

Shaffery Among the Immortals

by Frederik Pohl

Jeremy Shaffery had a mind a little bit like Einstein's, although maybe not in the ways that mattered most. When Einstein first realized that light carried mass, he sat down to write a friend about it and described the thought as "amusing and infectious." Shaffery would have thought that, too, although of course he would not likely have seen the implications of the Maxwell equations in the first place.

Shaffery looked a little bit like Einstein. He encouraged the resemblance, especially in the hair, until his hair began to run out. Since Einstein loved sailing, he kept a sixteen-foot trimaran tied up at the observatory dock. Seasickness kept him from using it much. Among the things he envied Einstein for was the mirror-smooth Swiss lakes, so much nicer than the lower Caribbean in that respect. But after a day of poring over pairs of star photographs with a blink comparator or trying to discover previously unknown chemical compounds in interstellar space in a radio trace, he sometimes floated around the cove in his little yellow rubber raft. It was relaxing, and his wife never followed him there. To Shaffery that was important. She was a difficult woman, chronically p.o.'d because his career was so persistently pointed in the wrong direction. If she had ever been a proper helpmeet, she wasn't any more. Shaffery doubted she ever had, remembering that it was her unpleasant comments that had caused him to give up that other hallmark of the master, the violin.

At the stage in Shaffery's career at which he had become Director of the Carmine J. Nuccio Observatory in the Lesser Antilles, he had begun to look less like Einstein and more like Edgar Kennedy. Nights when the seeing was good he remorselessly scanned the heavens through the 22-inch reflector, hoping against hope for glory. Days when he was not sleeping he wandered through the dome like a ghost, running his finger over desks for dust, filching preserved mushrooms from Mr. Nuccio's home-canned hoard, trying to persuade his two local assistants to remember to close the dome slit when it rained. They paid little attention. They knew where the muscle was, and that it wasn't with Shaffery. He had few friends. Most of the white residents couldn't stand his wife; some of them couldn't stand Shaffery very well, either. There was a nice old-lady drunk out from England in a tidy white house down the beach, a sort of hippie commune on the far side of the island, and a New York television talk-show operator who just flew down for weekends. When they were respectively sober, unstoned and present, Shaffery sometimes talked to them. That wasn't often. The only one he really wanted to see much was the tv man, but there were obstacles. The big obstacle was that the tv man spent most of his waking time skin diving. The other obstacle was that Shaffery had discovered that the tv man occasionally laid Mrs. Shaffery. It wasn't the morality of the thing that bothered him; it was the feeling of doubt it raised in Shaffery's mind about the other's sanity. He never spoke to the tv man about it, partly because he wasn't sure what to

say and partly because the man had halfway promised to have Shaffery on his show. Sometime or other.

One must be fair to Shaffery and say that he wasn't a bad man. Like Frank Morgan, his problem was that he wasn't a good wizard. The big score always evaded him.

The Einstein method, which he had studied assiduously over many years, was to make a pretty theory and then see if, by any chance, observations of events in the real world seemed to confirm it. Shaffery greatly approved of that method. It just didn't seem to work out for him. At the Triple A-S meeting in Dallas he read an hour-long paper on his new Principle of Relevance Theory. That was a typical Einstein idea, he flattered himself. He had even worked out simple explanations for the lay public, like Einstein with his sitting on a hot stove or holding hands with a pretty girl. "Relevance Theory," he practiced smiling to the little wavelets of the cove, "only means that observations that don't *relate* to anything don't *exist*. I'll spare you the mathematics because—" self-deprecatory laugh here— "I can't even fill out my income tax without making a mistake." Well, he had worked out the mathematics, inventing signs and operators of his own, just like Einstein. But he seemed to have made a mistake. Before the AAAS audience, fidgeting and whispering to each other behind their hands, he staked his scientific reputation on the prediction that the spectrum of Mars at its next opposition would show a slight but detectable displacement of some 150 angstroms toward the violet. The son of a bitch didn't do anything of the kind. One of the audience was a graduate student at Princeton, hard up for a doctoral thesis subject, and he took a chance on Shaffery and made the observations, and with angry satisfaction sent him the proof that Mars had remained obstinately red.

