

# Weird Tales



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(In two parts—part I)

*The Finest and Most Thrilling Novel Ever Written by the World's Acknowledged Master of the Weird Tale.*

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

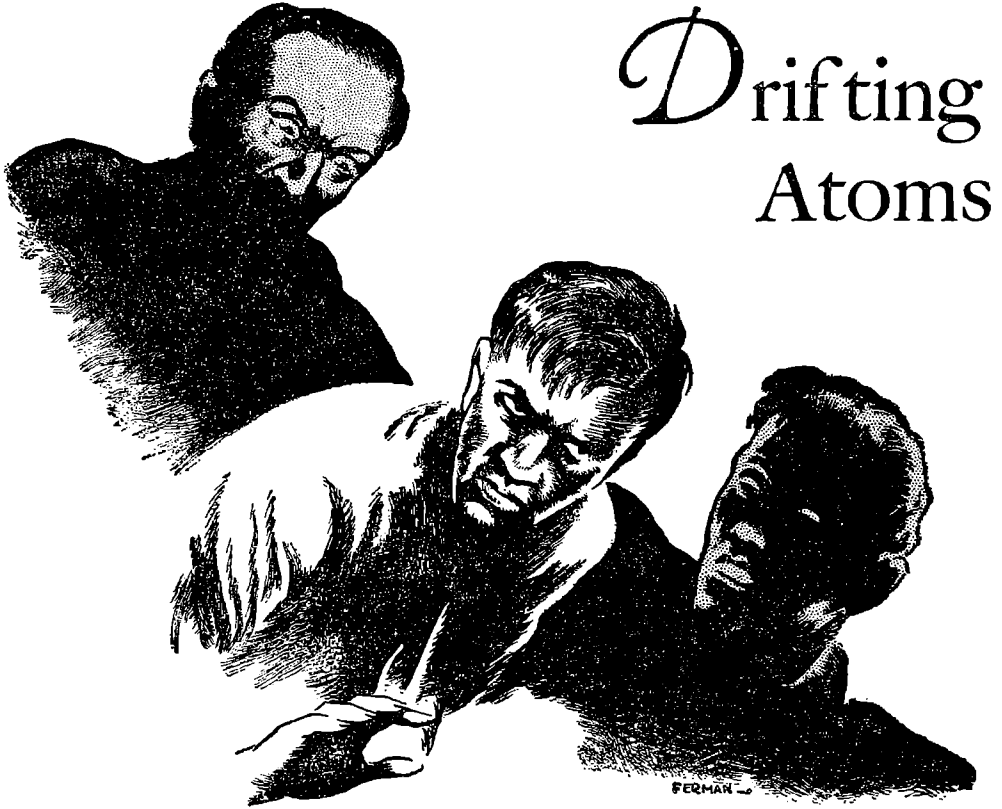
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# Drifting Atoms

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

*Five young men—coming to the brink of a discovery that would have revolutionized the world—find madness and death.*

THE whole business began at Ray Chetham's, the night of July 2nd. Just shows you, that, how close we are to the weird and the unbelievable even in the most ordinary of settings. But whenever men get together and start thinking, really *thinking*—well, anything can happen. Anything.

We had met, as usual, for our weekly poker session. Just the five of us, pals since high school days. Chet, Perry Lester, Tom Scofield, and Boyton Greer. And me, Joe Littleton.

There we were, five ordinary American business men. Lounging around the table in Chet's apartment, sleep-eyed, in

shirt sleeves, drinking and smoking companionably and arguing about things in general.

Perry was popping off about the next election, Boy griping about the hand Tom had dealt him, when Chet suddenly remarked to me out of a clear sky:

"Joe—suppose someone could change the spots on a card merely by willing them to change. See what I mean? Simply by *thinking* about it. And why not? Look here. Everything we see in this room is nothing but a collection of atoms, held together by—what? Some kind of centrifugal force. If that force were all at once destroyed, everything in the universe would

fly into particles of matter and go spinning off into space."

Perry grinned at him, reaching for a glass. "Here, pal," he drawled. "You need a drink. Put this under your belt, and you'll feel a lot better." He winked at me, describing a rotary gesture at his temple. "Nutty as a fruitcake! Poor old Chet!"

Chetham ignored him. He took the glass of whiskey, held it to the light, regarding it lazily. "Atoms," he murmured. "Nice little glassful of atoms. Pretty soon they'll be part of me. It takes iron, leafy vegetables, fat, and what-not to make a man's hand. . . . You morons know what I think? I think all atoms are exactly alike—and it's only the way they're put together that determines whether they'll be wood or flesh or metal or what-have-you. All matter is composed of the same basic material." He grinned, and struck an attitude.

