# LOST STARS

## FORGOTTEN SCIENCE FICTION FROM THE "BEST OF" ANTHOLOGIES

**Edited by**

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# INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of modern science fiction in 1926 with Hugo Gernsback's*Amazing Stories* , tuHuhere have been at least a couple of hundred anthologies presenting "best of" stories. The first of these titled,*The Best of Science Fiction,* was published

in 1946 and skimmed the cream of the crop of the previous two decades of sf. By 1950, the genre was producing so much work of such high quality that an annual series was inaugurated. Since editors often differ on just which works are "best," this first annual series was followed by others. And, since the late 1960s, there have generally been at least three such anthologies every year, each under the helm of a different editor. In addition, many science fiction magazines have issued their own stand-alone or annual anthologies, comprising the "best of" selected from among their pages. Furthermore, other editors have put together such ingenious twists on the idea as,*My Best Science Fiction Story* and*Science Fiction: Editor's Choice* (wherein editors of various magazines selected their personal favorite from among the publication's stories).

Because of the huge volume of stories in these anthologies, and the age of some, which have been out of print for more than a half century, many of these gems of science fiction have been forgotten. This anthology hopes to correct that tragedy, at least in part, by restoring to print a generous helping. We are certain you will enjoy these tales as much as we did while rereading them for*Lost Stars* .

Jean Marie Stine

07/15/2003

# TEETHING RING

# JAMES CAUSEY

(Selected from*The Second Galaxy Reader of Science Fiction* , 1954)

Half an hour before, while she had been engrossed in the current soap opera and Harry junior was screaming in his crib, Melinda would naturally have slammed the front door in the little man's face. However, when the bell rang, she was wearing her new Chinese red housecoat, had just lustered her nails to a blinding scarlet, and Harry junior was sleeping like an angel.

Yawning, Melinda answered the door and the little man said, beaming, "Excellent day. I have geegaws for information."

Melinda did not quite recoil. He was perhaps five feet tall, with a gleaming hairless scalp and a young-old face. He wore a plain gray tunic, and a peddler's tray hung from his thin shoulders.

"Don't want any," Melinda stated flatly.

"Please." He had great, beseeching amber eyes. "They all say that. I haven't much time. I must be back at the University by noon."

"You working your way through college?"

He brightened. "Yes. I suppose you could call it that. Alien anthropology major."

Melinda softened. The initiations those frats pulled nowadays–shaving the poor guy's head, eating goldfish–it was criminal.

"Well?" she asked grudgingly. "What's in the tray?"

"Flanglers," said the little man eagerly. "Oscilloscopes. Portable force-field generators. A neural distorter." Melinda's face was blank. The little man frowned. "You use them, of course? This is a Class IV culture?" Melinda essayed a weak shrug and the little man sighed with relief. His eyes fled past her to the blank screen of the TV set. "Ah, a monitor." He smiled. "For a moment I was afraid–May 1 come in?"

Melinda shrugged, opened the door. This might be interesting, like a vacuum-cleaner salesman who had cleaned her drapes last week for free. And Kitty Kyle Battles Life wouldn't be on for almost an hour.

"My name is Porteous," said the little man with an eager smile. "I'm doing a thematic on Class IV cultures." He whipped out a stylus, began jotting down notes. The TV set fascinated him.

"It's turned off right now," Melinda said.

Porteous' eyes widened impossibly. "You mean," he whispered in horror, "that you're exercising Class V privileges? This is terribly confusing. I get doors slammed in my face, when Class Fours are supposed to have a splendid gregarian quotient–you do have atomic power, don't you?"

"Oh, sure," said Melinda uncomfortably. This wasn't going to be much fun.

"Space travel?" The little face was intent, sharp.

"Well," Melinda yawned, looking at the blank screen, "they've got Space Patrol, Space Cadet, Tales of Tomorrow..."

"Excellent. Rocket ships or force-fields?" Melinda blinked. "Does your husband own one?" Melinda shook her blonde head helplessly. "What are your economic circumstances?"

Melinda took a deep rasping breath, said, "Listen, mister, is this a demonstration or a quiz program?"

"Oh, my excuse. Demonstration, certainly. You will not mind the questions."

"Questions?" There was an ominous glint in Melinda's blue eyes.

"Your delightful primitive customs, art-forms, personal habits–"

"Look," Melinda said, crimsoning. "This is a respectable neighborhood, and I'm not

answering any Kinsey report, understand?"

The little man nodded, scribbling. "Personal habits are tabu? I so regret. The demonstration." He waved grandly at the tray. "Anti-grav sandals? A portable solar converter? Apologizing for this miserable selection, but on Capella they told me–" He followed Melinda's entranced gaze, selected a tiny green vial. "This is merely a regenerative solution. You appear to have no cuts or bruises."

"Oh," said Melinda nastily. "Cures warts, cancer, grows hair, I suppose."

Porteous brightened. "Of course. I see you can scan. Amazing." He scribbled further with his stylus, glanced up, blinked at the obvious scorn on Melinda's face. "Here. Try it."

"You try it." Now watch him squirm!

Porteous hesitated. "Would you like me to grow an extra finger, hair–"

"Grow some hair." Melinda tried not to smile.

The little man unstopped the vial, poured a shimmering green drop on his wrist, frowning.

"Must concentrate," he said. "Thorium base, suspended solution. Really jolts the endocrines, complete control ... see?"

Melinda's jaw dropped. She stared at the tiny tuft of hair which had sprouted on that bare wrist. She was thinking abruptly, unhappily, about that chignon she had bought yesterday. They had let her buy that for eight dollars when with this stuff she could have a natural one.

"How much?" she inquired cautiously.

"A half hour of your time only," said Porteous.

Melinda grasped the vial firmly, settled down on the sofa with one leg tucked carefully under her.

"Okay, shoot. But nothing personal."

Porteous was delighted. He asked a multitude of questions, most of them pointless, some naive, and Melinda dug into her infinitesimal fund of knowledge and gave. The little man scribbled furiously, clucking like a gravid hen.

"You mean," he asked in amazement, "that you live in these primitive huts of your own volition?"

"It's a G.I. housing project," Melinda said, ashamed.

"Astonishing." He wrote: Feudal anachronisms and atomic power, side by side. Class Fours periodically "rough it" in back-to-nature movements.

Harry junior chose that moment to begin screaming for his lunch. Porteous sat, trembling. "Is that a Security Alarm?"

"My son," said Melinda despondently, and went into the nursery.

Porteous followed, and watched the ululating child with some trepidation. "Newborn?"

"Eighteen months," said Melinda stiffly, changing diapers. "He's cutting teeth."

Porteous shuddered. "What a pity. Obviously atavistic. Wouldn't the creche accept him? You shouldn't have to keep him here."

"I keep after Harry to get a maid, but he says we can't afford one."

"Manifestly insecure," muttered the little man, studying Harry junior. "Definite paranoid tendencies."

"He was two weeks premature," volunteered Melinda. "He's real sensitive."

"I know just the thing," Porteous said happily. "Here." He dipped into the glittering litter on the tray and handed Harry junior a translucent prism. "A neural distorter. We use it to train regressives on Rigel Two. It might be of assistance."

Melinda eyed the thing doubtfully. Harry junior was peering into the shifting crystal depths with a somewhat strained expression.

"Speeds up the neural flow," explained the little man proudly. "Helps tap the unused eighty per cent. The pre-symptomatic memory is unaffected, due to automatic cerebral lapse in case of overload. I'm afraid it won't do much more than cube his present IQ, and an intelligent idiot is still an idiot, but–"

"How dare you?" Melinda's eyes flashed. "My son is not an idiot! You get out of here this minute and take your-things with you." As she reached for the prism, Harry junior squalled. Melinda relented. "Here," she said angrily, fumbling with her purse. "How much are they?"

"Medium of exchange?" Porteous rubbed his bald skull. "Oh, I really shouldn't–but it'll make such a wonderful addendum to the chapter on malignant primitives. What is your smallest denomination?"

"Is a dollar okay?" Melinda was hopeful.

Porteous was pleased with the picture of George Washington. He turned the bill over and over in his fingers, at last bowed low and formally; apologized for any tabu violations, and left via the front door.

"Crazy fraternities," muttered Melinda, turning on the TV set.

Kitty Kyle was dull that morning. At length Melinda used some of the liquid in the

green vial on her eyelashes, was quite pleased at the results, and hid the rest in the medicine cabinet.

Harry junior was a model of docility the rest of that day. While Melinda watched TV and munched chocolates, did and redid her hair, Harry junior played quietly with the crystal prism.

Toward late afternoon, he crawled over to the bookcase, wrestled down the encyclopedia and pawed through it, gurgling with delight. He definitely, Melinda decided, would make a fine lawyer someday, not a useless putterer like Big Harry, who worked all hours overtime in that damned lab. She scowled as Harry junior, bored with the encyclopedia, began reaching for one of Big Harry's tomes on nuclear physics. One putterer in the family was enough! But when she tried to take the book away from him, Harry junior howled so violently that she let well enough alone.

At six-forty, Big Harry called from the lab, with the usual despondent message that he would not be home for supper. Melinda said a few resigned things about cheerless dinners eaten alone, hinted darkly what lonesome wives sometimes did for company, and Harry said he was very sorry, but this might be it, and Melinda hung up on him in a temper.

Precisely fifteen minutes later, the doorbell rang. Melinda opened the front door and gaped. This little man could have been Porteous' double, except for the black metallic tunic, the glacial gray eyes.

"Mrs. Melinda Adams?" Even the voice was frigid.

"Y-Yes. Why?"

"Major Nord, Galactic Security." The little man bowed. "You were visited early this morning by one Porteous." He spoke the name with a certain disgust. "He left a neural distorter here. Correct?"

Melinda's nod was tremulous. Major Nord came quietly into the living room, shut the door behind him. "My apologies, madam, for the intrusion. Porteous mistook your world for a Class IV culture, instead of a Class VII. Here–" He handed her the crumpled dollar bill. "You may check the serial number. The distorter, please."

Melinda shrunk limply onto the sofa. "I don't understand," she said painfully. "Was he a thief?"

"He was–careless about his spatial coordinates." Major Nord's teeth showed in the faintest of smiles. "He has been corrected. Where is it?"

"Now look," said Melinda with some asperity. "That thing's kept Harry junior quiet all day. I bought it in good faith, and it's not my fault–say, have you got a warrant?"

"Madam," said the Major with dignity, "I dislike violating local tabus, but must I

explain the impact of a neural distorter on a backwater culture? What if your Neanderthal had been given atomic blasters? Where would you have been today? Swinging through trees, no doubt. What if your Hitler had force-fields?" He exhaled. "Where is your son?"

In the nursery, Harry junior was contentedly playing with his blocks. The prism lay glinting in the comer.

Major Nord picked it up carefully, scrutinized Harry junior. His voice was very soft.

"You said he was-playing with it?"

Some vestigial maternal instinct prompted Melinda to shake her head vigorously. The little man stared hard at Harry junior, who began whimpering. Trembling, Melinda scooped up Harry junior.

"Is that all you have to do—run around frightening women and children? Take your old distorter and get out. Leave decent people alone!"

Major Nord frowned. If only he could be sure. He peered stonily at Harry junior, murmured, "Definite egomania. It doesn't seem to have affected him. Strange."

"Do you want me to scream?" Melinda demanded.

Major Nord sighed. He bowed to Melinda, went out, closed the door, touched a tiny stud on his tunic, and vanished.

"The manners of some people," Melinda said to Harry junior. She was relieved that the Major had not asked for the green vial.

Harry junior also looked relieved, although for quite a different reason.

Big Harry arrived home a little after eleven. There were small worry creases about his mouth and forehead, and the leaden cast of defeat in his eyes. He went into the bedroom and Melinda sleepily told him about the little man working his way through college by peddling silly goods, and about that rude cop named Nord, and Harry said that was simply astonishing and Melinda said, "Harry, you had a drink!"

"I had two drinks," Harry told her owlishly. "You married a failure, dear. Part of the experimental model vaporized, wooosh, just like that. On paper it looked so good—"

Melinda had heard it all before. She asked him to see if Harry Junior was covered, and Big Harry went unsteadily into the nursery, sat down by his son's crib.

"Poor little guy," he mused. "Your old man's a bum, a useless tinker. He thought he could send Man to the stars on a string of helium nucleii. Oh, he was smart. Thought of everything. Auxiliary jets to kick off the negative charge, bigger mercury vapor banks—a fine straight thrust of positive Alpha particles." He hiccupped, put his face in his hands.

"Didn't you ever stop to think that a few air molecules could defocus the stream? Try a vacuum, stupid."

Big Harry stood up.

"Did you say something, son?"

"Gurfle," said Harry junior.

Big Harry reeled into the living room like a somnambulist.

He got pencil and paper, began jotting frantic formulae. Presently he called a cab and raced back to the laboratory.

Melinda was dreaming about little bald men with diamond-studded trays. They were chasing her, they kept pelting her with rubies and emeralds, all they wanted was to ask questions, but she kept running, Harry junior clasped tightly in her arms. Now they were ringing and she groaned, sat up in bed, and seized the telephone.

"Darling." Big Harry's voice shook. "I've got it! More auxiliary shielding plus a vacuum. We'll be rich!"

"That's just fine," said Melinda crossly. "You woke the baby."

Harry junior was sobbing bitterly into his pillow. He was sick with disappointment. Even the most favorable extrapolation showed it would take him nineteen years to become master of the world.

An eternity. Nineteen years!

## THE DIVERSIFAL

## ROSS ROCKLYNNE

(Selected from *The Best of Planet Stories,* 1975)

"NO," said the shadowy man who sat high above the floor on the chair of the time-machine, "you can't do that."

"Can't, eh?"

"No!"

"Sorry."

For a second, Bryan was shaken with indecision. This is intolerable, he thought. I'll turn the doorknob. After all, he has no real jurisdiction over any actions. Nor has he, in spite of the stakes involved, any right to meddle in my life the way he has.

His rebel thoughts endured for only that second. His grip loosened on the doorknob,

his gloved hand fell away. He actually took a few steps backward, as if he would negate that action which led toward disaster. Then he turned quickly, urged his undernourished body back up the threadbare hall, into his equally threadbare room. Off came his shapeless hat, and overcoat which was ripped at seams and pockets, and he sat down, brain numb, the sensations of his stomach forgotten in the greater hunger.

Where is she? Who is she!

He did not have the courage to meet the cold eyes of the man who sat in shadowy outline amongst nebulous, self-suspended machinery, although that being watched him with merciless inflexibility of purpose. He had only the courage to speak, while his eyes fixed dully on the gingerbreaded metal bed with its sagging mattress.

"The Alpha Group?"

"The Alpha Group," the shadowy man spoke coldly, in agreement, "Punctus four. You would have met her."

"I thought so. I felt it."

"You felt nothing of the sort. You have an exaggerated notion of the perceptive qualities of your psyche."

"I named the Alpha Group," said Bryan wearily.

"Because for the first three or four years of our association, the Alpha Group will predominate. And because you have come to associate certain of my facial expressions and tonal qualities with the group. There was no telepathic pick-up from the girl. She is not aware that you exist. Nor will she ever be aware, as long as you choose to work in close collaboration with me–and as a humanitarian yourself, you will not refuse to collaborate."

Bryan leaned back in the worn armchair, grinning twistedly, though his heart was lead in his breast. He held the longlashed eyes of the god-like creature with a flickering sidewise glance. "Perhaps you will choose to stop collaborating with me."

The nostrils of the being flared. "No. Never. We will continue-we must continue to work together until the Alpha, Delta, and Gamma groups are exhausted–"

"Or until–"

"Or until I commit suicide as you suggested."

"Yes."

Bryan lost his tensity, and his fear that he could not bear it, might disobey a command from this creature. Suddenly, he was amused. Bryan was chained to this creature, but no less than this creature was chained to him; chained to him for ten long years, or until he might take his own life.

Creature? Yes'. For certainly any animal that is not homo sapiens is a creature. Even if he be homo superior, of the year Eight-hundred thousand A.D., and has invented a time-machine, and has but one powerful, compelling thought in mind–to save the human race. Or that race of creatures which had stemmed from the human race. That was it. After fighting and imagining, aspiring and succeeding, for a good many millions of years, man was about to be snuffed out. So the shadowy being–homo superior–had told Bryan on that day a week ago when he had appeared in this room. The human race, far in the future, would destroy itself unless–unless Bryan Barret did not do something that he had done; did not become something that he had become.

The thoughts of the creature had impinged on his brain clearly after the first moments of fright. Bryan had listened, and believed.

"So I'm a diversifal," he had muttered. "Bryan Barret, liberal, radical, diversifal."

"You are a diversifal. I can coin no other word for it."

"And she is a diversifal."

"Yes!"

"And, our child would be a mutant."

"Yes.

"I, thought," Bryan had said, his thoughts sinking heavily into a morass of intangibles, "I thought, if one wants to follow the theory to its logical conclusion, that there are an infinite number of probable worlds."

"Are there?" The depthless eyes of the being, looking down at Bryan from his shadowy height above the floor, had been contemptuous with disinterest. "I know of only two. They are the only two with which I am concerned. A thousand years in my future they warred–and humanity destroyed itself. This I know. This I must prevent. From your unborn mutant child my race stems."

"Your race?" Bryan had exclaimed.

"Yes."

"You are seeking to prevent your own world of probability?'

"Yes." The long-lashed eyes flickered. The being leaned forward a little, staring down at Bryan. "Why not, Bryan Barret? Does it matter? It is my world of probability which discovered the manner of traveling to the other world. It is my world which waged the war. It is my world, your world, which is–will be at fault. I am selfless. You know what it is to be selfless. You can understand. And, after all, you are the diversifal–the splitting factor."

Bryan was inwardly shaken. The selfless superman. Or, and this was more likely, the selfless scientist. The picture, in its entirety, had come quite clearly to Bryan Barrett.

He was a diversifal, because in him impinged events any of which might lead to the creation of a certain time-branch; a time-branch which must not be created if humanity in a far distant era were to survive. The concept of worlds of if was not new to Bryan, nor was the idea of the, future of man outside his thoughts. He dealt with the future, with the liberation of man from his bondage to tyranny. He was fighting for a future wherein man would know no poverty, no social backwardness; for a time when man could come into his own, blossom forth and make true use of the boundless resources that were possible. Small wonder, then, that he could accept the idea of a man from the far future without trouble, and could decide to give ten years of his life to the cause for which this man from the future was fighting.

But already the first week of that ten years had become a nightmare.

"You've kept me here," he now told the being, "three days, without any food except some stale cakes. Why?"

"Because the events of the Alpha Group are worked around your every probable action like a net. If you left this house before morning, you would meet her." His sharp-pointed face turned hard. "The psychological data I have on her is sketchy. I can control your actions. I cannot control hers, nor guess what they would be. And also, had you left here at any time during the last three days, you would have made an acquaintance whom you would not see again for eight, perhaps nine years."

"The Gamma Group!"

"The Gamma Group. That acquaintance would show up as a probable event in the Gamma Group which would lead to tickets to a musical comedy in a New York–" He stopped speaking, but Bryan Barret, without knowing it, was watching him with cunning expression. The man from the future sneered. "Your obvious, unconscious desire to trick me would sicken even you, Bryan. Every word I speak is to your unconscious merely a clue to her identity. You must fight that."

Sweat started on Bryan's square, thinning face. He bowed forward, feeling as if he were about to burst. "I can leave here tomorrow morning?" His voice was muffled.

"Yes. And your way of life must change. You will go to Hannicut, editor of The Daily News-Star, and tell him you'd like to take that job he offered you last year."

Bryan came to his feet in a blaze of anger. "No! You know why I didn't take that job!"

"I know why. But it is still necessary for you to lose your integrity if we are to succeed. Go to Hannicut and tell him you're willing to falsify the news either by commission or omission. Also you -will cancel your membership in the so-called radical organization, Freedom For All. And in any other liberal organization you may belong to."

He looked calmly down into Bryan's stricken, agonized face. "I know what those

associations mean to you–and to freedom-loving men everywhere. I am truly sorry. I conceive the future to be more important than this present, however. This, Bryan Barrett, is your first step to wealth and power. A financial gulf must be created as an additional precaution between you and her. A gulf that a poverty-stricken person can never cross. She is poor. She will always be poor..."

It was strange the way that nightmarish week turned into a month, that month into a year. Hannicut, editor of The Daily News-Star, performed a blunder from the viewpoint of the man who owned that newspaper and a hundred others throughout the world: He printed a story which told the truth about a recent labor-big business dispute. Hannicut's boss fired him, and in elevating Bryan Barret to the post warned him never to give labor a break, else he'd go the way of Hannicut.

"Take the job," came the cold thoughts of the man from the future, and his name Bryan Barret now knew–Entore.

Bryan got the first damp issue back from the pressroom the next day, and looked at it with sickened eyes. He left the office with his hat pulled low over his eyes. Newsboys were hawking the edition–big scareheads which told of another strike in the coalmines, and never mentioned one word about the strike a certain big business corporation was pulling against the government. Which never said a thing about the filibuster a certain senator had pulled in Congress to defeat a pro-minority bill.

In the second week of Bryan's editorship, he started to leave the office. Back in Bryan's hotel suite, Entore, man from the future, sent another wordless command.

"Do not leave the office now."

"No?" Bryan muttered the word from the graying mustache he now wore.

"No. Two men are waiting downstairs–two rowdies front the Freedom For All League. They are intending to throw bricks."

Bryan's fists clenched. "There are no rowdies in the Freedom For All League. No matter what the newspapers claim."

"These men once knew you, when you fought tyranny together. They are law-abiding men. But something has snapped in them. In their eyes, you are a traitor. They could never punish you by law. They are willing to sacrifice their own lives if they can kill you."

"Thanks."

Bryan sank into a chair in the corner of his office. His head bowed, and he knew there was gray in his hair, gray that the last year had put there. Later Entore spoke again. Bryan left.

He had no sooner reached the street and signaled a taxi than Entore spoke again. "Do not take that taxi. Walk one block left. The Alpha Group. That taxi will have a

minor street accident. Among those who gather in the crowd will be she."

Bryan stood with his hand upraised. The taxi was sloping in toward him. His heart thudded. He felt a voiceless, impassioned longing, as if a mind, a human mind, were reaching across distances and touching his without saying anything. Her mind. Then he turned and walked one block left and took another taxi. He sat in the taxi, cold and graying, a man who was rising in power and wealth as the editor of a great metropolitan daily. A man who by all the rules of human conduct was a quisling of the worst sort. Yet, could they, his former friends and fellow fighters, know what hell he was going through now because he was looking farther into the future than they could ever hope to look? They were fighting against the corruptness of present civilization. Someday their fight would bear fruit in a nationwide, and later on a worldwide, Utopia. Bryan Barret had been forced to look farther ahead than that. To and beyond the year 800,000 A.D. They would never understand.

"Turn your head to the right," came the command.

Automatically Bryan turned his head. "Why?" he asked dully.

"The Gamma Group, seven years from now. Had you kept your eyes on the left side of the street, Punchis nineteen of the Gamma group would have occurred. You would have seen a woman who resembled your mother so strongly that later on, this week you would write a letter to her in your hometown, wondering if she had been in New York. She would have answered quickly, wondering why you wrote so seldom, and telling you she hadn't been in New York, but that, come to think of it, she would make the trip to see you. You would have met her in Penn Station, and in the excitement would have lost your billfold. A traveler would have found the billfold, taken the money, and dropped the billfold in a drawer at his home. Seven years later, his wife, cleaning house, would have found the billfold and returned it to you. You would have rewarded the woman. A few days later, you would meet her on the street; with her, a friend–"

"She!" Bryan interposed huskily.

"Yes," Entore said. "The possibilities of meeting her through the Gamma Group of events are the shadowy ones. One by one I am destroying the possibility of events both in the Delta and the Gamma Groups. But both will be relatively strong long after the Alpha Group no longer exists."

Bryan went back to his hotel suite without eating. Entore was there, staring at him with impersonal, cold glance.

Bryan said, his hand still on the closed door, "I won't be able to stand much more of this."

Entore leaned forward on the console of his machine. "I, too, am sacrificing," he pointed out.

