

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 3 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • NOVEMBER, 1953

► *Four Star-Flung Novels*

- HIGHWAY J** **Charles Eric Maine** 4
 He was Ingram of 1953, inventor of J-rotation . . . and along with his lightweight bicycle, directly responsible for the most gigantic nuisance of the 25th century.
- THE PRISON OF THE STARS** **Stanley Mullen** 30
 To head out beyond Pluto a venturer needs more than a super-spaceship . . . he needs men as super-desperate and freedom-mad as himself . . . people strange and daring. Wilding, the trespasser, found them on Alcatraz, the rogue asteroid . . . the prison of the stars.
- PURPLE FOREVER** **Jack Lewis** 62
 Three men on Venus . . . lolling about in their shirt sleeves and breathing an atmosphere of chlorine and ammonia that was certain to kill a man in thirty seconds. The pictures lied . . . they must lie. Trick photography? . . . Or the greatest hoax ever staged?
- BEYOND THE X ECLIPTIC** **Fox B. Holden** 86
 Earthman was dying slowly of boredom. Hope had become folly; work a means to avoid insanity; and death was the great reward . . . until Cragin, step-son of darkest space, dared the Barrier; dared to soar beyond the dread X Ecliptic where The Owners grimly governed all the fading galaxies.

► *Four Exciting Short Stories*

- THE GOLDEN APPLES OF THE SUN** **Ray Bradbury** 21
 Toward the sun . . . south toward the vorest of all burning hearths sped the refrigerated, ice-sheathed rocket . . . run by proud and vain men hoping to sting the lion and escape the maw.
- SLAY-RIDE** **Winston K. Marks** 25
 It was a great cosmic joke when the wholesale triggerman, the pirate of the spaceways, became the victim of a simple, webbed nylon garment known as spaceman's underwear.
- PASSWORD** **J. W. Groves** 55
 Professor Medcalfe had it. And he meant to keep it. For all men were fools . . . and only the Lanyiah deserved the Earthen jackpot.
- THE FATAL THIRD** **Theo. L. Thomas** 78
 Huge, violent Webster was moulded for war—but he lived in an age of peace. So he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew down Uranus . . . and smiled at his victory.
- THE VIZIGRAPH** **2 & 110**
 Of mice and men and affectionate fen.

T. T. SCOTT, *President*

JACK O'SULLIVAN, *Editor*

MALCOLM REISS, *Mgr. Editor*

PLANET STORIES • Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1953, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reentered as second-class matter September 30, 1952, at the Post Office at Stamford, Conn. Additional entry at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. Price 25¢ per copy. One-year subscription: \$1.50; additional postage for Canada, 15¢; foreign countries, 30¢. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.



