

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

WONDER Stories

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ON THE COVER THIS MONTH

from Clark Ashton Smith's exciting "Master of the Asteroid," we see the curious worshippers on the lonely asteroid paying homage to the imprisoned terrestrial in the space ship. Though the man is helpless and facing certain death, ironically he will be knelt to as a god by these curious beings.

Published by STELLAR PUBLISHING CORPORATION, H. GERNBSACK, Pres., S. GERNBSACK, Treas., I. S. MANHEIMER, Sec'y.
Publication Office, 404 North Wesley Avenue, Mount Morris, Illinois.

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WONDER STORIES is published on the 3rd of the preceding month. 12 numbers per year, subscription price is \$2.50 a year in United States and its possessions. In foreign countries, \$3.00 a year. Single copies 25c.

Address all contributions for publication to Editor, WONDER STORIES, 98-99 Park Place, New York. Publishers are not responsible for lost MSS. Contributions cannot be returned unless authors remit full postage.

Chicago Advertising Representative—L. F. McClure, 737 North Michigan Ave.
Western Advertising Representative—Lloyd B. Chappell, 220 No. Catalina St., Los Angeles, Calif.

London Agent: Hachette & Cie., 3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, E. C. 4
Paris Agent: Hachette & Cie., 111 Rue Reaumur

Editorial and General Offices, 98-99 Park Place, New York

WONDER STORIES is for sale at principal newsstands in the United States and Canada.

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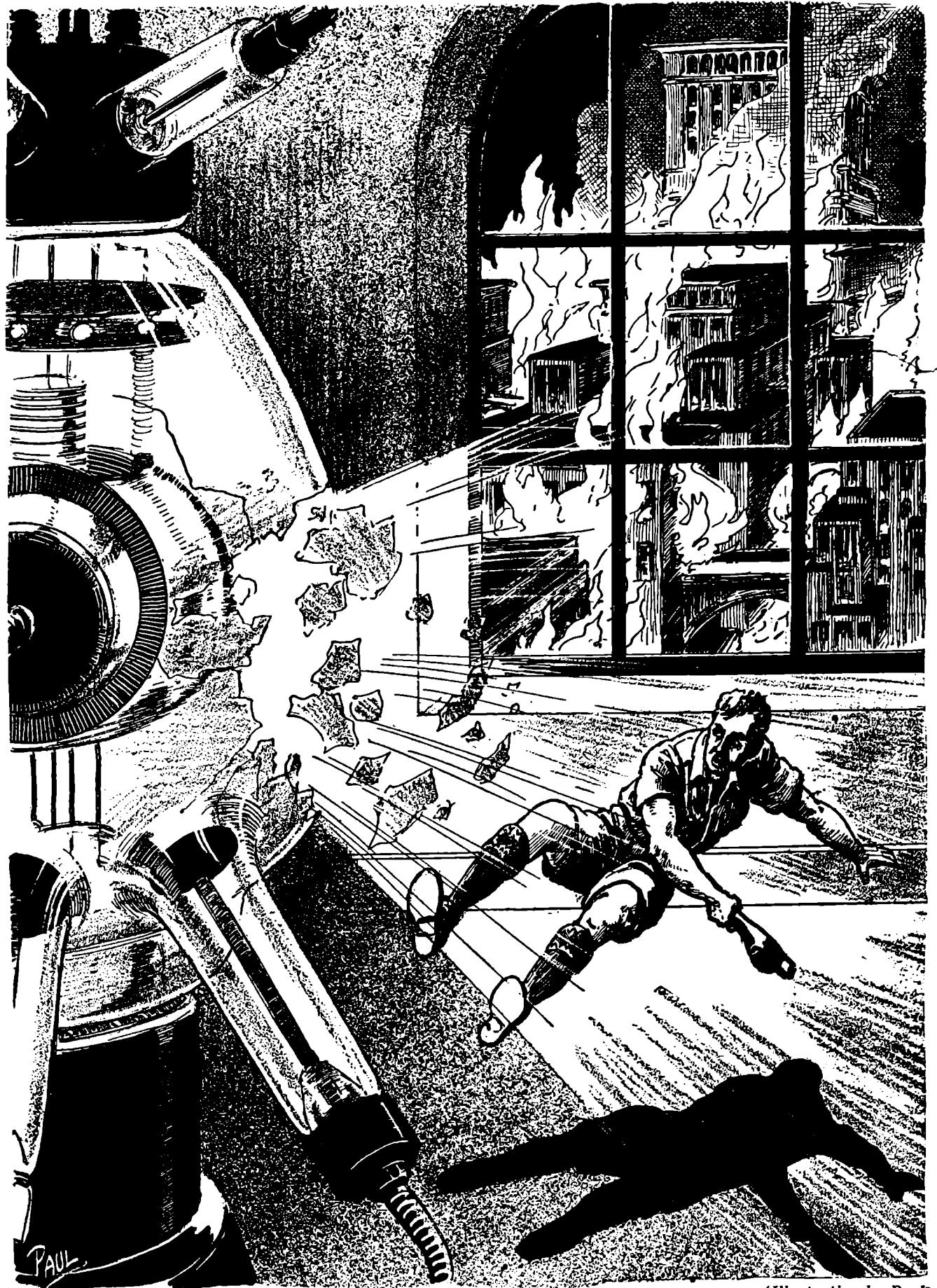
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(Illustration by Paul)

Out of the shattered coils and tubes, like a giant's breath, came a wave of force that picked me up and flung me against the far wall.

CHICAGO 2042 A. D.

By PAUL BOLTON

- The following historical document was found in the archives of Leser-Detroit, where it had been for centuries, since the death of its author. Of Vann Wakefield we know nothing save what is in the manuscript. Of his protagonist, Jerry Raton, books have been written. Wakefield's story throws new light on the last of the super-gangsters. Historic fate of all men of eminence, Raton's career has inspired many a legend, obscuring his real person.

Wakefield brings us a picture of the man; he reduces the gang overlord to terms of everyday life. For that reason, if for no other, the manuscript would be valuable. But it does more than that. It clears up many points that have heretofore been mysteries. Moreover, it gives us one man's reaction to the trying days in which he lived. As a true, although in spots inadequate, picture of those times, the manuscript has authentic historic value.

Its editors have confined themselves almost wholly to modernizing the language employed. We call particular attention to the idiomatic language of gangland, scattered throughout the manuscript, which we have transferred, as nearly as possible, into their modern equivalents. Many of these expressions are vividly self-explanatory. Others may be found unintelligible. Still others, impossible of intelligent transcription were deleted. In these expressions, the reader may find the inspiration for words or phrases frequently and commonly used today, evidencing the tremendous effect upon our national life exerted by the wolves of the underworld.

One further notation: Wakefield must not be regarded as an historian. He had one story to tell, his own. He wrote for contemporary consumption, hence neglected to enlarge upon many of the larger aspects of his scene, and even some of the detail which was familiar to him. We have annotated carefully but feel that this is, at best, a makeshift method. But these inadequacies should be overlooked by the reader interested in the human document of one man who lived through two stages of one of civilization's dark ages.

Done at Leser-Detroit, Federation of Americas, 18th of October, 2508, A.D., by Lars, III, librarian, and assistants at the Baden Memorial library.

CHAPTER I

The Rise of Raton

- Zooming down a sultry sky, three airplanes droned steadily toward Chicago. Two were small, fast monoplanes; the third a large cabin ship. In the cabin ship was Frank "Babyface" Julius, vice-lord extraordinary; and in the smaller ships were his ever present bodyguards.

Babyface Julius dreaded trips of any kind, air or

● That the gangster and racketeer are menaces, no one doubts. But how many people look ahead to predict the course of history should his power increase. Recently in Chicago an impudent hold-up man walked out of court because his machine guns were preventing witnesses against him from testifying. The prosecuting attorney confessed that the gangster was stronger than the police force of Chicago.

Robber barons of the Middle Ages dominated all trade and transportation and no one could use the roads without paying him toll. Such might be the condition of the future. This would be especially true if gangsters adopted the discoveries of science and used them before their dull-witted opponents.

Many will believe this story to be fantastic; yet our forebears of 1850 would be more incredulous were they to return and see the state of affairs of today.

ground. The presence of his "fingers," the bodyguard, in fast fighting ships, could not alleviate the uneasy fear which gripped him when another plane on the important St. Louis-Chicago air route zipped by. For Babyface Julius lived in constant fear of death, fear of being put "on the spot" as he had put many a rival—the inevitable price of eminence in gangland.

As the three planes neared Zion, Illinois, a patrol of nine planes which had been flying in huge circles high overhead, hardly visible from the earth, nosed downward. From the V of this group came a tracer bullet which left behind it a long tail of smoke. As if in answer, the motors of ten planes roared simultaneously, and another V rose from the ground, headed toward Julius.

The observer in the rear guard plane first spied the attackers. He shouted excitedly and the pilot nosed forward abreast of the cabin plane, gesticulating frantically. The huge plane shot forward at high speed. As it sped through the air, the V above altered its course in a huge parabola, headed inexorably toward Julius, steadily cutting down the space that separated them.

Suddenly from a score of guns came the rat-a-tat-tat of machine guns. The cabin plane coughed, wavered, and side slipped sickeningly toward the earth. In a few moments all that was mortal of Babyface Julius was wrapped in a flaming shroud. He was the first gangster "taken for a ride" in an airplane; and his death gave a new meaning to an old term. He had been "given the air."

Babyface Julius met his death August 1, 1935. The

same day, Jerry Ratoni indirectly announced his ascension to the throne.

The sensational story of the sky battle was spread all over the front pages of the nation's newspapers,* that afternoon. At six o'clock the early editions of the morning papers appeared on the streets of Chicago, and in two of the three morning papers appeared a full page advertisement—Jerry Ratoni's bid for underworld leadership. The third paper, for ethical reasons, had declined to print it.

"Jerry Ratoni, Inc.," said the headlines on that advertisement. The announcement continued that one Jerry Ratoni, hitherto unknown, had purchased the Neuvo Laredo, Mexico, distillery formerly owned by the Schwartz interests and would shortly be running at full capacity. All liquors from the distillery, the announcement continued, hereafter would bear the name "Jerry"† and the quality of Jerry liquors would be guaranteed to purchasers "in any part of the world."

"Be satisfied; buy from a Jerryman," the ad. boldly concluded.

● When a man bites a dog, that's news. Ratoni needed no other advertisement. Press associations verified the authenticity of the advertisement; newspaper correspondents at Laredo, Texas, across the border from Nuevo Laredo, reaped a small fortune in a few hours; and on the front pages of other morning newspapers, the story of Julius' death was paralleled by the story of Ratoni's advertisement—with much speculation on the identity of Ratoni, the man who had thumbed his nose‡ at the United States government.

There was a nation-wide clamor for the immediate arrest of Ratoni, as the murderer of Julius, as well as for insolence toward the government. In the midst of this clamor, Jerry walked casually into the office of the State's attorney at Chicago, introduced himself, commented that he had seen his name in the newspapers, asked if there was anything he could do for the police, and then, quite as casually, walked out again; for there was no charge upon which he could be held. Many months later he submitted to arrest for income tax evasion and served three months imprisonment. Those three months constituted the sum total of his prison record.**

*The newspaper was a printed daily sheet which once was the principal method of imparting information concerning world or local happenings. It was displaced late in the 20th century by the radio. Newspaper publishers were first to sense their fate. As early as 1931, prominent publishers declared the radio had become a rival which should be subject to the same restrictions as the newspaper in regard to advertising. Advertising was the principal source of revenue for support of the journals under the intricate financial system of the times, and the inroads made by the radio upon advertising revenues finally swamped the daily journal, although many kept on at a financial loss for years in an inane effort to "uphold the traditions of the Fourth Estate."

†Students of Americana here may find, for the first time, the origin of the name for our "Tom and Jerry," although the origin of "Tom" is not explained.

‡Literal transcription. Meaning obscure but apparently a gesture of defiance or contempt.

