

# AMAZING STORIES

MARCH 1950

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Published monthly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill. New York Office, Empire State Building, New York 3, N. Y. Entered as second class matter June 3, 1947, at the Post Office, Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry, Rulyoke, Massachusetts. Subscription: in U. S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions \$2.50 for 12 issues; all other foreign countries \$3.50 for 12 issues. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 185 North Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.



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# For Each Man Kills



A chill seemed to shroud their embrace, and a gaunt specter loomed closer to them . . .

## By William F. Temple

**When jealousy drove him into sending his rival to certain death, he didn't know that his enemy and his sweetheart were one!**

**S**HE WAS different from most women, but one thing she had in common with all women: she knew that to keep a man waiting increased his desire for the sight of her.

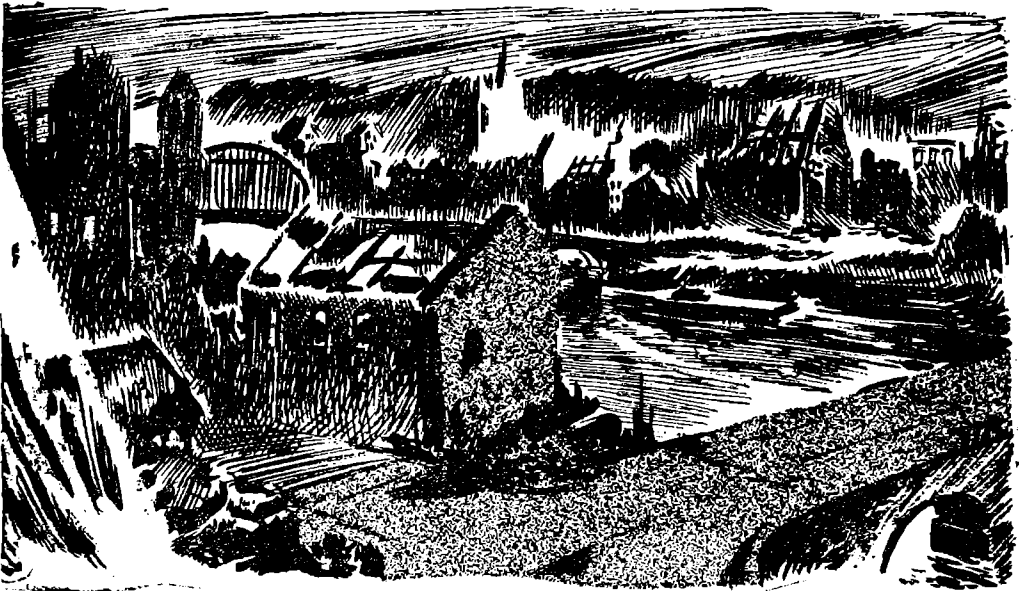
Ellen had called from the bedroom: "Make yourself at home, Russ. I've not finished dressing. The U.235 report is on the table... I'll be out in ten minutes."

The ten minutes became twenty, and Russ hadn't glanced at the report. He'd wandered moodily about the room looking at pictures of Ellen. The portrait in oils in the alcove. Sloman had got something of Ellen, something of the Gioconda smile,

but, as a whole of course it hadn't come off. Da Vinci himself couldn't have put all of Ellen on canvas. Not on one canvas. He'd have to fill a gallery with angles on her, and then, inevitably, there would still be something—an important something—that the mesh had been too coarse to hold.

Sloman was no Da Vinci, but he was good. The best of the bunch in Pine-town. He'd have to remember to suggest Sloman's name to the Mayor for presidency of the Academy. When they'd put the roof back on it...

There was a miniature of Ellen, also by Sloman. He didn't like it much. The classic features were too classic. The pale blue eyes were not



regarding you or anything in this world—what was left of it. It was that detached, silent mood, when Ellen gave her attention to other things than you and vouch-safed nothing about them. And you suspected they were of more importance than you. Which was disquietening if you loved her as Russell Howard did, with a fretting eagerness to possess.

There were three mirrors in the room. He inspected himself carefully in each. He was still young-looking but the lines of responsibility were beginning to show.

Three mirrors? The ration in Pinetown was one per apartment, and you had to be a 60-hour a week worker at that. He must sound Ellen about it. The glass-works was going well now, but the silvering bottleneck...

The hell with it. He'd come here to forget work. He wasn't Atlas. Why did he keep trying to be?

There were fourteen photos of Ellen about the room. He counted them. They ranged from snaps to cabinets. The bulk of them pre-war. There were few chemicals to spare these days for purely personal photographs. 93 per cent of such chemicals were reserved for technical photography. About bromide: couldn't it be produced by...?

He shrugged the world from his shoulders again with an effort.

Come on, Ellen, he thought, come and take me out of myself. Talk about Beethoven's last quarters, and the peak novels of Mauriac, the omniscience of Balzac, the insight of Cezanne. And Siena and Amalfi and Bruges and Granada, and all those other wonderful faraway places you saw and whose beauty may now be dust for all anyone knows.

Why do I always have to come to

you? Why don't you come to the office sometimes, talk with me, and revive my faith in the vision I'm trying to build out of this ashcan—this Pinetown that never had beauty even before the rockets hit it?

His hand closed on the Palm Beach snap of Ellen and slipped it into his inner pocket. As he re-arranged the photos to cover the gap, he thought: that's one way I can carry you around with me. He liked that snap particularly. Ellen would never give him a photo of her. It was another odd side to her.

The bedroom door opened and she came out. He realized at once that no photo could ever remotely compensate for her physical absence. That strange and exciting contrast of light blue eyes and raven-black hair...

"What's the program?" she asked.

"Well," he said, hesitantly, "Jed's concert is postponed—he's ill. And the movie house is shut: run out of carbons. Anyway, we've seen all their films six times. Perhaps we could just sit here and talk?"

She looked around the room. "I'd like a change of scenery. I'm tired of looking at me. Let's walk."

