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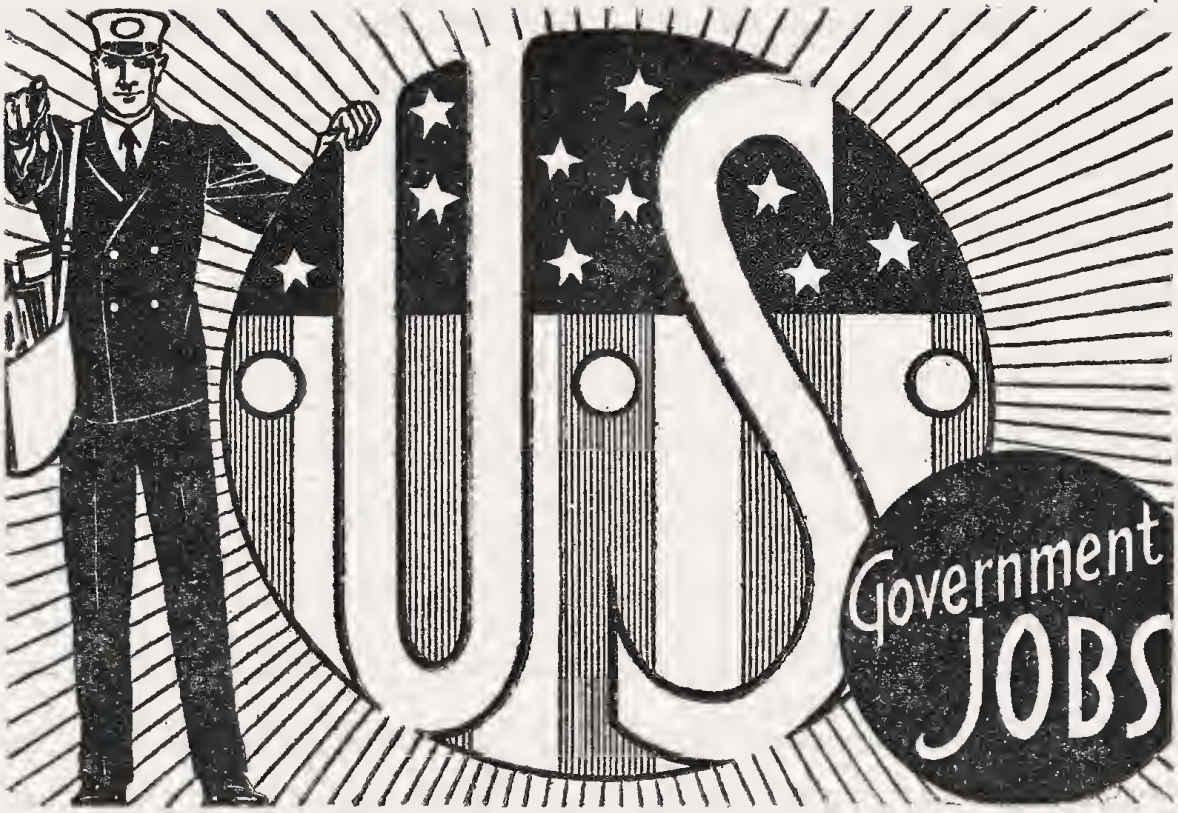


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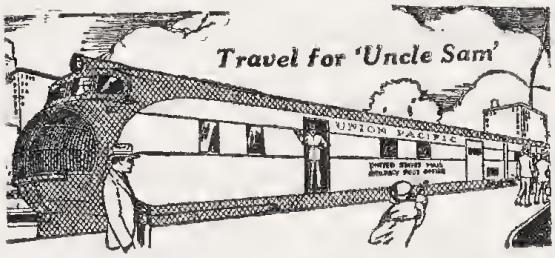


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# STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

VOLUME 1 FEBRUARY, 1941 NUMBER 1

## STIRRING SCIENCE-FICTION



## STIRRING FANTASY-FICTION



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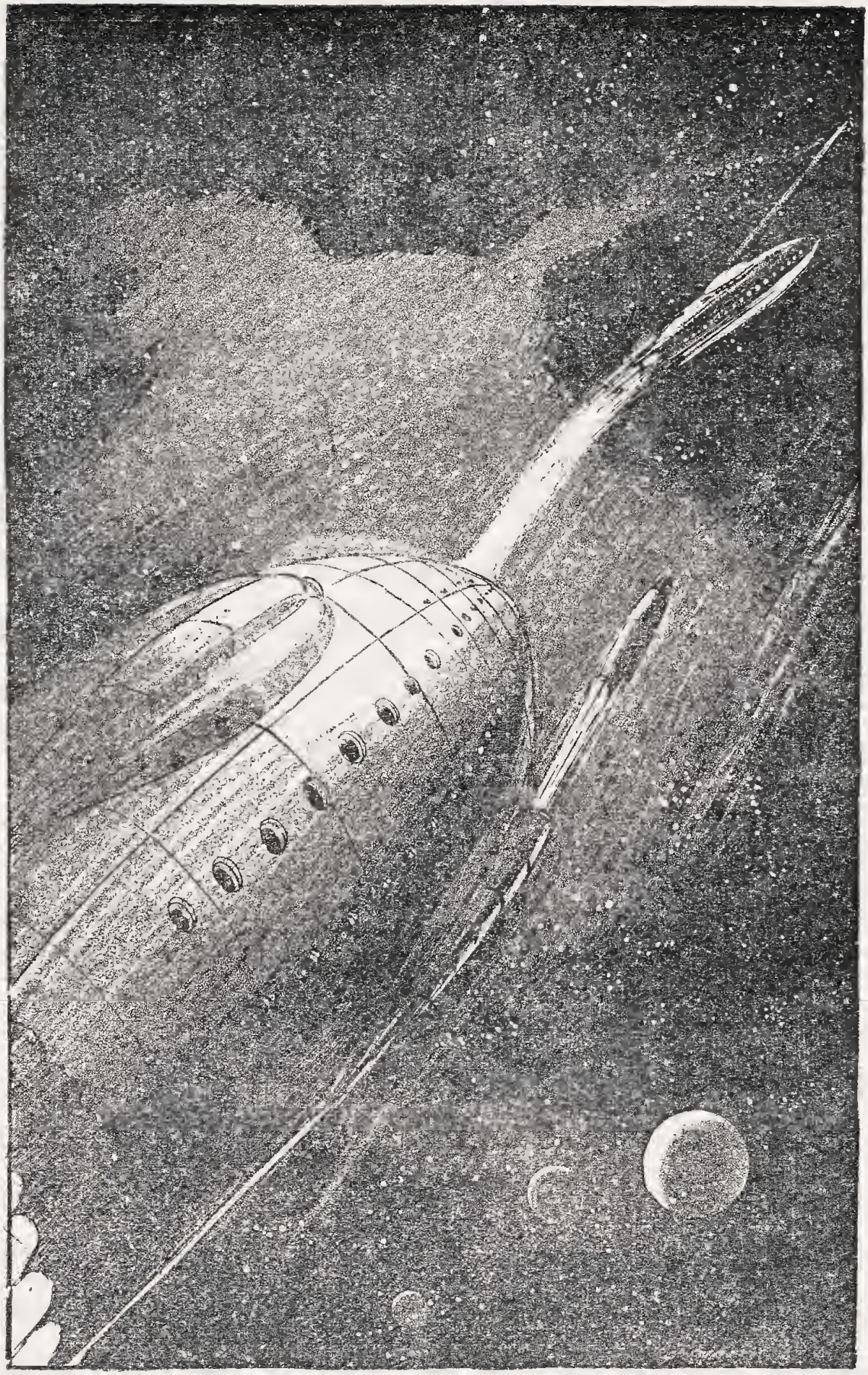


# DEAD CENTER

by

## S. D. Gottesman

(Author of "Before the Universe," "Trouble in Time," etc.)

Where is the exact dead center around which the entire cosmos revolves? For whoever can get there first can control the universe!

### CHAPTER 1

THE chilled-steel muzzle of the old-fashioned automatic swerved not an inch as Angel Maclure spoke: "I'm at your service, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

"Put that gun down," advised the shorter man easily. "We just didn't want any fuss. You have our blasters—we won't try anything."

Maclure grinned and lowered his pistol. "Right," he said. "I wasn't sure whether you'd mistaken me for a banker or somebody who deserved killing." He gestured at the blasters which he had wrenched from his assailants' hands. "Pick 'em up, boys." They did, and pocketed the deadly little tubes. "Now what did you want?"

The shorter, softer-spoken man began: "Excuse my friend—he's new in our service. He doesn't realize that we should have asked you first and then pulled the tubes. Understand?"

"All forgiven," said Maclure shortly. "I just didn't expect to be jumped two minutes after I get off a liner. It usually takes months before the police hear that I'm around. What's the service you mentioned?"

"Let's wait before I tell you anything," said the shorter man. He smiled confidingly. "You'll find out enough to blow your top off. Now, Mr. Maclure, you're supposed to come with us—whether of your own free will or by force. Understand?"

"Sure. Call me Angel. What's your tag?"

Maclure walked off down the street, flanked by the other two. He knew that their pocketed hands fingered blaster tubes, and that a false move might cost him a foot or arm. But he was interested by the distinctly peculiar set-up he had seemingly blundered into. The last year he had spent on Venus doing a big engineering job—barracks and installation—for one of the wildcat land promoter outfits. The new scar on his jaw he had acquired when he had stormed into the company offices with a payslip that he wanted cashed in full. He still carried the scar, but he had got his due amount, and with it a bit of interest lying in the back of the blasted safe. His trip to Earth again had been in quest of some much-needed relaxation; he had not taken kindly to being jumped by two strangers.

The shorter man hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps you've heard of me. Baldur Gaussman."

"Yeah?" asked Angel, impressed. "You did that first floating weather-station on Uranus, didn't you?"

"That's right," said Gaussman. He halted before a curtained taxi. "We

get in here," he said quietly. And they did.

As the taxi took off Angel didn't even try to figure out the direction they were taking; he knew that the involved loops and spins would hopelessly confuse him. He faced Gaussman quizzically. "This must be something awfully big," he said. "I mean using high-grade extra-terrestrial engineers for muscle-men on a simple pick-up job. Unless I guess wrong this is concerned with some pretty high finance."

The taller man took out his blaster again. "Don't try anything this time," he said thickly. "And don't get nosey before you're supposed to. You can get hurt doing that."

"Yeah?" asked the Angel, mildly eyeing him. "That struck home? Okay, pal." He turned again to Gaussman. "You must have been in this for several years, whatever it is," he said.

"That's right. My last job in the open was for Pluto Colony Corporation. I handled their mining in full." He glanced at his watch. "We're here," he said. As he spoke the muffled hum of the plane stopped abruptly and Angel felt it being swung about by a ground crew or turntable. He grinned.

"As I figure it," he said, "we've come about seventy-three miles due East after swinging around four times to throw my sense of direction off the track. I think we're in the heart of the New York financial district, on about the twentieth floor of a very high building."

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Gaussman, open-mouthed. "How did you do that?"

"Long years of training at the hands of my late beloved father, rest his martinet soul," said Angel. "You behold the only practical, authentic superman. No short cuts, no royal road—just hard work and development of everything I was born with. Let's go." He gestured at the door, which had opened to reveal a dim, luxurious corridor.

"Okay," said the taller man. "Hand over your gun." Maclure obeyed, smiling. "When I pass in front of the metal-detector," he said, "remember the eyelets in my shoes. They're a beryllium alloy."

"That's all right," said Gaussman. "We use an X-ray."

"Oh," said Angel shortly. "Then I might as well tell you now that I have a saw in my shoe and a gas-capsule in my zipper." He produced them and handed them over as he got out of the taxi.

"Thanks," said Gaussman. He pointed. "Through that door, Angel. You go in alone."

AS the door—heavy as a bank-vault's—closed ponderously behind him, Maclure instinctively recoiled at the terribly moist heat of the room he was in. In the dim red glow that came from the ceiling he could see little curls of steam in the air. His clothes were sopping wet. Absently he wiped his face with a soaked handkerchief.

A voice rang through the air—a thin, feeble whisper, magnified over a PA system. Normally it would be so faint that one could not even strain to hear it. It was the voice of an old man—a man so terribly old that intelligible speech was almost lost to him. It said: "Sit—there, Angel Maclure." A boxy chair glowed for a moment, and the young man sat. He was facing a soft sort of wall, which was red beneath the ceiling lights—a dull, bloody dried red. It slid aside slowly and in absolute silence.

This room was certainly the quietest place in all the world, Maclure thought. He could hear not only his heartbeat but the little swish of air passing through his bronchial tubes and the faint creaking of his joints as he moved his hand. These were sounds which the most elaborate stethoscope could bring out but faintly. Perhaps it was the quiet of the room, he thought, and perhaps it was the faint and mysterious aura which the figure, revealed by the sliding wall, diffused.

IT WAS the shape of a man—had been once, that is. For it was so terribly old that the ordinary attributes of humanity were gone from its decrepit frame. It could not move, for it was seated with legs crossed and arms folded over the shrivelled breast, these members held in place by padded clamps. The dully-glowing tangle of machinery about it bespoke artificial feeding and digestion; a myriad of tiny silvery pipes entering into its skin must have been man-made perspiration ducts. The eyes were lost behind ponderous lenses and scanning devices, and there was a sort of extended microphone that entered the very mouth of the creature. Soundgrids surrounded it in lieu of ears that had long since shrivelled into uselessness.

The lips unmoving, the creature spoke again: "You know me?" it whispered penetratingly.

Maclure dredged his memory for a moment, following the clue of the high, crusted brow of the creature. "You must be Mr. Sapphire, it seems," said Angel slowly.

"Excellent," whispered the creature. "I am Mr. Sapphire—of Planets Production Corporation, Extraterrestrial Mines. Amusements Syndicate, Publishers Associated—can you complete the list?"

"I think so," said Angel. "In spite of the very clever management it's almost obvious—after a rather penetrating study—that there is one fountainhead of finance from which springs almost all the industry and commerce and exchange in the system today. I had not suspected that you were at the head and still alive. One hundred and eighty years, isn't it?"

"Yes," whispered the creature. "One hundred and eighty years of life—if this is it. Now, Maclure, you do not know why I called you. It is because I am a proud man, and will not be humiliated by death. I shall live, Maclure. I shall live!" The voiceless whisper was still for a moment.

"And," suggested Angel, "you want me to help you?"

"Yes. I followed your childhood in the hands of your father. I saw you at twelve the equal of men four times your age, physically and mentally their actual equal. And I know that after the death of your father you chose to disappear. I knew you would do this, Maclure, for a while. It was your intention to slip into the way of the world and forget that you were the infinite superior of your fellows. Well—you succeeded, in your own mind at least. You are well on the way to forgetting that to those around you you are as a man among apes. That is so of all men except you—and me."

Angel grinned bitterly. "You struck it," he said. "I think you and I stand alone in the world. I was the victim of my father's ambition. What are you?"

"Life eternal," sounded the voiceless whisper. "To watch the world and its aspects—to mould it as I will,

and eventually—destroy it! Destroy it and fashion another! Maclure, medicine has done all for me that it can. I am the final example of the surgical art. Once my brain was transplanted into a youthful body, but even I could not stand the shock. I died, and was revived only with the greatest difficulty.

"Three times since then I have died. The last time it took three hours to revive me. Ten minutes more and I would never have lived again. Under the laws of nature I can last no longer. And so you must come to my rescue."

"How am I to do that?" demanded Angel.

"For me," breathed Mr. Sapphire, "you will suspend these laws. Do not interrupt. I can give you only a few minutes more before I retire for a treatment.

"All creation is in motion, we know. So we are taught. Earth moves about the sun, sun about the great hub of the galaxy, the galaxy in a mighty circle about its own directrix — space itself, 'ether,' so called, is like a mighty ball rolling and tumbling through unimaginable chaos. To this outside of space we cannot attain, for to go to the end of space is to return to the starting point.

"But there is another locus in space—wholly unique, wholly at variance with any other time-and-space sector that may be marked off. Can you conceive of it?"

Angel, his brows closely knit, shot out: "The vortex! The hub around which space revolves—space at rest and absolutely without motion!"

With the faintest suggestion of mockery in his voice Mr. Sapphire whispered, "The celebrated superman has it. Utterly unique and lawless—or perhaps with laws of its own? At any rate it must be obvious that the limitations which bind matter in space are removed in this vortex of Dead Center."

"And I am to find it and release a certain amount of matter, your body, from certain restrictions, that is, human decrepitude?" countered Angel.

"That is it. You will work for me?"

"Damn right I will," exploded Angel. "And not for your money or anything you have to offer—but just for the kick of finding your quiet spot and doping it out!"

"That," whispered Mr. Sapphire, "is how I had estimated it." The wall began to slide back into place again, hiding his shriveled body and tangle of machinery, when he spoke again: "Use the metal tab lying on that table." He was gone.

Angel looked about, and as a table lit up with a little flash, he picked a tag of some shiny stuff from it and pocketed the thing. He heard the ponderous door grind open behind him.

## CHAPTER II

ANGEL, his mind buzzing with figures and colossal statistics, had aimlessly wandered into the proving room. Assistants leaped to attention, for he was known as a captain in the Tri-Planet Guard. And the ship and plotting were, of course, official business. That was only one of the many ways in which his work had been made easier. But work it still was—the hardest, most gruelling kind of work of which any man could be capable. The first job he had ordered had been the construction of immense calculating machines of a wholly novel type. He could not waste his own

time and his own energy on the job of simple mathematics. He just showed up with the equations and theoretical work well mapped out and let the machines or his assistants finish it off.

"At ease," he called. "Get back to work, kids." He ambled over to the main structural forge and confronted the foreman. "Rawson," he said, "as I planned it this job should be finished by now."

Rawson, burly and hard, stared at the Angel with something like contempt. "You planned wrong," he said, and spat.

Angel caught him flat-footed. After one belt on the chin Rawson was down and out. "How much longer on this job?" he asked a helper.

"Nearly done now, sir. Who's stuck with the proving-ground tests?"

"Nobody's stuck. I'm taking her out myself."

With something like concern the helper eyed Maclure. "I don't know, sir," he volunteered. "In my opinion it isn't safe."

"Thanks," said the Angel with a grin. "That's what we aim to find out." He climbed into the ship—small and stubby, with unorthodox fins and not a sign of a respectable atmospheric or spacial drive-unit, and nosed around. He grunted with satisfaction. No spit-and-polish about this job—just solid work. To the men who were working a buffer-wheel against the hull he called, "That's enough. I'm taking her out now." They touched their caps, and there was much whispering as Maclure closed the bulkhead.

WITH a light, sure touch he fingered the controls and eased the ship inches off the ground, floating it to the take-off field, deeply furrowed with the scars of thousands of departing rockets. There was no fanfare or hullabaloo as he depressed the engraved silver bar on the extreme right of the dash. But in response to that finger-touch the ship simply vanished from the few observers and a gale whipped their clothes about them.

Maclure was again in the black of space, the blinking stars lancing through the infinitely tough plastic windows. And he was travelling at a speed which had never before been approached by any man. "Huh!" he grunted. "I always knew I could work it out." He saw the moon in the distance—about a million miles behind and to starboard.

Deliberately he cut into the plane of the ecliptic, determined to take on any meteorites that might be coming. He had a deflection device that needed testing.

Through the clear window before him he saw a jagged chunk of rock far off, glinting in the sun. Deliberately he set out to intersect with its path. As they met there was a tension in the atmosphere of the ship that set his hair on end. But there was no shock as he met the meteorite; he did not meet it at all, for when it was about a yard from the ship it shimmered and seemed to vanish.

Maclure was satisfied; the distortion unit was in order. And the chances of meeting anything so freakish as a meteorite were so small that he did not need any further protection. He was whistling happily as he headed back to Earth.

Then, abruptly, there was a peculiar chiming resonance to the idling whisper of the drive-units. And in the back of Angel's head a little chord seemed to sound. It was like something remembered and for-

gotten again. Scarcely knowing what he was saying and not caring at all he called softly: "I can hear you!"

The chiming sound mounted shrilly, seemed to be struggling to form words. Finally, in a silvery tinkle of language he heard: "We're superhet with your malloidin coils. Can't keep it up like this. Full stop —all power in malloidin for reception. Okay?"

That, at least, he could understand. Someone had performed the almost impossible task of superhetrodyning some sort of nodular wave of constant phase-velocity into a coil set up as an anchor-band! He groaned at the thought of the power it must have taken and flung the ship to a halt, reversing his power to flow through the anchoring coil that was receiving the message. It sounded again: "That's better. Can you make it 7:7:3, please?"

He snapped insulated gloves on his hands and adjusted the armature windings. "God knows where they get their juice from," he thought. "But I hope they have plenty of it."

"We can't hear you, Angel Maclure," said the voice from the coils. "This must be going through to you, though, because you've followed our requests. I can't get detailed, because this little message will burn out every power-plant we have. Do not return to Earth. Do not return to Earth. Do you get that? Come instead to coordinates x-3, y-4.5, z-.1—get that? three, four point five, point one. We'll be able to contact you further there. But whatever you do, don't return to Earth. Signing off—"

The metallic voice clicked into silence. Maclure, mind racing, grabbed for a star-map. The coordinates indicated in the message were those of a fairly distant and thinly-filled sector of space. He hesitated. Why the hell not? No man had ever been beyond Pluto, but was he a man?

He grinned when he remembered his tight-fisted, close-mouthed father who had made him what he was with a gruelling course of training that began actually before he was born.

Yes, he decided, he was a man all right, and with all of a man's insatiable curiosity he set his course for the distant cubic parsec that was indicated by the coordinates he had so strangely heard through a drive-unit receiver. And with all the fantastic speed of which his craft was capable he did not want to drive it beyond its capacity. Having set the controls he relaxed in a sort of trance in preparation for his week-long trip.

AFTER locating himself among the unfamiliar stars of his destination he rearranged his coils. "That wasn't necessary," they said almost immediately in the metallic chimes. "We're coming out for you." Then they fell silent. But minutes later a craft hove alongside and fastened onto his hull with a sort of sucker arrangement. It was no larger than his own, but somehow sleeker and simpler in its lines.

They had clamped right over his bulkhead and were hammering on it. He opened up, trusting to luck and logic that their atmosphere was not chlorinous. "Come in," he called.

"Thanks," said the foremost of three ordinary individuals. "My name's Jackson."

"Yeah?" asked Maclure, staring at him hard. He was dressed exactly as Maclure was dressed, and his features were only slightly different.

Jackson smiled deprecatingly. "You're right," he said. "But you can call me Jackson anyway. I'd rather not show you my real shape. Okay?"

"You should know best," shrugged the Angel. "Now tell me what's up."

"Gladly," said Jackson, settling himself in a chair with a curiously loose-jointed gesture. "You're not very much of a superman, you know."

"Pardon the contradiction," said the Angel ominously, "But I happen to know for a fact that I'm very far above the normal human being."

"Intellectually," said Jackson. "Not emotionally. And that's very important. You don't mind my speaking plainly?"

"Not at all."

"Very well. You're much like an extremely brilliant child. You have a downright genius for mechanics and physical sciences, but your understanding of human relationships is very sub-average. That must be why you were so badly taken in by Mr. Sapphire."

"Taken in?" reflected the Angel. "I don't think he fooled me. I knew that he'd try to get me out of the way—murder or otherwise—as soon as he got what he wanted from me. I trusted myself to take care of him."

"Good, but not reasoned far enough. Did it ever strike you that Mr. Sapphire—as you persist in thinking of him—was not a free agent? That he was—ah—grinding somebody else's axe?"

"Holy smokes!" yelped Maclure. The strange discrepancies which he had bundled into the back of his mind suddenly resolved themselves into a frightening pattern.

"Exactly," smiled Jackson. "You are the key piece in the problem. Both sides must take care of you, for if you are lost the game is at an end. Shall I begin at the beginning?"

"You'd better," said the Angel weakly.

"Very well," began Jackson. "Our opponents are known to us as the Morlens; we are the Amters. For some thousands of your years there has been an intermittent warfare going on between us. You must take my word for it that it is they who are bent on destroying us and that we act only in self defense. They are situated about nine parsecs away from us, which makes attack a difficult and dangerous undertaking, yet they have not hesitated to risk their entire generations in desperate attempts to wipe us out.

"Of late there had been little of that; when our spies reported they informed us that an intensive psychological campaign was going on against us. This we could repulse with ease. But we could not very well block their attempts to gain mental domination of Earth and its solar system. They did not, of course, control every individual, but they reached sufficient key-persons like Mr. Sapphire to be nearly masters of your world."

"One moment," interrupted the Angel. "I can assure you that Mr. Sapphire knew that they were at work on him. I also believe that he only pretended submission. His ends were his own."

"Perhaps," Jackson shrugged. "At any rate, what they needed was mechanical and physical genius. And you, Angel Maclure, are the outstanding mechanical and physical genius of the universe. You can solve problems that no other mind could even approach. And the first of such problems was the one of Dead Center, which we have been investigating for many generations."

"Investigating?" snapped Angel. "How?"

"Purely psychological investigations, such as the projection of minds within the region of the Center. This

has been actually a desperate race against the Morlens, for we believe that who is master of the Center is master of the universe."

"That's probably true enough," said Maclure thoughtfully. "And so you make your bid for my support?"

"We do," said Jackson somberly.

"That's nice," snapped the Angel viciously. "Now get this and get it straight: I'm not playing anybody's game but my own, and if helping you out against the damn Morlens helps me out I'll do it. On those terms—okay?"

"Okay," said Jackson gravely. "And you'd better begin helping us out pretty fast, because your benefactor Sapphire either relayed to or had his mind read by the Morlens, and they know the results of your calculations. They know where the Center is and, in a way, how to get there."

"Yeah," jeered the Angel. "Give me a piece of land and some tools and I'll build you a space-ship that'll make this thing look like a waterbug for size and speed!"

"Haw!" laughed Jackson. "More damn fun!"

## CHAPTER III

MACLURE had mostly duplicated the calculating work he had done back on Earth, working speedily and accurately though somehow depressed by the strangeness of the planet on which he had landed. Not yet had he seen the actual shapes of the Amters; they preferred to show themselves as almost replicas of his own face and body. Jackson had become his guide and companion.

"Look," said the Angel, glowing with pride. "Something new." He indicated a little sphere of silvery metal that looked somehow infinitely heavy. It rested ponderously on a concrete table well braced with steel beams, and even that sagged beneath it.

Jackson inspected the thing. "Weapon?" he asked.

"Darn tootin', friend! I found this as a by-product of warp-synthesis. The base is osmium, the heaviest by volume of any natural element. And over that is a film one molecule thick of neutronium itself. How do you like it?"

"How do you use it?" asked Jackson cautiously.

"Mix up about a hundred of these things and when you get near enough to an enemy scoot them out into space. And unless they have a damned efficient screen they'll be riddled by simple contact with the things."

"Um," grunted Jackson. "Child's play, of course. When does the real job begin?"

"Any minute now, if you mean the ship. And I have some bad news for you," Maclure added grimly. "You boys're supposed to be the prime exponents of hypnotism and telepathy in the galaxy, right?"

"I think we are," snapped Jackson.

"Well, laugh this off: I happened to get curious about the Morlens so I rigged up a projection gimmick that traces interferences of the eighth magnitude. Or, to translate my terms back into yours, a thought detector."

"Go on, Angel. I think I know what you found," said Jackson slowly. "The Morlens—they're at it?"

"Right," said the Angel. "My setup showed a complete blanketing spy system. The minds of all workers on the calculators were being picked over carefully. In some cases they even substituted Morlen personalities

for the workers' and used their eyes. Naturally the Morlens didn't try to tap your mind or mine; we would have known it. I did what I could—put up a dome screen of counter-vibrations that seem to shut off our friends. But—what do you think?"

"You have more to tell me," said Jackson. "Go on."

"At it again?" asked Maclure with a grin. "Okay, mind-reader. Lamp this gimmick." He opened a cabinet and produced a small, flimsy device. "The engineering's pretty sound on this," he said, "but I'm still shaky on the psycho-manipulation you folks taught me last week. We'll see if it works."

He plugged leads and conductors into ponderously insulated power-pickups and laughed as Jackson laid a worried hand on his.

"That's fixed," he said. "I need all the juice I can get to bring over a vidio beam. Not wanting to blow out your power stations again I built a little thing of my own." Angel patted a stubby little casing of thick, tough glass. "Underneath that baby's hide," he said, "is $3^9$ volts. Not that I'll ever need anything near that."

THE Angel's deft fingers made minute adjustments within the spidery frame of his new gimmick; finally he connected it with a standard television screen. "Lights out," he said as he snapped the switch. The room went dark.

Slowly, with writhing worms of light wriggling across the ground glass screen, the scene illuminated and went into full color. Maclure grimaced at the fantastic spectacle. The things he saw—!

The Morlens on whom he had focused, nine parsecs away, were hideous creatures. Like giant crabs in a way, and partly suggestions of octopi, they sprawled horribly over machinery and furniture. "That them?" he asked hoarsely.

"The Morlens," said Jackson. "Do you wonder that I have used my hypnotic powers to mask from you my own form?"

"I suspected that you were the same race," said Maclure. He turned again to the screen, and cut in the sound factor. A dull, clacking babble sounded from the speaker. "You know their language?"

Jackson shook his head. "They aren't talking language. It's a code that can't be broken without a key. They don't underestimate you, Angel. What else has the gimmick got?"

"Psycho circuit. If the damn thing works we won't need to break their code. We'll be able to tap their thoughts. Shall I try it? The most I've done before was to scout around back on Earth. Couldn't find much there, though. Okay?"

"Okay," snapped Jackson. "You only live once."

Delicately, with the most painful precision, knowing well that a too sudden and too amplified projection of the Morlens' minds would blow his mind out the way a thunderclap could deafen him, he turned the tiny screws of the gimmick.

The Angel winced and set his jaws as a surge of hate filled the room. It was the Morlens, far across the galaxy, who were the source. Like the pulsing roar of a dynamo the undersurge of detestation and the will to destroy beat into his brain. Hastily he turned down the psycho band, and concrete thoughts emerged from the welter of elemental emotion that rushed from the screen.

It took Maclure only a moment to solve the unfamiliar thought-patterns of the Morlens. One of them, in some commanding position, was

addressing the rest in cold, measured tones. The Angel's mind strained at the effort of encompassing the weird concepts and imagery of the creatures.

". . . increase of destruction," the Morlen was saying. "Not very well pleased with the technique displayed he has come to lend the weight of his personality and training to our efforts. I remind you that I am his direct representative. I remind you that any sort of rebellion is futility, for his innate ability is such and his immense experience is such that he can cope with any problem set him. It was he who devised the spy system which was successfully operated on the Amters up to a short time ago when their prodigy from Earth began to understand. It was he who devised the penetration-proof screen which shields us from any outside detection, either physical or intellectual."

"They think so," interjected the Angel grimly. He averted his eyes from the screen.

JACKSON stirred at his side. "Look!" he gasped.

There was a slow motion on the wall of the room in which the Morlens were gathered. And there entered a crawling vehicle of glass, surrounded by a tangle of machinery slick with moisture. Within the glass Maclure saw, obscured by moisture and drifts of steam, the shriveled, lofty, crusted brow of Mr. Sapphire.

The eyes, behind their ponderous lenses, turned directly on the Angel. "Maclure," the voiceless whisper rang out. "Now you should know who is your adversary. I cannot hear you, but I know you have a one-way setup on this room. A man does not meditate for one hundred years without a moment's pause and fail to learn many things about his own mind and the minds of others. To you I was a financier, I think. Now learn your error.

"It is true that my passion is for life and being. And I will brook no opposition in the way of that end. I waited the long years for you to reach the full colossal apex of your genius; a genius so profound that you yourself do not realize one tenth of its capacities.

"Maclure, you will come to heel or be crushed. You have fulfilled your mission. You have plotted the course to Dead Center, and you have given me the faster-than-light drive which enables me to see for the first time that race of beings over whom I have for half a century been unquestioned master. My Morlens are my hands; they will duplicate for me the drive which you have devised for the Amters. Now I offer you your choice:

"Either cut your Amters dead, for from them you have nothing to gain, or refuse me and suffer the terrible consequences. For you have nothing to offer me, Angel. All you can do with the Center I now know. Only on the chance that you will in the future be of use to me do I offer to spare you. What is your answer?" The aged monster whispered in a tone of mockery: "I shall know by your actions. Within the hour I start for the Center in a perfect duplicate of the ship you have devised for your friends. Follow or oppose and you shall take the consequences. Now cut off!"

And from the ancient creature's mind there radiated such a stream of destructive hate that the Angel winced and shut off the machine at its power lead. "Mr. Sapphire," he meditated aloud, "is not all that I had thought him to be."

Jackson grinned feebly. "What're you going to do, Maclure?"

The Angel said thoughtfully: "Mr. Sapphire must not get to the Center before us. You heard that he was starting—we must follow. And we must work on the way."

"He's terribly strong," said Jackson. "Terribly strong now that he has his own mind and a good part of yours in his grasp. How do we lick his psychological lead?"

"The only way I can and with the only weapons I got, chum. Cold science and brainwork. Now roll out that bus we have and collect the star-maps I got up. Round up every top-notch intellect you have and slug them if you have to, but at any cost get them into the ship. We're going to Dead Center, and it's a long, hard trip."

COMFORTABLY ensconced in the cabin of the *Memnon*, which was the altogether cryptic name Maclure had given the Center ship, Jackson was listening worriedly.

"The directive factor in the course," said Angel, "is not where we're going but how we get there. Thus it's nothing so simple as getting into the fourth dimension, because that's a cognate field to ours and a very big place. Dead Center is wholly unique, therefore there's only one way to get there."

"And finding out that way," interjected Jackson, "was what had you in a trance for thirty hours mumbling and raving about matrix mechanics and quintessimal noduloids. Right?"

"Right," admitted Angel, shuddering a little at the recollection. "Half of the math was the most incredibly advanced stuff that you have to devote a lifetime to, and the rest I made up myself. Look." He gestured outside the window of the ship.

Obediently Jackson stared through the plastic transparency at the absolute, desolate bleakness that was everywhere around them. In spite of the small, sickening sensation in the stomach they might as well have been stranded in space instead of rushing wildly at almost the fourth power of light's speed into nothing and still more nothing. He tore his eyes away. "Quite a sight," he said.

"Yeah. And do you know where we're going?"

"As far as I can see you've nearly reached the limit of space, Angel. Unless my math is greatly at fault you're going to find that we've been traveling for a month to find ourselves back where we started from. What's the kicker you're holding?"

"The kicker, as you vulgarly call it," said Maclure, "is a neat bit of math that I doped out for myself. A few years ago I stumbled on the interesting fact that there is a natural limit to the speed-direction ratio as such. I mean, there are certain directions we can go in as long as we stay beneath this limiting constant, which I refer to as J after my Uncle Joe. Anyway, when you scrounge around with some triple integration you find out what this limiting constant is. I have found it to be the speed of light to the fifth power.

"Once you go over that the fences are down. You have another direction you can go in, and that's the direction we're going to take. Reason I went way out here, nearly to the end of space, is because when we go in that direction something spectacular ought to happen to any surrounding matter. Ready to increase speed now you know?"

"Okay," said Jackson briefly.

"You're the boss. Murphy!" Another of the Amters, who was handling the controls, nodded. "Over the top?" he asked grinning.

"Darn tootin', Murph," said Angel. "Hold fast, friends."

Murphy depressed the little silver bar still farther, in one savage stab. Actually they felt the ship leap ahead colossally, its beams straining under the unimaginable atomic stress and bombardment to which it was being subjected. Angel, his eyes on the port, gasped as he saw the jet black of space writhe with a welter of colors. "This is it," he snapped thinly. He turned a wheel at his hand, spinning it into the wall.

There was a throbbing of valves and pistons as great directive pumps ponderously went into action, grasping out to grip onto the very fabric of space itself. The ship changed direction then, in some weird and unexplainable manner. Speaking mathematically, the equation of the ship's dynamics altered as the factor J inoperated conversely. But from what Angel saw he doubted all his math and science. This firmest mind in the galaxy wondered if it were going mad.

## CHAPTER IV

BENEATH them swam an incalculably huge plain, curiously dim under a diffused light from high overhead. The vast expanse stretched as far as the eye could see, and there were moving lumps on its surface that shifted strangely without seeming to move.

Jackson screamed grotesquely. Then, as Angel caught his eye and held it he smiled sheepishly. "Imagine!" he grinned. "Me going off my rocker! But this place looks like hell to me, Angel—honest it does. What do you make of it?"

"Don't know," said the Angel quietly. "But it's more than appearances that makes an Amter scream that way. What did you pick up?"

"Can't fool you, I guess. I felt something — a very strong, clear thought band. And I didn't like it one little bit. Now that's unusual. There isn't a single thought-pattern in creation that's that way. Usually your feelings are mixed. Once you really get into a person's mind you find out that you can't hate him. You're bound to find something good.

"Even Mr. Sapphire, that horrid old octopus, has a spark of worship in him, and a very fine, keen feeling for beauty. But the band I just got—" Jackson shuddered and looked sick.

"We're soaring, Murph," directed Maclure. The ship skimmed lightly over the plain, the Angel busily staring through the ports. "Whatever the damn things are," he commented, "they don't move in any normal perceivable manner. They don't traverse space, I think. Just see they're in one place and then in another. You meet some very strange people in these parts, I think."

Crash! The ship came to a sickening halt. Angel, not wasting a word, pulled his blue-steel automatics. "The only original and authentic superman," he said in hard, even tones, "feels that dirty work is being done."

The *Memnon* settled to the ground and was surrounded by the big, grey lumps with the disconcerting ability to move without moving. Jackson shuddered. "That's it," he whispered. "Thoughtband of pure evil and hate. I could kill them for just existing."

"Hold it," said the Angel quietly. "See if you can get a message from

them. I think something's coming through."

They must have been concentrating on the occupants of the craft, for even he could feel it without effort, and to the psychologically trained and sensitive Amters it came as a buffeting blow. "Come out!" was the message, sent with deadly dull insistence and power. "Come out! Come out! Come out!"

