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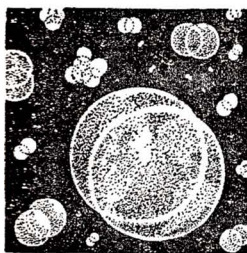
STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 18, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

September, 1948

A Complete Novel



What Mad Universe

By FREDRIC BROWN

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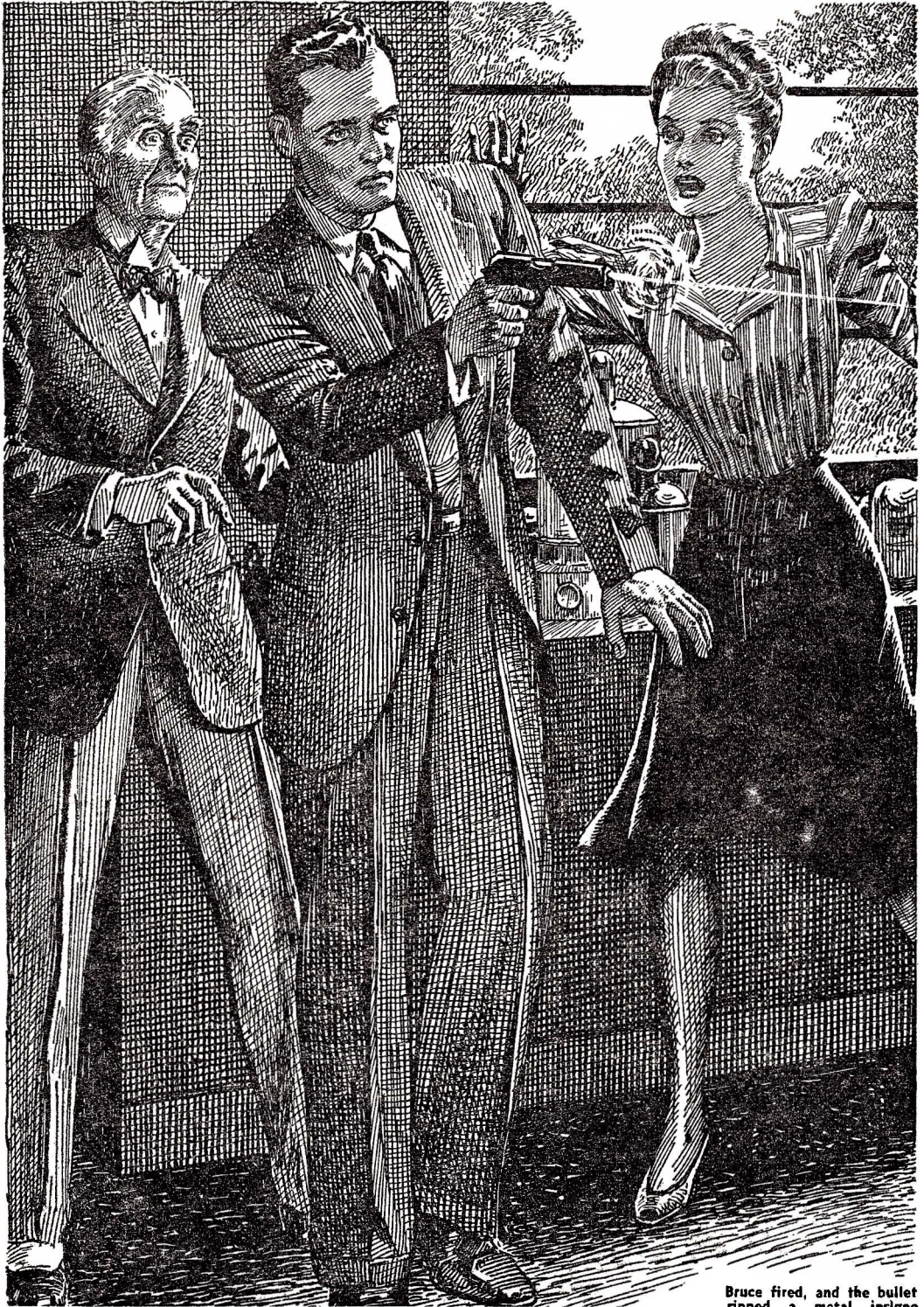
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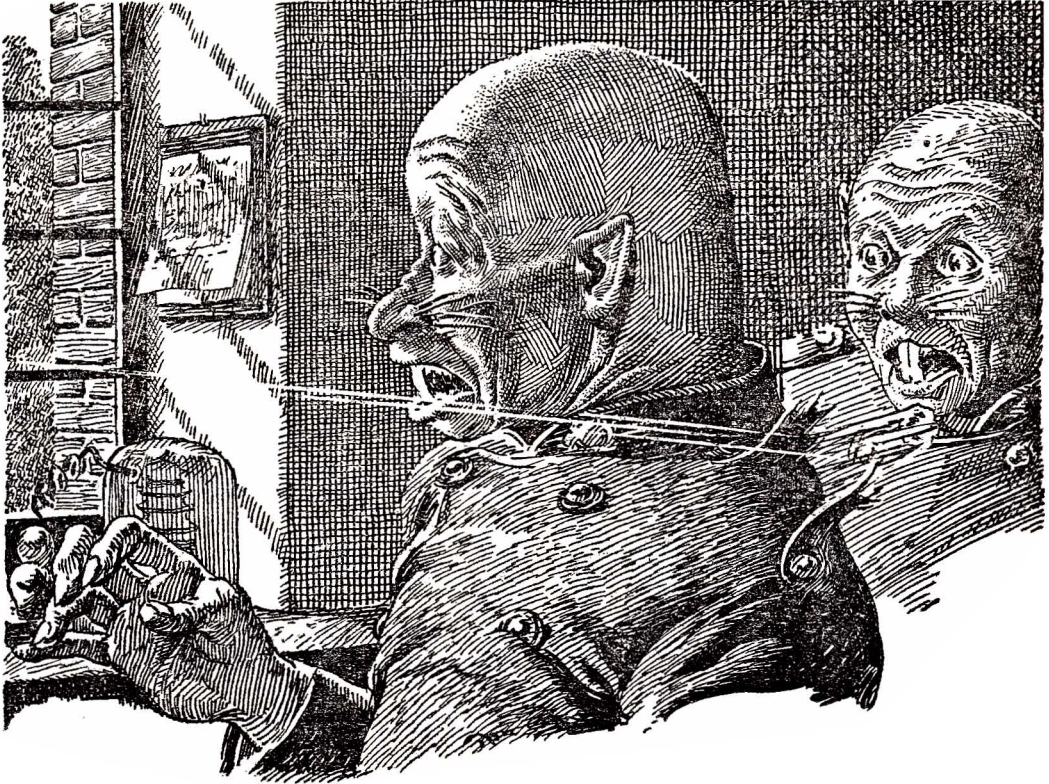
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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.



