

BLUE BOOK

September, 1950 **MAGAZINE** Vol. 91, No. 5

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The short stories and novel herein are fiction and intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.



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And Lo, the

THE AUTHOR OF "THE MASK OF MEDUSA" AND "THE MAGIC STAIRCASE" HERE OFFERS A FANTASY THAT IS SOMETHING SPECIAL

I DON'T know why I'm bothering to write this. It's undoubtedly the most useless bit of writing I've ever done in a career—I suppose you'd call it that?—devoted to defacing reams of clean copy paper with torrents of fatuous words. But I've got to do something to keep my mind occupied on this cheerless March day in the Year of Grace 1960. And since I was in this from the beginning, I might as well set it down as I remember it.

Of course, my record of those first days makes no difference now. But then, nothing matters much now.

Perhaps nothing *ever* really mattered much, actually. I don't know. I'm not very sure about anything any more. Except that this is an absurdly unimportant story for me to be writing. And that somehow I must do it, none the less. . . .

I've said I was in this from the beginning; that's a laugh. How long ago it really started is any man's guess. It depends on how you choose to measure time. Some four thousand-odd years ago if you're a fundamentalist, a dogged adherent to Archbishop Usher's chronology. Perhaps three thousand million years ago if you

*Illustrated by
Brendan Lynch*



"Here," Abramson said. "See for yourself."

Bird!

by

NELSON BOND

have that which until a few short weeks ago vaingloriously we used to speak of as a "scientific mind." I don't know the truth of the matter, nor does anyone else. But so far as I'm concerned—and you and all of us—it started about a month ago. On the night the city editor, Smitty, wig-wagged me to his desk and grunted a query at me.

"Do you," he asked a bit petulantly, "know anything at all about astronomy?"

"Why, sure," I told him. "Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune and something-or-other."

"How?" said Smitty.

"And Pluto," I remembered. "The solar family. The planets in the order of their distance from the sun. I had a semester of star-gazing at school. Some of it rubbed off."

"Good," said the C.E. "You've just won yourself an assignment. Do you know Dr. Abramson?"

"I know who he is. The big wheel on the University observatory staff."

"That's right. Well, go see him. He's got something big—so *he* says," appended Smitty.

"Cab?" I asked hopefully.

"Bus."

"Astronomically speaking," I suggested, "a big story could mean a lot of things. A comet striking earth. The heat of the sun failing, and letting us all freeze to death."

"Things are tough all over," shrugged Smitty. "Suburban busses run every twenty minutes until midnight."

"On the other hand," I mused, "he may have run into some meteorological disturbance that means atomic experiment. If the Reds are playing around with an H-bomb—"

"O.K., a cab," sighed Smitty. "Get going."

ABRAMSON was a small slim sawlow man with shadowed eyes. He shook my hand and motioned me into a chair across the yellow oak desk from him. He adjusted a gooseneck lamp so it would shine in neither of our faces, then steepled lean white fingers. He said, "It was good of you to come so promptly, Mr.—"



"Flaherty," I told him.

"Well, Flaherty, it's like this. In our profession it isn't customary to release stories through the press. As a rule we publish our observations in technical journals comprehensible, for the most part, only to specialists. But this time such treatment does not seem adequate. It might not be fast enough. I've seen something in the heavens—and I don't like it."

I made hen scratches on a fold of copy paper.

"This thing you saw—a new comet, maybe?"

"I'm not sure I know," said Abramson, "and I'm even less sure I want to know. But whatever it is, it's unusual enough and, so I suspect, important enough to warrant the step I'm taking. In order to get the swiftest possible confirmation of my observations, and of my fears, I feel I must use the public press to tell my message."

"All the news that's fit to print," I said, "and a lot that isn't; that's our stock in trade. What is it you've seen?"

He stared at me somberly for a long minute. Then:

"A bird," he said.

I glanced at him in swift surprise. "A—a bird?" I felt like smiling, but the look in his eyes did not encourage mirth.

"A bird," he repeated. "Far in the depths of space. The telescope was directed toward Pluto, farthestmost

planet of our solar system. A body almost four thousand millions of miles from Earth.

"And at that distance"—he spoke with a painful deliberation—"at that incredible distance, *I saw a bird!*"

Maybe he read the disbelief in my eyes. Anyway, he opened the top drawer of his desk, drew forth a sheaf of eight-by-ten glossies, and laid them before me.

