

WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

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All Stories New and Complete

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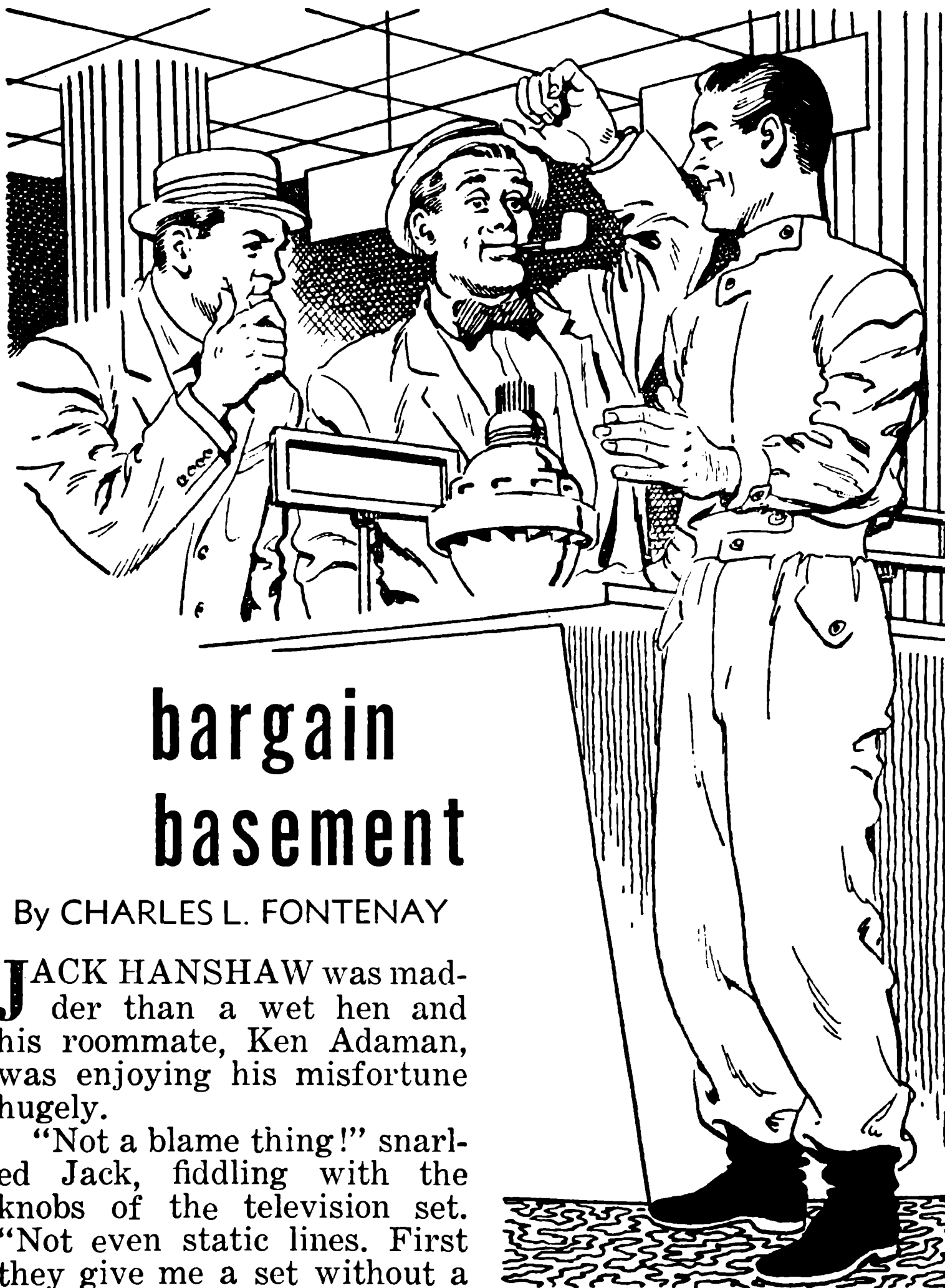
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*How could it give away such buys? Very easy—by doing
a business in pennies and a profit in billions!*



bargain basement

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

JACK HANSHAW was madder than a wet hen and his roommate, Ken Adaman, was enjoying his misfortune hugely.

“Not a blame thing!” snarled Jack, fiddling with the knobs of the television set. “Not even static lines. First they give me a set without a

plug-in cord, and now this one's got a no-good picture tube."

