

JANUARY  
1942

VOLUME 16  
NUMBER 1

# AMAZING STORIES

TRADE MARK REGISTERED

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Volume 16  
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# LIFE FOR

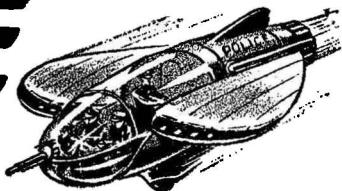


"Rebel!" she cried. "Throw off the tyrants who rule us from Science Tower!"

# SALE

by

ALFRED BESTER



**Life For Sale, Inc. had exactly that to sell. And they sold it—because even if air is free, you've got to breath it . . .**

**F**OR the love of mud, are you going to let a pack of women make you jittery?" laughed Guthry Wilder, Chief of Scienticity. He grinned at the other Department Heads gathered in the Broadcasting studio. "You're all as jumpy as a flea circus with the itch."

"It's not a case of jitters," protested Billy Freeman, "I'm only throwing out an idea for what it's worth. I just said I was worried about two hundred Helicopters hanging ten thousand feet over-

head all morning . . . And now Fray Gilbert's speech . . ."

"Them Helios are probably an advertising stunt," grunted Jinx Cauldwell. He was tall and indolent, but his speech had a caustic quality. It seemed to enrage Billy Freeman.

"Yeah?" he said. "Well, listen to this." He went to the control board and snapped a switch.

Instantly the great viso-screen took life. They saw the tiny figure of a girl gesticulating on a platform. Below her,



dressed in the red and blue uniforms of the Suffragette Party, hordes of women screamed and waved white-flashing arms.

"... This is the twenty-first century," cried Fray Gilbert in a bell-clear voice. "This is Scienticity, the scientific center of the world. Here, we women work side by side with the men. We work as hard and as well; and yet we're excluded from the Governing Board of the City. The women of all other cities throughout the world have the vote . . . but not us . . ."

"Funny," laughed Guth Wilder, "how a principle can make an idiot out of a gal. No offense, Steve."

"I can take it," groaned Steve Emory, Chief of Physiology. "If I'd known Fray was going to start this foolishness, I'd never have started dating her."

Guth Wilder paced to the window of the Broadcasting Control room. Below them, on the broad green lawn before the building, was the Suffragette Demonstration that was being broadcast. Guth thrust open the crystal window and listened to the cacophony that drifted up through the warm afternoon air. Fray Gilbert's voice sounded clearly. Her words from the studio "mike" called like an echo.

"We demand proportional representation," she cried. "This is not the dark age. We are all Scienticitizens; we have as many rights as men. I tell you, unless we are granted the vote, we shall have to take matters in our own hands!"

A scream of approval went up.

"You hear that?" demanded Billy Freeman. He pointed overhead. "You see those white Helios? Drifting up there all morning. Why? I'll tell you. This Gilbert woman is organizing a putsch. Those Helios are waiting up there for a signal. When Fray Gilbert

says the words, they'll come swooping down and let hell break loose!"

"Ridiculous!" snorted Steve Emory. "You fellows don't know Fray. She may get excited about an ideal, but she'd never do anything like that."

"No . . . Wait a minute." Guth stared down at the demonstration and then up at the Helios soaring like specks of silver. "Maybe Billy isn't so wrong. You better cut her off, son. Let her finish her speech, but don't broadcast any more."

"I knew you'd see light!" exclaimed Billy Freeman. He dashed to the control panel and began throwing switches. The image on the viso-screen faded. The voice was chopped off. Through the studio windows they could hear it continue.

"This is silly," complained Emory. "Fray will be furious when she finds out."

"Maybe not so silly," drawled Jinx Cauldwell. "Seems to me Guth usually has an A-1 hunch for the things he does."

"It's only a hunch," admitted Guth. He looked around at the Department Chiefs who had gathered in the Studio. A dozen young men, the cream of the world's scientific talent. It gave him a feeling of security to know they were behind him, ready to back up any one of his hunches. The responsibility of directing Scienticity lay heavy on his own young shoulders.

**T**HROUGH the broad open window of the Studio came the dull clamour of a mob. The shrills of women's voices punctuated by men's shouts. Fray Gilbert had ceased speaking.

The Department Chiefs glanced curiously at each other, then moved to the window to look out again, their light metal-fabric tunics rustling. The Broadcasting Studio was set in a small park,

and from the window the men could easily examine the tree studded lawn below them.

They stared, then shouted with laughter. A small parade had formed and was marching around the Studio. A parade of women, in ragged ranks, all carrying the red and blue banners of the Suffragette Party. They sang snatches of their party anthem and were screaming excitedly. Banners read: WE WANT TO VOTE and DOWN WITH MEN and NO REPRESENTATION, NO PRODUCTION. But most ridiculous of all, the women had stripped off their clothes and were marching stark naked!

Crowds of jeering men lined the sidewalks around the park and gaped. The guards before the Studio gates had left their posts for a better look, and were nearly doubled up with laughter. The afternoon sun filtered through the towering buildings and glinted on the nude bodies. From far to the east came the faint howls of police sirens.

"And that," laughed Guth Wilder, "is what wants to vote. These are the women who want to sit at the Governing Board with us."

"The more I look," grinned Billy Freeman, "the more I'm inclined to like the idea."

The park packed solidly with human flesh, the women still trying to march, the bystanders crowding around, yelling and guffawing. It was the most unprecedented mob scene that had yet taken place since the turn of the twenty-first century. As the police drove up and knifed their way through the jammed thousands, the lawn turned into a roiling mass of confusion.

The Department Chiefs of Scientific leaned far out to watch the fun, and only dimly through the confusion did they hear a woman's voice behind them. Curt and incisive.

"Turn around!"

As he withdrew his head from the window, Guth Wilder was only vaguely conscious of the interruption. He turned easily and saw the others of his staff yanking in their heads. Then he started as he realized that the Studio had filled up with women. They were drawn up, ten of them, before the broad instrument-lined wall, all in the smart red blouses and blue shorts of the Suffragette Party. A little before them stood a tall girl.

She had flaming red hair and fierce green eyes, and her full mouth was drawn into a severe line. Her legs were long and straight and under the light blouse, Guth could see the trembling rise and fall of her high breasts. But the gleaming Chron-gun in her hand was a little too real, and it looked like a cannon in her long fingers as she advanced slowly.

"Sit down," she said. She motioned the gun at the others.

WILDER eased his big frame into a crystal chair and nodded to his men. Then, for a few minutes, there was no sound in the large office but the echo of shouts and screams from the park.

"Very nice," said Wilder at length. "Is this a social call?"

"In heaven's name, Fray!" cried Steve Emory, "are you out of your mind?"

"The name," she said acidly to Emory, "is *Miss* Gilbert . . . and this happens to be a business call." She turned to Guth. "Now listen to me, Mister Wilder and all the rest of you fatuous, conceited Governors. I expected at least the right of free speech and fair play from you."

"Now, now," soothed Guth. He didn't like the looks of those Chron-Guns. One little blast could paralyze

a man for keeps.

"I knew you cut off my broadcast within a minute," snapped Fray Gilbert. "I had aides listening in waiting for just such a dirty trick . . . and I had that parade of mine outside organized to take care of such an emergency. In the past you've laughed at our demand for a vote in Scienticity affairs. I think my ruse for breaking into the Broadcasting Studios may twist that laugh to the other side of your face."

"Very adroit," nodded Guth. "You attracted the attention of the guards in front of the gate with that mass strip-tease and slipped in unnoticed." Rapidly he calculated the odds. There were twelve men to eleven women. Easy enough but for the fact that they were strapping gals who seemed to know how to handle their Chron-guns.

"Please, Fray," broke in Emory. "Can't we talk this over reasonably. You're letting yourself in for an awful mess . . ."

"Shut up, Steve. Now . . . we don't like you, Mister Wilder," she continued in flat tones. "We've worked in the labs of Scienticity just as hard as the men. When we've asked for a vote in the city affairs you've brushed us aside as though we don't count."

