus delicti*, and as we have stated not one of the bodies of his victims has been found. Investigation of the doctor's past career showed that he had been a graduate of Heidelberg and Jena where he took high honors in endocrinology, but that he later lost his German license on account of malpractice. His original name was Grundhausen.

As to the present manuscript. When the State Troopers raided the Grimshaw Sanitarium they found it nearly empty. In the search for incriminating evidence, which followed, one of the troopers found three gelatine capsules in a corner by the fire-

place in the reception room. He dropped them into his pocket and forgot about them until some time later. When he examined them, he found they contained something white. Imagining it might be drugs of some kind, he turned them over to the State Medical Examiner.

The Medical Inspector opened one of the capsules and found that it held a small wad of exceedingly thin paper, apparently cut or torn from the edge of a thin-paper edition of the Bible. He noted that something written on the paper in minute characters. With the aid of a microscope, he was able to decipher the writing, which was finer than anything but the finest known engraving. Like the first the other capsules contained strips of paper, and when the whole had been deciphered and arranged in its obvious order the following manuscript resulted. It will be noted that there is a gap in the story, representing, probably another capsule which has not yet been found.

* * *

Into whatever hands this may fall, I pray to God that the finder will lay it before the police at the earliest opportunity. I herewith lay a complaint that Dr. Grimshaw is engaged in the drug traffic; Dr. Voyna, his assistant must be involved also.

I fear that in spite of my precautions this will fall into Grimshaw's hands; if so, it will only provide that good doctor with a view of how he looks to other people—Sherman and Kraicki, Arthur Kaye and myself. Dr. Grimshaw, we salute you! Behold your mirror—mirror set in a skull, as it were—for we speak to you as men already dead. And you, unknown finder and reader of this last testament of a dying man, if you be not Grimshaw himself, will you do me the last favor that even the condemned of the scaffold may ask? A small thing—merely to inform Miss Millicent Armbruster of 299 Wallace Avenue, Buffalo, that John Doherty is indeed dead.

Then put the police on the trail. The officers will no doubt be skeptical—ask them to make an examination of the coffin that supposedly contains the remains of Arthur Kaye.

I may as well start my story at the beginning, lest I be taken for one of the sad souls that infest this place, merely maundering under a delusion of persecution. I have no such mania; neither am I one of the dipsomaniacs and drug-fiends kept here for "cures;" strangely ironic word. My name is John Doherty; I am a graduate of Hamilton College, class of '16, a member of the Theta Alpha fraternity, and a detective by profession. I was led into the business by a certain

taste for romance and a physical development that caused me to become a member of most of the athletic teams at college.

I had been working for the Pinkerton agency for some time when they sent me as additional guard with a money shipment from Buffalo to Philadelphia. The messenger in charge of it was suspected of double-dealing. It was essential that extra protection be provided, and I was locked with him in the baggage car. The journey was a long one, the motion of the train soporific. I suppose I dozed; I was weakened by a flicker of motion as the messenger drew his gun, and we both fired at practically the same moment. My bullet killed him; his just grazed my skull, rendering me unconscious.

When I had recovered from the injury, I found some difficulty in concentrating enough attention on my work to do it properly, and my employers, as a matter of gratitude, decided to send me to Dr. Grimshaw's Sanitarium, which had already achieved a considerable reputation through the remarkable success of the doctor in handling just such cases.

I was received with extreme courtesy, subjected to a searching series of inquiries as to my tastes, habits and past life, and then given a series of tests that were readily recognizable as modified Binet-Simon examinations.

It seemed rather unnecessary, as a man with a college diploma is supposed to be beyond that sort of thing, I fancy, but I made no comment, imagining that Dr. Grimshaw knew his business. He did—to my infinite cost.

At the sanitarium I was given a pleasant room and very little by way of occupation. I was kept in at all times save during meals and for a short period in the afternoon, when all the patients were taken for exercise to a large park or garden, with a small stream running through it. During this period I encountered Arthur Kaye, a large man with a high forehead, who was under treatment for dipsomania; a man named Kraicki, a decayed Polish aristocrat of a sort who was troubled apparently with a chronic weak-mindedness; Sherman, the interne in charge of our wing, to whom I felt considerably drawn by common tastes in literature and art.

There was little to do in the park but to sit and talk with these three. We formed a more or less self-sustaining group, somewhat separated from the other patients and internes about us.

For a time, we attempted to amuse ourselves by playing bridge, but this resource proved futile. Kraicki was totally incapable of keeping his mind on the game, and would ask the most absurdly naive questions about

what he should do when he held four aces. Naturally, the enforced idleness began to become somewhat wearisome. I am of an intensely active temperament, and have led an active life, and I began to cudgel my brains for something to plan and accomplish.

Searching about for a rule to break in the most interesting way, I hit on the problem of the wall. At the left side of the park a high stone wall separated our bourne from that where the charity patients were confined. Sherman remarked one day that nobody but Grimshaw himself, and his leading assistant, Voyna, were allowed beyond it, and the building in which the charity patients were kept was only connected with the main body of the sanitarium by a kind of covered passage. To get over that wall and solve the mystery of the seclusion of the charity patients—that would be an enterprise worthy of accomplishment.

So one afternoon, just before we were called for the regular period of exercise, I arranged a dummy in my bed. After the exercise period, as we emerged from the dining room, a more or less disorderly group, I slipped around a corner into the operating room and waited behind the door till the attendants, who brought up the rear of the procession, had passed, then back into the dining room, and out one of the windows into the park

again. There I concealed myself in a little group of maples by the edge of the stream until darkness came. I knew the night attendant in the halls would flash his lamp through the peep-hole in the door of my room, but trusted to the dummy (as I have many times done in detective work) to deceive him.

After the lights in the building went out, I searched along the wall until I found a tree growing against it, scaled it with some little difficulty and dropped down on the other side. I found myself in another exercise yard—not so large nor so well carpeted with grass as ours, and without the stream. It was entirely shut in by a lofty wall, crowned with spikes on every side save that where I came over.

The windows of the charity patients' building were barred like ours. Thinking myself more or less of a fool and my adventure a rather paltry one, I tried the door, more to assure myself of the impossibility of entering than for any other reason. To my surprise it was unlocked. In the lower hall, there was a single dim light, but the building was silent save for a subdued moaning from somewhere upstairs. The maniacs who formed Dr. Grimshaw's more serious cases were usually making some noise of that sort, so I gave the matter no thought.

I was about to try the upper floor to see what I could observe

through the peep-holes, when I heard the grating of a key in the lock at the end of the covered passage. The outer door was too far away to be attempted with any prospect of success. I must find concealment, and quickly. Fortunately a large clothes hamper stood in the hall. Into it I leaped, and by the grace of the gods, found it empty save for a couple of towels. Through its sides I could get a somewhat imperfect view of the hall, and I saw that the newcomers were three in number—Grimshaw, Voyna and a boy of about twelve, I should judge.

They passed me so closely that their clothes brushed my place of concealment, and they turned on the light in the room by whose door the hamper stood. I was unable to see what they were doing, but Grimshaw's voice rose sharp and clear:

"You'd better be reasonable and take your medicine. It will relieve the pain."

A second voice replied, "But I won't take it, I tell you. I know what it is, it's dope. You can do what you like; you made a midget out of me, but you ain't going to make no dope fiend out of me."

The voice was neither Grimshaw's nor Voyna's; I had heard both often enough. It must therefore belong to the boy, and then the startling connotation of the speech struck me—it was no boy

at all but a dwarf or midget.

"You won't take it, eh?" said Grimshaw, with a kind of suppressed fury in his voice, "I'll show you!" and I heard the sound of a blow.

"No I won't," said the voice, rising near tears.

"Wait a minute," (this was Voyna speaking) "That's not the way, Grimshaw. You can't bully these Americans. Show him how much he will gain by it. Look here—you take the medicine the doctor is good enough to prescribe for you, and in a short time you will not only be well enough to be discharged, but we will find you a position in which you will make more money than you ever saw before."

"You go to hell," said the third voice (it had a singularly boyish timbre that touched me). "I won't take your dope and won't peddle your dope. Look at Tony Gabbotta. He's peddling dope—" his speech was broken by the sound of another blow, and somewhere, one of the maniac patients began to shout.

"Shut the door, will you, Ben?" said Grimshaw, and that was the last I heard.

My muscles were cramped by the confinement, but I lost no time in escaping from the hamper and the building. I wondered whether they had been giving me drugs in my food; how many of the sanitarium's employees were in on this business; and

what lay behind all these sinister manifestations. "You made a mid-get out of me"—what could it mean. I judged, however, that Sherman was honest enough, else he would have been admitted to whatever grisly secrets the charity building held. As to habit-forming drugs in our food, I was not so sure, but it didn't look like it, if they had to coerce the dwarf into taking the dope. And then the whole thing might be the result of a maniac's imagination. I had no guarantee the dwarf was sane.

Nevertheless, I slept beneath the trees that night. I feared that I might run into Grimshaw or Voyna in the halls, and if they were actually engaged in any such shady business as it seemed, such an encounter would be dangerous to the last degree. In the morning I entered by the same way I had left the building, hid in the operating room again, and joined the crowd at breakfast, after which I went to my room and destroyed the dummy. Just what to do was a problem, but I reasoned that Sherman would tell me better than anybody else what lay behind it, for even if he were not involved, he could add much corroborative information to what knowledge of the events I had. If he should prove one of the gang, then I must trust to strength and speed to escape.

That afternoon, during the ex-

ercise period, I told him the whole story. Kaye and Kraicki hung around and heard it too—somehow I couldn't seem to get rid of them.

"My God!" said Sherman, when I had finished, "So that's why . . ." and he stopped.

"That's why what?" I asked.

"Why no one but Voyna is allowed in the charity wing or on the third floor of this building," he said. "I always thought it was queer."

"But are you sure they're not putting drugs in our food?" I asked.

He gave a little laugh. "Hardly possible," he said. "There are too many people here and too many visitors. No, that would be crude. Moreover, there are too many internes here. Someone would be sure to notice the taste. It is very characteristic."

That was a relief, at all events. As to the question of whether Grimshaw and Voyna were actually engaged in the drug traffic, Serman seemed not quite certain, but judged that the best procedure would be to certify me cured, get me out and let me return with search warrants and police and check up on that mysterious charity ward. Leaving the problem at that point, we went to dinner.

The table was unusually quiet that night, and I imagine it must have grated on Kraicki's rather frayed nerves. At all events, before any of us could check him,

he hysterically burst out with:

"I know what's the matter. They're all mad at you, Dr. Grimshaw, because you peddle dope." I slid a plate to the floor, where it broke with a crash, but it was too late—my action only served to emphasize the indiscretion of the speech. Grimshaw darted a sudden look at us, and making some excuse, left the table. Trouble was in the air.

After the meal, the doctor summoned Kraicki to his office. I knew things would very likely be stirring that night, so I did not even bother to undress; merely turned out my light, and waited by the door for what was coming.

Sure enough, along about one o'clock, the door creaked slowly open, and a hand holding a flashlight was extended through the aperture. I snatched the wrist, pulling the holder clear in and off balance with my left hand, at the same time striking out with all my force with the other hand. My blow struck full in the intruder's face and he went down as though pole-axed. But Grimshaw had been forearmed. As the first man went down, a second gripped me by the knees, and when I bent to care for him, a third leaped on my back. I put up a good battle, but they were too many for me. They got me down and strapped tight, and not till then did someone turn on the light. I saw Grimshaw standing over me, dabbing a

bloodied mouth with his handkerchief.

"So!" he said, and I could not but admire the man's calmness. "You have delusions of persecution. You imagine I am trying to give you and other patients cocaine. I am afraid my treatment has not been altogether successful in your case. You will have to take another treatment—a long one, Mr. Doherty." He looked incredibly benignant. I began to speak.

"Come, come, don't excite yourself. I'm going to give you something to quiet your nerves," he said, and flashed out a hypodermic with which he proceeded to give me an injection.

I lost consciousness under the effects of the drug, and when I recovered it was morning. I woke in a different room; it must have been on the third floor, the forbidden floor, for I could see the tops of trees beyond the barred window.

I was kept there for a long time; just how long I am uncertain for I lost all count of the hours. During most of the period I was in a straight-jacket, and once I was operated on, somewhere at the front of the skull, for I recollect my head being held firmly in a plaster cast after the operation, and an infinite feeling of nausea as the effect of the anaesthetic wore off.

Every day a rough looking chap fed me from a spoon, and every

night Grimshaw returned to give me another hypodermic injection. I felt terribly ill and depressed all the time. In the morning I would wake with a blinding headache that would last out the day, leaving me weak as a kitten. I began to develop hallucinations, too. The room seemed to grow perceptibly in size, and the strait jacket became looser.

One day, when I felt better than usual, I made an attempt to wriggle out of the now thoroughly loosened straight-jacket. It succeeded, and I lay still on the bed in a mood of profound self-congratulation. When Grimshaw entered I would rise and strike him to the floor—a poor revenge, but better than none. And there was always the chance of getting past the opened door, out and away.

But all my dreams came to nothing. I was so weakened by long confinement and pain that he handled me as though I were a child—and here, again, I noted a curious thing. He seemed at least a head taller than I—and I am a six-footer. How could that be? Drugs were the only explanation I could fit to it at the time.

The period succeeding this futile attempt to escape is all a haze for me, shot by macabre impressions. I remember once being taken out on the balcony for air; and once imagining that I saw Kayne on the next balcony,

muffled in a straight jacket as I was. But there could be no certainty, and the muffled figure did not speak. And the dreams!—the dreams! I imagined myself as light as a feather. Great giants wandered about my room, with huge weapons in their hands; hideous creatures.

My first clear consciousness was when Grimshaw told us all about it. One night the evening meal was not followed by the usual injection and the morning brought the first surcease from pain in—God alone knows how long. I woke with my eyes on a ceiling that seemed miles overhead, and when I looked at the foot of the bed it appeared to have retreated to an infinite distance. The room was gigantic.

Grimshaw came in a moment later. He carried a bundle in his arms, and to my wondering eyes, he looked fifteen feet tall. He came right over to the bed, and deposited his bundle there, and with infinite astonishment, I saw it was Arthur Kaye, that big man with the high forehead, yet small enough to be carried like a baby by a Dr. Grimshaw grown titanic in size. A few moments later the doctor returned with another bundle and then a third—and they contained Sherman and Kraicki, as the first had contained Kaye.

He looked down at us with a kindly smile for a moment, and then began to shout. His voice was so extremely loud and deep

that I had no little difficulty in understanding what he was saying, but I set it down as nearly as possible:

"Allow me to congratulate you four gentlemen. You are the subjects of a classical experiment—one that will undoubtedly place me in the front rank of the world's endocrinologists, and will hand your names down to posterity.

"You, Dr. Sherman, will have already understood the nature of the experiment I have performed. To the rest I must offer a few words of explanation, suitable to their somewhat limited intelligences. There are certain glands thyroid, parathyroid and pituitary glands. They are known as the ductless glands and have no obvious function. But it has been discovered that if the pituitary or thyroid glands of a young animal, say a sheep or dog, are destroyed, the animal will be a dwarf; in other words, these glands in some way unknown to most scientists, control the growth of the animal.

