

**THE ORIGINAL
SCIENCE
FICTION
STORIES**

35¢
Volume 8
Number 4
January, 1958

NOVELETS

- THE WILD ONES** *Tom Godwin* 20
They'd been welcome and needed once, but they'd served their purpose, and Earth wanted no more heroes on the frontier worlds. Not even men who'd kill in self-defense...
- THE BETTER EGG** *Dick Hetschel* 61
"Harmonized eggs" huh? thought Norman Estes. Only he was an expert on eggs, and he knew that no chicken had laid these prodigies...
- DEATH WISH** *Nicholas G. Lordi* 84
There was one thing that this strange being they called "Pincus" could not do for itself...

SHORT STORIES

- PRIME COMMANDMENT** (illustrated on cover)
..... *Calvin M. Knox* 6
The two groups agreed on so many things that it was fatal...
- DANGEROUS WEAPON** *Donald Franson* 110
Any intelligent man would tremble at the thought of what might come were it to get out of control...

FEATURE

- OH, THAT LOST SENSE OF WONDER!** *Isaac Asimov* 103
With thanks to Sir William Gilbert's "Yeoman of the Guard".

DEPARTMENTS

- AUTHOR, AUTHOR!** 5
A brief run-down on some of our contributors.
- THE EDITOR'S PAGE** *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 17
It's a grand word, but what do we mean by "Freedom"?
- INSIDE SCIENCE FICTION** *Robert A. Madle* 104
Reports and Reminiscences from the science fiction world.
- THE LAST WORD** *The Readers* 119
- READERS' PREFERENCE COUPON** 130
Clip it out, fill it out, and send it in, if you haven't time for a letter!

Editor: **ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES** **MARIE A. PARK**, Asso. Ed.
COVER BY **EMSH** **DOROTHY B. SEADOR**, Asso. Ed.
Illustrations by **Emsah, Freas, and Murphy**

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, January, 1958, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entire contents copyright 1957 by Columbia Publications, Inc. 35¢ per copy; yearly subscriptions \$2.10. Printed in the U. S. A.

Author, Author!

TOM GODWIN will probably be associated for years to come with a fine story that John W. Campbell used for the purposes of illustrating his ideas of science fiction in an article he wrote for *Saturday Review*, in 1956. You remember "The Cold Equations", and we hope you'll remember, "The Wild Ones".

★ DICK HETSCHEL and NICHOLAS G. LORDI have one thing in common, besides their debut in SFS, this issue. Before we'd read their stories, we had never heard of them before. But I think we'll be hearing more from them.

DONALD FRANSON could be found in the "Science Discussions" departments of leading science fiction magazines, back in 1937. His last appearance with us was in a short story on language reform, called, "Comes The Revolution".

★ CALVIN M. KNOX is a great admirer of Robert Silverberg, and seems to follow Bob around in the magazines. Latest news is that Knox expects to follow Silverberg into the pocket-book novels market,



THE BETTER EGG

Novelet by Dick Hetschel

illustration by MURPHY

The grocery store was selling something new, "hormonized" eggs, bigger eggs than you ever dreamed of buying before. Only Norman Estes was an expert—he could see that no chicken had ever laid such an egg!

NORMAN ESTES plumped himself down at the table without missing a syllable of his victory chant.

"...without a doubt, honey, without a doubt the most exact, the most exhaustive compendium of the knowledge that we, as human beings, have ever assembled on the subject. Professor Wundt's

eyes really will bulge when he sees it." As Estes spoke, his own eyes shone with an inner light that Wilma Estes found beautiful to behold.

Wilma sighed. "And thank goodness it's done at last. I think I've worked harder than you, worrying whether you'd ever get it finished. How are your eggs, honey?" Wilma was surprisingly pretty for the wife of a lean, hungry-looking assistant instructor in Zoology. She had the kind of prettyness, not exactly beauty, that does not look out of place and loses none of its charm in an apron.

"They're delicious! Yes, it's late, all right. The department will be expecting something special, but they're going to get it, too. Imagine! Why, my section on the North American bird eggs along would be an excellent master's thesis in itself. And my study of the evolution of the egg! Complete! honey, complete. Absolutely as far as human knowledge has penetrated!"

WILMA TRIED to look properly impressed. She actually was impressed a little, but maybe not quite "properly" impressed. "And speaking of eggs, sugar, as we do so often, is the one you're eating now up to par?"

He shovelled another forkful into his mouth. "Every bit as good as usual. You're as brilliant a master of egg

cookery as I am of egg study. It's delicious!"

"But doesn't it seem unusual in any way?"

"Unusual?" He studied the piece on his fork. "You mean texture? amount it's fried? color? way it's seasoned? elasticity? No, it seems perfectly ordinary." He popped it into his mouth. "Tastes same as usual, too. Good! I like eggs."

"Look at your plate!"

He looked at her a moment, then at his empty fork, then down at the plate.

"Yeee-eee-EEE! What the heck is it? Ostrich egg? No, that's too big. Let me think!"

"It's just a chicken egg, honey. Hormonized."

"Hormonized?"

"Uh huh."

He looked at the fried egg closely. It filled the plate completely, and it was a larger plate than the one on which she usually served his breakfast. "What do you mean it's hormonized?"

"That's what Mr. Abroga-do at the grocery told me. Doesn't it make sense?"

"I don't know! I don't think so! At least I've never heard of such a thing. Wilma! Wilma! Do you realize what this means? My thesis! It's not complete! An entirely new development in eggs and no mention of it in my thesis!"

"Didn't any of those periodicals you read mention it?"