"Are you?" Bryan's eyes and voice tore across at him with sarcasm. "You can disappear back to your own time for an hour, a week, a year, if you choose, and return back to this same second of time without my being aware that you had gone. You have relief from the vigil. I have none. Ten years?" His laugh was brittle. "I'll go crazy!"

Entore said nothing.

Bryan ground out, "You'd want me confined in a sanitarium, Entore. That would be similar to death, as far as destroying the Groups goes. No, thanks. I'll hang on."

He looked back at Entore, as impersonally as Entore was looking at him. Bryan thought, as he looked at the assemblage of machinery. He's shadowy, vague. He has –no real substance in this world. I can see through him and his machinery, a little. But he's partly solid. I've touched the machine. I've had to push hard to get my hand through. Maybe a bullet...

He thrust the thought away, seeing in a flash what horrors it could bring. Kill Entore? Kill him? He who had, with his own science of a far future, assembled groups of event-data which alone could guide Bryan Barret, diversifal, along the path he must take, rather than the path he would normally take? And yet, what if some day, in a burst of rage...?

Bryan Barret planned nothing of that sort. Another year passed, and another. The circulation of The Daily News-Star rose. Bryan could have pointed to Entore, when rich friends pointed to Bryan as one of the great editors of the times. Entore could look around corners, see what was coming from the future. Entore could scoop them all. If a war was going to break out, Bryan could have correspondents on the spot days before the event. If there was to be a mine explosion, Bryan could, if he wished, write the story ahead of time, himself. His salary rose to a fabulous figure. And he remembered, hollowly, Entore's purpose. A financial gulf must be created between him and her. She would always be poor...

Bryan Barret did not consciously plan to kill Entore. It was merely that events pointed in that direction–events as sure and far-reaching as those events of the Delta and Gamma Groups which now and again Entore forced him to by-pass. There was the instance of the gun. Bryan was passing an alleyway in the fourth year of his association with Entore. Had it not been for the reflection from the store window, Bryan would not have seen the assassin. He ducked as the gun roared. With a continuation of the motion, he hurled himself into the alley, for a long second wrestled mightily with death. He jerked the gun from the man's hands, threw him against the wall. His eyes widened.

"Drake!"

"Okay, Bryan," the shabbily dressed man spat at him. "I'll admit I was out to get you. I'll stay here until the police come. And when they try me, I'll tell things to the courtroom you never would allow to get into your paper. How you and your boss

put the pressure to bear, and disbanded the Freedom For All League."

Bryan paled, dropped the gun into his pocket. "Drake," he said, "get moving. Nothing happened. I was acting under my boss' orders when I printed that antileague propaganda. I wouldn't have done it myself. But you wouldn't understand. Go on."

Bryan quickly turned away, walked in the other direction. By the time the crowd formed, both participants in the scene were gone. But something had snapped in Bryan's mind. He walked faster, faster, as fast as his thoughts. An hour later, he burst into his suite, his hand in his pocket around the gun.

"Entore!" he snapped, taking two stiff-legged steps toward the suspended creature. "All day, you've been in communication with me. Yet, as I was coming home from the office, somebody tried to kill me. Why didn't you warn me about that?"

Entore's face remained cold. "Were you killed?"

"What does that matter? It was a lucky accident I wasn't. A matter of a reflection in a window, something even you couldn't have foreseen with your high and mighty science. Entore, you wanted me to die!"

Entore said nothing for awhile, his face a study. Finally, as if admitting something that had only hovered on the fringes of his mind: "Bryan, I suppose we have both at last come to hate each other. But I have never once tried to lead you into any situation that would mean your death."

"Except this evening!"

But already the force of Bryan's rage had died. Entore's logic was indisputable. He hadn't been killed. He felt the cold, hard mass of the gun in his pocket. He wondered if Entore knew about that. He wondered how deeply Entore could probe into his thoughts.

Entore repeated, with an abstraction that was entirely strange in him, "No, Bryan. No. I have never thought of that, never thought of consciously plotting your death, although it would free me."

His eyes flickered; and Bryan, turning, went with the steps of an old man toward the bedroom. He took off the coat, hung it up. The gun was stilt in the pocket. Bryan tried to force than thought of the gun from his mind, to get the memory of it deep into his unconscious.

The gun stayed there in that coat for three years.

The Alpha Group was now destroyed. The Alpha Group, running thick with events which would have led him to her. And the Delta Group, too, was now so blocked off, and the probabilities of a meeting occurred in such long, involved chains, that Entore could destroy Puncti merely by dictating to Bryan Barret in such small matters as the color of a necktie, or a choice of dessert, or–well, how could the color

of a necktie start a chain of events which would lead to her? This way: A tie bought hastily, worn once, disliked; given to the new hotel maid. The maid is making a quilt from old neckties, and several others are given to her. When she completes the quilt, she sells it to a small department store. The department store displays the quilt in the window, the maid informs Bryan, pridefully. On his way from lunch, Bryan feels obliged to stop by and look at the quilt. But he is in somewhat of a hurry, turns, looking at his watch, bumps head-on into her... But Entore prevented Bryan from buying the chartreuse necktie.

In the eighth year, the Delta Group of events ceased to exist. They were now in the shadowy realms of the Gamma Group. Those events which were far-flung echoes of the past.

"There's not much chance, now, eh?" Bryan queried.

"Not much chance."

Bryan sat down. He was forty years of age, and the years had treated him harshly. He was tired, in mind and body. Fine lines had been etched deep in his face; strands of gray ran thickly through his hair. He was tall, and gaunt, and inclined to stoop at the shoulders, as from a physical burden. He moved through life with a slow, firm tread which was not so much an indication of his bodily strength as of his will, which he whipped to action as he would a stubborn animal.

Entore had in no way changed.

"I would like," Bryan muttered, in the voice of a man asleep, "I would like to meet her."

"I know," said Entore.

"Tomorrow night," said Bryan, "I am going incognito to a public meeting of the so-called United Liberty Lovers' League. It is a sham organization, masquerading under a name which indicates its opposite nature. I intend to expose the League in my paper,"

"No," said Entore.

Bryan looked up, his face savage. "Yes! Eight years ago, I deserted every ideal that made me worthy of life. I was in some measure responsible for the disbanding of a league that was fighting corruption–the kind of corruption my newspaper has dealt in. I intend to make one strong bid for my self-respect."

"You will no longer have your position if you print such a story. The man who owns the paper sponsors the organization you intend to expose."

"That's all right," said Bryan still savagely. He rose, pounding one fist with restrained emphasis into the palm of his left hand. "I've never gone against you, Entore. Never. Not in the slightest detail. This time I must. If this is a step that will create a chain of

events which is undesirable, there's still a way for you to lead me back to a safe path."

Entore's depthless eyes flickered. His small mouth turned slowly hard. "If you wish," he said coldly. "But you must obey me in small particulars."

Bryan nodded curtly.

Bryan Barrett never reached the meeting hall of the sham organization United Liberty Lovers' League the next night.

"Do not go by way of Columbus Circle," Entore's thoughts came.

Bryan leaned forward, spoke to the taxi driver, giving lain another route, a route that led toward death. Bryan saw the moving van coming with ponderous sureness from a side-street, bearing down broadside on the taxi. The driver cramped the wheel hard, screamed. The monster loomed, and Bryan moved, his nerves pulling at his muscles like reins holding the head of a spirited horse. He halfway rolled from the middle of the seat, with one foot kicked the door lever and shoved the door open. He threw himself from the taxi, bit shoulder first in the street, scraped his face on hard pavement. He lay like one dead. When he came to, he arose from the crowd that circled him, pushed his way through like a swimmer breaking water. Somebody tried to stop him, but he went, staggering at first, and then quickly.

He got back in another taxi. Entore did not speak to him once during that trip. he did not speak when Bryan came into the hotel suite. Bryan emptied his mind of coherence. He went into the bedroom, took off his torn coat. He put on another coat, and he tried not to realize that the gun was in that pocket.

Then he came out into the living-room and took a stance looking up at Entore. "You tried to kill me," he said.

Entore said coldly, looking at the blood on his face, "I am ignorant of all events after the taxi changed course. You deliberately closed your mind to me. However, I am glad you didn't go to the League meeting. It would have set in motion a number of puncti which would have been hard to destroy. There now remains a chance—one bare chance that you will ever meet her. Once that Pundus is destroyed, the Gamma Group will have been destroyed. You will be pleased to know—as I will be pleased-that our association can then be disbanded."

Bryan started to shake inwardly. Then the trembling was transmitted to his outward person.

"Entore," he had to whisper, "I know something now I didn't know before, You're a superman, and you're a congenital liar. You can lie with a straight face when you know big events hang on your lies. More, you can convince yourself that your lies are true—and maybe that's a valuable survival characteristic. Because you lied to me when you first appeared to me eight years ago."

He gulped in air, tired to control his trembling. He spoke again.

"Most of what you said was true. I believe most of it. But you just caught yourself up on one big lie. You knew how selfless I could be, because I believed in an ideal. You appealed to my selflessness by putting yourself in the same category. You told me it was your world of probability you were trying to destroy. Put that way, I could do nothing less than promise to collaborate with you completely. However, if by the destruction of one more punchis, the last chance of my meeting her is destroyed, then, in that same instant, your world will be destroyed, and you will be destroyed, too. You will cease to exist. Yet you speak of disbanding our association. If you spoke the truth, it would be disbanded automatically–and you would not have a chance to be pleased or displeased. Entore," said Bryan, reaching into the pocket and taking out the gun, "you have tried to kill me once too often. You won't get another chance."

He fired. He fired point-blank. And in his innermost heart he did not think he would succeed, did not want to succeed.

The bullet struck Entore in the chest.

Entore's passionless eyes widened. The delicate shadowy fingers clasped suddenly at the open hole in his chest that suddenly gushed with pink, barely discernible blood. He choked. Then he fell forward across the console of his machine.

"I am dying!" The hideous, incredulous thought-words ripped at Bryan's brain. He saw Entore's fingers scrambling at buttons on the control of his suspended machinery. The machinery and Entore suddenly disappeared, like smoke dissipated before a breeze. There was emptiness.

The gun dropped from Bryan's fingers, as if it were a serpent which had struck him. He stood frozen for a long moment, icy cold horror pouring along the winding arteries of his body, pervading his brain.

"Entore!" he cried. "Entore! Come back!"

But Entore would not come back. In his last moments, Entore had sent himself spinning back to his own time. Bryan sank, stupefied into a chair,

Bryan left the hotel suite the next morning. He moved slowly, like a blind man who feels he is liable to stumble over the brink of a precipice at any moment. He walked along the street listening for Entore's thought-voice.

Suddenly he stopped' in mid-pace, turned, walked back, and then a block in the other direction. He started to board a bus, then changed his mind.

At breakfast, he ordered mechanically–then, in fright, changed the order completely.

When the day was done, he lay in bed, rigid with nervous exhaustion, knowing he had set himself an impossible task. Two years of this. And his battle against

mechanical or impulsive actions was no substitute for Entore's knowledge of puncti.

He thought of Entore, as he lay rigid in darkness. Entore had been a liar. And yet his lie did not matter. The same result, the preservation of humanity in the far distant future, would be achieved whether Entore's world or the other world ceased to have being. The murder of Entore had solved nothing, but had left Bryan in a tangle of complexities from which there was only one straightforward path: suicide.

A month passed. And Bryan suddenly saw that insanity was another way out. He was surely growing insane. He was trying to control the minutiae of his existence, and doing so was like an entity in his own head, ripping his mind to shreds. He looked at his hand–large, bony–and it shook visibly. He looked straight down at the glass-top of his desk, and saw a hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed specter. He sank back into his chair, closed his eyes wearily. And as he sat thus, he made his decision.

With the decision came a vast, flooding peace, a cauterizing of the disease that was growing in his mind. He opened his eyes as if he were looking on a new world. A world where he, Bryan Barret, did as he pleased without censorship from Entore or from himself. He rose quickly.

On his desk, he heard the rustle of papers. He turned, filled with a drunken elation. The wind was flicking over pages of the rival newspaper on his desk much as a human hand could flick them over. Bryan put a paperweight on each corner, sank gloatingly into his chair. Events were flowing as they should flow, even in the small matter of wind blowing a newspaper.

Small?

Something exploded in his brain like a bell struck violently.

He came to his feet, bent over the newspaper, staring at the advertisement which leaped with smashing impact toward his eyes. An advertisement smugly explaining the virtues of a musical comedy that was in its sixth month.

Years ago, Entore had said something about a musical comedy. Of an acquaintance who would later show up in the Gamma Group with tickets for a musical comedy. Only, Entore had destroyed that possibility by making certain Bryan did not make the acquaintance in the first place.

He reached for the 'phone automatically. The wells of resistance had been pumped dry. That evening he sat in a rear theatre seat, far from the stage. And yet he saw her. Third act, second row, in the middle. Long before the show ended, he was standing at the stage-door, waiting for her to come out. She came soon. She halted in the door. Then she saw him. Without hesitance, she walked toward him and without saying anything, fell into step beside him and they walked down the street.

Their conversation until they sat in the restaurant with the dinner plates cleared away

was nothing that either of them would remember. Then it was Bryan who spoke.

"You'd never married?"

"No. And you?"

"Never. We've been kept apart."

"I know," she said quietly. "Entore."

He looked across the table at her, unable to feel the shock of that suddenly imparted information. Her name was Ann. She was small and dainty of body, but the beauty that had been hers was fading into the serene depth of her eyes.

He said at last, "Entore came to you first, did he?"

"He did. And I refused him."

"Why?"

"Because I was living in the present, and eight hundred thousand years from now is eight hundred thousand years."

He struggled with that logic, but there were implications in it which escaped him. "But," he persisted, "the race of man would die. It would end because of us."

She leaned forward a little tensely, a little pleadingly, and the dark eyes flooded their inner beauty over her face so that he caught his breath. She wanted to explain something to him, but she had no words to say it. She sank back, mutely. He sat silently, holding himself in an iron control, and then it was that the barrier leaped up between them. For hours they sat there, talking of other things that neither would remember.

Finally she rose, quickly, holding her purse with both hands. "I must leave now," she told him. He rose, too. Panic flickered on her face, and her hands–thin fragile hands–wound around the purse. "I have a feeling--as strong as the feeling that your eyes were on me from the audience–that if I leave now, we'll never meet each other again. Do you want it that way. Do you really want it that way?"

"It's the way it must be," he said, and it was as if his Nemesis, Entore had forced the damning words from his lips.

A second after she had turned, walking so quickly that it seemed she was running away, turned and disappeared up the short flight of stairs toward the traffic-roaring street, he could still see the startled, destroying pain that wrenched her face. The incredulity that even the hope of the empty years of her life had been taken from her and left a narrowing memory of near happiness only.

Only a second he stood there, remembering that tortured expression. Then a thunderbolt exploded inside him. This is the present, and eight hundred thousand

years is eight hundred thousand years, as long as eternity, as meaningless!

"Ann!" he shouted—screamed the name as he stood on the street. She was not in sight. And he knew he would never see her again. The black, nauseating wind of self-hatred poured madly through his brain, and carried the mocking memory of Entore. The last punctus of the Gamma Group of events had been dissipated. He was truly his own master again. He had the choice of facing straight ahead into the unwelcome future or—of fastening his mind on some more pleasant memory of the past, fastening it there permanently, and assuming the expression of an idiot.

# THE CYBER AND JUSTICE HOLMES

## FRANK RILEY

(Selected from *The First World of If* 1957)

"Cyber justice!" That's what the District Attorney had called it in his campaign speech last night.

"Cyber justice!"

Oh, hell!

Judge Walhfred Anderson threw the morning fax paper on top of the law books he had been researching for the past two hours, and stomped angrily across his chamber to the door of the courtroom.

But it was easier to throw away the paper than the image of the words:

"—and, if re-elected, I pledge to do all in my power to help replace human inefficiency with Cyber justice in the courts of this county!"

"We've seen what other counties have done with Cyber judges. We've witnessed the effectiveness of cybernetic units in our own Appellate Division ... And I can promise you twice as many prosecutions at half the cost to the taxpayers ... with modern, streamlined Cyber justice!"

Oh! Hell!

Walhfred Anderson caught a glimpse of his reflection in the oval mirror behind the coat rack. He paused, fuming, and smoothed down the few lingering strands of gray hair. The District Attorney was waiting for him out there. No use giving him the satisfaction of looking upset. Only a few moments ago, the Presiding judge had visiphoned a warning that the D.A. had obtained a change of calendar and was going to spring a surprise case this morning...

The judge cocked his bow tie at a jaunty angle, opened the neckline of his black robe enough for the pink boutonniere to peep out, and stepped into the Courtroom as

sprightly as his eighty-six years would permit.

The District Attorney was an ex-football player, square-shouldered and square-jawed. He propelled himself to his feet, bowed perfunctorily and remained standing for the Pledge of Allegiance.

As the bailiff's voice repeated the pledge in an unbroken monotone, Walhfred Anderson allowed his eyes to wander to the gold-framed picture of his personal symbol of justice, Oliver Wendell Holmes. Judge Anderson winked at Justice Holmes. It was a morning ritual he had observed without fail for nearly fifty years.

This wasn't the classic picture of Justice Holmes. Not the leonine figure Walhfred Anderson had once seen in the National Gallery. The Justice Holmes on the wall of judge Anderson's courtroom was much warmer and more human than the official portrait. It was from an old etching that showed the Justice wearing a natty grey fedora. The Justice's fabled mustaches were long and sweeping, giving him the air of a titled playboy, but his eyes were the eyes of the man who had said: "When I am dying, my last words will be–have faith and pursue the unknown end."

Those were good words to remember, when you were eighty-six. Walhfred Anderson stared wistfully at the yellowed etching, waiting for some other dearly remembered phrase to spring up between them. But justice Holmes wasn't communicative this morning. He hadn't been for a long time.

The District Attorney's voice, threaded with sarcasm, broke into his reverie:

"If the Court pleases, I would like to call up the case of People vs. Professor Neustadt."

Walhfred Anderson accepted the file from his aging, nearsighted clerk. He saw that the case had been assigned originally to Department 42. It was the case he had been warned about by the Presiding Judge.

Walhfred Anderson struggled to focus all his attention on the complaint before him. His craggy features, once described as resembling a benign bulldog, grew rigid with concentration. The judge had a strong sense of honor about dividing his attention in Court. A case was not just a case; it was a human being whose past, present and future were wrapped up in the charge against him.

"Your Honor," the District Attorney broke in, impatiently, "if the Court will permit, I can summarize this case very quickly."

The tone of his voice implied:

A Cyber judge would speed things up around here. Feed the facts into the proprioceptor, and they'd be stored and correlated instantly.

Perhaps so, Walhfred Anderson thought, suddenly tired, though the morning was still young. At eighty-six you couldn't go on fighting and resisting much longer.

Maybe he should resign, and listen to the speeches at a farewell luncheon, and let a Cyber take over. The Cybers were fast.

They ruled swiftly and surely on points of law. They separated fact from fallacy. They were not led down side avenues of justice by human frailty. Their vision was not blurred by emotion. And yet ... Judge Anderson looked to justice Holmes for a clarifying thought, but the Justice's eyes were opaque, inscrutable.

Judge Anderson wearily settled back in his tall chair, bracing the ache in his back against the leather padding.

"You may proceed," he told the District Attorney.

"Thank you, your Honor."

This time the edge of sarcasm was so sharp that the Clerk and Court Stenographer looked up indignantly, expecting one of the Judge's famous retorts.

The crags in the Judge's face deepened, but he remained quiet.

With a tight smile, the District Attorney picked up his notebook.

"The defendant," he began crisply, "is charged on three counts of fraud under Section 31÷."

"To wit," rumbled Judge Anderson, restlessly.

"To wit," snapped the D.A., "the defendant is charged with giving paid performances at a local theatre, during which he purported to demonstrate that he could take over Cyber functions and perform them more efficiently."

Walhfred Anderson felt the door closing on him. So this was why the D.A. had requested a change of calendar! What a perfect tie-in with the election campaign! He swiveled to study the defendant.

Professor Neustadt was an astonishingly thin little man; the bones of his shoulders seemed about to thrust through the padding of his cheap brown suit. His thinness, combined with a tuft of white hair at the peak of his forehead, gave him the look of a scrawny bird.

"Our investigation of this defendant," continued the D.A., "showed that his title was assumed merely for stage purposes. He has been associated with the less creditable phases of show business for many years. In his youth, he gained considerable attention as a 'quiz kid,' and later, for a time, ran his own program and syndicated column. But his novelty wore off, and he apparently created this cybernetic act to..."

Rousing himself to his judicial responsibility, Judge Anderson interrupted:

"Is the defendant represented by counsel?"

"Your Honor," spoke up Professor Neustadt, in a resonant, bass voice that should have come from a much larger diaphragm, "I request the Court's permission to act as my own attorney."

Walhfred Anderson saw the D.A. smile, and he surmised that the old legal truism was going through his mind: A man who defends himself has a fool for a client.

"If it's a question of finances," the judge rumbled gently.

"It is not a question of finances. I merely wish to defend myself."

Judge Anderson was annoyed, worried. Whoever he was or claimed to be, this Professor was evidently something of a crackpot. The D.A. would tear him to small pieces, and twist the whole case into an implicit argument for Cyber judges.

"The defendant has a right to act as his own counsel," the D.A. reminded him.

"The Court is aware of that," retorted the judge. Only the restraining eye of Oliver Wendell Holmes kept him from cutting loose on the D.A. But one more remark like that, and he'd turn his back on the Justice. After all, what right had Holmes to get stuffy at a time like this? He'd never had to contend with Cyber justice!

He motioned to the D.A. to continue with the People's case, but the Professor spoke up first:

"Your Honor, I stipulate to the prosecution evidence."

The D.A. squinted warily.

"Is the defendant pleading guilty?"

"I am merely stipulating to the evidence. Surely the prosecution knows the difference between a stipulation and a plea! I am only trying to save the time of the Court by stipulating to the material facts in the complaint against me!"

The D.A. was obviously disappointed in not being able to present his case. Walhfred Anderson repressed an urge to chuckle. He wondered how a Cyber judge would handle a stipulation.

"Do you have a defense to present?" he asked the Professor.

"Indeed I do, your Honor! I propose to bring a Cyber into the courtroom and prove that I can perform its functions more efficiently!"

The D.A. flushed.

"What kind of a farce is this? We've watched the defendant's performance for several days, and it's perfectly clear that he is merely competing against his own special Cyber unit, one with very limited memory storage capacity..."

"I propose further," continued Professor Neustadt, ignoring the D.A., "that the

prosecution bring any Cyber unit of its choice into Court. I am quite willing to compete against any Cyber yet devised!"

This man was not only a crackpot, he was a lunatic, thought Walhfred Anderson with an inward groan. No one but a lunatic would claim he could compete with the memory storage capacity of a Cyber.

As always when troubled, he looked toward Oliver Wendell Holmes for help, but the Justice was still inscrutable. He certainly was being difficult this morning!

The judge sighed, and began a ruling:

"The procedure suggested by the defendant would fail to answer to the material counts of the complaint..."

But, as he had expected, the D.A. did not intend to let this opportunity pass.

"May it please the Court," said the District Attorney, with a wide grin for the fax reporter, "the people will stipulate to the defense, and will not press for trial of the complaint if the defendant can indeed compete with a Cyber unit of our choice."

Walhfred Anderson glowered at the unsympathetic justice Holmes. Dammit, man, he thought, don't be so calm about this whole thing. What if you were sitting here, and I was up there in a gold frame? Aloud, he hedged:

"The Court does not believe such a test could be property and fairly conducted."

"I am not concerned with being fairly treated," orated the wispy Professor. "I propose that five questions or problems be posed to the Cyber and myself, and that we be judged on both the speed and accuracy of our replies. I am quite willing for the prosecution to select the questions."

Go to hell, Holmes, thought Judge Anderson. I don't need you anyway. I've got the answer. The Professor is stark, raving mad.

Before he could develop a ruling along this line, the grinning D.A. had accepted the Professor's terms.

"I have but one condition," interposed the defendant, "if I win this test, I would like to submit a question of my own to the Cyber."

The D.A. hesitated, conferred in a whisper with his assistant, then shrugged.

