

Infinity

SCIENCE FICTION

FEBRUARY, 1956

Vol. 1, No. 2

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COVER, illustrating Kenneth Bulmer's *Quarry*, by Ed Emsh.

ILLUSTRATIONS by Emsh, Engle, Remington, Stallman and Wilimczyk

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INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION, published bi-monthly by Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th St., New York 17, N. Y. Single copy, 35¢; subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, \$3.50; elsewhere, \$4.50. Copyright 1955 by Royal Publications, Inc. Application for second class entry pending at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.



If you discovered a fantastic power like this, you'd use it benevolently, for the good of the entire human race—wouldn't you? Sure you would!

a

likely story

by DAMON KNIGHT



THAT WAS the damnedest December I ever saw in New York. Whatever the weather is, Manhattan *always* gets the worst of it—frying hot in summer, snow or slush up to your ankles in winter—and all along the seaboard, it was a mean season. Coming in from Pennsylvania the day before, we'd been held up twice while the tracks were cleared. But when I stepped out of the hotel that night, the Saturday after Christmas, it was like a mild October; the air was just cool, with a fresh hint of snow in it. There was a little slush in the gutters, not much; the pavements were dry.

I was late, or I would have gone back and ditched the rubbers; I hate the foolish things to begin with, one reason I moved to the country—out there, I wear house slippers half the year, galoshes the rest; there's no in-between. I took off my gloves, opened my scarf, and breathed deep lungfuls while I walked to the corner for a cab. I began to wonder if it had been smart to move 90 miles out of town just because I didn't like rubbers.

The streets didn't seem overcrowded. I got a cab without any trouble. Nobody was hurrying; it was as if the

whole population was sitting peacefully at home or in some bar, in no rush to be anywhere else.

"Listen," I said to the cabbie, "this is still New York, isn't it?"

He jerked his chin at me. "Hah?"

"Where's the crowds?" I said. "Where's the rotten weather? What happened?"

He nodded. "I know whatcha mean. Sure is funny. Crazy weather."

"Well, when did this happen?"

"Hah?"

"I said, how long has this been going on?"

"Cleared up about three o'clock. I looked out the winda, and the sun was shinin'. Jeez! You know what I think?"

"You think it's them atom bombs," I told him.

"That's right. You know what I think, I think it's them *atom* bombs." He pulled up opposite a canopy and folded down his flag.

In the lobby, I found an arrow-shaped sign that said, "MEDUSA CLUB."

The Medusa Club is, loosely speaking, an association for professional science fiction writers. No two of them will agree on what science fiction is—or on anything else—but

WARNING TO NEW WRITERS: *Early in your career (it always happens), you'll be tempted to write a story in which the characters are writers and—possibly—editors. Don't do it! Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it won't be funny, or even interesting, to readers. Occasionally, of course, someone does it well; but it takes someone with tremendous talent and experience, someone who can combine the best of science fiction and detective puzzle-stories with a generous salting of sparkling humor—someone, that is, like Damon Knight.*

they all write it, or have written it, or pretend they can write it, or something. They have three kinds of meetings, or two and a half. One is for club politics, one is for drinking, and the third is also for drinking, only more so. As a rule, they meet in people's apartments, usually Preacher Flatt's or Ray Alvarez', but every year at this time they rent a hotel ballroom and throw a whingding. I'm a member in bad standing; the last time I paid my dues was in 1950.

Rod Pfehl (the P is silent, as in Psmith) was standing in the doorway, drunk, with a wad of dollar bills in his hand. "I'm the treasurer," he said happily. "Gimme." Either he was the treasurer, or he had conned a lot of people into thinking so. I paid him and started zigzagging slowly across the floor, trading hellos, looking for liquor.