"No, not a word. That is

strange!" He stood up suddenly. "Why, how could you possibly serve the egg to me like this? You..." he looked down into his plate "...you fried it! You ruined it! Can we get another? Do you...? Suppose we can't get another?"

WILMA GOT up and went over to the cupboard. "I thought you might be interested. I got two." She held it up for him to see.

He made a grab for it. "Dark! Greater luster than a hen's egg! Fully three times the volume. Maybe four. Could be five, but I don't think so. I've got to study this, honey. Call the department! Tell I'll need a substitute for my eleven o'clock lab."

Wilma folded her arms. "Oh, no, you don't! That thesis is due in at noon today and you know what they said. No more extensions, and no more cutting classes; that's your responsibility, Norman. They can't get a new instructor to replace you every few days. You've got about an hour before you have to get ready! Do what you can in that time!"

"Well, I'll try." He dashed up the stairs toward the small laboratory he had established in a corner of the bedroom. "But it's not going to be enough time, I can tell you that now!"

IT WAS NOT an hour, but a mere forty minutes later that Norman came back down.

"Baking, eh? Smells good!" He drew himself up to his full five feet ten. "I have news for you. That is *not* a chicken egg! Not a hormonized chicken egg and not any other kind of chicken egg! It is no more like a chicken egg than a robin egg is like a chicken egg!"

"OK., you're the eggspert around here; I believe you. What is it then?"

"Before I answer that, let me remind you again that I do not like puns. Especially puns about eggs and me. All day on the campus it's puns. 'Eggzactly.' 'How are your eggperiments going?' I'd like my home to be a refuge from things like that.

"But to answer your question; I haven't the slightest idea what kind of egg it is!"

"What!"

"I will go further; definitely, it is not related closely to any other egg I have ever studied. Its differences are so great, in fact, that, judging by the egg, I feel sure the bird that laid it cannot be placed in any known order of the bird family!"

"Order? That's the classification above class and below family, isn't it? Why, that's impossible! It must belong to *one* of the orders..."

"It's the classification *below* class and *above* family, but it's still impossible. Even

if a representative of an extinct family had laid the egg, we should have some record of its ancestors in the geological record; that is, if extinct representatives could lay eggs and if extinct families had representatives and ... Did Mr. Abrogado actually *tell* you they were hormonized eggs or did you just assume that?"

"He said it! He said it! I'm sure of it! He pointed them out to me as something special and there was even a sign above them that said so. They cost 39c apiece, too."

"Well, chicken eggs could never be changed like that. Call the department!"

"CALL THE department? Oh, no! You take that thesis just as it is and go teach your lab. It's time you got ready, too."

"Come to think of it, I'd better call them myself. They were kind of nasty about it last time, weren't they?"

"They said once more and they'd have to cancel your fellowship award for next semester!"

He dialed the number while she stood by anxiously.

"Hello? Professor Waldteufel? Oh, hello; this is Estes. Well, yes, but... Well, you see... It's an emergency. But it's an emergency. Yes, a *real* emergency. Yes, well...uh. Uh huh. But... You see... My wife is hav-

ing a baby! Yes, a baby. Oh, yes we were! Yes, it's sooner than we expected; caught us by surprise. Uh huh. Well, I'll be in tomorrow sure. My thesis, too. You bet; good-bye.

"You see, honey; nothing to it."

"And exactly what did you tell them!"

"No sense getting mad; just a little white lie. I've already told them I had everything from acinaciformosis to xenophobia and I had to say something."

"And how do you expect to explain that to him later?"

"Oh, I'll think of something." He was slipping on his coat. "Well, goodbye, honey; I'll be back soon."

"Where are you going? And you haven't shaved!"

"Haven't time. I'm going to find out where those dam' eggs are coming from!"

ABROGADO'S GROCERY is at the corner of 16th and Michigan streets. It's a little larger than the average neighborhood grocery, perhaps, but is still definitely *no more* than a neighborhood grocery. Norman had been there several times before when, for one reason or another, the household shopping had devolved upon him.

This was too important, though, for a direct approach. Mr. Abrogado might have some reason to keep

silent about where he got the eggs. Just possible, if there was something funny about them. He stared at the displays through the window for a while, trying to remember what part of the store was reserved for eggs.

When he finally went in, he idled around the store a while before he closed in, picking up a few odd items, some coffee, a tooth-brush, a couple of bags of cookies. Then he slapped a rigid control on himself and turned toward the eggs.

He could scarcely resist crying out. There they were! Two large eggs resting in the bottom of a wire box and above them a sign that proclaimed:

SPECIAL
Harmonized Eggs
 42c apiece

He picked one up—best not to appear too eager—and took it over to the counter with the rest of the items he had chosen.

ONE OF MR. ARBOGADO'S sons waited on him, to his intense disappointment. He had tried to time it so he would be next when Mr. Abrogado was free.

He tried to appear nonchalant as the boy checked off the items, but his head was in a whirl. *He hadn't planned this carefully*

enough! He didn't know what to say!

Mr. Abrogado saved the day for him. "Good morning, Mr. Estes; isn't your wife feeling well this morning?"

Norman spun around, uncertain at first who had spoken. He was shaking and he tried hard to control himself.

"Mr. Abrogado! Good morning...no, she's a little under the weather the eggs—no—yes, yes the eggs you see." His manner became confidential as he gently elbowed aside the customer Mr. Abrogado was serving, "The eggs, you see, these eggs, the big ones; I'm afraid thy didn't agree with her."

"Oh, that's too..." began Mr. Abrogado, looking a little worried.

