

COUNTER FOIL
by George O. Smith

It was near the close of a normal day in late July, if a day in late July can properly be called normal. The temperature and the humidity were tied in the mid-nineties; a reporter from the *Megapolis* fired the usual egg on the pavement while his photographer snapped the picture that would appear in tomorrow's front page. There had been three flying saucer sightings reported, and the Loch Ness monster had made his appearance right on schedule. The cases of heat prostration were running high, and nerves in the un-air-conditioned areas were fraying short. Still, the clock displayed hope as it crawled on toward the end of the work day and promised freedom from bondage and the right to pursue both internal and external liquid happiness.

Gertrude, the videophone receptionist, still looked crisp in her office. Her voice as she responded with the singy-songy, "Tele-por-TRAN-sit," had not lost its lilt. But it was obvious to the caller that Trudy sat in air-conditioned splendor. And either she loathed the idea of leaving her comfort and going home, or she despised him who called. For after the lilting greeting, her voice dropped to a flat, "Oh, it's you again."

Johnny Peters smiled. "Show?"

"No."

"Swim?"

"No."

"Dinner?"

"No."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing!"

"Trudy, I'm not poison, you know."

"Johnny, I know you're not poison. But you're not very ambitious, either."

"Now listen," he said sharply, "I'm only asking for a date. I'm not offering to have you share my frugal life, bed, and board as a lowly technician. A date I can afford; a wife I can't."

"You could try to get ahead."

"I've made my bid. I asked my illustrious leader for advanced training and an accelerated course so I could move along faster, and he said that moving too fast was bad for a young man. Should I quit now and go elsewhere?"

"Where would you go?"

"That's the trouble, Trudy. I majored in teleportronics, and it's either teleportronics or I go back to school and start something new. Think the boss-man will move me faster in Greater Chicago. I doubt it. So I might as well stay right here in Megapolis."

"I suppose you're right."

"All right, let's start over again. Show?"

"Johnny, not tonight. I'm busy."

"Tomorrow?"

"If we're not all cooked by then. Call me, Johnny." "Will do," he said with a growing smile.

Johnny Peters broke the connection and checked his instrument panel. The primary power from Con Edison was running a tenth of a volt low; with a bored, routine gesture he twitched a knob. He watched the voltage rise, and then he settled back with little more to do until the end of his shift duty.

In the distant reaches of the city, the uneasy slumber of a napping woman was broken by a wave of pain. A gush of body-warm wetness brought a flash of things to mind that came and went as thought, far too rapidly to reproduce in any electromechanical medium of expression. Thought, in turn: It was her firstborn. The doctor said there was little point in predicting the arrival of a firstborn because they had no record upon which to base an estimate. The women in her family were prone to deliver in taxicabs and ambulances on the way to the hospital.

A second wave of pain assailed her, interrupting the rapid flow of thought. Then as the pain subsided, she went on: That was fast!

She struggled to her feet and duckwalked heavily on her heels to the videophone. She pressed the button for one of the stored-program numbers and immediately a crisp, cool voice responded: "Tele-port-TRAN-sit," in the lilt with all four clear tones sounding in order.

"Trudy, this is Irma Fellowes. Can you connect me with Joe?"

"Sure thing. Half a mo' and you're on. How's things?"

"Baby's on the way." The simple statement was emphasized by a smothered groan and a grimace of pain on Irma Fellowes' face.

Trudy gulped and lost her cool, crisp, composure. "Whoops! I'll give Joe the double-whammy ring."

The muted wail of a siren came, and almost instantly the scene on the videophone switched to a man, seated at his desk. His face was still changing to a look of puzzled concern. He barked: "Where's the emergency and what's the matter? Oh! Irma. What's the matter?"

"Baby's on the way, Joe."

"Fine," he said. "Have you called Maternity?"

"Not yet."

"Irma, I can't do you any good at all. I appreciate the information, but it could have waited until you got to the hospital."

"Joe! It's your child!"

"Sure. And you're my wife. Now buzz off here and call the hospital. Get going."

He hung up; reluctantly because he hated the harshness of the act, but deliberately because it was the only way he could get her to move in the right direction.

Irma Fellowes stared at the videophone as though it should resume operation after a brief interruption. It didn't. Whatever she started to think at that moment was stopped by another wave of agony. When it subsided, she pressed another button, one that had been set up for a temporary emergency. It connected her with the maternity ward of City Hospital; the plate showed an elderly woman in nurse's uniform, who said, "Maternity, Nurse Wilkins speaking."

"This is Mrs. Fellowes. Baby's on the way."

"Just how frequent are your pains, Mrs. Fellowes?" "Rapid. And coming faster all the time."

Irma was interrupted by another pain, through which, faintly, she heard the muted siren. Nurse Wilkins read off some detailed instructions from a card, speaking unhurriedly to someone who could not be seen on the videophone. When she finished, Nurse Wilkins said to Irma Fellowes: "Take it easy now, there's a resident doctor, an interne, and a nurse on their way."

