

# STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

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## STIRRING SCIENCE-FICTION

<b>DEAD CENTER (Novelette)</b> . . . . .	<b>S. D. Gottesman</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>LUNAR GUN</b> . . . . .	<b>John L. Chapman</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>GOLDEN NEMESIS</b> . . . . .	<b>David A. Kyle</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>ROCKET MAIL</b> . . . . .		<b>34</b>
<b>RESILIENCE</b> . . . . .	<b>Damon Knight</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>CITADEL OF THOUGHT</b> . . . . .	<b>James Blish</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>"TODAY RATHER THAN TOMORROW"</b> . . . . .		<b>50</b>
<b>STRANGE RETURN</b> . . . . .	<b>Lawrence Woods</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>THE VORTEX (Department)</b> . . . . .		<b>67</b>

## STIRRING FANTASY-FICTION

<b>THIRTEEN O'CLOCK (Novelette)</b> . . . . .	<b>Cecil Corwin</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>BONES</b> . . . . .	<b>Donald A. Wollheim</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>OLD TRINITY CHURCHYARD (Poem)</b> . . . . .	<b>A. Merritt</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>KEY TO CORNWALL</b> . . . . .	<b>David H. Keller</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>OUT OF THE JAR</b> . . . . .	<b>Charles R. Tanner</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>DEVOTEE OF EVIL</b> . . . . .	<b>Clark Ashton Smith</b>	<b>109</b>
<b>THE ABYSS</b> . . . . .	<b>Robert W. Lowndes</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>ALWAYS COMES EVENING (Poem)</b> . . . . .	<b>Robert E. Howard</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>THE FANTASY WORLD (Department)</b> . . . . .		<b>126</b>

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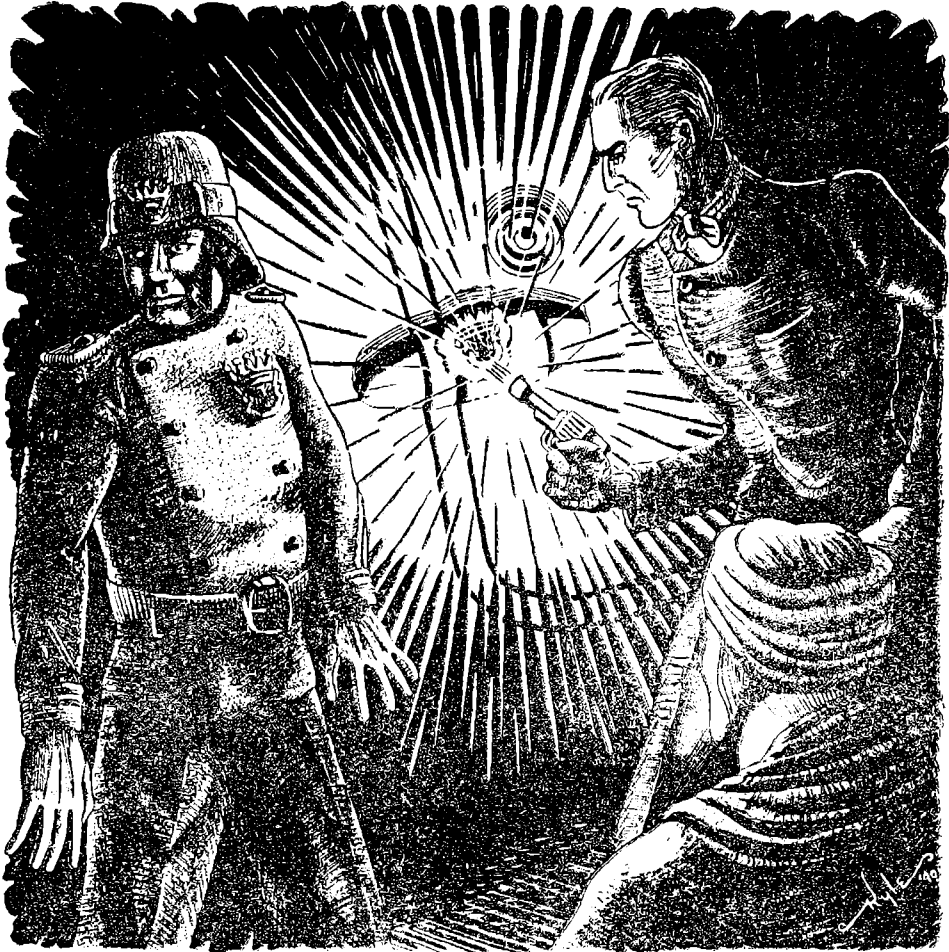
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# STRANGE RETURN

by

Lawrence Woods

(Author of "Inhuman Victory," "Cosmic Coincidence," etc.)



Either the two space fliers had gone mad or else the whole world was wrong  
...for the U. S. A. had never existed!

**T**HE two middle-aged men were standing on the lawn, talking, when they first heard the sound of the falling vessel. At first it had been little more than a faint, far humming, as of a plane too far away to be seen. Pos-

sibly it might be the mail plane that usually flew over Staunton's place at this time, en route to New York, some fifty miles away. But with the rapid and astonishing increase in the all-pervading vibration, such conjecture had to be thrown to the

winds. The thing screamed down upon the Long Island estate with an overwhelming stridency.

Both men looked up as one. At first they saw nothing, but, in an instant, they spotted the tiny point of light. A speck of brilliance in the soft blue sky above, growing rapidly to a red flare directly overhead.