**Wakefield here assumes his readers would be as familiar as himself with conditions in those days. Under a law known as the prohibition law, the transportation, sale, and in some circumstances, possession of liquors, was a crime, punishable by imprisonment and fines. This law was openly and flagrantly violated. Those who sold forbidden liquors were "bootleggers;" those bootleggers who extended their activities into operation of gambling enterprises, sale of narcotic drugs, and other vices, were gangsters, or "racketeers." Ratoni's immunity from imprisonment was by no means uncommon. Gangsters were often forced to pay heavy tribute to the government, in the form of "income tax" on their illegally obtained revenues, and in some cases penalized for falsifying concerning the amount of these revenues; but were seldom punished for the very illegal activities which resulted in those revenues. The ends of justice often were ill served by the law.

● I, Vann Wakefield, who write this chronicle, describe the Ratoni coup so that my readers may have a true picture of conditions as they were in 1935 and thereafter.

There is much to tell in this narrative of gangdom's dictatorship and my small part in it. I was secretary to a great newspaper publisher; I became, in the interests of humanity a Jerryman, a follower of Ratoni.

After the death of Julius came the inevitable conflict with the leaderless Julius gang and the inevitable triumph of the Jerry gang. Through a system of forced tributes, or rackets,* the Jerryman soon controlled a score of legitimate business enterprises, besides directing the dope, liquor and gambling trades of the nation.

Occasionally a suspected Jerryman was caught. If convicted, chances were that he would be freed within a few months, buying or shooting his way out. At least six of the appalling prison breaks of 1937 were laid at Ratoni's door; there were fewer thereafter, for fewer Jerrymen were imprisoned as more officials were purchased. Like a giant human octopus, the Jerry gang spread its tentacles into every important city in the nation. America was on a debauch, comparable only to that which preceded the fall of Rome.†

I sketch now with a broad brush, purposely careless of detail. A few of many instances may suffice to illustrate the rough-shod Ratoni methods: The assassination of Governor Roberts of Texas, whose private resources and unimpeachable conscience made him immune to bribery when Ratoni sought freedom of the air for whiskey planes bound northward from Nuevo Laredo; the siege of Harlem Flats in New York, when seven Jerryman, caught red-handed after they had beaten to death an aged merchant who refused to pay tribute, were captured only after they had shot down five policemen and three bystanders—and then were acquitted by a corrupted jury, on a plea of "self defense"; the daylight looting of the Republic Bank of Oklahoma City‡ in which five innocent persons were wantonly slaughtered; and the kidnaping and subsequent treatment of Joyce Lomac, daughter of another incorruptible, Mayor Lomac of New Orleans, a strategic city in Ratoni's plans. Miss Lomac died by her own hand three days after she had been returned, "as a lesson," to her father's home.

With this incomplete survey I come to the Council of 46.** That organization, which took its name from the number of its original members, was planned by five men:

*Small business men were forced by gangsters to pay tribute, i.e., to pay sums of money as "protection" against marauders, the marauders being the same gangsters who collected the tribute. Failure to pay tribute meant destruction of the merchant's physical plant, sometimes injury to himself. This was known as a "racket."

†Rome, one of the great cities in the infancy of the world's history, fell a victim to its own moral degeneration. It is interesting to note that Rome's last days saw roving bands of outlaws, comparable to the gangs of the 20th and 21st centuries, preying upon the inhabitants. Quite likely, Wakefield has this parallel in mind. He was not the first to note it. Another parallel is found by the historian in the gangsters' "rackets" and the feudal system of a few centuries before. In both instances the producer was forced to share with the non-producer, in return for spurious "protection." The feudal lord punished with pillory and prison, rope and sword. The gang lord punished with knife and pistol, dynamite and destruction.

‡Banks were depositories for gold and silver, metals used then as mediums of exchange in trade and commerce.

**It is difficult to understand the reasoning of the Council of 46. Their's was a foolhardy, albeit courageous attempt to cure the patient by striking off an arm, when the poison had penetrated into the blood stream. We know now Ratoni was but a symbol. His successor, and his successor's successor, stood ready for their coronation, as one boll succeeds another until the poison is ejected from the system.

John M. Randolph, publisher of the *New York Evening Sentinel*; Erasmus K. Shelby, retired educator; Dr. Julius K. Seidel, famed psychologist; General Paul J. Sterling, former governor-general of the Philippines and Jasper Canby, multi-millionaire public utility owner.* I was present as confidential secretary for Col. Randolph, in whose home the meeting was held.

Without preamble, Col. Randolph plunged into his subject.

"Gentlemen, you and I know this nation is faced with a threat without parallel in the history of mankind, a threat the more ominous because it is financed and condoned by the masses of the people, unable to see what lies before them. I do not know whether we can avert the impending catastrophe; I do know we can try. Gentlemen, I propose to you that we wipe from the face of the earth Jerry Ratoni and his followers, before Ratoni becomes dictator of the nation!"

"My four friends here and I have talked over the situation from every possible angle. We have finally reached one conclusion. You do not arbitrate with a rattlesnake; nor do you hale him into a court of law. You strike, and you must strike first. Jerry Ratoni is the snake. He lies coiled, ready to strike; his goal, subjugation of the American people.

"Authorities are useless—worse than useless, since many are Ratoni's allies. We must depend on our own resources, and I propose, if you will join me, that we fight him with his own weapons, fire with fire!"

He outlined his plan, essentially, simply. Members of the Council were to worm their way into the Jerry gang, mark its men, learn its secrets, determine what politicians were in Ratoni's pay—in short, expose to the council the complete intricate network of the gang. When we were ready we would strike, and strike with all our strength.

So was formed the greatest secret organization since the Ku Klux Klan.† Membership in the council spread rapidly across the nation. Soon the Jerry gang was honeycombed with Council members. When a stubborn minority in Congress defeated a proposed repeal of the Volstead act,‡—despite urgent appeals from the Anti-Saloon League, the W. C. T. U.** and other temperance organizations, council members furnished a list of those who voted at the behest of Jerry, who profited too greatly from prohibition to see its repeal. We learned the names of business men secretly aiding the gang leader; of his sources for drugs, and thousands of other details. We had decided to take our case to the courts only if we were certain we could win there; otherwise we would appoint ourselves

*Public utilities or power companies, paradoxically, were owned by private citizens.

†Vigilante societies of the United States organized after the Civil War, 1865.

‡Volstead act: the prohibition law, previously noted. Its repeal by Congress in 2071 A.D. was an empty gesture, since it had long before been forgotten.

**We have been unable to determine what organization these initials denoted.

judges and executioners. First we wanted all the facts, so that no innocent man would be harmed, nor a guilty one escape.

● So I became a Jerryman. How?—would make another story. Suffice to say that I started as a worker in the distillery at Neuvo Laredo. I was promoted—because of my youth, strength and ability at the controls of a plane—to rum runner.

As a rum runner, I came to know Ratoni, and this personal contact led me to the trusted position of pilot on his cruiser, a light dirigible in which he journeyed from the Mexican border to his American headquarters in the Zenith building, latest giant of the Chicago skyscrapers.*

Ratoni fulfilled the gangster legend. A well-knit, bulky, dark man, something of the prize-fighter and something of the business man mingled in his face. Ratoni was a business man; he had applied big business methods to the rackets. He was soft spoken, quietly dressed, unobtrusive. He did not seek publicity; not for him the luxury of a winter home at Palm Beach. I never saw him perturbed or disheveled until that fateful March 18, 1940.

There was another in his office, even more mysterious, to me, than Ratoni himself. I met her the first time Ratoni called me in. When I entered the outer office of his suite at the distillery, she gazed hard at me, then asked coolly:

"Well, what do you want?"

I stifled an impulse to slap her and answered Ratoni had sent for me.

"Okay," she said. "You're the new one. Thought maybe you were trying to crash the gate. Just a minute."

She stepped into Ratoni's private office and a minute later the "Big Shot" himself came out.

"You're Wakefield?" he questioned me. I admitted my identity, still smarting a bit under my abrupt reception. "You must learn to know Miss Wentworth," he went on. "She handles all your reports. Come in here."

We went into the inner office, and Ratoni questioned me in detail about my past. He finally appeared satisfied and outlined my work.

There followed eighteen of the most thrilling months of my life, through which, acting under Council orders, I became in every sense of the word except loyalty, a Jerryman rum runner. It was also eighteen months of planning by the council—and eighteen months during which a curious disquiet crept into my heart as I learned to love a gangster's secretary, automatically branded a criminal by service to a criminal.

I could learn little of Alice Wentworth's past. She was about 28 years old, three years younger than myself; a

*Skyscraper: a form of city architecture peculiar to the age when the exodus from the country to the city sections was at its height, and space in cities at a premium. They were built hundreds of feet into the air, towering toothpicks of steel, masonry and glass, each with office space for thousands of drone-like office workers.



PAUL BOLTON

tall, cool, efficient blonde, self-contained but an interesting, intelligent companion in our idle hours. With me, she seemed to drop her aloofness become less constrained and more free. And as my affection for her grew, there also grew in my heart a conviction that this girl was not a criminal, despite the damning evidence against her.

CHAPTER II

A Catastrophe

- Plans of the Council were nearly ripe; but their fruition came with breath-taking suddenness.

One day in March, 1940, Alice called me. "We're going to Chicago tomorrow," she said. I had then been promoted to the place as pilot on Ratoni's dirigible. "Let's spend the evening in San Antonio."

That suited me fine. We flew up in her couplet, and information she let fall in our casual conversation on the way sent me posthaste, at the first opportunity to absent myself, to call Col. Randolph on his private wavelength.*

"Ratoni has called a meeting of fifty of his principal agents," I whispered excitedly. "They are to meet in the Zenith headquarters tomorrow at 2 o'clock. Don't know what's up!"

Col. Randolph's answer was a long whistle. "Wait a bit," he said, "I want Sterling to hear this." I heard him buzz Sterling's home in Chicago, and soon came the general's voice. "What's the excitement?"

"Vann's on the line," Randolph said. I repeated my story.

"Gad!" exclaimed the general. "You're sure of your facts?"

"Absolutely. Got the news from Jerry's private secretary."

"Are you sure you can trust him?"

"It's not a him," I explained, hoping the air did not carry my blush from San Antonio to New York and Chicago. "It's a her!"

"Oh!" came over the air accompanied by what I suspected was a smothered laugh, "I see!" Then Col. Randolph spoke.

"General, are the detectors in place?"†

"The building is honeycombed with them."

"How many men can you muster in Chicago in a hurry?"

"At least 200. What do you mean? Not—strike?"

"Yes," came the curt response. "The opportunity is golden. By tomorrow night Ratoni and his leaders shall have been wiped out of existence. I'll see you early tomorrow."

Sterling was still dubious. "But Colonel, the courts—"

"Damn the courts! Do you think we ever would have such an opportunity again?" And Sterling agreed.

As casually as that plans were laid for what resulted in the most horrible catastrophe of the 20th century.

Shortly before noon the next day we moored to the tow-

er of the Zenith Building. Ratoni and Alice disembarked, but to my chagrin, Ratoni gave me strict orders to stay aboard, ready to take off at a moment's notice.

The meeting was to take place in Ratoni's council chamber at 2 p. m. At 2:30 p. m., the Council's raid was scheduled. I debated what course I should follow. In the council's attack, surprise would be the deciding element—that moment in which sub-machine guns, revolvers and shot-guns could be brought into play.* It would never do for me to arouse Ratoni's suspicions. This consideration decided me to stay at my post until a few minutes before the zero hour, and then descend to the council chamber, on the 98th floor, just in time to be in on the kill.

For two interminable hours, during which my anxiety increased with every passing moment, I paced restlessly through the dirigible, or from the observation platform attempted to pierce with my gaze the swirling smoke and fog which encircled the tower of the building. At 2:15 I decided I would wait no longer, and at that moment Ratoni signalled me. It was the raphone buzzer. I stepped to the vision plate, cursing my luck, and tubed in.

A misty picture grew on the shield; Ratoni made no effort to clear it up, as his message was for my ears. I could discern the long table, around which the gangsters gathered for their infrequent conferences with their leader, and around it the blurred figures of the gangsters. A curious hissing noise came from the loudspeaker, and I finally decided it came from a curious box-like mechanism in the center of the table, over which one of the men was working. From one end of this box protruded snout-like barrels, like those on a sawed-off shotgun.

