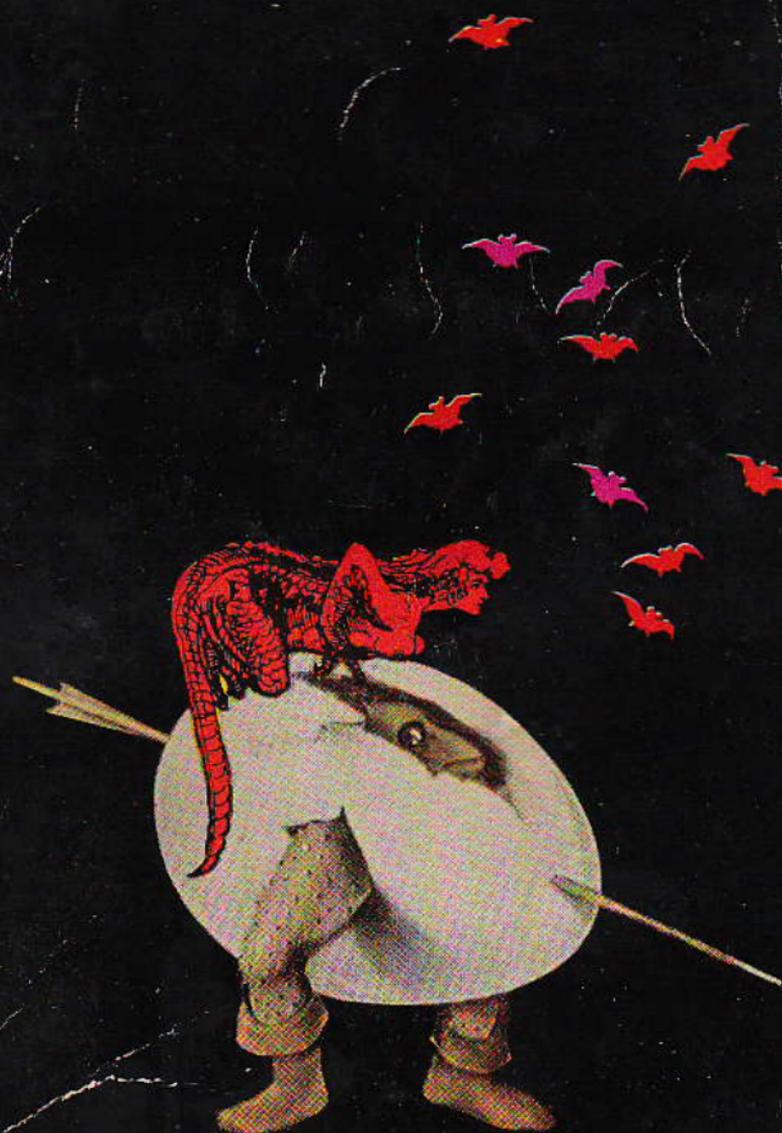


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NIGHTMARES AND GEEZENSTACKS





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these people thought they had the world by the tail— but the Geezenstacks had them by the tail!

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**NIGHTMARES
AND
GEEZENSTACKS**

47 STORIES **by**

Fredric

Brown

NIGHTMARES AND CHEZESTACKS

A Bantam Book / Published July 1961

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Sam A. Miller III

NASTY

Walter Beauregard had been an accomplished and enthusiastic lecher for almost fifty years. Now, at the age of sixty-five, he was in danger of losing his qualifications for membership in the lechers' union. In danger of losing? Nay, let us be honest; he had *lost*. For three years now he had been to doctor after doctor, quack after quack, had tried nostrum after nostrum. All utterly to no avail.

Finally he remembered his books on magic and necromancy. They were books he had enjoyed collecting and reading as part of his extensive library, but he had never taken them seriously. Until now. What did he have to lose?

In a musty, evil-smelling but rare volume he found what he wanted. As it instructed, he drew the pentagram, copied the cabalistic markings, lighted the candles and read aloud the incantation.

There was a flash of light and a puff of smoke. And the demon. I won't describe the demon except to assure you that you wouldn't have liked him.

"What is your name?" Beauregard asked. He tried to make his voice steady but it trembled a little.

The demon made a sound somewhere between a shriek and a whistle, with overtones of a bull fiddle being played with a crosscut saw. Then he said, "But you won't be able to pronounce that. In your dull language it would translate as Nasty. Just call me Nasty. I suppose you want the usual thing."

"What's the usual thing?" Beauregard wanted to know.

"A wish, of course. All right, you can have it. But not three wishes; that business about three wishes is sheer superstition. One is all you get. And you won't like it."

"One is all I want. And I can't imagine not liking it."

"You'll find out. All right, I know what your wish is. And here is the answer to it." Nasty reached into thin air and his

hand vanished and came back holding a pair of silvery-looking swimming trunks. He held them out to Beauregard. "Wear them in good health," he said.

"What are they?"

"What do they look like? Swimming trunks. But they're special. The material is out of the future, a few millenniums from now. It's indestructible; they'll never wear out or tear or snag. Nice stuff. But the spell on them is a plenty old one. Try them on and find out."

The demon vanished.

Walter Beauregard quickly stripped and put on the beautiful silvery swimming trunks. Immediately he felt wonderful. Virility coursed through him. He felt as though he were a young man again, just starting his lecherous career.

Quickly he put on a robe and slippers. (Have I mentioned that he was a rich man? And that his home was a penthouse atop the swankiest hotel in Atlantic City? He was, and it was.) He went downstairs in his private elevator and outside to the hotel's luxurious swimming pool. It was, as usual, surrounded by gorgeous Bikini-clad beauties showing off their wares under the pretense of acquiring sun tans, while they waited for propositions from wealthy men like Beauregard.

He took time choosing. But not too much time.

Two hours later, still clad in the wonderful magic trunks, he sat on the edge of his bed and stared at and sighed for the beautiful blonde who lay stretched out on the bed beside him, Bikiniless—and sound asleep.

Nasty had been so right. And so well named. The miraculous trunks, the indestructible, untearable trunks worked perfectly. But if he took them off, or even let them down . . .

ABOMINABLE

Sir Chauncey Atherton waved a farewell to the Sherpa guides who were to set up camp here and let him proceed alone. This was Abominable Snowman country, a few hundred miles north of Mount Everest, in the Himalayas. Abominable Snowmen were seen occasionally on Everest, on other Tibetan or Nepalese mountains, but Mount Oblimov, at the foot of which he was now leaving his native guides, was so thick with them that not even the Sherpas would climb it, but would here await his return, if indeed

he did. It took a brave man to pass this point. Sir Chauncey was a brave man.

Also, he was a connoisseur of women, which was why he was here and about to attempt, alone, not only a dangerous ascent but an even more dangerous rescue. If Lola Gabraldi was still alive, an Abominable Snowman had her.

Sir Chauncey had never seen Lola Gabraldi, in the flesh. He had, in fact, learned of her existence less than a month ago, when he had seen the one motion picture in which she had starred—and through which she had become suddenly fabulous, the most beautiful woman on Earth, the most pulchritudinous movie star Italy had ever produced, and Sir Chauncey could not understand how even Italy had produced her. In one picture she had replaced Bardot, Lolorigida, and Ekberg as the image of feminine perfection in the minds of connoisseurs of women everywhere, and Sir Chauncey was the top connoisseur anywhere. The moment he had seen her on the screen he had known that he must know her in the flesh, or die trying.

But by that time Lola Gabraldi had vanished. As a vacation after her first picture she had taken a trip to India and had joined a group of climbers about to make an assault on Mount Oblimov. The rest of the party had returned, Lola had not. One of them had testified that he had seen her, at a distance too great for him to reach her in time, abducted, carried off screaming by a nine-foot-high hairy more-or-less manlike creature. An Abominable Snowman. The party had searched for her for days before giving up and returning to civilization. Everyone agreed that there was no possible chance, now, of finding her alive.

Everyone except Sir Chauncey, who had immediately flown to India from England.

He struggled on, now high into the eternal snows. And in addition to mountain-climbing equipment he carried the heavy rifle with which he had, only the year before, shot tigers in Bengal. If it could kill tigers, he reasoned, it could kill Snowmen.

Snow swirled about him as he neared the cloud line. Suddenly, a dozen yards ahead of him, which was as far as he could see, he caught a glimpse of a monstrous not-quite-human figure. He raised his rifle and fired. The figure fell, and kept on falling; it had been on a ledge over thousands of feet of nothingness.

And at the moment of the shot arms closed around Sir

Chauncey from behind him. Thick, hairy arms. And then, as one hand held him easily, the other took the rifle from him and bent it into an L-shape as easily as though it had been a toothpick, and then tossed it away.

A voice spoke from a point about two feet above his head. "Be quiet, you will not be harmed." Sir Chauncey was a brave man, but a sort of squeak was all the answer he could make, despite the seeming assurance of the words. He was held so tightly against the creature behind him that he could not look upward and backward to see what its face was like.

"Let me explain," said the voice above and behind him. "We, whom you call Abominable Snowmen, are human, but transmuted. A great many centuries ago we were a tribe like the Sherpas. We chanced to discover a drug that let us change physically, let us adapt by increased size, hairiness, and other physiological changes to extreme cold and altitude, let us move up into the mountains, into country in which others cannot survive, except for the duration of brief climbing expeditions. Do you understand?"

"Y-y-yes," Sir Chauncey managed to say. He was beginning to feel a faint return of hope. Why would this creature be explaining these things to him, if it intended to kill him?

"Then I shall explain further. Our number is small, and we are diminishing. For that reason we occasionally capture, as I have captured you, a mountain climber. We give him the transmuting drug, he undergoes the physiological changes and becomes one of us. By that means we keep our number, such as it is, relatively constant."

"B-but," Sir Chauncey stammered, "is that what happened to the woman I'm looking for, Lola Gabraldi? She is now—eight feet tall and hairy and—"

"She *was*. You just killed her. One of our tribe had taken her as his mate. We will take no revenge for your having killed her, but you must now, as it were, take her place."

"Take her place? But—I'm a *man*."

"Thank God for that," said the voice above and behind him. He found himself turned around, held against a huge hairy body, his face at the right level to be buried between mountainous hairy breasts. "Thank God for that—because I am an Abominable Snowwoman."

Sir Chauncey fainted and was picked up and, as lightly as though he were a toy dog, was carried away by his mate.

REBOUND

The Power came to Larry Snell suddenly and unexpectedly, out of nowhere. How and why it came to him, he never learned. It just came; that's all.

It could have happened to a nicer guy. Snell was a small-time crook when he thought he could get away with stealing, but the bulk of his income, such as it was, came from selling numbers racket tickets and peddling marijuana to adolescents. He was fattish and sloppy, with little close-set eyes that made him look almost as mean as he really was. His only redeeming virtue was cowardice; it had kept him from committing crimes of violence.

He was, that night, talking to a bookie from a tavern telephone booth, arguing whether a bet he'd placed by phone that afternoon had been on the nose or across the board. Finally, giving up, he growled "Drop dead," and slammed down the receiver. He thought nothing of it until the next day when he learned that the bookie *had* dropped dead, while talking on the telephone and at just about the time of their conversation.

This gave Larry Snell food for thought. He was not an uneducated man; he knew what a whammy was. In fact, he'd tried whammies before, but they'd never worked for him. Had something changed? It was worth trying. Carefully he made out a list of twenty people whom, for one reason or another, he hated. He telephoned them one at a time—spacing the calls over the course of a week—and told each of them to drop dead. They did, all of them.

It was not until the end of that week that he discovered that what he had was not simply the whammy, but the Power. He was talking to a dame, a *top* dame, a stripteuse working in a top night club and making twenty or forty times his own income, and he had said, "Honey, come up to my room after the last show, huh?" She did, and it staggered him because he'd been kidding. Rich men and handsome playboys were after her, and she'd fallen for a casual, not even seriously intended, proposition from Larry Snell.

Did he have the Power? He tried it the next morning, before she left him. He asked her how much money she had

with her, and then told her to give it to him. She did, and it was several hundred dollars.

He was in business. By the end of the next week he was rich; he had made himself that way by borrowing money from everyone he knew—including slight acquaintances who were fairly high in the hierarchy of the underworld and therefore quite solvent—and then telling them to forget it. He moved from his fleabag pad to a penthouse apartment atop the swankiest hotel in town. It was a bachelor apartment, but need it he said that he slept there alone but seldom, and then only for purposes of recuperation.

It was a nice life but even so it took only a few weeks of it to cause it to dawn on Snell that he was wasting the Power. Why shouldn't he really use what he had by taking over the country first and then the world, make himself the most powerful dictator in history? Why shouldn't he have and own everything, including a harem instead of a dame a night? Why shouldn't he have an army to enforce the fact that his slightest wish would be everyone else's highest law? If his commands were obeyed over the telephone certainly they would be obeyed if he gave them over radio and television. All he had to do was pay for (pay for?, simply demand) a universal network that would let him be heard by everyone everywhere. Or almost everyone; he could take over when he had a simple majority behind him, and bring the others into line later.

But this would be a Big Deal, the biggest one ever swung, and he decided to take his time planning it so there would be no possibility of his making a mistake. He decided to spend a few days alone, out of town and away from everybody, to do his planning.

He chartered a plane to take him to a relatively uncrowded part of the Catskills, and from an inn—which he took over simply by telling the other guests to leave—he started taking long walks alone, thinking and dreaming. He found a favorite spot, a small hill in a valley surrounded by mountains; the scenery was magnificent. He did most of his thinking there, and found himself becoming more and more elated and euphoric as he began to see that it could and would work.

Dictator, hell. He'd have himself crowned Emperor. Emperor of the World. Why not? Who could defy a man with the Power? The Power to make anyone obey any command that he gave them, up to and including—

“Drop dead!” he shouted from the hilltop, in sheer vicious

exuberance, not caring whether or not anyone or anything was within range of his voice . . .

A teen-age boy and a teen-age girl found him there the next day and hurried back to the village to report having found a dead man on the top of Echo Hill.

NIGHTMARE IN GRAY

He awoke feeling wonderful, with the sun bright and warm upon him and spring in the air. He had dozed off—for less than half an hour, he knew, because the angle of shadows from the beneficent sun had changed but slightly while he slept—sitting upright upon the park bench; only his head had nodded and then fallen forward.

The park was beautiful with the green of spring, softer green than summer's, the day was magnificent, and he was young and in love. Wondrously in love, dizzily in love. And happily in love; only last night, Saturday night, he had proposed to Susan and she had accepted him, more or less. That is, she had not given him a definite yes but she had invited him this afternoon to meet her family and had said that she hoped he would love them and that they would love him—as she did. If that wasn't tantamount to an acceptance, what was? They'd fallen in love at sight, almost, which was why he had yet to meet her family.

Sweet Susan, of the soft brown hair, with the cute little nose that was almost pug, of the faint, tender freckles and the big soft brown eyes.

She was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to him, that could ever happen to anyone.

Well, it was midafternoon now and that was when Susan had asked him to call. He stood up from the bench and, since he found his muscles a bit cramped from the nap, yawned luxuriously. Then he started to walk the few blocks from the park where he had been killing time to the house he'd taken her home to last night, a short walk through the bright sunshine, the spring day.

He climbed the steps and knocked on the door. It opened and for a second he thought Susan herself had answered it, but the girl only looked like Susan. Her sister, probably; she'd mentioned having a sister only a year older than she.

He bowed and introduced himself, asked for Susan. He thought the girl looked at him strangely for a moment. Then she said, "Come in, please. She's not here at the moment, but if you'll wait in the parlor there—"

He waited in the parlor there. How odd of her to have gone out. Even briefly.

Then he heard the voice, the voice of the girl who had let him in, talking in the hallway outside and, in understandable curiosity, stood up and went to the hallway door to listen. She seemed to be talking into a telephone.

"Harry—*please come home right away*, and bring the doctor with you. Yes, it's Grandma . . . No, not another heart attack. Like the time before when he had amnesia and thought that Grandma was still— No, *not* senile dementia, Harry, just amnesia, but worse this time. Fifty years off—his memory is way back before he even married Grandma . . ."

Suddenly old, aged fifty years in fifty seconds, he wept silently as he leaned against the door . . .

NIGHTMARE IN GREEN

He awoke with full recollection of the decision, the big decision, he had made while lying here trying to go to sleep the night before. The decision that he must hold to without weakening if ever again he was to think of himself as a man, a whole man. He must be firm in demanding that his wife give him a divorce or all was lost and he would never again have the courage. It had been inevitable, he saw now, from the very start of their marriage six years ago, that this turning point, this tide of his affairs, would come.

To be married to a woman stronger than himself, stronger in every way, was not only intolerable but had been making him progressively more and more a helpless weakling, a hopeless mouse. His wife could, and did, best him at everything. An athlete, she could beat him easily at golf, at tennis, at everything. She could outride him and outhike him; she could drive a car better than he'd ever be able to. Expert at almost everything, she could make a fool of him at bridge or chess, even poker, which she played like a man. Worse, she had gradually taken over the reins of his business and financial affairs and could and did make more money than

he had ever made or hoped to make. There was no way in which his ego, what little was left of it, had not been bruised and battered over the years of their marriage.

Until now, until Laura had come along. Sweet, lovable little Laura who was their house guest this week and who was everything that his wife was not, fragile and dainty, adorably helpless and sweet. He was mad about her and knew that in her lay salvation for him. Married to Laura he could be a man again, and would be. And she would marry him, he felt sure; she *had* to for she was his only hope. This time he *had* to win, no matter what his wife said or did.

He showered and dressed quickly, dreading the coming scene with his wife but eager to get it over with while his courage lasted. He went downstairs and found his wife alone at the breakfast table.

She looked up as he came in. "Good morning, dear," she said. "Laura has finished breakfast and gone for a walk. I asked her to, so I could talk to you privately."

Good, he thought, sitting down across from her. His wife *had* seen what had been happening to him and was making things easier by bringing up the subject herself.

"You see, William," she said, "I want a divorce. I know this will come as a shock to you, but—Laura and I are in love with each other and are going away together."

NIGHTMARE IN WHITE

He awoke suddenly and completely, wondering why he had let himself drop off when he hadn't meant to, and quickly glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. It gleamed brightly in the otherwise utter darkness and told him that the time was only a few minutes after eleven o'clock. He relaxed; he'd taken only a very brief cat nap. He'd gone to bed here, on this silly sofa, less than half an hour ago. If his wife really was going to come to him, it was too early. She'd have to wait until she was positive that his damned sister was asleep, and sound asleep.

It was such a ridiculous situation. They'd been married only three weeks, were on their way back home from their honeymoon, and this was the first time he'd slept alone in that time—and all because of his sister Deborah's absurd insistence that they spend the night in her apartment here

on their way back home. Another four hours' driving would have got them there, but Debbie had insisted and finally carried her point. After all, he'd realized, a night's continence wouldn't hurt him, and he *had* been tired; it would be much better to face his last lap of driving fresh, in the morning.

Of course Debbie's apartment had only the one bedroom and he knew in advance, before accepting her invitation, that he could not possibly have accepted her offer to sleep, herself, out here and let him and Betty have the bedroom. There are degrees of hospitality which one cannot accept, even from one's own sweet and loving spinster sister. But he'd felt sure, or almost sure, that Betty would wait out his sister's going to sleep and come to join him, if only for a few affectionate moments—for she might be inhibited in giving more than that lest sounds might awaken Debbie—to give him a better "good night" than, under his sister's eyes, they'd indulged in.

Surely she'd come to him—at least for a *real* good night kiss, and if she was willing to risk going beyond that, so was he—and so he'd decided not to go to sleep right away, but to wait for her to come to him, at least for an hour or so.

Surely she would—yes, the door was opening quietly in the darkness and quietly closing again, only the faint click of the latch being really audible, and then there was the soft rustle of her nightgown or negligee or whatever falling, and she was under the covers with him, pressing her body against his, and the only conversation was his whispered "Darling . . ." and her whispered "Shhhh . . ." But what more conversation was needed?

None at all, none at all, but for the so-long so-short minutes until the door opened again, this time with glaring white light coming through it, outlining in white horror the silhouette of his wife standing there rigid and beginning to scream.

NIGHTMARE IN BLUE

He awoke to the brightest, bluest morning he had ever seen. Through the window beside the bed, he could see an almost incredible sky. George slid out of bed quickly, wide awake and not wanting to miss another min-

ute of the first day of his vacation. But he dressed quietly so as not to awaken his wife. They had arrived here at the lodge—loaned them by a friend for the week of their vacation—late the evening before and Wilma had been very tired from the trip; he'd let her sleep as long as she could. He carried his shoes into the living room to put them on.

Tousle-haired little Tommy, their five-year-old, came out of the smaller bedroom he'd slept in, yawning. "Want some breakfast?" George asked him. And when Tommy nodded, "Get dressed then, and join me in the kitchen."

George went to the kitchen but before starting breakfast, he stepped through the outside door and stood looking around; it had been dark when they'd arrived and he knew what the country was like only by description. It was virgin woodland, more beautiful than he'd pictured it. The nearest other lodge, he'd been told, was a mile away, on the other side of a fairly large lake. He couldn't see the lake for the trees but the path that started here from the kitchen door led to it, a little less than a quarter of a mile away. His friend had told him it was good for swimming, good for fishing. The swimming didn't interest George; he wasn't afraid of the water but he didn't like it either, and he'd never learned how to swim. But his wife was a good swimmer and so was Tommy—a regular little water rat, she called him.

Tommy joined him on the step; the boy's idea of getting dressed had been to put on a pair of swim trunks so it hadn't taken him long. "Daddy," he said, "let's go see the lake before we eat, huh, Daddy?"

"All right," George said. He wasn't hungry himself and maybe when they got back Wilma would be awake.

The lake was beautiful, an even more intense blue than the sky, and smooth as a mirror. Tommy plunged into it gleefully and George called to him to stay where it was shallow, not to swim out.

"I can swim, Daddy. I swim swell."

"Yes, but your mother's not here. You stay close."

"Water's warm, Daddy."

Far out, George saw a fish jump. Right after breakfast he'd come down with his rod and see if he could catch a lunch for them.

A path along the edge of the lake led, he'd been told, to a place a couple of miles away where rowboats could be

rented; he'd rent one for the whole week and keep it tied up here. He stared toward the end of the lake trying to see the place.

Suddenly, chillingly, there was an anguished cry, "*Daddy, my leg, it—*"

George whirled and saw Tommy's head way out, twenty yards at least, and it went under the water and came up again, but this time there was a frightening *glubbing* sound when Tommy tried to yell again. It must be a cramp, George thought frantically; he'd seen Tommy swim several times that distance.

For a second he almost flung himself into the water, but then he told himself: It won't help him for me to drown with him and if I can get Wilma there's at least a chance . . .

He ran back toward the lodge. A hundred yards away he started yelling "*Wilma!*" at the top of his voice and when he was almost to the kitchen door she came through it, in pajamas. And then she was running after him toward the lake, passing him and getting ahead since he was already winded, and he was fifty yards behind her when she reached the edge, ran into the water and swam strongly toward the spot where for a moment the back of the boy's head showed at the surface.

She was there in a few strokes and had him and then, as she put her feet down to tread water for the turn, he saw with sudden sheer horror—a horror mirrored in his wife's blue eyes—that she was standing on the bottom, holding their dead son, in only three feet of water.

NIGHTMARE IN YELLOW

He awoke when the alarm clock rang, but lay in bed a while after he'd shut it off, going a final time over the plans he'd made for embezzlement that day and for murder that evening.

Every little detail had been worked out, but this was the final check. Tonight at forty-six minutes after eight he'd be free, in every way. He'd picked that moment because this was his fortieth birthday and that was the exact time of day, of the evening rather, when he had been born. His mother had been a bug on astrology, which was why the moment of his birth had been impressed on him so exactly. He wasn't superstitious himself but it had struck his sense of

humor to have his new life begin at forty, to the minute.

Time was running out on him, in any case. As a lawyer who specialized in handling estates, a lot of money passed through his hands—and some of it had passed into them. A year ago he'd "borrowed" five thousand dollars to put into something that looked like a sure-fire way to double or triple the money, but he'd lost it instead. Then he'd "borrowed" more to gamble with, in one way or another, to try to recoup the first loss. Now he was behind to the tune of over thirty thousand; the shortage couldn't be hidden more than another few months and there wasn't a hope that he could replace the missing money by that time. So he had been raising all the cash he could without arousing suspicion, by carefully liquidating assets, and by this afternoon he'd have running-away money to the tune of well over a hundred thousand dollars, enough to last him the rest of his life.

And they'd never catch him. He'd planned every detail of his trip, his destination, his new identity, and it was foolproof. He'd been working on it for months.

His decision to kill his wife had been relatively an afterthought. The motive was simple: he hated her. But it was only after he'd come to the decision that he'd never go to jail, that he'd kill himself if he was ever apprehended, that it came to him that—since he'd die anyway if caught—he had nothing to lose in leaving a dead wife behind him instead of a living one.

He'd hardly been able to keep from laughing at the appropriateness of the birthday present she'd given him (yesterday, a day ahead of time); it had been a new suitcase. She'd also talked him into celebrating his birthday by letting her meet him downtown for dinner at seven. Little did she guess how the celebration would go after that. He planned to have her home by eight forty-six and satisfy his sense of the fitness of things by making himself a widower at that exact moment. There was a practical advantage, too, of leaving her dead. If he left her alive but asleep she'd guess what had happened and call the police when she found him gone in the morning. If he left her dead her body would not be found that soon, possibly not for two or three days, and he'd have a much better start.

Things went smoothly at his office; by the time he went to meet his wife everything was ready. But she dawdled over drinks and dinner and he began to worry whether he could get her home by eight forty-six. It was ridiculous, he

knew, but it had become important that his moment of freedom should come then and not a minute earlier or a minute later. He watched his watch.

He would have missed it by half a minute if he'd waited till they were inside the house. But the dark of the porch of their house was perfectly safe, as safe as inside. He swung the blackjack viciously once, as she stood at the front door, waiting for him to open it. He caught her before she fell and managed to hold her upright with one arm while he got the door open and then got it closed from the inside.

Then he flicked the switch and yellow light leaped to fill the room, and, before they could see that his wife was dead and that he was holding her up, all the assembled birthday party guests shouted "*Surprise!*"

NIGHTMARE IN RED

He awoke without knowing what had awakened him until a second temblor, only a minute after the first, shook the bed slightly and rattled small objects on the dresser. He lay waiting for a third shock but none came, not then.

He realized, though, that he was wide awake now and probably would not be able to go back to sleep. He looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch and saw that it was only three o'clock, the middle of the night. He got out of bed and walked, in his pajamas, to the window. It was open and a cool breeze came through it, and he could see the twinkling, flickering lights in the black sky and could hear the sounds of night. Somewhere, bells. But why bells at this hour? Ringing for disaster? Had the mild temblors here been damaging quakes elsewhere, nearby? Or was a real quake coming and the bells a warning, a warning to people to leave their houses and get out into the open for survival?

Suddenly, although not from fear but from a strange compulsion he had no wish to analyze, he wanted to be out there and not here. He had to run, he had to.

And he was running, down the hallway and out the front door, running silently in bare feet down the long straight walk that led to the gate. And through the gate that swung shut behind him and into the field . . . *Field?* Should there be a field here, right outside his gate? Especially a field dotted with posts, thick ones like truncated telephone poles

his own height? But before he could organize his thinking, try to start from scratch and remember where *here* was and who *he* was and what he was doing here at all, there was another temblor. More violent this time; it made him stagger in his running and run into one of the mysterious posts, a glancing blow that hurt his shoulder and deflected his running course, almost making him lose his footing. What was this weird compulsion that kept him going toward—what?

And then the real earthquake hit, the ground seemed to rise up under him and shake itself and when it ended he was lying on his back staring up at the monstrous sky in which now suddenly appeared, in miles-high glowing red letters a *word*. The word was *TILT* and as he stared at it all the other flashing lights went off and the bells quit ringing and it was the end of everything.

UNFORTUNATELY

Ralph NC-5 sighed with relief as he caught sight of Planet Four of Arcturus in the spotter scope, just where his computer had told him it would be. Arcturus IV was the only inhabited or inhabitable planet of its primary and it was quite a few light-years to the next star system.

He needed food—his fuel and water supplies were okay but the commissary department on Pluto had made a mistake in stocking his scouter—and, according to the space manual, the natives were friendly. They'd give him anything he asked for.

The manual was very specific on that point; he reread the brief section on the Arcturians as soon as he had set the controls for automatic landing.

"The Arcturians," he read, *"are inhuman, but very friendly. A pilot landing here need only ask for what he wants, and it is given to him freely, readily, and without argument.*

"Communication with them, however, must be by paper and pencil as they have no vocal organs and no organs of hearing. However, they read and write English with considerable fluency."

Ralph NC-5's mouth watered as he tried to decide what he wanted to eat first, after two days of complete abstinence from food, preceded by five days of short rations; a week ago he had discovered the commissary department's mistake in stocking his lockers.

Foods, wonderful foods, chased one another through his mind.

He landed. The Arcturians, a dozen of them and they were indeed inhuman—twelve feet tall, six-armed, bright magenta—approached him and their leader bowed and handed him paper and pencil.

Suddenly he knew exactly what he wanted; he wrote rapidly and handed back the pad. It passed from hand to hand among them.

Then abruptly he found himself grabbed, his arms pinioned. And then tied to a stake around which they were piling brushwood and sticks. One of them lighted it.

He screamed protests but they fell, not on deaf ears but on no ears at all. He screamed in pain, and then stopped screaming.

The space manual had been quite correct in saying that the Arcturians read and write English with considerable fluency. But it had omitted to add that they were very poor at spelling; else the *last* thing Ralph NC-5 would have requested would have been a sizzling steak.

GRANNY'S BIRTHDAY

The Halperins were a very close-knit family. Wade Smith, one of the only two non-Halperins present, envied them that, since he had no family himself—but the envy was tempered into a mellow glow by the glass in his hand.

It was Granny Halperin's birthday party, her eightieth birthday; everyone present except Smith and one other man was a Halperin, and was named Halperin. Granny had three sons and a daughter; all were present and the three sons were married and had their wives with them. That made eight Halperins, counting Granny. And there were four members of the second generation, grandchildren, one with his wife, and that made thirteen Halperins. Thirteen Halperins, Smith counted; with himself and the other non-Halperin, a man named Cross, that made fifteen adults. And there had been, earlier, three more Halperins, great-grandchildren, but they had been put to bed earlier in the evening, at various hours according to their respective ages.