"We so stipulate."

Firmly, Walhfred Anderson turned his back on Oliver Wendell Holmes.

"In the opinion of the Court," he thundered, "the proposed demonstration would be irrelevant, immaterial and without substantive basis in law. Unless the People proceed with their case in the proper manner, the Court will dismiss this complaint."

"Objection!"

"Objection! "

The word was spoken simultaneously by both the D.A. and the Professor. Then the defendant bowed toward the District Attorney, and asked him to continue.

For one of the few times in his life, Walhfred Anderson found himself faced with the same objection, at the same time, from both prosecution and defense. What a morning! He felt like turning the Court over to a Cyber judge right here and now, and stomping back to his chambers. Let Holmes try getting along with a Cyber!

The D.A.'s voice slashed into his thoughts.

"The People object on the grounds that there is ample precedent in law for the type of court demonstration to which we have agreed..."

"For example," spoke up the Professor, "People vs. Borth, 20l N.Y., SUPP. 47–"

The District Attorney blinked, and looked wary again.

"The People are not familiar with the citation," he said, "but there is no reason to be in doubt. The revised judicial Code of Procedure provides for automatic and immediate review of disputed points of law by the Cyber Appellate Division."

CAD! Walhfred Anderson customarily used every legal stratagem to avoid the indignity of appearing before CAD. But now he was neatly trapped.

Grumbling, he visaphoned the Presiding Judge, and was immediately assigned to Cyber V, CAD, fourth floor.

Cyber V presided over a sunlit, pleasantly carpeted courtroom in the south wing of the justice Building. Square, bulky, with mat black finish, the Cyber reposed in the center of a raised mahogany stand. Its screen and vocader grill looked austerely down on the long tables provided for opposing counsel.

As Walhfred Anderson belligerently led the Professor and the D.A. into the courtroom, Cyber V hummed softly. A dozen colored lights on its front grid began to blink.

Judge Anderson angrily repressed an instinct to bow, as he had done in his younger years when appearing to plead a case before a human Appellate Court.

The Cyber's soft, pleasantly modulated voice said:

"Please proceed."

Curbing his roiled feelings of rage and indignity, the judge stepped to the stand in front of the vocader grill and tersely presented the facts of the case, the reasons for his ruling. Cyber V blinked and hummed steadily, assimilating and filing the facts.

The D.A. followed the judge to the stand, and, from long habit, addressed Cyber V with the same emotion and voice tricks he would have used in speaking to a human judge. Walhfred Anderson grimaced with disgust.

When the D.A. finished, Cyber V bummed briefly, two amber lights flickered, and the soft voice said:

"Defense counsel will please take the stand."

Professor Neustadt smiled his ironic, exasperating smile.

"The defense stipulates to the facts as stated."

The frontal grid lights on Cyber V flashed furiously; the hum rose to a whine, like a motor accelerating for a steep climb.

Suddenly, all was quiet, and Cyber V spoke in the same soft, pleasant voice:

"There are three cases in modern jurisprudence that have direct bearing on the matter of People vs. Neustadt.

"Best known is the case of People vs. Borth, 201 N.Y., SUPP. 47."

Walhfred Anderson saw the D.A. stiffen to attention as the Cyber repeated the citation given by Professor Neustadt. He felt his own pulse surge with the stir of a faint, indefinable hope.

"There are also the cases of Forsythe vs. State of Ohio, and Murphy VS. U.S., 2d, 85 C.C.A.

"These cases establish precedence for a courtroom demonstration to determine points of material fact.

"Thank you, Gentlemen."

The voice stopped. All lights went dark. Cyber V, CAD, had rendered its decision.

Whatever misgivings the D.A. may have generated over the Professor's display of legal knowledge were overshadowed now by his satisfaction at this display of Cyber efficiency.

"Eight minutes!" he announced triumphantly. "Eight minutes to present the facts of the case and obtain a ruling. There's efficiency for you! There's modern courtroom procedure."

Walhfred Anderson felt the weight of eighty-six years as he cocked the angle of his bow tie, squared his shoulders and led the way back to his own courtroom. Maybe the new way was right. Maybe he was just an old man, burdened with dreams, memories, the impedimentia of human emotions. It would have taken him many long, weary hours to dig out those cases. Maybe the old way had died with Holmes and

the other giants of that era.

Details of the demonstration were quickly concluded. The D.A. selected a Cyber IX for the test. Evidently he had acquired a new respect for Professor Neustadt and was taking no chances. Cyber IX was a massive new model, used as an integrator by the sciences. Judge Anderson had heard that its memory storage units were the greatest yet devised.

If Professor Neustadt had also heard this, he gave no sign of it. He made only a slight, contemptuous nod of assent to the D.A.'s choice.

For an instant, the judge found himself hoping that the Professor would be beaten into humility by Cyber IX. The man's attitude was maddening.

Walhfred Anderson banged his gavel harder than necessary, and recessed the bearing for three days. In the meantime, a Cyber IX was to be moved into the courtroom and placed under guard. Professor Neustadt was freed on bail, which he had already posted.

Court fax-sheet reporters picked up the story and ballooned it. The D.A.'s office released publicity stories almost hourly. Cartoonists created "Battle of the Century" illustrations, with Cyber IX and Professor Neustadt posed like fighters in opposite corners of the ring. "Man challenges machine" was the caption, indicating that the Professor was a definite underdog and thus the sentimental favorite. One court reporter confided to Judge Anderson that bookmakers were, offering odds of ten to one on Cyber IX.

To the judge's continuing disgust, Professor Neustadt seemed as avid as the Prosecutor's office for publicity. He allowed himself to be guest-interviewed on every available television show; one program dug up an ancient film of the Professor as a quiz kid, extracting cube roots in a piping, confident voice.

Public interest boiled. TV coverage of the court test was demanded, and eagerly agreed to by both the Prosecutor and Professor Neustadt. Walhfred Anderson ached to cry out against bringing a carnival atmosphere into his courtroom; the fax photographers were bad enough. But he knew that any attempt to interfere would bring him back before that infernal CAD.

When he entered his courtroom on the morning of the trial, the Judge wore a new bow tie, a flippant green, but he felt like many a defendant he had watched step up before his bench to receive sentence. After this morning, there'd be no stopping the D.A.'s campaign for Cyber judges. He glared unhappily at the battery of television cameras. He noted that one of them was pointed at Oliver Wendell Holmes. The Justice didn't seem to mind; but who would–all safe and snug in a nice gold frame? Easy enough for Holmes to look so cocky.

The bright lights hurt his eyes, and he had to steel himself in order to present the picture of dignified equanimity that was expected of a judge. People would be

looking at him from every part of the world. Five hundred million viewers, one of the columnists had estimated.

Professor Neustadt appeared in the same shiny brown suit. As he passed the huge Cyber IX unit, metallic gray and mounted on a table of reinforced steel, the Professor paused and bowed, in the manner of a courtly gladiator saluting a respected foe. Spectators clapped and whistled their approval. Television cameras zoomed in on the scene. With easy showmanship, Professor Neustadt maintained the pose for closeups, his owlish eyes wide and unblinking.

Judge Anderson banged his gavel for order. What a poseur! What a fraud! This charlatan would get a million dollars' worth of publicity out of the case.

At a nod from the D.A., the bailiff gave Professor Neustadt a pad of paper on which to note his answers. It had been previously agreed that Cyber IX would answer visually, on the screen, instead of by vocader. The Professor was seated at the far end of the counsel table, where he could not see the screen. Clerks with stopwatches were stationed behind the Professor and Cyber IX.

"Is the defendant ready?" inquired Judge Anderson, feeling like an idiot.

"Of course."

The Judge turned to Cyber IX, then caught himself. He flushed. The courtroom tittered.

The District Attorney had five questions, each in a scaled envelope, which also contained an answer certified by an eminent authority in the field.

With a flourish, keeping his profile to the cameras, the D.A. handed the first envelope to Judge Anderson.

"We'll begin with a simple problem in mathematics," he announced to the TV audience.

From the smirk in his voice, Judge Anderson was prepared for the worst. But he read the question with a perverse sense of satisfaction. This Professor was in for a very rough morning. He cleared his throat, read aloud:

"In analyzing the economics of atomic power plant operation, calculate the gross heat input for a power generating plant Of 400 x 106 watts electrical output."

Cyber IX hummed into instantaneous activity; its lights flashed in sweeping curves and spirals across the frontal grid.

Professor Neustadt sat perfectly still, eyes closed. Then he scribbled something on a pad of paper.

Two stopwatches clicked about a second apart. The clerk banded the Professor's slip of paper to Judge Anderson. The Judge checked it, turned to the screen. Both

answers were identical:

3,920 x 10(6) Btu/hr.

Time was announced as fourteen seconds for Cyber IX; fifteen and three-tenths seconds for Professor Neustadt. The Cyber had won the first test, but by an astoundingly close margin. The courtroom burst into spontaneous applause for the Professor. Walhfred Anderson was incredulous. What a fantastic performance!

No longer smirking, the D.A. handed the Judge a second envelope.

"What is the percentage compressibility of caesiurn under 45,000 atmospheres of pressure, and how do you account for it?"

Once again Cyber IX hummed and flickered into action.

And once again Professor Neustadt sat utterly still, head tilted back like an inquisitive parakeet. Then he wrote swiftly. A stopwatch clicked.

Walhfred Anderson took the answer with trembling fingers. He saw the D.A. rub dry lips together, try to moisten them with a dry tongue. A second stopwatch clicked.

The judge compared the correct answer with the Professor's answer and the answer on the screen. All were worded differently, but in essence were the same. Hiding his emotion in a tone gruffer than usual, Judge Anderson read the Professor's answer:

"The change in volume is 17 percent. It is due to an electronic transition for a 6s zone to a 5d zone."

The Professor's elapsed time was 22 seconds. Cyber IX had taken 31 seconds to answer the compound question.

Professor Neustadt pursed his lips; he seemed displeased with his tremendous performance.

Moving with the agility of a pallbearer, the D.A. gave judge Anderson the third question:

"In twenty-five words or less, state the Nernst Law of thermodynamics."

This was clearly a trick question, designed to trap a human mind in its own verbiage.

Cyber IX won, in eighteen seconds. But in just two-fifths of a second more, Professor Neustadt came through with a brilliant twenty-four word condensation:

"The entropy of a substance becomes zero at the absolute zero of temperature, provided it is brought to this temperature by a reversible process."

A tabulation of total elapsed time revealed that Professor Neustadt was leading by nine and three-tenths seconds.

A wild excitement blended with the Judge's incredulity. The D.A. seemed to have developed a tic in his right cheek.

On the fourth question, dealing with the structural formula similarities of dimenhydrinate and diphenhydramine hydrochloride, Professor Neustadt lost three seconds.

On the fifth question, concerning the theoretical effects of humidity inversion on microwave transmission, the Professor gained back a full second.

The courtroom was bedlam, and Walhfred Anderson was too excited to pound his gavel. In the glass-walled, soundproofed television booths, announcers grew apoplectic as they tried to relay the fever-pitch excitement of the courtroom to the outside world.

Professor Neustadt held up his bone-thin hand for silence.

"May it please the Court... The District Attorney agreed that in the event of victory I could ask Cyber IX an optional question. I would like to do so at this time."

Judge Anderson could only nod, and hope that his bulldog features were concealing his emotions. The D.A. kept his back rigidly to the television cameras.

Professor Neustadt strutted up to Cyber IX, flipped on the vocader switch and turned to the cameras.

"Since Cyber IX is essentially a scientific integrator and mathematical unit," he began pedantically, "I'll put my question in the Cyber's own framework. Had another Cyber been selected for this test, I would phrase my question differently."

He turned challengingly back to Cyber IX, paused for dramatic effect, and asked:

"What are the magnitudes of a dream?"

Cyber IX hummed and twinkled. The hum rose higher and higher. The lights flickered in weird, disjointed patterns, blurring before the eye.

Abruptly, the hum stopped. The lights dimmed, faded one by one.

The eternally calm, eternally pleasant voice of Cyber IX spoke from the vocader grill:

"Problem unsolved."

For an interminable instant there was silence in the courtroom. Complete silence. Stunned incredulity. It was followed by a collective gasp, which Walhfred Anderson could hear echoing around the world. Cyber IX had been more than beaten; it had failed to solve a problem.

The gasp gave way to unrestrained cheering.

But the Professor brought quiet again by raising his bony hand. Now there was a

strange, incongruous air of dignity about his thin figure.

"Please," he said, "please understand one thing... The purpose of this demonstration and my question was not to discredit Cyber IX, which is truly a great machine, a wonder of science.

"Cyber IX could not know the magnitudes of a dream ... because it cannot dream.

"As a matter of fact, I do not know the magnitudes of a dream, but that is not important ... because I can dream!

"The dream is the difference... The dream born in man, as the poet said, 'with a sudden, clamorous pain'."

There was no movement or sound in the courtroom. Walhfred Anderson held the Professor's last written answer between his fingers, as if fearing that even the small movement to release it might shatter something delicate and precious. "The dream is the difference." There it was. So clear and true and beautiful. He looked at Holmes, and Holmes seemed to be smiling under his gray mustaches. Yes, Holmes had known the dream.

In the sound-proof booths, the announcers had stopped speaking; all mike lines were open to carry Professor Neustadt's words to five hundred million people.

"Perhaps there are no magnitudes of such a dream ... no coordinates. Or it may be that we are not yet wise enough to know them. The future may tell us, for the dream is the rainbow bridge from the present and the past to the future."

Professor Neustadt's eyes were half-closed again, and his head was cocked back bird-like.

"Copernicus dreamed a dream... So did da Vinci, Galileo and Newton, Darwin and Einstein ... all so long ago...

"Cyber IX has not dreamed a dream ... nor have Cyber VIII, VII, VI, V, IV, III, II, I.

"But they can free men to dream.

"Remember that, if you forget all else: They can free men to dream!

"Man's knowledge has grown so vast that much of it would be lost or useless without the storage and recall capacity of the Cybers—and man himself would be so immersed in what he knows that he would never have time to dream of that which he does not yet know, but must and can know.

"Why should not the scientist use the past without being burdened by it? Why should not the lawyer and the judge use the hard-won laws of justice without being the slave of dusty law books?"

Walhfred Anderson accepted the rebuke without wincing. The rebuke for all the hours he had wasted because he had been too stubborn to use a Cyber clerk, or consult Cyber V. The old should not resist the new, nor the new destroy the old. There was the letter of the law, and there was the spirit, and the spirit was the dream. What was old Hammurabi's dream? Holmes had quoted it once. "...to establish justice on the earth ... to hold back the strong from oppressing the feeble ... to shine like the sun-god upon the blackheaded men, and to illumine the land..." Holmes had dreamed the dream, all right. He had dreamed it grandly. But maybe there was room for small dreams, too, and still time for dreams when the years were so few and lonely.

The Professor suddenly opened his eyes, and his voice took on the twang of steel under tension.

"You are already wondering," he told the cameras accusingly, "whether I have not disproved my own words by defeating Cyber IX.

"That is not true.

"I defeated Cyber IX because I have wasted a man's life—my own! You all know that as a child I was a mnemonic freak, a prodigy, if you prefer. My mind was a filing cabinet, a fire-proof cabinet neatly filled with facts that could never kindle into dreams. All my life I have stuffed my filing cabinet. For sixty years I have filed and filed.

"And then I dreamed one dream—my first, last and only dream.

"I dreamed that man would misuse another gift of science, as he had misused so many... I dreamed of the Cybers replacing and enslaving man, instead of freeing man to dream ... And I dreamed that the golden hour would come when a man would have to prove that he could replace a Cyber—and thereby prove that neither man nor Cybers should ever replace each other."

Professor Neustadt turned to Judge Anderson, and his voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"Your Honor, I move that this case be dismissed."

The worn handle of his old teakwood gavel felt warm and alive to the judge's fingers. He sat up straight, and banged resoundingly on the top of his desk.

"Case dismissed."

Then, in full view of the cameras, Walhfred Anderson turned and winked boldly at Oliver Wendell Holmes.

# A PECULIAR PEOPLE

# BETSY CURTIS

(Selected from *The Best Science Fiction Stories 1952* )

In the momentary privacy of the gentlemen's room, Fedrik Spens loosened the neck cord of his heavy white toga and reached for the threadlike platinum chain of his tiny adjuster key. Pulling back the pale plastissue skin from the almost invisible slit at the center of his chest, he inserted the key in the orifice of the olfactory intensificator and gave it two full turns. Three full turns for the food receptacle grinder. These official banquets could be murder. Removing the key, he retied the cord and approached the mirror, as the ambassador had insisted in last minute instructions to the several robots on the embassy staff.

"Normal respiration, human body temperature–" Fedrik could still hear the stentorian tones of the ambassador–"as there may be dancing after dinner. Check appearance carefully with a mirror. Martian security demands Terran ignorance of your mechanical nature!" (As if all of them hadn't lived like humans all their lives. It might be true, as some of the boys said, that the ambassador was subconsciously prejudiced.)

Coming out of the gentlemen's room, Spens found the ceremonial dinner procession already forming. His searching eyes found the little knot of attaches and he hurried to join his dinner partner, a statuesque blonde swathed in an ice-blue tissue tunic, and offered her his arm with appropriate compliments.

The great dinner was well under way when Fedrik, a little weary of small talk about Earth politics and fashions, let his gaze wander down and up the long resplendent table and saw the girl. Her head, demurely inclined to listen attentively to the man on her left, showed hair black and smooth as a Martian dove's wing, drawn softly back to a great Spanish knot. He stared at the gently rounded cheek and chin, proud neck and exquisitely modeled shoulders rising from folds of shiny deep green stuff-shoulders, neck, and face of the color and texture of the brown yornith blossom.,

Trying to seem casual, he asked the blonde who she was, and received the noncommittal reply that she was probably the wife of one of the undersecretaries, who, she stated flatly before returning to the succulent ambaut roatel, were seldom invited to State Department functions.

Attache Spens turned from his uninformative dinner partner to the imposing lady on his left and wondered at the towering mass of white hair piled on her head before he looked at her eyes and asked his question again.

"Who?" she replied. "The girl in bottle-green sataffa? Sitting this side of your Martian Emissary of Finance? Why she's Gordon Lowrie's daughter–the Minister of Terran Agriculture, you know. He's sitting down there between Alice Farwell and Teresita Morgan." The white tower nodded almost imperceptibly down and across the table to Fedrik's left.

Fedrik looked covertly down the table where she gestured and noticed for the first time Gordon Lowrie's ageless face, the keen dark eyes, the smooth skin so dark a brown that the white, close-cropped hair seemed assumed for dramatic contrast. But not so dramatic as the daughter, Spens thought, as he stole a glance at the other end of the table.

He smoothed the magenta ribbon that crossed the glistening white folds on his chest, the ribbon that marked him as an attache of the Martian Embassy, and smiled at the grande dame of the white hair-do. "The men in our department were jealous as anything when they found out I was coming to Earth. You earthwomen certainly outdo any of the rumors that reach us on Mars."

The lady inclined her white tower graciously, pleased. "We do have some pretty girls. But I'm sure," she added deprecatingly, "that half the effect is just seeing them in a different setting."

"No, I hate to say it, but our girls are mostly homely, like me. Attractive as anything, but homely." He grinned as she looked appraisingly at his straight red hair, craggy red brows, hawk nose and wide mouth. "You women all have a delicacy of feature that is a great pleasure to see."

White-tower's nose was tiny, straight, patrician. Spens looked down at his plate. "And the cooking. Is it always this good? I'm beginning to be sorry that I'm slated for only a year here."

"Randole is the treasure of the State Department," she informed him. "Good cooks are probably just as hard to come by here as on Mars. I hope some day you'll have a chance to eat with us at the Transport Hall. My husband, as you know, is Undersecretary Breton of Transport. We think our Ashil Blake as good as Randole, although Randole's ambaut..."

Fedrik stopped listening and began scheming.

Finding his quarry in the throng milling about the great silver ballroom was much easier than he had expected. His dinner partner had been claimed by her mustachioed husband as soon as they left the banquet hall; and as Spens circled the ballroom, he caught sight of Gordon Lowrie's white hair just beyond the shoulder of Bartok Borrl, the Martian finance chief. He joined the group casually, remarking deferentially to Borrl that the Terrans certainly put on a mighty splendid party and that "we'll have to work extra hard to give them a taste of Martian hospitality soon, won't we, sir?"

Borrl's eye searched the crowd for an instant, and it seemed to Fedrik that he performed the introductions with more than his usual enthusiasm. In fact, Fedrik had hardly begun to explain to Gordon Lowrie that he had wanted to meet him than his superior was excusing himself to the smiling girl and disappearing in the melee.

"My father," Fedrik continued, "was a tweedle and bradge farmer south of Jayfield

and I grew up on the farm. He took his agricultural training here on Earth while the irrigation projects in his area were under construction; and I've always had a consuming curiosity about the Earth farms. Dad used to tell me and my brothers stories about cowboys and cattle ranching and miles of tall corn and plains of -wheat rippling in the wind till we dreamt of it nights. We even used to have I roundups' with bands of hoppy little tweedles and then throw them handfuls of bradoe and tell 'em to eat their corn and get fat now."

Anna Lowrie's laugh was a gay arpeggio.

"This part of the country is going to be a disappointment to you. Dad," she turned to Gordon, "has a few acres of choice tobacco and a prize dairy, but no prairies and no cowboys. When he's on the warpath, he insists he's part Indian, but he never gets very wild."

"We have garden corn, too, but it's Dwarf Pearl and we wouldn't think of casting it before swine," added Lowrie's rich baritone.

"Well anyhow, maybe you'll give me the address of a cow so I can tell my brothers, Donnel and Rone, that I've really seen one when I get back," Fedrik requested.

"Anna," said Gordon, "I wonder if this poor, ignorant, earnest, young man..."

"This seeker for wider experience, Father?"

"Exactly! Isn't it our duty to broaden his knowledge as well as to behave toward the stranger in our midst with diplomatic hospitality?"

"Mr. Spens," Anna's smile was infectious, "Daddy would like to invite you to become personally acquainted with one or several of our cows. Klover Korzybski Kreamline Garth would be charmed to know you, though you may prefer Altamont Daybird Fennerhaven, she being the petite Jersey type."

Gordon Lowrie frowned thoughtfully. "Of course, you'll have to meet them at their hours. Early morning, that is. What time do you have to be at the office?"

Fedrik was suddenly aware of his internal food chopper grinding away at speed three. "Oh, not much before eleven," he said as nonchalantly as he could.

"Then you could come right home with us now and visit with their highnesses at crack of day tomorrow and still have plenty of time to get back to stern realities by eleven." Anna was persuasive.

Fedrik could feel something, his little plans jumping up and down in his head. "Oh but..." he gestured toward the great shining floor where couples were turning in the slow ellipses of the xerxia, "I couldn't think of taking you away from here so early. Wouldn't you really like to dance?" He could even sacrifice the pleasure of looking at her for the pleasure of hearing more of her delicate contralto voice.

"Not tonight," she responded at once. "And everybody's used to my leaving early. I'm a government sculptress and my studio opens at eight, not eleven."

"You mean you do busts for halls of fame and bas-reliefs for post offices and things like that?"

"Well ... that's close enough. Anyhow, do come. We practically promised Mother to bring home something or someone from the party, didn't we, Dad?"

"Solemn promise, Annie. You're trapped, Mr. Spens. Trapped by two fiendishly exacting women. We'll meet you up at the copter stage as soon as we can find our robes," and Lowrie took his daughter's hand to leave the room as if there were no more to be said.

Fedrik hurried to the gentlemen's room where he had left his downy black fur robe. Fortunately the room was again empty, and he turned off the empty grinder with considerable relief. Then out and up the ramp to the copter stage.

The thirty-minute copter trip seemed like ten to the young Martian as Anna and Gordon drew out the story of his winters at Jayfield Union School and Donnel's phoenix fair and Rone and Betha's trip to deep space.

