

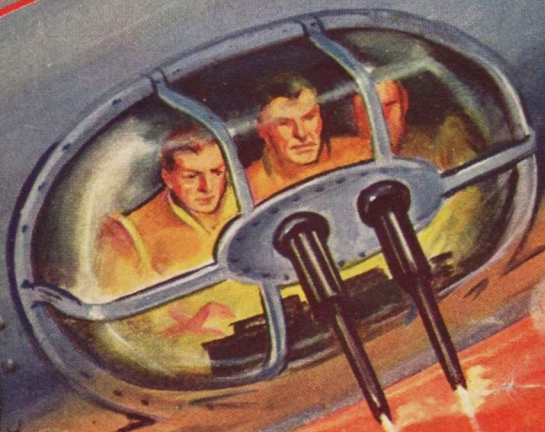
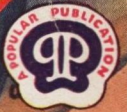
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# ASTONISHING

4/4

## STORIES

APR.



**LAND OF NO RETURN**

by NELSON S. BOND

**OUTPOST OF THE EONS**

by DIRK WYLIE

**FOREVER TOMORROW**

THE DAY WHEN TIME STOOD STILL CLEVE CARTMILL

Drink a Toast to Our Armed Forces

# NEW... EXCITINGLY DIFFERENT

## "DRINKING COMPANIONS"

for Readers of

THIS MAGAZINE

**Patriotic . . . Unique . . . SO Different You'll Want to Take Advantage of This Coupon Offer Now While Supplies Are Still Available**

Just think! A matched set of six, best-quality, big 10-ounce Victory drinking glasses, and on a coupon offer so amazing it may never be duplicated.

What makes these glasses so amazingly unusual is the full color design, different on each glass, saluting each different branch of our armed forces . . . Army, Navy, Marines, Air Corps, Coast Guard and even the Defense Worker. ALL are "toasted" and honored. There are TWO illustrations on EACH glass. We have illustrated what you see from the front. You'll get a real kick out of the back view, when you turn the glass around. In good taste for young and old.

So, readers, accept this coupon offer now, while this special arrangement is on. You'll be glad you did!

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**Then You'll Be Delighted When You Read the Coupon**

## SEND NO MONEY JUST MAIL THE COUPON

**INSPECT...USE...SHOW YOUR FRIENDS ON THIS NO-RISK OFFER**

Be sure to mail your coupon today. When your set of 6 full-color Victory Glasses, toasting our armed forces, reaches you, give postman only \$1.49 plus C.O.D. postage. Consider them "on approval." See the excellent quality glass, the perfect shape. Note the safety chip-proof bevel edge. Most important, be happy with the vivid full-color illustrations, different front view and back view, toasting our armed forces. Use your set for 10 days, put them to every test. If you aren't 100% pleased beyond words, return the set and your money will be immediately refunded. Victory Glasses make every party a sure success, are ideal for everyday use, too. Timely, exclusive and such a wonderful coupon value, you'll be delighted. Readers, be the first in your set to Toast Our Armed Forces for Victory! Now, today, mail the coupon.



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Chip-Proof  
Bevel Edge  
•  
Full 10 Oz.  
•  
Ideal for Beer,  
Highballs, Water  
and  
Every Beverage



**MAIL COUPON NOW...**  
*See for Yourself*

**FREE!**

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For prompt action in mailing the coupon, not only do you receive your set of 6 different full-color Victory Glasses at an amazing low price, but also you'll receive a set of 6 valuable and useful coasters, free of all extra charges. Don't wait. Mail coupon now.

MASON and CO., Dept. P-5  
154 E. Erie St., Chicago, Illinois

**NO-RISK  
10-DAY TRIAL  
OFFER**

Send me a set of 6 big 10-ounce illustrated Victory glasses and the free set of coasters. On arrival I will deposit with postman \$1.49 plus postage charges on the iron-clad guarantee that if I am not completely satisfied, I may return the set of glasses and coasters in 10 days for complete refund without question.

MONEY ENCLOSED (If money with order, glasses come postpaid.)

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(Print Plainly)

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City ..... State .....

**SPECIAL:** Send me 3 complete sets, with FREE coasters for \$3.49. (Due to the demand and our limited supply, only 3 sets may be ordered by one customer.)

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BEFORE COMPLETING YOUR COURSE I OBTAINED MY RADIO BROADCAST OPERATOR'S LICENSE AND IMMEDIATELY JOINED STATION WMPC WHERE I AM NOW CHIEF OPERATOR.

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AMERICAN AIRLINES, MUNICIPAL AIRPORT, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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## Here's the Formula That Has Worked For Hundreds

Mail the Coupon—I will send you my 64-page illustrated Book, **RICH REWARDS IN RADIO**—a real introduction to the wonders and opportunities of Radio!



You'll see how my thorough, practical methods offer a *tested way to more pay*, and a chance to get a steady job in a field with a bright future. It's not a "miracle cure" nor a "long chance" operation, but the same formula that worked for the men above, and hundreds of others, too. It is a time-tested way to make \$5, \$10 a week extra while training for a full time Radio job paying up to \$50 a week.

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Many N.R.I. students make \$5, \$10 a week EXTRA MONEY fixing Radios in spare time *while learning*. I send EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that tell how to do it!

N.R.I. trains you "from the ground up"—covers fundamentals thoroughly. The combined efforts of more than 100 people have made the Course so *interesting*, with hundreds of pictures, charts, and diagrams—so *easy-to-grasp*, with special teaching methods—that we believe you will be "old friends" with Radio almost before you know it!

## EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY, TOO

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, **MUCH HIGHER PAY**. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

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Today there's room nearly everywhere for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians are starting their own businesses—making \$30, \$40, \$50 a week! Others take good-pay jobs with Broadcasting Stations. Many more are needed for Government jobs as Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians, Radio manufacturers employ orders to help fill Government wartime orders.

And Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Loudspeaker Systems are live, growing fields. Then, think of the NEW jobs Television, and other Radio developments will open after the war. I give you the Radio knowledge required for these fields.

## Find Out Today What N. R. I. Can Do For You

MAIL THE COUPON NOW for my 64-page book FREE. You'll discover things you never knew about Broadcasting, Radio Servicing, Manufacturing, other Radio fields of opportunity. You'll read a description of my Course, Extra Money Job Sheets. You'll see letters from many men I trained telling what they're doing, earning. Mail Coupon AT ONCE! J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3CS9, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

## Training Men For Vital Radio Jobs

## THIS FREE BOOK HAS SHOWN HUNDREDS NOW TO MAKE GOOD MONEY

**MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3CS9**  
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Mail me FREE without obligation, your 64-page book, **RICH REWARDS IN RADIO**. (No Salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

I Trained These Men at Home I Will Train You Too

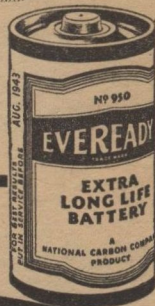


# *LIGHTER MOMENTS* with **fresh Eveready Batteries**



*"Normally I'd consider this a dirty trick"*

FRESH BATTERIES LAST  
LONGER... Look for  
the date line →



REMEMBER—our fighting forces need “Eveready” flashlights and batteries and the materials they are made from. You can serve by conserving yours!

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# ASTONISHING STORIES



ALL STORIES NEW

NEXT ISSUE ON SALE  
MARCH 31ST

VOL. 4

APRIL, 1943

No. 4

## GREAT SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL OUTPOST OF THE EONS.....by Dirk Wylie 32

The battle to save his hard-won world had been over for centuries—but the man from the end of time, pitted against the pirate horde of death, had yet to win it—or die!

## FANTASY NOVELETTE LAND OF NO RETURN.....by Nelson S. Bond 10

Two men and a girl—against the attack of a hundred Venusian war rockets, with the fate of a Solar System as the prize!

## SHORT STORIES

### THE MAN FROM 2890.....by Ray Cummings 58

Out of nowhere he came, bringing strange terror to the world—the Man from 2890, whose touch meant sudden death!

### SUBTERFUGE.....by Ray Bradbury 68

"The Venusians are attacking, and we cannot hope to fight them off. Gentlemen, Earth is doomed—unless every Earthman dies!"

### FOREVER TOMORROW.....by Cleve Cartmill 74

The world was divided between eternal night and everlasting day—and the key to salvation lay in a madman's hands!

### EXIT.....by Bob Tucker 90

Once in a hundred million times this miracle may be performed—but the magician cannot live to see its success!

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Meet the King of Taraluk—whose world was tiny, but packed a mighty punch!

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The coming Boston Conference—with news of all the fantasy field.

### FAN MAGS..... 31

The latest output of the fan publishers—small, this time, but select!

### FANTASY CIRCLE ..... 98

Beyond natural law there are things that cannot be true—but are!

### THE MAIL BAG..... 104

Where the fans get together to talk things over with the editors.

Cover painting by Milton Luros, illustrating "Land of No Return"

Inside illustrations by Bok, Lawrence, Les Tina, Morey and Paul

# VIEWPOINTS



**Editor's Note:** It is the intention of this department to publish news and information about fans and their activities, plus interesting sidelights about the professionals who write, edit or draw for the science fiction magazines. Viewpoints will be open to, and serve as the voice of, all readers and fans who care to make use of it. All items should be addressed to **ASTONISHING STORIES**, Ficioneers, Inc., 210 East 43 Street, New York City.

**B**OSKONE THREE—less familiarly known as the Third Annual Boston Science-Fiction Conference—is definitely scheduled for the 23rd of February, 1943. This is in complete conflict with the prediction made here a few issues ago that all conventions and conferences in science fiction would have to be abandoned for the duration due to difficulties in transportation, loss of fans to the armed services and to war industries, and so forth—but we were never more glad to eat our own words.

Fan A. L. Schwartz, in charge of the preparations for the affair, declares that the limited range from which the usual attendance is drawn makes another Boskone possible at this time. A national convention would certainly be impossible; but experience in the past has shown that most fans making the February pilgrimage to Boston come from no farther away from New York, a mere two hundred and fifty miles. There have been notable exceptions, of course; the Columbia Camp, last year, attended in a body, coming all the way from South Carolina by automobile.

If you can't be there in person, at least you can read about it in this column next month!

## FANTASY FANDOM AND THE DRAMA

**S**CIENCE-FICTION fans express their reactions to their favorite form of literature through almost every art known to man. The fan magazines are full of science-fiction verse, fiction, essays, biographies and other literary efforts of the fans. The Hollywood and New York groups have for long been experimenting with recording or composing fantasy music, ranging from transcribing the orchestral themes from fantasy films to composing science-fiction rounds and ballads to be sung at fan gatherings. Even a science-fiction dance group was formed in Brooklyn a few years ago, and gave at least one public performance of interpretive fantastic dancing in its precarious and short existence. And painting or sculpting fantastic scenes has been a fan avocation from time immemorial.

What could be more natural, then, than that fans should turn to the stage and screen for further modes of expression?

The first organized attempt to produce a 100% fan-fantastic play was in 1936, when the International Scientific Association—since defunct—an organization composed principally of fantasy fans, de-

*(Continued on page 8)*

# How to Make YOUR Body Bring You **FAME**

... Instead of **SHAME!**

**ARE YOU  
Skinny?  
Weak?  
Flabby?**

**Will You Let Me  
Prove I Can Make You  
a New Man?**

**I** KNOW what it means to have the kind of body that people pity!  
Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was  
once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed  
to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor  
specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-  
conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only **HALF-ALIVE**.

But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "the  
World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like  
to prove to you that the same system can make a **NEW  
MAN OF YOU!**

## What Dynamic Tension Will Do For You

I don't care how old or young you are or how  
ashamed of your present physical condition you  
may be. If you can simply raise your arm and  
flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps  
—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time!  
Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own  
home—is all the time I ask of you! And  
there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders,  
strengthen your back, develop your  
whole muscular system **INSIDE** and  
**OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your  
chest, give you a vise-like grip, make  
those legs of yours lithe and powerful.  
I can shoot new strength into your old  
backbone, exercise those inner organs,  
help you cram your body so full of  
pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality  
that you won't feel there's even  
"standing room" left for weakness  
and that lazy feeling! Before I get  
through with you I'll have your whole  
frame "measured" to a nice new,  
beautiful suit of muscle!

## Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just  
tell me where you want handsome,  
powerful muscles. Are you fat and  
flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are  
you short-winded, peevish? Do you  
hold back and let others walk off with  
the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.?  
Then write for details about "**Dynamic  
Tension**" and learn how I can  
make you a healthy, confident, power-  
ful **HE-MAN**.

"**Dynamic Tension**" is an entirely  
**NATURAL** method. Only 15 minutes  
of your spare time daily is enough to  
show amazing results—and it's actu-  
ally fun. "**Dynamic Tension**" does  
the work.

"**Dynamic Tension!**" That's the  
ticket! The identical natural method  
that I myself developed to change my  
body from the scrawny, skinny-chested  
weakling I was at 17 to my present  
super-man physique! Thousands of  
other fellows are becoming marvelous  
physical specimens—**my way**. I give  
you no gadgets or contraptions to fool  
with. When you have learned to de-  
velop your strength through "**Dynam-  
ic Tension**," you can laugh at artifi-  
cial muscle-makers. You simply  
utilize the **DORMANT** muscle-power  
in your own body—watch it increase  
and multiply into real, solid **LIVE  
MUSCLE**.

My method—"Dynamic Tension,"  
—will turn the trick for you. No  
theory—every exercise is practical.  
And man, so easy! Spend only 15  
minutes a day in your own home.  
From the very start you'll be using  
my method of "**Dynamic Tension**,"  
almost unconsciously every minute of  
the day—walking, bending over, etc.—  
to **BUILD MUSCLE** and **VITALITY**.



*Charles  
Atlas*

Holder of title,  
"The World's  
Most Perfectly De-  
veloped Man." As  
he looks to day,  
from actual un-  
touched snapshot.

**Mail Coupon  
For My  
FREE Book**

## FREE BOOK "EVERLASTING HEALTH AND STRENGTH!"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-  
the-shoulder language. Packed with  
inspirational pictures of myself and  
pupils—fellows who became **NEW**

**MEN** in strength, my way. Let me show you what  
I helped **THEM** do. See what I can do for **YOU!**  
For a real thrill, send for this book today, **AT  
ONCE**. **CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 833, 115 East  
23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

**CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 833,  
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "**Dynamic  
Tension**" will help make a New Man of me—give me  
a healthy, husky body and big muscle development.  
Send me your free book, "**Everlasting Health and  
Strength**."

Name .....  
(Please print or write plainly)  
Address .....  
City ..... State .....



(Continued from page 6)

spite its name, embarked on the production of a motion picture. A contest was held for the best original story suitable for a motion picture, and a comedy by John B. Michel and Donald A. Wollheim was selected.

Unfortunately for the future of the plan, the International Scientific Association collapsed at that time and was dissolved. A year passed. Then a special group of fans was formed for the sole purpose of producing the picture.

But internal dissension—the bane of every fan club of that period—set in, and the club broke up as quickly as had the I. S. A. before it. The picture died stillborn, and was never to be revived.

In the early months of 1941, Hannes Bok and Boris Dolgov, well known fantasy artists and fans, announced to members of the Futurian Society of New York and other fans in that city that they were prepared to finance and produce a full-length science-fiction play.

This was definitely the most hopeful outlook that fan drama had ever had. The Futurians, one of the largest and most active fan clubs in existence, had over a score of professional and semi-professional authors, editors, artists and what-not in their ranks. S. D. Gottesman and Robert W. Lowndes were among those chosen as a committee to select a suitable script; Bok, Dolgov and Leslie Perri were to design the sets and costumes. A large sum of money was advanced to cover preliminary expenses, with the promise of as much more as should prove necessary, once production was actually begun.

A preliminary draft for a play was written and approved. Sketches for scenery were made by Bok and Dolgov, and passed by the group as a whole. All that remained to be done was actually to go into production. The group met to set a date for that—

And got nowhere. The Denver Con-

vention was coming up, and many of the group planned to attend, were reluctant to have the play begin rehearsals before the convention. Several important members were leaving shortly for California and would be gone for several months. A number who had planned to devote a good deal of time to the play found that their activities had to be curtailed, due to increased activity in their jobs and professions.

So it was planned to postpone activity on the production until the following fall. The life of the producing group was suspended—and never revived. The reasons? Simply lack of interest, once the initial enthusiasm had passed, largely due to the unwieldiness of such a large group working on a single project.

So perished the most hopeful attempt at a large-scale amateur fantasy theater.

#### PERSONALS

THE artistic talents of science-fiction's number one penman, Frank R. Paul, will be devoted for the next few months or years to producing down-to-earth drawings of cargo ships rather than imaginative rockets or Martian creatures. He's going to work as a designer in a Southern shipyard for the remainder of the war. He hopes to be able to continue illustrating as well, but the war, of course, comes first. . . . Artist David A. Kyle is now one of those fortunate humans who are labeled "gentlemen" by act of Congress. His commission as a second lieutenant in the Armored Corps came through last December. . . . Dirk Wylie, author of *Outpost of the Eons* in this issue, is, of all things, a military policeman in Army life. Mild-mannered Dirk is certainly as far removed from the 1917 ideal of a hard-boiled M. P. as can be. . . . Bob Tucker, who contributes *Exit* to this number, is best known to fans as publisher of the hilarious fanzine, *Le Zombie*, and a leading participant in fan doings for the past decade.



**Today I'M the foreman!**  
 -last week I was only a bench worker

**FOREMEN WANTED!**

**TO GET WAR WORK OUT**

More Foremen than ever are needed to keep war production schedules at their peak.

**FOREMEN WANTED!**

**TO TRAIN NEW WORKERS**

Industry's labor problem is so great, Foremen are needed to train new men and women at their work benches.

**FOREMEN WANTED!**

**FOR SUPERVISORY JOBS**

War industries are in need of skilled and seasoned management. Foremen must be trained to fill good pay jobs at once.



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Right in your own factory—maybe in your own department, there's probably a job open for you . . . the job you've always wanted—the job of FOREMAN. Can you get it? Well, if you train yourself to know how to plan and schedule factory work—keep production at peak—handle labor problems—break in new workers—cut out waste—the need for competent Foremen exists everywhere today. And LaSalle has the proven way to train yourself at home in your spare moments to become a Foreman.

**Important to Your Country—VITAL TO YOU**

Ultimate Victory requires continuous, superior production of everything American fighting men need. If you're a qualified Foreman, you can help assure this. And after Victory—your ability and training will qualify you for the better jobs in industry. Can you do it? We'll show you proof that it has been done by many men. And what others have done you should be able to do.

**THESE MEN SUCCEEDED  
 And So Can You!**

"In the last 18 months, I have been worker, group leader, assistant foreman and at present am foreman. My salary has been more than doubled." O. C., Ky.

"During the five months I was studying your training, my salary more than doubled." O. S., Ohio

"When I enrolled, I was making approximately \$40 a week. For the past three months, I have made \$85 a week, so am entitled to your 100% Club button." C. N., Ind.

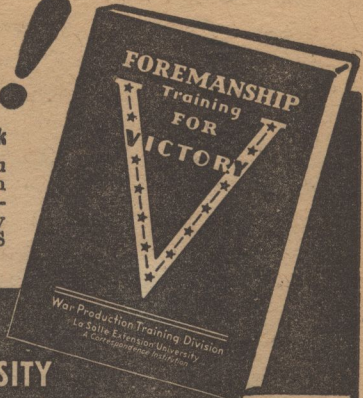
"Since enrolling, I have been appointed night foreman over nine inspectors and 12 machine operators." R. A., Ill.

"Since I enrolled, my salary has been raised 63 percent and I have been given new responsibilities." L. G., Montreal

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Get this big 48-page book

Yours FREE to tell you how you can easily train yourself and qualify as a Foreman. You owe it to your country and to yourself to MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!



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 EXTENSION UNIVERSITY**

**A Correspondence Institution**

**CHICAGO  
 Dept. 3334-FV**

Send me FREE, without cost or obligation, your 48-page book which shows me how I can train at home to qualify as Foreman in my work.

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Address .....

City ..... State .....

→ → → → →

# LAND OF NO RETURN

## CHAPTER ONE

### The White Feathers

**M**ONK McCALL, his battered sun hat pulled well down over his eyes, glanced uneasily at his friend and employer as their course led them from the quieter streets of Kennau-

By **NELSON**



Two men and a girl — against the assault of a hundred Venusian war-rockets, with the fate of a Solar System as the prize!

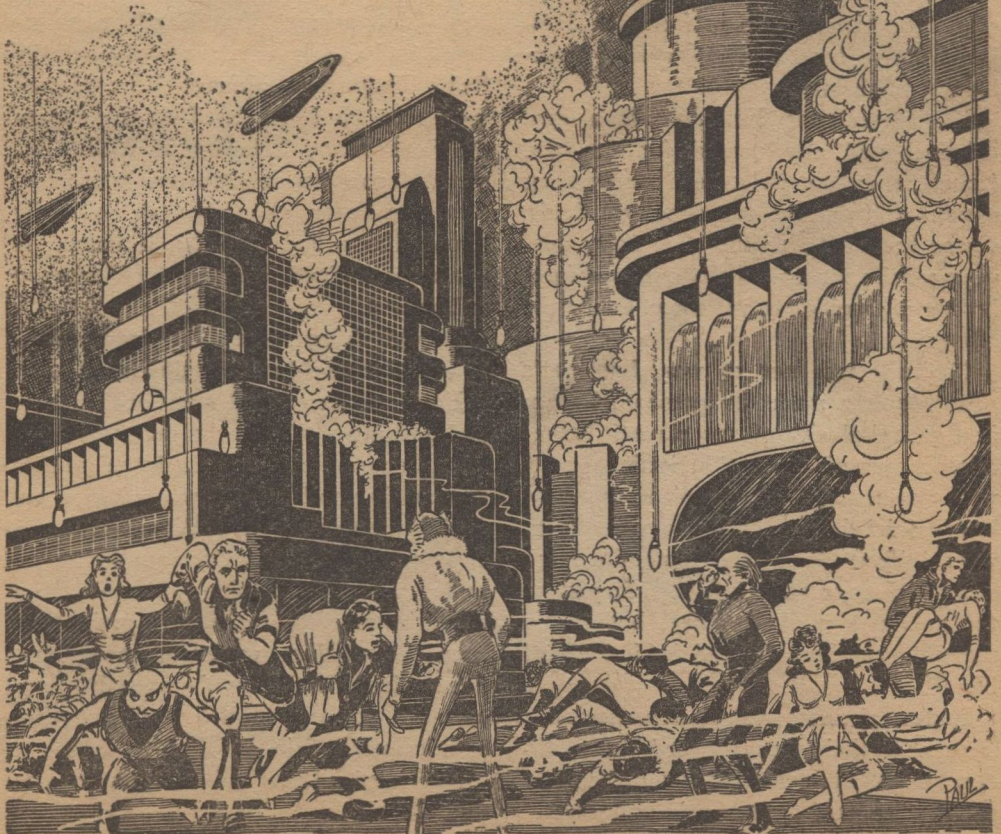


baala to a major, busy thoroughfare. "Look, Lee," he suggested dubiously, "wouldn't it be a good idea if we was to stick to the back streets, sort of? I mean, there's a helluva lot of uniforms gallopin' around these parts lately an' feelings is runnin' pretty high—"

Lee Greenwell said, "Nonsense!" sharply.

Almost *too* sharply, as a matter of fact. It was not his nature to be so curt. The very brusqueness of his tone, coupled with the set of his jaw, gave evidence of the mental strain under which he was laboring.

## S. BOND



"Nonsense!" he repeated half angrily. "We have just as much right on the streets as they have. There is no reason for us to skulk through the back streets and alleys like—"

"'Course not!" agreed Monk hastily. "The streets is open to anybody. All I meant was that maybe it'd create less commotion if we was to stay in the background, but I don't mind if *you* don't, though."

"I," said Greenwell doggedly, "most certainly do not mind. What people think or say about me does not bother me a bit. Come on!"

He led the way onto the central avenue of Kennaubala, capital city of Mercury.

But as he strode along, head lifted perhaps a trifle too deliberately high, shoulders a bit too square, his keen gaze noted the vast change which had come over the city since his last trip in from the Hotlands and a breath of uncertainty trembled through him.

No longer was Kennaubaala a gay, bright-lighted city geared for fun and frolic, ready to welcome free-spending miners in from the torturing ore fields. There brooded over the once noisy avenues a grim tenseness—an ominous foreboding of trouble not yet come, but in the offing.

Mercury was not at war, but war's gaunt specter made its presence known in the capital city of the planet. Stores once warm with cheerful invitation, gaudy with paint and neon placards, now huddled in darkened silence with doorways dully agape like sullen mouths. High office buildings stretched like fingers to the golden sky of Mercury, but within them the workers labored behind closed blinds.

Fewer pleasure vehicles roamed the streets. In their stead prowled blunt military motorcars. Behind their rayproof panes were hard-eyed men in uniforms.

Mercury was ready—or trying to make

ready, in its feeble way—for the dreaded blow which might at any moment come: active participation in the war.

Six months ago—Solar Constant Time—the Venusians had precipitated interplanetary war with an unprovoked attack on the asteroid Iris. "Liberation of an oppressed Venusian minority" was the catch-phrase excuse offered by the Venusian government's propaganda minister in his official proclamation.

But everyone knew the act represented a deliberate challenge to the democratic planet, Earth. Comfortably content with fat reserves of raw materials and plenty of fertile colonies, Earth had been complacently satisfied to loll back, espousing the aged dream of "universal peace", for more than ten decades.

THE diplomatic eyes of every planet had swung Earthward questioningly. Iris was a member of the Solar Union, an alliance fostered and sponsored by Earth itself at the end of the Fontanaland Rebellion in 2083 A.D., a power pact designed to end interplanetary strife for all time. A militarily strong Earth had forged that union. It was a weak Earth which was called upon to honor it.

Would Terra respect its obligations—or would it meekly accept this insult?

Earth answered that question instantly and gallantly. Within the same hour the first Venusian ray scorched the soil of Iris, an Earth ultimatum was winging the void to the moist planet. When at the end of twenty-four Solar Constant hours no reply was forthcoming, Earth's tiny militia went into action. A space fleet consisting of thirty ancient spacecruisers, five modern Patrolmen-o'-war and twenty over-age destroyers hurtled to the relief of beleaguered Iris.

The result of that quixotic gesture was catastrophic!

Too late, Earthmen discovered that

Venus had been preparing for just such an engagement for years. Only a score of Venusian vessels engaged the Earth armada—but these twenty were armed to the jets with every latest achievement of military science.

The Battle of Iris Basin took its place in history as one with other gallant but hopeless causes—Lepanto, Balaclava, the Alamo, Pearl Harbor. Nine-tenths of the Earth fleet was destroyed in that single engagement. The remainder, outclassed, was forced to withdraw. Of the glittering fleet that had lifted from Earth's spaceports, only a handful ever returned—and half of these were blistered wrecks manned by men whose eyes were blank with the agony of horror.

And of course the Venusians had then been in a position not only to consolidate their gains on Iris, but expand into other desirable objectives of the asteroid belt. Vesta had fallen to the invaders, so had Ceres, Pallas and Juno—a dozen others. Hidalgo, in whose ports lay half the Jovian space fleet, did not succumb since it was at the farthest end of its orbit, nearer Saturn than any other planet. But Eros, most strategically vital of all the asteroids because it approached Earth within 14,000,000 miles—closer than any cosmic body save Earth's own moon—fell after a single night's conflict.

**B**UT if Earth, in that first staggering defeat, lost most of its fleet and many important bases, it did not lose everything. In at least one respect it gained immeasurably. It rose to new heights in the estimation of its Solar neighbors. The hearts of freemen the universe over responded to Earth's demand that the obligations of the Solar Union Pact be met—and as the hearts of the people dictated, so voted the various governments.

Mars was the first to honor the alliance. Jupiter was but a few hours less speedy,

and its horde of satellites ranged themselves with the parent planet. Io, Ganymede, Europa, Callisto. The populations of these worlds were small, but their courage was great.

Saturn confirmed the pact, and with it Mimas, Titan and Enceladus. The other six Saturnian satellites joined in the Alliance automatically, since they had dominion governments under the mother world.

Uranus was the last of the major planets to join the Alliance. A delicate situation obtained on this outer world. Originally settled by Venusians, its people were torn between love of motherland and love of freedom. But eventually honor overcame instinct, and Uranus, too, confirmed the pact. This completed the wall of strength arrayed against the traitor planet, since Neptune and Pluto, being still territories under the control of the Interplanetary Council, had no independent governments.

So it was Venus against the remainder of the System. Except for one world—Mercury.

Here no vote had been taken—not because the Mercurians were not willing to do so, but because the Alliance itself had suggested it. The inner world had been asked to refrain from immediate action, maintaining neutrality as long as possible.

The reason for this was easy to see. Nearest of all the planets to Venus, Mercury was militarily indefensible. Its incredibly rich store of vital ores and raw materials would be an easy prey for the Venusian pirates should they decide to invade.

As a neutral, Mercury would have to maintain diplomatic relations with the enemy, true. It would also be called upon to supply an increased amount of material to the Venusian war machine, and it would no doubt be compelled to serve as a supply depot for Venusian merchantmen.

But it was better to suffer these indignities than to become a forthright victim of Venusian aggression. And, reasoned the Alliance Command rightly, were Venus to take over the smaller planet, turning its inhabitants to slave labor, ten times as much military equipment would be forthcoming from its Hotland mines.

So neutral Mercury, sole noncombatant in a universe for six months at war, clung feverishly to a precarious neutrality, entertaining upon its soil diplomats of both commands, feeling the war tension mount with each passing day, hourly expecting the invasion which would hurl it completely into the enemy camp.

And a crying shame, too, thought Lee Greenwell. Nowhere in the universe was a lovelier city than Kennaubaala. Its majestic towers, spiraling to the sky, were like a glimpse of fairyland. Its broad streets and bannered avenues were, in peacetime, a vision to stir the senses with delight.

Earthmen had built Kennaubaala. Earthmen, far from home and nostalgic for its beauty, had constructed the city, and tried to reconstruct their dreams of the mother planet.

The Mercurian natives could never have built the capital which they now claimed. Tiny creatures, weak-muscled and spindling, they had been content to dwell in thick-walled mud hovels, until space-adventurers had come to raise their standard of living.

But now things were changed.

Now still another race of space-adventurers threatened to come. Not with plowshares and pick-axes, but with sword and flame—

“OH!” gasped Greenwell, startled from his reverie, “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me.”

He had collided with a young lady. A very beautiful young lady, he discovered to his chagrin. An Earth girl, tawny-

gold of hair, blue of eye, fair of skin despite the incessant blazing sun of Mercury.

“I—I’m afraid I wasn’t looking where I was going,” he confessed. “I hope I didn’t hurt you?”

“Not at all,” smiled the girl. “Perhaps it was I who got in your way. You were going in—*here?*”

She nodded significantly to the doorway before which they stood. It was a small building which had once housed a restaurant. Now it offered fare of a harder sort.

Its portals were draped with the crimson, gold and blue colors of the Alliance, and in its window hung a huge poster depicting a bruised and battered Alliance spaceman with outstretched arms, demanding:

“WAS OUR SACRIFICE IN VAIN?”

*Avenge Iris Basin!*

FREEMEN DEMAND FREEDOM

Join the Alliance Forces

NOW!

A queue was lined before the doorway. It comprised a cross-section of civilization. Earthmen were in that line, and lean, wiry Martians—Jovian “runts” whose stunted bodies were imbued with bull-like strength, Saturnian “greenies” and even a few diminutive Mercurians. Upon attaining an age-old dream—space-flight—Earthmen had discovered one odd truth. Though physical characteristics differed somewhat in the races of the solar universe, fundamentally the children born of Sol’s empire were more or less the same. Height and build differed, skin coloration varied and sometimes environment created strange physical adaptations—as the furred ruffs on Martian throats and the scaly hides of aquatic Venusians—but by and large evolution had followed an identical pattern on all the planets of the universe.

“Well?” queried the girl.

Lee Greenwell shook his head and smiled.

"No," he said. "Sorry, miss. I'm not a soldier. I am a professional miner."

"So," hinted the girl, "were most of these others—before Iris Basin. But they're signing up, now, to fight for their homelands and for freedom. Don't you want to do the same?"

Others were beginning to stare at the curious tableau. The girl was making no effort to lower her voice. On the contrary, it seemed to Greenwell that she was speaking deliberately loud. It occurred to him, suddenly, that maybe their collision had not been an accident, after all. She was no doubt a planted, unofficial recruiting agent. . . .

A trifle impatiently he said again, "I'm sorry, miss. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"What's the matter, miner?" asked the girl. "Afraid to fight?"

Someone in the listening crowd snick-

ered, and Lee's cheeks burned slightly. McCall, ranging up beside him, said to the girl, "Look, sis, you better run along. We ain't got time to listen to—"

"Never mind, Monk," interrupted Lee. "Don't argue about it. Let's get on about our business."

He attempted to brush past the girl. But once more she sidestepped, holding her place before him insistently.

"Very well, stranger," she said. "If you won't, you won't. But before you go, I've got a little present for you."

Lee stared at her curiously.

"Present?"

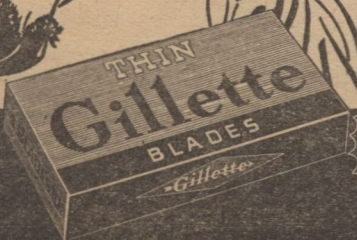
"Yes. With the compliments of every freedom-loving woman in the galaxy. Here."

She pressed something into his palm, turned and handed something to Monk—then whirled and was gone.

Lee stared after her in blank bewilderment as the crowd engulfed her. A

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**2. APPLY LATHER** or brushless shaving cream while face is wet. If lather is used, dip your brush in water frequently



**3. TWO EDGES** double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves



**4. CLEAN BLADE** in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

present? It surely didn't make sense.

"Hey!" snorted Monk. "Hey, what the hell is this?"

His sun-crimsoned countenance was a shade redder. The wattles of his beefy throat were aswell with anger as he stared at the downy "present" in his hand.

Lee glanced at his own gift—and felt a quick, cold, biting anger chill his veins even as his color flamed to match that of his comrade. The Earth girl's present was—

A white feather!

## CHAPTER TWO

"Cargo: Death!"

**T**HE snickering of the onlookers, which had formed a background for the tableau, now swelled to undisguised laughter.

From the shuffling queue a voice called, "Put it in your buttonhole, Bud, and show the world where you stand!"

Another watcher suggested derisively, "Sew it on your sleeve, big boy! That makes you a sergeant in the Stay-at-home Guards!"

Monk McCall's brawny fists knotted at his sides; he took a swift step toward the foremost of the speakers. But for the second time that afternoon Lee halted him.

"Never mind, Monk! We've got business to attend to. Come on!"

Unheeding of the shouts which echoed after them, they pressed through the surrounding group and on down the street. Lee said nothing more to Monk who, though his eyes were sultry, followed obediently. There was nothing he could say, and he himself was almost inarticulate with emotions.

The white feather! The age-old and universal symbol of cowardice!

Anger was leaden within him that he should be thus publicly branded before

brave men, fighting men—and by a mere slip of a girl, whose white hands had never known the bite of a rotor-gun grip, the burning backlash of a Haemholtz pistol!

Glancing at his palm through eyes blinded by red rage he discovered that he still held the downy symbol. He started to hurl it from him; then, restrained by an instinct he could not identify, reconsidered and jammed it angrily in his reefer pocket.

Then Monk was calling his name.

"Lee!"

"Yes? What is it?"

"That guy—he's either trailin' or tryin' to catch up with us."

"Guy?" Lee's head swiveled abruptly. "What guy?"

But the stranger's quickened approach left no doubt as to his intentions. He was not spying on them, but hastening to overtake them. He lifted an arm in greeting as Lee and Monk slowed down. Curiously the two mining engineers eyed him.

"He looks like—" began Monk wonderingly—"Hey, Lee! He *is*! He's a water-rat!"

A water-rat—the spaceman's derisive term for Venusians. As the stranger drew nearer, Greenwell saw Monk was right. The approaching fellow's hands were palish green and covered with the fine scales of the moist planet's people, thinly webbed between the lower finger joints. His cranium was high and bulging above the brows, thinly covered with a hint of soft, fine hair. The Venusians were physically incapable of growing long tresses. Like the Amerindians they had no facial hair at all.

"Water-rat!" repeated Lee wonderingly. "What does he want with us? Why—"

**T**HEN there was time for no further speculation, for their hailer was at hand, panting for breath.

"If you please, gentlemen—"



His husky voice was soft, ingratiating, typically Venusian. Another stigmata of the water-worldites was their inability to sound the consonant, "l", generally substituting the "r" sound. In this, it occurred to Lee, the Venusian vandals had another point in common with a race which centuries before had set the example with the same kind of dastardly surprise attack.

"If you please, gentlemen, I desire a word with you."

"It ain't mutual," growled Monk. "Run along."

Lee shot his friend a swift, warning glance.

"Well?" he asked.

The Venusian smiled a toothy smile.

"I happened to witness the incident back there—" he nodded—"by the Arranger recruiting station."

