

THRILLING WONDER STORIES



The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

Vol. XIII, No. 2
April, 1939

TENTH ANNIVERSARY
NUMBER NEXT
ISSUE!

•
**FEATURING
THE ULTIMATE
CATALYST**

A Novelet of Laboratory
Magic

By **JOHN TAINE**

•
ROBOT NEMESIS

An Interplanetary
Novelet

By

**DR. EDWARD ELMER
SMITH**

•
DAWN OF FLAME

A Complete Short Novel

By

**STANLEY G.
WEINBAUM**

•
Plus Stories by

DR. DAVID H. KELLER

EANDO BINDER

OTIS ADELBERT KLINE

**JOHN COLEMAN
BURROUGHS and
HULBERT
BURROUGHS**

JACK WILLIAMSON

—and others!

EVERY STORY BRAND-NEW

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● **ON THE COVER**

Artist Brown has depicted a scene from the novelet, MEN MUST DIE, by Ward Hawkins, which appears in this issue.

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Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk.

FIRST PRIZE-WINNER

THE BROKEN AXIOM

The Laws of Physics State That Two Bodies Cannot Occupy the Same Space at the Same Time—but Dr. Halday Finds a Loophole!

By **ALFRED BESTER**

IT was a fairly simple apparatus, considering what it could do. A Coolidge tube modified to my own use, a large Radley force-magnet, an atomic pick-up, and an operating table. This, the duplicate set on the other side of the room, plus a vacuum tube some ten feet long by three inches in diameter, were all that I needed.

Graham was rather dumfounded when I showed it to him. He stared at the twin mechanism and the silvered tube swung overhead and then turned and looked blankly at me.

"This is all?" he asked.

"Yes," I smiled, "It's about as simple as the incandescent electric lamp, and I think as amazing."

"As amazing!" He gulped a little. "My dear Doctor Halday, you're too modest."

"No . . . please don't misunderstand me. Many people are under the impression that the apparatus which performs a scientific marvel must, of necessity, be extremely complicated. Edison's inventions wrought breathless wonders, yet they were very sim-

MEET THE AUTHOR OF THIS PRIZE STORY



Alfred Bester

IN selecting Mr. Bester's story as the winner in our contest for amateur writers, we were impressed, in the first place, by the excellent technique and style employed by its author.

We want emphatically to encourage writers like Mr. Bester, who have the knack of developing an interesting story that carries you breathlessly through its incidents and comes to a natural climax. (For further details concerning our Amateur Contest, see Science Fiction League Department.)

Mr. Bester is twenty-five years old, and has been an enthusiastic follower of science fiction for over a decade. He is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in music, physiology, art and psychology. At present he is associated with a publicity office.

Hobbies: Telescope making, painting, photography, playwriting, composing, and interpreting James Joyce. If he had his choice of the arts to follow, he would without doubt, he says, select all seven—or however many there are.

AMATEUR STORY CONTEST

ple. That is, simple to understand once they had been conceived. It is the conception that involves years of calculation; the execution usually is quite simple."

"And this?"

"This is another simple execution. Here we have on the one side, a transmitter; on the other, a coherer. You will notice that they are twin mechanisms connected by the vacuum tube overhead. A subject is placed on the transmission table and is subjected to the field of a Radley magnet which 'spreads' the individual atoms an infinitesimal fraction. Simultaneously, a beam from this Coolidge tube bombards the subject, section by section, tearing off the atoms one by one. These are deflected to the atomic pick-up where a smaller magnetic field directs them through the vacuum tube to the receiver. There the entire process is reversed and the subject recreated on the coherer table."

I stepped over to the switchboard and snapped on the dynamo. As the low hum purred through the room and the long line of storage batteries flanking the wall, began to charge; I started the tedious check-up that always must precede an experiment. Graham watched me with a glassy stare. Evidently what I had just told him had come as a violent shock. He muttered something to himself and at last interrupted my work.

"I say— Doctor Halday!"

"Yes?"