And he liked them all, Smith thought mellowly, although now that the children had been abed a while, liquor was

flowing freely and the party was getting a bit loud and boisterous for his taste. Everyone was drinking; even Granny, seated on a chair not unlike a throne, had a glass of sherry in her hand, her third for the evening.

She was a wonderfully sweet and vivacious little old lady, Smith thought. Definitely, though, a matriarch; sweet as she was, Smith was thinking; she ruled her family with a rod of iron in a velvet glove; he was just inebriated enough to get his metaphors mixed.

He, Smith, was here because he'd been invited by Bill Halperin, who was one of Granny's sons; he was Bill's attorney and also his friend. The other outsider, a Gene or Jean Cross, seemed to be a friend of several of the grandson-generation Halperins.

Across the room he saw that Cross was talking to Hank Halperin and noticed that whatever they were saying had suddenly led to raised and angry voices. Smith hoped there wouldn't be trouble; the party was much too pleasant to be broken up now by a fight or even an argument.

But suddenly Hank Halperin's fist lashed out and caught Cross's jaw and Cross went backward and fell. His head hit on the stone edge of the fireplace with a loud *thunk* and he lay still. Hank quickly ran and knelt beside Cross and touched him, and then Hank was pale as he looked up and then stood up. "Dead," he said thickly. "God, I didn't mean to— But he said—"

Granny wasn't smiling now. Her voice rose sharp and querulously. "He tried to hit you first, Henry. I saw it. We all saw it, didn't we?"

She had turned, with the last sentence, to frown at Wade Smith, the surviving outsider.

Smith moved uncomfortably. "I—I didn't see the start of it, Mrs. Halperin."

"You did," she snapped. "You were looking right at them, Mr. Smith."

Before Wade Smith could answer, Hank Halperin was saying, "Lord, Granny, I'm sorry—but even that's no answer. This is *real* trouble. Remember I fought seven years in the ring as a pro. And the fists of a boxer or an ex-boxer are legally considered lethal weapons. That makes it second-degree murder even if he did hit first. You know that, Mr. Smith; you're a lawyer. And with the other trouble I've been in, the cops will throw the book at me."

"I—I'm afraid you're probably right," Smith said un-

easily. "But hadn't somebody better phone a doctor or the police, or both?"

"In a minute, Smith," Bill Halperin, Smith's friend, said. "We got to get this straightened out among ourselves first. It was self-defense, wasn't it?"

"I—I guess. I don't—"

"Wait, everybody," Granny's sharp voice cut in. "Even if it was self-defense, Henry's in trouble. And do you think we can trust this man Smith once he's out of here and in court?"

Bill Halperin said, "But, Granny, we'll have to—"

"Nonsense, William. I saw what happened. We all did. They got in a fight, Cross and Smith, and killed each other. Cross killed Smith and then, dizzy from the blows he'd taken himself, fell and hit his head. We're not going to let Henry go to jail, are we, children? Not a Halperin, not *one of us*. Henry, muss that body up a little, so it'll look like he was in a fight, not just a one-punch business. And the rest of you—"

The male Halperins, except Henry, were in a circle around Smith now; the women, except Granny, were right behind them—and the circle closed in.

The last thing Smith saw clearly was Granny in her throne-like chair, her eyes beady with excitement and determination. And the last thing Smith heard in the sudden silence which he could no longer make his voice penetrate was the soft sound of Granny Halperin's chuckling. Then the first blow rocked him.

CAT BURGLAR

The Chief of Police of Midland City owned two dachshunds, one of which was named Little Note and the other Long Remember. But this fact has nothing at all to do with cats or cat burglars, and this story concerns the concern of the said Chief of Police over a seemingly inexplicable series of burglaries—a one-man crime wave.

The burglar had broken and entered nineteen houses or apartments within a period of a few weeks. Apparently he cased his jobs carefully, since it could not have been coincidence that in each and every house he burglarized there was a cat.

He stole only the cat.

Sometimes there had been money lying loose in sight, some-

times jewelry; he ignored them. Returning householders would find a window or door forced, and their cat missing, nothing else was ever stolen or disturbed.

It was for this reason that—if we wish to belabor the obvious, and we do so wish—the newspapers and the public came to call him the Cat Burglar.

Not until his twentieth—and first unsuccessful—burglary attempt was he caught. With the help of the newspapers, the police had set a trap by publicizing the fact that the owners of a prize-winning Siamese cat had just returned with it from a cat show in a nearby city, where it won not only the best-of-breed prize, but the much more prized prize for the best of show.

Once this story, accompanied by a beautiful picture of the animal, had appeared in the newspapers, the police staked out the house and had the owners of it leave, and in an obvious manner.

Only two hours later the burglar appeared, broke into the house and entered it. They caught him cold on his way out, with the champion Siamese under his arm.

Downtown at the police station, they questioned him. The Chief of Police was curious, and so were the listening reporters.

To their surprise, the burglar was able to give a perfectly logical and understandable explanation of the unusual and specialized nature of his thefts. They didn't release him, of course, and eventually he was tried, but he received an exceedingly light sentence since even the judge agreed that, although his method of acquiring cats had been illegal, his purpose in acquiring them had been laudable.

He was an amateur scientist. For research in his field, he needed cats. The stolen cats he had taken home and put mercifully into eternal rest. Then he had cremated the cats in a small crematory which he had built for the purpose.

He had put their ashes in jars and was experimenting with them, pulverizing them to various degrees of fineness, treating different batches in different ways, and then pouring hot water over them. He had been trying to discover the formula for instant pussy.

THE HOUSE

He hesitated upon the porch and looked a last long look upon the road behind him and the green trees that grew beside it and the yellow fields and the distant hill and the bright sunlight. Then he opened the door and entered and the door swung shut behind him.

He turned as it clicked and saw only blank wall. There was no knob and no keyhole, and the edges of the door, if there were edges, were so cunningly fitted into the carved paneling that he could not discern its outline.

Before him lay the cobwebbed hallway. The floor was thick with dust and through the dust wound two so slender curving trails as might have been made by two very small snakes or two very large caterpillars. They were very faint trails and he did not notice them until he was opposite the first doorway to the right, upon which was the inscription *Semper Fidelis* in old English lettering.

Beyond this door he found himself in a small red room, no larger than a large closet. A single chair in this room lay on its side, one leg broken and dangling by a thin splinter. On the nearest wall the only picture was a framed portrait of Benjamin Franklin. It hung askew and the glass covering it was cracked. There was no dust upon the floor and the room appeared to have been recently cleaned. In the center of the floor lay a bright curved scimitar. There were red stains upon its hilt, and upon the edge of the blade was a thick coating of green ooze. Aside from these things the room was empty.

After he had stood in this room for a long time, he crossed the hallway and entered the room opposite. It was large, the size of a small auditorium, but the bare black walls made it seem smaller at a first glance. There was row upon row of purple-plush theater seats, but there was no stage or platform and the rows of seats started only a few inches from the blank wall they faced. There was nothing else in the room, but upon the nearest seat lay a neat pile of programs. One of these he took and found it blank save for two advertisements on the back cover, one for Prophylactic toothbrushes and the other for choice building lots in the Sub Rosa Subdivision. Upon a page near the front of the program he saw

that someone had written with a lead pencil the word or name *Garfinkle*.

He thrust the program into his pocket and returned to the hallway, along which he walked in search of the stairs.

Behind one closed door which he passed he heard someone, obviously an amateur, picking out tunes on what sounded like a Hawaiian guitar. He knocked upon this door but a scurrying of footsteps and silence was the only answer. When he opened the door and peered within he saw only a decaying corpse hanging from the chandelier, and an odor hurled itself upon him so nauseating that he closed the door hastily, and walked on to the stairway.

The stairway was narrow and winding. There was no banister, and he clung close to the wall as he ascended. He saw that the first seven steps from the bottom had been scrubbed clean but in the dust above the seventh step he saw again the two winding trails. Upon the third step from the top they converged, and vanished.

He entered the first door to his right and found himself in a spacious bedroom, lavishly furnished. He crossed immediately to the carved poster bed and pulled aside the curtains. The bed was neatly made, and he saw a slip of paper pinned to the smoothed pillow. Upon it was written hastily in a woman's handwriting, *Denver, 1909*. Upon the reverse side, neatly written in ink in another handwriting, was an algebraic equation.

He left this room quietly and stopped short just outside the door to listen to a sound that came from behind a black doorway across the hall.

It was the deep voice of a man chanting in a strange and unfamiliar tongue. It rose and fell in a monotonous cadence like a Buddhist hymn, yet over and over recurred the word *Ragnarok*. The word seemed vaguely familiar, and the voice sounded like his own voice, but muffled by many things.

With bowed head he stood until the voice died away into a blue trembling silence and twilight crept into the hallway with the stealth of a practiced thief.

Then as though awakening, he walked along the now-silent hallway until he came to the third and last door and he saw that they had printed his name upon the upper panel in tiny letters of gold. Perhaps radium had been mixed with the gold for the letters glowed in the hallway's dimness.

He stood for a long moment with his hand upon the knob,

and then at last he entered and closed the door behind him. He heard the click of the latch and knew that it would never open again, yet he felt no fear.

The darkness was a black tangible thing that sprang back from him when he struck a match. He saw then that the room was a counterpart of the east bedroom of his father's house near Wilmington, the room in which he had been born. He knew, now, just where to look for candles. There were two in the drawer, and the stump of a third, and he knew that, burned one at a time, they would last for almost ten hours. He lighted the first and stood it in the brass bracket on the wall, from whence it cast dancing shadows from each chair, from the bed, and from the small waiting cradle that stood beside the bed.

Upon the table beside his mother's sewing basket lay the March 1887 issue of *Harper's*, and he took up the magazine and glanced idly through its pages.

At length he dropped it to the floor and thought tenderly of his wife who had died many years ago, and a faint smile trembled upon his lips as he remembered a dozen little incidents of the years of days and nights they had spent together. He thought, too, of many other things.

It was not until the ninth hour when but half an inch of candle remained and darkness began to gather in the farther corners of the room and to creep closer, that he screamed, and beat and clawed at the door until his hands were a raw and bloody pulp.

SECOND CHANCE

Jay and I were in the stands at New Comiskey Field in Chicago to watch the replay of the October 9, 1959, game of the World Series, and play was about to start.

In the original game just exactly five hundred years ago, the Los Angeles Dodgers had won, nine to three, which had ended the series in six games and had given them the championship. Of course it could come out differently this time, although conditions at the start were as near as possible to those of the original game.

The Chicago White Sox were out on the field and the starting players were tossing the ball around the infield a few times before throwing it to Wynn, the starting pitcher, to take his warm-up pitches. Kluszewski was on first, Fox

on second, Goodman on third, and Aparicio was playing short. Gilliam was coming up to bat first for the Dodgers, with Neal on deck. Podres would be their starting pitcher.

They were not the original players of those names, of course. They were androids, artificial men who differ from robots in that they are made not of metal but of flexible plastics, powered by laboratory-grown muscles, and designed as exact simulacrum of human beings. These were as nearly exact replicas as possible of the original players of half a millennium ago. As with all reproduced athletes of ancient games and contests, early records, pictures, television films, and other sources had been exhaustively studied; each android not only looked like and played like the ancient player he represented, but was adjusted to be just as skillful as and no more skillful than his prototype. He hadn't played over an entire season—baseball is now limited to the set of World Series games played once a year on the semimillennial anniversaries of the original games—but if he had played for the whole season his batting and fielding averages would have been identical to those of the player he imitated; so would the earned-run average of the pitchers.

In theory the scores should come out the same as those of the individual games, but of course there are the breaks, and the fact that the respective managers—also androids—may choose to issue different instructions and make different substitutions. The same team usually wins the Series that originally won it, but not always in the same number of games, and the scores of individual games sometimes vary widely from the original scores.

This particular game kept the same score, nothing to nothing, for two innings, as the original, but it varied widely in the third; that had been the big inning for the Dodgers with six runs. This time Wynn let three men get on base with only one out, but managed to put out the fire and hold the Dodgers scoreless.

The stands and bleachers started roaring. And Jay, who favors the White Sox, made me a bet; he'd been afraid to offer even odds till that half inning was over.

In the sixth inning—but the game is on record, so why go into details? The White Sox did win, by a one-run margin, and stayed in the Series. It was three games apiece, and the Sox would have a chance tomorrow to make it a complete upset and win the championship.

Jay (his real name is J with twelve digits after it) and I

stood up to leave, as did the rest of the spectators. There was a wave of bright steel throughout the stands.

"I wonder," Jay said, "what it would be like to see a game really played by human beings, as it used to be."

"I wonder," I said, "what it would be like just to see a real human being. I'm less than two hundred and there haven't been any alive for at least four hundred years. How'd you like to go with me for a lube job? If I don't get one today I'll start getting rusty. And how do you want to bet on tomorrow's game? The White Sox have a second chance, even if the human race hasn't. Well, we keep their traditions alive as much as we can."

GREAT LOST DISCOVERIES I —

Invisibility

Three great discoveries were made, and tragically lost, during the twentieth century. The first of these was the secret of invisibility.

The secret of invisibility was discovered in 1909 by Archibald Praeter, emissary from the court of Edward VII to the court of Sultan Abd el Krim, ruler of a small state loosely allied to the Ottoman Empire.

Praeter, an amateur but enthusiastic biologist, was injecting mice with various serums for the purpose of finding an injection which would cause mutations. When he injected his 3019th mouse, the mouse disappeared. It was still there; he could feel it in his hand, but he could not see a hair or claw of it. He put it carefully in a cage and two hours later it appeared again, unharmed.

He experimented with increasing dosages and found that he could make a mouse invisible for up to twenty-four hours. Larger doses made it ill or torpid. He also learned that a mouse killed while invisible reappeared instantly at the moment of death.

Realizing the importance of his discovery, he wired his resignation to England, dismissed his servants and locked himself in his quarters, and began to experiment with himself. Starting with a small injection that made him invisible for only a few minutes, he worked up until he found his tolerance was equal to that of mice; an injection that made

him invisible for more than twenty-four hours also made him ill. He also found that although nothing of his body was visible, not even his dentures if he kept his lips closed, nudity was essential; clothing did not become invisible with him.

Praeter was an honest and fairly well-to-do man, so he did not think of crime. He decided to return to England and offer his discovery to His Majesty's government for use in espionage or war.

But he decided first to allow himself one indulgence. He had always been curious about the closely guarded harem of the Sultan to whose court he had been attached. Why not have a close look at it from inside?

Besides, something—some nagging thought that he couldn't quite isolate—bothered him about his discovery. There was some circumstance under which . . . He couldn't get beyond that point in his mind. An experiment was definitely in order.

He stripped and made himself invisible for the maximum period. It proved simple to walk past the armed eunuchs and enter the harem. He spent an interesting afternoon watching the fifty-odd beauties at their daytime occupation of keeping themselves beautiful, bathing and anointing their bodies with scented oils and perfumes.

One, a Circassian, especially attracted him. It occurred to him, just as it would have occurred to any man, that if he stayed the night—perfectly safe since he would be invisible until the following noon—he could keep her in sight to learn which room she slept in and, after the lights were out, join her; she would think the Sultan was favoring her with a visit.

He kept her in sight and noticed the room she entered. An armed eunuch took his post at the curtained doorway, others at each of the other doorways to the sleeping rooms. He waited until he was sure she would be asleep and then, at a moment when the eunuch was looking down the hall and would not see the movement of the curtain, he slipped through it. The light had been dim in the hallway; here the darkness was utter. But he groped carefully and managed to find the sleeping couch. Carefully he put out a hand and touched the sleeping woman. She screamed. (What he had not known was that the Sultan never visited the harem by night but sent for one, or sometimes several, of his wives to visit his own quarters.)

And suddenly the eunuch who had been outside was inside and had hold of him by the arm. The last thing he thought

was that he now knew the one worrisome circumstance of invisibility: it was completely useless in pitch darkness. And the last thing he heard was the swish of the scimitar.

GREAT LOST DISCOVERIES II —

Invulnerability

The second great lost discovery was the secret of invulnerability. It was discovered in 1952 by a United States Navy radar officer, Lieutenant Paul Hickendorf. The device was electronic and consisted of a small box that could be carried handily in a pocket; when a switch on the box was turned on the person carrying the device was surrounded by a force field whose strength, as far as it could be measured by Hickendorf's excellent mathematics, was as near as matters to infinite.

The field was also completely impervious to any degree of heat and any quantity of radiation.

Lieutenant Hickendorf decided that a man—or a woman or a child or a dog—enclosed in that force field could withstand the explosion of a hydrogen bomb at closest range and not be injured in the slightest degree.

No hydrogen bomb had been exploded to that time, but at the moment he completed his device, the lieutenant happened to be on a ship, cruiser class, that was steaming across the Pacific Ocean en route to an atoll called Eniwetok, and the fact had leaked out that they were to be there to assist in the first explosion of a hydrogen bomb.

Lieutenant Hickendorf decided to get lost—to hide out on the target island and be there when the bomb went off, and also to be there unharmed after it went off, thereby demonstrating beyond all doubt that his discovery was workable, a defense against the most powerful weapon of all time.

It proved difficult but he hid out successfully and was there, only yards away from the H-bomb—after having crept closer and closer during the countdown—when it exploded.

His calculations had been completely correct and he was not injured in the slightest way, not scratched, not bruised, not burned.

But Lieutenant Hickendorf had overlooked the possibil-

ity of one thing happening, and that one thing happened. He was blown off the surface of the earth with much more than escape velocity. Straight out, not even into orbit. Forty-nine days later he fell into the sun, still completely uninjured but unfortunately long since dead since the force field had carried with it enough air to last him only a few hours, and so his discovery was lost to mankind, at least for the duration of the twentieth century.

GREAT LOST DISCOVERIES III —

Immortality

The third great discovery made and lost in the twentieth century was the secret of immortality. It was the discovery of an obscure Moscow chemist named Ivan Ivanovitch Smetakovsky, in 1978. Smetakovsky left no record of how he made his discovery or of how he knew before trying it that it would work, for the simple reason that it scared him stiff, for two reasons.

He was afraid to give it to the world, and he knew that once he had given it even to his own government the secret would eventually leak through the Curtain and cause chaos. The U.S.S.R. could handle anything, but in the more barbaric and less disciplined countries the inevitable result of an immortality drug would be a population explosion that would most assuredly lead to an attack on the enlightened Communist countries.

And he was afraid to take it himself because he wasn't sure he *wanted* to become immortal. With things as they were even in the U.S.S.R.—not to consider what they must be outside it—was it really worth while to live forever or even indefinitely?

He compromised by neither giving it to anyone else nor taking it himself, for the time being, until he could make up his mind about it.

Meanwhile he carried with him the only dose of the drug he had made up. It was only a minute quantity that fitted into a tiny capsule that was insoluble and could be carried in his mouth. He attached it to the side of one of his dentures, so that it rested safely between denture and cheek and he would be in no danger of swallowing it inadvertently.

But if he should so decide at any time he could reach into his mouth, crush the capsule with a thumbnail, and become immortal.

He so decided one day when, after coming down with lobar pneumonia and being taken to a Moscow hospital, he learned from overhearing a conversation between a doctor and nurse who erroneously thought he was asleep, that he was expected to die within a few hours.

Fear of death proved greater than fear of immortality, whatever immortality might bring, so, as soon as the doctor and the nurse had left the room, he crushed the capsule and swallowed its contents.

He hoped that, since death might be so imminent, the drug would work in time to save his life. It did work in time, although by the time it had taken effect he had slipped into semicoma and delirium.

Three years later, in 1981, he was still in semicoma and delirium, and the Russian doctors had finally diagnosed his case and ceased to be puzzled by it.

Obviously Smetakovsky had taken some sort of immortality drug—one which they found it impossible to isolate or analyze—and it was keeping him from dying and would no doubt do so indefinitely if not forever.

But unfortunately it had also made immortal the pneumococci in his body, the bacteria (diplococci pneumoniae) that had caused his pneumonia in the first place and would now continue to maintain it forever. So the doctors, being realists and seeing no reason to burden themselves by giving him custodial care in perpetuity, simply buried him.

DEAD LETTER

Laverty stepped through the open French windows and crossed the carpet silently until he stood behind the gray-haired man working at the desk. "Hello, Congressman," he said.

Congressman Quinn turned his head and then rose shakily as he saw the revolver Laverty was pointing at him. "Laverty," he said. "Don't be a fool."

Laverty grinned. "I told you I'd do this someday. I've waited four years. It's safe now."

"You won't get away with it, Laverty. I left a letter, a letter to be delivered in case I'm ever killed."

Laverty laughed. "You're lying, Quinn. You couldn't have written such a letter without incriminating yourself by telling my motive. Why, you wouldn't want me tried and convicted—because the truth would come out, and it would blacken your name forever."

Laverty pulled the trigger six times.

He went back to his car, drove over a bridge to rid himself of the murder weapon, then home to his apartment and to bed.

He slept peacefully until his doorbell rang. He slipped on a bathrobe, went to the door and opened it.

His heart stood still, and stayed that way.

The man who had rung Laverty's doorbell had been surprised and shocked, but he had done the right thing. He had stepped over Laverty's body into the apartment and had used the phone there to call police emergency. And he had waited.

Now, Laverty having been pronounced dead by the emergency squad, the man was being questioned by a lieutenant of police.

"Your name?" the lieutenant asked.

"Babcock. Henry Babcock. I had a letter to deliver to Mr. Laverty. This letter."

The lieutenant took it, hesitated a moment, and then opened and unfolded it. "Why, it's just a blank sheet of paper."

"I don't know about that, Lieutenant. My boss, Congressman Quinn, gave me that letter a long time ago. My orders were to deliver it to Laverty right away if anything unusual ever happened to Congressman Quinn. So when I heard on the radio—"

"Yes, I know. He was found murdered late this evening. What kind of work did you do for him?"

"Well, it was secret, but I don't suppose the secret matters now. I used to take his place for unimportant speeches and meetings he wanted to avoid. You see, Lieutenant, I'm his double."

RECESSIONAL

The King my liege lord is a discouraged man. We understand and do not blame him, for the war has been long and bitter and there are so pathetically few of us left, yet we wish that it were not so. We sympathize with him for having lost his Queen, and we too all loved her—but since the Queen of the Blacks died with her, her loss does not mean the loss of the war. Yet our King, he who should be a tower of strength, smiles weakly and his words of attempted encouragement to us ring false in our ears because we hear in his voice the undertones of fear and defeat. Yet we love him and we die for him, one by one.

One by one we die in his defense, here upon this blooded bitter field, churned muddy by the horses of the Knights—while they lived; they are dead now, both ours and the Black ones—and will there be an end, a victory?

We can only have faith, and never become cynics and heretics, like my poor fellow Bishop Tibault. "We fight and die; we know not why," he once whispered to me, earlier in the war at a time when we stood side by side defending our King while the battle raged in a far corner of the field.

But that was only the beginning of his heresy. He had stopped believing in a God and had come to believe in gods, gods who play a game with us and care nothing for us as persons. Worse, he believed that our moves are not our own, that we are but puppets fighting in a useless war. Still worse—and how absurd!—that White is not necessarily good and Black is not necessarily evil, that on the cosmic scale it does not matter who wins the war!

Of course it was only to me, and only in whispers, that he said these things. He knew his duties as a bishop. He fought bravely. And died bravely, that very day, impaled upon the lance of a Black Knight. I prayed for him: *God, rest his soul and grant him peace; he meant not what he said.*

Without faith we are nothing. How could Tibault have been so wrong? White must win. Victory is the only thing that can save us. Without victory our companions who have died, those who here upon this embattled field have given their lives that we may live, shall have died in vain. *Et tu, Tibault.*

And you were wrong, so wrong. There is a God, and so great a God that He will forgive your heresy, because there was no evil in you, Tibault, except as doubt—no, doubt is error but it is not evil.

Without faith we are noth—

But something is happening! Our Rook, he who was on the Queen's side of the field in the Beginning, swoops toward the evil Black King, our enemy. The villainous one is under attack—and cannot escape. We have won! We have won!

A voice in the sky says calmly, "Checkmate."

We have won! The war, this bitter stricken field, was *not* in vain. Tibault, you were wrong, you were—

But what is happening now? The very Earth tilts; one side of the battlefield rises and we are sliding—White and Black alike—into—

—into a monstrous *box* and I see that it is a mass coffin in which already lie dead—

IT IS NOT FAIR; WE WON! GOD, WAS TIBAULT RIGHT? IT IS NOT JUST; WE WON!

The King, my liege lord, is sliding too across the squares—

IT IS NOT JUST; IT IS NOT RIGHT; IT IS NOT ...

HOBBYIST

"I heard a rumor," Sangstrom said, "to the effect that you—" He turned his head and looked about him to make absolutely sure that he and the druggist were alone in the tiny prescription pharmacy. The druggist was a gnome-like gnarled little man who could have been any age from fifty to a hundred. They were alone, but Sangstrom dropped his voice just the same. "—to the effect that you have a completely undetectable poison."

The druggist nodded. He came around the counter and locked the front door of the shop, then walked toward a doorway behind the counter. "I was about to take a coffee break," he said. "Come with me and have a cup."

Sangstrom followed him around the counter and through the doorway to a back room ringed by shelves of bottles from floor to ceiling. The druggist plugged in an electric percolator, found two cups and put them on a table that had a chair on either side of it. He motioned Sangstrom to

one of the chairs and took the other himself. "Now," he said. "Tell me. Whom do you want to kill, and why?"

"Does it matter?" Sangstrom asked. "Isn't it enough that I pay for—"

The druggist interrupted him with an upraised hand. "Yes, it matters. I must be convinced that you deserve what I can give you. Otherwise—" He shrugged.

"All right," Sangstrom said. "The *whom* is my wife. The *why*—" He started the long story. Before he had quite finished the percolator had finished its task and the druggist briefly interrupted to get the coffee for them. Sangstrom finished his story.

The little druggist nodded. "Yes, I occasionally dispense an undetectable poison. I do so freely; I do not charge for it, if I think the case is deserving. I have helped many murderers."

"Fine," Sangstrom said. "Please give it to me, then."

The druggist smiled at him. "I already have. By the time the coffee was ready I had decided that you deserved it. It was, as I said, free. But there is a price for the antidote."

Sangstrom turned pale. But he had anticipated—not this, but the possibility of a double-cross or some form of blackmail. He pulled a pistol from his pocket.

The little druggist chuckled. "You daren't use that. Can you find the antidote"—he waved at the shelves—"among those thousands of bottles? Or would you find a faster, more virulent poison? Or if you think I'm bluffing, that you are not really poisoned, go ahead and shoot. You'll know the answer within three hours when the poison starts to work."

"How much for the antidote?" Sangstrom growled.

"Quite reasonable. A thousand dollars. After all, a man must live. Even if his hobby is preventing murders, there's no reason why he shouldn't make money at it, is there?"

Sangstrom growled and put the pistol down, but within reach, and took out his wallet. Maybe after he had the antidote, he'd still use that pistol. He counted out a thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills and put it on the table.

The druggist made no immediate move to pick it up. He said: "And one other thing—for your wife's safety and mine. You will write a confession of your intention—your former intention, I trust—to murder your wife. Then you will wait till I go out and mail it to a friend of mine on the

homicide detail. He'll keep it as evidence in case you ever *do* decide to kill your wife. Or me, for that matter.

"When that is in the mail it will be safe for me to return here and give you the antidote. I'll get you paper and pen . . .

"Oh, one other thing—although I do not absolutely insist on it. Please help spread the word about my undetectable poison, will you? One never knows, Mr. Sangstrom. The life you save, if you have any enemies, just might be your own."

THE RING OF HANS CARVEL

(retold and somewhat modernized
from the works of Rabelais)

Once upon a time there lived in France a prosperous but somewhat aging jeweler named Hans Carvel. Besides being a studious and learned man, he was a likable man. And a man who liked women and although he had not lived a celibate life, or missed anything, had happened to remain a bachelor until he was—well, let's call his age as pushing sixty and not mention from which direction he was pushing it.

At that age he fell in love with a bailiff's daughter—a young and a beautiful girl, spirited and vivacious, a dish to set before a king.

And married her.

Within a few weeks of the otherwise happy marriage Hans Carvel began to suspect that his young wife, whom he still loved deeply, might be just a little *too* spirited, a little *too* vivacious. That what he was able to offer her—aside from money, of which he had a sufficiency—might not be enough to keep her contented. *Might* not, did I say? *Was* not.

Not unnaturally he began to suspect, and then to be practically certain, that she was supplementing her love life with several—or possibly even many—other and younger men.

This preyed on his mind. It drove him, in fact, to a state of distraction in which he had bad dreams almost nightly.

In one of these dreams, one night, he found himself talking to the Devil, explaining his dilemma, and offering the traditional price for something, *anything*, that would assure him of his wife's faithfulness.

In his dream, the Devil nodded readily and told Hans: "I will give you a magic ring. You will find it when you awaken. As long as you wear this ring it will be utterly and completely impossible for your wife to be unfaithful to you without your knowledge and consent."

And the Devil vanished and Hans Carvel awakened.

And found that he was indeed wearing a ring, as it were, and that what the Devil had promised him was indeed true.

But his young wife had also awakened and was stirring, and she said to him: "Hans, darling, not your finger. *That* is not what goes *there*."

VENGEANCE FLEET

They came from the blackness of space and from unthinkable distance. They converged on Venus—and blasted it. Every one of the two and a half million human beings on that planet, all the colonists from Earth, died within minutes, and all of the flora and fauna of Venus died with them.

Such was the power of their weapons that the very atmosphere of that suddenly doomed planet was burned and dissipated. Venus had been unprepared and unguarded, and so sudden and unexpected had been the attack and so quick and devastating had been its results that not a shot had been fired against them.

They turned toward the next planet outward from the sun, Earth.

But that was different. Earth was ready—not, of course, made ready in the few minutes since the invaders' arrival in the solar system, but ready because Earth was then—in 2820—at war with her Martian colony, which had grown half as populous as Earth itself and was even then battling for independence. At the moment of the attack on Venus, the fleets of Earth and Mars had been maneuvering for combat near the moon.

But the battle ended more suddenly than any battle in history had ever ended. A joint fleet of Terrestrial and Martian ships, suddenly no longer at war with one another, headed to intercept the invaders and met them between Earth and Venus. Our numbers were overwhelmingly su-

perior and the invading ships were blasted out of space, completely annihilated.