Guth laughed.

"And now you're going to show me that you do count," he said. "Look, Miss Gilbert, you're too pretty to talk politics behind a gun. Why get so excited? It's not really that important, is it?"

"Let's understand each other," returned Fray icily. "We're serious about this. We intend to take matters in our own hands. Even if it means bloodshed and violence."

"What did I tell you!" exclaimed Billy Freeman. "Those damned white Helios floating around up there . . ."

"Shut up, Billy!" snapped Guth. He

arose despite the menace of the gun. "Well, Miss Gilbert, what's on your mind? A slight case of murder?"

"A slight case of Broadcast," she returned. "I'm going on the air again, here in this studio, and I'm going to finish my speech. If that doesn't awaken Scienticity to the glaring injustice, I'm prepared to take more urgent measures."

"Ah," smiled Guth. He motioned to his staff. "All of us are Department Chiefs and comprise the Board of Governors. You wouldn't intend to use us as the price of women's suffrage, would you?"

"If you make it necessary," answered Fray grimly. She waved the Chron-gun at Billy Freeman, Chief of Radio. "And now, Mister Freeman, if you will tell your crew to prepare a studio for me . . ."

Her Chron-gun blasted as Wilder leaped forward. The blast whistled over his shoulder. He shouted and caught the girl's arm, yanking her against his chest. Billy Freeman, lightning-fast, had already plunged forward and tackled one of the Suffragettes. There were high shrill cries as the other men rushed. Then the Chron-guns roared.

**G**UTH thought he had tangled with a wildcat. She lashed her arm free and whipped the heavy gun across his temple, but as he slumped, he dragged her down to the smooth steel floor with him.

He managed to look around. Case Conway, the Metabolism Chief, was floundering alongside the control panel, clutching a gory shoulder. Over against the viso-screen, his staff had closed with the Suffragettes and were struggling to take the Chron-guns from the clawing girls.

"Lie still," hissed Guth, "and I won't hurt you!"

His arm around the girl's waist crushed her against him. He could feel the hard young muscles writhe as she punched at him with her free hand. He shook her wrist once, so savagely that the gun flew from her fingers and clattered across the floor. Then he gazed down at her vivid features.

Suddenly Guth forgot that he was a Lord of Scienticity, one of the rulers of a million scientists. He forgot that this was the girl whom Steve Emory had been rushing for almost six months. He could only think that he was thirty years old and had never before been so close to a lovely spit-fire; that he was thirty years old and had never had time enough to fall in love.

"Be quiet," grinned Guthry Wilder. "This won't hurt."

He bent his head and kissed her.

And at that moment he nearly died. His heart paused . . . clutched and stuttered. His breath stopped and his frame was wracked with an agonizing palsy. He was conscious of blackness before his eyes and a roaring in his ears . . . as though he were drowning.

He took a breath, and another, his heart pounding under the strain. There was something horribly wrong with his lungs. They had forgotten how to work. They would only fill with air when he remembered to inhale.

The fighting in the Broadcasting Studio had stopped. Guth looked around wildly and saw that the others too were gasping spasmodically, a look of terror on their faces. Outside, the streets were silent.

Pumping his lungs laboriously, Guth got to his feet. He walked toward the Studio window and never realized he progressed across the slick steel floor like a crooked, deformed thing with hunched back and twisted spine. All he knew was that the lawn and streets before the Broadcasting Building were

cluttered with spasmodically jerking humans, crawling on the ground.

He almost fell from the window-sill before he remembered to pump his lungs and drive back the sick, dizzy blackness that had swept over him. He thought: God in Heaven! Respiration has suddenly become a voluntary function. If you don't remember to breathe, you don't . . . and you suffocate. My lungs won't inhale unless I consciously direct them . . . like working my arms and legs. What's happened to us?

IT was, thought Guth, like learning to live. He crouched over the window and tried to draw breath regularly. His diaphragm felt like a new muscle. No, not a new one; an old one that he was just learning to use. The way a man, long bed-ridden, has to learn how to walk all over again.

He crawled to where Fray Gilbert lay. Her eyes were open and he could see the strained pulse throbbing in her neck. Her breasts heaved.

"What is it?" she gasped.

"I don't know," answered Guth. "Don't talk now . . ."

He made the rounds of the Studio. Case Conway was dead. He'd probably fainted from the wound in his shoulder. An unconscious man couldn't remember to breathe. And there was a blonde girl with bangs and astonished brown eyes, her mouth in an Oh of amazement. But she too must have forgotten to pump her lungs until suffocation caught her and made it too late to remember.

The others nodded faintly to Guth. He crawled back to a chair and yanked himself upright.

"Listen, people," he said. "I don't know what's hit us. I do know that the lung muscles have turned from involuntary to voluntary functions. You've got to remember to breathe.

If you fail you may faint away from suffocation. Then it's sure death. Remember to breathe."

They nodded. Billy Freeman struggled to his feet and began helping the others up. Every few minutes he reeled dizzily, clutching at his side. Pearls of sweat showed on his chalk-white face.

"There's no sense just staying here and gasping," continued Guth. "As Chiefs and Governors of Scienticity, we should be the first to analyze and find a solution. If this plague has struck all of Scienticity, it means that world communications have broken down . . . everything will be disorganized. Scienticity is the brain and heart of the Earth. We've got to act fast."

They were all on their feet when he finished, but as they groped toward the door, they heard the roar of Helio engines come swooping down out of the skies.

"The white helios," gasped Billy Freeman. He lurched toward the window.

Guth followed him and stared up. Drifting a few hundred feet overhead, twisting and floating through the skyscraper heads, was a glittering white Helicopter. Through the buildings they could see scores more, sailing over the city.

"Look there!" exclaimed Guth. He pointed.

On the gleaming white metal body of the Helio above them, black letters stood in relief. Slowly they spelled them out. LIFE FOR SALE, INC. And at that moment, there was a cough and a blare of giant loudspeakers, and an enormous metallic voice blasted out, speaking to the limp Scienticitizens who stared up from below.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" roared the voice. "This horrible plague that has

crushed our city can be cured. It is a new disease, never before known to science, but already a cure has been discovered. If you want to return to normality. If you want to breathe again. If you want to be able to sleep and eat and work without fear of death . . . go to a White Helio and ask for The Cure. Go to a White Helio and ask for The Cure . . ."

The voice blasted on, repeating the message. In the distance they could hear the faint mechanical rasp of other speakers.

"The Cure," echoed Billy Freeman. "I think I begin to get the idea . . ." He doubled over suddenly and began to cough. Red froth appeared on his lips.

"Do you?" said Guth. "Come on. Let's see what this is all about."

THE streets looked like slow motion pictures. Hundreds crawled along, hands pressed to their sides. At every moment a body would crumple to the ground, either to add to the thousands that were already limp, or shake a while and at last rise again. There were few voices . . . only whispers.

Gravi-cars were piled up in little clumps along the driveways, their occupants sprawled motionless within. Overhead gyros hung aimlessly, their pilots crumpled over the controls. But the planes in the higher altitudes flew with purpose, frantically, like birds whose nests had been destroyed. Every so often one would swoop low, then suddenly hang in mid-air as its pilot abruptly stiffened upright and collapsed.

There was a line a quarter of a mile long before the White Helio they found, but the Blazon of the Governing Board on their tunics gave them immediate preference. Guth entered the ship, half supporting Fray Gilbert, with Steve



Emory at her other side.

The cabin was twelve feet square and absolutely bare but for a long rack of cases, a small stool and an enormous sterilizer. The clerk, a small man in white smock, was guarded by half-a-dozen muscular men, carrying heavy Chron-guns. They wore strange chain-metal tunics and caps, and around their necks were steel collars lettered: L.F.S.

The clerk lifted the lid of the sterilizer and brought out a rack of hypo needles. He unlocked a case and selected a handful of ampules. As he nipped off the sealed tips and placed them in the syringes, a thug beside a safe in the corner of the cabin called to them.

