

By Paul Ernst

HE DIDN'T WANT SOUP

Man's glorious heritage was only a memory in the ruthless, organized future world into which Brod Varney had stumbled. Had he crossed countless centuries now only to be given three minutes to adjust—or die?

BROD VARNEY'S first surprise was caused by the fact that he was standing up. He had been sure that when he came to, he would be lying on the sidewalk with a curious crowd around him.

His next surprise was his surroundings.

He had fainted, or anyhow things had gone all black, outside in front of Greer's store. He had evidently been hauled indoors somewhere, but not into Greer's store or any other building near Greer's store, for there were no buildings like this anywhere in that neighborhood. He knew because he had been hauling beer in that vicinity for six years.

This building he was in seemed kind of like a church, for the ceiling was maybe fifty feet up and the walls were gray stone and there were columns like oak trees scattered around.

But the stuff in it didn't look like stuff you'd find in a church. It looked like what you'd find in a big school or maybe one of them technical colleges. On the mechanical side, only you could just get a hunch it was machinery without being able to see what the machinery really was.

Like the big thing beside him. It was a great big greenish metal box inside which wheels whirred softly but with no way to look in and see what the wheels did.

Brod shook his head a little. He had lost consciousness on the sidewalk of a suburban neighborhood in front of Greer's store and he came to in this joint that looked like a cathedral, beside a big box that whirred, and

with nobody around or paying the slightest attention to him. Which was better than having a crowd of folks gawking at him, at that.

He was kind of ashamed of his fainting spell. He was thirty-one, five-eleven, pretty husky, and he'd never done a thing like that in his life before.

He had a sort of explanation for it. He had been standing at the tailgate of his truck, feeling good, and he had stretched widely and drawn an extra deep breath—and then fallen into a black feather-bed. A guy had told him once that when you did that you took in an extra amount of oxygen, inflating lung cells clear down that weren't often fully inflated, and that it acted like a knockout drop and keeled you over for a minute. It didn't mean that you were weak or anything.

Nevertheless he felt ashamed of it and he stared around with his jaw out and his shoulders squared to show whoever had carried him in here that he was not at all weak.

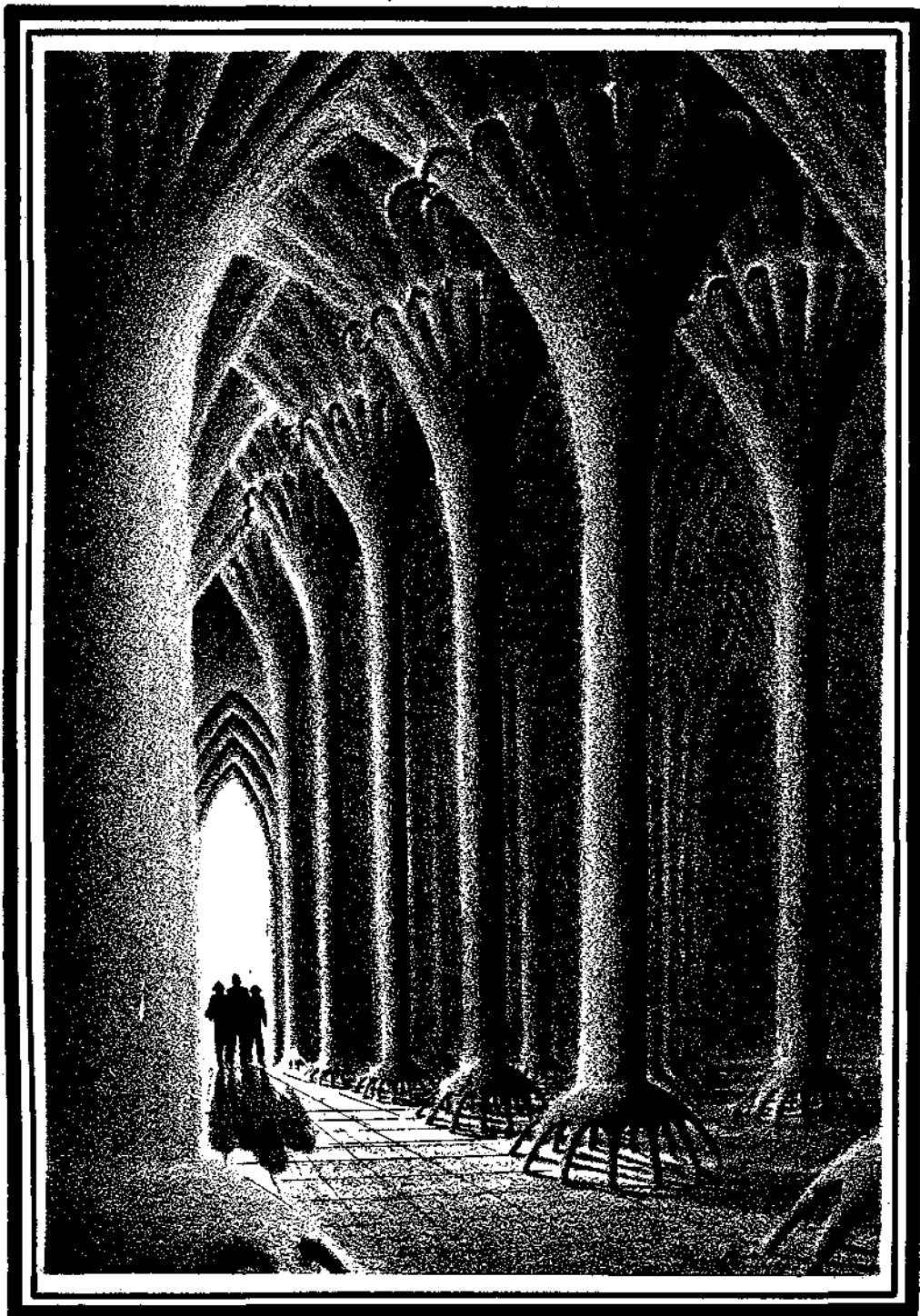
He still didn't see anyone, but he heard a voice so near that it made him jump, and then an answering voice.