"She's allergic to...corn, you see, and we thought maybe these chickens had been fed corn. I thought maybe I could find out so we'd know what to do for her—two kinds of pills, you know, and we're not sure which ones to take. Do you know maybe what they were fed?"

"Why, no, I..."

THIS WAS his opening, and Norman's eyes went wild as he leaped in. "Then maybe I could get in contact with the people that laid them...with the chickens who owned the...with the

people that had the eggs that the chickens..."

"Is she very sick, Mr. Estes?" asked Mr. Abrogado gravely, noticing how flustered Norman was.

"Yes! Well, pretty much; at least I'm kind of worried. It's the...you see...she's having a...no! no! I don't mean... It's just that...just a little allergic reaction, you know, but it makes her feel pretty miserable, you know."

"Of course. Well, I wish I could help you, but I guess the best I can do is give you the name of the distributor that brought us the eggs. He should be able to help you some." Mr. Abrogado opened a little book and copied an address from it. "Or maybe it would be best to just phone. You could..."

"No, no, this is fine!" Norman grabbed the slip of paper.

"Mr. Estes! Come back! Your package! Well, I'll be darned! I guess we'd better deliver it; did he pay you Joe?"

II

THE DISTRIBUTOR had a downtown address, but as the town was not large (the college being its main industry), downtown was only a few blocks away. Norman Estes already had the car out, though, and he got as close to the main street as he

could find a parking spot. He left the motor running—on the slight chance that he might have to make a quick getaway upon leaving the distributor—and headed toward the address Mr. Abrogado had given him.

The place was one he had passed many times but had never particularly noticed. An office in the front of the building was all he could see from the street, though there was a wide driveway beside it of the type that heavy delivery trucks used.

He paused a moment outside. Would information be his for the asking, or would the distributor try to cover up? Everything was probably on the up-and-up—but then, maybe the process was secret, or perhaps there was something illegal about it. After all, they did call the eggs "chicken eggs" and they were nothing of the kind. Norman didn't have much time, and he knew he couldn't possibly put off the thesis a day longer. He should have mapped out a plan of action in advance—but on the other hand, he always seemed to do his best thinking on the spur of the moment. Right now his mind was empty. He opened the door and went in.

"Good morning," said a black-haired woman who appeared to be about 45 and had a sort of unmarried look. She was seated behind a typewriter.

"Good morning," said Norman; "I'd like..."

"Is that Wally?" shouted a heavy voice from a room somewhere in back.

THE LADY behind the typewriter looked at Norman apologetically, obviously feeling it improper for a lady to raise her voice in a shout. "No," she called, then looked at Norman apologetically again, pursing her lips slightly in a gently irritated manner.

The voice roared back. "Well, when he gets here ask him where the hell he's been all this time and what kind of a damn place he thinks this is!"

The lady behind the typewriter made a visible mental note of the message and turned back to Norman. "And what can we do for...?"

"Who the hell is out out there?" called the voice again.

The lady behind the typewriter looked distressed. "Did you wish to see Mr. Cuddy?" she asked Norman hurriedly, getting up from the chair.

Norman nodded.

She hurried to the back of the building, leaving Norman alone for the moment.

PLANS, PLANS, plans; he had to think of something. Mr. Cuddy sounded as if he might be a difficult man to

deal with. And if there was something shady behind it all..."

"Mr. Cuddy will see you."

Mr. Cuddy matched his voice; heavy black hair, heavy black beard already poking out into view before noon, hulking shoulders, gigantic hands, gigantic feet placed solidly on a wooden desk. "Well, what do you want?"

He's probably good-natured—this is just his manner, thought Norman, trying to get his brain working.

"It's about eggs..." he began weakly.

"Well, you've come to the right place!" Mr. Cuddy said sarcastically.

"...about eggs. I...we have a problem. We..."

Mr. Cuddy blew his nose violently. I don't believe he's even listening, thought Norman worriedly. "We're...we're having some trouble with one of your eggs."

THAT MADE Mr. Cuddy look up, at least.

"One of the big ones—one of the hormonized ones; it's..." Norman thought desperately "...it's hatching!"

Mr. Cuddy's feet left the desk and his throat made a noise a little like a bird-call. "Hatching!"

"Yes, we don't know what to do about it."

"Hatching!"

"Yes—we're worried. We don't know what a hormon-

ized egg will turn into; they're so big and all. I think I should get in touch with the people who...hormonize them."

Mr. Cuddy looked him squarely in the eye, obviously wondering whether he could have any possible reason for lying. "They're hatching?"

"Just *one* of them," corrected Norman, beginning to feel better. He felt he had hit upon the right course.

"That just ain't possible!"

"I know...but one is!"

Norman had him in a corner, and knew it.

"We got nothing to do with it. We just handle them." Mr. Cuddy stated flatly.

"Oh?" Best not to press too hard; Mr. Cuddy was moving in the right direction.

"It's none of our business—you'll have to see the guy we get them from. Sam will know about that."

Norman kept his mouth shut—waiting expectantly.

"We get them from an old guy way out somewhere. I don't know where. You'll have to ask Sam."

The feet were back on the desk and Mr. Cuddy picked up a newspaper and began shuffling through it. Apparently the interview was completed. Norman walked back to the outer office where the secretary was busily typing. "Who's Sam?" he asked.

SAM BURNS lived in a pleasant section of town near the river. The house—green and white and shaded by several tall trees, each of a different variety—was enough to give Norman a pang of jealousy; he, an egg expert, Sam, an egg distributor; he, a three-room apartment, Sam, this! He shrugged his shoulders and went up the walk.