Within twenty-four hours peace between Earth and Mars was signed at the Earth capital of Albuquerque, a solid and lasting peace based on recognition of the independence of Mars and a perpetual alliance between the two worlds—now the only two habitable planets of the solar system—against alien aggression. And already plans were being drawn for a vengeance fleet, to find the base of the aliens and destroy it before it could send another fleet against us.

Instruments on Earth and on patrol ships a few thousand miles above her surface had detected the arrival of the aliens—though not in time to save Venus—and the readings of those instruments showed the direction from which the aliens had come and indicated, although not showing exactly how far they had come, that they had come from an almost incredible distance.

A distance that would have been too great for us to span had not the C-plus drive—which enabled a ship to build up to a speed many times the speed of light—just been invented. It had not yet been used because the Earth-Mars war had taken all the resources of both planets, and the C-plus drive had no advantages within the solar system since vast distances were required for the purpose of building up to faster-than-light speeds.

Now, however, it had a very definite purpose; Earth and Mars combined their efforts and their technologies to build a fleet equipped with the C-plus drive for the purpose of sending it against the aliens' home planet to wipe it out. It took ten years, and it was estimated that the trip would take another ten.

The vengeance fleet—not large in numbers but incredibly powerful in armament—left Marsport in 2830.

Nothing was ever heard of it again.

Not until almost a century later did its fate become known, and then only by deductive reasoning on the part of Joa Spencer 4, the great historian and mathematician.

"We now know," Spencer wrote, "and have known for some time, that an object exceeding the speed of light travels backward in time. Therefore the vengeance fleet would have reached its destination, by our time, before it started.

"We have not known, until now, the dimensions of the universe in which we live. But from the experience of the vengeance fleet, we can now deduce them. In one direction,

at least, the universe is C° miles around—or across; they mean the same thing. In ten years, traveling forward in space and backward in time, the fleet would have traversed just that distance—186,334^{186,334} miles. The fleet, traveling in a straight line, circled the universe, as it were, to its point of departure ten years before it left. It destroyed the first planet it saw and then, as it headed for the next, its admiral must have suddenly recognized the truth—and must have recognized, too, the fleet that came to meet it—and must have given a cease-fire order the instant the Earth-Mars fleet reached them.

“It is truly startling—and a seeming paradox—to realize that the vengeance fleet was headed by Admiral Barlo, who had also been admiral of the Earth fleet during the Earth-Mars conflict at the time the Earth and Mars fleets combined to destroy what they thought were alien invaders, and that many other men in both fleets on that day later became part of the personnel of the vengeance fleet.

“It is interesting to speculate just what would have happened had Admiral Barlo, at the end of his journey, recognized Venus in time to avoid destroying it. But such speculation is futile; he could not possibly have done so, for he had *already* destroyed it—else he would not have been there as admiral of the fleet sent out to avenge it. The past cannot be altered.”

ROPE TRICK

Mr. and Mrs. George Darnell—her first name was Elsie, if that matters—were taking a honeymoon trip around the world. A *second* honeymoon, starting on the day of their twentieth anniversary. George had been in his thirties and Elsie in her twenties on the occasion of their first honeymoon—which, if you wish to check me on your slide rule, indicates that George was now in his fifties and Elsie in her forties.

Her dangerous forties (this phrase can be applied to a woman as well as to a man) and very, very disappointed with what had been happening—or, more specifically, had *not* been happening—during the first three weeks of their second honeymoon. To be completely honest, nothing, absolutely nothing had happened.

Until they reached Calcutta.

They checked into a hotel there early one afternoon and after freshening up a bit decided to wander about and see as much of the city as could be seen in the one day and night they planned to spend there.

They came to the bazaar.

And there watched a Hindu fakir performing the Indian rope trick. Not the spectacular and complicated version in which a boy climbs the rope and—well, you know the story of how the full-scale Indian rope trick is performed.

This was a quite simplified version. The fakir, with a short length of rope coiled on the ground in front of him, played over and over a few simple notes on a flageolet—and gradually, as he played, the rope began to rise into the air and stand rigid.

This gave Elsie Darnell a wonderful idea—although she did not mention it to George. She returned with him to their room at the hotel and, after dinner, waited until he went to sleep—as always, at nine o'clock.

Then she quietly left the room and the hotel. She found a taxi driver and an interpreter and, with both of them, went back to the bazaar and found the fakir.

Through the interpreter she managed to buy from the fakir the flageolet which she had heard him play and paid him to teach her to play the few simple repetitious notes which had made the rope rise.

Then she returned to the hotel and to their room. Her husband George was sleeping soundly—as he always did.

Standing beside the bed Elsie very softly began to play the simple tune on the flageolet.

Over and over.

And as she played it—gradually—the sheet began to rise, over her sleeping husband.

When it had risen to a sufficient height she put down the flageolet and, with a joyful cry, threw back the sheet.

And there, standing straight in the air, was the drawstring of his pajamas!

FATAL ERROR

Mr. Walter Baxter had long been an avid reader of crime and detective stories, so when he decided to murder his uncle he knew that he must not make a single error.

And that, to avoid the possibility of making an error, simplicity must be the keynote. Utter simplicity. No arranging of an alibi that might be broken. No complicated *modus operandi*. No red herrings.

Well—one small herring. A very simple one. He'd have to rob his uncle's house, too, of whatever cash it contained so the murder would appear to have been incidental to a burglary. Otherwise, as his uncle's only heir, he himself would be too obvious a suspect.

He took his time in acquiring a small crowbar in such a manner that it could not possibly be traced to him. It would serve him both as a tool and a weapon.

He planned carefully every trifling detail, knowing he dared make no single error and certain that he would not. He chose the night and the hour with care.

The crowbar opened a window easily and without noise. He entered the living room. The door to the bedroom was ajar, but as no sound came from it he decided to get the details of burglary over with first. He knew where his uncle kept the cash, but he'd have to make it look as though a search had been made. There was enough moonlight to let him see his way; he moved silently . . .

At home two hours later he undressed quickly and got into bed. No chance of the police learning of the crime before tomorrow, but he was ready if they did come sooner. The money and the crowbar had been disposed of; it had hurt him to destroy several hundred dollars but it was the only safe way, and it would be nothing to the fifty thousand or more he'd inherit.

There was a knock at the door. Already? He made himself calm; he went to the door and opened it. The sheriff and a deputy pushed their way in.

"Walter Baxter? Warrant for your arrest. Dress and come with us."

"A warrant for my arrest? What for?"

"Burglary and grand larceny. Your uncle saw and recognized you from the bedroom doorway—stayed quiet till you left and then came downtown and swore out—"

Walter Baxter's jaw dropped. He *had* made an error after all.

He'd planned the perfect murder but, in his engrossment with the burglary, had forgotten to commit it.

THE SHORT HAPPY LIVES OF EUSTACE WEAVER I

When Eustace Weaver invented his time machine he was a very happy man. He knew that he had the world by the tail on a downhill pull, as long as he kept his invention a secret. He could become the richest man in the world, wealthy beyond the dreams of avarice. All he had to do was to take short trips into the future to learn what stocks had gone up and which horses had won races, then come back to the present and buy those stocks or bet on those horses.

The races would come first of course because he would need a lot of capital to play the market, whereas, at a track, he could start with a two-dollar bet and quickly parlay it into the thousands. But it would have to be at a track; he'd too quickly break any bookie he played with, and besides he didn't know any bookies. Unfortunately the only tracks operating at the present were in Southern California and in Florida, about equidistant and about a hundred dollars' worth of plane fare away. He didn't have a fraction of that sum, and it would take him weeks to save that much out of his salary as stock clerk at a supermarket. It would be horrible to have to wait that long, even to start getting rich.

Suddenly he remembered the safe at the supermarket where he worked—an afternoon-evening shift from one o'clock until the market closed at nine. There'd be at least a thousand dollars in that safe, and it had a time lock. What could be better than a time machine to beat a time lock?

When he went to work that day he took his machine with him; it was quite compact and he'd designed it to fit into a camera case he already had so there was no difficulty involved in bringing it into the store, and when he put his coat and hat into his locker he put the time machine there too.

He worked his shift as usual until a few minutes before closing time. Then he hid behind a pile of cartons in the stock room. He felt sure that in the general exodus he wouldn't be missed, and he wasn't. Just the same he waited in his hiding place almost a full hour to make sure everyone else had left. Then he emerged, got his time machine

from the locker, and went to the safe. The safe was set to unlock itself automatically in another eleven hours; he set his time machine for just that length of time.

He took a good grip on the safe's handle—he'd learned by an experiment or two that anything he wore, carried, or hung onto traveled with him in time—and pressed the stud.

He felt no transition, but suddenly he heard the safe's mechanism click open—but at the same moment heard gasps and excited voices behind him. And he whirled, suddenly realizing the mistake he'd made; it was nine o'clock the next morning and the store's employees—those on the early shift—were already there, had missed the safe and had been standing in a wondering semicircle about the spot where it had stood—when the safe and Eustace Weaver had suddenly appeared.

Luckily he still had the time machine in his hand. Quickly he turned the dial to zero—which he had calibrated to be the exact moment when he had completed it—and pressed the stud.

And, of course, he was back before he had started and . . .

THE SHORT HAPPY LIVES OF EUSTACE WEAVER II

When Eustace Weaver invented his time machine he knew that he had the world by the tail on a downhill pull, as long as he kept his invention a secret. To become rich all he had to do was take short trips into the future to see what horses were going to win and what stocks were going up, then come back and bet the horses or buy the stocks.

The horses came first because they would require less capital—but he didn't have even two dollars to make a bet, let alone plane fare to the nearest track where horses were running.

He thought of the safe in the supermarket where he worked as a stock clerk. That safe had at least a thousand dollars in it, and it had a time lock. A time lock should be duck soup for a time machine.

So when he went to work that day he took his time machine with him in a camera case and left it in his locker. When they closed at nine he hid out in the stock room and

waited an hour till he was sure everyone else had left. Then he got the time machine from his locker and went with it to the safe.

He set the machine for eleven hours ahead—and then had a second thought. That setting would take him to nine o'clock the next morning. The safe would click open then, but the store would be opening too and there'd be people around. So instead he set the machine for twenty-four hours, took hold of the handle of the safe and then pressed the button on the time machine.

At first he thought nothing had happened. Then he found that the handle of the safe worked when he turned it and he knew that he'd made the jump to evening of the next day. And of course the time mechanism of the safe had unlocked it en route. He opened the safe and took all the paper money in it, stuffing it into various pockets.

He went to the alley door to let himself out, but before he reached for the bolt that kept it locked from the inside he had a sudden brilliant thought. If instead of leaving by a door he left by using his time machine he'd not only increase the mystery by leaving the store tightly locked and thereby increasing the mystery, but he'd be taking himself back in time as well as in place to the moment of his completing the time machine, a day and a half *before* the robbery.

And by the time the robbery took place he could be soundly alibied; he'd be staying at a hotel in Florida or California, in either case over a thousand miles from the scene of the crime. He hadn't thought of his time machine as a producer of alibis, but now he saw that it was perfect for the purpose.

He dialed his time machine to zero and pressed the button.

THE SHORT HAPPY LIVES OF EUSTACE WEAVER III

When Eustace Weaver invented his time machine he knew that he had the world by the tail on a downhill pull, as long as he kept his invention a secret. By playing the races and the stock market he could make himself fabulously wealthy in no time at all. The only catch was that he was flat broke.

Suddenly he remembered the store where he worked and

the safe in it that worked with a time lock. A time lock should be no sweat at all for a man who had a time machine.

He sat down on the edge of his bed to think. He reached into his pocket for his cigarettes and pulled them out—but with them came paper money, a handful of ten-dollar bills! He tried other pockets and found money in each and every one. He stacked it on the bed beside him, and by counting the big bills and estimating the smaller ones, he found he had approximately fourteen hundred dollars.

Suddenly he realized the truth, and laughed. He had *already* gone forward in time and emptied the supermarket safe and then had used the time machine to return to the point in time where he had invented it. And since the burglary had not yet, in normal time, occurred, all he had to do was get the hell out of town and be a thousand miles away from the scene of the crime when it did happen.

Two hours later he was on a plane bound for Los Angeles—and the Santa Anita track—and doing some heavy thinking. One thing that he had not anticipated was the apparent fact that when he took a jaunt into the future and came back he had no memory of whatever it was that hadn't happened yet.

But the money had come back with him. So, then, would notes written to himself, or Racing Forms or financial pages from newspapers? It would work out.

In Los Angeles he took a cab downtown and checked in at a good hotel. It was late evening by then and he briefly considered jumping himself into the next day to save waiting time, but he realized that he was tired and sleepy. He went to bed and slept until almost noon the next day.

His taxi got tangled in a jam on the freeway so he didn't get to the track at Santa Anita until the first race was over but he was in time to read the winner's number on the tote board and to check it on his dope sheet. He watched five more races, not betting but checking the winner of each race and decided not to bother with the last race. He left the grandstand and walked around behind and under it, a secluded spot where no one could see him. He set the dial of his time machine two hours back, and pressed the stud.

But nothing happened. He tried again with the same result and then a voice behind him said, "It won't work. It's in a deactivating field."

He whirled around and there standing right behind him

were two tall, slender young men, one blond and the other dark, and each of them with a hand in one pocket as though holding a weapon.

"We are Time Police," the blond one said, "from the twenty-fifth century. We have come to punish you for illegal use of a time machine."

"B-b-but," Weaver sputtered, "h-how could I have known that racing was—" His voice got a little stronger. "Besides I haven't made any bets yet."

"That is true," the blond young man said. "And when we find any inventor of a time machine using it to win at any form of gambling, we give him warning the first time. But we've traced you back and find out your very first use of the time machine was to steal money from a store. And that is a crime in any century." He pulled from his pocket something that looked vaguely like a pistol.

Eustace Weaver took a step backward. "Y-you don't mean—"

"I do mean," said the blond young man, and he pulled the trigger. And this time, with the machine deactivated, it was the end for Eustace Weaver.

EXPEDITION

"The first major expedition to Mars," said the history professor, "the one which followed the preliminary exploration by one-man scout ships and aimed to establish a permanent colony, led to a great number of problems. One of the most perplexing of which was: How many men and how many women should comprise the expedition's personnel of thirty?"

"There were three schools of thought on the subject.

"One was that the ship should be comprised of fifteen men and fifteen women, many of whom would no doubt find one another suitable mates and get the colony off to a fast start.

"The second was that the ship should take twenty-five men and five women—ones who were willing to sign a waiver on monogamous inclinations—on the grounds that five women could easily keep twenty-five men sexually happy and twenty-five men could keep five women even happier.

"The third school of thought was that the expedition should contain thirty men, on the grounds that under those

circumstances the men would be able to concentrate on the work at hand much better. And it was argued that since a second ship would follow in approximately a year and could contain mostly women, it would be no hardship for the men to endure celibacy that long. Especially since they were used to it; the two Space Cadet schools, one for men and one for women, rigidly segregated the sexes.

"The Director of Space Travel settled this argument by a simple expedient. He— Yes, Miss Ambrose?" A girl in the class had raised her hand.

"Professor, was that expedition the one headed by Captain Maxon? The one they called Mighty Maxon? Could you tell us how he came to have that nickname?"

"I'm coming to that, Miss Ambrose. In lower schools you have been told the story of the expedition, but not the *entire* story; you are now old enough to hear it.

"The Director of Space Travel settled the argument, cut the Gordian knot, by announcing that the personnel of the expedition would be chosen by lot, regardless of sex, from the graduating classes of the two space academies. There is little doubt that he personally favored twenty-five men to five women—because the men's school had approximately five hundred in the graduating class and the women's school had approximately one hundred. By the law of averages the ratio of winners should have been five men to one woman.

"However the law of averages does not always work out on any one particular series. And it so happened that on this particular drawing *twenty-nine* women drew winning chances, and only *one* man won.

"There were loud protests from almost everyone except the winners, but the director stuck to his guns; the drawing had been honest and he refused to change the status of any of the winners. His only concession to appease male egos was to appoint Maxon, the one man, captain. The ship took off and had a successful voyage.

"And when the second expedition landed, they found the population doubled. Exactly doubled—every woman member of the expedition had a child, and one of them had twins, making a total of exactly thirty infants.

"Yes, Miss Ambrose, I see your hand, but please let me finish. No, there is nothing spectacular about what I have thus far told you. Although many people would think loose morals were involved, it is no great feat for one man, given time, to impregnate twenty-nine women.

"What gave Captain Maxon his nickname is the fact that work on the second ship went much faster than scheduled and the second expedition did not arrive one year later, but only nine months and two days later.

"Does that answer your question, Miss Ambrose?"

BRIGHT BEARD

She had been frightened, badly frightened, ever since her father had given her in marriage to the strange big man with the bright beard.

There was something so—so sinister about him, about his great strength, about his hawklike eyes and the way they watched her. And there was that rumor—but of course it was *only* a rumor—that he'd had other wives and that nobody knew what had happened to them. And there was that strange business of the closet which he had warned her that she must never enter or even look into.

Until today she had obeyed him—especially after she had tried the door of the closet and found that it was kept locked.

But now she stood in front of it with the key, or what she felt sure was the key, in her hand. It was a key she had found only an hour ago in her husband's den; it had no doubt dropped from one of his pockets, and it looked just the right size for the keyhole of the door to the forbidden closet.

She tried it now and it *was* the right key; the door opened. Inside the closet was—not what she had, however subconsciously, feared to find, but something more bewildering. Bank upon bank of what looked like tremendously complicated electronic equipment.

"Well, my dear," said a sardonic voice from just behind her, "do you know what it is?"

She whirled to face her husband. "Why—I think it's—it looks like—"

"Exactly, my dear. It's a radio, but an extremely powerful one which can transmit and receive over interplanetary distances. With it I can and do communicate with the planet Venus. You see, my dear, I am a Venusian."

"But I don't under—"

"You don't have to understand, but I may as well tell you—now. I am a Venusian spy, advance guard, as it were, for a pending invasion of Earth. What did you think? That my beard is blue and that you would find a closet of

murdered former wives? I know that you are color-blind, but surely your father told you my beard is red?"

"Of course, but—"

"But your father was wrong. He saw it as red, since whenever I leave the house I dye my hair and beard red, with an easily removable dye. At home, however, I prefer to have it its natural color, which is green. That is why I chose a color-blind wife, since she would not notice the difference.

"That is why all of my wives have been chosen, because they were color-blind." He sighed deeply. "Alas, regardless of the color of my beard, sooner or later each one of them became too curious, too inquisitive, as you have. But I do not keep them in a closet; they are all buried in the cellar."

His terribly strong hand closed about her upper arm. "Come, my dear, and I will show you their graves."

JAYCEE

"Walter, what's a Jaycee?" Mrs. Ralston asked her husband, Dr. Ralston, across the breakfast table.

"Why—I believe it used to be a member of what they called a Junior Chamber of Commerce. I don't know if they still have them or not. Why?"

"Martha said Henry was muttering something yesterday about Jaycees, fifty million Jaycees. And swore at her when she asked what he meant." Martha was Mrs. Graham and Henry her husband, Dr. Graham. They lived next door and the two doctors and their wives were close friends.

"Fifty million," said Dr. Ralston musingly. "That's how many parthies there are."

He should have known; he and Dr. Graham together were responsible for parthies—parthenogenetic births. Twenty years ago, in 1980, they had together engineered the first experiment in human parthenogenesis, the fertilization of a female cell without the help of a male one. The offspring of that experiment, named John, was now twenty years old and lived with Dr. and Mrs. Graham next door; he had been adopted by them after the death of his mother in an accident some years before.

No other parthie was more than half John's age. Not until John was ten, and obviously healthy and normal, had the authorities let down bars and permitted any woman who wanted a child and who was either single or married to

a sterile husband to have a child parthenogenetically. Due to the shortage of men—the disastrous testerosis epidemic of the 1970s had just killed off almost a third of the male population of the world—over fifty million women had applied for parthenogenetic children and borne them. Luckily for redressing the balance of the sexes, it had turned out that all parthenogenetically conceived children were males.

“Martha thinks,” said Mrs. Ralston, “that Henry’s worrying about John, but she can’t think why. He’s such a *good* boy.”

Dr. Graham suddenly and without knocking burst into the room. His face was white and his eyes wide as he stared at his colleague. “I was right,” he said.

“Right about what?”

“About John. I didn’t tell anyone, but do you know what he did when we ran out of drinks at the party last night?”

Dr. Ralston frowned. “Changed water into wine?”

“Into gin; we were having martinis. And just now he left to go water skiing—and he isn’t taking any water skis. Told me that with faith he wouldn’t need them.”

“Oh, *no*,” said Dr. Ralston. He dropped his head into his hands.

Once before in history there’d been a virgin birth. Now fifty million virgin-born boys were growing up. In ten more years there’d be fifty million—Jaycees.

“No,” sobbed Dr. Ralston, “*no!*”

CONTACT

Dhar Ry sat alone in his room, meditating. From outside the door he caught a thought wave equivalent to a knock, and, glancing at the door, he willed it to slide open. It slid open. “Enter, my friend,” he said. He could have projected the idea telepathically, but with only two persons present, speech was more polite.

Ejon Khee entered. “You are up late tonight, my leader,” he said.

“Yes, Khee. Within an hour the Earth rocket is due to land, and I wish to see it. Yes, I know, it will land a thousand miles away, if their calculations are correct. Beyond the horizon. But if it lands even twice that far the flash of the atomic explosion should be visible, and I have waited long for first contact. For even though no Earthman will be on

that rocket, it will still be first contact—for them. Of course our telepath teams have been reading their thoughts for many centuries, but—this will be the first *physical* contact between Mars and Earth.”

Khee made himself comfortable in one of the low chairs. “True,” he said. “I have not followed recent reports too closely, though. Why are they using an atomic warhead? I know they think our planet is probably uninhabited, but still—”

“They will watch the flash through their lunar telescopes and get a—what do they call it?—a spectroscopic analysis, which will tell them more than they know now (or think they know; much of it is erroneous) about the atmosphere of our planet and the composition of its surface. It is—call it a sighting shot, Khee. They’ll be here in person within a few oppositions. And then—”

Mars was holding out, waiting for Earth to come. What was left of Mars, that is; this one small city of about nine hundred beings. The civilization of Mars was older than that of Earth, but it was a dying one. This was what remained of it, one city, nine hundred people. They were waiting for Earth to make contact, for a selfish reason and for an unselfish one.

Martian civilization had developed in a quite different direction from that of Earth. It had developed no important knowledge of the physical sciences, no technology. But it had developed social sciences to the point where there had not been a single crime, let alone a war, on Mars for fifty thousand years. And it had developed fully the parapsychological sciences, the sciences of the mind, that Earth was just beginning to discover.

Mars could teach Earth much. How to avoid crime and war, two simple things, to begin with. Beyond those simple things, telepathy, telekinesis, empathy . . .

And Earth would, Mars hoped, teach them something even more valuable to Mars: how, by science and technology—which it was too late for Mars to develop now, even if they had the type of minds which would enable them to develop these things—to restore and rehabilitate a dying planet, so that an otherwise dying race might live and multiply again. Each planet would gain greatly, and neither would lose.

And tonight was the night when Earth would make its first contact, a sighting shot. Its next shot, a rocket contain-

ing Earthmen or at least an Earthman, would be at the next opposition, two Earth years, or roughly four Martian years, hence. The Martians knew this because their teams of telepath were able to catch at least some of the thoughts of Earthmen, enough to know their plans. Unfortunately, at that distance, the connection was one-way and Mars could not ask Earth to hurry its program. Or tell Earth scientists the facts about Mars' composition and atmosphere which would have made this preliminary shot unnecessary.

Tonight Ry, the leader (as nearly as the Martian word can be translated), and Khee, his administrative assistant and closest friend, sat and meditated together until the time was near. Then they drank a toast to the future—in a beverage based on menthol, which had the same effect on Martians as alcohol on Earthmen—and climbed to the roof of the building in which they had been sitting. They watched toward the north, where the rocket should land. The stars shone brilliantly through the thin atmosphere . . .

In Observatory No. 1 on Earth's moon, Rog Everett, his eye at the eyepiece of the spotter scope, said triumphantly, "Thar she blew, Willie. And now, as soon as the films are developed, we'll know the score on that old planet Mars." He straightened up—there'd be no more to see now—and he and Willie Sanger shook hands solemnly; it was a historical occasion.

"Hope it didn't kill anybody. Any Martians, that is. Rog, did it hit dead center in Syrtis Major?"

"Near as matters. The pix will show exactly but I'd say it was maybe a thousand miles off, to the south. And that's damn close on a fifty-million-mile shot. Willie, do you really think there are any Martians?"

Willie thought a second and then said, "No."

Willie was right.

HORSE RACE

Garn Roberts, also known—but only to the Galactic Federation's top security officers—as Secret Agent K-1356, was sleeping in his one-man spaceship which was coasting at fourteen light-years an hour on automatics two hundred and six light-years from Earth. A bell rang, instantly awakening him. He hurried to the telecon and turned

it on. The face of Daunen Brand, Special Assistant to the President of the Federation, sprang onto the screen, and Brand's voice came from the speaker.

"K-1356, I have an assignment for you. Do you know the sun called Novra, in the constellation—"

"Yes," Roberts said quickly; communication at this distance was wasteful power, especially on tight beam, and he wanted to save the Special Assistant all the time he could.

"Good. Do you know its planetary system?"

"I've never been there. I know Novra has two inhabited planets, that's all."

"Right. The inner planet is inhabited by a humanoid race, not too far from ours. The outer planet is inhabited by a race who are outwardly similar to terrestrial horses except that they have a third pair of limbs which terminate in hands, which has enabled them to reach a fairly high state of civilization. Their name for themselves is unpronounceable for Earthmen, so we call them simply the Horses. They know the derivation of the name, but don't mind; they're not sensitive that way."

"Yes, sir," said Roberts, as Brand paused.

"Both races have space travel, although not the faster-than-light interstellar drive. Between the two planets—you can look up the names and co-ordinates in the star guide—is an asteroid belt similar to that of the solar system, but even more extensive, the residue of the break-up of a large planet that had once had its orbit between the orbits of the two inhabited planets.

"Neither inhabited planet has much in the way of minerals; the asteroids are rich with them and are the major source of supply for both planets. A hundred years ago they went to war over this, and the Galactic Federation arbitrated the war and ended it by getting both races, the Humanoids and the Horses, to agree that one individual of either race could stake claim, for his lifetime, to one asteroid and only one asteroid."

"Yes, sir. I remember reading about it in Galactic history."

"Excellent. Here is the problem. We have a complaint from the Humanoids claiming that the Horses are breaking this treaty, claiming asteroids under false names of non-existent Horses in order to get more than their share of the minerals.

"Your orders: Land on the Horses' planet. Use your

trader identity; it will not be suspect since many traders go there. They are friendly; you'll have no trouble. You'll be welcome as a trader from Earth. You are to prove or disprove the assertion of the Humanoids that the Horses are violating the treaty by staking claims to more asteroids than their numbers justify."

"Yes, sir."

"You will report back to me by tight beam as soon as you have accomplished your mission and left the planet." The screen went blank. Garn Roberts consulted his guides and charts, reset the automatic controls and went back to his bunk to resume his interrupted sleep.

A week later, when he had accomplished his mission and was a safe ten light-years out from the Novra system, he sent a tight-beam signal to the Special Assistant to the President of the Galactic Federation, and in minutes Daunen Brand's face appeared on the screen of the telecom.

"K-1356 reporting on the Novra situation, sir," Garn Roberts said. "I managed to get access to the census statistics of the Horses; they number a little over two million. Then I checked the claims of the Horses to Asteroids; they have filed claims on almost four million of them. It is obvious that the Humanoids are right and that the Horses are violating the treaty.

"Otherwise, why are there so many more Horses' asteroids than there are Horses?"

DEATH ON THE MOUNTAIN

He lived in a hut on the side of a mountain. Often he would climb to the peak and look down into the valley. His red sandals were drops of blood upon the snow of the peak.

In the valley people lived and died. He watched them.

He saw the clouds that drifted over the peak. The clouds took strange shapes. At times they were ships or castles or horses. More often they were strange things never seen by anyone save him, and he had seen them only in his dreams. Yet in the strange shapes of drifting clouds he recognized them.

Standing alone in the doorway of his hut, he always watched the sun spring from the dew of earth. In the valley

they had told him that the sun did not rise but that the earth was round like an orange and turned so that every morning the burning sun seemed to leap into the sky.

He had asked them why the earth revolved and why the sun burned and why they did not fall from the earth when it turned upside down. He had been told that it was so today because it had been so yesterday and the day that was before yesterday, and because things never changed. They could not tell him why things never changed.

At night he looked at the stars and at the lights of the valley. At curfew the lights of the valley vanished, but the stars did not vanish. They were too far to hear the curfew bell.

There was a bright star. Every third night it hung low just above the snow-covered peak of the mountain, and he would climb to the peak and talk to it. The star never replied.

He counted time by the star and by the three days of its progress. Three days made a week. To the people of the valley, seven days made a week. They had never dreamed of the land of Saarba where water flows upstream, where the leaves of trees burn with a bright blue flame and are not consumed, and where three days make a week.

Once a year he went down into the valley. He talked with people, and sometimes he would dream for them. They called him a prophet, but the small children threw sticks at him. He did not like children, for in their faces he could see written the evil that they were to live.

It has been a year since he had last been to the valley, and he left his hut and went down the mountain. He went to the market and talked to people, but no one spoke to him or looked at him. He shouted but they did not reply.

He reached with his hand to touch a market woman upon the shoulder to arrest her attention, but the hand passed through the woman's shoulder and the woman walked on. He knew then that he had died within the past year.

He returned to the mountain. Beside the path he saw a thing that lay where once he had fallen and had risen and walked on. He turned when he reached the doorway of his hut, and saw the people of the valley carrying away the thing which he had passed. They dug a grave in the earth and buried the thing.

The days passed.

From the doorway of his hut he watched the clouds drift

by the mountain. The clouds took strange shapes. At times they were birds or swords or elephants. More often they were strange things never seen save by him. He had dreamed of seeing them in the land of Saarba where bread is made of stardust, where sixteen pounds make an ounce, and where clocks run backward after dark.

