

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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FALL
ISSUE

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

The
**ETERNAL
NOW**
*An Astonishing
Novelet*
By **MURRAY
LEINSTER**

**THE LAST
MAN IN
NEW YORK**
*An Amazing
Novelet*
By **PAUL
MAC NAMARA**

Frank B. Rowland

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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction



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Fall, 1944

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Pioneer
Space Adventure

By
ARTHUR K. BARNES

PI IN THE SKY

A Hilarious Novellet

By
FREDRIC BROWN

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Contest Story

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Plus Many Others

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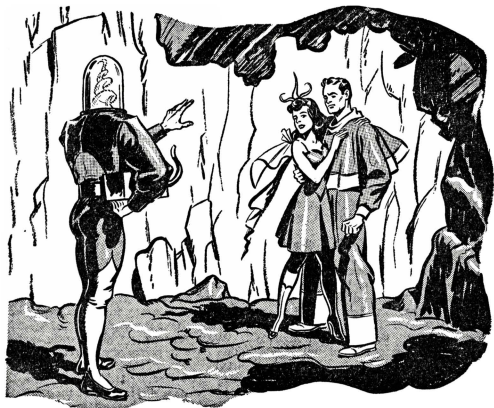
ON THE COVER: Painting by Rudolph Belarski depicts a scene from BEYOND THE VORTEX, by Frank Belknap Long.

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November, 1944, Issue

Read our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—STARTLING STORIES



Winslow nodded and, as the horror stopped, he seemed to increase in size

BEYOND THE VORTEX

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG

When a Traveler from a Distant Galaxy Kidnaps a Group of Callisto-Bound Earthmen, It Doesn't Stop George, the Photographer, from Coming Back with a Living Picture!

“HE HAD less than a Chinaman's chance,” Ben Holden said, rattling the ice at the bottom of his glass. “Before he could lash out with his fists, they surrounded him and took him away.”

Holden looked distinctly white under the gills. He had been drinking steadily for hours, but was pale notwithstanding. He was a top-flight newspaperman, but when he got wound up, his conversation made me want to wring his neck.

He was telling it here, of all places—right here where it had happened, by Charlie's bar in Callisto City, under the swollen red disk of Jupiter.

“When you get an assignment like this, you go all to pieces,” I grunted. “Are you a newspaper guy or a mouse?”

He drank what was left of his rye.

“A mouse,” he said. “Right now I feel as if I were in the biggest cat you ever saw, being digested.”

We hadn't much to go on. It was all ru-

A FANTASTIC COMPLETE NOVELET

mor, and did-you-hear-what-happened-at-Sloppy-Charlie's-bar-the-night-before-last? A big-game hunter named Dawson had disappeared. One minute he was standing by the bar, waving his arms about. The next, something resembling a looking-glass brought to a boil swirled up about him. When the glimmering subsided, he just wasn't.

No more to it than that? Well, there was a little more. Before it happened, a dozen shadowy shapes surrounded him. One looked like an alligator walking upright, balancing itself on its tail. Another was like a grinning toad, still another like a gigantic skate.

In the depth of the glimmering were three or four cylindrical, slimy things. They were garden slugs perhaps, or perambulating eels. With them were a couple of lobsters, a furry black-and-white mammal—a panda? Could be, except for the fact that there are no mammals on Callisto. The tundra is covered with a thin, purplish lichen, and through it scuttle rust-red crustaceans not unlike fiddler-crabs.

On Jupiter, of course, on the vast equatorial plains, there are huge furry animals galore. They are not mammals by any stretch of the imagination—not even oxygen-breathing animals. But the methane-breathing beasts with pressure-withstanding pelts and external lungs which roam the Jovian plains have evolved about to the panda level.

Silhouetted against the penny-sized disk of the sun, with their blubbery lungs tucked in their belly pouches, they might have convinced a few people they were pandas. But the penny-sized sun wasn't on Jupiter. It was a cold light bulb, and it swung above Sloppy Charlie's bar on Callisto, where nothing like the Dawson business had any right to happen.

There had been seven eye witnesses, including the bartender. Seven frightened people had seen it happen—seven swacked people, perhaps, but their stories tallied. Braving ridicule, they had assured the Callisto City police that Dawson had vanished screaming, jerking his elbows and writhing in the grip of two enormous lobster shapes.

The fact that Dawson was a famous hunter, who had bagged struebestes on Saturn and descended into active volcanoes on Ganymede to clamp bubble traps over fiery crater whorls made it a story. And if you think the city editor of the Callisto News-Gazette applied a skeptical yardstick to stories you just don't know our skipper.

He had called Ben into the city room, and fixed him with a fishy stare.

"It may not have been animals," he mouthed, "but something happened to Dawson to make him disappear. It could happen again. Go after it and stay on it. George here will shake the alcohol out of you, if necessary."

"Skipper, a story as tall as that one couldn't be news," Benny had protested. "George and I could park ourselves by that bar for six months without seeing the impolite end of a gnat."

"I want a photograph, and a story," had been the skipper's ultimatum. "If George delivers and you don't, there will be a new face right above where you won't be sitting tomorrow."

I couldn't help feeling sorry for Benny Holden. He was the News-Gazette's ablest reporter, and I was just a fotog. But he had to tank up to swing into high, and I could take it or leave it alone.

When you can get along without it you don't have to worry at all. No matter how heavily you indulge, your self-control is safe. I was feeling twice as noble as Ben, and twice as much in need of the stuff.

"Order another bottle," I urged. "We'll split it two ways."

"George, the last time we split it, my share went down the wrong gullet, and wound up in your stomach," he complained.

I STARED at him venomously, but before I could take a poke at him, my neck hairs stiffened and a shiver ran down my spine.

The man was attired in a rust-colored pressure suit and high tundra boots. There was an oxygen pack on his shoulder and an anti-grav belt hung in loose folds from his waist. He looked perfectly normal in all respects except for one thing.

He had no head. Where his head should have been, yawned a nebulously weaving spiral of iridescent mist. He was standing between Ben and myself. He had wedged himself in between us and was drumming with his knuckles on the bar.

"A straight whiskey," he said. The voice came out of the spiral and seemed to reverberate along the bar.

Ben let out a strangled moan and crumpled to the floor in a dead faint. I was made of sterner stuff. All I did was jerk my shoulders and leap back as though a cobra had materialized a yard from my face.