Bruce fired, and the bullet
ripped a metal insignia
from the shoulder of the
Café Gan



RAT RACE

By **DOROTHY** and **JOHN DE COURCY**

The Rat-men's empire spread ever outward until it engulfed the world in a paralysis of total terror

LOIS MACDONALD opened the door of the laboratory. Her husband, Bruce, and Dr. Granas were studying something intently.

"It's six o'clock, Bruce," she called from the doorway.

Bruce looked up from the table. "Already?" he asked, surprised.

Dr. Granas stretched. "That's the way it is, Bruce. Time seems to slip through a man's fingers when he's doing something."

Bruce walked across the room. "Well, we might as well hear what he has to say and

get it over with." He snapped on the television and walked back to the sink. The two men washed their hands and dried them, occasionally glancing at the screen.

The orchestra that had been playing vanished to be replaced by the solemn face of an announcer. "Ladies and Gentlemen. This is Malcolm Field, speaking to you from the United Nations Government Building in Geneva. Through the cooperation of the European Broadcasting Alliance, we bring you a special address by United States Delegate, Avery B. Clark."

The scene shifted and the usually tragic face of Delegate Clark appeared looking more dejected than usual. He cleared his throat.

"My fellow citizens. There are few of you, if any, who do not know of the momentous events of these last four days. You have heard, as did I, the surrender ultimatum of the Cafis. Yesterday, we experienced the type of warfare which we can expect if we are to resist.

"For one hour, it was as if our civilization did not exist and we were returned to the Stone Age. The official emissary of the Cafis explained the principle of this weapon and has shown how it is applied, yet none of our scientists, either professional or amateur, has been able to find a way to combat this weapon. The Cafis have informed us that this only one of many such weapons and each is equally potent.

"This is not war as we of earth have known war, but it is war none the less. The Cafis are an alien race and therefore a peculiar one. If they had wished, they could have attacked us without warning and by now, we would all be dead.

"My fellow delegates and I have felt the grave responsibility resting upon us and we have considered the facts carefully. If I were deciding for myself alone, I would say, fight! Fight to the end! I would have nothing of greater value to risk than my life and my honor. But, I have had to decide for you, for your wives, for your fathers and mothers, for your husbands and for your children.

