

THE SKY WAS FULL OF SHIPS By THEODORE STURGEON

*They tried Gordon Kent for murder—but it was impossible to find
those who were really responsible for the curious crime!*

SYKES died, and after two years they tracked Gordon Kemp down and brought him back, because he was the only man who knew anything about the death. Kemp had to face a coroner's jury in Switchpath, Arizona, a crossroads just at the edge of the desert, and he wasn't too happy about it, being city-bred and not quite understanding the difference between "hicks" and "folks."

The atmosphere in the courtroom was tense. Had there been great wainscoted walls and a statue of blind Justice, it would have been more impersonal and, for Kemp, easier to take. But this courtroom was a crossroads granger's hall in Switchpath, Arizona.

The presiding coroner was Bert Whelson, who held a corncob pipe instead of a gavel. At their ease around the room were other men, dirt-farmers and prospectors like Whelson. It was like a movie short. It needed only a comedy dance number and somebody playing a jug.

But there was nothing comic about it.

These hicks were in a position to pile trouble on Kemp, trouble that might very easily wind up in the gas chamber.

The coroner leaned forward. "You got nothin' to be afeard of, son, if your conscience is clear."

"I still ain't talking. I brought the guy in, didn't I? Would I of done that if I'd killed him?"

The coroner stroked his stubble, a soft rasping sound like a rope being pulled over a wooden beam.

"We don't know about that, Kemp. *Hmm*. Why can't you get it through your head that nobody's accusing you of anything? You're jest a feller knows something about the death of this here Alessandro Sykes. This court'd like to know exactly what happened."

He hesitated, shuffled.

"Sit down, son," said the coroner.

That did it. He slumped into the straight chair that one of the men pushed up for him, and told this story.

* * *

I guess I better go right back to the beginning, the first time I ever saw this here Sykes.

I was working in my shop one afternoon when he walked in. He watched what I was doing and spoke up.

"You Gordon Kemp?"

I said yes and looked him over. He was a scrawny feller, prob'ly sixty years old and wound up real tight. He talked fast, smoked fast, moved fast, as if there wasn't time for nothin', but he had to get on to somethin' else. I asked him what he wanted.

"You the man had that article in the magazine about the concentrated atomic torch?" he said.

"Yeah," I told him. "Only that guy from the magazine, he used an awful lot of loose talk. Says my torch was three hundred years ahead of its time." Actually it was something I stumbled on by accident, more or less. The ordinary atomic hydrogen torch—plenty hot.

I figured out a ring-shaped electro-magnet set just in front of the jet, to concentrate it. It repelled the hydrogen particles and concentrated them. It'll cut anything—anything. And since it got patented, you'd be surprised at the calls I got. You got no idea how many people want to cut into bank vaults an' the side doors of hock shops. Well, about Sykes. . . .

I told him this magazine article went a little too far, but I did have quite a gadget.

I give him a demonstration or two, and he seemed satisfied. Finally I told him I was wasting my time unless he had a proposition.

He's lookin' real happy about this torch of mine, an' he nods.

"Sure. Only you'll have to take a couple of weeks off. Go out West. Arizona. Cut a way into a cave there."

"Cave, huh?" I said. "Is it legal?" I didn't want no trouble.

"Sure it's legal," he tells me.

"How much?"

He says he hates to argue.

"If you'll get me into that place—and you can satisfy yourself as to whether it's legal—I'll give you five thousand dollars," he says.

NOW, five thousand berries cuts a lot of ice for me. Especially for only two weeks' work. And besides. I liked the old guy's looks. He was queer as a nine-dollar bill, mind you, and had a funny way of carryin' on, but I could see he was worth the kind of money he talked.

He looked like he really needed help, too. Aw, maybe I'm just a boy scout at heart. As I say, I liked him, money or no money, and chances are I'd have helped him out for free.