"By Jove! What's--" started Burleigh, then stopped short. Both men ducked instinctively as the flame from out of the sky seemed to come pouncing down upon their heads.

The ground shone red for an instant, then, suddenly, the carnate glow disappeared. For a moment there was shocked silence, then a terrific crash that shook the ground under their feet and sent them both sprawling.

Burleigh straightened up slowly, shook his head to clear it. "Lord," he queried in a shocked tone, "what was that?"

Staunton seemed too stunned to speak for an instant. His eyes stared out unseeing for a second, then, fixing upon something untoward in the view, stopped and came to a focus. His face leaped into startled amazement, quickly followed by fury.

"Hey! That's my tulip bed you've ruined!" he yelled and started running in the direction of the shining metal ovoid now nestling comfortably in a pit of its own making, surrounded by strewn rocks, soil, and crushed and mangled flowers of the now-vanished garden.

Staunton scarcely took note in those first few moments of the unusual design of the flying craft; his ire could see only that it had chosen his favorite flower beds for a landing field. But, as his mind took in the remarkably stream-lined silvery sides of the rather bullet-shaped

craft, his sense of proportion returned and he came to a halt.

It was perhaps fifty feet long and twenty feet wide at its greatest diameter. In many ways it resembled a giant cartridge, its nose, with its jutting bull's-eye porthole, tapering down to a blunt point, its stern flat and tubed as if intended for a large number of exhaust pipes. Right now that section was smeared with black soot as if recently exposed to flames. And bits of up-thrown dirt were spattered over the otherwise glistening sides and against the three or four tiny thick-glassed portholes that studded the side.

Burleigh panted up to his friend, gasped "What kind of airplane is that? It's a new one to me."

"Looks like one of Gatling's rockets grown to monstrous proportions," commented Staunton walking cautiously a little closer.

"I'll bet that's what it is. The fellow had a place over in New Jersey once, and he's probably back again--making a damned nuisance of himself," added Burleigh as if in afterthought.

"He's going to pay for this nuisance, though," growled the estate owner, regaining some of his anger. "He'll wish he stayed back in the Border Territory before I get through!"

**T**HE long lanky man carefully unstrapped the belts around his waist, eased himself down onto the narrow floor of the cramped control room. "Whew!" he muttered to himself, "That's over!" He tried to stretch his tired muscles, cramped from long hours of sitting hunched up in the tiny space the ship afforded.

"Yay! Halloo! Three cheers! We're home, Congreve, old boy; we've made it!" a cheery voice boomed

from the bowels of the craft behind him. Presently a leather-clad man stumbled and squirmed through the narrow way, into the too-small control room.

The newcomer was several inches shorter than Congreve. "You can stretch, now," he exulted. "You can stretch that scarecrow frame of yours to your heart's content once we get that door open. Earth at last! And what a trip!"

Congreve hunched over to peer through the quartzite front port. His blue eyes took in the scene outside, the blue sky, the green foliage, multi-colored flowers, and the colonial mansion reposing in the midst of it. His eyes took in the scene again hungrily. "No," he whispered, as if in answer to a question, "there isn't another place in the universe as beautiful as Earth."

"Right!" boomed the voice behind him. "So let's open the door and get out onto beautiful Earth while it's still here." Congreve nodded. "You first, Dave."

Preceded by Mitchell, he made his way back into the depths of the ship again; casting a passing glance at the tiny cabin in which the two men had lived and slept the past three months, he squeezed his way to the door of the lock. They got the first door open and Mitchell went inside the small space of the air-lock to swing the heavy outer door open, shouting gaily as it gave outward and he swung himself to the ground below.

Congreve pushed through after him, burst out laughing at the sight of the little man rolling about on the soft dirt like a puppy which had just had a bath. He felt like doing the same, but after all, Mitchell was the cut-up. The papers would not expect such doings from him.

The chief pilot and captain of the two-man ship let himself down on the newly upthrown soil and essayed a step. He staggered a bit, unused to the gravity he had missed these many weeks. Then he threw up his arms, indulged in a good long stretch, filling his lungs with the clean, fresh air. "It's good," he proclaimed to no one in particular.

"**W**HAT'S GOOD? You've ruined the best tulip beds on Long Island, thrown dirt and rocks all over the place, nearly scared me and my guest to death, then you stand there and say 'it's good'!" came an infuriated voice a few feet distant. "What a crust you rocket bums have! Just because you're crazy and think you can fly to the moon, don't think that you can get away with destroying an honest man's property. You may be a hero to kids, but you're a pain to me! And you'll pay for every bit of damage that infernal contraption of yours has done to my estate!" Staunton had arrived upon the scene.

Congreve looked up, startled; Mitchell scrambled to his feet, wiped away some of the dirt that was smeared on him. Neither one knew quite what to say. They had been prepared, mentally, to answer reporters or newsreel men, mayors, or any other similar forms of welcoming committee. But this was totally unexpected.

Congreve cleared his throat. "I sincerely regret, sir, if we have damaged your property, and assure you that we can pay for any destruction the ship has caused."

Staunton bristled. "Pay!" he wailed. "That won't restore my grounds; that won't replace my flowers. It'll take years before anything will grow here again! You've burned

out the very land itself; this whole piece of property is worthless."

"My dear sir," Congreve said quietly. "I assure you that all such damages will be recompensed for in one way or another. My name, since you do not seem to recognize me, is Congreve — Charles Congreve of Salt Lake City, Utah." He waited to see what effect this name would have. Considering the uproar the two space fliers had received in the press and radio all over the planet, this final revelation should be the "Open Sesame" to the estate owner. He was astonished that the man had not recognized him before now. But Staunton's answer was to astonish him further.