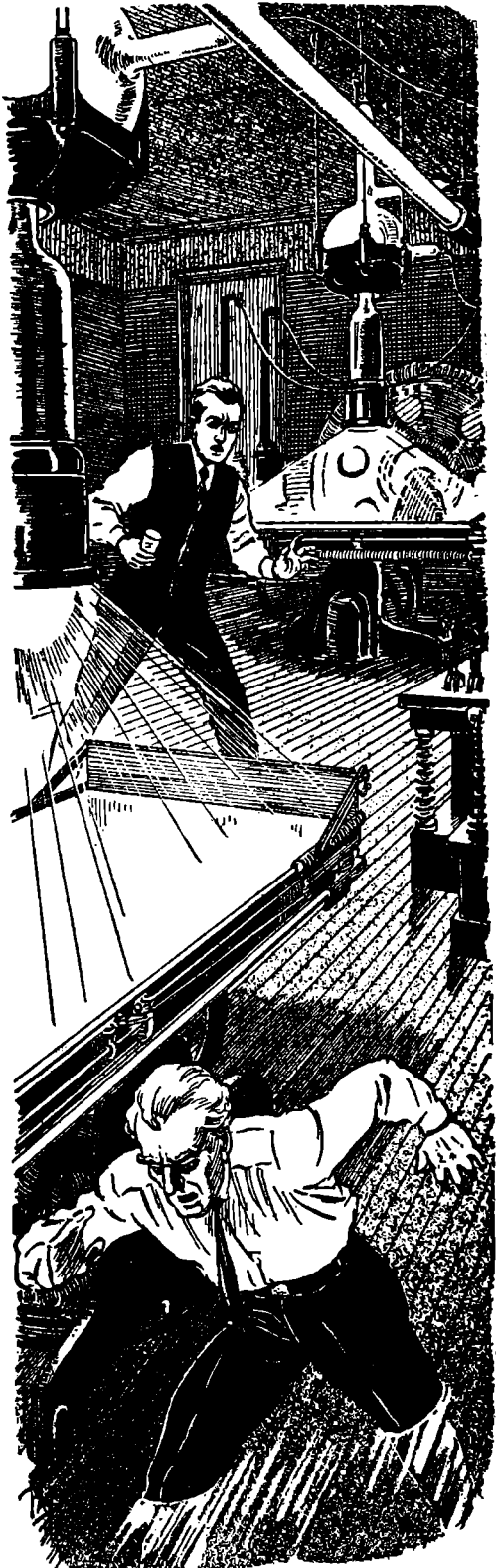
"Where do I fit in?" His voice broke with excitement. "After all, I'm only an instructor in electrical engineering and—"

I finished setting the Coolidges and straightened up to look at him mildly.

"The fact is, Graham, I need a subject. That's why you're here."

"A subject? But it may be dangerous."

"Precisely. For that reason I could never ask anyone to submit to the process. I've got to do it myself. I asked you to help because someone must operate the switchboard."



In horror I saw that I had sunk through the floor to my knees

GRAHAM waved his arms wildly. "Doctor Halday, what's the need for a human subject? You tell me you've sent several dogs through. Isn't that enough?"

I shrugged with irritation at his logic. Graham is a sound man with a fine mind, but I believe he is absolutely devoid of emotion and imagination. He could never understand my almost insane desire to transmit a human being through the apparatus. Somehow, the successful experiment on the human subject seems to stand as the final goal of success. Anything short seems paltry in comparison.

It was useless to convey my sentiments to him. Wordlessly I completed the round of inspection, and at last ran down to the stock room brought up a small white rat which I handed to Graham.

"Anesthetize." I said shortly. "You'll find ether and cotton on my desk." I bent over the control panel and adjusted the disintegration and coherer dials. "The mechanism must be adjusted to the size of the subject," I called over my shoulder, "There's no sense in wasting power. I'm going to put the rat through as a final check-up. Then it's my turn."

Graham soon had the animate bit of white fluff quite unconscious. I placed it on the transmission table and focused the Coolidge. Once again I looked over the dials, this time making the adjustment with a strong magnifying glass.

"This is the most important feature of the operation," I said. "I want you to make a special note of it. Unless the sets are tuned precisely alike, the specimen will not be transmitted. Compare it to the radio, if you like. For unless the receiver is tuned to the wave length of the broadcast, you will receive nothing but static. Or at best, a blurred reception. All right, now come and stand beside me. I want you to get a working idea of the technique."

We went to the control board where I cut the generator switch bringing a sudden stillness over the room. Then, taking my stop watch in hand, I threw the arm that set the Radley going. As

the high whine of the magnet echoed through the room, I counted off ten seconds by the clock and set the Coolidge into operation.

