

# *Astounding* **SCIENCE FICTION**

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# SUBURBAN FRONTIERS

BY ROGER FLINT YOUNG

*The ideal form of insurance would, of course, insure you—not your heirs. They had ideal insurance—and a terrific political-military problem as a result!*

Illustrated by Hicks

George Linden stopped at the threshold of the office and looked across to the window where Badick was sitting. Badick looked up from the papers in his hand and started to smile. He saw Linden's face, then, and the smile never quite hit his lips.

The two men looked at each other, gravely, while Linden closed the door behind him, then went to his own desk in the corner. It was

Badick who looked away, finally, his eyes drifting toward the window, then, remembering, back to the papers in his hand.

There was something very close to hatred in Linden's young, almost handsome face. The little wrinkles at the corners of his mouth made his blue eyes look bitter and tired. He still watched Badick, waiting, wanting the older man to speak first.



Badick still stared at the papers in his hands, not looking up, swallowing continually, his large Adam's apple running up and down his throat.

Linden sighed, finally, put his feet up on the desk and let his body relax. He looked away from Badick; his eyes sought a spot on the ceiling, failed to find one, and concentrated on nothing at all.

"You should have gone," he said. "You should have had to take it. It should have been your job."

Badick cleared his throat before answering. "I know it, George. Was it—bad?"

"Bad? *Bad?*" Linden laughed shortly. "He blistered me. He burned me. He turned me inside out and put hot coals between my skin and my bones. They're still there."

"George, I'm sorry. One of us had to go and say no to him. You could keep on saying it because you didn't have the authority to say anything else."

Linden ignored him. "And that was just the start. He'll crucify us, Will. Crucify us. You and me—I've wondered how that kind, gentle old statesman could survive among politicians. Now I know. He's got the personality of Medusa, the tongue of a hundred ports, and he'll have the vengeance of a jealous god."

Badick nodded. "I knew something of that, George. That's why you had to be the one to face him. You did say nothing doing?"

Linden grunted. "What choice

did I have? The President of the United States turns on the heat, and I can't even give him an apology or a good reason. Just: 'No, Mr. President.' I won't go back, Will. You'll have to go next time."

Badick sighed and shrugged his resignation. "All right, George. We're unpatriotic, of course?"

"Naturally. Printably speaking, we are the very seeds of treason, the flowers that blossom in the hothouse of national disunity, and we are the core of defeat. And that's the least of our crimes. That we don't bow to President Martin S. Warner seems to be our major failing."

"I suppose so. Well, we've still got our business to run, George."

"For the moment, you mean. You don't think Basic Assurances is big enough to get away with this, Will. From what Warner said we're already on the skids."

Badick met his eyes, now, and looked at him steadily. "How?"

"How? Lord, Will, they'll fix us. There's a dozen ways they can do it. From what Warner said, though, they'll know all our secrets, and the government will take care of things without troubling Basic Assurances at all."

"They could, of course." Badick stabled at the intercom on his desk, waited until Miss Ayers answered. "Get Hammond in here." He looked at Linden again. "If they get the right men and follow us in theory, they could get there, all right."

Hammond came in the office, a

small, balding young man, very self-reliant, very assured. He nodded slightly to the two men and took a chair without speaking.

"How are your rumors today, Hammond?"

Hammond shrugged slightly and kept the grin off his face. "The president had George for tea at the White House. It is said that the president found George quite indigestible."

Linden looked at Hammond then and both men smiled slightly. "I'll bet," Linden suggested, "you could have told me that before it happened?"

"Almost," Hammond admitted.

Badick waved this aside. "We want to know if the government is making any effort to duplicate Basic Assurances' work."

Hammond seemed annoyed. "I send you both reports every day. That's what you hire me for. Then you don't read what I send. If you'd—"

"All right, we don't read them all the time. How will it boil down?"

"Violently. Warner's been on your tail for about three months. They've backtracked both of you since your school days. They know every move you've made since then, every book you've read, every movie you've seen, every date you've had, and about every other thought that's been in your minds."

"All right. That doesn't help them."

"No? They know how your minds work and what's interested you

through the years. They know what you wrote for college theses when you had your choice of material. They know where all your interests have been, and they have an idea of what they're after. They've checked every supply house and know every piece of equipment you've ever ordered. So they know what you used for material and tools. They've got men who can put those things together."

"It still won't get them there."

"It started them well enough. All that, and ICM."

"They found that?"

"Sure, Will. They found that two months ago. ICM made a special calculating machine for you a few years ago. So they decided they needed one, too."

Linden looked a little pleased. "That's all right. Even with the special ICM machine it took us two years to get the answer. They can't put things through it any faster than we did."

Badick was frowning. "How many did they order?"

"Indefinite. They've already got delivery on a hundred and some of them. They're taking them as fast as ICM can get them off the line."

Linden looked at Hammond suspiciously. "It took ICM six months to make one for us."

