

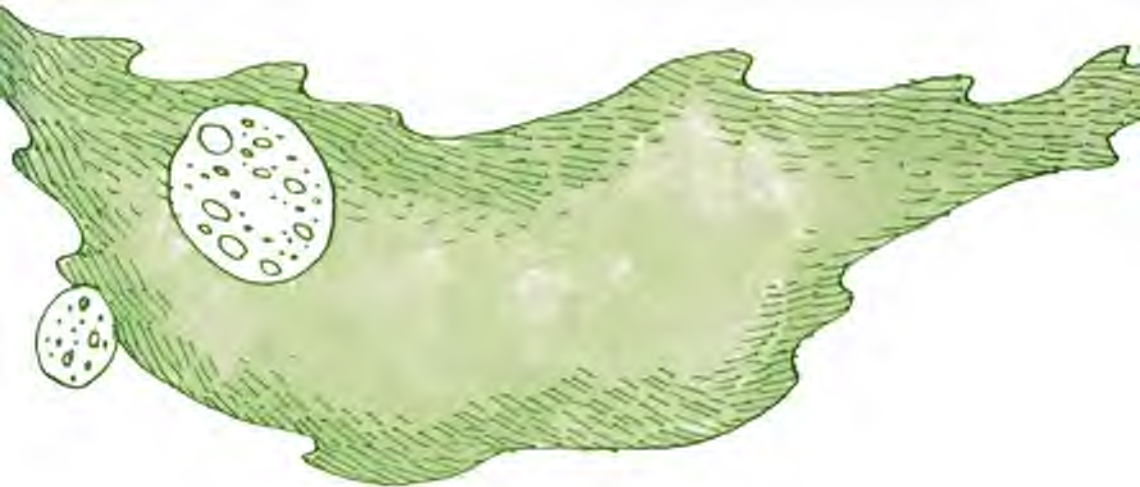
# THE FEAR PLANET

and Other Unusual Destinations



ROBERT BLOCH



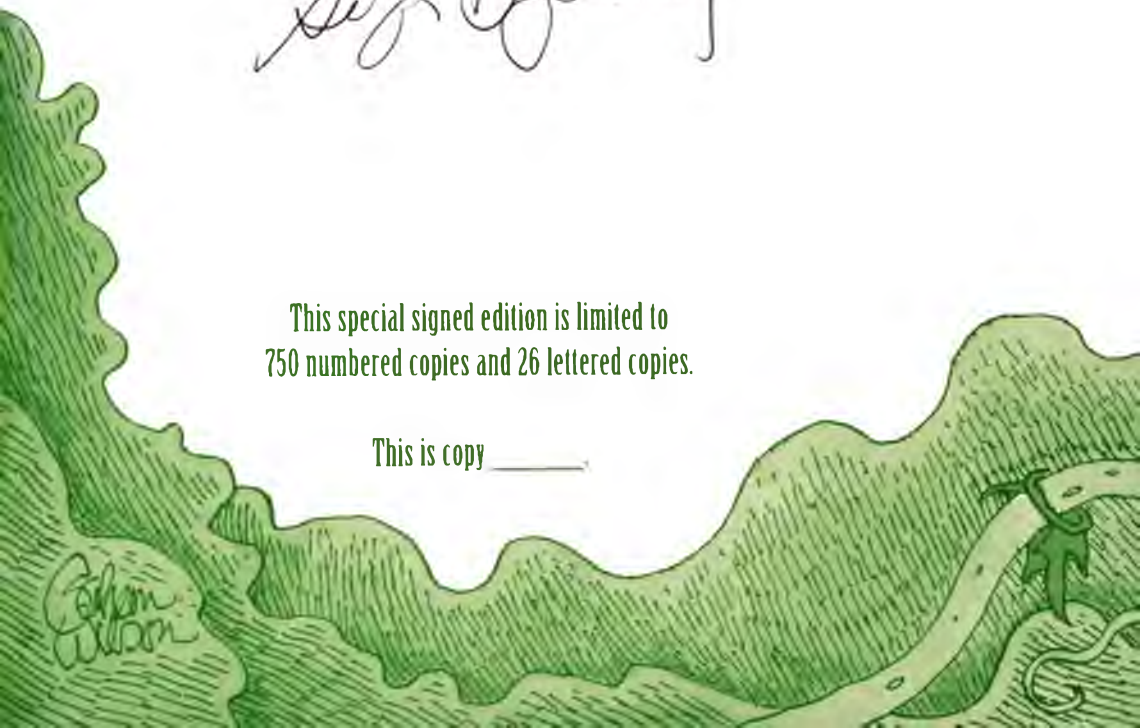


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*John Wilson*





**The Reader's Bloch, Volume One**



**The Fear Planet  
and Other Unusual  
Destinations**





**The Reader's Bloch, Volume One**



**The Fear Planet  
and Other Unusual  
Destinations**



**Robert  
Bloch**



**edited by  
Stefan R. Dziemianowicz**

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**For David J. Schow**



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# Future Imperfect

by Stefan R. Dziemianowicz

The science-fiction writer is dangerous because his mind knows no barriers. His imagination is not curbed by normal rules.

— Robert Bloch  
“The Mad Scientist”

**M**ention of pulp science fiction conjures a set of stock images that have become part of our common cultural consciousness: rockets sculpted in sleek art-deco contours thrusting heavenward; square-jawed astronauts in pneumatic Michelin Man suits brandishing blasters; damsels in steel brassieres wriggling in the clutches of bug-eyed monsters.

Tell that to Robert Bloch. He wrote a *lot* of science fiction for pulp magazines and their digest-sized descendants in the 1940s and '50s — enough to merit his own chapter in *Seekers of Tomorrow*, Sam Moskowitz's pioneering study of the writers who forged science fiction's "Golden Age" — but you really have to look long and hard at his stories to glimpse any of the genre's key signifiers. Instead of space-age hardware that represented the apogee of humanity's technologic know-how he wrote about malfunctioning gadgets invented by two-bit Edisons with more ambition than common sense. In place of heroic space jockeys pursuing mankind's manifest destiny across the universe he offered earthbound men and women who would happily trade the stars for financial security and a stable relationship. And as for the damsels in steel brassieres — well, you get the idea that a lot of characters in Bloch's stories have a fantasy life as rich as a science fiction fan's.

Bloch epitomized the science fiction writer described in his tale "The Mad Scientist:" his imagination refused to play by the normal

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rules. But he took this renegade role one step further, straying off the trails his science fiction contemporaries were blazing. At a time when it was expected that science fiction would have a futuristic and visionary slant, Bloch focused squarely on the here and now. While most pulp science fiction writers regularly extrapolated scientific trends to project their impact centuries hence, Bloch seemed never to want to look much further than the next day, or the suburban development one block over. Science and scientific progress in his stories are not forces that advance civilization—they're just one more set of complications to befuddle, frustrate and mystify his ordinary characters as they go about their everyday lives.

It's easy to dismiss Bloch's unorthodox approach to science fiction as mere dilettantism. By the time he began publishing in the science fiction pulps, he was best known as a writer of horror fiction for *Weird Tales*, which he had cracked at age 17 and was appearing in on an almost every-other-issue basis. What's more, Bloch had earned a reputation in *Weird Tales* as a protégé of H.P. Lovecraft, whose fiction specialized in depicting humankind as the unwitting butt of a cosmic joke. The science that Lovecraft introduced in his stories only called attention to the small-mindedness of his human characters and inevitably brought them more despair than enlightenment. If you wanted upbeat, forward-looking science fiction steeped in that all enchanting sense of wonder, chances are you wouldn't think to look for it from Bloch or any other *Weird Tales* alum slumming in the latest issue of your favorite science fiction magazine.

So quite possibly Bloch was a little too set in his gloomy weird fiction ways to approach science fiction and its progressive attitude with anything but skepticism. But maybe it's not that simple. While it's true that Bloch's science fiction often reflects the same mindset (and how could it not?) as his supernatural fiction, it's also true that his supernatural stories were unlike most of what shared page space with them in the horror pulps. Certainly they boasted their share of hideous monsters and gruesome fates, but they were equally distinguished for their portraits of human villains and misguided mortals who sought to improve their lot through supernatural means. In later years Bloch would earn renown for his tales of psychological horror and suspense, but much of his early fiction also reveals an acute interest in the motives and drives that propel characters into extraordinary experiences. He seemed genuinely fascinated by human behavior, and his fiction provided him with a laboratory in which he could test just how characters might respond to messy situations created by ill-informed

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choices or miscalculated consequences. In emphasizing the human factor over the hardware in his science fiction, Bloch could look to prestigious predecessors, including H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley (whose *Brave New World* had been published in 1932, less than three years before Bloch's first professional sale), writers with a predisposition to social philosophy who found in science fiction the perfect tools for crafting cautionary or satirical tales that explored the immutability of human nature in the face of scientific progress. No one would confuse Bloch's fiction with theirs, but like these authors Bloch seemed to bring more of a mainstream than genre sensibility to his work.

Bloch was not one to ground his stories in the scientific extrapolation that defined the groundbreaking science fiction of the day. As he noted in a 1975 interview:

You're talking to someone who knows nothing whatsoever about the hard sciences, who was very deficient in mathematics, and who, I think, has a psychological hangup inasmuch as I like to be able to control the material that I work with, and I don't want to be bound by hard and fast scientific laws and premises and postulates. So much of the science fiction that I have done is science fiction by sufferance. It falls into that category because editors of science fiction magazines have been willing to accept it. But by and large the closest approximation that you can make is if you call it scientific fantasy. It's just a matter of personal disinclination. You work from your strengths, and that's just not one of my strengths.

This "personal disinclination" kept Bloch out of *Astounding Science-Fiction*, the leading science fiction magazine of the day and the model for speculative fiction in which science impacted the story at every level. But there were abundant other magazines looking to distinguish themselves from *Astounding* and express science fiction's sense of wonder in a variety of ways – through adventure, thrills, romance, and even humor – and Bloch eventually found a home in most of them. He often wrote under less than ideal conditions – sometimes to help out an editor looking to shore up a content gap, or to turn a quick paycheck – and didn't always hold what he wrote in the highest regard. This could explain why very little of what he published in science fiction magazines in the 1930s and '40s ever was collected in his lifetime. Yet these stories do not reflect badly on the work he was proudest of; if anything, they provide a fuller picture of how Bloch's imagination worked during one of the most creative intervals of his long career.

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Bloch didn't get bitten by the science fiction bug — he caught it as a social disease. In 1935, while still the *enfant terrible* of *Weird Tales*, he joined the Milwaukee Fictioneers, a writer's group that included, among others, Roger Sherman Hoar (who, under the byline Ralph Milne Farley, had been writing pulp science fiction before it was called science fiction) and Stanley Weinbaum, acknowledged today as one of the most talented writers whose science fiction career was launched before the hothouse decade of the 1940s. Also in the ranks was Ray Palmer, a sometimes writer and constant fan who, in 1938, was tapped to edit *Amazing Stories*, once the flagship magazine of the science fiction field. When Palmer took the job, *Amazing* was on the ropes, having lost much of its readership to competitors who were publishing better fiction and commandeering a larger fan base. Palmer knew that in order to turn the magazine around, he would have to recruit new talent, and he leaned heavily on his Fictioneers colleagues.

At the time, the science fiction genre was still in its infancy. *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine devoted exclusively to science fiction, had only begun publishing "scientifiction" in 1926. The second science fiction magazine wouldn't appear until 1929, and until the late 1930s, when America had begun to claw its way back to financial solvency from the Great Depression, science fiction was a branch of popular reading shaped primarily by three magazines and a handful of writers. But the fiction itself was evolving on a monthly basis — some of it still read like wild west fiction transplanted to outer space, and some like engineering class lectures cosmetically enhanced with thrills siphoned from the adventure pulps, but a lot of it was massaging serious speculative content into its escapist fancies.

At the same time, Bloch was himself evolving as a writer. Finally out of his teens, and out from under the immediate influence of Lovecraft, who had died in 1937, he was starting to look beyond the confines of *Weird Tales* — his sole market up to that point, and the magazine that virtually defined him as a writer — with the eager expectancy of a young and unworldly man looking to make his first break from home. There were pulp fiction magazines to suit every taste and literary fetish, and Bloch would experiment with many. Initially, though, science fiction must have seemed a tad closer in spirit to the weird fiction he had been writing up to that point. What's more, it was the first market to openly solicit work from him, a heady experience for any pulp writer used to submitting manuscripts over the transom. Under Palmer, *Amazing* and its sister publication, *Fantastic Adventures*, would publish a lot of fiction by pulpsmiths hiding behind multiple



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pseudonyms and pulling a monthly draw for delivering a predetermined tonnage of words. Bloch was too much his own man to become a house writer, but a receptive marketplace provided him with irresistible opportunities for trying approaches and strategies that might never have passed muster in *Weird Tales*. By the end of his first decade as a professional writer, there were more than a dozen science fiction magazines and he surely realized that the greater volume of stories they published guaranteed more chances for publication and more possibilities for experimentation than were offered by the two or three pulps publishing supernatural fiction.

Bloch responded to Ray Palmer's gentle pressure with "The Secret of the Observatory," which appeared in the August 1938 issue of *Amazing*. It was his first science fiction story and it earned him his first cover. Although not one of his best works it's one of his most important, because it was his first professional sale to a magazine other than *Weird Tales*. The story is basically an espionage thriller smeared with enough pseudoscience to cover its gaping holes in logic. Its yellow peril theme was a staple of pulp action tales, and a clue that Bloch was writing largely to formula. Bloch dismissed the story in later years, but he had the consolation of having written a speculative tale about a threatened Japanese military assault on the United States more than three years before Pearl Harbor.

More interesting is the story's protagonist, Dan Marlin, who fits a character type that Bloch would refine in his science fiction from that point on: the outsider to the mad science, who brings a layman's perspective and suspicion to events. Bloch wasn't one for casting his tales with gutsy space-jocks or scientific geniuses who embodied the best humanity had to offer—his heroes are made of less stern stuff: "I know just enough about science to change a washer," says the narrator of his 1958 tale "Red Moon Rising," speaking for virtually all of his leads. These characters are minor variations on the hapless victims of his weird tales, who find themselves in trouble and out of their depth when the supernatural fireworks start. Bloch loved to cast wisecracking newspaper reporters and public relations flacks in these roles: they always got the best lines, and usually the girl—a triumph of the organic over the technologic that serves as the moral of all his science fiction.

"The Secret of the Observatory" was no worse than anything else appearing in *Amazing* at the time, and Bloch got better fast. His next excursion into science fiction, "The Strange Flight of Richard Clayton," appeared in the March 1939 issue. It was the only science fiction story he allowed to be reprinted in his seminal collection, *The Opener of the*

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*Way*, and it has become one of his best-known works (which means you should check it out if you haven't already). Bloch rounded out his first year writing science fiction with "The Man Who Walked Through Mirrors," only his second published humorous story after his oft-reprinted fantasy, "The Cloak," appeared three months before in *Unknown*. Told completely tongue-in-cheek, it takes a sharp poke at *Amazing*, which had run a banner on the issue with his science fiction debut outrageously proclaiming "Every Story Scientifically Accurate." It was the first of several Bloch stories, including "The Mad Scientist" and "The End of Science Fiction," in which the eccentricities of fans and writers served as grist for science fiction scenarios. Doubtless many readers got the joke of the story, although some surely missed part of the punchline: The name of the screwball inventor, Volmar Clark, is a nod to Bloch's *Weird Tales* colleague Clark Ashton Smith, who wrote several stories featuring interstellar spaceship pilot Captain Volmar. Smith's tales, which were steeped more in horror than science, were frequent victims of the editorial blue pencil in the science fiction pulps, and Bloch understood as well as Smith the difficulties a horror writer faced trying to pass in a science fiction market.

The fact is, much of what Bloch wrote for science fiction pulps is indistinguishable from the horror fiction he was publishing in *Weird Tales*, save for some fancy gadgetry or scientific gimmick. The title character of his story "The Mad Scientist" even caricatures the science fiction writer as a horror writer working to scale:

He's a grown-up with a child's imagination. He's an opium smoker with a perpetual supply of opium, and no recognizable stigma or deterrent physical decay to hamper him. He's a super Jack the Ripper with a wide background of knowledge. What in others is regarded as juvenile daydreaming, or hashish visions, or sadistic mania is merely the accepted stock-in-trade of the average science-fictioneer.

Now do you get what I'm driving at? You and your kinds are the only ones on earth who can, with perfect safety, indulge in perpetual flight from reality—of the most dangerous sort. You brood on destroying the world, the universe. You hatch fiendish plots, plan gruesome crimes. You create weird monstrosities, actuated by no human emotion or purpose. You cultivate your abnormality as a matter of course, seek to justify the aberrations in your stories—and worse than that, attempt to develop a *modus operandi* for your death-rays and blasters and disintegrators.

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Many of the stories that Bloch sold Palmer suggest that he developed strategies early that would allow him to sell to the science fiction pulps while still staying true to his horror roots. "The Phantom from the Film," one of the earliest tales reflecting his fascination with Hollywood filmmaking, has a monster-on-the-loose B-movie plot retrofitted with a science fiction rationale. "The Mad Scientist" is a *conte cruel* whose weird-science twist calls to mind Universal horror films such as "The Black Cat" more than other fiction appearing in *Amazing*. "Murder from the Moon" is a closed-room murder mystery with a science fiction overlay. "The Black Brain" features an extraterrestrial monster which, in one of Bloch's weird tales, might have been summoned by an incantation out of Lovecraft. Lovecraft's horrors are themselves evoked in "Queen of the Metal Men," which steals a name from Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythology and a plot device — cybernetically imprisoned human brains — straight from Lovecraft's tale "The Whisperer in Darkness" (a story Bloch clearly admired, since he revisited its theme again — albeit with a good-deal of rib nudging — in "The End of Science Fiction"). Even outside of Raymond Palmer's magazines, Bloch seemed to have no trouble placing stories that showed the dark side of science fiction. "The Fear Planet," one of the few science fiction tales Bloch did not set on Earth, first appeared in *Super Science Stories* which, its title notwithstanding, didn't seem to have problems with Bloch writing a variation on the old and-then-there-were-none suspense theme. "The Last Laugh," which appeared in the space opera magazine *Startling Stories*, is a tale of physical grotesquerie transplanted to a science fiction setting.

While science fiction provided Bloch with new ways to approach horror themes, it gave him opportunities to stretch in other directions as well. The sardonic streak that ran through his weird fiction often blossomed into comedy in stories he wrote outside the tight confines of *Weird Tales*. In 1942, *Fantastic Adventures* began publishing Bloch's series of pun-filled fantasies featuring perennial loser, Lefty Feep. Their whimsicality occasionally leached into his other writing. "The Mystery of the Creeping Underwear" is one of several slapstick science fiction stories he wrote featuring hapless heroes who run afoul of inept scientists and even more inept villains. It plays strictly for laughs the same eruptions of the abnormal that Bloch was treating more sinisterly in his horror writing. Stories of this ilk, which pile one incongruous episode on top of another, would become a staple of his contributions to digest publications in the 1950s and '60s.

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It was in the digests that Bloch's unorthodox approach to science fiction suddenly ceased to seem so unconventional. Birked in the years following the end of World War II, when paper shortages and competition from the developing paperback market forced magazines to shrink in physical dimensions, digests with names like *Imagination*, *Other Worlds*, *Imaginative Tales*, *Fantastic*, *Infinity*, *Fantastic Universe*, and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* carried on the traditions of the genre. But they also offered fiction more sophisticated and cynical than their prewar pulp forebears. For a generation that came of age in the wake of Hiroshima and at the dawn of the Nuclear Age, science fiction had lost its innocence, and the bravado of the past gave way to a more somber mood. Horror crossovers and satires of scientific progress by other writers were suddenly more common, and Bloch's humanistic tales were less out of step with general science fiction trends. "Red Moon Rising," with its echoes of Arthur C. Clarke's novel *Childhood's End* (1953) and Robert Wise's cautionary film "The Day the Earth Stood Still" (1951), speaks clearly to the mood of Cold War paranoia that infected America in the wake of Russia's launching of Sputnik and the start of the Space Race. In their own way, "Beep No More, My Lady," with its darkly comic portrait of a future where television advertisers control outer space, and "Let's Do It for Love," whose moral is that misery makes the world go round, also take the pulse of their time. Bloch never lost his ability to find something amusing in the human condition, but much of the fiction he produced in his final decades is laced with sharp criticism of a world where trends supplant values, the superficial is confused with substance, and popular taste trumps the wisdom of the past. The tone and temper of his later work is prefigured in much of his writing for the science fiction digests.

Although Bloch wrote them in relatively equal quantities, he is still better known for his short horror tales than his science fiction stories. His own analysis of his legacy to science fiction was modest. "The only contribution I've attempted to make, or would hope to make, is to provide the reader with basic entertainment and, in certain cases, to convey some of my own values and attitudes," he said in a 1980 interview. "I have no reason to rank myself among the leading writers in the genre. I've broken no new ground. I don't expect I ever will." Doubtless, he would have pointed to the one or two stories endlessly reprinted at the expense of his entire output as proof that he was a bush-leaguer when it came to science fiction. But the ground a writer breaks today is likely to serve as his burial plot tomorrow, and it's a mistake to measure merit in writing solely in terms of who coins a

## Future Imperfect

concept first. By its nature, science fiction is a literature of planned obsolescence: its themes are constantly morphing and reshaping in response to the reality it always try to stay one step ahead of, and its landmark works are fated to become historical artifacts, some more quickly than others. The stories that endure have something more going for them than mindbending extrapolations of science or visionary forecasting.

The stories collected in *The Fear Planet and Other Unusual Destinations* have aged much better than a lot of science fiction published in the same era. They show Bloch less concerned with the scientific details that seduced genre readers than with telling a diverting tale. To that end, they show the same attention to craft that comes through in the horror and crime fiction that will be showcased in subsequent volumes of *The Reader's Bloch* series. Although some of these works have been anthologized, few have been reprinted since their initial publication, and none has been previously incorporated into a Robert Bloch collection. They've escaped the scrutiny of his best-known writing, and that only enhances their entertainment value. By his own admission Bloch never was a power hitter in science fiction – but maybe it was because he didn't regularly swing for the fences that he managed to connect as often as he does in these stories.

–Stefan R. Dziemianowicz  
April 2004



## Red Moon Rising

I'll never forget the day they launched the big one.

At precisely four o'clock I was sitting in my little unpadded cell here at *Globe News*, pounding out the usual daily stint for a Washington dateline column called *The View from Washington's Monument*.

At precisely one minute after four the bulletins started coming in over the wire up front.

My office is way down at the end of the corridor, but within three minutes the bedlam had reached a pitch where I couldn't work any longer. I got up and joined the crowd in the front layout.

From the noise and the milling around, you'd think they were doing the Christmas Party bit. Until you got a look at their faces.

I realized what had happened at once.

Somebody had pushed the panic button.

About the time I managed to squeeze my way clear of the corridor, McGregor climbed up on top of his desk and told everybody shut up.

It was the sight of him there that did it. McGregor isn't the kind of a man who stands on desks, and we all knew it. The effect was as shocking as seeing Albert Schweitzer sitting in with Louis Armstrong at a Newport Jazz Festival.

Any tendency to murmur a comment about this was effectively stilled by a glimpse of McGregor's face. I've been with *Globe* for a good many years, and I'd never seen him so stunned – not even on the night that Truman clobbered Dewey.

Then he held up his hand and started to read.

Now it would be nice to pretend I have total recall, but the truth is that I can't give a single word of direct quotes. I was too stunned to remember; I could only react, as we all reacted.

But I got the message.

There was another satellite in the sky.

## Robert Bloch

Another Sputnik had been launched.

And its estimated weight was in the neighborhood of fifty tons.

That's right. *One hundred thousand pounds.*

No official confirmation had been received yet, of course — but it wasn't necessary. Some eight million citizens had seen the satellite in orbit as it passed over Los Angeles and environs. Signals had already been picked up as it continued its progress.

It wasn't a gag, it wasn't a flying saucer, it wasn't a publicity stunt for Mike Todd's birthday.

The sword of Damocles was hanging over our heads, and it weighed fifty tons.

Runners kept pushing through to McGregor with fresh bulletins, and somewhere along the line he stopped reading them and began calling out names. So-and-so to check the rival news services and the TV networks immediately; so-and-so to contact our sources on the Geophysical Year project, at once; so-and-so to the Pentagon pronto; so-and-so to the White House, soonest.

I turned away. I didn't expect to be called; when it came to questions of actual news, *The View from Washington's Monument* was pretty dim.

That's why I was startled when I heard my name blasted out. I got up to the desk in nothing flat, and McGregor gave me a glare which told me I should have made better time.

"Where's Carling?" he snapped.

"I don't know. It's his day off, isn't it? Have you tried —"

"Yes, we tried his apartment. And we tried the Mayflower Bar and that joint down on B Street, too. You're a buddy of his. What else would he be doing on his day off?"

"I —"

"Never mind. Go out and find him, fast."

"Right. It'll take me just five minutes to finish up on the column, and then —"

This wasn't my day for finishing sentences. McGregor, like the true executive he was, disposed of my column in a few well-chosen words.

I went straight back to my cubicle and picked up my hat and coat. In order to save time, I didn't even stop to do what he'd suggested I do with my column.

There was no need to emphasize the importance of finding Carling. At a time like this, *Globe News* could use his services. Leonard Carling was Science Editor. He'd copped a Pulitzer for his series on the Los Alamos Project a few years ago. A yarn like this could easily win him another.



## Red Moon Rising

If I could find him.

Actually, I had a pretty fair idea of where he might be. There was a little spot around the corner from his place, run by a bartender who detested rock-'n'-roll and put his own collection of records on the jukebox. Sometimes, on his day off, Carling would squeeze into a back booth and listen to a stack – stuff like the old Raymond Scott Quintet numbers on the Brunswick label.

I managed to flag down a taxi on the street and gave the driver the address. Apparently he had not heard about the satellite yet, because he had nothing to say. This suited me. If I found Carling, he'd do plenty of talking. As a matter of fact, he already had.

On the face of it, our friendship was a very offbeat item. Carling wasn't just another wire-service reporter; he had quite an educational background, including the M. I. T. bit. As for me, I know just enough about science to change a washer – and even there I rely more on profanity than technological know-how. But somehow, we enjoyed each other's company. Maybe it was because both of us were divorced.

Carling thought so. I remember how he'd analyzed it one night. "It isn't so much that we're lonely," he said. "Each of us has our friends. But we lack sounding-boards. That's a wife's function, you know. To serve as a sounding-board for her lord and master. To listen to all his gripes, all the complaints, all the wild ideas and foolish theories. I used to talk to Lucy about the nucleonics projects twenty-four hours a day. Come to think of it, maybe that's why she divorced me. At least *you're* willing to listen."

I was. Maybe I couldn't dig the scientific terminology, but his opinions always interested me. Even lately, when he'd begun to get very downbeat about the Red satellites and our own failures.

"You haven't seen anything yet!" he'd predicted, in that we-are-gathered-here-to-pay-our-last-sorrowful-tribute voice of his, just the other night. "The next one's going to be the clincher."

I didn't ask him how he knew.

Leonard Carling, on the basis of his reputation, had *entree* to high official circles and even higher unofficial circles. Much of his information came from the latter; he couldn't write it for publication, but he got the word.

And now his prophecy had come true.

So I was quite lathered up when I walked into the little bar and spotted Carling's gray crewcut rising over the top of the rear booth. The place was almost empty; the bartender stood down front talking to a couple of Department of Agriculture stenographer types who were

## Robert Bloch

making faces at the jukebox. The juke box didn't care; it went right on playing an old John Kirby number.

Leonard Carling looked up and smiled at me.

"Sit down," he said.

I shook my head. "Grab your socks." I told him. "McGregor wants you."

"Does he know where I am?"

"Of course not. But he sent me out to find you, and I guessed."

"So you couldn't locate me." He gestured. "Sit down and have an ale."

"No time. Wait'll you hear the news."

"About the satellite?" He shrugged. "The bulletin came over TV ten minutes ago. Fifty tons, I think they said."

I stared at him. "Well, aren't you going to do something about it?"

"I *am* doing something about it. I'm drinking ale. Care to join me?"

He signaled the bartender before I could object. I slumped into the seat opposite him when the bartender came and waited until he brought our order and went away again. John Kirby's outfit began to play *Rose Room*.

"I suppose McGregor wants me to check at top-level," he mused, pouring his ale carefully. "I imagine he'd like some interviews."

"Of course. So put on your coat and —"

"No, thanks. I brought in enough interviews when the earlier Sputniks were launched. Let him rewrite them. I guarantee the story will be the same."

He was using that funeral-oration voice of his, but some how it sounded very appropriate. I listened.

"The first interview would be with the top brass, wouldn't it? You know what they'll tell me. The military geniuses who claimed they needed billions to keep us ahead of Russia in national defense will say this only proves they need *more* billions to keep us ahead. The big boys who went around bragging about how America is always first in the technology race will issue statements denying there ever *was* a technology race. The politicians who did their best to get rid of all the egghead scientists will loudly proclaim that we need *more* egghead scientists. None of these people see a real Sputnik in the sky — all they see up there is a political football."

"But the man in the street —" I began.

"As for the man in the street, he doesn't see *anything*. When the first satellite was launched, there was plenty of publicity — but actually, the average citizen was more interested in whether on not the Braves

## Red Moon Rising

would win the World Series. Of course, his wife was more excited when the second Sputnik went up—because of the dog. The way it struck her, it was a moral victory for our side; *we* would never send a poor, helpless, little puppy to its doom that way! Then the dog died, and the public forgot the whole thing.”

“They won’t forget *this* one,” I said. “There’s a hundred thousand pounds up there. They saw it with the naked eye on the West Coast, and it’ll be visible to the whole country on its orbital course. By tomorrow morning there’ll be hell to pay. And you’re still willing to sit here and make with the cheap cynicism.”

“I’m using only the most expensive cynicism. The most costly, shall we say?”

“Either you’re drunk or you’ve flipped,” I told him. “But if you don’t snap out of it, half the world will be drunk or flipping within twenty-four hours. This thing is big enough to hold a dozen men. Is it a manned satellite? Maybe it’s armed. Maybe it’ll be followed by rockets with warheads. Aren’t you interested in finding out?”

“Certainly. And in due time, Von Braun and Arthur C. Clarke will write articles on the subject.”

“Be serious, won’t you? I’m no scientist, but this thing scares the hell out of me.”

“Yes.” He nodded slowly. “You’re scared. And, as you say, everybody will be frightened by tomorrow. So my going out and getting interviews won’t help the situation. Something more must be done.”

“Such as sitting here and drinking, I suppose?”

“Exactly. It so happens I’m here by appointment. In a little while I expect a visitor. If our meeting goes as I think it might, it may be that I shall really be able to help.”

“A visitor? Who?”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

“You mean you already contacted a guy who—”

“He contacted me. I decided, under the circumstances, it would be wisest not to meet at my apartment. Therefore, I selected the semi-privacy of this establishment.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so in the first place? Just clue me in a little so I can tell McGregor what you’re doing.”

“No. There must be no interference. When I’m certain of my facts, I’ll notify him. Until then, just say that you couldn’t find me.”

“Look, at least give me a hint. Why all the hush-hush? Did you locate a leak somewhere? Is this government stuff?”

He shook his head.

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I lowered my voice. "All right, let me guess. You're onto the Soviet angle, isn't that it? Somebody's willing to spill the inside story of how they did it. That must be it. Right?"

"Don't ask any questions. Now, run along. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow." I echoed and went away. Wondering if there would be a tomorrow.

\* \* \*

A nasty conviction was beginning to filter through to me. Talk about the propaganda value of the previous Sputniks — *this* was the real thing! One look at the Red moon in the sky tonight and the man in the street might very well become the man in the cellar, the man under the bedclothes, cowering and waiting for the first bomb to fall.

I thought about it as I drank my dinner down the street. Then, as the evening wore on, I thought about it some more.

Talk about the Christmas Party bit, or New Year's Eve! The streets were jammed and the bars were crowded. Everybody was talking, everybody was yelling, everybody was drinking. But there was one difference — nobody was laughing or even smiling.

They had heard the word.

The word, out of Chicago, when the Red moon came over and the panic-stricken motorists abandoned their cars in the middle of Outer Drive.

The word, out of a small town in Pennsylvania, where an obscure religious leader of a still more obscure sect saw the sphere in the sky as a period proclaiming the end of the world and — gathering his fanatical followers — set fire to the buildings of the entire community.

The word, out of Boston, of riots in Scollay Square.

The Soviet Government must have anticipated this reaction, counted on it when they launched their miniature moon.

*Miniature*, hell! It weighed fifty tons. What kind of initial thrust had been necessary to launch a satellite of this size? With that kind of power, they could speed nuclear warheads around the world and back again. Maybe they'd be doing just that, soon.

Maybe they *were* doing it, now.

The Sputnik was circling above the globe, but the rumors circled even more swiftly down in the streets, rising from the saliva-flecked launching-platforms of human lips.

"Jeez, did you hear the latest? Air Force spotted Red bombers comin' over Alaska..."

## Red Moon Rising

"Yeah, they hit Seattle. They must have, I was listening to CBS news and it was supposed to be a roundup, they said for Seattle to come in, and then they right away switched back to New York..."

"I have it on good authority, I tell you! Everything west of the Mississippi has been blacked out. The President will issue an emergency proclamation any minute now..."

"Shut up about the damn thing and let's get ourselves a drink!"

"— and what I want to know is, why hasn't the President gone on the air with a statement? I tell you the whole thing is part of a conspiracy, we've sold out to save our necks, and —"

"What I'm gonna do is climb in the car and get the hell out of town, right now. There's hills over in West Virginia where they'll never find you..."

"Who cares *how* much it costs? A fat lot of good it's going to do to save your money *now*, George!"

"I'm scared."

"Why doesn't somebody *do* something?"

"Have another drink!"

"To hell with you!"

"*To hell with everybody!*"

\* \* \*

And that's the way it went; on the streets, in the bars, up and down Pennsylvania and along Connecticut and halfway to Chevy Chase. It wasn't a mob scene yet, even though the cops weren't in evidence and nobody was bothering to obey the traffic signals. The character who was thinking about West Virginia was a little more farsighted than his fellows; maybe by tomorrow at this time there would be a wild exodus from this city and from every city, but tonight it was mainly a matter of restless wandering and hysterical wondering. And finally it all blended into a blur of *I'm scared why doesn't somebody do something, have a drink and to hell with you*, over and over and over again until I was scared and wanted somebody to do something and wanted a drink — and then I said to hell with it.

And elbowed my way back along the streets until I came to the little bar where I'd left Leonard Carling.

He was gone, of course. The bartender said he'd left over an hour ago. Yes, he'd had company in the back booth — a little fellow with dark glasses. They'd talked for quite a while, and then he went away. Carling stuck around for another drink and then vanished.

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I looked at my watch. It was almost eleven o'clock. Carling had gone home.

So I walked around the corner to his apartment. The crowd was streaming past, and I paid no attention to any of the faces wavering before me. It wasn't until a man hurried out of the doorway and jostled me just as I walked in that I bothered to take a second look. He disappeared in the mob before I got a glimpse of his face; I couldn't even see if he wore dark glasses or not.

Do Russian spies wear dark glasses, or is that corny? Are Russian spies corny, with or without dark glasses? Carling hadn't really admitted anything to me.

But I'd admitted one thing to myself. Corny or not, I was frightened. For myself, for Carling, for everybody.

And I got up those stairs, fast. I hurried down the hall to his apartment door, started to press the buzzer. Then I noticed, with a shock, that light was streaming across the carpet. His door was ajar.

I pushed it open, catching sight of Carling's profile as he sat behind his desk staring out the window.

My first reaction was relief; my second, indignation. I stormed up to him.

"Don't you know any better than to leave the door open?" I muttered. "What's the matter, have you got a hole in your head?"

I crossed the room in five steps. As my feet thudded across the floor, Carling nodded. At least, I thought he was nodding, then realized he was swaying and falling forward, out of the chair.

But not before I saw his forehead.

Leonard Carling *did* have a hole in his head.

They didn't let me go until past noon the following day, and even then I was lucky.

I was lucky because there were fingerprints all over the room; Carling's and somebody else's—not mine. I hadn't even touched the doorknob when I came in.

I was lucky because the bartender told a straight story about my meeting with Carling and how I'd come back to find him, less than five minutes before I phoned the police about the discovery of his body.

I was lucky because they listened to what I told them about my encounter with Carling, and how I'd seen a stranger come out of the place just before I found him.

But even so, I doubt if they would have let me go—even on bail, as a material witness—if McGregor hadn't pulled strings in high places. Not with the D. C. police force, either, but with the Federal boys. Yes,

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they were in on it from the first. They were great on listening and not much on talking, but I managed to find out one thing which confirmed my own suspicions – Carling had evidently made some connections with the Reds.

That he was a traitor I could not and didn't believe. That the man he'd met in the tavern was a Soviet agent was still a matter of conjecture. That the man who killed him was the same person seemed even more dubious. It was much more likely that he'd managed to contact a defecting agent who gave him some information – but that *another* agent had then trailed him and killed him immediately. The crime was clumsily and hastily committed; evidently it was of the utmost importance to get him out of the way before he could reveal what he had learned.

But it was all theory.

And now we'd never know what he *had* found out.

"Maybe I can really help," he'd said.

Well, it was too late now.

That's what I told McGregor, driving back along Pennsylvania after they turned me loose.

He sighed. "You're right, it *is* too late now. But I doubt if he could have found out anything that would stop this."

"What're you talking about?"

He blinked at me. "I forgot, you've been under wraps for fourteen hours, haven't you? You didn't hear about the press conference."

"Where? The White House?"

McGregor sighed again. "I wish to God that's where it was. But things have changed. This one is scheduled for two o'clock – at the Soviet Embassy."

"The Reds called – ?"

He still wasn't letting me finish my sentences. "The Reds are calling everything," he muttered. "Including the shots. This is top level. The Soviet Government refused to issue any statement in reply to the questions of our own State Department last night or this morning. Instead, they set up this conference at the Embassy. Only the news service reps are to be admitted; two from each agency. And if our officials want to find out what's going on, they'll have to come and beg admittance."

"But that's fantastic!"

"What isn't?" He chewed on his pipe. "Is it fantastic that New York City is being evacuated? That a National Emergency has been

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proclaimed? That this damned Red moon is putting the fear of death into the citizens of Dubuque and bringing psychosis to Peoria?

"Don't you worry — our big wheels will roll into the Soviet Embassy this afternoon. You'll see them there."

I stared at him.

"That is, if you're up to it. I've got permission for two representatives from our outfit. Naturally, I wanted to cover it myself. If Carling were alive, God rest him, he'd be the other one. But in view of what happened, I thought of you. Not because of what you can write, but because of the tie-in with the story. Human interest angle, get it?" He laughed, but there was no mirth in his mouth. "Human interest! I wonder if any of us will give a damn about human interest by this time tomorrow?"

We turned off; we were approaching the embassy now. Crowds boiled along the streets, but National Guardsmen had cleared an inner lane.

"What do you think is going to happen?" I asked.

Again the lifeless laughter came. "Isn't it obvious? The Reds have won the war before it's started. They weren't ready to risk a sneak attack and they weren't going to sit back and wait for us to try and catch up to their scientists, either. How they ever managed to get this thing into the sky I'll never understand — but the point is, they did it. Which means they have the power to blast their bombs anywhere in the world.

"This so-called press conference is merely a public gesture. Actually, I doubt if anybody is going to get a chance to ask questions. We'll be *told*. And it won't be a matter of issuing a prepared statement. What we're going to hear is an ultimatum. They're going to dictate terms of surrender. It's all out in the open, now — an *either-or* proposition."

"Do you think we'll accept it?"

"What choice do we have?"

We were parking now. The gates of the Embassy loomed ahead. McGregor fumbled in his coat, handed me a wallet.

"It's yours," he said. "Identification and credentials for this clambake. They'll be strict."

They *were* strict. And once inside, there was none of the old-style red-carpet-and-champagne treatment. As we assembled in the big hall I didn't even notice the usual buffet and bar setup for the press. More significant still, I saw no neat stacks of printed handouts awaiting distribution for after the conference.



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We took our places on hard chairs, before a long table. I recognized a number of the boys from the other outfits: AP, UP, INS, the radio and TV networks. They weren't fraternizing; just sitting glumly. Then the top-level people started coming in, and they were even glummer.

McGregor nudged me. "See, what did I tell you?" he whispered, fiercely. "The House, the Senate, the whole damned Cabinet! Plus the Chiefs of Staff and —"

I nudged him back. "There." I murmured. "Two seats ahead. The little fellow with the dark glasses!"

"You're crazy! You mean the one the bartender said was talking to Carling? It couldn't be —"

"I'm going to find out," I began, and started to rise.

McGregor pulled me back.

"Not now," he said. "Here it comes!"

The doors had closed behind us and now another door opened at the end of the room. A half-dozen men filed in, all of them wearing the uniform of the Soviet Army. They took their places at the big table. Suddenly the room became quiet — deadly quiet.

Then the fat man walked out.

He wasn't smiling and he wasn't waving, the way he usually did in the newsreels. He merely moved to the head of the table, then stood there and stared.

There was an audible rustle as he took a paper from his pocket and laid it on the table before him. Quite deliberately he donned spectacles. Then he picked up the paper and started to read.

McGregor had guessed right. This was no press conference — not even the pretense of one.

What we were listening to was a demand for unconditional surrender.

Again, there's no sense pretending that I can give direct quotes. The guttural voice droned on; sometimes the pompous phrases blurred, but the meaning was always clear.

As I listened, I glanced at the little man wearing the dark glasses. He sat there, hunching forward, his head protruding from the neck of his big overcoat, and in profile he resembled a turtle peering out of his carapace. The dark glasses contributed to the effect, as did his mittened hands, which twisted nervously in his lap as he listened to the ultimatum.

The guttural voice droned on.

There was no sense in maintaining a pretense any longer, the voice told us. The time for meaningless diplomacy was past. There was no

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more need for hypocritical protestations of friendship. Since we, as a nation, had persisted in our warmongering efforts in spite of every reasonable warning, it had been decided to take steps. Once and for all, it would be demonstrated that the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic had the might, as well as the right, to assume world leadership. We had just witnessed the first portion of that demonstration.

Now we would be given the opportunity to respond to it. A detailed agreement had been drawn up which would establish our future relationship, and in a moment its terms would be outlined.

However, if for any reason these terms were ignored, it would be necessary to allow the demonstration to proceed. We had already seen the Russian satellite. It was to be fervently hoped that we would not require a firsthand experience of comparable Russian advances in the field of thermonuclear warfare.

"Yesterday," the guttural voice proclaimed, "the Soviet Union launched a Red moon. Tomorrow we launch a Red world!"

I had been watching the turtle-profile of the man in the dark glasses. Now I was startled to see him move; though not half as startled as the Soviet spokesman when he rose and took three paces forward, facing the room.

"He lies!"

The voice was even deeper than that of the official Soviet spokesman. Deeper, and more compelling. "He lies!" the voice repeated.

"No, let me speak. You understand, of course, that it will do no good to try and harm me."

Suddenly, shockingly, the fat face of the Soviet leader began to sag. "Who are you?" he murmured. "How did you come here?"

"The credentials I presented state that I am Leonard Carling," the stranger said. "This, of course, is a falsehood, for Leonard Carling is dead — murdered by one of your agents, no doubt, after I talked to him last night.

"Originally, it had been planned that Leonard Carling be here today, to bring you the truth. He was selected on the basis of his reputation, as a proper, unbiased representative. Now he is dead, and I must speak for him.

"What he was prepared to tell you was quite simple. It is this. There is no Russian satellite in the sky today."

The Soviet leader did not move. The uniformed men did not rise to shoot the stranger. The crowd did not murmur. The silence in that room was thick as solid glass.

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"I repeat—there is no Russian satellite in the sky today. And the Russians know it. That is why they dare not harm me. Because there would be retaliation—far worse than anything with which they have threatened you.

"Naturally, they had no way of knowing just what the satellite really was. All they realized was that they had not launched it; could not possibly have launched an instrument of such magnitude. When no statement was forthcoming from your government, and panic spread, they knew no so-called western power was responsible. It was then decided to take a daring gamble; to capitalize on the general assumption that this was a Russian satellite and call for your surrender.

"It was in anticipation of this that Leonard Carling was approached and given the truth. Since he is no longer able to speak, you must listen to me."

I wanted to believe him. And yet I had to know. Before I realized it, I was on my feet, my voice thinly insistent.

"What proof have we got? How can we be sure this isn't just another trick—that you didn't murder him yourself?"

The turtle-profile turned to face me.

"I am not totally unfamiliar with your police methods," the deep voice intoned. "According to my understanding, there is the question of fingerprints found in Leonard Carling's apartments. In order to leave fingerprints, one must have—fingers."

And the mittened hands rose and twisted, the mittens fell to the floor. I, and everyone in the room, saw what they had concealed—the *pink, webbed paws*.

The pink, webbed paws that rose, now, sweeping off the dark glasses and revealing the place where the eyes *should* have been, and the short, blunted stalks which took their place in the rimmed sockets and evidently fulfilled their function in some unearthly way. Some *unearthly way*—

"I see I have convinced you in this matter," the voice continued. "And I trust I am equally convincing in my other statements to you. When I tell you that the satellite in the sky is not a creation of Russia or any other nation. To be quite specific, it is *not* a satellite. You might call it a 'spaceship,' but even this term is inadequate. It is best that you think of it as a *warning*.

"I do not presume to threaten, but I can advise. I suggest that all of you—as official representatives or as common citizens of your various governments—instantly abandon any further efforts to place 'artificial moons' in orbit. I suggest you turn your eyes away from the stars and

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contemplate, with renewed honesty and insight, the spectacle of life here on your own earth. You have much to do here.

"The time may come when you have achieved the vision to go beyond. But you are not presently prepared or qualified; your motives and attitudes can lead only to self-destruction.

"I ask you to convey this message to the world at large, and to act upon it. For the span of a lunar month, we shall continue to orbit the earth. If you cooperate within that time, we shall leave you. If, however, you do not comply, we shall be forced to take — further measures.

"But I sincerely hope this will not prove necessary. And once again, I urge you to heed my warning.

"I suggest that you abandon the satellite race and consider the human race."

That was the end. The end of his speech and the end of his presence among us. I didn't have to ask how it was that he managed to get by the stakeout at Leonard Carling's apartment and acquire his wallet and credentials. If you can disappear into thin air at will, you undoubtedly can appear at will, too.

The point is, *you can't*. And *I can't*.

*We* happen to be human.

And as for him —

Well, all this happened about ten days ago, and the thing in the sky is still orbiting on schedule.

But the universal treaties have been signed, and the whole peace program is going forward, and chances are he'll carry out his part of the bargain and take the object away at the end of the month.

Meanwhile, habit is a funny thing. The papers, and most people, still refer it to as a Red moon.

Oddly enough, they *could* be right at that. According to the way I heard it, Russia isn't the only thing that's Red.

Seems to me there's also a Red planet out there.

Some day, maybe, we'll have a chance to find out for ourselves, first-hand.

Some day....

## Let's Do It for Love

Sometimes they come crawling out of the woodwork. Sometimes they wear Napoleon hats and ride in on invisible white horses. Sometimes they're equipped complete with little green men who keep pulling your socks down when they're not looking.

But this one was different. He looked completely normal. I guessed his age at thirty, his weight at about 160, stripped. Only he wasn't stripped. He was wearing the kind of blue suit that this kind of guy always wears whenever he takes his wife along with him to pick out a gray one.

He had brown hair, rimless glasses, and one of those sincere faces you usually see painted on expensive Mamma dolls. Oh yes, he had a name, too—Joe Stevens. Nothing alarming about any of these things, nothing to make me think that he was a fugitive from the laughing academy.

But it was what he said that set me off higher than a rocket to the moon.

"Mr. Mortimer, you're a public relations man," he yacked. "What kind of a job can you do to promote love?"

I opened my mouth, but for a minute nothing came out. And when nothing comes out of my mouth for a whole minute, I get worried. Finally I reached inside and dragged out a few words.

"Love?" I said. "You mean, boy-meets-girl kind of love?"

"Not exactly. Perhaps I'd better explain."

"Sit down," I suggested. He picked out a chair, which wasn't too difficult, seeing as how I only have one chair in my office. And then it started.

When it finished, about fifteen minutes later, I was in full possession of the following facts, any or all of which I would gladly have traded for a two-cent stamp.

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Joseph Stevens, my visitor, was a chemist employed by the Wagtail Dog Biscuit Company, Inc., of this city. Married, and the father of two children, he was wont to slip down into the basement of his modest little mortgage-covered cottage during the evening and perform experiments.

At a time when all decent, respectable Godfrey-fearing citizens are usually huddled around their TV sets, Joe Stevens would be found somewhere behind the furnace, either working out or testing a chemical formula he had invented.

"I thought if I sort of puttered around long enough," he explained, in his erudite, scientific way, "I might hit on something that would make me some money. I'd be just as happy to do it for the fun of experimenting, but Dorothy — that's my wife — seems to prefer money."

I nodded.

"You do understand," said Stevens. "I take it you're married, too?"

"Yes. I understand perfectly," I told him. "And that is one of the reasons I very definitely am *not* married."

"Oh. Well, anyway, I perfected quite a few compounds during the last few years of work. I rigged up a very complete little laboratory in the cellar, and managed to perfect a number of products. But none of them, so far, has appealed to any manufacturer."

"Just what did you come up with?"

"Well, for example, there was my spot remover. It looked to me like a surefire proposition."

"But there are plenty of spot removers on the market right now, aren't there?"

"Not like mine. This was no ordinary naphtha compound. My Spot Remover would actually remove any spot. I thought it might be kind of dramatic to hold a demonstration for some possible buyers, so I took a bottle of the stuff out to the zoo and tossed some on a leopard. Sure enough, it worked."

"You took the spots right off a leopard?"

"Absolutely. But all that happened was the zoo officials wanted to sue me for damaging their property — because without spots their leopard looked like a common mountain lion. My buyers got scared, and Dorothy made me give up the idea. I haven't even tried to use that Spot Remover again, except the time I put some on my youngest child when she had the measles."

"Is that all you perfected?"

## Let's Do It for Love

"No. The next thing was a headache powder. That really worked, too. But the trouble was, most people would rather have a headache than sprinkle this powder on their heads."

Right at this point I could have used a little of the stuff myself. But I determined to carry on to the bitter end. "What else did you invent?"

"Oh, plenty of things. Like my hair restorer. It actually would grow hair on a billiard ball. But then I found out that nobody wants to buy billiard balls with hair growing on them."

"Life is cruel," I told him. "But when do we get to the love part?"

"Only after about two years more of compounding and mixing and stirring and blending. But the important thing is, once I got the basic concept, I worked night and day, every weekend and holiday, to concoct this formula. And finally, I got it. This isn't a fluke—I tell you, it's going to revolutionize the world!"

"But what is it, exactly? What does it do?"

"It's simply a glandular stimulant which produces an endocrinological readjustment of the metabolic factors affecting personality mutation, thus increasing normal empathy."

"There's just one little point that bothers me."

"Namely?"

"What does it mean?"

"It means I have produced a chemical compound that makes people love one another. Simple, isn't it?"

"You are—I mean, it is," I gulped. "But aren't there already such chemicals in use? Regular aphrodisiacs?"

"That's just the point. My concoction is *not* an aphrodisiac. It does not stimulate sexual activity or arouse the senses."

"Too bad," I sighed. "I was kind of thinking of a big advertising and promotion campaign, maybe with a picture of some guy holding a violin and smooching some broad who's playing the piano—like a perfume, see? And then we—"

"This is not a perfume, Mr. Mortimer. It can be taken orally, by injection, or direct cutaneous application."

"Watch your language, son."

"I mean, it can be applied to the surface of the skin and the pores will absorb it."

"Like a beauty cream?"

"No. It doesn't change the appearance. But it does alter behavior patterns. It eliminates hatred, prejudice, dislike, antipathy. People exposed to this potion feel nothing but pure affection for others—all others."

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"Now, wait a minute! You mean to tell me you've invented something that will actually win friends and influence people? What about hangovers?"

"There is no hangover, as you call it, Mr. Mortimer. Depending on the amount administered and the method of absorption, the effects of this formula vary from a few hours' duration to lifetime permanency."

"You take enough, the right way, and you love everybody the rest of your life?"

"Exactly!"

"Even neighbors with loud radios, and guys who try to pass your car on the right, and income tax collectors?"

"Certainly."

"This I've got to be convinced of."

For a moment I stared at the floor, trying to find the two pieces of the infinitive I'd just split. Also, to be perfectly frank, I was also looking for a way to get rid of Mr. Stevens. A good, fast way, because I had done business with screwballs before and found it wise to get rid of them before they started to bounce.

"I'm willing to convince you," Mr. Stevens was saying, "if you agree to take me on as your client."

This was all the opening I needed. "Well, as a matter of fact, I've got a pretty tight schedule — loaded with assignments, you might say. Besides, I expect I'll have to be going down to Washington next week for one of the big oil companies, and —"

Joe Stevens rose and stuck out his hand. "I guess I shouldn't have bothered you, Mr. Mortimer. A big man like you, I know how it is — you wouldn't be interested in someone like me with only a measly three hundred dollar retainer —"

I grabbed his hand and held on, tight. Very, very tight. "Now, wait a minute! I was just about to say, money isn't everything, you know. Even though I'm running a business, I still have time for sentiment. And your notion of spreading love appeals to my idealistic side. Definitely! Er — do you happen to have the three hundred bucks with you?"

"Here it is."

With his free hand he drew a roll of small bills out of his pocket. With my free hand I managed to count and tuck the money away in my vest. And all the while I was giving him the old fraternity grip and the old college try.

"I see great possibilities in your love serum, Stevens," I told him. "Should have no trouble at all selling it to the right parties. This isn't a



## Let's Do It for Love

matter of shoving propaganda at the public—what you want is to interest a few people with money and get this thing rolling. But first, I'd still feel better if I had a little demonstration."

"Whenever you like," he agreed. "Just come out to the house. If you weren't so busy and all, I'd have invited you to come home right now, for supper."

I grinned. "Like I say, Stevens, I'm a man of sentiment. Let's go."

\* \* \*

Half an hour later I was standing on the doorstep of the Stevens' bungalow and Stevens was doing the honors.

"Dorothy," he said, "I have a guest for dinner."

"So I see. Why didn't you call and let me know ahead of time?"

"Well, it was all so sudden. I mean, Mr. Mortimer here just got together with me and—"

"Together where? In some bar?"

"Now you know I don't drink, honey. This is business."

Dorothy Stevens sniffed. She wasn't a bad-looking tomato for a housewife-type, but that sniff told me all I wanted to know about Joe Stevens and his home life. "What kind of business?" she asked, as the two kids ran out and grabbed Joe by the legs.

"You know, darling. The love potion. Mr. Mortimer is in public relations and he's going to promote it for me. He thinks there's a lot of possibility in it."

"Huh!" Tomatoes can be awfully sour.

"Now, sweetheart—we can tell you all about it at dinner."

"I suppose." She stood back and let us get past her into the living room. Joe Stevens dragged his kids along—they had their hands in his pockets and I kind of got the idea they had learned this particular trick from watching Mama at work.

Dorothy Stevens went out into the kitchen as we sat down at the table and began to rattle pots and pans—which is a woman's way of swearing.

"Say," she called, "what did you do about the car?"

"What?" A look came over Stevens' face and I glanced around to see if I was on a rocking boat—because he certainly seemed to be seasick all of a sudden.

"You know perfectly well what," Dorothy called out. "I gave you three hundred dollars just before you left the house for the down-

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payment — all the money we got from Aunt Imogene's will. What did the man say? Will he take it on a trade-in?"

"I didn't get to the car dealer."

"You didn't?" The rattling of pots turned into a banging and crashing. "Then hand back the money — it isn't safe to carry so much around with you in cash."

"I — uh — haven't got the money."

The banging stopped. "You haven't? Then who has?"

"Well, Mr. Mortimer here needed a retainer if he's going to work on the formula, and so —"

There was a loud crash.

Joe Stevens rushed out into the kitchen and closed the door. I sat there and tried not to listen. The two kids were watching a cowboy kill fifty Indians on television, and the noise almost but not quite drowned out the sounds of murder from the kitchen.

Finally it was all over and Stevens tottered back into the room. He didn't look seasick any more. He looked drowned.

"Dorothy has a headache," he said. "We'll be eating alone, I guess. If you don't mind."

So we went into the kitchen and ate alone. The kids did all the talking during the meal, and most of the eating. But after we finished, I managed to drag Stevens back to business.

"Don't be discouraged," I told him. "Women just don't understand these things. But once we get rolling, and the money starts coming in, she'll be all right."

He cheered up, a little. "Thanks for being so patient with me," he said. "You know, Dorothy is really a fine wife — I couldn't ask for better. It's just that she hasn't got the faith I have in my inventions. Now, this compound —"

"Yes, let's see it," I told him. "You say you work in the cellar?"

He took me down there, and I got to admit he'd rigged up the best little laboratory I ever saw outside of a Universal Pictures horror movie. He had electric gadgets and test-tubes and coils and retorts; everything except Boris Karloff in a white robe and an old pair of rubber gloves. And he had a nice, pint-sized vial of bubbling yellow stuff that sparkled when he held it up to the light.

"Here it is — the compound."

I squinted at it. "Very pretty. Haven't seen anything like it since I served a hitch in the Army Medical Corps. But I got only one question — does it work?"

## Let's Do It for Love

"Does it work? Of course it works. Take my word for it. I've tried it out. Here, you drink some and see for yourself."

"Not me, brother. I'm in public relations, how can I love people? But I insist on a demonstration."

There was a squawk from outside the cellar door.

"What's that?" yelled Stevens, jumping about a foot and almost spilling the liquid out of the vial.

"Oh, just some alley cat, I suppose."

"Alley cat?" A gleam came into his eye; one of those genuine 18-karat Mad Scientist gleams. "Wait here."

He tiptoed to the door. There was a shriek and a scuffle and a snarl, and he came back with the cat in his arms. "Help me hold it now while I fill this hypodermic syringe," he panted. "There. Just a drop will do. Don't let it claw you! My, it's a fierce beast, isn't it? Now — let me make the injection here in the shoulder."

The cat jumped about a foot and landed on the table, back hunched and claws ready for action. It spit and snarled and — smiled. And then its tail began to wave. It purred. It came over and rubbed against my shoulders.

"See? Just one drop."

I shrugged.

"Want more proof? Wait a minute." He raced up the stairs and in a minute he was back with a cage in one hand. Something tiny and yellow fluttered and squeaked inside the cage, and when it saw the cat, it beat against the bars. He reached in with the hypodermic needle, and the canary quieted. It began to sing.

Then he set the cage down on the laboratory table and opened the door. The cat went over to the cage. The canary came out. The cat opened its mouth. It raised its paws. Then it purred and stroked the canary. The canary jumped up and perched on its head, chirping. The mewing and the chirping blended until they were doing a duet that sounded very much like half of a barbershop quartet singing *I Love You Truly*.

I stared, but there it was, right in front of my own eyes. One drop for each and they made beautiful mew-sic together.

"You win," I said. "I'm sold. And you mean to say this will work on anything? Animal or human?"

"Of course. It's all a glandular reaction, as I told you. The basic components —"

"Yeah. I know. And it's permanent, doesn't wear off?"

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He frowned. "I can't answer that one fully, yet. I haven't had enough opportunity to experiment. Injections are all I've tried, and they seem permanent enough. It seems to me that spraying the entire skin surface would be even more of a guarantee of a permanent reaction. The oral method is another way of absorbing the compound. This I haven't been able to work with."

"Well, I hope you won't get me wrong," I said. "But it might be a good idea to test that idea right here at home. I mean, slipping a drink of this stuff to your wife —"

His frown got frownier. "I know what you mean," he sighed. "And I'd thought of it, even suggested it. But Dorothy won't cooperate. And she won't let me use it on the kids."

"You could sort of sneak it into her coffee or something, couldn't you?" I suggested. "No worse than a bad Mickey Finn."

"No, Mr. Mortimer, that's out. It isn't ethical. It violates the true spirit of Science."

I shrugged. "Okay, just a thought. And speaking of thoughts, now that I've seen it in action, what do you want me to do with this stuff? I can promote it, but what's the gimmick? You must have some idea in mind."

"I have a purpose. A very serious purpose," he assured me.

"Making money is always serious," I agreed. "And I'm here to help. Is your idea to get this made up like some kind of a perfume and use it in an atomizer? So that a tomato can get the old love-light working in her boyfriends' eyes? Or do you want it for salesmen only — slip it into customers' drinks so they'll love that product, huh? Or is it for political campaigns? Blow it out through the air-conditioning system in a meeting hall and have all the voters fall in a swoon for the candidate?"

"You can stop right there, Mr. Mortimer."

"Okay. But I got a million more ideas. When I go into action for a client, I really go into action."

"You have the wrong slant entirely. This discovery of mine will never be used commercially. While there may be money in it for me eventually, I do not intend to prostitute it commercially. This is a serious and important finding. I told you it could revolutionize the world, and that is what I plan it to do."

"Like how, for instance?"

"Mr. Mortimer, I need your help in only one thing; to enlist the attention of important people all over the nation. We must tell them about this discovery and promote its use. It is my hope that the government itself will take over the manufacture of my preparation and prepare bombs."

## Let's Do It for Love

"Bombs?"

"Yes. Love-bombs, you might call them. A complete stockpile of bombs which can be dropped on foreign soil, exploded in quantities large enough to cover the face of the earth, and spread love throughout the entire world.

"Do you understand now what this means? It can be the end of wars, the end of hatred, the end of suspicion and enmity and fear. Men will love one another and my work will be done."

I blinked. "But won't it cost a fortune? What about the machinery to produce them? How about time?"

"It won't cost a fraction of what it costs us currently to maintain armaments," Stevens declared. Regular detonating mechanisms can be used, filled with this concoction in fluid or gas form, and they could be turned out in quantity within a period of two or three weeks. No, the whole thing is simple. All I need now is your advice and help in bringing this whole miraculous discovery to the attention of those in authority. And I hope you'll agree with me that it's a job worth doing."

He didn't look like a Mad Scientist any more. He looked like the starry-eyed idealist.

I thought about it for a minute. The whole notion was screwy, but it might work. Anyhow, the chemical *did* work. And it had great possibilities. Suppose the government would go for it? An exclusive contract to supply them with this elixir of love might run into a pretty penny or a beautiful buck. Stranger things have happened. Great nuts from little acorns grow, and when some dumb old Greek name of Archimedes or something invented the lever, little did he reckon that someday from this simple discovery would spring the entire mighty slot-machine industry.

"I'll do it!" I said. "Meet me tomorrow morning, nine o'clock, in Bert Bugle's office."

"Bert Bugle?"

"The attorney," I explained. "First thing we gotta do is get this mixture patented. Protect it against anyone else stealing the formula. He knows his way around in Washington and he can steer us to the right guys to see. Cut through all this red tape, take us through to the President, maybe."

"Fine. I knew I could rely on you, Mr. Mortimer."

"See you at nine, then? Goodnight."

"Goodnight," said Stevens. The cat and the canary gave me a farewell serenade, and as I went out the door I could see the canary

## Robert Bloch

pecking at the cat's claws. The canary wasn't hurting the animal; just giving it a manicure.

Came nine o'clock. Came Stevens and I to Bert Bugle's office in the Banker's Building.