At the house, Anna and her father left him to find her mother. Fedrik had only a few moments to look about at the deep, walnut-paneled room and notice the many stringed instruments lying about on tables and the top of the great black piano, the books, looking in the glow of many lamps like jewels, ruby, ultramarine, garnet, in their cases set into the paneling, the sedate smile of an old portrait, and the high, many-arched window. Anna entered almost at once, followed by a wheel chair pushed by Gordon Lowrie, which contained, feather-wool afghan across her knees, a lady in a rose sataffa wrap. Gordon eased the chair down the two broad steps to the lower level and Fedrik approached the chair.

"Mother," Lowrie bent over the chair, "this is Fedrik Spens from the Martian Embassy." He straightened. "Fedrik, this is my wife, Janet Lowrie."

Spens looked down into the sweet dark face. "So very glad, Mrs. Lowrie..."

"My name is Janet." The fine lines of a smile spread to her thin dark cheeks from the corners of clear brown eyes as she held out her hand. Fedrik took it and found the gentle pressure drawing him down to a chair beside her. "I won't ask you for your first impressions of Earth or what you think of Terran Woman." Fedrik grinned. "Gordon tells me that your father was a farmer; and presently we should like to hear about the Martian farm, but first let's have some real Brazilian coffee. Gordon?"

"At once, dear." He went back up the steps and out through the wide doorway.

Anna came to the other side of the chair and took her mother's other hand. "Mother's a sculptress, too, Fedrik, not a chronic invalid. She had a little accident at the studio a few weeks ago, but she's almost through with the wheel chair."

"A dangerous profession?" he asked, grave-faced, looking at the perfect modeling of Anna's head and shoulders.

"Oh no," she answered quickly. "A beaker of ... of ... solution fell and broke on her foot and an infection set in. By the way," her free hand waved about the room, "do you like music, and do you play a viol by any strange chance?"

"I could probably wring a tune out of this one." He rose and crossed to lift a viola d'aubade from the top of the piano. "I was the star," he bowed to the ladies, "of our grade-school orchestra. Though I'm afraid I haven't played a note since."

"Daddy wrote a lovely xerxia for three viols the other day," Anna was setting up stands and handed Janet a tiny violette whose pale patina shone from use. "Let's surprise him with it."

The sweet sonority of the trio greeted Gordon's return. When the piece was finished, he set the tray before Anna and said, "Bravo, Fed. I like that even if I did write it myself. Do you know any of those rousing Martian frontier songs? Out Along the Rim, In Ellberg Town, or Her Six-Ton Boots?"

"Sure, but it's been so long since I held a viol that I don't think I could sing them and accompany at the same time."

Janet laughed. "Well, drink your coffee now and afterwards Anna can fake the harmony on the piano while you roar out those wonderful words."

Despite the cows and Anna's studio, it was one-thirty when Gordon showed Fedrik his room. An evening to remember for its fullness.

Skillfully as usual, Fedrik maneuvered the copter he had rented by the month, for the express purpose of bringing Anna home from the studio, down to the stage on the roof of the George Willis Public School to pick up Bud and Sukie, Anna's young brother and sister.

Bud waved from the crowd of children at the top of the ramp and bounded over to the copter yelling, "Hi Fed, hi Annie," at the top of his seven-year-old lungs. Sukie, six, as tall as Bud, followed more demurely and had to be boosted in, clutching a coloring book in one hand and holding a bright splashy painting on newsprint in the other.

"Hi kids. Home James, huh?" greeted Fedrik.

"Give her fifty gees and slam for the ranch!" hooted Bud from the back seat, while Sukie cuddled down on Anna's lap in the front and began a long "D'ya know what..." description of her school day to her older sister, who sat smiling and listening carefully.

Fed was glad he did not have to make talk as the copter carried them swiftly toward the Lowries'. This was probably the last trip, though the kids didn't know it. Neither

did Anna. Nobody but himself had heard his going-over from the ambassador only an hour before.

"The Lowrie girl, Mr. Spens," the ambassador always came straight to the point with his subordinates in spite of his reputation as an interplanetary diplomat, "you're seeing a great deal of her these days."

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"That's hardly fair, Spens. Not fair to her if she's a tenth as sweet and affectionate as I imagine she is; not fair to us because there's an ever present danger that anyone who knows you too well will find out that we have robots on our staff and draw the obvious conclusion that there are many of your kind on Mars. It's only human nature, you know, to be afraid of machines, and what men fear they fight."

"Yes, sir, but…"

"Interplanetary suspicion isn't likely to be aroused by a girl's being jilted by a young man; but I don't want it to go even that far. Lowrie's an important man to us, you know. We're still importing more than a fifth of our food, thanks to the fact that Earth farmers feel they can trust him. He's got to trust us."

"But sir, Miss Lowrie's not in love with me. It's true of course that I've been going out there to see her, but I want to be with her family, too. It's a family, sir, and they do things together–sing and talk and plan things like ... like a garden ... or a new cow barn ... it's so well ... unlovely. It's more like having a new father and mother. I'm sure they don't suspect anything." He hoped wildly that the ambassador couldn't suspect how much he needed Anna's incredibly friendly self.

The ambassador's face softened for a moment, his eyes looked far out the window. "Fathers and mothers have very sharp eyes, son. You love your Mars family too well to threaten their existence by a war, don't you? If I can't convince you that nobody on earth can hold your secret safely and that you must give up the Lowries, I'll have to ship you back home on the next flight. You'll have to get your music at concerts and your talk at receptions or not at all around here. That's all."

"Yes, sir. But may I take Miss Lowrie home this afternoon? She's expecting me."

"Of course. But make it brief. You can tell them that you've got a new assignment that's going to take a lot of time. Thank them nicely. Remember, we need Lowrie's good will."

Fedrik landed the copter gently in the plot by the house. The children dashed off into the interior and he followed Anna slowly into the paneled Music room as usual. Anna slipped into her favorite chair and he brought her a frosty green glass of minth from the kulpour on a side-table.

Before he could get words in order, Sukie popped into the room around the corner of the door, barefooted in a tattered old red plaid dress. "Look at me quick," she

giggled and danced and bobbed about, then back to the door. "Just wait a minute now. You don't have to shut your eyes." She popped out.

In a moment she was back, resplendent in a ballet frock of spangled net, a star in her ebony curls, shining silveglas slippers on her twinkling feet. Bud followed her in reluctantly, swathed in a long mauve cape which did not entirely hide mauve knee-breeches. Sukie laughed at him gently, trillingly. "Daddy says I'm his queen of the starlings—and Bud and I are playing Cinderella. Do you like me?"

"I couldn't help myself, your majesty," Fedrik dropped gallantly to one knee and held out his hand as the little girl twirled about him.

Anna ran to the piano and added a few bars of the Butterfly Ptude to the fun. Bud grinned condescendingly down at the kneeling Fedrik. Sukie stopped her whirling and laughed at Bud.

"You look so silly for a prince with all those teeth out," she said.

Fedrik got awkwardly to his feet. "Why Sukie, you'll look just as silly in a year or so when yours begin to drop," he observed.

"Oh no I shan't. Mine aren't going to drop," she stated saucily.

Anna got up. Her voice seemed cold. "Susan Lowrie, you know better than to say such things. Tell Bud you're sorry you teased him and then run along and play Cinderella in the nursery."

"I'm sorry, Bud," Sukie was half penitent. She followed him to the door, then turned back to Fedrik defiantly. "Just the same, I'm never going to look silly and my teeth aren't ever going to drop," and she was gone.

"Kids," Fedrik smiled, returning to the sofa, " always so jealous of their dignity."

Anna went back to her chair, stood behind it grasping the back. "Sukie mustn't learn to enjoy teasing Bud," she said quietly. "Everybody has some dignity. Bud's a right guy, but be can get perfectly miserable when he thinks he's not living up to what that little minx expects of him. Sue's got to learn to be fair."

That word fair again. Fed looked about the room and seemed to feel a wrench somewhere in the vicinity of his grinder. He searched his synapses for the thing to say and heard his voice, wistful, "You love children, don't you, Anna?"

Her face went blank. Her eyes stared at him. Her voice was empty. "Yes, Fedrik, I suppose I do." She walked around the tapestried chair and continued toward the steps and the door. "Please excuse me." Her voice seemed faint, confused. When she reached the door she was moving rapidly; and Fed imagined that she was running after she turned into the hall.

He had not had a chance to rise before she was gone; and he leaned forward to put

his head in his hands, an unconscious imitation of Gerel Spens, who had sat like this when he was baffled.

His fingers had barely met at his temples when Janet Lowrie came through the door and down the steps, steadying herself on her husband's arm. Fedrik pulled himself off the sofa and stood up.

Gordon Lowrie assisted Janet to a tall carved chair and sat down on the arm of it. "Sit down, please, Fedrik."

Fedrik sat down.

"What was the matter with Anna, Fed? She came running out of here as if something were after her." Janet's voice was full of deep concern.

"Really, Janet, I don't know. We were talking about Bud and Sukie and suddenly she just said 'excuse me' and went out."

"Can you remember exactly what you said before she went?" asked Lowrie. "I have a particular reason for wanting to know."

"I … I ... well, I guess I said she loved children, didn't she."

"Oh." Janet's dark face was full of pain and she reached for Gordon's hand where it lay on his knee.

Gordon took hers, clasped it. He looked at Fedrik. "I don't want to sound like the stem medieval father, Fedrik Spens, but I want to know if you are in love with Anna."

Here it was. There was no escape from finding words this time. Fed wondered what the ambassador would have said in his place. He tried to sit straight and matter of fact on the sofa, but it was too soft and he seemed to be wriggling deeper into the cushions.

"I'll tell you, Gordon, but it'll have to be in a sort of round-about way."

Gordon Lowrie's white head nodded, but otherwise he sat motionless.

"My father wanted to be an artist–a painter–but Mars needed farmers and his ... his responsibilities combined with what amounted to orders from the government made him come here for training and then move out and start a family in the thick bradge country. When I used to go around with him he was always ... exulting over colors and shadings and forms. He even used to bring home twigs of dry bradge and put them in bowls and sketch them; and when the brown and mauve yornith blossomed in the spring we used to have expeditions to the little valleys to bring home a few for a special celebration. Well, Gordon, Anna is lovely like all the things Dad showed me, and I wanted to make a special celebration for her."

Gordon glanced proudly down at Janet, who smiled up, then both turned back to

Fed.

"And when I got to know her she was such a friendly encouraging sort of person and ... and she had you. I don't know how to put it, but there's something about this house full of things you like to use and the children who don't look at you twice except as a welcome audience and ally ... and ... well ... Anna is my friend. I guess that's not exactly love but there it is." He wondered how anybody could make such a lame speech as that.

Gordon's face was still serious, but he seemed somehow relieved. "It's hard, son, but that's how we hoped it was. Not love yet. Because we're going to have to ask you to see very little of us for a while."

"For the love of..." thought Fed, "they're going to do the breaking off and it's out of my hands." His relief was followed by the thought of the utter absence of Anna. "Of course, if you say so, but I don't understand..."

"We want you to understand," Gordon said kindly, "and we want you to know because you're like one of the family and we don't want you to feel that we've cast you out. But the story of the reason is what all our government offices call a security risk; and once you know it, we could hardly let you go back to Mars." He looked hopefully at the young Martian.

"I'm afraid you'd better not tell me, Gordon," Fedrik replied regretfully, firmly. "The ambassador told me today that I was slated for a special mission back any day. I only came this afternoon to break the news and say goodbye."

"Would you like to stay, Fed?" Janet asked sympathetically. "Even if it meant not coming here for a while ... that is, until Anna's married or living somewhere else?"

A soft, low voice broke in. "What about Anna, Mother? Are you planning to get rid of me?" No one had noticed her come so slowly through the door and down the two shallow carpeted steps.

Fedrik jumped and turned his head. Janet raised a beckoning hand and Anna went to sit on the other arm of her mother's chair. "What about Anna?"

"Wait a bit, dear," said Janet.

Gordon addressed Fedrik again. "I have papers in my study, Fed, that need only my signature to declare you a security risk for Earth and require that you stay here. And we really need men like you. There are a dozen excellent jobs. You can have your pick. And when you understand about us you'll probably find you want to stay and help anyway."

Fedrik sat motionless for a moment, flooded with a thought of gruesome humor ... a security risk to both sides would be ... well ... too great a risk. He could imagine the interminable delicate argument between the ambassador and the President of Earth as to who was to conduct the disassembly, which side have the doubtful privilege of

short-circuiting his synapses.

Gordon seemed to interpret Fedrik's silence as indecision. "There's Earth security, Fedrik, and Mars security; and then there's human security. I guess that really comes first; and that's why we need to tell you and have you understand."

Fed's memory cells flashed him a sudden picture of his father and of Betha, his father's only human child; and a feeling of affection and pity for their weakness, their kindness and their vast lovely dreams seemed mixed with the very metal of his bones. "Human security. Yes."

"So as one human being to another, I must tell you of your duties as a man as well as your privileges."

(His father had explained duty to him and Donnel and Rone so they'd understand about Betha.)

"You see, Susan and Anna here are–are our daughters, but they're not human like Bud. They're what you and Martians would think of as robots. Please don't interrupt me yet," as he saw Fed's mouth open.

"Because of the emigrations to other planets and an inexplicably declining birth rate, we came to depend more and more on intelligent machines in almost all kinds of work. And as we began to depend on them we began to be afraid–afraid of their alienness–afraid that they wouldn't always see things our way–afraid that some day we should have to choose between giving them up entirely, destroying them, or having them give us up entirely as poor, weak, selfish things who didn't deserve to clutter up their earth. We found out that we'd have to make friends of them, sons and daughters as well as bridge partners and copter mechanics ... personalities that had to develop slowly like us, who understood and sympathized with us, no matter how much easier and more interesting and productive physical existence might be for them than for us. They had to love humanness. That's one reason why they look like humans. Both Janet and Anna," he smiled down, "are body sculptors. Janet made Anna almost as truly as if she were her real flesh-and-blood offspring.

"You're probably wondering now where the human security comes into the picture, what you and I are bound to do. Well ... humans are a peculiar people with peculiarly human capabilities. We're bound to be fathers if we can–fathers of human children and mechanical, to grow up together under the most intelligent and loving care we can give them. Robots may be parents of robots here, but it's not the same. That's why you have a great duty that is not to Anna."

Anna added earnestly, "That's why I scolded Sukie, you see, Fed. She mustn't ever make Bud feel inferior–a feeling he might take out on his mechanical children some day. Of course Sukie's teeth won't ever drop out, although she will change her body every year for the next ten or eleven. We have our responsibilities too, in understanding you and in doing well the things we are made so well to do."

Fed traced the pattern in the wine carpet to the wall and back with his eyes as Gordon finished his revelation.

"And last of all comes interplanetary security," Gordon concluded firmly, sadly. "Your young cultures are still expanding and you rely on men still, not machines. As you can all too easily see, Mars would fear, and, when her economy is more self-sustaining, she would fight what she would think of as the alien invasion of Earth. She might try to rescue a few Janets, a few Gordons, from what she would consider the domination of unhuman interests; but most Earth humans as well as our dear foster children would be doomed. Because we humans have learned not to be type-gregarious. There are no associations here whose membership is more than about a quarter human. Janet and I have had two earlier families: this makes four children of our bodies, fifteen children given to us by the government. You must stay with us, Fedrik Spens, because you understand from knowing Anna what we can do here and why it must not be destroyed."

Martian stood up to face Earthman. He spoke deliberately but without feeling. "Settling the interplanetary angle will be even harder than you think ... although I'm glad you told me. I imagine with care we can keep it between a few men at the top and me."

Gordon's dark face took on a shade of gray, not brown. "You don't mean that you're going to tell your ambassador?"

"It may be the best thing to do," was the reply, as Fedrik opened the neck of his conservative dark green toga and exposed the pale skin of his chest. He fumbled for the slit and pulled the edges back to show the adjustor orifices, the silver plate bearing his name and serial number. "I represent more than one security risk."

He retied the neck cord and smiled a little at last. "If I'm not officially disassembled, I might even marry Anna. That is, if she'll have me."

Anna rose and held out her hand, which he grasped as if never to let go.

Gordon began to laugh, convulsively, until he saw that Janet was weeping. He tightened his arm around her shoulders.

"I wouldn't worry about disassembly," he said. "I think your ambassador and I can make plans to write you into the charter at last without having anything to hide. And do you really want to get married?"

Two human-type mechanical faces looked only at each other.

"Then Annie, you bring me home a parentage application form from the studio tomorrow. I'll qualify you as parents first class."

"Anna," Fedrik asked, "will you make all our kids look just like you?"

"Personally, I rather fancy craggy red-haired people."

"'People..." Gordon Lowrie murmured to his wife. There were tenderness and wonder and amusement in the quotation marks with which he enclosed the word.

Janet smiled up at him. "Well?" she asked.

# DOUGHNUT JOCKETY

## ERICK FENNEL

(Selected from *The Best Science Fiction Stories 1953* )

Faintly the unmistakable howl of a driver rocket drifted across the ten-mile-wide safety strip surrounding Mukilteo Spaceport. The new guard heard it, and frowned inquiringly.

Mike Kelly cocked one ear, yanked the lever opening the main gate, then jerked the new man bodily into the low pillbox-like gatehouse. He kicked the heavy door shut.

"That's Doughnut Merrill turning off the highway," he lectured. "If the gate ain't open, he'd as soon drive that hellwagon automobile right through it. He's got a miniature Haskell driver bolted into the back deck of that roadster. Fixed it himself. The cops would throw away the keys if they caught him using it on the roads, so he plays out here like he's flying low. Wild as a coot, that fellow."

"But won't he stop to check in?" The new man took his duties seriously.

Kelly snorted. "He never does. And this morning he has a good excuse, for once."

"What's it all about, anyhow?"

Kelly looked serious. "Must be something bad wrong. Interplanet don't break schedule for fun."

Walter Merrill glanced toward the blast pits as he passed the perimeter fence. The squatty, ludicrous shape of Doughnut II was already on the supports. Fireball lay beside it in the retrieving cradle on which it had been dragged from Puget Sound after its last run, sleek and slender and, to anyone with an engineering brain, breathtakingly beautiful.

The three, tall cranes were in position, their boom tips interlocked to form the stable tripod needed to set a Fireclass ship upright. They always made Merrill think of gawky long-necked geese whispering secrets.

Soon Fireball would be positioned in the hole of Doughnut, ready to go out. The scene was perfectly familiar, but this time it carried a special thrill. Merrill smiled happily. This was his big day.

He cut the jet, tromped brakes, and from sheer exuberance made it a spectacular squealing stop-one that streaked hot rubber across the parking lot beside the

administration building. He felt eager and well disposed toward all mankind as he headed for Jerry Slidell's office.

The operations manager of Interplanet started to jump up, then remembered what long accelerations in the pre-Gravinol days had done to his heart valves, and rose more sedately. He was in his thirties, but his hair was white from radiation leakage, and his face was deeply lined.

"How long to blast-off?" Merrill began. "Tape ready? What's wrong at Mars Colony to need a special hop?"

Slidell eased himself back into his chair.

"A pneumonia carrier—one of those people who have it in their systems without showing any symptoms—must have got through the medical check-up. And you know what high-level meson stuff and Rho shower-effect discharges from the hull plates do to viruses. This mutation is so damnably virulent it stands to wipe out the Colony."

Merrill whistled in dismay.

"Benson and his relief pilot were both coming down with it when they splashed Firefly in last night. But the doctors say this new serum should hold even a mutant virus—if we get it out there in time. We found a supply in Seattle-pure luck—and it's being loaded now to stand acceleration and shock.

"So Fireball goes out light, no load but the serum, no relief pilot even, and it'll be full boost, open throttle, and jets an the way."

"But—"

"I know, I know! She'll get in without enough fuel to come back, and there she sits out of action until the Misreport plant starts producing. It messes up the whole schedule, but there's nothing else to do."

Merrill leaned forward, his hands gripping the edge of Slidell's desk.

"Jerry, I'll set you a speed record that will stand a long time," he declared.

He had a disturbing thought then, but before he could put it into words, the operations manager looked him in the eye. "Walter!" He avoided the nickname he knew Merrill detested. "Just a minute. Don't you think—"

Instantly the smile was gone from Merlin's lean face.

"Again?" he barked.

Slidell sighed. "All right, I promised," he said resignedly. "You can take Fireball if you insist."

"But you want me to–"

"Use your head, Walter. We need all the boost Doughnut will put out. Not bare escape velocity. And you know there hasn't been time to check her properly since you boosted Firestreak out last Thursday. You're the one who–"

"How about Bob Ord?"

"He could, under normal conditions. But this won't be standard pattern. Besides, we haven't been able to find him yet. This would happen between schedules, when everybody's scattered to hell and gone!"

"Now, listen here, Jerry. I don't intend to get pushed–"

"Walter, I'm doing my best. I caught Wraxton vacationing in Los Angeles, and he should be here in a couple hours to see what he can do."

Merrill grimaced. Wraxton of Chesapeake Spaceport was supposed to be a good boosterman, but Doughnut was touchy and Chesapeake used a different control system. The pleasant feeling of a few minutes earlier had evaporated completely.

Slidel's voice was suddenly crisp with authority. "Go get your shots. Thomas will take care of you. We'll settle later who takes what."

Merrill didn't argue, but if the door panel had been glass instead of plastic, it would have shattered as he slammed it. As he stomped toward the locker-room he had a rebellious suspicion that he was being had–again.

Haskell-Jenkins nuclear shift drivers had taken spaceflight out of the over-Niagara-in-a-barrel category, but they had the intrinsic drawback of critical mass limitation. Too much fuel, and a ship exploded spontaneously. Enough to stay under the e.c.m. and it could reach Mars–but on the return voyage it would run out of fuel before completing deceleration, and hit Earth's atmosphere fast enough to burn itself to powder.

The intricate equipment necessary made step-rockets, in which sections were jettisoned in space, fantastically uneconomical. So the great brains of Interplanet had conceived the Doughnut to boost its ships through the power-hogging lift from Earth.

Walter Merrill had been picked off the Luna experimental work for his uncanny power sense and delicate kinesthetic perceptions, for no auto-control had been devised capable of coping with all the variables of blast-off. He had become Interplanet's first and only boosterman.

In many ways it was a dream job. One boost-out a month, with the rest of the time almost entirely his own. A salary rating of Senior Pilot "A," which easily financed such impractical hobbies as putting jets on an automobile, as well as a house and sailboat and all the trimmings. A sense of importance, too, for the fate of each

spaceship was in the hands of the boosterman during the most critical interval.

But dissatisfaction had set in. Boosting lacked the glamour of deep space. The line pilots and their relief men talked endlessly of the strange floating landings through the low .38 gravity of Mars, and of the remains of a vanished civilization there, and of the Colony that was beginning to grow at Marsport–and all be could do was keep his mouth shut.

He was a glorified elevator operator, missing out on the high adventure that lay out there, never getting much beyond Luna's orbit, and ending each flight with a hissing drop into Puget Sound beside the Mukilteo beacon, while his friends one after another had been given command of fullfledged space vessels.

Recently even men he had been forced to downcheck as potential boostermen had been taking ships through to the Colony. Here he was, stuck in a rut, and every time he had been promised a line run, something had gone sour!

He stripped and put on the buttonless one-piece knit garment he would wear beneath his circulation suit, then kicked his feet savagely into a pair of slippers and shuffled down the hall to the medical department. In the empty treatment room he stuck two fingers into his mouth and whistled shrilly.

Bubsy Thomas emerged from the dispensary. She had auburn hair and green eyes; and her white stockings and starched nurse's uniform could not hide the fact she carried deluxe equipment throughout; but for once he was too disturbed to open the conversation with his customary suggestion of matrimony.

"Limit dose," he told her. "And Neogravinol too. This hop will get rough."

She looked at him questioningly. The boosterman ordinarily did not need the more prolonged action of Neogravinol in addition to the regular Gravinol shot.

"You had breakfast before the office caught you," she accused.

"Coffee and toast," he hedged.

"And three eggs and a pound of bacon. I've seen you eat. Now get your teeth out."

"Aw, honey!" he protested.

Impatiently she tapped a toe against the waxed flooring.

His front uppers had been removable ever since one of the Luna experimentals had set in with a smash that broke his shock chair straps, but still he felt there was something comical and faintly disreputable about wearing falsies. Too much like those females who wore padding to remedy natural deficiencies–which Bubsy definitely did not.

