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FUGITIVE FROM SPACE

BY MURRAY LEINSTER

Burt was an ordinary guy going his ordinary way, when somebody dropped a tent on him. Then this weird runaway from outer space, took over his body, his girl, and his mind. Burt got mad. Well wouldn't you?

WHEN the first streaks of night appeared among the stars, Burt was telling Norma goodnight. He had left the motor of his car running as earnest of his intention to leave immediately, but he didn't want to go. This was up at Lake Katona, where he'd borrowed a lakeside cottage to get some writing done. Norma happened to be vacationing at a boarding-house at the same resort, and they'd met and it seemed very remarkable. They even discovered that they lived within blocks of each other when not on vacation, though they'd never met. Burt discovered to his astonishment that he even knew the building in which Norma had a small apartment. So it was very plainly an act of destiny, no less, which caused them to en-

counter each other here.

The sky was like velvet. Night-insects whirred insistently. The scents of summer filled the air. There was no moon.

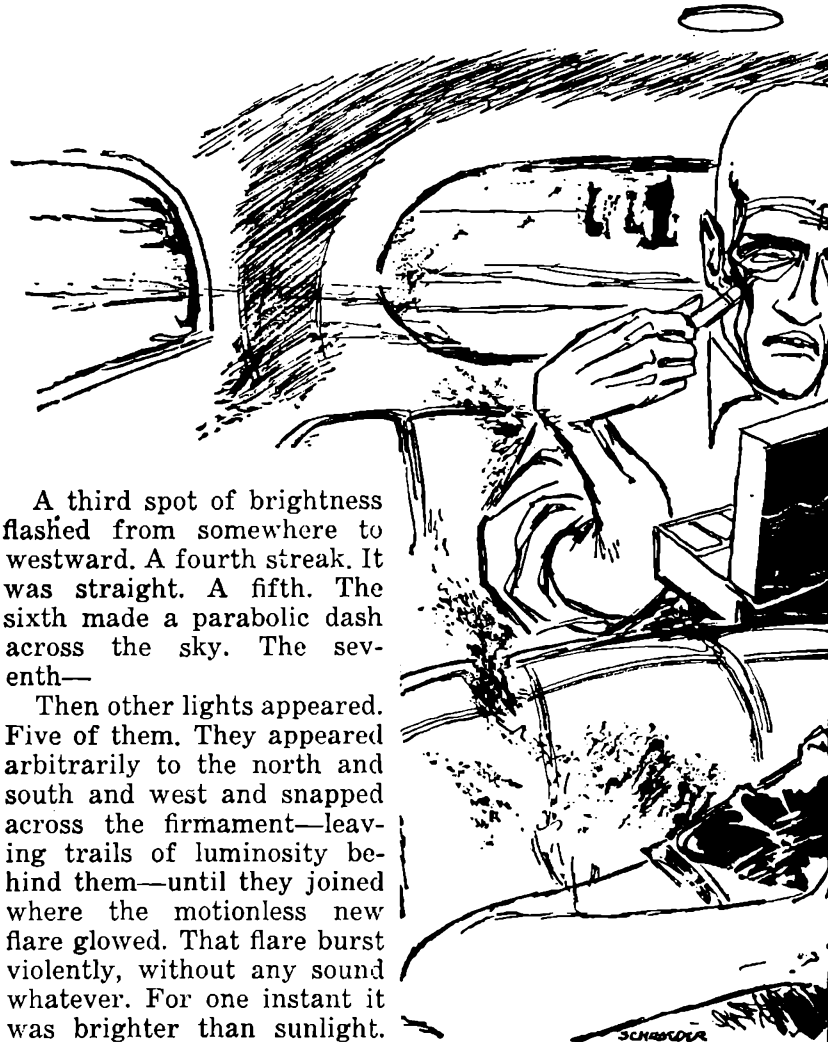
"Maybe tomorrow," said Burt, reluctantly ready to depart, "tomorrow we can—"

Then the first streak of light flashed across the sky.

It wasn't a shooting-star. It wasn't even a streak of light, but a tiny spot of lurid brightness, which shone so harshly and moved so swiftly that it seemed to be a line.

There was another flash. They saw it clearly. The glow it left behind was sharp-edged. It looked like a line-wide strip of the Milky Way stretched across the sky.

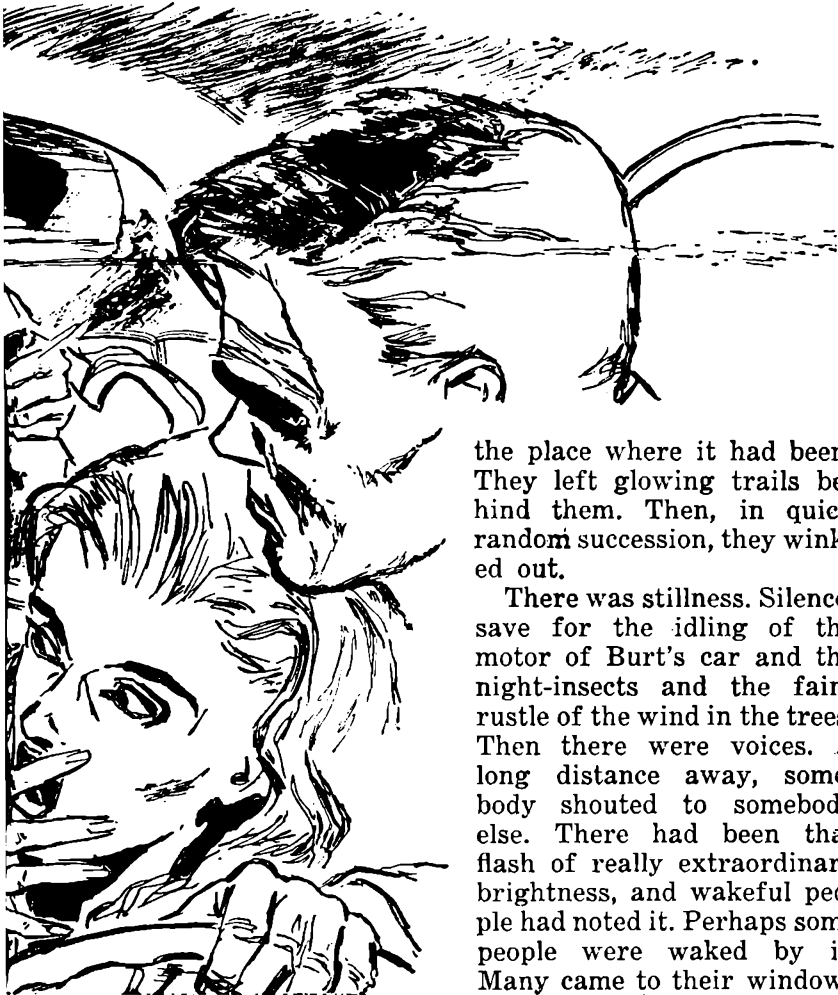
"I don't know what it is," admitted Burt. "I've never seen anything like it before."



A third spot of brightness flashed from somewhere to westward. A fourth streak. It was straight. A fifth. The sixth made a parabolic dash across the sky. The seventh—

Then other lights appeared. Five of them. They appeared arbitrarily to the north and south and west and snapped across the firmament—leaving trails of luminosity behind them—until they joined where the motionless new flare glowed. That flare burst violently, without any sound whatever. For one instant it was brighter than sunlight. Then it turned yellow, faded swiftly to orange, and went out in an infinitesimal speck of red which ceased to be.

Six lights like small lurid stars moved restlessly about



the place where it had been. They left glowing trails behind them. Then, in quick random succession, they winked out.

There was stillness. Silence, save for the idling of the motor of Burt's car and the night-insects and the faint rustle of the wind in the trees. Then there were voices. A long distance away, somebody shouted to somebody else. There had been that flash of really extraordinary brightness, and wakeful people had noted it. Perhaps some people were waked by it. Many came to their windows to see its cause. They looked skyward, and saw the meaningless hieroglyphic in the heavens.

Burt and Norma still stared upward. Norma whispered:

"Do you—suppose that was—near?"

Burt shrugged. "I think it was in our atmosphere, yes. That first line is getting blurry. And I think all the lines are moving a little. There's a bright star there, shining right through one of those lines. A moment ago it was outside it."

He was right. The pattern in the sky was shifting, though very slowly. Also it was blurring. Where Burt stood, there were voices all about. Somebody called authoritatively:

"Vapor-trails! They're the vapor-trails of jet-planes up there! Night maneuvers!"

Burt shook his head a little. Norma whispered again.

"Is it that, Burt? Vapor-trails from planes?"

"They wouldn't show at night," said Burt, "unless in bright moonlight, and there isn't any moon. No: Planes didn't make those lines! And what exploded?"

"What?" asked Norma.

"I don't know. I'm asking." Burt continued to frown upward.

People came out of the boarding-houses, pulling on wraps and bathrobes to stare up at the heavens. None had seen the lights themselves.

Most had looked out because of the flashing, noiseless explosion in mid-sky which had lighted all the world for part of a second. They'd seen the streaks of luminosity. Now they came out to gape at them.

But nothing happened. Burt's car-engine purred quietly. People called to each other. There was that curious gaiety which overtakes commonplace human beings when something happens which is startling enough to justify unconventional behavior or attire.

Norma drew away from Burt.

"The lines are fading," said Burt awkwardly. "I guess I'll be going. See you tomorrow?"

She nodded. She pressed his hand and moved toward the door. Burt got in his car and drove away. There were many people out-of-doors now, with blankets or shawls about their nightclothing. They continued to call to each other. Apparently all had been roused by the flash of light from something which had appeared to explode. Apparently nobody else had seen the spots of light which had made the now blurring lines among the stars.

The lakeside village ended. Burt drove along the narrow

concrete highway that circled the lake and served the cottages and small estates upon its shores. The windows of his car were open, and all the fragrance of the night blew through. The highway curved and curved. There were trees. There were the ditches beside the road. Now and again a mailbox. Once or twice more elaborate gateways. The elaboration of entrances was not always proportionate to the buildings inside them. The smell of pine-tags. Once or twice, dim lights in houses well back from the road.

Ahead, there was a clearing where somebody had cut down trees to make room for a summer cottage and a lawn. A toolshed showed in the headlight beams. Burt knew that there was a pile of building material a little way back in the open space. His car came out of the trees. He leaned forward to look up through the windshield at the dimming pattern in the sky.

The stars were blotted out. Something huge and black was plunging down. It was close.

It was upon him.

Brownish leathery stuff descended before the car and cut off its headlight-beams. It descended on both sides. The car was in a tent of un-

likely brown flexible material. There were many cords and ropes. Something bulky writhed and struggled. . . .

Then the car's front wheels ran over the edge of the fabric which had dropped about it. There were many strainings. The front wheels took charge. They tried to ride up the fabric side-walls. The fabric should have ripped. It did not. There was a chaotic, nightmarish instant in which the car plunged frantically in a confusion of resistant stuff. If Burt had driven headlong into the open end of a canvas tent with a floor-cloth, and if the material were so strong the car couldn't breast its way through, the feel of things would have been similar.

The ending might have been similar, too. The car reeled over on its side, skidding sickishly on its rear wheels. Burt struggled frantically to steer. Somehow he knew that something else that was alive struggled as frantically as himself.

Then the car overturned and his head hit something solid. He slid into unconsciousness.

Later he had a moment of vague half-consciousness in which his sensations were completely impossible. His

brain felt cold. There was a feeling of chill, of frigidity, inside his mind. Not on the skin or flesh of his skull, but inside! Which of course could not be.

He was thinking absorbedly about the cottage by the lake, and a picture of the cottage flashed through his mind, and he remembered all its rooms as empty, and then he remembered in detail the way to the cottage, and where he turned off on his own driveway, and exactly how to open the door with his key. And he was vaguely bewildered that he was thinking of such things, because he knew that he wanted to find out what had fallen on his car and what had happened to him. But his mind would not work the way he wanted it to. It refused to function normally.

Then it stopped working altogether. He was unconscious again.

He ached all over and his eyes were bandaged when he came back to himself. He heard the chirping of birds. It would be daytime again. He heard somebody moving about in the next room. The covers were tight about his body. He stirred. He knew that all his members responded but there were sundry hurtings that

told him he was bruised. His eyes, though—

He felt a twinge of panic. He struggled to raise his arms to touch the bandage that blinded him.

There was a crash beside the bed. Somebody came running. A voice said:

“Easy, there! Hold everything.”

Burt felt himself gently pressed down in the bed again. The voice was masculine and completely familiar, but he couldn’t recognize it. It confused and bewildered him.

“Easy!” repeated the voice. Its intonation was matter-of-fact. “You got banged up a little last night. I’m looking after you. You’ll be all right. Just lie still a little while longer.”

“My—eyes!” panted Burt. They felt all right, but they were bandaged! He sweated in apprehension that he had been blinded.

