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GAS!

By PAUL V. DALLAS

It seemed everyone in town was getting mighty careless in handling their gas jets—leaving them turned on and asphyxiating themselves into kingdom come. But Tom McCormack thought something far more sinister than carelessness was involved and he planned to prove it—even if he had to kill Mayor Farrall in the process.

THIS is Mayor Farrall speaking. This message comes to you as part of the current campaign aimed at eliminating the terrible tide of needless deaths caused by gas poisoning. Last night, fourteen people died in this city . . .”

The sound trucks were making their way throughout the city, blaring their message to the streets and buildings. The echoes swirled up the concrete canyons and the Mayor's words were carried by the wind down every side street and alley. Every hour on the hour the local radio and television stations broadcast excerpts from the same message, and the newspapers donated front-page space to the campaign. The reaction of the populace ranged from

complete cooperation—to the point of shutting off their gas completely and cooking on hot-plates—to annoyance at the repeated exhortations, and the conviction that this was all somehow a scheme cooked up in City Hall to guarantee the re-election of Mayor Farrall.

“ . . . making a total of fifty-six deaths from the careless handling of ordinary home gas for the week, and bringing the total since the epidemic came to public notice to seven hundred and twenty-three. Every one of these deaths—each and every one of them—was unnecessary! Fellow citizens, I urge you to exercise the greatest care . . .”

Tom McCormack walked over to the window and



**Were the tiny fiends real, or were they
spawned in his fevered mind?**

closed it. He had heard the message many times by now, and he had absorbed it. He supposed it was a good piece of work. The number of casualties from gas poisoning had risen alarmingly over the last few months, and drastic measures were no doubt in order, to try to educate the people to the menace of improperly handled gas outlets. But Tom had checked his own gas range dutifully and everything was okay there, so now he had had enough. He didn't trust the radio to leave the subject unmentioned, so he turned, instead, to his record player. He loaded it with long-play platters and settled down. He had several hours' work to do on the books for the Kutrite Manufacturing Company, and wanted to be left alone . . . no messages.

At one o'clock in the morning, Tom closed his books, his task completed, had a glass of milk and went to bed. At three-thirty he awakened, choking. Gas!

The apartment was full of it. With leaden, fumbling motions, Tom threw back the covers and got groggily to his feet. He put his hand to his head and tried to grasp the situation, but he couldn't focus. He stood there, swaying,

thinking he was dreaming, knowing he was awake. Then with a mighty effort, he shook himself into action and in his bare feet stumbled his way into the kitchen. He groped for the light switch. The smell of gas was much stronger in here . . . overpowering, sickening, drawing him into the sticky, bottomless pool of nausea and unconsciousness. He paused, bent almost double, supporting himself on the door, and then brought his tired, burning eyes to bear on the stove. Of the five gas controls, three were turned full on.

Tom let go of the door and lurched toward the stove. His bare feet stepped in a wet spot by the sink, where a leaky connection had formed a slippery pool. They shot out from under him and he crashed, striking his head on the floor.

Tom McCormack would have died right there, except for the fact that his limp body skidded across the floor and he came to rest with his face pressing up against the back door. The flow of clear air that sighed under the crack filled his lungs and allowed the spark of life to linger.

He lay there while his bodily processes fought back,

trying to overcome the effect of the poison he had inhaled. His eyes were closed, and his breath was coming in shuddering gasps, when he became aware of voices in the room. He tried desperately to turn, to answer the voices, to thank them for coming to his rescue, but he could not bend his body to his will. So he lay quietly, suspended between sleep and action, and listened.

"That was very good, men. But not good enough. There were delays . . . and timing is the essence of this operation. The Third Squadron will have to intensify their drills. Now just take time out to familiarize yourself with your environment, but stay close to the vapor line. That will be all."

The voice faded and a general hubbub arose as the remaining voices discussed the exercise. There were high spirits and loud laughter as they called to one another across the room, jubilant over their success.

Suddenly a cry was raised. "Over here, quickly. It's Ramm. He has fallen into the water."