The stranger turned slowly and transfixed me with a warning stare. Behind the mist, a



Standing directly above me was Mona Colbin—a blond bombshell if there ever was one

face that wasn't there was unmistakably telling me to keep my shirt on, or else.

The voice came again.

"I wanted a bracer first. You'll probably kick up a row, and I'll have to get tough. Inside, I'm a gentle sort of guy."

"Who are you?" I choked.

"You don't know me? You've photographed me often enough. I'm Winslow—Dawson's buddy. My head was clawed off last perihelion by a struebeste on the tundra."

The revelation seemed to dry out my throat.

"Winslow—Dawson's buddy," he reiterated. "Hold on to yourself, man. You're responsible for me. I was on your mind, but now I've stepped out from you. Electromagnetic chain reactions inside your brain, you understand? The vortex solidifies them."

"The vortex?"

"You're standing in a unified field vortex. Dawson might have brought me back, if he hadn't had so many animals on his mind."

I had the ghastly feeling that he was sadly shaking his missing head.

"Poor old Dawson looked and acted tough, but he was just a scared kid inside. He wanted to go home. He was always dreaming about the mountains, rivers and valleys of Earth. He was so homesick he kept visualizing terrestrial animals, even when he was stalking big game on the tundra."

The stranger's missing face seemed to stare straight at me.

"Your mind is full of smashed-up wretches like myself. Maimed and crippled explorers, lads with neutron bullets in their insides. You're a sympathetic sort of guy, and you keep thinking about the gruesome human wrecks you've photographed. We haunt you night and day."

He glanced down at Ben.

"This man thinks about nothing but women and tankards of ale. Suppose I told you that you've populated a huge strip of territory, just by standing here. The vortex solidifies cerebral chain reactions. Just by standing here and visualizing me you've brought me back. You've brought back smashed-up wretches and girls dead a thousand years.

"Your friend here brought back the girls. He doesn't think much of living women. He moons over ancient American cinema stars. Holly—yes, Hollywood stars. You can reconstruct a personality from an image and a voice, and the girls he visualized can hardly wait to get their hands on him."

A unified field vortex—I didn't understand

it, and I tried to plead with him for a little more time. He had hooked one arm about my shoulder and was pulling me away from the bar.

"I'll sock you if I have to," he said. "We need you out there. Dawson's animals—"

Something seemed to snap in my brain. One minute I had my feet firmly planted on the sawdust in Charlie's place, and the next—I was lying on my back in long, purple grass, my ears deafened by savage snortings, my mouth choked with mud. Furious hoofs were churning up the earth on both sides of me, and clumps of turf kept bouncing off my chest.

I was lying directly under the water buffalo, staring up. I could see its gigantic udders, the gleaming curvature of its flanks. I knew it was a water buffalo because its horns were enormous, and it had the deceptive docility of expression which distinguishes that animal alone.

Through its completely transparent bulk, I could make out the outlines of trees which seemed to be growing downward from the sky, of domed huts suspended in midair.

My clothes were clammy with sweat, and when I tried to sit up, the water buffalo's tail flicked back between its legs, and laid me out flat.

"Well, boy, you asked for this," I remember thinking. "You've been taking too much too fast too long. This is the payoff."

"Sheo, bossy, go away." The most musical voice I had ever heard came from somewhere behind me.

INSTANTLY the snortings subsided and the hoofs became motionless, as though the ground had hardened to the consistency of cement. Without a backward glance the water buffalo elevated its mud-encrusted rump, and moved off through the purple grass, wagging its tail.

"Oh, dear, are you hurt?"

I groaned and sat up. Standing directly above me, her hands on her hips, was Mona Colbin. You've seen her in the ancient films—a blond bombshell, if ever there was one. Cornsilk hair, eyes like the sky over Io—a deep, limpid blue. A mouth resolute, but lovely—

You've seen her in the films, but I saw her in the flesh. She had been dust for a thousand years, yet there she stood—green sunlight in her hair, her shadow sweeping in lithe lines over the purple grass.

"Dawson was only nine years old when he saw a water buffalo," she said. "A little boy in knee pants. He visualized it as transpar-

ent and docile, with a long tail. You see, it was hazy to him, and he made it a gentle, transparent beast."

"I see," I groaned untruthfully.

"Once in a while one doesn't act that way. Intestinal worms. But you talk to it, you call it bossy, and it calms right down."

"Good heavens!" I muttered, getting swayingly to my feet.

"You're the man who takes gruesome photographs, aren't you?" she asked. "I knew you'd be coming here to help us. Winslow said he'd persuade you to come. Winslow came out of your mind, didn't he?"

"That's what he said," I choked.

"Well, I came out of Holden's mind. Just three hours ago, as you think of time. But of course there is no time here, and we do not think of it."

She gnawed at her underlip.

"This is Dawson's land. He visualized the scenery and the animals in a wild burst of imagination. It's a steamy jungle land, but it's no worse than the chill, cold grayness in the depths of your mind. Winslow says you think in gray abstractions—like a mathematician."

I stared dazedly around. Apparently Dawson had stood in Charlie's place and thought about the wildest scenery I had ever seen. It was partly upside down, like a mirage. Between clumps of jungle grass and gigantic trees, a swollen green sun smouldered dully.

There were islands of foliage directly overhead, and the roots of the upside down trees seemed alive. As I stared up at them in horror, they appeared to writhe against the solar disk. It may have been the glare, but for an instant I had the illusion that something wet and repulsive was hopping around on airborne lianas a yard from the sky.

Mona Colbin was staring at me reproachfully.

"What an opportunity you had. Winslow says you stood in a unified field vortex which came from the Great Nebula in Andromeda. He says the vortex has been hovering for two days in a place called Charlie's. You could have imagined a glorious land—a land overflowing with a little of everything.

"But all you did was visualize gruesome photographic closeups. Men without legs, men without—"

She shuddered.

"That's all you did. Gruesome figures against a foggy background. And that little wretch Holden was so busy concentrating on our ankles he failed to notice that we were working on location in the Grand Canyon.

Winslow says it was all there in the ancient films, but he just left out the background."

"He left out the background?"

She nodded.

"Yes, precisely as you did in your closeups. You and Holden stood in the vortex and visualized people. Dawson saw animals. But only Dawson visualized a background for his solidified cerebral images. Winslow says there are no mental barriers now between what you and Holden imagined, and what Dawson imagined."