"Ahah! Foreigners to boot! Think you can trample over the King's good territory just because you're protected by a passport. Why, I'll bet you haven't got a passport!" Burleigh stepped up beside Staunton now, laid a hand on his shoulder. "Let me handle this," he whispered, "it may be more serious."

"**N**OW, Mr. Congreve, I am sure this can all be settled peacefully. My friend is a little perturbed over the loss of his flower beds."

"A little perturbed!" snorted Mitchell. "Wonder what he's like when he's angry." The look which all three of them cast silenced him.

"If you two," continued Burleigh, "can show me your passports and flying permits, there will be no need to call the constabulary."

"Passports!" This time Congreve was taken aback. "Why we're as good Americans as you, or any other citizen of this country. Why passports?"

"Sir, it seems you do not realize that you are no longer in Mormon lands; you are in the Appalachian country, now. Haven't you a pass-

port?" Burleigh was a bit puzzled by the stupidity of these foreign aviators.

"What the deuce difference does it make what section of the nation we're in? As far as that goes, we took off from just outside Newark Airport where our vessel was built," the lanky American answered, becoming ruffled at last.

Burleigh seemed a bit puzzled. If they built their ship in Newark, they must possess legal rights to traverse the Appalachian country. "I imagine, then," he said, "you have some sort of flying permits or leave of stay from the New Jersey officials?"

Congreve glared a second, stupefied. "Yes," he finally managed to sputter, "we have flying licenses." He reached into his leather jacket and pulled out his papers, thrust them into the two men's faces.

Burleigh took them, examining them carefully. Gradually his face became more and more puzzled. "These aren't Appalachian papers," he announced. "They're from some federation called the United States of America — nothing to do with the British Commonwealth of Nations. They seem to be in perfect order, but I must confess I have never heard of this United States of America. Come, come, man; if you haven't F. A. S. papers, say so."

Mitchell edged over to the pilot. "I think they're both bats. We'd better humor them till we get a cop."

Congreve thought so too, but an idea just occurred to him. He whispered back to his friend. "It just came to me that time may be wrong out there in space. We think three months have passed; perhaps we are wrong. Perhaps decades, centuries have gone by." He addressed the two men in front of him. "Excuse me,

gentlemen. It may seem irrelevant, but can you give me the date?"

The two stood still awaiting an answer, one which might be the explanation. But it fell on their ears like a dull thud. "The date's right," Mitchell whispered. "So the only answer is that they're nuts."

At this moment Staunton was murmuring to Burleigh. "I believe that these men are lunatics. You engage them in conversation while I notify a constable." He slipped away from the group and made his way rapidly into the house.

Meanwhile, Burleigh had arrived at the same conclusion and saw it might be dangerous to anger these foreigners any more. So he started to question them as to where they had been and what kind of ship they had.

This was more to the two spacemen's liking; Congreve felt at ease. He expanded, began to tell this man everything. The heart of a man long isolated from others is friendly, given the chance.

**B**URLEIGH beckoned the two over nearer the house where beach chairs were set out on what was left of the lawn. They had been overturned by the impact of the ship; he set them up thinking that it might be safer to have the lunatics in a comfortable position. For himself, he chose a comfortable, upright chair from which he could rise swiftly if need be.

Papers and legal documents were forgotten for the moment as the two related of their voyage; told of the building of the ship, the shot into space, the veering of the rocket as they approached the sun. No sooner than they had escaped the Terrestrial zone of gravity did the rocket

turn away from its course, thus ending their chances of landing on Luna as they'd planned. They told how they had managed to rocket the ship into the attraction of Mercury and land on that world, how they had spent weeks in the Mercurian Twilight Zone while they repaired ship, made explorations and calculations. And the grand day when the gleaming green star that was Earth finally came again into view.

Burleigh listened in fascination. Madmen these two were, but interesting madmen. They knew their astronomy and theory of space-travel (he recalled having read several authoritative texts on the subject and what the two said checked with the facts) and they refrained from melodramatics. A simple, straightforward tale for all the fantastic tenor of it.

"You know," Mitchell was saying, "we couldn't exactly measure time except by that. A year on Mercury is roughly 88 of our days, but, as it doesn't revolve, we couldn't tell when they had passed save when old green Earth swung on the horizon. There's no mistaking this planet, sir."

Burleigh nodded politely, half-friendly, almost regretting that the police would soon come and take these lunatics away. He wanted to hear a great deal more; perhaps he could write a thesis on the subject to be checked against reality if and when, some day, such a voyage were actually made.

"Yes," broke in Congreve, "it was good to set foot on Terra again, until—" then he stopped himself, realizing that he had brought attention back to the subject they had been trying to keep away from.

There was an awkward silence for a moment.

“HELLO!” said Mitchell suddenly. “Here’s your friend with a cop.”

“Now we can straighten things out,” breathed Congreve and Burleigh, almost in unison, stopping then to stare at each other.

The constable’s voice broke in on them. “Mr. Staunton here informs me that you have been trespassing on his property, destroying his flowers, and making a general nuisance of yourself. In addition to that, he charges that you are foreigners and cannot show passports or legal flying permits. What have you to say? I warn you that anything stated here may be used against you later.”

The spacemen stared at the uniformed man in growing bewilderment. A horrible suspicion began to slither in their minds that something was quite wrong. For the uniform the man wore was not that of the New York State or City Police, or like that of any police with whom they had ever had contact. Blue it was; that much was true. But the cut was all wrong; and the design on the buttons, shield, and cap decorations was such that it caught them unaware.