Angel pocketed his guns. "We'd better," he said. "If I make no mistake these people can back themselves up. And if they had any intention of destroying us right out I think they could have done it."

The seven Amters and Angel filed from the ship into the chill, sweetish air of the dim plain. The grey lumps surrounded them, confronting Angel. He studied the creatures and saw that they had rudimentary features. As he guessed at their evolution they must be the end-product of an intensely intellectual and emotional race. All this, of course, subject to alteration by the unguessable influence of their surroundings.

The stolid, battering thought-waves came again. "Mr. Sapphire told us of you. He has threatened us and we know that he is powerful. We shall hold you for his disposal. He said that you were swifter than he but not as powerful and we should not fear you. If you do not wish us to believe that you must prove otherwise."

"Ask him," Angel said to Jackson, "how Mr. Sapphire threatened them."

Jackson knit his brows and Maclure could feel the pulsing communication. Promptly the creatures answered: "He locked us into time. He is very wise and knows things about time that we do not."

They were either primitive or degenerate, thought Maclure, and probably the latter from their advanced physical make-up. Perhaps he could try the time stunt himself. He whipped out a minute set of tools and selected a fairly complicated little projector. He varied the pitch of its lenses and filaments rapidly and addressed the creatures directly: "As Mr. Sapphire has done I can too. See!"

He snapped on the device, praying that his estimate of the natural properties of this half-world had not gone awry. And he had not prayed in vain, for all those creatures whom the little beam of ionized air impinged on froze stiffly into a full-fledged stoppage in time. "Let Mr. Sapphire beat that!" he grunted, releasing them.

CRASH! The titanic detonation of a trinite bomb shattered the ground a half-mile away into a soft-spreading fog. Through the trembling air there spread the terrible whisper of the master of Morlens: "Can and will, Angel! I warned you. You were faster, but I got to them first. Look up!"

Above them was hanging a sister-craft to the *Memnon*, but a sickly green in hue. Said Sapphire: "Do not move or I shall release the second bomb. You underestimated these good people of mine. They are the Grey Watchers of the Silence. They are the ones to whom hate is all, and who will aid no good. With their aid I located you in your little display and with their aid I reached this world only a moment after you. And with their aid I shall become master of the Center, Angel Maclure. Now speak if you wish."

"Muscles," prayed the Angel, "do your damndest!" Acting independently his two hands leaped from his

pockets grasping the snub-nosed automatics that he knew so well. While the left hand blasted the closing circle of the Watchers into pulpy fragments, the right hand was pouring a steady stream of explosive pellets into the belly of the craft above. With such stunning speed had he acted that it was not the fifth part of a second before the grey circle around them had been broken wide open and the ship above was heeling over sickly with a gaping, shattered wound in its hull.

"Come on!" spat Maclure to the Amters. And in another fifth of a second they were in the ship and tearing wildly over the grey plain. "It'll take them ten minutes at least to get going with what I did to them. Make tracks! In ten minutes we land and get to work!"

ABOUT them rose the gigantic ribs of the super-spacer that Angel Maclure had undertaken to build. Nervously he glanced at his watch to confirm his own acute time-sense. "Three hours since we landed," he complained. "Can't you put some steam into it?"

"They're doing their best," said Jackson. "We aren't all supermen, y' know. About this statistics business here—how do you arrive at these coordinates?"

"Never mind," snapped Angel. "If Maclure says it's right you can bet your boots on it. We haven't time to check."

"Then that finishes the calculations," yawned Jackson. "By your own words the Dead Center should rise from some unidentified spot in this damn plain some minutes hence."

"Right. And what it'll look like and how we'll know we've found it is only one of the things I don't know. That's where Mr. Sapphire has the lead on us again. He's hand-in-glove with the Watchers, and if any race is expert on the Center they must be. Suppose you turn your mind to the psychological problem of what in Hades these Watchers expect to get out of all this."

"Evil, I think," said Jackson slowly. "Nothing but their unalloyed instinct for mischief and destruction. You may find it hard to understand that line of thinking; I, being of the same basic stock as the Morlens do not. They are a shallow example of that perfection toward which the Watchers strive. This is a very strange land, Angel."

"I know that," snapped Maclure. 'And I don't like it one bit more than I have to. The sooner we get our work done and well done, I'm making tracks And the Center, once I've fixed Mr. Sapphire, can go plumb to hell and gone." He stared at the ship which was reaching completion. "Get that on!" he roared as a crew of three gingerly swung his original power-unit into place.

Jackson smiled quietly. "How much longer?" he asked.

"Dunno," said Angel. "But that's the last plate. Quite a hull we have there—what with transmutation and things. I didn't think it'd work with the elements of this world, but why not? Good job, anyway. Thousand yards from stem to stem, fifty yards from keel to truck. I don't see how they can crack her." But his face showed lines of worry.

"What's eating you?" asked Jackson.

"Mr. Sapphire," exploded Angel. "Always a jump ahead of us everywhere we turn—what do you make of it? How can we be sure there isn't a catch to the whole business?"

"I know the feeling," said Jackson. "Hey!" he yelled suddenly,

looking up. One of the workers who had been spreading on a paste which dried to the metal of the hull, was gesturing horribly as though in a convulsive fit. His voice reached them in a strangled wail, and then suddenly he was himself again, waving cheerily.

"Thought I was going to fall!" he called.

"Yeah?" asked Jackson. He snapped a little tube from his pocket and cold-bloodedly rayed the Amter. He fell horribly charred.

The Angel incinerated the corpse with his own heat-ray and turned to Jackson. "You must have had a reason for that," he commented. "What was it?"

"He wasn't our man," said Jackson, shaken. "They've found where we are and got some other mind into his body. It was the other one that I killed; our man was dead already."

"Ah," said Angel. "Let's get out of this." He sprang into the half-finished ship. "Hold fast and keep on working," he roared to the men who were clinging to the framework. Then he took off, handling the immense control-board with the ease of a master.

In only a few minutes the rest of the men came inside. The ship was not luxurious but it was roomy and fast, and the hull was stored with weapons and screen-projectors of immense power. "Going up," said the Angel. Delighting in the smooth-handling speed of the immense craft he zoomed high into the thin air of the weird half-world.

"Look," whispered Jackson. And in the very center of the control room there was appearing a semi-solid mass that took the shape of Mr. Sapphire. It greeted Angel in the voiceless whisper that was its voice: "Maclure, can your mechanics master this or even match it? You see a projection out of my body—once called ectoplasmic.

"With this implement and extension of me I could strangle you to death, for ectoplasm knows no limitations of cross-sectional strength. My Watchers have taught me much, and what they did not know I supplied from my century of meditation. We are the symbiosis of evil, Angel. Do you yield now?"

Maclure's fingers danced over the immense keyboard that semicircled around him, setting up the combination of a snap-calculated field. "Beat this!" he taunted, plunging home a switch. And a plane of glowing matter intersected horizontally with the projection, cutting it cleanly in half.

"So!" rasped the whisper of Mr. Sapphire. "We shall do battle in earnest, Angel Maclure. I am coming for you!" The severed projection faded away.

## CHAPTER V

LIKE A COMET from nowhere a second ship roared into the sky, fully as large as the Angel's.

"Now how the hell did he manage to build that?" worried Maclure. "I thought I had the monopoly on transmutation and psycho-construction. Get a line on that, Jackson."

His sidekick, brow furrowed, answered slowly: "From what I can hear he did it the hard way—forged his metal and welded it together. But that must have taken him four or five months, at least. Wait a—that's it. The Watchers worked a stoppage of time for him so that he's been working on his armaments and ship for a year while we built our

thing in three hours. Isn't that dirty?"

"Dirty as hell," said the Angel busily. He was feinting the ship this way and that, now closing in, now roaring a light-year distant. "Get the men at battle-stations, will you? Work it out among them. I want to be alone here."

The Angel zoomed in swiftly and shot out one sizzling beam of solid force as a feeler. It was to his surprise that it touched the ship and charred the hull. But, he worried, it should have more than charred it. He closed in again and shot out his very best repeller ray. It caught the other ship square amidships and heeled it over in a great spin for control. While it floundered he stabbed at it with a needle-ray.

The sharp-pointed, unbearably brilliant beam struck into the flank of the ship and bored fiercely. Then it was shaken off, and Maclure shot far and away out of range. Under cover of a cloud of smoke which he released from a jet he scattered a few hundred of the osmium pellets into space.

"Come on!" he muttered to himself, shooting a tractor ray at the other ship. He could hear trembling in the power room the tortured whine of his generators, and could see the agonizing vibrations of the other ship. Almost an impasse it seemed, when with a jerk the other ship lost ground and slid clean into the path of the artificial meteorites.

The Angel grunted with satisfaction as he saw myriad punctures appear in the hull. Then the already-battered ship disappeared behind a dull red glow. "Screens," he muttered. He snapped on his own, leaving open only a small observation-port. This, he noticed, the others did not have. His vantage.

From behind the screen of the other ship crept a tenebrous cloud. Angel backed away. He didn't like the look of the thing, whatever it was. In rapid succession he rayed it with everything he had. But nothing happened. It could not be burned nor frozen, nor ionized, nor attracted nor repelled. With a sinister persistance it reached out farther yet as he backed off stalkily.

Almost in a panic the Angel aimed and released one of his preciously hoarded torpedos. The blunt, three-ton killer, packed solid with destruction, plunged squarely through the blackness and exploded colossally but to no avail against the red screen of the other ship. "Whatever it is," brooded Maclure, "it can go through screens." And that wasn't good. He could do no more than watch hopelessly as it detached itself from the other ship by breaking the one slender filament which still connected it. From then on it seemed to be a free agent.

"Playing tag with a heavy fog," mused Angel, dancing the ship away from the cloud. It was, he saw, assuming more solid form—condensing into a more compact and still huge mass. The thing was curiously jelly-like as it crawled sluggishly through space at a few hundred miles a second.

"Jackson!" the Angel yelled into a mike. "Get a line on that damn thing, will you? Try probing it en masse with the rest of your friends."

"Oke," came back the dry tones of his lieutenant. "We did already. That stuff is ectoplasm in the most elementary form. We aren't sure how much it has on the ball, but it might be plenty. Watch yourself—we'll try to break it down psychologically if we can."

"Right," snapped Maclure. He

tried a ray on the thing again, and it seemed to be affected. Skillfully wielding the needle, he carved a hunk of the stuff off the major cloud. With incredible speed it rushed at him, and only by the narrowest of margins did he avert having the stuff plaster all over his ship.

With a steady hand he aimed the second of his torpedos, masking its discharge under a feinting barrage of liquid bromine. The tool sped through space almost undetected, finally lodged inside the cloud. The explosion was monstrous, but ineffectual. Though the cloud had been torn into about a dozen major pieces and numberless minor ones, it immediately reformed and began stalking his ship again.

As he drove it off with a steady barrage of repeller rays the thing seemed to expand and soften again. The agitated voice of Jackson snapped over the circuit. "Either we broke it down or it's given up, Angel. But something's brewing aboard their ship. They suddenly changed their major aim, somehow. Murphy says they're looking for something—think it's—?"

"Dead Center!" yelled Maclure. Almost under his very eyes the only unique phenomenon in creation had suddenly appeared.

IT HAD risen from the plain with a splashing of colors and sounds, so violent a contravention of all the rest of the universe that his ship was transparent under its colors and the roaring, constant crash of its sound threatened to crystallize and rend the framework of his body. He could do no more than collapse limply and regard it in wonder.

The Center was, in short, everything that the rest of creation was not. In no terms at all could it be described; those which Maclure saw as light and heard as sound were, he realized, no more than the border-phenomena caused by the constant turmoil between the outer world and the Quiet Place that it surrounded.

Angel Maclure came to with a violent start. The ectoplasmic weapon had, he saw, been allowed to disperse. There was a strange quiet in space then. He snapped a tentative spy-ray on the other ship. Its screens fell away easily. The Angel blinked. "What goes on?" he muttered. The ray penetrated easily, and as he swept it through the ship he saw not one living figure. There was nothing at the barrage-relay but a complicated calculating device with shut-offs and a lead-wire to the control booth. And everywhere the ray peered he found nothing but machinery.

But in the booth from which the ship was guided his ray found and revealed Mr. Sapphire, alone and untended, his machinery pulsing away and the ancient, crusted skin dull and slack. In the faintest of faint whispers Angel heard Mr. Sapphire speak: "Maclure. My detector tells me you have a ray on us. Pull alongside and board me. You have safe-conduct."

Obeying he knew not what insane impulse the Angel heeled the ship around and clamped alongside the other. "Come on, Jackson," he called. Together they entered the ship and easily forced the door to the control booth.

"Mr. Sapphire," said Maclure.

"Maclure," sounded the whisper. "You have beaten me, I think. For I died more than three hours ago. I cannot keep this up much longer, Angel."

"Died," gasped Maclure. "How—"

With the feeblest semblance of

mockery the ancient creature whispered: "A man does not meditate for a hundred years without a moment's pause without learning so simple a secret as the difference between life and death. I sought the Center, Maclure, that I might find youth and being again. There was hot in me the urge to smash and create anew —the thing that is the trouble of every mind above the ape.

"I see that I have failed again . . . the Center is yours. You may do many things with it—operate its laws as wisely and well as you have the more familiar laws of the outer world. Now—

"Stop my machinery, Angel Maclure. I am a proud man, and this mockery of life in death is more than I can bear."

Without another word the Angel's nimble fingers danced among the tangle of tubes and found a petcock that he turned off with a twitch of his wrist. The machinery stopped in its pulsing, and there was no difference at all save in the complicated unit that had been Mr. Sapphire.

"AND WAS IT really you that complained against the grimness of life in this place?" asked Jackson with a smile.

The Angel, tapping away with lightning fingers at a vast calculating machine's keyboard, looked up without ceasing from his work. "Could have been," he admitted. "But there's nothing like work on a grand and practical scale to make a man forget. This business of mapping out the laws and principles of a whole new kind of creation is what I might call my meat."

"Yeah," jeered Jackson. "The only original and authentic superman."

"In person," the Angel admitted modestly.

# LUNAR GUN

by

## John L. Chapman

(Author of "Cycle," "In the Earth's Shadow," etc.)

There was a cannon in the center of Tycho and it was pointing directly at the Earth!

THE RUGGED, crust-like surface of the moon was plainly visible in the great 300-inch reflector. The numerous mountains and half-shadowed craters seemed but an arm's length away. The scope was small, showing only a portion of the satellite's bleak face, though that portion wouldn't have been a better view from a hovering space ship.

Brad Graham straightened, relaxing momentarily from the cramped position, then manipulated a tiny, delicate adjustment at his side. He bent forward again, and saw Tycho's jagged shape come into view. He marvelled for a moment at the infinite clearness of the scene. He was proud to be the son of the man who had constructed the 300-inch telescope.

Brad Graham's pride turned, suddenly, to astonishment, for there in the middle of the huge crater, barely visible in the pale light, was the unmistakable glint of metal! Trembling a little, Brad made further adjustments, and the scope increased, bringing the crater to full view.

Brad looked again—and the metal dot had been bisected. There were two distinguishable objects now, situated on a crisp-looking plain that bore signs of inhabitance.

One of the objects was a tiny, dome-shaped building. All around it the ground was darker than the rest of the plain, proving that the crust undoubtedly was broken under foot. The other object was a black framework, apparently the foundation of a second building. The crust was broken around it also.

Tingling with the thrill of discovery, Brad pressed closer, his unbelieving eyes eagerly studying the bleak lunar scene. It didn't seem possible—he was gazing at a strange, airless body 240,000 miles from the earth, and he was seeing a segment of alien civilization, a product of some other form of life!

Brad called his father and the other members of the observatory staff. All of them took hurried glances and stepped back in amazement. Questions began to fly.

"Moon life!" exclaimed Arthur Graham. "But how does it survive? And what is the purpose—of these domes?"

"The domes are shelter, of course," said Brad excitedly, "and those who live there—must be able to survive without air."

"That's possible," said one of the assistants, "but what about the rest of the race? There are no other domes—nothing like this has been sighted before—so that leaves but one conclusion. If this is intelligent life we see, it probably lives under-

ground! It appears on the surface for a reason. The domes, no doubt, have a special purpose."

"Possibly," said Arthur Graham, "but it's the principle of the thing, gentlemen! We've made a revolutionary discovery—the moon is inhabited!"

TRUE, the earth's pale-faced satellite bore animate existence. This was propounded by extensive observation during the months following the initial discovery. While the amazed scientific world looked on, astronomers trained their telescopes on the rugged globe 240,000 miles distant, watching with intense interest the constructive developments of a yet unseen race.

There in the center of Tycho the black framework which at first appeared to be another dome's foundation grew steadily and took on a strikingly different pattern. As astronomers watched the slow progress, months wore on and soon the framework became a huge metal base. Another building? Observers were certain of it at first, but as work continued on the great black surface, they grew doubtful. The moon people were not constructing another dome, or any other such form of shelter. Their present task involved something much more vast and important. It was important, in view of the slow, precise labor that was administered.

Weeks passed and the metal base acquired a circular cavity in its middle. From the cavity grew a huge, round tube. Another week went by, and the work stopped; no further additions were made to the structure.

Astronomers studied the apparition consistently, and for a number of days no one could offer a sound explanation.

One night when atmospheric conditions were good and visibility was clear, Arthur Graham viewed Tycho for several hours through the 300-inch telescope. No other magnifying instrument would provide a closer view. The two lunar structures seemed but a few miles distant, and to the elder Graham, the purpose in the minds of the moon people suddenly became apparent. The dome was shelter—beyond all doubt. But the other object was distinctly a weapon, a monstrous, sinister gun that was aimed at the earth.

Realization dawned upon the world. Astronomers gazed at Tycho once more and unanimously announced that Graham's supposition was correct. A shocked and unbelieving humanity accepted the warnings of science. Strange, maddened aliens were aiming a tremendous weapon at the earth!

IT WAS like a fantasy; there had been countless stories of cosmic dangers and invasions. For untold centuries the world existed without interference from other worlds. Skepticism had always dominated the possibilities of "life on other planets," "runaway stars," or "invading comets." Such things might occur in the distant future....

There was no mass hysteria. Despite the magnitude of interplanetary hostilities, the situation was received calmly and without furor. The weapon was there on the moon, and if it was intended to send mighty shells at the cities of earth, there was no need for preparation and confusion. The world was defenseless.

Humanity waited.

Consequently, as astronomers had anticipated, the massive barrel on Tycho spouted something black and circular. The concussion was tremen-

dous, for even in the satellite's airless conditions a streamer of flame was visible. Later, there were reports that a wide crack had appeared on Tycho's sun-baked plains.

Days went by, and the black projectile winged its way earthward. Its velocity as well as its size increased day by day.

As it neared the earth, astronomers calculated desperately in an effort to determine where the great shell would fall. Somewhere along the Atlantic coast, they reported, adding that the reports were mere guesses.

Then Arthur Graham made an astounding announcement.

"The projectile," he told the world, "has a greater immensity than previous observation has shown. It is more than a shell. It is a huge bomb of destruction that could wipe out a whole city! But I plead with you—there is a way we can fight it. Due to the shell's size, it's possible for us to do one of two things: Clock its course and explode it with anti-aircraft guns before it lands, or deflect its course entirely and plunge it into the ocean."

A small chance, thought the world, but worth a try. The army set to work, and in a few hours numerous gun bases were established along the coast-line and several miles inland. The projectile from the moon swept downward, met the earth's atmosphere, and plunged for the Carolinas.

Promptly Graham's method of attack was under way. The bomb became visible to the naked eye, and as it rushed earthward, army guns lashed fire into the sky. To explode it or deflect it, Graham had said. Apparently, to do one would be to do the other, but in the hurried moments of ceaseless army gunfire, the chances for a direct hit were very few, and only one was accomplished. The deflection was ever so slight, yet sufficient to send the sinister shell whining into the Atlantic just a few miles off shore. There was no explosion, no cataclysmic sound. Some hours later, a comparatively small tidal wave rushed over the shoreline, and settled.

THE tiny, green-bodied Lunarian turned from the dome's lone window, where the immense cannon was visible, and grimly faced a vast gathering of his subjects. The long silence was broken.

"Something has happened to our courageous friends," said the Lunarian, "something unexpected has occurred during their momentous undertaking. There has been no reply via ether-wave, nor any sign of them for almost a year. Our attempt at space flight has failed; we must go underground—where we belong." He looked out the window again, at the rising globe of the mother planet. "Three-fourths of it is water," he murmured. "That must be the answer. Or could it be—that they thought our ship was hostile?"

# GOLDEN NEMESIS

by

David A. Kyle

He sought complete control of his brain and got it!

HIS face was a mask of fear. Like a drunkard, he stumbled across the room to lean against the dresser, knocking over test tubes and bottles. The noise of their shattering and the tinkling of broken glass on the bare floor attracted none of his attention. He stared with fascination at the hypodermic needle that lay before him.

Slowly his head rose. In the high, clear mirror before him was a terrifying image. Beneath that perspiring brow were two frightening eyes, dead black, peering at him from a drawn and haggard face. That wizen,

hollow-eyed face a foot away, so much like a withered plant dying of a vicious blight, was his own. The thought seemed too horrible to bear.

"Oh God, I'm dying! Why must I suffer so?" His hot, damp hands beat his forehead and pushed back his unkempt hair with quick and desperate motions.

Suddenly he straightened. His jaws tightened firmly together, and his mouth became a thin, bloodless slit. If he was to die, there were things to do first.

Stiffly, he walked to the large table near his bed. Briefly, he scanned the jumble of paraphernalia on it. Glass bottles and tubing of every description were heaped with bewildering scientific apparatus. Disregarding the disorder, he roughly pushed everything aside and uncovered a soiled book. Though almost worn away, the words on the cover were still faintly visible: *"The Human Brain."*

For a moment he appeared to caress it, then abruptly, he opened it. A piece of paper fluttered from the open page to fall to the littered floor.

Recovering the paper, he read for the last time those words which he had copied. "All the functions of man are controlled by the brain, yet less than a fourth of the brain tissues are used. Size has no importance relative to brain capacity, which exists solely because of synapses among the neurons, more simply explained as connections among the different cells. Thus, the more of these connections, the more brain capacity and proportionately the more intelligence is produced."

Then a paralyzing shock seemed to grip the man. On the paper were words to which he had never paid much attention. They caught his eye as if written in red. How strangely prophetic they were. He had read of his death many times and had never realized it! *"The control of the brain makes it possible for the body to function properly."*

He was a fool! A blind, blundering fool! Mad with anger, he flung the book at the window; it smashed through the dusty pane, hitting three floors below with a smack that was heard clearly in the still night. The paper had crumpled in his fist.

UT of the confusion on the table he pulled a bunsen burner. A sputtering match lit it. He smoothed out the paper and thrust a corner into the blue flame. The fire raced along its top edge, slowly eating downward. He watched it burn, enchanted by the way it erased those words: "The control of the brain—makes it possible for—the body—to function — pro—pe—r—l—y." The flickering flames seared his fingertips. The last bit became ash and the sparks floated to the stained table.

"Mother of God!" he suddenly screamed. His face contorted with agony and from his twisting lips came choking, gasping sounds. His fingers dug into his chest, and the veins in his neck pounded with blood. His heart was being consumed with a fire like that which had consumed the paper. He staggered against the table and collapsed. Abruptly the wooden legs gave way and with a roar all crashed against the wall. The plaster was ripped away as they slid to the floor.

In one corner the bunsen burner glowed. Next to it a small blaze began. Flames crept along the shattered wood and spilt chemicals.

The man dragged himself to his feet.

"I must get it back. I must destroy it. I must!"

He pulled open a drawer of the

dresser and searched through it. Finally he found what he wanted, a worn envelope. The letter, which he took out, was brief: "This is to acknowledge receipt of your letter. I am holding your papers until further notice."

His interest, however, was not in the message. It was the address of the lawyer, who had signed it, for which he had searched.

A wave of heat engulfed him. He whirled around. The side of the room was a mass of flames, little hungry tongues of red licking toward his feet. A shelf leaned crazily from the wall spilling boxes and glass into the fire. Flames of rainbow hues sprang at his face.

He drew back frightened, then raced for the door, jamming the envelope into his pocket.

Standing in the street, in the growing light of day, he studied the address again and hurried off.

The sun had risen high in the heavens by the time he had climbed the floors to the law office. Outside, the rumble of business and the noise of humanity penetrated into the small room with a far-away murmur. The sunlight, dimmed by the dirt-streaked window, streamed in upon the dusty floor and splashed about the scattered papers that were piled on a grimy, battered desk. The chair groaned at his shift in weight.

Behind the single table, the curious lawyer, his plump form rolling beneath his sooty, threadbare coat, leaned over the jumbled mass of paper to speak soothingly to the slight figure in the chair.

"Yes, I have papers such as you describe, but why should I give them to you? What proof do you have that they are yours?"

His frantic client could scarcely keep his voice from rising to a shout. "Break the seal and read the title. You'll find it says: 'Chemical formula for artificially increasing cellular connections in the human brain.' Go ahead, read it! It says that, doesn't it? That's proof. You can't keep from giving it to me. You were to keep it for me until I wanted it. Well, I want it now, do you hear?"

"Yes, it does read that way, and you have that letter from me. But surely you must realize that that isn't sufficient proof. You must identify yourself. Have you . . ."

"Lord, you are curious!" The weary face of the suffering man grew bitter. "You want to know, don't you? You're just itching to know all about me, aren't you? You're too damn curious! Maybe you'd enjoy hearing my little tale. Maybe you won't hold those papers in your hands so carelessly. Maybe you'll be glad to give them back!"

THE speaker halted, but the lawyer made no move. His curiosity had to be satisfied.

"So you want to know. Well, I'll tell you. I'll tell you something that your weak mind won't understand. All those long weeks of anguish I suffered. Only God knows how I suffered!

"Those papers in your hand are the result of my theory. I believed that the entire brain could be made usable, instead of the usual small amount. Such a discovery would mean a superman—a majestic intellect! And that paper held so carelessly by you can do it—has done it!

"I experimented for many months, using chemicals and electricity. Interesting work, but grueling. Then the time came when I was convinced that I had solved the problem. Tests seemed to uphold such a view. A

chemical compound would irritate the cells just so. . . . And then . . . ?

"Do you know what I did then, Mr. Lawyer? I decided to try it out on myself! Crazed by my convictions and by my nearness to fulfillment after so many months, I decided to finish it alone. Without anyone's help —actually to make an incision into my own brain!

"After a sleepless night intensely rechecking my calculations, the great moment came."

Slowly the narrator raised himself from his chair and placed his hands upon the desk. He bent toward the startled lawyer and deliberately continued his story.

"I stood before the mirror of my dresser. Before me lay the surgical instruments which I was to use. Carefully, with painful patience, I shaved the front of my head. A steady hand, which taxed my will power to its utmost, moved the razor up, down, back, across my moist forehead. My skull appeared with a dead-white color."

His voice sank to a whisper, those gleaming eyes of his boring into the widened ones of the listener. The blood in the lawyer's cheeks, like the fading of a delicate color in the sun, began to drain away at each word as the voice made the scene seem to happen again.

"I took the tiny silver drill and pressed it just above the left frontal lobe of the cerebrum." As he spoke, he appeared to forget where he was. In him steadily grew the vivid recollection of that fatal night. He was reliving it, as he had done many times before.

"The drill sank slowly into the bone; my nerves were tense from the strain of watching lest it go farther than I had marked. Line by line, it went down, until the minute red marking was flush with the skin. Then, with trembling hands, I eased it up. It came free, and quickly I slipped a disinfectant cotton pad over the tiny hole. The moment had arrived . . . !

"In front of me on its clean white wrapping cloth lay the slender steel hypodermic. Rays from the unshielded electric light sparkled from its polished sides. Almost on their own volition my ice-cold fingers curved around it. With my other hand I reached for the thick glass bottle. The bottle that held all my dreams, all my fears.

"After working out the stopper with my teeth, I dropped the frail, needle-like point into it and gently drew the plunger back. Silently, that yellow golden liquid was sucked into the barrel. Mysterious and alien, that hellish stuff swirled as though angered by its capture, almost resentful of me, its creator."

The words flew more rapidly.

"Swiftly removing the protecting cloth, I inserted the point of the instrument into the microscopic hole, adjusting it to the best position. Gradually, I squeezed down the plunger. I could imagine that thick, golden fluid piercing down between the layers of tissue above the brain, instantly dissolving into the 'dura mater' and going on to thoroughly permeate the 'arachnoid' and 'pia mater'—into the brain serum itself—irritating.

"And thus it was done."

HIS breath was coming in shorter gasps and his face had become more strained. He wearily sank back into the wooden chair.

The lawyer sufficiently aroused himself to croak hoarsely, "And the results? What were the results?" He had begun to fear the peculiar

person who was telling this fantastic story.

"Ah, yes, the results. They were really very interesting. And very successful, too. In fact, they were much more than merely successful. You ought to find them startling.

"When I had finished that operation and a tiny silver sliver blocked the small hole at one side of my forehead, two weeks ago to be exact, my brain commenced to feel inexplicably light. I knew my brain had undergone a transformation. From the book shelf I took down a ponderous volume on mathematics. To test myself I began to solve a complicated problem in my head. It was done with no struggle at all!

"From then on I expected the impossible. I was not surprised when, after reading the evening paper, I found that I had memorized it entirely. My memory was astounding, and every little detail of every little experiment remained firmly etched in my brain. I did things that I could never have done without such a power as I had given myself.

"I took radios apart and put them back together successfully. I memorized whole pages of Shakespeare and the dictionary. I could add an infinite amount of numbers in my head with as much ease as two and two. I was the genius of all geniuses! I was the superman of which men dream!

"That day two weeks ago saw the greatest man in the world; yet five days later . . .

"My discovery had transformed me from a poor, struggling boy, unknown and friendless, to a talented man, equipped with a dozen times as much mentality as I originally had. A glorious success, borne aloft by a few drops of golden molecules! Yet a glory that was doomed . . . for three days later I experienced something queer. My abilities were remarkable and more than I had hoped for, but strange things had begun to happen. In the early dawn of that morning, I threw myself out of bed and into the rays of the rising sun. I took a step toward the closet—and nearly fell! It was only by calm deliberation that I was able to walk safely about the room.

"It was like that the entire day. Every little act that I heretofore had done unconsciously was now dependent upon my continuous attention. At every movement, I had to think. A reversal had taken place; my mind had become the slave of my body.

"It did not take me long to realize the reason. The realization numbed my befuddled brain; my serum had not only built up my mental capacity, but it also had linked habit-formed actions with the voluntary and thinking control. I could do nothing without special consideration of it!

"Imagine my surprise, then terror. Dreadful thoughts surged and heaved in my brain until I was driven almost mad." The speaker paused, and the bitterness in his words sent a twinge of pity through the lawyer. It seemed the truth, and the strange man was convincing. The lawyer let the papers, which he had been holding, drop from his sticky hands to the surface of the blue, splotched desk blotter and relaxed against the chair back. The head of the speaker was bowed. It straightened suddenly as a shiver passed through the man, and, with a nervous lick of his lips, he continued.

"My emotions were finally conquered and my true status took form; I was unable to have any more common everyday habits. I must always be forced to think. It was consoling to know that it was a small

price to pay for the greatest brain in the world. It would certainly be worth the handicap. A little practice until I had adapted myself to my new condition and I could start to reap its benefits.

"For two days I exercised my growing knowledge. The discomforts were comparatively easily overcome. That evening, however, I had new and greater cause to worry.

"As I was sitting in my single room, prior to going to bed and dreaming of what I might do with my power, I began to grow dizzy. My head whirled and my lungs burned. I was suffocating! I was not breathing! Hastily I gulped in some air. The hideous fact was apparent—I had to will myself to breath! No longer did my brain take care of my respiration without conscious help. My breathing, too, must be controlled by me!

"I DID not sleep that night. Nor the night following. My fears were increasing with every hour. That now devilish liquid had penetrated through the cerebrum and through the cerebellum, to touch the medulla oblongata! Everything that had absorbed it had been made dependent upon my conscious behavior. Oh God!—if that fluid should keep penetrating. Do you see? Do you understand? That evil drug would—Oh, Lord, how foolish I had been!

"The crisis came that morning: My heart fluttered and stopped! My doom was sealed.

"I made it beat, as steadily and energetically as before. But it bound me to it with something worse than steel chains. Even my great brain was powerless. Every atom of concentration that I had was needed to keep me alive. No longer could I sleep, for to do so was to die. Nothing could interest me too intensely or I would lose control.

"Many times I had to start my heart into action—the minutes ticked by and became hours — my brain grew fogged—my eyeballs stung and burned—my body quivered with fatigue. I arose and walked out into the rays of the mellow moon and the cool air fanned my cheeks . . . Crack! My thoughts whipped back to my condition. My heart had stopped. A searing pain racked it as I knotted the muscles to make it beat again.

"The night fled on lingering hours of torture. My body cried aloud for sleep, but my will cried louder for survival.

"The next night was worse. Stimulants forced me awake — awake so that I might suffer another day.

"My only hope was that my mental Frankenstein would be dissolved and carried away by the blood. A hope of which even my blinded brain knew the impossibility. And though the days dragged themselves through, like thirsty men on a desert of sand, I bore up. To slip into the portals of sleep, to relax into dreams — the temptation was maddening. Every second I had to be thinking. Every second since I came into this office I have been concentrating: Beat, beat, beat; a deep breath; beat, beat, beat. . . .

"Desperation has driven me to courage. I have one hope, a friend of mine; I am going there as soon as I leave you. Now give me those papers!"

Awkwardly, the tired man pushed himself erect. The lawyer sat paralyzed by the weird story of unimaginable suffering; he could neither think nor talk. Seconds of silence passed by. With a cry of rage at the unbearable suspense, the man

snatched up the papers from the desk. Before the surprised lawyer could intervene, he had begun to strip the paper into many tiny pieces. His fury lent him strength and he yelled joyously, "I'll scatter this spawn of Satan to the winds. None shall know its secret."

Suddenly his expression changed. Every muscle of his body seemed to jump and twist. The scream that seemed to tear itself from his very soul frightened the lawyer to his feet.

"My God! My nerves are on fire! I cannot think! I cannot think! . . . It's death!"

THE lawyer's ponderous form knocked over the squeaking chair in his haste to reach the limp figure. He bent over the body which was covered with countless tiny white pieces of paper and gazed at the upturned face, that registered peace and calm, which a few seconds ago had been convulsed with agony from some inner struggle. The black, puffy eyelids were gently closed and the drawn, haggard skin was smoothed over the sharp bones of the face. The hair was pushed back, and a little speck of silver glittered on the skull in the half-smothered light of the sun.

Sliding his hand from the slumped man's chest, the bulky one picked up the telephone.

"Hello? Police Station. Is that you, Sarge? Yeah, it's me. Something just happened in my office. A client dropped dead. Wasn't so ordinary. The guy was insane, a regular maniac—worked himself into a frenzy. . . . That's right, just a common case of heart failure."

## ROCKET MAIL

While it may not be known very well to the general public, mail has been carried by rockets and rocket mail stamps command a high price from those who collect them.

The first such flights were made in Austria by Friedrich Schmiedl. In his experiments in the construction and firing of large size rockets, powered by powder or liquid explosives, Herr Schmiedl placed packets of mail in the jackets of his rockets, and mailed the letters after the flight. In several instances, governments have given semi-official status to the rocket-mail.

The earliest instance of rocket mail flight was February 2nd, 1931. Since then flights have been made in virtually every country of the globe and a rocket stamp catalogue today would have a fairly extensive listing.

Throughout 1931 to 1936 rockets were carrying mail across streams, from mountain to village, from British Channel Isle to Isle, from ships to the shore, and from the shore to lonely lighthouses in India.

The first rocket flights carrying mail in the Western Hemisphere were directly creditable to a science-fiction club—the New York Branch of the International Cosmos Science Club, which flew two large rockets carrying mail bearing special stamps September 22, 1935.

Since then flights have been made across the Mexican border and elsewhere.

Rocket mail is still not a regular government service, but we shall not be in the least surprised when regular four-hour rocket mail service is established across the Atlantic in a few years.

# RESILIENCE

by

## Damon Knight

And the Little Men just kept on marching!

"IT WAS here that the Little People made their last stand," said the conductor of the rubberneck bus, looking boredly at the stone ruins. His audience yawned, craned, or just goggled, after the manner of sightseers everywhere.

"Their high-powered projectiles were at this time inflicting some damage," the conductor went on, in a monotone, "so the Army of Conquest, under General Drlnac, retired and starved them out. Their almost incredibly delicate bodies were preserved in the Tzino Museum."

He yawned.

"BAH!" said the General of the Little Men, scowling at his aides. His antennae quivered fiercely. "This is no time for sentimentality! Whether or not this world is inhabited, we shall take it over for the use of our expanding race.

"Besides," he went on, looking up at the deserted barn beside which the Little Army stood, "this structure convinces me that we have to deal with a very low order of mentality. We can expect no great resistance."

He turned. "Onward—march!"

Their metal caps flashing above the dandelion tops, the Little Men moved on.

"Oh, look!" said the girl, pointing excitedly. Metal caps gleamed across the road from their car. "Jim, what are they? Why, there are hundreds of them!"

"Huh? Where?" asked Jim, wiping lipstick off his cheek. "Oh! Well—I'll—be—damned!"

"What are they?" asked the girl, again.

"Elves, or—or gnomes, or something," he said, dazedly. "But there just aren't any of those—I mean, we must be dreaming or something."

"Little, tiny men in sky-blue coats," she said. "It's just like a fairy-tale! See, they even have 'feelers.'

"Jim, I'm afraid," she ended, unreasonably.

He laughed. "What of—them?"

"But they're pointing something at us," she said.

It was true. The foremost of the Little Men were aiming tiny, bright tubes at the couple.

Then they turned abruptly around and started off down the road.

"I think they're funny," said Jim, as the last of the column passed. "They look so—so serious and determined. Let's follow them." He pressed the starter.

Then things began to happen. Instead of the powerful, contented purr usually associated with the pressing of that button, there came a series of loud clanks, ending in a louder crash, from the hood of the car.

The boy and girl looked at each other.

"What—" began the girl.

Then the car seemed to shake itself, gave a lurch and settled wearily.