Shouts of dismay came to Tom's ears, and cries of alarm spread throughout the room. Then a sad quiet stifled the

noise, and in the stillness a lone voice spoke.

"He's dead. He was splashed all over with water and he died almost instantly. Men, this tragedy illustrates again how important it is to keep your guard up at all times. You must keep your head under all conditions, and remember that water and air can kill.

"Quickly, now, we must take his remains with us. Officers! Rally your men and sound the retreat."

In the ensuing commotion, orders were barked, sounds of scurrying bounced off the walls and, as the noise retreated, silence returned, broken only by the ugly hiss of escaping gas.

Tom's breathing grew deeper; he stirred as he pressed his face closer to the source of fresh air, Gulping desperately at the restoring oxygen, he tried to make sense of what he had heard, but in his dizziness, sense eluded him. He lay prone for several long moments; when he thought he had gathered sufficient strength, he took a final deep breath and held it, pressing his lips tightly together.

He got drunkenly to his feet and lurched toward the stove. Reaching it, he turned

the handles, shutting off the deadly fumes. The burning in his lungs spread through his body, saturating his being with nausea and sending his brain spinning. Knowing that his life depended on it, he forced his feet in the direction of the window and with his last reserve of strength, drew it open. He collapsed to his knees, letting his head rest on the windowsill. He knew he had saved himself. Gratefully he breathed in the cool early morning air, content to do nothing more.

Finally the sickness left Tom's stomach and his head steadied. New strength flooded through his limbs and he became conscious. He got to his feet; walking unsteadily, he made his way into the bedroom and opened the window. Then he flung himself on the bed and reviewed his close call. The one all-important point of which he was sure was that he had checked the stove before retiring, and it was turned off. He was certain of that. What could have happened to turn it on?

Still moving with great effort, he walked through the three rooms of his apartment, checking the windows and both front and rear doors. All the windows were closed and locked. Both doors were lock-

ed and their chains were in place. He went back to his bed and flopped on top of the covers, thinking.

As his mind wandered over the problem, he remembered with surprise the conversations he had heard while lying semi-conscious on the kitchen floor. His first thought was to dismiss the event as an hallucination, but as he probed the mystery deeper and more thoroughly, he realized that the most unlikely solution was the only one. Somehow or other, the control valves of his stove had been opened from the inside! Abruptly he sat up and reached for the phone on his night table.

He asked the operator for the night number of the gas company. After a long wait, a sleepy voice answered him.

"I hate to trouble you at this time," Tom began, "but this is urgent. Can you tell me, is it possible for the control valves to be turned on by a buildup of pressure within the gas pipe?"

"Is this an emergency?" the voice asked in a bored tone. "If it is you've gotta give me your name and address."

"No, no," Tom assured him. "It isn't that kind of emergency. I just want to know..."

"Look, Mac," the man said, "if it ain't an emergency, call back after nine o'clock. This is the number for night emergencies only."

"I know, I know," Tom pleaded with the man to stay on the phone, "only please, I've got to know just one thing. Can the gas pressure in the pipes build up so that it can force open the valve on a stove?"

"Why doncha sleep it off and quit bothering a working man?"

"I'm not drunk." Tom was desperate. "Please, mister, this is very important. Could the gas pressure . . ."

"Of course not!" the ear-phone roared at him. "The gas pressure don't get that high, and if it did, a pipe would bust or a connection would let go—but the valves don't turn on by themselves."

"You're sure of that? You're absolutely certain?"

"Aw, lay off, Mac, I told ya, didn't I? Gas don't turn on no valves by itself. Now go to sleep, will ya, bud, and if you have any more questions call after nine."

The click indicated that the night man had hung up, and Tom slowly replaced the receiver.

He was still sitting on the edge of his bed. Except for

an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach, the effects of the gas had left him, and his normally acute mind raced around the problem, seeking a way into the heart of the enigma. Eliminating all the impossibles, he found himself left with the one answer which, improbable as it seemed, was the only remaining explanation. The longer he thought about it, the more convinced he became, and he continued to turn the thing over in his mind as he shaved and dressed. He knew he would have to act on his discovery.