Grimly she watched him, and finally he took them out.

She measured a brownish liquid into a small glass while he cursed the medical records for telling her about his teeth. They hardly helped make him a romantic figure.

"The basin is over there," she directed. "Now drink this."

Two minutes later he had no further worries about gravity cramps from a full stomach. It was full no longer.

"Sometime you'll blast with that bridgework in, and get it knocked down your throat," she warned as she had often before.

"A lot you'd care," he growled, still retching.

"But I would," she declared sweetly. "You might wreck a ship."

Before he could think of a suitable rejoinder, she had the hypos ready.

I shot your left arm last time," she remembered, and he rolled back his right sleeve.

Deftly she found the vein and pressed the plunger. Then, changing syringes, she began to inject the Neogravinol.

"If you take–sit still, dam it–who'll handle–"

His skin was prickling and itching, and a distinct rainbow aura was forming around every object in the room as drugs took effect.

"Ord, maybe. Or Wraxton from Chesapeake. But I'm taking Fireball."

For a moment her hands were unsteady.

"And why not?" he asked sharply. "I can straighten out any trajectory error they hand me."

If it's not too bad," she corrected. "But what about Mars Colony if Fireball gets a sour boost and has to abort?"

Merrill didn't want to think about that. "But I don't intend to keep on–"

Jerry Slidell banged through the door. His face was streaky pale from moving too violently, but his tongue was unimpaired.

"Wraxton was flying his own plane up," he told them at last with forced calmness. "At Medford some lard-headed student cut in on him during landing. He's got a fractured leg and concussion. Now what the hell?"

"Call Ord," Merrill snapped. He was in the depressive-irritant phase that followed a Gravinol injection. He started to get up, but the nurse pushed him back. He had to take it easy until the shots "settled in."

Slidell glared. "Been trying, and still am. You think I got holes in my head?"

"Yes, if you think I'm going to–" Merrill growled sullenly.

"Shut up, both of you!" Bubsy interrupted. "Barking at each other won't help."

Slidell's shoulders slumped, and his manner was almost pleading.

"You'll stay on call, Walter?"

"Yeah. I'll be around until you get me a boosterman."

A circulation suit was too heavy to put on until the last minute, so he had nothing to do but wait. It should have been pleasant, but the nurse ignored him while she cleaned up and put the hypodermics in the sterilizer. The few glances which she did cast his way were troubled, almost angry.

He used her phone to get preliminary flight data from Calculations. Then he fidgeted.

"What's the idea of giving me the busy signal so much lately?" he asked at length. "You sore at me? Or is it that Fred Morgan off Firesprite?"

The girl turned quickly, as though she had been waiting for that question.

"I've been afraid."

"Huh?"

"Not of you. Of myself. Afraid moonlight and biochemistry would gang up on me."

"And that would be wrong, because I'm a boosterman instead of a line pilot?" he demanded belligerently.

Her eyes misted unexpectedly. "You and I both know there's something real under all our kidding. But Walter, I want a husband who's emotionally mature, who understands responsibilities and accepts them instead of acting like a brat in a temper tantrum."

Merrill frowned.

Jerry Slidell's voice interrupted, rattling abruptly through the inter-office call-box. "We've found Bob Ord. Get ready to give him his shots."

Instantly the nurse thrust personal matters aside.

Merrill felt better. Slidell wasn't giving him the runaround after all. But now he had a different worry.

He had let Bob handle a few splits, those critical moments when Doughnut and boosted spaceship parted company; and although Bob looked more promising than any of the other men sent to him for training, he hadn't yet quite got the feel. This

was going to be a tough boost; and it had to be good—or else. He only hoped Bob could hold the trajectory skew below the limit that meant aborting the flight.

Slidell's voice came again, tinny through the speaker. "Walter, better get your suit on."

Automatically Merrill answered. "On my way!" He turned to the nurse as the connection snapped off. "How'd he know I was here?" he demanded. She smiled, half tenderly and half teasingly. "Everyone around here knows how long and painted and gray-furred your ears are. And since that front-office blonde—"

"She did not!" he retorted indignantly. "And I never made a pass at her, anyhow."

"Okay. So you didn't, and she didn't." Bubsy pulled that infuriating feminine trick of refusing to argue.

There were eighteen zippers and twenty-seven adjustment straps on the suit, and he checked each one personally while the two dressers made the suit-to-boots, suit-to-gloves, suit-to-helmet and helmet-to-face-mask hook-ups. Then he lumbered stiffly across the room and plugged in to the test modulator.

The over-all inflation went on, squeezing his body equally from all directions. He jiggled the manual control—in flight the pressure would compensate automatically with acceleration—and it responded perfectly.

He cut in the sectional controls, and felt the familiar yet eerie rippling sensations as a multitude of tiny compartments in the suit began rhythmic fluctuations in response to his body's needs as reported by built-in blood pressure and pulse and respiration meters. The suit's action had been patterned after the peristaltic movements of a digestive system, using the same idea of progressive, serially applied pressures, and his fingertips and toes tingled as the blood was hurried along.

In tree-dwelling days the human race had developed a reflex response to short-duration, one-G falls. Veins and arteries constricted; blood pressure shot up; and major changes took place in the action of the heart valves. This automatic reaction had minimized the injuries of many a falling man, and it was still right for its original purpose.

But under the hours-long, multi-G strains of space-light, it became a peril instead of a protection, putting strains on the body that meant permanent damage. Gravinol short-circuited the reflex, but if used alone under heavy acceleration, it would bring blood circulation—and the pilot's life-to a dead stop. The answer, worked out at heavy cost in lives and health, was Gravinol plus a circulation suit.

The suit felt right, almost as though it were alive and part of his body. He nodded okay, unplugged, then loosened his face-mask for comfort. Then he turned heavily at a sound behind him.

"Hiya, Bob," said Merrill friendly enough. This finagling wasn't Ord's fault.

Ord squinted. He was having difficulty focusing his eyes.

"Neo?" Merrill asked.

"Yeah. I still itch."

Merrill's lips tightened. Neogravinol for Ord meant that Slidell was still scheming.

"What'd Jerry tell you?" he demanded challengingly.

"Nothing. Said get the dope from you."

Merrill made a face. That smelled like an attempt to appeal to his "better nature." Nuts to that!

He was just a bit sick with disappointment. All the while he had handled the Doughnuts, he had dreamed of his first real command, dreamed the day of his first deep space blastoff up into quite an event. Now those dreams had gone bust, and he felt sour and blue, cheated of the exhilaration he had anticipated.

Slidell's voice buzzed through the speaker. "You pilots hurry up! We don't want to recalculate."

Merrill was on his feet at once, anxious to give Slidell a hot earful and then climb into Fireball. After this flight, he'd see about a job with Chesapeake on the Venus run.

The pick-up car was waiting, the driver goosing his engine, and as Merrill climbed aboard, the operations manager thrust both autocontrol tapes into his gloved hands. There was no question which was which, for Doughnut's tape was much wider than Fireball's. Still, no tape could handle all the unpredictable variables. That was what made a pilot. Merrill skimmed the visual sheets and trajectory graphs, while Ord peered over his shoulder.

"What's the orders?" he asked truculently.

"Get it out hot and in line," Slidell said.

"But–"

"You know the situation and what's needed. I wash my hands of it." Slidell sounded thoroughly disgusted.

"But–"

Bubsy leaned across the car door and kissed him. "That's for luck," she whispered.

Then she drew back. "Don't forget your teeth," she said aloud.

"Listen here, Jerry," Merrill began, ignoring the girl for more important matters.

Slidell jerked a thumb at the driver, and in a second the car was streaking toward the

blast pit.

"Damn him!" Merrill growled, handing Doughnut's graph sheets to his companion.

Ord whistled, then looked pained.

"You don't have to rub it in," he said, still irritable from his shots.

"Huh?" Merril's eyes widened. Bob had nothing to gripe about. Either way, this day's work would get him a Senior Pilot rating, and Interplanet never downgraded a man without very good cause.

Damn! This break would have to come now, on an off-standard boost and before I was ready for it!" the junior pilot said bitterly.

"You mean you actually want–" Merrill demanded incredulously.

"Why the hell do you think I requested tryout assignment on Doughnut?" Ord snapped.

Merrill took that idea for what it was worth.

"Well, okay. If you think you can boost me anywhere near trajectory, I'll take Fireball. Be glad to."

Ord looked grateful but uncertain as the car began to slow, and Merrill wasn't entirely happy either...

Doughnut's jets were humming and the snoring rumble of Fireball's five big nozzles reverberated deep in the pit. The heat of the idling drivers sent a stinging breeze against Merrill's uncovered face.

Doughnut was nothing but a huge power ring fitting snugly around the middle of Fireball, designed to feed a maximum of fuel through her drivers in a minimum time. Her range was short, but she had a theoretical acceleration, minus ship, of better than forty gravities-which Merrill had never been so suicidal as to test.

Her thirty-six jets were fixed-mounted four degrees radially outward to save the aft half of the boosted ship from blast effect, and three of them were movable plus or minus one degree annularly for rotation correction. There were no vane deflectors, no full-swing jets, no heavy axial stabilizing gyros, no extras whatsoever; and control was accomplished entirely with the fractional throttles. Even turnovers were made without sidethrust or braking rockets, and with the inherently unstable ring design of Doughnut, that took handling. She was an ugly and ungraceful machine, strictly functional, a tug rather than a ship; and with her tremendous power she could easily break the neck of any pilot who made a single wrong move.

The pick-up car stopped beside the ground trap, and within seconds the two warm-up mechanics emerged from the tunnel.

"Fireballs ready. Everything's normal," one reported.

The other acted uneasy. "Two, five and eleven–" he began.

"Tell Bob too," Merrill interrupted.

"Two, five and eleven overheating, eleven the worst. Seventeen running incomplete shift as far as I dared try her, but may clear at full throttle. Thirty-two still sputtering as if the nozzle field is out of phase."

He turned back to Merrill. "That's the one you reported, sir. We were going to yank the tube, but didn't get time."

"It adds up how?" Merrill demanded.

"She'll be hell to balance."

"But she'll lift?"

"Yes. The dynes come up."

Merril's face hardened. "Then we don't cancel. Well, Bob?"

Ord's face was pale. "That ties the ribbons on it," he said slowly. "Guess I'm plain scared. You're senior man; you call it."

But Merrill knew it was the thought of what a sour lift here would mean on Mars, rather than the chances of a crash, that had Bob Ord frightened. He sighed, feeling as harried as Jerry Slidell usually looked, but admiring Ord's honesty.

"Here's your tape, Bob," he said. "Luck!"

Together they ducked into the tunnel leading to the ships. The mechanics tugged the counterweighted trapdoor shut behind them, and ran for the car.

Around the spaceport perimeter the sirens shrieked their warning to take cover or take the consequences.

Merrill crowded clumsily into the pilot chair, plugged in his suit, cinched the safety straps, tightened his face-mask, then cursed petulantly as he had to loosen it again to remove his bridgework. He slipped the tape into the robot, threaded the end through the drive sprockets, clipped the visual sheets into the holder where they'd be in sight for reference. He swung his chair back until he lay supine with reference to blast axis, for sitting up during initial acceleration was how pilots got ruptured intervertebral cartilage disks and pinched spinal cords. The control panel on which everything was crowded within fingertip-reach swung with him.

"Ready?" he asked. The hull-to-hull contact phone carried his words.

"Set."

He cut in the master intercontrol, and after a momentary pause to run through his mental checklists he thumbed the Big Red Button. Relays cracked, and the tape hooked in the timers. They were on the roller coaster now—unless they canceled immediately.

He heard a faint click as the external feed lines that had been replacing the fuel burned during warm-up disconnected and retracted.

"Last chance," Merrill announced quickly.

"Clear to lift," the answer came back.

Slidell pulled the cobalt glass screen down across the slanting blast-proof window of his office. Conversation was impossible through the uproar of the sirens, so he glanced at the chronometer, he tapped the nurse's shoulder and held up five fingers.

Involuntarily she winced. Then even through the heavy purple shield the glare filled the room with blistering radiance. Around the pit a flattened sphere of flame more deadly than the heat of any blast furnace ballooned and burst. A shrieking cyclone of superheated gas bombarded the low, solid building with dust and gravel.

A few seconds later a second sun was rapidly fading overhead. The din of the sirens lowered and died.

"Was it—" she asked.

"It was very, very smooth—so far."

"But was it—"

Slidell shrugged. He raised the shield and stared unseeingly at the thermal dust-devils still dancing over the field.

"But which one?" she insisted.

Slidell turned impatiently. "Don't you think I want to know too?"

"Sorry, boss."

"Mr. Slidell? Radar Plot?"' the intercom rasped suddenly.

Jerry gripped the speaker box as though to squeeze information from it. Haskell-Jenkins interference made direct radio contact impossible even on microwave, but three radar eyes were following the Doughnut-Fireball combination while a mechanical brain compared their findings with the theoretical flight path.

"How bad?" he demanded.

"Not too much deflection, sir, but a nasty gyration on the longitudinal axis."

"Power output?"

"Full."

Slidell exhaled gently. At least, the flight wasn't aborting–yet.

"Keep me posted," he ordered unnecessarily.

He slumped behind his desk, and from the workings of his face muscles the nurse knew that in spirit he was riding a control chair again, his body heavy under the acceleration stresses, watching the spots of light on the meter faces swing, and punching studs to steady them.

After a few minutes he snapped out of it and used his dictating machine to record a pungent memorandum on changes in medical procedure to prevent other virus carriers from getting aboard any spaceship.

Radar reports during the next hours were poor but maddeningly inconclusive. It was impossible to tell from them whether Doughnut was running well and being erratically piloted, or whether someone was really hand-riding a set of surging, unsteady jets. The data grew steadily less intelligible as the Earth turned, and the probing beams pierced the atmosphere at an increasingly oblique angle.

Finally the intercom spoke again. "Below horizon. Contact broken."

Honolulu would take over the tracking, and then Guam.

The nurse returned to the spaceport after a night of dream-haunted naps and headed directly for Slidell's office. He was already there, and the drawn, gray look on his face made it obvious he had slept no better than she. The current flight graphs were strewn across his desk.

He shoved the power output chart toward her. It was full of irregular sawtoothed peaks and valleys, and although she was not an engineer, she knew they signified jet malfunction. But Slidell was smiling faintly.

"They're still pretty close to plotted trajectory," he told her. "We'll know soon now."

The radiophone buzzed, and as Slidell snatched the handset, Bubsy leaned over to eavesdrop shamelessly.

"Guam? Reduced power on which unit?'

He listened a moment. "Damn your foul driver emission meters! Why don't you get something sensitive?"

The radio sputtered indignantly.

"Okay, okay. Yes. I'll see the directors about an appropriation to develop one," he promised, and broke contact.

"They've split, but whether it's line-out or back-out we can't be certain until

Doughnut and Fireball are far enough apart to read their power impulses separately," he explained.

They waited what seemed like ages before Guam called again, and then Slidell picked up the phone as though it might bite.

"Continuing steady full? Good! Other on intermittent low bursts? Thanks!"

That was Merrill's trademark, the signature of a smooth pilot, rocking Doughnut into turnover with minimum throttle settings to save his body and ship from the jarring shocks of suddenly applied power.

Bubsy knew it as well as Slidell did, for more than once Walter had diagrammed it for her on restaurant tablecloths. She grinned, and the operations manager grinned back. Then, suddenly and irrationally, she wanted to cry. She knew the intensity of Merrill's desires, but with a mutant virus loose in Mars Colony, the surest way had been the only decent way. Bob Ord might have flown a successful fullpower boost, but then−

Slidell looked years younger as he switched his interphone into the public address system.

"All hands! Fireball is lined out!" he announced. 'Hot, straight and normal!"

For a minute he leaned back and relaxed, then spoke.

"Sit down, Miss Thomas."

She jerked around, startled by the unaccustomed formality, then saw the twinkle in his eyes.

"Are you a sufficiently loyal employee to enter into a private conspiracy for the good of the company?" he asked seriously.

"Just what are you talking about?" she demanded.

"This is off the record yet, but I'm slated to get myself heavily doped and ride deadhead to Marsport for some special development work. The new operations manager here–I just picked him–has guts enough so once he's stuck with this job, he'll hang tight and ride it.

"But he's going to beef and yank and kick at the traces-unless someone helps keep him contented."

Bubsy understood, and smiled as she nodded.

"But it's just for dear, old Interplanet, you understand." Slidell raised one eyebrow quizzically but said nothing. "Oh. you go to the devil!" she blurted, and blushed for the first time since her high-school days.

The yellow car actually paused at the gate. "Checking out."

"Okay, Mr. Merrill, Miss Thomas."

It was one of those crystal nights that come occasionally to foggy Puget Sound, moonless and with a sky full of stars. South of the zenith, the faint pink dot of Mars twinkled invitingly.

Merrill sighed. "That scheming fox! Eighteen months before I get another chance, but I'll get there yet–if Van Zwaluvenberg's new emission meters and Doughnut III plans don't land me in the nuthatch first."

The girl let one hand slide along his arm. This was no night for talking shop.

"But they should have some decent transient facilities ready by then, as well as the fuel plant," he continued. "Might even be a good spot for a honeymoon."

"Eighteen months? Second honeymoon," she corrected firmly.

# THE LANSON SCREEN

# ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

**(Selected from *The Best of Science Fiction,* 1946)**

## CHAPTER 1

Harry Osborn, First Lieutenant U. S. Army Air Corps, banked his wide-winged bombing plane in an easy, swooping curve. In the distance New York's white pinnacles caught the sun above a blue-gray billowing of twilight ground-haze. A faint smile lifted the corners of his lips as he glanced overside, saw a train crawl along shining rails and come to a halt. Brown dots appeared from the passenger car behind its locomotive and clustered in ordered confusion about the other oblong that completed the train's complement.

What appeared from his altitude to be a rather large pocket-handkerchief slid from the car and spread out on the grass. A metal tube glittered in the sun, came into motion, swivelling to the east. It looked like a cap-pistol, but Osborn knew it to be an eighteen-inch railroad gun.

He slanted down through lambent air. The terrain below was flat, lushly green. It was entirely vacant save at the very center of its five-mile sweep of marsh. Here a small hut was visible in the middle of a hundred-yard area ringed by a water-filled moat.

Two manikins stood before the structure. One was clothed in o.d., the other in black. The civilian's tiny arms gesticulated, and he went into the house. The army man moved sharply into an automobile and sped in the direction of the waiting artillery train.

"Five minutes to zero, Harry." The voice of Jim Raynes, his observer, sounded in the pilot's earphones, "What's the dope?"

"Target practice, Jim. We're to spot for the railroad gun and then we're to bomb. The target is–Good Lord!"

The plane wabbled with Osborn's sudden jerk on its stick, steadied. "Harry!" Raynes exclaimed. "What is it, Harry?"

"The target's that house down there. There's a man inside it. I saw him go in."

"The hell! What's the big idea?"

"Search me. There's no mistake though. Orders say 'absolute secrecy is to be maintained by all participants in this maneuver as to anything they may observe...'"

"Maybe it's an execution. Something special. Maybe–"

"...and this order is to be obeyed to the letter no matter what the apparent consequences," Osborn finished. "General Darius Thompson signed it personally, not 'by direction.' Tie that, will you?"

"I can't. But–it's orders."

Osborn levelled out, got his eyes focussed on the astounding target.

Suddenly there was nothing within the watery circle. Not blackness, or a deep hole, or anything similarly startling but understandable. It was as if a blind spot had suddenly developed in his own visual organs so that he could not see what there was at that particular point, although the wide green expanse of the swampy plain was elsewhere clear and distinct.

A key scraped in the door of a third-floor flat on Amsterdam Avenue. Junior's two-year-old legs betrayed him and he sprawled headlong on the threadbare rug in the little foyer.

John Sims bent to his first-born, tossed him into the air, caught him and chuckled at the chubby, dirt-grimed face. He'd been tired as the devil a moment before. But now–

June Sims was flushed from the heat of the kitchen range, but her black hair was neat and a crisply ironed housedress outlined her young slim figure. Junior was a warm bundle against her breasts as she kissed John.

"You're early, dear. I'm glad."

"Me too. What's for supper?"

"Pot roast." June's hazel eyes danced. "Johnny, mother phoned. She's going to come over tomorrow night to take care of Junior so that we can go out and celebrate your birthday."

"That's right! Tomorrow is May ninth!"

"Yes. Listen, I have it all planned. 'Alone With Love' is playing at the Audubon. We'll see that, and then splurge with chow mein. I've saved two dollars out of the house money just for that."

"You have! Maybe you'd better get yourself a bat. I saw an ad–"

"Nothing doing. We're going to celebrate! You go downtown." And so on, and on...

"They're starting, Harry."

Raynes' businesslike crispness somewhat eased Lieutenant Osborn's feeling that something uncanny was happening down there and his hand was steady as be jerked the stick to cope with the bump of the big gun's discharge. A dirt mushroom sprouted in the field.

"Short, two-tenths. Right, four point three," Jim intoned, correcting the range.

A white panel on the ground acknowledged his message. The cannon fired again and slid back in the oil-checked motion of its recoil.

"Over a tenth. Center."

The target was bracketed, the next try must be a hit. Harry banked, levelled out. The brown dots that were the gunners jerked about feverishly, reloading. Whatever it was that obscured his vision of the shack would be smashed in a moment now.

The gunners were clear. The pilot saw an officer's arm. drop in signal to fire. Yellow light flickered from the big rifle. Osborn imagined he saw the projectile arc just under his plane. His eye flicked to where that house should be.

And nothing happened! No geyser of dirt to show a miss, no dispersal of that annoying blind spot. Had the gun misfired?

Wait? What was that black thing gliding in mid-air, sliding slowly, then more rapidly toward the ground? The shell that could pierce ten inches of armor was incredibly falling along what seemed the surface of an invisible hemisphere.

It reached the grass and exploded with the contact. The earth it threw up spattered against–nothing. Why hadn't the shell exploded on contact with whatever had stopped it? What was going on down there?

"I–I can't make a report, sir." There was a quiver in Jim's phlegmatic voice. Even his aplomb had now been pierced. "I think it would have been a hit, but–"

Again and again the great gun fired. Osborn and Raynes, got the signal to go ahead, dropped five three-hundred-pound bombs point-blank on the mysterious nothingness. The area around the circular canal was pitted. excavated, scarred as No Man's Land had never been.

Aviation Lieutenant Harry Osborn flew back to Mitchell Field in the gathering dusk. His young head was full of dizzy visions. Armies, cities, a whole nation blanketed from attack by invisibility. Spheres of nothingness driving deep into enemy territory, impregnable.

It was good to be alive, and in the old uniform, on this eighth day of May in 1937.

## CHAPTER 2

In the tea room of the Ritz-Plaza, the violins of Ben Donnie's orchestra sobbed to the end of a melodic waltz. Anita Harrison-Smith fingered a tiny liqueur glass nervously.

"I'm afraid, Ted. What if he suspects, and–"

The long-fingered hand of the man whose black eyes burned so into hers fisted on the cloth.

"Afraid. That has been always the trouble with you, Nita. You have always been afraid to grasp happiness. Well, I can't make you do it. But I've told you that I'm sick of this hole-and-corner business. If you don't come with me tomorrow, as we have planned, I go alone. You will never see me again."

The woman's face went white and she gasped.

"No! I couldn't bear that. I'll come, Ted. I'll come."

Van Norden's sharp, dark features were expressionless, but there was faint triumph in the sly purr of his voice.

"Have you got it straight? The Marechal Fock sails at midnight tomorrow from Pier 57, foot of West Fifteenth Street. You must get away from the Gellert dance not later than eleven-thirty. I'll meet you at the pier, but if there is a slip-up remember that your name is Sloane. Anita Sloane. I have everything ready, stateroom, passports, trunks packed with everything you can possibly need. You have nothing to do but get there. Whether you do or not I'll sail. And never come back."

"I'll be there," she breathed.

"Good girl. Tomorrow is the ninth. By the nineteenth we will be in Venice."