Tom Q. Jones went by in a hurry, carrying a big camera. That was unusual; Tom Q. is

head components designer for a leading radio-TV manufacturer, and has sold, I guess, about two million words of science fiction, but this was the first time I had ever seen him in motion, or with anything but a highball in his hand. I spotted Punchy Carroll, nut-brown in a red dress; and Duchamp biting his pipe; and Leigh MacKean with her pale protoNordic face, as wistful and fey as the White Knight's; and there was a fan named Harry Somebody, nervously adjusting his horn-rims as he peered across the room; and, this being the Christmas Party, there were a lot of the strangest faces on earth.

Most of them were probably friends of friends, but you never knew; one time there had been a quiet banker-type man at a Medusa meeting, sitting in a corner and not saying much, who turned out to be Dorrance Canning, an old idol of mine; he wrote the "Woman Who Slept" series

and other gorgeous stuff before I was out of knee pants.

There were two blue-jacketed bartenders, and the drinks were eighty-five cents. Another reason I moved to the country is that the amusements are cheaper. Nursing my collins, I steered around two broad rumps in flounced satin and ran into Tom Q. He snapped a flashbulb in my face, chortled something, and went away while I was still dazzled. Somebody else with a lemon-colored spot for a head shook my left hand and muttered at me, but I wasn't listening; I had just figured out that what Tom had said, was, "There's no *film* in it!"

SOMEBODY fell down on the waxed floor; there was a little flurry of screams and laughter. I found myself being joggled, and managed to put away an inch of the collins to save it. Then I thought I saw Art Greymbergen, my favorite publisher, but before I could get anywhere near him Carrol's clear Sunday-school voice began calling, "The program is about to begin—please take your seats!" and a moment later people were moving sluggishly through the bar archway.

I looked at my watch, then hauled out my copy of the

little mimeographed sheet, full of earnest jocularly, that the club sent out every year to announce the Party. It said that the program would begin somewhere around 10, and it was that now.

This was impossible. The program always pivoted on Bill Plass, and Bill never got there, or anywhere, until the party was due to break up.

But I looked when I got down near the bandstand, and by God there he was, half as large as life, gesturing, flashing his Charlie Chaplin grin, teetering like a nervous firewalker. He saw me and waved hello, and then went on talking to Asa Akimsov, Ph.D. (A-K-I-M-I-S-O-V, please, and never mind the Akirfesian, or Akimsiov.)

Maybe it *was* them atom bombs. I found a vacant folding chair with a good view of the platform, and a better one of a striking brunette in blue. Akimsov got up on the platform, with his neck sticking out of his collar like a potted palm (he had lost forty pounds, again) and began telling jokes. Ace is the second funniest man in Medusa, the first being Plass; the peculiar thing is that Plass writes humor professionally, and delivers his annual set-pieces the same way—the rest

of the time he is merely a perfectly fascinating morbid wit—but Akimisov, who writes nothing but the most heavily thoughtful fiction in the business, bubbles with humor all the time, a poor man's Sam Levenson. I was going to write an article once proving that a writer's personality on paper was his real one turned inside out, but I fell afoul of some exceptions. Like Tom Q., who was still flashing his bulbs over at the side of the platform, and being noisily suppressed—you could paper him all over with his published stories, and never know the difference.

The program was good, even for Medusa. Ned Burgcon, wearing a sky-blue dinner jacket and a pepper-and-salt goatee, played his famous twenty-one-string guitar; a dark-haired girl, a new one to me, sang in a sweet, strong contralto; there was a skit involving Punchy Carrol as a dream-beast, L. Vague Duchamp as a bewildered spaceman, and B. U. Jadrys, the All-Lithuanian Boy, as a ticket agent for the Long Island Railroad. Then came Plass's annual monologue, and there is just nothing like those. I'm not exaggerating out of parochial pride (once a year is enough Medusa for



me): the simple truth is that Plass is a comic genius.

He had his audience laid out flat, gasping and clutching its sides. Why should a man like that waste his time writing fiction?

