



THE SEESAW

Astounding Science Fiction July 1941 by A. E. van Vogt (1912-)

MAGICIAN BELIEVED TO HAVE HYPNOTIZED CROWD!

June 11, 1941—Police and newspapermen believe that Middle City will shortly be advertised as the next stopping place of a master magician, and they are prepared to extend him a hearty welcome if he will condescend to explain exactly how he fooled hundreds of people into believing they saw a strange building, apparently a kind of gun shop.

The building seemed to appear on the space formerly, and still, occupied by Aunt Sally's Lunch and Patterson Tailors. Only employees were inside the two aforementioned shops, and none noticed any untoward event. A large, brightly shining sign featured the front of the gun shop, which had been so miraculously conjured out of nothingness; and the sign constituted the first evidence that the entire scene was nothing but a masterly illusion. For from whichever angle one gazed at it, one seemed to be staring straight at the words, which read:

FINE WEAPONS
THE RIGHT TO BUY WEAPONS
IS THE RIGHT TO BE FREE

The window display was made up of an assortment of rather curiously shaped guns, rifles as well as small arms; and a glowing sign in the window stated:

THE FINEST ENERGY WEAPONS
IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE

Inspector Clayton of the Investigation Branch attempted to enter the shop, but the door seemed to be locked; a few moments later, C. J. (Chris) McAllister, reporter of the Gazette-Bulletin, tried the door, found it opened, and entered.

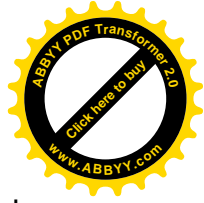
Inspector Clayton attempted to follow him, but discovered that the door was again locked. McAllister emerged after some time, and was seen to be in a dazed condition. All memory of the action had apparently been hypnotized out of him, for he could make no answer to the questions of the police and spectators.

Simultaneous with his reappearance, the strange building vanished as abruptly as it had appeared.

Police state they are baffled as to how the master magician created so detailed an illusion for so long a period before so large a crowd. They are prepared to recommend his show, when it comes, without reservation.

Author's Note: The foregoing account did not mention that the police, dissatisfied with the affair, attempted to contact McAllister for a further interview, but were unable to locate him. Weeks passed, and he was still not to be found.

Herewith follows the story of what happened to McAllister from the instant that he found the door of the gun shop unlocked.



There was a curious quality about the gun shop door. It was not so much that it opened at his first touch as that, when he pulled, it came away like a weightless thing. For a bare instant, McAllister had the impression that the knob had freed itself into his palm.

He stood quite still, startled. The thought that came finally had to do with Inspector Clayton, who a minute earlier had found the door locked.

The thought was like a signal. From behind him boomed the voice of the inspector: "Ah, McAllister, I'll handle this now."

It was dark inside the shop beyond the door, too dark to see anything, and somehow his eyes wouldn't accustom themselves to the intense gloom... .

Pure reporter's instinct made him step forward toward the blackness that pressed from beyond the rectangle of door. Out of the corner of one eye, he saw Inspector Clayton's hand reaching for the door handle that his own fingers had let go a moment before; and quite simply he knew that if the police officer could prevent it, no reporter would get inside that building.

His head was still turned, his gaze more on the police inspector than on the darkness in front; and it was as he began another step forward that the remarkable thing happened.

The door handle would not allow Inspector Clayton to touch it. It twisted in some queer way, in some energy way, for it was still there, a strange, blurred shape. The door itself, without visible movement, so swift it was, was suddenly touching McAllister's heel.

Light, almost weightless, was that touch; and then, before he could think or react to what had happened, the momentum of his forward movement had carried him inside.

As he breasted the darkness, there was a sudden, enormous tensing along his nerves. Then the door shut tight, the brief, incredible agony faded. Ahead was a brightly lit shop; behind—were unbelievable things!

For McAllister, the moment that followed was one of blank impression. He stood, body twisted awkwardly, only vaguely conscious of the shop's interior, but tremendously aware, in the brief moment before he was interrupted, of what lay beyond the transparent panels of the door through which he had just come.

There was no unyielding blackness anywhere, no Inspector Clayton, no muttering crowd of gaping spectators, no dingy row of shops across the way.

It wasn't even remotely the same street. There was no street.