"I don't see—"

"Oh, it's really quite simple. Winslow says a unified field vortex melts down the barriers between minds when it solidifies mental images. He says it makes everything flow together, sort of.

"He says we're in this steamy jungle land because you failed to provide backgrounds for us. You see, the only imaginative background inside the vortex field was Dawson's land. Naturally we flowed into it."

"You flowed—"

"Yes, quite naturally. We needed a solidified imaginative background, because we're solidified mental images. I came out of Holden's mind, but now I'm inside Dawson's imagination. If you could visualize a safer background it would solidify elsewhere, and we could all go into it. Dawson's animals could go into it, too, of course, but Winslow says they probably wouldn't. He says—"

SHE screamed, and leapt back into my arms. The snake was unmistakably a cobra. As though infuriated by our conversation, it had reared its hooded bulk above the purple grass and was gliding swiftly toward us.

The fact that Mona Colbin was in my arms should have robbed death of its sting, but there is something about a cobra—Her slender loveliness was an encumbrance which brought a shiver to my spine and turned my blood to ice.

"Let go of me," I pleaded. "You're tangling us up. For Pete's sake, girl—"

"Watch out for your eyes," she shrieked, clinging to me with all her strength, and digging her little, hard knuckles into my shoulder. "It's a spitting cobra."

Before her advice could take effect the reptile hissed loudly, and sprayed us with venom.

"It's all over," I thought, clawing at my cheeks and reeling backward.

Almost instantly my eyes began to smart, and a dizziness swept over me.

"Visualize an antidote quickly," Mona im-

plored. "Try, oh, try. The phial will leap into your hand."

"Cobra venom is a nerve poison," I groaned, watching the snake sink back into the grass, and seeing a skull where Mona's face should have been. "There is no known antidote for the bite of the Colubrine snakes. Antivenin would be useless. We—"

"Then visualize three minutes," she implored wildly.

"Visualize—"

"Two or three minutes. Visualize a little, choppy wave of time. Get the feel of three minutes, and then—unwind it in your mind."

It was sheer insanity, but I made the effort. Instantly she leapt backwards out of my arms and the cobra reared up again. But instead of advancing upon us it receded jerkily through the grass, its hood deflating like an ancient American automobile tire.

"You did it!" she sobbed, staring at me as though I had turned myself inside out without using my hands. "There is no time here, but you dissolved a portion of Dawson's imagination. You sent that cobra back three minutes in Dawson's mind."

My temples were bursting. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her until her jaw sagged.

"I can't stand any more of this," I choked. "No more of it. You've got to stop it."

"How can I?" she protested. "It has nothing to do with me. Stop shaking me, oh, stop. We've been lucky so far. Dawson's land is teeming with poisonous snakes and—carnivores."

"Cats, big cats," Winslow said, arising from the long grass by our side. "Mona is right. No use kidding ourselves. We're desperately on the spot."

I released Mona and stared at Winslow aghast. "How did you get here?"

"You thought about me," Winslow replied. "I was sitting with the others in Dawson's cave when you thought—'I wish Winslow was here.' You were shaking Mona, but visualizing me."

"We may as well go back to the cave," Mona said. "It's safer than the open veldt, even if Dawson is there."

Winslow's expression was grim.

"You're right, girl. We've got to stick together."

He grabbed hold of my arm.

"This way," he advised. "Follow me, and keep your thoughts to yourself."

Striding through the long grass between Winslow and Mona Colbin, I kept visualizing a straight whiskey. The thing in the sky looked like a flying giraffe, but it was so

high up I could have been mistaken. There was something utterly spine-chilling about it as it soared and wheeled, its long neck out-thrust.

A coldness crept between my fingers, and a little of the whiskey spilled before I could drink it down. Winslow glanced at me and frowned.

"You can solidify little images," he said, "but not a new background for us. You haven't enough imagination."

Mona Colbin nodded scornfully.

"He thinks in colorless abstractions, doesn't he?"

"He does. And his little Casanova friend can't remember what your Twentieth Century cin—movie location looked like. If he could visualize the Grand Canyon, we'd be out of here."

"It's a good thing he can't visualize it," I flung at him. "The earthquake which closed it up occurred in 1944. He's seen pictures of that quake, and if he visualized it in, say nineteen forty, he might leap ahead a couple of years in his mind, and—"

"That stuff is addling your wits," Winslow grunted, an undercurrent of mockery in his voice. "If Holden saw a picture of the Great Quake there must have been a girl in the foreground. He just can't visualize the Grand Canyon."

"But Dawson can visualize anything," Mona said.

"You're telling me."

"I feel sort of sorry for Dawson," Mona said. "He's System-famous and has stalked big game in far places for forty years. But actually he's just a big, overgrown boy."

"Day in and day out, during long hazardous years in the Jupiter field, he kept dreaming about the animals back home. He got them mixed up, made some of them docile, some ferocious. He visualized half of the veldt upside down, put trees in the sky—"

"I know," Winslow said. "He was plenty plastered when he stood by the bar in Charlie's place and dreamed about an Africa that never was on sea or land. He tells me he got this background out of an ancient book called 'In Darkest Africa.' Today, on Earth, only the neo-Congo reservation looks remotely like Dawson's Africa."

HE NODDED grimly.

"The animals he saw in zoos when he was knee-high to a grasshopper. Some of them came from Asia, I'm afraid."

"Why afraid?" Mona looked startled.

"The ancient Asian fauna was the deadliest on Earth. There were a few choice speci-

mens in zoos when Dawson was a kid, including those spitting cobras. But what makes it positively devilish is that he's brought a lot of marine horrors here from the Indian Ocean. I don't like what we've seen so far."

"He doesn't know what we've seen," Mona said, nodding in my direction. "He doesn't know how bad it is."

I saw the octopus just in time. We were splashing across a shallow river when it swirled up out of the muddy brown water and swam swiftly toward us.

"Look out, darling," Mona screamed, swaying back against me.

Darling! A stab of rapture went through me. It would have taken weeks to wrench such a cry from such a girl in a less insane environment. Dodging two lashing tentacles, I gathered her in my arms and carried her up a sloping bank to safety.

With a startled oath, Winslow clambered up beside us, and stared at us in bewilderment.

"Well, I'll be—"

"The instant I saw you I knew you were my man," Mona gasped, returning my kisses with vehemence. "There is no time here and no waiting. We either know or we don't."

"I get it," Winslow grunted cynically. "You're his dream girl, eh?"