Toward the end he paused, looked up from his notes, and ad-libbed a biting but not very funny wisecrack about—well, I'd better not say about what. A certain member in the audience stiffened and half got up, and there was a little embarrassed murmur under the laughter, but it was over in a minute. Bill looked flustered. He went back to his prepared speech, finished, and got a roar of applause.

I did my share, but I was worried. Bill can charm the rattles off a snake; if he wanted to go in for quack-doctoring, nut cultism or Canadian mining stock, let alone night-club comedy, he could be a millionaire. That

gaffe simply hadn't been like him, at all. Still, it was Bill's Dostoevskian soul that made him the funny man he was, and God only knew what had been happening to him in the year since I'd been in town . . .

Akimisov, as m.c., delivered the final words. He bowed, straightened, and his pants fell down.

In the dressing room, when I got back there, Bill was busy apologizing to the member on whose toes he had trodden—that apology would have soothed a tiger with a toothache — and Akimisov, with a bewildered expression, was holding up his pants. That was what I was curious about; it was another false note—I didn't think Ace would stoop that low for a laugh. The pants were too big for him, of course, but Ace had always struck me as the kind of guy who wears a belt *and* suspenders.

He did; but the tongue had come out of the belt-buckle, and all the suspenders buttons had popped, all at once. Scouts were being sent out to look for a belt that would fit.

I wandered out into the hall again. I was beginning to get a peculiar feeling on one drink. Too many fresh vegetables; I can't take it like I

used to. So I went to the bar and got another.

When I came out, the brunette in the blue evening gown was standing near the doorway listening to Larry Bagsby. Next thing I knew, she let out a whoop, grabbed her bosom, and fetched Larry a good one on the ear. This was unfair. I was a witness, and Larry hadn't done a thing except look; her overworked shoulder straps had simply given way, like Akimisov's suspenders.

CURIOUSER and curiouser . . . The noises around me were picking up in volume and tempo, for all the world like a dancehall scene in a Western movie, just before somebody throws the first table. There was a thud and a screech off to my right; I gathered that somebody else had fallen down. Then a tinkle of bursting glass, and another little chorus of shouts, and then another thud. It went on like that. The crowd was on the move, in no particular direction; everybody was asking everybody else what was going on.

I felt the same way, so I went looking for Ray Alvarez; you can always count on him to tell you the answer, or make one up.

Tom Q. went by, flashing that camera, and it wasn't till the mob had swallowed him that I realized he wasn't replacing the bulb between shots—the same one was blazing over and over.

Well, a few years ago it was silly putty; the year before that, Diarrhetics. This year, everlasting flash bulbs—and no film in the camera.

Ned Burgeon passed me, his grin tilting his whiskers dangerously near the lighted stub in his cigarette holder; he was carrying the guitar case as if he were wading ashore with it. I saw Duchamp off to one side, talking to somebody, gesturing emphatically with his pipe.

It isn't so, but occasionally you get the impression that science fiction writers are either very tall or very short. I watched H. Drene Pfeiffer stilt by, Ray Bolgerish in an astonishing skin-tight suit of horseblanket plaid, followed by Will Kubatius and the *heldentenor* bulk of Don W. Gamble, Jr. I lowered my sights. Sandwiched between the giants there ought to have been half a dozen people I'd have been glad to see—if not Alvarez, then Bill Plass or his brother Horty; or Jerry Thaw; Bagsby; Preacher Flatt, who looks too much

like a marmoset to be true . . . But no: down on those lower levels there was nobody but an eleven-year-old boy who had got in by mistake, and the ubiquitous fan, Harry You-Know, the one with the glasses and all that hair. I tacked, veering slightly, and beat across the room the other way.

There was another crash of glass, a *big* one, and a louder chorus of yells. It wasn't all automatic female shrieks, this time; I caught a couple of male voices, raised in unmistakable anger.

The crowd was thinning out a little; droves of friends of friends appeared to be heading for the coat room. Across one of the clear spaces came a pretty blonde, looking apprehensive. In a minute I saw why. Her skirt billowed out around her suddenly and she yelled, crouched, holding the cloth down with both hands, then sunfished away into the crowd. A moment later the same thing happened to a tall brown-haired girl over to my left.