For the shield was surmounted by a crown and the brass buttons each bore the same symbol. And the heraldic emblems were entirely alien to the two Americans.

Congreve choked a second. Finally he ventured: “Would you please tell us exactly where we are? In what section of the country?”

The officer, a burly ruddy-faced man, hesitated an instant, then replied. “You are on Long Island, near New York City, in the state of New York.”

The two astral navigators looked at each other in astonishment. They

had begun to think that perhaps they might have landed in Newfoundland or Canada, but this confirmed previous observations. Yet, here was a mystery which defied solution.

Congreve spoke up slowly. “I’m afraid there’s some great mistake here. If you have a car, I think it would be better if we went with you to the city to clear this matter up.” It had occurred to him that, perhaps, if he could get away from this crazy mansion (no doubt, the two men were regarded as merely eccentric, in view of their wealth) he might find sane people who could explain this matter. In any case, he could obtain a lawyer.

The policeman looked relieved, signified his assent. He had expected trouble.

Mitchell and Congreve swung the door of their great space-rocket shut and locked it. Then they crossed the lawns of the estate and entered the officer’s blue-green radio car. They seated themselves in the back seat, the officer with them, and a second officer, who had remained in the car, drove off.

The little astronaut thought he knew cars, but he couldn’t place this one. “What make of car is this?” he inquired. “I thought you police always used Fords.”

The officer grunted. “It’s a Royal Six. Never heard of Fords; must be one of your foreign makes.”

Mitchell gulped and looked out of the window wondering what was wrong with the world. The view outside seemed all right. Beautiful Long Island scenery, fine homes, blue sky, green grass—he couldn’t be entirely mad.

They drove on in silence to a police station in some small town. There their man got out and went inside; after a little while he returned, got in

again and told the driver to go right on into the city to the "Federation Building."

**C**ONGREVE smiled to himself; now, he fancied, he'd be recognized and given his due reception.

They drove on for half an hour, finally passing the city border and entering Brooklyn. Mitchell stared quite thoughtfully at the streets as they passed. Somehow or other he couldn't quite place what part of the borough they were in; it did look like Brooklyn. But this street should be Flatbush Avenue; instead, the signs read Prince Edward Boulevard.

They came to the bridge. Mitchell, who knew New York as well as the palm of his hand, seemed a bit puzzled that they had arrived at the bridge this way. He knew that it should lie several blocks over. As they crossed, Congreve gasped and jerked his friend's arm. "Look at that skyline!"

The short man looked, and fell back against the seat limply. For a moment his brain refused to think. The skyline was changed! In the few weeks they had been away New York had undergone a startling, incredible metamorphosis.

At first glance, it might seem (to one who was not intimate with the city) quite the same, the tall skyscrapers jutting up into the clouds from downtown Manhattan, several huge buildings towering over the others. But the Americans could recognize none. Where the Empire State Building should have been was only a moderately high affair—some blocks away, where nothing of importance had been in the skyline, a colossus towered up, different in contour from any of the skyscrapers they knew. Nor could they find the Chrysler Building or even the once-mighty

Woolworth Building. There were others, equally as imposing in other places, but all were strange—the designs different.

"It's all wrong," Mitchell groaned, burying his head in his arms. "Something has happened to us—I think we've gone mad."

As for Congreve, he was not a New Yorker and was unaware of the amazing degree of difference. He only knew that something was wrong.

The car stopped and they emerged. The Federation Building was a massive many-storied structure in the downtown district. Neither of the two men had ever seen it before. Above its wide entrance appeared the same crown and shield that was on their escorting officers. A flag flew from a staff jutting out three stories above the entrance.

At first glimpse, Congreve thought it was the American flag. He had spotted the familiar red and white stripes and blue field of Old Glory. But something odd about it made him look again. It was hanging on its staff and he couldn't make out what it was.

The officers flanked them and took them in through the doorway. As they passed into the entrance, the man from Utah cast a glance upward at the flag. A gust of wind had caught it, flinging its colors out to the breeze. And Congreve felt another shock.

Thirteen red and white stripes there were. Yet, up in the corner where the forty-eight white stars should have been in their blue field, there appeared another design. A British Union Jack!

The two Americans stopped thinking. They merely walked stolidly beside the two policemen through the corridors and into an elevator. The bustling crowd of business people



passing in and out barely noticed them. They got off and went through a door marked "Bureau of Immigration."

Before a desk, behind which sat a middle-aged gentleman with gray hair, they stopped. One of their escorts began to tell Staunton's version of the arrival of the rocket. Congreve's annoyance returned at the continued use of the word "foreigners." "I beg your pardon, sir," he cut in, "but I'd like to inform you that we are not foreigners. We are loyal, tax-paying American citizens—as much so as you."

**T**HE gray-haired Immigration Authority looked at him quizzically and remarked, "I don't doubt that you are Americans, but that is hardly the point. It isn't what continent you are from, but what nation. Now, where is your home city and residence? In what state or province do you pay taxes?"

Congreve smiled. "I was born and have my home in Salt Lake City, Utah. Naturally I pay taxes in that state, as well as to the U. S. Government."

The man behind the desk nodded. "Now we are getting to facts. You admit to being a citizen of the Mormon Republic of Utah and paying taxes to a 'U. S.' government. I presume that means Utah State. Since you are quite apparently in Federated States without a passport, we shall have to contact your Consulate here."

