

WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

AUGUST 1955

35 CENTS

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FRANCHISE

by Isaac Asimov

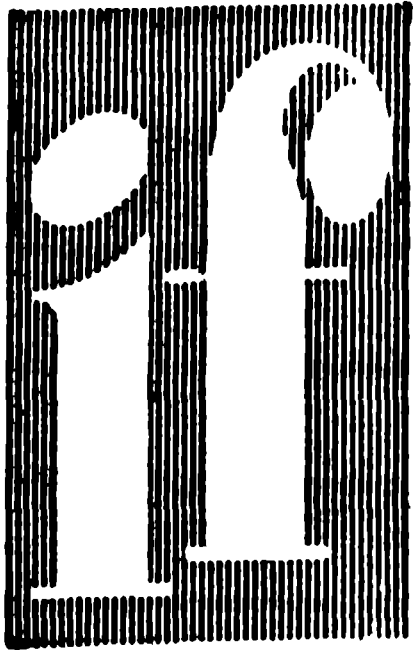
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BIRTHRIGHT

a new short novel by April Smith

PHILIP K. DICK • WINSTON MARKS • CHAS. L. FONTENAY • WILLARD MARSH



WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

AUGUST 1955

All Stories New and Complete

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By Kenneth Rossi, illustrating "Bleedback"

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BLEEDBACK

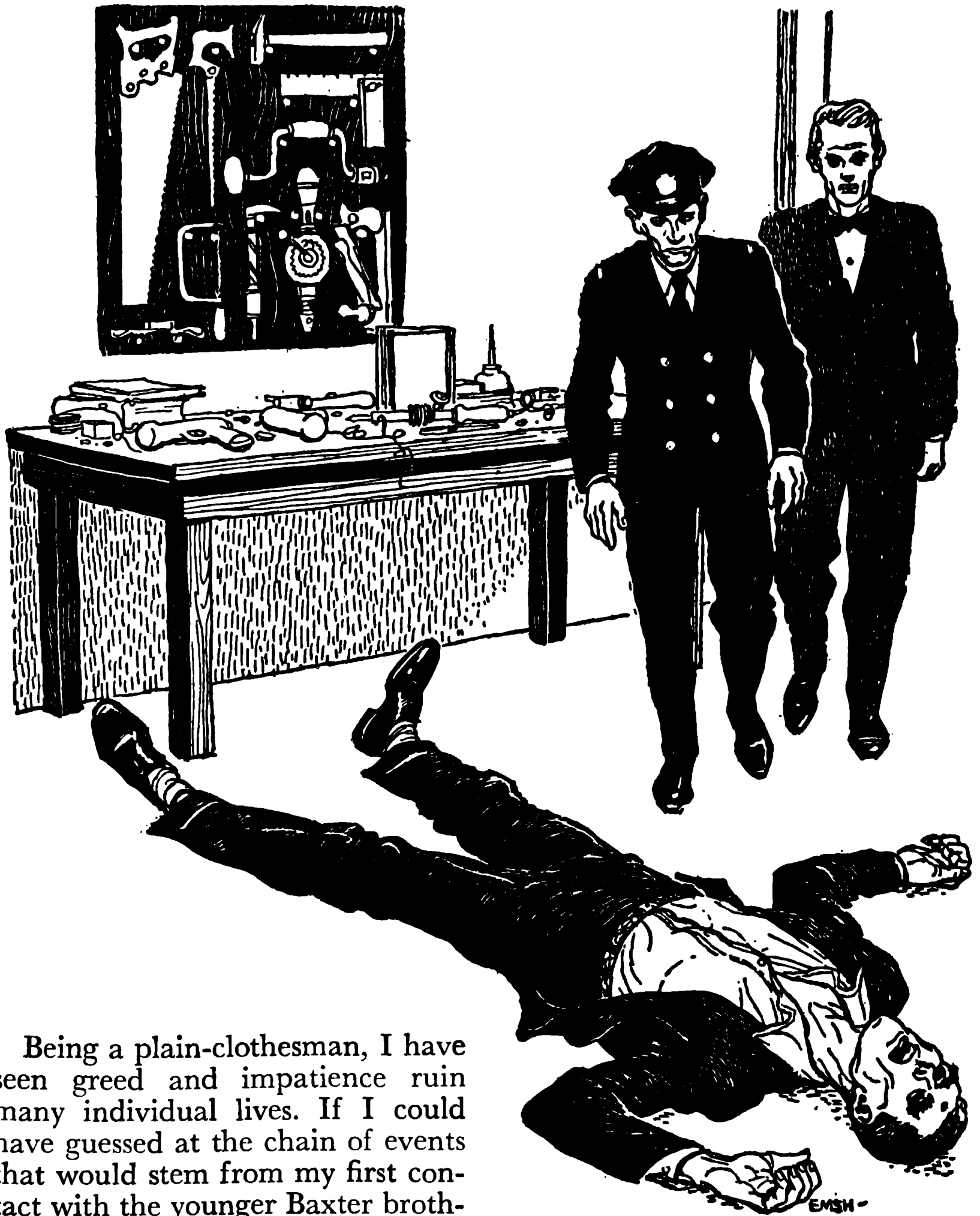
BY WINSTON MARKS

It was just a harmless, though amazing, kid's toy that sold for less than a dollar. Yet it plunged the entire nation into a nightmare of mystery and chaos . . .

