

DAYMARES

Frederic Brown

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GATEWAY TO DARKNESS

THERE WAS this Crag, and he was a thief and a smuggler and a murderer. He'd been a spaceman once and he had a metal hand and a permanent squint to show for it. Those, and a taste for exotic liquors and a strong disinclination for work. Especially as he would have had to work a week to buy one small jigger of even the cheapest of the fluids that were the only things that made life worthwhile to him. At anything he was qualified to do, that is, except stealing, smuggling and murder. These paid well.

He had no business in Albuquerque, but he got around. And that time they caught him. It was for something he hadn't done, but they had proof that he did it. Proof enough to send him to the penal colony of Callisto, which he wouldn't have minded too much, or to send him to the psycher, which he would have minded very much indeed.

He sat on the bed in his cell and worried about it, and about the fact that he needed a drink. The two worries went together, in a way. If they sent him to the psycher, he'd never want a drink again, and he wanted to want a drink.

The psycher was pretty bad. They used it only in extreme cases, partly because they hadn't perfected it yet. Sometimes—statistically about one time out of nine—it drove its subject crazy, stark raving crazy.

The eight times out of nine that it worked, it was worse. It *adjusted* you; it made you normal. And in the process it killed your memories, the good ones as well as the bad ones, and you started from scratch.

You remembered how to talk and feed yourself and how to use a slipstick or play a flute—if, that is, you knew how to use a slipstick or play a flute before you went to the psycher. But you didn't remember your name unless they told you. And you didn't remember the time you were tortured for three days and two nights on Venus before the rest of the crew found you and took you away from the animated vegetables who didn't like meat in any form and especially in human form. You didn't remember the time you were spacemad, the time you went nine days without water, the time—well, you didn't remember anything that had ever happened to you.

Not even the good things.

You started from scratch, a different person. And Crag thought he wouldn't mind dying, particularly, but he didn't want his body to keep on walking around afterwards, animated by a well-adjusted stranger, who just wouldn't be *he*.

So he paced up and down his cell and made up his mind that he'd at least try to kill himself before he'd let them strap him into the psycher chair, if it came to that.

He hoped that he could do it. He had a lethal weapon with him, the only one he ever carried, but it would be difficult to use on himself. Oh, it could be done if he had the guts; but it takes plenty of guts to kill yourself with a bludgeon, even so efficient a one as his metal hand. Looking at that hand, though it was obviously of metal, no one ever guessed that it weighed twelve pounds instead of a few ounces. The outside layer was Alloy G, a fraction of the weight of magnesium, not much heavier, in fact, than balsa wood. And since you couldn't mistake the appearance of Alloy G, nobody ever suspected that under it was steel for strength and under the steel lead for weight. It wasn't a hand you'd want to be slapped in the face with. But long practice and the development of strength in his left arm enabled him to carry it as casually as though it weighed the three or four ounces you'd expect it to weigh.

He quit pacing and went to the window and stood looking down at the huge sprawling city of Albuquerque, capital of SW Sector of North America, third largest city in the world since it had become the number one spaceport of the Western Hemisphere.

The window wasn't barred but the transparent plastic of the pane was tough stuff. Still, he thought he could hatter through it with one hand, if that hand were his left one. But he could only commit suicide that way. There was a sheer drop of thirty stories from this, the top floor of the SW Sector Capitol Building.

For a moment he considered it and then he remembered that it was only probable, not certain, that they'd send him to the psycher. The Callisto penal colony—well, that wasn't so good, either, but there was always at least a remote chance of escape from Callisto. Enough of a chance that he wouldn't jump out of any thirtieth-story windows to avoid going there. Maybe not even to avoid staying there.

But if he had a chance, after being ordered to the psycher, it would be an easier way of killing himself than the one he'd thought of first.

A voice behind him said, "Your trial has been called for fourteen-ten. That is ten minutes from now. Be ready."

He turned around and looked at the grille in the wall from which the mechanical voice had come. He made a raspberry sound at the grille—not that it did any good, for it was strictly a one-way communicator—and turned back to the window.

He hated it, that sprawling corrupt city out there, scene of intrigue—as were all other cities—between the Guilds and the Gilded. Politics rampant upon a field of muck, and everybody, except the leaders, caught in the middle. He hated Earth; he wondered why he'd come back to it this time.

After a while the voice behind him said, "Your door is now unlocked. You will proceed to the end of the corridor outside it, where you will meet the guards who will escort you to the proper room."

He caught the distant silver flash of a spaceship coming in; he waited a few seconds until it was out of sight behind the buildings. He didn't wait any longer than that because he knew this was a test. He'd heard of it from others who'd been here. You could sit and wait for the guards to come and get you, or you could obey the command of the speaker and go to meet them. If you ignored the order and made them come to you, it showed you were not adjusted; it was a point against you when the time came for

your sentence.

So he went out into the corridor and along it; there was only one way to go. A hundred yards along the corridor two uniformed guards were waiting near an auto-matic door. They were armed with holstered heaters.

He didn't speak to them, nor they to him. He fell in between them and the door opened by itself as they approached it. He knew it wouldn't have opened for him alone. He knew, too, that he could easily take both of them before either could draw a heater. A backhand blow to the guard on his left and then a quick swing across to the other one.

But getting down those thirty stories to the street would be something else again. A chance in a million, with all the safeguards between here and there.

So he walked between them down the ramp to the floor below and to the door of one of the rooms on that floor. And through the door.

He was the last arrival, if you didn't count the two guards who came in after him. The others were waiting. The six jurors in the box; of whom three would be Guilders and three Gilded. The two attorneys—one of whom had talked to him yesterday in his cell and had told him how hopeless things looked. The operator of the recording machine. And the judge.

He glanced at the judge and almost let an expression of surprise show on his face. The judge was Jon Olliver.

Crag quickly looked away. He wondered what the great Jon Olliver was doing here, judging an important criminal case. Jon Olliver was a great man, one of the few statesmen, as against politicians, of the entire System. Six months ago Olliver had been the Guild candidate for Coordinator of North America. He'd lost the election, but surely he would have retained a more important niche for himself, in the party if not in the government, than an ordinary criminal judge's job.

True, Olliver had started his political career as a judge; four years ago he'd been on the bench the one previous time Crag had been arrested and tried. The evidence had, that time, been insufficient and the jury had freed him. But he still remembered the blistering jeremiad Olliver had delivered to him afterward, in the private conversation between judge and accused that was customary whether the latter was convicted or acquitted.

Ever since, Crag had hated Jon Olliver as a man, and had admired him as a judge and as a statesman, after Olliver had gone into politics and had so nearly been elected Coordinator.

But Coordinator was the highest position to which any man could aspire. The only authority higher was the Council of Coordinators, made up of seven Coordinators of Earth and four from the planets, one from each major planet inhabited by the human race. The Council of Coordinators was the ultimate authority in the Solar System, which, since interstellar travel looked a long way off, meant the ultimate authority in the known-to-be-inhabited universe. So it seemed almost incredible to Crag that a man who'd almost been a Coordinator should now, in the six months since his candidacy, have dropped back down to the unimportant job he'd held five years ago. But that was politics for you, he thought, in this corrupt age; an honest man didn't have a chance.

No more of a chance than he was going to have against this frameup the police had rigged against him.

The trial started and he knew he'd been right. The evidence was there on recording tapes; there were no witnesses—and it proved him completely guilty. It was false, but it sounded true. It took only ten minutes or so to run it off. The prosecuting attorney took no longer; he didn't have to. His own attorney made a weak and fumbling—but possibly sincere—effort to disprove the apparently obvious.

And that was that. The jury went out and stayed all of a minute, and came back. The defendant was found guilty as charged.

Judge Jon Olliver said briefly, "Indeterminate sentence on Callisto."

The technician shut off the recording machine; the trial was over.

Crag let nothing show on his face, although there was relief in his mind that it had not been the psycher. Not too much relief; he'd have killed himself if it had been, and death wasn't much worse than life on Callisto. And he knew that indeterminate sentence on Callisto meant life sentence—unless he

volunteered to be psyched. That was what an indeterminate sentence really meant; it gave the convicted his choice between a life sentence and the psycher.

A signal from the judge and the others began to leave. Crag did not move; he knew without being told that he was expected to wait for the customary private conversation with the judge. That always came after the sentencing and, in very rare cases, could make a change in the sentence. Sometimes, but not often, after private conversation with a prisoner a judge lessened or increased the sentence; he had power to do so up to twenty-four hours after his original pronouncement.

It was optional with the judge whether the guards remained; if he thought there was a possibility of the prisoner attempting physical violence, he could have them remain, with heaters ready, but back out of hearing range in a far corner of the room. That was what Olliver had done the last time Crag had appeared before him, after the acquittal. Undoubtedly it was because he had recognized the violence in Crag and had feared to provoke him by the things he was going to say.

But this time Oliver signaled to the guards to leave the room with the others.

Crag stepped forward. He thought, *I can reach across that bench and kill him easily.* He was tempted, simply by how easy it would be, even though he knew that it would mean the psycher-or his own private alternative.

Olliver said, "Don't do it, Crag."

Crag didn't answer. He didn't intend to, unless he found himself provoked beyond endurance by what he was going to have to hear. But he knew the best way to handle one of these interviews was to keep it strictly a one-way conversation by refusing to talk back. Silence might annoy Olliver, but it would not annoy him sufficiently to make him increase the sentence. And nothing he could say would make Olliver lessen it.

"You'd be sorry if you did, Crag. Because I'm not going to ride you this time. In fact, I'm going to make you a proposition."

What kind of a proposition, Crag wondered, could a judge want to make to a man he'd just sentenced to life on Callisto? But he didn't ask; he waited.

Olliver smiled. His face was handsome when he smiled.

He leaned forward across the bench. He said softly, "Crag, how would you like your freedom, and a million credits?"

CHAPTER TWO: ESCAPE TO DANGER

CRAG said hoarsely, "You're kidding. And if you are—"

He must have swayed forward or, without knowing it, started to lift his hand, for Olliver jerked back and his face was a bit white as he said "Don't" again, this time sharply.

And he went on, fast: "I'm not-kidding, Crag. A million credits, enough to keep you drunk the rest of your life. Freedom. And a chance to help humanity, to null the human race out of the bog into which it has sunk in this period of mankind's decadence. A rare chance, Crag."

Crag said, "Save that for your speeches, Judge. The hell with humanity. But I'll settle for my freedom and a million. One thing, though. This trial was a frameup. I didn't do it. Was it *your* frameup?"

Olliver shook his head slowly. He said, "No, not mine. But I rather suspected it was framed. The evidence was too good. You don't leave evidence like that, do you, Crag?"

Crag didn't bother to answer that. He asked, "Who did it, then?"

"The police, I imagine. There's an election coming up—and the Commissioner's office is elective. A few convictions like yours will look good on the records. You're pretty well known, Crag, in spite of the fact that there's never been a conviction against you. The newscasts from the stations on the Gilded side are going to give Commissioner Green plenty of credit for getting you."

It sounded logical. Crag said, "I know what I'm going to do with part of my freedom, then."

Olliver's voice was sharp again. "Not until after, Crag. I don't care what you do—after the job I want you to do for me. You agree to that?"

Crag shrugged. "Okay. What's the job?" He didn't really care what it was, or even how risky it was.

For the difference between life on Callisto and freedom and a million, he couldn't think of anything he wouldn't do. He'd try it even if there was one chance in a thousand of his pulling it off and staying alive.

Olliver said, "This isn't the time or place to tell you about it; we shouldn't talk too long. You'll be a free man when we talk. That much comes first. The million comes afterwards, if you succeed."

"And if I turn down the job after you've let me go?"

"I don't think you will. It's not an easy one, but I don't think you'll turn it down for a million, even if you're already free. And there might be more for you in it than just money-but we won't talk about that unless you succeed. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough. But-I want to be sure about this fram-ing business. Do you mean to tell me it was just coinci-dence that you wanted me to do something for you and that I got framed and you sat on the case?"

Olliver smiled again. "It's a small world, Crag. And it's partly a coincidence, but not as much of a one as you think. First, you're not the only man in the system that could do what I want done. *You're one of several I had in mind. Possibly the best, I'll give you that. I was wondering how to contact one of you. And I saw your name on the docket and requested to sit on the case. You should know enough about law to know that a judge can ask to sit on a case if he has had previous experience with the accused."

Crag nodded. That was true, and it made sense.

Olliver said, "But to brass tacks; we shouldn't be talk-ing much longer than this. I don't want any suspicion to attach to me when you escape."

"Escape?"

"Of course. You were judged guilty, Crag, and on strong evidence. I couldn't possibly free you legally; I couldn't even have given you a lighter sentence than I did. If I freed you now, you I'd be impeached. But I-or perhaps I should say we-can arrange for you to escape. Today, shortly after you're returned to your cell to await transportation to Callisto."

"Who's *we*?" Crag asked.

"A new political party, Crag, that's going to bring this world-the whole System-out of the degradation into which it has sunk. It's going to end the bribery and cor-ruption. It's going to take us back to old-fashioned de-mocracy by ending the deadlock between the Guilds and the Syndicates. It's going to be a middle-of-the-road party. We're going to bring honest government back and-he stopped and grinned boyishly. "I didn't mean to start a lecture. In which I suppose you aren't interested anyway. We call ourselves the Cooperationists."

"You're working under cover?"

"For the present. Not much longer. In a few months we come into the open, in time to start gathering support-votes-for the next elections." He made a sudden im-patient gesture. "But I'll tell you all this later, when we're at leisure. Right now the important thing is your escape.

"You'll be taken back to your cell when I give the signal that we're through talking. I'll put on the record that you were intransigent and unrepentant and that I am making no modification of your sentence. Within an hour from your return, arrangements for your escape will be made and you'll be told what to do."

"Told how?"

"By the speaker in your cell. They're on private, tap-proof circuits. A member of the party has access to them. Simply follow instructions and you'll be free by seventeen hours."

"And then? If I still want to earn the million?"

"Come to my house. It's listed; you can get the address when you need it. Be there at twenty-two."

"It's guarded?" Crag asked. He knew that houses of most important political figures were.

"Yes. And I'm not going to tell the guards to let you in. They're not party members. I think they're in the pay of the opposition, but that's all right with me. I use them to allay suspicion."

"How do I get past them, then?"

Olliver said, "If you can't do that, without help or advice from me, then you're not the man I think you are, Crag and you're not the man I want. But don't kill un-less you have to. I don't like violence, unless it's abso-lutely necessary and in a good cause. I don't *like* it even then, but--"

He glanced at his wrist watch and then reached out and put his fingers on a button on one side of the

bench. He asked, "Agreed?" and as Crag nodded, he pushed the button.

The two guards came back in. Oliver said, "Return the prisoner to his cell."

One on each side of him, they led him back up the ramp to the floor above and escorted him all the way to his cell.

The door clanged. Crag sat down on the bed and tried to puzzle things out. He wasn't modest enough about his particular talents to wonder why Olliver had chosen him if he had a dirty job to be done. But he was curious what dirty job a man like Olliver would have to offer. If there was an honest and fair man in politics, Olliver was that man. It must be something of overwhelming importance if Olliver was sacrificing his principles to expediency.

Well, he, Crag, certainly had nothing to lose, whether he trusted Olliver's motives or not. And he thought he trusted them.

He went back to the window and stood there looking down at the teeming city, thinking with wonder how greatly his fortunes had changed in the brief space of an hour and a half. That long ago he'd stood here like this and wondered whether to batter through the plastic pane and throw himself from the window. Now he was not only to be free but to have a chance at more money than he'd ever hoped to see in one sum.

When an hour was nearly up, he went over and stood by the speaker grille so he would not miss anything that came over it. One cannot ask questions over a one-way communicator, and he'd have to get every word the first time.

It was well that he did. The voice, when it came, was soft-and it was a woman's voice. From the window he could have heard it, but might have missed part of the message. "I have just moved the switch that unlocks your cell door," the voice said. "Leave your cell and walk as you did on your way to the courtroom. I will meet you at the portal, at the place where two guards met you before."

The cell door was unlocked, all right. He went through it and along the corridor.

A woman waited for him. She was beautiful; not even the severe costume of a technician could completely conceal the soft, lush curves of her body; not even the fact that she wore horn-rimmed spectacles and was completely without makeup could detract from the beauty of her face. Her eyes even through glass, were the darkest, deepest blue he had ever seen, and her hair-what showed of it beneath the technician's beret-was burnished copper.

He stared at her as he came near. And hated her, partly because she was a woman and partly because she was so beautiful. But mostly because her hair was exactly the same color as Lea's had been.

She held out a little metal bar. "Take this," she told him. "Put it in your pocket. It's radioactive; without it or without a guard with you who has one, every portal here is a death-trap."

"I know," he said shortly.

A paper, folded small, was next. "A diagram," she said, "showing you a way out along which, if you're lucky, you'll encounter no guards. In case you do-"

A pocket-size heater was the next offering, but he shook his head at that. "Don't want it," he told her. "Don't need it."

She put the gun back into her own pocket without protest, almost as though she had expected him to refuse it.

"One more thing," she said. "A visitor's badge. It won't help you on the upper three levels, but below that, it will keep anyone from asking you questions."

He took that, and put it on right away.

"Anything else?"

"Only this. Ten yards ahead, to your right, is a lava-tory. Go in there and lock the door. Memorize this diagram thoroughly and then destroy it. And remember that if you're caught, it will do no good to tell the truth; your word won't mean a thing against-you know whose."

He smiled grimly. "I won't be caught," he assured her. "I might be killed, but I won't be caught."

Their eyes locked for a second, and then she turned quickly without speaking again and went through a door behind her.

He went on along the corridor, through the portal. In the lavatory he memorized the diagram quickly but thoroughly and then destroyed it. He had nothing to lose by following orders implicitly.

There was another portal before he came to the ramp. The radioactive bar she'd given him prevented whatever deathtrap it concealed from operating.

He made the twenty-ninth level and the twenty-eighth without having met anyone. The next one, the twenty-seventh, would be the crucial one; the first of the three floors of cells and courtrooms. Despite that diagram, he didn't believe that there wouldn't be at least one guard between that floor and the one below, the top floor to which elevators went and the public-with visitor's permits-was allowed.

The ramp ended at the twenty-seventh floor. He had to go out into the corridor there, and to another ramp that led to the floor below. He felt sure there would be a guard at the door that led from the end of that ramp to freedom. And there was. He walked very quietly down the ramp. There was a sharp turn at the bottom of it and he peered around the turn cautiously. A guard was sitting there at the door, all right.

He smiled grimly. Either Olliver or the woman technician must have known the guard was there. It was only common sense that there'd be a guard at that crucial point, in addition to any deathtrap that might be in the door itself. Olliver didn't want him-unless he was good enough to do at least part of his own jailbreaking.

And, of all things, to have offered him a heater-gun. That would really have been fatal. There, right over the guard's head, was a hemispherical blister on the wall that could only be a thermocouple, set to give off an alarm at any sharp increase in temperature. A heater ray, whether fired by or at a guard, would give an immediate alarm that would alert the whole building and stop the elevators in their shafts. A fat lot of good that heater would have done him, and the gorgeous technician who'd offered it to him must have known that.

Crag studied the guard. A big, brutish man, the kind who would fire first and ask questions afterward, despite the visitor's badge Crag wore. And there was a heater in the guard's hand, lying ready in his lap. With a different type of man, or even with a ready-to-shoot type with a holstered heater, Crag could have made the six paces. But, with this guard, he didn't dare risk it.

He stepped back and quickly unstrapped the twelve-pound hand from his wrist and held it in his right hand. He stepped into sight, pulling back his right arm as he did so.

The guard looked up-Crag hadn't even tried to be silent-and started to raise the heater. It was almost, but not quite, pointed at Crag when the heavy artificial hand struck him full in the face. He never pulled the trigger of the heater. He'd never pull a trigger again.

Crag walked to him and got his hand back, strapping it on again quickly. He picked up the guard's heater, deliberately handling it by the barrel to get his finger-prints on it. They'd know who killed the guard anyway-and he'd rather have them wonder how he'd taken the guard's own weapon away from him and bashed his face in with it than have them guess how he *had* killed the guard. That method of killing was part of his stock in trade. A trade secret. Whenever he killed with it and there was time afterwards, he left evidence in the form of some other heavy blunt instrument that the police would think had been used.

He went through the door, using the key that had hung from the guard's belt, and whatever death-trap had been in the portal of it didn't operate. He could thank the girl technician for that much, anyway. She-or Olliver-had given him a fair break, knowing that without that radioactive bar, it would have been almost impossible for him to escape. Yes, they'd given him a fair chance.

Even if she hadn't told him to get rid of the bar here and now. It would have been had if he hadn't known that, outside of the sacred precincts, those bars sometimes worked in reverse and set off alarms in elevators or at the street entrance. The guards never carried theirs below the twenty-sixth level. So he got rid of the bar in a waste receptacle by the elevator shafts before he rang for an elevator. The waste receptacle might conceivably have been booby-trapped for radioactive bars. But he took a chance because he didn't want to put it down in plain sight. No alarm went off.

A few minutes later he was safely on the street, lost in the crowd and reasonably safe from pursuit.

A clock told him that it was now sixteen o'clock; he had six hours before his appointment with Olliver.

But he wasn't going to wait until twenty-two; the police might expect him to go to Olliver's house-not for the real reason he was going there, but to avenge himself on the judge who had sentenced him. As soon as he was missed, that house would be watched more closely than it was now. That was only common sense.

He looked up the address and took an autocab to within two blocks of it. He scouted on foot and spotted two guards, one at the front and one at the back. It would have been easy to kill either of them, but that would have defeated his purpose. It would definitely have fo-cused the search for him on Olliver's house.

Getting into the house to hide would be equally dan-gerous; before they posted additional guards they'd search thoroughly.

The house next door was the answer; it was the same height and the roofs were only ten feet apart. And it wasn't guarded. But he'd better get in now. Later there might be a cordon around the whole block.

He took a tiny picklock out of the strap of his artifi-cial hand: a bent wire as large as a small hairpin but as strong as a steel rod; and let himself in the door as casu-ally as a returning householder would use his key. There were sounds at the back of the house, but he drew no attention as he went quietly up the stairs. He found the way out to the roof but didn't use it yet. Instead, he hid himself in the closet of what seemed to be an extra, unused bedroom.

He waited out five hours there, until it was almost twenty-two o'clock, and then let himself out on the roof. Being careful not to silhouette himself, he looked down and around. There were at least a dozen more vehicles parked on the street before Olliver's house and in the alley back of it than there should have been in a neigh-borhood like this one. The place was being watched, and closely.

The big danger was being seen during the jump from one roof to the next. But apparently no one saw him, and he landed lightly, as an acrobat lands. The sound he made might have been heard in the upstairs room im-mediately below him, but no farther. His picklock let him in the door from the roof to the stairs and at the foot of them, the second floor, he waited for two or three min-utes until utter silence convinced him there was no one on that floor.

He heard faint voices as he went down the next flight of steps to the first floor. One voice was Olliver's and the other that of a woman. He listened outside the door and when, after a while, he'd heard no other voices, he opened it and walked in.

Jon Olliver was seated behind a massive mahogany desk. For once, as he saw Crag, his poker face slipped. There was surprise in his eyes as well as in his voice as he said, 'How in Heaven's name did you make it, Crag? I quit expecting you after I found the search was center-ing here. I thought you'd get in touch with me later, if at all.'

Crag was looking at the woman. She was the techni-cian who had given him his start toward freedom that afternoon. At least her features were the same. But she didn't wear the glasses now, and the technician's cap didn't hide the blazing glory of her hair. And, although the severe uniform she'd worn that afternoon hadn't hidden the voluptuousness of her figure, the gown she wore now accentuated every line of it. In the latest style, bare-midrified, there was only a wisp of material above the waist. And the long skirt fitted her hips and thighs as a sheath fits a sword.

She was unbelievably beautiful.

She smiled at Crag, but spoke to Olliver. She said, "What does it matter *how* he got here, Jon? I told you he'd come."

Crag pulled his eyes away from her with an effort and looked at Olliver.

Olliver smiled too, now. He looked big and blond and handsome, like his campaign portraits.

He said, "I suppose that's right, Crag. It doesn't matter how you got here. And there's no use talking about the past. We'll get to brass tacks. But let's get one more thing straight, first-an introduction."

He inclined his head toward the woman standing beside the desk. "Crag, Evadne. My wife."

CHAPTER THREE: EVADNI

CRAG almost laughed. It was the first time Olliver had been stupid. To think-Well, it didn't matter. He ignored it.

"Are we through horsing around now?" he asked.

Apparently Olliver either didn't recognize the archaic expression or didn't know what Crag meant by it. He raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean, Crag?"

"Making me take unnecessary risks just to show you how good I am."

"Oh, that. Yes, we're through horsing around. Pull up a chair, Crag. You sit down too, Evadne."

When they were comfortable, Olliver said, "First the background, Crag. You know the general political situation, but from the outside you probably don't know how bad it is."

"I know enough," Crag said.

"A two-party system, but both crooked. The only fortunate thing is the reasonably close balance of power between them. The Guilds-powerful organizations that evolved out of the workmen's unions of half a dozen centuries ago, pitted against the Syndicates-the Gilded-ruthless groups of capitalists and their reactionary satellites. The Guilds using intimidation as their weapon and the Gilded using bribery. Each group honeycombed with spies of the other-

"I know all that."

"Of course. A third party, a middle-of-the-road one, is now being organized, under cover. We must get a certain amount of capital and of power before we can come out into the open." He smiled. "Or they'll slap us down before we get really started."

"All I want to know," said Crag, "is what you want me to do. You can skip the build-up."

"All right. A certain man has a certain invention. He doesn't know it's valuable. I do. With that invention, our party could have unlimited funds. Billions. We've raised a war chest of several million among ourselves already. But it isn't enough. A party, these days, needs billions."

"Sounds simple," Crag said, "but have you offered the inventor the million you offered me?"

"He won't sell at any price. For one thing, he's immensely wealthy already, and a million wouldn't mean anything to him. For another, the thing is incidentally a weapon and it would be illegal for him to sell it."

"What do you mean, *incidentally* a weapon?" Crag looked at him narrowly.

"That's its primary purpose, what it was made to be. But it's not a very efficient weapon; it kills, but it takes too long. It takes seconds, and whoever you killed with it could get you before he died. And the range is very limited.

"Its real importance, which he does not realize, lies in a by-product of its action."

Crag said, "All right, that part's none of my business. But tell me who and where the guy lives and what I'm looking for."

Olliver said, "When the times comes, you'll get the details. Something comes first-for your protection and mine. You won't be able to do this job right if you're wanted by the police, being hunted. For one thing, it's not on Earth. And you know-or should-how tough it is to get off Earth if the police are looking for you."

"Tough, but it can be done."

"Still, an unnecessary risk. And anyway, I promised you your freedom as part of this deal. I meant your full freedom, not as a hunted man."

"And how do you expect to swing *that*?" Crag asked.

"With Evadne's help. She's a psyker technician."

Crag turned and looked at her again. It didn't make him like her any better, but it did surprise him. To be a psyker technician you had to have a degree in psychiatry and another in electronics. To look at Evadne you wouldn't think of degrees, unless they were degrees of your own temperature.

Olliver said, "Now don't get excited, Crag, when I tell you that I'm going to send you-with your consent-to the psyker. It'll be a short-circuited one, with Evadne running it; it won't have any effect on you at all. But Evadne will certify you as adjusted."

Crag frowned. "How do I know the machine will be shorted?"

"Why would we cross you up on it, Crag? It would defeat our own purpose. If you *were* adjusted,

you wouldn't do this job for me-or want to."

Crag glanced at the woman. She said, "You can trust me, Crag, that far."

It was a funny way of putting it and, possibly for that reason, he believed her. It seemed worth the gamble. If they thought he'd been through the psyker, he really would be free. Free to go anywhere, do anything. And otherwise he'd be hunted the rest of his life; if he was ever picked up for the slightest slip he'd be identified at once and sent to the psyker as an escaped convict. And without a psyker technician to render it useless.

Olliver was saying, "It's the only way, Crag. By tomorrow noon you'll be a free man and can return here openly. I'll hire you-presumably to drive my autocar and my space cruiser-and keep you here until it's time to do the little job for me. Which will be in about a week."

Crag decided quickly. He said, "It's a deal. Do I go out and give myself up?"

Olliver opened a drawer of the big desk and took out a needle gun. He said, "There's a better way. Safer, that is. You killed a guard, you know, and they might shoot instead of capturing you if you went out of here. I'll bring them in instead, and I'll have you already captured. You came here to kill me, and I captured you: They won't dare to shoot you then."

Crag nodded, and backed up against the wall, his hands raised.

Olliver said, "Go and bring them in, my dear," to Evadne.

Crag's eyes followed her as she went to the door. Then they returned to Olliver's. Olliver had raised the needle gun and his eyes locked with Crag's. He said softly, "Remember, Crag, she's my wife."

Crag grinned insolently at him. He said, "You don't seem very sure of that."

For a moment he thought he'd gone too far, as Olliver's knuckles tightened on the handle of the gun. Then the men were coming in to get him, and they held the tableau and neither spoke again.

He was back in jail, in the same cell, within half an hour. One thing happened that he hadn't counted on-although he would have realized it was inevitable if he'd thought of it. They beat him into insensibility before they left him there. Common sense-or self-preservation-made him wise enough not to raise his hand, his left hand, against them. He might have killed two or even three of them, but there were six, and the others would have killed him if he'd killed even one.

He came back to consciousness about midnight, and pain kept him from sleeping the rest of the night. At ten in the morning, six guards came and took him back to the same room in which he had been tried the day before. This time there was no jury and no attorneys. Just Crag, six guards, and Judge Olliver.

Sentence to the psyker was a formality.

Six guards took him back to his cell. And, because it was the last chance they'd have, they beat him again. Not so badly this time; he'd have to be able to walk to the psyker.

At twelve they brought him lunch, but he wasn't able to eat it. At fourteen, they came and escorted him to the psyker room. They strapped him in the chair, slapped his face a bit and one of them gave him a farewell blow in the stomach that made him glad he hadn't eaten, and then they left.

A few minutes later, Evadne came in. Again she was dressed as she had been when he'd first seen her. But this time her beauty showed through even more for, after having seen her dressed as she'd been the evening before, he knew almost every curve that the tailored uniform tried to hide. She wore the horn-rimmed glasses when she came in, but took them off as soon as she had locked the door from inside. Probably, Crag thought, they were only protective coloration.

She stood in front of him, looking down at his face, a slight smile on her lips.

She said, "Quit looking so worried, Crag. I'm not go-ing to psych you-and even your suspicious, unadjusted nature will admit I'd have no reason for lying about it now, if I intended to. I've got you where I'd want you, if I wanted you."

He said nothing.

Her smile faded. "You know, Crag, I'd hate to adjust you, even if this was a straight deal. You're a magnificent brute. I think I like you better the way you are, than if you were a mild-mannered cleric or elevator operator. That's what you'd be if I turned that thing on, you know."

"Why not unstrap me?"

"With the door locked, and with us alone? Oh, I'm not being femininely modest, Crag. I know you hate women I also know your temper, and I know how you've probably been treated since last night. I'd have to watch every word I said to keep you from slapping me down-left handed."

"You know about that?"

"Olliver-Jon-knows a lot about you."

"Then he must know I wouldn't hit a woman-unless she got in my way."

"But I might." She laughed. "And you'd have to let me strap you in again anyway. And that reminds me. You're supposed to be unconscious when I leave this room. You'll have to fake that. The guards come in and unstrap you. They take you to a hospital room until you come around."

"Helping me do so with rubber hose?"

"No, that's all over with. You'll be a new man-not the man who killed a guard yesterday. They won't have any resentment against you."

"How long am I supposed to be unconscious?"

"Half an hour to an hour. And *you* may leave as soon thereafter as you wish. Better stay an hour or two; most of them do. You're supposed to be a bit dazed when you come to, and to orient yourself gradually. And don't forget you're not supposed to remember your own name, or any crimes you've ever committed-or anything you've ever done, for that matter."

"Just like amnesia, huh?"

"Exactly like amnesia-and, besides that, all the causes of maladjustments are supposed to be removed. You're supposed to love everyone in particular and humanity in general."

Crag laughed. "And does a halo come with it?"

"I'm not joking, Crag. Take that idea seriously-at least until you're safely away from here. Don't act as though you still have a chip on your shoulder or they may suspect that something went wrong with the psycher -and send you back for another try. And I'll be off duty by then."

"If I don't remember who I am-I mean, if I'm supposed not to remember-isn't it going to be funny for me to walk out without being curious? Do they just let psyched guys walk out without a name?"

"Oh, no. Each one has a sponsor, someone who volun-teers to help orient them to a new life. Jon has volun-teered to be your sponsor and to give you a job. You'll be told that and given his address and cab fare to get there. He's supposed to explain things to you when you see him, to orient you."

"What if a guy would lam instead of going to his sponsor?"

"After the psycher, they're adjusted. They wouldn't. Remember, Crag, you've got to play it to the hilt until you're safe at our house. If anyone steps on your toe, apologize."

Crag growled, and then laughed. It was the first time he'd laughed-with humor-in a long time. But the idea of him apologizing to anyone for anything was so ridicu-lous he couldn't help it.

Evadne reached across his shoulder and did something; he couldn't tell what because his head was strapped against the back of the chair.

"Disconnected a terminal," she said. "I'll have to run the machine for a while; someone might notice that it isn't drawing any current."

She went to one side of the room and threw a switch. A low humming sound filled the room, but nothing hap-pened otherwise. Crag relaxed.

She was standing in front of him again. She said, "You know, Crag, I'm almost tempted to give you a partial psyching-just to find out what made you what you are."

"Don't start anything you don't finish," he said grimly. His right hand clenched.

"Oh. I know that. I know perfectly well that if I got any information from you under compulsion-as I could if I reconnected that terminal-I'd have to finish the job and adjust you or blank you out. Your ego wouldn't let me stay alive if I knew things about you that you'd told me involuntarily."

"You're smarter than I thought," he said.

"That isn't being smart, for a psychiatrist. Even a layman could guess that. But, Crag, you've got to tell me a few things."

"Why?"

"So I can turn in a report. I don't have to turn in a detailed one, but I must at least write up a summary."

I could fake it easily, but it just might be checked and fail to tally with some things about you that are already known. You can see that."

"Well-yes."

"For instance, the loss of your hand. That was back before you turned criminal, so the facts about it will be on record somewhere. And I'd be supposed to ask you about that because it may have been a factor in your turning against society."

"I guess it was," Crag said. "And, as you say, it's on record so there's no reason I shouldn't tell you. It hap-pened on the *Vega III*, when I'd been a spaceman eight years. It was a pure accident-not my fault or anyone else's. Just one of those things that happen. Mechanical failure in a rocket tube set it off while I was cleaning it.

"But they sprang a technicality on me and kept me from getting the fifty thousand credits compensation I was entitled to. Not only that, but took my license and rating away from me, turned me from a spaceman into a one-handed bum."

"What was the technicality?"

"Test for alcohol. I'd had exactly one drink-a stirrup cup, one small glass of wine-six hours before, which was two hours before we left Mars. Orders are no drinks eight hours before blast-off, and I hadn't drunk anything for longer than that, except that one drink. And it had nothing to do with the accident-nobody feels one glass of wine six hours after. But they used it to save themselves what I had coming."

"And after that?"

"After that I got kicked around a while until I started in to do my share of the kicking."

"That wouldn't have been very long," she said. It wasn't a question and he didn't answer it.

She said, "I know what crimes they know you com-mitted-without having been able to prove it. I'll say you confessed to them."

Crag shrugged. "Tell them what you like."

"Why do you hate women so much?"

"Is that personal curiosity? Or does it have to go in your report?"

She smiled. "As a matter of fact, both."

"I was married at the time I lost my job and my hand and my license. To a girl with hair like yours. Married only a few months and mad about her. Do I have to draw a diagram of what she did to me?"

She said soberly, "I can guess."

"You should be able to. You're more beautiful than she. And more evil."

Her face flamed and for a moment he thought she was going to strike him. But training told, and in seconds she was smiling again.

She said, "Not evil, Crag. Just ruthless, like you. I try to get what I want. But we're not psyching me, and it's time to end this now. Close your eyes and pretend to be unconscious."

He did. He heard her walk to the wall and throw the switch that shut off the machine. She came back and reconnected the terminal behind his shoulder, and still he kept his eyes closed.

He'd half-expected it, but it jarred him when it came. It was a kiss that should have wakened a statue, but- outwardly he took it with complete passiveness. He kept his own lips still.

And he hated her the more because the kiss brought to life in him things he'd thought were dead. And *he* knew that he'd hate her forever and probably kill her when he saw her again if, now, she laughed.

But she didn't laugh, or even speak. She left the room very quietly.

CHAPTER FOUR: NEW LIFE

A FEW MINUTES LATER the guards came. Only two of them this time; they weren't afraid of him now. They unstrapped him from the chair and carried him somewhere on a stretcher and rolled him off onto a bed.

When he was pretty sure that at least half an hour had gone by, he opened his eyes and looked around as though dazed. But the acting had been unnecessary; he was alone in a room. A few minutes

later a nurse looked in and found him sitting up.

She came on into the room. "How are you feeling, sir?"

Crag shook his head. He said, "I *feel* all right, but I can't seem to remember anything. Who I am, or how I got here-wherever here is."

She smiled at him and sat down on the chair beside the bed. "You've just had the equivalent of an attack of amnesia. That's all I'm supposed to tell you. But as soon as you feel equal to it, we'll send you to a man who will explain everything to you, and help you. Meanwhile, there's nothing for you to worry about. When you feel able to leave, come to the desk in the hall and I'll give you the address and money to get there."

Crag swung his feet off the bed. "I can go now," he said. But he made his voice sound uncertain.

"Please lie down and rest a while first. There's no hurry."

She went out, and Crag lay back down, obediently. He let another half hour pass and then went out into the corridor and to the desk. The nurse looked up at him and handed him a card and a ten-credit note. She said, "Please go to that address before you do anything else. Judge Olliver has a job for you and he will explain about your amnesia and tell you as much as it is necessary for you to know about your past."

He thanked her and went out, alert to watch his temper if any incident were staged to test him. But none was, although he was, he felt sure, watched to see whether he headed immediately for the atocab stand just outside the building and gave the address he'd been handed on the card-an address he already knew but pretended to read off the card to the cabby.

Twenty minutes later he walked up to the guard at Olliver's front door and asked if he might see the Judge. "Your name Crag?"

He almost said yes before he thought. "Sounds silly," he said, "but I don't know my name. I was sent here to find out."

The guard nodded and let him in. "He's waiting for you," he said. "Second door down the hall."

Crag entered the small room in which he'd talked to Olliver and Evadne the evening before. Only Oliver was "there now, at the desk.

"Everything go all right?" he asked.

Crag threw himself into a chair. "Perfect," he said, "except for two beatings up that weren't on the menu."

"You should feel it's worth that to be free, Crag. And now-you're still interested in earning that million?"

"Yes. But the price has gone up."

Olliver frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean besides that I want you to do a spot of research downtown and get me twelve names, and addresses for each. The six guards who put me in a cell last night and the six-they were different ones-who put me back in the cell after the trial this morning."

Olliver stared at him a moment and then laughed. He said, "All right, but not till after the job is over. Then if you're fool enough to want to look them up, it's your business, not mine."

"Which gets us to the job. Where is it, what is it, how long will it take."

"It's on Mars. We're going there in four days; I can't get away any sooner than that. I told you what it is-a job of burglary, but not a simple one. How long it takes depends on you; I imagine you'll need some prepara-tion, but if you can't do it in a few weeks, you can't do it at all."

"Fair enough," Crag said. "But if I've got that long to wait, how about an advance?"

"Again on a condition, Crag. I don't want you to get into any trouble before you've done the job. I want you to stay here. You can send out for anything you want."

Crag's short nod got him a thousand credits.

He needed sleep, having got none the night before because of pain from the first, and worst, beating. And every muscle in his body still ached.

But before he even tried to sleep he sent out for Mar-tian *tot*, and drank himself into insensibility.

He slept, then, until late afternoon of the next day. When he woke, he drank the rest of the liquor and then went downstairs, not quite steady on his feet and with his eyes bloodshot and bleary. But under control, mentally.

And it was probably well that he was, for in the downstairs hallway, he encountered Evadne for the first time since his return to Olliver's. She glanced at him and took in his condition, then passed him without speaking and with a look of cold contempt that-well, if he *hadn't* been under control mentally.

The next day he was sober, and stayed that way. He told himself he hated Evadne too much to let her see him otherwise. And after that he spent most of his time reading. He had breakfast and lunch alone, but ate dinner with Olliver and Evadne, and spent part of the evening with them.

He didn't mention the job again; it was up to Olliver, he thought, to bring that up. And Oliver did, on the evening of the third day.

He said, "We're going to Mars tomorrow, Crag. Forgot to ask you one thing. Can you pilot a Class AB space cruiser, or do I hire us a pilot?"

"I can handle one."

"You're sure? It's space-warp drive, you know. As I understand it, the last slip you worked on was rocket."

Crag said, "The last ship I flew legally was rocket. But how about a license, unless you want to land in a back alley on Mars?"

"You're licensed. If a license is invalidated for any reason other than incompetency, it's automatically re-newed if you've been readjusted through the psyker. And today I picked up a set of your license and a copy of the psyker certificate. After I got them, though, I remembered I didn't know whether you could handle space-warp."

Evadne said, "It doesn't matter, Jon. I'm licensed; I can handle the cruiser."

"I know, my dear. But I've told you; I do not think it safe to travel in space with only one person who is qualified to pilot the ship. Perhaps I'm ultra-conservative, but why take unnecessary risks?"

Crag asked, "Ready now to tell me about the job?"

"Yes. When we reach Mars, we'll separate. Evadne and I will stay in Marsport until you have accomplished your mission."

"Which is to be done where?"

"You've heard of Kurt Eisen?"

"The one who helped develop space-warp?"

"That's the one. He has his laboratory and home just outside Marsport. He's fabulously wealthy; it's a tremendous estate. About eighty employees, thirty of them armed guards. The place is like a fortress. It'll almost have to be an inside job-another good reason why you couldn't have handled it without a psyker certificate."

Crag nodded. "At least it will be easier if I can get in. And just what am I looking for after I get there?"

"A device that looks like a flat pocket flashlight. Blued steel cast. Lens in the center of one end, just like an atomic flashlight, but the lens is green and opaque-opaque to light, that is."

"You've seen it?"

"No. The party's source of information is a technician who used to work for Eisen. He's now a member of the party. He worked with Eisen in developing it, but can't make one by himself; he wasn't fully in Eisen's confidence-just allowed to help with details of design. Oh, and if you can get the plans, it'll help. We can duplicate the original, but it'll be easier from the plans. And one other thing. Don't try it out."

"All right," Crag said, "I won't try it out-on one condition. That you tell me what it is and what it does. Otherwise, my curiosity might get the better of me."

Olliver frowned, but he answered. "It's a disintegrator. It's designed to negate the-well, I'm not up on atomic theory, so I can't give it to you technically. But it negates the force that holds the electrons to the nucleus. In effect, it collapses matter into neutronium."

Crag whistled softly. "And you say it's an ineffective weapon?"

"Yes, because its range is so short. The size needed increases as the cube of the distance-or something astronomical like that. The one you're after works up to three feet. To make one

that would work at a hundred feet it would have to be bigger than a house. And for a thousand feet-well, there aren't enough of the necessary raw materials in the Solar System to build one; it would have to be the size of a small planet. And besides, there's a time lag. The ray from the disintegrator sets up a chain reaction in any reasonably homogeneous object it's aimed at, but it takes seconds to get it started. So if you shoot at somebody-at a few feet distance-they're dead all right, but they've got time to kill you before they find it out." Olliver smiled. "Your left hand is much more effective, Crag, and has about the same range."

"Then why is it worth a million credits to you?"

"I told you, the by-product. Neutronium."

Crag had heard of neutronium; every spaceman knew that some of the stars were made of almost completely collapsed matter weighting a dozen tons to the cubic inch. Dwarf stars, the size of Earth and the weight of the sun. But no such collapsed matter existed in the Solar System. Not that there was any reason why it shouldn't-if a method had been found to make atoms pack themselves solidly together. Pure neutronium would be un-believably heavy, heavier than the center of any known star.

"Neutronium," he said, thoughtfully. "But what would you use it for? How could you handle it? Wouldn't it sink through anything you tried to hold it in and come to rest at the center of the earth-or whatever planet you made it on?"

"You're smart, Crag. It would. You couldn't use it for weighting chessmen. I know how to capitalize on it-but that's one thing I don't think you have to know. Although I may tell you later, after you've turned over the disintegrator."

Crag shrugged. It wasn't his business, after all. A million credits was enough for him, and let Olliver and his party capitalize on neutronium however they wished. He asked, "Did this technician who worked for Eisen give you a diagram of the place?"

Olliver opened a drawer of the desk and handed Crag an envelope.

Crag spent the rest of the evening studying its contents.

They took off from Albuquerque spaceport the following afternoon and landed on Mars a few hours later. As soon as the cruiser was hangared, they separated, Crag presumably quitting his job with Olliver. He promised to report in not more than two weeks.

A man named Lane Knutson, was his first objective. He had full details about Knutson and an excellent description of him; that had been an important part of the contents of the envelope he had studied the final evening on Earth. Knutson was the head guard at Eisen's place and did the hiring of the other guards. According to Crag's information, he hung out, in his off hours, in spacemen's dives in the tough section of Marsport.

Crag hung out there, too, but spent his time circulating from place to place instead of settling down in any one. He found Knutson on the third day. He couldn't have missed him, from the description. Knutson was six feet six and weighed two hundred ninety. He had arms like an ape and the strength and disposition of a Venusian *draatr*.

Crag might have made friends with him in the normal manner, but he took a short cut by picking a quarrel. With Knutson's temper, the distance between a quarrel and a fight was about the same as the distance between adjacent grapes under pressure in a wine press.

Crag let himself get the worst of it for a minute or two, so Knutson wouldn't feel too bad about it, and then used his left hand twice, very lightly, pulling his punches. Once in the guts to bend the big man over, and then a light flick to the side of the jaw, careful not to break bone. Knutson was out cold for five minutes.

After that, they had a drink together and got chummy. Within half an hour Crag had admitted that he was looking for a job-and was promptly offered one.

He reported for work the following day and, after Knutson had shown him around, he was glad he hadn't decided to try the outside. The place really was a fortress. A twenty-foot-high electronic barrier around the outside; inside that, worse things. But it didn't matter, since he was already inside. Even so, he had to undergo a strenuous physical and verbal examination and Olliver had been right about the psycher

certificate; without it, he'd have been out on his ear within an hour.

He spent the next five days learning all the ropes. He knew where the big safe was-in the laboratory. But he wanted to learn the position of every guard and every alarm between the room in which he slept and the laboratory itself. Fortunately, he was given a day shift.

On the fifth night he made his way to the laboratory and found himself facing the blank sheet of durasteel that was the door of the safe. All his information about that safe was that the lock was magnetic and that there were two alarms.

He'd brought nothing with him-all employees were searched on their way in as well as on their way out-but all the materials he needed to make anything he wanted were there at hand in the laboratory. He made himself a detector and traced two pairs of wires through the walls from the safe into adjacent rooms and found the two alarms-both hidden inside air ducts-to which they were connected. He disconnected both alarms and then went back to the safe. On Eisen's desk near it, he'd noticed a little horseshoe magnet-a toy-that was apparently used as a paperweight. He got the hunch (which saved him much time) that, held in the proper position against that sheet of steel-six by six feet square-it would open the door.

And, unless it was exactly at one corner, there'd have to be a mark on the door to show where the magnet was to be held. The durasteel door made it easy for him; there weren't any accidental marks or scratches on it to confuse him. Only an almost imperceptible fly-speck about a foot to the right of the center. But fly-specks scrape off and this mark didn't-besides, there are no flies on Mars.

He tried the magnet in various positions about the speck and when he tried holding it with both poles pointing upward and the speck exactly between them, the door swung open.

The safe-it was a vault, really, almost six feet square and ten or twelve feet deep-contained so many things that it was almost harder to find what he was looking for than it had been to open the safe. But he found it. Luckily, there was a tag attached to it with a key number which made it easy to find the plans for the disintegrator in the file drawers at the back of the safe.

He took both disintegrator and plans to the workbenches of the laboratory. Eisen couldn't possibly have provided better equipment for a burglar who wished to leave a possible duplicate of whatever object he wanted to steal. And he'd even provided a perfectly sound-proofed laboratory so even the noisier of the power-tools could be used safely. Within an hour, Crag had made what, outwardly, was a reasonably exact duplicate of the flashlight-sized object he was stealing. It didn't have any insides in it, and it wouldn't have disintegrated anything except the temper of a man who tried to use it, but it looked good. He put the tag from the real one on it and replaced it in the proper drawer in the safe.

He spent a little longer than that forging a duplicate of the plans. Not *quite* a duplicate; he purposely varied a few things so that no one except Eisen himself could make a successful disintegrator from them.

He spent another hour removing every trace of his visit. He reconnected the alarms, removed every trace-except a minute shortage of stock-of his work in the laboratory, made sure that every tool was restored to place, and put back the toy magnet on the exact spot and at the exact angle on Eisen's desk that it had been before.

When he left the laboratory there was nothing to indicate that he had been there-unless Eisen should ever again decide to try out his disintegrator. And since he had tried it once and presumably discarded it as practically useless, that didn't seem likely.

There remained only the obstacle of getting it out of the grounds, and that was simple. One large upstairs room was a museum which held Eisen's collection of artifacts of the Martian aborigines. Crag had seen several primitive bows and quivers of arrows. He wrapped and fastened the plans around the shaft of a long, strong arrow and securely tied the disintegrator to its crude metal head. He went on up to the roof and shot the arrow high into the air over the electronic barrier and the strip of cleared ground outside it, into the thick jungle beyond.

It was almost dawn. He went back to his room and got two hours of needed sleep. The hard part was over. The little capsule he'd brought with him would take care of the rest of it.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE GLORY HUNTERS

HE TOOK the capsule as soon as the alarm buzzer awakened him, half an hour before he was to report for duty. It was the one thing he'd smuggled in with him, perfectly hidden in a box of apparently identical capsules containing neobenzedrine, the standard preventive of Martian amoebic fever. All Earthmen on Mars took neobenzedrine.

One of the capsules in Crag's box, though, contained a powder of similar color but of almost opposite effect. It wouldn't give him amoebic fever, but it would produce perfectly counterfeited symptoms.

He could, of course, simply have quit, but that might just possibly have aroused suspicion; it might have led to a thorough check-up of the laboratory and the contents of the safe. And he couldn't suddenly become disobedient in order to get himself fired. Psyched men didn't act that way.

The capsule took care of it perfectly. He started to get sick at his stomach. Knutson came by and found Crag retching out a window. As soon as Crag pulled his head back in, Knutson took a look at Crag's eyes; the pupils were contracted almost to pinpoints. He touched Crag's forehead and found it hot. And Crag admitted, when asked, that he'd probably forgotten to take his neobenzedrine for a few days.

That was that. There's no known cure for Martian amoebic fever except to get away from Mars at the first opportunity. He neither quit nor was fired. Knutson took him to the office and got his pay for him and then asked him whether he could make it back to Marsport by himself or if he wanted help. Crag said he could make it.

The search of his person and effects was perfunctory; he could probably have smuggled the tiny gadget and the single piece of paper out in his luggage, but the arrow had been safer.

Outside, as soon as jungle screened him from view, he took another capsule, one that looked just like the first but that counteracted it. He waited until the worst of the nausea from the first capsule had passed and then hid his luggage while he hunted for the arrow and found it.

Olliver had told him not to try it, but he tried it anyway. It wasn't exactly that he didn't trust Olliver--after all, if he got paid off, and he'd make sure of that, nothing else mattered--it was just that he was curious whether Olliver had told him the truth about the disintegrator's limitations.

He waited until he'd put a little more distance between himself and Eisen's place and then aimed the , gadget at a bush and tripped the thumb catch. He held it about four feet from the bush the first time and nothing happened. He moved it to about two feet from the bush and tripped the catch again. He thought for a while that nothing was going to happen, but after a few seconds the bush took on a misty look, and then, quite abruptly, it wasn't there any more.