"Screwball!" Lester snorted pleasantly, fishing for cigarettes in Greer's coat pocket. He lit one, blew smoke rings into the air. "Look at that," he jerked his thumb at one gray spiral. "You mean to say that I and that smoke are composed of the same stuff?"

"Absolutely!" Chetham nodded, jabbing a forefinger through one of the rings. "More atoms went into you, Perry, and they're stuck together in a special way—that's the only difference. If I could get that smoke to stay put in the shape of a red-headed, pug-nosed reporter, your own fiancée couldn't tell it from you except for the density of atoms. And if I could get enough smoke together to supply the same amount of atoms as you have in your homely carcass—why, presto! You'd have a twin! It wouldn't be alive, of course; couldn't move or speak. Just a big blob of matter that looks like you. See?"

"Two Perry Lesters for the price of

one!" Greer piped up, laughing. "I've been swindled!"

We all chuckled drowsily—none of us very much concerned or interested—except Chet, a science professor, and me, a fiction writer, who enjoyed crazy flights of imagination. Tom Scofield, moody and quiet since his hardware business had failed, looked on with a forced smile. Boyton Greer, a nervous young bank clerk with a hobby of indoor photography, shuffled the cards impatiently. Perry Lester, who covered the courthouse beat for the *Globe*, openly yawned.

**WE** MIGHT have gone on from there with never a thought beyond our own humdrum lives, had not Chet leaned back in his chair, sipping his highball, and voiced the crazy idea that was to launch us all on this incredible jaunt into the unknown.

"You know something else I think?" he drawled. "I think that, before Creation, some *Force*—call it by any religious name you like—collected a lot of atoms out of space, threw them together, and called them planets or stars or what-have-you. And when men were created, they were given a small portion of that Force, or Power. Call it Will, or Intelligence; call it Soul; call it anything you like. But I believe there is enough electrical power in the human mind to draw and hold atoms together, in any form we choose!"

Scofield laughed uneasily. Greer snorted. Perry Lester and I said nothing, but leaned forward with greater interest.

"Ghosts, now," Chetham expanded. "Materializations of any kind at a séance. They're simply a collection of atoms gathered together by the sheer mind-power of a group of people concentrating on one thing."

Lester's cigarette burnt him; he dropped it with a curse, still blinking at Chet.

"I never heard anything so completely screwy!" he exploded. "You mean a group of people, ordinary people, can create something out of thin air, just by thinking it? Why, you're——"

Chetham waved him to silence. "Now, now, keep your shirt on, Perry. I didn't say exactly that. I said the atoms already exist. The very air around us is full of them—microscopic particles flying around until the gravity pull of some larger solid draws them to it and they become part of that solid. But . . . you've seen a magnet pull a heavy piece of metal to it? If our mind-power was developed enough, we could draw atoms *away* from solids. I could take you apart and reassemble you on my body, except that your mind-power would be pulling against mine. Or we could both concentrate on dissolving that chair, atom by atom, and sticking it onto this chair over here. . . ."

Perry winked at me. "See?" he whispered. "I told you he was nuts! Of all the crazy——"

"But that degree of mind-power," Chet went on, ignoring him, eyes narrowed dreamily, "could probably never be attained by the human brain in its present state. If it could—think of the chaos! Right now, though, I'm convinced we could materialize any familiar object out of detached atoms that are not yet caught by any centrifugal force. Your watch, Perry, for example, could be duplicated. . . ."

Our reporter-pal snorted. With a flourish, he took out the new watch his aunt had given him last Christmas and laid it down on the table, clearing a place among the cards and chips.

"All right!" he waved at it. "That turnip cost Aunt Mag a hundred and ten bucks. I know—I've hocked it. Make me one like it, Chet my friend, and I'll give you this one!"

Scofield, Greer and I were leaning forward now, interested and amused in spite of ourselves. But we laughed openly at Chet, who sat gazing dreamily at the watch, running a hand through his shaggy black mop of hair.

"You think it's so funny?" he said quietly. Those black eyes, sliding over our faces, were serious and unsmiling. "Listen, you knot-heads!" Chet snapped. "Ancient necromancers—the Medes and the Persians, the old Magi—could create anything you'd like to name, simply by the power of thought. They were able even to change the atom formations at will: water into wine, wood into stone, inanimate objects into animate ones—the way Moses turned his rod into a snake—the way Lot's wife, by her own mental turmoil, turned her own flesh into salt. They could *do* it, I tell you! And their minds were no better developed—in fact, I'd say they were much less developed—than yours or mine. We have a knowledge of electrical force, chemistry, physics, that those old ducks never had. . . ."