"Dollar a shot," he said. "You pay as you go."

Guth threw him a handful of bills and seated Fray on the stool. The injection was made and her arm swiftly swabbed with iodine.

"Twenty hours' immunity," said the clerk briskly. "Come back tomorrow. Next?"

The antidote "took" almost immediately. Guth was relieved to see Fray smile and relax. It seemed like a million years before all the women were injected, and finally his staff. Guth waited until all were through, and at last took his treatment. The injection ran through his veins like liquid fire. He was tingling when he stepped outside the cabin to find his staff waiting for him. The Suffragettes had disappeared.

"And a good thing, too," said Billy Freeman. "We've got plenty work ahead of us."

"It's a beautiful idea," said Guth reflectively. It was an incredible relief to be able to walk and talk without devoting the entire consciousness toward respiration. "Yes . . . a beautiful idea. I'd like to meet the black dog

who thought of it. Life for sale! Force people to buy what they've always taken for granted. The whole thing was planned, of course. Polson our respiration centers and then provide a temporary cure at a dollar a shot. Probably all his clerks and assistants were immunized way in advance. What a fortune that heel is going to make before we catch up with him!"

"A dollar a shot," drawled Jinx Cauldwell. "Ten million people in Scienticity. Ten million dollars a day . . ."

"We don't know if it's all Scienticity," interrupted Guth. "That's one of the things we'll have to discover. It may show just how we've been poisoned. What in blazes could hit so many people at the same time? I've a hunch it's gas. Did you notice that Helios were immune until they dropped too low?"

THEY reached the Central Administration Building, in the little park adjoining the Broadcasting Studios. There were located the score of offices occupied by the various Departmental Chiefs of Scienticity. The streets and park were deserted, except for the horribly still bodies sleeping on the pavement and grass. It reminded Guth of Case Conway, lying upstairs in the television Studio.

"Damn it!" gritted Guth, "it's just mass murder!"

He vaulted up the broad marble steps in a white fury, his staff hurrying behind him, and burst into his large, book-lined office. It was only after three furious steps that he saw a man lounging easily behind the big square desk. A man in chain metal with a collar around his neck.

"Good evening," smiled the man. "I've been waiting for you." He had a swarthy face and a thin jet moustache.

"Get to hell out of here," said Guth softly, "before I tear you apart."

"Temper! Temper!" admonished the swarthy man. "I have a message for you from The Salesman."

"The Salesman!" Guth laughed harshly. "Salesman of what?"

"Just now . . . Life," answered the suave man. He adjusted his collar elaborately. "But it'll be death unless you follow orders. The Salesman commands you to disband the Governing Council of Scienticity at once!"

"Get out of here," Guth said evenly. He stepped forward. The swarthy man jumped out of the chair and slipped away from Guth's outstretched hand.

"Those are the orders," he repeated. "All science, all research must stop at once. All Department Chiefs must retire and await further information. You can obey orders . . . or take the consequences." He began to saunter out.

"Wait a moment," said Steve Emory. "What's it worth to you to sell out?"

"Betray The Salesman?" laughed the swarthy man. "It's not safe." Nevertheless he hesitated.

"Here's our price!" broke in Guth. He dug his fingers into the metal collar and lifted the man wriggling into the air. One quick stride brought him to the head of the stairs. He swung the emissary clattering down the flight, turned on his heel and re-entered his office, dusting his hands. The heavy metal door slammed on the last of the fall.

"That was silly, Guth," protested Emory. "He might have helped if we'd handled him right."

"No, Steve. If he'd sell out one side, he'd betray the other. We'd just be wasting time and money, and taking chances. Now look, fellows, this is our job for right now. Steve, I want you to check on the extent of the plague. Jinx, get all the data you can on the

infection itself. Billy . . . Where the hell has Billy Freeman gone to?"

They looked around.

"No matter," grumbled Guth. "He's probably romancing one of those Suffragettes. I'll do the job myself."

THEY scattered for work. Guth plugged in the telecaster and dialed feverishly. He thanked heaven that the teley used the automatic system. As his calls came through and he spoke for a few minutes with the Scienticity Police Commissioner and other officials, his face darkened and he began swearing sulphurously under his breath.

Steve Emory and Jinx Cauldwell came back at last with their reports. The infection had covered a ten-mile area and was spreading slowly. It reached an altitude of about six hundred feet. It seemed to be a gas. Jinx could only add that it might be a nitrogen compound.

"I haven't had time for a complete analysis," he said. "There's an eighty per cent nitrogen content in the air sample I took, and that's way too high. But you've got to give me at least five hours more . . ."

"You won't get 'em," retorted Guth. "And we won't be able to find out how this gas hits us, either. I've just contacted all the city officials. The Salesman sent his gentle warnings to them, too, and they're in a blue funk. It looks as though Life For Sale, Inc., is really going to take over."

There was a buzz at the teley, and Guth jumped. He took the call, to discover Billy Freeman's excited face on the screen.

"Billy!" he exploded. "What the hell?"

"Listen," whispered Billy, "I've got to talk fast. I tailed that guy in the trick moustache back to his headquarters. There isn't much time, because I

think they're tailing me now. Look, Guth, the closer you get to the headquarters, the more you sniff a powerful stink of ammonia. I think this is a gas infection."

"We figured that ourselves," interrupted Guth. "Maybe a nitrogen compound being released. Ammonia may be one of the by-products of manufacture. You found out their plant?"

"Yeh . . ." Billy glanced around hurriedly. To one side of him they could see the glint of the glass booth door. "It's in the headquarters, I think. The Central Building, right opposite the old Central Park Weather Tower. Make it quick, Guth. I'll wait here for you. And look, if it's a gas, why don't you dig up some gas masks?"

He cut off.

"Gas masks!" exclaimed Guth. "Where in blazes does he suppose we're going to get them?"

"Museum," answered Frosty Adamson. "On the way up, we can drop in at the Museum of Antiquities. They have a hundred there, all in good shape. We can pick up Chron-guns too."

"Spoken like an Archaeologist oughta," drawled Jinx Cauldwell. "Let's go."

They hustled out of the Administration Building and drove swiftly uptown to the Museum of Antiquities on the site of the old Metropolitan Museum of Art. There, Frosty Adamson dug into the archives and emerged with a dozen masks of glass and fabric, relics of World War VII, fifty years ago.

"Damned peculiar," grunted Adamson as he handed around the masks and procured Chron-guns from the arsenal. "I could have sworn there were at least a hundred masks here, last time I looked. These are all I could find."

"No matter," answered Guth. "We'll find the answers later. Just now we've got to get west to the Central

Building!"

They walked unobtrusively through the streets. It was getting dark and there were deep shadows. The city seemed paralyzed from the shock and horror, and the only figures that could be seen were the sanitary squads belatedly removing the last few inert forms.

They paused before the Central Building and lurked behind an Underground kiosk. The Central was a small, round structure of steel and cobalt. It was only ten stories high, and the middle floors bulged outward so that the structure had a barrel-like appearance. Just to the right was the Old Weather Tower that Billy had mentioned, perched high up on the one fragment of rock left as a relic of ancient Central Park. There was no sign of Billy. No sign of guards near the Central.

**F**ORMING a rough phalanx with Guth at the apex, they prepared to advance.

"Just keep moving straight ahead," whispered Guth, "as though we've come for a talk. Don't start shooting the place down until they fire."

They walked forward. As they neared the Central Building Guth tried to restrain himself from running. It was a naked feeling, walking slowly and waiting for a shot to come ripping out of that silent building . . . out of anywhere.

But there were only about twenty paces more to reach the bleak-looking, empty entrance. It looked like a mousetrap. Now only eighteen to go . . . sixteen . . .

The attack swooped down on their flanks with whirlwind silence and efficiency. One moment they were walking across an empty avenue toward an empty building, the next, a wall of figures had swept down on them from

either side.