When the custodian opened the doors of City Hall at nine o'clock, a citizen was waiting on the steps. It was Tom McCormack. He rushed into the cavernous building, consulted the directory and walked swiftly down the corridor leading to the Mayor's office. He was stopped at the outer office by several secretaries and a couple of guards, who were annoyed at him for interrupting their first order of business—the leisurely drinking of containered coffee.

One dowdy-looking woman gave him her attention.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"The Mayor," said Tom. "I want to see the Mayor."

"Yeah? Well, he isn't in.

You'll have to come back," she answered, sipping her coffee.

"When will he be in?"

"I couldn't say."

Tom whipped out a notebook. "May I have your name, miss?" he asked, pencil poised.

"What do you want my name for?" she asked suspiciously, as she put down the container.

"I have to have a record of everyone I speak to, for the committee," he replied innocently.

"What committee?"

"The committee on the gas campaign," Tom answered. "Your name, please."

"Well, now, wait a minute," the secretary hedged. "Let me see what I can do. I'll be right back." She left him and went through a door at the rear. He waited, pleased that his little ruse had worked. With the gas campaign receiving such publicity, he had figured that no one at City Hall would want to buck a committee on the subject.

The woman came back and smiled at him. "Mayor Farrall is in his office, now," she said. "He'll see you. But just for a few minutes, you understand. He's very busy."

"Thanks," he said, following her into the Mayor's office.

Mayor Farrall sat at the big executive desk; he looked up as Tom walked in. The Mayor's face was a mixture of greeting and question.

Without waiting to be asked, Tom seated himself in the chair facing the city executive.

"Good morning, Mayor Farrall," he said. "I've come to see you on a matter of the utmost importance."

"Ah, yes, gas, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir, I believe I have found the answer to the recent wave of gas deaths."

The Mayor straightened up, brightening. "You have?" he said eagerly. "Well, what's the answer?"

"I'd like to give you a little background, Mayor, if I may."

"Yes, but please keep it brief. I'm quite familiar with the background, you know."

"I would just like to point out, sir, that there is no reasonable explanation for the fact that gas is being turned on unexpectedly, all over the city, killing people."

"Of course there is no reasonable explanation," Mayor Farrall said. "It's carelessness, just plain carelessness."

"No, sir, carelessness does not explain it at all. To begin with, seven hundred people don't suddenly get careless in

an ever-mounting pattern—and heaven only knows how many were affected before it was ever noticed that a pattern was developing.”

“All right, then,” the Mayor said, “what is your point? Defective equipment? We’ve checked the stoves in every apartment where a death occurred and they were all in perfect order. No, sir. Equipment is not the answer.”

“I agree with you, sir. The equipment is not to blame at all.”

“Well, then, what is your point?” the Mayor asked impatiently.

Tom drew a deep breath. “The valves are being opened from the inside, sir.”

If he expected the Mayor to react violently to the idea, he was disappointed. The man just looked at him as if he expected him to continue, and when he didn’t, the Mayor said, “Why, we know they’re being turned on from the inside. The people turn the damn things on inside their apartments—and carelessness does the rest.”

“I didn’t mean that, sir. I meant that something inside the gas pipes is turning on the valves.”

“How do you mean?” the

Mayor asked, regarding Tom with a fixed stare.

“I believe, sir, that there is life of some sort. A type of being that exists within the gas piping, who manages to turn the valve, releasing the gas into the rooms.”

“And just what do you think is their purpose in doing this?”

“In my opinion, they’re planning some sort of action against us, sir,” Tom answered. “I’m convinced that these sorties are merely rehearsals of the main attack—which may come at any time.”

Mayor Farrall leaned back and studied the young man.

“Do you,” he finally asked, “have any idea how we can thwart their plans?”

“Yes, sir, I do. As a matter of fact, I know that water, ordinary tap water, kills them! We could install water filters at the source and filter all the gas before it is piped to the homes and factories. That would kill them.”

“Ah, but you’ve overlooked the ones that are in the pipes now.”

“They could easily be taken care of,” Tom explained. “At a given time, all stoves all over the city must be turned off, and water run through the pipes. That would kill any that were in there—and from

then on, the filter would handle them."