"Oh, but this is genuine," Mona said. "There is nothing adolescent about the way we feel. Darling, darling, how long have I known you?"

"Ten thousand years," I said.

She smiled at me tenderly. "It was really longer than that. Much longer."

"It was before the world began," I assured her.

"Look," Dawson said, standing up and brushing mud from his trousers. "If you two want to bill and coo it's okay with me. But I'm heading for the cave."

Before I could set Mona down something bit me in a tender spot. It was an ant, but big. When I pulled it from the seat of my pants it clamped itself on my wrist, and squirted a thin stream of fluid at me from the tip of its abdomen which tasted exactly like lemon juice.

"Ugh!" Mona choked. "Set me down, George."

"A forager ant," Winslow said. "Dawson never saw one, but he read about—"

Something squashy landed on my head from an upside-down tree and ran down my face. It had bristly legs and a wet, soggy mouth.

"Stanley never had to put up with this," I choked, digging it from my armpit, and staring at it in disgust. It had water-glass eyes, and was repulsively reminiscent of an acute stomach upset.

Mona was on her feet now, tugging at me. "Come on, darling. It's getting late. When night falls in Dawson's land unmentionable things drop down from the trees and squeeze up through the earth."

The cave seemed a little askew. It was not upside down, but it loomed up out of the yellow Dawsonian twilight with distorted glimmerings. A cold chill tightened about my heart as we threaded our way around misshapen boulders to the V-shaped entrance.

SITTING cross-legged about a swollen fire were six familiar figures. Although I had not visualized them sitting up, but lying flat on their backs around the wreck of an Io stratoplane, I recognized them straight off. Charred, blackened, they still were, their faces showing the ravages of exploding atomotor valves.

One of them leapt up at our approach, and bared his teeth in the deepening dusk.

"He's filled the cave with pink and black lizards," he complained savagely, gripping Winslow's wrist and giving it a twist. "Where have you been? Why did you run out on us?"

With an impatient grimace Winslow wrenched his arm free.

"Save it," he rapped. "Come on, Craig."

The interior of the cave was vast and gloomy and as chill as a tomb. The floor was covered with writhing lizard shapes which looked like Gila monsters, the roof was a mass of dripping stalactites.

On a boulder near the entrance sat Dawson, his head cradled in his arms. His hair was tousled, and he was mumbling to himself.

"Why did they come for me? Why did my own animals bring me here? My own animals—"

Solemn and still on both sides of the System-famous hunter stood four enormous gray lobsters, their claws folded on their chests. The panda thing was lying in a coiled-up ball at Dawson's feet. But it was not asleep. It was watching him out of one bulging eye like an evil gnome.

Holden had a slender girl on his knee. On both sides of him stood other ancient Hollywood beauties, their faces flushed and resentful. One of them was kicking Holden's shins and hissing like a cat.

"Zuzu Phelan," Mona murmured. "She always was a little ticky in the coco."

FURIOUSLY Winslow grabbed hold of Ben's shoulders, and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"Blast you, Holden!" he stormed. "I told you to get a grip on yourself. You have enough imagination to get us out of this mess, but you'll have to sober up first."

"Oh, sho you don't like me?" Holden mumbled. "You think I can't holdge it, eh?"

The girl on Holden's knee scowled.

"I like him," she said. "He's a good guy. These girls are just envious 'cause—hic—he likes me best."

Holden's color was rising. I had seen him like this once before. When he had more than twenty rocked-in-the-kegs inside of him, he was utterly unpredictable.

"Stansh up, honeybunch," he muttered. "I'll show him I can imagish things. Boy, will I show him."

The girl descended from Holden's knee and stood sullenly, glaring at Winslow. Mona's hand had crept into mine, as though a ghastly thought had entered her mind, and she couldn't bear to be alone with it. Having come out of Holden's mind, she must have known what he was capable of. Winslow seemed startled, too.

"Sit down, man," he crawled. "You're all right—a swell guy. We all like you."

It was no soap. A tremor shook the cave, and something that looked like a flying porcupine materialized out of thin air directly overhead.

"Ye gods!" Winslow croaked.

Erratically, the bizarre creature encircled the cave, flapping membranous wings and tinkling like a cluster of sheep bells. On a sheep, of course. Only this wasn't a sheep, it—

My thoughts began to gyrate. As though from an immeasurable distance, I heard Ben mutter:

"You're all as crazy as bedbugs. You ought to be in padded cells."

"Now, man, be calm. We're all buddies, aren't we?" I could hear Winslow saying, a note of desperate urgency in his voice. "We're your friends, and we're not crazy. You wouldn't want to drive us crazy, would you? Your friends, your buddies?"

"Could I?"

"No, you couldn't, and you wouldn't want to. Now sit down and be quiet. This little girl likes you. She'll climb back on your knee, and you can imagine that you're sitting in the Golden Falcon Night Club in Callisto City. How would you like that?"

"You're sure you're not crazy?"

"Of course not. None of us are crazy.

We're sane, sane!"

"Maybe you are right at that—hic. Maybe I should sit down."

I was aware of violent hands shaking me. The awful mixed-up feeling seemed to sprout wings and fly out of my brain. Winslow's face was studded with sweat, he was trembling in every limb and his hands were on my shoulders shaking me.

"He's more dangerous than Dawson's animals," he said hoarsely. "Our minds are not safe when he's like this. He could imagine us in a nuthouse."

"What can we do about it?" I croaked.

"You'll have to put your imagination to work. You'll have to visualize a safer background for us."

The gray spiral where his face had been looked at me steadily.

"Bringing you here was a desperate gamble, but Dawson was visualizing poisonous reptiles faster than we could cope with them. I thought there was a bare chance of sobering Holden up, and persuading him to visualize a safe country landscape on Earth somewhere—a landscape without women.

"I wouldn't trust him with a city, but he might have swung something simple like the Sussex downs, or the vineyards of southern France. A serene pastoral landscape with rivers and fruit-bearing trees, and enough depth to it for us to move around in. Instead, he's become a menace."

"Why is my imagination dangerous?" I asked.

"You think in stripped images," he said. "For instance, edible fruits, shade trees and Hollywood girls are all luscious images. I doubt if you could visualize a luscious image. You like to reduce objects to their chemical constituents. The scientific mentality, you understand?"

"When you're not jolted—no, haunted by a gruesome image like myself, a phial of H₂O, ash and potassium salts would be your mental picture of a human being. You also think in mathematical symbols."

