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VOL. 10

OCTOBER, 1948

No. 1

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*Book-Length Novel*

- The Lion's Way** C. T. Stoneham 10  
Betrayed by Man, hunted by his kind, Kaspas of the Lions went for a last grim rendezvous with death—that the Law of the Jungle might live on!

*Short Stories*

- The Women** Ray Bradbury 104  
Had she heard the siren sea calling death to her doomed love? Surely not here on a modern beach . . . but a soul-chilling warning told her he had heard it too. . . .
- The Human Angle** William Tenn 112  
What greater folly than to seek out the human angle in a thing that belongs not to humanity?
- That Low** Theodore Sturgeon 118  
Crimly, alone, he fought his spectral battle—the man who could not die . . . yet never quite succeeded in living. . . .
- The Readers' Viewpoint** 6
- In the Next Issue** 29
- The Lawrence Portfolio** 111
- Masters of Fantasy** Neil Austin 117  
Edgar Rice Burroughs

Cover by Lawrence. Inside illustrations by Finlay, Lawrence and Clyne.

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Published bi-monthly by All-Fiction Field, Inc., a subsidiary of Popular Publications, Inc., at 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter April 24, 1946, at the Post Office at Chicago, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1948, by All-Fiction Field, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25c. Annual subscription for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.60; other countries 38c additional. Send subscriptions to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates, address Sam J. Perry, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose stamped, self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional. Printed in the U.S.A.



*Grimly, alone, he fought his spectral battle  
—the man who could not die . . . yet never  
quite succeeded in living. . . .*

# THAT LOW

By  
Theodore Sturgeon

**T**HERE was a "psychic" operating on Vine Street. Fowler went to see her. Not that he had any faith in mumbo-jumbo; far from it. He had been told that this Mrs. Hallowell worked along strict logical lines. That's why he went. He liked the sound of that, being what he was. He went to her and asked her if there were any good reason for not killing himself. She said he couldn't do it. Not "You won't." She said, "You can't."

This Fowler was a failure specialist, in the sense that a man is a carburetor specialist or a drainage specialist or a nerve specialist. You don't get to be that kind of specialist without spending a lot of time with carburetors or drainage layouts or nerves. You don't stay nice and objective about it, either. You get in it up to the elbows, up to the eyeballs. Fowler was a man who knew all that one man could know about failure. He knew all of the techniques, from the small social failure of letting his language forget what room of the house he was in, through a declaration of war on the clock and the calendar (every appointment and schedule in his life was a battle lost) to the crowning stupidity of regarding his opinions as right purely because they were his opinions. So he had fallen and floundered through life, never following through, jumping when he should have crept, and lying down at sprinting-time. He could have written a book on the subject of failure, except for the fact that if he had, it might have been a success . . . and he hated failure. Well,

you don't have to love your specialty to be a specialist. You just have to live with it.

It was understandable, therefore, that he should be impressed by Mrs. Hallowell's reputation for clarity and logic, for he truly believed that here was a kindred spirit. He brought his large features and his flaccid handshake to her and her office, which were cool. The office was Swedish modern and blond. Mrs. Hallowell was dark, and said, "Sit down. Your name?"

"Maxwell Fowler."

"Occupation?"

"Engineer."

She glanced up. She had aluminum eyes. "Not a graduate engineer." It was not a question.

"I would of been," said Fowler, "except for a penny-ante political situation in the school. There was a fellow—"

"Yes," she said. "Married?"

"I was. You know, the kind that will kick a man when he's down. She was a—"

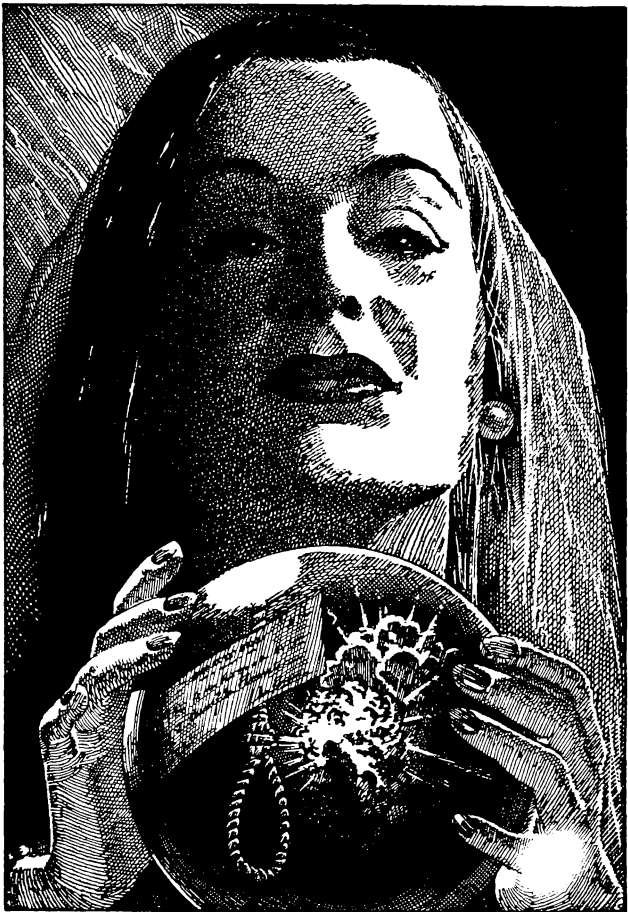
"Now, Mr. Fowler. What was it you wanted here?"