“Don’t worry,” said the voice, without emotion. “Just hold everything for half an hour and you can get up.”

Burt felt himself held fast. Gently, but he couldn’t move. He said shakily:

“Who are you?”

“Smith,” said the voice. “John Smith. You don’t know me. I’m just looking after you until the doctor gets back and

says you can get up. I found you last night."

The voice was incredibly familiar. He'd heard it over and over again. He recognized it, absolutely. But he didn't know anybody named John Smith. Certainly not anybody who could talk to him in a voice as familiar to him as his own—

Then he did know whose the voice was. He gasped. He knew he was wide-awake, but his just-discovered knowledge was as much like a nightmare as anything could possibly be. He wavered precariously between an hysterically violent reaction, and a paralysis of pure horror. This was insanity! He must be insane! He must be!

The completely known voice said:

"Look, Burt! You just promise to lie still here until the doctor comes, and everything'll be all right."

Burt knew that he was deathly white. He felt that way. He lay still, numb with horror. The voice said:

"Okay? You'll do that?"

Burt didn't move or answer. He couldn't. He was stunned by the recognition of the voice. He seemed, probably, to have fainted. There was a moment's silence, and then a readjustment of the bed-

clothing over him. It tightened. The footsteps went into the next room. And Burt would have done something completely insane if he'd recognized them. But they were not familiar footsteps. The door stayed open. Burt lay absolutely motionless. He was thinking crazily that this couldn't be, and if it was he was out of his head. Because he knew, now, whose voice it was. It was perfectly reasonable that he shouldn't have recognized it at first. Now he did. But it was impossible!

The voice that had spoken to him was his own.

His own voice had called him Burt. His own voice had told him to keep still until the doctor came. And then he, using his own voice, had asked questions, and his own voice in another throat had put him off.

Frozen, he heard small movements in the next room. He stirred with infinite caution—the cunning of the insane, he thought desperately. The cover was tight across his shoulders. When he'd moved, before, something crashed to the floor. One side of the cover was tucked tightly under the mattress. The other must be laid flat on a chair with something heavy

on it. When he stirred, that heavy thing would be upset.

With infinite, frantic care he moved his right arm sideways, not loosening the cover at all. He brought his hand up past his shoulder, flat to the mattress, and turned his face to it. He fumbled at the bandage over his eyes and plucked it away. He could see. There was nothing wrong with his eyesight. There were no scratches from broken glass or anything else about his face. He saw the end of the cover resting on the chair beside his bed. It was devised exactly as he'd expected, so that movement which loosened the cover would pull the bucket on it, and the bucket would fail. It was to give notice when he moved.

But it was easy to defeat. A lunatic could defeat it. Burt had merely to loosen the cover at the other side of the bed, where the mattress held it. He did. He was in his pajamas. He had evidently been put carefully to bed while unconscious.

He got up very quietly, though his teeth tended to chatter. There were noises in the room nearest the lake. This John Smith was doing something there. Burt picked up the bucket as a weapon. It should have been an alarm.

He wasn't sure why he wanted a weapon, because outside the sun shone and birds sang very peacefully, but Burt was in a precarious psychological state. Somebody had blindfolded him and tried to persuade him he was seriously injured. But it was worse than that! The somebody who'd deceived him about his eyes was using Burt's own voice to lie to him with. And Burt felt a crawling horror at that thought.

But he went very softly to the door and peered into the next room.

There was a figure seated in a chair at his own worktable. The figure wore one of his shirts, and a pair of his trousers, and his shoes. It was bent over something at which it labored. There were yards and yards of leathery bronze-color stuff—not woven fabric—in a heap at one side of the room. The figure was working with pieces cut out of it.

Burt found rage choking him. It was necessary to rage, or he would be frightened. But then the figure's hands lifted something. Burt saw what it was. It was a face, modeled in the leathery material. But it was flexible. It was like a child's rubber-latex Hallowe'en mask, save that it was not grotesque and was of

the unchanged bronze color of its substance. But it was remarkably flexible. It yielded in the figure's hands.

The figure put the face on itself.

Burt made a strangled noise. The figure started up and faced him. It wore the face Burt had just seen in its hands.

And Burt knew the truth, then. He couldn't have put it into words, but it filled him with a sickish horror past all reason. It wasn't even a relief to know that he wasn't crazy. He wanted to be sick. He wanted to explode in murderous fury. He wanted to kill. In fact, a part of his horror came from astonishment that he hadn't been killed—that he was alive and looking at what he looked at.

Then his own voice spoke matter-of-factly from across the room. "It looks like you've guessed."

Burt heard words come out of his own mouth. "It was—those lights in the sky," he said thickly. "You!"

The figure seemed to reflect. Then it nodded.

"And the thing I ran into," panted Burt absurdly, "with the car. That was you landing—with a parachute." His voice in his own throat was

strange—and it was good for it to be so. It was unlike the voice of the figure. "You—fell on my car."

The figure said matter-of-factly:

"Yes, I was landing."

"You—you're not a man!" said Burt thickly. "You're not—human!"

"No."

There was a pause. The figure stood and looked at him. Burt felt an ache in his fingers. He had gripped the door-frame so tightly that his whole hand hurt. He loosened it. Then he said in ridiculous vexation:

"But you're wearing my clothes. You talk English!" Then he found himself angry despite his horror. "You're talking with my voice! You've got a hell of a nerve!"

The figure paused. Then it said tonelessly:

"I am a fugitive. I had no clothes like you wear. So I took yours. I planned to hide in the woods when I had finished this face."

"That's not your face, either!" raged Burt. "You copied it from a picture on my work-table! But it isn't colored right. How'd you get my voice? What the hell do you mean, anyhow?"

He listened to his own complaints, amazed at their

irrelevance. But one does not react with calm and reasoned thoughts in the face of the unthinkable as a visible and patent fact. He saw the figure spread out its hands as if somehow it knew that that was an appropriate gesture.

"I was a fugitive," it repeated without any intonation whatever. "I was being chased. I reached your atmosphere. My pursuers were close. I set my ship to go on by itself and I jumped. My pursuers caught my ship and destroyed it. They searched with their—" a pause here—"weapons for me. But I had jumped in time. They did not find me. They may believe I was in my ship when they destroyed it. But they will try to make sure. Therefore I must hide."

Burt's mind went dizzily in several directions at once. A picture in a magazine on the work-table, that was the model for the face. His voice and the use of English he couldn't understand. And there was the fact that this figure had admitted that it was not a human being. But it was intelligent! It was rational!

It happens that the idea of non-human intelligence is the most horrifying of possible

concepts. The idea of a non-human which thinks and talks is the idea of a demon, a ghost, a werewolf, a monster, a devil out of hell. Burt's hair tended to stand on end.

But on the other hand the creature spoke tonelessly, without attempts either to frighten or persuade. It described flight and pursuit and escape. The flashing lights in the sky, last night, and the incredible soundless explosion Burt had seen, were points which checked with its story. But they added up to the statement that Burt was faced in his own living room with a fugitive from space—a member of a race so far beyond men in science or intelligence that they had ships which roamed the stars, and weapons whose nature Burt could guess at.

He sat down abruptly in a chair.

"L-look," he said shakily. "This is—impossible, of course, but all the same . . ."

The figure waited. After a moment it said:

"I did not expect to talk to humans so soon. I thought to have my disguise complete and to be hiding in the woods before you woke. Then you would have been puzzled, and you would be angry, but you would not have seen me."

Then the figure said as tonelessly as before: "I have much to think of and plan."

"If—you're on the run," said Burt jerkily. "It's important that nobody knows you're here and alive?"

"If I am known to have landed, I will be destroyed," said the figure in that extraordinarily prosaic manner. "My pursuers may have ways of learning if my landing is known. I do not know. If they do learn I am alive, they will destroy me even if they have to destroy this world to make sure of it."

Burt said querulously:

"But what do you mean to do?"

"I mean to hide, so your radios will not speak of me or your newspapers know that I exist."

"And after?"

There was a pause as if the creature sought for a gesture or a word that fitted. It shrugged.

"I am on your world not of my own choice. I may never be able to leave it. I have to think."

The figure stood quite unnaturally still and looked at Burt. And he was horrified and repelled, but he was also tormented with curiosity and not wholly capable of coherent thought. He was not sure

he believed the alien's story, but nobody else would believe in the alien's existence. He needed to do some thinking himself.

"I could do with a chance to think too," said Burt uneasily. "I take it you've told me this much because you don't want me to tell anybody you're here until you've had time to make some decisions."

The figure nodded its head.

"I'm pretty dizzy," Burt told him," but I know well enough that if I tried to persuade anybody that a man from Mars—or wherever you're from—had paid me a visit, they'd lock me up. I think you're safe from babbling on my part! But I'm not too clear-headed just now. Suppose you go off in the woods and do your thinking. Come back here tonight. We'll talk things over, then, when we both are able to—have a little perspective on it. Right?"

He desperately wanted the creature to get out of his sight just now. He wanted to be in a normal world when he thought about incredible things. He still did not quite believe his eyes and ears.

The figure—it had the build of an athletic man, and Burt's clothes fitted it rather well—

prosaically began to make a bundle of the plastic brown material from which it had made itself a face and hands, and very probably other elements of a humanoid body as well. But it moved deftly enough. It made a surprisingly small bundle of the fabric that had been its parachute. It moved to the door. Then it paused.

"I should tell you," said the figure tonelessly, "that I have the usual emergency weapons of my race. I will not allow myself to be made a captive. If necessary, I can explode what you call an atom bomb."

Burt's mouth dropped open. The figure nodded carefully, as if conscious that this was the proper gesture to make. It reached inside Burt's shirt, which it was wearing. It brought out a small, misshapen metal object. It showed the object to Burt and put it away again and went out of the door. Through the window Burt saw it move away toward the woods.

Birds sang loudly in the sunshine.

Norma was at the swimming-place when Burt found her. All the summer boarders and people whose cottages did not front on the lake came to the incorporated village for

their swimming. There were diving-boards and diving-towers, a fenced-off shallow area for small children, and spaces and facilities where lovers of the out-of-doors in summer could anoint themselves with sun-tan oil, wear dark glasses, and make acquaintances if they hadn't any, and snub unneeded acquaintances if they had. The lake was a very normal sort of vacation resort.

Today the sky was beautifully blue, and there were cotton-wool clouds in the sky. There were squealings and laughter from those who swam in the lake, and there was a humming of talk from those who sat at tables and drank soft drinks and either took pleasure in the act, or else enjoyed themselves by pretending to be bored. Everything was quite appropriate for the pleasure of people temporarily without cares.

Norma splashed cheerfully to shore when Burt arrived.

"Aren't you swimming?" she asked in surprise.

He shook his head, speechless. She swung up to the platform and sat there, dripping and with the sunlight shining on her wetted skin. She regarded him with her head cocked on one side.

"You sounded queer this morning," she observed. "All you said was yes and no. Even when I told you I'd be here."

"I sounded queer—" Burt tensed. "You talked to me?"

"Naturally!" said Norma. "You remember! I phoned that a gang was going on a picnic and that we'd stop at your cottage for you if you'd go. All you said was no. Then I said I didn't care much about the picnic, myself, and would you be along here, and you said yes." She looked at his face and flushed. She said awkwardly: "I didn't really care about the picnic."

Burt found his hands clenched tightly.

"You weren't talking to me," he said in a strangled voice.

"But I was!" Then Norma stopped short. She said with some constraint. "I—the last thing you said last night was something about today. That's why I called. I misunderstood, I guess."

She moved to slip overboard again, but Burt said:

"Hold it!" He swallowed. "It wasn't me you talked to. It was somebody—" He hesitated. The figure wearing his clothes and using his voice was not exactly a somebody, but a something. He went on, "It was somebody who sound-

ed like me, pretending to be me. I didn't know you telephoned. I . . ."

Then his voice failed him. In this particular place, with such completely ordinary activities all about, it struck him very forcibly indeed that what had happened last night and this morning was not exactly credible.

"L-look," he said unsteadily. "I was certain I wasn't crazy, just now, but what I remember is! Come along a moment, will you?"

He led the way from the swimming-space to his car. Norma followed, stepping carefully in her bare feet. Burt's teeth chattered suddenly. He pointed to the mudguards of his car. They were bent but not scratched.

"On the way to the cottage last night," said Burt constrainedly, "after I left you, I ran into something. The car turned over. You can see the dents."

Norma stared, and turned to him in quick concern:

"Burt! Were you hurt?"

He looked at the dents. There was not a single scratch on the paint. The leathery stuff, of course, had not prevented denting, but it had protected the paint against abrasion.

"Did you ever see dents like

those?" he demanded. "It looks as if there'd been something like a cloth protecting the paint when the dents were made, doesn't it?"

"Why, yes," agreed Norma. "What happened?"