"You get what you pay for," said Ken, laughing. "I've warned you about these so-called bargains. But what's this about the plug-in cord?"

Ken had been at work the day before, when Jack first brought the new television set into their apartment and discovered that omission.

"I didn't see any point in saying anything about that last night," admitted Jack. "After I bought the thing yesterday and brought it home, I found out it didn't have a cord to plug it in—not even a connection in the back for a cord. I took it back to them and they said something about the wrong kind of power and fixed it up for me last night."

"You got stung, old buddy," said Ken, unwinding his long legs from the arm of the easy chair. "They probably made it from junk parts."

"It doesn't look like it," said Jack stubbornly.

It didn't. The television set was shiny and new-looking, although rather odd. With a thirty-five-inch screen, it was only about six inches thick, and it had a strange antenna of concentric circles on top instead of the conventional rabbit ears. There were only two dials, one for the channels (it was lettered instead of numbered) and one for off-on and volume.

"I'd take it back and demand my money," said Ken.

"I'll take it back, all right, but if they'll fix it, I don't want my money back. Guess how much it cost me."

"Well . . ." Ken pulled a stubby pipe from his coat pocket and began to pack it slowly from a humidor on the chairside table. "Knowing your bargains, I'd say about a hundred and fifty dollars."

"Two dollars," said Jack. "Two dollars and no strings attached."

KEN WHISTLED. "I smell a sucker game somewhere."

"Maybe so, but what's two dollars? The materials are worth more than that as junk. And if they fix it . . . How about going along with me to return it, Ken?"

Ken lit his pipe carefully and glanced at his wristwatch.

"Okay," he said, "if we can be back in an hour. I'm curious to see this place, but I've got a date with Lorene tonight and I have to get cleaned up."

Jack winced. The roommates were competitors for the hand of Lorene Shavely, the pert brunette in the tobacco store down the street. But Ken was getting so much the better of it that it could be called competition in name only by now.

"It's only about five blocks, on Gehannon Street," Jack said. "We'll be back in time."

He repacked the television set in its box.

"Ardex," said Ken, reading the name on the box. "Off-brand. I never heard of it before."

They set out, Jack carrying the box under one arm. The set was remarkably light for its size.

The street lights were coming on along Gehannon Street, for it was five o'clock on a winter afternoon. Jack bought a late edition from a newsboy on the corner.

"Probably closed by now," said Ken.

But it wasn't. Just past Wing Fan's Chinese laundry, Jack turned into an alley and went down a flight of concrete steps. There was a door there, leading into a basement under the Eat-A-Bite Restaurant. It was unlighted, and there were no signs there to indicate anything but that the Grove Brothers Circus, Greatest Show on Earth, was coming to town two years ago.

But when they opened the battered wooden door, the light inside was like fairyland. Soft, of many changing hues, it lit a spotless expanse of floor that stretched away farther than Ken had realized the basement extended. The floor was broken by merchandise-loaded counters and gleaming machines. Here and there a clerk moved, in raiment that changed color with the light.

One of the clerks approached them. He was black-eyed, black-haired and handsome, and wore a tunic and balloon trousers.

"Ah, Mr. Hanshaw!" he exclaimed, recognizing Jack. "Glad to see you back again. But I see you have the—uh—television with you. Still having trouble?"

"Yeah," said Jack. "The screen's no good. No picture at all."

The clerk looked puzzled. "The tube couldn't be bad. It must be in the transmission facilities."

"You mean the TV stations? I don't see how—"

"Different methods of transmission," said the clerk hastily. "Just a minute, Mr. Hanshaw, and I'll see what our communications man can do about this."

He took the box from Jack and started off.

"Wait," said Jack. "Here's your newspaper."

WITH A SMILE of thanks, the man accepted the paper and disappeared into the depths of the basement store.

"What's with the newspaper business?" demanded Ken.

"That's part of the bargain," said Jack. "When I bought the television set, I agreed to bring him a late newspaper every time I come in the store."

"Hmm. Queer setup. And

what kind of funny clothes is he wearing?"

"Store uniform, I guess."

"Some uniform," remarked Ken, who worked in a men's clothing store. "That fabric's spun glass, I think. And some of these people in 'store uniforms' seem to be customers."

Indeed, some of the perhaps two dozen people visible, all dressed like the clerk, appeared to be making purchases.