Two women climbed the mountain and walked through him into the hut. They looked about them.

—They be nothing here, said the elder of the women.—Where might be his sandals, I ken not.

—Go ye back, said the younger woman. —Late it grows. Come sunrise, I will find they.

—Be ye not afraid?

—The shepherd cares for his sheep, said the young woman.

The older woman trudged down the path into the valley. Darkness fell, and the younger lighted a candle. She seemed afraid of the darkness.

He watched her, but she saw him not. Her hair, he saw, was black as night, and her eyes were large and lustrous, but her ankles were thick.

She removed her garments and lay upon the bed. In sleep, she tossed uneasily, and the blanket slipped to the floor. The candle still burned upon the table.

The light of the candle flame fell upon a small black crucifix that lay in the white hollow between her breasts. It rose and fell.

He heard the curfew bell and knew that it was time to go to the top of the peak, for it was the third night.

Upon the mountain had descended a storm. The wind shrieked about the hut but the woman did not awaken.

He went out into the storm. The wind was cruel as never before. The hand of fear gripped his heart. Yet the star was waiting.

The cold grew more intense, the night blacker. A blanket of snow drifted over the mountain, covering the spot where he fell.

In the morning the woman found the red sandals in the thawing snow and took them back to the valley.

—A strange dream I had, said the elder woman. —A man writhed on a cross.

The younger woman crossed herself. —The Christus?

—Not, said the elderly woman. —Shouted he about Saarba and oblivion.

—I ken them not, said the younger woman. —They be no such places.

—That shouted he, said the elder. —Remember I now.

—La, laughed the younger woman. —Dreams be only dreams. Things what be be and things what be not be not.

—So, said the elder. She shrugged.

Clouds take strange shapes. At times they are wagons or swans or trees. More often they are strange things never seen save in the land of Saarba.

Clouds are impersonal. They drift by an empty peak as readily.

BEAR POSSIBILITY

If you've ever seen an expectant father pacing the waiting room of a hospital lighting cigarette after cigarette—usually at the wrong end if it's a filter-tip—you know how worried he acts.

But if you think that *that* is worry, take a look at Jonathan Quinby, pacing the room outside a delivery room. Quinby is not only lighting the wrong ends of his filter-tips but is actually smoking them that way, without tasting the difference.

He's really got something to worry about. It had started when they had last visited a zoo one evening. "Last visited" is true in both senses of the phrase; Quinby would never go within miles of one again, ever, nor would his wife. She had fallen, you see, into—

But there is something that must be explained, so you may understand what happened that evening. In his younger days Quinby had been an ardent student of magic—real magic, not the slight-of-hand variety. Unfortunately charms and incantations did not work for him, however effective they might be for others.

Except for one incantation, one that let him change a human being into any animal he chose and (by saying the same incantation backward) back again into a human being. A vicious or vengeful man would have found this ability useful, but Quinby was neither vicious nor vengeful and after a few experiments—with subjects who had volunteered out of curiosity—he had never made use of it.

When, ten years ago at the age of thirty, he had fallen in

love and married, he had used it once more, simply to satisfy his wife's curiosity. When he had told her about it, she had doubted him and challenged him to prove it, and he had changed her briefly into a Siamese cat. She had then made him promise never to use his supernatural ability again, and he had kept that promise ever since.

Except once, the evening of their visit to the zoo. They had been walking along the path, with no one in sight but themselves, that led past the sunken bear pits. They'd looked for bears but all of them had retired into the cave portion of their quarters for the night. Then—well, his wife had leaned a little too far over the railing; she lost her balance and fell into a pit. Miraculously, she landed unhurt.

She was getting to her feet and looking up at him; she put her finger to her lips and then pointed to the entrance to the den. He understood; she wanted him to get help but quietly, lest any sound might waken the sleeping bear in its den. He nodded and was turning away when a gasp from his wife made him look down again—and see that it would be too late to get help.

A young male grizzly bear was already coming out of the den entrance. Growling ominously and heading toward her, ready to kill.

There was only one thing that could possibly be done in time to save his wife's life, and Jonathan Quinby did it. Male grizzly bears do not kill female grizzly bears.

They have other ideas, though. Quinby stood wringing his hands in helpless anguish as he was forced to witness what was happening to his wife in the bear pit. But after a while the male grizzly went back into his den and—ready to change her back on a second's notice if the male should again emerge—Quinby said the incantation backward and brought his wife back to her proper form. He told her that if she could find footholds in the rocks and climb part way up, he could reach down and pull her the rest of the way. In a few minutes she was safely out of the pit. White and shaken, they had taken a taxi home. Once there, they agreed never to discuss the matter again; there was nothing else he could have done but watch her be killed.

Nor had they discussed it again, for a few weeks. But then—well, they'd been married ten years and had wanted children but no children had come. Now three weeks after her horrible experience in the pit she was—with *child*?

Have you ever seen an expectant father pacing a hospital waiting room, looking like the most worried man on Earth? Then consider Quinby, who's right now pacing and waiting. For what?

NOT YET THE END

There was a greenish, hellish tinge to the light within the metal cube. It was a light that made the dead-white skin of the creature seated at the controls seem faintly green.

A single, faceted eye, front center in the head, watched the seven dials unwinkingly. Since they had left Xandor that eye had never once wavered from the dials. Sleep was unknown to the race to which Kar-388Y belonged. Mercy, too, was unknown. A single glance at the sharp, cruel features below the faceted eye would have proved that.

The pointers on the fourth and seventh dials came to a stop. That meant the cube itself had stopped in space relative to its immediate objective. Kar reached forward with his upper right arm and threw the stabilizer switch. Then he rose and stretched his cramped muscles.

Kar turned to face his companion in the cube, a being like himself. "We are here," he said. "The first stop, Star Z-5689. It has nine planets, but only the third is habitable. Let us hope we find creatures here who will make suitable slaves for Xandor."

Lal-16B, who had sat in rigid mobility during the journey, rose and stretched also. "Let us hope so, yes. Then we can return to Xandor and be honored while the fleet comes to get them. But let's not hope too strongly. To meet with success at the first place we stop would be a miracle. We'll probably have to look a thousand places."

Kar shrugged. "Then we'll look a thousand places. With the Lounacs dying off, we must have slaves else our mines must close and our race will die."

He sat down at the controls again and threw a switch that activated a visiplate that would show what was beneath them. He said, "We are above the night side of the third planet. There is a cloud layer below us. I'll use the manuals from here."

He began to press buttons. A few minutes later he said,

"Look, Lal, at the visiplate. Regularly spaced lights—a city! The planet *is* inhabited."

Lal had taken his place at the other switchboard, the fighting controls. Now he too was examining dials. "There is nothing for us to fear. There is not even the vestige of a force field around the city. The scientific knowledge of the race is crude. We can wipe the city out with one blast if we are attacked."

"Good," Kar said. "But let me remind you that destruction is not our purpose—yet. We want specimens. If they prove satisfactory and the fleet comes and takes as many thousand slaves as we need, then will be time to destroy not a city but the whole planet. So that their civilization will never progress to the point where they'll be able to launch reprisal raids."

Lal adjusted a knob. "All right. I'll put on the megafield and we'll be invisible to them unless they see far into the ultraviolet, and, from the spectrum of their sun, I doubt that they do."

As the cube descended the light within it changed from green to violet and beyond. It came to a gentle rest. Kar manipulated the mechanism that operated the airlock.

He stepped outside, Lal just behind him. "Look," Kar said, "two bipeds. Two arms, two eyes—not dissimilar to the Lounacs, although smaller. Well, here are our specimens."

He raised his lower left arm, whose three-fingered hand held a thin rod wound with wire. He pointed it first at one of the creatures, then at the other. Nothing visible emanated from the end of the rod, but they both froze instantly into statuelike figures.

"They're not large, Kar," Lal said. "I'll carry one back, you carry the other. We can study them better inside the cube, after we're back in space."

Kar looked about him in the dim light. "All right, two is enough, and one seems to be male and the other female. Let's get going."

A minute later the cube was ascending and as soon as they were well out of the atmosphere, Kar threw the stabilizer switch and joined Lal, who had been starting a study of the specimens during the brief ascent.

"Vivaparous," said Lal. "Five-fingered, with hands suited to reasonably delicate work. But—let's try the most important test, intelligence."

Kar got the paired headsets. He handed one pair to Lal, who put one on his own head, one on the head of one of the specimens. Kar did the same with the other specimen.

After a few minutes, Kar and Lal stared at each other bleakly.

"Seven points below minimum," Kar said. "They could not be trained even for the crudest labor in the mines. Incapable of understanding the most simple instructions. Well, we'll take them back to the Xandor museum."

"Shall I destroy the planet?"

"No," Kar said. "Maybe a million years from now—if our race lasts that long—they'll have evolved enough to become suitable for our purpose. Let us move on to the next star with planets."

The make-up editor of the *Milwaukee Star* was in the composing room, supervising the closing of the local page. Jenkins, the head make-up compositor, was pushing in leads to tighten the second last column.

"Room for one more story in the eighth column, Pete," he said. "About thirty-six picas. There are two there in the overset that will fit. Which one shall I use?"

The make-up editor glanced at the type in the galleys lying on the stone beside the chase. Long practice enabled him to read the headlines upside down at a glance. "The convention story and the zoo story, huh? Oh, hell, run the convention story. Who cares if the zoo director thinks two monkeys disappeared off Monkey Island last night?"

FISH STORY

Robert Palmer met his mermaid one midnight along the ocean front somewhere between Cape Cod and Miami. He was staying with friends but had not yet felt sleepy when they retired and had gone for a walk along the brightly moonlit beach. He rounded a curve in the shoreline and there she was, sitting on a log embedded in the sand, combing her beautiful, long black hair.

Robert knew, of course, that mermaids don't really exist—but, extant or not, there she was. He walked closer and when he was only a few steps away he cleared his throat.

With a startled movement she threw back her hair, which had been hiding her face and her breasts, and he saw that she

was more beautiful than he had thought it possible for any creature to be.

She stared at him, her deep-blue eyes wide with fright at first. Then, "Are you a man?" she asked.

Robert didn't have any doubts on that point; he assured her that he was. The fear went out of her eyes and she smiled. "I've heard of men but never met one." She motioned for him to sit down beside her on the embedded log.

Robert didn't hesitate. He sat down and they talked and talked, and after a while his arm went around her and when at last she said that she must return to the sea, he kissed her good night and she promised to meet him again the next midnight.

He went back to his friends' house in a bright daze of happiness. He was in love.

For three nights in a row he saw her, and on the third night he told her that he loved her, that he would like to marry her—but that there was a problem—

"I love you too, Robert. And the problem you have in mind can be solved. I'll summon a Triton."

"Triton? I seem to know the word, but—"

"A sea demon. He has magical powers and can change things for us so we can marry, and then he'll marry us. Can you swim well? We'll have to swim out to meet him; Tritons never come quite to the shore."

He assured her that he was an excellent swimmer, and she promised to have the Triton there the next night.

He went back to his friends' house in a state of ecstasy. He didn't know whether the Triton would change his beloved into a human being or change him into a merman, but he didn't care. He was so mad about her that as long as they would both be the same, and able to marry, he didn't care in which form it would be.

She was waiting for him the next night, their wedding night. "Sit down," she told him. "The Triton will blow his conch shell trumpet when he arrives."

They sat with their arms around each other until they heard the sound of a conch shell trumpet blowing far out on the water. Robert quickly stripped off his clothes and carried her into the water; they swam until they reached the Triton. Robert treaded water while the Triton asked them, "Do you wish to be joined in marriage?" They each said a fervent "I do."

"Then," said the Triton, "I pronounce you merman and

merwife." And Robert found himself no longer treading water; a few movements of a strong sinuous tail kept him at the surface easily. The Triton blew a note on his conch shell trumpet, deafening at so close a range, and swam away.

Robert swam to his wife's side, put his arms around her and kissed her. But something was wrong; the kiss was pleasant but there was no real thrill, no stirring in his loins as there had been when he had kissed her on shore. In fact, he suddenly realized, he *had* no loins that he could detect. But how—?

"But how—?" he asked her. "I mean, darling, how do we—?"

"Propagate? It's simple, dear, and nothing like the messy way land creatures do it. You see, mermaids are mammalian but oviparous. I lay an egg when the time comes and when it hatches I nurse our merchild. Your part—"

"Yes?" asked Robert anxiously.

"Like other fishes, dear. You simply swim over the egg and fertilize it. There's nothing to it."

Robert groaned, and suddenly deciding to drown himself, he let go of his bride and started swimming toward the bottom of the sea.

But of course he had gills and didn't drown.

THREE LITTLE OWLS

(a fable)

Three little owls lived with their mother in a hollow tree in the middle of the woods.

"My children," she would say to them, "you must *never, never* go out in the daytime. Night is the time for little owls to be out. Never when the sun is shining."

"Yes, Mother," the three little owls would chorus.

But, thought each little owl to himself, I'd like to try it just once to find out why I shouldn't.

As long as their mother was there by day to watch them, they minded her. But one day she went away for a while.

The first little owl looked at the second little owl and said, "Let's try it." And the third little owl looked at both of them and said, "What are we waiting for?"

Out of the hollow tree they went, into the bright sunlight in which owls, whose eyes are made for night, can see but poorly.

The first little owl flew to the next tree. He sat on a limb and blinked in the bright sunlight.

Just then *bang!* went a gun under the tree and a bullet took a feather out of his tail. "*Hooooo*," said the first little owl and he flew home again before the hunter could shoot a second time.

The second little owl flew down to the ground. He blinked twice and looked around him, and just as he turned his head he saw a big red fox come from behind a bush. "*Grrrrr*," said the fox, and he jumped at the second little owl. "*Hooooo*," said the second little owl and, just in time, he flew away, back to the hollow tree.

The third little owl flew up as high as he could fly. When his wings were tired he soared down again toward the hollow tree that was his home, and perched on its highest branch to rest.

He looked down and saw that a big wildcat crouched on a limb of the tree. The wildcat had not seen the third little owl perched above him, but he was watching the round black hole in the tree that led to home and safety for the third little owl.

"*Hooooo*," said the third little owl, but he said it to himself so the wildcat would not hear. He looked about him to find a way to get safely home.

He saw a thorn tree nearby and flew to it. He broke off a thorn with his beak and held it very tightly. Without making a sound he flew back and stuck the sharp thorn into a tender part of the wildcat, just as hard as he could.

"*Eeeeeow*," said the wildcat. He tried to get up and to turn and to jump, all at once, and he fell off the limb. The wildcat's head hit the limb below and then he fell on down and landed right on top of the hunter's head. The hunter dropped his gun and fell, and the gun went off *bang!* and shot the fox, who had been hiding behind a bush.

"*Hooooo*," said the third little owl. His beak hurt badly because he had held the thorn very tightly and had thrust it as hard as he could, but he did not mind that now.

He went proudly into the hollow tree and told his two brothers that he had killed a wildcat, a hunter, and a fox.

"You must have dreamed it," said the first little owl.

"You certainly must have dreamed it," said the second little owl.

"Wait until night and I'll show you," said the third little owl.

The wildcat and the hunter were only stunned. After a while the wildcat came to, and slinked away. Then the hunter woke up; he found the fox that his gun had shot when he dropped it, and took the fox and went home.

When night came, the three little owls came out of the tree.

The third little owl looked and looked, but he could not find the wildcat, the hunter, or the fox. "Hooooo," he said. "You are right. I must have dreamed it."

They all agreed that it was not safe to go out when the sun was shining, and that their mother had been right. The first little owl thought so because he had been shot at by a hunter, and the second little owl thought so because he had been jumped at by a fox.

But the third little owl thought so most of all, because the dream he had dreamed had left his beak very tender and it hurt him so badly to try to eat that he went hungry all day.

MORAL: Stay home by day. Matinees can get you in trouble.

RUNAROUND

For many days now he had wandered ponderously through the hungry forests, across the hungry plains of dwarf scrub and sand, and had wandered along the lush edges of the streams that flowed down to the big water. Always hungry.

It seemed to him that he had always been hungry.

Sometimes there was something to eat, yes, but it was always something small. One of the little things with hoofs, one of the little things with three toes. All so small. One of them was not more than enough to put a keener edge on that monstrous saurian appetite of his.

And they ran so fast, the little things. He saw them, and his huge mouth would slaver as he ran earth-shakingly toward them, but off they whisked among the trees like little furry streaks. In frantic haste to catch them, he would bowl over the smaller trees that were in the way, but always they were gone when he got there.

Gone on their tiny legs that went faster than his mighty ones. One stride of his was more distance-devouring than fifty of theirs, but those flashing little legs flickered a hundred

strides to his one. Even in the open where there were no trees for them to dodge among, he could not catch them.

A hundred years of hunger.

He, Tyrannosaurus Rex, king of all, mightiest and most vicious fighting engine of flesh that ever the world had evolved, was able to kill anything that stood against him. But nothing stood against him. They ran.

The little things. They ran. They flew, some of them. Others climbed trees and swung from limb to limb as fast as he could run along the ground until they came to a tree tall enough to be well out of his twenty-five-foot reach and thick enough of bole that he could not uproot it, and then they would hang ten feet above the grasp of his great jaws. And gibber at him when he roared in baffled, hungry rage.

Hungry, always hungry.

A hundred years of not-quite-enough. Last of his kind, and there was nothing left to stand up against him and fight, and fill his stomach when he had killed it.

His slate-gray skin hung upon him in loose, wrinkled folds as he shriveled away within it, from the ever-present ache and agony of hunger in his guts.

His memory was short, but vaguely he knew that it had not always been thus. He'd been younger once, and he'd fought terribly against things that fought back. They had been scarce and hard to find even then, but occasionally he met them. And killed them.

The big, armor-plated one with the terrible sharp ridges along his back, who tried to roll over on you and cut you in half. The one with the three huge forward-pointing horns and the big ruff of heavy bone. Those had been ones who went on four legs; or had gone on four legs until he had met them. Then they had stopped going.

There had been others more nearly like himself. Some had been many times bigger than he, but he had killed them with ease. The biggest ones of all had little heads and small mouths and ate leaves off the trees and plants on the ground.

Yes, there had been giants on the earth, those days. A few of them. Satisfying meals. Things you could kill and eat your fill of, and lie gorged and somnolent for days. Then eat again if the pesky leather-wings with the long bills of teeth hadn't finished off the Gargantuan feast while you had slept.

But if they had, it did not matter. Stride forth again, and

kill again to eat if hungry, for the pure joy of fighting and killing if you were not hungry. Anything that came along. He'd killed them all—the horned ones, the armored ones, the monster ones. Anything that walked or crawled, His sides and flanks were rough and seamed with the scars of ancient battles.

There'd been giants in those days. Now there were the *little* things. The things that ran, and flew, and climbed. And wouldn't fight.

Ran so fast they could run in circles around him, some of them. Always, almost always, out of reach of his curved, pointed, double-edged teeth that were six inches long, and that could—but rarely had the chance to—shear through one of the little hairy things at a single bite, while warm blood coursed down the scaly hide of his neck.

Yes, he could get one of them, once in a while. But not often enough, not enough of them to satisfy that monstrous hunger that was Tyrannosaurus Rex, king of the tyrant reptiles. Now a king without a kingdom.

It was a burning within him, that dreadful hunger. It drove him, always.

It drove him today as he went heavy-footed through the forest, scorning paths, crashing his way through heavy underbrush and sapling trees as though they were grass of the plains.

Always before him the scurry and rush of the footsteps of the little ones, the quick click of hoofs, the *pad-pad* of the softer feet as they ran.

It teemed with life, that forest of the Eocene. But with fleet life which, in smallness and speed, had found safety from the tyrant.

Life, it was, that wouldn't stand up and fight, with bellowing roars that shook the earth, with blood streaming from slaving jowls as monster fought monstrosity. This was life that gave you the runaround, that wouldn't fight and be killed.

Even in the steaming swamps. There were slippery things that slithered into the muddy water there, but they, too, were fast. They swam like wriggling lightning, slid into hollow rotten logs and weren't there when you ripped the logs apart.

It was getting dark, and there was a weakness upon him that made it excruciating pain for him to take another step. He'd been hungry a hundred years, but this was worst of

all. But it was not a weakness that made him stop; it was something that drove him on, made him keep going when every step was effort.

High in a big tree, something that clung to a branch was going "*Yahh! Yahh! Yahh!*" mocking and monotonously, and a broken piece of branch arced down and bounded harmlessly off his heavy hide. Lese majesty. For a moment he was stronger in the hope that something was going to fight.

He whirled and snapped at the branch that had struck him, and it splintered. And then he stood at fullest height and bellowed challenge at the little thing in the big tree, high overhead. But it would not come down; it went "*Yahh! Yahh! Yahh!*" and stayed there in cowardly safety.

He threw himself mightily against the trunk of the tree, but it was five feet thick, and he could not even shake it. He circled twice, roaring his bafflement, and then blundered on into gathering darkness.

Ahead of him, in one of the saplings, was a little gray thing, a ball of fur. He snapped at it, but it wasn't there when he closed his jaws upon the wood. He saw only a dim gray streak as it hit the ground and ran, gone in shadows before he could take a single step.

Darker, and though he could see dimly in the woods, he could see more clearly when he came to the moonlit plain. Still driven on. There was something to his left, something small and alive sitting on haunches on a patch of barren soil. He wheeled to run toward it. It didn't move until he was almost there; then with the suddenness of lightning it popped down a hole and vanished.

His footsteps were slower after that, his muscles responded sluggishly.

At dawn he came to the stream.

It was effort for him to reach it, but he got there and lowered his great head to drink, and drank deeply. The gnawing pain in his stomach rose, a moment, to crescendo, and then dulled. He drank more.

And slowly, ponderously, he sank down to the muddy soil. He didn't fall, but his legs gave way gradually, and he lay there, the rising sun in his eyes, unable to move. The pain that had been in his stomach was all over him now, but dulled, more an aching weakness than an agony.

The sun rose high overhead and sank slowly.

He could see but dimly now, and there were winged

things that circled overhead. Things that swept the sky with lazy, cowardly circles. They were food, but they wouldn't come down and fight.

And when it got dark enough, there were other things that came. There was a circle of eyes two feet off the ground, and an excited yapping now and then, and a howl. Little things, food that wouldn't fight and be eaten. The kind of life that gave you the runaround.

Circle of eyes. Wings against the moonlit sky.

Food all about him, but fleet food that ran away on flashing legs the minute it saw or heard, and that had eyes and ears too sharp ever to fail to see or hear. The fast little things that ran and wouldn't fight.

He lay with his head almost at the water's edge. At dawn when the red sun was again in his eyes, he managed to drag his mighty bulk a foot forward so he could drink again. He drank deeply, and a convulsive shudder ran through him and then he lay very quietly with his head in the water.

And the winged things overhead circled slowly down.

MURDER IN TEN EASY LESSONS

There isn't anything romantic about murder. It's a nasty business and you wouldn't like it.

Yes, take a murder and take it apart. You'll find it about as pleasant to dissect as a several-weeks-dead frog. The smell is pretty much the same, and you'll be in just as much of a hurry to rush to the incinerator with your subject.

You can quit reading now, right here. If you don't, remember I warned you.

You wouldn't have liked Morley Evans; few people did. You might, incidentally, have read about him in the paper, but not under that name. Duke Evans was the name he went by. Later, I mean; as a boy they called him Stinky.

Sounds like a joke, that name Stinky. Usually it is, but not always. Occasionally kids show an uncanny knack of picking nicknames. Not that he smelled physically; as a boy he was required by his parents to bathe his body at reasonable intervals. As a man, he was dapper and well groomed in a greasy sort of way. Maybe I seem to be too prejudiced; he wasn't really greasy. But he did use hair oil.

We're getting ahead of ourselves, though. Back to Stinky

Evans and the first lesson. He was fourteen then. He ran with a gang who used to raid the dime stores every Saturday afternoon, coming out with their pockets stuffed. Most of them were rather good at it and were seldom caught.

Harry Callan was the head of the gang. He was a little older than the others and he had connections. He could take a conglomeration of twenty dollars' worth of packaged razor blades, phonograph needles and the like, and turn it into five dollars cash. With that ability and with his fists and his advantage in size, he ruled the gang.

You might say that Stinky Evans' first lesson in murder came the afternoon when Harry Callan knocked the hell out of him. For no particular reason; just that every once in a while Harry beat up one of his satellites to be sure they'd stay in line.

It happened in the alley behind the Gem Bowling Alleys, where some of them set pins once in a while. It started with words—mostly Harry Callan's words—then Harry whaled into Stinky Evans and whaled the tar out of him.

It was a new experience, for Stinky's only fights had been with kids smaller than himself. It didn't last long. When it was over he lay in the alley, half-sobbing, half-cursing, with blood running out of his nose. Not really hurt; he could easily have stood up again to take more.

But in spite of the blind anger and hatred in him, he knew better. He knew he was licked.

So he lay there and his hand closed around the cobblestone and that was when the little devil got into his mind and he picked up the cobblestone. *Kill*, something told him. *Kill the rat*.

It didn't lead to anything. Harry Callan kicked the stone out of his hand, kicked him in the face and broke three of his teeth, and then turned away into the back door of the Gem Bowling Alleys.

It wouldn't have led to anything, anyway. He wouldn't have thrown the stone, or at any rate he wouldn't have thrown it at Harry Callan's head. He'd have weakened, because he wasn't ready for murder yet.

After a while, he got up and went home.

If marriages are (as they tell us) made in heaven, then murders must be made in hell.

Of course, nobody much believes in hell any more—not, that is, in a concrete hell with little red devils running around with pitchforks and that sort of thing.

But there must be a hell, just the same, for that is where murders are made. To explain the build-up of a murder, you've got to believe that much. And since we've got to have some kind of a hell, let's stick to the classical model. Since we're going to postulate a hell, let's make it good. Little red devils and all.

In other words, let's shoot the works. Let's imagine a Little Red Devil chuckling gleefully while Stinky Evans was walking home from the alley behind the Gem.

Let's imagine the Little Red Devil talking to the big boss himself. "Good material, Boss. A nasty little punk if there ever was one. He'll make the grade, Boss."

"You gave him the first lesson?"

"Yep," said the Little Red Devil. "Just now. A few more from time to time and he'll come through."

"All right, he's yours. Stay with him."

"You bet, Boss," said the L.R.D. "I'll stay with him, all right. I'll stay with him."

That was Stinky Evans at fourteen. At fifteen he got caught stealing a spare tire. He spent a night in the bullpen before they found out he was under age and switched him over to the juvenile authorities. In the bullpen he got talking with a four-timer and they got around to shivs.

It was dark in the cell except for the pattern made by the bars of the doors upon the floor. A pale yellow trapezoid with narrow black parallel stripes. A cockroach started across it and a big foot in prison-made shoes went out from the bunk and squashed the cockroach.

"If you ever stick a shiv in a guy, twist it," the four-timer told him. "Lets the air in and he flops quick. Hasn't time to yell or scramble any eggs for you, see? That's why a wide blade's best. Lets in more air when you twist. Those damn' stiletos ain't no good; you got to hit the heart or else stab the guy half a dozen times . . ." There was more. It was quite a lesson. Stinky thought about Harry Callan.

Down the corridor a drunk with d.t.'s was yelling like hell because tarantulas were after him. Stinky Evans shivered.

They gave him probation on the tire theft.

Before that was up, though, he got in trouble again and this time took six months at the reformatory. That was a good six months; he learned plenty there. Without boring you with the unpleasant details, let's count it as lessons three to five, inclusive, and consider ourselves conservative.

He was fifteen when he got out, but he looked older.

He felt older. He'd decided not to go home. Going home meant he'd have to take a job and keep reporting to the juvenile authorities how he was getting along in it. They'd keep checking on him all the time. The hell with that.

He went home only long enough to sneak out some clothes and get the rent money out of the chipped teapot. Twenty-five bucks, it was.

He hopped a rattler and got off when he saw the shacks working along the train at Springfield, the divison point.

He took a cheap room in Springfield and cased the town. When most of his money was gone, he went back where there'd been a **BOY WANTED** sign in a poolroom window.

It was the Acme Pool Parlor, run by Nick Chester. Maybe you've heard of Nick Chester. You'd know of him, all right, if you ever lived in Springfield.

A swarthy little guy, but smooth. He wore two-hundred-dollar suits and smoked fifty-cent cigars. Lived in a swank mansion out at the edge of town and drove a custom-made car. All the trimmings, if you know what I mean. All out of a little poolroom that maybe took in twenty or thirty dollars a week.

Nick tilted his twenty-dollar fedora back on his head and looked Stinky Evans over with eyes that didn't miss any tricks.

"How old ya, kid?" he said.

"Twenty."

"Been in stir, huh?" Nick didn't wait for an answer to that one. "Okay by me if y'ain't hot."

Stinky shook his head.

"What's ya name?" Nick asked.

Stinky'd decided that. "Duke," he said. "Duke Evans."

"Okay, Duke. You rack balls for a while," Nick said. "When I get to know you better, maybe I can give you something else. We'll get along."

Duke went back by the pool tables. He watched Nick Chester, and he knew now what he was going to be. That was for him; a two-C suit with a white carnation in the lapel, expensive cigars, a blank but knowing pair of eyes and a pocketful of hay.

Power. That was for him. He'd work for it; he'd steal for it; he'd even commit . . .

Maybe there was rejoicing in hell. I mean, of course, if there is any such place. Things were going swimmingly. It

was all too obvious that the Little Red Devil was on the job.

"He's coming along fine, Boss," said the L.R.D. "Just had the sixth lesson, you might say. Another year—"

"Not so soon. Let him ripen. Be sure of him."

"He'll graduate, Boss, *cum laude*. But you mean I got to wait two or three years yet?"

"Let him ripen. Five or six years."

The L.R.D. gulped and looked aghast. "That long? Oh, Heaven!"

So they had to wash his mouth out with brimstone.

Call it the seventh lesson, at eighteen. Duke Evans was beginning to look like Duke Evans. He wore only a thirty-dollar suit but the trousers had a razor edge to them.

He wasn't racking balls now; he was making collections. Small ones, but lots of them. That was Nick's system and his strength—a finger in a thousand small pies. One at a time, Duke was learning about those pies.

He went into the florist's shop on Grove Street, walked briskly on through and found the little florist alone in the back room making up a wreath. Duke grinned at him. "Hi, Larkin. Your dues; forty bucks."