He told her about something huge and dark falling swiftly from the sky and overwhelming the car. Sweat stood out on his forehead. There were people all about. There were the half-dozen stores of the village, with perfectly commonplace customers going in and out of them. There was everyday sunshine and trees looked as they had always looked. People ate hot dogs, and children consumed ice-cream cones, and back at the water's edge a squealing, laughing struggle took place as somebody tried to push somebody else overboard, and there was a splash as both contestants fell into the water together. It was completely natural and commonplace. Burt's story seemed inconceivable in such a setting. He stopped the tale at the point where he'd been knocked unconscious.

Norma stared at him, paling. Droplets of lake-water still stood on her tanned skin. She was the only human being to whom Burt would have

dared tell even so much, though he had known her only a week. But she had seen the lights in the sky, last night, and anyhow it is possible to feel remarkably close to a person like Norma in a week.

"Does that sound crazy?" he demanded when he'd finished.

She shook her head.

"Did you see the morning paper?" she asked in turn. "It said that there were stories of streaks of light in the sky last night. It said that phenomena like northern lights were rare as far south as this, but that they aren't unknown. I wondered if the lights we saw were auroral displays. But from what *you* say . . ."

"They weren't," said Burt.

"Then the thing that fell out of the sky on your car . . ."

"If you'll get dressed," he told her, "I'll show you where it happened. It came from a ship up there. Maybe it was a hundred miles high, at the very edge of the atmosphere. But there was a ship. —I'm going to make a phone call," he added abruptly. "Maybe I can find out something useful. Meet me here?"

She smiled at him quickly and moved away. Just as a man can find it possible to tell

a girl his inmost and most private thoughts after knowing her only a week, a girl can find possible the most unquestioning obedience, within limits, in a similar length of time.

Burt made the phone-call. He was back at the parked car when Norma came out, immaculate though her hair was wetted a little where the edge of her swimming-cap had been. He opened the car-door in silence. He started the motor and backed out from the curb.

"I just telephoned the FBI, long-distance," he told her. "I said I was a science-fiction writer, asking for information."

"Why?"

"If you say you're a writer," he said detachedly, "it's expected that the information you ask for will be on the wacky side. And you get all sorts of cooperation. It works anywhere. I told the FBI I was working on a story and explained that the character in my yarn needed to convince the FBI that he had encountered an alien from outer space. And I asked what sort of evidence he'd need, to appear somebody who wasn't a crackpot telling a story that shouldn't be true. Fellow at the FBI office gave me some

good advice on how to make the thing convincing. Said to let him know when the yarn was printed."

Norma frowned a little. "Encountered . . ."

"Yes," said Burt grimly. "I'm going to try to find proof to convince the FBI that I did encounter a creature from another world, who landed on Earth from a space-ship. I did. The thing that dropped on my car was a parachute, and a creature was in it."

Driving out of the village, he told her the rest of his story—from the instant he waked in his own bed, blindfolded, until the creature that spoke with his own voice went away—so it said—to hide in the woods until nightfall.

"I told it it needn't fear my talking," added Burt coldly, "because nobody would believe me. I didn't really believe it myself. How could a creature tumbling down out of the sky speak English? But no actual man could duplicate my voice! Something happened, and the only plausible guess happens to be lunatic. So I'm going to try to get evidence to convince the FBI—whose business it would be to handle anything as important as possible information about space-travel—and let them take

over from there. I don't want any part of the business for myself!"

Norma shivered a little. But she said quietly:

"If you were—abnormal, Burt, you wouldn't be willing to allow for doubt. You'd resent anybody not believing you. But instead you act just the way a person should when up against something that's been thought impossible."

"Thanks," said Burt drily.

He drove. Norma frowned a little, beside him. He drove along the exact way he'd followed the night before. The highway curved and curved, encircling the lake. There were trees which thickened into woodland through which the car rolled. There were little driveways branching off, with mail-boxes at the turn-offs. They led to the lakeshore cottages. There was the aromatic smell of pines, and the sound of insects, and there were faint, faint bird-calls, and now and again a shingled cottage with an encircling screened porch.

Burt pulled off to the side of the road and stopped the car. He got out. Norma joined him. He said grimly:

"These marks—" he pointed— "are where I went off the road. There's no pattern of the tread, because my tires

were running on that brown stuff I told you about. The parachute. Here's where the car turned over."

In the soft mould the mark of the car's toppled body was clear. There were leaves and twigs pressed flat. There was the cut-off stump of a six-inch tree. It was plainly the thing that had made the deepest dent in the car.

"The car turned over all right, you see," said Burt. "Now, how did it get turned back on its wheels?"

He searched. Presently he pointed, without saying a word. There were two deep indentations in the soft earth. If a man were strong enough to lift at the side of a toppled light car, and set it upright again, the place where he planted his feet would show deep footmarks from the weight. But not many human beings could do such a thing as had been done with Burt's car.

On the other hand, these weren't human footprints.

Norma shivered a little.

"Unfortunately," said Burt coldly, "there's no detail. Maybe the creature was wearing something on the order of shoes."

He hesitated a moment. Then he said frowning:

"I'm pretty well convinced I'm not crazy, Norma. Especially since you don't seem to think I am. But I'm going to need evidence to convince the FBI that I'm not cracked. And there's the fact that if things go right I'll want you to back my story of the lights in the sky—but if they go wrong I want you away from here. Well away from here! That's important."

Norma said uneasily:

"You're thinking of what it said about an atom bomb?"

He nodded.

"But Burt," she said more uneasily still. "You don't *want* to be involved in this! It isn't really your affair. If you decided to finish your vacation somewhere else, couldn't you just drop the whole matter?"

He shook his head.

"There's a slight patriotic obligation," he said drily. "The creature came here in a space-ship. Its pursuers were after it in other space-ships. They had weapons which apparently broke down air into atomic flame, and when they hit this creature's ship they disintegrated it. We humans, and specifically our own government, do not know how to make space-ships or weapons like that. This creature does. It would be good if our gov-

ernment found out how to make such things—from it."

Norma listened, unhappily.

"Another point of view," said Burt. "The thing's a fugitive. It's in danger from its pursuers, it says. Even more, it's in danger from humans. What do you think would happen if unwarned human beings discovered something that wasn't human going around among human-kind? They'd panic, at best. At worst they'd try to kill it out of pure fear. And it would defend itself. It has what it calls emergency weapons. It spoke of an atom bomb, which might be possible or might not." He spread out his hands. "I've got to prevent that if I can."

Norma said reluctantly:

"What are you going to do, then?"

"Take you to a safe place. Write out what I know. Leave it with you. Come back and try to get proof that'll satisfy the FBI that they'd better come along and make contact with the creature and make some sort of bargain with it. If there's an explosion or other unhappy events, you take my written account to the FBI anyhow. Understand?"

Norma's forehead creased.

"You'll lose a lot of

time . . ." Then she said uneasily, "You arranged to meet it in your cottage after dark, Burt. It's hiding in the woods now. If you hope to find some proof in your cottage, why not go now, right away, while it's gone? If you do find anything, by nightfall you could have somebody convinced and back here with you."

It looked like a highly practical suggestion. It looked right. If even a scrap of proof of the creature's existence remained at the cottage, by nightfall he could have made contact with confidential branches of the government. He could be back with somebody prepared to offer protection and secrecy in exchange for the information the alien creature possessed. An atom bomb that a man could carry in his hand . . . the knowledge of space-drives and weapons it could give . . .

"I'll risk ten minutes at the cottage," said Burt slowly. "If I don't find anything then, I take you off somewhere and do as I said." He looked sharply at her. "Take you back to the village first?"

She shook her head. She wouldn't be much safer in the village, anyhow. He got back in the car and drove on past

the clearing. The highway was still narrow. It meandered, and sometimes the lake was visible through tree, and sometimes it was not. They saw a newly-painted canoe turned upside down to let its coating dry. A row of bathing suits on a line.

He reached the turn-off to his own cottage. A bare hundred yards, and the lake was clearly visible. The house was exactly as he had left it. He turned the car completely about before he stopped the motor.

"For a quick getaway if we need it," he said curtly. "Wait here. If you hear voices, drive like mad for town—and keep going!"

But Norma, shivering, turned off the ignition and got out.

"I'm afraid of the idea of being alone," she said apologetically. "I'd rather come in too."

Burt opened the door. For an instant it seemed to him that he smelled a faint—a very faint—unfamiliar scent which was practically undetectable. He wrinkled his nostrils, and it was gone. He went quickly and grimly through every room. Empty. He opened drawers and closets, quickly. He came back to Norma.

"He's still hiding," said Burt, "and he didn't leave anything stored where I can find it. But he was working here."

He went to the work-table. He found half a dozen very tiny scraps of the brown plastic material. It was as thick as thick wrapping-paper, but as flexible as tissue. Yet when he tugged at it it seemed not to give at all. It would be enormously strong, because his car had not been able to tear it. And such strength with such unbelievable flexibility was impossible to human technology. Anything as strong as this—

"This will probably do," he said in satisfaction. "We've nothing like this!"

"L-let's go, then," said Norma. "I'm frightened, Burt."

They started for the door. A shadow moved outside. And Burt's own voice said tonelessly:

"Hold it."

The figure filled the exit. It was the alien. It stood in the doorway and, silhouetted so, it looked remarkably human. It had the masculine features of a magazine illustration. It wore Burt's clothing.

But suddenly it was appalling. It was ghastly. It was horrifying! When it opened its mouth, its teeth were

brown. Its lips were of the same color as its forehead. It suddenly looked like a bronze statue intolerably alive and clothed and moving.

And it spoke tonelessly in Burt's own voice:

"That is Norma. You will have to tell me what you plan."

Norma shrank into Burt's arms, speechless. The face and lips and teeth which were all one color made the thing which called itself John Smith a visible impossibility, visibly unhuman and as monstrous to look at as the thing out of space which it happened to be.

It moved toward them, now. Its eyes did not blink. They were uncanny. Their fixed, unintermittent regard was terrifying.

Burt swung Norma behind him and faced the thing in a sort of fury.

"Dammit!" he cried fiercely. "You're scaring her!"

The figure said tonelessly: "She would not be afraid of me if you had not told her what I am. Put her in a chair."

It continued to move forward. Burt experienced the startled realization that it expected him to get out of its way, just as a man expects a

dog to make way. Norma shuddered uncontrollably at the nearer approach of the thing from space. She might scream if it approached too closely. Burt turned and seated her in the one easy chair the living room of the cottage contained. He stood protectively before her, bristling.

"What do you want?" he demanded. "What's the matter? Why'd you come back here before dark?"

The figure spoke, again without inflections. Its brown teeth and brown lips and brown tongue made it seem demoniac, as if a statue had become possessed by a demon which used it as a body.

"I have been examining the memories I took from your mind when your car turned over," it said in its flat voice. "I cannot know what you have thought, but I know what you have seen and heard and done up to the time I took your memories. I have been learning your language and your civilization from that information. And I reasoned that you would come and try to get proof that I have landed on this world. You should wish to give that proof to your rulers."

Burt ground his teeth. The thing had examined his memories? How? Then he began

to feel a ghastly helplessness. For a first instant, of course, he did not distinguish between knowing his memories and knowing his thoughts. The alien's statement actually meant that he had been able to extract from Burt's brain-cells the recorded sensory data on which his mind had worked, but not the working of his mind on the sensory-data. The thing from space did not abruptly possess himself of all Burt's knowledge. It had still to learn exactly as a baby learns, by comparing sense-perceptions with each other and abstracting ideas. But it had Burt's remembered sense-perceptions to learn from. Just as it had memories of Burt's voice to duplicate. It was duplicating Burt's voice now.

"It seems that you have done as I reasoned," said the creature without emotion. "But I cannot allow you to prove that I exist. I am in danger. You endanger me."

"You'll be damned unsafe," said Burt fiercely, "if you try to pass as a man!"

"Now, yes," it agreed. "But I know it. I have not examined all your memories."

Burt said nothing. He was staggered, but he glared. Norma held fast to his hands, breathing in a panicky tempo.

"And," said the creature from space, completely without expression, "you humans are strange. I have decided that there may well be humans in communication with my enemies, keeping their arrangement a secret from other humans, that they may profit by it. If there are such spies of my enemies among you humans, they will search for me. Here. So I must go away."

Burt did not cease to glare, but he began to hope. Norma was here. For himself, he was angrily ready to take chances. But the obligation to see Norma safely away was greater than any other obligation could possibly be.

"All right then," snapped Burt. "Go away! Nobody'd believe us if we told our story, anyhow!"

But his mind leaped ahead to what he'd be able to report to the FBI. If the scraps of plastic weren't too good as evidence, still his story and Norma's and the blunders the creature was sure to make—

"You will come with me," said the alien without emphasis. "You will be convenient for me, for a time."

Burt felt cold. But there was Norma. He clenched his

hands. After all, the thing did have what it said was an atom bomb. If it had landed from space, and the drama in the sky had been its escape from its pursuers, he couldn't risk Norma's life on a guess that it bluffed about emergency weapons. Men would take emergency weapons along if they were forced to land on what to them would be a savage and a hostile world.

