

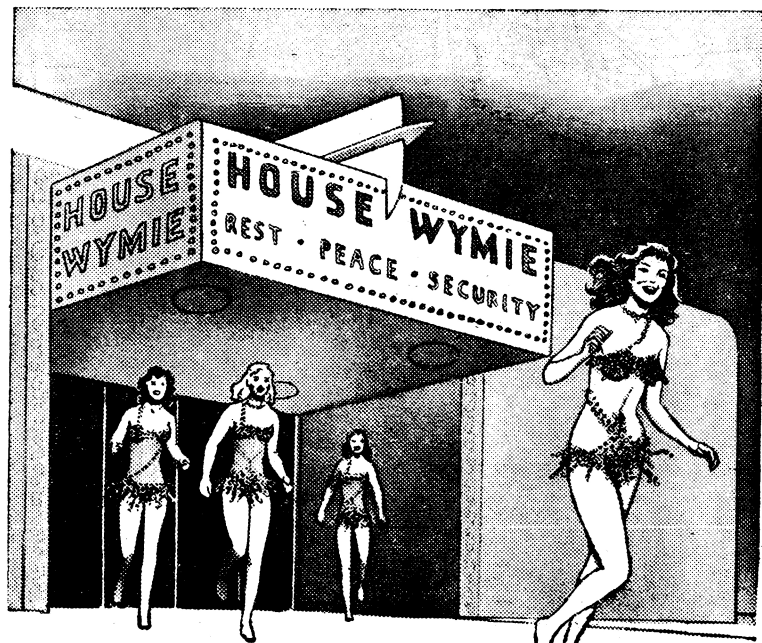
NOVELET

PEACE ON EARTH

Peace, security, brotherhood, all was possible, and all had come to man—but at what price?

By IRVING COX, JR.

illustrated by EMSH





STEWART had trouble starting his car, but he had expected that. Three months ago, the time-loss would have been a major disaster; now, he matter-of-factly pushed the coupe to the crest of the hill—the incline was enough to turn over the motor.

For fourteen miles the road twisted through a dry stream-bed. Stewart sat relaxed behind the wheel, at peace with himself. He smiled when he remembered how tense he had been on the way up to the cabin three months ago: driven by worry and fear; his mind cluttered with a dozen half-finished schemes; his lashing determination to double the seventy thousand net he'd made the first quarter.

The trail opened on a secondary highway, a narrow ledge cut in the face of a mountain. As Stewart made the turn, he caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. He wore dusty boots and jeans; he was naked above the waist, burned brown by the sun; his face was lean and hard; his hair had become bleached gold.

For three months he had been alone in the Sierras, fishing unnamed mountain lakes, hiking uncharted meadows alive with deer. For three months he had been without news of the outside world; he had seen no fellow-man. And Stewart suddenly realized that he had missed nothing. The daily crises would be the same; the blazing headlines would not change; the politicians would still scream their fragile, semantic lies.

Thirty miles from the cabin the secondary road joined U. S. 50. Stewart turned west. He might have observed that something was wrong, if he had not grown so ac-

customed to solitude. He passed only three other cars on the road; the thriving, foothill town of Auburn was nearly deserted.

Stewart saw his first newspaper when he entered Sacramento. The headline screamed across eight columns,

SOVIET DAY IN S. F.

The sub-head was even less comprehensible,

*Soviet Friendship Fleet Anchors in Bay;
Moscow Congress Ratifies
U. S. Constitution.*

Stewart glanced up at the street sign. M Street, the mall leading to the state capital building, had been renamed Marx Boulevard.

He looked for a gas station. None was open. The Sacramento streets were empty. No, not entirely; an old man sat sunning himself in Capital Park.

Stewart jerked on a plaid shirt and leaped out of his car. "What's happened?" he demanded. "Where is everyone? All this nonsense in the papers—"

"Ain't nonsense. 'Spect you ain't been around much, Bub," the old man answered. "Most of the people's gone up to Frisco for the p'rade."

"What parade?"

"To welcome the Commies. The President's come out to make a speech. They're sayin' Malenkov will fly over for the Grand Ball tonight."

Stewart tried to say something; but the words wouldn't come.

"Say, where you been these past few weeks, Bub?"

"Up in the hills," Stewart's voice was a weak whisper.

The old man cupped his ear. "What's that? Payin' bills? Nobody's got no bills no more, not since the Wymies come. Say, you sure look like you needed a treatment. Their new House up on K Street ought to be open."