"Here," he said. "See for yourself."

THE first photograph meant little to me. It showed a field of star-embellished space—the typical sort of picture you find in any astronomy textbook. But on it one square was outlined in white pencil. The second photo was an enlargement of this square, showing in magnified detail the outlined area. The field was larger, brighter; a myriad of glowing stars diffused a silvery radiance over the entire plate. Against this nebulousity stood out in stark relief the firm, jet silhouette of a gigantic birdlike creature in full flight.

I ventured an uncertain attempt at rationalization. I said: "Interesting. But, Dr. Abramson, many dark spots have been photographed in space. The Coalsack, for instance. And the black nebula in—"

"True," he acknowledged. "But if you will now look at the next exposure?"



*By the third week
it had reached naked-eye
visibility.*

I turned to the third photograph, and for the first time felt the breath of that cold, helpless dread which in the weeks ahead was to come to dwell with me. It depicted an overlapping portion of that field surveyed in the second print. But the dark, occulting silhouette had changed. That which was limned against the background of

the stars was still the outline of a bird—but the shape had changed. A wing which had been lifted now was dropped; the postures of neck and head and bill were definitely altered.

"This photograph," said Abramson in a dry, emotionless voice, "was taken five minutes after the first one. Disregarding the changed appearance of

the—the image, and considering only the object's relative position in space as indicated by the parallax, to have shifted its position to such an extent in so short a time indicates that the thing casting that image must have been traveling at a velocity of approximately one hundred thousand miles per minute."

"What!" I exclaimed. "But that's impossible. Nothing on earth can travel at such a speed."

"Nothing on earth," agreed Abramson. "But cosmic bodies can—and do. And for all that it has the semblance of a living creature, this thing—whatever it is—is a cosmic body."

"And that," he continued fretfully, "is why I asked you to come out here. That is the story I want you to write. That is why no moment must be wasted."

I said, "I can write the story. But it will never be believed."

"Perhaps not—at first. Nevertheless, it must be released. The public may laugh, if it wishes. Other observatories will check my discovery, verify my conclusions. And that is the important thing. No matter what it may lead to, what it means, we must learn the truth. The world has a right to know the threat confronting it."

"The threat? You think there is a threat?"

He nodded slowly, gravely.

"Yes, Flaherty. I know there is. There is a thing those pictures may not tell you, but that will be recognized instantly by any trained mathematician."

"That thing—bird, beast, machine or whatever it may be—travels in a computable path. And the direction of its flight is—toward our sun!"

MY interview threw Smitty for a loss. He read copy swiftly, scowled, studied the pix, and read the story again, this time more slowly and with furrows congealing on his forehead. Then he stalked over to my desk.

"Flaherty," he complained in a tone of outraged indignation, "what is all this? What the hell is it, I mean?"

"A story," I told him. "The story you sent me out to get. Abramson's story."

"I know that. But—a bird! What the hell kind of a story is that!"

I shrugged. "Frankly, I don't know. Dr. Abramson seems to think it's important. Maybe," I suggested, "he's got it in his head."

It was too subtle for Smitty. He smudged the bridge of his nose with a copy pencil and muttered something uncomplimentary to astronomers in general and Abramson in particular.

"I suppose we've got to print it," he decided. "But we don't have to make damned fools of ourselves. Lighten this up. If we must run it, we'll play it for laughs."

So that's what we did. We carried it on an inside page, complete with Abramson's pictures, as a special feature, gently humorous in tone. We didn't openly poke fun at Abramson, of course. After all, he was the observatory chief of staff. But we soft-

pedaled the science angle; I rewrote the yarn in the style we generally used for flying-saucer reports and sea-serpent stories.

This was, of course, a terrific boner. But in all fairness to Smitty, how was he to know this was the story to end all stories? The biggest story of his or any newspaperman's career?

Think back to the first time you read about it, and be honest. Did you guess, then, that it was gospel truth?

We soon discovered our mistake. Reaction to the yarn was swift and startling. The *Banner* had been on the streets less than an hour when the phones began to ring.