"Earthquake!" yelled Jim, jumping to conclusions. "Let's get out of here!" He opened the door and leaped out, pulling the girl with him.

Outside, he stopped suddenly and looked down at his hand with a puzzled air. In it was the plastic handle of the door. The rest of the door was a pile of rusty dust scattered between him and the car.

Then, as they watched, the metal body of the car ran away in little streams, leaving the upholstery and the plastic windows and fittings lying in a pile of the same dust.

The two looked at each other in silence.

"SO HELP me God," muttered Traffic Officer Koehler, as he threaded his way among the jammed cars, "if another of them women has tried to make a U-turn at that corner, I'll tear off my badge, and then I'll take her by the hair and yank her out of her car—and I'll get at least twenty years, but it'll be worth it."

Then he stopped short and stared speechlessly ahead of him. Between two cars came the cause of the jam; a string of little men in sky-blue coats and metal caps, swinging tiny tubes back and forth at the cars and buildings around.

The foremost of the Little Men calmly rayed Officer Koehler, and started to pass on. Koehler, however, came to his official self with a start, and made a grab for him.

As his fingers closed about the mite's body, he was horrified to feel it bend inward like a piece of rubber. He let go hastily. Then he dazedly watched the Little Man's belly snap back into place, also like rubber. He marched on, as if nothing had happened.

A few seconds later, Officer Koehler failed to notice that his metal suspender clasps had given way, on account of the fact that a street-full of cars and a number of buildings were falling at the same time as his trousers.

"IS THAT them?" asked one of the soldiers incredulously, looking through the bushes at the column of little figures.

"Yep," whispered another. "They have some kinda ray that makes your gun fall to pieces. That's why we gotta ambush 'em."

"Ready," came the command. "Aim . . . Fire!"

The rifles barked.

"Hell," said a soldier, clearly. "We only got five!"

"They're too damn small," another replied. "Whadda they think we are, Dead-eye Dicks?"

The surviving Little Men swiftly scattered out and fell flat, raying the bushes. The next volley got none of them.

As their guns fell to dust and the Little Men marched on past them, a soldier said, disgustedly, "Hell, we shoulda used fly-swatters."

"AS I UNDERSTAND it," said Professor Ferrin, "the — ah — invaders employ a ray which induces what is known as 'fatigue' in metals, making them lose their molecular cohesion. If it were not for that, our militia would no doubt have been able to pick them off from ambush, but, you see, they are so very small that it is—ah—extremely difficult to hit one. Machine guns are no good, either,

because they can get behind little rocks and into tiny holes.

"But they have no actually destructive weapon, so it should be quite simple to merely—ah—swat them," he finished. "That is why we civilians have been asked to volunteer."

"Wot abart the ruddy militia?" asked Hemingway, the tobacconist. "W'y carn't they swot 'em?"

"Well, as I understand it," said the professor, "the militia have so much metal about them, you know—buttons and belt-buckles, and so forth—that it's simpler just to turn the thing over to the—ah—civilians than to remove it all. There's really no danger at all, of course."

"Ah," said Hemingway, doubtfully.

"Here they come!" came the word along the line.

The Little Men marched into view, scattered out now, and with ray-tubes at the ready.

"Up and at 'em!"

Armed with baseball bats, pokers, and clubs, the civilian volunteers rushed the Little Men.

"There, you rascal!" panted Professor Ferrin, as he smote the foremost with his club.

Then he halted and stared. Where a bloody pulp, or at least a lifeless body, ought to have been, was an unharmed Little Man, calmly marching onward.

Taking a firmer grip, the professor followed him and smote him again. This time he distinctly saw the Little Man telescope under the blow and then pop up again.

"Amazing!" he breathed, a scientific gleam in his eye.

This time he hit the Little Man horizontally. Again he conducted himself like a rubber ball; bending with the blow, then snapping back out again. He picked himself up, apparently unhurt, and went ahead without a backward glance.

"Amazing!" the professor said again.

The Little Men marched on.

# CITADEL OF THOUGHT

by

James Blish

(Author of "Bequest of the Angel," "Emergency Refueling," etc.)

Dan Lothar fell into the seas of Neptune and found himself in the midst of interstellar war.

## CHAPTER I

WHEN Dan Lothar's shattered *Ganymedian* dropped into the ammoniac mists of Neptune, turning slowly and trailing a wraith-like, ephemeral fan of incandescent gas, there was nothing to show the watching police cruiser that death was not waiting to enfold it below. The cruiser's job, after all, was done; the *Ganymedian* was crumpled, seared, riddled, and falling out of control to a bleak and uninhabited planet; the cruiser's young captain, who still required his men to call him "sir," was justly proud of himself.

That he did not take into account Lothar's phenomenal resourcefulness was perhaps wrong; yet he had beaten the interplanetary outlaw in a fair duel between ships, and more experienced men than the young commander had been satisfied with less. Withal he should have known that no police cruiser could have beaten the wasp-like *Ganymedian* unless there was something wrong inside; he should have remembered the shrewd mind behind Lothar's dark eyes, and the ability of that mind to take full advantage of chance. But the police cruiser went back toward the sun, and if a spaceship can strut, it did so.

For there had been much amiss within the *Ganymedian* when it blundered so carelessly into range of the cruiser's fire. Nothing was wrong with the ship itself—Lothar was too careful of it and too much in love with its sleek, deadly beauty, mothering it constantly with oily hands. No, it was the hand at the boards that was out of control. Dan Lothar was sick.

Any other man would have been dead. His lungs were burning unendingly with the corrosive purple mists of Io; his eyelids rasped over dry balls that saw everything as if at a great distance through a milky film. The bronzed skin was sallow, the cheeks sunken, the black hair singed; and from a razor-edged slash across the right shoulder unclotting blood oozed constantly. Every movement was a dull agony, pierced through as if by a white-hot sword from the shoulder-wound. His fingers refused to obey, moving in clammy independence at each impulse from the fighting brain; the dials on the board conveyed no meaning. Never-ending flight was Dan Lothar's chosen life, and again it had led him across deadly alien worlds before it gave him brief rest. Since he had left the Earth ten years ago, stifled by routine and toy sophistication, nearly every planet in the system had felt his flying feet and reached for him with a million deadly hands; now it seemed that Jupiter's poisonous moon would claim him as a proxy conquest.

He managed to get into his space-

suit and fight the *Ganymedian*, driving the quivering, wasted body as if it did not belong to him. That was his way, the terrible drive of his brain which would never let him rest; but even against the will of Dan Lothar, who had thrown himself deliberately against five worlds out of sheer disgust, nature took its wonted toll. . . .

And so it was that the tiny planet-plane, mangled beyond recognition, plunged into the dry, cold atmosphere of Neptune, and a slumped spacesuited figure sat strapped in its metal seat, head rolling grotesquely . . . and before it a jury-rigged rocket tube, such as the spacelanes had not seen since geotrons were invented in 1987, coughed, popped, hissed. . . .

## CHAPTER II

STRANGE disconnected images swept through his brain as he forced himself to consciousness. At first they were long-forgotten scenes on Earth—dinner-suits and tall candles—a humming cyclotron—a bright, silent peal of laughter from a brown-framed face. The face moved nostalgically above brighter waving fields of grain; the waves persisted, now green and white-ridged water, while the face faded. For long ages he saw nothing but rolling water, moaning and sighing through his head.

Then at last the sea-waves merged into a single harsh green glow; the glow centered in a single tube-light directly above his head. He winced and closed his eyes; red spots floated persistently before them in protest. He remembered his battered body and gritted his teeth in anticipation as he turned his head away from the glare; but there was no answering stab of pain. Tentatively he moved his arm; it came up to his shoulder freely, in complete control, without any abnormal sensation. His wasted muscles no longer ached; the fire had been drawn out of his lungs. He took an appreciative breath, noticing the faint musty odor with relish, and opened his eyes again. Once more he had cheated the ebony gates, borrowed another short period of life.

The room in which he lay convinced him that it was not a very long respite. It was unfurnished, prison-bare stone, bleak in the light of mercury-vapor. The Plutonian mines! It was too cold to be Venus; the light was not calculated for human eyes. Photocells were more sensitive in such illumination, and the mine guards were robots, for no free man would take such a job. Probably the cruiser had followed him down, vulture-like, and finding him still alive, had remembered the larger reward for the living criminal, brought him here. He did not then consider his healed wounds, for circumstantial confirmation was placed upon his befuddled theorizing.

A silver egg drifted into his field of vision, watched him through two black eye-lenses. A proxy-robot. A new model, apparently, far advanced over those he had beaten in his escape from the radium mines years ago. It had no appendages for weapons, but there was another opening, slot-like, below the eyes which might be a porthole for a ray. It gave the front end of the egg a severe schoolmarm expression; he chuckled grimly.

"You are well," said the proxy abruptly. "You can stand." It was not a question, but a cross between a statement of fact and a command. The metallic voice startled him; without thinking he climbed to his

feet, flexing his muscles. He was indeed in perfect condition, better than before he had started the wild race across Io. The fact, startling enough in itself when he considered the cold stone upon which he had made this recovery, was subordinated by the sight of an open door behind the proxy. Not even a door, but a barless doorway. He had not seen it before; it seemed as if it had just sprung into being. He considered a break, but the proxy was too high to grab and watching carefully.

"This is Pluto, I suppose," he said. "The bad penny has returned to the mint."

"Follow," the adding-machine voice replied, and the egg pointed its prim face out the doorway, swooped forward. He strode after it, but some instinct made him turn as he entered the corridor. There was no door behind him—only a solid wall!

"Tricky," he murmured, and grinned. Tricky prisons were easiest to break.

But he became increasingly bewildered as he followed the proxy down the green-lit corridor. He passed several doorways to his right and left, and what he saw beyond them was not prison-like. It was more like the interior of a stone spaceship, crowded with machinery, some of it familiar, most of it incomprehensible and technically senseless. A bad boy turned loose in a fortress with a toy construction set and a box of old radio parts might have produced most of what he saw; yet it all spun, whirred, and blinked purposefully. Nowhere did he see an attendant, although a few of the proxies were poised motionlessly here and there as if watching.

Another blank wall came into view around a bend; he waited for it to vanish from his path. Instead the proxy shot up and disappeared, leaving him standing at the bottom of a tremendous shaft, into which light radiated at intervals as far as he could see. The egg had vanished, but finally appeared, floating in a beam of green far above his head, apparently waiting for him to follow.

"I'm no damn' bird," he protested, and immediately shot upward, arms and legs asprawl. In a moment the unexpected force had brought him up beside the egg and deposited him, breathless, on another stone floor. He stood motionless, gaping.

## CHAPTER III

THIS was certainly not Pluto; beyond that negative he could say nothing of what he saw. Before him was a huge hall, about two stories high, and seemingly as long as the levitation shaft was high. Its sole furnishings were a number of tilted couches dotting the floor, in each of which lay a sleeping figure. The light was, as ever, bright blue-green and hard on the eyes; yet apparently this was a vast dormitory for all the human occupants of the weird place. The silence was absolute, empty of the machine-mutters with which he had lived in his lost *Ganymedian;* it seemed to wash in his ears with seashell sounds. He recognized the effect as the cause of his dreams before awakening.

"The egg must have slipped," he thought in awe. "This is the boudoir."

Then horror struck him as he saw that every eye in his range of vision was open, staring glassily ahead. His flesh crawled; he grasped his raytube automatically, not surprised to find it there. Under the green radiance they all seemed ghastly corpses,

yet breathing movements were clearly evident.

"Thinking," he told himself unsteadily. "Contemplating their psychic navels, that's what." He shivered in the unnatural silence.

"Daniel Lothar," a voice whispered in his ear. He swung, but all the eyes were regarding him, and he could not tell who had spoken. His nerves were quivering.

"It is I," said the voice. "Here." He felt his gaze being compelled to his right.

At first it appeared to be but another of the monstrous dreamers upon a slightly more ornate couch. Then he saw that it was a woman. . . .

She might have been a beautiful woman, but her face was sallow in the unflattering light, her hair was swept back from her forehead so that her brain-case seemed to bulge. Yet the bulge was merely optical, for she seemed perfectly formed. . . . Her eyes claimed his; he felt himself drawn down, down, into deeper wells than he had ever known. All the loveliness of this woman, who seemed physically little more than a girl, was annulled by those eyes, which burned with a cold, subtle fire, detached, ascetic, powerful. He could not fight those eyes, though his will had met five worlds. Or perhaps he would not, subconsciously. . . .

"You are the first outsider to come since the Hall was built," the whispering voice went on. "We bid you welcome."

"Where am I?" he tried to say, but his lips would not form the words.

"You are in the Hall of Thought, on Neptune, at the bottom of the Sea."

The Sea, Dan Lothar remembered, was liquid gases, mainly methane.

"How did I get here, then?"

"You fell in your ship; we brought you in." She fell silent, contemplating him with those unspeakably inhuman eyes; it came to him that she had not moved her lips either during the entire conversation. Mind to mind—something puzzled him.

"I was injured," he began.

He felt a sensation of cold amusement, not laughter, but faint contempt. He wondered if she had forgotten what real laughter was, lying here thinking to herself.

"Do you suppose your bodily ailments have any moment in the Hall of Thought? The mind controls the body, as it controls, perhaps creates, all matter. Tell me . . . how old do you think I am, then?"

"If you'll stop looking at me . . ." He sensed faint apology and the mental compulsion was withdrawn. With the icy mental flame gone he could see her more clearly. Accounting for the green light, she was not at all bad. Better than he at first thought.

"About twenty," he judged, speaking the words now.

"The figure," said the incomprehensible girl, "is closer to two hundred and twenty."

## CHAPTER IV

SHE MOVED an arm slightly; he approached and sat down at her sign at the foot of the couch, perching tensely on the edge. Wryly he remembered another time he had done the same thing, but not in a room with hundreds of other beds, at the bottom of a sea of liquid gases! He tried to concentrate on the two hundred and twenty. It sounded impossible. And yet so much in the Hall of Thought was just that—the strange machinery, the vanishing doors, the serried silent phi-

losophers, his own quick recovery—figments of an *Etaoin* pleasure-palace dream.

"When I was a little girl on Earth, about 1965, I was adopted by a college of metaphysicians." Again the sensation of amusement. "They were blunderers compared to our present advancement, but they accomplished one thing. They taught me to believe death was unnecessary." She paused. "I was never allowed to think anything about dying. I was told, and had no reason to think otherwise, that no one had to die, that I never would. My mental powers, groomed by them to greater ability, directed on that one lesson, pounded into me ceaselessly . . . well, I am deathless."

He shut his mouth with a click. Crazy! This was the most fantastic feature yet. But the powers of mind over matter were known. . . . A fragment of an old creed came back to him: "There is no life, truth, intelligence, nor substance in matter. All is mind, and its manifestation. . . ." That was misquoted, but the idea was there.

He shuddered again. So that was the reason for this silent hall! Immortals, sitting or lying in eternal thought . . . a defiance of nature?

She divined his thought. "The Hall has another function than contemplation, Dan Lothar. Were we dedicated to that alone, you would not have been brought here. Perhaps some day we may devote ourselves to the pursuit of the cosmic comprehension, but now there is another task set us."

He made no comment and she went on.

"Long ago we tried to reach that cosmic awareness. The massed minds of the college were flung out, united, in a great effort at understanding—but without warning came a terrible interruption. There was another thought present. At first it was a faint disturbance, nothing more, jarring our concentration. We could not find the source. Then, gradually as we became attuned to it, it grew; an alien thing, not human, and inimical, cold, deadly, coming from we knew not what nadir beyond our Earth. . . . How inhuman our Hall must seem to you, I realize," she interrupted, and he was astonished to see a faint smile transfigure the acerb expression for a moment, "but you have no idea of the difference between thought patterns of human and alien minds, no matter how advanced the former may be, until you have actually sensed them. We did. We felt this deadly current, this other-world pattern, playing coldly across the Earth, and we were afraid. We had no way of knowing its meaning, yet we did know that it meant ill things for man and his works. Soon after we began to piece it out . . . it was lost in the human thoughts all around us.

"We came out here, away from human interference, to search out that spatial cold we had felt. Only a few of us are immortal; but we are all doing the same work—tracing, projecting, attuning our mind-channels to that thought. You cannot imagine why it seemed so important, because you cannot feel what we did—yet it means death to mankind unless it is halted, Dan Lothar."

He put a hand to his head. Unbelievable nightmare! A citadel on acerb Neptune, built at unguessable cost, to seek a thought, a single wave, that seemed dangerous to Earth! The idea chilled him; yet on the surface it seemed ridiculous.

"I know," she said. "Close your eyes and I will show you."

## CHAPTER V

AND immediately he was sorry. He felt his mind being probed by delicate, intangible fingers, opened, readjusted, sensitized, as if it was being made to think on another plane . . . and pouring in on him in stifling waves came . . .

There was no name for it in human speech. It was not words, nor pictures, nor physical sensation. It originated in no human mind, nor in any known mind of the Solar System. It was like the breath of Death, utterly horrible, utterly irresistible. It filled all space, charged it with unspeakable things; it was Fear, and Hatred, and emotions human beings had never known. It seemed directed at him personally, an implacable lust for his shrinking soul; yet it surged and swirled like a charnel wind over the universe of man so that all the great cities on the planets were darkened and human figures lost their life and became tiny wooden puppets immersed in cold, invisible flame. It blighted all hope and re-opened the ebony gates. It ran through his brain in rivulets of ice—

Then it all folded shut around him, like the turning of a page, left him white and trembling.

"You see?" the girl asked softly. He clenched his hands to stop the quivering. It was gone now, yet he knew he would never forget it; that in some measure, as long as the unthinkable mind that was broadcasting it lived, he would be able to sense it.

"What—what—is it?" he gasped.

"It is the approach of another world, another people," she said, her face like the expressionless marble of some ancient statue, lovely and lifeless. "They come from a far star, we do not know what one, and they are very near now."

"Why did you call me here?" He felt a faint anger. To die fighting in the outlawed paths of a flamboyant, understandable universe was as nothing to having lived and seen the gulfs of unsuspected things yawn below.

"For knowledge." She frowned slightly. "Our work here is done. Once we thought that we could project suggestions to them, influence their minds, but the patterns are too different. It is fighting that must be done now, star against star, before they can reach our system and carry out whatever purpose may be back of those deadly waves. And we cannot build a ship! None of us are technicians. The work on the Hall was done under the direction of a man now dead; we need you now for that knowledge."

He digested that. "Why didn't you warn the world, instead of sprawling here thinking at—Them?"

"The world has no weapons against such forces."

"But you must have—"

"The weapons are important, yet remember—we are meeting minds as well; minds skilled in all the powers of thought. We are the only ones equipped to fight a mental battle. With an ally for the physical fighting we may win. You must be that ally. We can protect your mind, but to call an Earth fleet would be throwing lives away—we could not possibly shield them all."

She arose, and as if it were a signal, the lights flashed yellow. It was a grateful change, and made the vast stone cavern seem almost cosy. A stir of motion ran over the Hall. Even the emotionless face of the immortal girl seemed more real. The

men on the couches were arising and moving toward them.

"Tell me," she said. "Will you fight for Earth now, instead of against it?"

This was, at last, something that Dan Lothar understood. This talk of immortality, the powers of the mind, the dreadful power which had held him for a moment, had built but a hazy picture in his mind. But how clearly he could see himself riding a mighty cruiser, fighting some invader, burning space with lancing rays, riding the red clouds of dinitron recklessly as of yore! He smiled a little. It wouldn't be bad, and . . . he glanced sidewise at the girl. She was still lovely, no matter how many centuries she had lived, or how far back her hair was combed; she still had something to learn, with all her centuries, that no one in the Hall had thought to teach her but himself. . . .

His smile broadened, and he nodded.

## CHAPTER VI

HE WAS glad when the ship was finished. A wonderful ship, fast and powerful as none on Earth had ever been; but the way it had built itself under the lashing thoughts of the Hall as he ran the plans carefully through his mind was nerve-wracking and weird. The whole process took less than a week, during which no one ate, or seemed to require food, and no one slept but himself. Strange devices were attached to the generators, fitted awkwardly into the standard rayports he had supplied. He insisted also on a standard rocket rifle being installed in one turret. The girl was constantly at his side, her emotionless voice topping the crashing of the ship as it seemed to fling itself together: he noticed that she had undone the bun at the back of her head and arranged her hair more naturally. He grinned to himself. She was learning without knowing it. She looked almost attractive now, he admitted, even though the jarring mercury-vapor lights had been restored for the use of the proxies, which had appeared from nowhere in swarms.

At last the job was done. The intellectuals, like a group of eager children, wanted to get under way at once, but Lothar insisted on a week of training in the handling of the mechanisms and in astronautics. "Damned if I'll blast off with a crew of walking brains who don't know a C-tube from a ray-tube," he said. Finally he considered the requirements met, named the ship the *Ganymedian II* ("Bad luck to fly a nameless ship," he said, against the scoffings of the metaphysicians), and, surrounded by meteor screens drawn in close to prevent the "waters" of the Sea from crystallizing the metal skin, the great flier burst from the airlocks and mounted space over Neptune.

He locked the controls, sending the ship outward in a great arc which would bring it eventually to rest far beyond the boundaries of the Solar System, and turned to the girl.

"There's nothing to do now but sit," he told her. "You can put your organic robots back to bed."

She smiled for the second time since he had seen her. "I'm sorry that we all seem so inhuman to you," she said. "We've all been trained so thoroughly in abstractions that, well . . . we lose our hold on the things that are real to most people." She looked down at the loose mud-colored gown that she had worn since the

first day. "I don't look much like a woman, do I?"

At that moment Don Lothar could not imagine her two hundred years older than he. He grinned broadly.

"There seems to be a stock of space-harnesses in the stores, since I thought of them in conjunction with the food and the other unnecessary items when we were building. Why don't you climb into one of those?"

The harness needed a few discreet adaptations involving small spare metal reflectors and several feet of leather to fit it for feminine use, but eventually she got it on. She looked even more human now. The shorts were very enhancing to unsuspected beauty.

"Now," she said. "Teach me something about the ship. I don't want to be so much useless brains."

They sat together at the board, and Lothar began the job of showing her the complexities of astronautics. It was a very pleasant few minutes, but only a few, because he never had to repeat anything or even explain complicated facts. She absorbed them instantly.

And just when Dan was feeling more natural the ominous nightmare reasserted itself. One of the younger metaphysicians popped into view from thin air, his white face strained.

"They are near," he said. "Nearer than we thought. We can feel them. And Di Falco and Guyer cannot handle the machine in chamber two."

DAN muttered to himself and punched buttons. "Damn' intellectuals," he commented, with additions. "What's the matter down there?"

"Something is wrong," the speaker rasped tinnily. "Come and see. We cannot control the current."

"I don't have to come and see," Dan roared. "What do you think I've got meters for? Cut the power on the condensers before you burn us all to a cinder. Watch your input. Wake up. Think about something useful." The girl was actually grinning like a gamin when he turned away; he felt happy himself, although the specter of dread hung over him as it did over the whole ship.

"Now you," he said to the startled young man. "Where are they?"

"Near," replied the other, waving his hands helplessly.

"Great Leonids! Where?"

"Wait a minute," the girl broke in. "They are 20 degrees off starboard, down ten degrees, and about a million miles away." Her face was expressionless again, but her tone seemed to be saying, "How am I doing?"

He turned to the boards and watched the detectors, flinging them out in a spherical screen to their farthest range. It seemed that his brief experience had sensitized him, for he could feel the cold alien breath faintly now. The indicators gave no sign.

And then, suddenly, the needles bobbed; simultaneously the *Ganymedian II* gave a terrible lurch which threw them all to the floor. The First Interstellar War was begun!

## CHAPTER VII

THEY struggled to their feet, faces white. Dan climbed back into his seat and watched the detectors, the girl peering over his shoulder.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Tractor. Tripped automatically by the detector field. Nothing new." But he felt a chill as he fingered the

buttons. This sudden blow out of trackless and seemingly empty space! What horrors did it herald?

He bawled orders into the microphone; the ship, answering clumsily to the unskilful hands of the drivers, bounded free of the beam, arced in an unpredictable hyperbola toward the unseen enemy. The girl crouched breathlessly in the copilot seat; the young metaphysician climbed into the spacesuit locker and hid.

"Big help," grunted Lothar. His eyes remained glued to the screen, watching for the first sign of the approaching invaders. He had shut down the detectors for fear of setting off another relay. The floors quivered to straining generators.

"Balance that flow!" he ordered into the microphones. "Number Two, you're still using too much power. You're shaking the whole ship."

A tiny bright dot—too bright, it seemed, for reflected starlight—appeared on the screen, grew with agonizing slowness.

"Port turret," he snapped tersely. "Range four hundred thousand. Three hundred. Two hundred. Fire!"

Nothing happened. There was no flash of rocket rifle, no streak of ray. But a tenuous, almost invisible network of green light burst like fireworks far to one side of the white point and died away. Not bad shooting for this distance.

But from the white point on the visor screen, now fast becoming a disc, another point detached itself, floated deliberately toward them, seemed to pause a breathless instant, then arrowed for the stern as if magnetized. There was a flare and a racing tide of flame engulfed the whole tail of the *Ganymedian II*, growing like a fiery amoeba. Dials quivered; the song of the generators rose to a tortured howl.

"Cut the drivers!" he cried. The howling died out mournfully, but the sheath of flame still advanced, silently, swiftly, like a sentient cocoon. On a hunch Dan turned off the screens.

Immediately the white fire quivered, paused indecisively, and then streamed indifferently off into space and faded. Sweat broke out on his body. He jerked the ship forward again; again the pale green network flowered briefly beside the alien. It was fully visible now, not more than a thousand miles away, a windowless ball of metal, seeming to shine by its own radiance. The green network was flung across it, and Dan held his breath.

But beyond a slight temporary dimming of the white glow, the invader was unharmed when the green light faded.

"Stymied," Dan whispered.

As if hearing and understanding, the sphere broke its headlong drive toward them and looped over them toward the distant sun.

"After them," the girl panted. "Quick!"

And now began the grim chase. . . .

## CHAPTER VIII

WITHOUT hope, Dan tried one more shot from the regulation gun. As he expected, it rebounded harmlessly in a red dinitron flower before touching the fleeing sphere. It would have done so from an Earth vessel.

After that no further shots were exchanged. The two, alien and Earthman, matched astronautics in silence, the one bent with deadly ferocity upon reaching some inhabited planet, the other doggedly clinging, hoping, waiting for an opening. Weird battle! The white sphere dodging, putting

on speed, trying to lose its tiny bulk in the vastness of space, yet unable to hide; the cruiser from the Hall of Thought pursuing always, while mentalities meeting action for the first time in their cloistered lives fastened grimly upon the betraying thought-waves, holding that fearsome spoor for the merely human pilot at the controls. Faster, faster, while the motionless stars mocked the climbing speed indicators. . . . Pluto's orbit was passed. . . .

Abruptly the white sphere vanished from the screen, vanished utterly. In vain Dan Lothar searched the space ahead. The girl sat beside him, eyes burning coldly, white brow furrowed, and he felt once more the awe and sense of smallness at her aspect. She broke her strained silence as he scanned the meters frantically.

"They've stopped."

"What!"

"Yes . . . they're turning back."

"It isn't possible. They'd be crushed."

"Nevertheless, they did."

Dan braked the *Ganymedian II* until it seemed the acceleration would squeeze his bones to jelly despite the compensators. The girl gasped for breath, then was silent again, her face strained with concentration. He swung the ship laboriously around, while precious seconds flew by, and wondered what manner of things the silver sphere contained, to stop dead at full speed.

"There they—are—they did stop—how on earth—"

But there was no time for wondering, for the white sphere was plunging back toward Pluto. It was going to land!

Dan dropped after it and braked furiously, sweeping around the planet in a deceleration arc. The enemy ship flashed below them for an instant; the intellectuals on the gun deck fired four times at close range. All four shots were hits but they were out of sight before the effect could be determined.

"Nice," Dan breathed in surprise. "I wonder . . ."

"No," said the girl. "I can still feel them."

THE cruiser struck the frozen ground, bounced, and Dan let it ride free a moment. At last he grounded it in rough haste, and the keelplates screamed in protest through the very beams of the ship.

"We're only a few miles from them," the girl whispered. "You circled almost the whole planet."

"Yes," said Dan Lothar grimly, "and we're plunk in the middle of the Plutonian penal colony."

Indeed, the single dome which covered the main mine shaft, and the small field for receiving the infrequent freighters were visible through the ports. The few human guards who occupied the dome were running out toward them in spacesuits. There were, Dan estimated hastily, about twenty of them. "Glad of the diversion, I'll bet," he thought. He switched on the radiophone.

"Commander!"

"Commander Cameron speaking. Who are you — that other ship —"

"Interstellar invaders. Dangerous, inimical, down about ten miles from here."

"What! Who are you, I say—"

"No time. Don't argue. It's life and death for you and the Earth as well. Break out your prisoners and arm them. They're ray-screened, but I think they're vulnerable to gunfire now that their meteor screens are down. Quick!"

"We can't arm them all—and besides—"

"Never mind, arm as many as you can and get them into suits. No time for legal worries. This is interstellar war, you fool."

He cut the connection and opened the suit-locker, jerking the terrified young intellectual out of it. "Everyone into suits—no, not you—"

"I'm going," said the immortal woman, and he was too much in awe of her now to protest further.

As the airlock shut behind them the prisoners were bounding out of the dome in their suits. "Most of them trusties," said the commander. "The others have no love for Earth."

"I can imagine," Dan thought sardonically to himself, remembering the radium-eaten inmates.

Then, "Let's go!"

## CHAPTER IX

AGAINST the light gravity of Pluto the trip was short. Behind them some of the guards dragged a few hastily dismounted rifles, and others clutched futile-looking rocket guns. The intellectuals carried long ray-tubes without grips, clumsy affairs obviously designed by amateurs but containing unknown powers. In a moment the white light of the invader glowed over the jagged, rocky horizon, and Dan again sensed faintly the terrible emanations.

"All right," he whispered, as if afraid the unguessable intelligences within that malign craft could hear. "Scatter. Their detectors must have us spotted but we're too small to hit individually." The order had barely been a minute in execution when one of the fireballs floated silently over the hills and sent a creeping pool groping toward them. There were no attracting screens around their suits, however; the shots had been blind, had caught no one. Quickly, taking advantage of every cover, the little party crept forward. The white sphere came slowly into full view, and into Dan's brain the evil thought-waves beat overpoweringly.

"Let 'em have it," he hissed softly, and raised his own gun, trying to shield his eyes against the white light, which seemed at this distance to be penetrating his whole body. The dread current of fear rocked his mind, made him dizzy and sick, and he could not pull the trigger . . . the stars spun before him.

"Dan!" the girl's voice cut across the whirling universe, and it was as if a veil had lifted. Her own will had seized upon his, held it against the deadly force.

But not so with the others. Guns hanging limp, the prisoners and guards were straggling forward, rapt, powerless, toward the gleaming, radiant ship. And as they advanced, little balls of white fire, like monstrous eggs, rolled to meet them. . . .

Around him the intellectuals crouched, their trained minds fighting the hypnotic effulgency, holding out mentally, yet with no power left over for physical movement. He tried to help the girl with his own will, the power with which he fought five worlds and death itself in his little *Ganymedian*, and suddenly found himself unshackled. He leapt to one of the discarded rifles, righted it, crowded a clip of five shells into it in terrible haste, pulled the cord blindly.

The shot was soundless, but the ground jolted under him and a red flash of dinitron marked the alien's hull. Around it the white light dimmed and began to disappear! He roared an insane laugh, pulled the cord again and again, continued pull-

ing it in a scarlet haze long after the clip was exhausted. There was a huge dark patch on the glowing sphere—but the shots had not penetrated!

Not penetrated . . . but the intellectuals, their mighty minds pitted successfully against the now-dimmed light, raised their awkward tubes, concentrated on that crater; the green network flowered, grew, and ate mordantly where the screening radiation was gone.

ABRUPTLY it was all over. There was a silent burst of energy, green and white intermingled; the alien ship shattered like a glass bubble. Within they caught brief, horror-sickened glimpses of things forever unknowable and indescribable; then, that too, was gone; there was but a heap of scrap metal, dull and lifeless.

The girl sat back on a rock, slumped; for a moment it seemed she would faint under the release of the ghastly strain. But she was still the immortal mistress of the Hall of Thought, and after a moment she straightened with an effort, looked squarely at him.

"Now you see the power of the mind," she whispered. "Are you sorry I am so much an intellectual, Dan Lothar?"

It was an utterly human question.

"You still have something to learn," he replied. "There are other powers." He leaned toward her. The glass of their face-plates clinked, and then they both laughed—an explosive, free, and human sound beneath the black Plutonian heavens.

## TODAY RATHER THAN TOMORROW

WHEN we read stories of the future, many of us must have thought: "But this is possible today, why cannot we do it and achieve the future in the present?"

In 1840, a Frenchman, Etienne Cabet, wrote a book called "A Trip to Icaria." This described a magnificent new country West of the Mississippi run on model lines with plenty for all—a veritable paradise. So convincing did this volume read that a large group of people set sail for New Orleans and made the long trip through the wilds into Texas. There their dreams ran into reality. Swindled by a land company, the going was tougher than they had imagined. Another expedition reached America; the Texans joined them and sailed up the river to Illinois where they again established themselves. This time they managed to struggle on, still trying to create their Icarian Utopia, until 1887.

In Paraguay an Australian, William Lane, enthused by Bellamy's "Looking Backward," established the settlement of New Australia in six hundred square miles granted him by the government. His great mistake was in insisting on prohibition; the colonists insisted on staying "wet," Lane left, and now the project is just another native town.

Theodor Hertzka, a German, wrote, in 1889, a volume telling of a wonderful nation established in Africa which would by 1925 lead the world in glory. An expedition set out to establish his Freeland in Uganda but enthusiasm ran on the rocks due to such unimaginative things as sandbars, monsoons, jungles, savages, etc.

# STRANGE RETURN

by

## Lawrence Woods

(Author of "Inhuman Victory," "Cosmic Coincidence," etc.)

Either the two space fliers had gone mad or else the whole world was wrong .....for the U. S. A. had never existed!

THE two middle-aged men were standing on the lawn, talking, when they first heard the sound of the falling vessel. At first it had been little more than a faint, far humming, as of a plane too far away to be seen. Possibly it might be the mail plane that usually flew over Staunton's place at this time, en route to New York, some fifty miles away. But with the rapid and astonishing increase in the all-pervading vibration, such conjecture had to be thrown to the

winds. The thing screamed down upon the Long Island estate with an overwhelming stridency.

Both men looked up as one. At first they saw nothing, but, in an instant, they spotted the tiny point of light. A speck of brilliance in the soft blue sky above, growing rapidly to a red flare directly overhead.

"By Jove! What's—" started Burleigh, then stopped short. Both men ducked instinctively as the flame from out of the sky seemed to come pouncing down upon their heads.

The ground shone red for an instant, then, suddenly, the carnate glow disappeared. For a moment there was shocked silence, then a terrific crash that shook the ground under their feet and sent them both sprawling.

Burleigh straightened up slowly, shook his head to clear it. "Lord," he queried in a shocked tone, "what was that?"

Staunton seemed too stunned to speak for an instant. His eyes stared out unseeing for a second, then, fixing upon something untoward in the view, stopped and came to a focus. His face leaped into startled amazement, quickly followed by fury.

"Hey! That's my tulip bed you've ruined!" he yelled and started running in the direction of the shining metal ovoid now nestling comfortably in a pit of its own making, surrounded by strewn rocks, soil, and crushed and mangled flowers of the now-vanished garden.

Staunton scarcely took note in those first few moments of the unusual design of the flying craft; his ire could see only that it had chosen his favorite flower beds for a landing field. But, as his mind took in the remarkably stream-lined silvery sides of the rather bullet-shaped craft, his sense of proportion returned and he came to a halt.

It was perhaps fifty feet long and twenty feet wide at its greatest diameter. In many ways it resembled a giant cartridge, its nose, with its jutting bull's-eye porthole, tapering down to a blunt point, its stern flat and tubed as if intended for a large number of exhaust pipes. Right now that section was smeared with black soot as if recently exposed to flames. And bits of up-thrown dirt were spattered over the otherwise glistening sides and against the three or four tiny thick-glassed portholes that studded the side.

Burleigh panted up to his friend, gasped "What kind of airplane is that? It's a new one to me."

"Looks like one of Gatling's rockets grown to monstrous proportions," commented Staunton walking cautiously a little closer.

"I'll bet that's what it is. The fellow had a place over in New Jersey once, and he's probably back again—making a damned nuisance of himself," added Burleigh as if in afterthought.

"He's going to pay for this nuisance, though," growled the estate owner, regaining some of his anger. "He'll wish he stayed back in the Border Territory before I get through!"

THE long lanky man carefully unstrapped the belts around his waist, eased himself down onto the narrow floor of the cramped control room. "Whew!" he muttered to himself, "That's over!" He tried to stretch his tired muscles, cramped from long hours of sitting hunched up in the tiny space the ship afforded.

"Yay! Halloo! Three cheers! We're home, Congreve, old boy; we've made it!" a cheery voice boomed

from the bowels of the craft behind him. Presently a leather-clad man stumbled and squirmed through the narrow way, into the too-small control room.

The newcomer was several inches shorter than Congreve. "You can stretch, now," he exulted. "You can stretch that scarecrow frame of yours to your heart's content once we get that door open. Earth at last! And what a trip!"

Congreve hunched over to peer through the quartzite front port. His blue eyes took in the scene outside, the blue sky, the green foliage, multicolored flowers, and the colonial mansion reposing in the midst of it. His eyes took in the scene again hungrily. "No," he whispered, as if in answer to a question, "there isn't another place in the universe as beautiful as Earth."

"Right!" boomed the voice behind him. "So let's open the door and get out onto beautiful Earth while its still here." Congreve nodded. "You first, Dave."

Preceded by Mitchell, he made his way back into the depths of the ship again; casting a passing glance at the tiny cabin in which the two men had lived and slept the past three months, he squeezed his way to the door of the lock. They got the first door open and Mitchell went inside the small space of the air-lock to swing the heavy outer door open, shouting gaily as it gave outward and he swung himself to the ground below.