We four were not laughing now. Chet's mood of gravity and growing excitement was contagious. Lester peered at him, one eyebrow cocked at a quizzical angle. Boyton Greer gaped at him, unwinking. Scofield, however, seemed the most affected. He was staring at Chet strangely, wringing his hands in that nervous way of his until the knuckles cracked. A little muscle in his mouth twitched. Tom was always high-strung.

Unexpectedly he blurted: "Chet, I—I've got a book at home——"

All eyes shifted to him, and he reddened like a small boy caught showing off.

"That is," he stammered, "I just thought it might amuse you fellows. Just for a laugh, of course. I mean, what you were saying, Chet; this book tells how——"

Chetham sat up with a jerk, his eyes bright with interest.

"Huh? What kind of book, Tom? You mean, this crackpot theory of mine has been thought of before? Not seriously?"

Scofield nodded shyly. "Y'yeah," he stuttered. "It's all in this book. Uncle of mine willed it to me with the estate. . . ."

We fidgeted uncomfortably. Each of us knew about this uncle—he had died in an insane asylum last year, and any mention of him brought a flare of panic to Tom's eyes. Hereditary insanity is not a pleasant thought for a jittery chap like him. But, with a morbid eagerness:

"Uncle had a lot of crazy books," he was saying now. "Used to collect them. Banned stuff, dealing with witchcraft and so on. This one I mentioned is a compilation of rituals stolen from a Parsi temple. Persian fire-worshippers, you know. Chet, your saying that about the Medes and Persians awhile ago made me remember it. Those Parsi *mobeds*—priests—really had thought-control down to a fine art, even better than the Yogis of India. In this book are all sorts of formulæ for impossible tricks, like setting a bush afire with a glance, or making water spurt out of a dry rock. They could do it, too, in those days. Nothing supernatural about it; just sheer science."

He stopped for breath, glancing from one face to another, then back at Chet for approbation that was certainly forthcoming. The four of us blinked at him, intent and fascinated by such a weird conversation coming out of shy, moody Tom Scofield. As for Chet, he was grinning like a kid with a new toy.

"Say!" he burst out. "I'd like to see that book! Can I borrow it tomorrow?"

"And me next?" Perry Lester chimed in, and mugged at us. "Gentlemen, won't you join us in a padded cell?"

I remember that was the very crack he made. Perhaps if we had realized how prophetic it was, we would have dropped

the whole thing like a hot brick. But we didn't realize, of course. Chet was full of fantastic theories which he and Perry were always squabbling about, for nothing more than the sheer pleasure of popping off. Boyton, Tom, and I had always trailed along, putting in our two-cents-worth, until the "debate" ended in a big laugh. Life on Mars, the construction of a stratosphere plane, the physical changes of a psychopathic "werewolf" — these were some of the crackpot matters we had taken apart, for the fun of it. Naturally, then, our fancy was caught by this new idea of Chet's while, as naturally, none of us took it seriously.

WE HAD not forgotten it the next time we met, this time at Boyton Greer's because his wife was out of town. Perry mentioned it almost at once. And Tom, shy but eager for attention, brought out the promised book. There was a clause in his uncle's will, he said, preventing his ever letting it out of his possession; but we could all see it, anyhow, in his presence.

It was an ancient-looking volume, inscribed on vellum and sloppily bound. Pages were missing, and the whole thing was in Sanskrit. But Tom's uncle had translated passages here and there. In fact, he must have been working on this **very** translation when he lost his mind—from overwork and too intensive study, the doctors said. I doubt that diagnosis, in view of what was in those translations — and what happened later.

We didn't play any poker that night. After Chet had read aloud a few pages of that book, we were too interested for ordinary thoughts.

The wording was obscure. There was a lot of stuff mixed in about *Abura Mazda*, the Parsi deity of light, and *Narasamsa Agni*—fire—in his various forms.

But between the lines there was a curious sort of scientific theory, hinted at now and then—something about the non-existence of matter except as held together by "the Law of Eternal Mind." It was very vague. There was still more about all phases of earthly matter being akin, and that caught Chet's attention at once.

"There!" he pointed out eagerly. "That agrees with my theory! Look how many plants seem to be almost animal, and how many insects are nothing but animated twigs and leaves. And don't plants eventually turn into mineral form? Petrified trees—that's one marked instance. Then, there's that disease science has no cure for, when flesh hardens slowly into stone and can be chipped off. . . . Yes, there's a link somewhere, and I believe it's in the atom. Hmm! . . . You know, I think we've stumbled on something revolutionary!"