"Investigation has also shown that an injured pituitary or thyroid gland in the human individual produces equally curious results—giants, seven-footers seen in circuses, being the product of insufficient gland activity. Even in adults these glands are known to produce certain effects. Dr. Haussler has recorded how an abnormally active pituitary gland cause a man's fingers to become

short, wide and stubby, long after he was fully grown.

"These endocrine glands cause their changes by releasing certain substances into the blood stream, among them being various enzymes or yeasts, which by a complicated series of chemical reactions bring about the changes indicated. I have investigated over three hundred cases of indicated. I have given my life to the investigation of these glands and their enzymes. It will gratify you, Dr. Sherman, to know that I have investigated over three hundred cases of dwarfism and giantism, making elaborate blood and X-ray examinations. In time I became convinced that a certain enzyme, which I call "Theta" was responsible for all known cases of dwarfism. I have isolated enzyme theta and found that a normally active pituitary body secretes and releases a counteracting enzyme to it, thus preserving the balance of the body. It then became a question whether I produce artificial dwarfism by damaging the pituitary body and introducing enzyme theta by subcutaneous injection.

"Animals did not give satisfactory results. Hence I was led to establish the charity ward of this sanitarium and, for experiment, secured a number of feeble-minded human specimens, whose absence would not be noted. I have succeeded in producing mid-gets as small as two feet ten

inches in height by this means. Unfortunately it was impossible to release them into the world as normal midgets, the civilization of this country being so backward that scientific investigation of a man as an animal is actually punishable. Therefore I have introduced these midgets to the delights of cocaine and maintain my control over them by furnishing their supply of it.

"But with you gentlemen I decided to conduct the experiment on an altogether higher plane. You are already so familiar with the details of my business that I could not release you, even as cocaine addicts. Consequently, I have decided, by carefully graduating the dosage of enzyme theta, to produce in you a series of hyper-midgets. In the cases of the charitypatients death always resulted from such attempts; but they were mostly in poor physical condition and their mental weaknesses were such that cerebral collapse supervened. You however, are not feeble-minded, with the possible exception of Mr. Kraicki, you are in excellent condition. You show none of the deleterious effects that have ruined my experiments with the charity patients, and I shall proceed until I have reduced you to a size at which you will no longer be dangerous or until your death puts an end to the experiment.

"Your chances of survival are

greatly heightened by the fact that I have produced artificially a second enzyme, which I call enzyme omicron, to supplement enzyme theta. Both these substances are secreted in small quantities by the hitherto little investigated gland located—

(At this point occurs the distressing lacuna in the manuscript, a fact doubly unfortunate, since it deprives us of the opportunity for a scientific check on the extraordinary statements of Dr. Grimshaw as reported by Jack Doherty. The other details of Mr. Doherty's tale have been in part confirmed by subsequent research. A Pinkerton detective bearing the name of Dougherty was committed to the Grimshaw sanitarium in the early part of 1922. There was also a man named Arthur Kaye there at the same time, under treatment for dipsomania. The names of Kraicki and Dr. Sherman have not been traced. The deaths of Doherty and Kaye were reported by Dr. Grimshaw at widely separated intervals; that of Doherty in 1923, that of Kaye not till March 1924. A Miss Millicent Armbruster did live at the address given by Doherty; the city records show she married a man named Kellett in October 1922, after which all trace of her is lost.

When the story begins again, with the contents of the last capsule, it is evident that the experiment has entered its final

phase and that Dr. Grimshaw had to a degree lost interest in his four patients. It begins as it broke off—abruptly in the middle of a sentence.)

—stumbled over a grass root and we had to stop for him. The grass was forest-like in its density, and if he had not waited I doubt if we would have found him again. The beetle escaped, and thus we missed a meal that night also. The gardens was still too far away to be made in the dark and Kraicki was too done up to go much further; moreover once at the garden our problem would only be transferred, for we would have many wanderings to make before discovering anything small enough for our feeble efforts.

So we camped in a tuft of grass like Malays, taking turns at watching through the night. It was bitterly cold; the piece of bandage was so rough it rasped the skin and the three asleep had to use all the silk for coverlets. Every time I blundered into one of the groass stems it would drench me with icy dew, like a shower bath.

In the morning Kraicki, always weak and unstable, became so feebly insistent on not moving before he had had food, that we fairly had to drag him along. An hour's wandering brought us to a rotting twig that promised well as fuel. We pulled some of the decaying fibres loose and burdened ourselves with them. They

would be handy to make a fire with, provided we ever found anything worth cooking over a fire. As for the method, there was always the possibility of striking a spark from a pebble with the piece of watch-spring Sherman had found the day before.

A little further along Sherman, who was then in the lead, shouted. We hurried up to find him standing over a June-bug, which was lying on its back, kicking feebly. I attached the insect with a piece of watch-spring, but it was no good. His shell defied my best efforts and I received a nasty scratch on the back from his barbed legs as I tried to slay him. Sherman suggested we turn him over and work under the wing-cases, but I was afraid he would crawl away before we could accomplish anything, and our final decision was to build a pyre over him and cook him as he lay.

Striking a spark from a stone may be easy to those who are familiar with the art; for me it was agonizing effort. When we did get our fire going, the heat excited so much activity, on the June-bug's part, that it kicked over our pile of wood and we were back where we had started. After that Kaye and I hunted up a pebble of some size, and heaving together we managed to smash the animal's head in. There were a few convulsive motions after that, but for the most part he lay still, and we managed to

get the fire going in good shape.

The meat in the legs, just where they swell out before joining the body, is the best; not unlike crab-meat to the taste. Inside the body the meat was not so thoroughly cooked and very fat besides. Kraicki was the only one who would eat it.

By the time we had finished with the June-bug it was already late afternoon. The conference we held decided against pushing on to the garden. There was a good deal of June-bug meat left, and we had before us now the problem of shelter rather than that of food. There was also the question of weapons, though I solved this to some extent by worrying loose the wing cases of the beetle and splitting them down with the watch-spring. Properly sharpened on a stone, they made not inefficient poinards; rough, but good enough to attack insects with.

Kaye, who was a bit of an antiquarian, essayed making a sling with the aid of some tough grass fibres. After considerable practice, he became quite expert with this ungainly weapon. With tiny stones for ammunition, he could knock flies off distant grass blades almost every time—an interesting but impractical feat, as after the first attempt, not one of us cared to try fly-meat again. The odor alone is enough to turn the stomach. Once he did succeed in slaying a bee, however, and we

got some valuable food from it, and about a week later, Kaye and his sling removed from our path a very grim and ferocious-looking spider that we all hesitated to approach.

Our main difficulty was clothing. Sherman offered the idea of working around toward the park where we could perhaps come by a handkerchief or something of the sort. He pointed out that the numerous trees would constitute an advantage, both in offering us ample fuel and a place to live under the roots, and there was a possibility of getting small fish out of the shallower reaches of the creek.

It took us over a week to make the long march, but when we had accomplished it, we were repaid for all our labor. At the border of the stream we found a chair that one of the internes must have left behind, and with it not only his medicine case, but a book, some writing paper and a bottle of ink.

This was treasure-trove indeed. Kaye and I hammered away at the catch of the medicine case for half an hour with the biggest stone we could lift, and finally managed to get it open. Beside various oddments of no utility to us, it contained a bottle of quinine capsules, which were just what we wanted. Once the quinine had been emptied out of them, they made ideal general carryalls. The bottle we succeeded in break-

ing, and with a sharp glass and a good deal of patience, fashioned useful tools and weapons.

I thought it would be worth while to write some kind of a record, as long as the gods had thrown the bottle of ink and the paper in our way, and with the aid of the others managed to roll the ink down to the headquarters we presently established under an arching tree-root. The paper was a wash-out, however. It was too heavy and the beetle's leg, which was perforce the only pen I had, too scratchy.

By this time it was full day, and we were running chances by going back to the things the interne had left, but the gain was worth the risk, and I made another attempt. By great good fortune the book was Brinkley's "History of Japan—India paper. With Sherman's help I got a couple of the fly-leaves loose, and he had gone off with one when I looked up and saw the menacing shape of a man in the distance—Grimshaw, I thought, though from his height and the distance, I could not be certain. Leaving the paper behind I fled.

I doubt whether I would have written this record even then but for what has happened since. We were comfortably domiciled under our root in the park, living off grasshoppers (of which there seemed an unending supply) and making preparations for the winter. Once we even caught

a mole, stabbed it to death with our glass swords, and skinned it laboriously. It furnished us both good food and clothing. Sherman developed uncanny skill with such poor needles as we could contrive, and even Kraicki contributed to the general fund of welfare by the discovery that the yellow hearts of grass stems have a delicious flavor when baked.

But three days ago there came a change. Sherman and Kraicki were out hunting together. I was in our home, trying out some darts I had made with fragments of wood and glass points, when Sherman burst in, panting with speed and very pale.

"What's the matter?" I asked, "and where's Kraicki?"

"Gone," he said. "Grimshaw's got a cat. It found us."

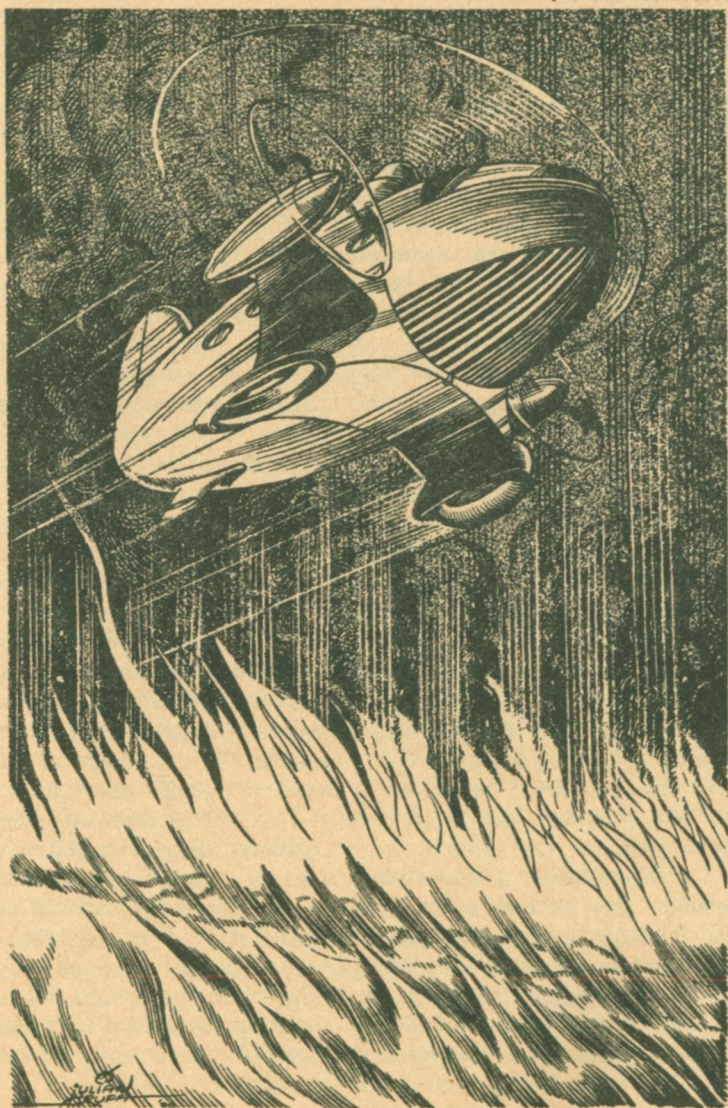
Then I saw it all.

So I am leaving this record. There is no more hope for us. All that remains is a chance, however remote, that these capsules will fall into the hands of some not too skeptical individual who will take the trouble to investigate—the shadowy chance of a delayed revenge which I shall not live to see. I only hope the cat will not get me before I can secrete these capsules in some place where they will be found. Winter is coming; we dare not hunt for fear of the animal, and our food is running short.

The End

THE FLAME FROM NOWHERE

Illustrated by JULIAN S. KRUPA



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By RANDO BINDER

Like most literary forms, sf has run into the ground its own fair share of stock plots, most of which—we're glad to say—have long been abandoned by the better writers in the field. But simply because a good idea was imitated to death doesn't necessarily mean we should ignore the best of its prototypes. This one, for example, in which atom-fire threatens the entire world, unless Dan Nelson is willing—literally—to live a lifetime in a matter of hours!

Chapter 1

An Unquenchable Fire

JUST how it started, no one seemed to know. But there it was, a raging fire. It sent most of Jed Polty's fine timber up into the flues of heaven and looked like it might take the rest of Wisconsin in its stride. Long skyscrapers of flame licked up toward the clouds, sparkling like Fourth-of-July rockets. But there wasn't much smoke. That's why it had taken so long to discover.

"Forest fire! Forest fire!"

The cry went around the countryside in a wail of terror. Men dropped whatever they were doing and hopped into cars to join the swelling procession. There were other timber patches, and farms and towns threatened, depending toward the fire.

It was a case of everyone helping for his own as well as the common good. And which way the wind would blow from time to time while the fire kept up, no one knew. A long, dry summer

just passed made everyone feel it was going to be a tough, hard struggle. Demon fire against grim, cornered humans. The battle was on.

Jed Polty, already a ruined man, marshaled one corps of men in a fight of bitter revenge against the enemy. At the south gap, where the fire converted the last of his cedar into gaunt, black skeletons, he saw his chance. For a mile facing the fire was scrub land, not very fattening to a greedy fire.

But if even *that* poor fuel were taken away. . .

His men fell to with a will. The wind was blowing right, toward the fire. The men spread over that mile in a long line and set the scrubble aflame. It started slowly, throwing up a huge, dense smoke screen. But the sharp wind whipped it up and sent it scurrying to meet the other fire. Fighting fire with fire—it was a tried and true maxim. Then the men stood back to watch.

"That'll stop you!" screamed

Jed Polty, hurling his fist at the fire that had turned him from a potentially rich man to a pauper in an hour. He stood there, shouting a string of epithets almost as scorching as the thing they personified.

"Somethin' funny about that there fire," said another man. He sent a golden stream of tobacco juice in its direction, speculatively. "It's a-comin' right into the teeth of the wind without slackening up any, far as I can notice."

It was true. They all could see that. A normal fire, changing from rich forest fuel to skimpy bush-scrub, especially against a wind, would peter out, or at least slow down. This one didn't even slow down. Its hundred-foot flames continued to probe the sky, like searchlight beacons. The flame-streamers did not even bend noticeably with the breeze.

The two fires met, intermingled. The watchers perked up. Now the other fire would have to stop. There was a hundred-yard stretch of seared, barren ground before it. No fire known to man could find anything left to burn in that black belt.

As though they had been puppets jerked by one string, all the men started. A gasp came from their dry throats.

The wall of fire did not stop!

Astonished, frightened faces looked at one another. The hair

of every man there stood on end, stiff as wire. An invisible silent wind seemed to buffet them from the direction of the undiminished fire. A strange, awful wind separate from the one that blew the air at their backs.