The next year the International Astrophysical Union's referees, after some discussion, finally allowed him twenty minutes for a Brief Introduction into the General Consideration of Certain Electromagnetic Anomalies. He offered thirty-one pages of calculations leading to the prediction that the next lunar eclipse would be forty-two seconds late. It wasn't. It was right on time. At the meeting of the World Space Science Symposium they told him with great regret that overcommitments of space and time had made it impossible for them to schedule his no doubt valuable contribution, and by the time of the next round of conferences they weren't even sending him invitations any more.

Meanwhile all those other fellows were doing great. Shaffery followed the careers of his contemporaries with rue. There was Hoyle, still making a good thing out of the Steady State Hypothesis and Gamow's name, still revered for the Big Bang, and new people like Dyson and Ehricke and Enzmann coming along with all sorts of ideas that, if you looked at them objectively, weren't any cleverer than his, Shaffery thought, except for the detail that somehow or other they seemed lucky enough to find supporting evidence from time to time. It did not strike him as fair. Was he not a Mensa member? Was he not as well educated as the successful ones, as honored with degrees, as photogenic in the newsmagazines and as colorfully entertaining on the talk shows? (Assuming Larry Nesbit ever gave him the chance on his show.) Why did they make out and he fall flat? His wife's theory he considered and

rejected. "Your trouble, Jeremy," she would say to him, "is you're a horse's ass." But he knew that wasn't it. Who was to say Isaac Newton wasn't a horse's ass, too, if you looked closely enough at his freaky theology and his nervous breakdowns? And look where he got.

So Shaffery kept looking for the thing that would make him great. He looked all over. Sometimes he checked Kepler's analysis of the orbit of Mars with an adding machine, looking for mistakes in arithmetic. (He found half a dozen, but the damn things all canceled each other out, which proves how hard it is to go wrong when your luck is in.) Sometimes he offered five-dollar prizes to the local kids for finding new stars that might turn out to be Shaffery's Nova, or anyway Shaffery's Comet. No luck. An ambitious scheme to describe stellar ballistics in terms of analogy with free-radical activity in the enzyme molecules fell apart when none of the biochemists he wrote to even answered his letters.

The file of failures grew. One whole drawer of a cabinet was filled with reappraisals of the great exploded theories of the past—*A New Look at Phlogiston*, incomplete because there didn't seem really to be anything to look at when you came down to it; a manuscript called *The Flat Earth Reexamined*, which no one would publish; three hundred sheets of drawings of increasingly tinier and increasingly quirkier circles to see if the Copernican epicycles could not somehow account for what the planet Mercury did that Einstein had considered a proof of relativity. From time to time he was drawn again to attempting to find a scientific basis for astrology and chiromancy, or predicting the paths of charged particles in a cloud chamber by means of yarrow stalks. It all came to nothing. When he was really despairing, he sometimes considered making his mark in industry rather than pure science, wherefore the sheaf of sketches for a nuclear-fueled car, the experiments on smellovision that had permanently destroyed the nerves of his left nostril, the attempt to preserve some of Mr. Nuccio's mushrooms by irradiation in his local dentist's X-ray room. He knew that that sort of thing was not really worthy of a man with all those graduate degrees, but in any event he did no better there than anywhere else. Sometimes he dreamed of what it would be like to run Mount Palomar or Jodrell Bank, with fifty trained assistants to nail down his inspirations with evidence. He was not that fortunate. He had only Cyril and James.

It was not all bad, however, because he didn't have much interference to worry about. The observatory where he was employed, last and least of the string of eleven that had given him a position since his final doctoral degree, didn't seem to mind what he did, as long as he did it without bothering them. On the other hand, they didn't give him much support, either.

Probably they just didn't know how. The observatory was owned by something called the Lesser Antilles Vending Machine Entertainment Co., Ltd., and, so Shaffery had been told by the one old classmate who still kept up a sort of friendship with him, was actually some sort of tax-evasion scheme maintained by a Las Vegas gambling syndicate. Shaffery didn't mind this, particularly, although from time to time he got tired of being told that the only two astronomers who mattered were Giovanni Schiaparelli and Galileo Galilei. That was only a minor annoyance. The big cancerous agony was that every year he got a year older and fame would not come.