Instead, a peaceful park spread there. Beyond it, brilliant under a noon sun, glowed a city of minarets and stately towers--

From behind him, a husky, musical, woman's voice said, "You will be wanting a gun?"

McAllister turned. It wasn't that he was ready to stop feasting his eyes on the vision of the city. The movement was automatic reaction to a sound. And because the whole affair was still like a dream, the city scene faded almost instantly; his mind focused on the young woman who was advancing slowly from the rear section of the store.

Briefly, his thought wouldn't come clear. A conviction that he ought to say something was tangled with first impressions of the girl's appearance. She had a slender, well-shaped body; her face was creased into a pleasant smile. She had brown eyes, neat, wavy brown hair. Her simple frock and sandals seemed so normal at first glance that he gave them no other thought.

He was able to say: "What I can't understand is why the police officer who tried to follow me couldn't get in. And where is he now?"

To his surprise, the girl's smile became faintly apologetic. "We know that people consider it silly of us to keep harping on that ancient feud."



Her voice grew firmer: "We even know how clever the propaganda is that stresses the silliness of our stand. Meanwhile, we never allow any of her men in here. We continue to take our principles very seriously."

She paused as if she expected dawning comprehension from him, but McAllister saw from the slow puzzlement creeping into her eyes that his face must look as limp as were the thoughts behind it.

Her men! The girl had spoken the word as if she were referring to some personage, and in direct reply to his use of the words, police officer. That meant her men, whoever she was, were policemen; and they weren't allowed in this gun shop. So the door was hostile, and wouldn't admit them.

A strange emptiness struck into McAllister's mind, matching the hollowness that was beginning to afflict the pit of his stomach, a sense of unplumbed depths, the first, staggering conviction that all was not as it should be.

The girl was speaking in sharper tone: "You mean you know nothing of all this, that for generations the gunmaker's guild has existed in this age of devastating energies as the common man's only protection against enslavement. The right to buy guns—"

She stopped again, her narrowed eyes searching him; then: "Come to think of it, there's something very illogical about you. Your outlandish clothes—you're not from the northern farm plains, are you?"

He shook his head dumbly, more annoyed with his reactions every passing second. But he couldn't help it. A tightness was growing in him, becoming more unbearable instant by instant, as if somewhere a vital mainspring were being wound to the breaking point.

The young woman went on more swiftly: "And come to think of it, it is astounding that a policeman should have tried the door and there was no alarm."

Her hand moved; metal flashed in it, metal as bright as steel in blinding sunlight. There was not the faintest hint of the apologetic in her voice as she said, "You will stay where you are, sir, till I have called my father. In our business, with our responsibility, we never take chances. Something is very wrong here."

Curiously, it was at that point that McAllister's mind began to function clearly; the thought that came paralleled hers: How had this gun shop appeared on a 1941 street? How had he come here into this fantastic world?

Something was very wrong indeed!

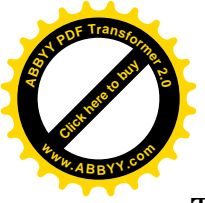
It was the gun that held his attention. A tiny thing it was, shaped like a pistol, but with three cubes projecting in a little half circle from the top of the slightly bulbous firing chamber.

And as he stared, his mind began to quiver on its base; for that wicked little instrument, glittering there in her browned fingers, was as real as she herself.

"Good Heaven!" he whispered. "What the devil kind of gun is it? Lower that thing and let's try to find out what all this is about."

She seemed not to be listening; and abruptly he noticed that her gaze was flicking to a point on the wall somewhat to his left. He followed her look—in time to see seven miniature white lights flash on.

Curious lights! Briefly, he was fascinated by the play of light and shade, the waxing and waning from one tiny globe to the next, a rippling movement of infinitesimal increments and decrements, an incredibly delicate effect of instantaneous reaction to some supersensitive barometer.



The lights steadied; his gaze reverted to the girl. To his surprise, she was putting away her gun. She must have noticed his expression.

"It's all right," she said coolly. "The automatics are on you now. If we're wrong about you, we'll be glad to apologize. Meanwhile, if you're still interested in buying a gun, I'll be happy to demonstrate."

So the automatics were on him, McAllister thought ironically. He felt no relief at the information. Whatever the automatics were, they wouldn't be working in his favor; and the fact that the young woman could put away her gun in spite of her suspicions spoke volumes for the efficiency of the new watchdogs.