General Darius Thompson stood at the side of his olive-green Cadillac and looked at his watch. The bombing plane was a vanishing sky-speck just above the horizon, the railroad-gun had chugged back toward its base. He was alone under the loom of that sphere of nothingness against which the army's most powerful weapons had battered in sheer futility. It existed. It was real. Unbelievably.

A man was in the doorway of the flimsy but that had been the target of the shells. Quarter-inch lenses made his bulging eyes huge; his highdomed head was hairless and putty-colored; his body was obscenely fat. Professor Henry Lanson gave one

the impression that he was somehow less than human, that he was a slug uncovered beneath an overturned rock. But his accession to the Columbia University faculty had been front-page news and the signal for much academic gloating.

"Well?" From gross lips the word plopped into the warm air like a clod into mud. "What do you think now, my dear General? Against my Screen your biggest shells were as puffballs. Yes? Your most gigantic bombs as thistledown. You thought me utterly insane when I insisted on remaining within." The scientist grinned, humorlessly. "What do you think now?"

Thompson shook his grizzled head, as if to rid it of a nightmare. "You took an awful chance. Suppose it had cracked."

"Cracked! In the name of Planck cannot you understand that the Lanson Screen is not matter that can crack?" The other spread veined, pudgy hands. "It is the negation of all energy, a dimensionless shell through which energy cannot penetrate. And since matter is a form of energy–" The physicist checked himself, shrugged. "But what's the use? I cannot expect you to understand. Besides myself there are perhaps a dozen in the world who could comprehend, and none is an American. Enough for you to know that I had to be inside to operate the B machine that cut the negative force the A apparatus set up. From outside it could not be done. The Screen would have remained forever and you would not be convinced there had been no effect of your bombardment within it."

"Could you not have managed some remote control device, some way of working your B machine from outside?"

"Lord, but you military men are stupid!" the physicist burst out exasperatedly. "Don't you understand yet that once the Lanson Screen is erected all within is, as absolutely cut off from the rest of the universe as if it were a different space, a different dimension? Nothing can penetrate within–electricity, wireless, the cosmic rays, the sun's radiations. Nothing!"

"Then if a city were covered by it, as you suggest, there would be no means of communication with the outside?"

"That is correct."

"If knowledge of this were universal there could be no more war." Thompson's gray eyes lifted and met the other's. A momentary silence intervened while a message flashed between these two so diverse characters. Then the general went on. "But if it were the exclusive property of a single nation that nation could become master of the world."

Lanson nodded. His voice betrayed knowledge of the rapprochement established in that single, long glance. "If I published my results I should gain very little from it. But if I sell it to one power it is worth almost anything I choose to demand. That is why I have worked at it alone. That is why I have never set the details down on paper, to

be stolen. After I have sold the invention to you secrecy will be your concern, but till you meet my terms all knowledge of how I produce the effect remains here in my brain." Lanson tapped his clifflike brow. "Here and nowhere else."

"After we purchase it you might still sell your device to others."

"With a million dollars in hand I shall have no temptation to do so. No one could want, or use, more. That is one reason why you should be willing to recommend its payment."

The general shrugged. "I can get it for you when I am convinced that you can veil an entire city as you did this one small house. It seems to me impossible, or so tremendous a task, requiring such huge installations, such .vast power, that it would be forbiddingly costly."

The physicist's grating, short laugh was contemptuous. "I'll shield New York for you with the same machine I used here, with the same power storage batteries not larger than those in your car. Their energy is needed ,for only an instant, to start the complex functioning of forces whose result you have just witnessed. I'll erect a screen for you about Manhattan Island, an ellipsoid as high and as deep as the least axis of the enclosing rivers. Will that satisfy you?"

"If you can do it, and I cannot blast through, it will. When can you -get ready?"

"As soon as I can move my machines to the required location, and set them up. Tomorrow night, if you wish."

"Very well. What help do you require?

"Only an army truck to convey my apparatus, and, since I will use the rivers as a delimiting guide for the screen, a place near the water to set it up."

The general was eager now, eager as the other. "I'll order a truck out here at once. And there is an army pier at West One Hundred and Thirtieth Street that you can use. I'll see that it is made ready for you."

# CHAPTER 3

Midnight of May eighth, 1937. An army truck noses into the Holland Tunnel. On its flat bed are two tarpaulin-covered bulks, machinery of some sort. Its driver is crowded against his wheel by the rotund form of a blackclad civilian whose chins hang in great folds on his stained shirt and whose bulging eyes glow with a strange excitement behind thick lenses. The truck comes out on Hudson Street and turns north.

Tenth Avenue is alive as puffing trains bring the city's food for tomorrow. A herd of bewildered cattle file into an abattoir. West End Avenue's apartment houses are asleep. Under the Riverside Viaduct a milk plant is alight and white tank trucks rumble under its long canopy. At One Hundred and Twenty-ninth Street the army

van waits for a mile-long refrigerator car, loaded with fruit from California, to clear the tracks it must cross. The way is cleared. The truck thunders across cobbles and steel, vanishes within the dark maw of a silent pier.

Two blocks eastward a lighted subway train crawls out on its trestle for a breath of air, pauses fleetingly, dives underground again like a monstrous serpent seeking its burrow. Above the southward course of that burrow midtown Broadway is a streak of vari-colored illumination, exploding into frantic coruscation and raucous clamor at Forty-seventh Street. Crowds surge on sidewalks, in shrieking cabs, private cars; pleasure seekers with grim, intent faces rushing to grills, night clubs; rushing home, rushing as if life must end before they can snatch enough of it from greedy Time. Blare of the latest swing tune sets the rhythm for them from a loud-speaker over the garish entrance of a so-called music store.

Time writes its endless tale in letters of fire drifting along a mourning band around Time's own tower.

MARKET CLOSES STRONG TWO POINTS UP PRESIDENT ANNOUNCES RECOVERY ACCOMPLISHED CHAMPION CONFIDENT OF VICTORY FRIDAY HITLER DEFIES LEAGUE POLICE WILL SMASH DOCK RACKET SAYS VALENTINE GIANTS WIN....

There is no Mene, Mene, Tekel Upharsin written on that slender wall for sonte prophet to read.

Felix Hammond knots the gold sash rope of his black silk dressing gown. His satin slippers make no sound as they cross the thick pile of the glowing Kermanshah on the floor of his study to a darkly brooding Italian Renaissance secretary. He fumbles in the drawer for a silent moment, pulls out a book whose tooled-leather cover should be in some museum. He sits down, opens the book.

Minuscular, neat writing fills page after page. Hammond reads an entry. Something that might be a smile flits across his ascetic countenance. His bloodless lips wince at another item. He riffles the sheets rapidly to the first blank space, reaches for a fountain pen and starts writing.

May 8: Wednesday. Another day gone. I confess I do not know why I continue this diary, except, it may be, that it serves as a reminder of the utter futility of life. There are, however, certain scarlet pages, and lavender ones also, that still have the power to titillate emotions I thought long atrophied. I wonder if anyone save I will ever read them.

Aloysia opened in her new show tonight. I have just come from the theatre. She wanted me to join the supper Stahlbaum is giving the company, but I declined with thanks—thanks that I was in a position to decline. Time was that I should have leaped at the invitation, but I no longer need to share her with others. Her part suits her—Norton has given her fully two-thirds of the lines and she trails languid sensuality across the stage to her heart's content. I noticed that she used that trick with the

mouth she first developed for my benefit. It was lost on the rabble...

# CHAPTER 4

Eleven p.m., Thursday, May ninth, 1937.

Item: June Sims hangs on her husband's arm as they exit from the Audubon Theatre. Her eyes sparkle with happiness. She sighs tremulously. Then: "Johnny. Maybe we'd better call up and see if Junior is all right before we go eat."

Item: Anita Harrison-Smith peers over the shoulder of her black-coated dance partner with narrowed eyes. The florid-faced, heavy man in the alcove they are just passing is her husband. His companion is Rex Cranston, president of the A.P.&C.

Without hearing she knows their talk is of debentures, temporary reactions, resistance points on Cumulative Index graphs. Howard Harrison-Smith has forgotten Anita exists, will remain oblivious of her till she comes for him to take her home.

Her small red lips set in a firmer line. He has a long wait ahead of him tonight.

Item: Aloysia Morne lets her ermine cape slide into Felix Hammond's deft hands. He bends and kisses her where a shoulder no less white than the snowy fur melts into the perfect column of her neck. She turns with studied grace, and her throaty voice reproduces the deepest note of a 'cello.

"Do you know, Felix, this lovely place of yours is more home to me than my own so-grand rooms." Hammond smiles thinly, and does not answer.

Item: In the dim light of a decrepit pier jutting into the Hudson Professor Henry Lanson is more than ever like a gigantic larva as he putters about a grotesque combination of steel rods and glittering, lenticulai copper bowls out of which a brass cylinder points telescopelike at the zenith.

An arm-thick cable crawls over the pier's frayed boards, and coils over their edge to the water. Lanson turns and checks connections on another, smaller machine.

Far across the Hudson's black surface loom the Palisades. A dash of yellow luminance zigzags against their ebony curtain, a trolley climbing to where an amusement park is an arabesque of illumination against the overcast sky.

To the right the cables of George Washington Bridge dip, twin catenaries of dotted light, and rise again. A red spark and a green one are the apices of moire, chromatic ribbons rippling across the water to the pier head from the deeper shadow of an army launch.

Braced vertically, five feet behind that pierhead, is a whitewashed steel plate. This is the target for the automatic rifle that will be fired from that bobbing launch as a first trial of the Lanson Screen's efficacy.

Other tests will follow, later. But General Thompson will not yet chance firing

artillery into Manhattan.

Henry Lanson calls, in his voice without resonance, "Ready, General. Ten minutes for the first try."

From across the water Thompson snaps, "Ready. Go ahead."

Lanson lumbers back to his machine, thrusts at a lever. There is no sound, no vibration. Suddenly the river, the Palisades, disappear. The amusement park is gone, the inverted necklaces of pearly light that mark the bridge cables. There is no sky. Lanson looks at his wrist watch.

"Ten minutes," he chuckles. "He couldn't get through in ten thousand years."

He is very sure of himself, this man. But perhaps there is a minute residuum of doubt in his mind. After all, he has never experimented with so vast an extension of his invention's power. He thuds to the steel target, puts one doughy paw against it, leans out to view its riverward surface. Will there be any flecks of black on it to show the impact of the bullets that are being fired at it?

Is he warned by a sound, a creak? One cannot know. At any rate he is too obese, too ponderous, to avoid catastrophe. Under his leaning weight the steel plate rips from flimsy braces. Falls.

Its edge thuds against the physicist's head, knocks him down, crushes his skull.

Professor Henry Lanson's brain, and its secrets, are a smear of dead protoplasm mixed with shattered bone and viscous blood.

## CHAPTER 5

Eleven-twenty-eight p.m., Thursday, May ninth, 1937.

The lights are dim in Foo Komg's pseudo-Oriental establishment. John Sims spoons sugar into a hot teapot.

"I'm going to make a lawyer out of Junior," he says slowly. "He'll go to Dartmouth for his academic course and then to Harvard. He won't have to start working right out of high school like I did."

John is reminded of the days before June belonged to him by the setting, by the dreamy light in her eyes.

`Let's walk down Broadway," he says, "when we get through here." That is what they used to do when all the glittering things in the store windows did not seem quite as unattainable as they did now.

"No, Johnny. I want to go home. I have a queer feeling there's something wrong. Mother isn't so young any more, and she's forgotten what to do if a child is croupy or anything."

"Silly. Nothing's wrong."

"Take me home, hon."

"Oh, all right." Petulantly. "It's just like you to spoil things..."

Anita Harrison-Smith slips out of the side door of the old Gellert Mansion on East Sixty-first Street. She signals a taxi.

"Pier Fifty-seven." Her violet eyes are deep, dark pools and a visible pulse throbs in her temple...

Nobody looks at the sky. Nobody ever looks at the sky in New York. Nobody knows the sky has suddenly gone black, fathomless.

## CHAPTER 6

Later:

"Nita!"

"Ted I–"

"You did come! Here, driver, what's the fare?"

The cab circles in Fifteenth Street, vanishes eastward. Van Norden takes the woman's arm.

"Have any trouble getting away?"

"No." She is quivering. "Hurry, darling. Let's get on board before anyone sees us."

"There's some trouble. Fog or something. The pier doors are closed, but the officials say they'll be open again directly. They won't sail without us."

"Look, Ted, it is a heavy fog. Why, you can't see the river from here. Even the other end of the ship is hidden. But there isn't any haze here. Queer. The ship seems to be cut in half; it's quite distinct up to a certain point, then there just isn't anything more. It's black, not gray like fog ought to be."

"Let's go in that little lunch wagon till we can get aboard. Nobody will look for us in there."

"Let's. I'm afraid, Ted. I'm terribly afraid..."

Nobody looks at the sky except General Darius Thompson, bobbing in a little launch on the Hudson. He is staring at vacancy where New York had been a quarter hour before. Up the river the cables of the great Bridge come out of nothingness, dip, and rise to the western shore.

Toward the Bay there is nothing to show where the metropolis should be. No light,

no color. Nothing. Sheer emptiness. He looks at the radiant figures on his watch once more.

"Wonder what's keeping the old fool," be growls. "He should have dissipated the screen five minutes ago."

The night is warm, but General Thompson shivers suddenly, an appalling speculation beats at his mind, but he will not acknowledge it. He dares not.

A hundred yards from Thompson, in another space, a device of steel and copper and brass stands quiescent over the unmoving body of the one man who knew its secret.

Into the dim recesses of the army pier a dull hum penetrates, the voice of a million people going about their nightly pursuits, unaware, as yet, of doom.

In his cubicle on the hundred and ninetieth floor of New York University's Physics Building, Howard Cranston watched the moving needle of his Merton Calculator with narrowed eyes. If the graph that was slowly tracing itself on the result-sheet took the expected form, a problem that had taxed the ingenuity of the world's scientists for sixty years would be solved at last.

The lanky young physicist could not know it, but the electrically operated "brain" was repeating in thirty minutes calculations it bad taken Henry Lanson three years to perform, two generations before. His own contribution had been only an idea, and knowledge of the proper factors to feed into the machine.

A red line curved on the co-ordinate sheet, met a previously drawn blue one. A bell tinkled, and there was silence in the room.

Breath came from between Cranston's lips in a long sigh. Curiously, he felt no elation.

He crossed the room slowly, and looked out through the glassite-covered aperture in the south wall. Just below, elevated highways were a tangles maze in the afternoon sun, and helicopters danced like a cloud of weaving midges. But Cranston neither heard nor saw them. His gaze was fixed farther away, down there where a curious cloud humped against the horizon, a cloud that was a challenging piling of vacancy; something that existed, that occupied space, yet was nothing.

Beyond it he could see the shimmering surface of New York Bay, and rising from it a tall white shaft. At the apex of that shaft a colossal figure faced him. It was a gigantic woman of bronze, her head bowed, her hands pressed to her heavy breasts that agonized in frustration. The Universal Mother stood in eternal mourning over the visible but unseen grave of millions.

"It might be dangerous," Howard Cranston muttered. "The gases of the decomposed bodies—there was no way for them to escape. Before I start building the machine I must find out. Carl Langdon will know."

He turned away. `But first I'll draw it up. It's simple enough–will take less than a week to build."

The design that presently took pictured form under Howard Cranston's flying fingers was strangely like that which sixty years ago Henry Lanson had called his B machine. But there was a difference. This one could be used from outside the Screen.

With the aid of this, by expanding the radius to include the original barrier, it would be a simple matter to destroy the hemiobloid of impenetrable force that was a city's tomb, to release the force which Lanson had set up.

# CHAPTER 7

Rand Barridon's flivver-plane settled before a graceful small structure of metal and glass. He swung his rather square body out of the fuselage, crunched up the gravel path.

The door opened, irislike, as he stepped into the beam of the photoray. Somewhere inside a deep-toned gong sounded, and tiny pattering feet made a running sound. "Daddy! Daddy's home!"

Blond ringlets were an aureole around tiny Rob's chubby face. The father bent to him, tossed him in the air, caught him dexterously. Ruth Barridon appeared, taller than her husband, her countenance a maturer, more feminine replica of the boy's. Rob was a warm bundle against her breasts as her lips met Rand's. "You're late, hon. Supper's been ready twenty minutes."

"I know. We were talking about what they found down there." He gestured vaguely to the south. "One of the fellows flew down last night. They wouldn't let him land. But he saw enough, hovering on the five thousand foot level, to keep him awake all night."

Ruth paled, shuddered. "What an awful thing it must have been. You know, nobody ever thought much about it. The cloud had been there all our lives and it really didn't seem to mean anything. But seeing all those buildings where people just like us once lived and worked, seeing those..."

"Afterward, dear." Ruth caught the signal of the man's eyes to the quietly listening child and stopped. "I'm hungry. Let's get going."

The soft glow of artificial daylight in the Barridon living room is reflected cozily from its walls of iridescent metal. Rand stretches himself, yawns. "What's on tap tonight, hon?"

"We're staying home for a change."

"I thought this was Matilda's night."

"It is. But Mrs. Carter asked me to change with her, she had something on. And I

would rather stay home. There's a new play by Stancourt. I think they call it 'Alone with Love.' Fred Barrymore is taking the lead."

"That gigolo–I can't see what you women find in him!"

"Rand! That's just a pose. You know darn well you turn him on every time."

"Oh, all right. But let's get the magazine viewcast first. They always have something interesting." He crosses the room, touches an ornamental convolution on the wall. A panel slides noiselessly sideward, revealing a white screen. A switch clicks, the room dims, the screen glows with an inner light. Rand twirls a knob.

The wall-screen becomes half of an oval room, hung with gray draperies, gray-carpeted. There is a small table in the room, behind it show the legs and back of a chair. Like the furniture in the Barridons' own place, table and chair are of lacquered metal, but these are gray. The drapes part, a tall man comes through. His face is long, pinched, his blond hair bristles straight up from his scalp, and his brown eyes are grave. The impact of a strong personality reaches out from the televised image, vibrant with a stagy dominance even over the miles of space intervening between actuality and reproduction.

"Oh, it's Grant Lowndes," Ruth breathes. "I love him!"

"Shhh." Barridon is intent. "Shhh."

The Radio Commission's premier reader moves with practiced grace. An adept at building up interest in trivialities by pantomimed portentousness, Lowndes is weaving a spell about his far-flung audience that will assure him concentrated attention. As he sinks into the seat his eyes stare from the screen with hypnotic penetration. He places a book on the table before him. Its covers are of tooled leather, but there is a smudge of green mould across them concealing the design. He opens it.

The pages are yellow, frayed-edged. Faded handwriting is visible; mimiscular. An old diary, perhaps, picked up from some dusty second-hand display.

"Good evening, friends." His voice is mellow, warming, vibrant with a peculiar tensity. Ruth's tiny, stifled gasp is a tribute to its art. "The manufacturers of General Flyers Helioplanes have honored me tonight with a great privilege and a sad task. I bring to you a voice from the past, a voice long silent, speech from a throat long mouldered into dust, thoughts from a brain whose very molecules are one with the snows of yesteryear. I bring to you the palpitant, living agony of the greatest catastrophe the world has ever known." His eyes drop to the volume on the lectern, and his slim, white hand presses down upon its face.

"My colleagues of the viewcast service have informed you of the rending of the veil that sixty-two years ago cut off Manhattan Island from the world. They have brought into your homes the awful vision of dead buildings; dead streets strewn with twisted

skeletons. You have, I am sure, tried to picture what must have happened there in the tragic days till eternal silence fell and the entombed city had become a vast necropolis. Today, my friends, the searchers found an account of one man's experience, a painstakingly written chronicle of that time. General Flyers is sponsoring the presentation to you of this human, pitiful tale. I will quote from the diary."

# CHAPTER 8

May 9, Thursday: It is four in the morning. Aloysia came here with me from the theatre... I have just returned from escorting her to the place where she resides. She does not call it home–that name she reserves for these rooms. "Home, Felix," she said, "is the place where happiness dwells." 1 recognized that, it is a line from one of her earlier appearances. Her mind is a blotter, seizing the thoughts, the ideas, the mental images of others and becoming impregnated with them. No. Molding itself to them. Perhaps that is the secret of her arts-dramatic and amatory.

I am restless, uneasy. There is a peculiar feeling in the air, a vague sense of impending catastrophe. Even the recollection of the past few hours with her does not drive it away...

I thought music might fit my mood. But the radio is out of gear. Tonight nothing but silence. Strangely enough the police talk was roaring in. There seems to be some trouble along the waterfront...

It ought to be getting on to dawn, but it is still pitch dark outside. There isn't any breeze. The sky is absolutely black. I have never seen anything like it in New York. Clouds at night always reflect the glow of the city lights. And if there are no clouds there should be stars, a moon. Can there be a storm coming down on the big city–a tornado? That would explain the way I feel.

May 10, Friday: There has been no daylight today. The only illumination is artificial. Somehow that seems the worst of what has happened to the city. For something has happened. Manhattan is surrounded by an impenetrable barrier. Nobody, nothing can get in or out. There have been no trains at Grand Central or Penn Station, the subway is operating only within the borders of Manhattan Island.

I have been driving around with Aloysia all day. In spite of the darkness things went on very much as usual in the morning-children went to school, toilers to their work. It dawned only gradually that more than half the staffs in offices and stores had not shown up. Those who do not live in Manhattan. At noon the newspapers came out with scare headlines. Every bridge out of the city is closed off by the veil of–what can I call it? Every pier. A cover has shut down over us as if Manhattan were a platter on which a planked steak was being brought from the kitchen of the RitzPlaza. Even the telephone and telegraph have been affected.

By three in the afternoon the whole city was in the streets. My car was forced to move at a crawl. There was no sign of fear, though. The general consensus was that

the phenomenon was something thrilling, a welcome break in the humdrum of daily existence. The mayor's proclamation, in the newspapers and over the few radio stations located within the city, seemed quite superfluous. He urged the people to be calm. Whatever it was that had shut us in was only temporary, it would vanish of itself or a way would be found to get rid of it. He has appointed a committee of scientists from Columbia and the City Colleges to investigate and make plans. The best of them all, however, is unavailable. Henry Lanson. He was found crushed to death on a Hudson River pier, killed in some obscure experiment.

Aloysia left me in time for the evening performance. The theaters and movie houses are crowded–they have had the best day in their history.

At ten o'clock tonight I went to take a drink of water. None ran from the tap. I called the superintendent and he said the mains had been shut off. There was no longer any pressure. Police orders are that water is to be used only for drinking and cooking. It is being pumped from the main by fire engines stationed at the hydrants and a rationing system has been devised. I have two or three cases of Perrier–they should be sufficient for my needs till this thing is over. There is plenty of wine and Scotch, but I have no desire for alcohol.

## CHAPTER 9

May 11, Saturday: The darkness still continues. No milk was delivered this morning. Prices for food have begun to go up. There is very little fresh meat to be had, practically no vegetables or fruits. Evaporated milk is being sold at a dollar a can. I am afraid the children are going to suffer a great deal...

## CHAPTER 10

May I2, Sunday: Church was packed. There have been several riots in the poorer sections of the city. Grocery stores were raided, a warehouse gutted. The militia has been called out, and all stocks of food taken over by the authorities for rationing.

Aloysia has just appeared, bag and baggage. She says she feels safe only here. I am going out to see what is going on.

Two p.m.: There is no longer any water in the system! The lakes in Central Park are being emptied, the fluid taken to breweries and distilleries nearby, where the water is being filtered and chlorinated. The little thus obtained, and canned fruit juices, furnish the only drink for children. Adults are drinking beer and wine.

My car was stopped by a detail of national guardsmen in uniform. No gasoline engines are to be run any longer. There is no escape for the carbon monoxide fumes being generated, and they are poisoning the atmosphere. There already have been several deaths from this cause.

A fire started in an apartment house on Third Avenue. It was extinguished by chemicals. I wonder how long that will be efficacious?

I thought I was fairly well stocked up for at least a week. But with Aloysia here, her maid and my own man, my stock of food and drinkables is rapidly disappearing. For the first time I have sent Jarvis out to the food depots, with an affidavit setting forth the size of my "family," my residence, etc. I understand that each adult is being allotted one can of meat or vegetables, and one pint of water, per day.

