

Untitled Story

by Frank M. Robinson

The mayor bought a bottle of “cure-all water”—which was a silly sort of gag to fall for. But it wasn’t a gag; it worked. And it was several thousand times more dangerous than ever he imagined...

Illustrated by Schneeman

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[Notes](#)

“I’m afraid I’ve been a fool,” the man said.

He was a big, rawboned Irishman and looked as solid as the oak desk he sat behind. A trace of white ran through his hair but he still didn’t look his age.

His kind never do, Hayssen thought. They look like they can handle a hod full of bricks up to the day they die.

The man’s name was Flaherty and he had a faintly worried look on his bulldog face. He ran a nervous hand through his hair and for a fleeting moment, with that gesture and his worried expression, he looked like he was honestly pushing the middle sixties.

“I *am* a fool,” he added.

Hayssen shrugged his capable shoulders and looked interested. You didn’t get to be mayor of a city like Chicago by being a fool.

The mayor cleared his throat and looked at the younger man intently.

“You know, when you get old, Hayssen, you want to believe in a lot of things. You want to believe so hard sometimes that you throw your common sense out of the window. You get a hardening of the cranial arteries, you get gullible. To be brutal, you become stupid. And I’m afraid that’s what I’ve been.”

Hayssen shooed invisible bugs off his hatband.

“They call it senility,” he said, “but I don’t think you’re suffering from that—at least, not yet.” He wondered what the snapper was going to be.

Flaherty hunched over his desk and lowered his voice, as if he was afraid somebody might be listening.

“I want you to do some investigating for me, Hayssen. But before I tell you what it’s all about, I’d have to have your promise that you would keep it confidential.”

Hayssen sighed. “The detective business is a confidential business, your honor. My clients’ names and the reasons they hire me are kept strictly secret.”

Flaherty seemed satisfied.

“I’ll make it simple then and I won’t apologize for myself. Two weeks ago I purchased a vial of radioactive water that’s supposed to cure any disease and keep you healthy enough so you can live to be a hundred or better.”

Hayssen had sense enough not to laugh. Flaherty, who had probably originated more crooked schemes than you could count, falling for something like this!

“It’s none of my business,” he said slowly, “but how come you fell for it?”

The mayor was looking older by the minute. Hayssen thought of the doomed expression that criminals have when they feel the hood drop over their face and the metal strips clamped over their shaved legs.

“You see, Hayssen,” the mayor began in a tired voice, “life has suddenly become very precious to me. It’s not too well known but I have a small cancer. It’s in an inaccessible place for surgery and X rays would be dangerous.

“How much time I have left, I don’t know. But I can’t make plans in advance. If I want a vacation in California, I pack up and go. Tomorrow or a few months from now might be too late. And if somebody comes to me with a vial of radioactive water and says it will cure my cancer and help me live longer, I think twice before I throw him out as a crackpot. And if I have a particularly *bad* day”—he emphasized the “bad” slightly and Hayssen had a good idea of what he meant—“maybe I’ll even buy it.”

There was silence in the room and Hayssen felt vaguely embarrassed.

“What did you drop on it?”

“A thousand dollars.” Flaherty managed to say it without flinching.

Hayssen uncorked a low whistle. It was, roughly, a tenth of the salary that Flaherty got as mayor. But then, Flaherty couldn’t afford his car or the house he lived in on his salary either and he still got by.

“What do you want me to do, get it back?”

Flaherty waved the question aside with a blue-veined hand.

“The money’s not important. The point is, it was a dumb thing to do. The people”—he coughed apologetically—“might think I was rather naive if word got around that I had dropped a grand on something like this.”

“In other words, it wouldn’t do you any good if the loyal opposition got hold of the information, would it?”

Flaherty looked grim.

“I have every reason to believe that the opposition is behind it. It would be a neat trick for them to sell me the vial, then reveal the whole thing at election time.”

“Have you anything substantial, any other reasons to think that it might be a political plot?”

Flaherty had anticipated the question. “Naturally. Shortly after I purchased the vial I received an anonymous phone call not to take it. The phone call implied that it might be a poison or a drug of some kind.”

It didn’t quite fit. “How do you get a plot out of that?”

“Consider. If I had taken the contents of the vial, nothing would have happened and I would know something was up or that I had been a sucker. But before I have a chance to take it, I get a phone call advising me not to.”

Flaherty probably had political plots on his mind all the time but Hayssen granted him a point. “I think

I see. If you had bought the vial and then regretted it, a phone call like that would make you think there might be something to it after all.”

Flaherty nodded agreement. “Exactly. Reverse psychology. I wouldn’t take the vial but I would still hang onto it, thinking that possibly it might be the real McCoy.

“But that’s how I’m supposed to feel. Be indecisive and remain that way until the elections a few weeks from now.”

Hayssen pulled at his ear. Politics was dirty but this was a new low.

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Investigate the man who sold it to me. Find out who’s behind it, what backing they have. Maybe we can figure out a way to turn the tables on them.”

Flaherty rummaged around in his desk and finally came up with a card and a vial of thick, colorless liquid. He handed them to Hayssen.

“You might as well have the vial so you know what one looks like. The card gives his name and business address.”

Hayssen read the card: Arthur C. Lehman, Longevity Expert. It gave an address in an exclusive part of town.

Flaherty looked like he had other things to do so Hayssen picked up his hat and coat and started to leave. He stopped at the door and looked back. He felt sorry for Flaherty. It was true that he ran a crooked city machine but Hayssen had seen times when it had been a lot worse.

And you couldn’t help but feel sorry for a guy who could spell out the rest of his life in the ticks of his watch.

But business was still business.

“What’s in it for me?”

Flaherty didn’t look up. “The price of the vial and maybe more.”

Hayssen had to hand it to him.

Flaherty was willing to pay for his mistakes.

He closed the door softly behind him. He was facing outwards, into the room where you cooled your heels until Flaherty got ready to see you. Flaherty’s secretary was writing something down on a pad. She hadn’t heard him.

He let the knob turn in the lock with a soft click. Her hand darted toward a box on her desk and then she was relaxed and poised once more.

He walked up to her desk and stopped. He coughed politely and she turned toward him, her face friendly.

“You were in there a long time,” she drawled. “Howd’ja come out?”

“Swell. I bought the Outer Drive for only ten bucks and the cost of mailing.”

“That’s kind of high,” she said. “Last week he was offering it for five.”

She said “five” like a telephone operator does.

And it was the voice that got him. Offhand, it sounded like a good grade of Brooklynese with a trace of some other accent. Just a trace of a strange accent that he had never heard before.

He took a good long look at her and felt sorry about being sarcastic. She was a nice-looking girl, even sitting down. Very nice. He made a mental note to write Rose La Rose a letter and tell her she’d have to find somebody else to dream about her.

“I’m sorry,” he said contritely. “I’ve been listening to too many detective programs.”

She showed her teeth in a pearly smile. They were nice white teeth and he even forgave the chewing gum. It probably helped keep them that way.

“It isn’t polite to stare,” she said.

“I was only wondering what your name was.” The frank approach was always the best.

She pointed to a triangular sign on her desk that read *C. Cooper*.

“The C stands for Cathrinxa.”

“Never heard of it.”

“My folks named me after a famous actress,” she answered, and then suddenly bit her lip:

“I’ll call you Catherine. And look, I’m sorry about that wisecrack. Next time I come up to see hizzoner I’ll bring along a package of gum as a gift offering. O.K.?”

“O.K.!” Her eyes were laughing and he couldn’t help but think they were the clearest blue he had ever seen.

“What’s *your* name?” she asked. The card he had presented listed the agency name, not his own.

He felt like a heel. She was getting a big kick out of this. It was a shame that it wasn’t going to last.

“Donald Hayssen,” he said slowly. “But I thought you knew. You’ve been listening to the mayor call me by it for the last half hour.”

He leaned over and threw the switch on her intercom box. The click was a nice sharp noise in the room.

“Big Mike’s kind of careless, isn’t he?” He said it half apologetically.

The look on her pretty face told him what she was thinking. In her mind’s eye she was feeding him to the vultures. Piece by piece.

Hayssen sniffed the air and listened to the satisfying crunch of his shoes on the dry leaves that lay on the sidewalk. The air was filled with wisps of smoke from smoldering piles of half-burned brush.

Just dusk, he thought. The time of early evening when the last touch football game has broken up. Supper time, when all the kids are washing up and the old man is starting to relax in his easy-chair, ready for his pipe and slippers.

He stared at the warm, friendly windows of the houses he was walking by.

The time of early fall evening when every bachelor wishes he wasn’t one. When girls like Catherine

Cooper really got under your skin.

He shook his head angrily and stomped up the walk to the apartment house where he lived.

He heard the phone ringing before he even got the door key out of his pocket. It was a long, wailing ring. The kind that tells you the operator has been buzzing your number for the last hour because someone was being downright mean and insistent about it.

He flipped his hat on an end table and picked up the phone. The voice at the other end of the line sounded muffled, like it was being strained through two layers of handkerchief.

“Is this Mr. Donald Hayssen?”

“I live alone and don’t like it,” Hayssen said. “Were you expecting someone else?”

The voice was annoyed. “Just a warning, Mr. Hayssen. Stay away from your liquor cabinet and don’t touch your bed.”

“I’m sorry but I don’t like to sleep on the floor!” Hayssen snapped.

He banged down the receiver disgustedly. One of the joys of being a private detective. Like being zoo keeper on April 1st when all the wise guys call up and want to talk to Mr. Lion and Mrs. Tiger.

Sir Jock, his little Scottish terrier, was at his feet, whining and barking.

“You should be glad that you’re not a detective, Jock,” he said musingly. “All kinds of people calling you up and trying to get your goat. Sometimes I wish I had shaggy ears like you so I couldn’t hear them.”

He went to his bedroom and started to strip for a shower.

“I’m not supposed to sleep in my bed tonight, Jock. Imagine that! I suppose I should use a park bench, instead.”

He was in the shower now, soaping up. Jock was in the doorway to the bathroom, his ears pricked up and head cocked. Hayssen scraped some of the suds off a muscular arm and flicked them at Jock.

Jock backed away and barked.

“That’s no way to act, Jock. And come to think of it, you weren’t your old exuberant self tonight when I came home. No jumping all over me, like you usually do.”

He was out of the shower, toweling himself.

Jock was still whining and acting very strange, like he had ever since Hayssen had come home.

Hayssen walked to the back door and opened it, shivering slightly as he felt the cold air against his damp skin. “Want to go out, Jock?”

Jock didn’t go near the door.

Hayssen shrugged and went into the bedroom and rummaged around in his drawer for some clean underwear. He put on his shorts and turned to face the bed. It was a very ordinary bed, with a plain blue and white chenille spread.

“Look at that bed, Jock! Did you ever see a more ordinary bed in your life? But I shouldn’t sleep on it. I suppose I shouldn’t eat either.” He knotted his tie and strolled over to the bed.

Jock whined and barked and pulled at Hayssen’s trousers.

Hayssen looked at him closely. The dog was frightened of something, he couldn't deny that. Had somebody been in his apartment?

It wasn't impossible, he supposed.

He knelt down and scratched the dog's ears. "What's wrong, Jock? Is there really something wrong with the bed?"

He turned and lifted up a corner of the spread and peered under the bed.

"There's nothing underneath the bed, Jock, nothing at all."