"Therefore, I have made the only decision possible. It is the unanimous decision of the United Nations Government that we accept the ultimatum, 'surrender without condition.' The surrender will take effect at seven o'clock tonight, Eastern Standard Time. From then on, we will be subjects of the Galactic Empire of Cafis, and we will be expected to govern ourselves accordingly."

DELEGATE CLARK paused, his lower lip trembling. "Good-by and God be with you," he finished hastily.

Bruce turned the television off. He looked at Granas and then at his wife. "Hello, fellow slaves," he said, grinning.

"It's not funny, Bruce!" Lois snapped and buried her face in her hands. Bruce went to her side and put his arms around her.

"I wonder what we do now?" Dr. Granas asked of no one in particular.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Uncle Bob,"

Bruce answered. "I haven't had much experience at this sort of thing."

"Is— isn't there something we can do?" Lois burst forth, desperately. "Maybe— maybe if there was more electricity—"

Dr. Granas shook his head. "If you were a scientist, Lois, you'd understand. This thing can't be beaten. You've seen condensers and you know how simple they are. The weapon of the Cafis is almost the same as a condenser. They created two electrostatic fields of unimaginable intensity which encompassed the earth outside the atmosphere. This in turn, converted the earth into a non-unified stress field and isn't entirely understood."

"But—but how does it work?" Lois asked. "Surely there is some way to combat it!"

Dr. Granas smiled. "Well, any electrical activity, no matter how slight, acting in this field, instantly sets up a counter potential of almost equal pressure. It would take billions of horsepower to operate even the devices in the house. The earth simply hasn't got the available power to overcome this potential, and even if it did, we would be defeating ourselves in using it since the Cafis draw their power directly from the sun.

"Why, there would be such a tremendous amount of heat released here on Earth that it would destroy all life within a matter of hours. Even if we surmounted that obstacle, the Cafis would be draining so much power from the sun that in a few weeks, it would become unstable and might even explode into a super-nova.

"We would then literally be jumping from the frying pan into the fire. There might be another way but we simply haven't the technology and knowledge to find it or use it. In a hundred years we might, but not now."

Lois nodded dejectedly. They just sat disconsolately in the laboratory. There was nothing to say; nothing to do but wait.

Finally, Dr. Granas glanced at the clock. "Thirty-eight more minutes of freedom," he sighed. "Thirty-eight more precious minutes and I have nothing to do."

Bruce roused himself. "Do you remember that bottle of Napoleon brandy you gave us two years ago?" Dr. Granas nodded. "Well, it seems to me," Bruce continued, "that it's still in the refrigerator."

Lois looked up. "It's still there, darling. Shall I get it?"

"I think it would be a good idea," Bruce

said. "Take it into the living room, dear, and I'll get the goblets."

In the living room, Bruce carefully divided what was left of the brandy into three goblets. He set the bottle down and silently handed glasses to Lois and her Uncle Bob. They stood facing each other, Bruce slightly swirling the brandy in his glass.

Dr. Granas again glanced at the clock. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, oratorically, "since this is my last twenty-seven minutes of freedom. I offer a toast. To the United Nations, to the United States, and to—tomorrow morning. May I wake up and find this is all a dream."

Lois bit her lip as the glasses tinkled. They fell silent again after the toast, each counting the minutes and having in them, thoughts too private to share.

Soon, Granas walked over to the televisior. He turned. "Shall I turn it on?" he asked, hesitantly.

"Let's wait until seven," Lois suggested. "We're free to do as we please until then."

"Maybe it would be better," Granas agreed. "I imagine the 'rats' will have us listening every day to propaganda broadcasts from now on."

"You're going to have to watch out for that word in the future, Uncle Bob," Bruce said. "They may be rodents but they're also our bosses."

Lois shuddered. "They do look like rats," she interposed. "I think they're horrible!"

BRUCE replied, "You know, I think we're being illogical. They don't really look like rats. They don't have any fur. If it weren't for their teeth and that bottle-like shape, they could easily pass themselves off as men. We humans have some sort of a natural aversion for rodents, particularly rats, but after all, just because they're rodents instead of primates doesn't mean they are vicious. I think they've treated us quite well, so far."

"We still don't know what they're going to do," Dr. Granas said, caustically.

"I wonder how such a terrible life form happened to become a dominant animal?" Lois asked.

"Oh, it's logical enough," Dr. Granas answered. "It's really only an accident that a primate like man became dominant here. On the whole, rodentia are intelligent, and they are certainly prolific. By all rights they should have developed here. Even as it is,

we have a great deal of trouble saving civilization from rats. They have lived with us everywhere and have practically defied our every attempt to get rid of them."