A frightful, crackling discharge sounded in our ears, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed that Graham jumped at the suddenness of it. The entire disintegration system was bathed in a green luminescence, and the small white form now lay in a pool of emerald light which slowly increased in brilliance. I glanced again at Graham and saw him staring intently at the operating table. Little beads of sweat cascaded down his face to his lips where they were licked away by his nervous tongue.

When the aura that covered the white rat at last became almost too intense for the eye to bear, I turned my back and studied the watch dial. At the sixty-second mark I threw the coherer switch, and the mechanism at the other side of the room leaped into brilliant radiation. I poked Graham violently.

"She's going through," I informed. "Watch her."

IN the far table a nucleus of sparkling green formed and spread slowly until it made a small pool. Gradually it deepened in color, the dartling specks of fire faded away and a dark cocoon took shape in the centre. Two minutes had already passed and I was forced to direct my attention to the stop watch. The last sixty seconds that I counted out seemed to be sixty minutes. My voice trembled as I shouted the numbers aloud to get the rhythm, and my hand shook as I reached forward toward the panel. I counted five, then four, three, two, one, and on the zero snapped the break switch that cut the operation and left the room in a deafening silence. I sighed and wiped my brow feebly with my grimy hand.

"There's something about this process that gives me a slight fright, no matter how many times I do it!" I said.

Graham never heard me. Unable to restrain his impatience, he rushed over to the second table and stared

down. There on the coherer lay the small white rat, twitching gently in her sleep, whole and unharmed. There was an overpowering odor of ozone in the air.

"What do you say now?" I asked.

For an answer Graham reached out and poked the animal gingerly. Then, mustering his courage, he picked it up and examined it carefully. At last he turned to me.

"Absolutely incredible!" He breathed.

"Fine!" I patted him heartily on the back. "Now let's prepare for the final transmission. It won't take long."

I started the dynamo humming again and began to prepare the apparatus for myself. As I worked, I kept up a running chatter of comment and advice to Graham, for I wanted to give him no chance to demur. I had already written out an instruction sheet for him to follow, and this I placed in his icy hand. He attempted to speak once or twice, but somehow could never grasp the opportunity.

Perhaps my interminable talk was due also to my own nervousness, for I confess that I was frightened. My hands trembled so that it was almost impossible for me to readjust the transmission and coherer dials, setting them to the proper readings. That and other minor irritations delayed me for some time. It must have been at least half past ten before I stretched out on the table and told Graham to get the ether.

"Do you have to use it?" he asked. "I'd feel so much better if I knew you were awake and watching me."

"I'm sorry," I answered. "But I don't know yet whether the operation is painless. It would be best to avoid the possibility of extreme discomfort. Now, come on. You know exactly what to do. Apply the ether."

He gave a worried smile and patted me on the shoulder. It seemed to take him a million years to prepare the ether cone and set it over my nose; and about another million to drip the first sickly smelling drops on the cotton wadding. For the briefest second I had an almost uncontrollable desire to sweep the cold metal from my face

and rush out of the laboratory. My ears roared and heavy hammers pounded on my head. With an agonized effort I raised one arm to halt Graham. Lifted the heavy arm inch by inch for an endless space of time. . . .

WHEN at last my hand reached my face I realized that I was coming out of the ether. For a moment I lay quietly, trying to calm my violent illness. The realization that I was whole and conscious told me, with a triumphant surge, that the experiment had been successful. For one more instant I lay quiescent, savoring the first joy of my success, then happily I rolled over and opened my eyes. The blow came with shattering effect. I could see nothing.

I was not quite in total darkness, for as my eyes adjusted to the altered surroundings, I was able to make out the dim outlines of the laboratory. It was as though I had a pair of heavily darkened glasses before my eyes. There was no color, no high light, no brilliance. All things were a uniform dim gray, gray dark and silent.

It came to me in a flash that I could not hear the faintest sound. I could just make out the window shade flapping slowly in the evening breeze, but I could not hear the clack that should accompany it. My eye traveled to the sink in the corner and I noticed that someone had left the water running, but I could not hear it.

I raised my fist to pound it against the table on which I lay, hoping to hear the thud, but when I smacked it down smartly, I received the greatest shock of all. My hand passed smoothly through the metal until my arm was buried to the elbow.