Jock apparently wasn't satisfied.

Hayssen was puzzled. "I can't understand you, Jock." He turned and started to sit down on the bed when Jock, with an anguished whine, jumped on top of the spread and barked a warning.

It was the last jump that Jock ever made. The spread on the bed suddenly closed in on him. like a Venus flytrap does on a fly. The spread rolled itself up into a tight, hard ball and Hayssen could hear cracks like somebody snapping twigs.

There had been a muffled yelp at the very start and then nothing. After that the bundle seemed to relax slightly and the spread started to soak up red, like a blotter.

Hayssen stared at the quiet bundle in disbelief. It had happened, so suddenly, without a moment's warning. And Jock—

Jock.

He made it to the bathroom just in time. He stayed there a while, then thought of Jock and forced himself to go back in the bedroom. The bundle was still there, stained and relaxed looking. He got a book and threw at it. Nothing happened. He came closer and wriggled a corner of the fabric loose.

It had silvery threads of something running through it, threads that were probably made of some sort of spring steel. But a spring steel like nothing he had ever known. The spread had been "set," like a web, to react when something fell on it or touched it.

Or sat on it, to take off its shoes and socks.

He felt sick again, with the sickness of sheer, horrible fright.

Something like himself.

The phone call had been on the level then. Somebody had been in the apartment and rigged it for him. Jock knew something was wrong and had tried to tell him when he came home.

The phone call wasn't altogether right, though. He didn't have a liquor cabinet.

Hayssen felt a cold shiver go down his spine.

No, he didn't have a regulation liquor cabinet. He used the storage space in his radio cabinet that was meant to hold phonograph records. It was neatly fitted out with glasses and a bottle opener and a few bottles of cheap Scotch and fixings.

He went into the living room and inspected the radio cabinet. There was nothing on the outside that indicated anything was wrong.

He got a coat hanger, one of the wire kind, from the clothes closet and untwisted the top and straightened it out. He formed a little hook on one end of it and wriggled open the door of the cabinet while he stood to one side.

There was a thin, violet, fan-shaped flare of light that streamed at an upward angle from the open cabinet. Then something on the inside gurgled and died in a flash of reddish flame.

At first nothing in the room seemed touched.

An end table had been in the path of the flash and Hayssen went over and inspected it. There was a thin, fine line cut diagonally through the top. He touched the table and it shivered slightly and fell in two along the cut line. The cut surface was as smooth as the surface of a Johansen Gauge block.

His hat had been on the table and he picked it up. It was cut, too, on a diagonal line that went from the hatband through the crown.

The beam had fanned out and cut slightly into the wall facing it. A picture lay on the sofa. The beam had cut the wires that held it.

Hayssen stood in front of the cabinet and looked down. The bottles had been shoved toward the back and a tiny piece of apparatus had been placed in the cleared space.

There was nothing left of the apparatus now but a fused lump of metal.

He made an estimate and bent over, like he would if he was going to open the cabinet.

The beam would have caught him right at the neckline.

He sat on the sofa and thought over the events of the day before he had come home. There was only one that stood out.

Flaherty and his vial of radioactive water that was supposed to guarantee good health and long life. Maybe Lehman or one of his associates wasn't anxious that he should be looking into their affairs.

But then, they weren't supposed to know about it yet, either.

He went to the cabinet and got himself a tumbler of whisky. Somehow, they had known that he was going to investigate them. Somehow he had become dangerous to Lehman and his mob.

But how had they known that he was after them? How?

Naturally.

Flaherty's very pretty—and very curious—secretary. She had listened in on the conversation. She was the only one besides Flaherty and himself who knew what he was after.

And there was the phone call he had received. A feminine voice, even though it was husky, muffled by the old gag of placing a handkerchief over the mouthpiece.

A feminine voice with an accent, he recalled. An accent like Catherine Cooper's.

There was a C. Cooper listed in the telephone book and he dialed the number. She was home.

His voice was ragged and he made a mess of asking for a date.

She was coy. What made him think she didn't have a date? Besides, and her voice became frosty, she was sure he wouldn't like going out with a girl who was addicted to eavesdropping.

He hated to use it but this time it was true.

“Cathy, I have to see you! It’s a matter of life and death!”

Whose, she wanted to know.

“Mine! And I’m strictly on the level.”

On second thought, she’d be glad to go to dinner since she hadn’t eaten yet. She had been busy washing a pair of stockings. Any place would be O.K.

He put down the receiver with a relieved feeling. She hadn’t eaten yet. And she hadn’t been preparing a meal for somebody else.

For what it was worth, Catherine Cooper wasn’t married.

She was wearing a blue nylon dress and a short, gray fur coat. They went real well with her blue eyes and soft, shoulder length blond hair.

Hayssen noted that she seemed to approve of everything. He supposed that she had been expecting one of those cozy little neighborhood cafes that specialize in red table cloths and homemade spaghetti.

He hoped that she was cheerfully disappointed. It was a high-class chromium-plated place that specialized in red leatherette booths, thick steaks, a small floor show, and high prices.

It was just the place to oil up a secretary if you wanted some information.

It was also just the place, he realized, to make a hit with a pretty blonde.

After they had eaten, he got down to business.

“What do you know about Arthur Lehman?” he asked casually.

Her face was vacant.

“Am I supposed to know something about him?”

She was pretty, Hayssen thought. She had a quick wit and a nice figure and even had a vaguely planned place in his future.

She had also listened in on his conversation with the mayor about Arthur C. Lehman. And shortly after that, somebody had tried to kill him in several ingenious ways.

“I’ll refresh your memory,” he said stiffly. “I had a talk with hizzoner today about something that one Arthur C. Lehman sold him. You listened to that conversation. When I got home tonight somebody tried to kill me. I’m just smart enough to think there’s a connection between you and Lehman and that you tipped him off that I was interested in him.

“How’s that? Good enough for a first try?”

She hadn’t changed her expression.

“All right—I listened. But only if you say so.”

She was going to play dumb, he thought, and deny everything.

“It’s not my own life so much, Cathy, it’s other people’s too. Lehman is no pitchman peddling flukum

and ink sticks on the street corner. Sure, it might be just a political plot. But Lehman might have approached other people on it. Do you think it's right to play on a person's fear of death and disease to bilk them out of a thousand dollars at a crack? So Flaherty can afford it. There might have been others who couldn't."

The life-is-grim, life-is-earnest routine might get more out of her than trying to face her down, Hayssen thought.

Her face was impassive.

"Do you feel as sorry as this for the people who buy silver polish and fountain pens from your pitchman?"

"Look," he said. "I used to have a little Scottish terrier at home named Jock. He was a friendly dog and because I fed him every night and took him for walks in the park, he grew to like me. He liked me so much the mutt gave his life trying to protect me. He didn't have a chance. Right now he's a crushed bundle of gristle and blood and fur.

"And if I had felt like a drink when I first came home tonight, the coroner would have thought the French Revolution had taken place in my apartment."

Her eyes were questioning and he gave her the whole brutal story of what had happened. He was pleading with her, he realized, something he hadn't planned to do. Her face was a picture of conflicting emotions and he tried to press his point.

"Cathy, when I called up tonight and you answered the phone and heard my voice, I thought you sounded a little relieved. Like you were glad I was calling. Like you were glad I was still alive."

She sipped her drink quietly.

Hayssen stared at her grimly and then on impulse reached over and took her purse before she could object. He went through the contents very quickly and found what he wanted, loosely crumpled in a corner. He had figured out that she would be in a hurry and forget to check little details. He had been correct.

He took the handkerchief and placed it on the table. It was a clean handkerchief and had a faint circle indented on it, with little wrinkles running out from the circle's edge.

"Thanks anyway for calling. You saved my life. You see, I recognized your voice even though muffled by a handkerchief. You've got a cute accent that's hard to disguise."

There was a sudden fear in her eyes, he thought, and a touch of pity.

"Why don't you leave it alone, Don? You can call Flaherty and turn down the assignment. Give him back his vial and tell him you're not interested in finding Lehman. Couldn't you do it, Don? For me?"

Hayssen's lip curled. It sounded like the punch line in a B movie.

"If you want to help me so much, why not tell me what it's all about?" he urged. "You're too nice a girl to be mixed up with guys like Lehman."

Her face mirrored the fighting that was going on inside her.

"I would like to but I can't. I can't!"

He picked up the check.

“You can play it that way if you want but to me it’s as thin as a bowl of restaurant soup. You know something and you won’t tell me. Too bad Jock didn’t feel the same way.” He walked out. He didn’t look back.

He went home and dug in the back yard for a while and then spent the rest of the night in the local Y.M.C.A. He didn’t sleep well; Jock and Flaherty and Cathy haunted his sleep.

The next day he went downtown and called the local branch of the Better Business Bureau. They had never heard of Arthur C. Lehman, Longevity Expert. He tried several headings under health and old age and pulled a blank there, too.

By one o’clock he was in the City Hall outside the license bureau, waiting for the public servants to come back from lunch.

At one thirty he had littered the marble floor with cigarette butts. Five minutes later a short, pudgy character in his late forties showed up, stared at the butt-littered floor in disapproval, and reluctantly opened up the license window for Hayssen’s benefit.

Hayssen flashed a tin badge and tried to look official.

“Didja ever issue a license to a guy named Arthur C. Lehman. He’s a”—Hayssen studied the card as if it had just been handed to him a few minutes before—“longevity expert, whatever that is.”

“Long what?”

Hayssen spelled it out and the pudgy man disappeared for a moment. He came back shaking his head and looking relieved that Hayssen would leave now.

Hayssen didn’t.

“Try under Health then.”

It was just a guess that Lehman might be running a health salon of some kind at the address he had given.

The pudgy man came back this time with a piece of paper, heavily stamped and certified. Hayssen reached for it but the pudgy man held it back.

“I’m not so sure you have the authority—”

Hayssen took the cigarette out of his mouth and stared at him as if he had just crawled out from under a rock.

“Do ya like your job here, Charlie? Ya know ya could be obstructin’ justice and—”

The pudgy man bleated and handed over the license without any more argument.

The license didn’t say much, just authorizing one Arthur C. Lehman to run a health salon at such and such an address. A photograph of Lehman was attached. It was not an unusual face. You could run into it three times a day and it would never stick in your mind. Rather thin, balding, pleasant face. Glasses.

There was an affidavit attached to it that gave a little more information. He had done business in a suburb before this. The same suburb that was listed as his home town. A Martin Green, of the same town, was down as a reference.

Hayssen handed the certificates back, grunted a “thanks” and left.

The suburb was an old German settlement; old homes and a lot of taverns with German names. The address listed for reference was on a shady side street. The gingerbreading on the outside dated the house as having been built before the turn of the century.

There was a separate entrance for Martin Green. Hayssen walked up the stairs and leaned against the buzzer.

The character who answered the bell was portly and dignified with the type of pompous face that usually graces a bank board meeting. He was all decked out in a bathrobe and slippers and carrying the afternoon paper in his hands.

“Something I can do for you?” His voice wasn’t overly friendly and it carried a slight accent.

Hayssen flashed his badge again and then abruptly wished he hadn’t. Green looked like he might be the type who would insist on seeing credentials.

“Just a little checking I would like to do; nothing serious.”

“Certainly. Come right in and make yourself comfortable.” He was being nice to Authority, Hayssen thought. Authority always played on the side of people like Green anyway.