"Oh let's not talk about them any more," Lois exclaimed. "They make my skin crawl!"

"All right," Dr Granas answered. "Maybe we should be watching the televisior. The Cafis will probably have plenty to say."

"I guess I'll go to bed," Lois said. "I don't think I could stand seeing those awful rat faces again."

Bruce kissed her. "I'll be up soon, dear, and don't worry. Everything will be all right."

Lois smiled and nodded her head, but Bruce could see that she wasn't convinced.

Dr. Granas waited until Lois was gone and then snapped on the televisior. A well-known commentator was reviewing the events of the preceding four days, augmented by recorded scenes.

". . . more than industrial paralysis. In homes and offices, these scenes were typical."

The scene shifted to show a young woman snapping on switches and plugging in appliances all over her house. Nothing worked. The scene changed to an office where a young man smilingly demonstrated an in-operative adding machine. The young man picked up a flashlight and snapped on the switch. Nothing happened.

The commentator's voice broke in. "These scenes are in no way exaggerated as you all know. Although we have not yet received the final reports, preliminary surveys show that all types of electrical equipment, no matter where situated, were blanked out during the one hour test yesterday."

"The Cafis emissary, Atis Tobe, declared that if the weapon had been stepped to a higher degree, it would have also prevented the travel of light and heat. Incidentally, we were able to make these recordings by using mechanical motion picture devices and so the stoppage had no effect."

He paused. "That's about all the time we have left. There will be further bulletins every hour unless the Cafis begin censorship of news. And now we take you to the New York News Bureau."

"Now what?" Dr. Cranas asked.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Marvin Hill. Our New York News Bureau has become more or less the center of attention during the last twenty minutes. The

Cafis Gan, Atis Tobe, has landed in New York and has requested a hookup for a nationwide broadcast. Reports are coming in indicating that similar broadcasts will take place in Europe and Asia. Official emissaries of the Cafis have established headquarters in London, Paris, Moscow, Madrid, Rome and Istanbul.

"We have a tentative report from Shanghai but it has not yet been verified. It appears that simultaneous broadcasts which will cover the whole world will begin in a very few minutes. Indications are that New York will be the new seat of government at least temporarily. We are preparing— That's the signal, ladies and gentlemen. We take you to the Municipal Building."

"I wish they wouldn't be so cheerful," Bruce muttered. "You'd think this was the Fourth of July or something!"

A NEW face appeared on the screen. "Good evening ladies and gentlemen of the United States," the face intoned. "This is Kimball Trent. We are bringing you a special address by the Viceroy of the Cafis Empire, Atis Tobe." He paused, significantly. "Viceroy Tobe."

The face and shoulders of the Viceroy came into view. "So that's the number one rat," Dr. Granas mumbled. Bruce thought Atis Tobe was staring directly at Dr. Granas. At least, it looked as though he were. A man's voice was heard in the background. "You're on the air, Your Excellency."

"Thank you," the Viceroy said with a slight lisp. With beady eyes he stared from the screen and twitched his nose a little. The whiskers on the side of his nose were trimmed close and even, looking very much like an out-of-place mustache. His ears were small and except for the bulging forehead, he looked very much like a hairless rat. Even his voice was high pitched and somewhat squeaky.

"I bring greetings to the most recently acquired of the Cafis Empire. Although you have surrendered and are technically a subject race, may I assure you that your status is that of citizens in our great Empire."

"Soft soap!" Bruce growled.

"As fellow citizens," the Cafis Gan continued, "I feel we should understand one another. I am sure that a few of you are harboring some misconceptions regarding us. Possibly I do also regarding you. We have studied your planet for only four days and

most of our energy and resources have been devoted to the study of your languages. It has been difficult but we have mastered them sufficiently to adequately express our desires. By induction, we have been able to formulate a reasonably accurate picture of the average inhabitant of this planet.

"That you are creatures of logic is obvious, since you have surrendered rather than tried to resist the inevitable. That you are civilized is plain, not only from your technology but from your attitude toward us, an alien race. Because of these things, I am safe in assuring you that you will soon be granted full citizenship in the Cafis Empire with all its rights and privileges."

Dr. Granas snorted. "He hasn't gathered what our attitude really is! His hide must be a foot thick!"

They listened to a glowing dissertation on the benefits of citizenship in the Cafis Empire. The inducements were purely intellectual and carried not even a residue of emotional appeal.

"Cold blooded little beggars!" the doctor growled.

"There are a few prerequisites to obtaining citizenship, however," the Viceroy went on, "but since these conditions are logically necessary, I confidently expect your full cooperation."