"That's the d-devil's own fire! J-Jed, come on—"

Jed Polty shook off a hand. He stood there and stared, thunderstruck. He was vaguely aware of men scurrying back, frightened away. Dimly he heard car motors start and roar away. A voice called to him frantically. Jed ignored it. He rubbed a gnarled hand over the three-day stubble on his chin, bewilderedly.

Alone, Jed Polty began walking toward the fire-wall. A deep blind anger filled him. He must find that scientist chap and wring his fool neck, for undoubtedly he had started the fire. Jed should never have let him use the cabin deep in his timber. Wring his neck. Jed's hands were doing that already. His face was twisted.

The mysterious wind tore at him. His eyes smarted and his throat became parched. His hair stood out stiffly from his head. At each step tiny fingers of electricity played about his shoes from the ground underfoot.

Strangest of all, however, there was little heat from the fire, as he drew close. And no smoke. It seemed almost like a phosphorescence, cool and dull. Against

the sunlit sky, the tall ray-like flames were unmistakably there, burning up from the ground, crawling forward inch by inch.

Wring his neck, the blasted fool! Jed Polty walked into the curtain of flame. He didn't burn up on the spot. His dazed mind took no account of that. But something did work inside of him, in his individual cells, making him feel tired and worn.

He wandered blindly in the flame-curtain, seeking the cause of his ruination . . . Jed Polty died hours later, an old, old man.

In the meantime, to the west where another patch of valuable timber was threatened, men labored like slaves to save it. Colonel Dale, owner, alternately cursed and bribed his crew. If his timber went, so would his palatial home and all his life of comfort. His wife and children would be heart-broken.

"Ten dollars to every man here—ten dollars!" he stormed, prancing up and down the line on his great horse. "Get those trees down! You, Hank—stop leaning on that axe! Damn you for a lazy, good-for-nothing—" The rest was vituperation.

The men toiled in the hot sun, sweaty and begrimed. For twenty feet back from the creek, every tree was felled and dragged away by teams of horses. The creek was twenty feet wide. The fire wouldn't be able to jump that

natural gap if its fuel on the other side was out of reach.

The colonel's head constantly jerked around to watch the advance of the fire. It was uncomfortably close, but by a narrow margin they would win.

But every time the colonel looked, a puzzled, worried frown creased his brow. Somehow, the fire was the queerest one he'd ever seen or heard of. It made no smoke, even with its green timber fuel. No heat could be felt from it. And he noticed the peculiar electric tenseness that pulsed in the air.

Colonel Dale was most startled when he drew out his watch and saw the radium-dial glowing like a beacon. He tried to remember what he had learned in college about such things, but that was too many years ago. But why should he worry? Water would stop it. Water always put out fires.

Finally the timber patch had been cleared off the bank of the creek. All was set. The men lined up along the creek, ready to beat out any small flames that might fly across and try to start on their side.

"Good work, men!" yelled Colonel Dale. "That fire won't get into my land."

He waited confidently. The towering wall of fire loomed up on the opposite side. Like a fiery giant on a rampage, it laid waste

the forest. Colonel Dale frowned again. Somehow, it didn't look like burning. No ordinary burning. Trees seemed to shrink in its path, as though something were sucked out of them that went streaming off into the sky.

And it was such a silent thing. It had none of the majestic roar and crackle of most forest fires. There was only a low, hissing drone, like a transformer. Colonel Dale thought of that simile because there was a distinct electrical quality to the fire. He had already glanced around to see everyone's hair on end. His own crackled when he tried to brush it down.

The Niagara of flames pushed to the edge of the creek.

"That's as far as you get!" muttered Colonel Dale.

Then his eyes began to pop out of their fat folds of flesh like marbles in putty. *The flames simply began burning on the water!* The unbroken wall advanced across the creek like a marching army, driving them back.

Men screamed. They fled in a stampede. Colonel Dale's horse bolted, throwing him against a tree and breaking his neck. His dead body lay there as the demon of fire crawled up the bank—his bank—and reached for his timber.

Timber that hadn't been saved by a creek-full of water before it.

It was the same all that day,

on all sides of the fire. But *was* it fire? Strange stories began to drift in around the countryside. Eye-witnesses swore that a newly plowed field, in which you couldn't start a fire with a blowtorch, had burned just as though it were paper.

Nothing could stop it, apparently. Creeks, backfires, sand-ditches — nothing. Unnameable fears haunted the area surrounding the fire, toward which the flames were spreading. What ghastly thing was happening? Why did flames that had consumed their natural materials fail to die away in fuel starvation? What incredible ultra-fire could feed itself on water, on moist ground, on sandy soil, as though they were inflammable?

Late that evening it rained. Rained hard. A dubious prayer of thanks rose from thousands of hearts. Rain like that could always put out forest fires. But men who had gone to see came back gaunt-eyed and shaking. The terrible fire had not gone out.

In fact, the flames had risen higher with the rain, greedily licking up the drops as though they were gasoline!

The next morning it was in the papers, ridiculed as the Fire-That-Could-Not-Be-Put-Out. By evening, after reporters had rushed to the scene and observed, it became the nation's number one item. Even the latest big-

time murder in New York's vice ring could not compete with it.

But the world of science, not to be misled by common news-mongery, quietly ignored the astounding reports. Officials pigeon-holed a frantic plea from the county sheriff of that region for up-to-date fire-fighting apparatus from the great western forest reserves. The latter were too important to leave unguarded for a moment because of a puny little fire in Wisconsin.

And all the while the mysterious pseudo-fire continued its course, like a Juggernaut, laughing at man's efforts to stem its inexorable spread.

Chapter II

Dan Nelson Seeks the Answer

Dan Nelson pulled up in Tipler, Wisconsin, to find that little town in a big-town furor. Cars were leaving, packed to the gills with family belongings. Other cars were arriving with men enlisting in the fight against the fire. Typewriters clacked from the open windows of the main hotel, where newsmen rattled off their exciting stories.

Tipler was the nearest town to the fire. It would be the first to be engulfed if they couldn't stop it. A glow in the sky, barely two miles north, was the cynosure of worried eyes and constantly craning necks.

Nelson hopped out of his car and took a room in the hotel, the last one available. Then he went outside and listened to the buzz of conversation among loiterers. What he heard convinced him, against his will, that the letter he had was more significant than he liked to think.

He went up to his room to read it again. It had been mailed from Tipler a week before. Its pages were in the crabbed handwriting of Dr. Anson Berg. For the past three years, during his summer vacations from the university, Dan Nelson had been Dr. Berg's assistant in his private researches.

"Dear Dan," it began. "Northern Wisconsin is God's own country, but of course I did not come here, last year, to enjoy the climate or scenery. I came here for secondarily in my research, and secondarily to keep from blowing up half of Chicago.

"My cosmic-ray photon collector is a wonderful success. I'm proud of it. It is, as you remember it in cruder form, a large glass bulb coated with pitch and supported in a magnetic field. The magnetic field refracts the entering radiation enough to make the photons rebound from the neutron-screen embedded in the pitch covering. I won't go into full detail. You know most of it.

"At any rate, my dream has come true. The cosmic-rays rain

down as a veritable flood of energy from interstellar depths. I've been collecting cosmic-ray photons for eight months, in my glass bulb. I have close to a milligram of them. You recall, of course, that a *pound* of pure energy—say in the form of infrared waves—is enough to melt thirty million tons of rock.

"In actual terms, my milligram of cosmic-ray photons is equal to more than *one billion horsepower*

"To put it a little more poetically, I've tapped the power reservoir of the universe. It was August Piccard who said, 'I advise all of you who own shares in coal mines to sell your shares in them the day before the liberated energy from cosmic-rays is harnessed.' That's good advice, Dan! I really believe this can develop into a commercial process antedating Niagara and Boulder Dam, etc.

"I had a graphic example of the amount of power in my hands, a week ago. I drew off a mere trifle of my milligram of photons and sealed it into a small capsule. My idea was to convert it into electricity. I left the capsule on the table in the shed while I went back for something in the cabin. It probably rolled off—an explosion blew one side of the shed out and turned my table into kindling wood. I never found a piece of the Gieger-Mul-

ler apparatus I'd been using.

"Sometimes I stare uncomfortably at that glass bulb. It holds a dozen Boulder Dams and Niagaras in its dark interior. I have the terrible sensation of sitting on top of a volcano. Perhaps I've let my enthusiasm run away with me. I collected and hoarded the energy like a miser with his gold.

"I think tomorrow I'll drain most of that energy out of the bulb. I don't need so much for further tests. I can ground the power.

"But anyway, it's been a success. As soon as I find a way to convert that raw energy into electricity, I'll patent the process and see what comes of it.

"Au revoir, Danny. I'll expect you here next month."

Dan Nelson looked up from the letter, his face awed.

"One billion horsepower of raw energy!" he said aloud. "Like a mountain of TNT in a hat. It must have exploded, or escaped, setting fire to the cabin and forest—yes, but what *kind* of fire?"

He dashed out and leaped into his car. A half hour later he had reached the nearest wall of the fire, where it was ferociously eating its way across a boulder-strewn, sandy stretch of poor land. Fantastic, supernal flame reared over his head, feeding on nothing that ordinary fire would

have touched. No heat, no smoke, no light, and it gave off electrons which were making his hair stand on end.

Nelson stared, puzzled, trying to figure it out. Suddenly an abysmal fright squeezed his heart. He thumped the side of his head.

That ground wasn't burning— it was *disintegrating*

Nelson's mind reeled.

Dr. Berg had been a fool for playing around with cosmic-rays without due precautions. He should have foreseen! Cosmic-rays had always been streaming down on earth, disintegrating atoms, but only in a minor degree. Earth could withstand that mild bombardment for countless ages. But Berg's concentrated charge of cosmic-ray photons had started off a true holocaust. It was like the difference between the slow rotting of wood and its rapid burning, which were the same process actually. This fire from the stars would destroy earth long before its time!

"What have you done?" Nelson whispered, as though accusing the ghost of the dead scientist. "God — you've destroyed the world!"

Nelson's thoughts horrified him, as they charged on. It was like a nightmare that he couldn't wake from.

The circle of atom-fire would spread, consuming all in its path. Mountains, trees, rivers—even

the oceans would burn, for they were its fuel too. Cities would crumble, vanish—all life would be destroyed. But the atom-fire would continue greedily, sucking down the air to burn it. Then it would eat inward, like a cancer, to the center of earth, till the world he knew was nothing but a cinder. No not even a cinder—there would be nothing left—nothing—

"Hey, are you deaf?"

A tall, lanky figure grasped Nelson's arm, startling him.

"I'm Sheriff Mack. I don't know who you are but I'm conscripting every man I see. Come along. We're going to try to save Tippler."

Nelson laughed bitterly in the bedraggled, sweaty face.

"The town? Is that all you're worried about?" he asked. "Given enough time, this atom-fire is going to engulf *the entire world.*"

"What?" The sheriff peered closely at Nelson, visibly impressed by his manner and appearance.

"Atom-fire? What do you mean?"

Nelson tried to explain.

"This is a disintegration process, set off by cosmic-ray photons, like a spark sets off gasoline. Matter has an ignition-point, that starts its disintegration, just as combustible fuels have. And once started, that atomic-fire continues, for all

the world, and everything in it, is its fuel! Anything made of atoms and molecules. And that includes anything you can name on earth. This isn't a local matter any more. This is a menace to the whole world!"

"Yeah?" Behind the sheriff's drawl was stark fear. He had seen enough of the fire to know it wasn't anything normal. "Then we'll have to find a way to stop it."

"I don't know if there *is* a way!" Dan Nelson found himself croaking.

Sheriff Mack looked at him queerly.

"There's got to be!" he ground out. "We're going to try to choke it off with fresh concrete—a big wall of it—"

Nelson threw up his hands as he left. He went back to his car and headed for town. He tried to think of something to do. Notify the authorities of his conjecture? Try to get scientific minds on the job? *But would there be time?*

Nelson sweated, but from more than the heat. In a way, he felt personally responsible, for he had helped Dr. Berg develop the bulb in its earlier stages. But aside from that, it was his problem anyway, as it would be the problem of any other human being who knew what the fire was and what its continued depredation meant.

He neared the town without having decided on any definite course of action. He arrived just in time to see a gyrocopter plane settling at the outskirts. On impulse, Nelson turned toward it. Ordinarily its arrival would have brought the whole town out. Now, it was unnoticed except by a few barefooted kids.

Nelson drove close to the plane.

"Cameraman?" he inquired of the short, stocky man who clambered out of its rear cockpit.

"News service," nodded the pilot. "I'm here to take pix of the fire. Say, what's all this about they can't put it out? Whatsamatter with these hillbillies?"

Nelson took out his wallet and waved a ten-dollar bill.

"Take me up with you?"

"Against the rules, Buddy," returned the cameraman, taking the bill and grinning. "But I've got to have some eats first, and gas for the buggy. I drove it all the way from Chicago."

Chapter III A Lifetime in a Day

An hour later, Nelson and the cameraman were circling high above the fire area. Nelson peered down anxiously. Just how fast was the atom-fire spreading? He saw that it had already eaten out a circle roughly five miles in diameter. Some rapid mental calculation convinced him that its

diameter increased at an unchangeable rate. Unlike a true forest fire, it was not subject to the vagaries of wind and available fuel.

Therefore, the larger it got, the more rapidly it consumed equal areas. In a few days—weeks at the most—it would sweep out like an express train, to swallow the earth whole in its fiery maw. Nelson shuddered.

But another thing engaged his attention and made him thoughtful. The fire itself was actually only a thin ring, perhaps a hundred feet thick. All the center area was free of flame. It was hideously black and seared looking—lifeless, chilling.

But it wasn't burning any more! Nelson's pulses throbbed with sudden hope. Then it wasn't a complete disintegration! There was ash from the atom-fire—black ash that didn't burn any more.

He twisted around in his cockpit and yelled across to the pilot above the rumbling swish of the gyrocopter blades.

"Hey, Reed—how would you like to make history?"

"Make who?" yelled back the pilot.

"History! History!" screamed Nelson. "Land down there—in the middle of the black area." At a determined shake of the pilot's head, Nelson half arose as though to force him.

"You've got to, man!" he

pleaded. "What do you want—money? A hundred dollars—"

"Dangerous!" shouted back Reed dubiously, staring at Nelson's grimly earnest face. "We might crack up—want to take a chance?"

Nelson weighed that for a second. It wasn't just his life. But if he were killed now, and nobody knew what he knew, till it was too late. . . . But it might be too late anyway, in a few more hours. If it once got out of hand, it wouldn't help for all the world to know to a man. It was a race against time and chance. He pointed down. The pilot nodded, set his lips grimly, and lowered the plane.

Fortunately, the thirty feet of landing space needed by the gyrocopter was free of dangerous rocks beneath the obscuring black blanket that lay over the ground. Nelson jumped out eagerly and picked up a handful of jet black matter that trickled as a coarse powder through his fingers. It seemed peculiarly heavy.