There was absolutely nothing he could do but play out this increasingly grim and inexplicable farce. Either he was mad, or else he was no longer on Earth, at least not the Earth of 1941—which was utter nonsense.

He'd have to get out of this place, of course. Meanwhile, the girl was assuming that a man who came into a gun shop would, under ordinary circumstances, want to buy a gun.

It struck him suddenly that, of all the things he could think of, what he wanted to see was one of those strange guns. There were implications of incredible things in the very shape of the instruments. Aloud he said, "Yes, by all means show me."

Another thought occurred to him. He added: "I have no doubt your father is somewhere in the background making some sort of study of me."

The young woman made no move to lead him anywhere. Her eyes were dark pools of puzzlement, staring at him.

"You may not realize it," she said finally, slowly, "but you have already upset our entire establishment. The lights of the automatics should have gone on the moment father pressed the buttons, as he did when I called to him. They didn't! That's unnatural, that's alien.

"And yet"—her frown deepened—"if you were one of them, how did you get through that door? Is it possible that her scientists have discovered human beings who do not affect the sensitive energies? And that you are one of many such, sent as an experiment to determine whether or not entrance could be gained?

"Yet that doesn't make logic either."

"If they had even a hope of success, they would not risk so lightly the chance of an overwhelming surprise. Instead you would be the entering wedge of an attack on a vast scale. She is ruthless, she's brilliant; and she craves all power during her lifetime over poor saps like you who have no more sense than to worship her amazing beauty and the splendor of the Imperial Court."

The young woman paused, with the faintest of smiles. "There I go again, off on a political speech. But you can see that there are at least a few reasons why we should be careful about you."

There was a chair over in one corner; McAllister started for it. His mind was calmer, cooler.

"Look," he began, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't even know how I came to be in this shop. I agree with you that the whole thing requires explanation, but I mean that differently than you do. In fact . . ."

His voice trailed. He had been half lowered over the chair, but instead of sinking into it, he came erect like an old, old man. His eyes fixed on lettering that shone above a glass case of guns behind her. He said hoarsely, "Is that—a calendar?"

She followed his gaze, puzzled: "Yes, it's June third. What's wrong?"



"I don't mean that. I mean—" He caught himself with a horrible effort. "I mean those figures above that. I mean—what year is this?"

The girl looked surprised. She started to say something, then stopped and backed away. Finally: "Don't look like that! There's nothing wrong. This is eighty-four of the four thousand seven hundredth year of the Imperial House of the Isher. It's quite all right."

There was no real feeling in him. Quite deliberately he sat down, and the conscious wonder came: exactly how should he feel?

Not even surprise came to his aid. Quite simply, the whole pattern of events began to make a sort of distorted logic.

The building front superimposed on those two 1941 shops; the way the door had acted; the great exterior sign with its odd linking of freedom with the right to buy weapons; the actual display of weapons in the window, the finest energy weapons in the known universe!

He grew aware that minutes had passed while he sat there in slow, dumb thought. And that the girl was talking earnestly with a tall, gray-haired man who was standing on the open threshold of the door through, which she had originally come.

There was an odd, straining tenseness in the way they were talking. Their low-spoken words made a curious blur of sound in his ears, strangely unsettling in effect—McAllister could not quite analyze the meaning of it until the girl turned; and, in a voice dark with urgency, said, "Mr. McAllister, my father wants to know what year you're from!"

Briefly, the sense of the sentence was overshadowed by that stark urgency; then: "Huh!" said McAllister. "Do you mean that you're responsible for— And how the devil did you know my name?"

The older man shook his head. "No, we're not responsible." His voice quickened but lost none of its gravity. "There's no time to explain. What has happened is what we gunmakers have feared for generations: that sooner or later would come one who lusted for unlimited power; and who, to attain tyranny, must necessarily seek first to destroy us.

"Your presence here is a manifestation of the energy force that she has turned against us—something so new that we did not even suspect it was being used against us. But now—I have no time to waste. Get all the information you can, Lystra, and warn him of his own personal danger."

The man turned. The door closed noiselessly behind his tall figure.

McAllister asked, "What did he mean—personal danger?" He saw that the girl's brown eyes were uneasy as they rested on him.

"It's hard to explain," she began in an uncomfortable voice. "First of all, come to the window, and I'll try to make everything clear. It's all very confusing to you, I suppose."