At this point, the Cafis Gan attempted a grin. Seldom had Bruce seen a more revolting spectacle. The Viceroy decided he had grinned enough and continued his speech.

"In order to coordinate technology, it is necessary that all scientists and technicians be registered. If then, you are engaged in one or more of the following professions, full or part time, you will go to the nearest center of local government and there leave your name, address and other such data as you will be asked by those in charge of the registration. Registration will begin tomorrow morning at eight o'clock and will continue until the registration is complete."

THE Viceroy began reading off the names of various sciences, arts and crafts with monotonous intonations. When he reached 'Biologist', Bruce stirred and mumbled something inaudibly. Shortly after that came 'Chemist'.

"I see I'm in this too," Dr. Granas sighed.

They listened while the Cafis Gan finished his list. Then he favored his audience with another smile. He laid down several more

edicts which were not too restrictive and suggested that it was desirable that each person conduct himself in his most normal manner.

"Business as usual during altercations!" Dr. Granas gritted.

The Viceroy stopped speaking and turned his head. He made a motion to someone, and his face vanished to be replaced by that of a local announcer.

Dr. Granas reached over and switched off the televiser. "Well, Bruce, I wonder how many times a minute they would like to have us breathe!"

Bruce didn't move. He just stared at the blank screen.

"What do you think we should do now?" Dr. Granas asked.

Still Bruce didn't stir.

"What's the matter, boy? Are you hypnotized or something?"

"Huh? Oh. What did you say, Uncle Bob?"

"I said, are you hypnotized?"

"Ah—oh no. It was just that profile."

"Well," Granas smiled, "I can't say that it's any more repugnant than a full face view."

"No, I mean—" Bruce paused. "Oh, I don't know." He sighed. "Let it go."

"I've been thinking, Bruce. If we get downtown early tomorrow, we may not have to wait long to register."

"Yeah, I suppose so," Bruce answered, "but if you feel up to it, I'd like to do a little work tonight. The only thing we have to do is connect up the amplifying circuits."

"It's all right with me," Dr. Granas replied. "We can start testing tomorrow then."

"That reminds me," Bruce interrupted. "In order to energize the colloid, we'll have to feed a variable current into the input amplifier."

"Yes," Dr. Granas nodded. "The more variable, the better."

"Well, how about this idea," Bruce suggested. "Let's hook a microphone up to the input and stand it in front of the loudspeaker of the lab's televiser. That would really give us variation. We can keep it turned on low enough so it won't bother anyone."

"Sometimes, Bruce, you get the darnedest ideas," Dr. Granas chuckled. "I guess you're just naturally lazy. There's nothing like letting the broadcasting company energize the colloid for us!"

"Do you think it'll work?" Bruce asked.

"I don't see why not. There's nothing wrong with it."

The two men went into the laboratory and set to work on the final connections.

Forty-five minutes later, Bruce laid down his soldering iron. "Pretty much Goldburghish but the output is O.K."

"You all done?" Granas asked.

"Yup, she's all hooked up. Do you want me to help you?"

"No, I'm done too. The circulation pump looks kind of crude but I'll give it the 'Granas' personal guarantee."

Bruce walked over to a cabinet and took out a small microphone. As he walked back, he unwound the cord and plugged it into the calculator's input amplifying circuit. They finally got the microphone properly propped up in front of the televiser. As Granas tuned in a program, Bruce stuck two test leads into the innards of the tube circuit.

"A little more volume, Uncle Bob. There, that's about right."

Dr. Granas straightened and grinned. "Well, shall we go to bed and let the 'MacDonald automatic energizing system' do the work for us?"

Bruce stuck his ear next to the loudspeaker attached to the calculator's output.

"What do you expect to hear, Bruce?"

"Oh, nothing. I just couldn't resist it. By tomorrow we should have a pretty good echo coming through."

"I hope you're right, my boy," Dr. Granas replied. "If we don't, we will have wasted a lot of time and money."

"Under the present circumstances," Bruce said, slipping off his lab coat, "I don't see that it makes much difference how much money we lose."

"No use being bitter," Granas retorted. "It isn't going to do the Cafis any harm or you any good."

"I guess you're right," Bruce sighed.

The two men left the laboratory. Dr. Granas paused at the stairway. "You go ahead, Bruce. I forgot to shut the lights off."

"O.K. Good night."

"Pleasant dreams, fellow Roman!"

Bruce went upstairs. Lois was asleep so he undressed quietly and eased himself into bed.

BREAKFAST was a dismal ritual. Dr. Granas made two or three ineffectual attempts to relieve the oppression. Lois was obviously depressed, but Bruce seemed de-

tached, preoccupied, and his face wore the same expression of philosophic calm it had the night before.