"Neutronic matter!" he cried jubilantly. "Neutrons stop a cosmic-ray cold, which was the way Dr. Berg captured them in the first place. And neutrons are stable enough to resist this primary disintegration too. This dead, black stuff left after the fire is composed of them. All the elements that were here before are here now, but burned

down to isotopes of neutrons.* All excess protons, electrons and other particles were freed. The energy released is enough to keep the atom-fire going, but there's no excess heat. It all adds up!"

"Yeah? Must serve some good corn-likker around these parts. Adds up to what?" The pilot kicked at the black dust with his toe.

"To this—that no reaction, living or non-living, can continue in its own waste products!"

And then, in the eyes of the cameraman, his young passenger did the queerest thing yet. He began throwing handfuls of the black powder into the cockpit of the plane, as though his life depended on it.

"Hey, what's the idea? I don't want—"

* Neutrons, technically, are close combinations of electrons and protons, being electrically neutral. Harkins has suggested that the neutron is a new kind of matter with atomic number zero. It also can be compared to double-weight hydrogen atoms, which consist of one hydrogen atom and one neutron, thereby becoming electrically stable. It has been estimated that a thimble-full of neutrons would weigh a million tons, since they do not push each other apart but lie compactly together. Therefore, it seems evident that the "neutronic matter" left as ash by this strange atom-fire, is not essentially completely neutronic in character, but more likely, neutronic isotopes of the consumed matter, that is, double-weight atoms, with a single neutron added to each atom of matter.—Ed.

"Have you a wife and children in Chicago?" Nelson demanded.

"Yeah, but what has that got to do—"

"Then you'd better help me!"

Nelson explained while he worked frantically. The pilot, a little pale, began helping.

They were both covered with soot, an hour later, when their plane rose and soared out of the ring of ultra-flame. Under Nelson's directions, the pilot landed it in the wide field a mile from Tipler, wherein toiling men were erecting a wall of concrete. Trucks, tools and materials from a nearby Public Works Administration project had been boldly confiscated by Sheriff Mack, for this desperate measure.

Nelson strode up to him.

"Oh, the scientist chap." Sheriff Mack's voice was cracked from shouting orders. "You said there mightn't be a way to stop that fire, but by God, we have to try, don't we?" His eyes, reflecting a gaunt doom, gazed off at the approaching flame-curtain, a half-mile away.

"We have to try, don't we?" he repeated doggedly.

"But this isn't the way!" cried Nelson. "I told you—"

The sheriff's face turned livid. "Get away from here!" he snarled. "What do you want me to do, sit down and snivel?"

"No, but I think there is a

way!" Rapidly Nelson told of the neutronic ash.

"Black powder — neutrons?" echoed the sheriff. "Sounds too much like a science lecture, young fella—"

Nelson grabbed his arm tensely. "If they couldn't put out a normal forest fire in any other way, they'd choke it off with ashes, too, wouldn't they? We've got to *try* it, anyway."

"You're right!"

The sheriff began barking orders. His men continued work on the concrete buttress, but he himself accompanied Nelson in a truck, after they had transferred the black powder from the plane into a bushel basket. They headed for the tall flames that cast a lurid violet light over the surroundings.

They stopped a hundred feet away, and ran up with the bushel basket between them. They hastily made a ridge of the powder ten feet from the straight, sheer edge of heatless fire that crept forward steadily over sterile sandy soil. Then they fell back to watch, with electrical tingling all over their skins.

The supernal atom-fire burned its way across the ten feet, met the neutronic powder — *and stopped!* With an audible hiss, the flames that met the powder were quenched.

"It works!" croaked Sheriff Mack. "Thank God—it works!

Now we have to get all of that powder we can. I'll phone the governor—send for airplanes, lots of them—"

"No!" Nelson shook his head. "It would take too long that way. There's more than fifteen miles of fire-edge to bank with these ashes. The fire-edge is enlarging at a terrific rate. There's only one way to beat time at this game—by going through the fire-wall with trucks."

Sheriff Mack gasped. "But the trucks will burn—their gasoline—the men—"

"Maybe not!" Nelson hissed. "There's only a hundred feet or so of actual flame. And it isn't hot flame. If trucks go through fast enough, like circus dare-devils through hoops of fire, maybe—"

"Maybe!" echoed the officer hopelessly.

"There is only one way to find out!" Nelson was already running back to their truck.

"Hey, you damn fool—"

The sheriff had to jump out of the way as the truck came charging down on the fire. Nelson sat grimly at the wheel. He had driven trucks one summer vacation to earn tuition fees. But he was driving one now for a far more important reason. Just before he came to the fire-wall, he crossed his fingers. Then suddenly all the universe around

him was engulfed by fire.

The truck tore on madly. With in the strange, cold curtain of ultra-flame, everything looked unreal, ghostlike, as a world viewed through swirling water. Nelson's only physical sensation was one of lassitude. He almost felt like stopping and lying down to rest, as though he were very tired. But his foot continued to press the gas-throttle to the floor-board. The truck bounced over rocks and ruts, nearly jerking out of his hands at times.

It seemed to take an age to get through the flame-curtain, though Nelson knew it was only seconds. Then suddenly clear sky greeted him. He stopped the truck well beyond the flames and looked himself and the machine over. There was no sign of burning, or anything akin to burning, anywhere. With a shout of triumph, he leaped back into the driver's seat, turned the truck, and roared back through the flames.

Sheriff Mack peered closely at him when he stepped out, on the other side. "Won through all right, I see, but you look older, son! It aged you—!"

"Never mind that!" snapped Nelson. "I want a dumping-truck now, the kind that tips its load at the back by a control in the driver's seat. I'll build a roadway of black ash through the flame-ring. A roadway free of flame. You're going to get all your

trucks going then, in and out of the flame-ring, along that roadway. Men must be stationed on the other side to dig and fill the trucks. It's going to be a big job, but we can win if we hurry—" He pulled the sheriff in the truck and shifted gears.

They were back in a few minutes, at the ultra-flame's edge, with a large but fast dumping truck. Nelson was the driver. In the back were ten men, grim-faced volunteers, carrying shovels. Nelson pushed Sheriff Mack out of the driver's cabin stopping at the flame-wall.

"You're needed here, to direct operations later," said Nelson over the sheriff's protest. "No need for you to take chances—"

Then the large truck roared into the curtain of pseudo-fire. Sheriff Mack watched it disappear like a ship lost in a tempest of swirling light. He waited, stepping back a little as the flame-wall crept forward in its relentless way. Would the young college student's plan work? Or was there some unforeseen hitch to it? Sheriff Mack was troubled by the doubts that would plague any man facing that terrible, cryptic ultra-fire that had never been seen on earth before.

The truck flung itself out of the flames a half hour later with its load-carrier tipped. The last trickles of black powder were sliding from the rear end. The

truck stopped and Nelson leaped out. He pointed back into the flame-curtain.

"See that dark lane through the atom-fire?" he said in a hoarse voice of triumph. "I've laid down a thin bed of neutron-ash. In two or three more trips I'll have a flame-free lane wide enough for trucks to pass side by side!"

"Good work!" returned the sheriff. "I'll get several other dumping trucks on the job and make a roadway wide enough for ten trucks to pass—"

He started to turn but Nelson caught his arm. "No, sheriff. Let me do it alone!"

The officer stared. "but—"

"Alone, do you hear?" Nelson almost shouted. Without waiting for an answer, he leaped into the truck and it rumbled back into the strange, cold flames.

Sheriff Mack pursed his lips in perplexity. He knew young Nelson hadn't suddenly gone mad. Nor was he the type to try grabbing a larger share of the glory. There was some deep, earnest reason for his queer request. But exactly what?

The sheriff broke from his thoughts and headed for his camp of operations at a lope. He must begin organizing the fleet of trucks for the big task ahead of them when the roadway was completed.

When Nelson reappeared from the flames the third time, a line

of trucks waited to plunge down the roadway he had made. It was like a black gash through the towering fire-wall. At a nod from Nelson, Sheriff Mack waved an arm and the caravan of trucks rolled along the flame-free pathway to the supply of neutron-ash beyond.

"You look tired—better take a rest," the sheriff said, putting a hand on the young man's shoulder. He added, half dazedly, "And you look older again—"

"I'm all right," Nelson said gruffly. "Can't rest now—must keep making the roadway wider so the trucks won't be delayed." His own truck was moving before the last word was out.

Hour after hour flying vehicles shuttled back and forth. Men on the other side shoveled black dirt at a furious tempo. Men on the flame-threatened side piled it up in a continuous ridge. They cheered as they saw the ultra-flame quenched. Then they went to work with redoubled energy. They were seized by a fanaticism that comes to men at a time like that—in the face of an enemy that must be conquered.

Hour after hour.

Men worked as they had never worked before, through the night. The trucks began dumping their black loads all around the huge circumference of the flame belt. Cars, new and old, were volunteered, and commandeered, to

serve in place of trucks where needed.

Now and then flame seeped through a spot at which another truck-load of black dust would be dumped. Slowly the circle was being choked off . . . a menace to the world was being stifled that the world did not even realize existed.

Hour after hour.

Nelson drove his truck back and forth countless times, sleepless, driven by the same super-human will that drove them all. They were working primarily to save their farms and families. Dan Nelson could only look at it in the larger sense—saving mankind.

Now and then, Sheriff Mack would meet him. They would eye one another as two men recognizing sterling qualities in each other. But the sheriff would always peer closely then, and say the same thing, in a sort of wondering moan:

"You look older, Nelson. Every time you come back you look older—and older—"

At noon the next day, they knew they had won.

"Well, it's over!" sighed Nelson, slumping down on the

running-board of his battered truck. "The atom-fire can't burn down into the ground, for its own neutron-ash chokes it out. It can't feed on air alone, for that fuel is too thin and will cool it below its ignition-point. The menace is over!"

But the sheriff was groaning. "You're an old man, Nelson! You look like an incredibly old man!"

Nelson's gaunt, wrinkled face drew up in a senile grin.

"Yes, I *am* an old man, because I went in and out of the flame-curtain many times, touched by the atom-fire. Old age is an effect of the cosmic-rays—bathing our bodies all our lives and slowly distintegrating them internally, filling them with isotopic poisons. I passed through that process in a few hours, in the bath of disintegrating flame. I lived a lifetime in there!"

He went on softly. "I realized that from the start—but it was a small price to pay."

He turned to watch as the last flickers of mysterious atom-fire licked defeatedly against a bulwark of black powder. His old man's face reflected quiet triumph.

The End

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THE COMMUTER

By PHILIP K. DICK

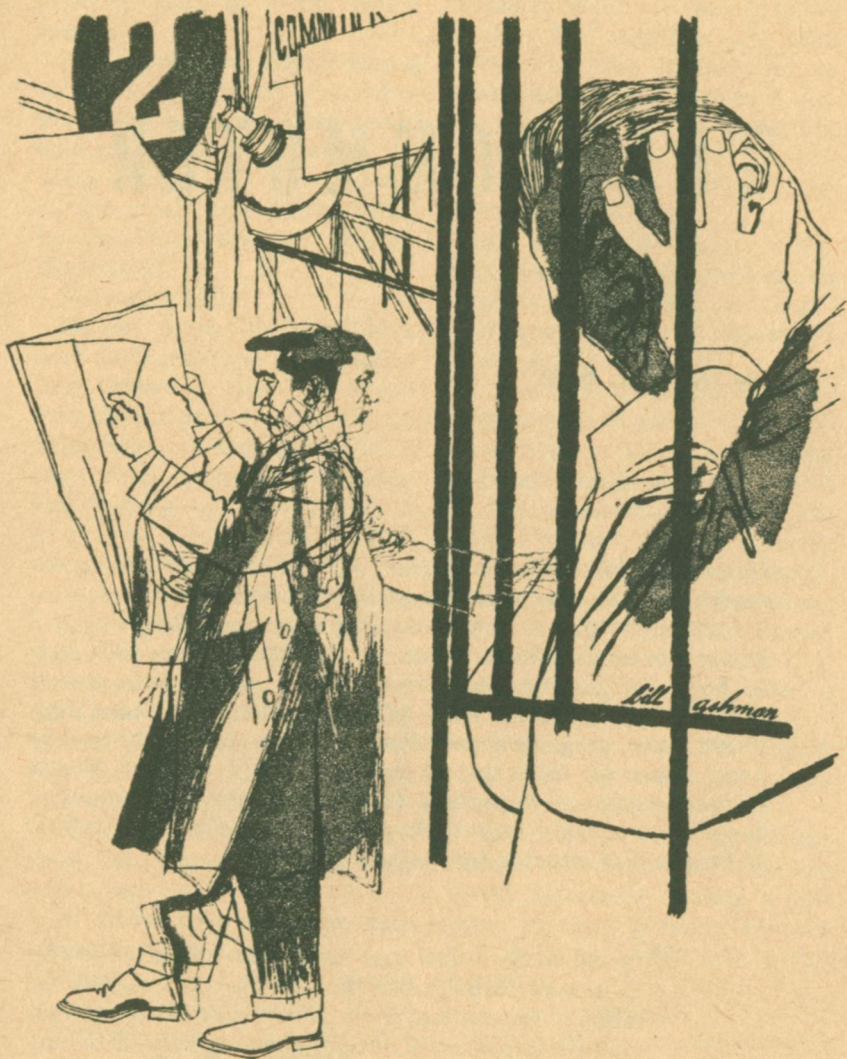
"The Commuter"

In one of his tarter moments, E.B. White defined a commuter as someone who spends his life riding to and from his wife. A life sentence—as Hugo-winner Philip K. Dick shows us—little Ernest Critchet, bookkeeper, would gladly have settled for—just so he could get back to Macon Heights and take it easy after a particularly hard day. There was only one problem, though—the ticket seller kept insisting that the B train couldn't stop at Macon Heights because—according to all his charts and records—there just wasn't any such place—and he'd been selling tickets at that window for the past six years!

THE little fellow was tired. He pushed his way slowly through the throng of people, across the lobby of the station, to the ticket window. He waited his turn impatiently, fatigue showing in his drooping shoulders, his sagging brown coat.

"Next," Ed Jacobson, the ticket seller, rasped.

The little fellow tossed a five dollar bill on the counter. "Give me a new commute book. Used up the old one." He peered past Jacobson at the wall



Illustrator: Bill Ashman

clock. "Lord, is it really that late?"

Jacobson accepted the five dollars. "Okay, mister. One commute book. Where to?"

"Macon Heights," the little fellow stated.

"Macon Heights." Jacobson consulted his board. "Macon Heights. There isn't any such place."

The little man's face hardened in suspicion. "You trying to be funny?"

"Mister, there isn't any Macon Heights. I can't sell you a ticket unless there is such a place."

"What do you mean? I live there!"

"I don't care. I've been selling tickets for six years and there is no such place."

The little man's eyes popped with astonishment. "But I have a home there. I go there every night. I —"

"Here." Jacobson pushed him his chart board. "You find it."

The little man pulled the board over to one side. He studied it frantically, his finger trembling as he went down the list of towns.