"I've got other plans," said Burt shortly. "What would I gain by helping you?"

If the creature needed him, he'd play hard to get. Make a bargain for knowledge; scientific information to pass on for human use.

But the alien did not answer. It was carefully examining exactly the place that Burt had just searched, for scraps of the brown plastic. It found a few morsels he'd missed. It moved to put them somewhere which was not where the pockets of Burt's clothes were. It corrected its mistake. It ignored Burt's query. He repeated it.

"I said, what would I get out of helping you?"

The so-human head turned with its utterly unhuman, un-winking regard.

"You do not understand," it said flatly. "Humans kill rats and mice because they

are inconvenient. They keep dogs because they are convenient. You are intelligent. You can choose to be convenient or not. You will tell me now."

Completely without emotion, it reached inside the shirt it wore and brought out the exotically shaped metal object it had indicated was a weapon. It was convincingly without feeling one way or another.

"We will go now," it said flatly.

It did not care. Burt felt a raging humiliation because it would kill him with neither regret or elation. But he said urgently:

"You just sit here, Norma, and—don't tell anybody anything about this. They wouldn't believe you, anyhow."

The figure said as indifferently as before:

"She may be convenient. She will come also."

"No!" raged Burt. "No! You shan't——"

"I can kill her," said the alien without interest. "It does not matter."

Norma stood up. She sobbed just once. She moved very stiffly. She groped for Burt's arm and clung to it. She moved jerkily. She walked out of the house. Burt moved with her, to steady and

support her. The thing followed them out. It went to the cover of the well from which the cottage water-supply was drawn. It lifted the cover with an ease which spoke of terrifying physical strength.

"For your information," it said, "you will look."

It pointed its metal object down toward the water in the well. There was a sudden flash of intolerable brightness from the weapon. The creature drew back its hand. And steam roared up out of the well in a monstrous gush that rose tree-top high. It rolled and curled among the upper branches.

"Now," said the creature, "you will drive."

Burt took the wheel. He felt utterly sickened. Norma sat beside him, her face like chalk. The creature got into the back of the car.

"Drive westward," it commanded coldly. "I will stay out of sight. My face is not properly colored yet." Then it added matter-of-factly, "You understand what I will do if I am inconvenienced."

It sank down impossibly to the floor of the back of the car. Norma looked at it. Her expression became one of utter horror. Burt stared down. The body that had looked so human, looked human

no longer. It had folded in upon itself. It had no bones. The flexible mask which was its face had visibly become detached from whatever was behind it. For its own idea of comfort, the fugitive from space had ceased to fill the legs of the trousers and the sleeves of the shirt. It was impossible to guess what its normal shape might be. It looked simply shapeless.

But its voice came up from the floor-boards. Burt's voice.

"Drive westward. And I shall not want attention drawn to this car."

From the mass, the mound, the blob of whatever-it-was inside the collapsed garments, the voice which was Burt's own sounded like something out of a madman's nightmare.

Burt drove away, his hands clenched tightly on the wheel. Norma sat stiffly beside him, her cheeks like marble.

Before dusk fell, Burt said in a low tone to Norma:

"We'll need some gas soon. If I were alone, I'd let the car run out of it. But—when I stop for gas, you get out and walk around. To powder your nose—anything. Try to slip away."

They were then better than a hundred miles from the lake and the place where the alien

had landed. They had come partly through the mountains in whose foothills the vacation resort was located. They rode along a wide smooth highway, with some mountains against the setting sun, but western foothills visible between them.

Norma licked her lips. Four hours of driving, without a word or movement of the creature in the back of the car. Nothing had happened to reassure her, but it is not possible to sustain an acute emotion of any sort for a very long time. The hysterical horror which had cowed her as much as fear had become merely a numbed dread.

Burt showed greater signs of strain. He felt not only responsibility for Norma's safety, but that it was through him that the alien was clothed and partly disguised, and might ultimately become able to conceal itself, with untoward results for all human beings. The creature might be a criminal among its own kind. It might have been pursued by interstellar avengers in the nature of police. If it were a criminal, and could hide on Earth and ultimately escape, Earth might become a galactic hideout for criminals of its stripe, ultimately

to be destroyed simply to root them out. On the other hand, there might be legal warfare among the stars, and the creature might draw upon Earth the destructive weapons of a galactic civilization, or—even worse—make Earth in some sort a military base for the interstellar nation it belonged to.

But meanwhile the car hummed along the highway. Burt's throat was dry. He tried despairingly to think, but he had no material to think about. The creature knew too much. It knew all he had ever seen or done. While he was unconscious it had somehow drained his brain of all its memories, which would have been the cause of the incredible sensation of coldness inside his skull when he woke and found his thinking controlled to absorbed remembering. It would have been the creature seeking ruthlessly for a place to hide. Which it had found.

There was a highway sign, "One and one-half miles to Service Area." That would be gas-pumps and a restaurant and a shop where oil could be changed and repairs made. Norma might be able to get into the restaurant. She might—she might!—be able to escape. But somehow he,

Burt, must manage to destroy the alien or at the least disarm or disable him: in some fashion remove the danger the alien created by its mere existence alive and at liberty on Earth.

Ahead, the red sun touched the edge of the world. There was the fragrance of growing things in the breeze that blew past the car's windows.

Another sign. It said, "*½ Mile to Service Area.*"

Burt said thickly:

"We need gas. If we are to go much further I should stop and buy more."

There were sounds in the back of the car. A shoe scraped. Something was pushed aside. Burt knew that the thing in the back was flowing from shapelessness into the legs and arms and simulacrum of a face and head that lay on the floor behind him. He could imagine it too vividly. He wanted to be sick.

Then there were stirrings. He felt a hand—he knew it would look like a hand: it was shaped like one—grasp the seat-back by his shoulder. Norma shuddered, but did not look. Burt felt that the thing had raised itself and now sat human-fashion on the back seat. To a casual glance, in twilight, it would look human

enough. To Burt it was perhaps more horrible for that very reason.

"I have been examining the memories I took last night," said the creature tranquilly. "You need money to pay for the gasoline. Do you have it?"

Burt nodded, fighting against the nausea his mental picture of a moment before had produced.

Burt drove on. Half a mile beyond, there was a turn-off to a filling-station with an elaborate restaurant behind it. Burt drove to a gas-pump. His voice was strained as he ordered gas. Norma did not stir. With his hand held so that it was not visible from the back, he gestured urgently for her to get out of the car—of course assuming that she would make some excuse.

She sat still, trembling. Once he saw her move as if to try to rise, but it was as if her legs would not support her.

The pump-bell clanged and clanged. Then the tank was full. Burt paid. The attendant wiped off the windshield. Burt drove out of the service area and back on the highway.

A long time after—when it was dark—Burt said desperately:

"Have you decided where you want me to drive you?"

Somehow it had not been possible to question the creature while it lay withdrawn into shapelessness on the floor of the car. When it had human form, horrible as it was, it was at least possible to address it.

His own voice came back to him.

"I have made plans." Then, suddenly, the voice ceased to be toneless. "Your memories, on careful examination, tell me that I have not fully spoken your language. There are not only words, but tones. From now on, I shall vary this voice as you do. I shall practice. You will listen and tell me when I do not speak quite like a human being."

Burt swallowed, dry-throated.

"Now I shall speak pleasantly," said the voice. And it did. Its intonation became cordial: "I realize now how Norma knew I was not a man. The teeth of my face are not bright. From your memories I think the inside of the mouth should have a different look. The skin that shows should look differently. And your memories say that there is make-up to change the look of the skin, and it can be bought in drug-stores. You will find a town. I wish you to buy the make-up that will

make this face look quite human."

The tone, by its inappropriate cordiality, made the whole speech a grisly performance. And there was an odd uncertainty in the use of words substituted for color.

Burt drove on. The sky overhead grew darker. Stars appeared. There were shadows in the underbrush and woods beside the road. They turned slowly black. Burt saw Norma moving on the seat beside him. Suddenly she gave a little cry.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"I—I can move again!" she gasped. "At the filling station I couldn't!"

The now-pleasant voice from the back of the car said:

"I used a very small power-charge so that she could not rise. It has worn off now. I did not want her to run away. It would have been inconvenient for me to have to destroy the filling-station and restaurant. My pursuers might learn of it if they have spies among you humans."

Burt drove and drove and drove. Other cars showed headlights, some bright and some dim. Burt's mind had practically ceased to work rationally. He had considered

violating traffic laws so that a motorcycle policeman would stop him. But the alien's weapon—judged by the flash of fire down the well—was deadly. To attract attention of the police would mean simply the death of a policeman. He had thought of crashing head-on into another car or running it over a cliff or through the guard-rail of a bridge. He would have been willing to get himself killed, in such a desperate measure, but there was Norma. His ability to think was exhausted. He couldn't work out anything more.

Cars, coming from the opposite direction, made occasional rushing sounds as they flowed along the road toward Burt, and then boomed gustily past. The highway curved through longer, easier curvings as the foothills grew less. It rolled up and down grades that were less and less noticeable.

Half an hour after leaving the filling-station, there were twinklings of light yet miles away against the dark horizon.

"There's a town ahead," said Burt, wearily. He wasn't afraid, now. The sensation of fear was worn out. "You want me to stop at a drug-store."

The voice behind him said cordially:

"I will sit in the car. With Norma. But first stop the car beside the road at some convenient place."

"What——?"

"I wish to demonstrate something, said the voice. "So you will understand why you must do as I say. I shall not hurt either of you."

Burt felt shame. It was deep humiliation to be commanded by a creature which was not even human. He had not the sick hatred that would have come of knowing he was afraid. He wasn't. He knew that he was capable of doing anything, up to and including getting himself killed, if only it dealt fully with the fugitive from space. All the pride that humans take for granted in their superiority to all other living things, was outraged by this being's attitude. It regarded humans as vermin, like rats or mice. It would make use of them as humans made use of dogs. And to Burt it had become much less important to stay alive than to justify his humanity.

He turned off the concrete onto the road's turfed shoulder. The highway ran through a deep cut, here. He stopped

the car. The motor idled. There was the sound of night-things, and stars shone overhead, and somewhere a night-bird called. There was the feel of life all about. The grass and trees and even the cut-away stone of the hillside seemed alive and familiar. But the thing in the back—that was purest, hackle-raising, hateable alienness. A frightening thing.

It stirred, on the rear seat. With uncanny deftness it cranked down the window on the side next the road.

"I told you," it said cordially, "that I had an emergency weapon. Your race has not yet begun to understand atomic energy. And you, Burt, have been thinking of ways to destroy me. So I show you my weapon. It releases energy under close control, from so little that Norma did not feel the beam that paralyzed her, to all the energy of its fuel-store at one instant. And it is much more efficient than your uranium bombs, Burt."

Burt waited dully. He was not really aware of any emotion except exhaustion and a hatred that was so deep-rooted that it was as much a part of him as his name. It was pure, primeval instinct to hate anything which dared to put itself on equality with

man. And this creature set itself above!

The headlights shone on the rocky side-wall of the cut. The road curved on ahead. There were the multitudinous sounds of the night. The creature said placidly:

"My speaking should be more human now. Is it?"

Burt said harshly: "Yes."

He waited. Nothing happened. Only the night-noises and the night-smells, and the sound of the idling motor. But there came a grumbling sound. It was a motor-truck, approaching around the curve and climbing a hill.

The truck's headlights came around the curve. It was a huge, aluminum-painted oil-truck. There were huge, red, black-bordered letters on its side, spelling out GASOLINE. It reached the top of the grade, and Burt heard its gears shift, and it came on. It went past on the other side of the highway, rumbling and clanking and roaring as such trucks do.

The thing in the back moved its arm, clad in the sleeve of Burt's shirt. A metal object glinted. There was a flash of unbearably brilliant light.

The gasoline-truck burst into flame from one end to

the other. Its tank body shattered. A flood of flaming liquid spouted skyward and went racing over the highway and splashed against the walls of the cut. There was a lake of leaping flames which made the highway and its rocky sidewalls brighter than day.

And the truck rolled onward. Fallen flaming gasoline drenched its cab and hood and burned man-height high before it. Running burning gasoline flowed along beside it.

It rolled and rolled and rolled, sending thirty-foot flames skyward, moving in the middle of an inferno. The highway straightened. The truck continued to curve. It ran off the concrete and into a ditch and stopped there, burning.

Burt had the door of the car open to rush to the aid of the driver. He could not hope to do anything, but the action was automatic.

"The driver is dead," said his own voice from the back of the car. "The energy killed him as it blasted the truck. Get back in the car."

Burt plunged toward the flames.

His arms and legs—his whole body—became as water. He felt himself tumbling to

the concrete. Norma cried out. Burt lay on the road. He had no feeling in any of his members. He could only see and hear.

The voice said placidly:
"Get back in the car."