That, in itself, was not unusual. Any out-of-the-ordinary story brings its quota of cranks crawling forth from the woodwork. Discount the confirmation of the local amateur observer who called in to verify Abramson's observation. His possibly lucid report was overshadowed by the equally sincere, but considerably less credible, reports of a dozen naked-eye "witnesses" who also averred to have seen a gigantic birdlike creature soaring across the heavens during the night. Half of these described the markings of the bird; one even claimed to have heard its mating call.

Two erstwhile Civilian Defense aircraft spotters called to identify the object variously, but with equal assurance, as a B-29 and a Russian super-jet. One member of the Audubon Society identified the bird as a ruby-throated nuthatch which, he suggested, must have flown in front of the telescope just as the camera clicked. An itinerant preacher of an obscure cult marched into our office to inform us with a savage delight that this was the veritable bird foretold in the Book of Revelations, and that the end of the world could now be expected momentarily, if not sooner.

THESE were the lunatic fringe. What was unusual was that all the calls which flooded our office during the next twenty-four hours were not made by screwballs and fanatics. Some were of great importance, not only to their instigators but to the scientific world, to mankind in general.

We had fed a short take to the A.P. To our astonishment, from that syndicate we received an immediate demand for follow-up material, including copies of Abramson's pix. The national picture magazines were even more on their toes; they flew their own boys to town and had contacted Abramson for a second story before we wised up to the fact that we had broken the number-one sensation of the year.

Meanwhile, and most important of all, astronomers elsewhere in the

world set their big eyes for the arena of the thing first spotted by Dr. Abramson. And within twenty-four hours, to the stunned dismay of all who, like Smitty and myself, had seen it as a terrific joke, verifications were forthcoming from every observatory that enjoyed good viewing conditions. What's more, mathematicians verified Dr. Abramson's estimates as to the thing's speed and trajectory. The bird, estimated to be larger in size than any solar planet, was conceded to be somewhere in the vicinity of Pluto—and approaching our sun at a speed of 145,000,000 miles per day!

By the end of the first week, the bird was visible through any fair-sized telescope. The story snowballed, and in its rolling picked up all the oddments lying in its path. A character who introduced himself as a member of the Fortean Society—whatever that is—came to the office armed with a thick volume in which he pointed out to us a dozen paragraphs purporting to prove that similar dark objects had been seen in the skies above various parts of the world over a period of several hundred years.

The central council of the P.T.A. issued a plaintive statement deploring scare-journalism and its evil effects on the youth of our nation. The Daughters of the American Revolution passed a resolution branding the strange image a new secret weapon of Uncle Joe's lads, and urging that immediate steps—undefined but drastic—be taken by the authorities. Locally, a special committee of the ministers' association called to advise us that the story we had originated tended to undermine the religious faith of the community; they demanded that we print a full explanation and retraction of the hoax in the earliest possible edition—which was, by now, a complete impossibility. Before the end of the second week, the black dot in the skies could be viewed with binoculars of moderate power.

By the middle of the third week it had reached the stage of naked-eye visibility. Crowds gathered in the streets when this became known, and those with good eyesight professed to be able to discern the rhythmic rise and fall of those tremendous wings now familiar to all because of the scores of photographs which, by this time, had appeared in every newspaper and magazine of any importance.

The cadenced beating of those monstrous wings was but one of the many inexplicable—or at least unexplained—mysteries about the creature from beyond. Vainly a few diehard physicists pointed out that wings were of no propulsive help in airless void, that alate flight is possible only where there

are wind currents to lift and carry. The thing flew. And whether its gigantic pinions beat, as some men thought, on an interstellar atmosphere unguessed by earthly science, or whether they stroked against beams of light or quantum bundles, as others contended, these were meaningless quibbles in the face of that one stark, incontrovertible fact: the thing flew.

WITH the dawning of the fourth week, the thing from outer space reached Jupiter and dwarfed it—an ominous black interloper equal in size to any cosmic neighbor which man had ever seen. . . .

I sat alone with Abramson in his office. Abramson was tired. Tired and, I think, a little ill. His smile was not a success; nor had his words their hoped-for jauntiness.

"Well, I got what I wanted, Flaherty," he admitted. "I wanted swift action, and I got it. Though what good it is, I don't know. The world recognizes its danger now, and is helpless to do anything about it."

