

Galaxy

SCIENCE FICTION

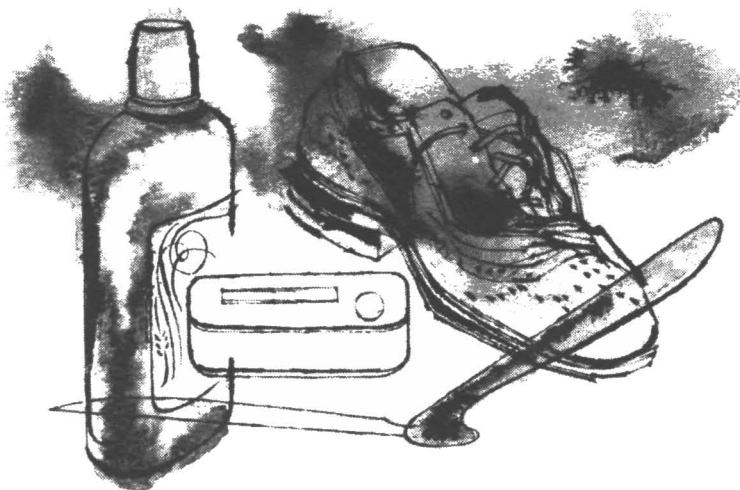
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CONTENTS

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL—Installment 1	PAGE
GLADIATOR AT LAW	
<i>by Frederik Pohl & C. M. Kornbluth</i>	6
 NOVELETS	
DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN... <i>by William Tenn</i>	78
FORGET ME NEARLY..... <i>by F. L. Wallace</i>	124
 SHORT STORIES	
SOMETHING FOR NOTHING.... <i>by Robert Sheckley</i>	55
HIGH MAN..... <i>by Jay Clarke</i>	68
SEE?..... <i>by Edward G. Robles, Jr.</i>	113
 SCIENCE DEPARTMENT	
FOR YOUR INFORMATION..... <i>by Willy Ley</i>	104
 FEATURES	
EDITOR'S PAGE	<i>by H. L. Gold</i> 4
FORECAST	103
GALAXY'S FIVE STAR SHELF..... <i>by Groff Conklin</i>	118
Cover by EMSH Illustrating GLADIATOR AT LAW	

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Illustrated by **ASHMAN**

SEE?

By **EDWARD G. ROBLES, JR.**

*Seeing things? Don't go to an
analyst—see the Commission—*

if it doesn't find you first!

WELL, there was this song a few years back. You know the one. Phil Harris singing about a thing that you couldn't get rid of, no matter what you did, a thing so repul-

sive it made you a social outcast. Never thought I'd see one, though. Dirty Pete found it.

Don't rush me. I'll tell you about it.

We're hobos, understand? Now

a hobo is a different breed of cat than you think. Oh, people are getting educated to the idea that a hobo will work and move on, whereas a tramp will mooch and move on, and a bum will mooch and hang around, but you still find folks who are ignorant enough to call us bums.

We're aristocrats, yes sir. If it wasn't for us, you wouldn't enjoy half the little luxuries you do. Oh, don't believe me—talk to your experts. They know that, without the migratory worker, most of the crops wouldn't get harvested. And, if I talk high-falutin' once in a while, don't blame me. Associating with the Professor improves any man's vocabulary, in spite of themselves.

THERE was the four of us, see? We'd been kicking around together for longer than I care to think about. There was the Professor and Dirty Pete and Sacks and Eddie. I'm Eddie. Nicknames are funny things. Take the Professor — he was a real professor once, until he began hitting the bottle. Well, he lost his job, his home, his family, and his rep.

One morning, he wakes up on Skid Row without a nickel in his jeans and the great-granddaddy of all hangovers. He comes to a decision. Either he could make

a man out of himself, or he could die. Right then, dying looked like the easiest thing to do, but it took more guts that he had to jump off a bridge, so he went on the Road instead.

After he got over his shakes—and he sure had 'em bad—he decided that, if he never took another drink, it'd be the best thing for him. So he didn't. He had a kind of dignity, though, and he could really talk, so he and I teamed up during the wheat harvest in South Dakota. We made all the stops and, when we hit the peaches in California we picked up Sacks and Dirty Pete.

Sacks got his monicker because he never wore shoes. He claimed that gunny-sacks, wrapped around his feet and shins, gave as much protection and more freedom, and they were more comfortable, besides costing nix. Since we mostly bought our shoes at the dumps, at four bits a pair, you might say he was stretching a point, but that's one of the laws of the Road. You don't step on the other guy's corns, and he don't step on yours.

So guess why Dirty Pete was called that. Yeah. He hadn't taken a bath since 'forty-six, when he got out of the army, and he didn't figger on ever takin' another. He was a damn' good worker, though, and nobody'd

ever try anything with him around. He wasn't any bigger than a Mack truck. Besides, he was quiet.