"House? What sort of House? Who—"

"The Wymies built 'em. All over; everywhere." The old man made an expansive gesture and smiled; he took a thin, pink inhalator from his pocket and sniffed it luxuriously. His aging body sagged deeper on the park bench; his eyes glazed; his face became vacant, expressionless, as innocent as a child's. "My booster," he muttered, vaguely offering the capsule to Stewart. "Try a snort, Bub."

Stewart knocked the inhalator aside and rudely pulled the old man to his feet. "Who the hell are the Wymies?"

"Friends, Bub." The old man nodded toward the sky. "Come from up there." His eyes slid shut and he began to snore placidly.

STEWART went back to his car. He drove to K Street, looking for the House of the Wymies. He had no difficulty locating it. The

low, plastic-walled building filled half a block where once the Senator Theatre had stood. The structure was pink, glowing like a polished gem in the sunlight. Above the marquee was a large neon sign, "House Wymie." Smaller green letters offered "Rest, Peace, Security." Six beautiful women served as doorkeepers. Except for a fringe of pink beads across their breasts and loins, they were nude.

Stewart brought his coupe to a stop, and the women ran to open the door and help him out. Their hands were as soft as powder-pads, yielding, sensuous, inviting. Stewart shook them off stubbornly. "What is all this?" he asked. "Who are the Wymies?"

"House Wymie is their gift to you—peace and comfort, security eternal." The soprano chorus was like the whisper of a summer wind across a field of grain, but the women looked at Stewart with dead eyes. "You came to us of your own free will, sir; we give to you freely, the peace of House Wymie."

They drew open the lobby door. Stewart went inside.

He was engulfed in silence—the silence of death, the silence of eternity. The green carpet was a forest down beneath his dusty boots. The air was cold, indefinably fragrant. He breathed deeply; he could not help himself. His muscles relaxed; his body went limp.

He felt like a swimmer trapped too far from shore. If he exerted himself, he could make it to safety—but he was tempted to sink into the warm, green embrace of death. The choice was his.

The choice was his! That was the key to understanding House Wymie. Stewart knew he could turn back; nothing forced him to remain in the cold silence of the plastic building—nothing but his own lack of will and the flaccid weariness of his body.

The choice was his. Yet, involuntarily he moved down a dark corridor, carried like a twig on the crest of a surging stream. He entered the dark auditorium, lit by narrow, fluorescent tubes close to the ceiling. He fumbled into a seat and sank gratefully into the soft, foamy cushions; arms from the chair closed around him, embracing his body tenderly, suggestively.

Colored light began to swim across a screen that was very far away. As the color grew brighter, the screen seemed to expand; gradually it moved closer, until the abstract pattern of light seemed to be playing its sensuous drama within Stewart's mind.

Suddenly the swirling light had meaning. It was fulfillment. Fulfillment of every secret dream Stewart had ever had—good and evil, lust and nobility, torn from his own soul; infinite wishes



granted with the open-handed largeness of a fairy-tale godmother.

Stewart's satisfaction was profoundly complete; for the first time in his life he was absolutely safe, absolutely secure. He felt no envy, no hate, no greed; for was he not the master of all things? And all things were his.

Infinite security and contentment: all his, in this fantasy fulfillment which was more vivid than reality. All his, at the price of—?

It was quite clear what the price must be: ambition, initiative, responsibility. He would never face failure again—but, without risking failure, he could never experience achievement. The price for absolute security was the substance of Stewart's personality as an individual.

The choice was his.

FEAR CRAWLING in his throat, Stewart fought free of the chair. When he stood up, the pattern of color vanished, but the effect lingered in his brain, sapping his will. He struggled to return to the lobby, against invisible currents that pulled at his body.

Then he saw his first Wymie—tall, graceful, almost human in form. The alien's head was enormous, egg-shaped, bald. His thin, willowy body was clothed in a spangled cloak. A veiled blankness swam in his pink, saucer-eyes as he extended stick-like arms toward Stewart in a gesture of welcome.

"Friend, you return the wrong way," the Wymie purred in a gentle, deep-throated voice. "The auditorium is merely a beginning. Let me show you the other dream rooms."

"No!" Stewart shrank against

the pink wall, but the Wymie made no attempt to touch him.

"You have nothing to fear, friend; we give you rest, security—"

"And you rob me of my soul!"