The power of motion returned to Burt's limbs and body. He panted incoherently at the thing from space, his fists clenched as he staggered upright. The voice said tonelessly:

"I will be inconvenienced if I need to throw you in the flames. Get in the car."

Norma cried out pleadingly. And Burt came out of a moment of fury so horrible as to be unrememberable. The truck burned terribly, but there was no outcry from inside it. There had been none. If the driver had been alive, at the least there would have been screams.

Burt gasped and choked and panted almost unintelligibly:

"I'll kill you for this! I'll kill you! I'll kill——"

"Get in the car!" cried Norma shrilly. "Please! For my sake!"

And the idea of Norma alone with the creature and purest horror was the one thing that could move Burt just then. He stumbled toward the car. He did not want to.

He would have preferred to be killed. But there was Norma, and there was the other fact that if he were killed nobody but Norma would know that the creature from space did exist and was on Earth.

He slid under the wheel, drunk with hatred.

"Drive on, now," said the alien.

Burt drove on, his hands shaking and tightening convulsively.

The creature in the back said calmly:

"I have studied your memories. I think you plan to disobey me. Whenever I think you plan to disobey me I shall kill a human. You will blame yourself. You will be right. If you do disobey me I will kill you and all other humans nearby."

Burt's teeth clamped together as he drove. He was half-blind with rage. Beside him, Norma trembled. The car went on and on and on. They passed a car coming from the direction in which they were headed. It would encounter the still-burning tank-truck. A little later, they passed an interurban bus, bound the same way. A fierce hope sprang up in Burt that when the truck was discovered——

But there had been no missile. A blast of pure heat—pure energy—had exploded and ignited the truck's cargo. Examination of the burned-out shell would tell nothing to men who did not even suspect that a weapon like the alien's could exist.

There was simply no answer to the situation.

Miles later—and here the land was nearly flat—the lights of the town glittered very near. Here the traffic was heavier. There were many cars on the highway. As the town drew nearer and nearer, highway-speed could no longer be maintained. Burt found himself trailing another car. Its brake-lights flashed on. Burt slowed sharply.

A fast truck came roaring out of the town. It had the regulation headlights, and extra bright red warning-lights which flicked on and off beside them. Traffic bunched and pulled aside to give it right of way. It went rushing past, the red warning-lights securing it right of way. Its noise diminished toward the highway cut in which the truck had exploded. It had been discovered—still burning—and help telephoned for. The traffic near the town re-

sumed its normal speed, once the rescue-truck had gone on its way.

His voice came from the creature in the back.

"I do not identify that truck from your memories," said the voice. "Why did the other cars make way for it?"

Burt had not seen red warning-lights used in exactly that arrangement before, but of course he knew its purpose.

"It's a rescue truck," he said, hating. "It's going to try to help the poor devil you killed back yonder. They'll be too late, but they'll try."

There was a pause. Burt's features were drawn and savage. The alien said reflectively:

"It is not in your memories. How did you know?"

"The blinking lights," snapped Burt. "They were red. It couldn't be anything else."

"Red," said the thing in the back. "That is what you call a color. Colors are important to you humans?"

"To us humans, yes," said Burt harshly.

Silence again. The town was very near. Houses appeared on either side of the highway. Street-lights. The alien pressed itself into the darkest corner.

"Here you will buy the col-

ors for my face and skin," it said tonelessly once more.

"I will buy it," agreed Burt in the very quintessence of quiet hate. "I will not give you an excuse to kill anybody else. There's a drug-store ahead. I'm going to buy grease-paint and lipstick and powder. I have money to pay for it."

The creature said: "I know. Your memories have told me of the need for money, now that I am on your world. First I need to make this face look just right."

The car was actually in the town by this time. For two or three blocks there was a narrow street with residences rising abruptly from the sidewalk-line. The traffic here ran bumper-to-bumper. Sidestreets were wider, and Burt could tell that many were tree-lined, with branches meeting above the pavement. The air was full of the smell of engine-exhausts. Ahead, traffic-lights glistened red and green and there was a brightness which would be the business section of whatever town this might be. There would certainly be a drug-store here.

The way widened at the first traffic light, and here was the most miniature of great White Ways—a movie theater with a brilliantly

lighted marquee, an hotel with a sign; stores, a confectionary—open—a bakery. There was a drug-store on a street corner.

Burt turned off the main street and stopped and parked just beyond the turn. He could look into the side windows of the drug-store and see the customers. Two giggling teen-age girls, consuming sodas. A fat woman, without a hat, waiting for a prescription. Behind the car, on the main street, was an unending sound of traffic.

Burt got out of the car and went into the drug-store. The commonplaceness, the complete normality of the scene and the people around him, was so strange as to be shocking. Here were the smells of ice-cream flavoring and perfume and antiseptics and newsprint from the magazine-stand, all blended together into a perfectly typical well-known odor. These people were thinking about everyday things—where they had come from, where they'd go next, what so-and-so had said—without any doubt about the permanence of all familiar things.

But outside, in the car, there was a creature who regarded all human beings as vermin. Burt had a sense of

unreality, of an insistent disbelief in the reality of things. This small town was reality. Enormous emptinesses between stars, and strange worlds from which ships made voyages, and creatures with not even permanent shapes of their own—they were preposterous!

But when the druggist came to wait on him, Burt heard himself asking for grease-paint and lipstick and powder and eyebrow pencil and a mirror. For what amounted to a make-up kit to cause a plastic mask to look human.

As he picked his wares, the druggist offered a lipstick with a red faked jewel in its top. The faceted glass glittered redly. And suddenly Burt realized an overwhelmingly important fact of which he hadn't been aware before. It was that the alien absolutely, positively, certainly could never hope to pass for a human being among humans without the help of some human being that it trusted! Any captive it might secure could always make the alien betray itself! Not one could ever fail to learn of his power to unmask the thing from emptiness! The alien had to have human friends to survive. Friends!

Because it was color-blind.

It knew that colors existed. It had somehow absorbed all of Burt's sensory memories. But it could not perceive colors, itself. It had not been able to tell that the flashing lights on the rescue-truck were red ones. It had asked if colors were important.

It could not possibly learn to use make-up so that the job would deceive a human eye, because its eyes were different from human ones! And very probably it could not even grasp the significance of variations in tints it could not perceive!

Burt paid for the make-up and went out to the car again. Norma was sobbing quietly to herself. She gasped in relief when Burt came back. She clutched his arm and held on to it.

"I was so—frightened!" she gasped. "If I'm ever left alone with it again, I'll die!"

Burt started the motor. He said grimly, over his shoulder:

"I've got the make-up for your mask and hands. Where shall I drive you now?"

He saw the bronze-colored face in the rear-view mirror. Its eyes were fixed upon him.

"Drive to some secluded place," said the alien placidly,

"where I can make myself convincingly human. Then I will tell you of an enterprise to get the money you use and that I need. I will need a great deal."

Burt drove. Around the block, and when a green light showed he got back into the stream of through traffic. There was no conversation. There were only the sounds of the traffic and once a sudden blaring of music which was probably a car radio in passing.

The last traffic-light. Beyond it, speeds rose. The cars drew apart. The highway went out of town, and presently bored through farmland and woodland and once past a marshy meadow in which frogs croaked resonantly to the stars. They came upon occasional side-roads. Most of them obviously led to farmhouses, but presently Burt braked abruptly. There was a cart-track, unpaved and barely marked by wheels, which led into a second-growth pine-thicket. Burt inspected it in the bright yellow light of the headlights.

"This looks like a suitable make-up room," he said grimly. "A little way in, you should be invisible. You'd use the dome light for your artwork."

"You may drive in," said the voice behind him.

Burt entered in low gear. Weeds grew in the middle. Three-inch and four-inch and five-inch saplings crowded close to the track on either hand. The abandoned road turned this way and that. Two hundred yards in, Burt stopped and switched off the headlights. He turned off the motor. The musical sounds of a summer night came in the car's open windows. The traffic on the highway was still audible, but not even a glint of headlights came through the trees.

Burt switched on the light inside the car and presented his purchases to the bronze-colored figure in the rear seat, which looked so much like a human being—and was so horrible because it did not look entirely like one.

"You know how to use this," said Burt curtly, "if you do know everything I ever did. I did some amateur theatricals in college."

The alien nodded benignly. Its flexible plastic fingers deftly opened the wrapped parcel Burt handed over.

"Your memories," it said blandly, "are excellent preparation for passing as a human on this world."

It spread out the make-up kit. It set up the mirror. It began to work with the grease-paint, smearing the flesh-colored stuff over its brown plastic skin. Burt watched. Then he spoke to it in a low voice.

"I think I should tell you," he said quietly, "that you are color-blind."

The figure regarded itself in the mirror.

"When you think," said Burt, "you'll realize that it's important. You're color-blind! You can't pass as a human without the help of human beings you can trust. Trust, remember! The only way you can live safely and securely on this world is to make a proper bargain with our government. You'll be given an asylum and concealment in exchange for technical information."

The thing said coldly:

"Are you thinking to deceive me?"

"No," said Burt. "To enlighten you."

The creature ignored him. It worked the grease-paint into the plastic. Its face and throat and neck. Its cunningly formed hands and arms up to what should have been its elbows. It seemed able to recall every movement Burt had made, years before, making

up for collegiate amateur theatricals.

It was infernally intelligent. It had infernally great abilities. Between a little after last midnight and the time of Burt's awakening near noon of today, it had learned to speak English by the examination of his memories. In the same time it had made for itself, out of the plastic of its parachute, a flexible human body, very near to perfection among things of the kind. These were strictly individual achievements, not depending solely on the technology its race had developed. And these were evidences of a kind of intelligence that Burt would have admired—however reluctantly in an alien—but for the wholly unreasonable fact that the creature did not normally have a human-shaped body.

As he watched, Burt saw it make astonishingly human-like motions. But suddenly it did something which shocked him out of all reason, for the thing that it was. The alien had used its humanoid form with skill, bending the arms only at the shoulder and elbow and wrist. But it did not actually have bones. It found some clumsiness in its pretense of humanity. It bent its left forearm to reach some-

thing, exactly as if there had been a fourth joint there, or else as if there had been bones and both had snapped. And Burt's stomach protested violently at the sight.

The thing looked in the mirror. It applied lipstick. It put the stuff horribly into the mouth of its mask, working it about. It applied tooth-enamel to its brown teeth. It looked estimatingly at Burt—turning whiter and sicker as the process went on—for a comparison.

Norma grew more and more tense as the travesty of humanity developed, according to the alien's own best perception of what would be perfectly deceptive to the eye.

"In a little while," said the creature tonelessly, "you will drive me back into the town we just left. Your memories tell me that for money you creatures will do anything. Money will buy anything. I will get money. Your memories even tell me where to get it and what the safe of a bank is like. My energy weapon, of course, will make it easy."

Burt stared, his eyes wide in astounded unbelief.

"You mean," he said in flat incredulity, "that you—with the knowledge you've got—

the technology you know about—the civilization you represent—you'll come to Earth and rob a bank?"

The alien said flatly:

"Of course. It will be convenient to have money. Naturally I will take it. You are only human beings."

Norma had neither eaten nor drunk since morning, nor Burt for a longer time than that, but neither of them thought of such things now. The creature from space completed its make-up job to its own satisfaction. Then it said tonelessly:

"Now you will take me to the bank."

"It will be unwise now," said Burt. He added bitterly, "I'm not thinking of your welfare! But with a lot of people about the streets, there is more likely to be an alarm. If you're interrupted, you may have to kill a hundred people to get away."

The alien spoke without emotion. "You would kill a hundred mice."

"The point is," Burt told it doggedly, "that human bank-robbers can't kill a hundred people! If you do, it will be evident that you aren't human. If it becomes evident that a bank has been robbed by a non-human creature, the

newspapers will be full of it. The radio news will broadcast it. If your enemies have agents on earth, they'll know it immediately."

The eyes in the grease-painted mask regarded him unwaveringly. Burt knew that a search was being made among the memories that had been stolen from him, for sensory data to confirm or refute what he had just said. The alien knew sounds Burt had heard, but it had had to work out for itself what words might mean. It knew newspaper headlines Burt had read, but it had to deduce from words spoken about them, what the newspapers said. It had had less than twenty-four hours in which to acquire—by second-hand experience—a knowledge of a human world. It had done, so far, better than any human being could possibly do. But there were bound to be limits to its ability to understand, so soon.

It said, after a moment:

"Yes. Your memories justify what you have said. I shall wait until humans sleep."

It sat quietly in the back. After a moment it said:

"Turn out the light."

Burt turned out the light. There was silence. Above the cart-track there was a narrow

band of stars. Frogs croaked somewhere a little way off. Burt felt a slight movement beside him. He reached out and Norma's hand closed frightenedly over his. There was not much reassurance he could give her.

"I should repeat to you," said Burt steadily to the darkness behind him, "that you need human help. You are colorblind!"