I went in ahead of Stevens and paved the way.

"Hi, Bert. How's life from the back of an ambulance? Have you habeased any good corpuses lately?"

"Mortimer! I've been looking for you! What are you doing about Mountain Dew? Six months ago I gave you a thousand-dollar retainer to promote it for me, and where are we? Halfway to bankruptcy, that's where!"

"But Bert—"

"I've got a lot of money tied up in that company. Everybody in Blue View is laughing at me because we can't sell the lousy stuff. I'll admit it's a vile-tasting bottled water, but you assured me you could put it on every table in the suburb for your fee. I've got a good mind to slap a lawsuit on you!"

"Bert! Listen a minute, will you? Never mind about the Mountain Dew. I've got something big for you in the outer office. Something really *big*!"

"Animal, vegetable, elephant?"

"This is real, this is *really* real. Come on out and meet a million dollars!"

At the mention of a million dollars, Bert Bugle calmed down. I led him out to meet Joe Stevens and commenced talking.

The whole pitch went just the way I'd planned. I told him what I had, what we wanted. Then I pulled the trump card. I sent Joe out for an alley cat and told him to buy a canary in the pet shop downstairs. In five minutes he was back with a mangy, spitting tomcat and an anemic-looking canary. Out came the vial and the hypodermic syringe. In went the compound. And thus did Love come to Bert Bugle's office.

"There," I said. "Now do you understand?"

Bugle's eyes goggled. "Do I? Indeed I do! Mortimer, I want to talk to you for a moment, privately. If you'll excuse us, Mr. Stevens."

Bugle dragged me into his private office and slammed the door. Then he grabbed my collar.

"Man," he panted. "Do you know what this means?"

"It means you're tearing my collar," I informed him.

"Never mind that. This love philtre, or whatever it is, works!"

"Of course it works, and it's going to be worth millions."

"Millions to Stevens, perhaps. But for me, it's plain bankruptcy."

## Let's Do It for Love

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, suppose his scheme goes through — and it might, very easily. They start dropping love-bombs all over the place and what happens? People begin loving each other, that's what!"

"Is that bad?"

"It's awful!" Bugle groaned. "Eight years I went to school, ten years I spent building up a law practice. And now people are going to love each other. No more lawsuits! No more divorces! No more thefts, no more murders, and that means no more need for lawyers! Yes, and no need for judges, or sheriffs, or police. What kind of a deal is this, that I should cut my own throat?"

"But you'll be assured of a good fee for handling our work."

"Maybe so." Bugle stuck out his chin. "But after all, I owe something to the legal profession. I have ethics to maintain, and because I'm ethical, I can't stand by and see a man deliberately and coldbloodedly set out to exterminate rape, arson, fraud, and all the things we attorneys hold so dear. No, I'm afraid I not only refuse — I must also go ahead and fight your scheme with every force at my command."

He turned to go back into the other room where Joe waited. "Just a minute, Bert. This guy Stevens is sincere, he's sacrificing everything for an ideal. Maybe you won't help us, but you can't fight us. It isn't fair!"

"Sorry. But I have no choice. And as for you, if you'd spent your time promoting Mountain Dew instead of running around with crackpots, I might have listened to you."

"All right," I sighed. "You win. But please, don't *tell* Stevens you're going to fight him. Just say you have too much other work or something."

"You talk like a crackpot yourself," Bugle sneered, "but that's your affair. Go on out and tell him I'm too busy to handle the deal. But I warn you, I'm going to get up a legal committee to pull strings in Washington against this. And as for you, I'm suing you for that thousand dollar retainer on Mountain Dew. Now, good day to you."

If that was Bert Bugle's contribution to a good day, I'd hate to see what he'd come up with for a bad one. I shuffled out, collected Stevens, the cat and the canary. In the car I told him a sob story about Bugle's health breaking down.

"But don't worry, we'll get somebody else. The world is full of lawyers."

"We'd better hurry. I haven't much time, and my money is running out. Lawyers cost a lot."

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"But you've got a steady job."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I quit yesterday. Figured this would be taking all our time from now on. Dorothy is plenty burned up about it, so it's up to you."

"Great!" I managed to keep the car on the road, but I was beginning to sweat a little. So far, in one day on the assignment I'd accomplished a lot. I'd made a man quit his job, set things up for his wife to leave him, and lined myself up for a lawsuit.

"You know, I have a lot of confidence in you, Mr. Mortimer. You sure know how to get things done." Stevens gave me that trusting look and I winced. "Now where are we going?"

"Where — ? Why, to the newspaper, of course."

"Newspaper?"

"We need publicity, don't we? What's a better way of getting Washington to notice an important discovery? Why, this is front page news here — worldwide news." As I talked, I began to see the sense of that. Why hadn't I thought of it in the first place? Once we got our headlines, lawyers would come running to represent us. It was that simple.

"Here," I said. "You wait in the car. I'm going up and see the editor. Not the city editor — the managing editor, the big boy himself. Give me that vial, and the cat, and the canary."

I marched in. I knew my way around, and within five minutes I was sitting in Tom Mason's office. The vial was in my hand, the cat was on my lap, and the canary was sitting on my left ear.

"Now listen, Mortimer, if this is another one of your crazy stunts." Mason began to make noises like an executive. I cut him short and launched into my story. Thirty seconds of it was enough to quiet him down, and a minute had him gasping.

The cat meowed, the canary chirped, I talked, and Mason gurgled. Finally his gurglings turned into words.

"And it really works?" he choked. "You can drop love-bombs on the whole world, even Russia?"

"I personally guarantee it."

"It's a miracle!" wheezed Mason.

"Then you'll give it a front-page spread? I've got the guy downstairs in my car right now, ready for pictures. You can play up the local boy angle, get it on the wire services!"

"I'd sooner run my own obituary!"

"What?"

"Get out of here before I throw you out!"



## Let's Do It for Love

"You mean you don't believe me?"

"Of course I believe you. And that's just why I won't touch the story with a ten-foot pole. Can't you see what would happen if they did drop love-bombs? War would stop, wouldn't it? And crime, too. There wouldn't be any stories for newspapers to run any more, and I'd be out of business in a year."

"But couldn't you run stories about *nice* things? About the good, constructive actions people would be engaged in? Isn't that news, too?"

"My boy, always remember one thing. Good news is no news. No, I'll have no part of it. And don't try any of your publicity stunts because they won't work. I'll give orders to kill any story mentioning love-bombs. And that's final."

His secretary stuck her beak through the door, thus completing her resemblance to Woody Woodpecker, and sniffed. "Mr. Mason, there's a Mr. Bugle on the phone for you."

"Bert Bugle?" I asked.

"Neighbor of mine out in Blue View. Wonder what he wants." Mason moved towards the phone and waved me out. "Get out of here, Mortimer, but remember what I said. No story. Not now, or ever!"

I got out. Down and out. No story, and already Bugle and Mason would be getting together. They had to be neighbors, yet! How could I lick this thing? Every step took me closer to the edge of ruin. Nobody wanted love, so go fight City Hall. Tell it to your Congressman.

"Knocklewort!" I shouted.

Joe Stevens blinked at me as I opened the car door.

"Knocklewort! That's our answer! We're going to see Congressman Knocklewort!"

"But what about the papers?"

"Oh, that." I gulped. "The editor was afraid to break the yarn without an official OK. Security measures, you know; talk about dropping bombs and stuff might upset people. Have to clear it with the government. Knocklewort's our man. He's congressman for this district, he's in town this week, and besides, I once handled his campaign for him. We'll tell him the story and let him take it right to Washington."

We were off to the Hotel Tippmore, vial, cat and canary. And when I got through to Gifford Knocklewort's suite, I took the whole menagerie upstairs with me, including Joe Stevens.

Once again I went into the now familiar pitch. I told old Knocklewort the whole story, watching his face through a cloud of cigar smoke. One thing about Knocklewort—even though he is a

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congressman, he very seldom blows out anything but smoke. He kept his mouth shut until I'd finished, and I waited very anxiously for a reaction. Finally, it came.

"Sorry, I'd like to help you, but it's out."

"Think of the publicity, Congressman! You, as sponsor of this idea, taking it to the President. Why, you'll be hailed as the saviour of the world! This thing is big! I'll bet you could be the next President yourself, with this deal."

"President of what?" asked Knocklewort. "A bankrupt nation?"

"But it wouldn't cost much to make these bombs," Joe Stevens explained. "I have the formula all worked out, ready to go."

"Isn't that just lovely?" Knocklewort spread his palms upward. "Now work out another formula showing how people can get along in this country after you drop your bombs. Your cat here, and your canary can get along — they've got others to feed them. But people can live only by working. Working means business. Business means competition. Competition means progress. Progress won't exist once folks start to love each other. They won't want to step on each other's toes, take advantage of one another.

"Why, in six months business would be at a standstill and this nation would be ruined. For that matter, if folks start to live in harmony, they won't need any government — and I'll be out of a job!"

I couldn't stand to look at Stevens' face, so I sat down. The young chemist was getting a new formula into his head — a formula of what makes the world go around.

"Sorry, young man." Knocklewort put his arm around Joe Stevens' shoulders. "I'm as much in favor of love as the next man — kiss a lot of babies when I campaign — but there just isn't any place for it in business, or politics either. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a dinner engagement to keep. Old friend of yours, Mortimer. Tom Mason. Know him well, don't you?"

"Yes," I sighed. "I know him. Well, come on, Joe. Let's go."

\* \* \*

We went. Stevens was scowling, and even the cat and the canary seemed to have lost their sex appeal for each other. But in the car, Stevens turned to me with every tooth gritted.

"I'm not licked yet," he said. "Can you leave for Washington with me next week?"

## Let's Do It for Love

"Why, you don't want to do that, my boy. First of all, it costs too much money."

"Never mind. Dorothy's going to leave me. Oh, don't think I haven't realized that! She'll leave the minute she hears we aren't getting anywhere. So I might as well sell the house. And I'll take the money to finance us. We'll go to Washington and see the President himself!"

"Now look, son." I faced Joe Stevens and for a moment it was as if I actually were facing a son of mine. "You might as well know the truth. Bert Bugle isn't sick. He just won't touch your problem because he thinks love will ruin the legal profession. And Tom Mason isn't afraid of censorship. He believes love will kill newspaper circulation. You heard what the Congressman told you. And you're going to get the same story everywhere. It will be the same in Washington."

"So you had better realize one thing right now. This world doesn't want love. It isn't ready for love yet on a large scale. Oh, it might work for individuals. It always has, you know. And it might even work for a small community. But not for the masses."

"I can't believe it," Stevens sighed.

"You'd better believe it. Because you're going to be fought tooth and nail. As I left Mason's office, Bert Bugle was already calling him on the phone to warn him about your love-bomb menace. And now, the Congressman is dining with Mason. They're probably all going to get together and run you out of town. I advise you to forget this scheme, go back to Dorothy, take your old job. And — much as it hurts me to do this — here's your three hundred bucks back."

Stevens managed to find a smile and spread it over his face. It didn't quite reach. "Never mind the money," he said. "You stuck by me, and you tried your best to help."

"Please take it. I don't want your dough."

He shook his head and I was surprised that nothing rattled. "No, it's yours. I'm going home now and see what Dorothy is going to do." Stevens made a gesture that included the cat, the canary, and the vial of love potion. "You might as well keep these as souvenirs. I won't be needing them."

I nodded, then plodded up the street. The cat followed me, purring, with the canary hitching a free ride on his back. I held the vial in my hand and looked for a sewer. No sense keeping this stuff. It was just bad medicine. Nobody wanted love. Bert Bugle was right. I should have stuck to Mountain Dew Water.

Then the thought sneaked up and kicked me in the pants. I stopped plodding and started running.

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I didn't stop running until around ten o'clock that night, when I ended up panting on Joe Stevens' doorstep.

He opened the door and I breezed in.

"Mortimer. What brings you here?"

"A taxi. But never mind that. I came to tell you that we're saved."

"Saved?"

"Just came from Mason's house. He and Congressman Knocklewort and Bert Bugle have agreed to call off their feud. Bert Bugle isn't going to sue me either. We can have all the publicity we want, Bugle will get us our patent protection, and Knocklewort himself will go to Washington for us to see the President!"

"Wait a minute. How did all this happen?"

"You did it! Or, rather, your love potion did it. Remember the vial you left with me?"

Stevens nodded.

"Well, I got to thinking. All three of these birds were having dinner together. If a delivery man showed up at the back door with some Mountain Dew Table Water, and if they drank it at dinner – and if this water happened to contain the love potion."

"You did it!"

It was my turn to nod. "Then, when I figured the stuff had plenty of time to get in its licks, I showed up at the front door. The rest was easy as pie. They loved me. They loved you. They loved the idea. They loved everybody. So we're all set. Now we can begin our campaign." I paused, waiting for the applause. "What's the matter, Joe? Doesn't it get you excited?"

Stevens stared out of the window. "You forget what I told you," he said. "If my potion is injected, the effect is permanent. If it's sprayed on to the skin surface it's also sure to last forever. But if you just drink a small amount, it wears off, perhaps in a matter of a few hours. Tomorrow those men will be free of its influence and they'll go back to opposing us."

"But we can keep them hopped up with the water forever if needs be," I argued. "I can manage to slip them drinks all day long."

"It's no use. They're not the only ones who have to be sold. No, Mortimer, you've shown me today that you can't sell love to the world. Everybody in Washington will be the same way and you can't change human nature."

"Guess I never thought of that angle." I glanced at him closely. "But that isn't all you have on your mind, is it?"

## Let's Do It for Love

Stevens pointed towards the door. "See those suitcases? Dorothy packed up when she heard the news. She's ready to leave now. Don't know what's keeping her."

"That's tough," I said. "If there's anything I can do to help—" I stopped and sniffed. "You smell anything burning?"

"You're right, there is something burning!" Stevens wheeled around. "It's the cellar! The house is on fire. Come on!"

We clattered down the basement steps and into the smoky cellar. But the house wasn't on fire. I saw only two things burning down there. Stevens' wife, Dorothy, and a little pile of papers on the laboratory table.

Since Dorothy seemed to be burning only with rage, I turned my attention to the pile of papers. "Get some water!" I yelled. Stevens ran to the laundry tub, filled a pail, and splashed the contents over the charred fragments on the table.

"What's the big idea?" he asked. Dorothy made a little sound that might have been a laugh and might also have been a sob.

"It's too late," she said. "I did it."

"Did what—?" Stevens stopped and stared.

"I burned the formula. The formula for the love potion."

"But—"

"Love potion!" She *was* sobbing, now. "All it ever caused was trouble. And even though I'm leaving—yes, I *am* leaving and for good, so don't try to talk me out of it—I wanted to get rid of that horrible elixir forever!"

Stevens sat down and covered his face. "Two years of work shot to pieces!" he groaned. "Nothing to show for it but the little flask on the table."

Dorothy was over to the table and back again before I'd noticed it. She thrust the flask into my hands. "Here, Mr. Mortimer! A little farewell gift for you. A token of my personal appreciation for busting up my family, busting up my husband's life. Now, get out of here! Get out of here and take this damned love with you!"

I held the flask and stared at the yellowish liquid. I held love in my hands and it was cold and pale. I didn't like it, because nobody loves love. It doesn't work for the masses, only for individuals.

"Here," I said to Dorothy. "A little farewell gift for you, too!"

Lifting the flask, I broke it over the top of her head. She went down in a heap, with the love potion splashing all over her.

## Robert Bloch

"You \$#°/o&@¢/\*!!!" yelled Stevens — only, he yelled it much more plainly than that. "Trying to kill my wife, huh? Just let me get my hands on you —"

The proposition didn't appeal to me. I turned and ran. The last I ever saw of Joe Stevens, he was sitting on the cellar floor holding his wife in his arms, trying to revive her.

Yes, that was the last I ever saw of Stevens. But I heard from him once, since then.

About a week afterwards, he called me on the phone.

"I'm the happiest man in the world," he told me. "And I can never thank you enough for all you did for me."

"It was nothing, really."

"First of all, you showed me that this business of reforming the world is a lot of foolishness. No one man or one idea is big enough to do the trick. So I went around and got my old job back again. From now on, I'm sticking to Dog Biscuits."

"And your wife?" I asked.

"Ever since you hit Dorothy on the head she's been a new woman. She adores me. And you deserve the thanks for it."

I smiled to myself. "Sort of thought that would do the trick," I said. "Couldn't figure out a better use for the last of the love potion than to spray her with it. You said it would be permanent."

"I guess it is." Stevens hesitated. "Just one thing you should know, though — only don't ever let my wife hear about it."

"What's that?"

"She made a mistake. There really was none of the love potion left at all."

"But the stuff I splashed on her from the flask —"

The happiest man in the world chuckled. "That was some cleaning fluid I had lying around."

He hung up, and I suppose that's the way the story ends. But there really *was* a love potion, and I can prove it. Come around to my office anytime and take a look at my cat and my canary.

Or, if you'd prefer to wait about a month or so, I think I'll be able to show you the only kittens in the world with wings.

# The Fear Planet

I hope nobody reads this.

Because if they do, it means someone else has come here. And if they come here, they'll get caught, like we were caught.

Just to play safe, I won't mention dates. I won't give the name of our expedition, either. No clues. Just a warning.

I'll write it as a warning, then. Write it now, while I'm still able to.

We landed yesterday on this accursed asteroid. There were four of us—Commander Jason Sturm in charge; little Benson, engineer and navigator; Hecker, our biologist. And myself—radioman, assistant navigator, jack of all trades.

Never mind about the trip. It was nasty. Packed like sardines in a tin ship, hurtling through space. We'd have landed on a comet just to feel solid ground under our feet.

Commander Sturm's chartings showed brilliant imagination, but damned little else. Why he chose this particular destination I'll never know. A God-forsaken little asteroid is what it seemed to me—and it certainly turned out to be one.

But we were elated when we nosed down. Benson's indications on atmospheric pressure, density and component analysis showed we could step out freely without using our insulated suits. Moist air, and almost too much oxygen. Temperature above eighty.

When we landed, Benson looked through the perio-glass.

"God!" he muttered. "What a spot!"

I couldn't improve on his comments anyway.

I squinted out at the surface of this miniature earth. In my time I've done a little serious drinking. I've seen pink elephants. But this was the first time I ever saw green nightmares.

That's what the place was—a green nightmare.

## Robert Bloch

Nothing but forest, as far as the eye could see—a lush, tropical green forest. Swamplike growths rising out of mud that was not brown, but a verdant green. And twining through mazes of twisted vegetable tentacles was the mist. The livid mist of coiling, greenish steam.

Our own Amazon was nothing compared to this ripe and rotten blight. A true green hell.

But we'd been weeks inside the ship. As I say, anything looked good. And if the air was right—

"Let's go," said Commander Jason Sturm. Tall, gruff-looking, weather-beaten old space dog, but a big name in the annals of interspatial exploration.

He already had the flag out and unrolled. Typical Sturm touch. Gangling biologist Hecker helped me lug the marker with the official exploration disc.

The four of us lowered the ladder and clambered down into the ooze.

Sturm led the way. The new Columbus, you know—flag and all. He stepped down into the swirling mist and walked forward. Three paces and we could hardly see him. The steam was that thick. Literally pea soup.

But he stuck the end of his flagpole down in the mud and made a little speech.

"I claim this body in the name of—"

I didn't listen. I was trying to haul that marker along. Hecker grunted beside me. The damned thing was heavy. Every step caused us to sink into that slimy ooze. We gasped.

Breathing the moist, warm steam wasn't much relief.

"Curse these vines!" Hecker almost tripped as his feet were enmeshed in the octopoidal coils of a trailing plant.

"Wait a minute!" Sturm had concluded his verbal formalities. He stood beside me and raised his hand.

"Better get some knives," he suggested. "We'll carry the marker over to some kind of rise and clear away the vines around it. That way, the marker will stand out."

"Doubt if it will do much good," commented Hecker, stooping over and examining a stray tendril. "This stuff will probably grow over again in forty-eight hours."

"What is it?"

"Don't know, yet. Certainly isn't earthly. Something like the Venus formations. Note the valvular conformations."



## The Fear Planet

"To hell with the valvular conformations!" decided Sturm. "Time for that later. Let's get out the knives and set the marker."

\* \* \*

We should have taken a couple of aborigines along with their machetes. We had to virtually hack our way through the forest of plant life. No trees here, understand. Just towering vegetables and ferns and bushes.

We didn't mind, at first. The elation of landing was still buoying us up. Hecker wiped the steam from his spectacles and grinned. Benson cut a swath ahead. Sturm stormed along, good-natured as ever.

"Here's a spot," he suggested, indicating a little green knoll.

Hecker and I set down the marker with gasps of relief.

I didn't like to gasp. Inhaled too much of that air — rank, fetid air. Rank and fetid, like the vegetation. Vegetation —

"Say!" Hecker's voice rose in an excited whisper.

"What's up?" I gave him a look. He was peering over his shoulder apprehensively.

"Thought I saw something move. A bush, over in that clump."

I followed his glance. Nothing there but a mass of livid growths waving gently.

"You're mistaken. Wipe the steam off your glasses."

Hecker grinned and followed my suggestion.

We moved the marker up, ready to dig around the base and sink it. Sturm and Benson bent down to assist.

That's why we didn't see what was coming until too late.

"Look out!"

I straightened up with a jerk, whirled around. Whirled around and stared at slithering horror.

The thing was green. That's all I saw at first — the green outlines of the rushing figure. The great green figure with the waving arms. Then I looked and realized the truth.

"It's a plant!" I yelled. "And it's *alive!*"

Undulating toward me, undulating on trailing tentacles that somehow resembled bloated caricatures of human legs, a towering monstrosity swept forward. Two stalks carried a pulpy, swollen body like that of an obscene idol. Above were the waving arms of the plant creature, on either side of a rising growth corresponding to a head.

The head was the worst of all. Round, squat, the size of a green melon, it bobbed on the monstrosity's neck — if neck it was — like a

## Robert Bloch

nodding flower. But there was nothing flowery in the wrinkled, obscene visage that peered from the forefront of the rounded head. The thing had a face – a face with eyes and mouth.

I know it had a mouth. Because it came too quickly for me to do more than stare, shudder, and try to dodge the groping arms. I did swerve to one side, but too late. The tentacles enfolded me.

Sturm was shouting orders. Benson was waving his knife. I couldn't see Hecker. But I paid no attention. My being – physical and mental – was literally gripped by the silent, slithering green horror with the coiling arms that now squeezed my throat in a rubbery embrace.

I fought and clawed, but I was pressed close to the pulpy body of the monstrosity; close enough to smell the rank carrion odor of fetid decay. The tentacles pinned my head back. I stared into the horrid greenish wrinkles that parodied a face on the end of the nodded stalk that served for a neck. I stared into emerald eyes – eyes with livid pupils that seemed to swim in chlorophyll.

My fist lashed out at that dreadful mockery of a countenance, landed deeply in the putrescent mass. The thing squeezed tighter. I saw Sturm at my side. He too had a knife, and it stabbed down in a vicious arc into the body of the vegetable creature.

“Look out!” he shouted, again.

Suddenly the creature raised me in its arms. I kicked air as the plant held me aloft. The head strained closer to me, the ghastly semblance of a face craning at the end of the stalklike neck as though it sought to bury its mouth in my flesh. I watched that champing hole of a mouth –

Writhing frantically, I wriggled free. But too late. As I fell, the tentacles caught my ankles. I hung head downward as the gigantic vegetable bent. I felt the rubbery lips of the monster press against my leg. Press, and drink deep. Needle-like pains lanced through my calves.

Then, dizzy and faint, I fell.

My last memory was that of kaleidoscopic vistas of horror. The rank nausea of the face, the pain of the creature's bite; the distorted faces of Sturm, Benson and Hecker as they plunged their knives into the towering green body – and then the cool softness of the mossy earth as I landed.

\* \* \*

When I awoke I was in my bunk. Sturm bent over me, eyes grave. I sat up.

## The Fear Planet

"What are you doing to my leg?" I asked. He'd ripped the trousers away from my right leg, baring it to the knee. Now he tore the cloth from my left leg.

"The thing must have stung you," he told me.

His fingers indicated the two incisions in the flesh of either calf. Tiny punctures, deep in the fatty part, with little purplish discolorations around them. I noted a slight angry swelling at the points of the wounds.

"Better cut into them," Sturm grunted. "Damned thing might have a poisonous sting."

I shook my head. "Put on some antiseptic and let's see what happens," I suggested. "They don't hurt now – and I'd hate to be laid up on the voyage back if it isn't necessary."

Sturm shrugged.

"What happened after I passed out?" I asked.

He sighed, rose, busied himself with the antiseptic and a swab.

"Devil got away," he confessed. "Stung you, dropped you, and scuttled off. We had our knives into it. Benson tried to follow. The plant just lashed out once with one of those green cables and knocked him flat. Scooted hell for leather back into the jungle."

Antiseptic applied, he stepped back. I wheeled around and attempted to stand up.

I didn't succeed. A wave of weakness swept over me in a giddy cloud. I dropped back on to the bunk.

"What's the matter, boy?" asked Sturm. His eyes, on my face, were anxious.

"I – I don't know," I murmured. "I feel weak. My legs seem numb."

"What's that? Can't hear you."

Was it possible? I thought I was talking in a normal voice, yet he couldn't hear me. I must be weaker than I thought.

"Better lie down and let me cut," Sturm advised.

"No." I forced a grin. "I'll just lie down and sleep for a bit. That'll fix me up."

"Think you'll be all right? We're going out to take a look around the place. Want to see if we run into any more of those things. And this time we'll go armed."

"Go ahead," I said. "Good luck."

Storm clumped out. I turned my face to the wall. I felt hot, feverish. My legs were numb, and the numbness seemed to be creeping up to my hips. It was a warm, pleasant feeling. With an effort, I sat up and propped my head on my hand. I stared down at my exposed legs. The swelling hadn't perceptibly increased.

## Robert Bloch

That was a relief. I dropped back to the pillow and lay there. The numbness was natural, after all. I was very tired. Very tired. I would sleep.

I drifted off.

How long I slept I do not know. But when I opened my eyes again, I was a different man.

The numbness was gone. I sat up and took another look. My legs were unchanged. No inflammation. No pain. I swung off the bunk, stood up. Everything was all right.

Rummaging around, I found an old white shirt. I ripped it up into strips and quickly bandaged my legs, improvising puttees.

Then I strolled out.

The change was remarkable. My depression had passed. Now I could gaze on the weird landscape with new appreciation. Whatever terrors might lurk out beyond, there was a certain ghastly beauty in this God-forsaken spot on a lonely asteroid.

As I watched, green twilight crept over the land. The trees were shadowed by approaching darkness, and the steam assumed new and fanciful shapes, peopling the abysses of the forest with misty ghost-presences.

Ghost-presences!

I wondered about that monster from the jungle. What was it — this walking vegetable? What freak, what mutation, what biological aberration had produced the strange life-form which had attacked me?

I gazed into the twilight and pondered.

\* \* \*

It was dark when they returned. Not the familiar bluish darkness of earth, but green-dark. A deep, heavy green.

I was sitting on the ladder.

"How do you feel?" asked Sturm.

"Fine." I indicated the bandages I'd wrapped around my legs. "These help."

"Maybe you could use some more salve," Hecker suggested.

"Don't bother. I'm all right."

I was, too. I felt much better after my leaden slumber. Full of new energy.

"What are you staring at?" Sturm asked me.

"Look," I whispered, pointing over his shoulder.

They turned. Stared at the rising moons.

## The Fear Planet

Yes, moons. Two of them. Moons for an asteroid. Green moons.  
Nightmare moons for a nightmare world.

They rose over the horizon, wide apart, like two green eyes set in the broad face of space. Green eyes that gloated down on this twisted, tangled world of mad life.

Sure, I know what that sounds like. But the sight of those moons inspired that kind of thinking.

"Where'd you go?" I asked.

"Didn't get very far," Sturm told me. "That damned jungle is too thick to plow through in darkness. Besides, those things —"

"Forget it," I said, quickly.

"I can't forget it." Hecker interrupted, rubbing his glasses with a handkerchief. "There's something wrong here. Animate vegetables with animal characteristics. Almost anthropomorphic."

"Almost what?"

"Anthropomorphic. Manlike."

"You're crazy."

"I'm not crazy. Nature is crazy, yes. I tell you, I want to investigate. This is something new. Never in the annals of interspatial biological or chemical discovery have I heard of this life-form. Why, the chemistry is all wrong! The chlorophyll doesn't react — it's like blood plasma!"

"Why don't you set up the portable lab equipment and do a little checking?" asked Sturm. "Might as well put something down in your notebooks. We'll be getting out of here in the morning — whenever that is."

"That's right," Benson added. "Wonder how long night lasts in these parts?"

"We shall see. But I hope it's short. Frankly, this place gives me the creeps."

Coming from a man like Commander Sturm, this was an admission. But we all felt it.

Nevertheless, Hecker did get busy. He went back into the ship and began to putter around. I could hear him humming under his breath, an eerie sound in the dead green emptiness all about us.

"What next?" asked Benson.

"A little food," Sturm suggested.

They ate.

"What about you?" Sturm asked me.

"I'm not hungry," I answered. And truthfully, I didn't want to eat.

"You're shaken up. Why not lie down again?"

I laughed the suggestion off.

## Robert Bloch

"I feel too full of pep. Let's have another look around after you finish eating."

"You go, Benson," said Sturm. "I'll take a nap here while Hecker works."

So Benson and I started off.

Our flashlights cut a swath of white radiance through the greenish jungle. Our knives cut their swath also. It was a slow, painful journey that we made, burrowing into the lair of nightmare.

If there had only been some sound, some sign of life! But there was only the silence, the interminable silence as deep as the vegetable forest itself.

Yet we were straining our ears for a sound. A rustling sound. The sound those plants would make—the creeping plants that coiled and struck and stung. Somewhere they lurked and waited. Somewhere they crouched in the green maze beyond.

Benson and I toiled silently on. Until—

"Over there!" Benson gripped my shoulder. And I saw it.

Through the towering, outlandish boles of a clump of vegetable monstrosities, the livid moonlight fell on that incredible vision.

"A ship!" I gasped.

It was indeed just that. A spaceship, blunt nose buried in the ichorous slime, from which the arms of strangler vines rose to embrace it and drag it down farther into the ooze.

It was a ship—but what a ship! I haven't seen one like it except in the museums back home. Fully seventy or eighty years old—an ancient model with the big old tube-drive. How such a tub ever managed to land here under its own power was past comprehension.

We crept closer.

Benson opened his mouth to call hello, and then stopped. He grinned in embarrassment. Of course there was no need of calling out. Obviously the ship was deserted.

We found the guide rope leading up to the cabin. The door swung open, on dangling hinges. An old-style model indeed, we saw—the kind of ship they used to blowtorch shut before a voyage and then reopen at landing.

We went in. Small cabin, of course.

"Let's look for the papers," Benson suggested. We looked. The safe compartment was unlocked. I rummaged around inside.

"Here they are," I said.

But I spoke too soon. My hands encountered nothing but ashes.

"The papers—they burned them," I whispered.

## The Fear Planet

"I wonder why?" Benson asked.

I didn't answer. I thought I knew, but I couldn't be sure.

"Better get out of here," I told him.

"We can come back tomorrow with Sturm and really investigate."

I tried to push him from the cabin. But he saw it.

"There," he muttered. "On the floor."

He saw it, all right. Those reddish stains...and the tattered scraps of clothing...and the rotted bits of tendrils.

They told the story.

"Those vegetable things," Benson whispered. "They must have come in here. But where are the bodies?"

"Never mind that," I answered. "Let's clear out."

We cleared out, but the matter was not forgotten. The thought haunted us. The thought haunted the ghostly forest through which we floundered. It leered from the greenish mist. Leered like the pulpy visage of the monster –

"I see it!"

Benson tugged at my arm. I winced, stepped back. He pointed at the clearing ahead. Sure enough, I recognized the all-too-familiar shape of a vegetable creature. It was stalking sluggishly through the mist, long green neck craned off to one side.

We crouched back as it passed.

"Look at its back," Benson urged.

I stared. Was I mad – or did I see the tattered remnants of a garment trailing in rotted shreds from the body of the monstrosity.

It couldn't be. The things destroyed the men on the ship we found, and then took their garments, like apes or aborigines might.

More mystery. A strange ship. Burned papers. And vegetables wearing clothes. Why?

We watched the apparition moving off into the mist. Then Benson led the way. We almost ran back to camp. I couldn't move too fast. My swollen legs prevented me. My hands, too, were oddly numb. That damned vegetable horror, attacking me –

But I forgot all that when we reached our campsite.

Sturm had a fire going, and his eyes reflected its glare as we approached.

"Thank God," he muttered. "You're safe."

"Where's Hecker?" I asked.

Sturm didn't answer. He gripped my shoulder, steered me towards the ship. Benson followed.

## Robert Bloch

I almost expected what I saw – a duplicate of the scene in the ruined spaceship we'd found in the forest.

The portable laboratory was no more. Shattered glass and twisted metal spread a tangle of debris across the floor of the ship. And glistening against the glass and steel were ominously bright red drops of a thick fluid....

"I dozed off," Sturm whispered. "Just dozed off. I thought I saw a shadow pass the fire. It slithered swiftly as though I glimpsed it in a dream. But it was no dream when I heard Hecker scream."

"Where is Hecker?" I repeated.

Sturm pointed mutely towards the shambles on the floor. I didn't understand. Then his finger followed an imaginary line outwards. A line not wholly imaginary, marked in bright red drops.

"Those things are swift," he muttered. "It dragged him off through the trees, into the forest and the fog. I couldn't leave the camp alone and follow. Besides – from the way he screamed – I knew it would be no use any more. No use at all. Hecker's gone."

I turned away. But Benson, at my side, shivered openly.

"Let's refuel and get out of here," he whispered. "We must."

If such a suggestion usurped Commander Sturm's authority, he gave no sign. His shrug held, instead, a definite indication of relief.

"How long will it take to get up power?" he asked.

"Seven or eight hours, full speed."

"That means we're stranded all night."

"We could take turns keeping watch."

I opened my mouth. "No need of that. Benson, you'll be working inside. Sturm, you might as well sleep. I can hold the fort by the fire here. I'm not tired."

Sturm gave me a grateful smile, then frowned quickly.

"No, you don't," he said. "You're still shaky; your legs are swollen. That was a narrow escape you had today. Don't go in for mock heroics. You sleep and I'll stand watch."

"But –"

"Orders." Sturm patted my shoulder. "Let Benson go to work. You lie down in the other cabin. I'll stick by the fire."

For a moment there was silence. All three of us turned, as if by common impulse, and stared out at the green fog. Stared at the livid eyes of the moons. Stared into the darkness and wondered what shambled there, lurking in wait for warm flesh.

Then, "Let's go," Sturm muttered.

He strode off.



## The Fear Planet

Benson, with a shuddering glance at the floor, turned to the control panels.

I sought a bunk in the other cabin, lay down.

Before I turned out the light I got bandages. More bandages. I hadn't told Sturm how accurate his diagnosis had been. I was shaky. Very shaky.

I bound myself up like a mummy. Vague apprehensions whirled through my brain. I fought them back, bound them in under mental bandages as tight as the actual ones which swathed my limbs.

I didn't dare think. I slept.

And then I dreamed.

I dreamed of the fog-filled forest, and the ship we'd found. I dreamed of the vegetable monsters and of what happened to poor Hecker. In this dream, Sturm and Benson and I played curious roles. Roles that were somehow quite natural – now. I seemed to understand, for the first time, that this was all *right*, somehow. I lived through our discovery again, but this time there was no feeling of strangeness. It was natural.

Even the scream was natural. The scream that shattered my sleep, forced me bolt upright. It sent me out of bed and racing into the other cabin.

By the time I reached it, the scream had died away into a horrible, gurgling moan. A ghastly thud, punctuated by muffled breathing, followed. Then another moan, and silence. Deep, green silence.

I wrenched open the door, then stepped back. The horrid tableau was plainly visible – too plainly, for no man can look clearly on nightmare.

Benson, slumped over the control board, was quite dead. As dead as a partially decapitated man can be.

Sturm, at his side, was quite alive. The axe in his hand still swung heavily from his wrist.

But I only glanced at these two. My eyes were riveted on the figure that sprawled at Benson's feet, tentacles still twitching up to his throat. The green figure, the forest figure, the image of vegetable madness that had torn Benson's neck with avid fangs.

The vegetable figure – that wore human garments!

I stared and stared at that grotesque horror, that mad caricature of all that had once been a man. A scarecrow figure, half-human and half-vegetable – with just the trace of contorted features in the pulpy face.

## Robert Bloch

Sturm had smashed into the body with his axe, and now the creature was dead. Dead, and pouring its awful reddish, greenish ichor in a vast pool from mingled cells and veins.

I stared and blinked again, this time at those human garments which were bursting at the seams and at the plant tentacles that forced their way through. Human garments—

Hecker's garments!

Sturm looked at me, tossed the axe to the floor. I picked it up, looked at the discolored blade, and flung it out of the cabin doorway.

"Don't you understand?" whispered Sturm. "It is Hecker. He was bitten and carried off by those vegetable monsters. And now—he's one himself!"

Sturm sat down on one of the cabin bunks, head in hands. I watched the cords throb convulsively in his neck.

"You see what it means," he murmured. "Hecker turned into one and bit Benson. Now Benson will rise. Like—like that old earth legend about vampires.

"Something must get into the bloodstream, change the whole physiological structure. A virus, but more than a virus. Something that changes chemically, with amazing swiftness. Holds back death, too. Turns animal life into carnivorous vegetable life."

Suddenly Sturm sat up, a sheepish smile on his face.

"But such a thing is incredible," he blustered. "No, I've been talking like a frightened child. It couldn't be that way, could it?"

I walked over to him, moving slowly, impeded by the bulk of my bandages.

"Maybe it could, Sturm," I said. "I believe it could."

He grinned at me, but I went right on.

"You see, I know," I whispered.

"Know? How?"

"Because I lied to you today. I wasn't stung by those things when they attacked me earlier today—I was bitten. And I didn't go to sleep afterwards when you left me lying down.

"I *died* instead. And came alive."

Sturm was on his feet then, but he was too late.

I pushed him back against the bunk. He was a strong man, but I was strong, too. Very strong. And quite determined—when I looked at his neck.

My bandages loosened. I brought my hands up to his throat.

He saw them.

## The Fear Planet

For the first time he noticed how they had changed. That they were green....

And then he saw what heaved out from my coat, budding forth from my chest and sides. He saw my face. My strength blossomed, yes, blossomed!

That was hours ago, of course. I'm still changing as I write this. Sturm isn't *awake* yet. But he will be. And so will Benson. Then we shall be together again.

The three of us will go out and seek Hecker in the forest. And the others – the ones that came before us. We shall live there, grow there forever.

And someday a new ship will come. A new ship, with new men. Men with white throats. Men with red blood.

Look around, reader. Look around. If you see a moving green shape behind you – the story's over!



## Beep No More, My Lady

Lady rose from her launching pad shortly before dawn on April 1st. She carried a full payload of sending and receiving instruments as she soared triumphantly into space, and officials freely predicted that she would go into orbit around the sun by April 5th.

S. O. Bushwhacker rose from *his* pad shortly before noon on the latter date. He carried a full payload of benzedrine and tranquilizers as he soared triumphantly into his executive suite at UBC in Hollywood, and officials freely predicted that he would go into orbit today without hitting the ceiling.

Lady – or Unmanned Satellite 69, as she was affectionately known to the government observers and astronomers who tracked her course – fell into solar orbit around 3 P.M. The faint and intermittent *beep-beep* of her signaling devices reassured those who charted her progress.

S. O. Bushwhacker – or “old S.O.B.,” as he was affectionately known to the underlings and network minions who tracked his course – returned from a leisurely luncheon at Tail o’ the Cock and fell into his chair around 3 P.M. The faint and intermittent burping of his digestive devices reassured those who charted his progress.

Exactly what prompted Lady’s sudden outburst a half hour later is still a matter of conjecture. But there is no dispute as to what caused S. O. Bushwhacker’s outburst at precisely the same time.

He was sitting in his private washroom, monitoring a new network comedy show, about a group of loveable hillbillies, called *The Real Rabinowitzes*, when the explosion occurred.

Members of his staff rushed in from the outer office, fully expecting that the inevitable had finally occurred – somebody had planted depth-charges in the plumbing.

The plumbing, however, was intact. It was Mr. Bushwhacker who had gone to pieces.

## Robert Bloch

"Did you hear that?" he shouted, gesticulating at the TV set.

"Hear what?" inquired personal secretary Crosley Sneed.

"The commercial!" Bushwhacker stabbed a shaking finger in the direction of the television screen. "Listen!"

Centered on the tube was the stern, distinguished face of a prominent physician. Like all medical scientists, he had one of those machines which light up to reveal a cross-section of the human body through which pills raced, arrows of pain darted, and small fires raged in the large intestine.

Crosley Sneed shrugged. "Looks okay to me," he murmured. "Of course, maybe we could blow up that intestine a little more. Make it king-size, for greater visual impact, like—"

"Never mind how it *looks!*" Bushwhacker yelled. "I designed the damned thing myself. I'm asking you to *listen!*"

The prominent physician was pointing his index finger at the viewing audience, as prominent physicians so frequently do— with or without the benefit of finger-cots— and speaking earnestly.

"— and so remember, friends, *modern* hemorrhoids demand a *modern* remedy. That's why leading scientists recommend amazing new miracle discovery, Preparation J—the only hemorrhoid remedy in the world that helps shrink atomic piles! If *you* suffer from the burning, itching torture of piles, why not limp down to your friendly neighborhood BEEP-BEEP today?"

"Whad' he say?" demanded Crosley Sneed.

"Yes, folks, that's Preparation J—the new, quick-acting ointment that will bring instant relief to your BEEP-BEEP or double your money back! Remember the name— that's Preparation BEEP-BEEP—"

"Hear that?" Mr. Bushwhacker exclaimed. Sneed and the others nodded; they heard it loud and clear. Punctuating every few words now came the BEEP-BEEP tones, blasting out of the set and drowning out the commercial.

"Sabotage!" Mr. Bushwhacker shouted. "We're being jammed by another network. Get me Edward R. Murrow, that—"

"Wait a moment." As is usual in a crisis, cooler and wiser heads prevailed. Fortunately, one of the staff members was the distinguished psychiatrist, J. Hooper Trendex, who may be remembered as the author of that popular adult western series, *Have Couch—Will Travel*.

It was he who spoke, and now stepped forward to switch channels on the set. For a moment Mr. Bushwhacker's jaws clenched convulsively; never before had anyone dared to tune in on a rival

## Beep No More, My Lady

network here at UBC, and to do so now, in the sacred confines of his own private washroom—

But the deed was done, and J. Hooper Trendex stepped back as a face and voice emerged from the tube. An idiot child gaggled forth in a smiling, loathsome close-up. "Look, Mom!" the little cretin shouted. "No BEEP-BEEP!"

"Just as I suspected," murmured Trendex. "All over the channels. This isn't sabotage. It's the signal from that new satellite they sent up the other day. The one they call Lady."

"*Mamma mia!*" Mr. Bushwhacker groaned and seated himself on the sole available article of furniture in the room.

"I'm quite sure," Trendex continued. "Radio signals have been coming in for days—just a faint beep at regular intervals."

"But this isn't a faint beep," Mr. Bushwhacker protested. "It's a blast! And it's interrupting every few seconds. How can anyone listen to television with that noise going on?"

"I'm positive Washington is already aware of the difficulty," Trendex soothed. "Perhaps something went wrong when the satellite began to orbit around the sun. They'll take care of it down there. Meanwhile, people can always listen to radio."

"Oh no they can't!" Otis Wormley, chief of the Radio Division, burst into the room just in time to catch the last remark. "All hell's breaking loose, Chief!" he gasped. "I just got word from the engineers. Somebody is beeping Arthur Godfrey!"

Mr. Bushwhacker sprang to his feet. "Is nothing sacred?" he cried. "This has gone far enough. Get the FCC on the phone. Tell them we want the interference stopped immediately. It *must* be stopped before we hit A-Time tonight. Don't you realize we're premiering the new western?"

All faces sobered. UBC was indeed launching a new western series—its twenty-seventh effort of the season, and undoubtedly one of the best. Sick and tired of cowboys armed with pistols, revolvers, derringers, rifles and sawed-off shotguns, the network had come up with a novelty designed to revolutionize the field; the first cowboy in television history to carry a machine-gun.

"Get moving!" ordered Mr. Bushwhacker. "We've got to save that show!"

His entire staff mobilized into action, almost precisely at the same moment as other staffs at another networks moved into the fray. They called the FCC and the FCC called the Department of Defense and the

## Robert Bloch

Department of Defense called the Top Brass and the Top Brass called the Top Scientists, but—

At 9 o'clock, when the new cowboy hero pointed his weapon at the crooked gambler and pulled the trigger, the machine-gun beeped.

"Holy Moley!" screamed Mr. Bushwhacker. "Why can't somebody do something?"

"You heard the reports," Trendex told him. "Nobody really understands just what went wrong. Apparently the sun's proximity did something to the sending devices—stepped up the signal and beamed it over to AM and FM frequencies. Engineers say it's up to a decibel-count of around eighty right now and rising fast. Just one of those freak coincidences, but apparently there's nothing dangerous about the phenomenon."

"Nothing dangerous? It's killing the ratings, and you say it isn't dangerous." Mr. Bushwhacker gulped. "How long do they expect this noise to go on?"

Trendex shrugged. "There's no telling. Lady can orbit around the sun for years, apparently. And the signals should continue for the life of the satellite."

"Satellite, schmatellite!" Mr. Bushwhacker smote his desk a vicious blow. "You realize what this means? We'll get beeped out of business!"

During the days that followed, it seemed as if his grim prediction was all too true. Frantic TV viewers and radio listeners were promptly reassured as to the source of the strange sounds emanating from their sets, but this did nothing to alleviate their irritation at the interruptions. Nobody wanted to hear something called *This Is Your Beep* or follow the irregular rhythm of Lawrence Welk and his *Beep-Beep* music. So the sets clicked off, and the sponsors canceled in droves.

Meanwhile, the volume and irregularity of the signals continued to rise. Die-hard listeners began to sue the networks because of headaches they suffered while attempting to listen to headache-remedy commercials. A mob armed with switchblades and zap-guns picketed the studios where *American Bandstand* originated, protesting that the beeps were destroying the beat of rock-'n-roll. Several prominent stand-up comedians laid down on the couch in utter frustration because while their writers had all come up with beep-beep gags, there was no medium on which the routines could be heard.

Finally, the President preempted the networks for a Special Message, but by this time almost nobody was bothering to listen. The few who did reported that he said little or nothing. Mostly, he just beeped.



## Beep No More, My Lady

"It can't go on," Mr. Bushwhacker moaned. "People won't be able to get along without TV! Why, they've got nothing to do! Reports say they're flipping all over the country – jumping off roofs, blowing their brains out, even reading books." He paused, then resumed grimly. "That's right, *reading books*. You know what that means, don't you, Trendex? You're a psychiatrist. You've heard what happens when people start reading. It gets so they can't stop. First thing you know, everybody'll be hooked, they can't kick the habit –"

"I know." Trendex sighed. "Another few months and we'll lose our audience forever. Not only are they reading now, but some of them are even starting to go *outdoors* again. Taking walks, going on picnics, indulging in sports and games and their own home entertainment. You know what *that* will lead to. Sooner or later somebody is bound to rediscover sex, and then –"

"This is the ulcer bit! There's got to be some way out!"

"So there is," Trendex mused, softly. "I've checked the government engineering reports, and they've found a method. The trouble is, they can't afford it. The government doesn't have the kind of money we have here at the network."

"Then let's spend the money," Mr. Bushwhacker groaned. "I don't care what it costs, just as long as we get back into business."

"Very well," Trendex murmured. "We'll call a meeting of execs from all networks and raise a kitty. Each network buys its own satellite from the government – yes, they have them ready for launching, but it costs too much to send them up. We'll foot the bill, provided our engineers are allowed to install a frequency system to jam out and ride over the beep-beep signal. And we'll put in a projection system too –"

As he continued, Mr. Bushwhacker's eyes widened. "It'll cost a fortune," he commented. "And what about the set manufacturers?"

"Who cares?" Trendex shrugged. "As for the cost, once you start operating again, you can always raise the rates and get the money back from the sponsors."

And that is exactly the way it worked out.

Two weeks later, to the day, UBC launched its first satellite. Promptly at sunset, Mr. Bushwhacker and his staff gathered at the window and gazed at the darkening sky. Behind them stood the inner-office TV set, silent and neglected. It would remain so from now on, and so would all the television receivers and radio sets throughout the country and the world.

Because now, up in the sky, the lights of the 21,000,000,000-mile screen brightened into view, projecting the picture from the transmitting

## Robert Bloch

satellite orbiting forever around the sun. And all over the nation, eager eyes sought the heavens.

Up there the tremendous face beamed benevolently at the multitude below. A huge hand flicked a switch and a cross-section of the human body appeared against the Milky Way.

Then came the historic moment, as the voice thundered clearly from the sky, penetrating palatial mansions and poorest tenements alike.

"Friends," boomed the message from the heavens. "Are you one of the three out of four people who can't visit the washroom after every meal? Scientists say —"

Down on earth, Mr. Bushwhacker wasn't listening to what scientists say. He was hugging Trendex, and he had a message of his own. "It works!" he exulted. "It really works!"

"Certainly marvelous," Trendex agreed. "This marks the beginning of a new era of communication. No more sets, no more aials —"

"Never mind that jazz," Mr. Bushwhacker said, as the voice in the sky proclaimed amazing new relief from harsh laxatives. He winked at Trendex, and grinned.

"The important thing to remember," he said, "is that from now on, nobody can ever turn it off..."

## Phantom from the Film

Nothing is quite as refreshing as a nice cold glass of water.

Tell you what you do—go pour yourself one, now. You're going to need it.

Good! Now drink about half of it.

There. Have you still got half a glass left? Are you sure that it's icy cold?

All right. Take that remaining half glass of ice-cold water and pour it down the back of your neck.

Then you'll feel the way I did on the night of Terry Sylvestro's preview. The cold shudder running down your spine will just about correspond with mine.

I'm not trying to sell you a bill of goods. Yes, I know—I'm Pat Peters, in publicity at Seven Arts Studios. A Hollywood press agent, always building up a phoney angle. But there was nothing phoney about Terry Sylvestro and his new horror movie. I only wish there was—then maybe I'd find it easier to sleep these nights. Sometimes, when that silvery shadow crawls across my chest and wriggles into my dreams—

But let me tell you what happened.

It all started when Terry Sylvestro announced the production of *The Skull Man*. That's big news along the Strip.

I don't suppose you recognize Terry Sylvestro's name. Funny, isn't it?—the public is crazy about movie stars but nobody knows anything about the real big shots, the producers and directors. Outside of Orson Welles and De Mille they're virtually unknown.

But the Coast knows Sylvestro. One of the big independent producers, a smart showman with a talent that spells box office. Seven Arts was lucky to get a three-picture release deal with him. Everybody was on edge waiting for his first production announcement.

## Robert Bloch

It came. I got the news the day it broke. Terry Sylvestro planned to produce *The Skull Man*.

A shiver drama from Sylvestro? I smelled a story. I hopped over to his office on the lot.

The story was waiting for me, all right.

"Get your hands off my throat!"

I heard the gasping wail as my fingers tightened on the knob of his office door. A woman's wail of terror.

"Get them off – you're choking me – Ooooooh!"

The door wrenched under the impact of my shoulder. I saw the owner of the voice – recognized her. Louise. *My Louise!*

Her fear-filled face hung before me, contorted in agonized dismay. And that was all I saw of her. For towering above her, broad shoulders moving convulsively as arms bent her body back, was a creature spawned in a nightmare's darkest halls.

The silvery monstrosity was like nothing human. The torso of an anthropoid, covered with slick, hairless skin that glistened evilly – a huge, bald head resting squarely on the neckless shoulders, and a face –

The face turned toward me as the thing noted my entrance. I stared into the visage of a fiend. Fleshless, bony jaws champed fretted lips which parted to reveal yellowed fangs. Silvery cheekbones reared about a gaping hole where a nose should be. And above that, bedded in deep-set sockets, burned hell's own fires. The eyes. The eyes of a demon, glaring with the idiot glee of a cavern gargoyle.

The creature hissed at me, and Louise screamed again. Then I lost my head. I started forward, arms swinging. The huge bulk of the monster loomed before me, but I didn't hesitate. I lashed out savagely, felt my arm pinned from behind.

A voice chuckled.

"Take it easy, Pat. It's all right."

I wheeled.

Fat, bushy-haired little Terry Sylvestro stood grinning behind me.

"But he's got Louise – he's –"

"Isn't it wonderful?" It was Louise who spoke. The monster's hands still gripped her throat, but she smiled up at me.

"Wonderful? Why –"

"Of course, darling. I'm so excited! Sylvestro's testing me for the feminine lead in his new picture."

"All right," I said. "I give up. And I suppose this skull-headed gorilla here turns out to be Robert Taylor or somebody."

## Phantom from the Film

"Pat, I want you to meet a new star," Sylvestro broke in. "This is Franz Basilov. I've just signed him for the title spot in *Skull Man*."

Franz Basilov released Louise and grabbed my hand. He smiled through his heavy makeup, but the hideous leer of his pseudo-skull remained.

"Please to meet you, Mr. Petairs," he said. His voice was deep and the accent heavy. "This is great day for me, you know. Now you excuse please, I go and remove this." Again a smile. "I hope I do not frighten you."

He loped out of the room as Louise giggled.

"Oh, darling, you were too funny—charging in here like a mad bull!"

"Go ahead and laugh," I retorted. "Lucky for you it was only a test. Can't blame me for falling for it, though. Certainly is a remarkable makeup job." I turned to pudgy little Sylvestro.

"Who's this guy Basilov?" I demanded. "Never heard of him before. Refugee import?"

"Not exactly." Sylvestro smiled. "He's a bit player. He's been in this country about six years."

"And you're going to make him carry the lead in your picture?" I exploded. "Are you crazy?"

"Not at all," the producer assured me. "Remember *Frankenstein*? What was Karloff before that? The film made the actor—the actor didn't make the film. That's the way *Skull Man* is going to work out. That's why I'm casting unknowns like Louise, here.

"Maybe you think I'm screwy." The word sounded queer falling from the lips of the erudite little production artist, for his eyes were glowing, intense, as he faced me.

"Yes, maybe you think I'm screwy. But you're wrong. I know a horror film is something out of my usual line. I know that the usual horror film is out of any *intelligent* producer's line. It's corny hokum.

"But I have something in mind that's different. A horror film that really horrifies! Not a stock plot with a series of stupid close-ups of grotesque makeup, but a work of the calibre of *Citizen Kane*—with experimental lighting and camera angles to tell the story. To burn the story into the audience's brain. That's why I'm not using any name players. The camera will be the star of this picture."

I tapped a cigarette against the desk. Things were beginning to click now. "Sure, I get it. And what a spot for some real publicity releases! Sylvestro does an Orson Welles! Discovers celebrated new

## Robert Bloch

European horror star! A new thrill is arising from the lots of Seven Arts Studio to—”

A wave of Sylvestro’s pudgy hand cut me short. He faced me, shaking his head.

“No, Pat. That’s not the way. I don’t want that kind of publicity. In fact I don’t want any publicity at all.”

“What?”

“That’s right. No publicity. Listen, Pat. I’m sticking my neck out here. For years I’ve wanted to do a horror film. For years I’ve filed away ideas, piled up research on the job. But it isn’t the kind of thing Hollywood expects from me. I’ve never dared risk it. Now is the time. I’m doing this picture on a low budget, without name stars or writers. Production costs are low. And Monsen handles the cameras, best man in the business. I’m going to turn out a ‘sleeper’ picture. If it goes over, fine. If not, nobody will be hurt—if we don’t publicize it in advance.”

I puffed on my cigarette.

“But can’t I even play up this Franz Basilov? Give him a man of mystery buildup with the fan magazines?”

Terry Sylvestro’s eyes narrowed.

“No, Pat. He’s just an unknown, understand? He’s a foreigner, he’s nervous and excitable. As a matter of fact, his past is—dubious. And I don’t want anybody bothering him. He’s ideal for this role and I’m going to handle him myself and get out of him what I want. I’ll make him the monster of all time—but you must let him alone. Remember what I said. The camera is the star of this movie.”

In weeks to come I had good reason to remember what Terry Sylvestro said. Good and terrible reasons.

But we’re coming to that.

I’ll skip the weeks of production. I didn’t see Louise at all. She was on the set day and night, and the set was closed to visitors. That meant studio officials too—when Terry Sylvestro gave an order, it went through.

Naturally the lot was full of rumors about Sylvestro’s new picture. The designers hinted that he had gone crazy—was ordering the most outlandish sets and props. The other cameramen couldn’t get a thing out of Monsen. He and Sylvestro were always closeted in the laboratories with the day’s rushes.

But the big mystery was Franz Basilov. Who was he, and what was he? Why were he and Sylvestro inseparable—going and coming together to and from the studio?

## Phantom from the Film

There were whispers of his conduct on the set. How he worked only to music. How Sylvestro was driving him until he cracked up into almost daily hysterics.

They said he was a dope fiend — that he was crazy — that Sylvestro hypnotized him before he went before the cameras — that he was a genius — that he was a moron — that he was actually the monster he meant to portray.

"They" said. I didn't say anything. I just sat back and waited. I still had that feeling that a big story was about to break. Without seeing Louise, without talking to Sylvestro, without checking rumors — I waited.

\* \* \*

Then came the preview.

It wasn't announced. Usually a Terry Sylvestro preview is an event. They run the film in three or four suburban houses simultaneously to get audience reaction. There's a lot of ballyhoo and excitement. But in keeping with his policy on this picture, there was no announcement, no fanfare.

Louise called me up that afternoon.

"Hello, darling — are you taking me to the preview tonight?"

"What preview — where?"

She told me. It was an obscure little house in Glendale.

"Sure. Shall I pick you up?"

She agreed. Her voice aroused my concern. It was a weary voice, and I might be haywire, but I could swear I detected a note of fright in it. Surely Louise didn't talk like a girl who might be on the verge of stardom. She didn't sound as if this preview meant a life-or-death verdict to her career. She sounded as though it just meant a life-or-death verdict to her.

But then, I was imagining things. Or was I?

Because when I drove her to the theater, I got a nasty shock.

Louise was pale, thin. Her eyes were circle-haunted. Her smile was forced, fixed. She trembled, but not from excitement.

I was smart enough to play dumb. I didn't appear to notice anything out of the way. My questions were innocent enough on the surface.

"Who's showing up?"

"Sylvestro, of course. And Monsen. And I suppose Dick Blynn."

Dick Blynn was a stock-contract pretty boy who played the male lead opposite Louise in the film.

## Robert Bloch

"Anybody else?"

"Well, Mr. Kruger will be there."

Barney Kruger, the Big Boss of the studio. He would be.

"What about the new star? What about Franz Basilov?"

Was I really seeing things or did Louise turn pale?

"He—he isn't coming," she whispered. "He can't."

"Can't come? But this is his great moment—"

"He's sick," Louise murmured. "He collapsed on the set on the last day of shooting. Overwork."

"Sylvestro must have driven him pretty hard, eh?"

"Yes." There was a quaver in Louise's voice. "He had to go through tortures with that makeup."

"By the way, who handled the job?"

"Why, Sylvestro did it himself."

"Sylvestro?"

"Yes, he and Monsen. It took five hours every day to apply it and three to get it off. It's something new—special. For camera effects. It's horrible."

She made no effort to control her shudders now.

"Louise. What's the matter?"

"Darling, I'm frightened."

That was no news report. She huddled close to me, biting her lips as she continued.

"That awful face," she gasped. "I can't bear to think of the way he looked—that skull—"

I sensed something phoney here. I remembered the day I broke in on their test for the parts. Basilov was wearing makeup then and Louise wasn't frightened. No, there was something else behind this, behind all the rumors on the lot, behind Louise's hysteria.

She was whimpering on.

"The way he used to look at me on the set—as if he were dead. And he spoke like that, too, as though he were talking in his sleep. Or from beyond the grave."

"Come on, Louise, snap out of it."

"I can't. You don't understand. You don't know what Sylvestro used to do to him. The way he talked to him in his dressing room. The way he directed him with his hands. And the torture he went through, with his makeup burning into his skin. Basilov told me when Sylvestro was away. He told me what the part was doing to him. It was like a vampire—draining him of his life, his soul."

I stopped the car and took Louise by the shoulders.



## Phantom from the Film

"Here, now. Seems to me that you're the one who's collapsed, not Basilov. What's all this about Sylvestro torturing the guy? What kind of a picture is this, anyway?"

"You'll see," was all that Louise would tell me.

And I did.

The dingy marquee of the little theater bore no hint of the preview performance. But when we walked down the aisle as the feature flickered to its end, I noted the little block of seats reserved for Dick Blynn, Sylvestro, Monsen, the Big Boss, and ourselves. One extra seat — that would be for the missing Basilov, of course.

We sat down. The others straggled in. Dick Blynn tapped my shoulder casually. Monsen, the cameraman, gave me a curt flicker of recognition from behind thick-lensed spectacles. Sylvestro entered with the Big Boss. He was dressed to the hilt — his usual custom on preview evenings. His smile was disarming.

I stared at Louise's pallid face in the gloom. Was she imagining things? None of the others looked a bit excited.

But as the feature ended, Louise squeezed my arm at the elbow until I winced with pain. She almost gasped as the preview announcement flared up, followed by the title.

### *The Skull Man*

Then hell broke loose.

Never mind what the picture was about. It was all Terry Sylvestro hinted at, and more. Weird musical effects, distorted camera pans and angle shots, and a fantastic story about a man who became a zombie, long after death — a walking dead man whose head was a bare and grinning skull.

Dialogue carried the action along. Louise and Blynn dominated the early scenes. But all the while the film was building up to the climax—the moment when Basilov, as the zombie, *Skull Man*, would walk.

The moment came. The scene was a cellar crypt beneath an old house. Here *Skull Man* lay in ghastly slumber by day, waiting sunset time to rise and walk. The camera bore down on the door of the cellar as the light faded.

Then came the hellish part.

The film went *three-dimensional!*

The audience gasped. So did I.

## Robert Bloch

So this was what Sylvestro had up his sleeve—this was why he had devised special makeup and closeted himself with Monsen the camera-man!

Three-dimensional film. Two projectors running together is the old, imperfect process. But this was different. I looked at the back of the house. Only one machine running film. Yet the illusion was perfect. You could see the door stand out on the screen. It was vivid.

The audience was in a frenzy. They sat on the edge of their seats, these suburban moviegoers, and waited for the horror to appear on film.

It appeared.

As the door swung open—actually swung outward, I could swear—the figure stood revealed.

*Skull Man!*

I could see the gleaming silver body bulking, the face hidden by shadows. Arms swung forward, almost off the screen. And the monster advanced, straight for the camera. It was a medium shot and the image was life-size. The shadows fell away. I saw the face of *Skull Man*.

Louise gasped at my side, but I didn't notice. All I could hear was the pulsing terror-throb of my own heart. For the face of *Skull Man* was the face of living death.

Death's teeth were fixed in a snarl of hate. Death's bony muzzle leered out from the screen. And his eyes—his eyes bulged and blazed from the hollow sockets in a stare that transfixed my spine.

*Skull Man* moved forward, towards the audience. The crowd screamed as one. It looked as though he were actually walking into the theater. His arms clawed out. He reached. His feet moved.