Lester, Greer, Scofield and I were reading over his shoulder, scanning the neat translations appended to each vellum leaf. Suddenly Lester indicated one paragraph, and murmured the words aloud:

*" . . . And he shall make, with his own mind and the Power thereof, a likeness unto that which is. And the likeness shall be, it shall exist, until the Power is withdrawn. Yea, what though Life is not given and Growth forbidden, it shall be seen, and touched, it shall have weight and color and substance, according to the Will of him who thinks. For so it was in the Beginning . . . "*

"What do you get out of that, Chet?" Lester muttered. "And look; further down, it tells how to——"

We all read those next few paragraphs, forming the words silently. Simple words—but with a meaning that struck one like a blow between the eyes.

"Why, there's nothing to it!" Greer murmured, frowning. "All you do, according to this, is sit and put everything

else from your mind, and concentrate on something."

Chet smiled. "Yes, sure. But that's not so easy as you might think. In fact, it's damned hard to concentrate on any one thing for much longer than ten to twenty minutes. Almost impossible for the average person."

Perry nodded. "Yeah. Little sounds distract you. Other thoughts creep in. But you can train yourself to do it. It was devilish hard for me to turn out copy in the news room, with everybody yelling and the teletype going. But it can be done—and so could this."

I grinned at them, nodding at the card table Gerer had previously set up for poker. "Let's have a séance," I chuckled. "Perry, does that offer about your watch still hold good?"

A murmur of laughter greeted this, but it was uncertain laughter. The phrases of that Sanskrit translation were thrumming in all our heads. Could it be? *Could it be?*

Still laughing, Boyton Greer swept cards and chips from the table and gestured solemnly to the chairs drawn up to it. I sat down. Perry snorted. Tom Scofield ran a nervous glance over our faces, smiling shakily. Then, as Chet sat down opposite me with a clowning gesture of pressing forefinger to forehead, eyes closed as in a trance, the others sat also. With a flourish Perry Lester took out his watch and planked it down in the center of the table.

"There!" Chet laughed. "That's our pattern, gentlemen. Take a good look at it, get the picture of it firmly fixed in your mind. Because—we're going to materialize one exactly like it!"

After a moment we controlled our levity and got fairly serious about the thing; though, of course, each of us thought the idea was absurd. We were merely amusing ourselves, as people do with an ouija

board, not laughing only because that was part of the game.

WE TOOK a good look at the watch, shiny white and gold-rimmed against the black table top. Then, with a swift gesture, Chet removed it. For a few moments we could still see the "light-image" of it against the dark surface; then even that faded. But, by agreement, we still sat motionless, concentrating every thought on the spot where the watch had lain.

No one moved. No one spoke. Five men, from varied walks of life, no different from any five you might see on the street every day. But we sat there around a card table that night, tampering with physical laws as a child might toy with a sleeping cobra. . . .

We sat. We stared. We concentrated.

Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. . . .

Perry was the first to break. With a snort of laughter, he suddenly sat back in his chair, fishing for cigarettes.

"This is silly as hell," he burst out. "Goes against every known law of science. . . . Aw, come on. Let's play some poker! . . . Smoke, Chet?"

The rest of us, at his words, had relaxed, laughing. Chet, blinking eyes that watered after our concentrated vigil, shrugged and leaned across the table, bracing himself on a bare elbow for support.

Instantly he jerked back his arm, rubbing it and cursing. All the laughter had vanished from his eyes as he put out a hand gingerly and touched the table top where his arm had rested.

"Huh!" Chet exploded. "Feel that—the place where we've all been staring! It's—it's *hot!*"

Wide-eyed, we felt the spot. And there was no mistake—it was warm, that one round spot in the center of the table top; warm, but cooling rapidly. We gaped at each other blankly. Greer shivered. Scofield

swallowed noisily. Perry tried to grin, and shook his head like a punch-drunk fighter.

"Say!" he breathed. "Do you suppose—?"

Chet's narrowed eyes stared at the spot, bright with elation. "Do I suppose? Hell yes! Do you know what happened? Our combined mental attraction was collecting atoms at that point of focus—and welding them together! . . . Perry, put out that cigarette," he snapped. "Tom, sit back down—we've got to try this thing again!"

We glanced at Scofield, who had half risen from his chair. Sweat dewed his high forehead, and his pale eyes were frightened.

"Chet, I—I don't like this," he blurted. "They—they say my—uncle was babbling about something like this when—when he—do you suppose he was really mad?" his voice rose pathetically. "I mean—could such a thing—?"

We were all looking at him, which made him flush and stammer as usual. But Chet spoke calmly, very scientific and detached again.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "It could be and is, Tom. Sit down. We're going to prove it."

But Tom Scofield was pushing his chair back, shaking his head. That little muscle in his cheek was twitching more violently than ever, and his face was ashen. His eyes were wide and glassy.