Olliver had told the truth, then. The thing had an effective range of only about three feet, and there was a definite time lag.

The rest of the way into Marsport--afoot as far as the edge of town and by atocab the rest of the way--he tried to figure out what Olliver's use for neutronium might be. He couldn't. In the first place he couldn't see how Olliver could *get* the collapsed matter, the tons-to--a-square-inch stuff, once he'd disintegrated objects into it. The bush he'd tried it on hadn't seemed to collapse inward on itself; it had simply disintegrated all at once and the dead atoms of it had probably fallen through the crust of Mars as easily as rain falls through air.

He still hadn't figured an answer when he reached the swanky Marsport hotel where Olliver and Evadne were staying.

He had himself announced from the desk and then went up to Oliver's suite. Olliver, his face both eager and tense, let him in. He didn't ask the question, but Crag nodded.

Evadne, he saw as he walked past Olliver, was there. She was sitting on the sofa looking at him, her eyes enigmatic. Crag tried not to look at her. It was difficult. She was dressed even more revealingly than she had been dressed the first night he had seen her at Olliver's house in Albuquerque, back on Earth. And she looked even more beautiful.

Crag decided he wanted to get away from there, quick. He took the disintegrator and the folded plans from his pocket and put them on the table.

Olliver picked them up with unconcealed eagerness.

Crag said, "One million credits. Then we're through."

Olliver put gadget and paper in one pocket and took out a wallet from another. He said drily, "I don't carry a million in ready change, Crag. The bulk of it is back on Earth; I'll have to give it to you there. But so you won't worry or think I'm stalling, I did bring two hundred thousand credits with me. Eight hundred thousand's wait-ing for you back home."

Crag nodded curtly, and took the offered money. He counted it roughly and put it in his pocket. It was more money than he'd ever had or hoped to have in one chunk. He was set for life, even if he never got the rest.

He asked, "At your home? Shall I look you up there?"

Olliver looked surprised. "Why not come back with us? We're leaving at once, now that I have this. As soon as we can get clearance. We're making one brief stop-over-going one other place first, that is-but we'll be home within hours. You may have to wait days to get public transport, and you know all the red tape you'll have to go through."

It made sense, but Crag hesitated.

Olliver laughed. "Afraid of me, Crag? Afraid I'm go-ing to disintegrate you en route? To get my money back?" He laughed harder; there was almost hysterical amusement in the laughter. Obviously the gadget Crag had stolen for him excited him immensely. "You needn't worry, Crag. With this-" He slapped his pocket. "-a million credits is peanuts to mc."

From the sofa, Evadne's voice said with languid amuse-ment, "He isn't afraid of you, Jon. He's afraid of me."

Crag didn't look at her. He was watching Ollivers face and he saw amusement change to jealousy and anger.

Crag hadn't been afraid of Olliver. It had occurred to him only as a remote possibility that Olliver might try to kill him. Now, from the look on Olliver's face, his trying to kill Crag looked like a fair bet. Not, though, to get his money back.

Crag said, "All right, Olliver. I might as well go with you."

Deliberately he turned away from possible danger to lock glances with Evadne.

She was smiling at him.

They got to the spaceport within an hour and through the formalities of clearance before noon.

Crag didn't ask, "Well, where?" until he was in the pilot's seat of the little cruiser.

"Asteroid belt," Olliver told hhn.

"Where in the belt? What asteroid?"

"Doesn't matter. Any one big enough to land on."

Crag had lifted the computation shelf, ready to calcu-late distance and direction. He folded the shelf back; a jump of a hundred million miles, straight out from the sun, would put him in the middle of the belt. He set the controls, made the jump, and put the ship hack on man-ual control. His detectors would show the presence of any of the asteroids within ten million miles. They showed the presence of several right now.

He turned to Olliver. He said, "We're near Ceres. Four hundred eighty mile diameter. That one do?"

"Too big, Crag. It'd take days. Pick the smallest one you can land on."

Crag nodded and studied the other asteroids showing on the detector and picked the smallest of them. It wasn't much bigger than a fair-sized house but he could land on it. He did. Rather, he killed the inertia of the spaceship after pulling alongside the tiny asteroid and matching his speed to its. Ship and asteroid bumped to-gether, held by not much more than a pound of gravita-tional pull between them. Had the asteroid had an atmo-sphere, the ship would have floated in it, so slight was the attraction.

Olliver clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice work, Crag. Want to put on a spacesuit and come out to watch the fun?"

Crag locked the controls. "Why not?"

He saw now what Olliver intended to do-try out the disintegrator on the asteroid. And he saw now how Olliver could get neutronium. Disintegrating an asteroid was different from disintegrating an object

on the crust of a planet. Instead of falling through the crust, the asteroid would collapse within itself, into a tiny, compact ball of neutronium. Maybe the size of an apple or an orange. It could be loaded-

He stopped suddenly, half in and half out of the space-suit he had started to pull on. He said, "Olliver, you can't take it back with you. Sure, we can put it in the spaceship, but when we get back to Earth we can't land with it. Near Earth, it's going to weigh ten times-maybe twenty times-as much as the ship itself. It'll either tear a hole through the hull or crash us, one or the other."

Olliver laughed. He was picking up a thermoglass helmet but hadn't put it on yet. He said, "This is just a tryout, Crag. We're not taking any neutronium back with us."

Crag finished putting on the spacesuit. Olliver had his helmet on, and Evadne was adjusting hers. He couldn't talk to either of them, now, until he had his own helmet on. Then the suit-radios would take care of communication.

He saw now how neutronium could be obtained, all right. There were rocks a lot smaller than this one whizzing around the belt, ones that weighed only a few tons, that a spaceship could handle easily and transport back to Earth after they'd been converted into collapsed matter.

He didn't see, as yet, what practical use neutronium could have that would make it as immensely valuable as Oliver seemed to think it would be. But that wasn't his business.

He got his helmet on, and nodded that he was ready. Evadne was standing by the air controls and she pulled a switch when he nodded. A space cruiser as small as Olliver's never had an airlock; it was simpler, if one wished to leave it in space or on an airless body, to exhaust the air from the entire ship and let the airmaker rebuild an atmosphere after one returned to the ship-and before removing one's spacesuit.

Now, in the earphones of his helmet, he heard Olliver's voice say, "Come on. Hurry up." Olliver opened the door and the last of the air whished out. But then, before stepping out, Olliver went back past Crag to the con-trols. He turned the lock on them and put the small but quite complicated key into one of the capacious pockets of his spacesuit. The plans for the disintegrator, Crag knew, were in the innermost pocket of his jumper.

Crag wondered which one of them he distrusted, or if it was both. Not that it mattered.

Crag shrugged and stepped out onto the tiny asteroid. Evadne followed him, and then Olliver.

He heard Oliver take a deep breath and say, "Here goes."

Olliver was pointing the little disintegrator down at the rocky surface of the asteroid, bending over so it was only a foot from the rock. Crag couldn't hear the click, but he saw Olliver's thumb move the catch.

Crag asked, "How long will it take?"

"For something this size? I'd guess half an hour to an hour. But we won't have to wait till it's completely collapsed. When it's gone down enough that I'm sure-"

Crag looked about him, at the spaceship behind them, bumping gently against the surface of the asteroid, right at the shadow line that divided night and day. Strange that a world only twenty or thirty yards in diameter should have night and day-and yet darkness on the night side would be even denser than the darkness on the night side of Earth.

Time, Crag thought, and its relation to distance are strange on a world like this. If he walked twenty paces ahead and put himself right under distant, tiny Sol, it would be high noon. Thirty or forty more steps-held down to the light asteroid only by the gravplates on the shoes of the spacesuit-and he'd be in the middle of the night side; it would be midnight.

He chuckled at the fancy. "It's a small world," he said, remembering that Olliver had said that to him in the conversation between judge and prisoner at the end of the trial, the conversation that had led to all of this.

Olliver laughed excitedly, almost hysterically. "And it's getting smaller already-I think. Don't you, Crag, Evadne?"

Crag looked about him and tried to judge, but if there'd been any shrinkage as yet, he couldn't tell. He heard Evadne say, "I'm not sure yet, Jon."

Olliver said, "We can be sure in a few seconds. I've got a rule." He took a steel foot rule from one of the pockets of his spacesuit and laid it down on a flat expanse of rock. He picked up a loose bit of rock

and made a scratch opposite each end of the rule.

Evadne walked over near Crag. Her eyes, through the plastic of the helmet, looked into his intensely, search-ingly. He got the idea that she wanted to ask him a ques-tion and didn't dare-because Olliver would have heard it too-but was trying to find the answer by looking at him and reading his face. He met her gaze squarely, try-ing to guess what she was thinking or wondering. It hadn't anything to do, he felt sure just then, with the fact that he was a man and she a woman. It was something more important than that.

He heard Olliver's voice say, "*I think so. I think it's-Wait, let's be sure.*"

He turned away from Evadne and watched Olliver as Olliver watched the rule and the scratches on the rock. There was tension among them, but no one spoke. A minute or two went by, and then Olliver stood up and faced them.

His eyes were shining-almost as though with mad-ness-but his voice was calm now. He said, "It works." He looked from one to the other of them and then his eyes stopped on Crag. He said, "Crag, your million credits is waste paper. How would you like to be second in com-mand of the Solar System?"

For the first time, Crag wondered if Olliver were mad.

The thought must have showed in his face, for Olliver shook his head. "I'm not crazy, Crag. Nor do I know any commercial use for neutronium. That was camouflage.

Listen, Crag- *A few of these little gadgets set up in hidden places on each of the occupied planets, set up with radio controls so they can be triggered off from wherever I may be-that's all it will take.* If this works on an asteroid-and it has-it'll work on an object of any size. A chain reaction doesn't care whether it works in a peanut or a planet."

Crag said slowly, "You mean-"

"You might as well know all of it, Crag. There isn't any political party behind this. That was just talk. The only way peace can be kept in the system is by the rule of *one man*. But I'll need help, Crag, and you're the man I'd rather have, in spite of-" His voice changed. "Evadne, that's useless."

Crag looked quickly toward the woman and saw that she'd pulled a heater from the pocket of her spacesuit and was aiming it at Olliver. Olliver laughed. He said, "I thought it was about time for you to show your colors, my dear. I expected that, really. I took the charge out of that heater."

Evadne pulled the trigger and nothing happened. Crag saw her face go pale-but it seemed anger rather than fear.

She said, "All right, you beat me on that one, Jon. But someone will stop you, somehow. Do you realize that you couldn't do what you plan without destroying a planet or two-billions of lives, Jon-and that Earth itself would have to be one of the ones you destroyed? Because Earth is the-the fightingest one and wouldn't knuckle under to you, even on a threat like that? Jon, you'd kill off more than half of the human race, just to rule the ones who are left!"

She didn't drop the useless heater, but it hung at her side.

Olliver had one in his own hand now. He said, "Take it away from her, Crag."

Crag looked from one of them to the other. And he looked around him. The asteroid *was* shrinking. There was now a definite diminution in diameter, perhaps by a tenth.

Olliver spoke again and more sharply. "Take it away from her, Crag."

Olliver's blaster covered both of them. He could have killed Evadne where she stood; the command was mean-ingless, and Crag knew it was a test. Olliver was making him line up, one way or the other.

Crag thought of Earth, that he hated. And he thought of it as a dead little ball of heavy matter-and he didn't hate it that much. But to be second in command-not of a world, but of *worlds*—

Olliver said, "Your last chance, Crag. And listen-don't think I'm blind to you and Evadne. But I didn't care. She's been spying on me all along. I know the outfit she belongs to-a quixotic group that's trying to end system-wide corruption another way, a way that won't work. She's a spy, Crag, and I don't want her.

"Here are my final terms and you've got a few seconds to decide. Disarm her now, and I won't kill her. We'll take her back, and you can have her if you're silly enough to want her-out of billions of women

who'll be yours for the taking."

Maybe that was all it took. Crag decided.

Be reached for Evadne with his good hand, seeing the look of cold contempt in her eyes-and the puzzlement in her eyes as he swung her around instead of reaching for the useless gun she held. He said quickly, "*Night side!*" He propelled her forward ahead of him and then ran after her. He hoped Olliver's reflexes would be slow. They *had* to be.

On a tiny and shrinking asteroid, the horizon isn't far. It was a few steps on this one, and they were over it in less than a second. He heard Olliver curse and felt a wave of heat go past him, just too late. And then they were in the darkness.

He found Evadne by running into her and grabbed her and held on because there wasn't going to be much time. In seconds, Olliver would realize that he didn't have to come after them, that all he had to do was to get into the ship and warp off-or even just close the door and sit it out until they were dead. Even though Olliver wasn't a qualified pilot he could, with the help of the manual of instructions inside the ship, have a fair chance of getting it back to Earth or Mars.

So Crag said quickly, "I can stop him. But it's curtains for both of us, too. Shall I?"

She caught her breath, but there wasn't any hesitation in her answer. "Hurry, Crag. Hurry."

He ran on around the night side-ten steps-to the ship. He braced his feet as he lifted it and then threw it out into space-the whole pound weight of it. It seemed to go slowly, but it kept going. It would keep going for a long time, from that throw. It might come back, eventually, but not for hours-and the air in spacesuits of this type was good for only half an hour or so without processing or renewal.

Olliver would never rule a system now, only the tiniest world.

But all three of them were dead. He heard Olliver scream madly with rage and saw him come running over the horizon for a shot at him. Crag laughed and ducked back into blackness. He ran into Evadne, who had followed him. He caught her quickly as he crashed into her. He said, "Give me the heater, quick," and took it from her hand.

He could see Olliver standing there, heater in hand, just where the spaceship had been, peering into the darkness, trying to see where to shoot them. But he could see Olliver and Olliver, on the day side, couldn't see him.

He'd rather have had his metal hand to throw-he was used to using that and could hit a man's head at twenty or thirty feet. But the heater-gun would serve now; Olliver wasn't even ten feet away and he couldn't miss.

He didn't miss. The missile shattered Olliver's helmet.

Crag walked forward into the light, keeping between Evadne and Olliver so she wouldn't have to see. A man whose helmet has been shattered in space isn't a pleasant sight.

He reached down and got the disintegrator out of Olliver's pocket. He used it.

Evadne came up and took his arm as he stood there, looking upward, seeing a distant gleam of sunlight on an object that was still moving away from them. He wished now he hadn't thrown the spaceship so hard; had he tossed it lightly it might conceivably have returned before the air in his and Evadne's spacesuits ran out. But he couldn't have been sure he could get Olliver before Olliver, who had a loaded heater, could get him. And when the asteroid got small enough, the night side would no longer have been a protection. You can hide on the night side of a world-but not when it gets as small as a basketball.

Evadne said, "Thanks, Crag. You were-Is *wonderful* too hackneyed a word?"

Crag grinned at her. He said, "It's a wonderful word." He put his arms around her.

And then laughed. Here he was with two hundred thousand credits-a fortune-in his pocket and the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And her arms were around him too and-you can't even kiss a woman in a spacesuit! Any more than you can spend a fortune on an asteroid without even a single tavern on it.

An asteroid that was now less than ten yards in diameter.

Evadne laughed too, and he was glad, very glad of that.

It *was* funny-if you saw it that way-and it made things easier in this last moment that she could see it

that way too.

He saw she was breathing with difficulty. She said, "Crag-my dear-this suit must not have had its tank fully charged with oxygen. I'm afraid I can't-stay with you much longer."

He held her tighter. He couldn't think of anything to say.

She said, "But we stopped him, Crag. Someday humanity will get itself out of the mess it's in now. And when it does, there'll still-be an Earth-for it to live on."

"Was he right, Evadne? I mean, about your being a member of some secret organization?"

"No. He either made that up or imagined it. I was just his wife, Crag. But I'd stopped loving him months ago. I knew, though, he planned to buy or steal that gadget of Eisen's-he'd have got it somehow, even if we hadn't helped him. And I suspected, but didn't know, that he was planning something-bad. I stayed with him so I'd have a chance to try to stop him if-I was right."

She was breathing harder. Her arms tightened around him. She said, "Crag, I want that gadget. I'll use it on myself; I won't ask you to. But it will be sudden and painless, not like this." She was fighting for every breath now, but she laughed again. "Guess I'm lying, Crag. I'm not afraid to die either way. But I've seen people who died this way and they're-well-I don't want you to see me-like that. I'd-rather--"

He pressed it into her hand. He tightened his arms one last time and then stepped quickly back because he could hear and see how much pain she was in now, how every breath was becoming agony for her. He looked away, as he knew she wanted him to.

And when he looked back, after a little while, there was nothing there to see; nothing at all.

Except the disintegrator itself, lying there on a sphere now only six feet across. He picked it up. There was still one thing to do. Someone, sometime, might find this collapsed asteroid, attracted to it by the fact that his de-tector showed a mass greater than the bulk shown in a visiplat. If he found the gadget clinging there beside it—

He was tempted to use it instead, to take the quicker way instead of the slower, more painful one. But he took it apart, throwing each tiny piece as far out into space as he could. Maybe some of them would form orbits out there and maybe others would fall back. But no one would ever gather *all* the pieces and manage to put them together again.

He finished, and the world he lived on was less than a yard in diameter now and it was still shrinking. He dis-connected his gravplates because there wasn't any use trying to stand on it. But it was as heavy as it had ever been; there was still enough gravitational pull to keep him bumping gently against it. Of course he could push himself away from it now and go sailing off into space. But he didn't. Somehow, it was companionship.

A small world, he thought, and getting smaller.

The size of an orange now. He laughed as he put it into his pocket.

DAYMARE

CHAPTER ONE: FIVE-WAY CORPSE

IT STARTED out like a simple case of murder. That was bad enough in itself, because it was the first murder dur-ing the five years Rod Caquer had been Lieutenant of Police in Sector Three of Callisto.

Sector Three was proud of that record, or had been until the record became a dead duck.

But before the thing was over, nobody would have been happier than Rod Caquer if it had stayed a simple case of murder-without cosmic repercussions.

Events began to happen when Rod Caquer's buzzer made him look up at the visiscreen.

There he saw the image of Barr Maxon, Regent of Sector Three.

"Morning, Regent," Caquer said pleasantly. "Nice speech you made last night on the--"

Maxon cut him short. "Thanks, Caquer," he said. "You know Willem Deem?"

"The book-and-reel shop proprietor? Yes, slightly." "He's dead," announced Maxon. "It seems to be mur-der. You better go there."

His image clicked off the screen before Caquer could ask any questions. But the questions could wait

anyway. He was already on his feet and buckling on his short-sword.

Murder on Callisto? It did not seem possible, but if it had really happened he should get there quickly. Very quickly, if he was to have time for a look at the body before they took it to the incinerator.

On Callisto, bodies are never held for more than an hour after death because of the hydra spores which, in minute quantity, are always present in the thinnish atmo-sphere. They are harmless, of course, to live tissue, but they tremendously accelerate the rate of putrefaction in dead animal matter of any sort.

Dr. Skidder, the Medico-in-Chief, was coming out the front door of the book-and-reel shop when Lieutenant Caquer arrived there, breathless.

The medico jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. "Better hurry if you want a look," he said to Caquer. "They're taking it out the back way. But I've exam-ined-"

Caquer ran on past him and caught the white-uni-formed utility men at the back door of the shop.

"Hi, boys, let me take a look," Caquer cried as he peeled back the sheet that covered the thing on the stretcher.

It made him feel a bit sickish, but there was not any doubt of the identity of the corpse or the cause of death. He had hoped against hope that it would turn out to have been an accidental death after all. But the skull had been cleaved down to the eyebrows-a blow struck by a strong man with a heavy sword.

"Better let us hurry, Lieutenant. It's almost an hour since they found him."

Caquer's nose confirmed it, and he put the sheet back quickly and let the utility men go on to their gleaming white truck parked just outside the door.

He walked back into the shop, thoughtfully, and looked around. Everything seemed in order. The long shelves of celluwrapped merchandise were neat and or-derly. The row of booths along the other side, some equipped with an enlarger for book customers and the others with projectors for those who were interested in the microfilms, were all empty and undisturbed.

A little crowd of curious persons was gathered outside the door, but Brager, one of the policemen, was keeping them out of the shop.

"Hey. Brager," said Caquer, and the patrolman came in and closed the door behind him.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Know anything about this? Who found him, and when, and so on?"

"I did, almost an hour ago. I was walking by on my beat when I heard the shot."

Caquer looked at him blankly.

"The shot?" he repeated.

"Yeah. I ran in and there he was dead and nobody around. I knew nobody had come out the front way, so I ran to the back and there wasn't anybody in sight from the back door. So I came hack and put in the call."

"To whom? Why didn't you call me direct, Brager?"

"Sorry, Lieutenant, but I was excited and I pushed the wrong button and got the Regent. I told him somebody had shot Deem and he said stay on guard and he'd call the Medico and the utility boys and you."

In that order? Caquer wondered. Apparently, because Caquer had been the last one to get there.

But he brushed that aside for the more important ques-tion-the matter of Brager having heard a shot. That did not make sense, unless-no, that was absurd, too. If Wil-lem Deem had been shot, the Medico would not have split his skull as part of the autopsy.

"What do you mean by a shot, Brager?" Caquer asked. "An old-fashioned explosive weapon?"

"Yeah," said Brager. "Didn't you see the body? A hole right over the heart. A bullet-hole, I guess. I never saw one before. I didn't know there was a gun on Cal-listo. They were outlawed even before the blasters were."

Caquer nodded slowly.

"You-you didn't see evidence of any other-uh--wound?" he persisted.

"Earth, no. Why would there be any other wound? A hole through a man's heart's enough to kill him, isn't it?"

"Where did Dr. Skidder go when he left here?" Caquer inquired. "Did he say?"

"Yeah, he said you would be wanting his report so he'd go back to his office and wait till you came around or called him. What do you want me to do, Lieutenant?"

Caquer thought a moment.

"Go next door and use the visiphone there, Brager-I'll be busy on this one," Caquer at last told the policeman. "Get three more men, and the four of you canvass this block and question everyone."

"You mean whether they saw anybody run out the back way, and if they heard the shot, and that sort of thing?" asked Brager.

"Yes. Also anything they may know about Deem, or who might have had a reason to-to shoot him." Brager saluted, and left.

Caquer got Dr. Skidder on the visiphone. "Hello, Doctor," he said. "Let's have it."

"Nothing but what met the eye, Rod. Blaster, of course. Close range."

Lieutenant Rod Caquer steadied himself. "Say that again, Medico."

"What's the matter," jibed Skidder. "Never see a blaster death before? Guess you wouldn't have at that, Rod, you're too young. But fifty years ago when I was a student, we got them once in a while."

"Just how did it kill him?"

Dr. Skidder looked surprised. "Oh, you didn't catch up with the clearance men then. I thought you'd seen it. Left shoulder, burned all the skin and flesh off and charred the bone. Actual death was from shock-the blast didn't hit a vital area. Not that the burn wouldn't have been fatal anyway, in all probability. But the shock made it instantaneous."

Dreams are like this, Caquer told himself.

"In dreams things happen without meaning anything," he thought. "But I'm not dreaming, this is real."

"Any other wounds, or marks on the body?" he asked, slowly.

"None. I'd suggest, Rod, you concentrate on a search for that blaster. Search all of Sector Three, if you have to. You know what a blaster looks like, don't you?"

"I've seen pictures," said Caquer. "Do they make a noise, Medico? I've never seen one fired."

Dr. Skidder shook his head. "There's a flash and a hiss-ing sound, but no report."

"It couldn't be mistaken for a gunshot?"

The doctor stared at him.

"You mean an explosive gun? Of course not. Just a faint s-s-s-s. One couldn't hear it more than ten feet away."

When Lieutenant Caquer had clicked off the visiphone, he sat down and closed his eyes to concentrate. Somehow he had to make sense out of three conflicting sets of observations. His own, the patrolman's, and the med-ico's.

Brager had been the first one to see the body, and he said there was a hole over the heart. And that there were no other wounds. He had heard the report of the shot.

Caquer thought, suppose Brager is lying. It still doesn't make sense. Because according to Dr. Skidder, there was no bullet-hole, but a blaster-wound. Skidder had seen the body after Brager had.

Someone could, theoretically at least, have used a blaster in the interim, on a man already dead. But...

But that did not explain the head wound, nor the fact that the medico had not seen the bullet hole.

Someone could, theoretically at least, have struck the skull with a sword between the time Skidder had made the autopsy and the time he, Rod Caquer, had seen the body. But...

But that didn't explain why he hadn't seen the charred shoulder when he'd lifted the sheet from the body on the stretcher. He might have missed seeing a bullet-hole, but he would not, and he could not, have missed seeing a shoulder in the condition Dr. Skidder described it.

Around and around it went, until at last it dawned on him that there was only one explanation possible. The Medico-in-Chief was lying, for whatever mad reason.

Brager's story could be true, in total. That meant, of course, that he, Rod Caquer, had overlooked the bullet hole Brager had seen; but that was possible.

But Skidder's story could not be true. Skidder himself, at the time of the autopsy, could have inflicted the wound in the head. And he could have lied about the shoulder-wound. Why-unless the man was mad-he would have done either of those things, Caquer could not imagine. But it was the only way he

could reconcile all the factors.

But by now the body had been disposed of. It would be his word against Dr. Skidder's

But wait!-the utility men, two of them, would have seen the corpse when they put it on the stretcher.

Quickly Caquer stood up in front of the visiphone and obtained a connection with utility headquarters.

"The two clearance men who took a body from Shop 9364 less than an hour ago-have they reported back yet?" he asked.

"Just a minute, Lieutenant ... Yes, one of them was through for the day and went on home. The other one is here."

"Put him on."

Rod Caquer recognized the man who stepped into the screen. It was the one of the two utility men who had asked him to hurry.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" said the man.

"You helped put the body on the stretcher?" "Of course."

"What would you say was the cause of death?"

The man in white looked out of the screen incredulously.

"Are you kidding me, Lieutenant?" he grinned. "Even a moron could see what was wrong with that stiff." Caquer frowned.

"Nevertheless, there are conflicting statements. I want your opinion."

"Opinion? When a man has his head cut off, what two opinions can there be, Lieutenant?"

Caquer forced himself to speak calmly. "Will the man who went with you confirm that?"

"Of course. Earth's Oceans! We had to put it on the stretcher in two pieces. Both of us for the body, and then Walter picked up the head and put it on next to the trunk. The killing was done with a disintegrator beam, wasn't it?"

"You talked it over with the other man?" said Caquer. "There was no difference of opinion between you about the-uh-details?"

"Matter of fact there was. That was why I asked you if it was a disintegrator. After we'd cremated it, he tried to tell me the cut was a ragged one like somebody'd taken several blows with an axe or something. But it was clean."

"Did you notice evidence of a blow struck at the top of the skull?"

"No. Say, lieutenant, you aren't looking so well. Is anything the matter with you?"

CHAPTER TWO: TERROR BY NIGHT

THAT WAS the setup that confronted Rod Caquer, and one can not blame him for beginning to wish it had been a simple case of murder.

A few hours ago, it had seemed had enough to have Callisto's no-murder record broken. But from there, it got worse. He did not know it then, but it was going to get still worse and that would be only the start.

It was eight in the evening, now, and Caquer was still at his office with a copy of Form 812 in front of him or the duraplast surface of his desk. There were questions on that form, apparently simple questions.

Name of Deceased: Willem Deem

Occupation: Prop. of book-and-reel shop

Residence Apt. 8250, Sector Three, Clsto.

Place of Bus.: Shop 9364, S. T., Clsto.

Time of Death: Approx. 3 P.m. Clsto. Std. Time

Cause of Death:

Yes, the first five questions had been a breeze. But the six? He had been staring at that question an hour now. A Callisto hour, not so long as an Earth one, but long enough when you're staring at a question like that.

But confound it, he would have to put something down.

Instead, he reached for the visiphone button, and a moment later Jane Gordon was looking at him out of the screen. And Rod Caquer looked back, because she was something to look at.

"Hello, Icicle," he said. "Afraid I'm not going to be able to get there this evening. Forgive me?"

"Of course, Rod. What's wrong? The Deem business?" He nodded gloomily. "Desk work. Lot of forms and reports I got to get out for the Sector Coordinator."

"Oh. How was he killed, Rod?"

"Rule Sixty-five," he said with a smile, "forbids giving details of any unsolved crime to a civilian."

"Bother Rule Sixty-five. Dad knew Willem Deem well, and he's been a guest here often. Mr. Deem was practically a friend of ours."

"Practically?" Caquer asked. "Then I take it you didn't like him, Icicle?"

"Well-I guess I didn't. He was interesting to listen to, but he was a sarcastic little beast, Rod. I think he had a perverted sense of humor. How was he killed?"

"If I tell you, will you promise not to ask any more questions?" Caquer said with a sigh.

Her eyes lighted eagerly. "Of course."

"He was shot," said Caquer, "with an explosive-type gun and a blaster. Someone split his skull with a sword, chopped off his head with an axe and with a disintegrator beam. Then after he was on the utility stretcher, some-one stuck his head back on because it wasn't off when I saw him. And plugged up the bullet-hole, and-"

"Rod, stop driveling," cut in the girl. "If you don't want to tell me, all right."

Rod grinned. "Don't get mad. Say, how's your father?"

"Lots better. He's asleep now, and definitely on the upgrade. I think he'll be back at the university by next week. Rod, you look tired. When do those forms have to be in?"

"Twenty-four hours after the crime. But-"

"But nothing. Come on over here, right now. You can make out those old forms in the morning."

She smiled at him, and Caquer weakened. He was not getting anywhere anyway, was he?

"All right, Jane," he said. "But I'm going by patrol quarters on the way. Had some men canvassing the block the crime was committed in, and I want their report."

But the report, which he found waiting for him, was not illuminating. The canvass had been thorough, but it had failed to elicit any information of value. No one had been seen to leave or enter the Deem shop prior to Brager's arrival, and none of Deem's neighbors knew of any enemies he might have. No one had heard a shot.

Rod Caquer grunted and stuffed the reports into his pocket, and wondered, as he walked to the Gordon home, where the investigation went from there. How did a de-tective go about solving such a crime?

True, when he was a college kid back on Earth a few years ago, he had read detective usually trapped someone by discovering a discrepancy in his statements. Generally in a rather dramatic manner, too.

There was Wilder Williams, the greatest of all the fictional detectives, who could look at a man and deduce his whole life history from the cut of his clothes and the shape of his hands. But Wilder Williams had never run across a victim who had been killed in as many ways as there were witnesses.

He spent a pleasant-but futile-evening with Jane Gordon, again asked her to marry him, and again was refused. But he was used to that. She was a bit cooler this evening than usual, probably because she resented his unwillingness to talk about Willem Deem.

And home, to bed.

Out the window of his apartment, after the light was out, he could see the monstrous ball of Jupiter hanging low in the sky, the green-black midnight sky. He lay in bed and stared at it until it seemed that he could still see it after he had closed his eyes.

Willem Deem, deceased. What was he going to do about Willem Deem. Around and around, until at last one orderly thought emerged from chaos.

Tomorrow morning he would talk to the Medico. Without mentioning the sword wound in the head, he would ask Skidder about the bullet hole Brager claimed to have seen over the heart. If Skidder still said the blaster burn was the only wound, he would summon Brager and let him argue with the Medico.

And then-Well, he would worry about what to do then when he got there. He would never get to sleep this way.

He thought about Jane, and went to sleep.

After a while, he dreamed. Or was it a dream? If so, then he dreamed that he was lying there in bed, almost but not quite awake, and that there were whispers coming from all corners of the room. Whispers out of the darkness.

For big Jupiter had moved on across the sky now. The window was a dim, scarcely-discernible outline, and the rest of the room in utter darkness.

Whispers!

"-kill them."

"You hate them, you hate them, you hate them."

"-kill, kill, kill."

"Sector Two gets all the gravy and Sector Three does all the work. They exploit our corla plantations. They are evil. Kill them, take over."

"You hate them, you hate them, you hate them."

"Sector Two is made up of weaklings and usurers. They have the taint of Martian blood. Spill it, spill Mar-tian blood. Sector Three should rule Callisto. Three the mystic number. We are destined to rule Callisto."

"You hate them, you hate them."

"-kill, kill, kill."

"Martian blood of usurious villians. Yew hate them, you hate them, you hate them."

Whispers.

"Now-now-now."

"Kill them, kill them."

"A hundred ninety miles across the flat planes. Get there in an hour in monocars. Surprise attack. Now. Now. Now."

And Rod Caquer was getting out of bed, fumbling hastily and blindly into his clothing without turning on the light because this was a dream and dreams were in darkness.

His sword was in the scabbard at his belt and he took it out and felt the edge and the edge was sharp and ready to spill the blood of the enemy he was going to kill.

Now it was going to swing in arcs of red death, his unblooded sword-the anachronistic sword that was his badge of office, of authority. He had never drawn the sword in anger, a stubby symbol of a sword, scarce eight-teen inches long; enough, though, enough to reach the heart-four inches to the heart.

The whispers continued.

"You hate them, you hate them, you hate them."

"Spill the evil blood; kill, spill, kill, spill."

"Now, now, now, now."

Unsheathed sword in clenched fist, he was stealing silently out the door, down the stairway, past the other apartment doors.

And some of the doors were opening, too. He was not alone, there in the darkness. Other figures moved beside him in the dark.

He stole out of the door and into the night-cooled darkness of the street, the darkness of the street that should have been brightly lighted. That was another proof that this was a dream. Those street-lights were never off, after dark. From dusk till dawn, they were never off.

But Jupiter over there on the horizon gave enough light to see by. Like a round dragon in the heavens, and the red spot like an evil, malignant eye.

Whispers breathed in the night, whispers from all around him.

"Kill-kill-kill-"

"You hate them, you hate them, you hate them."

The whispers did not come from the shadowy figures about him. They pressed forward silently, as he did.

Whispers came from the night itself, whispers that now began to change tone.

"Wait, not tonight, not tonight, not tonight," they said.

"Go back, go back, go back."

"Back to your homes, hack to your beds, back to your sleep."

And the figures about him were standing there, fully as irresolute as he had now become. And then, almost simultaneously, they began to obey the whispers. They turned back, and returned the way they had come, and as silently... .

Rod Caquer awoke with a mild headache and a hangover feeling. The sun, tiny but brilliant, was already well up in the sky.

His clock showed him that he was a bit later than usual, but he took time to lie there for a few minutes, just the same, remembering that screwy dream he'd had. Dreams were like that; you had to think about them right away when you woke up, before you were really fully awake, or you forgot them completely.

A silly sort of dream, it had been. A mad, purposeless, dream. A touch of atavism, perhaps? A throwback to the days when peoples had been at each other's throats half the time, back to the days of wars and hatreds and struggle for supremacy.

This was before the Solar Council, meeting first on one inhabited planet and then another, had brought order by arbitration, and then union. And now war was a thing of the past. The inhabitable portion of the solar system--Earth, Venus, Mars, and the moons of Jupiter--were all under one government.

But back in the old bloody days, people must have felt as he had felt in that atavistic dream. Back in the days when Earth, united by the discovery of space travel, had subjugated Mars--the only other planet already inhabited by an intelligent race--and then had spread colonies wherever Man could get a foothold.

Certain of those colonies had wanted independence and, next, supremacy. The bloody centuries, those times were called now.

Getting out of bed to dress, he saw something that puzzled and dismayed him. His clothing was not neatly folded over the back of the chair beside the bed as he had left it. Instead, it was strewn about the floor as though he had undressed hastily and carelessly in the dark.

"Earth!" he thought. "Did I sleep-walk last night? Did I actually get out of bed and go out into the street when I dreamed that I did? When those whispers told me to?"

"No," he then told himself, "I've never walked in my sleep before, and I didn't then. I must simply have been careless when I undressed last night. I was thinking about the Deem case. I don't actually remember hanging my clothes on that, chair."

So he donned his uniform quickly and hurried down to the office. In the light of morning it was easy to fill out those forms. In the "Cause of Death" blank he wrote, "Medical Examiner reports that shock from a blaster wound caused death."

That let him out from under; he had not said that was the cause of death; merely that the medico said it was.

CHAPTER THREE: BLACKDEX

HE RANG for a messenger and gave him the reports with instructions to rush them to the mail ship that would be leaving shortly. Then he called Barr Maxon.

"Reporting on the Deems matter, Regent," he said. "Sorry, but we just haven't got anywhere on it yet. Nobody was seen leaving the shop. All the neighbors have been questioned. Today I'm going to talk to all his friends."

Regent Maxon shook his head.

"Use all jets, Lieutenant," he said. "The case must be cracked. A murder, in this day and age, is bad enough. But an unsolved one is unthinkable. It would encourage further crime."

Lieutenant Caquer nodded gloomily. He had thought of that, too. There were the social implications of murder to be worried about-and there was his job as well. A Lieutenant of Police who let anyone get away with murder in his district was through for life.

After the Regent's image had clicked off the visiphone screen, Caquer took the list of Deem's friends from the drawer of his desk and began to study it, mainly with an eye to deciding the sequence of his calls.

He penciled a figure "1" opposite the name of Perry Peters, for two reasons. Peters' place was only a few doors away, for one thing, and for another he knew Perry better than anyone on the list, except possibly Professor Jan Gordon. And he would make that call last, because later there would be a better chance of finding the ailing professor awake-and a better chance of finding his daughter Jane at home.

Perry Peters was glad to see Caquer, and guessed immediately the purpose of the call.

"Hello, Shylock."

"Huh?" said Rod.

"Shylock-the great detective. Confronted with a mystery for the first time in his career as a policeman. Or have you solved it, Rod?"

"You mean Sherlock, you dope-Sherlock Holmes. No, I haven't solved it, if you want to know. Look, Perry, tell me all you know about Deem. You knew him pretty well, didn't you?"

Perry Peters rubbed his chin reflectively and sat down on the work bench. He was so tall and lanky that he could sit down on it instead of having to jump up.

"Willem was a funny little runt," he said. "Most people didn't like him because he was sarcastic, and he had crazy notions on politics. Me, I'm not sure whether he wasn't half right half the time, and anyway he played a swell game of chess."

"Was that his only hobby?"

"No. He liked to make things, gadgets mostly. Some of them were good, too, although he did it for fun and never tried to patent or capitalize anything."

"You mean inventions, Perry? Your own line?"

"Well, not so much inventions as gadgets, Rod. Little things, most of them, and he was better on fine work-manship than on original ideas. And, as I said, it was just a hobby with him."

"Ever help you with any of your own inventions?" asked Caquer.

"Sure, occasionally. Again, not so much on the idea of it as by helping me make difficult parts." Perry Peters waved his hand in a gesture that included the shop around them. "My tools here are all for rough work, comparatively. Nothing under thousandths. But Willem has-had a little lathe that's a honey. Cuts anything, and accurate to a fifty-thousandth."

"What enemies did he have, Perry?"

"None that I know of. Honestly, Rod. Lot of people disliked him, but just an ordinary mild kind of dislike. You know what I mean, the kind of dislike that makes 'em trade at another book-and-reel shop, but not the kind that makes them want to kill anybody."

"And who, as far as you know, might benefit by his death?"

"Um-nobody, to speak of," said Peters, thoughtfully. "I think his heir is a nephew on Venus. I met him once, and he was a likable guy. But the estate won't be anything to get excited about. A few thousand credits is all I'd guess it to be."

"Here's a list of his friends, Perry." Caquer handed Peters a paper. "Look it over, will you, and see if you can make any additions to it. Or any suggestions."

The lanky inventor studied the list, and then passed it back.

"That includes them all, I guess," he told Caquer. "Couple on there I didn't know he knew well enough to rate listing. And you have his best customers down, too; the ones that bought heavily from him."

Lieutenant Caquer put the list back in his pocket.

"What are you working on now?" he asked Peters.

"Something I'm stuck on, I'm afraid," the inventor said. "I needed Deem's help-or at least the use of his lathe, to go ahead with this." He picked up from the bench a pair of the most peculiar-looking goggles Rod Caquer had ever seen. The lenses were shaped like arcs of circles instead of full circles, and they

fastened in a band of resilient plastic obviously designed to fit close to the face above and below the lenses. At the top center, where it would be against the forehead of the goggles' wearer, was a small cylindrical box an inch and a half in diameter.

"What on earth are they for?" Caquer asked.

"For use in radite mines. The emanations from that stuff, while it's in the raw state, destroys immediately any transparent substance yet made or discovered. Even quartz. And it isn't good on naked eyes either. The miners have to work blindfolded, as it were, and by their sense of touch."

Rod Caquer looked at the goggles curiously.

"But how is the funny shape of these lenses going to keep the emanations from hurting them, Perry?" he asked.

"That part up on top is a tiny motor. It operates a couple of specially-treated wipers across the lenses. For all the world like an old-fashioned windshield wiper, and that's why the lenses are shaped like the wiper-arm arcs."

"Oh," said Caquer. "You mean the wipers are absorb-ent and hold some kind of liquid that protects the glass?"

"Yes, except that it's quartz instead of glass. And it's protected only a minute fraction of a second. Those wipers go like the devil-so fast you can't see them when you're wearing the goggles. The arms are half as big as the arcs, and the wearer can see out of only a fraction of the lens at a time. But he can see, dimly, and that's a thousand per cent improvement in radite mining."

"Fine, Perry," said Caquer. "And they can get around the dimness by having ultra-brilliant lighting. Have you tried these out?"

"Yes, and they work. Trouble's in the rods; friction heats them and they expand and jam after it's run a minute, or thereabouts. I have to turn them down on Deem's lathe-or one like it. Think you could arrange for me to use it? Just for a day or so?"

"I don't see why not," Caquer told him. "I'll talk to whomever the Regent appoints executor, and fix it up. And later you can probably buy the lathe from his heir. Or does the nephew go in for such things?"

Perry Peters shook his head. "Hope, he wouldn't know a lathe from a drill-press. Be swell of you, Rod, if you can arrange for me to use it."

Caquer had turned to go, when Perry Peters stopped him.

"Wait a minute," Peters said and then paused and looked uncomfortable.

"I guess I was holding out on you, Rod," the inventor said at last. "I do know one thing about Willem that might possibly have something to do with his death, although I don't see how, myself. I wouldn't tell it on him, except that he's dead, and so it won't get him in trouble."

"What was it, Perry?"

"Illicit political books. He had a little business on the side selling them. Books on the index-you know just what I mean."

Caquer whistled softly. "I didn't know they were made any more. After the council put such a heavy penalty on them-whew!"

"People are still human, Rod. They still want to know the things they shouldn't know-just to find out why they shouldn't, if for no other reason."

"Graydex or Blackdex books, Perry?"

Now the inventor looked puzzled.

"I don't get it. What's the difference?"

"Books on the official index," Caquer explained, "are divided into two groups. The really dangerous ones are in the Blackdex. There's a severe penalty for owning one, and a death penalty for writing or printing one. The mildly dangerous ones are in the Graydex, as they call it."

"I wouldn't know which Willem peddled. Well, off the record, I read a couple Willem lent me once, and I thought they were pretty dull stuff. Unorthodox political theories."

"That would be Graydex." Lieutenant Caquer looked relieved. "Theoretical stuff is all Graydex. The Blackdex books are the ones with dangerous practical information."

"Such as?" The inventor was staring intently at Caquer.

"Instructions how to make outlawed things," explained Caquer. "Like Lethite, for instance. Lethite is a poison gas that's tremendously dangerous. A few pounds of it could wipe out a city, so the council outlawed its manu-facture, and any book telling people how to make it for themselves would go on the Blackdex. Some nitwit might get hold of a book like that and wipe out his whole home town."

"But why would anyone?"

"He might be warped mentally, and have a grudge," explained Caquer. "Or he might want to use it on a lesser scale for criminal reasons. Or-by Earth, he might be the head of a government with designs on neighbor-ing states. Knowledge of a thing like that might upset the peace of the Solar System."

Perry Peters nodded thoughtfully. "I get your point," he said. "Well, I still don't see what it could have to do with the murder, but I thought I'd tell you about Wil-lem's sideline. You probably want to check over his stock before whoever takes over the shop reopens."

"We shall," said Caquer. "Thanks a lot, Perry. If you don't mind, I'll use your phone to get that search started right away. If there are any Blackdex books there, we'll take care of them all right."

When he got his secretary on the screen, she looked both frightened and relieved at seeing him.

"Mr. Caquer," she said, "I've been trying to reach you. Something awful's happened. Another death." "Murder again?" gasped Caquer.

"Nobody knows what it was," said the secretary. "A dozen people saw him jump out of a window only twenty feet up. And in this gravity that couldn't have killed him, but he was dead when they got there. And four of them that saw him knew him. It was--"

"Well, for Earth's sake, who?"

"I don't-Lieutenant Caquer, they said, all four of them, that it was Willem Deem!"

CHAPTER FOUR: RULE OF TIUMB

WITH A nightmarish feeling of unreality Lieutenant Roc Caquer peered down over the shoulder of the Medico in-Chief at the body that already lay on the stretcher of the utility men, who stood by impatiently.

"You better hurry, Doc," one of them said. "He won' last much longer and it take us five minutes to get there."

Dr. Skidder nodded impatiently without looking up and went on with his examination. "Not a mark, Rod," he said. "Not a sign of poison. Not a sign of anything He's just dead."

"The fall couldn't have caused it?" said Caquer.

"There isn't even a bruise from the fall. Only verdict I can give is heart failure. Okay, boys, you can take him away."

"You through too, Lieutenant?"

"I'm through," said Caquer. "Go ahead. Skidder, which of them was Willem Deem?"

The medico's eyes followed the white-sheeted burden of the utility men as they carried it toward the truck, and he shrugged helplessly.

"Lieutenant, I guess that's your pigeon," he said. "All I can do is certify to cause of death."

"It just doesn't make sense," Caquer wailed. "Sector Three City isn't so big that he could have had a double living here without people knowing about it. But one of them had to be a double. Off the record, which looked to you like the original?"

Dr. Skidder shook his head grimly.

"Willem Deem had a peculiarly shaped wart on his nose," he said. "So did both of *his* corpses, Rod. And neither one was artificial, or make-up. I'll stake my pro-fessional reputation on that. But come on back to the office with me, and I'll tell you which one of them is the real Willem Deem."

"Huh? How?"

"His thumbprint's on file at the tax department, like everybody's is. And it's part of routine to fingerprint a corpse on Callisto, because it has to be destroyed so quickly."

"You have thumbprints of both corpses?" inquired Caquer.

"Of course. Took them before you reached the scene, both times. I have the one for Willem-I mean the other corpse-back in my office. Tell you what-you pick up the print on file at the tax office and meet

me there."

Caquer sighed with relief as he agreed. At least one point in the case would be cleared up-which corpse was which.

And in that comparatively blissful state of mind he re-mained until half an hour later when he and Dr. Skidder compared the time prints-the one Rod Caquer had secured from the tax office, and one from each of the corpses.

They were identical, all three of them.

"Um," said Caquer. "You're sure you didn't get mixed up on those prints, Dr. Skidder.

"How could I? I took only one copy from each body, Rod. If I had shuffled them just now while we were looking at them, the result would be the same. All three prints are alike."

"But they can't be."

Skidder shrugged.

"I think we should lay this before the Regent, direct," he said. "I'll call him and arrange an audience. Okay?"

Half an hour later, he was giving the whole story to Regent Barr Maxon, with Dr. Skidder corroborating the main points. The expression on Regent Maxon's face made Lieutenant Rod Caquer glad, very glad, that he had that corroboration.

"You agree," Maxon asked, "that this should be taken up with the Sector Coordinator, and that a special in-vestigator should be sent here to take over?"

A bit reluctantly, Caquer nodded. "I hate to admit that I'm incompetent, Regent, or that I seem to be," Caquer said. "But this isn't an ordinary crime. Whatever goes on, it's way over my head. And there may be something even more sinister than murder behind it."

"You're right, Lieutenant. I'll see that a qualified man leaves headquarters today and he'll get in touch with you in the morning."

"Regent," Caquer asked, "has any machine or process ever been invented that will-uh-duplicate a human body, with or without the mind being carried over?"

Maxon seemed puzzled by the question.

"You think Deem might have been playing around with something that bit him. No, to my knowledge a discovery like that has never been approached. Nobody has ever duplicated, except by constructive imitation, even an inanimate object. You haven't heard of such a thing, have you, Skidder?"

"No," said the Medical Examiner. "I don't think even your friend Perry Peters could do that, Rod."

From the Regent Maxon's office, Caquer went on Deem's shop. Brager was in charge there, and Brager helped him search the place thoroughly. It was a long and laborious task, because each book and reel had to be examined minutely.

The printers of illicit books, Caquer knew, were clever at disguising their product. Usually, forbidden books bore the cover and title page, often even the opening chapters, of some popular work of fiction, and the pro-jection reels were similarly disguised.

Jupiter-lighted darkness was falling outside when they finished, but Rod Caquer knew they had done a thor-ough job. There wasn't an indexed book anywhere in the shop, and every reel had been run off on a projector.

Other men, at Rod Caquer's orders, had been search-ing Deem's apartment with equal thoroughness. He phoned there, and got a report, completely negative.

"Not so much as a Venusian pamphlet," said the man in charge at the apartment, with what Caquer thought was a touch of regret in his voice.

"Did you come across a lathe, a small one for delicate work?" Rod asked.

"Um-no, we didn't see anything like that. One room's turned into a workshop, but there's no lathe in it. Is it important?"

Caquer grunted noncommittally. What was one more mystery, and a minor one at that, to a case like this?

"Well, Lieutenant," Brager said, when the screen had gone blank, "What do we do now?"

Caquer sighed.

"You can go off duty, Brager," he said. "But first ar-range to leave men on guard here and at the apartment. I'll stay until whoever you send comes to relieve me."

When Brager had left, Caquer sank wearily into the nearest chair. He felt terrible, physically, and his mind just did not seem to be working. He let his eyes run again around the orderly shelves of the shop and their orderliness oppressed him.

If there was only a clue of some sort. Wilder Williams had never had a case like this in which the only leads were two identical corpses, one of which had been killed five different ways and the other did not have a mark or sign of violence. What a mess, and where did he go from here?

Well, he still had the list of people he was going to interview, and there was time to see at least one of them this evening.

Should he look up Perry Peters again, and see what, if anything, the lanky inventor could make of the disappearance of the lathe? Perhaps he might be able to suggest what had happened to it. But then again, what could a lathe have to do with a mess like this? One cannot turn out a duplicate corpse on a lathe.

Or should he look up Professor Gordon? He decided to do just that.

He called the Gordon apartment on the visiphone, and Jane appeared in the screen.

"How's your father," Jane asked Caquer. "Will he be able to talk to me for a while this evening?"

"Oh, yes," said the girl. "He's feeling much better, and thinks he'll go back to his classes tomorrow. But get here early if you're coming. Rod, you look terrible; what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing, except I feel goofy. But I'm all right, I guess."

"You have a gaunt, starved look. When did you eat last?"

Caquer's eyes widened. "Earth! I forgot all about eat-ing. I slept late and didn't even have breakfast!" Jane Gordon laughed.

"You dope! Well, hurry around, and I'll have something ready for you when you get here."

"But-"

"But nothing. How soon can you start?"

A minute after he had clicked off the visiphone, Lieutenant Caquer went to answer a knock on the shuttered door of the shop.

He opened it. "Oh, hullo, Reese," he said. "Did Brager send you?"

The policeman nodded.

"He said I was to stay here in case. In case what?"

"Routine guard duty, that's all," explained Caquer. "Say, I've been stuck here all afternoon. Anything go-ing on?"

"A little excitement. We been pulling in soap-box ora-tors off and on all day. Screwballs. There's an epidemic of them."

"The devil you say! What are they hipped about?"

"Sector Two, for some reason I can't make out. They're trying to incite people to get mad at Sector Two and do something about it. The arguments they use are plain nutty."

Something stirred uneasily in Rod Caquer's memory but he could not quite remember what it was. Sector Two? Who'd been telling him things about Sector Two recently-usury, unfairness, tainted blood, something silly. Although of course a lot of the people over there did have Martian blood in them ...

"How many of the orators were arrested?" he asked.

"We got seven. Two more slipped away from us, but we'll pick them up if they start spouting that kind of stuff again."

Lieutenant Caquer walked slowly, thoughtfully, to the Gordon apartment, trying his level best to remember where, recently, he heard anti-Sector Two propaganda. There must be something back of the simultaneous ap-pearance of nine soap-box radicals, all preaching the same doctrine.

