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# Secret Of The Painting

by

*Robert Moore Williams*

**Many men would have killed to possess the painting—for Tom Calhoun knew it held a key to knowledge that would rock the scientific world!**

“**H**OLD IT, BUDDY,” this fellow said, coming along the bar toward me. “I want to talk to you.”

The way he spoke set my teeth on edge. There was a whining, placating tone in his voice, but under this was a growl which indicated that if he had the chance, he would be glad to *order* me to stop and talk to him, instead of asking me. His clothes were expensive, but unpressed, and he was wearing them in a way that I didn't like. There was another thing about him that I liked even less — the slight bulge under his left armpit.

All in all there was only one thing that I liked about him — the way his lower jaw stuck out ahead of the rest of his face. It was a perfect target for a left jab.

“You're Luke Shaw, ain't you?”

he asked.

“I am. And so what?” He looked me over carefully after I spoke. A faint flicker of grudging respect appeared on his face as his gaze crossed my shoulders. He measured me for a hidden gun, which he didn't find because I wasn't wearing it. He liked this. It made his job safer, if not easier.

“Look, Luke, I'm not trying to stir up any trouble.” The whining tone was back in his voice. “I just wanted to know — you work for Tom Calhoun, eh?”

I felt my back hair begin to raise as he mentioned Tom's name. So far as I knew — and it was my business to know — Tom Calhoun didn't have an enemy on Earth. He had me on his payroll for two reasons, the first being that I was the best friend he ever had, with the possible exception of Ann Briscoe, his laboratory assistant,



the second reason being that he knew he could trust me right down to his last chip. Sometimes it gets important to have one guy you can really trust. My job was to shoo away all curiosity seekers, who would invade his lab by the scores just to get a glimpse of the great

scientist, thus making certain that Tom got all the privacy he wanted, which was about all there was of this article. Also if the commies should come prying around, I was supposed to meet them and roll out the carpet edged in black. They had and I had.

Long Jaw didn't look like a commie, though in my experiences these birds never look like what they are but always like something else. The thing that makes them commies is inside, where it can't be seen, never outside.

"Whatever you've got on your mind, get it off," I said. As I spoke a couple of new customers came into the little saloon and lined up at the back bar. Ned Kenro, owner of the place and my good friend, went back to serve them.

"How would you like to make a couple of thousand bucks for yourself?"

His question staggered me. Two thousand dollars was a lot of money. "What do I have to do for it?" I asked.

"Give me the key to the back door of Calhoun's laboratory." Long Jaw said. As he spoke he watched my face. What he saw there, made him realize he had said too much. He reached for the gun inside his coat.

He was fast, I'll give him credit for that. But not fast enough.

*Smack!* My left jab caught him on the end of his protruding jaw, right on the button. He got his feet tangled up with the bar rail and went over backward. The gun, a nasty looking little .38, flew out of his hand. I reached to pick it up. This movement probably saved

my life.

A beer bottle came down across the left side of my head and struck my shoulder a numbing blow. As I went to the floor, the whole saloon seemed to turn upside down. Dazed, I tried to sit up and bring my eyes into focus. I couldn't see very well but what little I saw, I didn't like. The two joes who had lined up at the bar were coming toward me. They didn't intend to kiss me.

I turned around to look for the gun that Long Jaw had dropped. It was under the edge of the bar, out of reach. I tried to get to my feet. My legs had rubber in them. Meantime Long Jaw's two pals kept coming toward me.

Then the first one stopped coming. A stout length of hickory billy came over the bar and went home against the skull of the first one with a crack that was completely satisfying to me. I knew who was on the other end of that billy: Ned Kenro! Never in the years had he owned this little saloon, had he had to hit a man twice.

Nor did he have to hit this one the second time. The guy's eyes turned upward into his skull as if he was trying to look inside his cranium and see what had landed on his noggin. While he was trying to do this, he fell flat.

I got the gun into my fingers.

My eyes were back into focus. There had been two men. The second one had seen Ned go into action with the billy and he had also seen me get possession of the gun. He changed his mind and headed for the rear exit, fast. Ned Kenro vaulted over the bar and helped me to my feet.