"Find it?" Jacobson demanded, resting his arms on the counter. "It's not there, is it?"

The little man shook his head, dazed. "I don't understand. It doesn't make sense. Something must be wrong. There certainly must be some —"

Suddenly he vanished. The

board fell to the cement floor. The little fellow was gone — winked out of existence.

"Holy Caesar's Ghost," Jacobson gasped. His mouth opened and closed. There was only the board lying on the cement floor.

The little man had ceased to exist.

"What then?" Bob Paine asked.

"I went around and picked up the board."

"He was really gone?"

"He was gone, all right." Jacobson mopped his forehead. "I wish you had been around. Like a light he went out. Completely. No sound. No motion."

Paine lit a cigarette, leaning back in his chair. "Had you ever seen him before?"

"No."

"What time of day was it?"

"Just about now. About five." Jacobson moved toward the ticket window. "Here comes a bunch of people."

"Macon Heights." Paine turned the pages of the State city guide. "No listing in any of the books. If he reappears I want to talk to him. Get him inside the office."

"Sure. I don't want to have nothing to do with him. It isn't natural." Jacobson turned to the window. "Yes, lady."

"Two round trip tickets to Lewisburg."

Paine stubbed his cigarette out and lit another. "I keep feeling

I've heard the name before." He got up and wandered over to the wall map. "But it isn't listed."

"There is no listing because there is no such place," Jacobson said. "You think I could stand here daily, selling one ticket after another, and not know?" He turned back to his window. "Yes, sir."

"I'd like a commute book to Macon Heights," the little fellow said, glancing nervously at the clock on the wall. "And hurry it up."

Jacobson closed his eyes. He hung on tight. When he opened his eyes again the little fellow was still there. Small wrinkled face. Thinning hair. Glasses. Tired, slumped coat.

Jacobson turned and moved across the office to Paine. "He's back." Jacobson swallowed, his face pale. "It's him again."

Paine's eyes flickered. "Bring him right in."

Jacobson nodded and returned to his window. "Mister," he said, "could you please come inside?" He indicated the door. "The Vice-President would like to see you for a moment."

The little man's face darkened. "What's up? The train's about to take off." Grumbling under his breath, he pushed the door open and entered the office. "This sort of thing has never happened before. It's certainly getting hard

to purchase a commute book. If I miss the train I'm going to hold your company —"

"Sit down," Paine said, indicating the chair across from his desk. "You're the gentleman who wants a commute book to Macon Heights?"

"Is there something strange about that? What's the matter with all of you? Why can't you sell me a commute book like you always do?"

"Like — like we *always* do?"

The little man held himself in check with great effort. "Last December my wife and I moved out to Macon Heights. I've been riding your train ten times a week, twice a day, for six months. Every month I buy a new commute book."

Paine leaned toward him. "Exactly which one of our trains do you take, Mr. —"

"Critch. Ernest Critchet. The B train. Don't you know your own schedules?"

"The B train?" Paine consulted a B train chart, running his pencil along it. No Macon Heights was listed. "How long is the trip? How long does it take?"

"Exactly forty-nine minutes." Critchet looked up at the wall clock. "If I ever get on it."

Paine calculated mentally. Forty-nine minutes. About thirty miles from the city. He got up and crossed to the big wall map.

"What's wrong?" Critchet

asked with marked suspicion.

Paine drew a thirty-mile circle on the map. The circle crossed a number of towns, but none of them was Macon Heights. And on the B line there was nothing at all.

"What sort of place is Macon Heights?" Paine asked. "How many people, would you say?"

"I don't know. Five thousand, maybe. I spend most of my time in the city. I'm a bookkeeper over at Bradshaw Insurance."

"Is Macon Heights a fairly new place?"

"It's modern enough. We have a little two-bedroom house, a couple years old." Critchet stirred restlessly. "How about my commute book?"

"I'm afraid," Paine said slowly, "I can't sell you a commute book."

"What? Why not?"

"We don't have any service to Macon Heights."

Critchet leaped up. "What do you mean?"

"There's no such place. Look at the map yourself."

Critchet gaped, his face working. Then he turned angrily to the wall map, glaring at it intently.

"This is a curious situation, Mr. Critchet," Paine murmured. "It isn't on the map, and the State city directory doesn't list it. We have no schedule that includes it. There are no commute books

made up for it. We don't —"

He broke off. Critchet had vanished. One moment he was there, studying the wall map. The next moment he was gone. Vanished. Puffed out.

"Jacobson!" Paine barked. "He's gone!"

Jacobson's eyes grew large. Sweat stood out on his forehead. "So he is," he murmured.

Paine was deep in thought, gazing at the empty spot Ernest Critchet had occupied. "Something's going on," he muttered. "Something damn strange." Abruptly he grabbed his overcoat and headed for the door.

"Don't leave me alone!" Jacobson begged.

"If you need me I'll be at Laura's apartment. The number's some place in my desk."

"This is no time for games with girls."

Paine pushed open the door to the lobby. "I doubt," he said grimly, "if this is a game."

Paine climbed the stairs to Laura Nichols' apartment two at a time. He leaned on the buzzer until the door opened.

"Bob!" Laura blinked in surprise. "To what do I owe this —"

Paine pushed past her, inside the apartment. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No, but —"

"Big doings. I'm going to need some help. Can I count on you?"

"On me?" Laura closed the

door after him. Her attractively furnished apartment lay in half shadow. At the end of the deep green couch a single table lamp burned. The heavy drapes were pulled. The phonograph was on low in the corner.

"Maybe I'm going crazy." Paine threw himself down on the luxuriant green couch. "That's what I want to find out."

"How can I help?" Laura came languidly over, her arms folded, a cigarette between her lips. She shook her long hair back out of her eyes. "Just what did you have in mind?"

Paine grinned at the girl appreciatively. "You'll be surprised. I want you to go downtown tomorrow morning bright and early and —"

"Tomorrow morning! I have a job, remember? And the office starts a whole new string of reports this week."

"The hell with that. Take the morning off. Go downtown to the main library. If you can't get the information there, go over to the county court house and start looking through the back tax records. Keep looking until you find it."

"It? Find what?"

Paine lit a cigarette thoughtfully. "Mention of a place called Macon Heights. I know I've heard the name before. Years ago. Got the picture? Go through the old atlases. Old newspapers in the

reading room. Old magazines. Reports. City proposals. Propositions before the State legislature."

Laura sat down slowly on the arm of the couch. "Are you kidding?"

"No."

"How far back?"

"Maybe ten years — if necessary."

"Good Lord! I might have to —"

"Stay there until you find it." Paine got up abruptly. "I'll see you later."

"You're leaving? You're not taking me out to dinner?"

"Sorry." Paine moved toward the door. "I'll be busy. Real busy."

"Doing what?"

"Visiting Macon Heights."

Outside the train endless fields stretched off, broken by an occasional farm building. Bleak telephone poles jutted up toward the evening sky.

Paine glanced at his wrist watch. Not far, now. The train passed through a small town. A couple of gas stations, roadside stands, television store. It stopped at the station, brakes grinding. Lewisburg. A few commuters got off, men in overcoats with evening papers. The doors slammed and the train started up.

Paine settled back against his seat, deep in thought. Critchet had vanished while looking at the

wall map. He had vanished the first time when Jacobson showed him the chart board. — When he had been shown there was no such place as Macon Heights. Was there some sort of clue there? The whole thing was unreal, dream-like.

Paine peered out. He was almost there — if there were such a place. Outside the train the brown fields stretched off endlessly. Hills and level fields. Telephone poles. Cars racing along the State highway, tiny black specks hurrying through the twilight.

But no sign of Macon Heights.

The train roared on its way. Paine consulted his watch. Fifty-one minutes had passed. And he had seen nothing. Nothing but fields.

He walked up the car and sat down beside the conductor, a white-haired old gentleman. "Ever heard of a place called Macon Heights?" Paine asked.

"No sir."

Paine showed his identification. "You're sure you never heard of any place by that name?"

"Positive, Mr. Paine."

"How long have you been on this run?"

"Eleven years, Mr. Paine."

Paine rode on until the next stop, Jacksonville. He got off and transferred to a B train heading back to the city. The sun had set. The sky was almost black. Dimly, he could make out the scenery

out there beyond the window.

He tensed, holding his breath. One minute to go. Forty seconds. Was there anything? Level fields. Bleak telephone poles. A barren, wasted landscape between towns.

Between? The train rushed on, hurtling through the gloom. Paine gazed out fixedly. Was there something out there? Something beside the fields?

Above the fields a long mass of translucent smoke lay stretched out. A homogeneous mass, extended for almost a mile. What was it? Smoke from the engine? But the engine was diesel. From a truck along the highway? A brush fire? None of the fields looked burned.

Suddenly the train began to slow. Paine was instantly alert. The train was stopping, coming to a halt. The brakes screeched, the cars lurched from side to side. Then silence.

Across the aisle a tall man in a light coat got to his feet, put his hat on, and moved rapidly toward the door. He leaped down from the train, onto the ground. Paine watched him, fascinated. The man walked rapidly away from the train across the dark fields. He moved with purpose, heading toward the bank of gray haze.

The man rose. He was walking a foot off the ground. He turned to the right. He rose again, now — three feet off the ground. For a

moment he walked parallel to the ground, still heading away from the train. Then he vanished into the bank of haze. He was gone.

Paine hurried up the aisle. But already the train had begun gathering speed. The ground moved past outside. Paine located the conductor, leaning against the wall of the car, a pudding-faced youth.

"Listen," Paine grated. "What was that stop!"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"That stop! Where the hell were we?"

"We always stop there." Slowly, the conductor reached into his coat and brought out a handful of schedules. He sorted through them and passed one to Paine. "The B always stops at Macon Heights. Didn't you know that?"

"No!"

"It's on the schedule." The youth raised his pulp magazine again. "Always stops there. Always has. Always will."

Paine tore the schedule open. It was true. Macon Heights was listed between Jacksonville and Lewisburg. Exactly thirty miles from the city.

The cloud of gray haze. The vast cloud, gaining form rapidly. As if something were coming into existence. As a matter of fact, something *was* coming into existence.

Macon Heights!

He caught Laura at her apartment the next morning. She was sitting at the coffee table in a pale pink sweater and dark slacks. Before her was a pile of notes, a pencil and eraser, and a malted milk.

"How did you make out?" Paine demanded.

"Fine. I got your information."

"What's the story?"

"There was quite a bit of material." She patted the sheaf of notes. "I summed up the major parts for you."

"Let's have the summation."

"Seven years ago this August the county board of supervisors voted on three new suburban housing tracts to be set up outside the city. Macon Heights was one of them. There was a big debate. Most of the city merchants opposed the new tracts. Said they would draw too much retail business away from the city."

"Go on."

"There was a long fight. Finally two of the three tracts were approved. Waterville and Cedar Groves. But not Macon Heights."

"I see," Paine murmured thoughtfully.

"Macon Heights was defeated. A compromise; two tracts instead of three. The two tracts were built up right away. You know. We passed through Waterville one afternoon. Nice little place."

"But no Macon Heights."

"No. Macon Heights was given up."

Paine rubbed his jaw. "That's the story, then."

"That's the story. Do you realize I lose a whole half-day's pay because of this? You *have* to take me out, tonight. Maybe I should get another fellow. I'm beginning to think you're not such a good bet."

Paine nodded absently. "Seven years ago." All at once a thought came to him. "The vote! How close was the vote on Macon Heights?"

Laura consulted her notes. "The project was defeated by a single vote."

"A single vote. Seven years ago." Paine moved out into the hall. "Thanks, honey. Things are beginning to make sense. Lots of sense!"

He caught a cab out front. The cab raced him across the city, toward the train station. Outside, signs and streets flashed by. People and stores and cars.

His hunch had been correct. He *had* heard the name before. Seven years ago. A bitter county debate on a proposed suburban tract. Two towns approved; one defeated and forgotten.

But now the forgotten town was coming into existence — seven years later. The town and an undetermined slice of reality along with it. *Why?* Had something changed in the past? Had an

alteration occurred in some past continuum?

That seemed like the explanation. The vote had been close. Macon Heights had *almost* been approved. Maybe certain parts of the past were unstable. Maybe that particular period, seven years ago, had been critical. Maybe it had never completely "jelled". An odd thought: the past changing, after it had already happened.

Suddenly Paine's eyes focussed. He sat up quickly. Across the street was a store sign, half way along the block. Over a small, inconspicuous establishment. As the cab moved forward Paine peered to see.

BRADSHAW INSURANCE

[OR]

NOTARY PUBLIC

He pondered. Critchet's place of business. Did it also come and go? Had it always been there? Something about it made him uneasy.

"Hurry it up," Paine ordered the driver. "Let's get going."

When the train slowed down at Macon Heights, Paine got quickly to his feet and made his way up the aisle to the door. The grinding wheels jerked to a halt and Paine leaped down onto the hot gravel siding. He looked around him.

In the afternoon sunlight, Macon Heights glittered and sparkled, its even rows of houses stretching out in all directions. In

the center of the town the marquee of a theater rose up.

A theater, even. Paine headed across the track toward the town. Beyond the train station was a parking lot. He stepped up onto the lot and crossed it, following a path past a filling station and onto a sidewalk.

He came out on the main street of the town. A double row of stores stretched out ahead of him. A hardware store. Two drug-stores. A dime store. A modern department store.

Paine walked along, hands in his pockets, gazing around him at Macon Heights. An apartment building stuck up, tall and fat. A janitor was washing down the front steps. Everything looked new and modern. The houses, the stores, the pavement and sidewalks. The parking meters. A brown-uniformed cop was giving a car a ticket. Trees, growing at intervals. Neatly clipped and pruned.

He passed a big supermarket. Out in front was a bin of fruit, oranges and grapes. He picked a grape and bit into it.

The grape was real, all right. A big black concord grape, sweet and ripe. Yet twenty-four hours ago there had been nothing here but a barren field.

Paine entered one of the drug-stores. He leafed through some magazines and then sat down at the counter. He ordered a cup of

coffee from the red-cheeked little waitress.

"This is a nice town," Paine said, as she brought the coffee.

"Yes, isn't it?"

Paine hesitated. "How — how long have you been working here?"

"Three months."

"Three months?" Paine studied the buxom little blonde. "You live here in Macon Heights?"

"Oh, yes."

"How long?"

"A couple years, I guess." She moved away to wait on a young soldier who had taken a stool down the counter.

Paine sat drinking his coffee and smoking, idly watching the people passing by outside. Ordinary people. Men and women, mostly women. Some had grocery bags and little wire carts. Automobiles drove slowly back and forth. A sleepy little suburban town. Modern, upper middle-class. A quality town. No slums here. Small, attractive houses. Stores with sloping glass fronts and neon signs.

Some high school kids burst into the drugstore, laughing and bumping into each other. Two girls in bright sweaters sat down next to Paine and ordered lime drinks. They chatted gaily, bits of their conversation drifting to him.

He gazed at them, pondering moodily. They were real, all right. Lipstick and red fingernails.

Sweaters and armloads of school books. Hundreds of high school kids, crowding eagerly into the drugstore.

