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Science Fiction

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QUARTERLY

ONE OF MR. CUMMINGS' MOST FAMOUS NOVELS

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She introduced him to the First Lady.

GANGWAY FOR HOMER

C'mon out of the shadows, Homer: Here's one who claims you as his patron. Unstring your lyre, mighty bard and sing the epic of Achilles Maravain, who can't be hurt by bullets, bombs, or blasters, and whose touch brings instant death!

Illustrated by John Forte

HIS NAME was really John Smith. Incredibly enough, it had always been John Smith. As far back as people in his circle and neighborhood could remember, it had been John Smith—and they could remember back all the way to when he had been a mere tottering tot—to the swaddling clothes days. He was what might

be called a medium man. His height was medium. His middle-age was medium. His hair, eyes, and nose were medium. Unpretentious he looked and adequate. He fulfilled his name, which, as we mentioned above, was John Smith—not Achilles Maravain.

Yet she persisted in calling him Achilles Maravain. She declaimed;

by **GEORGE R. HAHN**

she cried out; she excited herself and all present—all to the effect that John Smith was Achilles Maravain. Everybody paid her the best of attention, although they couldn't believe her. Everybody regarded her with interest. She had a wild, pale, exotic-looking face, a figure ~~it~~ would be indelicate to remark upon, and legs that were crystallized ecstasy. They listened to her words; they gazed upon her. The Los Angeles Forum of Camera Arts gazed to satiety on face and figure and legs and sighed en masse. Insanely gay sighs, sighed they. She was desirable and moreover she had interrupted President Soupy's discussion of "Repentance," a camera study in monotone by Pierre de la Bardier. Had you ever listened to President Soupy remarking that such and such was "taken on a Zeiss Super Iconta B with Metchnormatic Ultra-Lite film at an exposure of f5.6 with diaphragm—, etc.," you too would have been gay—aye, insanely gay—to have had him interrupted by a luscious looking pair of legs like that. Thus, everybody was happy. The LAFCA was happy; the lost-looking scientist with the galvanometer and other trivia was happy, and the three dapper young men were happy. Even John Smith was happy.

His happiness was obvious in the reluctance with which he took his departure, in his formality. He rose from his seat and said to the three dapper young men, of the hard, virtuous faces, "The Federal Bureau of Investigation, I presume?"

"Right," crisply, youngishly. "John Smith, alias Achilles Maravain, you are under arrest on charges of murder, seditious conduct, and high treason against the government of the United States. Will you come along quietly?"

Achilles—for it is as such he is to be referred to forever hence—did not come along quietly. He did not come along. In point of fact, he went his own way. The three grim young men of the FBI bitterly contested his going, and, since, as everyone knows nowadays, to touch Achilles Maravain was to undergo collapse, disintegration, and death, the results were unfortunate.

THIS was the first and perhaps most important incident in his history. It was the acorn from which sprouted that large and aberrant oak-tree that was Achilles Maravain.

The next important incident—a scene perhaps even more diverting than the last—was the Lincoln Heights scene. As the odds are against it that the reader of this is either an archeologist or some pervertedly informed devotee of ancient Los Angeles topography, it is excusable to mention that Lincoln Heights was the jail of the city, an institution comparable in purpose to our modern concentration camps, but differing in that it was merely a squat, few-story cement structure abundantly furnished with steel bars, locks, chains, gyves, paraphernalia, and policemen. Its architecture was thus ideal for Achilles' purposes. His purposes being to imprison the prison, purposes in which he succeeded.

His remarkable feat first manifested itself when Sergeant Leery crashed titanically into nothingness. Not actual nothingness—as was evidenced by its palpability—but a substance that, for all practical purposes, was nonexistent; all practical purposes that is except that of preventing exit or entry in regards to the Lincoln Heights jail. Sergeant Leery withdrew his nose a few paces, vigorously rubbing that injured

member, and stared quizzically at this absurd tangibility. He stared for a long and ponderous time and then began shouting. Minions of the law popped miraculously into view at this point, as if conjured there by the magic of Leery's stentorian voice. Miraculously they popped and popping, equally miraculously popped no more. The invisible barrier restrained them; it framed their popping faces, their popping eyes. It kept them within the building, sealing the doors, the windows, the walls. It was, in fact a prison; Achilles Maravain had imprisoned the prison.