"Not much change of scenery possible that way, either," he said. "Still—O. K."

**THEY PICKED** their way down the main street. The bigger holes had been filled in, but there were still enough small ones to twist your ankle unless you were careful. Russ frowned.

"I must get on to Hawkins. Seems to me his labor squads are spending more time in the park than on main street. These pot-holes—"

"You should be glad to see them," she said. "Only two years ago this street was twenty feet deep in debris, all the way. Hawkins' men moved

mountains. Look, Russ, let's forget it for awhile."

"Forget it!" he exclaimed. "I wish I could. But you can't escape it. Everywhere you look there's work screaming to be done. This town was half a century growing. It died in one night. We're trying to rebuild it on a shoe-string—with shoe-strings. No gasoline, no coal, little timber, only salvaged rubber—name any raw material you like and we either haven't got it or there's just enough to wear on your finger."

She knew it all, she'd heard it all. But she also knew he'd come to her to be praised and soothed. She squeezed his arm sympathetically. "There's no shortage of enthusiasm," she said. "The Mayor and you have seen to that."

"It was the Mayor," he said. "Without him we'd still be sitting on the rubble chewing our nails—and that's all we'd have to chew. He knew what to go for first: crops. He's organized everything since: labor squads, opening up the roads, patching up living quarters, rationing, the newspapers—we're even thinking about culture again. Before we're dead we may have a city that's a work of art."

They were nearing a lone Gothic arch. It was both the sole relic and the tombstone of the Protestant church. It could have been symbolic of anything, futility or the indestructibility of design, a monument to the betrayal of a religion or a sign still indicating the way. The low red sun threw a gaunt shadow of it across the new-laid turf of the park. And suddenly the relief of a decision came to him. This was the place, this was the time.

He steered Ellen to a seat of yellow brick. Her hand was still on his arm, and he regarded it as he spoke.

"Ellen, I want you to marry me. I don't know how you feel about it. We've chummed around, I guess, because we've certain interests in common. Because sometimes one gets tired of talking about the weather, and work, and how it was in the old days. But lately I've not been able to get you out of my mind. You're getting between me and everything. I've got to needing you somewhere near. Once, twice a week isn't enough. The waiting is hell. I want you to live with me. What do you say?"

It was odd. He had said this twenty times in his imagination with passion. When it came to it, it was like someone else speaking. A quiet, impersonal voice. His attention seemed more upon the attention of her hand than on her reply. It was a slim, delicate hand. The nails scrupulously clean, shining, with little flecks of white on them. They meant pleasant surprises, someone had told him long ago.

Then the hand was withdrawn from him, became a support for its owner's chin as she gazed abstractedly across the park at the flat desert.

"Russ, you'd better know," she said, slowly. "I've sopped up all I can find of atomic theory. Now I want to put it to use. I've applied to work on the pile. The application was granted."

He stared at her.

"You're taking a hellish risk. It's stuck together with stamp-paper. It leaks neutrons like a sieve leaks water. I'd much rather you kept away from it until we've learned more about it."

"The only way we can learn more about it is by practical experiment, trial and error. And hope we don't make one error too many. As you know, the literature we've managed

to scrape together about atomic physics could be tucked under one arm. If we're ever going to get this town looking like a town again, if we're going to have some degree of civilization, and if we ever hope to reach the world outside, we've got to have power. There's no other hope but the pile."

**H**E GLOOMED, then answered reluctantly: "All right, Ellen. But be careful. I don't want you fading away... I'm still waiting for an answer."

"Oh, Russ, don't you understand? I've given you the answer. You remember what happened to Lilian Webb, who was the only woman who worked on the pile?"

Russell Howard went rigid. He paled slowly.

"Do you mean, that might happen to you?" He had difficulty in speaking. The hinges of his jaws were stiff.

"It's very likely. It could be termed an occupational disease."

He gripped her by the elbows, swung her round to face him. "Now, listen to me," he said, grimly and deliberately: "You're not—"

"Let me go," she said, very quietly. He could feel that her body had gone as tense as his. All friendliness had left her. She stared at him with eyes that had become wide and ice-blue. Slowly, he took his hands from her. He had known of this side of her character, but this was the first time it had been directed towards him.

"You're not the Mayor yet," she said. "Until you are, you have no authority to tell me what I shall or shan't do. Remember that."

He, who daily ordered the lives of half the town, felt like a reprimanded schoolboy. Instinctively, he covered it with anger.

"You'd better remember yourself you've a duty to the community. We've far too few women, and far too many of those have been barren by radiation. We have a generation to rear. If you think because of your intellectual arrogance you're exempt—"

She got up and walked away. He sat gripping the edge of the seat and gazing after her. Suddenly he jumped to his feet and gave the seat a mighty kick. It had only been constructed that day. One yellow brick fell out.

He swore, and stuck it crookedly back. Then he went dawdling along behind Ellen, feeling ferocious. She was stepping circumspectly over the rough ground.

At the corner where the drug-store had been, Lefty Smith stepped out of a broken doorway. He didn't look around, and thought Ellen was unescorted. He fell in behind her.

"Hello, sister, how 'bout you an' me—"

Russell pulled him round by the car.

"Smith, you're incorrigible," he said. "You're for the cooler to-morrow. Meanwhile, here's something to go on with."

His uppercut was misjudged, and caught Smith in the Adam's apple.

"Sorry," said Russell, and split Smith's lip with a straight left. Smith decided to lie down and think it over. He'd served his purpose as an outlet for Russ's feelings, anyway.

Ellen had watched this brief slaughter. Russ saw the passing glint of excitement in her eyes. Yes, she was different from all women and yet like all women. She got a kick out of seeing men fighting for her.

"I'd better see you back to your apartment," Russ grunted.

"As you wish," she said, distantly. "But don't unbutton your armor, Sir Lancelot—you're not staying."