I was so amazed as I drew it out that I did not see Graham come rushing back into the lab, a glass in his hand. At any rate I didn't hear him slam the door. He came up to me and I could see dimly that his face was distorted with fear. He opened his mouth, said something and then waited. I shook my head in despair.

"I can hardly see you, Graham," I shouted, "much less hear you." My voice sounded strangely thin and muf-

fled.

He stared at me for a while and then said something else. I threw up my hands in disgust, but with astonishing results, for the reaction to the gesture drove my posterior six inches through the table. I struggled up and out much as one scrambles out of deep snow, and slid to the floor up to my ankles.

I hadn't much weight, I discovered. It seemed from the heft of my body that I didn't gross more than a hundred pounds. I felt myself gingerly and found to my relief that at least I was solid to my own touch. At last I looked up and perceived Graham hovering dimly in the distance. From the squinting look on his face I took it that I was as nebulous to him as he to me.

We must have squinted at each other for some time as we began to realize what a hopeless situation it was. It was desperately necessary that I get back to a normal state as soon as possible. I stood and thought very hard, probing for the reason for the mishap. Evidently I had failed to adjust the coherer precisely to the transmitter. My nervous hands had probably been responsible.

The net result was that instead of being transmitted and recreated in the correct order, the integral atoms of my system were slightly altered in position. Not quite sufficiently to remove me altogether from our own space system, but enough to enable me to co-exist with any ordinary solid in the same space at the same time.

From my weightlessness and my ability to thrust myself through objects, I judged that the atomic structure had been spread slightly. Apparently gravity could not exert its full force on me, but I became conscious of what force it had in another moment. In horror I saw that during my reflections I had sunk through the floor to my knees.

THE expression on Graham's face was laughable when he saw me plow my way up to the top of the floor. It was an extremely difficult task, not because of the resistance of the wood, but because I had nothing

upon which to obtain purchase. I felt like a man in a quagmire and as Graham hovered about me like a mother hen, his position was as ludicrous as mine. Each time he instinctively tried to pull me up by the arm his hand passed right through me as though he were trying to pick up a handful of molasses.

On the whole, it was a good thing for us, for we both chuckled a little and regained some composure. I found that if I kept moving I could avoid sinking through the floor, and Graham discovered, after some fooling around, that we could see each other a little better in a red light. He sat down at the desk, took some paper and a pencil and began figuring. I paced and thought some more.

The sound came just before the crimson cloud appeared. It was a high-pitched vibration, incredibly thin and far, and it sent cold shivers down my spine. I swirled about and peered intently through the gloom in the direction from which I thought the sound had come. I stood alert for several moments, my senses keening for that unearthly cry, but it was not repeated. Then, just as I was about to relax and turn my attention back to Graham the red cloud appeared.

It snapped into existence quite abruptly, a tiny mass of flaming nebulousity, and hung poised far in the distance. It looked like nothing I had ever seen before, and somehow it sent a clutch of horrid dread through my heart. I glanced hastily at Graham, anxious for what little dim companionship I could obtain from him in my lonesome isolation, but he was working away at the desk, oblivious to all.

Some intuition told me that the crimson cloud was a life form. I was positive of that. It had an ameboid motion that bespoke a living intelligence. Although it was far off, I could see the fluctuations of color, the quick graduations from deep red to pale pink, the sparkling gleam of vitality. It remained, gently twisting and convoluting for two or three minutes, and then vanished as abruptly as it had appeared.

Suddenly I began to tremble. It

was bad enough that I was a thing not of my own world, bad enough that I was faced with a ghastly prospect of slow, lonesome starvation; but now I was beginning to realize that there were other dangers in this half-way world. Apparently there was more than one world to consider.

I had never thought that the old axiom could ever be broken: "Two things cannot occupy the same space at the same time." Yet here I was in the very act of disproving it, and I was learning to my horror that there were other beings accompanying me.

I reflected that it was much like the case of several radio broadcasts occupying the ether at the same time, not interfering with each other because of their varying frequency. I knew that I was not of the same frequency as the normal earth, and I prayed that I would be just as unsubstantial to these crimson clouds.

SUDDENLY the thin vibrating sound began again. This time it slowly increased in intensity and lowered in pitch until it became a low, pulsating throb. I stood motionless, unable to move, unable to think, filled with a horrible anticipation. Then, as the sound died away, a multitude of crimson clouds suddenly appeared in the distance.