The little man didn't smile back. "I—I can't afford it; I told Mr. Wescott of your association. Talked to him on the phone this morning. I've been losing money since I started paying—"

Duke quit grinning and his eyes got hard. "I got orders to get it. See?"

"But look, I haven't even got forty dollars. I haven't paid all the rent yet. I can't—"

He'd stepped backward and there was fear in his face. That was a mistake. Nobody had ever before shown fear of Duke Evans. And the florist was a little guy, too. The little mark was scared stiff.

It wasn't Duke's job; he could have gone back and reported. One of the muscle boys would have been sent around. But it was so easy.

He gave Larkin the back of his hand across the left side of his face and knocked his glasses off, then smashed the palm of his hand across the other side of the face, stepping in as the florist stepped back.

Then again, rocking the little man's head back and forth before he stepped in with a hard jab to the pit of the stomach. Larkin doubled over and retched.

Duke stepped back. "That was a sample. Still think you can't rake up forty bucks?"

Duke got the forty bucks. On the way back to headquarters, he bought himself a cigar. He didn't like the taste of it as well as cigarettes, but from now on he was going to smoke them. On his lapel was a white rosebud he'd taken from a vase on his way out of Larkin's.

He got his shoes shined, too, although they didn't really need it. He felt pretty good.

Nick Chester looked at the white rosebud. His left eyebrow went up half a millimeter, which wasn't enough for Duke to notice.

Duke got friendly with Tony Barria—as nearly as anyone could ever get to being friendly with Tony.

Tony was a little guy, too, like Larkin had been, but Tony wasn't the kind of little guy that you shoved around. Tony was a torpedo.

He was cold and tense and he moved with a smooth grace that seemed jerky because it was so fast. Nobody ever felt at ease with Tony, really; you sort of got the idea that if you clapped him on the back, he'd explode. Maybe they tailored that word *torpedo* just to fit Tony Barria. But shoot a couple of snooker games with him and then you could loosen his tongue with Chianti, which is an expensive word for Italian red wine. And because Duke wanted to learn something that Tony could teach him, he kept Chianti in his room. He took a lesson from Tony in things an ambitious young man should know.

Like: "Look, if you're going to *use* it on somebody, a forty-five automatic's the thing. Don't monkey with a little gun. A forty-five, because if you hit the shoulder or the leg or somewhere with a little gun, it don't mean nothing. Got to hit the head or the heart. In the guts'll kill him, but he'll live a while first. Maybe long enough to talk, see? But a big slug wherever it hits knocks 'em down like a baseball bat.

"But if you're carrying a rod just in case, a thirty-two automatic'll do. Light and don't bulge your coat . . ."

Oh, sure, those were elementary things, but Duke dug in and got some fine points, too. Like how to beat a paraffin test; and if you don't know that, you're better off not to. I'm not giving lessons; just telling about them.

Tony was a gunman all the way. He thought shivs were effeminate, fists were for gorillas, tommyes were for morons

who couldn't learn to shoot straight with a heater. "Why, any day I'd go up against a typewriter, with a forty-five. One shot I'd need and there'd be time for three while he was getting that damn' thing swung around and pointed—"

Duke Evans picked up quite a bit from Tony. One thing he didn't learn: how not to be afraid of Tony. But when he moved in, he thought Tony would be on his side. Tony didn't like Nick, and Duke worked on that . . .

Duke let a couple of years go by. He grew in evil, in stature, and in favor with himself and the gang. He bought himself two pistols, obtaining them in such a manner that they could not be traced back to him. He bought himself a rifle, too, but he purchased that openly and talked about it. His occasional hunting trips were for the purpose of finding secluded spots in the woods where he could practice shooting an automatic. Nobody knew about the pistols or his practice with them.

For a while, he took over running the strong-arm squad. Just telling them whom to see and how much of a job to do on him. He got a kick out of that.

Once he planted a pineapple himself that blew the guts out of a cigar store run by a man named Perelman who'd decided, against advice, not to job a book on the ponies. That was why the pineapple was put in his store. But the reason Duke Evans did the job in person was that Perelman had said, "Get out of here, punk," to Duke Evans.

Duke Evans wasn't a punk any more.

He heard the explosion from several blocks away and thought, "Punk huh?" He wished Perelman had been in the store when the bomb went off. He pictured it vividly. Because he was standing in a dark alley and didn't have to stay dead-pan, the look on his face wasn't nice.

Not nice at all. But then Duke Evans wasn't a nice guy. I warned you about that.

Then after a while, he was ready. Ready for the take-over and the gravy train.

He'd worked it out, and he wasn't going to be crude and use a gun after all. That was for cheap torpedoes like Tony. There were reasons why it would be better if Nick's death looked like a hit-run.

He stole a car one day and kept it under wraps until late at night, after Nick had gone home. Then he made his phone call. He'd worked out the angles on that. It was important he saw Nick right away; something had come up. And since

Nick wouldn't ever allow any of his men to come to his home, would Nick please—

Well, the details don't matter; it worked out that Nick would get dressed and go out to walk about two blocks, too short a distance to bother getting his car out of the garage. And Nick would have to cross at a certain corner.

Duke parked the stolen car with the lights out and the engine turning over lightly, at just the right spot. He could start up when Nick was a third of the way across, and get him whether he tried to go ahead or duck back.

There was a light down at the corner, but it was dark where the car was parked. It was darker than he thought. Nick would be coming along any minute now. All of Duke's attention was concentrated on watching for him.

He didn't hear the two men coming afoot from the opposite direction until they were at the car and one opened a door on either side. One of them was Tony Barria, the other was the Swede.

Tony got in beside him and held the forty-five in his ribs. Duke remembered what a forty-five did to a man. Duke began to sweat. He said, "Listen, Tony, I—"

The gun prodded. "Shut up. Drive north."

"Tony, I'll give you—"

Swede, in the back seat, raised the butt of his pistol and brought it down in a short vicious arc.

But it wasn't until near dawn (in Springfield; not in hell) that the Little Red Devil came running into the main office, grinning triumphantly and lashing his arrow-tipped tail in high glee.

"Just graduated him, Boss," he chortled. "Just gave him the final lesson. He knows all about murder now. Got kayoed, but he came to before they got to the bay and took it all in while they were putting the cement tub on his feet. You shoulda heard him beg till they had to gag him. But he took it all in; he knows all about it, plenty. Yep, he sure graduated. He sure—"

"Good. You brought him along, of course."

"Yep," said the L.R.D. "I brought him along, all right; I sure brought him along . . ."

DARK INTERLUDE

(in collaboration with Mack Reynolds)

Sheriff Ben Rand's eyes were grave. He said, "Okay, boy. You feel kind of jittery; that's natural. But if your story's straight, don't worry. Don't worry about nothing. Everything'll be all right, boy."

"It was three hours ago, Sheriff," Allenby said. "I'm sorry it took me so long to get into town and that I had to wake you up. But Sis was hysterical awhile. I had to try and quiet her down, and then I had trouble starting the jalopy."

"Don't worry about waking me up, boy. Being sheriff's a full-time job. And it ain't late, anyway; I just happened to turn in early tonight. Now let me get a few things straight. You say your name's Lou Allenby. That's a good name in these parts, Allenby. You kin of Rance Allenby, used to run the feed business over in Cooperville? I went to school with Rance . . . Now about the fella who said he come from the future . . ."

The Presidor of the Historical Research Department was skeptical to the last. He argued, "I am still of the opinion that the project is not feasible. There are paradoxes involved which present insurmountable—"

Doctr Matthe, the noted physicist, interrupted politely. "Undoubtedly, sir, you are familiar with the Dichotomy?"

The Presidor wasn't, so he remained silent to indicate that he wanted an explanation.

"Zeno propounded the Dichotomy. He was a Greek philosopher of roughly five hundred years before the ancient prophet whose birth was used by the primitives to mark the beginning of their calendar. The Dichotomy states that it is impossible to cover any given distance. The argument: First, half the distance must be traversed, then half of the remaining distance, and so on. It follows that some portion of the distance to be covered always remains, and therefore motion is impossible."

"Not analagous," the Presidor objected. "In the first place, your Greek assumed that any totality composed of an infinite number of parts must, itself, be infinite, whereas we

know that an infinite number of elements make up a finite total. Besides—”

Matthe smiled gently and held up a hand. “Please, sir, don’t misunderstand me. I do not deny that today we understand Zeno’s paradox. But believe me, for long centuries the best minds the human race could produce could not explain it.”

The Presidor said tactfully, “I fail to see your point, Doctr Matthe. Please forgive my inadequacy. What possible connection has this Dichotomy of Zeno’s with your projected expedition into the past?”

“I was merely drawing a parallel, sir. Zeno conceived the paradox proving that it was impossible to cover any distance, nor were the ancients able to explain it. But did that prevent them from covering distances? Obviously not. Today, my assistants and I have devised a method to send our young friend here, Jan Obreen, into the distant past. The paradox is immediately pointed out—suppose he should kill an ancestor or otherwise change history? I do not claim to be able to explain how this apparent paradox is overcome in time travel; all I know is that time travel *is* possible. Undoubtedly, better minds than mine will one day resolve the paradox, but until then we shall continue to utilize time travel, paradox or not.”

Jan Obreen had been sitting, nervously quiet, listening to his distinguished superiors. Now he cleared his throat and said, “I believe the hour has arrived for the experiment.”

The Presidor shrugged his continued disapproval, but dropped the conversation. He let his eyes scan doubtfully the equipment that stood in the corner of the laboratory.

Matthe shot a quick glance at the time piece, then hurried last-minute instructions to his student.

“We’ve been all over this before, Jan, but to sum it up—you should appear approximately in the middle of the so-called twentieth century; exactly where, we don’t know. The language will be Amer-English, which you have studied thoroughly; on that count you should have little difficulty. You will appear in the United States of North America, one of the ancient nations—as they were called—a political division of whose purpose we are not quite sure. One of the designs of your expedition will be to determine why the human race at that time split itself into scores of states, rather than having but one government.

“You will have to adapt yourself to the conditions you

find, Jan. Our histories are so vague that we can help you but little in information on what to expect."

The Presidor put in, "I am extremely pessimistic about this, Obreen, yet you have volunteered and I have no right to interfere. Your most important task is to leave a message that will come down to us; if you are successful, other attempts will be made to still other periods in history. If you fail—"

"He won't fail," Matthe said.

The Presidor shook his head and grasped Obreen's hand in farewell.

Jan Obreen stepped to the equipment and mounted the small platform. He clutched the metal grips on the instrument panel somewhat desperately, hiding to the best of his ability the shrinking inside himself.

The sheriff said, "Well, this fella—you say he told you he came from the future?"

Lou Allenby nodded. "About four thousand years ahead. He said it was the year thirty-two hundred and something, but that it was about four thousand years from now; they'd changed the numbering system meanwhile."

"And you didn't figure it was hogwash, boy? From the way you talked, I got the idea that you kind of believed him."

The other wet his lips. "I kind of believed him," he said doggedly. "There was something about him; he was different. I don't mean physically, that he couldn't pass for being born now, but there was . . . something different. Kind of, well, like he was at peace with himself; gave the impression that where he came from everybody was. And he was smart, smart as a whip. And he wasn't crazy, either."

"And what was he doing back here, boy?" The sheriff's voice was gently caustic.

"He was—some kind of student. Seems from what he said that almost everybody in his time was a student. They'd solved all the problems of production and distribution, nobody had to worry about security; in fact, they didn't seem to worry about any of the things we do now." There was a trace of wistfulness in Lou Allenby's voice. He took a deep breath and went on. "He'd come back to do research in our time. They didn't know much about it, it

seems. Something had happened in between—there was a bad period of several hundred years—and most books and records had been lost. They had a few, but not many. So they didn't know much about us and they wanted to fill in what they didn't know."

"You believed all that, boy? Did he have any proof?"

It was the dangerous point; this was where the prime risk lay. They had had, for all practical purposes, no knowledge of the exact contours of the land, forty centuries back, nor knowledge of the presence of trees or buildings. If he appeared at the wrong spot, it might well mean instant death.

Jan Obreen was fortunate, he didn't hit anything. It was, in fact, the other way around. He came out ten feet in the air over a plowed field. The fall was nasty enough, but the soft earth protected him; one ankle seemed sprained, but not too badly. He came painfully to his feet and looked around.

The presence of the field alone was sufficient to tell him that the Matthe process was at least partially successful. He was far before his own age. Agriculture was still a necessary component of human economy, definitely indicating an earlier civilization than his own.

Approximately half a mile away was a densely wooded area; not a park, nor even a planned forest to house the controlled wild life of his time. A haphazardly growing wooded area—almost unbelievable. But, then, he must grow used to the unbelievable; of all the historic periods, this was the least known. Much would be strange.

To his right, a few hundred yards away, was a wooden building. It was, undoubtedly, a human dwelling despite its primitive appearance. There was no use putting it off; contact with his fellow man would have to be made. He limped awkwardly toward his meeting with the twentieth century.

The girl had evidently not observed his precipitate arrival, but by the time he arrived in the yard of the farm house, she had come to the door to greet him.

Her dress was of another age, for in his era the clothing of the feminine portion of the race was not designed to lure the male. Hers, however, was bright and tasteful with color, and it emphasized the youthful contours of her body. Nor was it her dress alone that startled him. There was a touch of color on her lips that he suddenly realized couldn't have been achieved by nature. He had read that primitive women used

colors, paints and pigments of various sorts, upon their faces—somehow or other, now that he witnessed it, he was not repelled.

She smiled, the red of her mouth stressing the even whiteness of her teeth. She said, "It would've been easier to come down the road 'stead of across the field." Her eyes took him in, and, had he been more experienced, he could have read interested approval in them.

He said, studiously, "I am afraid that I am not familiar with your agricultural methods. I trust I have not irrevocably damaged the products of your horticultural efforts."

Susan Allenby blinked at him. "My," she said softly, a distant hint of laughter in her voice, "somebody sounds like maybe they swallowed a dictionary." Her eyes widened suddenly, as she noticed him favoring his left foot. "Why, you've hurt yourself. Now you come right on into the house and let me see if I can't do something about that. Why—"

He followed her quietly, only half-hearing her words. Something—something phenomenal—was growing within Jan Obreen, affecting oddly and yet pleasantly his metabolism.

He knew now what Matthe and the Presidor meant by paradox.

The sheriff said, "Well, you were away when he got to your place—however he got there?"

Lou Allenby nodded. "Yes, that was ten days ago. I was in Miami taking a couple of weeks' vacation. Sis and I each get away for a week or two every year, but we go at different times, partly because we figure it's a good idea to get away from each other once in a while anyway."

"Sure, good idea, boy. But your Sis, she believed this story of where he came from?"

"Yes. And, Sheriff, she had proof. I wish I'd seen it too. The field he landed in was fresh plowed. After she'd fixed his ankle she was curious enough, after what he'd told her, to follow his footsteps through the dirt back to where they'd started. And they ended, or, rather, started, right smack in the middle of a field, with a deep mark like he'd fallen there."

"Maybe he came from an airplane, in a parachute, boy. Did you think of that?"

"I thought of that, and so did Sis. She says that if he did he must've swallowed the parachute. She could follow his steps every bit of the way—it was only a few hundred

yards—and there wasn't any place he could've hidden or buried a parachute."

The sheriff said, "They got married right away, you say?"

"Two days later. I had the car with me, so Sis hitched the team and drove them into town—he didn't know how to drive horses—and they got married."

"See the license, boy? You sure they was really—"

Lou Allenby looked at him, his lips beginning to go white, and the sheriff said hastily, "All right, boy, I didn't mean it that way. Take it easy, boy."

Susan had sent her brother a telegram telling him all about it, but he'd changed hotels and somehow the telegram hadn't been forwarded. The first he knew of the marriage was when he drove up to the farm almost a week later.

He was surprised, naturally, but John O'Brien—Susan had altered the name somewhat—seemed likable enough. Handsome, too, if a bit strange, and he and Susan seemed head over heels in love.

Of course, he didn't have any money, they didn't use it in his day, he had told them, but he was a good worker, not at all soft. There was no reason to suppose that he wouldn't make out all right.

The three of them planned, tentatively, for Susan and John to stay at the farm until John had learned the ropes somewhat. Then he expected to be able to find some manner in which to make money—he was quite optimistic about his ability in that line—and spending his time traveling, taking Susan with him. Obviously, he'd be able to learn about the present that way.

The important thing, the all-embracing thing, was to plan some message to get to Doctr Matthe and the Presidor. If this type of research was to continue, all depended upon him.

He explained to Susan and Lou that it was a one-way trip. That the equipment worked only in one direction, that there was travel to the past, but not to the future. He was a voluntary exile, fated to spend the rest of his life in this era. The idea was that when he'd been in this century long enough to describe it well, he'd write up his report and put it in a box he'd have especially made to last forty centuries and bury it where it could be dug up—in a spot that had been determined in the future. He had the exact place geographically.

He was quite excited when they told him about the time capsules that had been buried elsewhere. He knew that they had never been dug up and planned to make it part of his report so the men of the future could find them.

They spent their evenings in long conversations, Jan telling of his age and what he knew of all the long centuries in between. Of the long fight upward and man's conquests in the fields of science, medicine, and in human relations. And they telling him of theirs, describing the institutions, the ways of life which he found so unique.

Lou hadn't been particularly happy about the precipitate marriage at first, but he found himself warming to Jan. Until . . .

The sheriff said, "And he didn't tell you what he was till this evening?"

"That's right."

"Your sister heard him say it? She'll back you up?"

"I . . . I guess she will. She's upset now, like I said, kind of hysterical. Screams that she's going to leave me and the farm. But she heard him say it, Sheriff. He must of had a strong hold on her, or she wouldn't be acting the way she is."

"Not that I doubt your word, boy, about a thing like that, but it'd be better if she heard it too. How'd it come up?"

"I got to asking him some questions about things in his time and after a while I asked him how they got along on race problems and he acted puzzled and then said he remembered something about races from history he'd studied, but that there weren't any races then."

"He said that by his time—starting after the war of something-or-other, I forget its name—all the races had blended into one. That the whites and the yellows had mostly killed one another off and that Africa had dominated the world for a while, and then all the races had begun to blend into one by colonization and intermarriage and that by his time the process was complete. I just stared at him and asked him, 'You mean you got nigger blood in you?' and he said, just like it didn't mean anything, 'At least one-fourth.'"

"Well, boy, you did just what you had to do," the sheriff told him earnestly, "no doubt about it."

"I just saw red. He'd married Sis; he was sleeping with

ber. I was so crazy-mad I don't even remember getting my gun."

"Well, don't worry about it, boy. You did right."

"But I feel like hell about it. He didn't know."

"Now that's a matter of opinion, boy. Maybe you swallowed a little too much of this hogwash. Coming from the future—huh! These niggers'll think up the damndest tricks to pass themselves off as white. What kind of proof for his story is that mark on the ground? Hogwash, boy. Ain't nobody coming from the future or going there neither. We can just quiet this up so it won't never be heard of nowhere. It'll be like it never happened."

ENTITY TRAP

Listing from the World Biographical Dictionary, 1990 edition: DIX, John, b. Louisville, Ky., U.S.A., Feb. 1, 1960; son Harvey R. (saloonkeeper) and Elizabeth (Bailey); student Louisville public schools 1966-1974; ran away from home at 14, worked as pin boy, bell hop; sentenced 6 mos. Birmingham, Ala., 1978, charge: procuring; enlisted U.S. Army, 1979, fought as private in Sino-American War, 1979-1981; reported missing in Battle of Panamints, 1981; led Revolution of 1982, became President of United States Aug. 5, 1982, Dictator of North America Apr. 10, 1983; died at age of 23 yrs. June 14, 1983.

The concrete of the pillbox was still moist. As Johnny Dix peered out of the slit, over the sights of his machine gun, he touched it with his finger and hoped it had hardened enough to stop the bullets of the yellow men.

A heavy pall of dense smoke hung over the foothills of the Panamints. From the slope behind the pillbox the roar of the American artillery was thunderous. Ahead, less than a mile away, the mobile guns of the Chinese thundered back.

Johnny Dix was too close to the war to be able to see it or to know that this was the turning point, the farthest penetration of the abortive Chinese invasion of California—made after the ICBM's had reduced most major cities of both countries to rubble, but had still proved undecisive—and that from here the Chinese would be driven back into the sea and the war would end.

"They're coming," Johnny Dix threw back over his shoulder. His companion's ear was only inches away but Johnny had to yell to make himself heard. "Get the next belt ready. Gotta hold them."

Got to hold them. It ran through his mind like a refrain. This was the last fully prepared line of defense. Behind it was Death Valley; it would live up to its name if they were shoved back into those open, arid wastelands. Out in the open there they would be mowed down like wheat.

But for three days now, the Panamint line had held. Hammered by steel from the air and steel from the ground, it had held. And the momentum of the attack had been blunted; it had even been thrown back a few hundred yards. This pillbox was one of a new line of outposts, hastily thrown up the night before under cover of darkness.

Something black and ugly, the nose of a huge tank, pushed through the smoke and haze. Johnny Dix let go the hot handgrips of the chatter-gun, useless against the coming monster, and nudged his companion. He yelled, "Tank about to cross the mine. Throw the switch quick! Now!"

The ground under their prone bodies shook with the terrific concussion of the exploding mine. Deafened and temporarily almost blinded by the blast that turned the monster tank into scrap iron, they did not hear the screaming dive of the plane.

The bomb it released struck a scant yard from their pillbox. And the pillbox wasn't there any more.

They should both have been killed instantly, but only one of them was. Life can be tenacious. The thing that had been Johnny Dix wriggled and rolled over. One arm—the other was gone—flailed about, the fingers clutching as though searching for the grip of the machine gun that lay yards away. One eye stared upward unseeingly above a bloody gaping hole where once had been a nose. Helmet had been blown away and with it most of the hair and scalp.

The mangled thing, no longer living but not yet dead, twisted again and began to crawl.

Back swooped the plane. Explosive bullets from its prop gun plowed a furrow of destruction that crossed the crawling thing above the knees, cutting off the legs. Dying fingers clutched spasmodically at the ground and then relaxed.

Johnny Dix was dead, but accident had timed with hair-trigger precision the instant of his death. His mangled body lived. This is the part of the story not known to the compilers

of the World Biographical Dictionary when they made their listing for John Dix, Dictator of North America for eight months before his death at twenty-three years of age.

The nameless entity whom we shall call the Stranger paused in his interplanar swing. He had perceived something that should not have been.

He went back a plane. Not there. Another. Yes, this was it. A plane of *matter*, and yet he perceived emanations of consciousness. It was a paradox, a sheer contradiction. There were the planes of consciousness and there were the planes of physical matter—but never the two together.

The Stranger—a nonmaterial point in space, a focus of consciousness, an entity—paused amid the whirling stars of the matter-plane. These were familiar to him, common to all the matter-planes. But here there was something different. Consciousness, where there should be no consciousness. A foreign *kind* of consciousness. His perception seemed to tell him that it was allied with *matter*, but that was a complete contradiction in concepts. Matter was matter; consciousness was consciousness. The two could not be as one.

The emanations were faint. Then he found that by decreasing his time-motion he could make them stronger. He continued the decrease until he had passed the point of maximum strength and then went back to it. They were clear now, but the stars no longer whirled. Almost motionless they hung against the curved curtain of infinity.

The Stranger now began to move—to shift the focus of his thought—toward the star from which the ambiguous emanations came, toward the point which he now perceived to be the third planet of that star.

He neared it and found himself outside the gaseous envelope that surrounded the planet. Here again he paused, bewildered, to analyze and try to understand the amazing thing his perceptions told him lay below.

There were entities there below him, millions, even billions, of them. More in number on this tiny sphere than in the entire plane from which he had come. But these beings were each *imprisoned in a finite bit of matter*.

What cosmic cataclysm, what interplanar warp, could have led to such an impossible thing? Were these entities from one of the myriad consciousness-planes who, in some unknown manner and for some unknown reason, had brought about this unthinkable misalliance of consciousness and matter?

He tried to concentrate his perception on a single entity, but the myriad emanations of thought from the planet's surface were too many and confusing to let him do so.

He descended toward the solid surface of the sphere, penetrating its outer gasses. He realized he would need to come near one of the beings in order to tune out, as it were, the jumbled confusion of the thoughts of the many.

The gas thickened as he descended. It seemed strangely agitated as though by intermittent but frequent concussions. Had not sound and hearing been things foreign to an incorporeal entity, the Stranger might have recognized the sound waves of explosions.

The mass of smoke he recognized as a modification or pollution of the gas he had first encountered. To a creature who perceived without sight it was neither more nor less opaque than the purer air above.

He entered solidity. That, of course, was no barrier to his progress, but he perceived now that he was on a vertical plane roughly coincidental with the surface of solidity, and that from that plane, on all sides of him, came the confused and mystifying emanations of consciousness.

One such source was very near. Shielding his own thoughts, the Stranger moved closer. The consciousness-emanations of the nearby entity were clear now—and yet not clear.

He did not know that their confusion was due to the fact that agonizing pain muddled or blanked out everything but itself. Pain, possible only to an alliance of mind and matter, was utterly inconceivable to the Stranger.

He went closer, encountering solidity again. This time it was a different type of surface. Outside, it was wet with something thick and sticky. Below that, a flexible layer covered a less flexible layer. Beyond that, soft and strange matter, queerly convoluted.

He was nearer the source of the incomprehensible consciousness-emanations now, but oddly they were becoming fainter. They did not seem to come from a fixed point, but from many points upon the convolutions of softness.

He moved slowly, striving for understanding of the strange phenomenon. The matter itself was different, once he had penetrated it. It was made up of cells and there was a fluid that moved among them.

Then, with awful suddenness, there was a convulsive movement of parts of the strange matter, a sudden flare of the un-understandable pain-consciousness-emanation—and ut-

ter blankness. Simply, the entity that he had been studying was *gone*. It had not moved, but it had vanished utterly.

The Stranger was bewildered. This was the most astonishing thing he had yet encountered on this unique planet of the matter-mind misalliance. Death—deepest mystery to beings who have seen it often—was deeper mystery to one who had never conceived as possible the end of an entity.

But more startling still, at the instant of the extinguishment of that incoherent consciousness, the Stranger had felt a sudden force, a pull. He had been shifted slightly in space, *sucked into a vortex*—as air is sucked into a sudden vacuum.

He tried to move, first in space and then in time, and could not do so. He was trapped, imprisoned in this incomprehensible thing he had entered in search of the alien entity! He, a being of thought, had in some way become inextricably entangled with physical matter.

He felt no fear, for such emotion was unknown to him. Instead, the Stranger began a calm examination of his predicament. Throwing his perception-field out more widely, alternately expanding and contracting it, he began to study the nature of the thing in which he was held prisoner.

It was a grotesquely shaped thing, basically an oval cylinder. From one corner, as it were, projected a long jointed extension. There were two shorter but thicker projections at the other end of the cylinder.

Strangest of all was the ovoid thing at the end of a short flexible column. It was inside this ovoid, near the top, that the focus of his consciousness was now fixed.

He began to study and explore his prison, but could not begin, as yet, to understand the purpose of the weird and complex nerves, tubes, and organs.

Then he felt the emanations of other entities nearby, and threw still wider the field of his perceptions. His wonder grew.

Men were crawling forward across the battlefield, passing the shattered body of Johnny Dix. The Stranger studied them and began, dimly, to understand. He saw now that this body he was in was roughly similar to theirs, but less complete. That such bodies could be *moved*, subject to many limitations, by the entities that dwelt within them, even as he now dwelt within this body.

Held prisoner to the surface of solidity of the planet, nevertheless these bodies could be moved in a horizontal plane. He pulled his perceptions back to the body of Johnny Dix

and began to probe for the secrets of inducing it to locomotion.

From his study of the things that crawled past him, the Stranger had sought and found certain concepts that were now helpful. He knew the projection with the five smaller projections was "arm." "Legs" meant the members at the other end. "Head" was the ovoid in which he was imprisoned.

These things moved, if he could discover how. He experimented. After a while a muscle in the arm twitched. From then on, he learned rapidly.

And when, presently, the body of Johnny Dix began to crawl slowly and awkwardly—on one arm and two truncated legs—in the direction the other crawling beings had taken, the Stranger didn't know that he was performing an impossible feat.

He didn't know that the body he caused to move was one which never should have done so. He didn't know that any competent doctor would not have hesitated to pronounce that body dead. Gangrene and decay were already setting in, but the Stranger's will made the stiffening muscles move despite them.

The mangled thing that had been Johnny Dix crawled on, jerkily, toward the Chinese lines.

Wong Lee lay prone against the sloping side of the shellhole. Above it projected only his steel helmet and the upper half of the goggles of his gas mask.

Through the hell of smoke and fire before him, he peered toward the American lines from which the counterattack was coming. The shellhole he occupied was slightly behind his own front lines, now under the barrage of American fire. With eight others, he had left shelter five hundred feet behind to reinforce an advance position. The eight others were dead, for shells had fallen like rain. Wong Lee, loyal though he was, had seen that he would be serving his leaders better by waiting here than by accepting certain death trying to make the last hundred feet.

He waited, peering into the smoke, wondering if anyone or anything could survive in the holocaust up ahead.

A dozen yards away, dimly through the smoke, he saw something coming toward him. Something that did not seem quite human—although he could not yet see it clearly—had crawled through that hellish rain of steel, and still

crawled slowly. Tattered shreds of an American uniform clung to it here and there.

Already he could make out that it wore no gas mask or helmet. Wong Lee gripped a gas grenade from the pile of equipment beside him and lobbed it high and straight. It fell true, scarcely a foot in front of the crawling thing. A white geyser of gas mushroomed up—a gas of which a single whiff caused instant death.

Wong Lee grinned a mirthless grin and told himself that that was that. The gas maskless figure was as good as dead. Slowly the white gas dissipated itself into the smoky air.

Then Wong Lee gasped. The thing was still coming; it had crawled right through that white cloud of death. It was nearer now and he could see what had been its face. He saw too the shattered horror that had been its body and the impossible method of its forward progress.

A cold fear gripped his stomach. It did not occur to him, yet, to run. But he knew that he had to stop that thing before it reached him or he would go mad.

Forgetting, in his greater terror, the danger of falling shells, he jumped to his feet, pointed his heavy service automatic at the crawling monstrosity, now but ten feet distant, and pulled the trigger. Again and again and again. He saw the bullets strike.