"So?" demanded Monk truculently.

The Venusian ignored McCall, addressing himself to the more receptive Greenwell.

"I am a member of the Venusian diplomatic corps here in Mercury. It made me most happy to see that there remain a few interrigent Earthmen whose common sense has not been swept away by ber-rigerent emotionarism."

Greenwell said bluntly, "Look here, Kru—" He hesitated after the salutation, the Venusian equivalent of Earth's "Mr".

The stranger supplied his name.

"Taor-U. Jota Taor-U, at your service."

"Look here, Kru Taor-U, don't draw false conclusions from what you just saw. Just because we refused to be coaxed into supplying ourselves as cannon fodder for the Alliance doesn't mean we're sympathetic to the Venusian cause. We are Earthmen, after all."

"But," smiled Taor-U blandly, "you are *interrigent* Earthmen. You show good, sound reasoning ability in refusing

to permit emotionarism to undermine your judgment. That is why I have taken the liberty of forrowing you, Venus is eager to maintain its former friendship with Earthmen like you."

He hesitated briefly, and despite every effort to remain completely noncommittal, Lee Greenwell's nostrils dilated as he sensed a hidden meaning behind the diplomat's innocent words.

"There is no reason," said Lee reasonably, "why all men of all planets should not be friendly."

"Exactry!" declaimed the Venusian. "That is precisery what our race has contended from the day hostirities began. There is no reason for this strife and warfare. Earth and Venus should be friends. What does it matter if we of the superior races take over the government of a few tiny, scattered pranetoids? There are too many of them, anyway, unimportant motes in the Garaxy."

"Get to the point," broke in Monk crisply. "What's on your mind, Taor-U?"

The coldness of his voice drew Taor-U's gaze. For a moment the veil of suave companionship dropped from his eyes. The glance he directed at McCall was hard, hot, venomous.

In another instant it was gone, though, and again he spoke to Lee.

"In the presence of your friend, here," he said, "it is not easy to converse. However, Earthman, I berieve if you and I could meet privaterly for a chat, I might have something interesting to discuss with you. Would you visit our Embassy some time?"

"Why," said Lee puzzledly. "I suppose I could. But, really, I don't see what—"

"Suppose," suggested the Venusian, "you ret me worry about that? Good. How about tomorrow at this same hour?"

Lee frowned. "Well, I don't know. I'm only in town for a short time. Came in for a few supplies. I've got to get back to my diggings—"

"If it is a matter of finances," smiled Taor-U, "you wurr be adequatry compensated for any rost time. I think we can make it up to you. You may set your own price, but after you have heard our proposition, I do not berieve we wurr have any disagreement. Tomorrow, then?"

"Very well," agreed Lee. "Tomorrow." Then, as the Venusian bowed and turned to go. "But, wait a minute. Don't you want to know my name? I am—"

Taor-U glanced back over his shoulder and smiled.

"That," he said, "is unnecessary. We know your name, Mr. Greenwerr!"

And he strode away.

**G**REENWELL stared at McCall, and Monk stared back at his employer-pal.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Lee flatly. "He knows my name! Say, that must be some espionage system the Venusians have."

"Did you ever think any different?" grunted McCall. "Them guys lurk in cracks and crevices. We been tucked away in the Mercurian sticks for more months than I got calluses to prove it. But the first time we meander into town, out pops a water-rat who knows your famby tree from sap to nuts!

"You—" he stared at Lee anxiously—"you ain't really serious about keepin' that tetty-tet with them skunks tomorrow, are you?"

Greenwell shrugged.

"Why not?"

"Why not! Pal, what do you think the other Earthmen on this planet will say if you pay a visit to the Venusian embassy with the sitchyation what it is!"

"Lee Greenwell," said Lee Greenwell doggedly, "came to this planet for one purpose, Monk—to make money in the easiest and quickest way. Honestly, if necessary, and by the sweat of his brow if no simpler

way presented itself—*but to make money!* Judging from Kru Taor-U's not-too-subtle approach, there is money to be earned by contacting the Venusians. Such being the case—"

McCall stared at his comrade in blank astonishment.

"You mean—" he stammered. "But, Lee, you wouldn't. Hell's bells, chum, you can't do a thing like that! Anyway, where do I come in? I wasn't included in that invitation, you know."

Lee smiled thinly.

"No. As usual, Monk, you let your tongue wag you into disfavor. But just because you talked yourself out of a good thing doesn't mean I've got to pass it up too. Yes, my friend, tomorrow at this time I shall present myself at the Venusian embassy and listen with great interest to whatever proposition they have to offer."

Monk shrugged disgruntledly.

"Okay. It's your neck," he grumbled. "Stick it out if you want to. But you're askin' for trouble, that's all I got to say. And you'll get it, too—"

"Monk!" Lee's cry interrupted the other man's glum prediction. "Look out for God's sake!"

In a single blinding movement he clutched his pal's arm, half dragged, half hurled him into the shelter of an adjacent doorway before himself.

Monk, knocked completely off balance, fell to his knees. In that position, he did not see the juggernaut of destruction which a split second later hurtled over the very spot upon which he and Lee had been standing!

He only heard its thunderous roar, and felt the whiplash of concussion as the runaway object struck a barrier farther down the street. . . .

He lurched to his feet, wide-eyed with wonderment.

"Wh-what—"

"A truck!" rapped Greenwell swiftly.

"One of those big army vans. Driver must have lost control. Ran up on the pavement—oh, Lord!" He was at the doorway now. "Monk, it smashed head-long into that line of enlisting men—jammed the entrance to the shop—and now it's on fire!"

**H**E STARTED to leap from their pseudo-shelter. Monk seized him from behind, wrestled with him.

"Wait, you damn fool! Where do you think you're goin'?"

"Where? Why, down there to help, of course!"

"Stand still! Don't you see the color of that there truck? *Red!* Lee—that's a munitions van, loaded with high explosives!"

Greenwell slashed at his friend's hands, broke free.

"Do you think I'm blind? I know what it is. But it may let go at any moment—and there are brave men down there trapped like rats! A woman—perhaps dying!"

The last words came fleetingly, for Lee was racing down the street furiously. Monk, because he was Monk McCall, was right behind him.

The scene of the accident was a shambles. Where had been standing a queue of laughing, fearless men, now circled a shaking mob impotent for lack of leadership.

The alarm had been given, and most of the crowd had leaped to safety before the van struck. A few had not. The ponderous wheels had dragged to a stop over a mound of broken bodies; the pavement matched the color of the blazing truck, with sickening rivulets that drained into an unsightly gutter.

Lee fought his way through the throng, clambered to the running-board of the truck, wrenched open the door to its cab. The closed compartment was foul

with fumes from the spluttering motor. As Lee groped for the controls a body toppled from the driver's seat and fell against his shoulder; a starkly grinning face leered up at him in ghastly camaraderie.

Lee stared at the dead man for a stricken moment, then with new grimness set about his self-appointed task of clearing the truck from the recruiting station doorway.

Straddling the gruesome thing which was his companion, he tugged at the controls. Within the blazing engine a purr heightened to a throb—a roar.

Lee tossed a prayerful whisper skyward. Motor still operating; thank God for that! He kicked the clutch into reverse, felt the van roll sluggishly away, bump down off the curbing. . . .

Monk's face was at the thick glass pane beside him. His mouth was working frantically.

"Come out of there, you idiot! The doorway's clear! But this buggy's goin' by-by any minute—"

"Coming!" shouted Lee, and smashed open the door. A moment later he was on the street, charging toward the shop. Figures were staggering from within, choking, gasping, half-asphyxiated by the noisome fumes of the burning van. Men in Alliance uniform . . . half-stripped recruits . . . a woman.

It was to the girl's side Lee Greenwell raced. He tossed a strong arm about her shoulders, half carrying her as the trio fled down the street. Her eyes streamed with tears of hurt; she could not see where she was going or who guided her, but blindly obeyed.

A block away, Lee ducked into the doorway of a huge stone building.

"Ought to be far enough!" he panted. "Stay back out of the doorway, Monk! And lie down! When that van lets go, the concussion will flatten everything—"

He hurled the girl to the floor, cover-

ing her slim body with his stronger, heavier one. Monk needed no second admonition. He too fell prone in the angle of a wall. . . .

And at that moment—the van let go!

### CHAPTER THREE

#### The Impossible Salient

**T**HERE came an ear-splitting blast that hammered at Lee's eardrums like a bellow of a thousand Niagaras. The hard marble floors on which he and his companions lay trembled with a retching ague, and with a sharp, explosive sound one wall of the building in which they had sought refuge cracked from top to bottom.

A shower of plaster sifted down from the ceiling. The tinkle of broken glass filtered from a dozen sides, and the oblong of the doorway became a fierce hell of flame for a blinding instant.

Then—it was over.

It was over, and they lived!

Lee pulled himself awkwardly to his feet. Monk had risen too, and was peering cautiously around the door jamb at the holocaust they had escaped. His turning eyes met Lee's anxious gaze, and he shook his head, wetting white lips.

"It—it's just as well she *can't* see, Lee. Get her away from here. Don't let her look."

But the girl had recovered, now, and was staring at her rescuers starkly. Her eyes were still reddened with the smart of smoke, but quick with understanding.

She said, "It's that bad?"

Monk nodded somberly. "The entire block flattened like a pancake. Them that didn't hightail it when we did—"

There was no need to finish the sentence. All knew the force and fury of modern HE armaments. The liberation of isotopic uranium's energy. . . .

Lee said abruptly, "Yes. We must get

you home. If you will tell us where—"

"The Army garrison," said the girl dully. "I live at the Alliance post. I am Coral Blaine. My father is Major Blaine, commanding officer—"

She caught her breath sharply, recognizing her two companions for the first time. "But, you—you are the men—"

Monk snorted, and Lee grimaced wryly.

"That's right, Miss Blaine. We are the two men you presented with 'gifts' a short time ago. My name is Greenwell, Lee Greenwell. This is my buddy, Monk McCall."

The embarrassment was now complete. The girl flushed scarlet. Her eyes fell.

In a faltering voice she said, "I owe you my life. For what I did a little while ago, I—I'm sorry."

"Forget it!" suggested Lee roughly. "You did what you thought was right. The only thing you forgot was that we are a free people. Every Earthman has a right to follow his own beliefs—and I happen to be one of those who disbelieve in war, that's all."

"You mean," echoed the girl, "you're a conscientious objector? But—but I thought that disappeared two hundred years ago."

"Not with my people it didn't," retorted Greenwell. "My family is an old Quaker line. We've never believed in armed strife, never will. But—" he shrugged—"that doesn't matter now. May we take you home?"

**A**N HOUR later, having been completely unable to locate a public vehicle in the turmoiled streets of Kennaubaala, the footsore trio entered the gates of Fort Chennault, Earth's army post on the innermost planet.

It was Coral Blaine who supplied the password which allowed them to enter. For six months Fort Chennault had been on a "preparedness" basis, anticipating

any eventuality. But never had it seemed quite so hectic as at this moment. The two visiting strangers could almost feel the tenseness, the air of electric suspense which permeated the encampment.

Apparently even when vouched for by the daughter of the C.O. they were not entirely free of suspicion, for scarcely had they passed the charged portals when a trim, sprightly figure in Army field-green stepped briskly across the parade grounds to meet them.

Lee Greenwell did not need to spot the leaves on the commandant's shoulders to know who he was. His features were an older, leaner, tougher replica of those of the girl, Coral Blaine. Major Blaine said, almost sharply, "Coral, who are these two Earthmen? You know better—"

Coral laughed reproachfully.

"Daddy, please! You know I wouldn't have disobeyed orders unless there were a good reason. But these gentlemen are our friends. I owe them a great debt. You see—they saved my life."

"Saved—" Major Blaine's features tightened with alarm, then relaxed. "Coral, you weren't in that explosion? Lord, we just got a report on it. It must have been frightful. The worst accident since—"

"No," interposed Lee quietly. "It wasn't an accident, Major Blaine."

The C.O. glanced at him sharply. "Eh? What's that? Be careful what you say,

young man. I sympathize with your natural feelings, but we here on Mercury are attempting to maintain a very delicate status quo. It is not wise to make insinuations against our enemies. Officially, the wreckage of that explosives van must be considered an accident."

"In which case," Lee pointed out, "the fault was yours, Major. It was extremely careless of you to send out a truck under the guidance of a man in the condition of that driver."

Major Blaine's trim figure stiffened with affront.

"I beg your pardon, sir! Do you mean to imply that driver was intoxicated?"

"Not at all," replied Greenwell gently. "The driver was—dead! I saw him in the cab of the van before he was cremated in the explosion. Major Blaine, his body was scorched black with the unmistakable burns of a Venusian needle-gun!"

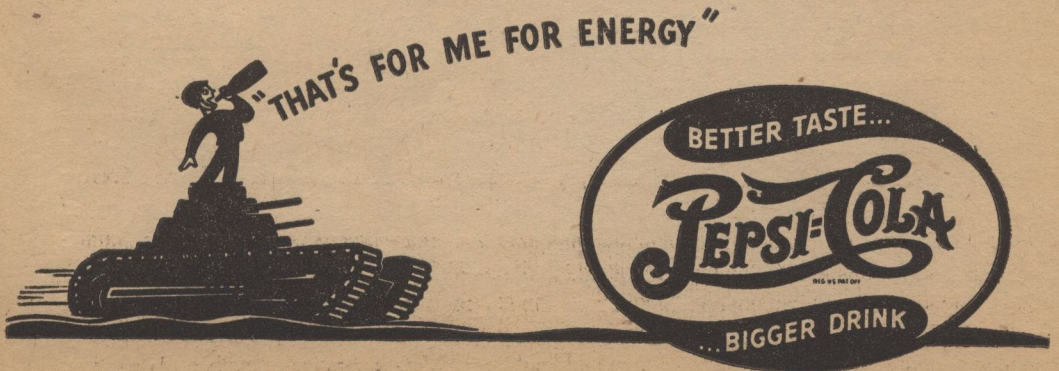
A moment's startled silence greeted his pronouncement. Then, above the girl's gasp and Monk's grunt, Blaine spoke starkly.

"You—you are quite sure of that, sir?"

"I would stake my life on it, Major."

"Then—" whispered the C.O., more to himself than to his audience—"then it has started in earnest! At last! They have struck. And now, God only knows—"

A voice, crying across the parade grounds, stopped him. The voice of a



subaltern racing toward their group on the double-quick, holding in his hand a flimsy from the wireless control.

"Major! Major Blaine! Double-A seal report! Just came in!"

Blaine opened the flimsy, scanned it swiftly. They who watched saw the ruddiness drain from beneath his leathery coat of space tan, leaving his cheeks a sallow ash. His lips pressed thin and fine as parchment.

"Daddy?" cried Coral. "What is it?"

The commandant's shoulders tensed as under a blow. And then, "My apologies, sir," he said to Lee. "You were absolutely right. It has started. This message—"

"Yes?"

"From our observation control rocket circling this planet. A fleet has been sighted, only hours distant. It is a Venusian war fleet coming to take over Mercury!"

**B**LAINÉ went into action. Every man garrisoned at the fort was ordered to battle station. Previous defense plans were hauled out, studied, and in emergency conference recalled to each staff officer at the post.

Ordnance was checked, untarpaulined, prepared to go into instant action. All leaves were cancelled; men on leave were summoned to their posts from wherever they were. Back from Kennaubaala they came and from the Shadow Club in the Twilight Zone, from hunting expeditions on Darkside and from exploration trips into the Hotlands. By car and plane and rocketcraft they came, the wanderers of the wasteland, the fun-loving, hard-fighting, hard-drinking, hard-living Earthmen in whose all-too-few hands rested the defense of the last neutral world.

"But I'm afraid," said Major Blaine some time later, in a rare breathing spell, "I'm afraid we are just preparing for a suicide stand. Gentlemen, I might as well be frank about it.

"From a military standpoint, Mercury is practically indefensible. We are outnumbered, outshipped, and our supply lines are more than twice as long as those of the Venusians. So—we will fall, as Iris fell, and a dozen of the other asteroids. As Luna may soon fall, if the siege of New Chicago does not soon turn in our favor. But—" his jaw set grimly—"I promise you we will give a good account of ourselves."

"If you are so certain of losing," asked Lee Greenwell, "why resist and fight at all, Major?"

Blaine's eyes widened in mute bewilderment.

"Eh? Why fight?"

"Mr. Greenwell," interrupted Coral hastily, "doesn't believe in fighting, Daddy. He is a Quaker."

"Oh—a conchie!" Blaine nodded. "In that case, I won't ask what I was going to, Greenwell. I was on the verge of asking if you and your friend would care to sign up with us. We're shorthanded here, as you have seen. It's a damned bad proposition, anyway. I offer you nothing but the chance to fight—and die."

"Why not," asked Greenwell, "surrender without putting up a battle? It will save lives. According to the Interplanetary Rules of War the Venusians will be obliged to treat you decently as prisoners. And there will come a day when the tables will be turned. That is unavoidable—as certain as fate. Even though the Venusians have scored all the early successes in this struggle, the superior number and reserves of the Alliance forces will win out in the end. Already Earth is springing to all-out war production . . . the Martians have seventy million men in training . . . the outer planets are building a gigantic space fleet—"

"Because," rasped Major Blaine in some exasperation, "that is not the way we of Earth's Foreign Army do things.

We are soldiers, Greenwell, not turncoats. Even though the odds are overwhelmingly against us, we must fight. It would be neither honest nor honorable to lay down our arms without making any resistance.

"Furthermore—and this is even more important—we who garrison Fort Chenault have an important mission to fulfill, though we die in the accomplishment. We must delay the enemy! Every hour we can keep them fighting, every Venusian we can destroy, brings us that much nearer to the day when our armies can turn to the offensive.

"We are expendable! Our lives are worth minutes, weapons, men—to the enemy. But I do not expect you to understand that. You are a conscientious objector."

"I am a miner," said Lee Greenwell simply. "I came to Mercury to make a living. I am caught in the middle of a war of which I want no part."

**M**AJOR Blaine bit back the retort on his lip, and turned to McCall. "And you? Will you fight with us? Or—"

McCall said stolidly, "I think you got the right idea, Major. I'm with you—in spirit; I admire your guts. But Lee Greenwell's my buddy and my boss. Where he goes, I go."

"Very well!" nodded Blaine. In a tone he could not restrain from showing contempt, "Then I would suggest that you both leave the fort now. Within a few short hours it may be very disagreeable here for men of your pacifist temperaments."

Lee said stolidly, "As you wish, sir. Well, Monk?"

"Coming," said Monk. To the commander, "Good luck, Major," he said.

"Thank you." Major Blaine appeared to have been wrestling with another problem. Now he lifted his head suddenly.

"Just a moment. There is one thing you can do for me—if you will."

"Certainly, sir."

"My daughter—" began Blaine. "She is not a member of the armed forces. There is no reason she should endure that which is to come. If you would be kind enough to take her with you, keep her in comparative safety—"

"No!" cried Coral Blaine. "No! I will not leave!"

"Excuse me, my dear," said Major Blaine quietly, "but you will leave. I am speaking now not as a father who loves you, but as the military commandant of this fort. You will accompany these gentlemen—if they will take you."

"Certainly," said Greenwell. "We will be glad—"

"Good! Then that is settled. I think you will be safe in the city. It has no military objectives, a point we will make clear to the Venusians as soon as we can contact them by ultrawave. We will declare Kennaubaala an open city, and spare it the—"

He stopped abruptly. "Then, *au revoir*, my dear. I will see you later."

"No, Daddy! No!" Coral was sobbing openly. "I won't leave you. I won't!"

"Mr. Greenwell—" Major Blaine looked tortured—"If you will be so kind—"

Lee placed his arms about the girl's shoulders.

"Come, Coral," he coaxed. "Your father is right—you must come with us. It will do no good for you to stay."

Major Blaine accompanied them to the gate. To the sentry there he said, "These two Earthmen are to have freedom of the fort, do you understand? It is a special order."

The sentry said, "Yes, sir!" automatically. Then, his eyes identifying the duo, he exclaimed, "Excuse me, sir. These two?"

"Yes, soldier. Why do you ask?"

"Because, sir," declared the sentry in ringing tones, "I just returned from leave in the city. I saw these two just a few hours ago, deep in conversation with an attaché of the Venusian embassy. And this one agreed to visit the embassy tomorrow!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Miner's Pay Lode

LEE GREENWELL'S heart gave a sudden, convulsive lurch and missed a beat. This was trouble—plenty of trouble! In such a moment as this the soldier's accusation meant only one thing—death! He and Monk had been seen conversing with a Venusian and had now roamed Fort Chennault, studying its most secret installations. . . .

There was but one thing to do—and that swiftly. A cry left his lips.

"Okay, Monk! Take the major!"

And as he shouted the order, *he* took the sentry. A whirling leap, battering down the soldier's ray gun—a left to the midsection, doubling the man up; a haymaker right to the jaw—and the sentry crumpled to the ground before he knew what had happened.

Monk moved as swiftly, and with equal effectiveness. His brawny fist met the major's jaw with a meaty *chunk!* and the commandant collapsed.

It all happened so quickly that Coral Blaine didn't have time to scream before Lee covered her mouth with his palm, lifted her under his arm and raced for a small motor speedster parked by the gate.

Into this he and his friend tumbled. As Monk kicked the motor into life he groaned, "Now the fat's really in the fire! Damn it, Lee, I don't know why I pal around with you. You can get into the worst messes."

"Let's talk about that," suggested Lee, "later." To the girl he said, "We're out

of earshot of the fort now. If I remove my hand, will you behave yourself?"

Her eyes scored him with withering disdain, but she nodded angrily. He removed his hand. She spat contemptuously, as if his touch had repelled her.

"So!" she blazed. "The 'conscientious objector' is nothing but an enemy Quisling, masquerading under the guise of a coward."

"Think what you want," said Lee grimly. "I did what had to be done to save my life."

"Your pitiful, worthless life!"

"Maybe so," grunted Lee, "but I like it too well to lose it against a wall before a firing squad."

"Never mind all that," said Monk. "Where shall I take this buggy, Lee? Our camp?"

"No. The city."

"City! Are you crazy! That fleet will be landing in jigtime. Our lives won't be worth a tinker's dam—"

"Blast your stubborn hide," roared Lee. "Do as I say! Drive to the Venusian embassy!"

"Venu—" The girl stared at him in sick contempt. Then she turned away. Throughout the remainder of the ride she would not again turn her eyes even to look upon his face.

THE Venusian embassy was seething with activity. A guard met them at the door, studied them suspiciously when Lee asked for Taor-U, but ushered them inside. There they were joined a few minutes later by the Venusian. He did not seem altogether pleased to see them.

"Mr. Greenwerr," he began impatiently, "we arranged to meet tomorrow, not today! And I specifically requested you to come *arone*. This friend of yours I do not rike. And this woman—"

"That's neither here nor there," said Lee hurriedly. "We came because we had



to. Because your embassy is the one place in Kennaubaala we can be safe until the military situation here is completely under control. You see, we were apprehended and nearly arrested by the Earth forces. We escaped the fort only after shooting and killing Major Blaine and one of his staff officers. This young lady is Miss Coral Blaine, the major's daughter. We seized her as hostage."

As he spoke, Coral's eyes had opened wider and wider, matching the widening of her lips. Now she cried amazedly, "You—you shot my father—"

It was tough going, but again Lee was forced to act swiftly. In a fashion he knew his Venusian friend would approve, he spun and coldly slapped the spluttering girl across the mouth.

"Silence!" he rasped. "I warned you to keep a still tongue in your head! Well, Taor-U?"

The attaché was smiling pleasedly.

"I knew I made no mistake in selecting you, Greenwerr," he purred. "You have made a very fine start. I presume you know what we have planned for you to do?"

"I have guessed. The Mercurians like Earthmen more than Venusians. When your fleet lands and takes over Mercury you want to set me up as puppet governor of the planet. Is that right?"

"Exactry! The natives wurr be more receptive to orders emanating from an Earthman. You wurr do it?"

"Would I be here," demanded Lee, "if I wouldn't?"

Taor-U nodded, satisfied.

"Very good! You are an interrigent man, Greenwerr. Our espionage agents reported that you were such. But these companions of yours?"

"I will be responsible for them." Greenwell smiled meaningfully. "McCall is headstrong, but can be trusted. As for the girl—I have plans for her."

Taor-U nodded understandingly. "I

see. We have no desire to intrude on your private affairs, Greenwerr. Now, come with me. We must see that you are protected against any accident during the attack."

"Attack?" repeated Lee. "Oh, I should have told you—the fleet need not attack Kennaubaala. Major Blaine told us it would be declared an open city."

"So?" Taor-U smiled carelessly. "Perhaps not. But we wurr take no chances. The Mercurians are stubborn. They may decide to fight, and we cannot risk an attack from our rear when we attack the fort. Anyway, our High Command wants to try out our new weapon. It is the onry way we can study its effectiveness in combat."

"New weapon?"

"Yes. A most interesting one, recently deveveloped in our raboratories. An anaesthetic gas which immediatery puts to sreep its victims. That is why you must wear spacesuits. Our warriors wurr be so equipped. It promises to be most entertaining."

Coral Blaine stared at the Venusian with loathing in her eyes. "Water-rat!" she spat. "Warriors? Dirty beasts, you mean!"

Greenwell turned to her harshly. "That will do!" he snapped. "You will begin learning to respect the masters of the new order now, or—"

Then, to the Venusian, "Whenever you are ready, Kru Taor-U. We would like to get our equipment now, so we can leave."

"Reave?"

"Yes. I think it wisest that we hide out in my camp until the hostilities have ended. If it can be demonstrated to the Mercurians that I took no active part in the fighting, but came to them as a 'protector' out of the wilderness—"

Taor-U pondered the suggestion, came to a decision. "Yes, that is a good idea, Greenwerr. Ret it be so. When we have

subdued the enemy, we wurr send for you."

"AND now?" demanded Monk McCall.

In the speedster they had stolen from Fort Chennault the three Earthlings were flashing across unbroken metallic plateaus toward the mining camp wherein Lee and Monk had labored for so many months. They were almost there. More than an hour had elapsed since, equipped with protective bulgers, they had departed the Venusian embassy. There had been signs of battle even as they left the city. The foremost of the Venusian ships had arrived over Kennaubaala, there to be intercepted by Earth vessels. After a brief skirmish, in the course of which four Earth ships of ancient model were destroyed and one Venusian ship slightly damaged, the remaining defenders had been forced to withdraw to Fort Chennault. It was obvious the Earth cause was doomed.

"And now," said Lee Greenwell grimly, "we contact Major Blaine and tell him what we have learned!"

Coral Blaine said feebly, "I—I don't understand! Are you a man, Lee Greenwell, or a pinwheel? You shift with every breeze! You deliberately attacked my father—yet you lied to Taor-U and told him you had killed the commandant at the fort! You refused to fight—promised to aid the Venusians—yet now you are planning to reveal their secrets."

"You," snapped Lee curtly, "talk too much! There's an old adage you seem never to have heard: 'All's fair in war'. I pretended to side with the Venusians because it was my duty to do so, part of a plan devised many months ago. Do you think Monk and I hid ourselves away in the Mercurian Hotlands for six solid months because we enjoyed it?"

"To—to earn a living, I suppose. You are miners."

"Miners!" McCall snorted. "Troubleshooters is the word! You might as well know now, this guy you've been scornin' and disdainin' and hangin' white feathers on ain't plain Lee Greenwell, miner. He's *Captain* Lee Greenwell of the Solar Space Patrol!"

"Captain!" The girl's eyes widened with recollection. "I remember now! The patrolman who was courtmartialed for insubordination and dereliction of duty, drummed out of the service. . . ."

"Right!" grunted Greenwell. "Except that the courtmartial was part of the build-up, too. We knew the Venusians had spies on Earth who would report me as a likely prospect for their Mercurian Quisling.

"But—" he ended his explanation abruptly—"that can wait. We've got a job to do now. And here's the camp. Get the *Sally* warmed up, Monk!"

"The—the *Sally*?" repeated the girl dazedly.

"Our ship," said Lee. "Yeah, I know. Maybe it looks like an old bulk. It should. It took a crew of experts three weeks to make it look like that. But beneath the rust and grime is the smoothest, toughest little patrolship you ever lifted grav's in! Get going, Monk!"

"Right!" said Monk, and hurried into the airlock of the dilapidated little scouter beside which they had stopped.

"And now," said Lee, "to get in touch with your dad!"

HE LED the way to the control turret of the scouter, snapped on the ultrawave radio, dialed it to the private Army wavelength and contacted Fort Chennault. Within minutes he had Major Blaine on the screen. Blaine's swollen jaw dropped when he saw who had audioed him, and identified his daughter standing beside the speaker.

"Greenwell—you! And Coral! Where are you?"

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Intrigue on the Inner World

"Skip all that!" commanded Lee. "Identification code word: *Triumphant!*"

"Gad!" Major Blaine started violently. "You're the Patrolman! Our instructions are to cooperate with you in every possible way. What do you want to know?"

"The situation—quickly. How are things going?"

"Badly. The entire Venusian fleet has landed on the Kennaubaala spaceport. The city's radio has gone off the air. We don't know why."

"I do!" grunted Lee. "Anaesthetic gas. Go on! Are they already laying siege to the fort?"

"Anaes—" Blaine gulped and continued. "Yes. We are encircled. They're beginning to haul up heavy armament. Can't get to us from above, you know, because of our aerial force-shield. But they can crack our shield by steady ground bombardment, and that's their plan. It—it looks hopeless, Greenwell."

"A fight is never hopeless," gritted Lee, "till the last man's dead. Hold tight, and give 'em all you've got until we get there! We're hitting them from the rear. If you see them begin to crumple, send up every ship you've got. Do you understand?"

"Yes. We'll do our best."

"Good! Then that's all. No—wait! Another thing. If you see a large meteorite approaching Mercury, don't try to disrupt it! This is important!"

"Large meteorite? But I don't understand—"

"You will! It's on its way now. See you later!"

And Lee broke the connection. As he did so, there sounded Monk's voice over the intercommunicating system. His words were quick and tense.

"O. Q., Cap! Hypoes hot!"

"Good. Lift gravs!"

With a whine of surging hypatomics, the *Sally* rose from its cradle and flashed toward Kennaubaala.

"YOU know what this means, Lee?" said Monk McCall anxiously. "We're one against twenty. If the lump doesn't get here in time—"

"It will," said Greenwell. "It has to. They promised it would."

"Lump?" repeated Coral. "What are you talking about?"

"You'll see," Lee told her. "O. Q., Monk. We're almost there. Hop the rotor!"

"Right!" said Monk. He turned to the girl. "Sure you can handle this jalopy?"

Coral laughed aloud. "I was born on a spacecruiser, teathed on a dixie-rod and learned my ABC's from a control panel. I can handle anything that ever blasted a jet."

"You'll have a chance to prove it," said Lee. "Monk and I will have to work the rotors, and you've got to fly the *Sally*. Your gun cold, Monk?"

"Icy!"

"Good! Mine's hot. Coordinates are checked O. Q.? Then we're ready, I guess."

Coral Blaine said wonderingly, "I thought I knew all the tricks of space warfare, but this is a new one on me. One twin-rotor fires an intensely hot beam, its mate fires a beam of absolute zero. What's the idea?"

"A little stunt Monk and I dreamed up in our spare time. It's never been tried in actual battle, but we've used it experimentally, and from a theoretical point of view it's the only way to smash Venusian defenses.

"You see, coming from a normally torrid planet, the Venusians have developed spacesuits which are invulnerable to heat rays such as those fired by the usual rotor gun. Their force-shields simply *absorb*

extremes of temperature. Ditto their superquartzite head-globes, which are designed to withstand with equal ease the terrible heat of rays and the frightful cold of space.

"But matter has its limitations! One of these is that a thing can't expand with heat and contract with cold at one and the same time! Therefore, we use a double gun on them—one firing a stream of heat, the other shooting freezing cold. When the two strike at the same time—*snappo!* There goes the head globe, the most vulnerable spot of the bulger!"

"And—and it will work?"

"That," said Lee tautly, "we will know in the next few minutes. Because there's our first objective—that troop of marching water-rats! Bring her down, Coral! We'll strafe 'em from fifty feet. Ready, Monk?"

"Let 'er rip!"

So flashed the *Sally* into battle. For the time being the little fighter had things all her own way. The Venusian fleet, supremely confident, had cradled. Its troops had disembarked and were marching for frontal assault on Fort Chennault. There was no time to hurl ships into the sky to meet the single, menacing combat craft which appeared from nowhere.

As the *Sally* flashed groundward, the bulger-garbed leader of the foremost attack force whirled, saw it coming, and shouted swift commands to his followers. What orders he issued will never be known. What defense hand guns could have offered against the heavier rotors is dubious, anyhow.

But whatever frantic plan spawned in his batrachian mind at the last moment was never put into execution. Even as he turned to shout, the double beam of the twin-rotors smashed squarely into his supposedly invulnerable headpiece. Shards of superquartzite splintered and fell as the headpiece broke into a million fragments.

And the leader fell, victim of a horrid death, his body blasted by heat, shriveled

with cold, seared by those same gases his own people had liberated over the slumbering city of Kennaubaala.

**H**E WAS but the first. The *Sally* dipped, swooped, glided like a winging bird. Where its beams lashed down upon the invaders, piles of bodies toppled in gruesome windrows. One whole troop was lost to a man. Another decimated; a third scythed with the twin rays of doom. . . .

It was more than even brave men could stand, and the Venusians were not brave when confronted with superior force. Their valor was greatest when they had the odds strongly in their favor. The ranks trembled—wavered—broke.

Terrified units shattered into motes which were frightened individuals, racing, scrambling, crawling for any spot which offered shelter from the dreadful aerial attack.

"We're gettin' 'em!" howled Monk with enthusiasm. "By jumpin' Jupiter, we're lickin' 'em single-handed, Cap! It works—and *how* it works! Boy, look at 'em run!"

"And here come the ships from the fort," cried Coral from her bucketseat at the control panel. "We're not alone any more."

"*No!*" called Lee. "The fort's craft must not lift! Contact them immediately, Coral—order them down!"

"But—but why? Together we can clean out the entire rat's nest."

"Do as I say! They'll be destroyed. See—the Venusian fleet is manned at last! Here they come, a dozen of their finest cruisers."

Monk twisted sidewise, glanced once and understandingly at his friend and superior officer.

"Oh-oh! Then this is it, pal? Lights out?"

"I'm afraid so. I was hoping the Lump would arrive in time, but I guess it wasn't

as fast as the experts figured it would be. Well—" he shrugged—"it was a good fight while it lasted, anyway. There's only one thing I regret."

"Yeah?"

"Coral. I'm sorry she had to get mixed up in this."

Having called the fort, Coral was beside the two men with whom she had fought. Her voice was level, unafraid.

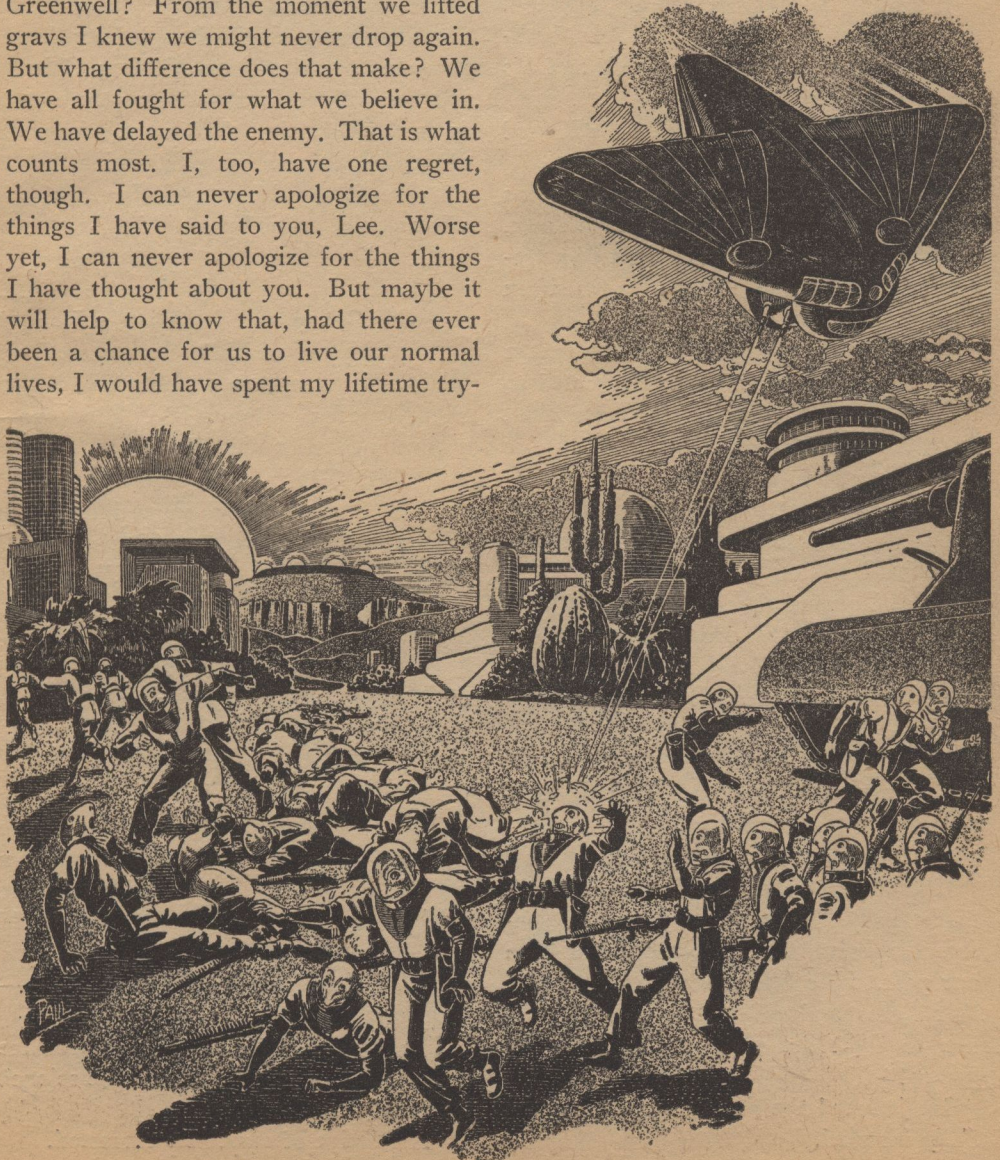
"Do you think that bothers me, Lee Greenwell? From the moment we lifted gravs I knew we might never drop again. But what difference does that make? We have all fought for what we believe in. We have delayed the enemy. That is what counts most. I, too, have one regret, though. I can never apologize for the things I have said to you, Lee. Worse yet, I can never apologize for the things I have thought about you. But maybe it will help to know that, had there ever been a chance for us to live our normal lives, I would have spent my lifetime try-

ing to make up for the wrong I did you.