"Sure. Then ICM thought the design over, decided it was good for general mathematical usage, and got it ready for mass production. They were about to start their marketing

campaign when government agents came along."

Linden swore softly. "How long, Will?"

Badick shrugged. "Depends on how well they know what they're doing. If they break the steps up properly between machines they can get the answer in . . . if they're lucky, say—"

"They were lucky," Hammond broke in. He was very casual, as though it didn't matter, as though he didn't know it were a bombshell. "They got the answer three weeks ago. They built an experimental portal and tried it out yesterday."

There was silence for a few minutes. Linden and Badick waited for Hammond to speak. Hammond brought out a pair of nail clippers, worked on his nails, then trimmed the wick of his cigarette lighter.

"All right, what happened?"

Hammond smiled lightly, then. "I'm still waiting for the report."

Linden grunted. Hammond stood up. "I'll let you know as soon as I find out."

Both men nodded, but neither spoke. Hammond reached the door, then turned back.

"There's going to be a war." He wasn't looking at either of the other men.

"Yes," Badick said, admitting it. "Yes, there's going to be a war."

Hammond hesitated before going on, shifting uncomfortably. "There'll be some atomic bombing, naturally."

"Naturally." It was Badick again.

"Basic Assurances could get the ones that land in this country, and— Well, it'd save a lot of lives, and property. It might be the balance in the war."

"Yes."

"Well—" Hammond looked at the two men, from one to the other, then down at the doorknob. "I guess it isn't my job to tell people things they already know."

"I guess not."

Hammond nodded. "That's the way I figure it. I'll let you know." He closed the door gently behind him.

"Well?"

Badick smiled. "I don't know of anything to say."

"No . . . I'm going to look around."

Badick didn't answer. Linden got up from his desk, then turned back and shuffled through some papers, half-wondering if there were anything that needed doing. He dropped them back to the desk, and left the office.

Jane was in the outer office, talking to Miss Ayres. She didn't see him, for the moment, and Linden stood still, watching her. As always, the first glance at her brought him the *feel* that was in the very sight of her: That intense look of the very goodness of life. Then, as always, the shocking drop inside him at the remembrance of her illness, already beginning to take the young life away from her.

Jane looked up, smiling, when she

heard Linden, went to him swiftly. She was still smiling when she kissed him, and her soft eyes looked over his shoulder into some far distance.

Linden held her away to get a good look at her. He dabbed at the corners of her eyes where the tear-drops were.

"How is it, Jane?"

"Good, darling. Good."

"What do you mean?"

The smile was fixed on her face now, looking a bit strained. "No worse, George. Not that they can tell. So that means it's good."

Linden nodded and tried to smile. "All right, Jane. Let's sit down some place and talk."

"No. I'm always resting. I'd rather walk."

"I was just going downstairs to look things over. Want to come with me?"

"Yes." She took his arm, steered him away from the elevator, toward the stairs. "I said walk."

The stairs brought them out on the first floor, behind the reception room. Linden stopped for a moment, looking at the people waiting for appointments.

"Counting the house, George?"

He nodded. "Business is getting good, all right. Every satisfied customer—client, rather—means a dozen more customers."

"Clients."

"Yes, clients." They went down the long hall behind the reception room, stopped before one of the compartments. Linden held the

curtain aside, for Jane. She looked in first.

"There's someone in there."

"Yes." Linden motioned her in.

The man in the chair didn't see them. His eyes were opened wide, staring at the wall where the wheel turned steadily. Jane watched the wheel for a moment. It was fascinating, the way the color bands first caught the eyes, then, as they revolved, made the eyes follow them to the center of the wheel where the small bright light shone so brightly. It hurt the eyes, a little, it was so bright, so bright, and she never wanted to look at anything else again, just watched the little bright—

She couldn't see it any more. Jane became aware that someone was shaking her. She couldn't see anything.

"Jane!" Linden was beside her, still shaking her gently, one hand in front of her eyes. "Jane! . . . That's better." She heard him laugh. Then she was wide awake again, looking toward him. He took his hand from before her eyes.

"I'm sorry, George. I know better, of course. But I just looked at the wheel and it got me, before—"

"Easy!"

"What?"

"You were starting to look at it again."

"All right. I'll be careful."

She kept her eyes away from the wheel, looked back at the man in the chair. He was well past middle age, paunchy, well-dressed. He reminded

her a little of a frog, the way his eyes were almost popping while he stared at the wheel, and the way the lines were almost gone out of his face, his face smoothed out and softened because of his drooping lower jaw.

She could hear the loud-speaker in the wall now.

"—need anyone. Any time you need anyone. Need anyone. Whenever someone can help you. If you're in pain. In pain. Accident and no help around. Whenever you need anyone. Need anyone. Whenever—"

She listened to the voice, over and over, and knew it was only a recording and couldn't get her unless she looked at the wheel.