While waiting for the clerk to return, the two of them looked around at the nearby counters.

"Funny thing about this place," said Ken, "is I don't know what seventy per cent of these gadgets they're selling are. Those I can recognize look strange. Like that set of dishes—I'm no housewife, but I've never seen shapes like those before."

"I noticed that, too," said Jack. "But anything they've got that we can use, we can't afford not to buy, at the prices they ask."

"Let's wait and see how the television set turns out," suggested Ken.

THE clerk returned, empty-handed.

"My communications man thinks he can fix your comm—television set so it will be all right, if you can bring us a technical manual on television sets. I hate to ask you to go to such trouble—"

"What! You mean you've

got a television repairman who doesn't have a manual on the things?"

"Not on the type you need," said the clerk apologetically. "It wouldn't matter what brand or trade name the manual applies to."

"Why can't you have your communications man go out and buy his own?" demanded Ken. "Or order one?"

"Well—let's just say it would cause great inconvenience at this time. Mr. Hanshaw, I realize it would inconvenience you also, so in return for the favor I will be willing to give you, free, any item of merchandise in the store."

"Fair enough," agreed Jack, his eyes gleaming. "I'll bring it tomorrow."

"Incidentally, sir, would your friend be interested in a purchase while you are here?"

"No, absolutely not," said Ken, turning away.

Jack caught his arm. "Oh, come on, Ken! Price these things, anyhow. You'll be astonished. Show Mr. Adaman something he can use."

"Mr. Adaman?" The clerk's eyes widened delightedly. "Why, sir, that's my name, too. Edigo Adaman."

"Mine's Kenneth Adaman," said Ken shortly, but he showed more interest.

"It isn't a common name," said Edigo. "Are you by any chance a merchant, Mr. Adaman?"

"You might say so. I'm a

clerk in a men's clothing store."

EDIGO nodded gravely. "My family has been in the mercantile business for many generations," he said. "My father owns this store and it will be the largest in the Americas when we finish it. Now, Mr. Adaman, do you see anything that interests you? Anything at all?"

"Well," said Ken, moving over to a counter, "is this a watch?"

"Yes, sir, and a very good one." Edigo picked it up. It was a thin dial, with three hands and twenty-four numerals instead of the usual twelve.

"It's very nice-looking. But it's a pocket watch, isn't it? I wear a wristwatch."

"Oh, no," said Edigo. "Hold out your arm."

Ken obeyed. Edigo placed the dial on his wrist, and it clung without apparent support.

"Say, that's keen!" exclaimed Ken. "Some sort of magnetism, I suppose? How much?"

"Would—would fifty cents be too much?" asked Edigo anxiously.

"Fifty cents? Sold!" Ken pulled a coin from his pocket.

"Oh, no, sir. Not the cash. Deposit it in the account, please, and bring me the deposit slip. Mr. Hanshaw knows the bank."

"That's right," said Jack. "Broadway National, account of Supercolossal Mercantile Company. Here's the deposit slip on the two dollars for the television set."

"And we'll have it straightened out for you right away, Mr. Hanshaw, if you can only bring us the manual."

As the two of them headed for the door to the basement, Ken said to Jack in a low tone: "There goes another customer out ahead of us. I'm going to stop him outside and see if he can give us the answers to some of the things I don't understand about this place."

The customer, dressed like Edigo and all the others in the basement, went through the door just ahead of them. Jack caught it just before it shut. But when he and Ken mounted the steps, the man was nowhere in sight, either up or down the alley.

"Where could he have gone?" asked Ken in amazement. "He'd have had to run like hell to get out of the alley before we got up here."

They walked to the mouth of the alley and emerged into the glare of the neon lights. Ken held up his new watch and looked at it in a stunned sort of way.

"Say, you know something?" he said thoughtfully. "That fellow Edigo Adaman looks vaguely familiar to me."

"I noticed that, too," said

Jack. "Look like any of your relatives?"

Ken considered. "No, not in the least."

SEVERAL days later, Jack was in the tobacco store chatting with Lorene. Mr. Schmit, the store's owner, registered silent disapproval in the background, but was not likely to protest openly unless Lorene slighted a customer.

Jack had told Lorene about the strange bargain basement the day after he and Ken visited it. He found that Ken had mentioned it to her that night, too.