"You hurt, Luke?" His round face beamed with concern.

"Not much, thanks to you."

"Don't mention it. Glad to do the same for a friend any day." He hesitated, his delicacy preventing him from intruding into what might be a private fight. "But would you mind telling me what this is all about? Watch it, Luke!" Ned's voice grew tight with alarm.

**I** TURNED. Long Jaw wasn't coming toward me. He was heading out the front door and he was in a hurry. I could have shot him, and perhaps I should have smoked him, but I hate to shoot a running man. I followed him outside just in time to see him jump into a car and roar away.

Perhaps I should have gone back into the saloon and kicked the truth out of the third man, but all I could think of at that moment was that Tom had to know about this. Yelling at Ned to take care of the third man, I jumped into my own car and burned rubber getting out to the edge of town

where the lab was located. A car was parked in the driveway and a man was coming out the door. Picking up Long Jaw's gun from the seat beside me, I braked to a stop.

"Who are you and what the hell - - -" I got this far before I recognized him. Samuel Herker, president of the company that had been organized to develop Tom's inventions commercially. He had gotten rich off of Tom's discoveries, but his main ambition in life was to get richer. "Sorry, Mr. Herker," I called out.

He came across the drive to me. He was hot. "I want to tell you one thing, Shaw!" His voice grated like a dull file being drawn across tough metal. "Either this criminal expenditure of company funds comes to a stop or I'm going into court and ask for the appointment of a referee to conserve the assets of the company, then I'm going to ask for a lunacy hearing to determine if Calhoun is mentally fit to order equipment on company credit without my prior authorization!"

His feet kicked gravel as he stalked across the drive to his own car. The door slammed. The rear wheels spun as he jammed the accelerator to the floorboard. I headed into the lab.

Tom and Ann were there. Their heads close together, they were so

deeply engrossed in the papers spread all over the big lab table that they did not hear me enter. How many times had I come in and found them like this, deep in some problem? The sight always made me feel good. Here were two people who were doing their dead-level best to solve some of the problems that confront the human race. All day long and as far into the night as he wanted her, Ann was always in the lab with him, slipping away to steal a few hours of badly needed sleep so that she could return to work bright-eyed and eager the next morning. She was head over heels in love with Tom, and had been since the first day she came to work. So far as I had been able to see, he had never even discovered that she was a woman. A competent research worker, a thorough technician with a keen brain, yes; but a woman, no. He had not noticed that.

"Tom, I didn't want to interrupt, but I just met Herker outside —"

He looked up. A grin came over his face at the sight of me. "Would you like to see what Sam is so upset about?" Without waiting for an answer, he rose and moved to the back wall. New drapes had been hung there. With an expression on his face that said Earth's last secret was about to be revealed, he pulled the drapes aside.

I don't know what I was expecting, but I guess my jaw dropped. Behind the drapes was a painting, of a girl. Her features were even and regular, her eyes looked upward, and her face had a slightly oriental cast. What held my gaze was the haunting quality of her smile. Leonardo De Vinci had gotten something of this same haunting quality in the Mona Lisa. The girl in this painting smiled out at the world as if she knew everything that had ever been, or ever would be — and was laughing at the efforts of mere mortals to fathom her secret.

"I see it's getting you too," Tom said.

"It's a good job," I said. "But what is there about it to upset Herker?"

"The price I paid for it."

"What was that?"

"One hundred thousand dollars!"

**I** ROCKED BACK on my heels and whistled softly. At that moment, I was of the opinion that maybe Herker had something when he said Tom had gone nuts.

"Did you ever hear of the Dead Sea Scrolls?" Tom asked.

"Um. Yes. Manuscripts a couple of thousand years old that have been discovered near the Dead Sea in the last few years." I felt pleased that I knew the answer to his question. "But what do they

have to do with this, if anything?"

"This painting came from a sealed jar hidden inside a cave in the same region," Tom answered. "It was sold to a dealer in Egypt. I learned about it from a friend."

"So far so good," I said.

"You sound like Sam," he answered. "Honest, Luke, I'm not nuts." A strained expression crossed his face. "At least I don't think I am."

"To me, whatever you say is right," I said, loyally. "But what's the pitch on this painting? Why is it worth so much money?"