No one had time to say anything. Guth whipped up his Chron-gun and leveled it at a flashing form. Before he could press the firing stud, a tiny pencil of radiation pointed its bright finger at him and pricked his shoulder.

Waves of coma swept around his body from that prick, enfolding him like a hot, moist sheet. As he relaxed into black velvet unconsciousness, his dimming eyes discerned the dull glints of red and blue . . .

"GET up," said Fray Gilbert sharply. "You've lain there like swine all night." She kicked Guth's ribs.

He rolled over and opened his eyes painfully. Fray seemed to tower over him, miles high. Still clad in the red blouse and blue shorts of the Suffragettes, she fingered a compact glass and fabric gas mask that hung at her neck. Guth eyed it for a moment.

"Nice work," he said slowly. "You wouldn't be The Salesman of Death, would you?"

"Don't be a fool!" She shook her head impatiently and looked around at the others. Guth followed her gaze. He and his men were lying on a dozen low cots in what appeared to be a dormitory of sorts. Small, deep-set windows high up in the walls let in shafts of nacreous morning sun. The others of his staff groaned softly as they thrashed awake.

"I'd like to know what you dropped us with," said Guth mildly, attempting to conceal the anger that raged just under the surface. "Something new, isn't it?"

"Good and new!" mumbled Jinx Cauldwell, rubbing his forehead slowly.

"Yes," said Fray. A smile touched the corners of her full mouth. "Something I developed to take care of the Governors of Scienticity . . . In case Chron-guns proved inadequate. A neu-

ron ray. It sets up a short circuit between nerve filament and sheath through the length of the body."

"Not bad at all. And now would you mind telling us why you butted in just when you did? I suppose you realize we were about to liquidate Life For Sale? Or did I understand you to say you were The Salesman?"

"I told you not to be a fool!" flared Fray.

"You've been the fool," roared Guth, all self control suddenly gone, "and I'd like to beat some sense into your stubborn red head. You might have joined forces with us instead of sneaking off and knifing us in the back."

"Atababy, Guth," jeered Jinx Cauldwell. "Show her who wears the pants in this city."

Fray slipped a small silver pencil from her belt and displayed it.

"If I hear another word," she said furiously, "I'll drop you all again and let you sleep past injection time. Ever try to breathe consciously while you're unconscious?"

That sobered them.

"NOW," she continued a little more calmly. "I just want you to know, Mr. Wilder, that I'm not in league with Life For Sale, but I happen to be able to see more than an inch in front of my nose. I could join forces with you, but I'm aware that once the major menace is gone, you'd be quite capable of betraying me. I'd rather have you out of the way first before I crack this Life For Sale. Then I'll be sure that the aims of the Suffragette Party will be fulfilled when sanity is restored."

"That is," said Guth, "assuming that you'll be capable of cracking Life For Sale."

"Men are so superior," laughed Fray. "They'll never admit a woman can do something as well, if not better than

they. We trailed your Mister Freeman, intercepted his message, beat you to the Museum and left just enough gas masks to enable you to walk into our trap. If we can handle our Lords and Masters, the Gods of the Governing Council, so easily . . . we can deal with Life For Sale."

"What did you do with Freeman?" demanded Guth.

"He slipped away somehow . . . but," Fray dismissed the matter airily, "he'll be picked up again before long. Just now we have more important business at hand than to waste time with you."

"I'll say it's important," retorted Guth grimly. "Every moment of our time and yours that you've wasted means that much more for The Salesman to prepare for us. You're clever . . . yes, as clever as the mongrel that steals a bone the bigger dogs are fighting for."

"Quiet," shouted Fray.

"And that's typical of all you women," continued Guth savagely. He got to his feet and walked up to her deliberately. "You want to know why I've refused to give you a vote? I'll tell you. Because you women meddle, you confuse the issues, you're smugly proud of your strength when you knife a fighting man in the back. You haven't the guts to fight fairly nor the integrity to admit defeat. You're not fighters . . . you're scavengers picking at leftovers. *Now*, go ahead and shoot, damn your red-headed stupidity!"

She raised the pencil, speechless with rage, met Guth's furious eyes for a moment, and at last dashed out of the room. The door slammed and locked behind her.

"Nice work!" drawled Jinx Cauldwell.

"Couldn't have done better myself," grinned Frosty Adamson.

"Ditto!" called Billy Freeman.

"Billy!" Guth jumped and stared around. "Where in blazes are you, man?"

"At the window. Steve Emory's here too. We caught that speech. It was beautiful!"

**B**ILLY Freeman punctuated his words with little heaves that slid his slender frame through the high narrow window. As he lowered himself and dropped the last few feet, they saw Steve Emory crawl around a huge stone cornice and begin to squirm in.

"This is an old place, full of roccoco," grinned Billy as he shook hands all around. "Used to be some kind of girls' school overlooking the Hudson. It's cluttered with stone carvings. Steve and I had a cinch climbing up. Those stupid gals never thought of placing a guard on the roof."

"How'd you get away? What happened?"

"I was waiting for you just under the Weather Tower," explained Billy. "The first thing I knew there were you all coming across the avenue and a mob of Suffragettes between us. I skirted around to get to you from the rear and I heard pops and met Steve running like hell . . ."

"They missed me in the gloom," explained Emory.

"After they had you down," continued Billy, "they split up into two groups. One group picked you up and I followed them here. Steve followed the other gang. We arranged to meet at the Administration Building this morning."

"How about your gang, Steve," asked Guth. "What'd they do?"

"Nothing," grinned Emory. "Just like women. My gang just wandered around. Any fool could see they were trying to mislead shadowers. So I

scouted around the Central Building the rest of the night and ruined my throat with ammonia. Couldn't discover much, though."

"Well . . ." sighed Guth, "let's get to hell out of this hens' nest and get to work again."

Billy revealed half-a-dozen Chron-guns and they were snatched up eagerly. But when he had been boosted up to the window again to look around, he paused and whistled softly. Then he dropped back to the stone flagging.

"Just like women," he complained, "to do things too late. The roof has a dozen guards on it. No sense trying to climb out. They could be waiting for us by the time we got down."

"Damn!" swore Guth. "We can't shoot them down. I'd like to spank that Gilbert . . . but there's no real harm in the rest of them . . . Oh, no offense, Steve."

"I'd like to spank her too," said Emory grimly. "Making a fool of herself and me. When this mess is over I'm going to teach her the lesson of her life!" He shook his cropped head angrily.

"Let's rush out through the door," suggested Billy. "We can make a mass action out of it."

"Right," said Guth. "But remember, no shooting. These confounded Chronnies put people away for keeps. Let's save that for Life For Sale."

"Sure," laughed Billy. He went to the door and leveled his Chron-gun at the lock. "But it's all right to sock 'em, huh? There's a blonde I've got my eye on. It may lead to pleasant complications. Stand by, everyone!"

**HIS** Chron-gun blasted a square foot out of the heavy metal door. Billy kicked it open and the crowd of men rushed through. They came upon a small ante-room that led to a flight of

curving stairs. They were halfway down before a cry arose from below, and red and blue uniforms began to scurry.

Guth slammed a shot into the wall over their heads just to keep the women fluttering, but they didn't scare too easily. An uneven rank drew up along the high hall into which the stairs debouched. Fray Gilbert stood at their head, the silver pencil in her hand.

"Jig's up, Wilder," she called clearly. "As soon as you reach the bottom step we'll fire."

"Horse-opera!" he yelled and kept on down the stairs. They were only women, after all, he reflected, and they wouldn't be so eager to shoot those deadly little neuron pencils. It took a lot of nerve and experience to be able to shoot down a man point blank in cold blood.

"Last warning!" cried Fray as they thundered down. She raised the pencil and aimed directly at Guth's chest. He reached the last step and dove in a long driving tackle at her knees. His shoulder cracked her so sharply she cried out as she tumbled backward against the rank of girls behind her.

The other men held to their feet as they charged forward, scattering the red and blue furiously. Jinx Cauldwell reached down and yanked Guth to his feet.