But in that blurred, incomplete view, one thing caught my eye and left me horrified. Ratoni, his broad shoulders turned to my view, was seated at one end of the table; and by him, notebook before her, sat Alice!

She had said, the night before, she planned to do some shopping in Chicago, and I, unthinking, had supposed she was at this moment in one of Chicago's department stores, safe from the carnage planned by the Council of 46. Now she would be mowed down with the gangsters, as a gangster—and I was helpless to prevent her execution!

• Ratoni's whisper came to my ears from the concealed transmitter at his end of the table. "Get ready to go like hell," he said. Even as he spoke he rose—and Alice rose with him. Evidently he feared something, and if not the Council, then the black box. My mind whirled with aimless conjecture. But before I could collect my thoughts, Ratoni and Alice had threaded their way to the lift, stepped in, and shot skyward. In that moment, I failed in my duty to mankind; for to save Alice I saved Ratoni. I jumped to the controls and was ready to go when the elevator reached the tower.

Ratoni flung Alice to my arms and leaped after her, shouting as he leaped: "Let her go, for God's sake!" Terror was in his voice and his eyes. As we shot off into space he looked down upon the Zenith building, for the last time. I followed his gaze, and there saw a sight I shall never forget.

Like a stately dancer in a minuet of yesterday, the building was swaying back and forth, slowly at first, then faster

*Presumably the radio-phone, temporarily popular pending development of the television with which it was combined. We find later reference to the "raphone" combined with "vision plate," forerunner of the vuefone, the rauve, and many other inventions combining visual and audible communication.

†Lipscomb of New Boston has published a noteworthy monograph on crime detection methods of the 20th century, including a description of the dictograph and its successor, the radio-ear or detector. Hidden in rooms where suspects gathered, these instruments recorded conversation, which conversation was admitted as evidence at trials.

*Fortunately for the good name of the American people this bloody massacre was forestalled. Undoubtedly leaders of the council were monomaniacs.

until it appeared as in the grip of a mischievous Brobdingnagian. As I followed its sickening surges, Ratoni, standing at my side, caught my arm.

"Look!" he screeched. "Look!"

The building seemed to sway far out over Michigan avenue, and this time its towering top did not sway back into place. Little puffs of dust showered out from its sides as a huge segment of the upper portion literally broke off and floated, like a picture in a slow motion film, down toward the terror stricken crowds who had gathered below.

In those few brief seconds I saw many things which today I cannot definitely say happened. I thought I saw men jump from that falling segment, to mingle with the masonry and dust that trailed, like stardust in a comet's tail, down toward the pavement. I saw them clearly then; but now I do not know, for I saw but an instant. They were wiped out in a dull boom which swirled our ship in a mighty whirlwind and tore away our consciousness.*

Down, down, I fell, sometimes with a rush of speed, sometimes floating lazily. I tried to reach out and touch the sides of the black tunnel, but as I reached they receded. I was dimly conscious of clinging fast to a thin rod of iron. Then the abrupt shock of cold water ended my fall. I choked, fought desperately, then blackness.

A giant bee was singing at my ear. I brushed at it impatiently, then opened my eyes. Alice was bending over me. Ratoni sat in a nearby chair. Their garments told me they also had fallen into water. Before an unfamiliar instrument sat a fourth person—a man, his hair unkempt, his legs and torso bare, his only garment a pair of short trousers like those worn by Boy Scouts.

I still recall vividly my emotions. First, thankfulness that Alice was still alive; second, horror, in a remote sort of way, as I recalled the last grotesque dance of the Zenith building; and finally curiosity to know what had happened. The curiosity was of the detached sort, such as I might feel concerning an event that transpired long ago to another person. I put down these sensations for what

*From what Wakefield tells later, gleaned from Miss Wentworth and Ratoni, and from what we have gathered from other sources, we have reconstructed a partial account of the fall of the Zenith Building.

In Ratoni's council chamber was one who was neither gangster nor spy. He was Thornton Cassimir, eccentric inventor (all inventors who advanced revolutionary ideas in those days were called "eccentric"). We find Cassimir named, in the memoirs of James Z. Stone, financial genius who died in 1953, as one of many "crazy people" who attempted to obtain financial assistance from him. Cassimir, Stone said, declared he had found a way to release the latent power of the atom through partial disintegration, or transposition, of its component parts. Stone relates that he laughed at the man. That laugh caused the destruction of a great building, the death of thousands of people.

Cassimir, repulsed by Stone, turned to Ratoni. The criminal element, it may be noted, were receptive to the offerings of science. The bootleggers advanced chemical science notably in their experiments with the illicit manufacture of alcohol, and some of their engineering feats, particularly New York tunnels built without knowledge of authorities in the nineteen thirties, won the open admiration of their contemporaries.

Ratoni declared Cassimir told him only that he had stumbled upon a remarkable new force which could be utilized as a weapon. The inventor would not set a price upon it; but wanted to demonstrate it to Ratoni, and obtain financial aid in completing his experiments. We cannot say now what this force was; its efficiency is beyond dispute. Apparently Cassimir failed to control it. Ratoni sensed something was wrong at the demonstration and fled precipitately. His followers died. Died also members of the council of 46, who had just entered the building; at least five thousand others in the building; scores in neighboring buildings, shaken as though by an earthquake; and scores who had gathered as mobs gather in the streets.

We believe today that Cassimir partially tapped the power stored in the atom, some two hundred and fifty years before it was time. Unfortunately we do not know. Cassimir was not connected with the Zenith holocaust until the Wakefield manuscript was found. Indeed, the contractors of the steel sub-structure of the building were tried for murder, in the belief that faulty materials had caused its collapse.

they are worth in the light of what I shall disclose presently.

My first question was a normal one. "Where are we? What happened?"

"Nix!" This came sharp and curt from Ratoni. "We don't know where we are nor who . . ." He nodded suggestively at the man seated before the instrument, and I subsided.

Again that buzzing, and I realized now it came from the machine, reminding me of a raphone yet strangely unlike one*. As I looked, there was a click and a picture, perfect in detail, flashed on the screen which stood upright just above the instrument board. It was an office in which were four men, fat, sluggish looking fellows. They, too, were clad in the shorts and sandals which made up our host's attire, wearing in addition light blouses of vari-colored silk.

"Crazy Kriml reporting the rescue of two men and a woman in Lake Michigan." It was the man sitting before the instrument board speaking. A voice out of the machine spoke:

"Yeah? Why tell us? Want a medal?"

The back of the man who called himself Crazy Kriml turned a mottled crimson but he answered respectfully. "One of them still unconscious, and the other two refuse to talk or answer questions. They have no papers, and are queerly dressed. I supposed you would want to check up on them."

• The fellow in charge lifted his feet wearily from the desk. "Oh, all right," he said, "let's have a look at them." He made adjustments at an instrument before him, then stared intently at the screen. A grin spread over his face. We heard ejaculations.

"By the Great Lord Harry. Shirts and collars and ties and museum pants!" The other men crowded around and laughed, while the three of us, especially Ratoni and myself, glared futilely at the screen and felt extraordinarily foolish. "Okay, Kriml. Bring 'em to sub-station 1. I'll have a boat start out to meet you." The picture faded as connections were broken. Kriml turned to the controls and I felt the boat rock as we picked up speed, although I heard no motor.

We were on a craft about fourteen feet long by six feet wide, very much resembling a sled in appearance and in the manner in which it literally slid across the water. The cabin was glass-enclosed. I saw no signs of motive power.

I ventured to address our host. "Beg your pardon, but would you tell us where we are?"

"Lake Michigan, headed toward Chicago." He turned deep set piercing black eyes on me, showing a scraggly iron-grey beard and a high forehead, hidden behind locks of uncombed hair. "Who are you, and where'd you come from? You pop out of the air and into the water like so many jack-in-the-boxes, almost upset trying to keep from hitting you. What's your game?"

I started to answer when from behind me came Ratoni's voice. "I'm doing the talking for this outfit, and I'll do it at the right time and place!" His words were addressed to the old fellow who pulled us out of the water, but I felt they were meant for me, so I asked no more questions. We pushed on across the water and through the mists I could see dimly the outline of Chicago.

*This was Wakefield's introduction to the vuefone.

A craft was approaching us. "Kriml, ahoy!" came a shout across the waters. Our host responded in a loud-speaker at hand and soon we pulled alongside. On the side of the new boat—a larger model of the one which rescued us—I read "Lake patrol, 899, Chicago Police." A chubby, moon-faced fellow was in charge, his fat legs grotesquely out of place sticking from the shorts. "So you're the comical strangers Kriml picked up, eh? Well step lively." Again we scooted across the water, leaving Crazy Kriml behind. And in a few minutes the city loomed over us.

I had been watching the skyline through the mists and smoke as we approached with dismay. Now I looked upon it in a veritable panic. For it was not our Chicago. Where the Zenith building had stood—a few hours ago—there now was reared a mightier and more majestic structure. Not one of the buildings did I recognize.

And these great structures were connected, one to another, by long, shimmering threads of steel, which glittered in the sun as dew on a spider's web. Down these threads rolled huge balls of glass, perilously balanced between these strands of wire. About the tops of the skyscrapers fluttered what at first appeared to be hundreds of birds, but which I recognized, as we drew nearer, as helicopters, quite similar to the ones we had experimented with at Nuevo Laredo last week. My view was abruptly cut off as we entered a tunnel, the dense black of which was cut by a searchlight on the prow of our boat.*

CHAPTER III

A Hundred Years Later

● Our boat stopped before a door, outlined by a dim red light above it, which we discovered to be the entrance to an elevator. In it we stepped, and were shot upward. Our guide led us down a long carpeted hall and stopped before an ornately carved door. Before knocking, our chubby-faced guide turned to us.

"You look like strangers," he said, "so here's a tip. You're going to see the Big Shot. Sort of watch your step." He lifted the knocker and in a moment the door opened.

We looked into the most elaborately over-furnished apartment I have ever seen. A butler was at the door; he motioned us in. Thick expensive rugs were on the floor; murals, entirely unrelated in subject or method, lined the walls, interspersed with countless mirrors; a grand piano seemed entirely plated with gold; and over all, like a pall, hung a heavy, heady perfume that made my head swim. I glanced at Alice. She had lost her usual aloofness and was gazing about like a delighted schoolgirl. I distinctly heard her giggle as we passed through the two rooms and up a short stair to where the Big Shot awaited us.

Words fail me in attempting to describe that room. We were now evidently in a penthouse atop the roof. The Big Shot had not only the penthouse but the whole upper floor as well for his apartment. Through one door I caught a glimpse of a marble bath pool, in the midst of a

sunken garden. Another side opened out across the lake. Grotesque statues in comic strip poses were scattered about the room. And in a huge throne-like chair, on a raised dais, lolled the Big Shot himself. My heart sank as I recognized the type: The racketeer in natural evolution.

As we gazed speechless at him, I was reminded of the real or legendary Bavarian king who could walk only with the aid of a wheelbarrow, trundled before him to support the weight of his enormous paunch. Fat, gross, pig-eyed, he gazed at us as we at him; then began to laugh—a silent ripple that shook his whole body before it became a coarse guffaw which left him purple and apoplectic. Our trousers seemed to be the principal source of amusement, along with Alice's skirt.

Ratoni clenched my arm and whispered into my ear. "I've got this figured out, I believe, kid; least I think I have. If I can find out one or two more things we'll pull a fast one. Back me up!"

When the Big Shot and his two bodyguards had exhausted their merriment—and the Big Shot recovered from incipient apoplexy—he began questioning us.

"Well," he said, "who are you?"

Jerry whispered to me: "Poker face, kid," and instead of answering, walked to a nearby table upon which was a box of cigarettes, extracted one, and calmly lit it. Then he sat on the edge of the table, swinging a leg. At this display of insolence, the Big Shot was again threatened with apoplexy. But before he could explode, Ratoni spoke.

"I'm Jerry Ratoni. Ever hear of me?"

The Big Shot looked at his bodyguards. They shook their heads in unison. Then he answered: "No. Who is Jerry Ratoni?"

That must have been an awful blow to Jerry's vanity; but he stood it like a man. He studied a bit; then: "Call in that flunkie. He seemed to have a brain or two."