At his periodic low spots of despondency (he had even tried linking them with the oppositions of Jupiter, meteor showers, and his wife's periods, but those didn't come to anything either) he toyed with the notion of dropping it all and going into some easier profession. Banking. Business. Law. "President Shaffery" had the right kind of sound, if he entered politics. But then he would drag his raft to the water, prop two six-packs of Danish beer on his abdomen and float away, and by the end of the first pack his courage would come flowing back, and on the second he would be well into a scheme for detecting gravity waves by statistical analysis of 40,000 acute gout sufferers, telephoning the state of their twinges into a central computer facility.

On such a night he carried his little rubber raft to the shore of the cove, slipped off his sandals, rolled up his bell-bottoms and launched himself. It was the beginning of the year, as close to winter as it ever got on the island, which meant mostly that the dark came earlier. It was a bad time of the year for him, because it was the night before the annual Board Meeting. The first year or two he had looked forward to the meetings as opportunities. He was no longer so hopeful. His objective for the present meeting was only to survive it, and there was some question of a nephew by marriage, an astronomy major at U.C.L.A., to darken even that hope.

Shaffery's vessel wasn't really a proper raft, only the sort of kid's toy that drowns a dozen or so nine-year-olds at the world's bathing beaches every year. It was less than five feet long. When he got himself twisted and wriggled into it, his back against the ribbed bottom, his head pillowed against one inflated end, and his feet dangling into the water at the other, it was quite like floating in a still sea without the annoyance of getting wet. He opened the first beer and began to relax. The little waves rocked and turned him; the faint breeze competed with the tiny island tide, and the two of them combined to take him erratically away from the beach at the rate of maybe ten feet a minute. It didn't matter. He was still inside the cove, with islets, or low sandbanks, beaded across the mouth of it. If by any sudden meteorological miracle a storm should spring from that bright-lamped sky, the wind could take him nowhere but back to shore or near an island. And of course there would be no storm. He could paddle back whenever he chose, as easily as he could push his soap dish around his bathtub, as he routinely did while bathing, which in turn he did at least once a day, and when his wife was particularly difficult as often as six times. The bathroom was his other refuge. His wife never followed him there, being too well brought up to run the chance of inadvertently seeing him doing something filthy.

Up on the low hills he could see the corroded copper dome of the observatory. A crescent of light showed that his assistant had opened the dome, but the light showed that he was not using it for any astronomical purpose. That was easy to unriddle. Cyril had turned the lights on so that the cleaning woman could get the place spotless for the Board Meeting and had opened the dome because that proved the telescope was being used. Shaffery bent the empty beer can into a V, tucked it neatly beside him in the raft, and opened another. He was not yet

tranquil, but he was not actively hurting anywhere. At least Cyril would not be using the telescope to study the windows of the Bon Repos Hotel across the cove, since the last time he'd done it he had jammed the elevating gears and it could no longer traverse anywhere near the horizon. Shaffery put aside an unwanted, fugitive vision of Idris, the senior and smartest cleaning lady, polishing the telescope mirror with Bon Ami, sipped his beer, thought nostalgically of Relevance Theory and how close he had come with the epicycles, and freed his mind for constructive thought.

The sun was wholly gone, except for a faint luminous purpling of the sky in the general direction of Venezuela. Almost directly overhead hung the three bright stars of Orion's Belt, slowly turning like the traffic signals on a railroad line, with Sirius and Procyon orbiting headlight bright around them. As his eyes dark-adapted he could make out the stars in Orion's sword, even the faint patch of light that was the great gas cloud. He was far enough from the shore so that sound could not carry, and he softly called out the great four-pointed pattern of first-magnitude stars that surrounded the constellation: "Hey there, Betelgeuse. Hi, Bellatrix. What's new, Rigel? Nice to see you again, Saiph." He glanced past red Aldebaran to the close-knit stars of the Pleiades, returned to Orion and, showing off now, called off the stars of the Belt: "Hey, Alnitak! Yo, Alnilam! How goes it, Mintaka?"

The problem with drinking beer in the rubber raft was that your head was bent down toward your chest and it was difficult to burp; but Shaffery arched his body up a little, getting in some water in the process but not caring, got rid of the burp, opened another beer, and gazed complacently at Orion. It was a satisfying constellation. It was satisfying that he knew so much about it. He thought briefly of the fact that the Arabs had called the Belt Stars by the name Jauzah, meaning the Golden Nuts; that the Chinese thought they looked like a weighing beam, and that Greenlanders called them Siktut, The Seal Hunters Lost at Sea. As he was going on to remember what the Australian aborigines had thought of them (they thought they resembled three young men dancing a corroboree), his mind flickered back to the lost seal hunters. Um, he thought. He raised his head and looked toward the shore.