"No!" he jerked out harshly, groping for his hat. "No, no, I won't try it any more! I—don't like to *think* so hard about things, Chet. When I do, I—I feel dizzy. My head aches. . . . Please! I want to go home. I—get the jitters like this sometimes." He broke off so pitifully that Chet frowned at us and slapped him on the back.

"Okay, sure," he laughed. "Don't take this thing so seriously, old son—ye gods!

After all, it's just a screwy experiment. Why should it frighten you?"

I'll never forget Scofield's eyes as he stopped at the door and turned back to us. Those pale eyes stared at the table top for a moment, then veered away like a scared bird.

"Why?" he whispered. "It's the—the uncertainty, Chet, don't you see? That's what got my uncle—the doctor told me, and I—I visited him once at the asylum before he died. You see, he—got to worrying about—what we are and why we're here. *Are* we really here, after all? Where, exactly, is the thin line between imagination and reality? The human mind—it's so tricky, so easily fooled. . . ."

Chet scoffed at him reassuringly. Perry gave another of his down-to-earth snorts, though I saw Boyton Greer staring oddly at Tom as he opened the door.

"Nuts!" said Perry. "Don't try to tell me I spend forty bucks a week trying to clothe and feed a body that doesn't exist! I don't know *why* I'm here, but I know damn well I *am*! I'll slug the guy that says I'm——"

But Tom Scofield had gone.

**WE** LOOKED at each other for a moment before speaking.

"I didn't like that look in his eyes," Chet murmured. "Tom's such a queer duck. Goes off half-cocked over the slightest thing. Guess we shouldn't have stirred him up with a screwball theory like this."

"Rot!" Perry exploded. "Nothing wrong with Tom; he just took one too many, that's all. And as for your fine little theory, Mr. Chetham, I can explain that 'hot spot' on the table. It wasn't there. But you put on such a good act that we others believed it was, after you said so! Pure suggestion, that's the answer. 'Materializing a watch!'"

Chet grinned at him, eyes narrowing in

that stubborn way of his when someone—usually Perry — betters him in an argument.

"Think so?" he snapped. "Well, it so happens, my idiot friend, that I *did* feel heat at that point. Listen; let's meet at my apartment next week sometime, and try this little experiment again. I think I've got a way to disprove this 'suggestion' theory of yours, Perry."

We grinned at his vehemence and agreed to come, debating whether or not to ask Tom, since he had appeared so easily upset by the thing. . . .

But that question was settled for us next morning. Poor old Tom—wandering about the streets all night until the police took him in! They thought he was drunk at first, but later he was transferred to the psychopathic ward. We heard the details via Perry: how he had kept beating his fists against his head, and mumbling about a watch that kept ticking inside his brain. Only we four made any sense out of that, and we kept our mouths shut after a short discussion.

For, as Chet pointed out, everyone knew there was insanity in Tom's family. Anything was likely to set him off, and it had just happened to be our crazy discussion the evening before. Explaining Tom's aberration would not help him and would only bring on a lot of unpleasant publicity.

We had our meeting at Chet's the very next night, full of talk about Tom's commitment to the state mental hospital. Perhaps, had it not been for that, we might have lost interest in our fantastic "experiment with mind-power," as Chet called it. But anything capable of driving a man mad holds a sort of morbid curiosity for the normal man. Like a magnet, the subject drew us once more as we lounged around the apartment, drinking up Chet's company-Scotch and fogging the air with cigarette smoke.



"Of course," Perry drawled, "you've been clowning about the whole thing, Chet. Take off your beard; we know you!" He chuckled. "Come on, now—'fess up! You didn't really feel that hot spot, did you?"

Chet, leaning back in a deep leather chair, squinted at him thoughtfully. Then, with a crooked grin, he solemnly raised his right hand as we used to do in our kid days.

"Honor bright, I felt it," he said flatly. "But the more I think about it, the more I—I wonder if I didn't hypnotize myself into believing I felt it. Try pressing your fingertips together hard, with your eyes closed, and tell yourself there's a pane of glass between them. You know damn well it's not there—but you can feel it! I'm wondering if my 'hot spot' wasn't something of the kind."

I glanced at Boyton, about to make some jeering comment. But his serious, almost frightened eyes stopped me. He leaned forward now, eyeing Chet. Suddenly he blurted:

"I've—got to know. This thing—it gets under your skin, doesn't it? Worries you. . . . Listen, you three. There's a way we can find out for sure. Have someone else, someone who doesn't know a thing about our—our watch-idea, feel the spot after we've concentrated on it."

Chet grinned, and reached for the phone. "I thought of that, too," he nodded approval. "I'll phone the drug store and get them to send some ginger ale. When the delivery boy comes—well, he's our guinea-pig. Okay?"