He nodded somberly.

"It will be dangerous for us. But it's kill or cure now. We'll leave Dawson and Holden here to stew in their own imaginative juices. Your imaginative world may be a dissecting laboratory or a mathematical blind alley, but we'll have to chance it."

Mona was staring at me as though I were some new kind of monster. But her hand was still steady in mine, her look of loyalty unwavering.

"Winslow is thinking only of himself," she whispered. "He'd like to ditch the rest

of us."

There was a baying outside the cave. Dawson was beating on his chest, and one of Holden's girls was having hysterics.

"Wolves," Winslow muttered. "You'd better start visualizing. Make it a laboratory, if you have to."

VISUALIZING a laboratory brought the sweat out on me. I had to close my eyes and strain over the image. It took me a full five minutes, and while I was bringing the tables into focus, the baying increased in volume.

I remember thinking that Winslow was a cold-blooded scoundrel—leaving Dawson and Holden behind to be torn by wolves, running out on them.

I hoped we wouldn't see them in the laboratory, which was almost completed now. I was standing by tall windows gazing out over a blurry grayness, my heart thudding against my ribs.

I turned slowly, dreading what I might see on the long tables behind me. I hadn't intended to visualize a dissecting laboratory, but something deep inside me kept shrieking that my imagination had gotten out of hand.

It had. There were gray cadavers on all six of the tables. Worse, cloaked, gray figures were bending above them, long scalpels gleaming in their hands.

The ghastly truth seemed to flash and scintillate all about me. Winslow's suggestion had influenced me subconsciously, and I was in a dissecting laboratory.

"More animals," I thought. "Anthropoid apes."

"No, in some respects this is more like an operating theater," said one of the cloaked figures. "These are corpses."

"Human corpses?"

"Well, now," the cloaked figure said, "you needn't be tautological. Corpses are always human, aren't they?"

I wasn't sure. I could have visualized a dictionary and checked on it, but—

"You're wrong, Madamaus, and he is right," said another figure. "The Thirtieth Century Webster' defines corpse as follows—a dead body as of a human being. Syn.—see Body."

"But all bodies are dead," said the first figure. "Besides, would you call a dead sparrow a corpse?"

"I would, yes. It is a philologically sound expression."

"But these poor gentlemen, God rest them, are neither sparrows nor apes. They are very dead human bodies."

"Who is being tautological now?" said the second figure.

Hideously it was borne in on me that I was actually in a dream. In trying to visualize a laboratory I had recaptured a half-forgotten dream of my childhood which had left an ineffaceable impression on me.

"I'll have to think myself out of this," I thought. "Mona isn't here. I'm alone here. Mona, I need you, Mona."

"Do you, darling?"

She came reeling toward me between the tables, which were slowly dissolving now.

"Mona, where are we?" I choked.

"Darling," she said. "I was in a glowing hexahedron. You imprisoned me in a hexahedron before you visualized the laboratory. Subconsciously you thought, 'Mona is a jewel. I'll set her apart in my mind.' So I was a living jewel inside your mathematical mind."

Everything about me seemed to be dissolving, turning gray.

"It's Holden," I groaned. "He's here, too. He's trying to drive us mad."

"No," Mona said, reeling into my arms. "It's just your abstract imagination. You've distorted everything because—well, you're just not used to thinking in visual terms. Darling, hold me close. Something dreadful is going to happen. I feel it in my bones."

"Bones," I remember thinking. "The human skeleton may properly be considered under five divisions. The spine or vertebral column of an adult consists of twenty-six bones, and the number of vertebrae in each group may be expressed in the formula $C_7, Th_{12}, L_5, S_5, Coccyx$ equals 33 bones as seen in a child, and—"

Something cold and bony was moving under my hands. I glanced down and perceived that I was clasping a gleaming skeleton, that the lower part of my own body was a grisly articulated horror.

I tried desperately, but I wasn't able to talk. My jaw had stiffened, and my tongue felt numb and swollen.

"In man and all mammals, with a few exceptions, whatever the length of the neck—"

The skeleton I was clasping seemed to be trying to communicate with me. Its jaw quivered, and words tumbled out from it.

"No, darling, no! We're healthy, normal people. We're standing in the sunlight without a care in the world. Visualize us as we really are, darling. Quickly, oh, quickly!"

The effort to visualize trees and sunlight brought a pounding to my temples, but I could have shouted with joy when a grass-

strewn slope swept into view. It was dotted with—sacred cats! It was dotted with tombstones.

Around the skeleton, there had crept a misty shimmering which was coalescing into a white and stainless shroud. The death-head that had spoken assumed fleshy contours, and the shroud began to swell, as though an imaginative child had crept beneath it, and mistaken it for a clay modeling set.

Gargoylesque putty shapes glared up at me from the crinkling expanse of linen, and for an instant my sanity tottered.

"Holden," I thought frantically. "He's caught up with us. He's here."

ALMOST before the thought could jell Holden emerged from behind a tomb, and tore down the slope toward us. Pursuing him was a huge and formidable lizard-shape with tiny, dangling forelimbs and ponderous lower extremities.

The creature was as pink as a newborn babe—a D. T. Tyrannosaurus, if there ever was one.

"George, old fellow!" he shrieked. "Keep it off! Keep it away from me!"

Shock must have done it. My effort at visualization must have cracked wide open, for the instant the dinosaur hurled itself upon him a deafening explosion shook the slope, and jets of steam geysered high into the air from vents in the collapsing landscape.

The veldt was bathed in sunlight when I struggled to a sitting position. Digging a soggy strand of hair from my eyes I returned it to my forehead, and stared about me. My head ached, my tongue was swollen and my spine felt like a dissolving icicle.

Slowly, painfully, my vision adjusted itself to the glare. In the muddy soil about me were huge and sinister-looking footprints, and a few feet away stood—Winslow! The big fellow's body was drenched with perspiration, and he was shading his missing face with his hand.

Above him arched the branches of a tree which seemed out of place in Dawson's land. It grew straight up out of the ground and there were no upside-down leaves on it, or flying hedgehogs hopping around in its upper branches.

Winslow was staring at what appeared to be a rent in the landscape. Jagged it was, and filled with swirling mist which kept drifting out over him. When he saw me, a look of relief seemed to emanate from his missing face. Brushing a huge, black fly

from the edge of his un-countenance he strode through the purple grass toward me.