Hayssen walked in and found an easy-chair to sit in. He looked around the apartment while Green was picking some papers off of another chair. The room was rather modern in style. Blond furniture, a brand-new radio-television set. Expensive wall hangings. All in all a rather modern room that had become comfortable through use.

“Sorry to have to trouble you,” he started, “but I’m looking for information about an Arthur Lehman. What kind of business he’s been in, what kind of”—he coughed discreetly—“credit rating he might have. You see, I’m in the—”

Green held up a genial hand. “You don’t need to explain further, Mr...ah... Mr.—”

“Hayssen.” He pronounced it very carefully. It wouldn’t hurt to give his name. If Green insisted on a check, it might stand him in good stead to give the same name that was on his driver’s license.

“Well, you hardly need to worry about Lehman. He’s a very intelligent man when it comes to handling money.”

“I rather wondered about his standing in the community, Mr. Green. You know, if he’s done business here before and what kind of a reputation he’s had.”

“Oh yes, Art’s been established in this community for a long time. Excellent health business, very good organizer. As I understand it, the businessmen around here thought very highly of him. Member of the Elks and the Masons. Very good man.”

Hayssen beamed. “Well, that’s the kind of information I like to get hold of, Mr. Green,” he lied. “You’ve been a big help to me, a big help. It’s nice to be able to finish up the business so soon.”

Green was on his feet, holding open the front door. “Anything to be of service, Mr. Hayssen. You’ll never go wrong backing Arthur Lehman.”

That’s what you say, Hayssen thought.

They shook hands and he left.

It was queer, Hayssen thought. So neat a reference that actually wasn't a reference at all. And it was nice that Green had been home that afternoon. Of course, maybe he had shift work. Except a guy like Green wouldn't be working in a factory.

And Green himself. A character right out of Sinclair Lewis' "Babbitt." But why should a guy like Green be renting a tiny apartment in an old run-down house?

Green looked like the type of guy who should own the whole block.

An hour later Hayssen was sure the afternoon was going to be filled with unpleasant surprises.

The local Chamber of Commerce had no record of Lehman.

The Elks had never heard of him. Neither had the Masons.

The local grammar and high schools had no record of him.

Hayssen went back to Green's address. There was no answer to the buzzer. He knocked on the door. No answer. He knocked harder.

"What do you want? What are you making so much noise for?"

An elderly lady with a heavy German accent had opened the door downstairs and was peering up the dimly lighted hallway.

"I want to see Mr. Green," Hayssen said.

"No Mr. Green lives here." Her voice was flat. "I think you have the wrong address."

"But I just talked to him a couple of hours ago!"

She came up the stairs, slippers making a slapping sound on the treads.

"I tell you that Mr. Green doesn't live here! Maybe a month ago a Mr. Green came around and rented the apartment but he never moved in." She shrugged. "I do not understand it at all. But he paid good money and we've let it go vacant thinking he might come any day, but so far he hasn't."

She squinted at him closely. "Maybe you would like to see the apartment? Maybe you would like to rent it for yourself?"

She put the key in the lock and then hesitated again. "It is not furnished, however. We didn't have enough furniture to put in this apartment too."

Hayssen felt his skin turn clammy. Not furnished.

But Green had had a lot of modern furniture and rugs and wall hangings!

The old lady was saying something. "The size of the room doesn't matter to you, does it?"

"Size?"

She was fiddling with the key. "Mr. Green said he wouldn't rent it if it was any smaller than fourteen by sixteen feet."

The door swung open and her hand found the wall switch and flicked it.

The room was as empty as his hopes. The plastered walls were bare and a small leak in the roof had

discolored the ceiling. There was no sign of a carpet or any furniture.

“Thanks for letting me see it,” Hayssen said in a strangled voice, “but I don’t think I’ll take it. Like you say, maybe Mr. Green will show up any day now.”

He walked out into the night feeling like he had been sandbagged.

He stood well back in the doorway, in the shadows, watching who came down the corridor. He should have done this sooner, he thought. Shadow Lehman’s office and watch who went in and came out.

The building was small, one of those reconverted homes on Rush Street, and there weren’t many offices to a floor. There was a loan office at the end of the hall and a walk-up beauty parlor a door down from that. Lehman’s office was the next one down, directly across from the elevator. A milk organization that specialized in educating people to drink milk in preference to coffee, beer or water was the only other office on the floor. The doorway Hayssen stood in gave access to a fire escape.

He had been standing there for well over an hour and no results. A few people had gone to the loan office, a brunette who didn’t need it had patronized the beauty parlor, and the milk man had stepped out for lunch and a quick one at the corner tap.

He tensed and then relaxed. False alarm. Another customer for the beauty parlor.

Fifteen minutes later a janitor carrying a bucket came down the hall and stopped in front of Lehman’s office. He started doing something to the sign on the door. Hayssen swore softly and walked over.

The man was chipping away at the neatly lettered sign with a razor blade.

“Mr. Lehman move?” Hayssen asked in a friendly fashion.

The janitor looked up.

“Yes, sir! Mr. Lehman musta moved out some time yesterday. Called up this morning to say he had left.”

He started chipping away at the “h” in Lehman.

“Moved kind of suddenly, didn’t he?”

“He sure did! Why you know, he had files and cabinets and office machinery and I swear I never saw anybody take them out. Yes, sir, he just upped and disappeared.” He looked at Hayssen half suspiciously. “You have an appointment with him or something?”

Hayssen laughed. “Oh no! I was looking for office space and the building manager sent me up here to look at this one, see if I wanted it.” It seemed to be the thing to say if you wanted to look at a room or an office lately.

The janitor got out a key and opened the door. Hayssen followed him in and looked it over.

“Did this, ah, Lehman fellow do much business here?”

The janitor scratched his head. “I think maybe that’s why he left. I never seen anybody come up here to see him. Course I didn’t watch all the time, but it seems to me he never did much business at all.”

Hayssen went to the window and looked out. Nice view; you could see over to Michigan Avenue and the lake beyond.

He looked back in the room and then suddenly knelt down by the baseboard. The outlet plug had a little cap over it, the kind that keeps dust and dirt from accumulating. The other plugs had caps over them, too.

“Did you put the caps back on the outlet plugs when Lehman left?”

“No, sir! I haven’t been in here since Mr. Lehman left!”

“Do you know of anybody else who would have?”

The janitor looked thoughtful. “No, sir, I don’t.”

Hayssen looked back toward the window and gasped. He hadn’t noticed it when he came in but there was a thin covering of dust on the floor, marred only by where he and the janitor had stepped.

“Was this space vacant for very long before Lehman rented it?”

“About six weeks, but that’s all.” The janitor looked concerned. “Is there something wrong? Mr. Lehman in trouble?”

“Maybe.” Hayssen found a bill in his pocket and held it out to the janitor. Money might do more in this case than flashing his badge would. Besides, some day somebody would investigate that badge of his and find out he had got it for so many boxtops and the cost of mailing.

“What do you know about Lehman? What kind of a guy is he?”

“Well, just sort of an average fella. Medium height, mebbe a little taller than average. Kind of, well, plain lookin’. Didn’t dress fancy or anything.”

“Just the all-around, typical businessman,” Hayssen said disgustedly. He wished he had the bill back.

“Look, you already told me that he didn’t do much business. Do you remember anything else peculiar about him?”

The janitor brightened. “Well, yes, I do! I remember when he moved in he got a tape measure and measured the office. I asked him why and he said the office had to be at least fourteen by sixteen. I thought that was kind of odd but naturally I didn’t say anything.”

The janitor looked around the office again. “Yes suh, it sure beats all how having cabinets and files and things makes an office look *smaller*.”

Lehman had wanted an office at least fourteen by sixteen, Hayssen thought.

And Martin Green had wanted an apartment at least fourteen by sixteen before he would rent it.

And both of them had seemed able to move without the benefit of any moving company.

Later that afternoon Hayssen went to a local chemist he knew who did research and analysis for various hospitals. He kept some guinea pigs on the premises and Hayssen left him with a small portion of the contents of Flaherty’s vial and specific instructions as to just how to, use it.

It might be foolish, he thought, but he wouldn’t be satisfied until he had tried it.

It was almost dark when he got to his office. He leafed through the mail and then pulled open a drawer and took out a tumbler and a bottle of cheap bourbon. He poured himself half a glass and settled back with a sigh.

Take a mayor with cancer who bought himself a vial of atomic water and then changed his mind and

claimed it was a political plot. Add someone who liked to kill people with fine steel springs or else guillotine them with a pretty fantastic snicker-snack, and mix thoroughly with one Martin Green who had rented an apartment and then never used it—except when Hayssen came to see him for about fifteen minutes one sunny afternoon.

Sprinkle lightly with somebody who rents an office but never used the electric outlets and doesn't muss the dust that was left on the floor from a previous six-week vacancy, and add one curious blonde who could probably straighten out the whole mess if she wanted to.

And the result of it all was a severe case of heartburn.

He could call her, Hayssen thought. He could call her and apologize and try another way.

But no, that wouldn't do. It was up to her to call him.

The phone rang.

He grabbed it eagerly.

It was Flaherty. Hayssen was to drop Lehman. No, no. There was no explanation.

He stared at the phone in disbelief. "I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I'm sorry but I can't do it."

A little later he washed up in the mop closet down the hall and left.

He left just a moment too soon to hear his phone ring with an agonizing insistence.

"Rather cold tonight, isn't it, sir?"

The boy was looking up at him with sightless eyes of gray.

Hayssen grunted, took his paper, and dropped a quarter in the newsboy's hand. It must be tough, he thought, to be blind like that.

Ten minutes later, after changing street cars and jostling through the crowds, he sensed that he was being followed.

There wasn't much that he could pin it on. A familiar bit of cap that followed in the crowds when he transferred, a swift glance at a face that he had seen before. A dogged animal awareness as much as anything else.

He got off in his home block and casually inspected the people on the walks. Whoever it was who had followed him had given up. There was a pushcart peddler at one end of the block whom he didn't remember ever seeing before but then there were no laws against pushcart peddlers.

The others on the walk were hurrying for home through the chill night. Rather less than the usual number, he thought, but then he had spent a lot of time changing streetcars and dodging into doorways, trying to shake his elusive follower.

He stopped in a corner grocery store.

What every young bachelor gets to know. How to cook for himself. He idly wondered how good a cook Cathy Cooper was.

He picked out enough cans to get a supper together and took them to the counter. The clerk was a new one. They talked about sports and politics and inflation, the usual chitchat you mull over with

shopkeepers and hired help.

There was something odd about the clerk, Hayssen thought. Something about him, in a way, was familiar.

The clerk was putting the cans and the bottles and the packages of meat into a bag. He finished with the packing and looked up.

“You’re sure there’s nothing else, Mr. Hayssen?”

Hayssen started. He remembered now.

The accent.

The same peculiar accent that Catherine Cooper had. And Martin Green.

And how had the clerk known his name was Hayssen? He didn’t remember giving it. And the clerk was new.

“No,” he said slowly. “I don’t need anything more.”

He took the bag of groceries and started for the entrance. He had a view of the street through the plate glass window at the front. There was nobody on the street now. Nobody but the pushcart peddler and a newsboy on the corner and what looked like a cop on the beat.

The newsboy was familiar.