It was now more than a hundred yards away. That was farther than he really wanted to be, and so he kicked the raft around, oriented himself by the stars and began to paddle back. It was easy and pleasant to do. He used a sort of splashy upside-down breast stroke of the old-fashioned angel's wing kind, but as all his weight was supported by the raft, he moved quickly across the water. He was rather enjoying the exercises, toes and fingers moving comfortably in the tepid sea, little ghosts of luminescence glowing where he splashed, until quite without warning the fingertips of one hand struck sharply and definitely against something that was resistantly massive and solid where there should have been only water, something that moved stubbornly, something that rasped them like a file. Oh, my God, thought Shaffery. What a lousy thing to happen. They so seldom came in this close to shore. He didn't even think about them. What a shame for a man who might have been Einstein to wind up, incomplete and unfulfilled, as shark shit.

He really was not a bad man, and it was the loss to science that was first on his mind, only a

little later what it must feel like to be chopped and gulped.

Shaffery pulled his hands in and folded them on his chest, crossed his feet at the ankles, and rested them on the end of the boat, knees spread on the sides. There was now nothing trailing in the water that might strike a shark as bait. There was, on the other hand, no good way for him to get back to shore. He could yell, but the wind was the wrong way. He could wait till he drifted near one of the islets. But if he missed them, he would be out in the deep ocean before he knew it.

Shaffery was almost sure that sharks seldom attacked a boat, even a rubber one. Of course, he went on analytically, the available evidence didn't signify. They could flip a raft like this over easily enough. If this particular shark ate him off this particular half-shell, there would be no one to report it.

Still, there were some encouraging considerations. Say it was a shark. Say it was capable of tipping the boat or eating him boat and all. They were dull-witted creatures, and what was to keep one hanging around in the absence of blood, splashing, noise, trailing objects or any of the other things sharks were known to take an interest in? It might be a quarter mile away already. But it wasn't, because at that moment he heard the splash of some large object breaking the surface a foot from his head.

Shaffery could have turned to look, but he didn't; he remained quite motionless, listening to the gentle water noises, until they were punctuated by a sort of sucking sound and then a voice. A human voice. It said, "Scared the piss out of you, didn't I? What do you say, Shaffery? Want a tow back to shore?"

It was not the first time Shaffery had encountered Larry Nesbit diving in the cove; it was only the first time it had happened at night. Shaffery twisted about in the raft and gazed at Nesbit's grinning face and its frame of wet strands of nape-length hair. It took a little time to make the transition in his mind from eighteen-foot shark to five-foot-eight TV star. "Come on," Nesbit went on, "what do you say? Tell you what. I'll tow you in, and you give me some of old Nuccio's Scotch, and I'll listen to how you're going to invent antigravity while we get pissed."

That Nesbit, he had a way with him. The upshot of it all was that Shaffery had a terrible hangover the next day; not the headache but the whole works, trotting to the toilet and being able to tolerate only small sips of ginger ale and wishing, or almost wishing, he was dead. (Not, to be sure, before he did the one immortalizing thing. Whatever it was going to be.)

It was not altogether a disaster, the hangover. The next morning was very busy, and it was just as well that he was out of the way. When the Board of Directors convened to discuss the astronomical events of the year, or whatever it is they did discuss in the afternoon session to which Shaffery was definitely not invited, it was always a busy time. They arrived separately, each director with his pair of associates. One after another 40-foot cabin cruisers with fishing

tops came up to the landing and gave up cargoes of plump little men wearing crew cuts and aloha shirts. The observatory car, not ever used by any of the observatory personnel, was polished, fueled and used for round trips from the landing strip at Jubila, across the island, to Comray Hill and the observatory. Shaffery laid low in his private retreat. He had never told his wife that he was not allowed in the observatory for the board meetings; so she didn't look for him. He spent the morning in the tar-paper shack where photographic material had once been kept, until he discovered that the damp peeled the emulsion away from the backing. Now it was his home away from home. He had fitted it with a desk, chair, icebox, coffeepot and bed.