Paine rubbed his forehead wearily. It didn't seem possible. Maybe he was out of his mind. The town was *real*. Completely real. It must have always existed. A whole town couldn't rise up out of nothing; out of a cloud of gray haze. Five thousand people, houses and streets and stores.

Stores. Bradshaw Insurance.

Stabbing realization chilled him. Suddenly he understood. It was spreading. Beyond Macon Heights. Into the city. The city was changing, too. Bradshaw Insurance. Critchet's place of business.

Macon Heights couldn't exist without warping the city. They interlocked. The five thousand people came from the city. Their jobs. Their lives. The city was involved.

But how much? How much was the city changing?

Paine threw a quarter on the counter and hurried out of the drugstore, toward the train station. He had to get back to the city. Laura, the change. Was she still there? Was his *own* life safe?

Fear gripped him. Laura, all his possessions, his plans, hopes and dreams. Suddenly Macon Heights was unimportant. His own world was in jeopardy. Only one thing

mattered, now. He had to make sure of it; make sure his own life was still there. Untouched by the spreading circle of change that was lapping out from Macon Heights.

"Where to, buddy?" the cab driver asked, as Paine came rushing out of the train station.

Paine gave him the address of the apartment. The cab roared out into traffic. Paine settled back nervously. Outside the window the streets and office buildings flashed past. White collar workers were already beginning to get off work, swelling out onto the sidewalks to stand in clumps at each corner.

How much had changed? He concentrated on a row of buildings. The big department store. Had that always been there? The little boot-black shop next to it. He had never noticed that before.

NORRIS HOME FURNISHINGS

He didn't remember *that*. But how could he be sure? He felt confused. How could he tell?

The cab let him off in front of the apartment house. Paine stood for a moment, looking around him. Down at the end of the block the owner of the Italian delicatessen was out putting up the awning. Had he ever noticed a delicatessen there before?

He could not remember.

What had happened to the big

meat market across the street? There was nothing but neat little houses; older houses that looked like they'd been there plenty long. Had a meat market ever been there? The houses *looked* solid.

In the next block the striped pole of a barbershop glittered. Had there always been a barbershop there?

Maybe it had always been there. Maybe, and maybe not. Everything was shifting. New things were coming into existence, others going away. The past was altering, and memory was tied to the past. How could he trust his memory? How could he be sure?

Terror gripped him. Laura. His world . . .

Paine raced up the front steps and pushed open the door of the apartment house. He hurried up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. The door of the apartment was unlocked. He pushed it open and entered, his heart in his mouth, praying silently.

The living room was dark and silent. The shades were half pulled. He glanced around wildly. The light blue couch, magazines on its arms. The low blonde-oak table. The television set. But the room was empty.

"Laura!" he gasped.

Laura hurried from the kitchen, eyes wide with alarm. "Bob! What are you doing home? Is anything the matter?"

Paine relaxed, sagging with relief. "Hello, honey." He kissed her, holding her tight against him. She was warm and substantial; completely real. "No, nothing's wrong. Everything's fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Paine took his coat off shakily and dropped it over the back of the couch. He wandered around the room, examining things, his confidence returning. His familiar blue couch, cigarette burns on its arms. His old ragged footstool. His desk where he did his work at night. His fishing rods leaning up against the wall behind the bookcase.

The big television set he had purchased only last month; that was safe, too.

Everything, all he owned, was untouched. Safe. Unharmed.

"Dinner won't be ready for half an hour," Laura murmured anxiously, unfastening her apron. "I didn't expect you home so early. I've just been sitting around all day. I did clean the stove. Some salesman left a sample of a new cleanser."

"That's okay." He examined a favorite Renoir print on the wall. "Take your time. It's good to see all these things again. I —"

From the bedroom a crying sound came. Laura turned quickly.

"I guess we woke up Jimmy."

"Jimmy?"

Laura laughed. "Darling, don't

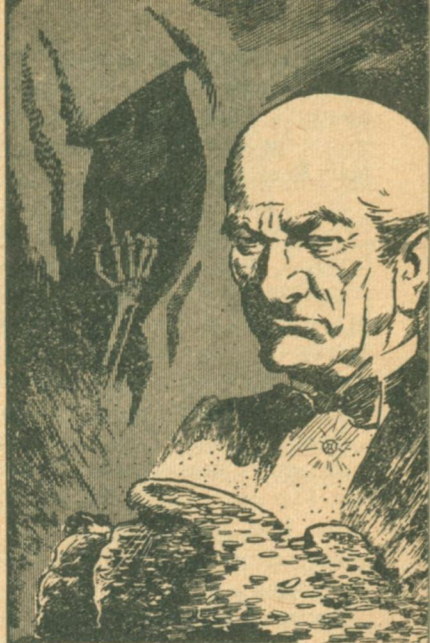
(Continued on page 160)

HE TOOK IT WITH HIM CLARK COLLINS

Anticipating by at least fifteen years the recent theories of cryogenicist R.C.W. Ettlinger—you remember, Freeze Now, Revive Later—the Clark Collins short that follows wryly suggests that sometimes you can take it with you—even though what you take may not be exactly what you have in mind.

HE sat in his chair silently for a long time after the doctor had left. One year. He didn't doubt Grayson's analysis of his health, he knew the man hated his guts—so did everyone else for that matter—but the physician was the best medical science could provide. Besides, he'd had every top authority on the disease in the country—he amended that, in the world—for consultation.

Matt Bently opened a drawer of his desk and brought out a battered silver dollar. He regarded it reflectively, recalling the circumstances under which it had been acquired. Then the long



years since, the striving, the fighting, the skullduggery, the heartlessness, the bribing, yes, the actual thieving.

His grin was a grimace. "I still say it'll buy anything. *Anything.*"

He rang for his secretary.

Bently scowled at the man before him. "My time is very limited, for reasons that you'll soon learn, so I'll cut this as short as possible.

"You're Professor Dumaine and your ambition for the past ten years has been to build an institution dedicated to pure research. An institute, in short, that could continue its work

without hindrance from government or industrialist. Science for science's sake I think was the way some newspaperman put it." Matt Bently sneered.

The physicist shrugged. "There've been less noble ambitions, I trust. For instance, the amassing of the largest fortune in the world at the cost of friends betrayed, governments corrupted, men, women and children crushed, wars provoked . . ."

Bently's smile was wolfish. "You make one mistake, Professor. I've never betrayed a friend, since I've never had one. It's going to be difficult for you to serve such a man isn't it?"

Andre Dumaine got to his feet and reached for his hat. He looked at the international financier grimly. "Not hard, impossible. Good day, Mr. Bently. It's a mystery to me why I let your secretary talk me into coming here in the first place."

Matt Bently still smiled. He shook his head and reached down into the desk drawer to bring out the battered dollar. "Do you see this, Dumaine? I found long ago that it was a wonderful substitute for friends. It will buy anything, even men like Professor Dumaine."

It was the other's turn to smile. "No, Mr. Bently. You just haven't tried to buy Andre Dumaine before. My work prevents me from making too thorough a study of world affairs but I am

aware enough of current events to know that you, and a handful of men like yourself, are rushing the race toward a new conflict which may completely destroy it. Under no circumstances could I serve such a man."

Bently flipped the coin back into his desk. "It's just a matter of how many you offer," he said easily. "For instance, Professor, I'm offering you one hundred million of them."

The physicist's eyebrows went up. "Are you insane? For what?"

"To build your research institute."

The other laughed scornfully, but there was tension in his voice. "You forget that I am interested in science for science's sake, Mr. Bently. My institution will either be free from all influence or it will never be built. Even your hundred millions don't attract me when I realize that your sinister figure would dominate the institute's work."

The tycoon got up from his chair and walked to a window. "It might interest you to know that my doctor gives me approximately one year to live," he said over his shoulder.

There was a pregnant silence.

The scientist said slowly, "Then you mean you actually desire to will a hundred million dollars to my project, and in no manner will control the spending of the sum?"

Matt Bently turned, his voice

held a sneer again. "One small string, Professor. But I want to ask some questions first."

The physicist's face hardened, and the billionaire laughed scornfully. "Don't let me frighten you. All I want is for the institute to take care of my grave."

Professor Dumaine frowned, and said warily, "If you are sincere about this it means a good deal to me."

"Of course. Sit down, Professor." The man who controlled a dozen governments returned to his own chair. "Now, first of all, will man ever attain immortality?"

"You mean life after death?" Dumaine was puzzled.

Bently flicked a hand impatiently. "I'm an atheist, Professor. I mean will science ever discover the secret of eternal life?"

"Oh." The Professor thought it over, his forehead wrinkled. Finally, "It's out of my line, of course, but I would say yes. Possibly not in our time, but eventually science will probably discover the causes of death and eliminate them. You wouldn't exactly call it discovering the secret of eternal life."

"It amounts to the same thing." Matt Bently's eyes gleamed. "How soon?"

"How in the world should I know?"

The most hated man in the world snarled. "Guess! My granting you the hundred million is

dependent on your answer."

Dumaine submerged the resentment this domineering egoist inspired. "Possibly within a hundred years, given a continuation of man's development at the present rate and barring a return to a new dark ages such as might be brought on by future wars. I would say definitely within two hundred years."

"Good. That isn't too long a time. I assume that by then we'll have conquered all diseases that presently plague man, including mine?"

The Professor nodded.

"Then I can assume further that if I were alive two hundred years from now I could be cured and insured eternal life?"

"I suppose so, but I fail to see what connection this could have with the proposed institute."

Matt Bently took a thick cigar from his desk humidior, without offering one to his visitor, bit off the end and lit it. He took the first breath of smoke into his mouth with satisfaction.

"I intend to endow the institute in such a manner that it will be perpetuated indefinitely. The only requirement will be that it take care of my body until such time as science will have advanced to the point where the corpse can be revived and brought back to life."

The professor stared at him. "Good Lord, man, you're insane."

He drew on his cigar again. "If so, it's worth a hundred million to your pet project. I've been a gambler all my life, Dumaine. I'm betting everything I've amassed on this."

He laughed grimly. "The percentages are with me. If I lose, I lose nothing, since I will already be dead. If I win, I win everything . . . eternal life. Now tell me, if you were interested in preparing my body in such a manner that the doctors of the future would have a chance to revive it, what would you do?"

"The scheme is fantastic!"

The tycoon didn't answer but sat silently, smoking his cigar with satisfaction.

The physicist ran his hand nervously through his hair and down the back of his neck. "I suppose that the best thing would be to take the body immediately after death, quick freeze it, and place it in as near a complete vacuum as possible. If ever science develops to the point where the dead can be revived, I should imagine that such preparations would give the fewest handicaps."

Matt Bently nodded with satisfaction. "Get to work on it immediately. In six months time, I'll want the arrangements finished. You can begin today to plan your institute. Remember, the only provision I hold you to, is that my coffin be kept in such a manner that when science has

progressed far enough to revive me, my corpse will be available and in suitable condition."

"It might take five hundred years—or longer!"

Then we must establish the institute in such a manner that it will survive for that length of time. Now, I'm a busy man, endless arrangements to make. See my secretary on your way out, he has an initial check for you. Get to work, Dumane.

In six months the disease had eaten far into even the dynamic Matt Bently but his plans were working out on schedule as usual. There was but one more major arrangement to be made.

He eyed the world famous authority before him with the old fire. "Daren, I know it's practically impossible for you damned economists to say anything without piling ifs, ands, and buts, around your statements. I'm asking you to cut it out today. I want straight answers, not the rot you customarily hand out in your newspaper columns."

The other said dryly. "You're paying for my time handsomely, Mr. Bently. Fire away."

Matt Bently snorted, then coughed hollowly into his handkerchief. "First of all, suppose I had discovered some manner of traveling into the future five hundred years. What would be the most valuable thing I could take with me into that period?"

Paul Daren stared at him.

"That's really a difficult question." He mused for a long moment. "Probably art objects. Or, possibly, some ultra rare element, say, radium."

"Not gold? Not diamonds?" The billionaire seemed surprised.

"Definitely not diamonds. I've no doubt that within the comparatively near future diamonds will be artificially produced and, consequently, cheap. Gold?" he shrugged. "Possibly in five hundred years we'll have transmutation of metals. But, even if not, we can't be sure that gold will be the medium of exchange, or even, that there will be a medium of exchange such as we think of it today. It's according to the type of social system we have by then."

"What do you mean by that?" Bently asked irritably.

"Five hundred years ago the most advanced nations of the world were living under a feudalistic form of government. Today capitalism is prevalent. What it will be in five hundred years is debatable to say the least."

Matt Bently stirred restlessly. He didn't like this. "What are the alternatives?"

"There are several," the other said carefully. "Given a continuation of the policies of the *cartel* controlled by Matt Bently and his associates, we might have an atomic war or two and the human race might well be driven back to feudalism, or, even further,

back to chattel slavery, or barbarism . . ."

Bently snarled, "I didn't bring you here to hear you lecture me, Daren. Besides, you don't know what you're talking about. In the past six months I've liquidated all my holdings. At the present time I control nothing but cash. And a good deal of that," he added with satisfaction.

The economist went on coolly. "You asked for the alternatives, I'm giving them to you. I can't guarantee that my answers will make you happy."

"Go on!"

"We might see our present social system give way to Stateism, which we see rapidly developing even today in various forms, the Soviet, for instance, in one manner, England, in another. Or there is DeLeonism, or Marxian Socialism in its most advanced form; or Industrial Feudalism, which has various possibilities including Technocracy. Of course, there's an x-factor here. Possibly an unknown will come along, but I'm inclined to think that any society of the future will be at most a variation of one of these.

"Any private property, especially wealth, that you took forward with you in this fanciful travel to the future, would do you little good unless the social system was some form of Stateism, or, possibly, Industrial Feudalism. Even then, you couldn't

be sure that you'd retain it."

After the economist had gone, Matt Bently rang for his secretary. He spoke to the man dully, contemptuously.

"Rogers, I want you to locate every Rembrandt in the world that might possibly be for sale. Price is no object. Also get complete data on the world supply of radium. I'll want to corner the market . . ." He paused "You'd better also make preliminary arrangements for the purchase of several millions worth of gold bullion, and investigate the possibility of securing some of the largest of the world's diamonds."

"Just to play safe," he added under his breath.

The secretary bobbed his head nervously and scooted from the room.

The sick man leaned back painfully and allowed himself a grimace of satisfaction. "I'll have to find several spots where I can have constructed secret vaults that'll remain hidden and safe for five centuries," he told himself.

He took out his silver dollar and eyed it sourly. "Wait until my relatives find that only a few thousand dollars will be left of my fortune when I die." His laugh was bitter.

"So you can't take it with you, eh? We'll see."

The darkness dropped away slowly, and consciousness re-

turned bit by bit, fitfully. Waves of nausea swept over him and he sank into blackness again.

The next time the return was less fitful. He became dimly aware of light, faint and yellow, but light. The nausea was more intense. His soul screamed to escape back into the empty dark.

A thought came into his dull mind. "*You are sick, perhaps I can remedy that.*"

The nausea dropped away. He slept. After nearly four centuries of eternal sleep, he awoke, to sleep again.