He came to see me a couple more times and we sweated out the details. It wound up with him and me on the train and my torch and the other gear in the baggage car up front. Maybe some of you remember the day we arrived here. He seemed to know a lot of people here. Mm? I thought so. He told me how many years he had been coming out to Switchpath

He told me lots of things. He was one of the talkin'est old geezers I ever did see. I understood about one ninth of what he said. He was lonely. I guess. I was the first matt he ever called in to help him with his work, and he spilled the overflow of years of work-in' by himself.

About this Switchpath proposition, he told me that when he was just a punk out of college, he was a archyologist roamin' around the desert lookin' for old Indian stuff, vases and arrowheads and such stuff. And he run across this here room in the rock, at the bottom of a deep cleft.

He got all excited when he told me about this part of it. Went on a mile a minute about plasticine ages and messy zorics and pally o' lithographs or something. I called him down to earth and he explained to me that this room was down in rock that was very old—a couple of hundred thousand years, or maybe a half million.

He said that rock had been there either before mankind had a start here on earth, or maybe about the same time as the missing link. Me, I don't care about dead people or dead people's great grandfather's, but Sykes was all enthusiastic.

Anyhow, it seems that this cave had been opened by some sort of an earthquake or something, and the stuff in it must have been there all that time. What got him excited was that the stuff was machinery of some kind and must have been put there *'way before there was any human beings on earth at all!*

That seemed silly to me. I wanted to know what kind of machinery.

"Well," he says, "I thought at first that it was some sort of a radio transmitter. Get this," he says. "Here is a machine with an antenna on top of it, just like a micro-wave job. And beside it is another machine.

"This second machine is shaped like a dumbbell standing on one end. The top of it is a sort of covered hopper, and at the waist of the machine is a arrangement of solenoids made out of some alloy that was never seen before on this earth.

"There's gearing between this machine and the other, the transmitter. I have figured out what this dumb-bell thing is. It's a recorder."

I want to know what is it recording. He lays one finger on the side of his nose and winks at me.

"Thought," he says. "Raw thought. But that isn't all. Earthquakes, continental shifts, weather cycles, lots more stuff. It integrates all these things with thought."

I want to know how he knows all this. That was when he told me that he had been with this thing for the better part of the last thirty years. He'd figured it out all by himself. He was real touchy about that part

of it.

Then I began to realize what was the matter with the poor old guy. He really figured he had something big here and he wanted to find out about it. But it seems he was a ugly kid and a shy man, and he wanted to make the big splash all by himself. It wouldn't do for him just to be known as the man who discovered this thing.

"Any dolt could have stumbled across it," he'd say. He wanted to find out everything there was about this thing before he let a soul know about it. "Greater than the Rosetta Stone," he used to say. "Greater than the nuclear hypotheses." Oh, he was a great one for slinging the five-dollar words.

"And it will be Sykes who gave this to the world," he would say. "Sykes will give it to humanity, complete and provable, and history will be reckoned from the day I speak."

Oh, he was wacky, all right. I didn't mind, though. He was harmless, and a nicer little character you'd never want to meet.

FUNNY guy, that Sykes. What kind of a life he led I can only imagine. He had dough—inherited an income or something, so he didn't have the problems that bother most of the rest of us. He would spend days in that cavern, staring at the machines. He didn't want to touch them. He only wanted to find out what they were doing there. One of them was running.

The big machine, the dumbbell-shaped one, was running. It didn't make no noise. Both machines had a little disk set into the side. It was half red, half black. On the big machine, the one he called the recorder, this here disk was turning. Not fast, but you could see it was moving. Sykes was all excited about that.

On the way out here, on the train, he spouted a lot of stuff. I don't know why. Maybe he thought I was too dumb to ever tell anybody about it. If that's what he thought, he had the right idea. I'm just a grease-monkey who happened to have a bright idea. Anyway, he showed me something he had taken from the cave.

It was a piece of wire about six feet long. But wire like I have never seen before or since. It was about 35 gauge—like a hair. And crooked. Crimped, I mean. Sykes said it was magnetized too. It bent easy enough, but it wouldn't kink at all, and you couldn't put a tight bend in it. I imagine it'd dent a pair of pliers.