Obviously to humor Jerry as a lunatic is humored, the butler was summoned.

"James," the Big Shot asked, "Did you ever hear of Jerry Ratoni?"

"Ratoni?" the cadaverous looking butler shook his head. "Why—er—I don't recall that name, sir; one of your friends, sir?"

"Naw," the Big Shot was getting bored now. "This buzzard here thought you'd know who he was."

"This gentleman's name is Ratoni, sir?" James searched his mind. "Come to think of it, sir, there was an—er—gentleman of the same name who lived in the last century. "My heart sank as he spoke, although I had half guessed our predicament, so utterly illogical in theory yet so logical in fact—unless I had been dreaming for the past several hours. James continued. "He was something of an—er—notorious figure, sir, a sort of 'Big Shot' in a small way, if I may be so bold as to say so, sir."

● I caught Alice's hand as the enormity of our situation came home to me. Had we been stranded on a desert island we could not have felt more alone, helpless. By some whimsy of fate, we had been caught up in time's maelstrom, opened by the explosion in the Zenith building, whirled willy-nilly through time and space; and

*Wakefield's description is unfair to the reader. It is a first impression, bewildered and overdrawn. The "shimmering threads of steel" were sturdy suspended roads, over which passed both pedestrians and machines. The huge "balls of glass" he might have described in terms of the "trolley car" of his day and the picture would have been less fantastic. Nor were the gyrocars less safe than the absurd traffic-blocking trolley of an earlier day.

dropped in an alien century, if not in an alien world.*

Ratoni's hand trembled as he lighted another cigarette but his voice went on smoothly. He had not been too greatly surprised. Like myself, he had guessed at the truth.

"Another question, James. What year is this?"

"Year? Why—2042, of course, sir. What year should it be, sir?" The fellow was more perplexed than we.

"That's right, James." Ratoni turned back toward the Big Shot. The man on the dais spoke first.

"I do recall now a fellow named Ratoni way back there," he said, "But what's that got to do with you?"

"I'm that fellow."

The big fellow was no longer amused. He waved his hand toward the door, at the same time relieving himself of a cavernous yawn. "See you again sometime," he said. We were dismissed. I turned and started to go, Alice still clinging to my hand. But Ratoni was not ready to go.

"Just a minute, you fat mullet! I've got things to say to you!" His hands flew to his armpits and came back with an automatic pistol in each fist. "Maybe you birds don't know what these are, but if you want to find out one of you move so much as a finger!" If the men did not understand his weapons they could not mistake the menace in his voice, and all three, all traces of lethargy gone, sat motionless.

"Now let's get this straight. As I told you I'm Jerry Ratoni. As James told you, I lived back in the last century. To be exact, I was born in the year 1907. That would make me about 135 years old. And I was something of a big shot back in those days. Not used to being laughed at, nor told when I can come and go. Get me?"

The fat fellow nodded.

"Now the way I get things, the Big Shot now means about the same as the Big Shot then. Now pull in your ears and listen to this. I'm not trying to pull a fast one on you; and I'm not trying to muscle in on any of your rackets. But I've got something you want, and you've got something I want, and I want to make you a proposition. I thought when I started here to see you there wouldn't be any trouble about talking to you; but our introduction wasn't very favorable. Otherwise I wouldn't have flashed these rods. To prove I'm shooting square, do this: Call the dicks and tell them to bring Jerry Ratoni's fingerprints up here. You can soon find out from 'em whether I'm lying."

The Big Shot blustered and scowled, but Ratoni kept his guns trained on the trio; and finally he buzzed the police, who, after a little argument, consented to dig Ratoni's prints out of their musty files.

Ratoni was exultant.

"It's a pipe, Vann!" he whispered, as we waited for the

*Wakefield's manuscript no doubt will add fresh fuel to the fire of controversy which has raged for centuries over whether time travel, i.e., literal transportation from one century to another without the normal body deterioration which marks the passing of time, is possible.

Generally speaking, there are two schools of thought which believe in the theoretical possibility of traveling through time—those who regard time as another dimension to add to those with which we are familiar and those who picture time as an endlessly flowing stream. Both schools have elaborate proofs of the soundness of their respective theories, too well known to repeat here. Regardless of their correctness, or incorrectness, there is no known record of bona fide time traveling into the past; and if any of our present day experimentalists have penetrated the future they have not returned to tell about it. Wakefield's story we must take on trust.

police. "They're soft—soft! See how easy I bluffed 'em? I half suspected what had happened to us from what I could get out of that nut who pulled us out of the Lake; but most of it was guesswork—and bluff. And how it worked! Oh, how it worked!"

"What's the lay?" I asked.

He grinned knowingly. "Wait and see, big boy, wait and see. All you and Alice have to do is back me up. We'll make this big shot look like a small potato."

Finally the police arrived, trailing into the reception room after the cadaverous James. They stood at attention before the Big Shot, and saluted him stiffly.

"They call these guys police," Ratoni observed, "but they act more like the Big Shot's private fingers."

"Oscar," the Big Shot addressed one of the three, whose great horn-rimmed glasses gave him an owlish appearance, "this bird over here says he's Jerry Ratoni, rose from the dead. He's a nut, of course, but we decided to give him a show. You got Ratoni's monikers?"

The spectacled one nodded.

"Well, give him the works."

Ratoni spoke no word during the ordeal of the finger print recording. The bespectacled one took every print with minute care; and when he was finished took from a brief case the familiar records of the Chicago police department, now a bit musty. I saw him start as he examined and compared the prints; then he bent carefully over the twin records, spread out on a table before him, ejaculating and muttering to himself as he scribbled and examined. At last he straightened up, glanced surreptitiously at Ratoni, and made his report.

"The prints, sir," he said, "correspond in every particular."

"You damned fool!" the Big Shot roared. "That's impossible! Ratoni's been dead a hundred years!" The bespectacled one held his ground. "I know nothing about that, sir. The fingerprints never lie. See for yourself." He carried the records to the dais, and the Big Shot studied them carefully under the magnifying glass. He was half convinced. He studied the record which accompanied the prints, then shot at Ratoni: "You still have a scar on your left shoulder?"

For answer Jerry pulled back his shirt to reveal a jagged, livid bullet mark. Then he asked:

"Now do you want to hear my proposition?"

The Big Shot gestured his assent, and the police departed, with a warning not to mention the fingerprints to any living soul.

Never more forcibly had Ratoni shown why he reached prominence in his chosen walk of life. He told his story so convincingly that I caught myself wondering if it were not true. At least it was as plausible as our actual experience.

"Try to get this through your head, Big Shot. You've got millions of dollars, power, everything that money can buy. In my head I've got something your money can't buy—but it has a price. That something is the secret that will show you how to live as long as I have lived!"

He paused impressively, then continued with his fantastically simple story, in which I took a leading part. I was a young chemist, Ratoni said, whom he had employed in his distillery, and in my experiments I stumbled on to a chemical combination which would arrest the process

of decay* in the body cells, staving off death indefinitely except through accident.

We three, Ratoni said, had tried the formula together, after satisfying ourselves of its potency. For nearly a century now, we had traveled in many countries seeing strange people and customs. At last we tired of traveling and turned back to Chicago, our home. Unfortunately, we met with an accident over Lake Michigan, making our introduction unimpressive, and to gain the audience we desired with the Big Shot it had been necessary to become somewhat abrupt.

Now, Ratoni proposed, if the Big Shot would cede a half-interest in his interests, together they would rule the world, with life everlasting. It was as subtle a mixture of cajolery, flattery and persuasiveness as I have ever seen. And the Big Shot, despite his better judgment, was more than half convinced.

"How do you make this chemical?" he shot at me. Ratoni interrupted as I stuttered.

"Not so fast, my friend, not so fast. I came to you because you're the man who has something I want; but that don't mean I'm going to hand you something on a silver platter. We'll fix up the pills. You have to take 'em once a week, and you can't afford to miss any of the weeks. We'll make just four a week, and all take 'em together. Then there'll be no double crossing."

During this speech, the Big Shot's apoplexy threatened again, but he calmed down as one of his henchmen whispered into his ear. I saw him stealthily reach to a button on a table near his chair. Ratoni's watchful eye caught the same motion.

"I forgot to tell you, fellow," he added, "that whatever you do don't try to squeeze us. Because we don't squeeze, see? And if you start anything like that the whole deal's off. We thought it would be a kick to team up with you; we thought you'd have the brains to see the possibilities. But if squeezing's a part of your layout, it's no go, and we might as well stop now." His voice was dangerous and carried conviction. My heart beat a tattoo as I waited for the big fellow's reaction; and again Ratoni won. Hatred in his eyes, the Big Shot called off the evident project of torturing our secret out of us; and asked for the night to think it over.

CHAPTER IV

"It is the End"

● We found food awaiting us in rooms within the apartment, to which James showed us, and ate ravenously. We had not realized we were so hungry—and tired. I was much too sleepy to note more than casually the luxuriousness of my bedroom.

I was awakened by a soft light streaming through the very walls of the bedroom. I gazed in astonishment for a moment before I realized where we were; then I examined the walls and found they were made of glass,† which was not transparent but allowed a mellow glow to shine

*Down through the centuries, man has sought fruitlessly for eternal life—rather, eternal youth. Pseudo-medical cliques, even religions, have been founded on this search for a short cut to eternity. It is not surprising that the Big Shot "fell" for Ratoni's story; he had many distinguished men as precedent. At that time, too, his life expectancy did not exceed 70 years as compared with our 150.

†Use of glass which was not penetrated by the burning actinic rays in the construction of houses was first being recognized when Wakefield lived in the 20th century.

through. The bath gleamed invitingly through an adjoining door, and in a jiffy I was beneath a cool shower, the water of which crackled as it struck my skin and left me tingling and glowing. It evidently was electrically treated.

My clothes were missing, but in their place were garments such as the Big Shot wore, silky and soft, quite in contrast to the rough woolens in my suit. They were a bit embarrassing to my 20th century modesty* but at least were comfortable.

Feeling quite undressed, I stepped out into the outer chamber. Alice and Ratoni were already there, seated at a table laid out in gleaming silver and snowy linens.

"Good morning, Mr. Wakefield," Alice smiled at me. But her smile turned to a blush as my eyes fell on her attire—virtually like my own except for the purely feminine frills and furbelows.

"They are all I could find," she said defensively, "and you know the saying—when in Rome, do as the Romans!"

I hastened to explain. "I wasn't criticizing, I was marveling!" Ratoni grunted and bit down on his toast. At that moment the Big Shot himself came in and sat down at the breakfast table.

"Well, Ratoni," he said, "it's early in the day to talk business, but I thought about your proposition last night, and to make it short, I've decided to take you up."

He stuck out a pudgy hand, and there was the beginning of the most diabolical plan ever conceived in one man's brain.

Later Ratoni gloating told me of his plans. The pills, supposedly containing eternal life, would hide slow death. Ratoni merely played for time. He first must learn the ramifications of the Big Shot's vast enterprises, after which the Big Shot would be excess baggage. Ratoni then would be the Big Shot, and he proposed that I be his first lieutenant.

"You see," he explained after a few days of investigating, "these birds have had things their own way too long. The Big Shot himself didn't have to work to get where he is. He sort of inherited it. He's fresh meat. I believe I could have taken him from a standing start. And with this eternal life stuff I cooked up, it's like taking candy from a baby."

Already we had gone through one farcical ritual of taking the Life Pills, and the Big Shot, so eager was he for life everlasting, declared he already was feeling the good effects, although assured by Ratoni that it would be several days, maybe weeks, before the effects would be noticeable.

"What are his rackets?" I queried. "Liquor and gambling?"

"Oh, sure," Ratoni gave a deprecating shrug, "He's got those—everything I had and then some. You've got to hand it to these babies for one thing. They had imagination.

"I sort of dabbled in politics, you remember, and was making a pretty good thing of it. Well the boys who followed me went on from there. They got to where they elected practically all the public officials. Got a finger

*Modesty" in the sense Wakefield here uses it refers to a sense of shame at displaying the body, prevalent in his time. Curiously enough it was not immodest to appear at public baths practically nude; but such costume on the streets would have brought out the police. Man was even more "modest" than woman. He was literally wrapped in clothes which left only his hands and his face bare, regardless of temperature.

in the state treasuries, a cut on all the big construction jobs. This was better even than the old protection racket, for there was no need to throw pineapples* about.