THE THING is over now, but I can't see a Teddy bear or a set of blocks in a department store window without shuddering. I'm thankful I'm a bachelor and have no children around to remind me of the utterly insane nightmare that a child's toy plunged our country into—the millions of people who died in agony—the total disruption and near dissolution of our nation.

And yet, as the United States tottered on the verge of complete

chaos, it was, ironically, another child's toy that saved us. A simple, ordinary, every-day toy for tots stopped the "fever", halted the carnage that was tearing our flesh and eyes and viscera into shreds. With most the scientists in the world working for an emergency solution, they could come up with no better answer than a toy that'd been around for generations before the "Mystery i-Gun" was even conceived.



Being a plain-clothesman, I have seen greed and impatience ruin many individual lives. If I could have guessed at the chain of events that would stem from my first contact with the younger Baxter brother, I would have put a bullet through his head in cold blood and cheerfully faced the gas chamber.

Instead I took off my hat and followed him through the substantial old house to a moderately large room in the rear where, I'd been

told, we would find a body.

Leo Baxter was a little guy about five-foot six, like me but with a better build. His size was important

Illustrated by Ed Emsh

for a couple of reasons, one being that it was startling to say the least, when he pointed to the giant on the floor and said, "My brother."

He caught my look and shrugged impatiently. "I know, I know, but this is no time for Mutt and Jeff gags. Calvin has been murdered. Now get with it, Lieutenant!" If Calvin *was* his brother, Leo's agitation was understandable, but his voice had a flat note of practicality in it that I didn't like.

As I looked down at the sprawled length of the big man on the tiled floor, the Mutt and Jeff angle didn't fit at all. David and Goliath was a better bet. This Goliath seemed also to have met his fate from a hole in the forehead. I say, "seemed," because it developed that Calvin Baxter was not yet quite dead.

"There's no pulse or breath," his brother said when I mentioned this error in his assumption.

"You're no doctor. Now call that ambulance like I told you. Jump!" I said.

He jumped. I made a quick examination, meanwhile, and when Leo came back from the phone I pointed. "See, the blood. It's still coming out."

"Corpses bleed, don't they?"

"Not in spurts," I said. "The hole's tiny, but whatever's in there touched an artery. See that?"

He looked and seemed convinced. "The ambulance will be here. Anything else I should do?"

"Yes. Nothing. Don't touch a thing in this room . . . or did you already?"

"Just Calvin. I heard him fall,

and when I came in he was on his face."

"Why did you ask for homicide when you called the police? Or let's put it this way: What makes you think it wasn't an accident?"

"Two reasons. First, because I couldn't see any cause of the accident. When I turned him over the floor was smooth and clean under his forehead except for the smear of blood. Reason number two: Because Calvin just doesn't have accidents. All his life he's moved in slow motion. I've never known him to stumble, or cut himself, or drop anything or even bump into anyone."

I was checking around the room myself, and I had to admit that both reasons might be valid. A man the size of Calvin wasn't likely to be the skittish type. And by the time the ambulance arrived I was ready to admit that if the injury were an accident, Calvin Baxter had contrived to conceal its source.

It took several of us to load the unconscious man onto the stretcher. I told his cocky little brother to stay on ice, while I rode downtown in the ambulance.

Dr. Thorsen called me into the emergency ward. "How did this happen?" he wanted to know. Thorsen is a lean, learned old chap who normally gives more answers than he asks.

I said, "Don't know, Doc. I found him in a sort of home workshop. No power tools, nothing dangerous in sight. The bench at one end had a couple of little gadgets on it—looked sort of electrical. Some wire, soldering iron, books, a

few rough circuit drawings.”

“The gadgets. What did they look like?”

I thought back and realized that what I had to describe would sound a little peculiar. “Sort of like flashlights with a pistol grip . . . and no lens where the light should come out. Just blunt, flat ends.

Thorsen shrugged. “Then I don’t know. I expected you to report some kind of a blast or explosion.”

“No sign of one.”

“All right, then what else but a flying particle could drill a hole in a man’s forehead the diameter of a piece of 16-gauge wire?”

“What do the x-rays show?”

“We’ll know in a minute. What about the murder-attempt angle?”

I said that I had nothing to go on yet. That was the whole truth and the final truth!

When Doc’s x-rays revealed *nothing but a blood clot* deep in the brain at the end of the tiny tunnel piercing the skull, I was left without even a “modus operandi”, let alone a substantial suspect.

FOR TWO DAYS I investigated brother Leo, and when I wasn’t investigating him I was questioning him. The small town in Minnesota where he claimed he and his brother were born had been the county seat, and the whole shivaree had burned up in a prairie fire years ago, courthouse, birth records and all. With no other living relatives, I had to depend on people who had known both men. From those whom I questioned, I ascertained that they had been

passing for brothers, at least, for some time.

On the third day Leo’s patience began to crack. “You keep asking me the same, stupid questions over and over. I tell you, I’m a mechanical engineer. My brother was a mathematician. We’re both single. I make enough money in the construction game to support both of us. What’s so suspicious about humoring my brother’s research?”