"Nice going," grunted Jinx. "Come on, Guth!"

Guth grinned, then felt things go black as his heart stuttered. It seemed that stones knocked in his chest. He doubled over, hands pressed to his sides, gasping feebly for breath. So soon? he thought. The injection should have lasted until the afternoon. What had happened?

He stood stock-still, fighting to hold on to consciousness. The others had paused too, gasping. Guth saw Fray and her aides snap the glass and fabric

masks over their faces with a triumphant air. This, then, was their finish.

But Fray had doubled over again, despite the mask's protection, and was clutching at her ribs, a look of bewilderment on her face. That, thought Guth in astonishment, was peculiar . . . Didn't the masks help after all?

There was a slamming and a pounding at the front door and the tearing sound of splitting metal. Voices shouting: "Open in the name of the L.F.S.!"

Acting quickly, despite the agonized labor of keeping his lungs pumping, Guth touched Billy's arm and motioned. As he crawled off he heard Billy following him. He led the way back through the room and around to a small space under the flight of stairs. As they squeezed in silently under the steps, they were followed by a third crawling figure clad in red and blue, a figure in a gas mask still brandishing a silver pencil menacingly.

"You'd try to get me if we were the last two alive on earth," whispered Guth bitterly. Then they lay quiet, concentrating on their respiration, as The Salesman's Troopers came storming into the house.

THE half-hour they were forced to spend in hiding comprised thirty individual infinities. When at last the L.F.S. Troopers had left the house with the Scientists and Suffragettes in tow, Guth, Billy and Fray crept from their cubby-hole. Fray whipped the mask from her face.

"Why didn't it work?" she demanded of Billy.

He shrugged and glanced at Guth.

"I was afraid this might happen," said Guth. "News of our idea must have leaked out. The Salesman is a smart fella. He's altered his gas to a sub-molecular constituency that will even filter through fabric . . . The

same way a virus will filter through ordinarily opaque material."

Fray threw the mask aside feebly. Her pale skin looked sallow against the flame of her hair, and the light silk blouse clung to her breasts moistly.

"I think I've got a solution to this infection," went on Guth, "if we can just get to my lab at the Administration Building."

"A man can try!" Billy tried to grin, but his lips were blue and he was trembling.

They got to their feet painfully. Guth eyed Fray.

"Don't you think it's time to forget politics?" he said gently. "This thing is bigger than either of us. Can't we bury the hatchet until we've beaten The Salesman?"

"I don't trust you," snapped Fray.

"Why? I'm reasonably honest."

"Honest enough to kiss me?" Fray gave him a scornful glance. "When you knew about Steve and myself. I thought Steve was a friend of yours."

"Oh," said Guth. He couldn't explain that when a girl is beautiful she makes one forget about friendship and loyalty. "Yes, Steve's a friend. I could say I'm sorry . . . but I'm not. I'll ask you a question. Steve and yourself . . . is that for keeps? Are you asking me to respect an engagement?"

Fray's eyes lowered and she refused to answer.

"That's all I want to know," said Guth soberly, "and I don't think there's any doubt about your answer. Now . . . what do you say?"

He held out his hand. Fray looked at him stubbornly and at last took his hand and shook it coldly.

"It goes against the grain," she said. "I hate you and distrust you. I despise everything you stand for . . . But I'll join forces temporarily. You can count on me."

"That's all I'm asking for," smiled Guth.

They stumbled to the street and paused to look out at the Hudson, blue sparkling in the morning sun. But the city streets were again filled with pain-wracked, sobbing people, victims of the new blast of sub-molecular gas.

All because of us, thought Guth. The Salesman tortures millions to make sure our gas masks won't help.

They followed the sickly stream of victims until they came at last to a White Helio. It stood in an open lawn of the long park that snaked along the site of what had once been ancient Broadway. A glance showed Guth that they were at mid-town. Fray's headquarters had been halfway between the Administration and Central Buildings.

FRAY took the injection first. She arose and stood to one side of the Helio Cabin as Billy Freeman seated himself anxiously. His flanks were heaving, his hands pressed to his ribs. It seemed to Guth that Billy mightn't hold out much longer.

"No," said the Clerk curtly to Freeman, "None for you."

"Why not?"

"I said none for you." The Clerk beckoned to the Troopers clustered around the safe.

"But I've paid," said Freeman.

"Get out!" snapped the Clerk. He held a sheaf of cards in his hand. Guth could see pictures on the cards. Shots of Billy, Jinx Cauldwell, himself . . . the entire staff. A rogues' gallery. Or, better still, like the lists of counterfeit bill numbers the treasury sent to shop keepers.

"Damn you," swore Freeman, struggling to his feet. "You dirty swine!"

He tried to plunge past the Clerk toward the shelves of antidote. A Trooper laughed, caught the reeling

Billy by the scruff of his neck, and cuffed him across the face. Guth trembled with the effort of holding back. He knew it was senseless to make a fight of it in his weakened condition. He caught Fray's eyes and motioned with his head.

"Come on," he said, grasping Freeman's arm. "Let's get outside." He eased the half-fainting man out of the White Helio. Fray joined them and they staggered across the lawn. The guffaws of the troopers sounded behind them.

"Don't you see," said Guth. "That's the Salesman's reprisal against us for not obeying his orders. That's what the emissary meant when he said 'Obey or take the consequences'."

Billy nodded in dumb misery.

"But I don't understand," said Fray. "Why didn't they try to capture us . . . the way the others did an hour ago?"

"You've answered it yourself," returned Guth. "'An hour ago.' That was a special squad that came after us. The regular Troopers probably haven't been tipped off yet to bring us in. But they will. That's why I hurried out of the Helio; that's why we've got to get to my lab . . . quick!"

They staggered hurriedly down toward the Administration Building with Fray between the two crooked men, vainly attempting to support their weight on her slim shoulders. But they bogged down under the strain of walking rapidly and concentrating on keeping their lungs going. They were forced to rest often.

The new gas attack had broken down what little communications that remained to Scienticity. The underground and surface transportation had failed altogether. There was not a gyrocab to be seen anywhere.

A quarter of a mile from their goal



they passed an empty lingerie shop. Guth straightened slightly when he caught sight of it, snapped his fingers and smiled. He left the others and vanished for some time into the vacant open store. When he returned he clasped a bulky, roughly done package under his arm. Shaking his head to their mute inquiries, he forced them to struggle on down town.

The Administration Building was empty when they arrived, an hour later, and they rushed immediately to Guth's lab adjoining his office. Fray looked around curiously at the lathe's and the neat racks of tools.

"Engineering," explained Guth shortly. "Dynamics was my department before I became Chief of Scientificity. Now I think engineering's going to be our salvation."

HE collected apparatus at one of the benches and got swiftly to work. The package he had brought with him he unwrapped and placed close beside him.

"I'll have to be brief," he said as he worked. "There isn't much time. The Troopers are probably combing the city for us at this minute. Naturally my office'll be the first place they search."

Guth selected two sheets of silvery spring steel from a locker. They were a foot wide, each, and five feet long. They glittered like metal snakes when he whipped them about experimentally.

"This gas," he went on almost absently, "has not attacked our lungs directly. It's paralysed the nerve centers in the medulla that stimulate the involuntary muscles of respiration and posture. That's why we must remember to breathe and remember to stand erect."

"So?" queried Billy.

"So if we can keep the lungs going mechanically, we've nothing more to

fear. Right?" Guth turned. In his hands he displayed two odd garments. Billy stared. Fray laughed.

"Oh Lord!" she said. "Corsets!"

"Right." Guth beamed. "Inside each corset is a strip of spring steel that binds firmly around the ribs. A small spring motor contracts the spring fifteen times to the minute (that's about the normal respiration rate), and the spring produces artificial respiration. Fray, you'd better lace us up."

Despite the seriousness of the situation she was forced to laugh as she tugged and bound the corsets tight. A small wheel protruded under the right arm of each of the men. That, Guth explained, was for rewinding the motor.