The same newsboy who had sold him a paper outside his office a half-hour ago. The familiar bit of cap he had seen so often on his way home, the face that had followed him.

And he would never have thought of the newsboy because the newsboy had pretended he was blind.

Gray contact lenses and a winning personality.

It had been very clever.

The clerk was at the front door, standing in front of it like Horatio at the Bridge. And just as determined. A slim, delicate looking pistol had appeared in his hand.

“I think you better wait here, Hayssen.”

Just like Riverview, Hayssen thought. A thrill every minute.

He threw the bag of groceries at the clerk and chopped at him roughly with the side of his hand.

There was a grunt of pain and then Hayssen was through the door and legging it across the street for his apartment building. A voice trailed after him yelling “Stop!”

The fake cop was heading for him now, pulling at his holster.

A thin beam of violet colored light cut through the chill air on Hayssen’s left. It splashed against a brick wall and Hayssen spotted a little charred hole in the bricks before the beam snapped off.

He was in the apartment building now, safe in the elevator.

Safe.

“You were in a hurry, Mr. Hayssen. Anything wrong?”

He could feel his hackles rise.

The fat little man who operated the elevator was new to him. Too new.

He turned and rabbit-punched the operator, then grabbed the controls and shot the cab up to the fifth floor.

He was out of the elevator and heading down the hall for the stairway that led to the roof. The door wasn't locked and a moment later he was on the pebbled roof, momentarily silhouetted against the velvet sky.

A flash of purple light ate away a piece of the cornice and he dropped flat to the roof. He could hear feet pounding on the stairway leading up.

He rolled to the rear of the building, safe for a moment in the shadows. Ten feet below him was the top of the fire escape. He let himself over, trying to grip the slippery edge of the cornice, hung for a moment, then dropped to the escape. The fall jarred him and he could feel the warm ooze of blood in his mouth where he had bit his tongue.

A moment later he was running quietly down the escape, slipping noiselessly past lighted windows where other tenants of the building were eating or playing cards or watching the television.

He could hear men searching the shadows above, looking behind the chimneys and the squat little shack that housed the top of the roof stairway.

Looking for him.

He was almost to the alley before one of them poked his head over the roof and hissed to his companions.

Hayssen was in the alley now, dodging down it for dear life. There was the clatter of men on the fire escape and soon they were padding silently after him.

They had seen him!

There was a flash of light and Hayssen dodged frantically. A thin smoky line appeared on a garage behind him.

He ducked through a backyard and headed for an apartment construction project, half a block away. Maybe he could lose his pursuers in the maze of lumber, cement, steel beams, and workmen's shacks that dotted the site.

At least he could gain time. Time enough for startled housewives and property owners to call the police.

With a sinking feeling he knew his pursuers knew it, too. They wouldn't be careful now. They would be out to get him as soon as they could.

What a sucker he had been. He had always considered that he had a slight margin of safety, that Cathy would warn him when his life was in danger, when Lehman's hoods were after him.

Fools are made, he thought.

And fools are buried.

He ducked behind a small mound of cement bags and sat down, breathing heavily. He could hear the

others moving noiselessly about in the lot. Their whispering and the creak of boards as they walked across them carried well through the night.

A thin film of sweat covered his face and he brushed at it with his coat sleeve.

An alley cat wailed for a second and then was abruptly quiet in a sudden flash of violet.

A beam of light appeared a hundred feet away but Hayssen couldn't see anybody behind it. They were using some new kind of flashlight, he realized. Beams of light that didn't flare straight ahead but could curve and probe around corners.

A sudden dazzle of light showed over the top of the cement bags and there was a light rustle as a thin wire arched over the top. He moved out of the way just in time and watched the wire coil tightly around the bags and cut into them. Dry cement spurted from the bags and he dodged over to a stack of lumber.

Moments later the men who had followed him were clustered around the spot where he had been. They inspected the ground and a low murmur of disappointment came from them.

He thought of his gun with regret. It was back at his apartment, carefully hidden under clothing in his bottom drawer.

He felt along the ground and located half a brick.

He hefted it casually. This was for Jock.

The brick was well-aimed. It hit the newsboy and there was a sudden scream of anguish.

They were after him again, throwing away all pretense at stealth and openly flaming piles of lumber and steel beams. Lights were going on in the houses around the project and Hayssen prayed that somebody would call the cops.

He was running parallel to a half-built brick wall. An I-beam lay on the ground, jutting out from the wall, and he fell over it. Pain twisted his face and he could feel the ligaments near his ankle tear.

In the distance he could hear the faint scream of sirens.

They would get there just in time to list his name with the other unsolved murders of the year, he thought.

A beam of light curled around the side of the wall and dazzled his eyes. There was a shout from one of his pursuers and then they were clustered around him.

He couldn't make them out. They were formless shadows, standing in back of the circle of light cast by one of their flashlights.

The police sirens were a lot nearer.

The shadowy figures scattered and one of them flicked a violet beam along the wall, at an upward angle so the cut would be on a slant.

The top of the wall hung there for a moment before it came crashing down on him.

The wail of the sirens sounded dimmer and then faded out altogether.

"Here, drink this," a voice commanded.

Hayssen felt the lip of a glass press against his mouth and he swallowed automatically. The liquid was

sweet and a trifle oily. After taking it, his head felt oddly clear and yet thick at the same time.

He was lying on a couch in an office. The man who had offered the glass of liquid looked familiar. Rather thin and balding with a pleasant face. Glasses.

“My name’s Arthur Lehman,” the man offered, seeing Hayssen’s puzzled expression.

Hayssen dropped the glass and sat up on the couch. There was something about Lehman. Something that was supposed to be dangerous.

But he couldn’t remember what it was.

His head began to swim and he felt Lehman’s hand on his shoulder, firmly pushing him back down on the couch.

“It will take a few minutes for you to feel like yourself, Hayssen.”

“What happened?” Hayssen asked inanely. His tongue felt like it was coated with glue.

Lehman smiled urbanely. “We got to you just in time, before Flaherty’s bully boys could do you in. Another minute and you would have been a goner.”

Hayssen digested the information slowly. Flaherty’s bully boys.

It didn’t seem right. He had been working for Flaherty who had hired him to do—something—about Lehman. And now Lehman had saved his life and it was Flaherty who was trying to murder him.

“I don’t understand,” he said slowly. “I was working for Flaherty. And now you say that Flaherty was trying to kill me. It doesn’t add up.”

He sat up and held his throbbing head. It was difficult to think straight about this. There were little bits of information that didn’t fit, little bits of information that somehow managed to elude him when he tried to think of them.

“I know,” Lehman sympathized. “It’s hard to believe. But Flaherty asked you to give up the case, didn’t he?”

Now that Lehman mentioned it, he vaguely remembered Flaherty calling him up and telling him to drop it.

He nodded. “Yes.”

“And you refused, didn’t you?” Lehman was being very logical about it.

Again he nodded.

Lehman looked patronizing. “I don’t see how it fails to add, then. It makes a kind of dangerous sense for you. Flaherty had hired you to investigate me, Hayssen, and then wanted you to quit. When you refused, there was only one alternative. To kill you.”

His head was clearing but it was still difficult to remember.

“Why would Flaherty kill me because I refused to give up investigating you?”

“You know a lot about the rackets, Hayssen. When Flaherty found out who I was, he obviously thought that it would be dangerous for you to find me. He probably figured that you and I would get together.”

Hayssen was puzzled. It was so hard to think, so difficult to get things straight.

“I see I had better explain things further.” Lehman dug some cards out of his wallet and passed them over to Hayssen.

“I’m on a citizen’s committee, Hayssen, working in conjunction with the Congressional Crime Investigating Committee. As you know, Flahertys’ administration is one of the most corrupt in the city’s history. We’ve been trying to get the goods on Flaherty and his mob and we think we’ve found a way to do it.”

“What about the vial?” Hayssen asked. He had almost forgotten about the vial and Lehman’s connection with it. Almost forgotten—

“I was coming to that. You see, that’s where I think you can be of service to us, Hayssen. Naturally you want to be of service?”

There was a thin edge of threat to that request but only a corner of Hayssen’s mind caught it.

He nodded dumbly.

“The vial contains a serum that the citizen’s committee has developed. Call it a compulsion serum, for lack of a better name. We’ve been trying to get Flaherty to take some of it. Naturally, we can’t legally force him to take it against his will so we have been trying to get him to take the serum under a guise. It may not be strictly legal but then you have to fight fire with fire!”

It was strictly for the movies, a corner of Hayssen’s mind thought. Strictly cloak and dagger.

But he wouldn’t think of opposing Lehman’s will. Lehman had saved his life.

Lehman continued. “Flaherty has discovered my connection with the citizens’ committee and so my usefulness has been largely ended. But Flaherty doesn’t know that you have found me—or vice versa. And that’s where you can be of help.”

Everything seemed so plausible when Lehman told it to him. Lehman was right, absolutely right.

Whatever Lehman asked him to do he would.

“How can I be of help?”

Lehman was all business now.

“It’s still necessary for Flaherty to take the serum. You see, it’s a much improved version of neoscopolamine. Once he takes it, he’ll truthfully answer all questions put to him. Now he’s wise to me. But he wouldn’t suspect you. *You* could get it to him.”

Lehman smiled. “So he did. Maybe you could get to see him about it, agree that you have other things to do, that you are actually too busy to continue the case anyway. Anything you happen to think of. Somehow you can get him to take a drink and slip the contents of the vial into it. It’s tasteless and he won’t suspect.

“You still have the vial you picked up at his office, don’t you?”

Hayssen felt around in his pocket and finally came up with the vial of sparkling liquid.

“Good. Just put that in his drink and we’ll clean up the city in nothing fiat. And, of course, there’ll be a tidy sum in it for you.”

Hayssen was thinking hard. There was somebody connected with this, somebody who had tried to save his life some time ago. A long, long time ago.

“What about Catherine Cooper, Flaherty’s secretary? She knows something about this. And yet—it’s hard to believe that she’d be mixed up in something like this.”

Lehman looked at him sadly, like the best friend who wouldn’t tell him that he had BO.

“Flaherty wouldn’t hire a secretary he couldn’t trust, Hayssen. Or one who would be afraid to work in the type of business he’s actually in. I’m afraid that Catherine Cooper is in as deeply as Flaherty himself.”

He watched the expression flit over Hayssen’s face.

“Of course, if you could find her and bring her in to me, perhaps we could get her to turn state’s evidence. The sentence would be light, then.”

Hayssen nodded. He felt confused and sick. Dimly, he felt that something was incredibly wrong.

But he had to trust Lehman. And Lehman had saved his life.

He picked up his hat. “I guess I better be going then. And thanks a lot.” His voice trailed off. “Thanks a lot for everything.”

He wandered out into the hallway.

Behind him, Lehman closed the door and went to his desk. He opened a drawer that revealed a long panel of buttons. He pressed one and the interior of the room shimmered and disappeared. There was nothing left but a bare floor with dust on it and electric outlets with their protective caps still on.

Hayssen stood in the shadows and watched the apartment building. Cathy’s room was black. But she’d be coming back sometime that night. She’d come back and then he would get her and take her to Lehman.

It was too bad she had to be mixed up with Flaherty. Too bad. But somehow he didn’t feel that she knew what she was doing.

Lehman had said that she was in it as deeply as Flaherty, though.

And he had also said that she could turn state’s evidence and get off with a light sentence.