“Among other things,” I said, “is your ignorance of what he was doing.”

“For the fiftieth time I tell you I *didn’t* know!” His exasperation was mounting to the pitch I had been awaiting.

“You used the past tense. You do know now?”

He wheeled and crossed the living room, poured himself a drink of straight bourbon and downed it. “Yes, I have a notion now, but it’s none of your damned business. His ideas may be patentable.”

I said slowly and quietly, “Now I’ll tell you what I’ve been waiting for. I’ve been waiting for you to offer me information about the two little gadgets that you removed from your brother’s work-bench—against my explicit orders not to touch anything. Until you produce those items and explain your actions I’ll be around here asking stupid questions. From now on, understand?”

“Damn cops!” He threw the shot glass to the floor and glared at me for a long minute. “All right, come with me.”

We went into a little library. He took two volumes from a high shelf

and from the recess snatched the two gadgets with the pistol grips.

From a table drawer, which he unlocked with a key from his pocket, he took some drawings that looked like the ones that had disappeared from his brother's little work-shop.

"Calvin developed a new effect by applying one of his esoteric mathematical symbols to a simple electronic circuit," Leo began, in his surly tone. He pointed at the margin of the circuit drawing. There were jottings of algebraic formulae in which the quantity "i" appeared prominently. He pointed this out to me and continued, "Being a cop you wouldn't understand, but this symbol stands for an imaginary number, the square root of a minus one."

This rang a bell from away back in my own college math. I said, "Yeah, I think I remember. It's some sort of operational factor in polar coordinates. No real meaning in itself, but—"

"Well! An educated cop! That's right, except that Calvin managed to give this symbol an actual, functional application. I was telling the truth when I said I didn't know what he was doing. I still don't understand it, and I've been losing sleep over these formulae."

"Then why not take it to the university and let the professors—"

"Because," he interrupted, "whether I understand it or not, Calvin's gadget, happens to work. Watch this."

He picked an ordinary paper clip from the debris of pencils, stamps and rubber bands from the top desk

drawers, touched it to the "muzzle" end of the gadget where it stuck as if magnetized. "Now keep your eyes on the paper clip," he ordered.

His forefinger pressed a button in the pistol grip, and without click, snap, buzz or murmur, *the paper clip disappeared.*

Leo stared at me, as thoughts of "hyper-space", fourth-dimension and space-warps flitted through my mind. It wasn't a Buck Roger's atomic disintegrator, because there was no heat, flash or sound. The clip was suddenly elsewhere.

"And I suppose the other gadget brings it back," I said.

"That's what I thought, but I can't make it work. I suppose my brother could, if he were here."

He tossed the thing to me, pointed at the little box of paper clips in the drawer and said, "Have fun."

I did, for about five minutes. Eight paper clips later I was convinced that whatever else it might be, the gadget was no potential murder weapon. The clips disappeared, totally. You could pass your hand through the point of departure without a tingle of sensation.

Leo briefed me further. The thing worked only on metallic conductors. It was harmless to human flesh and other organic matter. Then he removed the cover that ran the length of the rather crude, hand-carved, wooden barrel. From front to back, were: One pen-light cell, a lumpy-looking coil of wire hand-wound on a spindle-shaped iron core, and a short, cylindrical bar-magnet.

"In mass production," he said, "About 40 cents worth of material and maybe 50 cents worth of labor! Do you see why I wanted to keep it a secret until I could patent it?"

"No!" I said flatly. "Unless you consider a paper-clip disposal unit an item of commercial importance."

"But it's a whole new scientific principle—the rotation of matter completely out of our space-time continuum!"

"That much I grasp, but what good is it except as a demonstration of a piece of pure scientific research?"

"Good Lord, man, have you no imagination?"

"Okay, okay! Get rich," I said and slammed the front door behind me as I stomped out. I had been so certain that the missing gadgets would give me a motive for the attack on Leo's brother, or at least the method of inflicting the fantastic wound, that I was about ready to turn in my badge in frustration. All I could pin on Leo was a desire to cash in on his brother's gimmick—which, presumably, he could have done whether Calvin lived or died.

Suppose, I mused on my way back to the station, that Calvin had refused to let Leo commercialize on his discovery? Perhaps Calvin was preparing a paper for publication in scientific circles. Maybe cool-headed little Leo tried to knock off his brother to keep the secret in the family until it could be turned to a selfish dollar.

All right, suppose a jury would accept such an impalpable theory

as a motive, then what? No murder weapon. No witnesses. Not even a genuine murder yet, because Calvin was still alive.

Yes, old Doc Thorsen had kept the mathematician alive somehow. The elder Baxter lay on his back across two, white iron beds pushed together in the City Hospital, and Thorsen came in to report to me.

"The clot seems to be absorbing better than I expected, but it's doubtful that we could operate to remove the paralyzing pressure. The puncture is deep into the brain tissue, and he's too nearly gone to survive such an ordeal."

"Any chance that he might recover consciousness?"

"Pretty remote," Thorsen told me. "We'll keep a special nurse with him as you ordered, just in case he does."

I left Calvin Baxter pale and motionless as some great statue supine amid the tangle of plasma, glucose and saline hoses, under his transparent oxygen tent. The wound that had laid him low was no more than a dot of dried blood on his massive forehead.