"Because there is a secret hidden in it," he answered. "And I'm trying to re-discover it."

"Ah?" I said.

"Luke, you mustn't think that science came into existence this generation," he said. "There were men ahead of us who were just as interested in solving Nature's secrets as we are. Some of them came close to doing it. I think the man who painted this girl was one of them. I think he hid his knowledge in this painting, hid it because he did not dare reveal it. It is my hope that if I can discover his secret and perhaps add it to the knowledge of modern science, I can come up with something that may be as startling as the atom bomb, only in a different way." He frowned and a far-away look crept into his eyes. I knew

he was dreaming of the future as he saw it, a better, healthier, happier world. He was just the man to make that dream come true!

"I've already uncovered part of the secret." He nodded toward the pages of paper on the big table. "Enough to know that the man who painted that picture was a real genius even if recorded history has no record of him! The geometry of the painting itself has meaning, the distance between the eyes, the angle of the chin, the way the hair is dressed - - -" He went on at some length but I had stopped listening. I knew nothing of the more obscure aspects of cryptography but I knew enough to know that Tom could be right. I had never seen such a glow in his eyes or such an eager expression on his face during all the years I had known him. If he was dreaming, I hoped his dream came true.

I interrupted him long enough to tell him about the men in the saloon.

"You take care of all such intruders, Luke. That's your job," he told me.

Ann followed me outside, to ask further questions. "He had some visitors a few days ago, but I don't know who they were," she said.

"What do you think of this secret of the painting?" I asked.

"I think it's real," she answered, turning back toward the lab. Wist-

fully, I watched her go. Someday, maybe, I would be lucky enough to find a woman as loyal to me as Ann was to Tom. When this happened, I would notice that she existed! In the meantime, my job was to check the spacious grounds.

*Wham!*

The length of garden hose with the lead in the end of it came at me from behind a wide hedge I was passing. I saw both it and the arm holding it, but I didn't see either soon enough. It came down across my skull with enough force to have addled an elephant. I saw constellations of stars as I went down.

I recovered consciousness with the thought in mind that dozens of small-sized devils were jabbing me with red-hot needles. Trying to move, I discovered the source of the devils. I had been tossed into the middle of the wide hedge and the thorns were sticking me. My hands were tied behind my back and my feet were pulled up behind me and tied to my hands. Also, the sun was rising. I could see the glow of dawn in the sky. I had been unconscious all night!

"If I ever catch that Long Jaw!" I thought.

Then I realized that the light I was seeing wasn't coming from the rising sun. The main building of the lab was on fire! Tom and Ann might be in there!

The cords that bound my hands snapped like so many threads as I hunched my shoulders. Putting my hands in front of my eyes, I rolled out of the hedge. Thorns tore at my flesh. I didn't care. I hit the ground with a jolt that rattled every bone in my body, then tore the cords from my feet.

**S**MOKE WAS POURING upward into the night sky. Off in the distance a siren was screaming. The police or the fire department, I couldn't tell which. Heat seared my face and I ran toward the lab. Looking inside, I saw a figure moving against the flames. Ann! As I stared, she went down. Pulling my coat over my face, I dived into the lab. Flames crackled in my ears. I sensed rather than felt my clothes begin to smoke. Ann stumbled to her feet and went down again. Reaching her side, I saw that she had been trying to drag Tom out of the building. The task had been beyond her strength.

One under each arm, I carried them out of the inferno. Most of Ann's clothes were gone, burned off. Her flesh, raw and red, was exposed.

"They - - - they burst in. When Tom tried to stop them, they slugged him. They also hit me."

"They left both of you there after setting the lab on fire?"

"Yes. I think they hoped the



fire would cover up their theft.”

“And that it would also cover up you and Tom.” In my mind’s eyes, I was thinking what I would do to Long Jaw if I ever caught him again. “What did they take?”

“The painting.”

I didn’t have time to wonder what there was about the painting that was valuable enough to justify murder and theft. Fire engines with bells clanging were screeching to a halt in the drive. Men in rubber coats began yanking hose from the truck. They worked as if they knew exactly what to do and how to do it. They also wanted to talk to me, but I didn’t have time to tell them anything except that it was their fire from here on. Putting Tom and Ann into my car, I mashed the accelerator to the floorboard.