McAllister drew a deep breath. "Now we're getting somewhere."

His alarm was gone. The older man seemed to know what it was all about; that meant there should be no difficulty getting home again. As for all this danger to the gunmakers' guild, that was their worry, not his. Meanwhile--

He stepped forward, closer to the girl. To his amazement, she cringed away as if he had struck at her.

As he stared blankly, she turned, and laughed a humorless, uncertain laugh; finally she breathed, "Don't think I'm being silly, don't be offended—but for your life's sake don't touch any human body you might come into contact with."

McAllister was conscious of a chill. It struck him with a sudden, sharp dismay that the expression of uneasiness in the girl's face was—fear!



His own fear fled before a wave of impatience. He controlled himself with an effort. "Now, look," he began. "I want to get things clear. We can talk here without danger, providing I don't touch you or come near you. Is that straight?"

She nodded. "The floor, the walls, every piece of furniture, in fact the entire shop is made of perfect nonconducting material."

McAllister had a sudden sense of being balanced on a tightrope over a bottomless abyss. The way this girl could imply danger without making it clear what the danger was almost petrified him.

He forced calm into his mind. "Let's start," he said, "at the beginning. How did you and your father know my name, and that I was not of"—he paused before the odd phrase, then went on—"of this time?"

"Father X-rayed you," the girl said, her voice as stiff as her body. "He X-rayed the contents of your pockets. That was how he first found out what was the matter. You see, the X-rays themselves became carriers of the energy with which you're charged. That's what was the matter; that's why the automatics wouldn't focus on you, and—"

"Just a minute!" said McAllister. His brain was a spinning world. "Energy—charged?"

The girl was staring at him. "Don't you understand?" she gasped. "You've come across five thousand years of time; and of all the energies in the universe, time is the most potent. You're charged with trillions of trillions of time-energy units. If you should step outside this shop, you'd blow up this city of the Isher and half a hundred miles of land beyond.

"You"—she finished on an unsteady, upward surge of her voice—"you could conceivably destroy the Earth!"

He hadn't noticed the mirror before; funny, too, because it was large enough, at least eight feet high, and directly in front of him on the wall where a minute before—he could have sworn—had been solid metal.

"Look at yourself," the girl was saying soothingly. "There's nothing so steadying as one's own image. Actually your body is taking the mental shock very well."

It was! He stared in dimly gathering surprise at his image. There was a paleness in the lean face that stared back at him; but the body was not actually shaking as the whirling in his mind had suggested.

He grew aware again of the girl. She was standing with one finger on one of a series of wall switches. Abruptly, he felt better.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I certainly needed that."

She smiled encouragingly; and he was able now to be amazed at her conflicting personality. There had been on the one hand her complete inability a few minutes earlier to get to the point of his danger, a distinct incapacity for explaining things with words; yet obviously her action with the mirror showed a keen understanding of human psychology. He said, "The problem now is, from your point of view, to circumvent this—Isher—woman, and to get me back to 1941 before I blow up the Earth of . . . of whatever year this is."

The girl nodded. "Father says that you can be sent back, but—as for the rest: watch!"

He had no time for relief at the knowledge that he could be returned to his own time. She pressed another button. Instantly the mirror was gone into the metallic wall. Another button clicked—and the wall vanished.

Literally vanished. Before him stretched a park similar to the one he had already seen through the front door—obviously an extension of the same garden-like vista. Trees were there, and flowers, and green, green grass in the sun.



There was also the city again, nearer from this side, but not so pretty, immeasurably grimmer.

One vast building, as high as it was long, massively dark against the sky, dominated the entire horizon. It was a good quarter-mile away; and incredibly, it was at least that long and that high.

Neither near that monstrous building nor in the park was a living person visible. Everywhere was evidence of man's dynamic labor—but no men, not a movement; even the trees stood motionless in that strangely breathless sunlit day. "Watch!" said the girl again, more softly.

There was no click this time. She made an adjustment on one of the buttons; and suddenly the view was no longer so clear. It wasn't that the sun had dimmed its bright intensity.

It wasn't even that glass was visible where a moment before there had been nothing.

There was still no apparent substance between them and the gemlike park. But

The park was no longer deserted!

Scores of men and machines swarmed out there. McAllister stared in frank amazement; and then as the sense of illusion faded, and the dark menace of those men penetrated, his emotion changed to dismay.