They snapped on much as a series of lights are switched on at a control board, and took up a steady advance in my direction. The pulsations had died out when they reached me and yet their path had a thunderous quality for all the awesome silence. They glided past me, fiery crimson amebas, great twisting clouds, apparently without knowledge of my presence. I was breathing a sigh of relief when there came a shrill, cold scream, and all vanished.

Then I became conscious of the *impact*. It was something impossible to describe, for it affected none of the known senses. Perhaps it was only intuition, but I knew that I was being inspected by something. I quivered under the slice of those intellectual knives and the small hairs on the back of my neck twitched under that un-

endurable silent appraisal. That, and the ominous suspense.

I suppose I became hysterical at this point, for I turned violently and began to run. I dashed madly through the wall of the lab, out into Hamilton Walk, past the school dormitories to Woodland Avenue. It was a queer progress, although I was too far gone to enjoy my ability to speed through solids. I dashed wildly through a street car, smashed through the side of an apartment house smack into a dinner party. I remember how startled I was as I ploughed through that dinner table without so much as jarring a glass of water, but I hadn't a sense of humor just then.

And all the while I ran, in that semi darkness, I was conscious of the same intolerable scrutiny. It whipped me to the point of insane terror; it spurred my screaming nerves to frantic action; it racked my entire system with an unendurable horror until I was no more than a flailing structure of bone and muscle. I shut my eyes as I ran, the same way a child, afraid of the darkness, closes its eyes to keep it out.

When at last I was too exhausted to run, too exhausted to feel anything more than a dull fright, I pulled up sharp and opened my eyes. My heart was pounding in my ears and my chest was pumping in frightful heaves. But I was alone at last, and it seemed awfully good just to be alone.

But as I was regaining a little confidence and soothing my jumpy nerves, I sensed with another frightened start, that the low pulsation had once more begun. I listened intently, hoping that I was merely hearing the beat of my own pulse, but there was no room for doubt. I took a deep breath and looked about frantically, hoping for some means of escape, and then was almost blinded by a sudden onslaught of crimson clouds.

They surrounded me with their flaming brilliance that radiated no particle of heat; bombarding me with their chill, forceful intelligence that was all the more frightening for its unfamiliarity. They were alien, incomprehensible beings made gro-

tesquely horrible because they were outlined by the dim familiarity of my own native streets.

ONCE again that terrible scrutiny began, but this time it had purpose and direction. I could feel that they were vainly attempting to fathom, to analyze me and sum me up. I stood there sullenly, without the vaguest idea of what to do. Then, unaccountably, I screamed and jabbered a few broken sentences. They were the jumbled words that I had last spoken to Graham and I realized that I had been stimulated by these beings to speak.

One by one, they took my senses apart, the way a curious child tinkers with a clock. I spoke, I blinked, I breathed. I brandished my arms in inconceivable positions, walked, ran, sat, stood. Then when they had finished with my machinery they began tinkering with my mind.

I multiplied and divided for them, worked out the quadratic theory and illustrated a few Euclidian propositions. I worked out syllogisms and reviewed the history of the American Revolution. It seemed to me that I had never in all my life done so much haphazard thinking as I did in those few minutes.

It was the haphazardness that gave me my first hopes, that and my ability to retain a conscious objectivity. At first I had feared that in some way these creatures might try to harm me. Now I realized that I was as incomprehensible to them as they to me. They were operating my various mechanical parts the way a savage might toy with an automobile, without the faintest notion of the general nature and purpose of the mechanism.

They were pulling my levers and spinning my wheels without comprehension; nor could they ever hope to understand me, for we were of two different worlds. Best of all, however, was the fact that they could not reach certain portions of me. They could not affect my consciousness, my ego. At least I could retain my identity so that when they tired of the play perhaps I might slip away and...

The crimson clouds blinked out, and I sighed with relief. Then I gasped with fear, for I could feel myself moving. That is, I thought I was in motion. My body told me that it was being shifted about rather violently and I could feel my stomach tickle the way it always does when I am suddenly raised or lowered; but I could see from my dim surroundings that I was not moving.

The streets remained steadfast and still, and as far as my world was concerned I had not budged from the corner of 34th Street and Chestnut. It came to me, then, that these creatures were either progressing in a space that had no relation to ours, or else they were standing still and moving space around them. Either theory was possible and either would account for the paradox of my senses.