He phoned the order, then beckoned us to sit in a circle around the table as on that night when Tom showed us that weird book.

SEATED in comfortable chairs a moment later, we prepared to repeat our crazy "séance." Conditions this time were more

favorable. A lamp threw our faces in shadow. It did not hurt our eyes so much, illumining only the dark table top. And Chet stuffed our ears with cotton to shut out any noise.

We sat. We stared. We concentrated, as before on that night Scofield had been with us, mentally forming the shape of Perry's watch.

Ten minutes. Fifteen. A half-hour. . . .

If you have tried it, you'll know the strain of concentrating every faculty on one spot for any length of time. It's nerve-racking. After a very short time, my head began to ache. My eyes burned unbearably from the fixed staring. My muscles, tensed to the nth degree, begin to stiffen painfully, and I am sure the other three felt as I did.

But we did not move, did not speak. With every fiber of our beings, we concentrated on the formation of a flat gold watch at the same point on that dark table.

And suddenly . . .

Boyton Greer drew a sharp breath, visible but not audible to our cotton-stuffed ears. All of us tensed. We leaned forward, gaping at the table's center, concertedly tearing the cotton out for audible speech.

"Do you see what I see?" Perry whispered sharply. "Good Lord! I'm losing my mind! Or else——"

"You're not," Chet rapped out. "I see it, too! Boyton? Joe?"

We nodded, dazedly, and continued to gape at it.

It was fading slowly now — a round shiny-looking blob, the size of Perry's watch, white with a yellowish rim. The numerals were blurred, however, and there was no stem.

"Say!" Chet whispered, pointing out this last oddity. "I wasn't thinking about a stem for the darned thing! Were you?"

Perry, Greer and I shook our heads,

stunned. That was why the part had not materialized! We had all been concentrating on the *face only*.

Blinking at the shadowy thing, we saw it flatten out, become ovoid, then slowly begin to dissolve. Gingerly Chet poked it with a pencil, and the dent left in the thing's surface was like that one might make by poking a pat of wet sand. Fine sand, almost powdery—that is what the blob appeared to be made of. As we looked, it seemed to melt into the table top. . . .

And once more we all touched the spot where it had been. It was *hot*, as hot as the hearth in front of a blazing fire!

"Well, I'll be a——" Perry sat back, mopping sweat from his forehead.

Boyton Greer huddled in his chair, shivering, shaking his head dazedly.

Chet grinned broadly, spread his hands. The light of scientific triumph glowed in his thoughtful eyes—though there was bewilderment in them, too, and not a little healthy fright.

"It's true!" he breathed. "It—it works! In a minute, I'll realize it, but right now I—I just feel slap-happy! It *was* there, wasn't it, Perry? We *did* see it?"

Perry Lester nodded vaguely, slumped back in his chair. He ran a tongue over dry lips; then he scowled.

"Hypnotism!" he exploded. "You know what we've been doing? Sitting up here like a bunch of dopes, hypnotizing ourselves into seeing a watch! We haven't proved a thing . . . and personally, my head aches! I feel like the devil. Nuts to the whole thing! I'm going home to bed!"

"No, wait!" Chet seized his arm, forcing him back into his chair excitedly. "We've got to bring it back, Perry—and find out whether that delivery boy can see it or not! Then we'll know."

Perry sat down again slowly, running a finger around under his collar. "Well—okay," he growled. "But much of this

concentrating business is going to make us all sick. The strain is too great."

"Quiet!" Chet snapped. "Concentrate! The boy will be here in a few minutes. Now, get this. When I get up to let him in, keep concentrating. Replace your ear-cotton, and bring it back!" he whispered. "With the hands pointing to—a quarter to ten. Everybody must agree on that hour."

Fifteen minutes later—minutes that made my head ache sickeningly and my eyes burn with staring—there was that watch-like blob at the table's center again, as solid as before. It shimmered slightly, like an object seen under water. But the numerals were clearer—and this time, it had a stem and slender black hands pointing the hour Chet had planted in our minds before the thing materialized.

There was a knock on the door, and Chet rose quietly to open it.

With tremendous effort of will, Perry, Boy, and I kept our eyes glued to the table as the Negro delivery boy shambled in. The watch quivered as Chet maneuvered him into the dusky room. Cautiously I removed my ear-stops to hear as his light voice murmured:

"That was quick service, boy. So, for a tip, you can have anything you see on that table! Fair enough?"

The Negro grinned at him, then shuffled over to the table, eyeing us curiously because we sat so still and did not glance up at his approach. Sniggering, he peered at the table, then turned to Chet.