The pink eyes glittered. "You prefer the confection, then?" The Wymie offered Stewart an inhalator like the one the old man had used in the park. Stewart pushed it aside.

"As you wish, friend. Accept House Wymie or reject it, of your own volition. Before you leave us, may I have your personal data for our files? The doorkeepers have examined your vehicle registration; they inform me that your name is Andrew Stewart and your home is San Francisco."

The Wymie took a small pad from an inner pocket of his cloak. "Now, if I may have your age, and your place of occupation—"

In terror Stewart pulled open the lobby door. He drove furiously out of Sacramento along the highway to the coast. Slowly his fear slackened. When he was able to think clearly again, he deduced a shadowy explanation for what had happened.

For three months Stewart had been in the Sierras, out of touch with men. Sometime during that period the Wymies had landed on earth—aliens from Mars, Venus, or perhaps another solar system.

They had appeared to come in peace; they had been received as friends. Then they opened their dream-houses and enticed men to sacrifice their souls. The invasion had apparently been world-wide, for the Soviets had also bought the dream. The greed of human conflict had died with individual ambition and initiative.

The Wymies had given the world peace.

Peace on Earth...at the cost of the soul of man...

But surely, Stewart thought, he was not the only person who had escaped. There would be others. He must find them; they could organize a counter-revolution...

San Francisco was thronged. People jammed the streets from curb to curb; Stewart could not move his car beyond the bridge-ramp. Fortunately he saw an empty cubicle in a parking lot. He looked for an attendant, but found none. He went back to lock his car; a passer-by laughed at him.

"What's eating you, Mac? We ain't locked anything since the Wymies came."

STEWART edged through the crowd to Market Street, where the parade was underway. Marine bands, Legion bands, high school majorettes marched in the bright sun, doing homage to the visiting Soviet naval units. The Russians

rode in streamer-decorated Cadillacs; the Chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee shared a convertible with the Commanding Commissar. A delegation from the D. A. R. carried three enormous portraits of Malenkov, Lenin and Marx, while many of the Soviet sailors wore huge "I Like Ike" buttons.

Here and there, scattered through the crowd that lined the parade-route, Stewart saw Wymies in their spangled coats. They watched the festivities emotionlessly. When one of the aliens came close to Stewart, he shouldered the Wymie aside rudely; the stick-arm shot out and soft, cold fingers closed on Stewart's hand.

"You dislike us, friend?" the soft voice purred.

Stewart turned aside with a sneer of disgust.

"Friend, you need a treatment. There is a House not far from—"

"No, thanks."

"But House Wymie is our gift to your people! Rest, peace, security; come, friend, let me show you the way."

"I said, no!" When the Wymie moved toward him again, Stewart's fist shot out. It sank into soft, boneless flesh, and the invader collapsed. A small knot of people, distracted from the business of watching the parade, swarmed around them. Their white, balloon faces stared at the fallen Wymie

with terror. In dead voices, the men muttered, "He hit a Wymie; he hit a Wymie!"

In a moment, Stewart thought, the mob would turn on him. He slipped away, clinging close to the buildings. Looking back, he saw that one of the men was following him; Stewart tried to move faster, but that was impossible in the press of the mob.

He found an open door and slid into a deserted cocktail-lounge. A tiny restroom window opened on the back alley. With some difficulty, Stewart squeezed through it. But as he turned toward the street again, he saw his pursuer at the mouth of the alley. "Wait, friend," the man called, burlesquing the Wymies.

Stewart clenched his fists.

"So you don't like Wymies?"

"No."

"Ever had a treatment?"

"Just one—a couple of hours ago," Stewart said.

The stranger's eyebrows arched. "And you came out of it—like this?" He held out his hand. "Put her there, buddy; I ain't never met a guy who came through it alone." The man fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette; while he lit it, he studied Stewart thoughtfully. "You know, I think the boss can use you."

"Boss?"

"We're putting together a little organization—"

"Against the Wymies?"

The stranger laughed. "Sure, you could call it that."

"What about you? Why haven't the treatments—"

"Never took one; I knew better. You might say, we've been in this Wymie racket for years—only on a smaller scale. They've really got an organization." He laughed again. "Look us up tonight, buddy, at the *Gaiety*, down in the Mission District. Can't miss the joint. Ask at the bar for Herm Schultz."