Irma closed the circuit, waddled to the kitchen and drank a glass of water, returned to the living room and paced a bit. Perhaps two minutes passed, then came a rap on the door. She opened it to admit doctor and nurse, followed by the interne pushing a wheeled stretcher. "Hop on," said the interne.

"I can't," groaned Irma.

The doctor scooped her up and deposited her on the stretcher. He applied stethoscope, then

palpated her abdomen gently. "O.K.," he said after a moment. "Let's go. No problem."

Irma said, "But I was born in an ambulance, and—"

The doctor laughed. "Mrs. Fellowes, from what little I know of the process, teleportation takes you from entry to exit at the speed of light. Now, even if it were from here to Alpha Centauri, your baby couldn't be born en route simply because at the speed of light all timing processes come to a quiet standstill. And by 'timing processes' I mean things like clocks, and biochemical reactions, births, aging, and death. O.K.?"

"That's what Joe always says, but—"

"Well, let's find out if he's right."

The corridor was partly cooled from leakage from the air-conditioned apartments, but in contrast it was stifling enough to make Irma gasp. The interne had used foresight; the elevator door was blocked open so that no one could call it away and tie it up. He held the "No Stops" button so the elevator dropped them smoothly to the stage below the first floor. Here the full heat of the sun hit them as they made their way along a short corridor to the teleporttransit booth.

The signal light turned green as soon as the interne inserted the credit key in the lock-register. He pressed the buttons with a practiced hand, then paused to check the number in the address read-out panel carefully.

"Pays to be careful," he said.

"Ever goof?" asked the nurse.

"Not really bad," he replied turning the credit key. The green light changed to orange, which started the circuit-computer on its faster-than-lightning task of selecting the route from this elevator station to the address in the read-out panel. The orange turned to red. "Um-m-m. Maternity section has to have another customer," he said. "We'll be on our way as soon as they get her out of the booth and close the door." He looked at the number again.

"Worried?" asked the nurse.

"Not really worried," he replied. "But I've been thoughtful ever since I watched a hapless, well-dressed citizen trying to walk on air back to the diving exit they have over the ocean at Jolly Beach. He was still protesting and waving his brief case as he disappeared beneath the billowing wave."

"I hear you can watch about one per hour on a busy day," chuckled the doctor.

"Yeah," said the interne. He looked at the red light. "All right, all ready. Let's get cutting, huh?"

Two men whose names are legion paused and stood in momentary indecision halfway between Father's Bar and Grill on Eighth Avenue and the kiosk that led down to the 14th Street Teleporttransit Station. Habit clashed with common sense; there was also the reluctance to leave their company.

"Fast one?"

"In this heat?"

"Father's is air-conditioned."

"So's my apartment. And there I can have the Little Woman construct me a cool, tall one which I can get out of these clothes and into something comfortable. Then I can sit on the terrace in shorts and have my drink in comfort."

"You've got a point. No sense in leaving the office early if we don't take advantage of it."

They turned and headed for the kiosk. Down below, where the subway once rumbled, 14th Street Station was lined with booths, and before each booth was the start of a line-up of people. The big rush hour hadn't started yet, but there were enough citizens in this area who had the kind

job they could leave early to avoid the big jam. There were quite a number who didn't have that kind of job, but they left anyway, hoping their dereliction would either be overlooked or forgotten on Monday morning.

The legion of citizens who left their jobs early to avoid the rush were not being watched by Brother, but by an impersonal peg-count that drove a dial that indicated the number of complete transits per minute. Beside the dial was a series of animated graphs that compared the day's traffic against yesterday's traffic, the same day a year ago, the maximum and minimum for this day of the year, and the grand maximum and minimum for any day any year. All of the statistical graphs showed a sudden upsurge at the line denoting five o'clock, and the animated graph-line displayed today's traffic was approaching a record.

Today's traffic had surpassed yesterday's for the past half hour, but this was not surprising because the rush-hour and just-before-rush traffic was heavier on Friday afternoons. It would undoubtedly repeat itself on Monday morning.

But as the moving finger wrote on toward the critical hour, it approached an all-time record. There would ring no bells nor toot any whistles. It would be duly noted, and a memorandum would be issued authorizing a survey to determine the possible future expansion of facilities; the probable cost of such an expansion; and above all, how much more income would pour into the coffers of Tele-portransit, Incorporated.

Walter Long said, "I appreciate your interest, Harry, but I simply can't go out of line for you, Johnny Peters." "Is it out of line?" asked Harry Warren.

"Yes, and it is also obvious to us in this section. Or, rather, it would be obvious if I did it."

"I should think you'd jump at a chance to reward someone who asked for advancement."

"I would. And I could justify jumping Peters over a number of his seniors if he were outstanding in just one department. But he isn't outstanding in anything but his ability to lolly-gag with Trudy."

"You make him sound like a washout."

"Oh, Peters is no washout," said Walter Long. "He's just not sufficiently outstanding to warrant special attention."