"At least now you'll have to admit women are good for something," smiled Fray when she had finished lacing them into the tight fitting garments.

Guth paused and felt the steel strip around his ribs alternately tighten and relax as the motor whirred. It worked well, for an improvised job. His lungs were sucking in air without conscious direction.

"I'll admit a lot more than that," he said seriously. "Don't think I underestimate women, Fray. Maybe you've just failed to see the humor of the situation all along."

She stared at him a moment, then her vivid features broke into a lovely smile.

"Perhaps I have," she said.

At that moment they heard steps coming up the stairs of the Administration Building. Guth held up a warning hand.

The two men hastily threw their tunics over the respirators and then crept into Guth's office to await the unknown.

"Troopers," hissed Billy.

The steps came slowly to the head of the stairs, paused, then moved to the

office door. In silence they watched the heavy steel knob turn and then the high door push in. Fray poised her silver pencil. The door gaped wide to reveal the figure of Steve Emory.

He stared at them, his mouth drooping, then slowly oozed to the floor. His head clanged on the metal.

**G**UTH and Billy got him to a chair while Fray darted inside for water. When they had at last brought him back to consciousness he looked around and sighed.

"Thanks," he said, pushing away the glass, "you don't know how glad I am to be back here."

"You've had a tough time, fella," said Billy. "Better take it easy a while."

"No. . . ." Emory struggled up out of the chair. "No. . . . I didn't fight my way back here just to rest. Listen, things are pretty desperate for us. The Salesman's been drilling his Troopers. He's got them policing the streets. He's blackmailed every official in the city, threatening to withhold his antidote. Communications are down . . . the earth is like a body without a head!"

"And what's more," added Guth grimly, "the world can't even send help to us. No sooner does a healthy man enter the gas area than he too succumbs. . . ."

"Look," said Emory. "I broke out of the Central Building. I got away from the Troopers and came here. If there's a way out, there ought to be a way back in. Maybe we can locate The Salesman's gas plant and blast it to hell?"

"Sure . . . we're all set," soothed Guth, "but how about you? We haven't the time to make another respirator."

After they had explained their safeguard to Emory, he shook his head. "You're right," he said. "There isn't time. Besides, I managed to get an in-

jection after I escaped. Fray and I have twenty hours immunity. That ought to be enough. . . ."

"Okay," answered Guth. He looked tensely at Fray, hating to place her in danger again. But he knew there was no way of leaving her behind. "We'll try and take care of each other, eh?"

It was delicate work, sneaking through the streets. Patrols of L.F.S. Troopers were on continual duty, trampling up and back the avenues, guarding key stations of the underground, surface and overhead transportation systems. The skyways and streets were strangely hushed, but for the stern clangor of the metal shod shoes.

They located an abandoned Helio and boarded it, just managing to squeeze four inside the tiny cabin. Swooping and threading their way through the concealing towers of the skyscrapers, they managed to avoid the White Helios of The Salesman and get to Fray's headquarters overlooking the Hudson.

There, they crept inside and waited while Fray slipped to a concealed safe and withdrew three silver pencils, duplicates of the weapon she carried.

"Here," she said as she handed one to Guth. "I thought I'd be using this against you. . . . Never thought I'd willingly hand over my trump card to my arch-enemy."

"Never an enemy, Fray," he said, taking her hand. "If we get out of this mess . . . you'll see."

**T**HEY stood for a moment eyeing each other, totally oblivious of Steve's presence. Fray started to smile at him, then shook her head impatiently and strode back to the plane. In silence the others followed and presently, after ten minute's cautious flight and reconnoiter, brought the ship down alongside

the Ancient Weather Tower.

Steve Emory led them at a fast trot around to the rear of the Central Building. The streets were empty and silent behind the structure, and there was only the pungent, stinging odor of ammonia. Emory pointed to a small window, five feet over their heads, its lower sash gone.

Silently they boosted Emory up. Then he reached down and, one by one, hauled them kicking and struggling up. They were in a small store-room cluttered with crystal wall panes stacked against the walls. Emory tiptoed to the door, thrust it open, and stepped through, motioning them to follow.

He led them through a wide low-ceilinged hallway that seemed to twine aimlessly through the building until at last they came to the elevator shafts around which looped the broad ascending circles of frosted crystal stairs. The odor of ammonia was stronger and there was a strange sensation of heat gusting up.

"We ought to head down," whispered Guth. "Heat and ammonia vapors. . . They point toward the manufacturing plant."

"Below is where I came from," said Emory. "It's even hotter and smellier down there."

They dropped down the stairs, two flights of them, to a cellar. There was no illumination and they fumbled along in semi-darkness. The stench of ammonia burned stronger and they felt the heat piling up. Then the steps narrowed to a dark sloping tunnel and they descended another two flights through the pitch blackness in huddled single file.

The sub-cellar, fifty feet beneath the surface, was hideously hot . . . so hot that they gasped for breath, and then only sucked in the biting ammonia

fumes. It was impossible to see anything, but as they clustered close together, they discerned the faint hum of machinery. Slowly, with the others treading close behind him, Guth groped through the blackness in the direction of the sound.

The crash of gongs that banged and clanged through the sub-cellar preceded the blinding light by only a split second. In an instant, they were staggering in brilliant white arc radiations that blinded them as completely as the darkness had.

"Alarm!" shouted Guth. "For God's sake, let's get . . ."

He turned and smashed blindly against Billy behind him, meanwhile clawing for his silver pencil. The cellar reverberated with the shriek of bells.

And it was only a full five seconds later, when his eyes had cleared, that Guth was able to see to the depths of the cellar wall and perceive the solid ranks of L.F.S. Troopers surrounding them. And only faintly above the reverberations of the dimming gongs could he hear a voice that laughed softly.

"Very nice indeed. The prettiest trap I've ever set in all my career."

Guth turned and stared uncertainly. "You?" he said slowly. "You're The Salesman?"

"At your service," said Steve Emory.

EMORY stopped the last two Troopers to leave the small cell.

"These men," he said calmly, "each have artificial respirators on, under their tunics. Remove them."

Guth and Billy could only stand submissively before the nose of the silver neuron pencil Emory held, while the guards stripped them. Instantly, the steel flexion gone, they were forced to devote all their consciousness to breathing.

Emory stood there, looking at the two men and the girl.

"Well," he said smoothly, "we've come a long way, haven't we? Here you've been squabbling endlessly over votes for women. . . . It may make you feel better to know that under my system, there won't be votes for anyone. I'll do all the deciding."

"Go to hell, Emory," gasped Guth.

"You swine!" spat Fray. "With all your smooth talk and your gay romancing. You're vile . . . disgusting. . . . Oh, I can't find the words to describe you. If only I'd known!"

"But you didn't know," laughed Emory, "and that's what counts in the long run. Really, Fray, you made an excellent dupe. After I'd spurred you on to make a row about women's suffrage your agitations made a wonderful screen for my own preparations."

Guth stared at Fray.

"Emory put you up to it?" he asked. "The Suffragettes was *his* idea?"

Fray nodded miserably.

"And a splendid idea too," grinned Emory. "Fray attracted all the attention while I worked secretly without hindrance. I expect to control Scienticity within another six hours, and with the new variant of our gas apparatus . . . I shall have the United Nations in my grasp before the end of the month."

"And that variant is?"

"You've been so damned clever up to now," snarled Emory. "Suppose you figure it out for yourself. Pleasant dreams!" The cell door slammed and bolted behind him.

The prisoners lay silently in the darkness for a few moments until their eyes accommodated. They were in a cell that was perhaps ten feet square. In the distance they could hear the whine and hum of gas generators, and occasionally the murmur of voices. It

seemed to Guth that he could hear the high tones of women speaking, and he thought it likely that the other captives were caged somewhere nearby.

"I should have known," groaned Billy. "Now I realize how many cock-and-bull stories he told. That gag about watching the Central Building all night . . . He was probably down here altering his gas to offset our masks."