He felt the sweat standing on his forehead, even though the night was cold. Something inside was fighting his reasoning, something was trying to warn him against it.

A girl was coming up the walk now. He spotted her blond hair peeking out from under a black velvet hat.

It was Cathy.

She swung into the apartment building and disappeared. A moment later the lights went on in her

room. Hayssen started across the street.

A car that had been parked at the curb swung forward and blocked his way.

“O.K., Hayssen, in here,” a voice said.

He started to reach for his gun.

“I wouldn’t, Hayssen.” The door to the car was open. He got in.

A couple of men were in the back seat and Hayssen recognized them as the newsboy and the elevator operator. He remembered a little more. How they had tried to kill him at the apartment site.

They blindfolded him and tied his arms. One of them fished Hayssen’s gun out of his shoulder holster and let it drop to the floor of the car.

“You won’t be needing that.”

They drove for a long time and Hayssen couldn’t keep track of the number of turns they made.

They finally stopped the car and helped him out. It was late at night and he guessed that there was nobody around to see them.

He stumbled up some stairs and felt himself being led down a hallway. Then he was in a wooden chair and they were taking the blindfold off his eyes.

He was in a kitchen, a modern kitchen, with all metal cabinets and a shiny modern stove. A gas stove.

The men were busy, tying what looked like strings to the windows and the kitchen door. The various threads and strings ended up in an apparatus that looked like an alarm clock. The “newsboy” set the clock for a certain time, then turned the hands until they reached it.

The clock wound up, the strings drew taut, and the windows opened and the door swung wide. The clock continued winding and the various strings disappeared inside it. The newsboy hastily pressed another button and the clock stopped. Hayssen had a hunch that if the button hadn’t been pushed, the clock would have disappeared in a flash of flame like—Like what? He tried to think and couldn’t.

The peddler came over and pressed a few nerves in Hayssen’s neck. After that, Hayssen couldn’t move a muscle, but just sat there, hunched over the kitchen table.

The newsboy set up the system of strings again and attached them to the clocklike apparatus. They would turn on the stove, Hayssen thought, and after a certain amount of time had elapsed—when he was dead—the clocklike apparatus would come to life and automatically open the windows and the doors, airing the room out. The police would have a difficult time figuring out how he had died.

The peddler came over to inspect Hayssen before turning on the gas. He seemed puzzled for a moment and then rolled one of Hayssen’s eyelids back.

“He’s been drugged!”

The others crowded around. One of them said : “Let’s test it for sure.”

The newsboy got a glass of water and poured it down Hayssen’s throat.

His stomach reacted automatically and he threw up, the frothy liquid bubbling from his mouth like a baby drooling the breakfast gruel. “He’s been drugged all right.” One of them got a rag and wiped the table and Hayssen’s front. It wasn’t too good a job but then it wouldn’t make any difference in another

minute. "We could bring him out of it," one of them suggested.

Another shrugged. "Why bother?" They turned on the gas and left.

He could smell it. A sharp and yet sweet odor that drifted silently across the room.

He was almost under, the room had become a faint blur, when the door opened and Cathy Cooper came in.

She opened the windows and turned off the gas and then held Hayssen in her arms. The partial paralysis had worn off and his arms tightened around her. Then he was on his feet.

Cathy stared at him, puzzled, and then looked into his eyes.

Her face blanched.

"You've been drugged!" she breathed.

He was looking at her rather coldly.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come with me, Cathy. Lehman wants to see you."

She stared at him. "What makes you think I should see Lehman?" She had a frightened, trapped look on her face.

"Look," he pleaded. "You can turn state's evidence. That way you'll get off with a light sentence!"

"Light sentence! State's evidence!" She started to laugh bitterly. "What a fool you turned out to be. You think it's something as insignificant as a crime probe. Why you fool, you don't even know what it's all about. You're as gullible as all the ancients. And you're supposed to be a detective!"

She was defiant.

"Besides, what makes you think I'll go to Lehman with you?"

Hayssen held a light, slim pistol in his hand.

"I got this out of your handbag a moment ago. I'm sorry but you'll have to come in." He had tried to keep his voice businesslike but he couldn't hide a thin quiver in it.

She looked at him with pity welling up in her eyes. "You've been drugged," she said quietly. "I don't think you would do this otherwise."

She picked up her fur coat and walked before him.

Hayssen had a momentary urge to throw the gun away, to comfort her and tell her it had all been a mistake.

It wasn't right, it wasn't right, it wasn't right.

And yet he couldn't think straight enough to know why it should be wrong.

The house was a handsome house in a beautiful neighborhood. Hayssen went up the walk and worked the fancy brass knocker.

The door opened and Flaherty stood framed in the opening. He looked dourly down at Hayssen.

“Aren’t you even going to invite me in?” Hayssen asked.

The mayor grunted and stepped aside. Hayssen walked in and followed Flaherty into the library.

It wasn’t going to be easy, Hayssen thought. He hadn’t the faintest notion of what to ask Flaherty or how to trick him in to setting up some drinks.

Flaherty made himself comfortable in a huge easy-chair. He didn’t invite Hayssen to sit down.

“O.K., now, what’s the deal? Why couldn’t you see me at my office tomorrow?”

“I wanted to tell you that I’m dropping the Lehman case as of right now.”

“So? I’ve already ordered you to drop the Lehman case. This doesn’t add anything new.”

Hayssen thought frantically.

“I think I have a right to know why I was fired.”

Flaherty looked annoyed. “If you want it that way, it’s all right with me. I have it on good authority that for a private detective you’re not a very good one. You’re incompetent.”

That was a logical reason for Flaherty to give, Hayssen thought. Flaherty would hardly say that it was because Lehman was after him and it was too dangerous for Hayssen and Lehman to get together.

He looked at Flaherty with contempt. An old man with cancer who ran the worst city machine in history. There was a time when he had been more tolerant but Lehman had soon set him right on that.

He thought of Lehman with a vague sort of uneasiness. Lehman was telling him a lot of things, quite a lot.

For the twentieth time that day he tried to pin down an elusive thought that somehow just escaped him. It was always there, just trembling on the edge of his mind, wanting to be heard. But he could never quite grasp it, never get a hold on it.

Flaherty was looking at him rather thoughtfully.

“I’m sorry I trusted you, Hayssen. You can still ruin me, you know. But I don’t think you will. It would be too unhealthy.”

Flaherty was fencing with him.

It might serve his purpose to fence, too.

He took a chair without being asked and made himself at home.

“I suppose I *could* ruin you, Flaherty—if I wanted to.”

Flaherty took the bait. “What do you mean, if you wanted to?”

Hayssen yawned. “I’m thirsty. We might do better if we talked about it over some drinks. I’ve heard you have a good liquor cabinet.”

Flaherty grunted and rang a bell. A moment later a servant appeared and Flaherty ordered up the drinks.

It was a nice cool drink. Hayssen sipped at it while he thought desperately of what to say next.

“I didn’t know you collected antiques, Flaherty.”

He was looking past Flaherty at an old cherry table that served as a coffee stand.

Flaherty glanced around and Hayssen had the vial out and over Flaherty's glass, ready to empty its contents into the liquid.

A hand came out of nowhere, holding a cube of ice between a delicate pair of tongs.

"Do you wish more ice, Mr. Hayssen?"

He palmed the vial and glanced up in dismay. A sudden shock ran through him when he recognized the butler.

It was the clerk in the grocery store who had waited on him.

Flaherty turned back to Hayssen. "As a matter of fact, I don't. My wife does. Now what did you mean. when you said you could ruin me if you wanted to?"

Hayssen jerked his thumb towards the butler.

Flaherty looked grim.

"That's all right, Hayssen. Whatever you have to say, it's all right if Jonas hears it. You see, the doctors can't help him either."

Hayssen let out his breath in a slow sigh of disappointment. He couldn't do it. It was impossible now. With only Flaherty to contend with, he might have distracted him long enough to slip the contents of the vial into his drink. With the butler there too, he wouldn't be able to do it.

"I was only kidding," he said. "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it at all."

He left a few minutes later. He could feel Flaherty and the butler watching him through the front window.

When he got to the end of the block he turned and disappeared from their view. A moment later he cut up the alley and ended standing in the shadow of a tree several doors down. and across the street from Flaherty's house.

He had a hunch that Flaherty's butler didn't live there and he was right. A half hour passed and then, the front door opened and a figure left and walked rapidly down the street. Hayssen waited until the figure had a little head start and then he started after it.

He would have to catch the butler before he got to a main street.

It was dark out and a storm was blowing in from the west. The thunder drowned out Hayssen's footsteps.

He was behind the butler now. He shoved his pistol into the small of Jonas' back.

"We'll go home my way," he said softly.

The figure jerked, startled.

"You waited outside, I see. Very clever of you."

"I think so. It's about time I wised up, isn't it?"

The butler sneered. "I suppose you'll show how smart you are by taking me to Lehman?"

Hayssen wondered a little. He supposed that's what he should be doing. But he wasn't. And the fact that he wanted to find out something on his own didn't quite explain why.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not. We're going to my apartment and you're going to answer some questions directly to me."

The butler laughed, "You're rather simple, Hayssen. I don't think you're going to walk over to your apartment. And you don't have a car. That means we'll have to catch a bus or a streetcar. And once we do, what's to prevent me from simply walking away? I rather doubt that you would use your pistol in the open like that."

"What a shame," Hayssen said calmly. "You've pointed out the flaw in my plan. I suppose I'll have to kill you right here and now."

He grinned to himself at the butler's sudden rush of fear.

"But I'm not. And for that matter, we could take a cab home. But we're not going to do that either. We're going by streetcar and you're going with me. Because you'll want to."

"I don't see how—"

Hayssen took a common pin out of his pocket and held it behind the butler's ear, then jabbed sharply down with it. It drew a drop of blood and a startled cry from his captive.

"That's rather simple, too. You've probably read all about it. The slow acting poison that only the hero has the antidote for. In this case, it's at my apartment."

"You have a good imagination, Hayssen. I don't believe you."

Hayssen laughed. "O.K. then, don't. Go ahead. Walk away. I'm merely shooting off my mouth to make conversation."

The butler hesitated and then reluctantly gave in.

"And by the way, Jonas. We'll go up the back way. I wouldn't want any of your friends to run into us."

They made themselves comfortable in Hayssen's living room. The butler was sweating, small beads of sweat that crept into the corners of his eyes and made them water.

Hayssen mixed himself a tall one from the radio-cabinet liquor cache.

The butler finally broke the silence.

"You mentioned an antidote, I believe. I suppose it would be asking too much—"

Hayssen looked up, amused.

"It would. You see, there isn't any. My imagination only got as far as thinking of the poison."

The butler sprang to his feet.

Hayssen waved a pistol at him.

"This isn't as neat as the guns you use. It makes a nice, messy hole." The butler sat down. "And don't feel too bad about falling for a story like that. You couldn't afford to take the chance that it wasn't the truth."

He toyed with his drink. "I suppose I should be very British and offer you some but to be frank, I don't have enough whisky left." His voice became harsh. "Jonas is just too domestic a name, chum. What do you call yourself?"

"Smith is good enough."

"O.K., Smith. Now suppose you tell me just how you fit in the deal with Flaherty?"

Smith leaned forward eagerly.