"Well, you must admit that maintaining a monitor over a function-panel for a system that is continuously adjusted and operated by a computer is not a job that provides an opportunity to be outstanding. There's just so much verve and vigor with which an ambitious man can turn a small knob to twist the incoming line voltage by a couple of tenths. This operation gets pretty dull, especially when the computer will twist the knob itself if the line gets more than about a quarter of a volt off."

"I suppose you've a point."

"I think I do. But why not ask Johnny's boss? Joe knows him better than either of us."

"All right." Walter Long pressed a button; the intercom on his desk came to life.

Trudy, her composure regained, said, "Yes, Mr. Long?" "Trudy, connect me with Joe Fellowes, will you?" "Mr. Fellowes took off a few minutes ago."

"Where, for the love of Pete?"

"Mrs. Fellowes called and said that her baby was on the way. Joe took off for the maternity ward right after that. I could call him."

"No, don't bother right now. Just ask him to see me when he gets back. You've no word from the hospital yet, have you?"

"No, but from the way things looked, we won't have long to wait."

"O.K. Trudy. Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir." She closed the circuit; contact died in the middle of her lilting response "Tele-por-TRAN-sit," to some incoming caller.

The clock hit five. The dial registering transits per minute rose sharply, and so did the graphs displayed today's traffic compared to statistics. The increased load ran the incoming line down, computer compensated for the drop before Johnny Peters could react. Somewhere down in power distribution frames, a fuse blew; the local emergency power took over with no interruption while the blown fuse was replaced by a device that had neither nerves to twitch nor fingers to fumble.

The first inkling that something was wrong was given to Joe Fellowes.

Down in the computer, Joe's emergency trip from the Teleportransit Building to the maternity ward of City Hospital was racked up by the peg count circuits and added to the statistics being compiled in the Accounting Department. The computer also registered the awaiting trip of Mr. Fellowes, the doctor, the interne, and the nurse. Being a machine, it did not understand about birth and life or death, so it can't be blamed for not registering the unborn Fellowes infant, alive and a passenger though he be.

Machinelike, it awaited the closing of the booth door that exited in the maternity ward, and when the signal came it promptly processed the party—people, stretcher, and unborn—into the system.

In the maternity ward, Joe Fellowes stared at the door to the teleportransit booth; mentally he was urging it to open upon his wife. "What's keeping them?" he asked nervously.

"Heaven only knows," replied Nurse Wilkins, calmly.

"Something's wrong," he said.

"Hardly."

"What makes you think so?" he demanded.

"If anything were wrong, they'd call for help. Or come for it. That booth can't be used when the doctor or ... how did you get here, young man?" she demanded sharply.

"I'm with Teleportransit," he said bluntly, showing his identification card. "I used the override to bypass your pre-empt circuit."

"Well, that's—" and she fell silent simply because it was done and neither locking the barn door nor bawling out the stable boy would correct the act.

"Irma's family have their babies fast," he said. "Maybe—?"

Nurse Wilkins shook her head. "Even with delivery underway, they'd bring her back. That's why we send doctor, interne, and nurse along with everything necessary to handle any contingencies. Your teleport things work so fast we can send a whole team out on a call each time."

"Fine," said Fellowes. "Then where's my wife?"

Nurse Wilkins replied sharply, "Mr. Fellowes, please grant that we know our business and how to conduct it.

Granting that our hospital and its medical staff are competent, it's your teleport machinery they're using. Maybe something broke down."

"Well, we can find out about that," he snapped back. "Teleport circuits either work or they don't. It neither swallows people nor does it go off its electromechanical rocker and run off a squadron of duplicates. So if it will run with me, it'll run with your medicos and my wife. Mr. Fellowes, I think there's trouble at home and so I'm going to look."

Nurse Wilkins started to tell Joe Fellowes that he couldn't use the maternity ward teleportransit booth but Joe, with a practiced hand, inserted his credit key with one hand and plugged in his home address with the other. He waved as he withdrew the key and he disappeared as the computer

processed him into the system.

The man's disappearance brought an uneasy nervous-ness to Nurse Wilkins. The system must be working or, by Joe Fellowes' own statement, he couldn't have entered it. Ergo something must have gone wrong with the team of medical people dispatched to help Mrs. Fellowes. The latter did not seem likely; despite the urgency of the call and the obviously imminent parturition, it was an uncomplicated, routine matter well within the competence of the medical personnel and their equipment.

Further, the door to the booth remained dormant, its indicating lamp signaling a priority incoming traffic. Nurse Wilkins' uneasiness increased as the minutes passed. For now was added the complication of a second level of puzzlement; granting trouble with the medical team, Joe Fellowes might well stay home with them and his wife—and baby. On the other hand, they should have warned the hospital of the emergency. And third, granting that someone goofed and returned the hospital team to a wrong address, it took but a second to correct any such error.

Nurse Wilkins stared at the door that had, despite the statement of Joe Fellowes to the contrary, swallowed one doctor, one interne, one nurse, a wagon, and one civilian whose identification card said that he was an engineer with a degree in teleportronics. And unsaid, she wondered uneasily whether the door at the other end hadn't maybe swallowed one woman in final labor and a-borning child.