PASSWORD

By J. W. GROVES

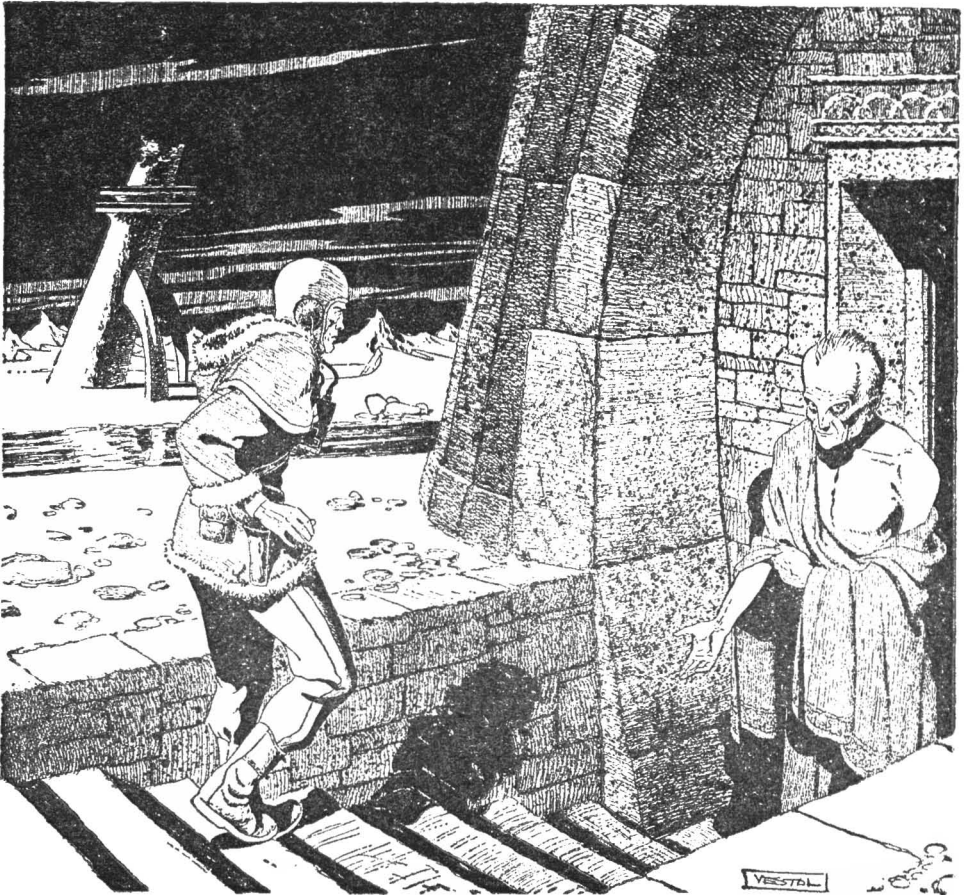
Only a fool would associate ideas of war and conquest with those grave, wise-eyed unguulates who arrived from outer space only a quarter century ago. Professor Medcalfe was the lone, honored fool.

The streets were tunnels of near-pitch darkness, where no light showed except for the faint glimmer of far-away stars and the purely subjective flashes and spots that danced before his eyes. The slap-slap of his feet upon the paving and the rasp of his breath in his throat echoed back at him from deserted buildings or lost itself, muffled, in the twinings of branched-off alley-

ways. And the stab of pain in his side was like a white-hot lance that jabbed and jabbed.

Fax and fifty, he thought grimly. No condition for a traitor to be in when he's running away from prison and an execution squall.

A stone turned beneath his foot and brought him to the ground with a thud that



jarred him close to unconsciousness. Sheer physical inability to rise kept him where he was, wasting long, precious seconds. The stronghold of the Lanyiah—the last on Earth—was still a dozen blocks away. It would need a miracle to get him there. And too many miracles had aided him this far for him to dare to hope for another.

Oh, my friends! he thought despairingly. My very dear friends! Why didn't you choose someone less of a fool to take your warning out to mankind?

MANKIND, Professor Medcalfe found, was rather a difficult creature to warn. He was apt to dismiss as crazy anyone who tried to draw attention to the existence of dangers not already self-evident.

Not that any of the minor government officials—all that the scientist could contact at first—actually used the word crazy to his face. They were too polite for that. But he could read it in the tilt of their eyebrows, in their chilly smiles, in the faint edge that came into their voices as they protested in varying words, "But Professor, the Lanyiah are our friends. They've never done anything but help us since they came here. We owe nearly the whole of our modern civilization to them."

In his heart the professor could not blame them for not believing him. To associate the ideas of war and conquest with those grave, wise-eyed ungulates who had come down out of space with friendly words and gestures a quarter of a century ago seemed almost to verge on blasphemy. But what had to be done had to be done. And so the scientist persisted.

"It was a trick," he said over and over again. "To lull our suspicions while they got a foothold on Earth."

It was as useless, though, as trying to make an impression on a rubber-foam mattress by pounding it with a feather. And after a whole day at it he wearily gave up, and used the information that he meant to keep for more important ears.

"All right," he said grimly to the last of the not-too-polite stallers; a balding gentleman with fluttery fingers and a squeaky voice who had demanded proof. "All right. If you want proof you shall have it. Mark

this. Some time tomorrow the atomic power plant in Oklahoma will be blown up. It will be done with a type of radiation that will leave everything glowing with a greenish tinge; something not known to human science. Within an hour of the explosion there won't be a single one of the Lanyiah to be found outside of their settlements. And from then the war will be on."

Then he turned on his heel, and as he left the room added over his shoulder, "Now I'm going home to bed. If any of your superiors want me they will know where they can find me."