At the bottom of the stairs, she said: "There's no need to come up."

"I didn't pick up that uranium report, and the Mayor wants it to-night."

"Oh, well—come on, then."

As soon as he entered, he began: "Ellen—"

"There's the report," she said, thrusting it into his hand.

"Look," he said, "let me get this straight, and I'll go. You love science more than you love me. Is that it?"

"You could put it that way."

"Right," he said. "That ends it."

He turned to go. "Wait," she said. "If you don't mind, I'd like back that snapshot. The one that stood there." She indicated the place.

"Do you make an inventory every time I come and go?" he asked, sarcastically.

She held out her hand.

"I'd like to keep it to remember you by," he said, taking it from his pocket and looking at it.

"I don't want you to remember me." And then she said an odd thing: "I don't want to remember myself."

He passed it to her silently, and left. For the rest of his life he remembered the sight of her standing, watching him go. The tall, very feminine figure. The dark sweep of hair. The photo in one slim white hand. The unusual pale blue eyes watching him with the detachedness of royalty.

It was the last he saw of Ellen Carr.

## CHAPTER II

**H**E TRUDGED along the pitted road towards the Mayor's house.

The last twenty minutes had been unreal. They hadn't registered. Things had happened, things had been said. But they had all been too quick. Time was only now slowly giving them form and significance. He had been a worried man, seeking to park his cares for the evening, even daring to hope for Ellen's permanent companionship. And suddenly he had butted into a wall and lost that companionship forever.

He was bewildered, angry, unhappy. There was a queer ache about his heart.

The Mayor was inking in a pile of tracings for blueprints, in the fading daylight. The candles were laid beside the candlesticks, ready for the continuance of work after dark. He allowed himself four a night, burnt in pairs. He never stopped work until the last candle had sputtered and died.

Mayor Pat Walkley was 69. He'd come to Pinetown an illiterate bricklayer of 18. He'd educated himself, lifted himself by his own bootstraps, and become the biggest contractor and wealthiest man in town. When he became Mayor he retired from business. In the short year before the war struck he did more for Pinetown than any other man in its history.

For one thing, he'd got Pinetown on atomic power ahead of many more important towns. And the secret wish of his heart had been granted: there had been an article about him in *Reader's Digest*.

Russ walked in.

"Here's the U.235 report from Miss Carr," he said in a low voice, stuck it in a corner of the table, and slumped in a chair.

"Miss Carr?" echoed the older man. He scratched his head with the end of the mapping pen, and looked



at Russ from under his white eyebrows. But Russ didn't say anything. Walkley picked up the report.

"H'm," he said, presently. "The pile's getting mighty low. I don't know how long I'm going to last myself, but it looks like I'll see the last of our U.235 out. Something's got to be done, son."

"Isn't there plutonium—or something?" said Russell, indifferently.

Walkley said, "There's probably something. The hell of it is that I wouldn't know the something if I saw it. Neither would you. Why did the bomb have to take the whole technical staff of the pile in one swipe? If it had spared but the youngest apprentice, he'd have known more than the rest of us. We're kids playing with fire, but we've got to have that fire. We've got to establish contact with any other oases there may be."

"This may be the sole Ararat," muttered Russ.

"Remember the airplane of the 17th May."

**R**USS remembered. Two citizens had reported seeing a plane, flying some twenty miles off, low along the western horizon. It had passed and gone. It was never seen again. But the whole town had become wildly excited and kept a smoke-fire burning in the market square for a week.

Russ had been as excited and hopeful as the rest. But now he was wearing dark glasses.

"It was probably a bird or an optical illusion," he said. "The radio doesn't even give us an illusion."

There were twenty-three radio receiving sets left intact in the town. Since the raid nothing had been heard on them but static.

The Mayor said, "Broadcasting stations are primary objectives in war.

Maybe there's not one working anywhere on the continent. But you can't wipe out human beings as easily as that. There must be millions still around. Maybe it's not really too bad out there. You can't judge everything by Pinetown."

"If they can flatten an unimportant, unproductive place like this, in the middle of a desert..." began Russ loudly, but the Mayor shushed him.

"Let it rest. What's got into you to-night, Russ? You're the guy who's going to step into my shoes, and I've always thought you the right guy. But these shoes aren't for anyone who can only beef and think negatively. If you don't have faith that all's going to turn out for the best in the end, you won't get far. It's all in the point of view—"

"All right, I read your article in the *Digest*," Russ growled.

The Mayor colored a little. He started screwing two of the candles in the sticks.

"You're sore at me over something. What is it?" he asked quietly.

"You gave Ellen Carr permission to work on the pile, didn't you?"

"I did." Still quietly.

"Knowing that the thing's short on graphite and radiates like a log fire."

"It's not all that bad. Anyway, Ellen knows the extent of the danger. She knows more about it than either of us."

"You remember what happened to Lilian Webb?" pursued Russ. "It may happen to Ellen. She told me."

"She told me, too," murmured Walkley, and began playing with the two unlit candles. "Even in the old days, it seems, no one knew much about the effect of neutron radiation on people. They knew continued X-radiation produced sterility in males,

and that neutron radiation is four times more powerful in that direction. And they knew that in females neutron radiation is liable to start tumors on the internal organs, particularly the kidneys. That's what happened to Webb."

"And then?"

"A benign tumor on the kidney pressed upon the cortex of one of the suprarenal bodies. That made it empty into the bloodstream a good deal more than the natural supply of sex hormone. Result: virilism. She developed masculine characteristics. Became, in fact, a man. There were many such cases known to medical history."

"Couldn't Doc Willis have cut away the tumor?"

"Willis is just a G. P. Our only surviving medical man of any sort. He's not a surgeon. He could diagnose, but he couldn't operate. In any case, Webb wanted to keep on work at the pile. The tumor would have grown again. If the change should happen to Ellen, it'll be permanent. She knows that. She went into it with her eyes open. You can't blame me."