That was too much. Glancing up, I happened to see the big cut-glass chandelier begin swaying gently from side to side, jingling faintly, working up momentum. I moved faster, buttonholing everyone

I knew: "Have you seen Ray? Have you seen Ray?"

I heard my name, and there he was, standing like stout Cortez atop the piano, where he could see the whole room like an anthill. I climbed up beside him. Alvarez, to quote Duchamp's description, is a small rumped man with an air of sleepy good-nature. This is apt until you get close to him, when you discover he is about as sleepy as a hungry catamount. "Hi," he said, with a sidewise glance.

"Hi. What do you think's doing it?"

"It could be," said Ray, speaking firmly and rapidly, "a local discontinuity in the four-dimensional plenum that we're passing through. Or it could be poltergeists—that's perfectly possible, you know." He gave me a look, daring me to deny it.

"You think so?"

"It *could* be."

"By golly, I believe you're right," I said. This is the only way to handle Alvarez when he talks nonsense. If you give him the slightest degree of resistance, he will argue along the same line till doomsday, just to prove he can.

"Mmm," he said thoughtfully, screwing up his face. "No, I don't—think—so."

"No?"

"No," he said positively. "You notice how the thing seems to travel around the room?" He nodded to a fist fight that was breaking out a few yards from us, and then to a goosed girl leaping over by the bar entrance. "There's a kind of irregular rhythm to it." He moved his hand, illustrating. "One thing happens—then another thing—now here it comes around this way again—"

A fat friend of a friend and her husband backed up against the platform just below us, quivering. There was something wrong with my fingers; they felt warm. The Collins glass was turning warm. Warm, *hell*—I yelped and dropped it, sucking my fingers. The glass looped and fell neatly on the flowered hat of the friend of a friend, and liquid splattered. The woman hooted like a peanut whistle. She whirled, slipped in the puddle and lurched off into the arms of a hairy authors' agent. Her husband dithered after her a couple of steps, then came back with blood in his eye. He got up as far as the piano stool when, as far as I could make out, his pants split up the back and he climbed down again, glaring and clutching himself.

"Now it's over in the

middle," said Ray imperturbably. "It *might* be poltergeists, I won't say it isn't. But I've got a hunch there's another answer, actually."

I said something dubious. A hotel-manager-looking kind of a man had just come in and was looking wildly around. Punchy Carrol went up to him, staring him respectfully right in the eye, talking a quiet six to his dozen. After a moment he gave up and listened. I've known Punchy ever since she was a puppy-eyed greenhorn from Philadelphia, and I don't underestimate her any more. I knew the manager-type would go away and not call any cops—at least for a while.

I glanced down at the floor, and then looked again. There were little flat chips of ice scattered in the wetness. That could have been from the ice cubes; but there was *frost* on some of the pieces of glass.

Hot on the bottom, cold on top!

"Ray," I said, "something's buzzing around in my mind. Maxwell's demon." I pointed to the frosted bits of glass. "That might— No, I'm wrong, that couldn't account for all these—"

He took it all in in one

look. "Yes, it could!" he snapped. His cat-eyes gleamed at me. "Maxwell had the theory of the perfect heat pump—it would work if you could only find a so-called demon, about the size of a molecule, that would bat all the hot molecules one way, and all the cold ones the other."

"I know," I said. "But—"

"Okay, I'm just explaining it to you."

What he told me was what I was thinking: Our unidentified friend had some way of changing probability levels. I mean, all the molecules of air under a woman's skirt *could* suddenly decide to move in the same direction—or all the molecules in a patch of flooring *could* lose their surface friction—it just wasn't likely. If you could *make* it likely—there wasn't any limit. You could make honest dice turn up a thousand sevens in a row. You could run a car without an engine; make rain or fair weather; reduce the crime index to zero; keep a demagogue from getting re-elected . . .