Shaffery paid no attention to the activity outside, not even when the directors' assistants, methodically searching the bushes and banana groves all round the observatory, came to his shack, opened the door without knocking, and peered in at him. They knew him from previous meetings, but they studied him silently for a moment before the two in the doorway nodded to each other and left him again. They were not well-mannered men, Shaffery thought, but no doubt they were good at their jobs, whatever those jobs were. He resolutely did not think about the Board Meeting, or about the frightening, calumnious things Larry Nesbit had said to him the night before, drinking the Board Chairman's Scotch and eating his food, in that half-jocular, shafting, probing way he had. Shaffery thought a little bit about the queasy state of his lower abdomen, because he couldn't help it, but what he mostly thought about was Fermat's Last Theorem.

A sort of picayune, derivative immortality was waiting there for someone. Not much, but Shaffery was getting desperate. It was one of those famous mathematical problems that grad students played at for a month or two and amateurs assaulted in vain all their lives. It looked easy enough to deal with. It started with so elementary a proposition that every high-school boy mastered it about the time he learned to masturbate successfully. If you squared the sides of a right triangle, the sum of the squares of the two sides was equal to the square of the hypotenuse.

Well, that was all very well, and it was so easy to understand that it had been used to construct right angles by surveyors for centuries. A triangle whose sides were, say, 3 feet and 4 feet, and whose hypotenuse was 5 feet, had to make a right angle, because $3^2+4^2=5^2$; and it always had, since the time of Pythagoras, five hundred years B.C., $a^2+b^2=c^2$. The hitch was, if the exponent was anything but 2, you could never make the equation come out using whole numbers; a^3+b^3 never equaled c^3 , and $a^{27}+b^{27}$ did not add up to any c^{27} , no matter what numbers you used for a, b and c. Everybody knew that this was so. Nobody had ever proved that it *had* to be so, by mathematical proofs, except that Fermat had left a cryptic little note, found among his papers after his death, claiming that he had found a "truly wonderful" proof, only there wasn't enough room in the margin of the book he was writing on to put it all down.

Shaffery was no mathematician. But that morning, waking up to the revolution in his stomach and the thunder in his head, he had seen that that was actually a strength. One, all

the mathematicians of three or four centuries had broken their heads against the problem; so obviously it couldn't be solved by any known mathematics anyway. Two, Einstein was weak in mathematics too and had disdained to worry about it, preferring to invent his own.

So he spent the morning, between hurried gallops across the parking lot to the staff toilet, filling paper with mathematical signs and operators of his own invention. It did not seem to be working out, to be sure. For a while he thought of an alternative scheme, to wit, inventing a "truly wonderful" solution of his own and claiming he couldn't find room to write it down in the margin of, say, the latest issue of *Mathematical Abstracts*; but residual sanity persuaded him that perhaps no one would ever find it, or that if it was found it might well be laughed off, and anyway that it would be purely posthumous celebrity and he wanted to taste it while he was alive. So he broke for lunch, came back feeling dizzy and ill and worried about the meeting that was going on, and decided to take a nap before resuming his labors.

When Cyril came looking for him to him the Directors desired his presence, it was dark and Shaffery felt like hell.

Coomray Hill was no taller than a small office building, but it got the mirror away from most of the sea-level dampness. The observatory sat on top of the hill like a mound of pistachio ice cream, hemispheric green copper roof and circular walls of green-painted plaster. Inside, the pedestal of the telescope took up the center of the floor. The instrument itself was traversed as low as it would go any more, clearing enough space for the Directors and their gear. They were all there, looking at him with silent distaste as he came in.

The inner sphere of the dome was painted (by Cyril's talented half-sister) with a large map of Mars, showing Schiaparelli's famous canals in resolute detail; a view of the Bay of Naples from the Vomero, with Vesuvius gently steaming in the background; and an illuminated drawing of the constellation Scorpius, which happened to be the sign of the constellation under which the Chairman of the Board had been born. A row of card tables had been lined up and covered with a green cloth. There were six places set, each with ashtray, note pad, three sharpened pencils, ice, glass, and bottle of John Begg. Another row of tables against the wall held the antipasto, replenished by Cyril after the depredations of the night before, but now seriously depleted by the people for whom it was intended. Six cigars were going and a couple of others were smoldering in the trays. Shaffery tried not to breathe. Even with the door open and the observing aperture in the dome wide, the inside air was faintly blue. At one time Shaffery had mentioned diffidently what the deposit of cigar smoke did to the polished surface of the 22-inch mirror. That was at his first annual meeting. The Chairman hadn't said a word, just stared at him. Then he nodded to his right-hand man, a Mr. DiFirenzo, who had taken a packet of Kleenex out of his pocket and tossed it to Shaffery. "So wipe the goddamn thing off," he had said. "Then you could dump these ashtrays for us, okay?"