The doctor in the emergency receiving room of the hospital didn’t waste any time on diagnosis. He took one look at the man I was carrying and a second look at the woman leaning on my arm, and went to work. He had Tom and Ann in separate rooms, with plasma and oxygen flowing into them, within minutes, and before I knew what was happening a nurse had thrown me out. I paced up and down the corridor for the two hours before I was able to get hold of Dr. Crane again.

“The woman has third degree

burns,” he told me when I cornered him. “The man has only first degree. However, he has a slight brain concussion.”

“Will they be all right?”

Down inside, he was a good joe. He didn’t want to give me the news, so he put on his professional smile. Both of us knew he was lying. “We will do everything we can. The man will probably recover. As to the woman - - -”

“You’ve got to fix her up too, Doc,” I begged him. “He doesn’t know it, but he’ll die without her.”

I left the hospital with the memory of his professional smile lingering in my mind. It was a sad smile. It said that in the face of some conditions, even the doctors were helpless.

Reaching the lab, I found that the fire had been extinguished. A deputy sheriff was on guard, to protect the property, and - - - Herker was there.

“You’re hired as a guard for this laboratory.” Herker told me. “You’re supposed to be on duty at all times, instead of out on all-night drunks. A lot of money went up in smoke because of your negligence. What do you have to say?”

I never wanted to clobber a man as much in my life, but I held my temper in check. I told him what had happened, and explained that the painting was gone.

“You utter fool! Don’t you

know the company paid a hundred thousand dollars for that daub?"

"I don't care what it cost," I answered. "There's more at stake now than a damned painting, namely Ann's and Tom's life." I walked away from him then. If I had stayed any longer, I would have hit him.

Reports had to be made to the sheriff's office and to the insurance people. Since the lab was outside the city limits, we had a bona-fide sheriff. He was willing and honest and he promised to do everything he could to locate the thieves but both of us knew that this was locking the stable after the horse had been stolen. When I finished with the insurance people and reached my room, the phone was ringing. "To hell with it." I thought. Fatigue was on me in layers. The phone kept right on ringing. Prepared to blister the guy on the other end, I jerked it off the cradle. Tom's voice came over the wire.

"Come and get me," he said.

"What?" I gasped. "You won't be released from the hospital for days!"

"Come and get me," he answered. And hung up.

**T**HERE WAS A FLURRY of nurses in Tom's room when I arrived. In addition, there were two big orderlies of the type and

size who are used when patients become obstinate. As soon as I entered the room, the orderlies measured me for size. I repaid the compliment and thought what a good time we were going to have. Tom, wearing a hospital nightgown and a dressing robe, his face almost covered with bandages, was on his feet. Dr. Crane, looking very serious, was present.

"Here's the man to drive me home," Tom said. "Bring me my bill."

Dr. Crane cupped his chin in his hands. "You ask me to accept a serious responsibility in discharging you when you are not ready."

"I agree with you," Tom said. "That's why I'm going home."

"Do you intend to resume your work?"

"I don't have any choice," Tom answered.

Dr. Crane's mouth became a knife line. Tom crooked his finger at me. I moved to his side. The two orderlies looked at me. I looked right back at them. Dr. Crane studied the situation. On the one hand, he didn't want a patient to leave before treatment was finished. On the other hand, by this time he had probably learned who Tom was. And on the third hand - - - well, he could see that my shoulders were broad and that I was willing. Finally, he nodded his agreement. "With the proviso that

you will report back for treatment in case it becomes necessary."

Tom nodded as if he did not know he was lying. With the two orderlies looking very relieved, we left the hospital. "What about Ann?" I asked outside.

Tom shook his head. "Take me to the lab."

"But - -"

"Shut up, Luke. I know what I'm doing."

I wish I could have said the same for myself.

In the lab, Tom surveyed ruefully the damage the fire and water had done. He stood for a long time staring at the spot on the wall where the painting had hung, then sighed and shook his head. I had the impression that he was sorry for the whole human race.