"It has hurdled the asteroids," I said. "Now it's approaching Mars, and it's still moving sunward. Everyone is asking, though, why doesn't its presence within the system raise merry hob with celestial mechanics? By all known laws, it should have thrown everything out of balance. A creature of that size, with its gravitational attraction—"

"You're still thinking in old terms, my boy. Now we are confronted with something strange and new. Who knows what laws may govern the Bird of Time?"

"The Bird," I repeated, "of Time? I seem to have heard the phrase."

"Of course." He quoted moodily, "The Bird of Time has but a little way to fly—and Lo! the Bird is on the Wing."

"The Rubáiyát?" I said.

"Yes. Omar was an astronomer, you know, as well as a poet. He must have known—or guessed—something of this." He gestured vaguely skyward. "Indeed, many of the ancients seem to have known something about it. I've been doing a lot of reading during these past weeks, Flaherty. It is amazing how many references there are in the old writings to a great bird of space—statements which until recently did not seem to be at all significant or important. But which now hold a greater and a graver meaning for us."

"Such as?"

"Culture myths," he said. "Legends. The records of a hundred vanished races. The Mayan myth of the space-swallow; the Toltec quetzlcoatl; the Russian fire-bird."

"We don't know yet," I pointed out, "that it is a bird."

He shrugged.

"A bird, a giant mammal, a pterodactyl, some similar creature on a cosmic scale; but what does it matter? Perhaps it is a life form foreign to anything we know, something we can name only in earthly terms, describe by earthly analogies. The ancients called it a bird. The Phoenicians worshipped the 'bird that was, and is again to be.' The Persians wrote of the fabulous roc; there is an Aramaic legend of the giant bird that rules—and spawns—the worlds."

"Spawns the worlds?"

"Why else should it be coming?" he inquired. "Does its great size mean nothing to you?" He stared at me thoughtfully for a moment. Then: "Flaherty," he asked strangely, "what is the earth?"

"Why," I replied, "the world we live on. A planet."

"Yes. But what is a planet?"

"A unit of the solar system. A part of the sun's family."

"Do you know that? Or are you merely parroting the things you were taught in school?"

"The latter, of course. But what else could it be?"

"The earth could be," he answered reluctantly, "no part of the sun's family at all. Many theories have been devised, Flaherty, to explain earth's place in this tiny segment of the universe which we call the solar system. None of them are probably inaccurate. But, on the other hand, none of them are demonstrably true.

"There is the nebular hypothesis, the theory that earth and its sister planets were born of a contracting sun. Were, in fact, small globules of solar matter left to cool in orbits deserted by their condensing parent.

"The planetesimal and tidal theories each are based on the assumption that unfathomable eons ago another sun by-passed our own, and that the planets are the offspring of that ancient flaming rendezvous in space.

"Each of these theories has its proponents and its opponents; each has its verifications and its denials. None can be quite refuted or wholly proven.

"But"—he stirred restlessly—"there is another possibility which, to the best of my knowledge, has never been expounded. Yet it is equally valid with any I have mentioned, and in the light of that which we now know, it seems to me more likely than any. It is that earth and its sister planets have nothing whatsoever to do with the sun. That they are not, nor ever were, mere members of its family. That the sun in our skies is simply a convenience."

"A convenience?" I frowned. "Convenience for what?"

"For the bird," said Abramson unhappily. "For the great bird which is

our parent. Flaherty, can you not conceive that our sun may be a cosmic incubator? And that the world on which we live may be, merely—an egg?"

I stared at him wildly. "An egg!" I cried. "Dr. Abramson, you're joking."

"You think so? You can look at the pictures, read the stories in the magazines, see the approaching bird with your naked eye, and still think there exists anything more incredible than that which has now befallen us?"

"But an egg! Eggs are egg-shaped. Ovoid."

"The eggs of some birds are ovoid. But those of the plover are pear-shaped, those of the sand-grouse cylindrical, those of the grebe biconical. There are eggs shaped like spindles and spears. The eggs of owls, and of mammals, are generally spheroid. As is the earth."

"But eggs have shells!"