"I still don't think there is any answer to such an equation."

"Well, we can try, can't we?"

Brod thought maybe the voices came from the head-high box, but on stepping around it he saw two men. He hadn't heard them before because they had been silent, figuring on a big block of paper at which both were still staring.

There was a young man and an older one,



They led Brod into a churchlike room. . . .

but the only way you could tell that one was older was by his graying hair. His face was as unlined and youthful as that of the young fellow. The two were dressed alike, in dark blue that might have been serge, which had very narrow pants-legs that were tight at the ankles as if held by bicycle clips.

The younger man heard Brod, and turned. He looked at Brod with a lot more surprise than Brod thought was warranted. His eyes went up and down Brod's frame as if he had never seen dungarees with a brewer's name on the back before.

"Hello," he said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Brod Varney," said Brod. "Thanks for picking me up in front of Greer's."

"Greer's?" said the older man, looking even more puzzled than the younger one.

"Sure. Greer's store. Allentown Road."

It didn't seem to make sense to either man so Brod said, "Well, maybe somebody else brought me here for you two to treat, but I don't need a doc. I feel all right now."

"Do you?" said the older man politely.

The younger one was pinching thoughtfully at his jaw.

"I don't think I've seen a costume quite like that before," he said. "Where did you say you came from?"

Brod felt irritated. He couldn't be very far from where he had fallen, and Allentown Road was an important enough thoroughfare for anyone near it to be familiar with it.

"I'm from Harrisburg," he retorted, naming the city on the outskirts of which was Greer's store.

"Harrisburg?" repeated the older man, still looking puzzled.

The younger one was smiling a little.

"I think I understand," he said. "The fellow must be from Section 3. Some on the hill country, you know. Quite isolated. Jon Terry went through there several years ago and he said one wouldn't believe how quaint the people are and how they cling to old beliefs."

The older man nodded. He turned half back to his work.

"Please leave," he said to Brod, pleasant but firm.

Brod ran stubby fingers through his thick yellow hair and felt like taking a poke at the guy, but he didn't because the sudden idea came to him that maybe he was in some kind of mental institution.

Not far from the big greenish case was a door, open to the summer warmth. He went toward it, while the two men at the high bench bent over the paper. He heard the younger man say something about XY over infinity, and X equaling time while Y would be the unknown quantity; and the older man

said something about not taking chances with the formula machine; and then Brod stepped through the doorway into sunlit morning.