"What have I done? Why won't you talk to me?" Dr. Granas asked.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Bob," Lois sighed. "I don't mean to be rude."

"Oh, it isn't that," Granas smiled. "I know you aren't trying to be rude, but it worries me when you don't talk."

"Is a woman always supposed to be talking?" Lois asked, smiling.

"Of course not," Granas answered, "but I know you too well. You're letting this thing get you, and you can't hide it."

"I'm sorry I'm—just—oh—I guess I'm not used to being a slave!"

"I know it's unpleasant," Granas admitted, "but there's nothing we can do about it, and as people have always done, we'll just have to grin and bear it. Come on, Bruce! Stop brooding!" The older man laid a friendly hand on Bruce's shoulder.

"Huh?"

"I said, cheer up!"

Bruce sighed. "Oh I'm not depressed. I've just been thinking."

"Well, you can do your thinking when we get back. It's almost time to leave. We want to get downtown before a line forms so we can get home earlier."

"Would you like some more coffee before you go?" Lois asked.

"I don't think so, dear," Bruce answered. "Uncle Bob is right."

"Bruce, you're getting to be a cynic, just like your father," Granas said.

"Maybe I am but I've got better reasons than he had."

Dr. Granas arose. "Let's get going. We can talk on the way to town."

Lois followed the two men into the hall. She took her coat out of the closet while Bruce was tying his tie.

"You aren't going too, are you?" Bruce asked.

"I most certainly am!" she replied.

"Oh there isn't any necessity for that, darling. This is only a registration. We're only going downtown and we'll be right back."

"I don't trust them, any of them!" she stated. "If you go, I go too!"

Bruce opened his mouth to object, then, finding no logical reason, let it go. "All right, dear. Maybe we'll take in a show or something afterward."

"Not today, we won't!" Granas interposed. "It has taken us two years to build our calculator and today we're going to test it!"

"I'm not so sure I want to test it," Bruce replied, opening the door. "After all, our work is supposed to be dedicated to humanity. Now we'll be giving it to the rats."

"I doubt if we'll be giving much away, Bruce, but in any case, this might be valuable later on. Our calculator might find a method of counteracting that electro-stasis field of the rats."

"I don't see how!" Bruce commented as he slammed the car door.

GRANAS answered. "I don't mean ours. I mean a later development. Suppose in ten years from now, an electro-colloidal calculator built on our principal, were given all the data on that stasis field, for example, a formula with an inoperative generator stated as part of the equation. Wouldn't the brain carry the formula to its logical conclusion? After all, an adding machine doesn't have to understand the term, two plus two.

"That's all just wishful thinking," Bruce replied. "A problem as complex as that would at least call for comprehension or awareness."

"It's only your mind that tells you that," Dr. Granas insisted. "In a sense, our colloid calculator does have awareness. There is always a continuous flow of impulses between all the cells, through the main inductors. You might say quite accurately that it thinks."

"Well, here we are," Bruce interrupted. "I'll let you two out and park the car."

"We'll wait in front of the building!" Lois called.

"All right!"

Ten minutes later, Bruce walked swiftly up to the entrance of the building. "I don't see a line waiting," Bruce smiled. "Have the rats lost their popularity so soon?"

"I wish you'd be serious, Bruce," Lois cautioned. "I don't think this is the least bit funny!"

"Maybe not, maybe not," Bruce replied as they walked into the building.

A policeman gave them directions and they soon found their way to the registration office. Dr. Granas picked out one of the interviewing desks at which no one was waiting. An oldish man was being interviewed

by a uniformed Cafis.

"Shall I go first?" Granas asked, "or do you want to?"

"It doesn't matter to me," Bruce shrugged. "Go ahead."

The oldish man arose and left the desk. Dr. Granas sat down in the chair and Bruce stood behind him.

The Cafis glanced up from the desk and looked at Bruce. "If you will have a chair over there, young man, I will be with you as soon as I have finished with this gentleman's interview."

"We work together," Dr. Granas remarked. "He might be able to give you information that I can't."

"I see," the Cafis said. "If you will draw up a chair, then, we will proceed." The rodent busied himself with some blanks then stared at Dr. Granas. "State your name, age and place of residence please."

"Doctor Robert Granas, fifty-four, thirty-four-o-three Hudson Terrace."

"Your profession."

"Bio-chemist."

"By whom are you employed?"

"We are doing independent research."

"State the nature of it briefly, please."