The commuting businessman comprises three general types. There is he who leaves early for a number of reasons, and he who habitually stays overtime either because he is intrigued with his work or bucking for a raise, or both. The in-between is the myriad who report in slightly before opening time and leave promptly at zero five zero-zero. When the latter turns up early, he surprises his family, sometimes in activities that astonish him. When he is late, his family think in terms of dragging the river, canvassing the hospitals, and sticking hatpins into an effigy of the boss, when he turns up the family is likely to smell his breath and inspect his handkerchief for evidence of dalliance.

Teleporttransit, Incorporated, did not change the habits of the commuter. At five o'clock, long queues of people lined up before the teleport booths that stood awaiting them on old subway platforms, in the basement of every large building in central Megapolis, and in special buildings to serve less densely populated areas. To serve the commuter better, Teleporttransit provided each commuter key with the two terminals coded in the matrix. It worked only at the commuter's home and office stations, in one and out the other exclusively. For other destinations, the address had to be spelled out digit by digit.

The upshot of this special commuter's key was rapid transit with capital letters. Step into the booth, insert the key, turn, restore, and withdraw it. How fast can a person move? With one hundred commuters, one teleporttransit booth can handle one person every three seconds. Twelve hundred an hour. Times Square Station has three hundred booths; 34th Street has two fifty. Multiply these various values by the couple of hundred stations in Megapolis, then add the smaller numbers in the basement of the prominent buildings, and the capacity of Teleporttransit to handle the four million daily commuters becomes clear.

The rush hour swung into gear and the transits-per-minute dial in the Teleporttransit Building clicked into an upper register, reading kilotransits.

And at the terminals in Scarsdale, Mountainside, Freehold, and Sea Bright, wives collected their station wagons to await their breadwinners. They waited. Then they looked at watches. Some turned on radios to check the time. Quite a few worried, and an equal number changed to

expression from bored tolerance to knowing accusation of infidelity. Only one thing was glaringly obvious. Either the teleport system had broken down, or all husbands were delinquent at the same time, if not at the same place.

Giving the poor devils the benefit of the doubt the thing to do was to ask someone what went wrong. And so

"Tele-por-TRAN-sit," sang Trudy, waiting for her date. "Hello," came a female voice, "something wrong?"

"Wrong?" asked Trudy.

"Yes. My husband hasn't come home yet."

"Well, I haven't—No, I mean, why ask me?"

"This is the Teleporttransit Office, isn't it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, miss, it isn't only my husband. None of them have come home."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. Every night there're about forty of us waiting here, and our men come home on a time over about fifteen minutes. Now we're here a half hour and not a one has come out of your station."

"Wait a moment. I'll check." Trudy buzzed Walter Long and told him. "There's a woman on videophone who thinks the system has broken down."

"It couldn't," said Walter Long, stoutly. "Put her on, Trudy."

The harassed voice, having run through the story once for Trudy, had it better prepared for Walter Long. When she finished, he assured her, "Madam, we apologize for this inconvenience and I personally thank you for bring-ing it to my attention. It's the first I knew of any tie-up. Now let me attend to it at once, and we'll have your husband home in a jiffy. And thank you for calling."

"But where is he?" the woman wailed.

"Don't worry, madam," he said calmly. "If he hasn't come out of the exit, he hasn't gone into the entrance. So there are probably a lot of irate husbands standing angrily in front of an inoperable teleport booth."

"But they all come from different places," she wailed.

"We'll get them home," repeated Walter Long. He broke the circuit because talking to the anxious woman was not letting him get to the source of the problem. He buzzed Trudy and heard her sing, "Tele-por-Tran-sit," with some of the zing gone from her lilt. "Oh! Mr. Long. White Plains and Far Hills have both reported some sort of trouble."

"Trudy, call the hospital and find out where Joe Fellowes is, and how fast can he get back here."

"Yes, sir." Long waited on the circuit while Trudy got Nurse Wilkins, who explained that neither doctor, interne, nurse, stretcher-wagon, nor Mr. Fellowes had returned, and that they'd been gone for almost half an hour. When that was finished, Walter Long said, "Trudy, call Joe's home." Once more he waited on the circuit, but this time it was completely unfinished because the videophoning-back burred and burrrred without an answer.

"Something's gone a long way wrong, Trudy," he said solemnly. On the open circuit, Walter Long could hear the incoming calls beginning to pile up. Trudy's usual singsong diminished until it became a flat and uninspired, "Tele-portransit," followed by a wait and the terse explanation that a minor breakdown had occurred, that they were working on it; and no, she was merely a receptionist and didn't know a three-port circulator from a dithrambic foot. Sorry, but the technician

staff is all busy correcting the fault and can't be interrupted.

"Trudy!" barked Walter Long.

"Yes?"

"Put the lilt back in your voice, and then record that last explanation and switch your board to automatic re-sponse. Just keep the private company incoming lines open."

"Yes, sir."

"And then come in here."

"Yes, sir. As soon as I finish."