He got his third surprise then.

The churchlike room was in a building that looked about a mile high, and all around the building, instead of Harrisburg streets, there was nothing at all. Just open, flat country with this one building sticking up like a sore finger.

"Maybe I'm the one that's nuts," muttered Brod. "Where the hell's Greer's store and Allentown Road? And where the hell's my truck?"

He walked farther away from the building across the sidewalk, if you wanted to apply that word to a stretch of cement at least five acres in extent. This business began to look sort of serious.

Evidently he had not fainted, after all, at the tailgate of his truck. His mind had clicked off, somehow, but his body had kept on working. What'd they call that? Amnesia. He had gone wandering around without any memory of who he was or what he had set out to do.

Then, back at that sanitarium, he had snapped out of it. But where on the map was this sanitarium, and the tremendous building that housed it? Had he bummed a ride or ridden the rods to parts unknown?

He had never heard of any big building like this in the open country in Pennsylvania. Though of course he knew that every once in a while somebody built an institution or an observatory or a scientific laboratory out in the wilds.

A man came out of one of innumerable doors to the building. He had on a blue suit with narrow pantlegs and tight ankles and wore a derby that was as round in the crown as a black bowl. Brod walked toward him.

"Pardon me," he said, "where am I?"

The man's eyebrows went up a little in his rather blank, pink face, but he was pleasant about it.

"Tower twelve," he said. And he turned and walked into another of the doorways.

Brod realized that his approach had been bad. If anyone had come up to him and abruptly asked where he was, he would have thought the guy crazy. He would be more gradual with the next man; maybe it would be best not even to ask where he was, but to inquire the way to a restaurant or some other place where by a little detective work he could locate himself.

A restaurant would be best, he thought. In a restaurant there are often roadmaps and local advertisements placing the vicinity. Besides, it was about noon and he was getting hungry anyhow.

It was lonely waiting on the wide concrete expanse next to the somehow lifeless-looking building. Brod was getting jittery and didn't mind admitting it to himself. Also he was getting nervous about his truck and his job.

It was about noon now. It has been almost noon when he got to Greer's store. He couldn't have traveled this far from Harrisburg in just a minute or two. It must be the next day. . . .

Gee! It would be two or three days—or a month! They'd have him chalked up as dead, back at the boarding house. Maybe they'd already wired his folks.

A man came out of a door. At first Brod thought he was the same one he had seen a moment ago, but then he saw that this one was bigger, though he had the same pink and unlined face, and wore a blue suit and derby hat.

"Excuse me," said Brod. "Can you tell me where the nearest restaurant is?"

It seemed to be Brod's luck to keep on meeting ditto-brains.

"Restaurant?" said the man, shifting his derby back on his forehead.

"Yeah. You eat, you pay," growled Brod.

"Pay?" said the man. "Pay! What a curious old word!"

He stared at Brod as the two in the church-like place had done, looking him over from head to foot with amusement and perplexity in his eyes.

"I guess you're from Section Three," he said. "They're thinking of making a government reserve out of that, and well they should. No other spot is so rich in Americana. Do you still pay for things in Section Three?"

"Listen, I never got anything in my life I didn't pay for," snapped Brod. "If you do, it's no good. I pay my way and I do what I like. See? Now, where's a restaurant?"

"Restaurant. You eat, you pay." The man nodded. "What you mean is, you want to go to a food-belt. But there is no payment necessary. Save perhaps in your own small back-country section, no one pays for anything any more."

"You mean—not for anything at all?"

"Not for anything at all," said the man patiently.

"Clothes, or cigarettes, or houses?"

"Nothing," said the man. "Nothing at all. Don't you even read of these things in Section Three? But no matter. I'll guide you to a food-belt. You might have trouble finding it if you're such an utter stranger."

Brod followed the man into one of the doors.

"Whup!" he exclaimed, clutching at the man's shoulder to keep from falling.

The floor he had stepped on was moving.

Then he saw that there was more moving floor ahead of him, strip after strip of it, with each strip moving faster than the one before. Five men, in blue suits and bowler-type derbies, suddenly whizzed past on the end strip so fast that he could barely make out their features.