The woman who answered the bell was red-faced, middle-aged and a little on the weighty side, and he felt better. "Is Sam home?"

"No, he's working."

"Could I get in touch with him?"

"He don't get home till six."

"Well, this is urgent; I'd like to contact him now."

"Sam don't like to be bothered when he's working. What do you want?"

Norman thought fast, rooted around a moment, and suddenly inspiration struck. "Mr...." what was the name of that...? "Mr. Cuddy sent me. It's about the lawsuit."

"Lawsuit?" Mrs. Burns looked puzzled and slightly worried.

"Yes. Someone's suing about those hormonized eggs, the big ones. Mr. Cuddy wants me to talk to Sam right away."

Mrs. Burns looked really worried now. "There isn't something wrong with them, is there?"

NORMAN tried to look serious, too. "I think they were patented or something." Be as vague as possible and speak in a grave tone of voice, seemed to be the ticket here. Mrs. Burns looked like the worrying kind.

"I warned him about those eggs," she said. "I thought there was something about them. Lord, I don't know what we'll do if we have any more expenses; we're still trying to pay for the damage the flood did, and Herby's teeth need fixing, and..."

"Sam?" interrupted Norman gently.

"...you'll probably find him at his warehouse on F street between Madison and Ellis. If he isn't there yet, wait and he'll show up."

Norman thanked her and turned to go, tripping over something on the porch behind him as he turned. He recovered his balance and looked down.

"This is Herby." Mrs. Burns explained.

"He kicked me," said Herby in a calm voice.

Norman liked children but was rather afraid of them. "I beg your pardon, I'm sorry," he explained as he hurried away, wondering where Herby had come from and how he had managed to get behind him so quietly.

SAM WAS already at the warehouse when he got

there. He looked up for a moment at his question, "Yeah, that's me." He looked down again at the papers on the desk in front of him; almost as though, Norman thought, the one glance had been enough to convince him that his caller wasn't worth much attention. People often gave Norman that impression and it always embarrassed him and made him slightly angry.

"I'd like to speak to you a moment," he said rather weightily.

Sam didn't look up from his papers; he was a severely drawn, slightly balding man. "I'm busy right now. Behind schedule. See me at my house tonight if it's important."

"It'll take just a moment."

"Umph," Norman could see he wasn't listening. This called for fairly desperately measures; if he got Sam irritated he'd never get his information. He thought of using the lawsuit idea again, but then noticed the telephone on Sam's desk. Sam would likely phone the downtown office, and then where would he be? If he could just get the guy away from his work for a few minutes he was sure he could talk...

Inspiration struck again. "It's about the flood." He recalled Mrs. Burns mentioning flood damage and remembered the trouble the river

houses had had a few months back.

Sam looked up. "What about it?"

Norman was hitting his stride. "The water's rising again. Your wife told me to come get you."

Sam was startled now. "But it hasn't rained in weeks," he said in a "they can't do this to me" voice.

"Not here, but in the mountains," said Norman smugly. "And she can't find Herby. He's out playing somewhere. She wants you to come home right away."

Sam was up and getting his coat on. "My car's out in front and the motor's warm," Norman added. "I'll take you. Hurry!"

IN THE CAR, Norman worked quickly. "I'm from the health commission," he said as he drove, Sam Burns sitting nervously beside him. "I called at your home to see you and your wife sent me to you. We..."

"Hold it!" Sam interrupted him; "a couple of neighbors of mine work in this next block. Their homes'll be in danger, too. We'd better pick them up."

Norman cast a worried side-glance at him but he pulled the car to a stop and waited while Sam hurriedly collected a couple of mill workers. A few blocks further on they stopped to pick up a store-keeper and his son whose

homes were also in the danger area.

The car was quite crowded as Norman took up where he had left off. "We have an epidemic on our hands, Mr. Burns." He said the word "epidemic" extra loudly and cast a side glance to see whether Sam reacted to it. He did. Norman hurried on. "Your company has some large eggs on the market—hormonized—and they're spreading something; we're not sure what. We've got to check the hens that lay them and find out what it is before anyone dies." he emphasized the word "dies" too. "If you'll give me the address you get them from, I'll be able to head there as soon as I drop you off. There isn't a moment to lose."

Sam was visibly shaken. "It's an old guy way out at the far end of Humphrey Lane. Only farm around there. He told me not to tell where I got them—it's something new he's still working on, he says, but... Do you think it's very serious?"

NORMAN mumbled a soft sentence with no real words in it. They were getting near Sam's house. Norman had carefully avoided river streets and he knew he dared go no further. He pulled the car up to a curb. "This is as far as I can go; can't turn around ahead because of the water."

The five men peered ahead. "I don't see any water yet,"

objected Sam. "We're still three or four blocks from..."

Norman raced the motor. "You'd better hurry."

The five of them got out, Sam still mumbling something, and Norman turned the car around quickly and raced back the way they had come. He felt a pang of remorse. He had treated Sam pretty harshly; the poor guy seemed worried sick. Still, think how good he'd feel when he got home and found there was no flood after all and there was nothing wrong with the eggs. Looked at that way, it didn't seem so bad. He started planning how he would approach the old guy at the end of Humphrey Lane.

III

HUMPHREY LANE gave up the ghost of respectability several miles from its end. As it wound higher into the foothills, the occasional farms were smaller, the crops thinner and the fences in wilder disarray. The road ended in a well forested area and the only mailbox in sight had the name "Morgan" scrawled across it in faded white paint. A trail led off into the trees between the mailbox and a big, red-lettered "*No Trespassing*" sign.