"It's funny, isn't it, Lee? I've known you and Monk for less than one day, but of all the men in the many worlds I know you two best. I like Monk. And you—I think I love you."

"Coral!" cried Lee. "Coral, you don't know what you are saying! You're—"

"Completely in my right mind," said Coral a little sadly. "Yes, Lee. If only



things were different—*oh!*” She broke off with a tiny scream. “Your rotors—quick! Here they come!”

Greenwell whirled to his weapon. As she had warned, the Venusian fleet was almost upon them. Within scant seconds they would be within firing range. He fingered the butt of his rotor, preparing to sell his life for the highest possible price.

**T**HEN, his eyes lifting to the golden skies of Mercury for a glimpse of the space for whose freedom Earthmen fought, he too cried aloud, and his cry was a paean of joy.

“The Lump! Look, Monk—the Lump! It’s come!”

Monk said, “God!” and his tone was not sacrilegious. It was fraught with awe, as well it might be, at the sight of a tremendous meteorite flaming down upon them from space.

At such speed was it traveling that a fine veil of shimmering flame seemed to quiver about its surface. It had a thin, fiery tail that stretched out behind it for countless miles.

“It—it’s a meteorite!” screamed the girl. “No, it’s an asteroid! A rogue asteroid!”

“No!” roared Lee Greenwell triumphantly. “It’s a *spaceship!* The first of a whole fleet of its kind, the newest and greatest invention of Alliance military genius! An asteroid hollowed out, equipped with super-hypatomics, and built into a gigantic, invulnerable, unbeatable man-o’-war! We’re saved! And Mercury is still free!”

“Which bein’ the case,” yelped Monk exuberantly, “we scam out o’ range before the Lump turns loose. We’ve done our part. Like Shakespeare says, ‘Them that fights and pulls their freight, will live to fight some other date!’ Home, James!”

He jammed the studs that whirled the *Sally* forward.

**L**ATER, when Major Blaine had completed the task of incarcerating the sorely beaten Venusian prisoners, the leaders of the Alliance freedom army were gathered in the now-peaceful headquarters of Fort Chennault.

Colonel Ring Ballard, commander of the meteorite-spaceship, said genially, “I’m terribly sorry we were late, Greenwell. But we ran afoul of a little trouble off Luna. Ambushed by a fleet of Venusians, and we had to take time out to smash them. You’ll be glad to learn, though, that the siege of New Chicago has been lifted. From now on the enemy is on the defensive. There are a hundred more *Leopards* under construction.”

“The *Leopard*,” grinned Lee. “That’s what you’ve named your ship?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s O. Q. for the official records. But to me, she’ll be the Lump.”

“Speaking of which,” interrupted Coral Blaine, “I have been meaning to ask *you* something for quite a while. Who—er—who named your ship?”

“Who? Why, I did, of course.”

“That,” said Coral suspiciously, “is what I thought. And just who is Sally?”

“Who *was* Sally, you mean.”

“What? You mean you named a ship after an old girl of yours?”

Both men snorted. Monk said, “Old girl! Boy, he’d turn over in his grave to hear that!”

“H-he? Sally—a *he?*”

“The *Sally*,” said Lee gravely, “was named after Salvation Smith, one of the grandest old guys who ever packed a prayer book and a gun. He didn’t believe in fighting—but, when he had to, could fight like a dozen wildcats.”

“Oh!” said Coral bleakly. “I see. A—a relative of yours?”

Lee grinned. And despite the presence of a startled Major Blaine, and the colonel, took the girl into his arms.

“A relative of *ours*,” he corrected.

# FAN MAGS

(In every issue we will review as many of the current crop of science fiction fan magazines as space allows. All magazines for review should be addressed to ASTONISHING STORIES, Fictioneers, Inc., 210 E. 43rd St., N. Y., N. Y.)

*FANTASITE*, published by Phil Bronson, 1710 Arizona Avenue, Santa Monica, California. Bi-monthly; 10c. Good articles by Corporal Doug Blakely, Phil Bronson, Donn Brazier and Walt Lieb-scher make this a banner issue. The illustrations are good, but not too well reproduced. Bob Tucker's column on *Recommended Reading* is worth recommending itself; it lists and synopsisizes fantasy books by non-fantasy authors, that the casual fan may have missed. This magazine shows promise of coming close to filling the gap left by the suspension of Harry Warner's *Spaceways*.

*FANTASY FICTION FIELD*, published by Julius Unger, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York. Weekly; 5c. The rumor has gone out that *Fantasy Fiction Field* is no more; this may be, for the last issue to reach this magazine is dated November. We hope it's wrong, for the bright comments and spot news in this publication make it valuable.

*FUTURIA*, published by Bowen Conway, 137 East 27th Street, New York City. Occasional; 5c. After a very bad start, the latest issue shows great improvement. It contains a lengthy account of the doings of the Futurian Society of New York for the past year or so, plus a detailed and humorous genealogical chart of the mythical Clan Conway.

*FUTURIAN WAR DIGEST*, published by J. Michael Rosenblum, 4 Grange Terrace, Chapelton, Leeds 7, England. Occasional; 10c. Undeterred by bombings and blitzkriegs, the remnants of British

fandom who are still out of uniform—and some who are in—have managed to produce a few more issues of a fairly large and quite interesting fan mag. The *Digest's* contents, strangely enough, are not too preoccupied with the war either; book reviews, notes on famous fantasy classics of old times, accounts of fan activities and news items take up almost all of its pages, with only a few paragraphs here and there to give an inkling of the difficulties under which it was published.

*SHANGRI L'AFFAIRES*, published by Aloj, 1055 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California. Occasional; free. The latest information on the goings-on around the city of Los Angeles and its active and alert bunch of science-fictionists. A one-page playlet dealing with the reunion of the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society after the war is the best single item.

*ULTRA*, published by Eric Russell, 274 Edgecliff Road, Woollahra, Sydney, New South Wales. Bi-monthly; 10c. This latest issue is dated December, 1941. The delay in sending it out was due to publishing difficulties unconnected with the war—which again gives us cause to marvel at the determination of British fandom.

*VOICE OF THE IMAGINATION*, published by Morojo, P. O. Box 6475, Metropolitan Station, Los Angeles, California. Occasional; 10c. As usual, *VOM* is full to the brim with letters of all sorts. This issue, luckily, the interesting ones predominate over the dull, with missives by Bob Tucker, Jack Speer and Mel Brown being among the most enjoyable.

# OUTPOST OF THE EONS

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Free Folk Die Hard!

MANNING held his fire and watched the helmet bob invitingly at the bend in the tunnel. It hung there a moment, then was jerked back as its owner realized the ruse had failed.

"Sucker trick," he said aloud. "The oldest in the book. They're not very flattering."

"Yes, they are," answered Brooklyn Cordry. "There are fifty of them and only us two here. That's sheer flattery."

She stopped talking and Manning saw her look at her faintly gleaming wrist chronometer.

"What time is it?" he asked. Not that it mattered, not with fifty so-called "police" outside and only the two of them alive of the dozen that had been trapped in the raid.

"Twenty-two ten," she said. "An hour and fifty minutes to midnight. Think we can hold out?"

Manning didn't answer—the only answer was a flat "no", and that was unnecessary cruelty. They were bound to die here, though the pirate rayshield





**Though the battle to save his world had been over for centuries—one man, pitted against the pirate horde of Death—still had to fight it!**

around Rhea could last less than two hours more; though it would be only that long before the lean rockets of Tri-Planet's navy could come blasting down to restore honest rule to the pirate planet.

*Hiss.* The flaring muzzle of his heat pistol lashed out with a gout of flame. It ravened down the tunnel, calcined the charred rock wall. A man's voice belloyed hoarsely and the elbow that had incautiously showed itself was rapidly withdrawn. Manning grinned in the dusk. There was one more fellow passenger for Charon's ferry when they went, too.

He inspected the gun. It was empty. He passed it to Brooklyn Cordry and got a full one back.

"Here," she said tightly.

Manning squinted at the object she was offering in the darkness. It was another gun.

"What—" he began.

"There are two shells in it, Steve," she said in a tiny voice. "That's all there are."

Two shells. One apiece. Manning didn't need to ask what that was for. When the other gun was empty and the rush came—well, death wasn't the worst fate the books held.

Manning stretched his racked frame and shifted position uneasily. A tiny pebble was dislodged and clattered down the rock wall. Immediately three lances of flame spat hideously at the rock barricade from the bend in the tunnel. They rebounded harmlessly away, but a drip of molten rock trickled down the wall.



"One thing's sure," Manning said, as though nothing had happened. "Eliot hasn't talked. If Eliot had cracked, they wouldn't need us. They'd have these men where they're needed instead of penning us up—"

"Steve!" Brooklyn's whisper was tense, afraid. "Steve, what's that?"

Manning rubbed his eyes and stared, cursing the gloom. Was it a cloud rolling down the tunnel at them? Did he hear the faint hiss of—

"Sleep gas!" he snarled. "Gas! God!" He leveled the heat pistol, squeezed the release, held it down recklessly as a dozen bolts of flaming hellfire ravened down the tunnel. He hurled the empty weapon away as a thousand-year-old stalactite slumped and dropped soddenly from the ceiling. A wisp of vapor invaded his nostrils, set his brain to reeling. He tried desperately to hold his breath, to fight off the onrush of unconsciousness—but the gas was stronger than he.

Manning grabbed for the mercy gun with the two shells. His clawing hand was as weak as a babe's, undirected as the hand of a sleeper. He found the gun, and his curling finger shot a single bolt into the ceiling as the tunnel spun madly about him—

Then abruptly he was asleep.

**M**ANNING said, "No!" He said it loudly, coldly. He forced his face to be passive, to show no emotion. He rubbed his arm where it still stung from the needle they had given him to offset the sleep gas.

Hilton noticed the gesture and smiled. Lean, dark Hilton, self-styled president of Rhea—a pirate with a price on his head that would buy a planetoid for the man who caught him.

"Afraid of pain, Manning?" he purred. "If your elbow bothers you, think of what a little skillful extraction of information will do."

"Go to hell," Manning said woodenly. "Soon. An hour from now, if you follow me."

Hilton laughed. "I follow you," he said. "In an hour our rayscreen breaks down. In an hour the Tri-Planet rockets will be able to get through. . . . Only they won't, because an hour from now they will have been destroyed—*two hours ago!*"

Manning stiffened. They had learned that much, then! Eliot had broken down enough to tell them what his machine was—the dimension-warping time machine that was the only hope the pirates had.

Hilton read his thoughts, and his smile persisted for a moment.

Then, like the turning of a switch, it was off.

"Damn you, Manning," he snarled. "Damn you and the fat cats like you that keep on the good side of the law. You think you can stall us off; you think that your infernal fleet will come galloping over the hill with flags flying to save you. I'll go back in the scrapheap, then, won't I? Back where I belong—a cheap petty crook, raiding the space lanes—"

He stopped in mid-sentence, brought up with a jerk. His eyes narrowed, and Manning realized with a chill that he was hopped up to the ears. *Drugs*, Manning realized. *There goes the last chance. He's kill-crazy!*

"Bring her in," Hilton said slowly. "Bring in the girl." One of the silent deadly men at the door spun round and went out.

"We have no time to waste, Manning," Hilton said. "We had an hour when they brought you here; we have fifty minutes now. That's enough."

Manning held his stone face. Not a flicker of an eyelash; not a sign of weakening. Whatever came, it would be better than giving in and telling them what they had to know. . . .

"I fought for this planet," Hilton said. He wasn't boasting wildly; he was a dead-

ly menace. "I want to keep it. I will keep it. You have to show me how. Eliot told us a lot, but he died before he could tell us everything. We have the machine; we know what it is; we've laid plans to use it. You will show us how to make it work—"

The silent man came back then and Brooklyn Cordry, hands bound behind her, was thrust in before him.

"I can't torture you, Manning," Hilton said. "I haven't the time. The girl here—she looks like the answer, Manning. If you help me, I'll forget what you've been, what you've done to me, you and your stupid Free People that are all dead now, on this planet. I'll pay for your help, Manning. If I start work on the girl, I'll have to be fast and thorough. She—won't ever be beautiful again. Make your choice."

The lean face hardened, and the eyes were the eyes of a predatory hawk. "Very well, Manning," he said after a second. "We'll do it the hard way. Ryan—" He whirled to one of the guards, spat a command—"You know what to do. Get moving!"

Manning fought to keep his lips sealed, fought to keep from saying it. What was one girl, any girl, against the welfare of a world? What was a life or a love—when the fate of a million people was in balance? He fought to quiet the voice inside him. But it wouldn't be quieted. It forced its way out, past his grim-held lips. . . .

"All right," he croaked. "Damn you, Hilton, *all right!*"

**H**OW many hairs on a blonde girl's head? A million? Seven million? *Please, God, Manning thought grimly, let it be seven million and a bit. That will make it just right. Seven million people on a world, and I sell them all into slavery for the sake of a girl. Each hair on her head—one man, woman or child*

*whose freedom I've given away forever.*

He said, "This thing has never been tried out, Hilton. It's apt to be damned dangerous."

Hilton laughed. "Funny man," he observed. "You want me to worry about danger now. Go ahead—move. And don't forget, we still have the girl. And you."

Manning bent to the dials and levers, jury-rigged, all of them, and apt to break down if the power went on. It would be easy to make sure they broke down—

But while he thought that, he was carefully, skillfully adjusting them with his quick, sure technician's touch. He wanted to avoid the chance that they might break down, that the machine might not work. For they still had Brooklyn Cordry.

What he couldn't understand, he thought, was that she just stood there, looking at him. They had a cruel gag jammed in her rose-white mouth, and she couldn't speak, or move her hands that were tied behind her back. And her eyes, of course; they were looking at him with horror and fright. There was strength in them that said she was ready to die, even by torture, and would not want to live at the price he had promised to pay. But she didn't struggle or try to stop him—and that was a strange thing.

*She trusts me!* he saw with a flash of insight. *She thinks I'll work something out—some way to get us out of this without helping Hilton and his killers.*

"She's ready, Hilton," Manning found himself saying. "That extension cord—plug it into the jack right above it. I'm sorry, very sorry," he apologized, "that this is only a rough model. There are no switches on the master control—only a jack and cord."

"No," said Hilton. "You plug it in." He looked at his watch, smiled with a hard twist to his lips. "Twenty-eight minutes," he said. "All the time in the world. I was commencing to grow impatient, but I see you weren't stalling after

all. Now plug it in—and do it quick.”

Manning picked up the cord with its machined brass tip and rolled it between his fingers as his eyes darted for the last time over the board. He licked his lips, then, and with a quick motion jammed the cord in.

Nothing happened.

Nothing at all happened for one, two, three seconds. Then Hilton, his voice a strangled snarl, said, “What the hell’s the matter, Manning? If you’re trying—”

“No,” said Manning, his voice harsh with emotion.

This was something more than a weapon, here before him. Above and beyond the danger and the lust for battle that was raging in these men, there was the cool hand of science at work; the first test of an unknown machine.

“No,” said Manning, “I’m not trying anything. Look!”

The tubes, gas-filled bubbles of crystal, were glowing, all a faint red, seeping through the open spaces of the rough-rigged board that was the front of the squat machine. As they warmed, slowly, the colors changed and each tube shone with a different hue, as their ionization spectra asserted themselves. A bank of three cast lurid violet glare; an argon-filled tube was brilliant blue-white; one of neon was blood red. A bright pale green tube was nitrogen-filled, with a filament in which sodium was alloyed.

“Watch,” said Manning, and he himself was watching. He alone saw the thing that was happening to the rheostat he had left half open. He saw it beginning to show light itself, though dimmed by the brighter glow from the giant tubes. Saw it turn red from heat, then white, as the current, transformed by the tubes into a thing of impossible frequency and fantastic power, surged through with more power and more.

Probably Hilton saw it too, right there at the last. His eyes, half-lidded to keep

out the flood of light as he stared at the machine, flared wide and he opened his mouth.

But that was late, and the current was already too much for the thin, resistant wire of the rheostat. It glowed brilliant violet-white, then abruptly slumped sluggishly, parting and refusing with violent colors. And the current no longer had to follow the long, tortuous, reducing coil, but could leap directly through, and so it was stronger than it should have been—

There was no sound, but there was an explosion of fierce and blinding light—as the building shifted crazily underfoot.

**I**T LASTED only a second, and then the tubes were flaring dully again, in normal operation. Some device within the machine, some automatic cut-off installed by the dead designer, had come into operation. But fierce heat was beating from the machine, and Manning was driven back from it.

Hilton said, “What the hell!”

He shrugged and spoke to Manning. “Is that the way it’s supposed to work?” he asked.

“How would I know?” Manning’s stare was into the eyes of Hilton, and the pirate president could find no trickery there. “Eliot could tell you that—if he was alive. Nobody else.”

But he had his private thoughts, and he kept them private. Only half by accident had that rheostat been partly open. The rest was design, subconscious design that was meant to keep the pirate from getting what he wished. Though Manning had no proof to back it up, he felt sure that this present state of the machine was temporary; the automatic cut-off would not last forever. . . .

“What time are we in now?” asked Hilton.

There was no fantasy in the question as he asked it, no sense of strangeness. Just the horrible dark yearning of a man

who sees what he wants most of all in his grasp—when the thing he wants is sordid power.

Manning squinted at a dial, trying to make out its reading through the haze of heat that beat out from the plastic face plate of the machine. He shook his head.

"No idea," he said. "I don't even know whether it's past or future. The dials that ought to register that seem to be broken."

A certain new grimness was in Hilton's jaw as he absorbed that, and the dark lines under his eyes sank deeper into the skin. His gaze as he looked at Manning grew colder, menacing.

"Nix," said Manning. "I didn't do anything. I didn't guarantee results on this. It was your idea."

Hilton nodded. "Well," he said, "any time will do. Providing that we can get ships into space, and bring them back into the right time when they're behind Tri-Planet's damned fleet."

He paused, regarding Manning. "We can do that, can't we?" he asked slowly, but with a burning intensity.

Manning shrugged again and nodded. "The time machine can send your fleet into the future a year or so, yes," he said. "Your fleet can form itself beyond the rayscreens, beyond where Tri-Planet's fleet is blasting away. Then you can bring them back into the proper time and jump the inner-world fleet from the back. It ought to work. . . ."

Hilton smiled, and the tenseness was going out of his face. "After all," he said "we can't expect too much from our new chief technician on his first day at the job, can we?" He was grinning now; then he sobered.

"Ryan!" he snapped, and the deadly, silent man at the door took a quick step forward. "Order the fleet out to rendezvous eighteen hundred miles out—at the admiral's discretion."

The silent guard saluted and left.

But in a minute he was back—and he was no longer a model of strictest, most punctilious military perfection.

He was haggard, sweating, drawn. "Sir," he said hoarsely. "Sir—the ships—aren't there. Nothing's there!"

Hilton smothered a curse and dashed to a window, peering out into the night sky. The outlook was dark, darker than it should have been. Gone were the sweeping beams of the anti-rocket lights that should have been probing the sky; gone were the flares of the patrol rockets of the pirate republic's guard fleet.

Hilton whirled and glared tightly at Manning.

There was death and torture in his deep-set eyes.

"Crossed!" he hissed. "Manning, you're not getting away—"

"Shut up, Hilton," said Manning. He brushed the pirate president aside, not with bravado or insolence, but as a man does who has an important thing on his mind. He went to the window.

"Not a thing," said Manning. "Nothing there. I wonder—"

He turned and said, "Untie the girl. I need her."

He cast the blackness from his mind—the wavering blackness, unbroken by any light, that he had seen from the window. Now was the time for action, not for wonderment at what had happened.

Hilton was looking at him, chill speculation on his face. He said to the guard, not taking his eyes off Manning, "Untie the girl." And he stood there, watching Manning, his hand hovering by the blaster butt at his hip.

Manning said, "You can't keep us here, Hilton. The girl and I are going out to look around. If we find out where we are, it'll be that much easier to figure out what to do."

"You're not going out," said Hilton. "Not alone, and not while it's dark. When dawn breaks—if dawn ever does—we'll

all go out and scout around. This is a time machine. If you can make it work, it won't matter how much time we waste here—or *now*, or whatever you'd call it. If you can't, it just won't matter."

Manning shrugged. He was only half listening, for once again he was watching something. For Hilton to see, he was watching the guard release Brooklyn Cordry from her gag and the ropes on her wrists. But with the corner of his eye he was seeing the machine again, watching the dial that was flickering ominously in rhythmic surges, each surge growing. Each run of the needle across the face of the dial came closer and perilously closer to a thin red line that seemed to waver and crawl in the heat that beat out from the machine.

Brooklyn Cordry was free now, standing there almost dazed, absently rubbing her red-lined wrists where the ropes had chafed them. With quick sure steps, Manning crossed to her and circled her shoulders with an arm, whispering to her as he steadied her.

Then, "Look, Hilton," said Manning, his voice straining with some emotion stronger than triumph. "Look at the machine!"

The heat was pounding out of it, stronger than ever, flaring up with sun-fury. And there was a thin, singing sound, as of a mammoth brazen teakettle. It was really the shriek of tortured metal surrendering to the buffets of more power than ever should have been thrust through it.

Abruptly there was a flare of light—and the sound stopped.

Silence. There stood Hilton, surprised with one hawklike hand stretching out to the machine, the guards, slack-jawed and staring, Manning and Brooklyn Cordry by the guards. And the light from the machine died down and was gone. But the room was not dark—for light was pouring in through the window. Sunlight.

One, two quick steps and Manning was by the side of the guard named Ryan. A flickering motion of his hand, and the gun was not in Ryan's holster, but in Manning's hand, gripped tight as Manning sprang back and covered them all.

"My turn now, Hilton," he observed. "Keep your hands where they are."

**B**UT Hilton wasn't listening. Slack-jawed, dull-eyed, he was staring out the window, gaping at a sun that was brighter than the sun should be, even from Earth—most especially from this remote moon of distant Saturn.

Manning looked too. That was never the sun—never so bright, with great goutts of flame reaching out from it like the hungry arms of an octopus, seeking to devour a world in an agony of fire. If it was the sun—the sun had gone mad.

"God," said Hilton. "What now—"

Manning gripped Brooklyn Cordry by the shoulder, spun her around and half shoved her out the door.

"Come along, Hilton," he said, gesturing with the gun. "You can leave your chums here. You and Miss Cordry and I are going out for a while. It's dawn now, abrupt and unpleasant though this sunrise may be. You said we'd go out together at dawn. You were quite right—"

Hilton snarled like a trapped animal as he came out of his momentary stupefaction and jerked his eyes away from the window. You could see the tiny tendons pulsing on the back of his lean hand as he battled against the supreme temptation to go for his blaster.

But he didn't reach for the gun slung at his hip, and he did come along, sidling close to Manning, ready for a lunge at him if Manning gave him the thinnest fraction of a chance.

"Tell the guards to stay here," Manning ordered.

"Stay here," echoed Hilton, never tak-

ing his venomous eyes off Manning. "Stay here like the man says," said Hilton, and there was bitter mockery in his voice, an undertone that said quite clearly, "*Follow me—and kill him!*"

"You're our safe-conduct," said Manning, waving Hilton on ahead of him, holding the blaster steady and ignoring the impotent guards. "If anything happens to us—a blaster will happen to you."

But in one thing Manning had been wrong. He had brought Hilton with him to order the guards away. He had expected guards to be there, in the presidential mansion of Rhea—that platinum structure that had meant serfdom for a thousand prisoners.

But there were no guards. There was nobody. There was the corridor outside the room, empty, and a sweeping flight of marble stairs at the end of it. And down the stairs, marching grandiosely to the bottom, was a single line of furry lemon-yellow monkeylike creatures, each one holding the tail of the one that went before. Where they had come from, Manning did not know; and where they were going, Manning did not believe.

For at the bottom of the steps, where they were headed, was green ooze and gray-green trees, lush purple foliage and dirty brackish streams. A primordial, prehistoric, steaming jungle, coming right up to the foot of the marble stairs—where should have been the grand ballroom of the president's mansion. The ballroom was gone, and so was half the building—for it was sheared cleanly in half, and the other half was nowhere to be seen!

From the jungle came weird hoots and lethal, bestial bellows of wild animals, of types never known to Manning. But their sound was a muted thing that did not penetrate, for there was too much wonder and awe in Manning's mind.

The time machine had worked—they were in Rhea's remote past, the dawn age of the satellite!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Five from the Future

"**S**TAND here, Hilton," said Manning, not thinking of the madness of the jungle being there, not dreaming of the fantasy of it all. He gestured the gun at the pirate president.

"Stand by the doorway, Hilton," said Manning, backing away. "With your back to us. If you move or call out while I can still see you—I'll blast you, Hilton. Look at me and make sure of that."

"Listen," Hilton croaked, his voice ragged and dry. "Let's stop this foolishness. Let's declare a truce while we figure out where we are and how to get out of it. Our private—"

Manning laughed sharply. "There's no truce, Hilton," he said. "You wouldn't keep it a second longer than you had to—and I'm not entirely sure I would."

Hilton shrugged somberly and turned about, his eyes staring blankly into the doorway from which they had come.

They left him that way, Manning with a finger to his lips, cautioning Brooklyn Cordry to silence. They walked silently, rapidly to the edge of the bush. Brooklyn Cordry would have hesitated there. Her eyes were wide in consternation at the thought of what might lurk in the tangled, unearthly brush. But Manning would not have it; Manning touched her shoulder and walked on into the jungle.

The blaster in his hand was a thing sharper than brutal fangs, more dangerous than the sting of a serpent. Whatever lay in the jungle could be no worse than death. Here, in the presidential mansion

that stood in solitary, ragged grandeur in its fantastic new surroundings, lay things that made death seem a favor earnestly to be sought. For Hilton—mad, outlaw Hilton—had been crossed, and his vengeance was not mild.

Now sinking ankle-deep into primordial ooze, now hearing the soles of their sandals slither across bare, raw rock, they hurried on, fighting the tangle of varihued vines, breathless, panting in the harsh steaming mist of the jungle. There was stillness about them, the silence of expectant waiting. From all about them, but a few hundred yards off, there were the shrieks of strange birds and the hoarse cries of animals. But there where they walked, and for a little way all about, there was silence. Waiting silence; watchful, ready silence.

A hundred yards inside the cover of the jungle, but seeming as far from the mansion as from Polaris, they paused at the brink of a swollen, sluggish stream. It rippled and burred in the center with the hint of life under the surface that swam about in ceaseless quest of food.

"I'm tired," said Brooklyn Cordry, panting, but it was not a complaint. "I don't think I can walk very far in—this."

Manning, staring at the carpet of needlelike bramblegrass, red and lethal-looking, said, "Well, don't sit down here. You might not get up—that stuff looks dangerous."

He stood there, holding the blaster loosely but always ready, looking about them. You couldn't see far into this dense, subtropical jungle, but by the same token, it would be hard for a marauder to see you. Manning took a quick look at Brooklyn Cordry, and at his own clothing. Bright, vivid colors they were—which was bad. But then the jungle, with its harsh purples and greens and reds, was vivid too. Almost they were camouflaged, matching their setting.

Manning, standing there, panting, was

conscious suddenly of a tension building up in the air. There was a feeling of strain that made his scalp quiver and itch, as though somewhere a mighty surge of power was leaping into the atmosphere, preparing to—

The machine! Hastily Manning looked at the chrono-dial on his wrist. Ten minutes since the last surge. . . .

Then it happened. There was an instant of reeling change, then the tension was gone.

So was the jungle about them.

**T**HERE was red sand around them, glistening. Sand dunes and valleys, stretching off into the distance. Overhead was a wan red sun, tiny and terribly far away. Manning and the girl, standing there, felt sharp cold make their exposed skin tingle, saw their breath form dense white vapor in the air. They were not dressed for cold, not on Rhea, warmed by the radium deposits under its surface that had made it a thing worth Hilton's while to conquer.

Brooklyn Cordry said, "It's cold, Steve." She looked about dismally, shivering as she took in the monotonous scene. Far to the west—what Manning thought was the west, though there was no way to tell—was a low range of hills. She looked at it, then at Steve.

"Do you think there might be a cave there, where we could keep warm?" she asked.

Manning shrugged. "Probably," he said. "Unless we're in the future even farther than I think—in which case erosion'll have made sure that there's not a cave on the planet. But it doesn't matter. I think—I know—that the machine is going to snatch us out of here, almost in a matter of seconds! It's still on—"

He stopped. "Listen!"

Voices—and the sound of feet slithering through the sand. Men's whispered grunts, and a clinking of metal. There



were two or three men around, somewhere, hidden behind a dune or crouching, crawling in a valley. But there were voices—whoever they were, they hadn't seen Manning and the girl, or they wouldn't speak.

"Hilton!" he whispered tightly to Brooklyn Cordry. "The machine—it has a grip on them, too. They were in its sphere of influence."

Alarm flared in her bright eyes, but her lips were taut and unquivering. She nodded silently, then obeyed his touch on her arm and followed him. Hastily they stepped through the clinging carmine sand, Manning guiding her so that they kept low down, partly hidden by the enormous dunes all about. The air, it seemed, was growing colder by the instant, freezing cold, with a bitterness that Manning had never known. He wondered abstractedly how it was that the atmosphere didn't congeal about them, didn't fall in crystalline shards about their feet, frozen solid.

The men's voices were behind them now, and not coming closer. Manning released the arm of Brooklyn Cordry and gestured for her to remain where she was. He scrambled up the slipping side of a dune, trying to avoid noise but hearing the gritting sound of the shifted sand louder than Gabriel's clarion.

Cautiously he eased his head over the top of the dune, looked around. The men were not in sight behind them—though a muddled trail of footprints across the top of a dune showed where they had been.

Manning rotated his head slowly.

The presidential palace. It was there, looming majestic and stark, a slab-sided ruin with half of it bitten off by the rending force of the time warper. Manning stared at it hard, trying to bridge with his eyes the quarter-mile distance that separated it from him. Was it empty—had Hilton and all the guards left in it come out to seek Brooklyn Cordry and him?

Or . . . who were the men they had heard among the dunes?

He looked away, and gave minute inspection to the round horizon. Nothing. Nothing, save the wavering dunes of blood-red sand.

*This is the far future, he thought silently. The sun is growing old and faint. The planet is dead. I wonder who won—*

He grinned sharply to himself and allowed himself to slide down the dune. Whoever had finally won—yes, the battle was over now. It had been over for centuries, perhaps for millions of years, in this world of the far future. And yet, though it was over—he had still to win it!

It was cold, deathly cold. His breath was a harsh thing that ripped into his lungs like chill flame. Brooklyn Cordry was standing where he had left her, there in the hollow between the dunes, not daring to sit and rest for even a moment in this Arctic frost. Her teeth dug into her lower lip deeply, clenched to prevent the chattering that strove to manifest itself. Her lips were blue, numb.

"What did you see, Steve?" she asked, her voice a thin whisper that trembled as she shivered with the cold.

He shrugged. "Nothing much," he said. He waved an arm. "Hilton's palace is with us still—over there. The men we heard seem not to have noticed us. They're going away, as far as I can tell."

Abstractedly he touched her elbow, drew her after him. They had to keep moving. Soon the machine would grasp them up in its taut clutch, of course. But before then they might easily freeze.

*Stephen.*

Drawn out of his concentration, he turned his head, looked at the girl.

"What?" he asked.

Brooklyn Cordry looked at him sharply. "I didn't say anything."

"Of course you did," he began with irritation. But—

*Stephen. Stephen Manning, listen to me. I must tell you something. Go meet those men—quickly.*

No, it wasn't the girl, wasn't Brooklyn Cordry who stood there looking at him with wonder in her eyes, crisp fay-lights of hoarfrost dancing in her blonde hair. She was not speaking aloud, nor was the voice that had called to Steve Manning a voice at all.

A thought without body, it was. The clear call of mind to mind.

It was the mind of someone Steve Manning knew, someone who couldn't be calling, couldn't ever—

*Stephen Manning!*

"Eliot!" Manning cried aloud. "Eliot! Where are you?"

Brooklyn Cordry, mouth falling open, conscious no longer of the cold that drained the life from her bones, looked at him. And there was suppressed, stillborn terror in her eyes; a thought that was there to see, if Manning had looked.

*It has been too much,* the thought said. *He has snapped!*

But Manning didn't see. He had no eyes for the girl. He was staring about with a wildness flaring from his deep eyes, a hope that he dared not believe in.

"Eliot!" he cried again. Then, on a softer note, "Eliot, are you here? Or have I gone insane?"

*I am not there, Stephen,* the thought came. *But—you are not insane. I cannot spare time to explain; I must hurry. Hilton and his guards are nearby, but they are going away and soon the time will be too late. Go to them—call to them. Surrender! If you would save the Free People, Stephen—surrender!*

"But, Eliot, I—"

*Stephen, Stephen!* The thought was urgent, piercing. *I have no time. Trust me for this. The Free People and myself—you and Brooklyn Cordry too, Stephen—all our lives depend on you. Surrender. Surrender, and when the time is ripe—I*

*will try to tell you what you then must do!*

Steve Manning stood there, tensed, the atrophied muscles in his scalp trying to prick up his ears, to make him hear better that which was no longer to be heard—and in the hearing of which the ear had played no part, but only the brain itself.

"Eliot," he said. "Eliot, did—"

But there was no answer.

He looked at Brooklyn Cordry and saw what was in her clear eyes. It rocked him back—but Eliot had said that there was no time, and it truly had been Eliot. How or why did not matter.

"Girl," he said, "trust me a while longer. We're going somewhere in a hurry."

And she said never a word, but took the quick hand he held out to her and followed after him, gasping in the stranglingly cold air, panting for breath as they raced and scrambled over the dunes, as they hurried quickly after the men they had heard. Never a word she said, not even when they saw the startled faces of three men turned over their shoulders to gape at them, not even when Hilton's blaster leaped up and covered them—but held its fire through sheer surprise.

Steve Manning said quickly, "You've won again, Hilton. Here!" With thumb and forefinger he plucked his commandeer blaster from its holster, held it out to the nearest of the stunned guards, butt first. . . .

THEY had a little fire going, a flickering heap of what papers they'd had in their pockets and a few shreds of flameweave garment, sparked by the furious flare of a blaster shot. Manning saw a thousand-credit note wadded up in the puny blaze, charring and sputtering as it burned.

*Even Hilton's money is no good,* he thought. *At least they could make it good kindling.*

"It doesn't matter," he said out loud.

Hilton blinked and came out of his stupor.

"What doesn't matter?" he asked.

"Your fire," Manning said. "You won't need it long—and you won't be able to keep it. We'll be gone in a couple of minutes. The machine—"

Hilton shrugged. "Until that happens," he said, "it's cold. God, but I'm glad that you've got some sense pounded into you, Manning. I shouldn't keep my offer open—but I have. You're in on whatever happens now. If we can get this crackpot time machine under control, you'll get all the money you can use, all the power. Anything you want you'll get. Anything—as long as my fleet gets into space in time to catch Earth's fleet by surprise."

He turned, looked at Brooklyn Cordry. Apprehension, controlled but visible, was in her silence as she stood there, her blonde hair crisp and crackling about her head in the icy air. A long, dangerous second he looked at her, making up his mind, weighing the chances.

Then: "She's in the bargain too, of course," he said easily. "Amnesty for her—since the rest of your hoodlums that called themselves the Free People are dead. We'll forget her crimes. . . . Still, Manning, she's even more dangerous to me than you yourself. A beautiful woman who is intelligent and determined can overthrow a government between noon and night.