Congreve opened his mouth in amazement. Consulate! Mormon Republic! Federated States! He was about to request further illumination, but his questioner held up his hand as he dialed a number on the telephone. The man spoke to someone about Congreve a moment, conclud-

ing with, "Yes, please send the Consul over. This is most unusual."

Hanging up, he announced, "Your Consul will be here shortly and take care of you." A hand waved the lanky Westerner to a chair.

"Now you, Mr. Mitchell. Where were you born and what do you do?"

Mitchell glared at him a moment, then replied, "I was born in the good old American city of New Orleans and have lived for the past twenty years right here in New York City."

The Immigration Officer frowned. "Have you ever been naturalized?"

Congreve thought Mitchell was going to burst an artery. "What! Naturalized! What do you think I am? I'm a citizen of the U. S. A. and was in the war. Me naturalized? I should say not!"

"Ah!" Everyone leaned forward, staring at Mitchell. "You admit having lived here for the past twenty years, un-naturalized, thus retaining your allegiance to the Empire of Louisiana. You even boast about having fought on their side in the late war. You realize that virtually makes you guilty of espionage?" The inquisitor looked exceedingly grave.

The short man was taken back completely. "Me a spy! Certainly not!"

The Immigration Officer leaned back in his chair, looking at Mitchell. Then he looked up at the policemen. "Take the prisoner away and hold him for court martial." Mitchell jumped as an officer placed a heavy hand on his shoulder.

"In the name of his Majesty James X., King of Britton and Dominions Overseas, I place you under arrest. Come along!"

They dragged the protesting astronaut out shouting as he went, "You can't do this to me! I'm an American, I tell you! American!"

Congreve clenched his fist. He wanted to step in, but realized that any action he took at the moment would only endanger himself without helping Mitchell.

**T**HE Mormon Consul, a lean, angular man named Brigham, arrived finally. Without giving Congreve a chance to speak at all, the consul talked the case over with the Immigrations man. The man at the desk seemed to give Brigham considerable respect, and finally the Consul signed several papers, and motioned to the American astronaut.

"You've been placed in my custody until we straighten your case out. Come along with me," he told the other, taking him by the arm and leading him out.

Congreve kept quiet. Once in the street, they entered the consul's car, which, the American noticed, had diplomatic plates and the Mormon coat of arms on the side. They drove in silence to a large brownstone house where they descended to the street. On one side of the door was set the same Mormon shield and the legend "Mormon Republic—Consulate."

Entering the building, they proceeded to the consul's private office where Congreve was given a seat. "Now suppose," said Brigham in a kindly tone, "you tell me your story."

The pilot of the first space ship from Earth lost no time in giving his account. The consul smoked a pipe and looked at him while he talked, giving no indication as to whether or not he believed him.

"You have had an amazing experience," remarked the man when Congreve had finished, "and I fear you have undergone considerable mental stress. But let me put you straight

on some cases where you seem confused."

The Consul took the pipe out of his mouth as if uncertain where to begin. "At the present moment, you are in the building of the Mormon Republic Consulate, at the corner of Fifth and King Charles Avenues, in the city of New York. This entire area is within the British Dominion known as the Federated Appalachian States. This is, as you assumed, the North American Continent." The Consul stood up and unrolled a large map of North America that hung on the wall. Congreve leaped to his feet in amazement; never had he dreamed the like.

The Consul put his finger on the city of New York. "As you can see, all this territory in pink is the Appalachian Dominion." His hand swept over the territory covered by the original thirteen colonies, Maine, and all the territory east of the Mississippi River, from Wisconsin down to approximately where Memphis should be. From there the Appalachian territory cut across to the Atlantic Ocean, never touching the Gulf of Mexico at any point. "All this territory is a British Dominion, separate from the Dominions of Canada and Newfoundland, to the North."

His hand fell to the Peninsula of Florida and a section of the Gulf of Mexico. "This is all the Republic of Florida, the uppermost of the Spanish-American Republics." West of the Mississippi, from Louisiana up to Missouri, the map showed as "Empire of Louisiana." A pseudo-independent country, actually a French protectorate. Texas stood out roughly in its old shape as Republic of Texas.

Far to the West was the Dominion of California, stretching along the

Pacific Coast as far as the Canadian Border; where the states of Utah, Idaho, and Nevada should have been, appeared the Mormon Republic. "This is our country, Congreve," whispered Brigham softly, "our God-given land."

Considerable territory in the Central States lay simply marked American Indian Federation. "A British protectorate," remarked the consul.

Congreve sat down abruptly. "I don't understand it," he breathed dazedly.

The Consul smiled sympathetically. "I'm afraid you have been suffering delusions, my boy. That Louisiana spy was using you as a defenseless tool."

Congreve looked up again. "Nonsense!" he snapped, suddenly defiant. "The United States of America, my country, is no delusion." But his eyes fell on that map and his spirits sagged again.

**D**URING the next few days Congreve went around hopelessly befuddled. He had finally been forced to take everything about him at its face value. Things were so very obviously real. But it was the similarities rather than the differences which staggered him. For example, the homeland of the British, the seat of His Majesty's Government, was not known as England but Britton. Scotland, Wales, and Eire were on the map, but he soon found that there was nowhere near the amount of distinction among them that he had known. The money, with the crowned head of the King, the people, American-seeming, yet possessed of a certain oddness about them that indicated the man of a British Dominion, the soldiers and flags, and the papers . . . especially the papers.