As he walked through the alternating shade and sunlight, Norman Estes tried to "set" the conflicting plans

that had been running through his mind as he drove up. Morgan could be anything from a suspicious old recluse who had stumbled onto something unusual to a lone-wolf scientist hiding out to perfect a radical new development.

After much thought Norman decided upon a simple but daring method of operation. He would tell the truth! If Morgan was a recluse, he could awe him with his position at the University—pumped up a little, perhaps—and if Morgan was a scientist, he could make a strong scientist appeal.

In a way, Norman was a bit appalled by the plan—it seemed too direct and uncomplicated to work and he had never had much luck with the naked, screaming truth. Still, it seemed the best method for these particular circumstance.

He came out of the trees into a little clearing that reached up toward the hills. Scattered here and there were several buildings: a house, wooden and very small, a woodshed, a leanto that partly sheltered a vintage Ford, an outhouse, a large pen crowded with Plymouth Rocks, and an enclosed shed of undeterminate usage. He started in the direction of the last since the chicken pen seemed to contain no birds of unusual shape or dimensions.

Then he stopped short. There was a gentleman coming toward him and he had a shotgun! Norman hadn't given

a thought so far to the possibility of personal danger; now he made up for lost time.

THE MAN said nothing until he was within easy conversing range. He was tall, thin, old, hawknosed, tanned, toughened and not particularly friendly of aspect. Tangled grey hair covered his head, a good deal of it standing straight up, but rather than relieving his harsh appearance it only added to it a feel of electrical energy.

"See my 'No Trespassing' sign?" he asked conversationally, shotgun under his arm where it would just need raising a little.

"Yes, sir," said Norman, "but I have business with a Mr. Morgan."

The gun did not waver and none of the unfriendliness disappeared. "That's me."

Norman could feel his method was not going to work and he wanted to kick himself for not having something better planned. He was afraid to ad-lib now, for fear of striking a false note with that gun so handy. "I'm from the University," he said, his sudden and sick loss of enthusiasm showing so clearly in his voice that even he noticed it; "I'm doing a research on eggs for my master's thesis and understand you've made some sort of new development in the field." And there it was, stark and naked and unconvincing. Norman felt sick with disgust.

Mr. Morgan left no possibility of Norman welcoming truth to his breast as a newfound ally. "I'm sorry, mister, but somebody's been kidding you," he said matter-of-factly, "I haven't developed anything. Looks like you better turn back the way you came. I've got work to do and can't afford to have people prowling around and maybe stealing things." The shotgun made a final little gesture back toward the trail and the look on its master's face advised against further talk.

Norman thought desperately for a moment. Then, no ideas coming forth, he turned wearily back the way he had come.

IT TOOK only a few steps away from his prize, though, to bring back to him the urgency of his mission, and with it came a rush of desperate energy. He turned around suddenly. Mr. Morgan...!"

Mr. Morgan was still standing on the trail watching him, shotgun under his arm.

"Mr. Morgan," Norman stumbled on, "I'm afraid I lied to you. I'm here on an important mission and I was told to feel you out before telling you about it—to be sure you were honest and that I would get your cooperation." He was perfecting his new idea as he spoke.

"Well?" asked Morgan.

"I know that the large 'hormonized' eggs do come from here," Norman got that out of the way quickly—it was touchy work telling a man with a shotgun that you know he's lying—"though I certainly don't blame you for trying to keep them a secret and not letting everyone know about them who comes barging onto your land. I... we got in touch with the distributor and he told me they came from here.

"Actually, I'm from the Sanitary Commission." He worked to put authority into his voice. "I've been sent to check on whether your 'hormonized' eggs are connected with a sort of epidemic we're having down in town." He paused. "Er...I'll have to ask you to let me examine the...hens that laid those eggs."

MORGAN thought for some time before answering. "If I get you right," he said finally, "you're worried that it's because they're hormonized and different from other eggs that they might of caused something?"

Norman nodded, almost eagerly.

"Then I guess I can't help you," the old man went on; "there's nothing unusual about the eggs when they leave here. It's the guy that picks them up that does something to them after he gets

them. He was telling me about it. He must of got scared when you told him about the epidemic and sent you here on a wild goose chase while he covers up. You better get back to him quick."

Norman sagged suddenly, feeling very tired. He knew the old man was lying. His investigation of the one egg had proved to his complete satisfaction that the eggs were not, and had never been chicken eggs. But he had discarded his first story—he was no longer an egg expert—what could he say?

He stared blankly at the old man for a moment, trying to think. "Better get back to him quick!" Mr. Morgan repeated, making a seemingly unconscious motion with the shotgun as he spoke. Norman's heart began slowly to break in two. He just *had* to find out...

SUDDENLY his mind started working again. "I may as well get down to brass tacks. I'll have to confess I was just feeling you out," he began, the light growing in his eyes as he talked—what did a shotgun mean when he was inspired! "But I think we can make a deal. Actually, I'm not from the Sanitary Commission at all. I used to work for Sam Burns, the guy who collects the eggs from you—so I know he really gets the hor-

monized eggs from you and doesn't do anything to them himself—though I don't blame you for doubting my story and trying to send me off the track." He took a deep breath. "And now I'd like to talk business!"

"I've quit Sam's company and I'm starting out on my own and I'd like to handle your eggs myself, especially the big ones. I'll pay you a lot more—Sam has been gyping you right along—and...well, I'm sure we can do business together—to our mutual satisfaction..."

"Yeah?" The man didn't seem overly impressed.