"Aw," he grinned. "You's jest funnin' me, ain't you, Cap'n?" I heard, and relaxed—but stiffened again as he added, "You-all wouldn't gimme no gold watch for a tip, now, would you?"

A moment later, when he had slipped the beaming darky a dollar and hustled him out, Chet whirled on us again. We were all leaning back in our chairs, exhausted and stunned . . . all but Perry.

With savage energy he stood up and reached for his hat, scowling. "I've had enough of this," he snapped. "I'm leaving——"

He stopped short, however, blinking quizzically as Boyton rose, eyes wide with a child-like terror of the dark.

"Chet," he whispered. "He *did* see it! It's—true! Then, you and I—all of us—are nothing but a collection of tiny particles, held together by—what? And we could dissolve, like that watch! Fly into atoms and go drifting off into space! I wonder," he muttered. "Is that what death is? When our bodies disintegrate into dust——"

Perry stared at him, then flashed a warning look at Chet and me. He laughed lightly, reassuringly.

"Oh, come on, Chet—this has gone far enough. Boy, don't take him seriously. Why, that nig seeing it doesn't prove a thing! It's nothing in the world but thought-transmission, coupled with mass hypnotism.

We were thinking that watch so hard, we made the nig see it. A darky is very sensitive, like dogs. That's the answer: telepathy and hypnosis. Eh, Chet?"

Chet glanced at Boyton's white face, and shrugged. "Sure," he drawled. "That's all there is to it. The watch didn't really exist at all."

Greer stared at him fixedly, then forced a grin. "You're—quite sure? Wow!" he laughed shakily. "This thing—had me going for a minute! The idea of——" He shook himself like a terrier, and faced us, more like the old Boyton. "Well, good night, atoms!" he drawled. "I'm going home and get some shut-eye. If I disappear in the night—*ponf!* like that—you'll know what happened to me! See you tomorrow."

But we didn't see Boyton, not ever again, alive.

I WAS sitting in the office next morning, nursing a blind headache caused by our mental strain the night before, when Chet phoned. Perry had just called him with the news, via the city room, about a young clerk, one Boyton C. Greer, who had been walking along the street on his way to lunch. Suddenly, without a word, he had leaped in front of an oncoming truck, to be killed instantly. Greer's wife was prostrated with grief, at a loss to explain the suicide except that Boyton had seemed very nervous and depressed the night before.

That afternoon we met — only Perry, Chet and I now—in a downtown restaurant. A deep gravity hung over us like a cloud as we sat discussing Boy's suicide, following so closely upon Tom's mental collapse.

"Chet," Perry blurted, "it *was* this watch-thing that got them both. Boy was such an impressionable kid, and poor old Tom was a psychopathic case. We should never have stirred them up with a crazy idea like this, and left them to worry over it, when there's absolutely nothing to it."

Chetham met his eye queerly. Sweat beaded his high forehead, and his hand shook nervously, holding his coffee cup.

"No?" he drawled. "Perry—Joe, I've been thinking about this damn business all night . . . and I'm not so sure! We started this as a gag, yes. Half the time I was pretending, of course—like the time we found that formula for witch-ointment, and rubbed the stuff into cuts on our arms. The aconite and belladonna in it did give a sensation of flying and high excitement, and we did have hallucinations; so I pretended we had really flown through the night to a witch's Sabbat. I actually had the rest of you believing it for awhile, but of course there was nothing to it. . . ."

Perry nodded, grinning faintly at the memory of five excited small boys camping out together under the stars.

His grin faded as Chet's quiet voice went on:

"But this thing—I'm not so sure. Franklin was playing a game with a kite and a key, when he stumbled on the truth about electricity. And we five nitwits, clowning around, may have actually been performing a valuable scientific experiment—with mental electricity. It—it scares me, the way it scared Tom and Boyton. But—I decided last night that we must go on with it. We owe it to those two to find out if there's anything to it besides telepathy and hypnotism. Don't you see? If they've given their lives for something of real value to science, Boy's and Tom's names will go down in history. And so will ours—if we can prove that watch was real!"

Perry and I stared at him. The noise and clatter of the small café faded into non-existence at his words.

"It can't be!" Perry burst out, almost desperately. "Chet—it's a scientific impossibility. Besides, there's no way to prove it. Why, good Lord, if a man can't believe his own senses, what can he believe?"

Ray Chetham pushed back his chair, and rose from the table, his dessert untouched.

"A camera," he replied flatly. "I'm going to Boy's now, to try and cheer up his wife—and borrow that pet camera of his and some stuff for developing. You know that old vacant house of my uncle's on Beecher Street? There's an old table and some chairs in the attic. I'll meet you there in an hour, and we'll test this crazy thing once and for all!"