"I sure feel like a hick," said Brod humbly. "I didn't know there were gadgets like this around anywhere in the country."

"Beg pardon?" said the man.

"Nothing," mumbled Brod.

He followed him over strip by strip till the last and fastest was reached. They dipped down, sped along. The man went back over the moving walks to the slow one, and stopped off on a stationary strip in front of a vaultlike door.

"Just go in there and say you want food," he said to Brod. Then he tipped his derby and walked onto the moving paths.

Some women passed Brod. They had pink, pretty, unlined faces and wore a kind of sailor hat, and light blue dresses that were long and straight like tubes. He wondered if they were sisters, all wearing the same thing like that. They were about of a size, too.

Women, and men, passed from view. He went into the vaultlike door.

It was the queerest restaurant Brod had ever seen. It didn't look like a restaurant at all. In fact it didn't look like anything except a long line of doors set in one side of a ten-foot corridor, with the left-hand wall blank.

At the near end of the corridor was a raised desk with a man seated at it. The man wore dark blue serge, and on a hook behind and to his right was hanging a derby hat. As Brod got nearer, he could see that part of the desk-top in front of the man was of frosted glass, and that there were moving figures on it. The man was staring at it and now and then marking something down on an endless unrolling tape beside it.

"Twelve eighteen, thirty-nine A," he said as Brod stopped in front of the desk. That was all.

It wasn't enough for Brod.

"Is this where I get something to eat?" he asked.

The man looked up from the frosted glass, then, with surprise on his pinkish, healthy, unlined face. As he stared at Brod, he frowned a little.

"Well!" he said. "I don't know where you came from, but I'm not sure that you can come in here dressed like that."

"Why not?" said Brod, frowning himself.

"No one has ever come in here dressed in such clothes."

"What's the matter with my clothes?"

snapped Brod. "Didn't you ever see dun-garees before or do you drive a truck in white tie and tails?"

The man didn't reply, and from his face it was obvious that the reason he didn't reply was that he had no notion what Brod was talking about.

"I don't know whether it is against the rules or not," he said doubtfully. "I should think it would be. Such nonconformity. . . I'll see."

He reached under the desk and took out a large book. He began flipping through this, while Brod stood first on one foot and then the other in front of the tall platform. He didn't like it and was about to say so with untrammelled emphasis when the man sighed and closed the book.

"I don't see anything in here about costumes," he said. "I should think there would be a rule. But there isn't. Twelve-eighteen, thirty-nine-A."

"If you'd just talk sense," Brod began. But a group of men in blue serge and bowler derbies was filing toward the desk from the door and the man behind the desk was no longer looking at him. Brod decided to watch the newcomers and do whatever they did.

The man at the desk droned a number to each, in a phonographic tone. They filed down the corridor and took up their stations in front of various doors. Brod saw then that each door had a number on it; and a short walk brought him to one numbered 39A. The 12:18 must mean time, but time for what he didn't know.

He tried the doorknob and it wasn't locked so he opened the door. A man looked up at him from a small metal table with complete amazement on his face. Such was the expression that Brod, without in the least knowing why, felt as he would if he had walked unannounced into a woman's boudoir.

"Sorry," he said awkwardly, backing out.

He saw that the other men were waiting patiently, each at a door; and then, after four or five minutes, the doors all opened. It was 12:18.

The man from 39A walked past Brod with a look of unutterable reproach on his pinkish, smooth face, and Brod walked in.

IT STILL wasn't like any restaurant Brod had ever seen. There was a six-by-eight cubicle with a metal table and chair, with the door at one end and a wide opening like a window at the other. From the window came a constant hum.

He went to the window and looked out into what seemed another corridor, only the floor of this was of some polished dark stuff and was

up within a few inches of the window sill. It moved steadily under the sill like a slow dark river, or four-foot ribbon, and its movement was the thing that seemed to give forth the humming sound.

Brod scratched at his thick yellow hair and found the thing it reminded him of most. It was like an assembly belt in a factory, only there were no metal parts on it to be bolted together as they moved along. Instead of nuts and bolts, there was food.

The belt was lined off at regular intervals, and the spaces were numbered. Some were empty and on others were metal dishes with always the same sequence: a bowl of stuff that must be soup because it was liquid and steaming, a small dish of greenish stuff that might be vegetables, and a larger dish with a square of meat and a mound of what could be potatoes.