When she entered, Walter Long said, "Trudy, among the things that are wrong is the absence of Joe Fellowes. That nurse said he went home, but hasn't returned. Maybe something's wrong at the Fellowes end of that circuit—by which I mean his wife and baby. Will you take a minute to go over to Fellowes' station and check?"

"Surely."

"And come back immediately. Understand? At once. Don't wait even if they have something that depends on you. Come back here and report. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Long. That's a promise."

Trudy used the teleport booth in the main front office. She was ultra-careful, inserting her credit key and entering each digit in the Fellowes address with deliberation. She checked the read-out of each digit before she was satisfied enough to return the key in the lock-register to start the teleportation process.

Like the four million commuters who disappeared once each morning and once each night, Trudy ceased to exist in the teleport booth that stood in the main front office of Teleportation Incorporated.

Like Nurse Wilkins and four million waiting wives, mistresses, girl friends, and terminal-station bartenders, Walter Long stared at the closed booth door and prayed for it to open. His station became a vigil, for minutes stretched out and the girl did not return.

"Blast that girl," muttered Walter Long, "and she promised."

It was ten minutes of six when Walter Long called Harry Warren. "Harry, something's wrong."

"Wrong? Can it wait until morning. Walter? We've company coming tonight, and—"

"Tomorrow's Saturday, Harry."

"Yes. I know. So I'll come in tomorrow and settle it. Leave me a note about it. I'm off to home."

"Wait, Harry. Don't go. Don't, of all things, use the teleport."

"Now that's downright silly. How else can I get home?"

"Harry, to the best of my knowledge, people seem to be going into the system, but none are coming out."

"What?"

"You heard me right."

"Where's Fellowes?"

"That's the trouble. Fellowes was one of the first." "But what are we going to do?"

"Has the technical staff—?"

"Yeah. At five o'clock they headed for the teleport on a dead run."

"Right into this Frankenstein's Monster we own."

"Moloch was the god that ate 'em alive," said Harry Warren absently. "Well, there's no one for maintenance and mon-itor. The night man."

"And if I guess right, he's probably the closest guy this side of Pittsburgh, Boston, or Washington who knows anything about the technical side of teleportation. Get him up here."

"Maybe we'd better go down to him."

"That'll leave the office empty if someone calls."

"Ask Trudy to stay over a bit. After all, this is an emergency."

"I can't. I sent Trudy through the teleport to look for Joe Fellowes. She's gone, too."

"There are days when everything goes wrong," said Harry Warren. "Now I find that monitor maintenance is none other than Johnny Peters."

"How come? If he has the duty tonight, why was he asking Trudy for a date?"

"It seems that she three-quarters promised him a date for tomorrow night, so Peters swap nights with Frank Nash."

"Well, if I can plug up the company lines on the switchboard without electrocuting myself, I'll them up on the downstairs set."

Johnny Peters lounged at the big test and control console, his feet hooked on one edge of desk-panel. He was reading a magazine, and from time to time he let his eyes stray over the meter. He was bored, and he was frustrated because being the back-up to a completely self-adjusting, self-repairing, automatic machine does not leave much opportunity to perform noteworthy deeds. He was in this attitude when Harry Warren and Walter Long burst in upon him.

"Hell breaking loose all over Megapolis," yelled Harry Warren, "and you sit there as if nothing were going on."

"So what's going on? No one tells me anything," replied Johnny Peters.

"You don't know?" asked Walter Long incredulously.

"No, I don't."

Harry Warren looked at the control console full of meters, dials, and multicolored pilot warning lamps. "Is that thing functioning properly?"

Peters cast a rapid eye over the board. "Perfectly," he said, reaching out and giving one switch knob an imperceptible turn.

"How can you be so sure so fast?"

"There isn't a red lamp showing," he said with a sweeping wave of his hand. "Blue-green indicates operating circuits that are functioning properly; yellow-orange indicates feedback information—a continuous incoming flow of variables—that keep the operating circuits so properly adjusted that they maintain a continuous show of blue-green. Hasn't been a red lamp shown since I've been with Teleporttransit, but I'm told that whistles blow, bells ring, cannon are fired and—"

"Well, something's gone to hell in a handbasket."

"For instance, what?"

"Our teleport system isn't working."

"Nonsense!" Peters pointed to a large dial. "Load's low tonight, but we're still making a couple of—"

"Stop them!" yelled Walter Long. "Peters, since somewhere about a quarter to five this evening people have been a-pouring into the entrances, and not coming out of the exits."

"But that can't happen."

"You explain that to four million commuters—if we ever get 'em back."

"And if we don't, you try to explain it to their heirs and assigns," said Harry Warren.

"Is this condition local or widespread?" asked Peters.

"It's the entire system."

"No," said Peters, "I mean, has Pittsburgh or Greater Chicago reported the same mess-up?"

"That we don't know."

"Then let's find out," said Peters. On the console, he snapped a switch. A videoplate came

life, there was a brief ringback burr, and then a man's face appeared.

"Peters here, Megapolis. Teleporttransit, Inc."

"Hi. James Gale. Pittsburgh Rapid. What's on your mind?"