"—subconscious inside you must cause automatic reaction. Your wristband will give you protection. Your wristband can save you. Whenever—"

Jane looked down at the plain metal band that circled her own wrist. At the stud that need only be pressed— There were some things that Basic Assurances couldn't help, no matter how hard the stud was pressed. Sometimes you could need help and—

She shook her head. This wasn't helping. Jane turned as the curtain moved, watched the red-haired young girl in white come in, cross briskly to the wall and stop the wheel. She realized the voice from the speaker had stopped.

The man in the chair was clearing his throat, blinking his eyes, and already looking sheepish, apologetic.

"Must have fallen asleep. I was watching that confounded wheel, and—"

He stopped, uncertain of what *had* happened. The nurse smiled at him.

"You were meant to fall asleep, Mr. Bronson. While you were asleep you were given all the information you'll require to operate the wristband. Now if you'll—"

Mr. Bronson was out of the cubicle, on his way to Band-fitting and Consignment Accounting when the girl in white brought another man in, seated him in the same chair, and started the wheel again.

They stood in the hall and watched the steady flow of clients in and out of the compartments, wondering going in, bewildered coming out. Only a few of the clients were women.

Jane giggled suddenly, turned to Linden. "It seems so silly. They come here and pay you ten percent of their entire worth as a retainer, and all you do is confuse them."

"It straightens out, by the time we release them. Remember when you went through? We've got the system a lot better now."

"I remember. I was confused all the way through, and getting rather angry. Then, after the lecture at the end, I began to feel all right. Safe and secure in the motherly arms of Basic Assurances."

Linden nodded, not really listening. "If we could get them to come during the night, we wouldn't have so much of a problem. We could go on a twenty-four hour shift here. The way business is coming in now

we'll have to open another place. And now isn't the time to expand."

"Why not? With all this business coming in—"

Linden started to tell her about his trip to Washington, didn't. "We're not making any money. Will keeps putting everything he can into trade material. We just keep enough out to take care of overhead."

"George—I want to go through the portal with you sometime."

"No— Well, I don't see why not, at that. I'm going through later today. Maybe—"

"I'm sure it'll be all right with Will."

Will nodded. "No reason why Jane can't. Are you sure you want to take her with you this time, though?"

"Why not?"

"Hm-m-m. No reason, I guess. You're going to have to tell Phlan what President Warner said."

"What?"

"We have to. Warner didn't know it, of course, but his offer wasn't to us, really. Not to Basic Assurances. It was to the Phlen."

Linden looked at his friend closely. "It's all right to lean over backwards, Will. You're built that way. But now you're falling over backwards."

Badick smiled. "If you can, put it so Phlan will reject the idea. If he doesn't, we'll have to talk him out of it. Try to make him see the Phlen would be cat's-paws and the

chestnuts would be very hot ones."

"All right, Will. I know what a cat's-paw is, I guess."

"You should. You're beginning to look like one."

"Which I should."

The big bookcase in the wall of the office swung back, revealing the silver gridlike doorway built into the wall. Linden took Jane's arm. She held back, suddenly.

"This is— I always thought it was something like a radio. Electronics and all, I mean."

Badick nodded. "This is just the portal end of it. The next two offices were ripped out to make room for the electronics that drive it. If it's tubes you want, there's over six thousand of them just in the portal circuit. Happy?"

"Hm-m-m. Let's go?"

Linden hung back then. "You're sure you feel up to it, Jane?"

"Of course. Let's go."

They stepped into the grid doorway. Linden was prepared for, hardly felt, the inner wrench as they went through. He remembered it, what it was like the first few times, when he realized Jane was staggering under the shock.

"He couldn't reach her, quite. She was beside him, untouchable, a vague outline in the rose-haze beyond the portal.

"I'm all right now." He knew she had spoken the words, though he'd heard nothing, could not make out her lips, but felt the words in his mind.

"It can't hurt you, darling. I



can't help you now, though. You'll have to shift for yourself. We can't touch each other, or anything."

"I'm all right." The words seemed to come from a long way off, then strengthened. "You're not talking to me. You're thinking at me. That's what I'm doing now. Can you . . . hear me?"

"Yes. Yes, Jane."

"It's easier to think words than try to talk them. This isn't the other . . . this isn't where the Phlen live, is it?"

"No. This is Inbetween. This is where we meet. Phlan, the permanent representative of the Phlen, lives here."

"Is that his name?"

"It's just what we call him. Names—they don't mean much. Here he comes."

Linden first, then Jane, felt the presence of another, drawing closer to them. Then it was beside them, and Jane could see only a bulge in the rosy haze where she knew Phlan must be.

Gradually she became better aware of him, though not with her eyes. She became aware of what he *should* look like, if she could see him.

He was man-sized, but there any resemblance to humanity ended. He was leathery, rubbery, from the dome of his head— She felt an inner gasp as she got a better conception of what Phlan was like. He was built like a cone, with the top rounded off, and bulged into what

must be a head. A head with a mouth, but without hair or eyes or nose or ears. His "body" seemed smooth and unbroken except for the four arms that came out of it, on the upper part not far from the head. Apparently he was without feet.