Until his death, his file would remain under unsolved crimes. In my own mind I was no longer sure of anything, except that if there was a nickel in Calvin Baxter's discovery, his mercenary brother would wring it out.

And he did. Even before Calvin died.

Some seven weeks later Leo marketed the "MYSTERY i-GUN" as a combined, toy, trick and puzzle, and it set the whole damned world on its ear!

I located Leo Baxter in his new suite of offices on the 34th floor of the State Building. He peeled back his lips in a sneery grin. "I thought you'd be showing up."

He waved away his male secretary who was still clinging to my arm trying to tow me back to the reception room. I said, "I kept your secret, then you pull an irresponsible thing like this! A kid's toy! Good Lord, man, that device might be dangerous!"

"I appreciate your professional ethics, Lieutenant. I've applied for a patent, so you can tell all your friends now. And stop worrying. The "Mystery i-Gun" is quite harmless. I experimented a week before going into production."

"A week?" I could scarcely believe my ears. "What happens when some kid jams his gun against a light-pole or an automobile . . . or the night lock on the First National Bank?"

"Nothing. It punches no holes. A large metallic object simply dissipates the field. The largest object it will handle is about a half-inch steel screw—"

"Baxter, your brother's accident is connected to that device—and you turn it loose as a novelty!"

"Nonsense. It's safe as a knot-hole. It simply makes things disappear. Little things, like tacks, ball bearing, old rusty nuts and bolts—"

"And dimes and mamma's earrings and the front door key," I snapped back. "Until you know how to bring those things back you had no right to market that rig."

He laid his small hands before him on the desk. "Lieutenant, I'm

sick of working for other people. This is my chance to get a bank-roll to back my own contracting firm. Yes, I financed Calvin's research because he's brilliant, and I knew he'd come up with something some day. Now he's done it, and I'm merely protecting his interests and my investment in him. See here." He shoved some documents at me. There was the patent application, a declaration of partnership for purposes of marketing the Mystery i-Gun, and the articles of incorporation of the Baxter Construction Company.

"Okay," I said. "So you've cut your brother in on all this. Who's his beneficiary when he dies?"

"Still looking for a motive for murder, aren't you, Lieutenant?"

I didn't admit it to him, but he was right. Calvin's "accident" seemed too convenient to the purposes of his practical little brother, Leo. What's more, the lab and medical men on the force were just as mystified today as they were when we brought Calvin in with the needle-thin hole in his skull. Old Doc Thorsen had admitted to me that he could name no implement—not even a surgical instrument—that could have inflicted such a narrow gauge hole. It had to be caused by a fragment, *but there was no fragment in the brain!*

"Leo," I said, "I know you consider this case closed, but I want you to do me a favor. I want to go over your brother's lab once more."

"But you've—" He stopped, shrugged and nodded his head. "Okay. I'm interested in finding out what hurt Cal, as much as you

are. I'll tell you, I'm busy the rest of this week, but I'll meet you at the old house next Monday evening at eight. You see, I closed up the place and moved downtown."

I agreed, with the feeling that he was deliberately making me wait just to annoy me. Leo Baxter was an important man now, a man graciously willing to cooperate with the police—at his own convenience. I stood up. "Your brother has been calling your name. I suppose they told you that?"

"They phoned. Doctor said it was just mutterings."

"You haven't even been to see him?"

"What's the use? He wouldn't recognize me."

Well, it wasn't any of my business, really, but it's funny how you get to hate a man for his attitude. I don't know what I expected to find by going over that lab-workshop again, but whatever it was, I hoped it would incriminate Leo. On the face of it he was guilty of nothing more than a premature marketing of a new device, but the way he was cashing in on Calvin's genius certainly did the dying man no honor.

Cash in was right! The toys sold like bubble-gum. The papers, radio, and TV picked up the sensational gimmick and gave it a billion bucks worth of free advertising. And the profitable part of it was that the i-Gun was so simple to mass-produce that Leo's fifteen contracting manufacturers were almost able to keep up with the astronomical demand.

Before that week was up, the

BLEEDBACK

Wall Street Journal estimated there were already more i-Guns in the hands of the juvenile public than all the yo-yos ever produced. They retailed at eighty-five cents, made of plastic with a hole in the back where you could change the pen-light battery. They sold, all right. They sold in drugstores and toy stores and dime stores and department stores. Toddler's, tykes and teen-agers went for them. And adults. Maybe 30 million of them were in the hands of the public before I saw Leo Baxter next.

Which was almost two weeks instead of the one week he had promised.

I finally got an appointment. "Sorry," he said. "I've been tied up with government people all week. The A. E. C. tried to get me in trouble."

I said, "Skip it. You promised for tonight. Now let's go."

"I can't possibly make it tonight." He pointed at his desk. It was littered with correspondence, orders and contracts. "Give me one more week, Lieutenant."

It was an order, not a request.

There was nothing to do but wait the third week. It was not, however, uneventful. It was the week the accidents began to happen.

At 4:14 of a Tuesday afternoon, a man was admitted to a local hospital with a perforated belly. Straight through, hide, guts and liver. A newsman got hold of it and wrote a scare story about an attack with a pellet gun that must shoot needles.