"You will explain," said the voice in the back.

"Your eyes do not see as ours do. There is color. The word does not mean anything to you. Maybe you see by what to us is in infra-red. But you do not see as we do. You cannot make up your face, by your eyesight, to look right by ours."

"My face and hands are like yours now," said the alien. "I compared. I know."

"You can't tell!" insisted Burt doggedly. "You do not look like a human. You look like a zombie! If you speak to a woman, she will scream. Speak to a man, and he will be frightened! You look like hell—to us!"

The alien said coldly:

"Turn on the light."

Burt turned on the light. The alien said:

"Norma. Turn and look at me."

Slowly, the girl turned. The creature in the back should have looked like a man. But it had used powder and its skin was a sickly dead white. It had shadowed under its eyes, because there were shadows under Burt's eyes now. Its own unwinking orbs were enormously emphasized, so that they looked terrifyingly remote from humankind—as they were. Its mouth was vividly red, and wrongly shaped.

Norma gasped.

She looked as if in another instant she would cry out shrilly.

"Turn out the light," said the alien.

Burt turned out the light. He could not tell if the alien were offended in its vanity—or if it had vanity. He could not tell whether its intelligence was so great that it would recognize facts which its intellect must discern, but which its senses could not verify, or whether it had a pride-of-race equal to the impassioned pride of men, so that it could not admit itself to be dependent on inferior creatures.

"I shall test this," said the alien tonelessly. "I shall see how other humans act when they see me. If you have lied I shall kill you both."

Burt licked his lips. He said steadily:

"There is nothing on earth I want to do more than to kill you. But I tell the truth. You cannot live on Earth without men. You cannot force men to serve you. I can arrange for my government to bargain with you—even forgive the murder of that poor devil in the tank-truck because you didn't know what you were doing. I offer to get you a hiding-place and protection from your enemies and secrecy so your existence won't be known to them. But you'll have to trade the technical information you have and that we haven't got yet. Unless you make that bargain—you're finished! And you can take it or leave it!"

It was an ultimatum which was absolutely based on fact. But it was not one that a man could take from a lower animal. It was not one that the alien could take from men.

Burt's muscles abruptly seemed to turn to water. He slumped in his seat. Norma, simultaneously, went absolutely limp. The two of them sagged helplessly where they sat. They were conscious, but unable to move. They were two utterly inert heaps on the front-seat cushion. They could not even try to stir. Burt, at

first, could only hate helplessly.

Nothing happened. Nothing. The alien had reduced the two to helplessness as a man might tether a horse. It did not want to pay attention to them. It numbed them to wait for it to use them again.

The helplessness lasted for a very long time indeed. The night-insects chirruped and stridulated outside the car. The breeze blew softly among the pine branches. The thing from space remained perfectly still. It waited for an appropriate time to leave this place and go back to the town through which it had recently passed. Perhaps it meditated upon materials to be bought, machines to be contrived, devices to be duplicated, and ultimately a headlong rush through space away from this world. For such purposes, money would be required, humans would have to be bribed, workshops established. The alien prepared to secure money as the practical means of getting things done on the planet Earth. It was the most practical way. So the creature from the stars would use the technology of a race that had conquered interstellar space, and the powers developed in a thousand thousand years of

progress—to rob a bank in a small country town.

It seemed centuries, but it was really no more than two hours before feeling and strength returned together in a rush to Burt's arms and legs and body. In those two hours, Burt had had perforce to think. He had thought with some clarity, if not to any encouraging purpose. But because he no longer had any illusions about the entity in the back seat of his car, he could never feel any more fear of it. Even his fears for Norma were changed in kind. He no longer hated the alien to any great degree. But he knew, now, a deep and implacable enmity for the creature that did not need hatred for energy. The alien was an enemy of mankind because of its very constitution. Because it existed. Because it was what it was. It might be a criminal among its own kind, or it might be in some unimaginable fashion a very gallant soldier. But on Earth it was an outlaw and a foe.

Burt raised himself carefully and helped Norma again to sit upright. The thing said:

"You will drive me to the town. I intend to rob the bank. Then I will have money to hire men to serve me. You

are not as useful as you could be."

There might have been a sneer in the last phrase, but Burt could not tell. He said in a voice as completely without emotion as the creature's own:

"I will need to turn the car around."

He started the motor. He turned on the headlights. He looked at Norma, shuddering in the seat beside him.

"All right, Norma?"

She moistened her lips and nodded, breathing fast.

He turned the car a hundred yards on, in a weed-grown open field. He drove back through the thicket. Presently he came out on the highway, and the traffic was much thinner now, and he crossed the road and headed back the way he had come.

It had been nearer three hours than two since he stopped at the drug-store for make-up. The drug-store was closed. In the brightly lighted four-block business section there was practically no traffic at all. The marquee of the movie theater was dark. There was a car parked at a filling-station, getting gas before that station closed too. There was only one pedestrian on the sidewalk, and he turned a corner and vanished as Burt

drove past the first traffic light. That light made small clicking sounds and turned red. After a decorous interval, it made other clicking sounds and turned green again.

Burt drove with great calmness to a position opposite the bank. He drew in to the curb and stopped.

"There are still cars coming through here," he said coldly, "so if you break in the front door it will be noticed and you will be interrupted. To keep you from killing people, I suggest that you break in from the back. There will undoubtedly be a burglar-alarm, which I do not doubt you will set off."

The creature said tonelessly:

"You will wait here."

It opened the rear car-door and walked across the street. Burt said calmly:

"I can't move my legs. Can you, Norma?"

"N-no," said Norma very quietly. "We'll have to wait."

Burt turned his head and watched the alien in motion. It looked convincingly human at any one moment, but the sum of several moments was less than satisfying. But it happened that no car passed through the town at just this moment. The creature's face had not been seen by anybody

but Burt and Norma, up to this time.

Burt watched with an odd detachment. He had stopped feeling anything in particular except a strong conviction that sooner or later the alien would slip in some fashion and he would kill it—or someone would. It was not at all a usual way to feel. Burt did not analyze his sensations, but if an opportunity had arisen to cause the alien's death at the cost of his own, he would have seized it with the most matter-of-fact promptness. The thing, indeed, intended to kill him presently because he was not a good nor satisfactory domestic animal.

The thing from space, wearing Burt's clothes, walked into an alleyway beside the bank. Its gait was near but not quite the way a man walks. It undulated. It vanished.

"It's going to kill us, I think," said Norma quietly.

"I think that's the intention," agreed Burt. "I'm sorry, Norma. You can't walk, can you? I can't."

She shook her head. She said steadily:

"I don't think we matter. If you can crash the car somehow, Burt, so it'll be sure to be killed . . ."

He nodded, and said with a warmth that was peculiar, under the circumstances:

"You're a good sport. I'm sorry you're in this, but you're a good partner for anything. Even dying, if it comes to that."

There was a very small noise across the street. Something like cracklings. Then a thump.

"He's getting in a door," said Burt. "He'd burn it in. I would guess he set off a burglar-alarm, but I don't hear anything. Maybe there'll be police—poor devils!"

"You can't drive?"

"Not without feet to use," he told her. "The starter's on the floor, and the accelerator too. I'm afraid not."

They waited. Burt's mind no longer hunted frantically for ways to escape the creature now in the bank. He only searched continually and coldly for a way to thwart or destroy it. The emergency weapon was the key to everything. It had to be gotten rid of. Even if the creature were killed, and Burt with it, that weapon had to be disposed of so it could not possibly be picked up by somebody and set off by accident or deliberately out of curiosity.

"It's odd," said Norma absorbedly, "how one gets past

being afraid. You aren't, Burt. I like you for it."

He said deliberately:

"If we'd lived, I think we'd have married. I hope so. I like you too."

They looked at each other. It seemed almost humorous to have taken time out for a mutual avowal of sentiment while waiting outside a bank that was being robbed, for the creature who abstractedly intended to kill them. Norma smiled faintly.

A curious small scratching noise came from the bank-building across the street. The front of the building was unchanged, of course. But around the edges of a window with a drawn-down shade, a flickering blue-white glow appeared. It had the uncertain waverings of electric sparks: of a torch: an arc.

"It's burning into the safe," said Burt. "It will pass for a thermit job, maybe. That weapon is versatile! Paralysis-gun, heat-ray, electric arc—and it says it can be detonated as a bomb."

The nearest traffic light clicked and changed color. A red convertible roared in low gear. It hurtled down the empty street and was gone. The light at the edge of the bank-building window at-

tracted no attention. The noise was very faint indeed. Maybe the arc which made it would create interference in radio or television sets, but the hour was late.

"Queer we're so calm," said Norma. "I haven't a bit of hope, but I don't feel hysterical. The creature will be killed sooner or later, of course."

"It's too bad we can't read its memories as it read mine," said Burt wryly. "If there are ships among the stars—and there are—it could tell us how they're made. And that weapon is no bigger than a revolver. If our scientists could only work on that . . ."

There was a muffled thud across the street. It was not loud enough to attract attention. The two in the car were especially conscious of it, of course. They were quite helpless, with the lower part of their bodies paralyzed by the exotic alien emergency device. They could not hope to attract the attention of other humans. There was nobody else on the street. If they called anybody, the alien would hear. If they managed to get themselves lifted out of the car, or if they signalled another car to a stop, the alien would kill other humans—kill in wholesale lots

—to destroy them. There was no purpose to be served by getting other people killed with nothing else achieved.

The traffic lights clicked and changed color. There was no car waiting to take advantage of a green light. There was tranquility. Street-lamps on brick pavements, closed-up stores. In one darkened window a ring-shaped light around one special advertising sign blinked senselessly off and on. There was the smell of tree-shaded streets in the air. The traffic lights clicked and changed.

The alien walked out of the lane beside the bank. It carried a bag. It crossed the sidewalk and strode across the street to the car. At a distance it looked human, but nearby the make-up on its face was unearthly. The face was white like the belly of a dead fish. It had put deep blue shadows under its eyes. They were staring, unwinking eyes at best. They looked demonic in the dead-white face.

It opened the back of the car and put the bag inside.

"There is a great deal of coin," the voice said tonelessly. "You will come and carry part of it."

It stood by the partly opened back door. Its plastic hand disappeared. Life and

feeling and strength came back to the lower part of Burt's body. He could move his legs again.

The traffic light clicked and changed color. Down the street, behind Burt, a car-motor roared. The thing from space turned.

Burt was in the act of unfastening the door beside him when the unseen car behind—going the same way Burt's car was headed—whined shrilly as it accelerated. Burt was stepping down into the street when the speeding car's horn blatted fiercely. The unknown driver was acting as some people do. The instant the traffic-light changed, he had shot his car ahead, shifted gear, and jammed down the accelerator to streak through the lighted empty street at sixty miles an hour.

When the horn blatted the alien turned sharply. And maybe under any other circumstances the driver could have swerved in time. But the alien turned upon him the face of a walking corpse, a zombie, something with glittering eyes straight out of hell itself. A metal object appeared in its hands.

The car hit. There was an indescribably horrible thud. But even more horrible was

the way the alien's body yielded to the impact. It did not crush, as the body of a man with bones would have done. It flexed. It bent. It *flowed* into a cup-like, completely impossible flattened mass—still clothed in Burt's garments—which clung to the front of the speeding car for twenty feet or more and then dropped slackly in the highway. And the car raced on ahead.

Burt glimpsed the driver's face for the fraction of an instant. It was a mask of unbelieving horror. The car roared desperately into the distance. The driver did not look back.

Then Burt realized two things simultaneously. One was that the metal object—the alien's weapon—had been knocked from its grasp. It had skidded to a stop no more than ten feet from where Burt stood absurdly with one foot on the pavement. The other was the fact that the mass of clothing which lay in the highway a little distance off, no longer looked even remotely human.

The arms and legs were empty. The head was deflated. The face had collapsed like an empty flexible mask—which it was—and lay at an impossible angle to its neck.

And the trunk of the body was no longer the rough flattened-cylinder shape which is proper to a human body. This thing bulged. It was almost a globe. It changed and was almost egg-shaped. It writhed and pulsated like a monstrous ameboid thing inside its human garmenture.

The sight of it was pure horror, in the deserted, brightly lighted street of a small town on a summer night. The thing inside the garments writhed blindly, and extended psuedopods within the enclosing cloth, and the empty, collapsed face and head turned foolishly, and the flattened, empty arms and legs jerked and stirred without purpose . . .

Burt picked up the metal thing which was the weapon the creature had used for everything from the demonstration-murder of an oil-truck driver to the burning open of a small bank's safe. He was icy cold, and he had thought he could have no further emotional reactions, but his stomach turned at the sight of the movements of the thing in the street.

He put the weapon in his pocket. He started the car. He drove savagely away. By instinct he swerved to avoid hitting the writhing thing. It

was not that he meant to spare it. In taking its weapon, he had destroyed it. But he felt an overwhelming revulsion to touching it with anything—even the wheels of his car.