She felt the thought: "Linden, I hope you have come with a promise of more copper. We must have more lattices."

"No, Phlan. There will be copper, though, in a few weeks."

Phlan's returning thought was depressive. "A few weeks to your people. That is many generations to us. Many generations."

"I'm sorry, Phlan. You must also understand that many generations to you are but a few weeks to us. That we must have time to get the copper and have it made into the proper strips, and then delivered."

"Why did you come?"

Jane thought she caught a flash of resentment in Linden's mind, one that was quickly smothered.

"I have an offer from our government, Phlan. We are faced with a war in which there will be atomic projectiles and bombs. I think you understand?"

"I understand the formulation, yes."

"We face the threat of having many of those atomic bombs dropped on our cities. Our government would like you to handle them."

"Your government is now aware of our existence?"

"The offer was made to Basic As-

surances, Phlan," Linden answered.

"How much copper would there be?"

Linden hesitated. "All you can use, almost. More than you've ever had from Basic Assurances. Probably more than you could ever get from us."

"We will accept."

"No, Phlan. You don't realize what it means. The bombs would go off in your world. Probably as soon as you could grapple them through. It would mean the lives of the grappling crew, at least."

"Six Phlen. The price would be low. We could evacuate any other Phlen from the vicinity before we brought the bombs through."

"Yes. Basic Assurances is against a nation solving its war troubles by bringing a neutral world into the conflict. There is no reason the Phlen should suffer for our mistakes."

"The suffering would be light, Linden, compared to what our gains in copper would be. How long will it be before the first bombs would have to be grappled?"

"In our time? Perhaps weeks, or months, or even years. The war might start anytime, or hold off."

"Then we would like the same form of payment as Basic Assurances uses."

"I don't— I see. The United States would pay a retainer to you, in copper, for which you would agree to take care of the bombs as they come?"

"Yes. The longer before the



bombs come, the more copper we would get."

"I suppose so. I can say nothing as I'll have to talk to Badick."

Jane realized that Phlan was leaving them, drifting off into the haze without effort.

"Is that all?"

"For the moment. Let's go back— No, don't try to walk. Just think of the portal and let yourself drift to it."

Badick closed the bookcase behind them.

"Phlan wants to do it," Linden told him. "I didn't argue."

"We'll see. I want to hear from Hammond before I do anything."

"Yes. Jane!" Linden took her by the arm and helped her to a chair.

"All right, now, George. Just felt a little rocky. There's no time there, is there?"

"Inbetween? No. That's what we call it, by the way: Inbetween."

"That's cute."

"We didn't mean for it to be. We've just never thought of any other name."

"There's time, all right, Jane," Badick assured her. "But it's a lot different from ours, or from the Phlen's. It's a time outside of time. Phlan has been there for a great many of his generations, staying there just to contact us. Messengers come from his world, bringing him the latest news."

Jane shuddered. "It must be lonely, by himself there. His wife,

children, relatives— He would have all of those?"

"Yes. But if someone didn't stay there it would mean we would have to contact a new generation every time we talked to them. Phlan acts as co-ordinator, never aging in Inbetween."

The telephone buzzed shortly. Badick picked it up, listened for a moment, then put the instrument down.

"Hammond. The government experimental portal gave them some trouble."

"How?"

"They sent six men through. None came back. Then while they were fussing around with it, the portal disappeared on them."

"Ungh!"

Jane looked at the two men in perplexity.

"What does that mean?"

"The six men went through the portal to the Phlen dimension. Apparently the government missed the idea of Inbetween. The Phlen got the six men as they came through, then grappled the portal through. It wouldn't have occurred to them to have it anchored."

"Got them? But what would they do?"

"Hold them for knowledge. When we first discovered the Phlen they were a semicivilized race. They had the capacity, but not the actual civilization."

"But Phlan seemed—"

"Well, they had more than the capacity, actually, but they didn't

have the world a civilization could exist on readily. Their world isn't like ours. It's like Inbetween."

"You mean they have to live in *that* all the time?"

"It's worse. Inbetween is more like our world, in some ways, than it is the Phlen-world. Nothing is solid, everything is mist and haze, and their 'farm-lands' must be followed by the farmers, lest they drift away from them entirely."

"Nothing is solid? Nothing?"

"Not as we understand it. Our experiments show us that the haze and mist of their world can be used to make anything that we make in our own world. However, the Phlen still lack the understanding to handle their material."

"No wonder they have difficulties in setting up a civilization!"

"Yes. We contacted them, as I said. When we went through the first time, we weren't expecting anything, really, and we found the Phlen, found we could communicate with them.

"They needed our help in establishing a civilization. By experiment we found that copper lattices could be made that would give them solid bases on which to center their communities.

"We couldn't finance the copper they needed. We didn't think our own world was ready for contact with them. So we took advantage of the difference in time rates. You know about that."