"Along about twenty-five years ago, the leader of the Chicago gang—which, the way I get it, has always held the reins—got so much money he didn't know what to do with it, and started investing it in public utilities, the power companies. This was too slow. The Big Shot—his name was Joe Gabraldi—owned the governors of about eight of the eastern and middlewestern states. Between them, they figured up a painless process. They lifted the franchises of the power companies, and restored 'em for a price. The price was a cut-in. Before anybody knew what was happening, Gabraldi practically owned 'em all. Every time you turned on the electric lights you slid a nickel into his war chest.

"The fat boy succeeded Gabraldi, and all he's done is elaborate what Gabraldi started. Now he's got a hand in the national banking chain; the big railroads; an airline from New York to London; and the radio companies, to mention a few. Man, I thought I was doing things in a big way; but they put me in the shade."†

● Alice and I were hopeless pawns in this diabolic game, friendless and helpless. Ratoni soon found the mechanical stenographers much more efficient than Alice for most of his needs, and he had little need of my services at first; so we spent most of our time wandering about the huge city, marveling at its wonders.

We never tired of seeing them: The moving streets predicted a century and a half before by a great fiction writer and philosopher;‡ the noiseless boats, helicopters, and cars of all descriptions, propelled by electricity by virtue of a perfected battery; the houses and buildings built of glass which let in the health-giving rays of the sun; the great air-liners, arriving and leaving on their transcontinental trips six times a day, carrying tons of freight and scores of passengers; the myriad sturdy little helicopters, which deposited workers gently on the landing stages provided on the roof of every large building. On the surface, the city appeared a modernized version of what it had been in our day—grown vaster and less noisy, but otherwise outwardly about the same.

More than all else, we loved to wander at night—watching the myriads of boats, like aimless glowworms, darting about the lake; the airships buzzing along airlines laid out for them by giant searchlights; the hordes of people traveling along the moving streets, stepping off in the gayly-lighted saloons and cafes, or gazing longingly into the sparkling show windows.

*Underworld term for explosives, especially the more common bombs.

†Ratoni's description was not exaggerated. Power begat power in those days. The corruption of politics alone put enormous sums of money into their "war chests;" consider the fact that in 1930-40, more than thirteen billion dollars annually, or a fifth of the total income of all the people in the United States, passed through the hands of public officials in public expenditures. At that time gang control was in its infancy. Public expenditures grew steadily throughout the century until it was estimated in the middle of the 21st century one-half of every wage earner's income went to taxes. Of course these were not direct taxes, the more popular form being the tax on natural resources or products, such as the tax on cigarettes; but in any event, the tax was passed on to the consumer. For the enlightenment of the casual reader, the value of the dollar was roughly equivalent to a half day's manual labor, the exact value depending upon the current purchasing power of the dollar, which was not stable.

‡H. G. Wells, whose earlier writings were imaginative excursions into the future. These works were then considered imagination of the highest order; today we regard Wells as a logician. He did not predict; he reasoned.

And these nocturnal excursions brought us a knowledge that Ratoni did not have—probably would not believe. There was a rumbling undercurrent of revolt among those who had been transformed into virtual office slaves and day laborers. It was not so much resentment at their work, for generations of such work had accustomed them to it, made it a part of daily routine; but it was resentment against high taxes; against police openly owned by the gangster chieftain; against rule, in short, by a despot. The people were muttering.

We saw pitiful cases of poverty too frequently to be an abnormal condition. We saw indignation meetings broken up by the police as quickly as they were discovered. One night we stopped to listen to a soap box orator, a golden haired lad who had selected one of the two lions in front of the Art Institute for his pedestal. Alice and I looked upon these lions as our friends; they recalled to us the Chicago we had known. Some sentimental soul, whom we blessed, had arranged to retain the lions when the Institute was lifted thirty stories into the air.

There were, perhaps, a hundred people listening when we first saw the speaker from afar, and the crowd was growing rapidly. It was a humid night and many people were along the avenue, seeking a breath of air.

The boy was a natural orator, and a champion of the underdog. The audience was with him as he poured forth a tirade upon the heads of police, figurehead officials, and the Big Shot.

"Who raises our taxes?" he shouted as we came up.

"The Big Shot!" a few scattered voices answered from the crowd, along with the admonition to "pour it on 'em!"

"Who lowers our wages?"

"The Big Shot!" A score or more had taken up the refrain.

"Who steals our sweethearts?"*

There was a rumble of anger in the crowd. "The Big Shot!" the answer boomed back at him. A woman near us began to weep hysterically.

"Who makes our lives a living hell?"

The crowd thundered its reply. "The Big Shot!" At that moment, the sirens of a police car bore down the avenue, and the youth shouted in a powerful voice that carried above the roar of his now aroused audience:

"Who carries out the Big Shot's orders?"

The answer came back in a wave of sound: "The Police!" Before the echo died away, the blunt nose of the armored police car spat forth a blue flame that buried itself in the throat of the orator. The thin blue streak hung there for an instant after the boy fell, hands clutching at his throat; then died away as the lifeless body rolled down the broad steps of the Institute.

"Notices have been posted and broadcast," came a monotonous metallic voice from the loud speaker in the heart of the car, "that no more demonstrations would be allowed. The people may have supervised meetings at any time in the public halls. Let this be an example to other extemporaneous orators . . . Now go to your homes and to the public dormitories."

● The car nosed up to the body, and two men opened the steel door, stepping out to pick up the lifeless form.

*Believed a reference to the commerce in unmoral and immoral women carried on by the criminal element. Many women were forced into this commerce, by actual want or kidnapping. It was an international trade, investigated extensively by that once powerful international body on arbitration, the League of Nations.

As they stooped, a strangely familiar voice, a woman's screamed a challenge.

"Cowards," the voice shrieked. "Fools! Cowards! Don't let them take that boy! He's yours! Tear their filthy hands off his body!" The startled officers looked up. The crowd surged restlessly about the car. And I, unbelieving, horrified yet elated beyond measure, grasped the arm of the girl who stood beside me; for the voice was the voice of Alice.

She shook off my restraining hand and climbed to the lion's pedestal. A fanatical light gleamed in her eyes as she pointed a shaking hand at the police car and its occupants.

"Cowards! Will you stand by and see your brother murdered without lifting a finger? He was one of you! He was pleading for your rights—he died for you—and there you stand, unprotesting. Is there any manhood left in your hearts? Or do your souls, as well as your bodies, belong to the Big Shot?"

One of the officers, recovered from his first surprise, carefully levelled a ray pistol at the slender figure. As the blue flame leaped across the short space, Alice fell into my arms; and as she fell, the crowd struck.

Those hapless officers, taken off their guard, were victims of the pent-up fury and hatred of the mob, which rolled over them in an irresistible wave. Literally with bare hands the mob tore the death car into a thousand fragments; and rolled down the avenue, gathering strength as it moved.

Up and down the street police sirens were screaming. The angry buzzing of helicopters came from above, the night patrol coming to investigate. Ahead of me, the mob; behind me, the locked doors of the Institute. I was trapped, Alice in my arms.

My first concern was with her. Gently I laid her on the broad steps and bent to hear if her heart was beating.

"I believe she has only fainted," came a voice from behind me. Whirling, I saw the mad inventor, Kriml, he who had picked us out of the lake.

He chuckled grimly as I gasped his name. "I was watching," he explained. "She fainted just as the fellow aimed. The blue flame did not touch her. Otherwise..." He shrugged expressively, then added: "Young man, you and the yellow-headed one have a penchant for trouble. First I pull you out of the lake; then I save you after you've incited a mob to riot. Next thing, you'll have police on my trail, and that would be sad; deplorable."

I stuttered my thanks for his preferred aid and gathered Alice in my arms, ready to follow him. "A moment," he said. He stepped down into the street where lay the body of the officer who had aimed at Alice, the gun still in his hand. This Kriml pried from the stiff fingers, then hurried back up the steps. "Let's go!" he flung Alice over his shoulder, stepping to a broad window which was open. He helped me with the inert form of Alice, then carefully closed and locked the window.

Through the dense blackness Kriml strode as one who knows his way, and I followed close at his heels. An automatic lift carried us to the top of the building. There we paused and looked down upon the street.

All the moving ways on the avenue had been stopped and traffic blocked. The mob had moved a bare two hundred yards; and before it sat a solid row of the armored police cars, their blunt, blue-black snouts glinting evilly.

"The police worked fast tonight," Kriml muttered. "They've been expecting this."

A phalanx of helicopters, in the familiar blue of the police, was surging down from behind. As those in the rear of the mob saw them they pressed forward; and as the mob moved, the weapons of the police cars spoke their blue message of death.

A solid sheet of blue flame leaped from the line, sizzling and crackling, mowing down the front ranks as a scythe mows wheat. Those behind, pressed by the helios, pushed forward to their death, until the bodies made a barricade through which the blue ray could not penetrate. Then the mob broke and ran.

The helicopters, hitherto watchful onlookers, swung into action. Pencils of light picked out fleeing figures; and along these thin white beams swept the blue death, inexorable, ruthless. My horror-filled mind reeled and I turned away, thankful that Alice could not see the carnage.

"The end," Kriml breathed beside me. "This is the end."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The end—for Chicago." He set off across the roof. "Come. My helio is about a mile from here." I followed, trying to fathom the cryptic meaning in his words.

CHAPTER V

Twenty-four Hours

● Across bridges and over roof-tops I followed Crazy Kriml's erratic trail. In ten minutes we were in his helio and there I administered first aid from a kit he carried while Kriml guided the flyer out over Lake Michigan. We were accosted once by a blue patrol, but passed when Crazy Kriml gave them his name.

Alice opened her eyes after an interminable period. "What happened? Where are we?" she asked.

"You're not to talk," I replied. "You fainted. We are with Crazy Kriml again, out over the lake."

"But I am all right," she protested. "It was silly of me to faint." She was silent for a moment, then added: "I suppose you will report to Ratoni?"

"I shall not," I retorted, "but I don't understand why you did it."

"Because that boy . . . he looked like my brother." Her tone was hushed and her eyes filled with tears. Then she became defiant. "Tell him if you like, but I can pretend no longer! One of Ratoni's followers killed my brother. Shot him down coldbloodedly, as the police shot that boy tonight. He was killed because he refused to pay tribute to the gangsters. For four years I worked for Ratoni, seeking to learn that killer's name. I meant to first kill him, then, if I could, Ratoni. I thought I was on the right track when . . . the Zenith fell. Now you know—and you're his man. Do what you please with me."

Her confession was inspired by despair. My answer was to sweep her into my arms. "Alice," I cried, "Alice! But I'm not Ratoni's man!" With a jubilant heart I told her of the role I, too, had been playing.

Here I must confess that when we alighted from the flyer our actions were such that Kriml muttered:

"Great Jupiter! Because I saved their lives twice they think I'm cupid!"

Crazy Kriml's refuge was a tiny cabin, on a wooded shore of the lake. Inside the cabin, he turned on me.

"Crazy Kriml, sometimes, gets as curious as other folk. Now I've heard that wild yarn you and Ratoni put over on the Big Shot, as has every one else in Chicago and the whole country, for that matter. But as one to whom you are deeply in debt, I'd like the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." There was nothing insane about his kindly eyes, and I desperately needed someone to advise me; so I told him the whole story.

When I had finished, he sat for some moments in silence; then, "H'mm," he said. "Very implausible though barely possible. However, the evidence, such as it is, bears you out; and there has to be some set of facts to account for you. At least the story's better than that wild yarn you told the Big Shot.

"The Council of 46 . . . So men have tried before. Pshaw! They were not so well equipped as I . . ."

I recalled his comment as we strode from the mob carnage, and connected it with what he said now. "What do you mean?" I asked. "You're well equipped . . . for what?"

He rose and strode restlessly up and down the room, finally pausing before me.

"Young man," he glared at me, "you say that you were a member of a secret band pledged to wipe out the gangsters. I believe your weird story . . . and I'm going to make you a member of another secret organization, pledged to the same high purpose . . . of which I am leader. You will have no duties, because the duties have all been assigned. The membership in this order, which has no name, is small.