STEWART did not return to the parade. He went to his own apartment, in a hillside-building overlooking the bay. San Francisco was blessed with one of its rare, clear days. From the view window of his living room Stewart could see the flag-draped Soviet fleet lying at anchor close to the Presidio. He stood in front of the window thoughtfully pulling at his underlip. He felt lost and helpless. Something had to be done—but what? How?

Lynn Sinclair. The name came abruptly into his mind; and he knew he had the answer. Sinclair was the crustiest, most viciously cut-throat individualist Stewart had ever known. Of all men, he was the last who would become a victim of the Wymie dream.

Stewart couldn't telephone; he'd had the service cut off when he went away. Sinclair lived out on the peninsula; Stewart would have

to wait until the streets were clear so he could use his car.

He showered and dressed leisurely. As he laid aside his boots and jeans, Stewart felt a sense of loss. The business tweed somehow symbolized his resumption of the shackles and the strain of civilization.

At sunset, the city festivities moved indoors. A B-36 winged into the naval airport, bringing Malenkov for the opening of the ball. The now-jovial Georgian ruler led the Grand March in partnership with the President's wife—or so the morning newspapers subsequently reported. Descriptions of his uniform glowed with saccharine clichés.

The climax of the friendship ceremony came when the G. P. U. Chief presented the Order of the Red Star to the National Commander of the American Legion, along with a commemorative plaque designating all U. S. war veterans as Soviet Heroes. The Secretary of State conferred American citizenship upon all active Communist Party Members. In a special sideshow of their own, the K. K. K. merged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

As soon as the streets were relatively clear, Stewart was able to take his car from the parking-lot; the attendant had returned from the parade. Stewart offered him a

bill, but he rejected it with an ingratiating smile. "No charge on holidays, sir." Then he saw the dent in Stewart's fender; his face quivered with horror. "We've damaged your car! Let me—"

"That happened months ago."

"But let us repair it, sir. I feel definitely responsible. There's no charge; absolutely no charge."

Stewart jammed the car into gear and it shot out into the street. Sweetness and light, overflowing everywhere;—the personality of the world had been transformed into a bland, tasteless pudding.

Anger made Stewart reckless. His coupe banged into the rear-end of a slow-moving truck, and a huge driver, who looked as if he might have made a hobby of weight-lifting, swung out of the cab and surveyed the wreckage.

"My gracious!" he cried. "You've broken your headlight. I'm terribly sorry, sir; it was all my fault. I should have been in the right-hand lane."

Stewart backed his car away. "She drives O.K."

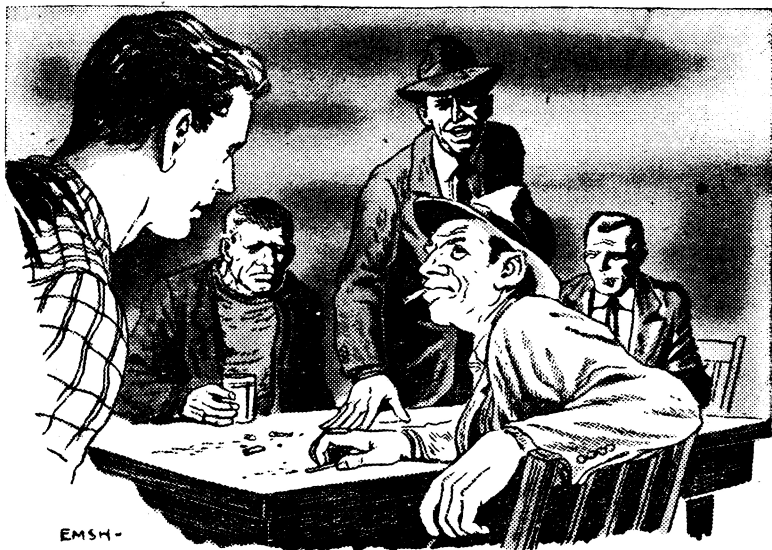
"But you mustn't drive with one light out; it's against the law. Let me fix it for you."

Stewart ground his teeth together. "Don't bother!"

"But, really, it'll only take a minute and—"

Stewart pulled his coupe into the stream of traffic.

IT WAS A twenty minute drive to the Sinclair estate. Behind its forbidding hedge, the house glowed with light. The outdoor Lynn Sinclair himself answered the door. He was in the process of dressing. He wore tuxedo pants and a partially-buttoned formal



floodlights over the tennis court and the pool were on. The driveway and the parking-area were cluttered with cars.