He strode out of the restaurant. Perry and I sat for a minute, staring at each other. He grinned at me shakily, and ran a finger around under his collar.

"I have a feeling," he said, "that we've gone quite far enough with this screwy business, Joe. Tampering with the Law of Creation, that's what we're doing—in case there's anything to it, which I doubt. But—suppose there is? What effect will such

knowledge have on the world of tomorrow? Cripes!"

He jerked to his feet, glancing at his pocket watch, and I saw him wince slightly as he did so.

"Be seeing you in an hour," he muttered. "I've got to go hock this thing to pay my rent." He laughed oddly. "Sordid down-to-earth thought, isn't it? Maybe if I waited, I could hock—the other one. And tomorrow, the pawn-shop owner would look for it, and ——" He strode out, laughing queerly.

I sat for a long time, almost the whole hour, thinking about what he had said. Thinking and thinking about it, imagining the possibilities. . . .

I felt funny and light-headed, and a little sick at the stomach, when I got up finally and headed for that old house on Beecher, to join Chet and Perry—and a camera.

THEY were already there when I arrived. Sunlight streamed through a curtainless window, full on the table around which Chet had placed two rickety chairs and a packing-box. On another chair he had rigged up Boy's camera for a time-exposure.

The half-open door of a spacious closet across the room revealed a second smaller table, with pans of acid ready for developing the picture of—whatever was to be on that table.

My head was spinning now. My heart pounded, and I felt a crazy excitement, similar to the effect of a marijuana cigarette, I once sampled. The room appeared all out of focus, and Chet's and Perry's faces looked distorted and unfamiliar. If they had looked at me, perhaps they would have noticed something in my expression. But they were too intent on the experiment; merely waved me to my chair, and sat down at the table.

It took a long time, this meeting, to make that blob of matter appear on the

table top—evidence of my mental state, and perhaps of theirs, too.

We sat, stared, concentrating for almost a full hour. And then—

There it was, quivering as from an electric current but clear in every detail. I wondered if the thing was solid, a hollow shell, or whether the vague rudiments of a mechanism were hidden there inside—distorted, perhaps, by minds unfamiliar with watch-works. I wondered. . . .

Then—*click!* Chet had pressed the camera release, and registered on the sensitive film whatever really lay on that bare table top.

The sound was loud in the silent room, so loud that it startled me, and made the watch-image quiver and lose its shape. Slowly it dissolved as Perry leaned back, rubbing his smarting eyes and stretching tense muscles.

Chet stood up dizzily, taking up the camera with great care. I felt rather than saw him make a bee-line for the closet; heard the door shut behind him. . . .

It was then that the roaring began in my head, deafening me, blinding me. I could see that door across the room, looming large and forbidding as the door to the death-chamber of a prison. Behind it a man was moving swiftly, dipping a section of film into a pan of acid—and thereby, perhaps, solving the eternal mystery of Creation.

And men would be gods, pitting their brain-power one against another—creating images that did not exist in the normal scheme of things, creating even women that did not exist—until no one could tell the true from the false, and madness would sweep the world. . . .

Terror shook me like an ague—a blind sick terror of space and mystery and things beyond our ken. In that moment it seemed that Boyton and Tom stood beside me. I

thought I could see them, waving frantic arms and screaming something at me, showing me toward that monstrous door. . . .

I heard someone—Perry—cry out:

"Joe—what's the matter, Joe? You look so—wait, Joe! Take it easy, old boy; you're—*Chet! Chet! He's gone mad! Look out!*"

Vaguely I remembered picking up a chair, feather-light, and raising it above my head, and smashing with it—smashing at a monster wearing a white mask made up to resemble Perry Lester's face.

Then the huge door burst open, and I was smashing again, wielding the chair with no effort, until a second fiend, masquerading as my old friend, Ray Chetham, went down like a felled ox.

Something was in his hand—a piece of film, ready for developing, but ruined now by exposure to the light. . . .

That's about all, Sergeant. You'll find the bodies in that second-floor room, in the old vacant house on Beecher. I came straight here, the minute I realized there was nothing I could do for poor old Perry and Chet—after I came to myself, you understand, I saw what I had done.

I thought of suicide at first, longed for it, bending over them and crying like a baby. Old Chet and Perry were more like my brothers than friends. . . . I couldn't stand the thought of what I'd done. . . .

Then I knew that suicide was the easy way. What I had to do was give myself up, so that I could tell someone about our experiments before they do—whatever the state is going to do to me.

Someone else may want to try what we tried—a scientific mind, not a bunch of untrained helpless laymen like the five of us. Someone not afraid to find out what was on that undeveloped film.

I don't want to know, myself. I hope to God nobody ever finds out!