"They call me Crazy Kriml, and on one subject I am crazy. I, like your yellow-headed one, have a grudge. I have harbored it longer than she. Never mind what it is. But your yellow-headed one has resolved me upon the course from which I shrunk. Tonight, as I stood on the roof of the Art Institute and watched the lives of my fellowmen snuffed out because they dared to express their resentment at the rule of a criminal, I decided there is only one way to destroy the gangster of America, and that is to destroy the city which harbors him.

"Chicago shall be first to go. If the gangster still thrives, others will follow. No, I do not expect you to believe me, now. But soon I shall give proof. This is your only part in my secret order: Go back to Ratoni with your Alice. And when Crazy Kriml gives the word to evacuate Chicago, take her and go.

"Now to bed. I have work to do tonight. You two must sleep." He was through as abruptly as he had begun, and stalked off to the next room, in which he had fitted up a laboratory. Hours later I heard him muttering to himself; and when he awoke next morning, he was gone, his helio with him.

Assuming he would return for us when he had finished his mission, we prepared breakfast from the stores in his cupboard and were eating when we heard the whirr of helio wings outside. Alice looked out the window.

"Vann!" she cried, "It's the police!"

"What of it?" I rejoined, and continued with my breakfast. The door opened, three police officers entered, and, to my surprise, their ray guns were in their hands.

"Hey," I shouted, "what's the idea of busting in without knocking? And what's the idea of the artillery?"

"You are under arrest," was the curt response. "Where is Kriml?"

Intuition told me to shield the eccentric old fellow. "Flew to Canada, early this morning," I said. "Planned to be gone two weeks. Left his boat for us to return to town. But what have we done?"

"Ask the Big Shot," was the reply, and that was all I could get out of them. It was useless to resist; anyway, I could not but believe a mistake had been made. Probably Ratoni had sent them to look for us—but if that were so how did they know we were at Kriml's cabin?

We followed the now familiar route to the Commonwealth Building, atop which was the penthouse of the Big Shot. As on our first visit, James met us at the door, and we walked through the grotesque outer rooms to the reception hall of the Big Shot. But as we stepped across the threshold, we stopped, our mouths agape.

For the familiar figure of the Big Shot was not there. Lolling in his chair, the bodyguards at either side, was Jerry Ratoni.

● "Ratoni!" I gasped. "Where's the Big Shot?"

"I am the Big Shot," he replied laconically. "The fat boy got his wish for eternal life last night—while you were gallivanting around the country with Kriml."

His lips twisted into an ugly snarl and his voice hardened as he went on. "You ought to know, Wakefield, that the walls have ears in this man's city. And the walls told me a-plenty, last night. All about the Council of 46, and the nutty scheme to destroy Chicago . . . And I also found out who was the yellow-haired woman who led that mob to riot last night. That was quite a big night." He gloated over us, then remembering, asked: "Where's Kriml?"

I repeated the story I had told the police. Ratoni swore, then jerked on the vuefone to confirm my story. "Those damned fools!" he shouted at the abashed officer, "Don't they know Kriml didn't plan to stay away? Get 'em back over to that cabin, with orders to wait there till he comes back. Hear me?" He snapped off the instrument then turned back on us.

"As for you two double-crossers, I'll hold you 'till we get our hands on Kriml. He seems to have taken a shine to you. Maybe you'd be pretty good hostages. After that . . . well, they tell me they got some funny schemes here, like a hot plate that warms your toes, then bakes and fries you, all at once." He turned to Alice. "So you planned to knock me off, eh? Well, I've just about made up my mind to add you to the Big Shot's private harem for a while . . . But first we'll find Kriml. Of course he can't do any damage, but as you know, Ratoni never passes up a bet!"

Handcuffed and guarded, we were shoved into the elevator and dropped to the basement, a veritable prison. There we were placed in cells, a narrow corridor separating us. Some comfort we found in the fact that we could talk, and see each other. Days passed, weeks. How many I do not know. Then one morning I awoke, went to the barred door, and looked across the corridor to find Alice was gone.

I was frantic. I screamed and shook the bars of the door. I paced the cell and tore at the walls until my fingers bled. Finding this futile, I calmed myself and as best I could laid a plan. When the pottering old man who served us brought my food, I would attack him, kill him if necessary, take his uniform, get out and in some

way get to Ratoni. But instead of the old fellow came three officers. They handcuffed me securely, and in a few moments I stood again before Ratoni, the Big Shot.

"You've got a chance for your life," he rasped. "Read these."

There were two typewritten letters.

"Ratoni," the first began, "Crazy Kriml sends you a message—and a warning."

"The message is this: Take your cohorts and leave Chicago.

"And the warning is this: Let no one enter your office building Monday morning.

Crazy Kriml."

That letter was dated Saturday. The second was dated Tuesday. Like the first, it began:

"Ratoni, Crazy Kriml sends you a message—and a warning."

"It is the second, and last, warning. You did not heed my first. You alone are responsible for what happened to your employes.

"Friday the destruction of Chicago begins. It begins with the Commonwealth building. Your penthouse will crash first. It begins at 2 o'clock.

"On one condition will I hold my hand. That is, that you take your followers and leave Chicago, leave America. If you wish to save the city, raise a white flag over the Commonwealth building. I will stay destruction until you leave, if you leave by noon Thursday, with all your followers, your police and your henchmen.

"If you fail to accept these terms, upon your soul rests the sin of the destruction of Chicago. And wherever you go, Kriml will follow you."

I looked up at the gangster. His face was pale with rage and fear. "Now listen!" He switched on the vuefone. No picture appeared, but a voice came from the speaker, a monotonous droning voice.

"This is Crazy Kriml. Chicago is doomed. You who wish to live must leave. All others will die. Friday at 2 o'clock I begin. You saw Ratoni's office fall. My message is to cities all over the world. Don't let Ratoni enter. Drive out your gangsters. I follow Ratoni. Where he stops, I destroy. Chicago goes first, because Ratoni would not leave." Over and over came the same words, with slight variation and short pauses.

"Since Monday the voice has been going like that!" Ratoni's voice was raw and sweat stood out on his forehead. I gloated inwardly.

"Why don't you, the Big Shot, stop him?"

"Stop him hell, we can't even find him. Besides," he grinned evilly at me, "I've saved that little job for you!"

"For me?" I laughed. "Why I don't even know where he is."

"Well ain't that too bad! Because the Commonwealth building is first on the nut's list, so he says; and at 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon, your girl friend will be the only living person in the Commonwealth building!"

I was stupefied. "You're joking. You wouldn't do that!"

"Oh, wouldn't I! Let's go see." He led me, my guards close behind, to the suite we used our first night in the new Chicago, and opened the door to the room which Alice had occupied. She lay on the bed. Not only was she sleeping, or unconscious, but her hands and feet were tied to the bedposts.

• Shackled as I was, I turned on Ratoni, intent on beating that black leer into his ugly face. I lunged at him futilely as my guards caught my arms.

"I should have told you, too, that she had just enough powders to make her sleep until about noon tomorrow, when I'll bid her good-bye—unless I've heard from you before then. The next couple of hours she can lay there wondering what it's all about. She'll finally find out, unless her brave boy friend comes through with the goods."

He turned to my guards. "Put him in his helio, boys, and turn him loose."

They jerked me out on the roof where a helio was parked, and took off my chains, keeping their guns trained on me the while. I was warned I would be shot if I were seen near the building, and then told to get going. I had no choice in the matter. Swinging the flyer off the roof, I started aimlessly on a search which seemed foredoomed to failure—to find one man in a city of seven million, one man who could save Alice from a horrible death.

Bewildered, without aim or plan, I hung there in mid-air for a moment, looking longingly back at the Commonwealth Building, in which Alice lay sleeping, and in which she would go to her death in just 24 hours if I could not find Crazy Kriml. The impulse to turn back, to storm the stronghold of Ratoni single-handed, flashed through my mind; but the still guards, their eyes fixed on my motionless helicopter, warned me that course would be certain death.

Glancing down I saw a huge crowd all around the Commonwealth Building. I swooped nearer and saw the mob was held back by the dangerous blue-black police cars, in a solid circle around the lower floor. For a moment I wondered, then recalled Kriml's droning voice: ". . . That was a warning. Ratoni did not heed it . . . Now Chicago is doomed." The mob had gathered courage to wreak vengeance upon Ratoni, but lacked the courage to fight against the deadly blue flame.

I rose high into the air. Airships of every description dotted the sky. Either they were settling on the buildings, or headed south and west. The exodus from Chicago was on. Long lines of craft, as far as the eye could follow, streaked down the sky. In this conglomerate crew I was surprised to see planes of an ancient vintage, reminiscent of my own day, their antiquated engines wheezing at every turn of the propeller.

Lake Michigan lay ahead. Far across the lake sat a little cabin, a cabin which held happy memories. I turned my ship toward that wooded shore, with little hope of success, but unable to conceive another starting point for my mad search. Precious hours of the few allotted me were spent seeking out that isolated spot. I found the cabin wrecked, turned upside down. Papers lay scattered on the floor. Through these I turned, in the hope of finding some clew that would give me a lead to follow. There was nothing. Heartsick I finally turned away, and headed my helio toward the lakeside city.

It was dusk when once more I flew over Chicago. The airways were not lighted tonight. It would be dangerous to stay up, as well as useless. I dropped to the nearest roof landing and made my way to the streets.

The Loop district was a solid mass of humanity. Traffic was virtually at a standstill. The moving ways had stopped. And everywhere were people: cars and vehicles loaded with household furnishings of every description;

squalling children led or carried by harassed parents; cursing men fighting to get through the jammed traffic; blaring horns which angry drivers sounded in vain. I even saw one spavined, frightened horse, ludicrous anachronism, completely hemmed in by horseless carriages.

But better pens than mine have described that awful exodus. My thoughts and my eyes were elsewhere than on the pathos, tragedy and humor of that babel of confusion. My job was to find Kriml. I walked the streets of Chicago, peering into faces that looked suspiciously back at me, fighting through the crowds for a better sight as a chance resemblance sent hope surging through me. I do not know what sustained me through that night. Much of it I cannot remember. I believe I must have been delirious. The first rays of morning found me slumped upon broad white steps on Michigan avenue, duly watching the stream of people that still poured past.

Those broad white steps—down which a youthful body had rolled. I sprang up, spun around, and shouted with joy. I stood before the Art Institute—and there was one hope left, one door yet unopened. The window through which we had crawled that wild night was not open as it had been, but one kick and I sprang through the shattered glass, into the still dark interior.

Was it possible that I could pick my way through this maze of roofs and bridges to the place where Kriml kept his helio parked? I do not believe I could repeat the feat today, were it possible to try; I did it that morning by sheer instinct. Often I closed my eyes, the better to recapture the sense of the direction we followed that dark night. Then, with Alice in my arms, it had taken us fifteen minutes. This breathless, harrowing morning, two long hours were wasted in carefully searching, tracing and retracing my steps. At last, as I nearly despaired, a gleam of metal caught my eye. There, nestled into a corner near the edge of the roof, was Kriml's slate-gray heliicopter, blending almost perfectly with the color of the roof.

CHAPTER VI

Ready for Destruction

With a hoarse shout of joy, I raced toward the helio. Midway I checked abruptly, dropped precipitately to the roof. Perhaps the instinct that led me to the ship also warned me of danger; perhaps my hearing had been made acute by mental and physical anguish. And as I fell, a thin blue flame of the police guns shot through the space above me.

"Wait!" I shouted, "It's Wakefield!"

"By the great . . . Don't tell me," came the familiar voice of Kriml, "that your life needs saving again!"

I certainly didn't feel humorous, but I could not forbear a chuckle. "Something like that," I said, struggling to my feet. Kriml, who had fired at me with the police gun he appropriated the night of the riot, hastened out of the roof-house to aid me. "Hurry," he urged, "we may be seen from above."

A cup of black coffee did much to revive me, and between gulps I told the aged inventor my purpose in seeking him out, and how I had found him.

"You mean," he commented, frowning, "that Raton

counts on me giving up my plans in order to save the yellow-headed one?"

I nodded.