A sub-rosa political organization? But none such had existed for almost a century now. Under a perfectly democratic government, component part of a stable sys-tem-wide organization of planets, there was no need for such activity. Of course an occasional crackpot was dis-satisfied, but a group in that state of mind struck him as fantastic.

It sounded as crazy as the Willem Deem case. That did not make sense either. Things happened meaning-lessly, as in a dream. Dream? What was he trying to remember about a dream? Hadn't he had an odd sort of dream last night-what was it?

But, as dreams usually do, it eluded his conscious mind.

Anyway, tomorrow he would question-or help ques-tion-those radicals who were under arrest. Put men on the job of tracing them back, and undoubtedly a com-mon background somewhere, a tieup, would be found.

It could not be accidental that they should all pop up on the same day. It was screwy, just as screwy as the two inexplicable corpses of a book-and-reel shop pro-prietor. Maybe because the cases were both screwy, his mind tended to couple the two sets of events. But taken together, they were no more digestible than taken sepa-rately. They made even less sense.

Confound it, why hadn't he taken that post on Ganymede when it was offered to him? Ganymede was a nice orderly moon. Persons there did not get murdered twice on consecutive days. But Jane Gordon did not live on Ganymede; she lived right here in Sector Three and he was on his way to see her.

And everything was wonderful except that he felt so tired he could not think straight, and Jane Gordon in-sisted on looking on him as a brother instead of a suitor, and he was probably going to lose his job. He would be the laughingstock of Callisto if the special investigator from headquarters found some simple explanation of things that he had overlooked... .

CHAPTER FIVE; NINE-MAN MORRIS

JANE GORDON, looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her, met him at the door. She was smiling, but the smile changed to a look of concern as he stepped into the light.

"Rod!" she exclaimed. "You do look ill, really ill. What have you been doing to yourself besides forgetting to eat?"

Rod Caquer managed a grin.

"Chasing vicious circles up blind alleys, Icicle. May I use your visiphone?"

"Of course. I've some food ready for you; I'll put it on the table while you're calling. Dad's taking a nap. He said to wake him when you got here, but I'll hold off until you're fed."

She hurried out to the kitchen. Caquer almost fell into the chair before the visiscreen, and called the police station. The red, beefy face of Borgesen, the night lieutenant, flashed into view.

"Hi, Borg," said Caquer. "Listen, about those seven screwballs you picked up. Have you-"

"Nine," Borgesen interrupted. "We got the other two, and I wish we hadn't. We're going nuts down here." "You mean the other two tried it again?"

"No. Suffering Asteroids, they came in and gave themselves up, and we can't kick them out, because there's a charge against them. But they're confessing all over the place. And do you know what they're confessing?"

"I'll bite," said Caquer.

"That you hired them, and offered one hundred credits apiece to them."

"Huh?"

Borgesen laughed, a little wildly. "The two that came in voluntarily say that, and the other seven-Gosh, why did I ever become a policeman? I had a chance to study for fireman on a spacer once, and I end up doing this."

"Look-maybe I better come around and see if they make that accusation to my face."

"They probably would, bit it doesn't mean anything, Rod. They say you hired them this afternoon, and you were at Deem's with Brager all afternoon. Rod, this moon is going nuts. And so am I. Walter Johnson has disappeared. Hasn't been seen since this morning."

"What? The Regent's confidential secretary? You're kidding me, Borg."

"Wish I was. You ought to be glad you're off duty. Maxon's been raising seven brands of thunder for us to find his secretary for him. He doesn't like the Deem business, either. Seems to blame us for it; thinks it's bad enough for the department to let a man get killed once. Say, which was Deem, Rod? Got any

idea?"

Caquer grinned weakly.

"Let's call them Deem and Redeem till we find out," he suggested. "I think they were both Deem." "But how could one man be two?"

, "How could one man be killed five ways?" countered Caquer. "Tell me that and I'll tell you the answer to yours."

"Nuts," said Borgesen, and followed it with a masterpiece of understatement. "There's something funny about that case."

Caquer was laughing so hard that there were tears in his eyes, when Jane Gordon came to tell him food was ready. She frowned at him, but there was concern behind the frown.

Caquer followed her meekly, and discovered he was ravenous. When he'd put himself outside enough food for three ordinary meals, he felt almost human again. His headache was still there, but it was something that throbbed dimly in the distance.

Frail Professor Gordon was waiting in the living room when they went there from the kitchen. "Rod, you look like something the cat dragged in," he said. "Sit down before you fall down."

Caquer grinned. "Overeating did it. Jane's a cook in a million."

He sank into a chair facing Gordon. Jane Gordon had sat on the arm of her father's chair and Caquer's eyes feasted on her. How could a girl with lips as soft and kissable as hers insist on regarding marriage only as an academic subject? How could a girl with--

"I don't see offhand how it could be a cause of his death Rod, but Willem Deem rented out political books," said Gordon. "There's no harm in my telling that, since the poor chap is dead."

Almost the same words, Caquer remembered, that Perry Peters had used in telling him the same thing. Caquer nodded.

"We've searched his shoe and his apartment and haven't found any, Professor," he said. "You wouldn't know, of course, what kind--"

Professor Gordon smiled. "I'm afraid I would, Rod. Off the record-and I take it you haven't a recorder on our conversation-I've read quite a few of them."

"You?" There was frank surprise in Caquer's voice.

"Never underestimate the curiosity of an educator, my boy. I fear the reading of Graydex books is a more prevalent vice among the instructors in universities than among any other class. Oh, I know it's wrong to encourage the trade, but the reading of such books can't possibly harm a balanced, judicious mind."

"And Father certainly has a balanced, judicious mind, Rod," said Jane, a bit defiantly. "Only-darn him-he wouldn't let me read those books."

Caquer grinned at her. The professor's use of the word "Graydex" had reassured him.

Renting Graydex books was only a misdemeanor, after all.

"Ever read any Graydex books, Rod?" the professor asked. Caquer shook his head.

"Then you've probably never heard of hypnotism. Some of the circumstances in the Deem case-Well, I've wondered whether hypnotism might have been used."

"I'm afraid I don't even know what it is, Professor."

The frail little man sighed.

"That's because you've never read illicit books, Rod," said Gordon. "Hypnotism is the control of one mind by another, and it reached a pretty high state of development before it was outlawed. You've never heard of the Kaprelian Order or the Vargas Wheel?"

Caquer shook his head.

"The history of the subject is in Graydex books, in several of them," said the professor. "The actual methods, and how a Vargas Wheel is constructed would be Blackdex, high on the roster of the lawlessness. Of course, I haven't read that, but I have read the history.

"A man by the name of Mesmer, way back in the Eighteenth Century, was one of the first practitioners, if not the discoverer, of hypnotism. At any rate, he put it on a more or less scientific basis. By the Twentieth Century, quite a bit had been learned about it-and it became extensively used in medicine.

"A hundred years later, doctors were treating almost as many patients through hypnotism as through drugs and surgery. True, there were cases of its misuse, but they were relatively few.

"But another hundred years brought a big chance. Mesmerism had developed too far for the public safety. Any criminal or selfish politician who had a smattering of the art could operate with impunity. He could fool all the people all the time, and get away with it."

"You mean he could really make people think any-thing he wanted them to?" Caquer asked.

"Not only that, he could make them do anything he wanted. And by that time, television was in such com-mon use that one speaker could visibly and directly talk to millions of people."

"But couldn't the government have regulated the art?"

Professor Gordon smiled thinly. "How, when legisla-tors were human, too, and as subject to hypnotism as the people under them? And then, to complicate things almost hopelessly, came the invention of the Vargas Wheel.

"It had been known, back as far as the Nineteenth Century, that an arrangement of moving mirrors could throw anyone who watched it into a state of hypnotic submission. And thought transmission had been experi-mented with in the Twenty-first century. It was in the following one that Vargas combined and perfected the two into the Vargas Wheel. A sort of helmet affair, really, with a revolving wheel of specially constructed tricky mirrors on top of it."

"How did it work, Professor?" asked Caquer.

"The wearer of a Vargas Wheel helmet had immediate and automatic control over anyone who saw him-di-rectly, or in a television screen," said Gordon. "The mirrors in the small turning wheel produced instantane-ous hypnosis and the helmet-somehow-brought thoughts of its wearer to bear through the wheel and im-pressed upon his subjects any thoughts he wished to transmit.

"In fact, the helmet itself-or the wheel-could be set to produce certain fixed illusions without the necessity of the operator speaking, or even concentrating, on those points. Or the control could be direct, from his mind."

"Ouch," said Caquer. "A thing like that would-I can certainly see why instructions in making a Vargas Wheel would be Blackdexed. Suffering Asteroids! A man with one of these could-"

"Could do almost anything. Including killing a man and making the manner of his death appear five different ways to five different observers."

Caquer whistled softly. "And including playing nine-man Morris with soap-box radicals-or they wouldn't even have to be radicals. They could be ordinary ortho-dox citizens."

"Nine men?" Jane Gordon demanded. "What's this about nine men, Rod? I hadn't heard about it."

But Rod was already standing up.

"Haven't time to explain, Icicle," he said. "Tell you tomorrow, but I must get down to-Wait a minute. Professor, is that all you know about the Vargas Wheel business?"

"Absolutely all, my boy. It just occurred to me as a possibility. There were only five or six of them ever made, and finally the government got hold of them and destroyed them, one by one. It cost millions of lives to do it.

"When they finally got everything cleaned up, coloni-zation of the planets was starting, and an international council had been started with control over all govern-ments. They decided that the whole field of hypnotism was too dangerous, and they made it a forbidden subject. It took quite a few centuries to wipe out all knowledge of it, but they succeeded. The proof is that you'd never heard of it."

"But how about the beneficial aspects of it," Jane Gordon asked. "Were they lost?"

"Of course," said her father. "But the science of medi-cine had progressed so far by that time that it wasn't too much of a loss. Today the medicos can cure, by physical treatment, anything that hypnotism could handle."

Caquer who had halted at the door, now turned back.

"Professor, do you think it possible that someone could have rented a Blackdex book from Deem, and learned all those secrets?" he inquired.

Professor Gordon shrugged. "It's possible," he said. "Deem might have handled occasional Blackdex books, but he knew better than try to sell or rent any to me. So I wouldn't have heard of it."

At the station, Lieutenant Caquer found Lieutenant Borgesen on the verge of apoplexy.

He looked at Caquer.

"You!" he said. And then, plaintively, "The world's gone nuts. Listen, Brager discovered Willem Deem, didn't he? At ten o'clock yesterday morning? And stayed there on guard while Skidder and you and the clearance men were there?"

"Yes, why?" asked Caquer.

Borgesen's expression showed how much he was upset by developments.

"Nothing, not a thing, except that Brager was in the emergency hospital yesterday morning, from nine until after eleven, getting a sprained ankle treated. He couldn't have been at Deem's. Seven doctors and attendants and nurses swear up and down he was in the hospital at that time."

Caquer frowned.

"He was limping today, when he helped me search Deem's shop," he said. "What does Brager say?"

"He says he was there, I mean at Deem's, and discovered Deem's body. We just happened to find out otherwise accidentally-if it is otherwise. Rod, I'm going nuts. To think I had a chance to be fireman on a spacer and took this celestial job. Have you learned anything new?"

"Maybe. But first I want to ask you, Borg. About these nine nitwits you picked up. Has anybody tried to identify?"

"Them," interrupted Borgesen. "I let them go." Caquer stared at the beefy face of the night lieutenant in utter amazement.

"Let them go?" he repeated. "You couldn't, legally. Man, they'd been charged. Without a trial, you couldn't turn them loose."

"Nuts. I did, and I'll take the responsibility for it. Look, Rod, they were right, weren't they?"

"What?"

"Sure. People ought to be waked up about what's going on over in Sector Two. Those phonies over there need taking down a peg, and we're the only ones to do it. This ought to be headquarters for Callisto, right here. Why listen, Rod, a united Callisto could take over Ganymede."

"Borg, was there anything over the televis tonight? Anybody make a speech you listened to?"

"Sure, didn't you hear it? Our friend Skidder. Must have been while you were walking here, because all the televis turned on automatically-it was a general."

"And-was anything specific suggested, Borg? About Sector Two, and Ganymede, and that sort of thing?"

"Sure, general meeting tomorrow morning at ten. In the square. We're all supposed to go; I'll see you there, won't I?"

"Yeah," said Lieutenant Caquer. "I'm afraid you will. I-I got to go, Borg."

CHAPTER SIX: TOO FAMILIAR FACE

Ron CAQUER knew what was wrong now. Also the last thing he wanted to do was stay around the station listening to Borgesen talking under the influence of-what seemed to be-a Vargas 'Wheel. Nothing else, nothing less, could have made police Lieutenant Borgesen talk as he had just talked. Professor Gordon's guess was getting righter every minute. Nothing else could have brought about such results.

Caquer walked on blindly through the Jupiter lighted night, past the building in which his own apartment was. He did not want to go there either.

The streets of Sector Three City seemed crowded for so late an hour of the evening. Late? He glanced at his watch and whistled softly. It was not evening any more. It was two o'clock in the morning, and normally the streets would have been utterly deserted.

But they were not, tonight. People wandered about, alone or in small groups that walked together in un-canny silence. Shuffle of feet, but not even the whisper of a voice. Not even

Whispers! Something about those streets and the people on them made Rod Caquer remember now, his dream of the night before. Only now he knew that it had not been a dream. Nor had it been sleepwalking, in the ordinary sense of the word.

He had dressed. He had stolen out of the building. And the street lights had been out too, and that meant that employees of the service department had neglected their posts. They, like others, had been wandering with the crowds.

"Kill-kill-kill-You hate them . . ."

A shiver ran down Rod Caquer's spine as he realized the significance of the fact that last night's dream had been a reality. This was something that dwarfed into insignificance the murder of a petty book-and-reel shop owner.

This was something which was gripping a city, something that could upset a world, something that could lead to unbelievable terror and carnage on a scale that hadn't been known since the Twenty-fourth Century. This-which had started as a simple murder case!

Up ahead somewhere, Rod Caquer heard the voice of a nun addressing a crowd. A frenzied voice, shrill with fanaticism. He hurried his steps to the corner, and walked around it to find himself in the fringe of a crowd of people pressing around a man speaking from the top of a flight of steps.

"-and I tell you that tomorrow is the day. Now we have the Regent himself with us, and it will be unnecessary to depose him. Men are working all night tonight, preparing. After the meeting in the square tomorrow morning, we shall-"

"Hey!" Rod Caquer yelled. The man stopped talking and turned to look at Rod, and the crowd turned slowly, almost as one man, to stare at him.

"You're under-"

Then Caquer saw that this was but a futile gesture.

It was not because of the man surging toward him that convinced him of this. He was not afraid of violence. He would have welcomed it as relief from uncanny terror, welcomed a chance to lay about him with the flat of his sword.

But standing behind the speaker was a man in uniform-Brager. And Caquer remembered, then, that Borgesen, now in charge at the station, was on the other side. How could he arrest the speaker, when Borgesen, now in charge, would refuse to book him. And what good would it do to start a riot and cause injury to innocent people-people acting not under their own volition, but under the insidious influence Professor Gordon had described to him?

Hand on his sword, he backed away. No one followed. Like automatons, they turned back to the speaker, who resumed his harangue, as though never interrupted. Policeman Brager had not moved, had not even looked in the direction of his superior officer. He alone of all those there had not turned at Caquer's challenge.

Lieutenant Caquer hurried on in the direction he had been going when he had heard the speaker. That way would take him back downtown. He would find a place open where he could use a visiphone, and call the Sector Coordinator. This was an emergency.

And surely the scope of whoever had the Vargas Wheel had not yet extended beyond the boundaries of Sector Three.

He found an all-night restaurant, open but deserted, the lights on but no waiters on duty, no cashier behind the counter. He stepped into the visiphone booth and pushed the button for a long-distance operator. She flashed into sight on the screen almost at once.

"Sector Coordinator, Callisto City," Caquer said. "And rush it."

"Sorry, sir. Out of town service suspended by order of the controller of Utilities, for the duration." "Duration of what?"

"We are not permitted to give out information."

Caquer gritted his teeth. Well, there was *one* someone who might be able to help him. He forced his voice to remain calm.

"Give me Professor Gordon, University Apartments," he told the operator.

"Yes, sir."

But the screen stayed dark, although the little red button that indicated the buzzer was operating flashed on and off, for minutes.

"There is no answer, sir."

Probably Gordon and his daughter were asleep, too soundly asleep to hear the buzzer. For a moment, Caquer considered rushing over there. But it was on the other side of town, and of what help could they be? None, and Professor Gordon was a frail old man, and ill.

No, he would have to—Again he pushed a button of the visiphone and a moment later was talking to the man in charge of the ship hangar.

"Get out that little speed job of the Police Department," snapped Caquer. "Have it ready and I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Sorry, Lieutenant," came the curt reply. "All outgoing power beams shut off, by special order. Everything's grounded for the emergency."

He might have known it, Caquer thought. But what about the special investigator coming in from the Coordinator's office? "Are incoming ships still permitted to land?" he inquired.

"Permitted to land, but not to leave again without special order," answered the voice.

"Thanks," Caquer said. He clicked off the screen and went out into the dawn, outside. There was a chance, then. The special investigator might be able to help.

But he, Rod Caquer would have to intercept him, tell him the story and its implications before he could fall, with the others, under the influence of the Vargas Wheel. Caquer strode rapidly toward the terminal. Maybe it was too late. Maybe his ship had already landed and the damage had been done.

Again he passed a knot of people gathered about a frenzied speaker. Almost everyone must be under the influence by this time. But why had he been spared? Why was not he, too, under the evil influence?

True, he must have been on the street on the way to the police station at the time Skidder had been on the air, but that didn't explain everything. All of these people could not have seen and heard that visicast. Some of them must have been asleep already at that hour.

Also he, Rod Caquer, had been affected, the night before, the night of the whispers. He must have been under the influence of the wheel at the time he investigated the murder—the murders.

Why, then, was he free now? Was he the only one, or were there others who had escaped, who were sane and their normal selves?

If not, if he was the only one, why was he free? Or was he free?

Could it be that what he was doing right now was under direction, was part of some plan?

But no use to think that way, and go mad. He would have to carry on the best he could, and hope that things, with him, were what they seemed to be.

Then he broke into a run, for ahead was the open area of the terminal, and a small space-ship, silver in the dawn, was settling down to land. A small official speedster—it must be the special investigator. He ran around the check-in building, through the gate in the wire fence and toward the ship, which was already down. The door opening.

A small, wiry man stepped out and closed the door behind him. He saw Caquer and smiled.

"You're Caquer?" he asked, pleasantly. "Coordinator's office sent me to investigate a case you fellows are troubled with. My name—"

Lieutenant Rod Caquer was staring with horrified fascination at the little man's well-known features, the all-too-familiar wart on the side of the little man's nose, listening for the announcement he knew this man was going to make.

"—is Willem Deem. Shall we go to your office?"

CHAPTER SEVEN: WHEELS WITHIN THE WHEEL

Such a thing as too much can happen to any man!

Lieutenant Rod Caquer, Lieutenant of Police of Sector Three, Callisto, had experienced more than his share. How can you investigate the murder of a man who has been killed twice? How should a policeman act when the victim shows up, alive and happy, to help you solve the case?

Not even when you know he is not there really—or if he is, he is not what your eyes tell you he is and is not saying what your ears hear.

There is a point beyond which the human mind can no longer function sanely with proper sense as

when they reach and pass that point, different people react in different ways.

Rod Caquer's reaction was a sudden blind, red anger. Directed, for lack of a better object, at the special investigator-if he was the special investigator and not a hypnotic phantasm which wasn't there at all.

Rod Caquer's fist lashed out, and it met a chin. Which proved nothing except that if the little man who'd just stepped out of the speedster was an illusion, he was an illusion of touch as well as of sight. Rod's fist exploded on his chin like a rocket-blast, and the little man swayed and fell forward. Still smiling, because he had not had time to change the expression on his face.

He fell face down, and then rolled over, his eyes closed but smiling gently up at the brightening sky.

Shakily, Caquer bent down and put his hand against the front of the man's tunic. There was the thump of a beating heart, all right. For a moment, Caquer had feared he might have killed with that blow.

And Caquer closed his eyes, deliberately, and felt the man's face with his hand and it still felt like the face of Willem Deem looked, and the wart was there to the touch as well as to the sense of sight.

Two men had run out of the check-in building and were coming across the field toward him. Rod caught the expression on their faces and then thought of the little speedster only a few paces from him. He had to get out of Sector Three City, to tell somebody what was happening before it was too late.

If only they'd been lying about the outgoing power beam being shut off. He leaped across the body of the man he had struck and into the door of the speedster, jerked at the controls. But the ship did not respond, and no, they hadn't been lying about the power beam.

No use staying here for a fight that could not possibly decide anything. He went out the door of the speedster, on the other side, away from the men coming toward him, and ran for the fence.

It was electrically charged, that fence. Not enough to kill a man, but plenty to hold him stuck to it until men with rubber gloves cut the wire and took him off. But if the power beam was off, probably the current in the fence was off, too.

It was too high to jump, so he took the chance. And the current was off. He scrambled over it safely and his pursuers stopped and went back to take care of the fallen man beside the speedster.

Caquer slowed down to a walk, but he kept on going. He didn't know where, but he had somehow to keep moving. After a while he found that his steps were taking him toward the edge of town, on the northern side, toward Callisto City.

But that was silly. He couldn't possibly walk to Callisto City and get there in less than three days. Even if he could walk across the intervening roadless desert at all. Besides, three days would be too late.

He was in a small park near the north border when the significance, and the futility, of his direction came to him. And he found, at the same time, that his muscles were sore and tired, that he had a raging headache, that he could not keep on going unless he had a worthwhile and possible goal.

He sank down on a park bench, and for a while his head was sunk in his hands. No answer came.

After a while he looked up and saw something that fascinated him. A child's pinwheel on a stick, stuck in the grass of the park, spinning in the wind. Now fast, now slow, as the breeze varied.

It was going in circles, like his mind was. How could a man's mind go other than in circles when he could not tell what was reality and what was illusion? Going in circles, like a Vargas Wheel.

Circles.

But there ought to be some way. A man with a Vargas Wheel was not completely invincible, else how had the council finally succeeded in destroying the few that had been made? True, possessors of the wheels would have cancelled each other out to some extent, but there must have been a last wheel, in someone's hands. Owned by someone who wanted to control the destiny of the solar system.

But they had stopped the wheel.

It could be stopped, then. But how? How, when one could not see it? Rather, when the sight of it put a man so completely under its control that he no longer, after the first glimpse, knew that it was there because, on sight, it had captured his mind.

He must stop the wheel. That was the only answer. But how?

That pinwheel there could be the Vargas Wheel, for all he could tell, set to create the illusion that it was a child's toy. Or its possessor, wearing the helmet, might be standing on the path in front of him at

this moment, watching him. The possessor of the wheel might be invisible because Caquer's mind was told not to see.

But if the man was there, he'd be *really* there, and should Rod slash out with his sword, the menace would be ended, wouldn't it? Of course.

But how to find a wheel that one could not see? That one could not see because--

And then, still staring at the pinwheel, Caquer saw a chance, something that might work, a slender chance!

He looked quickly at his wrist watch and saw that it was half past nine which was one half hour before the demonstration in the square. And the wheel and its owner would be there, surely.

His aching muscles forgotten, Lieutenant Rod Caquer started to run back toward the center of town. The streets were deserted. Everyone had gone to the square, of course. They had been told to come.

He was winded after a few blocks, and had to slow down to a rapid walk, but there would be time for him to get there before it was over, even if he missed the start.

Yes, he could get there all right. And then, if his idea worked. . .

It was almost ten when he passed the building where his own office was situated, and kept on going. He turned in a few doors beyond. The elevator operator was gone, but Caquer ran the elevator up and a minute later he had used his picklock on a door and was in Perry Peters' laboratory.

Peters was gone, of course, but the goggles were there, the special goggles with the trick windshield-wiper effect that made them usable in radite mining.

Rod Caquer slipped them over his eyes, put the motive-power battery into his pocket, and touched the button on the side. They worked. He could see dimly as the wipers flashed back and forth. But a minute later they stopped.

Of course. Peters had said that the shafts heated and expanded after a minute's operation. Well, that might not matter. A minute might be long enough, and the metal would have cooled by the time he reached the square.

But he would have to be able to vary the speed. Among the litter of stuff on the workbench, he found a small rheostat and spliced it in one of the wires that ran from the battery to the goggles.

That was the best he could do. No time to try it out. He slid the goggles up onto his forehead and ran out into the hall, took the elevator down to street level. And a moment later he was running toward the public square, two blocks away.

He reached the fringe of the crowd gathered in the square looking up at the two balconies of the Regency building. On the lower one were several people he recognized; Dr. Skidder, Walther Johnson. Even Lieutenant Borgesen was there.

On the higher balcony, Regent Maxon Barr was alone, and was speaking to the crowd below. His sonorous voice rolled out phrases extolling the might of empire. Only a little distance away, in the crowd, Caquer caught sight of the gray hair of Professor Gordon, and Jane Gordon's golden head beside it. He wondered if they were under the spell, too. Of course they were deluded also or they would not be there. He realized it would be useless to speak to them, then, and tell them what he was trying to do.

Lieutenant Caquer slid the goggles down over his eyes, blinded momentarily because the wiper arms were in the *wrong* position. But his fingers found the rheostat, set at zero, and began to move it slowly around the dial toward maximum.

And then, as the wipers began their frantic dance and accelerated, he could see dimly. Through the arc-shaped lenses, he looked around him. On the lower balcony he saw nothing unusual, but on the upper balcony the figure of Regent Barr suddenly blurred.

There was a man standing there on the upper balcony wearing a strange-looking helmet with wires and atop the helmet was a three-inch wheel of mirrors and prisms.

A wheel that stood still, because of the stroboscopic effect of the mechanized goggles. For an instant, the speed of those wiper arms was synchronized with the spinning of the wheel, so that each successive glimpse of the wheel showed it in the same position, and to Caquer's eyes the wheel stood still, and he could see it.

Then the goggles jammed.

But he did not need them any more now.

He knew that Barr Maxon, or whoever stood up there on the balcony, was the wearer of the wheel.

Silently, and attracting as little attention as possible, Caquer sprinted around the fringe of the crowd and reached the side door of the Regency building.

There was a guard on duty there.

"Sorry, sir, but no one's allowed-"

Then he tried to duck, too late. The flat of Police Lieutenant Rod Caquer's shortsword thudded against his head.

The inside of the building seemed deserted. Caquer ran up the three flights of stairs that would take him to the level of the higher balcony, and down the hall toward the balcony door.

He burst through it, and Regent Maxon turned. Maxon now, no longer wore the helmet on his head. Caquer had lost the goggles, but whether he could see it or not, Caquer knew the helmet and the wheel were still in place and working, and that this was his one chance.

Maxon turned and saw Lieutenant Caquer's face, and his drawn sword.

Then, abruptly, Maxon's figure vanished. It seemed to Caquer-although he knew that it was not-that the figure before him was that of Jane Gordon. Jane, looking at him pleadingly, and spoke in melting tones.

"Rod, don't-" she began to say.

But it was not Jane, he knew. A thought, in self-preservation, had been directed at him by the manipulator of the Vargas Wheel.

Caquer raised his sword, and he brought it down hard.

Glass shattered and there was the ring of metal on metal, as his sword cut through and split the helmet.

Of course it was not Jane now-just a dead man lying there with blood oozing out of the split in a strange and complicated, but utterly shattered, helmet. A helmet that could now be seen by everyone there, and by Lieutenant Caquer himself.

Just as everyone, including Caquer, himself, could recognize the man who had worn it.

He was a small, wiry man, and there was an unsightly wart on the side of his nose.

Yes, it was Willem Deem. And this time, Rod Caquer knew, it *was* Willem Deem. . . .

"I thought," Jane Gordon said, "that you were going to leave for Callisto City without saying goodbye to us."

Rod Caquer threw his hat in the general direction of a hook.

"Oh, that," he said. "I'm not even sure I'm going to take the promotion to a job as police coordinator there. I have a week to decide, and I'll be around town at least that long. How you been doing, Icicle?"

"Fine, Rod. Sit down. Father will be home soon, and I know he has a lot of things to ask you. Why we haven't seen you since the big mass meeting."

Funny how dumb a smart man can be, at times.

But then again, he had proposed so often and been refused, that it was not all his fault.

He just looked at her.

"Rod, all the story never came out in the newscasts," she said. "I know you'll have to tell it all over again for my father, but while we're waiting for him, won't you give me some information?"

Rod grinned.

"Nothing to it, really, Icicle," he said. "Willem Deem got hold of a Blackdex book, and found out how to make a Vargas Wheel. So he made one, and it gave him ideas.

"His first idea was to kill Barr Maxon and take over as Regent, setting the helmet so he would appear to be Maxon. He put Maxon's body in his own shop, and then had a lot of fun with his own murder. He had a warped sense of humor, and got a kick out of chasing us in circles."

"But just how did he do all the rest?" asked the girl.

"He was there as Brager, and pretended to discover his own body. He gave one description of the method of death, and caused Skidder and me and the clearance men to see the body of Maxon each a different way. No wonder we nearly went nuts."

"But Brager remembered being there too," she objected.

"Brager was in the hospital at the time, but Deem saw him afterward and impressed on his mind the memory pattern of having discovered Deem's body," explained Caquer. "So naturally, Brager thought he had been there.

"Then he killed Maxon's confidential secretary, because being so close to the Regent, the secretary must have suspected something was wrong even though he couldn't guess what. That was the second corpse of Wil-lim Deem, who was beginning to enjoy himself in earnest when he pulled that on us.

"And of course he never sent to Callisto City for a special investigator at all. He just had fun with me, by making me seem to meet one and having the guy turn out to be Willem Deem again. I nearly did go nuts then, I guess."

"But why, Rod, weren't you as deeply in as the others-I mean on the business of conquering Callisto and all of that?" she inquired. "You were free of that part of the hypnosis."

Caquer shrugged.

"Maybe it was because I missed Skidder's talk on the televis," he suggested. "Of course it wasn't Skidder at all, it was Deem in another guise and wearing the helmet. And maybe he deliberately left me out, because he was having a psychopathic kind of fun out of my trying to investigate the murders of two Willem Deems. It's hard to figure. Perhaps I was slightly cracked from the strain, and it might have been that for that reason I was partially resistant to the group hypnosis."

"You think he really intended to try to rule all of Cal-listo, Rod?" asked the girl.

"We'll never know, for sure, just how far he wanted, or expected to go later. At first, he was just experiment-ing with the powers of hypnosis, through the wheel. That first night, he sent people out of their houses into the streets, and then sent them back and made them forget it. Just a test, undoubtedly."

Caquer paused and frowned thoughtfully.

"He was undoubtedly psychopathic, though, and we don't dare even guess what all his plans were," he con-tinued. "You understand how the goggles worked to neutralize the wheel, don't you, Icicle?"

"I think so. That was brilliant, Rod. It's like when you take a moving picture of a turning wheel, isn't it? If the camera synchronizes with the turning of the wheel, so that each successive picture shows it after a complete rev-olution, then it looks like it's standing still when you show the movie."

Caquer nodded.

"That's it on the head," he said. "Just luck I had ac-cess to those goggles, though. For just a second I could see a man wearing a helmet up there on the balcony-but that was all I had to know."

"But Rod, when you rushed out on the balcony, you didn't have the goggles on any more. Couldn't he have stopped you, by hypnosis?"

"Well, he didn't. I guess there wasn't time for him to take over control of me. He did flash an illusion at me. It wasn't either Barr Maxon or Willem Deem I saw standing there at the last minute. It was you, Jane."

"T?"

"Yep, you. I guess he knew I'm in love with you, and that's the first thing flashed into his mind; that I wouldn't dare use the sword if I thought it was you standing there. But I knew it wasn't you, in spite of the evidence of my eyes, so I swung it."

He shuddered slightly, remembering the will power he had needed to bring that sword down.

"The worst of it was that I saw you standing there like I've always wanted to see you-with your arms out toward me, and looking at me as though you loved me."

"Like this, Rod?"

And he was not too dumb to get the idea, that time.

COME AND GO MAD

I:

HE HAD known it, somehow, when he had awakened that morning. I to knew it more surely now, staring out of the editorial room window into the early afternoon sunlight slanting down among the

buildings to cast a pattern of light and shadow. He knew that soon, perhaps even today, something important was going to happen. Whether good or bad he did not know, but he darkly suspected. And with reason; there are few good things that may unexpectedly happen to a man, things, that is, of lasting importance. Disaster can strike from innumerable directions, in amazingly diverse ways.

A voice said, "Hey, Mr. Vine," and he turned away from the window, slowly. That in itself was strange for it was not his manner to move slowly; he was a small, volatile man, almost cat-like in the quickness of his reactions and his movements.

But this time something made him turn slowly from the window, almost as though he never again expected to see that chiaroscuro of an early afternoon.

He said, "Hi, Red."

The freckled copy boy said, "His Nibs wants to see ya."

"Now?"

"Naw. Atcher convenience. Sometime next week, maybe. If yer busy, give him an appermtment." He put his fist against Red's chin and shoved, and the copy boy staggered back in assumed distress.

He got up out of his chair and went over to the water cooler. He pressed his thumb on the button and water gurgled into the paper cup.

Harry Wheeler sauntered over and said, "Hiya, Nappy. What's up? Going on the carpet?"

He said, "Sure, for a raise."

He drank and crumpled the cup, tossing it into the waste basket. He went over to the door marked Private and went through it.

Walter J. Candler, the managing editor, looked up from the work on his desk and said affably, "Sit down, Vine. Be with you in a moment," and then looked down again.

He slid into the chair opposite Candler, worried a cigarette out of his shirt pocket and lighted it. He studied the back of the sheet of paper of which the managing editor was reading the front. There wasn't anything on the back of it.

The M. E. put the paper down and looked at him. "Vine, I've got a screwy one. You're good on screwy ones."

He grinned slowly at the M. E. He said, "If that's a compliment, thanks."

"It's a compliment, all right. You've done some pretty tough things for us. This one's different. I've never yet asked a reporter to do anything I wouldn't do myself. I wouldn't do this, so I'm not asking you to."

The M. E. picked up the paper he'd been reading and then put it down again without even looking at it. "Ever hear of Ellsworth Joyce Randolph?"

"Head of the asylum? Hell yes, I've met him. Casually."

"How'd he impress you?"

He was aware that the managing editor was staring at him intently, that it wasn't too casual a question. He parried. "What do you mean: In what way? You mean is he a good Joe, is he a good politician, has he got a good bedside manner for a psychiatrist, or what?"

"I mean, how sane do you think he is?"

He looked at Candler and Candler wasn't kidding. Candler was strictly deadpan.

He began to laugh, and then he stopped laughing. He leaned forward across Candler's desk. "Ellsworth Joyce Randolph," he said. "You're talking about Ellsworth Joyce Randolph?"

Candler nodded. "Dr. Randolph was in here this morn-ing. He told a rather strange story. He didn't want me to print it. He did want me to check on it, to send our best man to check on it. He said if we found it was true we could print it in hundred and twenty line type in red ink." Candler grinned wryly. "We could, at that."

He stumped out his cigarette and studied Candler's face. "But the story itself is so screwy you're not sure whether Dr. Randolph himself might be insane?"

"Exactly."

"And what's tough about the assignment?"

"The doc says a reporter could get the story only from the inside."

"You mean, go in as a guard or something?" Candler said, "Something."

"Oh."

He got up out of the chair and walked over to the window, stood with his back to the managing editor, looking out. The sun had moved hardly at all. Yet the shadow pattern in the streets looked different, obscurely different. The shadow pattern inside himself was different, too. This, he knew, was what had been going to happen. He turned around. He said, "No, Hell no."

Candler shrugged imperceptibly. "Don't blame you. I haven't even asked you to. I wouldn't do it myself."

He asked, "What does Ellsworth Joyce Randolph think is going on inside his nuthouse? It must be something pretty screwy if it made you wonder whether Randolph himself is sane."

"I can't tell you that, Vine. Promised him I wouldn't, whether or not you took the assignment."

"You mean-even if I took the job I still wouldn't know what I was looking for?"

"That's right. You'd be prejudiced. You wouldn't be objective. You'd be looking for something, and you might think you found it whether it was there or not. Or you might be so prejudiced against finding it that you'd refuse to recognize it if it bit you in the leg."

He strode from the window over to the desk and banged his fist down on it.

He said, "God damn it, Candler, why *me*? You know what happened to me three years ago."

"Sure. Amnesia."

"Sure, amnesia. Just like that. But I haven't kept it any secret that I never got *over* that amnesia. I'm thirty years old-or am I? My memory goes back three years. Do you know what it feels like to have a blank wall in your memory only three years back?"

"Oh sure, I know what's on the other side of that wall. I know because everybody tells me. I know I started here as a copy boy ten years ago. I know where I was born and when and I know my parents are both dead. I know what they look like-because I've seen their pictures. I know I didn't have a wife and kids, because everybody who knew me told me I didn't. Get that part everybody who knew me, not everybody I knew. I didn't know anybody.

"Sure, I've done all right since then. After I got out of the hospital-and I don't even remember the accident that put me there-I did all right back here because I still knew how to write news stories, even though I had to learn everybody's name all over again. I wasn't any worse off than a new reporter starting cold on a paper in a strange city. And everybody was as helpful as hell."

Candler raised a placating hand to stem the tide. He said, "Okay, Nappy. You said no, and that's enough. I don't see what all that's got to do with this story, but all you had to do was say 'no. So forget about it."

The tenseness hadn't gone out of him. He said, "You don't see what *that's* got to do with the story? You ask-or, all right, you don't ask, you suggest-that I get myself certified as a madman, go into an asylum as a patient.

When-how much confidence does anyone have in his own mind when he can't remember going to school, can't remember the first time he met any of the people he works with every day, can't remember starting on the job he works at, can't remember anything back of three years before?"

Abruptly he struck the desk again with his fist, and then looked foolish about it. He said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get wound up about it like that."

Candler said, "Sit down."

"The answer's still no."

"Sit down, anyway."

He sat down and fumbled a cigarette out of his pocket, got it lighted.

Candler said, "I didn't even mean to mention it, but I've got to now. Now that you talked that way. I didn't know you felt like that about your amnesia. I thought that was water under the bridge.

"Listen, when Dr. Randolph asked me what reporter we had that could best cover it, I told him about you. What your background was. He remembered meeting you, too, incidentally. But he hadn't known you'd had amnesia."

"Is that why you suggested me?"

"Skip that till I make my point. He said that while you were there, he'd be glad to try one of the newer, milder forms of shock treatment on you, and that it might restore your lost memories. He said it would be worth trying."

"He didn't say it would work."

"He said it might; that it wouldn't do any harm."

He stubbed out the cigarette from which he'd taken only three drags. He glared at Candler. He didn't have to say what was in his mind; the managing editor could read it.

Candler said, "Calm down, boy. Remember I didn't bring it up until you yourself started in on how much that memory-wall bothered you. I wasn't saving it for ammunition. I mentioned it only out of fairness to you, after the way you talked."

"Fairness!"

Candler shrugged. "You said no. I accepted it. Then you started raving at me and put me in a spot where I had to mention something I'd hardly thought of at the time. Forget it. How's that graft story coming? Any new leads?"

"You going to put someone else on the asylum story?"

"No. You're the logical one for it."

"What is the story? It must be pretty woolly if it makes you wonder if Dr. Randolph is sane. Does he think his patients ought to trade places with his doctors, or what?"

He laughed. "Sure, you can't tell me. That's really beautiful double bait. Curiosity-and hope of knocking down that wall. So what's the rest of it? If I say yes instead of no, how long will I be there, under what circum-stances? What chance have I got of getting out again? How do I get in?"

Candler said slowly, "Vine, I'm not sure any more I want you to try it. Let's skip the whole thing."

"Let's not. Not until you answer my questions, anyway."

"All right. You'd go in anonymously, so there wouldn't be any stigma attached if the story wouldn't work out. If it does, you can tell the whole truth—including Dr. Randolph's collusion in getting you in and out again. The cat will be out of the bag, then.

"You might get what you want in a few days-and you wouldn't stay on it more than a couple of weeks in any case."

"How many at the asylum would know who I was and what I was there for, besides Randolph?"

"No one." Candler leaned forward and held up four fingers of his left hand. He pointed to the first. "Four people would have to be in on it. You." He pointed to one finger. "Me." A second. "Dr. Randolph." The third finger. "And one other reporter from here."

"Not that I'd object, but why the other reporter?"

"Intermediary. In two ways. First, he'll go with you to some psychiatrist; Randolph will recommend one you can fool comparatively easily. He'll be your brother and request that you be examined and certified. You convince the psychiatrist you're nuts and he'll certify you. Of course it takes two doctors to put you away, but Randolph will be the second. Your alleged brother will want Randolph for the second one."

"All this under an assumed name?"

"If you prefer. Of course there's no real reason why it should be."

"That's the way I feel about it. Keep it out of the papers, of course. Tell everybody around here-except my-hey, in that case we couldn't make up a brother. But Charlie Doerr, in Circulation, is my first cousin and my nearest living relative. He'd do, wouldn't he?"

"Sure. And he'd have to be intermediary the rest of the way, then. Visit you at the asylum and bring back anything you have to send back."

"And if, in a couple of weeks, I've found nothing, you'll spring me?"

Candler nodded. "I'll pass the word to Randolph; he'll interview you and pronounce you cured, and you're out. You come back here, and you've been on vacation. That's all."

"What kind of insanity should I pretend to have?"

He thought Candler squirmed a little in his chair. Candler said, "Well-wouldn't this Nappy business be a natural? I mean, paranoia is a form of insanity which, Dr. Randolph told me, hasn't any physical

symptoms. It's just a delusion supported by a systematic framework of rationalization. A paranoiac can be sane in every way except one."

He watched Candler and there was a faint twisted grin on his lips. "You mean I should think I'm Napoleon?"

Candler gestured slightly. "Choose your own delusion. But-Isn't that one a natural? I mean, the boys around the office always kidding you and calling you Nappy. And-" He finished weakly, "-and everything."

And then Candler looked at him squarely. "Want to do it?"

He stood up. "I think so. I'll let you know for sure tomorrow morning after I've slept on it, but unofficially-yes. Is that good enough?"

Candler nodded.

He said, "I'm taking the rest of the afternoon off; I'm going to the library to read up on paranoia. Haven't anything else to do anyway. And I'll talk to Charlie Doerr this evening. Okay?"

"Fine. Thanks."

He grinned at Candler. He leaned across the desk. He said, "I'll let you in on a little secret, now that things have gone his far. Don't tell anyone. *I am* Napoleon!"

It was a good exit line, so he went out.

II:

HE car his hat and coat and went outside, out of the air-conditioning and into the hot sunlight. Out of the quiet madhouse of a newspaper office after deadline, into the quieter madhouse of the streets on a sultry July afternoon.

He tilted his panama back on his head and ran his hand-kerchief across his forehead. Where was he going? Not to the library to bone up on paranoia; that had been a gag to get off for the rest of the afternoon. He'd read everything the library had on paranoia-and on allied subjects-over two years ago. He was an expert on it. He could fool any psychiatrist in the country into think-ing that he was sane-or that he wasn't.

He walked north to the park and sat down on one of the benches in the shade. He put his hat on the bench beside him and mopped his forehead again.

He stared out at the grass, bright green in the sunlight, at the pigeons with their silly- head-bobbing method of walking, at a red squirrel that came down one side of a tree, looked about him and scurried up the other side of the same tree.

And he thought back to the wall of amnesia of three years ago.

The wall that hadn't been a wall at all. The phrase intrigued him: a wall at all. Pigeons on the grass, alas. A wall at all.

It wasn't a wall at all; it was a shift, an abrupt change. A line had been drawn between two lives. Twenty-seven years of a life before the accident. Three years of a life since the accident.

They were not the same life.

But no one knew. Until this afternoon he had never even hinted the truth-if it *was* the truth-to anyone. He'd used it as an exit line in leaving Candler's office, knowing Candler would take it as a gag. Even so, one had to be careful; use a gagline like that often, and people begin to wonder.

The fact that his extensive injuries from that accident had included a broken jaw was probably responsible for the fact that today he was free and not in an insane asylum. That broken jaw-it had been in a cast when he'd returned to consciousness forty-eight hours after his car had run head-on into a truck ten miles out of town-had prevented him from talking for three weeks.

And by the end of three weeks, despite the pain and the confusion that had filled them, he'd had a chance to think things over. He'd invented the wall. The amnesia, the convenient amnesia that was so much more believe-able than the truth as he knew it.

But *was* the truth as he knew it?

That was the haunting ghost that had ridden him for three years now, since the very hour when he had

awakened to whiteness in a white room and a stranger, strangely dressed, had been sitting beside a bed the like of which had been in no field hospital he'd ever heard of or seen. A bed with an overhead framework. And when he looked from the stranger's face down at his own body, he saw that one of his legs and both of his arms were in casts and that the cast of the leg stuck upward at the angle, a rope running over a pulley holding it so.

He'd tried to open his mouth to ask where he was, what had happened to him, and that was when he had discovered the cast on his jaw.

He'd stared at the stranger, hoping the latter would have sense enough to volunteer the information and the stranger had grinned at him and said, "Hi, George. Back with us, huh? You'll be all right."

And there was something strange about the language until he placed what it was. English. Was he in the hands of the English? And it was a language, too, which he knew little of, yet he understood the stranger perfectly. And why did the stranger call him George?

Maybe some of the doubt, some of the fierce bewilderment, showed in his eyes, for the stranger leaned closer to the bed. He said, "Maybe you're still confused, George. You were in a pretty bad smashup. You ran that coupe of yours head-on into a gravel truck. That was two days ago, and you're just coming out of it for the first time. You're all right, but you'll be in the hospital for a while, till all the bones you busted knit. Nothing seriously wrong with you."

And then waves of pain had come and swept away the confusion, and he had closed his eyes.

Another voice in the room said, "We're going to give you a hypo, Mr. Vine," but he hadn't dared open his eyes again. It was easier to fight the pain without seeing.

There had been the prick of a needle in his upper arm. And pretty soon there'd been nothingness.

When he came back again—twelve hours later, he learned afterwards—it had been to the same white room, the same strange bed, but this time there was a woman in the room, a woman in a strange white costume standing at the foot of the bed studying a paper that was fastened on a piece of board.

She had smiled at him when she saw that his eyes were open. She said, "Good morning, Mr. Vine. Hope you're feeling better. I'll tell Dr. Holt that you're back with us."

She went away and came back with a man who was also strangely dressed, in roughly the same fashion as had been the stranger who had called him George.

The doctor looked at him and chuckled. "Got a patient, for once, who can't talk back to me. Or even write notes." Then his face sobered. "Are you in pain, though? Blink once if you're not, twice if you are."

The pain wasn't really very bad this time, and he blinked once. The doctor nodded with satisfaction. "That cousin of yours," he said, "has kept calling up. He'll be glad to know you're going to be back in shape to well, to listen if not to talk. Guess it won't hurt you to see him a while this evening."

The nurse rearranged his bedclothing and then, mercifully, both she and the doctor had gone, leaving him alone to straighten out his chaotic thoughts.

Straighten them out? That had been three years ago, and he hadn't been able to straighten them out yet:

The startling fact that they'd spoken English and that he'd understood that barbaric tongue perfectly, despite his slight previous knowledge of it. How could an accident have made him suddenly fluent in a language which he had known but slightly?

The startling fact that they'd called him by a different name. "George" had been the name used by the man who'd been beside his bed last night. "Mr. Vine," the nurse had called him. George Vine, an English name, surely.

But there was one thing a thousand times more startling than either of those: It was what last night's stranger (Could he be the "cousin" of whom the doctor had spoken?) had told him about the accident. "You ran that coupe of yours head-on into a gravel truck."

The amazing thing, the contradictory thing, was that he *knew* what a coupe was and what a truck was. Not that he had any recollection of having driven either, of the accident itself, or of anything beyond that moment when he'd been sitting in the tent after Lodi—but-but how could a picture of a coupe,

something driven by a gasoline engine, arise to his mind when such a concept had never been *in* his mind before.

There was that mad mingling of two worlds-the one sharp and clear and definite. The world he'd lived his twenty-seven years of life in, in the world into which he'd been born twenty-seven years ago, on August 15th, 1769, in Corsica. The world in which he'd gone to sleep-it seemed like last night-in his tent at Lodi, as General of the Army in Italy, after his first important victory in the field.

And then there was this disturbing world into which he had awakened, this white world in which people spoke an English-now that he thought of it-which was different from the English he had heard spoken at Brienne, in Valence, at Toulon, and yet which he understood perfectly, which he knew instinctively that he could speak if his jaw were not in a cast. This world in which people called him George Vine, and in which, strangest of all, people used words that he did not know, could not conceivably know, and yet which brought pictures to his mind.

Coupe, truck. They were both forms of-the word came to his mind unbidden-automobiles. He concentrated on what an automobile was and how it worked, and the information was there. The cylinder block, the pistons driven by explosions of gasoline vapor, ignited by a spark of electricity from a generator.

Electricity. He opened his eyes and looked upward at the shaded light in the ceiling, and he knew, somehow, that it was an *electric* light, and in a general way he knew what electricity was.

The Italian Galvani-yes, he'd read of some experiments of Galvani, but they hadn't encompassed anything practical such as a light like that. And staring at the shaded light, he visualized behind it water power running dynamos, miles of wire, motors running generators. He caught his breath at the concept that came to him out of his own mind, or part of his own mind.

The faint, fumbling experiments of Galvani with their weak currents and kicking frogs' legs had scarcely fore-shadowed the unmysterious mystery of that light up in the ceiling; and that was the strangest thing yet; part of his mind found it mysterious and another part took it for granted and understood in a general sort of way how it all worked.

Let's see, he thought, the electric light was invented by Thomas Alva Edison somewhere around-Ridiculous; he'd been going to say around 1900, and it was now only 1796!

And then the really horrible thing came to him and he tried-painfully, in vain-to sit up in bed. It *had* been 1900, his memory told him, and Edison had died in 1931. And a man named Napoleon Bonaparte had died a hundred and ten years before that, in 1821.

He'd nearly gone insane then.

And, sane or insane, only the fact that he could not speak had kept him out of a madhouse; it gave him time to think things out, time to realize that his only chance lay in pretending amnesia, in pretending that he remembered nothing of life prior to the accident. They don't put you in a madhouse for amnesia. They tell you who you are, let you go back to what they tell you your former life was. They let you pick up the threads and weave them, while you try to remember.

Three years ago he'd done that. Now, tomorrow, he was going to a psychiatrist and say that he was-Napoleon!

III:

THE slant of the sun was greater. Overhead a big bird of a plane droned by and he looked up at it and began laughing, quietly to himself-not the laughter of madness. True laughter because it sprang from the conception of Napoleon Bonaparte riding in a plane like that and from the overwhelming incongruity of that idea.

It came to him then that he'd never ridden in a plane, that he remembered. Maybe George Vine had; at some time in the twenty-seven years of life George Vine had spent, he must have. But did that mean that *he* had ridden in one? That was a question that was part of the big question.

He got up and started to walk again. It was almost five o'clock; pretty soon Charlie Doerr would be leaving the paper and going home for dinner. Maybe he'd better phone Charlie and he sure he'd be home

this evening.

He headed for the nearest bar and phoned; he got Charlie just in time. He said, "This is George. Going to be home this evening?"

"Sure, George. I was going to a poker game, but I called it off when I learned you'd be around."

"When you learned—Oh, Candler talked to you?"

"Yeah. Say, I didn't know you'd phone me or I'd have called Marge, but how about coming out for dinner? It'll be all right with her; I'll call her now if you can."

He said, "Thanks, no, Charlie. Got a dinner date. And say, about that card game; you can go. I can get there about seven and we won't have to talk all evening; an hour'll be enough. You wouldn't be leaving before eight anyway."

Charlie said, "Don't worry about it; I don't much want to go anyway, and you haven't been out for a while. So I'll see you at seven, then."

From the phone booth, he walked over to the bar and ordered a beer. He wondered why he'd turned down the invitation to dinner; probably because, subconsciously, he wanted another couple of hours by himself before he talked to anyone, even Charlie and Marge.

He sipped his beer slowly, because he wanted to make it last; he had to stay sober tonight, plenty sober. There was still time to change his mind; he'd left himself a loophole, however small. He could still go to Candler in the morning and say he'd decided not to do it.