As Brod stared, hands came out from the space on his left and took up the three dishes in a space on the belt numbered 38A, so then he got the idea. The man in each cubicle took the food on the space with the same number.

He found the whole idea sort of unappetizing, and he was very disappointed because if there was one thing he could be sure of it was that never in this eating joint would he find a clue to his whereabouts. There was no calendar with Reading, Pa. Planing Mills on it, or window cards advertising the Wilmington Strand Theatre; nobody calling from one table to another that Jake had just had a flat down the road from Chester—nothing like that to hint at location.

A wave of nostalgia swept over him for a homey, dust-flecked, raucous, smelly diner with hungry guys on each side of him along a row of stools. And then he saw 39A lettered on the moving belt and reached out to take the food.

There was just about time to remove the three dishes and turn with them to the metal table; but he took only two: the greenish stuff and the meat and—with luck—potatoes. The soup he left. The dark liquid didn't look very tasty, and at best he didn't go much for soup. The dish waited slowly to the right on the humming, sleek belt, and he tasted the whitish mound beside the meat.

It was not potatoes. What it was, he couldn't guess, but it tasted flat and hot and gooey. It all came of getting stuff for nothing, he decided gloomily. When you didn't pay for things, you took what they gave you and liked it. All these fellas running around in blue suits and derbies didn't seem to mind, but Brod did. He liked a choice of things.

He ate morosely.

He was aware of a growing murmur of voices to his right as he ate some of the greenish stuff and the whitish stuff and the meat which was not meat but something made of ground-up roots. The sounds came in his window like the twittering of a flock of birds that were frightened by a hawk and didn't know what to do about it.

Brod's social ear didn't read any meaning into the twittering, excited voices, but his mechanical ear read volumes a moment later.

First the soft humming of the food belt stopped, then there was a tight second of silence, and after that there was a grinding, screeching bedlam as if a couple of auto accidents were all happening at once. Followed another silence. The belt had jammed.

Brod stuck his tow-head out the window and looked down the line. Every other window had a head in it, all staring the same way.

The head next to Brod's turned and presented him with a pinkish, reproachful face.

"What did you want to do that for?" said the man.

"Me?" said Brod. "Do what?"

"Leave your soup on the belt."

"I hardly ever eat soup," said Brod, feeling on the defensive and not yet quite knowing why.

"You should have taken it," said the man sternly.

"But I don't like soup," said Brod.

"That makes no difference."

"You mean you have to take soup even if you don't like it?"

"Of course. It contained today's vitamins, B, G, R and O."

"Go on," said Brod. "There ain't that many. They've never got beyond K."

The man ignored this. He only got more reproachful.

"Where are you from, anyhow, that you don't consume what you're supposed to? I never heard of such lack of cooperation. It's definitely antisocial. You see the result."

"Look here," said Brod. "You mean to say my soup stopped the belt?"

"Certainly. What could you expect?"

"You knew it would stop the belt when it sailed past your window?"

"Yes. This in one of the new type food-belts without the rake-off bar at the end. It was assumed that everyone would act cooperatively, and that the bar was a vestigial relic no longer needed. You let a metal soup dish get into the gears—"

"If you knew all this, why didn't you reach out and take the dish off?" demanded Brod.

"My goodness, I couldn't do that! It wasn't on my number. One never takes food from any but one's own number."

"Well, if one hasn't any more sense than that," said Brod waspishly, "then one will have to expect trouble."

The door of his cell opened and two men came in. Each had a bright blue hatband around his derby, instead of the conventional black, and Brod sensed authority.

"Are you ill?" asked the first one, with bright concern on his smooth, pink face.

"Me?" said Brod. "No. Never felt better in my life."

The bright concern faded into petulance. "We assumed naturally that you were ill and unable to take the soup from the belt."

In the face of a growing host of things that Brod was finding it impossible to explain by any standards known to him, he managed to keep his temper.

"I just don't like soup," he explained.

"What has that got to do with it?" demanded the man, mouth open in surprise.

The second man was looking Brod over with his brows wrinkled. Brod was beginning to be self-conscious about his clothes. He felt more and more like a freak, without the blue serge and derby worn by every man; and the feeling increased the sense of loneliness that had been deepening within him.