"I can blame you for taking her from me. To-night I asked her to be my wife."

ONE OF the candles dropped from the Mayor's hand, rolled over a tracing and smudged the still wet ink.

"Russ. I had no idea. I thought—you were just friends. If I'd have known—"

He came around the table and put a hand on Russell's shoulder.

"I'll cancel the permission," he said.

"It wouldn't give me Ellen back," said Russell. "The split's come now. She turned me down deliberately. She admitted her love for science

was greater than her love for me."

"She means her love of the good science can do, not science itself. Look, Russ, to keep the town healthy and well fed we've got to recover some of the old knowledge. We need all the science we can get. We only produce just enough food. If there's a threat of blight to the crops, we want to know what to do. The population is bound to increase—"

"Not if all the women behave like Ellen Carr," said Russ.

"We've got to make arable land of that desert—somehow. Some application of atomic power may do it. There's medicine. We've one over-worked doctor and no therapy center. Ellen dug some book out of the library ruins. It's badly burnt, like the rest. But there was some important dope on extracting radioactive isotopes from U.235. They've invaluable medical uses, for one thing. If Ellen has to sacrifice her sex, it'll be in the cause of us all, not for any private reason."

"I don't give a hoot about her reasons," said Russell, bitterly. "She didn't see fit to discuss them with me. She chose her path. She can take it. If I were made Mayor right now I'd still let her go, and be damned to her."

"You'll get over this bitterness, Russ. To-morrow morning—"

But Mayor Walkley was not to know to-morrow morning. Russ leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, and the bullet that was meant for the back of his head fanned his hair and drilled into the Mayor's heart.

At the report, Russ leaped up, seized his chair by its arms and flung it behind him. One leg grazed Lefty Smith's cheek. The other knocked the smoking revolver from his hand.

Lefty dived after the gun. Russ dived after Lefty, grabbing one of the candlesticks as he passed.

Lefty got the gun. At the same time he got a crack on the skull from the base of the candlestick. The base was heavily weighted with lead. Lefty had a thin skull. He'd missed his revenge, and now he'd missed all chance of it. There was no tomorrow for him, either.

With a little groan, Russ knelt over Walkley. Even in the flickering light of the remaining candle, it was plain enough.

The Mayor was dead. Long live the Mayor!

## CHAPTER

**T**HE NEW Mayor's inheritance was the broken bones of a city, several hundred square miles of desert, unending work and absolute authority. Pinetown was under a benevolent dictatorship, but it was a dictatorship.

"Democracy can return later, when there's time for subcommittees to argue," Walkley had said. "First things first. Order and discipline, single-minded direction—until we're on our feet. That means rule by a strong man who knows what to do and the quickest way to do it. And that means me, and probably my successor. We'll see."

Russell Howard continued the autocracy. He hoped it wouldn't be too long before he could spread the burden. But Walkley had left plenty of pressing problems unsolved.

Of the sheaves of atomic missiles launched at the Pinetown area, only a few single rockets had hit the center of the target. Whether intentionally or not, the bulk had saturated a great outer circle around the city, well out in the desert. The

terrain of porous rock out there had retained the radio-activity unusually long. It was still an impassable barrier, and from the Geiger-Muller counts would remain so for a long time yet.

No exploring party had found a break in it. No storming out expedition had survived the crossing of it. There were no planes, no automobiles. The monorail that used to bear the 20th Century through Pinetown dropped into a great bomb crater like a frozen thread of water.

The isolation had to be broken. It must be faced: Pinetown was not self-sufficient. The water supply was limited. Therefore, so was irrigation and the crops. Scarcely any raw materials, no fuel. They were living on their small and dwindling capital. They must link up with outside.

Walkley and he had been working on an airplane, to be driven electrically by a battery charged from the pile. It was a bizarre contraption, a patchwork from half a dozen wrecked fighters. They knew little of aerodynamics. It was probably a death trap. But it had to be finished.

There were many things that had to be finished...

The new Mayor worked eighteen hours a day and often more. They said his energy was miraculous, greater than Walkley's at his peak. They didn't know he was cramming his mind with a thousand things to squeeze out the one thing that sought to dominate it: the memory of Ellen Carr.

There was no Ellen Carr now. But there was an Alan Carr, a young man who worked at the pile. This Russell knew from reports. He'd never been near the pile again, nor Ellen's old apartment. Sometimes he wondered whether his drive to

break out of the city was anything else than a desperate flight from all that.

He'd organized an H.Q. on quite a scale. There was a drawing office. There were desks, typewriters files, even a dictaphone they'd got going. No candles, but electric light burning all night—run on a line from the pile.

There were executives, designers, clerks, typists.

Especially one typist.

Her name was Maureen. She was eighteen, and she came from what had been uptown. She was petite, dainty, uncomplicated. No Mona Lisa smile about her, but a cheerful grin. She was of Celtic stock. She had black hair and light blue eyes, and when you saw her face at a certain angle—you felt a little stab, if Ellen Carr had meant anything to you.

Was that stab pain or pleasure? Russ didn't know. But he found it grew necessary, and unless Maureen was around it became hard to concentrate. When she was there, a void was filled.

He found he was sleeping better. And others found his temper better.

**MAUREEN** became his private secretary. The next development was old, old. She affected sophistication in her speech sometimes, she was quite uncalculating. He wondered whether she ever thought of him beyond his work. But these days he scarcely existed beyond his work. He must show her he had other interests. That he was human.

He took her to one of Jed's little shows. And then a dance.

On the way home: "Maureen," he said. "Are you the marrying sort?"

"Oh, I think so. It runs in the

family. My mother got married."

"Would you consider marrying me?"

She colored faintly, and looked away.

"Yes, I'd—I'd consider it."

She didn't resist his kiss.

Soon at the office they were exchanging little affectionate messages with their eyes—privately, intimately, despite the press of company and business. They became engaged.