"Look, Hayssen, I can't tell you the truth. I would like to but I honestly can't. But it isn't what you think. It's not a simple matter like a crooked city machine or anything like that. A world is in the balance, Hayssen!"

There had been somebody else, a long time ago, who had said something like that. Somebody who had wanted to tell him what it was all about but claimed they couldn't.

If only he could remember!

Smith was talking again. "I don't know what Lehman has told you, Hayssen, but I could puncture his logic for you if you were only normal. But you wouldn't believe me, now. You've been drugged, Hayssen, drugged!"

Hayssen considered it thoughtfully.

"Could you prove it?"

"Certainly. Tell me, have you drunk any water in the last day or so? I thought not. Try it now. You'll be sick, horribly sick, but it'll clear the drug out of your system."

He could try it. Drinking water wouldn't hurt any. And there was always the chance, the bare chance, that Smith was right.

It was odd, he thought. A day ago he would never have doubted Lehman. But now it seemed possible, just possible—His faith in Lehman had gradually been wearing off. Like a drug?

"O.K., I'll try it. But you go first."

Smith shrugged and preceded Hayssen to the kitchen. He ran the tap until the water was cold, then took a glass, filled it, and drank it. Hayssen watched him closely. There was no reaction at all, unless it was satisfaction at quenching one's thirst.

Hayssen held a glass under the tap, still keeping his gun trained on Smith.

The water tasted nice and cool and it came to him with something of a shock how dehydrated he actually felt. Not exactly thirsty, but just *dry*.

The reaction was swift.

He gagged and then vomitted. He managed to watch Smith through watering eyes and keep the gun trained on him but it took effort. Enormous effort. He retched some more and had the hideous feeling of the dry heaves coming on.

He was empty now, thoroughly empty inside. And he felt very weak. It was hard to think at all. Smith had been partially correct at any rate, or else it was an elaborately planned trick.

The phone rang.

Smith turned and walked in front of him back to the living room. Hayssen picked up the phone.

The voice at the other end of the line was frantic.

It was the chemist with whom he had left a small portion of the contents of Flaherty's vial.

"Hayssen? This is Jim Paul. I've been trying to get hold of you for hours. Tell me, do you have any more of that liquid you left here?"

Hayssen could feel the excitement in his voice.

"Why?"

"I injected one cc of the fluid into a cancerous guinea pig on the verge of death. The pig didn't die, Hayssen, it didn't die. It was a complete recovery! Not only that but the pig looks healthy enough to live to a hundred!"

Hayssen felt sweat soaking into his undershirt.

"I'll call you back."

He put down the receiver and stared at Smith. Smith had heard the conversation and had an I-told-you-so expression on his face.

"O.K., Smith, *I'm* convinced I was drugged and that Lehman isn't what he said he was. What's the whole story?"

Smith was stubborn. "I'd like to tell you, Hayssen. I mean that sincerely. But I can't."

Hayssen could remember things now, things that still didn't fit. He walked over to Smith.

Smith was smiling. "I suppose you'll let me go now?"

Hayssen shook his head. "Whatever else Lehman is, he saved me from being killed by you and the others. I suppose I'll have to see Lehman personally and find out what's going on for myself."

"You going to tie me up then?"

Hayssen remembered the pitiful bundle that had been Jock.

"I don't think that will be necessary." Before Smith could move, he brought up the pistol and slugged him on the side of the head.

He watched Smith crumple to the floor and then got his hat and coat. He would have to hurry.

He hadn't forgotten that Cathy Cooper was with Lehman. And that, for some reason, Lehman was a sworn enemy of hers.

A light was on in Lehman's office.

Hayssen ran lightly up the stairs and then stood outside the door for a moment before opening it.

He could hear Lehman and Catherine Cooper talking together on the inside. Cathy's voice was firm and controlled, though a quiver of fear ran through it.

Lehman's was threatening, brutal.

He listened and felt himself grow cold inside. They were speaking English, but a twisted, corrupted English that bore very little resemblance to what he spoke. And there was something he hadn't noticed before. Lehman was talking with the same peculiar accent that Cathy used.

He turned the knob and walked in.

Lehman looked up with a surprise that quickly turned to annoyance.

"What do you want, Hayssen?"

"I'd like to ask you some questions, Lehman."

Lehman assumed an air of tired patience.

"I'm questioning Miss Cooper right now, Hayssen. Why don't you wait until morning?"

"Why don't you question Miss Cooper in the morning?" Hayssen's voice was tight. "And what were you questioning her about?"

"Just asking her co-operation." Lehman's voice was smooth and untroubled. He turned to Cathy Cooper. "Wasn't I, Miss Cooper?"

Cathy looked up for the first time since Hayssen had come into the room and nodded wearily.

"Anything else you want to know, Hayssen? If not, I'd suggest you get back to following out your orders in regards to Flaherty."

"I think," Hayssen said slowly, "that I would like the answer to some questions first."

Lehman settled back in his chair.

"O.K., shoot."

"First of all, I would like to know, if Flaherty was out to get me *after* I refused to drop your case, who was it that tried to kill me before? Who was it that tried to kill me the same night after I first, saw Flaherty?"

"You're mistaken," Lehman said flatly. "It never happened, Hayssen."

It was becoming rather obvious, Hayssen thought.

"Look, Lehman, I drank some water recently and I got pretty sick. I think that I was drugged."

There was hidden fear in Lehman's eyes.

"I suppose you think that I tried to kill you. You're wrong, Hayssen, absolutely wrong. In fact, if you still doubt me, we'll leave it to an impartial judge."

He turned to Cathy Cooper, who had looked up with new hope in her eyes when Hayssen mentioned that he had been drugged.

"Tell him the truth," Lehman encouraged. "Did I ever try to kill Mr. Hayssen?" There was laughter in his eyes.

Cathy shook her head. "No, but—"

"And isn't it true that I rescued him from those who *were* trying to kill him?"

“Yes,” desperately, “but that isn’t the whole story!”

“It’s enough, Miss Cooper.”

“Wait a minute,” Hayssen said. “Suppose we let Cathy tell us the whole story.”

Cathy looked like she was ready to cry. “I can’t, Don. I can’t!”

Lehman shrugged.

“You see, Hayssen? She refuses to co-operate. As a thoroughly guilty person would.”

Hayssen felt his resolve begin to waver. It looked like Lehman was right, that Cathy was involved in some criminal scheme. He swore silently. You’re some guy, Hayssen, he thought. A pretty face and figure come along and somebody could use your brains for pillow stuffing.

He looked at Cathy and saw something he hadn’t noticed when he first came in. There were faint discolorations around her cheekbones and jaw. He had a pretty good hunch of just what and who had caused them.

He looked at Lehman and knew he hated him.

“I’ve got one more question,” he said quietly.

Lehman looked calmer now but there was still a guarded look in his eyes.

“All right, Hayssen, ask it. I have nothing to fear.”

I hate smooth guys, Hayssen thought. Particularly smooth guys who turn out to be right when I don’t want them to be right.

He took a breath. In a way it was a silly question, a fantastic one. But it would be still more fantastic to look for a logical explanation. If you had a certain line of reasoning you followed it to the bitter end, no matter how silly it seemed. And coiling wires, slim, modernistic pistols, people who seemed able to disappear at will, and even the peculiar accents made a twisted sort of sense.

“When are you from?”

There was a gasp from Cathy and a shocked look on Lehman’s face and he knew he had struck oil. Lehman’s hand darted for a desk drawer.

Hayssen leaped for the desk and brought his fist down on the hand. Lehman shrieked with pain and twisted away. Hayssen grabbed him by the shoulder and then Lehman doubled up and kned him.

They broke and rolled out on the carpet. He hammered at Lehman’s face, trying to break Lehman’s grip around his throat. The room started to blacken and then he had Lehman by the collar and they were on their feet. His fist shot into Lehman’s face. He could feel the splinter of teeth against his knuckles.

Lehman’s head jerked back and he hit the floor and lay still.

Hayssen turned to Cathy and swept her into his arms.

She was nice and soft, he thought, and her hair smelled good. He brushed her lips with his and they clung close together. There were a lot of things that weren’t explained but they could definitely wait.

After a moment Cathy sighed and wriggled comfortably out of his grasp.

She looked over his shoulder and her eyes went wide.

He turned in one movement and dove for the desk. Lehman sat behind it, fiddling with some knobs on what looked like a control board.

He found the right dial and turned a bloody, triumphant face to Hayssen.

Hayssen hit the desk and kept right on going through it, beyond it, to end lying on a floor that lay six inches beneath a ghostly carpet.

Lehman and his desk and office equipment, rugs, wall-hangings, and chairs were like a room within a room. They shimmered and twinkled in a ghostly phosphorescence and slowly faded from sight.

Hayssen picked himself off a dusty floor and stared around the room, bewildered.

It was absolutely empty except for he and Cathy.

“I think you had better explain some things, Cathy. It would help me a lot.”

She didn't look up. “We're not supposed to,” she said in a small voice.

“Look,” he burst out, “people have tried to murder me about five times in the last week. Somebody kicked my dog around and it wasn't funny. I've checked up on people who seem to appear and disappear whenever they want. And now Lehman does a by-by act right while I'm in the room!”

He lowered his voice to a lecture tone. “I know some of it. I know a lot of it. I tested the vial that Flaherty bought. It was the real McCoy. Everything that Lehman had told Flaherty about it was true. For all I know, Cathy, maybe Lehman was on the right side.”

She looked up at him. “You know about the vial then?”

“Yes.”

“It's against the Prime Injunction,” she said slowly. “We're not supposed to tell. We'd be breaking the rules.”

“What rules?” he prodded gently.

She managed to find the nerve to say it.

“Against the rules of time travel.”

He caught his breath. He had been right then. A wild, fantastic guess and he had hit the nail on the head.

“You're a time traveler from the future?”

“Yes,” she said proudly. “I'm from the future.”

He took his arm away. She wasn't just a frightened girl. She was something else. Something magnificent.

“Tell me about it,” he asked simply.

“Your century, Donald, has been visited many times by our people. I suppose that you could call me and the others history students. We go throughout all history and take small jobs and study the different civilizations. When I came back to your time I decided to become a secretary to one of your politicians. I

was going to write a thesis on the Twentieth Century.”

She had said that she had been named after a famous actress, Hayssen thought. But he had never heard of the name. Naturally not. She had been named after a famous actress in *her* time, an actress who would not be born yet for thousands of years!

“I suppose we’re actually more than just students,” Cathy continued. “Call us watchmen in the museum of time who see that none of the exhibits are damaged or stolen. We’re watch-wardens for the past, custodians of history to see that nobody comes back in time and tries to change it.”

“That’s where Lehman fits in, isn’t it?” he asked hesitantly.

She nodded. “Lehman is a member of what you would call a political party, but not a legally recognized one. By traveling into the past he sought to change it enough so that his party would be in power in the far future.”

“He hoped to work it through Flaherty some way, didn’t he?”

“Yes. If Flaherty lived long enough he would back a certain candidate for senator. This person in turn would become president. A very poor president, Donald. A tyrant. And the past would be altered sufficiently so that Lehman would be our ruler in the future.”

“At least Flaherty would get a fair shake out of it.” He felt sorry for Flaherty who had had the cure for his cancer right in his own grasp.

She shook her head. “Even Flaherty would not have benefited from it. You see, the vial of liquid would make a person live a thousand years, our own life span. But Flaherty would have lived just long enough to be useful. Then Lehman would have seen that he met with an accident.”