Had he stopped there, there's a shade of a ghost's super-attenuated chance that all might have been forgotten, except perhaps by the infuriated gendarmerie and prisoners who were left permanently to their own devices within the Lincoln Heights jail. But Achilles didn't stop. He visited the First Street Headquarters Jail and imprisoned it. He visited all the jails. Likewise the insane asylums and the hospitals. Personal appearance tour, it was; an interstate tour. He went to Salt Lake City and there gave a repeat performance. Jails, hospitals, etc. Thence to Denver; thence to Topeka; thence to Kansas City. Followed by St. Louis. Followed by Indianapolis. And on all the way to the East Coast.

It is not to be supposed that he was uncontested in this progression. Very much to the contrary. He was shot at. Often and with the utmost accuracy was he fired upon. Apparently, however, with no effect for he seemed invulnerable.

Not elusive was our Achilles, not wily, not adroit. Not even clever. He was merely invulnerable and clumsily so to boot. He would wade into a mass of stalwart police or soldiers—the militia tried cannons on

him—and projectiles would simply bounce away from him. They would explode in the conventional manner. Only no fragments or concussion waves apparently could reach him. After this, the opposition would be scattered like the proverbial chaff.

It was a melee, a very horrifying and immensely entertaining mess. Chaos there was and wildness and fantasy and even fanaticism. Yes, even the latter. This last was instanced the time a group of misdirected fans of Achilles misconstrued him, and, in the belief that he was the Almighty, surrounded him in the midst of the pursuit of one of his more stirring enterprises. He misconstrued them, too. They still remain, so far as is known, in the housing he provided their zeal.

NOW we return to the beginning of the story. Not for the sake of confusion, but merely to pick up a most important thread. Remember the Camera Forum scene? And Los Angeles? Los Angeles, if you are following the mood of this story, is mere dust and collapse by now. Nevertheless, we return to the vanished metropolis and to the Forum, the three young men of the FBI, and to the lost-looking scientist with the galvanometer and other trivia—the scientist whom you probably never noticed, having been lost in the spell of her. The lost-looking scientist was happy, too.

His happiness lay in that he had come to a conclusion, one affecting Achilles Maravain. His conclusion was that Maravain was scientifically explainable. Not just his feats; not just the decimation he wrought upon police; not just the prisons in which he enveloped prisons. No—more than that—the works. Everything about Achilles Maravain—his per-

sonality; his attitude toward life, love and literature—all down to his very kneejerks.

First and most important of all, our Achilles had an inferiority complex. Definitely. The proposition that anyone who had actually, with reason, been called John Smith all his life did not have an inferiority complex was fantastic. But the man's actions proved it beyond doubt: he picked on criminals, insane, and the sick because he felt inferior to them, and compensated thus. Amazing logic? Well, everyone thought so at the time, although as you can see, it was really extraordinarily simple.

But, at the time, everyone was amazed, even the scientist himself. He gloried in it, glowed and, entering further into the spirit and tempo of his theories, babbled out point after telling point. Argued. Philosophized. He quoted statistics about the ratio of invention to the inferiority-complex and compared it with the results Achilles had obtained. He proved that ultra-vibrational force-walls—this being essentially what Achilles had developed for the demolition of law and order and for the production of honestagawd, fool-proof, tamper-proof prisons—were Machiavellian, Mephistophelian, and just plain hellish. Why invent them, then, except to demonstrate a superiority the inventor really didn't feel?

The scientist meditated further, brooded, calculated, grunted awhile and then predicted—or, as he put it: prognosticated—that Achilles would declare himself a dictator.

Which Achilles did.