For a moment Stewart thought Sinclair was entertaining. But Sinclair belonged to the horsey, station-wagon set, and the automobiles in his yard were all rattletrap antiques. Scores of people were picnicking on the lawn; scrawny, underfed, slum children played in the pool.

shirt. He pumped Stewart's hand enthusiastically.

"Andy, boy! So you're back—and looking fit as a fiddle, too. Sorry I've got to receive you like this, but the servants are out. Wanted to see the parade, you know; I'm going to take in the ball myself."

"Then I won't keep you for—"

"Nonsense, my boy. Come in; let me make you a drink."

Sinclair took Stewart into the

library. The room, which Stewart remembered as the showplace of the estate, was in chaos. Sinclair was a collector; his library of first editions was priceless. Now, the books were piled haphazardly on the floor.

Sinclair gestured apologetically toward the confusion. "The children like to play in here," he explained. "Poor, little tykes from the city. I've more or less turned the house over to them; they seem to enjoy it so much." He kicked aside a castle, constructed from a set of Bancroft, and made his way to the telephone. He rang a number; after a moment, he said, "Of course; he's here now." Pause. "Be right over? Fine." Pause. "He'll wait; I promise you that."

Sinclair hung up and filled two glasses from a decanter and handed one to Stewart. "Now tell me all about it, Andy." He relaxed in a leather chair, after pushing a Shakespeare folio to the floor. "Did you enjoy the vacation? Catch many fish?"

"Lynn, isn't it more to the point for you to tell me—"

"Don't worry another minute, Andy; I handled all your accounts myself. You've cleared about ninety thousand, I think. Of course, there was that Johnston deal, but I figured it was my mistake, so I made it up out of my own pocket."

"Frankly, Lynn, I don't give one damn about any of that right now.

I want to know about the Wymies. Who are they? Where do they come from?"

Sinclair took a pink inhalator from his pocket and sniffed at it delicately. Stewart's heart sank. If they had caught Lynn Sinclair, the world was lost.

"Want a snort, boy?"

"No!"

"Don't know what you're missing," Sinclair sighed. "The Wymies are our friends, Andy; they made their first landing about two weeks after you left, I guess. The ones we have with us now come from a planet of the Sirius system, I think."

"There've been others?"

"A dozen or more different species. The first Lord Commander came from a world which has a chlorine atmosphere; he had to keep on a breathing-mask while he negotiated the treaty."

"What treaty?"

"The Wymies represent a kind of galactic civilization; they're grooming us for membership."

"Like hell they are! Don't you realize, Lynn—"

"Their worlds are far superior to ours. It's quite a compliment, really, and quite a responsibility."

"They're enslaving us, Lynn. These Wymie Houses—"

"Simply educative centers. The Wymies are teaching us their techniques of adjustment; it's marvelous, Andy."

Stewart snatched the pink inhalator from the older man. "Lynn, it's a drug!"

"The government had it analyzed before we signed the treaty. It's perfectly harmless; good for you, as a matter of fact."

CLENCHING his fists, Stewart began to pace the cluttered floor. "The Wymies have invaded our world; can't you understand that? They've used a new kind of weapon. It's made us peaceful and happy, yes; but we've become obedient little slaves, too. We've no drive any more, no push, no ambition—"

Stewart's voice trailed off. As he turned toward the hall he saw a Wymie standing in the doorway. The alien moved slowly into the library, holding out his stick-hand.

"Meet Kori-Tra, Andy," Sinclair said. "He's the Integrator for Frisco; I called him when you came."

"I had word from our Sacramento office about you, Mr. Stewart," the Wymie explained, "and I monitored all your friends here. We're so anxious to complete our data—"

Stewart glared at Sinclair. "So you betrayed me, Lynn!"

"Of course I didn't, Andy; but I do like to co-operate with our new friends, whenever I can."

"You used the wrong word, Lynn; it's obedience, not co-operation."

The Wymie laughed cozily. "Surely, Mr. Stewart, you find the world a better place than when you went away. Men have learned to live together without jealousy or greed; we've wiped out war."

"That's not co-operation."

"No?" Kori-Tra's egg face was contorted, but what his emotion was, Stewart had no way of knowing. "Tell me, friend, what does co-operation mean to you?"

"It's based on the conscious action of rational minds. It must be logically accepted—a mutual sacrifice of self-interest to common or group-interest—a working agreement freely arrived at by adult intelligences."

"Yet the net result would be the same as ours, Mr. Stewart."