"You're lucky to be alive!" he puffed. "Your imagination exploded right after you went through that bottleneck with Mona."

I stared up at him in sick incomprehension. "Bottleneck?"

Winslow nodded.

"Apparently your mind tightens up before you start visualizing. Straining brings on a cerebral spasm which puts a clamp on your imagination, a sort of bottleneck. You can force your thoughts through, but a narrowing of that kind can be plenty dangerous. Your imagination expands just beyond it, you understand?"

"No, I—"

"It expands, and then swirls back, creating a dangerous tension. You squeezed through yourself and took Mona with you, encased in a glowing hexahedron. But I squirmed back out when I saw the backwash coming."

His missing face seemed to crinkle.

"I saved my skin, but nearly lost my mind an instant before the bottleneck exploded. Holden was on his feet again, raving. I had to lay him out cold."

Winslow's shoulders jerked.

"A split second after I slugged him he vanished. One minute he was lying in a crumpled heap on the ground, the next he just wasn't. It has me stumped."

"I just now saw him," I choked.

"You saw him? Well, I'll be—"

The big fellow raised his hand, and flicked a condensation of water vapor from his missing countenance.

"Well, that explains it. An unconscious drunk is mentally flaccid. He could have squeezed through, all right. What amazes me is that he hasn't returned."

"It doesn't me," I gulped. "He was just now running down a grassy slope with a carnivorous dinosaur a yard from his heels. He was practically a morsel when the landscape exploded."

"I see," Winslow muttered. "Holden must be still in a fragment of the world you imagined."

He gestured toward the abnormally normal tree.

"See that foggy gap over there? That's it—that's the fragment. Holden must be still in there."

Groaning, I struggled to my feet, and staggered to the swirling, mist-filled rent which my exploding imagination had torn in Dawson's land. It had turned a rosy pink, and a faint odor of alcohol seemed to exude from it.

"Holden must be filling it with prehistoric

monsters," Winslow grunted. "I feel sorry for Mona."

A thin film of dread crept around my heart, but before it could congeal and stiffen something that felt like a dead shark's mouth caressed the back of my neck. With a convulsive shudder, I swung about.

Standing directly in front of me was a baby hippopotamus with the largest feet I had ever seen on an animal. Great, lumpish swollen disks they were, at least five feet in diameter. From them tapered stilt-like legs which raised to the level of my shoulders a cavernous mouth which threatened to swallow me whole.

"Get back!" Winslow yelled. "Don't tempt it!"

I leapt at least four feet back, my shoulders jerking.

"A gentle terrestrial river beast," Winslow grunted, as though aware of my thoughts. "But you never can tell."

"No, you can't," I groaned. "You never can tell, can you? Why take chances? Why, why, why? Oh, my mind—it's going."

I CLAMPED my palms to my temples, and stared at him out of what must have been a glary-eyed countenance.

His missing features thickened.

"Come, man, get a grip on yourself. We're not licked yet. If you take it easy, you can imagine us out of this without having a spasm."

"Why should I when I've lost Mona," I flung at him. "Besides, I'm as crazy as Holden thinks I am. I'm cracking up, and I like wolves, and I don't care if I'm torn by tigers."

A queer sort of giddiness was sweeping over me. If this is madness, make the most of it, I thought wildly.

"It's Holden," Winslow muttered. "He's influencing you from inside your own imagination. If Mona weren't with him, I'd persuade Dawson to send a herd of water buffaloes stampeding over that devilish fragment. A strong visual impulse would flatten it out."

A coldness gripped me when I realized that Winslow was weighing whether or not to do that anyway. Even though Mona was still in there, even though—

There was a sudden rustling like the murmur of a rising wind all about us, and into Winslow's missing face there came an expression which made me think of a mechanical doll dangling from a hangman's noose. The iridescent opacity above his shoulders seemed to curdle and assume a

lumpish expressiveness which chilled my heart like ice.

"I was afraid of this," he whispered hoarsely, gripping my wrist. "Dawson has visualized a scourge."

Even as he spoke, a double column of army ants darkened the sun-caked soil between us. Between diminishing patches of purple grass the voracious insects marched, clashing their formidable mandibles and consuming everything in their path.

Directly behind them came a Macedonian wedge of picked troops armed with enormous pincers and wasplike stingers, their slender abdomens glistening in the sunlight.

The elite formations were followed by a voracious black wave of ants which covered every inch of the landscape for miles, blotted out the sun and hung from the upside-down trees in swarming, beelike masses.

There was a continuous plop, plop, plop, as wind-lashed clumps broke off, fell to the ground and were carried furiously along on the crest of the onrushing torrent.

"They must be driver ants," Winslow diagnosed alarmingly. His featureless gaze was riveted on the hippopotamus. The animal had waged a desperate, last-ditch struggle, but it was lying utterly motionless now, its flanks hideous to look at, its long legs stripped of all flesh.

"Driver ants, forager ants and leaf-cutting ants are all army ants," Winslow muttered, his un-visage writhing. "But their habits differ. Forager ants attack spiders and small mammals. Leaf-cutting ants clip little square sections from vegetation. Only driver ants range over the countryside in ferocious swarms, and enter human dwellings."

His grip on my wrist tightened.

"There's nothing more dangerous than the detritus of an exploded imagination, but we'll have to chance it. You'd better go first. Quick, man—put yourself in motion. Do you want to whiten to a skeleton?"

I needed no urging. The rent in Dawson's land seemed to pulsate as I swung about and headed straight into it. There was a misty glimmering on both sides of me. Something that felt like an octopus with hair on its chest seemed to take hold of me and waltz me around.

When the glimmering subsided, I found myself lying flat on my stomach inside a mist-filled remnant of my own imagination staring up at the dim, still bulk of a thing.

Unmistakably it was a totem pole, but such a one as only a lunatic or horizontal drunk could have imagined. Low down on it was

the carven face of Mona Colbin, and then, in ascending sequence, came Dawson's face, my face, and a face that wasn't. A flat wooden oval yawned where Winslow's face should have been.

The topmost face gave me the worst jolt. It may have been merely a sculptured replica of Holden's face, but it had a fleshy look which made me feel as though I had been given a weak's notice by the skipper and was accompanying a little, hobbling dwarf over the hill to the madhouse.

"Jungle masks and such things," it mumbled. "Congo masks. Totem poles. Why shouldn't I imagine one? Why shouldn't I, old fellow? What has Dawson got that I haven't?"