In this, however, there was a flaw; here lay his weakness. Not in the actual fact that he protested himself the greatest and wisest of men, but that he attempted wiles. He didn't

come out with it forthrightly; he wasn't blunt as he had been with his interesting massacres. He proved himself cagey, contemptible, striking the Humanitarian pose. He was, he stated, producing all these absorbing newspaper stories for man's own good. Or, rather, Man's. Man with a capital M. A document he issued, long and scholarly. It reeked; it stank; it was crawling with hypocrisy and shoddy diplomacy. He took some thirty thousand words to indicate that pestilence, famine, and war was in existence. That thieving, murder, and kindred rot was also in evidence. He dithered about the general theme that this was horrible. Tediously he pedanted, hedging around concerning the Perfect State, eventually coming out into the open with his own private Perfect State plan. Revised and condensed it still reeked. Get rid of all the misfits and criminals and the insane. Prison up the squarepegs and breed them out. And then direct democracy just as the Greeks had.

Apparently he had never heard of economics. No one had told him that Greek democracy existed on the basis of a slave system. No one had told him of other things that had either been thought of, worked out, or had evolved according to the scientific laws concerning economics and society since the time of the Greeks. Achilles Maravain was stuck on Homeric Greek democracy—only he indicated that he, personally, would be Democrat Number One.

A GAIN we bewilder the reader with a thread from the beginning. Again we return to the Los Angeles Camera Forum Scene. This time to call to the mind of the elated reader that succulent item of femininity that first claimed our attention with her sprightly uncovering

of Achilles Maravain as the seemingly innocuous John Smith.

We find Cecile Douve, as she is known to the intelligence services of this and perhaps a few other countries, in a stinky little bedroom. Again don't get ahead of the story; she is merely investigating. Not engaged in active inquiry, if you follow me.

This stinky little bedroom, with massive volumes of a technical nature, broken test tubes, and other rot and junk of a like nature littering it, is the erstwhile bedroom of Achilles Maravain. He no longer inhabits it, although we can linger nostalgically for a moment, although we can sniff mystifiedly at the—peculiar—odors emanating from the broken test tubes, although we can tinker with the gimcracks and thingumbobs and machinery and no doubt shock ourselves into a reckoning with Old Scratch.

In any case, Cecile Douve is here searching for a clue to the whereabouts of Achilles. The scientist of the galvanometers is also here. His name is Harold Boscoe, and he is a Ph. D. Together, Cecile and the Ph. D. search and also engage in polite converse. They sniff not, mystifiedly or otherwise; they linger not on anything nor brood about the fact that perhaps here, in this very, very room was conceived the diabolicism of the force-wall. No, they search and converse.

"It must not happen. The man is a maniac," postulates Cecile prettily, then continues the efficient search.

"Honeybunch,"—evidently the poor egg has joined the clan of the lovelorn—"it shall not. I shall find something to combat him and his evil."

"Do you think you can do it, my pet?"

"Certainly. I'm a scientist, am I not? Just between you and me (and a few governments: Auth. Note) I'm working on something already. I have a magnificent conception that may well prove his downfall."

"Do you really think so? You're so wise—so—so marvelous."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes," a pause, then in husky tones, "really."

Embraces, osculations, and speeches. At precisely the right moment, when his devotion is white hot, she molds him and sends him back to work.

AT approximately this same time, there is going on a very important meeting of various high and significant officials of the government: the President, Vice President, Cabinet Members, House Committee on Achilles Maravain, Senatorial Investigation Committee on Achilles Maravain, the current successor to the Dies Committee, and the First Lady. Hubbub, clamor, chaos. The authoritative voice of the President lifts.

"Silence, please."