"The only thing is," Norman hurried on, "I'd like to take a quick look at the chickens—just a glance—to see that they're healthy—that they're not laying such big eggs because they're sick or something. I can pay you a lot more," he added, noting again the unconvinced look in the other's eye.

MR. MORGAN thought silently again for a good period of time. "I'm sorry," he said at last; "my wife died yesterday and she was the one that fed those chickens; it was all in what she fed them and she never would tell me. Too damn bad she died." His eyes gazed heavenward a moment and Norman had to adopt a reverent look, too, though he was sure there was not a

word of truth in the old man's speech. After all, he *knew* the eggs hadn't been laid by chickens. And the shack up the side of the hill looked as though it could never possibly have seen a woman's touch.

But there was nothing left to do but leave. Mr. Morgan still blocked the path and the shotgun was still held ready.

"Thank you," said Norman softly. "Goodbye."

Mr. Morgan said nothing, but Norman could feel the eyes on his back as he walked down the trail. One more chance...? How likely would the guy be to shoot?

He turned around.

"WELL? GOT another story?"

"Um...yes, sir. I...I may as well come clean this time. It's a personal matter and I was afraid you might not care to help me, but..."

Mr. Morgan said nothing, but a steely glint had come into his eyes.

Norman hurried on. "You see, my mother is sick and it seems to be one of those eggs that's the cause—not that there's anything wrong with them, but they just don't seem to hit her right. I ate some, too, and it didn't hurt me. But she's pretty old and she's very sensitive to some things and...well, I *am* actually a zoologist at the University and I've checked

the eggs enough to know that these are not chicken eggs, so I know you must have some special kind of creatures to produce them and...well, I wonder if you could please let me see them and see what they eat and so forth so I can maybe tell what's wrong with my mother? It means an awfully great deal to us."

FOR THE next full minute Mr. Morgan weighed his speech, watching Norman closely the while, obviously trying to judge whether this last and somewhat impassioned plea could possibly have a grain of truth to it. Norman tried to look as humble and distressed as possible, but the decision apparently went against him.

"I'm darn sorry, really I am," the old man insisted, obviously trying to match the distressed sincerity that had been in Norman's voice, "but I found those doggone eggs in the woods—each day eight or ten of them in the same spot. Oddest thing. Never did catch a glimpse of the things that laid them; must of come out at night." He took a deep breath. "Then day before yesterday there were no more. Ain't been since. Guess they just moved on. I didn't tell you that when I thought you were from Sam because I been hoping the eggs would start coming again and I

didn't want anyone else to get wise to them and steal them."

Norman looked desperately for a hole in the argument. He didn't believe a word of it, but... "Can I have a look in that one coop down there?" he waved toward the nearest one, "just to..."

The gun came up and looked him squarely in the eye. "You aren't calling me a liar?"

"No, of course not; I'm sorry," stammered Norman.

"Then get going!"

"But...but..."

Mr. Morgan aimed the gun and took a deep breath, seeming to Norman to expand to three times his normal size. "You've got ten seconds to get into those trees, and next time I see you I'll shoot on sight!"

Norman broke and ran.

NORMAN sat on the runningboard of his 1937 Ford, thinking, thinking. He looked up occasionally at the mailbox, and the "No Trespassing" sign, and the path that wound into the trees between them. He should give up, he told himself; it just wasn't worth the risk. But at the same time he knew he was not going to give up. He wouldn't have reached the position of Assistant Laboratory Instructor in Zoology if he gave up so easily when the going got

tough. Besides, his curiosity had been thoroughly aroused and he knew his curiosity well enough to be sure it would never let him stop short of its satisfaction—especially where his specialty, eggs, was so immediately concerned.

The whole thing hinged on Morgan, of course. How could you handle a man like that? The man was an outrageous liar. Norman had never been up against anyone quite like him before. Still, he couldn't help admiring the guy—there was a sort of forthrightness to him; with the kind of persons who invariably tell the truth, you never can know what they might have up their sleeves.

THE SUN was low; it would be getting dark in about an hour. Could he do his best work in daylight, in dusk, or in the dark? It was almost half a mile back through the woods, so he chose daylight for the first part of the job, at least.

First he drove the Ford down the road a way, took it off into the trees and bushes far enough to hide it. Back at the road he marked to place carefully in his mind—it would be dark when he got back—and returned to the end of the road.

He decided, after a moment's thought, that it would be preferable to risk getting

lost than to risk meeting Morgan on the trail, so he struck off into the woods somewhat to the left of the trail, trusting to the contour of the hills to guide him safely up the little valley.

The woods were thick and the shadows long, but he pushed ahead steadily, watching the ground carefully to avoid unnecessary noise. Once something large crashed into the bushes ahead of him and he stopped a few moments and listened carefully, moving even more cautiously when he started again.

He was thinking he had covered most of the distance and was straining to catch glimpses of the surrounding hills through the trees to orientate himself, when a sudden glance back at the ground stopped him in mid-stride.

At first it didn't fully register and he stood, one foot still raised, staring at the ground before him. Then he was down on his knees.

Bird tracks! Large! Large! Too large for anything common to the vicinity! Could this be...?

ALL OF NORMAN'S woodsy lore came to the fore, and he quickly decided, after a moment's uncertainty as to which way a bird's claws pointed when it walked, that they had been coming from the direction of the hills to

the left and heading toward the trail to the right.

Norman thought carefully. Would it be better to see where they were now, or check first where they had been? He fought down his impatience and decided to play it cautious; best to check back a little way and see if he could pick up any clues to their nature before he took a chance of coming upon them.