Congreve pushed through after him, burst out laughing at the sight of the little man rolling about on the soft dirt like a puppy which had just had a bath. He felt like doing the same, but after all, Mitchell was the cut-up. The papers would not expect such doings from him.

The chief pilot and captain of the two-man ship let himself down on the newly upthrown soil and essayed a step. He staggered a bit, unused to the gravity he had missed these many weeks. Then he threw up his arms, indulged in a good long stretch, filling his lungs with the clean, fresh air. "It's good," he proclaimed to no one in particular.

"WHAT'S GOOD? You've ruined the best tulip beds on Long Island, thrown dirt and rocks all over the place, nearly scared me and my guest to death, then you stand there and say 'it's good'!" came an infuriated voice a few feet distant. "What a crust you rocket bums have! Just because you're crazy and think you can fly to the moon, don't think that you can get away with destroying an honest man's property. You may be a hero to kids, but you're a pain to me! And you'll pay for every bit of damage that infernal contraption of yours has done to my estate!" Staunton had arrived upon the scene.

Congreve looked up, startled; Mitchell scrambled to his feet, wiped away some of the dirt that was smeared on him. Neither one knew quite what to say. They had been prepared, mentally, to answer reporters or newsreel men, mayors, or any other similar forms of welcoming committee. But this was totally unexpected.

Congreve cleared his throat. "I sincerely regret, sir, if we have damaged your property, and assure you that we can pay for any destruction the ship has caused."

Staunton bristled. "Pay!" he wailed. "That won't restore my grounds; that won't replace my flowers. It'll take years before anything will grow here again! You've burned

out the very land itself; this whole piece of property is worthless."

"My dear sir," Congreve said quietly. "I assure you that all such damages will be recompensed for in one way or another. My name, since you do not seem to recognize me, is Congreve — Charles Congreve of Salt Lake City, Utah." He waited to see what effect this name would have. Considering the uproar the two space fliers had received in the press and radio all over the planet, this final revelation should be the "Open Sesame" to the estate owner. He was astonished that the man had not recognized him before now. But Staunton's answer was to astonish him further.

"Ahah! Foreigners to boot! Think you can trample over the King's good territory just because you're protected by a passport. Why, I'll bet you haven't got a passport!" Burleigh stepped up beside Staunton now, laid a hand on his shoulder. "Let me handle this," he whispered, "it may be more serious."

"NOW, Mr. Congreve, I am sure this can all be settled peacefully. My friend is a little perturbed over the loss of his flower beds."

"A little perturbed!" snorted Mitchell. "Wonder what he's like when he's angry." The look which all three of them cast silenced him.

"If you two," continued Burleigh, "can show me your passports and flying permits, there will be no need to call the constabulary."

"Passports!" This time Congreve was taken aback. "Why we're as good Americans as you, or any other citizen of this country. Why passports?"

"Sir, it seems you do not realize that you are no longer in Mormon lands; you are in the Appalachian country, now. Haven't you a passport?" Burleigh was a bit puzzled by the stupidity of these foreign aviators.

"What the deuce difference does it make what section of the nation we're in? As far as that goes, we took off from just outside Newark Airport where our vessel was built," the lanky American answered, becoming ruffled at last.

Burleigh seemed a bit puzzled. If they built their ship in Newark, they must possess legal rights to traverse the Appalachian country. "I imagine, then," he said, "you have some sort of flying permits or leave of stay from the New Jersey officials?"

Congreve glared a second, stupefied. "Yes," he finally managed to sputter, "we have flying licenses." He reached into his leather jacket and pulled out his papers, thrust them into the two men's faces.

Burleigh took them, examining them carefully. Gradually his face became more and more puzzled. "These aren't Appalachian papers," he announced. "They're from some federation called the United States of America — nothing to do with the British Commonwealth of Nations. They seem to be in perfect order, but I must confess I have never heard of this United States of America. Come, come, man; if you haven't F. A. S. papers, say so."

Mitchell edged over to the pilot. "I think they're both bats. We'd better humor them till we get a cop."

Congreve thought so too, but an idea just occurred to him. He whispered back to his friend. "It just came to me that time may be wrong out there in space. We think three months have passed; perhaps we are wrong. Perhaps decades, centuries have gone by." He addressed the two men in front of him. "Excuse me,

gentlemen. It may seem irrelevant, but can you give me the date?"

The two stood still awaiting an answer, one which might be the explanation. But it fell on their ears like a dull thud. "The date's right," Mitchell whispered. "So the only answer is that they're nuts."

At this moment Staunton was murmuring to Burleigh. "I believe that these men are lunatics. You engage them in conversation while I notify a constable." He slipped away from the group and made his way rapidly into the house.

Meanwhile, Burleigh had arrived at the same conclusion and saw it might be dangerous to anger these foreigners any more. So he started to question them as to where they had been and what kind of ship they had.

This was more to the two spacemen's liking; Congreve felt at ease. He expanded, began to tell this man everything. The heart of a man long isolated from others is friendly, given the chance.

BURLEIGH beckoned the two over nearer the house where beach chairs were set out on what was left of the lawn. They had been overturned by the impact of the ship; he set them up thinking that it might be safer to have the lunatics in a comfortable position. For himself, he chose a comfortable, upright chair from which he could rise swiftly if need be.

Papers and legal documents were forgotten for the moment as the two related of their voyage; told of the building of the ship, the shot into space, the veering of the rocket as they approached the sun. No sooner than they had escaped the Terrestrial zone of gravity did the rocket turn away from its course, thus ending their chances of landing on Luna as they'd planned. They told how they had managed to rocket the ship into the attraction of Mercury and land on that world, how they had spent weeks in the Mercurian Twilight Zone while they repaired ship, made explorations and calculations. And the grand day when the gleaming green star that was Earth finally came again into view.

Burleigh listened in fascination. Madmen these two were, but interesting madmen. They knew their astronomy and theory of space-travel (he recalled having read several authoritative texts on the subject and what the two said checked with the facts) and they refrained from melodramatics. A simple, straightforward tale for all the fantastic tenor of it.

"You know," Mitchell was saying, "we couldn't exactly measure time except by that. A year on Mercury is roughly 88 of our days, but, as it doesn't revolve, we couldn't tell when they had passed save when old green Earth swung on the horizon. There's no mistaking this planet, sir."

Burleigh nodded politely, half-friendly, almost regretting that the police would soon come and take these lunatics away. He wanted to hear a great deal more; perhaps he could write a thesis on the subject to be checked against reality if and when, some day, such a voyage were actually made.

"Yes," broke in Congreve, "it was good to set foot on Terra again, until—" then he stopped himself, realizing that he had brought attention back to the subject they had been trying to keep away from.

There was an awkward silence for a moment.

"HELLO!" said Mitchell suddenly. "Here's your friend with a cop."

"Now we can straighten things out," breathed Congreve and Burleigh, almost in unison, stopping then to stare at each other.

The constable's voice broke in on them. "Mr. Staunton here informs me that you have been trespassing on his property, destroying his flowers, and making a general nuisance of yourself. In addition to that, he charges that you are foreigners and cannot show passports or legal flying permits. What have you to say? I warn you that anything stated here may be used against you later."

The spacemen stared at the uniformed man in growing bewilderment. A horrible suspicion began to slither in their minds that something was quite wrong. For the uniform the man wore was not that of the New York State or City Police, or like that of any police with whom they had ever had contact. Blue it was; that much was true. But the cut was all wrong; and the design on the buttons, shield, and cap decorations was such that it caught them unaware.

For the shield was surmounted by a crown and the brass buttons each bore the same symbol. And the heraldic emblems were entirely alien to the two Americans.

Congreve choked a second. Finally he ventured: "Would you please tell us exactly where we are? In what section of the country?"

The officer, a burly ruddy-faced man, hesitated an instant, then replied. "You are on Long Island, near New York City, in the state of New York."

The two astral navigators looked at each other in astonishment. They had begun to think that perhaps they might have landed in Newfoundland or Canada, but this confirmed previous observations. Yet, here was a mystery which defied solution.

Congreve spoke up slowly. "I'm afraid there's some great mistake here. If you have a car, I think it would be better if we went with you to the city to clear this matter up." It had occurred to him that, perhaps, if he could get away from this crazy mansion (no doubt, the two men were regarded as merely eccentric, in view of their wealth) he might find sane people who could explain this matter. In any case, he could obtain a lawyer.

The policeman looked relieved, signified his assent. He had expected trouble.

Mitchell and Congreve swung the door of their great space-rocket shut and locked it. Then they crossed the lawns of the estate and entered the officer's blue-green radio car. They seated themselves in the back seat, the officer with them, and a second officer, who had remained in the car, drove off.

The little astronaut thought he knew cars, but he couldn't place this one. "What make of car is this?" he inquired. "I thought you police always used Fords."

The officer grunted. "It's a Royal Six. Never heard of Fords; must be one of your foreign makes."

Mitchell gulped and looked out of the window wondering what was wrong with the world. The view outside seemed all right. Beautiful Long Island scenery, fine homes, blue sky, green grass—he couldn't be entirely mad.

They drove on in silence to a police station in some small town. There their man got out and went inside; after a little while he returned, got in

again and told the driver to go right on into the city to the "Federation Building."

CONGREVE smiled to himself; now, he fancied, he'd be recognized and given his due reception.

They drove on for half an hour, finally passing the city border and entering Brooklyn. Mitchell stared quite thoughtfully at the streets as they passed. Somehow or other he couldn't quite place what part of the borough they were in; it did look like Brooklyn. But this street should be Flatbush Avenue; instead, the signs read Prince Edward Boulevard.

They came to the bridge. Mitchell, who knew New York as well as the palm of his hand, seemed a bit puzzled that they had arrived at the bridge this way. He knew that it should lie several blocks over. As they crossed, Congreve gasped and jerked his friend's arm. "Look at that skyline!"

The short man looked, and fell back against the seat limply. For a moment his brain refused to think. The skyline was changed! In the few weeks they had been away New York had undergone a startling, incredible metamorphosis.

At first glance, it might seem (to one who was not intimate with the city) quite the same, the tall skyscrapers jutting up into the clouds from downtown Manhattan, several huge buildings towering over the others. But the Americans could recognize none. Where the Empire State Building should have been was only a moderately high affair—some blocks away, where nothing of importance had been in the skyline, a colossus towered up, different in contour from any of the skyscrapers they knew. Nor could they find the Chrysler Building or even the once-mighty Woolworth Building. There were others, equally as imposing in other places, but all were strange—the designs different.

"It's all wrong," Mitchell groaned, burying his head in his arms. "Something has happened to us—I think we've gone mad."

As for Congreve, he was not a New Yorker and was unaware of the amazing degree of difference. He only knew that something was wrong.

The car stopped and they emerged. The Federation Building was a massive many-storied structure in the downtown district. Neither of the two men had ever seen it before. Above its wide entrance appeared the same crown and shield that was on their escorting officers. A flag flew from a staff jutting out three stories above the entrance.

At first glimpse, Congreve thought it was the American flag. He had spotted the familiar red and white stripes and blue field of Old Glory. But something odd about it made him look again. It was hanging on its staff and he couldn't make out what it was.

The officers flanked them and took them in through the doorway. As they passed into the entrance, the man from Utah cast a glance upward at the flag. A gust of wind had caught it, flinging its colors out to the breeze. And Congreve felt another shock.

Thirteen red and white stripes there were. Yet, up in the corner where the forty-eight white stars should have been in their blue field, there appeared another design. A British Union Jack!

The two Americans stopped thinking. They merely walked stolidly beside the two policemen through the corridors and into an elevator. The bustling crowd of business people

passing in and out barely noticed them. They got off and went through a door marked "Bureau of Immigration."

Before a desk, behind which sat a middle-aged gentleman with gray hair, they stopped. One of their escorts began to tell Staunton's version of the arrival of the rocket. Congreve's annoyance returned at the continued use of the word "foreigners." "I beg your pardon, sir," he cut in, "but I'd like to inform you that we are not foreigners. We are loyal, tax-paying American citizens—as much so as you."

THE gray-haired Immigration Authority looked at him quizzically and remarked, "I don't doubt that you are Americans, but that is hardly the point. It isn't what continent you are from, but what nation. Now, where is your home city and residence? In what state or province do you pay taxes?"

Congreve smiled. "I was born and have my home in Salt Lake City, Utah. Naturally I pay taxes in that state, as well as to the U. S. Government."

The man behind the desk nodded. "Now we are getting to facts. You admit to being a citizen of the Mormon Republic of Utah and paying taxes to a 'U. S.' government. I presume that means Utah State. Since you are quite apparently in Federated States without a passport, we shall have to contact your Consulate here."

Congreve opened his mouth in amazement. Consulate! Mormon Republic! Federated States! He was about to request further illumination, but his questioner held up his hand as he dialed a number on the telephone. The man spoke to someone about Congreve a moment, concluding with, "Yes, please send the Consul over. This is most unusual."

Hanging up, he announced, "Your Consul will be here shortly and take care of you." A hand waved the lanky Westerner to a chair.

"Now you, Mr. Mitchell. Where were you born and what do you do?"

Mitchell glared at him a moment, then replied, "I was born in the good old American city of New Orleans and have lived for the past twenty years right here in New York City."

The Immigration Officer frowned. "Have you ever been naturalized?"

Congreve thought Mitchell was going to burst an artery. "What! Naturalized! What do you think I am? I'm a citizen of the U. S. A. and was in the war. Me naturalized? I should say not!"

"Ah!" Everyone leaned forward, staring at Mitchell. "You admit having lived here for the past twenty years, un-naturalized, thus retaining your allegiance to the Empire of Louisiana. You even boast about having fought on their side in the late war. You realize that virtually makes you guilty of espionage?" The inquisitor looked exceedingly grave.

The short man was taken back completely. "Me a spy! Certainly not!"

The Immigration Officer leaned back in his chair, looking at Mitchell. Then he looked up at the policemen. "Take the prisoner away and hold him for court martial." Mitchell jumped as an officer placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"In the name of his Majesty James X., King of Britton and Dominions Overseas, I place you under arrest. Come along!"

They dragged the protesting astronaut out shouting as he went, "You can't do this to me! I'm an American, I tell you! American!"

Congreve clenched his fist. He wanted to step in, but realized that any action he took at the moment would only endanger himself without helping Mitchell.

THE Mormon Consul, a lean, angular man named Brigham, arrived finally. Without giving Congreve a chance to speak at all, the consul talked the case over with the Immigrations man. The man at the desk seemed to give Brigham considerable respect, and finally the Consul signed several papers, and motioned to the American astronaut.

"You've been placed in my custody until we straighten your case out. Come along with me," he told the other, taking him by the arm and leading him out.

Congreve kept quiet. Once in the street, they entered the consul's car, which, the American noticed, had diplomatic plates and the Mormon coat of arms on the side. They drove in silence to a large brownstone house where they descended to the street. On one side of the door was set the same Mormon shield and the legend "Mormon Republic—Consulate."

Entering the building, they proceeded to the consul's private office where Congreve was given a seat. "Now suppose," said Brigham in a kindly tone, "you tell me your story."

The pilot of the first space ship from Earth lost no time in giving his account. The consul smoked a pipe and looked at him while he talked, giving no indication as to whether or not he believed him.

"You have had an amazing experience," remarked the man when Congreve had finished, "and I fear you have undergone considerable mental stress. But let me put you straight on some cases where you seem confused."

The Consul took the pipe out of his mouth as if uncertain where to begin. "At the present moment, you are in the building of the Mormon Republic Consulate, at the corner of Fifth and King Charles Avenues, in the city of New York. This entire area is within the British Dominion known as the Federated Appalachian States. This is, as you assumed, the North American Continent." The Consul stood up and unrolled a large map of North America that hung on the wall. Congreve leaped to his feet in amazement; never had he dreamed the like.

The Consul put his finger on the city of New York. "As you can see, all this territory in pink is the Appalachian Dominion." His hand swept over the territory covered by the original thirteen colonies, Maine, and all the territory east of the Mississippi River, from Wisconsin down to approximately where Memphis should be. From there the Appalachian territory cut across to the Atlantic Ocean, never touching the Gulf of Mexico at any point. "All this territory is a British Dominion, separate from the Dominions of Canada and Newfoundland, to the North."

His hand fell to the Peninsula of Florida and a section of the Gulf of Mexico. "This is all the Republic of Florida, the uppermost of the Spanish-American Republics." West of the Mississippi, from Louisiana up to Missouri, the map showed as "Empire of Louisiana." A pseudo-independent country, actually a French protectorate. Texas stood out roughly in its old shape as Republic of Texas.

Far to the West was the Dominion of California, stretching along the

Pacific Coast as far as the Canadian Border; where the states of Utah, Idaho, and Nevada should have been, appeared the Mormon Republic. "This is our country, Congreve," whispered Brigham softly, "our God-given land."

Considerable territory in the Central States lay simply marked American Indian Federation. "A British protectorate," remarked the consul.

Congreve sat down abruptly. "I don't understand it," he breathed dazedly.

The Consul smiled sympathetically. "I'm afraid you have been suffering delusions, my boy. That Louisiana spy was using you as a defenseless tool."

Congreve looked up again. "Nonsense!" he snapped, suddenly defiant. "The United States of America, my country, is no delusion." But his eyes fell on that map and his spirits sagged again.

DURING the next few days Congreve went around hopelessly befuddled. He had finally been forced to take everything about him at its face value. Things were so very obviously real. But it was the similarities rather than the differences which staggered him. For example, the homeland of the British, the seat of His Majesty's Government, was not known as England but Britton. Scotland, Wales, and Eire were on the map, but he soon found that there was nowhere near the amount of distinction among them that he had known. The money, with the crowned head of the King, the people, American-seeming, yet possessed of a certain oddness about them that indicated the man of a British Dominion, the soldiers and flags, and the papers . . . especially the papers.

The news, their very make-up was the manner of London papers, though there did seem to be a degree of Americanization about them. And the headlines, such as: REVOLT SWEEPS FLORIDA, VASQUEZ OUT, or REPORT SECRET MANEUVERS ON MISSISSIPPI FRONTIER, and such like. And Europe was all garbled too. Everything was different, yet things were subtly as he had known them. Names were similar, sometime identical, as were fashions — these, however, never reached beyond similarity.

He looked into history. That, too, was markedly similar (and different). There were fundamentally the same migrations of people, the same general movements of nations, the same general wars. But their dates (relatively) were different.

There had been an American Revolution. It had broken out around 1778, the revolutionary forces had been commanded by a General from Virginia. But his name was Rawlins, not Washington. But the British had put down the rebels and executed their leaders. However, within a century economic forces had culminated in a dominionship for the colonies and from that time on they attained a degree of independence approaching, but not exactly like, the politico-economic and geographic independence of the United States he knew.

In 1800 an adventurer from Corsica had arisen in France and had gained power and set up an Empire. His name was Marinet and he looked a great deal like Napoleon. In many ways he was greater than Napoleon. But he ruled a longer time, and as one result the territory of Louisiana never left French control, becoming an Empire under a cousin

of Marinet whose descendants still reigned.

In 1862 a rebellion had broken out in the Southern Appalachian States concerning the British attitude toward slavery. This revolt had been subdued after a year of bitter warfare, under the direction of a General Garrand and a Dominion Premier named Linke.

In 1895, a man in Britton had invented a successful flying machine powered by a ponderous steam engine. A few such craft made small flights of commercial value until in 1902 an inventor in Delaware had built a craft powered by a gasoline engine.

In 1913 a great international conflict had arisen in Europe, centering about the conflicting economic interests of France and Prussia. Britton aided the Prussians against the French and Bavarians. Eventually all of Europe had been dragged in, but the war ended in a stalemate. In America the war was fought between the Louisiana-Mexico and California-Mormon - Federated Appalachian combines.

CONGREVE could not get his mind straight. At times he had begun to think that perhaps he was, as the Consul suggested, a Mormon citizen, duped and hypnotized by a spy. But, at other times, he could think only of the United States.

Brigham had not yet successfully established his identity as a Mormon citizen, Congreve reflected. But then Brigham conjectured that Congreve might not be his name after all. That the astronaut could not see. Then came the day when Brigham announced that Mitchell had been tried by court-martial and found guilty. He would be shot, on the morrow, as a spy.

Congreve was shocked beyond measure. They could not do this to his friend and companion of the stars.

"Isn't there something you can do to stop them?" he asked Brigham anxiously.

"Nothing," was the reply. "He was a spy and as such shall be executed. You were lucky in that the British are friendly to our Republic; otherwise they'd have tried you as his accomplice even if you were deluded."

Congreve said nothing. He knew it was up to him to take action, but what action he knew not. Putting on his hat, he strode into the streets to walk and think it over.

He walked along rapidly, hands in his pocket, head down, his mind a mass of confused thoughts, his heart heavy. Mitchell had but one day more to live. Something must be done to prevent this murder, yet what? This world was all wrong; there was a United States; Mitchell was as innocent and confused as he.

Yet . . . was he? Congreve knew that, to a madman, his delusions seem real while the conceptions of those around appear hideously distorted, wrong, and insane. Had this world changed since their stay on Mercury? Or had he, Congreve, been temporarily unbalanced? If things were totally different, perhaps he might be right (though what the answer to the mystery in such a case might be baffled him). But—that damning similarity, that sameness which suggested that a few slight distortions had been effected in his concepts. Minute alterations which, expanded, resulted in vast differences . . . like the appalling difference the end-result of a mathematical problem can show if a single decimal point is shifted somewhere in the be-

ginning. Was all this a horrible quirk of his mind, induced by a spy? These strangely different, yet entirely human people around him: were they real, the normal?

And, supposing he were right, right through and through. What could he do about it? If by some freak of luck (for only the veriest luck could help now) Mitchell were rescued, where would they go?

He walked for an hour or two, caring not in what direction his feet took him. Walked on and on, realizing how infinitely absurd it was to conclude that this entire world was mad and he was sane—the only sane person therein. For, even if that were true . . . is not sanity the madness of the greatest number? Finally he stopped and took note of his surroundings.

It was a region of lower middle-class apartment houses, occasional brownstone stooped buildings, and a few stores. Walking along gazing abstractedly at the houses, he noticed a sign on a small plaque, set in the doorway of a three-story building. It read:—

CULT OF THE SACRED DUALITY
NADIR KHAN, TEACHER
SECOND FLOOR.

There was a diagram beneath it, a sort of holy symbol that caught Congreve's eye. The American walked up to it, studied the diagram. Something was stirring in the back of his mind. Then suddenly, with a gasp, he turned and dashed up the stairs.

NADIR KHAN turned out to be tall turbaned East Indian and an entirely scholarly man. He greeted Congreve quietly, inquired of him what he wished.

Congreve hesitated a moment, then plunged into his story. Ending up with the suggestion that had come to him upon noticing the Cult's name and symbol, he asked the Leader if he could shed any further enlightenment.

Khan's excitement showed that Congreve was on the trail of something. The Indian questioned him closely on the details of his flight through space, and of his earlier life. Then he explained what the Cult maintained and taught to those who would listen.

When Congreve left an hour later, he was accompanied to the door by the Indian.

"My devout converts number about thirty, and they will follow us to the end. I shall meet you tonight, my friend, at the appointed place." Congreve went back, a wild hope stirring in his heart and action tingling in his veins.

That night, after the consulate was asleep, Congreve slipped out of his room, down to the basement. Opening several large cases there, using keys he had taken from the consul's desk, he carried many large, long and slender implements outside to the automobile that had silently drawn up outside. Willing hands helped him in and stacked the things he had brought with him; the car drove off through the dark streets.

It stopped a half block from the entrance of the Dominion Prison where Mitchell was incarcerated. The three in the car stepped out, Nadir Kahn, Congreve, and another. Out of the shadows of the dark street stepped several other figures.

Two of the newcomers reached into the car, began to distribute the rifles Congreve had brought; the rest peeled off the light overcoats they had been wearing, revealing beneath the uniforms of the Royal American

Infantry, borrowed for the occasion.

Into the prison marched a file of soldiers, at their head a man in clerical garb, and a civilian. The warden was notified.

Congreve, who was in civilian clothes, stepped up to him.

"By orders of the Governor-General, the prisoner Mitchell is to be delivered to this firing squad for immediate execution."

The warden's eyes narrowed. "I understood he was to be shot in the morning." Congreve nodded. "Circumstances have arisen compelling the execution to take place immediately. There are matters of grave diplomatic consequence at stake. Here are your orders." He tended a neatly forged document to the warden.

The grey-haired man looked at it sleepily and nodded. "Send your men out into the prison yard. I'll take you and the minister to get the prisoner."

The short man was soundly asleep. Nadir Khan, who had told the warden that Mitchell was a convert of his, entered the cell and bent over the sleeper, awakening him.

"Keep quiet and don't recognize Congreve," he whispered. "We're friends; we are getting you out."

Mitchell blinked his eyes and sat up. He stared at them a moment, then got into his clothes while Nadir stood there mumbling religious chants in a dull monotone.

They filed out of the cell, police guards falling in by Mitchell's side, and the "spy" was led into the yard.

Congreve requested that the warden dismiss all police present, explaining that the thing must be done with as few observers as possible. In a moment there were none remaining in the dark courtyard save the Dualists, the two Americans, and the warden. The police official spoke up.

"I shall have to witness the execution. It's part of my duty."

"Of course," said Congreve quietly, shoving a revolver into the pit of the man's back. "Only you'll be dead before that happens."

The warden turned about; Nadir Khan whipped out his pistol and struck him with the butt. Catching the warden's body, he eased it gently to the ground. Two of the men bound and gagged the official.

THE warden was left hidden in a dark corner of the yard. One of the pretended soldiers produced a uniform from his knapsack while others came forward and quickly they put together a rifle as Mitchell donned the clothes.

"What's it all about, and who are these guys?" whispered Mitchell as he slipped into uniform.

"Keep quiet," commanded Congreve. "I'll explain later."

"O.K.?" whispered the lanky astronaut. Mitchell nodded.

Congreve turned to the others. "Take aim!" he yelled in a voice that should carry to any possible person who might be within earshot, adding in a low tone "in the air." The firing squad obeyed.

"Fire!" A volley rang out in the night air. A second later, Congreve fired a pistol in the air, which would be taken as a "mercy shot."

"Fall in!" he commanded and they formed a line and marched out.

None of the police around the halls and main entrance of the prison noticed that there was one more soldier going out than had come in. The warden's absence they took to indicate that he was directing the removal of the body.

ONCE in the street, Congreve, Mitchell, and Nadir Khan hur-

ried to their car and leaped in. The others donned their overcoats and faded away as they had come. The car roared into action and shot off down the street.

They headed for Long Island and the Staunton Estate where the Cultist had determined the space-ship was still lying, unmolested.

Once through Brooklyn, they stepped on the gas, shaking off the motorcycle police who buzzed after them. After about an hour, they reached the estate recognizable as Staunton's. The place was dark, its owner asleep. The three emerged from the car, then climbed over the stone wall. Dully in the moonless night the great rocket loomed ahead.

It was as they had left it save that a police seal had been put on the door. "Apparently they were holding it, untouched, for expert investigators," whispered Congreve, twisting the wheel that released the catches on the safe-like door.

The police seal proved an obstacle for a moment. A strip of solder fastened over the crack of the door. Not wishing to waste time, Congreve shot it off. A moment later lights flashed on inside the mansion and a voice called out, "What's going on down there!" But they were already inside even as someone started to run down the lawn in the rocket's direction.

The three closed the steel doors, then Congreve squeezed his way down the narrow passage into the control room. He had, he noticed, lost considerable weight. Mitchell led the Cultist into the little sleeping chamber where they managed to brace themselves into hammocks.

Congreve, in the pilot's seat, flashed the dashboard lights, glanced hurriedly around to see if all were in order. Everything checked; he leaned back and grasped the main switch.

"Contact!" he sang out. "Hold fast!"

OUTSIDE the servant who had run out on the lawn, and Staunton and several others who had gotten to the windows, held their breaths suddenly. They had noticed a flicker of light in one of the tiny portholes of the craft and guessed what would happen.

There was a terrific hissing as of a million snakes, a monstrous roar and a cataract of blue-green fire poured out of the exhaust pipes that formed the rear of the craft. Then the fire changed suddenly to vivid scarlet; there was a crashing noise as of myriad batteries of artillery in continuous action, and the great metal mass seemed to leap forwards.

It slid along the ground for a second, charring a wide swathe in the lawn, setting off brush fires. Then it shot forward, lifted off the ground, crashed through a clump of trees as if they were straws, and tore thunderously into the night sky.

THE GREEN globe of Earth lay far behind them. All about the rocket blazed innumerable stars, glistening jewels of lights in the abyss. Far off, at one side of the ship lay the sun, ninety-three million miles away.

Mitchell looked out the port in bewilderment.

"Where to now?" he asked. "We are still in Earth's orbit; where are we going?"

Nadir Khan looked up from the opposite window from which he had been devouring the spectacle of celestial space. He stared at Mitchell with a knowing smile. "You are going home again, my friends. Not to Mars; not to Venus; not to Mercury

or some other planet, but home whence you came."

Mitchell wrinkled his brow in puzzlement. "I don't understand what you're driving at. There is home; there is Earth behind us." He pointed back to the globe they were leaving.

"You do not comprehend the Sacred Duality," was the Cultist's answer. "Let us join your companion in the control room and it shall be made clear."

The two slipped through to the front chamber. Nadir Khan addressed the silent Congreve. "Your fellow space-man wished enlightenment, and now that we are far from the world behind us, it is time you tell him of our discovery."

Congreve nodded, thought awhile, then began:—

"The universe is a strange place, Mitchell. There are more incredible things, queer things, than ever any of us conceived." He stopped for a moment, then peered ahead as if searching for something.

"You recall our stay on Mercury. Our clocks were worthless, for, as soon as we had left Earth and the gravity ceased its pull, their springs threw them all out of gear, as we should have expected.

"On Mercury, we just couldn't compute time; the planet had neither day nor night and the motion of the stars was too slight to use as a criterion. We could only guess at time by the rising and setting of the planets.

"Earth is a vivid planet; it was close enough to give an unmistakable point. No one could fail to recognize it. When we landed on the little planet, Earth was a green spot high in the heavens. When we finished our many days of work and repair and exploration, we saw our Earth again high in the heavens. Naturally, we assumed that a Mercurian year had passed; our little planet had revolved once about the sun, we thought, and, thus, we had passed about eighty or so Terrestrial days there. So we set flight again, headed for that green globe so clearly placed in the sky.

"When we reached it, it was Earth; it had Earth's moon, Earth's continents, and in all respects was the same planet that we had left. But we were wrong . . . as we soon found out, although we did not realize it then. It was not our Earth, Mitchell. We were not on Mercury for the duration of one of the little planet's years; we were there only for a Mercurian half-year."

Mitchell's bewilderment grew. "But we saw Earth high in the sky; had we stayed only about forty days, it would have been behind the sun and out of sight."

"Precisely," answered Congreve. "So it was. Our Earth was behind the sun and out of sight. There are two Earths, Mitchell. Our world is one of twins. When, untold ages ago, the planets were cast off the sun, there was a dual explosion when it came to our planet's turn. Two bodies were cast off, of equal size and mass, each composed of similar elements. Each body was hurled an equal distance from the sun so that they exactly counterbalanced.

"Thus have they been through the ages. When they finally settled and hardened, the solar gravitational complex forced each into the same orbit; each pursued the same course about the sun, separated only by 180 degrees of their circle. They follow eternally in each other's footsteps, Mitchell; the sun is always between them so that one cannot be seen from the other."

Mitchell broke in. "But what about the similarity in life development, the similarities to such amazing degrees as we noticed?"

"Similar planetary environment can account for the co-development of life itself on the twin worlds. The forces that exist on our Earth, which culminated in homo sapiens as dominant mammal, also exist there; thus we had man on both worlds." He turned to Nadir Khan. "I think," he said, "you can best take up the story from this point."

NADIR KHAN smiled. "The elements are simply described. Languages, cultures, traditions, history, economic developments. They are all the end-results of environment. But we come upon another factor: the energy or force of what we term 'thought.' No one (at least no one in our Earth) has yet been able accurately to define thought; in fact, there have been entire explanatory theses worked out on the assumption that humans (and all life for that matter) do not 'think' at all . . . that it is entirely a complex of reflexes, conditioned by either physical or artificial factors.

"We of the Sacred Duality base our teachings and philosophy on the premise that 'thought' exists, that it is a physical, ultimately measurable force. Thus we postulate tremendous mental pressure from millions of human beings thinking and acting together, thought-strains that vibrate back along the orbit in which our planet travels to affect mentally the corresponding races of the other world. We conceive of this as a bi-directional phenomenon.

"In the beginnings of the human race on both worlds, there was little effect of one upon another. But the development of the two planets, being similar, forced the development of life along similar lines. Then, when 'thought' began to concentrate itself the two worlds affected each other mutually. That is why our histories are so similar.

"In your Earth, your philosophers guessed at this duality of planets, but you had imagined the opposite world to be one of Retribution, in which the socially reprehensible and socially commendable deeds of those departed would bring upon the individual a sort of just judgment. In our world, there are also such philosophies and theologies, but we of the Sacred Duality believe what I have just explained."

Congreve nodded. "In our Earth," he remarked to Mitchell, "the American colonies managed to free themselves from British rule; in Nadir's Earth the corresponding revolution failed. The same economic and historical forces brought about the action, but its precise manner—the degree—differed; it almost seems that only sheer luck prevented the same end as occurred in Nadir's Earth: failure. But, despite that failure, we see a similar end result. Under the United States of America of our Earth, or the Federated Appalachian States, we have the same type of society; the people have the same amount of liberty in the end."

THE three voyagers of space sat in silence for awhile, their thoughts dwelling on the dual planets they called Earth, and on the histories of each. Then Congreve grasped Mitchell's arm and pointed to the forward window. Nadir Khan looked up and smiled.

A green star was coming into view, far away; just coming into view behind the flaming corona of the sun.


AS YOU READERS must undoubtedly have surmised by this time, *Stirring Science Stories* isn't really one magazine but two. A sort of Siamese twin embracing within its covers for the first time in publishing history a science-fiction magazine and a weird-fantasy magazine. You'll find *Stirring Science Stories* in the pages preceding this department with an outstanding assortment of scientific imaginative fiction. You'll find our more modest twin *Stirring Fantasy Fiction* in the pages following this central vortex with the finest tales of fantasy and weird imagination you can obtain anywhere.

Perhaps you are not certain of just how we draw the distinction between the one form of fantasy and the other. Let us define our fields. Science-fiction is that branch of fantasy relying for its effect on the fact that its imaginative visionings are based upon logical projections of known science. That is, these stories are not impossible, not sheer dream-stuff, but actually conceivable as things that may occur under specific conditions today, or that may have occurred in the unrecorded past.

Weird fiction, on the other hand, is the branch of fantasy that depends upon the readers' willingness to accept the factors on which the story is based may be true (but cannot now be accepted by science), or that since, at one time or another great numbers of people have accepted such things as true, there may indeed be something to them. A weird-fantasy is by no means to be considered as impossible. It requires a more open mind, a mind that is willing to concede that the very laws of the universe may not be stable and may be subject to change even as every existing thing known to science is known to be subject to steady and never-ending change. Cannot the laws of science themselves be subject also to this eternal alteration? Are they not in fact actually so subject? Do we know everything already or is it true that "the more we know the more there is to learn"?

We place therefore in the forepart of our double-magazine those stories which science is prepared to accept as probable; we place in the latter half those stories which science may someday be willing to accept but is not now prepared to do.

We feel that there is a definite place for a magazine such as ours, we feel that those readers, and there

are myriads of you, who possess minds capable of encompassing the whole scope of human imagination, whose minds truly know no barriers, will welcome *Stirring Science Stories* with open arms. We, on our part, will justify that support by continuing to give you between these two covers, the most audacious and imaginative fiction to be had.

THE VORTEX, which is the midway dividing line, will serve as a combination editorial and correspondence department. We have only a few letters this time since only a handful of super-fans who make fantasy their all-in-all heard about our project in time to write us opinions.

A few words from *Olon F. Wiggins,* Director of the Colorado Fantasy Society and Chairman of the 1941 World Science Fiction Convention Committee:—

"There is definitely a place for a magazine combining the elements of science-fiction and weird-fantasy. I'm sure the magazine will be a success under your editorship—and if wishing you all the luck in the world will help—then you have my well wishes."

3214 Champa St.,
Denver, Colorado.

Managing Editor's Note:—

Thanks, Olon, we certainly intend to do our best. But perhaps the readers are wondering just who the editor thinks he is that he should be able to select just what is good and what is not among fantasy offerings. We think that's a serious point; we have often felt that putting together a magazine is not just a business routine; it is and should be a work of art done by experts, and not by just some literary store clerk. *Forrest J Ackerman and Morojo,* famous foremost fantasy fans, listed our editor's credentials when they first heard about *Stirring Science Stories:*—

"So it's come at last, the establishment of Wollheim as editor of a magazine of fanciful tales. . . . Possessor of a world-famous fantasy collection, noted as a book-reviewer, author of science-fiction stories, and one who has had the distinction of being the Top Fan for some time during the last decade, we can think of few fans so fit. Knowing your literary and science standard, your long record as a crusader for better things in the field of imaginative fiction, we anticipate a publication with editorial policy of significant science fiction and fine fantasy, that will be a wonderful success. . . ."

This is Wollheim again. We don't think our past record is as marvelous as our two Los Angeles fans outline, but we do admit to be just a bit frightened that so much is expected of us. Now we'll just have to grit our teeth and live up to expectations. Ackerman and Morojo go on to make a few suggestions:—

"We submit that stories of dynamic concept, sound psychology, humanitarianism, wit, satire, and grip can be had from Coblentz, Keller, Heinlein, deCamp, Bond, Hubbard, Moore, Van Vogt—. While these authors should be illustrated by artists worthy of their talents, it is senseless to suppose one can find one's favorite artists illustrating everything in all of them, so we should be satisfied with occasional pictures by the favorites, while recommending you concentrate on developing Mooney, Marconette, Wright, Perri and Hunt. Dold and Ferguson might be contacted to see if they would be interested in illustrating once again. And the unique hand of Hannes Bok is not yet being overworked. . . . By the time of the 3rd World Science Fiction Convention, the so-called 'Denvention' in Denver—'41, we hope your mag

will've climbed high on the popularity poll!"