"Have you any trouble reports?"

"No. What kind of trouble?"

"No tie-ups?"

"No. Now what can happen to a teleport circuit to tie it up?"

"I don't know, but everybody who goes into our machine just simply stays there."

"But that's not possible."

"All right. So that makes it a manifestation of the supernatural and it's swallowed more'n a million com-muters, and it's continuing to swallow them at the rate of about fifteen hundred a minute."

"Turn it off," advised Jim Gale.

"I don't dare," said Johnny Peters. "I have the uneasy feeling that continued operation is the contact that lies between here and the limbo they're lost in. I've no sound, scientific logic for my queasy feeling; it's just a conviction that I must follow." He turned to look at Walter Long and Harry Warren. Both of them looked blank until Johnny Peters said, "Unless I'm ordered to, I won't turn it off," which they both shook their heads violently.

"Well, this I've got to see," said Gale. "I'm coming over."

"Whoa!" cried Peters. "I'd advise some other mode of transportation."

"Urn ... guess you're right. So is there anything I can do to help?"

"Yes," said Walter Long quickly. "Get in touch with your top-level technical staff and tell them what we're up against. You can also call Boston and Washington and ask them what to do. Send the best technical brains of all three cities to get trains or cars to come here as fast as possible. In the meantime, we'll have to muddle through with a junior technician, a business administrator, and one puzzled personnel relations counsel."

Throughout Megapolis, the news was spreading fast. In an earlier day, the radio in a car or in the depot bar would have spread the news like wildfire. But the habit of the commuter was to get where he was going first, and then relax to get the news. The news was thus delayed in its dissemination by the recipient's habits, not by any machination of press, government, big business, or unfavorable foreign powers.

The transits-per-minute meter began to taper off in an increasing drop as the news was spread. But it did not drop to zero because there were those that had not heard, those who did not believe, a number whose curiosity exceeded their good sense, a few misguided self-sacrificers, and a few who, but continuous counting rate pegged up by sheer habit. For just as people during a power failure will enter a room and flip the light switch in a reflex action, people preoccupied with other things turned into the tele-port booth out of habit and whisked themselves into limbo.

More time passed; it takes time for the central nervous system of a vast Megapolis to react to a widespread emergency. Had one called two and the two then called four, and the four called eight, the word would have spread fast. But plans and programs such as this fail unsafely at the first breach in the pattern for there is no way of bridging the missing link. So in the usual ponderous way, the commissioners called the captains and the captains notified their lieutenants, and soon the word was spread to the patrolmen. And where there was a missing link to bridge, the radio called the patrolmen, firemen off-duty, members of the civil defense, and anybody who could be sworn to duty.

And not a few of these succumbed to habit by trying to take the teleport system to the teleport station they'd been assigned to prevent people from using.

Ultimately, the stations were under control and the transits-per-minute meter was down to unreadable, but still-not-zero figure. By this time, the hidden, unknown plane beyond the entrance of the teleports had its share of policemen and other keepers of the civic peace.

Johnny Peters looked at the mass of gray hammertone finish, chromium, and glass, and realized a helplessness, a complete futility, the utter impossibility of doing anything useful. For what had always worked properly had stopped abruptly at about four-thirty in the afternoon. It was as if the sun, having come up on time since the dawn of eyes to watch for it, failed to show.

For Teleporttransit was to Megapolis as hundreds of other teleport companies were to their respective cities. Take twelve years of handling commuter traffic five days each week and multiply that by the number of cities that had solved the commuting problem by licensing teleport companies, then quote the figure as a statistic with zero accidents in transit. The odds begin to approach the probabilities that the sun will not be late tomorrow morning.

Still, to Johnny Peters, Walter Long, and Harry Warren, there was no realization of the enormity of the situation. It was too impersonal, too remote, too vast. That four or five million human souls had vanished into their machinery was a fact they could not comprehend.

But as the word spread throughout the city, millions of individuals became intimately aware of the shocking, abrupt personal loss. And for the number who fold their hands and say "Kismet," there are an equal number who want to strike back. And so part of the public became a mob.

The night watchman on duty at the main door of the Teleporttransit Building saw the mob approach but did not comprehend until the leaders crashed the big plate glass doors with a timpani. As the mob came boiling into the lobby of the building, the night watchman fled in terror, taking the obvious way out along with two of the mob who pursued him into the teleport booth.

Had there been no stairs, the elevator system might have cooled some of the anger, for a mob completely articulated into tiny groups out of communication with one another loses the ability to regenerate its mass anger. The leaders, without a shouting mass behind them, might have listened to reason. But the elevators, at night, would respond only to authorized employees with special keys. And so the mob, strung into a broad-fronted wave, trailed up the stairs after the leaders. The toil of climbing added to their anger.

To prove the paranoiac quality of the mob, the air-conditioning in the Teleporttransit Building did not give them any comfort; it made them resent even more the men they held responsible because they sat in comfort to perpetrate the outrage.

Within the equipment room, the status remained quo. But not for long.