The news, their very make-up was the manner of London papers, though there did seem to be a degree of Americanization about them. And the headlines, such as: REVOLT SWEEPS FLORIDA, VASQUEZ OUT, or REPORT SECRET MANEUVERS ON MISSISSIPPI FRONTIER, and such like. And Europe was all garbled too. Everything was different, yet things were subtly as he had known them. Names were similar, sometime identical, as were fashions — these, however, never reached beyond similarity.

He looked into history. That, too, was markedly similar (and different). There were fundamentally the same migrations of people, the same general movements of nations, the same general wars. But their dates (relatively) were different.

There had been an American Revolution. It had broken out around 1778, the revolutionary forces had been commanded by a General from Virginia. But his name was Rawlins, not Washington. But the British had put down the rebels and executed their leaders. However, within a century economic forces had culminated in a dominionship for the colonies and from that time on they attained a degree of independence approaching, but not exactly like, the politico-economic and geographic independence of the United States he knew.

In 1800 an adventurer from Corsica had arisen in France and had gained power and set up an Empire. His name was Marinet and he looked a great deal like Napoleon. In many ways he was greater than Napoleon. But he ruled a longer time, and as one result the territory of Louisiana never left French control, becoming an Empire under a cousin

of Marinet whose descendants still reigned.

In 1862 a rebellion had broken out in the Southern Appalachian States concerning the British attitude toward slavery. This revolt had been subdued after a year of bitter warfare, under the direction of a General Garrand and a Dominion Premier named Linke.

In 1895, a man in Britton had invented a successful flying machine powered by a ponderous steam engine. A few such craft made small flights of commercial value until in 1902 an inventor in Delaware had built a craft powered by a gasoline engine.

In 1913 a great international conflict had arisen in Europe, centering about the conflicting economic interests of France and Prussia. Britton aided the Prussians against the French and Bavarians. Eventually all of Europe had been dragged in, but the war ended in a stalemate. In America the war was fought between the Louisiana-Mexico and California-Mormon - Federated Appalachian combines.

**C**ONGREVE could not get his mind straight. At times he had begun to think that perhaps he was, as the Consul suggested, a Mormon citizen, duped and hypnotized by a spy. But, at other times, he could think only of the United States.

Brigham had not yet successfully established his identity as a Mormon citizen, Congreve reflected. But then Brigham conjectured that Congreve might not be his name after all. That the astronaut could not see. Then came the day when Brigham announced that Mitchell had been tried by court-martial and found guilty. He would be shot, on the morrow, as a spy.

Congreve was shocked beyond measure. They could not do this to his friend and companion of the stars.

"Isn't there something you can do to stop them?" he asked Brigham anxiously.

"Nothing," was the reply. "He was a spy and as such shall be executed. You were lucky in that the British are friendly to our Republic; otherwise they'd have tried you as his accomplice even if you were deluded."

Congreve said nothing. He knew it was up to him to take action, but what action he knew not. Putting on his hat, he strode into the streets to walk and think it over.

He walked along rapidly, hands in his pocket, head down, his mind a mass of confused thoughts, his heart heavy. Mitchell had but one day more to live. Something must be done to prevent this murder, yet what? This world was all wrong; there was a United States; Mitchell was as innocent and confused as he.

Yet . . . was he? Congreve knew that, to a madman, his delusions seem real while the conceptions of those around appear hideously distorted, wrong, and insane. Had this world changed since their stay on Mercury? Or had he, Congreve, been temporarily unbalanced? If things were totally different, perhaps he might be right (though what the answer to the mystery in such a case might be baffled him). But—that damning similarity, that sameness which suggested that a few slight distortions had been effected in his concepts. Minute alterations which, expanded, resulted in vast differences . . . like the appalling difference the end-result of a mathematical problem can show if a single decimal point is shifted somewhere in the be-

ginning. Was all this a horrible quirk of his mind, induced by a spy? These strangely different, yet entirely human people around him: were they real, the normal?

And, supposing he were right, right through and through. What could he do about it? If by some freak of luck (for only the veriest luck could help now) Mitchell were rescued, where would they go?

He walked for an hour or two, caring not in what direction his feet took him. Walked on and on, realizing how infinitely absurd it was to conclude that this entire world was mad and he was sane—the only sane person therein. For, even if that were true . . . is not sanity the madness of the greatest number? Finally he stopped and took note of his surroundings.

It was a region of lower middle-class apartment houses, occasional brownstone stooped buildings, and a few stores. Walking along gazing abstractedly at the houses, he noticed a sign on a small plaque, set in the doorway of a three-story building. It read:—

CULT OF THE SACRED DUALITY  
NADIR KHAN, TEACHER  
SECOND FLOOR.

There was a diagram beneath it, a sort of holy symbol that caught Congreve's eye. The American walked up to it, studied the diagram. Something was stirring in the back of his mind. Then suddenly, with a gasp, he turned and dashed up the stairs.

**N**ADIR KHAN turned out to be tall turbaned East Indian and an entirely scholarly man. He greeted Congreve quietly, inquired of him what he wished.

Congreve hesitated a moment, then plunged into his story. Ending up

with the suggestion that had come to him upon noticing the Cult's name and symbol, he asked the Leader if he could shed any further enlightenment.

Khan's excitement showed that Congreve was on the trail of something. The Indian questioned him closely on the details of his flight through space, and of his earlier life. Then he explained what the Cult maintained and taught to those who would listen.

When Congreve left an hour later, he was accompanied to the door by the Indian.

"My devout converts number about thirty, and they will follow us to the end. I shall meet you tonight, my friend, at the appointed place." Congreve went back, a wild hope stirring in his heart and action tingling in his veins.