"No," he said emphatically. "That is out of the question. No. They have been warned—sufficiently. If Ratoni chooses to add one more life to the number for which he must account, that is his choice. My choice has been made. I cannot be changed."

He shook his head, as if to dispel unpleasant thoughts. "But enough of that. Would you care to see the weapon which destroyed the Big Shot's office building, and which will destroy Chicago?"

In a corner was a small cabinet, its face covered with knobs. -

"This is a small model," he said, apologetically, "the first I constructed. It hardly resembles the others. It will give you an idea." To my wholly unscientific eye, the cabinet appeared remotely like a radio cabinet of my own day. Its interior was a hodge-podge of tubes, with a motor nestling at one end, and hundreds of intricate wires leading out and in among them. At one side, projecting outward in a right angle, was a bellowing glass tube, about the diameter of a half dollar where it left the cabinet and terminating in a long smooth bore about the size and shape of a soda straw.

"The tubes on the larger models," Kriml continued, "are much larger. I have also equipped them with an ultra-efficient condenser which more than trebles their power." He turned a switch. "Don't stand before the tube," he warned.

In the tube a soft glow appeared, of creamy whiteness. This dulled to a deep purple, then to a smoky gray which seemed to remain constant, and which shot out of the end of the tube about four inches, then evaporated into the air.

On a nearby table were fragments of masonry, glass and stone. "Watch," Kriml muttered, and with talons of hard rubber picked up a small piece of glass. This he bathed in the smoky emanation for the space of ten seconds, then threw off the switch.

"Disappointed?" Kriml noted my doubtful mien, and extended the piece of glass. "Look this over."

I took it gingerly in the palm of my hand. It appeared unchanged. But as I fingered it dubiously, the seemingly solid fragment crumbled into crystalline bits. I dropped them as if stung.

"A shock, eh?" the old man laughed. "Well, I confess it was somewhat of a shock to me, too, the first time."

"But what is it?"

"Radio," he hesitated, then added, "At least, it's comparable to radio. Strictly speaking its one of the rays. Which one, I don't know. But consider that this machine is a miniature broadcasting plant, broadcasting, instead of the radio wave, a wave capable of breaking down the structure of material substances. And you get the idea."*

*This portion of Wakefield's manuscript discloses two remarkable facts: First the ignorance of the laymen on what we consider the elementals of science; and secondly, the haphazard hit-and-miss methods of experimentalists. They worked from result to cause; first inducing the result, more often than not by chance, through the trial and error method, and working backward to determine the cause.

To illustrate the first point, Wakefield probably used the telephone every day, as secretary to Col. Randolph, yet it is doubtful whether he could have explained the theory of the instrument; he would have been completely baffled had he been asked to reconstruct the instrument from raw materials.

Any one of a half dozen rays utilized at this time might have been used by Kriml in his projector. It probably was one in the

"I have my theories," he added ruefully, "but I have proved none of them. You and your yellow-headed one decided me upon trying the results with the cause still undetermined."

"You recall I picked up one of the blue-ray guns the night of the riot? It was curiosity that led me to risk those few seconds longer, the same curiosity that started me on these experiments. I wanted to see what made the ray-gun work. It was impossible to obtain one of the guns. The secret is the closely guarded secret of the police, a secret that has had much to do with the gangster's supremacy."

"The blue beam gun utilizes, I believe, the alpha ray of radium. I had been feeling my way into this field, except that I was working with those just below the rays we use in radio. Here I found one which had the penetrative power of the radio wave, with something else, a power of disintegration, an actual breaking down of the structure of material substances, as the X-ray burns away cancer cells. For want of a better name, I call it the Kriml ray."

"The projector is motivated by a Heidel battery, and draws its fuel from the limitless universe. The emanation mows down all material substance in its path. I direct the beam at the base of a building. Its underpinning eaten away, the building crumbles and falls."

• A fanatical light glowed in the old man's eyes, and he continued, half to himself.

"Crazy Kriml ten years ago was a rich man. Those riches are gone. In the place of riches are my machines of vengeance, scattered throughout Chicago, and the cities of America. When I turn a switch, they will start eating, like so many hungry termites, at the foundations of the great buildings, and those man-made structures, built on sand, will topple like so many houses of cards."

"Once when I was young, I had two loves. Now I have one—my country. Not the country as you see it now, or as you knew it a hundred years ago, nourishing a gigantic tarantula to its bosom; but the country of our common forefathers, who wrested the soil from the savages and from a savage nature, by sheer courage and love of home, endurance and patriotism."

"What of our people now? There are two classes, the preying lawless, the plodding serf. The one satisfies his belly hunger and lusts; the other pulls his belt tighter and plods on. The one lives in reckless, heartless luxury; the other spawns in abject poverty. The one must go; the other survives only if he has the will, the spirit to survive."

"But you are attempting," I hazarded, "to interfere with the normal process of evolution."

Infra-red zone, this guess hazarded by the description Kriml later gives.

Very little progress was made in the last half of the 20th and first half of the 21st centuries in fathoming the possibilities of the so-called light rays. The shortest utilized was the cosmic ray, or Millikan. Next came the short waves of radium, the Grenz ray, the ultra-violet, the visible spectrum, and the infrared, the latter often confused with those which were utilized in radio because their lengths merged, and because of the unusual powers of penetration of the longer waves in the zone.

An illustration of the incomplete knowledge of the times is found in a reference work which explained that "all of these oscillations of the ether are generated by electricity"—yet did not explain the nature of electricity! This was not due, moreover, to oversight. Electricity was known only as a phenomenon.

It must not be inferred that the editor deprecates the knowledge of the ancients, or underrates their contributions to science. They were pioneers, sailing uncharted oceans. Their achievements are remarkable in view of the groping-in-the-dark to which they, perchance, resorted.

"That may be true," he answered, slowly. "That may be true. But may it not also be true that I am a creature of evolution, of the process, a tool through which nature will work? Man grows as he overcomes obstacles. The obstacle will be a catastrophe such as the world has not known."

"And to test your theory, to destroy the guilty, you would make the innocent suffer," I interjected. "Surely the aged men like yourself, the women, the children, babes still at their mothers' breasts—surely they are deserving of compassion?"

"The eternal question," he replied. "Who are the guilty—and who the innocent? Are the guilty those who imposed upon the weaknesses, the spinelessness, of the many? Are the old men, who condoned lawlessness, both actively and passively, are they innocent? And are they less innocent—or less guilty—than those women whose eternal duty has been to lead their men, guide their footsteps and inspire them? As for the children—their choice is a life of bondage or the freedom of death."

"But you would make of me a murderer. I am not destroying them. I destroy only the foolhardy, who failed to heed my warning—surely a warning powerful enough to carry conviction to the wise. To those wise, I offer life, a happier, more useful, a fuller life. To those who can survive the metamorphosis from serfdom to freedom, from dependence to independence . . . And your Alice, young man, for whose sake you seek to stay my hand, she would chose rather to go as she must go, for the sake of the future generations. And her death be laid at the door of Raton!"

He rose from his chair, held out a hand.

"Now, my friend, I will say good-bye."

It was past one o'clock. In another hour, Kriml would carry out his ghastly threat.

"And if I . . . should not let you go?" I breathed. He smiled grimly. "Move to stay me and I should blast you with this flame." He indicated the pistol. "Nor could your youthful strength stay me," he added, gripping down upon the hand he held with a pressure which made me wince with pain.

"But I have no fear of you. See, if you wish you may accompany me, if you will consent to be blindfolded. For remember, you are a member of my secret organization. What do you say?"

The fear of failure if I should attack him there, the hope of an opportunity if I should accompany him, moved me to allow myself to be blindfolded. In the helio, for a time I tried to follow the direction he took, but it was not possible. Sometime later, fifteen or twenty minutes it seemed, we landed on another roof-top, and Kriml guided me to an elevator. We stopped after a breathless drop; and when Kriml removed the blindfold, we were in a small room, nearly on a level with the lower streets, in which stood a gigantic replica of the infernal machine Kriml had demonstrated a few hours before. Kriml caressed lovingly the sinister projector tube, which pointed at the drawn curtain of a window.

"In ten minutes," he said, "in ten short minutes, you go into action. First the Commonwealth Building; then Radio Square; then the power-plant—and all Chicago!"

"A hundred like this," he turned to me, "are scattered over the city. When I pull a single switch, which I will show you, they are started into action, the Heidel battery

on each furnishing the electricity. They spew forth destruction until the battery is exhausted."

● I shuddered. Across from this building was the Commonwealth Building, and at its very top, lay Alice, now awake and wondering what her fate was to be. Raton, probably already had fled. When Kriml threw the switch, Alice would die.

Kriml had pulled out his watch. "Five minutes," he observed. "Would you like to watch me throw the switch?"

His gun was in his hand now. He evidently did not plan on a frustration of his incomprehensible scheme. Perhaps I could catch him off guard . . . I shrugged in seeming resignation, and again we entered the lift. This time I was not blindfolded. We rode nearly to the top of the building and to another room, rather a suite, where Kriml apparently had done much of his experimenting. But I had no eye for the heterogeneous mass of apparatus; my gaze was fixed on an exaggerated large switch on the wall opposite the door, above which the words, "The Big Shot," had been painted in a moment of insane humor by the crazy man.

Straight toward that deadly switch Kriml hurried, my presence and all else forgotten. I sprang after him.

"Kriml!" I shouted, "touch that switch and I'll kill you, if I die myself!"

He turned, snarling, the gun in his hand.

"Force me and I'll burn you!" he warned, stepping backward the while. Frenziedly I leaped, despairing of success, yet willing to die in a last attempt. And as I leaped, his hand touched the switch, pushed it home, as my hands found his throat.

For an instant I shook him as a terrier shakes a rat, crusing and weeping; then flung him aside to disconnect the switch. The old man, his fingers rubbing his throat, shook his head. "Too late," he croaked. "Too late."

"But it's not too late to send your murdering soul to hell," I cried, and turned back on him, meaning to choke out his life with my hands; but I stopped horrified.

The insane man had dragged himself to a window and stood poised there. He glanced at me for an instant, a half smile on his face, which now seemed tired and worn. One look he took at Chicago, spread out in a panorama before him. "We go together, Chicago," he whispered, and leaped out into space. As he hurtled to the streets, the far-away chimes in a church tower sounded the afternoon's second hour.*

For an instant I gazed at the empty window frame, then rushed for the elevator. The infernal machine, trained on the Commonwealth Building—perhaps it already had done its deadly work but there was a bare chance . . . I did not know the floor. Once I missed it. The second time the wooden door of the little room greeted me as I stepped from the lift. It was locked. Precious minutes

*A long mooted question is thus settled in Wakefield's manuscript—the fate of August Kriml. He was never seen after the Chicago disaster, but it was universally believed he was in hiding, awaiting only the need to emerge with his death-dealing weapon. In the light of this account we are forced to believe that Kriml had no organization; that he planned and executed the destruction of Chicago alone; and that he counted on the moral effect of one city's destruction to accomplish his whole purpose. Kriml's contemporaries regarded him as insane; today he is an acknowledged genius, one who anticipated by some 250 years the mastery of those all-powerful rays upon which we largely depend today. His ruthless destruction of Chicago is seen, from this vantage point, as the act of a great humanist, who looked to the ultimate welfare of the race rather than the temporary hurt of a few.

were lost seeking a weapon to batter it down. An ancient chair filled my needs. Once, twice, I flung it with all my strength against the light wood, then jumped through the wreckage.

A heady, exhilarating aroma greeted me. The monster tube had turned a cloudy grey, telling me of the destruction started. I still clung to the fragments of the chair. Headless of results, I brought them down in a mighty blow on the tube. Out of the shattered coils and tubes, like a giant's breath, came a wave of force that picked me up and flung me against the far wall. How long I lay there, struggling to recapture breath and strength I do not know. It seemed hours, but probably was only minutes. At last I dragged across to the window, dreading the sight, yet hoping against hope the ray had not yet accomplished its purpose.

My prayer of thanksgiving when I saw the building still standing turned to a curse against high heaven. Kriml, in life and in death, had tricked me. The building opposite was NOT the Commonwealth. I laughed, an insane cackle, and fell senseless in front of the window.