"George!" a voice tore out of the grayness. "Oh, darling, I knew you'd come back." There was a patter of running footsteps behind me, and her little, cold hands crept into mine. "Darling, I knew. I felt it in my bones!"

For an imperishable instant we stood together back to back, with Holden's fleshy face smirking down at us.

I turned abruptly, and she was in my arms.

"Where did you go?" she sobbed, running her fingers over my face. "Oh, my sweet, what happened?"

"Ants," I faltered. "They—"

MY SPEECH congealed. Around the totem pole an ominous black torrent was pouring. Even as I stared it swirled up about the five-headed post in overlapping waves, enveloping Mona's carven face and filling the fragment with a gnawing as of termites amuck.

Hideously, Dawson's face crumbled, and my own became a dust-flecked symbol of corruption. From the summit of the pole, Holden was staring down in slack-jawed dismay, his wooden eyeballs protruding.

"Ants," he mumbled. "'Tittle black ants. Whattayaknow, Ants."

Ferocious driver ants were running in and out of my carven eyesockets, and filling my mouth with squirming maggots and pupae when the wave converged in front of the pole, and started across the fragment toward us.

"George," Mona pleaded hoarsely, cringing back against me. "Visualize something from your childhood again. A dream—anything. Your childhood memories are deep, and vivid."

Her features twitched.

"Unless—George, did you bring those ants in here with you? You could do that, you

know. The human mind derives a perverse pleasure from torturing itself. Winslow explained it to me.

"He said Dawson's animals wouldn't follow us unless you wanted them to. They'd stay inside Dawson's imagination, where the vegetation is lush and food abundant. They'd stay within ear-shot of the dinner bell."

My blood ran cold. The shock of realizing that I could no longer control my own thoughts was almost more than I could bear. For the first time, it dawned on me that I had an unsuspected capacity for—yes, giving myself the works.

All that was sane and civilized in me was revolted by the perverse pleasure which my subconscious mind derived from gruesome and terrifying images. I knew that there were sunlit vistas in my conscious mind, structures of crystalline loveliness, towering edifices of mathematical beauty—breathhtaking in design.

But what kind of background would such images make for us? Would they imprison us utterly? Would I find myself walled up in a complicated mathematical maze, staring at Mona through transparent but ice-hard walls—separated from her by the sides of a cubo-octahedron?

The thought was intolerable, and I shied away from it with all my strength. Shutting my eyes, I clasped Mona firmly and visualized—

Machines! It occurred to me that I could do that. I could visualize machines. From childhood, machines had always fascinated me—huge and complicated machines, humming, pulsing, throbbing, pounding—machines, machines.

I could visualize gigantic wheels turning, dynamos humming, drills and magnetic gauges bobbing up and down.

There was a smell of lubricating oil in my nostrils, a thunderous roar in my ears when I opened my eyes and stared dazedly about me.

"George, don't move!" Mona screamed. "Stay where you are. Oh, George, what have you done?"

Looking down, my brain swam. Directly beneath us there yawned a stupendous chasm, its almost perpendicular walls studded with blasted and blackened granite outcroppings.

We were standing on one of the widest of these, but its width wasn't comforting because a sixty-foot magnetic excavator was moving swiftly toward us, chipping it away in fragments.

"George, stand back! It's throwing up rocks as big as hen's eggs."

Even as she spoke, there was a splintering crash, and the shelf shuddered from the impact of a bulleting granite fragment. All down the slope beneath us, enormous drills were chipping away the walls of the cavern, moving faster than I had ever imagined a machine could move.

The ponderous, clattering instruments seemed to possess a life of their own. They stood straight out from the rock, as though, hovering behind them, were invisible giants with an insensate urge to get things done.

The gorge was so deep it seemed bottomless. There was a purple glimmering far beneath me which may have been a river. Something that looked like the alkali-bleached antlers of an enormous stag was lying on one of the ledges, a hundred feet further down.

Before I could shake off my dizziness, the excavator thundered nearer, demolishing the ledge in voracious gulps.

"Down, Mona!" I shouted. "Not back—down. Flatten yourself out."

Lying flat on our stomachs with our heads raised, we watched the excavator eat its way crunchingly toward us. My palms were wet and Mona was sobbing hysterically.

"I don't want to die," she moaned. "I love you, and I don't want to die."

WITH terrifying rumblings the excavator ground closer, disintegrating the ledge in great chunks. The remnant which supported us began to sag, and chips of stone splintered against the cliff wall behind us. Closer it came, and closer, closer, closer, its vast, mechanical face dripping with lubricants, its clashing jaws exuding greediness.

I had thrown one arm about Mona's shoulder, and was trying desperately to visualize a modified tetragonal scalenohedron—a figure with crisscrossing internal surfaces and no barriers between—when the crunch of shoes on gravel shattered the image to fragments. "It's Winslow," Mona almost sobbed. "Winslow darling. Winslow—"

He came striding toward us along what was left of the outcropping, his shoulders thrown back. The change in him was breathtaking. There was a nerve-shattering concentration of power in his faceless gaze, and a kind of—yes, nobility, seemed to emanate from him.

He was clothed in a soft-textured tunic, belted at the waist, and there were rainbow-hued sandals on his feet. Under his

arm was a small, metal box, perfectly square and surmounted by a glowing crystal tube—a sort of pipette.

He spoke in measured tones, but his voice seemed to come from an immense height, and his manner was that of a man with an unruly child on his hands while an adult task called for his attention elsewhere.

"Try to keep calm," he said. "When you think of me, you agitate the vortex. Unfortunately, disrupting it isn't going to be what you would call child's play."

I scarcely heard him. I was staring beyond him at the excavator. The roaring had subsided, and the powerful machine had ceased to munch. It hung suspended in mid-air, perfectly motionless, its serrated jaws agape.

"You visualized this chasm just in time," Winslow said. "See that bleached skeleton herd there? Before I could follow you a herd of water buffalos stampeded."

"The ants sent them thundering past in a cloud of dust. They would have flattened you out inside your own imagination if those machines hadn't cut the ground from under them."

I stared at him aghast.

"Then we're still in Dawson's land?"

Winslow nodded.

"Your scientific imagination has superimposed a truly remarkable vision of the future on Dawson's Africa. We're in Dawson's land ten thousand years from now. The animals have whitened to skeletons, and huge, intelligent machines are carving the continent up to suit themselves."

He seemed to increase in height.