Before the edition was sold out

the hospitals were loaded with emergency cases. People with holes in them. Tiny little holes, mostly, but holes that went right through them. Then dogs. Then automobiles, trucks and busses. Holes in their radiators. Holes in windshields that always went straight back, through seats and sometimes passengers—right out through the rear end.

THE CITY panicked. Then the county, state and nation. In two days, yes, the whole nation!

At first everyone thought we were being attacked by some secret weapon. By some miracle of statesmanship, the President of the United States prevented a "massive retaliation" attack by the army upon our most likely enemy—long enough for Intelligence to affirm that no enemy on Earth was that mad at us.

Then all thoughts turned to extra-terrestrial space. A bombardment from the sky? It was ridiculous to even consider, because none of the holes that appeared in people and things came from above. The holes were almost entirely in the horizontal plane.

Strangely enough during those first two days, nobody thought of the Mystery i-Gun. No one but me.

Leo Baxter had disappeared into thin air, as completely as if he'd turned to metal and crawled into the muzzle of one of his own "toys".

I had every known place he frequented staked out with a pair of plain-clothesmen, but it was the

morning of the second day of accidents before I got a radio call from the squad car stationed near the old Baxter home.

Leo had come home at last. He was a sad looking midget when I got there. Obviously no sleep, unshaven, deep hollows under his eyes.

"I figured you'd be waiting for me, Lieutenant, but you know what?" he demanded. "I don't give a damn! I kept waiting for them to figure out the answer to these accidents and string me up. How come you didn't tell anybody?"

I said, "Shut up and let's go inside."

Sure, I figured the i-Gun was the cause, but the last thing I wanted was for Leo to get strung up before I laid my hands on that other device—the one that wouldn't work. I wanted that rig and all the plans and formulae, and Leo undoubtedly had them hidden deeper than Fort Knox.

He unlocked the door, and I told the others to wait outside. We went into the hall and closed the door behind us. "So your little toy was harmless?" I said, grabbing him by his wrinkled lapels. "So it just shoots stuff off into another dimension?"

He stared at me, his eyes half glazed. "I don't—know. That's what the notes said." He sank into a chair. "I guess it doesn't, though. It must ball up the metal object and shoot it out—infinite velocity—reduced in size—infinite mass—infinite inertia—keeps circling the globe like—like a satellite. Goes

right through anything it hits. Goes on and on. Forever. Little bullets. Right through steel. Right through flesh and bones—”

“Simmer down,” I said. “You’ve been reading the papers. I’ve been checking the facts.”

“What do you mean?”

“That you were right the first time. It does shoot metal objects into another dimension. But *they don’t stay there*. They ooze back. Slowly. Real slow, so the first edge or corner that sticks back into our dimension is only a few millionths of an inch thick. Then a few ten-thousandths, then a few thousandths—and that’s about the time they start making holes in people and objects *that run into them*.”

“Run into them?”

“Certainly. There are no holes in buildings or other stationary objects. The holes are all horizontal. Now look, Baxter, our only chance is to work on that other device and your brother’s notes, and maybe we can develop an extractor of some kind.”

“No. No, you don’t understand,” he said shaking his head like a sleep-walker. “It balls up the metal. Shoots it out. Infinite mass. Infinite veloc—”

“Knock off that nonsense, and tell me where those plans are.”

“Trying to steal my brother’s other invention, are you? It’s not patented yet. You know that, don’t you? Couldn’t patent it because I can’t make it work yet. You’re smart, but you won’t get it from me—”

I had a fair hold on him, but the pure insanity that flared in his

eyes shocked me for just the instant it took him to wrench out of my hands. He stumbled to the door of the study and burst through it heading for the window. I didn’t hurry after him too fast, because I knew the boys outside would take him.

Leo Baxter was only three paces into the stale air of the unused library when he screamed, clasp his hands to his chest and dropped. A peculiar grating, plucking sound came faintly before he thudded to the carpet.

I stopped hard in my tracks and wiped the sweat from my face while Leo Baxter twitched almost at my feet, his heart shredded and bubbling its last in his perforated chest.

The paper clips. The ones I had propelled into nothingness weeks ago.

Hat in hand I advanced slowly, waving it before me chest high. Then it caught suddenly, grated for a split second and passed on in its arc. Now there were several tiny holes in it. I backed away a foot and brought my hat down slowly on the same lethal spot of air. Chest-high it caught and hung suspended.

Leaving it there as a marker I took off my suitcoat, held it before me and inched forward toward the desk. Something plucked at the dangling garment, and a chill froze my spine. Had I been walking forward normally, the tiny speck of metal that barely caught the glint of light from the window, would have pierced my skin at just about the site of my appendix. I

circled the spot continuing to feel forward with my coat. That was the paper clip Baxter had fired to demonstrate to me that first day.

At the phone I called headquarters and told the chief what to do.

"You're so right," he told me, his voice slurring strangely. "Only you're a little late. The order went out to confiscate the i-Guns. They think the damned toys might have something to do with the accidents. And I bought one of the first ones for my little Jerry!" His voice sounded hollow.

So they were figuring it out! The next question was, how to extract the deadly particles from the other dimension, or how to keep them from bleeding back slowly into ours.