"I'm guilty too," said Guth. "I should have realized he was lying when he said he managed to get an injection after he escaped. Every White Helio Clerk had pictures of the entire Staff. None of us could have gotten a shot. And that phoney faint of his when he stumbled over us in my office . . . And that gag of trying to bribe his own man . . . Oh, I could kick myself!"

"How about me?" whispered Fray. "I feel like such a God-awful fool!"

Guth heard her sobbing softly. He reached out and patted her shoulder helplessly. He felt weak and ineffectual. Everything seemed helpless.

**I**T was hot and enervating in the cell.

Guth was exhausted from the efforts of the preceding day and night. All he wanted was to rest a while and gather little strength. He lay quietly, alongside Fray, and failed to realize his danger until he drowsed and the sudden pause of his breathing awakened him in a panic.

He started up in terror, crawled to his feet and kicked Billy.

"Get up," he said tensely, "get up, Billy . . . if you want to stay alive!"

"Lemme rest awhile," protested Freeman. The heat was sapping him too.

"Wake up and keep your lungs pumping," insisted Guth. "It's death to fall asleep!" He turned to Fray, staring wide-eyed in the gloom. "Help me get him up!"

They managed to get Freeman to his feet, and together the two men, half-supported by Fray, paced the length of the cell.

"Talk . . . sing . . . shout . . . anything!" commanded Guth. "You've got to keep us awake, Fray!"

As she sang and talked they passed and repassed the length of the tiny room, each time feeling the gush of air from the ventilator blow across their faces. It became almost automatic. Guth could count the number of paces up to the ventilator, the turn, and then the ventilator again on their way back.

"It's no use," groaned Guth, "He'll fall asleep on his feet. Lay him down."

They lay Billy on his face. Guth kneeled at his hips, placed his palms above the small of Billy's back and began a slow artificial respiration in time with his own forced breathing. As he pumped air in and out of Billy's lungs, the exhausted man slept.

At last Guth gave up in exhaustion. Motioning Fray to take his place, he arose and tottered around the cell. He went to the ventilator and placed his face in the stream of cool air gushing in. The heat was knocking him out too, and only the fresh air could keep him awake. He had to stay awake, for Fray could never administer to both of them.

Thank God for the ventilator, though. Otherwise the air in the cell would be exhausted and then . . .

"Oh God!" whispered Guth. "If only I'm right."

He crawled to Billy and kicked and shook him awake.

"Take off your clothes," he said. He looked bleakly at Fray. "You too, Fray, as much as you can spare."

In fevered silence they stripped off their tunics and handed them to Guth. He jammed the cloth tightly into the ventilator mouth, then crawled to the door and stuffed the remainder into the

cracks. Returning to the middle of the cell, he fumbled in his pockets and withdrew a small petrol lighter. He kindled the flame and nursed it carefully.

"We've got to exhaust the air," he explained hurriedly, "and increase the CO<sub>2</sub> content. I've just remembered that if you inhale a large percentage of Carbon Dioxide it excites the respiration nerve center in the medulla. Maybe if we inhale enough we'll be able to offset the effects of Emory's Nitrogen gas. I have a hunch he used a CO<sub>2</sub> compound in his antidote. Go on, you two, breathe like hell!"

THEY inhaled and exhaled furiously.

Guth nursed his petrol lamp until it heated and scorched his fingers. Fray produced a packet of matches and burned them, one by one, down to the very ends. There was almost a thousand cubic feet of air space in that small cell. It would take an enormous amount of work to exhaust it.

Hours later they heard the tramp of footsteps coming through the cellars toward their prison. Guth, naked but for a pair of trunks, his body gleaming with sweat, looked around and hastily extinguished the petrol flame.

"If the Trooper comes in," he said, "we'll have to pray he doesn't make us take our clothes down from the vent . . ."

"Guth!" whispered Fray excitedly. "It's taken. Don't you realize?"

Suddenly Guth discovered that he was breathing without volition. A nod from Billy confirmed this.

"All right," he said. "I don't know how long this stimulation will last . . . but we'll make a fight of it."

They sprawled in apparent helplessness on the floor as the guard unbolted the door and swung it in. A dim light from the cellar corridor illuminated the

cell. The Trooper carried a rough tray with food piled on it.

He strode into the cell, openly contemptuous of the helpless prisoners. But as he bent to set the tray on the floor, Guth slid forward swiftly and leaped to the guard's shoulders. As the man staggered back and swung around with an oath, Guth poised himself and brought his big fist savagely against the man's jaw. The guard barely grunted as he sagged. They caught him and lowered him silently to the floor.

Snatching up the Chron-gun from the Guard's belt, Guth motioned to the others and slipped through the cell door. They followed without waiting to don their clothes, and found themselves in a long corridor, lit intermittently by tiny crypton tubes.

Guth led them to the right, reached a door at the end of the corridor and opened it a slit. It revealed the large subcellar where they had been trapped hours before. An L.F.S. Trooper paced up and back leisurely, obviously on sentry-duty.

Guth waited patiently, despite the fear in his mind that the carbon dioxide stimulus would wear off at any moment. But he knew that the Trooper's saunter would eventually bring him within silent striking distance.

And at last the man wandered aimlessly toward the door. He paused six feet distant, whistling through his teeth, then turned. Guth leaped forward. The Guard pivoted at the creak of the yawning door and at that moment Guth's Chron-gun crashed down.

"Come on!" snapped Guth.

**B**ARELY waiting for Billy to pick up the second Chron-gun, he sprinted across the cellar and thrust open the far door. There was a narrow black ramp leading down, deep into the earth. When they reached bottom they dis-

covered a large brilliantly lit office. Desk, chairs, papers; and lab smocks and tunics hung on the wall next to a curtained archway.

Guth darted to the arch, swept aside the curtain and peered through.

"Listen, Billy," he said. "Go back the way we came. When you get to our cell, keep on *left* along the corridor and I'm positive you'll find the rest of our people locked up there. Then follow us back here, and through that archway." Guth pointed to the recess alongside the coat rack. "That must lead to the gas plant. Fray and I will go ahead to reconnoiter, but we'll need all the help you can bring!"

"Right!" exclaimed Billy. He darted back up the ramp.

Guth and Fray passed through the archway, carefully replacing the acetate curtain behind them. They were in a long straight tunnel. It was hotter than a blast furnace and the sting of ammonia was overpowering.

The tunnel seemed endless. It ran, straight as a hollow arrow, through the earth. The walls and ceiling were a smooth black glass that looked like obsidian, and set in the apex of the low overhead arch was a long straight crypton tube that illuminated the darkness dimly and stretched far ahead like a pastel pencil line.

Abruptly the tunnel opened into a small crypt, walled with rugged blocks of obsidian. The crypt was round, and across the floor was a flight of three narrow steps, a landing and a giant circle of steel. The heat was thunderous and behind the steel port they could hear the crashing roar of machinery.

Guth walked cautiously to the door. It was unlocked. He thrust it open to a slit, peered, then opened it enough to let himself and Fray slip through. They shut it behind them and stared at the laboratory.

It was built under the Ancient Weather Tower, hollowed out of the living rock underneath. A vast round chamber, forty feet in diameter, it towered upward over two hundred feet, full into the Weather Tower itself. Its height was interlaced by gleaming cat-walks that ran from wall to wall at ten foot levels, and a narrow staircase spiralled dizzily up the circumference into the dim heights. Guth and Fray crouched back as they saw figures in white lab smocks clustered up on the cat-walks.

THE floor on which they stood supported four enormous atomic-cyclones that looked like gleaming steel snails. From the crest of each a giant crystal shaft emerged. Thirty feet above, the shafts merged into a maze of intricate crystal work. Lofting up over the nucleus of intermeshing crystal, a fractionating column zoomed into the heights.