Early the next morning the noise of the Oklahoma explosion, a hundred miles away, aroused him temporarily. And an hour later the World Bureau of Investigation men arrived and made his awakening permanent.

THEY asked him no questions themselves. Just stood by while he dressed and breakfasted, then took him away to a building that was familiar to him only as a name and a facade. And inside, for the first time since he had tried to penetrate the rubber curtain of official indifference he met someone whom he knew.

"Mac!" he said. Then added with belated respect, "General Mackay. You're one of the men I've been trying to reach."

The general's answering smile was born partly of old-time friendship, partly of later acquired habits of public diplomacy. "Sure," he said soothingly "Well, you've done it now, haven't you? Come in and meet some more of the high brass." And he led the professor on into an inner room.

When the portly little scientist saw the men whom he was being taken to meet he was overcome by a devastating shyness, despite his high sense of mission. These were indeed some more of the high brass! Practically every distinguished military commander from every country on Earth was there—all retired, it was true, since the establishment of the World State twenty years ago, but still highly respected men. And mingled with them were statesmen whose name had penetrated even to a recluse, like himself, interested in little but the gathering of knowledge. While at the back, a worried look on his broad, handsome face,

was a figure familiar enough as a picture but somehow incredible as real flesh.

Yes! It was him, though. The World President himself.

For a second or so only his duty to the human race kept the professor from turning and running out of the door. Then the abrupt silence that had fallen at his entrance was broken as everybody surged forward and began to pound his ears with a babble of questions. And at that the professor's shyness left him. Whatever their positions in the world these were only shocked and badly frightened men, willing to turn anywhere for help in the face of the horror that loomed over them.

The booming voice of the president rose above the din. "Gentlemen! Please! We shall get nowhere like this."

The authority in his tone brought comparative silence. Pushing his way through the crowd he strode up to the scientist. "And now, Professor Medcalfe, if you would be kind enough to tell us what you know about this treacherous act of Lanyiah's—"

The professor nodded, happily master of himself and the situation again. "Of course," he said. "This is what happened.—"

And a nice, mellerdramatic story it was that I gave them, too, he thought with a touch of grim humor. A real thriller, full of spying, and stolen designs for weapons, and cleverly filched war plans. But they all swallowed it. Because they wanted to. Because they didn't dare do anything else."

A slight, unidentifiable noise jerked his awareness back to the present time. He struggled slowly to his feet, and stood swaying. The sound faded and was not renewed. But now his over-vivid imagination turned the thumping of his heart into the thud of approaching footsteps. Shivering, only slightly recovered despite his forced rest, he started forward at a staggering run.

What a fool I've been! he thought bitterly. I could so easily have stayed the darling of the mob and the confidante of the great right up to the successful conclusion of the war, if only I hadn't been so naive at this sort of thing that I almost forced the government to suspect me.

THE party of men who came to take him in for 'A little routine questioning' was accompanied by General Mackay himself. And that hurt as much as anything else about the whole business. Good old Mac. The professor had known that there would be a lot of credit to be gained in this war by whoever led humanity in the fight, and he had been more than glad when he heard that Mac was to be that leader. But now it wasn't so nice to see worry and suspicion in the man's eyes.

Mackay was apologetic at first. "You have been seen quite distinctly coming out of the west coast Lanyiah stronghold on several occasions. But—well, I'm sure you have some adequate explanation."

He hadn't, though. And the lie that he thought up in his moment of panic sounded silly even to himself. "I—I was trying to steal some more plans. They still trust me, you see—"

"After the publicity about your revelations concerning them?" Mackay shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid it won't do, Professor."

So they took him away and shot him full of truth drug. And it was Mackay who, ignoring all usual procedure, asked him the first, disastrous question. "Are you working with the Lanyiah?"

He almost screamed when he heard it. The Lanyiah had warned him that the counter-drug they had injected in him would take a second or two to operate. But he had been relying on the inquisition's being opened with the usual routine stuff. 'Can you hear me?' 'Are you able to answer?' Not this.

He struggled fiercely not to speak, but the "Yes" forced itself from between his lips.

Mackay did not look surprised. Only disgusted. Plainly he had expected that answer, although he had allowed himself to hope for a different one. "But why?" he ejaculated angrily. "Why in the name of sanity did you do such a thing?"