"A little. Basic Assurances supplies a client with a wristband and

hypnotic instructions. If he's ever in trouble, needs help, he presses the stud. I suppose the Phlen come then."

"Yes. The wristband sends a tone to listeners on the Phlen-world. They can use the tone for location. They find the place in their own world corresponding to the clients' position in this. Then they break through with the grapplers we've supplied to them."

"But how can they help? If they're only partly civilized, what can they do?"

"We've trained many Phlen as instructors, and they've trained squads. If a client on a hunting trip gets acute appendicitis, and there's no doctor, he presses the stud on his wristband.

"It's only a fraction of a second to him before help gets there. Perhaps a month or more to a squad of Phlens. They don't know what the trouble is, of course, and have to be prepared for any emergency.

"The client never knows just what happens. If it's something like appendicitis, the grapplers give him an anaesthetic, pull him through Inbetween, operate, let him recuperate under hypnosis they can put him in with their sense of perception. Then they put him back where he was.

"The client wakes up a few seconds, Earth-time, after he's touched the stud on the wristband. He's well, his appendix is gone, and he's got the scar to show for it.

"The grappling squad has noted

the number of the wristband, and we get that, through Phlan, with the information. We send the client the bill for services rendered."

Jane nodded. "I've heard of some of those seeming miracles. But the Phlen can't see?"

"They can see almost as well as we can, though in a somewhat different way. They don't have our eyes, but they have their perception."

"I felt as though I had a perception sense in Inbetween. The Phlen can do anything with the grapplers, then?"

"Almost. If your car is plunging over a cliff, press your stud. Before you hit a Phlen squad will grapple it back to the road. Accidents, operations, fires, drownings—Basic Assurances has saved clients from every possible misfortune, and the client never knows what's going on."

Jane shook her head. "There's so much I don't understand. How can they see through into this world to know what to do?"

"We built scanners that look through— We probably could make ones that would see from our world into theirs, but we've never had need for them."

"And your only payment to them is in copper strips?"

"Almost. That's what they need most, to give them a foundation for a city civilization. We could never supply them with food, of course. They can eat some of our foods, but we'd never be able to grow things as fast as they can eat them."

"But, it doesn't seem right. Using them for service like that. If they want copper, it should be traded to them, as equals."

"That could be done, if they had something to offer in trade besides service—and if the world was ready to accept them. As it is, bringing the Phlen to public recognition now would mean opening new frontiers for the nations of this world to fight over."

"Yes, I can see that."

The phone buzzed. Linden reached for it, held it to his ear for a moment, then put it down.

"Hammond again. How does he do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get the information he does. As soon as he does. He says the Berendese Government military is confident they have a perfect defense against the atom bomb."

Badick looked at his watch. "It can't be the same. It hasn't been long enough since you talked to Phlan. He couldn't have—"

"No, not since then. It means he knew about it before I went to him."

"That's likely. They've been using scanners for spying, of course. It would have to be out of Inbetween, though."

"No. Not if they've got any sort of recording device. Lucky we're protected here. I guess this is the hatching of the egg, all right."

Jane looked at the two men, puzzled.

"Egg?"

"We knew we were heading for trouble sooner or later. The Phlen have too many ideas, and we're moving too slowly for them. They're ambitious now, want their civilization, and they don't want it to come through Basic Assurances. They're getting greedy, want all they can get."

"There'll be trouble, then?"

Badick spread his palms. "There shouldn't have been any way they could make it. We tried to take precautions. We can shut off the grappers. But they've got the government portal. They can go on from there without us."

"If they figure out how to power their grappers from the portal, there isn't much we can do."

"We'll be at their mercy?"

"Not completely. We've taken precautions we never thought we'd really need. But they can make it rough for us."

"Fight us? Kill us?"

"They could do that. We wouldn't have much to fight back with. We could invade them but we couldn't supply the invading army. The logistics would be impossible. We couldn't make supplies as fast as they would be used. We couldn't replace the men as fast they would be put out of action just from old age. Unless we could conquer immediately, of course, and there wouldn't be much hope for that. We'd be fighting in a world too alien, too little understood. But their weapon will be blackmail."

Linden faced Phlan through the rosy haze of Inbetween.

"That has to be our plan," Phlan admitted. "Basic Assurances can't give us what we need. We contacted the Berendese Government and they promised us a copper re-tainer. We'll get the same from your government. And others."

"That will be just the beginning of it, won't it?"

"Yes. When they're accustomed to paying, we'll ask more from them. Of course, now that we have the portal, it will be easy to keep the countries stirred up, on the verge of war. It isn't a policy with which I am in sympathy, but our own cause must be considered first. Military secrets developed by one country will be sold to another. For copper. Later on, for other supplies. For technicians to train our people in what they must know."

"You'll force us to fight back."

"No, there will be no war between us. Your methods developed for Basic Assurances will give us too much power."

"You'll bleed us to death," Linden warned. "We haven't the population to supply yours with all its needs. Mass production will mean nothing against the terrible consumption rate of your people."