"Just one more question," the Mayor said. "Have you any notion of how these, ah, creatures got into the lines?"

"I've given that a lot of thought, sir . . . I believe that the influx into the lines has something to do with the changeover from manufactured to natural gas. It was just about that time that these mishaps started occurring. I think that they live in the great wells of natural gas which are now being tapped for our supply."

"And how they got in the wells. You have a theory?" The Mayor's eyebrows teetered in the up position.

"Not exactly, although they might even have come from outer space. Many planets have atmospheres not unlike the natural gas we use. And if a form of life did exist on those planets, there might be some connection."

"I see," Mayor Farrall said. "Now tell me, what committee are you representing?"

Tom smiled. "Oh, that," he said. "To tell you the truth, I don't belong to any committee, sir; I just used that as a means of gaining admittance."

"In other words you are not

connected with any committee or organization at all, Mr. . . .?"

"Tom McCormack. That's right, I'm afraid—I really don't belong to any lodge, even."

"I see," the Mayor said. "And now you want me to pump water through all the gas lines in the city, and announce that I'm doing it to kill creatures from outer space that live in the pipes. That's what you want?"

"I admit it sounds implausible, Mr. Mayor, but you and I know that there can be no other explanation."

"Mr. McCormack, I shall make you a proposition."

"Yes, sir," Tom answered eagerly.

"When you leave this office, neither of us will mention this conversation again. We shall keep it quiet, you understand, as long as you give me your solemn word to seek competent psychiatric aid immediately."

"Psychiatric aid?" Tom said, stunned.

The Mayor nodded. "I imagine you are overwrought, young man. A sleepless night or two, perhaps. If I felt it was anything more serious than that, I would have you committed direct. Do you accept my proposition?"

"But, Mr. Mayor . . ." Tom protested.

"Yes or no?"

Tom gave up. "Yes, sir," he mumbled. "I'll do as you say."

"Good. Fine. And now, good day, sir. You'll be yourself again soon, believe me."

For the next few days, Tom plunged into his work. He took on more accounts than he normally handled, and in the secure world of books and pages and columns of figures, his experience with the gas creatures faded into the thick fuzziness of suppressed memory. When he did think of it, he found himself questioning whether it had ever happened. But in his conscious mind he never wavered. Under the circumstances, he dismissed the thoughts and buried himself in his work. He made one concession to his troubled mind. He devised tiny padlock-and-hasp arrangements, with which he locked each gas control handle individually. In order to turn the gas on in his stove, it was first necessary to use the keys, which he carried on him at all times. It could never be opened from the inside. The pilot light, he shut off altogether; he used matches, and felt safe.

After a particularly brutal

day, Tom sank into bed exhausted. He was not a dreamer, so he fell immediately into a deep, restoring sleep. The alarm clock was set to awaken him at six o'clock—but he awoke at three. He was suffocating! His breath tearing in agonized gasps through his gaping mouth. The room was heavy with gas.

He lay almost paralyzed from the effects of the poison seeping into his body through his lungs. His brain whirled, spinning, it seemed, through the room, spiralling up to the ceiling, brushing the floor, ricocheting off the walls. And soon it became aware of the voices.

"Now, that was fine, men. This operation points up the necessity for moving up our target date. Were it not for the excellent work done by the reconnoitering squad, we would not have been able to complete this night's assignment. Our leader feels that we are now ready for the push, and we must attack before the habit of outside locking becomes universal. This, then, will be the final exercise. Five days from today, we strike the final, overwhelming blow. This city will be the lead-off point, and you will have the privilege of starting the entire operation.

"Five days from today, all the natural gas available will be piped into the streets of this city, and we shall be able to overrun the entire area. We shall once again live on the surface, as we did on our beloved planet. Our lives below ground will be behind us, and we shall make this the sister planet to our own glorious home.

"Take a good look, men—this will be your last visit until the final assault. Officers! Rally your men. Sound the retreat."