He started back along the trail, working to control his trembling. He had to remain calm, keep all his senses intact... He recalled Morgan's story of finding the eggs in the woods and wondered for a moment whether it could have been true. Still, it hardly seemed possible the old man would have gotten so liberal with the facts at the last moment.

Norman pushed on through the woods, feeling as though he were on the verge of a great discovery. Then, suddenly, as he brushed aside an overhanging branch and gazed under it...

IV

IT DIDN'T make sense at first. A little fire had sprung up, and the ground was burned for a small area before him: there was a big crumpled and blackened sheet of metal wrapped half around a tree-trunk to one side. Then he

began to make out more and more shreds of blackened metal strewn throughout the burned area.

A wreck of some... Then his eyes caught something beyond the clearing and up in the air. A cloth blowing in the breeze! A pink-lavender cloth caught halfway up a tall pine.

He edged around the burned area and pushed through the underbrush, trying to keep his eye on the piece of cloth. It was further than he had imagined...

Then he was under the tree and looking up. A parachute? A parachute...? It certainly looked like one. A pink-lavender parachute! its straps released, its harness empty.

He searched the area beneath the tree. The tracks again! Just one set this time! He followed it until it joined another set that wound out of the woods. He followed the combined tracks until they reached the fringe of the burned area, where they were joined by others.

A plane wreck! A plane, perhaps a giant airliner to judge by the amount of metal strewn around, and crashed here, and some or all of the people in it had parachuted to safety.

But why did the people make tracks like birds?

A CHILL crept over him. It was beginning to get

dark in earnest now and the gentle sounds of the wind made the woods seem very lonely. It was about supper-time, too. He sat a moment on a log to rest because he felt very tired, but it was getting dark so fast and he had no flashlight.

Soon he would not be able to follow the tracks! He got up and hurried back the way he had come, head low to make out the bird tracks and his own beside them. Soon his own tracks turned off, and, with a queer feeling in his stomach, he began following the bird tracks only.

Suddenly he stopped. He bent lower, then got to his knees, staring at the ground. A shoe track! Yes, and it joined the trail here! His own tracks had been left behind. Had... Morgan...?

He followed the combined tracks and suddenly came upon the main trail leading to Morgan's buildings. Here the bird tracks were virtually obliterated, as though the trail had been trod many times since their use of it; but here and there a telltale mark remained—leading up the valley toward Morgan's buildings!

NORMAN ESTES was trembling again. A really horrible feeling of depression had suddenly come over him. He felt as though he were acting out the next-to-last lines of a Greek trag-

dy, as though the whole world were closing in around him, ready to dump him into caverns deep under the earth. If the Ku Klux Klan had come marching out of the dusk ahead he could scarcely have felt worse.

But he was angry, too. What had happened? He scarcely dared think. What was Morgan...?

And gradually his anger at Morgan replaced most of the fear. Even the shotgun no longer seemed so formidable. It probably shot nothing but buckshot! What the hell was so bad about that?

He was walking fast as he came upon the clearing. He scarcely slowed down as he headed for the nearest coop, the covered one he had been unable to see into.

He stole just one quick glance toward the farmhouse as he went. A dim light burned in one dingy window; nothing was visible inside but a stretch of bare wall.

Then he was at the coop. The door to it was on the side nearest the house and he stole around to it quietly. There were no windows; he hated to try to open the door, but...

HE STOOD for a moment with his head against the wooden door, listening. No sound for a while, then a faint rustle that could have been a chicken moving.

Or anything else moving, for that matter; he was learning nothing this way. The door was latched and padlocked and he fingered the padlock idly, trying to figure out what to do with it. He had been making little noises right along, he realized, but that couldn't be helped. He stole a glance back of him at the farmhouse but it hadn't moved.

He searched his pockets for something to work at the lock with. Handkerchief, car-keys, driver's license and draft-card, a few coins, a capsule of vitamin pills, a pencil stub. He thought of using a coin-edge as a file, but decided that couldn't possibly work. He tried the pencil stub as a pry and it broke in half with a dull pop. There seemed no other possibilities in his pockets.

He searched the ground. A long nail or something...

There was a sound behind him and a voice rang out. "Who's there!"

Norman spun around.

Morgan stood in the open doorway of the farmhouse, shotgun in hand.

NORMAN crouched back against the coop as Morgan peered out in his direction, trying to pierce the darkness. "Who the hell is that out there prowling around my henhouse?" the old man boomed; and Norman couldn't help thinking

to himself what a corny statement *that* was. He chased an even worse answer out of his mind and hunted desperately for a deeper shadow instead.

"I see you!" Mr. Morgan exclaimed suddenly, and the shotgun came up and pointed directly at Norman to prove the point. "Come out here in the open! Who are you?"

Norman edged hesitantly away from the wall of the coop. His mind translated the words "I'm Norman Estes" into "I'm the guy you promised to shoot on sight" and he wasn't sure which came out.

"You're the one who was here this afternoon," Morgan suddenly realized, "telling all kinds of lies!" Norman could see his hands tighten on the gun.

With more desperation than courage, Norman suddenly got the control of himself he had been fighting for. "You might as well shoot," he said, his anger beginning to return; "I've got to find out something and I'm going to do it even if it fills me full of buckshot!" The words were braver even than he had intended and they gave him such a shot of confidence that he turned around immediately and walked back to the door of the chicken coop.

Morgan didn't fire.

And that inflamed Norman's courage even higher.

"Come here and unlock this door," he ordered.

There was an ominous click behind him, and Norman spun to see the gun still levelled straight at him.

But Morgan wavered. "Let's talk this over. I'll give you a chance to have your say if you do it quick!"