Box 6475, Met Station,
Los Angeles, Cal.

We feel the same way about artists as you do and if you look you'll find we've taken several of your suggestions. About big-name writers however, *Robert W. Lowndes,* Chairman of the Futurian Society of New York, has varying views:—

"There are a few suggestions I'd like to offer along the line of making this title really stirring. (1) A 'To Hell with Big Names' policy. As a reader and fan of long standing, you yourself know that big names do not necessarily mean big stories. There are, true, a few virtually 100 per cent reliables, but they are very few and are nearly all sewed up by other markets. If you can resist the lure of names for your cover, regardless of merit of contributions to which those names are signed (as many editors apparently cannot) one big hurdle will be over and done with. And, on the other hand, if you can dispense with any reluctance at featuring the names of newcomers who have the goods, another will have gone. A great many editors seem determined to bury their best lights under bushels so long as they can publish a roll-call of (one-time) old standbys on their covers month after month.

"(2) Please make sure that the illustrators really illustrate. It's irritating to see a drawing which, upon closer inspection, has little or nothing to do with the story it graces. (3) Please make your readers' column a two-way affair; it may be a little more effort, but that little extra work will put you way ahead of other magazines whose editors either do not believe in the practice of putting personality in their magazines, or are reluctant to spend the extra time. That readers want this can be attested by the flood of positive replies that come up when the question is raised, and by the high standing that the old time discussions and readers columns had in the first science-fiction magazines. (4) Do not fence yourself around with policy. No story which you would like to use is over the heads of your readers and too high class for them. Keep a fumigator handy for authors who try to write down to readers.

"And, generally speaking, rig up some sort of device which will remind you periodically of all the things which you constantly demanded from other editors when you were a fan. Most editors who have risen from the ranks, as it were, seem to have forgotten that they were fans once; or have become aloof in the manner which they deplored so well when they wrote articles and letters. So long as you can keep the magazine up to a level which would have kept you haunting newsstands for it had someone else been putting out the identical thing a year or so ago, then neither you nor we fans have anything to worry about. *Stirring* will be tops and stirring away like mad!"

129 West 103 St.,
New York City

We suppose that we ought to comment in detail on Mr. Lowndes' opinions as he wishes but we can't because frankly we agree with most of what he says. We intend to edit *Stirring* without trepidation and in such a way as to play absolutely fair and square with our readers. We have tried to make a good start in this issue, we hope that we have succeeded and we guarantee you that we intend to make our magazine the leader in the field. We welcome your opinions and your comments and in our next issue will present in The Vortex as many of these views as we can find room for. We want you to let us know what you think of this issue, what you think we can do, and what your views are on anything that may concern the world of imagination. Write us.

*Donald A. Wollheim, Editor.*

# Thirteen o'Clock

## by Cecil Corwin

Peter Packer found a clock with thirteen hours and when it struck.... Wow! The dizziest adventure of the century!

### CHAPTER I

PETER PACKER excitedly dialed his slide-rule, peering through a lens as one of the minutely scored lines met with another. He rose from his knees, brushing dust from the neat crease of his serge trousers. No doubt of it—the house had a secret attic room. Peter didn't know anything about sliding panels or hidden buttons; in the most direct way imaginable he lifted the axe he had brought and crunched it into the wall.

On his third blow he holed through. The rush of air from the darkness was cool and sweet. Smart old boy, his grandfather, thought Peter. Direct ventilation all over the house—even in a false compartment. He chopped away heartily, the hollow strokes ringing through the empty attic and down the stairs.

He could have walked through the hole erect when he was satisfied with his labors; instead he cautiously turned a flashlight inside the space. The beam was invisible; all dust had long since settled. Peter grunted. The floor seemed to be sound. He tested it with one foot, half in, half out of the hidden chamber. It held.

The young man stepped through easily, turning the flash on walls and floor. The room was not large, but it was cluttered with a miscellany of objects—chests, furniture, knick-knacks and what-nots. Peter opened a chest, wondering about pirate gold. But there was no gold, for the thing was full to the lid with chiffons in delicate hues. A faint fragrance of musk filled the air; sachets long since packed away were not entirely gone.

Funny thing to hide away, thought Peter. But Grandfather Packer had been a funny man—having this house built to his own very sound plans, waiting always on the Braintree docks for the China and India Clippers and what rare cargo they might have brought. Chiffons! Peter poked around in the box for a moment, then closed the lid again. There were others.

He turned the beam of the light on a wall lined with shelves. Pots of old workmanship—spices and preserves, probably. And a clock. Peter stared at the clock. It was about two by two by three feet—an unusual and awkward size. The workmanship was plain, the case of crudely finished wood. And yet there was something about it—his eyes widened as he realized what it was. The dial showed thirteen hours!

Between the flat figures XII and I there was another—an equally flat XIII. What sort of freak this was the young man did not know. Vaguely he conjectured on prayer-time, egg-boiling and all the other practical applications of chronometry. But nothing he could dredge up from his well-stored mind would square with this freak. He set the flash on a shelf and hefted the clock in his arms, lifting it easily.

This, he thought, would bear looking into. Putting the light in his pocket he carried the clock down the stairs to his second-floor bedroom. It looked strangely incongruous there, set on a draftsman's table hung with rules and T squares. Determinedly Peter began to pry open the back with a chisel, when it glided smoothly open without tooling. There was better construction in the old timeplace than he had realized. The little hinges were still firm and in working order. He peered into the works and ticked his nail against one of the chimes. It sounded sweet and clear.

The young man took a pair of pliers. Lord knew where the key was, he thought, as he began to wind the clock. Slowly it got under way, ticking loudly. The thing had stopped at 12.59. That would be nearly one o'clock in any other timepiece; on this the minute hand crept slowly toward the enigmatic XIII.

Peter wound the striking mechanism carefully, and watched as a little whir sounded. The minute hand met the Roman numeral, and with a click the chimes sounded out in an eerie, jangling discord. Peter thought with sudden confusion that all was not as well with the clock as he had thought. The chimes grew louder, filling the little bedroom with their clang.

Horrified, the young man put his hands on the clock as though he could stop off the noise. As he shook the old cabinet the peals redoubled until they battered against the eardrums of the draftsman, ringing in his skull and resounding from the walls, making instruments dance and rattle on the drawing-board. Peter drew back, his hands to his ears. He was filled with nausea, his eyes bleared and smarting. As the terrible clock thundered out its din without end he reached the door feebly, the room swaying and spinning about him, nothing real but the suddenly glowing clock-dial and the clang and thunder of its chimes.

As he opened the door it ceased, and he closed his eyes in relief as his nausea passed. He looked up again, and his eyes widened with horror. Though it was noon outside a nightwind fanned his face, and though he was on the second-story landing of his Grandfather Packer's house dark trees rose about him, stretching as far as the eye could see.

FOR three hours—by his wristwatch's luminous dial — Peter had wandered, aimless and horrified, waiting for dawn. The aura of strangeness that hung over the forest in which he walked was bearable; it was the gnawing suspicion that he had gone mad that shook him to his very bones. The trees were no ordinary things, of that he was sure. For he had sat under one forest giant and leaned back against its bole only to rise with a cry of terror. He had felt its pulse beat slowly and regularly under the bark. After that he did not dare to rest, but he was a young and normal male. Whether he would or not he found himself blundering into ditches and stones from sheer exhaustion. Finally, sprawled on the ground, he slept.

Peter woke stiff and sore from his nap on the bare ground, but he felt better for it. The sun was high in the heavens; he saw that it was about eleven o'clock. Remembering his terrors of the night he nearly laughed at himself. This was a forest, and there were any number of sane explanations how he got here. An attack of amnesia lasting

about twelve hours would be one cause. And there were probably others less disturbing.

He thought the country might be Maine. God knew how many trains or busses he had taken since he lost his memory in his bedroom. Beginning to whistle he strode through the woods. Things were different in the daytime.

There was a sign ahead! He sprinted up to its base. The thing was curiously large—painted in red characters on a great slab of wood, posted on a dead tree some twelve feet from the ground. The sign said ELLIL. He rolled the name over in his mind and decided that he didn't recognize it. But he couldn't be far from a town or house.

Ahead of him sounded a thunderous grunt.

"Bears!" he thought in a panic. They had been his childhood bogies; he had been frightened of them ever since. But it was no bear, he saw. He almost wished it was. For the thing that was veering on him was a frightful composite of every monster of mythology, menacing him with sabre-like claws and teeth and gusts of flame from its ravening throat. It stood only about as high as the man, and its legs were long, but it seemed ideally styled for destruction, to the engineer.

Without ado he jumped for a tree and dug his toes into the grooves of the bark, shinning up it as he used to as a child. But there was nothing childlike about it now. With the creature's flaming breath scorching his heels he climbed like a monkey, stopping only at the third set of main branches, twenty-five feet from the ground. There he clung, limp and shuddering, and looked down.

The creature was hopping grotesquely about the base of the tree, its baleful eyes on him. The man's hand reached for a firmer purchase on the branch, and part came away in his hand. He had picked a sort of coconut—heavy, hard, and with sharp corners. Peter raised his eyes. Why not? Carefully noting the path that the creature below took around the trunk he poised the fruit carefully. Wetting a finger, he adjusted the placing. On a free drop that long you had to allow for windage, he thought.

Twice more around went the creature, and then its head and the murderous fruit reached the same point at the same time. There was a crunching noise which Peter could hear from where he was and the insides of its head spilled on the forest sward.

"Clever," said a voice beside him on the branch.

He turned with a cry. The speaker was only faintly visible—the diaphanous shadow of a young girl, not more than eighteen, he thought. Calmly it went on, "You must be very mancic to be able to land a fruit so accurately. Did he give you an extra sense?" Her tone was light, but from what he could see of her dim features they were curled in an angry smile.

Nearly letting go of the branch in his bewilderment he answered as calmly as he could, "I don't know who you mean. And what is mancic?"

"Innocent," she said coldly. "Eh? I could push you off this branch without a second thought. But first you tell me where Almarish got the model for you. I might turn out a few myself. Are you a doppleganger or a golem?"

"Neither," he spat, bewildered and

horrified. "I don't even know what they are!"

"Strange," said the girl. "I can't read you." Her eyes squinted prettily and suddenly became solid, luminous wedges in her transparent face. "Well," she sighed, "let's get out of this." She took the man by his elbow and dropped from the branch, hauling him after her. Ready for a sickening impact with the ground, Peter winced as his heels touched it light as a feather. He tried to disengage the girl's grip, but it was hard as steel.

"None of that," she warned him. "I have a blast-finger. Or didn't he tell you?"

"What's a blast-finger?" demanded the engineer.

"Just so you won't try anything," she commented. "Watch." Her body solidified then, and she pointed her left index finger at a middling-sized tree. Peter hardly saw what happened, being more interested in the incidental miracle of her face and figure. But his attention was distracted by a flat crash of thunder and sudden glare. And the tree was riven as if by a terrific stroke of lightning. Peter smelled ozone as he looked from the tree to the girl's finger and back again. "Okay," he said.

"No nonsense?" she asked. "Come on."

They passed between two trees, and the vista of forest shimmered and tore, revealing a sort of palace —all white stone and maple timbers. "That's my place," said the girl.

## CHAPTER II

"NOW," she said, settling herself into a cane-backed chair. Peter looked about the room. It was furnished comfortably with pieces of antique merit, in the best New England tradition. His gaze shifted to the girl, slender and palely luminous, with a half-smile playing about her chiseled features.

"Do you mind," he said slowly, "not interrupting until I'm finished with what I have to say?"

"A message from Almarish? Go on."

And at that he completely lost his temper. "Listen, you snip!" he raged. "I don't know who you are or where I am but I'd like to tell you that this mystery isn't funny or even mysterious—just downright rude. Do you get that? Now—my name is Peter Packer. I live in Braintree, Mass. I make my living as a consulting and industrial engineer. This place obviously isn't Braintree, Mass. Right? Then where is it?"

"Ellil," said the girl simply.

"I saw that on a sign," said Packer. "It still doesn't mean anything to me. Where is Ellil?"

Her face became suddenly grave. "You may be telling the truth," she said thoughtfully. "I do not know yet. Will you allow me to test you?"

"Why should I?" he snapped.

"Remember my blast-finger?"

Packer winced. "Yes," he said. "What are the tests?"

"The usual," she smiled. "Rosemary and garlic, crucifixes and the secret name of Jehovah. If you get through those you're okay."

"Then get on with it," the man said, confusedly.

"Hold these." She passed him a flowery sprig and a clove of garlic. He took them, one in each hand. "All right?" he asked.

"On those, yes. Now take the cross and read this name. You can put the vegetables down now."

He followed instructions, stammering over the harsh Hebrew word. In a cold fury the girl sprang to her feet and leveled her left index finger at him. "Clever," she blazed. "But you can't get away with it! I'll blow you so wide open—"

"Wait," he pleaded. "What did I do?" The girl, though sweet-looking, seemed to be absolutely irresponsible.

"Mispronounced the Name," she snapped. "Because you can't say it straight without crumbling into dust!"

He looked at the paper again and read aloud slowly and carefully. "Was that right?" he asked.

Crestfallen, the girl sat down. "Yes," she said. "I'm sorry. You seem to be okay. A real human. Now what do you want to know?"

"Well—who are you?"

"My name's Melicent." She smiled deprecatingly. "I'm a—sort of a sorceress."

"I can believe that," grunted the man. "Now why should you take me for a demon, or whatever you thought I was?"

"Doppleganger," she corrected him. "I was sure—well, I'd better begin at the beginning.

"You see, I haven't been a sorceress very long—only two years. My mother was a witch—a real one, and pretty first-class. I've heard it said that she brewed the neatest spells in Ellil. All I know I learned from her—never studied it formally. My mother didn't die a natural sort of death, you see. Almarish got her."

"Who's Almarish?"

She wrinkled her mouth with disgust. "That thug!" she spat. "He and his gang of half-breed demons are out to get control of Ellil. My mother wouldn't stand for it—she told him right out flat over a Multiplex Apparition. And after that he was gunning for her steady—no let-up at all. And believe me, there are mighty few witches who can stand up under much of that, but Mother stood him off for fifteen years. They got my father—he wasn't much good—a little while after I was born. Vampires.

"Mother got caught alone in the woods one morning without her tools—unguents, staffs and things—by a whole flock of golems and zombies." The girl shuddered. "Some of them—well, Mother finished about half before they overwhelmed her and got a stake of myrtle through her heart. That finished her—she lost all her magic, of course, and Almarish sent an ordinary plague of ants against her. Adding insult to injury, I call it!" There were real tears of rage in her eyes.

"And what's this Almarish doing now?" asked Peter, fascinated.

Melicent shrugged. "He's after me," she said simply. "The bandur you killed was one of my watchdogs. And I thought he'd sent you. I'm sorry."

"I see," breathed the man slowly. "What powers has he?"

"The usual, I suppose. But he has no principles about using them. And he has his gang—I can't afford real retainers. Of course I whip up some simulacra whenever I hold a reception or anything of that sort. Just images to serve and take wraps. They can't fight."

Peter tightened his jaw. "You must be in a pretty bad way," he volunteered diffidently.

The girl looked him full in the eye, her lip trembling. She choked out, "I'm in such a hell of a spot!" and then the gates opened and she was weeping as if her heart would break. The man stared frozenly, wondering how he could comfort a

despondent sorceress. "There, there," he said tentatively.

She wiped her eyes and looked at him. "I'm sorry," she said sniffing. "But it's seeing a fairly friendly face again after all these years—no callers but leprechauns and things. You don't know what it's like."

"I wonder," said Peter, "how you'd like to live in Braintree."

"I don't know," she said brightly. "But how could I get there?"

"There should be at least one way," reflected the man.

"But why—what was that?" shot out the girl, snatching up a wand.

"KNOCK on the door," said Peter. "Shall I open it?"

"Please," said Melicent nervously, holding up the slender staff. The man stood aside and swung the door wide. In walked a curious person of mottled red and white coloring. One eye was small and blue, the other large and savagely red. His teeth were quite normal—except that the four canines protruded two inches each out of his mouth. He walked with a limp; one shoe seemed curiously small. And there was a sort of bulge in the trousers that he wore beneath his formal morning-coat.

"May I introduce myself," said the individual removing his sleek black topper. "I am Balthazar Pike. You must be Miss Melicent? And this —ah—zombie?" He indicated Peter with a dirty leer.

"Mr. Packer, Mr. Pike," said the girl. Peter simply stared in horror while the creature murmured, "Enchanted."

Melicent drew herself up proudly. "And this, I suppose," she said, "is the end?"

"I fear so, Miss Melicent," said the creature regretfully. "I have my orders. Your house has been surrounded by picked forces; any attempt to use your blast-finger or any other weapon of offense will be construed as resistance. Under the laws of civilized warfare we are empowered to reduce you to ashes should such resistance be forthcoming. May I have your reply?"

The girl surveyed him haughtily, then, with a lightning-like sweep of her wand, seemed to blot out every light in the room. Peter heard her agitated voice. "We're in a neutral screen, Mr. Packer. I won't be able to keep it up for long. Listen! That was one of Almarish's stinkers—big cheese. He didn't expect any trouble from me. He'll take me captive as soon as they break the screen down. Do you want to help me?"

"Of course!" exploded the man.

"Good. Then you find the third oak from the front door on the left and walk widdershins three times. You'll find out what to do from them."

"Walk how?" asked Peter.

"Widdershins — counterclockwise. Lord, you're dumb!"

Then the lights seemed to go on again, and Peter saw that the room was filled with the half-breed creatures. With an expression of injured dignity the formally-attired Balthazar Pike asked, "Are you ready to leave now, Miss Melicent? Quite ready?"

"Thank you, General, yes," said the girl coldly. Two of the creatures took her arms and walked her from the room. Peter saw that as they stepped over the threshold they vanished, all three. The last to leave was Pike, who turned and said to the man: "I must remind you, Mister —er—ah—that you are trespassing. This property now belongs to the Almarish Realty corporation. All offenders will be prosecuted to the full-

est extent of the law. Good day, Mister—er—ah—." With which he stepped over the door and vanished.

Hastily Peter followed him across the line, but found himself alone outside the house. For which he was grateful. "Third oak from the left door," he repeated. Simple enough. Feeling foolish he walked widdershins three times around and stopped dead waiting for something.

What a sweet, brave kid she had been! He hoped nothing would really happen to her—before he got there.

He felt a sort of tugging at his serge trousers and stepped back in alarm. "Well?" shrilled a small voice. Peter looked down and winced. The dirtiest, most bedraggled little creature he had ever seen was regarding him with tiny, sharp eyes. There were others, too, squatting on pebbles and toadstools.

"Miss Melicent told me to ask you what I should do," said Peter. As the little leader of the troop glared at him he added hastily, "If you please."

"Likely tale," piped the voice of the creature. "What's in it for us?"

"I dunno," said the man, bewildered. "What do you want?"

"Green cloth," the creature answered promptly. "Lots of it. And if you have any small brass buttons, them too."

Peter hastily conducted an inventory of his person. "I'm sorry," he said hesitantly. "I haven't any green. How about blue? I can spare my vest." He carefully lowered the garment to the ground among the little people.

"Looks all right," said the leader. "Jake!" One of the creatures advanced and fingered the cloth. "Hmm ——" he said. "Good material." Then there was a whispered consultation with the leader, who at last shouted up to Peter: "Head East for water. You can't miss it!"

"Hey," said Peter, blinking. But they were already gone. And though he widdershin-walked for the next half hour and even tried a few incantations remembered from his childhood they did not come back, nor did his vest.

So, with his back to the sinking sun, he headed East for water.

## CHAPTER III

"MAHOORA City Limits," said the sign. Peter scratched his head and passed it. He had hit the stretch of highway a few miles back once he had got out of the forest, and it seemed to be leading straight into a city of some kind. There was a glow ahead in the sky; a glow which abruptly became a glare.

"Jeepers!" the man gasped. "Buildings—skyscrapers!" Before him reared a sort of triple Wall Street with which were combined the most spectacular features of Rockefeller Center. In the sudden way in which things happened in Ellil he turned a sort of blind corner in the road and found himself in the thick of it.

A taxi roared past him; with a muttered imprecation he jumped out of the way. The bustling people on the sidewalks ignored him completely. It was about six o'clock; they were probably going home from their offices. They were all sorts of people—women and girls, plain and pretty, men and boys, slim, fat, healthy and dissipated. And striding along in lordly indifference Peter saw a cop.

"Excuse me," said Peter, elbowing his way through the crowd to the member of Mahoora's finest. "Can

you tell me where I can find water?" That was, he realized, putting it a bit crudely. But he was hopelessly confused by the traffic and swarms of pedestrians.

The cop turned on him with a glassy stare. "Water?" he rumbled. "Would yez be wantin' tap, ditch, fire—or cologne?" The man hesitated. He didn't know, he realized in a sudden panic. The elves, or whatever they had been, hadn't specified. Cagily he raised his hand to his brow and muttered, " 'Scuse me — previous engagement — made the appointment for today—just forgot—" He was edging away from the cop when he felt a hand on his arm.

"What was that about water?" asked the cop hoarsely, putting his face near Peter's. Desperately the man blurted: "The water I have to find to lick Almarish!" Who could tell? Maybe the cop would help him.

"What?" thundered M. P. D. Shield No. 2435957607. "And me a loyal supporter of the Mayor Almarish Freedom Peace and Progress Reform Administration?" He frowned. "You look subversive to me—come on!" He raised his nightstick suggestively, and Peter meekly followed him through the crowds.

"HOW'D they get you in here?" asked Peter's cell-mate.

Peter inspected him. He was a short, dark sort of person with a pair of disconcertingly bright eyes. "Suspicion," said Peter evasively. "How about you?"

"Practicing mancy without a license, theoretically. Actually because I tried to buck the Almarish machine. You know how it is?"

"Can't say I do," answered Peter. "I'm a stranger here."

"Yeah? Well—like this. Few years ago we had a neat little hamlet here. Mahoora was the biggest little city in these parts of Ellil, though I say it myself. A little industry—magic chalices for export, sandals of swiftness, invisibility cloaks, invincible weapons—you know?"

"Um," said Peter noncommittally.

"Well, I had a factory—modest little chemical works. We turned out love-philtres from my own prescription. It's what I call a neat dodge—eliminates the *balneum mariae* entirely from the processing, cuts down drying time—maybe you aren't familiar with the latest things in the line?"

"Sorry, no."

"Oh—well, then, in came these plugs of Almarish. Flying goon-squads that wrecked plants and shops on order, labor spies, provocateurs, everything. Soon they'd run out every racketeer in the place and hi-jacked them lock stock and barrel. Then they went into politics. There was a little scandal about buying votes with fairy gold—people kicked when it turned into ashes. But they smoothed that over when they got in.

"And then—! Graft right and left, patronage, unemployment, rotten food scandals, bribery, inefficiency—everything that's on the list. And this is their fifth term. How do you like that?"

"Lord," said Peter, shocked. "But how do they stay in office?"

"Oh," grinned his friend. "The first thing they did was to run up some pretty imposing public works —tall buildings, bridges, highways and monuments. Then they let it out that they were partly made of half-stuff. You know what that is?"

"No," said Peter. "What is it?"

"Well—it's a little hard to describe. But it isn't really there and

it isn't really not there. You can walk on it and pick it up and things, but—well, it's a little hard to describe. The kicker is this. Half-stuff is there only as long as you—the one who prepared a batch of it that is—keep the formula going. So if we voted those leeches out of office they'd relax their formula and the half-stuff would vanish and the rest of the buildings and bridges and highways and monuments would fall with a helluva noise and damage. How do you like that?"

"Efficiency plus," said Peter. "Where's this Almarish hang out?"

"The mayor?" asked his cell-mate sourly. "You don't think he'd be seen in the city, do you? Some disgruntled citizen might sic a flock of vampires on his honor. He was elected in absentia. I hear he lives around Mal-Tava way."

"Where's that?" asked Peter eagerly.

"You don't know? Say, you're as green as they come! That's a pretty nasty corner of Ellil—the nastiest anywhere, I guess. It's a volcanic region, and those lava-nymphs are pretty tough molls. Then there's a dragon-ranch around there. The owner got careless and showed up missing one day. The dragons broke out and ran wild; they're the killingest you could hope to see. Anything else?"

"No," said Peter, heavy-hearted. "I guess not."

"That's good. Because I think we're going to trial right now." A guard was opening the door, club poised. "His Honor, Judge Balthazar Pike will see you now," said the warden. Peter groaned.

THE half-breed demon, his sartorial splendor of the preceding afternoon replaced by judiciary black silk, smiled grimly on the two prisoners. "Mr. Morden," he said indicating the erstwhile manufacturer, "and Mr.—er—ah?"

"Packer!" exploded the man. "What are you doing here?"

"Haw!" laughed the judge. "That's what I was going to ask you. But first we have this matter of Mr. Morden to dispose of. Excuse me a moment? Clerk, read the charges."

A cowed-looking little man picked an index-card from a stack and read: "Whereas Mr. Percival Morden of Mahoora has been apprehended in the act of practicing mancy and whereas this Mr. Morden does not possess an approved license for such practice it is directed that His Honor Chief Judge Balthazar Pike declare him guilty of the practice of mancy without a license. Signed, Mayor Almarish. Vote straight Peace and Progress Reform Party for a clean and efficient administration." He paused for a moment and looked timidly at the judge who was cleaning his talons. "That's it, your honor," he said.

"Oh—thank you. Now, Morden—guilty or not guilty?"

"What's the difference?" asked the manufacturer sourly. "Not guilty, I guess."

"Thank you." The judge took a coin from his pocket. "Heads or tails?" he asked.

"Tails," answered Morden. Then, aside to Peter, "It's magic, of course. You can't win." The half-breed demon spun the coin dexterously on the judicial bench; it wobbled, slowed, and fell with a tinkle. The judge glanced at it. "Sorry, old man," he said sympathetically. "You seem to be guilty. Imprisonment for life in an oak-tree. You'll find Merlin de Bleys in there with you, I rather fancy. You'll like him. Next

case," he called sharply as Morden fell through a trapdoor in the floor.

Peter advanced before the bar of justice. "Can't we reason this thing out?" he asked agitatedly. "I mean, I'm a stranger here and if I've done anything I'm sorry—"

"Tut!" exclaimed the demon. He had torn the cuticle of his left index talon, and it was bleeding. He stanched the green liquid with a handkerchief and looked down at the man. "Done anything?" he asked mildly. "Oh—dear me, no! Except for a few trifles like felonious impediment of an officer in the course of his duty, indecent display, seditious publication, high treason and unlawful possession of military and naval secrets—done anything?" His two odd eyes looked reproachfully down on the man.

Peter felt something flimsy in his hand. Covertly he looked and saw a slip of blue paper on which was written in green ink: "This is Hugo, my other watchdog. Feed him once a day on green vegetables. He does not like tobacco. In haste, Melicent."

There was a stir in the back of the courtroom, and Peter turned to see one of the fire-breathing horrors which had first attacked him in the forest tearing down the aisle lashing out to right and left, incinerating a troop of officers with one blast of its terrible breath. Balthazar Pike was crawling around under his desk, bawling for more police.

Peter cried, "You can add one more—possession of a bandur without a license! Sic 'em, Hugo!" The monster flashed an affectionate look at him and went on with the good work of clearing the court. The man sprang aside as the trapdoor opened beneath his feet and whirled on a cop who was trying to swarm over him. With a quick one-two he laid him out and proceeded to the rear of the courtroom, where Hugo was standing off a section of the fire-department that was trying to extinguish his throat. Peter snatched an axe from one and mowed away heartily. Resistance melted away in a hurry, and Peter pushed the hair out of his eyes to find that they were alone in the court.

"Come on, boy," he said. Whistling cheerily he left the building, the bandur at his heels, smoking gently. Peter collared a cop—the same one who had first arrested him. "Now," he snarled. "Where do I find water?"

Stuttering with fright, and with two popping eyes on the bandur, the officer said, "The harbor's two blocks down the street if you mean—"

"Never mind what I mean!" growled Peter, luxuriating in his new-found power. He strode off pugnaciously, Hugo following.

## CHAPTER IV

"I BEG your pardon—are you looking for water?" asked a tall, dark man over Peter's shoulder. Hugo growled and let loose a tongue of flame at the Stranger's foot. "Shuddup, Hugo," said Peter. Then, turning to the stranger, "As a matter of fact I was. Do you—?"

"I heard about you from them," said the stranger. "You know. The little people."

"Yes," said Peter. "What do I do now?"

"Underground Railroad," said the stranger. "Built after the best Civil War model. Neat, speedy and efficient. Transportation at half the usual cost. I hope you weren't planning to go by magic carpet?"

"No," Peter assured him hastily. "I never use them."

"That's great," said the stranger swishing his long black cloak. "Those carpet people—stifling industry, I call it. They spread a whispering campaign that our road was unsafe! Can you imagine it?"

"Unsafe," scoffed Peter. "I'll bet they wish their carpets were half as safe as your railroad!"

"Well," said the stranger thoughtfully, "perhaps not half as safe . . . No; I wouldn't say half as safe . . ." He seemed likely to go on indefinitely. Peter asked, "Where do I get the Underground?"

"A little East of here," said the stranger. He looked about apprehensively. "We'd better not be seen together," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Meet you over there by the clock-tower—you can get it there."

"Okay," said Peter. "But why the secrecy?"

"We're really underground," said the stranger, walking away.

Peter rejoined him at the corner of the clock-tower; with an elaborate display of unconcern the stranger walked off, Peter following at some distance. Soon they were again in the forest that seemed to border the city of Mahoora. Once they were past the city-limits sign the stranger turned, smiling.

"I guess we're safe now," he said. "They could try a raid and drag us back across the line, but they wouldn't like to play with your bandur, I think. Here's the station."

He pressed a section of bark on a huge tree; silently it slid open like a door. Peter saw a row of steps leading down into blackness. "Sort of spooky," he said.

"Not at all! I have the place ghostproofed once a year." The stranger led the way, taking out what looked like a five-branched electric torch. "What's that?" asked Peter, fascinated by the weird blue light it shed.

"Hand of glory," said the stranger casually. Peter looked closer and shuddered, holding his stomach. Magic, he thought, was probably all right up to the point where it became grave-robbery.

They arrived at a neatly tiled station; Peter was surprised to find that the trains were tiny things. The one pulled up on the tracks was not as high as he was. "You'll have to stoke, of course," said the stranger.

"What?" demanded Peter indignantly.

"Usual arrangement. Are you coming or aren't you?"

"Of course—but it seems strange," complained Peter climbing into the engine. Hugo climbed up into the coal car and curled up emitting short smoky bursts of flame which caused the stranger to keep glancing at him in fear for his fuel.

"What's in the rest of the train?" asked Peter.

"Freight. This is the through cannonball to Mal-Tava. I have a special shipment for Almarish. Books and things, furniture, a few cases of liquor—you know?"

"Yes. Any other passengers?"

"Not this month. I haven't much trouble with them. They're usually knights and things out to kill sorcerers like Almarish. They take their horses along or send them ahead by carpet. Do you plan to kill Almarish?"

Peter choked. "Yes," he finally said. "What's it to you?"

"Nothing—I take your money and leave you where you want to go. A tradesman can't afford opinions. Let's get up some steam, eh?"

Amateurishly Peter shoveled coal into the little furnace while the stranger in the black cloak juggled with steam-valves and levers. "Don't be worried," he advised Peter. "You'll get the hang of things after a while." He glanced at a watch. "Here we go," he said, yanking the whistle-cord.

The train started off into its tunnel, sliding smoothly and almost silently along, the only noise being from the driving rods. "Why doesn't it clack against the rails?" asked Peter.

"Levitation. Didn't you notice? We're an inch off the track. Simple, really."

"Then why have a track?" asked Peter.

The stranger smiled and said, "Without—" then stopped abruptly and looked concerned and baffled. And that was all the answer Peter got.

"WAKE up," shouted the stranger nudging Peter. "We're in the war zone!"

"Zasso?" asked Peter, blinking. He had been napping after hours of steady travel. "What war zone?"

"Trolls—you know."

"No, I don't!" snapped Peter. "What side are we on?"

"Depends on who stops us," said the stranger, speeding the engine. They were out of the tunnel now, Peter saw, speeding along a couple of inches above the floor of an immense dim cave. Ahead the glittering double strand of the track stretched into the distance.

"Oh—oh!" muttered the cloaked stranger. "Trouble ahead!" Peter saw a vague, stirring crowd before them. "Those trolls?" he asked.

"Yep," answered the engineer resignedly, slowing the train. "What do you want?" he asked a solid looking little man in a ragged uniform. "To get the hell out of here," said the little man. He was about three feet tall, Peter saw. "What happened?" he asked.

"The lousy Insurgents licked us," said the troll. "Will you let us on the train before they cut us down?"

"First," said the engineer methodically, "there isn't room. Second, I have to keep friends with the party in power. Third, you know very well that you can't be killed."

"What if we are immortal?" asked the troll agitatedly. "Would you like to live forever scattered in little pieces?"

"Second," said Peter abruptly, "you get out of it as best you can." He was speaking to the engineer. "And first, you can dump all the freight you have for Almarish. He won't want it anyway when I'm through with him."

"That right?" asked the troll.

"Not by me!" exploded the engineer. "Now get your gang off the track before I plough them under!"

"Hugo," whispered Peter. With a lazy growl the bandur scorched the nape of the engineer's head.

"All right," said the engineer. "All right. Use force—all right." Then, to the leader of the trolls, "You tell your men they can unload the freight and get as comfortable as they can."

"Wait!" interjected Peter. "Inasmuch as I got you out of this scrape —I think—would you be willing to help me out in a little affair of honor with Almarish?"

"Sure!" said the troll. "Anything at all. You know, for a surface-dweller you're not half bad!" With which he began to spread the good news among his army.

Later, when they were all together

in the cab, taking turns with the shovel, the troll introduced himself as General Skaldberg of the Third Loyalist Army.

Speeding ahead again at full speed the end of the cavern was in sight when another swarm of trolls blocked the path. "Go through them!" ordered Peter coldly.

"For pity's sake," pleaded the stranger. "Think of what this will do to my franchise!"

"That's your worry," said the General. "You fix it up with the Insurgents. We gave you the franchise anyway—they have no right of search."

"Maybe," muttered the engineer. He closed his eyes as they went slapping into the band of trolls under full steam. When it was all over and they were again tearing through the tunnel he looked up. "How many?" he asked brokenly.

"Only three," said the general regretfully. "Why didn't you do a good job while you were at it?"

"You should have had your men fire from the freight-cars," said the engineer coldly.

"Too bad I didn't think of it. Could you turn back and take them in a surprise attack?"

The engineer cursed violently, giving no direct answer. But for the next half hour he muttered to himself distraitly, groaning "Franchise!" over and over again.

"How much farther before we get to Mal-Tava?" asked Peter glumly.

"Very soon now," said the troll. "I was there once. Very broken terrain—fine for guerilla work."

"Got any ideas on how to handle the business of Almarish?"

The general scratched his head. "As I remember it," he said slowly, "I once thought it was a pushover for some of Clausewitz's ideas. It's a funny tactical problem—practically no fortifications within the citadel—everything lumped outside in a wall of steel. Of course Almarish probably has a lot on the ball personally. All kinds of direct magic at his fingertips. And that's where I get off with my men. We trolls don't even pretend to know the fine points of thaumaturgy. Mostly straight military stuff with us."

"So I have to face him alone?"

"More or less," said the general. "I have a couple of guys that majored in Military Divination at Ellil Tech Prep. They can probably give you a complete layout of the citadel, but they won't be responsible for illusions, multiplex apparitions or anything else Almarish might decide to throw in the way. My personal advice to you is—be sceptical."

"Yes?" asked Peter miserably.

"Exactly," said Skaldberg. "The real difficulty in handling arcane warfare is in knowing what's there and what ain't. Have you any way of sneaking in a confederate? Not a spy, exactly—we military men don't approve of spying—but a sort of—ah—one-man intelligence unit."

"I have already," said Peter diffidently. "She's a sorceress, but not much good I think. Has a blast-finger, though."

"Very good," grunted Skaldberg. "Very good indeed. God, how we could have used her against the Insurgents! The hounds had us in a sort of peninsular spot—with only one weak line of supply and communication between us and the main force—and I was holding a hill against a grand piquet of flying carpets that were hurling thunderbolts at our munitions supply. But their sights were away off and they only got a few of our snipers. God, what

a blast-finger would have done to those bloody carpets!"

The engineer showed signs of interest. "You're right!" he snapped. "Blow 'em out of the sky—menace to life and limb! I have a bill pending at the All Ellil Conference on Communication and Transportation —would you be interested?"

"No," grunted the general. The engineer, swishing his long black cloak, returned to his throttle muttering about injunctions and fair-play.

## CHAPTER V

"EASY, now!" whispered the general.

"Yessir," answered a troll going through obvious mental strain while his hand, seemingly of its own volition, scrawled lines and symbols on a sheet of paper. Peter was watching, fascinated and mystified, as the specialist in military divination was doing his stuff.

"There!" said the troll, relaxing. He looked at the paper curiously and signed it: "Borgenssen, Capt."

"Well?" asked General Skaldberg excitedly. "What was it like?"

The Captain groaned. "You should see for yourself, sir!" he said despondently. "Their air-force is flying dragons and their infantry's a kind of Kraken squad. What they're doing out of water I don't know."

"Okay," said the general. He studied the drawing. "How about their mobility?"

"They haven't got any and they don't need any," complained the diviner. "They just sit there waiting for you—in a solid ring. And the air-force has a couple of auxiliary rocs that pick up the Krakens and drop them behind your forces. Pincher stuff—very bad."

"I'll be the judge of that!" thundered the general. "Get out of my office!" The captain saluted and stumbled out of the little cave which the general had chosen to designate as GHQ. His men were "barracked" on the bare rock outside. Volcanoes rumbled and spat in the distance. There came one rolling crash that set Peter's hair on end.

"Think that was for us?" he asked nervously.