I moved cautiously through the old house fanning every inch of air ahead of me with a phone book. When I got to Calvin Baxter's workshop I was especially careful, but I needn't have been. The only metal particles stuck into the thin air seemed to be over his workbench where he had been experimenting with his device. All but one.

It was right where I expected to find it—better than six feet in the air, just fore-head high for a man tall as Calvin Baxter. He had fired his proto-type of the i-Gun just once into the middle of the room.

How long ago? Eight—ten weeks ago?

It seemed impossible that all this horror had occurred in such a short time.

But there it was, stuck in space, protruding about a hundredth of

an inch from nowhere into clear visibility. So little was showing that I couldn't be sure, but it looked like the tip of an ordinary little nail or wood-screw.

This was my "murder-weapon", the cause of Calvin Baxter's accident. He'd run into it, jerked his head back, and the speck had come out the same hole it went in.

In twenty minutes by the clock I had the lab crew out from headquarters, and had explained the whole business to them. First they measured the length of the protrusion, and my guess was about right. It measured .0095 inches on the micrometer caliper.

If it were a screw an inch long, at that rate of "bleedback" it would take another 98 weeks to come the rest of the way out. Almost two years!

Paul Riley, the lab chief, was sharp. He caught it about the same time I did and turned to look at me. "We've got to figure a way of getting those things out of the way."

I nodded. "But quick."

Collins, our print man, said, "Why not just shoot them back into wherever it is they go, with another i-Gun?"

"And have them come bleeding back after a few weeks?" Paul frowned him silent.

He picked up a hammer from the bench and tapped the tiny, glinting speck. The point flattened out a bit, but the thud of the hammer indicated how solidly it was stuck. Then he walked around behind the point and struck it a hard blow from the cross-section side.

The hammer shivered in his hand and he dropped it, rubbing his numbed fingers with his other hand.

"Lieutenant," he said slowly, "we are up against something."

We found we could file away the metal easily enough. Sure it filed away until the file cut into empty space. But cold comfort that was. In a few hours, we knew, molecule by molecule, the screw buried in the other dimension would come oozing back, a minute but lethal speck ready to ambush the first very tall man who walked toward it.

Tall man!

That's why Leo Baxter and I had failed to find it in the first place. I had criss-crossed that room half a thousand times in my previous examinations. If I had been taller, or the speck of metal lower—

"We've got to bring Calvin Baxter back to consciousness somehow," I said. "We've got to find out how that extractor of his works."

"Right!" Jerry said, dropping his hands in resignation. We'd run out of ideas at the same time, and the senior Baxter appeared to be our only hope.

WE FANNED our way out of there, into the squad car, and proceeded at a gingerly five miles per hour back to headquarters. On my insistence, Calvin Baxter had been set up in a private room at the jail with Doc Thorsen in attendance. The city hospitals were so jammed with accident victims and frantic relatives that it was no place to work with a man who was our

only salvation.

When I explained everything to Dr. Thorsen and told him how important it was that we bring Calvin back to consciousness he shook his head. "It might be done, but it would probably kill him—"

"But you said he'd never recover anyway," I argued.

Thorsen seemed to be considering that. "Yes," he said at last. "That's more apparent now than ever. He's beginning to suffer the usual complications of immobility. Probably won't last more than a few weeks anyway. But can't you get the dope you want from his brother?" he stalled while he weighed his ethics against the necessity of the moment.

"His brother," I told him, "is dead. Paper clips. Right through the heart."

"I see. Well, we could operate, but as I said, Calvin wouldn't survive for long. Maybe only hours or minutes. And maybe not even long enough to regain consciousness after we remove the clot."

I said, "I've left a crew at the Baxter house to tear it apart, board by board, until we find this so-called *extractor* that Leo hid. But even after we find it, we need Calvin to tell us how to make it work. There must be a part missing."

We had wandered into Calvin's room and were talking over his great, supine body, covered to the chin with a white sheet. The speck of scalp on his forehead had dried up and dropped off leaving only a faint white spot.

As I mentioned the missing part, his lips began moving and a grunt

issued from his throat. "Listen," I said. "He hears me! He's trying to talk!"

"No, Lieutenant." Thorsen said, putting a hand to his eyes. "He's been grunting like that for days. The only word that ever comes out is his brother's name, Leo."

The name struck anger and frustration in me. "Leo," I half-shouted. "That stinking little—never even visited his brother!"

"Relax, Gene. That won't do any good. The man's dead," he reminded me.

"Relax? When all over the country people are tearing their bodies to pieces? Innocent people. Little kids—"

"I know, I know. I just spent nine hours in the emergency ward. Peritonitis. Cardiac injury. Lungs. Torn eye-balls. And it's probably just the beginning."

"Then what are you waiting for?" I demanded. "Our only chance is to bring Calvin Baxter to consciousness long enough to explain how his extractor works."

Doc ran trembling hands through his fuzz of white hair. For the first time I noticed that the pupils of his eyes were moving back and forth in little quick, darting motions like a wild animal looking for escape. "I—don't know, Gene. I suppose you are right. Only—we need permission—we must—you see, he might die, and—"

I took a good look at him and suddenly realized that despite his calm voice, the old man was going to pieces. I grabbed him by the arm and hauled him out of there, across the hall to the chief's office. Dur-

stine had his head down on his arms, slouched over the desk fast asleep between two clanging telephones.