"Why," he said at last, "those men are soldiers, and the machines are—"

"Energy guns!" she said. "That's always been their problem: how to get their weapons close enough to our shops to destroy us. It isn't that the guns are not powerful over a very great distance. Even the rifles we sell can kill unprotected life over a distance of miles; but our gun shops are so heavily fortified that, to destroy us, they must use their biggest cannon at point-blank range.

"In the past, they could never do that because we own the surrounding park; and our alarm system was perfect—until now. The new energy they're using affects none of our protective instruments; and—what is infinitely worse—affords them a perfect shield against our own guns. Invisibility, of course, has long been known; but if you hadn't come, we would have been destroyed without ever knowing what happened."

"But," McAllister exclaimed sharply, "what are you going to do? They're still out there working—"

Her brown eyes burned with a fierce, yellow flame. "Where do you think Father is?" she asked. "He's warned the guild; and every member has now discovered that similar invisible guns are being set up outside his place by invisible men. Every member is working at top speed for some solution. They haven't found it yet."

She finished quietly: "I thought I'd tell you."

McAllister cleared his throat; parted his lips to speak—then closed them as he realized that no words were even near his lips. Fascinated, he watched the soldiers connecting what must have been invisible cables that led to the vast building in the background: foot-thick cables that told of the titanic power that was to be unleashed on the tiny weapon shop.

There was actually nothing to be said. The deadly reality out there overshadowed all conceivable sentences and phrases. Of all the people here, he was the most useless, his opinion the least worthwhile.

Oddly, he must have spoken aloud, but he did not realize that until the familiar voice of the girl's father came from one side of him. The older man said, "You're quite mistaken, McAllister. Of all the people here you are the most valuable.



Through you we discovered that the Isher were actually attacking us. Furthermore, our enemies do not know of your existence, therefore have not yet realized the full effect produced by the new blanketing energy they have used.

"You, accordingly, constitute the unknown factor—our only hope, for the time left to us is incredibly short. Unless we can make immediate use of the unknown quantity you represent, all is lost!"

The man looked older, McAllister thought; there were lines of strain in his lean, sallow face as he turned toward his daughter; and his voice, when he spoke, was edged with harshness: "Lystra, number seven!"

As the girl's fingers touched the seventh button, her father explained swiftly to McAllister: "The guild supreme council is holding an immediate emergency session. We must choose the most likely method of attacking the problem, and concentrate individually and collectively on that method. Regional conversations are already in progress, but only one important idea has been put forward as yet . . . ah, gentlemen!"

He spoke past McAllister, who turned with a start, then froze.

Men were coming out of the solid wall, lightly, easily, as if it were a door and they were stepping across a threshold. One, two, three—twelve.

They were grim-faced men, all except one who glanced at McAllister, started to walk past, then stopped with a half-amused smile.

"Don't look so blank. How else do you think we could have survived these many years if we hadn't been able to transmit material objects through space? The Isher police have always been only too eager to blockade our sources of supply. Incidentally, my name is Cadron—Peter Cadron!"

McAllister nodded in a perfunctory manner. He was no longer genuinely impressed by the new machines. Here were endless products of the machine age; science and invention so stupendously advanced that men made scarcely a move that did not involve a machine. He grew aware that a heavy-faced man near him was about to speak.

The man began: "We are gathered here because it is obvious that the source of the new energy is the great building just outside this shop—"

He motioned toward the wall where the mirror had been a few minutes previously, and the window through which McAllister had gazed at the monstrous structure in question.

The speaker went on: "We've known, ever since that building was completed five years ago, that it was a power building aimed against us; and now from it new energy has flown out to engulf the world, immensely potent energy, so strong that it broke the very tension of time, fortunately only at this nearest gun shop. Apparently it weakens when transmitted over distance. It—"

"Look, Dresley!" came a curt interruption from a small, thin man. "What good is all this preamble? You have been examining the various plans put forward by regional groups. Is there, or isn't there, a decent one among them?"

Dresley hesitated. To McAllister's surprise, the man's eyes fixed doubtfully on him, his heavy face worked for a moment, then hardened.

"Yes, there is a method, but it depends on compelling our friend from the past to take a great risk. You all know what I'm referring to. It will gain us the time we need so desperately."