Three p.m.: All house lights have been turned off to conserve coal. I am writing by candle. Street lighting is still maintained. There has been no gas since the Darkness fell, the plant being in Astoria. As my own kitchen has an electric range this did not impress me, but I understand those not so taken care of had been displaying remarkable ingenuity. Several families had upended electric laundry irons and used those as grills. That is ended now. However, there is so little to cook that the lack of heat hardly brings added hardship.

Jarvis has not yet returned.

Midnight: From my window I can overlook quite a large portion of the city. A vast black pall rests over us, relieved only by the network of glowing lamps outlining the streets. Even these seem to be growing dimmer.

My valet, Jarvis, is still among the missing. He has been with me for ten years. I thought him loyal, honest. He was honest with respect to money. I have trusted him with large sums and never found him faithless. But money is worth nothing today, while food...

Stress reveals the inner nature of the human animal. I met the Harrison-Smiths today, walking along Park Avenue in the foreboding restlessness that is keeping all New York on the sidewalks. The usually iron-visaged banker presented a countenance whose color matched the clammy hue of a dead fish's belly. His heavy jowls were dewlaps quivering with fear. Even while we talked his eyes clung to his wife, who was erect, a bright white flame in the Darkness. Her eyes were answering the appeal in his. She had strength enough for both, and was keeping him from collapse by sheer, silent will. The gossips, this winter, were buzzing about Anita and Ted Van Norden, the wastrel who reminds me so much of my own youth. There could not have been any truth in the rumors.

## CHAPTER 11

May 13, Monday: Noon, I went out at five this morning to take my place in the long line at the food station. I have just returned with my booty. One can of sardines and a six-ounce bottle of soda—to maintain three adults twenty-four hours! On my way back I saw a man, well-dressed, chasing an alley cat. He caught it, killed it with a blow of his fist, and stuffed it in a pocket.

The air is foul with stench. A white hearse passed me, being pushed by men on foot. Someone told me that Central Park is being used as a burying ground.

I stopped to watch the passing hearse near a National Guardsman, a slim young

chap whose uniform did not fit him very well. He spoke to me. "That's the worst of this thing, sir, what it's doing to children." Under his helmet his eyes were pits of somber fire. "Just think of the babies without milk. The canned stuff gave out today. My own kid is sick in bed; he can't stand the junk we've been giving him. June–that's my wife–is clean frantic."

I wanted to comfort him, but what, was there to say? "How old is your youngster?" I asked.

"Junior is two. And a swell brat! You ought to hear him talk a mile a minute. He's going to be a lawyer when he grows up."

I listened to him for a while, then made some excuse and got away. I had to or he would have seen that my eyes were wet.

Later: Aloysia has slept all day. All the windows in the apartment are open, but the air is heavy, stifling. It is difficult to move, to breathe. The shell that encloses us is immense, but eventually the oxygen in the enclosed air must be used up. Then what?

Unless relief comes soon death will be beforehand, the mass death of all the teeming population of this island. One must face that. Just what form will it take? Starvation, thirst, asphyxiation? Queer. I, who have so often babbled of the futility of life, do not want to die. It is–unpleasant–to contemplate utter extinction, the absolute end of self. I wish I believed in immortality–in some sort of future life. Even to burn eternally in hell would be better than simply–to stop.

There is a red glow to the south. Is it a thinning of the Darkness?

The city seems hushed with all traffic noise stopped. But another sound bas replaced it. A high-pitched murmur, not loud, but omnipresent, insistent. I have just realized what it is. Children crying. Thousands of them, hundreds of thousands, hungry children–thirsty children...

## CHAPTER 12

May I4, Tuesday: The clock says it is morning. It is not dark outside any more. A red light suffuses the scene, the light of the gigantic flame that has enveloped all the lower end of the Island. There is no wind. The conflagration is spreading very slowly, but it is coming inexorably. Overhead are vast rolling billows of smoke, edged with scarlet glare. Below there is a turbulent sea of human beings. The roar of the fire, pent-in and reverberant, mingles with the crash of breaking glass, the rattle of rifle shots, a growling animal–like sound that is the voice of the mob. They are engaged in a carnival of destruction, a blind, mad venting of protest against the doom that has overtaken them. I had a dog once that was run over by some fool in a truck. When I went to pick it up it snarled and sank its teeth in my hand. That is like those people down there. They do not know what has hurt them, but they must hurt someone in return.

Where they find the strength to fight I do not know. I can scarcely move. My tongue fills my mouth. It is almost impossible to breathe.

Aloysia has just called me. It was the ghost of a word, her "Felix." In a moment I shall go in to her and lie down beside her.

Grant Lowndes looks up from the book.

"That is all," he says simply. "In an inner room of the apartment where Ns was found the searchers discovered two skeletons on the mouldering ruin of a bed, a man's and a woman's.

"General Flyers bids you good night. I shall be with you again at this same hour on Friday."

He turns and goes slowly out through the gray curtains. The diary remains on the little gray table. Shadows close in from the edges of the screen, concentrating light within their contracting circle. The book is the last thing visible. That, too, is gone...

There is silence in the living room for a long minute. Rand Barridon reaches to the radiovisor switch, clicks it off. The screen is blankly white in the glow of the room light.

"You know," Barridon says slowly. "The city wasn't all burned up. Guess the fire burned up all the oxygen and put itself out. That was what killed the people too."

Ruth sighs tremulously. "Rand, I was thinking about that one thing he said, about that soldier that was worried about his sick little boy. Just think if anything like that were to happen to our Rob."

"Say, I noticed that too. The fellow had a good idea. That's what we're going to make of the kid, a lawyer. Big money and not too much hard work. We'll send him to Dartmouth first, and then to Harvard. A fellow was telling me they've got the best law school in the country.

## SIT BY THE FIRE

## MYRLE BENEDICT

(Selected from*The Fantastic Universe Omnibus* , 1960)

"Wasn't the fusty time I'd seen her-the strange wild girl tramping' over the hills, but 'twas the fusty time she'd come close enough sob's I could actual see what she looked like.

She didn't look mean, like the stories folks tale made her out to be. She looked kind of lost, and awful young, like. She was just a little bitty thing, too.

Now, I take that back about her lookin' lost. She didn't exactly. She looked more like

somebody had done gone off an' left her, an' she was jest bound to make do as best she could.

She didn't run off when she seen me. She helt her ground an' stared at me, long and hard, like 'twas her as owned the meader an' not me. She was right spunky, too. Didn't look like the sight of a ol' codger like me scairt her none.

Lookin' at her up close like that I could see she mighty close 'sembled my middle girl Virgie, her whut died when she warn't much older than this here girl.

I helt out my hand an' I spoke to her. I says, "Lookie here, girl, whut you doin' on my propitty?" Only I says it real gentle like.

When she seen me holdin' my hand out like that, she jumped a few steps back, like she was scairt I was gonna throw somethin' at her.

"Now hold on, girl," I says. "I ain't gonna hurt ya none. Now whut's a pritty leetle thing like you a-doin' out in the open all the time? Ain't you 'fraid you'll get hurt, or maybe et up by a mountain-lion or somethin'?"

For the first time her face kinda softened, like she'd heard air understood all I was sayin' only she didn't want to let on none.

"No," she says, so soft I could scarce hear her. "I ain't a-feared o' that."

Then, like it had just dawned on her she'd said a spoken word, she turned an' woulda scooted back into the brush if I hadn't said anythin.

"Wait a minutes' I says. "You don't have to run off. Not from me. Shecks, I'm jest a ordinary man, livin' up here on the side o' the mountain, all alone. You don't have to be a-feared o' me."

She turned, an' kinda looked at me, like she didn't know whether to believe me or not.

"Come on," I says. "Whyn't you an' me go down to my cabin an' talk? There's a mite o' corn pone and I got some ice-cole buttermilk back in th' spring-house. Won't hurt you none, by the looks o' you."

She opened her mouth an' then closed it again.

"I ain't tryin' to force you, girl," I says. "I'm a-goin' back, an' if'n you want to come, come, an' if'n you want to go without supper, do."

I turned around an' started back down the path to my little cabin. I'm a ol' man, an' all my children have gone off an' married. My ol' woman, she died some years back, an' I live up here all alone. I tend my field an' the garden patch, an! I'm a sight better off than a lot o' old men whut goes an' lives of'n their kids. Folks say I'm crotchety, but I ain't. I got a real nice life up here, an' I don't want no meddlin' busybody from down in the village messin' it up tryin' to "help." That Miz Perkins, in particular.

She's th' do-goodinist woman I ever seen. Thinks it's a cryin' shame my kids "neglect" their pa like they do. Well, I don't call it neglectin'. I raised 'em up to stand on their two hind legs an' look after themselves, an' I expect them to let me do th' same thing.

I got inside my cabin, an' left th' door open a little. It was nice an' cool, after the heat of Indian Summer. I went out to th' spring-house an' got th' pitcher o' cole buttermilk an' brung it back to th' house. I poured out two glasses full, an' set the pan o' corn pone on th' table. I didn't bother non to look an' see if'n th' wild girl follered me or not.

Pretty soon I heard a little rustlin' sound, like a mouse makes in a corncrib, only a lot softer, an' then I heard he a-gulpin' that buttermilk like she was starved. I pushed th pitcher toward her a little, an' let her be. She'd drank down three glasses o' buttermilk afore she said anythin'.

"That was good," she says.

I turned around an' looked at her. She was a-sittin' on the edge o' her chair, like she was a-measurin' the distance to th' door in case she had to run for it. She had a milk moustache on her, where she'd been too greedy with th' buttermilk, like a kid. She had on a darkish sort of dress an' it was all dirty an' tore from th' brambles. She didn't have on no shoes, an' I could tell she was used to wearin' shoes, 'cause her feet was little an' white an' looked soft, even though they was pretty dirty right now. She was kinda pale, an' had dark hair, all wild an' tumbled lookin'.

She saw me lookin' at her feet an' drew them up under her, like she was a-shamed.

"Whut's your name, chile?" I says. "Whut'r you doin' out roamin' the mountain? Ain't you got no folks?"

"N-No, I ain't," she says. "I ain't got nobody."

"Whut are you so scared about? I ain't gonna hurt you."

"You ain't for sure?" she asks like a kid.

"Ain't for sure. Now, how come you're actin' like a rabbit caught in a snare?"

"I-I don't like this place."

"Well, I don't blame you none, if'n all you've done lately is run away from ever'body, and not let any of 'em get in hailin' distance."

"I know. But they was all so big an' I was scared."

"Why ain't you so scared o' me?"

"I dunno. You don't seem like th' other folks I've seen. You ain't never yelled at me, nor flang a stone at me. You know when to let a body be."

"Who'd want to throw a stone at you?"

"Oh, one o' them kids from over on th' yonder side o' th' hill."

"Well, I ain't gonna let nobody harm you, neither. Fact is, you c'n stay right here, if'n you've a mind to. 'Tain't nobody here close 'cept me, an' I'm a ol' man, an' I wouldn't mind havin' a purty young thing like you to sorta liven up th' place."

She looked at me, suspicious-like. "Why?" she says.

"Oh, I dunno. Maybe it's cause you look like Virgie, a little. That's my middle girl. She died some years back, when she warn't much older 'n you. B'sides, you need some place to stay, don't you?"

"I reckon."

"Wull, that's settled, then. You c'n sleep up in the loft. I'll fix Virgie's ol' bed for you up there, an' you can have it all for yourself. Whut's your name, anyway, bein' as how you'll be livin' here?"

"I don't richly have no proper name," she says real soft.

"If'n you don't care, I'd 'preciate it if'n you'd just call me ... Virgie."

***

So the strange wild girl come to live with me. Once she'd gentled down an' decided to stay, she was a real joy to have around. She fixed up some of th' ol' dresses she'd found in a trunk, an' I went down to th' gen'rl store an' bought her some bright stuff so's she could sew some dresses for herself. She fixed up that loft so bright an' purty, an' give the walls a fresh coat o' whitewash, an' even whitewashed th' walls in th' rest o' th' cabin. She put up green curtains at th' winders an' put a red-an'-white checkered cloth on the table. She even made me change m' overhauls twiect a week an' trim ' m' hair an' beard, too, an' made me wash m' hands b'fore I eat. She was a tol'ble cook, an' she got better as she went along.

We give out down at the store that she was a distant relation, with no parents, so she'd come to live with me. There was a few who knew in their hearts that she was th' wild girl, but they never knew for certain, 'cause we never told.

But even them as thought they knew, stopped their talk in time an' come to look on her as my actual kin. She even called me "Uncle Reb." That's m' name, Rebel. M' folks named me that 'cause I was borned whilest th' War was goin' on.

Warn't no surprise t' me, when spring come 'round again that some o' th' young whelps down in th' village decided to come a-courtin' Virgie.

Now, Virgie, she'd done got over all her wildness an' shyness when she was around me, but when them lazy louts started drapin' themselves over th' porch rail, it come right back.

She'd sit there, pleased in a female way with all th' attention, but scairt, too, o' them big lumberin' boys. An' one evenin', after 'Kiah Piersall had been there, she come in a-cryin'.

"Virgie, what's that big ox done to you?" I says.

"Oh, Uncle Reb, he ain't done nothin', exactly," she says. "Only he—he tr-tried to kiss me, an' he was so hot an' the flesh around his eyes was so swollen, an' I was afeared!" She set down in the chair I'd made her an' huddled up in a heap. "He says he wants t' marry me, an' Uncle Reb, I just caint! I caint!"

"Whut do you mean, you caint? Now it's a fact that these menfolks hereabouts ain't whut you'd 'xactly call prizes, but you're gonna have t' marry somebody, some o' these days, Virgie."

"Oh, no, I ain't," she says, lookin' up sudden. "I ain't gonna marry nobody!"

"Why sure you are, Virgie. I knower that when I took you in. You caint spend the rest o' your life lookin' after a ol' man. You got to have a life o' your own, with a husband' to look after you, an' kids, maybe. I ain't gonna be here always, an' you just can't go through life without nobody. 'Tain't natural."

Her face went real white, an' I thought she was a-goin' t' swoon, but she didn't. There was two spots o' red in her cheeks, an' her voice shook a little. "Uncle Reb, I didn't know whut I was getting' myself into, when I come here. I don't like it much, but I'm here, an' there's not much I c'n do about it now. But I just want t' be left alone! That's why I come to live with you. You let me be. I thought you understood maybe, but you don't neither."

"Don't understand whut?" I says, but she don't 'pear to hear me.

"I c'n always go back an' roam th' hills. I c'n go far away, and maybe find somebody else who'll take me in for a while, but I don't want to. I like it here, an' I like you, Uncle Reb. Only don't make me mix with other folks!"

"You don't seem to mind goin' down to th' store, or goin' t' meetin, or to th' barndance once in a while."

"That kinda mixin' isn't too bad, Uncle Reb. It's th' springtime mixin' I'm a-talkin' about—th' kind o' spring an' fall mixin' that's in th' blood."

I laughed. "Honey, if'n it's in your blood, it's not anythin' to be ashamed of."

"But, Uncle Reb, you don't understand! It ain't in my blood ... the folks I come from, they don't even remember it, 'xcept as it was writ down in books. But you folks, you got it so strong it likes to make a body faint from just bein' close to it!"

"Virgie, I don't understand what you're sayin', for a fact."

"Uncle Reb, listen to me. I'm not like folks around here. I'm not like anybody you

ever met. I-I don't think it's quite proper for me t' mix too close with you folks. All I want is a roof over my head, an' good food, an' to be let alone!"

She meant it, I could tell. "Aw right, Virgie," I says. "I don't rightly understand why, but I'll go 'long with you, if'n that's whut you want."

"It is, Uncle Reb," she says, an' she lowered her eyes so's they caught the light for a minute an' shone out like two amber stones.

***

Springtime come an' went, an' when summer had come, th' young menfolk settled down a little. Virgie took t' going t' th' barndance once in a while again. But she quit it whenever th' autumn moon started shinin' big an' yeller along th' ridge o' th' hills.

When th' fust snow come, she really settled in for th' winter. Of an evenin', she'd sit by the fire, all skwoonched up with her eyes shut, for all th' world like th' ol' red cat whut come t' live with us.

Virgie hadn't been with me too long when a ol' red mamma-cat come trailing' by an' took up with her. I didn't care if n Virgie kept it, 'cause it could keep down th' mice in th' house, so long as it didn't bring in too many kittens.

So anyhow, of an evenin' them two's curl up afore th' fire an' toast themselves an' th' cat'd purr an' hold its head up for Virgie to pet it. She never give it no name, just called it Cat, but it seemed to know that's who she meant when she called it.

I think that's the time Virgie was happiest, when th' snow lay deep on th' ground, an' there was no call to go outdoors, nor no call for nobody else to, neither.

***

Come spring again, Virgie started to shed the good, healthy plump she'd built up in th' winter. Th' young men started comin' back, jest the same as last year, an' Virgie, she got as snappy as a ol' turtle.

"Uncle Reb, it's gettin' me, too," she says one day. "I c'n feel this spring-thing, almost like you-all can."

"Oh, hush your mouth," I says. "I'm gettin' just a little tired o' your complainin' 'cause the boys is after you. There's more'n one gal down to th' village whut would give a pretty to be in your shoes, let me tell you."

"I don't want th' boys after me!" she says, an' run off to hide.

I couldn't help snortin'. She was a silly little thing, not t' preciate that she had th' whole part o' th' young men at her heels. I couldn't see it, m'self. She was too little. Man lives in th' hills, needs a woman big an' strong 'nough to help 'im. But she did have a strange sort o' fare, with th' big eyes an' little chin, an' with that cloudy dark hair an' the pretty way she had o' talkin', she didn't need to say more'n a dozen

words 'fore th' boy she was a-talkin' to was plumb gone.

I didn't pay it too much mind when she didn't come home to supper. But she was gone all th' next day, too, an' didn't come in 'til 'way after dark. I could tell she'd been cryin.

"You et supper?"

"No, Uncle Reb. I ain't hungry.

She looked at me, an' her eyes caught in th' candlelight, like they had a way o' doin'.

"Uncle Reb, whut would you say if'n I told you I waset one o' your folks?"

"Honey, I know that. You ain't any more kin to me than..."

"No, I mean, I ain't like nobody around here. Nobody a-tall."

"Virgie, are you startin' that again? I declare, chile, you got the funniest notions in your head o' anybody..."

"Uncle Reb, I mean it. Set down here." She took th' candle an' lighted the gasoline lantern I don't hardly never use. She went over to th' chest an' got m' readin' glasses for me. "Here, put these on. I want you to see me good."

I put 'em on, an' she set down in front o' me. "Look close at m' eyes, Uncle Reb."

I looked at 'em, an' it was a minute afore it sunk in whut I was seein'. They wasn't like ordinary eyes, they wasn't. I still couldn't see 'em too plain, even with m' glasses, but I could see 'em well enough to see they was like that ol' red mamma-cat's eyes.

"Whut are you, Virgie?" I says.

"I'm a ... visitor, Uncle Reb," she says. "Me an' some more like me. We come from somewheres a far off. Th' others, they wanted to come a lot mor'n me, an' they talked me into it. I was feelin' awful fearful when you found me an' took me in."

"Where are th' others like you?"

"I dunno, we went all over. Most o' us is scattered through the hill countries, though, 'cause it's more dangerous for us in th' cities. Th' people there are more likely to notice that we're diff'rent."

"I reckon you're right. But how come th' folks 'round here ain't seen how yo're so diff'rent? Seems like they c'd look at them eyes an' see right off."

"I got some little bitty pieces o' special-made glass I wear on m' eyes, whenever I got to go among people. They don't hurt none, when you get used to 'em, an' they make my eyes look like everbody else's. I ain't wore 'em too much with you, 'cause your eyesight is awful poor anyhow. M' skin is diffrent colored, too. I keep some dye rubbed in t' give it color. That is, I did. I don't need to very much anymore."

"Why not, Virgie?"

"Uncle Reb, the longer I stay, th' more I get like th' folks here. I guess I ain't strong 'nough t' keep m'self like I was. If n I stay out in th' sun long anymore, I get brown. I never did before. My skin don't look silvery no more, even without the dye. O' course, there's some things I can't change, like m' eyes, an' m' feet." She stuck her feet out, with no shoes. I couldn't see anythin' diff'rent, 'til she wiggled her toes, an' there wasn't but four of 'em.

"But, Uncle Reb, I catch m'self thinkin' strange thoughts, like you folks. An' in th' springtime..." She started cryin' and hid her head in her skirt. She looked up again. "I ain't used to th' feelin'. With us, it's a quiet thing, but with youall, it's like a rollin' wave that don't never quite go down but climbs higher all th' time."

I didn't say nothin'. I jest set quiet for a while, thinkin'. After a little, Virgie got up an' went to her room in th' loft. Pretty soon she come down, dressed in th' old ragged dress she had on when I found her.

"I reckon you'll want me t' go," she says real quiet.

"No such thing," I says. "I been thinkin' long an' hard. You're a stranger, for sure, but you've lived under my roof an' you've eat my bread. I've come t' love you like one o' my own, an' youre welcome t' stay as long as you want."

She looked at me, an' those strange eyes o' hers lit up like candles. "Oh, Uncle Reb! Thank you so much!" She swooped over t' me an' give me a kiss on th' cheek, th' fust one I've had in years.

So Virgie stayed. As th' seasons o' the year passed, I c'd tell, little by little, she was losin' her strange ways.

I'm a-gettin' old, an' a little feeble, an' I worry 'bout Virgie sometimes, an' whut'll happen t' her when I'm gone. After she told me whut she did, I can't see that it would be good, crossin' her strain an' ours.

I jest hope she c'n maybe find one o' her own kind afore she gets so much like us he wouldn't be able t' tell who she was.

He'd better hurry. Last week I caught her kissin' 'Kiah Piersall, out in th' autumn moon. And this time, she warn't scairt.

## THE SUBLIME VIGIL

## CHESTER D. CUTHBERT

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It is storming outside. Jagged flashes of lightning are followed closely by the

crashing peals of thunder reverberating in the heavens. Thor is armed with a sledge-hammer tonight; and the sparks flying from his anvil are bound to mark with destruction things in the world of man. His armor must be tough and stubborn to work upon, for Thor has been busy for hours.

I have just returned from looking out of the east window. Bancroft is still standing upon that high bold crest of Mount Arden. He stands motionless, facing the west whence comes the storm. The wind blows his hair and beard awry; it tosses the rags of his clothing until they flutter behind him; it bows the stately trees on the Mountainside at his left; but it does not make him turn his broad back to its chilly blasts. The rain drenches every leaf and every blade of grass; falling on the mountain, it gathers into little rivulets which tumble down the slopes; but Bancroft pays it not the least attention. For twenty-five years now, he has stood upon that crest, day and night, summer and winter, year in and year out, in every kind of weather. Sometimes I think that only a lightning blast will end his vigil; and that is why I am always uneasy when it storms.

Often through the years I have tried to conjecture why he stays upon the mountain. So, no doubt, has everyone who has ever heard of John Bancroft. Only today did I learn the reason. And it is so strange that I have decided to write down all I know concerning Bancroft, in the hope that, with all the particulars freshly before me, I may be enabled to understand.

I can recall having heard discussion of John Bancroft ever since I was old enough to notice anything. Even before I could puzzle over what was said of him, these sayings created within me an awed, half-apprehensive wonder.

His origin is enshrouded with the mystery shadowing the greater part of his life. He was apparently about two years old when he was left on the steps of an orphanage in a town ninety miles away from Millburn, where I live. As a child, he was reserved and moody, holding his own with any of the children among whom he was placed, but seeming not to care to join them in their games or friendships. His constant attempts to escape from the orphanage caused trouble which made his lot no easier. He had run away perhaps a dozen times before he was fourteen; and on the last occasion proved to have hidden himself so well that a week's search failed to locate him. Finally declining to concern themselves further with so intractable a charge, the orphanage officials left the matter in the hands of the sheriff, who, being of indolent disposition, decided to leave well-enough alone-at least until the lad had done something to make his recapture a necessity.