Then one day Maureen didn't turn up at the office. She sent a message to say she wasn't well. Russ stuck it til midday, then sacrificed his lunch to go and see her.

She lay on the couch. The vivacity had left her. She was very pale. Even her eyes seemed more pale. Pale blue eyes. Russ inhibited a memory.

"Hello, Russ... Guess I've been overeating."

"Overworking, more exactly. I've been a fool, crowding you along. I should have remembered women have difficulties men never think of. Next time, girlie, don't be afraid to tell me. I'm six hundred kinds of a fool, but don't let me hurt you again."

"It isn't that, Russ. It's—I don't know what. I haven't the energy of a louse in its dotage. Doc Willis doesn't know what it is, either."

Doc Willis didn't, then. But at the end of a week, when he saw his patient develop purpuric rash, enlargement of the lymphatic glands, and a high temperature accompanied by a growing anaemia, he knew all right.

He came thrusting into the office in the middle of a conference on the relaying of the sewage system. He wanted to see Russ immediately.

Russ told him: "If we don't get this business settled to-day, you'll

have more cases of bubonic plague on your hands than you'll know what to do with."

Willis said: "If anyone gets bubonic, you have to shoot 'em—that's all I know what to do. I'm here about something we can deal with right away—and it's got to be dealt with right away."

"What's that?"

"The case of Maureen Knight."

Russell went taut. "I'll be right with you—This meeting is adjourned for an hour. That enough, Doc?"

"Should be."

The office cleared, save for the Mayor and the doctor.

"What's wrong with Maureen, Doc?"

"Leukemia."

"Is that bad?"

Doc Willis chewed his thumbnail and gazed at the floor.

"Medical science has always regarded it as fatal. Arsenic or benzole can stave it off for a bit. Not for long. Maureen's is a chronic case threatening to turn acute."

Russell's face was like stone. "I thought you said we can deal with it."

"It's this way," said Willis. "Leukemia is a hyperphasia of the tissues producing white cells in the blood. An excess of white cells is anaemia. Her blood's getting clogged with 'em. You can break 'em down with X-rays—if you can get them without at the same time burning up the healthy tissues. But that's near enough impossible with exterior radiation, or even with radium needles. However, just before the war they were developing a technique for getting around that, using radio-active tracers."

"What are they?"

"I think," said the doctor, getting to his feet, "you'd better hear about

them from the person who knows most about them—Alan Carr. He's waiting outside."

There was a pause.

"Bring him in," said Russell Howard.

IT MIGHT have been Ellen's brother. He was tall, slim, pale. The black hair was cropped short. The lips were pale now, and around them was the slight shadow of shaven hair.

There were little, curling black hairs on the backs of his hands... The hands were thin, muscular, stained from work—there was no memory of Ellen there. But Ellen looked at him through the pale blue eyes, and the faint, enigmatic smile was Ellen, too—it touched him on a nerve, and he winced.

"Do you wish me to stay?" asked Doc Willis.

"Yes. Yes. Stay," said Russell, jerkily. He put his fingers to his eyelids, as though his eyes ached, and passed the tips down his cheeks. He affected weariness, indifference. "Perhaps your colleague will explain his technique for dealing with leukemia." He spoke as though Alan Carr was a stranger. Perhaps he was.

In a quiet, unemasculated voice, Carr said: "Theoretically, it's simple. In practice, less so. The marrow of the bones is the chief birthplace of white blood cells. We have to get radio-activity into that marrow to break down the excess of those cells. Radium would be fatal. Its effect lasts too long. 1690 years too long, to be exact. But, by exposing them to neutron streams from the pile, we can make common chemicals radio-active. Including substances absorbed into the body by metabolism."

"Such as?"

"Iodine, carbon, phosphorous..."

These treated substances act chemically in the same way as their inert isotopes. Now, bones have a large phosphorous content. A large proportion of phosphorous taken in food will be deposited in the bones. If some of that phosphorous is radioactive..."

"I get it," said Russell. "But prolonged radio-activity in the body is fatal you say. How, then—"

"The half-life of radio-phosphorous is only fourteen days. Just long enough to produce good effects and avoid harmful ones. Treatment can be continued according to the patient's condition."

"Then a permanent cure is possible?" said Russell.

"Possible, yes, but certain, no," said Carr. "We don't know enough about it to be certain. Even before the war they didn't know enough about it. And I've only a few tattered scraps of information to go on. Those, and my judgment."

Russell was thoughtful and silent.

"It's the only chance," Doc Willis prompted. "If it's not certain, the alternative is—I can assure you of that."

Russell took out his handkerchief to wipe his lips.

"Begin treatment at once," he said muffledly.

#### CHAPTER IV

ALAN CARR had attended Maureen Knight for two months, supervised four meals containing radio-active phosphorous and traced it with a G.-M. counter, and made copious notes. He had also made her very thorough acquaintance. There was not a great deal to know about her. She was not complex.

On the other hand, he remained enigmatical to her, and because of that, fascinating. She realized she

only knew a corner of him, and there were great tracts of his knowledge, experience and apprehension that were hidden from her. Constantly she tried to discover more of him. They had long talks...

She spent most of the day on a chaise-longue reading the books he had lent her, listening to the Chopin he played for her, reflecting on some life-revealing thing he had said. He was far more handsome than Russ, more courteous, more understanding. And more self-controlled.

Perhaps, she thought, he was more understanding because he had once been a woman. It was the strangest thing, trying to picture him as Ellen Carr. She always failed. Maybe because she had never known Ellen Carr. Alan was completely masculine. Very attractively so.

Russell called as often as he could slip the responsibilities of the Mayoralty. It wasn't often. And he was usually worried and tended to unload his worries on her. It was rather thoughtless, she thought. He seemed to expect from her a strength she'd never had since this languishing anaemia set in. Though she was feeling noticeably better now.

She began to notice that she looked forward to the visits of Alan, while those of Russ took all her patience.