He asked me if I thought I could break it. I tried and got a gash in my lunch-hook for my trouble. So help me, it wouldn't break, and it wouldn't cut, and you couldn't get any of those crimps out of it. I don't mean you'd pull the wire and it would snap back. No. You couldn't pull it straight at all.

Sykes told me on the train that it had taken him eight months to cut that piece loose. It was more than just tough. It fused with itself. The first four times he managed to cut it through, he couldn't get the ends apart fast enough to keep them from fusing together again.

He finally had to clamp a pair of steel blocks around the wire, wait for enough wire to feed through to give him some slack and then put about twelve tons on some shears to cut through the wire. Forged iridium steel, those cutters were, and that wire left a heck of a hole in them.

But the wire parted. He had a big helical spring hauling the wire tight, so that the instant it parted it was snapped out of the way. It had to be cut twice to get the one piece out, and when he put the ends together they fused. I mean, both on the piece he took out and the two free ends in the machine—not a mark, not a bulge.

Well, you all remember when we arrived here with all that equipment, and how we hired a car and went off into the desert. All the while the old man was happy as a kid.

"Kemp, my boy," he says, "I got it decoded. I can read that tape. Do you realize what that means? Every bit of human history—I can get it in detail. Every single thing that ever happened to this earth or the people in it.

"You have no idea in what detail that tape records," he says. "Want to know who put the bee on Alexander the Great? Want to know what the name of Pericles' girl friend really was? I have it all here. What about these Indian and old Greek legends about a lost continent? What about old Fort's fireballs? Who was the man in the iron mask? I have it, son, I have it."

That was what went on all the way out there, to that place in the dry gulch where the cave was.

You wouldn't believe what a place that was to get to. How that old guy ever had the energy to keep going back to it I'll never know. We had to stop the car about twenty miles from here and hoof it.

The country out there is all tore up. If I hadn't already seen the color of his money I'd 'a said the heck with it. Sand an heat an big rocks an' more places to fall into and break your silly neck—*Lord!*

Me with a pack on my back too, the torch, the gas and a power supply and all. We got to this cleft, see, and he outs with a length of rope and makes it fast to a stone column that's eroded nearby. He has a slip-snaffle on it. He lowers himself into the gulch and I drop the gear down after him, and then down I go.

Brother, it's dark in there. We go uphill about a hundred and fifty yards, and then Sykes pulls up in front of a facing. By the light of his flash I can see the remains of a flock of campfires he's made there over the years.

"There it is," he says. "It's all yours, Kemp. If that three-hundred-years-in-the-future torch of yours is any good—prove it."

I unlimbered my stuff and got to work, and believe me it was hard. slow goin'. But I got through. It took nine hours before I had a hole fit for us to crawl through, and another hour for it to cool enough so's we could use it.

ALL that time the old man talked. It was mostly bragging about the job he'd done decoding the wire he had. It was mostly Greek to me.

"I have a record here, he says, swishin' his hunk of wire around, "of a phase of the industrial revolution in Central Europe that will have the historians gnashing their teeth. But have I said anything? Not me. Not Sykes!

"I'll have the history of mankind written in such detail, with such authority, that the name of Sykes will go into the language as a synonym for the miraculously accurate." I remember that because he said it so much. He said it like it tasted good.

I remember once I asked him why it was we had to bother cutting in. Where was the hole he had used?

"That, my boy." he says. "is an unforeseen quality of the machines. For some reason they closed themselves up. In a way I'm glad they did. I was unable to get back in and I was forced to concentrate on my sample. If it hadn't been for that, I doubt that I would ever had cracked the code."

So I asked him what about all this—what were the machines and who left them there and what for? All this while I was cutting away at that rock facing. And, man! I never seen rock like that. If it was rock, which, now, I doubt.

It come off in flakes, in front of my torch. *My* torch, that'll cut anything. Do you know that in those nine hours I only got through about seven and a half inches of that stuff? And my torch'll walk into laminated bank vaults like the door was open.