From that time, John Bancroft became an outlaw in so far as ordinary citizenship was concerned. In all the country visible from the top of Mount Arden could be found no one who had failed to hear rumors of him. He was about sixteen years of age when I was born. Even then people connected most mysterious happenings with his little-known life.

No normal boy could hear so much of Bancroft without wishing to see him. But his

few appearances in Millburn offered me no chance of having my hopes fulfilled in that respect. Usually he visited the general store at midnight of a Saturday—long after my parents had constrained me to retire—and stayed only long enough to obtain the supplies he required. Always somber and taciturn on these occasions, he spoke of nothing upon which idlers could conjecture; and it is little wonder that stories of his supposed misdemeanors lack sound evidence to support them.

Disregarding the warnings of my elders, as I passed from childhood to puberty, I used every available opportunity to attempt contact with the mysterious figure dominating my more thoughtful moods. Long hours were spent in lonely jaunts among the trees with which the cast and south slopes of Mount Arden are forested, for I heard that Bancroft often spent months there—months during which he was never seen. But my campfires must have warned him, for he stayed apart from those places wherein I hoped to find him.

My twelfth birthday had passed before I saw him. With a campfire in mind, I was gathering dry twigs from along the bank of the stream which runs through the woods. I had thought myself alone in that part of the forest, and was surprised to hear voices at no great distance. Running quickly toward the sounds, I parted the bushes and stared, fascinated, at the most dominating figure I had ever seen.

1 knew at once that it must be John Bancroft. Slightly over six feet in height, I judged him, compactly built, yet seeming slender and poised for ready action. Had it not been for the breadth and thickness of his shoulders, his head would have appeared massive. At the moment, it was inclined a little forward from an upright position on the well-molded column of his neck. His face was tense: jaw outthrust; nostrils of his long, straight nose distended; dark eyes flashing; lips compressed into a firm line.

"Get away from that dam!" he had said. I looked for the cause of his command. Tom Waters, a transient well-known in the district, was standing beside a dam recently constructed by a family of beavers. In his hands was a long pole. With this he had demolished their house of mud and twigs, and it was apparent that only Bancroft's arrival had halted the destruction of the dam.

That Waters was in an ugly humor I knew at once from the sullen glare with which he stared at Bancroft. His eyes were bloodshot, probably from a recent drinking bout. In a truculent tone he snarled: "They been muddyin' up the creek for days, now, an' I'm gonna stop them if I have to kill them all!"

"You're going to get out of here! And if I catch you near this place again, I'll boot you out of the country! Get out!"

"You seem to think you own this place! Why, you oughtta be in jail right now! I got as much right around here as you have. An' I'll bust this dam if I like!"

Waters placed the pole against the top of the dam and began pushing it into the stream. At once, Bancroft leaped. Twisting the pole from the other's grip, he hurled it away. Blocking the blow Waters launched, he grasped the tramp by an arm and a

leg, braced himself, whirled–and Tom, after describing an irregular arc in his flight, plunged flounderingly into the stream. He was carried downstream by the current, and when he came to the surface I saw that his face was contorted with pain. The force with which he was flung seemed to have broken his leg, for he trailed it uselessly as he tried to make the shore.

Barely had I noticed this when I heard a second splash. Bancroft had leapt into the water and was swimming toward the tramp. Disregarding the man's frantic struggles, he towed him ashore. After wringing most of the water from their clothing, Bancroft shouldered the tramp, who had fainted from pain, and started for the village four miles westward around the base of the mountain.

I had not been noticed. Camping plans forgotten, I followed Bancroft at a respectful distance. Only once on the long journey did he pause for rest; and my admiration for his strength increased with every step he made.

My father, Dr. Johnson, was the village physician. Bancroft carried Waters right to the door of my home on the outskirts of the village, and I dashed forward to open it.

"Thanks, kid," he said, smiling as he saw me for the first time. "Get the doctor, will you?"

At that moment, my father, who had heard us, entered the room. Bancroft laid his burden on the couch and, turning, said laconically, "Broken leg, I think." As Father bent to examine the tramp, Bancroft beckoned me outside.

"My name's Bancroft, if the doctor wants to know. Give him this." He extended a ten-dollar bill, a lot of money in those days. "If Waters wants to see me, he'll know where to find me."

There was no sign of fatigue in his upright figure as he walked away. I stared after him until he was out of sight, too overcome by the tremendous events of the afternoon to move or speak. But within myself I sensed a new dignity. I knew Bancroft-he had spoken to me!

I started as I heard my father's voice behind me.

"Where has he gone?"

I pointed toward the path rounding the base of the mountain. Then I handed him the money and told him what Bancroft had said.

"He's a queer man," he muttered, half to himself. To me he said: "Waters' leg was only dislocated. He'll be walking around pretty soon." He turned to go into the house.

The following day I chanced to see Waters boarding a train. He limped heavily, but with the aid of a crude staff, he moved about quite easily. I never saw him again. Months later, people noticed his absence; and when they heard of how Bancroft had

brought him to my father, their discussion of the incident soon gave rise to the rumor that he had persecuted the tramp until the man had fled the district in terror. This rumor was on a par with others concerning Bancroft, and since it merely heightened his appearance of mystery, I said nothing to reveal the truth of the matter.

For a long time, I basked in the limelight at school, for I could boast to my fellows of knowing the man who was, in the minds of us all, our ideal.

Six years passed before I saw Bancroft again. Of these one was passed in school at home, one in a preparatory school in the East, and the remaining four were spent in Berlin, where I pursued certain studies that my father felt were necessary to my education.

While I was in Europe, my mother died. To the usual strangeness of homecoming after a long absence was added a sense of loss at realization that life would no longer hold the brightness that she had given it. My father was changed; he seldom joined in the social activities which had formed a part of his life while Mother lived, but spent his time alone in his library–this room in which 1, too, have learned to ponder mysteries.

On the second evening after my return to Millburn, I caught sight of Bancroft. He was hastening along the main street, and turned toward the home of the Reverend Wilson. Burning with curiosity, I took the first opportunity to ask my father what had occurred to lure Bancroft away from his beloved forest.

He was seated in an easy chair before the huge fireplace, resting after his day's rounds. The fact that he was not reading told me that his daily grind must have placed a severe tax upon his failing vitality. Though I felt that I had intruded upon him at a time when he wished to be alone, he smiled thoughtfully and showed an immediate interest in the subject of my question.

"Never got over your enthusiasm for Bancroft, eh?" he asked. "Let's see, now. He was about sixteen when you were born. You're eighteen now. That makes him thirty-four. And for nineteen years Bancroft has been a cause for wonder among the people of this village. He's been vaguely accused of almost everything but murder, yet I cannot recall a single instance wherein his guilt has been more than a matter of hearsay. It speaks a great deal for the man's personality that interest in him, so seldom fed by anything tangible, has never died in that time. I think it may be that people like to blame anything they don't understand upon the man of whom they know the least.

"Well, things have altered in the last year or so. I've heard that it began when Johnny Parker got lost and Bancroft found him and took him to school. Reverend Wilson's niece, Alice Gray, has been teaching there for about two years. Though a quiet little creature, she's the prettiest girl living around here. I was a bit surprised when Bancroft started calling on her–she's not the type I should have thought would attract him. And I respect Bancroft for his choice.

"But I was even more surprised to discover that Alice returned his interest. His qualities are exactly the opposite of those which one might expect would recommend him to her. Her influence is changing Bancroft. Just the other day I heard that he had started a homestead on the other side of the mountain. I suppose they'll be married soon, and then people will have to find someone else upon whom to blame things that mystify them."

It was as though I had found to be an illusion something in which I had had perfect faith. The wish to reflect upon Bancroft's new interests stayed with me for many days. Wandering through the forest one warm, bright afternoon, I found myself near the dam where I had first seen him. It had remained undisturbed through the years and I wondered how much it owed its immunity to the watchfulness and care of Bancroft.

Feeling drowsy after a while, I sought a shady spot beneath a tree at no great distance, and lay down. When I awoke, a glance at my wrist-watch told me that it was after six o'clock. I sat up, thinking to hasten home before supper should be served. It was then that I noticed Bancroft and Alice Gray seated upon a mossy bank above the dam. I could not move without disclosing my presence, yet I could hardly remain where I was. While I hesitated, their voices came to me.

So softly that I barely heard the word, Alice whispered, "Yes."

Bancroft sprang to his feet. Grasping her arms near the shoulders, as one might grasp a child, he swung her to a standing position before him.

"Alice–" he choked. "Alice–you mean you'll marry me?"

Suddenly his arms were around her.

And I have never in all my life seen so much happiness in a man's face. I turned away as he bent to kiss her.

Alice said something I did not hear. Bancroft's reply came to me: "Of course, darling. I understand."

I dared not move as she walked away toward the top of the mountain. Bancroft took the path leading to the village and I followed, expecting to cut ahead of him at some fork in the way. No bypath could I discover, however, so I was forced to follow him or face his questions should I attempt to pass.

In half an hour, we rounded the base of the mountain. Bancroft stopped and faced about, looking up to its great bald crest. I, too, looked up. Outlined against the blue sky, face and figure glorified by the rosy light of sunset, Alice looked westward. Somehow I understood. She was revealing her happiness to the setting sun, looking upon it as though it were carrying away the years of her maidenhood.

The picture she presented was so beautiful that I could not look away. Her long white dress billowed in the light breeze and her golden hair, which she had unbound,

tumbled in waves almost to her knees. She was in full sight of the village far below, but it did not exist in her consciousness at that moment. Her face was calm, yet it glowed with an inner fire that would have astonished the friends who thought her so colorless. And in spite of her utter abandonment to emotion, a sweet dignity seemed to permeate her entire being. I was about to look at Bancroft when I sensed that Alice was in shadow. As I re-focussed my attention upon her, I saw that her face had lost its wondrous color. Her eyes opened wide, and she seemed about to scream in fright. No sound came to us, however, for she—disappeared.

I can say nothing to make my meaning clearer. She disappeared.

Bancroft cried out as though his heart were being torn from his body. Eyes fixed where she had stood, he started up the steep side of the mountain. Through bushes, over slopes of shale, along shelves of rock, ever ascending, he climbed. I ran to the ravine directly under the place where the mountain crest was out-thrust. And though I searched for hundreds of yards about, I found no trace of Alice. It was hardly to be expected that I should, for I had not seen her fall.

Some hours later, most of the men of the village had joined the search. After two days during which no slightest clue was found, the search was continued only intermittently. Men knew it was hopeless in the face of the known circumstances. And they could make nothing of my attempt to explain the shadow that had been cast upon Alice. Old folk whispered of eery beings; superstitious tales raged rampant about the country and many theories were advanced; but none of these things served to produce an explanation of the mystery.

For a month, Bancroft haunted the mountain, searching, ever searching. People spread the rumor that his mind was affected by his loss, for he rested little, and was abroad at his eternal search both day and night. All in the village wondered and speculated. People truly mourned, for Alice was beloved of all, but their sympathy for Bancroft was tempered by a reserved wonder concerning what he might do. They could not forget that he was still the man of mystery.

One night he disappeared. Amid the most terrific storm ever experienced in that part of the land, he silently went away. None saw him go; and for ten years no word of him was heard.

A day came, after the passing of the decade had made of him little more than a memory, when talk of him once more was bruited about the country. Early one morning, when fog was rising along the Mountainside, an awe-stricken farmer came to Millburn, bearing an almost incredible story of Bancroft's return. With the speed of lightning, the word spread.

My father had died a few years previously. I had married and had taken over his practice, all thought of a specialist's life being forgotten in the demands of my small, but growing family. But even the intervening years and their events had not served to erase my wonder of Bancroft; and so I hurried to gather the news.

The farmer said that Bancroft was standing erect upon the crest from which Alice had disappeared. And upon his face was graven the awful patience of one who is determined to deny, for centuries if need be, any thought of things other than that for which he waits. Only his eyes were alive, it seemed, and they, piercingly intent, held burning visions.

When the mist enshrouding the mountain crest had dissipated, it was seen that the farmer had spoken truly. In bold relief, Bancroft stood out against the sky. Beside him was a huge post, its lower part embedded in the rock.

As all were watching, Fred Barnes, proprietor of the hotel, ran up, waving a slip of paper. At once he was the center of attention. He told of finding the note under the door of the hotel, together with a sum of money to make possible the fulfillment of its requirements. He was to deliver supplies at regular intervals so long as they might be required, to a cave in the side of the mountain near where Bancroft stood.

For twenty-five years, Bancroft has stayed upon the mountain. Only for half an hour at noon and at midnight does he go to his cave for food or to care for himself. No one has ever noticed him asleep, but, since he must sleep, I think it is in snatches, as he leans against the mighty post beside him. And late at night his shadowy figure has been seen to stretch and bend as he flexes all his muscles that they may not atrophy. But the greater part of his time is spent in standing motionless beside the post, gazing westward with eyes that see nothing, yet ever seem to search for the concrete image of an inner vision.

In these years, John Bancroft has become more than a legendary figure. To the region he surveys, he is symbolic of changelessness. Many people claim that he wields a mighty power through a contract with shapes of darkness. In greater degree than when he roamed the forests of the mountain, but always more obscurely, his name is linked with mysterious happenings. But time has made it clear that the bare fact of his existence forms a much more absorbing topic of conversation than any tale.

His hair and beard grew long and thick. His body became thicker-set and more solidly powerful as the years advanced. He simply donned new clothing as the old was worn away by the elements. Discarding all but the essentials of life, he seemed to live only for the unknown purpose which binds him to his vigil. And the world, ignored, soon thought no more of Bancroft, the man; he was considered, instead, as a phenomenon.

But this afternoon something happened to bring an explanation of Bancroft. I have known awe since I first heard of him. Now I know an indefinable something–perhaps worship of a very rare kind-that binds my soul in wonder of him. I cannot think of him without feeling uplifted in mind, yet every thought of him brings me unutterable sadness, overwhelming sorrow. His life is devoted to something sublime, yet pitifully hopeless. What heights and depths of emotion he must have felt–must yet feel!

I was driving past the railway station when I saw, descending from a westbound train, a very old man with a long white beard, accompanied by one apparently his servant, also a man of ripe years. No sooner had these left the train than the bearded man gestured to his companion, who handed him a pair of field glasses. Seeking a point of vantage, the old man trained them on the crest of Mount Arden. Scarcely were the glasses focussed, however, than they were let fall from the nerveless hands of their owner, who stood swaying for a moment, then would have fallen had it not been for the supporting arms of the servant.

I hastened forward to proffer aid. The old man, his body rigidly unconscious, seemed to have suffered from shock. Placing him in my car with the servant's help, I was asked to drive him to the hotel, where rooms had been engaged. There he was made comfortable, and I busied myself with the task of bringing him back to consciousness. This proved more difficult than I had expected, but he revived in half an hour. He seemed very weak, so I had him swallow a sleeping potion, promising to return early in the evening.

On my return to the hotel, I found my patient much stronger, though still abed. He was glad to discover that I spoke German. Motioning the servant from the room, he at once leaned confidentially toward me and began talking swiftly.

"Tell me," he demanded. "Who is the man on the mountain-top? I must know."

I told him. He shrank a little, as though with fear, yet it seemed as if I had only confirmed something he had known.

"Tell me of him. Everything you know. Leave out nothing, however little of moment it may seem to you."

When I had finished a recital of what I knew, the old man sat silent for many minutes. Finally he whispered, "Twenty-five years! My God!" Suddenly he grasped my arm. "Tell me: Why, do you think, does he stay upon the mountain?"

I shook my head. "Perhaps he wishes to die where Alice disappeared. But I cannot explain his vitality, if that is so. It would seem that with death as his hope, he should waste away, instead of growing stronger year by year. I do not know."

"But I know, my friend. I know. For twenty years I have searched for John Bancroft. And now that I have found him, I realize that I can do nothing. It is too late —much too late. Twenty-five years! A generation of life in the world of men! What would he do if he should leave the mountain? All things would be strange to him—if, indeed, he yet retains some remnant of mortal reason. No! On the mountain he must stay. I see that now. Ali, God! That I should ever have been born!"

He shook in the grip of his emotions. His pulse was rapid, uneven. I tried to calm him, but he would not heed.

"Listen!" he commanded. "I will tell you what I know, for it is not right that such a

man should live unhonored by those who know him. The whole world should know of him! Ali, God!" he groaned again. "That I should have been the cause of such a thing! But I could not guess! And I–am I wholly to blame? Surely–" his voice broke with emotion.

"Twenty-five years! Listen–you are an educated man. At least you will know enough of such things to understand what I say. I will explain as much as I can, but–man knows so little! What is all man's knowledge but a warped, twisted view of a tiny section of All? How can he hope to explain happenings depending upon factors of whose very existence he can scarcely conceive? But I will try.

"Almost twenty-six years ago, it was. I, a professor in a German university, well known, respected, a learned man! What irony! Yet it was so. And when people wished to know things, they came to me, for they called me a philosopher and a man of science. Even a stranger in Germany might hear of me, if he sought information. So John Bancroft heard, and came to see me.

"Ali, how I remember that night! How often I have lain awake, recalling every detail, every word and sound and thought! Bancroft–how straight and tall and-brooding he seemed. From my first sight of him, I think I sensed how much this night would mean to me. His dark eyes, darting glances here and there as if looking-searching for something–made me wonder how they would look if they should see the object of their quest. I felt a thrill of awe, and braced myself for–I knew not what. But I felt that I must be alert.

"He told me something of himself and of the disappearance of Alice Gray. And then I listened to tales of his travels up and down and around the world, ever searching for Alice or for someone who could explain her disappearance. I think that he had never given up hope that she might have been transported to some far part of the world through some sorcery or means beyond his ken. No country exists in which he had not travelled, a tireless, somber figure... In my search for him in after years mention of him was always as 'the Searcher.' It soon became my guide...

"But when his story of wanderings and strange adventure was finished, he had his question to ask me: 'Can you explain the disappearance of Alice Gray?' And his eyes demanded the answer that I was reluctant to give."

The old professor paused, and his eyes were pleading. "You must understand that Bancroft and I had agreed that no human agency was responsible for Alice's–going. Since nothing is supernatural, that, too, we eliminated. There remained only the natural explanation–and that is so terrible that I shrank from revealing it to Bancroft; I feared for his reason. Still fearing, I tried to make my explanation convince him that such an occurrence was not unusual–indeed, such seemingly inexplicable disappearances do occur, if rarely–and thus lessen the horror of it. So I made my statement as complete as I could.

"To be given serious consideration, any conception of the universe as man senses it

must give some explanation, however problematical, both of the intangible, as represented by thought, and of the tangible or substantial, as our senses represent matter. For this, as well as for more practical reasons, man has postulated the existence of a universal medium, neither so fine as thought nor so gross as even the finest constituent particles of matter. This medium is termed variously the ether of space, the luminiferous-light-bearing-ether, absolute space, or the continuum. While imperceptible through our five senses or by means of instruments constructed with the intention of making it apparent, our power of reasoning has led us to accredit the ether, representing the body of the universe, with certain physical qualities, particularizing it to explain all conceivable universal processes or phenomena. To approach this ideal, the ether is claimed to be a genuine entity, filling all space without break or cavity–likely an incompressible, continuous fluid in a state of fine-grained, vortex motion; the vehicle of light and gravitation; the instrument for cohesion, chemical affinity, electric and magnetic forces of attraction and repulsion for every kind of mechanical force.

"Many eminent scientists have denied the existence of the ether. Others have stated the necessity of a number of ethers. Learned men have spent years of their lives in theoretical contemplation of the ether as they conceived it. In such contemplation they have considered phenomena whose known occurrence is incompatible with the qualities attributed to the ether. And an instance of such an occurrence is the disappearance of Alice Gray.

"Consider the circumstances: at one moment she is visible; at the next, with only the impermanence of a shadow to announce the change, she is invisible and no trace of her can be discovered. One cannot deny the existence of some state or agency bringing about this happening. And so one must take exception to the present ideal conception of the ether, at least in so far as its being perfectly continuous, without break or cavity, is concerned.

"Perhaps the first to elaborate theory of the presence of absolute vacua, or cavities in the etheric body, was a Dr. Hern who lived in Leipzig during the last century. Certain thinkers have agreed substantially with his conclusions. Granting the ether all the qualities I have mentioned, with the exception of absolute continuity, we must visualize the cavities as 'holes' which, containing no ether, possess no etheric qualities or properties. in such a vacuum, light could not exist or manifest itself; gravitation would be unknown; no conceivable action, force, quality or thing would naturally exist. Even to attempt to term such a cavity a nonentity would be to give a meaning which it would not, in fact, possess. It defies analysis, or the power of thought as man exercises it.

"In so dense a plenum as the ether, how could such cavities come into being? It is impossible, in the very nature of things, to prove any theory of their origin, but I think they are formed in the very hearts of the hottest stars. In these stars, tremendous pressures prevail, and almost inconceivably powerful forces are present. These forces are so great as to lead scientists to believe that they annihilate matter,

changing it into the form of radiation. In the processes of such transformation, these forces take advantage of the vortex motion of the ether, stressing its elasticity until small, individual vortices are formed. The motion of the outer boundaries of these vortices is so swift as to generate a centrifugal force great enough to fling the ether away from their 'cores.' Such vortices become vacua, varying in extent.

"After their escape from the stars, they travel through space at various speeds in the general direction of the etheric flow, whirring so swiftly that they bear light in curves around their boundaries, making themselves indiscernible through any observation of light phenomena in space. These 'travelling holes' occasionally come close to bodies of matter. Usually their motion causes them to rebound from fixed material bodies, but sometimes particles of substance are caught up in the whirl of the vacuum and carried off into sidereal space. This, I think, is what happened to Alice Gray.

"Standing atop the mountain, she was situated in a place favorable to the action of the vacuum as it swept along through space. Quite likely, the very edge of the vacuum caught her up, engulfing her and bearing her away. The shadow in which she seemed just before she disappeared would have been formed because of the interruption of the path of sunlight directly before her. It is scarcely to be wondered that Alice was terror-stricken. To see the sun blotted out instantly, while around her she could sense that all was as light as usual, must have shaken her severely. But she had not time to cry out before she was carried off.

"You will have realized from my explanation just why her fate is so awful. In the vacuum, neither life nor death could be, for they are processes dependent upon the action of forces of which none prevail in these cavities. She is doomed to wander through space, perhaps for all eternity, until the suns are dead worlds and the universe is nothing. Even if she should be precipitated out upon some spatial body, who can say what that body might be? She cannot live; she cannot die; she cannot think or move or exercise any of her senses. If she is cast out of the cavity, it will seem to her as though scarcely a second had passed, regardless of the aeons that may have flown. That is, unless there are laws whose existence is undreamed of in man's philosophy. Who can say?

"I said nothing of these conjectures to Bancroft, saying no more after explaining how she was carried off. But he guessed my thoughts. I was unprepared for his reaction. As though, possessing the power, I had damned his soul, he glared at me in horror. Struggling to retain his senses at thought of so awful a fate having taken Alice, he finally managed to gasp, 'Will she never be carried back to earth?' some of his horror communicated itself to me. 'Perhaps there is one chance in eternity,' I said, and attempted to explain that the vortex motion of the etheric drift might carry the hole back to earth at some era in cosmic time, but he seemed to have heard only what I said of 'one chance,' for into his face flashed a firm resolve, and he turned and ran from the room.

"I could not get him out of my mind. For over five years I fought the conviction that I would never know peace until I knew what became of him. And then I set out to

search the world for him. He had not told me, and since I knew the English language only from studies in a German university, I could not guess his place of origin. People here have taken him so much for granted that no word of him has reached the outer world, and until now, I searched in vain. And now I have found him—too late."

The old man sank back among the pillows, a faraway look in his eyes. I sat, stunned by this revelation, for many minutes. My thoughts were in chaos: a woman passing through all aeons of eternity in a split second! a man whose transcendent love... At last I arose and left the hotel, for I could not bear to speak. He did not notice my departure.

The storm has come while I have thought and wondered. And Bancroft still stands upon the mountain. There he will stay, I know, hoping that the awful fate that carried her from life will yet relent and bring Alice back to the world known of men. When, and if, that time comes, and the vacuum has descended upon him, it may not suffer him to rescue her; it may demand that he share his love's timeless, eternal voyagings into the Unknown.

The End

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