He roared away. But he could not help glancing behind in the rear-view mirror. The last glimpse he had of it showed it resuming human shape. When it was a bare speck in the mirror it was upraised on four stumpy projections, but the head-mask dangled emptily. It might be beginning to reform arms and legs.

Burt jammed down the accelerator. He wanted to get away from there! Beside him, above the whistling of wind past the car's windows, he heard Norma's teeth chattering.

Simply not having the alien in the car was enough to produce a completely fictitious feeling of safety. It was an enormous relief merely not to be near the monster any longer. True, Norma's legs—as she told Burt—had no sensation in them. She and Burt had both been left helpless while the alien opened the bank safe. Burt had been released from helplessness to carry loot. But Norma was still incapacitated.

"It'll be a hospital for you," said Burt grimly. "But the first need is to get as far away as possible from where we've marooned the thing. It hasn't got its weapon now. It has to hide. But it's infernally intelligent and it could be deadly even unarmed. So we want to get away!"

Norma said quickly: "We shouldn't try to use the—weapon to free me. It could, but we don't know how to use it."

Burt nodded. They were half an hour away from the place of their escape. The road was straight and empty before them. They were back in the foothills, and trees and hillsides flashed into view in the headlight rays and swept swiftly toward them, and then darted past and were gone.

Burt brought out the weapon he'd picked up. He looked at it in the light of the instrument-board. It was completely cryptic. There was no handle designed for a human hand to grasp—though the creature had been able to use its plastic human-seeming hands to hold and use it. It was flat and irregular in shape, and there were studs on both sides. They were recessed, and it was obviously from pressure upon different

combinations of them that the instrument acted in different fashions—as a paralysis-beam or a heat-ray or—so the creature had said—could detonate as an atomic bomb. It would not be possible to guess in advance which studs would release Norma from her helplessness.

Burt put it away.

“When I get a chance I’m going to fix it so it can’t be turned on accidentally.”

He felt perfectly safe, but he had overlooked something. A human criminal parachuted among savages would be cock-of-the-walk only so long as he had modern weapons. If he were disarmed, he would need to hide. Burt inevitably thought of the alien as like a civilized man among primitives. He hadn’t seen it, actually, except clothed and masked as a man. But the creature did not think of itself as a civilized man among savages. It had phrased its viewpoint with precision when it likened its view of men to Burt’s view of rats and mice. Its attitude toward mankind was that of a man to rats.

An armed human among intelligent rats would be at ease. Disarmed, he would be less at ease. But he would not hide. He would try instantly

and furiously to recover his weapons or make new ones.

The alien would not try to hide because he was disarmed.

But Burt didn’t happen to reason in that obvious fashion. He meant to drive the night through and get completely out of the area in which the thing must—he considered—conceal itself. He had evidence to demand instant belief and cooperation from the FBI. He had loot from a bank, and when the manner of its robbery was examined carefully, it would check with Burt’s tale. The alien would have burned open a door, where a human would get in more easily. Even the burned-open safe would not appear a torch job when carefully looked over. There was the fact of the burned oil-truck. There was Norma’s present condition. Above all, X-ray examination of the alien weapon would prove its non-human origin. A quiet and grim hunt would instantly be made for the fugitive from space. It would be captured. Then the bargain Burt had offered would be forced upon it. It would tell whatever it knew that could be useful to humans. Or else.

Then Norma said shakily:

“I think my legs are coming to life again!”

Burt was not a particularly safe driver, for a while. He was desperately intent upon the symptoms of Norma's recovery from the paralysis-beam. He did not even notice when the car roared through a deep cut, past a place where the road's surface was seared with fire, and the rocky side-walls were sooted, and the grass and weeds off the concrete were burned to gray ash. But the remains of the oil-truck had been taken away.

They went on and on through the night, and Norma found sensation returning, and the power of movement, and presently she said exultantly that she could walk and wanted to try.

Under the circumstances, a certain lack of forethought was natural.

They stopped at the very first of the service areas which by its lights was open for business at this hour. Burt had the gas-tank filled at the pump. Norma got out and walked about, exuberantly.

"It's wonderful!" she said softly, stopping by Burt's side of the car. "I feel giddy! I feel light-headed." Then she smiled at him. "And—I think we know each other now,

Burt, after what we've been through. I like what I know about you."

"We'll get something to eat," said Burt, "and then go on. Nothing much can be done before morning, anyhow."

He drove over to the diner, but Norma walked for joy in the obedience of her legs to her will. They were smiling at each other when they entered the diner which here catered to the public.

Burt always remembered that moment. There was a counter, and stools before it, and a stout man reading a newspaper. He had a radio turned on. As Burt and Norma walked in, he jerked his head to stare at the instrument.

"—apparently a maniac," said a reedy voice, "walked up to the filling-station attendant and attacked him without warning. He broke his neck, then approached the car, whose driver threatened him with a revolver. The maniac seized the arm holding the pistol and with super-human strength pulled the driver out through the window. He dashed him to the ground, killing him instantly. He then climbed in the car, but the driver's wife, in the back, opened the door and

jumped out, screaming. The maniac headed east on the post highway, the car swerving crazily. The only living witness, the woman whose husband was killed, hysterically insists that the maniac has a dead-white face and glittering eyes. It is presumed that now he is armed . . ."

Burt took Norma's arm and turned her around. They walked out of the diner again. Both of them were ashen-white. Burt led the way fiercely to the car. They were almost at it when a car came racing furiously along the way they had come. It swerved and roared into the service area. Burt put his hand on Norma's shoulder and pressed her fiercely downward.

"Behind the car!" he commanded thickly. "It's here!"

He watched through the car's windows from the outside. The other car braked to a stop, with screamings of tortured brake-bands. A figure got out of it. It went toward the diner. It passed within twenty feet of Burt and Norma, but the car was between. It went into the diner.

It was the alien.

Burt thrust Norma into the car and closed the door with a desperate softness. He plunged to the alien's car and

snatched out its ignition key.

There were sounds inside the diner. The fat man, inside there, had turned from a broadcast about a maniac with a white face and eyes like a ghoul. He looked up to see what looked like a zombie with a white face and eyes like a fiend from hell. The creature asked a question in an unhuman, toneless voice. The fat man gagged and goggled. He made absurd pawing motions in the air, as if to push the alien away. When the alien moved toward him, the fat man screamed.

Burt was in the act of letting in the clutch when he heard the shots. He was in the act of darting out the service-area exit to the highway again, when the alien came out of the diner. It had heard the retreating car. It began to run, very terribly, in pursuit. But it could not overtake the roaring car in all-out flight.

It was a long time later and many miles along the road before Burt could steady his voice to speak. Then he said in horror-struck revulsion:

"It was—coming after us! For its weapon! I got the ignition-key of its car . . ."

He nursed his car around a curve engineered for forty

miles an hour. He was doing better than seventy. The road became a straightaway and the speedometer needle climbed higher, higher, and higher yet.

Norma said faintly: "The filling-station man—"

"I think," said Burt grimly, "it will kill him. It will have to wait until another car comes. Then it will take that to follow us. It will kill the people . . . It has to catch us. We have its weapon!"

"But how—" chattered Norma, "h-how did it know—?"

Burt said bitterly: "It knows all my memories. It can work out how I'll think. It can figure out the choices I'll make. What I'll do—where I'll go—whether I stay on this road or dodge aside . . ."

The car went roaring onward through the night. Trees, hillsides, open fields, appeared for an instant and were gone.

A long time later, winking headlights appeared behind. They were not often visible. They blinked into view and vanished again. Sometimes they were not seen for minutes on end.

When they reappeared, though, they were always a little nearer.

They turned their car again, and again, and yet again. Norma finally grasped the necessity of introducing randomness into their choice of possible paths. She said, "Right" or "left" or "straight ahead" when time for a new choice turned up.

A long time later they drove beside a rushing, foaming mountain stream, under trees which arched completely over the narrow highway. Now and again the headlights glared out over the speeding water. Now and again they could look up and see vast mountain-flanks silhouetted against the star-filled sky overhead.

The road curved and climbed steeply, and they were riding into a very small town indeed, and there was a barrier with a red lantern on it, and half a dozen cars bunched beyond it, and people standing about. A state trooper flagged them to a stop. His hand was grimly at his pistol-holster until he had peered into the car and seen both Burt's and Norma's faces.

"All traffic's stopped," he said curtly. "There's a maniac running loose in a car. Roads aren't safe. You'll be all right here. Stick around."

Burt nodded, and steered

the car to a place among the others. He stopped it. Norma said in a whisper:

"Should we say anything?"

"No," Burt told her. "What we have to say wouldn't be believed here. But it might reach the newspapers. *We'd* be suspected of mania—especially with that bank loot in the back! We talk to the FBI and nobody else."

He looked keenly out at the people from the other stopped cars. There were a dozen or more, talking uneasily in groups. Now and again a voice came abruptly from the short-wave set in the trooper's car. That would be state police headquarters.

It was two-thirty in the morning, and very cool. The town was a very small one indeed—no more than twenty or thirty houses and two stores. But two highways crossed in it, and the state trooper was halting all traffic on both. Burt considered. He got out to learn the news. Norma came with him.

They listened. The waiting motorists talked in hushed tones. They told each other, over and over, the grisly tale of murder. The maniac had started his career when he killed a filling-station attendant in a small town. Somebody'd just learned that the

bank had been robbed there! The dead motorist's wife had described the maniac as pale as death, with glittering eyes and possessed of incredible strength. Thirty miles east the maniac had gone into a service area, killed a diner-cook and a gas attendant, and then waited for another car to turn in. Four men were in the car. The maniac killed two, crippled a third, and the fourth fled into the darkness. The survivors' description of the maniac—who had gone away eastward in their car—confirmed the first account. One of them used a telephone in the diner to report the atrocity. Four dead there, one injured. There was further alerting of all state police-cars.

A trooper found a car abandoned. It was the one taken from the four men of whom two had been killed. It had run out of gas. The bodies of a man and woman were found nearby. Apparently they had stopped to offer help, the maniac had killed them, and then it had gone on in their car.

When they heard where this last event had happened, Burt and Norma tensed. They'd turned off the main highway. The alien had fol-

lowed, infallibly. Burt had made the decision to turn. The alien had made the same decision.

It had crashed into a police-car set to block a highway. The trooper died, there. The creature had evidently secured another car, because a dead man was found with no car to account for his presence. And a car had gone around the wreckage, out again on the soft shoulder of the road.

That had taken place along the exact line of Burt's and Norma's flight. Cold prickles went down Burt's spine when he heard where that happened! The alien had unerringly followed four successive choices of right-or-left turns, made by Burt. It could anticipate what choices Burt would make, from its analysis of his past experiences. But the last few decisions had been Norma's. And the alien could not tell what she would choose. Whether to take a right or a left-hand branching of a highway. Whether to take the shortest route to a destination or a longer one. These decisions did not follow the pattern Burt's mind would have made. The creature from space could not tell what they would be.

Which, of course, was un-

questionably why they had not been overtaken.

The short-wave speaker in the trooper's car spoke in staccato fashion:

"All cars . . . All cars . . . Ten minutes ago a car traveling eighty miles an hour ran into a traffic barricade at Coytesville. It smashed the barrier, the driver lost control, and the car swerved into an empty-store-building and caught fire. It is now burning with the building. This may be the maniac. Caution will be continued, but this may be the man . . ."

Buzzing talk all around the barricade. It sounded right. Only a maniac would drive a car eighty miles an hour at night, so he couldn't stop at a red-lighted barricade. If the maniac had been killed in the crash and his body burned in the building, it served him right. People talked more loudly, while Burt and Norma listened. They were relieved. How many had he killed? Two at the first filling station, four at the second, a man and a woman, a state trooper and another man. Ten people killed by one maniac in a night's orgy of madness. But it must have been the maniac who'd been killed, because only a maniac would drive eighty miles an hour and

through a red-lighted barricade.

Which was true, but there are maniacs and maniacs.

Time passed, and they waited, and there were no further reports of atrocities. It seemed more and more likely that the murderous creature had been killed and his body burned in a car and an empty store-building. Some of the motorists grew impatient. Burt did not. He moved about at the edge of the grouping of waiting people. There was a wire-strand fence at the side of the road. One strand was broken. The loose end trailed. An idea came to Burt.

He broke off the snapped wire, by bending it repeatedly at one place. It was stout, stiff, fence-wire. He trailed seven or eight feet of it back to the car. He took out a pair of pliers. He snipped off a short length of wire and wrapped it once around the alien's weapon—and twisted the end. He repeated the process. He began to enclose the cryptic device in a series of tightly-drawn, tightly-twisted lengths of wire, any one of which would prevent pressure on any operating-stud underneath it, and all of which would prevent the device from being used at all

until the wire covering had been removed, strand by strand.