Shaffery did his best to smile at his Directors. Behind him he was conscious of the presence of their assistants, who were patrolling the outside of the observatory in loose elliptical orbits,

perigeeing at the screen door to peer inside. They had studied Shaffery carefully as he came across the crunching shell of the parking lot, and under their scrutiny he had decided against detouring by way of the staff toilet, which he now regretted.

“Okay, Shaffery,” said Mr. DiFirenzo, after glancing at the Chairman of the Board. “Now we come to you.”

Shaffery clasped his hands behind him in his Einstein pose and said brightly, “Well, it has been a particularly productive year for the observatory. No doubt you’ve seen my reports on the Leonid meteorite count and—”

“Right,” said Mr. DiFirenzo, “but what we been talking about here is the space shots. Mr. Nuccio has expressed his views that this is a kind of strategic location, like how they shoot the rockets from Cape Kennedy. They have to go right over us, and we want a piece of that.”

Shaffery shifted his weight uneasily. “I discussed that in my report last year—”

“No, Shaffery. This year, Shaffery. Why can’t we get some of that federal money, like for tracking, for instance?”

“But the position hasn’t changed, Mr. DiFirenzo. We don’t have the equipment, and besides NASA has its own—”

“No good, Shaffery. You know how much you got out of us for equipment last year? I got the figures right here. And now you tell us you don’t have what we need to make a couple bucks?”

“Well, Mr. DiFirenzo, you see, the equipment we have is for purely scientific purposes. For this sort of work you need quite different instruments, and actually—”

“I don’t want to hear.” DiFirenzo glanced at the Chairman and then went on. “Next thing, what about that comet you said you were going to discover?”

Shaffery smiled forgivingly. “Really, I can’t be held accountable for that. I didn’t actually say we’d *find* one. I merely said that the continuing *search* for comets was part of our basic *program*. Of course, I’ve done my very best to—”

“Not good enough, Shaffery. Besides your boy here told Mr. Nuccio that if you did find a comet you wouldn’t name it the Mr. Carmine J. Nuccio Comet like Mr. Nuccio wanted.”

Shaffery was going all hollow inside, but he said bravely, “It’s not wholly up to me. There’s an astronomical convention that the discoverer’s name goes on—”

“We don’t like that convention, Shaffery. Three, now we come to some really bad things, that I’m sorry to hear you’ve got yourself into, Shaffery. We hear you been talking over the private affairs of this institution and Mr. Nuccio with that dickhead Nesbit. Shut, Shaffery,” the man said warningly as Shaffery started to open his mouth. “We know all about it. This Nesbit is getting himself into big trouble. He has said some very racist things about

Mr. Nuccio on that sideshow of his on the TV, which is going to cost him quite a bundle when Mr. Nuccio's lawyers get through with him. That is very bad, Shaffery, and also, four, there is this thing."

He lifted up what had seemed like a crumpled napkin in front of his place. It turned out that it was covering what looked like a large transistor radio.

Shaffery identified it after a moment's thought; he had seen it before, in Larry Nesbit's possession. "It's a tape recorder," he said.

"Right on, Shaffery. Now the question is, who put it in here? I don't mean just left it here like you could leave your rubbers or something, Shaffery. I mean left it here with one of those trick switches, so it was going when a couple of our associates checked the place out and found it under the table."

Shaffery swallowed very hard, but even so his voice sounded unfamiliar to him when he was able to speak. "I—I *assure* you, Mr. DiFirenzo! I had nothing to do with it."