"I couldn't find the kind of complete television manual they need at any of the bookstores," said Jack gloomily. "I had to have one of them order me one, and while I'm waiting, no television. The man said it was color TV, too. I can't understand any store that big not getting its own manuals."

"Have you ever been upstairs?" asked Lorene.

"Upstairs? There's nothing there but the Eat-A-Bite Restaurant."

"Oh. Ken said they had something like elevators going up, and it looked like they might have floors above."

"I didn't know Ken had been back after that night," said Jack in surprise. "He didn't say anything to me about it. I got the impression

he thought the whole thing was a fake."

Lorene's black eyes sparkled as she smiled, and she turned a cheek to exhibit oddly cut earrings.

"He brought me these earrings from there. I'd think you'd be buying other things, too, Jack, at those prices, instead of moping over that television set."

"Oh, I have," said Jack. "I bought several suits of clothes at a dollar each. They didn't have any in stock except those funny outfits they wear in the store, but I took them a picture from a magazine advertisement and they made me some suits to order."

"Is that one of them?" asked Lorene, gazing critically at the somewhat baggy suit he was wearing.

"No," said Jack sheepishly. "I thought they were too nice to wear to work. They're that spun glass, or whatever it is. Go dancing with me tonight and I'll wear one."

"Can't," said Lorene. "I've got a date with Ken."

"I never get to go out with you any more, Lorene," Jack said glumly. "What have I done to make you turn me down every time?"

"Nothing," said Lorene candidly. "I like you as a friend, Jack. But Ken—well, he's got that extra something I can't resist. We're going to get married, you know."

"No, I didn't," said Jack,

but he wasn't very surprised.

Just then Ken breezed in.

"Hi, honey," he said. "Hello, Jack. Say, you two, come out and take a look at my new car."

"New car!" squealed Lorene. "Oh, Ken! But I can't leave the store. I'll have to look from the door."

"It's down the block," said Ken. "I'll drive by, and you can get a good look tonight. Come on, Jack."

Jack went with him. The automobile was one of those low-slung, half-block-long affairs like one Jack vaguely remembered seeing pictured in a foreign car magazine.

"That's not yours," he said flatly. "Those things cost ten or fifteen thousand dollars."

"Cost me fifty," said Ken smugly. "I got it at our friend Edigo's store. Fifty bucks."

"You mean they carry things like that?"

"I took them a picture and they made it for me," said Ken. "Had to widen that door and put runways up the steps to drive it out of there. It cost me twice as much as the car to get the door widened and then bricked back the way it was. They worked on the inside and I got a crew to work on the outside."

"Seems to me they'd have had it out in the street for you, instead of building it in the basement and then having to get it out," said Jack critically, gazing up and down the

gleaming length of black and chrome.

"Ha!" said Ken slyly. "That's just it, son. They couldn't. I've found out the secret of our friends in the bargain basement."

"Secret? You mean there is something phony about it?"

"I'll tell you while we're driving around in this dream wagon. But first let me show you something."

He went to the front of the car and raised the hood. Inside was the strangest little engine Jack had ever seen.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Turbo-jet," said Ken proudly. "And if you'll notice, you can't see inside the car—one-way glass. And it's got radar brakes and a hundred other new gadgets on it."

"But I thought the turbo-jet engine was still in the future," protested Jack.

"It is," said Ken solemnly. "That's where our bargain basement is—in the future."

THE BIG CAR swept along the superhighway as silently as a floating cloud. The speedometer read 160. Ken explained that was 160 kilometers, or about 100 miles an hour. He buzzed it up to 200 kilometers once when some youngsters in a souped-up sports car sought to race with them.

"They use solar power," Ken explained, "but it's broadcast power and wouldn't work

in a car sent back to the past. They made one like the picture, which just showed the outside, and I suppose they assumed we use turbo-jets back in this period. It must be pretty ancient to them."

"Why would people from the future want to set up a store in the basement under the Eat-A-Bite Restaurant?" protested Jack.

"Not *from* the future—in the future. For some reason, that basement door is in a time fault. People from now can go through it into the future and come back, and bring inanimate objects with them. But the people from the future can't come back to the past for some reason—that's why they can't go out and get things themselves, and that's why they want us to bring them rare antiques, like newspapers and books."

"Maybe," said Jack doubtfully. "How did you guess all this?"