When I asked him he shut up for a long time, but I guess he wanted to talk. He sure was enthusiastic. And besides, he figured I was too dumb to savvy what he was talking about. As I said before, he was right there. So he run off about it, and this is about how it went

"Who left these machines here or how they operate, we may never know. It would be interesting to find out, but the important thing is to get the records and decode them all."

It had taken him awhile to recognize that machine as a recorder. The tipoff was that it was running and the other one, the transmitter, was not.

"He thought at first that maybe the transmitter was busted, but after a year or two of examining the machines without touching them he began to realize that there was a gear-train waiting by the tape where it fed through the gismo that crimped it.

"This gear train was fixed to start the transmitter, see? But it was keyed to a certain crimp in the tape. In other words, when something happened somewhere on earth that was just the right thing, the crimper would record it and the transmitter would get keyed off.

Sykes studied that setup for years before he figured the particular squiggle in that wire that would

start that transmitter to sending. Where was it sending to? Why? Sure, he thought about that. But that didn't matter to him.

What was supposed to happen when the tape ran out? Who or what would come and look at it when it was all done? You know, he didn't care. He just wanted to read that tape, is all. Seems there's a lot of guys write history books and stuff. And he wanted to call them liars. He wanted to tell them the way it really was. Can you imagine?

So there I am, cutting away with my super-torch on what seems to be a solid wall made out of some stuff that has no right to be so tough. I can still see it.

So dark, and me with black goggles on, and the doc with his back to me so's he won't wreck his eyes, spoutin' along about history and the first unbiased account of it. And how he was going to thrust it on the world and just kill all those guys with all those theories.

I remember quitting once for a breather and letting the mercury cells juice up a bit while I had a smoke. Just to make talk I ask Sykes when does he think that transmitter is going to go to work.

"Oh," he says. "It already did. It's finished. That's how I knew that my figuring was right. That tape has a certain rate through the machine. It's in millimeters per month. I have the figure. It wouldn't matter to you. But something happened a while ago that made it possible to check. July sixteenth, nineteen hundred and forty-five, to be exact"

"You don't tell me," I says.

"Oh," he says, real pleased, "but I do! That day something happened which put a wiggle in the wire there—the thing I was looking for all along. It was the crimp that triggered the transmitter. I happened to be in the cave at the time.

"The transmitter started up and the little disk spun around like mad. Then it stopped. I looked in the papers the next week to see what it was. Nothing I could find. It wasn't until the following August that I found out." I suddenly caught wise.

"Oh—the atom bomb! You mean that rig was set up to send something as soon as an atomic explosion kicked off somewhere on earth!"

HE NODDED his head. By the glare of the red-hot rock he looked like a skinny old owl.

"That's right. That's why we've got to get in there in a hurry. It was after the second Bikini blast that the cave got sealed up. I don't know if that transmission is ever going to get picked up.

"I don't know if anything is going to happen if it is picked up. I do know that I have the wire decoded and I mean to get those records before anybody else does."

If that wall had been any thicker I never would've gotten through. When I got my circle cut and the cut-out piece dropped inside, my rig was about at its last gasp. So was Sykes. For the last two hours he'd been hoppin' up an' down with impatience.

"Thirty years' work," he kept saying. "I've waited for this for thirty years and I won't be stopped now. Hurry up! Hurry up!"

And when we had to wait for the opening to cool I thought he'd go wild. I guess that's what built him up to his big breakdown. He sure was keyed up.

Well, at last we crawled into the place. He'd talked so much about it that I almost felt I was comin' back to something instead of seeing it for the first time.

There was the machines, the big one about seven feet tall, dumb-bell shaped, and the little one sort of a rounded cube with a bunch of macaroni on top that was this antenna he was talking about.

We lit a pressure lantern that flooded the place with light—it was small, with a Hoot about nine by nine—and he jumped over to the machines.

He scrabbles around and hauls out some wire. Then he stops and stands there looking stupid at me.

"What's the matter, Doc?" I say. I called him Doc.

He gulps and swallows.

"The reel's empty. It's empty! There's only eight inches of wire here. Only—" and that was when he fainted.

I jumped up right away and shook him and shoved him around a little until his eyes started to blink.