NORMAN told his whole story from beginning to end, leaving out only his discovery of the parachute and certain of the more horrible of his fears as to what the whole thing meant. "And so you see," he finished, "this thing may well be a lot more important than either of us. I've got to find out more about these creatures, and I know you've got them hidden in that coop. What... what are they?"

Mr. Morgan sounded just a little more friendly. "Big chickens, son; biggest damn chickens you ever saw!" The old man had apparently been thinking things over while Norman spoke, and he went on: "You seem to know enough now, so you might as well know the whole thing—though I'm still not promising that you'll get away from here without a load of buckshot."

He lowered the gun a little and brought up one hand to scratch his neck. "There was a wreck, all right. About ten days ago. Something woke me up about four in the

morning, roaring by overhead, and then there was a crash off in the woods. I went to see and got there about daylight.

"I found the place where it came down but it hit hard and there was nothing left. If there was anyone in it they were killed sure.

"THEN, ON my way back I ran into these critters, nine of 'em, real queer looking things—like chickens, but bigger. They were all colors—some were colored like ordinary chickens and others weren't like any color bird I've ever seen. And they had odd necks, longer than a chicken should have.

"But the strangest of all—they were wearing things! Had things on like pants, with suspenders up over their backs and collars up around their necks. Darndest thing!"

The old man paused. "Here's how I figure it out. The thing that crashed was a government rocket that was sent up the way they've been doing lately to see how high they can get, and the chickens were put in it to test how it would affect them up there. They were either not regular chickens to begin with—something the scientists developed special—or they got changed up there on their ride by rays or something. The clothes must have been put on to keep them warm at the high altitudes.

"Well, something went wrong with the rocket and it crashed way out here. Only thing I can't figure out is how the critters got through the wreck without being killed.

"Anyway, they weren't afraid of me and followed me right back up to the house. Would of come inside with me if I'd let them."

"What...what did you do with them?" breathed Norman.

MORGAN looked a bit guilty. "Well, I figured at first on locking them up and then getting in touch with the government about its rocket, but I got no phone here and...well..."

"You *did* lock them up?" asked Norman, beginning to feel as terrible again as he had on the trail coming up. He edged a little away from the door of the coop.

"Yes, I coaxed them inside the coop—that one behind you—and then got out and padlocked the door. Used to keep a few setting hens in it but I took them out first.

"Then next day I went back to check up on them and feed them and I saw the eggs. I began to get ideas. When Sam Burns came up next to collect the regular eggs I showed them to him—just the eggs, not the chickens. Told him they were something new I was perfecting and he mentioned some-

thing about "hormonized" so I told him that was it. I guess that's the whole story."

"Did...how did they act? Norman felt as though he were talking from way down inside a deep hole, and his voice must have sounded sick, too, because Morgan glanced at him sharply.

"YES, THEY did," he answered. "They acted mighty odd. First day they set up an awful clamor, and next day when I went into the coop they kept doing all kinds of screwy things. Like flying up and down around my head and squawking like anything. Finally they all settled in a circle with one in the middle and it started making circles in the dirt with its claws..."

"Concentric circles?" gasped Norman, "one inside the other?"

"Yeah, and then all kinds of silly figures. I haven't paid too much attention—they've been doing it each time I go to get the eggs and feed them. That and all kinds of other crazy things. They've tried to dig out and break out and everything under the sun.

"They *really* acted crazy when I took the clothes off them. They..."

"You what!"

"When I took off those things they were wearing. I figured it wasn't good to

leave them on now that they were out of the stratosphere. They acted like they didn't have any sense for a couple of days after that—cackling and running around the coop and hiding behind things and peeking out at each other. I was afraid something was wrong with them but they finally seemed to get used to it."

"Did..." Norman's mouth was dry and he had to swallow a few times to get his tongue working, "did the circles they drew have a dot in the center and was there a dot or a little circle somewhere on each of the big circles?"

"Yeah; something like that. How did you know?" Morgan was puzzled and curious.

"And did they draw a line from one of the littler circles to another one?"

"Yes; something like that. But what...?"

"DON'T YOU realize what that means?" Norman screamed. "They are from another planet! They are our first interplanetary visitors! That wasn't a stratosphere rocket; that was a spaceship!"

Morgan stared at him, dumfounded. "By gosh, do...?"

"Don't you see? They were here to visit Earth—probably here on a peaceful visit—but their ship crashed and

they got away with nothing but the clothes on their backs." Norman told him about the parachute he had seen. "The first extraterrestrial visitors the Earth has had, undoubtedly the emmies of some great, highly developed civilization—and you threw them into a coop and stole their clothes and sold their eggs and..." Norman couldn't go on.

The old man looked genuinely startled. "Darn it all, you may be right..."

Norman spoke suddenly. "We've got to do something! We've got to explain it! It may mean interplanetary war if we don't! We've got to give them an explanation; even," he swallowed, "even if we have to make one up!"

"You mean lie to them?" asked Morgan, beginning to look as worried as Norman.

"If necessary!"

Morgan looked him squarely in the eye. "Well, you ought to think up a good story. You were shooting them at me this afternoon thick and fast."

"And you seemed to know your way around at that sort of thing, too," reminded Norman, slightly bitterly. His face brightened suddenly. "Something about a quarantine station maybe. But no; that doesn't sound too good." His eyes grew desperate. "We've got to have some-

thing airtight—absolutely airtight!”

Morgan fished a hand in a pocket and came up with a key. “This will open the coop

when we get ready,” he said. “Come on inside and we’ll have a cup of coffee and try to think up a good, strong yarn before we have to go explain things.”