"As does our earth. Earth's crust is but forty miles thick—a layer for a body of its size comparable in every respect to the shell of an egg. Moreover, it is a smooth shell. Earth's greatest height is Mount Everest, some thirty thousand feet; its greatest depth is Swire Deep in the Pacific, but thirty-five thousand—a maximum variation of about twelve miles. Why, to feel these irregularities on a twelve-inch model of the earth you would need the delicate fingers of the blind, for the greatest height protrudes but the hundred and twentieth part of an inch, and the lowest depth is but the hundredth part of an inch below its surface."

"Still, you can't be right," I argued desperately. "You've overlooked the most important fact. Eggs hold life! Eggs contain the fledglings of the creature that spawned them. Eggs crack open and—"

I STOPPED abruptly. Abramson nodded, creaking back and forth in his ancient swivel chair, the creaking a monotonous rhythm to his nodding. There was sadness in his eyes and in his voice.

"Even so," he said wearily. "Even so. . . ."

So that was the second great story that I broke. I was still fool enough to get something of a bang out of it at the time; I don't feel the same way about it now. But, then, I don't feel the same about anything any more. I guess you can understand that. The coming of the bird was such a big thing, such a truly big thing, that it dwindled into insignificance all the things we used to consider great, important, world-shaking.

World-shaking!

I'll make it brief. There's so little purpose to my telling of this story.

But there may be in it a fact here and there you don't know. And I've got to do something—anything—to keep myself from thinking.

You remember that grim fourth week, and the steady approach of the bird. We had settled for calling it that by then. We were not sure if it were bird or winged beast, but men think—and give names to things—in terms of more familiar objects. And that slim black shape with its tremendous wings, its taloned legs and long, cruel, curving beak looked more like a bird than an animal.

Beside, there was Abramson's world-egg theory to be considered. The people heard this, doubted it with a furious hope—but feared it might be true. Men in high positions asked what could be done. They sent for Abramson, and he advised them. He could be wrong, he acknowledged. But if he were right, there was only one hope for salvation. The life within Earth must be stilled.

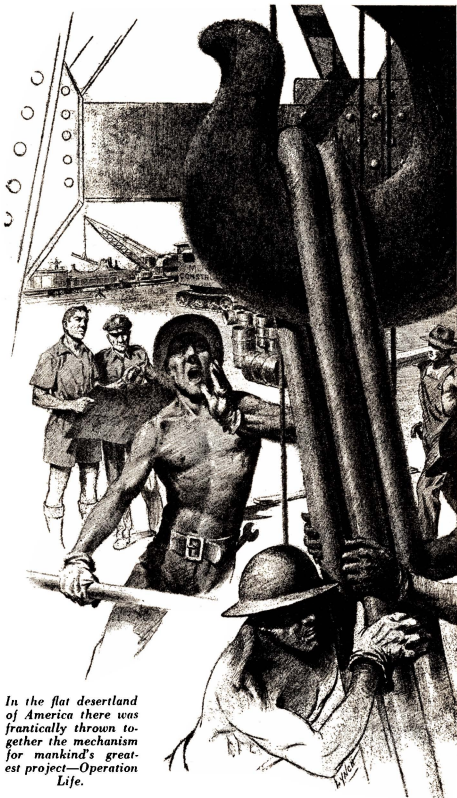
"I believe," he told a special emergency committee appointed by the President, "the bird has come to hatch the brood of young it deposited God knows how many centuries ago about that incubating warmth which is our sun. Its wisdom or its instinct tells it that the time of emergence is now; it has come to help its fledglings shed their shells.

"But we know that mother birds, alone and unaided, do not hatch their young. They will aid a struggling chick to crack its shell, but they never begin the liberating action. And with an uncanny second sense, they seem to know which eggs have failed to develop life within them: such eggs they never disturb.

"Therein, gentlemen, lies our only hope. The shell of Earth is forty miles in thickness. We have our engineers and technicians; we have the atomic bomb. If mankind is to live, the host to which we are but parasites must die. That is my only solution. I leave the rest to you."

He left them, still wrangling, in Washington, and returned home. He saw little hope, he told me the next day, of their reaching any firm decision in sufficient time to act. Abramson, I think, had already resigned himself to the inevitable, had with a wan grimace surrendered mankind to its fate. He said, once, that bureaucracy had achieved its ultimate destiny. It had throttled itself to death with its own red tape.