"Miss Cordry, I'd give my arm to have you on my side—with the rabble ready to follow wherever you send them, to throw their stupid little lives away for your word. The power that we'd have, the incredible and complete power, with your grip on their souls and mine on their miserable bodies. . . ."

He looked at her once again, and then abruptly shook his head. "But you couldn't do it," he said. "You couldn't control them unless you believed in what you said—and you do not believe in me. At the last, Miss Cordry, you're a woman still, and your heart rules your head. So—you will have amnesty for the sake of Manning, here. For yourself alone, you'd get a bolt from a blaster."

Brooklyn Cordry shrugged and looked away. She moved instinctively closer to the wan heat of the blaze, held her hands above it.

"For myself alone," she said, "I might prefer it."

Manning said, "There's too much conversation. Hilton, let's move. This fire isn't doing us any good; we'll freeze to death if the time warp doesn't grab us soon. And we have to get back to your palace. That's where the machine is, and the machine itself is what we must work on."

Hilton nodded his head quickly, jerked a thumb at the two silent guards. "We're going back," he said. And, "Give Dr.



Manning his gun. He's on our team. . . ."

It became a race, the five of them against the quick surge that would come from the time warp. Hilton and Manning ahead, eyes alert each time they topped a dune for the sight of the palace that so slowly drew closer; Brooklyn Cordry behind, helped by the rough, strong arms of the guards as they scrambled through the shifting, clinging dunes.

It was a chance, Manning knew, that the time era they were thrown into next would hide the palace. A jungle would do it, or a starless, featureless night. They could easily get lost. They had to get closer.

Suddenly the atmosphere was crinkling hazily about them, and the intolerable strain in it made the physical chill of the air a thing that they had forgotten. They could hardly move, for the tension was a clinging thing that impeded their progress. But they made it—or came close enough.

They were within a dozen yards of the shattered open face of the place when the coiled tension all about them released itself with almost an audible sound, and the instant of dizzying vertigo picked them up, hurled them silently, abruptly through time.

**T**HEY reached the palace through a driving rain, tepid but penetrating.

It billowed and surged around them, and the soft red mulch underfoot was heavy with it.

Whatever era they were in, it was a warm one. There was no sun, nor any marked vegetation. A few mosses and lichens underfoot were all of life—save for the five racing humans. It was daylight, but the scudding, pounding clouds overhead obscured the sun.

Hilton stopped when they reached the bottom of the long flight of stairs that had once opened upon the grand ballroom, now cascaded to a wet red morass.

There were sounds from inside, hissing, spitting, crackling sounds. The machine—

He turned, panting, absently brushing the rivulets of rain from his face. He looked at Manning for a second.

"Acting up, isn't it?" he asked.

Manning listened and shrugged. "It's overheated. It was when we left it; it's got worse since. What do you expect? Let's go look."

They ran up the stairs in open order, like skirmishers attacking their objective through withering enemy fire. The noises grew in volume as they topped the staircase, raced down the wide paneled hall, burst into the chamber.

Inside was—power, surging bright and hard; heat, hurling itself at them viciously; destruction, and strength gone mad.

The machine, a thing of crudely jointed angles and gaping panels, seemed to reel with its own furious energies.

Manning said, "We can't get close to that!"

Hilton nodded, and the tenseness was suddenly back in his face. No human could have approached that machine at that time. No human that had to breathe with moist lungs, no human made of moist flesh. The heat from it would have parched him in split seconds. The man to come near it would have been seared to a broiling, bubbling, shriveled hulk.

Manning lidded his eyes against the streaming energies that spurted from the machine. He raised an arm, pointed.

"Do you see that, Hilton?" he asked. "Do you see the cord there—so beautifully insulated, very beautifully. The heat won't melt that. That's Earth wiring, specially imported by Eliot in the days when we could import what we wanted, and didn't have to use your shoddy substitutes."

He turned to Hilton, eyed him carefully. "You see it, don't you?" he asked. "The one that juts out from the side of

the machine, and loops around, down below, and disappears into the base where the energy atoms are? Well, if you or I could get to the machine for just one second, and break that cord, or rip it out—the power would be off. Then we'd have time, Hilton. I'd be able to fix it, I think, once the power was off. . . . But it's too well shielded to be affected by the heat—until the rest of the machine is hopelessly wrecked, and we're stranded here."

He was smiling. Hilton saw him smiling, and the mask that was Hilton's face was not pleasant. There was no smile there, only the terrible intensity of a man who sees hell lying naked before him, and is afraid of it but carefully is weighing the chances, wondering whether the gains balance the losses, whether the risk is worth taking.

"You can't try, Manning," he said. "No one else can fix the machine. The girl would never make it. Myself—I won't try, for this is all for me and it would be fruitless to jeopardize my life, or my eyes."

His face was no longer a thing chiseled in lifeless stone. It was pulsing, working as he turned about, as his eyes were irresistibly drawn to the two guards who stood motionless behind him. He looked at them, dark speculation in his eyes, and cold appraisal.

The guards looked back at him, neither sullenly nor with interest. Stolid as always they were, their thoughts and feelings hidden behind a mask of diamond-hard obedience to duty. But before the flame of intensity in Hilton's eyes, the hard diamond began to crack, the stolidity melted and slumped away, the tough fiber of obedience in them wilted. And the human being at the core looked through, into Hilton's eyes, and saw what was there.

The face of one of them cracked open. "No!" he said aloud. "Chief, no!"

But Hilton was advancing on him, staring at him with the intent objectivity of a swimmer who sees shore. "Chief—" said the guard, and his face was convulsed. "Anything you want, Chief, but—"

Hilton brushed his words angrily aside. "Quickly!" his voice lashed. "That cord—get in there and break it!"

*Stephen! For God's sake, Stephen!*

"Hold it!" Manning shouted aloud, and was silent, while his mind cast about anxiously, striving to catch again the thin thread of thought that had linked him with a man who should have been dead. Frantically he tried to hear the message that his brain awaited.

The guard stood there numbly, face working, eyes riveted to the flaring, surging machine. Hilton spun around, glared at Manning. Then the fierceness in his eyes dimmed out and was gone, and concentration replaced it as he saw how Manning stood there, strangely intent on something that was not in Hilton's experience.

*Stephen, don't turn off the machine! All you need do now is—be ready for what will come. You've done the rest—*  
The voice was exultant. *Be ready, Stephen—with your blaster!*

**T**ABLEAU. There stood Steve Manning, his hand slowly creeping around to his side where the holster swung, his face taut but alight. There stood Brooklyn Cordry, waiting for what might come, but her face softening too as she realized that there was something in the air, something that had come to Steve Manning.

Hilton waited too, but with apprehension visible for the first time in his saturnine face. There also were the two guards, at whom no one looked. . . .

And dominating the scene, the flaring, sputtering, energy-sotted machine in the corner.

Abruptly its energies calmed. The radiant heat that beat out from it was no more—and only the intense but bearable heat from its tortured metal remained.

Its sounds diminished and died away. The waves of light from it died, and the pale colors of its tubes were the only illumination. In the sudden stillness they could hear the pounding of the tepid rain outside, the sighing of the wind as it caressed the ragged edges of the palace.

"Manning," Hilton said tautly. "What is this?"

"I don't know," Manning said truthfully, keeping his voice under control, trying not to let the stark expectancy in it seep through. "Wait and see."

*Stephen, clear the floor. Thirty seconds—*

"Stand back," said Manning sharply. "Get back out of the way, everybody. Something's going to happen!"

Seconds were fleeing, and each one left its mark on Manning's throat, tightening about it. The urgency in his voice allowed only obedience. Even outlaw Hilton stepped back silently, but with lethal darkness glimmering in his eyes.

The guards and Brooklyn Cordry—all stepped back.

Twenty seconds, and twenty-five. Manning for the first time felt his fingers reaching without an order from his brain for the warm, hard butt of his blaster. He saw from the corner of his eye that Hilton was watching him. Hilton's eyes flicked from Manning's face to the blaster butt, and comprehension flared in them. His own hand began to move—

*Ping.*

Clear and bell-like, a crystalline, hard, thin note. It permeated the air and clung to it, though it lasted only the thousandth of a second.

A flicker of motion, swirling and inchoate. A dazzlingly quick movement there in the cleared floor space from which they had just stepped back—and the swirl

condensed and took human forms. There were people there. Four men, lean, fervid, alert—armed with leveled blasters!

The first of them was a man Steve Manning knew well—a man who had said his dying words in Manning's ear, a word of friendship and an order to carry on the fight. It was Jordan who had died in a besieged tunnel end, with an arm and half a shoulder ripped off him by the searing bolt of a blaster!

"**S**TAND still!" Jordan snapped, and the three men behind him backed up his order with their blasters. "Out in the hallway—get!"

And he was herding them on, hurriedly. He stepped clear of the spot where he had materialized while the five wanderers fell back before him.

Then—*ping*, again. And four more were there—four ragged, thin men with fires of eagerness in their eyes. They stepped quickly out of the way, and—*ping!*

Only two this time. But one of them was Eliot.

"Stephen!" he cried. "It's hard to believe—"

Eliot pushed the men who had preceded him aside, hurried to Steve Manning, wrung his hand. Eliot, alive!

There were no words, Manning found. He didn't try to look for them. Action was for him—not words. He spun around, looked at Hilton.

The pirate president was masklike of face, tense of hand and body. His taut fingers hung there just below the grip of the blaster where they had been arrested by the four miraculously appearing men.

"Don't try anything, Hilton," Manning advised sharply. "I don't know what's happened, but you're outnumbered, outguessed. Give it up, or you'll die."

There was no change on Hilton's face to show that he had heard, only the impenetrable mask. His eyes were drops

of jet-black hatred, pouring fury out of themselves as they bored into Manning's.

Jordan was saying, "Sorry I had to treat you rough, Manning. I had no time. We had to get out of the way, so the next batch could come through. There are twelve of us here now, Manning. Twelve of the Free People; each of us armed. We're going to win a war with just the twelve of us!"

Manning looked at him, but the question on his lips was anticipated.

"Tell me quickly," Brooklyn Cordry begged. There was light and life in her face now. "What has happened—what miracle has happened? Oh, Eliot—all of you—we thought you were *dead!*"

Eliot nodded soberly. "We probably were," he said. "I'll tell you about it, soon. Not now." He looked quickly at his machine, and his face wrinkled. "Bad," he said. "It is not in good condition."

He was walking over to it, and already his fingers were in the pouch at his side, dragging out tiny tools and bits of wire.

"A few minutes," he said. "It will take me a few minutes to adjust it. . . ."

Jordan too, was uncoiling wire from his pouch. "Manning," he said, "give me a hand. Tie these lads up so they won't get hurt."

**T**HERE was no resistance in the two guards, none in dark Hilton. You'd have hardly thought that Hilton knew what was going on—except for the intensity of his eyes that watched every move of Manning's with concentrated fury. He said no word, made no motion of his own, and the two guards acted as if they just did not care.

Eliot was at the machine, and Manning turned from binding the three captives to stare in admiration at the thick, fumbling, incredibly deft fingers that were tearing out old circuits and rewiring them, making sure of every contact. Eliot was aware of Manning's gaze.

Over his shoulder he said, "You see, Stephen, the machine was not quite finished. I had put it aside temporarily to work on a pilot model. There were things that came up that I had to understand more clearly. I made the model, and finished it, and found the answers to the questions. I had just gone back to the big machine when—" he glared over his shoulder at Hilton—"I was interrupted. By that."

He stood up, resting one hand on the top of the machine, ignoring the heat that was still in it.

"That's how we got here," he went on. "That's how I was able to speak to you, telepathically. The pilot machine was easier to build than this great beast of a thing."

He gazed affectionately at his creation, as a father might at a well-deserving son. "*This* can move a world through time, anywhere, once it is properly adjusted. The pilot machine—a few cubic yards of space, a few hundred pounds of mass, that is all it can cope with."

Brooklyn Cordry said, her voice trembling with wonder that was only now beginning to show through her guard. "But we thought you were dead, as well as Jordan and Swayne here, and all the Free People. How does it come that you are not dead?"

Eliot looked at her full in the eyes, and there was a smile around his lips—a smile that bore a hint of sadness.

"I think we were dead," he said. "We must have been. But once—before we were dead, before you saw Jordan killed, and the others—we were all alive. And this is a time machine. In one time lane, you see, all of us are dead and wiped out; there are no Free People left alive. But there are an infinite number of time lanes, numerous as the branches of a tree. . . ."

His voice tapered off, and the smile was gone from his face as he stood staring into nothingness for a second. There was

deep awe in his eyes, and a thin taint of the fear of the unknown that every human has.

"It must have been because you started the big machine," he said. "The time radiations, the incredible distortion of everything chronological that occurred when it was started, let loose under its own power, without control by someone who knew exactly how to run it. Whatever it was, there was a backlash of power. Perhaps that isn't why, but there was a reason—for something utterly strange happened.

"I was in the laboratory, trying to complete this machine here. Hilton and half a dozen of his thugs broke in and found me. I spoke to them and they mentioned the machine, told me that they knew what it was, planned to have it to aid them in their battle to keep Rhea under their heels. I didn't try to argue with them—you don't argue with men like Hilton. I walked back, away from them, looking for something to fight with. A club or a knife. I walked around behind the machine here. They jumped me—

"Well, maybe the machine got turned on for a split second then. I don't know. All I know is that—in your time lane—they captured me and tortured me and finally killed me. In my time lane, I suddenly found myself once again in the laboratory. Only it was empty, and the big machine was gone.

"They had left the pilot machine. Probably they hadn't seen it, for it is quite small and I had put it aside."

Jordan nodded and broke in. "There's a televisor attachment on it, Steve," he said. "Something like that. Anyhow, with it Eliot can see into other eras and communicate, sometimes, with people who are in them. He saw us in the tunnel, and saw that we were being wiped out. He couldn't do anything about it then, but—well, I don't understand it. All at once something was squeezing me around the

chest and around the head. Then it let go, and I was in the laboratory with Dr. Eliot."

"I picked him right out of the tunnel," Eliot supplemented, grinning a little. "With the pilot machine. Just grabbed Swayne and Jordan and all the others I could get. There was something wrong with the focusing, though. Jordan says *he* doesn't understand it . . . I don't either. But the time eras slipped a little, and collapsed on each other, and there was duplication. For a dozen of the Free People were there in the laboratory with me—and also they were in the tunnel with you. The same people! In two places at the same time! They'll have to rewrite the books when they hear about that; it isn't in natural law. But then—neither is time travel."

Brooklyn Cordry said, "It doesn't matter. What matters to me is that you're alive. Now, Dr. Eliot—what do we do?"

Eliot's smile vanished. "We have work," he said. "If we just sit still, do nothing, our cause will triumph, I think. Tri-Planet's navy, in that era from which we came, was pounding at the screens around Rhea. And when they break down, Tri-Planet's fleet will wipe out Hilton's. But there will be death and destruction, and Rhea will not be free still. Tri-Planet will govern wisely, and go away when the time is ripe. But Rhea can govern itself now—once Hilton is crushed."

Manning felt the confidence and the strength flow back into him. Here was the promise of action again, and of combat!

"You mean," he said, "that we will get back into our own time era again, and fight?"

Eliot nodded soberly. "It won't be easy," he said. "Surprise we'll have, yes. We can pick our spot. But there are only twelve of us—"

Manning laughed aloud, exultation bub-



bling forth from him. "Easy? Who would want it easy?" he cried. "What's worth having is worth fighting for!"

Eliot smiled again. He dropped a hand to the machine at his side, held it there as he spoke. "Swayne, Plennith," he said. "You two stay where you are. After the others go through, I'll send you to a point before the screens were set up. Steal a ship; go out in space. Get to the outer limits of the screens. Take the pilot model with you, then snap back in time to the point where the Tri-Planet ships are attacking the screen. Signal them, tell them that normal government is being restored under the screens, and that Hilton's crowd is being thrown out. We'll deliver Hilton and his cutthroats to them in person, for their trial. The Tri-Planet commanders will listen. . . .

"The rest of you, I'll send back to the right time era at once. You'll be right in the heart of things, where all the brains and executives of Hilton's administration are gathered. I can't tell you just what to do—but they'll be in turmoil because of what has happened to the mansion, and you will be determined and armed. Take over. And if the worst comes to the worst—smash the ray screens and let the Tri-Planet ships through at once."

"Sure," smiled Manning broadly, touching the knurled grip of the blaster at his side. "Sure! Leave it to us. . . ."

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Nine Against a World

**E**IGHT men and a girl—nine blasters among them. And against them was the might of a despot who ruled a planet!

*Not quite*, thought Manning with grim triumph as they picked their way through the darkened, empty corridors of the presidential mansion, now once more complete and in its own proper era. *Only Hilton's*

*underlings are against us. The boss himself is—forcibly—neutral.*

It was a definite advantage that Hilton and two of his guards were bound and helpless, in the care of Dr. Eliot at some remote era in Rhea's past or future. Eliot had thought it best to keep it that way, until they had a chance to strike at his empire. They dared not take the chance of bringing him along with them—and Eliot had to stay to guard him.

To the other side of the mansion they had hurried, to a maze of sleeping chambers, which were rarely used, some of them having never been used. Hilton had had them built when he had planned the mansion. They were designed for visiting notables, for diplomats and royalty and statesmen from the other worlds. But Hilton's regime had never been recognized, and the ornate chambers had remained empty. . . .

Dark it was, and silent. They were looking for an exit into the darkness outside. Manning was the leader of the party, and the eyes of the others were eternally on him, staring, wondering. Manning felt them on his back, and knew he had no answer for their unspoken question: *What shall we do?*

All he could do was see what happened, and make the most of any chance. Nor was there much time. A few minutes, that was all. Then the shields would collapse, and there would be fighting. And Tri-Planet's navy would settle down to Rhean soil, and Tri-Planet's soldiers would do the ordering from then on, until—until too late. Rhean freedom had to be soon.

"Who goes there?"

Sharp and imperious, loud as the crack of doom. And a man's figure was limned against the pale seepage of light from the end of the corridor. A guard.

Manning's answer was the flare and burst of a blaster. There was the beginning of a man's shriek—but the sound of

the blaster cut it off, and the man was dead before he could complete it. Blaster-dead, which is to say—utterly charred.

"One for us," said Manning. "Damn him! Now they'll have heard the shot. . . ."

They had. The seven men and Brooklyn Cordry behind Manning bunched up closer to him, more alert and ready. Voices were ahead again, a confused babble.

"Right through them," said Manning in a sharp whisper. "Shoot them down and keep going. We've got to get out. If we can get outside and look around—Maybe the radio stations would be best. Once we disrupt them, they'll no longer be able to control their forces, give orders to them. Then the Tri-Planet fleet can simply walk over them."

He shrugged invisibly in the murky gloom. What should he do? Twenty minutes—in which to conquer a world!

There was no time for speculation. The tenor of the voices ahead had changed, and a clear, loud bass yell was giving orders. Shapes moved back and forth in the corridor ahead, and two searchlights kindled, swung their rays down the long hall at the group of nine Free People.

Manning hurled a blaster bolt at the end of the corridor, and annihilated the men at the lights, as well as the small knot of guards that were running up. But blasters were perilous things to play with. One bolt could wipe out all the enemies ahead—but should only one escape and find chance, a single bolt from his own blaster could destroy all nine of them!

Split-second silence ahead, then the running Free People heard dismayed voices from farther back, asking questions, calling out to each other. But they did not hesitate, did not halt. On they raced, while the enemy formed ranks around the bend ahead.

Manning, running for the turn in the hallway, felt a clumsy hand grab at his shoulder, throw him off stride.

"What—" he began in anger, then

stopped speaking as Jordan shoved him out of the way and raced ahead at top speed. He rounded the corner like a speedster rocket on the Earth-Mars Relay.

Great gouts of blaster flame met him, crisped him, annihilated every fragment of his body. But his own weapon had lashed out its fire at the same time—and there were shrieks from around the bend.

Manning followed around the bend almost before the incandescent flares died out, and his gun spat its lightnings. Almost, though, there were no targets for it. Only a great chamber in which lay the seared hulks of a score of men.

Jordan had done well—and had died.

Manning halted, stared.

"It's an armory," he said aloud, abruptly.

"That's right," panted Brooklyn Cordry, halting beside him while the others came up. "What of it?"

"What of it?" he echoed. "What of it? A roomful of explosives—"

His voice trailed off. He looked at her carefully, then stared at the others. A second fled.

"Nothing," he said sharply. "Just an idea I had. It won't work out." His eyes were roving around the room, staring from rack to rack of hand-weapons, from case to case of super-explosives.

"Take extra blasters," he ordered. "All the spare charges you can carry, but not enough to weigh you down. And go on ahead. Keep the exit clear for me. I'll try to fix it so no one will—follow us through here."

**W**E CAN'T stand still, thought Brooklyn Cordry with a white heat of anger in her brain, anger and irritation. *We've got to keep moving. That's all we have—smallness and speed and the ability to keep on the move. Why then are we waiting here for them to get set and wipe us out? Why doesn't Steve get here? It can't take him this long—*

"No trouble?" asked Steve Manning, coming through the doorway behind them, panting slightly from effort. "Good. Let's get moving. To the right here—down to the skyfield."

Short, heavy Dupres said, "What about the radio stations—the generators for the city's power? Weren't we—"

"I'm the boss," said Steve Manning. "I'll have to give the orders. And I don't have time to explain. Come on!"

And he circled Brooklyn Cordry's wrist with a lean-fingered hand, began an ungraceful but efficient lope through the darkness, along the dimmed side of the mansion. Brooklyn Cordry ran like the wind behind him, a little to the side. His hand on her wrist was a guide, not a tow-rope, for she paced him step for step, lightly as the thin air of the night.

"Halt!" A detachment of Hilton's soldiers burst out of a side alley across the dim, empty street. They stared at them, cried out a command, and reached for their blasters.

But quicker than the surprised soldiers, stout Dupres broke his waddling stride long enough to draw and fire in one motion—and the four soldiers were struck with man-made lightning from his gun. Two died then and there, in ashes; the other two dropped to the ground to re-

turn fire. But in that split second, three more blasters of the Free People spoke, and lashed out death to Hilton's killers.

"Come along," Manning said evenly, slipping his own half-drawn gun back into its sheath. "We haven't got time—"

The city was alive and pulsing around them as they raced panting through the Rhean night. Alive it was—but empty. Hardly a light was in a window, not a soul was on the streets. Overhead in the black sky flared the silent aurora of Hilton's ray screens, luminescing now as the massed forces of the Tri-Planet fleet strove to batter them down.

Manning stopped, drew a great, ragged breath through his flaring nostrils. "Stop now," he said, panting. "Catch your breath. Two minutes. . . ."

He looked down below, at the wide expanse of the skyfield with its great cargo rockets and tiny speedsters lined up ready for removal to less dangerous spots when Tri-Planet's fleet broke through. Already the deadly war rockets were gone, patrolling the night sky far overhead, just beneath the pyrotechnics of the ray screens.

Hilton's fleet could have annihilated Tri-Planet's if it had caught them by surprise, though Tri-Planet's was far the deadlier. But with the advantage in position, without surprise, without Eliot's

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time-warper working against them, Tri-Planet could not lose. All of Hilton's fleet could not guard Rhea against them. . . .

**M**ANNING looked at the glowing dial of his chronometer, stood up straighter. "We have ten minutes," he said. "Do you see the speedster down there, all by itself? There's nobody in it, nobody around it. We can steal that, and we need it. I hope it's fueled—"

Not a word from any of the seven with him, only silent nods. Manning was the boss.

They slid quietly down the ferroconcrete embankment that surrounded the skyfield, stepped gingerly over the high-tension power rail that fed the little handling cars that rolled on their tracks around the perimeter of the field—in normal times, that was, when the field was used for commercial purposes. A brace of R. M.'s—rocket mechanics—were walking slowly toward them, but still a distance away. They were heading for the same speedster as the Free People's tiny band.

In the background, by the huge rocket hangars, threading in and out of the looming shapes of the cargo ships there, were dozens of other men, R.M.'s, soldiers, men in mufti. But they were a thousand yards away.

"Dupres," said Manning. "You and Kinney—take the mechanics. Do it quietly; don't shoot. All the rest of you—follow me!"

They stepped out boldly, taking the better course. To skulk around might keep them from being noticed, but it would draw a bolt from the blaster of the first of Hilton's men to see them. This way, it might be assumed that they had business with the ship.

A speedster is a tiny thing, swift and insignificant as a wasp. It packs an equally deadly sting. Two men, they are built to hold. Or one man—and a girl.

"Brooklyn Cordry and I," said Steve Manning. "We'll get in the speedster. You five will have to stay here; there's no room. Take warning—there will be fireworks. Get to cover and stay there for the next half hour."

He was at the door of the ship. It yielded to his deft fingers. He gripped the elbow of Brooklyn Cordry, lifted her in, then followed. "Stand back," he said over his shoulder.

He cast a glance toward Dupres and Kinney. Already they had captured the two R. M.'s, and at blaster's point were bringing them over.

"Tell Dupres," said Manning. "Tell him that there's no room. He'll understand."

Then he slammed the door, dogged it down. He slid into the pilot's seat, strapped himself down and poised his fingers over the controls. Brooklyn Cordry was already in the gunner's seat just behind. He could sense her presence there in the narrow, rounded cabin of the speedster.

"Do you want me to use these things?" she asked. "I can, you know."

Manning twisted his neck to look at her. "I hope it won't be necessary," he said. "Look—I'm being high-handed. I know it. Forgive me, but I haven't got too much time."

"You could tell me what you want me to do," she said, and there was no doubt in her voice, no questioning. "You must have a reason for taking me along."

Manning glanced out the viewport, saw that the others were out of range of the speedster's jets. He slammed down on the warm-up levers, felt the tiny ship shake as its igniters sparked a stream of mad fire through its drive tubes. He cut the fuel supply to a trickle and heard the roar muted to a low, deadly rumble.

He reached into the pilot's locker, handed her a gossamer-light but bulky package, took one like it for himself.

"Put this on," he said in a voice that was strained as it rose over the jet-thunder. "We're going to have to jump. You have a job. If any of Hilton's ships come along, I'm relying on you to shoot them down. Dupres and Kinney are good shots; I could have taken them. I think you're better. . . ."

He finished buckling the gossamer parachute to his shoulders as he spoke. Without waiting for an answer, he again touched the main drive studs. Again the jets thundered a furious challenge, and the hull of the tiny ship thrummed dangerously about them.

There was a surge of power thrusting at their backs, then the horizon whirled dizzily in the port and they were airborne.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### "He Will Return!"

**M**ANNING looked again at the dials. Fully fueled—thank God it had been fully fueled. There was enough rocket fuel in the auxiliary tank to last through all the maneuvering he'd need. He should be able to husband the deadly contents of the main tank for his crazy idea—that he prayed was just sane enough to work. . . .

Up he drove the ship in a shrieking line of flame, the incandescent jets trailing behind. Up to gain height, then a kick on the rudder-jet pedal sent it swerving to the right. He held it straight and level for a couple of seconds while his agile fingers danced a complicated pattern over the keys. He was computing an orbit, feeding it into the automatic pilot's chart-course keys.

Steve Manning believed in the superiority of brain over metal—but this was a time when the aid of the automatic "mike" was indispensable. Without it he could not hope to carry out his scheme, for it entailed such racking changes of

course, such deadly accelerations as meant unconsciousness for the pilot.

Involuntarily his fingers paused in their dance, his eyes flicked to the red-handled lever that was marked *Ballast*. If only he could retain consciousness long enough to touch that at the proper time, then hit the automatic pilot's starter key and let it sweep them out of danger, out of the imminent peril of striking the surface of Rhea in one great incandescent blast.

He completed the course he had set up, let the machine's dials read it back to him while he checked it. It was right; it was fine. If only he could hold out, now. . . .

"Steve!" Brooklyn Cordry's voice was a scream behind him. "Fighter ships—coming up and at us!"

His teeth showed white as Steve Manning whirled his speedster about, spun till he saw clearly ringed in the port before him, the flame-spitting torpedoes that were three of Hilton's fast and deadly speedsters.

"Get them if you can!" he bawled over his shoulder. "I won't be able to give you any help!"

Then he was climbing again. Climbing while the deadly three raced in under him, spiraling up. They were no faster than he, but they were three to his one, and could cut off his escape in all directions. He had little time. Already there were bursts of flame in the air below him as the gunners of Hilton's ships tried vainly to find the range. He heard the flat slap of Brooklyn Cordry's guns behind him as she replied, but not a split-second's glance did he spare to see if she scored a hit. There was no time. . . .

Up and up, with the fuel in the tiny auxiliary tank running lower as he poured it into the jets with a prodigal touch. He cast a worried look at the gauge. He dared not tap the main tank; he needed that. Yet he might not have enough fuel left in the auxiliary to get them away.

They might die in a thunderous crash. . . .

*That's the chance you take,* he grinned to himself. *And the hell with it!*

Four miles of thin air gaped beneath him, with only the ravening wolf-ships of Hilton's navy to fill it. Then he had height enough, he knew.

He tipped the ship over and felt that instant of dizzying strain as the bottom dropped out of things, as the thrust of the rockets ceased—and the pull of gravity ceased. The ship began to fall. Then he cut the rockets in again at half blast, and what had been *up* became *down* as the rocket thrust imparted a false sense of gravity.

Down his ship streaked, through the startled trio of pursuers, who scattered, raining bolts from their guns on the thin air all about them, but never scoring a hit. Down and down it shrieked, till it had reached more velocity than was conceivably safe, more than he dared trust the automatic pilot to halt for them.

Then he applied a weak, slowing jet at the nose. He touched the rudder-rocket controls gingerly with a foot, and nosed the ship gently around in its careening flight till the bull's-eye in the port before him lined up exactly with the battered oblong of the presidential mansion below. Down he raced, faster than ship had ever traveled in air, for two miles, and three, and. . . .

At the last possible second he slammed down on the *Ballast* lever, cut in the automatic pilot. The ship screamed aloud in every member as the pilot obeyed its keyed instructions and whipped the nose up, fought the pull of gravity off, halted the mad rush for the surface. There was an instant of intolerable strain while the ship danced on its tail scant hundreds of feet above the surface. Then the skill of Manning's course plotting and the sheer power of the ship's fiercely driven rockets won—and the speedster began to climb. Up again it raced for nearly a mile.

Then abruptly its mad rocket flare died, and its climb halted.

The paltry few drops of fuel remaining in the auxiliary tank had run out.

**B**LOOD streaming from his nose, the headache to end all hangovers thundering through his skull, Manning pulled himself out of unconsciousness with sheer tenacity of will. He had known this would happen; had expected it. He had not known it would be so bad. . . .

But they were falling again; he could feel that they were falling. He dared not take time even to look, to see how far from the ground they were. He tore at the buckles that held him to the seat, forced himself out and to Brooklyn Cordry's side. Utterly unconscious she was, and there was no chance of awakening her.

Brutally, hurriedly he ripped the bracing belt from her, dragged her to the door, hurled it open. Clinging to her, he leaped. At once he saw the surface of Rhea below, with the city showing a handful of flickering lights, with the straining aurora of Hilton's ray shields still blazing in the sky overhead. Something, he knew, was missing. . . .

He yanked the ripcord at Brooklyn Cordry's shoulder, felt her torn from his arms as her chute boomed open and checked her fall. He reached for his own cord, held it for a second. It had all happened so suddenly—they had had only minutes when they'd emerged from the time warp into Hilton's mansion, and the flaring display overhead showed that those minutes had not yet expired.

*That's what is missing! Where—*

The thought died in him, and was answered. He grinned savagely as he pulled the ripcord of his chute. He didn't feel the angry strain of it as it flew open and held him—for his question was answered.

Beneath him, less than a mile, the great bulk of Hilton's mansion heaved and

buckled—and burst. His aim had been true; the tank of frightfully explosive rocket fuel he had jettisoned had fallen true to the mark. Down it had plunged to the center of Hilton's palace and had exploded.

The violence of its concussion had set off the land mines and the shells he had carefully sensitized in those seconds alone in the armory; they had exploded too, had set off further explosion waves that had touched off everything in the building that could explode. And all the blasts together, each a major upheaval by itself, had produced that which was frightful, beyond imagination.

The whole mansion, almost bodily, rose up at him. An inverted dense rain of debris flew past him as he dropped, swinging from his gossamer chute. The chute was riddled; he was hit by a hundred pieces of flying masonry. He was bleeding in a dozen places.

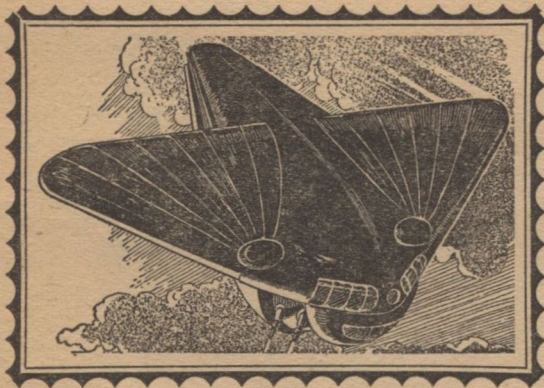
It didn't matter. He was laughing aloud as he fell through space, heedless of the inferno below. Luck had been with Brooklyn Cordry and himself so far; luck would continue to be with them. They had done their job and they would safely land.

Rhea was free.

And suddenly he was conscious that the ray aurora overhead had died—the power plant too had been struck by the violence of the blast. The lean snouts of Tri-Planet's ships would come poking through now, looking for the remnants of Hilton's mighty legions. . . .

But Rhea was free, and would remain so.

**I**T WAS only half an hour later, when Swayne had landed in his speedster in the ruins of the city and found Manning there, crouching watchfully beside the sleeping form of Brooklyn Cordry,



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that Manning felt the first stirrings of an unpleasant realization.

"I thought I'd find you here, Steve," said Swayne. "Everything went through fine on our side—Plennith's with the Tri-Planet commanders now. Hilton's fleet is surrendering all over the planet; hardly any fighting. They know when they're licked."

Manning looked up.

"How—" began Swayne, nodding toward the sleeping girl.

"She's fine as silk," said Manning. "Just worn out; no wounds. And Tri-Planet isn't going to take over—no protectorate, no nothing?"

"No nothing," echoed Swayne. "They're pretty nice people, Steve. They figure that we fought for liberty and won, and we can keep what we've fought for."

In her sleep Brooklyn Cordry stirred, flung out an arm. Steve Manning caught it and gently lowered it to the ground.

"Hadn't we better take her somewhere?" asked Swayne. "Somewhere where she can rest, and get a doctor's treatment if she needs it?"

"You take her," said Steve Manning. "Me—I'll stay here. Take her where she'll be safe, and then come back. I'm afraid there's a job to be done. You see—Eliot hasn't come back. . . ."

Anyone who goes to Rhea will see the great new administration building where the Council of Freedom sits, and from which the planet is governed. The inner patio, pure green lawn a hundred feet across, always arouses comment. It's a strange way to construct a building in these days—particularly since there is no statuary, no fountains, nothing but grass in all the hundred-foot space.

You can look at it, but you can't set foot on that grass. You can merely look down on it, and see the twelve soldiers that are always on duty there, marching around the graveled walk that circles the sward. What a strange custom—you

might think—to have the guard of honor *inside* the building!

But it isn't a guard of honor. The blasters that swing at the sides of the twelve soldiers are fully loaded and the safety catches are off. It is impressed on them before they are detailed to this duty, the pick of Rhea's fighting forces, that they be eternally vigilant.

It is important.

You see, Eliot didn't come back—and Eliot had a time machine. Eliot could have picked his time, and he would have wanted to return as quickly as possible to be with his friends at the very moment of their triumph. Eliot would have watched the conflict through the television attachment to his time warper and set the controls to bring him back at the very second the victory of the Free People was assured.

That is what Eliot would have done—if it had been up to Eliot. He didn't do that, and, *ergo*, he was no longer in command of his own actions. Which meant that—Hilton had got free.


Hilton, mad-dog Hilton, marooned somewhere in Rhea's past or future, able to scan the centuries and to feed his fury on the sight of a free Rhea rising from the ashes of the destruction he had wrought—able to strike at the instant the defenses were weakest, attack when the barriers were down!

In the Science Building, near the seat of the Council of Freedom, a wing is devoted to housing the great laboratories that are exploring the possibilities of Eliot's invention. There, day and night, eager young technicians are scanning the eons of Rhea's past and future history. They have learned much, but not the thing they have sought.

They have not located Eliot and Hilton and the two guards in whatever age they are stranded.

And they have not found the crucial hour, when Hilton will find Rhea's defenses relaxed for a second . . . and return.