And then—

*Skull Man walked off the screen!*

I saw it with my own eyes. Five hundred others saw it too. We didn't notice the muffled crash in the projection booth behind us. We didn't notice how the film flickered and died away. All we saw—all we could see—was that incredible silver figure, stepping from the screen to the stage. A life-sized silvery image—an image of walking death.

It moved to the edge of the stage. The crowd was on its feet. Louise was holding my arm, trying to tell me something. Her voice was lost in the single scream torn from the audience's throat. I didn't look at her. I looked at *Skull Man*.

Looked at him and *through* him...

## Phantom from the Film

His image was transparent. Solid – but transparent. But three-dimensional. Very.

Even as I watched, the monster was moving. His legs flashed. And then –

*Skull Man* leaped from the stage into the audience below!

The silver body hurtled through darkness, arms outstretched. I saw it swoop and land. The skull-head descended, arms closed on a man's neck.

They were climbing over the seats in panic, now. The screams rose to a crescendo of fear. Somebody at the back of the house turned on the lights.

That did it. I could see everything. A little vacant space had been cleared in the block of seats where the silvery figure landed. Fleeing spectators huddled away from the man who now struggled in strangulation under those silver fingers.

I saw his body twist and turn. I saw his purple face.

But *Skull Man* –

There was nothing there! With the lights on, the figure from the screen had disappeared!

And yet the body hung in air a moment before sagging to the floor of the aisle. The skull-headed creature was nowhere to be seen!

Then the crowd swept back. Something was pushing through the packed mass. Something strong. Something – *invisible*.

For a moment, as the little wave of movement passed me, I caught a hideous glimpse of a silvery-transparent torso against the background of a woman's dark coat. Just a glimpse, nothing more. Then it was gone.

And now Terry Sylvestro was dragging me out of the theater. I half-carried Louise through the mob. Straggling behind us came Monsen, Blynn, and the Big Boss. Monsen's goggle-eyes loomed close as he screamed in my ear.

"For God's sake, Pat – think of something! He's escaped – out of the theater – loose now out there – loose on the world –"

We made our way through, somehow. But it wasn't until we locked ourselves in the manager's office with that worthy and a hysterical machine operator that we did any talking.

Then there was nothing to say. Nothing to do.

We couldn't help the manager. We couldn't help the shocked projectionist. Neither of them knew anything, or had any explanation. All we could do was get out before the police arrived on the scene.

Terry Sylvestro summed it all up in his car as we sped away.

## Robert Bloch

"I thought I was making something new – but it turned out to be *Frankenstein* after all. I've created a monster. I pray it doesn't destroy me – and all of us."

"But how?" whispered the Big Boss, lips ashen as the tip of the cigar clenched between them.

"I don't know. I don't understand. The three-dimensional effect is ordinary enough. Something Monsen and I worked out together for a surprise. It's a revolution, but it isn't responsible for that – thing. I'd swear to it.

"Of course we used new makeup. I worked with Basilov for hours. I wanted him to 'live' the part. I'm afraid that somehow I've succeeded too well."

"But how do you explain it?" the Big Boss persisted.

"I can't. Nothing in physics, nothing in any science, nothing in any superstition can explain it. It's new. A man's image emerges from the screen as projected light rays in bodily manifestation. Alive. And with a purpose, a will of its own. A will to destroy."

"Yes," Louise murmured. "And it's escaped in the city."

"That's just it." Sylvestro sighed and brushed his hand through his hair with a despairing frown. "It's loose. Somewhere out there it's lurking. What it is and what it wants we don't know.

"But we must do something about it." Sylvestro sighed again.

"What can we do?" It was Monsen who spoke. "If it's a film image it isn't visible in light. You can't see it. We found that out when the lights went up in the show. It's visible only against a background in darkness. Of course, even in darkness you can't see the image at a 180-degree angle."

"Yes." It was Dick Blynn's quavering voice. The young juvenile was badly frightened. "And if you do see it – then what? How can you kill an image?"

That silenced us all. For long minutes we sped on in silence.

I forced a grin.

"Cheer up. We'll think of something. Meanwhile let's get a little rest. Tomorrow is another day."

Well, I was wrong about getting some rest. I doubt if anybody slept much that night.

But I was right about tomorrow being another day. And what a day!

I spent the morning in town, clamping down on the press. The Big Boss pulled every string he knew, but I had to do plenty of fast talking to keep the story of last night's tragedy out of the papers.

## Phantom from the Film

The yarn would spread fast enough, anyway. But printed in the newspapers, it would cause city-wide panic. Nation-wide, perhaps. The gruesome revelation that an invisible monster was abroad ravaging to kill — a monster bullets could not harm — would mean catastrophe.

The story was killed, somehow.

And when I got back to the studio, Dick Blynn was killed. Not somehow. But by — *Skull Man*.

They found him just inside the studio gates, lying behind his station wagon on the ground. He might have keeled over from a heart attack — but a heart attack doesn't leave the marks of squeezing talons around the throat.

"He's here — in the studio." That's what Sylvestro said when I entered his office. "He's out to get us all."

I didn't listen to him. I was trying to smile at Louise. She sat there, next to Monsen, wide-eyed with horror.

"We're safe here," I assured her. "Look, there's a police guard just outside the door."

"But they can't see it in daylight," Sylvestro objected. I could have kicked him.

"Still, there's the door itself," I went on. "If the thing is solid now it can't pass a locked door."

"It could slip in sideways," Monsen reminded me. "It just looks solid. Actually it's almost two-dimensionally thin."

I had a kick waiting for the cameraman, too.

But I persevered.

"Look here, we're going to find a way out of this. The first thing we must do is to study this creature — your creation. What are its habits? What is it after?"

"Us." Louise said it.

"But why?"

"Because it hates us. It loves to kill and it hates us. It's a character in a movie, remember. A mad thing. And we, all of us, were opposed to it. That's why it killed Blynn. Because he was the hero. And I'm — the heroine."

I put my arms around her.

"All right. Let's grant that for the moment. But why should it kill that man in the theater last night?"

"Panic. Or perhaps it was looking for us."

"Wait a minute. There's one sure way of finding out a few facts about *Skull Man*. Let's talk to the man who created him — really created the part and personality. Sylvestro — where is Franz Basilov?"

## Robert Bloch

For a moment Terry Sylvestro's eyes avoided mine. The producer bent his head as he answered.

"Basilov's ill. He collapsed, I told you. Don't drag him into this thing, Pat. The shock might be too great. It would kill him if he knew."

"It may kill him if he doesn't know," I retorted. "Get him down here to the studio right away. Every minute counts."

Sylvestro called. Basilov was on his way. We sat in silence. Each of us was watching the door — watching for what? An invisible presence? Here in daylight the whole thing seemed grotesque, absurd. But there was nothing absurd about the dead man in the theater and the strangled corpse of Blynn.

One more call was put through. The Big Boss did it. Shut down the studio and put a police guard around every lot. Only Basilov's car could come through now. If the monster was here at Seven Arts he would menace no one but ourselves.

A pleasant thought.

I nursed it until Basilov came in.

Then I got another shock. I'd seen Basilov only once, remember. At that time he was wearing the makeup for *Skull Man*.

It was a very different figure who now entered the office. Franz Basilov was tall and thin. His shoulders were stooped, his hair graying and sparse over his domed brow. His features were emaciated but kindly, and the only light in his haggard eyes was a glow of docility.

This man was no monster. This man was no phantom or fiend. He was — weak-willed.

"Weak-willed." The phrase struck a responsive chord in my brain. Basilov was weak-willed. Louise had said something about that —

But Basilov didn't leave me in perplexity.

He came into the room, hands twitching at his sides. His eyes lighted on Sylvestro and his lips twisted back in a convulsive tremor.

"So," he muttered. "It has happened, no? You knew it would. I warned you. You cannot tamper with the mind, with the psyche.

"You made me wear the makeup. You kept whispering to me your suggestions of evil. You commanded me to *be* the monster. You would not let me alone for an instant, no? Day and night you hounded me —"

"You're hysterical, Basilov!" shouted Sylvestro. "You're mad —"

"You are the one who is mad." Basilov stood before the desk, pale face drawn in a frown of accusation.

"You talk to me in my sleep. You make me watch the lights after I drink the solution and you suggest things to me that make me dream. You turn my soul into something wicked and dreadful that shines out

## Phantom from the Film

onto the screen. You create this thing from my soul. You talk to me when I sleep—”

“Hypnotism!” I sat up. I had it now. Those yarns about Basilov being drugged, or crazy. Louise’s story of being frightened by the man because his voice came from beyond the grave. The yarns about Sylvestro never letting Basilov out of his sight. Basilov was weak-willed. Sylvestro hypnotized him, made him a monster by influencing his subconscious while he was under the influence of some drug which released inhibitions. This, plus the strange makeup, plus the third-dimensional process combined in some way to create a new being—the image of *Skull Man* on the screen. And it came alive as a separate personality and body.

The realization was just a flash. Basilov was still speaking when I finished my chain of reasoning. Sylvestro sat defiantly in his chair, an ugly smile about his lips.

“Crazy,” he hissed. “Crazy as a loon.”

Then I saw it. Saw it out of the corner of my eye.

Just a shadow. A silver shadow. Pencil thin against the dark shadow of the desk on the floor. Suddenly I saw it broaden. Of course—the angle of refraction was lessened. Now the grotesque elongated transparency that was the creature’s body suddenly loomed upward.

Basilov saw it, too, but not in time.

He gave a choking cry. Hands went to his neck. And then, the monster struck.

I thought of de Maupassant’s *Horla*. I thought of the struggle between *Jekyll* and *Hyde*. I thought of screaming, myself. I did.

Then I wrenched the gun from my pocket and pumped blindly at the air—the flailing air about Basilov’s contorted body.

But he was slumping to the floor, throttled by that invisible monstrosity.

“Louise!” I yelled. I caught a glimpse of Sylvestro and Monsen racing out of the door. Louise was following, slowly.

“Louise—run for it!”

She heard me.

I turned to Basilov. Too late. He was lying there. And above him, as the sun went behind a cloud, I caught the faintest glimpse of the grisly shape of the screen monster, crouching at the kill.

A wild thought swept through my brain. Lucky for us the image emerging from the screen was only life-size—what if it had come off in a closeup later on?

Later on...

## Robert Bloch

There was a clue here, somehow.

I wanted to think about it, but there wasn't time. I had to get out of here, follow Louise, protect her.

I made for the door. The leprous silver image was behind me. It moved fast. Fast as light.

I ran down the hall. Ahead the trio was racing on. Sylvestro and Monsen were leading. Louise struggled to keep pace. Sylvestro reached the door of the projection booth in the studio theater, where the daily rushes were shown. The thing was solid metal. He had chosen it with an eye to protection.

He disappeared inside. Monsen followed. Then they shut the door. Louise arrived, found it slammed in her face.

She rapped frantically, kicked against the metal. The door held.

"Let me in – it's coming!" she gasped.

The door stayed shut. The cowards were taking no chances with their own skins.

I turned.

Swooping in midair behind me, swooping silently, sinisterly, was the phantom from the screen – *Skull Man*. A wave of transparent death flowed down the corridor towards us.

I grabbed Louise by the waist.

"Down!" I muttered. And dumped her to the floor. We crouched there in the corner. The thing didn't stop. It flowed forward, straight for the metal door. Then it stopped, hung in midair. Baffled.

No! Suddenly the image seemed to alter its shape grotesquely. The head and shoulders were huge, but the torso and legs dwindled. Then I saw. It was bending sideways – bending sideways and *sliding under the door!*

A moment's silence. Then a muffled scream from within the projection booth. A scream and a crash.

The door flew back. I caught a glimpse of Sylvestro writhing on the floor, enmeshed in a silver shroud of death. Then Monsen staggered out, eyes sick with loathing and despair.

He came to us, voice hoarse with panic.

"The thing's got Sylvestro. It'll look for us next. What'll we do?"

"Wait."

I held him down beside us. Louise and Monsen kept their eyes averted, but I watched carefully as the silver image rose from the huddled shape on the floor and then flowed out through the projection slit of the booth itself and into the theater beyond.



## Phantom from the Film

Then, "Come on," I shouted. And dragged Louise forward. Straight into the projection booth!

Monsen followed. He screamed his terror.

"What are we going in here for? We won't be safe. Sylvestro wasn't. What can we do? We can't hide from it. We can't shoot it or burn it or kill it in any way. It's loose on the world, forever—"

"Shut up." I grabbed the camera-man by the collar. "Shut up and listen. I've got an idea. Where's the film for the *Skull Man*?"

"Why, the can's right here. We only made one proof for the preview showing. Rest of the stuff is still over in the cutting room with the masters."

"Never mind that. I want the film you showed at the preview."

"Here it is—but what are you going to do?"

"Rewind."

"Rewind? But then—"

So I told him. Told him in a few short, crisp sentences. Monsen rewound. I got the projector ready.

"Second reel, wasn't it?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Well, make sure. Our lives may depend on it."

Monsen rewound. Louise helped. In this crisis her panic evaporated. She managed to force a smile. Good girl, Louise.

I didn't rewind, and I didn't smile. I stared out of the slit in the booth at the theater beyond—stared out of the slit through which the silver monstrosity had so incredibly crawled.

I looked into the yawning darkness of the little studio theater and saw the silvery horror stalk. It was perfectly visible now—a phosphorescent phantom, sometimes life-size and sometimes hideously thin as it turned at an angle from my eyes.

It was searching for us. Its talons were extended to kill. Its skull-head was bent forward as bony jaws opened and eyes stared intent on destruction.

It was searching. In a moment it would notice that the projection booth was occupied once more. In a moment it would see us and flow forward, flow forward to rend and destroy.

"No sound! Track's not set!" Monsen's whisper was frantic.

"Never mind. Let 'er go!" I yelled the command.

Light flashed on the theater screen. The projector started. The film went on.

Then the monster saw us. I didn't wait.

"Faster!" I yelled.

## Robert Bloch

Monsen stepped it up. He was sweating blood, but he knew his film.

Louise was fighting to keep down a scream.

The silver horror glided straight up for the booth. I didn't watch. I kept my eyes on the screen. The film shuttled by. Swiftly.

And then, it happened.

Suddenly the silver phantom halted. It was almost up to the booth now. The skull-eyes were wild with maniac glee. The claws, those intangible claws, loomed at my very throat. It was poised for the kill, ready to spring.

It sprang. I braced myself.

Then, in midair, the gleaming body stopped. Stopped so swiftly as to hang suspended in a flying leap.

Bit by bit it moved back, away. As though it were on the end of a piece of string that was being rewound. As though it were a fish being hauled in on the end of a line.

Further and further back moved the silver body. And all at once it was flying towards the stage. There was an indescribable look of confusion and apprehension in the horrid countenance. The arms scabbled impotently at empty air.

Then it was even with the stage, flush against the screen. And all in a moment, as the film flickered on, the figure abruptly descended *into* the screen itself.

Descended, and disappeared.

It was just a matter of seconds before the reel was finished. I halted the projector, yanked out the can. We tore it open, lifted the film from its spool. Monsen offered matches without a word.

The film sailed out of the booth in a fiery arc, and landed in a burning heap on the stone floor of the bare theater beyond.

I turned and faced Louise with an honest grin on my face.

"That does it," I told her.

"But how did you think of it—where did you get the idea?" she murmured. "Running the film *backwards*."

"Just a hunch," I admitted. "We don't know yet what created the monster. All we know is that he came from out of the film. Therefore there was a chance in a million that he could be drawn back into it—if we ran the reel in which he appeared in reverse."

"Well it worked." Monsen heaved a sigh.

"Wait a minute. The job isn't ended," I reminded him. "We'll burn all the rest of the reels. The masters, too. We must destroy this creature

## Phantom from the Film

utterly, so that he can never escape again. Trap him on celluloid and then burn him. Fire alone can cleanse the earth of evil.”

I stared somberly at the flaming pile on the theater floor. The smoke pouring up assumed a fanciful shape to my tired eyes. For a moment I almost thought I detected the twisting, ghostlike image of the silvery monster. Then it was gone – forever.

And *The Skull Man* went with it. You’ll never hear the story or see the picture now. But maybe it’s as well.

As for me, I’m done with horror films. So is Louise. She’s working in a love story now – but not in the movies.

We spend our evenings at home, Louise and I. We never go to the movies any more.

Some folks laugh at us for that – but I guess you’ll understand. Because somewhere, sometime, it *may* happen again.



# The Machine That Changed History

Victory!"

The word had resounded through the halls of Berchtesgaden before. But this time they carried a new meaning, for they came from the lips of Adolf Hitler.

The sallow little man standing before him in the private apartment smiled humbly.

"I am pleased and honored that the Fuehrer approves of my work," he whispered huskily. "If the Fuehrer desires, I can explain the principles on which my time-chamber operates."

Hitler's hand rose to command silence.

"Your theories? My dear Schultz, your theories do not matter. Your time-machine has been inspected, tested, and approved by the most eminent physicists and scientists in the Reich. We of the Reich are thorough. If your claims were not founded in truth, you would not now be my guest in Berchtesgaden."

Adolf Hitler rose, leaned forward. "Ah, no, I do not concern myself with your theories of invention. It is enough that you have achieved the seemingly impossible. You have constructed a working model of a machine capable of transporting men or objects through time itself."

"Yes—"

Hitler's frown cut off the sallow inventor's reply.

"It means victory, do you understand? Victory!"

He advanced across the room to the vast, gleaming silver shell which rested weirdly in the center. His fingers rose to press against the metal surface.

"We of the Reich move swiftly, Schultz," he whispered. "Already the Geopolitik has prepared for me a complete documentary survey of

## Robert Bloch

the potentialities inherent in this remarkable invention. It shall be of invaluable assistance to us in the days to come."

Schultz smiled.

"I too have dreamed," he murmured. "We could build many hundreds of these and with them move forward or backwards in time as we willed. We could attack—"

Hitler shook his head.

"The expense is too great. Besides, I have other plans. Plans I mean to execute swiftly. Which reminds me. You have the documents concerning this invention of yours?"

Schultz nervously proffered his briefcase.

"The method of operation is simple. A child could master the controls. Mathematical calculations are almost unnecessary, due to the principles of spatial inhibition embodied in the construction."

"In other words, it is all here in this briefcase— all that is essential to the building and operation of the time-chambers?"

"That is correct."

Hitler smiled.

"Then, Herr Schultz, our little interview is at an end."

His hand went to a buzzer.

The blackshirted man entered quietly. He took Schultz by the arm and ushered him out.

"Heil Hitler!"

Hitler nodded. "Germany will not forget your contribution, Schultz," he said.

The door closed. Hitler sat alone in the room, staring at the briefcase, then at the silver chamber of the time traveller.

He pressed a buzzer on the intercommunications system.

"Kellzer? Bauer has taken Schultz. He has his orders. Dispose of the body quickly. Notify his relatives of the accident as planned."

He released his finger. Again Hitler sat back, his stare intensified. Again he sounded the buzzer.

"Kellzer? Send Eglitz to me at once. Eglitz. Gestapo staff. The linguist."

Within a space of a few minutes, young Karl Eglitz clicked his heels smartly before the Fuehrer's desk.

"Heil Hitler."

"Eglitz— you have heard of what has been going on?"

"The Fuehrer refers to this Schultz person and his invention?"

"Yes."

"I assisted in drawing up the report on it."

## The Machine That Changed History

"Good. Then you understand. Eglitz—do you think you could operate this machine?"

"I do."

"Eglitz—do you speak French?"

"The Fuehrer must know that I have lived in France."

"So." Hitler was silent for a moment. "Eglitz—I have heard good reports of your character and ability. You are a reliable man." He paused. "I have a mission for such a man."

"I am honored."

"It is a mission of the utmost importance, and as such it is extremely confidential. No one will know of it but the two of us."

"The Fuehrer forgets that the Geopolitik knows of the uses to which the machine will be put."

"Wrong, Eglitz. This is a mission of my own—one that the Geopolitik never dreamed of. Eglitz, I have conceived of a use for this time-chamber which will stagger humanity. And you shall carry it out!

"It is a mission that will win the war—win the world! It embodies an idea so stunning in its impact that even I, whose inspiration conceived it, am humbled before it."

"The Fuehrer can trust me."

"Then listen, Eglitz. Listen to the mission I have planned for you. Listen intently."

Hitler whispered. Eglitz listened. His mechanical smile never left his face, but as the Fuehrer continued, a little gasp rose involuntarily from his throat. Beads of moisture appeared upon his forehead. His hands clenched. And still Hitler whispered on.

"So. That is your mission, Eglitz. Do you think you can carry it out?"

The Gestapo man's voice quavered. "I—might," he managed. "It will take several days of preparation. Research. I must find out when he was in Cologne. We must take the machine there, too. I must study documents pertaining to his daily routine, pick a time."

"The resources of the Reich are yours to command," Hitler answered. "You must not fail. If you succeed, we shall triumph beyond our wildest dreams."

"I shall prepare." Eglitz backed towards the door.

"Heil Hitler."

Hitler sat alone once more, smiling still. Suddenly he rose and walked to a corner ledge.

A little bronze bust rested there—the head of a stout man with piercing eyes; a man whose hanging forelock rested on a majestic brow.

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Hitler stared at the bronze head and his smile widened.

"They say you were master of Destiny, too," he whispered. "But I wonder if you ever dreamed of an enterprise as great as this? An enterprise defying space and time? You crossed the Alps—but I cross centuries. Napoleon, the world will soon learn you have a master!"

The time chamber, the bronze bust, and the ruler of Germany stood motionless in the twilight while Destiny wove a web to enshroud them all.

\* \* \*

The smile had not faded from Adolf Hitler's face before the wavering outlines of the metal chamber disappeared from sight. The room in Hitler's Cologne headquarters still pulsed with the humming vibrations of the time-chamber. Eglitz had entered it and disappeared. And now the chamber had disappeared.

For a moment there was nothingness. Then slowly the blurring contours of the silver machine materialized, looming irrationally out of the air in the way a slide specimen emerges from a blank microscopic field. The humming vibration increased as the chamber solidified.

Then came silence.

Hitler strode forward abruptly.

"Something has gone wrong," he rasped. "A mistake—"

The compartment door opened slowly in the silver side. The tall figure of Eglitz emerged stooping through the doorway. Eglitz drew himself erect in formal salute.

"Heil Hitler."

Adolf Hitler stared in astonishment. Eglitz had changed. His usual uniform was gone. Instead he wore a gaudy scarlet coat with green pipings, and his braided yellow trousers were tucked into shiny black boots. A sword dangled from an elaborate scabbard fastened about his waist by a white sash. In one hand he carried a bushy black busby with a green cockade. Moreover, his usual smooth-shaven countenance had disappeared under an imposing false mustache which quite dwarfed Hitler's own.

"Eglitz—back so soon?"

"Surely the Fuehrer realizes I have been absent a week?"

"A week? Are you raving, imbecile? You have been gone less than ten seconds."

"Time—a week to me, ten seconds to the Fuehrer. It is relative, as Einstein has it—"



## The Machine That Changed History

"Do not mention that person's name," Hitler scowled. Then, "Speak up, man! What of your mission? Did you get there? Was he there? *Did you bring him?*" Hitler's voice quivered with frantic impatience.

"I am pleased to report to the Fuehrer that, according to instructions, I arrived at the imperial Palace at Cologne on July sixth, 1807, at 9:15 P. M. In keeping with my orders, I assumed the disguise of military attache of the Grand Army —"

"Where is he?"

Hitler's voice was a knife.

"I am here."

The low tones came from the throat of the man in the doorway of the time-chamber.

Hitler stared.

The short, stocky figure descended. Hitler stared into the swarthy, fleshy face, stared at the majestic brow and the hanging forelock, stared into the deep-set, burning eyes of:

"Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French!"

He whispered the words.

The little man inclined his head.

"Indeed, sire. And you are —"

"Reichsfuehrer Adolf Hitler."

Two hands clasped. A fat, pudgy hand, and a lean, limp one. Two hands clasped — hands that had held the earth and crushed it, each in their time. Two hands clasped across the centuries. The hands of Napoleon and Hitler. Hands that wrote history.

Eglitz stood there, gaping.

Hitler turned.

"Eglitz — I'd forgotten about you. You may go now. You deserve a rest after your journey to secure our distinguished guest."

"The Fuehrer is kind. I assure the Fuehrer that my task was not easy. This Fouche, the Emperor's Chief of Police, has a system equal to our own Gestapo. In order to — ah — abduct the Emperor —"

"I've no time for that now, Eglitz. You may go. Germany will not forget your contribution, Eglitz."

"Heil Hitler."

Eglitz left.

Hitler's hand went to a buzzer.

"Kellzer? Eglitz has just left my apartment. Send two troopers and place him under arrest. No, not the camp. Treason trial. He must be disposed of within the hour. That is all."

Hitler turned again to face his visitor.

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"So," he breathed. "You are here."

Of the two, Napoleon was more at ease.

"So I observe."

"You are calm."

"Resigned, let us say."

"This must be a strange experience for you."

"I am accustomed to the unusual. Besides, your aide — this Eglitz, is it not? — told me much on the voyage. Despite the fact that he knocked me over the head, virtually kidnapped me as it were, I bear him no ill will. He seemed both friendly and intelligent."

"He was — is," Hitler agreed.

"He told me much of interest. This is 1942, is it not? So much seems to have happened. Naturally, I am still a bit confused as to the reasons for all this."

"Allow me to explain," Hitler urged.

Napoleon smiled.

"Very well. Your French, sire, is somewhat — rusty."

"Perhaps. But I could not risk an interpreter for what I am going to tell you. Please be seated."

\* \* \*

Emperor and Dictator, seated at a table in the quiet room. Emperor, Dictator, and the time-chamber. Bridge between two worlds of war. The room that had hummed to the vibrations of a machine which defied space and time now held the whisper of voices whose echoes had shaken continents.

"And so you see, that is why I brought you here." Hitler was hoarse from his hour-long monologue. "I am the master of my world. You were the master of yours. Together we can exercise twice the power."

Napoleon nodded.

"Besides," Hitler murmured, "I need you. I would admit that to no living man. But I need your knowledge of military science — and the inspired genius behind it. I have made — mistakes. Mistakes which must be rectified."

Again the voice droned on, as darkness deepened. From time to time the two men rose and consulted maps, charts, documentary material which was brought from the other rooms.

It was nearly midnight when the two weary men faced one another across the long table.

"But there must be some solution," Hitler sighed.

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"Your military position is perilous," Napoleon answered. "What is worse, that position is irrevocable. It cannot be changed." Imperial shoulders shrugged. "It was useless for you to send for me. I had best go back to my own day and place. I tell you frankly—your offer of joint partnership in this war is enticing, but it leads only to a hopeless end."

"You must help me," Hitler grated. "You must! You are Napoleon!"

"Yes. I am Napoleon. But I cannot change what exists," answered the Little Corporal, sadly.

Then his head jerked up.

"Wait. There is our solution!"

A pudgy finger stabbed towards the time-chamber.

"What do you mean? Are you mad?"

"No madder than you, sire, when you sent your aide to kidnap me through time. My solution is simple. Attend.

"As we have seen, your difficulties began at the outset of this war. In September, 1939. You missed the opportunity to invade England. You did not check Russia. You failed in your mission in the United States."

"But that is past—over two years ago. It is too late to change."

"Is it? Why can't we enter the time-chamber and return to 1939? Return to July of that year and plan the war anew for September?"

Hitler was on his feet.

"Could we—dare we—?"

"You want the world? Very well, we can obtain it. If you have the courage to make the journey. Once in 1939 we can rectify your previous errors, anticipate the others. Profit by experience. The war will be waged properly then, with you and me in command."

Blurred voices in a midnight room. Blurred figures moving towards the silver machine. A nightmare vision in a nightmare world. Napoleon, Hitler, and a time-machine.

And then—only an empty room, after all. The machine was gone. Somewhere in the reaches of infinity, two dictators sped back to remold the past. The earth trembled in anticipation.

It was Napoleon who handled the controls. The pudgy fingers of Bonaparte, ex-lieutenant of artillery, mastered the intricacies of the machine's working parts.

His interest in the principles of operating the chamber had almost exceeded his curiosity regarding the operations of the war itself. But Hitler had been patient. After all, a visitor so distinguished must be

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humored. And if Napoleon chose to guide the time chamber, it was well. He, Hitler, had chosen to guide the destinies of the world instead.

So they sat there, in the curiously vibrating metal shell. Napoleon's hands moved over the silver surface of the panels in silent concentration. Hitler's hands twisted nervously in his lap.

There was silence, save for the humming vibration — the silence of two men moving through the unknown, the unnameable; twisting through time on a mission to remold the fate of the world.

Just two men — but two men unlike any of the myriad billions who had preceded them on the face of earth. Two men, each of whom in his time had remolded the face of the earth; remodeled it with ruthless surgery that left it torn and bleeding.

Never two such men before, and never such a journey....

Something of the import must have occurred to them both as they sat there waiting for the vibrations to cease. For they glanced at one another suddenly, and their eyes met.

The eyes of Hitler met the eyes of Napoleon, somewhere within the emptiness of space and time. Met and mingled in a flaming resolve. It was the Fuehrer who addressed the Emperor.

"In just a moment," he whispered, "we shall arrive. And the work will begin. It was meant to be. You and I — our greatness is such that Fate itself has willed our union. Your sun and my star shall rise together in the heavens."

It was the voice of the mystic that rose above the humming; the voice of megalomania triumphant.

"Perhaps?" Bonaparte echoed. His dark eyes were filmed with sudden wonderment. "And yet I wonder if man can cheat his Fate?"

"I am Fate." The harsh voice of the Fuehrer rose. "As you shall see." His hand rose, extended. "Master of the world, and now master of time and space itself! We have gone far since your day, Napoleon. Your armies would be blasted to bits by a single *panzer* division. But you've seen that. You know how death can leap from the skies, or hurtle through the air from a hundred miles away. You know how death creeps on, above, and under the seas. You know how entire continents may be ravished by the flaming breath of war."

Napoleon smiled. "I too have made speeches," he declared, sardonically. "But perhaps I have learned to regret some of the deeds accompanying them."

"I do not regret and I shall not regret," Hitler retorted. "We are returning to 1939. This time there shall be no errors. England shall be invaded swiftly. And France shall —"

## The Machine That Changed History

He checked himself in time. A frown had appeared on the Little Corporal's forehead. Did the fool suspect? No. How could he? He did not know what had happened to France. He had been taken from Germany in 1807 to Germany in 1942. He didn't know—but Hitler worried about the frown.

"And France?" Napoleon echoed softly. "What of France?"

"France shall share its rightful place with Germany," Hitler amended, hastily.

The frown disappeared. In its place came a slow smile. For some reason Hitler didn't like the smile any better.

"That is well," answered the Emperor. "France shall hold its rightful place, yes."

Hitler was silent. His thoughts raced swiftly. In a moment they would arrive—arrive in 1939. It would be late summer again. He and Napoleon would enter into council. The war would be plotted afresh; with Hitler's memories of two years to come as an aid. Napoleon would be helpful with strategy, extremely helpful. His unbiased viewpoint would aid in pointing out various weaknesses even Hitler and his staff might overlook.

And then, the war. Hitler's war.

For he had decided finally. When Napoleon's work was over, he must go. Hitler didn't trust his frown or his smile. The fool would never stand for what would happen to France. He'd be disposed of—this self-styled Emperor.

Hitler's dream of triumph glittered in his eyes. What a final irony! Men had always compared him to Napoleon. Thought it a compliment when they termed him an equal. Well, Hitler would be superior to the French conqueror. His greatest victory.

"Wait! Do you feel that?"

Napoleon's voice cut through Hitler's meditations.

"I think we've arrived."

Yes. The vibrations were diminishing. The humming and droning within the metal chamber slackened. In a moment there was a curious little bump—not a physically-felt bump, but a sort of shifting and settling sensation in the consciousness of both men. As though they had been spinning in a void and suddenly set down on something solid.

"Yes—we're here!"

Napoleon rose. His pompous little body moved towards the compartment door. Hitler followed. Now his smile was broad.

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Napoleon couldn't see him. Instead he led the way—led the way to Hitler's triumph and his own doom.

The door swung open as the Emperor's fingers moved over the bolts and handles. Napoleon stood on the threshold, breathed deeply. Then he clambered out.

Hitler moved forward swiftly. He could hardly wait. To emerge again on the eve of victory—

Hitler stepped out.

Into the arms of two waiting guards.

"Hold this man!"

Napoleon's voice barked the order.

Hitler struggled in the grip of giant hands.

"What is this? Why—"

He stared upwards into the mustached visages of two Grenadiers. They wore huge shakos and gaudy green uniforms. The uniforms of Napoleon's troops!

Hitler's eyes roved wildly about the great chamber in which the machine rested. It was a court apartment—luxuriantly appointed in the styles of Napoleon's day.

And standing before him, no longer an incongruous figure, but with the air of a master in his own time and place was Napoleon.

Again Hitler saw the smile on the lips of the Emperor.

Hitler heard his voice through a swirling mist.

"We are here, Adolf Hitler—but in a time and place of my own choosing. The hour has arrived—but it is the hour of my destiny, not yours!

"We have returned to the day on which you abducted me. We are in Cologne, in my German palace, in 1807."

"But—"

Again Hitler saw the smile and shuddered. Napoleon advanced and whispered.

"You fool! Did you believe I would forsake my own destiny for yours? I handled the controls—and I set them for this day again. I want to live my own life, complete the mission of conquest on which I embarked. So I have returned to my own time."

Hitler's head whirled. He temporized swiftly.

"But you and I—we could have ruled a greater world together—I offered you everything—"

"Adolf Hitler, I do not want your kind of world." The Emperor's voice rose to a knell of doom. "Your aide, the man who brought me to

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you, was careless. He let hints slip on the journey through time. He told me *what you did to my France.*"

"France?"

"Did you think I was fooled? No, I knew all along. You and your hordes trampled over my land, ravaged it. And I swore to avenge my country. I shall do so, in my own way.

"Hitler, I am a warrior, a conqueror. But I am not a mad butcher! And I do not intend to unleash you once again upon my people.

"You and your crazy theories of racial superiority – of men who must kill like beasts in order to live! I am going to save France and the world from you."

Hitler wet his cracked lips. "What are you going to do?" he whispered.

Napoleon gestured curtly.

"Guards – place this man back in the machine."

The Grenadiers dragged the Fuehrer across the floor. His face was ashen. His voice rose to entreaty. "What are you going to do?"

Napoleon shrugged.

"There is no place here in my world for your kind. There is no place in the world to come – 1939 or 1942, or any year. There never will be a place again for men with your debased dreams!

"In all the ages, I know of only one time when the world would welcome your vile ideas. There you must go, to a world where the weak perish and only the strong survive. And I wish you joy!"

They were inside the chamber now. Napoleon's hands were moving over the controls. A tinkling sound splintered the silence.

"What was that?"

Napoleon turned.

"I have smashed the adjustment dials," he announced. "You are embarked on a one-way journey."

The guards backed out of the compartment. Napoleon followed. He stood in the metal doorway before closing the door.

"Goodbye, Adolf Hitler," he murmured. "You are going to seek your rightful destiny at last."

Hitler rose with a snarl, lunged forward.

But the iron door of the time chamber clanged hollowly in his face. And a humming rose to mingle with Hitler's anguished scream.

The humming rose and rose. It filled Hitler's head, throbbed through it. It was a dark drone, filling his brain with the black muttering of doom.

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Hitler lay in the darkness while fear pulsed through his being. Lay there for endless eons, lay there for an eternity – as he sped through eons and eternity alike.

But when the humming finally subsided, he had conquered his dread. He sat up sharply when he felt the curious *adjustment* sensation which meant the time-chamber had arrived. Hitler drew a deep breath.

He was here.

Napoleon had done it. The controls were beyond repair. He was here, and he'd face the future unafraid.

Napoleon had outwitted him, yes. But no use crying over spilt milk. The Emperor was crafty – but a fool, for all that! He was back again in 1807, strutting across the stage of history, playing the tyrant – but Hitler knew what Napoleon did not know. Knew that there was a Waterloo lying ahead for the Emperor in eight short years. What sweet revenge! That long exile ahead!

And he, Hitler, had been exiled. But he could still mold his future freshly, in whatever time he found himself.

Hitler smiled grimly. Yes. Napoleon forgot that he, Adolf Hitler, could shape his own destiny. Hadn't he risen from humble house-painter to mighty warlord in the complexity of the modern world? Well, with his brain and vision, his knowledge of men and the future, he could start again.

He wondered where Napoleon had sent him.

"Where the weak perish and only the strong survive." That might be ancient Rome. Barbarian times. Well, that was hardly a sad fate. He'd learn. He'd make adjustments. He knew men and he knew History. Wherever it was, Adolf Hitler could always rule in a world where strength ruled over weakness.

He rose, stepped to the chamber door. He unbolted it slowly, pushed it open. He drew another deep breath. The fresh air was sweet and clean.

Smiling, Adolf Hitler stepped out onto a grassy sward. His eyes blinked in the sunlight.

He stood on a hillside which rose like a grassy island amidst a sea of lush vegetation. Why, it was like a tropical forest!

Blinking again, he walked across the turf. The ground was soft, almost steaming with moisture beneath his feet.

Where was he? In what time did he exist? Where were the cities of Germany, the people?

Hitler shook his head. His vision cleared.



## The Machine That Changed History

Then he saw them emerge from the forest at his right. They came swiftly. He wheeled in panic.

Too late! The others were creeping up on him from the rear, cutting off his return to the door of the time-chamber.

Adolf Hitler stood surrounded by a ring—a ring of advancing figures. He stared at the figures and understood Napoleon's parting words at last.

He stared at a band of apelike shamblers—shamblers that had only the faces of men. Their shaggy bodies were covered with long, yellowish fur. Blonde fur. They were powerful, grinning in their strength. And their deep chuckling laughter was filled with hatred—the hatred of the strong for the weak.

Strong. Blonde. Brutes living in a time where he could find his rightful destiny—

As the monsters closed in on him, Adolf Hitler's screams rose from the little forest hillside in the Stone Age.



# Have Tux—Will Travel

*Takeoff, N.M.*  
*August 1, 2042*

Dear Wallie:

I suppose you caught my ad in *Variety* by this time.

Well, it's strictly legit.

I'm really on Mars-time now!

Bet you couldn't believe it when you read it, huh? Seeing as how you know I been turning down big deals to play Luna Circuit for years—everybody in the biz after me, you know. Could of named my own price, but I told you how I felt. You don't catch Bobby Baxter wasting the old personality on a bunch of space-happy colonials with crater-dust in their ears. Let 'em drool over me on feelio if they got the urge.

Which reminds me, before I forget it. Caught your act from Las Vegas on feelio the other night. You still haven't got the angle, kid. Stinx. Flash, but old-style. Cut out the monolog intro. Build up the tap routine. Hell, if I had the time I could teach you the ropes. Book you into 4D—I got a lot of contacts, you know.

But I can't. The rocket leaves tomorrow. They'll be rolling out the red carpet for yours truly. If they got any red carpets up there.

Well, kid, I suppose you're wondering what made me do it. You say to yourself, here's this Baxter character, got all the personality in the world, hottest comic working today. What's he mean by jetting off to a place where they never even heard of feelio, still goof around with old-fashioned live acts?

That's the answer, sweetheart. Live acts. I've never worked with a real audience: I guess nobody has in the last 50 years. Get some kicks out of the idea—like in the old days, comics all wanted to play *Hamlet*.

## Robert Bloch

By the way, some day I may get around to that little thing just for the hell of it. I never scanned any Shakespeer but the old creep must of had something or you wouldn't hear all this talk. Of course, I figure I'd have to rewrite, on account of from what they tell me this Shakespeer was pretty sad when it comes to gags. But I could make a real Bobby Baxter Production out of it. Kill the people.

But I was telling you how I come to take this Mars deal. Sam Fogle put me up to it. He books the Luna Circuit, you know, and he bumped into me the other day in NY and started to bend my ear about this new outfit of his he's setting up on Mars. Calls it *Space Operas, Inc.*

Seems he was up there a couple years back, looking over the situation, and he says the Martians are just ape for human shows. Of course, they never see anything except those old Cinerama movies the museum boys took along years ago. But he talked around, and he found out they got their own entertainment. Just like a hundred, two hundred years ago here on earth. Traveling performances, even circuses. And all of it from poverty. Give you some idea of what goes over big with the Martians, they like carneys the best. Oldstyle carney, under canvas, like they used to have here back in the live days. Sideshows with all native talent of course. Fogle says they're pretty sad. Not a jet character in the biz. And their musicians are even worse. Don't know their ASCAP from a hole in a piccolo.

Just to show you how bad it is, they still have geeks. You know that old carney pitch they tell about – some guy with a fright-wig down in a pit, gnawing the head off a chicken. Of course, they don't call them geeks up there, and they don't have any chickens. Fogle said they're called *porlees* and the thing they use in the act is a sort of bird like a chicken, a *gotch*. But it's the same deal.

Don't sound like much, does it, kid? But you know old Fogle. He kept telling me about the big new theater they got at Inport. Says there's fifty showhouses all over, the Martians built themselves. And he went and took an option on all of them – the works. Rebuilt the stage of the Inport house, too. That's how much he thinks of the possibilities up there.

Fogle told me he figured he could start something just like regular old earth-style vaudeville with live acts. Turn that Inport house into the big deal. You ever hear about the Palace, kid? Jettest thing in the biz a hundred years ago. In NY, when they had the old Keith-Orpheum time or whatever they called it, the thing was to play the Palace. If you went over there, you were in for life.

## Have Tux-Will Travel

Well, that's Fogle's deal. He's going to bring showbiz to Mars, with live acts. Got to be live, because even if he could get a feelio transmitter up there, or a 4D setup, the natives couldn't see it. On account of the three eyes, you know. They don't get the pictures right. Cinerama works, but not very well. Live stuff is what they really go ape for.

Fogle says it's a gamble, but he stuck plenty into it and thinks whoever gets there first will make millions.

Naturally, when it come to digging up the right talent, he thought of me. That's why he cornered me in his office.

So I told him absolutely no dice, did he think I was going to give up a sweet setup here to go running off on a 9G rocket and do my stuff for a bunch of yokels with three eyes? If they go for *porlees* nibbling a *gotch*, how're they gonna appreciate real Bobby Baxter material?

And so forth and so on. Then this Maxine Miller toddled in. I don't know if you ever caught her or not, she's done some stuff on feelio out east but not much on account of her material being a little bit on the blue side. But believe me, kid, she is pure hydrazine. Racked, stacked and shellacked. With the slickest figure I ever laid hands — I mean eyes on. If you know what I mean, kid.

Up to that time I wasn't what you'd call sold on the deal. Until I find out this Maxine Miller is signed with Fogle to open at Inport.

Of course she was just about crazy when she found out who I was. I don't blame the kid, and I got to hand it to her for covering up the way she did. But anybody could see she was dying to work with a name like me.

So I told Fogle yes, I could make it. And when was he planning to take off?

I flipped when he said next Tuesday — that's tomorrow, kid. I asked him what about the rest of the lineup? And he said he was going to book whatever he could pick up on short notice.

Well, you don't catch Bobby Baxter with his socks down, not me. I smelled a right angle here, and I pitched it. Told Fogle he was in for a lot of trouble, booking blind. And if he figured on opening at Inport soon as he arrived, he wouldn't have any time for rehearsals. Guess the poor guy was so excited he'd forgotten all about that: seeing as how he'd already gone ahead and started to beat the drums up there about the first night performance.

I told him why not leave the whole deal to me? For a couple of extra bills a week I'd take charge of the works — book some flash to pad out, make it a regular Bobby Baxter Production. Of course, the idea would be to build the show around me, and maybe spot this

Robert Bloch

Maxine Miller. But you got to have at least four other acts to warm up a house.

Well, Fogle was so happy to get me he said okay, anything I wanted. But not over three yards for the talent budget until we see how the thing goes. Maybe we'll find out they just like acrobats or something. Got to sort of feel our way.

Which I am now doing. With the acts all this afternoon, at auditions. And which I plan to do tonight, when I have dinner with this Maxine Miller. If you get what I mean.

So that's the pitch. I figured you'd like to know. Will drop you another line when I get a chance. Right now I got to do an off to Buffalo.

Your ever-loving  
Bobby

*In Free Fall*  
August 6, 2042

Dear Wallie:

Catch this flash stationery! Really class, yes? I never knew they had this space travel duked out so much. Why this ship is just like a fancy hotel, good as anything in Las Vegas or Miami B. And this artificial gravity or whatever they call it works perfect. Never know you were in freefall at all.

I got the best cabin on board, even better than Fogle's. Spend a lot of time here, too, with Maxine. Sweetheart, I'm really in, let me give you the word on that!

Whole deal is jet. Couple floops, but they don't amount to much. You know how it is, everything at the last minute – had a little trouble picking up any acts. Seems like I couldn't dig up enough singles who were at liberty, ready to take off on a route like this without any advance notice.

And I was spotting singles, on account of the budget. Only about eight showed up for the audition, and they were mostly dogs. Some kind of singer – grand opera, I guess she called it – old fatso with a set of pipes like the whole Rocketeer Chorus Line going at once. Out, of course. Told her this was *Space Opera*, not grand opera or whatever.

Got a pretty good juggler – name of Martini, he does some trick stuff with cocktail glasses, bottles. Ends up balancing a bottle on his

## Have Tux-Will Travel

head and a glass on his nose; pours from the bottle into the glass, then flips an olive into it.

You happen to know a hoofer named Terry King? He's along. Does that trick dance on stilts. Strictly a filler, but he works cheap. Also a fellow name of Murphy, he has a flash balancing act, slack wire with a bicycle. Juggles Indian clubs with his feet. Reason I picked him is to give those three-eyed rubes something to talk about. Figure they never saw any faster action than a *porlees* chasing a *gotch*. This is the kind of stuff that will panic the house.

Had a little trouble getting Murphy's equipment through. Seems they're pretty fussy about weight on these flights, and his rig and bike and clubs are pretty heavy.

They told me okay, they'd take it, but couldn't I leave out one of my trunks? I raised plenty of hell about that, believe me – if you think I'm going to open on Mars without a decent wardrobe, you're space-happy, I told the guy. Why, this is practiclly what you might say a historical ocassion and all. Besides, I got to have at least six changes because the way I got it figured I'm m.c.-ing the show and filling in all down the line.

That's on account of getting stuck with Mary and Jim.

They're the floops I was going to tell you about. Like I say, there was this trouble picking up acts at liberty on such short notice. Tell the truth, by the time I ran through the audition the afternoon before we took off I was getting kind of desperate, if you know what I mean. Because it looked like I would not be able to put on a real Bobby Baxter Production.

Just at the last minute these two kids show up – this Mary and Jim. Mary Connor and Jim Hastings. Team, but I never heard of them. She sings and he does instrumental solos. I asked where they'd been booking and they told me radio. Radio, for crying out loud, did you ever hear of such a thing? I didn't even know they still *had* radio. But I guess out in the mountains or wherever they run a couple stations or whatever they're called. And these two kids do some kind of act.

Well, like I said, I was strickly on the ropes, no more time for auditions, and a hole in the show to fill. I looked them over. Young stuff, and they were just about frantic to get a chance like this. Matter of fact, the guy – Hastings – said he'd go along just for the ride and the billing. The girl was willing to take peanuts. Not much on looks, no wardrobe, and on top of it she wears glasses, yet. You know what I mean, spectacels, the real old-style deal, not even contact lenses.

## Robert Bloch

Maxine was sitting next to me when this pair comes up and it was all she could do to keep from going into hysterics over the getup. I wanted to turn thumbs down, of course, but Maxine gave me the word. Pointed out the bill was weak on music and maybe this guy Jim Hastings could accompany her. She asked him and he said sure, he thought so.

So I said what about the girl, and Maxine said she did not think there was any comparison between their styles. It might make a good contrast. What she was really thinking, of course, was how she'd look compared to this Mary creep — I know how these babes figure.

But anything to keep Maxine happy. I wound up telling Mary and Jim okay, and we'd put together a show and rehearse it on the flight out.

That's what we did.

And that's why I got fill-ins to worry about.

Held a rehearsal the first day. Martini's great. So is the hooper, and so is Murphy — the slack-wire guy. All novelty acts, but with my line of chatter for a buildup, I'll make those triple-eyed yahoos think they're seeing the greatest show on earth. You know that old Bobby Baxter charm, sweetheart. I can really pour it on.

But even I couldn't save Mary and Jim.

Here's the payoff.

Mary's a singer, all right. And what do you suppose she sings? Ballads. That's it, brother. Ballads, yet. Oldies. Stuff you never even heard of, from before feelio. *Moon in My Heart*. *Crater of Love*. *Thunder and Roses*, I ask you. And talk about projection — there ain't. She just stands there and sings.

You ought to see Maxine move into one of her specialties to get the difference. She does this material of hers, something called *Air on a G-String*, a strip, but very refined like. And believe me, brother, she projects.

Even though I don't know what in hell we'll do about an accompanist, unless I double in brass for her.

Because the rest of the payoff is this guy Jim Hastings. The musician. *He* says. Know what kind of a musician he is? Turns out he plays a mouth-organ! That's a harmonicker, son. Bet you never even heard of it. Oldfangled dingus you play by putting in your mouth and blowing on it. Not a horn. Hell, I can't describe it to you. And the sounds it makes you wouldn't want to know about. What a floop!



## Have Tux-Will Travel

This is what I got to work with. On a Bobby Baxter Production! Well, not me. Minute I got a squint at their act, I yanked it. Maxine or no Maxine, nobody's going to louse me up on a historical occasion. Not this Thespeean.

I told Fogle, I said, "By Xst, I'll do the whole show myself before I let them get out there. If I got to drag out every routine in the book!"

And it looks like I'm doing just about that. Carrying the whole performance on my back. But I promised Maxine she could have at least four numbers, and that makes her happy.

One thing I will say, she sure warmed up to me in a hurry. Once she got a chance to know me.

I been seeing she gets plenty of chances, too. Last night for the gag of it I turned off the artificial gravity in my cabin. You wouldn't believe what happened unless you tried it yourself sometime. Which I advise you to do. If you can ever latch onto something like this Maxine, it's worth the trip.

Well, I got to go offbeam now. She just rapped on the door and it looks like we're going into free fall again.

Your ever-loving  
Bobby

*Still in Free Fall*  
*August 9, 2042*

Dear Wallie:

This is a quickie.

We land tomorrow and Fogle's as itchy as Grandpa's underwear. I don't blame the guy, he's got all this dough tied up. But there's nothing to worry about. I keep telling him everything's ready to jet.

Lined up a pretty good little show, if I do say so myself. Rehearsing every day in the lounge, and last night we let the rest of the passengers in for a sort of preview. They went absolutely ape over the whole deal.

Of course, I was in top form. I'm doing my horse act—you know the routine, where I come out in this half of a horse costume. The rear half. Like I'd been going to a masquerade party only my partner stood me up. Very funny, special material stuff. Blue, but sutle. You know how sutle I can get.

## Robert Bloch

Well, it murdered the people. Then I got another bit, the psichytrist bit. This one plays with a stooge, see, and I got Maxine up in the part to help me out. Can't take the time to run through it, but this ought to give you a rough idea of what it's like.

Maxine comes out on the stage and she says to me, "Hi, Bobby, what you doing these days?"

And I say, "I'm a psichytrist, see?"

Then she feeds me, "A psichytrist? That's a soft racket. All you guys do is sit around in your office waiting for patients to come in. Then you throw them on the couch, ask a lot of stupid questions, and charge a big price."

So I say, "Just a minute, now. First of all, you gotta understand we go to school for seven years. Then we gotta be inturns. Then we specialize. And those questions aren't stupid, either.

"For instance, I might ask a patient, what is it that a dog does in the backyard that you wouldn't want to step in? The answer is, he digs a hole.

"Or I ask, what does a woman have two of that a cow has four of? The answer is, feet.

"Or I ask, what does a man do standing, a woman sitting, and a dog on three legs? The answer is, shakes hands.

"But believe me — you'd be surprised at some of the crazy answers I get to those questions!"

That's only a part of it, I cleaned it up a lot, because if there's one thing I'm aiming at it's class. Class all the way — that's a Bobby Baxter trademark you might say.

And I just fractured the passengers. Shows it pays to be sutle.

That's what I was telling this Mary Connor fluff. She's been hanging around a lot lately, ever since I gave her and Jim the sad word about their act. Says she's awful sorry, and maybe I could sort of give her a couple pointers. They'll be going right back to earth on the next flight out when we land, and I guess this is her only chance to see a real Big Timer operate.

Also — this is rich, son — the poor creep is gone on me. You never saw anything like it, the way she's got it. Can't leave me alone. I have a helluva time shaking her when Maxine and I want to be together, which is usually.

She even tried to fix her hair, and the other day she comes around without her glasses on. So nearsighted she kept bumping into stuff. I had to laugh. Of course, I just give her the old freeze routine, but she keeps coming back.

## Have Tux-Will Travel

Her partner, this Jim Hastings, he don't know what to make of it all. He went and got himself engaged to Mary or something awful like that, and now he's from nowhere and besides he's burned because I tossed the act out.

The little rat even went to Sam Fogle behind my back the other day and put up a beef, claims he's got a contract and he wants to show.

Naturally Sam told me about it, and I gave him the third word on it—nobody plays without my say-so. I want this deal to be perfect. Understand *Variety* and *Billboard* will both be covering the opening, and I got my reputation. No floops for Bobby Baxter.

I never even let on to Jim that I knew he squawked. But just to teach him a lesson, I been forcing myself to play up to this Mary a little. Not much, because I can't stand the creep, but enough so as to give him a hard time.

You know me, kid, I'm too soft-hearted to really pull any rough stuff. Besides, Maxine is all the time watching me these days.

Well, I got no more time to write now. Tomorrow we land and tomorrow night is the historical moment when showbiz really comes to Mars.

I know you'll be waiting to catch those writeups in *Variety* and *Billboard*. But don't go green over them, kid, who knows, someday you may be up there yourself. If you ever learn the secret like I did, which is to develop that old lovable personality.

Your ever-loving  
Bobby

*Inport, Mars*  
*August 11, 2042*

Dear Wallie:

Well, I suppose the reviews are out.

Of course I haven't seen them up here, but before you or anybody else gets funny ideas, let me give you the real inside story of what happened.

If you think I'm taking this lying down, you're crazy. When I get through with this double-crossing rat of a Sam Fogle he won't be able to book a stag smoker date in the crater of Abulfeda or wherever.

I knew the whole setup was a phony from the word go. That's what I wrote you, remember? If it wasn't I'm so much of a idealis, I

## Robert Bloch

never would of listened to that lying dog. Sneaking around and appealing to my better nature about how I owe it to the biz to pioneer and bring high class entertainment to Mars! And all the while giving me that pitch about how they were ape for real talent. Why, those three-eyed apes would not recognize real talent if it came up and did a bump-and-grind right under their noses. If they had noses, that is.

Noses they ain't. Also all of them are about seven feet tall, or did you know that? And they smell funny. They eat funny food, too, and none of them smoke or drink or weed, either — bunch of creeps, if you ask me. Even if you don't ask me, I'm telling you. No wonder they got such lousy taste! It's pitiful, kid, believe me.

Well, I don't see the sense of giving you a long song and dance about what's wrong with the Martians — you ought to be able to figure for yourself when you read the reviews. (Hell, they're so dumb they don't even know they're Martians. Really! They call themselves *borteks*, some damned thing. I'm surprised those foureigners even had the sense to learn English, the way they talk.) Everything they do is crazy.

I was so excited about landing and all that I didn't notice much at first. They had a big reception arranged for us when we come off, and Sam Fogle sure had lined up some sweet publicity. The house was a sellout three hours after the box office opened, at noon. Some of these three-eyed goops had stood in line since the night before to get tickets.

Sam was plenty enthused when he found that out. Two carneys playing in town at the same time, and they were dying, absolutely. No biz at all. Everybody wanted to see Bobby Baxter.

"This is it," he told me. "Your gonna roll 'em in the aisles tonight."

Roll 'em in the aisles. That's a hot one! On account of this big showhouse he was talking about, the best spot in Inport, doesn't even *have* any aisles. Or seats, either. So help me, it's that way all over this damned planet. Martians never sit down, it turns out — and they watch their shows standing up!

Ever try to play to a standing house? You know it's murder. I told Fogle that, but he said it didn't matter, we had to make allowances for strange customs. When in Rome, do the Romans before they do you, or however it is.

Mostly he was worried about the gravity. Maybe you never heard of it, but another thing on this dizzy planet, they got the wrong kind of gravity. I can't explain it, not being what you call technicleminded, but up here I only weigh 60 pounds.

## Have Tux-Will Travel

So help me, that's right! 60 pounds I weigh, on account of their lousy gravity. Bounce right up in the air when I walk fast if I'm not careful.

Fogle told me we better have a rehearsal before showtime, to get used to the difference. Which was a good idea, except that the local press wanted interviews all afternoon. Catch me lousing up a million dollars worth of free publicity? Not on your life, kid. So I did the sensible thing and got buddy with the press. So the first show might be a little ragged, I figured these yahoos would never notice. Just so we got the press on our side.

Get that. I sacrificed a chance to rehearse, just to make sure Fogle got the breaks on publicity. I gave up a run-through only because I wanted to see that everybody in Inport knew about our show. I spent right up until suppertime telling these three-eyed reporters all about the performance — where I used to play on earth, what I did in feelio, how I socked 'em in 4D, anything they wanted to know. Even what I liked to eat, intimate stuff, just to make friends you might say.

I did all that. Then I went backstage and set the cues, and saw to it that all the props were there, and I even had to tell the stoop stagehands how to handle the lights. Troubles? You got no idea what troubles. I never had no love for the Union before, but when I see what these three-eyed foureigners call a lighting setup, it's murder.

Anyhow, I got it all set, just knocked myself out for Fogle's sake — and all the time he's interfering, keeps telling me what about giving Martini and the others a chance to practice with their props, nagging at me like I could do eight things at once when I'm trying to help Maxine zip into her breakaway dress. Anybody with sense would of walked out on him right then and there.

But you know me, kid, always good-natured. So I just kept on working and politely told him he should keep his goddam yap shut and let me run this show. Because it was my show, and he'd better not forget it, or he'd end up going out there all by himself and doing a two-hour single.

After that he calmed down, and I managed to line things up. I had this Jim and Mary working carrying props and stuff, and I put Jim in charge of the dumb juicers — at least he knew enough to handle lighting cues, I figured. Mary was hanging around, so I made her unpack my stuff and line it up and sew up my horse costume which got kind of tore in the trunk.

## Robert Bloch

Then it was time, and the house was packed – one thing I got to say about this business of no seats, you can sure jam in a crowd that way.

So we opened.

I suppose you figure I'm going to hand you a lot of excuses now, because of the write-ups. But why should I? You know me, kid. You've caught me enough times to realize Bobby Baxter never gave a bad performance in his life. The show must go on, that's my motto.

And you can tell anyone who asks you that you got it straight from me – Bobby Baxter did a great show that night. I was never better, believe me.

Can I help it if I was working the lousiest audience in the world? (World? In the universe, yet!)

Can I help it if this jerk juggler of a Martini uses liquor props in front of a crowd that never heard of drinking and don't know what he's doing? Is it my headache if his olive keeps floating around in the air on account of this crazy Martian gravity business?

Am I to blame for gravity, already? I ask you, *am* I? So when Terry King does his tap dance on the stilts and he can't keep them on the ground, what am I supposed to do – run out there and tie weights to the things?

Is it my fault if Murphy's Indian clubs sail forty feet in the air when he tries to juggle them, and his bike falls off the slack wire and hits him on the head just when he's got his neck twisted in the rope?

He didn't even get hurt bad, and the way he looked would get a yak out of any audience – except these three-eyed schmoes. They don't even think a pratfall is funny.

On top of it, Maxine Miller has to rope me into accompanying her on a midget piano when she goes on for her first strip. You think gravity can louse up a juggler – let me tell you, kid, just watch a peeler work with a breakaway costume that usually doesn't unzip unless you tug three times harder than you need to up here. She just gave one little yank and the whole damn outfit come off her. Like somebody unveiling a statue. Had to finish up her first number behind the piano, and like I say, it was only a midget piano. That sure gave those three-eyed characters a triple eyeful, but do you think they appreciated it? Not them, brother! They couldn't dig her songs at all.

Ignorant, that's the trouble with them. Just plain ignorant. I kept trying to hoke it up. Like I said, I never did a better job – I was out there myself most of the time, just knocking myself out with routines. Gave 'em everything in the old book.

## Have Tux-Will Travel

Talk about a cold house! They just plain didn't *get* it. The hind end of a horse routine, for instance. I guess none of them had ever *seen* a horse. Just couldn't figure out what the gags were about. And that psychiatrist bit, they could not catch that one either.

Right in the middle of it, they sat down. That's right, they all started to sit down!

I nearly flipped, and when I come off there was Fogle busting a gut in the wings. "You're dead!" he kept yelling. "Know what that means? When they sit down on you up here, it's like they walked out on you back on earth."

I said, "Who told you that malarkey?" and he said, "Jim Hastings. He's been talking to some of the natives on the stage crew. They all say your show stinx."

Then he started to go into a heavy routine, but I shut him up in a hurry. I told him I was sick and tired of beating my brains out for an unappreciative audience, and if he knew anybody who could do a better job, he'd better start looking them up in a hurry. Because as far as I was concerned, he could take his show and shove it into the next rocket leaving for earth.

That scared hell out of him, believe me. He kept moaning, "What can we do? Got an hour to go and nothing left. You got to save this turkey."

I told him it was all his fault, which it was, and the best thing I could think of was for him to go out there and tell his three-eyed vaudeville lovers they could get their money back.

Well, you know Sam Fogle, how he is when it comes to facing an audience. Full of big talk about how everybody else should go out and knock 'em dead, but when it comes to him, he's scared to blow his nose in a public phone-booth.

So he begged me, I should go make the announcement. Of course I just laughed at him.

Then this Jim Hastings comes up and says he'll do it. Which is okay by Fogle.

And out he goes, only he double-crosses me. He doesn't make any announcement. Instead, he starts going into his act. Of all the hammy tricks you ever heard of, this is the worst! Goes right out there with this harmonicker of his and cuts loose. You never heard such a blat in your life.

Before I know it, he's done two numbers and those creeps are beginning to stand up again. Then he waves into the wings and out

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comes Mary, of course, wearing her glasses yet because she's in such a hurry she forgot to take them off.

Know what she looked like, she looked like one of those Martians with an eye missing. On account of the glasses frames giving her that big, frog-eyed look they all have. Maybe they *thought* she was a Martian, because they started to hiss.

Did I tell you hissing is the way they applaud up here? Well, it is. Talk about *crazy!*

What's the sense of trying to explain it? Right away they go into one of their own routines. Never heard anything like it, never. Joe Miller stuff, with Martian switcheroos, yet.

Like, "Why does a *lavka* cross a canal?" And "Why do *morkogleps* wear red suspenders?"

Brother! I ask you!

And then Mary starts to sing, all that corny ballad stuff, and Jim slobbers into his mouth-organ or whatever, and they have to keep coming back for encores. Never heard such hissing. The crowd ends up by throwing vegetables at them – which is something almost never heard of, because vegetables are so hard to get up here. Like showering them with diamonds, yet....

One hour and forty minutes they improvise out there, and when we bring down the curtain it's a madhouse. Fogle wants to go on tour right away, but he can't, because the show is sold out three months in advance, including sitting-room only. (That's right, kid, when they can't get standing room, some of them are willing to sit on the railings of the balcony.)