Well, if all that was true, I wanted in. And I didn't have the ghost of a chance—I was out of touch; I didn't know anybody. Ray knew everybody.

"SPREAD out, folks!" said a bullhorn voice. It was Samwitz, of course, standing on a bench at the far wall. Kosmo Samwitz, the Flushing Nightingale; not one of the Medusa crowd, usually—a nice enough guy, and a hard-working committeeman, but the ordinary Manhattan meeting hall isn't big enough to hold his voice. "Spread out—make an equal distance between you. That way we can't get into any fights." People started following his orders, partly because they made sense, partly because, otherwise, he'd go on bellowing.

"That's good—that's good," said Samwitz. "All right, this meeting is hereby called to order. The chair will entertain suggestions about what the nature of these here phenomenon are. . . ."

Ray showed signs of wanting to get down and join the caucus; he loves parliamentary procedure better than life itself; so I said hastily, "Let's get down with the crowd, Ray. We can't see much better up here, anyway."

He stiffened. "You go if you want to," he said quietly. "I'm staying here, where I can keep an eye on things."

The chandelier was now describing stately circles, caus-

ing a good deal of ducking and confusion, but the meeting was getting on with its business, namely, arguing about whether to confirm Kosmo by acclamation or nominate and elect a chairman in the usual way. That subject, I figured, was good for at least twenty minutes. I said, "Ray, will you tell me the truth if I ask you something?"

"Maybe." He grinned.

"Are you doing this?"

He threw his head back and chuckled. "No-o, I'm not doing it." He looked at me shrewdly, still grinning. "Is that why you were looking for me?"

I admitted it humbly. "It was just a foolish idea," I said. "Nobody we know could possibly—"

"I don't know about that," he said, squinting thoughtfully.

"Ah, come on, Ray."

He was affronted. "Why not? We've got some pretty good scientific brains in Medusa, you know. There's Gamble — he's an atomic physicist. There's Don Bierce; there's Duchamp; there's—"

"I know," I said, "I know, but where would any of them have got hold of a thing like *this*?"

"They could have invented it," he said stoutly.

"You mean like Balmer and Phog Relapse running the Michelson experiment in their cellar, and making it come out that there is an ether drift, only it's *down*?"

He bristled. "No, I certainly don't—"

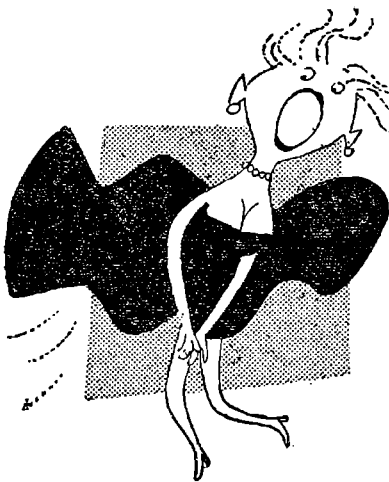
"Or like Lobbard discovering Scatology?"

"Ptah! No! Like Watt, like Edison, Galileo—" He thumbed down three fingers emphatically. "—Goodyear, Morse, Whitney—"

Down below, the meeting had taken less than five minutes to confirm Samwitz as chairman. I think the chandelier helped; they ought to install one of those in every parliamentary chamber.

The chair recognized Punchy, who said sweetly that the first order of business ought to be to get opinions from the people who knew something, beginning with Werner Kley.

Werner accordingly made a very charming speech, full of Teutonic rumbles, the essence of which was that he didn't know any more about this than a rabbit. He suggested, however, that pictures should be taken. There was a chorus of "Tom!" and Jones staggered forward with his war-



cry: "There isn't any *film* in it!"

Somebody was dispatched to get film; somebody else trotted out to telephone for reporters and cameramen, and three or four other people headed in a businesslike way for the men's room.