# Spatial Incident

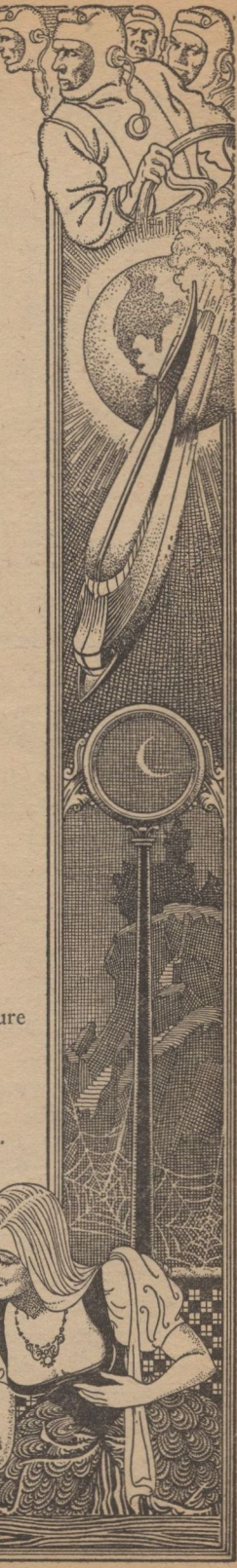
The King of Taraluk lives afar,  
"Fenton! Ignite that rocket charge!"  
On a distant world where the Androids are.  
"Ready the test for the repair barge!"  
His ways are odd and his manners crude,  
But we'll bear them all with Earth's fortitude.  
"Fenton! More fuel for this rocket charge!"

We sailed to his isle on a space-scarred bark  
"Jon! Put salt in this Martian stew!"  
From a green satellite with a glassite park.  
"Set the controls and call out the crew!"  
He gave us rooms on a red hill bleak,  
But the roof was alive with a fungus-leak—  
So we had to weld it once a week.  
"Jon! More salt for this Martian stew!"

A queer old atom is the Taraluk king;  
"Stand by stations for a meteor crash!"  
He's given to eating most any old thing.  
"Push that button when the red studs flash!"  
For the Taraluk master is sorely cursed  
With little to drink and a burning thirst,  
And his kingdom goes from worse to worst.  
"Clear that airlock of kitchen trash!"

But I like to visit that moonlit isle,  
"Fenton! Repair that permalloy sheathe!"  
Where they raise fair maidens every style,  
"Watch that vapor boil and seethe!"  
Where your word is law and your emotions pure  
And every day brings a brand-new lure.  
We're headed there on a course that's sure!  
"Fenton! This air is fit to breathe!"

—Earle Franklin Baker.



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★ ★ ★

# THE MAN FROM 2890

Out of nowhere he came, bringing strange terror to the world—the Man from 2890, whose knowledge meant life for Earth's suffering ones, but whose touch brought sudden death!

**T**HE thing began that oppressive summer evening last July. At about nine o'clock, July 19th, 2040, to be exact, is when he came. None of us in the Federal Laboratories of Westchester Section, just north of the New York City boundaries, had the least intimation that anything unusual was impending.

My name is George Rance. I was on twenty-four-hour duty in the Culture Division of Malignant Virus. Our small building, three miles away from the main laboratories—as you undoubtedly now have heard—stands at the top of a little hill overlooking the rolling country and villages of northern Westchester, with the great city a blaze of glory to the south.

I had finished my work at eight-thirty that evening. The culture room was steaming hot, breathless. After I had turned it over to Robert Carter, our head chemist,



By **RAY  
CUMMINGS**

I went outside, sauntered under the trees of the garden and sat on the brink of the little cliff that looks down to the river. I suppose I half expected that Jane Anise would be able to join me. Jane's work in the filter room was usually finished about that time.

I was lighting a cigarro-cylinder when I heard padding, thudding footsteps behind me. It was Opp, my little personal-servant robot who had followed me out here. Because the new automatic-thinking machines are still fairly expensive for private use, you who read this may have had little experience with them. Really they are not weird, gruesome or unpleasant to have around, as the public generally supposes. In the Federal Laboratories, as you know, they have been extensively used for the past five years. Here in the Culture Division we had nearly a hundred especially trained for us.

Not a silly Federal experiment, I do assure you, but a great advancement in modern science. The dawn of a new era—the release of mankind from all routine tasks. In the Culture Division—with a hundred robots to do the routine work for us—there were at this time only Jane and myself, Robert Carter, our chief, and three or four of his young assistants, with half a dozen young girls to operate the type machines for our work reports.

I turned as little Opp came padding up to me. He was not my laboratory work machine, but had been trained more as my personal servant. He was only some four feet tall, of conventional model—a square alumite body, jointed legs and head with square, boxlike face. He looked like a grotesque machine dwarf. Not gruesome; you get used to it.

Curiously enough, you sometimes forget that the things are machines. Really, it is a miracle of science. A memory-scroll, which in reality is nothing but highly tempered brassite, wired to a little honeycomb of porite-cells. Ganglia of

photo-electrolite cells suspended in fluorescent vacuums for command-reactions. Just an intricate machine.

But who knows what goes on that memory scroll? Who knows what those photo-electrolite cells are storing up in that machine mind? Human thought itself is still an enigma, much more so the machine thoughts of a robot. Little Opp seemed to have developed an affection for me—you could call it nothing else. It was an independent thought reaction, something which was there in the little machine.

"You, Opp," I said. "All right. Sit down here by me."

Opp's red-green electronic eyebeams deepened at the sound of my voice, to which he was attuned. His dangling, jointed arms clicked against his metal sides as my command registered. His legs bent and he squatted beside me.

From within him came the purring, throbbing electro-hum—the at-rest sound of the reaction selectors. To me he was like a favorite dog—surely as intelligent, and infinitely more highly trained.

WITH Opp's sleek shoulder pressing against my knees as I sat hunched, I was quietly smoking. It was much cooler out here than in the lab. A gentle wind rustled the trees overhead. Down in the valley the thread of river was glistening in the light of a fitful moon, and off at the western hills storm-clouds seemed gathering. Occasionally there was a distant flare of lightning.

No slightest hint was within me that I was upon the brink of any unusual occurrence. I recall that I was vaguely disappointed because Jane had not finished her work and come out. Our human senses are really so inadequate! Any dog lover will tell you that there are things about a dog which no one will ever understand. I often felt that way about Opp, and the thought jumped into my mind now, for suddenly Opp was sitting stiffly upright,

his eyebeams sweeping to a nearby tree trunk.

The grids of his listeners, like grotesque ears at the sides of his square metal face, were faintly luminous. And from his voice box a low, startled rumbling was audible.

"What's the matter?" I murmured. "Do you hear something, Opp? I don't."

My little robot was on his feet now, his arms dangling, and his eyebeams were still on that tree trunk. Nothing there.

To me there was no sound save the faint throb of the generators in the power building a hundred feet or so away, and the wind rustling in the trees over my head. . . .

And then I heard it!

A squealing, rasping hum. Faint and faraway at first, but in another second it was louder. Opp's electronic gaze swung silently to me, his instinctive reaction being to seek my command in regard to this new, strange sound.

"Stand still," I murmured. "There's nothing to do, Opp."

The hum seemed to be coming from the air some twenty feet away. It was an indescribable sound. It sounded as though it were coming closer to me, yet not changing its position. Queer thought, but I recall it distinctly.

A patch of moonlight was there by the distant tree. Did Opp see something now? At the end of one of his dangling arms his jointed fingers doubled and the little curved, knifelike hook which was his thumb slid out and clicked taut. His voice was rumbling—a low-pitched vibration characteristic of the reaction of alertness.

"Stand still," I reiterated softly.

My heart was pounding, perhaps more from the reactions of Opp than anything else. It had all happened in a few seconds.

And then I saw the thing! A wraith—a phantom, luminous blob in the air, over there by the tree trunk. For a second it was just a blob of shining mist, but swiftly it materialized. A ghost-shape—an ob-

long thing poised in the empty air. The moonlight was on it.

I saw, in those startled seconds, that it was a rectangular thing like a cage of glowing, luminous bars. The bottom of it was ten feet above the ground. A ghostly cage, some ten feet high and half as wide.

Without any command from me, little Opp's jointed legs twitched so that he took a forward step, but my hand on his alumite shoulder brought him to a halt.

The phantom shape in the air was pallid white in the moonlight. The electrical hum from it rose suddenly in pitch and intensity.

Then abruptly I was aware that the cage in the air was solid; a dead-gray metal framework, with luminosity obliterated and the hum grinding into silence. For a second, seemingly, it hung there. Then it crashed and hit the ground with a very tangible thud, the fragile metal bars of its grillework bending and crumpling so that the thing went over on its side and lay motionless.

I stood transfixed, peering, with Opp rigid beside me. Astonished? You could call it that. There are things of unbelievable fantasy which one may contemplate, theoretically, without emotion. But the solidity of this ten-foot cage appearing in the air out of nothingness—a ghost suddenly turning so solid that it crashed and lay here before my still unbelieving gaze—

I can only say that I stood numbed.

The night breeze was blowing from the wrecked cage toward me, bringing a faint, pungent, chemical smell. It was the smell, perhaps, of a deranged electronic current burning against broken metal contacts.

Then I was transfixed anew. From the wreckage a moan sounded, a human voice, in pain or fear.

Opp's quivering eyebeams again swung silently at me for my orders.

"Somebody must be in there," I murmured. "Come on; we'll go see."

WITH Opp marching beside me with his grotesque, martial tread, I cautiously approached the overturned cage. A blob was moving in it now—a man, struggling to get out!

In the silence I heard him cough as though the fumes were choking him. And then came his voice.

"You out there—You brainless—help me get out of here. Don't you speak Enlese? Help me shove this door up!"

English! The words were wholly familiar. There was impatient, contemptuous anger in them, but beyond that I have no ability to describe them. Our familiar words—but with a brisk, clipped intonation that made them sound foreign.

Still with a startled numbness upon me I ran forward, Opp after me. What was evidently a door of the wrecked cage was now on top.

I reached up, but Opp already had climbed upon the bars. There is an astonishing mechanical strength in the jointed metal arms of even a four-foot robot. Opp gripped the bars, wrenched at them, and the door broke loose.

"All right, Opp. Enough," I said. "Back to the ground. At attention."

The man inside the cage came struggling out. Obviously he was not injured. With a nimble leap he came up through the opening and jumped lightly to the ground beside me.

Numbed, I stared at him. He was a slim young fellow, perhaps no older than myself. He was strangely garbed in tight-fitting black trousers, which had a sheen to them as though they were of some woven, flexible metal; a jacket of the same material, tight at the waist, with shoulders slightly upturned.

However weird the young stranger looked to me, certainly I must have looked

the same to him. For a moment he stood silent, staring at me.

Like me, he was bareheaded. His hair was closely clipped, parted in the middle. The moonlight was on his face—a sleek, hairless face with high-bridged nose and gleaming dark eyes, deep set.

"You," he said, and now a slow, contemptuous smile curved his thin, bluish lips, "you are a youth of 2040? Speak up—I won't hurt you. This is the year 2040? Sometime in July?"

"The—the nineteenth," I stammered.

"Yes, my dials read July. The nineteenth is close enough. It does not matter. I did not intend to stop here." His gaze went down to Opp standing stiffly beside me. "And this—what is it?" he asked.

"My robot," I said. "A mechanism trained to serve me."

"Oh, yes, a machine. I see." The stranger's gaze left Opp, came back to me. "Don't stand brainless," he admonished. "My cage is wrecked. Take me to your chief—whoever is in charge here."

I gathered my wits. "You talk with a lot of command," I retorted. "My name's George Rance, if you're interested. Who the devil are you?"

He showed no resentment.

"My name is Alif Torgson," he said crisply. "Questions are forbidden. Is that clear to you? I am not interested in supplying knowledge to the ancient world. Take me to your chief, or send word to him. Tell him that Alif Torgson, from the year 2890, is here!"

"I DON'T like it," Carter said grimly. "There's something wrong here, has been for more than a month. Every damn robot we've got here's gone screwy. They don't react as they should, an' you know it."

**BE A STOCKHOLDER IN FREEDOM—BUY WAR BONDS!**

**TOP THAT 10%!**

"Ohm will find out what's wrong," I said. But I had to add, "We hope!"

Some three months had passed. It was mid-October.

Three months since that strange young man had come back from 2890. I say that so calmly—Alif Torgson, from 2890—as though it did not involve a thing of weird science which should have been utterly incredible.

Yet one may get used to anything. That time-traveling—in the year 2890—was an accomplished fact . . . well, we had the evidence of that before our eyes.

Three months. I need only summarize what had occurred, here in the Culture Division of the Federal Labs.

Torgson's time-traveling cage had been irrevocably smashed. He found that out, at once. He was marooned here with us. Carter, of course, had notified the authorities. Many scientists had come to inspect the cage, but the wreckage yielded nothing of its secrets.

Under some circumstances, the strange Alif Torgson could have been a scientific wonder. But that was not to be, for at once we encountered the will of young Torgson himself. He had quite different ideas.

"Questions are forbidden—is that clear to you? I am not interested in supplying knowledge to the ancient world!"

That was his attitude—a contemptuous tolerance of us as inferior humans; a calm assumption of command.

I find it difficult to make myself clear. I cannot make you feel as we felt in Torgson's presence—hearing his crisp, calm voice, feeling the dominance of his dark-eyed, smouldering gaze. Between him and us there was a gulf of more than eight centuries of progress. In his presence we all felt like children. Our instincts made us obey him; it was impossible not to. And we all felt an instinctive fear.

Alif Torgson had his way with us. That brought no triumph to him; he accepted

it as a natural thing. An adult feels no triumph when children obey him. To Torgson, there had been no possibility of conflict.

At once we found the vast difference between him and us. He would tolerate no questions. His great world of our future—its scientific knowledge, his reason for coming back into the past—contemptuously he refused to enlighten us on any of it.

It seemed that in his own world he had not been particularly scientific. But compared to us, his knowledge on many things was vast. We found that out at once.

He was intensely interested in our relatively crude attempts at medical research in the lab. Our cultures of the many malignant organisms which plague the human body—he understood them far better than we did. That was obvious. He began showing us, contemptuously and without explanation, what should be done. Then he was doing it himself.

Within a week he had devised a filter more effective than ours, and had trapped the hitherto unknown virus of infantile paralysis.

Three months. He was virtually in charge of the laboratory now, and we were nothing but his assistants. He did work for which our science of 2040 should have been profoundly grateful—well, we were. And the officials at Washington understood that we must be let alone here. No curious visitors could come to plague and anger Torgson. That was made clear at Carter's insistence.

**B**UT then—by this evening in mid-October—we were all really disturbed. Torgson from the beginning had been able to dominate our robots. There was no difficulty. His voice-timber had reacted as well as ours upon the delicate, intricate machines.

Yet gradually there was a difference here among the robots. Little things—

a sluggishness of response when Carter or Jane or myself issued a command. Or, sometimes, a command seemingly misunderstood.

Then one night, one of the huge ten-foot robots, with arms like cranes for heavy lifting, had dropped a piece of apparatus and smashed a globe of liquid in which billions of malignant bacteria were floating.

Something was wrong with the robots. We could not escape it. Suddenly it seemed as though within them there was a menace—something developing in the direction of independent thinking.

Torgson scoffed at it. To him they were mechanisms of utter crudeness, things which were built so badly that of course they would at times go wrong.

But did he really think that? Certainly he was not afraid of them; and the authority in his voice, his gaze, his gestures, made them always click with instant and skillful reaction.

We had sent finally to the Anglo-American Robot Builders—the huge Middle-west factory which supplied most of the American-made machines—asking them to send us an expert tester.

He had come this afternoon, a big gangling fellow named Peter Ohm, and now he was in an adjoining room with half a dozen of our robots, including little Opp.

“Don’t talk so loud,” Jane said suddenly. “If that Torgson should hear us—”

Torgson did not know we had sent for Ohm; we feared he might disapprove of it. And now in a small, blue-lit office of the lab, Carter, Jane and I sat like guilty, surreptitious children, waiting to see what Ohm might find wrong with the robots.

“Hear us?” Carter murmured. He was a burly fellow of forty. He sat now in his shirt sleeves with a green eyeshade on his forehead, slumped in his chair as he chewed savagely on a cigar. “Why in the

devil should we be afraid of Torgson hearing us anyway? You know, George, I’m beginning to think we’re fools!” With a hamlike fist he thumped on the desk beside him. “I’m the boss here, and one of these days—”

“Take it easy,” I said nervously. “Don’t let’s start anything.”

Do you who read this picture me as a nit-wit or a coward? I’m neither, I assure you. I’m six feet two inches—one and eighty-five pounds. With one hand I could have taken Torgson and wrung his neck. But the thought of doing that, somehow, revolted me.

“I wish he’d never come here,” little Jane murmured. “George, you—you don’t understand. He frightens me so horribly. When he’s in the room with me—I can’t help it; I just want to scream.”

Her gaze went past me to the closed door behind us. The little room abruptly seemed like a trap. I stared at the dark rectangle of the single window. The shade was up. There was the dim vista of the garden and the trees outside.

Eight hundred years of human progress. What did we actually know of Torgson’s character? He could be a man of diabolical villainy—a human fiend. And we were here, marooned with him—and with a hundred robots, all of them responding with strange abnormality to our commands.

Wild thoughts. But I could not fling them away.

“WHERE is he now?” Carter murmured.

“In Room C-2, just down the north hall,” I said. “He told me not to disturb him. He’s working on those cancer cultures.”

He was an untiring worker. Twenty hours a day sometimes, when a thing interested him.

“If only he weren’t so peculiar,” Jane murmured. “Like a hermit. He’s not

interested in us, treating us like children—”

Torgson, in truth, had largely ignored us. He had selected a room that he wanted for himself. At stated intervals we took his food to him—two sparse meals a day. Aside from the laboratory work he was always alone, not even bothering to speak to us.

“Peculiar?” Carter echoed savagely. “He’s that all right. If everybody in 2890 is as unpleasant to have around as he is—well, it must be a hell of a world! Look here, George, I’ve a mind to call him in here and have it understood—”

Carter checked himself abruptly. Jane gave a little outcry. Ohm was calling us softly from the adjacent room, but with our taut nerves it made us all jump.

“Come here and take a look,” Ohm said.

We hastened into the other room. Against its wall Ohm had ranged half a dozen of the smaller robots and one giant. Under his expert commands they stood with feet together, metal-sheathed arms at their alumite sides like a row of grotesque little soldiers, with wide, square shoulders touching. The towering giant was at the end of the line. They were all standing motionless, at attention, awaiting new orders.

On the floor little Opp lay on his back, inert, with arms and legs spread-eagled. His eyebeams were extinguished; there was no humming sound of current coming from him.

“I’ve de-fused him,” Ohm commented. The small fuse box in Opp’s center chest-plate was open; the fuse disc was on the floor beside him. “Think I’ll open him up and take a preliminary look with a magnifier at his reaction selectors. You say this one hasn’t been reacting normally, Rance?”

“No, not quite,” I admitted. “Usually he has been particularly responsive.”

It gave me a queer feeling, seeing little

Opp like that. Then my gaze shifted back to the line of standing robots. Their eyebeams—twin red-green shafts—all were turned on Opp.

Suddenly a shudder ran through me. It was as though those silent, motionless machines were resentfully watching Ohm as he squatted on the floor beside the de-fused Opp, as though within those metal brains some thought reactions, emotions, which should not have been there, were welling up.

Silently Carter, Jane and I stood gazing while Ohm unscrewed Opp’s big mid-section plate, exposing the ringed central shaft of shredded mica discs, with the myriad tiny nerve wires like ganglia clustering to it.

I muttered involuntarily, “Easy there. Don’t—don’t derange anything.”

THE words were stricken from me. It was as though in this glowing, tense room a bomb had exploded suddenly among us. The door which was ajar behind us had swung silently inward. The slim, black-clad figure of Alif Torgson stood there, drawn to his full height, with his hands at his sides clenched into tight white balls of fists. The room tube light gleamed on his pallid, hawk-nose face. His dark eyes, deep-set under the thin line of his black brows, were smouldering with his suppressed anger.

Confounded, for a second or two we all stared at him. I saw something newly Satanic about young Torgson.

Then, after a moment, he said slowly, “So what is this going on here? Speak—you, there on the floor—who are you who dares to come here? Visitors are forbidden!”

Ohm had heard of Torgson, of course, but had not yet seen him. Ohm stared mutely. Beside me, I could feel Jane shrinking against me. I put my arm around her.

The motionless line of little robots



stirred uneasily. A vagrant, abnormal reaction took place within them as their listeners vibrated from Torgson's voice and their eyebeams swung to him. The knee joints of the giant at the end of the line had bent, the muscle wires within his legs were pulling—as though he were about to make a leap. . . .

And I was aware that Jane's gaze, with a fascination of terror, was upon Torgson. Involuntarily Jane gave a little outcry, repressing it with a hand flung against her mouth. Torgson heard it, and saw her gesture. Upon his face in that second came an indefinable expression. Was it a look of regret that in his presence she felt repugnance? Could there have been anything as soft as that in Torgson's nature? Whatever it was, certainly anger predominated; and the look with which he swept her made me shudder.

All in a second or two. Then into the smouldering silence, Carter said, "His name is Peter Ohm. He is from the Anglo-American Robot Builders."

Surely that startled Torgson. It seemed that some emotion swept him that made him quiver. He took a sudden step and one of his arms went up with a gesture to the line of standing robots.

"The place where these robots were built? Why is he here?"

"Because I sent for him," Carter said. "Look here, Torgson. You know perfectly well there's something wrong with these robots."

"Is there?"

"Yes, there damn sure is," I put in. "Whatever is causing it—"

"I prefer to question you one at a time," Torgson interrupted. "Something is wrong with my robots, Carter?"

"Your robots?" I exploded. "Since when—"

"There is something wrong with them," Carter reiterated. He flung me a warning glance. "So I sent to the factory—"

"You did wrong," Torgson said.

"I don't think so," Carter said. "Torgson, I've wanted a talk with you for a long time. You're pretty confident of yourself."

"Confidence is based on knowledge. Insubordination from you, Carter—"

"To hell with that!" Carter suddenly exploded. "Look here, Torgson—we've appreciated your work. But we're not children to be ordered around!"

It had come. I tensed, staring, trying to keep from the vague shudder that seemed quivering along my spine. We had challenged Torgson. What would he do?

For that instant his gaze and Carter's crossed like sliding rapiers. The burly Carter had taken a step forward, and abruptly triumph swept me. Torgson's glittering gaze shifted away.

He took a step backward, recovered himself; and then his pale, thin lips were drawn into a smile. But it was almost a snarl.

"So? You wish trouble? There will be punishment—"

"We don't want any trouble," Carter retorted. "That's your idea, Torgson, not ours. I don't say that the way you've handled the robots has deranged them, but it is a fact that the trouble has come just since you've been with us."

"And this man Ohm thinks he can correct the trouble?" It seemed as though there was ironic amusement now in Torgson's calm voice, but there was a faint quiver there also. I could not miss it.

"That's what he's trying to do," Carter said. "Don't you understand, Torgson? We have billions upon billions of malignant bacteria here. Suppose some of the culture globes got smashed. One did get smashed, you remember? And we had quite a disinfecting job. There's enough bacteria here, if it got loose in the world, to devastate mankind. It could—"

Carter checked himself, and stared, numbed. For young Torgson was laugh-

ing—a wild, sudden, involuntary burst of laughter. It chilled me.

“Why—that is so. And wouldn’t that be terrible!” Torgson’s voice was shrill, quivering. Then again he seemed to control himself. “You fill yourself with needless fear, Carter. You forget my knowledge of antiseptics. There is no danger.” He gestured again toward the robots. “You forget also my knowledge of machines like these. If they need inspection and testing, I shall do it. Send this man Ohm away. I do not wish him to—”

**A**CRY from outside the room made Torgson’s words die in his throat. A girl’s distant, frightened outcry—one of the record-type girls.

“What the devil!” Carter muttered. He dashed for the door, with Ohm after him.

I pushed Jane away and bent down over the recumbent metal body of little Opp. I don’t know what made me do it—a sudden desire to have Opp alive again. I shoved in his fuse plug, closed his chest-plates.

And as his eyebeams glowed with the revivifying current in them, I murmured, “There’s trouble here, Opp. Get up. Stay by me.”

With Jane after me, I rushed out into the hall. The terrified assistants were clustered by Carter.

One of them gasped, “Our public audiophone—it’s dead! The main wires have been cut!”

We were disconnected here, our communications system cut!

And another of the girls gasped, “The robots—they’ve all left their posts in the culture rooms! No robot is on duty. They’ve all gone outside!”

Rebellion—it had come. And in the stricken silence now, we heard muttering, hollow cries.

Carter rushed back into the room we had just left. It had an outer door leading to the garden esplanade on this north

side of the building. The rest of us rushed after him.

The room was empty—the line of little robots, and the giant, had gone.

Opp too, was gone. In the confusion I had vaguely thought he would be at my side, but he was not.

The lanky Ohm was with us as we rushed to the door. “Gone out of control?” he murmured grimly. “I’ll handle them.” And then suddenly he added, startled, “That damned fellow, Torgson—where is he, Carter?”

Torgson had vanished.

I realized now he had not followed us into the hall, but had leaped and gone out this same door.

In the moonlight just outside the door we stood with the terrified girls behind us. The little garden was bright with patches of moonlight. Across its lower end a towering metal figure was running.

Then I saw other metal figures in the shadows at the edge of the woods. The big machine headed at them, and, joining them, seemed to recover itself so that it turned and stood confronting us.

“My God, they’re all out there!” Carter gasped. “Getting ready to rush us—”

“If I only was familiar with the names of the damned things,” Ohm muttered. “Can’t see the nameplates. General orders are less effective—”

With sudden inspiration, I shouted then, “Opp! Opp! Come here to me! Here!”

I saw Opp then. His small, square figure glistened pallid white with the moonlight on his alumite plates. At the sound of my voice he came from the shadows of the woods, lumbering toward us.

“Good boy, Opp,” I encouraged. “Now—stand still!”

His lumbering run slowed until he was walking with jerky steps. But still he kept on coming, disobeying my command to stop. And behind him the others now were coming from the woods. A hundred of them, a weird, metal rabble.

"Go back, Opp!" I shouted. "Back! Take the others with you!"

Futile commands. The oncoming metal figures wavered a little, but that was all.

Where was Torgson? I gazed around the lurid scene, but did not see him. Ohm had darted away from us.

Then suddenly Carter and I and the girls behind us were all staring with stricken horror. From the shadows of a thicket at the edge of the garden, a giant metal figure abruptly appeared. It was close upon Ohm before he could jump aside. The monstrous metal arms, like jointed cranes, swung at him, seized him. Ohm screamed—just once—as he was swung high into the air.

**S**TILL no sign of Torgson—and then we saw him!

Carter and I still were shouting at the oncoming robots. Abruptly, at the edge of the garden not far from me, I saw Torgson. He was standing on top of a small, rocky place, with the moonlight glistening on his black fabric clothes.

"You fools, you cannot stop them! You think I do not know how to control my robots. But you know differently now. This is the end of all of you—disease germs to devastate the world!"

He was wildly laughing—gruesome, gibbering laughter. And now he was shouting at the robots: "Come on, you metal things that do not look like men. You're just machines, but you've got brains! You know how to kill—haven't I taught you? Kill these people—kill them all!"

He was wildly, hysterically laughing again, and screaming, "I did it! I have made them killers! There is no man smarter than I am. Disease germs to kill everyone. All of you people—everyone in the world!"

With a jump I darted out of the red-green electronic glare at the doorway. The wild Torgson did not notice me as I slipped into the shadows where the woods

were close at the garden edge. In a few seconds I was behind him. A big, loose rock was on the ground here. I seized it, and as I jumped him from behind, I crashed it on his head. His scream died into a gruesome gurgle as he went down.

"Opp—Opp, where are you? Come here to me!"

I shouted into the turmoil. The robots were off to one side, suddenly halting, confused, milling with clanking bumps against each other as they saw Torgson fall. Their master was gone. And my voice and Carter's commanded. . . .

"Opp—where are you? Come here to me. I have always been your master. *You must obey!*"

Then I saw little Opp coming out of the jamming group.

"Good boy, Opp. Now—stand still!"

He stopped short, stood stiffly at attention. He obeyed me perfectly now! And the other robots saw it. Their eyebeams wavered, then all focused on me, bathing me in their glare as they looked to me for my commands.

"I am master of you all! Now—face the woods. March!"

At last they obeyed, a ragged line of them clanking to the lower garden, and, at the edge of the woods, stopping when I commanded it.

I found Jane beside me. Her arms went around me. "Oh, George, we're all right now."

And then suddenly she cried with a gasp of horror, "George—look!"

We were only a few feet from where Torgson had fallen. His slim, black-clad body lay crumpled here with the moonlight bright upon it. Moonlight was vividly bright upon his head, where his skull was smashed open by my blow.

I stood numbed, staring at his smashed head—at his skull, from which a tangle of wires and tiny grids and clusters of electronic cells had scattered out upon the rocks!



HANNES BOK



# SUBTERFUGE

By RAY BRADBURY



"The Venusians are attacking, and we cannot hope to fight them off. Gentlemen, Earth is doomed—unless every Earthman dies!"

**I**T WAS Tuesday morning, June 11th, in the year 2087.

Down the empty streets of Phoenix a breeze stirred softly. Nothing else in sight moved except a small Scottie dog that came to an alert while padding across the avenue.

The dog heard footsteps coming. It

scampered in the direction of the sound, yelping eagerly.

From far away and far above a faint echo sounded, rising and fading. Hanging poised in the sky like silver needles were a dozen alien projectiles. They hovered in a warm, humming motion over the quiet town.

The deep fabric of silence was slashed down the middle. Fat legs pounded the open avenue. An alien jolted heavily through the warm hush, a swarm of military men in his wake.

Armum of Venus stalked to the City Hall, strode long-leggedly up a silent rampway. There he paused and cursed the deathlike tranquility that had clasped the city.

"Is this the fruit of invasion?" bellowed Armum. "Is there no city left alive? Are they all like New York, Chicago and Phoenix?"

Echo voices answered back in mockery from the stone faces of tall buildings. *All like New York, New York, New York. All like New York!*

And then, a more subtle mockery, a voiceless teasing, *You thought to conquer, Armum. But Earth saw you coming and escaped. How did Earth escape, Armum? How did Earth escape?*

The Venusian glowered at his generals, as if to make them responsible.

*"We'll tell you, Armum—we, the voices of two billion. Earth committed suicide!"*

**T**HE bitter sound of those words, the keen knife of reality, impaled Armum. His carefully integrated plan of invasion, to capture the women of Earth as breeders of the new Venusian culture, crumbled into dry rot and pestilence.

Three thousand star-ships idled above Earth, awaiting orders from Armum.

The orders he would be forced to give had a poisonous flavor.

Where were the fighting Earthlings—the men of battles and bullets and soft

white flesh? Why had they given up so easily, preferring death shrouds to lightninglike war to the end?

Armum had so very much expected a nice, bloody Armageddon.

Armum's second-in-command gagged on the thin air. "Earth is no good to us this way," he choked out. "We don't want its cold climate, its naked atmosphere, its bad soil. We wanted productive protoplasm—and that is self-annihilated!"

The Venusians stood there, looking at the mute city. Dead; complete suicide. But Earthmen don't commit suicide. They aren't made that way. Not one man, woman or child alive—an impossible task.

Could there have been all that horror and agony just to escape Armum?

Looking around, one believed it. Here and there a shadow fluttered, a cat arched its back and prowled a fence; the little Scottie dog that had scampered eagerly to investigate, thinking its master had returned, now turned tail and scuttled away quickly at the sight of the invaders.

Armum grumbled, "I did not think it of the Earthlings. I did not think they could do it." He strode back down the avenue to the immense ship that was grounded in a plaza.

"Search and keep on searching!" ordered Armum. "There must be someone alive!"

The battle fleet of Armum jetted across the sky. It roared over a dead Earth, over dead cities, dead oceans.

This was an entirely different globe.

It was another world that had existed four years previously, on June 11th, 2083.

**"T**HAT is, without doubt, the most trivial statement ever made before us," said Manhardt.

"Not only is it not trivial, it is crucial!" Harler retorted. He pressed forward against the desk, his clean, bright eyes

wandering from face to face of the assembled men. "We've got one chance. Only one. Now—do we take it, or do we let the world die?"

"It's childish," said Manhardt.

Harler bristled. "So is the idea of an invasion, of being made slaves, of Venusians attacking to ruin the world. Good God, Manhardt, I know such things belong in books. I know. But you can't sing away facts. You can't whistle away weapons! My solution to the problem may sound ridiculous, but it's the only way—"

The conference had dragged on for weeks. Someone stood up in the back of the hall.

"A question, please."

Harler nodded.

"You have definite proof," the man asked, "that there really will be an invasion?"

"Yes. I tuned in on secret meetings when I was presenting myself diplomatically at the Venusian capitol. They didn't know I heard. They didn't know I saw certain weapons."

"You mentioned one weapon particularly—"

"Yes. A weapon that can paralyze or annihilate, according to the way it is focused. It's made from Venusian metal, which makes it impossible for us to duplicate it. They can sweep Earth with it. We'd be helpless. We have only one weapon to fight them with and that is—readjustment to a new environment. We can't hide; we can't run away. But we can do the unexpected. We can survive right under the nose of the invader."

"That sounds paradoxical. And anyway, how are you going to get the public to swallow your plan?"

"They'll have to. It's nothing but adaptation, a subterfuge."

"You speak of mass suicide glibly, Harler."

"And mass suicide it will be. But

planned and orderly, with reincarnation for some, the Great Sleep for others."

"You can't do it!"

"If I can't do it—the Venusians will do worse!"

Harler was done. "It's up to you, gentlemen. It'll be the biggest change ever come to Earth. It means the end of luxuries and even some necessities. It means simplification of our over-complicated lives. What will it be, gentlemen? A little—or none?"

He sat down. Grimly he fumbled with the reports he had handed to the council of two hundred scientists and politicians from all nations.

He remembered the day a year ago when the first Venusian ship had arrived with only six aliens on it—a diplomatic envoy. How he had gone back to Venus with them to study space-flight problems. How he had accidentally stumbled across Venusian plans—

But there was one point in their favor—on this day, June 11th, 2083, there were no Venusian spies on Earth. Earth was working against time. She had, at the most, four years to prepare for invasion of superior forces. And Earth had the advantage of working in secrecy—

A murmur touched the air. The president arose. "I'm calling for a vote. Either we try to fight a futile war with airplanes against spaceships, or we take the path suggested by Dr. Harler. Everyone favoring combat say *Aye*."

"*Aye—aye*." A mutter went around the table—sparse, intermittent. Harler stiffened, eyes widening, as the president noted the vote.

Then: "All in favor of Harler's plan?"

One man rose. "*Aye*."

A second, and a third and a fourth. Then, like grim, decided machines, all down the line, nearly every man, the council voted, "*Aye—aye!*"

Fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty—and a majority!

"The vote is carried," said the president. He turned solemnly to Dr. Harler.

Something gleamed on Harler's cheek. He brushed it off as he left his chair, as he faced his fellowmen.

He said, "You will not be sorry, gentlemen. Believe me, you will not be sorry."

"AND so, as you hear your numbers drawn and your names called, you'll know your places in the world of next year and the world of ten years from now—"

The television reporter droned on. "In the capital today, Dr. William Harler declared that no more than five hundred million people will remain 'aware and alive'. As many more must sleep to be awakened sometime in the future, perhaps never. The others—well, the others must be sacrificed. That means that one half of the world must die to insure the existence of the remaining half.

"A certain percentage of the population will be chosen by lottery, giving an element of fair play to the plan. But the rest, to insure intellectual and psychological stamina, will be selected scientifically for the survival of the fit.

"This is a time of unlimited emergency. Co-operate by listening each night, and by restraining hysterical outbursts. This much is certain: the Venusians are attacking. God grant we may be ready when they arrive. Signing off!"

It was on every lip—like honey and poison, like good and bad. There was argument, killing, acceptance, denial and ruthless insubordination. There was co-operation and sabotage. And the days rotted on the vine, dripping away into nothingness.

What a day for Earth. The dismal hours and months that followed extended inevitably into four years. The mobilization of doctors and machines, of men and beasts, of acceptance and patience. There

was a tremendous rebuilding afoot. Secret caches were made of certain new foods. Caches that would never be discovered because they were too obvious. The finest minds slaved day after day, operated surgically and manipulated mighty machines that did things to mankind never done before.

On the television: *Why We Are Fighting this Silent War.*

"Because Venusians wish to interbreed with the women of Earth, the fertility of Venus having fallen away to zero; because the combined races would produce children of horror; because all of those found sterile would be slain. Only our women would survive to live a life of terrified shame. This we cannot allow. Therefore we work—and work again."

The final days drew near. The battle fleets of Venus were even now gathering in the misty vapor of Venus' atmosphere. One Venusian ship flew over Earth in reconnaissance but noticed nothing out of place—nothing except the furious activity that had always been a part of Earth.

Harler spoke again.

"Tomorrow we shall know whether we succeed or fail in our mass-production subterfuge. Tomorrow will be the first change of one million experiments. And every day thereafter, in increasing numbers, up to five or ten million a day.

"We have thought of everything. Man will reproduce himself intelligently. The question is largely one of psychological adaptation to new surroundings, arts, tastes and hungers, to new homes and new viewpoints.