"Subversive," murmured the second man.

"You mean," said the first man patiently, incredulously, "that you didn't take the soup merely because you don't like soup?"

"That's right," Brod nodded.

"Definitely subversive," murmured the second man.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come along with us," said the first.

"So I'm pinched," said Brod bitterly, "just because I don't like soup."

"Pinched?" The man gave it up with a shrug.

The two turned and went out, taking it for granted that Brod would follow. He did so. Wherever he was, and whatever funny kind of cops these were, it would probably go harder on him if he resisted than if he went without argument.

The two walked down the corridor away from the vault-like main entrance and eventually went through an arch on the opposite side from the myriad food doors. They herded Brod into an elevator, rose quite a distance, and preceded him into a churchlike room much like the one in which he had found himself after recovering from his unconsciousness, or whatever it was that had hit him at Greer's store.

The men with the blue hat-bands led him over to a corner where there were two bare-headed. There was one young fellow, and an older one; though the faces of the two were

pink and lineless and identical, and the only way you could tell one was older than the other was that he had graying hair.

At first Brod thought they were the two he had seen behind the big metal box called a formula machine. Then he realized that this one was smaller and slimmer than the other young one.

One of the men with the blue hat-hands said to the older of the two bareheaded men. "Mental case. He didn't take soup. It jammed the food-belt quite badly."

"Didn't take soup?" said the older bare-headed man. "Nonsense. Everyone takes soup. How else could the proper vitamins be assimilated?"

"He didn't take it." Blue Hat-Band shrugged. "That's why we came here with him. Better put him under the I Q 'scope."

The older man nodded.

"Where is he from, in those curious garments?" he asked. "The back country of Section Three?"

"I don't know. Keep him in detention pending further orders, after you have examined him."

The men with the hat-bands went away. The younger of the bareheaded men wheeled a machine like an upended coffin over to Brod.

"First we'll have a look at the ulcers," he said in the pleasant, indulgent tone used by doctors everywhere. "If they're misbehaving too badly, they could be the cause."

"The cause of what?" demanded Brod. "I ain't got any ulcers."

"Just step inside," said the little man. "This won't hurt a bit, if that's what you're worrying about."

Brod got reluctantly into the coffin. A flat plate was pulled down over his front and a switch was turned. From a crack in the plate a little blue-green light escaped.

The little man gasped, looked long and hard at the plate.

"The fellow's right, Turner," he said finally. "He hasn't got ulcers."

The older man stared, then said peevishly, "Don't jest, Hulkins. Everyone has ulcers."

"He hasn't."

The older man stepped hastily to the plate and looked into it for at least four minutes. He stepped back, shaking his head.

"This is serious, Hulkins," he said. "This is something to study exhaustively. You, my man," he said to Brod, "go into the next room and stay till you're called."

Brod got his fists unclenched before they had done any damage, and went to the next room.

It was huge, two-storied, with twenty-foot windows swung high to the pleasant summer

air and wide doors opened back to the sun. There were a lot of guys in the room, in blue serge and derbies, with pinkish, blank faces. They were all talking together and the hum of the voices filled the chamber.

Brod felt a panic intensification of the loneliness that had oppressed him since finding himself in this strange part of the country; and this was funny when you came to think about it, because with a lot of people around he should have felt less like the last person alive in a world of fog and ice.

One of the men in the room stepped up to him with a fine wide smile on his healthy face.

"Good afternoon, friend," he said, tipping his derby. "I am the prison host and it is my duty to make everyone feel welcome here. I trust that your stay with us will be pleasant if not long."

"Wait a minute," protested Brod. "Prison? You mean this is a prison?" He looked at the wide-open doors and windows.

"Yes." The host smiled. "But you'll find we're a nice bunch of chaps here. All in for small misdemeanors—at the most a murder or so; no antisocial acts or anything serious like that."

I've got to get out of this joint, Brod thought. He pointed to the nearest open door.

"What's beyond that?"

"Beyond the door?" said the host, puzzled. "Nothing."

"You mean, no guards or anything?" said Brod.