One day Russ arrived while Alan Carr was there. Maureen was talking with real animation to Alan. It was an animation Russ rarely saw nowadays. His face lighted up. It was Maureen of the office days, the grin, the cracks she tried to make sound sophisticated.

Alan Carr stood up. All except the halt had to stand in the presence of the Mayor.

"Sit down, Alan," said Russ. It was the first time he'd used the name. It was the first time he'd felt any kindly disposition towards him.

Carr had restored Maureen. That must never be forgotten.

"I was just going," said Alan Carr.

"I'll see you to the door," said Russ.

Carr shrugged slightly. He gave Maureen a parting smile. She started to smile back, and then her face went serious, as though she had suddenly thought of something. Russ saw it, and was vaguely disturbed.

But, out of earshot of Maureen, he said: "Well, Alan Carr, it's odd how things turn out. I lost the one I loved to science. If I hadn't, I should have lost the one I love now. Maybe I can appreciate your point now. I mean, to love science is to love what it can do for people. In a way, that's loving people generally, instead of restricting it to one person. That's it, huh?"

**T**HAT FAINT puzzling smile was evident again. This time it didn't wound. Rather, it irritated. Russ didn't like to be smiled at when he was trying to be sincere. But he never had been certain of the source of that smile. It was something deep and probably not akin to anything in Russ's own nature.

"I don't think you appreciate my point at all," said Alan Carr. "I doubt if you'll ever be able to. Good day."

Russell went back, his perturbation growing. He didn't like uncertainty. His instinctive reaction to it was to take positive action. He went straight to the point.

"Maureen, by all reports you're on the upgrade—thanks to Carr. I don't want to rush you, but I'd like us to get married as soon as possible. D'you think you'd be well enough by, say, next week?"

"Russ," she said, not looking at him, fingering a worn place in the tapestry of the couch, "I was going

to ask you to release me from our engagement."

Maureen bit her lip.

"What?" It was as if he'd been hit by something solid.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You've been so good to me. I like you an awful lot, really. I thought I loved you. I *did* love you. It's only that I've found I love someone more."

"Who?"

"Alan."

He sat down, and didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or break up the furniture. He began a silly little tittering. It was all so damned crazy.

The person he had once hoped to marry looked like the person marrying the person he now hoped to marry. Say that again, and try to make it sound sense. It was like one of those riddles about who is who's father. His late love had come to steal his present love. The two girls he wanted to marry end up by marrying each other! Any way you looked at it, it was still the maddest thing since Jonah and the whale.

"And what does Alan think about it?" he asked, presently.

"He loves me. He told me so."

"I see," he said. "I see." Quite calmly, he went on: "Well, Maureen, I can't hope to change your feelings by argument, so I won't try. You know I love you and always shall. Let's leave it at that."

But a little devil of white-hot anger had been born inside him. A devil who was growing, taking possession of him, and who had no intention of leaving it at that.

Russell Howard went home. He locked himself in his apartment with several quarts of rye and bourbon.

The jag lasted a week. He saw no one, would answer no one, and ate nothing but a few crackers.

When he came out of it, he

wasn't Russell Howard any more. He was Nature's chosen agent to avenge an abominable outrage that had been done to her. That was the way he saw it. Or perhaps that was the way the devil who possessed his sickened and humiliated soul made him see it. He was Mother Nature's special representative charged with a holy mission.

He turned up at the office with bloodshot eyes and a splitting head. He had a week's growth of beard. That would have to wait. His hands were too shaky to deal with it now, and he didn't want a barber or anyone else to lay a finger on his riven skull.

The acting secretary, a fat blonde woman, was quivering with the burden of urgency.

"Oh, Mr. Howard, I've been trying to get you for the last three days. There's a report in from the atomic pile—"

"Send someone for some sandwiches," he said tersely. "I'm hungry."

"Yes, but—"

"Go on!" he roared.

She jellied away, but was brave enough to return before the sandwiches.

"Mr. Howard, this *is* important. The fuel at the pile is running unexpectedly low. It may last another two weeks, not more."

He stared at her.

"Someone's responsible for miscalculation, then," he said. "I understood there was enough for several months yet... Give me that report."

**A**S HE REACHED to take it, the whole plan leapt into his mind, complete and detailed. It was as though it had already been prepared by someone and held in reserve until this destined moment.

Oh, yes, he was only an agent, doing the bidding of a power greater than himself. He could not have thought this up himself.

"Send for Rollins," he said, quietly. "And when he's on his way, send for Alan Carr and have him wait in the outer office."

He'd digested the report on the U.235 situation when Rollins arrived.

"Sit down, Rollins. How's the anti-radiation equipment going?"

Rollins had for some time been working on Project Breakout No. 10, the organization for the next attempt to cross the wide radio-active belt. The main new points of this Project were special suits and masks to be worn by the party and insulated tents to sleep in during the traverse.

Rollins said: "Fraid there's nothing fresh to be added to my last report. Can't get the material to guarantee more than 53% protection. If it weren't for these darned shortages—particularly graphite—"

"Never mind. That's good enough. Get four suits and a tent to hold four ready by Tuesday next."

"But they'll be death-traps," said Rollins, surprised. "They won't stop anyone being burned to the guts before they're halfway across the belt."

"No one's crossing the belt," said Russell. "It's just a little foraging party."

"Even so, I wouldn't hold a brief for their lives for more than a couple of days."

Russell rang for the secretary.

"Show Mr. Rollins out and Mr. Carr in."

He didn't have to remind Rollins he was under orders. Rollins knew there could be no further argument. He left, depressed.

Alan Carr came in.



RUSSELL didn't tell him to sit down. He made him stand.

"I hear the U.235 is running out. Why wasn't I informed earlier of this?" Russell snapped it out like a whip.

"Because you were drunk and incapable," said Carr, calmly.

"Somebody at the pile must have been the same way—or just plain incapable," said Russell. "The last figures show a reserve of at least five months."