Hayssen whistled. “I’m beginning to see. But Flaherty was warned against taking the vial.”

She laughed. “I called him up and told him that it was poison. We covered Flaherty pretty thoroughly to make sure that Lehman couldn’t get to him. We even had a man stationed in Flaherty’s home as a butler.”

Hayssen thought of Smith, who was probably still out cold in his apartment.

The next question was a tough one. He could feel Cathy tense, expecting it.

“If neither Flaherty or Lehman were trying to kill me, who was?”

The answer came as a shock, even though he half expected it.

“We. were.”

“I... I don’t understand.”

She turned toward him, pleading.

“It’s one of the rules of time travel, Donald! We can’t let anybody in the past know that they are being visited by people from the future. We can’t allow the past to be changed, as it would be if people knew we were visiting them. If you change the past, you change the future. You alter the fabric of time!

“But there’s more to it than that. Do you think that people in the past would be content if they knew that there was a means of escape to a future that naturally offered a much better life than the age they were living in? Do you think that people would have incentive and ambition, knowing that everything that

could be already was? That every machine and invention had already been invented? They would search us out, Donald, and we would no longer be able to travel back in time. And if they got hold of the chrono-machines, the future would be faced with a wave of immigration from the past!”

“I see,” he said slowly. “And I was dangerous to you.”

She sighed and her head drooped. “Yes. You were a private detective, assigned to investigate Lehman. An ordinary person looking into Lehman’s past would have been dangerous. A private detective was much worse. And a private detective in possession of Flaherty’s vial of liquid was too dangerous to live. We thought that we could handle Lehman ourselves. But you were an unknown factor. You had to be eliminated.”

It all fit, he had to admit that. The newsboy and the clerk and the cop on the beat. All “history students” like Cathy was. When word went out that he was investigating Lehman, they had tried to kill him.

And they had succeeded in killing Jock.

Cathy read his face.

“I’m sorry about Jock,” she said. “But if you still want him, we can get him. I don’t think it would alter the future much if one small dog lives instead of dying.

His face was blank. “But you can’t bring objects back from the dead!”

She laughed at him.

“It’s very simple, Donald. Picture time as a highway with small roads that branch off, wander a little, and then come back to the main road. That’s what we can do. Travel back to just before Jock jumped on the mesh-net—the bedspread—and take him with us.”

Hayssen felt dizzy.

“Besides, Donald, how do you think that Lehman rescued you once the brick wall had toppled on you? He picked you up just before that.

“You don’t remember the wall, do you? Of course not. For you, it actually never happened. It’s a small part of the past that was changed. I know. You are about to say that it is a paradox. But that is only because you are foolish enough to believe that the future is dependent on a lot of little things. It isn’t. History is a tremendous canvas, Donald, and one or two very small brush strokes, if changed, would hardly alter the whole picture.”

“I shouldn’t complain,” he said. “After all, you saved my life.”

She blushed. “You were right when you accused me of eavesdropping. When I listened in on your talk with Flaherty that day, I reported to the others that you were after Lehman and were dangerous. We took a vote and the majority decided on eliminating you. I disagreed. I thought that perhaps you could be persuaded to drop the case.”

They do it for science, Hayssen thought, or they do it for friendship or they do it because of a maternal instinct. But they’ll never admit that they do it for love.

“You’re sure there wasn’t any personal reason?”

She was suddenly very furious, recalling his kiss when he had rescued her from Lehman.

“You are very foolish, Donald! I could never love a man thousands of years in the past. Besides, that

is expressly forbidden by the rules!”

He had her in his arms. She struggled for a moment and then abruptly relaxed.

“I love your cute futuristic accent.” he said softly.

“Is that all you love about me?” she murmured plaintively.

He kissed her mouth and she shut up.

“You’re more of a sociology student than a straight history student, aren’t you, Cathy?”

She smiled. “You’re right. How did you guess?”

“My business as a detective, darling. You knew what ink-sticks and flukum were when I mentioned them to you. It isn’t the sort of knowledge that any secretary would have.”

“I knew I had made a slip there. Like saying I had been named after a famous actress. You caught that one too, didn’t you?”

“I did, but it never made sense. And there’s something else that’s puzzling me. You called me at my apartment that one time to warn me. Why didn’t you call when your friends were waiting to kidnap me, the day I came home from work?”

“I did. Only you had gone home by then.”

It was nice to know she had been on his side all the way through, Hayssen thought.

“Well, what’ll we do about Lehman now?”

Cathy looked up.

“What do you mean ‘we’?”

He grinned. “The only safe place for me to be is with you, every minute. And I imagine you have plans about Lehman.”

She frowned. “Well, I guess I’ll make my report on him and then wait for further instructions.”

“We could keep after him,” he said slowly. “You and I. I still have a few scores to settle with him anyway.”

His neck still ached where Lehman’s powerful fingers had dug deep. And there was the slight matter of some bruises on Cathy. Lehman had done his best to get Cathy to co-operate, to betray her future.

“I was wondering, Cathy—is there any other age that Lehman could go to, where he could change things like he can here?”

“I don’t think so. Our bureau of research concluded that it would be easiest to change the fabric of time in the Twentieth Century.”

“Then he must still be around, still trying to get at Flaherty.”

She looked worried. “We have Flaherty pretty well covered but there’s always a chance—”

“Then we’ll have to find Lehman as soon as possible. I kind of wonder, though, if he would take off—go farther back in time—if we got too close to him.”

“We could follow in my own chrono-machine,” Cathy suggested. “But we’d have to get after him quickly.”

Hayssen suddenly thought of something. “Your apartment is a time-machine like Lehman’s office was, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“How big is it?”

“Fourteen by sixteen feet. You see, we have to live in them. You can’t park a time machine in an empty lot or leave it in a warehouse. So we live in them and have offices in them when we travel.” She laughed softly. “Sometimes we have trouble finding places where they fit. Once I had to rent a dungeon in Elizabethan England to hold mine!”

“You have your own power supply, don’t you?”

She nodded.

That explained the lack of use of the electric outlets, he thought.

He told her about Martin Green and how Green had been in his room one moment and gone the next.

“The man you call Green is one of Lehman’s confederates, Donald.”

The clerk in the license bureau probably was too, he thought. He could have notified Green that he was about to be visited and Green would naturally have been home when he called. Green had probably rented the room to lend a note of authenticity to Lehman’s references in case someone should look them up.

It wouldn’t have been at all difficult for Green to hop in a time machine and be in his apartment when Hayssen had called. The chrono-machines were maneuverable, in space, as well as time.

He kissed Cathy again. “Come on, we’ve got work to do.”

It was easier than he thought. Lehman was too anxious, too ready to try again. He found him through the papers. It was a business personal ad, just a small ad for a health salon. But the wording was such that it would catch the eye of an old duffer like Flaherty. It had good advertising appeal, hinting that you could be healthier and live longer if you came to the salon. And there was a catch line about cancer buried in the ad.

It could be just another quack, he thought. But it was too pat, too smoothly professional, for it to be anybody else but Lehman.

When he got to the address he was just a second too late. There was the same ghostly phosphorescence, the same shimmering outlines of Lehman, sneering openly at him.

He took a tiny “printed” transceiver from a brief case and gave Cathy the news.

“Go down to the street and wait for me, Donald. I’ll be there in exactly thirty seconds!” Her voice was warm and confident.

He ran down the stairs and out into the street.

Lehman’s new office had been in a building at the corner of Lawrence and Broadway. The streets were full of mid-afternoon shoppers and honking automobiles. A traffic cop stood at the intersection and

guided the streams of traffic. He probably tried to close a bookie, Hayssen thought briefly, and got sent to this corner as punishment.

He searched the air above the street closely. A few of the shoppers noted his concentration, stared at the open air, and then went on their way, nodding wisely to one another and pointing suggestively at him.

Suddenly there was a glimmering and then the shadowy outlines of the time machine came into view.

Traffic screeched to a halt and pedestrians were frozen in their tracks. There, ten feet above the street, was a full-sized room with transparent walls, hanging unsupported in midair!

Cathy slid the door open and lowered the machine until it just grazed the tops of the automobiles in the street.

Hayssen vaulted through the crowds and grasped the bottom of the open doorway. He pulled himself aboard and Cathy started the machine and they slowly disappeared from view.

He couldn't help grinning to himself. Several thousands of people had seen what had happened but it would be a miracle if there were ten who would agree on what they had seen.

The papers would run riot, he thought, but then some savant from the University would probably save the day by swearing that it was a mass hallucination and there were hundreds like it on record.

Cathy was busy at the instrument board and since there was nothing he could do to help, Hayssen bent his attention to the view through the transparent walls.

Below him, in the street he had just come from, he could see the traffic slowly moving backwards and people disappearing into stores. The whole colorful kaleidoscope was slowly winding up. In a minute or so all the traffic had disappeared and the light was dimming.

It was near morning, he thought, before the people started going to work.

Far in the distance, through one of the side walls, he spotted a little cube of red.

Cathy looked up from the instrumental panel at his question.

"That's Lehman's chrono-machine, Don. We'll have to follow him until he stops. There's nothing we can do until then."

He turned back to watch the city. The endless passage of days and nights had resolved itself into a featureless light gray that seemed to blanket the city. It was like seeing it through a very light fog. Some of the newer buildings were missing and a few older ones had taken their place.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of a human figure dressed in the style of the late Twenties and then they were going too fast to see people. Forests and brush had grown up and engulfed a good section of the city.

They were over the downtown area, now, about a mile from Lehman's machine. The Chicago Loop was vaguely outlined but the El structure had disappeared and so had the Board of Trade building and the Tribune Tower and other famous landmarks. In another heartbeat Chicago was nothing but a collection of wooden houses and mud streets. Then a stockade, nestling where the Chicago River and Lake Michigan joined together.

Lehman's machine slowly swung over the continent toward the East and Hayssen and Cathy followed. Chicago had disappeared entirely. Only prairie land and forests stood by the southern tip of

Lake Michigan. They were near the east coast before they hit cities again.

They hung over New York for half an hour or so and watched that fabulous port dwindle down to a tiny village of log huts and then disappear entirely into a stretch of virgin timber. A minute later a few small boats hastily put out from the Massachusetts coast and sped rapidly backwards to Europe.

They had followed Lehman over to England when Hayssen thought of something.

“Cathy, I kind of wonder why Flaherty took me off the case. That was something I hadn’t expected. I still can’t see why the old duffer did it.”

She smiled and an impish light shone in her eyes.

“All I did was tell him that I had looked you up and found that you were perfectly unreliable and that the best thing he could do was discharge you on the spot!”

He laughed and looked at the view outside the machine again. Cathy was standing at his side and his arm crept around her waist.

They were fleeing backwards in time, he thought, past the uncounted ages. They watched the fall of Rome and saw the glory that was Greece. They saw the pyramids gradually torn down, block by block slowly taken away and replaced in the enormous quarries. And Cathy told him how she had once been a priestess in a temple of Ra.

Civilization had receded now from the vast plains and forests of Europe. A small colony of thatched huts held sway for a moment along the banks of the Nile and then they, too, were gone. What human life there was existed in small isolated groups that lived in caves. Gradually these groups drifted back to the shelter and the comfort of the trees.