"Possibly; but men haven't used their rationality to build your nightmare. They've lost their individuality; you've made them automatons, puppets—"

"An intriguing argument, Mr. Stewart," Kori-Tra broke in crisply. "Friend, I want to ask you to help us do a little experiment." The Wymie offered Stewart a pink inhalator. "Use this, please, and see if your reaction is—"

"Do you think I'm a fool?"

"It is important to us both, Mr. Stewart."

Stewart edged backward toward the door. "Perhaps it seems childish stubbornness to you Wymies, but I prefer to remain exactly as

I am—untreated and unenlightened."

Again the strange expression passed over the alien's face. "I'm afraid I must insist, Mr. Stewart; hold him, Mr. Sinclair."

Stewart had expected that. He whirled and drove his fist into the older man's jaw. The Wymie raised his thin arms imploringly, "For your own good, Mr. Stewart!"

Stewart saw other Wymies waiting in the hall. He broke open the library window and fled across the lawn. His car was hemmed in by late-comers who had come to enjoy the hospitality of the Sinclair pool. He saw Wymies behind him, tripping daintily over the grass.

Then Stewart remembered the genial trustfulness of this new world. He selected a car at random; as he expected, the key dangled in the ignition-lock. Unfortunately, the vehicle was nearly twenty years old—a junkheap held together with tape and baling wire.

With the accelerator pressed to the floor, Stewart drove back to San Francisco. Sometimes, on a down grade, the speedometer reached forty-five. Lynn Sinclair had been no help, but Stewart had one chance left. He drove to the *Gaiety* and asked for Herm Schultz.

STEWART was taken through a dingy hall into a bare, airless

back room. Four men were sitting around a wooden table; one of them was Schultz. He sprang up and shook Stewart's hand warmly. His introductions were frenzied. But the little, greasy-haired man he called the boss—his name was Carlos—seemed very unimpressed; he studied Stewart with beady eyes.

"Herm tells us you're immune," Carlos said. "O. K., Stewart, consider yourself in; you can stop playing games now. I suppose you've just had sense enough to keep away from Wymie joints, like we have."

"Immune?" Stewart repeated.

"Herm says you left a Wymie House of your own free will."

"I did."

The beady eyes glittered. "Think it over, fellow. I can add a clever Joe to my outfit. We've never had a Wymie treatment; you haven't, either. Admit that, and we'll go on from there. If you go on lying to us—"

"I told you the truth."

"We can prove it, Stewart; you know that." After a moment, Carlos' eyebrows arched. The three men seized Stewart, pinning him against the wall. Carlos took out a pink inhalator and jammed it into Stewart's nostrils. "Goodbye, Mr. Stewart," he whispered. "Enjoy your Wymie dreamland."

Stewart held his breath, fighting the hands that held him, but he could not break away. At last he

was forced to gasp for a lungful of air. He had a very brief sensation of sensuous exhaustion; of vague dreams, half-remembered. It passed quickly and he stood leaning against the wall and glaring at Carlos.

"Just what you thought you'd prove by that—"

"He's O. K.," Herm Schultz whispered.

"So he is." Even Carlos seemed a little awed. "If you knew you were immune, Stewart, why didn't you simply show us—" Suddenly Carlos began to laugh. "But you didn't know, did you? All right, fellow, let me give you a breakdown on this Wymie deal."

Stewart pulled a chair up to the wooden table. Carlos sent to the bar for beer. They sipped it while they talked.

"The Wymies, Stewart, have the sweetest drug-peddling racket in the universe. We've been pikers; they make all the people on a planet addicts. I used to do some pushing myself, but my business has been shot to hell since the Wymies came. As soon as they put up their Houses, I spotted the gimmick—one peddler always knows another. That's why we haven't tried the Wymie Houses.

"For a long time I couldn't figure out how they made their deal pay off. The Houses are free, see? Where's the dough in that? Then I got the angle: they'll take it

out of us in trade. We'll build cars and T-V sets, and so on, and they'll sell them on some other world."

CARLOS finished his beer and fished out a cigarette. "There's only one thing wrong with the junk the Wymies peddle. Sure, one whiff of it turns most of us into addicts; but every once in a while a guy walks out of the Wymie House before the treatment's finished, and after that he's immune. When that happens, the poor guy always disappears after a couple of hours. The Wymies hunt him down, of course. You've been lucky, Stewart; damn' lucky. And so are we, because you're going to help us muscle in on their racket."