"No, Shaffery, I know you didn't, because you are not that smart. Mr. Nuccio was quite upset about this illegal bugging, and he has already made some phone calls and talked to some people, and we have a pretty good idea of who put it there, and he isn't going to have what he thinks he's going to have to play on his TV show. So here it is, Shaffery. Mr. Nuccio doesn't find your work satisfactory here, and he is letting you go. We got somebody else coming down to take over. We'd appreciate it if you could be out by tomorrow."

There are situations in which there is not much scope for dignity. A man in his middle fifties who has just lost the worst job he ever had has few opportunities for making the sort of terminal remark that one would like to furnish one's biographers.

Shaffery discovered that he was worse off than that; he was frankly sick. The turmoil in his belly grew. The little saliva pumps under his tongue were flooding his mouth faster than he could swallow, and he knew that if he didn't get back to the staff toilet very quickly he would have another embarrassment to add to what was already an overwhelming load. He turned and walked away. Then marched. Then ran. When he had emptied himself of everything in belly, bladder and gut he sat on the edge of the toilet seat and thought of the things he could have said: "Look, Nuccio, you don't know anything about science." "Nuccio, Schiaparelli was all wrong about the canals on Mars." It was too late to say them. It was too late to ask the questions that his wife would be sure to ask, about severance pay, pension, all the things that he had been putting off getting in writing. ("Don't worry about that stuff, Shaffery, Mr. Nuccio always takes care of his friends but he don't like to be aggravated.") He tried to make a plan for his future, and failed. He tried even to make a plan for his present. Surely he should at least call Larry Nesbit, to demand, to complain, and to warn ("Hist! The tape recorder has been discovered! All is lost! Flee!"), but he could not trust himself so far from the toilet. Not at that exact moment. And a moment later it was too late. Half an hour later, when one of the orbiting guards snapped the little lock and peered inside, the man who might have been Einstein was lying on the floor with his trousers around his knees, undignified, uncaring

and dead.

Ah, Shaffery! How disappointed he would have been in his *Times* obit, two paragraphs buried under the overhang of a pop singer's final notice. But afterward...

The first victim was Larry Nesbit, airsick in his Learjet all the way back to New York, overcome during the taping of his TV show, and dying the next day. The next victims were the Board of Directors, every man. They started home, by plane and boat. Some of them made it, but all of them died: en route or in Las Vegas, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Long Branch, New Jersey. Some of the "assistants" died and some were spared. (Briefly.) The reason was not a mystery for very long. The source of the new plague was tracked down quickly enough to Mr. Nuccio's antipasto, and particularly to the preserved mushrooms that Shaffery had borrowed for his experiment.

The botulinus toxin was long recognized as the most deadly poison known to man. The mutated version that Shaffery and his dentist's X-rays had brought into being was not much more deadly, but it had another quality that was new and different. Old, established *Clostridium botulinum* is an organism with a feeble hold on life; expose it to light and air, and it dies. *B. shafferia* was more sturdy. It grew where it was. In anything. In Mr. Nuccio's antipasto, in a salad in a restaurant kitchen, in Mom's apple pie on a windowsill to cool, in the human digestive tract. There were nine deaths in the first five days, and then for a moment no more. The epidemiologists would not have bothered their heads about so short a casualty list if it had not been for the identities of some of the victims. But the bacteria was multiplying. The stain of vomit under the boardwalk at Long Branch dried; the bacteria turned into spores and were blown on the wind until they struck something damp and fertile. Whereupon they grew. The soiled Kleenex thrown from a Cadillac Fleetwood on the road leading from O'Hare to Evanston, the sneeze between flights at Miami, expectorations in a dozen places—all added to the score. From the urine and feces of the afflicted men, from their sweat, even from their bed linen and discarded clothing, enspered bacteria leaped into the air and were inhaled, eaten, drunk, absorbed into cuts, in every way ingested into the waiting bodies of hundreds, then thousands, ultimately countless millions of human beings.

By the second week Detroit and Los Angeles were declared disaster areas. By the fourth the plague had struck every city in America and had leaped the oceans. If it had any merciful quality at all, it was that it was quick: an upset stomach, a sweat, a few pangs, and then death. None were immune. Few survived. Out of a hundred, three might outlive the disease. But then famine, riot and lesser ills took their toll; and of the billions who lived on the Earth when Shaffery exposed his antipasto in the dentist's office, all but a few tens of millions died in the outbreak that the world will never forget of the disease called Shaffery's Syndrome.