The heavy doors muffled the sound of the mob; by the time the noise penetrated loud enough to attract the three men in the room, the same timber used to crash the main doors came hurtling through the doors to the equipment room.

The foremost of the mob milled into the room and grabbed the three men. There were shouts of lynch-law: "Give it to 'em!" and "String 'em up!" and someone with a length of clothesline weaved his way through the mob to the fore.

A slipknot is not as efficient as the hangman's noose with its thirteen turns, but it is effective. It also terrify-ing. Being in the hands of a mob is panic-making in its own right. The sight of a mob adds terror. Such shock makes some people faint, some are simply stunned into inaction, and some enter a strange mental stage through which they watch the proceedings without realizing that the mob is going to harm them.

Some men take on a madman's fury, break free, and try to run.

As three of the mob held Johnny Peters, a fourth started to put the slipknot over his head, while the fifth tossed the other end of the clothesline over a ceiling strut. Johnny Peters lashed out, broke the grip of the three who held him, smashed the noose-holder in the face, and took off through the room, scattering the mob by sheer force. Behind him trailed the clothesline, for his wild round-house swing had passed through the noose.

Wildly, Johnny Peters headed for the only haven he knew, and as the door to the teleport booth closed behind him, the man who held the end of the rope shook it with a mad roaring laugh:

"He ain't going nowhere!"

With deliberation, he started to collect the line, hand over hand. It slung in a tightening caterpillar from the ceiling strut over to the teleport booth door frame.

Unmindful of his tether, Johnny Peters fished his key out, plugged it in, and twisted.

With a roar, three of the mob grabbed the rope and hauled. The end, cut clean, pulled out of the door frame gasket and trailed across the floor; the three who had hauled went a-sprawl. For a moment of thought must reveal, the system could hardly teleport a material body instantaneously into an enclosed exit booth without creating an explosion of thermonuclear proportions. The teleport booths were carefully made to rigid dimensions; in the transit, everything contained in one went to the other; they swapped.

Johnny Peters disappeared trailing his length of line.

Johnny Peters was in a nearly indescribable state of—awareness. There was no sense of feeling; the tactile sense no longer existed. The sensitive tip of the tongue did not send continuous messages to the brain about the state of teeth or the amount of saliva. The telemetry that provided feedback of limb position was missing. Pressure against the feet was gone, as if there were no gravity.

Where he was, there was no sound. Or, if sound existed there, he had not the ears with which to hear—nor taste, nor sight, nor olfactory sense.

Yet he felt an awareness of self, of being, of existing.

A remnant of long-forgotten Latin occurred, "Cogit, ergo sumt." And he wondered whether the Latin was correct. But right or wrong in the classics, Johnny Peters thought, and therefore he existed.

And once this became evident to Johnny Peters, there came the usual return of hope, for so long as life existed, there was hope of getting back from whatever strange plane he had entered. The terror with panic subsiding, Johnny Peters became faintly aware of others.

This, too, was a strange awareness. In life, for example, on a streetcar or subway, a person is aware of the presence of others because every sensory channel is bombarded, assaulted, overloaded. One can say, "They were so thick I could taste it!" and not be far from wrong because the chemicals that carry the spoor of close-packed human-ity to the sense of smell are soluble in water; in saliva the smell becomes a taste.

This was, or was it, like telepathy?

What is telepathy like? Does the telepath dial a mental address and then carry on a two-way remark-and--rejoinder, or does he broadcast on an open band? Can he extract the memories of peregrinations of someone who is un-aware of this invasion of privacy, or does the human desire for privacy act as a barrier? Is that why telepathy is not a going process?

In any event, Johnny Peters was aware of the presence of others; perhaps it is better to say he was aware of the awareness of others. Then as this awareness became stronger and more puzzling, he became vaguely and faintly cognizant of identity. Not identity in the sense that

individual is identified, but rather in the sense that his awareness included a number of separate entities. He recognized none of them, which may not be surprising since he had, by now, about a million individuals for company.

Johnny Peters knew how the teleport worked, but still had difficulty in freeing his mind of the feeling that others who had used the teleport booth in the equipment room of the Teleportation Building should be somewhere just beyond the entrance portal. Where they were he could not imagine, but he knew that the medium was not like a plugged tunnel, even though the tunnel appeared virtual, was the foundation for the teleport'.

For when the junction of a diode is very thin, and the energy of the electrons is very low, Heisenberg's Uncertainty says that they have a definite probability of crossing the forbidden gap between the junction and appearing on the other side. In the tunnel diode, simple probability is loaded with a voltage bias so that a current flows across the forbidden gap; electrons pass through invisibly as if they flowed through a tunnel. The teleport performed the same operation with humans and things—or had until five million people occupied the forbidden gap between terminals.

And so the people, instead of compact, locatable entities, were diffused essences of their beings, their awarenesses, occupying a volume of probability that encompassed and more likely exceeded the most distant of Teleportation's wide-flung network of terminals.

Aware that he was mingled with other entities, Johnny Peters felt the need of finding and identifying someone, anyone he knew as an individual; an awareness that was not simply another being, but a definite being. Simple want called her name to mind, and somehow he formed the simple concept:

"Trudy!"