But the professor was in control of himself again now, and he simply shook his head. Guessing what had happened his captors tried another shot of the truth drug, and then a little rough handling that almost descended to torture. Through it all he re-

mained obstinately silent. Finally they took him away and threw him into a cell.

Mackay spoke to him once again, before they closed the door on him. "This means a death sentence. You know that, don't you? In fact I could have had you shot out of hand, if I'd chosen. The only reason I didn't is that I'm hoping that you'll open up and tell us a bit more."

Well, at least I didn't do that, he thought grimly. Though how long I could have lasted out against them if this hadn't happened I don't know. There were scores of tricks they could have tried on me. Hypnosis. Draining and replacing my blood to clear me of the counter drug. Or maybe even hanging me up by my thumbs and lighting a slow fire under me.

The street began to slope gently upwards now. And before long the extra strain, slight though it was, added an impossible burden to his already overtired heart and lungs. Though every instinct shrieked to him to keep going he was forced to drop to the paving for another rest.

As the tumult within him died away somewhat he listened once more for sounds of pursuit, but still there were none. He should have been glad, but actually he was the more uneasy. It was too unnatural. Uncanny, almost. As suspiciously uncanny as his escape from prison had been.

IT WAS nearly ten minutes after the guard had gone that the professor discovered the man had forgotten to lock the door behind him. And nearly another ten minutes after that before the scientist could make up his mind whether to do anything about it or not. The Lanyiah were the only friends that he had in the world now, and they seemed impossibly far away. Even if, miraculously, the open door did mean that he could get out of the prison, he would still have to take his chance on the mob's finding him before he reached the stronghold.

And the treatment that the mob would give him would make whatever awaited him here seem by comparison a desirable thing.

Finally he compromised. There was only an hour to go to darkness. If no one came

to relock the door before then he would try to get away.

No one came. And, even more amazing, no one saw him in the corridor outside the cells, no one stopped him when he crept into the closet where the guards' spare uniforms were kept, and fitted himself out as best he could in clothes made for younger, bigger men.

After that it was easy. He simply walked out of the open door of the prison, through the small gate that broke the expanse of the tall, spike-topped wall, and out into the darkness. He was half-a-mile on his way to the Lanyiah stronghold when he heard the alarm siren sound.

Well, he thought as he dragged himself to his feet again, every month men win lotteries where the odds against them are high. Someone has to be lucky. Apparently this time it was me.

He simply could not force his body to run, now. The slope was too steep, and he too near the point of complete exhaustion. It took dogged effort even to keep up the unsteady walk at which he set forward.

Clouds were rearing dark masses between him and the stars by this time, and the shadows about his way grew thicker. Myopically his eyes blinked into them, and for a moment it seemed that one moved. The delusion faded, but it led to a thought that set even his tired old heart thumping a little faster. He had been assuming that he would be chased. But the prison guards and soldiers would know where he would make for. Supposing they hadn't gone directly after him, but had circled round to cut him off. Ambush—

A looming mass brought a short scream to his throat. Then he saw that it was only a mail box, made black and huge by the surrounding gloom. For a moment he stood rocking on his feet. He was a humble man, never intellectually arrogant enough to suppose that he knew what made and ruled the universe. And so he prayed without caring whether it was to God, or Gods, or blind uncaring powers. Please! Oh please, don't let them ambush me now.

He pressed on again, and seconds later more black, amorphous shapes swelled around him. Fear came back, and would

have forced another scream out of him; but be killed it with self-mockery. Was he going to let himself be fooled all the time by inanimate things?

Then rough hands seized him, and the glare of a hand-torch struck him in the face—

As his eyes adjusted he could see behind the torch's cone of light the thin, alert-eyed face of Mackay himself. In a queer tone, half jeering yet almost friendly, the man spoke. "Well, Fatso?"

The professor twisted his plump lips. To use that old name now, at a time like this! All right. If Mac wanted to carry the thing off with an air he would see that others could do the same. Fighting, the professor controlled his breath until it was almost normal. Then he said, "The great General Mackay himself. I am honored."

"You should be," retorted Mackay. "I've been waiting here over an hour in the cold, especially so that you and I could have a little talk."