"Wake up, chief!" I said, shaking him by the shoulder. "We have to get Baxter to City Hospital and—"

Durstine raised his head and stared at me. His usually sharp, gray eyes were dull, and his face looked dirty with a stubble of black whiskers. With a deliberate motion of both hands he knocked the receivers off both phones and fell back in his swivel chair. "Now what?" he asked thickly.

"You're drunk!" I exclaimed. *Durstine, who would fire a 20-year man without a qualm if he caught a single trace of beer on his breath on duty.*

"What else is new?" He could barely focus his eyes on me.

I swallowed a couple of times and began explaining what must be done. Get the mayor and Civil Defense on the phone. Commandeer all radio stations to explain the true nature of the metallic particles to the public. Tell them to stay put, and when they did move, to walk slowly, fanning the air ahead of them with something solid—an umbrella, a coat, newspaper, garbage can lid—anything to warn them of the tiny, suspended daggers.

"Yeah. Great idea. Some people doing it already." He said it without enthusiasm. "Only trouble is, the phones are swamped. Communications are breaking down already, and when people learn about the fever, they will blow sky-high."

"The fever?"

"The fever." He bobbed his head loosely. "My Jerry died of it this afternoon. Came down with it day before yesterday. By the time we got him to the hospital this morning he was running a hundred and five. Docs were too busy with bleeders. Wouldn't listen to me until it was too late. Jerry's dead. My little Jerry." His voice was flat, his eyes staring straight ahead.

Jerry was his only son, and one of the first kids in town to own an i-Gun. Durstine had said he bought it for himself. The chief went on, "What's more, the fever's epidemic. Before we left the hospital they were dragging victims in by the hundreds. Not just kids, either. On top of this other thing, we got the worst epidemic in history. No one knows what it is."

I looked at Thorsen. "You said you'd been at the hospital. What is it?"

"I—saw a few cases." He said it almost under his breath.

I grabbed him by his coat lapels. "Snap out of it, Doc. If you know what it is, for God's sake tell us!"

"They don't know what it is," he said looking down at the floor.

"But you do. I can tell by your face."

"All right, maybe I do." His face was drawn and defiant with an almost fanatical determination. "There aren't enough sulphas and antibiotics in the world to control it. We can't do anything about it, so why drive people crazy with fear?"

Durstine was coming out of his fog. He opened the big bottom

drawer of his desk and handed an open fifth of whiskey to Thorsen. He said, "Doc, you're in no condition to make a decision like that."

Thorsen tipped up the bottle and let several swallows pour down his leathery neck. The stuff brought tears to his eyes. He blinked them away and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "All right, public guardian, I'll tell you. It's pretty obvious, and other medical men will think of it pretty quick, I suppose—when they find out the cause of the punctures they are treating. This fever is just more of the same. Peritonitis. Only it's caused by particles so small that you can't even feel when they penetrate the skin. They're large enough to poke holes in your intestines, though. Large enough to make microscopic passages for bacteria. So, you see, for every bleeding patient, there will be hundreds, thousands, coming down with peritonitis—infection of the body cavity from within. Without drugs the inflammation spreads in hours, and the temperature goes up and up. It's fatal."

I could almost feel the pain in my belly and the fire in my veins as he spoke. Doc Thorsen took another drink and handed me the bottle. "You look a little pale, Gene. Have a jolt and see if *your* guts leak."

Durstine and I both had a drink, and the chief said, "I see what you meant. I wish you'd kept your mouth shut."

I said, "Dammit, we've got to do something."

"Like what?" Durstine asked bit-

terly. "Like quarantining the schools and the playgrounds?"

Thorsen nodded grimly. "And the parks? And all back yards and front yards?"

Durstine picked it up again. "And empty lots and all sidewalks and streets and public buildings and the whole damned outdoors plus the indoors?"

The enormity of the problem began to sink into my tired brain. In the space of weeks, more than 30 million i-Guns were sold in the United States alone. Multiply that figure by the number of times each was fired. Ten? Fifty? A hundred times? Only God knew how many billion nails, tacks, screws and rivets were launched into limbo, and were now just beginning to return—invisible at first—to skewer the American people.

Wherever kids had played—and that was virtually everywhere—death was hidden. And the semi-visible particles would keep emerging for weeks, in the order that they were shot into the other dimension. Worse yet, at the slow rate of emergence, it would be months or years before the metallic flotsam returned completely and dropped to earth!

A man could protect himself only by remaining motionless. But society was geared to motion, fast, space-covering motion. The nation would starve to death, if everyone didn't go insane first and tear themselves to pieces running around.

"We've got to get the secret of that extractor out of Calvin Baxter," I said. "If we can discover the principle, we can build large

models, like a vacuum cleaner—"

GETTING Baxter into City Hospital and finding a competent surgeon in good enough condition to perform the delicate operation, took almost twenty-four hours. The hospital resembled an abattoir, the corridor floors slick from the drippings of fresh blood, as people seeking help wandered frantically from floor to floor.

Somehow we managed to impress upon the staff the fact that Baxter had priority, and we were allowed on the operating floor, which was guarded at all entries.