Martini, Terry King and Murphy are going back on the next flight. I guess Maxine is going, too – let me tell you one thing, kid, a dame has no gratitude, and listening to her talk you'd think I had personally loused up her act. So let her go.

Not me, though. If Sam Fogle thinks he can get away with this, he's space-happy. Nobody's putting on a Bobby Baxter Production without Bobby Baxter. He's not going to run a full show featuring just that broken-down harmoniker player and a corny girl singer. Even if I did say I was quitting, I got a contract.

So no matter what the papers say, don't you worry, kid. He can't do this to me. I'll sue!

Your ever-loving  
Bobby



## Have Tux-Will Travel

*Dopunk, Mars*  
*August 30, 2042*

Dear Wallie:

Just time for a line between shows.

That's right, I'm working again—you never thought they could kick Bobby Baxter out of show business, did you?

Of course you know they tried. It must of been in the papers. These damn space-lawyers are no good, wouldn't even issue an injunktion or anything. So Fogle's going bigger than ever here.

Last I heard, he's sending back to earth for a whole flock of radio performers, got agents out scouring the woods for these kinds of acts—calls them "hill billys" or something. Bringing up an all girl accordion band yet, and something called Uncle Hezzy's Barn Dance, which you can imagine.

This dame Mary won't even give me a tumble any more. When I found out the score on trying to collect my back pay from Fogle, I went around to see her and turned on the old charm a little. But like I said before, dames are ungrateful. What a freeze I got! She's so stuck-up, ever since the Martian females started this fad of imitating her, wearing copies of her spectacels with three lenses yet.

All right, let them have their fun. It won't last. It'll be just like on earth—once you get a hick audience started, they get educated up to better things. In a year or two this corny stuff will be dead, and they'll be crying for real class. Which I can give them.

Believe me, I didn't have any trouble getting a job. All I had to do was shine around to one of the carnivals and they grabbed me.

It's nothing fancy, but I got to make enough for my return fare, and I've never been afraid of trouping, you know that, kid. Outfit I'm with plays a lot of burgs out in the sticks, but that's good experience. Only this business of eight performances a day sure can get you down when you're not used to it.

If I can just stick it out for a year or so, like I said, I'll really show them a few things—Fogle, those smart guys on *Variety*, everybody!

Your ever-loving  
Bobby

P.S.: I been thinking it over. I just come from doing another performance, and maybe I better not plan on any year up here.

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Look, kid, if you could send me the dough for my return fare, that's all I need. Once I get back to earth there's no problem— you know me, hottest act in the biz. I'll see that you get your money back right away. Just send it c/o General Delivery at Inport, because I'm heading out of this lousy carney tonight.

Between the two of us, I just can't take it any longer. Eight shows daily, yet! If you had to eat eight *gotch* a day, you'd know what I mean.

Bobby

## Grandma Goes to Mars

I'm not saying it's true and I'm not saying it's false.

All I know is that Joe Saunders is the man who told me. And you wouldn't think he'd lie about a thing like that. Not Captain Joseph Saunders, the first man to ever set foot on the planet Mars—and the only man who has ever piloted three successful round trips.

After the last one, General Electronics threw a big homecoming banquet for him at the Waldorf-Astoria. It was a tremendous affair, but of course the whole idea was General Electronics' baby. I guess everybody knows that, though.

Joe Saunders and three men made the first trip. Then he and the high brass made the second trip, a year later. Finally came this third expedition, testing an improved rocket with accommodations for twenty—a trip designed to prove that full-scale interplanetary flight was possible.

It couldn't have been more successful. The whole thing was over and done with in just under three weeks—no hitches, no problems, and everybody back safe and sound in time for the big banquet and gala celebration.

Speaking for myself, I thought it was terrific. I got a big charge out of being toastmaster—introducing everybody from Joe Saunders himself way on down to the Vice President of the United States. The crowd had a good time. The TV cameras worked perfectly. The publicity was sensational.

And after it was all over, I went upstairs to the company suite and found Joe Saunders sitting on the bed, crying in his beer.

I mean exactly what I said. He sat there with his shoes off, cradling a case of beer on his lap, and he was crying. This obviously had been going on for quite some time now—he was on his sixth bottle.

"Hey," I said. "What's with the conquering hero?"

## Robert Bloch

He just looked at me and sniffled. Captain Joseph Saunders, the greatest celebrity in the world, sniffled at me. "Lock the door," he sobbed. "And find me an opener, quick."

"Haven't you been using that doohickey behind the door?" I asked.

Joe Saunders stopped sniffing and glared. "Cut out that kind of talk," he said. "You sound like Grandma Perkins."

"So what's wrong with that?" I grinned at him. "Too bad she didn't stick around for the big banquet. But she said she had to get back home before her hens started to set. Funny old gal."

"Yeah." Saunders took a swig of beer. "Very funny."

"What's the matter? You sound as if you didn't much care for her?"

He sighed. "Oh, it's not her, exactly. You're the guy I really ought to kill. It was your idea that started everything."

"Started what?" I asked him.

And that's when he told me.

\* \* \*

It all began with my contest. Yes, the contest was my idea, and a good one. Everybody thought so. "WIN A FREE TRIP TO MARS! JUST COMPLETE THIS STATEMENT IN 50 WORDS OR LESS. 'I LIKE GENERAL ELECTRONICS PRODUCTS BECAUSE—'"

A natural, that's what it was, a natural. We got over two million entries. Don't ask me how they handled the job of selecting the winner. That was up to the judges. All I know is that the lucky party was a lady. Mrs. Hester Perkins, of Armadillo, Iowa.

General Electronics sent a private plane out to get her at their expense. We were all waiting at the airport when she came in. The press was there, too, of course, and when she hopped out of the plane with the pilot, the bulbs went off and blinded us all for a good minute.

Then we could see, and I guess Joe Saunders summed up the general reaction pretty accurately. All he said was, "Oh, no!" but that was enough.

Hester Perkins was a little old lady with white hair and rimless glasses. She wore a black silk dress and a black hat with red cherries all over the top. And so help me, she carried a bag of knitting.

President Benson swallowed twice, took a deep breath, and walked over to her. "Permit me to introduce myself," he said. "I'm Thaddeus Benson, of General Electronics. And you, I presume, are Mrs. Hester Perkins?"

## Grandma Goes to Mars

"That's right, young man." She beamed and held out her hand. "But you can call me Grandma. Everybody does. Where's the General?"

"General?"

"General Electronics. I thought he'd be down to meet me—"

The press closed in, and not a moment too soon. I thought Mr. Benson was going to flip his very expensive toupee. He turned to Farley, the pilot. "What's the meaning of this? Why didn't you warn me?"

"But what could I do, Mr. Benson? My orders were to bring back the lady who won the contest. That's her, all right. And I might say, she's a good passenger. Never been up in a plane in her life but she took it calm, even when we ran into a storm over Cleveland. Just knitted away for dear life—she's finishing some doilies for her daughter-in-law, you know, and—"

"I don't want to know!" Benson groaned. "This is awful! Saunders, what are we going to do?"

Joe Saunders shrugged. "We'll have to talk her out of it," he said. "I'm not taking an old lady on any spaceflight. Why, she's over sixty! Can you imagine us sitting around in the cabin for ten days each way, watching her knit doilies?"

"We'll talk her out of it," I said. "Offer her a cash award, something like that. Give the trip to the runner-up."

"That's right," Mr. Benson agreed. "Once she finds out what she's in for, she'll settle for cash."

But Grandma Perkins had other ideas.

We told her about the hazards of the trip that night, and it didn't faze her a bit. We even showed her through the rocket and pointed out the cramped quarters, the limited accommodations.

"Why, I think everything is perfectly scrumptious," she told us. "You should see the farm, since Homer passed away! Not that I don't keep things tied up, but we ain't got furniture like this, nor all these doohickeys. What are them straps for?"

Joe Saunders told her about the straps. He explained about the takeoff and the 10-G pressure. He went on to describe how the ship was in freefall for nine days each way, going and coming.

"Sounds real interesting," Grandma Perkins said. "I never get dizzy or nothing. Once at the fair I went up in one of them Ferris Wheels and I liked it so much I rode twice. Homer, he thought twenty cents was a heap to pay, but—"

"Fifty thousand dollars, cash!" Mr. Benson said. "I forgot to tell you about that, didn't I? If you don't take the trip, there's an alternate prize of fifty thousand. Tax free."

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Grandma Perkins laughed. "Lands sakes," she said. "I don't need money. Body gets to be my age, what do they want with money? It's the experience that counts, I always say. You just keep that money in the bank, young man. Never can tell when it might come in handy."

"Dangerous," Joe Saunders said. "Very dangerous. And a woman your age—"

"My age? I'm only sixty-three, and I've never been sick a day in my life. 'Cepting when I had Martha and Homer Junior, of course. You just ask the doctor, he'll tell you how spry I am."

"That's just what we intend to do," Joe Saunders told her. "You'll have to get a complete physical examination. We certainly can't risk taking you without a medical okay."

"I'm in better shape than you are, young man," Grandma Perkins said. "You'll see."

We did, too. The first specialist couldn't find anything wrong, and neither could the second, nor the third. And by that time the publicity was out.

"Looks like we're stuck!" Benson groaned, when he told me the findings.

"Stuck?" I crowed. "Look at these headlines! I tell you, we couldn't have made a better choice if we planned it this way. The whole idea of a typical American grandmother taking a spaceflight is just perfect. Did you see the editorials? All that stuff about Youth and Age, and Grandma Moses, and the pioneer spirit? We're not stuck!"

"No." Joe Saunders sighed. "You're not. But *I* am!"

And he was.

Of course all I know about the flight is what he told me there in the hotel room after the banquet. But that was enough. Nineteen men in the rocket, taking the 10-G pressure and then floating around or walking with weights, hanging on to straps from the sides and ceilings for nine days out. Nineteen men and Grandma Perkins.

Grandma Perkins didn't walk and she didn't hang. After she got used to the sensation, she spent most of her time floating. Joe said it was an awful thing to see her floating across the cabin, knitting away without missing a stitch.

"Got to get these doilies done before we get back," she said. "I promised." And then she'd look out of the port window. "Where are we now?"

I guess she drove the men crazy with her questions. Nineteen scientists and technologists, trapped in a cabin in space with one little old lady, and they couldn't escape. "What's that doofunny over there?"

## Grandma Goes to Mars

and "How much gasoline you reckon it takes to keep this thing going?" and "What happened to all the blue in the sky?"

They answered her, of course, and that's what made them wild — because she didn't quite believe them. It was obvious she hadn't the faintest idea of how a rocket operates, or why. Saunders tried to give her a briefing on the elementary laws of physics and astronomy and the difficulties involved in going into space. He tried to impress her with the immensity of Space and the importance of the flight itself. But Grandma Perkins didn't impress very easily.

"Seems to me you could have figured out a way to keep that engine quiet," she sniffed. "Sounds just like the electric motor Homer put on my pump. Whenever it gets out of whack, I mean. There's a sort of doobiddy on it and I have to give it a lick with my hand to make it quiet down or the water just overflows. Seems to me you could have put a muffler or whatever on that engine."

"It isn't an engine," Saunders told her. "It's a space-drive." And he explained again, until she nodded and floated away, smiling over her doily.

That's the way it went, for nine days. Nine days, with the men not daring to swear or even grumble. Not that they got much chance to get a word in edgewise. For Grandma Perkins was interested in conversation. She talked about her grandchildren, about the rations — "Call this cooking? Why, I turned out better meals on my old woodstove back home!" — and about the best way to cure a cold. By the end of the first week the men were nervous. The thought of an approaching landing didn't lessen their tension. Finally, on the morning of the ninth day, Joe Saunders took over.

He issued instructions and told Grandma something about the landing problems. She didn't seem much impressed.

"All you mean is we strap ourselves down again, isn't that right, young man? So why tell me about those doojiggers of yours?"

"Just thought you'd be interested. After all, you must have some mechanical aptitude. You won the contest."

"Yes, that's right." Grandma Perkins sighed. "But what I really want to know is, will I have time to finish this here doily before we get strapped down again?"

She had time. And after they landed, she was all ready to start on a fresh one. Saunders said she didn't even bother to look out of the observation port as they came down.

But they got her into an extra suit and gave her an oxygen tank and took her out with them. There wasn't much to see around Lacus

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Solis, of course, yet you'd think she'd be somewhat impressed. She was hooked up with Saunders on an intercom outfit, and he kept waiting for her to say something.

Instead, Grandma Perkins glanced around at the horizon for a moment, shrugged, and then stooped down.

"What are you doing?" Saunders asked.

"Just picking up some of these stones," she explained. "I promised Martha I'd bring some back for the children. Ain't likely to find much else by way of souvenirs from the looks of the place."

"But aren't you – well, impressed?" Saunders inquired.

"*Humph!* What's there to impress a body here? Can't breathe a bit of air, and there's no water. Just look at this soil! Why, you couldn't even sow alfalfa and hope to get a crop."

Just then one of the crew signaled Joe and he had to go back to the ship. He left Grandma in the care of Stigmeir, one of the engineers. They stayed out for another hour, and then came back. Stigmeir joined the others, forward, and Saunders came to the cabin where Grandma Perkins sat alone.

She had taken off her suit and helmet, and Joe says he thought she must have been impressed after all, because he noticed she'd been crying.

"Kind of gets to you, doesn't it?" he said. "The grandeur of it all, and the loneliness. Which reminds me –"

"Loneliness?" Grandma snapped. "Who's lonely? If you must know, young man, I'm crying because I'm ashamed."

"Ashamed?"

"Yes. I'm ashamed of myself." She dabbed at her eyes with the hem of an unfinished doily, then glanced carefully around the cabin. "You're sure we're alone?"

Saunders nodded. "They're all up front. I must tell you –"

"I must tell *you*." Grandma leaned forward. "Young man, I did an awful thing. You been so good to me, all you people, taking me on this trip and everything, and I can't help it. I got to tell somebody before I bust. I won this contest under false pretenses."

"False pretenses? You mean you didn't write –?"

"Oh, I wrote the hundred words myself, all right. But what I said just wasn't true. I mean, I really don't know anything about them newfangled General Electronics gadgets. I never owned a one of 'em, couldn't abide having them in my house! Outside of the old radio, and the motor on the pump, there isn't a doohunkus in the place. And me



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fibbing about how wonderful they all are, and how I enjoy having such things!"

For a moment she sat there, looking very little and very old. Joe Saunders reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. "That's all right," he said. "It doesn't matter, now."

"But it *does*! Me, fooling all you big scientists—"

Saunders sighed. "Big scientists!" he said. "That's a laugh. You know what I came here to tell you? It seems that we big scientists have run into some trouble. We planned on taking off tomorrow, but something's gone wrong."

"You mean, with the engine?"

"The space-drive. I had Watkins test it, and it doesn't respond. We checked the fueling mechanism and there's nothing wrong—but it won't start."

"Can't you send out for—" Grandma hesitated, and Saunders could see that she understood. "You mean—?"

He nodded. "I mean we have food and oxygen here for the nine-day return trip, plus an extra three days. Say two weeks at most, if we ration everything. And after that—" Saunders turned and stared out at the bleak plains of Mars.

"So you've got to fix the whatchamacallit by tomorrow or the next day if we're going to get back, is that it?"

"That's it." He turned and gave her a wry smile. "Apparently you aren't the only one traveling under false pretenses. We thought we knew our way around. But now, it looks as though it doesn't matter. Unless we can figure out the trouble, fast."

Then he went forward. He was forward all that day, and the next. The men slept in shifts, and they didn't say much—to Grandma or to each other. They checked and rechecked, cursing the lack of tools, cursing the impregnable housing of the drive that prevented them from stripping it down or reaching the source of the powerhead. And *they* stared out of the port, too.

Finally they got the drive to turn over, but the instruments stayed dead. The transmission and feeder mechanism was shot. This was on the third day, the last.

They went back to the cabin, then, with their micrometers and their testing instruments and their delicate probes, and they sat down while Joe Saunders paced the narrow aisle between the bunks.

"Well, it looks like this is it," he said. "There's nothing more we can do."

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Nobody said anything. Nobody, that is, but Grandma. "Lands sakes!" she murmured. "And me with the whole set of doilies almost finished." She cocked her head. "You fellers sure you tried everything?"

"Of course we're sure." Saunders clenched his fists. "Do you think we're anxious to stay here and die?"

"But the engine's running. I can hear it myself."

"It runs, yes. But the transmission — the induction coils — oh, what's the use?" Saunders turned on his heel, then halted.

"Hey," he called. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Up to take a look for myself," Grandma Perkins said. "Want to come along?"

A half-hour later, they took off for earth.

\* \* \*

"So that's how it was," Saunders told me, as he opened his eighth bottle of beer. "In half an hour we were on our way. And we didn't have a bit of trouble during the whole nine days. Of course, most of the boys talked about resigning once they got back, and I've got a good notion to turn in my card myself. None of us could look Grandma Perkins in the face. But I've got to hand it to her. She just sat there, knitting away; strapped in most of the time because she'd started some new embroidery and claimed she couldn't get it right while she floated."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You mean she fixed the space-drive for you?"

"Of course she did. And that's what's so awful about the whole thing. If it ever gets out we'll be the laughing-stock of the scientific world."

"But she didn't know anything about it," I said. "You told me she didn't. So what could she do?"

"What could she do?" Joe Saunders sighed, then grinned. "You remember how she kept comparing that space-drive to the electric motor on her pump back at the farm? Well, I took her in to see it and she listened for a minute, and then she did just what she did when that pump of hers gets out of order. And it worked."

"You mean —?"

"That's right." Joe Saunders raised his beer and uttered a great sob. "There happens to be a little doohickey on top of the dingus. And Grandma Perkins just lifted her skirts and kicked it."

## Queen of the Metal Men

You must promise," said the wrinkled little man known as the Wise One. "Warriors are forbidden to read the words of the ancients. Now that you have read from the forbidden books, you must forget. Promise that."

Darro turned away. In the dusk, the little fire before the two men, the Wise One Tabor, and the young warrior, Darro, was a flickering point of light. The hot coals lay like red eyes on the dark earth, and Darro looked again at the old man.

"Tell me, O Tabor," he said slowly, "why the knowledge of the great cities that lie buried beneath the ground is kept from us." His eyes searched as he spoke. "What have our strong people, the descendants of the great and ancient city of Baltimore, to fear from a world we have never seen, a world dead these two centuries?"

The Wise One was silent a few moments. At length he said, "You are young, Darro. In my grandfather's day there was a warrior, strong and impetuous as you, with a curious nature. He too had read the books, and he resolved to find the hidden entrance to the dead city. One day he did find it. Half the men in our clan were killed before...before..." and the old man stopped.

"What, O Tabor?" cried Darro. "You are speaking of my ancestor Dagon. What did he find? What is the meaning of *Dagon's Curse*?"

"Do not ask me," spoke the Wise One. "There are dead cities buried beneath the ground all over our land. But under us alone, under the proud Marylander Clan, lies the key to ultimate death of every living being on earth. The days of ice sealed it. You must not disturb it."

"But tell me what this key is, and I will be content."

"Do not ask me," repeated Tabor. "If you ever knew, the fire that burns in you would not be content until you had found the entrance

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again. A thousand lives were lost there once. Go now, only promise me to forget."

"No!" cried Darro, fiercely, as he sprang up. "No! I am not a timid maid! I am not a fool! If there are things to be known, I will know them — and I will tell the whole world!"

He remembered the eyes of the old man as he stalked away, eyes that held sorrow and an old fear. But Darro was heedless. He had come to the Wise One honestly, asking him what the forbidden books meant, the books over which his elder sister constantly pored, and which he had read secretly. But something else he had not told old Tabor....

*For Darro had found the entrance to the ancient city!* Days before, returning alone from a hunting foray, he had come upon the overgrown crevasse that hid it. Or else why should he, the warrior Darro, read books like a child or a maiden? He had waited long enough, and Tabor had only taxed his patience.

Now he stood on a hill, his face turned to the sky, impatient with the very night itself. When the dawn came, Darro would go!

Then, when the day was but a streak of light gray in the heavens, Darro was on his way. Swiftly he ran over the hilly ground, past fields laid bare by the advancing autumn, through a deep woods, until he stood at length before the first ridge of what formed the crevasse. A little cave marked the beginning. After that there was a huge iron door — a door that he had found ajar, rusted with age and unwieldy. Farther than that he had not gone before, but now...

Cautiously Darro drew his hunting knife, gripped his spear more firmly, and stepped into the gloom of the cave. With both hands he pressed against the huge iron door. Creaking, it gave until Darro squeezed past it — and suddenly Darro the warrior knew fear.

He stood in the half-darkness and gazed at that which rested before him — the iron body of a man; motionless, quieter than death. It did not breathe, for iron cannot live, and yet within the metal face glared two living eyes. The eyes were yellow, blazing with sight here in the murkiness of the cavern.

With an effort, Darro stopped trembling.

His face relaxed, and the long jaw protruded in a defiant grin. He stood his spear against the rocky wall and advanced slowly toward the throne, staring at the metal monster, hand clenching the dagger tightly. The Thing did not move.

Slowly Darro reached out one hand and touched the cold metal of the Thing's chest. Nothing happened. Darro's hand moved over the iron body, and he grinned. No need to fear this image!

## Queen of the Metal Men

And then, eyes blazed and body lunged. But not the eyes or body of the metal man. Charging across the floor of the cave on great, talon-studded paws, lunged a shaggy, elephant-bodied monster. The Thing had a head the size of a horse's body, and the great, slant-jawed skull held blazing green eyes. The snarling face was catlike, but no cat or common carnivore had the tusk-like fangs of this monster. The gaping red jaws held teeth like ivory sword-blades.

Darro whirled to face it. Saber-tooth! The deadliest creature of destruction of a new primitive world was upon him. That explained the half-open door — the saber-tooth lived there!

The monster leaped, and with a lightning movement Darro dodged behind the rocky throne on which the metal man rested. Yet the tiger did not swerve. Soaring through the air it landed full on the chest of the iron man, claws raking the metal in an impotent swath of doom. The ponderous body swayed. It was toppling back, crushing Darro as the beast lunged frantically against it.

Darro braced himself, trying to hold the figure erect as a shield. The rear of the iron being was studded with knobs and levers; Darro felt one strike his temple as he pushed against it. The creature was falling upon him; a moment and the saber-tooth would push it over, pin him helplessly beneath the giant iron figure, then leap over and close tiger-teeth in his throat.

Darro felt his knees give. He slid desperately to the floor, his hands clutched despairingly at the iron knobs in the metal back. They twisted under his fingers, slipped away as he landed with a gasp. The tiger lunged again. The figure would topple backward now, crush him, and then —

But no. The figure didn't fall. *It was moving!* With a start of awe, the trapped warrior gazed upward. The metal man was rising on ponderous feet. Great arms went up and embraced the shaggy body of the monstrous beast, catching it against its chest as one might catch a playful dog. Slowly the arms bent in. The roaring saber-tooth raked impotent claws against the metal, bit furiously at the iron face. But the arms pressed, squeezed, crushed.

Suddenly the roaring became a fierce scream and the body of the metal man became covered with ruddy spray. Claws ripped in one last convulsive spasm, and then the iron being dropped the limp carcass to the floor. The saber-tooth was dead.

For a moment the metal man stood swaying, arms still open. Darro saw that the tiger's blows had taken some effect, for one of the arms was dangling loosely on twisted wires, and the chest was partly

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crushed. Darro rose to his feet, rushed around to the front of the iron creature. He gazed into the yellow eyes that were strangely fading. With a thunderous crash, the iron body toppled to the floor atop the saber-tooth, the head splintering against the rocks into a tangled mass of coils and jagged splinters of steel.

\* \* \*

Later, a crude pine torch in his hand, Darro proceeded cautiously down the rocky floor of the passage. In the torchlight he could see smoothly-chiseled walls. He was on the right track; legend and fable must be true! Men had fashioned this corridor under the ice—for what strange purpose he could not say. Men, or else—

Darro nearly stumbled over the first one. It was an iron man, lying across the path. One great metal hand still grasped a strange implement. Tools lay scattered around the sprawling figure.

Another iron man! Darro pressed the levers in the back. Perhaps this one would move, too. But no, twirl as he might, the fallen figure lay motionless.

Darro rose, puzzled. What had destroyed the spark in this metal giant? And restored it to the other?

He shrugged, passing on. And then he found another. And yet another. From this point on the floor was strewn with fallen men of metal. Each one had a tool or instrument of outlandish design, the use of which Darro could not fathom.

Darro paused. His torch was exhausted. As he lit the second one he shivered. It was hellishly cold here in the pit under the ice. It was cold, much colder than in the cave above.

Darro hastened on, shivering, through the endless maze of the passage. Every few feet he passed another metal man; another giant sprawling helplessly on the rocks. There must have been thousands of them, and Darro felt a strange awe surging through him. Why did they lie here? What was their purpose? What civilization had produced them? And the buried city that legend said lay below; would he really find it dead when he reached it?

The cold grew intense; the journey became a nightmare of torch-lit shadows on twisted walls under icy earth, of frantic groping in frozen darkness beneath the glacier, of blind stumbling over the cold iron bodies of monster-men. Darro plunged doggedly forward, a burning spark of life in a world of death.

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And then the cavern slanted down—down to a door. The metal men lay in heaps, covered with a frost which made their bodies horrid, fur-covered monstrosities. But Darro did not waste a glance on them.

He stared at a new door; a great metal thing in the rock walls. It was flat, solid, undecorated, but it was a door—and beyond...?

Darro ran down the incline. His arms gripped the remaining torches; he raised them and beat upon the door. A brazen clang echoed down the silent corridor under the heart of ice. He stood there, a grotesque, half-naked little figure—pounding vainly at the gates of frozen mysteries.

Again and again he hammered on the doorway. It did not yield, it did not open. Darro swore softly. Was he to be thwarted at the end of his quest? He hammered with redoubled fury.

And then the miracle happened. Slowly, with a grating clang, a groaning of metal torment, the door began to slide open at the side.

Darro gaped. He thought of a city beyond, of power; of machines, of a million metal men straining and wrestling with that massive gateway. He gazed avidly, waiting for the revealed sight of the city's might, moving the mountainous door for him to enter.

The door slid back with a ponderous crash, and then Darro's mouth dropped open in amazement, for standing alone in the shadows, was a tiny, golden-haired girl!

"Come in," she said, smiling.

Darro's ears stung at the sound of the southern tongue, spoken here under the ice!

Darro had seen in his father's camps at ancient Baltimore the captive maidens of a dozen lands; he had journeyed through the world and gazed on beauties of every tribe. But this girl, this golden woman, was beyond any comparison he could make. Her hair was a misty cloud drawn from the sun, her eyes deep pools bluer than the diamond-glint on the ice, her slim body a creamy loveliness which dimmed the glacial snow. Her shapeliness was veiled in a flowing robe of green that struck fiery contrast to her vivid lips, now parted in a smile of greeting before which Darro's senses reeled.

"Come in," repeated the girl. Darro stepped past the doorway, no longer intent on seeking an army of automatons. He had eyes only for the charms of the golden girl. It was a full moment before he realized that the door had slid noiselessly back into place; a moment more before he comprehended that the operation was performed by her slim hand pressing a lever at its side. In another instant his senses were struck by the pleasurable warmth of the air about him; it was a tropical

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atmosphere contrasting delightfully to the freezing temperature of the tunnel beyond.

Still all this meant nothing to Darro, staring into the incarnate face of Beauty.

"You have come again," she said. "You returned."

"I don't know what you mean," Darro, said slowly.

The girl regarded him. "You look so alike," she murmured. "Yet it could not be. That was so long ago. I have almost forgotten about time." As if from a reverie, she asked, "Who are you?"

"Men call me Darro. I am of the south."

"The — the world?"

"The world."

"But how do you come here?"

Darro explained, briefly. The blue eyes of the girl clouded. "Then the robots did get through to the surface after all," she whispered. "I — we — couldn't know, you see. 18366 was set to come back and report; but the cold must have reached its coils before it could return."

"Didn't you send someone out to investigate?" Darro demanded.

"Who could — we — send?" asked the girl. "That was many years ago, and it had taken many years to build the passageway so that by the time it was completed I — we — had almost forgotten about it. And there was nothing to do. If the robots succeeded in digging a tunnel to the outer world they would return; if not, I couldn't risk going alone."

Darro knitted his brows. "I don't understand," he muttered. "I don't know."

The girl smiled. "Of course you don't — Darro. It's simple. When I say 'I' I refer to myself, naturally. I am the only *moving* being left here in Subterra, now that the robots are gone. I could not leave alone to investigate the progress of the tunnel. When I say 'we' I am referring to the other living being that cannot *move*; the brains that I tend. But perhaps I had better explain as I show you."

The blonde girl grasped Darro's hand. Her fingers were cold, but they held him firmly as she led him away from the door. Darro's eyes widened at the panorama of Subterra before him.

This was the great city under the ice. This was the gigantic realm of wisdom. This was the miracle of all legends.

*This tiny little series of small rooms!*

Darro saw his surroundings for the first time. He stood in an iron chamber with a high, plated ceiling embedded in the rock. A series of small apartment cubicles opened before him; their walls rising only a



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few feet higher than his head, so that he could see the rooms from the elevation at the doorway where he stood.

"Come along," said the girl. Darro followed, disappointment gnawing at his heart. But there was mystery, too; and Darro listened as the girl spoke.

"I'll be brief," she said. "The details are recorded in the talking cylinders, and you can hear it all later; data, statistics, scientific information, everything. Subterra was once a great nation under another name, ruling above on outer earth. This you know from the legends. The war years forced all life underground, and even when wars had gone, people lived there. And then the ice came.

"The scientists had known, of course, and made certain plans. But the actual glacier was preceded by volcanic convulsion which destroyed the city; ruined the tunnels and subterranea already dug in preparation. Only a small band of nobles and scientists escaped to one of the pits. This was the cavern of Rann Sivo, the Creator.

"Rann Sivo was the man who invented the robots; the metal men. They were the result of his experiments with electricity, and were provided with electrically-actuated brains attuned to vocal command. Rann Sivo was a great and wise scientist; he had been among the leaders in the preparation of plans for moving underground and escaping the ice. He built this pit, lower than the rest, and reinforced the walls with iron. In fact, on the night of the quake, he and some of the leading nobles were performing a tour of inspection here. They thus escaped the fate of the others. Rann Sivo was trapped, with his handful of men, here below the surface of the earth.

"The ice came, covering all, and still Rann Sivo and his few companions survived on the stores of food-tablets. Rann Sivo's vision of a great new underground city dwindled to this pitiful sham, here in a tiny alcove. But he did not despair. He worked. He built the robots; knowing someday that he would want them to dig a way out of the buried world. He set to work collecting all the wisdom he and the others could remember; all the history, the science recorded on talking-discs. They are now stored here, in this apartment."

The golden girl led Darro into the first tiny chamber, pointing to the rolls of metal cylinders in racks along the walls. "There is a machine to play them," she said. "Later, perhaps, you may wish to hear these things." She withdrew, and Darro followed.

"You see, it was Rann Sivo's dream, like your own, to someday bring wisdom back to a ruined world. But he was a man. And men are human. They die."

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The girl's voice was harsh. Darro started at her tones of bitterness. "So Rann Sivo planned again. He was wise. Knowing that he was getting older, that others were getting older and the race would not endure, he began one of his greatest creations—the brain-tube."

The girl led Darro into the second apartment. "The robots he never animated, storing them in the halls until the time the digging to the surface would begin. Now he concentrated on the brain-tubes."

The girl indicated the tables in this second small room, and Darro saw that their surfaces were covered with shiny silver domes. Wires ran from the disc-studded sides of these silver containers.

"Into these tubes Rann Sivo planned to place the brains of the men as they died. A simple surgical operation, and then the living brain-tissue, preserved in a saline solution favorable to maintain existence, would be hooked up by means of electrical apparatus, to speaking-devices. Rann Sivo's science that had discovered the electrical basis of life in creating robots, also extended to the preservation of thought as electricity in human brains.

"And thus it was. As men died, their brains were transferred to these cylinders, to live forever, and electrically record their thoughts as speech when the proper wires were connected. Now Rann Sivo and his followers would, in a manner of speaking, live forever. When the time came they could instruct the robots to dig them out, return, and carry their living brains into the world beyond, there to be hooked up again and by vocal command instruct the robots to rebuild the shattered cities. A tremendous scheme; and this simple account will hardly satisfy you. Later you can hear the cylinders."

"You mean Rann Sivo and his followers are still alive?" Darro gasped.

"Of course. Their brains are in these tubes. I myself change the saline solution regularly and do whatever else is necessary."

"But then why not turn them on, let me hear the words of Rann Sivo himself?"

It must have been imagination, or else Darro did detect a look of furtive fear flickering across the girl's face.

"No, I never turn them on. It is— forbidden," she whispered. "Later, perhaps— now, let me finish."

She led him into the other apartments in turn. "This is where they lived, centuries ago."

"Centuries?"

"Of course. Rann Sivo was the last to die, and his brain was transformed into a cylinder fully eight—"

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The girl stopped abruptly, then rushed on. "But that's not important. This is: Rann Sivo had accomplished what he set out to do, but it was not enough. He dreamed of another triumph. He wanted to improve his robots so as to perpetuate the race he knew had been destroyed. He began to experiment with synthetic flesh preparations. His knowledge of the electro-biologic basis of chemical life served him well. He built machines, instruments, which are stored now in these other apartments. He had accomplished much when he died, the last of them all."

"But you?" said Darro. "Who are you, and how are you alive after so many years?"

The girl was silent. Then—"Soon you may know all," she said quietly. She continued.

"But Rann Sivo's plans had gone further. He had meant to keep his work going after death; energizing the robots and having them carry out his commands directed by his voice from the cylinder. Then the robots would create the synthetic race under his direction, and finally tunnel a way out of Subterra.

"But he had finished his first experiment when he died, and although the robots transformed his brain to a cylinder they could not work on. Because Rann Sivo would not give them the secret of fire."

The girl sat down on a chair in the apartment and Darro followed suit.

"You may have noticed that there is no fire here. This sealed chamber has natural heat, fed through vents from the gaseous inner earth beneath, and it has a ventilating system the secret of which died with Rann Sivo. But no fire. Sivo used fire to make the robots and he needed fire to create the synthetic robot race, but he refuses to give up his secret from the brain-tube. So after his solitary experiment, no more synthetic humans were created.

"The robots began to dig the tunnel and their controls were affected by the cold so that they did not return. So there is no one to carry the brain-tubes or the cylinders of wisdom into the world.

"With the secret of fire I could build synthetic humans myself and form a new race; then we could go forth and with our hidden knowledge rebuild the world; fill it not with puny men that die, but with mechanical beings far more clever and beautiful than mere products of earthly flesh.

"That was my dream. But I could not leave here after the robots failed to return; I had to keep the brains alive, and the cylinders oiled. All that is changed now. You have come, and with that coming have

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brought the secret of fire once more. The machines will hum again, and soon we can go forth together. Heat will cause the robots to rise up from the passageway; they can be our army as we march back into the world with wisdom. Then we shall rule, and I can destroy the hateful brain of Rann Sivo and his friends' brains will be smashed, and only we two shall know and rule."

"We two...?" Darro's head spun. Who was this woman? What was she, with her strange story and her stranger dreams? There was something wrong here, something dangerous. He turned to question her, but the baleful beauty of her blue eyes held him in flaming bondage to her smile. "But why do you hate them?"

"I've talked too long," she whispered. "You're tired. Rest here. Tomorrow—strange, I have not used that word in years!—we shall plan."

Darro wanted to rise, to protest. But her eyes, her lips commanded. The golden glow of her beauty, blending with the blissful warmth of this chamber, impelled him toward impotent lethargy, toward the release of dreams. Darro let his head sink back. It was all so confusing. Tomorrow, rested, he could think, reason. Now, he wanted to sleep. His eyes closed as he felt the strangely cool hands of the girl restfully stroking his forehead.

\* \* \*

Darro awoke. How many hours had passed he did not know. Here in the cavern created by Rann Sivo there was no time. But Darro was rested, although somehow strangely nervous and tense. Something was wrong. He could feel it in the silence. Where was the girl?

That girl—she was stranger than everything else. Her fantastic story, her reticence concerning herself, her unnatural beauty, her wild plans. What weird mental outlook actuated her?

Why wouldn't she let him talk to Rann Sivo? Was it all a fraud?

Darro rose, searched for her. She wasn't in any of the apartments. Nor was she in the outer chamber. The gate of iron was closed. For some reason, instinctive panic was rising in Darro's heart.

He stepped down the hall between the cubicles. Impulsively he halted before the second one—the one housing the brain-cylinders, as the girl had called them. This was where Rann Sivo's brain rested; in the largest of the silver dome-things. Darro's eyes carefully inspected the wiring, the dials. Perhaps, if he were to tinker about a bit—

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Cautiously he twisted and turned. For a moment nothing happened. Then Darro jumped. From a sounding-board in the wall above his head a strange, metallic voice crackled into the room.

"Greetings."

"Rann Sivo?"

"I can scarcely hear you. Turn up the auditory response."

Darro found the dial, twisted it. And then he spoke, asking questions and the voice from the tube answered. For ten minutes Darro lived in a world of horror. Then he heard the crash.

It came from overhead; from far overhead. It was a rumbling, a thundering, a cosmic clashing; the sound of moving mountains, of shifting continents.

"Earth tremors," came the passionless voice from the brain; the same passionless voice that had just spoken such unemotional words of horror. "Escape. But do as I have told you."

"*Dagon's curse!*" Darro cried as the thundering increased.

"Turn me off," commanded the voice from the cylinder; and Darro complied. He raced from the room, hands fumbling at his waist. Sure enough, his flint was gone. *She* had stolen it as he slept, just as the brain of Rann Sivo had hinted. And Rann Sivo had done more than hint of what *she* would do with fire. His revelations had filled Darro with a sort of sick horror which was now tremendously accelerated in its effect by the ominous quaking of the earth about him. Such a tremor, long ago, had walled the little band of scientists and nobles in this subterranean chasm. Now he would be trapped unless he hastened. And somewhere out in that corridor, *she* worked, with one of the machines Rann Sivo had spoken of, warming the robots, bringing them to life so they would march out—

Breathing a prayer, Darro tugged at the lever in the iron door. It groaned open, and he reeled forward into the fetid air of the long passageway. The *warm* air!

Out here, where it had been awful cold, it now was as sultry as Hell's own chambers. Darro plunged down a long passage, running desperately. The rumblings shook the rock ceiling over his head. The place would topple at any moment!

Racing through the midnight madness without torch, Darro sprinted on. Horror gnawed his brain as he saw that his feet did not stumble over iron bodies. They were gone. *She* had raised them!

He ran, breath surging in time to the rumbles from above. A crash like doom echoed in his ears from behind. He knew a section of the

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rock had fallen, crushed down by glacial pressure, to bury forever the secrets of Subterra.

Darro sobbed with aching lungs as he rounded the curve and ran relentlessly, driving his body forward. The rumbling increased. Soon the entire cavern would collapse. He must reach *her* in time.

The heat increased. He was near, now. Yes, there —

Ahead, marched the iron army of robots, filing with brazen tread through the rocky passage. Hundreds, row on row, metal faces set in grimaces of brassy dread. And before them, the golden body of the girl, bending over each robot as she passed, bathing their bodies in the flaming glow shot from a long tube she carried in her arms; a machine ignited by the flint she had stolen, which warmed the secret core of the robot bodies and brought them again to life. Sensitive, coiled inner springs reacted to heat and a constantly augmented robot army marched on into the world, with *her* at the head, *and that must not be!* Darro remembered the words of Rann Sivo, thundering in his brain as now the very walls about him thundered.

He plunged through the robot ranks, heedless of danger, of trampling feet and iron arms that swung. He struggled up, the girl not suspecting his approach. She was bending over the figures, bathing them in the flame from her instrument, and they rose like resurrected corpses. There was a smile on her face which no human should ever wear, and her eyes blazed with an unearthly triumph.

Straight ahead she stared, straight ahead her iron army marched, and then Darro saw that they were nearly out of the passage.

"Too late!" he gasped. "I'll be too late!"

The gateway to the world loomed before them. Another moment and —

Darro reached her, as the ground quivered sickeningly beneath his flying feet.

"Stop!" he screamed hoarsely.

She faced him then, and the robots halted. On her face was a look of hideous dismay. It faded quickly, to be replaced by a crafty smile.

"Forward," she commanded. "Take him."

The ponderous surge, the metallic thudding of iron feet, moving over the rocks. They were coming, iron hands ready to crush and rend, and then over their thunder rose another thunder — a colossal, elemental throb that wrenched the earth in the throes of utter agony.

With a roar the walls caved down. The golden queen of the robots leaped toward Darro, bearing him back. They made the gateway, stood again in the cave beyond, safe in the upper world. But behind them

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the surging still sounded, and mountains of rock rained down to shatter the moving iron figures under tons of glacial debris.

Darro glanced down at her, panting with exhaustion.

She clung to him, the golden girl of his dreams. Her eyes were wide with fright, her lips parted with invitation. She was all woman, all female, now.

"Darro," she whispered. "I've been an ambitious fool. I meant to trick you, to take the robots out into the world and rule with my wisdom. But you were stronger, wiser. I know that now. So I ask you merely to take me with you. You will be the master, I the slave. I can teach you many things, Darro; I know the wisdom and the secrets of Rann Sivo. Together we can go far."

*"You thought you knew me,"* Darro breathed. *"You remembered Dagon, the man whose hot curiosity proved a curse to his people. You enchanted him with your beauty – and it took a thousand lives to right that mistake. It almost cost mankind its existence."*

Darro gazed tenderly down into the most beautiful face he had ever known. Tremblingly his hands caressed the cold throat, then suddenly they tightened.

She screamed then, just once, as Darro ruthlessly crushed her unearthly and beautiful body backward. There was a sharp snap; his hands clawed away strips of non-human tissue. He ripped once more and from beneath the mask of flesh projected a mass of torn wires and tiny cogwork.

Darro let the broken doll sag to the floor of the cave, and the shiny, twisted coils rolled outward.

"A robot," he grated through clenched teeth, "just as Rann Sivo told me!"

Several hours later, the warrior Darro, great-grandson of Dagon, came back to the peaceful plain of his clan. His eyes shone as he thought of the story he would tell. There would be a new story told for generations, told to his children's children – to the whole world, for the world was waking again.





## The Black Brain

He's brought me a brain," Hilton whispered. "A black brain!"

I stared into that cold gray face and wondered what madness lurked beneath the intensity of his eyes.

"Think of it," Hilton mumbled. "A black brain from Mars."

I thought of it and turned away. My own eyes stared at the grinning faces of the shrunken *dworp*-heads from Jupiter that hung from the walls, at the colossal skeleton of the giant *qtella* from the Saturnic ooze.

It was a long moment before I could look at Dennis Hilton again. He was smiling. He hugged his triumph, gloated over it, chuckled again.

"A black brain," he crooned. "A brain from Mars."

I thought vaguely of calling a physician. But you don't easily question the sanity of a man like Dennis Hilton – the "Uranium King" himself – the famous interplanetary financier.

That's what the telepapers called him. That's what the public thought he was. I suppose I am one of the few friends who know him in his true guise, as a man with an obsession. You couldn't call it a hobby, really. Dennis Hilton had an actual passion for collecting.

We sat now in his private sanctum. Sanctum? More truthfully, it was Hilton's private museum. All around the vast chamber were the trophy cases, the wall chests, the display tables holding Hilton's prizes.

Jewels from the Martian deserts, stuffed *ekis* from Venus, mummified *dringi* from the caves on the dark side of the Moon...pottery from Vlakka, statuary from the crypts of Ignis, rare parchments found in the seas of Yabar. Osseous, geologic, paleontological remains...fragments of the forgotten cultures of a dozen planets...plunder from half a hundred asteroids and a score of satellites...and now, Dennis Hilton sitting there before me and mumbling, "He brought me a black brain from Mars."

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I snapped out of it.

"Wait a minute, now," I said. "You flashed me in such a hurry I didn't get a chance to ask any questions. You told me nothing when I landed on the roof. All I've managed to get out of you here is something about securing a black brain. Let's start at the beginning, shall we?"

Dennis Hilton sat back, lighted a *sybarette*, and smiled. In a moment the mask of self-consciousness slipped over his heavy, sagging gray face. He was once again the financier, the authority, the man of the cosmos.

"Sorry," he apologized with a chuckle as ingenuous as it was false. "Guess I'm a little excited, that's all. As one collector to another—you understand."

"I collect facts," I told him, dryly. "I'm just an author, not a Uranium King. And so far I haven't heard any facts."

"Allow me to remedy that," said Hilton. "To begin with, I got the brain from Arnold Kress."

"You got the brain from *who*?" I exploded.

"Arnold Kress." Hilton repeated the name with a smile of triumph. "Yes, I know how peculiar that must sound. Kress and I have been rivals for years. Business rivals—and rivals in our hobby, as well. He's always had the jump on me, too. As owner of Transplanetary, Incorporated, he has been able to organize his own private expeditions. To Mars, the moon, Venus, and all points solar. Always coming back with ridiculous televisual poses showing him standing there with a new trophy tucked under one arm.

"As for me, you know how I've gone about my collecting. The skippers of my own fleet have to pick up the items for me. I've sent out my own private archeologists and planeticians, too. But Kress has always been able to lord it over me because he bagged his own trophies, as it were."

I held up my hand and halted his tirade.

"I know all this," I said. "Get to the point. Why did Arnold Kress honor you with this gift, and where did he get it?"

"He got it on Mars, and he gave it to me because he was afraid," Hilton replied.

"Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"You'll see soon enough," Hilton told me. "But first, you wanted facts. Kress went out about three months ago. Some operator of his up near Dalil gave him the tip. You know the Dalil deserts? Beyond the Great Chasm?"

"Dangerous territory, isn't it? Unexplored?"

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"Right. That only made Kress keener to be the first. As I understand it, his expedition was very elaborately organized. He made the desert crossing, all right. Got to the caves beyond."

"What caves?"

"The caves where he found the brain. Claims to have discovered a totally new lost Martian civilization there. Nothing alive, you understand, but remnants of immense ethnological value. Quite a contribution to interplanetary history and culture, as he tells it. Some of his professorial hirelings are probably writing up his findings for monographs.

"But all Kress actually achieved was the discovery of the brain. It was sitting in the cave. I've tried to get further details from him, but he's devilishly reticent. Not only reticent, but frightened."

"Frightened?"

"Yes." Again Hilton chuckled. "Imagine that—a big bad interplanetary buccaneer like Arnold Kress, afraid of his own shadow! And admitting it to me, his rival!"

"Facts," I prompted him.

"There aren't many more. From hints Kress dropped, his expedition left the caves beyond the Great Chasm in something of a hurry. Several men seem to have died in the Dalil desert crossing. The voyage back was something of an ordeal too, it seems. Fever got two of his staff planeticians—I gather it was the two who were assigned to tend and study the black brain."

"Study it?"

"We'll get to that, also," Hilton told me. "At any rate, when Kress returned, he was a frightened man. Whether he had some idea that the black brain was a jinx, in the way that ancient Egyptologists thought mummies were hoodoos, I don't know. When he came to me he merely offered me the black brain. But he seemed quite sincere in warning me that the thing seemed bewitched. He said he wished he had never removed it from its cave. In fact, he went further than that and said he is going to give up collecting. And by no means will he ever make another expedition to Mars."

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"He went up to his private estate to recuperate, under the care of a physician. Personally, I think Arnold Kress is a sick man. I believe his present attitude—his delusions about the brain—spring from a serious ailment. Frankly, some of the things he said to me weren't exactly sane."

I rose to my feet.

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"You know what you're doing to me, don't you?" I asked Hilton. "You're giving me the most damnable itch to see this black brain of yours. All this romantic buildup and air of mystery."

"Come on, then," Hilton urged. "I'll let you peek at it. But I warn you, you're due for a shock."

Dennis Hilton led the way down the long hall. He paused before the bronze doors of a further chamber and knocked.

Kiti answered his summons and opened the door.

I shouldn't mention Kiti, I suppose. But that no longer matters now. Kiti was a Berian—a Venusian from the warm cities. Despite interplanetary odes on immigration, Dennis Hilton had smuggled him in as a personal servant. Berians, as all reports show, make the best of all possible servants, combining doglike docility with utter devotion to their masters. Hilton was a man who liked unquestioning obedience. Hence, Kiti.

Still, I got a shock when he opened the door. You never get used to a Berian. It isn't their faces, though the single eye is bad enough. It's that greenish complexion, the dwarfed, stooping posture, and the claw-like fingers that arouse some instinctive repulsion in all earth dwellers.

"Yess?" hissed Kiti.

"We're going to look at the brain," said Hilton.

He moved forward. But Kiti didn't get out of the doorway.

"Here, now!" Hilton snapped.

"Please. Please, Master. Do not enter here." The soft, servile voice held a note of entreaty.

"What's this?" asked Hilton, in genuine astonishment.

"Please do not go to the brain. The brain wants you to go. It is not well to obey it. Please do not go to the brain."

"Berians!" Hilton muttered to me, under his breath. "Excellent servants, but really little better than cretins according to earth standards. They get these delusions."

He shouldered the little green man aside.

"This way," he called. I followed him into another room. It was a room I'd never seen before—or had I? Of course! This had once been a guest chamber; parlor and bedroom. Now its walls were tiled, antiseptically white. It looked like a surgical theater, or a scientific laboratory. Laboratory? But why?

We went towards the second door.

Hilton turned a face filled with triumph towards me.

"Here it is," he whispered exultantly. "The black brain from Mars."

## The Black Brain

I stepped into that room. I stared at that table. I gazed at that great inverted glass bell suspended on chains from the high ceiling. I gazed *into* that bell.

I saw the black brain.

I screamed.

The transparent glass bell...it was hanging from the ceiling on the chains like a huge bowl, ten feet wide. And within the crystal prison, strands of ebon horror clawing inkily in a frantic effort to escape, was the living, throbbing, pulsating midnight mass of the black brain!

"*It's alive!*" I gasped.

Hilton turned to me. His cold gray face held a mocking grin.

"That's the surprise I promised you. That's the best fact of all, isn't it? The brain is alive. Yes, alive!"

I forced myself to stare again at the serpentine horror. To my trembling gaze it looked like a Medusa's nest—like an octopus—like an ever-changing blob of monstrous protoplasmic slime—like anything but a brain.

"Can you conceive of the organism that once held *this* encased in a sentient skull?" Hilton gloated. "What manner of being could control, and be controlled, by this brain?"

It was a question I didn't want to ponder on. And there were other questions, equally pressing, and equally unpleasant.

I couldn't hold back the obvious one, however.

"What keeps it alive?" I asked.

I stared, searching vainly for clamps, sutures, for an electro-attachment such as surgeons use in keeping animal brains alive. There was nothing. Nor did there seem to be any saline solution in the clear, shallow watery liquid at the bottom of the inverted glass compartment.

"I don't know, exactly." Hilton answered my question slowly. "Arnold Kress found it this way, or says he did. The brain was in the cave. In a bowl—this bowl, to be exact."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "Kress discovers this bowl in a cave beyond the Great Chasm of Mars, sitting all alone in the ruins of a bygone civilization. No one to tend to it, no evidence as to how it got there, no clue as to why it managed to stay—alive—if it is alive. That's pretty hard to swallow."

For answer, Hilton pointed to the black blob behind the glass.

"There it is," he whispered.

And there it was. Throbbing ceaselessly, its nerve endings undulating like tentacles, the black brain seethed.

## Robert Bloch

"Are you sure it's a brain?" I asked. "How do you know it isn't some weird ultra-terrestrial life form? Some macrocosmic cell, or a sea denizen?"

"Look at the convolutions in the mass." Hilton unconsciously assumed a lecturing attitude as he walked around the suspended glass bowl. "Here is a definite line of demarcation between the cerebrum and cerebellum. And note the prominence of what is unmistakably the medulla oblongata. These fissures are well-pronounced. The infinity of convolutions betokens considerable intelligence. Naturally the intelligence isn't human, or even mundane. Yet the men in Kress's party unanimously recognized the mass as being the living brain of what was once a conscious organism."

Despite my inexplicable fear, I stepped closer. I was able to recognize the truth of what Hilton was telling me. Yes, it was a brain — not the small gray sponge of a human, but the black, alien, giant brain of some unknown monstrosity from another world.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" Hilton remarked.

I shook my head. "Horrible," I said.

"Nevertheless, it's a prize. A remarkable specimen. I will study it."

"Why don't you turn it over to the authorities?" I asked.

Hilton frowned. His was the indignation of a born collector.

"It's mine," he insisted. "I intend to keep it."

I shrugged, turned to go. At the door I paused.

"By the way," I remarked. "You said that Arnold Kress had some delusions about the brain? What exactly do you mean?"

Hilton hesitated before he answered. "Oh, nothing much. He thought perhaps the brain had been preserved as a sort of god by the forgotten peoples of the cave cities. He thought that it — well, you know the fancies a sick mind indulges in."

I let it go at that.

"Let me know if you find out anything," I told Hilton, as I left the room.

Going through the hall I encountered Kiti, crouching against the doorway in the darkness. There was a look of abject fear on his livid little face.

I fancied that Arnold Kress wasn't the only one who had strange fancies about the black brain in the bowl. Kiti had them, too.

And that night, when the memory of that dark and living horror came to slither through my dreams, I wondered whether or not those fancies might be true.

# The Black Brain

## II

"Kress has disappeared!"

Just three words. Three words, casually dropped by Spencer, at my office.

Yet for some reason the chills were racing up my spine.

I tried to be casual as I pumped Spencer for information. He didn't know much. Got the news over the telepapers this morning. Kress had left his private sanitarium. There was a hint that he had not exactly "left" in the ordinary sense of the word. "Escaped" was a better choice. Because he had been under observation for an "acute mental disturbance."

In a flash, I associated the story with what Hilton had told me. Kress was more than a bit disturbed — he was mad! And he had escaped.

Of course it wasn't my business, really. Or was it? Anyone who had seen that black monstrosity in the bowl would make it his business to find out anything connected with it. And Kress had gone mad because he'd found it.

That's why I could hardly wait until evening to pay a call on Dennis Hilton.

Hilton answered the door himself.

"Where's Kiti?" I asked.

Hilton sighed. "The crazy fool!" he said. "He left this morning. Couldn't argue him out of it, either. Wouldn't stay in the same place with the thing."

"The brain?"

"Yes."

I entered the hall. "But where could he go, Hilton? You certainly weren't fool enough to turn him loose outside. The authorities would nab you for that soon enough. Illegal entry of planetary visitors, and all that."

"I arranged to send him back to Venus on the afternoon flight," Hilton told me. "But it leaves me shorthanded here. And I'm worried."

"Worried? What about?"

Hilton answered me as he plodded on ahead. Without my asking, he was leading me straight into the chamber that housed the black brain.

"This," said Hilton, opening the door and gesturing me in.

I stepped under the brilliant lights, stared around the white-tiled room, gaped at the glass bowl hanging from the chains in the ceiling.

## Robert Bloch

The brain was there, bubbling blackly as it had in my midnight dreams. It contracted and expanded rhythmically, like some enormous black heart — an evil heart, nourished on unthinkable things. I watched it pulsate. Today the tendrils; nerve-endings, or whatever they might be, were not waving. The entire mass seemed sluggish, and except for the ceaseless throbbing, it lay quiescent at the bottom of the huge bowl.

Hilton watched my eyes. Then he coughed. "Notice anything?" he asked. His voice was strangely husky.

"Why — no — that is —" I stared again. I *did* notice something!

"It's bigger," I said.

Hilton's pallor was ghastly. He couldn't keep the forced smile on his lips. "You see it too?" he whispered.

"Much bigger," I said. "Why?"

"I don't know. And it frightens me. You see, Kress said that, too. The brain gets bigger. Look at it — nearly six feet in bulk! Kress told me, and I laughed at him."

The words recalled my mission.

"Kress," I said. "He's escaped."

"What's that?"

"Don't you know?"

Hilton shook his head.

I broke the story as I'd heard it. "I thought he'd come here to you," I admitted. "That's why I stopped in."

"This is serious," Hilton murmured. He lit a *sybarette* with a nervous gesture. "Come on, we'll go into my den and see what must be done. Can't have Kress running around like this. He needs the proper attention."

We went out, down the hall, entered the den. I found a chair in the midst of the museum display and sat down. As I did so, my knee knocked against a stick. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

I stooped, picked it up. The object was a cane, with a silver handle. It looked vaguely familiar.

Kress! Arnold Kress always carried a silver-handled cane! Every telephoto showed him with his stick. My fingers ran over the silver head, encountered grooves on the surface. I looked down. My eyes read the initials. "A. K."

My eyes rose, to encounter the shocked stare of Dennis Hilton.

"All right," he sighed. "I'll admit it. Kress was here."

"When?"



## The Black Brain

"This afternoon. He left about an hour ago. Oh, don't look at me like that! I did my best, tried to persuade him to return to the sanitarium. But he's mad, I tell you, utterly mad."

Hilton must have read my face.

"Perfectly harmless, though," he hastened on. "Simply delusions of persecution, that's all. He wants to go away, to escape."

"Escape from what?"

"From the brain, of course." Hilton sat down heavily on a sofa. "He thinks the brain is calling to him."

"Calling to him?" I echoed his words in utter mystification.

"Yes. That's what Kiti believed. That the brain is not only alive, but powerful. That it calls — telepathically. A sort of radioactive emanation that results in a hypnotic pull.

"That's why he gave the brain to me," Kress admitted. "He thought he could get away from it. He doesn't like me of course, and he usually never comes near my house. So he thought if I had the brain he might pull free of it. But he can't — he says. The brain called to him and he had to escape. He couldn't get away. It called to him."

"You don't sound much better yourself," I said, candidly. "I'm afraid you're a candidate for a strait jacket yourself."

"Don't say that!" Hilton was on his feet, his face convulsed. "Don't say that to me! I suppose you think I'm crazy, eh? That I just imagine the brain is growing? That I just imagine it whispers inside of my head and tells me to —"

He stopped.

"Go ahead, Hilton," I murmured. "What does the brain whisper to you?"

"Nothing." He sat down again, hastily. "Nothing. I don't know what I'm talking about, I guess. All this is too much of a shock to me. I wish you could have seen the look on Kress's face when he came here. I listened to what he whispered about the brain. He does believe it was a god of some kind, away in that other world. And he said it must have called the guides to come to it.

"They were almost lost beyond the Great Chasm, he said, though the guides wouldn't admit it. And then they seemed to go forward all at once as though they were being — directed. They came to the caves through an unbelievable maze, and found the brain right away. Because it called to them. Kress told me it wanted to be found. It wanted to go out into the cosmos again. To a world where it could find other minds to call to. A world where it could grow. Where it could grow. God!

## Robert Bloch

"Why does it grow? When will it stop growing? How can I make it stop?"

I had the answer to that one.

"Destroy it," I said.

"No. I couldn't do that." Hilton was obviously sincere. "It's too important a finding to destroy."

I twirled Arnold Kress's cane. "Hilton," I said, softly. "Why do you think the black brain grows?"

"Do you want to know?" Hilton whispered. "Do you really want to know?"

I nodded.

"I think it feeds," he murmured. "I think it feeds on the minds of men. That it drains their thoughts, their urges, their emotions. That it grows by drawing the power from other brains. Like a black vampire. Yes, a black vampire, that's what it is!"

"Believing that," I said—still softly—"do you think it is wise to keep it here?"

Hilton gulped. "You're right." His voice was almost inaudible. "Yes, I can see you're right. It must be destroyed. Will you come back again tomorrow? We shall do it together, you and I. Right now, I don't think I could stand seeing it again. But tomorrow evening, at eight. Bring a gun."

It was a pleasant invitation. And thinking of that growing monstrosity—that black vampire, as Hilton called it—it was an invitation I fully determined to keep.

\* \* \*

I knocked on Hilton's door at five minutes to eight. At eight o'clock I put my shoulder to it, and battered it open in blind panic.

The feeling had been with me all through the day. Something was wrong. Something was utterly wrong.

Now I knew it. Hilton didn't answer the door.

The hallway was dark. The entire downstairs was dark. No servants, human or otherwise, greeted me.

And no voice answered my shouts as I summoned Dennis Hilton.

I raced up the stairs through the pitch-blackness of that empty house, switched on every light at the top of the stairway. Hilton's room was empty. The house was deserted.

I made for the den, the museum trophy room. Nobody there. I stood in the doorway, glancing around quickly before I turned away.

## The Black Brain

Then I saw the paper on the table.

The paper was crumpled. The handwriting was so shaky it took me a full minute to recognize it as Dennis Hilton's penmanship. But the message hit me at once. Just two words, scrawled in a sprawling hand.

"Get out!"

Never have I received more excellent advice. And it was advice I meant to act on. For some reason, panic gripped me. I had no intention of going down that hall and looking at the brain in the bowl.

I would leave now, and return with the police. That was the sensible way – the only sane way. Somehow the thought of facing that sinister entity in the room beyond was terrifying in a way I couldn't analyze. But I loathed the very thought of the black brain. The black brain, pulsing there, throbbing endlessly through uncounted eons of ghastly life; growing and growing, and preying on the minds of men with a dark, unhuman appetite.

I carried that thought with me as I turned and left the doorway.

Then I lost that thought.

I lost *every* thought.

Now I could only *feel*.

For the house was throbbing about me. Yes, the house – the floors, the walls, everything, was pulsing. Pulsing in a weird rhythm. A thumping. A contraction-expansion. *Like the brain.*

The very air seemed to move in a hideously alien tempo of its own. It blew back and forth. It hummed with a tension. The tension of a purring dynamo, of a deathless machine. A machine that pulsed and throbbed. *Like the brain.*

My own body seemed gripped by a similar compulsion. The blood sang in my veins. I was conscious of an altered rhythm in my pulse. My heart pounded. My breathing altered to conform to the beats. And my head seemed squeezed and then released at every pulsation. Every pulsation of that ceaseless ebb and flow. *Like the brain.*

Now, through the feeling came the voice.

I thought it was a voice at first. Then I realized that it was not a voice I heard. I *heard* nothing. The voice was *felt*. I felt the voice inside me. Whispering. Urging. Commanding.

"Come."

Every expansion, every contraction, each beat of the insistent rhythm, drove that command into my consciousness.

"Come."

## Robert Bloch

It was the brain. The brain that had called to Arnold Kress. The brain that had called to Kiti. The brain that might have called to Dennis Hilton. And now it was calling to me.

"Come."

I walked down the hall. The gun in my pocket was forgotten. My original intention was forgotten. My very name, my being, was lost to me in the strength of that hypnotic command.

I passed the outer tiled chamber, where the light blazed. Like a man in a trance, I walked through the open doorway and stood before the brain.

The brain had grown. Its black bulk loomed ten feet, and towered along the glass sides of the huge bowl. I stood and stared mutely.

It was sucking my own brain, eating away my sanity. This I realized. I wondered how this would help it grow. I wondered what would become of me—would I be left with a vacant mind, an empty shell? I wondered why I must stand before it so it could nourish itself.

All this I pondered, but I could not move. I could not resist, or run away. Even as I saw the brain swell, and thicken, I couldn't run. I was trapped. And the black brain billowed up—

I heard my name, then. *Felt* my name then. A voice that was not a voice—a voice that was only a thought within me—screamed, "Kill it! For God's sake, kill it before it gets you!"