"Some have said this generation will not be able to reproduce, that intellect will not be passed on. They lie! Intellect will live. The mentality of man will live. The race of men and women will perish, but the precious ego, the power of life, will be retained in the seed we have perfected by experiment."

AND then the furious final days when egos, brains were dissected, boxed, stored. They were the Sleepers—the slumbering brains who were no more than brains, lying inert and helpless, waiting for the day when the living ones would awaken them.

“Five hundred million will take the brain sleep. We promise you that we shall awaken you—if we survive.”

There was a great deal of singing and quavering laughter and tears. And then compact, hidden slumber.

It is sad that nowhere was any of this transcribed. Not a word of print was ever laid to ink about the Change. Not a word as to the euthanasia, sleeping brains, the mysterious living ones.

The Venusians must never know about the living ones, or Earth would be completely doomed. The living ones remained alive to keep the world ticking until the Venusians had come, seen, and gone away for good and all.

Harler was interviewed on the television.

*Harler:* “The Venusian culture, without new blood and new bodies, will die within forty years. Then we of Earth may come out of hiding!”

*Question:* “Will we actually ever return?”

*Harler:* “No—not for a long time, if ever. The cities must fall as they are. We can rebuild them to our needs later, after Venus and its madmen are gone.”

It was punishable by instant death to even write it in a letter or diary that the Venusians might find and read later. Nothing in print! Newspapers and book publishers were ordered to cease publication.

Riots occurred in Chicago, London, Tokyo. Ten million died in riots over a four-year period. A civil war raged in China and in India and the Continental Mop Squads roared in and broke it up to the tune of fifteen million dead.

Earth was combed from North Pole to South. No one must be left alive. All men and women must be dead and buried.

Orders came by radio.

Joe Leighton got his.

“There it is, Alice. June 1st, four o’clock. A simple statement that puts an end to you and me.”

“At least we’ll be one of the last ones.”

“We’ll be one of the last, sure. And this—poison—they say it’s good stuff. Hell! I was going to get a promotion next month. Huh.”

“Will the plan work, Joe? Will everyone be dead?”

“All except the others, who’ll keep on running, all five hundred million of them. They’ll see to it we don’t refuse to take our poison at the last moment.” He shook his head. “There’s a coroner to each block. He checks everyone. He makes sure everyone is accounted for. If there’s a mistake, it’ll be *corrected*.”

“Will the others survive?”

“Who’d suspect them?”

“No one, I guess. And intelligence will survive with them through reproduction—”

“Sure. Years ago you couldn’t have done it. It would’ve taken a million years to produce the effect any other way. But you leave things to the scientists; they do anything with synthetic protoplasm.”

“I’m—I’m glad our children are sleeping, Joe, instead of dying. I’m glad they’ll wake up and have a chance.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Nice for them, eh? Well—bottoms up!”

Harler was one of the last ones in the Change.

“Street wardens,” he directed over the television. “Time is short. You have twelve hours to complete your rounds. The Venusian fleet is just off the orbit of the moon. All the others in the sound of my voice will receive verbal communications from time to time by word of mouth. Spread out; scatter. Don’t be



seen together. Roam alone. Eat and sleep alone. Take to the hills and valleys and deserts, but keep near running water. That's all. Good-by to all of you. You've done splendidly. May our prayers be answered. Signing off!"

**H**ARLER stood alone on a high hill, as the Venusian ships hurled down from the sky. He was in the town, unnoticed, when the Venusians swirled through.

He saw the bewilderment, amazement, the growing apprehension and terror of the Venusians as they found the world in death. . . .

Armú, leader of the Venusian horde, gave orders.

"Tell ships to capture New York, Chicago and London first! Land everywhere that there are huge populations!"

"What about those reports from Paris, Bombay and Tokyo, Armú?"

Armú scowled. "Widely separated cases. We will have our slaves yet; do not fear!"

But reports boiled in. Denver, Singapore, New York, Cairo. Dead, dead, dead. Sprawled, buried, killed. Shot, poisoned, euthanasia.

Frustration.

Armú roared from the steps of City Hall in New York, from the steps of City Hall in Los Angeles. He scanned them with quick purple flicks of his staring eyes.

Streets deserted except for a few stray alley-cats or unkempt dogs ambling, or perhaps a few birds fluttering across the sky. And silence—a great quantity of silence.

After two weeks of rummaging, of growing fury, Armú ordered his fleet to about face and head for Venus. This climate was bad, and the silence and death were damaging to morale.

Defeated, the Venusians poured into the sky. They never returned.

**H**ARLER saw them go. Manhardt saw them go. The president of the States saw them go. Five hundred million pairs of eyes watched the invaders vanish in hopeless fury.

*What a fantastic life this is, thought Harler. And yet our children will take the Change, the new arts, the new customs as natural. Our next flesh will be stronger, better shaped, better adapted. The Venusians are gone for good!*

Harler looked at the sky, seeing new color. *Impossible a century ago, reality today. New homes, new foods for us all. New bodies. New synthetic bodies formed to imitate others, but new and capable of reproducing intelligence in themselves.*

He stood upon the hill again, overlooking Los Angeles.

He raised his voice and chilled himself to hear the sound he made.

And now, beside a river, running, skipping, panting toward him, came a pack of dogs. Fine-furred, lean, gray, supple-footed, bright-eyed animals. Unsuspected animals. Dogs that roamed streets under the very feet of the invaders. Dogs that had brushed the invaders' bodies.

They had seemingly wandered, looking for their dead masters, and they had been ignored and kicked aside. Running and laughing, a new breed of animal, moulded from synthetic flesh and human brain.

Simplification. Adaptation. Subterfuge.

*Harler ran to meet them, thinking, God, but it is strange to run on four feet. It is strange the way the sun warms my fur, and the sound of my paws on the grass and my change of hunger and thoughts and demands!*

But most of all, as he hurtled down to join Manhardt, the president, Jane Smith and all the rest, he thought, *Well, I've kept my promise. The Venusians were misdirected. Earth has won!*

And, glowing with elation, he loped down into the valley.



# FOREVER TOMORROW

By **CLEVE CARTMILL**

**B**AT SILVER hunched his great shoulders and stumbled through the rubble of the building and the dead it had crushed.

He was dimly conscious that a miracle had spared him in this catastrophe which had all but wiped out animal life. He was not afraid, now that earthquakes had laid the city flat. If another flung him to the ground, he would simply lie still. Nothing could fall on him, for nothing was left to fall.

Heaps of shattered stone here and there had piled like snowdrifts against crushed and twisted automobiles and street cars, but he gave these a wide berth and stumbled toward the Sierras from which tongues of flame licked at a stormy sky.

Bat's mild eyes were glazed from shock, and shock had made his round face vacuous as a cretin's. He moved woodenly, instinct pushing him toward the edge of the city and the open plain beyond.

The ground shuddered again, and Bat fell on his face. Piles of stone shifted uneasily with a grinding noise, and a few feet to one side a wide crack opened to swallow the litter of buildings and corpses along what had been a street. Bat rolled

away from the chasm and retreated at a frenzied crawl. The roar of crashing stone sounded, and fountains of dust belched from the rift. Bat Silver broke into a cold sweat. He had not foreseen the possibility of being engulfed.

He marched on, wondering incuriously if he were the only person alive. Finally he reached the plain after three successive 'quakes had thrown him to the ground. He was bruised and dazed, but he was alive. He was also hungry.

He stepped across a flattened fence and entered the ruins of a little house. He averted his eyes from the parts of bodies that were visible and found edible scraps. He wolfed these at some distance from the house, his empty eyes wheeling about for signs of life.

He found none. Here and there was the twisted wreckage of a car, blown by that incredible wind from God knew where. He saw the carcass of a horse through which the wind had blown small sticks and bits of stone.

How long ago, he wondered, had that first shock blacked out the day? He had slept twice, after a fashion, and somehow preserved his life. Had two days passed?



A world divided between eternal night and everlasting  
day—and the key in a madman's hands . . .





He remembered nothing that resembled night.

The sun broke through heavy clouds at that moment, far out over the Pacific. Three o'clock, Bat estimated. That had been the hour of disaster—how long ago?

He stumbled on.

After a long and weary march, he became aware of a disturbing fact. The sun still stood at three o'clock. He knew that he had marched three hours, at least. His sense of time had been developed to a fine point in the years after the world's armies had collapsed; he couldn't be wrong.

Three o'clock.

He puzzled over this. The sun should have set an hour ago. Had it been three o'clock since the first 'quake leveled the city? Had the sun stopped?

For him, it had. He never understood afterward that Earth had ceased to rotate and now kept one face forever to the sun as the moon revolves around Earth. For Bat Silver the sun stood still.

Now, through his confused and disordered thoughts, sifted one idea only—preservation of his life. He dropped in the middle of a field when his legs would carry him no farther, and slept.

Voices awakened him. He smiled at a small group of men and one woman. He was not alone any more. He cried a little, turning away so they would not see.

Not that they would have cared. They were dazed too, except for the slim and dark Tony Post, and young Captain Elm, whose startling gray hair and bright blue eyes combined to give him an air of slightly sinister wisdom which his gentle smile rather accentuated.

"Come," he said to Bat Silver. "You will help. Administer the oath to this man, Tony."

**L**ITHE and whiplike Tony Post, rifle under one arm, attempted to answer Bat's question as the scouting party of four from Captain Elm's

headquarters crossed the twilight strip into the eternal night. He told of a mysterious wave or force, called trepidation, which had caused Earth's speed of rotation to vary at intervals. The first was recorded in 1790, when astronomical time as measured on Earth was 34 seconds from correct universal time.

It didn't make sense to Bat. He listened with only half an ear as Tony mentioned 1897, 1937, 1940 and 1958, in which year Earth dropped a full hour behind universal time. While Tony related how, on March 20, 1964, trepidation had stopped Earth dead on its axis and counteracted centrifugal force, which would have tossed all movable objects into space; how the atmosphere had ripped planes and birds from the sky and whipped away shattered mountaintops as it rushed to the poles; how the oceans, freed from centrifugal force, had divided to gather at the poles; how a series of earthquakes shook the globe into the form of a perfect sphere—while Tony talked of these phenomena, Bat privately decided that the sun had simply stopped. Then he examined the other two members of the party.

These were Jake Lain and Laura Belmont. Jake carried a long knife and moved with a wolfish glide; Laura strode at a wary distance from the others and had two guns slung on the smooth bulge of her hips.

She seemed as suspicious as a hunted cat. She leaned slightly forward on her small feet, her right hand flickering near a gun butt, and she never came within arm's reach of the others.

Bat Silver ended his scrutiny as Tony Post addressed him directly.

"So you see, Bat, that the sun didn't stop."

Bat pointed behind.

"But look, Tony. There it is—three o'clock."

"All right!" Tony snapped. "Have it

your way. Keep your eyes open, all of you, for a fire."

They were soon inside the dark, slogging through slanting snow, bending into a howling wind. Bat Silver located a far gleam of flame and led the way at a run.

They found a group of men and women whose exhaustion had halted their groping toward the volcanic horizon. They had flung themselves around a fire, hungry, numb and terror-stricken; and now slept while swirling snow salted their ragged coats, while a fury of elements growled overhead and the ground squirmed uneasily beneath them.

Tony Post prodded recumbent forms. "All right! Snap out of it! Everybody up!"

One by one they came awake, like the dead returning to life. One by one they got to their feet by a series of jerks and swayed dumbly in the wind. They seemed indifferent to life or death as Tony Post's words lashed their tired minds.

"You are to come with us, by orders of Captain Elm. We have food, which you may eat after you have taken an oath. If anyone refuses to take the oath, he will be left here to die. If he violates it later, he will be killed instantly. Do you understand?"

Obviously, Bat Silver thought, they didn't have the faintest idea what Tony was talking about. Their eyes were like the eyes of horses that have worked until they can't stand. They repeated the oath after Tony, but it was clear they didn't know what it meant.

"I pledge my will, my body, my life, my complete loyalty to Captain Elm until he releases me from the pledge."

They mumbled the words.

They ate the food which Bat distributed, set their empty eyes on him in a kind of thanks and waited the command to march.

Tony approached Laura Belmont, who

stood at the edge of the firelight, the wind whipping her hair to create a shifting pattern of black and gold. He frowned when a wary movement put her beyond arm's reach; he dropped his voice below the wail of the storm.

"You come with me, Laura. Jake and Bat can take this bunch. We may find others."

With a hand almost on her gun butt, she replied, "I'll stay with Bat, Tony. You take Jake."

Tony's eyes glinted. "I'm in command."

"Yes, I know. I'm not disobeying. But you and I have the guns. If somebody needs—"

"Killing?" he supplied when she hesitated. "Maybe you're right. Okay. You go in with Bat. If you must kill someone as an example, select a white man if possible. That's an order from Captain Elm."

"What's it all about, Tony? I don't want to shoot anybody."

"Remember," he cautioned. "You took the oath."

"But what does it mean?"

"I don't know. But for the time being, we're carrying out orders to the letter. Later—we'll see."

He called Jake, went off into the dark; Laura herded the miserable dozen toward the ragged skyline.

**V**ARIOUS scouting parties, composed mainly of Captain Elm's bodyguard, saved no more than a thousand and brought them to headquarters on the western slope of the Sierras. Here in the perpetual afternoon they began to build the city and the high stone stockade in the center.

They worked when Captain Elm commanded; they rested when he permitted. Makeshift shelters protected them, food details brought such goods as possible from the ruins of the nearest cities, armed

guards watched every move they made.

They came gradually to believe that they were the sole survivors of the human race, that the sun apparently would never slide any farther down the western sky.

They were in a continual stupor of exhaustion, with one or two exceptions. Only the hard-eyed young men who were the bodyguard, perhaps, had energy enough to wonder about Captain Elm's plans—the bodyguard and Tony Post.

He stood some time later in Captain Elm's house, in the room piled with such books as they had salvaged and with spare arms and ammunition, and watched the rock houses similar to this rising in rows. The stockade itself was nearly finished. Tony had reported for orders.

"Our first task," Captain Elm said, "is to finish the city."

Tony turned and searched the square face of his superior for the cause of his own uneasiness. The mouth was wide and full, pleasant not evil. The eyes were bright and blue, but not sinister. The eyebrows were neat and dark, in contrast to the shock of gray hair, but they seemed at rest. Captain Elm's big brown hands too were relaxed. Yet Tony sensed impending disaster, a doom to which he was unable to put a name.

"Then what?" he asked.

"The executions."

"What executions?"

"Perhaps less than ten per cent of those oxen out there are worth saving. The others die."

"Captain!"

Captain Elm rose from his rough chair and looked at his dark, slim lieutenant. He smiled gently.

"And did you think, Tony, that our purpose here was simply to start over with what was left of civilization?"

"What else?"

"This: we'll not duplicate the stupid mistakes of the past." Captain Elm gestured at the books stacked along one wall.

"These are more or less complete records of history. They have one common theme—clashing cultures, religious and racial hatreds and death."

"And so?"

Captain Elm gave Tony a level stare. "Don't use that tone to me, my friend."

"I'm not afraid of you," Tony said quietly.

"Ah, no, Tony. I believe you. But I shall kill you, nonetheless, at the first sign of disobedience."

"Yes, I know that. But you've just proposed to murder about nine hundred men and women. I don't like it."

"You state the proposition badly, Tony. I propose to make a new world—one culture, one religion, one race, and peace. A perfect world."

"Well, that's a bright dream."

"It shall come true and grow brighter. I have here a list of the nationalities represented in our city. We have one member of each sex from the following races: Mexican, Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, and Mongol."

CAPTAIN ELM read the list from the flyleaf of a book on which, with the sharpened point of a lead bullet, he had also worked out a number of computations.

"I have also selected a corresponding number from the white race. By crossing and recrossing these according to a plan I have evolved, one race will emerge after a given number of generations. Everyone will be alike: calm, peaceful, with no racial hatreds, no conflicting social or economic systems."

"You include maybe two dozen, Captain. What about the others?"

Captain Elm motioned through the window at the stockade. "They go inside, to be killed as quickly as possible."

"The slaughter pen."

"That depends on the point of view, Tony. Historians a thousand years from

now will see that this mass killing was necessary to produce the magnificent civilization they will enjoy."

"Let me ask you: If your seedlings are around a score in number, won't survivors in other parts of the world throw your system out of gear?"

"There aren't any other survivors."

"How do you know?"

"Simple. North America, except for a narrow strip along this coast, South America, Europe, Africa and a large part of Russia are on the dark side. Before the moon had completed her first two weeks journey from west to east, the air had begun to freeze. Life can't exist in that everlasting dark and cold. When the atmosphere rushed away from the equator, all life south of us died in a comparative vacuum and all life north of us died from atmospheric pressure. We can consider all life dead on such island groups as Japan, the Philippines, Australia and the like, because when the sea divided they were swept clean. In the corresponding strip in Asia, some have survived. I doubt this, because volcanic activity here hinted at almost incredible destruction from the mountains of Asia. However, there may be a few; as soon as we can prepare an armed air cruiser with auxiliary wing jets, we'll hunt them down and kill them. That will leave our little band intact."

Tony was silent. He had been answered.

"Furthermore," Captain Elm went on presently, "these people aren't worth saving. Go out and see for yourself. They are as lifeless as they can be and still walk around. But they're healthy and useful as breeding machines. They're perfect as the nucleus of the new race, for they'll obey."

"Some won't like it," Tony said, thinking of Laura and of Bat Silver.

"You refer to those who were with us on the day side, I suppose. With the exception of you and me, they all die."

"For God's sake, why?"

"Because they have initiative, because they might revolt."

"You're playing God, Captain!"

"I am God, as far as all of you are concerned. Remember, I led you to safety under conditions of the oath. Your lives are mine. I choose to save only those who are the most placid, the dullest, the most obedient. My bodyguard, the band I have led since the armies disintegrated five years ago into bands of guerrillas, must die.

"Those young men have learned to be hard and keen. I don't want their kind. I want only those who were stupefied by five years of chaos and further shocked by being caught in a darkness they couldn't understand. They can be molded into anything. Well, do you still object?"

"I'm a little stunned," Tony said. "Let me look around."

"Surely. But remember your oath. Violate it and you die."

AS HE walked about the city with his rifle under one arm, Tony Post turned a sharp scrutiny on the men and women who labored. As he saw the dull hopelessness in their eyes, their automatic movements, he began to believe that Captain Elm was correct. These people were walking dead. House builders placed one stone on another at the direction of an armed guard; water carriers slogged along with glazed eyes on the ground; out in the fields he could see the slow and lifeless movements of the cultivators.

They had met disaster and disaster had won.

"How are you getting along?" he asked a group who were lifting the last slab of rock into place at a house door.

They turned their empty faces toward his voice, stared for a long moment, then returned to their task.

Why? Tony asked himself fiercely as he

circled the stockade. *I'm alive, he thought, and I want to live. But they don't seem to care. They haven't been through any more than I have. There's something unnatural about all this.*

He waved a hand at Laura, who was in command of a gang of stone carriers, and went over to the cook shack.

This was presided over by Washington Adams, tall, gaunt Negro who was the only representative of his race. He was asleep when Tony entered, nodding by a huge copper pot that simmered over an open fire. He was to die, Tony thought, only because he was one of the odd singles; if a Negro woman had been saved, Washington Adams would have been included in Captain Elm's nucleus. Tony cleared his throat, and the man opened chocolate-colored eyes.

"Mistuh Post, suh!" he said in a voice full of music. "Kin I 'commo-date for' sumpin'?"

"No, thanks. Just stopped in to see how you like it here."

The cook stirred the pot with a peeled sapling and said from a wide row of shining teeth, "Sho' is fine, suh. Reckon I is mighty lucky. Mo' lucky dan my woman. Sho' was a good woman, dat Lucy." "She was killed?"

"Reckon, suh. One minute we in a haymow, settlin' fo' de night, hid from a gang in so'jer clothes. Next minute I is someplace else. Dunno 'bout Lucy, suh." He stirred the pot again, dipped in a finger and stuck it to his tongue. "Sho' was a good woman."

Tony's frown deepened as he walked toward the far edge of the plateau where Jake Lain supervised the quarry gang. The Negro had seemed in full command of his faculties, and he had been brought out of the night like those automatons building the city. Why should Washington Adams have recovered from the shock which had killed desire and thought in the others?

A commotion at the quarry caught his attention. There, where a wide face of shattered stone jutted upward, the workers piled blocks for the carriers. Jake Lain, long knife in his belt, paced back and forth with a feral glide, watching, watching.

When Tony was yet some distance away, the single woman in the gang threw down a block of stone and faced Jake Lain.

"Why?" she demanded. "We've got all eternity to finish, and you drive us like beasts. Why, in God's name?"

"Go back to work," Jake commanded. "Cap'n Elm's orders."

"To hell with Captain Elm then!" She placed hands on her hips and twisted a wide, contemptuous mouth at Jake Lain. "To hell with Captain Elm! I'm no slave. I'm free!"

Tony cried a warning, but too late, for Jake moved in a blur of speed. His knife flashed; the heavy blade bit into the woman's head and she fell. Tony jerked up his rifle, a chill of horror on the back of his neck. He pulled down on Jake, but held his fire as he became aware of two facts.

First, he caught a flash of movement toward the side—Captain Elm's personal squad was approaching and they would shoot him if he killed the guard. Second, the quarry gang spilled out of the pit and moved on Jake. He swung his rifle at the men.

"Halt!" Tony ordered. "One more step and I start shooting."

They faced him quietly, dully, and Tony saw the fire go out of them. It had been a feeble flame at best, and now it had died.

"Back to your work," Tony said.

They half turned to obey when a voice spoke at Tony's side. Captain Elm was here.

"These men are no longer valuable. Kill them!"



**T**ONY pivoted to see the captain, gray hair shining in the sun, arranging a small group of his body-guard into a firing squad. They stood in a ragged line, leveling their rifles, but before they could fire a man stepped forward from the lip of the quarry and stood over the motionless and bleeding woman.

He was big, with shoulders as broad as Captain Elm's; his dark eyes, Tony noted, were ablaze.

"What—what—" he growled inarticulately, and clenched huge fists.

The others behind him caught some of his emotion; they faced the captain, a sullen quintet.

Captain Elm's hand flickered, no more. Tony could not follow the movement which produced a gun that spoke five times—five shots, so close together they could hardly be counted.

The quarry gang remained standing for what seemed an eternity, each with a neat black hole between his eyes. Then, one by one, they toppled forward, backward, to the side, kicked once or twice and lay still. Captain Elm turned to Tony Post.

"I wasn't sure of you before," he said in a low but pleasant voice. "But I see you are loyal, Tony. When the stockade is completed, report to me. We'll put everyone inside, let out the guards one at a time and disarm them; then call out the list I have prepared."

Captain Elm turned away.

"Bury those men," he ordered the guard.

"I think the woman is still alive," Tony said.

Captain Elm walked away.

Tony stood for a moment in indecision and tried to bring this unreality into focus. It couldn't have happened.

But there lay the bodies, each casting an outline of shadow toward the hills. And there was the burial squad, rifles not yet lowered. Yonder walked Captain Elm, eyes straight ahead.

Jake Lain, his wolf eyes on Tony, said, "You didn't need to butt in, Tony. I can take care of myself. Don't forget it!"

Tony blinked back to reality and knelt beside the woman. Blood flowed from the long gash in her head, blood pumped by a yet-beating heart. He looked at her

# Getting Up Nights Makes Many Feel Old Too Soon

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face, twisted in anger, despair and surprise, and somewhere in his head a bell tolled a bitter note.

He carried the woman to the hospital shack, laid her on the rough table, half lifted a hand at the white-haired doctor and went back into the sun.

*Tomorrow*, he thought. *Tomorrow*.

Perhaps that was their trouble. This insidious illusion of sunlight had stopped time in its tracks. With the world forever at three o'clock, they had gone from one sleep to another as a man awakes from an afternoon nap and takes up a book he had dropped. The length of those sleeps, the amount of work done between them, the amount of food, all were governed by Captain Elm.

They had been shocked by the cataclysm into a stupor from which a killing schedule of work in the endless daylight allowed them no release. The human characteristics of these living dead were stifled by exhaustion, weariness of body and spirit.

The revolt at the quarry indicated the presence of such characteristics, and the attitude of Washington Adams, whose rest was not as rigidly limited as the others. They were all capable of growing back to normal.

But the stupefying schedule of work was designed by Captain Elm to prevent revolt when their time came to die. Yet, Tony told himself fiercely, they must be saved. They were the new world. They had a right to a tomorrow.

But how?

Captain Elm had a hundred armed young men who would kill like emotionless machines. Tony could not stage a revolt alone. Could he get help?

He would see.

**H**E FOUND Laura Belmont with her gang of carriers, their backs bent under heavy stones. Though she watched him warily, she did not keep him at her usual distance.

"Tony—you saw what happened?"

"At the quarry? I was there."

"What does it mean, Tony?"

"It means this: Captain Elm is master here." He added experimentally, "As he should be."

"They didn't have a chance," Laura said bitterly.

"Did they deserve one? By our own word we belong to the captain. We took the oath, each of us."

"Yes. We—took—the—oath."

Tony felt an inner surge. Here was an ally. A plan began to take shape in his mind, a plan that was double-edged in that even if it failed he could save himself and Laura.

"Come along," he said, and led the way to the edge of the plateau near the now-deserted quarry pit.

He called Bat Silver, who supervised a house gang. The big man joined them, swinging a heavy club. Tony held a caucus in the quarry pit and gave Bat specific and simple instructions.

"If it doesn't work," Tony said, "follow us, Bat. But I think it will, if you do your part."

Bat Silver gave Tony a steady look, slanted downward a little to the shorter man's eyes. "I know I'm not smart like you, Tony, but I'll do the best I can."

"I'm sure it'll be good enough, Bat."

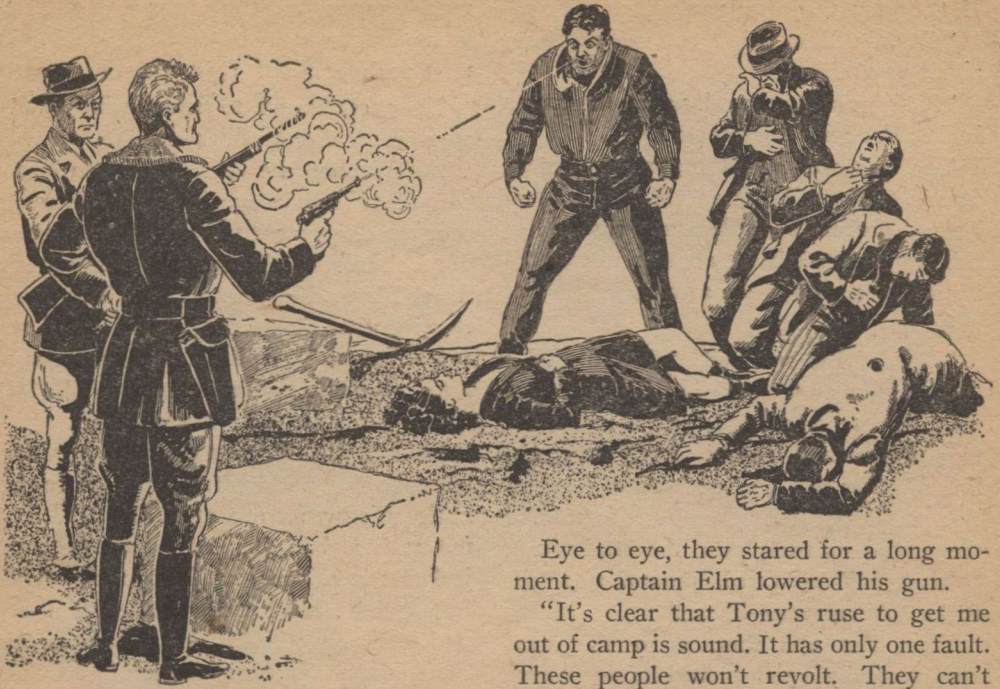
They shook hands, and Tony and Laura left. They dropped down the slope of the plateau, swung across the small stream below and headed for a far wooded hill like swift shadows.

When they had disappeared, Bat went back into the city and told a few of the planned execution. Then he went to the house of Captain Elm.

The guard took his club as he entered, and Captain Elm pierced him with a hard, blue glance.

"Well?"

"Tony and that girl have run off, Captain."



"What girl?"

"That blonde one that went on the other side with me and Tony and Jake. Tony told the people that you was going to kill 'em, and to stay out of the pen. Look!"

Bat waved at the window. Something was happening in the city. Men and women clustered together, and their confused murmur was a kind of low growl. Captain Elm got to his feet.

"I got a message for you, Captain, from Tony."

"Well?"

"He said you'd have to keep all the guard here to handle the people. And he said you'd be afraid to come after him and the girl. He said if you didn't come after 'em, they'd come back sometime and kill you."

Captain Elm smiled gently; a gun appeared in his hand. "Is that all?" he asked.

"Aw, look, Captain!" Bat Silver protested. "I'm for you. I swore an oath."

Eye to eye, they stared for a long moment. Captain Elm lowered his gun.

"It's clear that Tony's ruse to get me out of camp is sound. It has only one fault. These people won't revolt. They can't understand. Very well, Bat. As soon as I have killed Tony and Laura, I'll be back. I'll decide about you then."

Captain Elm was gone. Through the window Bat saw him throw a short command at the officer of the bodyguard and then disappear on the trail of Tony and Laura.

**B**AT SILVER was now alone in the room. He had done what Tony wanted; he had put Captain Elm on their trail. Tony and the girl would kill him and come back. But what about the guard, Bat wondered. Maybe they wouldn't let Tony be Captain Post. Bat could see clearly that it was up to him to do away with the guard.

He buckled two guns around his waist and stepped out into the sun. He beckoned to the commander of the guard, a suspicious young man who kept wary eyes on Bat.

"Captain Elm said I was in charge," Bat said. "Take all your men out behind them boulders. I'll talk to the people."

If they try to jump you, start killing.”

“Captain Elm didn’t tell me anything about you, chum.”

“He’s gonna be mad when he comes back,” Bat said, “if you act up.”

The commander of the guard was confused. Captain Elm’s specific orders had been to prevent a revolt at any cost. Now this big man, backed by an air of authority and two guns, gave a variation of that order.

“Well?” Bat snapped. “Get goin’!”

The commander gave in. He called his men, dispatched a messenger to call those from the crowd, and deployed behind a line of rocks that was well out of earshot. Bat suppressed a grin and strode toward the crowd massing near the stockade.

“Listen!” he cried, mounting a flat rock. “All of you—listen!”

Even Bat was shocked by the great face of apathy which turned its many eyes to him. These people were not angry; they were not afraid. They simply didn’t understand. They came forward like animals that had been called in a loud voice.

*They’re still like out there in the dark when Tony told ’em the oath, Bat thought. The poor devils!*

“Listen,” he said. “You don’t want to die, do you? Well, Captain Elm is gonna kill you if you let him. He’s got some crazy idea about only one race, and all but about twenty of you are gonna die. Are we gonna stand for it?”

He waited for the roar of “No!”, but it didn’t come. They looked at him, these men and women, but they didn’t understand.

“Look,” Bat said. “You ain’t sheep, you’re people. You got a right to live. Nobody’s got a right to kill you just because he thinks he ought to. Them guards out there behind the rocks is gonna shoot you down when the captain gets back. Well, we’re ten to their one, so let’s take their guns away from ’em. Not kill ’em, because they’re people too. But we gotta

protect ourselves. Come on; let’s go! Remember how you used to be. You’d fight then to live. Let’s fight now!”

They continued to stare with empty eyes. They didn’t remember.

Bat scanned the faces, trying to locate eyes that showed a spark. As he did so, he caught a movement far back in the center of the crowd. Somebody was coming toward him. Bat grinned. He was going to win, after all.

But it was Jake Lain, who had somehow remained with these. Well, Bat thought, maybe Jake would help.

He saw Jake’s purpose almost too late, when he was within striking distance, his knife singing an arc at Bat’s legs. Bat fell rather than jumped from the rock, jerked out a gun and fired point blank.

The first slug knocked Jake Lain several feet away; he hit the ground on his shoulders, a comic surprise on his wolfish face. Swift as a charging cat, he was on his feet and attacking again.

Then, methodically and without emotion, Bat emptied his gun into the incredibly swift body of the guard. When Jake was still, and dead, Bat flung a look at the line of boulders where the armed young men had gone. Several score were on their feet and watching. Bat motioned them to stay where they were before turning back to the crowd.

They were muttering among themselves, and Bat took this as a good sign. He waited for a few minutes, but when he gathered that they were discussing his fight with Jake, he held up his hands for silence.

“This guy,” Bat said, indicating Jake, “was gonna kill me because I said something against Captain Elm. The rest of ’em out there by the rocks feel the same way, only they’ll kill all of us. Now come on; get it through your heads. We can take their guns away and nobody’ll get hurt. They’re only a hundred, and we’re eight or nine hundred. Let’s go. Whadda you say?”

Silence. They were still cattle.

"Beat it!" Bat snarled at them. "Get back to work! Whadda I care what happens to you?"

They trooped away, but somewhat to Bat's amazement they did not return to work. Some went inside houses they had helped to build, and lay down to sleep; others entered the first temporary shelters; some lay on the ground.

Then, with a last look at the city, Bat Silver turned toward the triple trail of Captain Elm, Tony Post and Laura Belmont.

**T**ONY and Laura covered the first few miles in silence. She kept a position either to one side or behind—never in front—as they crossed a land that was cracked and dry, but striped with the bright green fringes of small streams.

*Somewhere, Tony thought, there are rivers.*

They came presently to one, still carrying debris on its muddy breast. They stood on its bank and identified broken bits of household furniture and a child's wooden doll. Tony realized with a sense

of shock that there were no children in this new world. He turned bright dark eyes on the girl who stood just out of reach; a little smile touched his mouth.

He spoke for the first time: "Well?"

Her eyes flickered at him. "Which way now?"

"Upstream. If we can't make a bridge or find a ford, we'll have to swim across. Can you?"

"Yes." She made a motion for him to precede her. "What's in your mind, Tony?"

Before replying he led the way around a huge boulder which had been part of a mountaintop.

"To go as far as we can, then to find a place where we can protect ourselves."

"Do you think Elm will follow us?"

"I hope so."

Her voice broke a little from its true pitch. "I'd rather have the whole body-guard on my trail."

"We can both handle him."

"Yes, I guess so. Why did he want to kill us all, Tony?"

"All? He didn't. He chose a few, myself among them, to build an amalgamated race."

## A Killer Would Hear His Death Sentence— IF THE CORPSE COULD ONLY TALK!

**S**SIX men hated old John Tindall, but only one of them dared kill him. For the others knew that Tindall's death would mean their own—as the district attorney would receive a letter from the corpse beginning, "*Now that I Am Dead—*" For thrills and chills, read this spine-tingling mystery novel by Philip Ketchum!

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"You?" she exclaimed. "Then why did you leave? Why didn't you stay?"

"Because you'd have gone to the slaughter."

"But why? Why, Tony?"

"The obvious reason, I suppose."

"Tony, wait!"

He stopped by a fallen tree and faced her. She came near and laid her right hand on his arm.

"Thanks, Tony."

Thereafter she sometimes led the way, and, arm in arm when possible, they marched on. They hardly disturbed a leaf as they passed, and there was no sound except for Tony's low voice as he explained the captain's plan.

"Is he mad, do you think, Tony?"

"I think any man is mad who is willing to kill others simply because they don't fit into his schemes."

"But the plan sounds like it would work."

"So does the plan of any madman who ever rose to power."

"But why couldn't he have done the same thing without killing? If all the races merged, it would be only a few generations before one race would come out of it."

"Yes," Tony said, "but Captain Elm is a perfectionist. Adhere to the plan, says he, and to hell with life!"

**T**HEY marched on.

They were hungry. They dug roots. They were thirsty; they drank from the river. They were sleepy, and bedded down in the open so that occasional earthquakes would not roll a log or rock on them.

They topped a broad, bare mound some hours after their first sleep and looked back along their trail. Nothing stirred there. Twin ribbons of green bordered a twisting river to the horizon; nothing moved but wind-stirred foliage. Far off to

the right was emptiness where once the ocean had rolled, pocked with deeps on which had floated exploded carcasses of weird marine monsters until eaten by brother survivors. But perhaps the ocean would roll there again some day.

Some day? No, Tony thought. Some time—this was forever, this day.

They saw a snake, thin, angry and swift, so swift that Laura's snap shot struck a full two inches behind it. Tony wondered, after reprimanding Laura for shooting, about that snake. Had some life survived? What did the snake eat? Were there mice? Rats? Bugs? There was a thought: If all the birds were dead, what would eat the bugs that would eat the vegetation the future farmer would plant? That little problem would have to be solved or the bugs would take over the earth.

They stood on the hill, her bright hair stirring in the breeze, and examined the trail, foot by foot, to the horizon. Finally they turned and marched again.

When they had reached the point where tired muscles would carry them no farther from their first sleep, Tony made a bed of boughs for the girl and she fell into it.

Before she closed her eyes, she gave him a wide, soft glance. "It's been so long, Tony, since I could sleep and not be afraid."