The Chairman of the House Committee on Achilles Maravain rises and addresses the President. "Mr. President," (cough), "we are led to believe that these are the facts of the case. There is (or are) a person (or persons) calling himself (or themselves) Achilles Maravain, who has been (or have been) imprisoning prisons, causing no end of annoyance and embarrassment, and who has (or have) proclaimed what purports to be the constitution of a new American state, founded after the manner of our Grecian predecessors in the experiment of democracy. The experiment of democracy, which, may I say, gentlemen" (voice takes ora-

torical tones) "has fulfilled all the most rosy hopes and expectations, which has turned a barren wilderness of thirteen original states into the magnificence and resplendency of—"

"We are all aware of that, Mr. Ainsworth." The President's grimace could rightly be termed sinister.

The Chairman sits down abruptly and the President continues. "In any event, gentlemen, we are confronted by a profoundly serious situation, coming as it is, at a time when we should bend every effort toward preparing for a war against the Old World. This person (or persons) known as Achilles Maravain is having a distressingly diverting effect upon us when all energies from that—er, madman—in Europe. Beyond doubt he is some pseudo-idealistic radical—perhaps an emissary of the Federation. Whatever he is, he has no full cognizance of the extreme gravity of our situation, and, as such will not assist us. Thus, he (or they) must be destroyed. What might any of you gentlemen suggest towards the speedy expedition of this destruction?"

The First Lady arises. "I'm not a gentleman," she simpers, "but—"

"Quite true. Sit down, please."

"Wait a moment. I have something to suggest. Perhaps you do not realize it, but I am indirectly responsible for the uncovering of Achilles Maravain, in Smith's clothing. It was one of my girls, Cecile Douve, who did the job. And we—she in active duty, and I as her patron—are continuing our efforts. As once she wormed her way into his affections, so shall she do it again. As once she effectively uncovered him, so shall she do a second time. I really promise you results, gentlemen. Results."

AND results she got. Results they were. The web, the power expended, the intricacies of thought, the drive of five hundred individuals were her results. The huge rolling mass of energy that was exhausted by five hundred highly specialized and superbly trained and educated beings was the result she directed against the insidious Mr. Maravain. And, most important of all, one person named Cecile Douve. Four hundred and ninety-nine engineers, scientists, technicians, and one little lump of hotcha generally known as Cecile Douve.

"I love you," she said.

Achilles replied. "The last time I believed that, you called in the FBI as witnesses to our mutual affection."

"I was mad, my darling. I didn't understand you." (Hushed, reverent tones.) "Even then I felt violently attracted to you, to you as a man, but your purposes and powers seemed so fearful . . . I thought you were a madman and myself a monster to love you. But now I know . . . when I read your wonderful proclamation, I realized how wrong I had been—how gentle and idealistic you are. I understood then your purity and realized the nobility of your aspirations.

"I love you."

She moved in for the clinch.

"It would only be fair to warn you," he replied, "that I still have the force screen armoring me. Cuddling under these conditions would be quite inadvisable."

She recoiled in a somewhat unamorous fashion.

"Still," he continued, "I love you, too. I don't want to trust you—but I do. Don't look hopeful my dear—I don't completely. Just to a certain, reasonable degree. So, here's what: if my noble aspirations pan out, as

I can't help but expect they will, I'll marry you. In the meantime, we can be friends. We can conduct a pleasant, frolicky little association, however—an entirely platonic one."

He sighed. "Would that Homer were alive today to write the story of Achilles Maravain as it should be written. Will I have poets worthy of me?"

This, she thought, could go on indefinitely. "How soon will it be?" she broke in. "When will you succeed? Can you make it very soon, my dearest?"

"It can't be any too soon for me, either, dewdrop—but restrain yourself."

"I can't—oh, I can't!" she cried. Heavy breathing, then, in more serious tones. "I know what to do. I have influence in Washington. I'll arrange an audience for you with the President. With the President and all of Congress. They'll see you."

"Nice of them, but I don't see the use of it."

"It might be of inestimable use, my darling. A direct impact of your personality and honesty and drive should convince them. It would be almost certain to convince them; they're only human, my dear. And think of the time and trouble we can save if they are ready to give in gracefully. Please!"

"Very well," he sighed. "I'll do it. Don't think for a moment I don't suspect treachery, my pet, but after all, I am invincible. You know that, I hope."