The voices and the noises melted into the darkness, and Tom was left alone in the foul smelling room, lulled by the angry hiss of gas. He squirmed. Somewhere deep within his remaining consciousness he perceived a warning that he must act or die. He strained mightily to respond . . . but his arms and legs, made heavy through lack of oxygen, could not be budged.

Tom slipped backward into the pleasant reverie of near death. His chest was working convulsively now, though he was not aware of it. He started down the easy slope to complete, eternal sleep. Then with one tremendous gathering of his last remnant of strength, he jerked his arm out, grasped the alarm clock

and hurled it across the room. His last conscious memory was the happy sound of splintering glass, crashing musically onto the sidewalk below.

It worked. Beautiful, elusive Luck, which can stick like glue or vanish in the mountaintops, brought Patrolman Bennett under the window just as the clock came sailing through. Within seconds, Tom's door was broken in, and many hands brought succor. Patrolman Bennett found the gas outlet, high up on the bedroom wall, a long-disused fixture once used for gaslight, and turned it off. An inhalator squad sped through the empty streets, and soon Tom McCormack was in a hospital bed. He was drugged and put into an oxygen tent. He came out of it almost forty-eight hours later. The drugs had worn off; his lungs, washed with pure oxygen, were fresh and clean—and he was hungry.

It took him several hours to digest the fact that he had been laid up for almost two days, to remember what he had heard and to plan what he must do. He discarded immediately the idea of a straightforward approach. He had tried that once before—and he had almost died, as a

result. And this time, he was racing the clock. Three days. Seventy-two hours, in which to convince the authorities and put the water-flushing plan into effect. He called for his clothes, overrode the vigorous protests of the nurse, the doctor and the hospital staff, and checked himself out.

Tom went straight home. From one of the valises stored high on a closet shelf, he extracted a pistol. A German P-38—the officers' model—his only souvenir. He checked the clip. Eight snub-nosed, ugly bullets pressed upon each other. He inserted the clip, but left the firing chamber free. Then he went to City Hall.

There is a certain business-like, purposeful manner which gets things done, and, for the first time in his life, Tom had it. He brushed aside all queries and objections, and strode unannounced into the Mayor's office.

Mayor Farrall was at his desk.

"Oh, it's you again," he said, as he recognized his visitor. "Are you still worried about little men in your gas pipes?"

Tom looked uncomfortable. For a moment he hesitated and reviewed his plans. Then,

resigning himself to what he had to do, he said firmly, "Your Honor, I'm certain of what I told you before. There definitely *are* little men, or creatures of some sort, in the gas lines. I have also found out that we have very little time left before they launch their big push."

Mayor Farrall had had just about enough of this. He was a very busy man, and he did not intend to waste any time on crackpots.

"Now, look here, McCormack," he said impatiently, "in my opinion, you're a positive menace. In times like these, there's always someone who goes completely haywire and stirs up the public. Can you imagine what would happen, if your fantastic story were given to the press? Well, I'll tell you. Ninety percent of the people would laugh and enjoy the joke, but the other ten percent might take the thing seriously . . . and they could tie up the city's emergency system with a whole raft of false alarms. They would be seeing little men every time they made a cup of coffee or boiled an egg. I'm warning you, young man, that if I ever hear you telling that story again, anywhere, I'll have you put in a safe place,

where anything you say will be all right."

Tom shivered involuntarily. He detested violence, and he knew the enormity of what he was about to do . . . but the situation was so desperate that he felt any risk was worthwhile. He pulled the big, awkward pistol from his jacket pocket and pointed it at the dumbfounded Mayor.

"I'm sorry, Mayor Farrall, but you'll just have to listen." The gun centered unwaveringly on the man's chest. "At best, you have two days to live. If you don't do as I say, you will have less than two minutes. I am fully prepared to shoot you right here. At least that might attract attention to the terrible danger which is about to engulf the city.

"I want you to follow me and do exactly as I say."

When a loaded gun is suddenly pointed at a man by a desperate character who has just been giving every evidence of lunacy, the true test of that man's courage is at hand. To Mayor Farrall's credit, he did not flinch. Instead he tried to talk reasonably to the young man.