"We are preparing a biological calculator utilizing a colloid substance which responds to electrical stimulæ in known patterns. We—"

"Doctor, you are attempting to mislead us. You are making an artificial brain."

"Only by a very broad definition could you call it a brain, sir," Granas answered.

"Let me describe the device to you, Doctor," the Cafis said. "This device is fundamentally a tank, divided into tiny insulated compartments. Each compartment has a small opening between itself and all of its immediate neighbors. You have horizontal rods or wires and vertical rods or wires passing through the tank but not directly connected to the cells.

"It seems, by induction, these pick up the tiny impulses. You have an energizing solution slowly filtering through the colloid mass which forms the third pole of your primary electrical system. Connected to this are appropriate amplifiers, integrators and/or various other devices which utilize the output of the brain."

Dr. Granas listed to this recital open mouthed. "But—but—how could you know! How could you possibly know!!"

"From my position, Doctor Granas, it is

quite simple but I am sorry that I can not tell you. I must, however, ask you to stop all work on this device. Our technicians will call at your laboratory this afternoon. You are not to do any further work until you receive their permission." Without waiting for a reply, he turned to Bruce. "Your name, age and place of residence, please."

"Bruce MacDonald, thirty-one, same address. I'm a biologist and I plan to leave here at once, return to our laboratory and work unceasingly until our device, as you call it, is finished! I wouldn't advise you or any of your friends to try and stop me."

"Mr. MacDonald. You are being irrational."

"And I plan to go right on being irrational! Any attempt at interference and I shall resort to violence. In case you don't realize what I mean, I will break bones and destroy lives if necessary!"

BRUCE jerked the appalled Granas to his feet and catching Lois by the arm, marched them out of the building. Lois was pale and Dr. Granas trembled a little. Bruce, however, took no notice of anything. Grimly, he led them up the street. No attempt was made to stop them. A few minutes later, they climbed into the car and drove homeward in silence.

As Bruce was unlocking the door, Lois whispered. "Bruce, why did you do it? Now they'll kill us all."

"I've been thinking about that," Bruce said, quietly. "I wondered if I'd made the biggest mistake of my life and possibly my last one—but I don't think so. The more I think about it, the more I'm sure I handled the situation in the only way possible."

"By losing your temper, I suppose!"

"And our lives in the balance!" Granas added.

"No, you two! They aren't going to do a thing to us!" Bruce answered. "I think—"

"And you'd better think fast too!" Granas interrupted, "because there's a car stopping out in front."

Lois dashed to the window. "Oh Bruce, they've come!" she sobbed. "What'll we do!"

The trio fell silent as two of the aliens emerged from the car, said something to the human driver, and walked measuredly toward the door. Bruce opened it for them and they stepped in without comment. Granas' eyes widened as he recognized the face

and dress of the Capis Gan.

The Viceroy turned and faced Bruce. "I am the Capis Gan. My name is Atis Tobe. You are, I believe, Bruce MacDonald."

"I am," Bruce admitted, trying not to smile.

"Something amuses you, Mr. MacDonald?" the observing Capis asked.

"Yes," Bruce answered. "I'm more or less amused to see that I guessed correctly."

The Capis Gan regarded him with an unwinking stare. "You have declined to follow our request to cease work."

"I have."

"You realize that you are being irrational then?"

"Your Excellency," Bruce began with a grin, "from your point of view, I am completely irrational but my behavior from the human standpoint is not only normal but you will encounter it in eighty percent of your subjects."

"That is impossible," Atis Tobe answered. "You are a civilized race. Such a thing will not be tolerated."

"You have only studied us for four days, Your Excellency," Bruce pointed out.

"True, but there are many indications of civilization. Your own device, for example."

"You have a point there," Bruce admitted, "but I have another device to show you." He reached into his pocket and took out an automatic.

Dr. Granas clenched his hands and Lois gasped. "Bruce, please!" she whispered, fervently.

"If I were to pull this bit of metal called the trigger, you would die instantly," Bruce said to the Capis Gan.

"Assuming that is the truth, Mr. MacDonald, what does it prove?" The Capis was annoyed.

"It proves, Your Excellency, that with us, destruction of life is a common thing."

Atis Tobe bent over and studied the revolver. "Did you make this?"

"No," Bruce answered. "Nearly every human possesses a gun and sometimes uses it. These are made in huge quantities, each one adapted to a specific purpose. This one is expressly designed for use on humans. It would work equally well on you also."

The Capis Gan continued to stare at the gun. "What is the principle?"

"It's a simple heat engine," Bruce replied. "Chemical reaction generates a high gas pressure which forces a metal pellet through

this tube. The velocity of the bit of metal or bullet will cause it to penetrate a body, rupturing its internal organs where it strikes."