And still the bird moved sunward. On the twenty-eighth day it made its nearest approach to Earth, and passed us by. I don't know—nor can the scientists explain—why our globe was not shattered by the gravitational attraction of that gigantic mass. Per-



In the flat desertland of America there was frantically thrown together the mechanism for mankind's greatest project—Operation Life.

haps because the Newtonian theory is, after all, simply a *theory*, and has no actuality in real existence. I don't know. If there were time, it would be good to study, and to learn the truth about such things. At any rate, we suffered very little from its nearness—all things considered. There were high tides and mighty winds; those sections of earth subject to earthquakes suffered some mild temblors. But that is all.

And then we won a respite. You remember how the bird paused in its headlong flight to hover for two full days around that tiniest of the solar planets—the one we call Mercury. Briefly, as if searching for something, it flew in a wide circle in an orbit between Mercury and the sun.

Abramson believed it was looking for something, for something it could not find because it was no longer there. Astronomers believed, said

finally silenced. Forgotten now were selfishness and greed, politics and interdepartmental strife. The world they infested trembled on the brink of doom—and a race of vermin battled for its life.

In the flat desertland of America there was frantically thrown together the mechanism for mankind's greatest project—Operation Life. To this desert flew the miners, the construction engineers, the nuclear physicists, the men skilled in deep-drilling operations. There they began their task, working night and day with a speed which heretofore had been called impossible. There they are working now, this minute, as I write, fighting desperately against each passing second of time, striving with every means and method they know to reach and destroy, before the bird comes, the life within our earth.

A week ago the bird moved on to Venus. Throughout these seven days we have watched its progress there. We cannot see much through the eternal veil of mist which surrounds our sister planet, so we do not know what has for so gratefully long a time occupied the bird. Whatever it is, we are thankful for it. We wait and watch. And as we watch, we work. And as we work, we pray. . . .

And so there is no real ending to this story. As I have said before, I don't know why I'm bothering to write it. The answer is not ready to be given. If we succeed, there will be ample time to tell the story properly—the whole great story, fully documented, of the battle being waged on the hot Arizona sands. And if we fail—well, then there will be no reason for this writing. There will be none to read it.

THE bird is not the greatest of our fears. If when it comes from Venus it finds here a quiet, lifeless, unresponsive shell, it will move outward—we believe and pray—to Mars, then Jupiter, and thence beyond.

That is the end we hope to bring about. Soon, now, our probing needles will penetrate Earth's shell, will dip beneath the crust and into the turgid of that horror which sleeps within us. But we have another more tormenting fear. It is that before the mother bird approaches us, the fledgling may awake and seek to gain its freedom from the shell encasing it. If this should happen, Abramson has warned, our work must then proceed at lightning speed. For let that fledgling once begin to knock, then it must die—or all mankind must die.

That is the other reason why I write. To keep from thinking thoughts I dare not think. Because—

Because early this morning, Earth began to knock. . . .

Abramson, that at one time there had been another planet circling between Mercury and the sun. Watchers of the sky had seen this as late as the Eighteenth Century, and had called it Vulcan. Vulcan had disappeared, perhaps had fallen into the sun. So thought Abramson. And so, apparently, the bird decided, too, for after a fruitless search it winged its way outward from the sun to approach the closest of its brood still remaining intact.

Must I remind you of that dreadful day? I think not. No man alive will ever forget what he saw then. The bird approaching Mercury, pausing to hover motionless above a planet which seemed a mote beneath the umbra of those massive wings. Men in the streets saw this. I saw more, for I stood beside Abramson in the University observatory, watching that scene with the aid of one of his telescopes.

I saw the first thin splitting of Mercury's shell, and the curious fluid ichor which seeped from a dying world. I watched the grisly emergence of that small, wet, scrawny thing—raw simulacrum of its monstrous parent—from the egg in which it had lain for whatever incalculable era was the gestation period of a creature vast as space and as old as time. I saw the mother bird stretch forth its giant beak and help its fledgling rid itself of a peeling, needless shell; stood horrified to watch the younger bird emerge and flap its new, uncertain wings, drying them in the burning rays of the star which had been its incubator.

And I saw the shredded remnants of a world spiral into the sun which was its pyre. . . .

It was then, at last, that mankind woke to action. The doubters were convinced at last, those who had argued against the "needless expense" and folly of Abramson's plan were