He had not quite emptied the clip when he heard the scream of the coming shell. He tried to throw himself back into the shellhole, just a little too late. He was off balance, falling backward when the shell struck. It struck and exploded just behind the thing that crawled. He heard the clang of a fragment of steel ricocheting off his helmet. Almost miraculously, he was otherwise unhit.

The impact on his helmet stunned him.

When consciousness returned, Wong Lee found himself lying quietly in the bottom of his shellhole. At first he thought the battle had ceased or moved on. Then the drifting smoke over the rim of the crater and the constant shaking of the ground beneath him told him that it was not so. The battle continued; the shattered eardrums of Wong Lee brought him no auditory impressions of it.

Yet he *heard*. Not the thunder of battle, but a quiet, calm voice that seemed to be speaking within his own mind. It asked, dispassionately, "What are you?" It seemed to be speaking Chinese, but that made it no less bewildering. Strangest of all, it did not ask *who* he was, but *what*.

Wong Lee struggled to a sitting position and looked about him. He saw it lying there beside him, scant inches away.

It was a human head, or what had been one. With growing horror he saw that it was the head of the thing that had crawled toward him. The shell that had struck just behind it had blown it here, though without the body that had enabled it to crawl.

Well, it was dead now, all right.

Or was it?

Again, in the mind of Wong Lee, that quiet query, "What are you?" made itself heard. And suddenly, not knowing how he knew, Wong Lee was certain that the asker of that question was the severed, horribly mutilated head beside him in the shellhole.

Wong Lee screamed. He tore off his gas mask as he scrambled to his feet and screamed again. He gained the top rim of the shellhole and began to run.

He'd taken out ten paces when, almost at his feet, the thousand-pound demolition bomb struck and exploded. Soil and rock from the explosion of the bomb rose high into the air and descended. The falling soil and rock filled completely most of the smaller shellholes around the new crater.

In one of these, now buried under seven feet of soil, lay the mutilated head that had once been part of the body of Johnny Dix, now the unbreakable prison of an alien being. Helpless to leave his new bonds of matter, helpless to move at all in space or to move in time other than to drift with the time-stream of this plane, the Stranger—until an hour ago a being of pure thought—began calmly and systematically to study the possibilities and limitations of his new mode of existence.

Erasmus Findly, in his monumental *History of the Americas*, devotes an entire volume to the dictator John Dix and the rise of imperialism in the United States immediately following the successful conclusion of the Sino-American War. But Findly, as do most modern historians, scouts the legendary character often given the figure of Dix.

"It is natural," he says, "that so sudden a rise from complete obscurity to complete and tyrannical control of the greatest government on the face of the earth should lead to such legends as those which the superstitious believe about Dix.

"It is undoubtedly true that Dix went through the Sino-American War as a buck private, without distinguishing himself. For this reason, possibly, he had most records of himself destroyed after his rise to power. Or possibly there was some mark on those records which made him wish them destroyed.

"But the legend that he was reported missing during the crucial battle of that war—the Battle of the Panamints—and was not seen until the following spring, when the war was over, is probably untrue.

"According to the legend, in the spring of 1982 John Dix, naked and covered with dirt, walked up to a Panamint valley farm house, where he was given food and clothing and from there he proceeded to Los Angeles, then under reconstruction.

"Equally absurd are the legends of his invulnerability; the statements that dozens of times the bullets of assassins passed through his body without seeming even to cause him inconvenience.

"The fact that his enemies, the true patriots of America, got him at last is proof of the falseness of the invulnerability legend. And the crowning horror of that scene in the Rose Bowl, so vividly described by many contemporary witnesses, was undoubtedly a trap-door conjuring trick engineered by his enemies."

Calmly and systematically, the Stranger had begun the study of the nature of his prison. With patience, he found the key.

Exploring, he tapped a memory in the head of Johnny Dix. A single episode suddenly became as vivid to him as though it were an experience of his own.

He was on a small boat, passing an island in a harbor. Beside him was a man who seemed very tall. He knew the man was his father and that this was happening when he was seven years old and they had taken a trip to a place called New York. His father said, "That's Ellis Island, kid, where they let the immigrants in. Damn foreigners; they're ruining this country. No chance any more for a real American. Somebody ought to blow Europe off the map."

Simple enough, but each thought of that memory brought connotations that explained it to the Stranger. He knew what a boat was, what and where Europe was, and what an American was. And he knew that America was the only

good country on this planet; that all the other countries were made up of contemptible people—and that even in this country the only good ones were the white ones who had been here a long time.

He explored further, found out many things that had bewildered him. He began to correlate these memories into a picture of the world in which he was now trapped. It was a strange, warped picture—although he had no way of learning that. It was a narrow ultra-nationalistic point of view, for one thing. And there were worse things than that.

He learned—and assimilated—all the hates and prejudices of buck private Johnny Dix, and they were many and violent. He knew nothing to the contrary of this strange world and so they became his hates and his prejudices, just as the memories became his memories.

Although he did not suspect it was so, the Stranger was finding his way into a narrower prison than his physical one; he was becoming trapped into the thoughts of a mind that had been neither strong nor straight.

There emerged a mentality which was a strange blend of the powerful mind of a strong entity and the narrow beliefs and prejudices of a Johnny Dix.

He saw the world through a dark, distorted lens. He saw that things must be done.

"Those fatheads in Washington," he—or Johnny Dix—had said, *"oughta be kicked out. Now if I was running this country—"*

Yes, the Stranger saw what things he must do to put this world right. This was a good country—parts of it—surrounded by bad countries, and the bad ones ought to be taught a lesson, if not exterminated. The yellows ought to be *all* killed, men, women, and children. There was a black race that ought to be sent back to a place called Africa, where they belonged. And even among white Americans, there were people who had more money than they should have, and it ought to be taken away from them and given to people like Johnny Dix. Yes, we needed a government that could tell people like that where to head in. And enough military power so we could tell the rest of the world where to head in, too.

But the Stranger saw, too, that buried as he was and in a piece of matter that was disintegrating even as he explored it, there was little chance of his accomplishing any of these important things.

So, avidly, he began to study the nature of matter. He could bring his perceptions down to the scale of atoms and molecules and study them. He saw that in the very soil about him he had the necessary materials, all of them, to reconstruct the body of Johnny Dix. By means of his memories of his first explorations of the incomplete body of Johnny Dix, as it had been when he first entered it, he began the study of organic chemistry.

He filled in his concept of the parts that had been missing from the body from the memories of Johnny Dix and began work.

Transmuting the chemicals of the soil was not a difficult problem. And heat was a mere matter of speeding up molecular action.

Slowly, new flesh grew upon the head of Johnny Dix; hair, eyes, and a neck began to form. It took time, but what was time to an immortal?

One evening in early spring of the following year, a naked but perfectly formed human figure clawed its way to the surface of soil that had been softened by molecular action to enable that figure to crawl out.

It lay quiet for a while, mastering the art of breathing air. Then, experimentally at first but with growing skill and confidence, it tried the use of various muscles and sensory organs.

The group of workmen on the Glendale Reconstruction Project looked around curiously as the man in the ill-fitting clothes stepped up on a packing crate and began to speak.

"Friends," he shouted, "how long are we going to tolerate—"

A uniformed policeman stepped up quickly. "Here now," he objected. "You can't do that. Even if you got a permit, these are work hours and you can't interrupt—"

"Are you satisfied, Officer, with the way things are run around here, and in Washington?"

The policeman looked up and his eyes locked with those of the man on the packing case. For a moment he felt as though an electric current had gone through his mind and body. And then he knew that this man had the right answers, that this man was a leader whom he'd follow. Anywhere.

"My name's John Dix," said the man on the box. "You ain't heard of me, but you'll be hearing of me from now on. I'm starting something, see? If you want in on the ground

floor, take off that badge and throw it down. But keep your gun; it'll come in handy."

The policeman reached up for his badge and unfastened the pin.

That had been the start.

June 14, 1983, was the day of the end. In the morning there had been a heavy fog over Los Angeles—now capital city of North America—but by midafternoon the sun was bright and the air balmy.

Robert Welton, leader of the little group of patriots who had failed, for some reason, to join the mass hysteria with which the people had backed John Dix, sat at a window of the new Panamera Building, overlooking the vast throng in the reconstructed Rose Bowl. On the floor under the window from which he looked lay a high-powered rifle with Mercer telescopic sights.

On the stage of the Bowl, John Dix, Dictator of North America, stood alone, although uniformed guards occupied all seats immediately around the stage and were scattered elsewhere in the audience. A microphone hung just overhead and a speaker system carried the dictator's voice to the farthest reaches of the Bowl, and beyond. Robert Welton and the others in the room with him could hear it distinctly.

"The day has come. We are prepared. People of America, I call upon you to rise in your wrath and stamp out now and forever the power of the evil countries beyond the seas."

Over the Bowl cheering rose, a mighty wave of sound.

Through it Robert Welton heard three sharp raps on the door of the room behind him. He crossed the room and opened the door. A tall man and a scrawny boy with a large head and great vacuous eyes came into the room.

"You brought the kid," said Welton, "What for? He can't—"

The tall man spoke. "You know Dix isn't human, Welton. You know how much good our bullets have done before! Why, in Pittsburgh, I *saw them hit him*. But this clairvoyant kid here—or maybe it's telepathy or something and not clairvoyance and I don't know or care—has got a line on him somehow. The first time the kid ever saw him he went into a fit. We can't fight Dix without knowing what we're fighting, can we?"

Welton shrugged. "Maybe. You play with that. I'm going to keep on trying steel-jacketed lead."

He drew a deep breath and walked again to the window. He knelt before it on one knee and raised the sash. His left hand reached for the rifle.

"Here goes," Welson said. "Maybe if we get *enough* lead in him—"

McLaughlin, author of the most famous biography of John Dix, while avoiding direct acceptance of any of the legends which have filled many other books, concedes the mystical aspect of Dix's rise to power.

"It is indeed strange," he writes, "that immediately, suddenly, after his assassination, the wave of insanity which had engulfed the United States disappeared abruptly and completely. Had not the few true patriots who failed to follow his lead succeeded, the history of the world during the last part of the twentieth century would have been a story of bloody carnage unparalleled in history.

"Extermination, or ruthless suppression, would have been the lot of every country which he could have conquered—and there is little doubt, in view of the superior armaments he had, that the ravage would have been far-flung. He might even have conquered the world. Although, of course, America itself would ultimately have suffered most.

"To say that John Dix was a madman can hardly explain the extent of his power over the people of his own country. Almost it is possible to credit the current superstition that he had superhuman powers. But if he was a superman, he was a warped superman.

"It was almost as though an ignorant, prejudiced, opinionated man, narrow-minded in every way, had miraculously been given the power to sway most of the population, able to impress his narrow hatreds upon all, or almost all, of those who listened. The few who were immune, battling terrific odds, saved the world from Armageddon.

"The exact manner of his death remains, after all this time, shrouded in mystery. Whether he was killed by a new weapon—destroyed after it had accomplished its purpose—or whether the monstrous thing seen by the throngs in the Bowl was a mere illusion, the trick of a prestidigitator extraordinary, will never be certainly known."

The muzzle of the rifle rested on the ledge of the window. Robert Welson steadied it and peered through the telescopic sights. His finger rested against the trigger.

The voice of the dictator boomed through the speaker "*Our day of destiny—*" Sentence incompleted, he paused, leaning forward across the table behind which he stood. The audience was hushed, awaiting completion of the sentence before the cheering would rise again.

The tall man standing behind Robert Welson put an urgent hand on Welson's shoulder. "Don't shoot yet," he whispered. "Something's happening. Look at the kid, the clairvoyant."

Welson turned.

He saw that the scrawny boy had fallen back into a chair, his muscles rigid. His eyes were closed, his face twisted. His lips writhed as he spoke:

"They're there. Near him. Like two shining points of light, only you can't see them. But there is a point like them—*inside John Dix's head!*

"Talking. They're talking to him, the two points of light like his point of light. Only not words. But I can get what they're saying, even if it isn't words. One of them asks, '*Why are you here? You seem strange. As though a lesser being had—*' I can't understand that part of it; there aren't any words I know that would say it.

"The thing, the point, inside Dix's head is answering. It says, '*I'm trapped here. The matter holds me. The matter and the memories in it hold me prisoner. Can you help me free?*'"

"They answer that they will try. They will all three concentrate together. The combined force of the three of them will free him from his prison. They're trying—"

Something strange *was* happening. The dictator was still silent, still leaning forward across the table. Minutes had passed, and he had not moved, had not completed the sentence he had started.

Robert Welson turned from the kid back to the window again. To see more clearly, he looked through the telescopic sights of the rifle, but his finger wasn't on the trigger now. Maybe the half-witted kid really had something on the ball. The dictator had never paused that long before.

Behind him the kid sang out "*Free!*" as though it were a triumphal thought repeated from somewhere in his brain. And, although the kid couldn't see out of the window from where he sat, that cry came simultaneously with whatever it was that happened to John Dix.

Welson gasped, but the sound was lost in the sudden screams and shrieks from the audience in the Bowl.

With awful suddenness the body of the dictator vanished before their eyes, vanished into a thin white mist that disappeared into the air as his empty clothing fell to the floor.

But the hideous thing that fell from vanished shoulders and lay in plain sight on the table did not disintegrate at once. It was a hairless, eyeless, almost fleshless, rotting thing that once had been a head.

THE LITTLE LAMB

She didn't come home for supper and by eight o'clock I found some ham in the refrigerator and made myself a sandwich. I wasn't worried, but I was getting restless. I kept walking to the window and looking down the hill toward town, but I couldn't see her coming. It was a moonlit evening, very bright and clear. The lights of the town were nice and the curve of the hills beyond, black against blue under a yellow gibbous moon. I thought I'd like to paint it, but not the moon; you put a moon in a picture and it looks corny, it looks pretty. Van Gogh did it in his picture *The Starry Sky* and it didn't look pretty; it looked frightening, but then again he was crazy when he did it; a sane man couldn't have done many of things Van Gogh did.

I hadn't cleaned my palette so I picked it up and tried to work a little more on the painting I'd started the day before. It was just blocked in thus far and I started to mix a green to fill in an area but it wouldn't come right and I realized I'd have to wait till daylight to get it right. Evenings, without natural light, I can work on line or I can mold in finishing strokes, but when color's the thing, you've got to have daylight. I cleaned my messed-up palette for a fresh start in the morning and I cleaned my brushes and it was getting close to nine o'clock and still she hadn't come.

No, there wasn't anything to worry about. She was with friends somewhere and she was all right. My studio is almost a mile from town, up in the hills, and there wasn't any way she could let me know because there's no phone. Probably she was having a drink with the gang at the Waverly Inn and there was no reason she'd think I'd worry about her. Neither of us lived by the clock; that was understood between us. She'd be home soon.

There was half of a jug of wine left and I poured myself

a drink and sipped it, looking out the window toward town. I turned off the light behind me so I could better watch out the window at the bright night. A mile away, in the valley, I could see the lights of the Waverly Inn. Garish bright, like the loud juke box that kept me from going there often. Strangely, Lamb never minded the juke box, although she liked good music, too.

Other lights dotted here and there. Small farms, a few other studios. Hans Wagner's place a quarter of a mile down the slope from mine. Big, with a skylight; I envied him that skylight. But not his strictly academic style. He'd never paint anything quite as good as a color photograph; in fact, he saw things as a camera sees them and painted them without filtering them through the catalyst of the mind. A wonderful draftsman, never more. But his stuff sold; he could afford a skylight.

I sipped the last of my glass of wine, and there was a tight knot in the middle of my stomach. I didn't know why. Often Lamb had been later than this, much later. There wasn't any real reason to worry.

I put my glass down in the window sill and opened the door. But before I went out I turned the lights back on. A beacon for Lamb, if I should miss her. And if she should look up the hill toward home and the lights were out, she might think I wasn't there and stay longer, wherever she was. She'd know I wouldn't turn in before she got home, no matter how late it was.

Quit being a fool, I told myself; it isn't late yet. It's early, just past nine o'clock. I walked down the hill toward town and the knot in my stomach got tighter and I swore at myself because there was no reason for it. The line of the hills beyond town rose higher as I descended, pointing up the stars. It's difficult to make stars that look like stars. You'd have to make pinholes in the canvas and put a light behind it. I laughed at the idea—but why not? Except that it isn't done and what did I care about that. But I thought a while and I saw why it wasn't done. It would be childish, immature.

I was about to pass Hans Wagner's place, and I slowed my steps thinking that just possibly Lamb might be there. Hans lived alone there and Lamb wouldn't, of course, be there unless a crowd had gone to Hans's from the inn or somewhere. I stopped to listen and there wasn't a sound, so the crowd wasn't there. I went on.

The road branched; there were several ways from here and I might miss her. I took the shortest route, the one she'd be most likely to take if she came directly home from town. It went past Carter Brent's place, but that was dark. There was a light on at Sylvia's place, though, and guitar music. I knocked on the door and while I was waiting I realized that it was the phonograph and not a live guitarist. It was Segovia playing Bach, the Chaconne from the D Minor Partita, one of my favorites. Very beautiful, very fine-boned and delicate, like Lamb.

Sylvia came to the door and answered my question. No, she hadn't seen Lamb. And no, she hadn't been at the inn, or anywhere. She'd been home all afternoon and evening, but did I want to drop in for a drink? I was tempted—more by Segovia than by the drink—but I thanked her and went on.

I should have turned around and gone back home instead, because for no reason I was getting into one of my black moods. I was illogically annoyed because I didn't know where Lamb was; if I found her now I'd probably quarrel with her, and I hate quarreling. Not that we do, often. We're each pretty tolerant and understanding—of little things, at least. And Lamb's not having come home yet was still a little thing.

But I could hear the blaring juke box when I was still a long way from the inn and it didn't lighten my mood any. I could see in the window now and Lamb wasn't there, not at the bar. But there were still the booths, and besides, someone might know where she was. There were two couples at the bar. I knew them; Charlie and Eve Chandler and Dick Bristow with a girl from Los Angeles whom I'd met but whose name I couldn't remember. And one fellow, stag, who looked as though he was trying to look like a movie scout from Hollywood. Maybe he really was one.

I went in and, thank God, the juke box stopped just as I went through the door. I went over to the bar, glancing at the line of booths; Lamb wasn't there.

I said, "Hi," to the four of them that I knew, and to the stag if he wanted to take it to cover him, and to Harry, behind the bar. "Has Lamb been here?" I asked Harry.

"Nope, haven't seen her, Wayne. Not since six; that's when I came on. Want a drink?"

I didn't, particularly, but I didn't want it to look as though I'd come solely for Lamb, so I ordered one.

"How's the painting coming?" Charlie Chandler asked me.

He didn't mean any particular painting and he wouldn't have known anything about it if he had. Charlie runs the local bookstore and—amazingly—he can tell the difference between Thomas Wolfe and a comic book, but he couldn't tell the difference between an El Greco and an Al Capp. Don't misunderstand me on that; I like Al Capp.

So I said, "Fine," as one always says to a meaningless question, and took a swallow of the drink that Harry had put in front of me. I paid for it and wondered how long I'd have to stay in order to make it not too obvious that I'd come only to look for Lamb.

For some reason conversation died. If anybody had been talking to anybody before I came in, he wasn't now. I glanced at Eve and she was making wet circles on the mahogany of the bar with the bottom of a martini goblet. The olive stirred restlessly in the bottom and I knew suddenly that was the color, the exact color I'd wanted to mix an hour or two ago just before I'd decided not to try to paint. The color of an olive moist with gin and vermouth. Just right for the main sweep of the biggest hill, shading darker to the right, lighter to the left. I stared at the color and memorized it so I'd have it tomorrow. Maybe I'd even try it tonight when I got back home; I had it now, daylight or no. It was right; it was the color that had to be there. I felt good; the black mood that had threatened to come on was gone.

But where was Lamb? If she wasn't home yet when I got back, would I be able to paint? Or would I start worrying about her, without reason? Would I get that tightness in the pit of my stomach?

I saw that my glass was empty. I'd drunk too fast. Now I might as well have another one, or it would be too obvious why I'd come. And I didn't want people—not even people like these—to think I was jealous of Lamb and worried about her. Lamb and I trusted each other implicitly. I was curious as to where she was and I wanted her back, but that was all. I wasn't suspicious of where she might be. They wouldn't realize that.

I said, "Harry, give me a martini." I'd had so few drinks that it wouldn't hurt me to mix them, and I wanted to study that color, intimately and at close hand. It was going to be the central color motif; everything would revolve around it.

Harry handed me the martini. It tasted good. I swished around the olive and it wasn't quite the color I wanted,

a little too much in the brown, but I still had the idea. And I still wanted to work on it tonight, if I could find Lamb. If she was there, I could work; I could get the planes of color in, and tomorrow I could mold them, shade them.

But unless I'd missed her, unless she was already home or on her way there, it wasn't too good a chance. We knew dozens of people; I couldn't try every place she might possibly be. But there was one other fairly good chance, Mike's Club, a mile down the road, out of town on the other side. She'd hardly have gone there unless she was with someone who had a car, but that could have happened. I could phone there and find out.

I finished my martini and nibbled the olive and then turned around to walk over to the phone booth. The wavy-haired man who looked as though he might be from Hollywood was just walking back toward the bar from the juke box and it was making preliminary scratching noises. He'd dropped a coin into it and it started to play something loud and brassy. A polka, and a particularly noisy and obnoxious one. I felt like hitting him one in the nose, but I couldn't even catch his eye as he strolled back and took his stool again at the bar. And anyway, he wouldn't have known what I was hitting him for. But the phone booth was just past the juke box and I wouldn't hear a word, or be heard, if I phoned Mike's.

A record takes about three minutes, and I stood one minute of it and that was enough. I wanted to make that call and get out of there, so I walked toward the booth and I reached around the juke box and pulled the plug out of the wall. Quietly, not violently at all. But the sudden silence was violent, so violent that I could hear, as though she'd screamed them, the last few words of what Eve Chandler had been saying to Charlie Chandler. Her voice pitched barely to carry above the din of brass—but she might as well have used a public address system once I'd pulled the juke box's plug.

"... may be at Hans's." Bitten off suddenly, if she'd intended to say more.

Her eyes met mine and hers looked frightened.

I looked back at Eve Chandler. I didn't pay any attention to Golden Boy from Hollywood; if he wanted to make anything of the fact that I'd ruined his dime, that was his business and he could start it. I went into the phone booth and pulled the door shut. If that juke box started again be-

fore I'd finished my call, it would be my business, and I could start it. The juke box didn't start again.

I gave the number of Mike's and when someone answered, I asked, "Is Lamb there?"

"Who did you say?"

"This is Wayne Gray," I said patiently. "Is Lambeth Gray there?"

"Oh." I recognized it now as Mike's voice. "Didn't get you at first. No, Mr. Gray, your wife hasn't been here."

I thanked him and hung up. When I went out of the booth, the Chandlers were gone. I heard a car starting outside.

I waved to Harry and went outside. The taillight of the Chandlers' car was heading up the hill. In the direction they'd have gone if they were heading for Hans Wagner's studio—to warn Lamb that I'd heard something I shouldn't have heard, and that I might come there.

But it was too ridiculous to consider. Whatever gave Eve Chandler the wild idea that Lamb might be with Hans, it was wrong. Lamb wouldn't do anything like that. Eve had probably seen her having a drink or so with Hans somewhere, sometime, and had got the thing wrong. Dead wrong. If nothing else, Lamb would have better taste than that. Hans was handsome, and he was a ladies' man, which I'm not, but he's stupid and he can't paint. Lamb wouldn't fall for a stuffed shirt like Hans Wagner.

But I might as well go home, now, I decided. Unless I wanted to give people the impression that I was canvassing the town for my wife, I couldn't very well look any farther or ask any more people if they'd seen her. And although I don't care what people think about me either personally or as a painter, I wouldn't want them to think I had any wrong ideas about Lamb.

I walked off in the wake of the Chandlers' car, through the bright moonlight. I came in sight of Hans's place again, and the Chandlers' car wasn't parked there; if they'd stopped, they'd gone right on. But, of course, they would have, under those circumstances. They wouldn't have wanted me to see that they were parked there; it would have looked bad.

The lights were on there, but I walked on past, up the hill toward my own place. Maybe Lamb was home by now; I hoped so. At any rate, I wasn't going to stop at Hans's. Whether the Chandlers had or not.

Lamb wasn't in sight along the road between Hans's place and mine. But she could have made it before I got that far, even if—well, even if she had been there. If the Chandlers had stopped to warn her.

Three quarters of a mile from the inn to Hans's. Only one quarter of a mile from Hans's place to mine. And Lamb could have run; I had only walked.

Past Hans's place, a beautiful studio with that skylight I envied him. Not the place, not the fancy furnishings, just that wonderful skylight. Oh, yes, you can get wonderful light outdoors, but there's wind and dust just at the wrong time. And when, mostly, you paint out of your head instead of something you're looking at, there's no advantage to being outdoors at all. I don't have to look at a hill while I'm painting it. I've seen a hill.

The light was on at my place, up ahead. But I'd left it on, so that didn't prove Lamb was home. I plodded toward it, getting a little winded by the uphill climb, and I realized I'd been walking too fast. I turned around to look back and there was that composition again, with the gibbous moon a little higher, a little brighter. It had lightened the black of the near hills and the far ones were blacker. I thought, I can do that. Gray on black and black on gray. And, so it wouldn't be a monochrome, the yellow lights. Like the lights at Hans's place. Yellow lights like Hans's yellow hair. Tall, Nordic-Teutonic type, handsome. Nice planes in his face. Yes, I could see why women liked him. Women, but not Lamb.

I had my breath back and started climbing again. I called out Lamb's name when I got near the door, but she didn't answer. I went inside, but she wasn't there.

The place was very empty. I poured myself a glass of the wine and went over to look at the picture I'd blocked out. It was all wrong; it didn't mean anything. The lines were nice but they didn't mean anything at all. I'd have to scrape the canvas and start over. Well, I'd done that before. It's the only way you get anything, to be ruthless when something's wrong. But I couldn't start it tonight.

The tin clock said it was a quarter to eleven, still that wasn't late. But I didn't want to think so I decided to read a while. Some poetry, possibly. I went over to the bookcase. I saw Blake and that made me think of one of his simplest and best poems, *The Lamb*. It had always made me think of Lamb—"Little lamb, who made thee?" It had always given me, personally, a funny twist to the line, a connotation that

Blake, of course, hadn't intended. But I didn't want to read Blake tonight. T. S. Eliot: "Midnight shakes the memory as a madman shakes a dead geranium." But it wasn't midnight yet, and I wasn't in the mood for Eliot. Not even Prufrock: "Let us go then, you and I, where the evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a table—" He could do things with words that I'd have liked to do with pigments, but they aren't the same things, the same medium. Painting and poetry are as different as eating and sleeping. But both fields can be, and are, so wide. Painters can differ as greatly as Bonnard and Braque, yet both be great. Poets as great as Eliot and Blake. "Little lamb, who—" I didn't want to read.

And enough of thinking. I opened the trunk and got my forty-five caliber automatic. The clip was full; I jacked a cartridge into the chamber and put the safety catch on. I put it into my pocket and went outside. I closed the door behind me and started down the hill toward Hans Wagner's studio.

I wondered, had the Chandlers stopped there to warn them? Then either Lamb would have hurried home—or, possibly, she might have gone on with the Chandlers, to their place. She could have figured that to be less obvious than rushing home. So, even if she wasn't there, it would prove nothing. If she was, it would show that the Chandlers hadn't stopped there.

I walked down the road and I tried to look at the crouching black beast of the hills, the yellow of the lights. But they added up to nothing, they meant nothing. Unfeeling, ungiving-to-feel, like a patient etherized upon a table. Damn Eliot, I thought; the man saw too deeply. The useless striving of the wasteland for something a man can touch but never have, the shaking of a dead geranium. As a madman. Little Lamb. Her dark hair and her darker eyes in the whiteness of her face. And the slender, beautiful whiteness of her body. The softness of her voice and the touch of her hands running through my hair. And Hans Wagner's hair, yellow as that mocking moon.

I knocked on the door. Not loudly, not softly, just a knock.

Was it too long before Hans came?

Did he look frightened? I didn't know. The planes of his face were nice, but what was in them I didn't know. I can

see the lines and the planes of faces, but I can't read them. Nor voices.

"Hi, Wayne. Come in," Hans said.

I went inside. Lamb wasn't there, not in the big room, the studio. There were other rooms, of course; a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom. I wanted to go look in all of them right away, but that would have been crude. I wouldn't leave until I'd looked in each.

"Getting a little worried about Lamb; she's seldom out alone this late. Have you seen her?" I asked.

Hans shook his blond, handsome head.

"Thought she might have dropped in on her way home," I said casually. I smiled at him. "Maybe I was just getting lonesome and restless. How about dropping back with me for a drink? I've got only wine, but there's plenty of that."

Of course he had to say, "Why not have a drink here?" He said it. He even asked me what I wanted, and I said a martini because he'd have to go out into the kitchen to make that and it would give me a chance to look around.

"Okay, Wayne, I'll have one too," Hans said. "Excuse me a moment."

He went out into the kitchen. I took a quick look into the bathroom and then went into the bedroom and took a good look, even under the bed. Lamb wasn't there. Then I went into the kitchen and said, "Forgot to tell you, make mine light. I might want to paint a bit after I get home."

"Sure," he said.

Lamb wasn't in the kitchen. Nor had she left after I'd knocked or come in; I remember Hans's kitchen door; it's pretty noisy and I hadn't heard it. And it's the only door aside from the front one.

I'd been foolish.

Unless, of course, Lamb had been here and had gone away with the Chandlers when they'd dropped by to warn them, if they had dropped by.

I went back into the big studio with the skylight and wandered around for a minute looking at the things on the walls. They made me want to puke so I sat down and waited. I'd stay at least a few minutes to make it look all right. Hans came back.

He gave me my drink and I thanked him. I sipped it while he waited patronizingly. Not that I minded that. He made money and I didn't. But I thought worse of him than he could possibly think of me.

"How's your work going, Wayne?"

"Fine," I said. I sipped my drink. He'd taken me at my word and made it weak, mostly vermouth. It tasted lousy that way. But the olive in it looked darker, more the color I'd had in mind. Maybe, just maybe, with the picture built around that color, it would work out.

"Nice place, Hans," I said. "That skylight. I wish I had one."