"This is too big for that, Carlos. The Wymies are aliens—invaders; they're conquering our world. It's up to us to stop them."

"Cut the flag-waving; I'm not interested."

"And I'm not interested in your petty—"

"But you are, fellow." Carlos smiled. "Because, if you don't help me, I'll turn you over to the Wymies." He ground out his cigarette fastidiously, with the toe of his shoe. "We're not asking much, Stewart. Just one city; they'll still have the rest of the world. Frisco; that's all I want; I'll even give them a percentage of the gross."

"What makes you think you can make any sort of deal with Wymies?"

"That's where you come in. Up to now we've been stymied because they have everything in Frisco protected by inhalator bombs. But you, Stewart—you're immune."

"Carlos, you've got to think of more than yourself! Mankind is being enslaved. If my immunity gives us any advantage—"

"We'll start operations tonight. Nobody knows how long we'll have you around, Stewart; we got to use the breaks when we get them."

"Listen, Carlos! It's far more important to—"

"You're wasting time, Stewart. I look out for Carlos; nobody else. First we'll bomb a couple of their joints. After that..."

Stewart listened in dull agony, while Carlos outlined his efficient scheme of terror, seeing no way out for himself. He gained nothing—either for himself or for mankind—by helping Carlos; but; but if he refused, Carlos would turn him over to the invaders. He wondered how many other men were immune; he tried to think of some way of contacting them, arousing them to action against the Wymies. If he could do that...

"Better still, we'll plant a bomb in the ballroom before the big dance breaks up," Carlos decided;

"that'll show the Wymies we mean business."

Then the solution came to Stewart. He asked quietly, "Are they broadcasting the Grand Ball?"

"Every network, on a worldwide hook-up. Brother, this friendship day is a big league operation."

"Sounds good enough for me."

"Beginning to see this my way, Stewart?"

"I guess I am, Carlos."

STEWART and the four men drove to Market Street in a big sedan. Stewart decided that Carlos must have learned his racketeering from watching fourth-rate thrillers on T-V. The streets were still crowded; they had to park three blocks from the ballroom. Carlos carried the bomb; the others packed a small arsenal of assorted revolvers.

They sent Stewart alone into the foyer to make sure it was clear of inhalators. "How'll I know?" he asked.

"The Wymies usually put them up over doorways," Carlos explained. "Long capsules, like fire extinguishers. They spray the air with a fine mist. It has a funny smell; you can't miss it."

Stewart reported the foyer uncontaminated. They went inside. Through a wide archway they looked in on the dancers. At the far end of the room, the orchestra sat in a band shell; banked on the

platform was a battery of microphones.

Herm Schultz whispered, "They got inhalators spraying the floor, boss."

Stewart saw clusters of narrow, metal tubes fastened to the columns of a colonnade which encircled the dance floor.

"I don't like this setup," Herm whined; "let's drop our bomb and get out of here."

"It won't do us any good if we put it out here," Carlos snapped. "We've got to show the Wymies that we can get in, even where they're protecting the joint with inhalators." He cradled the bomb in his hand. "I want this baby to go off on the dance-floor; Stewart'll put it there for us."

"You'll be killing our own people," Stewart said; "not Wymies."

"What difference does that make?"

"The Wymies are up front by the bandstand; if I—"

"I give the orders, Stewart."

"But the effect would be the same, wherever I leave the bomb!"

"Not quite. If we kill any Wymies, maybe they won't cut me in on their territory." He slipped the bomb into Stewart's hand. "Put it in the center of the floor, fellow; nowhere else. Don't forget—we'll be watching you from the hall." Stewart saw the gleam of a re-

volver in Carlos' hand. "I'm not in the habit of missing."

STEWART entered the ballroom. Carlos' stereotyped threat hadn't changed his plan; it simply added a new hazard. In any case, Stewart saw no possibility that he would get out of it alive; but if he could reach the microphones, he might make his sacrifice worthwhile. What he said would have to be brief and to the point. He was still unsure of the specific phrasing; but he must make it a rallying-point for others who were immune.

He moved slowly along the edge of the floor. Through the colonnade he saw Carlos and his three cohorts keeping pace with him in the outer hall. Stewart reached the middle of the room; Carlos gestured pointedly.

Stewart paused and drew a deep breath. The air was faintly perfumed, as it had been in the Wymie House in Sacramento.