Tony examined his rifle and found a high cliff from which he could watch the back trail. He forced his eyes to remain open, fought the weighted lids, and raked the country constantly.

As he lay on the ledge, Tony began to feel ashamed. He had taken a coward's way out, had left those dumb and helpless people to die. There had been a focal germ of revolt in Bat Silver, Washington Adams, Laura and himself. They could have drawn others around them and overpowered Captain Elm.

Instead, he had taken this woman he wanted and run away. What if he could

go back later and kill Captain Elm? By then the others would have died, and the future depended on them. Heroic work would be necessary to build a world in this eternal sunshine.

Men would go mad in the unchanging sun if some shield were not devised; they would seek voluntary death in the dark across the hills. Perhaps other animal life, whatever life survived, would evolve fast enough to be a menace to man.

They must go back, he and Laura, and attempt to save the others from a madman. All available hands must be used to build the new world, in which there would be time for rest and skepticism. It seemed better to die, if necessary, in defense of that world to come than to take this easier way out. Besides, this way was only temporary. He doubted that a scant two dozen could salvage and rebuild the scientific aids necessary to maintain life in these new conditions, whereas a thousand might manage it.

"Well, Tony! Aren't you being rather careless?"

He whirled at the words, and Laura smiled down at him. Bright eyed, flushed with sleep, she was something of a vision against the sky.

"How did you do it, Laura?"

"You didn't hear me, did you? Well, you're probably dead for sleep. I'll keep watch."

"There's no time for sleep. We're going back. We've got to save those people."

She was puzzled but firm. "You couldn't go five miles. Grab a nap, and we'll talk about it."

He agreed after some argument, and she took his place on the cliff's edge, determined that nothing would surprise her as she had Tony.

**L**ATER—how much later she had no way of knowing—her eye caught a movement far down the twisting river. It was a swift flash of light, such

as a bird would make. But there were no birds. She concentrated on the spot and presently saw another movement of light and shadow, caught the glint of sun on gray hair—Captain Elm.

She slipped back away from the cliff and ran on a roundabout path toward Tony.

She saw the snake halfway through a long stride. She twisted with one foot in midair and jumped as it coiled. She crashed over the edge of the cliff, scrambled for a hold with clawed hands and fell heavily a dozen feet into loose stones.

Pain lanced one leg, and for a moment she feared it was broken. But she found she could move her foot and stood up. She took a step and fell again. One thing was certain. She couldn't walk.

Tony appeared without sound. "Are you hurt?"

"Ankle, foot, something. Don't bother with me. He's coming, about forty minutes away. Quick! Get started! I'll wait here."

"I'll carry you."

"You'd get shot in the back. I'll be all right. You've got to be free. Here, take one of my guns."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "You're right." He took the gun, kissed her swiftly, turned away.

"Do be careful, Tony."

He waved a hand and disappeared.

Forty minutes, eh? Tony scooped up an armload of dead underbrush and ran down their back trail. He carefully covered it for some distance, then struck off at a tangent, making as many signs as possible at a dead run.

When he had gone at top speed for a mile, Tony circled a shattered heap of boulders and intersected his back trail. He had seen an opening in the pile of rock, and now found it to be a narrow tunnel where he could watch. It seemed a perfect spot for ambush.

He crawled, feet first, into the tunnel,

settled himself; after a short inward struggle, he decided that he would kill Captain Elm on sight, without warning.

He had no way to measure time except in his own consciousness. But discounting his tension and sense of interminable waiting, he began to think Laura must have been mistaken. Anyone should have followed that plain trail by now. But suppose, he thought strickenly, Captain Elm had penetrated his crude efforts and was even now stalking Laura?

This was enough to launch him into action. He raised himself on his elbows, and a swift series of events took place. His sleeve twitched, a small volcano of rock splinters erupted at his elbow, he dropped flat instantly and the sharp *spang* of a gun reached his ears.

As soon as his heart settled back, Tony said in a conversational tone, "You missed."

"Naturally," Captain Elm said from Tony's left. "I can't see you. I was shooting by guess work. But it's all right. I have plenty of time."

"So have I."

"Ah, no, Tony. The first earthquake will bring the whole pile on you. Where's the girl?"

"Here. She's unconscious."

"I see. You'd better come out, Tony. You can't get away. You can't wait for the night, for there isn't any more night. I'll get you in the end. But by the time I've broken down your resistance by waiting, you'll be nearly dead from thirst. That's unpleasant. If you come out now, I'll kill you quickly, while you're still comfortable. I'll kill the girl instantly too."

"Thanks, I'll take a chance."

**S**ILENCE fell then, and Tony began to wriggle back into the tunnel, feeling for an opening with his feet. Back and back he slid, and the tunnel began to rise. When half his body was in the incline, he had to discard his rifle.

He held Laura's revolver by the trigger guard with his teeth and pushed his body back and up with hands that were beginning to bleed.

If only he had room in which to turn, he thought, he might stand a chance. As it was, if this tunnel opened at the rear end, he would emerge feet first and offer a large expanse of target while his head was still underground.

The incline began to widen, and Tony pushed hard with aching arms. He reached a kind of pocket in which there was barely room to reverse his body, but from which he could see an opening above.

He made the opening and flung himself into the light, heedless of danger from Captain Elm. He lay on a shoulder of the pile, weak and trembling, gasping for breath. His trembling soon stopped and he looked about, after a thankful glance at the sun.

He slipped down the pile to level ground and edged his way around it as if he were walking on broken bottles.

Captain Elm stood, his back toward Tony, looking at the spot where the tunnel opening had been. This was now part of the face of shattered rock, marked only by a little cloud of settling dust.

Tony raised his gun, sighted between the captain's shoulder blades and tried to pull the trigger. He cursed himself in silent fury as his trigger finger refused to contract. Sweat stood out on his brow, and the gun wavered. He steadied his arm with his free hand.

"Don't move, or I'll kill you!"

Captain Elm flung himself aside, whirled and fired twice before he hit the ground. Something tugged at Tony's left shoulder. He too leaped to one side and fired until his gun was empty.

Two of his shots entered Captain Elm's head. The others went wild, for the captain's shots tore the flesh on Tony's gun arm.

He examined his own wounds as soon



as quiet had fallen again, stuffed them with dried leaves and set off along the back trail to Laura. He left the dead captain lie, for he was afraid he might bleed to death if he didn't find help. The bright track he left behind in dead brush and fallen trees strengthened this fear.

He saw movement ahead—Bat Silver.

"Bat!" Tony croaked. "We've won. Captain Elm is dead."

Bat slipped an arm around Tony as he started to fall.

"We haven't won," Bat said, and gave a brief account of what had happened.

"Then get Laura," Tony ordered, pointing. "Can't go back. Go away. Start own world. Can't fight guard. Get Laura."

He dropped into semi-consciousness then, and remained in that state for what he later computed as about forty-eight hours. He had only dim impressions of Bat carrying him like a sack across one shoulder and supporting Laura with his free arm along a river and across brown earth.

WHEN his senses returned, Bat and Laura were arguing.

"Tony must have a doctor," she said, "whatever the situation in camp."

"Well," Bat said, carrying them both at the same time across a little ditch, "you know them guards. We ain't very well armed, and besides, only two of us is good for shootin'."

"We're going in. Tony will die if we don't get his wounds dressed."

The jolting increased, and Tony went back into his stupor. He recovered sometime later in the hospital shack, a strange sound in his ears. Bat and Laura were seated on each side of his cot.

The sound baffled Tony, but before he could identify it Washington Adams came in with a bowl of soup and everyone began talking at once.

"Lemme spoon dis soup into you, yo' honnuh."

"Tony! Tony, we've won!"

"Yeah, Tony. Seems like they was too tired to know what I was talkin' about. But with Captain Elm gone, they could sleep all they wanted. When they come to, they started to get it through their heads. So they put it up to the guard, an' the guard says okay. So—"

"So we been waitin' two days fo' you to git awake so's we kin name you mayor, Mistuh Post, yo' honnuh."

Tony broke in. "Two days? How can you tell? Did the earth begin—"

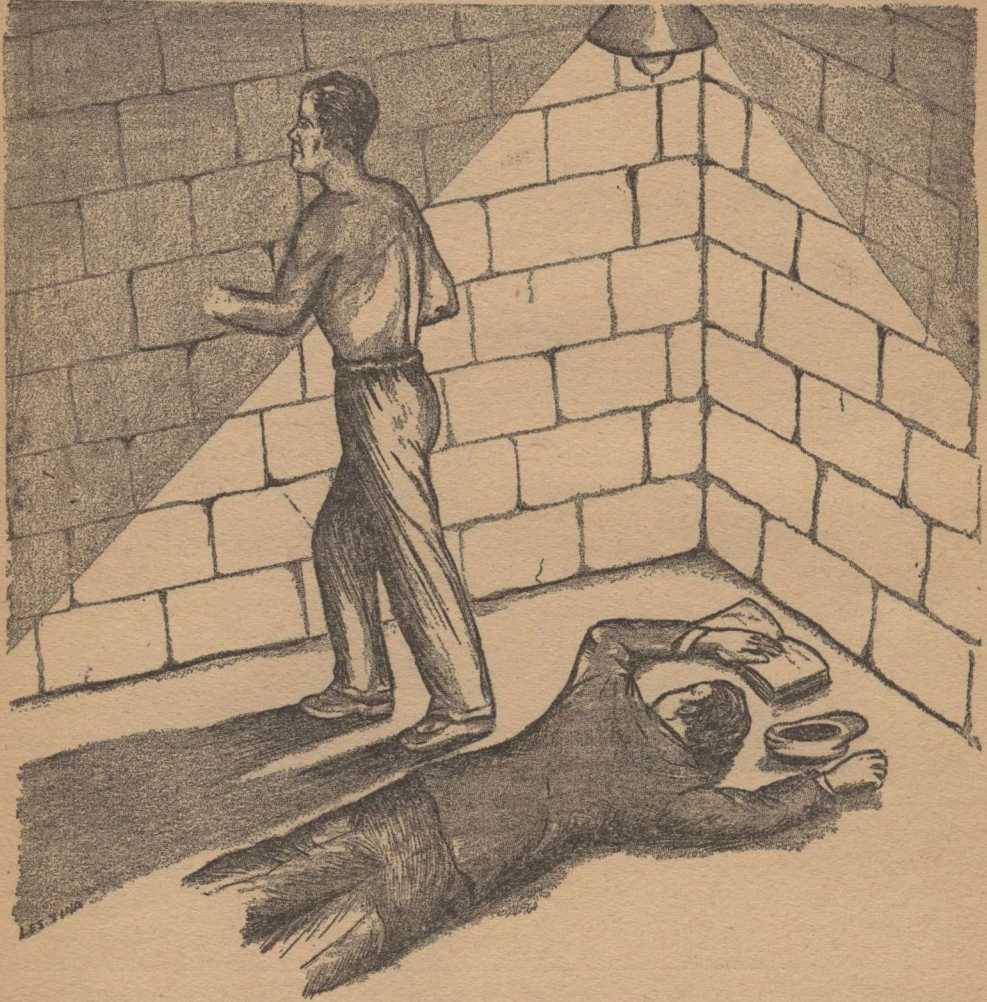
"No, suh. Look!" Washington Adams pointed to a shelf.

There was an alarm clock. One of its hands had been torn half away, but it told time; its busy clacking had been the sound which had bothered Tony.

"Why, when dey bring it from a old house, Mistuh Post, it sho' perked things up heah. Sho is fine knowin' when is tomorrow!"

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# EXIT



By **BOB TUCKER**

Once in a hundred million times a man may perform a scientific miracle—but he may not live to see his success!

**H**IS was Cell One. He was a small, dark-skinned Italian and he kept muttering "Hell!" aloud, over and over in droning monotony. He seemed not to understand that at long last his particular fate had tagged him,

was dodging right now at his heels.

He didn't seem to realize that he had but one more week of life; that this was his Last Mile. He said only, "Hell!"

The corridor was short, dank, brilliantly lighted. A guard stood at either end, motionless, alert. A third sat in the middle of the corridor, facing the cells. Drab, cement-block walls were painted a chalky, deathly white. Damp drafts scudded constantly across the scoured floor, climbing the sticky wall at the far end of the corridor; crept silently across a cold metal door embedded there. A dark green door with a black knob.

The draft drifted back across the room, waist-high.

The clerk was in Cell Two. An ordinary-appearing clerk; he would have been at home in any office. He sat dejectedly on the white metal bunk, weeping. Pale with the thought of the Thing to come, his pallor matched that of the cheerless walls around him. He wept continuously.

He had been crying for three unending weeks. His swollen eyes no longer welled tears, but he cried on—a dry, disturbing cry. He would cry for one week more.

Set in the dull white ceiling, a glassy brilliant eye, as bright as a carbon arc, burned relentlessly. It was never turned off. The probing rays burned into the eyelids when the men tried to sleep, burned into the muddy conscious when they simply lay there, thinking, staring. It burned into their minds when they cried for peace—and found none. The blinding light illuminated every corner, every inch of the corridor and the four white cells.

It brought out in bold relief each bunk and the occupant; it dispelled any shadows that may have lurked behind the white-washed bars.

Cell Three held a huge, bulky body. An overgrown ape of a man, unmoving and silent. Two great, hamlike hands supported an equally massive head. His

skin was coarse and matted with hair; spikelike whiskers jutted in spots on the clipped, bullet-shaped chin. Eyes were yellow, narrow and unblinking, slitted against the blinding light. Eyes that stared with deep hatred at the brass-buttoned, blue uniform stationed in the center of the corridor—just out of reach.

The occupant of Cell Three would go to his death a week hence—hating, silent, contemptuous.

The guard in the center of the corridor was colorless, quiet, and but for a slow, measured mastication of gum, almost unmoving. Gleaming brass buttons marched in two orderly rows down the breast of his uniform. He never for an instant took his eyes from the activities of the four men before him. Never permitted a movement to go unnoticed. Near his foot, set in the dank cement floor was the alarm button.

The guards at either end watched him. All three of them were changed every two hours—because of the strain.

This was death row.

THE man in Cell Four read a book. He was bothered not by the Italian's mutterings, the clerk's weeping, nor was he disturbed by the ominous, brooding silence in the cell next to his. He was absorbed by the book. The book must be finished before he should be forced to put it down—forever.

Forever began at midnight, tonight.

The book was all that was important. It would be a pity were he to die before he picked up a few more items of knowledge the book might contain for him. He turned the pages, reading rapidly, thoroughly.

The bars were white, like the ceiling, like the floor, like the walls. The iron bunk fastened securely and solidly to the wall was white. A white, canvas-covered ticking covered each bunk; each man wore a pair of white canvas trousers, a pair of

soft slippers. The chest was bare. Continually that chilling draft swung across the floor to gather more dampness and drift back, waist-high, across the room.

A gong clanged somewhere, far away. Meal time. The door opened and the powerful odor of cooking food rushed in, brushing before it the dingy smell of prison disinfectant.

The Italian glanced up with a dead, unuttered "Hell!" on his lips. Food was definitely understood; death was not. Next to him the clerk looked up hopefully, and stopped crying.

It would be the usual deep pan of soup, or meat stew, and a hunk of bread and coffee—but it was food.

The hairy ape said nothing, moved nothing but his eyes; these slithered toward the door where another uniform was bringing in a tray. He waited stolidly.

The man reading in Cell Four laid down his book almost regretfully. His tray came in first. He sat unsmiling on the edge of his bunk as a guard brought it in. The tray and a steaming pot of coffee was placed on the floor before the bunk; the man who brought it took up a position against the cell door, inside, watching. The door was locked behind him.

Last meal. There was half a chicken—roasted and savory.

The scholar pushed the book out of the way, placed the tray on the bunk. He stood up beside it to eat.

"Good reading, Professor?" The guard inside the cell flicked a finger at the book.

"Yes. Yes indeed." The scholarly eyes were friendly, intelligent. "A book, you know, is man's best friend—not the dog." He ate slowly. "My only regret is that I shall not have time to finish this one; it is so completely absorbing. I had hoped, you know, to be able to work completely through your library here, but. . . ."

"Yeah, I know. Tough luck, Profes-

sor." The sympathy seemed artificial.

"Not 'professor'," he attempted to correct, "but a . . . oh, never mind. The meal is delicious. My only wish now is to be able to complete the book!"

The guard in the cell shrugged. "Every man to his own taste. I'd rather eat, myself. And I can think of a lot of things I'd rather call friend, than a book. Besides, what's so good about this one?"

He reached out a hand and casually turned it over on the bunk, reading the title.

*Atoms and Their Properties.*

"That book?" The twinkling eyes looked up from the tray to smile guilelessly. "In that book, sir, one finds a very excellent means of escape. If one could but take advantage of it!"

At the word *escape* all activity ceased. The guards stopped, stared suspiciously. Eyes in the neighboring cells turned with one motion toward Cell Four. Silence.

"Huh?" The guard in the cell shot out a rough hand and grabbed the thin volume from the bunk. "Let me see that!" The others, outside in the corridor, had approached the cell door.

"What book is that?"

The title was read aloud. Everyone stared at the scholar for the space of seconds. The guard within the cell eyed him in speculative wonder. He wished he had paid more attention to high school physics. Atoms? Those little things that whirl around inside you, and inside all objects—that's what atoms were. But then, were atoms in physics? He wished he could remember for sure. Oh, why bother? Escape?

Ridiculous!

HE said as much, after thumbing the pages in idle fancy.

"I agree with you, sir." The eyes were still laughing. "But possible, nevertheless. Please do not let it worry you so!" His face was innocent, ap-

peared totally incapable of plotting and executing any kind of escape.

"I don't think you'd better keep this book any more."

"Oh, please. I already know all the information necessary for such a step, let me assure you—although it isn't likely that I could put such information to use. But I should like to finish the book before . . . Well, I dearly want to finish it!"

"I don't know, Professor." The guard was a picture of indecision. A last request was a last request and usually honored as such. On the other hand—suppose there was something in this book? Damn physics and atoms! What to do?

"I don't know," he repeated. "I can't let you deliberately have something that would aid in an escape—yet, just how this book could . . . Oh, hell! Just what is there in this book? There have been dozens of men read this before you, and *they* didn't escape!"

"That, sir"—the clean teeth showed quickly—"is probably because they weren't intelligent enough to take advantage of the facts. For that matter, neither am I. And too, there were the laws of chance working against them."

"Professor, if you want this book back you had better come clean! Otherwise back to the library it goes." He was sour, his patience rapidly nearing an end. He still couldn't decide whether atoms were in physics or astronomy, and it annoyed him.

"Spill it! What's this all about?"

The "professor" seated himself on the bunk, crossed his legs and patted his mouth with the paper napkin. The meal was over.

He said, "I take it you have never read that book, my friend? Also that you are probably not familiar with the properties and behavior of the atom?" The smile was most disarming.

"Why—no. I ain't got time to read books, Professor. A man ain't got time

to hardly read a newspaper around here. But I learned about atoms in high school." He added belligerently, "In physics."

"In chemistry, I'll wager." The correction was made with a polite smile. "But really, you should take the time to read this highly instructive book. Though your time be limited, I do not doubt but what you will be amply rewarded. But to answer you in brief—when, in a flight of theoretical fancy, the laws of chance cooperate with the atoms in two physical bodies, those two bodies may perform astounding feats. That is, one may walk through a cement wall, a steel door, unharmed—"

The guard stared, thunderstruck. His jaw hung slack in abrupt amazement. Suddenly he burst out laughing, and tossed the book on the bunk.

"Okay, Professor, you can have it! You sure had me going for a minute, I don't mind admitting." Genuine amusement shook his frame. "Call me, will you, when you get ready to do your fade-away act? I want to be around to see that!"

He was let out with the tray and walked up the corridor, laughing. In the death house his was not the only laughter.

"SHUT up, you guys!" For the first time in weeks, the huge man spoke. His hamlike hands dropped from propping up his head and he turned strange, slitted eyes on the neighboring cell. He seemed to see the mild little gentleman for the first time. His glance was brimming with curiosity and interest.

"I like you, Doc." Calculating eyes in the massive head roamed over the scholar's small body. "I like you. You're not bats like these birds over here—" jerking his great head at the clerk and the Italian. His eyes dropped to the book on the bed, and back to the finely featured face. "Yeah—I like you."

"Thank you. May I add I harbor no ill feelings toward you?"

"Yeah, I suppose so. You like me too, eh?" He hunched forward. "Is that the truth, Doc? About what you told brass buttons? Can a guy just get up and change his atoms and walk through the walls?"

He intended to whisper but it resembled a muted roar. The clerk looked around, attention attracted. In the far cell the dark-skinned man uttered a single, contemptuous, "Hell!"—and turned his back. The three guards looked on, half interested.

"Why, yes, it is theoretically true. I suppose. Actually, it is open to question. There is a school of belief that it has happened. History does record such incidents; well-known personages *have* vanished from jails and rooms thought escape-proof. When the doors were opened—poof! They were gone. Then they suddenly bobbed up somewhere else in the world.

"But understand, it is . . . well, practically impossible. Not everyone can expect to do it—not even in the longest lifetime. It can happen only once or twice in so many hundreds of millions of times. Perhaps only a bare half dozen times from the day of Creation to the end of time."

Unexpectedly, the clerk spoke up.

"I haven't heard anything about such happenings."

"Of course not, sir. You will very seldom find such happenings recorded elsewhere than in prisons—for who bothers to keep a record of such at a time or place where the disappearance was looked upon as merely a minor mystery? The fellow was most likely termed a magician and eventually forgotten. But it has, and can happen."

"Doc, do you mean that—that if a hundred millions other guys was in this cell with me, that one of them could walk

right out through that wall over there?"

The gross face was interested despite the disbelief plainly written on it. Beyond him, the clerk clung to the horizontal bar of his cell, watching and listening.

"Oh no, hardly that." The statement seemed to amuse the scholar. "What I meant to imply was . . . given an unlimited number of years in which to live, and given energy to go on forever without stopping, a man could, *eventually*, walk through a solid wall or some similar object. In some one attempt, in a million-million attempts, he could and would succeed. It might happen on the tenth try, it might be the thousand and tenth—or it well might be the hundred million and tenth.

"Those that have escaped by such method, if indeed they did escape that way, were lucky enough to find the laws of chance working in their favor at an early time. And in all probability, absolutely unknown to them. I would hazard a guess that they were merely leaning against the wall of their prison, or standing in the middle of the floor—when miraculously they sunk through. I doubt, too, if they realized afterward what happened.

"They might attribute it to a miracle, or a weak wall, or simply that they had become insane."

"Hell!" the man up in Cell One responded.

"Shut up, you little rat," Cell Three growled. He wished the doc hadn't used so many big words.

The clerk, however, grasped the idea at once.

"Then at almost any time, Professor, a given man can pass through a given object, providing the laws of chance so arrange the atoms of the two objects that they do not conflict?" Wild hope sprang alive in his swollen eyes.

"Yes, that is about as simple as I could put it. And it is correct enough for us

to speculate and argue upon. But do not expect it to work for you as you would a wheel of fortune in a gaming establishment, say. Making a fortune on the turn of the wheel before it broke you, is child's play compared to this."

"Hell, I t'ink you crazy."

"Shut up, you little rat!"

The bellowing roar shook the walls and seemed to cause the white bars to rattle in their beds. The Italian retreated to the far corner of his cell and flung back a small, defiant, "Hell!"

THE grizzled gorilla turned his attention back to Cell Four. "Go on, Doc. How does this business work?" The disbelief was slowly wearing off, something resembling limited understanding was taking its place. "Go on, Doc. Tell us."

"Atoms are—" the keen eyes surveyed the heavy face before him—"atoms are small particles inside your body that cannot be seen or felt. But they are there, millions of them, making up the bulk of your body. Millions and billions of them are constantly revolving about, inside you; were there no atoms there would be no—you. When your body dies, they of course die too. They cease moving in their orbits, transmigrate to some other form. Then your body . . . uh, decays."

"Something like germs, eh, Doc?" A grunt accompanied this as if complete understanding had been accomplished.

"Well—if that helps you to understand the better, yes. But much smaller, remember. Because atoms exist even inside the germs. Billions of atoms inside your finger alone."

The big head swung down to stare at a finger in some surprise. Experimentally, he pushed the finger against the wall.

"It didn't go through, Doc."

"Of course not! You surely don't expect to accomplish anything on the very first try. The laws of chance would have

to be operating very well indeed for such success! And too, if it *had* worked, it might have stuck in the wall. There is no guarantee that an object will pass completely through another object.

"It might, and again it might not. There is a strong possibility that it would pass into a wall, but not be able to emerge from the opposite side. In which event, you are imprisoned within the wall." The smile was gone. "Which would not be very pleasant, I assure you."

Undaunted, the big man sat in his bunk, pushing his finger again and again at the wall until a red welt appeared on the skin. The clerk was deeply interested. One or two of the guards were listening.

"Do you mind explaining that, Professor? The atom part of it I mean—walking through the wall, yet not coming out of the other side."

"Simple, sir. All these objects about us contain atoms that are, quite naturally, revolving at a tremendous speed. Just as those atoms in your body revolve.

"Now suppose that the atoms of one's body suddenly find themselves—this is where the laws of chance come in—on the same plane of rotation as the atoms in that wall, let us say. Not only on the same plane of rotation, but rotating in such a manner as to permit the two types of atoms to slide between each other—to pass one another without danger of collision.

"This would permit one, if he happened to be leaning against the wall, to—uh, float, seemingly, through the wall and not actually touch it. When these two atom groups slip between one another without collision—then two bodies may occupy the same space at the same time.

"It is when they *won't* slip and slide freely between each other, but constantly contact and repel, that your body is rebuffed from the wall."

This completely nonplussed the gangster. The expression on the broad face was both comical and pitiful to behold.

Suddenly his face lit up. "I got it, Doc. I got it!"

"Yes?"

"Yeah. You mean like the moon slides between the world and the sun and doesn't hit either one of them! Don't you, Doc?"

The author of the statement was beaming and proud.

THE elements themselves set the stage. Those few gentlemen of the press who came up from the city papers sat around the press room with coats on, collars turned up. Turned up against the chill of the wind and the rain outside, the dismal smell of disinfectant and death inside.

It was nearly eleven-thirty. At a quarter to twelve they would file solemnly into a small room, sit on benches, and watch a mild-mannered, mildewed scientist die in the chair for the murder of his wife. It was eleven-thirty now.

At exactly a quarter to twelve a tiny gong sounded, signaling their time to go to the room. The small room with benches and one chair.

No one heard the gong.

Instead, a brazen clanging drowned out all sounds, froze all movement, silenced all words; a clanging that held a note so high in the scale as to terrify those who heard it. Hair stood on end and skin crawled with the insistent, sinister appeal of that clanging.

Now other bells joined in. The administration building was a seething clamor of alarms and men. And over all, the sobbing moan of the escape siren atop the water tower began to screech! Escape.

In the warden's office a control board flickered with lights. All points in the immense prison system flashed their signals. A number kept repeating itself, continued flashing, flashing. Number three. The death house. Escape from the impossible. . . .

The floor was white—like the ceiling,

like the bars, like the walls. All but one wall. It was pinkish in hue.

The guard lay crumpled on the floor, dead; his body across the alarm button. Crumpled in a shapeless heap on the spotless floor, his eyes bulging from their sockets. His face was a readable mask of terror, of shock, of apoplectic death.

In the spotless white ceiling the miniature sun burned on, revealing every harrowing detail.

Cell One enclosed a dazed, shocked Italian, pointing a slim finger at nothing, muttering aloud to no one, "What the hell! What the hell. . . ." Sweat beaded his naked chest and dripped to the floor.

In Cell Two a thin, gaunt, crazed shadow of a man hurled his broken body again and again at the stolidly resisting wall. His eyes were filled with blood, his head rapidly becoming a pulpy mass of featureless flesh. Time and again he threw himself madly against the wall. His breath came in shaking gulps. A broken rib was puncturing a lung, being forced farther in with each mad lunge.

The overgrown man in Cell Three sat on the floor. He did nothing, he said nothing. Until at last he looked up to stare at the dead guard.

"I counted them," he said then, simply, to the unresponsive guard. "I counted them. Doc did pretty good. It was four thousand and fifty-nine. I counted them. I know."

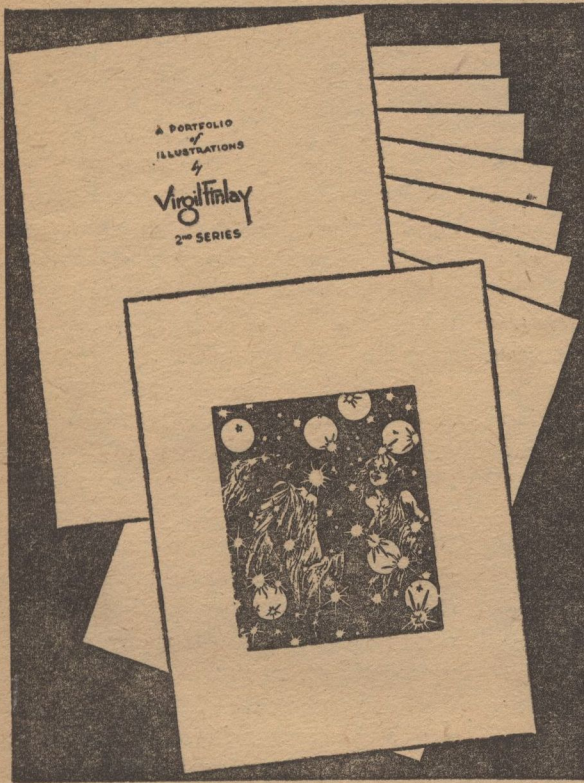
In Cell Four there was nothing. No one. There remained only a shadow on the concrete block rear wall—as if someone stood just outside and the bright sunlight projected his shadow through the wall. But the sun wasn't shining and the cell was located three floors up. There was no one outside. But the shadow was there.

It remained there, unmoving, pinkish, a shadow of a man.

The shadow would never move—not as long as the wall remained.



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WHEN we closed our last column, it was with a feeling of having barely scratched the surface on a topic of almost infinite possibility. The borderlands of science and knowledge are really vast territories almost certainly covering more ground than those continents of knowledge whose frontiers our men of science now probe. That there are whole undiscovered continents of fact and natural law is almost a certainty.

We asked our readers if they knew of strange data and strange experiences that would do well in this column. But we have not yet had time to obtain such material save for one or two examples.

Nevertheless, the files of fantasy fan magazines continue to yield a large amount of remarkable material. Fans, by their very nature, are always turning over in their minds the suggestions of things to be that are contained in the stories of this magazine and others similar to it. Stimuli produce some results.

For instance, we could not go long on these paths without encountering the lands of occult and psychic research. We do not necessarily seek those lands for they are already being covered by a great host of interested people and we seek the farther realms of Fortean items. But, just the same, we ran across an article in a British fan magazine, *Fantast*—still brought out under severe war conditions as the date is July, 1942—entitled, “Poltergeists”, by a British fan, Harold Chibbett, who had made a study of the subject. We quote:

“Poltergeist phenomena form only a small part of psychic phenomena in general, but they are a most interesting and, at times, amusing part. The word ‘poltergeist’ itself is of German origin and means ‘mischievous ghost’.

“I will give you a few instances, taken from actual cases, of the sort of things polts indulge in when they feel like it. In 1940, for instance, there was a cottage near Carrignamima, somewhere in Eire. The inhabitants were a man, his wife and a child. Manifestations began suddenly as they always do in these cases. ‘When we were eating our meals a cup or saucer would stagger across the table and fall on the floor and smash. Then, suddenly, the pots and pans would rattle and make a terrific din. One day I had to do a lot of washing up. When I had nearly done, I turned to the fire for a moment. When I got back, the clean things were in the dirty water. I gave up after three attempts. As I moved about the house I could hear people laugh at me, though I could see no one.’

“Then, there was the case of the Davis family, at Bethnal Green in March, 1938. The inhabitants of the house were Mr. Davis—a sixty-one-year-old compositor—a daughter, aged twenty, and her brother, aged sixteen. On another floor were a Mr. Harrison, his wife and their eighteen-month-old daughter.

“All sorts of queer things happened here.

“One or two instances will suffice for

our purposes. Mrs. Harrison said that she looked in the Davis's sitting room and found that the sofa had been moved away from the wall, and other furniture disarranged. The room in which all this was discovered had been locked before the Davis family went to bed. During the night, there were further displacements of furniture in the bedroom where Grace Davis, the daughter, used to sleep.

"Dr. Naddor Fodor, who investigated this case, says, 'It is always tempting to explain such phenomena by fraud or hoax. In the Bethnal Green case, this was impossible.'

"Blackpool distinguished itself in 1938 by permitting a poltergeist display in an outfitter's shop. Stock jumped from the shelves; an inkwell leaped from the counter and splashed ink over the manager's clothes; rubber stamps jumped about the floor.

"In 1937 the *Paris-Soir* reported a case of poltergeist haunting at Saint Victrola-Coste. There was a stone throwing, one of the pleasant forms of poltergeist activity. A party stayed up all one night to witness the manifestations. They saw stones, marbles and lumps of sugar thrown about the bakehouse, and emerged quite convinced that the place was haunted. No solution of the mystery has yet been found.

"It is easy enough for the skeptic to put it all down to fraud, hysteria and small boys; but it would be well for him to have personal experience before he forms an opinion. It should be remembered that what I have cited are only a small fraction of the cases which have occurred in the United Kingdom and Eire during the past few years. And the same sort of thing takes place in every country in the world."

**M**R. CHIBBETT went on to point out that these curious phenomena seemed to utilize the presence of a catalyst, usually a small child. But they

were not directly operated by that child or any other observable agency. What, then, we ask ourselves, could be the motivating force for these movements of inanimate objects? Pixies? Spirits? Or invisible probers from other worlds or planes?

We ourselves remember seeing a small item in a newspaper only a few months ago. It seems that in a small town in Italy something was throwing rocks at a statue in the public square. It went on all day and the police and Fascisti stood around and could not find the source of it. The rocks appeared in midair and struck the statue—that was all. The item did not identify the statue as that of Mussolini. We like to think it was and that the poltergeist forces hate Fascism.

But about political attitudes taken by the forces of the unknown, that is hard to say. Usually it is not possible to make any connection. They just don't seem to care for what we humans do. But I have one item taken from a fan magazine containing at least a prophecy. It is still another item from Kenneth B. Pritchard's series in *The Fantasy Fan*. This appeared in the issue for March, 1934, and again we must repeat that Pritchard did not consciously make them up. He asserts that all these items are true and honest accounts. Read then the curious evidence of "The Words in the Sky".

"On one evening in 1916, before the United States had entered the World War, I happened to be out with my mother. The place was Bridgeport, Connecticut, near the corner of Main and State Streets. The stars were shining as usual, though I gave them no particular notice.

"We had turned the corner and traversed several feet when I chanced to look up into the sky. Lo and behold, the stars had formed themselves into one great patch in the heavens in the form of letters and those letters spelled words!

"I could read some, at the time, but I tugged at my mother's arm and asked her what it said. I am hazy as to her answer. Perhaps she told me there was nothing there, or ignored the childish gesture entirely. At any rate, I looked up again and the words were still there. I don't believe that my mother even glanced at them.

"You are anxious to learn what it said? Well, it took years for that memory to come back to me but I now have it in what I am fairly sure are the correct words. The exact ones do not make any difference for I am sure of their meaning. The message in the sky read, 'The United States of America will run red with blood!'

"A short time after peering at the stars, some invisible forces took hold of them. The brilliant orbs were shifted as by a mighty hand. They moved like checkers on a vast board. And then the stars ceased their journeyings; they were once more on their accustomed courses. I lowered my head. The gigantic show was over! Delusion, you say? I'm afraid I don't agree with you."

Now that account is just about the most far-fetched of all those we have ever read. That the very stars in the sky could rearrange themselves to give a very small boy a dire message would take some mighty tall Fortean explanations, if it can ever be explained at all.

The thing which strikes me most forcefully in this is that the prophecy appears to be inaccurate. Even though we shortly afterward entered the first World War and even though today, some twenty-five years after, we are in a second great conflict, it is still not the territory of the United States that has run red with blood.

Americans are giving their lives for our nation, but the stars were still grossly exaggerating. Almost, one might say, they were engaging in a form of enemy scare propaganda.

Yet we must assert that Pritchard was honestly reporting when he wrote this account.

Moving rocks, literate stars, beings without shadow and shadows without being, what does it all add up to? How is it possible actually to find a solution in the advancing knowledge of science to fit all these eccentricities? Donald A. Wollheim was one of the few persons who saw our last column before it appeared in print. At that time he told us of some ideas of his own in explanation of the mysteries. We asked him to write them down and send them to us. Accordingly, I present to you his concept of a possible basis for all these children of fact.

"I FIRST read the works of Charles Fort many years ago while still in school studying orthodox science. I found that much of what Fort wrote was subject to discount, but a great deal was not. There are indeed many things which Fort and others, including the psychic investigators, record which simply does not tie in with modern science. In fact, studying science itself reveals that there are things, duly recorded and acknowledged, which actually seem contradictory to what might be termed the logic of nature. Natural laws should be the supreme example of logic—cause and effect. Actually they are nothing of the sort.