It gave directivity to his being, and cleared things; now he became aware of others, trying to make contact in the same way. Some of them had. Two were commenting on the situation in exceedingly uncomplimentary terms; in fact, they made his mind blush. Another was radiating the concept that he didn't know where he was but at least he wasn't suffering from the heat.

Johnny Peters tried again. "Trudy!"

If a completely diffused being had feelings, he might have felt something. Instead, he merely became aware of being surrounded by more essences of awareness, a mental crowding. This corresponded to his concept of the volume of probability; given absolutely zero energy, probability was equally good to be anywhere in the Universe. But as the energy became significant the volume of probability shrunk. Furthermore, there was a higher probability of occupying the center or near-center of the volume than occupying the outer edges. The distribution, of course, was Gaussian.

Then he became aware of a reply. The concept, "Johnny?"

"Yes, Trudy."

"What happened? Where are we?"

"Where we are I don't know," he formed. "It's supposed to be a forbidden gap between terminals that nothing can occupy. That's why nothing ever got lost before. It's either here or there but never between."

"I don't see," came the faltering reply. "But what happened?"

"I don't know, but I think it's some sort of traffic jam on the teleport."

"But why?"

"Lord knows. Let's figure it out after we find out how to get out of this in-between mess."

"Do you think you can?"

"I'm not too sure, but Joe Fellowes must be in this mess somewhere."

"Let's both call him."

Together, they formed the concept, "Joe Fellowes!" Again there was the awareness of something shifting, of a mental crowding; a reshuffling of the entities.

Trudy radiated, "Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"Johnny—I get the distinct impression of a baby cry-ing."

"Uh—yeah."

The awareness of reshuffling became intense. At one point, Johnny Peters caught a thought that might have been a reply from Joe Fellowes.

"Trudy?"

"Yes, Johnny?"

"Let's try Joe Fellowes again."

"No, let's try Irma Fellowes. I think women are more sensitive."

"Only a woman would make that statement," was his response, "but I'll try anything."

Now the reshuffling was almost a physical motion; the awareness of movement through a densely packed medium, of motion blocked from time to time, of packing tight, of flowing ever-so-slowly through extreme difficulty toward some focal point.

"Irma Fellowes?"

Faintly, dimly came the reply, unformed and wordless, but nonetheless it was the awareness of Irma Fellowes. Motion became a struggle, but they fought to move, urged on by some unknown drive.

Now the awareness of Irma Fellowes was stronger, mental flashes of Joe Fellowes began to come in, and as the latter increased in clarity, others began. There was the doctor; his awareness was concern for his patient. The interne was merely anxious to get back to his post. The nurse was impatient because she had a date that evening and didn't want to miss it. The baby was complaining, as babies do, about the rough treatment that was meted upon one's first appearance on Earth.

"Is it a boy or girl?" wondered Irma Fellowes.

"How can we possibly find out in this ... this ... nothingness?"

The interne advised, "Find out whether baby's thinking blue or pink thoughts."

Nurse wanted to know, "Is it born?"

Joe Fellowes' thought was a snort. "How can anything be born of a diffused essence that spreads out over a spherical volume of probability about a hundred and fifty miles in diameter? The term's meaningless."

"But what are we breathing? And how will we eat?"

The question, unanswerable by any form of reasoning or logic, was interrupted by a stronger feeling from the baby, a feeling of strain having been eased. The packed-in awareness flowed away throughout the entire volume of probability, motion became fluid, fast, and free.

The exit terminals of Teleporttransit began to spew forth humanity. They landed running, some of them; others were pushed violently because they did not move forward out of the way fast enough. The big rush hour of Megapopolis, started two hours ago, was finishing. With the finish on the hundred and twenty minutes of overtime, the mysterious medium between the terminals was doing its best to live up to the definition, "forbidden gap."

Being people once more instead of merely aware essences, they raised their voices.

"It's a boy," said the doctor.

"But what happened?" asked Trudy.

"It was like a log jam," explained Joe Fellowes. "And baby was the key log."

"But how could the teleport system form such a jam?" demanded Johnny Peters.

"We were too efficient," said Fellowes. "Our coinci-dence-counting circuits are set up to make double check on the transits. Some shiny-bottomed accountant wanted to be more than certain every transit was paid for, so all trips are checked at the entrance and again at the exit. Baby made 'em mismatch."

"All right, so how did we break the jam?"

"You did," chuckled Fellowes. "You went in to the teleport booth and plugged in your coordinates without entering a destination. That made the number of in-counts match the number of out-counts. And once your awareness approached the troubled area, the uncertainty of which was which, in this case, whose was whose, became high enough in probability to effect a transfer. Boom! The jam breaks and everything comes tumbling home."

"But—?"

"Baby? Well, you've heard it said that when they start, nothing will stop 'em," chuckled Fellowes. "And so baby has the dubious honor of being the first kid born en route to the hospital teleport."

"And," said the doctor dryly, "delivered by a diffused medical team of essences."