I recognized Hilton's thought. The spell snapped. My hand went for the gun.

Even as I whipped it out, I saw things *happen*.

I saw the horrid suggestion of a *face* forming within those black and boiling depths. I saw the rudimentary nerve endings resolve into limbs and feelers that reached out to claw. I saw the utterly hellish suggestion of a great *mouth*...a grinning black maw, gaping in the depths of the throbbing mass.

I shot. I fired again and again. The bowl shattered into a million fragments, but I kept pumping—pumping into the writhing blackness of the huge monstrosity that slithered towards me even as I ripped it to dirty black ribbons.

In a moment it was over. I stared down at the bubbling, coagulated mass that was all that remained of the black brain. For a moment I fancied I saw something—but it must have been my own imagination.

Because I knew, suddenly, what had happened to the men lost on Kress's expedition. I knew what had happened to Kiti—who did not go back on the afternoon flight to Venus. I knew what had happened to Kress—who did not leave the house again after his escape. And

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staring at the mass on the floor, I knew what had happened to Dennis Hilton after he had bid me goodbye last night. I knew what had called to him and brought him to this room to die.

That's why, in the bubbling ooze, I could almost imagine I caught one last ghastly glimpse of their faces...shifting momentarily through the dying liquid came the twisted countenances of the dead. The brain reformed at the end, and I could see Hilton's tortured mouth – Hilton, whose thought somewhere inside the black brain had sent the message which saved me.

I knew now what the brain had wanted, and how it grew. Because they were all wrong.

No matter what the evidence, it wasn't a brain. It was an animal. An animal with a strange hypnotic power. And it had used this power to destroy them. Because animals must – eat!



# Secret of the Observatory

## Chapter I The Mystery Girl

Great yellow eyes winked down from the mountain. Its great egg-shaped head reared from behind the trees, and the eyes stared from it; winking and watching the tiny human figures struggling up the path.

"What's the matter with me?" Dan Marlin muttered aloud.

His companion, a short, bald-headed man with a shrewd, bulldog face, stared at him through the darkness.

"That's what I'd like to know," he replied, sarcastically. "What is the matter with you?"

Marlin disregarded the mockery in his friend's voice, and continued: "I must have the shakes, I guess. Know what I was thinking? I got the idea that the observatory up there on the mountain was shaped like a gigantic head, and that those two windows were its eyes. As though it were watching us."

"Seeing things, eh?" grunted his bald-headed companion. "Well, I thought it would come to this. You used to be a first-rate reporter, Marlin – but now I think you're an A-number-one screwball."

There was gruff affection not unmixed with genuine concern in the little man's voice. Marlin stopped in the path and faced him.

"Don't worry, Hughes," he said. "I know all this seems pretty crazy to you – sneaking up here to spy on an observatory in the dark – but I know what I'm doing. If I'm right we're on the trail of the biggest news story ever broken."

"If you're wrong," returned the other, "we're going to land in a Canadian jail, and the only thing broken is liable to be our heads."

"Come on," whispered Marlin. "And from now on, don't talk so loudly. If they *are* watching us from the mountain up there, we're sunk."

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The burning yellow eyes of the observatory's lighted windows blinked as though in answer. Unconsciously the two men began to creep in the shadows, as though they were indeed being spied upon by unseen presences. The night wind whistled through the trees. Marlin led the way up a steep, vine-tangled path. Hughes tagged behind, lugging in his arms a large black box resembling an oversized valise.

"I don't mind your crazy notion of dragging us up here in the dead of night," grumbled the little man. "But just why you have to load me down with this infernal contraption is more than I can see."

"I told you all that before we started," murmured Marlin. "It's my spying instrument."

"It just don't make sense, that's all," Hughes grunted, as he stumbled along. "Spying on an astronomical observatory in the woods after dark is my idea of a—"

"Quick! Get down!" Marlin turned and pulled Hughes to the side of the path, then dropped to all fours, dragging the little man with him beneath a sheltering bush.

Scarcely had he done so when a great beam of yellow light cut across the little pathway ahead—a yellow beam which rode the sky straight from the top of the observatory half a mile away.

"I was right," Marlin whispered. "They *are* watching!"

He rose slowly, as the light flickered and died away. Hughes pulled himself painfully erect, and stood tottering beneath the burden of the bulky black box.

"I don't get it," he said. "Why not just march up to the place and ask this Doctor Okida, or whatever his name is, for a look-around? Why the secrecy?"

"That's what I'm here to find out," Marlin retorted. "Why the secrecy? These Asiatics came over two months ago and secured permission from the Canadian government to operate this observatory on Long Mountain. That checks. But they immediately discharge all the White assistants, barricade the place with barbed wire, and refuse admittance to all outsiders.

"This Doctor Okida, the man in charge—I heard of him before, when I covered war news on the Chinese front. He's a big scientist all right, but no astronomer. He specializes in building new weapons and war machinery."

"But—" spluttered Hughes.

"Put it all together, and it doesn't spell Mother to me," Marlin continued. "It looks very much to me as if our Oriental friends were using this astronomical observatory for a blind; as though they were



## Secret of the Observatory

really working on one of Okida's secret inventions. And judging from that spotlight we just avoided, the Doctor doesn't welcome press visitors."

"O. K.," Hughes said. "I see the point. But then why come up here at all? You can't get in, and what do you expect to see in the dark?"

"Plenty," returned Marlin, with a grin. "Wait until I set Argus up."<sup>1</sup>

"Who?"

"Argus—the Argus Eye. The machine you're carrying in the black box."

"Oh, it's a machine, is it? From the weight I thought you were going to call on the Doc and sell him a few gold bricks."

Hughes was facetious, but there was hidden respect in his gray eyes. He knew Marlin, and the man's history—knew that in the days before he had become Dan Marlin, ace correspondent, he had been a physicist at the Foundation in New York—and a good one. Just why Marlin had turned reporter he didn't understand; but he shrewdly reasoned that it had something to do with the little black box he inevitably carried with him on foreign assignments. Hughes had noted that Marlin's employer—Fiske, head of the syndicate—treated him with unusual respect. And that was enough for the older man. Still, he was curious.

"Just what is this contraption, Dan?" he persisted, as they wound their way along the tangled trail.

"I might as well let you in on it now," Marlin said. "Because in a few minutes, barring accidents, you'll see it at work. It's an X-ray camera."

"A *which*?"

"An X-ray camera. It photographs motion pictures through walls."

"*Do you take dope?*" snorted the little man, incredulously, pointedly.

"The Argus Eye," said Marlin, complacently, "is the camera of the future. Takes movies through solid objects up to a distance of a quarter mile, under proper lighting conditions. Adjustable, instantaneous focus. Eight millimeter film, easily developed by a special process, so that films taken can be shown almost immediately. The Argus Eye can be attached to an ordinary movie projector for that purpose. Portable, foolproof, easy to operate—if you know how. And—*Look out!*"

Marlin leaped backward, pulling his companion with him. He grasped the little man by the shoulders and hurled him to the ground.

"What's the matter?" wailed Hughes, sitting up and rubbing his bruised back.

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"There – on the path ahead." Marlin pointed. "Those leaves – I felt them give when I put my foot down. There's a pit under there; somebody dug a neat little hole and covered it over for a trap."

"Okida?" whispered Hughes.

"Yes. A charming host, and very thoughtful, I'm afraid. Come on, we're climbing up the side of this bluff."

Suiting the action to the words, Marlin led the way, Hughes scrambling after him, puffing and swearing softly as he wrestled with the clumsy black box.

They reached the top in darkness and stood on a little ledge overlooking the observatory a quarter mile away. Its lights still flickered mockingly into the night, but no sound came from within its walls, no sign of life other than the blinking yellow radiance that poured into the black sky.

"Here we are," Marlin said. "Give me the Argus."

Hughes was at his side. "Before you knocked me over," he observed, "you were trying to tell me some fairy tale or other about this mechanical suitcase of yours. Something about taking pictures through walls."

"Watch me, now, and I'll give you a demonstration," Marlin answered. "Meanwhile I'll try to explain the working principle in one-syllable words, for the benefit of your five-star final brain."

Although his tone was flippant, there was a businesslike firmness to Marlin's jaw, and a keen alertness in his eyes. It was easy for Hughes to sense that this was an important moment – that the entire trip had been merely a prelude to this queer activity on a midnight mountain. He listened with respect, watched with interest, as Marlin removed the outer covering from the black box. From the side he extended the spider-legs of a long, collapsible tripod.

Unsheathed, the black box was revealed to be ornamented by a great series of gleaming metal dials and small levers set in the face. It resembled a portable radio of the old style, Hughes thought. There seemed to be a microscope attachment at the front that looked something like a series of graduated lenses and prisms, mounted in a quartz tube.

"You see," began Marlin seriously, "the whole secret of the thing lies right here in this front attachment. That opaque disc in the end is the receiver. It receives the impact from the electrons shooting off the surface of the illuminated object, and translates them back into light once more."

## Secret of the Observatory

"I don't get it," objected Hughes dubiously. "What do you need to translate electrons into light for? Can't you use the light direct?"

Marlin shook his head. "How can I get light direct through solid walls? I've got to reconstruct that light, as it appears on the other side."

Hughes looked at him belligerently. "I still don't get it," he said firmly. "If nothing comes through, then what is it you pick up?"

Marlin was patient. "It's a sort of billiard-ball phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> You know how the motion is translated from one ball to another, causing it to move with the motion of the first."

"You mean," said Hughes incredulously, "that light is solid, like billiard balls?"

"Sure, didn't Einstein prove it?"

"Yeah," Hughes muttered dubiously. "I think I remember reading about it in the Sunday section one time—"

Marlin busied himself with the Argus Eye, sighting, getting his focus, consulting several tables and charts by the light of his flash.

He clicked open the shutter of the Argus Eye, and began grinding away as Hughes stared at the quartz tube, which seemed to glow with a weird light that was strangely artificial in nature, yellow, electric.

"You mean you got that thing focused on that observatory up there," he demanded, "and that light is the light from inside the building?"

"Sure. By means of my focusing charts, and some surveying I did, I can pick up light from any point in space I want up to a quarter mile range. I can even pick out any room, and my Argus Eye reproduces the original scene."

There was a look of awe on Hughes' face as he sat back and stared up at the laboratory, shifting his gaze back occasionally to the Argus Eye and shaking his head slowly as he watched the dim glow in the quartz tube.

For several moments all was silent on the mountaintop, save for the wind that rustled about the huddled forms bent over the gleaming silver and black of the Argus Eye.

Neither Marlin nor Hughes saw the gathering shadows in the bushes above the ledge; neither heard the cautious padding footfalls.

A shot ricocheted from the boulder at Marlin's left. The reporter turned and his eyes, flashing upward, caught the glint of a revolver's steel barrel extended from the brush overhead.

"Down, Hughes!" he shouted. The two men dropped to the protection of the rock, and clung to the outer side of the ledge as a volley whistled past their heads. Marlin saw a half-dozen forms appear

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on the bluff above them; masked figures, curiously short. The moonlight gleamed on saffron hands as weapons were raised.

"Okida's welcoming committee," he whispered. "Give me your gun, Hughes." Then, "Look out — they're trying to smash the machine!"

Indeed, the attackers were directing their fire at the black box which now stood unprotected on the ledge, shadowed by the wall of rock.

Dan raised his pistol and fired. A small figure tottered and fell with a wild scream, twisting and writhing in the air as the wounded man was hurtled into the gulf below. Marlin rose to his feet. Again the pistol barked, and again. A shot went wild, but the second one brought a shrill cry from one of the masked men, who dropped to his knees. The others were moving through the brush, hastily firing at the blurred outlines of the Argus Eye.

"Get the camera, Hughes," Dan whispered. "Hurry."

The little reporter crawled out from behind the boulder and inched his way towards the black box on hands and knees. Hughes' figure was clearly outlined. Marlin stepped before him, pistol ready, eyes alert for the slightest hint of motion from the bushes above. Suddenly instinct prompted him to wheel toward the side wall of the ledge behind him. Four silent stalking figures were creeping down the rocky bank of the wall. Marlin fired blindly, pumping shots at the two foremost figures.

Hughes reached the machine, rose with the bulky box in his arms, and reached Marlin's side. The two moved cautiously back down the ledge. An answering volley greeted Marlin's fire, and little spurts of dust rose about their feet as the bullets struck. The remaining assailants came on with hoarse cries in high-pitched, excited voices.

"Down the ledge, now," Marlin commanded softly. "I'll hold them off."

Hughes slid from sight as he clambered down the steep sides of the bluff to reach the trail they had originally ascended.

Marlin crouched on his knees, reloading the pistol. He raised it once more, and the four masked men were upon him. Flame burst about his face. He fired wildly, and a moan rose as a running figure dropped. Again he shot, and another of the masked attackers fell. The other two turned in retreat.

Marlin quickly clambered down the ledge.

Suddenly a burst rang out from below.

Marlin leaped the last eight feet of his descent. "Hughes!" he cried.

At the foot of the trail lay the little reporter, his body a huddled heap. Bending over him were the two surviving members of the attacking body. They were lifting up the Argus Eye.

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Rage rose in Marlin's heart. His pistol spoke. Surprised, the two rose to their feet and raced off down the trail. Marlin forgot the Argus Eye, forgot everything but the memory of his friend, lying death-still at the foot of that midnight trail. He sped after the fleeing figures, red murder in his heart.

Into the woods the slight, stooping masked men ran. Marlin followed. He could hear them crashing in the brush ahead, see glimpses of retreating forms amidst the trees. His pistol spat again.

Suddenly he blundered into a little clearing. A figure moved just ahead. Putting on a burst of speed, Marlin overtook the flying form just as the clearing's edge was reached. His arms went out, his legs rose in a flying tackle, as he bore the masked figure to the earth.

"Got you!" he grunted. The body struggled, then lay still, as Marlin turned it over in the moonlight. With a swift motion, Marlin tore the mask from the face, the hat from the sagging head. The moonlight revealed all.

"Well I'll be damned!" Dan Marlin swore.

For he was gazing not at the features of a Japanese, but the face of a blonde, indisputably white girl!

### Chapter II An Important Discovery

With characteristic swiftness, Marlin made his decision. He lifted the limp form of the unconscious girl in his arms and turned down the trail towards the battered little coupe at the end of the road.

It was still standing there, just where he and Hughes had left it, a few hours previously. So much had happened since then — but Marlin did not permit himself to ponder. Action was imperative. He slid the girl into the seat, closed the door, and raced up the face of the bluff once more; ran down to the ledge where the Argus Eye still lay. Breathing a prayer of thanks, he lugged the camera back to the car, dumped it in the girl's lap, and started his motor. His eyes stabbed the darkness for a glimpse of lurking presences, but the assailants had evidently fled. Satisfied, he turned and started back down the narrow little road through the night.

"Say! Get this thing off my lap!"

Marlin, jerked from reverie, jumped so violently that the coupe lurched almost into the bordering brush. He returned the car to the road and then gazed into the upturned, piquant features of the blonde

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girl in the seat beside him. Her blue, almost violet eyes were alight with indignation.

"What's this box doing here? Who are you? Where do you think you're going with me?"

"Wait a minute." Marlin drawled out the words, amused by the girl's utter indignance at the situation. "Not so fast sister—I'm not Professor Quiz, you know."

"Stop the car this instant, do you hear me?" Her husky, vibrant voice rose in command.

"Now hold on there—I'd like to have a little talk with you first, if you don't mind." Marlin's seriousness halted her tirade.

"In the first place, I'd be interested in knowing what you were doing with that band of cut-throats who tried to finish me off in the woods."

"What band?" Almost he could have sworn that genuine surprise appeared in her countenance. "Who are you?" she persisted.

"Dan Marlin, special correspondent, Continental News Syndicate."

"What were you doing?"

"Trying to find out a few things about that amateur astronomer, Doctor Okida. Unfortunately, he sent down a couple of his playmates and the game got rough. But look here, I'm doing the interviewing."

The girl flashed him a long, steady look. Evidently what she saw satisfied her—a hint of a smile curled about her red lips as she sat up, and her hands went to her hair in that instinctive feminine gesture known to all men.

"My name is Lois Doring. My father was Louis Doring, who used to be head of the Long Mountain Observatory."

"Then you know something about Okida?" Marlin persisted. Again a steady appraisal of his face by the girl.

"I think I can answer that. I'll take a chance—I must trust somebody." Her voice was shrill again.

Marlin patted her shoulder. "Let's have it now," he said.

"I know about Okida, all right. I lived at the observatory with my father, when Hatsuki Okida came here from the Orient to take over the place. The Canadian government granted him permission to establish his fellow scientists here, and my father was to remain and supervise their work. That was two months ago.

"My father didn't trust Okida—he's a queer man, very brilliant; but he looks like a fat little spider, and there's something repulsive and furtive about him. At any rate, Dad asked me to leave, but I refused. Instead, he agreed to let me pose as his housemaid.

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"Okida and his men had been at the observatory a month when Dad – disappeared."

Her eyes were moist as she continued, and Marlin nodded understandingly.

"I know Okida did it. The minute he came he barricaded the place – discharged the caretaker that used to live on the grounds, and sent some of his men out to build a barbed-wire fence blocking off the hillside. He closed the road, too; never allowed visitors. He himself took over the inner chamber and set up his own telescope – dismantling the old ones.

"That got Dad suspicious at the start; he told me Okida didn't know anything about proper astronomy, and certainly some of those yellow men he brought with him looked more like hoodlums than scientists. Dad had other ideas, too, about what Okida was doing all locked up in that room with the big telescope he brought. He wouldn't tell me, but I could see he planned to do something about things very soon – and then he disappeared.

"I listened to Okida's explanation; he said Dad had wandered off into town one day and hadn't come back. But I left the place that same night; climbed over the wall. Because I knew in my heart what had happened, and knew Okida would never let me go if he found out.

"I went back to town. Of course Dad hadn't been there – nobody from the observatory ever came down except once a month, to buy supplies.

"I didn't say much. I decided I'd better keep my mouth shut until I found out a few things for myself."

"Smart girl." Marlin nodded approvingly.

"So the past three weeks I've been on my own. I've gone up to the woods every afternoon and –"

The girl paused then looked abruptly out into the night. A sudden suspicion gripped Marlin. She was stalling, her story was a hoax; she was fumbling for a plausible explanation.

"What were you doing sneaking around in the woods?" Marlin grated.

The girl turned her face towards him, eyes wet with tears. In an almost inaudible whisper she replied, "I was looking for Dad's grave."

Marlin bowed his head. "I'm sorry," he said.

"I came up there tonight, wearing the mask. I know Okida sends masked men out into the woods at night – they nearly caught me the evening I got away. That's one of the mysteries I want to find out about. So I decided to dress like them, in case I was challenged. Then I could

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follow them around tonight and perhaps they might lead me to—the place.

“I heard shooting, and ran. Then you caught me—and I guess I fainted.”

Marlin drove in silence for a long moment. Then, making a mental decision, he began to tell his story in short, comprehensive fashion. He told the girl of his work with the Argus Eye; of the purpose he intended for it; spoke of how his employer, Publisher Fiske, had commissioned him to investigate this Okida affair. And he outlined his actions of the evening.

Town lights twinkled before he concluded, and he drew up before the hotel.

“By the way,” he asked, “I don’t know where you’re staying.”

“Why, here,” the girl replied. “I’ve got a room on the third floor.”

“Great God of coincidence,” Marlin muttered. “So have I! It looks like Fate is throwing us together. Same hotel, same mission. Now look here—I don’t know why, but I trust you. And I hope you trust me. Let’s work together.”

The girl’s nod was sufficient. Marlin watched her blonde locks bob in assent, and irrelevantly he thought to himself that Lois was very beautiful.

\* \* \*

Lois was more beautiful still the following afternoon as they climbed the hilltop to the ledge. The woods seemed brighter by her presence, and for the first time Marlin felt a lull in the atmosphere of menace which so strangely surrounded him on this mission.

At the ledge they halted, and Marlin trained the Argus Eye on the gleaming crown of the observatory across the treetops. Lois handed him the surveying charts and the notebook of formulae he had gathered for information on how to focus the camera with accuracy. Then she paled.

“Dan.”

“Yes—what’s the matter.”

“Okida said—nearly a month ago, I remember, before I left—something I didn’t understand at the time. He spoke about *screening off* the rooms.”

“Screening off?”

“Yes. He had a wire from New York, I guess, and it got him terribly excited. He sent men out to buy lead plates, or something with lead in them. He talked to Dad about spies; said that he was expecting someone



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to come up there and try to photograph the place. It was all very confusing to me at the time, and I was puzzled when his men built the lead screens flush with the outer walls of all the rooms. Do you think he knew about the Argus Eye?"

"By George," Marlin exclaimed. "It checks. I returned from the Chinese front a month ago, on Okida's trail. He must have put one of his men on me, learned that I had some kind of apparatus or other for taking pictures, and guessed the method. I can't get through lead with the Argus Eye, you know – the atomic reaction of light pulsations when passing through it distorts the images into a blur on the negative. So he screened off the rooms. What'll I do now?"

"Take your motion pictures anyway," the girl advised, calmly. "Here, I'll help you get an accurate idea of what the place looks like."

Pencil and paper aided her in producing a rough sketch of the observatory interior; marked with crude estimates of the rooms and their dimensions. Marlin studied the crude chart, then picked his focus.

The camera ground again and again, with pauses for reloading and refocusing. Marlin used general focus and close-up on every room indicated. It was a weary three hours of work, but there was a smile of satisfaction on the faces of both man and girl as they descended the trail.

"You've been a great help, Lois," Marlin said. "I only hope I can get something from these shots. Those I took yesterday are probably bungled. Anyway, tonight will tell the story."

That night did tell the story, after hours of labor in the improvised darkroom of the bedchamber at Marlin's hotel. Roll after roll of film was blurred, distorted, utterly blank. The leaden screens had done that. But the last roll –

Marlin scarcely waited for it to dry completely before he had dragged Lois from her room down the hall, rushed her into his own room, and seated her before the projector. The little silver screen he carried was tacked up against the wall; the lights dimmed, the machine whirred – and a scene flashed into view.

A room in the observatory; general view. A desk, a blackboard, and standing beside it, a peculiar device. It resembled a machine gun, but the muzzle was glass.

Marlin stopped the film, studied the general outline, then ground on. Close-up.

The reporter gasped. The figures on the blackboard; two charts loomed into view. There was writing beneath the charts, which indicated construction of the mechanism on the floor.

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Marlin stopped the film again and laughed triumphantly.

"By all that's holy, we've got it!" He executed an impromptu war-dance around the room, then rushed to the door.

"I'm phoning the chief in Frisco," he called. "I've got the biggest story of the year. And tomorrow night I'll have a bigger one—when we lay hands on Doctor Hatsuki Okida!"

### Chapter III Attack in Darkness

"Look!" The reporter thrust the headlines before the girl's eyes. His own eyes sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. "Good job?" he demanded.

Gigantic headlines greeted Lois's gaze.

#### SECRET OF NEW WAR WEAPON EXPOSED

Deadly machine uncovered.

Ignition-stopping ray<sup>3</sup> principle  
a future military peril.

An article followed, and there were photographs—the movie stills from the Argus Eye camera, showing the charts and diagrams which gave the principles on which the weapon worked. The article concluded with a short account of Marlin's work, omitting direct reference to the exact spot he had found his discovery. The article also implied that the ignition-stopping machine was in the hands of an unfriendly foreign power that planned to utilize it in future attacks on the United States. The exposure of the plans, however, would mitigate such a danger, since now the secret was common property.

"Great write-up, eh?" Marlin exulted. "What luck! Okida screened off all the other rooms except this one—and look what we found. I'll bet that there's a dozen other such things in similar rooms; Okida is using that observatory as a base for manufacturing war weapons. Tonight I'll go down and get the authorities to organize a little raid. But first, you and I are going to have dinner to celebrate."

"I'm proud of you, Dan." There was no mistaking the note in the girl's voice, and Marlin's heart soared as he grinned at her in boyish pleasure.

"Run along and get dolled up, honey. We're really going to paint this town a distinct red."

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Laughing, Lois swept out of the room, turning at the door to blow him a little kiss—a foolish gesture which Marlin somehow found particularly attractive at the moment.

He sat down and lit a cigarette, thumbing over the paper once again as he reread the write-up. There was triumph in his manner, but underneath it lay a quiet satisfaction. This was a bigger matter than just getting a headline. Marlin had labored for years on perfecting the Argus Eye. It was to be an instrument of peace—and work like this promoted peace.

Marlin hoped sincerely that a few more such efforts would insure that goal. Once nations realized their secret plans could be discovered, there would be an end to trickery and stealthy war preparations.

In the midst of his musings, a staccato knock sounded on the door. Marlin opened it, took the bulletin, read it, and sank into his chair.

Stunned, Dan Marlin read and reread the bulletin in his hand. He had no doubts as to its authenticity—the signature of Ralph Fiske, his employer and head of the Continental News Syndicate was unmistakable. And yet what did it mean?

Your photos of Okida's observatory have provoked international incident. Advised by War Department that Canadian Government demands immediate explanation. Ignition-stopping ray machine is property of Canadian government, not Japan. Diplomatic relations seriously strained unless you can advance full explanation of your actions at once. Don't move until further notice from me.

—Ralph Fiske.

The ignition-stopping machine was a Canadian weapon. But then what was it doing in Okida's observatory?

Sudden suspicion seized Marlin's brain. He knew now. Okida had suspected he would return. Therefore the scientist had stolen the machine from the Canadian government, and placed it where Marlin might observe it. Okida undoubtedly knew the properties of the Argus Eye, if not the secret method of constructing it. He had set up the Canadian machine in one of the rooms of the observatory, and allowed Marlin to photograph it.

In this way, he knew that Marlin's work could be stopped. Once the photos were printed, Canadian and American authorities would prevent him from further use of the Argus Eye. It was a brilliant scheme.

A brilliant scheme—too brilliant. Marlin thought further. How had it happened that all the rooms save the one holding the machine were

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screened off? Who had directed him to the proper spot for his photography?

Lois.

Lois had been a servant in the observatory. He had captured her, masked, in the woods. She had no identification beyond her own word, nothing to prove her fantastic story. And yet he had trusted her and she had led him — into this muddle.

Somehow the thought of Lois as a spy dismayed him. It did not seem possible. Perhaps she had acted squarely; he hoped with all his heart she could offer an explanation.

With ashy lips set in a determined line, Marlin left his room and strode down the hall. He knocked on the girl's door.

"Come in." The musical voice invited, and its even tones stabbed Marlin's heart. Surely she couldn't have such composure if she had actually betrayed him. He entered.

Lois stood in the center of the room, her slim hands busily adjusting the shoulder-strap of the cool blue evening dress she wore. Despite his anxiety, Marlin could not help but marvel again at the fresh, youthful beauty of the shapely blonde girl. Her violet eyes were alight, and as he entered, her lips curved into a red, provocative smile of pleasure.

"Like it?" she asked, indicating the lines of her dress, and pivoting around the room in imitation of a professional model. Marlin nodded appreciatively. Then sober thought triumphed.

"Lois, I must talk to you." His voice was soft but firm.

"Why — yes." She sensed the seriousness of his tone. "But couldn't we wait until after dinner —"

"Right now, if you please."

"Is anything the matter?" Marlin could have sworn there was genuine concern in her pretty features. He strode across the room until he stood facing her.

"I've been tricked," he said. "Read this."

Silently, her face a mask of growing confusion and dismay, Lois read Fiske's message. At the conclusion she looked up into Marlin's somber eyes.

"What do you think, Dan?" she said, slowly.

"I don't know what to think, yet. I was hoping that you might have something to say."

For a moment there was silence. Marlin held the girl's gaze steadily, but her glance never wavered.

Then, "Let's go back to your room," she suggested. "I'll talk there."

"Why not here?" Sudden suspicion flooded Marlin's brain.

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"Because the machine is in your room. Whoever knew enough to plant this ignition-stopping ray device where it could be photographed must also be aware of your Argus Eye. And it's logical, isn't it, that Okida would try to get hold of the camera, if he could. You must be on hand to guard it at all times."

The girl's manner convinced Marlin. "Come on," he said. He led the way down the silent hall, halted before his door, and produced the key. Turning the knob, he entered the blackness of the room, Lois behind him. His hand fumbled for the light switch on the wall.

Suddenly the darkness was filled with movement. Strong arms closed around Marlin's throat, a fist dug into his side. The reporter lunged forward, crashing into a solid form, but the grip on his throat never loosened. The blackness was filled with hoarse partings and grunts of pain as Marlin's fists lashed viciously into the hidden forms of his assailants.

Lois did not scream, but she gasped as she stepped forward and closed the door of the room. Now Marlin battled in utter night-gloom. He tried to call out, signal the girl to turn on the light, but his throat was gripped by those tenacious fingers—cruel, unshakable hands holding their relentless, steely grip on his throat.

And from out of the darkness, panting forms rose and wound their arms about his body. For a moment Marlin struggled to break their grips, and then something came out of the blackness behind him and crashed down upon his head. The grip on his throat relaxed. He went down in a sea of roaring red that turned black, blacker, and swirled into nothingness.

### Chapter IV A Lone Hand

Black into gray, gray into white, white into reality again. Dan sat up, fingers fumbling automatically at his bruised skull. He was still in his hotel room, but now the lights were on. A quick glance about showed him that the place was empty. Where was Lois?

He rose unsteadily, but anxiety lent him strength. He opened the door, literally raced down the deserted hall to the girl's room. But even before he frantically battered at the door he knew in his heart that the girl was gone. They had taken her—

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They had taken her and *what else?* With fear gnawing at his vitals, he sped back to his own room, and fumbled in the closet for the familiar bulk of the Argus Eye.

The camera was gone!

And Lois was gone. She had warned him that Okida knew of the machine, was after it.

She had warned him—and yet she had led him back to the room where the attackers had waited.

It was not fear now, but despair that held him as he reviewed the facts. He had asked Lois for an explanation—she had given none. Instead she had warned him about the camera. She said Okida knew of it; but who could have told him? Lois.

Who led him back to his room, back to the trap? Lois.

She had not screamed or called for help. She had waited until the gang had overpowered him, showed them where the machine was, and left with them. It had all been a ruse—the capture in the woods was deliberate, the planting of the ignition-stopping device, the frame-up tonight; it was the work of Lois, serving Doctor Okida. And he had trusted the girl!

Anger and resentment rose in Marlin's heart, mingled with another deeper feeling he could not name. She had seemed so honest, so brave! The memory of her face in the moonlight, her voice, her slim figure in the evening dress, her eyes, her hair, her fresh young laughter—no, it wasn't right. And yet the facts remained.

Marlin thought quickly. The Argus Eye was on its way to Okida now. He was helpless—and powerless to act, since the scandal that had broken over the Canadian incident. He realized that he had escaped death tonight only because the noise might have aroused the hotel, and the discovery of his body excite suspicion. Still, he was not safe. Okida would not rest until he died.

"You're on the spot, Dan," he whispered to himself. "And you're on it alone."

A sudden rustling outside the door of the room caused him to turn his head with new apprehension. Quickly Marlin reached into the drawer of his desk for the pistol which lay there.

A knock sounded from outside. Marlin pointed the muzzle in a steady bead with the doorknob. "Come in," he invited. The door opened to admit a tall, elderly man with a heavy-set body surmounted by a square-jawed head.

"Mr. Fiske!" Marlin exclaimed. "What the devil—"

The tall man smiled grimly.

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"I take it that's an invitation to come in," he said.

Marlin nodded mutely, too confused for speech. Ralph Fiske, his employer and head of the Continental News Syndicate, was the last person in the world the reporter expected to see. And as Fiske seated himself, Marlin gazed at the grim, set smile on the older man's face and felt foreboding. The presence of the newspaper magnate meant only one thing — Marlin was to be discharged. It was not unlikely that serious charges might be pressed against him, that the Government might prosecute him for unauthorized espionage work.

What a muddle it was — and yet, two weeks ago Marlin had seen Fiske in his New York office. He had unfolded his plan of using the Argus Eye camera, and Fiske had enthusiastically authorized him to go up to Okida's observatory.

Ralph Fiske was a crusader in the cause of World Peace. For years his papers had campaigned relentlessly against war agitators, and the construction of new and more deadly weapons. Fiske had backed Marlin and his camera, only to precipitate disaster. The reporter knew how his employer must feel at this moment, and he watched Fiske's grim smile with bitterness in his heart.

The gray-haired man spoke.

"Rotten break you got, son. I came up here as soon as that Canadian story broke. I wanted to hear your version from your own lips."

Something in the manner of his employer encouraged Marlin to speak freely, frankly. Hastily he sketched his movements from the time of his arrival up to the present moment, omitting nothing. He spoke of Hughes' death, the meeting with Lois, the photographs of the following night, and tonight's sudden betrayal. And as the tale unfolded, a look of understanding robbed Fiske's smile of its grimness. Marlin finished his story, and sat back expectantly.

"I knew you were playing the game, son," said Fiske. "I had to send you a somewhat harsh message to cover up — the Government expected action. But I believe in you, Dan — always have. And that's why I'm going to fire you."

"Fire me?"

"Exactly."

Marlin's face fell. Of course; it was to be expected, after all. Still, Ralph Fiske had seemed so earnest, so sincere —

"But I have another job for you."

Marlin rose.

"As head of the Syndicate, I am officially required to dispense with your services. However, if you want to work for me, personally, I'm

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offering you a two hundred dollar raise, and free rein to go ahead and do whatever you can to get Okida."

With a quick stride, Marlin was across the room. The two men shook hands and a smile of understanding flashed electrically between them.

"Now, to work," snapped Fiske. "I have news for you. A certain Oriental power — no need to name it — has obtained complete plans of all fortifications on the West Coast; shipyard constructions and air-base locations. The War Department wired me the information in connection with your pictures."

"Okida!" Dan exclaimed. "But how? — he has no spies there."

"You're going to find out how," Fiske replied. "That observatory of his has something to do with it, I've got a hunch on that. You must take that camera of yours and find out, fast."

Suddenly Fiske's face became ashy. "Great guns, boy, I forgot! They've stolen the Argus Eye — how can you work?"

Marlin smiled. "I'll build another. It will take two days."

"You can do it, then?" The older man looked reassured, and then again he paled. "But what if Okida discovers the secret of your camera — the one he stole? With that in his hands he can utilize it as a new weapon." Fiske's tones were leaden. "He could probably build a thousand of them, distribute them to agents, and then the entire country would be at his mercy insofar as military secrets are concerned."

Dan Marlin laughed.

"He may guess as to the principles operating the Argus Eye," he said. "He may even operate the one he stole — but he can never build another, or learn the secret of its construction."

"What do you mean?"

"When I built the Argus Eye, I put it together on the same principle as is used in fashioning the recuperator of the U. S. 3.3" gun.<sup>4</sup> That is, the machinery is composed of interlocking springs and mesh gear formations. The entire works will fly out in a thousand small pieces when tampered with by a stranger. It is therefore impossible to discover the identity of the parts and the method of their functioning."

Fiske looked relieved.

"All right, son. Now get to work. Two or three days might mean a lot right now. Okida is learning secrets — important secrets — and unless he's checked he'll pry out priceless information for his own government. I'd imagine he'll make a getaway soon, and you must stop it. Once that yellow scientist gets all his data, we'll be completely at the mercy of possible invaders; and it will always be a potential threat to our country. I may be melodramatic about this, but I believe



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that a great part of our national safety now lies solely in your hands. Get back to Okida's laboratory at once."

Fiske nodded curtly, turned, and left the room. Dan stared in silence at the closing door.

For a long moment he remained still, but his mind was busy with thoughts for the morrow. He must find a metalworker, rent his shop for two days, and devote his time to intensive work on a new Argus Eye. Fortunately he had had the foresight to grind and prepare the intricate series of lenses for a new camera, and bring along another motion-picture camera with parts easily convertible to use in his own instrument. But there was hard labor ahead, and a need for secrecy. Okida's men might be watching him at this very moment.

What Fiske had said about Government plans being stolen was all very confusing. Had Lois spoken the truth when she hinted that Okida was more interested in espionage work than in war weapons? But how could the scientist get information about fortifications and shipyards two thousand miles away? What was the Oriental's secret?

Marlin sank into a chair, his mind whirling under the stress of the past few hours. Now, to sleep —

A sudden knocking at his door. A gentle tap, audible only to his trained ears.

Marlin produced his revolver and stepped silently across the room. He opened the door.

The body of Ralph Fiske fell forward across the threshold, his face a purple mask of agony. About his constricted throat was woven a strangler's knot. Marlin knelt and tugged at the finely-woven cord which had choked the life from the publisher's body. The dangling end fastened in place a tiny card which hung over Fiske's chest. The reporter lifted the card to the light. Upon its white surface, in heavy, vermilion brush strokes — such as might be used by an Asiatic priest — was written a single sentence.

STAY AWAY.

They had listened outside the door to Fiske's conversation, and killed him as a warning.

Dan Marlin smiled bitterly at the thought, but he didn't smile as he looked again into Fiske's tortured face. "You'll have your fight for peace yet, sir," he promised.

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## Chapter V Doctor Okida's Secret

Marlin never knew how the next days passed. They loomed, a chaotic jumble in his memory. He fled the hotel at once, taking only his plans and equipment for the building of the new Argus Eye. He could not afford to risk the scandal connected with the discovery of his employer's body; could not spare the time necessary for a police investigation. He could never hope to convince authorities that Okida was back of the murder, and even if they did go to the observatory the wary scientist would flee. And that would be fatal to Marlin's plan.

So the reporter fled to the village of Belltown, rented the shop of a metalworker for the following three days, and immediately plunged into a whirlwind of activity.

Later he remembered hours of long toil over the iron tables, broken by an occasional pause for food and rest. But after the second day it was all a nightmare of haste, anxiety, and sheer dogged determination that bit through the weariness which numbed his brain. The lenses were adjusted, the machinery cut to specifications by the puzzled owner of the shop, whose curiosity concerning the camera was only halted by repeated offers of more money for his services.

On the morning of the third day the Argus Eye stood completed once more. Hastily, Marlin rigged up an improvised darkroom at the back of the place, and let down a screen for the movie projector. After that he slept through noon.

But before the afternoon sun had traveled midway across the western sky he was at the wheel of the battered coupe, driving again up the winding trail that led to Long Mountain. His face was marked with the toll of sleepless nights and feverish days, but there was new hope in his heart. Okida would not expect him this time. The rooms might no longer be screened off. If that was the case, then the truth would be known – the truth Hughes and Fiske had died for; the truth that would vindicate Marlin.

As he drove, the reporter could not repress a pang of misgiving. Once his mission was accomplished, Lois would suffer with the rest. Somehow, despite the girl's treachery, Marlin hated the thought of her paying the bitter penalty he knew an angry government might exact. After all, the girl was sincere; she did her duty with no thought of

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personal gain. Okida himself was a fanatic, and no doubt he visualized the power and prestige he would gain from his inventions. But Lois —

A vision of her laughing eyes floated, serene and lovely, through Marlin's mind. Resolutely he put the thought away. There was a more important stake in this game — the safety of the country. And the crusading spirit in the reporter's soul flared into determination.

He swung the car around, halting it behind the concealing shrubbery at the terminal of the road, then took the Argus Eye in his arms as he started up the pathway. The woods were dark and still; even in the afternoon they brooded in perpetual twilight. Marlin listened carefully for the sound of footsteps, but all was silent, deserted.

Deserted, too, was the ledge when Marlin reached it. The soft haze which was the prelude of twilight spun a delicate mist about the observatory dome in the distance.

The reporter quickly adjusted his range-finding devices. His surveying data again came into use as he carefully trained the lens upon the side of the observatory wall. It was quick work this time; the preliminaries were simple. But then Marlin proceeded with caution. He fed film after film, photographing each outer room in detail. Readjusting his focus, he proceeded to the next section of inner rooms, and a third focus gave his lens access to the final chamber.

Finally he felt assured that he had covered every inch of the observatory on this side. Looking up he was startled at the descent of darkness; deep twilight was already fading into night. He repacked the camera and started down the path to the car. Once inside, he abandoned all caution and turned on the headlights as he raced back along the road.

Two hours more and it would all be over. If these films developed — if Okida had left his rooms unscreened, particularly that inner chamber — Marlin was assured of sufficient evidence to authorize a raid on the observatory.

The thought sent fresh courage tingling through his veins. It was with new initiative that he entered the shop and made for the darkroom. For an hour he worked in feverish haste; for another hour he paced the floor as the films curled under the dryers. And then the projector was fed with the rolls, the screen was let down, and Dan Marlin, heart in his throat, saw the end of his quest.

From the first flicker he knew that he had triumphed. Dim, in some cases obscured by ill-lighting and often out of focus; nevertheless the camera did not lie.

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The first roll showed him the room of the ignition-ray machine once again; empty now, dismantled. The second roll showed a similar chamber, also dismantled.

Marlin was puzzled, then fearful. Was the place deserted? Had Okida fled? Another fear bit into his brain. There were no more machines – if that were so, then the observatory had not housed new war weapons. What, then, was its real purpose?

In the third roll, he gazed upon an outer chamber; the last of the three. Several small figures were seated around a table. White coats proclaimed them to be laboratory workers; slant-eyes and Oriental features betokened their kinship with Okida. They were studying a series of maps and charts, but Okida was not visible. Nor was Lois. Marlin felt a pang of disappointment. He did not realize until this moment that he had been subconsciously hoping for another glimpse of the girl who had betrayed him.

Still, he projected the next roll with growing excitement. This was the reel exposing the inner chamber – and as it flashed on he gasped with excitement.

A great domed room – and squarely across one wall stood a monstrous tangle of gleaming coils, clustered about a telescope that resembled a miniature cannon. Its gigantic muzzle was reared upwards through the observatory dome, and great mirrored panels scintillated at the side of the opening to the sky. Never had Marlin seen such a colossal instrument; nor could he guess the purpose of the numerous attachments.

He thanked his Maker that he had taken the precautions he did in photographing this inner chamber; for at this point he had shifted to a more direct close-up which now brought out the center of the room in vivid detail. And here stood the figure of Doctor Okida – unmistakably. The squat, barrel-chested yellow man with the shaven head bent before one of the coils attached to the telescope. *And in his hands was Marlin's Argus Eye!*

The watching reporter gasped. The stolen camera seemed to be in some way altered; the outer box had been removed, and it rested upon its tripod with the lenses evidently pointing into the end of a long gleaming coil. Then Marlin understood.

Okida had connected the Argus Eye to his telescope!

Why? How? A thousand questions flashed through his brain as he followed the movements of the yellow man, who removed the camera and placed it carefully on a side table.

## Secret of the Observatory

Marlin watched Okida walk across the room once more, studying the expression of triumph which gleamed unmistakably from his fat face. Suddenly Okida knelt, and Marlin understood.

The Asiatic was bowing before a small bronze idol, squatting in a niche against one wall. Incense swirled from a brazier before the ugly figure of the god, and Okida's lips seemed to move in prayer. He reached into a corner and drew forth several great joss-sticks which he placed upright in the brazier before the statue. Then, as Marlin followed each movement, the scientist drew forth several great cloths; long rectangular strips of silk, covered with what seemed to be painted Oriental characters. These he held up for a moment before the god, his lips continuing to move in prayer. Carefully he wrapped them about the joss-sticks and applied fire from a brazier brand. The cloths burned slowly.

Marlin guessed. Okida was offering up prayers of thanksgiving to his god. Thanksgiving for what? If he only knew!

As the film flickered off, Marlin rose with a grin of satisfaction. He *could* know!

He ran the film back to the moment when Okida held up the two strips of silk before the altar. Then he stopped the film and stepped up to the screen with a magnifying glass. Pencil in hand, he jotted down the characters which were plainly visible upon the silk.

Ten minutes of study, and he had translated the prayers. What they told him caused him to tremble with excitement at the magnitude of his discovery.

For Okida thanked the gods in triumph. His telescope was successful — *his curved-light long distance telescope, which had enabled him to spy on United States fortification secrets thousands of miles away.*

A curved-light telescope! Of course that had to be the explanation. That was where Okida secured information. He had perfected the use of special refractive devices in building a long-distance telescope; naturally he placed it in an observatory and worked from there. No need to send out spies when the instrument could work! Marlin marveled. So that was Okida's secret.

He longed for the moment when he could investigate the nature of the miraculous instrument, compare its principles to those governing his own Argus Eye.

His Argus Eye! Hastily, Marlin unreeled the film to the spot showing the second prayer strip. On the cloth were figures he again took down, interpreted, gratefully thanking his lucky stars for the linguistic abilities acquired from two years on the Eastern War Front at Shanghai.

## Robert Bloch

Yes, the prayer-cloths revealed their message; dimly this time, and in such poor focus that several sentences were obscured. But there was enough to show that Okida rendered homage to the Powers Above because he had harnessed the stolen camera to his telescope in a combination.

Now, with the benefit of motion pictures photographing telescoped scenes thousands of miles away, he had an apparatus for directing gunfire and therefore an invincible war weapon.

And Okida thanked the gods, for tonight he would leave again for the Orient, present his information to his government, and plan for the use of the knowledge in future attacks.

Marlin pieced it out, skipping over the flowery eloquence of the language, and clinging only to the hard, factual phrases which burst like bombshells before his eyes as he thought of their implications. He must act at once!

But there was still another reel of film to be shown. Marlin half-debated omitting its projection entirely. Surely the information he already had was important enough for immediate concern – but still, there might be additional knowledge to be gained. The reel, as he remembered, showed the lower chamber under the floor of the observatory proper; the one Lois had told him about as being abandoned. Was it a storehouse?

Hastily, Marlin inserted it, projected, gazed.

The dark walls of a dungeon. Stone bench, stone floor, gloom broken by torchlight. Torchlight streaming from a flare in a man's hand. A Japanese on guard.

He stepped aside, and Marlin gazed into the terrified face of – Lois!

The girl was shackled to the wall, her arms cruelly pinioned in iron cuffs. Her streaming hair hung down about her shoulders. There were rents and tears in her tattered dress.

A curse burst from between Marlin's gritted teeth. Lois – they had been torturing her! She had spoken the truth then; she hadn't betrayed him. When the attackers overpowered him in his room they had carried her off, and now they were trying to force her to tell what she knew of his activities.

Blind rage rose in Dan Marlin's heart. Gone were his plans of carrying his films to the authorities; gone was his scheme of waiting until midnight and leading a raid with government officers, if his pictures convinced them. Lois was in danger – immediate danger. He must act himself, go at once. If they had harmed her, killed her –

# Secret of the Observatory

Pocketing his revolver, Marlin dashed out of the room, leaped into the car, and hurled it down the road at breakneck speed.

## Chapter VI Death in the Dungeon

The burning yellow eyes leered down from the hilltop on which the observatory crouched. Dan Marlin felt that dreadful lifeless stare of light as his fingers worked the wire-cutter in feverish haste. The stout fence in the brush at the base of the observatory hilltop yielded an entrance at last, and he slipped through the gap of broken wire-ends.

He started up the long, shrubby-bordered walk which led to the door, his senses alert for the slightest sound; the hint of movement in the bushes about him, the gleam of a torch ahead. Instead he moved in complete silence — the silence of desertion; oppressive with unspoken menace.

There had been no plan in Marlin's mind when he started out — nothing but an overwhelming anger and a dreadful fear for the safety of the girl he had unwittingly misjudged. But now, as he crept along the shadowed pathways, his intelligence began to function swiftly.

How was he to enter the observatory undetected? Here memory served him in good stead. The Argus Eye camera films had revealed to him the geography of the observatory, and Lois's description gave him a fairly accurate conception of the rooms and corridors and their interrelations.

He remembered that there had been two deserted chambers in the films run off this afternoon. Surely there were windows in these rooms. His eyes searched the wall to the left of the entrance. A dark square of glass appeared at the end. This must be one of the chambers.

Marlin crept to a spot directly beneath the window. He leaped upward, his fingers clutching the projecting ledge, and drew himself to a crouch upon the sill. His hands pushed at the frame, and he breathed a prayer of thanks as the window raised.

He dropped, catlike, soundlessly landing upon the floor of the darkened room. His pocket flashlight quickly stabbed the gloom, revealing only the signs of utter desertion which had characterized the spot in the Argus Eye films. The glare illumined a door. Marlin knew it led to a corridor, and the corridor led to Lois.

## Robert Bloch

Without hesitation he moved forward. In a saner moment he would have stopped, searched even this apparently deserted chamber for evidence — but Marlin's anger brooked neither sane consideration nor delay. He opened the door, his free hand tightening on the revolver in his pocket, stepped out into a long corridor dimly lighted by a few weak lamps on the side walls.

Cautiously he edged his way down the hall, passing another door which memory told him led to the second deserted room of the pictures. And then he approached the third door, saw the fan of light which spread from under it. This was outer headquarters. And even as he stared at it, the door opened.

Marlin sank back against the wall, crouching in the shadows as a figure stalked forth — a figure that sent chills of dread rippling up his spine. It was the figure of a gigantic Mongol. The great, half-naked brute was grinning in a way which sickened Marlin, and in his hand he carried a strange glowing object.

Instinctively Marlin knew where the man was going, and he scarcely waited for the door to reclose behind the Mongol before he was creeping along behind.

The yellow giant strode down the corridor, and as he walked Marlin heard something clank at his side. And in the weird light from the thing he carried the silver outlines of a key chain hanging from his belt were revealed, and there was no longer any doubt as to the man's destination.

Marlin breathed a prayer of hope. All he need do now was follow the giant, wait until he unlocked the door to the dungeon, and then shoot him down. It was simple.

The reporter turned at the end of the corridor, as the Mongol led the way and began to descend a flight of stairs. Marlin edged close behind him, ready for action. And then —

Something cold bit into Marlin's neck, something bored deeply against his spine. A soft voice hissed, "Kindly raise your hands, sir."

Marlin extended his arms upward. He tried to turn his head, but the boring coldness bit deeper as the voice quickly continued, "Please not to look around, sir."

The game was up. One of the Japs had followed him from the room, stalking him as he had stalked the Mongol. And now the muzzle of a gun was at his spine. A yellow hand clawed around to the pocket of Marlin's coat, fumbling for the revolver within. Marlin stood helpless, hands upraised, with the unseen figure behind him. The hand gripped his gun, lifted it.



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Suddenly, the reporter stepped backwards. His left foot lunged out behind him, catching his unseen enemy at the knee and unbalancing him momentarily – just long enough for Marlin to wheel and lash out with his right. The blow landed just as the gun in the yellow hand moved for aim. Marlin grabbed at it with a speed born of desperation. He caught the arm, his right fist crashing into the face of the astonished Japanese. The man fell, soundlessly, as Marlin leaped forward and caught the falling weapon lest the clatter arouse those down the corridor.

Without a pause the reporter sped down the black stairs, holding his flash before him for guidance. But a moment later he needed no such aid.

For a woman screamed from the darkness ahead – and the voice was dreadfully familiar.

Lois!

Racing through spidery blackness, running across cold, wet stone that dripped with the slime of subterrene night, crashing blindly against the icy slickness of dark, damp walls, Marlin sped through the tunnel that led to the torchlit room ahead. Again the girl's voice rose on a note of utter horror, and above it came the sound of deep, bestial laughter.

Then Marlin halted, frozen by the tableau he glimpsed through the intervening bars. There, against the wall of the cell, crouched Lois. And above her towered the giant Mongol, grinning insolently. And then Marlin saw what the glowing thing was he carried in his hand.

It was a peculiar, somehow menacing weapon, glowing with strange radio-activity. Constructed with a blunt muzzle, a grip, and a thick butt, it made an efficient and mysterious looking instrument of torture. A sort of radium gun.

Even as he watched, the great, naked yellow arms were swinging up, pressing the horrible looking thing closer and closer to the white throat of the captive girl. What weird torture might not this thing, evidently another of Okida's horrid inventions, inflict on the helpless girl. Would it burn deeply, perhaps even lead to a slow, tortured death from radium cancer – ?

There was a sadistic grimace on the Mongol's brutish face. One great paw reached out to rip away the dress; the gun descended in heated horror and the world turned red as Marlin pumped shot after shot into the yellow body of the Mongol torture-master.

The figure toppled and fell; Marlin dashed through the open door, tore the keys from the belt, released the iron shackles, and with a greater exultation than he had ever known, took the sobbing girl in his arms.

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Her hysteria subsided, and suddenly they were together, arms and lips, and for a long moment Marlin forgot the world. Lois gasped out her story, and abruptly the reporter jerked back to awareness of present reality.

"They took me away, Dan," she whispered. "Okida discovered everything. He locked me up down here, and sent that creature to threaten me. He thought I knew the secret of the Argus Eye, and he said I would be tortured if I didn't speak. He came twice, and tonight Okida came an hour ago and said he didn't need my information, so he would send the Mongol down again to kill me if he wished. And he was going to when you —"

"I know." Marlin soothed her, as men have soothed frightened women from time immemorial. Gently, he narrated the events which had occurred since he had been struck down in the hotel room. When he spoke of the pictures taken that afternoon, Lois's eyes widened, and a look of apprehension clouded their perfect blue.

"Oh, Dan, she breathed. "Then it is true — I knew it! Okida wasn't lying when he said he wouldn't need any information about the Argus Eye. He's discovered the secret of your camera. That means he can leave here tonight with the plans he's uncovered, the secret of his telescope, and your own invention. Once he gets away we'll never touch him, and he'll be able to go ahead with his scheme. He means to turn his inventions and information over to his government and urge them into war. And to think of the uses he'll put your cameras to, once he builds them —"

Marlin calmed the girl, his face set in a reassuring smile in which there was no heart. He realized only too well that Lois had presented an accurate picture of what was likely to occur. But he spoke with desperate ease.

"Okida will never be able to build more Argus Eyes even if he does know how to operate one. The camera is constructed on the same plan as the recuperator of the U.S. 3.3" gun — I told you that. If he opens it up to examine the machinery, it flies apart into a thousand springs."

"But that telescope of his — I heard the others talking. He's packing it all up, hiding it away tonight. I know he means to flee the country at once. And if he ever gets away with what he knows we're lost. Don't you see?"

Marlin saw, only too well. But he smiled as he kissed her, and raised her to her feet, breathing a silent prayer that her flawless beauty had not been marred by the threatening sear of the radio-active gun he had glimpsed in the photographic reels. A part of the quest had been

## Secret of the Observatory

successful. But now, the grim path of duty lay before him—a grim path through the underground blackness of a hostile citadel. Somewhere over his head the fat, cunning little Oriental scientist was putting away the web that he had woven; the web of destruction which when next spun might engulf them all. The smile left the reporter's face and he stared down into the eyes of the girl.

"Will you follow me?" he asked. She nodded, slowly.

"Yes, Dan."

Through the cellar dark, up the stairs again, past the huddled body of the Japanese—Dan Marlin halted in the corridor near the lighted door.

"Okida's inner chamber," he whispered. "How near is it?"

"Around the corridor again, and through a series of doors. It's at the center of the building; shut off and soundproofed from outside."

"That's what I wanted to know," he answered. His features grew tense, sombre.

"Wait for me here. I have a duty to perform. A *duty*, understand?"

"I understand, Dan."

Lois did not waver as she saw the reporter raise his revolver and walk slowly towards the lighted door. She did not waver as he slowly entered, slammed it behind him.

There was a momentary babble of surprised voices; then two shots rang and echoed in rapid succession. Marlin reemerged from the room, revolver again in his pocket. His face was still grim, but Lois flashed him a glance of understanding and sympathy. It was a duty. Nothing could interfere now; there was too much at stake.

"Can you lead me to Okida's observatory chamber?" Marlin asked.

"Yes."

Down the corridor again, and through a door at one side. The pocket flash picked a path of light through a dark room, evidently a library. Another door, another room—living quarters. A third door, third room; long bare tables betokening the former presence of a laboratory. At the end of this room Lois halted.

"The next door," she whispered.

Marlin's fingers fumbled at the knob. It showed that this door, too, was unlocked.

"Now," he breathed. "Perhaps we can catch him unawares. He's probably finishing putting up his equipment. Are you sure there were only three Japs and the Mongol here in the observatory?"

"That's all I knew of," the girl answered.

Marlin took her in his arms in a silent embrace.

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"Just in case," he muttered. Then he turned. His hand pushed the door open a crack. He peered in.

The long, lighted chamber appeared monstrous in its nudity. Gone was the gleaming intricacy of telescope apparatus Marlin had seen in the pictures of the afternoon. The black skylight opening had been shut again, and the light glittered from high white walls. The tables were bare of charts and instruments. A few great boxes stood at the further end of the chamber; Marlin guessed that in these the machines had been stored away, preparatory to departure. At the center of the great deserted room, slightly to one side, was a small table. Otherwise all was bare.

And Okida — where was he? The figure of the scientist was nowhere visible. Perhaps he had another sanctum. At any rate, here were the secrets Marlin sought. He pushed open the door, entered, with Lois behind him. And the door swung shut. From behind it stepped a squat, sinisterly familiar form.

### Chapter VII Master of the World

"Kindly raise your hands," hissed Doctor Okida. The fat yellow man held a Mauser directly in line with Dan's waist as he motioned Marlin towards the center of the chamber. He smiled, but there was no more mirth in his grimace than in the grin of a skull.

"So Mohammed comes to the mountain?" he purred. His voice was sibilant, yet icy. Marlin stared into the cold dark eyes that blazed from the bland, hairless face of the scientist. Okida, with his plump paunchy body, his shaven skull, and his moon-shaped countenance was like a Buddha — a Buddha in the robes of science, holding in his hands a quite efficient modern weapon of death. Marlin looked upon Okida with more than a tinge of respect, and the Oriental read his gaze, for he grinned sardonically.

"You are Mr. Marlin, are you not? The so clever young man who invented this apparatus?" His eyes flickered for an instant to indicate the Argus Eye which now rested on the table at one side of the room.

Dan Marlin nodded, sparring for time. But the Mauser muzzle never wavered. Okida went on.

"A very commendable effort, indeed. It took me over three days to fathom the intricacies of its construction. Fortunately, a knowledge of Einsteinian formulae enabled me to adjudge the mechanical steps your

## Secret of the Observatory

reasoning would predicate in constructing a device to circumvent accepted light theories. After such reasoning, operation of your Argus Eye became a simple matter. I was so bold as to—ah—improve your little toy by attaching it to my own telescope. But I infer you already know its uses?”

“Yes,” Marlin muttered.

“Well then, we are fellow-scientists after a fashion, eh? Let us enjoy that distinction for a few moments; for I fear that we soon must—ah—part.”

The Mauser waved emphasis to his last words, and the fat bald head wobbled with mirth.

“Spider and fly, no, Mr. Marlin?” Again came laughter.

Marlin spoke. He had to keep talking. “Yes, but a very educated fly, Doctor Okida. You see, I know the purpose of your machine—I know how my Argus Eye attachment will enable you to direct gunfire accurately at any distance.”

“Yes, and instantaneously.” The fanatic in Okida flared from his eyes. “Together, we have unwittingly constructed the greatest all-round war weapon in the world. Not only will all bombardment be instantaneous and accurate, but the machine as a spy weapon is absolutely miraculous. With this device, my country will be utterly invincible. You see that, eh?”

Okida’s plump fingers curled about the handle of the Mauser. He stepped back towards the table and his free hand dropped to the camera.

Marlin’s arm encircled Lois’s waist in a gesture of instinctive protection.

He felt her tremble, but her eyes, looking up into his, were unafraid. Okida seemed to be aware of the girl’s presence in the room for the first time.

“I fear we are boring the young lady with our scientific discussion,” he purred. “Although the young lady seemed very much interested in science at one time—almost too interested.”

Okida’s stare was mocking the girl.

“You were an excellent bait, my dear. I am sure chivalrous Mr. Marlin would never have blundered in here alone unless he had noticed your plight. It was fortunate I waited without killing you before this.”

Marlin shuddered. His eyes stared at the weapon in Okida’s hand.

“Now, before we say good-bye,” the yellow man continued, “I shall thank you for this so excellent invention on behalf of my country. I am sure that it will prove of great service in—ah—our future plans.”

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Future plans! A vision born in Hell seared across Marlin's brain; a picture of screaming thousands rushing through a bombed city, as shells dropped with frightful accuracy upon defenseless throngs, guided by eyes peering through a telescope thousands of miles away.

"You did me an unwitting service in disposing of my men tonight," Okida was concluding. "They would not have been permitted to live, at any rate. I am the only one to be trusted with the secret, and my plans go with me tonight, when I take the Eastern plane. We three are all who know of this, and that must – not – be –"

The gun raised. Marlin tensed himself for the break. When the muzzle swept up, Marlin lunged forward. Okida stepped back hastily. The Mauser spoke and Marlin felt a stab of fire flame through his upper arm. Lois screamed as the reporter ran forward. The yellow man backed away, raising his weapon more deliberately for deadly aim. Once again the gun spoke. Marlin staggered, fell. Okida leveled the revolver for a finishing shot.

The terrified girl saw the reporter raise himself painfully. Despite wounded arm and shoulder, Dan Marlin rose half-way, then gathered himself in a final leap – a leap of desperate courage which could end only in death, for the revolver pointed at his heart.

But instinct intervened. Despite himself, Okida, startled at the movement, took another step backwards, and as he did so he collided with the table edge behind him. The Argus Eye, perched precariously on the rim, slid and fell. There was a crash as the camera box smashed to the floor, and suddenly the machine exploded.

A thousand springs flew upward as Okida screamed. Wires and coils struck him in the face. The gun went off in the air as Dan leapt with every remaining ounce of strength and bore the struggling Oriental to the floor. His own weapon flashed out. The two men threshed and rolled, Okida clawing insanely at the metallic mask of tangled wires that tore his face. Marlin's gun pressed against one shaven temple and his finger pressed on the trigger.

Hatsuki Okida, greatest of Asiatic scientists, slumped to the floor, dead.

And Dan Marlin, rising unsteadily to his feet, turned to contemplate the pile of boxes housing the massive telescope with a puzzled frown.