"A little deduction. I had some conversations with Edigo while I was shopping there. He said he just dug that basement as the lower floor of his new fifty-story building; but actually that basement's been there for years and is supposed to be empty. It belongs to old man Caswell, who owns the building the Eat-A-Bite's in, and God knows how he's going to react if he ever walks into it and finds that store. And it's not just that. The

costumes, the strange objects they have for sale, even that peculiar accent."

"**H**OW far in the future?" asked Jack.

"I don't know. Pretty far, I expect. How much interest does that bank account draw? You know, the one in their name, where we've been depositing the money for the things we bought?"

"Three per cent, I think, compounded quarterly."

"It would have to be compounded to amount to anything in a couple of hundred years or so."

"I still don't get it. Why do they sell things so cheap? Will prices be that much lower in the future?"

"Probably a lot higher," said Ken. "They don't even use the same sort of money we do—that's why they don't just ask us to make deposits of their own money for them. But they can afford to sell us at these ridiculously low prices because the deposits in their name draw compound interest and build up to a lot higher than the value of the merchandise in the future—their time. I expect every dime we deposit for them means a hundred dollars or more to them in their equivalent of our money."

"I just don't see that," said Jack. "We're in their past. How could they have us deposit money to build up for

them, unless, to them, the deposits are already there?"

"Edigo—you know, Jack, that fellow still reminds me of somebody I know—Edigo explained it to me when I made him admit this future business was true. The future can be changed, and we could change the present if we could influence the past. And don't I wish I could manage *that* trick!" Ken added greedily. "So every time we put a dime in their account—pop!—at their end, they've got an extra hundred dollars or more in the bank."

"I suppose so," said Jack thoughtfully. "But how about this fellow Edigo digging the basement? The basement's already there now. The real one, I mean."

"In a hundred years, two hundred years, you think it'll still be there?" demanded Ken scornfully. "Old Caswell's basement's going to fill in again, and some time in the future, this fellow Edigo Adaman's going to dig it out again. You know, Jack, with that name, he could be a descendant of mine."

"He seemed to think he might be, from what he said that first evening."

"Look, buddy, we'll have to go back," said Ken, pulling the car into a cloverleaf to turn around. "I've got a date with Lorene tonight, and I'm sure anxious to see her face when she climbs into this buggy."

"Sure," said Jack. "But drop me off at the bargain basement, will you? I've got an idea for something I want to buy."

EDIGO LOOKED at Jack curiously. There was that odd familiarity to the man's face that Jack couldn't quite place.

"We have strict regulations against influencing an individual's attitudes by artificial means," he said. "But I don't suppose it's against the law in your time, is it?"

"Not unless it's a dangerous or habit-forming drug," said Jack. "Possession of certain drugs, you know, can get you a stiff prison sentence. But there are milder things, like perfumes and alcohol, that influence people temporarily. That's sort of what I had in mind, only with a stronger effect—not a habit-forming drug."

"Hmm," murmured Edigo. "What we have wouldn't have been discovered in your time and wouldn't be covered by law. And it isn't dangerous or habit-forming. It's prescribed by psychologists in certain cases. But I am not sure I should—"

"One hundred dollars," said Jack.

"It's a great deal for five klens' worth of . . . All right. Would you prefer it in liquid, tablet or powder form?"

"How about like this?" sug-

gested Jack, handing over a package of chewing gum.

"Yes, it could be mixed in that. If you can wait a few minutes, I'll have our chemist prepare it."

Edigo went away with the chewing gum, and Jack gave himself over to doubts. Perhaps it wasn't fair, but what was that old saying about love and war? Jack convinced himself that Ken hadn't been fair in getting that flashy car.

What if Ken had thought of the same thing?

A momentary chill passed over Jack. But no. Ken didn't need it.

In a few moments, Edigo returned with the chewing gum. It looked no different. Jack couldn't tell whether it was the same gum, with a new ingredient added, or new sticks put in the old wrappers. It didn't matter.

"Thank you. I'll deposit the hundred dollars right away," said Jack. He took the gum and left.

He went straight to the tobacco store. He was just in time. Lorene was getting her hat and jacket on to return home. Surprisingly, Ken was not waiting outside for her with the new car.

"I'll walk you home, Lorene," suggested Jack.

"All right," she agreed, smiling at him. "Ken was to pick me up, but he phoned and said he had to work late on inventory."

They left the store together.

"Have some chewing gum," suggested Jack, offering her a stick. It was much better than trying to slip liquid or a tablet in a milk shake.