"Nope—I picked this spot for lava drainage. I have a hundred men erecting a shut-off at the only exposed point. We'll be safe enough." He turned again to the map, frowning. "This is our real worry—what I call impregnable, or damn near it. If we could get them to attack us—but those rocs smash anything along that line. We'd be cut off like a rosebud. And with our short munitions we can't afford to be discovered and surrounded. Ugh! What a spot for an army man to find himself in!"

A brassy female voice asked, "Somep'n bodderin' you, shorty?" The general spun around in a fine purple rage. Peter looked in horror and astonishment on the immodest form of a woman who had entered the cave entirely unperceived—presumably from some occult means. She was a slutty creature, her hair dyed a vivid red and her satin skirt an inch or two above the knee. She was violently made up with flame-colored rouge, lipstick and even eye-shadow.

"Well," she complained stridently, puffing on a red cigaret, "wadda you joiks gawkin' at? Aincha nevva seen a lady befaw?"

"Madam," began the general, outraged.

"Can dat," she advised him easily. "I hoid youse guys chewin' da fat—I wanna help youse out." She seated

herself on an outcropping of rock and adjusted her skirt—Northward.

"I concede that women," spluttered the general, "have their place in activities of the military—but that place has little or nothing to do with warfare as such! I demand that you make yourself known—where did you come from?"

"Weh did I come from?" she asked mockingly. "Weh, he wansa know. Lookit dat!" She pointed one of her bright-glazed fingernails at the rocky floor of the cave, which grew liquid in a moment, glowing cherry-red. She leered at the two and spat at the floor. It grew cold in another moment. "Don't dat mean nothin' to youse?" she asked.

The general stared at the floor. "You must be a volcano nymph."

"Good fa you, shorty!" she sneered. "I represent da goils from Local toity-tree. In brief, chums, our demands are dese: one, dat youse clear away from our union hall pronto; two, dat youse hang around in easy reach—in case we want youse fa poiposes of our own. In retoin fe dese demands we—dats me an' de goils—will help youse guys out against Almarish. Dat lousy fink don't give his hands time off no more. Dis place might as well be a goddam desert fa all de men around. Get me?"

"These—ah—purposes of your own in clause two," said the general hesitantly. "What would they be?"

She smiled dirtily and half-closed her eyes. "Escort soivice, ya might call it. Nuttin' harmful ta yer men, cap. We'll probably get tired of dem in a munt' or two and send dem off safe. You trolls are kinda cute."

The general stared, too horrified even to resent being called "cap."

"Well?" demanded the nymph.

"Well—yes," said the general.

"Okay, shorty," she said, crushing out her cigaret against her palm. "Da goils'l be aroun' at dawn fa de attack. I'll try ta keep 'em off yer army until de battle's over. So long!" She sank into the earth, leaving behind only a smell of fleur-de-floozy perfume.

"God!" whispered General Skaldberg. "The things I do for the army!"

IN IRREGULAR open formation the trolls advanced, followed closely by the jeering mob of volcano nymphs.

"How about it, General?" asked Peter. He and the old soldier were surveying the field of battle from a hill in advance of their forces; the hideous octopoid forms of the defenders of Almarish could be plainly seen, lumbering onward to meet the trolls with a peculiar sucking gait.

"Any minute now—any second," said Skaldberg. Then, "Here it comes!" The farthest advanced of the trolls had met with the first of the Krakens. The creature lashed out viciously; Peter saw that its tentacles had been fitted with studded bands and other murderous devices. The troll dodged nimbly and pulled an invincible sword on the octopoid myth. They mixed it; when the struggle went behind an outcropping of rock the troll was in the lead, unharmed, while the slow-moving Kraken was leaking thinly from a score of punctures.

"The dragons," said Peter, pointing. "Here they are." In V formation the monsters were landing on a far end of the battlefield, then coming at a scrabbling run.

"If they make it quicker than the nymphs—" breathed the general. Then he sighed relievedly. They

had not. The carnage among the dragons was almost funny; at will the nymphs lifted them high in the air on jets of steam and squirted melted rock in their eyes. Squalling in terror the dragons flapped into the air and lumbered off Southward.

"That's ocean," grinned the general. "They'll never come back—trying to find new homes, I suspect."

In an incredibly short time the field was littered with the flopping chunks that had been hewed from the Krakens. Living still they were, but powerless. The general shook his hand warmly. "You're on your own now," he said. "Good luck, boy. For a civilian you're not a bad sort of egg at all." He walked away.

Glumly Peter surveyed the colossal fortress of Almarish. He walked aimlessly up to its gate, a huge thing of bronze and silver, and pulled at the silken cord hanging there. A gong sounded and the door swung open. Peter advanced hopelessly into a sort of audience chamber. "So!" thundered a mighty voice.

"So what?" asked Peter despondently. He saw on a throne high above him an imposing figure. "You Almarish?" he asked listlessly.

"I am. And who are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm Peter Packer of Braintree, Mass. I don't even expect you to believe me." The throne lowered slowly and jerkily, as if on hydraulic pumps. The wizard descended and approached Peter. He was a man of about forty, with a full brown beard reaching almost to his belt.

"Why," asked the sorcerer, "have you come bearing arms?"

"It's the only way I could come," said Peter. "Let me first congratulate you on an efficient, well-oiled set of political machinery. Not even back in the United States have I seen graft carried to such a high degree. Secondly, your choice of assistants is an eye-opener. Your Mr. Pike is the neatest henchman I've ever seen. Thirdly, produce the person of Miss Melicent or I'll have to use force."

"Is that so?" rumbled Almarish. "Young puppy! I'd like to see you try it. Wrestle with me—two falls out of three. I dare you!"

Peter took off his coat of blue serge. "I never passed up a dare yet," he said. "How about a mat?"

"Think I'm a sissy?" the sorcerer jeered.

Peter was stripped for action. "Okay," he said. Slowly Almarish advanced on him, grappling for a hold. Peter let him take his forearm, then shifted his weight so as to hurl the magician over his shoulder. A moment later Peter was astonished to find himself on the floor underneath the wizard.

"Haw!" grunted Almarish, rising. "You still game?" He braced himself. "Yep!" snapped Peter. He hurled himself in a flying tackle that began ten feet away from the wizard and ended in a bone-crushing grip about the knees. Peter swarmed up his trunk and cruelly twisted an arm across his chest. The magician yelped in sudden agony, and let himself fall against the floor. Peter rose, grinning. "One all," he said cheerfully.

ALMARISH grappled for the third fall; Peter cagily backed away. The wizard hurled himself in a bruising body-block against Peter, battering him off his feet and falling on the young man. Instinctively Peter bridged his body, arching it off the floor. Almarish, grunting fiercely, gripped his arm and turned it slowly, as though he were winding a clock. Peter snapped over, rolling on the wizard's own body as a ful-

crum. He had his toe in his hand, and closed his fist with every ounce of muscle he had. The sorcerer screamed and fell over on his face. Peter jammed his knee in the wizard's inside socket and bore down terribly. He could feel the bones bend in his grip.

"Enough!" gasped the wizard. Peter let him loose.

"You made it," said Almarish. "Two out of three."

Peter studied his face curiously. Take off that beard and you had—

"You said it, Grandfather Packer," said Peter, grinning.

Almarish groaned. "It's a wise child that knows its own father—grandfather, in this case," he said. "How could you tell?"

"Everything just clicked," said Peter simply. "You disappearing—that clock — somebody applying American methods in Ellil—and then I shaved you mentally and there you were. Simple?"

"Sure is. But how do you think I made out here, boy?"

"Shamefully. That kind of thing isn't tolerated any more. It's gangsterism—you'll have to cut it out, gramp."

"Gangsterism be damned!" snorted the wizard. "It's business. Business and common-sense."

"Business maybe—certainly not common-sense. My boys wiped out your guard and I might have wiped out you if I had magic stronger than yours."

Grandfather Packer chuckled in glee. "Magic? I'll begin at the beginning. When I got that dad-blamed clock back in '63 I dropped right into Ellil—onto the head of an assassin who was going for a real magician. Getting the set-up I pinned the killer with a half-nelson and the magician dispatched him. Then he got grateful —said he was retiring from public life and gave me a kind of token—good for any three wishes.

"So I took it, thanking him kindly, and wished for a palace and a bunch of gutty retainers. It was in my mind to run Ellil like a business, and I did it the only way I knew how —force. And from that day to this I used only one wish and I haven't a dab of magic more than that!"

"I'll be damned!" whispered Peter.

"And you know what I'm going to do with those other two wishes? I'm going to take you and me right back into the good old U. S. A.!"

"Will it only send two people?"

"So the magician said."

"Grandfather Packer," said Peter earnestly, "I am about to ask a very great sacrifice of you. It is also your duty to undo the damage which you have done."

"Oh," said Almarish glumly. "The girl? All right."

"You don't mind?" asked Peter incredulously.

"Far be it from me to stand in the way of young love," grunted the wizard sourly. "She's up there."

Peter entered timidly; the girl was alternately reading a copy of the Braintree Informer and staring passionately at a photograph of Peter. "Darling," said Peter.

"Dearest!" said Melicent, catching on almost immediately.

A short while later Peter was asking her: "Do you mind, dearest if I ask one favor of you—a very great sacrifice?" He produced a small, sharp pen-knife.

AND ALL THE GOSSIP for a month in Braintree was of Peter Packer's stunning young wife, though some people wondered how it was that she had only nine fingers.

# Bones

## by Donald A. Wollheim

(Author of "Castaway," "The Planet That Time Forgot," etc.)

Where there once was life, new life may arise . . . but what of that which was never alive?

THE museum of Natural Sciences was not very far from the place where he was staying, so Severus found himself striding briskly through the dim, winding streets that night. He had come to Boston on a visit, renewed acquaintances with learned men with whom he had exchanged knowledge in years past; thus the letter he had received in this morning's mail inviting him to a private demonstration this night.

It was not a pleasant walk; already he was beginning to regret not having taken some other means of transportation. The buildings were old and loomed darkly over the narrow streets. Lights were few; for the most part, they came from flickering, dust encrusted lamp posts of last century's design. Large moths and other nocturnal insects fluttered over their surfaces, added their moving shadows to the air of desolation which hung about these ways.

The moon was behind clouds that had streaked across the autumn skies all day and now blocked out the stars. The night about him was warm with that touch of unexpected chill which comes in autumn. Severus shuddered more than once as a wandering breeze slithered across his face unexpectedly around some dreary corner. He increased his pace, looked more suspiciously about him.

Boston, the oldest section of the city. Antique brick buildings dating back to the revolution, some much farther. Dwelling places of the best families of two centuries ago. Now steadily advancing progress and life had left them derelict as upon deserted shores. Old, three or four story structures, narrow tottering dirty red bricked houses with yawning black windows that now looked out through filth-encrusted panes upon streets and by-ways that served to shelter only the poorest and most alien section of the city's people. Forgotten, the district imparted its despair and overhanging doom to the man who walked its ways that night.

Half conquered by the smell of the antique houses, the subtle vibrations of past generations still pervading his spirit, Severus came at last out of the narrow streets into the open square where stood the museum.

The change surprised him. Here all was open. The dark, cloud streaked sky loomed down overhead

with a closeness that appalled him for a moment. The white marble facade of the structure glistened oddly in his view. It stood out, the cleanliness of it, as something exceedingly out of place, as something too new, too recent to have any right here. Its Neo-Grecian designs were horribly modern and crude for the Eighteenth Century blocks that surrounded it.

He walked swiftly across the open square, up the wide stone steps to the entrance of the building. Quickly he thrust open the small side door, hurried through as if to escape the thoughts of forgotten streets outside.

HOW futile such hopes in a museum! He realized that, the instant the door was closed. He stood in a dark hall, lit dimly by one bulb above the entrance, another one at the opposite end of the main passage. And at once his nostrils were assailed by the inescapable odor of all such institutions—age!

The musty air rushed over his body, took him into its folds. The silence assailed his ears with a suddenness that all but took his breath away. He looked about, trying to catch his bearings. Then he ventured a step, walked rapidly across the large chamber, down a wide corridor opening off it. Not a glance did he cast from side to side. The looming shadows of indescribable things were enough for him. His imagination supplied the rest. Unavoidable glimpses of shadowy sarcophagi and grotesquely carven idols sent great cold chills thrilling down his spine, stirring up his heart.

Up a narrow staircase, a turn to the right. At last he was at the room set aside for the night's demonstration. He stood a moment trying to catch his breath and regain composure. Then he pushed the door open, stepped inside.

A BARE room with scarcely any furnishings. About seven or eight other men were there. In low tones they greeted him, drew him over to their circle. All were standing; there were no chairs in the room. A couple of small instrument-racks and the main object was all.

The room was dominated by a long, low table upon which rested a six-foot bundle of dull grey cloth like a giant cocoon. Severus stared at it a moment, then recognized it as an Egyptian mummy removed from its coffin case. It obviously awaited unwinding.

So this was what he'd been invited to, he thought, wishing he hadn't been so friendly to the Egyptologists attached to this particular musuem.

Glancing around, Severus took note of the others present. He was surprised to recognize one as a Medical Doctor highly esteemed at a city hospital. The doctor indeed seemed to be one of the active participants in what was about to take place for he wore a white smock that indicated action.

Bantling, the Egyptologist, held up a hand for silence.

"Most of you know what is about to take place tonight, therefore I will merely outline it for your convenience and for the one or two who know nothing about it." He nodded to Severus and smiled.

"This object, as you have all surmised, is an Egyptian mummy. But it is, we hope, different from all other such mummies previously examined.

"According to our painstaking translation of the hieroglyphics of the sarcophagus whence this body

came, this marks an attempt of the priesthood of the IVth Dynasty to send one of their number alive into the lands to come. The unique part of it, and that which occupies us tonight, is that this priest did not die, nor was his body in any way mutilated. Instead, according to the inscriptions, he was fed and bathed in certain compounds that would suspend, indefinitely, the actions of his body cells; he was then put to sleep and prepared for a slumber very like death, yet not true death. In this state he could remain for years, yet still be re-awakened to walk again, a living man.

"In brief, and using modern terminology, these people of what we call ancient times, claim to have solved the secret of suspended animation. Whether or not they did is for us now to determine."

SEVERUS felt himself grow cold as this knowledge penetrated his being. The past had indeed reached out to the present. He would witness this night the end of an experiment started thousands of years before. Perhaps he himself would yet speak to and hear speak an inhabitant of this lost age. Egypt, buried these hundreds of centuries, Egypt aged beyond belief—yet, a man of that time-lost empire lay here in this very room, in the North American city of Boston.

"3700 B. C." he heard someone remark in answer to an unheard question.

Severus raised his eyes from the object on the table, let his gaze fall upon the window and what was revealed through it. Some of the clouds had cleared away and the cold, bright stars shone through. Far-off flickering spots of light that must surely have shone upon Ancient Egypt as coldly. The very light just passing through his cornea may have originated in the time when this thing upon the table was about to be plunged into Life-in-Death.

Far off, the dull clanging of a church bell drifted into the room.

"Buck up, old man." A hand patted Severus' shoulder as an acquaintance came over to him. "It isn't as bad as it looks. Why that fellow will be as hale as any of us before the night is out. You'll think he's just a new immigrant."

Bantling and an assistant were even now engaged in unwrapping the mummy. Rolls and rolls of old, crumbling cloth were carefully being unwound from the figure on the table. Dust of death and ages now filled the air. Several coughs were heard; the door was opened on the dark passage outside to let the air change.

A gasp as at last the windings fell away. The body now lay entirely uncovered. Quickly, quietly, the wrappings were gathered together and piled in a receptacle while all crowded about to observe the Egyptian.

All in all, it was in a fine state of preservation. The skin was not brownish; it had not hardened. The arms and legs were still movable, had never stiffened in rigor mortis. Bantling seemed much pleased.

With horror Severus noted the several greyish-blue patches on parts of the face and body which he recognized without asking as a kind of mold.

Dr Zweig, the physician, bent over and carefully scraped off the fungoid growths. They left nasty reddish pitted scars in the body that made Severus feel sick. He wanted to rush out of the room, out of the building into the clean night air. But

the fascination of the horrible kept his glance fixed in hypnosis on the gruesome object before him.

"We are ready," Dr. Zweig said in a low voice.

THEY began to bathe the body with a sharp-smelling antiseptic, taking off all remaining traces of the preservatives used.

"Remarkable how perfect this thing is," breathed the physician. "Remarkable!"

Now at last the way was open for the work of revival. Large electric pads were brought out, laid all over the body, face and legs. Current was switched into them; the body surface was slowly brought up to normal warmth.

Then arteries and veins were opened, tubes clamped to them running from apparatus under the table. Severus understood that warm artificial blood was being pumped into the body to warm up the internal organs and open up the flow of blood again.

Shortly Dr. Zweig announced himself ready to attempt the final work toward actually bringing the now pliant and vibrant corpse to life. Already the body seemed like that of a living man, the flush of red tinging its skin and cheeks. Severus was in a cold sweat.

"Blood flows again through his veins and arteries," whispered the Egyptologist. "It is time to turn off the mechanical heart and attempt to revive his own."

A needle was plunged into the chest, a substance injected into the dormant, thousands-year old cardiac apparatus of the body. Adrenalin, Severus assumed.

Over the mouth and nostrils of the former mummy a bellows was placed, air forced into the lungs at regular periods. For a while there was no result. Severus began fervently to hope that there would be no result. The air was supercharged with tension, horror mixed with scientific zeal. Through the chamber, the wheeze of the bellows was the only sound.

"Look!"

Someone cried out the word, electrifying all in the room of resurrection. A hand pointed shakily at the chest of the thing on the table. There was more action now; the chest rose and fell more vigorously. Quietly the doctor reached over and pulled away the face mask and stopped the pumps.

And the chest of the Egyptian still moved. Up and down in a ghastly rhythm of its own. Now to their ears became noticeable an odd sound, a rattling soft wheezing sound as of air being sucked in and out of a sleeping man.

"He breathes." The doctor reached out and laid a finger on the body's wrist. "The heart beats."

"He lives again!"

Their eyes stared at what had been done. There, on the table, lay a man, a light brown-skinned, sharp Semitic-featured man, appearing to be in early middle age. He lay there as one quietly asleep.

"Who will waken him?" whispered Severus above the pounding of his heart.

"He will awaken soon," was the answer. "He will rise and walk as if nothing had happened."

Severus shook his head, disbelievingly. Then—

The Egyptian moved. His hand shook slightly; the eyes opened with a jerk.

Spellbound they stood, the eyes of

the Americans fixed upon the eyes of the Ancient. In shocked silence they watched one another.

The Egyptian sat up slowly, as if painfully. His features moved not a bit; his body moved slowly and jerkily.

The Ancient's eyes roved over the assembly. They caught Severus full in the face. For an instant they gazed at one another, the Vermont man looking into pain-swept ages, into grim depths of agony and sorrow, into the Aeons of old Past Time itself.

The Egyptian suddenly wrinkled up his features, swept up an arm and opened his mouth to speak.

And Severus fled from the room in frightful terror, the others closely following. Behind them rang out a terrible, hoarse bellow, cut off by a gurgling which they barely heard. The entire company, to a man, fought each other like terrified animals, each struggling to be the first out of that Museum, out the doors into the black streets and away.

For there are parts of the human body which, never having been alive, cannot be preserved in suspended life. They are the bones, the teeth —strong in death, but unable to defy the crushing millenia.

And when the Egyptian had moved his body and opened his mouth to speak, his face had fallen in like termite - infested wood, the splinters of fragile, age-crumbled bones tearing through the flesh. His whole body had shaken, and, with the swing of the arm, smashed itself into a shapeless mass of heaving flesh and blood through which projected innumerable jagged fragments of dark grey, pitted bones.

# Old Trinity Churchyard

## (5 a. m. Spring)

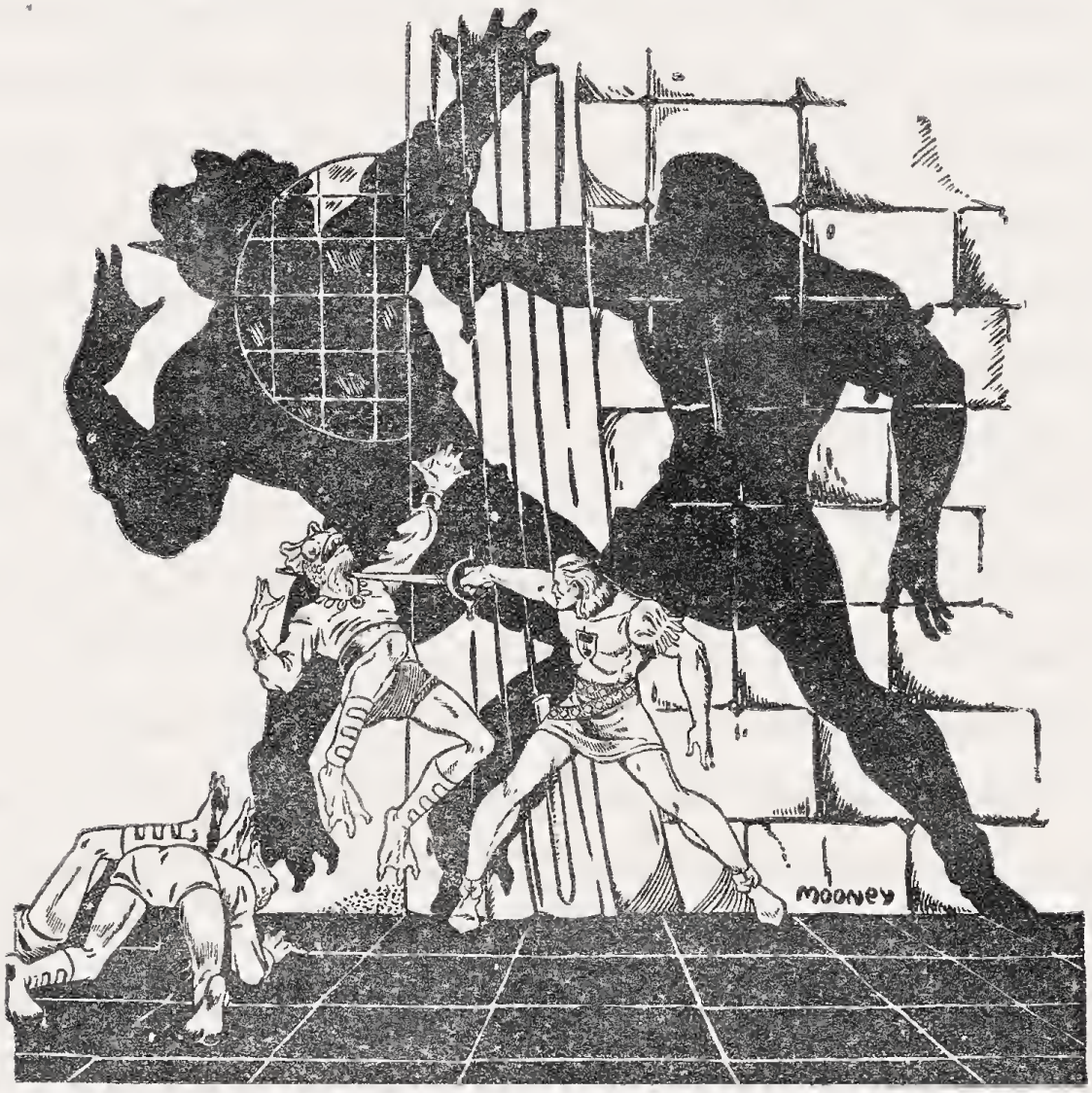
**by A. Merritt**

A lonely graveyard lies between high walls,
Death's quiet eddy off the roaring mart,
An oasis of peace, forgot, apart,
With muted strings the clamor on it falls;
And ghostly mists at dawn drop down like palls,
Lithe bodies creep and slip into its heart;
Half-seen; half-hid; across the mounds they dart.
Behold! On Beauty's grave a gaunt cat sprawls!
Beside some sage's stone their lusts are fed—
They stalk each other through the ragged grass;
Snakelike they crawl where heroes long have lain;
With playful paw they pat the mouldering dead.
Grotesques that writhe and wail a devilish Mass—
Thoughts, life-clothed, sent forth by some dead brain!

# The Key to Cornwall

## by David H. Keller

(Author of "The Human Termites," "The Ivy War," etc.)




Possession of a golden key meant possession of Cornwall. And the Toad-men wanted that land.....

THE overlord of Cornwall sat dreaming before the fire. He had never, even in his prime, been a large man; now age slowly had shrunk him till only his eyes held the youth that once was his. On the other side of the fire stood his son, Eric.

The men were waiting for the wise physician to announce the birth of Eric's child, who in turn would some day rule all the land. Cecil had found this country of Cornwall a land of starved, simple folk, horrific monsters and still more terrible giants. His wisdom, more

than his strength at arms, had wiped out evil till Cornwall was a pleasant place to live in. In time his only son, Eric the Golden, had married Black Breda, Princess of Wales. It was an odd marriage, the man a flaxen haired giant and the woman a black haired little female with great love in her heart and the laughter of pixies in her soul.

The old man stroked the golden key which hung pendant to a thick silken cord round his neck. He looked at his son.

"I am not easy about this matter of Breda and her child," he said. "Long years ago I came to this land from France and in various ways won victory over the Toad Men and became Overlord of the land. My friend, in that struggle of right over might and light over darkness, gave me this key. On it are graven words of a race so long dead that none can read it, but the meaning of those words is simply this,

'They who hold this golden key,
Shall ever lords of Cornwall be.'

"Thus far the prophecy on the key has been correct. In one way or another I have held the land for you and for those who come after you. We have made peace with those around us, have held our borders against those who lived by the sword. Our nobles rule wisely and our common folk are content.

"But yesterday I had a dream. Mayhap it was only a foreboding of evil caused by overanxiety concerning your lady and her travail, but it seemed to me that a few of the Toad Men still lived to do me and mine harm. I thought they were all dead, but it may be that evil never completely dies. You have heard me speak of this key before, but keep in mind the ancient words. Tell your son about them and have him tell his son. Long as we hold the key we hold Cornwall, but once it is taken Cornwall sinks back to the barbarism in which I found it."

Cecil would have said more, but was interrupted by the old physician. He walked before the fire and stood there rubbing his withered hands, though it was springtime and the air was warm. At last he turned to Eric, and as though answering a question, said:

"Your Lady will live, Prince Eric, but she will bear you no more children."

The golden haired giant sprang toward him, shook him rudely by shoulders and cried,

"What of the child? Is it a boy? Will he live?"

Lord Cecil leaned forward, hands gripping arms of his ivory chair. The physician laughed.

"'Tis a boy and he will live, though when you see him you will think it had been better had he died. Through him we are revenged for those of the Toad Men who died untimely that night Cecil, the pauper poet, slew us in his pride."

The Overlord of Cornwall stood up, whispering.

"Age made me lose my cunning caution. I should have known." Turning sharply, he cried to his son, "Hands off the man, Eric. Nothing must happen to you!"

With slow but certain step he came toward the old physician. For that ancient there was no retreat save into the blazing fire. Then they met, grappled, swayed and fell forward, the Overlord of Cornwall underneath. The physician had one arm around the body and one hand on the throat of the ruler, but Cecil appeared content to have both arms

around the other's neck. Eric tore a dagger from his belt and was bending to plunge it into the Toad Man when his wrist was caught in a grip that left him powerless. Turning he saw a stranger who simply smiled and whispered,

"Do not interfere. Your Sire is a proud man and I know that he has wisdom to use the only manner by which he can win. He would not care to be saved by either of us, if he needed saving, and I do not think he does."

Slowly Cecil brought his face against the face of his adversary; slowly he fastened to him mouth to mouth and there he held him, sucking the breath of life from his body. The man twisted above him, tried to rise, shake off his executioner, but slowly relaxed and at last, with a few tortured jerks, died. As death came to him his body changed till at last it became that of a toad, giant in size, clad in human dress, but none the less an airless toad and very dead at that. The stranger separated the living from the dead, then knelt beside the Overlord of Cornwall.

"I should have come long before, my dear friend," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "I was busy with serious duties in Gobi and only today I knew of your danger; I came on the wings of light, and hardly in time to aid you. Not in time to save the boy. Now he is as he is and no one can make him different. But his father can hold the key and after him, mayhap the boy can be made somewhat of. I am very wise and now know that there is still one of the race of Toads left to do us harm; but I am not all wise so I do not know where that one is or in what shape evil will come to harm you and your race. You have been badly hurt; the poison breathed from that spawn of Hell, methinks, will spell your doom. But all brave men pass sometime and you can be comforted by knowing that you passed bravely."

THUS CECIL, first Overlord of Cornwall, passed and Eric the Golden became custodian of the golden key and ruled in his father's land. Messengers carried the broken bow and the flameless torch throughout the country and by the third day many nobles came from near and far to do the dead man homage. But the simple folk sat unconsoled in their huts and wondered what now would happen to them.

It was not till after the funeral guests had departed and the stranger had returned to Gobi that Eric had time or even desire to visit his wife and son. He had asked often about them and was always assured that they were doing well. Now, with the castle empty of visitors he took a new suit of velvet and went to the river where he bathed till much of his grief and deep sorrow was washed from him. Then he dressed in his brave court suit and humming a little song walked back to the castle and to the room where his wife and child lay.

At the bed of Breda the Black-haired, he dropped to his knees. It was a high bed but he was a tall man and even with knees to floor he could overlook his wife. He took her hand in his, and knew, without asking, that Death had placed his cross on her forehead. She smiled.

"I am glad to see you, Eric, my first and last love; it sorrows me that I will not be a long time with you. It seems to me that I die from nothing in particular save the lack of desire to live. My Ladies tell me that now

I am the Queen of the Overlord and Mother of a new Prince; but I saw the boy, just for a moment, though my ladies tried to keep me from doing so and knowing how you would feel, I have no desire to live. Speed me with your lips, and burn candles for the peace of my soul."

Thus Eric the Golden lost two of the dear ones of his life. But he rose bravely from the side of his dead wife and whispered,

"I have a son and must live on for him, and his future greatness. Some day he will carry the golden key."

He told the ladies in waiting to take him to the child. Fearful, they escorted him to the nursery, where the withered husk of an old nurse sat at the foot of a cradle inlaid with gold, ebony and ivory, in which Eric had been rocked years before. The father looked down on his son. The ladies faded from the room. Only the old dame stayed rubbing her cold fingers.

"The boy has a large head," observed Eric. "He should be wise as a man."

"His head is large and shapely," muttered the nurse.

"There is a good jaw there. When he fastens on an opinion he will hold it. He has a strong neck and will hold his head high as he travels through life."

"His jaw is firm and his neck strong," answered the nurse, though she had no need to do so.

Eric whirled around, took her by the shoulder and shook her,

"What is wrong with the lad?" he demanded. "What is wrong with him?"

She started to cry. With great strong, shaking but tender hands Eric took off the baby clothes; then, white faced and silent replaced them and silently left the room. Out in the hall the ladies stood rigid against the walls as though waiting to be struck. He paused.

"Tend to the lad carefully and see that he is fed on goat's milk. I go to bury his Mother; when that is done which needs be done I will come back and provide for my son."

ON THE MORNING of the third day he dressed in leather hunting clothes, took the child from the nursery and rode away without escort into the dark forest. The babe slept but began to cry by noon for want of food. Just then a woman walked from the greenwood and paused in front of Eric's horse. Eric, looking down on her saw that she was young, deep bosomed, flaxen haired and in all respects comely. He said kindly,

"Who are you? Why do you stop me? What can I do for you?"

"I am Breda, woman of Olax the Dane and mother of his child. Our war vessel, the Swan, wrecked on your rocks two suns ago and I was the only one to reach the shore. I found a hut and slept; last night in a dream I saw you coming with a babe who hungered for a mother, as I hunger for a dead child."

Wordless, Eric handed her the baby. Wordless the woman sat down on the grass, opened her kirtle and nursed the little one. Finally the baby slept. The woman cradled him in her arms and said quietly,

"The child has a lovely face."

Eric looked at the two of them without answer.

"A strong chin and powerful neck," she continued. "With proper care he will become a fine man."

"Hand me the young one," commanded the Overlord of Cornwall, "and do you seat yourself behind me on the horse. The boy is yours to

care for, and I will take the two of you to my hunting lodge where there will be servants to wait on you and men-at-arms to protect you; for this baby, if he lives, will some day be Lord over all Cornwall. You are a good woman and thus you will have a home and safety; your care of the child will be rewarded, if a woman can be paid for such kindness to such a child."

Time passed on. Eric found work to keep him busy. His father had cleaned Cornwall, but the son put a polish on the land till it was a country anyone could be proud to live in. One day a month he rode to visit his son and the rest of the time he tried to forget him which was very difficult. When the boy was three years old he called to the Castle an old forester who had a flair for training dogs.

"From now on, Russel, you are going to train a Prince instead of wolfhounds. My son has a strong jaw. He must be taught to use it. He must learn to hang to a rope with that jaw and never let go till he so desires. Teach him to roll over and over on the grass, to arch his back, reach low branches and pull himself along. Every day rub his body with oil. I will have a wise man train him in the use of words, and after that in all wisdom. He can learn to hold a pen in his mouth and write. When he is six we will start him off on a pony with special harness and saddle. Do you know about the lad?"

"I have heard talk about him, but paid little heed to it. It seemed to me that things could not be as bad as 'twas said."

"It is as bad as that or worse. But the boy has a fine brain, and talks very well for his age; so far he does not realize—he has seen no other children—he does not know."

"Some day," said the forester boldly, "he will know, and then he will not thank you for keeping him alive."

Eric turned on him.

"Who am I to kill my own son? We all of us have something wrong with us, with our mind or body. The boy is not to blame. Let the future tell the story! The lad has a strong jaw and a fine mind. These must carry him where he will go. It is for us to help him make the most of what he has. Do as I have told you, and remember that you have in your keeping the next Overlord of the land."

FROM THAT TIME began a new life for Balder, for thus he was named, that naming having been the desire of Breda the Black, while she was carrying him. At times Eric pondered over the mockery of such a name, and thought it should be changed. Balder! Balder the Beautiful, the beloved, perfect God of the Northlands. What a name for what a child.

The boy learned to hold things in his mouth, death-gripped. He learned to ride the pony, guiding him with his teeth. Over and over he would roll on the ground. At seven he could write his name with a pen held in his mouth. Freda cared for him, Russel trained his body and a very wise, old man taught him wisdom. By the time he was twelve he knew all the old man could teach him, and could gallop on a war horse. Eric knew the time had come to bring him back to the Castle and begin teaching him the duties of Overlord which some day he would have to assume. What body he had grew strong, and he could do what any other fine boy of his age could have done with a similar body—just that much and nothing more. Because he had to

largely depend on his mind that part of him showed an unusual growth.

An artificer in leather made harness for him so he could sit in a saddle or be with his father in the banquet hall. There, except that he had to be fed, he seemed to be like any other young Prince, and, as those around him were accustomed to his care and through their great love for him never mentioned the fatal difference between him and other boys, he was mostly happy and gay and appeared to receive much of the joy of living which is the due of youth. Thus he came to his twenty-first birthday.

"And time for you to wed, my son," said Eric the Overlord of Cornwall. "The times are troublesome, and more and more it becomes difficult for us to keep the peace and preserve the land in its Golden Age. Marriage with a Princess of a neighboring land, Wales, Scotia or Ireland, would help, and mayhap your son would rule in peace and security. I think that it could be arranged."

Balder smiled rather sadly as he replied:

"It would be better for you to marry again, Father, and raise a son. No doubt some princess, bookish minded, would care to marry me for what I am above my neck, but what lovely lady would want me for the part below?"

"You have a strong neck, a powerful jaw and a fine mind, my son," said the Overlord, "and the time may come when such will take a man far in this troubled world. Your Grandfather was not much of a fighter. Just between the two of us I doubt all those legends of his conquering two-headed giants and scurvy dragons; but he had a clever mind. Had he lived he would have gloried in your knowledge of the books in his library. Suppose I look around and see if a suitable marriage cannot be made for you."

This was easier said than done. In all the lands near Cornwall men were still settling disputes with the pole-ax and battle sword. All the Kings were kind and sympathetic, and when Eric looked them in the eye made no reference to the peculiar disability of Prince Balder; but for this and that and the other reason found that a marriage between him and one of their daughters could not be arranged for. Then, just when Eric decided that his undertaking was impossible, messengers came from a land far away offering the hand of a Princess in marriage, a beautiful lady who would bring a dower of great wealth. They brought presents and a picture of the waiting lady, and quietly said that she and her Father knew about Prince Balder but that nothing made any difference. Eric sent gifts in return and at the end of a year the Princess came and mid great pageantry she was wedded to Balder, Prince of Cornwall.

That afternoon The Overlord called on his son, saying:

"As I told you these are troubled times. The King of Wales has sent messengers to me. Enemies from the North have come in long ships and are harassing his shore. He asks for help, and that help I must give him at once. Since I must leave Cornwall you must rule in my place against my return, so around your neck I place this cord of twisted silk from which hangs the Golden Key. Guard it well and remember the ancient verse,

'They who hold this golden key,
Shall ever lords of Cornwall be.'

And, when the enemy is driven back, or better still, destroyed, I shall re-

turn; I am ill at ease that I have to leave you at this time when you should have nothing between you and your bride save thoughts of love-a-daisies."

"Go without fear, Father, and return when the time comes," said the son, "while you are gone nothing shall happen to the Key, and my bride Marylyn will help me in all things because she seems to be a most wise and a most beautiful lady."

THUS Eric rode away followed by his men-at-arms, his archers and his pike-men and the castle drawbridge was raised; but Freda the nurse and Russel the Forester were worried and talked long into the night about their beloved Prince and his sudden advent into manhood and its responsibilities. But Lady Marylyn went to the bedroom of her husband and closed the door and locked it while Balder lay on the bed and wondered at her beauty—but not for long.

"And I am worried that a beautiful lady such as you are would deliberately mate with such a man as I am," he said sadly.

She laughed at him.

"I married you because I wanted to."

"But why should you want to?" he asked.