I tried to fend off for myself, but I found that I could not move a muscle. Just how I had been fastened down this way I could not tell, but it seemed that I had got the idea when first the animated clouds began their dissection.

THE motion continued for some time, a hurtling, jolting progress that knocked the wind out of me. Once in a while I could see human figures walking down Chestnut Street and it gave me an awful sense of futility to realize that I was only a few blocks away from the familiarity of my laboratory and yet so confounded distant.

At last the mad journey ceased and once again the low vibration that somehow was connected with their appearances, sounded in my ears. Then the blackness was transformed into a scarlet furnace and I found myself completely surrounded by crimson radiation.

"Doctor John Halday," I thought, without any volition on my part. I continued like an automaton, giving the details of my profession and the story of my life. Then, without continuity, I began an explanation of the basis and system of our life and at last launched into my theory about the relationship of these two worlds.

I told them that ours and theirs were co-existent in space, differing only in the matter of atomic structure and organization. As I continued in an elaboration of my explanation and a description of my transmission process, that little nucleus of ego in my brain that remained untouched wondered how many worlds there were that existed in the same universal space. I wondered whether it could be anything like those cunningly carved Chinese balls that contain many spheres, one within the other.

At last there came a pause and it seemed that those strange beings were attempting to digest and comprehend all I had told them. As I stood there, grateful for the comparative peace, I noticed them shudder once or twice with queer flaming contortions, and edge uneasily away. I could not for the life of me fathom what caused the discomfort, nor could I tell how I knew it was a discomfort.

Yet, somehow, there was an unmistakable air of irritation and fear in their nervous convulsions. They twitched again and those on my left drifted off to the right, leaving a small window of blackness in the crimson wall through which I peered intently. Then, far, far in the distance, I saw a small glow of greenish phosphorescence glimmer, and again there came that nervous shudder.

When I again turned to look at my captors, I saw that a change had come over them. All had taken up a swaying, hypnotic motion that almost forced me into a sympathetic, rhythmic swing. Then a single individual detached itself from the mass and slowly wafted in my direction. I stood, swaying numbly, and watched its gentle approach with a hopeless, panicky premonition. Slowly, the cloud drew close and gradually it threw its mantle about me. I felt no sensations at all at the contact, and could just sense the fall of its nebulous folds over my body.

Then the crimson cloud took up a confusing, whirling motion, spinning about the axis of my frame much the way a whirlpool of water spins over an opening vent. A burning thrust

stabbed at my side and I looked down to see a bright red spot gleaming over my flank. It grew steadily in intensity and as it waxed I saw that the whirling cloud was diminishing in size.

I could not tell what the purpose of this was, nor did I bother to make any guesses. I only knew that I was in terrible danger of something, that the unknown quantity in these garish-colored amebas was something to reckon with.

I STARTED and strained to dash off for freedom. I knew that it was hopeless to run, but my instincts knew only flight for self-preservation. I contracted my muscles fiercely, tensed my legs, whipped my body about to move from that infernal spot. And slowly the crimson spot on my side deepened and spread and burned. I knew that I was chained down, that it was impossible to move.

Then that bit of untouched ego in my brain wondered if I was really bound, or if these creatures had merely impressed the fact on my mind. Whether in truth I was fixed in space, or whether this was a hypnotic fixation. I attempted to calm myself.

I repeated over and over that I was not bound in space, that I was free. Within my brain I could feel the grim conflict between the two ideas. I clung steadfastly to the conviction that I was free, willed to believe it, clenched my teeth over my tongue and tried to drive the conviction into my heart. Then, inadvertently, I took a step backward.

With that one step I knew I had a chance. I turned about and sped off through that little window of blackness. The agonizing red slash in my side burned, stung and clung persistently. I turned my head and saw that I was still surrounded by the red creatures. Yet when I peered intently through the gray mist I saw that I was slowly moving through the streets in the direction of the University.

Just then I saw that spot of green flicker up and die away. Simultaneously, I felt the gnawing pain in my side die away momentarily and then increase. There was that same shud-

der repeated by my crimson hosts, but I noticed that the small window of darkness had perceptibly widened. Abruptly I made a decision, decided to gamble on the fear the crimson clouds had of that unknown green menace. Perhaps it might be some greater horror of this world which I should shun along with the red people, that I could not tell, but I knew they feared it and I gambled on the chance that it would not hurt me.