"Look here, McCormack," he said. "This sort of thing won't help. Maybe I didn't

realize how seriously you took this thing . . . but if you're really this earnest about it, maybe we can talk the whole problem over and arrive at some solution."

The gun pointed steadily at the Mayor's chest.

"It's too late for that, your Honor," Tom said. "I would never have gone this far, if I weren't prepared to see it through all the way. I know what's on your mind, and I can understand that you'd think you were doing your duty if you tried to have me arrested. But if you do, I'll shoot you down. Remember that, please, Mayor, because if I have to shoot you, I'll be very sorry, but I'll shoot. It has to be this way."

The Mayor placed both his hands on the surface of the desk. There was no use taking chances that this young man might pull the trigger by mistake.

"All right," he said. "What do you want me to do?"

"We are going over to my place," Tom answered him. "I'm going to prove to you once and for all that I am not crazy."

"This is an odd sort of a way to go about proving a point like that," Mayor Farrall observed. Then as he saw the glint in Tom's face, he

added hastily, "But I'll come with you, if you say so."

"Good. Now we'll leave together." Tom placed his hat over the hand holding the automatic. "I shall be right behind you, or at your side, so I needn't warn you not to try anything. Even if they jump me, you'll never know it. A bullet in the spine paralyzes if it doesn't kill. Remember that, as we go."

"Of course, of course." The Mayor was perspiring. "But what will I tell them? After all, I have several important appointments this morning, and if I just walk out on them . . ." He spread his hands. He felt it best to stall. The longer this madman stayed, the better the chance that something would happen to defeat him.

"That'll be your worry, Mayor. I won't tell you what to do or what to say. Just remember that if you say the wrong thing, it'll be your own problem. Now let's go." The hand covered by the hat waved towards the door.

The Mayor stood up and as he did, his hand moved imperceptibly to the button hidden under the overhang of his desk. A public official must have some sort of protection against the cranks

who every now and then slipped by the protective screening. The button sounded a buzzer in the room of the police captain stationed at City Hall. It was all worked out in advance. The police didn't just come running and bursting into the Mayor's office. . . . The emergency signal could mean anything. Might even be a madman with a gun, who would start shooting at the slightest upset.

When Mayor Farrall left his office, with Tom McCormack right at his heels, he mumbled a few words to his secretary. He was just going out for a few minutes, he advised her—would she just hold up his schedule, and he would be back shortly. Everything went smoothly.

Outside, Tom hailed a cab, and both men got in. Tom, still holding the gun trained on the Mayor, gave the driver his address, and they settled back. Neither of them saw the black sedan that pulled away from the curb in back of them and slid into place behind the taxi.

When they got to Tom's apartment, he handed the driver two bills and told him to keep the change. The Mayor got out first and Tom followed with the hat. And the gun. They walked up the

stone steps of the apartment building and went inside. As they passed through the door, the black sedan drew silently up to the curb and five serious-looking men got out.

Tom unlocked his door and let the Mayor in. Mayor Farrall looked about him. There was nothing about the tidy orderliness of the place to indicate an unbalanced mind. But that didn't mean much. The man with him lived here, and there was no question about it . . . he was a madman. The Mayor hoped his signal had worked; he had no way of knowing.

For his part, Tom wasted no time. Leading the Mayor into the kitchen, he seated him in a chair. He opened a kitchen drawer and drew out the cord he had placed there earlier; with this, he bound Mayor Farrall tightly and expertly to the chair. He swung it around so that the Mayor faced the stove. Then he pulled the key from his pocket.

"You'll notice, sir," he said, "that all these controls are locked. That's to prevent their being opened from the inside."

"By the little men?"

"That's right. Now I'm going to unlock them and open the valves; this will release

the gas and, if my theory is correct, the creatures will come right out with it and you will hear them."

Mayor Farrall strained at the cords, the first real stages of panic beginning to take hold of him.

"But see here, McCormack, if you open the gas, we'll both be killed. You can see that, can't you?" he pleaded. "The only way to settle this is scientifically. We can have the gas analyzed, and then your theories can be proved conclusively."