AND on this note ends the reconciliation. Immediately followed by much ado. Preparations while four hundred and ninety-nine engineers, etc., work in a veritable frenzy. And, out of their efforts and energy, there grows an amphithea-

tre, large and capacious. Pretty and modern. Beautiful.

This was to be the scene of the meeting. Here is to be decided the fate of more than a hundred and thirty million people. Here is to be expounded the rules and laws of a state founded on Grecian lines, on the classic examples.

Here, on March 15.

Beware of the Ides of March, O Caesar.

Glorious, powerful, invincible Achilles Maravain comes to the amphitheatre. Nowadays with the details and obscurities of the episode in history shuffled into relative inconspicuity, one doesn't know precisely how the cards fell or get the subtleties of the deal. Did any soothsayers annoy our equivalent of Caesar on his route; did his non-existent Calpurnia dream gorily the night before; did lionesses whelp in the streets, or did fierce, fiery warriors fight upon the clouds "which drizzled blood upon the capital"? Gangway for Homer, or even Shakespeare. Either of these two could have done justice to our play.

In any case, Achilles ignored whatever omens there might have been and came to the amphitheatre on March 15.

Cecile met him at the great, modern-looking portal and led him in, introducing him to her benefactress, the First Lady, who, in turn consummated the formalities with the President himself. Achilles was very well-behaved throughout these presentations, conducting himself with decorum and consideration for all the people who eyed his much-publicized armor with especial dubiety. He was very pleased with himself about the whole thing. All these key figures, these obstructions to his philosophy, this destructible humanity, ponder-

ous, ripe so to speak for explosions and force walls—and he showing such admirable restraint about it all. Indeed, he felt content. Restraint, control, self-discipline—these his watch-words.

The President didn't take him by the hand, the force wall preventing—but he did the next best thing. He preceded him to the raised dais in the centre of the amphitheatre and, from the spot, delivered a fetching little introduction about which no more severe a criticism can be applied than "superfluous." After this, Achilles began his talk.

Here also is the ubiquitous scientist of the lost-looking face. Apparently a member, if not a chieftain, of the clan of the four hundred and ninety-nine technicians. He is looking remarkably heroic at the moment. Almost gigantic—in a spiritual sort of way.

He turns and throws a switch.

And, in the amphitheatre, a globular hemisphere descends upon the dais supporting Achilles Maravain, immediately transforming him into a raging Achilles. A half-spheroid, transparent, glassy, but immensely malleable and tensile and strong.

UPSTAIRS in the little room in which stands the heroic and lost-looking scientist, the door flies open. Cecile Douve, betrayer extraordinary, hotcha extraordinary flies into his arms.

"Darling, the hemisphere is cracking—he's winning out. What'll he do to me?" All this excitedly. Then, ruminatively, almost sadly. "He won't want to marry me now."

"Never fear, my sweetness," replies the chieftain of the four hundred and ninety-nine. "We will win out. Earth science shall triumph. The hemisphere is just makeshift, to hold him in one spot for a minute or two. Earth'll really get going in a sec. Earth is insuperable. Classicism he wanted and classicism he'll get. Remember the first Achilles? He had a vulnerable spot. His heel!" The lost look was replaced by a malevolent grin, sage and content. "Achilles Maravain has a heel, too. It couldn't be protected by the force wall, could it? He doesn't walk on an inch of apparent nothingness does he? No. He's vulnerable, just as his Homeric predecessor. And we don't have to use clumsy poisoned arrows on this"—sneering emphasis—"heel." A wild laugh. "We just throw a shot of good old electricity into him."

On the dais, the violent, raging figure of John Smith, alias Achilles Maravain, colossus of the classics, exponent of the ages, Caesar omnipotent, stiffens convulsively as a couple of hundred thousand volts of electricity crisps his flesh. For a long moment, what is left of him remains upright. Then, quietly it falls.

Achilles number two seeks out his illustrious predecessor in Elysia.