"I hear you can foretell the future."

"I'm not interested in gossip," she said, and it was the only cautionary thing she said in the entire interview. "I know about people, that's all."

He said, "Ever since I could walk and talk, people have been against me. I can whip one or two or sometimes a half dozen or more, but by and large I'm outnumbered. I'm tired. Sometimes I think I'll check out."

"Are you going to ask me if you should?"



"You will never succeed in anything," the "psychic" said. "You will not even be able to commit suicide."

"No. If I will."

She said, "All right. I don't give advice. I just tell about what's going to happen."

"What's going to happen?"

"Fill out a check. Leave the amount blank and don't sign it. Give it to me."

"But—"

"You wouldn't pay me afterward."

"My word's as good as—" and then he looked into the eyes. He got out his check-book. When he had done as she asked, she took a pen and wrote on the check.

"That's foolish," he said.

"You have it, though."

"Yes, I have, but—"

"Sign it," she said casually, "or go away."

He signed it. "Well?"

She hesitated. There was something—

"Well?" he rapped again. "What will I do? I'm tired of all this persecution."

"Your tenses are mixed up." She smiled.

"Do you want to know what you should do? Or what you shall do?"

"What shall I do?"

She wet her lips. "You shall live a long and unhappy life."

"It can't be any unhappier than it is." "I said nothing comparative."

"Then I don't want to live a long life."

"You shall, however."

"Not if I don't want to," he said grimly.

"I'm tired, I tell you."

She shook her head. "You've gone too far," she said, not unkindly. "You can't change it."

"Any time I don't like it, I can kill myself."

That was when she told him he couldn't. He was very angry, but she did not give him back his check. By the time he thought of stopping payment on it, it had cleared the bank. He went on living his life.

But Mrs. Hallowell had one bad moment over the matter. She started up out of her sleep one night, thinking about Fowler.

"Oh, how awful," she said. "I made a mistake!"

SHE phoned in the morning. Fowler was not there. He had just decided to kill himself. The amount he had paid Mrs. Hallowell made it impossible for him to meet a certain vital obligation, and since his efforts to borrow failed, he had no choice but to face his creditor. Or to kill himself. So he got a piece of rope and made a noose and put it around his neck. He tied the other end to the leg of the radiator and jumped out the window. He

was a big man. The rope held, but the leg broke off the radiator. He fell six stories, struck the canvas marquee, tore through it and fell heavily to the sidewalk. There was quite a crowd there to listen to the noises he made because of what was broken.

Mrs. Hallowell called and called until someone answered who could tell her what had happened. The someone said, "Is there any message I could send to him?" And Mrs. Hallowell said, "No. No, there isn't. He'll find out when the time comes."

Fowler took a while to mend, during which he developed a scheme to clear himself with his creditors. Some money was entrusted to him and he stole it, and before he could sink it into his new plan, he was billed for the hospital expenses and threatened with a suit. He could not handle the suit. He paid the money to the hospital and his money-making scheme fell through. He determined to kill himself.

While he was bleeding in the bathroom from his opened wrists, the tenant in the next apartment, who had a bad cold, lit a match in a gas-filled kitchen and blew the end of the building out. Fowler was picked up from the wreckage, still bleeding. They saved him that time, too. It was a lot of trouble. They had to take this and that off, and the other out. He was put, finally, in a very short bed with a mass of equipment beside him, which hummed and clicked all the time. The equipment circulated fluids, and another part of it dripped into a tube, and another part pressured him gently to hold his breathing. It was all highly efficient.

That was the trouble with Mrs. Hallowell's talent. It lay in such broad lines. No details. A mistake could cover a lot of territory. Her mistake showed up after Fowler had been in that short bed for two months.

People came by and clucked their tongues when they saw him. There was a bright-eyed, dry-faced old lady who put flowers near him every couple of weeks. Everybody was sorry for him, and everybody always would be, as long as he lived, which would be very nearly as long as the equipment could be kept running. A long time. A long life. Mrs. Hallowell had been perfectly right, there. Where she made her mistake was in thinking that he would be unhappy. He didn't work. He didn't move very much. He just lay and was served and people were sorry. Maxwell Fowler was quite happy.