"In the course of the years it has never been possible to banish awareness of the contradictory in nature. A reading of Fort can never be eliminated if the reader is at all honest with himself. And in the course of that time, the mind continually reverts to the problem of explaining what actually is the true state of natural order. Why these apparent reversals of nature, why are they still very rare and not subject to the usual laboratory analyses? Why can't mathematics pin them down and fit them in?

"I think I have finally worked out a

possible line for an explanation. Yet the explanation I think may be the answer is itself a staggering alteration of our accepted ideas. But it is in line with the trends of scientific thought for the past fifty years.

"In the early Nineteenth Century, science formulated a mechanistic theory of the universe. Cause and effect were everything and all things adhered to strict, unchanging mechanical motivations. Darwin introduced an element altering this in the science of biology when he showed that species are subject to alteration. As time went on, this idea of evolution or constant change in things became more and more applicable to other things than biology.

"Physicists and chemists acknowledged that the elements were continually breaking down and altering. Radium entered the picture with its steady disintegration, and radioactive work was found even in the most inert of metals.

"Astronomers, led by Lowell, perceived that the planets and stars underwent steady and continual change, even as our Earth did. Change became the order of the day. Soon the very elements themselves began to be found not fixed by varying in their weights and qualities. I refer here to isotopes.

"Thus we found that every solid and observable substance was continually in a state of motion, a state of change, of alteration from one thing to another and different thing. This change was not sudden, but slow and gradual, so that a substance we took for, say, iron might be already infinitesimally something else and steadily ceasing to be iron every second that passed.

"Now it occurs to me that the laws of nature, the laws of science and the motion of things may themselves be evolving and changing along with everything else. The law of gravity may be subtly and slowly altering into a different type of force.

"It might be that all natural laws themselves may not be certainties but mere generalizations of what happens to be the dominating trend at that particular instant.

"Thus, Fort's items may be explainable as due to the operation of these alterations of law. In some cases, they may be the last, lingering traces of dying natural laws which may have operated to produce the magic and manifestations of the ancients; in others they may be the first examples of laws which will come into dominating effect thousands of years from now.

"In fact, I feel that what I postulate is a glimmering of what this century will eventually find to be true."

That is something to ponder over. Are laws themselves subject to steady change? Indeed, what are the boundaries of laws as they are today? Are their boundaries fixed even now?

We have on hand an item from a magazine in which a fan who calls himself "The Outlander" gives forth a private hypothesis on the extension of life in the universe. He gives his view in *Sardonyx* for June, 1942:

"Heat, we say, is comparative. We are unable—so far as I know—to reproduce heat even close to that of the sun's surface—and they tell us that at the center the heat is even more terrific. Now, if human life, unprotected, cannot long exist in subzero temperatures or temperatures intense enough to broil the meat from a man's bones, and if there is only a certain narrow range of temperatures within which vegetable life can thrive, and if it is well known that animal life generates its own heat under normal conditions, why is it not possible that in the sun we have a superb example of mineral life?

"If at such intense heats gold, iron, copper and the other metals are not actually consumed, and if it is reasonable to assume such metals had some beginning,

is it illogical to assume that there is a certain intense relative heat at which such metals may actually 'exist', reproduce and in turn create the intense heat in which their strange 'life' is possible? If so, then these metals as we know them are but the frozen and fossilized remains of a long dead race of 'animals'. There is no more chance to revive them here than to revive a man who died of starvation in Poland last week—but up above we see and feel the very magnitude of their supreme and intense existence. And what could make metal live? Who knows?"

**WE RETURN** abruptly to Kenneth Pritchard. In *The Fantasy Fan* for July, 1934, he speaks of something which may be another form of life—one taking a different shape than any we know in life. "The Outlander" spoke of life on the sun of gasified metals. He thought that metal might have life when in gaseous form under terrific solar temperatures. But this leads to speculation about gaseous life under normal temperatures. Pritchard says he saw something which might fill the bill:

"I chanced to be alone at the time. I was just about to enter the kitchen of the house. I opened the door and went in.

"I glanced over toward the gas stove near a window. Close to it a cloud of smoke streamed upward. It had the appearance of an easy rolling mass just expelled from the lungs of a smoker."

"I went to the stove, which had not been used for some hours, and looked for a recently ignited match or even for some oily substance which the sun might have caused to smoke.

"Everything was cold. The sun had not warmed anything. No match burned."

We do not know what really happened. But things are always happening that cannot be explained.

Are these living beings elsewhere and are we subject to occasional visits from

them or to other manifestations? Many years ago we read a book by the renowned Asiatic explorer, Nicholas Roerich, giving a diary of one of his expeditions into the remotest districts of Central Asia. We ran into an account of something which, in all the years since, we have been unable to believe was anything else than a spaceship from another world!

The book was entitled "Altai-Himalya"; the page is 361; the place was Mongolia in 1926:

"On August fifth—something remarkable! We were in our camp in the Kukur district, not far from the Humboldt Chain. In the morning, about half-past nine, some of our caravaneers noticed a remarkably big black eagle flying above us. Seven of us began to watch this remarkable bird. At this same moment another of our caravaneers remarked: 'There is something far above the bird!' And he shouted in his astonishment. We all saw, in a direction from north to south, something big and shiny reflecting the sun, like a huge oval moving at great speed.

Roerich was not a man to invent stories, nor are unimaginative Mongolian caravaneers subject to mass delusions. Also no amount of figuring can give any alternative solution to the nature of the huge metal oval moving through the air in the unexplored mountains. It was not a dirigible; it was not an airship. It was not a mirage—for if it were, what was the nature of the original? It was exactly like a description in a science-fiction story of a shining spacecraft from another planet.

**I**N THE fan magazine *Fantasite*, for May, 1942, John Chapman presents an article containing more facts that sound like science fiction:

"Since science fiction is basically imaginative, it would seem that all such stories are mere flights of fancy. Anything resembling known fact or reasonable facsimiles are admittedly out of place. Even

so, there is considerable evidence to show that, in some instances, reality is close at the heels of science fiction and vice-versa.

"With thanks to R. DeWitt Miller and the books of Charles Fort, I would like to relate a few cases where actual happenings came extremely close to fantasy.

"In August of 1910 a meteorite fell in Ohio and was found half buried in the earth. When uncovered it proved to be coated with what apparently was sulphur and flint. Its center was a strange substance resembling white marble. Oddly enough, the meteorite was *cylindrical*. It appeared to have been created by intelligent beings.

"To my knowledge no previous mention has been made of meteorites like this. Even though earth stones are known to acquire similar shapes, it's a very odd circumstance when a cylindrical rock falls from space.

"On December 7th, 1900, Dr. Percival

Lowell, during one of his observations of Mars, saw a shaft of light, hundreds of miles in length, shoot outward from the red planet. It remained in full brilliance for about seventy minutes, though at intervals appearing to fluctuate. Dr. Lowell indicated in his report that there seemed to be some sort of code.

"A hoax? An illusion? Possibly—but Dr. Lowell's observations of Mars gained him considerable renown as an astronomer.

"Stranger still was the experience of William Marconi, a radio technician, in the fall of 1921. Radio signals which we picked up on his yacht were of a wavelength ten times that which could be produced by any station on earth. Atmospheric disturbances he ruled out. The messages were very clear and regular as though in code. The code, however, was one that had never been recorded. Interplanetary communication again?"



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# THE MAIL BAG

**Confidentially, we didn't even notice the hands!**

Dear Editor:

While the first real snow-storm of the season flurries about outside, I sit by the window absently penning another letter to *Astonishing Ledgens* while trying to digest one of the Saturday-morning soap operas.

Let's not spend too much time on the cover, shall we? Luros should learn to draw hands. The face of the girl in the foreground, if you look at her face, is really beautiful. I don't care for the purple uniforms on the futuristic Zombies.

Paul is, of course, first on interior work. Lawrence's frontispiece for *The Halfling* was neat. His girl for *Earth, Farewell* was fine, but his man was sloppy. But who looked at the man? His pic for the Kuttner yarn was his best in the issue. Dorothy Les Tina was poor. By the way, is there any chance of a cover by Paul in the near future?

A very nice lineup of stories this time. They rate:

1. *It Happened Tomorrow*. A classic! Without the foreword, however, it would have meant nothing. What a movie it would make!

2. *Soldiers of Space*.

3. *The Halfling*. Futuristic carnival with a human-interest twist. One of the best Brackettales ever.

4. *Come to Mars*. More world destruction, but good.

5. *Earth, Farewell*. MacCreigh is right when he says he can't write science fiction. This was the only really poor story in the whole issue.

As to *The Mail Bag*, Ebey is right about the arrow looking like a Wrigley ad. It's almost as bad as the yaller spaceship on *Super Science*. I'd like to dunk Hagedorn's head in a bucket of snow! Those guys who write letters like Einsteins, when it is really too, too simple to see through them! Carter's letter was swell, and I agree with him about Rocklynn's *Darkness* series. Since your company has taken over *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*, how about reprinting the entire trilogy, complete in one issue? They're all really immortal. However, I hope that *Abys of Darkness* was the last in the series. It brings it right up to the stopping point, and any future sequels would spoil the mood.

Speaking of FFM, I sincerely hope that you'll keep the trimmed edges on that mag. It would be a shame to spoil it. As chief big-wig in the SISFPITE—Society for the Improvement of Science-fiction Publications by the Introduction of Trimmed Edges—I demand it!

Any hope for Leydenfrost's return? He's great, especially on spaceships. Keep Paul in every issue.

By the way, don't you think *Astonishing* has

been a bi-monthly too long? Monthly publication would be so welcome.

Scientificionally yours,

Gene Hunter,  
"Missouri's Gift to  
Science-Fiction"  
616 E. McCarty Ave.,  
Jefferson City, Mo.

**And a very good fanzine you have, indeed!**

Dear Mr. Norton:

It was a pleasant surprise indeed to receive your very welcome letter. I am looking forward to the receipt of copies of your two magazines.

Your list of "representative fans from across the sea" intrigued me immensely, and I should love to be aware of the British quota thereof. This is not mere curiosity but because for the past two years I have found myself acting more or less as center for the survivors of British fandom. Hence, if there is any assistance I can give by virtue of the knowledge acquired during these years, I shall be very glad indeed to help.

Actually, I've been able to read most of the wartime issues of *Super Science Stories* and *Astonishing Stories*, by the kindness of American stical penfriends, but your copies will be nonetheless welcome for that! There is no difficulty whatsoever in passing extra copies on to where they will be tremendously appreciated. The first choice would be the BFS library, but our Librarian, Mr. Jack Gibson, informs me that he is also on your list and his copies will be donated to the library. So mine can be devoted to a new project commenced recently, namely a "Service Chain" for circulating stf. magazines from one person in the Services to another. These people, on the whole, are unable to guarantee keeping a magazine in decent condition, or passing them on or back within any particular period, or indeed, often, to prevent them being read by all and sundry of their companions in arms. So I have decided to "sacrifice" extra copies of mine to the fate of being read to death! If possible, I'll ask the recipients to note their comments and pass the pertinent ones back to you.

Naturally, I'll be pleased to reciprocate to some extent by sending you copies of my fan magazine: *Futurian War Digest*, which will, I hope, be of some interest to you. Unfortunately, indeed, it is the only "fanzine" to be published regularly—if not the only survivor entirely—in this country. Incidentally, you may like to announce somewhere in your publications that I should be glad to exchange a year's subscription to *F.W.D.* for science-fiction magazines to the value of 50 cents.

At any rate, I can hardly close without offering my most sincere gratitude for your thoughtful and generous gift and assuring you once more that not one copy of your publications coming to this country will be wasted.



With very best wishes for the continued success of *Super Science* and *Astonishing* and to yourself, personally,

Sincerely,

J. Michael Rosenblum,  
4 Grange Terrace,  
Chapelton, Leeds, 7.

### The gals are always welcome, Miss!

Dear Editor:

Here I am again! The December ish of *Astonishing* was so good that I just had to let you know what I thought about it. It was swell, superb, delish, etc. It was a hard job to decide which story was best, but I finally did and here's how I rate them:

1. *Night of Gods*—SWELL! It was a true S.F. story. Mystery, fantasy, adventure and romance, when combined, make a swell story.

2. *Taa the Terrible*—Wonderful!

3. *Abyss of Darkness*—Good! That's the first story of the energy people I have read, but I thought it was swell.

4. *Mimic*—Strange, but good.

5. *Destination Unknown*—Fair. Why didn't Long give a little more detail—where the ship was going and why? Most S.F. writers do.

6. *Our Director Meets Trouble*—Poor. It doesn't belong in a S.F. mag. Most S.F. fans like adventure and fantasy, not stuff about growing food.

*Fantasy Circle* was good. Could you tell me where I could find further information about Charles Fort and any books about strange facts? I would appreciate it very much if you could give me information about it.

The *Mail Bag* was better this time because you have some feminine viewpoints. Thanx.

The pictures were pretty good this issue. The cover did illustrate the story, thank goodness! Lawrence did a good job on *Night of Gods*. So did Paul on *Taa the Terrible*. The cover was very good. It had the colors to attract the eye. I bought *Astonishing* on the way to school and believe me! every spare minute I had between classes, I had my nose in *Astonishing*.

I better sign off now if I ever expect to get the dishes done. We girls have to do those things, you know.

Sincerely yours,  
Frances Weddle,  
P.O. Box 171,  
Norman, Oklahoma.

Oh well, Cyrano was good, too, we guess.

Dear Ed.:

Just a word of congratulations and sincere thanks for publishing Rocklynne's *For Sale—One World*. I never enjoyed laughing so much since that time ten years ago when I came across *Cyrano De Bergerac*. I'd have given a few years of my life to have been able to write that.

Splendid art work, by the way, on the cover.  
J. S. Klimaris.

That man Leydenfrost's just too busy!

Dear Mr. Norton:

Comes now a report on the February issue of

*Astonishing*. Harken to my words, O Editor; for it is The One-man Gallup Poll who speaks, and when such a momentous occasion occurs all the world stops to listen.

Yes, indeed.

This issue, on the whole, is far from poor. However, I do not think it comes up to the high standard *Astonishing* has set for herself with the past several editions. Letting praises and vice-versas fall where they may, our hero starts with the cover and proceeds in an inward direction, using his amazing 1 to 10 rating system to clarify his opinions.

Cover: Another new artist, and another good one. Luros' work isn't quite as well done as Lawrence's cover on the last ish, but I like the subject matter better; it seems somehow more simple and dignified than Lawrence's BEM. Guess I'll have to declare a tie—9.

*The Halfling*. The plot was poor, I thought. The writing was fair, but not outstanding. In short, Brackett has written many a better yarn than this. It was readable, though—6.5.

*Earth, Farewell!* MacCreigh is always good. The illustration was excellent. Why doesn't Lawrence sign his work?—8.9.

*It Happened Tomorrow*. Seems a bit far-fetched, but it gives one food for thought. Bloch, I might add, handled the ancient plot in a new and refreshing way. Paul's pix look like something out of the "good old daze." Which is equivalent to saying they were very good. More from Paul wouldn't be amiss—9.3.

*Come to Mars*. Kubilius is always entertaining, though seldom exceptional. A good tale, nothing more. The pic looks interesting—what is it?—8.

*Soldiers of Space*. Take an old plot with a few new twists and what do you get? Not, I assure you, what you would expect. For it was not only a good story, but was an excellent one. The one truly outstanding story in the issue, in my opinion. The reason for this unusual state of affairs is quite simple. It can be expressed in one word—Kuttner. The pic? It was by Lawrence. Ahhhhhh—9.7.

The departments were half and half—half good and half fair. The half in the first category are *The Mail Bag* and *Fan Mag Reviews*. The half in the latter classification are *Viewpoints* and *Fantasy Circle*, both of which are usually good. Ah, well . . .

Complaint dep't: Where is Leydenfrost? He's good.

One suggestion and I shall leave. (Who cheered? The impolite guy! What if he is bored? Would I find fault with Einstein? Certainly not. And the One-man Gallup Poll is a genius. I, sir, rank in the Milt Lesser class. Immortal.) Anyhow, the suggestion is simply this: Would it be at all possible to obtain a cover by Paul? If it is, I know that I'm not alone in wanting to see a good Paulistic cover. Can do?

Seems that's all. See you next issue.

Ever thine,

The One-Man Gallup Poll,  
Chad Oliver,  
3956 Ledgewood,  
Cincinnati, Ohio.

**This sort of confuses us, brother Hagedorn.  
But—**

Scientific data on the cosmos is so transitory that your *Mail Bag* proves a most welcome source of information. Wishing to learn more, believing that discussion leads somewhere, I do hereby declare open season on this article. So, ahoy—take a shot at it with heavy ammunition and no zoot-zoot remarks, as ye *A. S.* authors have already so zoot zoo-oligized and so zoot-anthropothized their characters it's about all ye readers can endure.

Among cosmic properties under dispute are those of gravity and of ether. Some argue that space is not void; heat and light require a carrier. Thus the discovery of Mr. H. P. Ponghoff, Sr., that the theory of a frigid vacuum is erroneous brings forward a statement by Sir Oliver Lodge in which he described ether as a power equal to one million million steel rods each eight feet thick and extending from the earth to the sun, through which objects could pass but which exerted a supporting influence on stellar bodies. Perhaps the ether is one step closer to the ultimate unit, again supporting the nuclear theory of constituted mass even as the electron proved the constituent mass of the atom.

*Zinniger's Ethical Philosophy* states that the terms of *Force* and *Matter* are ambiguous and misleading, and that by use of the terms *Motion* and *Mass* we begin to get somewhere. Thus, matter is a mass of rarer and rarer units piled together and made so concrete as to become apparent to our senses.

Motion is the law of mass, in all its degrees and nuances and shades of expression. No blind force, no haphazard chance affinities and concretions. The premise of nothingness is neither fact nor truth in the universe, for something came from something—came from that latent universe lying beyond the range of the physical senses. Antecedents exist or have existed eon beyond eon, ad infinitum.

Taking up Newton's indestructibility of matter, its latency—disproving, denying any law of annihilation and thusly any condition of nothingness; but proving the law of change; that preexisting principle elusive as the rainbow and as ephemeral in that condition. Gravity cannot be a self-moving property, as the arbitrary reversal of elements to their former state seem to indicate a disposition of the elements to serve career and destiny.

And that gravity, another phase or property of the electro-magnetic field, is released by the law of change.

In a cruder form, water, responding to conditions or laws, assumes four forms. On rarer and rarer planes exist conditions, gravities, pressures, velocities, temperatures, etc., which are beyond our perception and interpretation.

Why not then, on planes of latency, the very same evolution of units and of elements as that which occurs in the transmutation of minerals into vegetation and into protoplasm?

With this leading to ontology as desire, expression and fulfillment certainly enters to exercise its place. No doubt a synthesis of all the

science into cosmology will agree with teleology that the universe has plan, purpose and use, away beyond our egoistic comprehension of the universe. Cosmitronic balances and checks—cosmitronic waxings and wanings, occupancies and departures.

With each cosmitronic rest or interval serving that time or stage in the chain of balances and checks and the reason for this cosmitronic evolution. Thus energy, rates and frequencies of vibration, agents of the universal intelligence; manifest as the material, formal, efficient and final cause, in which gravity plays a subject role.

Many persons have attempted to explain the nature of time but not the nature of space until Mr. Ponghoff came forward with his discovery of "etheribia." Some years ago a scientist claimed to have discovered a unit one-fifth the size of an electron. He called it a *natrona* or something similar.

Thus space, the fluid universe, timeless and eternal beyond the concrete universe, assumes the position of a celestial ocean having its own life, but serves as our earthly oceans do, to act as carriers for concrete stellar craft. And as water nourishes the earth so too does celestial space nourish its stellar family.

Gilbert Hagedorn,  
1223 Monroe St.,  
Vicksburg, Miss.

**What—only fifth?**

Dear Editor:

The thanks of the whole of British fandom should be extended to you and your company, as doubtless they will be. At any rate, permit me to voice my own personal thanks. I sincerely appreciate your fine gesture. To say more would be to wax fulsome, something I have no intention of doing.

Have no fear, any mags you send to me will be circulated among British fans, for all those I receive are immediately available through the Library of the British Fantasy Society to all members of the Society. (As you may know I'm the Librarian.)

Now to the mags themselves: I won't say they are the best on the market, for I don't think they are, but in my rating they occupy—jointly—fifth place. Don't get the idea that I'm saying this just to please you, for recently the opportunity presented itself of subbing to as many U. S. mags as we liked; in my own case, lack of funds limited me to three, of which *Super Science* was one.

Finally, I extend an invitation to any American fans who come "over here" to get in touch with me if they want any mags to read.

It's a vain hope but: *Pacon* *ad vi*,

Jack Gibson,  
7 Belmont Rd.,  
Parkstone, Dorset.

**Confidentially, we write those blurbs, pal!**

Dear Ed:

Who writes the blurbs for your stories? Whoever it is otta read the stories first. The blurbs

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I occasion to point out are those for *The Halfling* and for *Come to Mars*.

Did the Halfling plan to lead her people back to freedom? Well . . . the story states that she had killed several of her kind before Laska; if that's freedom I don't want it!

Did she plan to die? Not if she could help it, she didn't.

She was trying to get away when Jade shot her.

Where was the vision, the warning, in *Come to Mars*?

*It Happened Tomorrow* was the best of the ish. It sounded like time-travel at first, but soon warmed up. Rather nasty ending though; the machines are destroyed, but so is man.

*Come to Mars*, the short, was good reading; that mind-reflection stuff is a good idea. Who knows, perhaps anything and everything we see is but a reflection of what we imagine we see?

*Earth Farewell* is a masterpiece of emotional portrayal; it fairly seethes with emotion—also pretty good reading.

*The Halfling* is a very good story and is this low on the list only by virtue of a pretty wonderful issue. Miss Brackett's improving.

Last and least, but still a darn good story, we find *Soldiers of Space*, with the boys still not much farther than they were when the story started. At least Kuttner could have let the cameras run and get the battle so's the boys could make their million.

What per cent of your readers are fans, and what casual readers? Have you any way of

knowing? What is your average circulation? Wonder how many fans there are in the whole country.

Is there any way that I can obtain the original of the super-pic by Paul for *Sunward Flight* in the last SSS? If there is, will you let me know? In case it's any help, I've read both mags regularly for some little time. Incidentally, that's one of the best illustrations I've seen in either mag.

Scientifictionally yours,  
Editor's little helper,  
Jay Chidsey,  
Green Springs, Ohio.

**Lesser the Reformist takes pen in hand.**

Alden H. Norton,  
Astonishing Stories,  
Newyacity  
Terra  
Sol  
Milky Way Galaxy  
(?)

Ugh! and other salutations:

I am hereby resigning from that society I had been in for my last two unpublished letters. Reason? With all the assorted mess the thing created, the letters were over three, single-spaced, typed pages long! Who's crazy enough to swim through that? (Only ye ed knows what I'm talking about. But you've got to admit that those certainly were queer characters I created.)

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Announcement: (Which should interest all clever, intellectual editors) I have the following waiting to be bought by some magazine. Some I have sent out, others I have not as yet. One 2,000 word short-short, three short novelets of about 12,000 words each, one *super* short novel of about 28,000 words. (This last one has, as yet, not been sent out.) Another novel is in slight stages of development.

Now who in the world would be interested? (I hope.)

Also, deep in my mind, I vaguely recall there is a current issue of *Astonishing Stories* to be discussed. Right? Naturally.

I'd like to compliment you, Norton. Congratulations! You are the proud papa of quintuplets. Five very fine quint, at that. What, incidentally, am I talking about? Well, to get down to the serious, all five stories in the latest ish were not only above average, but all were at least very good.

The best story in the issue was also the best short novel I have seen anywhere since Eando Binder's immortally famous yarn of invasion from Mars and an underground civilization at the same time, *One Thousand Miles Below*. The story in question is Robert Bloch's novel, *It Happened Tomorrow*. It is definitely the best story ever to be seen within the borders of *Astonishing* and *Super Science*. Aye, even better than any of the great yarns from Rocklynn's *Darkness* trio, Hasse's *Destination Unknown!*, Bester's *The Biped Reegan*, Merlyn's *Sunken Universe*, Bond's unforgettable *World Within*, Jones' *The Invisible One*, Morrison's *Cepheid Planet* and a host of wondrous others. (In other words, Bloch's story was plenty good. To top that list, it had to be!)

Happy Genius (me) says, quote: "Even though nothing more than futuristic adventure, *Soldiers of Space* by Hank Kuttner packed enough punch to rate second place among a grand bunch of competitors." Unquote.

In third is the consistently good Brackett tale, which is seen frequently in your pages. *The Halfling* was a very adultish story, no gory thud and blunder, if you get what I mean. Speaking of women authors (being funny, I might refer to them as authoresses), why don't you give Helen Weinbaum a chance? I haven't seen her work in over a year, but I do remember that she is responsible for a great novelette that appeared about two years ago, called *Double Destiny*.

Fourth is Kubilius' fine short (see, they can be good, too), *Come to Mars*. This was, incidentally, the best title of the issue. Something appealing about it.

MacCreigh's novelette, *Earth Farewell*, in last place, is still a very good yarn. Just couldn't quite compete with the others, I imagine.

This seems a bit too steady a request, but, I repeat, quote: "When is *Super Science* going to have longer novels, anywhere from twenty-five (minimum for a full-length feature, in my mind) to forty-five thousand words?" Come on, ed, give us what we want.

But don't misunderstand. Short stories are needed, too. As far as *Super* goes, give us one

novel of about thirty-five thousand words, one of twenty-five, two fifteen-thousand wordlets, and one or two short-shorts. That would be ecstasy. One short novel of thirty thousand should appear in *Astonishing*, two lettes of about thirteen thousand, and as many shorts as space permits. And now, you know what I want. Well?

The art: Paul was best; continue with him. Lawrence perfection, too. More. Good-by, Les Tina. Ugh! Leydenfrost still has them all beaten, without even trouble.

What the art should be like: In *SSS*—cover by a new find of one of your competitors, a great artist, Anderson. (I must be a revolutionary.) Two interiors by Leydenfrost, two by Paul and two by Lawrence. In *Astonishing*, let's say five stories per ish. Cover—Anderson is still okay; interiors, one Paul, two Lawrence, two Leydenfrost.

Other frontal and interior pics could be by Finlay, Morey and anyone else someone else might want.

One more thing before I close my potential death ray—my mouth. As far as authors go, I haven't told you the crop I desire in a long time, s-o-o-o-o-o Binder, Hamilton, Wilcox—durn it, is he under option?—Bond, Hasse, Bloch, etc., etc., etc.

I am now known as Lesser, the reformist.

Luros, incidentally, after the nice build-up, is a big let-down. So sorry!

Yours till my correspondent, Oliver, the one man Gallup-pole gallops over a pole.

Thank for the stories under the pic on the cover.

Milt Lesser,  
The Happy Genius,  
2302 Avenue O,  
Brooklyn, N. Y.

**The jerque humbly bows his head.**

Dear Mr. Norton:

There was but one sour spot in the December issue, as far as I could see. Lawrence *can* do good covers, you know. Or do you?

To be a bit more specific, I object to covers featuring copious amounts of red and green in the foreground—plus a violet background. Also to leering, demonic monsters with bat wings. Covers like these always bring the adjective "repulsive" to my mind.

Things look somewhat brighter inside. The artwork is a delight to the eye and a joy to the heart. In Dolgov and Lawrence you have two of the finest illustrators in fiction. Er—what's their draft status?

Paul? A welcome addition. Morey? But we don't talk about that: Leo goes on forever.

I didn't care for *Night of Gods*, by Paul Edmonds. This type of story has been overworked of late. Morley began it with *My Lady of the Emerald*, remember? I enjoyed his rendition more than Edmonds'.

*Taa the Terrible* is typical Jameson—which equals typical adventure. Give it a so-so rating.

The other three stories, *Destination Unknown*, *Our Director Meets Trouble* and *Abys*s of

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## ASTONISHING STORIES

*Darkness*, rate between good and excellent. I liked *Destination Unknown* for the warm current of humanness at the end, *Our Director Meets Trouble* for its ribald humor, and *Abyss of Darkness*—well, for being the conclusion of one of the most unique sagas I've ever read. This trilogy reminded me of the "Posi and Nega" series, somehow.

Forgot Martin Pearson's *Mimic*. Ummm—read this theme before. Still, *Mimic* is readable—yea, entertaining. Good enough.

Departments, as always, are incomparable. I've some complaints on other things, though. First, the jerque who writes the blurbs ought to read the stories. Second, while the printing on the covers has been restricted, I think that the Wrigley arrow up above should have the same treatment. It should be restricted *entirely* away. Somehow that arrow makes the mag look cheap. Some improved form of lettering can be instituted.

Heigh-ho, that about clears up everything concerning the December issue. Still, I don't want to close without another plug for the artwork. Excluding the covers, it's unsurpassed.

Very sincerely,

George Ebey,  
4766 Reinhardt Drive,  
Oakland, California.

### Private Milty reports on Army life.

Dear Folks:

Camp is right at the Santa Anita race track, and I live in a stall at one of the stables. It is very close to Los Angeles, and it is so easy to get out of camp at night and weekends that I'm practically a resident of the city. The other day I saw Ackerman and Morojo and it was like a convention.

I just saw the February *Super Science Stories*. Gee, gosh, oh heck, etc. I *didn't* expect such a writeup as you gave me in *The Science Fictioneer*. At last I have a star in front of my name somewhere. Let us hope your printer doesn't have to buy any gold ink. . . .

Anyway, thanks for the blurb.

I read part of the issue last night. *For Sale—One World* is very cute. Different, actually. *The Persecutors* is well-written. Cleve Cartmill makes it sound like a new story, even though it is really the same old one when you boil it down. Cartmill has become one of the best science-fiction authors now writing.

Right now I have enough leisure to write a story myself, until camp actually gets into operation. But soldiers are lazy people. My mind is a complete blank.

Private Milton A. Rothman.

Ah, that Asimov neutron again!

Dear Editor:

Your December issue was an improvement over the last, and that I had already deemed as impossible. And the artwork—another impossibility shattered. How do you do it? You're doing it, and that's all that counts. For you have now got both feet on the platform and it

will take quite a jolt to knock you loose. If that sounds too vague, I merely mean you are here to stay in science fiction.

Now that your magazine has been rated, let's go to the authors and artists.

Ross Rocklyne, not that he's interested, is rated second by me of all the authors, with a rating of 1226. And I'll bet you're sorry that I'm not going to spend three pages explaining my method. Now you know that the *Abyss of Darkness* occupies first rung on this month's ladder. And if it weren't for the fact that *Into the Darkness* was the first of its kind, thus having a greater effect, I'd say that the *Abyss* story is equal to the first. I wonder how many more great connoisseurs of literature will give this latest story a classic rating?

The second rung is occupied by *Taa the Terrible*. A good story, nicely handled. The third spot on the ladder goes to *Night of Gods*. If the ending had been anything but, it would have been better. The fourth rung is crowded with *Destination Unknown* stepping over *Mimic*, trying to get higher. This gives the last rung to Harry's story. Why, you ask? Well—I guess it's just that all those stories of the hydroponics plants seem to run according to formula. In fact all most of us need do is read the beginning for the situation, then read the ending to verify our predictions. The writing was good; for that matter the writing of all the pulp magazines is good. Yet I read science fiction, and wouldn't give you a wooden nickel for the best in Western or detective mags. I see you expect me to give out with a discourse on the makings of a science-fiction story. No, others have done that time and time again. And some hack authors still exist in our field. I only want the fans and authors to recall their thoughts and reactions after reading their first good science-fiction story. My first reading was *After Worlds Collide*. Need I say more?

This takes us to the artists. And this time as with the last few, the subject is wonderful. You have a combination that makes the old-timers look awful. Paul's was—*magnifique*. Lawrence was—*magnifique*. In fact, Morey's pics were even—understandable.

All in all I'd say it is impossible to beat this issue—while knowing you could easily do it.

In my last letter to Mr. Asimov you overlooked one of the most important paragraphs of the letter, but that was unavoidable because it was written as a postscript, and it occupied the third page all by its lonesome. But I see there is no need to repeat it since Mr. Tony Raines had done so in the same issue.

I'm referring to my definition or theory of a neutron. Mr. Raines and I, and probably a myriad others, all agree that a neutron is the mutual combination of a proton and an electron—such as our double stars—each particle neutralizing the charge of the other. I wonder if Mr. Asimov disagrees?

I don't see where Mr. Raines is sticking his neck out though. Aside from using such a conglomeration of meaningless thousand-dollar words, he is merely repeating the best theories of the best scientists to date.

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Yet I would like to clear up a few facts, and I hope they have no disastrous after-effects.

First, is Mr. Raines' comparison between magnetism and gravitation. When Mr. Asimov gave the same theory in his story, *The Super Neutron*, I saw no room for argument, except of course that the groundwork or platform was rather flimsy. It is senseless to argue pro and con about two forces we know so little about. Yet we must use caution when we say that magnetism and gravitation are alike. Is it logical to suppose that if two things are not like a third—those two things must be alike? If a blonde is unlike a brunette, and a redhead unlike the same brunette, are the blonde and redhead alike? Yes—only that they are both unlike the brunette. Yet the blonde can be beautiful, and the redhead ugly. Even better yet, the blonde can be a girl and the redhead a boy. See what I mean? Regardless of whether gravity or magnetism are electromagnetic or not, it is not enough of an argument to say they are alike in nature.

Cordially yours,

Frederic G. Kammler  
52 S. Thomas Ave.  
Kingston, Pa.

We liked that BEM, too!

Dear Editor:

More notes from the Madman of the Middle West.

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Cover on the December issue: Mr. Lawrence does a neat job of portraying terror on the face of the fleeing men (that should be faces)—but why didn't he do the same with the women? The one to the left appears mildly curious and the other seems to be engaged in watching the antics of sea gulls or some such. The monster, of course, is really very bad. Oh, well, bring on your semi-nekkid wimmen and BEMS. What would stf be without them?

Interior pic honors are copped by Lawrence, whose black-and-white style appears to be something between Leydenfrost and Finlay. Very nice. I'm beginning to like this guy.

Paul, of course, takes second. This depiction is not exactly true to the story either. Good though. I have a feeling that he overdid the splendor of the Nova Atlantis skyline.

Best story was *Night of Gods*—by far. Are you sure "Edmonds" isn't Kuttner?

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Benedictions,

James Johnson  
P.O. Box 1322  
Aberdeen, S. D.

On the beam is good enough for us, chum.

Dear Editor:

This is my first reading of *Astonishing Stories*, and, being scientifically inclined myself, I found the magazine very interesting (of course, with exceptions).

Since I am not acquainted with other works of the authors of *A. S.*, I won't say anything, as it might not show the average of their work.

I should, however, like to say something about the conflagration having sprung up between Messrs. Kammler and Asimov. (Not to mention the entrance of Mr. T. Raines into aforementioned gabble.)

Having had three years of advanced chemistry and physics, I hope I'm qualified to get in the ring with the other boys.

Mr. Raines: You said that, "Since the force of gravitation does not exhibit any of the measurable physical qualities of any of the radiant frequencies ranging throughout the entire ether-wave spectrum—as for example alpha, beta, gamma, X-rays, etc.—we must come to the conclusion that it is not really an electromagnetic wave."

Well, sir, if you were to read C. E. Dull's book on the propounded theories of Einstein and Jeans you'd find that both gamma and X-rays are found physical measurable quantities in the ether-wave spectrum. As to the gravitational force not being an electromagnetic wave—maybe you haven't heard about there being such a thing as short wave. How do you think that short wave travels—by telepathy?

In general, most of the authors are on the beam (except maybe Monsieur Rocklynne and his *Abyss of Darkness*).

Sincerely,

Aviation Cadet R. V. Owen,  
Monmouth, Illinois.

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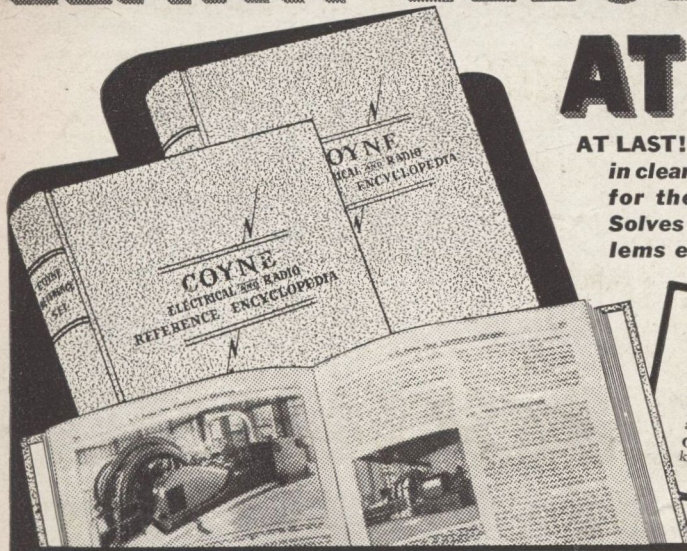
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