So that's it, thought the professor. That's the secret of my miraculous escape. You calculated that if I was allowed to build my hopes high enough, and then had them broken at the very last second, my spirit would be crushed to the point where I would tell you what you want to know. Well, we'll see.

Mackay spoke curtly to the soldiers. "Bring him along."

The professor expected to be dragged back the way he had come. Instead he was pulled off into a side turning, and then through a black hole of a door into a building of some sort. Mackay, following him and his captors inside, switched on a light. The professor blinked around. The place had evidently once been a small factory, but now, stripped of whatever machinery it had contained, with its bare brick walls and concrete floor lit by one naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, it was a shadowy, echoing cave.

The soldiers released the professor, and he turned his head to look at them. There were only two, in charge of a junior officer. Mackay spoke quietly. "Wait outside, please."

The officer glanced at the professor, raised

his eyebrows, and started to protest. "But—" Then realization of the other's rank overwhelmed him, and he fell silent.

Mackay smiled and jerked out his gun. "Don't let it worry you. I'm armed. He isn't. Outside please."

The officer saluted smartly and led his men through the door without further protest. Mackay turned to the professor. "Now," he said gently, "We're going to have our talk."

"Are we?" The professor's tone was grimly suspicious. "What are we going to talk about?"

"Oh, lots of things. You and I. The war. The Lanyiah and your dealings with them. You know, Fatso, that's a thing that a lot of people have never been able to understand. That after betraying the Lanyiah to us you have been able to go on having dealings with them."

"It isn't going to work, Mac. You've done everything you could to me short of physical torture. And I'm still not giving anything away."

MACKAY looked at him reproachfully, then sighed. "It used not to be like this in the old days, Fatso. We didn't have any secrets from each other when we played football together, or skipped school to go fishing; and then forgot to watch the float because we were so busy settling little things like the future of the world, and whether man would ever go out to the stars."

That hurt. More than the professor cared to admit even to himself. He'd been trying hard not to remember those days ever since Mackay had reminded him of them by using that old, almost forgotten nickname of Fatso. Now he bit his lip, raging inwardly. Why couldn't Mac have just hit him or something, instead of twisting the very heart of him like this?

Mackay spoke again. "You'd like to get out of here to your pals, the Lanyiah, wouldn't you?"

"Naturally."

"Well, there's a back way out of this building. One that the soldiers don't know about. Maybe I'll let you use it. Maybe not. It depends."

"On what?"

"Oh—things." Mackay lifted his right

hand to gesture with it, and suddenly became aware of the gun that he was still holding. He grinned briefly and tossed the thing aside so that it skittered across the concrete floor and came to rest in the corner of the room.

The professor was still stinging from the reproachful reminder of the old days. He spoke with elaborate sarcasm. "Aren't you afraid I'll attack you? I could probably injure you to some extent even if I lost the fight. And how could the people of Earth possibly win this last battle that's coming without the great General Mackay to lead them to victory?"

"How indeed?" said Mackay with a grin. Then he went on more seriously. "I've been thinking a lot about those victories of mine lately, Fatso. Do you realize that I've had to face the most powerful enemy any man was ever called on to face? An interstellar race thousands of years ahead of man in scientific knowledge. Yet I've beaten them. Driven them from stronghold after stronghold until it will take only one more push to clear them right off the planet. I'm the greatest war leader that this world has ever known—"

The professor spoke contemptuously. "You always did like yourself rather a lot, didn't you Mac?"

Mackay shrugged. "Either it's as I say, or else these Lanyiah are nothing but dirty, stinking little cowards—"

For a moment the professor held his teeth set grimly. Then a hot shout burst out of him. "How dare you say that of them? How dare you? They are wiser and braver than you'll ever be able to realize!"

Mackay threw back his head and let loose a gargantuan roar of laughter. "Thanks Fatso. Thanks a lot."

"For what?"

"For confirming everything I've been suspecting."

THE professor bit his lip. He was a simple scientist, at home in the laboratory or the lecture room, but completely lost when it came to the subtleties of intrigue. He did not know how much Mac knew now, how much more he might have guessed. But there was only one way out of it if the whole secret was not to come out.