"I want you to pick up all the scraps of paper that were on the big table," he said. "It doesn't matter if they are scorched or soaked. Enough will remain for me to reassemble my own equations that I developed from the painting. Bring these to the old lab. Then I want you to make certain that I have all the black coffee on hand I can drink. Then - -" He hesitated. "Do you think they will be back?" he said at last.

"I hope so." I said.

I collected the scraps of paper and took them to the old lab and set up an electric coffee maker that

would keep the black brew hot at all times. Digging a folding cot out of the basement, I put it across the door. Putting my gun within easy reach, I lay down on the cot. The last glimpse I had of Tom before I went to sleep, he was frowning at the pieces of paper on the table in front of him. With the bandages on his face, he looked like a mummy in grave clothes risen from the tomb to try to solve the riddle of the Sphinx, and not doing very well with the problem.

During the night I awakened. Tom was still at the table. When morning came, he was still there, but his head was beginning to droop. When I tried to coax him to take a turn on the cot, he glared at me as if I were crazy.

"I can't afford to sleep. Go get me some benzedrine."

From the drug store, I called the hospital. "Miss Briscoe is very low," Dr. Crane told me. "How is my other patient?"

"Alive," I answered. Returning to the lab with the benzedrine tablets, I didn't tell him about Ann. I spent the morning throwing out Herker and more inspectors from the insurance companies. I didn't want any of Long Jaw's pals to slip in under the pretense that they were insurance adjusters.

In the late afternoon Tom yelled, "I've got it, Luke. Here! Get these items for me." Hastily scrib-

bling what he wanted, he handed the slip of paper to me. "Burn up the road, Luke. Move!" I moved.

When I returned with the parts he wanted, he got busy assembling the weirdest-looking gadget I have ever seen. It seemed to be electronic in nature but it also seemed to include elements that started where electronics left off. All night long, he continued to work on it. Dozing on my cot, I awakened once to find him pacing the floor. "Uh-huh," I thought. "He hasn't got all the bugs out of it yet." Sometime during the night the unlisted phone rang. "What the hell?" I wondered, getting up to answer it. Nobody knew this number.

Dr. Crane was on the wire. "Miss Briscoe gave me this number," he said. "She asked me to call Mr. Calhoun and tell him that she needs him."

"I'll tell him," I said.

"You might also tell him that she can't possibly last out the night." Crane's dry objective voice went into quiet silence as he replaced the phone on its cradle.

**T**OM HADN'T HEARD the phone ring. I had to shake him to get his attention. When I told him what Crane had said, he nodded as if this was exactly what he had been expecting. "Okay, Luke, we'll go to her." He picked up the

breadboard on which his gadget was mounted.

"What are you taking that with you for?" I demanded.

"Ann worked hard helping me solve the secret of the painting," he answered. "She deserves to see its first performance. Get yourself into over-drive, Luke."

At the hospital, a nurse took us directly to Ann's room. Lying on the bed, swathed in bandages, she was a mummy that did not move. Deep in sedation now, she did not know we were present. On the far side of her bed, whole blood was being dripped into her arm. Dr. Crane looked up from checking her pulse as we entered. "Everything we could do to give her strength has failed," he said.

"What about infection?" Tom asked.

The doctor gave him a sharp look as if to ask what he meant by hinting that infection could exist in a properly run hospital. "There is no serious infection. Her burns were so severe that she simply lacks the strength to rally." His voice was as grim as my thoughts.

Tom set his breadboard on the foot of the bed and ran an extension cord to an electric outlet.

"What do you have there?" Crane asked.

"A way to give her strength," Tom answered.

The doctor leaned back on his heels. He looked at the instrument, which certainly did not impress him, and started to shake his head. Then he looked at Tom. The headshake turned into tightly clenched lips. "I am familiar with your reputation, Mr. Calhoun, but this - -" The headshake came back.

"There was a first time for a hypodermic injection, a time when somebody first gave blood, a time when somebody took the first antibiotic," Tom said.

Dr. Crane hesitated. A struggle was going on within his mind. He moved to the bed and felt Ann's pulse. A thin trace of perspiration appeared on his forehead. "She's dying," he whispered. "Under any other circumstances, I would say no. But - - - Oh, hell, Mr. Calhoun, if you know a way to give her strength, go ahead."