"Why would we have guards at a prison?" The host laughed. "By very definition of the word, such a thing is unnecessary. A prison is a place from which one is not allowed to go until permitted by a higher authority."

"Oh?" said Brod.

He walked to the door, with the host chatting comfortably beside him. But the host's smiling pink face expressed stark horror when Brod stepped over the threshold onto sun-warmed cement.

"Here! Where are you going?" he bleated. "You can't do that. You mustn't leave. This is prison. Don't you understand?"

"You're going to stop me?" said Brod, squaring his shoulders.

"Me? Naturally not. I'm the host. I don't know whose duty it would be to stop you. No one has ever left, in my time. You can't leave a p—"

Brod went along the wide area of concrete before the two-story stone mushroom in which he had been. The cornerstone of the building was not in his mind at all, and he was scarcely conscious of even glancing at it; but then he stopped as if someone had brought him up on a string, and he really looked at the numbers

and stuff chiseled there, and then he felt almost as he had at the tailgate of his truck when blackness was reeling up to engulf him.

"It ain't there," he said slowly, while his eyes dwelled on the stone.

"The stone-cutter that did that was drunk," he said, after another moment.

The first alternative appealed the most. The numbers simply weren't there; he was having eye trouble along with the rest of his cock-eyed afflictions.

He left the cornerstone with its mad implications, and turned right, away from the building. There was a half-mile of lawn ahead, and he stepped onto that, feet sinking gratefully into soft turf. It was about the only familiar sensation he had experienced since stretching his arms wide and drawing in an unusually deep breath in front of Greer's store.

Far ahead, to the west, a line of low mountains or high hills made a wavy line against the sky that seemed vaguely familiar. But he told himself determinedly that it was not familiar, because there were crazy implications in that, too. Implications he simply refused to face.

Panicky, he gave it up, shoving the whole business from his mind.

Behind him the commotion caused by his unorthodox departure from prison was dying in distance. Ahead was more concrete, and he wandered lonesomely toward it. This he saw as he got nearer, was a road. But it was a monster of a road. A road to end all roads.

It was, he judged, a quarter of a mile wide—perhaps more than that; as smooth as glass, and with no seams in it as far as he could see. He was almost frightened by the size of the thing. It made him feel like a very small ant on a very large table-top.

"Nuts," he said aloud, to exorcise fear. He started to cross it just because he felt that way. There was no other reason; he had no cause to think that the other side would be any closer to Harrisburg than this side.

Far off on the horizon there was an expanding dot. He gauged it, and kept on going. He was used to fast-moving cars. Give this one sixty miles an hour—no, give it eighty—and he still had plenty of time to get across in front of it.

The dot grew like a falling star, and Brod

cried out hoarsely and leaped ahead. Something like a meteor screamed past him on an angle, turned over twenty-five or thirty times, righted itself drunkenly with its snout pointing in a direction opposite to that in which it had been going, and wobbled back on a flat tire till locked brakes could stop it.

The car, so shaped that it looked vaguely like a whale on wheels, had run off the concrete by now and settled in a ripped-up patch of turf. Brod ran back to it, shaking a little from his own escape and from a conviction that all inside the thing were dead.

His fear was unfounded, he saw, as he neared the car. A man, a woman, and a little boy got dazedly out. The man took off his derby hat and fanned his pinkish face with it. The woman twitched at her tubular blue dress and straightened her sailor lid. The little boy began to cry.

"Why, Albert!" exclaimed the woman, looking at him in wonder. The little boy shut up, with a scared expression. And then Brod got there.

Relieved that he hadn't been the cause of a couple of deaths, Brod found himself getting sore.

"You!" he said to the man. "What's the idea, running down pedestrians like that? Where do you think you're going?"

The man stopped fanning with his hat and put it back on his head, still looking pretty unsteady from the shaking up he had received.

"I was going to tower twenty-two," he said. His tone was so courteous that it made Brod madder than ever.

"How fast were you going, anyhow?"

"Why, I'm sure I don't know. Two fifty or seventy-five, I guess."

The woman sighed audibly and stared at Brod out of round, incurious eyes.

"We'll be late getting home," she murmured. "But I suppose it's all for the best."

"Hey, what kind of a car you got there?" said Brod, forgetting to be angry. "You mean two-fifty an hour? And how is it you're not cat's meat after such a crash?"