That night, after the consulate was asleep, Congreve slipped out of his room, down to the basement. Opening several large cases there, using keys he had taken from the consul's desk, he carried many large, long and slender implements outside to the automobile that had silently drawn up outside. Willing hands helped him in and stacked the things he had brought with him; the car drove off through the dark streets.

It stopped a half block from the entrance of the Dominion Prison where Mitchell was incarcerated. The three in the car stepped out, Nadir Kahn, Congreve, and another. Out of the shadows of the dark street stepped several other figures.

Two of the newcomers reached into the car, began to distribute the rifles Congreve had brought; the rest peeled off the light overcoats they had been wearing, revealing beneath the uniforms of the Royal American

Infantry, borrowed for the occasion.

Into the prison marched a file of soldiers, at their head a man in clerical garb, and a civilian. The warden was notified.

Congreve, who was in civilian clothes, stepped up to him.

"By orders of the Governor-General, the prisoner Mitchell is to be delivered to this firing squad for immediate execution."

The warden's eyes narrowed. "I understood he was to be shot in the morning." Congreve nodded. "Circumstances have arisen compelling the execution to take place immediately. There are matters of grave diplomatic consequence at stake. Here are your orders." He handed a neatly forged document to the warden.

The grey-haired man looked at it sleepily and nodded. "Send your men out into the prison yard. I'll take you and the minister to get the prisoner."

The short man was soundly asleep. Nadir Khan, who had told the warden that Mitchell was a convert of his, entered the cell and bent over the sleeper, awakening him.

"Keep quiet and don't recognize Congreve," he whispered. "We're friends; we are getting you out."

Mitchell blinked his eyes and sat up. He stared at them a moment, then got into his clothes while Nadir stood there mumbling religious chants in a dull monotone.

They filed out of the cell, police guards falling in by Mitchell's side, and the "spy" was led into the yard.

Congreve requested that the warden dismiss all police present, explaining that the thing must be done with as few observers as possible. In a moment there were none remaining in the dark courtyard save the Dualists, the two Americans, and the warden. The police official spoke up.

"I shall have to witness the execution. It's part of my duty."

"Of course," said Congreve quietly, shoving a revolver into the pit of the man's back. "Only you'll be dead before that happens."

The warden turned about; Nadir Khan whipped out his pistol and struck him with the butt. Catching the warden's body, he eased it gently to the ground. Two of the men bound and gagged the official.

**T**HE warden was left hidden in a dark corner of the yard. One of the pretended soldiers produced a uniform from his knapsack while others came forward and quickly they put together a rifle as Mitchell donned the clothes.

"What's it all about, and who are these guys?" whispered Mitchell as he slipped into uniform.

"Keep quiet," commanded Congreve. "I'll explain later."

"O.K.?" whispered the lanky astronaut. Mitchell nodded.

Congreve turned to the others. "Take aim!" he yelled in a voice that should carry to any possible person who might be within earshot, adding in a low tone "in the air." The firing squad obeyed.

"Fire!" A volley rang out in the night air. A second later, Congreve fired a pistol in the air, which would be taken as a "mercy shot."

"Fall in!" he commanded and they formed a line and marched out.

None of the police around the halls and main entrance of the prison noticed that there was one more soldier going out than had come in. The warden's absence they took to indicate that he was directing the removal of the body.

**O**NCE in the street, Congreve, Mitchell, and Nadir Khan hur-

ried to their car and leaped in. The others donned their overcoats and faded away as they had come. The car roared into action and shot off down the street.

They headed for Long Island and the Staunton Estate where the Cultist had determined the space-ship was still lying, unmolested.

Once through Brooklyn, they stepped on the gas, shaking off the motorcycle police who buzzed after them. After about an hour, they reached the estate recognizable as Staunton's. The place was dark, its owner asleep. The three emerged from the car, then climbed over the stone wall. Dully in the moonless night the great rocket loomed ahead.

It was as they had left it save that a police seal had been put on the door. "Apparently they were holding it, untouched, for expert investigators," whispered Congreve, twisting the wheel that released the catches on the safe-like door.

The police seal proved an obstacle for a moment. A strip of solder fastened over the crack of the door. Not wishing to waste time, Congreve shot it off. A moment later lights flashed on inside the mansion and a voice called out, "What's going on down there!" But they were already inside even as someone started to run down the lawn in the rocket's direction.

The three closed the steel doors, then Congreve squeezed his way down the narrow passage into the control room. He had, he noticed, lost considerable weight. Mitchell led the Cultist into the little sleeping chamber where they managed to brace themselves into hammocks.

Congreve, in the pilot's seat, flashed the dashboard lights, glanced hurriedly around to see if all were in order. Everything checked; he

leaned back and grasped the main switch.

"Contact!" he sang out. "Hold fast!"

**OUTSIDE** the servant who had run out on the lawn, and Staunton and several others who had gotten to the windows, held their breaths suddenly. They had noticed a flicker of light in one of the tiny portholes of the craft and guessed what would happen.

There was a terrific hissing as of a million snakes, a monstrous roar and a cataract of blue-green fire poured out of the exhaust pipes that formed the rear of the craft. Then the fire changed suddenly to vivid scarlet; there was a crashing noise as of myriad batteries of artillery in continuous action, and the great metal mass seemed to leap forwards.

It slid along the ground for a second, charring a wide swathe in the lawn, setting off brush fires. Then it shot forward, lifted off the ground, crashed through a clump of trees as if they were straws, and tore thunderously into the night sky.

**THE GREEN** globe of Earth lay far behind them. All about the rocket blazed innumerable stars, glistening jewels of lights in the abyss. Far off, at one side of the ship lay the sun, ninety-three million miles away.