Ray was simultaneously trying to get the chair's attention and explaining to me, in staccato asides, how many epochal inventions had been made by amateurs in attic workshops. I said—and this was really bothering me—"But look: do you see anybody with any kind of a gadget? How's he going to hide it? How's he going to focus it, or whatever?"

Ray snorted. "It might be hidden in almost anything.

Burgeon's guitar—Gamble's briefcase— Mr. Chairman!"

Duchamp was talking, but I could feel it in my bones that Samwitz was going to get around to Ray next. I leaned closer. "Ray, listen—a thing like this—they wouldn't keep it to themselves, would they?"

"Why not? Wouldn't you—for a while, anyway?" He gave me his bobcat grin. "I can think of quite—a—few things I could do, if I had it."

So could I; that was the whole point. I said, "Yeah. I was hoping we could spot him, before the crowd does." I sighed. "Fat chance, I suppose."

He gave me another side-long look. "That shouldn't be so hard," he drawled.

"You *know* who it is?"

He put on his most infuriating grin, peering to see how I took it. "I've, got, a few, ideas."

"Who?"

Wrong question. He shook his head with a that-would-be-telling look.

Somebody across the room went down with a crash; then somebody else. "Sit on the floor!" Ray shouted, and they all did it, squatting cautiously like old ladies at a picnic. The meeting gathered speed again.

I looked apprehensively at the narrow piano top we were standing on, and sat down with my legs hanging over. Ray stayed where he was, defying the elements to do their worst.

"You know, all right," I said, looking up at him, "but you're keeping it to yourself." I shrugged. "Well, why shouldn't you?"

"O-kay," he said good-naturedly. "Let's figure it out. Where were you when it started?"

"In the bar."

"Who else was there? Try to remember exact-ly."

I thought. "Art Greymbergen. Fred Balester. Gamble was there—"

"Okay, that eliminates him—and you, incidentally—because it started in here. Right, so far?"

"Right!"

"Hmmm. Something happened to Akimisov."

"And Plass—that booboo he made?"

Ray dismissed Plass with a gesture. He was looking a little restive; another debate was under way down below, with Punchy and Leigh MacKean vociferously presenting the case for psychokinesis, and being expertly heckled by owlish little M. C. (Hot-foot) Burncloth's echo-cham-

ber voice. "It's too much," I said quickly. "There's too many of them left. We'll never—"

"It's perfectly simple!" Ray said incisively. He counted on his fingers again. "Burgeon — Kley — Duchamp — Bierce — Burncloth — MacKean — Jibless. Eight people."

"One of the visitors?" I objected.

He shook his head. "I know who all these people are, generally," he said. "It's got to be one of those eight. I'll take Kley, Bierce, Jibless and MacKean—you watch the other four. Sooner or later they'll give themselves away."

I had *been* watching. I did it some more.

A WAVE of neck-clutching passed over the crowd. Cold breezes, I expect. Or hot ones, in some cases. Tom Jones leaped up with a cry and sat down again abruptly.

"Did you see anything?" Ray asked.

I shook my head. Where, I wondered, was the good old science-fiction cameraderie? If I'd been the lucky one, I would have let the crowd in—well, a few of them, anyway—given them jobs and palaces and things. Not that they would have been grateful,

probably, the treacherous, undependable, neurotic bums. . . .

They were looking nervous now. There had been that little burst of activity after a long pause (even the chandelier seemed to be swinging slowly to rest), and now the—call it the stillness—was more than they could stand. I felt it, too: that building up of tension. Whoever it was, was getting tired of little things.

A horrible jangling welled out of Burgeon's guitar case; it sounded like a bull banjo with the heaves. Ned jumped, dropped his cigarette holder, got the case open and I guess put his hand on the strings; the noise stopped. That eliminated him . . . or did it?