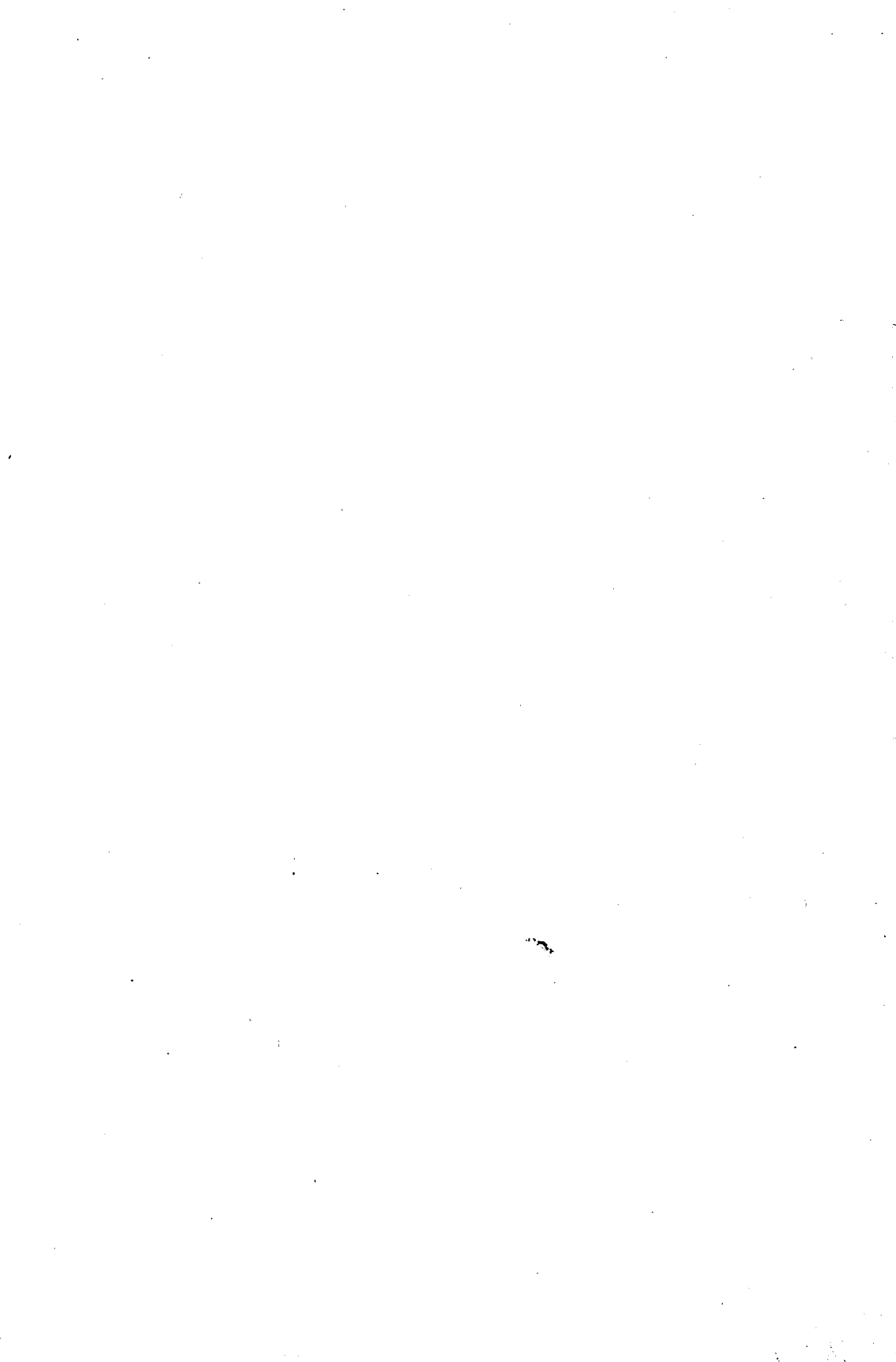
"Beats me how we're going to move it to the War Department," he said aloud. "But we'll do it. And I hope we never have to move it out again."

Again he ruefully surveyed the wreckage of the shattered Argus Eye. "I hope that's the last military duty it performs," he continued.

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Then Lois had stepped forward, her arms cool and close around him. "I hope that's the last military duty you ever perform," she whispered. "There are other duties for a man like you."

As his lips found hers, Dan Marlin decided that he agreed perfectly.





## The Man Who Walked through Mirrors

**E**ditor Stanhope gazed at his mild, round face in the mirror. He noted the redness of his eyes, the tight lines around his usually placid mouth, the dishevelment of his ordinarily orderly blonde hair. He looked like the devil.

Ordinarily, the editor enjoyed receiving visitors. Some of the magazine authors were old friends of his; some of the fans were welcome guests in the office. But today had brought out the screwballs.

Stanhope sighed. Running a science-fiction magazine had its drawbacks. There were eccentrics interested in the field, and at times they got *ideas*. One day a man had come up to the office with a perpetual motion machine, made out of rubber bands. Another visit produced a wild-eyed little fellow with an egg-beater attached to an electric motor. He had set the contraption up in the editorial office and insisted that Stanhope look into the revolving blades of the egg-beater and see the Fourth Dimension. It was exasperating. Today he had been visited by no less than three of these ninnies; all armed with pages of formulae and garbled quotations from Charles Fort or *Tertium Organum*. Editor Stanhope had been quite diplomatic, but it was a strain. And stories! "Every Story Scientifically Accurate" read the lines on the cover of the magazine. It was Stanhope's sole standard. And the manuscripts he read today were impossible.

There was the old story of the man who went back in time; written by somebody who probably thought a time-machine was some kind of alarm-clock.

There was a novelette in which the city of New York was destroyed by Martians, and once again the Empire State Building fell down. Editor Stanhope firmly resolved never to buy any more stories where the

## Robert Bloch

Empire State Building fell down. Why couldn't they pick on some other building for a change? Even the Chicago Tribune Tower would be a novelty; but no, it was always the Empire State Building that had to go boom. He wondered what Al Smith thought when he read all this.

There was a story about an atomic disintegrator ray; sound in theory, but with human characters so wooden and stilted the editor wished to heaven they'd turn the ray on themselves.

It was discouraging. But stories must be bought; good stories. "Every Story Scientifically Accurate." Editor Stanhope scowled into the mirror, then read on grimly. He was half-way through an absurd item about a space-ship with wings, meanwhile thinking of how Stanley Weinbaum must be turning over in his grave, when the door opened.

Stanhope looked up. He sighed, under his breath.

The stranger in the doorway did everything but carry a ten-foot sign on his chest labeled "Screwball."

There were all the signs. The tangled mop of black, curly hair straggling over the high forehead. The deep-set, blazing eyes. The cynical half-sneer of the mouth. The untidy clothing. The excited movements of his hands, the quickened breath, the nervous blinking of the eyelids. Worst of all, the stranger carried a machine under one arm.

Stanhope knew the type. He was not prejudiced, he was a reasonable man; but long experience had taught him that in some cases it did not pay to be overly tolerant. There are cranks and eccentrics in every field; but scientific cranks are by all odds the worst.

After all, it had been a hard day. The editor resolved to be firm.

"Good afternoon, sir. What can I do for you?"

"What can you do for me? Don't make me laugh! I'm going to do something for you." The smiling stranger advanced into the room.

"You're Stanhope, the editor of this rag, aren't you?"

"I am Mr. Stanhope, yes. But see here—"

"Never mind." The stranger waved the words aside with an airy gesture of his left hand as he sat down in the chair opposite the desk and deposited the shining mechanism he carried on the table. "Mr. Stanhope, my name is Volmar Clark. You know of me, no doubt?"

"Can't say that I do."

"What?" The stranger's eyebrows became two swords of accusation. "Never heard of Clark, the man who left the Institute after telling them all off for the pack of fools they were; the man who was called in to advise on the building of the Pasadena Observatory lens in spite of it all? Never heard of Clark? You're like all the other dolts;

## The Man Who Walked through Mirrors

gabbling of H. G. Wells and Sir James Jeans and a few other publicity hounds and ignoring the quiet work of the scientific great under your very nose."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Clark. I'm very busy and—"

"One is never busy in the presence of Genius. But you've never heard of Clark, you say? You know Einstein, don't you? Well, forget him. In years to come, Clark will outshine Einstein as the sun outshines a penny match!"

Stanhope winced. He was as patient as the next, but he couldn't afford to waste time any longer. This schizophrenic who referred to himself in the third person was impossible.

"You'll have to excuse me," Stanhope said, rising.

"Oh that's all right. I'm not blaming you for anything," the man called Clark announced. "It's only that I thought you might remember me. About a year ago, when I was still naive enough to wish for earthly recognition, I did a foolish thing. I embodied my scientific thesis, rejected by the academic ignoramuses of the Institute, in a story and sent it to you. I thought you might remember it; certainly it was the best thing of its kind ever written, and I don't ever see how it could have been rejected."

Stanhope lost his tact.

"What was the name of the story?"

"You don't even recall the name of the most startling bit of literature ever penned? Mr. Stanhope, I am truly sorry—for you. The story was entitled *Fourth Dimensional Mirror*."

Abruptly, Stanhope recalled.

How could he ever forget? *Fourth Dimensional Mirror!* A rotten title. But the story itself was far worse than the title implied. It had been something Stanhope had really tried to forget. Sheer babbling lunacy—a rambling, incoherent tale which purported to contain a theory about mirrors being the gates of the Fourth Dimension. It had been filled with wild explanations of the laws of optics and how the eye was connected by electric impulse with the brain so that light-waves and thought commingled to produce awareness of the Fourth Dimension. There was something about a field of force set up on the mysterious reflecting surface of a mirror, which could be physically entered by the human body. A man walking through a mirror into the Fourth Dimension was by all odds the most absurd notion Stanhope had ever encountered in all his reading of science fiction. He had firmly rejected the tale on his usual grounds: "Every Story Scientifically Accurate."

"I remember now," he said. "I recall rejecting the story."

## Robert Bloch

"Why?" The word was a jet of flame.

"Why? Why? Because it was implausible, Mr. Clark. Here," Editor Stanhope picked up a copy of the magazine from his desk. "You know our byline, our trademark, as it were. 'Every Story Scientifically Accurate.' I'm sorry, but your story wasn't."

Clark's beady eyes flickered as he suddenly grasped the magazine and crumpled it convulsively between his fingers.

"Every Story Scientifically Accurate!" His tone was purest venom. "You call this stuff science? Robots and Martians and fungoid beings and opium-smoker's visions? What if the so-called theories are mathematically correct? Does that make these stories accurate? They are fiction, not fact. And science is factual. How can you draw the line?"

"I haven't time to go into that just now, Mr. Clark."

"Of course you haven't. Neither have I. Neither did the men at the Institute when I showed them my theories on paper. They forced me to resign. And yet they respected my preeminent authority in the field of optics enough to call me in on the telescopic lens job; but they refused to believe the truth. I wrote the truth up in the form of fiction and even you couldn't swallow it as mere imagination. And yet it is true — truer than all this Martian humbug or spaceflight nonsense you insist is within the pale of possibility. But I'll show you! I'll show them all! What Einstein and De Sitter hinted at, I shall reveal. Every story scientifically accurate, eh?"

Stanhope thought vaguely of running out and getting help. This man was insane. He might become violent in his megalomania; this unnatural fuss about the rejection of a story a year ago was obvious proof of his pronounced unbalance.

"What makes stories scientifically accurate?" Clark was shouting. "I ask you?"

"Proof," muttered Stanhope, trying to avoid the too-bright gaze of his demented visitor.

"Proof? Exactly. And I've brought proof." Clark pointed at the machine.

"You ask me why I didn't go to the Institute, or to higher authorities with this machine. Simple. I've spent a year working on this, a solid year! I spent twenty before that in perfecting my theory and was laughed at for my pains. So I spent one year more building my proof; my machine. Now instead of taking it to the scoffers higher up, I decided this time to start at the bottom; with you, the most insignificant of my critics. You, and your 'scientifically accurate' stories couldn't swallow my theory. Therefore you shall be the first to swallow my

## The Man Who Walked through Mirrors

proof. You shall be my guinea pig, Editor Stanhope. How would you like to see that Fourth Dimension your ignorant authors are always babbling about?"

Stanhope was really afraid now.

This madman was larger, stronger than the slight-bodied editor, and he was obviously aroused. Stanhope must humor him, keep him talking until the art-editor or one of the stenographers happened in and could get wind of the situation. Therefore the editor tried to smile. He caught sight of his haggard face in the mirror and shuddered.

"Going to send me to the Fourth Dimension, eh?" he said. "How?"

"You read the story. Through the mirror, of course."

Stanhope wanted to be diplomatic, but his natural honesty rebelled at this. He was, first and foremost, an honest man; an honest editor. And his creed, "Every Story Scientifically Accurate" was written on his heart just as firmly as it was emblazoned on the cover of his magazine. He couldn't stomach this statement.

"Clark, be sensible. Send me through the mirror? Why that's childish fairy-tale stuff. Like Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*."

"Exactly," Clark answered, a smile on his pale face. "That's where I got the idea. Oh, you needn't scowl so. Lewis Carroll — what do you know about the man? He was a mathematician, writing children's books under a pseudonym. Nobody ever noticed the quiet little fellow in real life, yet *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* are perhaps the most unique literature ever written in themselves. Not only children but adults have found keen satire in their pages; and more than that, the two books are still conceded to be the most accurate descriptions of dreams ever recorded. Do you understand what I mean? Lewis Carroll, the shy, furtive little schoolteacher, was one of the world's greatest psychologists. And mark you, he was a mathematician as well. He was no fool — and when he sent Alice through the mirror into the dreamworld he was basing fantasy on the most advanced and abstruse mathematical logic ever conceived. Even today there are those who link dreams with the Fourth Dimension; the mathematical symbols of each are interchangeable. Where but in dreams, or the Fourth Dimension is body and consciousness altered? Where does life take on new and varied forms of expression? I wouldn't be such a fool, if I were you."

Stanhope lost his temper for one desperate moment.

"Get down to facts," he shouted. "Where is this machine and what does it consist of? Stop talking about dreams and fairy-tales."

## Robert Bloch

"That's right. The editor wants his scientifically accurate proof, doesn't he?" Clark's voice was mocking. "Very well. Here's the machine on the table."

Stanhope turned to gaze closely at the contrivance. It was a long, gleaming silver tube mounted on a pedestal base from which jutted a series of levers and buttons. Superficially, it resembled an ordinary microscope. Clark picked up the instrument, sat down on top of the desk, and cradled it in his lap. His hands unconsciously caressed it, and Stanhope watched the play of his long, slim fingers.

"Just what does this machine do?" the editor inquired.

"Just what the machine in my story did. You look through the lens, adjust the focus to correspond with your own vision — that is, the rate of speed by which light-rays impinge on your retina and are translated into electrical impulse by your brain. This sets up an electrical rhythm which in turn is acted upon by the system of angled lenses in the tube. Then you gaze through the tube at your image in a mirror and you become translated into the Fourth Dimension by means of electrical contact of duplicate foci. In other words, when you apply your eye to this tube, it becomes merely an extension of the tube itself; a necessary part of the machine linking your brain directly with your image. The force field draws brain into image, and there you are."

"In the nut-house," Stanhope wanted to add, but he thought better of it as he gazed into the fanatical eyes of Volmar Clark.

"But how did you build this; what are the principles?" asked the editor, sparring for time. Why didn't someone come in and rescue him?

"Let us be scientific, by all means," purred Clark. "Perhaps I can explain it by questioning you. To begin with, you believe in scientific accuracy, don't you?"

Editor Stanhope nodded.

"And yet you'd say my principle of mirror-images being Fourth-Dimensional projections of three-dimensional objects is not founded on scientific fact, and is therefore absurd?"

Again Stanhope nodded.

"Very well. Let us see whether or not you can give scientific reasons for your disbelief. I say you look through this tube into the mirror and become drawn through it."

"A solid man can't enter his own reflection," Stanhope parried. "That mirror on the wall is nothing but plate glass, backed by a thin coating of mercury. It merely reflects light from the smooth, polished surface of the glass."

## The Man Who Walked through Mirrors

"Very good, my skeptical editor. Very good. And now would you mind telling me something about glass?"

"Why, surely —"

"Scientifically, what is glass? Is it a metal?"

"Well —"

"Isn't it true that glass has no crystalline structure? All metals have."

"Now, wait a minute."

"Is glass a liquid or a solid? What is its definite melting point?"

"I don't know that."

"True. Nobody knows.\* No scientist knows, any more than he knows the exact nature of electricity, for instance. And neither you nor Einstein can discover the makeup of its molecular structure."

"Yes, I'm afraid you're right," the editor confessed.

"Of course I am. Glass is a mystery. Like electricity, man can produce it, control it within limits, and even use it in a few simple tasks which do not even begin to impinge on its possibilities. We can guess that thought is electricity, and that life is perhaps an electrical manifestation. No one has ever bothered to theorize on the mystery of plain, everyday glass; the greatest key to the secret of light. The strange substance through which we see the stars is the link between light and electricity; between seeing and being.

"And properly handled according to mathematical formulae, I say that a man can enter the peculiar molecular chaos of glass and enter through its planes into the Fourth Dimension. Man co-exists; he appears before himself in a mirror. The only reason the mirror image isn't real is because his brain is absent from it. His three-dimensional consciousness cannot penetrate a Fourth-Dimensional reflection — but my lens does that. By linking his eye to the lens to the image of his reflection, and by thus directly connecting brain to image, the electric structure of thought impinges on the mysterious planes of glass and he is drawn through."

Clark's eyes blazed.

"There's scientific accuracy for you," he challenged. "Refute me if you can. Everything I've asked about the nature of glass, and about the nature of reflection cannot be answered by science. I tell you I'm right."

"Negativism isn't proof," Stanhope replied. "That mirror over there may be all you say it is, but your machine is impossible. Have you ever tried it out?"

"I just completed it, under considerable stress. And I haven't tried it yet, thank you. I don't want to enter into a mirror. Beyond my own

## Robert Bloch

reflection and that of this room, I cannot dream of the strange world which inhabits the peculiar structure of ultra-dimensional light. But that's why I came to you, my editorial scoffer. You're my guinea pig, as I said. You shall look through the tube with your skeptical eye and find out the truth."

"What?" The maniac *was* convincing. Editor Stanhope felt a shudder he strove vainly to repress. For a moment the man's wild whispers had convinced him that he lived in a cosmos governed by strange laws. But it was nonsense. It had to be. Every story scientifically accurate — theory rejected.

Clark read skepticism in the editor's face.

"Well," he challenged. "You don't believe me, so you needn't be afraid. Look into my harmless little tube. Adjust the levers until you see perfectly; until you see your reflection in the mirror. Then watch the lens-angles as they revolve, as your brain spins *into* the tube, your consciousness flows *through* it and into the mirror. Go ahead."

Stanhope began to perspire. Clark towered over him, hands twitching. He looked as though he might spring at his throat. The white face was contorted.

"What would become of my real body if I was — drawn in?" he asked, trying to keep his voice calm, trying to stall for time.

"It would disappear, naturally. You would be real, then, in the mirror; in the strange molecular structure of the glass, which is the Fourth Dimension. We co-exist in the Third and Fourth Dimension, you know; even Einstein admits that. But we feel alive in the Third because our consciousness is tridimensional. Once that consciousness, by means of light-action on the electrical impulse we call thought, is transformed into our image, we live there. You'd disappear, into the room reflected in the mirror. What lies beyond we cannot say. But you shall find out." Clark's voice rose to a half-scream. "Look!"

He grasped the editor's shoulder and bent him forward toward the gleaming instrument. Stanhope struggled silently. The man was strong. His fingers forced —

And then there was uproar; welcome pandemonium.

The two men had come in very quietly, for all their burliness. They were efficient despite their strength. Without a word they had crept up behind Volmar Clark, and now they were upon him. Soundlessly they dragged him off the table and locked his arms behind his back. Clark gasped madly, but he was no match for the determined and capable captors. They held him firmly.

Editor Stanhope looked up. One of the men touched his hat.



## The Man Who Walked through Mirrors

"Sorry he disturbed you, sir. We've had orders to bring him in."

"What?"

"This is Volmar Clark. He's been in our charge at the Sanitorium for the past year; ever since he finished the observatory lens job. He had a — breakdown afterwards, and his relatives saw to it he was put in our care."

"Don't listen to the fools," Clark hissed. He lunged, but a quick jerk of his captors' arms brought him to a standstill.

"Usually he's very quiet. We allowed him to build his laboratory in his room at the Sanitorium and he's been quite happy building some kind of machine or other. But today he sneaked off. Luckily we traced him down here at once; he let his destination slip to the nurse. Sorry he's been a bother — but I'd appreciate it if nothing was said to the authorities. He's in a private institution, and in view of his past position, his family would be grateful for secrecy."

Stanhope nodded.

The man turned. "Come along, Mr. Clark," he said. "Back to the laboratory."

It was the cue for the maniacal scene. It was the point where Clark should have gone berserk and collapsed, to be dragged screaming from the room. By dramatic tradition it should have happened. Instead, Volmar Clark, mathematical genius and optics authority, drew himself up to full height and smiled at Editor Stanhope.

"All right," he said. "Sorry about our little interview, Stanhope. Another minute and I'd — well, never mind. Wish you'd remember what I told you, though. I've worked for a year."

With that he turned, and the two efficient-looking men escorted him from the room.

Stanhope sank into his chair behind the desk and mopped his brow. That was that. What a day!

Thank heavens, all over now. He glanced at his face in the mirror once more. He *was* haggard. No use to resume manuscript reading; it was time to go home and rest. No use to submit his dazed brain to the test of maintaining that "Every Story Scientifically Accurate" standard. Not now.

Abruptly his eyes fell on the silver object which still stood on the desktop. Clark's lens. He'd left it here! The guards had never noticed it. Clark hadn't either. Or had he? Had he left it here on purpose? Editor Stanhope remembered the cryptic parting words.

He picked up the magazine once more and gazed unseeingly at the cover. "Every Story Scientifically Accurate." He smiled, wearily.

## Robert Bloch

Well, Clark's story wasn't scientifically accurate. Mystery or no mystery, man didn't walk through glass mirrors into new worlds. The theories didn't hold. No scientific accuracy. He rejected the idea as he would a story.

But wait a minute. That madman had been a genius, once. He was still sincere. As an editor, Stanhope admired sincerity. He wouldn't reject a story without reading it. Could he wholly reject Clark's theory without testing it? The test lay merely in looking through the lens.

When Clark was forcing him, Stanhope had been afraid — charmed by the words of the demented man. Now his fear had passed. He could look through the lens calmly, discover just what principles actuated the mechanism. Why not? Here it was.

Idly, Stanhope bent over the tube, one hand still clutching the magazine. He half-rose and squinted down the long chamber, then raised the cylinder and aimed it at his image in the mirror. He peered down. He saw nothing but cloudy gray. He remembered the lever system. His free hand casually twirled first one lever, then another. He turned and adjusted.

Ah. There it was. His face, his body in the mirror. The room in reflection. Why, this device didn't change the image at all! Clark was mad. He adjusted focus, as he would if peering into a microscope. How clear his image in the mirror was!

No. Not so clear now. It was blurring. Getting gray again. And — his eyes hurt. A series of flickering, brilliant lights seemed to run from the mirror up through the tube into his eyes; into the brain behind them. His eyes felt *glued* to the lens; his *brain* felt glued. He no longer had eyes. His brain was a part of the lens.

"*Eyes and brain and tube all part of the machinery,*" Clark had said. But Clark was mad. Then he must be mad, imagining this!

The brilliant rays were brighter than ultraviolet. They moved *circularly* and Stanhope saw in *circles*. It was impossible, but he knew it was like that. The tube was filled with spinning lenses, all moving at queer angles, distorting the image he gazed at, sending blinding light that was not light, but electricity, into his brain. He couldn't look away, he couldn't *think* away. He felt one with the image beyond; felt himself slide into it.

For one climactic, dreadful instant he had the peculiar sensation of looking *out* from his eyes instead of *in*; the light waves seemed to be reversed, flowing from his retina instead of flowing toward it. He felt as though he were in the bottom of the tube, looking up, instead of down. And then the image in the mirror grew brighter and brighter,

## The Man Who Walked through Mirrors

and larger and larger, and Stanhope felt his body swim in circles of light.

With a gasp, he crumpled to the floor in the gray room.

He opened his eyes in a moment. He blinked rapidly. For a single gruesome moment he thought he had been blinded. Then the brilliant mist passed, and he could see.

He rose from the floor, clutching the magazine. He breathed deeply. That damnable machine! Clark *had* done something with it after all; he had made a hypnotizing agent out of it. The bright reflecting surface of the mirror, viewed through twirling mirrors and lenses in the tube, acted as a focal point in the hypnotic process. That was what had happened. He'd hypnotized himself. Yes, glass and mirrors had strange properties, and light became electrical thought in the brain all right. But that Fourth-Dimensional theory wasn't scientifically accurate after all.

Stanhope laughed. He'd looked through the tube, and he hadn't entered the mirror and the reflection of the room in the Fourth Dimension. There was the mirror now, still in front of him. It reflected the room of his office, just as it always had.

Editor Stanhope glanced idly down at the magazine he still held in his hand. With wild panic surging up in his breast, he read the words on the cover. Strange words, words that could not be safe in reflection, words that bit into his brain.

EVERY STORY SCIENTIFICALLY ACCURATE



## Alternate Universe

Stanley Hunter strolled into the office wearing a pearl-gray homburg and matching gloves.

"Nice day for sex," he remarked.

Tom Morton merely grunted. He had heard his bachelor partner voice this sentiment before—in fact, he voiced it every day, rain or shine.

Fortunately for the business affairs of Bio Laboratories, Stanley Hunter confined himself to the sales-promotion end. Maybe his consuming interest in human biological affairs helped him to sell biological products to pharmacists.

Tom Morton didn't much care, as long as he was permitted to devote his own attention to research and experiment. He picked up a small vial from the desk and squinted at it.

"What have you got there?" asked Stanley Hunter. "Some new aphrodisiac, I hope?"

"Not exactly," Tom answered. "In fact I don't quite know what this is. Some off-trail derivative of mescaline hydrochloride. The boys from the lab just sent it in for testing."

"Mescaline?" Stanley Hunter sounded a little vague. "Isn't that the stuff junkies use when they want to climb the walls?"

"Aldous Huxley isn't a junkie," Tom told him, scowling. "This drug has unusual properties—you must have read about it. It expands the threshold of consciousness, alters the time-sense. From some reports, it even gives the illusion of time-traveling. And the potentials of a new derivative like this have never been explored."

"You're going to monkey around with it, eh?" Stanley Hunter murmured. "I suppose that means you'll be cluttering the place up with a lot of guinea-pigs again."

## Robert Bloch

"Not at all," Tom assured him. "There's only one way to test this preparation, and that's subjectively."

"You mean you intend to swallow the stuff?" his partner groaned. "Be careful, boy! Remember the time I decided to take a nip of cantharadin—"

"Don't worry, it can't harm me in this quantity." Tom's eyes gleamed behind the spectacles. "Think of the possibilities, man! Suppose we could alter our perception sufficiently to really travel in time—there's no end to what might happen."

"Maybe so." Stanley Hunter tipped his homburg. "Go ahead and play around with it this afternoon if you like. As for me, there's no time like the present, I always say. And I intend to make the most of it."

"Off to the races?" Tom inquired.

"Just off." Stanley Hunter whistled and sauntered toward the door. "Take it easy, now. Don't mess with the mescaline."

He made his exit, but Tom was scarcely aware of his departure. Already he had pen and notebook ready. He buzzed his receptionist and instructed her not to disturb him with any calls, then drew the blinds and sat down behind his desk again. He uncorked the vial.

400 mg. of a new mescaline hydrochloride derivative, swallowed at—let's see now—1:30 P.M. April 12th.

He made the notation, then hesitated.

Actually, this was all very unscientific. What he ought to do was bring in a volunteer, rig up a whole series of testing devices to check reactions, conduct the experiment in the presence of a physician. That was the scientific way.

But then Tom, being a true scientist, *was* unscientific. He wanted, more than anything else, to enjoy the thrill of a new discovery; the intimate, personal thrill of being *first*. The first to explore a new realm of hyperconsciousness, a new dimension of awareness, a new world of sensation. If Stanley Hunter thought this was a nice day for sex, then why wasn't it a nice day for something completely novel, something transcending sex?

Tom blinked at the thought. Sex. Hadn't he better call Ann first, just in case something *could* happen? But no, there was no sense in needlessly alarming her. And besides, she generally took a nap in the early part of the afternoon. He could tell her all about it tonight. But right now—

Tom raised the vial to his lips and drank.

For a moment nothing happened.

## Alternate Universe

For an hour nothing happened.

For a century nothing happened.

Except that Tom was aware he couldn't estimate duration—moment, hour, century were all the same. He tried to focus his eyes on his wristwatch, but he couldn't find it. He couldn't find his wrist, he couldn't find his arm, he couldn't find his body.

He had no body.

He just *was*.

Where were the glowing colors Huxley and the others had written about? Where were the strange sounds, the weird visions? Tom was conscious only of himself, swirling in emptiness.

But he *was* conscious, *was* himself. He could still reason logically. This wasn't the usual mescaline reaction because he hadn't swallowed the usual compound. He'd taken something new. *This* was something new.

All at once, he was back in his own body again, back in his own office. He could feel, he could see. Everything remained unchanged. There was a slight humming sensation, a faint vibration, and his vision wavered just a trifle as though what he saw was being projected by a faulty television tube. But there were no hallucinations. He was aware of a normal self in a normal world.

For a moment he was conscious only of a terrible disappointment. To have expected so much and then to get no reaction at all!

Tom stood up, and then it happened.

He burned.

He began to burn all over. That's the way Stanley Hunter had said he felt, the time he swallowed the cantharidin extract. That's the way Tom himself had felt, with Ann, on their honeymoon.

*A nice day for sex.*

No reaction, eh?

Tom began to tremble. This stuff had a reaction, all right. A totally unexpected one, but it was there. He felt like a satyr, like Pan, like Elvis Presley doing a second chorus.

His hand reached out to press the buzzer. He'd get his secretary in here, that's what he'd do, and—

No. Ann wouldn't like that.

Besides, he didn't have to. Because he had Ann, didn't he? Ann was home right now, in bed, taking a nap.

All he had to do was sneak out the side door, hail a cab, drive home, open the door, tiptoe upstairs—

## Robert Bloch

And something *had* happened to his time-sense after all, because he was *doing* those very things, doing them so rapidly he was scarcely conscious of a moment elapsing.

On the other hand, maybe his consciousness was completely preoccupied with the burning sensation. All he could think of was his body.

Now he was going through the downstairs hallway, noting the table next to the stairway. No letters on it. Good. He wasn't in the mood to stop and read any letters, anyway. All he could think of was his body. And hers.

Her body was on the bed, in the bedroom. The shades were down, but he could see her. The gorgeous gleaming. It was warm, and she hadn't bothered to wear anything.

Ann, sleeping. The gorgeous gleaming. The burning. Should he wake her up? Yes, but in his own way.

Tom set about it, and apparently she had no objections to his methods. In fact her cooperation was altogether – and mutually – satisfactory.

Then the burning subsided and there was only the gorgeous gleaming, and Ann giggling, "Oh, Tom, you surprised me!"

"Didn't I, though?"

"Yes." She sighed, snuggling gracefully, then stiffened. "But think of the chance you're taking! What if *he* found out?"

"He?"

"Stanley, of course."

"Stanley Hunter? You mean my partner? What's he got to do with us?"

"He'd have plenty to do if he knew about this." Ann giggled again. "Don't forget, he's more than your partner. He also happens to be *my* husband."

"Stanley – your husband?"

"Maybe you have your dates mixed, darling. Is today the day you planned to sneak in on some other girl, you bachelor wolf, you? Get with it, boy – this is Ann Hunter you're talking to."

Tom tried to read her face in the dimness. "Are you kidding?" he gasped. "Darling, you're *my* wife."

"It'll never stand up in a court of law," Ann assured him. "Come on, stop teasing. Or if you must tease, think of another way. Like this, for instance."

Ann thought of another way, and Tom pretended he did, too. But actually, all the while he was conscious of reeling instead of reality.



## Alternate Universe

He was the bachelor and Ann was married to Stanley. But that was impossible! He *knew* who he was, what had happened. He didn't have anything wrong with his memory. He recalled meeting Ann four years ago. Why, Stanley had even introduced them. Maybe Stanley had gone with her for a while before then, but he had no intentions of ever marrying her. And he hadn't married her. Tom did. He remembered their wedding-day, their honeymoon, everything. Stanley was still a bachelor. Just this afternoon he'd walked into the office and —

*The office. That's where Tom had swallowed the mescaline derivative.*

It all came back to him now, and so did the consciousness of that faint humming vibration. The room was shimmering, even Ann's gorgeous gleaming rippled in waves.

"Darling, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. Got to go now."

Then everything speeded up like a fast film, or a tape recorder being run at double speed. What he said and what Ann said sounded like gobbling. He was dressing, walking, running, hailing a cab, riding, zooming up in the elevator, opening the door, falling into his chair behind the desk. He was falling, falling, falling —

And he landed.

Landed in his own office, landed at precisely 3:10 by the watch on his wrist, which was ticking normally now without the slightest suggestion of a humming noise in the background to interfere.

There was no vibration, no burning sensation. All Tom knew was that he was tired, and drenched with perspiration.

He reached for the carafe on the desk and poured himself a glass of water.

What a nightmare!

Then he stared down at the empty vial. Suppose it hadn't been a nightmare? He'd swallowed the stuff, hadn't he? And passed out for a little over two hours?

But any other explanation was absurd. The whole thing was a trick of the subconscious. Sure, that was the answer. The old subconscious. Instead of expanding perception, this drug expanded the imagination.

Tom nodded wisely at himself in the silver, mirrorlike reflection of the water carafe. Then he leaned forward and stared.

Even the blurred image showed the red stains on his mouth and face.

## Robert Bloch

He rubbed a finger across his lips, then brought his hand away. He recognized the lipstick smudges, and now he could smell a familiar perfume. Ann's perfume.

So he *had* been somewhere. Where?

The answer was beginning to form. He'd hoped for a time-traveling effect, but the drug didn't exactly work that way.

Suppose, instead, it opened another doorway? A doorway to a world of *if*, a parallel world existing in a dimension side-by-side with our own, an *alternate* universe?

In this world, Stanley had married Ann and rented the same house Tom would have picked.

Now he was getting confused, because it wasn't a question of "would have picked" – Tom *had* picked the house in the present world. If this *was* the present world.

Tom had to find out. He knew he had to find out at once, or he couldn't stand it. Maybe it was a toxic reaction from the drug, but he knew he was on the verge of flipping.

But what to do? He couldn't just get on the phone and call Ann and ask her if he was really her husband in this world.

"Get a grip on yourself," he muttered. "There's an easier way. A sensible way."

And he found it. Carefully wiping the rest of the lipstick from his face, Tom buzzed his secretary. "Mr. Hunter still out? All right." He hesitated, then took a deep breath. "Did my wife call?"

"No, Mr. Morton."

Tom clicked off, the grateful sigh rushing from his lips. "No" meant "Yes." It meant yes, he *was* married, Ann *was* his wife, he *was* in this world.

The best of all possible worlds, he told himself.

All this business of yearning for new sensations was nonsense. He ought to be content with what he had. Ann, for example.

And right now, even without the burning sensation to incite him, he was pleased to go home. With the curious feeling of retracing his footsteps, he left by the side entrance, hailed a cab, and drove to his house.

This time the sense of duration was normal. There was no humming or buzzing to interfere with his thoughts as he rode.

The mescaline derivative, now – what was to be done about it? Should he go ahead and set up an orthodox full-dress experiment?

## Alternate Universe

No. Too dangerous. If what he had experienced was any indication, it would be better to forget the whole thing. Tell the boys in the lab they'd come up with a dud.

Maybe the doors had better remain closed. It was an ugly place. Best if no one else ever blundered into it.

Actually, he couldn't even tell Ann what had happened. She wouldn't like the idea of being an unfaithful wife, even in another world.

Tom made up his mind as he paid the cabdriver and went up the front steps.

His eyes searched out the nameplate in the mailbox. *Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Morton*. That resolved all his doubts.

He was in the right world at last. And at the right time. Upstairs Ann might still be in bed, gorgeously gleaming. And he could tiptoe in and awaken her –

Tom did tiptoe, into the hall.

He got as far as the stairs, then glanced at the little table. There were no letters on it.

But resting on the tabletop were Stanley Hunter's gray homburg and his matching gloves.

Tom paused, staring.

This was it, then. He was in the right world, at the right time. And he could go upstairs and surprise his wife and his partner and raise a big stink and dissolve the firm and dissolve the marriage and –

The alternative? There *was* an alternative. A whole universe of alternatives, in fact. And somehow, in the light of what he had just discovered, it might not be so ugly after all.

A nice day for sex, eh?

Tom hesitated a moment longer, then smiled – and tiptoed out of the house again.

He wondered how long it would take the boys out in the lab to mix up another batch of that mescaline derivative.



## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

Little Mr. Fooze walked up the front steps to the door of his neat suburban bungalow. His jaw was squared with determination.

Tonight he was going to have it out with Professor Beaker once and for all.

"Things," brooded Mr. Fooze, darkly, "have gone far enough. Dora shouldn't have taken him as a boarder anyway. I admit we could use the money and the spare room was going to waste. But why did she rent it to a crazy chemistry professor?"

Sidney Fooze halted before the door and hesitated before announcing his arrival. He needed to work his courage up a little more. He paced back and forth, remembering the insults and injuries caused by their boarder.

"The first thing he did was to move in all those chemicals of his," muttered Mr. Fooze. "Then he began to make those foolish 'experiments.' Wouldn't tell what he was doing or why. Nothing leaked out about them except the smell."

Mr. Fooze wrinkled his nose reminiscently.

The smell had been terrible. Mr. Fooze and Dora would wake up in the middle of the night and sniff at what was coming down on the air from the attic where Professor Beaker lived and worked.

That was bad enough. And then Professor Beaker had set fire to his room one Sunday morning.

Mr. Fooze had wanted to throw him out then, but he paid so promptly and pleaded the urgent necessity of his "great experiment" and Mr. Fooze had let him stay.

Last week there had been a flood.

## Robert Bloch

Three days ago he had brought ten live chickens into the attic and turned the place into a shambles of feathers.

Mr. Fooze was sick and tired of his star boarder and his antics. No matter what he was "experimenting" on — perpetual motion or a rocket to the moon — Professor Beaker must go. If he wouldn't tell what he was doing or let anyone into his room, that was tough. He'd better hire himself a padded cell and continued his chemical research there.

"And another thing, Professor!" growled Mr. Fooze, raising his voice and sneering at the imaginary figure cowering in his brain. "You can kindly take your whole apparatus and —"

"Sidney!"

Mr. Fooze jerked out of his twilight daydream suddenly. Dora, his wife, stood on the doorstep.

"Hello, dear," he said, meekly.

"What in the world are you talking to yourself for?" she asked.

"I was just rehearsing," Mr. Fooze explained. "I'm going to tell the Professor off tonight."

"No, Sidney."

"What do you mean — no?"

"You won't be able to, I'm afraid."

"Why not?"

"Well — you see, he left here rather suddenly today."

"Left here suddenly? How?"

"Through the roof," Dora told him.

"No!"

"Yes. Poor Professor Beaker," sighed Dora. "He was always afraid he'd go to pieces over his work."

"You mean he blew himself up?"

"That's the direction he was going," Dora agreed.

"Then what about our roof?"

"The insurance men are going to put on a new one," said Mrs. Fooze. "The police were here, of course."

"Did you send for an undertaker?"

"There isn't any need to," said Dora, simply. "So far all they've found is part of his upper plate. It landed on the schoolhouse roof three blocks away."

She kissed Mr. Fooze on the nose. "But let's not stand here gabbing," she said. "Supper's getting cold."

Mr. Fooze shook his head. After three years of married life, he still couldn't figure it out. The boarder blew himself to bits and took the roof off, and all Dora could do was worry about supper getting cold.

## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

He sighed and went in to dinner.

After supper he explored the attic room.

Sure enough, the roof was gone — a big chunk of it, anyway. Twisted debris was all that remained of a bunsen-burner unit and laboratory table. The Professor's room itself was a shambles. Mr. Fooze waded ankle-deep in broken glass from beakers, retorts and bottles. Walls were stained weird hues from the splashing of exploded and spilled chemicals. The Professor's notes and laboratory papers were a soggy mass buried under the broken glass and powdered crystals.

"The men are coming tomorrow to fix the roof," said Dora. "I'll have them clean up this room, too."

"Good idea," said Mr. Fooze.

"You should have heard the explosion," Dora told him. "It made so much noise I could hardly hear my serial program."

"Quite likely."

"I wonder what he was doing up here?" Dora asked. "I often meant to ask him. But there was always so much to do during the day I never had a chance."

"You mean so many radio serials to listen to," said her husband, sarcastically.

"That's right," Dora answered. "Ooh, hurry downstairs, dear! There's a program on tonight I *can't* miss!"

She scurried down the steps and Mr. Fooze followed, shrugging helplessly.

Dora sat in the parlor fiddling with the radio, and Mr. Fooze stared at the tigerskin rug on the floor. The tiger head winked up at him and Mr. Fooze winked back. Women were funny.

Gradually he dozed off and forgot about it.

He was walking in his sleep when he went up to bed that night. He turned in without any consciousness of what he was doing.

He was still snoring when Dora jerked him violently by the shoulder.

"Whzzmattr?" he inquired, digging his face into the pillow.

"Wake up, Sidney! It's five o'clock!"

"What of it?" grunted Mr. Fooze.

"You've got to be at the office at eleven," Dora reminded.

"Buzz' only five," groaned her husband.

"But you'll have to get up and do the washing first," said Dora.

"Washing?"

## Robert Bloch

"With all that excitement yesterday, I forgot to wash," Dora explained. "And you'll need fresh clothes when you go to that big meeting today."

Mr. Fooze groaned and crawled out of bed. Once in his innocent honeymoon days he had volunteered to "help around the house." He had been so gallant.

Now he was just plain stuck. He crept into his oldest shirt and trousers.

"As long as you're up," Dora suggested, "you might as well go into the attic and pick up some of that broken glass. Carry it down to the basement when you take the wash."

\* \* \*

Mr. Fooze shivered his way up to the attic and Professor Beaker's ruined room. He dumped a lot of glassware into the laundry basket on top of the clothes and carried the whole mess down to the basement.

He stacked bottles and vials on the floor and then began to do things with the laundry.

Cursing sweetly, he dumped underwear, shorts, panties, shirts, socks, gloves, neckties, dresses, several pairs of wash pants into the washing machine.

The machine began to clank and grind. So did Mr. Fooze who was singing "*Rinso white*," in a hideous falsetto.

After a while Mr. Fooze got pretty sick and tired of the whole business – but mostly tired. He lay down on the basement floor and went back to sleep.

"Sidney!"

His wife called from the head of the stairs.

"Yes, dear?"

"Did you remember to put in the blueing?"

"Oh, sure," lied Mr. Fooze, who had done no such thing.

He got up, rubbing his eyes, and searched the basement shelves for the bottle of blueing.

Yawning, he spied the little blue bottle on the floor, twisted the cap, and poured in a generous measure.

Then he lay down on the coal pile.

"Sidney!"

He sprang to attention. "Yes, sugar?"

"I forgot to tell you – the blueing is upstairs in the kitchen," Dora called down.



## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

"Oh, oh!" grunted Mr. Fooze, under his breath. He glanced in the washing machine. He hoped he hadn't made a mistake and put some ink into it. Stooping, he examined the blueing bottle.

No label. And the stuff smelled funny. But it was blue. And the clothes didn't look spoiled.

He hoped for the best as he carried his basket of wet wash out to the yard. The clothesline flapped in a strong breeze. Good. The garments should dry in an hour or so with this wind.

Mr. Fooze hung clothes and then lay down in the backyard for his delayed nap.

This time he actually slept.

It seemed to Mr. Fooze that he had a horrid dream. A most real and ghastly dream.

It seemed as though Mr. Fooze woke up two hours later. The first thing he noticed was that the breeze had died down—died down completely.

Then he glanced at the clothesline and gasped.

There was no wind, but the clothes were moving!

Shirts and shorts danced up and down the line, instead of dangling decently. For a moment, Mr. Fooze had the confused impression that the laundry was—somehow—*alive*.

He walked over and felt the edge of a chemise. It was perfectly dry. Good! He could take this stuff down, iron it, and leave for the office.

Humming under his breath, Mr. Fooze began to unpin the wash and drop garments into the basket.

That's when he realized he must be dreaming.

Mr. Fooze reached up and unfastened a long union suit. As he did so, the garment seemed to slip from his fingers.

It did not fall to the ground.

Instead, the union suit *stood* beside him in the yard!

Stood there on woolen legs, arms resting jauntily on the hips!

Mr. Fooze stared with jaw agape, as the union suit suddenly turned its back on him, disclosing a gaping open flap in the rear.

He reached out to grasp the unnatural object, but the union suit swiftly moved away.

Mr. Fooze lost his temper and lunged.

Immediately, the union suit started to run! Wobbling grotesquely, it scampered across the backyard, with Mr. Fooze hot on its ankles—for a union suit has no heels.

## Robert Bloch

"Come back here!" yelled Mr. Fooze, scarcely realizing what he was shouting. He glanced around wildly. What if neighbors should see?

The union suit played tag around the clothes posts, its open flap fluttering coyly.

Mr. Fooze went slightly berserk, then. He jerked down the end of the clothesline and coiled the rope purposefully.

The union suit danced just out of his range, like a headless ghost, taunting him and waving its wrinkled arms.

But Mr. Fooze was ready. He twirled his clothesline and it settled — like a lasso — over the bewitched garment.

Cursing furiously, Mr. Fooze dragged the union suit to his side, stooped down, and thrust it, still squirming, into the clothes basket.

Then, as he lifted the basket full of writhing garments, he suddenly stumbled and went down. The force of his fall knocked the wind out of him.

And it jarred his senses still more. For he realized, in a hideous moment, that he was not dreaming. He was wide awake. And his laundry *was* alive!

Arms and legs waved from the basket, as imprisoned clothing squirmed. Mr. Fooze held on tight and stared.

He didn't know what had happened, or why. But there was only one thing to do with clothes, alive or dead. That was — iron them. Iron them and lock them into drawers where they'd be out of sight.

Muttering under his breath, Mr. Fooze carried the laundry basket into the house, set it down on the kitchen table, and put up the ironing board.

He was grateful to see that Dora didn't enter the kitchen. She was listening to a program in the parlor.

While he wanted for the iron to heat, Mr. Fooze tried to figure things out.

Obviously, something had happened to the laundry. But what?

Then Mr. Fooze remembered the blueing he had dumped into the wash — the blueing that was not really blueing.

It had come from a blue bottle, he remembered. A blue bottle on the basement floor. On the basement floor, where he had dumped the bottles he carried from Professor Beaker's room.

Could it have been a bottle of chemical from the Professor's experiments?

Perhaps.

But what kind of a concoction could bring clothes to life?

## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

Mr. Fooze tried to think. He stared at the laundry basket in apprehensive horror. The thought of ironing these unusual garments dismayed him. What if they didn't like heat? What if the pants refused to be pressed?

There was only one worse alternative—and that was what Dora would say to him if she found this out. That must never happen. He had to iron the clothes and hide them.

Mr. Fooze approached the clothes basket. To his relief, he found the garments lying still. Nothing rustled or slithered or waved to and fro.

He touched the top garments gingerly. They did not move.

Perhaps the effects of the strange chemical had worn off. He hoped so. He began to iron at top speed. First some underwear, then a pair of socks. He'd need them to wear today to the office.

After that he pressed a green wash tie. That was also a part of his wardrobe.

Then Mr. Fooze got to work on the real job—ironing the brown slack suit he must wear at the office today. The boss had insisted he wear the horrible ensemble.

As he ironed, he glanced at his watch. Only an hour left!

There was no time to finish ironing the rest of the garments. Fluttering in haste, he hurriedly jammed the rest of the wash back into the basket, picked up the ironed garments, and lugged the load up to the bedroom.

To be on the safe side, he stuffed all the unpressed clothing in his wife's bureau drawers and locked them up.

Then he took a pair of green shorts, underwear, the green tie, socks, and his slack suit, and sat down on the bed.

He dressed swiftly—but without a hitch. The garments didn't try to run away. At last he stood before the mirror in slack suit and necktie. He looked perfectly normal in his attire. Stepping into a pair of sandals, he turned and made for the stairs.

Going downstairs, his trouble started.

He remembered the blue bottle in the cellar. Some inner instinct told him not to leave without looking at it again.

Mr. Fooze made for the cellar. Sure enough, there stood the unlabeled bottle, right where he had left it. The blue glass tingled against his palm as Mr. Fooze lifted it up and took out the cork. He sniffed at the liquid. It smelled faintly of ether. But there was nothing very unusual in that.

## Robert Bloch

His eye lighted on the bar of soap on the wash tub. With trembling deliberation, Mr. Fooze tilted the bottle gently. A drop fell squarely on the soap.

Mr. Fooze saw the liquid fall. Then he grinned. Nothing happened. The soap still rested there.

Then—

The soap jumped.

Mr. Fooze saw it jump, and his mouth opened.

That was bad, for the soap sailed in the direction of Mr. Fooze's face, and landed squarely in his open mouth.

He groaned and spluttered as the soap suddenly bounded from between his teeth and began to hop around on the floor. Mr. Fooze made a dive for it, but it jumped into a rat-hole and disappeared.

He stood there, trying to control his trembling fingers.

It was true then. This blue bottle—Professor Beaker's bottle—contained some mysterious ingredient that had the power of animating objects. Making things come alive.

Mr. Fooze shuddered.

Something must be done, but there was not time to decide right now. He had to get to the office.

He went up the stairs, carrying the blue bottle carefully in his hand. He'd better not drop it, or the steps might suddenly spring to life and start clattering all over the house!

Mr. Fooze headed straight for the parlor. While the tigerskin rug glared up at him accusingly, he put the blue bottle in the upper drawer of his desk and locked the desk.

Still shaking, he went back down the hall and slipped out of the house. Dora was listening to the radio, and he didn't disturb her. He was afraid to tell her.

All Mr. Fooze could do was hope and pray. Hope and pray that the newly-washed clothes he was wearing would behave. Perhaps the ironing had done the trick. He had always known that clothes make the man— and he was only afraid that they might make the man crazy. Well, it would all come out in the wash.

It took all of Mr. Fooze's powers of concentration to find his streetcar corner—because by this time he didn't know if he was coming or going.

His slack suit was not moving, but he held his hands close to his sides, just in case. When the streetcar arrived, he got on cautiously and took a seat in back, all by himself.

## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

For a few blocks he rode in peace. Then the car began to fill up with passengers. He eyed them malignantly, hoping no one would choose the vacant seat at his side.

A fat lady bustled down the aisle and caught his eye. She returned his stony stare with an obvious sniff, and plopped her poundage squarely next to Mr. Fooze, squeezing him against the window.

The pressure irritated Mr. Fooze. It also seemed to irritate his clothes.

For suddenly Mr. Fooze felt his slack suit squirm. The arms flapped out and the trousers showed a tendency to cross. Inasmuch as his legs were not crossed, the trousers ballooned forth very obviously. Mr. Fooze struggled silently to maintain his composure—to say nothing of his sanity.

Suddenly his necktie flew up and began to curl around his neck.

The fat lady turned and noticed the green, snakelike tie as it squirmed along his throat.

Mr. Fooze forced a smile. The fat lady grunted.

He pushed the tie down hastily. But he was beginning to perspire.

Once again the tie flew up. It crept across and brushed the fat lady's fourth chin.

Mr. Fooze tried to yank his tie back. But too late. It wrapped itself around the fat lady's neck.

"Eeek!" she complained, shrilly. "Take it away!"

Several passengers turned their heads and stared. It was a bad moment for Mr. Fooze, who was pulling at his necktie with both hands. To the spectators, it looked as though he were trying to strangle the woman with his tie.

Evidently she had the same opinion. Bringing up her heavy purse, she banged Mr. Fooze across the top of the head. The purse opened and Mr. Fooze received a shower of powder grains and hairpins on his head.

"Pardon me," he wheezed. "My tie is caught—wait—"

He snapped the tie back and tucked it inside his slack shirt. The fat woman glared but settled back in her seat.

Mr. Fooze really was perspiring, now. He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to mop his face.

"Why you beast!" screamed the fat lady, rising to her feet.

Mr. Fooze glanced down. He was mopping his face with his handkerchief—what was wrong with that?

Just one thing. What Mr. Fooze held in his hand was not a handkerchief.

## Robert Bloch

He was mopping his face with a pair of pink bloomers!

How the bloomers had become lodged in his pocket he didn't know. Perhaps they had climbed in of their own accord, he thought wildly.

As if to prove it, the bloomers suddenly slipped from his hand to his lap. There they stood up on their diminutive legs and began to dance. A hideous quivering convulsed the panties as the bloomers shimmied.

"Beast!" shrieked the fat lady. "Take them away!"

"They're not mine," yelled Mr. Fooze. As if to prove it, he rose to his feet and bolted down the aisle of the streetcar.

Passengers turned and giggled. Mr. Fooze heard guffaws and titters. He paused in his frantic race. Paused and stared at the pursuing pink panties.

The bloomers were chasing him down the aisle!

In a panic, he turned and headed back for his seat, jumping over the pink barrier. Almost at once the bloomers followed him. Back to the fat lady he ran, with panties at his heels.

She was on her feet, waiting for him.

"These bloomers — I swear they're not mine!" repeated Mr. Fooze desperately.

"Oh!" wailed the fat lady. "Do you mean to say those are *my* bloomers? Then you must have — oh, you *monster!*"

Down came the purse again, splitting on Mr. Fooze's head. The fat lady charged, and he ran; glancing back he saw her trip over the dancing panties as he jumped off the streetcar on the corner stop.

"Merciful God!" breathed Mr. Fooze, in a truly devout voice, as he regained his breath on the corner.

He turned and trudged the remaining three blocks to the office. He slowly recovered his composure as he noted that his clothing was unruffled. Nothing moved unnaturally. Perhaps his troubles were over. The effect of the strange liquid must be wearing off. At least, he hoped it was.

His coming ordeal would be bad enough without further complications.

Mr. Fooze entered the office and tensed himself for the business at hand.

It was five minutes to eleven by the office clock.

At eleven o'clock he would be on the spot. On the spot before a microphone in the big showroom on the second floor.

\* \* \*

## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

Mr. Fooze's office was not, strictly speaking, an office. It was the business quarters of the Hummenkapper Clothing Company—manufacturers and designers of an exclusive line of men's clothing.

In the office downstairs, Mr. Fooze, along with a large staff, labored over plans for "merchandising campaigns" and "men's style shows" designed to sell Hummenkapper garments to out of town buyers for men's shops all over the country.

Today such a style show was in preparation. At eleven, a hundred clothing buyers and style specialists would gather in the showroom on the second floor. One by one, fashion models would walk out and display Hummenkapper styles for the coming season, while an announcer read his script over a public address microphone.

Mr. Fooze was to be that announcer.

It was really a spot. His boss had chosen him for the assignment after long deliberation.

"You'd better do the trick," he had snarled. "Hummenkapper needs to push merchandise. Write a script and read it as if you meant it. If not—"

The boss had made a familiar gesture, drawing his thumb across his throat.

Mr. Fooze was afraid of public address systems, but he was more afraid of his boss. Mr. Gnasher, of the Hummenkapper Clothing Company, was a hard man. A very hard man. It was a common rumor around the office that Mr. Gnasher had been named after his teeth.

Therefore, Mr. Fooze had worked hard on his script. He had rehearsed the reading of it for many hours. When they told him at the last minute he would have to appear in a slack suit—a new Hummenkapper style—he hadn't dared refuse.

That was why he had the ridiculous garment on. He hoped it would behave.

Glancing at his tie in the mirror and fixing the crease of his rumpled trousers, Mr. Fooze glided into the office, ignored the giggling stenographers, grabbed his script, and raced upstairs.

They were all up there—all the house salesmen and officials, sitting down in front on hard chairs. On either side, the buyers lolled, puffing cigars and exchanging the kind of stories salesmen always exchange.

Mr. Fooze looked through the curtains at his audience and gulped. The script rattled in his hand as he saw a spotlight go on from the back of the house and focus at the microphone that stood on the bare platform before the velvet curtains.

## Robert Bloch

He would be standing out there in just a minute.

Mr. Fooze glanced nervously at the audience once more. Hard, brutal faces — coarse, crude men who would undoubtedly snicker when they saw him in a slack suit. Their business was selling new fashions, not wearing them. Most of them were dressed in unpressed, sloppy tweeds.

The models began coming out of their dressing rooms and lining up behind Mr. Fooze. As he gave them their cues from the script, they would come out and parade on the platform. Mr. Fooze looked at their calm self-possession and trembled. How could they take it so casually?

On his next peek, Mr. Fooze saw his boss, sitting down in front.

Mr. Gnasher was glancing at his watch and frowning. As little Mr. Fooze stared, the boss began to mutter something under his breath and tap his foot on the floor.

It was time to start.

Tugging his necktie into place, Mr. Fooze wobbled out onto the platform, his script waving in his jittery hand.

Clutching the microphone for support, he began to read the opening greeting of his script.

The sound of his own voice, magnified by the microphone, reassured him. Ignoring the murmurs from his audience, he settled down to delivering his message before introducing the first clothing model.

“And so I say to you,” Mr. Fooze orated, “that if you men stock up on the new Hummenkapper fall models, you will have a record of sales this year that you will be proud of. As a matter of fact, this should be one of your most fiscal years! And now, I present to you —”

An indignant grunt came from somewhere in the audience. Mr. Fooze paused to locate it. Just as he feared, it had been Mr. Gnasher’s grunt.

Mr. Fooze started again. Again, the grunt.

What was wrong?

Fooze looked down at his script. Then he saw it.

Stabbing at his script — sticking straight out from his neck in a livid line — was Mr. Fooze’s elusive necktie! Mr. Fooze clutched the devilish cravat in his right hand and crammed it back into his slack shirt.

He opened his mouth to speak, then let it hang open in amazement.

Something moved on his neck. Something moved swiftly. He glanced down as a whistle came from the audience.

His necktie was untying itself!



## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

Faster than his eye or clutching hand could follow, the green cravat slithered off his neck!

Like a wriggling worm it crawled down the side of the microphone. Mr. Fooze dropped his script and tried to grab it. Too late. The audience was in an uproar.

As he stooped to pick up his script, Mr. Fooze felt strange movements across his chest. One by one, the buttons on his slack shirt slipped from their buttonholes. His shirt opened by itself!

Mr. Fooze threw his hands over his head in dismay.

This was the wrong thing to do. It gave his shirt a perfect opportunity to bunch up and shoot over his head. He felt the sleeves crawl over his arms. In a second, his entire shirt had twisted itself from his torso.

"Take it off!" yelled a raucous voice from the crowd. Above it Mr. Fooze heard the barking cough of Mr. Gnasher. He tried to locate the boss in the audience.

As he peered, something happened at his waist. Looking down, he saw the belt of his trousers unbuckle suddenly, swiftly. His pants marched down his legs!

Mr. Fooze almost tripped as the trousers bunched at his ankles. He leaped aside and they came off, pulling his sandals with them. Mr. Fooze stood before the laughing throng in his underwear, as his socks joined the parade and wiggled off his bare toes.

In utter horror he saw his shirt, trousers, necktie and socks fluttering before the microphone in midair. He made a grab at the garments.

"What's coming off here?" he shrieked.

He got his answer very promptly.

As though the words were a cue, his underwear quickly unbuttoned. The sleeves crawled up his scrabbling arms, jerked past his shoulders. The garment fell. So did Fooze. He lay on the platform, kicking his legs as the underwear crawled off his body.

Clad in a pair of bright green Hummenkapper shorts, Mr. Fooze wobbled to his feet.

Amidst the screams of the mob, he dashed up and down the platform, chasing his clothes. His underwear was bowing to the audience, and as the applause rose, his pants dipped in recognition. The shirt had both sleeves over its head in a prizefighter's gesture and the socks were jumping over the wriggling necktie.

Mr. Fooze made one despairing dive for his galloping garments. As he did so, his shorts started to join the party.

It was too much to bear — and much too much too bare.

## Robert Bloch

With a yowl of panic, he bolted from the stage. Bursting through the excited knot of models on the side, Mr. Fooze ran a naked race through the hall.

Coming upon a window dummy in the corridor, he yanked savagely at the clothing adorning it. He pulled on a shirt, a pair of pants, and a suit coat. The outfit was a good eight sizes too large for him, and the coat rose almost to the top of his ears, but Mr. Fooze didn't care. He felt like hiding.

Ignoring the shouts from the stage behind him, he galloped down the stairs and out of the building. He clambered aboard the first streetcar and headed home, his senses reeling.

Mr. Fooze was a broken man, and he knew it. His spirits fell when he thought of telling his wife, and so did his oversize trousers.

Mr. Fooze staggered into the house, dragging both his saggy face and saggy trousers.

Dora was waiting for him in the hall. She ignored both his long face and long pants and flung her arms around his neck.

"Oh, darling!" she whispered. "You're wonderful!"

Mr. Fooze raised his eyebrows. Then he stepped back, clutched at his belt buckle, and raised his drooping trousers.

"What do you mean?" he muttered.

"Mr. Gnasher called up from the office," Dora told him, ecstatically. "He said he just couldn't wait to congratulate you."

"Congratulate me?"

"Oh, don't be so modest, Sidney! Mr. Gnasher told me all about your stunt, and I think it was so cute. Mr. Gnasher said your new strip tease method of displaying men's fashions will have the whole industry interested."

"Ulp!" gulped Mr. Fooze.

"He said he doesn't know how you did it, but if you can teach it to the rest of the models he'll make you promotion manager. He said all the buyers are talking about it — they got such a kick out of the novelty."

"So I'm not fired?" whispered Mr. Fooze, under his breath.

"What did you say, darling?"

"I said, it's just the way I figured," Mr. Fooze lied. "Well, that's that."

"I'm so proud of you," Dora breathed. "You know, Sidney, I've been thinking. A man like you — in the style business — must really look his best. And I think from now on I ought to do the washing and ironing. Really. I'm getting pretty sick of radio serials anyway."

Mr. Fooze beamed.

## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

"Well, all's well that ends well," he murmured, taking Dora in his arms.

Suddenly his wife drew back.

"Oh, I almost forgot!"

"Forgot what?"

"There's a visitor waiting to see you in the parlor."

"Visitor? Who?"

"He wouldn't give me his name. Said he had to wait and see you. It was very important. Maybe you'd better go in and find out what he wants."

"Awferheavensakes!" growled Mr. Fooze. "Another salesman! Watch me get rid of this baby."

Pulling up his trousers, the little man walked briskly into the parlor.

It was dim in the fading twilight. The tigerskin rug glared up with eyes and teeth. It looked rather ghastly.

Then Mr. Fooze saw the glare of other eyes and other teeth—the eyes and teeth of his visitor. These eyes and teeth were worse than those of the rug, he quickly decided.

The visitor sat in the easy chair. He was a tall, thin man with a huge, domed forehead. His bald, bony head bobbed, and he raised a gaunt, lined visage to confront Mr. Fooze with a knowing grin.

A clawlike hand reached out, and a long finger stabbed at Mr. Fooze's chest.

"Here you are," rasped the stranger. "You're Fooze, eh?"

"Yes. Who are you, might I ask?"

"You might." The bony man grinned. "And I might tell you. I'm Doctor Kranoff."

"Doctor Kranoff?"

"That's right. A friend of Professor Beaker's."

"But Professor Beaker is not here. He—"

"I know all about it. And that's why *I'm* here." Again Doctor Kranoff grinned. Suddenly he erased the grimace from his gaunt features and rose to tower over Mr. Fooze.

"Where is it?" he grated.

"Where is what?"

"You know—the stuff," said Doctor Kranoff, hoarsely. "Where is the Elixir?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't try and deceive me," growled Doctor Kranoff, his bony fingers writhing in excitement. "Where is the Elixir of Life?"

"Elixir of Life?"

## Robert Bloch

"Of course, you stupid dolt! What do you think old Beaker was working on in his chemical laboratory upstairs? A biochemical formula, a synthesis of protoplasmic forms capable of rendering inanimate objects animate. Elixir of Life is what the ancients called it. They never found the formula. Beaker did. He was completing it and I knew it. I wanted to share the discovery. He wouldn't let me. Now I'm here to get it."

"But I don't know anything about Beaker's work," objected Mr. Fooze, hastily.

"Then I'll have to search the place," said Doctor Kranoff.

"Look here now – this is my home. You can't go searching my house this way."

Doctor Kranoff laughed. There was nothing funny for him to laugh at, and there was no mirth in his cackle.

"Listen, friend," he whispered. "Do you think I'm going to be stopped at the last moment? Nothing will stop me from getting my hands on this great discovery, after all I've done. Who do you suppose slipped the nitroglycerine in old Beaker's mixing vat the day he went through the roof?"