Tom closed a switch. A soft hum came from the instrument. A cone that looked like a small transmitting antennae was mounted on the breadboard. Tom lined up the cone so that it pointed at Ann's body. He glanced at me. Sweat was visible on his face too. Without a word, I lit a cigarette and gave it to him. The sweat was very clear on his face now. Or was it tears?

"You knew all the time that Ann had no chance to get well?" I asked. "That's why you worked so hard, on this?"

"Yes," he answered. "It was a race against time. It still is." He turned his attention to his instruments.

I shut up. It got very still in that hospital room. In the corridor outside feet lisped on tip-toe as a nurse hurried on an errand of mercy. In the far distance a car hooted impatiently as somebody bucked for his place in the emergency receiving room. Dr. Crane stood without moving. His eyes went from Tom to the instrument, then on to Ann, then retraced their course. Tom closed another switch. A white radiation leaped from the cone. It touched Ann's body at the knees. Part of it seemed to dive through the bandages there and flow inward. The rest of it passed upward along the body, penetrating where it touched. It turned the bandages the color of old silver, well polished.

"What is that?" Dr. Crane asked. His voice was a taut whisper.

"The white light that you see is the visible component of invisible radiations," Tom answered. "It means my generator is not working properly. Otherwise, there would be nothing to see."

"Is this the bug you were worrying about?" I asked.

"Yes. I didn't have time to clean it up."

THE DOCTOR STEPPED forward and took Ann's wrist in his fingers. A startled expression appeared on his face. "Her pulse is getting stronger," he said.

"She is receiving energy, her whole body is being bathed in it," Tom said. "Seen from one viewpoint, energy is all that exists." His voice suddenly had the dry tones of a professor addressing a class in atomic physics. "Energy in motion at one rate of speed we call light. Energy whose motion has been slowed to a crawl, we call matter. The two are interchangeable. Even the human body, with all of its marvelous glands, its nervous system, and its wonderful brain, falls into the last category. If we could see our bodies as they actually exist, we would be aware of an infinite number of dancing points of light, the infinitesimally minute particles of energy that compose it." He paused. The doctor stood absolutely motionless. "So there is energy - - - and something else." Tom continued. His voice seemed to come from miles away.

"What is this something else?" the doctor asked.

"I call it *mind*," Tom answered. "It works with energy, directs it, and moulds it into a thousand different shapes and forms." His voice was soft with awe and reverence.

The doctor reached forward to check Ann's pulse. An exclamation of surprise came from his lips. He lifted her arm, then snapped on a light. His surprise grew greater. Snatching a pair of scissors, he cut swiftly through the bandages that swathed her arm.

"New flesh!" the doctor gasped. "Where there was only burned meat, now there is new flesh. And n--new skin!" A stutter appeared in the doctor's voice. A glaze came into his eyes. His chest heaved. "Medicine knows nothing like this." His voice was heavy with wonder.

"It knows something like this now," Tom said. "Remove the rest of the bandages."

The doctor's fingers shook as he applied the scissors. Her body was revealed. The burns had vanished. Instead there was the warm pink flesh of a child, built there by the energy flowing from the cone.

She stirred sleepily on the bed. "I have been having the most wonderful dream - - - that I have a new body."

Under heavy sedation, she knew nothing that had been going on. She thought she was having a dream. The three of us in that room knew how wonderful that dream really was.

Cool air breathed across my neck. I don't know how I knew what had happened but I knew. As I turned, my eyes confirmed my

hunch. The door was open. Three men were coming through it. Long Jaw was in the lead.

I hit with all my strength. The protruding jaw was within range. My fist landed full on the button with a thud that I felt all the way through my body. Never in my life had I hit a man that I enjoyed hitting as much. Long Jaw went over backwards.

I found myself looking at guns in the hands of the two men who were following him. "Get your hands up!" the first one said. Since I had no choice, I obeyed. As my hands went up, the second man stepped forward and slugged me in the pit of the stomach. As I doubled up from the pain, he hit me in the jaw.