CHAPTER VII

A Strange Operation

● Balls of fire weighed on my eyelids. With an effort I raised them. A dull red glare shone through the window. Night had fallen.

My throat was parched, my stomach retching. The shoulder which had hit the wall ached so painfully I feared it was broken.

One thought beat dully on my brain. Alice was gone.

I whispered a prayer that I might live long enough to find Raton. First I must escape before I was trapped in a falling building.

Painfully I struggled to the elevator, ascended to the top, and climbed into Kriml's helicopter. But it was not until I swung off the building that I realized what had caused the red glare which awakened me.

Chicago was in flames.

In all directions, gigantic sheets of flame leaped upward from heaps of crumpled masonry. Like tongues from the imps of hell flames darted out in ghastly mimicry at the billowing black clouds of smoke. The blazing bed lay as far as I could see; its ends were lost in dense blackness of smoke. Holocaust had stepped in where Kriml left off.

The building across from me—the building I had saved—I recognized now as Radio Square. Lights shone from the upper rooms. Against the bare chance they were sending, I tuned in the vuefone in the helio. A picture formed on the screen, a picture of two young fellows, surrounded by littered ash trays, sweat running from their brows, yet grinning and joking as they gave the world the story of the great Chicago fire.

"Folks," one of the pair was saying, "It's now time for Uncle Piggly's Bedtime Story, eight bells, but all is not well and Uncle Piggly asked us to present his apologies. We will do our best to take his place with a description of the bonfire in our backyard.

"For the benefit of those who have just tuned in to hear Uncle Piggly we will now repeat: Chicago is burn-

ing. Crazy Kriml, who told us he would blow up Chicago forgot to say he was also going to burn us up—”

“Which was a burning shame,” interjected the other young fellow.

“Which was a burning . . . Will you be quiet, please? The destruction started at 2 p.m., promptly—

“By courtesy of Julova Watch Company.”

“By courtesy of . . . Now I ask you, what am I to do with a guy like that? The destruction started at 2 o'clock as Kriml had warned. First went the Commonwealth Building, then the power-plant. We were third on the list. Something evidently went wrong, though, because this outfit didn't follow on schedule. It was the—”

“—first time we'd been off schedule in two years,” came the comment of the incorrigible.

“—first time we'd . . . Excuse him, folks, he's crazy with the heat. It was the only hitch in his entire plan, however, for fifteen minutes after the power-plant fell, a bombardment began of the whole loop district. Jack here and myself were in a helio above the town. When we saw the Square still stood we decided to chance it, and here we are.

“It is estimated that more than three million people left Chicago Wednesday and Thursday, and that not more than a half million were in the downtown district when the bombardment began. They were diehards like ourselves. How many pulled out after 2 o'clock we don't know. But there has been a steady stream of ships passing over the building for the past six hours, hi-tailing it out of Chicago.

“All we can tell you about the fire is that it is some fire. Kriml makes Mrs. O'Leary's cow go way back and sit down.”*

“The fire broke out in the wreck of the Commonwealth Building and spread rapidly, even more rapidly than the buildings fell. There were none left to fight the flames, and it is now spreading far into suburban residential districts. We believe hundreds of thousands of people are out here, but they are comparatively safe, since they can outrun the flames.

“What we need now is help. It is too late to save the city, or any part of it; Kriml did his task well. But homeless millions must be fed and housed. New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Kansas City, St. Louis—bring us food, medicine, tents, nurses, doctors. Nearby cities are filled overrun with fugitives. Rockford and Aurora are guarding all roads and airways with militia, warning fugitives no more can be accommodated.

“The two principal actors in this melodrama are strangely silent. The Big Shot—Ratoni—was believed to have pulled his freight just before the Commonwealth fell. Unverified reports were that he hoped until the last minute Kriml would fail. He is reported to have said he had an ace up his sleeve. And Kriml, the father of this fiesta, spoke his last word this morning. He delivered this letter by messenger, which I read now for the tenth time—no, I can't stand to read it again; here, Jack, you read it.”

“I don't need to read it,” his companion rejoined, “I

know it by heart. Here goes:

“To the people of America: Tonight your second largest city will be in shambles. And the guilty man will be the Big Shot. I hesitated long before I placed myself in the role of judge and avenger. I hoped the people of America would awaken. That hope was futile. Only a catastrophe of unprecedent proportions could stir you from your soddness, your lethargy, your turpitude. I have brought you that catastrophe. May God grant the price was not too great.

“To the people of America: Crazy Kriml speaks for the last time. He warns for the last time. Let no city, no village, no community, harbor Ratoni and his ilk. When I strike again, I strike without warning. When I am gone, my students will replace me. And be sure that I, or those who follow me, guided by my spirit, will strike when the need arises.”

“Such a sweet, harmless old fellow,” the boy added.

That was enough. Sick at heart, I headed my machine out across the cool waters of Lake Michigan to Kriml's deserted cottage, my only refuge.

● The horrible days which followed the destruction of

Chicago have been described by pens more able than mine. Typhoid and smallpox broke out among the refugees. Both diseases had been dormant for years, and the supplies of toxins were insufficient for the needs. It has been freely predicted since that had it not been for the successful adaption of electro-therapy the nation would have been virtually wiped off the map; and this treatment in the quarantine area was delayed for days because the Chicago power-plant had been the central plant for the mid-western states.*

As soon as I felt able to travel, I set out on my search for Ratoni—the only thing left in life for me, a desire for vengeance. Wherever he was, I knew he would not dare to be surrounded by his usual heavy bodyguard, and if I could find him I did not doubt my revenge would be easy.

I reasoned Ratoni would seek to cross the nearest border line; and I also reasoned that immigration officers of Canada would be unusually diligent in preventing him from crossing. That took me to Detroit, and there, by chance, my search ended.

I had quartered myself in a dingy section of the city, and spent my days patrolling the streets, confident that sooner or later I would see Ratoni or one of his henchmen, and from him learn where the Big Shot was. But the man I found was the last I expected—the impeccable James, butler to two Big Shots.

His uniform abandoned, his clothes ragged and soiled, James was buying fruit at a street stand at which I had stopped. He first recognized me.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but aren't you Mr. Wakefield, sir?” he accosted me.

“James!” I turned on him, astounded. “What are you doing here?”

He was somewhat embarrassed at being caught at the menial task of buying groceries. “You see, sir, we had

*As Wakefield implies, disease took a greater toll than the actual catastrophe, although it was not possible to estimate the dead in the Chicago fire. A quarantine area, a hundred miles in diameter, was rigidly maintained for three months. This probably saved the nation from a devastating plague. The two diseases he names had been brought under control by serum treatment by the end of the 20th century, hence few had been immunized against either at the time of the catastrophe.

A disastrous fire in Chicago in the nineteenth century was attributed, in legend, to a cow which kicked over a lantern in a barn. Fires were numerous in those days of open-flame lights. On the ruins of this historical fire was raised the second largest city in the United States, a city of such fabulous wealth that the residential section in which its builders lived was known as “the Gold Coast.”

to let some of the—er—help go, sir, since we—er—left Chicago.

"We?" I questioned, "what do you mean? Are you still with Ratoni?"

"Yes, sir," he answered, "with the Big Shot and Miss Alice."

I grabbed the man by both arms. "What are you talking about," I shouted at him. "Miss Alice died in Chicago."

"Begging your pardon, sir," he replied, "but she didn't."

"Don't sir," he exclaimed, a minute later, "you're musing me all up!"

I was doing just that. I had grabbed him around the neck and was doing a war dance, around and around in the street. James brushed down his clothes when I loosed him, looking at me reproachfully.

"As for that," he added, "we supposed you were dead, sir."

Of course. Ratoni, believing me dead, had seen no reason for keeping Alice a prisoner in the doomed building, and had taken her with him when he fled. Another thought struck me, and I turned on him again. "James is Miss Alice—all right?"

"As well as could be expected, sir," he answered. "She's pretty near worn out, though. You see, Ratoni has been ill, very ill, and he will not permit us to call in help. Perhaps you would help us?" he added hopefully.

I would do anything that would take me to Alice, and told him so. He led me to a cheap rooming house of 1930 vintage, up two flights of stairs to one of those atrocities known as a kitchenette apartment. James went in, and I heard Alice's voice, weary and forlorn.

"He's taken a turn for the worse," she said. "He doesn't seem to recognize me any longer." Then she saw me.

I draw the curtain over the reconciliation. We laughed and cried as we related our joint adventures. But there was no time, now, for talk if we were to help this pale figure on the only bed in the apartment—for whom, strangely enough, I no longer held hate or malice.

"I am convinced," Alice said, "that it is appendicitis. You know he has always suffered from it, in chronic form. But he swears he will kill any stranger who enters. He is asleep now, but I dare not bring in a physician to examine him. He sleeps with his gun in his hand."

That was simple. I bent over the sleeping man, turned back the covers, and grasped the hand that held the gun. His eyes opened, and a gleam of recognition came in them. The lids wavered, closed again.

"Hello, Wakefield," he said. "I double-crossed you."

The lids wavered, closed again.

"Ratoni," I said, "we are going to call a physician." The hand holding the gun tensed, then relaxed, and I pulled it away. "You've got me on the spot, kid," he murmured.

I summoned a neighborhood physician and tersely explained the man, I believed, had an acute attack of appendicitis, and that he had objected to calling a physician. The doctor understood well enough how residents of this unsavory neighborhood might object to having a physician in, but he was frankly puzzled about my description of the ailment.

"Appendicitis," I explained, "infection of the vermiform appendix." I was becoming impatient with him. "The case is very clear, even to a layman like myself."

"Vermiform appendix . . ." The physician mulled the words over. He seemed to be thinking. Suddenly he turned to me in triumph. "I knew the words were familiar from my anatomical studies. Where you learned them, I do not know; but if you know what you're saying, you must also know that the vestige has disappeared from the human anatomy."

That staggered me. The appendix had disappeared! But regardless of that, I knew Ratoni and I and Alice still possessed ours, and Ratoni's was very much in need of amputation. It was no time for dissimulation. So I told the doctor who we were, and how Ratoni came rightfully by his appendix.

I will say that when Dr. Ross comprehended the situation he acted fast. He first located a colleague, instructed him in detail where a description of the simple appendicitis operation could be found in his medical library, and other pertinent details. In five minutes, a helio ambulance was on the roof, and in fifteen minutes more Ratoni was on the operating table.

Dr. Ross's colleague must have worked fast, too, for there were no less than eight doctors present to witness the operation. I was permitted to stand outside the glass walls of the operating room and look on.

Everything seemed to go off splendidly. In a surprisingly short time Dr. Ross straightened up triumphantly, and his colleagues gathered round to look upon the fragment of flesh which had been the focal point for Ratoni's pain. Even the nurses paused to look, to exclaim and gesture. It was, no doubt, an epochal day in the life of Dr. Ross—the only man to perform an appendectomy in more than a half century. It was his crowning hour. I was amused at the delighted enthusiasm on the faces of the doctors—amused, then irritated, finally downright alarmed; for in their enthusiasm they literally forgot the patient!

I started shouting but they could not hear me through the sound-proof walls; then I beat on the walls until one of the nurses glanced up, and I pointed at the body. Then I pushed my way through the crowded onlookers, unable to look longer.

Those readers who are interested may find Dr. Ross' account of his successful appendectomy in the Journal of the American Medical Association. Ratoni lingered two days, semi-conscious, then died in a hospital bed, victim of an anachronism. Dr. Ross explained that the case was hopeless from the start and I am willing to concede the point.

Two years have elapsed since his death. As I write, I look out of the window of Kriml's cabin—now enlarged and made into a home for Alice and me. Only our complete happiness here together has been able to veil the memory of those nightmarish events through which we went together, to dispel the nostalgia for our own time.

Nor can I, looking forward, discover whether the gangster will return to the American scene of his greatest triumph, his bravado recovered after a few brief years of peace. But in my heart I believe those thousands did not die in vain; that Kriml's solution, drastic as it was, was effective; that the people of this freedom loving nation, their lesson learned, will forever jealously guard against the threat of domination; and that we are on the dawning of a new era in which the degradation of empires, as well as the degradation of the masses as serfs of the mighty, will be relegated to the musty pages of ancient history.