The tiny hamlet about them slept soundly. There were seven cars waiting for assurance of safety. But the short-wave report did sound as if all danger was over. It seemed extremely plausible that the maniac—or the alien from space—had been killed and his body destroyed in a burned-down empty store-building.

But Burt had had a shock. The alien had followed his choices of choices of ways to go. It was possible, at least, that it had been able to anticipate that Burt would ultimately make Norma choose the way he drove. If that were true—at the moment when knowing Burt's mind would do no good—the alien would abandon the direct chase. It would go on to something else. It would not abandon its emergency weapon. It could not.

But it could know exactly how Burt would react.

He thought very grimly as he finished encasing the weapon. The alien could not anticipate that. It couldn't reason that Burt would find a loose fence-wire and have time to make use of it to make

the weapon useless—for a time, at least. But there had to be a decision the alien could anticipate, which it would do it no good to know in advance. It would be completely implacable. It had to have its weapon back. It couldn't be allowed to have it. So it had to be trapped and killed, once and for all.

There was one decision it would do the alien no good to be able to foresee. Burt lifted his head from where he worked on the weapon.

"Norma," he said quietly, "You've got to make a plan. Good or bad, it doesn't matter. But it has to be yours. Now listen . . ."

He talked quietly. Presently there was a staccato noise from the trooper's car—the short-wave set. When it ended, there were stirrings. Burt got out as one of the waiting cars droned into low and started off along the highway. Others were whirring their starters. Burt asked questions. The fire had been put out and the body of the man in the eighty-mile car had been examined. He was a big man, six feet and over in height. He should have been a powerful man. He could have been capable of the maniac's atrocities. Traffic was permitted to move, again.

Burt went back and took the wheel.

"It wasn't the creature, but a human being," he told Norma. "The creature's bound to be hiding now. It'll be waiting for us. Where?"

Gray dawn began, and it was a matter of only ten or fifteen miles to the town where both Burt and Norma lived. Before them, on a narrow highway, there was a long procession of clumsy, make-shift, slatted farm-trucks. Burt came up to the last of them and glanced at Norma. She shook her head slightly. He fell in behind the line, not trying to pass. She said:

"I feel foolish, telling you what to do."

Burt said carefully: "The creature can figure out every decision I'll make, including the decision that it can figure out what I'll decide. But it doesn't know what you'll decide. So you know what we want to do, and you're deciding the moves toward it. That is the one way to outguess the creature."

Norma protested: "But we're betting our lives on acting illogically."

They were. In order to have any real hope of living on, Burt and Norma had to

convince somebody—the FBI preferably—that the alien was real and what he was, and that he simply must be captured. Obviously, they must produce that belief without giving the thing from space a chance to kill them first. Since he knew their purpose and had—to put it mildly—no scruples at all, the last item was difficult. Their danger was not one particle less than it had been. The alien was infernally intelligent, and its desperation was complete. It would even risk detection to get its weapon back, because its enemies might not ever learn of its landing, but it could not survive on earth unarmed. Because it was not human!

The car trailed the odorous line of farm-trucks toward the city. The dawnlight strengthened. Presently Burt said somberly:

“The thing’ll have changed its appearance by now. It knows it can’t go on when everybody screams as soon as they see it.”

“But it’s color-blind! What can it do?”

“It’s got my memories,” said Burt bitterly. “It’ll think of sun-glasses to hide its eyes—and there’s at least one pair in nearly every car’s glove-compartment. It’ll think of a

false beard to hide its face and mouth. I’d be willing to bet that somewhere there’s been a beauty-salon window smashed so somebody could snatch a wig off a mannikin. It could make a beard. I wore a false one, once, in amateur theatricals! I’ll bet I could describe it by now. Soft hat pulled down low. Long coat and beard. Dark glasses. Probably a cane or a crutch to walk with. It’ll figure out that it can’t just melt into the human race and have nobody look at it. You notice unusual things about a commonplace man—pallor, or anything else. But in an unusual figure, the odd is commonplace!”

He glowered. Norma said hopefully:

“Do you realize that though it can know what you do because it knows all your experiences, you can know what it’ll do because you know every bit of information it has about Earth?”

Burt blinked. He thought it over. Then he brightened.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way! But it’s so! And it puts a new light on things! Hmm.”

Daylight was here, now, and very far away they could just see the tall buildings of the city which was their home, rising from the smoky mist that seems to cover most

cities at dawning. A little way ahead a neat secondary road led off to the right, away from where it was Burt's instinct and purpose to go, and where the alien should expect to meet him. The market-trucks rumbled ahead a little more swiftly now. But when Burt reached that minor highway, he turned aside with a new decisiveness. He drove not toward the city but toward a suburban town some twenty miles away which he chose because he had never been there in his life before, and the creature from emptiness could not possibly find it in his memories.

As he stepped cheerfully on the gas, the sun lifted from the horizon and all the world and wide green fields looked beautifully alive and sparkling.

His activities, he explained gravely to Norma, were deliberate folly, because the alien couldn't imagine such a thing. They had breakfast at an inn, whose earliest customers they were. They lingered over the meal—though as a matter of pure precaution Burt sat where he could watch the doorway and out the windows. Here he secured writing materials and wrote a moderately lengthy note,

with much careful choice of phrasing. When the first stores opened, Burt bought a good-sized suitcase, a flat metal box, an assortment of fishermen's sinkers, and a hunting-knife. Then he drove to a newly opened garage and packed the sinkers in the metal box and had the box brazed shut, all around, so it couldn't be opened again without metal-cutting tools. While the brazing-torch flamed, he went in the back part of the car—his nostrils wrinkled momentarily—and packed the suitcase. He packed it with the bag the alien had brought from the robbed bank. With money. He included the note he'd written with the bag.

Then he found a messenger service and dispatched the carefully locked suitcase by special messenger on an interurban bus. Norma followed him unquestioningly about while he did these cryptic errands.

"Now," he told her when the messenger had started off, "there's just one thing more, besides the phone-calls I'm going to make presently."

"I don't understand in the least," said Norma uneasily. "I know what you've done, but not why."

"The natural thing for me

to do," explained Burt, "would be sensible. Go straight to the FBI at daybreak. Spout my stuff. Show my proofs. I'd go direct to their headquarters, because I wouldn't expect them to believe my yarn and come to me. The creature knows that I am highly intelligent—" he grinned—"so it expects me to be sensible. But I know what it knows, so I'm doing foolish things to confuse it. There's one more thing to do."

He told her. She gasped.

"But it's ridiculous!" she protested. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"You just have," Burt corrected her gently. "Come along."

They had to stand in line. She still protested that it was foolish. But not very energetically.

They drove into their home town at late dusk. Burt had had several conferences with the FBI by telephone. His messenger had delivered the brand-new suitcase to the FBI during the early morning. Opened, the suitcase contained eighteen thousand dollars, robbed from a bank the night before, nearly two hundred miles away. With it there was a note. By the time Burt telephoned, the FBI was

intensely curious and almost inclined to believe a wild tale—but his story was much wilder than they'd expected. But it linked up with the activities of a maniac during the previous night. It coincided with three items in the local police news of early morning. A beauty-shop window had been smashed and a mannikin's wig stolen. A second-hand clothing shop had been robbed. A store for orthopedic appliances broken into. But it was Burt's story that made the orthopedic store discover that one crutch had been stolen with the contents of its cash register.

When a chemist reported on a scrap of brown plastic Burt had enclosed, the FBI was staggered. It began to hunt for somebody—some human—who should have answered Burt's description. They found nobody. They began to be dubious. But half an hour before Burt's return they suddenly became convinced. There was an hotel just opposite the building in which the FBI offices were. In late afternoon one of the housekeepers entered a guest's room and happened to open a closet. She found there the body of a chambermaid. The maid's neck was broken. The occupant—checked in only

that morning—had been a bent and whiskered cripple of convincingly feeble appearance.

It could be guessed that the maid had noticed that his appearance was not wholly human, and had stared at him.

So, as Burt entered the edge of town, a car pulled up alongside his and a man in the car made a recognition signal. Burt felt a little better, but not much. The alien hadn't been caught. It had to be. It looked like it wouldn't be until Burt caught it, and he was grim about that necessity.

So he drove through the dusk and the city traffic to the building where Norma lived. There were shadows in the air and the street lights winked on as he drove. The smell of dust and hot asphalt and gasoline fumes, and a whiff of green stuff, and the sound of people in motion with all their contrivances.

He drove sedately to Norma's address. Night had fallen swiftly, and it was dark when he parked. He saw a movement in the shadows nearby. Distinct cold shadows ran up and down his spine. But then a figure made an agreed-on recognition signal. He felt better. At least one FBI man. He hoped more.

There were. He and Norma

went inside. She was pale. She started a little when she saw a strange elevator-operator. But Burt felt a warm gratitude. It would be his inevitable instinct to take Norma to her home first of all. Before he went to his own apartment. Before he went to the FBI.

In the elevator, the man nodded when Burt looked questioningly at him. The elevator stopped at Norma's floor. They got out and Burt automatically followed her lead down the hall. But suddenly he got ahead of her, and sniffed, and then he said very quietly:

"This is your door?"

She nodded, deathly white. He turned her away from it and gave her a little shove—so she'd go away and let him enter by himself. She'd already given him her key. He put it in the lock and turned it and opened the door—unobtrusively turning the catch so the door could be opened from outside, behind him—and reached in to where Norma had said the light-switch was.

The room leaped into light. Empty. Burt went in. The door closed decisively behind him, and Norma was there with him. She wouldn't be left

behind. The faint, faint, inhuman smell was stronger.

As if the closing of the door had been a signal, the alien came from an inner room. It had a revolver in its hand. It wore a shapeless soft black hat, and a long coat. It had a long and silky beard. But it took off its dark glasses and threw them away. It said tonelessly—in Burt's own voice:

"Give me my weapon."

Burt did not have to feign surprise. The emotional impact of facing the creature was enough. But he slowly reached into his pocket and brought out the brazed-shut metal box. He tossed it on a table near the creature. He said grimly:

"I didn't want it to go off by accident."

The alien picked up the box. Its plastic fingers tore at it. The box did not yield. It pocketed the box and moved—

Burt presented the hunting-knife, drawn and ready. He was completely savage and completely the match of the alien in ferocity, because Norma was here. The alien stopped short and said without expression:

"I would have killed you silently."

Its revolver came up. Burt

snapped off the light and flung Norma aside as two shots crashed in the darkness and the gun clicked empty. Then there was a raging humming noise, wholly unlike any sound that could have been made by a human throat—and the door burst in and flashlight beams darted inward. Burt said sharply:

"That's it!"

The thing stared at the FBI men. It hummed horribly. Then it flung its useless pistol at them with superhuman force and scrambled with incredible agility for the window. It crashed through to the fire-escape. It vanished as the FBI men plunged after it. A hand thrust a flashlight out. There were shoutings. A shot outside. The three men climbed out. One of them started up. There was another shot outside, and whistlings, and there were flickerings of light, and a loud humming noise that had somehow the effect of a scream of fury, only infinitely more terrible to hear.

A man shrieked. There were shots overhead. A fusillade . . .

The man who came back to the apartment looked acutely ill. He held the metal box gingerly in his hands. It was

twisted and bent. A monstrous strength had been exerted upon it, and a brazed seam had begun to give.

"We got it up on the roof," said the FBI man, in the tone of a man talking about something he will have bad dreams about for a long time to come. "It broke one man's arm, but it kept trying to open this box even while we were pumping bullets into it. It came out of that human skin like it was a cocoon, worrying at this box and making that humming noise. What was it?"

Burt was very busy, but he said politely:

"I haven't the least idea what it would be called."

"Listen!" said the FBI man, sweating. "We didn't really believe you, but that money, and then the maid being killed and all—" Burt looked politely annoyed. The FBI man said, "This is—the bomb, isn't it? It almost got at it."

Burt removed one arm from where it was and produced the creature's weapon, elaborately sheathed with twisted wire.

"No. This is the weapon. I didn't want to take a chance of anybody fiddling with it. It goes to Washington. Atomic Energy Commission. Tell them about the creature."

The FBI man took the weapon in a trembling hand.

"We'll tell them about the—thing, whatever it was," he said sickishly. "We'll tell them! My God, did you ever see anything like that in your life?"

"No," said Burt. "I didn't. I'd rather not, anyhow. Look! I don't know what your name is, but could we talk this over in the morning? We just got married today and my wife's rather overwrought. Could you excuse us?"

The FBI man said, "Yeah. Oh, sure!" He went to the door and said: "Until we get orders from Washington, we won't let any news get out. You understand? For the moment, no talking?"

"No talking," agreed Burt. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," said the FBI man. He went out the door. He couldn't remember which of the two objects was the one to be careful of, and he had no clear idea what the thing could do anyhow—except that the creature on the roof had been trying to get at it while it hummed and died. So the FBI man walked very gingerly down the hall carrying both objects very carefully. He walked like a man carrying an atomic bomb.

He was.