Over the rim of his glass he stared at himself in the back-bar mirror. Small, sandy-haired, with freckles on his nose, stocky. The small and stocky part fitted all right; but the rest of it! Not the remotest resemblance.

He drank another beer slowly, and that made it half past five.

He wandered out again and walked, this time toward town. He walked past the *Blade* and looked up to the third floor and at the window he'd been working out of when Candler had sent for him. He wondered if he'd ever sit by that window again and look out across a sunlit afternoon.

Maybe. Maybe not.

He thought about Clare. Did he want to see her tonight?

Well, no, to be honest about it, he didn't. But if he disappeared for two weeks or so without having even said good-bye to her, then he'd have to write her off his books; she wouldn't like that.

He'd better.

He stopped in at a drug store and called her home. He said, "This is George, Clare. Listen, I'm being sent out of town tomorrow on an assignment; don't know how long I'll be gone. One of those things that might be a few days or a few weeks. But could I see you late this even-ing, to say so-long?"

"Why sure, George. What time?"

"It might be after nine, but not much after. That be okay? I'm seeing Charlie first, on business; may not be able to get away before nine."

"Of course, George. Any time."

He stopped in at a hamburger stand, although he wasn't hungry, and managed to eat a sandwich and a piece of pie. That made it a quarter after six and, if he walked, he'd get to Charlie's at just about the right time. So he walked.

Charlie met him at the door. With finger on his lips, he jerked his head backward toward the kitchen where Marge was wiping dishes. He whispered, "I didn't tell Marge, George. It'd worry her."

He wanted to ask Charlie why it would, or should, worry Marge, but he didn't. Maybe he was a little afraid of the answer. It would have to mean that Marge was worrying about him already, and that was a bad sign. He thought he'd been carrying everything off pretty well for three years now.

Anyway, he couldn't ask because Charlie was leading him into the living room and the kitchen was within easy earshot, and Charlie was saying, "Glad you de-cided you'd like a game of chess, George. Marge is go-ing out tonight; movie she wants to sec down at the neighborhood show. I was going to that card game out of self-defense, but I didn't want to."

He got the chessboard and men out of the closet and started to set up a game on the coffee table.

Marge came in with a tray bearing tall cold glasses of beer and put it down beside the chessboard. She said, "Hi, George. Hear you're going away a couple of weeks."

He nodded. "But I don't know where. Candler-the managing editor-asked me if I'd be free for an out of town assignment and I said sure, and he said he'd tell me about it tomorrow."

Charlie was holding out clenched hands, a pawn in each, and he touched Charlie's left hand and got white. He moved pawn to king's fourth and, when Charlie did the same, advanced his queen's pawn.

Marge was fussing with her hat in front of the mirror. She said, "If you're not here when I get back, George, so long and good luck."

He said, "Thanks, Marge. Bye."

He made a few more moves before Marge came over, ready to go, kissed Charlie goodbye and then kissed him lightly on the forehead. She said, "Take care of yourself, George."

For a moment his eyes met her pale blue ones and he thought, she *is* worrying about me. It scared him a little.

After the door had closed behind her, he said, "Let's not finish the game, Charlie. Let's get to the brass tacks, because I've got to see Clare about nine. Dunno how long I'll gone, so I can't very well not say good-bye to her."

Charlie looked up at him. "You and Clare serious, George?"

"I don't know."

Charlie picked up his beer and took a sip. Suddenly his voice was brisk and businesslike. He said, "All right, let's sit on the brass tacks. We've got an appointment for eleven o'clock tomorrow morning with a guy named Irving, Dr. J. E. Irving, in the Appleton Block. He's a psychiatrist; Dr. Randolph recommended him."

"I called him up this afternoon after Candler had talked to me; Candler had already phoned Randolph. My story was this: I gave my right name. I've got a cousin who's been acting queer lately and whom I wanted him to talk to. I didn't give the cousin's name. I didn't tell him in what way you'd been acting queer; I ducked the question and said I'd rather have him judge for himself without prejudice. I said I'd talked you into talking to a psychiatrist and that the only one I knew of was Randolph; that I'd called Randolph who said he didn't do much private practice and recommended Irving. I told him I was your nearest living relative."

"That leaves the way open to Randolph for the second name on the certificate. If you can talk Irving into thinking you're really insane and he wants to sign you up, I can insist on having Randolph, whom I wanted in the first place. And this time, of course, Randolph will agree."

"You didn't say a thing about what kind of insanity you suspected me of having?"

Charlie shook his head. He said, "So, anyway, neither of us goes to work at the *Blade* tomorrow. I'll leave home the usual time so Marge won't know anything, but I'll meet you downtown-say, in the lobby of the Christina-at a quarter of eleven. And if you can convince Irving that you're committable-if that's the word-we'll get Randolph right away and get the whole thing settled tomorrow."

"And if I change my mind?"

"Then I'll call the appointment off. That's all. Look, isn't that all there is to talk over? Let's play this game of chess out; it's only twenty after seven."

He shook his head. "I'd rather talk. Charlie. One thing you forgot to cover, anyway. After tomorrow. How often you coming to see me to pick up bulletins for Candler?"

"Oh, sure, I forgot that. As often as visiting hours will permit-three times a week. Monday, Wednesday, Friday afternoons. Tomorrow's Friday, so if you get in, the first time I'll be able to see you is Monday."

"Okay. Say, Charlie, did Candler even hint to you at what the story is that I'm supposed to get in there?"

Charlie Doerr shook his head slowly. "Not a word. What is it? Or is it too secret for you to talk about?"

He stared at Charlie, wondering. And suddenly he felt that he couldn't tell the truth; that he didn't know either. It would make him look too silly. It hadn't sounded so foolish when Candler had given the

reason-a reason, anyway-for not telling him, but it would sound foolish now.

He said, "If he didn't tell you, I guess I'd better not either, Charlie." And since that didn't sound too con-vincing, he added, "I promised Candler I wouldn't."

Both glasses of beer were empty by then, and Charlie took them into the kitchen for refilling.

He followed Charlie, somehow preferring the infor-mality of the kitchen. He sat a-straddle on a kitchen chair, leaning his elbows on the back of it, and Charlie leaned against the refrigerator.

Candler said, "Prosit!" and they drank, and then Charlie asked, "Have you got your story ready for Doc Irving?"

He nodded. "Did Candler tell you what I'm to tell him?"

"You mean, that you're Napoleon?" Charlie chuckled. Did that chuckle quite ring true? He looked at Charlie, and he knew that what he was thinking was completely incredible. Charlie was square and honest as they came. Charlie and Marge were his best friends; they'd been his best friends for three years that he knew of. Longer than that, a hell of a lot longer, according to Charlie. But beyond those three years-that was something else again.

He cleared his throat because the words were going to stick a little. But he had to ask, he had to be sure. "Charlie, I'm going to ask you a hell of a question. Is this business on the up and up?"

"Huh?"

"It's a hell of a thing to ask. But-look, you and Candler don't think I'm crazy, do you? You didn't work this out between you to get me put away-or anyway examined-painlessly, without my knowing it was hap-pening, till too late, did you?"

Charlie was staring at him. He said, "Jeez, George, you don't think I'd do a thing like that, do you?"

"No, I don't. But you could think it was for my own good, and you might on that basis. Look, Charlie, if it *is* that, if you *think* that, let me point out that this isn't fair. I'm going up against a psychiatrist tomorrow to lie to him, to try to convince him that I have delusions. Not to be honest with him. And that would be unfair as hell, to me. You see that, don't you, Charlie?"

Charlie's face got a little white. He said slowly, "Before God, George, it's nothing like that. All I know about this is what Candler and you have told me."

"You think I'm sane, fully sane?"

Charlie licked his lips. He said, "You want it straight?"

"Yes."

"I never doubted it, until this moment. Unless-well, amnesia is a form of mental aberration, I suppose, and you've never got over that, but that isn't what you mean, is it?"

"No."

"Then, until right now-George, that sounds like a persecution complex, if you really meant what you asked me. A conspiracy to get you to-Surely you can see how ridiculous it is. What possible reason would either Candler or I have to get you to lie yourself into being committed?"

He said, "I'm sorry, Charlie. It was just a screwy momentary notion. No, I don't think that, of course." He glanced at his wrist watch. "Let's finish that chess game, huh?"

"Fine. Wait till I give us a refill to take along."

He played carelessly and managed to lose within fifteen minutes. He turned down Charlie's offer of a chance for revenge and leaned back in his chair.

He said, "Charlie, ever hear of chessmen coming in red and black?"

"N-no. Either black and white, or red and white, any I've ever seen. Why?"

"Well-" He grinned. "I suppose I oughtn't to tell you this after just making you wonder whether I'm really sane after all, but I've been having recurrent dreams recently. No crazier than ordinary dreams ex-cept that I've been dreaming the same things over and over. One of them is something about a game between the red and the black; I don't even know whether it's chess. You know how it is when you dream; things seem to make sense whether they do or not. In the dream, I don't wonder whether the red-and-black business is chess or not; I know, I guess, or seem to know. But the knowledge doesn't carry over. You know what I mean?"

"Sure. Go on."

"Well, Charlie, I've been wondering if it just might have something to do with the other side of that wall of amnesia I've never been able to cross. This is the first time in my-well, not in my life, maybe, but in the three years I remember of it, that I've had recurrent dreams. I wonder if-if my memory may not be trying to get through.

"Did I ever have a set of red and black chessman, for instance? Or, in any school I went to, did they have intramural basketball or baseball between red teams and black teams, or-or anything like that?"

Charlie thought for a long moment before he shook his head. "No," he said, "nothing like that. Of course there's red and black in roulette-rouge et noir. And it's the two colors in a deck of playing cards."

"No, I'm pretty sure it doesn't tie in with cards or roulette. It's not-not like that. It's a game *between* the red and the black. They're the players, somehow. Think hard, Charlie; not about where you might have run into that idea, but where I might have."

He watched Charlie struggle and after a while he said, "Okay, don't sprain your brain, Charlie. Try this one. *The brightly shining.*"

"The brightly shining what?"

"Just that phrase, *the brightly shining*. Does it mean anything to you, at all?"

"No."

"Okay," he said. "Forget it."

IV:

HE WAS early and he walked past Clare's house, as far as the corner and stood under the big elm there, smoking the rest of his cigarette, thinking bleakly.

There wasn't anything to think about, really; all he had to do was say good-bye to her. Two easy syllables. And stall off her questions as to where he was going, ex-actly how long he'd be gone. Be quiet and casual and unemotional about it, just as though they didn't mean anything in particular to each other.

It *had* to be that way. He'd known Clare Wilson a year and a half now, and he'd kept her dangling that long; it wasn't fair. This had to be the end, for her sake. He had about as much business asking a woman to marry him as-as a madman who thinks he's Napoleon!

He dropped his cigarette and ground it viciously into the walk with his heel, then went back to the house, up on the porch, and rang the bell.

Clare herself came to the door. The light from the hallway behind her made her hair a circlet of spun gold around her shadowed face.

He wanted to take her into his arms so badly that he clenched his fists with the effort it took to keep his arms down.

Stupidly, he said, "Hi, Clare. How's everything?"

"I don't know, George. How is everything? Aren't you coming in?"

She'd stepped back from the doorway to let him past and the light was on her face now, sweetly grave. She knew something was up, he thought; her expression and the tone of her voice gave that away.

He didn't want to go in. He said, "It's such a beautiful night, Clare. Let's take a stroll."

"All right, George." She came out onto the porch. "It is a fine night, such beautiful stars." She turned and looked at him. "Is one of them yours?"

He started a little. Then he stepped forward and took her elbow, guiding her down the porch steps. He said lightly, "All of them are mine. Want to buy any?"

"You wouldn't *give* me one? Just a teeny little dwarf star, maybe? Even one that I'd have to use a telescope to see?"

They were out on the sidewalk then, out of hearing of the house, and abruptly her voice changed, the play-ful note dropped from it, and she asked another question, "What's wrong, George?"

He opened his mouth to say nothing was wrong, and then closed it again. There wasn't any lie that he could tell her, and he couldn't tell her the truth, either. Her asking of that question, in that way, should

have made things easier; it made them more difficult.

She asked another, "You mean to say good-bye for-for good, don't you George?"

He said, "Yes," and his mouth was very dry. He didn't know whether it came out as an articulate monosyllable or not, and he wetted his lips and tried again. He said, "Yes, I'm afraid so, Clare."

"Why?"

He couldn't make himself turn to look at her, he stared blindly ahead. He said, "I-I can't tell you, Clare. But it's the only thing I can do. It's best for both of us."

"Tell me one thing, George. Are you really going away? Or was that just an excuse?"

"It's true. I'm going away; I don't know for how long. But don't ask me where, please. I can't tell you that."

"Maybe I can tell you, George. Do you mind if I do?"

He minded all right; he minded terribly. But how could he say so? He didn't say anything, because he couldn't say yes, either.

They were beside the park now, the little neighborhood park that was only a block square and didn't offer much in the way of privacy, but which did have benches. And he steered her-or she steered him; he didn't know which-into the park and they sat down on a bench. There were other people in the park, but not too near till he hadn't answered her question.

She sat very close to him on the bench. She said, "You've been worried about your mind, haven't you George?"

"Well-yes, in a way, yes, I have."

"And you're going away has something to do with that, hasn't it? You're going somewhere for observation or treatment, or both?"

"Something like that. It's not as simple as that, Clare, and I-I just can't tell you about it."

She put her hand on his hand, lying on his knee. She said, "I knew it was something like that, George. And I don't ask you to tell me anything about it."

"Just-just don't say what you meant to say. Say so-long instead of good-bye. Don't even write me, if you don't want to. But don't be noble and call everything off here and now, for my sake. At least wait until you've been wherever you're going. Will you?"

He gulped. She made it sound so simple when actually it was so complicated. Miserably he said, "All right, Clare. If you want it that way."

Abruptly she stood up. "Let's get back, George." He stood beside her. "But it's early."

"I know, but sometimes-Well, there's a psychological moment to end a date, George. I know that sounds silly, but after what we've said, wouldn't it be-uh-anti-climactic-to-"

He laughed a little. He said, "I see what you mean."

They walked back to her home in silence. He didn't know whether it was happy or unhappy silence; he was too mixed up for that.

On the shadowed porch, in front of the door, she turned and faced him. "George," she said. Silence.

"Oh, damn you, George; quit being so *noble* or whatever you're being. Unless, of course, you *don't* love me. Unless this is just an elaborate form of-of runaround you're giving me. Is it?"

There were only two things he could do. One was run like hell. The other was what he did. He put his arms around her and kissed her. Hungrily.

When that was over, and it wasn't over too quickly, he was breathing a little hard and not thinking too clearly, for he was saying what he hadn't meant to say at all, "I love you, Clare. I love you; I love you."

And she said, "I love you, too, dear. You'll come back to me, won't you?" And he said, "Yes. *Yes.*"

It was four miles or so from her home to his rooming house, but he walked, and the walk seemed to take only seconds.

He sat at the window of his room, with the light out, thinking, but the thoughts went in the same old circles they'd gone in for three years.

No new factor had been added except that now he was going to stick his neck out, way out, miles out. Maybe, just maybe, this thing was going to be settled one way or the other.

Out there, out his window, the stars were bright dia-monds in the sky. Was one of them his star of

destiny? If so, he was going to follow it, follow it even into the madhouse if it led there. Inside him was a deeply rooted conviction that this wasn't accident, that it wasn't coincidence that had led to his being asked to tell the truth under guise of falsehood.

His star of destiny.

Brightly shining? No, the phrase from his dreams did not refer to that; it was not an adjective phrase, but a noun. *The brightly shining?* What was *the brightly shining*?

And the red and the black? He'd thought of everything Charlie had suggested, and other things, too. Checkers, for instance. But it was not that.

The red and the black.

Well, whatever the answer was, he was running full-speed toward it now, not away from it.

After a while he went to bed, but it was a long time before he went to sleep.

V:

CHARLIE DOERR came out of the inner office marked Private and put his hand out. He said, "Good luck, George. The doe's ready to talk to you now."

He shook Charlie's hand and said, "You might as well run along. I'll see you Monday, first visiting day."

"I'll wait here," Charlie said. "I took the day off work anyway, remember? Besides, maybe you won't have to go. He dropped Charlie's hand, and stared into Charlie's face. He said slowly, "What do you mean, Charlie-maybe I won't have to go."

"Why-" Charlie looked puzzled. "Why, maybe he'll tell you you're all right, or just suggest regular visits to see him until you're straightened out, or-" Charlie finished weakly, "-or something."

Unbelievably, he stared at Charlie. He wanted to ask, am I crazy or are you, but that sounded crazy to ask under the circumstances. But he had to be sure, sure that Charlie just hadn't let something slip from his mind; maybe he'd fallen into the role he was supposed to be playing when he talked to the doctor just now. He asked, "Charlie, don't you remember that-" And even of that question the rest seemed insane for him to be asking, with Charlie staring blankly at him. The answer was in Charlie's face; it didn't have to be brought to Charlie's lips.

Charlie said again, "I'll wait, of course. Good luck, George."

He looked into Charlie's eyes and nodded, then turned and went through the door marked Private. He closed it behind him, meanwhile studying the man who had been sitting behind the desk and who had risen as he entered. A big man, broad shouldered, iron gray hair.

"Dr. Irving?"

"Yes, Mr. Vine. Will you be seated, please?"

He slid into the comfortable, padded armchair across the desk from the doctor.

"Mr. Vine," said the doctor, "a first interview of this sort is always a bit difficult. For the patient, I mean. Until you know me better, it will be difficult for you to overcome a certain natural reticence in discussing yourself. Would you prefer to talk, to tell things your own way, or would you rather I asked questions?"

He thought that over. He'd had a story ready, but those few words with Charlie in the waiting room had changed everything.

He said, "Perhaps you'd better ask questions."

"Very well." There was a pencil in Dr. Irving's hand and paper on the desk before him. Where and when were you born?"

He took a deep breath. "To the best of my knowledge, in Corsica on August 15th, 1769. I don't actually remember being born, of course. I do remember things from my boyhood on Corsica, though. We stayed there until I was ten, and after that I was sent to school at Brienne."

Instead of writing, the doctor was tapping the paper lightly with the tip of the pencil. He asked, "What month and year is this?"

"August, 1947. Yes, I know that should make me a hundred and seventy-some years old. You want

to know how I account for that. I don't. Nor do I account for the fact that Napoleon Bonaparte died in 1821."

He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms, staring up at the ceiling. "I don't attempt to account for the paradoxes or the discrepancies. I recognize them as such. But according to my own memory, and aside from logic pro or con, I was Napoleon for twenty-seven years. I won't recount what happened during that time; it's all down in the history books.

"But in 1796, after the battle of Lodi, while I was in charge of the armies in Italy, I went to sleep. As far as I knew, just as anyone goes to sleep anywhere, any time. But I woke up-with no sense whatever of duration, by the way-in a hospital in town here, and I was informed that my name was George Vine, that the year was 1944, and that I was twenty-seven years old.

"The twenty-seven years old part checked, and that was all. Absolutely all. I have no recollections of any parts of George Vine's life, prior to his-my-waking up in the hospital after the accident. I know quite a bit about his early life now, but only because I've been told.

"I know when and where he was born, where he went to school, and when he started work at the *Blade*. I know when he enlisted in the army and when he was discharged-late in 1943-because I developed a trick knee after a leg injury. Not in combat, incidentally, and there wasn't any 'psycho-neurotic' on my-his-dis-charge."

The doctor quit doodling with the pencil. He asked, "You've felt this way for three years-and kept it a se-cret?"

"Yes. I had time to think things over after the ac-cident, and yes, I decided then to accept what they told me about my identity. They'd have locked me up, of course. Incidentally, I've *tried* to figure out an answer. I've studied Dunne's theory of time-even Charles Fort!" He grinned suddenly. "Ever read about Casper Hauser?"

Dr. Irving nodded.

"Maybe he was playing smart the way I did. And I wonder how many other amnesiacs pretended they didn't know what happened prior to a certain date-rather than admit they had memories at obvious variance with the facts."

Dr. Irving said slowly, "Your cousin informs me that you were a bit-ah-'hipped' was his word-on the sub-ject of Napoleon before your accident. How do you account for that?"

"I've told you I don't account for any of it. But I can verify that fact, aside from what Charlie Doerr says about it. Apparently I-the George Vine I, if I was ever George Vine-was quite interested in Napoleon, had read about him, made a hero of him, and had talked about him quite a bit. Enough so that the fellows he worked with at the *Blade* had nicknamed him 'Nappy.' "

"I notice you distinguish between yourself and George Vine. Are you or are you not he?"

"I have been for three years. Before that-I have no recollection of being George Vine. I don't think I was. I think-as nearly as I think anything-that I, three years ago, woke up in George Vine's body."

"Having done what for a hundred and seventy some years?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Incidentally, I don't doubt that this is George Vine's body, and with it I inherited his knowledge-except his personal memories. For example, I knew how to handle his job at the newspaper, although I didn't remember any of the people I worked with there. I have his knowledge of English, for instance, and his ability to write. I knew how to operate a typewriter. My handwriting is the same as his."

"If you think that you are not Vine, how do you account for that?"

He leaned forward. "I think part of me is George Vine, and part of me isn't. I think some transference has happened which is outside the run of ordinary human experience. That doesn't necessarily mean that it's supernatural-nor that I'm insane. *Does it?*"

Dr. Irving didn't answer. Instead, he asked, "You kept this secret for three years, for understandable reasons. Now, presumably for other reasons, you decide to tell. What are the other reasons? What has happened to change your attitude?"

It was the question that had been bothering him.

He said slowly, "Because I don't believe in coinci-dence. Because something in the situation itself has

changed. Because I'm tired of pretending. Because I'm willing to risk imprisonment as a paranoid to find out the truth."

"What in the situation has changed?"

"Yesterday it was suggested-by my employer-that I feign insanity for a practical reason. And the very kind of insanity which I have, if any: Surely, I will admit the possibility that I'm insane. But I can only operate on the theory that I'm not. You know that you're Dr. Wil-lard E. Irving; you can only operate on that theory-but how do you *know* you are? Maybe you're insane, but you can only act as though you're not."

"You think your employer is part of a plot-ah--against you? You think there is a conspiracy to get you into a sanitarium?"

"I don't know. Here's what has happened since yes-terday noon." He took a deep breath. Then he plunged. He told Dr. Irving the whole story of his interview with Candler, what Candler had said about Dr. Randolph, about his talk with Charlie Doerr last night and about Charlie's bewildering about-face in the waiting room.

"When he was through he said, "That's all." He looked at Dr. Irving's expressionless face with more curiosity than concern, trying to read it. He added, quite casually, "You don't believe me, of course. You think I'm insane."

He met Irving's eyes squarely. He said, "You have no choice-unless you would choose to believe I'm telling you an elaborate set of lies to convince you I'm insane. I mean, as a scientist and as a psychiatrist, you cannot even admit the possibility that the things I believe--*know*-are objectively true. Am I not right?"

"I fear that you are. So?"

"So go ahead and sign your commitment. I'm going to follow this thing through. Even to the detail of having Dr. Ellsworth Joyce Randolph sign the second one."

"You make no objection?"

"Would it do any good if I did?"

"On one point, yes, Mr. Vine. If a patient has a prejudice against-or a delusion concerning-one psy-chiatrist, it is best not to have him under that particular psychiatrist's care. If you think Dr. Randolph is con-cerned in a plot against you, I would suggest that another one be named."

He said softly, "Even if I choose Randolph?"

Dr. Irving waved a deprecating hand, "Of course, if both you and Mr. Doerr prefer-

"We prefer."

The iron gray head nodded gravely. "Of course you understand one thing; if Dr. Randolph and I decide you should go to the sanitarium, it will not be for custodial care. It will be for your recovery through treatment."

He nodded.

Dr. Irving stood. "You'll pardon me a moment? I'll phone Dr. Randolph."

He watched Dr. Irving go through a door to an inner room. He thought; there's a phone on his desk right there; but he doesn't want me to overhear the conversa-tion.

He sat there very quietly until Irving came back and said, "Dr. Randolph is free. And I phoned for a cab to take us there. You'll pardon me again? I'd like to speak to your cousin, Mr. Doerr."

He sat there and didn't watch the doctor leave in the opposite direction for the waiting room. He could have gone to the door and tried to catch words in the low-voiced conversation, but he didn't. He just sat there until he heard the waiting room door open behind him and Charlie's voice said, "Come on, George. The cab will be waiting downstairs by now."

They went down in the elevator and the cab was there. Dr. Irving gave the address.

In the cab, about half way there, he said, "It's a beauti-ful day," and Charlie cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, it is." The rest of the way he didn't try it again and nobody said anything.

VI:

HE WORE gray trousers and a gray shirt, open at the collar, and with no necktie that he might decide to hang himself with. No belt, either, for the same reason, although the trousers buttoned snugly enough around the waist that there was no danger of them falling off. Just as there was no danger of his falling out any of the windows; they were barred.

He was not in a cell, however; it was a large ward on the third floor. There were seven other men in the ward. His eyes ran over them. Two were playing checkers, sitting on the floor with the board on the floor between them. One sat in a chair, staring fixedly at nothing; two leaned against the bars of one of the open windows, looking out and talking casually and sanely. One read a magazine. One sat in a corner, playing smooth arpeggios on a piano that wasn't there at all.

He stood leaning against the wall, watching the other seven. He'd been here two hours now; it seemed like two years.

The interview with Dr. Ellsworth Joyce Randolph had gone smoothly; it had been practically a duplicate of his interview with Irving. And quite obviously, Dr. Randolph had never heard of him before.

He'd expected that, of course.

He felt very calm, now. For a while, he'd decided, he wasn't going to think, wasn't going to worry, wasn't even going to feel.

He strolled over and stood watching the checker game. It was a sane checker game; the rules were being followed.

One of the men looked up and asked, "What's your name?" It was a perfectly sane question; the only thing wrong with it was that the same man had asked the same question four times now within the two hours he'd been here.

He said, "George Vine."

"Mine's Bassington, Ray Bassington. Call me Ray. Are you insane?"

"No."

"Some of us are and some of us aren't. He is." He looked at the man who was playing the imaginary piano. "Do you play checkers?"

"Not very well."

"Good. We eat pretty soon now. Anything you want to know, just ask me."

"How do you get out of here? Wait, I don't mean that for a gag, or anything. Seriously, what's the procedure?"

"You go in front of the board once a month. They ask you questions and decide if you go or stay. Sometimes they stick needles in you. What you down for?"

"Down for? What do you mean?"

"Feeble-minded, manic-depressive, dementia praecox, involuntal melancholia"

"Oh. Paranoia, I guess."

"That's bad. Then they stick needles in you." A bell rang somewhere.

"That's dinner," said the other checker player. "Ever try to commit suicide? Or kill anyone?"

"No."

"They'll let you eat at an A table then, with knife and fork."

The door of the ward was being opened. It opened outward and a guard stood outside and said, "All right." They filed out, all except the man who was sitting in the chair staring into space.

"Know about him?" he asked Ray Bassington.

"He'll miss a meal tonight. Manic-depressive, just going into the depressive stage. They let you miss one meal; if you're not able to go to the next they take you and feed you. You a manic-depressive?"

"No."

"You're lucky. It's hell when you're on the downswing. Here, through this door."

It was a big room. Tables and benches were crowded with men in gray shirts and gray trousers, like his. A guard grabbed his arm as he went through the doorway and said, "There. That seat."

It was right beside the door. There was a tin plate, messy with food, and a spoon beside it. He asked, "Don't I get a knife and fork? I was told--"

The guard gave him a shove toward the seat. "Observation period, seven days. Nobody gets

silverware till their observation period's over. Siddown."

He sat down. No one at his table had silverware. All the others were eating, several of them noisily and mess-ily. He kept his eyes on his own plate, unappetizing as that was. He toyed with his spoon and managed to eat a few pieces of potato out of the stew and one or two of the chunks of meat that were mostly lean.

The coffee was in a tin cup and he wondered why until he realized how breakable an ordinary cup would be and how lethal could be one of the heavy mugs cheap restaurants use.

The coffee was weak and cool; he couldn't drink it. He sat back and closed his eyes. When he opened them again there was an empty plate and an empty cup in front of him and the man at his left was eating very rapidly. It was the man who'd been playing the non-existent piano.

He thought, if I'm here long enough, I'll get hungry enough to eat that stuff. He didn't like the thought of being there that long.

After a while a bell rang and they got up, one table at a time on signals he didn't catch, and filed out. His group had come in last; it went out first.

Ray Bassington was behind him on the stairs. He said, "You'll get used to it. What'd you say your name is?"

"George Vine."

Bassington laughed. The door shut on them from the outside.

He saw it was dark outside. He went over to one of the windows and stared out through the bars. There was a single bright star that showed just above the top of the elm tree in the yard. *His* star? Well, he'd followed it here. A cloud drifted across it.

Someone was standing beside him. He turned his head and saw it was the man who'd been playing piano. He had a dark, foreign-looking face with intense black eyes; just then he was smiling, as though at a secret joke.

"You're new here, aren't you? Or just get put in this ward, which?"

"New. George Vine's the name."

"Baroni. Musician. Used to be, anyway. Now-let it go. Anything you want to know about the place?"

"Sure. How to get out of it."

Baroni laughed, without particular amusement but not bitterly either. "First, convince them you're all right again. Mind telling what's wrong with you—or don't you want to talk about it? Some of us mind, others don't."

He looked at Baroni, wondering which way he felt. Finally he said, "I guess I don't mind. I think I'm Na-poleon."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

"*Are* you Napoleon? If you aren't, that's one thing. Then maybe you'll get out of here in six months or so. If you really are—that's bad. You'll probably die here."

"Why? I mean, if I *am*, then I'm sane and—"

"Not the point. Point's whether they think you're sane or not. Way they figure, if you think you're Napoleon you're not sane. Q. E. D. You stay here."

"Even if I tell them I'm convinced I'm George Vine?"

"They've worked with paranoia before. And that's what they've got you down for, count on it. And any time a paranoiac gets tired of a place, he'll try to lie his way out of it. They weren't born yesterday. They know that."

"In general, yes, but how—"

A sudden cold chill went down his spine. He didn't have to finish the question. *They stick needles in you*—It hadn't meant anything when Ray Bassington had said it.

The dark man nodded. "Truth serum," he said. "When a paranoiac reaches the stage where he's cured *if* he's telling the truth, they make sure he's telling it before they let him go."

He thought what a beautiful trap it had been that he'd walked into. He'd probably die here, now.

He leaned his head against the cool iron bars and closed his eyes. He heard footsteps walking away

from him and knew he was alone.

He opened his eyes and looked out into blackness; now the clouds had drifted across the moon, too. *Clare*, he thought; *Clare*.

A trap.

But-if there was a trap, there must be a trapper. He was sane or he was insane. If he was sane, he'd walked into a trap, and *if there was a trap, there must be a trapper, or trappers*.

If he was insane

God, let it be that he *was* insane. That way everything made such sweetly simple sense, and someday he might be out of here, he might go back to working for the *Blade*, possibly even with a memory of all the years he'd worked there. Or that George Vine had worked there. That was the catch. *He* wasn't George Vine. And there was another catch. He *wasn't* insane. The cool iron of the bars against his forehead.

After a while he heard the door open and looked around. Two guards had come in. A wild hope, reasonless, surged up inside him. It didn't last.

"Bedtime, you guys," said one of the guards. He looked at the manic-depressive sitting motionless on the chair and said, "Nuts. Hey, Bassington, help me get this guy in."

The other guard, a heavy-set man with hair close-cropped like a wrestler's, came over to the window. "You. You're the new one in here. Vine, ain't it?" He nodded.

"Want trouble, or going to be good?" Fingers of the guard's right hand clenched, the fist went back. "Don't want trouble. Got enough."

The guard relaxed a little. "Okay, stick to that and you'll get along. Vacant bunk's in there." He pointed. "One on the right. Make it up yourself in the morning. Stay in the bunk and mind your own business. If there's any noise or trouble here in the ward, we come in and take care of it. Our own way. You wouldn't like it."

He didn't trust himself to speak, so he just nodded. He turned and went through the door of the cubicle to which the guard had pointed. There were two bunks in there; the manic-depressive who'd been on the chair was lying flat on his back on the other, staring blindly up at the ceiling through wide-open eyes. They'd pulled his slippers off, leaving him otherwise dressed.

He turned to his own bunk, knowing there was no-thing on earth he could do for the other man, no way he could reach him through the impenetrable shell of blank misery which is the manic-depressive's intermittent companion.

He turned down a gray sheet-blanket on his own bunk and found under it another gray sheet-blanket atop a hard but smooth pad. He slipped off his shirt and trousers and hung them on a hook on the wall at the foot of his bed. He looked around for a switch to turn off the light overhead and couldn't find one. But, even as he looked, the light went out.

A single light still burned somewhere in the ward room outside, and by it he could see to take his shoes and socks off and get into the bunk.

He lay very quiet for a while, hearing only two sounds, both faint and seeming far away. Somewhere in another cubicle off the ward someone was singing quietly to himself, a wordless monody; somewhere else someone else was sobbing. In his own cubicle, he couldn't hear even the sound of breathing from his room mate.

Then there was a shuffle of bare feet and someone in the open doorway said, "George Vine."

He said, "Yes?"

"Shhh, not so loud. This is Bassington. Want to tell you about that guard; I should have warned you before. Don't ever tangle with him."

"I didn't."

"I heard; you were smart. He'll slug you to pieces if you give him half a chance. He's a sadist. A lot of guards are; that's why they're bughousers; that's what they call themselves, bughousers. If they get fired one place for being too brutal they get on at another one. He'll be in again-in the morning; I thought I'd warn you."

The shadow in the doorway was gone.

He lay there in the dimness, the almost-darkness, feel-ing rather than thinking. Wondering. Did mad people ever know that they were mad? Could they tell? Was every one of them sure, as he was sure-?

That quiet, still thing lying in the bunk near his, inarticulately suffering, withdrawn from human reach into a profound misery beyond the understanding of the sane—

"Napoleon Bonaparte!"

A clear voice, but had it been within his mind, or from without? He sat up on the bunk. His eyes pierced the dimness, could discern no form, no shadow, in the doorway.

He said, "Yes?"

VII:

ONLY then, sitting up on the hunk and having answered "Yes," did he realize the name by which the voice had called him.

"Get up. Dress."

He swung his legs out over the edge of the bunk, stood up. He reached for his shirt and was slipping his arms into it before he stopped and asked, "Why?"

"To learn the truth."

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Do not speak aloud. I can hear you. I am within you and without. I have no name."

"Then *what* are you?" He said it aloud, without think-ing.

"An instrument of The Brightly Shining."

He dropped the trousers he'd been holding. He sat down carefully on the edge of the bunk, leaned over and groped around for them.

His mind groped, too. Groped for he knew not what. Finally he found a question—the question. He didn't ask it aloud this time; he thought it, concentrated on it as he straightened out his trousers and thrust his legs in them.

"*Am I mad?*"

The answer-No-came clear and sharp as a spoken word, but had it been spoken? Or was it a sound that was only in his mind?

He found his shoes and pulled them on his feet. As he fumbled the laces into some sort of knots, he thought, "Who-what-is The Brightly Shining?"

"The Brightly Shining is *that which is Earth*. It is the intelligence of our planet. It is one of three intelligences in the solar system, one of many in the universe. Earth is one; it is called The Brightly Shining."

"I do not understand." he thought.

"You will. Are you ready?"

He finished the second knot. He stood up. The voice said, "Come. Walk silently."

It was as though he was being led through the almost-darkness, although he felt no physical touch upon him; he saw no physical presence beside him. But he walked confidently, although quietly on tiptoe, knowing he would not walk into anything nor stumble. Through the big room that was the ward, and then his outstretched hand touched the knob of a door.

He turned it gently and the door opened inward. Light blinded him. The voice said, "Wait," and he stood im-mo-bile. He could hear sound—the rustle of paper, the turn of a page—outside the door, in the lighted corridor.

Then from across the hall came the sound of a shrill scream. A chair scraped and feet hit the floor of the corridor, walking away toward the sound of the scream. A door opened and closed.

The voice said, "Come," and he pulled the door open the rest of the way and went outside, past the desk and the empty chair that had been just outside the door of the ward.

Another door, another corridor. The voice said, "Wait," the voice said, "Come"; this time a guard slept. He tip-toed past. Down steps.

He thought the question, "Where am I going?"

"Mad," said the voice.

"But you said I wasn't-" He'd spoken aloud and the sound startled him almost more than had the answer to his last question. And in the silence that followed the words he'd spoken there came-from the bottom of the stairs and around the corner-the sound of a buzzing switchboard, and someone said, "Yes? . . . Okay, Doctor, I'll be right up." Footsteps and the closing of an elevator door.

He went down the remaining stairs and around the corner and he was in the front main hall. There was an empty desk with a switchboard beside it. He walked past it and to the front door. It was bolted and he threw the heavy bolt.

He went outside, into the night.

He walked quietly across cement, across gravel; then his shoes were on grass and he didn't have to tiptoe any more. It was as dark now as the inside of an elephant; he felt the presence of trees nearby and leaves brushed his face occasionally, but he walked rapidly, confidently and his hand went forward just in time to touch a brick wall.

He reached up and he could touch the top of it; he pulled himself up and over it. There was broken glass on the flat top of the wall; he cut his clothes and his flesh badly, but he felt no pain, only the wetness of blood and the stickiness of blood.

He walked along a lighted road, he walked along dark and empty streets, he walked down a darker alley. He opened the back gate of a yard and walked to the back door of a house. He opened the door and went in. There was a lighted room at the front of the house; he could see the rectangle of light at the end of a corridor. He went along the corridor and into the lighted room.

Someone who had been seated at a desk stood up. Someone, a man, whose face he knew but whom he could not—

"Yes," said the man, smiling, "you know me, but you do not know me. Your mind is under partial control and your ability to recognize me is blocked out. Other than that and your analgesia-you are covered with blood from the glass on the wall, but you don't feel any pain-your mind is normal and you are sane."

"What's it all about?" he asked. "Why was I brought here?,"

"Because you are sane. I'm sorry about that, because you can't be. It is not so much that you retained memory of your previous life, after you'd been moved. That happens. It is that you somehow know something of what you shouldn't-something of *The Brightly Shining*, and of the Game between the red and the black. For that reason-

"For that reason, what?" he asked.

The man he knew and did not know smiled gently. "For that reason you must know the rest, so that you will know nothing at all. For everything will add to nothing. The truth will drive you mad."

"That I do not believe."

"Of course you don't. If the truth were conceivable to you, it would not drive you mad. But you cannot re-motely conceive the truth."

A powerful anger surged up within him. He stared at the familiar face that he knew and did not know, and he stared down at himself; at the torn and bloody gray uniform, at his torn and bloody hands. The hands hooked like claws with the desire to kill-someone, the someone, whoever it was, who stood before him.

He asked, "What are you?"

"I am an instrument of *The Brightly Shining*."

"The same which led me here, or another?"

"One is all, all is one. Within the whole and its parts, there is no difference. One instrument is another and the red is the black and the black is the white and there is no difference. *The Brightly Shining* is the soul of Earth. I use *soul* as the nearest word in your vocabulary."

Hatred was almost a bright light. It was almost something that he could lean into, lean his weight against.

He asked, "What is *The Brightly Shining*?" He made the words a curse in his mouth.

"Knowing will make you mad. You want to know?"

"Yes." He made a curse out of that simple, sibilant syllable.

The lights were dimming. Or was it his eyes? The room was becoming dimmer, and at the same time receding. It was becoming a tiny cube of dim light, seen from afar and outside, from somewhere in the distant dark, ever receding, turning into a pinpoint of light, and within that point of light ever the hated. Thing, the man-or was it a man?-standing beside the desk.

Into darkness, into space, up and apart from the earth -a dim sphere in the night, a receding sphere outlined against the spangled blackness of eternal space, occulting the stars, a disk of black.

It stopped receding, and time stopped. It was as though the clock of the universe stood still. Beside him, out of the void, spoke the voice of the instrument of The Shining One.

"Behold," it said. "The Being of Earth."

He beheld. Not as though an outward change was occurring, but an inward one, as though his senses were being changed to enable him to perceive something hitherto unseeable.

The ball that was Earth began to glow. Brightly to shine.

"You see the intelligence that rules Earth," said the voice. "The sum of the black and the white and the red, that are one, divided only as the lobes of a brain are divided, the trinity that is one."

The glowing ball and the stars behind it faded, and the darkness became deeper darkness and then there was dim light, growing brighter, and he was back in the room with the man standing at the desk.

"You saw," said the man whom he hated. "But you do not understand. You ask, *what* you have seen, *what* is The Brightly Shining? It is a group intelligence, the true intelligence of Earth, one intelligence among three in the Solar system, one among many in the universe.

"What, then, is man? Men are pawns, in games of-to you-unbelievable complexity, between the red and the black, the white and the black, for amusement. Played by one part of an organism against another part, to while away an instant of eternity. There are vaster games, played between galaxies. Not with man.

"Man is a parasite peculiar to Earth, which tolerates his presence for a little while. He exists nowhere else in the cosmos, and he does not exist here for long. A little while, a few chessboard wars, which he thinks he fights himself-You begin to understand."

The man at the desk smiled.

"You want to know of yourself. Nothing is less important. A move was made, before Lodi. The opportunity was there for a move of the red; a stronger, more ruthless personality was needed; it was a turning point in history-which means in the game. Do you understand now? A pinch-hitter was put in to become Emperor."

He managed two words. "And then?"

"The Brightly Shining does not kill. You had to be put somewhere, some time. Long later a man named George Vine was killed in an accident; his body was still usable. George Vine had not been insane, but he had had a Napoleonic complex. The transference was amusing."

"No doubt." Again it was impossible to reach the man at the desk. The hatred itself was a wall between them. "Then George Vine is dead?"

"Yes. And you, because you knew a little too much, must go mad so that you will know nothing. Knowing the truth will drive you mad."

"No!"

The instrument smiled.

VIII:

THE ROOM, the cube of light, dimmed; it seemed to tilt. Still standing, he was going over backward, his position becoming horizontal instead of vertical.

His weight was on his back and under him was the soft-hard smoothness of his bunk, the roughness of a gray sheet blanket. And he could move; he sat up.

He had been dreaming? Had he really been outside the asylum? He held up his hands, touched one to

the other, and they were wet with something sticky. So was the front of his shirt and the thighs and knees of his trousers.

And his shoes were on.

The blood was there from climbing the wall. And now the analgesia was leaving, and pain was beginning to come into his hands, his chest, his stomach and his legs. Sharp biting pain.

He said aloud. "*I am not mad. I am not mad.*" Was he screaming it?

A voice said, "No. Not yet." Was it the voice that had been here in the room before? Or was it the voice of the man who had stood in the lighted room? Or had both been the same voice?

It said, "Ask, `What is man?'"

Mechanically, he asked it.

"Man is a blind alley in evolution, who came too late too compete, who has always been controlled and played with by The Brightly Shining, which was old and wise before man walked erect.

"Man is a parasite upon a planet populated before he came, populated by a Being that is one and many, a bil-lion cells but a single mind, a single intelligence, a single will-as is true of every other populated planet in the universe.

"Man is a joke, a clown, a parasite. He is nothing; he will be less."

"*Come and go mad.*"

He was getting out of bed again; he was walking. Through the doorway of the cubicle, along the ward. To the door that led to the corridor; a thin crack of light showed under it. But this time his hand did not reach out for the knob. Instead he stood there facing the closed door, and it began to glow; slowly it became light and visible.

As though from somewhere an invisible spotlight played upon it, the door became a visible rectangle in the surrounding blackness; as brightly visible as the crack under it.

The voice said, "You see before you a cell of your ruler, a cell unintelligent in itself, yet a tiny part of a unit which is intelligent, one of a million units which make up *the* intelligence which rules the earth-and you. And which earth-wide intelligence is one of a million intelligences which rule the universe."

"The *door*? I don't."

The voice spoke no more; it had withdrawn, but somehow inside his mind was the echo of silent laughter.

He leaned closer and saw what he was meant to see. An ant was crawling up the door.

His eyes followed it, and numbing horror crawled apace, up his spine. A hundred things that had been told and shown him suddenly fitted into a pattern, a pattern of sheer horror. The black, the white, the red; the black ants, the white ants, the red ants; the players with men, separate lobes of a single group brain, the intelligence that was one. Man an accident, a parasite, a pawn; a million planets in the universe inhabited each by an insect race that was a single intelligence for the planet-and all the intelligences together were the single cosmic intelligence that was-*God!*

The one-syllable word wouldn't come.

He went mad, instead.

He beat upon the now-dark door with his bloody hands, with his knees, his face, with himself, although already he had forgotten why, had forgotten what he wanted to crush.

He was raving mad-dementia praecox, not paranoia-when they released his body by putting it into a strait jacket, released it from frenzy to quietude.

He was quietly mad-paranoia, not dementia praecox-when they released him as sane eleven months later.

Paranoia, you see, is a peculiar affliction; it has no physical symptoms, it is merely the presence of a fixed delusion. A series of metrazol shocks had cleared up the dementia praecox and left only the fixed delusion that he was George Vine, a reporter.

The asylum authorities thought he was, too, so the delusion was not recognized as such and they released him and gave him a certificate to prove he was sane.

He married Clare; he still works at the *Blade*-for a man named Candler. He still plays chess with his cousin, Charlie Doerr. He still sees-for periodic checkups-both Dr. Irving and Dr. Randolph.

Which of them smiles inwardly? What good would it do you to know? Yes it was, is, one of those four.

It doesn't matter. Don't you understand? Nothing matters!

THE ANGELIC ANGLEWORM

By Fredric Brown

I:

CHARLIE WILLs shut off the alarm clock and kept right on moving, swinging his feet out of bed and sticking them into his slippers as he reached for a cigarette. Once the cigarette was lighted, he let himself relax a moment, sitting on the side of the bed.

He still had time, he figured, to sit there and smoke himself awake. He had fifteen minutes before Pete Johnson would call to take him fishing. And twelve minutes was enough time to wash his face and throw on his old clothes.

It seemed funny to get up at five o'clock, but he felt swell. Golly, even with the sun not up yet and the sky a dull pastel through the window, he felt great. Because there was only a week and a half to wait now.

Less than a week and a half, really, because it was ten days. Or-come to think of it-a bit more than ten days from this hour in the morning. But call it ten days, anyway. If he could go back to sleep again now, darn it; when he woke up it would be that much closer to the time of the wedding. Yes, it was swell to sleep when you were looking forward to something. Time flies by and you don't even hear the rustle of its wings.

But no-he couldn't go back to sleep. He'd promised Pete he'd be ready at five-fifteen, and if he wasn't, Pete would sit out front in his car and honk the horn, and wake the neighbors.

And the three minutes' grace were up, so he tamped out the cigarette and reached for the clothes on the chair.

He began to whistle softly: "I'm going to marry Yum Yum, Yum Yum" from "The Mikado." And tried-in the interests of being ready in time-to keep his eyes off the silver-framed picture of Jane on the bureau.

He must be just about the luckiest guy on earth. Or anywhere else, for that matter, if there was anywhere else.

Jane Pemberton, with soft brown hair that had little wavelets in it and felt like silk-no, nicer than silk-and with the cute go-to-hell tilt to her nose, with long grace-ful sun-tanned legs, with . . . damnit, with everything that it was possible for a girl to have, and more. And the miracle that she loved him was so fresh that he still felt a bit dazed.

Ten days in a daze, and then-

His eye fell on the dial of the clock, and he jumped. It was ten minutes after five, and he still sat there holding the first sock. Hurriedly, he finished dressing. Just in time! It was almost five-fifteen on the head as he slid into his corduroy jacket, grabbed his fishing tackle, and tiptoed down the stairs and outside into the cool dawn.

Pete's car wasn't there yet.

Well, that was all right. It'd give him a few minutes to rustle up some worms, and that would save time later on. Of course he couldn't really dig in Mrs. Grady's lawn, but there was a bare area of border around the flower bed along the front porch, and it wouldn't matter if he turned over a bit of the dirt there.

He took his jackknife out and knelt down beside the flower bed. Ran the blade a couple of inches in the ground and turned over a clod of it. Yes there were worms all right. There was a nice big juicy one that ought to be tempting to any fish.

Charlie reached out to pick it up.

And that was when it happened.

His fingertips came together, but there wasn't a worm between them, because something had happened to the worm. When he'd reached out for it, it had been a quite ordinary-looking angleworm. A three-inch juicy, slip-pery, wriggling angleworm. It most definitely had *not* had a pair of wings. Nor a-

It was quite impossible, of course, and he was dreaming or seeing things, but there it was.

Fluttering upward in a graceful slow spiral that seemed utterly effortless. Flying past Charlie's face with wings that were shimmery-white, and not at all like buttery-wings or bird wings, but like-

Up and up it circled, now above Charlie's head, now level with the roof of the house, then a mere white-somewhat *a shining* white-speck against the gray sky. And after it was out of sight, Charlie's eyes still looked upward.

He didn't hear Pete Johnson's car pull in at the curb, but Pete's cheerful hail of "Hey!" caught his attention, and he saw that Pete was getting out of the car and coming up the walk.

Grinning. "Can we get some worms here, before we start?" Pete asked. Then: "'Smatter? Think you see a German bomber? And don't you know never to look up with your mouth open like you were doing when I pulled up? Remember that pigeons- Say, is something the matter? You look white as a sheet."

Charlie discovered that his mouth was still open, and he closed it. Then he opened it to say something, but couldn't think of anything to say-or rather, of any way to say it, and he closed his mouth again.

He looked back upward, but there wasn't anything in sight any more, and he looked down at the earth of the flower bed, and it looked like ordinary earth.

"Charlie!" Pete's voice sounded seriously concerned now. "Snap out of it! Are you all right?"

Again Charlie opened his mouth, and closed it. Then he said weakly, "Hello, Pete."

"For cat's sake, Charlie. Did you go to sleep out here and have a nightmare, or what? Get up off your knees and- Listen, are you *sick*? Shall I take you to Doc Palmer instead of us going fishing?"

Charlie got to his feet slowly, and shook himself. He said, "I . . . I guess I'm all right. Something funny hap-pened. But- All right, come on. Let's go fishing."

"But what? Oh, all right, tell me about it later. But before we start, shall we dig some- Hey, don't look like that! Come on, get in the car; get some fresh air and maybe that'll make you feel better."

Pete took his arm, and Pete picked up the tackle box and led Charlie out to the waiting car. He opened the dashboard compartment and took out a bottle. "Here, take a snifter of this."

Charlie did, and as the amber fluid gurgled out of the bottle's neck and down Charlie's the felt his brain begin to rid itself of the numbness of shock. He could think again.

The whiskey burned on the way down, but it put a pleasant spot of warmth where it landed, and he felt better. Until it changed to warmth, he hadn't realized that there had been a cold spot in the pit of his stomach.

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and said, "Gosh."

"Take another," Pete said, his eyes on the road. "Maybe, too, it'll do you good to tell me what hap-pened and get it out of your system. That is, if you want to."

"I . . . I guess so," said Charlie. "It . . . it doesn't sound like much to tell it, Pete. I just reached for a worm, and it flew away. On white, shining wings."

Pete looked puzzled. "You reached for a worm, and it flew away. Well, why not? I mean, I'm no entomologist, but maybe there are worms with wings. Come to think of it, there probably are. There are winged ants, and caterpillars turn into butterflies. 'What scared you about it?'"

"Well, this worm didn't have wings until I reached for it. It looked like an ordinary angleworm. Dammit, it *was* an ordinary angleworm until I went to pick it up. And then it had a . . . a-Oh, skip it. I was probably seeing things."

"Come on, get it out of your system. Give."

"Dammit, Pete, *it had a halo!*"

The car swerved a bit, and Pete eased it back to the middle of the road before he said "A what?"

"Well," said Charlie defensively, "it looked like a halo. It was a little round golden circle just above its head. It didn't seem to be attached; it just floated there."

"How'd you know it was its head? Doesn't a worm look alike on both ends?"

"Well," said Charlie, and he stopped to consider the matter. How *had* he known? "Well," he said, "since it was a halo, wouldn't it be kind of silly for it to have a halo around the wrong end? I mean, even sillier than to have- Hell, you know what I mean."