I veered around in its direction and ran with every ounce of my strength. The ego-force of those lurid creatures pounded in my brain, telling me that it was useless to flee, useless to do anything but submit. As I persisted, growing more and more fatigued, they took up that note and drummed in my brain a song of tired futility. The red cancer had grown to enormous proportions and burned with a crucifying intensity. The persistent pulsation of defeat and futility throbbed in my brain, and still I kept on, battering my way along like a mad elephant.

The creatures swirled excitedly. I could sense a note of panic in the urgency of the messages that pounded through my head. I knew that they were in a deadly fear of that green radiation that flickered in the distance. Some of their terror was conveyed to me. But by now I was careening along the upper class dormitories and heading in the direction of Hamilton Walk.

THE sob of my whistling breath sounded like a death knell in my ears and it seemed that I couldn't continue much longer. Then, a scant hundred yards off, the light flamed up and glowed for a few seconds brightly. As it died away I realized that it was something from my own earth, something of my world which these creatures feared. For I had seen the dim outlines of a room in the medical school building, a small room on the second floor, illuminated in green.

The flaming robe burned over my body from neck to ankles as I climbed up the steps of the Medical building, not quite sure of what I was to do.

It was impossible to pause even for an instant for I could not take the chance of being bound again. As I trotted through the marble lobby, wondering on which side of the building was that light, it flared up again almost directly overhead.

I cut over sharply to the left stairs and tried to think what might be going on upstairs that could create this device. I reached the first landing with a grim choking in my throat. I could hardly bear the savage knives that thrust through my head.

I plodded down the dark hall-way and wished to God that I could see well enough in the gloom to tell which of the labs was being used. I knew it was a matter of seconds now, for the grinding ache in my head was making me dizzy and I could feel my legs buckling under me. My head rang with weird sounds and I seemed to think and see red.

For an instant I had an evanescent sensation that I was beginning to comprehend the life and the structure of those crimson beings; then I saw the green light flicker up just beside me. Turning, I sprang and dived furiously, despairingly in its direction.

I seemed to pass through a mile of plaster and glassware. An unearthly shriek broke on my ears, and I caught a glimpse of crimson clouds twisting in tortuous shudders. I remember landing smack under an enormous X-ray tube and the astonished nose of Dr. Barton of the Roentgenology department. Then all went black.

I suppose I spent half an hour getting around to opening my eyes, but it was such a blessed relief to lie and hear the comfortable earth sounds again that I could not rush. When at last I did look about me I was so happy to see the cool white of the hospital walls and so overjoyed to feel the smooth sheets under my fingertips that I refused to wonder how I had got back.

I lay still, resting my tired body, and tried to convince myself that it had all been a rather remarkable fever dream. The sight of Graham's anxious face peering over the bed brought me down to earth with a bang.

"Hullo, Graham!" I said weakly. He smiled and nodded his head.

"Well? What went wrong?" I demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "Or everything; depending on the way you look at it."

"I'm pretty tired," I groaned. "You'll have to do the talking for awhile."

AND he began to talk. This boy whom I had once thought unimaginative had done the prettiest bit of thinking and some of the fastest work that I have ever heard of. When I had dashed out of my laboratory he had not bothered to try to follow. He had reasoned that something extraordinary must have driven me to such behavior, and that I probably would either return safely or look for help if in danger.

He knew that he alone could never find me in the city at night, so he phoned every man in the university whom he knew to be working that night and told them the story. Most of them thought he was drunk, but all of them were sufficiently impressed by the intensity of his voice to listen and to agree to watch for me.

Thus, when I fell into the X-ray room at the medical school, old Barton had been more or less prepared and had phoned Graham. I had to laugh when Graham ruefully described the labor of getting my unconscious body back to my lab.

"It was awful!" he said, "I got Barton and two others to help. We put you on a mattress and grabbed the corners. But you oozed through every minute and we would have to stop and roll you on again."

"Never mind about that!" I croaked, "Tell me, how in blazes did you reconvert me to a normal atomic structure? I thought I'd never get back."

"Oh, that was easy," Graham smiled, "Remember how I began figuring as soon as you regained consciousness after being put through?"

"Yes, yes . . . well?"

"I realized that I had no idea what

your atomic structure was, so that it would have been impossible to set the transmitter to pick you up."

"I'm no freshman," I grumbled. "Why all the explanation?"