"You mean you murdered Professor Beaker?" gasped Mr. Fooze.

"Exactly," said Doctor Kranoff. "And I'll do as much for you unless you let me search the house."

Mr. Fooze realized that Doctor Kranoff was a man of his word, because the tall, gaunt scientific figure suddenly pulled a pistol from his hip pocket and leveled it at Mr. Fooze's falling waistline.

"Let's try the attic, first," suggested the Doctor, pleasantly. "By the way – not a word to your wife. Or I'll have to use two bullets."

Mr. Fooze couldn't have said a word if he wanted to. His throat was dry – parched. And he couldn't very well move his tongue anyway, for his heart was in his mouth.

Silently, he led Doctor Kranoff up the stairs. The pistol prodded him in the small of the back.

\* \* \*

Once in the attic, the Doctor set to work. He ransacked the piles of debris on the floor. His clawing fingers swept through the remainder of the bottles and glassware.

"Cagliostro's curse!" he growled. "Nothing here! Let's see your cellar."

Obediently, Mr. Fooze led his ghastly guest down the stairs.

## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

Dora was listening to the radio as they passed through the parlor. "Where are you going?" she called.

"I'm just taking this man down to look at the furnace," lied Mr. Fooze. Dora returned to her radio and Mr. Fooze entered the cellar. The Doctor quickly surveyed the old bottles and miscellany of scientific paraphernalia gathered from Professor Beaker's room.

"It isn't here," he muttered.

"You see," said Mr. Fooze. "That proves there is no such thing."

Doctor Kranoff patted his pistol. He smiled sweetly.

"Not so fast," he answered. "Did you move this junk down here to the cellar?"

"Why — yes."

"Then you found the Elixir of Life," the Doctor declared. "Found it and hid it away somewhere in the house. Come on — we'll search every room until I get my hands on it."

Silently they ascended the stairs.

"Where is the bedroom?" demanded the Doctor.

"This way."

They entered the bedroom. Doctor Kranoff dived for the closet. He rummaged around, always keeping Mr. Fooze covered with his pistol.

Mr. Fooze got nervous. He knew the blue bottle was safely locked in the parlor desk downstairs. If he could only head this madman off somehow!

"By the way," he gulped, "just why do you want the Elixir of Life, anyway?"

"Oh, that?" chuckled Doctor Kranoff. "It so happens I have a few cadavers knocking around my own laboratories. Medical specimens — condemned and executed criminals, mostly. I think it might be interesting to reanimate them, don't you?"

"No!" wailed Mr. Fooze, emphatically.

"Well, either I find the Elixir and use it on those corpses," said the Doctor, "or else I'll be adding a new corpse to my collection shortly."

Mr. Fooze felt his heart sink within him at these words. His trousers sagged considerably, too. He pulled them up. Doctor Kranoff was going through the bureau drawers now, ransacking them with muttered oaths and imprecations.

"Not a damned thing!" he snorted.

"Really," said Mr. Fooze. "You're making an awful mistake, Doctor. There's no such thing as an Elixir of Life around here. It must have been blown up with Professor Beaker."

## Robert Bloch

"Say, I never thought of that!" exclaimed Doctor Kranoff. "Do you really think so?"

"Sure. It was a terrific blast. The whole attic went through the roof. Practically everything was lost."

"Just my luck!" groaned the Doctor. "I used too much nitro-glycerine, I suppose."

"Everybody makes mistakes," Mr. Fooze consoled him. "You can see there's no Elixir of Life in this house. Why don't you just forget about it? Go home and play with your corpses or something."

"Maybe I'd better," sighed the demented medico. "Just this one drawer here. Your wife's things, eh? Well, looks like nothing doing—oooops!"

Doctor Kranoff opened the top bureau drawer to reveal a stack of pink lingerie. As he reached in to ruffle the garments, something stirred.

Something uncoiled like a serpent—like a pair of serpents. Something raised a brown, sinuous length from the bureau drawer.

Doctor Kranoff drew back aghast as a pair of silk stockings rose from the drawer, jumped lightly to the floor, and began to march around the room.

"Aha!" yelled Doctor Kranoff.

He plunged his hand into the drawer. A pair of gloves suddenly scuttled forth to the bureau top. Two spiders poised before the Doctor's image in the mirror. Scampering up the shiny surface, the right glove thumbed the Doctor's nose in the mirror. The other glove began to open a powder box.

"So!"

Doctor Kranoff wheeled and held the pistol at Mr. Fooze's chest.

"Come on," he said. "You're through fooling, now. You almost got away with it, but not quite. You have that Elixir—this proves it. You've hidden it away. Lead me to it."

"But—"

"Lead me to it this minute," said Doctor Kranoff, "or I'll arrange matters so that you'll need the Elixir of Life for yourself."

Mr. Fooze gave up. He paused only long enough to recapture the gloves and stockings and replace them in the drawer.

"I'm licked," he sighed. "The bottle is downstairs, in the parlor. Follow me."

Down the stairs they marched. Mr. Fooze felt the muzzle of the pistol boring into his back. He had never been quite so bored in all his life.

## Mystery of the Creeping Underwear

The Doctor forced him into the parlor so quickly he almost tripped over the rug.

"Hand it over," snapped Doctor Kranoff. "Quickly, now."

Mr. Fooze, trembling violently, tottered over to the desk. His shaking fingers fumbled with the key.

He pulled the drawer open. He groped for the little blue bottle, found it.

He drew it forth, held it up to the light. It was half-filled. Elixir of Life!

His hands shook.

But Doctor Kranoff's hand, holding the pistol, was quite firm and steady. So was his voice.

"Hand it over," said Doctor Kranoff.

Mr. Fooze extended his hand...

\* \* \*

Some ten minutes later a haggard Mr. Fooze lurched out of the parlor and fell into his wife's waiting arms.

"What happened?" gasped Dora. "All that noise—"

"Elixir of Life!" grunted Mr. Fooze.

"What Elixir?"

So Mr. Fooze told her. Told her about the blue bottle and the clothes, and Doctor Kranoff, who murdered Professor Beaker to get his secret concoction. He told about giving the Elixir of Life to Doctor Kranoff at the point of a gun.

"But I don't understand, Sidney," said Dora. "What was all that screaming and yelling in the parlor? And what did I see when I looked out of the window—that Doctor running down the road with that awful whatever-it-was at his heels?"

"Never mind," smiled Mr. Fooze. "It's all over, now. The Doctor is gone for good, I imagine, and so is the Elixir. Let's forget the whole thing ever happened."

"Tell me what happened," Dora demanded. "What was all that growling and shrieking?"

"It's very simple," Mr. Fooze explained, happily. "You see, Doctor Kranoff was chased out of the house."

"Don't tell me that—"

"Right," grinned Mr. Fooze. "My hands trembled so that when I held out the Elixir of Life, I dropped the bottle. Spilled it right smack in the middle of our tigerskin rug!"





## The Old Switcheroo

The moment the transporter landed on his roof, Joe Slobkin came running to meet me.

I could tell at a glance that success hadn't gone to his head. Apparently it had moved in the other direction, for he was wearing a pair of ermine shorts.

"Same old Joe," I said.

"Why not?" He took off his diamond-studded sunglasses (ground specially for him by the same team that had worked on the Moonbase Observatory lens) and grinned at me. "You don't have to worry about me, old buddy. Even if I am the most intelligent-type agent in Hollywood, which modesty forbids I should mention."

Leading me along the flat roof, he paused before the transporter as the uniformed pilot saluted him.

"Park it in the hangar with the others," he ordered.

The pilot clicked his heels. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yeah. Take the rest of the day off. But before you go, remember to feed the elephant."

"You have a pet elephant?" I murmured.

"Who said anything about pets? Some of my musician clients are all time coming over and banging on my grand piano. I got tired of replacing the busted keys, so I figured it would be cheaper raising my own ivory. In this business you gotta watch all the angles."

I had no answer to that, so I turned and stared down at the palatial expanse of San Simoleon, the Slobkin estate.

"Quite a view, huh?" he commented. "On a clear day you can see the smog."

I shook my head. "How did you ever manage to find a place surrounded entirely by mountains?"

## Robert Bloch

"Just wanted privacy, dig? Matter of fact, it wasn't surrounded. When I came here it had mountains on only three sides. I built the fourth one myself."

"And that kidney-shaped swimming pool—"

"You like it? Had a doctor design it for me. Modeled after one of my own kidneys. On the other side I got a liver-shaped swimming pool. Which I don't use, on account of hepatitis."

Slobkin led me to the elevator and we descended to the Grand Ballroom. A golden fountain cascaded merrily at one end, and Slobkin produced glasses that he held beneath the spray.

"How's for some champagne?"

I took the glass, staring in admiration at his tattooed arm.

"Neat, huh?" He flexed his biceps. "It's an original Picasso. You know, Sidney Picasso, the old-time artist's grandson. Had him do it the last time I was in Paris. Some day I'll get something put on my chest. Maybe one of them there Remnants, or Rembrands, whatever."

"Rembrandt is dead," I said.

"Hell, too bad. I should of caught him on the first trip." Slobkin led me to a sofa before the fireplace, at which silent, unobtrusive servitors were barbecuing a yak on a spit. We settled back in comfort.

"Let's rap about you," he said. "Been over three years since we huddled. What's the scam?"

"Nothing to tell. I'm still a freelance writer."

Slobkin frowned. "Same bag, huh? Speaking of which, I bet you still got the same wife, too. You never did have no ambition. Look what I done in the past couple years."

"I'm looking," I told him. "And I still can't believe it. Just think, when I met you, all you had was desk space in that little office over on Smogset Strip."

His frown deepened. "That pay-toilet! No wonder I never got nowhere being an agent—crowded into the same room with ten other guys. Why, in those days I didn't even have a spot to pitch in."

I nodded. "You couldn't get a line into the studios. I remember how excited you were the first time you landed a part for a client. Who was that, anyway?"

"It was a chimpanzee," Slobkin said. "I had a deal lined up with Paranoid Pictures. They were to use him as somebody's stand-in for *Beyond the Backside of the Planet of the Apes*. Only he bombed. Once the chimp got a whiff of makeup he decided to quit show biz and go into politics." Slobkin grimaced with angry distaste. "Believe me, I didn't vote for him. But he got in anyway. More champagne? Or a little caviar,

## The Old Switcheroo

maybe? I'll have one of the boys run down to the pond and squeeze out a sturgeon."

"Never mind." I gestured him back into his seat. "What I want to know is what happened to you. How did the change come about?"

"No change," Joe Slobkin told me solemnly. "Just the old switcheroo, that's all. The old switcheroo."

"You're going to tell me about it, aren't you?"

"Sure. That's why I had you come out here. Figured you could use a story. And this one's a grabber. This one I could break with any of the services. But I wanted it should go to you, baby." Slobkin chewed sentimentally on the end of his cigar.

I leaned forward. "Would it by any chance happen to concern your two biggest clients? Has it something to do with Ricky Ticky and Michele Belch?"

Slobkin nodded. "I'll tell it like it is."

And he did, just as I'm putting it down here. Only the grammar has been changed, to protect the innocent.

Three years ago (Joe Slobkin told me) there was no such person as Ricky Ticky. There was no such person as Michele Belch. There was just poor old Joe Slobkin, the ten-percenter, sitting in his little desk-space and trying to figure out how he could live on ten percent of nothing. And there was a kid named Oscar Fink and a chick named Irma Schmutz.

"Very straight," Slobkin said. "And loaded with talent. This Irma Schmutz could do anything—sing, dance or play all kinds of instruments, including musical. Oscar Fink was great, too. Particularly on imitations. That stud could do a take-off on anybody. Really a natural, dig? But neither of 'em had a dime and neither of 'em had a chance. I guess that's why they finally ended up with me.

"Well, I did my best, but it was like nowhere. Two of 'em got acquainted in my office and they used to come in together, sort of like a team. One day they leaned on me—wanted to know what was wrong. So I laid it on them.

"I told 'em the whole hangup was they were weak in the looks department. This Irma Schmutz was just what you might call an average bird. Brown hair, thin face, little on the tall side. Also, her chest was flat enough to play Scrabble on, if that's your kick.

"Oscar Fink was in even worse shape, what there was of it. He was short, had kind of a high voice and ran to fat.

"So what's a guy gonna do? You know how important the old image is in this industry. And I put it to them just that way, let it all hang out.

## Robert Bloch

"Nobody was happy when I got finished. Irma said, 'But Oscar is a good mimic. He doesn't have to be a groovy-looking stud for that, does he?' And Oscar said, 'Irma can play and sing and dance even with her clothes on — what more do you want?'

"I told 'em it wasn't a question of what I wanted. It's what the public wants. Brown-haired, flat-chested babes don't get to be stars — they just get married.

"And that's where Oscar Fink came up with the beginning of the switcheroo.

"He told me something I should of figgered for myself all along. 'Fake it,' he said. 'All you got to do is fake it. What kind of chicks made it in the old-time movies? Right from the beginning it's been big-busted blondes — Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe and all those other broads. How many of them used their real names? How many of them were real blondes? How many of them had natural big busts?'

"Well, I had to admit he was right, at least about the names and the blonde part of it. The busts I never had a chance to investigate, not firsthand, that is.

"Oscar Fink poured it on: 'So you change her name,' he said. 'And dye her hair. And you do a little shopping for falsies at Farmer's Market or wherever. Teach her to wiggle when she walks and pitch her voice lower. No problem.'

"This got Irma all excited. 'Don't forget Oscar, either,' she said. 'Maybe he looks more like a crud than a stud, but he has talent. What about all the hard-rock and soul singers with the way-out names? They weren't handsome either, but you couldn't see their faces under the hair. They mostly didn't sing, just howled. Like this.' And she ups with a demonstration which is like to tear my ears off.

"So I say, 'Okay, why not? We got nothing to lose. First off, we change the names. From now on there ain't no Irma Schmutz and Oscar Fink any more. From now on you're gonna be — let's see — Michele Belch and Ricky Ticky.'

"Just like that the names come to me. After which I slammed out a couple of fake biographies, got in touch with some flacks who owed me a few favors, went out and bought them a mod wardrobe on credit, rounded up an electronic guitar from a hockshop, and we were rolling."

Joe Slobkin paused to catch his breath, and his third glass of champagne.

"You don't have to tell me any more," I said. "Everybody knows what happened after that. Michele Belch got a walk-on bit in a family-type home-nudie and became a sensation the moment she stopped

## The Old Switcheroo

walking and started to lie down. Ricky Ticky signed with an obscure recording company – Obscure Records, wasn't it? – got a few numbers on cassettes – and the phones began to ring all over the country. It's been a pushover all the way."

Joe Slobkin shook his head. "That's what you think. Only it wasn't quite so easy."

"But all this happened, didn't it?"

"Sure it happened. Only not at first."

"What did happen first, then?"

"They bombed."

I frowned. "You mean the scheme didn't work?"

"That's right, baby. It didn't work. Changing names wasn't enough. Planting stories wasn't enough. I ought to have figured it from the start. Maybe a smart flesh-peddler can take a skinny little chick and build her up into a real C-cup personality. Maybe he can turn an insignificant little insect into another Beatle. But he's got to have something going for him if he wants to hit the top ten on the Porno Graph. The chick has to be sexy; the guy has to put a gut-feeling into his vocal chords. Trouble is, all these two had was ability. And so they bombed."

I stared at him. "How can you say that? They *did* make it. The stories are true, you built them up, made big stars out of them, made millions."

Joe Slobkin smiled patiently. "Later. After I figured out the angle."

"What angle? Is that the story you're giving me an exclusive on?"

The little agent turned pale. "Not in a million years!" he gasped. "This is all off the record, get me? The yarn I want you to break is –"

"Joe, baby –!"

My head swiveled at the interruption, then nearly fell off as Michele Belch wriggled into the room. She was every bit as blonde, as bosomy and as beautiful as in my wildest dreams. She was puffing on an Acapulco roach.

"Hiya sweetheart!"

It was Ricky Ticky, in the flashy flesh; tangled hair mopping his thin forehead and his velvet blue-jeans glued to his *gluteus maximus* with a crotch-clutching closeness.

"Everything set?" Joe Slobkin inquired.

"Copasetic." Ricky nodded at Michele. "We trans off for New Vegas in five minutes, right from your pad here. Be married in an hour. Got my guitar all packed for the honeymoon."

## Robert Bloch

"Beautiful!" Joe Slobkin beamed and advanced on Michele. "How's the bride? Got enough luggage and everything?"

"Just my hope chest," she replied, with a shy downward glance at the article in question.

I gulped. "This is true? These two are going to be hitched?"

Slobkin nodded at me. "Eloping right now. That's why I got you over here. In a couple of hours the wiretapes will have the whole enchilada—but it's yours, right now, in advance. Minute they leave, you get on the com and make a deal with the media for your exclusive. Tomorrow you'll be made, baby—the guy who beat old Jill Haber and Bill Katz to the biggest news item of the century."

He turned and faced the loving couple. "This guy's my buddy," he murmured. "I want you two to cooperate—answer any questions he lays on you."

"I've got no questions," I said. "I think I can handle it without a routine interview, and something tells me you're both anxious to get on your way."

"Yeah." Slobkin nodded, frowning at Ricky Ticky. "Something tells me the same thing, and get your hands off her until the honeymoon. Or at least until you're on the trans."

Ricky Ticky grinned at me. "Mighty nice of you to understand."

I took a deep breath. "Just one favor, though. Uh—could I kiss the bride?"

Michele Belch gave me a surprised look. Then she took the ciggy out of her mouth, crushed it and stood indecisively for a moment, holding it in her hand. A quick glance was exchanged between her and Ricky. Then, with a coy gesture, she waved her butt at me.

I advanced to claim my reward. Somehow I hadn't reckoned on the bearskin in front of the fireplace. My heel caught in the bear's open jaws and I slipped. My hands, seeking to encircle Michele's shoulders, grabbed at her hair instead.

It came off.

"Holy Toledo!" cried Joe Slobkin. "Get the hell out of here!"

Ricky Ticky began to sob. "Now look what's happened! He'll spill it—I know he'll spill it!"

"No he won't!" Slobkin shouted. "He's with it. Besides, I was gonna tell him anyway, after you left. Just cut out now, before anybody else sees you. Split!"

He herded them off in the direction of the elevator, and I sank back on the sofa as the babble of their voices died away in the distance.

## The Old Switcheroo

A moment later Joe Slobkin returned. Silently he handed me a glass of champagne and silently I drank it.

"So that's how it is," I said.

"Yeah." He sighed deeply, then shallowly. "That's how it is. I told you they bombed. And then I lucked out.

"I got to thinking about the way they'd given me a pitch that day in the office. Here was a kid who could imitate anybody – so why not an imitation of a chick? What was wrong with giving *him* the falsies, and maybe a good wig?

"And here was a chick who had talent for any instrument and a voice that could lift the roof off an outhouse at three hundred feet. Why not let *her* grow the mop and wear the jeans? So I put it to them, and they bought it, and the rest is like history."

"Unisex, eh?"

"Right," Slobkin assured me. "Like I told you, it's nothing but the old switcheroo."

Many months have passed since the truth was revealed to me there in the Grand Ballroom of Slobkin's estate. Since that time the marriage of Ricky Ticky and Michele Belch has reached the point where a blessed event is in the offing. In view of this fact, their secret can remain a secret no longer, and I am thus privileged to reveal the facts.

What I'm really hoping for now is that my old friend Joe Slobkin will see fit to give me another exclusive story. I'd like a scoop on the impending birth.

But up to this time, Joe Slobkin hasn't quite made up his mind whether they're going to have a boy or a girl.





## How Bug-Eyed Was My Monster

Something very unusual happens to me the other night. It is around ten o'clock and I am standing in a tavern.

This in itself maybe isn't so unusual. But what makes it unusual is that this is the night when Fast Mickey saves the world.

Fast Mickey is the bartender at this juice-stand, and I don't suppose anybody figures at the time that he is going to be the cat who saves the world, but most of us regulars already know he is blue-blade sharp. Lots of uptowners come into the tavern just to talk to Fast Mickey — real hep characters like bigshot professors and skull doctors and even some used-car dealers.

He is most particular-wise the favorite of the headshrinkers. In fact, on this evening he is entertaining a whole gang of them, including Subconscious Sigmund.

Subconscious Sigmund always brings his troubles to Fast Mickey. "You bartenders are really the best psychiatrists," he says. "You listen to people's troubles every day of the year and hear more confessions than we do. You're the original father-image and medicine-man rolled into one. Maybe you can help me out."

Fast Mickey smiles and nods. "Sure," he says. "You want I should probe your psyche or whatever? OK, just climb up here on the bar and stretch out. Just close your eyes and relax now, and tell me the first thing that comes into your mind —"

The reason I remember all this is because I am standing right next to them, trying to catch the ball game on the radio. And here it is, the ninth inning, all tied up, and the Bums are at bat, and —

And then, it happens.

The studio announcer cuts in with a fast pitch of his own.

## Robert Bloch

"Flash!" he hollers. "We interrupt this broadcast to bring you a bulletin from the Disassociated Press!"

Everybody listens carefully, because we know they won't interrupt a ball game unless it's really important.

"Maybe they got a cure for some disease," I say.

"Could be that Russia is dropping the H-Bomb," Subconscious Sigmund suggests.

"It must be more important than that to cut into the Bums game," says Fast Mickey. "I figure it's an announcement that Marilyn Monroe is gonna make *The Brothers Karamazov*."

We were all wrong.

The studio announcer is really yelling. "*The Unidentified Flying Object over the city is now identified as a genuine flying saucer. Landing in the corner of Central Park, it is presently discharging a passenger. Eyewitness reports agree that the creature emerging from the saucer is definitely an extraterrestrial. It is about nine feet tall, covered with green fur, and has multiple tentacles. Please stand by for further bulletins now coming in.*"

One of the cats down the bar starts to cackle. "It's a gag, that's what it is—like this here Invasion From Mars bit they do years ago. There ain't no such thing as a flying saucer."

"Mass hallucination, apparently," says Subconscious Sigmund. "Who can believe that business about multiple tentacles? Covered with green fur, indeed!"

"I don't know about the tentacles," I tell him. "But if you want to check on that green fur bit, come around early some morning and look at my tongue."

"STAND BY!" yells the announcer again. "*Latest bulletin on the creature from the flying saucer. It is definitely outside the strange craft now, walking across the Park. According to what is coming over the wire to us here in the studio, it is being met by the Mayor's Welcoming Committee and three squad-cars armed with riot guns. Oops—what's that again? Our report says it is brushing off the Mayor's Welcoming Committee with one tentacle and brushing off the riot guns with another. Apparently bullets have no effect on this organism. It is overturning the squad cars and heading for the street. The crowds are running.*"

"I'll say they are!" squawks Fast Mickey, all of a sudden. "Turn off that radio and you can hear them. I just happen to remember—Central Park is only two blocks away from here!"

This is true. With the radio off, we can hear noise from outside—cats are howling and scampering off to their pads.

## How Bug-Eyed Was My Monster

"It's no fake, then," Subconscious Sigmund mutters. "A monster is in our midst. Somebody must stop him!"

"Don't look at me," I tell him. "I am allergic to monsters. In fact, I once lost a good job working for a politician because I refused to attend his monster rally."

"This creature lands on earth for a definite purpose," Subconscious Sigmund says. "If after all these years of flying saucer reports, one actually comes down, it means there's an important reason. The creature must want something."

"Well, it isn't the keys to the city, apparently," says Fast Mickey. "And it isn't a night in the pokey, either."

"Of course not," Sigmund tells him. "They're handling him all wrong. This calls for a psychologist. Such as me. I'm going out and reason with him."

"Wait!" yells Fast Mickey.

But Subconscious Sigmund doesn't wait. He grabs up the little portable couch he carries around with him for curbside service and dashes out the door.

The rest of us sit and wait. Pretty soon there is more shrieking outside the door and then we hear some awful crashes. There is a pretty chick at the other end of the bar whose name is Estrellita Shapiro and who weighs about 120 pounds soaking wet.

This I find out all of a sudden, because after the first big crash she jumps into my lap and upsets a drink all over her.

"Save me!" she yells. "The monster is coming this way!"

Sure enough, the door opens, but it isn't the monster. It's Subconscious Sigmund, and he is beat down to the seat. His clothes are torn, his glasses are broken, and half of his goatee is missing.

"Hear that crash a minute ago?" he pants. "The creature just rips down a four-story office building. It goes scrabbling around inside with its big green tentacles. It's looking for something all right."

"You probe its mind?" asks Fast Mickey.

"Not me! I wouldn't probe its mind with a ten-foot pole!" yells Sigmund. "It takes one look at me when I get close and starts to grab. So I do the only sensible thing."

"Which is —?"

"I run like hell," Subconscious Sigmund says. He looks at us. "I suggest we turn out the lights and lock the door, but fast. If it ever decides to come after me —"

Suddenly he leaps up.

"Yeow!" he remarks. "*Here it is now!*"

## Robert Bloch

And here it is, coming right through the door.

The radio report is mostly right. The creature is nine feet tall, it is covered with green fur, and it has lots of long, slimy feelers. Also it has eyes that bug out. Only it doesn't walk, really. It sort of writhes and twists and skootches its way along.

It is really awful. It looks like Elvis Presley with tentacles.

For a second it stands in the doorway and then it opens up its mouth and starts making sounds. And the sounds are even worse than Elvis Presley.

By this time Subconscious Sigmund and the other headshrinkers and customers are under the bar, in back. I would be there too, only this Estrellita Shapiro is hanging onto my neck and trying to crawl down the top of my shirt. She almost makes it, too.

But Fast Mickey just stands there. He isn't scared a bit. He looks up at this bug-eyed monster and listens to its sounds. Then he reaches down behind the bar and pours a drink. He hands it over.

The monster doesn't pay any attention. He starts wriggling down the aisle towards me.

Fast Mickey shakes his head. He turns around and opens the cash register, hauls out a wad of lettuce and slaps it down next to the drink. The monster doesn't even look at the loot. He keeps right on moving.

All at once Fast Mickey races around the end of the bar and comes up to where I'm sitting with Estrellita Shapiro. He yanks her off my lap and shoves her over to the monster.

The monster wriggles right by her.

"No use," whispers Subconscious Sigmund, from under the bar. "I know what you're doing – trying to find out what the creature is after. It isn't money, it isn't liquor, it isn't women."

"What else does anybody come in here for?" Fast Mickey says.

"This isn't somebody," Subconscious Sigmund groans. "It's a being from another world – something weird, alien, uncanny!"

The monster is making nasty growling noises now. But all of a sudden Fast Mickey smiles. He turns around, walks right up to the monster, and grabs it by a tentacle. Then he pulls it along with him to the end of the room and disappears.

Two minutes later the monster is gone. It just walks out through the tavern again and up the street. No more shrieks, no more crashes. And when we turn on the radio we are just in time to hear a report that it is back in the saucer and the flying saucer is taking off.

## How Bug-Eyed Was My Monster

That's the end of it, of course. We're all out in the open again, and Fast Mickey is setting up drinks on the house, and then the reporters come and interview him on saving the world.

Fast Mickey is very modest. "Nothing to it," he says. "When Subconscious Sigmund describes the creature as uncanny, I suddenly understand. Taking a trip in a flying saucer is probably just like taking a long drive in an automobile. Sooner or later, you're going to want something. I just figure out what it is and take him there."

"Brilliant psychology," says Subconscious Sigmund. "But how do you ever arrive at this conclusion?"

"Because I am a bartender, not a psychiatrist," Fast Mickey tells him. And I know that anybody who comes into a tavern wants one of four things. If it isn't liquor, or money, or women, then it has to be the other. You see," he says, lifting his drink, "it's all a matter of elimination."



## Last Laugh

Angus Breen, controller of the Cosmic Research Division of Interplanetary Colonies, Incorporated, laughed pleasantly as he brushed his hair. Why shouldn't he laugh? He was preparing to sit down to a hearty breakfast. But that wasn't all. Today was the last possible day in the time limit set that Martin Vail could return from Hystero to prevent Breen's legal acquisition of his properties, insurance, and inventions.

Of course, Breen had promptly taken over things after Vail's departure. Everything belonging to his brilliant subordinate was now in Breen's control. But today made possession absolutely legal. So Angus could well afford to smirk at his fat-faced reflection in the mirror and laugh out loud.

Suddenly the laugh choked in his throat, the smirk froze on his features. In his ears there sounded an ear-splitting crash outside his window, a crash that jarred and shook every beam in his ornate penthouse residence. A stratosphere liner or a small spaceship had landed in his backyard.

Offhand, this statement would seem silly. Not to Controller Angus Breen. The pudgy little controller's backyard was a mile-square area atop the gigantic Cosmic Research Plant, and the experimental space vessels returning from the exploration of other planets came to rest there regularly. But they didn't come down with a crash — *and they didn't appear unscheduled!*

Angus Breen scowled and put down his hairbrush. If some drunken intruder had landed by mistake on the scientific sanctuary of his roof — well, the interloper was slated to lose his license, that was all. The controller's pudgy face creased unpleasantly as he strode toward the glass wall that was his window. He stared out at the crumpled hulk lying on the sodded roof yards away from the nearest landing cradle.

## Robert Bloch

"Well, I'll—I'll be eternally damned!" exclaimed Mr. Breen, his fat features whitening.

A pretty accurate prediction, at that. For Controller Breen was an excellent candidate for damnation, although nobody on earth knew that. But right now he was a better candidate for stark amazement. He was looking at something he had never expected to see again.

Martin Vail's spaceship! Vail—the scientific explorer he had sent to certain death. Vail, who had been commissioned to land on Hystero!

Hystero—aptly named, because it had appeared out of nowhere to disrupt the Pleiades, whirling in a gaseous orbit that betokened its arrival as a strange, cosmic intruder in the galaxy.

Breen had sent Vail to explore Hystero, knowing that he would die. The planet had never been observed, let alone studied. Its surface conditions were unknown. It appeared in imminent danger of exploding, this runaway planet from another system passing by the Solar family like a ship steaming past an island.

So Breen had sent Vail there "for the sake of science." And after sending him, went home and appropriated Vail's properties. He knew that Vail would never come back.

Yet here he was.

Here was the ship, a long silver splinter resting on the roof. A dagger thrown from the sky. A dented dagger—for the sides of the vessel were scarred and pitted by the meteoric stones of space. The entire surface appeared to be crusted with a congealed, silvery fuzz, attesting to the heat and friction of the voyage.

Controller Angus Breen didn't take a second look. He buzzed the Observation Tower to signal that he knew of the vessel's arrival, and barked a brief message. "Don't send a crew up. I'll take over myself."

No one else must witness this meeting between himself and Vail. Vail had returned, and if he should suspect now why he had been sent—

Breen buckled on his drug-gun, felt for the clip of opium needles with which it was loaded. He might face violence.

"Well, let's get it over with," the fat Controller muttered, as he strode out on the roof.

Wind fluttering his white jacket, he waddled up to the ship's side. The port was sealed. There was a lever on the side, but Breen, impatient as he was, didn't pull it at once. He knew the heat generated by the friction of speed through space; could feel it radiating yet from the ship's silver sides. Pulling out his gloves, he let his asbestos-clad fingers release the catch and throw out the metal ladder leading up to the



## Last Laugh

port. He climbed, pulling out his master key – for ordinarily the ports of a spaceship can be opened only from the inside. Safety measure.

Only men like Controller Breen had master keys. Only men like Controller Breen could send others to their deaths in spaceships....

But Angus Breen didn't want to think about that. He had supposed Vail dead, and now he had come back, alive. Sometimes plans go wrong.

"Get it over with," he muttered again, clutching his drug-gun. Then he pulled the airlock door open and hauled his heavy body up until he could step inside.

A breath of synthetic air smote him as his feet touched the floor of the ship's interior. It was dark. He snapped on the lights.

The long narrow cabin was immaculate. No signs of scarring, no inner damage. No signs of life, either. At one end of the little chamber was the great silver control board. Before it was the piloting chair. But where was Vail?

The cot was empty, the bunks untenanted. Had the ship returned *alone*? Why wasn't Vail at the door to greet him? After a month's confinement in these steel prisons poised in space, men usually were clamoring for release. Breen had seen them babbling with ecstasy as they fought their way out to solid earth.

But no Vail. Only the empty chamber, the chair, and the control board.

Angus Breen's eyes cut through the glare. And then he saw the back of Vail's head, over the top of the piloting chair that faced the controls.

"Vail!" he barked.

The head didn't move.

Was he unconscious? Was he – this would be almost too much to hope for – dead?

Breen didn't know. "Vail!" he called again.

And then something rustled in the shadows of a wall shelf. Angus Breen nearly jumped out of his skin – no mean feat, considering his weight.

Then he relaxed. Vail, sentimentalist, had taken his cat, Comet, on the voyage. Comet jumped down from the shelf and Breen saw horror.

The cat, the gray cat, walking on mincing feet across the floor, had no head!

It was a headless feline that blundered over the surface of the cabin, and in a ghastly moment arched its back and rubbed its living fur against Controller Breen's leg.

Robert Bloch

Breen shuddered terribly, forced himself to look down at the apparition. He saw where the neck ended in a little silver cap, like the cover of a tin can. One or two wire ends stuck up from the interior of the silver cap. But the beast was headless. Headless—yet alive!

It was to escape this monstrosity that Breen moved toward the controls. He wasn't thinking so vividly of Vail, and he almost unconsciously put out his hand to pat Vail on the shoulder over the back of the piloting chair.

His groping hand encountered—nothing.

He felt again, eyes still on that headless horror of a cat. Again his hands met empty air. Vail's head did not turn.

And Angus Breen, choking with startled fear, moved around until he faced the front of the piloting chair.

Faced—*the bodiless head of Vail!*

Clamped with steel sutures against the top of the chair, fastened with a system of cords and wires leading from the severed neck, throat studded with glass and rubber tubing, the head of Martin Vail stared up at Angus Breen with a glassy smile.

Controller Breen stared back, stared into open eyes, open mouth. Stared, and stared, and stared—

"How are you, Breen?"

No. That couldn't be. The lips moving, and the metallic voice that wasn't Vail's, coming from Vail's throat.

"What's the matter, Breen? Surprised?"

"Y—yes—" whispered Breen.

"Never thought you'd see my face again, eh? Well, that's just about all you are seeing, at that."

"Vail—don't joke about this."

"Joke? That's what it is, isn't it? A joke." The face smiled.

Breen stared into the smiling visage with a sick dread in his heart. Vail's expression had changed. No, his hair hadn't turned white overnight, and there was no network of wrinkles etched in agony. The change was the agony in the eyes, and yet they were laughing. The fat man shivered.

He saw where the silver wires entered the neck like shining strands of veins and arteries; saw that they extended down into the seat of the piloting chair, which appeared to have been scooped out and then recovered after the wires had been run through them.

The eyes of the head suspended in space stared into his, following his glance.

## Last Laugh

"Clever, isn't it? Looks crude – like the early Russian experiments we used to read about in school. They used a saline solution for dogs' heads, or something of the sort, didn't they? This is much better."

Angus Breen didn't look as though he thought this was much better. He could only gaze in fear at the decapitation that spoke.

It wasn't Vail's voice. What does speech sound like without lungs? It was a metallic burr. That silver tubing in the throat might account for it.

The nostrils didn't move. No breathing. Chemical life. Bloodstream fed through wires and tubing. A self-sustaining solution.

Fragments of chemical biology filtered through Breen's brain. Just fragments, filtering through the greater bulk of the pure horror which held it. "Vail – what happened? Why – this?"

Vail laughed. The head on the clamps atop the chair shuddered. "Sorry, but it *hurts* to laugh. I forget that sometimes; you understand?"

Breen nodded. Understand – how could he understand? He wanted to run; wanted to tear his eyes away from that living head and flee. He had made that head what it was by sending Vail on that perilous mission. Vail's eyes showed he knew that. And while the head couldn't harm him, Angus Breen was still afraid.

"Go on," said Controller Angus Breen, hoarsely. "Go on."

"I followed your orders, and the temporary charting," droned the metallic voice. "The voyage itself doesn't matter. Oh, I know you're interested. I thought it was important myself at the time. Took it all down in the chart book. So if you want details, look there. The whole of the observations are recorded.

"But they're not important to me any more. And I doubt if they'll be important to you, after you hear the rest of my story. Who wants to read a roadmap that leads to Hell?"

That metallic whinny could only be laughter, Breen knew. It sickened him.

"I have something else to tell you, Breen. About Hystero itself. I landed, you know. The surface is solid enough, and after a preliminary observation I saw that oxygen masks wouldn't be necessary. That's how Comet happened to leave the ship and come along with me."

Vail's eyes indicated the cat. Breen glanced down, saw the headless creature with the tin can over an empty throat. A feeling of being in a nightmare came over him. Vail was buzzing on.

"I'll condense it. Hurts to talk, and nothing's important except my message. Hystero is inhabited. By *men*, if you choose to call them that."

## Robert Bloch

Breen got excited. "Men? Why, there's never been another body discovered that has men on it! Vail — do you realize what this discovery may mean?"

"Yes," said the head. "But you don't. Not yet. There are some men one doesn't *bother* too much. Nor *study*. I didn't think so at first. I thought I'd blundered into a higher race. They had cities, you know, and a civilization. They wore clothes, and talked, and communicated in other ways.

"That's how they understood me, Breen. Telepathic communication. Their speech is too difficult to learn. Other habits are difficult to understand, too — but it isn't important to talk about them."

"What do you mean, it isn't important?" Angus Breen exploded. Already avarice was overcoming his initial fear. Why, publicization of this discovery would make him famous! "Why, everything about this new planet and race is important."

"No," said the head of Vail. "Only one thing is important. What they did to me." The drone in the voice deepened. So did the dreadful intensity of Vail's stare. It held Breen's eyes riveted.

"You see what they did to me," Vail said. "Do you know why?"

"No."

"For a joke."

"Joke?"

"Yes. Now do you understand? These are men, but men far in advance, mentally, of earthly beings. Minds above so much that interests us and our lesser intelligences. For example, on Hystero there is no music, no art. Those beings read no books. Their minds are beyond that; they find no stimulation in the *synthetic*.

"They are no longer interested in what we call 'civilization.' They don't want to build higher buildings any more, or bigger factories, or make more 'money.' They are quite above those qualities we call 'patriotism' or 'idealism' or even 'love' — though they understand such mental attitudes perfectly."

"What *do* they find interest in?" Breen asked.

"Jokes."

"Jokes?" Breen echoed weakly.

"Yes. And since there is cruelty in humor, and a certain reality, they are cruel. As the ancient Roman emperors who had everything become cruel in their humor. Like Caligula. They have a sense of irony.

"I found that out. Here was I, a stranger from another world. Did they fear me? No — for they were too clever to know fear. Did they worship me, like savages? Again, no. Their reactions were not our

## Last Laugh

human reactions at all. Nor did they study me. They weren't even curious. The intricate science of their civilization no longer exists as a means of *learning*. They wanted to use it only to play a joke."

Vail paused an instant, as though to draw breath — breath no longer needed. "That's what they did to me, Breen. They played with me, like a child plays with its toys. They took Comet, here, and examined her. There are no animals on Hystero. And they began to experiment. You see what that experiment leads to, don't you?"

"They wanted to keep this strange living thing animate after removing its brain. A sort of puzzle for them, a game. That kind of curiosity, the same curiosity which men used to manifest centuries ago when they took automobiles and radios apart, tinkered with them, and put them back together again. So they did that to Comet. .And they did this to me!"

Breen shivered as he saw the eyes of the head, saw them moisten with ghastly tears.

Vail went on, with a terrible smile.

"So you've had your way, Breen, haven't you?"

"What — what do you mean?"

"You sent me out there knowing I'd be killed, didn't you?"

"No — no —"

"Oh, why bother to lie? I can't harm you now, can I?"

Breen couldn't check a grin that broke through. That *was* true. He fingered his drug-gun. There was no danger in Vail any more. There was, instead, a definite value. Breen thought of calling in the scientists, all his fellow workers and superiors. Exhibiting Vail's head. Telling the story. Conducting a research of the processes that kept him alive, bodiless. Perhaps mastering the technique himself. It was all simple chemistry, biology, and surgery.

Why not? And meanwhile, Vail's possessions were his.

There were just a few things he wanted to find out first. He might as well admit it.

"I guess you're too clever for me, Vail." he chuckled. "It's true. I didn't think you'd come back. But there was nothing underhanded in my sending you — I swear it. You were the best, the bravest; you had the endurance. And I'm glad you made it. Glad, even in spite of your — accident."

"It was no 'accident' as you call it." The droning laugh was mirthless. "Any more than it was an 'accident' that I came back."

"Yes, I meant to ask about that. Why did they let you go? Why did they send you back?"

## Robert Bloch

"Because of their sense of humor," said Vail. "They sent me back to kill you."

"Kill me? Why?" Breen was shocked, trembling unaccountably.

"I told them the story. Told them you sent me. How they laughed at me. They psycho-analyzed you – through me. Turned you inside out. They proved to me that you never expected me to return, that your motive was to steal my parabola warp and my property. Do you deny it?"

The fool! He *knew!* Breen's pudgy fingers tightened on the drug-gun. Then he smiled. He realized he had nothing to fear from a mere bodiless head, clamped to a metal chair. "So they let you go," he whispered. "Like this."

"Yes. When I got over the shock and saw the humor of it I told them what a fine situation it would be. What a glorious *joke*. The idea, you see, appealed to their prime instinct – their sense of humor. That's why they let me come back to kill you."

Now Breen knew. Vail was mad.

Those eyes proved it.

"Sense of humor, see Breen? You didn't expect me. Seeing me like this would startle you, then make you confident I was out of the way. And I'd talk to you. Tell you what masters of surgery and chemistry these creatures were. How they could control the body. How they could make a cat live without a head. How they could make a head live without a body. How they could keep a heart beating or a leg moving without any other control than the proper wires and tubes. And I knew you'd listen; would believe me without guessing what I was driving at. And that I could kill you.

"That's what I've been thinking about. A month is a long time to go on this way, living as I have. Looking out into space and watching the chart as I came back. Knowing what I was, remembering my agony – only one thing kept me going. The thought of killing you. I have acquired some of *their* sense of humor now, you see. The time has come for me to laugh."

"You –" Breen spluttered. "You can't kill me. You can't move!"

"How did you think I got the ship back through space?" whispered Vail. "My head *directed* it, yes. But brains, with all the Hysteroan surgical cunning, can't make a ship steer by thought alone."

"What steered your ship?" Breen whispered.

The answer loomed suddenly behind him, a horrible answer that gripped Breen's throat and pressed and choked his life away. While he had been talking with Vail's head, Vail's great body had come silently

## Last Laugh

forward from the aft part of the ship, functioning precisely like the body of the cat, and had seized him. The horrified controller stared at the ghastly monstrosity with a silver cap instead of a head on the neck stump—a thing animated by the diabolic surgery of a strange and runaway planet—a hulking horror that was strangling him to death....

Breen was almost dead when, through the roaring in his ears, he heard the head of Martin Vail laugh. At the same moment he felt one groping paw of the headless monstrosity release his throat and slide down to grip his right hand and start jerking it up and down.

"Yes," cackled the head of Vail, "a marvelous sense of humor. We all have it. You sent me to my death. They cut off my head. So I told them I'd come back to earth on one condition—that they'd fix it so I could *shake hands with you again.*"

The laughter rose madly long after Breen's life had ebbed away. And in the darkening cabin of the space ship the headless body continued, automatically, to pump Breen's dead hand in a gesture of greeting.





# Murder from the Moon

## Chapter I Warm Welcome

"And what do you think of America?" asked Bill Stone, eagerly.

"It surpasses my wildest expectations," answered the visitor.

"You surpass mine," Stone grunted under his breath. Nevertheless, the reporter scribbled hastily. A knot of his fellow scribes crowded closer around the visitor, waving notebooks and craning necks in unison.

"Do you plan a long stay?"

"I have accepted the hospitality of Solar Foundation," the soft voice purred. "It is their intention to exchange information with me for a considerable period of time."

"Fine. Say – how about some pictures?"

It was the signal for clamor. The penthouse of Solar Foundation was filled with arms waving cameras and flashbulbs.

"Very well."

"Suppose you pose shaking hands with some of the guests?"

"Just as you say."

Bill Stone took charge. He faced the other end of the penthouse chamber, where scientists and savants stood waiting until the press had its will of their visitor.

"Let's see, now." The reporter scanned faces, counted beards, squinted at bald heads.

"Mr. Bennet, you'll pose, of course?"

A bulky young man in a white laboratory apron rose heavily to his feet and smiled in assent. He elbowed his stout body through the crowd of newshounds and took his place beside the visitor.

"I don't suppose you'd object if we included Professor Champion in the same shot?"

## Robert Bloch

"Not at all." Bennet smiled at the scowling, bearded man who hustled towards him. "Hello, Butch," he said.

The Director of the Champion Foundation favored the young head of the Solar Foundation with an intent stare in which all the hatred of his bitter rivalry shone.

The reporter rattled off the names of the rest.

"Changara Dass."

A turbaned Hindu bowed low and approached.

"Miss Valery."

The smiling secretary of Solar took her place with a smile which caused several of the photographers to murmur, "Ah—cheesecake!" in a complimentary fashion.

"O.K." said Stone. He turned to the visitor. "Now, if you'll just shake hands with all of them—"

"All four at once?"

"Certainly."

Bill Stone turned again to the photographers at his side and exulted in low tones.

"Boy, what a shot!" he whispered. "Never anything like it in the history of the world before. Imagine—the four biggest scientists in the world shaking hands with *him*. And at the same time, too!"

It was quite a scene at that.

There stood the visitor—his four long arms extended from two sets of shoulder blades, his four birdlike claws grasping the hands of the scientists. The visitor's snouted pink face stared affably into the distinguished countenances.

Stone's brain was already busy with captions and headlines.

MAN IN THE MOON MEETS MORTALS

VISITOR FROM VOID PROVES DOWN-TO-EARTH FELLOW

LUNAR LUMINARY SHAKES HANDS WITH SCIENTISTS

Why, the creature was almost human! True, it didn't look exactly like a man. Manlike body, yes—but with four arms. And the face was mostly nose; a mass of pinkish flesh with a slit mouth and two popping blue eyes.

Despite this it had a voice of human pitch and timbre, it spoke English, and it certainly seemed at home here on earth. This, and the marvel of the space-ship in which it arrived certainly indicated a mentality equal to any human's.

Stone was still lost in musing as the flashbulbs flickered. He was ready to resume the interview when the fat body of Stephen Bennet blocked him off. Young Bennet raised his arms and voice.

## Murder from the Moon

"Quiet please, gentlemen. I feel our distinguished visitor has had enough excitement for the moment. He will be glad to receive the press again tomorrow.

"At the moment I must insist that the reception proceed, so that he be given the opportunity to meet our guests. However, if you like, I'll issue a statement for the papers at this time."

The great room was hushed as Stephen Bennet, Director of the Solar Foundation, faced his audience.

"I wish my father were here today," said Bennet, softly. "It would have been the greatest triumph in a life filled with triumphs.

"You all know the story of Avery Bennet. Solar Foundation was his achievement. He was a great scientist, a great pioneer, a great discoverer. We know that, now.

"Yet forty years ago they thought him mad. The world felt that he had tricked his financial backers into setting up this gigantic laboratory, that his plans for a flight to the moon were fantastic, impossible. When he announced the completion of his lunar surveys and the construction of the ship to undertake the first voyage, he was laughed at.

"When he announced that he was taking a staff of research men with him, there was almost a court investigation. Finally, when my mother declared she'd accompany him, public indignation reached its peak.

"'The Mad Noah.' That's what they called my father. You all know the story of how he launched the flight in secrecy. You all know how the press jeered when he failed to return.

"Only Changara Dass, here, believed. He was my father's friend. He fought to keep Solar Foundation legally in my father's name. He waited for a message, for prearranged signals that never came.

"At the end of six years—but you know *that* story. The ship that came back; without my father, without the crew. The ship that plummeted to earth in Jersey. The ship in which *I* was born, en route from the moon to earth."

Here, Bennet cast a look of malice at bearded Professor Champion.

"Yes, I was born there in space—when my father locked my mother into the compartments and set the controls to chart the voyage back to earth.

"What became of him we have never been able to learn. What perils forced him to imprison my mother and send her back to the safety of earth? These questions have remained unanswered through the years. You know my mother died at my birth. It was Changara Dass who

## Robert Bloch

took me from that spaceship, reared me in the tradition of Solar Foundation.

"For thirty-odd years we have waited here — waited while so-called scientists have jeered and sneered at the story. It was too fantastic for them to swallow. It was all a hoax, they claimed. My father had never reached the moon. He'd hidden out somewhere — sent the ship back to prove his wild story of a flight. For thirty-odd years we have endured these insinuations, endured the malicious libels of men like Professor Champion."

Bennet cleared his throat.

"My father's secrets, we thought, died with him. We had no access to his plans for constructing a new vessel. He sent back no charts, no journals, no vestige of proof or record of his discoveries. We could not answer our critics. We could only wait.

"During those years I have had faith in my father. Changara Dass has had faith. We knew that sooner or later there would be proof forthcoming.

"The years have been bitter. I will not hide the fact. The press has made a mockery of my own life. Called me 'The Moon-calf.' Ridiculed the way I was educated here in the privacy of the Solar Foundation. Laughed at my habit of hiding from the world, carrying on astronomical and astro-physical research.

"Now it is my turn to laugh. Three days ago, when the space-ship landed upstate, the world learned for the first time that my father's secrets had not died with him. That there was life on the moon — as he had always claimed. That this life possessed intelligence, that it had learned from him, worked with him, and created indisputable proof of its own.

"Because when the spaceship was entered, we found — our visitor.

"He is here today to tell the story to the world. And the world, laughing no longer, is waiting to hear him.

"I need not impress you with the importance of this moment. For the world, it means the beginning of a new era in scientific achievement. For me, it means a little more."

Bennet's voice softened.

"It means that I shall learn at last the story of my father's flight — of his life, and his last days. It means that the name of Bennet will rise from ignominy to shine beside the stars."

There was a murmur of excitement from the crowd.

"Today you — the great scientific names of this world — are gathered here to meet a man from another world."

## Murder from the Moon

Lila Valery stepped before the impassioned scientist and pressed his arm with a smile.

"Stephen, dear, you're talking too much. Let's get on with the reception."

"Guess you're right." Bennet waved his arm.

"You'll find drinks at the end of the room. Shall we proceed with a little informal discussion and introductions?"

Crowd murmurs swelled to conversational pitch. Bennet, Changara Dass, and Lila Valery moved towards the fleshy pink body of the lunar visitor. The scowling Professor Champion was already deep in conversation, his eyebrows wagging cynically.

The pink snout of the visitor flashed up when Bennet neared.

"I must see you at once. I have an urgent message for you. You are to come back with me, you know."

"What's that?" Bennet gasped.

"I cannot delay any longer. I had thought to humor you by attending this — reception, you call it? — and then leave. I see you have other ideas, so I must speak to you at once."

"This sounds interesting." Professor Champion gazed intently at the fleshy countenance.

But Bennet paled.

"Perhaps, if it's so urgent, we'd best step into the other room for a moment. Dass, you come with me. And you, Lila."

"Surely you wouldn't exclude a fellow scientist from these revelations?" Champion's tone was mocking.

Bennet gave him a long look.

"Come along if you wish," he invited.

They retreated discreetly to the doorway of an adjoining chamber. The lunar visitor shuffled along, waving his pinkish arms grotesquely.

"All this noise — this excitement — it makes me cold. You know, Stephen."

Bennet bit his lip. "Of course. I'd forgotten. Can I get you a cocktail?"

"Cocktail?"

"It contains alcohol. Warms the blood."

"It's a cold drink, though," Lila interjected.

"Yes — so it is. Better make it cocoa. Did you prepare some, Dass?"

The aged Hindu nodded.

"Get a cup and hurry."

## Robert Bloch

The turbaned savant withdrew hastily. They stood alone in the antechamber.

"And now —"

"Spill it, friend."

The four-armed moon visitor turned. So did his companions.

"How did you sneak in here?" Bennet angrily addressed Bill Stone. The young reporter faced him with a disarming grin.

"It's my business to go after news. Something tells me there's plenty of it right in this room."

"I must ask you to leave at once. This is a private matter."

"Please." The moon man quavered, hysteria droning through the queer, high-pitched voice. "All this excitement — I am getting so cold — so cold."

The long arms were trembling now. The slick, poreless flesh was chafed, and the pinkish glow was queerly dull.

"I forgot. Where's Dass with that cocoa?"

Bennet made for the door, disappeared. Dass entered with the steaming cup a moment later. Bennet followed, grasped it hastily.

"Here you are."

"Wait — you're spilling it. Allow me." Champion, grinning in disdain at Bennet's excitement, grasped the cocoa and offered it to the visitor.

One of the four arms extended in a weaving, octopoidal pattern. The claw-like hand closed around the cup and the creature from the moon raised it to his lips, draining the steaming contents.

A little sigh of satisfaction bubbled from the fleshy pink throat.

Then came another sigh.

It wasn't satisfaction.

Four arms rose simultaneously. Four claws clutched at a convulsive neck. The tall body trembled in sudden revulsion.

"Wait — what's wrong —"

Lila Valery stepped forward to face the shuddering moon man, but it was too late for inquiry.

With a shrill scream the lunar visitor fell and huddled in a writhing heap on the carpet. As the others watched, the pinkish flesh slowly faded to a dead rose color, then turned silver as frost.

In less than a minute the thing on the floor lay still. Still and —

"Dead!"

Changara Dass felt for a pulse forever stilled.

"Dead and — cold." Champion drew his hand away from the neck with a shudder. "Cold as ice."

## Murder from the Moon

"Oh!" Lila Valery hid her eyes with her hands. For the white body was quite silver now – silver and shining, like the moon that gave it birth.

They stared.

All but Bill Stone, the reporter. He made the door in three strides.

"Got my story," he panted. "And what a story! THE MAN IN THE MOON IS – MURDERED!"

### **Chapter II The Strangler from the Sky**

It was Lila Valery who stopped Stone. The fact that the reporter allowed himself to be persuaded was a tribute to her eloquence – or perhaps to her brown eyes.

"Don't you see?" the girl pleaded. "It would create a scandal that would ruin Solar Foundation. We can't let those people outside know."

"Got to notify the police anyway," Stone argued.

"Why? Are you sure it's murder? It might be shock – exhaustion – anything. You can't print such a story until you have proof."

"But –"

Champion intervened.

"I think she's right. Let me go out and dismiss the guests. Tell them our visitor needs rest. Then when we're alone, I'll see to it that you get your story. I'm interested in going to the bottom of this affair myself. I'll take this cocoa, with Bennet's permission, and analyze it for poison. You'll get your story, I promise you, and shortly."

Champion flung a baleful glance at Stephen Bennet, who shrugged. "Go ahead," he mumbled. "Does that suit you, Stone?"

The reporter answered, but he looked at Lila Valery.

"I suppose it's worth waiting for."

Champion stalked out.

In a few moments he returned. "They're leaving," he announced. "Now, if you will excuse me for a few moments, I'll make use of your excellent laboratories, Mr. Bennet. Perhaps Changara Dass would accompany me to verify my report?"

Dass rose silently. His brown hand closed around the cup. He scooped it from the floor where it had fallen. A few drops of brownish liquid still rested in the rounded side.

Together the scientist and the savant departed. Stone, Lila, and Stephen Bennet remained.

## Robert Bloch

It was Stone who drew a couch-cover over the silent silver monstrosity on the floor. Bennet and the girl were huddled in the corner.

The stout young man was trembling as he rocked to and fro, head bowed.

"Don't—Stephen," Lila whispered.

"I can't help it," sighed Bennet. "Don't you realize what this means? Here, at the very moment of triumph, all that I've worked for and lived for has been snatched away. The clearing of my name, and my father's name. The research and knowledge that could have been ours. Gone now. Because he died before he could speak!"

"Do you think he was—murdered?" Lila whispered.

"I don't know. I can't think. Dass carried the cocoa. I handled it. And Champion gave it to him. If it contained poison, we're the only suspects. And none of us has a motive."

"Perhaps not." Stone thought aloud. "You haven't, Bennet. But Professor Champion is your rival, after all. He has been the chief critic of you and your father, and he is the head of the Champion Foundation."

Surprisingly enough, Bennet bridled. His pudgy features creased indignantly.

"Professor Champion, whatever his scientific attitude may be, is a man of unquestioned integrity. Certainly he would never be so foolhardy as to endanger his reputation by so clumsy a trick."

"And this Changara Dass?"

"Changara Dass is my friend, my father's friend. Today's success meant as much to him as it did to me."

Lila Valery rose and faced the reporter. "I think your hunch is wrong. Our lunar visitor had a chill. You heard him complain of the cold, didn't you? We don't know anything about the physiology of these creatures. Probably he succumbed to his seizure just as he drank the cocoa. I'm willing to wager that Dass and Champion find no trace of poison in that cocoa."

"Right you are." Champion's booming voice rose as he entered the room, followed by the Hindu. He faced Stephen Bennet.

"We found nothing, absolutely nothing," the Hindu added. His turbaned head nodded slowly as he bent over the cloth-covered object on the floor.

"We shall, therefore, proceed with the autopsy at once."

"Wait a minute." Bennet was on his feet.

"Yes?"

"Do you think it's really—necessary?"



## Murder from the Moon

"If you don't do it, the coroner will."

"But the law has no rights over a lunar inhabitant."

"Stephen Bennet." The Hindu's voice was soft, grave. "I have known you all your life. Was I not as a father and mother to you?"

"Yes, Changara Dass."

"Have we not worked together, planned together for this day? Have we not dreamed of the heritage of wisdom which might be ours?"

"True."

Dass's eyes gleamed. "Today we have met seeming failure. Death has stilled the voice that could have told us all we wished to learn. But with an autopsy, we can perhaps cheat death."

"How?"

"We can study the physiology of our visitor. The structure, the mechanics of his anatomy. Even if we find no trace of poison, there are things we want to learn, you and I. Is that not true?"

Bennet bit his lip.

"Yes. You're right. Go ahead with it then, man — but don't talk about it. I don't like to hear you talk about it. I can't stand it."

His voice rose, cracked. Lila Valery's arms soothed his huddled shoulders.

Silently Dass stooped and gathered the limp, cold body of the moon man in his arms. The dangling silver arms hung bobbing from the folds of the cloth as he carried the corpse from the room.

Lila turned to Stephen Bennet.

"Lie down. Try to rest," she urged. "It will be an hour or so at least. We'll go down the hall."

Champion cleared his throat. "Might as well stick here and see this thing through," he decided. "But I'm not going to sit around. I'm hungry. There's a table full of food in the next room, and that's where you'll find me."

In the end it was Bill Stone who followed Lila Valery down the twilight-darkened hall to the office. He sat on the desk, swinging his legs, his blue eyes frankly appraising the girl in an admiring grin.

"You seem to be the only cheerful person around here," the girl murmured. "This place is like a —"

"Morgue," Stone finished for her. "That's what it is, with bodies being dissected, and all the trimmings."

"Please, let's not talk about it," Lila whispered. "I'm worried."

"Bennet?"

"Yes. He's so upset about this thing."

Robert Bloch

"He'll sleep it off and forget it." Stone smiled. "You must be very fond of him — covering him up and everything. Maternal instinct?"

"We're engaged." Her voice was low.

"Oh. I understand."

"Stephen's a brilliant man. But he has to be watched over, always. Changara Dass is like a nursemaid to him. Humors him. Because he isn't like the rest of us, you see."

"No, I don't see, exactly."

"Well, you heard what he said today about his father — Avery Bennet, who founded Solar, and made the moon voyage. How his mother went along, and how Stephen was born out there in space on the way back.

"Stephen has never forgotten his heritage. Never forgotten that he's — well, an outsider, really. Sometimes I think he's really alien to this world at heart.

"You know, he's never left this Foundation since he came here?"

"Really?"

"Changara Dass brought him up. He had a private tutor. He lives here in his own apartments, refuses to go outside. His childhood was hardly — normal. All his life he's hated the world for what it did to his father. He shuns people. Stephen has worked and waited only for the day when proof of his father's discovery would be forthcoming. Not until then, he swore, would he enter the outside world."

"You mean he doesn't even go out of the building for a shave?" Stone asked, incredulously.

"No. Even the tailors come here for his fittings. He's a recluse. Or was, until I met him. I've tried to wean him away from these eccentricities of his. I think I've succeeded, a little. But even though we're engaged, I sometimes feel that he *resents* me. He gets these bitter moods and I don't understand him. Oh, but why should I tell you this —"

"It's been very interesting," Stone protested. "Very. But tell me — what about the landing of this space-ship and our late lunar friend? Just what did Bennet expect to learn from all this?"

"I don't know, exactly. When the ship came down, three days ago, he and Changara Dass were as surprised as the rest of the world. When they found this creature inside and it asked at once to be taken to Solar Foundation, Stephen knew that it was the expected proof from his father at last.

"He told me that it meant a complete vindication of everything he'd claimed. That his father had discovered life on the moon, that he

## Murder from the Moon

had probably lived on up there for a long time—long enough to establish communication and interchange knowledge with the lunar inhabitants.

"Naturally, all this was conjecture. Stephen hoped that the moon man would possess complete information—tell him of Avery Bennet's life and fate, and exchange data. The moon man asked to be brought here to Solar Foundation, as you know; asked for Stephen Bennet, and refused to divulge anything to anyone else."

"In other words, he made the voyage especially to see Bennet?"

"Yes."

Stone pursed his lips.

"Miss Valery—Lila—do you recall what the moon man said when we went into the private room? About some message he had for Stephen—about wanting him to come back?"

"That's right."

"Did he mean that he wanted Stephen Bennet to return to the moon with him?"

"I don't know. He *did* say something like that, didn't he?"

"I wonder why."

"Perhaps he had news of his father."

"Perhaps." Bill Stone dismissed the notion momentarily. He rose, wiped his forehead.

"Whew! Don't see how he froze to death. It's hot enough here to boil eggs."

"They keep it warm enough here at Solar Foundation. Changara Dass is something of a fanatic on the subject of air-conditioning. He sees to it that the temperature is always up in the eighties and nothing can argue him out of it."

"I wonder if the old swami is making any progress?"

"Progress?"

"Yes, on his little carv—on the autopsy, I mean."

The answer came in the form of a sudden buzz from the desk telephone.

Stone lifted the receiver.

"Mr. Stone?" It was the voice of Dass, a hasty whisper.

"Yes."

"Mr. Stone, I wonder if you would care to step down the hall to the surgery. It's at the far end, at the right."

"Why? Something up?"

"I think, Mr. Stone, that I have news for you. Some very startling news."

## Robert Bloch

"I'll be right down."

The reporter clicked the receiver back.

"Lila, you stay here. I'm going over to the morgue—I mean, the surgery."

"And leave me here all alone? Not on your life!"

The girl joined him.

Together, the two moved down the black corridor of the empty Foundation. Once outside, Lila made it evident that she regretted her decision to accompany him. The girl shivered at the shadows, and involuntarily her hand clutched Stone's wrist.

"I'm scared," she murmured.

"Of what? There's no one here but ourselves."

"I can't help it. I have a feeling something's wrong."

"Forget it. Dass is waiting for us. Here."

Bill Stone pushed open the surgery door.

They entered.

Lila screamed.

Changara Dass was waiting for them. But the turbaned Hindu would wait forever. He slumped forward over the horrible pinkish body of the moon man, his eyes bulging glassily in a fixed stare at the corpse on the slab. His brown skin was very pale indeed, save for one spot around his neck.