"Because of that key you wear around your neck. Many years ago a Prince of Darkness, aided by your grand-sire, destroyed the Toad-men who for centuries had ruled Cornwall. Only one escaped and he was my father. Soon after you were born, Cecil, Overlord of the land, killed my father, killed him most terribly and pitilessly. I am the last of my race. Through my legerdemain I arranged the marriage because, though your father can fight, above his neck he is simply a goodnatured fool. The message from Wales was simply a part of my plan, as your father will find out when it is too late. My spirit men surround the castle. Late tonight after I am rested I will place a candle in the window. Then the silken cord will be around my neck and the golden key will lie between my breasts; my men will swarm into the castle killing and over Cornwall destroying and once again we will rule in Cornwall. Too late your Father will learn of it—too late." She laughed merrily and ended, "And that is why I married you, poor fool!"

Taking him in her lovely arms she raised him from the bridal bed and rolled him over on the floor; then she took off her bridal dress and her silver shoes and Balder knew that she spake the truth because her toes were long and webbed, like those of a toad. Savagely she tore the silk cord from his neck and placed it around her head, then with a lighted candle on the chest at the foot of the bed, she lay down and rested and soon slept—for she had nothing to fear—nothing to fear from such a bridegroom.

Eric's son, Cecil's grandson, Balder, the far from Beautiful, save that of him above the neck, lay helpless on the floor. He thought of Cornwall, his land where peace had reigned for so many years, and knew that he and he alone stood between the simple, happy folk and death and disaster. Because there was nothing to say he said nothing. But he waited realizing that though he had lost the key, none of the spirit men would know that till the candle was placed in the window.

His bride, the so beautiful Marylyn, last of the Toad-folk, with the

arms and hands of a Venus and feet of a batrachian, lay resting, waiting, drowsing on the bed. At last she must have slept for one fair arm dropped off the bed and rested, hand on floor. Then Balder knew that perhaps fate had delivered her into his power. Very carefully he rolled over and once again over on his body, a trick he had learned on the meadow grass. Now his face was but a few inches from the devil-lady's wrist. He arched his neck, that strong bull-like neck and opened his mouth; then he suddenly took that wrist and fastened on it with jaws that for many years, once fastened, had never let go.

The toad woman screamed with pain.

Jerking, he pulled her off the bed.

She beat him on the face with her free hand, but he simply held her tighter, shaking her arm as a terrier would shake a rat. Her blood covered his face but he held her tight. She pulled him over the floor trying to reach the candle and with it in her free hand, the window; but though once and again twice, she almost reached it, each time, with a powerful, almost convulsive movement, he pulled her back to the floor. At last she fainted from loss of blood and pain. That was what he was waiting for. Opening his mouth he jerked upward and secured a new hold on her upper arm. She woke only to scream and faint again. Now, exerting all his strength, he reached her neck and clamped his jaws on it, just below her chin. Almost losing consciousness, he thought:

"All I have to do now is to hold fast."

Tighter and tighter he held her! Closer and closer his jaws closed on that white tower of loveliness and at last he knew that he lay fastened to his dead bride. He opened his jaws, worked his mouth down the silken cord, covered now with blood, and finally came to the golden key. He closed on that with his mouth and, satisfied with the knowledge that his land was safe, he fell asleep.

THE next morning, urged to do so by Breda the nurse, Russel the forester with a few men-at-arms broke open the door. There on the floor lay a giant toad, its body already puffed with putrefaction, one arm torn and broken and the neck horribly mangled. Beside the dead toad lay Balder, Prince of Cornwall, with the golden key in his mouth, his face and body red with dried blood. They woke him.

"Cornwall is safe," he said with a smile, and went to sleep again.

Breda fastened the key around his neck with her apron string and Russel picked him up and carried him to his room. There they washed him and nursed him and in due time he was able to tell them the story of that night battle. And later on Breda told the story to Eric, Overlord of Cornwall, who had come back in haste, suspecting treachery when he found that Wales was at peace.

Eric listened patiently till the end of the tale.

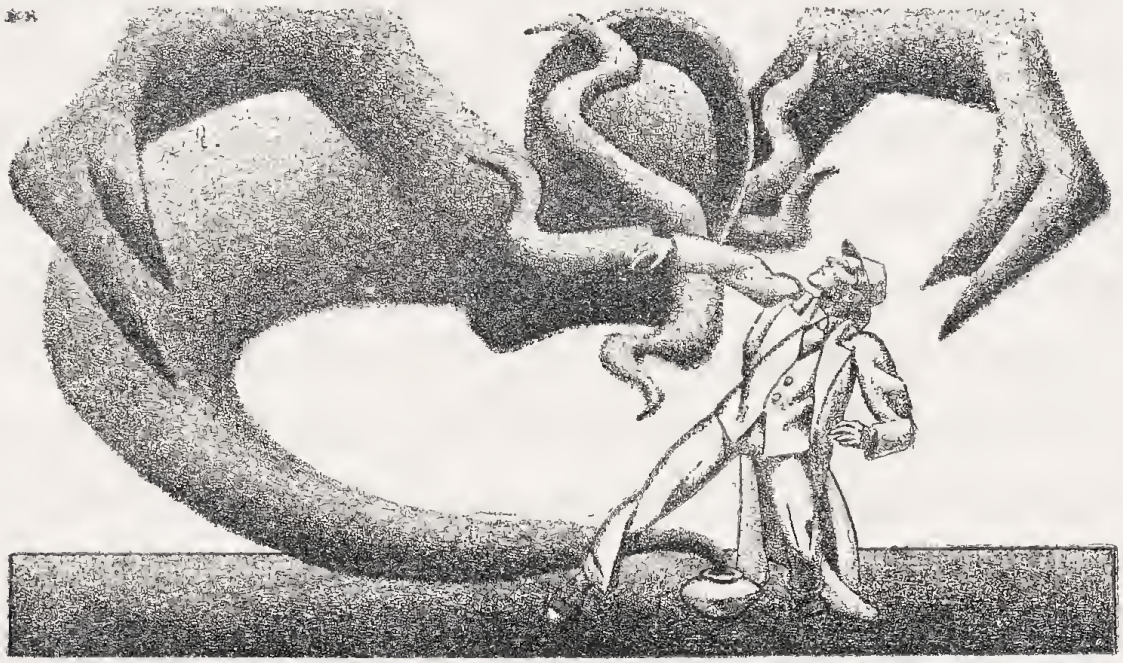
"My son did very well," he said gladly. "Considering that he had neither arms or legs to fight with, he did very well."

"He has a strong jaw," said Breda the nurse.

# Out of the Jar

## by Charles R. Tanner

(Author of "Tumithak of the Corridors," "Flight of the Mercury," etc.)



Are you inquisitive too? Do you want to know things? Too many things?

I AM PRESENTING here, at the insistence of my friend, James Francis Denning, an account of an event or series of events which, he says, occurred to him during the late summer and early fall of 1940. I do so, not because I concur in the hope which Denning has that it may arouse serious investigation of the phenomena he claims took place, but merely that a statement of those phenomena may be placed on record, as a case history for future students of occult phenomena or—psychology. Personally, I am still unpersuaded under which head this narration should be placed.

Were my mind one of those which accepts witches, vampires and werewolves in the general scheme of things, I would not doubt for a moment the truth of Denning's tale, for certainly the man believes it himself; and his lack of imagination and matter-of-fact mode of living up until the time of the occurrence speak strongly in his favor. And then too, there is the mental breakdown of the brilliant young Edward Barnes Halpin, as added evidence. This young student of occult history and the vague lesser known cults and religions was a fairly close acquaintance of Denning's for years, and it was at Denning's home that he suffered the stroke which made him the listless, stricken thing that he is today.

That much is fact and can be attested to by any number of people.

As to Denning's explanation, I can only say that it deserves a thorough investigation. If there is any truth in it at all, the truth should certainly be verified and recorded. And so, to the story.

IT BEGAN, Denning says, in the summer of last year, when he attended a sale disposing of the stock of one of those little secondhand stores that call themselves antique shops and are known to most people as junk shops. There was the usual hodge-podge of Indian curios, glassware, Victorian furniture and old books; and Denning attended it as he did every event of this kind, allowing himself to indulge in the single vice which he had—that of filling his home with a stock of cheap and useless curios from all parts of the world.

At this particular sale he emerged triumphantly with a carved elephant tusk, an Alaskan medicine man's mask and—an earthenware jar. This jar was a rather ordinary thing, round-bodied, with a very short cylindrical neck and with a glazed band around its center, blue glaze, with curious angular characters in yellow that even the rather illiterate Denning could see bore a certain relation to Greek characters. The auctioneer called it very old, said it was Syraic or Samaritan and called attention to the seal which was affixed to the lid. This lid was of earthenware similar to the jar and was set in the mouth after the manner of a cork and a filling of what seemed to be hard-baked clay sealed it in. And on this baked clay, or whatever it was, had been stamped a peculiar design—two triangles interwoven to form a six-pointed star, with three unknown characters in the center. Although the auctioneer was as ignorant as Denning as to the real significance of this seal, he made a mystery of it and Denning was hooked. He bought the thing and brought it home, where it found a place, in spite of his wife's objections, on the mantle in the living room.

And here it rested, in a questionable obscurity, for a matter of four or five months. I say questionable obscurity, for as near as I can gather it was the bone of contention, during most of that time, between Denning and his wife. It was but natural, I think, that this estimable lady should object to having the best room in their little home filled with what were to her a mass of useless objects. Yet nothing was done about it. In the light of Denning's story of subsequent events, it seems almost incredible that that frightful thing could sit there, day after day, in that commonplace living room, being taken down and dusted now and then, and carelessly placed back.

Yet such was the case, and such remained the case until the first visit of young Halpin. This young man was an acquaintance of Denning's of long standing, and their friendship had been slowly ripening during the last year, owing to the fact that Halpin was able to add much to Denning's knowledge of the curios which he accumulated. Both of them worked for the same company and, seeing each other every day, it was not unusual that they had become quite friendly in spite of the fact that neither had ever visited the other's home. But Denning's description of certain carvings on the elephant's tusk which he had bought interested young Halpin sufficiently to cause him to pay a visit to Denning's home to make a personal examination of the tusk.

Halpin, at this time, was still under thirty, yet he had become already a recognized authority in this country of that queer borderland of mystic occult study that Churchward, Fort, Lovecraft and the Miskatonic school represent. His articles on some of the obscure chapters of d'Erlette's "Cultes des Goules" has been accepted favorably by American occult students, as well as his translation of the hitherto expurgated sections of the Gaelic "Leabhar Mor Dubh." In all, he was a most promising student and one in whom the traits of what now seem to have been incipient dementia præcox were conspicuous by their absence. Indeed, one of his strongest characteristics, Denning tells me, was a pronounced interest in almost everything about him.

"He was like that, the night that he first visited me," says Denning. "He looked over the tusk, explained all the curious carvings that he could and made little sketches of the remaining figures, to take away and study. Then his eyes began roving about the room and pretty soon they noticed some other little thing, I don't remember just what, and he began talking about that. I had a couple of Folsom points—those curious flints that are supposed to be much older than any other American artifacts—and he spoke about them for nearly twenty minutes.

"Then he laid them down and was up and around the room again; and presently he picked up something else and was talking about that. I used to learn an awful lot from Ed Halpin, but I think I learned more that night than I ever did at any other one time. And at last his eyes lit on that jar."

YES, his eyes lit on the jar, and started the series of happenings that at last made this story necessary. For Halpin was stricken with a sudden curiosity, picked up the jar and glanced over it, and then suddenly became wildly excited. "Why, it's old!" he ejaculated. "It's ancient Hebrew, Jim. Where in the world did you get it?"

Denning told him, but his curiosity was unappeased. He spent several minutes trying to extract from Denning a knowledge which it became obvious that the latter did not possess. It was easy to see that Halpin already knew more concerning the jar than did Denning, and so his questions ceased.

"But surely you know what it is supposed to be, don't you?" quizzed Halpin. "Didn't the auctioneer tell you anything about it? Didn't you see the previous owner? Lord, Denning! How can you find interest in these things, if you don't learn all you can of them?"

Denning was rendered apologetic by his evident exasperation, and Halpin suddenly relented, laughed and started to explain.

"That six-pointed star, Jim, is known as Solomon's seal. It has been a potent sign used in Hebraic cabala for thousands of years. What has me interested is its use in connection with Phoenician characters around the body of the vase. That seems to indicate a real antiquity. It might just be possible that this is actually the seal of Solomon himself! Jim," his attitude suddenly changed, "Jim, sell me this thing, will you?"

Now, it seems incredible that Denning saw no slightest gleam of light in this guarded explanation of Halpin's. The young student certainly was aware of much of the importance

of the jar, but Denning insists that the explanation meant nothing whatever to him. To be sure, Denning was no student, he had probably never heard of the Cabala, nor of Abdul Alhazred or Joachim of Cordoba, but surely, in his youth he had read the "Arabian Nights". Even that should have given him a clue. Apparently not—he tells me that he refused Halpin's offer to buy the vase, simply because of a collector's vagary. He felt that, well, to use his own words: "If it was worth ten dollars to him, it was worth ten dollars to me."

And so, though Halpin increased the offer which he first made, Denning was obdurate. Halpin left with merely an invitation to come back at any time and examine the vase to his heart's content.

DURING the next three weeks, Halpin did return, several times. He copied down the inscription on the blue band, made a wax impression of the seal, photographed the vase and even went so far as to measure it and weigh it. And all the time his interest increased and his bids for the thing rose higher. At last, unable to raise his offer further, he was reduced to pleading with Denning that he sell it, and at this, Denning grew angry.

"I told him," says Denning, "I told him that I was getting sick and tired of his begging. I said I wasn't going to sell it to him and that, even if it cost me our friendship, that vase was going to stay mine. Then he started on another line. He wanted to open it and see what was inside.

"But I had a good excuse for not complying with that plea. He himself had told me of the interest that attached to the seal on the clay and I wasn't going to have that broken if I knew myself. I was so positive on this score that he gave in and apologized again. At least, I thought he gave in. I know different now, of course."

We all know different now. Halpin had decided to open the vase at any cost, and so had merely given up the idea of trying to buy it. We must not think, however, that he had been reduced to the status of a common thief in spite of his later actions. The young man's attitude was explainable to any one who can understand the viewpoint of a student of science. Here was an opportunity to study one of the most perplexing problems of occult art, and obstinacy, combined with ignorance, was trying to prevent it. He determined to circumvent Denning, no matter to what depths he had to stoop.

THUS it was that several nights later Jim Denning was awakened, sometime during the early morning hours, by a slight, unusual noise on the lower floor of his home. At first but half awake, he lay and listlessly pondered the situation. Had his wife awakened and gone downstairs for a midnight snack? Or had he heard, perhaps, a mouse in the kitchen? Could it be — a sleeping sigh from his wife's bed made him realize that it wasn't she and at the same moment came a repetition of the sound—a dull "clunk" as of metal striking muffled metal. Instantly alert, he rose from his pillow, stepped out of bed, fumbled for robe and slippers and was tiptoeing down the steps, stopping only long enough to get his revolver from the drawer in which he kept it.

From the landing he could see a dim light in the living room, and

again he heard the "clunk" that he had heard before. By leaning far over the banister, he was able to look into the living room, where he could see, by the light of a flashlight lying on the floor, the dark form of a man; his long overcoat and hat effectively concealing all his features. He was stooping over a round object, and as Denning looked, he raised a hammer and brought it down sharply but carefully on a chisel which he held in his hand. The hammer's head was wrapped in rags and again Denning heard the dull noise which had awakened him.

Of course, Denning knew at once who the dark form was. He knew that the round object was his vase. But he hesitated to make an outcry or even to interrupt the other for several seconds. He seemed a little uncertain as to the reason for this, but I am convinced, from what I know of Denning's character, that curiosity had gotten the better of him. Half consciously, he was determined to find out just why Halpin was so interested in the vase. So he remained silent, and it was only after several seconds that some slight noise he made caused Halpin to turn in a panic. As he did so, the last bit of seal crumbled from the jar, and rising, he still clung unconsciously to the lid. The jar turned over on its side and lay there for a moment unnoticed. Halpin was almost horror-stricken at the realization that he had been caught, as the lawyers say, in *flagrante delicto*. He burst into chattering, pleading speech.

"Don't call the police, Jim! Listen to me. I wasn't going to steal it, Jim. I'd have been gone with it long ago if I had intended to steal it. Honest! Let me tell you, Jim. It's one of Solomon's jars, all right. I was only going to open it. Good Lord, man, haven't you ever read about them? Listen, Jim, haven't you ever heard those old Arabian legends? Let me tell you about them, Jim—"

As he spoke, Denning had descended the stairs. He stepped into the room and seized Halpin by the shoulders and angrily shook him.

"Quit babbling, Halpin. Don't act like a damned fool. I guess the jar and its contents are still mine. Come on, snap out of it and tell me what this is all about."

Halpin swallowed his panic and sighed.

"There are old Arabian and Hebrew legends, Jim, that speak of a group or class of beings called Jinn. A lot of the stuff about them is claptrap, of course, but as near as we can make out, they were a kind of super-being from some other plane of existence. Probably they were the same things that other legends have called the Elder Ones, or the Pre-Adamites. Perhaps there are a dozen names for them if they are the same beings that appear in myths of other countries. Before the time of man, they ruled the world; but fighting among themselves and certain conditions during the Glacial Period caused them to become almost extinct, here on this earth. But the few that were left caused damage enough among men until the time of King Solomon.

"ARABIAN legend says that Solomon was the greatest of all kings, and from an occult standing I guess he was, in spite of the fact that the kingdom he ruled over was little more than a jerk-water principality, even in that age. But Solomon's occult knowledge was great enough to enable him to war on the Jinn and to conquer them.

And then, because it was impossible to kill them (their metabolism is entirely different from ours), he sealed them up into jars and cast the jars into the depths of the sea!"

Denning was still dense.

"Halpin, you're not trying to tell me that you expect to find a Jinn in that jar, are you? You're not such a superstitious fool as to believe—"

"Jim, I don't know what I believe. There's no record of such a jar as this having ever been found before. But I know that the Elder Ones once existed, and from an examination of that jar an occult might learn much concerning—"

While Halpin had been speaking, Denning's eye had fallen on the jar, lying where it had tumbled at Halpin's sudden rising. And the hair on Denning's neck quivered with a wave of horripilation, as he stammered suddenly: "For the love of God, Halpin, look at that jar!"

Halpin's eyes turned at Denning's first words and he, too, stared, unable to take his eyes off the thing that was taking place. From the mouth of the jar was flowing, slowly, sluggishly, a thick, viscous mass of bluish, faintly luminous stuff. The mass was spreading, oozing across the floor, reaching curious curdly pseudopods out in all directions, acting, not like an inert viscous body should, but like—like an amoeba under a microscope. And from it, as though it were highly volatile, curled little streamers of heavy smoke or vapor. To their ears came, almost inaudibly at first, and then more and more loudly, a slow deliberate "cluck—cluck—c-lu-uck" from the mass, as it spread.

The two had forgotten their differences. Denning stepped toward Halpin and clasped his shoulder fearfully. Halpin stood like a stone statue but his breath was like that of a winded runner. And they stood there and looked and looked as that incredible jelly spread and steamed across the floor.

I think it was the luminous quality of the mass that horrified the men the most. It had a dull bluish glow, a light of a shade that made it absolutely certain that it was not merely a reflection from the light of the flashlight which still threw its beam in a comet's-tail across the floor. And too, it was certain properties, in the mist, for that behaved not like a normal mist, but with a sentience of its own. It floated about the room, seeking, seeking, and yet it avoided the presence of the two men as though it feared their touch. And it was increasing. It was quite apparent that the mass on the floor was evaporating, passing into the mist, and it was evident that it would soon be gone.

"Is it—is it one of those things, Halpin?" whispered Denning, hoarsely; but Halpin answered him not at all, but only gripped his hand, tighter and tighter and tighter. Then the mist began a slow twirling motion and a deep sigh came from Halpin. It seemed that he was assured of something by this, for he leaned over and whispered to Denning with what seemed a certain amount of confidence: "It's one of them, all right. Stand back by the door and let me handle it. I know a little something from the books I've read."

DENNING backed away, more than a little fearful of Halpin now, seeing that the young man seemed to know something of this terrible thing, but nevertheless grateful for the suggestion. Standing there by the doorway, hoping vaguely that his traitorous legs would obey

him if it became necessary to flee, he watched the dread process of materialization take place. And I think he has never quite recovered from the effects of it; for surely, at that moment, the entire philosophy of his life was changed. Denning, I have noticed, goes to church quite regularly now.

However, as I say, he stood there and watched. Watched the smoke, or vapor, or whatever it was, whirl and whirl, faster and faster, snatching up the vagrant wisps and streamers that had strayed to the far corners of the room, sucking them in, incorporating them into the central column, until at last that column, swirling there, seemed almost solid.

It was solid. It had ceased its whirling and stood there quivering, jelly-like, plastic, but nevertheless, solid. And, as though molded in the hands of an invisible sculptor, that column was changing. Indentations appeared here, protuberances there. The character of the surface altered subtly; presently it was no longer smooth and lustrous, but rough and scaly. It lost most of its luminosity and became an uncertain, lichenous green. Until at last it was a—thing.

That moment, Denning thinks, was the most horrible in all the adventure. Not because of the horror of the thing that stood before him, but because at that very moment an automobile, driven by some belated citizen passed by outside, the light from its headlights casting eerie gleams across the walls and the ceiling; and the thought of the difference between the commonplace world in which that citizen was living, and the frightful things taking place in this room almost overcame the cowering man by the doorway. And, too, the light made just that much plainer the disgusting details of the creature that towered above them.

For tower it did. It was, apparently about nine feet tall, for its head quite reached the ceiling of Denning's little room. It was roughly man-like, for it had an erect body and four limbs, two upper and two lower. It had a head and a sort of a face on it. But there its similarity to man ceased. Its head had a high ridge running from the forehead to the nape of the neck—and it had no eyes and no nose. In the place of these organs was a curious thing that looked not unlike the blossom of a sea-anemone, and beneath that was a mouth with an upper lip that was like a protruding fleshy beak, making the whole mouth take on the semblance of a sardonic letter V.

The front of its body had the flat, undetailed plainness of a lizard's belly, and the legs were long, scaly and terribly scrawny. The same might be said of the arms, which terminated in surprisingly delicate, surprisingly human hands.

Halpin had been watching the materialization with the eagerness of a hawk, and no sooner was it complete, no sooner did he notice that tautening of the creature's muscles that indicated conscious control, then he burst out with a jumble of strange words. Now, it happens that Denning was so keyed up that his mind was tense and observant of every detail, and he clearly remembers the exact words that Halpin uttered. They are in some little-known tongue and I have failed to find a translation, so I repeat them here for any student who may care to look them up:

"Ia, Psuchawrl!" he cried. "'Ng topuothikl Shelemoh, ma'kthoqui h'nirl!"

AT THE cry, the horror moved. It stooped and took a short step toward the uncowering Halpin, its facial rosette rose just as a man lifts his eyebrows in surprise, and then—speech came from its lips. Halpin, strangely, answered it in English.

"I claim the forfeit," he cried boldly. "Never has one of your kind been released that it did not grant to whoever released it one wish, were it in its power to grant it."

The thing bowed, actually bowed. In deep—inhumanly deep—tones it gave what was manifestly an assent. It clasped its hands over what should have been its breast and bowed, in what even the paralyzed Denning could tell was certainly mock humility.

"Very well, then!" the heedless Halpin went on. "I want to know! That is my wish—to know. All my life I have been a student, seeking, seeking—and learning nothing. And now—I want to know the why of things, the cause, the reason, and the end to which we travel. Tell me the place of man in this universe, and the place of this universe in the cosmos!"

The thing, the Jinni, or whatever it was, bowed again. Why was it that Halpin could not see its mockery! It clasped those amazingly human hands together, it drew them apart, and from fingertips to fingertips leaped a maze of sparks. In that maze of brilliant filaments a form began to take shape, became rectangular, took on solidity and became a little window. A silvery, latticed window whose panes were seemingly transparent, but which looked out upon—from where Denning stood, it seemed nothing but blackness. The creature's head made a gesture and it spoke a single word — the only word which it spoke that Denning recognized.

"Look!" it said, and obeying, Halpin stepped forward and looked through that window.

Denning says that Halpin stared while you might have counted ten. Then he drew back a step or two, stumbled against the couch and sat down. "Oh!" he said softly — very softly, and then: "Oh, I see!" Denning says he said it like a little child that had just had some problem explained by a doting parent And he made no attempt to rise, no comment, nor any further word of any kind.

And the Jinni, the Elder One, demon or angel or whatever it was, bowed again and turned around—and was gone! Then, suddenly, somehow or other, Denning's trance of fright was over, and he rushed to the light switch and flooded the room with light. An empty jar lay upon the floor, and upon the couch sat one who stared and stared into vacancy with a look of unutterable despair on his face.

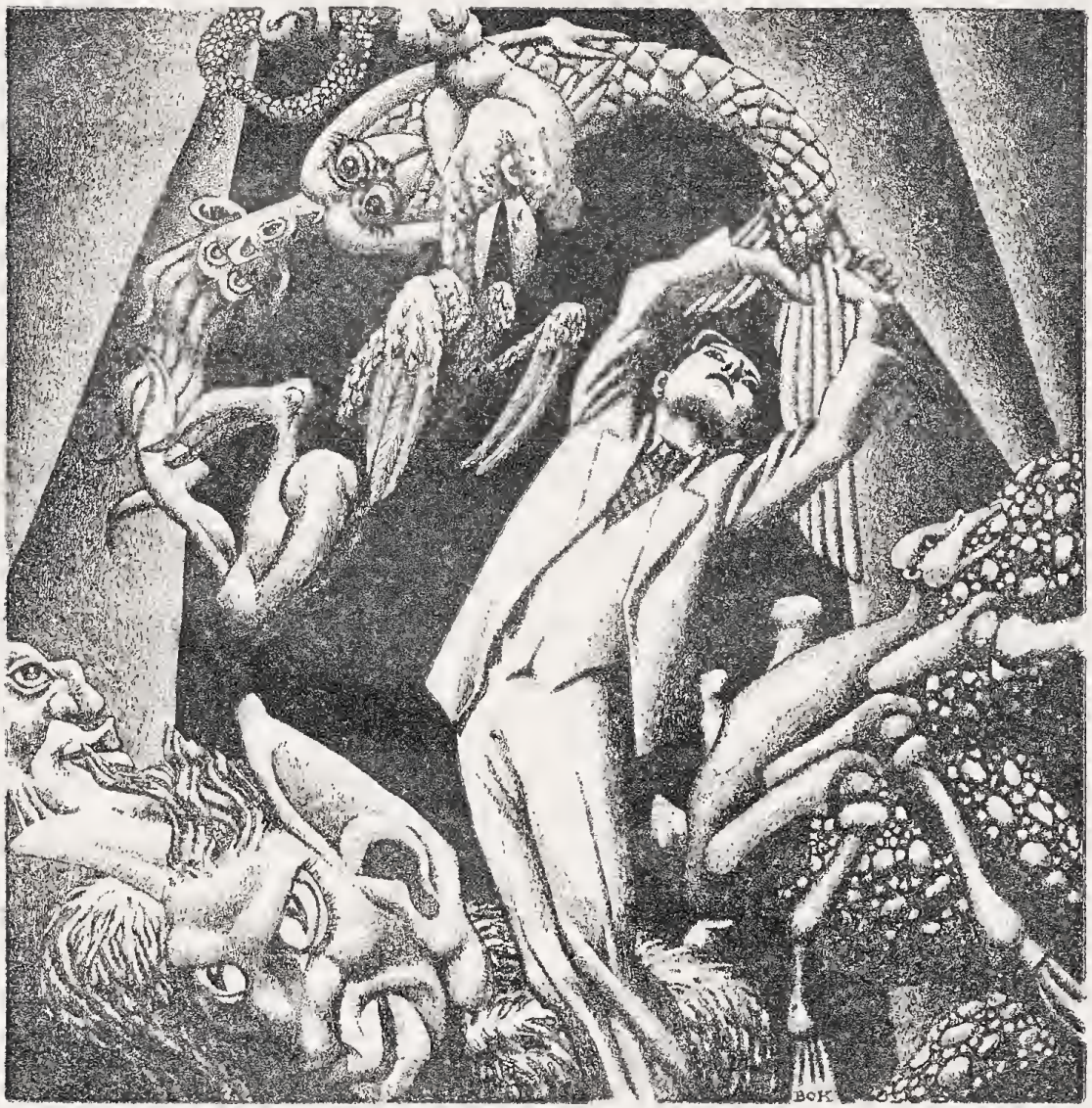
LITTLE more need be said. Denning called his wife, gave her a brief and distorted tale which he later amplified for the police, and spent the rest of the night trying to rouse Halpin. When morning came, he sent for a doctor and had Halpin removed to his own home. From there Halpin was taken to the state asylum for the insane where he still is. He sits constantly in meditation, unless one tries to arouse him, and then he turns on them a sad, pitying smile and returns to his musings.

And except for that sad, pitying smile, his only look is one of unutterable despair.

# The Devotee of Evil

## by Clark Ashton Smith

(Author of "City of Singing Flame," "The Double Shadow," etc.)



People often talk of the forces of Evil but has anyone ever done anything about it?

THE old Larcom house was a mansion of considerable size and dignity, set among oaks and cypresses on the hill behind Auburn's Chinatown, in what had once been the aristocratic section of the village. At the time of which I wrote, it had been unoccupied for several years and had begun to present the signs of desolation and dilapidation which untenanted houses so soon display. The place had a tragic history and was believed to be haunted. I had never been able to procure any first-hand or precise accounts of the spectral manifestations that were ac-

credited to it. But certainly it possessed all the necessary antecedents of a haunted house. The first owner, Judge Peter Larcom, had been murdered beneath its roof back in the seventies by a maniacal Chinese cook; one of his daughters had gone insane; and two other members of the family had died accidental deaths. None of them had prospered: their legend was one of sorrow and disaster.

Some later occupants, who had purchased the place from the one surviving son of Peter Larcom, had left under circumstances of inexplicable haste after a few months, moving permanently to San Francisco. They did not return even for the briefest visit; and beyond paying their taxes, they gave no attention whatever to the place. Everyone had grown to think of it as a sort of historic ruin, when the announcement came that it had been sold to Jean Averaud, of New Orleans.

My first meeting with Averaud was strangely significant, for it revealed to me, as years of acquaintance would not necessarily have done, the peculiar bias of his mind. Of course, I had already heard some odd rumors about him; his personality was too signal, his advent too mysterious, to escape the usual fabrication and mongering of village tales. I had been told that he was extravagantly rich, that he was a recluse of the most eccentric type, that he had made certain very singular changes in the inner structure of the old house; and last, but not least, that he lived with a beautiful mulatress who never spoke to anyone and who was believed to be his mistress as well as his housekeeper. The man himself had been described to me by some as an unusual but harmless lunatic, and by others as an all-round Mephistopheles.

I had seen him several times before our initial meeting. He was a sallow, saturnine Creole, with the marks of race in his hollow cheeks and feverish eyes. I was struck by his air of intellect, and by the fiery fixity of his gaze—the gaze of a man who is dominated by one idea to the exclusion of all else. Some medieval alchemist, who believed himself to be on the point of attaining his objective after years of unrelenting research, might have looked as he did.

I was in the Auburn library one day, when Averaud entered. I had taken a newspaper from one of the tables and was reading the details of an atrocious crime—the murder of a woman and her two infant children by the husband and father, who had locked his victims in a clothes-closet, after saturating their garments with oil. He had left the woman's apron-string caught in the shut door, with the end protruding, and had set fire to it like a fuse.

Averaud passed the table where I was reading. I looked up, and saw his glance at the headlines of the paper I held. A moment later he returned and sat down beside me, saying in a low voice:

"WHAT interests me in a crime of that sort, is the implication of unhuman forces behind it. Could any man, on his own initiative, have conceived and executed anything so gratuitously fiendish?"

"I don't know," I replied, somewhat surprised by the question and by my interrogator. "There are terrifying depths in human nature—more abhorrent than those of the jungle."

"I agree. But how could such im-

pulses, unknown to the most brutal progenitors of man, have been implanted in his nature, unless through some ulterior agency?"

"You believe, then, in the existence of an evil force or entity—a Satan or an Ahriman?"

"I believe in evil—how can I do otherwise when I see its manifestations everywhere? I regard it as an all-controlling power; but I do not think that the power is personal, in the sense of what we know as personality. A Satan? No. What I conceive is a sort of dark vibration, the radiation of a black sun, of a center of malignant eons—a radiation that can penetrate like any other ray—and perhaps more deeply. But probably I don't make my meaning clear at all."

I protested that I understood him; but, after his burst of communicativeness, he seemed oddly disinclined to pursue the conversation. Evidently he had been prompted to address me; and no less evidently, he regretted having spoken with so much freedom. He arose; but before leaving, he said:

"I am Jean Averaud—perhaps you have heard of me. You are Philip Hastane, the novelist. I have read your books and I admire them. Come and see me sometime—we may have certain tastes and ideas in common."

Averaud's personality, the conceptions he had avowed, and the intense interest and value which he so obviously attached to these conceptions, made a singular impression on my mind, and I could not forget him. When, a few days later, I met him on the street and he repeated his invitation with a cordialness that was unfeignedly sincere, I could do no less than accept. I was interested, though not altogether attracted, by his bizarre, well-nigh morbid individuality, and was impelled by a desire to learn more concerning him. I sensed a mystery of no common order—a mystery with elements of the abnormal and the uncanny.

THE grounds of the old Larcom place were precisely as I remembered them, though I had not found occasion to pass them for some time. They were a veritable tangle of Cherokee rose-vines, arbutus, lilac, ivy and crepe-myrtle, half overshadowed by the great cypresses and somber evergreen oaks. There was a wild, half-sinister charm about them—the charm of rampancy and ruin. Nothing had been done to put the place in order, and there were no outward repairs in the house itself, where the white paint of bygone years was being slowly replaced by mosses and lichens that flourished beneath the eternal umbrage of the trees. There were signs of decay in the roof and pillars of the front porch; and I wondered why the new owner, who was reputed to be so rich, had not already made the necessary restorations.

I raised the gargoyle-shaped knocker and let it fall with a dull, lugubrious clang. The house remained silent; and I was about to knock again, when the door opened slowly and I saw for the first time the mulatress of whom so many village rumors had reached me.

The woman was more exotic than beautiful, with fine, mournful eyes and bronze-colored features of a semi-negroid irregularity. Her figure, though, was truly perfect, with the curving lines of a lyre and the supple grace of some feline animal. When I asked for Jean Averaud, she merely smiled and made signs for me

to enter. I surmised at once that she was dumb.

Waiting in the gloomy library to which she conducted me, I could not refrain from glancing at the volumes with which the shelves were congested. They were an ungodly jumble of tomes that dealt with anthropology, ancient religions, demonology, modern science, history, psychoanalysis and ethics. Interspersed with these were a few romances and volumes of poetry. Beausobre's monograph on Manichæism was flanked with Byron and Poe; and "Les Fleurs du Mal" jostled a late treatise on chemistry.

Averaud entered, after several minutes, apologizing profusely for his delay. He said that he had been in the midst of certain labors when I came; but he did not specify the nature of these labors. He looked even more hectic and fiery-eyed than when I had seen him last. He was patently glad to see me, and eager to talk.

"You have been looking at my books," he observed immediately. "Though you might not think so at first glance, on account of their seeming diversity, I have selected them all with a single object: the study of evil in all its aspects, ancient, medieval and modern. I have traced it in the religions and demonologies of all peoples; and, more than this, in human history itself. I have found it in the inspiration of poets and romancers who have dealt with the darker impulses, emotions and acts of man. Your novels have interested me for this reason: you are aware of the baneful influences which surround us, which so often sway or actuate us. I have followed the working of these agencies even in chemical reactions, in the growth and decay of trees, flowers, minerals. I feel that the processes of physical decomposition, as well as the similar mental and moral processes, are due entirely to them.

"In brief, I have postulated a monistic evil, which is the source of all death, deterioration, imperfection, pain, sorrow, madness and disease. This evil, so feebly counteracted by the powers of good, allures and fascinates me above all things. For a long time past, my life-work has been to ascertain its true nature, and trace it to its fountain-head. I am sure that somewhere in space there is the center from which all evil emanates."

HE SPOKE with a wild air of excitement, of morbid and semi-maniacal intensity. His obsession convinced me that he was more or less unbalanced; but there was an unholy logic in the development of his ideas; and I could not but recognize a certain disordered brilliancy and range of intellect.

Scarcely waiting for me to reply, he continued his monologue:

"I have learned that certain localities and buildings, certain arrangements of natural or artificial objects, are more favorable to the reception of evil influences than others. The laws that determine the degree of receptivity are still obscure to me; but at least I have verified the fact itself. As you know, there are houses or neighborhoods notorious for a succession of crimes or misfortunes; and there are also articles, such as certain jewels, whose possession is accompanied by disaster. Such places and things are receivers of evil. . . . I have a theory, however, that there is always more or less interference with the direct flow of the malignant force; and that pure, absolute evil has never yet been manifested."

"By the use of some device which would create a proper field or form a receiving-station, it should be possible to evoke this absolute evil. Under such conditions, I am sure that the dark vibration would become a visible and tangible thing, comparable to light or electricity." He eyed me with a gaze that was disconcertingly exigent. Then:

"I will confess that I purchased this old mansion and its grounds mainly on account of their baleful history. The place is unusually liable to the influences of which I have spoken. I am now at work on an apparatus by means of which, when it is perfected, I hope to manifest in their essential purity the radiations of malign force."

At this moment, the mulatress entered and passed through the room on some household errand. I thought that she gave Averaud a look of maternal tenderness, watchfulness and anxiety. He, on his part, seemed hardly to be aware of her presence, so engrossed was he in the strange ideas and the stranger project he had been expounding. However, when she had gone, he remarked:

"That is Fifine, the one human being who is really attached to me. She is mute, but highly intelligent and affectionate. All my people, an old Louisiana family, are long departed . . . and my wife is doubly dead to me." A spasm of obscure pain contracted his features, and vanished. He resumed his monologue; and at no future time did he again refer to the presumably tragic tale at which he had hinted: a tale in which, I sometimes suspect, were hidden the seeds of the strange moral and mental perversion which he was to manifest more and more.