When he became conscious once more, he waited for long moments before opening his eyes. A sudden fear flooded over him. Perhaps this return to life would be partial. Perhaps some of his senses had died forever: his hearing, his taste, his speech, his touch, *his eyes!*

He opened them suddenly and groaned with relief to feel the blazing hurt of sunlight. He narrowed his eyelids until he became used to the brightness, then opened them slowly. He was in a large, white, ceilingless room. Alone.

It suddenly occurred to him that his vision was perfect in spite of the fact that he wore no glasses. He felt the goodness of perfect health in his body and suddenly realized that these physicians of the future had cured *all* of his ills. He raised his left hand and stared at the finger

which a childhood accident had prevented him from bending for forty years. It bent again. It seemed the greatest miracle of all. He clasped and unclasped his fist, wonderingly.

A thought came to him. "*I sense you are awake, Matt Bently. Forgive me for not being present. We thought it more practical for you to be alone at first and until some explanations were made.*"

He didn't know what to say. He recognized that he was being contacted through mental telepathy. Finally, "What year is this?" He spoke aloud, not sure that the question would be heard.

"I'm afraid you wouldn't understand our present calendar. But, using the one in use in your day, it is roughly 2350 A.D."

He remained silent, assimilating that. Unable to think of anything further to say.

"I suggest you eat, and rest again," the thought said. "*When you are stronger and your mind used to the shock of awakening, I will visit you.*"

He noticed for the first time a table beside the bed. A bowl of thick soup steamed. He reached for the spoon, obediently.

When Matt Bently awoke again he felt the thought almost immediately. "*You are rested.*"

It was more a statement than a question, but he answered, "Wonderfully, I feel better than I

can ever remember." He swung his feet over the side of the bed and stood up gingerly. He was surprised to find himself able to walk with ease. He'd thought he'd be stiff for a time.

There was a comfortable chair in one corner of the room. He made his way to it and relaxed in its depths with satisfaction. He smiled triumphantly.

"Made it," he said to himself. "2350 A.D."

The thought said, "*The Bently Institute is as pleased as you are yourself, Matt Bently. Your revival has been a great challenge to us.*"

He said with satisfaction, "Then this is still the Bently Institute which I founded nearly four hundred years ago."

"The world has always been proud and grateful for this contribution on your part, Matt Bently. Verily, the All Highest has said that sacrifice for the good of the race is the greatest honor achievable."

"Ummm . . . of course," he muttered. So they still had religion. That was a good sign as far as he was concerned. The Matt Bentlys of life thrived among the gullible.

"How doubly honored that you should live again and be able to sacrifice again."

"How's that?"

"You have brought a treasure from the past that is of immense value, Matt Bently."

His lips drew back. So! He'd struck pay dirt with at least one of his hidden vaults. He'd have to handle this carefully. He wondered what it was, the diamonds, the art objects, the gold, the radium? Whatever it was, it sounded as though they were anxious to get hold of it.

He'd better hedge. "Why the long distance mental telepathy? Can't we get together on this?" If they thought he was going to 'sacrifice' anything willingly, they had another thought coming.

"A bit later, Matt Bently. A great deal has happened since your . . . death."

He remembered what the economist had told him. "Such as what?" he asked cautiously.

"Briefly. The first of three atomic wars broke out shortly after your demise. Before they were over, nearly all life was swept from the planet. All of homo sapiens was destroyed."

"What?"

"All mankind was destroyed as a result of the atomic wars."

"But . . . I don't understand. Who are . . . What are you . . . ?" A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

The thought gave an impression of gentleness, pity. "That is why we have not let you see us as yet, Matt Bently. Perhaps our unfamiliar appearance would distress you. The atomic wars led to many mutations.

Let us say that the present dominant race of earth combines all the more desirable attributes of homo sapiens with those of such older forms of life such as the ant and the bee. Meanwhile, we strive endlessly to improve still further. Experimentation on ourselves has enabled us to achieve wonders in developing the species. Verily, the All Highest has blessed many with the opportunity to sacrifice for the benefit of the race."

A feeling of horror was growing within him. He stuttered, "This great treasure that you mentioned my bringing from the past. Which did you mean, the radium, the Rembrandts, the gold, the diamonds . . . ?"

"These things you mention have no value today, Matt Bently."

"Then what do you mean?" He was shouting now. "WHAT TREASURE DID I BRING FROM THE PAST?"

"Why, your body, Matt Bently. For three hundred years our scientists haven't had the opportunity to work upon a living homo sapiens specimen. No one now alive has ever dissected a man. Your sacrifice will enable us to add tremendously to our store of knowledge. Undoubtedly, the race will be improved as a result of what we learn. Verily, the All Highest . . ."

Bently screamed in madness.

The End

(Continued from page 45)

how I got home, though it did suggest a reason why I'd slept so long. But the drug must have worked its way out of my system by now. I'd passed water before I thought of saving some to test for excreted traces, and what I could squeeze out following my breakfast tested neutral.

Problems on this level, though, worried me so little it was as though I'd taken a tranquilizer. And gradually the disturbance to which I'd woken dissipated. I was satisfied that someone had given me knockout drops. I'd suffered the aftermath of them as I was waking, and now I was all right. Today . . . today, I decided, it might be interesting to go to the Old Temple again, and this time look the whole place over, study the fifteen famous artifacts on display there and refresh my stale memory of them. After all, they were chief among the unique things about Mars.

I went down to bottom-level of the apartment block and crossed the foyer to check the mail-rack. I found one item addressed to me, one of my father's sad rambling letters containing the usual half-hearted invitation to come around the planet and see him next time I was stopping over. He was in Pegasus now, not Voyager, but he didn't explain why he'd moved on. He was always moving on, as though stepping through a

pathetic shadow-copy of my own roamings.

Perhaps that was why, as the years slipped away, we got on together less and less well. Perhaps he was jealous of my qualifications and achievements. He was what Martians called a jobbing-man, a general maintenance technician and handyman, occasionally hiring out as a mere laborer.

Of course, we could do with more maintenance. There was a leak in the roof which I'd seen . . .

Where? I started. Where had I been, that I'd seen a leaky roof sifting down sand?

A misplaced childhood memory, I decided, forced to the surface as part of my unusually vivid dream of last night—this morning, rather. For I could clearly picture three kids playing around in the drizzle of dust.

"Ray!"

No, this simply wasn't good enough. I—

"Ray!" Wheezing up to me came shriveled old Gus Quaison, manager of this block. He was an Earth immigrant, but a nice enough guy after twenty-five years here. I set aside my pre-occupation and greeted him.

"There was someone asking for you this morning," he said. "A Centaur officer, name of Major Housk. Uh. . ."

"Centaur?" I said feelingly.

"Gus, my last trip was into Centaur space. I hadn't shipped far in that direction before, and never on a Centaur vessel. And after that—well, let's say that if I never see another Centaur it'll be too soon."

"Thought you might feel that way," Gus chuckled. "I've heard you let your hair down about them once or twice before, haven't I? Thought you were always neutral on principle between them and the Bears. I told him you were out, anyway, and he left an address for you to contact him. Want it?"

"Did he say what for?" I was puzzled.

"No." Gus's sharp eyes scanned my face. "You don't know him, huh?"

"Housk?" I don't think so. And if he's a major I doubt if I want to."

Gus grinned and made to move off. I checked him with a gesture. "Say, there's one thing! How did I get home last night?"

"Don't you know? What did you do, drink yourself under?" When I didn't give a better answer than a scowl, he shrugged. "I'm supposed to know? I wasn't here, was I? I go off duty at sundown, and you weren't back by then. I thought you'd picked up a girl and were staying over with her again."

The significance of that last little word "again" only hit me when I happened to glance, several minutes later and a good distance away, at the dial of a date-time clock.

I was briefly giddy, thinking of the stale pointless joke about the wallowers on Goldstar, fat beasts almost hidden in liquid mud, moving from their wallows once a year at mating-season.

"What day is it?" one wallower asks another.

Pause of several hours. "Tuesday."

Pause, longer still. "Funny! I keep thinking it's Wednesday. . ."

And Gus had said, "Stay over with her *again*."

Almost anywhere else I'd been, bar Durrith, I'd have been inclined to accept the possibility of a two-day binge. I'd have spent half of it sleeping where I'd fallen, owing to the strain of carrying my own weight in a one-gee environment. I was in the habit of preparing for such an eventuality, never carrying more money than I could afford to have stolen while I was dead to the galaxy, for instance. And in most of the pleasure-quarters of most worlds in Bear space, the time of day mattered scarcely at all.

But on Mars you didn't do that.

There weren't the resources here to support such binges—a source of complaint among visiting spacemen.

Especially on Mars I as a Martian didn't do that. I felt it was out of place, though being a native I could probably have organized things better than a stranger. I liked to be at home, where I could forget about precautions like carrying a minimum of money. No Martian could rob an unconscious man. At least, I didn't want to have proof that this proud declaration wasn't true, or even be forced into the suspicion that it wasn't, thanks to some dirty offworlder not bred to Martian standards of honor.

Then . . . where had I been, what had I done, after going out on the town the night before last?

Not last night, The night before!

I stopped in my tracks, turned aside to the nearest bar I spotted, and sat, sweating for a much better reason than too-high heat and humidity in my apartment. Someone slipping me a Finn was too pat an explanation, especially as it failed to jibe with my retaining all the things a robber would be apt to take. I put the tips of my fingers on the flat wad of papers in my innermost pocket, confirming by touch that I hadn't lost anything.

I found a style and drew up a list of what I'd salvaged from

whatever wreck my memory had suffered. When I'd completed it, I was none the wiser. What could there be in common between the Old Temple, a girl with almond eyes and golden skin, and a nudge bed? What could have muddled Bears with Centaurs for me? Where had I been when I saw a drizzle of sand leaking through an ill-maintained section of roof?

I hesitated over the last item and finally struck it out. Three children playing suggested too strongly that this was a dream-image from my youth.

I had one possible inroad on this mystery. Gus had said that a Major Housk was after me, a Centaur, and he'd left an address at which I could contact him. I hadn't taken that address. I was a fool. Should I go back and collect it?

It seemed a reasonable idea. Whether or not Centaurs had such thin skins they would harbor a grudge indefinitely, it was strange to hear that one of them wanted to contact me, and the only explanation I could think of was that the Chief Officer I'd been rude to actually exercised some influence thanks to his boasted family connection with the Tyrant, and had sent someone to complete the settlement of accounts.

Which still left most of what I knew shrouded in mist. I didn't really believe my own conclu-

sions; I simply had nothing better.

Minutes later, Gus was blinking at me in embarrassment. He said, "Ray, you told me you didn't want anything to do with the guy! So I put the card in the disposal!"

"Oh, for—!" I caught myself. No use swearing at Gus. He was quite right—I had insisted I didn't want to meet any Centaur majors. "Can you remember any details of the address?"

"What's come over you?" he demanded. "Just now you were wishing all Centaurs to the Coal-sack, and now you're—"

"Gus!" I blasted. He flinched and put on a frown.

"There was a comweb number with it, I do remember that. Ah—it had double-five in it."

"Is that all?"

"Ray, I hardly even looked at it! Just took it off the man and stuffed it in my pocket. I didn't expect you to be interested."

"All right, forget it," I sighed, and turned away.

"Ray! If you're that interested, why don't you try the Centaur Embassy? They'd probably know where one of their officers is staying in town—you know how strict they are."

"I do," I agreed grimly. "Thanks for the suggestion. I may just do that."

And, when another hour's cogi-

tation had failed to turn up a better proposal, I decided I should.

I was thoroughly depressed as I sat hunched up in the back of the cab I'd called to take me to the Centaur Embassy. For years past, I'd assumed that my mind was as good and smoothly functioning as most people's, and a sight better than most. I'd enjoyed the extra advantage of Thoder's teaching, and even if I hadn't been the best of his disciples—I corrected that, pupils—I'd taken it for granted that I'd absorbed enough of what he showed me to have an edge over less fortunate folk.

Here, now, was a situation tailor-made to test my skills in that area—and I was floundering as helplessly as any Centaur lost in a strange town. I resolved that I wasn't going to behave Centaur-fashion if I found the key to this mental maze. I wasn't immediately going to pretend that I'd never been at a loss at all, the way Centaurs did if they had to demean themselves and ask guidance from foreigners. No, I was going to make a private promise and stick to it: I'd seek out Thoder and do something to recover the psychological techniques I'd neglected so long I was in danger of losing them.

Wait.

There was another of the puzzling visions surfacing in my mem-

ory. Four Centaurs, lost, unable to find their way. It was a predictable concomitant of the metaphor I'd employed to reinforce my decision with self-contempt, but it had a strange vividness. Something else out of this dream, to which I was so readily ascribing other improbabilities?

Or a real memory breaking through from limbo?

Uncertain, I peered ahead to see how far I still was from the Centaur Embassy. Just coming into sight around the curve of the canal. Why weren't its lighted signs on?

Why should they be, in the middle of the day?

Why should I expect them to be?

Exactly in the manner in which the wind begins to lift away drifted dust concealing something on the Martian desert, these tantalizing clues were now hinting at an underlying pattern. For some as yet indefinable reason I knew it was wrong, perhaps dangerous, for me to go to the Embassy. I stopped the cab with a shaking hand, paid it off and made for the nearest sidewalk lock.

Instead of entering it, however, I paused and glanced at the Embassy one more time. I *had* last seen it with its big gaudy signs illuminated. And, what was more, from approximately this angle and this dis-

tance. Where had I come from, to get here?

That eluded me for the present. I made to open the lock and checked afresh. I hadn't gone in to the sidewalk; I'd stayed on the street. This confirmed that it was night-time. Traffic was sparse anywhere on Mars compared with most human worlds, but by day it was thick enough to make walking in the roadways of a town a dangerous pastime.

From here to—well, quite likely the Old Temple. This kept recurring and recurring in my thoughts with enough insistence to make it the best possibility by lightyears.

The Old Temple lacked any sort of door or window. The discoverers had come down to floor-level from above, using ladders; then, of course, sand-drifts had banked clear to its top. When they were building Zond, they drove a tunnel under the street, rising into the middle of the mysterious building. I recalled the tunnel as being large, bright, decorated with handsome murals by a native Martian painter—gay mineral glazes baked into tile.

I found sifted sand an inch deep underfoot, half the fluorescents extinguished, many of the tiles from the murals missing without even an attempt being made to replace them. A sort of panic gripped me. What was becoming

of my home world while I galivanted around the stars?

Climbing the steps at the far end of the tunnel, I found an apathetic guide reciting an account of the Temple's discovery to a group of young Earthsiders about seven or eight years old—mid-teens, Earth-style. To judge from the comments of those nearest me, they were concerned with the fact that they were being shown around by a human instead of being given pre-programmed autoguides to play over through earphones, as in an Earthside museum, and they weren't greatly impressed.

There were no other Martians here, of course. Even the guide wasn't a Martian, but an elderly Earthborn woman. Did any Martians ever visit this planetary shrine nowadays? The only other visitors were a scholarly pair of Bears with the indefinable stamp of teachers on sabbatical leave.