He shrugged. "You don't work from models anyway, do you? And outdoors is outdoors."

"Outdoors is in your mind," I said. "There isn't any difference." And then I wondered why I was talking to somebody who wouldn't know what I was talking about. I wandered over to the window—the one that faced toward my studio—and looked out of it. I hoped I'd see Lamb on the way there, but I didn't. She wasn't here. Where was she? Even if she'd been here and left when I'd knocked, she'd have been on the way now. I'd have seen her.

I turned. "Were the Chandlers here tonight?" I asked him.

"The Chandlers? No; haven't seen them for a couple of days." He'd finished his drink. "Have another?" he asked.

I started to say no. I didn't. My eyes happened, just happened, to light on a closet door. I'd seen inside it once; it wasn't deep, but it was deep enough for a man to stand inside it. Or a woman.

"Thanks, Hans. Yes."

I walked over and handed him my glass. He went out into the kitchen with the glasses. I walked quietly over to the closet door and tried it.

It was locked.

And there wasn't a key in the door. That didn't make sense. Why would anyone keep a closet locked when he always locked all the outer doors and windows when he left?

Little lamb, who made thee?

Hans came out of the kitchen, a martini in each hand. He saw my hand on the knob of the closet door.

For a moment he stood very still and then his hands began to tremble; the martinis, his and mine, slopped over the rims and made little droplets falling to the floor.

I asked him, pleasantly, "Hans, do you keep your closet locked?"

"Is it locked? No, I don't, ordinarily." And then he realized

he hadn't quite said it right and he said, more fearlessly, "What's the matter with you, Wayne?"

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing at all." I took the forty-five out of my pocket. He was far enough away so that, big as he was, he couldn't think about trying to jump me.

I smiled at him, instead. "How's about letting me have the key?"

More martini glistened on the tiles. These tall, big, handsome blonds, they haven't guts; he was scared stiff. He tried to make his voice normal. "I don't know where it is. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said. "But stay where you are. Don't move, Hans."

He didn't. The glasses shook, but the olives stayed in them. Barely. I watched him, but I put the muzzle of the big forty-five against the keyhole. I slanted it away from the center of the door so I wouldn't kill anybody who was hiding inside. I did that out of the corner of my eye, watching Hans Wagner.

I pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot, even in that big studio, was deafening, but I didn't take my eyes off Hans. I may have blinked.

I stepped back as the closet door swung slowly open. I lined the muzzle of the forty-five against Hans's heart. I kept it there as the door of the closet swung slowly toward me.

An olive hit the tiles with a sound that wouldn't have been audible, ordinarily. I watched Hans while I looked into the closet as the door swung fully open.

Lamb was there. Naked.

I shot Hans and my hand was steady, so one shot was enough. He fell with his hand moving toward his heart but not having time to get there. His head hit the tiles with a crushing sound. The sound was the sound of death.

I put the gun back into my pocket and my hand was trembling now.

Hans's easel was near me, his palette knife lying on the ledge.

I took the palette knife in my hand and cut my Lamb, my naked Lamb, out of her frame. I rolled her up and held her tightly; no one would ever see her thus. We left together and, hand in hand, started up the hill toward home. I looked at her in the bright moonlight. I laughed and she laughed, but her laughter was like silver cymbals and my laughter was like dead petals shaken from a madman's geranium.

Her hand slipped out of mine and she danced, a white slim wraith.

Back over her shoulder her laughter tinkled and she said, "Remember, darling? Remember that you killed me when I told you about Hans and me? Don't you remember killing me this afternoon? Don't you, darling? Don't you remember?"

ME AND FLAPJACK AND THE MARTIANS

(in collaboration with Mack Reynolds)

Wanta hear how Flapjack saved the world from the Martians, huh? All right, partner. It happened on the edge of the Mojave, just south of Death Valley. Me and Flapjack was . . .

"Flapjack," I told him complainingly, "you ain't worth a whoop no more since you done got rich. You're too all-fired proud these days to be ploddin' through the desert doing an honest day's work. Ain't yuh?"

Flapjack didn't answer. He ignored me and looked ahead of him disgustedly at the sand, the dust, the little clumps of cactus. He didn't have to answer; just his whole attitude made it plenty clear he wished we was back in Crucero, or maybe up in Bishop.

I frowned at him. "Sometimes," I told him, "I think you was just never cut out for this, Flapjack. Oh, sure, you've spent most of your life in the desert and the mountains, just like I spent most of mine. And maybe you know 'em better than I do; I gotta admit it was you and not me that stumbled on that there last strike we made. But I still don't think you like the desert and the hills.

"I think I got reason for sayin' that, Flapjack. It's the way you've acted ever since we got a few dollars in the poke from that strike. Now you don't have to look hurt like that. You know the way you been carryin' on ever since we got money in the bank. A real caution. Why as soon as we get into Bishop or maybe Needles, what do you do? You make a beeline for the nearest saloon, that's what you do. Gotta let everybody in town know we got money to spend."

Flapjack yawned and kicked up the dust underfoot. He

didn't mind my talking on and on, because you get to where you kind of like to hear somebody's voice out in the desert, but he wasn't paying no real attention to what I was saying. But I didn't let that stop me. I laid it into him.

I said, "And you ain't satisfied to spend our money in just one bar, neither. The minute you finish off a gallon of beer in one saloon, you head for the next. You're gettin' yourself talked about, Flapjack. But that don't make no difference to you. In fact, like I said, you're gettin' yourself so all-fired proud you don't care *what* anybody says about you.

"It ain't as though we got so much money we can retire. If we tried livin' in town permanent-like, we'd be flat broke in no time. Especially with the way you hang around in saloons and guzzle beer. Well, at least you don't buy drinks for the house; guess you think on account of that I ain't got no complaints comin'."

Flapjack snorted at my words and stopped.

"Oh, you think we oughta make camp, huh?" I said. I let my eyes go around the landscape. "All right, I guess one place is as good as another. Ain't no water within a dozen miles anyhow."

I took the pack off Flapjack's back and began to set up my little tent. I'd never packed a tent before I'd made my strike—or Flapjack had made it for me—but that hombre in the store had caught me in a weak moment with money in my pocket and he'd talked me into it. A piece of foofaraw, but it served Flapjack right for having to carry it.

Flapjack watched me for a minute and then ambled off to size up the possibilities of a little graze or such other grub as a burro can rustle up in the desert. I knew he wouldn't wander far and that I didn't have to watch him or hobble him, so I minded my own business and let him mind his.

It wasn't no exaggeration, what I'd been telling him. He'd been acting up for days and the reason was plain to see. Flapjack wanted to get back to where he could get his ration of beer every night, and some good fancy feed to top it off with. Ever since he kicked over that rock and made the silver strike, he's had credit in every bar in every town around here. He just walks in and the bartender fills a bucket with beer for him and he drinks it down, and then he ambles on to the next bar. He's crazy about beer. Holds it pretty well, too.

Maybe I should never have made the arrangements, but,

like I said, it was Flapjack that made the strike, so I thought it was only fair. Even if once in a while I regret it, like the time he got in the fancy place in Crucero by mistake and got out in the middle of the fancy dance floor and—well, you can't expect a burro to know better than that, can you? And there weren't any people dancin' just then anyway so I don't see what they made such a big fuss about. Funny thing, Flapjack never done anything like that in a place where he was welcome, and I sometimes wonder. Especially after what happened with the Martians. But we ain't quite got to that yet.

Anyway I was just jawing at Flapjack; I was gettin' just about ready for a trip to town myself, and maybe that's why I was takin' it out on him. I like a trip to town just as well as Flapjack does, only I ain't there no length of time before I get fed up with all the noise and the folks and the buildings and sleeping in beds and I just got to get out and head for the hills again. That's the only thing me and Flapjack really differ on; he'd rather stay longer.

I was makin' supper half an hour later and Flapjack probably thought I didn't see him go into the tent. He was scoutin' around for something to steal. Flapjack's the stealingest burro I ever did see. If he thinks it's something I want, he'll steal it quicker'n you can say "Holy hominy," even if he don't like it or want it himself. I recollect the time I was gettin' tired of the way he'd swipe pancakes in the morning, so I cooked up a batch with lots of red pepper in them. You think he'd let out a peep? Not Flapjack. He was so happy about getting away with swiping my pancakes that he didn't care how awful they tasted.

Flapjack's a caution, Flapjack is. But I started out to tell you about the Martians. Maybe I better.

It was coming on morning; let's see now, just to be accurate-like, it must've been August 6 or maybe August 7, sometimes you lose track in the desert.

Anyway, I opened my eyes when I heard Flapjack bray, real indignant-like. I knew something was up; Flapjack doesn't use that tone of bray unless. I stuck my head out of the tent just in time to see this here—well, balloon was what I thought it was at first—balloon on fire. Fire was shootin' out from beneath it like crazy. I expected a big explosion any minute.

But it didn't explode. The balloon settled down no more than maybe fifty feet away, and the flames died out.

"Holy hominy," I said to myself and to Flapjack, "it must've blowed all the way from some fair somewheres."

I crawled the rest of the way out of the tent, figurin' on gettin' over to where that thing had come down to investigate-like. I didn't expect no folks to be there cause there wasn't no basket slung underneath. And if there had been, both the basket and the folks in it would've been fried to a crisp, the way that thing had been spouting fire as it came down.

I'd plumb forgot about Flapjack. You can't blame him for feeling kind of skittish, but instead of runnin' away he'd backed up toward the tent. And when he heard me movin' behind him, he let go with his hind hoofs real quick. I don't think he done it on purpose.

But that's all I remembered for a while.

When I woke up again, it was good and light. I must've been out at least an hour, could have been two. I put my hand up to my head and groaned and then, sudden, I remembered that balloon. I staggered up to my feet and looked over at it.

That balloon wasn't no balloon. I seen one balloon back in Missouri at a fair and I seen pictures of other ones, and this thing, whatever it was, wasn't no balloon. I'll guarantee you that.

Besides, whoever heard of anybody being *inside* a balloon?

Maybe I shouldn't say *anybody*, I should say *anything*, on account of the critters that was dartin' in and out of a door in the side of that thing sure wasn't ordinary folks. First thing that come to my mind was maybe it was something from a circus; they have the darnedest freaks and animals—and contraptions, too—at a circus. Only I couldn't decide whether these things was freaks or animals. They was somewhere in between.

Anyhow, these critters was dartin' in and out of the big ball that I'd taken for a balloon, sometimes on their back legs, sometimes on all fours. On two legs, they was about four feet high, and on four they was only knee-high to a heifer, on account of their legs—and arms, if their front legs was arms—was so short. They was carryin' all sorts of funny devices which they was settin' up on the desert just about halfway between me and that ball-contraption they went in and out of. And three of 'em swarmed around puttin' together what the others brought 'em.

Then I noticed Flapjack. He was standin' right near 'em

and didn't look afraid at all. Just curious, like any burro is.

Well, I got up my courage and meandered over that way and took a look at the thing they was workin' on, but I couldn't make nothing of it. I said, "Hullo," and they didn't answer me and didn't pay no more attention to me than if I was a prairie dog.

So I went around 'em, keepin' my distance, and went up to the side of this ball and reached up and touched it. Holy hominy! It was made out of metal as smooth and hard as the barrel of a Colt and it was as big as a two-story house.

One of the funny-lookin' little critters came along and shooed me away, kinda waving a thing in his hand that looked something like a flashlight. I had a sneaking suspicion that it wasn't no flashlight and I wasn't too curious, just then, to find out what would happen if he did more than wave it at me, so I got. I went back about twenty feet or so and watched.

Pretty soon they seemed to have finished putting together whatever it was they'd been working on. Flapjack was standing only a few feet away from it by now, and I started to wander up closer but one of 'em waved a flashlight at me again and I got back.

Two of 'em stood there on their hind legs pullin' levers and twistin' knobs. There was a kind of loud-speaker on top of it, like you used to see on old-fashioned phonographs. Suddenly the loud-speaker said: "It should be correctly adjusted now, Mandu."

You could have knocked me down with a pebble. Here were these things looking like they'd escaped from a zoo and they had a talking machine of some kind or other. I sat down on a rock and stared at the loud-speaker.

"It would seem so," the loud-speaker said. "Now if this terrestrial has the type of mentality that we have deduced, we should be able to communicate."

All of the critters walked away from the device except one and he looked direct at Flapjack and said, "Greetings."

"Greetings, yourself," I said. "Flapjack's a burro, so how's about talking to me?"

"Will one of you," said the loud-speaker, "please attempt to stop that domesticated creature over there from making his fantastic noises?"

Flapjack hadn't been makin' any noise that I could hear. But a flashlight got waved at me so I shut up to see what'd happen.

"I assume," said the loud-speaker, "that you are the dominant intelligence of this planet. Greetings from the inhabitants of Mars."

A funny thing about that there loud-speaker; something makes me remember every dang word it said, just like it said 'em, even when I still don't rightly know what all the fancier words mean.

While I was tryin' to figure the answer to what they'd said, danged if Flapjack didn't beat me to the draw. He opened his mouth, showed his teeth and brayed real hearty.

"Thank you," said the loud-speaker. "And in answer to your question, this is a sonic telepathor. It, in a manner of thinking, broadcasts my thoughts and they are reproduced in the mind of the listener in the language which he speaks and understands. The sounds you seem to hear are not the exact sounds that come from the speaker; it emits an abstract sound pattern which your subconscious, with the aid of the carrier wave, hears as expression in your own language. It is not selective, many creatures speaking many tongues would all understand what I am thinking. Our adjustment consisted in tuning the receiver part, which *is* selective, to the particular pattern of your individual intelligence."

"You're crazy," I yelled. "Why don't you fix that danged thing so it can understand what I say?"

"Please keep that animal quiet, Yagarl," said the loud-speaker. Flapjack looked at me over his shoulder reproachfully. That didn't worry me. But one of the critters with flashlights waved it at me again and that did. And anyway the speaker was blaring again and I wanted to hear what it said so I listened.

"We of Mars had the same difficulty," it was saying. "Happily, we have been able to solve the problem by substituting robots for domesticated animals. Obviously, however, you have a different situation. Through the lack of suitable hands, or even tentacles, you have found it necessary to domesticate one of the lower orders which is so equipped."

Flapjack brayed briefly and the loud-speaker said, "Naturally you wish to know the purpose of our visit. We wish your advice in solving a problem that is vital to us. Mars is a dying planet. Its water, its atmosphere, its mineral resources, are all practically exhausted. If we had been able to develop interstellar travel, we might seek an unoccupied planet somewhere in the galaxy. Unfortunately we have not; our ships will take us only to other planets in the solar

system and only the discovery of an entirely new principle would enable us to reach the stars. We have not found even a clue to that principle.

"In the solar system, yours is the only planet—besides Mars—that can support Martian life. Mercury is too hot, Venus has no land surface and an atmosphere poisonous to us. The force of gravity of Jupiter would crush us and all of its moons are—like yours—airless. The outer planets are impossibly cold.

"So we are faced with the necessity, if we wish to survive, to move to Earth—peaceably if you submit; forcibly if we must use force. And we have weapons that can destroy the population of Earth within days."

"Just a minute," I yelled. "If you think for a minute that you can—"

The critter who had been aiming a flashlight at me lowered it at my knees and, as I started toward the one who'd been operating the speaker contraption, he pushed a button. My knees suddenly went rubber and I fell down. Also I shut up.

My legs just didn't work at all. I had to use my arms to get to a sitting position so I could see what was going on.

Flapjack was braying.

"True," the speaker said. "That would be the best solution for both of us. We do not wish to occupy—by force or otherwise—an already civilized planet. If you can really suggest another answer to our problem—"

Flapjack brayed.

"Thank you," said the loud-speaker. "I am sure that will work out. Why we did not think of it ourselves I cannot imagine. We appreciate your assistance immeasurably; we offer you our heartfelt gratitude. We leave with good will in our hearts. We shall not return."

My knees worked again and I got up. I didn't go anywhere, though. My knees had been out of commission for a full minute and I was thinking that if that flashlight thing had been pointed higher and had stopped my heart working for a full minute I wouldn't be worrying about my knees.

Flapjack brayed just once more, and not for long this time. The funny-looking critters began to take their contraption with the speaker apart and carry it a piece at a time back to the big ball they'd come in.

It and them were all back in the balloon that wasn't a balloon in ten minutes, about, and the door in it closed. The

bottom of it began to fire up again and I ran back to where my tent was and watched from there. And all of a sudden the contraption *whooshed* upward and disappeared almost straight up into the sky.

Flapjack came strolling over toward me, kind of avoiding my eyes, like.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" I asked him. He wouldn't answer me.

But I guess he did think so. Later on that same day he stole my pancakes again.

And that's the whole story, partner. That's how Flapjack saved the world from the Martians. You want to know what he told 'em? Well, I'd like to know, too, but he won't tell me. Hey, Flapjack, come over here. You had enough beer for tonight.

All right, partner, here he is. You ask him. Maybe he'll tell you. Or maybe he won't. Flapjack's a caution, Flapjack is. But go ahead and ask him.

THE JOKE

The big man in the flashy green suit stuck his big hand across the cigar counter. "Jim Greeley," he said. "Ace Novelty Company." The cigar dealer took the offered hand and then jerked convulsively as something inside it buzzed painfully against his own palm.

The big man's cheerful laughter boomed. "Our Joy Buzzer," he said, turning over his hand to expose the little metal contraption in his palm. "Changes a shake to a shock; one of the best numbers we got. A dilly, ain't it? Gimme four of those perfectos, the two-for-a-quarters. Thanks."

He put a half-dollar on the counter and then, concealing a grin, lighted one of the cigars while the dealer tried vainly to pick up the coin. Then, laughing, the big man put another—and an ungimmicked—coin on the counter and pried up the first one with a tricky little knife on one end of his watch chain. He put it back in a special little box that went into his vest pocket. He said, "A new number—but a pretty good one. It's a good laugh, and—well, 'Anything for a Gag' is Ace's motto and me, I'm Ace's salesman."

The cigar dealer said, "I couldn't handle—"

"Not trying to sell you anything," the big man said. "I

just sell wholesale. But I get a kick out of showing off our merchandise. You ought to see some of it."

He blew a ring of cigar smoke and strolled on past the cigar counter to the hotel desk. "Double with bath," he told the clerk. "Got a reservation—Jim Greeley. Stuff's being sent over from the station, and my wife'll be here later."

He took a fountain pen from his pocket, ignoring the one the clerk offered him, and signed the card. The ink was bright blue, but it was going to be a good joke on the clerk when, a little later, he tried to file that card and found it completely blank. And when he explained and wrote a new card it would be both a good laugh and good advertising for Ace Novelty.

"Leave the key in the box," he said. "I won't go up now. Where are the phones?"

He strolled to the row of phone booths to which the desk clerk directed him and dialed a number. A feminine voice answered.

"This is the police," he said gruffly. "We've had reports that you've been renting rooms to crooked boarders. Or were those only false roomers?"

"Jim! Oh, I'm so glad you're in town!"

"So'm I, sweetie. Is the coast clear, your husband away? Wait, don't tell me; you wouldn't have said what you just said if he'd been there, would you? What time does he get home?"

"Nine o'clock, Jim. You'll pick me up before then? I'll leave him a note I'm staying with my sister because she's sick."

"Swell, honey. What I hoped you'd say. Let's see; it's half-past five. I'll be right around."

"Not that soon, Jim. I've got things to do, and I'm not dressed. Make it—not before eight o'clock. Between then and half-past eight."

"Okay, honey. Eight it is. That'll give us time for a big evening, and I've already registered double."

"How'd you know I'd be able to get away?"

The big man laughed. "Then I'd have called one of the others in my little black book. Now don't get mad; I was only kidding. I'm calling from the hotel, but I haven't actually registered yet; I was only kidding. One thing I like about you, Marie, you got a sense of humor; you can take it. Anybody I like's got to have a sense of humor like I have."

"Anybody you like?"

"And anybody I love. To pieces. What's your husband like, Marie? Has *he* got a sense of humor?"

"A little. A crazy kind of one; not like yours. Got any new numbers in your line?"

"Some dillies. I'll show you. One of 'em's a trick camera that—well, I'll show you. And don't worry, honey. I remember you told me you got a tricky ticker and I won't pull any scary tricks on you. Won't scare you, honey; just the opposite."

"You big goof! Okay, Jim, not before eight o'clock now. But plenty before nine."

"With bells on, honey. Be seeing you."

He went out of the telephone booth singing "Tonight's My Night with Baby," and straightened his snazzy necktie at a mirror in front of a pillar in the lobby. He ran an exploring palm across his face. Yes, needed a shave; it felt rough even if it didn't show. Well, plenty of time for that in two and a half hours.

He strolled over to where a bellboy sat. "How late you on duty, son?" he asked.

"Till two-thirty, nine hours. I just came on."

"Good. How are rules here on likker? Get it any time?"

"Can't get bottle goods after nine o'clock. That is, well, sometimes you can, but it's taking a chance. Can't I get it for you sooner if you're going to want it?"

"Might as well." The big man took some bills out of his wallet. "Room 603. Put in a fifth of rye and two bottles of soda sometime before nine. I'll phone down for ice cubes when we want 'em. And listen, I want you to help me with a gag. Got any bedbugs or cockroaches?"

"Huh?"

The big man grinned. "Maybe you have and maybe you haven't, but look at these artificial ones. Ain't they beauties?" He took a pillbox from his pocket and opened it.

"Want to play a joke on my wife," he said. "And I won't be up in the room till she gets here. You take these and put 'em where they'll do the most good, see? I mean, peel back the covers and fill the bed with these little beauties. Don't they look like real ones? She'll really squeal when she sees 'em. Do you like gags, son?"

"Sure."

"I'll show you some good ones when you bring up the ice cubes later. I got a sample case full. Well, do a good job with those bedbugs."

He winked solemnly at the bellboy and sauntered across the lobby and out to the sidewalk.

He strolled into a tavern and ordered rye with a chaser. While the bartender was getting it he went over to the juke box and put a dime in, pushing two buttons. He came back grinning, and whistling "Got a Date with an Angel." The juke box joined in—in the wrong key—with his whistling.

"You look happy," said the bartender. "Most guys come in here to tell their troubles."

"Haven't any troubles," said the big man. "Happier because I found an oldie on your juke box and it fits. Only the angel I got a date with's got a little devil in her too, thank God. Real she devil, too."

He put his hand across the bar. "Shake the hand of a happy man," he said.

The buzzer in his palm buzzed and the bartender jumped.

The big man laughed. "Have a drink with me, pal," he said, "and don't get mad. I like practical jokes. I sell 'em."

The bartender grinned, but not too enthusiastically. He said, "You got the build for it all right. Okay, I'll have a drink with you. Only just a second; there's a hair in that chaser I gave you." He emptied the glass and put it among the dirties, coming back with another one, this one of cut glass of intricate design.

"Nice try," said the big man, "but I told you I *sell* the stuff; I know a dribble glass when I see one. Besides that's an old model. Just one hole on a side and if you get your finger over it, it don't dribble. See, like this. Happy days."

The dribble glass didn't dribble. The big man said, "I'll buy us both another; I like a guy who can dish a job out as well as take one." He chuckled. "Try to dish one out, anyway. Pour us another and lemme tell you about some of the new stuff we're gonna put out. New plastic called Skintex that—hey, I got a sample with me. Lookit."

He took from his pocket a rolled-up object that unrolled itself, as he put it on the bar, into a startlingly lifelike false face. The big man said, "Got it all over every kind of mask or false face on the market, even the expensive rubber ones. Fits so close it stays on practically of its own accord. But what's really different about it is by gosh it looks so real you have to look twice and look close to see it ain't the real McCoy. Gonna be an all-year-round seller for costume balls and stuff, and make a fortune every Halloween."

"Sure looks real," said the bartender.

"Bet your boots it does. Comes in all kinds, it will. Got only a few actually in production now, though. This one's the Fancy Dan model, good looking. Pour us two more, huh?"

He rolled up the mask and put it back into his pocket. The juke box had just ended the second number and he fed a quarter into it, again punching "Got a Date with an Angel," but this time waiting to whistle until the record had started, so he'd be in tune with it.

He changed it to patter when he got back to the bar. He said, "Got a date with an angel, all right. Little blonde, Marie Rhymer. A beauty. Purtiest gal in town. Here's to 'er."

This time he forgot to put his finger over the hole in the dribble glass and got spots of water on his snazzy necktie. He looked down at them and roared with laughter. He ordered drinks for the house—not too expensive a procedure, as there was only one other customer and the bartender.

The other customer bought back and the big man bought another round. He showed them two new coin tricks—in one of which he balanced a quarter on the edge of a shot glass after he'd let them examine both the glass and the coin, and he wouldn't tell the bartender how that one was done until the bartender stood a round.

It was after seven when he left the tavern. He wasn't drunk, but he was feeling the drinks. He was really happy now. Ought to grab a bite to eat, he thought.

He looked around for a restaurant, a good one, and then decided no, maybe Marie would be expecting him to take her to dinner; he'd wait to eat until he was with her.

And so what if he got there early? He could wait, he could talk to her while she got ready.

He looked around for a taxi and saw none; he started walking briskly, again whistling "Tonight's My Night with Baby," which hadn't, unfortunately, been on the juke box.

He walked briskly, whistling happily, into the gathering dusk. He was going to be early, but he didn't want to stop for another drink; there'd be plenty of drinking later, and right now he felt just right.

It wasn't until he was a block away that he remembered the shave he'd meant to get. He stopped and felt his face, and yes, he really needed one. Luck was with him, too, because only a few doors back he'd passed a little hole-in-the-wall barber shop. He retraced his steps and found it open. There was one barber and no customers.

He started in, then changed his mind and, grinning happily, went on to the areaway between that building and the next. He took the Skintex mask from his pocket and slipped it over his face; be a good gag to see what the barber would do if he sat down in the chair for a shave with that mask on. He was grinning so broadly he had trouble getting the mask on smoothly, until he straightened out his face.

He walked into the barber shop, hung his hat on the rack and sat down in the chair. His voice only a bit muffled by the flexible mask, he said, "Shave, please."

As the barber, who had taken his stand by the side of the chair, bent closer in incredulous amazement, the big man in the green suit couldn't hold in his laughter any longer. The mask slipped as his laughter boomed out. He took it off and held it out for examination. "Purty lifelike, ain't it?" he asked when he could quit laughing.

"Sure is," said the little barber admiringly. "Say, who makes those?"

"My company. Ace Novelty."

"I'm with a group that puts on amateur theatricals," the barber said. "Say, we could use some of those—for comic roles mainly, if they come in comic faces. Do they?"

"They do. We're manufacturers and wholesalers, of course. But you'll be able to get them at Brachman & Minton's, here in town. I call on 'em tomorrow, and I'll load them up. How's about that shave, meanwhile. Got a date with an angel."

"Sure," said the little man. "Brachman & Minton. We buy most of our make-up and costumes there already. That's fine." He rinsed a towel under the hot-water faucet, wrung it out. He put it over the big man's face and made lather in his shaving cup.

Under the hot towel the man in the green suit was humming "Got a Date with an Angel." The barber took off the towel and applied the lather with deft strokes.

"Yep," said the big man, "got a date with an angel and I'm too damn' early. Gimme the works—massage, anything you got. Wish I could look as handsome with my real face as with that there mask—that's our Fancy Dan model, by the way. Y'oughta see some of the others. Well, you will if you go to Brachman & Minton's about a week from now. Take about that long before they get the merchandise after I take their order tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," said the barber. "You said the works? Massage and facial?" He stropped the razor, started its neat clean strokes.

"Why not? Got time. And tonight's my night with baby. Some number, pal. Pageboy blonde, built like you-know-what. Runs a rooming house not far from— Say, I got an idea. Good gag."

"What?"

"I'll fool 'er. I'll wear that Fancy Dan mask when I knock on the door and I'll make her think somebody *really* good-looking is calling on her. Maybe it'll be a letdown when she sees my homely mug when I take it off, but the gag'll be good. And I'll bet she won't be *too* disappointed when she sees it's good old Jim. Yep. I'll do that."

The big man chuckled in anticipation. "What time's it?" he asked. He was getting a little sleepy. The shave was over, and the kneading motion of the massage was soporific.

"Ten of eight."

"Good. Lots of time. Just so I get there well before nine. That's when— Say, did that mask really fool you when I walked in with it?"

"Sure did," the barber told him. "Until I bent over you after you sat down."

"Good. Then it'll fool Marie Rhymer when I go up to the door. Say, what's the name of your amatcher theatrical outfit? I'll tell Brachman you'll want some of the Skintex numbers."

"Just the Grove Avenue Social Center group. My name's Dane. Brachman knows me. Sure, tell him we'll take some."

Hot towels, cool creams, kneading fingers. The man in green dozed.

"Okay, mister," the barber said. "You're all set. Be a dollar sixty-five." He chuckled. "I even put your mask on so you're all set. Good luck."

The big man sat up and glanced in the mirror. "Swell," he said. He stood up and took two singles out of his wallet. "That's even now. G'night."

He put on his hat and went out. It was getting dark now and a glance at his wrist watch showed him it was almost eight-thirty, perfect timing.

He started humming again, back this time to "Tonight's My Night with Baby."

He wanted to whistle, but he couldn't do that with the false face on. He stopped in front of the house and looked

around before he went up the steps to the door. He chuckled a little as he took the VACANCY sign off the nail beside the door and held it as he pressed the button and heard the bell sound.

Only seconds passed before he heard her footsteps clicking to the door. It opened, and he bowed slightly. His voice muffled by the mask so she wouldn't recognize it, he said, "You haff—a rrrroom, please?"

She was beautiful, all right, as beautiful as he remembered her from the last time he'd been in town a month before. She said hesitantly, "Why, yes, but I'm afraid I can't show it to you tonight. I'm expecting a friend and I'm late getting ready."

He made a jerky little bow. He said, "Vee, moddomm, I vill rrrreturnn."

And then, jerking his chin forward to loosen the mask and pinching it loose at the forehead so it would come loose with his hat, he lifted hat and mask.

He grinned and started to say—well, it didn't matter what he'd started to say, because Marie Rhymer screamed and then dropped into a crumpled heap of purple silk and cream-colored flesh and blond hair just inside the door.

Stunned, the big man dropped the sign he'd been holding and bent over her. He said, "Marie, honey, what—" and quickly stepped inside and closed the door. He bent down and—remembering her "tricky ticker"—put his hand over where her heart should be beating. *Should* be, but wasn't.