"Not a chance," Tom said, shaking his head and turning on the gas. "You know yourself how much you wanted to test the gas when I first came into your office. You wanted to have me locked up. Well, the only way is to let you see for yourself . . . then you'll see that action is taken. Without a second's delay."

The pungent smell of the escaping gas spread through the room, and the Mayor coughed. Perspiration was streaming down his face as he struggled vainly to get loose.

"Take it easy, Mayor. I'm going to leave you alone in here and close the door. I'll be back when you've had time to hear the creatures. Don't worry, I won't let you suffo-

cate." With that, Tom left the room.

But the Mayor worried. The room was rapidly filling with the poison.

As Tom reached the living room, he put the gun in his pocket and was about to sit down when there was a pounding on the front door.

"We know you're in there, McCormack," someone shouted through, "and we know you've got Mayor Farrall with you. Now we'll give you just two minutes to open the door and come out with your hands up. You haven't got a chance, McCormack. The place is surrounded, so come on out."

Tom swallowed hard. He jumped to his feet, pulling the gun out of his pocket. He flattened himself against the wall, just to one side of the door. He had to see this through—nothing could interfere with his plans now. Just a few more minutes! Already the smell of gas, seeping under the kitchen door, told him that the Mayor was going to be hearing the creatures any minute now. He cleared his throat and made his voice tough.

"Listen, you!" he snarled. "I've got the Mayor right here with me. If you make a move to break in, I'll kill him. In

five minutes, I'll open the door and you can all come in... but if you try anything before that, you'll have a dead Mayor on your hands. Get me?"

The voice through the door became soothing.

"Now, son. You don't want no trouble. Why don't you just open the door, and we won't say anything more about it, huh?"

"You heard what I said," Tom answered, keeping his tone grating, rough. "One move out of you guys and I blow off the top of his head. Now go away, and come back in five minutes."

Tom sensed rather than heard the noise at the window and whirled around to see it crash inward as a man leaped through, charging at him, low, like a fullback. Another man followed, and then another. He was hit hard and fell, crushed against the floor and the wall. As the heavy bodies of the two men blotted out light and sound, the door splintered and fell to the floor. He heard shouts and running feet. Then the bodies lifted themselves off him, and he was being pulled to his feet.

He got his wind back, and saw the men in the kitchen. They had opened the windows

and turned off the gas. The two men who held him had his arms twisted behind him, and now one of them whipped out a pair of handcuffs and in one practiced move applied them to his wrists.

They had unbound the Mayor now and were carrying him, still in the chair, in from the kitchen. The man was barely conscious, his head was swaying gently to and fro and his body sagged limply in the chair. They set him down in the middle of the living room, and one detective started fanning him with a magazine from the table.

One man detached himself from the group and walked up to Tom, who had been witnessing the scene with mixed feelings of rage, despair and frustration.

"Okay, bub, you'll come along with us. Kidnapping and attempted homicide."

The man grasped Tom's arm and swung him around. They started out the door together, but were stopped by a loud spluttering; Mayor Farrall, coming to, was alternately coughing his lungs out and trying to bellow something.

"That boy," the Mayor panted, heaving and pointing a finger at Tom, "hold him!"

"Yes, sir," the detective an-

swered. "We're taking him to headquarters."

A paroxysm of coughing shook the Mayor . . . his eyes were running. "No, no," he managed to gasp. "Hold him here. Take those handcuffs off him."

He was getting back to normal now, although his eyes were still watery and he was breathing hard. "We've got work to do." He turned to one of the other men. "Jim," he said, "get the Commissioner of Water Supply and Gas down to my office."

Tom's eyes widened. "You heard them, sir?"

"Yes, son, I heard them." The Mayor attempted a weak smile. "I guess there was no other way you could do it."

Tom relaxed. "And I'm really sorry about . . ."

"Forget it, son. But tell me one thing. You're sure that water kills them?"

"Yes, sir. I remember when one of them slipped and fell into a puddle . . ."

The Mayor silenced him with an upraised hand. "That's good enough. I'll take your word for it."

The group of hardened men looked blankly from one another to Mayor Farrall and then to Tom. They were perplexed. But Tom McCormack was grinning happily. **THE END**