The four shafts each bubbled up a brilliant liquid . . . crimson, cobalt, emerald and silver . . . and all liquids were merging in a blaze of sparkling radiance. The resultant gas that tinkled up through the beads of the fractionating column glowed like sparks over a fire.

"There's where the ammonia is coming from," said Guth, his mouth close to Fray's ear. He pointed to a ten-foot sphere between the steel-snail cyclones. It smoked with a milky vapor.

A shout echoed down, over the roar of the machinery. Guth lifted the Chron-gun and waited tensely. Figures began descending the spiral stairs, clattering faintly. From the far side of the laboratory a man in a white lab smock appeared, weaving in and out between the apparatus that dwarfed him.

It was Emory.

He came up and jarrred to a halt at

the sight of Guth. His jaw dropped.

"Tell them to cut off the apparatus!" yelled Guth. He levelled the Chron-gun at Emory's chest.

Emory stared for another second, then raised his arm slowly and waved. The drone died away in stages until at last the laboratory roared with silence. Emory never took his eyes from Guth's face. His assistants came down the stairs, one by one, and clustered behind him, gaping. Guth thought he recognized some of them from Emory's department.

"Well . . ." Guth smiled mirthlessly. "We certainly have come a long way, haven't we?"

Emory didn't answer. Guth swept the Chron-gun in a slight arc that included the rest of the men.

"Now," he continued, "we're going to stand here, just as we are, and wait for my friends to arrive. I don't know what keeps me from dropping you murderers right now. I wish one of you would try something . . . just to give me the excuse."

For a moment he thought Fray had begun to hum a tune.

Then he realized she had moaned slightly. He twisted his head in astonishment to see her crumple against him, clutching at her heart in an agonized way that Guth knew meant the failure of the antidote. Instinctively, he bent to support her, then twisted in quick awareness of his position. But Emory's men had already leaped forward.

Guth blasted a shot at the foremost, and he went down with a cough. Before Guth could press the firing stud again, the others vaulted the shuddering body and were on top of him. He lashed out frenziedly and crushed the Chron-gun against a temple.

His arm tangled in the skirt of a smock and before he could free it, it was pinioned. He lurched violently

to shake loose and drove his left fist into a distorted face. It dissolved into a red pulp, but a great bear-like man wrapped his arms around Guth's elbow and held.

THERE was no sound in the lab but the pant and sob of fighting men. Then Guth heard Emory rap out: "Get his legs, you two!" and his feet were yanked from under him. As he was swept up, he broke his right arm free and scooped up the Chron-gun from the floor. He levelled it at Emory.

Then blackness swept over him. Guth felt stones begin to rumble in his chest, and he knew that the CO<sub>2</sub> had worn off. The gun dropped from his inert fingers. He sobbed in the effort to fill his lungs with air and drive back the impending coma.

They tossed him to the floor alongside a reagent table, with his head almost in Fray's lap. She, too, was gasping and fighting to hold on to life. Emory stood over them, flipping the Chron-gun in his hand. He smiled malevolently, then started as he heard the sound of footsteps thundering outside, coming down the tunnel.

"Lock the door, quick!" barked Emory. He looked at Guth as the bolt fell into place. "Your rescuing friends, no doubt. Well, we'll give them a little party. Have you figured out the new development of our apparatus yet?"

Guth compressed his lips and searched around desperately for an opening.

"I'll tell you," went on Emory, "so you can appreciate it. A nitrogen gas . . . we spray it, like a liquid, it's so heavy. Naturally we're all immunized, but you're not. One whiff and the blood carries a corrosive that destroys every neuron in the body. Leaves the target a living mass of protoplasm

. . ." Emory paused and bowed to Fray. "Your own neuron pencil gave us the final clue, *darling*. Thanks very much."

The steps outside rumbled up the door and slammed against it. It shook under a barrage of knocks. Voices shouted faintly. Guth wanted to yell a warning, but his heart was knocking under the strain and his lungs refused to take in enough wind for a shout.

Emory ran to his apparatus and signaled. The roar of the cyclones crowded everything else out of Guth's ears. A long flexible glass hose was run from the interior of the apparatus to a small pump of chrome and copper. The gleaming nozzle was aimed at the door and Emory nodded to one of the assistants. The man grinned and started toward the door.

Guth looked around frantically for anything to signal with. If he could just throw something at the door to land with a smash . . . that might warn Billy and the others. He glanced up and saw the tall reagent jugs standing on the table over his head.

He struggled to raise himself but tottered weakly; then he gave Fray a despairing look. She raised her knees slowly, just enough to brace Guth. His eyes lofted like a slow elevator and at last reached the level of the table. And then he saw hope.

Iodine! Five litres of iodine.

Iodine and ammonia . . . and the room was hot!

Hot and bright with light!\*

Emory saw him just as his trembling

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\* When liquid iodine is mixed with ammonia, under the influence of heat and brilliant light, it forms a chemical combination that is singularly unstable, and inevitably results in an explosion of terrific violence. What Guth did here was a simple trick that many an amateur chemist has regretted performing in the basement—and one you should not try to duplicate, even if you don't believe us!—Ed.



hands reached the bottle. He leaped from behind the gas sprayer with a shout and plunged toward Guth.

Guth managed to swing around, the bottle cradled in his arms, his back braced against the table-edge. As Emory came up to him, he summoned every erg of energy to raise a leg and drive his heel into Emory's stomach.

And as the man staggered back with a hoarse cry, Guth raised the heavy bottle high and flung it crashing across the laboratory, full into the great sphere of ammonia. Then he dropped his body over Fray.

There was a shattering explosion!

**G**UTH WILDER awoke and tried to scrape away the dark. Eyes out of focus, he made out the shattered remains of the laboratory; then dimly, he realized that Billy Freeman was kneeling over him, half-naked and grinning like the Cheshire cat.

"How long have I been out?"

"Maybe five minutes . . . maybe ten. We got to you just in time. We were trying to blast open the door with our Chronnies when the explosion blew it out in our faces."

"Ten minutes?" echoed Guth.

"Yeh . . . We had to use artificial respiration on the two of you until I could get the hypos ready. I had the antidote with me and shot you and Fray as quick as I could. It's peculiar stuff . . . Frosty Adamson says it's probably di-nitro-carbonate . . ."

"Never mind Frosty," said Guth impatiently. "How'd you get the stuff?"

"Oh, simple. When I went back to look for the others I stumbled on Emory's pharmaceutical storeroom. There were thousands of hypos and ampules. He must have been preparing this overthrow for years. When I located the other people I shot them up and brought along a little for you."

"Thanks, pal," said Guth fervently. He sat up and felt gingerly at the torn cuts over his body.

"Emory?" he asked.

"He's dead. Explosion got him and half the crew. The place is a smithereeno. What blew up, and how?"

Guth grinned. "I took a wild chance and it worked. I heaved liquid iodine into ammonia. Get it? Hot room, bright lights . . ."

"Yeh," said Freeman, "but . . ."

But Guth wasn't listening any more, for Fray had struggled up weakly alongside him. He put an arm around her and looked at her vivid features.

"Truce?" he said softly. "Bury the hatchet forever . . . Smoke a peace pipe, and suchlike?"

"Maybe we've both been wrong," said Fray. Her face was lovely despite the lines of fatigue. "I . . . I know I've acted like a fool in some ways."

"Maybe we've both been a little foolish," smiled Guth. He felt the scent of her breath on his cheek. He sat amid the debris of the broken laboratory, close beside her, and remembered again that she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen, and that a man couldn't build his whole life around science and Scienticity.

"The last time I kissed you," he said, "Holy Hell broke loose. Do you think it's safe this time?"

"A man could try," answered Fray.

The crowd in the smashed laboratory stared silently. Women in soiled red and blue uniforms; short girls, tall girls, incredulous girls. Men in tattered Staff tunics; short men, tall men, incredulous men.

"Nice work!" drawled Jinx.

"Couldn't do better myself," grinned Frosty Adamson.

"I don't know about that," murmured Billy Freeman. He edged around the crowd toward that blonde.