He got out of there quickly. With a wife and kid of his own back in Minneapolis, he couldn't be— Well, he got out. Still stunned, he walked quickly out.

He came to the barber shop, and it was dark. He stopped in front of the door. The dark glass of the door, with a street light shining against it from across the way, was both transparent and a mirror. In it, he saw three things.

He saw, in the mirror part of the door, the face of horror that was his own face. Bright green, with careful expert shadowing that made it the face of a walking corpse, a ghoul with sunken eyes and cheeks and blue lips. The bright-green face mirrored above the green suit and the snazzy red tie—the face that the make-up-expert barber must have put on him while he'd dozed—

And the note, stuck against the inside of the glass of the barber-shop door, written on white paper in green pencil:

CLOSED

DANE RHYMER

Marie Rhymer, Dane Rhymer, he thought dully. While *through* the glass, inside the dark barber shop, he could see it dimly—the white-clad figure of the little barber as it dangled from the chandelier and turned slowly, left to right, right to left, left to right . . .

CARTOONIST

(in collaboration with Mack Reynolds)

There were six letters in Bill Garrigan's box, but he could tell from a quick glance at the envelopes that not one of them was a check. Would-be gags from would-be gagmen. And, nine chances out of ten, not a yak in the lot.

He carried them back to the adobe hut he called his studio before bothering to open them. He tossed his disreputable hat onto the two-burner kerosene stove. He sat down and twisted his legs around the legs of the kitchen chair before the rickety table which doubled as a place to eat and his drawing board.

It had been a long time since the last sale and he hoped, even though he didn't dare expect, that there'd be a really salable gag in this lot. Miracles *do* happen.

He tore open the first envelope. Six gags from some guy up in Oregon, sent to him on the usual basis; if he liked any of them he'd draw them up and if they sold the guy got a percentage. Bill Garrigan looked at the first one. It read:

GUY AND GAL DRIVE UP TO RESTAURANT. SIGN ON CAR READS "HERMAN THE FIRE EATER." THROUGH WINDOWS OF RESTAURANT PEOPLE EATING BY CANDLE LIGHT.

GUY: "OH, BOY, THIS LOOKS LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO EAT!"

Bill Garrigan groaned and looked at the next card. And the next. And the next. He opened the next envelope. And the next.

This was getting really bad. Cartooning is a tough racket to make a living in, even when you live in a little town in the Southwest where living doesn't cost you much. And once you start slipping—well, the thing was a vicious circle. As your stuff was seen less and less often in the big markets, the best gagmen started sending their material elsewhere. You wound up with the leftovers, which, of course, put the skids under you that much worse.

He pulled the last gag from the final envelope. It read:

SCENE ON SOME OTHER PLANET. EMPEROR OR SNOOK, A HIDEOUS MONSTER, IS TALKING TO SOME OF HIS SCIENTISTS.

EMPEROR: "YES, I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'VE DEVISED A METHOD OF VISITING EARTH, BUT WHO WOULD WANT TO WITH ALL THOSE HORRIBLE HUMANS LIVING THERE?"

Bill Garrigan scratched the end of his nose thoughtfully. It had possibilities. After all, the science-fiction market was growing like mad. And if he could draw these extra-terrestrial creatures hideous enough to bring out the gag—

He reached for a pencil and a piece of paper and started to sketch out a rough. The first version of the Emperor and his scientists didn't look quite ugly enough. He crumpled up the paper and reached for another piece.

Let's see. He could give each one of the monsters three heads, each head with six protruding, goggling eyes. Half-a-dozen stubby arms. Hmmm, not bad. Very long torsos, very short legs. Four apiece, front ones bending one way, back ones the other. Splay feet. Now how about the face, outside of the six eyes? Leave 'em blank below the eyes. A mouth, a big one, in the middle of the chest. That way a monster wouldn't get to arguing with himself as to which head should do the eating.

He added a few quick lines for the background; he looked upon his work and it was good. Maybe too good; maybe editors would think their readers too squeamish to look upon such terrible monstrosities. And yet, unless he made them as horrible as he could, the gag would be lost.

In fact, maybe he could make them even a little more hideous. He tried, and found that he could.

He worked on the rough until he was sure he'd got as much as could be drawn out of the gag, found an envelope

and addressed it to his best market—or what had been his best market up to several months ago when he'd started slipping. He'd made his last sale there fully two months ago. But maybe they'd take this one; Rod Corey, the editor, liked his cartoons a bit on the bizarre side.

Bill Garrigan had almost forgotten the submission by the time it came back almost six weeks later.

He tore open the envelope. The rough was there with a big red "O.K. *Let's have a finish,*" scrawled to one side of it and with the initials "R.C." beneath.

He'd eat again!

Bill made it back from the post office in double time, brushed the odds and ends of food, books, and clothing from the table top and reached for paper, pencil, pen, and ink.

He wedged the rough between a milk can and a dirty saucer to work from it, and he stared at it until he got himself back in the frame of mind he'd been in when he'd first roughed out the idea.

He did a job of it, because Rod Corey's market was in there with the best; the only one that gave him a hundred bucks a crack. Of course some of the really top markets paid higher than that to name-cartoonists, but Bill Garrigan had lost any delusions of his own grandeur. Sure, he'd give his right arm to hit the top, but it didn't seem likely to happen. And right now he'd settle for selling enough to keep him eating.

He took almost two hours to complete the finish, did it up carefully with cardboard and made his way back to the post office. He mailed it and rubbed his hands with satisfaction. Money in the bank. He'd be able to get the broken transmission fixed on his jalopy and be on wheels again, and he'd be able to catch up fractionally on his grocery and rent bills to boot. Only it was a shame that old R.C. wasn't quicker pay.

As a matter of fact the check didn't come until the day the issue containing the cartoon hit the stands. But in the meantime he'd made a couple of small sales to trade magazines and hadn't actually gone hungry. Still in all the check looked wonderful when it came.

He cashed it at the bank on his way from the post office and stopped off at the Sagebrush Tap for a couple of quick ones. And they tasted so good and made him feel so cheerful that he stopped at the liquor store and picked up a bottle of Metaxa. He couldn't afford Metaxa, of course—who

can?—but somewhere along the line a man has to do a reasonable amount of celebrating.

Once home, he opened the bottle of precious Greek brandy, had a couple of slugs of it and then settled his long body into the chair, propped his scuffed shoes on the rickety table and let out a sigh of pure contentment. Tomorrow he'd regret the money he'd spent and he'd probably have a hangover to boot, but tomorrow was *mañana*.

Reaching out a hand he picked the least dirty of the glasses within his reach and poured a stiff shot into it. Maybe, he thought, fame is the food of the soul and he'd never be a famous cartoonist, but this afternoon at least cartooning was giving with the liquor of the gods.

He raised the glass toward his lips, but he didn't quite make it. His eyes widened.

Before him, the adobe wall seemed to shimmer, quiver, shake. Then, slowly, a small aperture appeared. It enlarged, grew, widened; suddenly it was the size of a doorway.

Bill darted a reproachful look at the brandy. Hell, he told himself, I've hardly touched it. His unbelieving eyes went back to the doorway in the wall. It could be an earthquake. In fact, it must be. What else—

Two six-armed creatures emerged. Each had three heads and each head had six goggling eyes. Four legs, a mouth in the middle of—

"Oh, no," Bill said.

Each of the creatures held an awesome, respect-inspiring gunlike object. Each pointed it at Bill Garrigan.

"Gentlemen," Bill said, "I realize that this is one of the most potent drinks on earth, but, so help me, two jiggers couldn't do *this*."

The monsters stared at him and shuddered, and each one closed all but one of its twenty-four eyes.

"Hideous indeed," said the first one to have come through the aperture. "The most hideous specimen in the solar system, is he not, Agol?"

"Me?" said Bill Garrigan faintly.

"You. But do not be afraid. We have come not to harm you but to take you into the mighty presence of Bon Whir III, Emperor Snook, where you will be suitably rewarded."

"How? For what? Where's—Snook?"

"Will you please ask questions one at a time? I could answer all three of those simultaneously, one with each

head, but I fear you are not equipped to understand multiple communication."

Bill Garrigan closed his eyes. "You've got three heads, but only one mouth. How can you talk three ways with only one mouth?"

The monsters mouth laughed. "What makes you think we talk with our mouths? We only laugh with them. We eat by osmosis. We talk by vibrating diaphragms in the tops of our heads. Now, which of your three previous questions do you wish answered?"

"How will I be rewarded?"

"The Emperor did not tell us. But it will be a great reward. It is our duty merely to bring you. These weapons are merely a precaution in case you resist. And they do not kill; we are too civilized to kill. They merely stun."

"You aren't really there," Bill said. He opened his eyes and quickly closed them again. "I've never touched a reefer in my life. Nor had d.t.'s, and I couldn't suddenly get them on only two brandies—well, four if you count the ones at the bar."

"You are ready to go with us?"

"Go *where*?"

"To Snook."

"Where's that?"

"The fifth planet, retrograde, of System K-14-320-GM, Space Continuum 1745-88JHT-97608."

"Where, with relation to here?"

The monster gestured with one of his six arms. "Immediately through that aperture in your wall. Are you ready?"

"No. What am I being rewarded for? That cartoon? How did you see it?"

"Yes. For that cartoon. We are thoroughly familiar with your world and civilization; it is parallel to ours but in a different continuum. We are people with a great sense of humor. We have artists but no cartoonists; we lack that faculty. The cartoon you drew is, to us, excruciatingly funny. Already, everyone in Snook is laughing at it. Are you now ready?"

"No," said Bill Garrigan.

Both monsters lifted their guns. Two clicks came simultaneously.

"You are conscious again," a voice told him. "This way to the throne room, please."

There wasn't any use arguing. Bill went. He was here now,

wherever *here* was, and maybe they'd reward him by letting him go back if he behaved himself.

The room was familiar. Just as he'd drawn it. And he'd have recognized the Emperor anywhere. Not only the Emperor, but the scientists who were with him.

Could it, conceivably, have been coincidence that he had drawn a scene and creatures that actually existed? Or—hadn't he read somewhere the theory that there existed an infinite number of universes in an infinite number of space-time continuums, so that any state of being of which one could possibly think actually existed somewhere? He'd thought that had sounded ridiculous when he'd read it, but he wasn't so sure now.

A voice from somewhere—it sounded as though from an amplifier—said, "The great, the mighty Emperor Bon Whir III, Leader of the Faithful, Commander of the Glories, Receiver of the Light, Lord of the Galaxies, Beloved of His People."

It stopped and Bill said, "Bill Garrigan."

The Emperor laughed, with his mouth. "Thank you, Bill Garrigan," he said, "for giving us the best laugh of our lifetimes. I have had you brought here to reward you. I hereby offer you the post of Royal Cartoonist. A post which has not existed before, since we have no cartoonists. Your sole duty will be to draw one cartoon a day."

"One a day? But where'll I get the gags?"

"We will supply them. We have excellent gags; each of us has a magnificent sense of humor, both creative and appreciative. We can, however, draw only representationally. You will be the greatest man on this planet, next to me." He laughed. "Maybe you'll be even more popular than I—although my people really do like me."

"I—I guess not," Bill said. "I think I'd rather go back to— Say, what does the job pay? Maybe I could take it for a while and take some money—or some equivalent—back to Earth."

"The pay will be beyond your dreams of avarice. You will have everything you want. And you may accept it for one year, with the option of life tenure if you so wish at the end of the year."

"Well—" Bill said. He was wondering just how much money *would* be beyond his dreams of avarice. A devil of a lot, he guessed. He'd go back to Earth rich, all right.

"I urge you to accept," said the Emperor. "Every car-

toon you draw—and you may draw more than one a day if you wish—will be published in every publication on the planet. You will draw royalties from each.”

“How many publications have you?”

“Over a hundred thousand. Twenty billion people read them.”

“Well,” Bill said, “maybe I should try it a year. But—uh—”

“What?”

“How’ll I get along here, outside of cartooning? I mean, I understand that physically I’m hideous to you, as hideous as you are to—I mean, I won’t have any friends. I certainly couldn’t make friends with—I mean—”

“That has already been taken care of, in anticipation of your acceptance, and while you were unconscious. We have the greatest physicians and plastic surgeons in any of the universes. The wall behind you is a mirror. If you will turn—”

Bill Garrigan turned. He fainted.

One of Bill Garrigan’s heads sufficed to concentrate on the cartoon he was drawing, directly in ink. He didn’t bother with roughs any more. They weren’t necessary with the multiplicity of eyes that enabled him to see what he was doing from so many angles at the same time.

His second head was thinking of the great wealth in his bank account and his tremendous power and popularity here. True, the money was in copper, which was the precious metal in this world, but there was enough copper to sell for a fortune even on Earth. Too bad, his second head thought, that he couldn’t take back his power and popularity with him.

His third head was talking to the Emperor. The Emperor came to see him sometimes, these days. “Yes,” the Emperor was saying, “the time is up tomorrow, but I hope we can persuade you to stay. Your own terms, of course. And, since we do not want to use coercion, our plastic surgeons will restore you to your original—uh—shape—”

Bill Garrigan’s mouth, in the middle of his chest, grinned. It was wonderful to be so appreciated. His fourth collection of cartoons had just been published and had sold ten million copies on this planet alone, besides exports to the rest of the system. It wasn’t the money; he already had more than he could ever spend, here. And the convenience of three heads and six arms—

His first head looked up from the cartoon and came to

rest on his secretary. She saw him looking, and her eyestalks drooped coyly. She was very beautiful. He hadn't made any passes at her yet; he'd wanted to be sure which way he'd decide, about going back to Earth. His second head thought about a girl he'd known once back on his original planet and he shuddered and jerked his mind away from thinking about her. Good Lord, she'd been hideous.

One of the Emperor's heads had caught sight of the almost-finished cartoon and his mouth was laughing hysterically.

Yes, it was wonderful to be appreciated. Bill's first head kept on looking at Thwil, his beautiful secretary, and she flushed a faint but beautiful yellow under his stare.

"Well, pal," Bill's third head said to the Emperor, "I'll think it over. Yeah, I'll think it over."

THE GEEZENSTACKS

One of the strange things about it was that Aubrey Walters wasn't at all a strange little girl. She was quite as ordinary as her father and mother, who lived in an apartment on Otis Street, and who played bridge one night a week, went out somewhere another night, and spent the other evenings quietly at home.

Aubrey was nine, and had rather stringy hair and freckles, but at nine one never worries about such things. She got along quite well in the not-too-expensive private school to which her parents sent her, she made friends easily and readily with other children, and she took lessons on a three-quarter-size violin and played it abominably.

Her greatest fault, possibly, was her predilection for staying up late of nights, and that was the fault of her parents, really, for letting her stay up and dressed until she felt sleepy and wanted to go to bed. Even at five and six, she seldom went to bed before ten o'clock in the evening. And if, during a period of maternal concern, she was put to bed earlier, she never went to sleep anyway. So why not let the child stay up?

Now, at nine years, she stayed up quite as late as her parents did, which was about eleven o'clock of ordinary nights and later when they had company for bridge, or went out for the evening. Then it was later, for they usually took her along. Aubrey enjoyed it, whatever it was. She'd sit still as

a mouse in a seat at the theater, or regard them with little-girl seriousness over the rim of a glass of ginger ale while they had a cocktail or two at a night club. She took the noise and the music and the dancing with big-eyed wonder and enjoyed every minute of it.

Sometimes Uncle Richard, her mother's brother, went along with them. She and Uncle Richard were good friends. It was Uncle Richard who gave her the dolls.

"Funny thing happened today," he'd said. "I'm walking down Rodgers Place, past the Mariner Building—you know, Edith; it's where Doc Howard used to have his office—and something thudded on the sidewalk right behind me. And I turned around, and there was this package."

"This package" was a white box a little larger than a shoe-box, and it was rather strangely tied with gray ribbon. Sam Walters, Aubrey's father, looked at it curiously.

"Doesn't look dented," he said. "Couldn't have fallen out of a very high window. Was it tied up like that?"

"Just like that. I put the ribbon back on after I opened it and looked in. Oh, I don't mean I opened it then or there. I just stopped and looked up to see who'd dropped it—thinking I'd see somebody looking out of a window. But nobody was, and I picked up the box. It had something in it, not very heavy, and the box and the ribbon looked like—well, not like something somebody'd throw away on purpose. So I stood looking up, and nothing happened, so I shook the box a little and—"

"All right, all right," said Sam Walters. "Spare us the blow-by-blow. You didn't find out who dropped it?"

"Right. And I went up as high as the fourth floor, asking the people whose windows were over the place where I picked it up. They were all home, as it happened, and none of them had ever seen it. I thought it might have fallen off a window ledge. But—"

"What's in it, Dick?" Edith asked.

"Dolls. Four of them. I brought them over this evening for Aubrey. If she wants them."

He untied the package, and Aubrey said, "Oooo, Uncle Richard. They're—they're lovely."

Sam said, "Hm. Those look almost more like manikins than dolls, Dick. The way they're dressed, I mean. Must have cost several dollars apiece. Are you sure the owner won't turn up?"

Richard shrugged. "Don't see how he can. As I told you, I went up four floors, asking. Thought from the look of the box and the sound of the thud, it couldn't have come from even that high. And after I opened it, well—look—" He picked up one of the dolls and held it out for Sam Walters' inspection.

"Wax. The heads and hands, I mean. And not one of them cracked. It couldn't have fallen from higher than the second story. Even then, I don't see how—" He shrugged again.

"They're the Geezenstacks," said Aubrey.

"Huh?" Sam asked.

"I'm going to call them the Geezenstacks," Aubrey said. "Look, this one is Papa Geezenstack and this one is Mama Geezenstack, and the little girl one—that's—that's Aubrey Geezenstack. And the other man one, we'll call him Uncle Geezenstack. The little girl's uncle."

Sam chuckled. "Like us, eh? But if Uncle—uh—Geezenstack is Mama Geezenstack's brother, like Uncle Richard is Mama's brother, then his name wouldn't be Geezenstack."

"Just the same, it is," Aubrey said. "They're all Geezenstacks. Papa, will you buy me a house for them?"

"A doll house? Why—" He'd started to say, "Why, sure," but caught his wife's eye and remembered. Aubrey's birthday was only a week off and they'd been wondering what to get her. He changed it hastily to "Why, I don't know. I'll think about it."

It was a beautiful doll house. Only one-story high, but quite elaborate, and with a roof that lifted off so one could rearrange the furniture and move the dolls from room to room. It scaled well with the manikins Uncle Richard had brought.

Aubrey was rapturous. All her other playthings went into eclipse and the doings of the Geezenstacks occupied most of her waking thoughts.

It wasn't for quite a while that Sam Walters began to notice, and to think about, the strange aspect of the doings of the Geezenstacks. At first, with a quiet chuckle at the coincidences that followed one another.

And then, with a puzzled look in his eyes.

It wasn't until quite a while later that he got Richard off into a corner. The four of them had just returned from a play. He said, "Uh—Dick."

"Yeah, Sam?"

"These dolls, Dick. Where *did* you get them?"

Richard's eyes stared at him blankly. "What do you mean, Sam? I told you where I got them."

"Yes, but—you weren't kidding, or anything? I mean, maybe you bought them for Aubrey, and thought we'd object if you gave her such an expensive present, so you—uh—"

"No, honest, I didn't."

"But dammit, Dick, they couldn't have fallen out of a window, or dropped out, and not broken. They're wax. Couldn't someone walking behind you—or going by in an auto or something—?"

"There wasn't anyone around, Sam. Nobody at all. I've wondered about it myself. But if I was lying, I wouldn't make up a screwy story like that, would I? I'd just say I found them on a park bench or a seat in a movie. But why are you curious?"

"I—uh—I just got to wondering."

Sam Walters kept on wondering, too.

They were little things, most of them. Like the time Aubrey had said, "Papa Geezenstack didn't go to work this morning. He's in bed, sick."

"So?" Sam had asked. "And what is wrong with the gentleman?"

"Something he ate, I guess."

And the next morning, at breakfast, "And how is Mr. Geezenstack, Aubrey?"

"A little better, but he isn't going to work today yet, the doctor said. Tomorrow, maybe."

And the next day, Mr. Geezenstack went back to work. That, as it happened, was the day Sam Walters came home feeling quite ill, as a result of something he'd eaten for lunch. Yes, he'd missed two days from work. The first time he'd missed work on account of illness in several years.

And some things were quicker than that, and some slower. You couldn't put your finger on it and say, "Well, if this happens to the Geezenstacks, it will happen to us in twenty-four hours." Sometimes it was less than an hour. Sometimes as long as a week.

"Mama and Papa Geezenstack had a quarrel today."

And Sam had tried to avoid that quarrel with Edith, but it seemed he just couldn't. He'd been quite late getting home, through no fault of his own. It had happened often,

but this time Edith took exception. Soft answers failed to turn away wrath, and at last he'd lost his own temper.

"Uncle Geezenstack is going away for a visit." Richard hadn't been out of town for years, but the next week he took a sudden notion to run down to New York. "Pete and Amy, you know. Got a letter from them asking me—"

"When?" Sam asked, almost sharply. "When did you get the letter?"

"Yesterday."

"Then last week you weren't— This sounds like a silly question, Dick, but last week were you thinking about going anywhere? Did you say anything to—to anyone about the possibility of your visiting someone?"

"Lord, no. Hadn't even thought about Pete and Amy for months, till I got their letter yesterday. Want me to stay a week."

"You'll be back in three days—maybe," Sam had said. He wouldn't explain, even when Richard did come back in three days. It sounded just too damn' silly to say that he'd known how long Richard was going to be gone, because that was how long Uncle Geezenstack had been away.

Sam Walters began to watch his daughter, and to wonder. She, of course, was the one who made the Geezenstacks do whatever they did. Was it possible that Aubrey had some strange preternatural insight which caused her, unconsciously, to predict things that were going to happen to the Walters and to Richard?

He didn't, of course, believe in clairvoyance. But was Aubrey clairvoyant?

"Mrs. Geezenstack's going shopping today. She's going to buy a new coat."

That one almost sounded like a put-up job. Edith had smiled at Aubrey and then looked at Sam. "That reminds me, Sam. Tomorrow I'll be downtown, and there's a sale at—"

"But, Edith, these are war times. And you don't *need* a coat."

He'd argued so earnestly that he made himself late for work. Arguing uphill, because he really could afford the coat and she really hadn't bought one for two years. But he couldn't explain that the real reason he didn't want her to buy one was that Mrs. Geezen— Why, it was too silly to say, even to himself.

Edith bought the coat.

Strange, Sam thought, that nobody else noticed those coincidences. But Richard wasn't around all the time, and Edith—well, Edith had the knack of listening to Aubrey's prattle without hearing nine-tenths of it.

"Aubrey Geezenstack brought home her report card today, Papa. She got ninety in arithmetic and eighty in spelling and—"

And two days later, Sam was calling up the headmaster of the school. Calling from a pay station, of course, so nobody would hear him. "Mr. Bradley, I'd like to ask a question that I have a—uh—rather peculiar, but important, reason for asking. Would it be possible for a student at your school to know in advance exactly what grades . . ."

No, not possible. The teachers themselves didn't know, until they'd figured averages, and that hadn't been done until the morning the report cards were made out, and sent home. Yes, yesterday morning, while the children had their play period.

"Sam," Richard said, "you're looking kind of seedy. Business worries? Look, things are going to get better from now on, and with your company, you got nothing to worry about anyway."

"That isn't it, Dick. It—I mean, there isn't anything I'm worrying about. Not exactly. I mean—" And he'd had to wriggle out of the cross-examination by inventing a worry or two for Richard to talk him out of.

He thought about the Geezenstacks a lot. Too much. If only he'd been superstitious, or credulous, it might not have been so bad. But he *wasn't*. That's why each succeeding coincidence hit him a little harder than the last.

Edith and her brother noticed it, and talked about it when Sam wasn't around.

"He *has* been acting queer lately, Dick. I'm—I'm really worried. He acts so— Do you think we could talk him into seeing a doctor or a—"

"A psychiatrist? Um, if we could. But I can't see him doing it, Edith. Something's eating him, and I've tried to pump him about it, but he won't open up. Y'know—I think it's got something to do with those damn' dolls."

"Dolls? You mean Aubrey's dolls? The ones you gave her?"

"Yes, the Geezenstacks. He sits and stares at the doll house. I've heard him ask the kid questions about them, and

he was *serious*. I think he's got some delusion or something about them. Or centering on them."

"But, Dick, that's—*awful*."

"Look, Edie, Aubrey isn't as interested in them as she used to be, and— Is there anything she wants very badly?"

"Dancing lessons. But she's already studying violin and I don't think we can let her—"

"Do you think if you promised her dancing lessons if she gave up those dolls, she'd be willing? I think we've got to get them out of the apartment. And I don't want to hurt Aubrey, so—"

"Well—but what would we tell Aubrey?"

"Tell *her* I know a poor family with children who haven't any dolls at all. And—I think she'll agree, if you make it strong enough."

"But, Dick, what will we tell Sam? He'll know better than that."

"Tell Sam, when Aubrey isn't around, that you think she's getting too old for dolls, and that—tell him she's taking an unhealthy interest in them, and that the doctor advises— That sort of stuff."

Aubrey wasn't enthusiastic. She was not as engrossed in the Geezenstacks as she'd been when they were newer, but couldn't she have both the dolls *and* the dancing lessons?

"I don't think you'd have time for both, honey. And there are those poor children who haven't *any* dolls to play with, and you ought to feel sorry for them."

And Aubrey weakened, eventually. Dancing school didn't open for ten days, though, and she wanted to keep the dolls until she could start her lessons. There was argument, but to no avail.

"That's all right, Edie," Richard told her. "Ten days is better than not at all, and—well, if she doesn't give them up voluntarily, it'll start a rumpus and Sam'll find out what we're up to. You haven't mentioned anything to him at all, have you?"

"No. But maybe it would make him feel better to know they were—"

"I wouldn't. We don't know just what it is about them that fascinates or repels him. Wait till it happens, and then tell him. Aubrey has already given them away. Or *he* might raise some objection or want to keep them. If I get them out of the place first, he can't."

"You're right, Dick. And Aubrey won't tell him, because I told her the dancing lessons are going to be a surprise for her father, and she can't tell him what's going to happen to the dolls without telling the other side of the deal."

"Swell, Edith."

It might have been better if Sam had known. Or maybe everything would have happened just the same, if he had.

Poor Sam. He had a bad moment the very next evening. One of Aubrey's friends from school was there, and they were playing with the doll house. Sam watching them, trying to look less interested than he was. Edith was knitting and Richard, who had just come in, was reading the paper.

Only Sam was listening to the children and heard the suggestion.

"... and then let's have a play funeral, Aubrey. Just pretend one of them is—"

Sam Walters let out a sort of strangled cry and almost fell getting across the room.

There was a bad moment, then, but Edith and Richard managed to pass it off casually enough, outwardly. Edith discovered it was time for Aubrey's little friend to leave, and she exchanged a significant glance with Richard and they both escorted the girl to the door.

Whispered, "Dick, did you see—"

"Something is wrong, Edie. Maybe we shouldn't wait. After all, Aubrey has agreed to give them up, and—"

Back in the living room, Sam was still breathing a bit hard. Aubrey looked at him almost as though she was afraid of him. It was the first time she'd ever looked at him like that, and Sam felt ashamed. He said, "Honey, I'm sorry I— But listen, you'll promise me you'll *never* have a play funeral for one of your dolls? Or pretend one of them is badly sick or has an accident—or anything bad at all? Promise?"

"Sure, Papa. I'm—I'm going to put them away for tonight."

She put the lid on the doll house and went back toward the kitchen.

In the hallway, Edie said, "I'll—I'll get Aubrey alone and fix it with her. You talk to Sam. Tell him—look, let's go out tonight, go somewhere and get him away from everything. See if he will."

Sam was still staring at the doll house.

"Let's get some excitement, Sam," Richard said. "How's about going out somewhere? We've been sticking too close to home. It'll do us good."

Sam took a deep breath. "Okay, Dick. If you say so. I—I could use a little fun, I guess."

Edie came back with Aubrey, and she winked at her brother. "You men go on downstairs and get a cab from the stand around the corner. Aubrey and I'll be down by the time you bring it."

Behind Sam's back, as the men were putting on their coats, Richard gave Edith an inquiring look and she nodded.

Outside, there was a heavy fog; one could see only a few yards ahead. Sam insisted that Richard wait at the door for Edith and Aubrey while he went to bring the cab. The woman and girl came down just before Sam got back.

Richard asked, "Did you—?"

"Yes, Dick. I was going to throw them away, but I gave them away instead. That way they're gone; he might have wanted to hunt in the rubbish and find them if I'd just thrown—"

"Gave them away? To whom?"

"Funniest thing, Dick. I opened the door and there was an old woman going by in the back hall. Don't know which of the apartments she came from, but she must be a scrubwoman or something, although she looked like a witch really, but when she saw those dolls I had in my hands—"

"Here comes the cab," Dick said. "You gave them to her?"

"Yes, it was funny. She said, '*Mine? To Keep? Forever?*' Wasn't that a strange way of asking it? But I laughed and said, 'Yes, ma'am. Yours forev—'"

She broke off, for the shadowy outline of the taxi was at the curb, and Sam opened the door and called out, "Come on, folks!"

Aubrey skipped across the sidewalk into the cab, and the others followed. It started.

The fog was thicker now. They could not see out the windows at all. It was as though a gray wall pressed against the glass, as though the world outside was gone, completely and utterly. Even the windshield, from where they sat, was a gray blank.

"How can he drive so fast?" Richard asked, and there was an edge of nervousness in his voice. "By the way, where are we going, Sam?"

"By George," Sam said, "I forgot to tell her."

"Her?"

"Yeah. Woman driver. They've got them all over now. I'll—"

He leaned forward and tapped on the glass, and the woman turned.

Edith saw her face, and screamed.

THE END

Professor Jones had been working on time theory for many years.

"And I have found the key equation," he told his daughter one day. "Time is a field. This machine I have made can manipulate, even reverse, that field."

Pushing a button as he spoke, he said, "This should make time run backward run time make should this," said he, spoke he as button a pushing.

"Field that, reverse even, manipulate can made have I machine this. Field a is time." Day one daughter his told he, "Equation key the found have I and."

Years many for theory time on working been had Jones Professor.

END THE

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