Oh, sure. You wanna know why I'm on the Road. Well, it happens I like whiskers. Trouble is, they're not fashionable, unless you're some kind of an artist, which I'm not. You know, social disapproval. I didn't have the guts to face it, so I lit out. Nobody cares on the Road what you do, so I was okay with my belt-length beard.

A beard's an enjoyable thing, too. There's a certain kind of thrill you get from stroking it, and feeling its silkiness run through your fingers. And besides, combing it, and keeping it free of burrs, snarls and tangles, sort of keeps your spare moments so full that the devil don't find any idle time to put your hands to work in. If you ask me, I think that the razor has been the downfall of society. And I'm willing to bet I have plenty of company with the same opinion.

Show me a man who doesn't let his beard grow once in a while, even if it's only for a day or so, and you've shown me a man who thinks more of social pressure than he does of his own comfort. And show me a man who says he likes to shave, and you've shown me a man who is either a liar or is asking for punishment.

THAT'S enough about us. Now to get on with the story. You know, if the Professor hadn't been around, there would probably have been murder done over the Thing, or at least our little group would've split up, 'cause none of us had the brains to figure it out.

Pete's an expert scrounger. His eyes are sharp, and he's always on the lookout for a salable piece of goods, even if he can only get a nickel for it. One night, we're sitting in a jungle near Sacramento, trying to figure out whether to go north for the grapes, or south for the grapes. They're all over California, you know, and they pay pretty well.

Pete, as usual, is out looking, and pretty soon he comes back into camp with this thing in his hand. He handles it like it was hot, but he's pleased he's found it, because he hopes to merchandise it. So he walks up to me, and says, "Hey, Eddie. What'll you gimme for this, huh?"

I say, "Get that to hell away from me! I'll give you a swift kick in the pants if you don't."

He looks real surprised. He says, "Huh, I thought maybe you could use it."

I get up on my feet. I say, real low and careful, because maybe he's joking, "Look, Pete — you oughtta know by this time, I *like* my beard. Now will you go away?"

He mooches off, looking like I'd kicked him, and goes over to the Professor. I figure maybe the Professor could use it, so I listen. The Prof looks like he was being offered a live rattlesnake.

"No, thanks, really, Pete. I have resolved never to touch it again. I hope you don't mind."

Well, for some reason Pete don't look pleased, and he's real unhappy by this time, but he tries again.

"Hey, Sacks, what'll you gimme for—"

He don't get a chance to finish. I'm only listening with half an ear, but I'm so surprised I stand up like I been stuck with a pin. Sacks says, "Whatinell would I do with a left shoe? You know I don't use 'em."

Pete looks at the thing in his hand, and the Prof and I go over there.

The Professor looks at the thing real carefully and speaks up. "Say, Pete, look at that thing and tell me what it is."

"Why, it's a brand new bar of soap, of course. I don't use it, but one of you might want to. What's all the beef about?"

"Soap?" I say. "Why, you poor fish, something must have happened to your eyes. When you offered me that straight razor, I thought you'd gone off your nut. Now I know it."

The Professor interrupts. He

looks excited. "Wait a minute, Eddie. To me that item looks exactly like a full fifth of Old Harvester, 100 proof. Used to be my favorite, before I became an abstainer. To Pete, it looks like soap. To you, it looks like a straight razor while, to Sacks, it resembles a shoe. Does that give you any ideas?"

"Means we're all having hallucinations," I grunts.

"Exactly. Pete, was there anything else in the location where you found this thing?"

"Nothing but some scrap tin."

"Show us."

SO, the four of us wanders across the field and, sure enough, there was this silly looking object lying there. It was about eighteen or twenty feet across, and two feet thick, and I nearly made a fool of myself. I almost screamed when I saw six straight razors *crawling* out of a hole in its side.

The Professor whistled. "Grab them, boys. We want them."

Well, Sacks sacrifices one of his sacks, and we rounded up fifteen of the useless things. We went back to the jungle, where the Prof explained it.

"Look, fellows, suppose you were a being from another planet that wanted to take over here. Suppose, further, that you were rather small and relatively de-

fenseless. To finish the suppositions, suppose you were a positive telepath, with not only the ability to read minds, but also the ability to create visual and tactile hallucinations. How would you protect yourself?"

A light began to dawn, but I didn't say a word about it.

The Professor continued. "If you could do all this, you'd make yourself look just as useless as possible. To Pete, you'd look like a bar of soap, because he never uses the stuff. To Sacks, you'd look like a shoe, because his dislike for shoes is evident in his mind. To Eddie, who is proud of his beard, you'd look like a razor, while to me, you'd look like a bottle of booze, because I dislike its

effects intensely. In other words, you would assume an imposture that would assure you'd never be picked up, except by someone like Pete, who would see in you a salable item, even though not a usable one. It may be, Pete, that you have saved the world."

So, that's the story. We're all still on the Road, of course, but now we are the "Commission for the Investigation of Extraterrestrial Invasion." Congress named us as that, when we got the data to them.

Now, Mr. Mayor, you see our problem. Have your citizens seen anything around that they don't want? If they have, we want to look at it.

—EDWARD G. ROBLES, JR.