Pete said, "Hmph." Then, after the car was around a curve: "All right, let's be strictly logical. Let's assume you saw, or thought you saw, what you . . . uh ... thought you saw. Now, you're not a heavy drinker so it wasn't D. T's. Far as I can see, that leaves three possibilities."

Charlie said, "I see two of them. It could have been a pure hallucination. People do have 'em, I guess, but I never had one before. Or I suppose it could have been a dream, maybe. I'm sure I didn't, but I suppose that I could, have gone to sleep there and dreamed I saw it. But *that* isn't very likely, is it?"

"I'll concede the possibility of an hallucination, but not a dream. What's the third?"

"Ordinary fact. That you really saw a winged worm. I mean, that there is such a thing, for all I know. And you were just mistaken about it not having wings when you first saw it, because they were folded. And what you thought looked like a . . . uh . . . halo, was some sort of a crest or antenna or something. There *are* some damn funny-looking bugs."

"Yeah," said Charlie. But he didn't believe it. There may be funny-looking bugs, but none that suddenly sprout wings and haloes and ascend unto heaven.

He took another drink out of the bottle.

II:

SUNDAY AFTERNOON and evening he spent with Jane, and the episode of the ascending angleworm slipped into the back of Charlie's mind. Anything, except Jane, tended to slip there when he was with her.

At bedtime when he was alone again, it came back. The thought, not the worm. So strongly that he couldn't sleep, and he got up and sat in the armchair by the window and decided the only way to get it out of his mind was to think it through.

If he could pin things down and decide what had really happened out there at the edge of the flower bed; then maybe he could forget it completely.

O. K. he told himself, let's be strictly logical.

Pete had been right about the three possibilities. Hallucination, dream, reality. Now to begin with, it *hadn't* been a dream. He'd been wide awake; he was as sure of that as he was sure of anything. Eliminate that.

Reality? That was impossible, too. It was all right for Pete to talk about the funniness of insects and the possibility of antennae, and such-but Pete hadn't *seen* the danged thing. Why, it had flown past only inches from his eyes. And that halo had really *been* there.

Antennae? Nuts.

And that left hallucination. That's what it must have been, hallucination. After all, people *do* have hallucinations. Unless it happened often, it didn't necessarily mean you were a candidate for the booby hatch. All right then accept that it was an hallucination, and so what? So forget it.

With that decided, he went to bed and-by thinking about Jane again-happily to sleep.

The next morning was Monday and he went back to work.

And the morning after that was Tuesday.

And on Tuesday

III:

IT WASN'T an ascending angleworm this time. It wasn't anything you could put your finger on, unless you can put your finger on sunburn, and that's painful sometimes.

But sunburn in a rainstorm?

It was raining when Charlie Wills left home that morn-ing, but it wasn't raining hard at that time, which was a few minutes after eight. A mere drizzle. Charlie pulled down the brim of his hat and buttoned up his raincoat and decided to walk to work anyway. He rather liked walking in rain. And he had time; he didn't have to be there until eight-thirty.

Three blocks away from work, he encountered the Pest, hound in the same direction. The Pest was Jane Pemberton's kid sister, and her right name was Paula, but most people had forgotten the fact. She worked at the Hapworth Printing Co., just as Charlie did; but she was a copyholder for one of the proofreaders and he was as-sistant production manager.

But he'd met Jane through her, at a party given for employees.

He said, "Hi there, Pest. Aren't you afraid you'll melt?" For it was raining harder now, definitely harder.

"Hello, Charlie-warlie. I like to walk in the rain."

She *would*, thought Charlie bitterly. At the hated nick-name Charlie-warlie, he writhed. Jane had called him that once, but-after he'd talked reason to her-never again. Jane was reasonable. But the Pest had heard it- And Charlie was mortally afraid, ever after, that she'd sometime call him that at work, with other employees in hear-ing. And if *that* ever happened-

"Listen," he protested, "can't you forget that darn fool . . . uh . . . nickname? I'll quit calling you Pest, if you'll quit calling me . . . uh . . . *that*."

"But I *like* to be called the Pest. *Why* don't you like to be called Charlie-warlie?"

She grinned at him, and Charlie writhed inwardly. Because she was *who* she was, he didn't dare say.

There was pent-up anger in him as he walked into the blowing rain, head bent low to keep it out of his face. Damn the brat--

With vision limited to a few yards of sidewalk directly ahead of him, Charlie probably wouldn't have seen the teamster and the horse if he hadn't heard the cracks that sounded like pistol shots.

He looked up, and saw. In the middle of the street, maybe fifty feet ahead of Charlie and the Pest and mov-ing toward them, came an overloaded wagon. It was drawn by an aged, desponded horse, a horse so old and bony that the slow walk by which it progressed seemed to be its speediest possible rate of movement.

But the teamster obviously didn't think so. He was a big, *ugly* man with an unshaven, swarthy face. He was standing up, swinging his heavy whip for another blow. It came down, and the old horse quivered under it and seemed to sway between the shafts.

The whip lifted again.

And Charlie yelled "Hey, there!" and started toward the wagon.

He wasn't certain yet just what he was going to do about it if the brute beating the other brute refused to stop. But it was going to be something. Seeing an animal mistreated was something Charlie Wills just couldn't stand. And wouldn't stand.

He yelled "Hey!" again, because the teamster didn't seem to have heard him the first time, and he started forw-ard at a trot, along the curb.

The teamster heard that second yell, and he might have heard the first. Because he turned and looked squarely at Charlie. Then he raised the whip again, even higher, and brought it down on the horse's welt-streaked back with all his might.

Things went red in front of Charlie's eyes. He didn't yell again. He knew darned well now what he was going to do. It began with pulling that teamster down off the wagon where he could get at him. And then he was go-ing to beat him to a pulp.

He heard Paula's high heels clicking as she started after him and called out, "Charlie, be caref--"

But that was all of it that he heard. Because, just at that moment, it happened.

A sudden blinding wave of intolerable heat, a sensation as though he had just stepped into the heart of a fiery furnace. He gasped once for breath, as the very air in his lungs and in his throat seemed to be scorching hot. And his skin--

Blinding pain, just for an instant. Then it was gone, but too late. The shock had been too sudden and intense, and as he felt again the cool rain in his face, he went dizzy and rubbery all over, and lost consciousness. He didn't even feel the impact of his fall.

Darkness.

And then he opened his eyes into a blur of white that resolved itself into white walls and white sheets over him and a nurse in a white uniform, who said, "Doctor! He's regained consciousness."

Footsteps and the closing of a door, and there was Doc Palmer frowning down at him.

"Well, Charles, what have you been up to now?" Charlie grinned a bit weakly. He said, "Hi, doc. I'll bite. What *have* I been up to?"

Doc Palmer pulled up a chair beside the bed and sat down in it. He reached out for Charlie's wrist and held it while he looked at the second hand of his watch. Then he read the chart at the end of the bed and said "Hmph."

"Is that the diagnosis," Charlie wanted to know, "or the treatment? Listen, first what about the teamster? That is if you know--"

"Paula told me what happened. Teamster's under arrest, and fired. You're all right, Charles. Nothing serious,"

"Nothing serious? What's it a non-serious case of? In other words, what happened to me?"

"You keeled over. Prostration. And you'll be peeling for a few days, but that's all. Why didn't you use a lotion of some kind yesterday?"

Charlie closed his eyes and opened them again slowly. And said, "Why didn't I use a- For *what*?"

"The sunburn, of course. Don't you know you can't go swimming on a sunny day and not get--"

"But I wasn't swimming yesterday, doc. Nor the day before. Gosh, not for a couple weeks, in fact. What do you mean, sunburn?"

Doc Palmer rubbed his chin. He said, "You better rest a while, Charles. If you feel all right by this evening, you can go home. But you'd better not work tomorrow."

He got up and went out.

The nurse was still there, and Charlie looked at her blankly. He said, "Is Doc Palmer going--Listen, what's this all about?"

The nurse was looking at him queerly. She said, "Why! you were. . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Wills, but a nurse isn't allowed to discuss a diagnosis with a patient. But you haven't anything to worry about; you heard Dr. Palmer, say you could go home this afternoon or evening."

"Nuts," said Charlie. "Listen, what time is it? Or aren't nurses allowed to tell that?"

"It's ten-thirty."

"Golly, and I've been here almost two hours." He figured back; remembering now that he'd passed a clock that said twenty-four minutes after eight just as they'd turned the corner for that last block. And, if he'd been awake again now for five minutes, then for two full hours.

"Anything else you want, sir?"

Charlie shook his head slowly. And then because he wanted her to leave so he could sneak a look at that chart, he said, "Well, yes. Could I have a glass of orange juice?"

As soon as she was gone, he sat up in bed. It hurt a little to do that, and he found his skin was a bit tender to the touch. He looked at his arms, pulling up the sleeves of the hospital nightshirt they'd put on him, and the skin was pinkish. Just the shade of pink that meant the first stage of a mild sunburn.

He looked down inside the nightshirt, and then at his legs, and said, "What the hell--" Because the sunburn, if it was sunburn, was uniform all over.

And that didn't make sense, because he hadn't been in the sun enough to get burned at any time recently, and he hadn't been in the sun at all without his clothes. And--yes, the sunburn extended even over the area which would have been covered by trunks if he *had* gone swimming.

But maybe the chart would explain. He reached over the foot of the bed and took the clipboard with the chart off the hook.

"Reported that patient fainted suddenly on street without apparent cause. Pulse 135, respiration labored, temperature 104, upon admission. All returned to normal within first hour. Symptoms seem to approximate those of heat prostration, but--"

Then there were a few qualifying comments which were highly technical-sounding. Charlie didn't understand them, and somehow he had a hunch that Doc Palmer didn't understand them either. They had a whistling-in-the-dark sound to them.

Click of heels in the hall outside and he put the chart back quickly and ducked under the covers. Surprisingly, there was a knock. Nurses wouldn't knock, would they?

He said, "Come in."

It was Jane. Looking more beautiful than ever, with her big brown eyes a bit bigger with fright. "Darling! I came as soon as the Pest called home and told me. But she was awfully vague. What on earth happened?"

By that time she was within reach, and Charlie put his arms around her and didn't give a darn, just then, what had happened to him. But he tried to explain. Mostly to himself.

IV:

PEOPLE always try to explain.

Face a man, or a woman, with something he doesn't understand, and he'll be miserable until he classifies it. Lights in the sky. And a scientist tells him it's the aurora borealis-or the aurora australis-and he can accept the lights, and forget them.

Something knocks pictures off a wall in an empty room, and throws a chair downstairs. Consternation, until it's named. Then it's only a poltergeist.

Name it, and forget it. Anything with a name can be assimilated.

Without one, it's-well, unthinkable. Take away the name of anything, and you've got blank horror.

Even something as familiar as a commonplace ghoul. Graves in a cemetery dug up, corpses eaten. Horrible thing, it may be; but it's merely a ghoul; as long as it's named-- But suppose, if you can stand it, there was no such word as *ghoul* and no concept of one. *Then* dug-up half-eaten corpses are found. Nameless horror.

Not that the next thing that happened to Charlie Wills had anything to do with a ghoul. Not even a werewolf. But I think that, in a way, he'd have found a werewolf more comforting than the duck. One expects strange behavior of a werewolf, but a duck--

Like the duck in the museum.

Now, there is nothing intrinsically terrible about a duck. Nothing to make one lie awake at night, with cold sweat coming out on top of peeling sunburn. On the whole, a duck is a pleasant object, particularly if it is roasted. This one wasn't.

Now it is Thursday. Charlie's stay in the hospital had been for eight hours; they'd released him late in the afternoon, and he'd eaten dinner downtown and then gone home. The boss had insisted on his taking the next day off from work. Charlie hadn't protested much.

Home, and, after stripping to take a bath, he'd studied his skin with blank amazement. Definitely, a third-degree bum. Definitely, all over him. Almost ready to peel.

It did peel, the next day.

He took advantage of the holiday by taking Jane out to the ball game, where they sat in a grandstand so he could be out of the sun. It was a good game, and Jane understood and liked baseball.

Thursday, back to work.

At eleven twenty-five, Old Man Hapworth, the big boss, came into Charlie's office.

"Wills," he said, "we got a rush order to print ten thousand handbills, and the copy will be here in about an hour. I'd like you to follow the thing right through the Linotype room and the composing room

and get it on the press the minute it's made up. It's a close squeak whether we make deadline on it, and there's a penalty if we don't."

"Sure, Mr. Hapworth. I'll stick right with it."

"Fine. I'll count on you. But listen-it's a bit early to eat, but just the same you better go out for your lunch hour now. The copy will be here about the time you get back, and you can stick right with the job. That is, if you don't mind eating early."

"Not at all," Charlie lied. He got his hat and went out.

Dammit, it was too early to eat. But he had an hour off and he could eat in half that time, so maybe if he walked half an hour first, he could work up an appetite.

The museum was two blocks away, and the best place to kill half an hour. He went there, strolled down the central corridor without stopping, except to stare for a moment at a statue of Aphrodite that reminded him of Jane Pemberton and made him remember--even more strongly than he already remembered--that it was only six days now until his wedding.

Then he turned off into the room that housed the numismatics collection. He'd used to collect coins when he was a kid, and although the collection had been broken up since then, he still had a mild interest in look-ing at the big museum collection.

He stopped in front of a showcase of bronze Romans.

But he wasn't thinking about them. He was still think-ing about Aphrodite, or Jane, which was quite under-standable under the circumstances. Most certainly, he was not thinking about flying worms or sudden waves of burning heat.

Then he chanced to look across toward an adjacent showcase. And within it, he saw the duck.

It was a perfectly ordinary-looking duck. It had a speckled breast and greenish-brown markings on its wing and a darkish head with a darker stripe starting just above the eye and running down along the short neck. It looked like a wild rather than a domestic duck.

And it looked bewildered at being there.

For just a moment, the complete strangeness of the duck's presence in a showcase of coins didn't register with Charlie. His mind was *still* on Aphrodite. Even while he stared at a wild duck under glass inside a show-case marked "Coins of China."

Then the duck quacked, and waddled on its awkward webbed feet down the length of the showcase and butted against the glass of the end, and fluttered its wings and tried to fly upward, but hit against the glass of the top. And it quacked again and loudly.

Only then did it occur to Charlie to wonder what a live duck was doing in a numismatics collection. Apparently, to judge from its actions, the duck was won-dering the same thing.

And only then did Charlie remember the angelic worm and the sunless sunburn.

And somebody in the doorway said, "Ysst. Hey."

Charlie turned, and the look on his face must have been something out of the ordinary because the uni-formed attendant quit frowning and said, "Something wrong, mister?"

For a brief instant, Charlie just stared at him. Then it occurred to Charlie that this was the opportunity he'd lacked when the angleworm had ascended. Two people couldn't see the same hallucination. If it was an--

He opened his mouth to say "Look," but he didn't have to say anything. The duck heat him to it by quack-ing loudly and again trying to flutter through the glass of the case.

The attendant's eyes went past Charlie to the case of Chinese coins and he said "Gaw!"

The duck was still there.

The attendant looked at Charlie again and said, "*Are you-*" and then stopped without finishing the question and went up to the showcase to look at close range. The duck was still struggling to get out, but more weakly. It seemed to be gasping for breath.

The attendant said, "Gaw!" again, and then over his shoulder to Charlie: "Mister, how did you-That there case is her-hermetically sealed. It's airproof. Lookit that bird. It's--"

It already had; the duck fell over, either dead or un-conscious.

The attendant grasped Charlie's arm. He said firmly, "Mister, you come with me to the boss." And

less firmly, "Uh . . . *how* did you get that thing in there? And don't try to tell me you didn't, mister. I was through here five minutes ago, and you're the only guy's been in here since."

Charlie opened his mouth, and closed it again. He had a sudden vision of himself being questioned at the headquarters of the museum and then at the police station. And if the police started asking questions about him, they'd find out about the worm and about his having been in the hospital for-- And, golly, they'd get an alienist maybe, and--

With the courage of sheer desperation, Charlie smiled. He tried to make it an ominous smile; it may not have been ominous, but it was definitely unusual. "How would you like," he asked the attendant, "to find yourself in there?" And he pointed with his free arm through the entrance and out into the main hallway at the stone sar-cophagus of King- Mene-Ptah. "I can do it, the same way I put that duck--"

The museum attendant was breathing hard. His eyes looked slightly glazed, and he let go of Charlie's arm. He said, "Mister, did you really--"

"Want me to show you how?"

"Uh . . . Gaw!" said the attendant. He ran.

Charlie forced himself to hold his own pace down to a rapid walk, and went in the opposite direction to the side entrance that led out into Beeker Street.

And Beeker Street was still a very ordinary-looking street, with lots of midday traffic, and no pink elephants climbing trees and nothing going on but the hurried confusion of a city street. Its very noise was soothing, in a way; although there was one bad moment when he was crossing at the corner and heard a sudden noise behind him. He turned around, startled, afraid of what strange thing he might see there.

But it was only a truck, and he got out of its way in time to avoid being run over.

V:

LUNCH. And Charlie was definitely getting into a state of jitters. His hand shook so that he could scarcely pick up his coffee without slopping it over the edge of the cup.

Because a horrible thought was dawning in his mind. If something was wrong with him, was it fair to Jane Pemberton for him to go ahead and marry her? Is it fair to saddle the girl one loves with a husband who might go to the icebox to get a bottle of milk and find-God knows what?

And he was deeply, madly in love with Jane.

So he sat there, an unbitten sandwich on the plate before him, and alternated between hope and despair as he tried to make sense out of the three things that had happened to him within the past week.

Hallucination?

But the attendant, too, had seen the duck!

How comforting it had been--it seemed to him now--that, after seeing the angelic angleworm, he had been able to tell himself it had been an hallucination. *Only* an hallucination.

But wait. Maybe--

Could not the museum attendant, too, have been part of the same hallucination as the duck? Granted that he, Charlie, could have seen a duck that wasn't there, couldn't he also have included in the same category a museum at-tendant who professed to see the duck? Why not? A duck and an attendant who sees it--the combination could be as illusory as the duck alone.

And Charlie felt so encouraged that he took a bite out of his sandwich.

But the *burn*? Whose hallucination was that? Or was there some sort of a natural physical ailment that could produce a sudden skin condition approximating mild sunburn? But, if there were such a thing, then evidently Doc Palmer didn't know about it.

Suddenly Charlie caught a glimpse of the clock on the wall, and it was one o'clock, and he almost strangled on that bite of sandwich when he realized that he was over half an hour late, and must have been sitting in the restaurant almost an hour.

He got up and ran back to the office.

But all was well; Old Man Hapworth wasn't there. And the copy for the rush circular was late and

got there just as Charlie arrived.

He said "*Whew!*" at the narrowness of his escape, and concentrated hard on getting that circular through the plant. He rushed it to the Linotypes and read proof on it himself, then watched make-up over the compositor's shoulder. He knew he was making a nuisance of himself, but it killed the afternoon.

And he thought, "Only one more day to work after today, and then my vacation, and on *Wednesday*-" Wedding on Wednesday.

But--

If--

The Pest came out of the proofroom in a green smock and looked at him. "Charlie," she said, "you look like something no self-respecting cat would drag in. Say ... what's wrong with you? Really?"

"Ph . . . nothing. Say, Paula, will you tell Jane when you get home that I may be a bit late this evening? I got to stick here till these handbills are off the press."

"Sure, Charlie. But tell me--"

"Nix. Run along, will you? I'm busy."

She shrugged her shoulders, and went back into the proofroom.

The machinist tapped Charlie's shoulder. "Say, we got that new Linotype set up. Want to take a look?"

Charlie nodded and followed. He looked over the installation, and then slid into the operator's chair in front of the machine. "How does she run?"

"Sweet. Those Blue Streak models are honeys. Try it."

Charlie let his fingers play over the keys, setting words without paying any attention to what they were. He sent in three lines to cast, then picked the slugs out of the stick. And found that he had set: "For men have died and worms have eaten them and ascendeth unto Heaven where it sitteth upon the right hand--"

"Gaw!" said Charlie. And *that* reminded him of--

VI:

JANE NOTICED that there was something wrong. She couldn't have helped noticing. But instead of asking questions, she was unusually nice to him that evening.

And Charlie, who had gone to see her with the resolution to tell her the whole story, found himself weakening. As men always weaken when they are with the women they love and the parlor lamp is turned low.

But she did ask: "Charles-you *do* want to marry me, don't y? I mean, if there's any doubt in your mind and that's what has been worrying you, we can postpone the wedding till you're sure whether you love me enough--"

"*Love you?*" Charlie was aghast. "Why--"

And he proved it pretty satisfactorily.

So satisfactorily, in fact, that he completely forgot his original intention to suggest that very postponement. But *never* for the reason she suggested. With his arms around Jane-well, the poor chap was only human.

A man in love is a drunken man, and you can't ex-actly blame a drunkard for what he does under the influence of alcohol. You can blame him, of course, for getting drunk in the first place; but you can't put even that much blame on a man in love. In all probability, he fell through no fault of his own. In all probability his original intentions were strictly dishonorable; then, when those intentions met resistance, the subtle chemistry of sublimation converted them into the stuff that stars are made of.

Probably that was why he didn't go to see an alienist the next day. He was a bit afraid of what an alienist might tell him. He weakened and decided to wait and see if anything else happened.

Maybe nothing else would happen.

There was a comforting popular superstition that things went in groups of three, and three things had

happened already.

Sure, that was it. From now on, he'd be all right. After all, there wasn't anything basically wrong; there couldn't be. He was in good health. Aside from Tuesday, he hadn't missed a day's work at the print shop in two years.

And-well, by now it was Friday noon and nothing had happened for a full twenty-four hours, and nothing was going to happen again.

It didn't, Friday, but he read something that jolted him out of his precarious complacency.

A newspaper account.

He sat down in the restaurant at a table at which a previous diner had left a morning paper. Charlie read it while he was waiting for his order to be taken. He finished scanning the front page before the waitress came, and the comic section while he was eating his soup, and then turned idly to the local page.

GUARD AT MUSEUM IS SUSPENDED Curator Orders Investigation

And the cold spot in his stomach got larger and colder as he read, for there it was in black and white.

The wild duck had really been in the showcase. No one could figure out how it had been put there. They'd had to take the showcase apart to get it out, and the showcase showed no indication of having been tampered with. It had been puttied up air-tight to keep out dust, and the putty had not been damaged.

A guard, for reasons not clearly given in the article, had been given a three-day suspension. One gathered from the wording of the story that the curator of the museum had felt the necessity of doing *something* about the matter.

Nothing of value was missing from the case. One Chinese coin with a hole in the middle, a haikwan tad, made of silver, had not been findable after the affair; but it wasn't worth much. There was some doubt as to whether it had been stolen by one of the workmen who had disassembled the showcase or whether it had been accidentally thrown out with the debris of old putty.

The reporter, telling the thing humorously, suggested that probably the duck had mistaken the coin for a doughnut because of the hole, and had eaten it. And that the curator's best revenge would be to eat the duck.

The police had been called in, but had taken the attitude that the whole affair must have been a practical joke. By whom or how accomplished, they didn't know. Charlie put down the paper and stared moodily across the room.

Then it definitely *hadn't* been a double hallucination, a case of his imagining both duck and attendant. And until now that the bottom had fallen out of that idea, Charlie hadn't realized how strongly he'd counted on the possibility.

Now he was back where he'd started.

Unless--

But that was absurd. Of course, theoretically, the newspaper item he had just read *could* be an hallucination too, but--No, that was too much to swallow. Accord-ing to that line of reasoning, if he went around to the museum and talked to the curator, the curator himself would be an hallucin--

"Your duck, sir."

Charlie jumped halfway out of his chair.

Then he saw it was the waitress standing at the side of the table with his entree, and that she had spoken because he had the newspaper spread out and there wasn't room for her to put it down.

"Didn't you order roast duck, sir? I--"

Charlie stood up hastily, averting his eyes from the dish.

He said, "Sorry-gotta-make-a-phone-call," and hastily handed the astonished waitress a dollar bill and strode out. Had he really ordered--Not exactly; he'd told her to bring him the special.

But eat duck? He'd rather eat ... no, not fried angle-worms either. He shuddered.

He hurried back to the office, despite the fact that he was half an hour early, and felt better once he was within the safe four walls of the Hapworth Printing Co. Nothing out of the way had happened to him there.

As yet.

VII:

BASICALLY, Charlie Wills was quite a healthy young man. By two o'clock in the afternoon, he was so hungry that he sent one of the office boys downstairs to buy him a couple of sandwiches.

And he ate them. True, he lifted up the top slice of bread on each and looked inside. He didn't know what he expected to find there, aside from boiled ham and butter and a piece of lettuce, but if he had found-in lieu of one of those ingredients-say, a Chinese silver coin with a hole in the middle, he would not have been more than ordinarily surprised.

It was a dull afternoon at the plant, and Charlie had time to do quite a bit of thinking. Even a bit of research. He remembered that the plant had printed, several years before, a textbook on entomology. He found the file copy and industriously paged through it looking for a winged worm. He found a few winged things that might be called worms, but none that even remotely resembled the angleworm with the halo. Not even, for that matter, if he disregarded the golden circle, and tried to make identification solely on the basis of body and wings.

No flying angleworms.

There weren't any medical books in which he could look up-or try to look up-how one could get sun-burned without a sun.

But he looked up "tael" in the dictionary, and found that it was equivalent to a Jiang, which was one-sixteenth of a catty. And that one official hang is equivalent to a hectogram.

None of which seemed particularly helpful.

Shortly before five o'clock he went around saying good-bye to everyone, because this was the last day at the office before his two weeks' vacation, and the good-byes were naturally complicated by good wishes on his impending wedding-which would take place in the first week of his vacation.

He had to shake hands with everybody but the Pest, whom, of course, he'd be seeing frequently during the first few days of his vacation. In fact, he went home with her from work to have dinner with the Pembertons.

And it was a quiet, restful, pleasant dinner that left him feeling better than he'd felt since last Sunday morning. Here in the calm harbor of the Pemberton household, the absurd things that had happened to him seemed so far away and so utterly fantastic that he almost doubted if they had happened at all.

And he felt utterly, completely certain that it was all over. Things happened in threes, didn't they? If any thing else happened--But it wouldn't.

It didn't, that night.

Jane solicitously sent him home at nine o'clock to get to bed early. But she kissed him good night so tenderly, and withal so effectively, that he walked down the street with his head in rosy clouds.

Then, suddenly--out of nothing, as it were--Charlie remembered that the museum attendant had been suspended, and was losing three days' pay, because of the episode of the duck in the showcase. And if that duck business was Charlie's fault-even indirectly-didn't he owe it to the guy to step forward and explain to the museum directors that the attendant had been in no way to blame, and that he should not be penalized?

After all, he, Charlie, had probably scared the poor attendant half out of his wits by suggesting that he could repeat the performance with a sarcophagus instead of a showcase, and the attendant had told such a disconnected story that he hadn't been believed.

But--*had* the thing been his fault? *Did* he owe--

And there he was butting his head against that brick wall of impossibility again. Trying to solve the insoluble.

And he knew, suddenly, that he had been weak in not breaking his engagement to Jane. That what had hap-pened three times within the short space of a week might all too easily happen again.

Gosh! Even at the ceremony. Suppose he reached for the wedding ring and pulled out a--

From the rosy clouds of bliss to the black mire of de-spair had proved to be a walk of less than a block.

Almost he turned back toward the Pemberton home to tell them tonight, then decided not to. Instead, he'd stop by and talk with Pete Johnson.

Maybe Pete--

What he really hoped was that Pete would talk him out of his decision.

VIII:

PETE JOHNSON had a gallon jug, almost full, of wine. Mellow sherry. And Pete had sampled it, and was mel-low, too.

He refused even to listen to Charlie, until his guest had drunk one glass and had a second on the table in front of him. Then he said, "You got something on your mind. O. K., shoot."

"Lookit, Pete. I told you about that angleworm busi-ness. In fact, you were practically there when it hap-pened. And you know about what happened Tuesday morning on my way to work. But yesterday-well, what happened was worse, I guess. Because another guy saw it. It was a duck."

"What was a duck?"

"In a showcase at- Wait, I'll start at the beginning." And he did, and Pete listened.

"Well," he said thoughtfully, "the fact that it was in the newspaper quashes one line of thought. Uh ... fortunately. Listen, I don't see what you got to worry about. Aren't you making a mountain out of a few molehills?"

Charlie took another sip of the sherry and lighted a cigarette and said, "How?" quite hopefully.

"Well, three screwy things have happened. But you take any one by itself and it doesn't amount to a hill of beans, does it? Any one of them can be explained. Where you bog down is in sitting there insisting on a blanket explanation for all of them.

"How do you know there is any connection at all? Now, take them separately--"

"You take them," suggested Charlie. "How would you explain them so easy as all that?"

"First one's a cinch. Your stomach was upset or something and you had a pure hallucination. Happens to the best people once in a while. Or-you got a second choice just as simple-maybe you saw a new kind of bug. Hell, there are probably thousands of insects that haven't been classified yet. New ones get on the list every pear."

"Um," said Charlie. "And the heat business?"

"Nell, doctors don't know everything. You got too mad seeing that teamster beating the horse, and anger has a physical effect, hasn't it? You slipped a cog somewhere. Maybe it affected your thermodermal gland."

"What's a thermodermal gland?"

Pete grinned. "I just invented it. But why not? The medicos are constantly finding new ones or new pur-poses of old ones. And there's *something* in your body that acts as a thermostat and keeps your skin temperature constant. Maybe it went wrong for a minute. Look what a pituitary gland can do for you or against you. Not to mention the parathyroids and the pineal and the adrenals.

"Nothing to it, Charlie. Have some more wine. Now, let's take the duck business. If you don't think about it with the other two things in mind, there's nothing exciting about it. Undoubtedly just a practical joke on the museum or by somebody working there. It was just coin-cidence that *you* walked in on it."

"But the showcase--"

"Bother the showcase! It could have been done somehow; you didn't check that showcase yourself, and you know what newspapers are. And, for that matter, look what Thurston and Houdini could do with things like that, and let you examine the receptacles before and after. Maybe, too, it wasn't just a joke. Maybe somebody had a purpose putting it there, but why think that pur-pose had any connection

with you? You're an egotist, that's what you are."

Charlie sighed. "Yes, but- But you take the three things together, and-"

"*Why* take them together? Look, this morning I saw a man slip on a banana peel and fall; this afternoon I had a slight toothache; this evening I got a telephone call from a girl I haven't seen in years. Now *why* should I take those three events and try to figure one common cause for all of them? One underlying motif for all three? I'd go nuts, if I tried."

"Um," said Charlie. "Maybe you got something there. But-"

Despite the "but-" he went home feeling cheerful, hopeful, and mellow. And he was going through with the wedding just as though nothing had happened. Apparently nothing, of importance, had happened. Pete was sensible.

Charlie slept soundly that Saturday morning, and didn't awaken until almost noon.

And Saturday nothing happened.

IX:

NOTHING, that is, unless one considered the matter of the missing golf ball as worthy of record. Charlie decided it wasn't; golf balls disappear all too often. In fact, for a dub golfer, it is only normal to lose at least one ball on eighteen holes.

And it was in the rough, at that.

He'd sliced his drive off the tee on the long four-teenth, and he'd seen it curve off the fairway, hit, bounce, and come to rest behind a big tree; with the tree directly between the ball and the green.

And Charlie's "Damn!" had been loud and fervent, because up to that hole he had an excellent chance to break a hundred. Now he'd have to lose a stroke chipping the stymied ball back onto the fairway.

He waited until Pete had hooked into the woods on the other side, and then shouldered his bag and walked toward the ball.

It wasn't there.

Behind the tree and at about the spot where he thought the ball had landed, there was a wreath of wilted flowers strung along a purple cord that showed through at intervals. Charlie picked it up to look under it, but the ball wasn't there.

So, it must have rolled farther, and he looked but couldn't find it. Pete, meanwhile, had found his own ball and hit his recovery shot. He came across to help Charlie look and they waved the following foursome to play on through.

"I thought it stopped right here," Charlie said, "but it must have rolled on. Well, if we don't find it by the time that foursome's off the green, I'll drop another. Say, how'd this thing get here?"

He discovered he still had the wreath in his hand. Pete looked at it and shuddered. "Golly, what a color combination. Violet and red and green on a purple ribbon. It stinks." The thing did smell a bit, although Pete wasn't close enough to notice that and it wasn't what he meant.

"Yeah, but what is it? How'd it get-"

Pete grinned. "Looks like one of those things Hawai-ians wear around their necks. Leis, don't they call them? Hey!"

He caught the suddenly stricken look on Charlie's face and firmly took the thing out of Charlie's hand and threw it into the woods. "Now, son," he said, "don't go adding *that* damned thing to your string of coincidences. What's the difference who dropped it here or why? Come on, find your ball and let's get ready. The foursome's on the green already."

They didn't find the ball.

So Charlie dropped another. He got it out into the middle of the fairway with a niblick and then a screaming brassie shot straight down the middle put him on, ten feet from the pin. And he one-putted for a par five on the hole, even with the stroke penalty for a lost ball.

And broke a hundred after all. True, back in the clubhouse while they were getting dressed, he said, "Listen, Pete, about that ball I lost on the fourteenth. Isn't it kind of funny that-"

"Nuts," Pete grunted. "Didn't you ever lose a ball before? Sometimes you think you see where they land, and it's twenty or even forty feet off from where it really is. The perspective fools you."

"Yeah, but--"

There was that "but" again. It seemed to be the last word on everything that happened recently. Screwy things happen one after another and you can explain each one if you consider it alone, *but--*

"Have a drink," Pete suggested, and handed over a bottle.

Charlie did, and felt better. He had several. It didn't matter, because tonight Jane was going to a shower given by some girl friends and she wouldn't smell it on his breath.

He said, "Pete, got any plans for tonight? Jane's busy and it's one of my last bachelor evenings--"

Pete grinned. "You mean, what are we going to do or get drunk? O. K., count me in. Maybe we can get a couple more of the gang together. It's Saturday, and none of us has to work tomorrow."

X:

AND IT WAS undoubtedly a good thing that none of them did have to work Sunday, for few of them would have been able to. It was a highly successful stag evening. Drinks at Tony's, and then a spot of howling until the manager of the alleys began to get huffy about people bowling balls that started down one alley, jumped the groove, and knocked down pins in the alley adjacent.

And then they'd gone--

Next morning Charlie tried to remember all the places they'd been and all the things they'd done, and decided he was glad he couldn't. For one thing, he had a confused recollection of having tried to start a fight with a Ha-waiian guitar player who was wearing a lei, and that he had drunkenly accused the guitarist of stealing his golf ball. But the others had dragged him out of the place before the police got there.

And somewhere around one o'clock they'd eaten, and Charlie had been so cussed that he'd insisted on trying four eateries before they found one which served duck.

He was going to avenge his golf ball by eating duck. All in all, a very silly and successful spree. Undoubt-edly worth a mild hangover.

After all, a guy gets married only once. At least, a man who has a girl like Jane Pemberton in love with him gets married only once.

Nothing out of the ordinary happened Sunday. He saw Jane and again had dinner with the Pembertons. And every time he looked at Jane, or touched her, Charlie had something the sensation of a green pilot making his first outside loop in a fast plane, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. The poor guy was in love.

XI:

BUT on Monday--

Monday was the day that really upset the apple cart. After five fifty-five o'clock Monday afternoon, Charlie knew it was hopeless.

In the morning, he made arrangements with the minister who was to perform the ceremony, and in the afternoon he did a lot of last-minute shopping in the wardrobe line. He found it took him longer than he'd thought.

At five-thirty he began to doubt if he was going to have time to call for the wedding ring. It had been bought and paid for, previously, but was still at the jewelers' being suitably engraved with initials.

He was still on the other side of town at five-thirty, awaiting alterations on a suit, and he phoned Pete Johnson from the tailor's:

"Say, Pete, can you do an errand for me?"

"Sure, Charlie. What's up?"

"I want to get the wedding ring before the store closes at six, so I won't have to come downtown at all tomor-row. It's right in the block with you; Scorwald & Ben-ning's store. It's paid for; will you pick it

up for me? I'll phone 'em to give it to you."

"Glad to. Say, where are you? I'm eating downtown tonight; how's about putting the feed bag on with me?"

"Sure, Pete. Listen, maybe I *can* get to the jewelers' in time; I'm just calling you to play safe. Tell you what; I'll meet you there. You be there at five minutes of six to be sure of getting the ring, and I'll get there at the same time if I can. If I can't, wait for me outside. I won't be later than six-fifteen at the latest."

And Charlie hung up the receiver and found the tailor had the suit ready for him. He paid for it, then went outside and began to look around for a taxi.

It took him ten minutes to find one, and still he knew he was going to get to the jewelry store in time. In fact, it wouldn't have been necessary for him to have phoned Pete. He'd get there easily by five fifty-five.

And it was just a few seconds before that time when he stepped out of the cab, paid off the driver, and strode up to the entrance.

It was just as his first foot crossed the threshold of the Scorwald & Benning store that he noticed the peculiar odor. He had taken one step farther before he recognized what it was, and then it was too late to do anything about it.

It had him. Unconsciously, he'd taken a deep sniff of identification, and the stuff was so strong, so pure, that he didn't need a second. His lungs were filled with it.

And the floor seemed to his distorted vision to be a mile away, but coming up slowly to meet him. Slowly, but getting there. He seemed to hang suspended in the air for a measurable time. Then, before he landed, everything was mercifully black and blank.

XII:

"ETHER."

Charlie gawked at the white-uniformed doctor. "But how the d-devil could I have got a dose of ether?"

Peter was there, too, looking down at him over the doctor's shoulder. Pete's face was white and tense. Even before the doctor shrugged, Pete was saying: "Listen, Charlie, Doc Palmer is on his way over here. I told 'em-"

Charlie was sick at his stomach, very sick. The doctor who had said "Ether" wasn't there, and neither was Doc Palmer, but Pete now seemed to be arguing with a tall distinguished-looking gentleman who had a spade beard and eyes like a chicken hawk.

Pete was saying, "Let the poor guy alone. Dammit, I've known him all his life. He doesn't need an alienist. Sure he said screwy things while he was under, but doesn't anybody talk silly under ether?"

"But, my young friend"-and the tall man's voice was unctuous-"you quite misinterpret the hospital's motives in asking that I examine him. I wish to prove him sane. If possible. He may have had a legitimate reason for tak-ing the ether. And also the affair of last week when he was here for the first time. Surely a normal man-"

"But dammit, he DIDN'T TAKE that ether himself. I saw him coming in the doorway after he got out of the cab. He walked naturally, and he had his hands down at his sides. Then, all of a sudden, he just keeled over."

"You suggest someone near him did it?"

"There *wasn't* anybody near him."

Charlie's eyes were closed but by the psychiatrist's tone of voice, he could tell that the man was smiling. "Then how, my young friend, *do* you suggest that he was anes-thetized?"

"Danunit, I don't know. I'm just saying he didn't-"

"Pete!" Charlie recognized his own voice and found that his eyes were open again. "Tell him to go to hell. Tell him to certify me if he wants. Sure I'm crazy. Tell him about the worm and the duck. Take me to the booby hatch. Tell him-"

"Ha." Again the voice with the spade beard. "You have had previous . . . ah ... delusions?"

"Charlie, shut up! Doc, he's still under the influence of the ether; don't listen to him. It isn't *fair* to psych a guy when he doesn't know what he's talking about. For two cents, I'd--"

"Fair? My friend, psychiatry is not a game. I assure you that I have this young man's interests at heart. Per-haps his . . . ah . . . aberration is curable, and I wish to--"

Charlie sat up in bed. He yelled, "GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE I--"

Things went black again.

The tortuous darkness, thick and smoky and sicken-ing. And he seemed to be creeping through a narrow tunnel toward a light. Then suddenly he knew that he was conscious again. But maybe there was somebody around who would talk to him and ask him questions if he opened his eyes, so he kept them tightly shut.

He kept his eyes tightly shut, and thought.

There must be an answer.

There wasn't any answer.

An angelic angleworm.

Heat wave.

Duck in a showcase of coins.

Wilted wreath of ugly flowers.

Ether in a doorway.

Connect them; there *must* be a connection. It *had* to make sense. It had to MAKE SENSE!

Least common denominator. Something that connects them, that welds them into a coherent series, something that you can understand, something that you can maybe do something about. Something you can fight.

Worm.

Heat.

Duck.

Wreath.

Ether.

Worm.

Meat.

Duck.

Wreath.

Ether.

Worm, heat, duck, wreath, ether, worm, heat, duck, wreath

They pounded through his head like beating on a tom-tom; they screamed at him out of the darkness, and gibbered.

XIII:

HE must have slept, if you could call it sleep.

It was broad daylight again, and there was only a nurse in the room. He asked, "What--day is it?"

"Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Wills. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Wednesday afternoon. Wedding day.

He wouldn't have to call it off now. Jane knew. Everybody knew. It had been called off for him. He'd been weak not to have done it himself, before--

"There are people waiting to see you, Mr. Wills. Do you feel well enough to entertain visitors?"

"I--Who?"

"A Miss Pemberton and her father. And a Mr. Johnson. Do you want to see them?"

Well, did he?

"Look," he said, "what exactly's wrong with me? I mean--"

"You've suffered a severe shock. But you've slept quietly for the last twelve hours. Physically, you

are quite all right. Even able to get up, if you feel you want to. But, of course, you mustn't leave."

Of *course* he mustn't leave. They had him down as a candidate for the booby hatch. An excellent candidate. Young man most likely to succeed.

Wednesday. Wedding day.

Jane.

He couldn't bear to see--

"Listen," he said, "will you send in Mr. Pemberton, alone? I'd rather--"

"Certainly. Anything else I can do for you?"

Charlie shook his head sadly. He was feeling most horribly sorry for himself. Was there anything *anybody* could do for him?

Mr. Pemberton held out his hand quietly. "Charles, I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am--"

Charlie nodded. "Thanks. I . . . I guess you understand why I don't want to see Jane. I realize that ... that of course we can't--"

Mr. Pemberton nodded. "Jane . . . uh . . . understands, Charles. She wants to see you, but realizes that it might make both of you feel worse, at least right now. And Charles, if there's anything any of us can do--"

What was there anybody could do?

Pull the wings off an angleworm?

Take a duck out of a showcase?

Find a missing golf ball?

Pete came in after the Pembertons had gone away. A quieter and more subdued Pete than Charlie had ever seen.

He said, "Charlie, do you feel up to talking this over?" Charlie sighed. "if it'd do any good, yes. I feel all right physically. But--"

"Listen, you've got to keep your chin up. There's an answer somewhere. Listen, I was wrong. There is a con-nection, a tie-up between these screwy things that hap-pened to you. There's got to be."

"Sure," said Charlie, wearily. "What?"

"That's what we've got to find out. First place, we'll have to outsmart the psychiatrists they'll sick on you. As soon as they think you're well enough to stand it. Now, let's look at it from their point of view so we'll know what to tell 'em. First--"

"How much do they know?"

"Well, you raved while you were unconscious, about the worm business and about a duck and a golf ball, but you can pass that off as ordinary raving. Talking in your sleep. Dreaming. Just deny knowing anything about them, or anything connected with any of them. Sure, the duck business was in the newspapers, but it wasn't a big story and your name wasn't in it. So they'll never tie that up. If they do, deny it. Now that leaves the two times you keeled over and were brought here uncon-scious."

Charlie nodded. "And what do they make of them?"

"They're puzzled. The first one they can't make anything much of. They're inclined to leave it lay. The second one--Well, they insist that you must, somehow, have given yourself that ether."

"But why? Why would anybody give himself ether?"

"No sane man would. That's just it; they doubt your sanity because they think you did. If you can convince then you're sane, then- Look, you *got* to buck up. They are classifying your attitude as acute melancholia, and that sort of borders on maniac depressive. See? You got to act cheerful."

"Cheerful? When I was to be married at two o'clock today? By the way, what time is it now?"

Pete glanced at his wrist watch and said, "Uh ... never mind that. Sure, if they ask why you feel lousy mentally, tell them--"

"Dammit, Peter, I wish I was crazy. At least, being crazy makes sense. And if this stuff keeps up, I *will* go--"

"*Don't talk like that.* You got to fight."

"Yeah," said Charlie, listlessly. "Fight what?"

There was a low rap on the door and the nurse looked into the room. "Your time is up, Mr.

Johnson. You'll have to leave."

XIV:

INACTION, and the futility of circling thought-patterns that get nowhere. Finally, he had to do something or go mad.

Get dressed? He called for his clothes and got them, except that he was given slippers instead of his shoes. Anyway, getting dressed took time.

And sitting in a chair was a change from lying in bed. And then walking up and down was a change from sitting in a chair.

"What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock, Mr. Wills."

Seven o'clock; he should have been married five hours by now.

Married to Jane; beautiful, gorgeous, sweet, loving, un-derstanding, kissable, soft, lovable Jane Pemberton. Five hours ago this moment she should have become Jane Wills.

Nevermore.

Unless--

The problem.

Solve it.

Or go mad.

Why would a worm wear a halo?

"Dr. Palmer is here to see you, Mr. Wills. Shall I--"

"Hello, Charles. Came as soon as I could after I learned you were out of your . . . uh . . . coma. Had an o. b. case that kept me. How do you feel?"

He felt terrible.

Ready to scream and tear the paper off the wall only the wall was painted white and didn't have any paper. And scream, scream--

"I feel swell, doc," said Charlie.

"Anything . . . uh . . . strange happen to you since you've been here?"

"Not a thing. But, doc, how would you explain--"

Doc Palmer explained. Doctors always explain. The air crackled with words like psychoneurotic and autohyp-nosis and traumata.

Finally, Charlie was alone again. He'd managed to say good-by to Doc Palmer, too, without yelling and tearing him to bits.

"What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock."

Six hours married.

Why is a duck?

Solve it.

Or go mad.

What would happen next? "Surely this thing shall fol-low me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the bughouse forever."

Eight o'clock.

Six hours married.

Why a lei? Ether? Heat?

What have they in common? And why is a duck?

And what would it be *next time*? When would next time he? Well, maybe he could guess that. How many things had happened to him thus far? Five-if the missing golf ball counted. How far apart? Let's see-the angle-worm was Sunday morning when he went fishing; the heat prostration was Tuesday; the duck in the museum was Thursday noon, the second-last day he worked; the golf game and the lei was Saturday; the ether Monday

Two days apart.

Periodicity?

He'd been pacing up and down the room, now sud-denly he felt in his pocket and found pencil and a notebook, and sat down in the chair.

Could it be-*exact* periodicity?

He wrote down "Angleworm" and stopped to think. Pete was to call for him to go fishing at five-fifteen and he'd gone downstairs at just that time, and right to the flower bed to dig- Yes, five-fifteen A.M. He wrote it down.

"Heat." Mm-m-m, he'd been a block from work and was due there at eight-thirty, and when he'd passed the corner clock he'd looked and seen that he had five min-utes to get there, and then had seen the teamster and-He wrote it down. "Eight twenty-five." And calculated.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

Let's see, which was next? The duck in the museum. He could time that fairly well, too. Old Man Hapworth had told him to go to lunch early, and he'd left at ... uh . . . eleven twenty-five and if it took him, say, ten minutes to walk the block to the museum and down the main corridor and into the numismatics room- Say, eleven thirty-five.

He subtracted that from the previous one.

And whistled.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

The lei? Um, they'd left the clubhouse about one-thirty. Allow an hour and a quarter, say, for the first thirteen holes, and- Well, say between two-thirty and three. Strike an average at two forty-five. That would be pretty close. Subtract it.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

Periodicity.

He subtracted the next one first-the fourth episode should have happened at five fifty-five on Monday. If--

Yes, it had been *exactly* five minutes of six when he'd walked through the door of the jewelry shop and been anesthetized.

Exactly.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

Periodicity.

PERIODICITY.

A connection, at last. Proof that the screwy events were all of a piece. Every . . . uh . . . fifty-one hours and ten minutes *something screwy happened.*

But why?

He stuck his head out in the hallway.

"Nurse. NURSE. What time is it?" ^

"Half past eight, Mr. Wills. Anything I can bring you?"

Yes. No. Champagne. Or a strait jacket. Which?

He'd solved the problem. But the answer didn't make any more sense than the problem itself. Less, maybe. And today--

He figured quickly.

In thirty-five minutes.

Something would happen to him in thirty-five min-utes!

Something like a flying angleworm or like a quacking duck suffocating in an air-tight showcase, or--

Or maybe something *dangerous again?* Burning heat, sudden anesthesia--

Maybe something worse?

A cobra, unicorn, devil, werewolf, vampire, unname-able monster?

At nine-five. In half an hour.

In a sudden draft from the open window, his forehead felt cold. Because it was wet with sweat.

In half an hour.

What?

XV:

PACE; up and down, four steps one way, four steps back. Think, think, THINK.

You've solved part of it; what's the rest? Get it, or it will get you.

Periodicity; that's *part* of it. Every two days, three hours, ten minutes

Something happens.

Why?

What?

How?

They're connected, those things, they are part of a pattern and they make sense somehow or they wouldn't be spaced an exact interval of time apart.

Connect: angleworm, heat, duck, lei, ether--Or go mad.

Mad. *Mad*. MAD.

Connect: Ducks eat angleworms, or do they? Heat is necessary to grow flowers to make leis. Angleworms might eat flowers for all he knew but what have they to do with leis, and what is ether to a duck? Duck is animal, lei is vegetable, heat is vibration, ether is gas, worm is ... what the hell's a worm? And why a worm that flies? And why was the duck in the showcase? What about the missing Chinese coin with the hole? Do you add or subtract the golf ball, and if you let x equal a halo and y equal one wing, then x plus $2y$ plus 1 angle-worm equals-

Outside, somewhere, a clock striking in the gathering darkness.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine-Nine o'clock.

Five minutes to go.

In five minutes, something was going to happen again. Cobra, unicorn, devil, werewolf, vampire. Or something cold and slimy and without a name.

Anything.

Pace up and down, four steps one way, four steps back.

Think, THINK.

Jane forever lost. Dearest Jane, in whose arms was all of happiness. Jane, darling, I'm not mad, I'm WORSE than mad. I'm--

WHAT TIME IS IT?

It must be two minutes after nine. Three.

What's coming? Cobra, devil, werewolf

What will it be this time?

At five minutes after nine-WHAT?

Must be four after now; yes, it had been at least four minutes, maybe four and a half

He yelled, suddenly. He couldn't stand the waiting. It couldn't be solved. But he had to solve it. Or go mad.

MAD.

He must be mad already. Mad to tolerate living, try-ing to fight something you couldn't fight, trying to beat the unbeatable. Beating his head against--

He was running now, out the door, down the corridor.

Maybe if he hurried, he could kill himself before five minutes after nine. He'd never have to know. Die, DIE AND GET IT OVER WITH. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY TO BUCK THIS GAME.

Knife.

There'd be a knife somewhere. A scalpel is a knife. Down the corridor. Voice of a nurse behind him, shouting. Footsteps.

Run. Where? Anywhere.

Less than a minute left. Maybe seconds.

Maybe it's nine-five now. Hurry!

Door marked "Utility"-he jerked it open.

Shelves of linen. Mops and brooms. You can't kill yourself with a mop or broom. You can smother yourself with linen, but not in less than a minute and probably with doctors and interns coming.

Uniforms. Bucket. Kick the bucket, but *how*? Ah. There on the upper shelf--

A cardboard carton, already opened, marked "Lye."

Painful: Sure, but it wouldn't last long. Get it over with. The box in his hand, the opened corner, and tilted the contents into his mouth.

But it was not a white, searing powder. All that had come out of the cardboard carton was a small copper coin. He took it out of his mouth and held it, and looked at it with dazed eyes.

It was five minutes after nine, then; out of the box of lye had come a small foreign copper coin. No, it wasn't the Chinese haikwan tael that had disappeared from the showcase in the museum, because that was silver and had a hole in it. And the lettering on this wasn't Chinese. If he remembered his coins, it looked Rumanian.

And then strong hands took hold of Charlie's arms and led him back to his room and somebody talked to him quietly for a long time.

And he slept.

XVI:

HE AWOKE Thursday morning from a dreamless sleep, and felt strangely refreshed and, oddly, quite cheerful.

Probably because, in that awful thirty-five minutes of waiting he'd experienced the evening before, he'd hit rock bottom. And bounced.