Then he went toward the bandstand as rapidly as he could. Carlos motioned him to turn back; his revolver was in his hand. Stewart pushed up the platform steps; the band blared a brassy-sweet rendition of "Margie."

Fifty or more Wymies were standing at the front of the auditorium, watching the festive display of their handiwork. One by one they glanced at Stewart. They

whispered together. Unobtrusively, in pairs, they began to close in upon him.

In the wings Stewart saw Carlos. He gestured once again, furious, with the muzzle of his revolver. When Stewart ignored it, Carlos leveled the weapon and took careful aim.

The dance came to an end. Polite applause rippled over the audience. Stewart seized a microphone and he began to talk. How much time did he have? Five seconds? Ten? One point seemed very important. People who were immune had to be warned to conceal their immunity. Just like the addicts, they must continue to patronize the Wymie Houses, so the aliens could not isolate them. After that, they could begin to organize a counter-attack against the invaders.

How much he said, Stewart never knew. Carlos' gun cracked, and flaming pain stabbed Stewart's shoulder. Waves of unconsciousness closed over his mind. Grasping a microphone stand, he slid slowly to the floor.

He had a vague impression that the Wymies had done nothing to stop him. Instead, they had surrounded Carlos and the other three men, and dragged them out into the drugged mist that sprayed the ballroom.

Stewart had failed. He might have said something to save man-

kind, but he had been prevented—not by the action of the invaders, but by the greed of man himself. Unconsciousness came to him on a flood of seething, helpless bitterness. . . .

HE OPENED his eyes. He lay strapped on a padded shelf in a metal-walled, cylindrical room which seemed to be moving. A pliable, transparent substance, like soft rubber, lay over his wound.

A Wymie came and hung above him, floating in the air.

"You gave us more trouble than any of the others," the Wymie purred, and it seemed to Stewart that the alien was amused.

"Why don't you kill me and be done with it?"

"The Galactic Federation, Mr. Stewart, has a perverse affection for life in all its forms."

"The master's consideration for his slaves!"

"Our foolish comedy of cross-purposes would have been quite entertaining for us both, if you had not been so badly wounded." The Wymie shifted his body so he could look into Stewart's face. "Let me set your mind at rest."

"The Galactic Federation is a very old organization, Mr. Stewart. By our standards, your civilization is still in its infancy. Yet you've made tremendous technological strides—one of the most rapid rational revolutions we've observed

anywhere in the universe. But you gave us quite a problem. Your people were on the verge of attempting spaceflight, but they were not sociologically ready to join the Federation. Your concepts of conquest were very dangerous to us. Theoretically, we should have wiped out your planet—but that we could not do. So we came to your world, Mr. Stewart, as friends; and we set up the Wymie Houses."

"To enslave us," Stewart broke in. "To rob us of incentive, and—"

"Quite true, I'm afraid; but also very necessary. We imposed the appearance of co-operation on your world. With the illusion of complete personal security, your people would give up their desire to conquer the stars. You see, your motivation is all wrong. Your people dream of finding eternal security sometime, somewhere. You fight your wars to gain that end. Yet the only security of such an order which life ever finds is death. It takes an adult mind—a Galactic mind—to realize that, and to substitute a more mature goal.

"A few of your people rejected our hypnotics—as you did, Mr. Stewart; your so-called immunity is no more than that. When you first entered the Wymie House you were conscious that you had to make a choice. You chose one thing; most of your people, another. By our standards, Mr. Stewart,

you then became a citizen of the Federation.

"We're taking you to the new world now; a Centaurian planet very much like your own. You'll find other earth-people there—more than a hundred thousand—and the number is growing steadily; but you may be surprised at *who* they are, these adults of your world. Not many of the men you call great, I'm afraid; simply ordinary people who discovered the secret of growing up."

"What of the earth? Will we ever go back?"

"Perhaps. The Federation has high hopes for the new generation, Mr. Stewart. The children will grow up in a world of brotherhood, and co-operation, and friendship. All the cliches your people give lip-service to will be real; all your spiritual idealism. There will be no inconsistency, no semantic frustration, no social double-talk. We've given your children the fertile soil where adulthood can thrive. Consider the technical progress your people have made in the past thousand years; many of our Federation planets have done no more in fifty thousand. Who knows tomorrow? Your people, Mr. Stewart, may one day grow up to rule the Galaxy."

"As adults," Stewart said slowly; "not as conquerors."

"Yes, Mr. Stewart, as adults."