It was weird, Hayssen thought. From proud, upright man to brutish, beetle-browed creatures who caught and ate small animals raw because they hadn’t yet discovered the magic of fire.

Several hours after they had started, a call came for Cathy on the small radio that allowed communication between the students in the various eras.

She answered it and turned to Hayssen with a sober look on her face.

“We have eliminated Martin Green.”

Hayssen tore himself away from the view through the transparent walls.

“How?”

“Green stopped his chrono-machine in Spain during the Inquisition. One of the students there managed to wreck his machine and block his escape. Then, in the guise of a monk, he accused Green of heresy.”

He could see Green, fat and sweating, before the Inquisitors. He probably hadn’t been able to answer their questions satisfactorily so naturally he would be tortured to give the right answers. And poor Green probably hadn’t known them.

He tried to keep his attention on the scenery.

They had followed Lehman all over the globe now, a trip that was a fascinating tour of the ages.

Land bridges appeared between England and Europe and Asia and America. Then the continents themselves subtly altered shape and changed and flowed in an almost fluid fashion.

He saw great sheets of ice creep down from the poles and cover huge sections of America and Eurasia, and then crawl back even faster.

The time machine was gaining speed, rocketing through the years.

Huge forests of the carboniferous era sprang up and died overnight. They slowed down once over a continent that looked like a badly distorted map of Africa and Hayssen saw huge saurians wallowing in the swamps and lumbering over the lush plains.

Then the dinosaurs themselves dwindled and disappeared and the only life was the teeming forests of ferns and the little things that wriggled and dove in stagnant pools of water.

The machine was slowing down and Cathy maneuvered it closer to the reddish cube that was Lehman's.

The land was a nightmare now. Fields of rubble and tumbled stone and volcanic ash. The light was tinged a lurid red and active volcanoes belched huge columns of acrid smoke and flames high into the air.

The machine stopped.

Lehman's machine was about a city block from theirs. The door to it swung open and Lehman appeared, haggard and worn. He hesitated a moment and then he was outside, running on the soft, hot ash.

"Open the door, Cathy."

Her face was frightened.

"You don't need to, Don! We—"

"Open it, Cathy!"

She bit her lip and punched the button on the control board. The door slowly swung open.

It was like standing at the open door to a furnace. Waves of heat beat in at him and the air was hot and smelled of sulphur.

He stood there for a moment and then plunged outside after Lehman.

The acrid air cut into his lungs and brought tears to his eyes. Lehman was a dim figure in the distance, half obscured by wisps of smoke.

He could feel the heat from the hot ash seep through his soles and start to burn his feet. He wouldn't be able to stand it long. He'd have to catch up with Lehman in a hurry.

He caught Lehman on a rocky mound past which flowed a small stream of molten lava. Lehman had turned and was facing him, hate and determination on his face.

"You made a mistake, Hayssen," he shouted. "You came out unarmed!"

Lehman had a flame pistol in his hand and Hayssen promptly dropped to the ground. A beam of purple light flared through the air, cutting through the spot where he had been.

He couldn't stay there forever, he realized. The hot ground was burning his chest and the steamy, sulphurous vapors were eating at his nostrils.

He was on his feet, ducking and twisting toward Lehman. Lehman's eyes were red and watering and he had difficulty aiming at Hayssen.

Then Hayssen was on him, grabbing and twisting his arm. Lehman's fingers relaxed and the pistol fell into the lava stream.

They were fighting silently now, atop a cindery hill a billion years back in time. Lehman fought tenaciously and well, rolling with Hayssen's punches and slowly edging him toward the side of the mound. Thirty feet down, small flames leaped and ran over the lava.

They were practically naked, clothing that was wet with sweat long since having been burned off and torn. Hayssen could feel the soles of his feet blistering. His lungs choked and burned for oxygen.

He got Lehman by the throat and started to rain blows on his head. They twisted and rolled and then Lehman was up, half crazed with pain, backing off, scrambling back like a crab, one hand feeling along the ground for a loose rock.

Lehman was at the brink and suddenly his hand felt nothing beneath it. He screamed and scabbled for a grip.

His last scream died in a wailing gurgle.

Hayssen crawled to the edge and peered down. Something lay charred on the surface of the lava flow, something that flared for a minute with a bright harsh flame and then was nothing but flaky cinders.

He felt sick and turned to go back to the time machine.

There was no way back! The way was choked by fiery fingers of molten rock. And the hill he stood on was gradually being submerged by the flow.

He coughed and staggered back to the summit. There was nothing to do but wait for death.

A moment later he felt something settle nearby. It was Cathy and the time machine. He half fell and was half pulled through the open doorway. Then he felt cool hands caress his face and start to strip from his feet the twisted and burned pieces of leather that had once been his shoes.

Hayssen woke with a slow feeling of wonder. His blistered feet and seared lungs no longer pained him. He was dressed in clean, cool clothing and was lying on a couch in what seemed like an anteroom.

Cathy was smiling at him.

"You didn't expect to recover like this, did you?"

She sat on the couch and stroked his forehead. "Really, Don, don't you think that medical techniques have improved some since your time? Blistered feet and twisted ankles are as minor as a cold now."

He thought of the time when he had tripped over the I-beam at the apartment site and twisted his ankle. That had been a clue he had overlooked.

I wonder what the A.M.A. would think, he thought.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"We are to await judgment before the Council." Her smile was somewhat sad.

Hayssen was on his feet. "What for?"

“We changed things slightly, Don. When I picked you up off the streets of Chicago that time. If it hadn’t been for the distraction of the chrono-machine, a certain girl going shopping that day would have met and fallen in love with a young man who worked in one of the stores.

“It’s one of those things that hardly ever happen, Don, but it did and the future was changed. Their descendants disappeared from history. It wasn’t a large line or a strong one but there are several slight differences now. One of the students who was studying your time has disappeared, so has a member of the Council.”

He felt his heart sink. This council of hers wouldn’t be lenient, he thought.

She opened a door and he got up to follow her through it. He felt something rub his legs and he looked down.

Jock was looking up at him, patiently waiting for him to give some sign of recognition.

Cathy must have picked him up like she had said she could.

He knelt down and scratched the dog’s ears. “We’re in a fix, Jock. Maybe she shouldn’t have picked you up—”

He turned and followed Cathy into the council room. Jock padded silently after them.

The Council chamber was a huge, vault-shaped room the top arch of which was hundreds of feet above his head. The floor was a solid surface that looked like blue tinted marble and stretched for yards without a sign of a crack. They were the only ones in the room with the exception of eleven men sitting on a low dais at the exact center.

Once there had been twelve councilors, Hayssen thought.

There were no visible guards but Hayssen could conceive of nobody trying to break away or commit a violence. It would be like a murder inside a cathedral.

The dais seemed at least a full city block away. Their footsteps, echoed from the marble floor and re-echoed from the polished brilliance of the glassy walls. There were no corners to the room and he realized it was like being inside a shell casing, magnified a million times, where the floor is perfectly round and the walls rise to a cone overhead.

They were in front of the Council now. He stood ill at ease and watched Cathy bend her head slightly as a token of respect. He followed her lead and then stood there awkwardly awaiting what might happen next.

The old man who sat in the middle, apparently the head of the Council, looked at them quietly for a few minutes. Hayssen had a feeling that he was being inspected and weighed and found wanting.

“The case of Cathrinxa Cooper and one Donald Hayssen, an ancient from the Twentieth Century,” the old man droned. “The woman Cooper is charged with violating the Prime Injunction and revealing the existence of time travel to said Hayssen. Her motives apparently were confusing at the time but it is thought that personal desires entered into it. Recommended that she be confined, stripped of her status as watch-warden and student, and be prohibited from ever entering the time lanes again.”

He paused a moment. A murmur of assent rose from the other members of the Council. Catherine Cooper said nothing but stood there with bowed head. Hayssen moved closer to her and let his hand find her own.

The oldster started up again.

“As to Donald Hayssen, inadvertently drawn into an affair not dealing with his time and age, it is recommended that he be deprived of his memories of the event and sent back to his own time, to live his life as he will.”

Again the murmur of assent.

The Council started to file off the dais. At the same time Hayssen finally found his voice. It was a cracked and trembling voice but he managed to keep it fairly well under control.

He was nervous but that couldn't be helped. A Neanderthal brought before a group of Chicago aldermen would feel exactly like I do, Hayssen thought.

“I object!”

The Council looked interested. It had been a long, long time since anybody had objected to their decisions.

“I object,” he repeated. “I think you owe me something!”

The oldster pursed his lips. “Why do you think we owe you something?”

Hayssen tried to be as persuasive as possible.

“It's true that the students might have been able to take care of Lehman by themselves. But the fact is, they didn't. Lehman might easily have changed the past, and far more radically than Cathy and I did. Perhaps to the extent that your civilization as you know it—maybe even yourselves—would cease to exist!

“Cathy and I were the ones who followed Lehman.” His voice dropped. “We were the ones who killed Lehman. And we were the ones who saved you.”

The Council sat there quietly.

“I think you owe us something,” Hayssen repeated stubbornly.

“All right, Hayssen,” the oldster said finally. “What is it you want?”

“Cathy.”

The Council was in an uproar. Cathy moved next to him and he put his arm around her protectingly.

“If we grant the woman Cooper to be reprieved and allowed to live with you as your wife,” the oldster began, “has it occurred to you that she will live for a thousand years while your own life span is at most a hundred?”

“I've thought of that,” Hayssen said humbly, “and I've thought of a solution.”

He reached into his pants pocket and drew forth the vial of sparkling fluid. He had saved it and protected it for the last three weeks and he thanked the gods who had given him brains enough to leave it in the time machine when he had gone out after Lehman.

He drew the cork and drained the contents, then let the vial drop and shatter on the floor.

“That was the last of Lehman's vials,” he announced. “And there is no reason now why Cathy and I can't be together.”

The Council sat in silence. They seemed unable to come to a decision.

“If I may,” Hayssen pleaded, “I think I can suggest a solution.” They looked at him coldly.

“One of your Council members is missing and so is one of the students who was studying my era. Why can’t Catherine and I return to my time and continue there as she has been, studying the past and acting as watch-warden so people like Lehman can’t alter the past? What have you to lose?”

There was a sober discussion and then the head of the Council turned back to Hayssen. He had a hint of a smile on his face.

“So be it!”

They were in the time machine again, watching the ages roll past. Cathy stood next to him, her head resting lightly against his shoulder.

It was going to be a wonderful future, he thought. They would see the marvels of tomorrow, watch the race develop spaceships and grasp the moon and the planets and then reach out for the distant stars. They would watch the world come out of the dark ages and gradually become a better place in which to live.

But there would be heartbreak and pain, too. They would outlive their own children ten times over. They would see wars and poverty and famine past anything they had ever known.

And they would have to disappear every twenty years or so. If they didn’t, their friends and neighbors would get to wondering why he and Cathy were always so young, so youthful.

It wouldn’t be easy to see his children die and have to find a new living and make new friends every twenty years or so. But it would be worth it.

He would have a ringside seat at the drama of the ages, the ebb and flow of the tides of history.

He looked out of the transparent walls of the machine. The familiar towers and buildings of Chicago were slowly coming to view.

He bent down and kissed Catherine.

“I love you, Cathy,” he murmured softly.

It would be a wonderful future, he thought again. And the best part of it was, Catherine would always be with him.

For a thousand years—

The End

Notes and proofing history

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