"Not bleed you, Linden. We'll milk you. It will all work out quite well."

"We'll run from you, Phlan. We won't be Earth-bound much longer. If we have to take all of our people to the other planets to get away from

you, we'll do that. You won't be able to stop us."

"We wouldn't try to stop you, Linden. You'll find the new relations will be almost on the same basis as with Basic Assurances. We will provide a service to your people, and you will give us what we need. Our wisest leaders have discussed it thoroughly and found it morally right."

Linden saw no hope there. They would be able to justify all they did, to themselves. If they were in need, they would create a situation in which they could be of service.

"You won't try to stop us from going to the planets? Not even if we all go?"

"No, not even if you all could go. Not even if it meant your getting away from us entirely. But it's no difference, actually, to us, whether you live on this island or another."

"It clicked, then," Linden told Badick. "I always wondered what Phlan meant by referring to Earth and other planets as islands. That's all they are to the Phlen, islands set down in the midst of their world. Their world must take in all the solar system—and perhaps beyond—dotted with islands of another dimension that are the planets."

Badick nodded. "That's what I've suspected. They don't live on a space that's comparable to Earth's position. Their world lies between the planets. If we could lay copper lattice tracks in their world, we could walk from here to Venus."

"Fort said something like that."

Linden frowned, reached for "The Book of the Damned." He thumbed pages for a minute. "If one could break away from the traditions of the geographers, one might walk and walk, and come to Mars, and then find Mars continuous with Jupiter?"

Badick smiled grimly. "I don't think he was talking about the same thing. Though the Phlen-world would explain a lot of the things that puzzled Fort. However, walking wouldn't be required, of course, nor even copper lattice. Remember how it was when we were in the Phlen-world? You just wished to move, and you did move."

"Yes. They've got us. Right where we put ourselves, too. Where's Jane?"

"She left while you were going into the portal. She was rather tired."

"I know." Linden picked up the telephone, dialed a number. "Dr. Stevens, please . . . Steve, this is George Linden . . . Fine . . . How's Jane doing . . . No, Steve, don't give it to me like that . . . Tell me . . . Oh! . . . Yes . . . All right, Steve. Thanks." He dropped the phone back to its cradle. He looked older and tired.

"What did Steve say, George?"

"Same thing. She's getting worse and there's nothing to do. Have you checked Reynolds lately?"

"Yes. This morning. He came to me, as a matter of fact. The ICM came up with an answer."

"The answer." Hope showed now in Linden's face.

"An answer. He had a complete set of equations, and I sent them on to Harkness for analysis."

"But what did they mean?"

Badick shrugged. "Not too much, to me. My mathematics doesn't go far enough. I gathered that if there is an Earthtime as we know it, and if there is a Phlen-world-time, there should be a Minor."

"That's all we need then. The equations should show us how to get there."

Badick smiled ruefully. "Yes, they should. But that's assuming that the other two factors exist in actuality."

"You know they do!"

"Yes, we *know* they do. If the mathematics bears us out, it will be a cinch."

Linden rubbed his knuckles against the side of his head. "Ungh! We know that you and I exist. We assume that Basic Assurances exists. If we can prove that Basic Assurances doesn't exist, then you and I don't exist. Is that the same reasoning?"

"No, but it's the same line. We'll have to wait and see what Harkness says."

"Is he pushing it?"

"Sure. He promised a reply this afternoon."

"O.K. I'll sit and twiddle my thumbs."

"No. You'll set up a crew to work Basic Assurances from the fringes of the Phlen-world and In-between. Here's the modulation

pattern Harkness worked out for the squad cars. You know what it means; the men won't actually be either in Inbetween or Phlen-world. Impress it on them that they've got to keep the modulators going at all times except when they're grappling.

"Get work going, then shut off the Phlen grappers."

"All right, Will."

"We're going to have to put out a lot of cash to start operating, but we'll make some money around here for a change. This'll be the first time everything hasn't been going to the Phlen."

"And Phlan?"

"Chop him off. There's nothing else we can do. We have to come first, now."

"About time."

"Maybe. Reynolds has all the tab cards. He ought to be able to sort them and run them off in an hour. Take this list of squad components and have him sort them, too. Better get several of the girls to help telephoning men as soon as Reynolds can get the list."

"Sure."

Linden was back at five. He took one look at Badick.

"You've been up to something."

"Lots of things. Harkness came by. Minor exists, all right. He's standing over a couple of technicians converting the standby portal."

Linden sat down, feeling suddenly limp and tired.

"It'll work, then?"

"Harkness isn't saying that. He hardly spoke to me; you know how he is. The way he acted, I think he's pretty sure it will do what we want."

"That's a relief. What else? You've got something inside."

"Yes. But how did you make out?"

"First squad went through. I sent Hammond with them through the big portal. They've got everything from sewing kits to fire-fighting equipment. Hammond can get them used to things. The extra men I sent with them can be seeded into the other squads as they form."