Mitchell looked out the port in bewilderment.

"Where to now?" he asked. "We are still in Earth's orbit; where are we going?"

Nadir Khan looked up from the opposite window from which he had been devouring the spectacle of celestial space. He stared at Mitchell with a knowing smile. "You are going home again, my friends. Not to Mars; not to Venus; not to Mercury

or some other planet, but home whence you came."

Mitchell wrinkled his brow in puzzlement. "I don't understand what you're driving at. There is home; there is Earth behind us." He pointed back to the globe they were leaving.

"You do not comprehend the Sacred Duality," was the Cultist's answer. "Let us join your companion in the control room and it shall be made clear."

The two slipped through to the front chamber. Nadir Khan addressed the silent Congreve. "Your fellow space-man wished enlightenment, and now that we are far from the world behind us, it is time you tell him of our discovery."

Congreve nodded, thought awhile, then began:—

"The universe is a strange place, Mitchell. There are more incredible things, queer things, than ever any of us conceived." He stopped for a moment, then peered ahead as if searching for something.

"You recall our stay on Mercury. Our clocks were worthless, for, as soon as we had left Earth and the gravity ceased its pull, their springs threw them all out of gear, as we should have expected.

"On Mercury, we just couldn't compute time; the planet had neither day nor night and the motion of the stars was too slight to use as a criterion. We could only guess at time by the rising and setting of the planets.

"Earth is a vivid planet; it was close enough to give an unmistakable point. No one could fail to recognize it. When we landed on the little planet, Earth was a green spot high in the heavens. When we finished our many days of work and repair and exploration, we saw our

Earth again high in the heavens. Naturally, we assumed that a Mercurian year had passed; our little planet had revolved once about the sun, we thought, and, thus, we had passed about eighty or so Terrestrial days there. So we set flight again, headed for that green globe so clearly placed in the sky.

"When we reached it, it was Earth; it had Earth's moon, Earth's continents, and in all respects was the same planet that we had left. But we were wrong . . . as we soon found out, although we did not realize it then. It was not our Earth, Mitchell. We were not on Mercury for the duration of one of the little planet's years; we were there only for a Mercurian half-year."

Mitchell's bewilderment grew. "But we saw Earth high in the sky; had we stayed only about forty days, it would have been behind the sun and out of sight."

"Precisely," answered Congreve. "So it was. Our Earth was behind the sun and out of sight. There are two Earths, Mitchell. Our world is one of twins. When, untold ages ago, the planets were cast off the sun, there was a dual explosion when it came to our planet's turn. Two bodies were cast off, of equal size and mass, each composed of similar elements. Each body was hurled an equal distance from the sun so that they exactly counterbalanced.

"Thus have they been through the ages. When they finally settled and hardened, the solar gravitational complex forced each into the same orbit; each pursued the same course about the sun, separated only by 180 degrees of their circle. They follow eternally in each other's footsteps, Mitchell; the sun is always between them so that one cannot be seen from the other."



Mitchell broke in. "But what about the similarity in life development, the similarities to such amazing degrees as we noticed?"

"Similar planetary environment can account for the co-development of life itself on the twin worlds. The forces that exist on our Earth, which culminated in homo sapiens as dominant mammal, also exist there; thus we had man on both worlds." He turned to Nadir Khan. "I think," he said, "you can best take up the story from this point."

**N**ADIR KHAN smiled. "The elements are simply described. Languages, cultures, traditions, history, economic developments. They are all the end-results of environment. But we come upon another factor: the energy or force of what we term 'thought.' No one (at least no one in our Earth) has yet been able accurately to define thought; in fact, there have been entire explanatory theses worked out on the assumption that humans (and all life for that matter) do not 'think' at all . . . that it is entirely a complex of reflexes, conditioned by either physical or artificial factors.

"We of the Sacred Duality base our teachings and philosophy on the premise that 'thought' exists, that it is a physical, ultimately measurable force. Thus we postulate tremendous mental pressure from millions of human beings thinking and acting together, thought-strains that vibrate back along the orbit in which our planet travels to affect mentally the corresponding races of the other world. We conceive of this as a bi-directional phenomenon.

"In the beginnings of the human race on both worlds, there was little effect of one upon another. But the development of the two planets, be-

ing similar, forced the development of life along similar lines. Then, when 'thought' began to concentrate itself the two worlds affected each other mutually. That is why our histories are so similar.

"In your Earth, your philosophers guessed at this duality of planets, but you had imagined the opposite world to be one of Retribution, in which the socially reprehensible and socially commendable deeds of those departed would bring upon the individual a sort of just judgment. In our world, there are also such philosophies and theologies, but we of the Sacred Duality believe what I have just explained."

Congreve nodded. "In our Earth," he remarked to Mitchell, "the American colonies managed to free themselves from British rule; in Nadir's Earth the corresponding revolution failed. The same economic and historical forces brought about the action, but its precise manner—the degree—differed; it almost seems that only sheer luck prevented the same end as occurred in Nadir's Earth: failure. But, despite that failure, we see a similar end result. Under the United States of America of our Earth, or the Federated Appalachian States, we have the same type of society; the people have the same amount of liberty in the end."

**T**HE three voyagers of space sat in silence for awhile, their thoughts dwelling on the dual planets they called Earth, and on the histories of each. Then Congreve grasped Mitchell's arm and pointed to the forward window. Nadir Khan looked up and smiled.

A green star was coming into view, far away; just coming into view behind the flaming corona of the sun.