"Anyway," he continued, "even if I could have set the transmitter to disintegrate you properly, I didn't know the difference between your structure and the normal; so it was impossible to set the coherer properly to allow for the difference."

"Will you get to the point!" I cried. "Or must I guess?"

"All right!" he said hastily. "The answer came when I remembered you had said that the apparatus consisted of two duplicate sets. In other words I had a coherer and transmitter already adjusted to allow for the problematic differences because they had originally created it. The only trouble was that they were backwards."

"Backwards?" I asked.

"Why yes. Don't you see? The coherer was adjusted to your atomic structure but it should have been a transmitter. So I made it one."

"I thought so," I muttered. "You reversed the machine!"

"Sure!" He grinned. "Then the transmitter was already adjusted to reconvert you to normality, so I turned it into a coherer. It took me a helluva time to figure it out, but I had your notebooks with the wiring plan and—well, here you are, safe and sound!"

"Yes," I answered, trying to brush something from my eyes.

I was thinking of many things: Of the X-ray luminescence that had frightened away the crimson horde; of the small, small zone of safety created by that little glow; of the long trip from the medical building to my lab and the long wait until Graham had transmuted me back to normality and safety.

I was wondering what had happened to my body during that time, wondering whether it was fatigue or a crimson entity lurking in my soul that gave every object I saw a scarlet aura or haze.

"Yes," I answered, "safe and sound!"

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

TODAY'S headlines serve as the most potential source of inspiration for the science fiction writers of tomorrow! And we can prove it.

For example, it was the glamour associated with "Bring 'Em Back Alive" Frank Buck that inspired the Gerry Carlyle series by Arthur K. Barnes. Mr. Barnes thought it would be intriguing to write about the various strange forms of life existing on distant planets. And he was right—Gerry Carlyle, the female huntress who roams the nine worlds collecting alien creatures for the London Interplanetary Zoo, proved a big hit with our readers.

A few months later Henry Kuttner decided to chronicle the exciting experiences of the movie-makers of tomorrow. Thus the Hollywood-on-the-Moon series was born.

You've probably followed the rollicking exploits of the Judge Hardy family in the films. Wait a few issues and one of our popular authors will introduce you to the Abbott family of the future. You'll be fascinated by the story of one man's family and the experiences encountered in a novel spaceship-trailer. Watch for the first of this series in an early issue.

And so it goes. Science fiction writers have but to saturate themselves with the world around us and they will be able to write of imaginary worlds.

REPEALING THE LAWS OF PHYSICS

THE laws of physics state firmly that it is impossible for any one object to be in two places at the same time, or words to that effect. To Alfred Bester, winner in our amateur prize contest, that law meant a challenge. An interesting story could be written in which that law was shattered, he decided. **THE BROKEN AXIOM** is the result, and we hope you liked it. Here's what happened behind the scenes:

One never knows where the original idea for a story comes from. I suppose **THE BROKEN AXIOM** was lurking in the back of my mind for some time, in one form or another, before an incident brought it to my consciousness. Probably, if one were familiar enough with fantasia and science fiction, he might be able to point directly to the story from which I may have unconsciously cribbed the idea. Thank heaven I have no conscious guilt of any theft.

At any rate, the story began with an argument. At a discussion with some friends, someone mentioned the old playwrights' cliché—that if you create a set of characters and place them together, they'll work out a story for you by their own inter-reactions, characters, etc. I scoffed at the idea, being more or less a realist, and asked coldly whether this person thought every writer was like the author who inadvertently created Pirandello's "Six Characters" . . .

"It's ridiculous to expect the mind that subjectively creates certain characters to become objective by mental juggling and stand by as a mere observer," I said. "That's baloney!"

"Then how do you write?" challenged my friend; and that stumped me completely. In that circle of aesthetes I was ashamed to admit that I didn't have a theory about writing and I knew it would seem lame to say: "Oh, I just plain write when I get an idea." So I concocted a little something on the spur of the moment and said that I created a central paradox as a sort of major premise and then worked the story out on that basis.

"As, for instance?" badgered my friend.

"Oh," I hazarded. "For instance, I take a central character and give him a strange quality like walking through walls. Then I work out the succession of situations that this quality would lead him into, tack on a reasonable explanation beforehand . . . and

Thank God they all laughed at me and let the topic drop . . . but that was the inception of **THE BROKEN AXIOM**.