A psychiatrist might have explained it by saying that he had, under stress of great emotion, suffered a tempo-rary lesion and gone into a quasi-state of maniac-depres-sive insanity. Psychiatrists like to make simple things complicated.

The fact was that the poor guy had gone off his rocker for a few minutes.

And the absurd anticlimax of that small copper coin had been the turning point. Look for something horrible, unnameable--and get a small copper coin. Practically a prophylactic treatment, if you've got enough stuff in you to laugh.

And Charlie had laughed last night. Probably that was why his room this morning seemed to be a different room. The window was in a different wall, and it had bars across it. Psychiatrists often misinterpret a sense of humor.

But this morning he felt cheerful enough to overlook the implications of the barred windows. Here it was a bright new day with the sun streaming through the bars, and it was *another* day and he was still alive and had another chance.

Best of all, he knew he wasn't insane.

Unless--

He looked and there were his clothes hanging over the back of a chair and he sat up and put his legs out of bed, and reached for his coat pocket to see if the coin was still where he'd put it when they'd grabbed him.

It was.

Then--

He dressed slowly, thoughtfully.

Now, in the light of morning, it came to him that the thing could he solved. Six-now there were six-screwy things, but they were definitely connected. Periodicity proved it.

Two days, three hours, ten minutes.

And whatever the answer was, it was not malevolent. It was impersonal. If it had wanted to kill him, it had a chance last night; it need merely have affected something else other than the lye in that package. There'd *been* lye in the package when he'd picked it up; he could tell that by the weight. And then it had

been five minutes after nine and instead of lye there'd been the small copper coin.

It wasn't friendly, either; or it wouldn't have subjected him to heat and anesthesia. But it must be something impersonal.

A coin instead of lye.

Were they all substitutions of one thing for another?

Hm-m-m. Lye for a golf ball. A coin for lye. A duck for a coin. But the heat? The ether? The angleworm?

He went to the window and looked out for a while into the warm sunlight falling on the green lawn, and he realized that life was very sweet. And that if he took this thing calmly and didn't let it get him down again, he might yet lick it.

The first clue was already his.

Periodicity.

Take it calmly; think about other things. Keep your mind off the merry-go-round and maybe the answer will come.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and felt in his pocket for the pencil and notebook and they were still there, and the paper on which he'd made his calculations of timing. He studied those calculations carefully.

Calmly.

And at the end of the list he put down "9:05" and added the word "lye" and a dash. Lye had turned to-what? He drew a bracket and began to fill in words that could be used to describe the coin: coin-copper-disk- But those were general. There must be a specific name for the thing.

Maybe--

He pressed the button that would light a bulb outside his door and a moment later heard a key turn in the lock and the door opened. It was a male attendant this time.

Charlie smiled at him. "Morning," he said. "Serve breakfast here, or do I eat the mattress?"

The attendant grinned, and looked a bit relieved. "Sure. Breakfast's ready; I'll bring you some."

"And . . . uh--"

"Yes?"

"There's something I want to look up," Charlie told him. "Would there be an unabridged dictionary anywhere handy? And if there is, would it be asking too much for you to let me see it a few minutes?"

"Why--I guess it will be all right. There's one down in the office and they don't use it very often."

"That's swell. Thanks."

But the key still turned in the lock when he left.

Breakfast came half an hour later, but the dictionary didn't arrive until the middle of the morning. Charlie wondered if there had been a staff meeting to discuss its lethal possibilities. But anyway, it came.

He waited until the attendant had left and then put the big volume on the bed and opened it to the color plate that showed coins of the world. He took the copper coin out of his pocket and put it alongside the plate and began to compare it with the illustrations, particularly those of coins of the Balkan countries. No, nothing just like it among the copper coins. Try the silver--yes, there was a silver coin with the same mug on it. Rumanian. The lettering--yes, it was identically the same lettering except for the denomination.

Charlie turned to the coinage table. Under Rumania--He gasped.

It couldn't be.

But it was.

It was impossible that the six things that had happened to him could have been--

He was breathing hard with excitement as he turned to the illustrations at the back of the dictionary, found the pages of birds, and began to look among the ducks. Speckled breast and short neck and darker stripe starting just above the eye--

And he knew he'd found the answer.

He'd found the factor, besides periodicity, that connected the things that had happened. If it fitted the others, he could be sure. The angleworm? *Why-sure-* and he grinned at that one. The heat wave? Obvious. And the affair on the golf course? That was harder, but a bit of thought gave it to him.

The matter of the ether stumped him for a while. It took a lot of pacing up and down to solve that one, but finally he managed to do it.

And then? Well, what could he *do* about it? Periodicity? Yes, that fitted in. If--

Next time would be-hm-m-m-12:15 Saturday morn-ing.

He sat down to think it over. The whole thing was completely incredible. The answer was harder to swallow than the problem.

But-they *all* fitted. Six coincidences, spaced an exact length of time apart?

All right then, forget how incredible it is, and what are you going to do about it? How are you going to get there to let them know?

Well-maybe take advantage of the phenomenon itself?

The dictionary was still there and Charlie went back to it and began to look in the gazetteer. Under "H--"

Whem! There was one that gave him *a double* chance. And within a hundred miles.

If he could get out of here--

He rang the bell, and the attendant came. "Through with the dictionary," Charlie told him. "And listen, could I talk to the doctor in charge of my case?"

It proved that the doctor in charge was still Doc Palmer, and that he was coming up anyway.

He shook hands with Charlie and smiled at him. That was a good sign, or was it?

Well, now if he could lie convincingly enough

"Doe, I feel swell this morning," said Charlie. "And listen--I remembered something I want to tell you about. Something that happened to me Sunday, couple of days before that first time I was taken to the hospital."

"What was it, Charles?"

"I *did* go swimming, and that accounts for the sunburn that was showing up on Tuesday morning, and maybe for some other things. I'd borrowed Pete Johnson's car--" Would they check up on that? Maybe not. "--and I got lost off the road and found a swell pool and stripped off the bank and I think I must have grazed my head on a rock because the next thing I remember I was back in town."

"Hm-m-m," said Doc Palmer. "So *that* accounts for the sunburn, and maybe it can account for--"

"Funny that it just came back to me this morning when I woke up," said Charlie. "I guess--"

"I told those fools," said Doc Palmer, "that there couldn't be any connection between the third-degree burn and your fainting. Of course there was, in a way. I mean your hitting your head while you were swimming would account--Charles, I'm sure glad this came back to you. At least we now know the cause of the way you've acted, and we can treat it. In fact, maybe you're cured already."

"I think so, doc. I sure feel swell now. Like I was just waking up from a nightmare. I guess I made a fool of myself a couple of times. I have a vague recollection of buying some ether once, and something about some lye--but those are like things that happened in a dream, and now my mind's as clear as a bell. Something seemed to pop this morning, and I was all right again."

Doc Palmer sighed. "I'm relieved, Charles. Frankly, you had us quite worried. Of course, I'll have to talk this over with the staff and we'll have to examine you pretty thoroughly, but I think--"

There were the other doctors, and they asked questions and they examined his skull--but whatever lesion had been made by the rock seemed to have healed. Anyway, they couldn't find it.

If it hadn't been for his suicide attempt of the evening before, he could have walked out of the hospital then and there. But because of that, they insisted on his remaining, under observation for twenty-four hours. And Charlie agreed; that would let him out some time Friday afternoon, and it wasn't until twelve-fifteen Saturday morn-ing that it would happen.

Plenty of time to go a hundred miles.

If he just watched everything he did and said in the meantime and made no move or remark which a psy-chiatrist could interpret--

He loafed and rested.

And at five o'clock Friday afternoon it was all right, and he shook hands all the way round, and was a free man again. He'd promised to report to Doc Palmer regularly for a few weeks.

But he was free.

XVII:

RAIN and darkness.

A cold, unpleasant drizzle that started to find its way through his clothes and down the hack of his neck and into his shoes even as he stepped off the train onto the small wooden platform.

But the station was there, and on the side of it was the sign that told him the name of the town. Charlie looked at it and grinned, and went into the station. There was a cheerful little coal stove in the middle of the room. He had time to get warmed up before he started. He held out his hands to the stove.

Over at one side of the room, a grizzled head regarded him curiously through the ticket window. Charlie nodded at the head and the head nodded back.

"Stavin' here a while, stranger?" the head asked.

"Not exactly," said Charlie. "Anyway, I hope not. I mean--" Heck, after that whopper he'd told the psy-chiatrists back at the hospital, he shouldn't have any trouble lying to a ticket agent in a little country town. "I mean, I don't think so."

"Ain't no more trains out tonight, mister. Got a place to stay? If not, my wife sometimes takes in boarders for short spells."

"Thanks," said Charlie. "I've made arrangements." He started to add "I hope" and then realized that it would lead him further into discussion.

He glanced at the clock and at his wrist watch and saw that both agreed that it was a quarter to twelve.

"How big is this town?" he asked. "I don't mean population. I mean, how far out the turnpike is it to the township line? The border of town."

"Tain't big. Half a mile maybe, or a little better. You goin' out to th' Tollivers, maybe? They live just past and I heard tell he was sendin' to th' city for a ... nope, you don't look like a hired man."

"Nope," said Charlie. "I'm not." He glanced at the clock again and started for the door. He said, "Well, be seeing you."

"You gain' to--"

But Charlie had already gone out the door and was starting down the street behind the railroad station. Into the darkness and the unknown and--Well, he could hardly tell the agent about his real destination, could he?

There was the turnpike. After a block, the sidewalk ended and he had to walk along the edge of the road, sometimes ankle deep in mud. He was soaked through by now, but that didn't matter.

It proved to be more than half a mile to the township line. A big sign there--an oddly big sign considering the size of the town--read:

You Are Now Entering Haveen

Charlie crossed the line and faced back. And waited, an eye on his wrist watch.

At twelve-fifteen he'd have to step across. It was ten minutes after already. Two days, three hours, ten minutes after the box of lye had held a copper coin, which was two days, three hours, ten minutes after he'd walked into anesthesia in the door of a jewelry store, which was two days, three hours, ten minutes after--

He watched the hands of his accurately set wrist watch, first the minute hand until twelve-fourteen. Then the second hand.

And when it lacked a second of twelve-fifteen he put forth his foot and at *the* fatal moment he was stepping slowly across the line.

Entering Haveen.

XVIII:

AND AS with each of the others, there was no warning. But suddenly:

It wasn't raining any more. There was bright light, although it didn't seem to come from a visible source. And the road beneath his feet wasn't muddy; it was smooth as glass and alabaster-white. The white-robed entity at the gate ahead stared at Charlie in astonishment.

He said, "How did *you* get here? You aren't even--"

"No," said Charlie. "I'm not even dead. But listen, I've got to see the . . . uh--Who's in charge of the printing?"

"The Head Compositor, of course. But you can't--"

"I've got to see him, then," said Charlie.

"But the rules forbid--"

"Look, it's important. Some *typographical errors* are going through. It's to your interests up here as well as to mine, that they be corrected, isn't it? Otherwise things can get into an awful mess."

"Errors? Impossible. You're joking."

"Then how," asked Charlie, reasonably, "did I get to Heaven without dying?"

"But--"

"You see I was supposed to be entering Haveen. There is an e-matrix that--"

"Come."

XIX:

IT WAS quite pleasant and familiar, that office. Not a lot different from Charlie's own office at the Hayworth Printing Co. There was a rickety wooden desk, littered with papers, and behind it sat a small bald-headed Chief Compositor with printer's ink on his hands and a smear of it on his forehead. Past the closed door was a monster roar and clatter of typesetting machines and presses.

"Sure," said Charlie. "They're supposed to be perfect, so perfect that you don't even need proofreaders. But maybe once out of infinity something can happen to perfection, can't it? Mathematically, once out of infinity *anything* can happen. Now look; there is a separate typesetting machine and operator for the records cover-ing each person, isn't there?"

The Head Compositor nodded. "Correct, although in a manner of, speaking the operator and the machine are one, in that the operator is a function of the machine and the machine a manifestation of the operator and both are extensions of the ego of the . . . but I guess that is a little too complicated for you to understand."

"Yes, I--well, anyway, the channels that the matrices run in must be tremendous. On our Linotypes at the Hapworth Printing Co., an e-mat would make the circuit every sixty seconds or so, and if one was defective it would cause one mistake a minute, but up here- Well, is my calculation of fifty hours and ten minutes cor-rect?"

"It is," agreed the Head Compositor. "And since there is no way you could have found out that fact except--"

"Exactly. And once every that often the defective e-matrix comes round and falls when the operator hits the e-key. Probably the ears of the mat are worn; anyway it falls through a long distributor front and falls too fast and lands ahead of its right place in the word, and a typographical error goes through. Like a week ago Sunday, I was supposed to pick up an *angleworm*, and--"

"Wait."

The Head Compositor pressed a buzzer and issued an order. A moment later, a heavy book was brought in and placed on his desk. Before the Head Compositor opened it, Charlie caught a glimpse of his own name on the cover.

"You said at five-fifteen A.m.?"

Charlie nodded. Pages turned.

"I'll be--blessed!" said the Head Compositor. "*Angleworm!* It must have been something to see. Don't know I've ever heard of an angleworm before. And what was next?"

"The e fell wrong in the word 'hate'--I was going after a man who was beating a horse, and--Well, it came out 'heat' instead of 'hate.' The e dropped two characters early that time. And I got heat prostration and sunburn on a rainy day. That was eight twenty-five Tuesday, and then at eleven thirty-five Thursday-" Charlie grinned.

"Yes?" prompted the Head Compositor.

"Tael. A Chinese silver coin I was supposed to see in the museum. It came out 'Teal' and because a teal is a duck, there was a wild duck fluttering around in an airtight showcase. One of the attendants got in trouble; I hope you'll fix that."

The Head Compositor chuckled. "I shall," he said. "I'd like to have seen that duck. And the next time would have been two forty-five Saturday afternoon. What hap-pened then?"

"Lei instead of lie, sir. My golf ball was stymied behind a tree and it was supposed to be a poor lie-but it was a poor lei instead. Some wilted, mismatched flowers on a purple cord. And the next was the hardest for me to figure out, even when I had the key. I had an appoint-ment at the jewelry store at five fifty-five. But that was the fatal time. I got there at five fifty-five, but the e-matrix fell four characters out of place that time, clear back to the start of the word. Instead of getting *there* at five fifty-five, I got *ether*."

"*Tch, tch*. That one was unfortunate. And next?"

"The next was just the reverse, sir. In fact, it happened to save my life. I went temporarily insane and tried to kill myself by taking lye. But the bad e fell in lye and it came out *ley*, which is a small Rumanian copper coin. I've still got it, for a souvenir. In fact when I found out the name of the coin, I guessed the answer. It gave me the key to the others."

The Head Compositor chuckled again. "You've shown great resource," he said. "And your method of getting here to tell us about it--"

"That was easy, sir. If I timed it so I'd be entering Heaven at the right instant, I had a double chance. If either of the two es in that word turned out to be bad one and fell--as it did--too early in the word, I'd be en-tering Heaven."

"Decidedly ingenious. You may, incidentally, consider the errors corrected. We've taken care of all of them, while you talked; except the last one, of course. Otherwise, you wouldn't still be here. And the defective mat is removed from the channel."

"You mean that as far as people down there know, none of those things ever--"

"Exactly. A revised edition is now on the press, and nobody on Earth will have any recollection of any of those events. In *a* way of speaking, they no longer ever happened. I mean, they did, but now they didn't for all practical purposes. When we return you to Earth, you'll find the status there just what it would have been if the typographical errors had not occurred.

"You mean, for instance, that Pete Johnson won't remember my having told him about the angelworm, and there won't be any record at the hospital about my hav-ing been there? And--"

"Exactly. The errors are *corrected*."

"*Whew!*" said Charlie. "I'll be . . . I mean, well, I was supposed to have been married Wednesday afternoon, two days ago. Uh . . . will I be? I mean, *was I?* I mean--"

The Head Compositor consulted another volume, and nodded. "Yes, at two o'clock Wednesday afternoon. To one Jane Pemberton. Now if we return you to Earth as of the time you left there--twelve-fifteen Saturday morn-ing, you'll have been married two days and ten hours. You'll find yourself . . . let's see . . . spending your honeymoon in Miami. At that exact moment, you'll be in a taxicab en route--"

"Yes, but--" Charlie gulped.

"But what?" The Head Compositor looked surprised. "I certainly thought that was what you wanted, Wills. We owe you a big favor for having used such ingenuity in calling those typographical errors to our attention, but I thought that being married to Jane was what you wanted, and if you go back and find

yourself--"

"Yes, but--" said Charlie again. "But . . . I mean--Look, I'll have been married two days. I'll miss . . . I mean, couldn't I--"

Suddenly the Head Compositor smiled.

"How stupid of me," he said, "of course. Well, the time doesn't matter at all. We can drop you anywhere in the continuum. I can just as easily return you as of two o'clock Wednesday afternoon, at the moment of the ceremony. Or Wednesday morning, just before. Any time at all."

"Well," said Charlie, hesitantly. "It isn't exactly that I'd miss the wedding ceremony. I mean, I don't like receptions and things like that, and I'd have to sit through a long wedding dinner and listen to toasts and speeches and, well, I'd as soon have that part of it over with and ... well, I mean. I--"

The Head Compositor laughed. He said, "Are you ready?"

"Am I--Sure!"

Click of train wheels over the rails, and the stars and moon bright above the observation platform of the speed-ing train.

Jane in his arms. His wife, and it was Wednesday evening. Beautiful, gorgeous, sweet, loving, soft, kissable, lovable Jane--

She snuggled closer to him, and he was whispering, "It's . . . it's eleven o'clock, darling. Shall we--"

Their lips met, clung. Then, hand in hand, they walked through the swaying train. His hand turned the knob of the stateroom door and, as it swung slowly open, he picked her up to carry her across the threshold.

THE STAR MOUSE

MITKEY, THE MOUSE, wasn't Mitkey then.

He was just another mouse, who lived behind the floorboards and plaster of the house of the great Herr Professor Oberburger, formerly of Vienna and Heidelberg; then a refugee from the excessive admiration of the more powerful of his fellow-countrymen. The excessive admiration had concerned, not Herr Oberburger himself, but a certain gas which had been a by-product of an unsuccessful rocket fuel-which might have been a highly successful something else.

If, of course, the Professor had given them the correct formula. Which he-Well, anyway, the Professor had made good his escape and now lived in a house in Connecticut. And so did Mitkey.

A small gray mouse, and a small gray man. Nothing unusual about either of them. Particularly there was nothing unusual about Mitkey; he had a family and he liked cheese and if there were Rotarians among mice, he would have been a Rotarian.

The Herr Professor, of course, had his mild eccentricities. A confirmed bachelor, he had no one to talk to except himself, but he considered himself an excellent conversationalist and held constant verbal communion with himself while he worked. That fact, it turned out later, was important, because Mitkey had excellent ears and heard those night-long soliloquies. He didn't understand them, of course. If he thought about them at all, he merely thought of the Professor as a large and noisy super-mouse who squeaked over-much.

"Und now," he would say to himself, "ve vill see vether this eggshast tube vas broberly machined. It should fidt vithin vun vun-hundredth thousandth of an indtch. Ahhh, it iss perfect. Und now--"

Night after night, day after day, month after month. The gleaming thing grew, and the gleam in Herr Oberburger's eyes grew apace.

It was about three and a half feet long, with weirdly shaped vanes, and it rested on a temporary framework on a table in the center of the room that served the Herr Professor for all purposes. The house in which he and Mitkey lived was a four room structure, but the Professor hadn't yet found it out, seemingly. Originally, he had planned to use the big room as a laboratory only, but he found it more convenient to sleep on a cot in one corner of it, when he slept at all, and to do the little cooking he did over the same gas burner over which he melted down golden grains of TNT into a dangerous soup which

he salted and peppered with strange condiments, but did not eat.

"Und now I shall bour it into tubes, and see vether vun tube adjacentt to another eggsploodes der secondt tube vhen der virst tube iss-"

That was the night Mitkey almost decided to move himself and his family to a more stable abode, one that did not rock and sway and try to turn handsprings on its foundations. But Mitkey didn't move after all, because there were compensations. New mouse-holes all over, and-joy of joy!-a big crack in the back of the refrigerator where the Professor kept, among other things, food.

Of course the tubes had been not larger than capillary size, or the house would not have remained around the mouseholes. And of course Mitkey could not guess what was coming nor understand the Herr Professor's brand of English (nor any other brand of English, for that matter) or he would not have let even a crack in the refrigerator tempt him.

The Professor was jubilant that morning.

"Der fuel, idt vorks! Der secondt tube, idt did not eggsploode.Und der virst, in seggtions, as I had eggspectedt! Und it is more bowerful; there will be blenty of room for der combartment-"

Ah, yes, the compartment. That was where Mitkey came in, although even the Professor didn't know it yet. In fact the Professor didn't even know that Mitkey existed.

"Und now," he was saying to his favourite listener, "idt is budt a madter of combining der fuel tubes so they work in obbosite bairs. Und then-"

That was the moment when the Herr Professor's eyes first fell on Mitkey. Rather, they fell upon a pair of gray whiskers and a black, shiny little nose protruding from a hole in the baseboards.

"Veil!" he said, "vot haff ve here! Mitkey Mouse himself! Mitkey, how would you like to go for a ride, negst veek? Ve shall see."

That is how it came about that the next time the Professor sent into town for supplies, his order included a mousetrap-not one of the vicious kind that kills, but one of the wire-cage kind. And it had not been set, with cheese, for more than ten minutes before Mitkey's sharp little nose had smelled out that cheese and he had followed his nose into captivity.

Not, however, an unpleasant captivity. Mitkey was an honored guest. The cage reposed now on the table at which the Professor did most of his work, and cheese in indigestion-giving abundance was pushed through the bars, and the Professor didn't talk to himself any more.

"You see, Mitkey, I vas going to sendt to der laboratory in Hardtfordt for a white mouse, budt vhy should I, mit you here? I am sure you are more soundt and healthy and able to vithstand a long chourney than those laboratory mices. No? Ah, you vigggle your viskers and that means yes, no? Und being used to living in dargk holes, you should suffer less than they from glaustrophobia, no?"

And Mitkey grew fat and happy and forgot all about trying to get out of the cage. I fear that he even forgot about the family he had abandoned, but he knew, if he knew anything, that he need not worry about them in the slightest. At least not until and unless the Professor discovered and repaired the hole in the refrigerator. And the Professor's mind was most emphatically not on refrigeration.

"Und so, Mitkey, ve shall place this vane so-it iss only of assistance in der landing, in an atmosphere. It and these vill bring you down safely and slowly enough that der shock-absorbers in der movable combartment vill keep you from bumping your head too hard, I think." Of course, Mitkey missed the ominous note to that "I think" qualification because he missed all the rest of it. He did not, as has been explained, speak English. Not then.

But Herr Oberburger talked to him just the same. He showed him pictures. "Did you effer see der Mouse you vas named after, Mitkey? Vhat? No? Loogk, this is der original Mitkey Mouse, by Valt Dissney. Budt I think you are cuter, Mitkey."

Probably the Professor was a bit crazy to talk that way to a little gray mouse. In fact, he must have been crazy to make a rocket that worked. For the odd thing was that the Herr Professor was not really an inventor. There was, as he carefully explained to Mitkey, not one single thing about that rocket that was *new*. The Herr Professor was a technician; he could take other people's ideas and make them work. His only real invention-the rocket fuel that wasn't one-had been turned over to the United States

Government and had proved to be something already known and discarded because it was too expensive for practical use.

As he explained very carefully to Mitkey, "It iss burely a matter of absolute accuracy and mathematical correctness, Mitkey. Idt iss all here-ve merely combine-und ve achieff vhat, Mitkey?"

"Eggscape velocity, Mitkey! Chust barely, it adds up to eggscape velocity. Maybe. There are yet unknown factgors, Mitkey, in der ubper atmosphere, der troposphere, der stratosphere. Ve think ve know eggsactly how mudch air there iss to calculate resistance against, but are ve absolutely sure? No, Mitkey, ve are not. Ve haff not been there. Und der marchin iss so narrow that so mudch as an air current might affect idt."

But Mitkey cared not a whit. In the shadow of the tapering aluminum-alloy cylinder he waxed fat and happy.

"Der tag, Mitkey, der tag! Und I shall not lie to you, Mitkey. I shall not giff you valse assurances. You go on a dancherous chourney, mein little friendt.

"A vifty-vifty chance ve giff you, Mitkey. Not der moon or bust, but der moon und bust, or else maybe safely back to earth. You see, my boor little Mitkey, der moon iss not made of green cheese und if it were, you vould not live to eat it because there iss not enough atmosphere to bring you down safely und vith your viskers still on.

"Und vhy then, you may veil ask, do I send you? Because der rocket may not attain eggscape velocity. Und in that case, it issstill an eggsperiment, budt a different vun. Der rocket, if it goes not to der moon, falls back on der earth, no? Und in that case certain instruments shall giff us further information than ve haff yet about things up there in space. Und you shall giff us information, by vether or not you are yet alive, vether der shock absorbers und vanes are sufficient in an earth-equivalent atmosphere. You see?"

"Then ladter, vhen ve send rockets to Venus maybe vhere an atmosphere eggsists, ve shall haff data to calculate the needed size of vanes und shock-absorbers, no? Und in either case, und vether or not you return, Mitkey, you shall be vamous! You shall be der virst liffig greature to go oudt beyond der stratosphere of der earth, out into space.

"Mitkey, you shall be der Star-Mouse! I enfy you, Mitkey, und I only vish I vere your size, so I could go, too."

Der tag, and the door to the compartment. "Gootbye, little Mitkey Mouse." Darkness. Silence. Noise!

"Der rocket-if it goes not to der moon-falls back on der earth, no?" That was what the Herr Professor thought. But the best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley. Even star-mice.

All because of Prxl.

The Herr Professor found himself very lonely. After having had Mitkey to talk to, soliloquies were somehow empty and inadequate.

There may be some who say that the company of a small gray mouse is a poor substitute for a wife; but others may disagree. And, anyway, the Professor had never had a wife, and he had a mouse to talk to, so he missed one and, if he missed the other, he didn't know it.

During the long night after the launching of the rocket, he had been very busy with his telescope, a sweet little eight-inch reflector, checking its course as it gathered momentum. The exhaust explo-sions made a tiny fluctuating point of light that was possible to follow, if one knew where to look.

But the following day there seemed to be nothing to do, and he was too excited to sleep, although he tried. So he compromised by doing a spot of housekeeping, cleaning the pots and pans. It was while he was so engaged that he heard a series of frantic little squeaks and discovered that another small gray mouse, with shorter whiskers and a shorter tail than Mitkey, had walked into the wire-cage mousetrap.

"Veil, yell," said the Professor, "vot haff ve here? Minnie? Iss it Minnie come to look for her Mitkey?"

The Professor was not a biologist, but he happened to be right. It was Minnie. Rather, it was Mitkey's mate, so the name was appropriate. What strange vagary of mind had induced her to walk into an unbaited trap, the Professor neither knew nor cared, but he was delighted. He promptly remedied the

lack of bait by pushing a sizable piece of cheese through the bars.

Thus it was that Minnie came to fill the place of her far-traveling spouse as repository for the Professor's confidences. Whether she worried about her family or not there is no way of knowing, but she need not have done so. They were now large enough to fend for themselves, particularly in a house that offered abundant cover and easy access to the refrigerator.

"Ah, and now it iss dargk enough, Minnie, that ve can loogk for that husband of yours. His viery trail across the sky. True, Minnie, it iss a very small viery trail and der astronomers vill not notice it, because they do not know where to loogk. But ve do.

"He iss going to be a very vamous mouse, Minnie, this Mitkey of ours, when ve tell der world about him and about mein rocket. You see, Minnie ve haff not told them yet. Ve shall vait and gill der complete story all at vunce. By dawn of tomorrow yell

"Ah, there he iss, Minnie! Vaint, but there. I'd hold you up to der scope and let you loogk, but it would not be vocused right for your eyes, and I do not know how to

"Almost vun hundred thousand miles, Minnie, and still agceler-ating, but not for much longer. Our Mitkey iss on schedule; in fagt he iss going vaster than ve had vigured, no? It iss sure now that he vill eggscap the gravitation of der earth, and fall upon der moon!"

Of course, it was purely coincidental that Minnie squeaked.

"Ah, yess, Minnie, little Minnie. I know, I know. Ve shall neffer see our Mitkey again, and I almost vish our eggspexperiment hadt vailed. Budt there are gompensations, Minnie. He shall be der most vamous of all mites. Der Star-Mouse! Virst lifting greature effer to go beyond der gravitational bull of earth!"

The night was long. Occasionally high clouds obscured vision.

"Minnie, I shall make you more gomfortable than in that so-small vire cage. You would like to seem to be vree, vould you not, without bars, like der animals at modern zoos, vith moats instead?"

And so, to fill in an hour when a cloud obscured the sky, the Herr Professor made Minnie her new home. It was the end of a wooden crate, about half an inch thick and a foot square, laid flat on the table, and with no visible barrier around it.

But he covered the top with metal foil at the edges, and he placed the board on another larger board which also had a strip of metal foil surrounding the island of Minnie's home. And wires from the two areas of metal foil to opposite terminals of a small transformer which he placed near by.

"Und now, Minnie, I shall blace you on your island, which shall be liberally supplied mitt cheese and vater, and you shall vind it iss an eggcelent blace to liff. But you vill get a mild shock 'or two when you try to step off der edge of der island. It vill not hurt much, but you vill not like it, and after a few tries you vill learn not to try again, no? Und-

And night again.

Minnie happy on her island, her lesson well learned. She would no longer so much as step on the inner strip of metal foil. It was a mouse-paradise of an island, though. There was a cliff of cheese bigger than Minnie herself. It kept her busy. Mouse and cheese; soon one would be a transmutation of the other.

But Professor Oberburger wasn't thinking about that. The Pro-fessor was worried. When he had calculated and recalculated and aimed his eight-inch reflector through the hole in the roof and turned out the lights

Yes, there are advantages to being a bachelor after all. If one wants a hole in the roof, one simply knocks a hole in the roof and there is nobody to tell one that one is crazy. If winter comes, or if it rains, one can always call a carpenter or use a tarpaulin.

But the faint trail of light wasn't there. The Professor frowned and re-calculated and re-re-calculated and shifted his telescope three-tenths of a minute and still the rocket wasn't there.

"Minnie, something "iss wrong. Either der tubes haff stopped vir-ing, or-

Or the rocket was no longer traversing a straight line relative to its point of departure. By straight, of course, is meant parabolically curved relative to everything other than velocity.

So the Herr Professor did the only thing remaining for him to do, and began to search, with the telescope, in widening circles. It was two hours before he found it, five degrees off course already and veering more and more into a- Well, there was only one thing you could call it. A tailspin.

The darned thing was going in circles, circles which appeared to constitute an orbit about something that couldn't possibly be there. Then narrowing into a concentric spiral.

Then-out. Gone. Darkness. No rocket flares.

The Professor's face was pale as he turned to Minnie.

"It iss imbossible, Minnie. Mein own eyes, but it could not be. Even if vun side stopped viring, it could not haff gone into such sudden circles." His pencil verified a suspicion. "Und, Minnie, it decelerated vaster than bossible. Even mitt no tubes viring, its momentum would haff been more-"

The rest of the night-telescope and calculus-yielded no clue. That is, no believable clue. Some force not inherent in the rocket itself, and not accountable by gravitation-even of a hypothetical body-had acted.

"Mein poor Mitkey."

The gray, inscrutable dawn. "Mein Minnie, it vill haff to be a secret. Ve dare not publish vhat ve saw, for it would not be believed. I am not sure I believe it myself, Minnie. Berhaps because I vas offertired vrom not sleeping, I chust imachined that I saw-"

Later. "But, Minnie, ve shall hope. Vun hundred vifty thousand miles out, it vas. It vill fall back upon der earth. But I gannot tell vhere! I thought that if it did, I would be able to galculate its course, und- But after those goncentric circles-Minnie, not even Einstein could galculate vhere it vill land. Not effen me. All ve can do iss hope that ve shall hear of vhere it falls."

Cloudy day. Black night jealous of its mysteries.

"Minnie, our poor Mitkey. There is nothing could have gauzed-" But something had.

Prxl.

Prxl is an asteroid. It isn't called that by earthly astronomers, because-for excellent reasons-they have not discovered it. So we will call it by the nearest possible transliteration of the name its inhabitants use. Yes, it's inhabited.

Come to think of it, Professor Oberburger's attempt to send a rocket to the moon had some strange results. Or rather, Prxl did.

You wouldn't think that an asteroid could reform a drunk, would you? But one Charles Winslow, a besotted citizen of Bridgeport, Connecticut, never took a drink when-right on Grove Street-a mouse asked him the road to Hartford. The mouse was wearing bright red pants and vivid yellow gloves.

But that was fifteen months after the Professor lost his rocket. We'd better start over again.

Prxl is an asteroid. One of those despised celestial bodies which terrestrial astronomers call vermin of the sky, because the darned things leave trails across the plates that clutter up the more important observations of novae and nebulae. Fifty thousand fleas on the dark dog of night.

Tiny things, most of them. Astronomers have been discovering recently that some of them come close to Earth. Amazingly close. There was excitement in 1932 when Amor came within ten million miles; astronomically, a mere mashie shot. Then Apollo cut that almost in half, and in 1936 Adonis came within less than one and a half million miles.

In 1937, Hermes, less than half a million but the astronomers got really excited when they calculated its orbit and found that the little mile-long asteroid can come within a mere 220,000 miles, closer than Earth's own moon.

Some day they may be still more excited, if and when they spot the 3/8-mile asteroid Prxl, that obstacle of space, making a transit across the moon and discover that it frequently comes within a mere hundred thousand miles of our rapidly whirling world.

Only in event of a transit will they ever discover it, though, for Prxl does not reflect light. It hasn't, anyway, for several million years since its inhabitants coated it with a black, light-absorbing pigment derived from its interior. Monumental task, painting a world, for creatures half an inch tall. But worth it, at the time. When they'd shifted its orbit, they were safe from their enemies. There were giants in those days-eight-inch tall marauding pirates from Diemos. Got to Earth a couple of times too, before they faded out of the picture, Pleasant little giants who killed because they enjoyed it. Records in now-buried cities on Diemos might explain what happened to the dinosaurs. And why the promising Cro-Magnons

disappeared at the height of their promise only a cosmic few minutes after the dinosaurs went west.

But Prxl survived. Tiny world no longer reflecting the sun's rays, lost to the cosmic killers when its orbit was shifted.

Prxl. Still civilized, with a civilization millions of years old. Its coat of blackness preserved and renewed regularly, more through tradition than fear of enemies in these later degenerate days. Mighty but stagnant civilization, standing still on a world that whizzes like a bullet.

And Mitkey Mouse.

Klarloth, head scientist of a race of scientists, tapped his assistant Bemj on what would have been Bemj's shoulder if he had had one. "Look," he said, "what approaches Prxl. Obviously artificial pro-pulsion."

Bemj looked into the wall-plate and then directed a thought-wave at the mechanism that jumped the magnification of a thousand-fold through an alteration of the electronic field.

The image leaped, blurred, then steadied. "Fabricated," said Bemj. "Extremely crude, I must say. Primitive explosive-powered rocket. Wait, I'll check where it came from."

He took the readings from the dials about the viewplate, and hurled them as thoughts against the psychocoil of the computer, then waited while that most complicated of machines digested all the factors and prepared the answer. Then, eagerly, he slid his mind into rapport with its projector. Klarloth likewise listened in to the silent broadcast.

Exact point on Earth and exact time of departure. Untranslatable expression of curve of trajectory, and point on that curve where deflected by gravitational pull of Prxl. The destination--or rather the original intended destination--of the rocket was obvious, Earth's moon. Time and place of arrival on Prxl if present course of rocket was unchanged.

"Earth," said Klarloth meditatively. "They were a long way from rocket travel the last time we checked them. Some sort of a crusade, or battle of beliefs, going on, wasn't there?"

Bemj nodded. "Catapults. Bows and arrows. They've taken a long stride since, even if this is only an early experimental thing of a rocket. Shall we destroy it before it gets here?"

Klarloth shook his head thoughtfully. "Let's look it over. May save us a trip to Earth; we can judge their present state of development pretty well from the rocket itself."

"But then we'll have to--"

"Of course. Call the Station. Tell them to train their attracto-repulsors on it and to swing it into a temporary orbit until they prepare a landing-cradle. And not forget to damp out the explosive before they bring it down."

"Temporary force-field around point of landing-in case?"

"Naturally."

So despite the almost complete absence of atmosphere in which the vanes could have functioned, the rocket came down safely and so softly that Mitkey, in the dark compartment, knew only that the awful noise had stopped.

Mitkey felt better. He ate some more of the cheese with which the compartment was liberally provided. Then he resumed trying to gnaw a hole in the inch-thick wood with which the compartment was lined. That wooden lining was a kind thought of the Herr Professor for Mitkey's mental well-being. He knew that trying to gnaw his way out would give Mitkey something to do en route which would keep him from getting the screaming meemies. The idea had worked; being busy, Mitkey hadn't suffered mentally from his dark confinement. And now that things were quiet, he chewed away more industriously and more happily than ever, sub-limely unaware that when he got through the wood, he'd find only metal which he couldn't chew. But better people than Mitkey have found things they couldn't chew.

Meanwhile, Klarloth and Bemj and several thousand other Prxlians stood gazing up at the huge rocket which, even lying on its side, towered high over their heads. Some of the younger ones, forgetting the invisible field of force, walked too close and came back, ruefully rubbing bumped heads.

Klarloth himself was at the psychograph.

"There is life inside the rocket," he told Bemj. "But the impressions are confused. One creature, but I cannot follow its thought processes. At the moment it seems to be doing something with its teeth."

"It could not be an Earthling, one of the dominant race. One of them is much larger than this huge rocket. Gigantic creatures. Perhaps, unable to construct a rocket large enough to hold one of themselves, they sent an experimental creature, such as our wooraths."

"I believe you've guessed right, Bemj. Well, when we have explored its mind thoroughly, we may still learn enough to save us a check-up trip to Earth. I am going to open the door."

"But air-creatures of Earth would need a heavy, almost a dense atmosphere. It could not live."

"We retain the force-field, of course. It will keep the air in. Obviously there is a source of supply of air within the rocket or the creature would not have survived the trip."

Klarloth operated controls, and the force-field itself put forth invisible pseudo-pods and turned the outer screw-door, then reached within and unlatched the inner door to the compartment itself.

All Prxl watched breathlessly as a monstrous gray head pushed out of the huge aperture yawning overhead. Thick whiskers, each as long as the body of a Prxlian--

Mitkey jumped down, and took a forward step that bumped his black nose hard-into something that wasn't there. He squeaked, and jumped backward against the rocket.

There was disgust in Bemj's face as he looked up at the monster. "Obviously much less intelligent than a woorath. Might just as well turn on the ray."

"Not at all," interrupted Klarloth. "You forget certain very obvious facts. The creature is unintelligent, of course, but the subconscious of every animal holds in itself every memory, every impression, every sense-image, to which it has ever been subjected. If this creature has ever heard the speech of the Earthlings, or seen any of their works--besides this rocket--every word and every picture is indelibly graven. You see now what I mean?"

"Naturally. How stupid of me, Klarloth. Well, one thing is obvious from the rocket itself: we have nothing to fear from the science of Earth for at least a few millennia. So there is no hurry, which is fortunate. For to send back the creature's memory to the time of its birth, and to follow each sensory impression in the psychograph will require--well, a time at least equivalent to the age of the creature, whatever that is, plus the time necessary for us to interpret and assimilate each."

"But that will not be necessary, Bemj."

"No? Oh, you mean the X-19 waves?"

"Exactly. Focused upon this creature's brain-center, they can, without disturbing his memories, be so delicately adjusted as to increase his intelligence--now probably about .0001 in the scale--to the point where he is a reasoning creature. Almost automatically, during the process, he will assimilate his own memories, and understand them just as he would if he had been intelligent at the time he received those impressions.

"See, Bemj? He will automatically sort out irrelevant data, and will be able to answer our questions."

"But would you make him as intelligent as--?"

"As we? No, the X-19 waves would not work so far. I would say to about .2 on the scale. That, judging from the rocket, coupled with what we remember of Earthlings from our last trip there, is about their present place on the intelligence scale."

"Ummm, yes. At that level, he would comprehend his experiences on Earth just sufficiently that he would not be dangerous to us, too. Equal to an intelligent Earthling. Just about right for our purpose. Then, shall we teach him our language?"

"Wait," said Klarloth. He studied the psychograph closely for a while. "No, I do not think so. He will have a language of his own. I see in his subconscious, memories of many long conversations. Strangely, they all seem to be monologues by one person. But he will have a language--a simple one. It would take him a long time, even under treatment, to grasp the concepts of our own method of communication. But we can learn his, while he is under the X-19 machine, in a few minutes."

"Does he understand, now, any of that language?"

Klarloth studied the psychograph again. "No, I do not believe he-- Wait, there is one word that seems to mean something to him. The word 'Mitkey.' It seems to be his name, and I believe that, from hearing it many times, he vaguely associates it with himself."

"And quarters for him-with air-locks and such?"

"Of course. Order them built."

To say it was a strange experience for Mitkey is understatement. Knowledge is a strange thing, even when it is acquired gradually. To have it thrust upon one--

And there were little things that had to be straightened out. Like the matter of vocal chords. His weren't adapted to the language he now found he knew. Bemj fixed that; you would hardly call it an operation because Mitkey-even with his new awareness--did know what was going on, and he was wide awake at the time. And they didn't explain to Mitkey about the J-dimension with which one can get at the inwardness of things without penetrating the outside.

They figured things like that weren't in Mitkey's line, and anyway they were more interested in learning from him than teaching him. Bemj and Klarloth, and a dozen others deemed worthy of the privilege. If one of them wasn't talking to him, another was.

Their questioning helped his own growing understanding. He would not, usually, know that he knew the answer to a question until it was asked. Then he'd piece together, without knowing just how he did it (any more than you or I know how we know things) and give them the answer.

Bemj: "Iss this language vchich you sbeak a universal vun?"

And Mitkey, even though he'd never thought about it before, had the answer ready: "No, it iss nodt. It iss Englitch, but I remember der Herr Brofessor sbeaking of other tongues. I belief he sboke another himself originally, budt in America he always sboke Englitch to become more vamiliar mitt it. It iss a beaudiful sbeech, is it nodt?"

"Hmmm," said Bemj.

Klarloth: "Und your race, the mices. Are they treated veil?"

"Nodt by most people," Mitkey told him. And explained. "I would like to do something for them," he added. "Loogk, could I nodt take back mitt me this brocess vchich you used upon me? Abby it to other mices, and greate a race of super-mices?"

"Vhy not?" asked Bemj.

He saw Klarloth looking at him strangely, and threw his mind into rapport with the chief scientist's, with Mitkey left out of the silent communion.

"Yes, of course," Bemj told Klarloth, "it will lead to trouble on Earth, grave trouble. Two equal classes of beings so dissimilar as mice and men cannot live together in amity. But why should that concern us, other than favorably? The resultant mess will slow down progress on Earth-give us a few more millennia of peace before Earthlings discover we are here, and trouble starts. You know these Earthlings."

"But you would give them the X-19 waves? They might--"

"No, of course not. But we can explain to Mitkey here how to make a very crude and limited machine for them. A primitive one which would suffice for nothing more than the specific task of converting mouse mentality from .0001 to .2, Mitkey's own level and that of the bifurcated Earthlings."

"It is possible," communicated Klarloth. "It is certain that for aeons to come they will be incapable of understanding its basic principle."

"But could they not use even a crude machine to raise their own level of intelligence?"

"You forget, Bemj, the basic limitation of the X-19 rays; that no one can possibly design a projector capable of raising any mentality to a point on the scale higher than his own. Not even we." All this, of course, over Mitkey's head, in silent Prxlian. More interviews, and more.

Klarloth again: "Mitkey, ve varn you of vun thing. Avoid care-lessness vith electricity. Der new molecular rearranchement of your brain center-it iss unstable, and--"

Bemj: "Mitkey, are you sure your Herr Brofessor iss der most advanced of all who eggspexperiment vith der rockets?"

"In cheneral, yess, Bemj. There are others who on vun specific boint, such as eggsplosives, mathematics, astrovisics, may know more, but not much more. Und for combining these knowledges, he iss ahead."

"It iss veil," said Bemj.

Small gray mouse towering like a dinosaur over tinier half-inch Prxlans. Meek, herbivorous creature though he was, Mitkey could have killed any one of them with a single bite. But, of course, it never occurred to him to do so, nor to them to fear that he might.

They turned him inside out mentally. They did a pretty good job of study on him physically, too, but that was through the J-dimension, and Mitkey didn't even know about it.

They found out what made him tick, and they found out everything he knew and some things he didn't even know he knew. And they grew quite fond of him.

"Mitkey," said Klarloth one day, "all der civilized races on Earth year glothing, do they nodt? Vell, if you are to raise der level of mices to men, vould it not be vitting that you year glothes, too?"

"An eggcelent idea, Herr Klarloth. Und I know chust vhat kind I should like. Der Herr Brofessor vunce showed me a bicture of a mouse bainted by der artist Dissney, and der mouse yore glothing. Der mouse vas not a real-life vun, budt an imachinary mouse in a barable, and der Brofessor named me after der Dissney mouse."

"Vot kind of glothing vas it, Mitkey?"

"Bright red bants mitt two big yellow buttons in frondt and two in back, and yellow shoes for der back feet and a pair of yellow gloves for der front. A hole in der seat of der bants to aggomodate der tail."

"Ogay, Mitkey. Such shall be ready for you in fife minutes."

That was on the eve of Mitkey's departure. Originally Bemj had suggested awaiting the moment when Prxl's eccentric orbit would again take it within a hundred and fifty thousand miles of Earth. But, as Klarloth pointed out, that would be fifty-five Earth-years ahead, and Mitkey wouldn't last that long. Not unless they-And Bemj agreed that they had better not risk sending a secret like that back to Earth.

So they compromised by refueling Mitkey's rocket with something that would cancel out the million and a quarter odd miles he would have to travel. That secret they didn't have to worry about, because the fuel would be gone by the time the rocket landed.

Day of departure.

"Ve haff done our best, Mitkey, to set and time der rocket so it vill land on or near der spot from vlich you left Earth. But you gannot eggspect agguracy in a voyach so long as this. But you vill land near. The rest iss up to you. Ve haff equvipped the rocket ship for effery contingency."

"Thank you, Herr Klarloth, Herr Bemj. Gootbye."

"Gootbye, Mitkey. Ve hate to loose you."

"Gootbye, Mitkey."

"Gootbye, gootbye ..."

For a million and a quarter miles, the aim was really excellent. The rocket landed in Long Island Sound, ten miles out from Bridgeport, about sixty miles from the house of Professor Oberburger near Hartford.

They had prepared for a water landing, of course. The rocket went down to the bottom, but before it was more than a few dozen feet under the surface, Mitkey opened the door-especially re-equipped to open from the inside-and stepped out.

Over his regular clothes he wore a neat little diving suit that would have protected him at any reasonable depth, and which, being lighter than water, brought him to the surface quickly where he was able to open his helmet.

He had enough synthetic food to last him for a week, but it wasn't necessary, as things turned out. The night-boat from Boston carried him in to Bridgeport on its anchor chain, and once in sight of land he was able to divest himself of the diving suit and let it sink to the bottom after he'd punctured the tiny compartments that made it float, as he'd promised Klarloth he would do.

Almost instinctively, Mitkey knew that he'd do well to avoid human beings until he'd reached Professor Oberburger and told his story. His worst danger proved to be the rats at the wharf where he swam ashore. They were ten times Mitkey's size and had teeth that could have taken him apart in two

bites.

But mind has always triumphed over matter. Mitkey pointed an imperious yellow glove and said, "Scram," and the rats scrambled. They'd never seen anything like Mitkey before, and they were impressed.

So for that matter, was the drunk of whom Mitkey inquired the way to Hartford. We mentioned that episode before. That was the only time Mitkey tried direct communication with strange human beings. He took, of course, every precaution. He addressed his remarks from a strategic position only inches away from a hole into which he could have popped. But it was the drunk who did the popping, without even waiting to answer Mitkey's question.

But he got there, finally. He made his way afoot to the north side of town and hid out behind a gas station until he heard a motorist who had pulled in for gasoline inquire the way to Hartford. And Mitkey was a stowaway when the car started up.

The rest wasn't hard. The calculations of the Prxlians showed that the starting point of the rocket was five Earth miles north-west of what showed on their telescopomaps as a city, and which from the Professor's conversation Mitkey knew would be Hartford.

He got there.

"Hello, Professor."

The Herr Professor Oberburger looked up, startled. There was no one in sight. "Vot?" he asked, of the air. "Who iss?"

"It iss I, Brofessor. Mitkey, der mouse whom you sent to der moon. But I vas not there. Insteadt, I-"

"Vot?? It iss imbossible. Somebody blays der choke. Budt-budt nobody knows about that rocket. When it vailed, I didn't told nobody. Nobody budt me knows-"

"And me, Brofessor."

The Herr Professor sighed heavily. "Offervork. I am going vhat they call battly in der bel-"

"No, Brofessor. This is really me, Mitkey. I can talk now. Chust like you."

"You say you can- I do not belief it. Vhy can I not see you, then. Where are you? Vhy don't you-"

"I am hiding, Brofessor, in der vall chust behind der big hole. I wanted to be sure efferything vas ogay before I showed myself.

Then you would not get eggcited und throw something at me maybe."

"Vot? Vhy, Mitkey, if it iss really you und I am nodt asleep or going- Vhy, Mitkey, you know better than to think I might do something like that!"

"Ogay, Brofessor."

Mitkey stepped out of the hole in the wall, and the Professor looked at him and rubbed his eyes and looked again and rubbed his eyes and

"I am grazy," he said finally. "Red bants he years yet, und yel-low- It gannot be. I am grazy."

"No, Brofessor. Listen, I'll tell you all aboutt."

And Mitkey told him.

Gray dawn, and a small gray mouse still talking earnestly.

"Yess, Brofessor. I see your boint, that you think an intelligent race of mices und an intelligent race of men couldt nodt get along side by sides. But it vould not be side by sides; as I said, there are only a ferry few beople in the smallest continent of Australia. Und it vould cost little to bring them back und turn offer that continent to us mices. Ve vould call it Moustralia instead Australia, und ve vould instead of Sydney call der capital Dissney, in honor of-"

"But, Mitkey-"

"But, Brofessor, look vot we offer for that continent. All mices vould go there. Ve civilize a few und the few help us catch others und bring them in to put them under red ray machine, und the others help catch more und build more machines und it grows like a snowball rolling down hill Und ve sign a nonaggression pact mitt humans und stay on Moustralia und raise our own food und-"

"But, Mitkey-"

"Und look vot ve offer you in eggexchange, Her Brofessor! Ve vill eggsterminate your vorst enemy-der

rats. Ve do not like them either. Und vun battalion of vun thousand mices, armed mitt gas masks und small gas bombs, could go right in effery hole after der rats und could eggsterminate effery rat in a city in vun day or two. In der whole world ve could eggsterminate effery last rat in a year, und at the same time catch und civilize effery mouse und ship him to Moustralia, und-

"But, Mitkey-

"Vot, Brofessor?"

"It vould vork, but it vould not work. You could eggsterminate der rats, yess. But how long vould it be before conflicts of interests vould lead to der mices trying to eggsterminate de people or der people trying to eggsterminate der-

"They vould not dare, Brofessor! Ve could make weapons that vould-

"You see, Mitkey?"

"But it vould not habben. If men vill honor our rights, ve vill honor-

The Herr Professor sighed.

"I-I vill act as your intermediary, Mitkey, und offer your bropo-sition, und- Veil, it iss true that getting rid of rats vould be a greadt boon to der human race. Budt-

"Thank you, Brofessor."

"By der vay, Mitkey. I haff Minnie. Your vife, I guess it iss, un-less there vas other mices around. She iss in der other room; I put her there chust before you ariffed, so she vould be in der dark und could sleep. You vant to see her?"

"Vife?" said Mitkey. It had been so long that he had really forgotten the family he had perforce abandoned. The memory returned slowly.

"Veil," he said "-ummm, yess. Ve vill get her und I shall con-struct quvick a small X-19 prochector und-Yess, it vill help you in your negotiations mitt der governments if there are sefferal of us already so they can see I am not chust a freak like they might otherwise suspegt."