Carr shrugged. "Not my department. I'm not running the pile. I'm only engaged in research."

"Well, well. That's a fine exhibition of the spirit of science, I must say. Nothing to do with you, eh? I thought you were so keen on science you'd sacrifice anything—or anybody—for it?"

He could not help the emphasis on "anybody." That wound still had not healed.

"Your thoughts are not my affair, either, Mr. Howard."

Russ clenched his fist, then slowly unwound it. Crude violence now would spoil the greater plan. He looked narrowly at the slim, cool figure. It was Ellen's eyes that stared him out. He looked down at the report again.

"We'll soon see how far this devotion to science goes," he muttered. And suddenly he shot out: "Do you love Maureen Knight?"

There was a silence.

"I am bound to answer questions dealing with my work," said Carr, in a low voice, "but my personal affairs remain my personal affairs."

Russell depressed the corners of his lips.

"And I thanked you for saving her for me! You saved her for yourself."

"She's not saved for anybody," said Carr. "For a long time yet

she'll need a diet of radio-active phosphorous to keep her alive. And the pile will run out in a couple of weeks."

"Can't you build up a store?" The question was perfunctory. He knew the answer well enough.

"If I baked ten tons of phosphorous, it would all lose radio-activity within fourteen days."

"So we've both lost Maureen, it seems. You don't appear to be very upset."

"Don't I?" said Alan Carr, and Russell was reminded that there were still a lot of angles about that personality he hadn't even guessed about. There was some pattern of deep emotions behind that controlled exterior. What that pattern was he'd never know unless Carr unburdened himself. There was small likelihood of that.

"Be that as it may, I'm going to give you the chance to save her," said Russell.

Carr went very still. "How?"

"I've been investigating a report that there's an unexploded atomic rocket lying out there in the radio-active belt. It's the real thing, all right. Here's a photo taken through a telescopic lens... You'll be able to see it through a telescope from Point 679 on a bearing of 23 degrees."

"You're sending me?"

"I'm putting the facts before you. We want that U.235 out of the bomb. It'll be a ticklish business getting it out. You know more about it than anyone. You're the safest bet. We've got to have the stuff. If we don't, my airplane will never get off the ground and the chances of reaching the outside slip near to zero. And if you care for Maureen, here's your chance to keep her alive. I'll send three huskies with you from the labor squads to do

the heavy work. Rollins will have protective suits and a tent ready for all of you by Tuesday."

They held each other in a steady gaze for a long moment.

Russ thought: He knows I'm sending him to his death. He knows that if he gets back at all, he'll be burned to a cinder.

But Carr said nothing.

Russ said: "It's all for the sake of science, you know. You're not choosy about making sacrifices for that? You used not to be."

Bitterness stained every word.

"I'll go," said Carr. "Is that all?"

Russ nodded. The bitterness had turned into a pain that gripped him so that he could not speak.

Alan Carr turned to leave. The ghost of the strange smile had come back. He said something under his breath. Russ caught a bit of it: "...kills the thing he loves."

"What was that?" jerked Russ.

"Oh, nothing..." The door closed behind Carr.

## CHAPTER V

THEY'D BEEN gone thirty-four hours. They should be near the bomb now. Perhaps they'd already pitched camp at it.

Russ was beginning his second quart of whisky.

He had tried to see Maureen. She'd held him off. Sent a message by Doc Willis that she didn't feel well enough to receive visitors. Doc upheld her.

Of course, they both knew he'd sent Alan Carr to practically certain death through a mad jealousy. Everyone knew he was playing Othello.

There had been no need to risk killing off the best scientific brain in the town. A score of other atomic workers knew enough to have made a fair attempt at the job.

Russ reached for the glass. As his fingers touched it, there came a low distant rumbling. It was a purely conditioned reflex action as he plunged straight to the floor, under the table, leaving the whisky standing above his head. That sound was an echo from the long night when Pinetown died.

The rumbling swelled into a rolling roar. A blast of heated air smote Pinetown like the hammer of Thor. The building heaved, the window flew into a thousand fragments, the ceiling came down with a rush and a choking gray cloud of plaster dust sprang from the floor and filled the room.

All through Pinetown unsafe buildings rocked and fell, and a rack of burning sand and dust rolled like a tidal wave over the town. All at once it was twilight, though the red smeary sun hung up there at zenith. A glow was spreading in the building across the street: a fire had started.

Then the wind passed, carrying much brick dust mixed with the dust of the desert. The glow across the road shrank but still continued to burn. The faint crackle of its progress, a slithering here and there of loose debris, and some distant calls for help were the only sounds in the town now.

Russ heard none of them. He lay under a splintered table listening to a dead voice in his mind.

*"There's no new wisdom, Russ. It's all in the Upahishads: Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata. To give. To sympathize. To keep control. There's no other way to live fully..."*

Live fully! And he'd smashed that bright and aware life like someone slamming a fist. Give!—

he'd given a death sentence. Sympathise! He'd had plenty of sympathy. For himself. Keep control! That was a laugh.

So he laughed. He laughed until he cried. He thought he'd been living in hell. Now he found what hell was really like.

## CHAPTER VI

**I**T WAS WELL past the middle of the night when Doc Willis came banging at the split door. There was no need to bang so loudly. Russell was awake. For three weeks now he'd scarcely known what sleep was. But he had learned the living death of insomnia.

Russell opened up.

"It's Maureen," said Doc. "Her chances of seeing the dawn are pretty small. I think she knows it. She wants to see you."

"I've tried a dozen times to see her," said Russell. "Why this last minute change of heart?"

But he felt no curiosity. Nor sadness nor anger nor, any longer, shame. He could not even feel tired. He was like something frozen alive in ice.

Willis, who did feel tired, said wearily: "I don't know. She just wants to tell you something. And when it's over, remind me—I've something to give you."

They walked together through the silent night.