"Eh!" said McAllister, and stood stunned as all eyes turned to stare at him.



The seconds fled; and it struck McAllister that what he really needed again was the mirror—to prove to him that his body was putting up a good front. Something, he thought, something to steady him.

His gaze flicked over the faces of the men. The gunmakers made a curious, confusing pattern in the way they sat, or stood, or leaned against glass cases of shining guns; and there seemed to be fewer than he had previously counted. One, two—ten, including the girl. He could have sworn there had been fourteen.

His eyes moved on, just in time to see the door of the back room closing. Four of the men had obviously gone to the laboratory or whatever lay beyond the door. Satisfied, he forgot them.

Still, he felt unsettled; and briefly his eyes were held by the purely mechanical wonder of this shop, here in this vastly future world, a shop that was an intricate machine in itself and--

He discovered that he was lighting a cigarette; and abruptly realized that that was what he needed most. The first puff tingled deliciously along his nerves. His mind grew calm; his eyes played thoughtfully over the faces before him.

He said, "I can't understand how any one of you could even think of compulsion. According to you, I'm loaded with energy. I may be wrong, but if any of you should try to thrust me back down the chute of time, or even touch me, that energy in me would do devastating things—"

"You're damned right!" chimed in a young man. He barked irritably at Dresley: "How the devil did you ever come to make such a psychological blunder? You know that McAllister will have to do as we want, to save himself; and he'll have to do it fast!"

Dresley grunted under the sharp attack. "Hell," he said, "the truth is we have no time to waste, and I just figured there wasn't time to explain, and that he might scare easily. I see, however, that we're dealing with an intelligent man."

McAllister's eyes narrowed over the group. There was something phony here. They were talking too much, wasting the very time they needed, as if they were marking time, waiting for something to happen.

He said sharply, "And don't give me any soft soap about being intelligent. You fellows are sweating blood. You'd shoot your own grandmothers and trick me into the bargain, because the world you think right is at stake. What's this plan of yours that you were going to compel me to participate in?"

It was the young man who replied: "You are to be given insulated clothes and sent back into your own time—"

He paused. McAllister said, "That sounds okay, so far. What's the catch?"

"There is no catch!"

McAllister stared. "Now, look here," he began, "don't give me any of that. If it's as simple as that, how the devil am I going to be helping you against the Isher energy?"

The young man scowled blackly at Dresley. "You see," he said to the other, "you've made him suspicious with the talk of yours about compulsion."

He faced McAllister. "What we have in mind is an application of a sort of an energy lever and fulcrum principle. You are to be a 'weight' at the long end of a kind of energy 'crowbar,' which lifts the greater 'weight' at the short end. You will go back five thousand years in time; the machine in the great building to which your body is tuned, and which has caused all this trouble, will move ahead in time about two weeks."



"In that way," interrupted another man before McAllister could speak, "we shall have time to find a counteragent. There must be a solution, else our enemies would not have acted so secretly. Well, what do you think?"

McAllister walked slowly over to the chair that he had occupied previously. His mind was turning at furious speed, but he knew with a grim foreboding that he hadn't a fraction of the technical knowledge necessary to safeguard his interests.

He said slowly, "As I see it, this is supposed to work something like a pump handle. The lever principle, the old idea that if you had a lever long enough, and a suitable fulcrum, you could move the Earth out of its orbit."

"Exactly!" It was the heavy-faced Dresley who spoke. "Only this works in time. You go five thousand years, the building goes a few wee ..."

His voice faded, his eagerness drained from him as he caught the expression on McAllister's face.

"Look!" said McAllister, "there's nothing more pitiful than a bunch of honest men engaged in their first act of dishonesty. You're strong men, the intellectual type, who've spent your lives enforcing an idealistic conception. You've always told yourself that if the occasion should ever require it, you would not hesitate to make drastic sacrifices. But you're not fooling anybody. What's the catch?"

It was quite startling to have the suit thrust at him. He hadn't observed the men emerge from the back room; and it came as a distinct shock to realize that they had actually gone for the insulated clothes before they could have known that he would use them.

McAllister stared grimly at Peter Cadron, who held the dull, grayish, limp thing toward him. A very flame of abrupt rage held him choked; before he could speak, Cadron said in a tight voice, "Get into this, and get going! It's a matter of minutes, man! When those guns out there start spraying energy, you won't be alive to argue about our honesty."