Atis Tobe had apparently been practising his smile for this one was not nearly so gruesome. "Your explanation, Mr. MacDonald, is most ingenious. For a moment, I almost believed you."

BRUCE lined the gun up at point blank range and squeezed the trigger. The report was deafening in the small room. A metal insignie ripped off the shoulder of the uniform of the Capis Gan. The Viceroy felt of the torn fabric and turned to look at the wall behind. It was almost imperceptible but Bruce detected a faint quiver in the rodent's talonlike hand.

"Almost you have convinced me," the Capis said slowly.

"Lois," Bruce said. "Will you get that package from the butcher shop? It's in the refrigerator behind the milk."

"What?" Lois asked, confused.

"Get me our latest purchase from the butcher shop," Bruce repeated, distinctly.

Lois hurried to the kitchen and returned a moment later with a package wrapped in white paper. She extended it timidly to Bruce. He ripped it open with the muzzle of his automatic and removed a two inch thick, round steak from the wrapper. Slowly, Bruce extended the dripping steak to the Viceroy.

The rodent man recoiled a little. "A specimen, Mr. MacDonald?" he asked.

"No," Bruce replied, trying to leer. "Food!"

Atis Tobe winced and covered his eyes. In a moment he recovered his composure and turned to stare at Dr. Granas. "Is all this the truth?"

Granas nodded his head. "I'm afraid it is, Your Excellency."

"How horrible! How depraved!"

There was silence in the room as Bruce placed the steak back in its wrapper and handed it to Lois.

"I believe we have made a terrible mistake," the Capis Gan said, weakly. "It is incredible that such barbarism can exist among thinking creatures!" His body twitched. He turned and walked to the door. In stupefied silence, the trio watched the two Capis leave. The rodents paused at the car and stared at the human driver. Almost fearfully, they stepped in and drove off.

Lois turned from the window. "What are they going to do now?" she asked, wringing her hands.

"I imagine their full time occupation from now on will be leaving the earth and trying to forget it as soon as possible," Bruce answered, smiling.

Dr. Granas shook his head. "I don't understand this at all," he said. "What's going on?"

"It's quite simple, Uncle Bob," Bruce replied. "The Cafis thought we were civilized. In fact, I don't think they've ever come across an uncivilized race before."

"What do you mean, uncivilized!" Granas bristled.

"Civilization is a pretty relative term," Bruce answered. "To us, we are civilized. To the Cafis, however, we are monsters. You see, the Cafis don't kill. Their understanding of the term 'war' is a sort of a contest, certainly not bloodshed."

"But they're a conquering race!" Granas objected. "How can they do it without bloodshed?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Bruce replied, thoughtfully. "I'm only guessing but so far, my guesses have been pretty good. My theory is that the rest of their empire is much like themselves. You yourself remarked that it was only an accident that the rodents didn't become the predominant race here on earth."

"That's true," Dr. Granas admitted.

"I think we can assume, that up until now, the Cafis have only had to deal with races similar to themselves. When they came here, they carried on their warfare just as they always have done. I bet the rest of their empire considers them pretty ruthless conquerors."

"I don't see what you're getting at!" Granas exploded.

"I got the clue last night, Uncle Bob," Bruce continued, "when Atis Tobe turned his head. I thought about it for a long time and finally decided that I was right. I guessed that they were non-carnivores and were therefore unaccustomed to violence and bloodshed. It was so unheard of to them, that they didn't for one minute expect to find a carnivorous civilization.

"Look at how they conquered the earth. Not by killing! Their weapons are of a different type. They paralyze a civilization and give you a chance to nullify the weapon and if you can't do it, they win. If you can combat their weapon, then they think up a new one and on it goes until someone's resources are exhausted."

"Well—well—how did you know they were so peaceful?" Lois stammered. "Rats here on earth are vicious—and horrible!"

BRUCE laughed. "Darling, that's what comes from jumping to conclusions. The Cafis are rodents to be sure, but as rodents go, rats are certainly not the most intelligent!"

"Well these rats are certainly intelligent!" Granas interrupted.

"Not rats, Uncle Bob," Bruce replied, grinning. "Beavers!"

"Not exactly," a loud voice boomed.

The trio stood frozen, staring at each other.

"W-h-a-t?" Granas said, weakly.

"I said, not exactly." The voice rumbled through the open door of the laboratory.

There was a momentary mad scramble as they all tried to go through the laboratory door at one time. Their eyes took in the empty room at a glance then rested on the loudspeaker of the calculator. They waited, hardly breathing.

"Rabbits!" the calculator said.