One spot on Changara Dass's neck—a long, pinkish spot forming the outline of a hand. A hand that had twisted around the Hindu's throat and strangled him to death.

### Chapter III The Lunatic

They found Bennet on his couch down the hall. Champion dropped his sandwich in the outer chamber a moment later. The four of them were back in the surgery room, trying hard to keep their eyes away from the death that seemed to lurk in the shadows.

"The hand," Champion whispered. "Look at the prints. No human hand makes such an impression."

"It was his," Bennet muttered. "His." He stared down at the pinkish body lying on the slab. "Look at those claws. They did it."

"But he's dead," Stone answered. "Dead man can't rise and murder."

## Murder from the Moon

"Dead *men* cannot rise," Bennet groaned. "But he wasn't a man. He was a creature from another world, another planet. Who knows what ghastly laws govern such beings?"

"You're hysterical, Bennet," scowled Professor Champion. "Look." His hands went to the creature's armpits. "These tendons were severed by the dissecting knife. The thing, even if animated, couldn't raise its arms, let alone strangle a man with its hands."

"But it did," Bennet whispered. "Or *something* did. A ghost, perhaps. Perhaps it was a ghost."

"Don't be a fool!" Champion objected. "Let's reason this thing out. Dass called Stone. In less than two minutes Stone and Miss Valery arrived. They found Dass dead."

"Dead." Bennet couldn't control himself. "Dass is dead. He had found something out and he was going to tell. So he died. The moon guards its secrets well. It's fate, I tell you! We weren't meant to know such things — that's what we get for meddling! Let's burn the bodies, get out of here!"

"Stephen."

"I'm sorry, darling. But it's too much."

"I know. Let's go back to the office."

"Go ahead." Champion took command. "I'll phone the police."

"Police?"

"Of course. There's no doubt of at least one murder, now."

"That's right," Bill Stone agreed. "And I'll phone the office with the story."

Bennet shrugged.

"I suppose," he said, tonelessly, "This means the end, but it has to be."

Together he and Lila left the room. Champion followed.

"Coming, Stone?" he called.

"I'll stay here for a minute and look around. Want to get the details straight in my mind. Once the cops get here we reporters won't have a chance."

"Very well. I'll go back to the reception room and phone from there." Champion left.

Bill Stone stared down at the partly-dissected cadaver of the moon-creature. Once more he gazed at the horrible prints on the dead Hindu's throat. He fingered the scalpels and instruments on the adjoining table. He noted the empty cocoa cup and the partly-filled retorts beside it. He ran his eyes along the cabinet of pharmacopia.

## Robert Bloch

Suddenly his eyes were arrested by a label. He opened a metal tin curiously. Then he stared at the dead moon man once again.

With a shrug of decision, he selected an empty glass from the table and poured the contents of the tin into it. Then he covered the glass with a handkerchief.

Quickly, he left the room and headed down the corridor. It was pitch black now, and silent as death. Silent as the death that crept through the night about him. Death that had crept and then sprung.

As he neared the closed office door the silence was broken by the strident murmur of conversation.

Stone paused outside.

Bennet and Lila, inside.

"But don't you see?" Bennet's voice. "I can't face that, Lila. It will ruin me — ruin the Foundation. The publicity, the investigation, the suspicions. And in the end, they'll never get anywhere. They can't bring Dass or the moon man back to life. They'll never be able to tell the story that will clear my father's name."

"But your idea is madness."

"Why? What other way of escape is open? The space-ship is waiting. It's ready. I have no charts or instruments, but the control system itself should be easily mastered. We can take it and get away now, before the police arrive. Come with me, Lila."

"To the moon? No, Stephen — I can't."

"Lila, don't you understand? I want to know. I want to find out for myself. I could go there and prove that my father was right — go there and return with the full story. We could be together, you and I.

"And who knows, Lila? Who knows what we might find up there? Avery Bennet might have built himself an empire. We could rule that empire, Lila, you and I. I am his son. I have the heritage of my birth. Oh, I know it sounds like madness, but it's the one chance, the only chance."

"You're wrong."

Bill Stone entered quietly, stood in the doorway. Bennet wheeled, his pudgy arms waving, his face flushed with agitation.

"Stone!"

"I think I can help you out," the reporter replied. "No need to go to the bother of that lunar trip. At least I think I know how our moon man was murdered."

"Poison?"

## Murder from the Moon

"No." Stone smiled. "He was literally frozen to death. That's what Dass must have discovered during the autopsy. That's why he called me. And I think I've found out what did it."

The reporter turned to the girl.

"Lila—go get Professor Champion. He'll want to hear this."

The girl nodded, left the room.

As the door closed, Bennet shook his head.

"I still don't understand."

"It's very simple." Stone held out the glass, covered by his handkerchief. "This stuff here did it."

Bennet took the glass and held it. His eyes met Stone's. "But what about Changara Dass? Who killed him?"

"That's a puzzler, isn't it? Perhaps we can solve that when the others get back."

Abruptly, Bennet winced. "Here, Stone—take this. It's too damned cold to hold."

Stone retrieved the glass.

"Aren't you going to look inside?" he asked. "Cold or not, I'd think you'd be interested in what it contains. Unless," he murmured, "unless you already know."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you murdered the moon man."

Stephen Bennet laughed. Then he did a very curious thing. His hands fumbled with his white jacket.

Stone watched him closely. Too closely. He didn't see Bennet's feet glide forward. They glided swiftly—and suddenly Stephen Bennet sprang.

His fists crashed against the reporter's face. Stone moved back, arms flailing as he beat against the bulky body of his assailant.

Bennet's blows glanced from his forehead. A fist dug into his eye. Stone parried, trying to keep off those lunging arms.

Bennet was punching, punching. And then Stone felt cold horror. For as Bennet's fists punched at his face, Bennet's hands were locked around his neck!

It could not be—but it was! Stone saw the fists hammer towards him through a red haze. And at the same time he felt fingers tighten in his throat. Strong, tearing fingers digging away his life!

Bill Stone glanced down and saw them then—saw what was strangling and clawing at his neck.

Saw, from Bennet's opened jacket, *the two pink arms—the two extra arms, ending in the birdlike claws.* The claws of a moon man!

## Robert Bloch

Then the red haze welled up. Stone's head whirled. Desperately he parried blows from human fists. And all the while the hidden hands from inside Bennet's jacket pressed and pressed.

Stone went to his knees.

The monster was gasping now. Bennet's great bulging eyes shone with maniacal intensity as he ripped and tore. A high, wheezing cackle burst from his corded, pinkish neck.

Blindly, Stone fumbled for his pocket. Bennet was bending him back. The cold claws were digging deep. In a moment it would all be over. In a moment—

With a last desperate wrench, Stone's fingers closed about the glass, tore away the handkerchief. One hand rose to Bennet's neck. He pressed the glass down, let the contents pour forward.

Bennet screamed. The two pinkish arms fell away, tore at Stone's hand, clawed at the glass cupped tightly against Bennet's neck.

Stone rose. He pressed the glass down.

Bennet's fingers clutched the air. His human fists fell. A gurgling came from a pinkish neck that slowly whitened. The color drained from Bennet's face.

The glass dug deeper. And then Stephen Bennet fell. Fell like a white ghost, like a silver ghost.

In a moment the bulky body lay inert upon the floor. The two horrid tentacles lay limp, the claws extended upwards in a last gesture of supplication.

"Bill!"

Lila was at Stone's side, and Champion with her.

"I had to do it," the reporter gasped. "I had to."

"Those arms—" the girl whispered. "Look at those arms."

"No wonder he always wore that heavy jacket," Stone whispered. "Look at the straps—he had them strapped down at his sides. No wonder he never went out; had a special tailor."

"What does it mean?"

"It means that Stephen Bennet's mother was not human," Stone answered. "That was his secret, and his father's secret. Changara Dass must have known, and shielded Bennet all these years. Stephen Bennet had moon blood in his veins.

"When the lunar visitor came, he had a mission. He wanted Bennet to forsake earth and return to the moon. Bennet preferred the fame that would be his if he remained here on earth, as a human.

"The lunar visitor was about to insist—and Bennet feared he would reveal his secret, if necessary, in order to make him go back.



## Murder from the Moon

"So Bennet murdered him. Changara Dass discovered how he did it during the autopsy, and phoned me. Bennet must have been listening in on the wire. He got to the surgery before I did. Using his lunar tentacles, he strangled Dass.

"Then he wanted to escape in the space-ship, knowing he'd be discovered if the police examined him. He was pleading with Lila here to accompany him when I walked in and announced that I'd solved the lunar visitor's death. So he tried to kill me as well."

"But how did he do it?" Champion asked. "That's still a mystery." He scowled. "There was no poison — I'm sure of that."

"Of course there wasn't. No need for it. Bennet, having lunar blood himself, knew the weakness of the moon beings. Knew they cannot stand cold. He always had it hot as an oven here, you remember.

"So he slipped something into the cocoa which immediately chilled the moon man's system; paralyzed his peculiar blood stream with sudden cold. Something that wouldn't show up in analysis; something we'd never expect in steaming cocoa."

"What was that?"

"Nothing but simple, everyday dry ice," Stone grinned.

"It steamed naturally in the cup and left no traces. I found a can of it in the surgery, brought a glassful here. When Bennet attacked me, I pressed the stuff against his throat. You know the rest."

There was a long silence in the little room. Lila's hand went to Bill's shoulders as they stared at the tentacled body on the floor.

"He wanted me to go there with him — to the moon," she whispered. "I'm glad I refused."

"Perhaps it is not meant for men to dwell beyond earth," mused Champion, gravely.

"Let's get out of here," was all Bill Stone said. They moved towards the door. Stone snapped out the light.

"Look!" whispered Lila.

Through the high windows, a shaft of silvery moonlight crept into the room. It moved over the floor and bathed the grotesque, crumpled body in an evil glow. But in its rays the face of Stephen Bennet shone with a peaceful light.

"Maybe he's gone there, now. Back up there, where his spirit belongs."

"Maybe," Stone nodded. "But right at the moment, my spirit belongs somewhere else. Somewhere where there is electric light and a little down-to-earth entertainment. Want to join me?"

"All right."

Robert Bloch

"I may have a few drinks, too."

Lila smiled. "That's all right with me," she murmured. "But Bill, if you have a drink, promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Don't put any ice in it."

They closed the door behind them. In the little room, the silvery light continued to pour down on the dead face of the man from the moon.

## The Tin You Love to Touch

Good morning, Madam," said the traveling salesman. "Are you the lady of the house?"

The slight figure in the apron and gingham dustcap moved forward in the doorway. "Kindly scram out of here," growled the voice from under the dustcap.

"But lady –"

"Don't you 'lady' me!" snarled the voice. "Now get out before I kick your sample-case for you!"

The salesman turned hastily away and the door slammed behind him.

Inside the bungalow, the figure in cap and apron sat down wearily on the chair nearest the door of the hallway.

"Oh for heaven's sake!" growled Roscoe Droop. "What in blazes can I do?"

Neither Heaven nor Hell gave him a reply as Mr. Droop flung his apron in the corner and tore the cap from his head. Without his domestic disguise, Roscoe Droop was revealed as a small, sallow-faced man with a slight body and gentle blue eyes.

Right now his eyes were clouded with rage and baffled indignation.

"What can I do?" he sighed, wearily. "That makes the third time this week some jerk salesman has mistaken me for a woman. What a spot to be in!"

He blushed and reached for a cigar. But he didn't light the stogie. Just in time he remembered – Agatha hated cigar smoke.

Agatha!

She was to blame for all his troubles. Agatha Droop. Sometimes Mr. Droop wondered why he had ever married her. Then he realized that he hadn't, really. *She* had married *him*.

## Robert Bloch

Agatha was like that. Domineering. Six feet of solid muscle. Arms like steel cables. Just what they wanted down at the Hercules Steel Mill.

No wonder she'd found it easy to get a job as a welder! That had started all the trouble – Agatha's welding job. Mr. Droop recalled the announcement perfectly.

"I'm going to be a welder," she had told him one evening. "I'll make about seventy bucks a week, plus overtime."

"But honey," he protested.

These were the last words Mr. Droop ever uttered on the subject. Because Agatha started in.

"You'll have to quit your job, of course," she said. "Quit it at once. I can earn more money than you, so it's only common sense. You're too frail for factory work, and nobody wants a runt like you around anyway. So you can stay home and take it easy from now on.

"All you need to take care of is the housework, the gardening, firing the furnace, mowing the lawn, marketing, washing, cleaning, scrubbing, mopping, dusting and getting my meals."

Mr. Droop started to open his mouth again to say, "But honey" and then he stopped. Because Agatha hit him over the head with a teapot.

And so Agatha went to work and Mr. Droop stayed home and took care of the house.

It was humiliating. It was infuriating. It couldn't go on. Mr. Droop would have gone mad if it weren't for his hobby.

His hobby had always managed to save him, somehow. When he got married, Roscoe Droop was an enthusiastic putterer. He loved to mess around with tools and woodcarving jobs, and he had a home workshop in his basement. That is, he had it for about a month – and then Agatha made him give it up.

Now, in moments of strain, Mr. Droop had nothing to turn to but his hobby magazine.

Like many an enthusiastic amateur, Mr. Droop was an avid reader of a magazine called UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. Its pages were crowded with monthly hints on how to build a yacht in your basement, how to run a model pigpen in your garage and other such fascinating topics.

Not that it did Mr. Droop any good. Right now he could have used a washing machine or a vacuum cleaner more than anything else. But he had no money to buy such household aids.

Roscoe Droop simply wasn't the domestic type. He hated his washing and dusting and cooking. And these episodes with salesmen

## The Tin You Love to Touch

humiliated him. In times like these he turned to the consoling pages of UNPOPULAR SCIENCE.

It was with black despair (and his hands) that he now picked up the latest issue and riffled through the pages of the magazine.

He read the ads.

"YOU TOO CAN TURN YOUR ATTIC INTO A MODEL AQUARIUM."

"BUILD A SUBWAY IN YOUR BASEMENT."

It was no use. Roscoe Droop would never build an aquarium or a subway. He riffled through the classified advertisements and thought of his housekeeping tasks to come.

Housekeeping—

The little square ad in the fine print fairly leaped out at him.

"BANISH HOUSEWORK CARES FOREVER," the headline proclaimed. "Startling new discovery eliminates all household duties!"

It sounded like a blurb for a new brand of soap chips to Mr. Droop. But he read on.

"Prominent scientist has perfected the ideal women's home companion," the ad stated. "Working models now in experimental stage. A limited number available for immediate trial. These models will not be sold—merely loaned out for six months' free trial to responsible parties. If you desire to take advantage of this offer, kindly submit complete character references in first letter. Write DR. PEDRO MOKE, B.S.: S. O. L. BOX 13, UNPOPULAR SCIENCE."

Mr. Droop sat up. Maybe this might prove to be a solution to his unpleasant domestic difficulties. This invention, whatever it was, could relieve him of his work.

But Agatha would object, of course—

"Roscoe!"

The soft voice, gentle as the cry of a bull walrus, smote Mr. Droop's ear. A moment later the same ear was smote by a brawny fist.

"What are you loafing around for, you lazy bum?" growled a voice.

Mr. Droop looked up—way up—at Agatha.

Agatha Droop stood six feet tall in her Safety-Toe work shoes. The slacks covering her massive frame would have made an excellent puppet for a large troop of Boy Scouts.

She was not exactly a sight for sore eyes, although she was able to hand out sore eyes to those who didn't jump fast enough to suit her.

"What gives?" Agatha bellowed, flinging her lunch pail to the floor. "Isn't my dinner ready yet?"

"Just a minute, darling," sighed Mr. Droop.

## Robert Bloch

"Well, hurry it up," his wife grumbled. "Here I work hard at the shop all day and you sit around the house taking things easy. I'm a working woman and I want my food."

Mr. Droop went into action. He brought Agatha the evening paper and her house slippers, and then finished up preparing the dinner in the kitchen.

Agatha snorted and grumbled her way to the table. She sat down and helped herself to the meat, the potatoes, the asparagus, the peas, the salad, the coffee, the pie.

Mr. Droop waited for comments. He'd worked hard at this meal. One bite was enough.

"Where'd you get this stuff?" demanded Agatha, chewing her steak.

"Why, at the butcher's, darling."

"At the shoemaker's, you mean! It's as tough as leather!"

"But—"

Agatha swung and Mr. Droop ducked. Gravy splattered the top of his head as the meat sailed across the room.

"One more mistake like that and I'll fix you," growled Agatha, stalking from the table.

Mr. Droop crept away. In the hall, he noticed his discarded copy of UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. His lips tightened in a grim smile.

"All right," he murmured. "We'll see."

It was only a matter of minutes before he had written his letter to Dr. Pedro Moke—Inventor. He mailed it that same evening.

He didn't know what to expect, but he had a naive hope that his troubles would soon be over. That night he slumbered in bed quite peacefully.

On Mr. Droop's face was the gentle, trusting look of a little child—and the black eye that Agatha gave him just before they went to sleep.

\* \* \*

It was nearly a week later that the expressmen arrived with the package. Mr. Droop had almost forgotten about his letter by this time.

But the doorbell rang and he answered it, and one of the expressmen tipped his cap and said, "Pardon me, Madam—"

Mr. Droop almost slammed the door in his face when he noticed the big package the men had carried up the stairs. It was a heavy wooden crate, and bore his name and address on the side in bold black crayon lettering.

"That's for me!" he exclaimed. "Where do I sign?"

## The Tin You Love to Touch

In his excitement he lighted a cigar, and the expressmen scratched their heads as the "housewife" puffed on a fat stogie while signing the receipt.

Then they went down the steps and drove away, and Mr. Droop approached the bulky crate and tried to lift it.

Too heavy. It wouldn't budge.

Mr. Droop bent down to try again, wondering if he ought to answer a truss advertisement in UNPOPULAR SCIENCE. He strained and swore. The crate remained immovable.

"Now what the hell do I do?" he groaned.

"Why not open me up here?" said a voice.

"Fine idea — *what's that?*" snapped the startled man.

"Unwrap me here, silly," the voice advised.

"Where are you?" asked Mr. Droop, whirling around.

"Inside the crate, of course. Hurry up — it's no picnic being cooped up this way."

"It's no picnic listening to strange voices from packing crates, either," observed Mr. Droop, a little bitterly. Still, he scurried away for a hammer and chisel.

When he returned, he approached the task of removing nails a little hesitantly. He was somewhat afraid of what might be inside the crate. These screwball inventors, now —

"What are you waiting for?" complained the shrill voice.

"Why — it's just that — who are you, anyway?" he demanded suddenly.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"Of course not, silly."

"Where did you come from, then?"

"From Dr. Moke, naturally. He made me."

"Then who are you?"

"I'm not a who, I'm a what," said the voice.

"Animal, vegetable or mineral?" inquired Mr. Droop.

"Neither."

"But —"

"Oh, open the crate, Mister! I won't bite you."

This wasn't much of a promise, but Mr. Droop was beginning to worry lest neighbors observe him carrying on a conversation with a packing crate. Those old hens were gossipy enough, anyway.

With a deep sigh, Mr. Droop set to work. He pried away the boards and got tangled up in a bale of excelsior beneath. Then he began to

## Robert Bloch

remove a number of packages, wrapped in brown paper. Some were big, some small, some were long and some short. He set them down carefully on the porch.

He stooped again and his hands encountered—the bottom of the crate!

Where was the person who had spoken to him?

Outside of the small packages, the crate was empty!

"Hey!" said Mr. Droop. "What's happened to you?"

"I'm right here," said the voice, patiently. "Here, at your feet."

Mr. Droop jumped to one side. A large round brown-paper parcel rested before him.

"Come on, unwrap me," coaxed the voice.

His trembling fingers had quite a time, but Mr. Droop did the job. Then he stared down at the heavy, shining object in his hands.

It was a head—a metal head!

At least, it resembled a head. There was a sharp steel chin, a jutting aluminum nose, two eyesockets and a mouth set on a hinged jaw. The top of the silver skull was smooth and gleaming, but the base was corrugated, and a pipe extended under the chin.

"Hello," said the metal face. "Who are you?"

"God only knows," gasped Mr. Droop wildly. "I'm a guy that never expected to be talking to a steel head."

"I know," said the gleaming face. "You're Mr. Droop, the man I've come to work for."

"I guess so," Mr. Droop sighed. He watched in morbid fascination as the steel hinge slipped up and down on the jaw.

"How do you talk?" he asked.

"Quite well, thank you," answered the head. "But come on, quit stalling. Put me together, will you please?"

"Put you together?"

"Of course. Assemble me. You'll find the rest of my parts in the other packages."

"What kind of crazy talk is this?" he wondered wildly.

"Are you by any chance accusing me of not being all there?" snapped the head, coldly. "If so, you're mistaken. Dr. Moke personally dismembered me and packed me up. He would have sent you complete instructions for putting me together again, but there was no need. I can give you the directions personally. Come on, get busy. It's really very simple, you know. A three-year-old child could do it."

Mr. Droop turned hastily away.

"Where are you going?" asked the head.



## The Tin You Love to Touch

"To find you a three-year-old child. Let him do it. I don't want to."

The head burst into metallic laughter. "Come on, now. Just put me together. You'll find nuts and bolts in that small parcel, next to my arms and legs. And oh yes – that looks like my torso over there."

Cautiously, Mr. Droop set about his unusual task. Aided by the expert direction of the metal head, he began to assemble what soon proved to be a complete metal body. Two arms and two legs – beautifully hinged and articulated in the smallest detail – were easily attached to a shapely torso. Small openings in the metal sides were provided for the reception of a number of loose wire ends which made automatic connections somewhere inside the steel frame.

Little aluminum pins were set in place, and the head lowered onto an opening at the top of the torso. A telescoping connection evidently served as a neck.

Finally, Mr. Droop affixed wonderfully designed hands and feet to the ends of the metal limbs. The fingers and toes were quite the most remarkable features of the entire body.

"There," said the head, with some satisfaction. "At last! Hope all my wires are in place. You men are so clumsy." A surprising giggle came from the hinged jaws. "You lack the feminine touch."

"Feminine touch? Are you – female?"

"Of course, silly," tittered the head. "Aren't house servants supposed to be female?"

"Then what's your name?"

"I have none. That's up to you, Mr. Droop. Now would you mind helping me up?"

Mr. Droop gingerly assisted the metal creature to its – or *her* – feet. Surprisingly enough, the five-foot body stood there in a perfect simulacrum of humanity.

Just like the Tin Woodman of Oz, Mr. Droop thought, wildly. Abruptly, he opened his mouth.

"That's it," he exclaimed. "I'll call you Tinnie."

"Tinnie? That's very nice – if not strictly accurate," said the metal creature. "After all, Dr. Moke might not like it if you inferred his robots were made out of tin."

"You're a robot," said Mr. Droop. "A real, sure-enough robot."

"Of course I am," said Tinnie.

"And you can talk and walk and think and – everything?"

"Not quite 'everything,' I'm afraid," Tinnie giggled. "You needn't worry about feeding me or a place to sleep. A little oiling now and then, and a little attention to my wiring is all I need."

## Robert Bloch

Tinnie walked across the porch and Mr. Droop followed her metallic movements with astounded eyes. Aside from a slight clattering and swaying, the robot moved with remarkable precision. Whatever the miracle behind sight, hearing, thought, and mechanical coordination — the robot was real. And definitely a perfect working model.

As he watched, Tinnie bent down and scooped up brown paper and boards.

"Better clear this up right away," said the robot.

"Wait — I'll help you," said Mr. Droop, out of habit.

"Never mind," the robot told him. "This is my job. That's what Dr. Moke told me before I was packed. I came here to do the housework. So if you'll just show me around and tell me what you want done..."

Shaking his head in bewilderment, Mr. Droop followed Tinnie into the house.

It all sounded too good to be true. In his elation, he could have hugged the metal mademoiselle, kissed her squarely upon the hinges of her shiny silver jaw. But Mr. Droop was a highly moral man.

He compromised by giving Tinnie the house apron and dust-cap to wear.

The robot stood before the mirror, adjusting the garments.

"How lovely," Tinnie sighed. "You're so thoughtful, Mr. Droop. I know I'll enjoy working here for you. Is there anything you want before I go out and prepare supper?"

Mr. Droop paused, then grinned.

"Why yes," he said. "Yes, there is. Would you mind running into the bedroom and bringing me out a cigar?"

\* \* \*

The next few days were perfect — almost too perfect.

Mr. Droop made up his mind on one point, right away. Agatha must never know. Long before she arrived home that first evening, Mr. Droop had carefully instructed Tinnie on her expected chores and warned her to keep out of sight when Mrs. Droop was around.

He offered no explanation, and was thankful when the robot demanded none.

"Lie down under the bed," he suggested. "Stay there all night. Agatha goes to work at seven. Then you can get up."

Tinnie obeyed. The next day Mr. Droop showed her around and told her what was necessary for her to know about running the house.

## The Tin You Love to Touch

It was sheer delight to watch Tinnie work. She never tired, never questioned, never complained. She swept, mopped, dusted. She washed and cleaned. And she cooked beautifully.

Dr. Moke had wrought wonders, all right. Mr. Droop could ask for nothing more. Tinnie stayed out of sight whenever the doorbell rang.

Agatha was more than pleased at the way the household was run. She asked no questions, but she grunted her surprise at Mr. Droop when she inspected the carefully dusted parlor and ate the well-cooked meals.

Mr. Droop had never been so happy before in his life – his married life, that is.

He couldn't help but tell Tinnie as much.

One afternoon, as the robot was sweeping the carpets and Mr. Droop stretched out on the sofa reading UNPOPULAR SCIENCE and puffing on a cigar, he suddenly shook his head.

"Is something wrong?" asked Tinnie, cocking her metallic head.

"Not at all," said Mr. Droop. "Quite the contrary. I was just marveling at your efficiency. You're really quite wonderful, you know."

"Thank you," said the robot. "Dr. Moke would be pleased to hear that, I'm sure."

"What kind of a man is Dr. Moke?" asked Mr. Droop.

"He's a very famous scientist," Tinnie told him. "He's been working on his robot models for many years."

"He ought to be proud of creating you," Mr. Droop declared. "But I don't quite understand just how he managed to do it."

"Would you like to hear how I was made?" inquired Tinnie.

"Well –" said Mr. Droop. For no reason at all, he blushed a little.

"What's the matter?" Tinnie asked. "Didn't you ever hear about how to make a girl?"

"Uh – not exactly," admitted Mr. Droop, turning redder by the moment.

"It was an awful problem," the robot sighed. "To begin with there were the radio-frequencies to establish. How that man sweated over my wiring! Then he devised the artificial larynx, the balance and coordination centers, and my chromium receptors. Even designing a steel and aluminum body was a problem. I'll never forget how he hid me in the basement during the scrap drive!"

Tinnie sighed reminiscently, and her toes rattled.

"Well, he did a swell job," Mr. Droop declared. "You look perfect."

## Robert Bloch

"You really think so?" Tinnie giggled coyly. "Sometimes I think so myself." She swayed closer. "Have you noticed my chassis?" she murmured.

"Indeed I have," said Mr. Droop. "You have a lovely chassis, my dear."

Tinnie tittered.

"I mean it," said Mr. Droop. "I like you, Tinnie. I like everything about you. You're quiet and sensible and hardworking. You never nag or bully. I like your shining face and your —"

"Awk!" said Tinnie.

"Whassat?" yelped Mr. Droop.

"Awk."

Tinnie suddenly stood rigid. Her metal arms dropped to her side and her head hung forward.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Droop asked, springing to his feet.

"I don't know." Tinnie's jaw moved laboriously on its hinges. "Your flattery got me so upset — I think maybe I've blown a fuse."

"Great heavens!" Droop exclaimed. "Maybe I'd better send for a doctor."

"A garage mechanic would be better," squeaked the robot. "No — don't. I know now. One of the wires in my neck is loose. I can feel it dangling. You'll have to slip it back into my batteries, that's all. Just reach in and set the loose end back where it belongs."

Mr. Droop approached the robot and found the dangling wire. He bent down, put his arms around Tinnie's neck and held her back as his hands fumbled with the loose connection.

"Roscoe!"

Mr. Droop whirled suddenly.

Agatha stood in the doorway. Her blazing eyes consumed the scene before her.

"Roscoe — what are you up to?" rasped Mrs. Droop. "What is this — this animated garbage can?"

"It's a robot," Mr. Droop whispered. "Her name is Tinnie."

"Her name?" Agatha bristled. "A woman, eh?"

"No, you don't understand," Mr. Droop protested. "She's only a maid. She's been helping me out around the house..."

"So I see."

Agatha stared bleakly at Mr. Droop's pose. He still held Tinnie in his arms, and his left hand was poised at her neck in what appeared to be an impassioned caress.

## The Tin You Love to Touch

"But you don't see!" wailed Mr. Droop. "I wasn't doing anything, Agatha—I swear it! I was merely tinkering with her batteries—"

"Tinkering with her batteries?" Agatha was shocked.

"I mean, she asked me to examine her chassis—"

Mr. Droop waved his arms pitifully. "I can't explain," he sighed. "But it's all right. She's harmless. Not like you and I. No mother or father—"

"Go on," snapped Agatha. "Go on. Tell me how you took advantage of this poor orphan while I was away. I ought to tear you limb from limb."

"Please don't make a mess," piped Tinnie. "I've just cleaned the carpet."

"You see?" exclaimed Mr. Droop, triumphantly. "She's a robot. A scientist sent her here to do the housework. She's a perfect servant."

"Humph!" remarked his wife. Then she shrugged. "We'll look into all this later," she promised. "I'd tend to this little affair now, but there's something more important on my mind."

"What is it?" asked Mr. Droop.

"I'm bringing the boss home for dinner tomorrow night," Agatha announced.

"The boss?"

"Yes sir," Agatha declared, triumphantly. "If I make a real impression I can go places at the Hercules Steel Mill. My dinner guest is none other than George Musclebinder himself."

"The Steel King?" said Mr. Droop, impressed in spite of himself.

"Nobody else but. Tomorrow night you'll prepare dinner for one of the biggest steel men in the country and I want you to remember that. You and your Tin Lizzie kitchen maid had better turn out a good meal, or else."

"We'll do it," Mr. Droop promised.

"Of course we will," said the robot.

Mrs. Droop glared at Tinnie malevolently.

"None of your tricks now," she muttered. "I'm going to let you stay until tomorrow and help out. But after that—"

"You aren't going to send her away, are you?" whispered Mr. Droop. Agatha nodded.

"Certainly am," she told him. "After tomorrow night, she goes out of here on her tin can!"

\* \* \*

## Robert Bloch

Mr. Droop had a miserable time of it that night and throughout the following day. He himself tended to the dusting and cleaning while Tinnie busied herself in the kitchen, preparing the meal for Agatha and her special guest.

"You'll have to serve," she told him. "Your wife won't let her boss see me. I don't think Agatha likes me very well."

"She'll get over it," Mr. Droop assured her, none too convincingly. "Agatha is like that. Just fix a good meal, now, and I'm sure she'll forgive you and let you stay."

"You want me to stay?" said Tinnie. A melting gleam appeared in the reflected corners of her eyesockets.

"More than anything in the world," said Mr. Droop. "It's been just heavenly having you here—for the first time I know what peace and comfort means."

Tinnie giggled. Mr. Droop stared at her. For the first time he noticed that her jaw-hinges made dimples in her cheeks. A most becoming phenomenon.

"Well." He cleared his throat. "We'd better hurry. They should be arriving any minute now."

Mr. Droop set the table and Tinnie retreated to the kitchen. He could hear her fussing with pots and pans on the stove.

Then the doorbell rang and Agatha entered.

George Musclebinder followed her into the hallway.

The Steel King was as rugged as his nickname implied. He was as tall and muscular as Agatha herself, and his bulldog features lent him an air of formidable pugnacity. At the moment, however, he was chuckling playfully and slapping Agatha on the back.

Agatha, coy and red-faced, snorted merrily and lighted his cigar for him.

Mr. Droop stood in the doorway amazed. Agatha acting playful! Agatha permitting someone to smoke in her house!

"Hello there," she called to him. "George and I are a little late, I guess. We stopped in for a couple boilermakers on the way home."

"Shot and a beer," Musclebinder explained. "Puts hair on your chest, eh, Aggie?"

Mr. Droop fully expected his wife to strike the Steel King dead. The idea of anyone calling her "Aggie" was unthinkable.

But Agatha did nothing of the sort. Instead she giggled, gave Musclebinder a dig in the ribs, and then sneered at Mr. Droop.

"What are you goggling at?" she demanded. "Take George's hat for him and get ready to serve dinner. We're starving."

## The Tin You Love to Touch

Mr. Droop reached for Musclebinder's hat. The big man surveyed him with a chuckle.

"So this is your better half, eh, Aggie?" he said. "Well well well. Pleased to meet you – Droop."

He suddenly seized Mr. Droop's hand and began to grind it to a pulp. Mr. Droop's arm became totally numb up to the shoulder.

Musclebinder, evidently making up his mind whether or not to remove the arm from its socket, suddenly decided against it and dropped Mr. Droop's hand again.

"Let's see what you've cooked up for us working folks," he roared, with hideous heartiness. "Aggie tells me you're quite a good cook. Guess that's why she married you, huh?"

Mr. Droop would gladly have killed the man on the spot. Instead, a withering glance from Agatha sent him off to the closet with Musclebinder's hat. Then he stood aside as his wife and the Steel King made for the dining room.

They sat down. Agatha stared the neatly-decorated table.

"What's the idea of three places?" she demanded.

"Well, there's Musclebinder, and you, and myself –"

"There's George and I," she corrected. "You can eat in the kitchen after we've finished. Hurry up now, start serving."

She turned to Musclebinder with a cloying smile. "Don't mind him – he's such a dope," she declared.

Mr. Droop stumbled out into the kitchen. He sighed.

"What's the matter?" asked Tinnie, solicitously, as she covered the *entree* with a silver lid.

"Nothing, nothing at all," lied Mr. Droop desperately. He knew how hard Tinnie had worked preparing this meal and he hadn't the heart to spoil things for her now.

"Everything will be all right," he lied. "I'm going to eat out here with you and keep you company."

The robot flashed him a look of gratitude not unmixed with maternal anxiety.

"I do hope her boss likes what I've prepared for him," she said. "Here's Agatha's plate. But this dish is specially for him."

"Swell," said Mr. Droop.

He took soup into the dining room. Agatha and Musclebinder were laughing uproariously. At the sight of Mr. Droop, his wife's jaw set.

"What's this?" she demanded.

"Why – soup."

## Robert Bloch

"That's not what I mean, stupid! What's the idea of serving food without being properly dressed? Go back in the kitchen and put on your apron."

"Haw haw!" laughed Musclebinder. "That's a hot one! Got him trained, haven't you?"

"You can bet who wears the slacks around this family!" Agatha boasted. "He toes the line, just like the men do down at the shop."

"That's right," Musclebinder declared. "In all my years as a steel man I've never seen anyone who could handle men the way you could. That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Aggie. How'd you like to be promoted to foreman?"

Mr. Droop didn't hear her answer. He humbly cleared away the soup plates, and returned from the kitchen with the main dishes.

Agatha's plate contained meat and potatoes.

Musclebinder received a bare platter and the silver-lidded entree dish.

"Something special for you," Mr. Droop told him.

"Swell! Say, I'll bet you're the sweetest little housekeeper," snickered Musclebinder, roguishly pinching Mr. Droop's cheek.

He swept the lid off the platter and helped himself liberally to the gravy-covered contents.

"Gawd, I'm starved," he bellowed. "I'm gonna eat and eat and —"

He speared a forkful from the mass on his plate and gulped eagerly. Suddenly his eyes goggled.

"Gazawp!" he spluttered. "Oookle. Mfffuggg! Ulp!"

"What's the matter?" Agatha murmured.

"Urgle! Plupppff! Aaaargh!" groaned Musclebinder. His face turned a deep purple and he began to choke and cough.

"George — what in the name of —"

"Yeeeeooooowww!!!"

With a gasping shriek, Musclebinder managed to expectorate the obstruction in his throat.

Objects fell with a hideous clank on his plate.

Wide-eyed, Mr. Droop stared at what lay there. A gravy-covered collection of nuts, bolts, and pieces of sheet metal!

"What the hell?" croaked Musclebinder.

"Come here — *you!*" yapped Agatha.

Mr. Droop made a dash for the kitchen door. Agatha pounded at his heels.

"Who did it?" she screamed, bursting into the kitchen to confront her husband and the robot.



## The Tin You Love to Touch

"Did what?" asked Tinnie, calmly.

"Who served my boss that dish of hardware?"

"Why I did, of course," Tinnie told her. "What's the matter, did you want some too? I hardly thought I should give nuts to you."

"Nuts to who?" yelled Agatha. "Quit insulting me! What I want to know is – why serve George Musclebinder a plate of metal?"

"Isn't that what he likes to eat?" asked Tinnie. "I thought you said he was a big steel man."

"Steel man?"

Agatha went berserk.

She made a dive for the robot across the room. Halfway in her charge she scooped up the can opener from the kitchen table. Brandishing the deadly weapon, she bore down on Tinnie with murderous intent.

"You metal-brained moron," screamed Agatha. "I'll chop you up into tin cans!"

She slashed out with the can opener as Tinnie retreated around the kitchen table.

Mr. Droop stood paralyzed for an instant. But only for an instant. Then something snapped inside him. He growled.

"Let her alone!" yelled Mr. Droop.

Agatha turned. "How dare you interfere, you worm?" she demanded.

"Let her alone!" commanded Mr. Droop. "Don't you dare harm the woman I love."

"Love?" Agatha gasped.

So did Mr. Droop. The words came unbidden to his lips – but when he spoke them, he realized he was telling the truth.

"You love this walking junkheap?" rasped Agatha.

"Yes," said Mr. Droop, desperately. "And if you harm her, I'll – no you don't!"

Agatha turned and struck out at Tinnie.

As she did so, Mr. Droop went into action. Grabbing up a rolling pin, he brought it down firmly on Agatha's head. The rolling pin broke, but Agatha stopped.

At that moment, George Musclebinder lurched into the kitchen.

"What's all this?" roared the Steel King.

His eyes goggled as he saw Tinnie. The robot, seeking to escape, tottered toward him. Musclebinder saw the gleaming steel-body, the metallic face, the outstretched clawing arms advancing.

"A monster!" he gurgled. "Help – it's witchcraft – take it away!"

## Robert Bloch

Shaking with sudden fright, Musclebinder dashed from the kitchen. Agatha followed.

"Wait for me, George," she wailed. "I'm coming with you."

She paused in the doorway and sniffed at Mr. Droop.

"I suppose you know this is the end," she told him. "I'm leaving you for good. You've made a wreck out of poor George. And if you prefer the company of a walking garbagecan to me—well, it's your funeral!"

Mr. Droop made a gesture with his rolling pin and Agatha closed the door hastily.

He stood there, listening to the sound of retreating footsteps.

Tinnie was at his side, her jaw-hinges moving in a slow smile.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for saving me."

"Nothing at all," muttered Mr. Droop, in an embarrassed voice. "Forget it."

"I can't forget it," said Tinnie. The robot moved closer. Her voice was soft. "Did you mean what you told Agatha?" she asked.

"What?" gulped Mr. Droop.

"About—about the woman you love." Tinnie turned her face away shyly as she spoke.

"I—I guess I did," admitted Mr. Droop, slowly.

"Then I can stay here," said Tinnie. "And cook for you and keep house and everything."

Mr. Droop turned with new resolution. He held the robot close. "I'll say you can," he muttered. "I'll go out and get a job and feel like a man again. And you can run the household. Tinnie, I've always wanted a girl just like you."

And so it was arranged. Mr. Droop wrote to Dr. Moke and got permission. The two of them have settled down quite happily.

As to whether a union between a man and a robot can work out, only time can tell.

But at the moment both Tinnie and Mr. Droop are looking forward to the day they can celebrate their tin wedding anniversary.

# The End of Science Fiction

I know I shouldn't be telling you this, because we are all pledged to secrecy. I guess the publishers were afraid of what might happen if the news leaked out.

"Let it ride," said one of the editors at the meeting where the decision was made. "Of course there'll be talk about it at first. But we can fix it with the trade papers and the public press. The only trouble is that the fans will do a lot of complaining and investigating. They will wonder why science-fiction magazines aren't going to be published any more.

"Well, let them wonder. We'll just keep quiet. We must. And after a while the readers will forget. They'll find something else to think about. Of course the whole thing is awkward, but we have no choice—not after what happened."

That's the way it was finally decided. And up to now, nobody has breathed a word. Nothing has leaked out concerning the reasons for discontinuing all science-fiction publications—forever.

I'm breaking the pledge of silence now for the first time.

I'm going to tell you what happened on that last day—the day when science fiction ended forever.

Naturally, I have my reasons for speaking out. I'll give them to you cold.

First of all, I owe it to Richard Ormsbee to tell the truth. I know he'd want it that way, and as his friend I must do it.

Secondly, I think you should be warned. Yes, I said "warned." Because already I've heard rumors that some fan groups are agitating for the return of science-fiction magazines. Several publishers who never put out a fantasy book are thinking of entering the field. This must not happen.

There's a third reason, too. A most important reason.

## Robert Bloch

This nation, this world, is in a bad enough situation without the addition of further madness and confusion. We are in no shape or condition to beat back new enemies—particularly the enemies I have in mind.

Does that sound peculiar to you? A little wacky, perhaps? I wish it were just that. But there's a grim truth behind my words.

Even now, these same words may be read by others. Others who read not for pleasure but for information. Others who might plagiarize, just as they plagiarized on that final, fatal day when science fiction died.

When you finish this, you'll understand what I mean. And I want you to understand, for a reason.

I want you to go up into your attic or down into your cellar, wherever you've stacked or saved back issues, of science-fiction and fantasy magazines. Go and find them, and destroy them. Destroy them instantly and utterly. Destroy them before they fall into the wrong hands and destroy you.

Remember, now—it's a bargain.

In return, I'm telling you the whole story. Here is the way it happened—the way that science fiction died...

\* \* \*

The Tenth World Science Fiction Convention was scheduled for Labor Day Weekend. As a fantasy reader, you probably know all about the Conventions—organized on an annual basis by fans in various cities, they have become an institution. Each year, several hundred fans, editors and authors meet for three days in the selected city, attending regular sessions of speeches, lectures and discussions at a convention hall. This last year was New York's turn to play host, and Labor Day Weekend had been eagerly awaited by fandom.

I pulled into Penn Station on Friday afternoon and lugged my grips down the platform. I kept my weather eye peeled for a glimpse of Richard Ormsbee. He'd promised to meet me at the train, but there wasn't hide, hair nor mustache of Dick as I made my way through the crowd.

Instead, a short, pudgy-faced young man jostled toward me and stared upward. He hesitated for a long moment, then spoke.

"Pardon me, but are you Robert Bloch?"

"What did you expect?" I asked. "A gorilla?"

## The End of Science Fiction

"No – it's just that you don't look the way I expected you to look – I mean –"

"I understand," I shrugged. "It's true that I used to have two heads but one of them was amputated last year. I carry it in my suitcase. Want to see it?"

How far I might have succeeded in driving him crazy I'll never know. Larry Fisher came along at that moment and grabbed my arm. He's my agent, and he handled my arm gingerly so as not to injure the muscles I use in typing stories.

"Good to see you, Bob!" he greeted me. "By the way, meet George Selby. He's a fan of yours." Larry gestured toward the moon-faced young man. I started to apologize for my rudeness and attempt to put him at his ease, but Larry took charge of the situation.

"Let's get your things over to the hotel," he suggested. "Then we'll grab something to eat." He waved Selby aside. "See you at the Convention tomorrow," he promised. "You'll have plenty of time to talk to Bloch then."

He hustled me over to the cabstand and we ploughed through traffic toward the hotel.

"Where's Ormsbee?" I inquired, as we shot up Broadway with the speed of a rheumatic snail on crutches.

"Haven't seen him for the last few days," Larry told me. "Of course he's pretty busy – guest of honor at the Convention and all that. He's probably typing the final draft of his speech right now."

"He promised to meet me," I said.

"We'll call him from the hotel," Larry suggested. "I know he's anxious to see you."

I was anxious enough to see him. Richard Ormsbee and I had been friends for a dozen years. When I'd met him through correspondence he'd been a fan. Then he'd turned writer, and within a few years his reputation was established not only in the field of fantasy but beyond. He sold to the slicks, turned out books, did radio and TV work, and at the same time managed to retain his warm and unassuming friendliness. Where I come from in the writing business, that's no mean achievement, and I liked Dick for it. As a matter of fact, it was the news of his selection as guest of honor that drew me to this Convention.

So here I was but no Ormsbee!

There was no answer when we phoned his house from my hotel room. That puzzled me. We'd made plans to meet by mail. What was wrong?

## Robert Bloch

I didn't have much time to puzzle over the problem. Otto Binder and some of the New York gang arrived about five, and then Ackerman called — just in from the Coast — and Bob Tucker came up looking for a deck of cards.

We had dinner somewhere eventually, and drinks. We kept running into other Conventioneers, and more drinks. Gradually I forgot about Ormsbee.

\* \* \*

By the time I got back to the hotel, there was no room for anything in my head except the triphammer that seemed to be operating up there.

Then I went into my suite and found — Richard Ormsbee.

He was sitting on the bed. Or rather, he *had* been sitting there. But when I opened the door he jumped up.

"Oh — it's you!"

"Expecting a blonde?" I asked.

"No. Not exactly." He smiled, but as we shook hands I noticed that he seemed tired. What had become of the usual Ormsbee banter that had charmed so many people across (and under) the table in days gone by?

I thought I had an obvious clue. Dick must be suffering from a bad case of stage fright. The idea of making a speech tomorrow had him stymied.

"Convention got you down?" I asked. "Thinking about your speech?"

He shook his head. "It's not my speech, Bob," he said. "I've got that part figured out. Would you like to hear it?"

"Sure, Dick. Of course I would. Shoot."

Ormsbee hunched forward on the bed and began to talk. He never cracked a smile, but what he said was oddly grotesque.

"Mr. Chairman, friends, and science-fiction fans of the world:

"What I have to say to you today is not very pleasant. You will not particularly enjoy listening to it, and I certainly do not enjoy telling it to you.

"But I have no choice, so I'll try to make it short and to the point. Friends, my message to you is simply this —

*"Science fiction must be destroyed!"*

"What do I mean by that? I mean that all writers must stop writing science-fiction stories. Stop immediately, and forever.

## The End of Science Fiction

"I mean that all publishers of fantasy magazines must give up publications—immediately, and forever.

"I mean that all fans must abandon their interest in the field. They must destroy all current and back issues of magazines, and amateur publications. They must burn—yes, *burn*—all books and pamphlets pertaining to fantasy.

"I mean that this must be the last World Science Fiction Convention. I mean that the name, the very memory of science fiction must perish from the earth. I mean—*What's that?*"

The last two words were a shout. Ormsbee jerked his head towards the window, his face white with sudden shock.

I headed for the open window and peered out. I saw nothing beyond except the lights of Manhattan.

"I'm pretty shaky," Ormsbee murmured. "For a minute I thought it might be *them*."

He pulled out a cigarette, stuck it between his lips, but didn't light it. I faced him grimly.

"Listen, Dick, what is all this? What's with this screwball speech of yours? What's all the melodrama about 'them'? Are you kidding?"

He shook his head. "I could give you the rest of the speech," he sighed. "That would explain it. But I'll boil it down. In the speech I give details, because I must be convincing. I want them to believe me. But I'll just give you bare facts."

He sat down once more and lighted the cigarette. "It started on the day they called me up to tell me about making the speech at this Convention.

"Naturally, I was pleased. I decided to knock off work and take a stroll. I went down to a little bookbinder by the name of Breutsch. He had a copy of H. P. Lovecraft's *The Outsider* that he was rebinding for me.

"I walked into Breutsch's little basement shop and the old man shuffled out of the back room. When he saw me, his face fell a bit.

"'Isn't it ready yet?' I asked.

"He shook his head. 'Mr. Ormsbee—I don't know how to explain this to you—but your book has been stolen.'

"'Stolen?'

"'Either that, or the rats got it. There's prints like rats' paws in the dust near the window. And the window's broken.'" He led me into the back room and showed me.

## Robert Bloch

"Must have happened last night!" he said. "I had your book in clamps over there on the window-edge, drying. When I opened up shop this morning, here's what I found."

"I stared at the dusty ledge. There were clamps setting against the wall. They had been pried open. And all around the clamps were prints. Prints in the dust. They looked like the marks of rodent claws, or the lines etched by scraping fingernails. But with one peculiarity. Each disturbance of dust came in a regular pattern of six marks. Not four, like a rat's claws. Not five, like fingerprints. Six. Six indentations in a pattern, repeated a dozen times.

"Above the ledge was the window. The pane had obviously been shattered, but there was no broken glass. The opening was not jagged, but quite neat. A glass-cutter does that kind of a job. Then an arm might have reached down, a hand pried open the clamps, and taken the book.

"Very simple. Except that the marks were *not* made by fingers.

"I stared again at the disturbed dust. And then I began to shudder. Don't ask me why. It wasn't anything like your yarns, Bob. No feeling of 'hovering horror' or 'evil presences.' But the skin crawled against my neck and my mouth went dry and I thought of my lost Lovecraft anthology and shuddered.

"Who—or what—had stolen this book? Why had this particular volume been chosen? It wasn't a regular robbery.

"Breutsch said something about insurance and paying me back and notifying the police. I mumbled something about accidents and petty thieves. But we were both lying. As I left the shop I stared into his eyes and saw that *he* knew.

"Then, when I got home, I found the apartment had been searched."

Ormsbee doused the cigarette and continued. "There was no dust in the place, and I saw no unnatural prints. Somehow I was glad of that. But evidences of search were unmistakable. They'd pried a window up—don't ask me how, since I'm on the fourth floor with a sheer drop to the courtyard below—and they'd gone through the place thoroughly.

"No money or jewelry was missing. That was strange.

"My clothes had been jumbled about a bit in the closet. And there was a gap in my bookshelves. Some back issues of magazines were gone. Also I missed a photograph from the dresser. But that was all.

"I could have called the police, but I didn't. I merely straightened things out and took a drink. But I couldn't straighten out my thoughts.

"And when at last I went to bed and tried to sleep off my forebodings, I had this dream."



## The End of Science Fiction

Ormsbee's voice was low. It deepened as he went on.

"I dreamed that I had fallen asleep and left the radio going. Now, in my sleep, the radio spoke to me. From the blare of late dance-band music, a voice slithered out. It came from far away—and it called to me in accents that weren't formed in a human throat.

"That's what disturbed me, I guess. Because the words, as I half-heard them, were soothing. 'Sleep' said the voice. 'Sleep and rest.' Gentle, beguiling words. The words of a hypnotist. And from a throat that wasn't meant to form words. Even in slumber I could tell that about the voice. It wasn't a foreign accent, it was an *alien* one. 'Sleep and rest,' it droned.

"I might have obeyed at that. I might have sunk into a deeper coma. But then everything coalesced. Something about the prints in the dust and my disturbed room and the theft of that particular book seemed to add up at the sound of the alien voice. Something clicked into place. I knew, suddenly, what it was that I suspected and feared. And I woke up with a scream.

"*'The Whisperer!'* I shrieked. *'The Whisperer in Darkness!'*

"I awoke. There was a glowing in my room, but it didn't come from a light, or anything inside. It came from the open window just beyond. Something was hanging out there, something suspended before the opening. It appeared—in the brief glimpse I got of it—to be a shiny metal cylinder of surprising dimensions. I had the vague impression of sudden, blurred movement. Then the thing faded, or moved away before the echo of my shout had time to reverberate.

"I was out of bed at a bound. The sky beyond the window was clear. But so was the realization that haunted me now as I guessed the truth.

"Since that time, nothing has happened. Nothing *definite*, that is. I am taking some sedative the doctor made up, and there are no dreams. It's bad enough to live with my thoughts while I'm awake.

"Not that I'm afraid. *They* may have what they were after, anyway—the Lovecraft book and the magazines. That should give them all the information they need. Of course, I'm bothered by their taking my photograph. It's utterly fantastic. But so is the whole business.

"So, you see, I must make the speech I gave you. I must make that speech tomorrow and warn them—warn the other writers and the editors. Tell them that *they* are here and plan on taking over. And we must do our part in preventing it."

Ormsbee's monologue ended, but my bewilderment had just begun.

## Robert Bloch

"I don't see anything," I confessed. "Who are *they*? What is this warning you want to make? What's the clue of *The Whisperer in Darkness*?"

"Don't you remember the story?" asked Ormsbee. "Lord knows where Lovecraft got the idea—if it *was* only an idea, even then. It's about the things that came from beyond; from Pluto, the dark planet. They had a queer, superior intelligence, and planned to rule earth through renegade humans who acted as their spies.

"They stole human intelligence, too, when they needed it. And gradually, by means of hypnotism, deception and outright violence, they planned to take control of mankind. When a man suspected the secret or knew too much, he was—eliminated."

"Now wait a minute," I said. "Fun's fun, but you aren't trying to tell me that good old HPL's story is fact and the monsters from Pluto are on your trail."

"Of course not. But something is," Ormsbee said, earnestly.

"Huh!" I snorted. "Sounds like something out of Eric Frank Russell or a hundred other science-fiction yarns I've read. Trouble with you is that you've been reading too much science fiction!"

"That's the point," said Ormsbee. "Now you're getting it. Only, *I'm* not reading science fiction. They are!"

"What do you mean?"

"Suppose," said Ormsbee, slowly, "that beings do exist. Beings from another dimension, or another planet. Beings forming part of a life-pattern alien to earth.

"Suppose, again, that these creatures—whatever their purposes or desires—have suddenly found a way of communicating with earth. Or even of *coming* to earth in what we writers have spoken of so glibly for so many years: a space-ship.

"Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this is the truth behind the so-called Flying Saucers, as has often been suggested. Grant that it's true. Outsiders with a superior intelligence arrive on this planet—what will they do?"

"Wreck the Empire State Building," I sneered. "They try it in every story."

"Exactly!" Ormsbee declared. "It's from those stories that they get their information!"

"Now, wait a minute—"

"Don't you see?" he persisted. "Picture these aliens, these outsiders, arriving through a gap in the continuum of space or time. They have no direct kinship with humanity or human thought. The strongest link

## The End of Science Fiction

would naturally be through the minds of those who are at least conditioned – however unwittingly – to the possibility of their existence. To be specific, the writers of fantasy and science fiction, whose brains can conceive of such beings.

“That’s how they were drawn to me, I suppose. And through my mind they learned of the books and the magazines.

“Suppose you were a spy in enemy territory. Wouldn’t you want to secure plans, maps, theories of strategy? Of course! And the theories of strategy for those outside of earth are – science-fiction stories!

“Where else would you find ideas on how to destroy the earth, or rule the human race? Where else would you find such detailed consideration of just how the world might be successfully invaded from outside?

“They took the Lovecraft book containing that *Whisperer* story. And then they came to my place for magazines. There’s some psychic connection with my unconscious mind, and it guides them. Of course, I can’t guess what they want, or what they plan to do. Why they tried to get to me in sleep. What that half-waking vision of a silver cylinder signifies.

“All that I’m sure of is that a menace does exist. And I’m making my speech tomorrow. I’m telling the science-fiction world everything I’ve told you. We’ve aided an enemy unconsciously for years, and it must stop.

“For whoever they are, and whatever they plan, we mustn’t help them any longer. We must stop writing the stories. We must seal our imaginations to those images of *outside* that seem to aid them.

“Perhaps they will come out in the open, soon. It may be that we can make plans, anticipate their movements, learn more about them. But come what may – I’m giving my speech.”

Ormsbee concluded abruptly, forcing a grin as he rose to his feet.

“Now I must rush,” he said. “Maybe you think I’m crazy, and maybe everyone will think I’m crazy, after tomorrow. But please promise me one thing – not a word to anyone until I appear at Convention hall. Good night. See you tomorrow.”

I fumbled for words, but there was nothing to say. He left the room, left me standing by the open window.

For a long time I stared down at the lights of the city below. Then I stared upward at the distant stars, and at the gulfs of blackness between the stars.

And I wondered –

## Robert Bloch

\* \* \*

Long before the official opening of the Convention at 10 A.M., the penthouse hall was crowded. There must have been over four hundred in attendance. Everyone milled around, and I had a hard time spotting familiar faces. But the whole fantasy field was out in force: editors, authors, and fans.

Then George Selby, perennial fan, grabbed my elbow and steered me into the hall outside. He began to pump my arm and also me, for information. What did I write? How did I write? Why did I write?

The more he talked, the more I wondered. Meanwhile, the speeches of welcome had already started in the hall and the seats were filled. By the time I managed to shake friend Selby and get back into the hall there was nothing left but standing room against the wall, near the door. And Ormsbee's name was being announced as the next speaker.

There was applause as Richard Ormsbee stepped out from the back of the raised platform and approached the lectern and microphone. Knowing what I did, it was easy to detect signs of strain on his rigid features. He looked pale, and his lips were compressed beneath his mustache. He walked slowly, and kept his hands in his pockets. I could imagine how nervous he must be, but his face was stolid, immobile.

The applause subsided. A building attendant peered into the room, glanced around curiously, and withdrew. I hunched against the wall and prepared to listen.

Ormsbee had already begun to talk. His voice sounded dully over the microphone. Hall acoustics were not all they should be. But then, neither was his speech.

For Ormsbee was not delivering the speech he had recited to me the night before!

I listened intently as I heard the unfamiliar sentences pour out.

"The peculiar irony of it," he was saying, "is that you — who are presumed authorities on the subject — know nothing about it. Absolutely nothing!

"What do you know about space, for example? Not as much as Columbus knew about the western hemisphere before he sailed. Not as much as the ancient Phoenicians, rather. For early sailors at least ventured out to sea.

"But no man has ever risen more than a few dozen miles into what you call the stratosphere. No man-made instrument has ever risen much higher and returned.

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"And yet, in your ignorance, you presume to set forth 'laws' about space. A stupid Einstein, using the formalized gibberish you call mathematics, tries to compress the entire universe into a concept bounded by three-dimensional figures and equations.

"You and your scientific postulates! They are not based on actual observations of physical reactions, but on hollow philosophic attitudes toward those reactions. You *name* rather than explain; yours is a system of labeling.

"Exactly what is the 'cosmic ray?' What is 'corpuscular radiation' and 'auroral streamers' – what is this jargon about 'E' layers in electronics? Just words, gibberish of little men who don't even dream of what electricity really is. Men who claim to chart the universe while squatting on an earth so faultily weighed and measured that there is no mathematical certitude anywhere. And if a phenomenon presents itself that is not in line with your hollow theories, you ignore it.

"You pitiful, deluded ones, who don't even dream of what goes on under your very noses, who sneer at Fort, scoff at the few thinkers who dared to speculate on the truth –"

Ormsbee's speech wasn't exactly making a hit. Even though he delivered it stolidly enough, there were growing murmurs, grumbings and mutterings rising to open complaints.

"Still, you have unwittingly served your purpose. Ignorantly, you have opened the way to the very abysses of which you complacently scribble in your childish fantasies –"

I felt an arm jab into my back, and turned. The building attendant who had peered into the room was staring at me, now. There was no curiosity in his face, only a grimace of horror.

"Let me through," he whispered. "Got to make an announcement, right away –"

"Wait a minute," I began. He shook his head. Suddenly he opened his mouth and began to yell, in a voice that drowned out Ormsbee's words from the platform.

"It was you fellers done it!" he shouted. "You and your crazy tricks!" Heads turned, craned. The attendant faced his audience.

"Get it off the roof right away!" he yelled. "Get it off, or I'll have the whole gang tossed out of the hotel!"

"What's on the roof?" I snapped.

"That damned silver cylinder – it come down from the sky and it's humming and purring –"

Silver cylinder? Hadn't Ormsbee told me?

I took sudden command of the situation.

## Robert Bloch

"Where's the stairs?" I yelled. I'm afraid my own voice held a note of hysteria. "Come on, let's see this thing."

We turned. The speech was forgotten as the crowd poured out at our heels. Half of them must have thought it was a gag—but nobody likes to miss a gag.

The jam on the staircase to the roof was terrific. But I was still right behind the attendant when we reached the top.

I stared at the empty roof.

"It's gone!" His jaw hung slackly.

"No it isn't," I muttered. "There!" And I pointed toward the horizon.

Faint and far away the flicker of light shone down. Something spun off into space—spun like a silver top against the sun. Something that might have been a great round metal cylinder. Something that might have been a flying saucer. Something that might have been a spaceship from a story.

I don't know how many of the others saw it. But I saw it. And then—

"Where's Ormsbee?"

The familiar voice whispered at my side. It was Larry, my agent. He stared at me as I bent my head. "I called him this morning to pick him up on the way to the Convention. But he wasn't home. Then I came over here alone. Just got in and saw the crowd up on the roof—"

"It's all right," I said. "Ormsbee's here. Downstairs making a speech when this interruption came." I steered Larry back downstairs, through the throng of excited fans, all babbling at once.

Ormsbee was not a part of the crowd here or in the corridor below, so I assumed he was still on the platform, patiently waiting for his audience to return.

We entered the hall. It was deserted. Only then, as I stared up at the platform did the monstrous conjecture form in my mind.

They—

They had taken the Lovecraft book. That story—*The Whisperers in Darkness*—would give them an idea. No wonder Ormsbee had feared it. As he said, we writers could tell them what to do.

So they took the book. And they took his magazines. And inspected his clothing. And stole his picture. And when they couldn't get him to sleep, they waited.

Waited until last night—

Why? Because he was going to make a speech. A speech about destroying science fiction. A speech warning science fiction and the world about invaders from outside.

## The End of Science Fiction

So they had taken steps, moving in their great metal globe, to see that Ormsbee wouldn't make that speech.

But he had just spoken. Or else—

I didn't say anything to Larry. I just thought of the strange mockery of the speech I had heard, and I thought of how curiously immobile Ormsbee's face had been, and how he had held his hands in his pockets, walked woodenly, and talked in a drawling drone.

Then I was running down the aisle, clawing my way up to the lectern. I knew what I was looking for, of course. Anybody who had read Lovecraft's story would guess.

I was looking for a rubber mask—the kind that can be fitted over the head. A rubber mask molded in the features of Richard Ormsbee.

I didn't find it.

It wasn't until I stumbled backstage that I found something—and promptly passed out.

\* \* \*

Ever since that discovery I've been waiting for other things to be found. Waiting for other manifestations of those presences from outside.

I don't know when they will move again. I don't know exactly what they want. If they plagiarized the ideas in Lovecraft's story they can plagiarize any horror, make it real.

All I can do is plead with you, implore you to abandon science fiction forever. Don't give them any more help!

All I can do is tell you what I stumbled over when I went backstage.

It was Ormsbee's body. Or certain *parts* of it.

They had sewed up the head again very cleverly, and it wasn't until the doctors arrived and made their examination that the *changes* could be detected.

It took a complete autopsy to determine how the brain had been removed and the spinal column altered. Even now they cannot account for the tangle of wires, coils and metal filaments that filled the empty skull and extended through the body.

Some say it was a mechanical brain, substituted to animate a corpse. There have been learned comments about the use of unclassified metals and alloys.

On only one point are they agreed—whatever the mechanism animating the body of Richard Ormsbee on that fatal day when science fiction died—*it wasn't made on earth!*





## Original Appearances

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- "The End of Science Fiction," © 1951 for *Other Worlds*, October, 1951.

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