Still he hesitated; the room seemed insufferably hot; and he was sick—sick with the deadly uncertainty. Perspiration streaked stingingly down his cheeks. His frantic gaze fell on the girl, standing silent and subdued in the background, near the front door.

He strode toward her; and either his glare or presence was incredibly frightening, for she cringed and turned white as a sheet.

"Look!" he said. "I'm in this as deep as hell. What's the risk in this thing? I've got to feel that I have some chance. Tell me, what's the catch?"

The girl was gray now, almost as gray and dead-looking as the suit Peter Cadron was holding. "It's the friction," she mumbled finally, "you may not get all the way back to 1941. You see, you'll be a sort of 'weight' and—"

McAllister whirled away from her. He climbed into the soft, almost flimsy suit, crowding the overall-like shape over his neatly pressed clothes. "It comes tight over the head, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes!" It was Lystra's father who answered. "As soon as you pull that zipper shut, the suit will become completely invisible. To outsiders it will seem just as if you have your ordinary clothes on. The suit is fully equipped. You could live on the moon inside it."

"What I don't get," complained McAllister, "is why I have to wear it. I got here all right without it."

He frowned. His words had been automatic, but abruptly a thought came: "Just a minute. What becomes of the energy with which I'm charged when I'm bottled up in this insulation?"



He saw by the stiffening expressions of those around him that he had touched on a vast subject.

"So that's it!" he snapped. "The insulation is to prevent me losing any of that energy. That's how it can make a `weight.' I have no doubt there's a connection from this suit to that other machine. Well, it's not too late. It's—"

With a desperate twist, he tried to jerk aside, to evade the clutching hands of the four men who leaped at him. Hopeless movement! They had him instantly; and their grips on him were strong beyond his power to break.

The fingers of Peter Cadron jerked the zipper tight, and Peter Cadron said, "Sorry, but when we went into that back room, we also dressed in insulated clothing. That's why you couldn't hurt us. Sorry, again!"

"And remember this: There's no certainty that you are being sacrificed. The fact that there is no crater in our Earth proves that you did not explode in the past, and that you solved the problem in some other way. Now, somebody open the door, quick!"

Irresistibly he was carried forward. And then--

"Wait!"

It was the girl. The colorless gray in her face was a livid thing. Her eyes glittered like dark jewels; and in her fingers was the tiny, mirror-bright gun she had pointed in the beginning at McAllister.

The little group hustling McAllister stopped as if they had been struck. He was scarcely aware; for him there was only the girl, and the way the muscles of her lips were working, and the way her voice suddenly flamed: "This is utter outrage. Are we such cowards—is it possible that the spirit of liberty can survive only through a shoddy act of murder and gross defiance of the rights of the individual? I say no! Mr. McAllister must have the protection of the hypnotism treatment, even if we die during the wasted minutes."

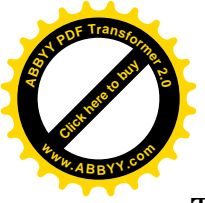
"Lystra!" It was her father; and McAllister realized in the swift movement of the older man what a brilliant mind was there, and how quickly the older man grasped every aspect of the situation.

He stepped forward and took the gun from his daughter's fingers—the only man in the room, McAllister thought flashingly, who could dare approach her in that moment with the certainty she would not fire. For hysteria was in every line of her face, and the racking tears that followed showed how dangerous her stand might have been against the others.

Strangely, not for a moment had hope come. The entire action seemed divorced from his life and his thought; there was only the observation of it. He stood there for a seeming eternity and, when emotion finally came, it was surprise that he was not being hustled to his doom. With the surprise came awareness that Peter Cadron had let go his arm and stepped clear of him.

The man's eyes were calm, his head held proudly erect; he said, "Your daughter is right, sir. At this point we rise above our petty fears, and we say to this unhappy man: 'Have courage! You will not be forgotten. We can guarantee nothing, cannot even state exactly what will happen to you. But we say: if it lies in our power to help you, that help you shall have.' And now—we must protect you from the devastating psychological pressures that would otherwise destroy you, simply but effectively."

Too late, McAllister noticed that the others had turned faces away from that extraordinary wall—the wall that had already displayed so vast a versatility. He did not even see who pressed the activating button for what followed.