"All right. Better cut the grapplers."

"I did. The Phlen can't get through without the government portal."

"Good. They've got some other worries from now on."

"You did it, then?"

"Yes. I keep telling myself I didn't have any choice. I still feel like a mass executioner."

"It might not work." Linden looked at Badick, looked away quickly at the sight of the now gray face.

"I don't know." His voice was weary and there was the sound of defeat in it. "I don't know. A little, I hope it won't work. Mostly, I hope it will. We've got to win, and win fast."

"Yes. It should work. I think your reasoning was good."

It was a moment before Badick said anything. "It was your idea as much as mine."

"No it wasn't, Will. Remember—" Linden stopped, looked at Badick. "I see. Someone will get the credit."

"It isn't that, George."

"The devil it isn't. You're thinking of giving me the credit. Same old cat's-paw."

"I don't want the credit."

"Do you think I do? There have been worse wanton destroyers in history than the Vandals, but they got stuck with the name. Governor Gerry gave his name to gerrymander. Captain Boycott gave his name to a cause. Thomas Bowdler contributed to bowdlerize. Charles Lynch and the lynch law. Quisling and—"

"All right, George."

"All right, nothing. Mankind will have other examples of this in the next thousand and ten thousand years. I don't want lindenize to become part of the language; a word synonymous with destruction of intelligent races by using inferior races as—"

"I know. Cat's-paws."

"Yes. Badickize them if you wish, but leave me out of it."

"All right, George. Sooner or later it will come out. We'll have to think of something before then."

"We'll think of something. I'm going over to the standby portal. Coming?"

"No. I've had enough for the day. I'm going home."

"Right."

It was two in the morning before

the last wire was changed the last new tube socket in place.

Harkness wiped more oil into his face, grinned at Linden.

"All set. We'll try it tomorrow."

"Hey! What's wrong with now?"

"Who's going in? I'm not. I can't ask these men"—he waved at the technicians—"to."

"I'm going. You knew that."

Harkness grinned again. "Go to it, Son. She's all yours."

"It'll work?"

"Should. If you bang your head on the wall, then the portal isn't working."

"I'll go slow."

Linden started through, walking slowly, keeping his eyes on the plaster wall behind the portal. If it worked, he'd never reach the wall.

He felt the wrench, sharper than when he went through the portal to Inbetween. He felt the floor give way beneath him, the jar, and the buckling of the knees as he dropped several feet to solid footing once more.

He looked ahead of him. Here was no mist of Inbetween or Phlen-world. This was much like the Earth he knew. The sky was blue above him, the grass green beneath his feet, and trees—

He felt the rough pull on his shoulder, started to turn. Then he realized he was caught tight in a harness. He struggled against it, briefly, then felt himself pulled up.

There was a wrench, then he was pulled again. He stumbled back.





Someone caught and steadied him, turned him around and started removing the harness.

Harkness. Linden blinked, looked around the room. The technicians were gone. He saw Badick close to him, Hammond further away, and Reynolds in the background holding a handful of the inevitable tab cards.

"I was coming back, boys, really I was. What's the idea?"

"How long were you there, George." Harkness had the harness off him, was leaning forward eagerly. "How long did it seem?"

"I just got there. Three or four seconds, perhaps. Five at the most. Why?"

Harkness grinned happily. "It took us a week to get you out of there. It was my fault. I just stood there for a while, like a fool, waiting for you to come back. Then I realized that if the portal had put you in Minor we'd have to pull you out, or wait the rest of our lives while you turned around to start back."

"A week— It seemed just those few seconds."

"We had to build a scanner to locate you, then a grappler and a harness to get at you. Then we had a tough time fishing. The grappler slowed down to nothing once it hit Minor time. We had to maneuver the harness for three days to slip it over you. Now I know what a Basic Assurances' rescue squad goes through."

"The harness came so fast I couldn't fight it."

"All right. You've got your Minor."

Linden was just realizing it. He turned to Hammond. "Get hold of Jane, and have her come down."

Hammond winked. "She's on her way, George."

"Good. We'll shove her in first. Then others. I've got the plans worked out. I can go in when she does and—"

"No, George."

Linden swung toward Badick. "What do you mean?"

"No one goes in like that. No one except people like Jane and those who'll be needed to help them."

Linden stared at Badick, not saying anything.

"Sorry, George. But think it over. You go in because you want to be with Jane. Then her mother and father want to be near her. Maybe her sister. Then maybe her sister's boy friend. Then maybe his family. It'll be that way with everybody. Send one person like Jane in and a dozen perfectly well people will drag along."

"All right. The land can support them. It's like Earth, and—"

"We saw it through the scanner. It looks better than Earth. If everyone goes there, where will the advantage be?"

"We have to make full use of the time differences. Jane, and others that need medical attention beyond present knowledge, can go there. They'll be almost in suspended animation, as far as Earth is concerned."

On Earth we'll go about our daily tasks. Gradually, research will produce knowledge that will help those in Minor."