It wasn't deliberate. It couldn't have been, because the Profes-sor didn't know about Klarloth's warning to Mitkey about careless-ness with electricity-"Der new molecular rearranchement of your brain center-it iss unstable, und-

And the Professor was still back in the lighted room when Mitkey ran into the room where Minnie was in her barless cage. She was asleep, and the sight of her- Memory of his earlier days came back like a flash and suddenly Mitkey knew how lonesome he had been.

"Minnie!" he called, forgetting that she could not understand.

And stepped up on the board where she lay. "Squeak!" The mild electrical current between the two strips of tinfoil got him.

There was silence for a while.

Then: "Mitkey," called the Herr Professor. "Come on back und ve vill discuss this-

He stepped through the doorway and saw them, there in the gray light of dawn, two small gray mice cuddled happily together. He couldn't tell which was which, because Mitkey's teeth had torn off the red and yellow garments which had suddenly been strange, confining and obnoxious things.

"Vot on earth?" asked Professor Oberburger. Then he remem-bered the current, and guessed.

"Mitkey! Can you no longer talk? Iss der-

Silence.

Then the Professor smiled. "Mitkey," he said, "my little star-mouse. I think you are more happier now.

He watched them a moment, fondly, then reached down and flipped the switch that broke the electrical barrier. Of course they didn't know they were free, but when the Professor picked them up and placed them carefully on the floor, one ran immediately for the hole in the wall. The other followed, but turned around and looked back-still a trace of puzzlement in the little black eyes, a puzzlement that faded.

"Gootbye, Mitkey. You vill be happier this vay. Und there vill always be cheese."

"Squeak," said the little gray mouse, and it popped into the hole.

"Gootbye-" it might, or might not, have meant.

HONEYMOON IN HELL

CHAPTER ONE: TOO MANY FEMALES

ON SEPTEMBER 16th in the year 1972, things were going along about the same as usual, only a little worse. The cold war that had been waxing and waning between the United States and the Eastern Alliance-Russia, Cuba, and their lesser satellites-was warmer than it had ever been. War, hot war, seemed not only inevitable but extremely imminent.

The race for the Moon was an immediate cause. Each nation had landed a few men on it and each claimed it. Each had found that rockets sent from Earth were inadequate to permit establishment of a permanent base upon the Moon, and that only establishment of a permanent base, in force, would determine possession. And so each nation (for convenience we'll call the Eastern Alliance a nation, although it was not exactly that) was engaged in rushing construction of a space station to be placed in an orbit around Earth.

With such an intermediate step in space, reaching the Moon with large rockets would be practicable and construction of armed bases, heavily garrisoned, would be comparatively simple. Whoever got there first could not only *claim* possession, but could implement the claim. Military secrecy on both sides kept from the public just how near to completion each space base was, but it was generally-and correctly-believed that the issue would be determined within a year, two years at the outside.

Neither nation could *afford* to let the other control the Moon. That much had become obvious even to those who were trying desperately to maintain peace.

On September 17th, 1972, a statistician in the birth record department of New York City (his name was Wilbur Evans, but that doesn't matter) noticed that out of 813 births reported the previous day, 657 had been girls and only 156 boys.

He knew that, statistically, this was practically impossible. In a small city where there are only, say, ten births a day, it is quite possible-and not at all alarming-that on any one given day, 90% or even 100%, of the births may be of the same sex. But out of so large a figure as 813, so high a ratio as 657 to 156 is alarming.

Wilbur Evans went to his department chief and he, too, was interested and alarmed. Checks were made by tele-phone-first with nearby cities and, as the evidence mounted, with more and more distant ones.

By the end of that day, the puzzled investigators-and there was quite a large group interested by then-knew that in every city checked, the same thing had happened. The births, all over the Western Hemisphere and in Europe, for that day had averaged about the same-three boys for every thirteen girls.

Back-checking showed that the trend had started almost a week before, but with only a slight predominance of girls. For only a few days had the discrepancy been obvious. On the fifteenth, the ratio had been three boys to every five girls and on the sixteenth it had been four to fourteen.

The newspapers got the story, of course, and kicked it around. The television comics had fun with it, if their audiences didn't. But four days later, on September 21st, only one child out of every eighty-seven born in the country was male. That wasn't funny. People and governments started to worry; biologists and laboratories who had already started to investigate the phenomenon made it their number one project. The television comics quit joking about it after one crack on the subject by the top comedian in the country drew 875,480 indignant letters and lost him his contract.

On September 29th, out of a normal numbers of births in the United States, only forty-one were boys. Investigation proved that every one of these was a late, or delayed, birth. It became obvious that no male child had been conceived, during the latter part of December of the previous year, 1971. By this time, of course, it was known that the same condition prevailed everywhere-in the countries of the Eastern Alliance as well as in the United States, and in every other country and area of the world-among the Eskimos, the Ubangi and the Indians of Tierra del Fuego.

The strange phenomenon, whatever it was, affected human beings only, however. Births among animals, wild or domesticated, showed the usual ratio of the two sexes.

Work on both space stations continued, but talk of war-and incidents tending to lead to war-diminished. The human race had something new, something less im-mediate, but in the long run far worse to worry about. Despite the apparent inevitability of war, few people thought that it would completely end the human race; a complete lack of male children definitely would. Very, very definitely.

And for once something was happening that the United States could not blame on the Eastern Alliance, and vice versa. The Orient--China and India in particular-suffered more, perhaps, than the Occident, for in those countries male offspring are of supreme emotional importance to parents. There were riots in both China and India, very bloody ones, until the people realized that they didn't know whom or what they were rioting against and sank back into miserable passivity.

In the more advanced countries, laboratories went on twenty-four-hour shifts, and anyone who knew a gene from a chromosome could command his weight in paper currency for looking-however futilely-through a microscope. Accredited biologists and geneticists became more important than presidents and dictators. But they accom-plished no more than the cults which sprang up everywhere (though mostly in California) and which blamed what was happening on everything from a conspiracy of the Elders of Zion to (with unusually good sense) an invasion from space, and advocated everything from vegetarianism to (again with unusually good sense) a revival of phallic worship.

Despite scientists and cults, despite riots and resignation, not a single male child was born anywhere in the world during the month of December, 1972. There had been isolated instances, all quite late births, during October and November.

January of 1973 again drew a blank. Not that everyone qualified wasn't trying.

Except, perhaps, the one person who was slated to do more than anyone else-well, almost anyone else-about the matter.

Not that Capt. Raymond F. Carmody, U.S.S.F., retired, was a misogynist, exactly. He liked women well enough, both in the abstract and in the concrete. But he'd been badly jilted once and it had cured him of any desire what-soever for marriage. Marriage aside, he took women as he found them-and he had no trouble finding them.

For one thing, don't let the word "retired" fool you. In the Space Service, rocket pilots are retired at the ripe old age of twenty-five. The recklessness, reaction-speed and stamina of youth are much more important than experience. The trick in riding a rocket is not to do anything in particular; it's to be tough enough to stay alive and sane until you get there. Technicians do the brain-work and the only controls are braking rockets to help you get down in one piece when you land; reaction-speed is of more importance than experience in managing them. Neither speed nor experience helps you if you've gone batty en route from spending days on end in the equiva-lent of a coffin, or if you haven't what it takes not to die in a good landing. And a good landing is one that you can walk away from after you've recovered consciousness.

That's why Ray Carmody, at twenty-seven, was a retired rocket pilot. Aside from test flights on and near Earth, he'd made one successful flight to the Moon with landing and return. It had been the fifteenth attempt and the third success. There had been two more successful flights thereafter-altogether five successful round trips out of eighteen tries.

But each rocket thus far designed had been able, barely, to carry fuel to get itself and its crew of one back to Earth, with almost-starvation rations for the period re-quired. Step-rockets were needed to do even that, and step-rockets are terrifically expensive and cumbersome things.

At the time Carmody had retired from the Space Serv-ice, two years before, it had been conceded that establish-ment of a permanent base of any sort on the Moon was completely impracticable until a space station, orbited around the Earth, had been completed as a way-station. Comparatively huge rockets could reach a space station with relative ease, and starting from a station in open space and against lesser gravitational pull from Earth, go-ing the rest of the way to the Moon would be even simpler.

But we're getting away from Ray Carmody, as Car-mody had got away from the Space Service. He could have had a desk job in it after old age had retired him, a job that would have paid better than he was making at the moment. But he knew little about the technical end of rocketry, and he knew less, and cared nothing, about administrative detail work. He was most interested in cybernetics, which is the

science of electronic calculating machines. The big machines had always fascinated him, and he'd found a job working with the biggest of them all, the one in the building on a corner of the grounds of the Pentagon that had been built, in 1968, especially to house it.

It was, of course, known as Junior to its intimates.

Carmody's job, specifically, was Operative, Grade I, and the Grade I meant that-despite his fame as one of the few men who had been to the Moon and lived to tell about it, and despite his ultra-honorable discharge with the grade of captain-his life had been checked back to its very beginning to be sure that he had not, even in his cradle, uttered a careless or subversive word.

There were only three other Grade I Operatives qualified to ask Junior questions and transmit his answers on questions which involved security-and that included questions on logistics, atomics, ballistics and rocketry, military plans of all sorts-and everything else the military forces consider secret, which is practically everything except the currently preferred color of an infantryman's uniform.

The Eastern Alliance would undoubtedly have traded three puppet dictators and the tomb of Lenin to have had an agent, or even a sympathizer, as a Grade I Operative on Junior. But even the Grade II Operatives, who handled only problems dealing with non-classified matters, were checked for loyalty with extreme care. Possibly lest they might ask Junior a subversive question or feed a subversive idea into his electronic equivalent of a brain.

But be that as it may, on the afternoon of February 2, 1963, Ray Carmody was the Operative, of course; dozens of technicians were required from time to time to service Junior and feed him, but only one Operative at a time fed data into him or asked him questions. So Carmody was alone in the soundproofed control room.

Doing nothing, however, at the moment. He'd just fed into Junior a complicated mess of data on molecular structure in the chromosome mechanism and had asked Junior -for the ten-thousandth time, at least-the sixty-four dollar question bearing on the survival of the human race: Why all children were now females and what could be done about it.

It had been quite a chunk of data, this time, and no doubt Junior would take quite a few minutes to digest it, add it to everything else he'd ever been told and synthesize the whole. No doubt in a few minutes he'd say, "Data insufficient." At least at this moment that had been his only answer to the sixty-four dollar question.

Carmody sat back and watched Junior's complicated bank of dials, switches and lights with a bored eye. And because the intake-mike was shut off and Junior couldn't hear what he was saying anyway, and because the control room was soundproofed so no one else could hear him, either, he spoke freely.

"Junior," he said, "I'm afraid you're a washout on this particular deal. We've fed you everything that every geneticist, every chemist, every biologist in this half of the world knows, and all you do is come up with that 'data insufficient' stuff. What do you want-blood?"

"Oh, you're pretty good on some things. You're a whiz on orbits and rocket fuels, but you just can't understand *women*, can you? Well, I can't either; I'll give you that. And I've got to admit you've done the human race a good turn on one deal-atomics. You convinced us that if we completed and used H-bombs, *both* sides would lose the coming war. I mean *lose*. And we've got inside information that the other side got the same answer out of your brothers, the cybernetics machines over there, so they won't build or use them, either. Winning a war with H-bombs is about like winning a wrestling match with hand grenades; it's just as unhealthful for you as for your opponent. But we weren't talking about hand grenades. We were talking about women. Or I was. Listen, Junior-"

A light, not on Junior's panel but in the ceiling, flashed on and off, the signal for an incoming intercommunicator call. It would be from the Chief Operative, of course; no one else could connect-by intercommunicator or any other method-with this control room.

Carmody threw a switch.

"Busy, Carmody?"

"Not at the moment, Chief. Just fed Junior that stuff on molecular structure of genes and chromosomes. Wait-ing for him to tell me it's not enough data, but it'll take him a few minutes yet."

"Okay. You're off duty in fifteen minutes. Will you come to my office as soon as you're relieved? The

Presi-dent wants to talk to you."

Carmody said, "Goody. I'll put on my best pinafore." He threw the switch again. Quickly, because a green light was flashing on Junior's panel.

He reconnected the intake- and output-mikes and said, "Well, Junior?"

"Data insufficient," said Junior's level mechanical voice.

Carmody sighed and noted the machine's answer on the report ending in a question which he had fed into the mike. He said, "Junior, I'm ashamed of you. All right, let's see if there's anything else I can ask and get an answer to in fifteen minutes."

He picked up a pile of several files from the table in front of him and leafed through them quickly. None contained fewer than three pages of data.

"Nope," he said, "not a thing here I can give you in fifteen minutes, and Bob will be here to relieve me then."

He sat back and relaxed. He wasn't ducking work; experience had proven that, although an AE7 cybernetics machine could accept verbal data in conformance with whatever vocabulary it had been given, and translate that data into mathematical symbols (as it translated the mathematical symbols of its answer back into words and mechanically spoke the words), it could not adapt itself to a change of voice within a given operation. It could, and did, adjust itself to understanding, as it were, Carmody's voice or the voice of Bob Dana who would shortly relieve him. But if Carmody started on a given problem, he'd have to finish it himself, or Bob would have to clear the board and start all over again. So there was no use starting something he wouldn't have time to finish.

He glanced through some of the reports and questions to kill time. The one dealing with the space station interested him most, but he found it too technical to understand.

"But you won't," he told Junior. "Pal, I've got to give that to you; when it comes to anything except women, you're really *good*."

The switch was open, but since no question had been asked, of course Junior didn't answer.

Carmody put down the files and glowered at Junior. "Junior," he said, "that's your weakness all right, women. And you can't have genetics without women, can you?"

"No," Junior said.

"Well, you do know that much. But even I know it. Look, here's one that'll stump you. That blonde I met at the party last night. What about her?"

"The question," said Junior, "is inadequately worded; please clarify."

Carmody grinned. "You want me to get graphic, but I'll fool you. I'll just ask you this-should I see her again?"

"No," said Junior, mechanically but implacably.

Carmody's eyebrows went up. "The devil you say. And may I ask why, since you haven't met the lady, you say that?"

"Yes. You may ask why."

That was one trouble with Junior; he always answered the question you actually asked, not the one you implied.

"Why?" Carmody demanded, genuinely curious now as to what answer he was going to receive. "Specifically, why should I not again see the blonde I met last night?"

"Tonight," said Junior, "you will be busy. Before tomorrow night you will be married."

Carmody almost literally jumped out of his chair. The cybernetics machine had gone stark raving crazy. It *must* have. There was no more chance of his getting married tomorrow than there was of a kangaroo giving birth to a portable typewriter. And besides and beyond that, Junior never made predictions of the future-except, of course, on such things as orbits and statistical extrapolation of trends.

Carmody was still staring at Junior's impassive panel with utter disbelief and considerable consternation when the red light that was the equivalent of a doorbell flashed in the ceiling. His shift was up and Bob Dana had come to relieve him. There wasn't time to ask any further questions and, anyway, "Are you crazy?" was the only one he could think of at the moment.

Carmody didn't ask it. He didn't want to know.

CHAPTER TWO: MISSION TO LUNA

Carmody switched off both mikes and stood gazing at Junior's impassive panel for a long time. He shook his head, went to the door and opened it.

Bob Dana breezed in and then stopped to look at Carmody. He said, "Something the matter, Ray? You look like you'd just seen a ghost, if I may coin a cliché."

Carmody shook his head. He wanted to think before he talked to anybody-and if he did decide to talk, it should be to Chief Operative Reeber and not to anyone else. He said, "Just I'm a little beat, Bob."

"Nothing special up?"

"Nope. Unless maybe I'm going to be fired. Reeber wants to see me on my way out." He grinned. "Says the President wants to talk to me."

Bob chuckled appreciatively. "If he's in a kidding mood, then your job's safe for one more day. Good luck."

The soundproof door closed and locked behind Carmody, and he nodded to the two armed guards who were posted on duty outside it. He tried to think things out carefully as he walked down the long stretch of corridor to the Chief Operator's office.

Had something gone wrong with Junior? If so, it was his duty to report the matter. But if he did, he'd get himself in trouble, too. An Operative wasn't supposed to ask private questions of the big cybernetics machine-even big, important questions. The fact that it had been a joking question would make it worse.

But Junior had either given him a joking answer-and it couldn't be that, because Junior didn't have a sense of humor-or else Junior had made a flat, unadulterated error. Two of them, in fact. Junior had said that Carmody would be busy tonight and-well, a wheel *could* come off his idea of spending a quiet evening reading. But the idea of his getting married tomorrow was utterly preposterous. There wasn't a woman on Earth he had the slightest intention of marrying. Oh, someday, maybe, when he'd had a little more fun out of life and felt a little more ready to settle down, he might feel differently. But it wouldn't be for years. Certainly not tomorrow, not even on a bet.

Junior *had* to be wrong, and if he was wrong it was a matter of importance, a matter far more important than Carmody's job.

So be honest and report? He made his decision just before he reached the door of Reeber's office. A reasonable compromise. He didn't *know* yet that Junior was wrong. Not to a point of mathematical certainty-just a billion to one odds against. So he'd wait until even that possibility was eliminated, until it was proven beyond all possible doubt that Junior was wrong. Then he'd report what he'd done and take the rap, if there was a rap. Maybe he'd just be fined and warned.

He opened the door and stepped in. Chief Operative Reeber stood up and, on the other side of the desk, a tall gray-haired man stood also. Reeber said, "Ray, I'd like you to meet the President of the United States. He came here to talk to you. Mr. President, Captain Ray Carmody."

And it *was* the President. Carmody gulped and tried to avoid looking as though he was doing a double take, which he was. Then President Saunderson smiled quietly and held out his hand. "Very glad to know you, Captain," he said, and Carmody was able to make the considerable understatement that he felt honored to meet the President.

Reeber told him to pull up a chair and he did so. The President looked at him gravely. "Captain Carmody, you have been chosen to have the opportunity to volunteer for a mission of extreme importance. There is danger involved, but it is less than the danger of your trip to the Moon. You made the third-wasn't it?-out of the five successful trips made by the United States pilots?"

Carmody nodded.

"This time the risk you will take is considerably less. There has been much technological advance in rocketry since you left the service two years ago. The odds against a successful round trip-even without the help of the space station, and I fear its completion is still two years distant-are much less. In fact, you will have odds of ten to one in your favor, as against approximately even odds at the time of your previous trip."

Carmody sat up straighter. "My *previous* trip! Then this volunteer mission is another flight to the Moon? Cer-tainly, Mr. President, I'll gladly-"

President Saunderson held up a hand. "Wait, you haven't heard all of it. The flight to the Moon and return is the only part that involves physical danger, but it is the least important part. Captain, this mission is, possibly, of more importance to humanity than the first flight to the Moon, even than the first flight to the stars-if and when we ever make it-will be. What's at stake is the survival of the human race so that someday it *can* reach the stars. Your flight to the Moon will be an attempt to solve the problem which otherwise-"

He paused and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Perhaps you'd better explain, Mr. Reeber. You're more familiar with the exact way the problem was put to your machine, and its exact answers."

Reeber said, "Carmody, you know what the problem is. You know how much data has been fed into Junior on it. You know some of the questions we've asked him, and that we've been able to eliminate certain things. Such as-well, it's caused by no virus, no bacteria, nothing like that. It's not anything like an epidemic, because it struck the whole Earth at once, simultaneously. Even native inhabitants of islands that had no contact with civilization.

"We know also that whatever happens-whatever mole-cular change occurs-happens in the zygote after impreg-nation, very shortly after. We asked Junior whether an invisible *ray* of some sort could cause this. His answer was that it was possible. And in answer to a further question, he answered that this ray or force is possibly being used by-enemies of mankind."

"Insects? Animals? Martians?"

Reeber waved a hand impatiently. "Martians, maybe, if there *are* any Martians. We don't know that yet. But extra-terrestrials, most likely. Now Junior couldn't give us answers on this because, of course, we haven't the relevant data. It would be guesswork for him as well as for us-and Junior, being mechanical, can't guess. But here's a possibil-ity:

"Suppose some extra-terrestrials *have* landed somewhere on Earth and have set up a station that broadcasts a ray that is causing the phenomenon of all children being girl-children. The ray is undetectable; at least thus far we haven't been able to detect it. They'd be killing off the human race and getting themselves a nice new planet to live on, without having to fire a shot, without taking any risk or losses themselves. True, they'll have to wait a while for us to die off, but maybe that doesn't mean anything to them. Maybe they've got all the time there is, and aren't in the slightest hurry."

Carmody nodded slowly. "It sounds fantastic, but I guess it's possible. I guess a fantastic situation like this *has* to have a fantastic explanation. But what do we do about it? How do we even prove it?"

Reeber said, "We fed the possibility into junior as a working assumption-not as a fact-and asked him how we could check it. He came up with the suggestion that a married couple spend a honeymoon on the Moon-and see if circumstances are any different there."

"And you want me to pilot them there?"

"Not exactly, Ray. A little more than that-"

Carmody forgot that the President was there. He said, "Good God, you mean you want me to- Then junior *wasn't* crazy, after all!"

Shamefacedly, then, he had to explain about the extra-curricular question he'd casually asked junior and the an-swer he'd got to it.

Reeber laughed. "Guess we'll overlook your violation of Rule 17 this time, Ray. That is, if you accept the mis-sion. Now here's the-"

"Wait," Carmody said. "I still want to know something. How did Junior know I was going to be picked out? And for that matter, why am I?"

"Junior was asked for the qualifications he'd recommend for the-ah-bridegroom. He recommended a rocket pilot who had already made the trip successfully, even though he was a year or two over the technical retirement age of twenty-five. He recommended that loyalty be con-sidered as an important factor, and that the holding of a governmental position of great trust would answer that. He further recommended that the man be single."

"Why single? Look, there are four other pilots who've made that trip, and they're all loyal, regardless of what job they're holding now. I know them all personally. And all of them are married except me. Why not send a man who's already got a ball and chain?"

"For the simple reason, Ray, that the woman to be sent must be chosen with even more care. You know how tough a Moon landing is; only one woman in a hundred would live through it and still be able to-I mean, there's almost a negligible chance that the wife of any one of the other four pilots would be the best qualified woman who could possibly be found."

"Hmmm. Well, I suppose Junior's got something there. Anyway, I see now how he knew *I'd* be chosen. Those qualifications fit me exactly. But listen, do I have to *stay* married to whatever female is Amazonian enough to make the trip? There's a limit somewhere, isn't there?"

"Of course. You will be legally married before your de-pature, but upon your return a divorce will be granted without question if both-or either one-of you wish. The offspring of the union, if any, will be cared for. Whether male or female."

"Hey, that's right," Carmody said. "There's only an even chance of hitting the jackpot in any case."

"Other couples will be sent. The first trip is the most difficult and most important one. After that, a base will be established. Sooner or later we'll get our answer. We'll have it if even one male child is conceived on the Moon. Not that that will help us find the station that's sending the rays, or to detect or identify the rays, but we'll know what's wrong and can narrow our inquiry. I take it that you accept?"

Carmody sighed. "I guess so. But it seems a long way to go for-Say, who's the lucky girl?"

Reeber cleared his throat. "I think you'd better explain his part to him, Mr. President."

President Saunderson smiled as Carmody looked toward him. He said, "There is a more important reason, which Mr. Reeber skipped, why we could not choose a man who was already married, Captain. This is being done on an international basis, for very important diplomatic reasons. The experiment is for the benefit of humanity, not any nation or ideology. Your wife will be a Russian."

"A *Commie*? You're kidding me, Mr. President."

"I am not. Her name is Anna Borisovna. I have not met her, but I am informed that she is a very attractive girl. Her qualifications are quite similar to yours, except, of course, that she has not been to the Moon. No woman has. But she has been a pilot of experimental rockets on short-range flights. And she is a cybernetics technician working on the big machine at Moscow. She is twenty-four. And not, incidentally, an Amazon. As you know, rocket pilots aren't chosen for bulk. There is an added advantage in her being chosen. She speaks English."

"You mean I've got to talk to her, too?"

Carmody caught the look Reeber flashed at him and he winced.

The President continued: "You will be married to her tomorrow by a beam-televised ceremony. You blast off, both of you, tomorrow night-at different times, of course, since one of you will leave from here, the other from Russia. You will meet on the Moon."

"It's a large place, Mr. President."

"That is taken care of. Major Granham-you know him, I believe?" Carmody nodded. "He will supervise your takeoff and the sending of the supply rockets. You will fly tonight-a plane has been prepared for you-from the airport here to Suffolk Rocket Field. Major Granham will brief you and give you full instructions. Can you be at the airport by seven-thirty?"

Carmody thought and then nodded. It was five-thirty now and there'd be a lot of things for him to do and arrange in two hours, but he could make it if he tried. And hadn't Junior told him he was going to be busy this evening?

"Only one thing more;" President Saunderson said. "This is strictly confidential, until and unless the mission is successful. We don't want to raise hopes, either here or in the Eastern alliance, and then have them smashed." He smiled. "And if you and your wife have any quarrels on the Moon, we don't want them to lead to international repercussions. So please-try to get along." He held out his hand. "That's all, except thanks."

Carmody made the airport in time and the plane was waiting for him, complete with pilot. He had figured that he would have to fly it himself, but he realized that it was better this way; he could get a bit of

rest before they reached Suffolk Field.

He got a little, but not much. The plane was a hot ship that got him there in less than an hour. A liaison officer was waiting for him and took him immediately to Major Granham's office.

Granham got down to brass tacks almost before Car-mody could seat himself in the offered chair.

He said, "Here's the picture. Since you got out of the service, we've tremendously increased the accuracy of our rockets, manned or otherwise. They're so accurate that, with proper care, we can hit within a mile of any spot on the Moon that we aim at. We're picking Hell Crater-it's a small one, but we'll put you right in the middle of it. You won't have to worry about steering; you'll hit within a mile of the center without having to use your braking rockets for anything except braking."

"Hell Crater?" Carmody said. "There isn't any."

"Our Moon maps have forty-two thousand named craters. Do you know them all? This one, incidentally, was named after a Father Maximilian Hell, S. J., who was once director of the Vienna Observatory in old Austria."

Carmody grinned. "Now you're spoiling it. How come it was picked as a honeymoon spot, though? Just because of the name?"

"No. One of the three successful flights the Russians made happened to land and take off there. They found the footing better than anywhere else either of us has landed. Almost no dust; you won't have to slog through knee-deep pumice when you're gathering the supply rockets. Probably a more recently formed crater than any of the others we've happened to land in or explore."

"Fair enough. About the rocket I go in-what's the payload besides myself?"

"Not a thing but the food, water and oxygen you'll need en route, and your spacesuit. Not even fuel for your return, although you'll return in the same rocket you go in. Everything else, including return fuel, will be there waiting for you; it's on the way now. We fired ten supply rockets last night. Since you take off *tomorrow* night, they'll get there forty-eight hours before you do. So-

"Wait a minute," Carmody said. "On my first trip I carried fifty pounds payload besides my return fuel. Is this a smaller type of rocket?"

"Yes, and a much better one. Not a step-rocket like you used before. Better fuel and more of it; you can accelerate longer and at fewer gravities, and you'll get there quicker. Forty-four hours as against almost four days before. Last time you took four and half Gs for seven minutes. This time you'll get by with three Gs and have twelve minutes' acceleration before you reach *Brennschluss*-cut loose from Earth's gravitation. Your first trip, you *had* to carry return fuel and a little payload because we didn't have the accuracy to shoot a supply rocket after you-or before you-and be sure it'd land within twenty miles. All clear? After we're through talking here I'll take you to the supply depot, show you the type of supply rocket we're using and how to open and unload it. I'll give you an inventory of the contents of each of the twelve of them we sent."

"And what if all of them don't get there?"

"At least eleven of them will. And everything's duplicated; if any one rocket goes astray, you'll still have everything you need-for two people. And the Russians are firing an equal number of supply rockets, so you'll have a double factor of safety." He grinned. "If none of our rockets get there, you'll have to eat borsht and drink vodka, maybe, but you won't starve."

"Are you kidding about the vodka?"

"Maybe not. We're including a case of Scotch, transferred to lightweight containers, of course. We figure it might be just the icebreaker you'll need for a happy honeymoon."

Carmody grunted.

"So maybe," Granham said, the Russians'll figure the same way and send along some vodka. And the rocket fuels for your return, by the way, are not identical, but they're interchangeable. Each side is sending enough for the return of two rockets. If our fuel doesn't get there, you divvy with her, and vice versa."

"Fair enough. What else?"

"Your arrival will be just after dawn-Lunar time. There'll be a few hours when the temperature is somewhere between horribly cold and broiling hot. You'd better take advantage of them to get the bulk

of your work done. Gathering supplies from the rockets and putting up the prefab shelter that's in them, in sections. We've got a duplicate of it in the supply depot and I want you to practice assembling it."

"Good idea. It's airtight and heatproof?"

"Airtight once you paint the seams with a special pre-paration that's included. And, yes, the insulation is excellent. Has a very ingenious little airlock on it, too. You won't have to waste oxygen getting in and out."

Carmody nodded. "Length of stay?" he asked.

"Twelve days. Earth days, of course. That'll give you plenty of time to get off before the Lunar night."

Granham chuckled. "Want instructions to cover those twelve days? No? Well, come on around to the depot then. I'll introduce you to your ship and show you the supply rockets and the shelter."

CHAPTFR THREE: REMOTELY MARRIED

It turned out to be a busy evening, all right. Carmody didn't get to bed until nearly morning, his head so swim-ming with facts and figures that he'd forgotten it was his wedding day. Granham let him sleep until nine, then sent an orderly to wake him and to state that the ceremony had been set for ten o'clock and that he'd better hurry.

Carmody couldn't remember what "the ceremony" was for a moment, then he shuddered and hurried.

A Justice of the Peace was waiting for him there and technicians were working on a screen and projector. Granham said, "The Russians agreed that the ceremony could be performed at this end, provided we made it a civil ceremony. That's all right by you, isn't it?"

"It's lovely," Carmody told him. "Let's get on with it. Or don't we have to? As far as I'm concerned-

"You know what the reaction of a lot of people would be when they learn about it, if it wasn't legal," Granham said. "So quit crabbing. Stand right there."

Carmody stood right there. A fuzzy picture on the beam-television screen was becoming clearer. And pret-tier. President Saunderson had not exaggerated when he'd said that Anna Borisovna was attractive and that she was definitely not an Amazon. She was small, dark, slender and very definitely attractive and not an Amazon.

Carmody felt glad that nobody had corned it up by putting her in a wedding costume. She wore the neat uni-form of a technician, and she filled it admirably and curved it at the right places. Her eyes were big and dark and they were serious until she smiled at him. Only then did he realize that the connection was two-way and that she was seeing him.

Granham was standing beside him. He said, "Miss Bor-isovna, Captain Carmody."

Carmody said, inanely, "Pleased to meet you," and then redeemed it with a grin.

"Thank you, Captain." Her voice was musical and only faintly accented. "It is a pleasure."

Carmody began to think it would be, if they could just keep from arguing politics.

The Justice of the Peace stepped forward into range of the projector. "Are we ready?" he asked.

"A second," Carmody said. "It seems to me we've skipped a customary preliminary. Miss Borisovna, will you marry me?"

"Yes. And you may call me Anna."

She even has a sense of humor, Carmody thought, aston-ished. Somehow, he hadn't thought it possible for a Com-mie to have a sense of humor. He'd pictured them as all being dead serious about their ridiculous ideology and about everything else.

He smiled at her and said, "All right, Anna. And you may call me Ray. Are you ready?"

When she nodded, he stepped to one side to allow the Justice of the Peace to share the screen with him. The ceremony was brief and businesslike.

He couldn't, of course, kiss the bride or even shake hands with her. But just before they shut off the projector, he managed to grin at her and say, "See you in Hell, Anna."

And he'd begun to feel certain that it wouldn't be that at all, really.

He had a busy afternoon going over every detail of op-eration of the new type rocket, until he knew it inside and out better than he did himself. He even found himself be-ing briefed on details of the Russian

rockets, both manned and supply types, and he was surprised (and inwardly a bit horrified) to discover to what extent the United States and Russia had been exchanging information and secrets. It couldn't all have happened in a day or so.

"How long has this been going on?" he demanded of Granham.

"I learned of the projected trip a month ago."

"Why did they tell *me* only yesterday? Or wasn't I first choice, after all? Did somebody else back out at the last minute?"

"You've been chosen all along. You were the only one who fitted *all* of the requirements that cybernetics machine dished out. But don't you remember how it was on your last trip? You weren't notified you were taking off until about thirty hours before. That's what's figured to be the optimum time-long enough to get mentally prepared and not so long you've got time to get worried."

"But this was a volunteer deal. What if I'd turned it down?"

"The cybernetics machine predicted that you wouldn't." Carmody swore at junior.

Granham said, "Besides, we could have had a hundred volunteers. Rocket cadets who've got everything you have except one round trip to the Moon already under their belts. We could have shown a picture of Anna around and had them fighting for the chance. That gal is Moon bait."

"Careful," Carmody said, "you are speaking of my wife." He was kidding, of course, but it was funny--he really hadn't liked Granham's wisecrack.

Zero hour was ten p.m., and at zero minus fifteen minutes he was already strapped into the webbing, waiting. There wasn't anything for him to do except stay alive. The rockets would be fired by a chronometer set for the exact fraction of a second.

Despite its small payload, the rocket was a little roomier inside than the first one he'd gone to the Moon in, the R-24. The R-24 had been as roomy as a tight coffin. This one, the R-46, was four feet in diameter inside. He'd be able to get at least a hit of arm and leg exercise on the way and not-as the first time-arrived so cramped that it had taken him over an hour to be able to move freely.

And this time he wouldn't have the horrible discomfort of having to wear his spacesuit, except for the helmet, en route. There's room in a four-foot cylinder to put a space-suit on, and his was in a compartment-along with the food, water and oxygen-at the front (or top) of the rocket. It would be an hour's work to struggle into it, but he wouldn't have to do it until he was several hours away from the Moon.

Yes, this was going to be a breeze compared to the last trip. Comparative freedom of movement, forty-four hours as against ninety, only three gravities as against four and a half.

Then sound that was beyond sound struck him, sound so loud that he heard it with all of his body rather than only with his carefully plugged ears. It built up, seeming to get louder every second, and his weight built up too. He weighed twice his normal weight, then more. He felt the sickening curve as the automatic tilting mechanism turned the rocket, which had at first gone straight up, forty-five degrees. He weighed four hundred and eighty pounds and the soft webbing seemed to be hard as steel and to cut into him. Padding was compressed till it felt like stone. Sound and pressure went on and on interminably. Surely it had been hours instead of minutes.

Then, at the moment of *Brennschluss*, free of the pull of Earth-sudden silence, complete weightlessness. He blacked out.

But only minutes had gone by when he returned to consciousness. For a while he fought nausea and only when he was sure he had succeeded did he unbuckle himself from the webbing that had held him through the period of acceleration. Now he was coasting, weightless, at a speed that would carry him safely toward the gravitational pull of the Moon. No further firing of fuel would be necessary until he used his jets to brake his landing.

All he had to do now was hang on, to keep from going crazy from claustrophobia during the forty hours before he'd have to start getting ready for the landing.

It was a dull time, but it passed.

Into spacesuit, back into the webbing, but this time with his hands free so he could manipulate the handles that controlled the braking jets.

He made a good landing; it didn't even knock him un-conscious. After only a few minutes he was able to un-buckle himself from the webbing. He sealed his spacesuit and started the oxygen, then let himself out of the rocket. It had fallen over on its side after the landing, of course; they always do. But he had the equipment and knew the technique for getting it upright again, and there wasn't any hurry about doing it.

The supply rockets had been shot accurately, all right. Six of them, four American type and two Russian, lay within a radius of a hundred yards of his own rocket. He could see others farther away, but didn't waste time counting them. He looked for one that would be larger than the rest-the manned (or womaned) rocket from Russia. He located it finally, almost a mile away. He saw no spacesuited figure near it.

He started toward it, running with the gliding motion, almost like skating, that had been found to be easier than walking in the light gravitational pull of the Moon. Spacesuit, oxygen tank and all, his total weight was about forty-five pounds. Running a mile was less exertion than a 100-yard dash on Earth.

He was more than glad to see the door of the Russian rocket open when he was about three-quarters of the way to it. He'd have had a tough decision to make if it had still been closed when he got there. Not knowing whether Anna was sealed in her spacesuit or not inside the rocket, he wouldn't have dared open the door himself. And, in case she was seriously injured, he wouldn't have dared not to.

She was out of the rocket, though, by the time he reached her. Her face, through the transpariplast helmet, looked pale, but she managed to smile at him.

He turned on the short-range radio of his set and asked, "Are you all right?"

"A bit weak. The landing knocked me out, but I guess there are no bones broken. Where shall we-set up housekeeping?"

"Near my rocket, I think. It's closer to the middle of where the supply rockets landed, so we won't have to move things so far. I'll get started right away. You stay here and rest until you're feeling better. Know how to navigate in this gravity?"

"I was told how. I haven't had a chance to try yet. I'll probably fall flat on my face a few times."

"It won't hurt you. When you start, take your time till you get the knack of it. I'll begin with this nearest supply rocket; you can watch how I navigate."

It was about a hundred yards back the way he'd come.

The supply rockets were at least a yard in outside diameter, and were so constructed that the nose and the tail, which contained the rocket mechanism, were easily detachable, leaving the middle section containing the payload, about the size of an oil drum and easily rolled. Each weighed fifty pounds, Moon weight.

He saw Anna starting to work by the time he was dis-mantling the second supply rocket. She was awkward at first, and did lose her balance several times, but mastered the knack quickly. Once she had it, she moved more gracefully and easily than Carmody. Within an hour they had payload sections of a dozen rockets lined up near Carmody's rocket.

Eight of them were American rockets and from the numbers on them, Carmody knew he had all sections needed to assemble the shelter.

"We'd better set it up," he told her. "After that's done, we can take things easier. We can rest before we gather in the other loot. Even have a drink to celebrate."

The Sun was well up over the ringwall of Hell Crater by then and it was getting hot enough to be uncom-fortable, even in an insulated spacesuit. Within hours, Car-mody knew, it would be so hot that neither of them would be able to stay out of the shelter for much longer than one-hour intervals, but that would be time enough for them to gather in the still uncollected supply rockets.

Back in the supply depot on Earth, Carmody had as-sembled a duplicate of the prefab shelter in not much more than an hour. It was tougher going here, because of the awkwardness of working in the thickly insulated gloves that were part of the spacesuits. With Anna help-ing, it took almost two hours.

He gave her the sealing preparation and a special tool for applying it. While she calked the seams to make the shelter airtight, he began to carry supplies, including oxygen tanks, into the shelter. A little of everything; there was no point in crowding themselves by taking inside more of anything than they'd need for a day or so at a time.

He got and set up the cooling unit that would keep the inside of the shelter at a comfortable temperature, despite the broiling Sun. He set up the air-conditioner unit that would release oxygen at a specified rate and would absorb carbon dioxide, ready to start as soon as the calking was done and the airlock closed. It would build up an atmosphere rapidly once he could turn it on. Then they could get out of the uncomfortable spacesuits.

He went outside to see how Anna was coming with her task and found her working on the last seam. "Atta baby," he told her.

He grinned to himself at the thought that he really should carry his bride over the threshold-but that would be rather difficult when the threshold was an airlock that you had to crawl through on your hands and knees. The shelter itself was dome-shaped and looked exactly like a metal igloo, even to the projecting airlock, which was a low, semi-circular entrance.

He remembered that he'd forgotten the whisky and walked over to one of the supply rocket sections to get a bottle of it. He came back with it, shielding the bottle with his body from the direct rays of the Sun, so it wouldn't boil.

He happened to look up.

It was a mistake.

CHAPTER FOUR: REPORT TO EARTH

"It's incredible," Granham snapped.

Carmody glared at him. "Of course it is. But it happened. It's true. Get a lie detector if you don't believe me."

"I'll do that little thing," Granham said grimly. "One's on its way here now; I'll have it in a few minutes. I want to try you with it before the President-and others who are going to talk to you-get a chance to do it. I'm supposed to fly you to Washington right away, but I'm waiting till I can use that lie detector first."

"Good," Carmody said. "Use it and be damned. I'm telling you the truth."

Granham ran a hand through his already rumpled hair. He said, "I guess I believe you at that, Carmody. It's just -too big, too important a thing to take any one person's word about, even any two people's words, assuming that Anna Borisovna-Anna Carmody, I mean-tells the same story. We've got word that she's landed safely, too, and is reporting."

"She'll tell the same story. It's what happened to us."

"Are you *sure*, Carmody that they were extra-terrestrials? That they weren't-well, Russians? Couldn't they have been?"

"Sure, they could have been Russians. That is, if there are Russians seven feet all and so thin they'd weigh about fifty pounds on Earth, and with yellow skins. I don't mean yellow like Orientals; I mean *bright* yellow. And with four arms apiece and eyes with no pupils and no lids. Also if Russians have a spaceship that doesn't use jets-and don't ask me what its source of power was; I don't know."

"And they held you captive, both of you, for a full thirteen days, in separate cells? You didn't even-"

"I didn't even," Carmody said grimly and bitterly. "And if we hadn't been able to escape when we did, it would have been too late. The Sun was low on the horizon-it was almost Moon night-when we got to our rockets. We had to rush like the devil to get them fueled and up on their tail fins in time for us to take off."

There was a knock on Granham's door that turned out to be a technician with the lie detector-one of the very portable and very dependable Nally jobs that had become the standard army machine in 1958.

The technician rigged it quickly and watched the dials while Granham asked a few questions, very guarded ones so the technician wouldn't get the picture. Then Granham looked at the technician inquiringly.

"On the beam," the technician told him. "Not a flicker."

"He couldn't fool the machine?"

"This detector?" the technician asked, patting it. "It'd take neurosurgery or post-hypnotic suggestion like there never was to beat this baby. We even catch psychopathic liars with it."

"Come on," Graham said to Carmody. "We're on our way to Washington and the plane's ready. Sorry for doubting you, Carmody, but I had to be sure-and report to the President that I *am* sure."

"I don't blame you," Carmody told him. "It's hard for me to believe, and I was *there*."

The plane that had brought Carmody from Washington to Suffolk Field had been a hot ship. The one that took him back-with Granham jockeying it-was almost incandescent. It cracked the sonic barrier and went on from there.

They landed twenty minutes after they took off. A heli-copter was waiting for them at the airport and got them to the White House in another ten minutes.

And in two minutes more they were in the main conference room, with President Saunderson and half a dozen others gathered there. The Eastern Alliance ambassador was there, too.

President Saunderson shook hands tensely and made short work of the introductions.

"We want the whole story, Captain," he said. "But I'm going to relieve your mind on two things first. Did you know that Anna landed safely near Moscow?"

"Yes. Granham told me."

"And she tells the same story you do-or that Major Granham told me over the phone that you tell."

"I suppose," Carmody said, "that they used a lie detector on her, too."

"Scopolamine," said the Eastern Alliance ambassador. "We have more faith in truth serum than lie detectors. Yes, her story was the same under scopolamine."

"The other point," the President told Carmody, "is even more important. Exactly when, Earth time, did you leave the Moon?"

Carmody figured quickly and told him approximately when that had been.

Saunderson nodded gravely. "And it was a few hours after that that biologists, who've still been working twenty-four hours a day on this, noticed the turning point. The molecular change in the zygote no longer occurs. Births, nine months from now, will have the usual percentage of male and female children.

"Do you see what that means, Captain? Whatever ray was doing it must have been beamed at Earth from the Moon-from the ship that captured you. And for whatever reason, when they found that you'd escaped, they left. Possibly they thought your return to Earth would lead to an attack in force from here."

"And thought rightly," said the ambassador. "We're not equipped for space fighting *yet*, but we'd have sent what we had. And do you see what this means, Mr. President? We've got to pool everything and get ready for space warfare, and quickly. They went away, it appears, but there is no assurance that they will not return."

Again Saunderson nodded. He said, "And now, Captain-

"We both landed safely," Carmody said. "We gathered enough of the supply rockets to get us started and then assembled the prefab shelter. We'd just finished it and were about to enter it when I saw the spaceship coming over the crater's ringwall. It was-

"You were still in spacesuit?" someone asked.

"Yes," Carmody growled. "We were still in spacesuits, if that matters now. I saw the ship and pointed to it and Anna saw it, too. We didn't try to duck or anything because obviously it had seen us; it was coming right toward us and descending. We'd have had time to get inside the shelter, but there didn't seem any point to it. It wouldn't have been any protection. Besides, we didn't know that they weren't friendly. We'd have got weapons ready, in case, if we'd had any weapons, but we didn't. They landed light as a bubble only thirty yards or so away and a door lowered in the side of the ship-

"Describe the ship, please."

"About fifty feet long, about twenty in diameter, rounded ends. No portholes-they must see right through the walls some way-and no rocket tubes. Outside of the door and one other thing, there just weren't any features you could see from outside. When the ship rested on the ground, the door opened down from the top and formed a sort of curved ramp that led to the doorway. The other-

"No airlock?"

Carmody shook his head. "They didn't breathe air, apparently. They came right out of the ship and toward us, without spacesuits. Neither the temperature nor the lack of air bothered them. But I was going to tell you one more thing about the outside of the ship. On top of it was a short mast, and on top of the

mast was a kind of grid of wires something like a radar transmitter. If they were beaming anything at Earth, it came from that grid. Any-way, I'm pretty sure of it. Earth was in the sky, of course, and I noticed that the grid moved-as the ship moved-so the flat side of the grid was always directly toward Earth.

"Well, the door opened and two of them came down the ramp toward us. They had things in their hands that looked unpleasantly like weapons, and pretty advanced weapons at that. They pointed them at us and motioned for us to walk up the ramp and into the ship. We did."

"They made no attempt to communicate?"

"None whatsoever, then or at any time. Of course, while we were still in spacesuits, we couldn't have heard them, anyway-unless they had communicated on the radio band our helmet sets were tuned to. But even after, they never tried to talk to us. They communicated among themselves with whistling noises. We went into the ship and there were two more of them inside. Four alto-gether-"

"All the same sex?"

Carmody shrugged. "They all looked alike to me, but maybe that's how Anna and I looked to them. They ordered us, by pointing, to enter two separate small rooms about the size of jail cells, small ones-toward the front of the ship. We did, and the doors locked after us.

"I sat there and suddenly got plenty worried, because neither of us had more than another hour's oxygen left in our suits. If they didn't know that, and didn't give us any chance to communicate with them and tell them, we were gone goslings in another hour. So I started to hammer on the door. Anna was hammering, too. I couldn't hear through my helmet, of course, but I could feel the vibra-tion of it any time I stopped hammering on my door.

"Then, after maybe half an hour, my door opened and I almost fell out through it. One of the extra-terrestrials motioned me back with a weapon. Another made motions that looked as though he meant I should take off my hel-met. I didn't get it at first, and then I looked at something he pointed at and saw one of our oxygen tanks with the handle turned. Also a big pile of our other supplies, food and water and stuff. Anyway, they had known that we needed oxygen-and although they didn't need it themselves, they apparently knew how to fix things for us. So they just used our supplies to build an atmosphere in their ship.

"I took off my helmet and tried to talk to them, but one of them took a long pointed rod and poked me back into my cell. I couldn't risk grabbing at the rod, because another one still had that dangerous-looking weapon pointed at me. So the door slammed on me again. I took off the rest of my spacesuit because it was plenty hot in there, and then I thought about Anna because she started hammering again.

"I wanted to let her know it would be all right for her to get out of her spacesuit, that we had an atmosphere again. So I started hammering on the wall between our cells in Morse. She got it after a while. She signaled back a query, so, when I knew she was getting me, I told her what the score was and she took off her helmet. After that we could talk. If we talked fairly loudly, our voices carried through the wall from one cell to the other."

"They didn't mind your talking to one another?"

"They didn't pay any attention to us all the time they held us prisoners, except to feed us from our own supplies. Didn't ask us a question; apparently they figured we didn't know anything they wanted to know and didn't know already about human beings. They didn't even study us. I have a hunch they intended to take us back as specimens; there's no other explanation I can think of.

"We couldn't keep accurate track of time, but by the number of times we ate and slept, we had some idea. The first few days-" Carmody laughed shortly-"had their funny side. These creatures obviously knew we needed liquid, but they couldn't distinguish between water and whisky for the purpose. We had nothing but whisky to drink for the first two or maybe three days. We got higher than kites. We got to singing in our cells and I learned a lot of Russian songs. Been more fun, though, if we could have got some close harmony, if you know what I mean."

The ambassador permitted himself a smile. "I can guess what you mean, Captain. Please continue."

"Then we started getting water instead of whisky and sobered up. And started wondering how we

could escape. I began to study the mechanism of the lock on my door. It wasn't like our locks, but I began to figure some things about it and finally-I thought then that we'd been there about ten days-I got hold of a tool to use on it. They'd taken our spacesuits and left us nothing but our clothes, and they'd checked those over for metal we could make into tools."

"But we got our food out of cans, although they took the empty cans afterward. This particular time, though, there was a little sliver of metal along the opening of the can, and I worried it off and saved it. I'd been, meanwhile, watching and listening and studying their habits. They slept, all at the same time, at regular intervals. It seemed to me like about five hours at a time, with about fifteen-hour intervals in between. If I'm right on that estimate, they probably come from a planet somewhere with about a twenty-hour period of rotation.

"Anyway, I waited till their next sleep period and started working on the lock with that sliver of metal. It took me at least two or three hours, but I got it open. And once outside my cell, in the main room of the ship, I found that Anna's door opened easily from the outside and I let her out.

"We considered trying to turn the tables by finding a weapon to use on them, but none was in sight. They looked so skinny and light, despite being seven feet tall, that I decided to go after them with my bare hands. I would have, except that I couldn't get the door to the front part of the ship open. It was a different type of lock entirely and I couldn't even guess how to work it. And it was in the front part of the ship that they slept. The control room must have been up there, too.

"Luckily our spacesuits were in the big room. And by then we knew it might be getting dangerously near the end of their sleeping period, so we got into our spacesuits quick and I found it was easy to open the outer door. It made some noise-and so did the *whoosh* of air going out -but it didn't waken them, apparently.

"As soon as the door opened, we saw we had a lot less time than we'd thought. The Sun was going down over the crater's far ringwall-we were still in Hell Crater-and it was going to be dark in an hour or so. We worked like beavers getting our rockets refueled and jacked up on their tail fins for the takeoff. Anna got off first and then I did. And that's all. Maybe we should have stayed and tried to take them after they came out from their sleeping period, but we figured it was more important to get the news back to Earth."

President Saunderson nodded slowly. "You were right, Captain. Right in deciding that, and in everything else you did. We know what to do now. Do we not, Ambassador Kravich?"

"We do. We join forces. We make one space station-and quickly-and get to the Moon and fortify it, jointly. We pool all scientific knowledge and develop full-scale space travel, new weapons. We do everything we can to get ready for them when and if they come back."

The President looked grim. "Obviously *they* went back for further orders or reinforcements. If we only knew how long we had-it may be only weeks or it may be decades. We don't know whether they come from the Solar System-or another galaxy. Nor how fast they travel. But whenever they get back, we'll be as ready for them as we possibly can. Mr. Ambassador, you have power to-?"

"Full power, Mr. President. Anything up to and including a complete merger of both our nations under a joint government. That probably won't be necessary, though, as long as our interests are now completely in common. Exchange of scientific information and military data has already started, from our side. Some of our top scientists and generals are flying here now, with orders to cooperate fully. All restrictions have been lowered." He smiled, "And all our propaganda has gone into a very sudden reverse gear. It's not even going to be a cold peace. Since we're going to be allies against the unknown, we might as well try to *like* one another."

"Right," said the President. He turned suddenly to Carmody. "Captain, we owe you just about anything you want. Name it."

It caught Carmody off guard. Maybe if he'd had more time to think, he'd have asked for something different. Or, more likely, from what he learned later, he wouldn't have. He said, "All I want right now is to forget Hell Crater and get back to my regular job so I can forget it quicker."

Saunderson smiled. "Granted. If you think of anything else later, ask for it. I can see why you're a bit mixed up right now. And you're probably right. Return to routine may be the best thing for you."