To distract myself from the droning voice of the guide, I strode to the far end of the floor and occupied myself in a study of the fifteen artifacts ranged in argon-filled pressurized cases to protect them from further decay. They were time-gnawed beyond recognition, even assuming they had ever served a function comprehensible to human beings. Once, I seemed to recall, I'd stared at them in awe. Now they were just lumps. Aluminum,

steel, complex plastics, glasses opaqued from millennia of radiation. I looked at the explanatory texts—*First discovered, 34 mm x 107 mm, bluish-grey, irregular; mostly steel, five rods of glass through left end, diameters 2 mm, 4.1 mm, 1.6 mm, 1.9 mm, 2.8 mm. Weight of whole artifact . . .*

Yes, the only thing we knew about them after all these years was that they were too regular to be natural formation.

"Excuse me!" The elderly guide was bellowing up at me from somewhere around my left elbow, trying to make me move over so she could spiel about the display and get rid of her miserable band of children. I went. All the way out, back to the tunnel. I felt sick.

Wandering aimlessly along the damaged mural, I reached out and touched the tiles around the gaps in the picture, to see if any more were loose, wondering why those that fell had been taken—or thrown—away instead of being stuck back in place. With my fingertips I pried at each gap's edge in turn.

Something ought to be done about this, as about the leaking roof I'd seen . . . or dreamed I'd seen . . .

That one gave to the touch! I came back from my musing with a start, expecting to hear a thud as a dislodged tile landed

in the sand underfoot. No tile fell. Yet I was certain I'd felt a movement—was it this tile, the last I'd touched, or the one before?

The one before. But the sense in which it moved wasn't that of coming away. It stayed stuck fast in place, but the entire section of wall to which it was attached swung very slowly outward towards me.

Beyond, a small concealed room to which this formed the door. It was bare, lit by a single high fluorescent and containing among a few other chairs of ordinary plastic one special chair, chair, its back high as my own shoulder, chipped rather than carved from a block of Martian stone.

Memory came surging back on the instant, violent as the blasting rockets, and I stood in a dream of bewilderment as I struggled to organize the facts available to me. I had no way of telling how long I might have stayed rooted to the spot, for I was interrupted.

The room also held a man. A Centaur, wearing major's insignia. At my intrusion he had gasped and swung to face me and, during my spasm of total dissociation had snatched at a weapon lying on the seat of the stone chair. A nerve-whip.

"Come in, Engineer Mallin!" he rasped. "Pull the door to behind you!" And, when I failed to

stir, he added, "Move, you fool! You of all people should know I can use this thing!"

And when I still did not move, he used it.

Chapter 10

The door was ajar. At any moment someone might enter the tunnel—perhaps one of the bored children being shown over the Old Temple, eager to get away at the earliest possible opportunity—see it, come to investigate. Some such consideration must have made the major put his whip on medium rather than maximum, a setting capable of blotting out a bull's consciousness with pain, let alone a man's. At medium, I should be hurt enough to obey, yet retain sufficient strength to pull the door to, and the time taken would be less than if he rendered me unconscious where I was standing, so that I fell across the threshold and he had to drag me out of the way before he could shut the door himself.

Thus far I could read the major's thoughts as clearly as a page of print. Beyond that point I could only make guesses based on his open-mouthed expression of amazement and disbelief. When he whipped me, I might have been expected to double over like a man punched hard in the solar plexus. Instead, he

was the one who got hit—full on the front of the throat, the choking blow with the stiff fingers with which a dwarf can disable a giant, just above the Adam's apple. Like most men accustomed to dealing with—well—dwarfs, height six feet or so, he had no mental preparation for the reach of a Martian arm; like all men wary of low gravity, he unconsciously checked his faster movements for fear he should overshoot with them.

But this was only a part of the way I managed to take the whip away from him.

He had seen me freeze into a paralysis of shock as I opened the door, recognized the room and was engulfed by a sandstorm of recovered memory. He had mistakenly thought that all the rest of the time I was standing stockstill I was as petrified as during the first few heartbeats.

Not so. Far more had come blasting into my mind than merely the things that Thoder had tried to hide from me—it had to be Thoder's doing, my loss of yesterday, or at least he must have betrayed me into the hands of the person directly responsible. Barriers due to simple passage of time had been blown to splinters as well as those artificially imposed with the past day. Whole blocks of Thoder's teaching for which I had never found a use before suddenly integrated and

offered me escape from this accidental entrapment. Moreover, since I tried them out as childhood exercises I'd acquired the experience of an adult to guide me in their application. I could almost hear him saying what he had drilled into me about pain being a powerful reinforcement.

So, with pain assured . . .

There was the little bead on the string. Glancing at it casually, one would think that between the hole drilled at the top and that drilled at the bottom was a straight line. In fact it was curved thus:) . Let the string slacken, the bead slid down to the bottom rapidly. Pull it taut, and the bead stopped.

First I stopped it, to give myself time to analyze and digest the welter of information I'd recovered. I could hear a voice curiously drawling and deep, saying what seemed to be, "Ay . . . ay . . . aynnn . . . jee . . . nn . . . ee . . . aaarr . . . mmm . . . all . . . ll . . . ee . . . eenn . . ."

Engineer Mallin. The sound stretched like elastic.

So this was presumably Major Housk, the one who'd been looking for me at home. By implication he'd admitted that he was one of my interrogators of the night before last—indeed, he was the one who used the whip so cruelly. I ought to turn the tables. The way offered itself.

Pain was a reinforcement. I gathered my energies to take advantage of the certainty of violent pain, instructing myself in this elongated moment of now what I should do. When I was sure I would not miss with my outstretched fingers, but find the vulnerable area of his throat precisely, I prepared to let the string slacken to the fullest extent compatible with consciousness, so that the instant the first pain-messages were reported to my mind I would switch modes and my *now* would leap ahead at dozens of times the normal rate, dulling the pain to the subliminal level until I was safely in possession of the whip.

Of course, I had to return to a normal mode of perception before he could recover; otherwise he would have found me sluggish and easy prey. The return brought the aftermath of the whipping into temporal focus. I gasped and choked and my vision swam, but I was able to see that Housk was in a worse condition and I could spare the time to get to and shut the door.

I was none too soon. Already the tunnel outside was noisy with the clattering feet and high juvenile voices of the party of children leaving the Temple.

I came back and sat down in the huge stone chair. It was a sort of poetic balancing of the accounts to resume my place as in-

terrogator instead of victim. "Get up," I said to Housk, prodding him with my toe.

He moaned thickly. I put the whip on minimum—a level which most people find equivalent to being scalded by boiling water—and gave him a taste of his own medicine. That made him scramble to his feet.

"All the same, you Centaurs," I said bitterly. "Your arrogance must be a mask for insecurity. Still, who wouldn't be insecure, trying to keep his place in the peck-order while running the crazy treadmill you call a society? Is your name Housk?"

He gave a sullen nod. He was a stockily built man, about six-two, with coppery hair, pallid skin and grey eyes.

"Why did you come looking for me this morning?"

Silence. I gave him another short tickling, and when that failed gave him five of six in quick succession. I'd never tried this sort of thing before, but I remembered with diamond clarity how he'd gone about it when interrogating me. I was prepared to be a diligent pupil in his methods.

Cringing, he forced out words. "We—we had to get hold of you again!"

"You'd had me already, for several hours. Clearer!"

Sweat ran down his face in revolting streams. "We didn't think

anyone could have held out for so long—we thought you must have been telling the truth!”

“What made you change your mind?” I hefted the whip, but now he was talking I didn’t need to use it.

“Orders came. . .” He gulped and clutched his belly.

“What orders? Who from?”

“From—home. . .” He cosed his eyes and swayed. Evidently these trickling admissions were costing him dear. “They said you must know something, and when we found out that you’d been to Nizam—and then you turned out to have been a disciple of Thoder’s. . .”

Again that curious term “disciple,” when only “pupil” had ever been used by Thoder himself! But I didn’t care to pursue a mere academic distinction.

“Been watching me pretty closely, have you?”

“Uh—some of the time!” More gulping, then a resumption in haste before I could renew the agony. “We didn’t find out you were picked up by Nizam until after you’d been reported going to the herald’s.”

“What was so special about that? Wait, don’t tell me. I know that was how you first got on my track—you posed as a distant relative of mine and got the heralds to give you a family tree . . .

“Are we related?”

“Fifth—degree—cousins.”

“Seems unkind of you to greet your own kinfolk with this whip, then,” I grunted. “What made you so eager to get in touch, though? You still haven’t explained that.”

Mutinously he set his jaw. Obviously this was the limit of his betrayals of the Centaur cause; I’d come to the secret he meant to hang on to.

“Right, we’ll take it slowly. For some reason connected with my having been aboard the *Hippodamia*, you wanted to locate me. The heralds enabled you to identify Ray Mallin, four-space engineer, giving you a key to my background and what family connections I have. You then tortured me to find out whether I knew—well, whatever was so special about the *Hippodamia* on her last trip. Thinking I didn’t know, you let me go.

“Whereupon, as a result of further instructions from home, you regret having done so. You discover—how? Perhaps by a hint picked up off those four Centaur spacemen I guided to the herald’s—that last night I didn’t do the sensible thing and sleep off the effects of my whipping, but went to attend to some business of my own. Tracking back from there, you also discover that I was retrieved from the sandpile where you left me to drown by this Peter Nizam. Hmmm!” I

frowned. "You must therefore be keeping a careful watch on him—he assured me no one knew I was at his place." Out of the corner of my eye I looked to see how exact my deductions were, but pain-tension-overlay any betraying muscle-twitches in the Centaur's face.

"This leaves one important gap in our explanations. Tell me, what made you want to interrogate me in the first place?"

No reply. I put the whip up to medium and aimed it at his legs. He staggered and his face went pasty-white, but he remained silent.

I copied his sequence of operations, as before, and whipped his genital region. That blasted him open like a crashing spaceship, bringing words in a kind of scream.

"I don't know! Damn you, damn you, I don't *know*! All I was told to do was find you, question you about your last trip, report home—that's all, I swear it. *that's all!*"

Reluctantly I decided that, though disappointing, his claim was likely to be true. Centaurs were trained to uninquisitive obedience. Moreover, since at least three parties not counting myself were showing interest in the matter—Housk and his companions, Peter and Lilith and whoever they might represent, and apparently Thoder, though I

dared not guess why—the secret underlying the *Hippodamia's* last voyage might well be one the Centaurs wanted to keep from small fry like Housk.

Anyhow, this sort of interrogation wasn't on my orbit at all. My nausea from the brief whipping he'd given me on entering this room had faded, but it had been replaced by a worse kind due to the pain I was inflicting. Logic compelled me to put one more question before I desisted, however.

"What were you supposed to find out from me, then? They must have told you that much, at least, or you'd have been looking for a dark star in the Coal-sack!"

He shook his head, clamping his jaw tight against the mere idea of further admissions.

I raised the whip.

"Damn you!" The words were a shriek. "Why do you have to make me talk any more? You know all the rest, you must know it, but if they find out I told you any more they'll kill me!"

"Aren't they likely to kill you for talking as freely as you already have?"

He shook his head again and cast his eyes down. "I'll got busted to the ranks, but—but that's a Centaur whip you're holding. . ."

"In other words, who should know better than a Centaur how

hard it is to stand out against it?" I scowled at the nasty little weapon. "You have a point there. All right, I've done with you."

He looked at me like a model for one of those little Bear statuettes entitled *Apprehension*, fearing I didn't mean it.

"But beat this fact into your superiors' heads, will you? I did not, I do not, and if everyone else I meet is as dumb as you I'm not likely to, know whatever the hell it is you were trying to find out from me! And now—"

I thumbed the whip to maximum and knocked him out. As I knew from recent experience, that was a less cruel action than using the lower settings—it brought merciful release.

Then I searched this extraordinary concealed room, and was scarcely any the wiser. When I interrupted him, Housk had been peering into a gap between two of the rough stones forming the wall, large enough to accept two fingers. All I found in the hole

was a triangle of paper torn from the corner of a larger sheet, blank and white. The best idea which occurred to me was that the hole was what they used to call a "mail-drop" in the days of international spies—a place to be checked at intervals for reports from, or orders to, Centaur agents.

Reluctantly concluding that I could learn no more here, I considered my next step. It seemed logical to find out more about Peter Nizam and Lilith Choy. The precept wasn't one which would have satisfied Thoder, but the saying did go, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," and Nizam wasn't a name Housk had uttered in the tone reserved for one's allies.

As to Thoder . . . When I next saw him, and I fully intended to see him soon, I wasn't going to approach him as a kind of prodigal son, a lamb returning to the teacher's fold. Not by a million lightyears!

To Be Concluded

THE COMMUTER

(Continued from page page 140)

you remember your own son?"

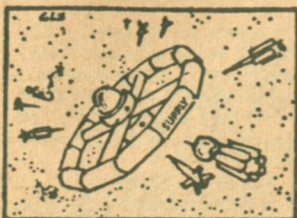
"Of course," Paine murmured, annoyed. He followed Laura slowly into the bedroom. "Just for a minute everything seemed strange." He rubbed his forehead, frowning. "Strange and unfamiliar. Sort of out of focus."

They stood by the crib, gazing

down at the baby. Jimmy glared back up at his mother and dad.

"It must have been the sun," Laura said. "It's so terribly hot outside."

"That must be it. I'm okay now." Paine reached down and poked at the baby. He put his arm around his wife, hugging her to him. "It must have been the sun," he said. He looked down into her eyes and smiled.



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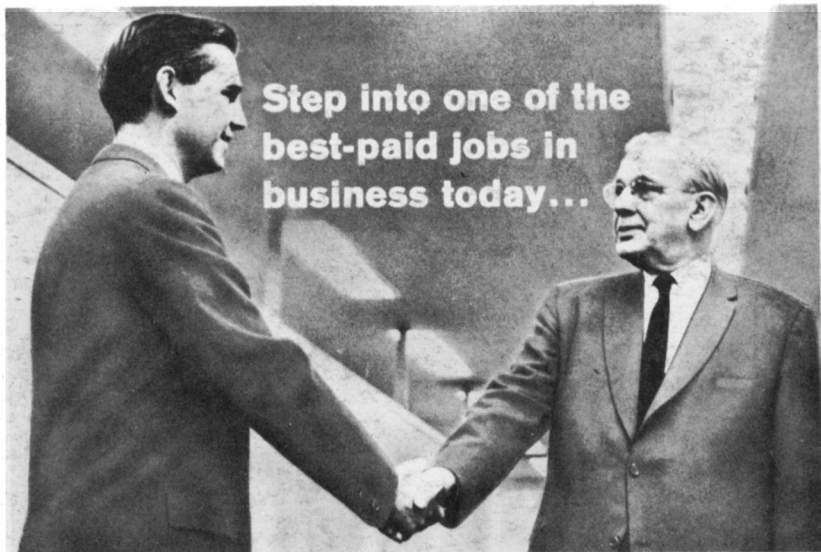
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