Take it another way. What would the guy have to be like who would waste a marvel like this on schoolboy pranks at a Medusa Christmas party? Not Jibless, I thought—he abominates practical jokers. Bierce didn't seem to be the type, either, although you could never tell; the damndest wry stories get hatched occasionally in that lean ecclesiastic skull. Duchamp was too staid (but was I sure?); MacKean was an enigma. Gamble? Just maybe. Burgeon? Jones? It could be

either, I thought, but I wasn't satisfied.

I glanced at Ray again, and mentally crossed him off for the second or third time. Ray's an honorable man, with in his own complicated set of rules; he might mislead me, with pleasure, but he wouldn't give me the lie direct.

But I had the feeling that the answer was square in front of me, and I was blind to it.

The meeting was just now getting around to the idea that somebody present was responsible for all the nonsense. This shows you the trouble with committees.

A shocking idea hit me abruptly; I grabbed Ray by the coatsleeve. "Ray, this cockeyed weather—I just remembered. *Suppose it's local.*"

His eyes widened; he nodded reluctantly. Then he stiffened and snapped his fingers at somebody squatting just below us—the invisible fan, Harry Somebody. I hadn't even noticed him there, but it's Ray's business to know everything and keep track of everybody—that's why he's up on his hill.

The fan came over. Ray handed him something. "Here is some change, Harry—run out and call up the weather bureau. Find out whether this

freak weather is local or not, and if it is, just where the boundaries are. Got that?"

Harry nodded and went out. He was back only a couple of minutes later. "I got the Weather Bureau all right. They say it's local—just Manhattan and Queens!"

Something snapped. I did a fast jig on the piano top, slipped and came crashing down over the keys, but I hardly noticed it. I got a death-grip on Ray's trouser leg. "Listen! If he can do that—he doesn't have to be in the same room. Doesn't Gamble live out in—"

There were cries of alarm over by the open courtyard window. The room was suddenly full of cats—brindle ones, black ones, tabbies, white ones with pink ribbons around their necks, lunatic Siamese.

After them came dogs: one indistinguishable wave of liquid leaping torsos, flying ears, gullets. In half a second the room was an incident written by Dante for the Mutascope.

I caught a glimpse of a terrier bounding after two cats who were climbing Samwitz' back; I saw Duchamp asprawl, pipe still in his mouth, partially submerged under a tidal eddy of black

and white. I saw Tom Q. rise up like a lighthouse, only to be bowled over by a frantically scrambling Leigh MacKean.

Ray touched my arm and pointed. Over by the far wall, his back against it, Gamble stood like a slightly potbound Viking. He was swinging that massive briefcase of his, knocking a flying cat or dog aside at every swipe. Two women had crawled into his lee for shelter; he seemed to be enjoying himself.

Then the briefcase burst. It didn't just come open; it flew apart like a comedy suitcase, scattering a whirlwind of manuscript paper, shirts, socks—and nothing else.

The tide rushed toward the window again: the last screech and the last howl funneled out. In the ringing silence, somebody giggled. I couldn't place it, and neither could Ray, I think—then. Stunned, I counted scratched noses.

Samwitz was nowhere in sight; the crowd had thinned a good deal, but all of the eight, thank heaven, were still there—MacKean sitting groggily on a stranger's lap, Werner Kley nursing a bloody nose, Tom Q., camera still dangling from his neck, crawling carefully on hands

and knees toward the door. . . .

He reached it and disappeared. An instant later, we heard a full chorus of feminine screams from the lobby, and then the sound of an enormous J. Arthur Rank-type gong.

Ray and I looked at each other with a wild surmise. "*Tom lives in Queens!*" he said.

I scrambled down off the piano and the platform, but Ray was quicker. He darted into the crowd, using his elbows in short, efficient jabs. By the time I got to the door he was nowhere in sight.

The lobby was full of large powdery women in flowered dresses, one of them still shrieking. They slowed me down, and so did tripping over one of those big cylindrical jardinières full of sand and snipes. I reached the street just in time to see Ray closing the door of a cab.