He sits up and shakes himself.

"Refilled," he says. He is real hoarse. "Kemp! They've been here!"

I began to get the idea. The lower chamber is empty. The upper one is full. The whole set-up is arranged to run off a new recording. And where is Sykes' thirty years' work?

He starts to laugh. I look at him. I can't take that. The place is too small for all that noise. I never heard anybody laugh like that. Like short screams, one after the other, fast. He laughs and laughs.

I carry him out. I put him down outside and go back in for my gear. I can hear him laughing out there and that busted-up voice of his echoing in the gulch. I get everything onto the back pack and go to put out the pressure lantern when I hear a little click.

It's that transmitter. The little red and black disk is turning around on it. I just stand there watching it. It only runs for three or four minutes. And then it begins to get hot in there.

I got scared. I ducked out of the hole and picked up Sykes. He didn't weigh much. I looked back in the hole. The cave was lit up. Red. The machines were cherry-red, straw-color, white, just that quick. They melted. I saw it. I ran.

I don't hardly remember getting to the rope and tying Sykes on and climbing up and hauling him up after me. He was quiet then, but conscious. I carried him away until the light from the gulch stopped me. I turned around to watch.

I could see a ways down into the gulch. It was fillin' up with lava. It was lightin' up the whole desert. And I never felt such heat. I ran again.

I got to the car and dumped Sykes in. He shifted around on the seat some. I asked him how he felt. He didn't answer that but mumbled a lot of stuff.

Something like this.

"They knew we'd reached the atomic age. They wanted to be told when. The transmitter did just that. They came and took the recordings and refilled the machine.

"They sealed off the room with something they thought only controlled atomic power could break into. This time the transmitter was triggered to human beings in that room. Your torch did it, Kemp—that three-hundred-years-in-the-future torch! They think we have atomic power! They'll come back!"

"Who, doc? Who?" I says.

"I don't know," he mumbles. "There'd be only one reason why someone—some creature—would want to know a thing like that. And that's so they could stop us."

I laughed at him. I got in and started the car and laughed at him.

"Doc," I said. "we ain't goin' to be stopped now. Like the papers say, we're in the atomic age if it kills us. But we're in for keeps. Why, humanity would have to be killed off before it'd get out of this atomic age."

"I know that. Kemp—I know—that's what I mean! What have we done? What have we done?"

After that he's quiet a while and when I look at him again I see he's dead. So I brought him in. In the excitement I faded. It just didn't look good to me. I knew nobody would listen to a yarn like that.

There was silence in the courtroom until somebody coughed, and then everyone felt he had to make a sound with his throat or his feet. The coroner held up his hand.

"I kin see what Brother Kemp was worried about. If that story is true I, for one, would think twice about tellin' it."

"He's a liar!" roared a prospector from the benches. "He's a murderin' liar! I have a kid reads that kind of stuff, an' I never did like to see him at it. Believe me, he's a-goin' to cut it out *as* of right now. I think this Kemp feller needs a hangin'!"

"Now, Jed!" bellowed the coroner. "If we kill off this man we do it legal, hear?" The sudden hubbub quieted, and the coroner turned to the prisoner.

"Listen here, Kemp—somethin' jest occurred to me. How long was it from the time of the first atom blast until the time that room got sealed up?"

"I dunno. About two years. Little over. Why?"

"An' how long since that night you been talking about, when Sykes died?"

"Or was murdered," growled the prospector.

"Shut up, Jed. Well, Kemp?"

"About eighteen mon— No. Nearer two years."

"Well, then," said the coroner, spreading his hands. "If there was anything in your story, or in that goofy idea of the dead man's about someone comin' to kill us off—well, ain't it about time they did?"

There were guffaws, and the end of the grange hall disappeared in a burst of flame. Yelling, cursing, some screaming, they pushed and fought their way out into the moonlit road.

The sky was full of ships.

Next Issue: Complete Novelets by WILLIAM FITZGERALD, GEORGE O. SMITH and HENRY KUTTNER – plus many other stories!