I took my leave, after promising to return for another talk. Of course, I considered now that Averaud was a madman; but his madness was of a most uncommon and picturesque variety. It seemed significant that he should have chosen me for a confidant. All others who met him found him uncommunicative and taciturn to an extreme degree. I suppose he had felt the ordinary human need of unburdening himself to someone; and had selected me as the only person in the neighborhood who was potentially sympathetic.

I SAW him several times during the month that followed. He was indeed a strange psychological study; and I encouraged him to talk without reserve—though such encouragement was hardly necessary. There was much that he told me—a strange medley of the scientific and the mystic. I assented tactfully to all that he said, but ventured to point out the possible dangers of his evocative experiments, if they should prove successful. To this, with the fervor of an alchemist or a religious devotee, he replied that it did not matter—that he was prepared to accept any and all consequences.

More than once he gave me to understand that his invention was progressing favorably. And one day he said, with abruptness:

"I will show you my mechanism, if you care to see it."

I protested my eagerness to view the invention, and he led me forthwith into a room to which I had not been admitted before. The chamber was large, triangular in form, and tapestried with curtains of some sullen black fabric. It had no windows. Clearly, the internal structure of the house had been changed in making it; and the queer village tales, emanating from carpenters who had been hired to do the work, were now

explained. Exactly in the center of the room, there stood on a low tripod of brass the apparatus of which Averaud had so often spoken.

The contrivance was quite fantastic, and presented the appearance of some new, highly complicated musical instrument. I remember that there were many wires of varying thickness, stretched on a series of concave sounding-boards of some dark, unlustrous metal; and above these, there depended from three horizontal bars a number of square, circular and triangular gongs. Each of these appeared to be made of a different material; some were bright as gold, or translucent as jade; others were black and opaque as jet. A small hammer-like instrument hung opposite each gong, at the end of a silver wire.

Averaud proceeded to expound the scientific basis of his mechanism. The vibrational properties of the gongs, he said, were designed to neutralize with their sound-pitch all other cosmic vibrations than those of evil. He dwelt at much length on this extravagant theorem, developing it in a fashion oddly lucid. He ended his peroration:

"I need one more gong to complete the instrument; and this I hope to invent very soon. The triangular room, draped in black, and without windows, forms the ideal setting for my experiment. Apart from this room, I have not ventured to make any change in the house or its grounds, for fear of deranging some propitious element or collocation of elements."

More than ever, I thought that he was mad. And, though he had professed on many occasions to abhor the evil which he planned to evoke, I felt an inverted fanaticism in his attitude. In a less scientific age he would have been a devil-worshipper, a partaker in the abominations of the Black Mass; or would have given himself to the study and practice of sorcery. His was a religious soul that had failed to find good in the scheme of things; and lacking it, was impelled to make of evil itself an object of secret reverence.

"I fear that you think me insane," he observed in a sudden flash of clairvoyance. "Would you like to watch an experiment? Even though my invention is not completed, I may be able to convince you that my design is not altogether the fantasy of a disordered brain."

I CONSENTED. He turned on the lights in the dim room. Then he went to an angle of the wall and pressed a hidden spring or switch. The wires on which the tiny hammers were strung began to oscillate, till each of the hammers touched lightly its companion gong. The sound they made was dissonant and disquieting to the last degree—a diabolic percussion unlike anything I have ever heard, and exquisitely painful to the nerves. I felt as if a flood of finely broken glass was pouring into my ears.

The swinging of the hammers grew swifter and heavier; but, to my surprise, there was no corresponding increase of loudness in the sound. On the contrary, the clangor became slowly muted, till it was no more than an undertone which seemed to be coming from an immense depth or distance—an undertone still full of disquietude and torment, like the sobbing of far-off winds in hell, or the murmur of demonian fires on coasts of eternal ice.

Said Averaud at my elbow:

"To a certain extent, the combined notes of the gongs are beyond hu-

man hearing in their pitch. With the addition of the final gong, even less sound will be audible."

While I was trying to digest this difficult idea, I noticed a partial dimming of the light above the tripod and its weird apparatus. A vertical shaft of faint shadow, surrounded by a still fainter penumbra, was forming in the air. The tripod itself, and the wires, gongs and hammers, were now a trifle indistinct, as if seen through some obscuring veil. The central shaft and its penumbra seemed to widen; and looking down at the floor, where the outer adumbration, coforming to the room's outline, crept toward the walls, I saw that Averaud and myself were now within its ghostly triangle.

At the same time there surged upon me an intolerable depression, together with a multitude of sensations which I despair of conveying in language. My very sense of space was distorted and deformed, as if some unknown dimension had somehow been mingled with those familiar to us. There was a feeling of dreadful and measureless descent, as if the floor were sinking beneath me into some nether pit; and I seemed to pass beyond the room in a torrent of swirling, hallucinative images, visible but invisible, felt but intangible, and more awful, more accurst than that hurricane of lost souls beheld by Dante.

Down, down, I appeared to go, in the bottomless and phantom hell that was impinging upon reality. Death, decay, malignity, madness, gathered in the air and pressed me down like Satanic incubi in that ecstatic horror of descent. I felt that there were a thousand forms, a thousand faces about me, summoned from the gulfs of perdition. And yet I saw nothing but the white face of Averaud, stamped with a frozen and abominable rapture as he fell beside me.

Like a dreamer who forces himself to awaken, he began to move away from me. I seemed to lose sight of him for a moment in the cloud of nameless, immaterial horrors that threatened to take on the further horror of substance. Then I realized that Averaud had turned off the switch, and that the oscillating hammers had ceased to beat on those infernal gongs. The double shaft of shadow faded in mid-air, the burden of terror and despair lifted from my nerves, and I no longer felt the damnable hallucination of nether space and descent.

"MY GOD!" I cried. "What was it?"

Averaud's look was full of a ghastly, gloating exultation as he turned to me.

"You saw and felt it, then?" he queried — "that vague, imperfect manifestation of the perfect evil which exists somewhere in the cosmos? I shall yet call it forth in its entirety, and know the black, infinite, reverse raptures which attend its epiphany."

I recoiled from him with an involuntary shudder. All the hideous things that had swarmed upon me beneath the cacophonous beating of those accurst gongs, drew near again for an instant; and I looked with fearful vertigo into hells of perversity and corruption. I saw an inverted soul, despairing of good, which longed for the baleful ecstasies of perdition. No longer did I think him merely mad: for I knew the thing which he sought and could attain; and I remembered, with a

new significance, that line of Baudelaire's poem—"The hell wherein my heart delights."

Averaud was unaware of my revulsion, in his dark rhapsody. When I turned to leave, unable to bear any longer the blasphemous atmosphere of that room, and the sense of strange depravity which emanated from its owner, he pressed me to return as soon as possible.

"I think," he exulted, "that all will be in readiness before long. I want you to be present in the hour of my triumph."

I do not know what I said, nor what excuses I made to get away from him. I longed to assure myself that a world of unblasted sunlight and undefiled air could still exist. I went out; but a shadow followed me; and execrable faces leered or moved from the foliage as I left the cypress-shaded grounds.

FOR days afterward I was in a condition verging upon neurotic disorder. No one could come as close as I had been to the primal effluence of evil, and go thence unaffected. Shadowy noisome cobwebs draped themselves on all my thoughts, and presences of unlineamented fear, of shapeless horror, crouched in the half-lit corners of my mind but would never fully declare themselves. An invisible gulf, bottomless as Malebolge, seemed to yawn before me wherever I went.

Presently, though, my reason reasserted itself, and I wondered if my sensations in the black triangular room had not been wholly a matter of suggestion or auto-hypnosis. I asked myself if it were credible that a cosmic force of the sort postulated by Averaud could really exist; or, granting it existed, could be evoked by any man through the absurd intermediation of a musical device. The nervous terrors of my experience faded a little in memory; and, though a disturbing doubt still lingered, I assured myself that all I had felt was of purely subjective origin. Even then, it was with supreme reluctance, with an inward shrinking only to be overcome by violent resolve, that I returned to visit Averaud once more.

For an even longer period than usual, no one answered my knock. Then there were hurrying footsteps, and the door was opened abruptly by Fifine. I knew immediately that something was amiss, for her face wore a look of unnatural dread and anxiety, and her eyes were wide, with the whites showing blankly, as if she had gazed upon horrific things. She tried to speak, and made that ghastly inarticulate sound which the mute is able to make on occasion, as she plucked my sleeve and drew me after her along the somber hall to the triangular room.

The door was open; and as I approached it, I heard a low, dissonant, snarling murmur, which I recognized as the sound of the gongs. It was like the voice of all the souls in a frozen hell, uttered by lips congealing slowly toward the ultimate torture of silence. It sank and sank till it seemed to be issuing from pits below the nadir.

Fifine shrank back on the threshold, imploring me with a pitiful glance to precede her. The lights were all turned on; and Averaud, clad in a strange medieval costume, in a black gown and cap such as Faustus might have worn, stood near the percussive mechanism. The hammers were all beating with a frenzied rapidity; and the sound became still

lower and tenser as I approached. Averaud did not seem to see me: his eyes, abnormally dilated, and flaming with infernal luster like those of one possessed, were fixed upon something in mid-air.

Again the soul-congealing hideousness, the sense of eternal falling, of myriad harpy-like, incumbent horrors, rushed upon me as I looked and saw. Vaster and stronger than before, a double column of triangular shadow had materialized and was becoming more and more distinct. It swelled, it darkened, it enveloped the gong-apparatus and towered to the ceiling. The inner column grew solid and opaque as ebony; and the face of Averaud, who was standing well within the broad penumbral shadow, became dim as if seen through a film of Stygian water.

I MUST have gone utterly mad for a while. I remember only a teeming delirium of things too frightful to be endured by a sane mind, that peopled the infinite gulf of hell-born illusion into which I sank with the hopeless precipitancy of the damned. There was a sickness inexpressible, a vertigo of redeemless descent, a pandemonium of ghoulish phantoms that reeled and swayed about the column of malign omnipotent force which presided over all. Averaud was only one more phantom in this delirium, when with arms outstretched in his perverse adoration, he stepped toward the inner column and passed into it till he was lost to view. And Fifine was another phantom when she ran by me to the wall and turned off the switch that operated those demoniacal hammers.

As one who re-emerges from a swoon, I saw the fading of the dual pillar, till the light was no longer sullied by any tinge of that satanic radiation. And where it had been, Averaud still stood beside the baleful instrument he had designed. Erect and rigid he stood, in a strange immobility; and I felt an incredulous horror, a chill awe, as I went forward and touched him with a faltering hand. For that which I saw and touched was no longer a human being but an ebon statue, whose face and brow and fingers were black as the Faust-like raiment or the sullen curtains. Charred as by sable fire, or frozen by black cold, the features bore the eternal ecstasy and pain of Lucifer in his ultimate hell of ice. For an instant, the supreme evil which Averaud had worshipped so madly, which he had summoned from the vaults of incalculable space, had made him one with itself; and passing, it had left him petrified into an image of its own essence. The form that I touched was harder than marble; and I knew that it would endure to all time as a testimony of the infinite Medusean power that is death and corruption and darkness.

Fifine had now thrown herself at the feet of the image and was clasping its insensible knees. With her frightful muted moaning in my ears, I went forth for the last time from that chamber and from that mansion. Vainly, through delirious months and madness-ridden years, I have tried to shake off the infrangible obsession of my memories. But there is a fatal numbness in my brain, as if it too had been charred and blackened a little in that moment of overpowering nearness to the dark ray that came from pits beyond the universe. On my mind, as upon the face of the black statue that was Jean Averaud, the impress of awful and forbidden things has been set like an everlasting seal.


ROY HUNT
-HD-

# The Abyss

## by Robert W. Lowndes

(Author of "A Green Cloud Came," "The Gourmet," etc.)

A tale of a ghastly journey down a little strip in the center of a rug!

WE TOOK Graf Norden's body out into the November night, under the stars that burned with a brightness terrible to behold, and drove madly, wildly up the mountain road. The body had to be destroyed because of the eyes that would not close, but seemed to be staring at some object behind the observer, the body that was entirely drained of blood without the slightest trace of a wound, the body whose flesh was covered with abhorrent, luminous markings, designs that shifted and changed form before one's eyes. We wedged what had been Graf Norden tightly behind the wheel, put a makeshift fuse in the gas tank, lit it, then shoved the car over the side of the road, where it plummeted down to the main highway, a flaming meteor.

Not until the next day did we realize that we had all been under Dureen's spell—even I had forgotten. How else could we have rushed out so eagerly, leaving him to gloat over his triumph. From that terrible moment when the lights came on again, and we saw the thing that had, a moment before, been Graf Norden, we were as shadowy, indistinct figures rushing through a dream. All was forgotten save the unspoken commands upon us as we watched the blazing car strike the pavement below, observed its demolition, then tramped dully each to his own home. When, the next day, partial memory returned to us and we sought Dureen, he was gone. And, because we valued our freedom, we did not tell anyone what had happened, nor try to discover whence Dureen had vanished. We wanted only to forget.

I think I might possibly have forgotten had I not looked into the *Song of Yste* again. With the others, there has been a growing tendency to treat it all as illusion, but I cannot: I have learned a small part of reality. For it is one thing to read of books like the *Necronomicon, Book of Eibon,* or *Song of Yste,* but it is quite different when one's own experience confirms some of the dread things related therein. Many have read excerpts from the *Necronomicon,* yet are reassured by the thought that Alhazred was mad: what if they were to discover that, far from being mad, Abdul Alhazred was so terribly sane that others dubbed him mad simply because they could not bear the burden of the facts he uncovered?

Of such truths, I found one paragraph in the *Song of Yste* and have not read farther. The dark volume, along with Norden's other books, is still on my shelves; I have not burned it. But I do not think that I shall read more—but let me tell you of Dureen and Graf Norden, for around these two lie the reasons for my reluctance for the further pursuance of my studies.

I met Graf Norden at Darwich University, in Dr. Held's class in Mediaeval and early-Renaissance history, which was more a study of obscure thought, and often outright occultism.

Norden was greatly interested; he had done quite a bit of exploring into the occult; in particular was he fascinated by the writings and records of a family of adepts named Dirka, who traced their ancestry back to the pre-glacial days. They, the Dirkas, had translated the *Song of Yste* from its legendary form into the three great languages of the dawn cultures, then into the Greek, Latin, Arabic and finally, Elizabethan English.

I TOLD Norden that I deplored the blind contempt in which the world holds the occult, but had never explored the subject very deeply. I was content to be a spectator, letting my imagination drift at will upon the many currents in this dark river; skimming over the surface was enough for me—seldom did I take occasional plunges into the deeps. As a poet and dreamer, I was careful not to lose myself in the blackness of the pools where I disported—one could always emerge to find a calm, blue sky and a world that thought nothing of these realities.

With Norden, it was different. He was already beginning to have doubts, he told me. It was not an easy road to travel; there were hideous dangers, hidden all along the way, often so that the wayfarer was not aware of them until too late. Earthmen were not very far along the path of evolution; still very young, their lack of knowledge, as a race, told heavily against such few of their number who sought to traverse unknown roads. He spoke of messengers from beyond and made references to obscure passages in the *Necronomicon* and *Song of Yste*. He spoke of alien beings, entities terribly unhuman, impossible of measurement by any human yardstick or to be combatted effectively by mankind.

Dureen came into the picture at about this time. He walked into the classroom one day during the course of a lecture; later, Dr. Held introduced him as a new member of the class, coming from abroad. There was something about Dureen that challenged my interest at once. I could not determine of what race or nationality he might be—he was very close to being beautiful, his every movement being of grace and rhythm. Yet, in no way could he be considered effeminate; he was, in a word, superb.

That the majority of us avoided him troubled him not at all. For my part, he did not seem genuine, but, with the others, it was probably his utter lack of emotion. There was, for example, the time in the lab when a test tube burst in his face, driving several splinters deep into the skin. He showed not the slightest sign of discomfort, waved aside all expressions of solicitude on the part of some of the girls, and proceeded to go on with his experiment as soon as the medico had finished with him.

The final act started when we were dealing with hypnotism, one afternoon, and were discussing the practical possibilities of the subject, following up the Rhine experiments and others. Colby presented a most ingenious argument against it, ridiculed the association of experiments in thought transference or telepathy with hypnotism, and arrived at a final conclusion that hypnotism (outside of mechanical means of induction) was impossible.

It was at this point that Dureen

spoke up. What he said, I cannot now recall, but it ended in a direct challenge for Dureen to prove his statements. Norden said nothing during the course of this debate; he appeared somewhat pale, and was, I noticed, trying to flash a warning signal to Colby. My frank opinion, now, is that Dureen had planned evoking this challenge; at the time, however, it seemed spontaneous enough.

THERE were five of us over at Norden's place that night: Granville, Chalmers, Colby, Norden, and myself. Norden was smoking endless cigarettes, gnawing his nails, and muttering to himself. I suspected something irregular was up, but what, I had no idea. Then Dureen came in and the conversation, such as it had been, ended.

Colby repeated his challenge, saying he had brought along the others as witnesses to insure against being tricked by stage devices. No mirrors, lights, or any other mechanical means of inducing hypnosis would be permitted. It must be entirely a matter of wills. Dureen nodded, drew the shade, then turned, directing his gaze at Colby.

We watched, expecting him to make motions with his hands and pronounce commands: he did neither. He fixed his eyes upon Colby and the latter stiffened as if struck by lightning, then, eyes staring blankly ahead of him, he rose slowly, standing on the narrow strip of black that ran diagonally down through the center of the rug.

My mind ran back to the day I caught Norden in the act of destroying some papers and apparatus, the latter which had been constructed, with such assistance as I had been able to give, over a period of several months. His eyes were terrible and I could see doubt in them. Not long after this event, Dureen had made his appearance: could there have been a connection, I wondered?

My reverie was broken abruptly by the sound of Dureen's voice commanding Colby to speak, telling us where he was and what he saw around him. When Colby obeyed, it was as if his voice came to us from a distance.

He was standing, he said, on a narrow bridgeway overlooking a frightful abyss, so vast and deep that he could discern neither floor nor boundary. Behind him this bridgeway stretched until it was lost in a bluish haze; ahead, it ran toward what appeared to be a plateau. He hesitated to move because of the narrowness of the path, yet realized that he must make for the plateau before the very sight of the depths below him made him lose his balance. He felt strangely heavy, and speaking was an effort.

As Colby's voice ceased, we all gazed in fascination at the little strip of black in the blue rug. This, then, was the bridge over the abyss . . . but what could correspond to the illusion of depth? Why did his voice seem so far away? Why did he feel heavy? The plateau must be the workbench at the other end of the room: the rug ran up to a sort of dais upon which was set Norden's table, the surface of this being some seven feet above the floor. Colby now began to walk slowly down the black swath, moving as if with extreme caution, looking like a slow-motion camera-shot. His limbs appeared weighted; he was breathing rapidly.

Dureen now bade him halt and look down into the abyss carefully, telling us what he saw there. At this,

we again examined the rug, as if we had never seen it before and did not know that it was entirely without decoration save for that single black strip upon which Colby now stood.

HIS voice came to us again. He said, at first, that he saw nothing in the abyss below him. Then he gasped, swayed, and almost lost his balance. We could see the sweat standing out on his brow and neck, soaking his blue shirt. There were things in the abyss, he said in hoarse tones, great shapes that were like blobs of utter blackness, yet which he knew to be alive. From the central masses of their beings he could see them shoot forth incredibly long, filamentine tentacles. They moved themselves forward and backward—horizontally, but could not move vertically, it seemed. They were, he thought, nothing but living shadows.

But the things were not all on the same plane. True, their movements were only horizontal in relation to their position, but some were parallel to him and some diagonal. Far away he could see things perpendicular to him. There appeared now to be a great deal more of the things than he had thought. The first ones he had seen were far below, unaware of his presence. But these sensed him, and were trying to reach him. He was moving faster now, he said, but to us he was still walking in slow-motion.

I glanced sidewise at Norden; he, too, was sweating profusely. He arose now, and went over to Dureen, speaking in low tones so that none of us could hear. I knew that he was referring to Colby and that Dureen was refusing whatever it was Norden demanded. Then Dureen was forgotten momentarily as Colby's voice came to us again, quivering with fright. The things were reaching out for him. They rose and fell on all sides; some far away; some hideously close. None had found the exact plane upon which he could be captured; the darting tentacles had not touched him, but all of the beings now sensed his presence, he was sure. And he feared that perhaps they could alter their planes at will, though, it appeared that they must do so blindly, seemingly like two-dimensional beings. The tentacles darting at him were threads of utter darkness.

A terrible suspicion arose in me, as I recalled some of the earlier conversations with Norden, and remembered certain passages from the Song of Yste. I tried to rise, but my limbs were powerless: I could only sit helplessly and watch. Norden was still speaking with Dureen and I saw that he was now very pale. He seemed to shrink away—then he turned and went over to a cabinet, took out some object, and came to the strip of rug upon which Colby was standing. Norden nodded to Dureen and now I saw what it was he held in his hand: a polyhedron of glassy appearance. There was in it, however, a glow that startled me. Desperately I tried to remember the significance of it—for I knew—but my thoughts were being short-circuited, it seemed, and, when Dureen's eyes rested upon me, the very room seemed to stagger.

Again Colby's voice came through, this time despairingly. He was afraid he would never reach the plateau. (Actually, he was about a yard and a half away from the end of the black strip and the dais upon which stood Norden's work bench.) The things, said Colby, were close now: a mass of thread-like tentacles had just missed him.

NOW Norden's voice came to us; it, too, seemingly far away. He called my name. This was more, he said, than mere hypnotism. It was—but then his voice faded and I felt the power of Dureen blanking out the sound of his words. Now and then, I would hear a sentence or a few disjointed words. But, from this I managed to get an inkling of what was going on.

This was not mere hypnotism, but actually trans-dimensional journeying. We just imagined we saw Norden and Colby standing on the rug—or perhaps it was through Dureen's influence.

The nameless dimension was the habitat of these shadow-beings. The abyss, and the bridge upon which the two stood, were illusions created by Dureen. When that which Dureen had planned was complete, our minds would be probed, and our memories treated so that we recalled no more than Dureen wished us to remember. He, Dureen, was a being of incredible power, who was using Colby and the rest of us for a nameless purpose. Norden had succeeded in forcing an agreement upon Dureen, one which he would have to keep; as a result, if the two could reach the plateau before the shadow-beings touched them, all would be well. If not—Norden did not specify, but indicated that they were being hunted, as men hunt game. The polyhedron contained an element repulsive to the things.

He was but a little behind Colby; we could see him aiming with the polyhedron. Colby spoke again, telling us that Norden had materialized behind him, and had brought some sort of weapon with which the things could be held off.

Then Norden called my name, asking me to take care of his belongings if he did not return, telling me to look up the "adumbrali" in the *Song of Yste*. Slowly, he and Colby made their way toward the dais and the table. Colby was but a few steps ahead of Norden; now he climbed upon the dais, and, with the other's help, made his way onto the bench. He tried to assist Norden, but, as the latter mounted the dais, he stiffened suddenly and the polyhedron fell from his hands. Frantically he tried to draw himself up, but he was being forced backward and I knew that he had lost. . . .

There came to us a single cry of anguish, then the lights in the room faded and went out. Whatever spell had been upon us now was removed; we rushed about like madmen, trying to find Norden, Colby, and the light switch. Then, suddenly, the lights were on again and we saw Colby sitting dazedly on the bench, while Norden lay on the floor. Chalmers bent over the body, in an effort to resuscitate him, but when he saw the condition of Norden's remains he became so hysterical that we had to knock him cold in order to quiet him.

COLBY FOLLOWED us mechanically, apparently unaware of what was happening. We took Graf Norden's body out into the November night and destroyed it by fire, telling Colby later that he had apparently suffered a heart attack while driving up the mountain road; the car had gone over and his body was almost completely destroyed in the holocaust.

Later, Chalmers, Granville, and I met in an effort to rationalize what we had seen and heard. Chalmers had been all right after he came around, had helped us with our grisly errand up the mountain road. Neith-

er, I found, had heard Norden's voice after he had joined Colby in the supposed hypnotic stage. So, it was as I thought: Dureen's power had blanked out the sound of Norden's voice for them completely. Nor did they recall seeing any object in Norden's hand.

But, in less than a week, even these memories had faded from them. They fully believed that Norden had died in an accident after an unsuccessful attempt on the part of Dureen to hypnotize Colby. Prior to this, their explanation had been that Dureen had killed Norden, for reasons unknown, and that we had been his unwitting accomplices. The hypnotic experiment had been a blind to gather us all together and provide a means of disposing of the body. That Dureen had been able to hypnotize us, they did not doubt then. The illusion of the abyss, they said, was just a cruel joke. . . .

IT IS NO USE telling them what I learned a few days later, what I learned from Norden's notes which explain Dureen's arrival. Or to quote sections from the *Song of Yste* to them. Yet, I must set these things down. In that accursed book is a section dealing with an utterly alien race of entities known as the adumbrali.

*". . . And these be none other than the adumbrali, the living shadows, beings of incredible power and malignancy, which dwell without the veils of space and time such as we know it. Their sport it is to import into their realm the inhabitants of other dimensions, upon whom they practice horrid pranks and manifold illusions . . ."*

*". . . But more dreadful than these are the seekers which they send out into other worlds and dimensions, beings of incredible power which they themselves have created and guised in the form of those who dwell within whatever dimension, or upon whichever worlds where these seekers be sent . . ."*

*". . . These seekers can be detected only by the adept, to whose trained eyes their too-perfectness of form and movement, their strangeness, and aura of alienage and power is a sure sign. . . ."*

*". . . The sage, Jhalkanaan, tells of one of these seekers who deluded seven priests of Nyaghoggua into challenging it to a duel of the hypnotic arts. He further tells how two of these were trapped and delivered to the adumbrali, their bodies being returned when the shadow-things had done with them . . ."*

*". . . Most curious of all was the condition of the corpses, being entirely drained of all fluid, yet showing no trace of a wound, even the most slight. But the crowning horror was the eyes, which could not be closed, appearing to stare restlessly outward, beyond the observer, and the strangely-luminous markings on the dead flesh, curious designs which appeared to move and change form before the eyes of the beholder. . . ."*

# Always Comes Evening

**by Robert E. Howard**

Riding down the road at evening with the stars for steed and shoon
I have heard an old man singing underneath a copper moon;
"God, who gemmed with topaz twilights, opal portals of the day,
"On your amaranthine mountains, why make human souls of clay?

"For I rode the moon-mare's horses in the glory of my youth,
"Wrestled with the hills at sunset—till I met brass-tinctured Truth.
"Till I saw the temples topple, till I saw the idols reel,
"Till my brain had turned to iron, and my heart had turned to steel.

"Satan, Satan, brother Satan, fill my soul with frozen fire;
"Feed with hearts of rose-white women ashes of my dead desire.
"For my road runs out in thistles and my dreams have turned to dust,
"And my pinions fade and falter to the raven-wings of rust.

"Truth has smitten me with arrows and her hand is in my hair—
"Youth, she hides in yonder mountains—go and seek her, if you dare!
"Work your magic, brother Satan, fill my brain with fiery spells.
"Satan, Satan, brother Satan, I have known your fiercest Hells."

Riding down the road at evening when the wind was on the sea,
I have heard an old man singing, and he sang most drearily.
Strange to hear, when dark lakes shimmer to the wailing of the loon,
Amethystine Homer singing under evening's copper moon.


FANTASY readers are strange people. Unlike the readers of Westerns and Detectives, fantasy fans insist on doing things. Just what things doesn't always matter just as long as they are doing something. Thousands of them collect their fantasy readings, accumulating huge quantities of amazingly interesting magazines, books, motion picture stills, clippings, and what not. Others write long letters to each other and to the editors expounding on every topic under the sun with an erudition that always amazes the outsider. Many form clubs, societies, leagues, international federations and so on. When that happens things really start rolling. Visits are made between fans and between fan groups, wrangles, ideas, a veritable microcosm of activity goes on. All this in the name of fantasy, in the name of science-fiction, in the name of weird-fiction.

This world of readers' thought, of fantasy life, we choose to term the Fantasy World. This column is here to do justice to the affairs, thoughts, and opinions of that world. If it weren't here, your editors would be deluged with letters and delegations until it appeared. Besides which we're all in favor of it; we're a part of that fantasy world and we love it.

The fantasy world has its own independent amateur press. Dozens of fan magazines, some monthly, some otherwise, usually mimeographed, reach all over the real world binding the active centers of the fantasy world together. Whether this column will endeavor to keep track of these publications will depend on a number of factors, principally the length of this department and the amount of interest that these magazines may contain.

The big affair in fantasy fandom in the past few years has been the nation-wide gathering that occurs annually. This gathering, the Science Fiction Convention, usually occurs during the summer, is usually sponsored by a fan organization and is awaited with baited breath by writers, fans, and yes, editors all over the country. It serves as a grand opportunity to meet all the people whose stories, or whose letters you've read all year round or about whom you've heard or to whom you've something to say. In past years such conventions have been held with growing success in New York, in Philadelphia, and in Chicago. The 1940 gathering was at the latter city and it is of that that *The Fantasy World* will deal.

SEPTEMBER second at the Hotel Chicagoan saw dozens and dozens of America's leading fans, writers and enthusiasts, converging

at the second floor meeting hall designated by the Illini Fantasy Fictioneers as the place of the World Convention.

They arrived from all parts of the country and by all manner of travel. Several fans — Forrest Ackerman, Paul Freehafer, Morojo and Pogo (lest you readers go mad these are the *noms-de-fantasie* of Myrtle R. Douglas and her niece) — came by train from Los Angeles. Riding the dangerous way, underneath a freight train, came Denver's Olon F. Wiggins and Lew Martin.

Others came by car, by train, on bicycles, or just plain walked. Washington, Boston, New York City, Cleveland; Indiana and Michigan, Wisconsin and Wyoming, all were represented. One car full of fans turned over on the road; unhurt, they just picked it up, put it back on its wheels, and drove on to Chicago! Others almost starved themselves to make the trip, but they made it. When fantasy demands it, apparently nothing can stop the fans!

At the first session of the Convention, the assembly heard speeches of introduction from almost everyone there. Chairmen Mark Reinsberg, Bob Tucker, and Erle Korshak carried through the order in good style. Words were heard from Jerome Siegal (creator of Superman), Don Wilcox, Charles R. Tanner, J. Chapman Miske, John B. Michel, Helen Weinbaum, Lee Gregor, Jack Speer, Ross Rocklynne, Julius Schwartz, David Wright O'Brien and your editor.

A very interesting and odd motion picture was shown which had been literally scraped off a Hollywood cutting room floor. Titled "Monsters of the Moon," the film was made up of parts that had been cut out of a trailer announcing the film of that name. Ackerman and Bob Tucker

were responsible for the work of salvage. The film itself is lost, now only this patchwork is left.

Dr. Edward E. Smith, Ph.D., gave a long and thought-provoking speech on the nature of the fantasy fan and his psychology. Ralph Milne Farley spoke, making observations on the quirks of science-fiction. Mort Weisinger and Ray Palmer, who edit a couple of our feeble contemporaries, also talked.

A MASQUERADE and auction marked the first night of the "Chicon". Prizes for costumes were carried off by *Stirring's* artist-author David A. Kyle attired as Ming the Merciless and *Stirring's* author Robert W. Lowndes garbed as the Bar Senestro, villain of "The Blind Spot". Smash hits were made by E. E. Smith in black leather and carrying a real ray-gun in the character of "Northwest Smith"; by Art Widner as "Giles Habibula" from the "Legion of Space"; and by several fans dressed alike as Buck Rogers.

An auction of original covers and interior illustrations occupied most of the night and part of the second day. Bidding was heated; made literally so by *Stirring's* unrestrainable S. D. Gottesman, who, attired as The Invisible Man, went around giving intent bidders the hot-foot!

The second day was devoted to business, resolutions and determining the whereabouts of the next convention. After thorough discussion Denver was chosen as the Convention City for 1941—Olon F. Wiggins approved as Chairman.

Needless to say these are the barest outlines of the Chicago Convention. Letters were read from those who could not attend, valuable contacts were made, special issues of fan magazines were sold, fan

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***Edited by Dr. Edward Podolsky***

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**Foreword by James Parker Hendry**

Need for sex understanding to aid married happiness—book offers key to true understanding of sex.

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**Chapter 19—Feminine Hygiene and Beauty**

How to develop your charm and sex appeal.

**Chapter 20—Reducing Diets**

How to diet. Complete menu for famous Hollywood 18 day diet.

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feuds were dissolved and friendships made. When we left everyone was determined to meet again in Denver, July 4th, 1941.

WORK on the Denver Convention has already been started. A Colorado Fantasy Society has been formed which seeks nation-wide membership to support the coming affair. A publication has been launched to keep up contacts, *The C. F. S. Review*, plans are being perfected, and the support has been gained of every major organization and publication in the country. Beyond a doubt, fantasy world interests will center around Denver this year and we would certainly urge those who want to get to know about things in fantasy to keep up with it. Address 1258 Race St., Denver, Colo.

Details of the Chicago Convention, and some of them are real funny and others real enlightening, can be had from several of the leading fan magazines and we recommend *Le Zombie* (Box 260, Bloomington, Ill.) and *Spaceways* (303 Bryan Pl., Hagerstown, Md.) for detailed accounts of the goings-on. Better send a dime along though as these boys are not sponsored.

SUGGESTIONS for this column will always be welcome. We had intended to make some remarks about our writers and our artists but the Chicon pushed that aside. Next time then. We had also in mind reviewing a few books, making remarks about some of the recent fantasy movies, and in general reviewing the various fan organizations and what they're up to. If those organizations and fan magazine publishers will keep us informed, we'll do our best to record everything that's *Stirring* in *The Fantasy World*. —DAW.

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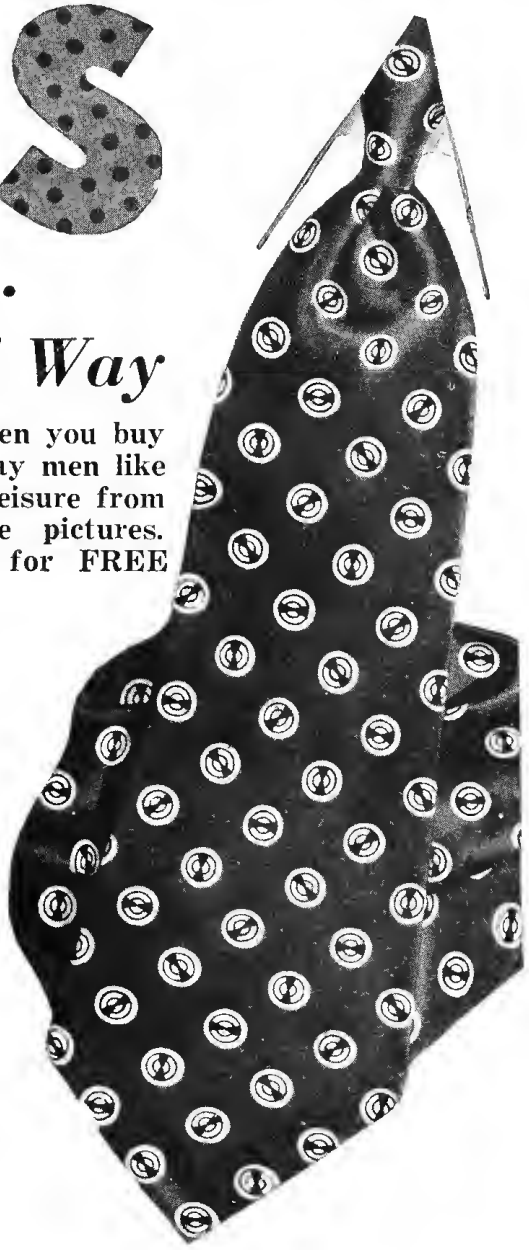

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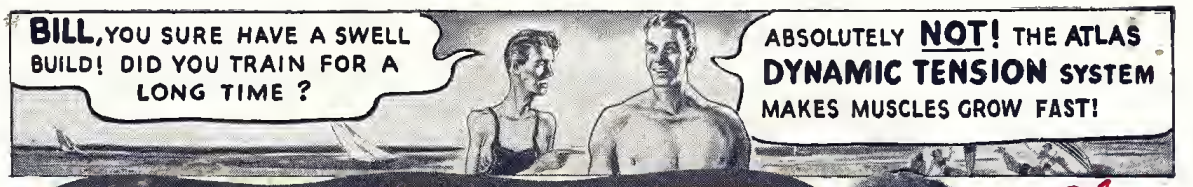


# Here's the Kind of MEN I Build!


# Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

MEN—Meet J. G. O'Brien, of California, one of my Silver Cup Winners! Look at that strong neck—those broad, handsome, perfectly proportioned shoulders—that muscled chest and stomach. Read what he says: "Look at me NOW! **Dynamic Tension** WORKS! I'm proud of the **natural**, easy way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"— *J. G. O'Brien.*

I, myself, was once a skinny weakling of 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health and strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the secret that changed me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man," the title I won *twice* and have held *ever since*, against all comers. My secret is *Dynamic Tension.* It is a *natural* method. Its purpose is not only to give you the powerful, rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror, but also—for those whose systems are sluggish from lack of proper exercise—to help them tone up their entire body, inside and out.

## Accept My 7-Day Trial Offer

Do you want a better build? Are you dissatisfied with your present physical development? All I ask is a 7-DAY TRIAL. Just one week! In even that short time you will notice your chest hardening and filling out with solid muscle—or the 7-Day Trial will cost you nothing. Surely this is proof enough that by continuing with my **Dynamic Tension** method I will make you a **New Man**—give you bodily power and drive, and put you in magnificent physical condition which wins you the envy and respect of everyone.

**CHARLES ATLAS**
**Dept. 45A, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.**

I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic Tension** will help make me a New Man—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your **FREE** book, "Everlasting Health and Strength" and full details about your 7-DAY Trial Offer.

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State.. ..


## FREE BOOK ON DYNAMIC TENSION

Let me show you the results produced for other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, "**Everlasting Health and Strength.**" It shows actual photos. Write your name and address carefully on coupon. Mail it to me personally today. I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 45A, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

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