The man didn't answer. He was looking at his automobile with an anguished expression. Brod walked to it.

The car was immense, longer by far than his truck. It had a few scratches on it from the

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recent rough treatment, but no dents. He peered through a window that was incredibly unbroken and saw deep cushions with straps over them like the straps over airplane seats.

"My tire!" said the man who owned the car, getting his anguish into words at last. "Look! It's flat! It's ruined. And it has less than a hundred thousand miles on it."

Brod felt grudgingly in his pocket. The tires on this super-super job were large and fancy looking. He didn't know whether a week's pay, drawn by check yesterday afternoon and cashed this morning, would buy a new one or not.

"I'll pay for it," he said gruffly. "After all, you wouldn't be in this fix if you hadn't slewed out and missed me."

"Pay?" said the man, staring as hard as had the man from whom Brod had asked the way to a restaurant. "I'm not quite sure I know.... I can get a new tire without delay at tower twenty-two, but how in the world am I to get there on this flat one?"

It was Brod's turn to look dumb. The boy whimpered just once, looked frightened at his own sound, and sucked his thumb. The woman didn't look any way at all. "I'm sure it's all for the best," she said.

"You don't have to run on a flat, do you?" said Brod. "Haven't you a spare?"

"A spare tire?" echoed the man. "Yes, I suppose I have. I've never looked."

"You've never changed a tire?" said Brod.

"No. Why should I? They run about two hundred thousand miles and then before they get badly worn you trade them for new ones. I don't believe I know anyone who has ever changed a tire."

"They must blow out in accidents, sometimes. Like yours."

"It has been over two years since I've ever read of an accident." The man looked severely at Brod. "The only thing that would cause an accident would be if someone wandered absent-mindedly onto a road. And no one ever walks on a road."

"How do they get across, then?"

"They use the underpasses. There's one every mile. . . . This tire! What shall I do?"

"If you have a spare, you must have tools to change it," argued Brod.

The man doubtfully swung out a trapdoor in the side of his whale. There was a tire, and there were tools. It took even Brod, mechanical-minded as he was, quite a time to figure out how to use the things. They were so simple they baffled him. But he managed, and changed tires, with the man, woman and boy staring with eyes that came near to bulging.

"You did it!" breathed the man, when Brod let the car down again.

"Do it again," pleaded the little boy, awe in his eyes.

"Can I give you a lift down the road?" asked the man.

Brod considered, then shook his head.

"I'm not going that way," he said.

"Which way are you going?"

"I—I don't know," admitted Brod. Then he cleared his throat aggressively.

"I could get you there awfully fast," said the man brightly.

"I'm sure it would be for the best," added his wife.

Brod shook his head again, hands in pockets.

The man in the blue suit settled his derby more firmly on his head and got in the car. His wife followed, trim in tubular dress and sailor hat. The little boy took one more look at the genius who could change a tire, and got in too. The door slammed.

The car rolled ever more swiftly down the tremendous road.

Brod turned back toward the prison building, since he couldn't think of any place else to go. He had never felt so lonely in his life, and he hadn't a notion on earth what to do about it.

But in a moment that feeling began to subside.

He stared at the cornerstone of the prison building as he walked back toward it. He couldn't see the insane numbers chiseled in it from here, but he knew now that they were there, that he hadn't been having spots before his eyes when he saw them. And he knew they must be true figures.

A.D. 2429. And the building looked to be twenty to thirty years old.

The slanting sun high-lighted that line of hills, which he was not prepared to admit that he had seen many times from west of Harrisburg. He was not in some foreign land.

His shoulders began squaring. 2400 and something A.D., instead of 1951!

Somehow, he had been jumped ahead about 450 years into a funny state where nobody dast do anything without orders from higher up, and where you loomed like a large man in a world of pigmies. All right, admit it, accept it as a fact. Impossible, but apparently true.

Brod was almost smiling now. It was occurring to him that an out-sized guy who was regarded as a miracle worker just because he could change a tire, might go a long way in this goofy setup. Maybe clear to the top, if he wanted to get tough about it.

He began wondering comfortably what the president, or whatever they called the head man now, would be able to get to eat. Something, he'd bet, besides that thin, rummy-looking soup.