At that moment, I would cheerfully have destroyed both of them with my bare hands. All I could do was glare at them. As I fell back against the wall, I saw that Dr. Crane was looking at them. Judging from the expression on his face, I think he would gladly have used his best surgical knives to cut their hearts out, if he had had the chance. He started to move. A gun swung to cover him. "Just stand pat, doc," he was advised.

Tom, at the foot of Ann's bed, did not even look around. His attention was completely engrossed in his gadget.

"You can't get away with this," I said. "This man is working on a project that is vital to national defense. The FBI will hound you to Siberia." I was bluffing and I knew it. So did they.

**L**ONG JAW GOT SLOWLY to his feet. "Is that so?" he said. He moved toward Tom. "Come on. We want you - - - and your machine."

For the first time, Tom looked up. "I'll come with you in just a few minutes," he said, nodding toward Ann. "Her life is not quite out of danger yet."

"To hell with that," a new voice spoke from the doorway. "Get the machine - - - and the inventor."

I didn't have to turn to know that voice. Herker! He was standing in the doorway waving a bunch of papers.

"I always knew you had the makings of a crook," I said. "You at least, ought to have the sense to know that you can't get away with it."

"These men are in my employ." Herker waved his fingers toward the three. "I have a court order here empowering me to seize any and all company property in order to conserve the assets of the corporation." His face was very smug and self-assured. "It's all legal. There's nothing you can do about it."

I would have rocked back on my heels if the wall hadn't already been behind me. "What about Tom?" I finally managed to say. "Have you got a court order to seize him too, as a company asset?"

Herker fingered through his papers. "Yes," he said. "I have an order here empowering me to bring him before a lunacy commission."

For the first time, Tom looked up. "What you are really trying to say is that these men came to you and offered you more millions than you can count for my discovery and for the chance to force me to tell them how it works."

Herker acted as if somebody had slugged him in the throat. He gulped and tried to find words. "How - - - how did you know?"

"They approached me first," Tom answered. "I refused to talk to them."

"But why? There's millions in it!" In all his life, he had never been able to see anything more important than a dollar.

"Enough of this," Long Jaw said, taking command of the situation. "We want you and your invention."

He moved toward the bed, but Tom held up his hand. "There on the bed you see proof of what this invention can do in the way of saving life. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Sure, sure," Long Jaw answered. "You'll be well taken care of. Just as soon as you demonstrate it to the big boys, your future will be safe."

"I'll demonstrate it now," Tom said.

He swung the cone so that the radiation from it would strike Long Jaw, then closed a switch.

A burst of blackness leaped from the cone. It struck Long Jaw. Instantly it seemed to flow over his body, engulfing him. I heard him scream, once, a sound that seemed to get farther and farther away.

Then the space he had occupied was empty.

Moving with the speed of light, the blackness leaped on to engulf the other two men. They went as Long Jaw had gone, into the blackness, swallowed up in an instant.

Herker dropped the papers. The black light hit him. He screamed and was gone into the darkness, gone instantly, gone forever.

The wall behind started to vanish as Tom cut the switch.

"The energy that heals can also destroy," Tom said. He turned the cone back to Ann and changed the switch again. Again the white light flowed out. I stepped forward and picked up the papers. The doctor, who had stood rooted to the floor, roused himself with a jerk. "I swear I saw four men come in here. Where did they go? What hap-



pened? Somebody tell me what happened!" His voice was rising.

"Perhaps your nerves are a little overstrained," Tom said, his voice very kind. "A mild sedative might help."

Without a word the doctor went from the room.

Tom switched off the light and moved to the edge of the bed. "Ann . . ." he whispered. "Ann . . ."

Even under sedation, she heard his voice. The smile that came over her face seemed to light the whole room.

I went outside and closed the door and stood guard over it. They had some things to talk about

which didn't need my presence, or they would have some things to talk about as soon as Ann regained consciousness and found that her dream was true.

In time the world of tomorrow would have something to talk about too, a secret that some scientist of the long-gone time almost found, and hid in a painting in the hope that in some future day some unborn genius would discover his secret again, and perfect it, and give it to the world. Awe was in me, at the wonders of the world in which I lived, and gratitude, that such men as Tom Calhoun inhabited it.