Sick with exhaustion, I waited with Durstine. Thorsen was impressed into duty immediately, and that was the last we saw of him. It was a good many hours before they called us into the operating room. I won't try to describe the sight in detail. Surgeons and nurses hovered over tables, weaving like drunken butchers in blood-soaked aprons. In one corner, on a cot, Baxter lay with his head and shoulders propped up high. His feet hung over the end at least fourteen inches. A single sheet covered him.

The top of his skull was bandaged, and he looked even paler than before. A doctor and one nurse stood on either side of him. As we came in the doctor said, "I've been told of the problem. We've done all we can, but this man is dying. I think we can bring him to consciousness for a few minutes. It's a terribly cruel thing to do, and I'm not sure he will be

coherent. Are you sure you want me to try?"

"It's his invention that brought on all of this," I said. "If there's any solution to it, he has it in his head."

"Very well."

He did things with a hypodermic needle while the nurse rigged an oxygen tent. The smell of ether and blood made me sicker. My throat was dry, and I remember wishing I hadn't drunk Durstine's whiskey. As we stood waiting the humid air felt almost unbearably hot, and I had difficulty focussing my eyes.

Durstine looked terrible, hollow-eyed, unshaven, but he seemed in better shape than I. It was he who caught the first flicker of Baxter's eyes and dropped to his knees. The color came back to the scientist's face in a rush of pink, and his chest heaved with deep breathing.

"Can you hear me?" Durstine began.

An hour later Baxter was dead as predicted. And so was all hope of removing the lethal debris with his other invention. The "extractor" didn't work, he had told us. Yes, he'd been trying to reverse the field to retrieve the metallic objects from the other dimension, *but the experiment was a failure!*

Durstine took my arm. "Come on, Gene. We've done all we can. I know one safe place—a place where no kids ever played."

"Yeah, I know," I said with a tongue two sizes too big. "The nearest bar. The damned kids! They've murdered us! Leo Baxter and the

damned kids!"

Things were turning gray, but I remember the chief catching me by the shoulder and jerking me around. Too late I remembered about his little Jerry and the agony my words must have carved in his heart. I wished he'd slug me, but he didn't. He looked at me for a long minute and said something I don't remember, because the fog closed in—a hot, dry fog that swept into my brain and blacked out the light. I don't even remember falling.

The last thought I had was, *the fever! I've got it. And Thorsen said there were no more antibiotics or drugs left in the city.*

SOME WEEKS later it was a surprise but no pleasure, to discover I was still alive. Through the smoke of my unfocussed eyes I could tell that my "private" room was occupied by at least a dozen other patients. Some were on cots and some, like me, simply lay on the floor with a blanket over them.

I had one 30-second visit from the doctor before Durstine came to take me away. The doc said simply, "You're a lucky man, Lieutenant. We didn't save many 'fever' patients after the drugs ran out."

The chief brought a couple of boys in blue with a stretcher to haul me out. I was amazed to discover that automobiles were still moving about the streets—not many, but a few. I was too sick and exhausted to talk during the ride.

Durstine rode in back with me, a hand on my shoulder. "Don't wor-

ry, Gene," he said. "You're going to be all right. And we've got this thing pretty well licked."

He looked into my eyes and read the question I was too weak to speak aloud.

"No," he said, "we didn't figure out Baxter's extractor. But we do have a successful detector, and all we have to do now is use it—then hang a tin can or an old ketchup bottle on each speck of metal for a marker. Yeah, the country's going to be cluttered up like a hanging garbage dump for a long time, but if you can see 'em you can dodge 'em."

A detector? Why, they'd have to equip every person in the country with one! And surely nothing less than an electronic, radar-type gadget could detect the microscopic particles as they first began to emerge—the kind that had riddled my intestines and given me the fever without even leaving a mark on my skin.

"I know what you are thinking," Durstine said. His face was gray and drawn, but he wore a faint smile. "It was simple when somebody thought of it. What would be cheap enough to distribute universally, yet effective enough to give you positive warning? You see, these tiny particles are so fine at first that you can fan the air with a plank and never know when one passes through."

He raised me up from the stretcher and let me look out the window of the police ambulance.

Through squinted eyes I made out a strange sight. A thin scattering of pedestrians was moving slowly on the sidewalks, winding their ways among a random collection of floating tin cans and inverted bottles.

When we stopped for a red light I watched a young woman in a business suit step between a whiskey bottle head-high, and a bean can about knee-high, and then proceed gingerly waving a colored sphere ahead of her. This sphere, about eighteen inches in diameter, suddenly disappeared. She stopped abruptly and began shouting. Before the traffic light turned green, a man came up with an empty motor oil can and placed it on the sidewalk, under the point she indicated in the air before her.

Durstine explained, "When that speck gets large enough to support it, that can will be hung on it. Meanwhile, other people are forewarned that the air over the can is out-of-bounds, so they won't waste detectors on it."

As he spoke, the young woman was fishing another "detector" from her purse. It was a limp bit of something which she placed to her lips and inflated until it was a foot-and-a-half in diameter, then she tied off the neck and proceeded down the walk waving it before her in great vertical sweeps.

It was as simple as that.

Our undoing had been a 85-cent kid's toy. And our salvation was a penny-balloon! • • •

Science surpasses the old miracles of mythology.

—Emerson