There was a flash of dazzling light. For an instant he felt as if his mind had been laid bare; and against that nakedness the voice of Peter Cadron pressed like some ineradicable engraving stamp: "To retain your self-control and your sanity—this is your hope: this you will do in spite of everything! And, for your sake, speak of your experience only to scientists or to those in authority who you feel will understand and help. Good luck!"

So strong remained the effect of that brief flaring light that he felt only vaguely the touch of their hands on him, propelling him. He must have fallen, but there was no pain.

He grew aware that he was lying on a sidewalk. The deep, familiar voice of Police Inspector Clayton boomed over him: "Clear the way; no crowding now!"

McAllister climbed to his feet. A pall of curious faces gawked at him; and there was no park, no gorgeous city. Instead, a bleak row of one-story shops made a dull pattern on either side of the street.

He'd have to get away from here. These people didn't understand. Somewhere on Earth must be a scientist who could help him. After all, the record was that he hadn't exploded. Therefore, somewhere, somehow--

He mumbled answers at the questions that beat at him; and then he was clear of the disappointed crowd. There followed purposeless minutes of breakneck walking; the streets ahead grew narrower, dirtier--

He stopped, shaken. What was happening?

It was night, in a brilliant, glowing city. He was standing on an avenue that stretched jewel-like into remote distance.

A street that lived, flaming with a soft light that gleamed up from its surface—a road of light, like a river flowing under a sun that shone nowhere else, straight and smooth and--

He walked along for uncomprehending minutes, watching the cars that streamed past and wild hope came!

Was this again the age of the Isher and the gunmakers? It could be; it looked right, and it meant they had brought him back. After all, they were not evil, and they would save him if they could. For all he knew, weeks had passed in their time and--

Abruptly, he was in the center of a blinding snowstorm. He staggered from the first, mighty, unexpected blow of that untamed wind, then, bracing himself, fought for mental and physical calm.

The shining, wondrous night city was gone; gone too the glowing road—both vanished, transformed into this deadly, wilderness world.

He peered through the driving snow. It was daylight; and he could make out the dim shadows of trees that reared up through the white mist of blizzard less than fifty feet away.

Instinctively he pressed toward their shelter, and stood finally out of that blowing, pressing wind.

He thought: One minute in the distant future; the next where?

There was certainly no city. Only trees, an uninhabited forest and winter

The blizzard was gone. And the trees. He stood on a sandy beach; before him stretched a blue, sunlit sea that rippled over broken white buildings. All around, scattered far into that shallow, lovely sea, far up into the weed-grown hills, were the remnants of a once tremendous city. Over all clung an aura of incredible age; and the silence of the long-dead was broken only by the gentle, timeless lapping of the waves--

Again came that instantaneous change. More prepared this time, he nevertheless sank twice under the surface of the vast, swift river that carried him on and on. It was hard swimming, but the insulated suit was buoyant with the air it manufactured each passing



second; and, after a moment, he began to struggle purposefully toward the tree-lined shore a hundred feet to his right.

A thought came, and he stopped swimming. "What's the use!"

The truth was as simple as it was terrible. He was being shunted from the past to the future; he was the "weight" on the long end of an energy seesaw; and in some way he was slipping farther ahead and farther back each time. Only that could explain the catastrophic changes he had already witnessed. In a minute would come another change and--

It came! He was lying face downward on green grass, but there was no curiosity in him. He did not look up, but lay there hour after hour as the seesaw jerked on: past—future—past—future--

Beyond doubt, the gunmakers had won their respite; for at the far end of this dizzy teeter-totter was the machine that had been used by the Isher soldiers as an activating force; it too teetered up, then down, in a mad seesaw.

There remained the gunmakers' promise to help him, vain now; for they could not know what had happened. They could not find him even in this maze of time.

There remained the mechanical law that forces must balance.

Somewhere, sometime, a balance would be struck, probably in the future—because there was still the fact that he hadn't exploded in the past. Yes, somewhere would come the balance when he would again face that problem. But now--

On, on, on the seesaw flashed; the world on the one hand grew bright with youth, and on the other dark with fantastic age.

Infinity yawned blackly ahead.

Quite suddenly it came to him that he knew where the seesaw would stop. It would end in the very remote past, with the release of the stupendous temporal energy he had been accumulating with each of those monstrous swings.

He would not witness, but he would cause, the formation of the planets.