I hadn't the wind to shout. I saw his cheerful face and Tom's in the small yellow glow of the cab light; I saw Tom Q. raise the camera, and Ray put out his hand to it. Then the cab pulled away into traffic, and I watched its beady red tail lights down the avenue until they winked out of sight.

SOME time later, walking down the cold morning street, I discovered there was somebody with me, keeping step, not saying anything. It was Harry Er-Ah.

He saw I had noticed him. "Some party," he remarked.

I said yeah.

"That was pretty funny, what happened in the lobby."

"I didn't see it."

"He came tearing through there on all fours. Right into the middle of all those women. They probably thought he was a mad dog or something."

I took two more steps, and stopped, and looked at him. "That was *all* he did?" I said.

"Sure."

"Well, then," I said with mounting exasperation, "in the name of— Oh. Wait a minute. You're wrong," I told him, calming down again. "There was the gong. He made that gong noise."

"Did he?" said Harry. One nervous hand went up and adjusted the hornrims.

I felt a little tugging at my shirt front, and looked down to see my necktie slithering out. I swatted at it instinctively, but it ducked away and hovered, swaying like a cobra.

Then it dropped. He showed me his open hand, and

there was a wire running up out of his sleeve, with a clip on the end of it. For the first time, I noticed two rings of metal wired behind the lens frames of his eyeglasses.

He pulled his other hand out of his pocket, and there was a little haywire rig in its batteries and a couple of tubes and three tuning knobs.

Fans, I was thinking frozenly—sixteen or eighteen, maybe, with pimples and dandruff and black fingernails, and that wonderful, terrible eagerness boiling up inside them . . . slaving away at backyard rocketry experiments, wiring up crazy gadgets that never worked, printing bad fiction and worse poetry in mimeographed magazines. . . . How could I have forgotten?

"I wasn't going to tell anybody," he said. "No matter what happened. If they'd *looked* at me, just once, they would have seen. But as long as you're worrying so much about it—" He blinked, and said humbly, "It scares me. What do you think I ought to do?"

My fingers twitched. I said, "Well, this will take some thinking about, Harry. Uh, can I—"

He backed off absent-mindedly as I stepped toward him.

"I've been thinking about it," he said. "As a matter of fact, I haven't been to bed since yesterday morning. I worked on it straight through from four o'clock yesterday. Twenty hours. I took caffeine tablets. But go ahead, tell me. What would you do if you—" he said it apologetically—"were me?"

I swallowed. "I'd go at it slowly," I said. "You can make a lot of mistakes by—"

He interrupted me, with a sudden fiendish glint in his eye. "The man that has this is pretty important, don't you think?" And he grinned. "How would you like to see my face on all the stamps?"

I shuddered in spite of myself. "Well—"

"I wouldn't *bother*," he said. "I've got something better to do first—"

"Harry," I said, leaning, "if I've said anything . . ."

"You didn't say anything." He gave me such a look as I hope I never get from a human again. "Big shot!"

I grabbed for him, but he was too quick. He leaped back, jamming the gadget into his pocket, fumbling at the spectacles with his other hand. I saw his feet lift clear of the pavement. He was hanging there like a mirage, drifting backward and up-

ward just a little faster than I could run.

His voice came down, thin and clear: "I'll send you a postcard from . . ."

I lost the last part; anyhow, it couldn't have been what it sounded like.

JUST over a month later came Palomar's reports of unaccountable lights observed on the dark limb of Mars. Every science fiction reader in the world, I suppose had the same thought—of a wanderer's footprints fresh in the ancient dust, his handprints on controls not shaped for hands, the old wild light wakened. But only a few of us pictured hornrims gleaming there in the Martian night. . . .

I drove over to Milford and had a look through Ham Jibless' homemade telescope. I couldn't see the lights, of course, but I could see that damned infuriating planet, shining away ruddy there across 36,000,000 miles of space, with its eternal *Yah, yah, you can't catch me!*

MEDUSA meetings have been badly attended since then, I'm told; for some reason, it gives the members the green heavens to look at each other. ∞ ∞