"Not right now," she said. "It's too soon before supper."

"Oh, come on," he invited jovially. "You only live once. I'll have some, too."

No harm in that. It couldn't change his feelings much, anyhow.

She accepted a stick, and they chewed as they walked. Jack could guess her feelings from the intensification of his own. Suddenly Lorene was the most beautiful woman in the world—Cleopatra, Helen, the Queen of Sheba. He would have died for her gladly.

He took her hand in his and squeezed it. She leaned against his shoulder and turned starry eyes up to him. That walking kiss was the most ecstatic thing he had ever experienced.

"Let's get married, Lorene," he said huskily. "Now."

"Yes, Jack, yes," she sighed.

KEN TOOK the announcement rather hard. After all, he and Lorene already had set their wedding date. He looked very thoughtful, but Jack was not worried. Ken would never suspect that Lorene had been won away from him by a package of chewing gum doctored with some unknown drug from the future.

Jack and Lorene would not

be able to get married until the next day, because the city hall had closed for the afternoon and they were unable to get a license. They spent the evening shopping in the bargain basement for Lorene's trousseau, ordering things from pictures in magazine advertisements, and planning for the future.

"I'll get them to make us a car like Ken's," said Jack, "and maybe we can work out some way of buying a house through them. With this set-up, we can live like royalty, even on my salary."

THEIR wedding was a peculiar one—as the minister pronounced them man and wife, Jack's clothing vanished. He was kissing his bride when a sudden chill and the gasps of those around him made him realize he was in his underwear.

He borrowed a suit from the minister and took Lorene back to the apartment. Ken was packing his things.

"I'll move my stuff to a hotel until I can find another apartment," said Ken. "Call me a cab, will you, old man? Somebody's stolen my car."

Jack and Lorene were to leave on their honeymoon the next day. That afternoon he announced his intention of going to the bargain basement and lodging a complaint.

"That suit and shirt I had on were clothes I bought

there," he said. "If their stuff's going to disintegrate like that, it's not worth even what little I paid for it. After that trouble with the television set . . . Say, what happened to the television set? I'll bet Ken took it with him!"

"And to think I almost married him!" shuddered Lorene.

On the way to the bargain basement, Jack explained to Lorene what Ken had told him: how the bargain basement existed in the future, and the door to it was a fault in time.

They passed Wing Fan's laundry and turned into the alley. They went down the steps to the basement door and opened it.

A blank wall of raw earth met their eyes.

"What in blazes!" exclaimed Jack.

There were footsteps in the alley above them. Old man Caswell came down the steps with a policeman in tow.

"My basement!" Caswell was complaining bitterly, almost shouting. "I was going to rent it today, and somebody fills it up with dirt. Why, I ask you, *why?* Why would anybody want to fill my basement with dirt?"

He caught sight of Jack and Lorene standing to one side.

"You!" he cried. "You have anything to do with this?"

"Absolutely nothing," Jack assured him. "I thought there was a store here."

"Store!" snorted Caswell.
"Dirt!"

Jack and Lorene got away and made their way back to the street.

"Was there really a store there, Jack?" she asked.

"We're really married, aren't we, honey? I mean yes, there was. I don't know what happened."

He looked at her, smiling, and the smile faded.

"Oh, oh," he said slowly. "I think I know now."

"What?"

"I know now who Edigo Adaman reminded me of. You!"

HE DIDN'T tell her the rest. He didn't tell her he was almost sure that, the way things would have been, Lorene and Ken would have been married and Edigo would have been their descendant.

But Edigo had changed all that when he sold Jack a drug that Jack used, to make sure that Ken wouldn't marry Lorene, but that he would in-

stead. And since Ken and Lorene wouldn't be married now, Edigo would never be born, and would never have the idea of building a fifty-story building at that spot, starting it by digging a basement.

So that was what happened to the suit and Ken's car and the television set. Since the basement wasn't to be built there, they wouldn't be, so they weren't—they never had been.

The strange thing about it was that Jack remembered it all, and even stranger, he was still married to Lorene, and he wouldn't have been except for the drug. But then that had to be, because if he hadn't married her, she'd have married Ken—and then the basement would have been, and he'd have gotten the drug, and Ken wouldn't have married Lorene because Jack would have, and then there wouldn't have been any basement...

Jack sighed. He was happy that the circle stopped where it did. **END**