"But— You're right, of course. But I can die of old age while Jane is spending a short while, to her, in Minor."

"Yes— So you'll push research that will cure her, won't you?"

"More than that. I'll start a research center in Phlen-world. A few days, weeks, Earth time, and—" Linden stopped abruptly, and then looked at Badick questioningly.

Badick nodded. "Hammond knows of a few things that have happened while you were in Minor. Phlan went through to Washington. Right through the barrier into Warner's office. Just about scared the old boy to death.

"Phlan pulled him into Inbetween and talked turkey. Warner bought in, but hasn't released any information. Apparently he's going to get the money out of some special appropriation . . . Hammond says our Chief Executive got a really nasty shock out of Phlan."

Linden grinned. "O.K. Maybe I'm even with him. The things I had to sit and take from the old—Jane!" He hurried forward and took her hand as she came in the door.

"Jane, I want to put you through this portal for a few minutes. Other people will be along pretty soon to keep you company. They'll bring food and supplies—"

"But, George . . . George!"

Linden kissed her briefly on the cheek, steered her through the portal, watched her disappear.

"I forgot to warn her about the drop. Well, it isn't bad. We can take a month before sending what I promised, and she'll still be standing there, blinking her eyes."

Badick caught his eye, motioned with his head.

The two men left the room together, heading for their office.

"How is it?"

"Good, George. Basic Assurances is rolling smoothly. We've started expanding, and I'm considering some branch offices. I'm hiring as fast as I can find suitable people."

"All right. How about the Phlen?"

"We haven't been able to get hold of Phlan. We developed some scanners, but they're useless against the time-rate. All we get is mist. I think Phlan is some place in Inbetween. You could probably reach him."

"I'll try."

They reached the office, went in and swung the bookcase back.

Linden peered through the rose-mist, searching, not remembering. Then he closed his eyes, letting his sense of perception reach out, sharpen, call through the haze.

He became aware of Phlan's approach and thought it was with more haste than was usual.

"Linden. Why did you come?"

"To exchange thoughts."

"It is well, Linden. I have been wishing for you."

"I am here."

"We have decided to send a colony to your world, Linden, to live and learn and observe."

Linden hesitated before commenting. "It will not be comfortable in our world. The sense of perception is almost useless. You will not be able to move about except with the use of attachments to your body."

"Still, we wish it."

Linden caught the underlying urgency in the thought that Phlan tried to keep casual.

"How many are there in this colony, Phlan?"

"About two thousand."

"Where are they?"

Linden felt that Phlan tried to stop the thought, but it was too late. "Here . . . In Inbetween."

"So— We refuse permission."

"Linden! Remember, we can make things severe for your people."

"No. You are not asking for a colony, Phlan. You seek sanctuary."

It was long before Phlan answered. "Yes, Linden, we beg sanctuary."

Linden felt sympathy. "This two thousand—"

"There are no other Phlen left."

"I'm sorry, Phlan. But your threat was too great. You forced us to it."

"I understand, now . . . Linden, we had no choice against them. At first we ignored the few we perceived. They multiplied with amaz-

ing rapidity, attacked our farms, took our food so that our peoples starved.

"At first they destroyed. Then they seemed to learn. There were mutations. They developed an alert, savage intelligence. They took over our farms, developed them, fought off our counterattacks. They used their teeth and claws against us, then learned to fashion weapons that killed at a distance. They slaughtered us even for food.

"They became much like you humans, Linden, in the way they built and fought and thought."

"We did not expect them to develop intelligence, Phlan, but we thought they would cause a diversion."

"They are horrors. They have learned to fashion the mist-material. Whatever you can make on your world, Linden, I think they can make on Phlen-world. They were your rats, of course?"

"Yes. A cunning, destructive rodent on our world. A conqueror on yours. Stay here, Phlan, and I will talk to Badick."

"Warner made the deal with them, Badick. Let him supply the colony with land and food, and figure out what to do with them. We can make a guarantee on atomic warfare. We can make projectors to hurl bombs into Phlen-world."

Badick shook his head. "I've been dodging it, George. Basic Assurances will give basic assurance from now on. We'll guarantee peace-on-earth. You can start planning

your research center on Phlen-world."

"Yeah? All right, I'll get the big game hunters."

"Who?"

"The big game hunters to kill the tigers."

"What tigers?"

"The ones who kill the wolves who kill the dogs who kill the cats who kill the rats we sent against the Phlen."

Badick shook his head, then laughed.

"We won't be needing all of that,

George. Phlan told you those rats had developed intelligence, a civilization not unlike Man's. They've mutated, George, remember that."

"Yes. But they're still savage, still wanting to fight and kill. You'd deal with them? With rats?"

"Of course. We'll give them the benefits of a more advanced civilization, George, and let them work out their own destiny. All the benefits: Gunpowder and dope and atomic warfare and bacteria and poison gas. A few of our weeks, and—"

George nodded.

THE END