Doc Willis said once: "There's been no hope, of course, since the pile stopped. Pity that gamble to get uranium didn't come off."

Russell said nothing.

When they got there, all there was to see of Maureen was a pale yellow face, with the teeth protruding through the shrivelled lips, the cheekbones jutting—it was the face of a little old Chinese lady. The

eyes had yellowed, too. The hair was soot-black, lustreless. The rest of her was beneath the bed-clothes, and it was as well. There had never been much of her at any time.

"Hello, Maureen," he whispered.

The jaundiced eyes moved slowly to his face. A small, gasping voice answered: "Hello...Russell. I haven't...much time."

"I guess none of us has," said Russell. "I've been trying to see you—"

"I know...I was foolish... It doesn't matter now... Nothing matters very much...when you're where I am, I loved...Alan so...and you killed him."

"Yes," said Russell. "I loved you. I was insanely jealous, and I killed him. I knew there was a strong chance of the bomb going off when they tried to operate on it. If it hadn't been that, it would have been the radiation. He had no chance, and he knew it. It's no good my saying I'm sorry. I'm beyond feeling sorry. I'm beyond feeling anything. There's no difference between you and me except that I'm standing up."

"I can still feel...sorry. For you."

It was as if the ice had started to melt, and he stirred with pain.

"Don't, don't," he said, abruptly. "It—hurts."

"I wanted to...tell you...about Alan. He...came to see me...before he left... He said he didn't want... to hurt me...but he didn't love me... He'd made...a mistake... He said...he'd make every effort...to get back...with the uranium. For my sake. And...for your sake. He said...you loved me...very much. And...I was to forget him...and make you happy...when I got well."

Doc Willis watched the face of the man at the bedside, and then he got up and went to gaze out of the

patched window at the night. He'd been at too many distressing death scenes not to get hardened. But he knew Russell too well to be able to watch his agony with any detachment.

At the window he watched the pale stain of dawn spread slowly up the sky. He had not listened to the quietly murmuring voices behind him because it was none of his business.

And now one of the voices grew very faint and passed and was heard no more.

**R**USSELL wandered through the streets in the early light. He had started to go home, but that purpose had faded and was forgotten. He was slouching along quite aimlessly.

All at once he found himself looking down at the yellow brick seat in the park, where he had proposed to Ellen, where he had been rejected. He sat down slowly.

He became aware of the crumpled envelope in his hand. Doc Willis had had to remind himself to give it to him.

Russell plowed it open with a forefinger. He tried to focus his attention on the sheets it contained.

A letter in Ellen's handwriting. No—Alan's writing. Same thing.

*Dear Russ.*

*I left this with Doc, and you'll only see it if Maureen doesn't survive. I shan't survive myself, of course, but—and this will surprise you—I don't want to.*

*But I do want Maureen to live. She can give you the happiness I was never able to. So I hope you never see this.*

*But should you lose her, I would like you to understand that I didn't deliberately try to take her from you. All this trouble has arisen be-*

*cause I am the sort of character I am. I can't help it. I tried to change it with my sex, but it was born in me and it stayed in me.*

*Ellen Carr was much too fond of Ellen Carr. Surely you must have gathered that from the number of pictures of her in her own apartment. And the number of mirrors.*

*We go through a period of narcissism in childhood, when we become exceptionally self-conscious, when we spend half our time admiring ourselves in mirrors. I stuck there, that's all. I never grew out of that phase.*

*But I hated it, and hated myself. Myself? How many selves are we?... Who was the self that loved myself, and who was the self that despised myself because of that? And who was the self that loved you?—because I did.*

*But I knew it was no use marrying you, because I'd always love myself more than I loved you. You deserved better than that. I deliberately took the post at the pile, not because of any special love for science, but to give you a chance to escape from me—and me a chance to escape from myself.*

*As far as I was concerned, it didn't work out. Alan Carr remained in love with Ellen Carr. His physical form had changed. His memory hadn't. He used to moon over her pictures and long for her, until he destroyed them. He thought he'd escaped at last. And then he met Maureen Knight.*

*He saw in her just what you had seen in her. He and you were both in love with a memory. Maureen had physical features and little personal characteristics which partly personified that memory. She was very reminiscent of Ellen, you know. We both made our longings*

material in her.

Maureen, unfortunately, sensed Alan Carr's longing and returned it. She let him know, and he was foolish enough to admit to her he loved her. The moment he told her that he realised it was a lie. He loved only the ghost of Ellen Carr he saw in her.

His self-disgust became more than he could bear. And against his will he was hurting Russell Howard all over again:

There seemed no course left but to make an end of himself and his harmful self-love. And then you handed him the opportunity and the means. He accepted it gladly. Especially as through it he might save Maureen's life. Before he went he told her his declaration had been a mistake, and that you were the man for her.

I only hope it turns out all right for you both. If it doesn't, and you read this, then perhaps it may persuade you not to think too harshly of

Yours,

Alan, who was also Ellen.

PS. If you remember your Greek mythology, Tiresias, the blind soothsayer of Thebes, also lived as both man and woman. He thought there

was more pleasure in being a woman. But he was a relatively simple soul compared with me. I was not happy as either. There wasn't much point in going on.

HE READ it slowly through again, and as he did so an airplane came buzzing from the distance and circled the town. He did not raise his eyes.

The plane came in for a landing on the flat stretch beyond the park.

He did not look at it, did not look at the semi-clothed inhabitants of the town who ran shouting from their beds to greet it. Pinetown was making contact with the outer world on Pinetown's own ground.

A hardly audible voice was repeating over and over again in his memory: "Each man kills the thing he loves."

Thousands of tongues had said that since Wilde. But no one had ever voiced its concomitant: that when he does, each man kills himself also.

There was a clamor of rejoicing about the airplane. The outer world was friendly, was going to break the radio-active ring. Life was beginning for Pinetown.

It had ended for its Mayor.