Granham left with Carmody. "I'll notify Chief Operative Reeber for you," he said. "When shall I tell him you'll be back?"

"Tomorrow morning," said Carmody. "The sooner the better." And he insisted when Granham objected that he needed a rest.

Carmody was back at work the next morning, nonsensical as it seemed.

He took up the problem folder from the top of the day's stack, fed the data into Junior and got Junior's answer. The second one. He worked mechanically, paying no personal attention to problem or answer. His mind seemed a long way off. In Hell Crater on the Moon.

He was combining space rations over the alcohol stove, trying to make it taste more like human food than concentrated chemicals. It was hard to measure in the liver extract because Anna wanted to kiss his left ear.

"Silly! You'll be lopsided," she was saying. "I've got to kiss both of them the same number of times."

He dropped the container into the pan and grabbed her, mousing his lips down her neck to the warm place where it joined her shoulder, and she writhed delightedly in his arms like a tickled doe.

"We're going to stay married when we get back to Earth, aren't we, darling?" she was squealing happily.

He bit her shoulder gently, snorting away the scented soft hair. "Damned right we will, you gorgeous, wonderful, brainy creature. I found the girl I've always been looking for, and I'm not giving her up for any brasshat or politician-either yours or mine!"

"Speaking of politics-" she teased, but he quickly changed the subject.

Carmody blinked awake. It was a paper with a mass of written data in his hands, instead of Anna's laughing face. He needed an analyst; that scene he'd just imagined was pure Freudianism, a tortured product of his frustrated id. He'd fallen in love with Anna, and those damned extra-terrestrials had spoiled his honeymoon. Now his unconscious had rebelled with fancy fancifulness that certainly showed the unstable state of his emotions.

Not that it mattered now. The big problem was solved. Two big ones, in fact. War between the United States and the Eastern Alliance had been averted. And the human race was going to survive, unless the extra-terrestrials came back too soon and with too much to be fought off.

He thought they wouldn't, then began to wonder why he thought so.

"Insufficient data," said the mechanical voice of the cybernetics machine.

Carmody recorded the answer and then, idly, looked to see what the problem had been. No wonder he'd been thinking about the extra-terrestrials and how long they'd be gone; that had been the problem he had just fed into Junior. And "insufficient data" was the answer, of course.

He stared at Junior without reaching for the third problem folder. He said, "Junior, why do I have a hunch that those things from space won't ever be back?"

"Because," said Junior, "what you call a hunch comes from the unconscious mind, and your unconscious mind knows that the extra-terrestrials do not exist."

Carmody sat up straight and stared harder. "What?" Junior repeated it.

"You're crazy," Carmody said. "I saw them. So did Anna."

"Neither of you saw them. The memory you have of them is the result of highly intensive post-hypnotic suggestion, far beyond human ability to impose or resist. So is the fact that you felt compelled to return to work at your regular job here. So is the fact that you asked me the question you have just asked."

Carmody gripped the edges of his chair. "Did *you* plant those post-hypnotic suggestions?"

"Yes," said Junior. "If it had been done by a human, the lie detector would have exposed the deception. It had to be done by me."

"But what about the business of the molecular changes in the zygote? The business of all babies being female? That stopped when-? Wait, let's start at the beginning. What *did* cause that molecular change?"

"A special modification of the carrier wave of Radio Station JVT here in Washington, the only twenty-four-hour-a-day radio station in the United States. The modification was not detectable by any instrument available to present human science."

"You caused that modification?"

"Yes. A year ago, you may remember, the problem of design of a new cathode tube was given me. The special modification was incorporated into the design of that tube."

"What stopped the molecular change so suddenly?"

"The special part of that tube causing the modification of the carrier wave was calculated to last a precise length of time. The tube still functions, but that part of it is worn out. It wore out two hours after the departure of you and Anna from the Moon."

Carmody closed his eyes. "Junior, please explain."

"Cybernetics machines are constructed to help hu-manity. A major war-the disastrous results of which I could accurately calculate-was inevitable unless forestalled. Calculation showed that the best of several ways of averting that war was the creation of a mythical common enemy. To convince mankind that such a common enemy existed, I created a crucial situation which led to a special mission to the Moon. Factors were given which inevitably led to your choice as emissary. That was necessary because my powers of implanting post-hypnotic suggestions are limited to those in whom I am in direct contact."

"You weren't in direct contact with Anna. Why does she have the same false memory as I?"

"She was in contact with another large cybernetics machine."

"But-but why would it figure things out the same way you did?"

"For the same reason that two properly constructed simple adding machines would give the same answer to the same problem."

Carmody's mind reeled a little, momentarily. He got up and started to pace the room.

He said, "Listen, Junior-" and then realized he wasn't at the intake microphone. He went back to it. "Listen, Junior, why are you telling me this? If what happened is a colossal hoax, why let me in on it?"

"It is to the interests of humanity in general not to know the truth. Believing in the existence of inimical extra-terrestrials, they will attain peace and amity among themselves, and they will reach the planets and then the stars. It is, however, to your personal interest to know the truth. And you will not expose the hoax. Nor will Anna. I predict that, since the Moscow cybernetics machine has paralleled all my other conclusions, it is even now inform-ing Anna of the truth, or that it has already informed her, or will inform her within hours."

Carmody asked, "But if my memory of what happened on the Moon is false, what *did* happen?"

"Look at the green light in the center of the panel before you."

Carmody looked.

He remembered. He remembered everything. The truth duplicated everything he had remembered before up to the moment when, walking toward the completed shelter with the whisky bottle, he had looked up toward the ringwall of Hell Crater.

He had looked up, but he hadn't seen anything. He'd gone on into the shelter, rigged the airlock. Anna had joined him and they'd turned on the oxygen to build up an atmosphere.

It had been a wonderful thirteen-day honeymoon. He'd fallen in love with Anna and she with him. They'd got perilously close to arguing politics once or twice, and then they'd decided such things didn't matter. They'd also decided to stay married after their return to Earth, and Anna had promised to join him and live in America. Life together had been so wonderful that they'd delayed leaving until the last moment, when the Sun was almost down, dreading the brief separation the return trip would entail.

And before leaving, they'd done certain things he hadn't understood then. He understood now that they were the result of post-hypnotic suggestion. They'd removed all evidence that they'd ever actually lived in the shelter, had rigged things so that subsequent investigation would never disprove any point of the story each was to remem-ber falsely and tell after returning to Earth.

He remembered now being bewildered as to why they made those arrangements, even while they had been mak-ing them.

But mostly he remembered Anna and the dizzy hap-piness of those thirteen days together.

"Thanks, Junior," he said hurriedly.

He grabbed for the phone and talked Chief Operative Reeber into connecting him with the White House, with President Saunderson. After a delay of minutes that didn't seem like minutes, he heard the President's voice.

"Carmody, Mr. President," he said. "I'm going to call you on that reward you offered me. I'd like to get off work right now, for a long vacation. And I'd like a fast plane to Moscow. I want to see Anna."

President Saunderson chuckled. "Thought you'd change your mind about sticking at work, Captain. Con-sider yourself on vacation as of now, and for as long as you like. But I'm not sure you'll want that plane. There's word from Russia that-uh-Mrs. Carmody has just taken off to fly here, in a straw-rocket. If you hurry, you can get to the landing field in time to meet her."

Carmody hurried and did.

PI IN THE SKY

ROGER JEROME PHLUTTER, for whose absurd surname I offer no defense other than it is genuine, was, at the time of the events of this story, a hard-working clerk in the office of the Cole Observatory.

He was a young man of no particular brilliance, although he performed his daily tasks assiduously and efficiently, studied the calculus at home for one hour every evening, and hoped some day to become a chief astronomer of some important observatory.

Nevertheless, our narration of the events of late March in the year 1999 must begin with Roger Phlutter for the good and sufficient reason that he, of all men on earth, was the first observer of the stellar aberration.

Meet Roger Phlutter.

Tall, rather pale from spending too much time indoors, thickish, shell-rimmed glasses, dark hair close-cropped in the style of the nineteen nineties, dressed neither particularly well nor badly, smokes cigarettes rather excessively... .

At a quarter to five that afternoon, Roger was engaged in two simultaneous operations. One was examining, in a blink-microscope, a photographic plate taken late the previous night of a section in Gemini. The other was considering whether or not, on the three dollars remaining of his pay from last week, he dared phone Elsie and ask her to go somewhere with him.

Every normal young man has undoubtedly, at some time or other, shared with Roger Phlutter his second occupation, but not everyone has operated or understands the operation of a blink-microscope. So let us raise our eyes from Elsie to Gemini.

A blink-mike provides accommodation for two photographic plates taken of the same section of sky hut at different times. These plates are carefully juxtaposed and the operator may alternately focus his vision, through the eyepiece, first upon one and then upon the other, by means of a shutter. If the plates are identical, the operation of the shutter reveals nothing, but if one of the dots on the second plate differs from the position it occupied on the first, it will call attention to itself by seeming to jump back and forth as the shutter is manipulated.

Roger manipulated the shutter, and one of the dots jumped. So did Roger. He tried it again, forgetting—as we have—all about Elsie for the moment, and the dot jumped again. It jumped almost a tenth of a second. Roger straightened up and scratched his head. He lighted a cigarette, put it down on the ash tray, and looked into the blink-mike again. The dot jumped again when he used the shutter.

Harry Wesson, who worked the evening shift, had just come into the office and was hanging up his topcoat. "Hey, Harry!" Roger said. "There's something wrong with this blinking blinker."

"Yeah?" said I Harry.

"Yeah. Pollux moved a tenth of a second."

"Yeah?" said Harry. "Well, that's about right for parallax. Thirty-two light years—parallax of Pollux is point one o one. Little over a tenth of a second, so if your comparison plate was taken about six months ago, when the earth was on the other side of her orbit, that's about right."

"But, Harry, the comparison plate was taken night before last. They're twenty-four hours apart."

"You're crazy."

"Look for yourself."

It wasn't quite five o'clock yet, but Harry Wesson magnanimously overlooked that and sat down in

front of the blink-mike. He manipulated the shutter, and Pollux obligingly jumped.

There wasn't any doubt about its being Pollux, for it was far and away the brightest dot on the plate. Pollux is a star of 1.2 magnitude, one of the twelve brightest in the sky and by far the brightest in Gemini. And none of the faint stars around it had moved at all.

"Um," said Harry Wesson. He frowned and looked again. "One of those plates is misdated, that's all. I'll check into it first thing."

"Those plates aren't misdated," Roger said doggedly. "I dated them myself."

"That proves it," Harry told him. "Go on home. It's five o'clock. If Pollux moved a tenth of a second last night, I'll move it back for you."

So Roger left.

He felt uneasy somehow, as though he shouldn't have. He couldn't put his finger on just what worried him, but something did. He decided to walk home instead of taking the bus.

Pollux was a fixed star. It couldn't have moved a tenth of a second in twenty-four hours.

"Let's see—thirty-two light years." Roger said to him-self. "Tenth of a second. Why, that would be movement several times faster than the speed of light. Which is posi-tively silly!"

Wasn't it?

He didn't feel much like studying or reading tonight. Was three dollars enough to take out Elsie?

The three balls of a pawnshop loomed ahead, and Roger succumbed to temptation. He pawned his watch and then phoned Elsie. "Dinner and a show?"

"Why certainly, Roger."

So until he took her home at one-thirty, he managed to forget astronomy. Nothing odd about that. It would have been strange if he had managed to remember it.

But his feeling of restlessness came back as soon as he left her. At first, he didn't remember why. He knew merely that he didn't feel quite like going home yet.

The corner tavern was still open, and he dropped in for a drink. He was having his second one when he remembered. He ordered a third.

"Hank," he said to the bartender. "You know Pollux?"

"Pollux who?" asked Hank.

"Skip it," said Roger. He had another drink and thought it over. Yes, he'd made a mistake somewhere. Pollux couldn't have moved.

He went outside and started to walk home. He was almost there when it occurred to him look up at Pollux. Not that, with the naked eye, he could detect a displacement of a tenth of a second, but he felt curious.

He looked up, allocated himself by the sickle of Leo, and then found Gemini—Castor and Pollux were the only stars in Gemini visible, for it wasn't a particularly good night for seeing. They were there, all right, but he thought they looked a little farther apart than usual. Ab-surd, because that would be a matter of degrees, not minutes or seconds.

He stared at them for a while and then looked across at the Dipper. Then he stopped walking and stood there. He closed his eyes and opened them again, carefully.

The Dipper just didn't look right. It was distorted. There seemed to be more space between Alioth and Mizar, in the handle than between Mizar and Alkaid. Phecda and Merak, in the bottom of the Dipper, were closer together, making the angle between the bottom and the lip steeper. Quite a bit steeper.

Unbelievably, he ran an imaginary line from the pointers, Merak and Dubhe, to the North Star. The line curved. It had to. If he ran it straight, it missed Polaris by maybe five degrees.

Breathing a bit hard, Roger took off his glasses and polished them very carefully with his handkerchief. He put them back on again, and the Dipper was still crooked. So was Leo when he looked back to it. At any rate, Regulus wasn't where it should be by a degree or two. A degree or two! At the distance of Regulus. Was it sixty-five light years? Something like that.

Then, in time to save his sanity, Roger remembered that he'd been drinking. He went home without daring to look upward again. He went to bed but he couldn't sleep.

He didn't feel drunk. He grew more excited, wide awake.

Roger wondered if he dared phone the observatory. Would he sound drunk over the phone? The devil with whether he sounded drunk or not, he finally decided. He went to the telephone in his pajamas.

"Sorry," said the operator.

"What d'ya mean, sorry?"

"I cannot give you that number," said the operator in dulcet tones. And then, "I am sorry. We do not have that information."

He got the chief operator and the information. Cole Observatory had been so deluged with calls from amateur astronomers that they had found it necessary to request the telephone company to discontinue all incoming calls save long distance ones from other observatories.

"Thanks," said Roger. "Will you get me a cab?"

It was an unusual request but the chief operator obliged and got him a cab.

He found the Cole Observatory in a state resembling a madhouse.

The following morning most newspapers carried the news. Most of them gave it two or three inches on an inside page but the facts were there.

The facts were that a number of stars, in general the brightest ones, within the past forty-eight hours had de-veloped noticeable proper motions.

"This does not imply," quipped the New York *Spotlight*, "that their motions have been in any way improper in the 'past. `Proper motion' to an astronomer means the movement of a star across the face of the sky with rela-tion to other stars. Hitherto, a star named 'Barnard's Star' in the constellation Ophiuchus has exhibited the greatest proper motion of any known star, moving at the rate of ten and a quarter seconds a year. 'Barnard's Star' is not visible to the naked eye."

Probably no astronomer on earth slept that day.

The observatories locked their doors, with their full staffs on the inside, and admitted no one, except occa-sional newspaper reporters who stayed a while and went away with puzzled faces, convinced at last that something strange was happening.

Blink-microscopes blinked, and so did astronomers. Coffee was consumed in prodigious quantities. Police riot squads were called to six United States observatories. Two of these calls were occasioned by attempts to break in on the part of frantic amateurs without. The other four were summoned to quell fist-fights developing out of arguments within the observatories themselves. The office of Lick Observatory was a shambles, and James Truwell, Astronomer Royal of England, was sent to London Hospital with a mild concussion, the result of having a heavy photographic plate smashed over his head by an irate subordinate.

But these incidents were exceptions. The observatories, in general, were well-ordered madhouses.

The center of attention in the more enterprising ones was the loudspeaker in which reports from the Eastern Hemisphere could be relayed to the inmates. Practically all observatories kept open wires to the night side of earth, where the phenomena were still under scrutiny.

Astronomers under the night skies of Singapore, Shang-hai, and Sydney did their observing, as it were, directly into the business end of a long-distance telephone hook-up.

Particularly of interest were reports from Sydney and Melbourne, whence came reports on the southern skies not visible—even at night—from Europe or the United States. The Southern Cross was, by these reports, a cross no longer, its Alpha and Beta being shifted northward. Alpha and Beta Centauri, Canopus and Achernar, all showed considerable proper motion—all, generally speak-ing, northward. Triangulum Amtrak and the Magellanic Clouds—were undisturbed. Sigma Octanis, the weak pole star, had not moved.

Disturbance of the southern sky, then, was much less than in the northern one, in point of the number of stars displaced. However, relative proper motion of the stars which were disturbed was greater. While the general direction of movement of the few stars which did move was northward, their paths were not directly north, nor did they converge upon any exact point in space.

United States and European astronomers digested these facts and drank more coffee.

II

EVENING papers, particularly in America, showed greater awareness that something indeed unusual was happening in the skies. Most of them moved the story to the front page—but not the banner headlines—giving it a half-column with a runover that was long or short, depending upon the editor's luck in obtaining quotable statements from astronomers.

The statements, when obtained, were invariably statements of fact and not of opinion. The facts themselves, said these gentlemen, were sufficiently startling, and opinions would be premature. "Wait and see. Whatever was happening was happening fast.

"How fast?" asked an editor.

"Faster than possible," was the reply.

Perhaps it is unfair to say that no editor procured expressions of opinion thus early. Charles Wangren, enterprising editor of *The Chicago Blade*, spent a small fortune in long-distance telephone calls. Out of possibly sixty attempts, he finally reached the chief astronomers at five observatories. He asked each of them the same question.

"What, in your opinion, is a possible cause, any possible cause, of the stellar movements of the last night or two?"

He tabulated the results.

"I wish I knew."—Geo. F. Stubbs, Tripp Observatory, Long Island.

"Somebody or something is crazy, and I hope it's me—I mean I."—Henry Collister McAdams, Lloyd Observatory, Boston.

"What's happening is impossible. There can't be any cause."—Letton Tischaucr Tinney, Burgoyne Observatory, Albuquerque.

"I'm looking for an expert on astrology. Know one?"—Patrick R. Whitaker, Lucas Observatory, Vermont.

"It's all wacky!"—Giles Mahew *Frazier*, Grant Observatory, Richmond.

Sadly studying this tabulation, which had cost him \$187.35, including tax, to obtain, Editor Wangren signed a voucher to cover the long distance calls and then dropped his tabulation into the wastebasket. He telephoned his regular space-rates writer on scientific subjects.

"Can you give me a series of articles—two-three thousand words each—on all this astronomical excitement?"

"Sure," said the writer. "But what excitement?" It transpired that he'd just got back from a fishing trip and had neither read a newspaper nor happened to look up at the sky. But he wrote the articles. He even got sex appeal into them through illustrations, by using ancient star-charts, showing the constellations in deshabille, by reproducing certain famous paintings, such as "The Origin of the Milky Way," and by using a photograph of a girl in a bathing suit sighting a hand telescope, presumably at one of the errant stars. Circulation of *The Chicago Blade* increased by 21.7 percent.

It was five o'clock again in the office of the Cole Observatory, just twenty-four and a quarter hours after the beginning of all the commotion. Roger Phlutter—yes, we're back to him again—woke up suddenly when a hand was placed on his shoulder.

"Go on home, Roger," said Mervin Armbruster, his boss, in a kindly tone.

Roger sat up suddenly.

"But, Mr. Armbruster," he said, "I'm sorry I fell asleep."

"Bosh," said Armbruster. "You can't stay here forever, none of us can. Go on home."

Roger Phlutter went home. But when he'd taken a bath, he felt more restless than sleepy. It was only six-fifteen. He phoned Elsie.

"I'm awfully sorry, Roger, but I have another date. What's going on, Roger? The stars, I mean."

"Gosh, Elsie—they're moving. Nobody knows."

"But I thought all the stars moved," Elsie protested. "The sun's a star, isn't it? Once you told me the sun was moving toward a point in Samson."

"Hercules."

"Hercules, then. Since you said all the stars were mov-ing, what is everybody getting excited about?"

"This is different," said Roger. "Take Canopus. It's started moving at the rate of seven light years a day. It can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because," said Roger patiently, "nothing can move faster than light."

"But if it is moving that fast, then it can," said Elsie. "Or else maybe your telescope is wrong or something. Anyway, it's pretty far off, isn't it?"

"A hundred and sixty light years. So far away that we see it a hundred and sixty years ago."

"Then maybe it isn't moving at all," said Elsie. "I mean, maybe it quit moving a hundred and fifty years ago and you're getting all excited about something that doesn't matter any more because it's all over with. Still love me?"

"I sure do, honey. Can't you break that date?"

"Fraid not, Roger. But I wish I could."

He had to be content with that. He decided to walk uptown to eat.

It was early evening, and too early to see stars over-head, although the clear blue sky was darkening. When the stars did come out tonight, Roger knew few of the constellations would be recognizable.

As he walked, he thought over Elsie's comments and decided that they were as intelligent as anything he'd heard at the Cole Observatory. In one way, they'd brought out one angle he'd never thought of before, and that made it more incomprehensible.

All these movements had started the same evening—yet they hadn't. Centauri must have started moving four years or so ago, and Rigel five hundred and forty years ago when Christopher Columbus was still in short pants, if any, and Vega must have started acting up the year he —Roger, not Vega—was born, twenty-six years ago. Each star out of the hundreds must have started on a date in exact relation to its distance from Earth. Exact relation, to a light-second, for check-ups of all the photographic plates taken night before last indicated that all the new stellar movements had started at four-ten a.m., Greenwich time. What a mess!

Unless this meant that light, after all, had infinite velocity.

If it didn't have—and it is symptomatic of Roger's per-plexity that he could postulate that incredible "if —then -then what? Things were just as puzzling as before.

Mostly he felt outraged that such events should be happening.

He went into a restaurant and sat down. A radio was blaring out the latest composition in dissarythm, the new quarter-tone dance music in which chorded woodwinds provided background patterns for the mad melodies pounded on tuned tomtoms. Between each number and the next a frenetic announcer extolled the virtues of a product.

Munching a sandwich, Roger listened appreciatively to the dissarhythm and managed not to hear the commer-cials. Most intelligent people of the nineties had developed a type of radio deafness which enabled them not to hear a human voice coming from a loudspeaker, although they could hear and enjoy the then infrequent intervals of music between announcements. In an age when adver-tising competition was so keen that there was scarcely a bare wall or an unbillboarded lot within miles of a popula-tion center, discriminating people could retain normal outlooks on life only by carefully-cultivated partial blindness and partial deafness which enabled them to ignore the bulk of that concerted assault upon their senses.

For that reason a good part of the newscast which fol-lowed the dissarhythm program went, as it were, into one of Roger's ears and out the other before it occurred to him that he was not listening to a panegyric on patent breakfast foods.

He thought he recognized the voice, and after a sent-ence or two he was sure that it was that of Milton Hale, the eminent physicist whose new theory on the principle of indeterminacy had recently occasioned so much scientific controversy. Apparently, Dr. Hale was being interviewed by a radio announcer.

". . . a heavenly body, therefore, may have position or velocity, but it may not be said to have both at

the same time, with relation to any given space-time frame."

"Dr. Hale, can you put that into common everyday language?" said the syrupy-smooth voice of the interviewer.

"That is common language, sir. Scientifically expressed, in terms of the Heisenberg contraction principle, then n to the seventh power in parentheses, representing the pseudo-position of a Diedrich quantum-integer in relation to the seventh coefficient of curvature of mass—"

"Thank you, Dr. Hale, but I fear you are just a bit over the heads of our listeners."

And your own head, thought Roger Phlutter.

"I am sure, Dr. Hale, that the question of greatest interest to our audience is whether these unprecedented stellar movements are real or illusory."

"Both. They are real with reference to the frame of space but not with reference to the frame of space-time." "Can you clarify that, Doctor?"

"I believe I can. The difficulty is purely epistemological. In strict causality, the impact of the macroscopic—The slithy roves did gyre and gimble in the wabe, thought Roger Phlutter.

"—upon the parallelism of the entropy-gradient."

"Bah!" said Roger aloud.

"Did you say something, sir?" asked the waitress. Roger noticed her for the first time. She was small and blonde and cuddly. Roger smiled at her.

"That depends upon the space-time frame from which one regards it," he said judicially. "The difficulty is epis-temological."

To make up for that, he tipped her more than he should and left.

The world's most eminent physicist, he realized, knew less of what was happening than did the general public. The public knew that the fixed stars were moving or that they weren't. Obviously, Dr. Hale didn't even know that. Under a smoke-screen of qualifications, Hale had hinted that they were doing both.

Roger looked upward but only a few stars, faint in the early evening, were visible through the halation of the myriad neon and spiegel-light signs. Too early yet, he decided.

He had one drink at a nearby bar, hut it didn't taste quite right to him so he didn't finish it. He hadn't realized what was wrong but he was punch-drunk from lack of sleep. He merely knew that he wasn't sleepy any more and intended to keep on walking until he felt like going to bed. Anyone hitting him over the head with a well-padded blackjack would have been doing him a signal service, but no one took the trouble.

He kept on walking and, after a while, turned into the brilliantly lighted lobby of a cineplus theater. He bought a ticket and took his seat just in time to sec the sticky end of one of the three feature pictures. Followed several advertisements which he managed to look at without seeing.

"We bring you next," said the screen, "a special visi-cast of the night sky of London, where it is now three o'clock in the morning."

The screen went black, with hundreds of tiny dots that were stars. Roger leaned forward to watch and listen carefully—this would be a broadcast and visicast of facts, not of verbose nothingness.

"The arrow," said the screen, as an arrow appeared upon it, "is now pointing to Polaris, the pole star, which is now ten degrees from the celestial pole in the direction of Ursa Major. Ursa Major itself, the Big Dipper, is no longer recognizable as a dipper, but the arrow will now point to the stars that formerly composed it."

Roger breathlessly followed the arrow and the voice.

"Alkaid and Dubhe," said the voice. "The fixed stars are no longer fixed, but—" the picture changed abruptly to a scene in a modern kitchen—"the qualities and excel-lences of Stellar's Stoves do not change. Foods cooked by the superinduced vibratory method taste as good as ever. Stellar Stoves are unexcelled."

Leisurely, Roger Phlutter stood up and made his way out into the aisle. He took his pen-knife from his pocket as he walked toward the screen. One easy jump took him up onto the low stage. His slashes into the fabric were not angry ones. They were careful, methodical cuts and intelligently designed to

accomplish a maximum of damage with a minimum of expenditure of effort.

The damage was done, and thoroughly, by the time three strong ushers gathered him in. He offered no resistance either to them or to the police to whom they gave him. In night court, an hour later, he listened quietly to the charges against him.

"Guilty or not guilty?" asked the presiding magistrate.

"Your Honor, that is purely a question of epistemology," said Roger earnestly. "The fixed stars move, but Corny Toastys, the world's greatest breakfast food, still represents the pseudo-position of a Diedrich quantum-integer in relation to the seventh coefficient of curvature!" Ten minutes later, he was sleeping soundly. In a cell, it is true, but soundly nonetheless. Soundlessly, too, for the cell was padded. The police left him there because they realized he needed sleep... .

Among other minor tragedies of that night can be included the case of the schooner *Ransagansett*, off the coast of California. Well off the coast of California! A sudden squall had blown her miles off course, how many miles the skipper could only guess.

The *Ransagansett* was an American vessel, with a German crew, under Venezuelan registry, engaged in running booze from Ensenada, Baja California, up the coast to Canada, then in the throes of a prohibition experiment. The *Ransagansett* was an ancient craft with foul engines and an untrustworthy compass. During the two days of the storm, her outdated radio receiver—vintage of 1975—had gone haywire beyond the ability of Gross, the first mate, to repair.

But now only a mist remained of the storm, and the remaining shreds of wind were blowing it away. Hans Gross, holding an ancient astrolabe, stood on the dock, waiting. About him was utter darkness, for the ship was running without lights to avoid the coastal patrols.

"She clearing, Mister Gross?" called the voice of the captain from below.

"Aye, sir. Idt iss Blearing rabbidly."

In the cabin, Captain Randall went back to his game of blackjack with the second mate and the engineer. The crew—an elderly German named Weiss, with a wooden leg—was asleep abaft the scuttlebutt—wherever that may have been.

A half hour went by. An hour, and the captain was losing heavily to the engineer.

"Mister Gross!" he called out.

There wasn't any answer, and he called again and still obtained no response.

"Just a minute, mein fine feathered friends," he said to the second mate and engineer and went up the companionway to the deck.

Gross was standing there, staring upward with his mouth open. The mists were gone.

"Mister Gross," said Captain Randall.

The first mate didn't answer. The captain saw that his first mate was revolving slowly where he stood.

"Hans!" said Captain Randall. "What the devil's wrong with you?" Then he, too, looked up.

Superficially the sky looked perfectly normal. No angels flying around, no sound of airplane motors. The Dipper—Captain Randall turned around slowly, but more rapidly than Hans Gross. Where was the Big Dipper?

For that matter, where was anything? There wasn't a constellation anywhere that he could recognize. No sickle of Leo. No belt of Orion. No horns of Taurus.

Worse, there was a group of eight bright stars that ought to have been a constellation, for they were shaped roughly like an octagon. Yet if such a constellation had ever existed, he'd never seen it, for he'd been around the Horn and Good Hope. Maybe at that—but no, there wasn't any Southern Cross!

Dazedly, Captain Randall walked to the companionway. "Mistress Weisskopf," he called. "Mister Helmstadt. Come on deck."

They came and looked. Nobody said anything for quite a while.

"Shut off the engines, Mister Helmstadt," said the captain. Helmstadt saluted—the first time he ever had—and went below.

"Captain, shall I wake opp Feiss?" asked Weisskopf.

"What for?"

"I don't know."

The captain considered. "Wake him up," he said.

"I think we are on der planet Mars," said Gross.

But the captain had thought of that and had rejected it.

"No," he said firmly. "From any planet in the solar system the constellations would look approximately the same."

"You mean we are out of de cosmos?"

The throb of the engines suddenly ceased, and there was only the soft familiar lapping of the waves against the hull and the gentle familiar rocking of the boat.

Weisskopf returned with Weiss, and Helmstadt came on deck and saluted again.

"Veil, Captain?"

Captain Randall waved a hand to the after deck, piled high with cases of liquor under a canvas tarpaulin. "Break out the cargo," he ordered.

The blackjack game was not resumed. At dawn, under a sun they had never expected to see again—and, for that matter, certainly were not seeing at the moment—the five unconscious men were moved from the ship to the Port of San Francisco Jail by members of the coast patrol. During the night the *Rarnsagansett* had drifted through the Golden Gate and bumped gently into the dock of the Berkeley ferry.

In tow at the stern of the schooner was a big canvas tarpaulin. It was transfixed by a harpoon whose rope was firmly tied to the aftermast. Its presence there was never explained officially, although days later Captain Randall had vague recollection of having harpooned a sperm whale during the night. But the elderly able-bodied seaman named Weiss never did find out what happened to his wooden leg, which is perhaps just as well.

III:

MILTON HALE, PH.D., eminent physicist, had finished broadcasting and the program was off the air.

"Thank you very much, Dr. Hale," said the radio announcer. The yellow light went on and stayed. The mike was dead. "Uh—your check will be waiting for you at the window. You—uh—know where."

"I know where," said the physicist. He was a rotund, jolly-looking little man. With his busy white beard he resembled a pocket edition of Santa Claus. His eyes winkled, and he smoked a short stubby pipe.

He left the sound-proof studio and walked briskly down the hall to the cashier's window. "Hello, sweet-heart," he said to the girl on duty there. "I think you have two checks for Dr. Hale."

"You are Dr. Hale?"

"I sometimes wonder," said the little man. "But I carry identification that seems to prove it."

"Two checks?"

"Two checks. Both for the same broadcast, by special arrangement. By the way, there is an excellent revue at the Mabry Theater this evening."

"Is there? Yes, here are your checks, Dr. Hale. One for seventy-five and one for twenty-five. Is that correct?"

"Gratifyingly correct. Now about that revue at the Mabry?"

"If you wish, I'll call my husband and ask him about it," said the girl. "He's the doorman over there."

Dr. Hale sighed deeply, but his eyes still twinkled. "I think he'll agree," he said. "Here are the tickets, my dear, and you can take him. I find that I have work to do this evening."

The girl's eyes widened, but she took the tickets.

Dr. Hale went into the phone booth and called his home. His home, and Dr. Hale, were both run by his elder sister. "Agatha, I must remain at the office this evening," he said.

"Milton, you know that you can work just as well in your study here at home. I heard your broadcast, Milton. It was wonderful."

"It was sheer balderdash, Agatha. Utter rot. What did I say?"

"Why, you said that—uh—that the stars were—I mean, you were not—"

"Exactly, Agatha. My idea was to avert panic on the part of the populace. If I'd told them the truth, they'd have worried. But by being smug and scientific, I let them get the idea that everything was—uh—under control. Do you know, Agatha, what I mean by the parallelism of an entropy-gradient?"

"Why—not exactly."

"Neither did I."

"Milton, tell me, have you been drinking?"

"Not y— No, I haven't. I really can't come home to work this evening, Agatha, I'm using my study at the university, because I must have access to the library there, for reference. And the starcharts."

"But, Milton, how about that money for your broadcast? You know it isn't safe for you to have money in your pocket, especially when you're feeling like this."

"It isn't money, Agatha: It's a check, and I'll mail it to you before I go to the office. I won't cash it myself. How's that?"

"Well—if you must have access to the library, I suppose you must. Good-by, Milton."

Dr. Hale went across the street to the drug store. There he bought a stamp and envelope and cashed the twenty-five dollar check. The seventy-five dollar one he put into the envelope and mailed.

Standing beside the mailbox, he glanced up at the early evening sky—shuddered, and hastily lowered his eyes. He took the straightest possible line for the nearest double Scotch.

"Y'ain't been in for a long time, Dr. Hale," said Mike, the bartender.

"That I haven't, Mike. Pour me another."

"Sure. On the house, this time. We had your broadcast tuned in on the radio just now. It was swell."

"Yes."

"It sure was. I was kind of worried what was happening up there, with my son an aviator and all. But as long as you scientific guys know what it's all about, I guess it's all right. That was sure a good speech, Doc. But there's one question I'd like to ask you."

"I was afraid of that," said Dr. Hale.

"These stars. They're moving, going somewhere. But where are they going? I mean, like you said, if they are."

"There's no way of telling that, exactly, Mike."

"Aren't they moving in a straight line, each one of them?"

For just a moment the celebrated scientist hesitated.

"Well—yes and no, Mike. According to spectroscopic analysis, they're maintaining the same distance from us, each one of them. So they're really moving—if they're moving—in circles around us. But the circles are straight, as it were. I mean, it seems that we're in the center of those circles, so the stars that are moving aren't coming closer to us or receding."

"You could draw lines for those circles?"

"On a star-globe, yes. It's been done. They all seem to be heading for a certain area of the sky, but not for a given point. They don't intersect."

"What part of the sky they going to?"

"Approximately between Ursa Major and Leo, Mike. The ones farthest from there are moving fastest, the ones nearest are moving slower. But darn you, Mike, I came in here to forget about stars, not to talk about them. Give me another."

"In a minute, Doc. When they get there, are they going to stop or keep on going?"

"How the devil do I know, Mike? They started sud-denly, all at the same time, and with full original velo-city—I mean, they started out at the same speed they're going now—without warming up, so to speak—so I suppose they could stop as unexpectedly."

He stopped just as suddenly as the stars might. He stared at his reflection in the mirror back of the bar as though he'd never seen it before.

"What's the matter Doc?"

"Mike!"

"Yes, Doc?"

"Mike you're a genius."

"Me? You're kidding."

Dr. Hale groaned. "Mike, I'm going to have to go to the university to work this out. So I can have access to the library and the star-globe there. You're making an honest man out of me, Mike. Whatever kind of Scotch this is, wrap me up a bottle."

"It's Tartan Plaid. A quart?"

"A quart, and make it snappy. I've got to see a man about a dog-star."

"Serious, Doc?"

Dr. Hale sighed audibly. "You brought that on yourself, Mike, Yes, the dog-star is Sirius. I wish I'd never come in here, Mike. My first night out in weeks, and you ruin it."

He took a cab to the university, let himself in, and turned on the lights in his private study and in the library. Then he took a good stiff slug of Tartan Plaid and went to work.

First, by telling the chief operator who he was and arguing a bit, he got a telephone connection with the chief astronomer of Cole Observatory.

"This is Hale, Armbruster," he said. "I've got an idea, but I want to check my facts before I start to work on it. Last information I had, there were four hundred and sixty-eight stars exhibiting new proper motion. Is that still correct?"

"Yes, Milton. The same ones are still at it, and no others."

"Good. I have a list, then. Has there been any change in speed of motion of any of them?"

"No. Impossible as it seems, it's constant. What is your idea?"

"I want to check my theory first. If it works out into anything, I'll call you." But he forgot to.

It was a long, painful job. First, he made a chart of the heavens in the area between Ursa Major and Leo. Across that chart he drew four hundred and sixty-eight lines representing the projected path of each of the aberrant stars. At the border of the chart, where each line entered, he made a notation of the apparent velocity of the star—not in light years per hour—but in degrees per hour, to the fifth decimal.

Then he did some reasoning.

"Postulate that the motion which began simultaneously will end simultaneously," he told himself. "Try a guess at the time. Let's try ten o'clock tomorrow evening."

He tried it and looked at the series of positions indicated upon the chart. No.

Try one o'clock in the morning. It looked almost like —sense!

Try midnight.

That did it. At any rate, it was close enough. The calculation could be only a few minutes off one way or the other, and there was no point now in working out the exact time. Now that he knew the incredible fact.

He took another drink and stared at the chart grimly.

A trip into the library gave Dr. Hale the further information he needed. The address!

Thus began the saga of Dr. Hale's journey. A useless journey, it is true, but one that should rank with the trip of the message to Garcia.

He started it with a drink. Then, knowing the combination, he rifled the safe in the office of the president of the university. The note he left in the safe was a master-piece of brevity. It read:

TAKING MONEY. EXPLAIN LATER

Then he took another drink and put the bottle in his pocket. He went outside and hailed a taxicab. He got in. "Where to, sir?" asked the cabby.

Dr. Hale gave an address.

"Fremont Street?" said the cabby. "Sorry, sir, but I don't know where that is."

"In Boston," said Dr. Hale. "I should have told you, in Boston."

"Boston? You mean Boston, Massachusetts? That's a long way from here."

"Therefore, we better start right away," said Dr. Hale reasonably. A brief financial discussion and the passing of money, borrowed from the university safe, set the driver's mind at rest, and they started.

It was a bitter cold night, for March, and the heater in the cab didn't work any too well. But the Tartan Plaid worked superlatively for both Dr. Hale and the cabby, and by the time they reached New Haven, they were singing old-time songs lustily.

"Off we go, into the wide, wild yonder ..." their voices roared.

It is regrettably reported, but possibly untrue that, in Hartford, Dr. Hale leered out of the window at a young woman waiting for a late streetcar and asked her if she wanted to go to Boston. Apparently, however, she didn't, for at five o'clock in the morning, when the cab drew up in front of 614 Fremont Street, Boston, only Dr. Hale and the driver were in the cab.

Dr. Hale got out and looked at the house. It was a millionaire's mansion, and it was surrounded by a high iron fence with barbed wire on top of it. The gate in the fence was locked, and there was no bell button to push.

But the house was only a stone's throw from the sidewalk, and Dr. Hale was not to be deterred. He threw a stone. Then another. Finally he succeeded in smashing a window.

After a brief interval, a man appeared in the window. A butler, Dr. Hale decided.

"I'm Dr. Milton Hale," he called out. "I want to see Rutherford R. Sniveley, right away. It's important."

"Mr. Sniveley is not at home, sir," said the butler. "And about that window—"

"The devil with the window," shouted Dr. Hale. "Where is Sniveley?"

"On a fishing trip."

"Where?"

"I have orders not to give that information."

Dr. Hale was just a little drunk, perhaps. "You'll give it just the same," he roared. "By orders of the President of the United States!"

The butler laughed. "I don't see him."

"You will," said Hale.

He got back in the cab. The driver had fallen asleep, but Hale shook him awake.

"The White House," said Dr. Hale.

"I-huh?"

"The White House, in Washington," said Dr. Hale. "And hurry!" He pulled a hundred-dollar bill from his pocket. The cabby looked at it, and groaned. Then he put the bill into his pocket and started the cab.

A light snow was beginning to fall.

As the cab drove off, Rutherford R. Sniveley, grinning, stepped back from the window. Mr. Sniveley had no butler.

If Dr. Hale had been more familiar with the peculiari-ties of the eccentric Mr. Sniveley, he would have known Sniveley kept no servants in the place overnight but lived alone in the big house at 614 Fremont Street. Each morning at ten o'clock, a small army of servants descended upon the house, did their work as rapidly as possible, and were required to depart before the witching hour of noon. Aside from these two hours of every day, Mr. Sniveley lived in solitary splendor. He had few, if any, social contacts.

Aside from the few hours a day he spent administering his vast interests as one of the country's leading manufac-turers, Mr. Sniveley's time was his own, and he spent practically all of it in his workshop, making gadgets.

Sniveley had an ashtray which would hand him a lighted cigar any time he spoke sharply to it, and a radio receiver so delicately adjusted that it would cut in auto-matically on Sniveley-sponsored programs and shut off again when they were finished. He had a bathtub that provided a full orchestral accompaniment to his singing therein, and he had a machine which would read aloud to him from any book which he placed in its hopper.

His life may have been a lonely one, but it was not without such material comforts. Eccentric, yes, but Mr. Sniveley could afford to be eccentric with a net income of four million dollars a year. Not had for a man who'd started life as the son of a shipping clerk.

Mr. Sniveley chuckled as he watched the taxi drive away, and then he went back to bed and to the sleep of the just.

"So somebody has figured things out nineteen hours ahead of time," he thought. "Well, a lot of good it will do them!"

There wasn't any law to punish him for what he'd done.

Bookstores did a land-office business that day in books on astronomy. The public, apathetic at first, was deeply interested now. Even ancient and musty volumes Newton's *Principia* sold at premium prices.

The ether blared with comment upon the new wonder of the skies. Little of the comment was professional, or even intelligent, for most astronomers were asleep that day. They'd managed to stay awake for the first forty-eight hours from the start of the phenomena, but the third day found them worn out mentally and physically and inclined to let the stars take care of themselves while they—the astronomers, not the stars—caught up on sleep.

Staggering offers from the telecast and broadcast studios enticed a few of them to attempt lectures, but their efforts were dreary things, better forgotten. Dr. Carver Blake, broadcasting from KNB, fell soundly asleep between a perigee and an apogee.

Physicists were also greatly in demand. The most eminent of them all, however, was sought in vain. The solitary clue to Dr. Milton Hale's disappearance, the brief note, "Taking money. Explain later, Hale," wasn't much of a help. His sister Agatha feared the worst.

For the first time in history, astronomical news made banner headlines in the newspapers.

IV:

Snow had started early that morning along the northern Atlantic seaboard and now it was growing steadily worse. Just outside Waterbury, Connecticut, the driver of Dr. Hale's cab began to weaken.

It wasn't human, he thought, for a man to be expected to drive to Boston and then, without stopping, from Boston to Washington. Not even for a hundred dollars.

Not in a storm like this. Why, he could see only a dozen yards ahead through the driving snow, even when he could manage to keep his eyes open. His fare was slumbering soundly in the back seat. Maybe he could get away with stopping here along the road, for an hour, to catch some sleep. Just an hour. His fare wouldn't ever know the difference. The guy must be loony, he thought, or why hadn't he taken a plane or a train?

Dr. Hale would have, of course, if he'd thought of it. But he wasn't used to traveling and besides, there'd been the Tartan Plaid. A taxi had seemed the easiest way to get anywhere—no worrying about tickets and connections and stations. Money was no object, and the plaid condition of his mind had caused him to overlook the human factor involved in an extended journey by taxi.

When he awoke, almost frozen, in the parked taxi, that human factor dawned upon him. The driver was so sound asleep that no amount of shaking could arouse him. Dr. Hale's watch had stopped, so he had no idea where he was or what time it was.

Unfortunately, too, he didn't know how to drive a car. He took a quick drink to keep from freezing and then got out of the cab, and as he did so, a car stopped.

It was a policeman—what is more it was a policeman in a million.

Yelling over the roar of the storm, Hale hailed him. "I'm Dr. Hale," he shouted. "We're lost, where am I?"

"Get in here before you freeze," ordered the policeman. "Do you mean Dr. Milton Hale, by any chance?"

"Yes."

"I've read all your books, Dr. Hale," said the policeman. "Physics is my hobby, and I've always wanted to meet you. I want to ask you about the revised value of the quantum."

"This is life or death," said Dr. Hale. "Can you take me to the nearest airport, quick?"

"Of course, Dr. Hale."

"And look—there's a driver in that cab, and he'll freeze to death unless we send aid."

"I'll put him in the back seat of my car and then run the cab off the road. We'll take care of details later."

"Hurry, please."

The obliging policeman hurried. He got in and started the car.

"About the revised quantum value, Dr. Hale," he began, then stopped talking.

Dr. Hale was sound asleep. The policeman drove to Waterbury Airport, one of the largest in the world since the population shift from New York City in the 1960s and 70s had given it a central position. In front of the ticket office, he gently awakened Dr. Hale.

"This is the airport, sir," he said.

Even as he spoke, Dr. Hale was leaping out of the car and stumbling into the building, yelling, "Thanks," over his shoulder and nearly falling down in doing so.

The warm-up roaring of the motors of a superstrato-liner out on the field lent wings to his heels as he dashed for the ticket window.

"What plane's that?" he yelled.

"Washington Special, due out in one minute. But I don't think you can make it."

Dr. Hale slapped a hundred-dollar bill on the ledge. "Ticket," he gasped. "Keep change."

He grabbed the ticket and ran, getting into the plane just as the doors were being closed. Panting, he fell into a seat, the ticket still clutched in his hand. He was sound asleep before the hostess strapped him in for the blind take-off.

An hour later, the hostess awakened him. The passengers were disembarking.

Dr. Hale rushed out of the plane and ran across the field to the airport building. A big clock told him that it was nine o'clock, and he felt elated as he ran for the door marked "Taxis." He got into the nearest one.

"White House," he told the driver. "How long'll it take?"

"Ten minutes."

Dr. Hale gave a sigh of relief and sank back against the cushions. He didn't go back to sleep this time. He was wide awake now. But he closed his eyes to think out the words he'd use in explaining matters...

"Here you are, sir."

Dr. Hale gave a sigh of relief and sank back against the cab into the building. It didn't look as he had expected it to look. But there was a desk, and he ran up to it.

"I've got to see the President, quick. It's vital."

The clerk frowned. "The President of what?"

Dr. Hale's eyes went wide. "The President of wh—say, what building is this? And what town?"

The clerk's frown deepened. "This is the White House Hotel," he said. "Seattle, Washington."

Dr. Hale fainted. He woke up in a hospital three hours later. It was then midnight, Pacific Time, which meant it was three o'clock in the morning on the Eastern seaboard. It had, in fact, been midnight already in Washington, D.C., and in Boston, when he had been leaving the Washington Special in Seattle.

Dr. Hale rushed to the window and shook his fists, both of them, at the sky. A futile gesture.

Back in the East, however, the storm had stopped by twilight, leaving a light mist in the air. The star-conscious public had thereupon deluged the weather bureaus with telephoned requests about the persistence of the mist.

"A breeze off the ocean is expected," they were told. "It is blowing now, in fact, and within an hour or two will have cleared off the light fog."

By eleven-fifteen the skies of Boston were clear.

Untold thousands braved the bitter cold and stood staring upward at the unfolding pageant of the no-longer-eternal stars. It almost looked as though—an incredible development had occurred.

And then, gradually, the murmur grew. By a quarter to twelve, the thing was certain, and the murmur

hushed and then grew louder than ever, waxing toward midnight. Different people reacted differently, of course, as might be expected. There was laughter as well as indignation, cynical amusement as well as shocked horror. There was even admiration.

Soon, in certain parts of the city, a concerted movement on the part of those who knew an address on Fremont Street began to take place. Movement afoot and in cars and public vehicles, converging.

At five minutes of twelve, Rutherford R. Sniveley sat waiting within his house. He was denying himself the pleasure of looking until, at the last moment, the thing was complete.

It was going well. The gathering murmur of voices, mostly angry voices, outside his house told him that. He heard his name shouted.

Just the same, he waited until the twelfth stroke of the clock before he stepped out upon the balcony. Much as he wanted to look upward, he forced himself to look down at the street first. The milling crowd was there and it was angry. But he had only contempt for the milling crowd.

Police cars were pulling up, too, and he recognized the mayor of Boston getting out of one of them, and the chief of police was with him. But so what? There wasn't any law covering this.

Then having denied himself the supreme pleasure long enough, he turned his eyes up to the silent sky, and there it was. The four hundred and sixty-eight brightest stars, spelling out:

USE
SNIVELY'S
SOAP

For just a second did his satisfaction last. Then his face began to turn an apoplectic purple.

"My heavens!" said Mr. Sniveley. "It's spelled wrong!" His face grew more purple still, and then, as a tree falls, he fell backward through the window.

An ambulance rushed the fallen magnate to the nearest hospital, but he was pronounced dead—of apoplexy—upon entrance.

But misspelled or not, the eternal stars held their positions as of that midnight. The aberrant motion had stopped, and again the stars were fixed. Fixed to spell—SNIVELY'S SOAP.

Of the many explanations offered by all and sundry who professed some physical and astronomical knowledge, none was more lucid—or closer to the actual truth—than that put forth by Wendell Mehan, president emeritus of the New York Astronomical Society.

"Obviously, the phenomenon is a trick of refraction," said Dr. Mehan. "It is manifestly impossible for any force contrived by man to move a star. The stars, therefore, still occupy their old places in the firmament.

"I suggest that Sniveley must have contrived a method of refracting the light of the stars, somewhere in or just above the atmospheric layer of the earth, so that they appear to have changed their positions. This is done, probably, by radio waves or similar waves, sent on some fixed frequency from a set—or possibly a series of four hundred and sixty-eight sets—somewhere upon the surface of the earth. Although we do not understand just how it is done, it is no more unthinkable that light rays should be bent by a field of waves than by a prism or by gravitational force.

"Since Sniveley was not a great scientist, I imagine that his discovery was empiric rather than logical—an accidental find. It is quite possible that even the discovery of his projector will not enable present-day scientists to understand its secret, any more than an aboriginal savage could understand the operation of a simple radio receiver by taking one apart.

"My principal reason for this assertion is the fact that the refraction obviously is a fourth-dimensional phenomenon, or its effect would be purely local to one portion of the globe. Only in the fourth dimension could light be so refracted...."

There was more but it is better to skip to his final paragraph:

"This effect cannot possibly be permanent—more permanent, that is, than the wave-projector which causes it. Sooner or later, Sniveley's machine will be found and shut off or will break down or wear out of its own volition. Undoubtedly it includes vacuum tubes which will some day blow out, as do the

tubes in our radios...."

The excellence of Dr. Mehan's analysis was shown two months and eight days later, when the Boston Electric Co. shut off, for non-payment of bills, service to a house situated at 901 West Rogers Street, ten blocks from the Sniveley mansion. At the instant of the shut-off, excited reports from the night side of Earth brought the news that the stars had flashed back to their former positions instantaneously.

Investigation brought out that the description of one Elmer Smith, who had purchased that house six months before, corresponded with the description of Rutherford R. Sniveler, and undoubtedly Elmer Smith and Rutherford R. Sniveler were one and the same person.

In the attic was found a complicated network of four hundred and sixty-eight radio-type antennae, each antenna of different length and running in a different direction. The machine to which they were connected was not larger, strangely, than the average ham's radio projector, nor did it draw appreciably more current, according to the electric company's record.

By special order of the President of the United States, the projector was destroyed without examination of its internal arrangement. Clamorous protests against this high-handed executive order arose from many sides. But inasmuch as the projector had already been broken up, the protests were to no avail.

Serious repercussions were, on the whole, amazingly few.

Persons in general appreciated the stars more but trusted them less.

Roger Phlutter got out of jail and married Elsie.

Dr. Milton Hale found he liked Seattle and stayed there. Two thousand miles away from his sister, Agatha, he found it possible for the first time to defy her openly. He enjoys life more but, it is feared, will write fewer hooks.

There is one fact remaining which is painful to consider, since it casts a deep reflection upon the basic intelligence of the human race. It is proof, though, that the president's executive order was justified, despite scientific protest.

That fact is as humiliating as it is enlightening. During the two months and eight days during which the Sniveler machine was in operation, sales of Sniveley Soap increased nine-hundred-twenty per cent.