"I may as well tell you about myself," he said. "I just pretended to be Winslow. I didn't come out of your mind. I came from—well, call it another universe."

"Your conceptions of time and space are still very rudimentary, but from your point of view it would be partly true to say I came from the Great Nebula in Andromeda, folded back upon itself and turned inside out."

"You came from—"

"The Great Nebula. Or, if you prefer, a universe which impinges on the closed system which you are accustomed to think of as the physical universe, but is actually outside it. I came in a dimension-traveler, and placed the vortex by the bar in Charlie's place."

His missing face seemed to tighten.

"In my world I'm what you would call an experimental physicist. We knew what a unified field could do in our universe, but

we wanted to test one out in yours. That's why I put a negation-mask on my face and pretended to be one of your mental images.

"You thought about the real Winslow, but you couldn't visualize a headless man moving about on his feet. The real Winslow just couldn't rise up in your mind."

He was staring at me steadily.

"I blotted out his prone image when I masked my face and stepped into his shoes. Seeing my face might have tightened you up mentally, and I wanted you to give your imagination free rein. Testing out an abstract imagination under the influence of the vortex field was an opportunity I couldn't afford to pass up."

He tapped the metal box.

"Now I must get back to my world. I've got to disrupt the vortex, you understand? With your cooperation, this apparatus will do it. The unified field makes all cerebral chain reactions come to life, as you would say. Chain reactions when you think are as real as your physical body, but—evanescent, attenuated in structure. The field solidifies them, freezes them."

He nodded.

"No time for definitions, you understand? No time to discuss what is real, solid, substantial in your world and what isn't. A unified field makes everything substantial by fusing entropic variants of matter-energy."

"But—"

"Matter-energy is hardly an accurate term, but it will have to suffice. Call it universe stuff, if you prefer—the warp and woof of reality. It's very difficult to explain, because your knowledge is so limited. But—well, the unified field is a sort of filter.

"It dissolves the kinks in matter-energy by draining away the distortions of entropy. The kinks are very important from your point of view. Without them, you might turn around and meet yourself yesterday, or spend the rest of your life with your toes pointing in the wrong direction."

"Holy cats!" I choked.

"Unfortunately my present task is more complex than any mechanical process with which you are familiar. But you might say that I'm de-electrolyzing the vortex, disrupting it in segments. This apparatus is somewhat similar to a lead container immersed in a calorimeter."

Mona's hand had gone cold in my clasp.

"George, if he disrupts the vortex you'll never see me again. You can take me with you. Darling, fight him, show him you have a mind of your own!"

"You're giving him the wrong advice," Winslow said coldly. "You're not going to lose him. He's thought about you so intensely that you've taken on weight and substance.

"When the vortex goes, you'll be standing by the bar in Charlie's place. I'll squeeze you out, but you'll have to help me. You'll have to calm him down. All violent thoughts agitate the vortex, and I'm trying to keep it quiescent.

"I'm going to show you my face now. If you concentrate on my face your thoughts won't go shooting off in all directions. Just keep thinking about nothing at all, and let me do the worrying."

The gray opacity above his broad shoulders seemed to brighten and expand. It glowed and then pinwheelled, throwing off little quivering blobs of light. Faster and faster it revolved while a giddiness swept over me.

IT WAS a strange sort of giddiness, for one part of my mind remained calm and detached and utterly unaffected by the gyrations of that molten wheel. One part of my mind felt drowsy and relaxed, and yet a little hard lump of excitement seemed to be glowing in the depths of my consciousness.

Gradually, from the spinning wheel, there emerged a huge, shadowy head. Amidst the molten drip, drip, drip, it slowly coalesced, and assumed familiar contours.

It was not a human head. On ancient Egyptian mummy cases there are badly drawn donkeys which some Egyptologists insist are jerboas, and others okapis. Staring awestruck at Winslow's great head, I knew that the ancient Egyptians hadn't just imagined the most bellicose of their gods.

Yet the Warrior, by the Greeks called Typhon, had been—

"Yes," Winslow said, nodding. "We made a test flight to the Valley of the Nile once. The Egyptians defied us. They thought we were animal-headed gods. But look closely. My face is not really donkeylike."

It was true, yet of course.

Winslow's face was not that of an animal, "Look into my eyes," he urged soothingly. "Into my eyes. That's it. Deeply—deeply—sleep—that's it—deeply—deep—sleep—into my eyes—"

"Holy smokes!" Holden yelled, upsetting his rocked-in-the-keg. On my feet, so help me. George, did you thump me?"

Drowsily, I blinked sleep from my eyes. Not donkeylike—of course not—it was soft-

textured, mobile, and it expressed Winslow's thoughts even more eloquently than a human countenance could have done.

"George, snap out of it, will you? Hey, this is crazy. I passed out standing up. Twenty years I've been practicing, and never once—"

Someone was tugging at my sleeve.

"George, George, oh, darling, wake up. We're outside. We're in Charlie's place."

I opened my eyes wide.

Dawson was down at the end of the bar, slumped forward on his elbows over a tall one. I remember thinking that he must have finished that drink two days before. Then, suddenly, it started. It all started coming back so fast I felt like a cork in a tea kettle.

She was right beside me plucking at my sleeve. Her eyes were moist, and she was trying to kiss me. Although I wanted her to, I kept pushing back against the bar.

"Darling, he kept his word. He squeezed me out along with you."

"I don't know yet how I kept from bursting a blood vessel in my brain. But gradually the bobbing up and down feeling subsided, and the confusion went out of me."

We were all there together in Charlie's place—not counting the bartender. Dawson and Holden, and Mona Colbin, and the News-Gazette's ace fotog were back.

"Darling," Mona exclaimed. "You'll have to get me a job. I could handle a society column, I think. Could you maybe take it up with the skipper?"

I told her no. Grabbing her about the waist I lifted her into the air until she was lips-high and a little over.

"I've something better in mind," I told her, lowering her again until her mouth was flush with my own.

"You mean—"

"Sure, a home and kids. "But you've got to forget that you were ever a Hollywood star."

"Huh?" Holden mumbled. "Hollywood star? Hey, that's an idea. Let's go back to the morgue and run off one of those hotsy-totsy ancient cinema films. We're never goin' to find out what happened to Dawson, anyway. I feel it in my bones."

Far down the bar Dawson raised bleary eyes.

"My own animals," he muttered. "They came for me. My own animals came for me. My own animals—"