He moved suddenly, ducking past Mackay

and diving for the door. He heard the General's shout. "Come here, you fool!" But he ignored it, pressed on towards the black rectangle that led to the street. Then an out-thrust foot tangled with his and sent him sprawling just as a blue flash punctured the darkness where his body had been a second before.

Mackay leaned over him, grabbed the gun out of the corner of the room, and was covering the cowering figure of the professor with it when the soldiers came plunging back into the building. "All right," he said reassuringly. "I've got him under control. He won't get a chance to try that again. You can return outside."

For a moment it seemed that the young officer was going to argue. Then he shrugged almost imperceptibly, saluted, and took his men back through the door. Mackay looked down at the professor. "Why did you do that, you old fool? They'd have burned you to a crisp if I hadn't intervened."

The professor dragged himself up from the floor. "That was the idea," he said sullenly.

"Oh, don't be such a melodramatic idiot." Mackay pushed his gun back into its holster. Then he chuckled. "Getting yourself burned wouldn't do much good, Fatso. I Know All, as they say in the video thrillers." He spoke more soberly. "Anyway, there's no need to sacrifice yourself because of anything that I've found out. I don't want to tell anybody about it."

The professor stared at him. "You don't? Then why—well, what do you want to do?"

"I want to know the password that will get me through the Lanyiah lines."

The professor's voice still had a note of suspicion in it. But there was also a faint hint of hope. As if he thought it possible, just remotely possible, that he might get the right answer. "Why should I give you that?" he asked.

Mackay gave a mock sigh of resignation. "Still going to be obstinate? All right. I'll tell you. You should give it to me because you're their friend and I'm yours."

"But you are their enemy. You're the leader of the forces that are driving them off this planet that they tried to conquer."

"Am I?" said Mackay with a gentle laugh. Then with an abrupt change of tone he

went on, "Tell you what, Fatso. Have you ever noticed how much brighter and more alert everybody is since this war started? It almost seems that we were slipping into a sort of lethargy, and needed this fight to snap us out of it. I've been thinking about that a lot lately."

"Have you?"

"Uh-huh. And I've been thinking about something else, too. The history of the Australian aborigines."

The professor jerked his shoulders, but said nothing. Mackay's smile grew much brighter.

"It's a pity, isn't it, that those poor devils were allowed to die out the way they did? Of an inferiority complex. If the white man had only been a little wiser and a little kinder he could so easily have realized in time what was happening and saved them by devising some trick to restore their self-respect. Say, forcing a war on them, then turning to flee in confusion before their primitive bows and spears while he fired his own rifles and pistols into the air."

THE professor's breathing grew more rapid, but still he said nothing. Mackay resumed, "The inferiority-caused drive to extinction among the aborigines was a mass effect, of course. If the white men had needed one of them to help put their trick across they could easily have found one intelligent enough to be immune, and bought his friendship by promising to take him off with them to civilization when the war was over. And no doubt when his job was done that little aborigine would have had a wonderful time gazing at all the wonders of New York and London and Paris. But I

think that after a while he would have become rather a lonely little aborigine. I think that he would have begun to wish that he had taken one of his own kind, a friend, along with him."

Suddenly Mackay stopped smiling, jerked his head up, and roared in a gigantic voice, "And now, you pig-headed, pot-bellied little barrel of lard, will you tell me the password that will get me through the Lanyiah lines?"

The professor looked at him for a moment, blinked, then giggled almost hysterically, "There isn't any. They use a telepathic scanner that automatically checks the intentions in your mind and either accepts you or rejects you." He laughed again more naturally. "And now, you overgrown hunk of soldiery, will you show me that back way out of this shack?"

"There isn't any. That was just a trick of mine to check the intentions in your mind so that I could either accept you or reject you." Mackay guffawed uproariously. "But don't let it worry you, Fatso. We don't need a back entrance."

He jerked his gun out of its holster, strode to the door and sighted carefully. There came three sharp cracks. A trio of blue-light lances flashed into the night.

The professor began a protest. "But—" "Stun strength only," explained Mackay briefly. "They'll recover in fifteen minutes. But there are others not far away who'll be down before that to find out what the shooting's all about."

He took his friend by the shoulder, propelled him through the door, then gave his back a slap that thrust him in the direction of the Lanyiah stronghold. "Come on Fatso," he shouted, "Run for it."