

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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The Coming of M. Alkerhaus

BY ALLISON V. HARDING

THE extraordinary thing about it was the girl. She was a big girl, strongly built, with an expressive face that was also pretty, now a little defiant with what she had to do, as though it was against her inclination to speak to him. But she did and called him by his first name, although as he looked at her, her eyes nearly level with his—he was tall but she was nearly his height—you could see from his face that he knew he had never seen her before.

It seemed strangely right, though. The picture of him walking leisurely along on a downtown sidestreet only a little less aglitter than the main thoroughfares with movie and restaurant signs. You learned that it was a day-off for him and unusually hot for early spring. He'd been in the park earlier, lying on the grass, watching the roaring boys and the giggling girls rowing on the lake. He'd had his tiny portable radio with him—to listen to a snatch of concert or news or whatever. He was still carrying it with him now, swinging it in a warm, sweat-moistened hand.

And then she stood in front of him. Blonde, curling hair, broad-shouldered, large but perfect figure, her flowered dress—she was blocking his path. He stepped to go around her. That was when she spoke, as though driven to do it and in spite of herself. She called him by name. Next, as though by agreement, they fell into step, and he forgot to be as amazed as he should have been. Her name was Barbara and you know that something inside of him nodded

as though it had been aware of that too all the time. He gave her a cigarette and she lit it with strong, capable hands, leaning against the side of a frail newsstand. The proprietor came bustling around the side to see what had shaken the flimsy sides of his little stand, but his angry words died at the sight of the two big young people. They went away laughing together.

THEY went familiarly along the hot, crowded sidewalks as though they'd walked the breadth of the world together. They both sniffed deliciously at the smell of hot roasted popcorn; chortled at the spectacle of the midget in a midget car arguing with the traffic policeman; stopped in front of the music shop, mutually touched with nostalgia as a record gave forth with a sweet version of "If You Were The Only Girl In The World."

Of a sudden he took Barbara's hand, squeezed it. "Come on!" She never asked once where they were going. Not even when they reached the garage and he took his small, last year's convertible out, but slid in beside him comfortably onto the leatherette seat.

"Too hot to stay around here. Let's drive out to the country!"

"It's a wonderful idea!"

They weaved through the crowd and noise, hit the Tube, and finally came out on one of those dim-getting-dimmer roads that leads directly away from the city. As they drove, it began to get cooler. After a while they began to climb foothills. Barbara

For after all, the past may be more readily forgotten than the future!

Heading by JOHN GIUNTA



John Giunta

flicked open the top of the tiny portable. An all-night record show was playing "If You Were The Only Girl In The World."

Neither of them said: "Funny," but of course they both were thinking it. He knew before he turned his head that Barbara was looking at him. She was humming with the radio. When he put his hand out, her hand was already there. He stopped the car. Took her into his arms. He kissed her and it was all the things that a kiss should be and more. All the things people write about, the people who have never experienced it and never will. This was the dream come true.

Finally they drove on. Up a desolate mountain road he had never taken before and chanced on now by accident. Dark, forbidding. It seemed they were nearing the top of the world. Finally the bumpy, dwindling road reached the crown of the summit. Ahead, dimly, lay the descending trail. They were very close to the stars and the night itself.

Barbara nestled against him—but straightened as she felt him stiffen.

"What's that?" He pointed to a rocky promontory that stuck out some ways ahead of them on the mountain peak's side. Barbara looked where he pointed. She turned back to him.

"I don't see anything, darling."

But through his eyes there was the faint suggestion of someone, a dark bulk, silhouetted against the lighter horizon of the sky.

"We're not the only people in the world," he shrugged finally. "Maybe some local spooners like it up here too."

They embraced again and he started to talk. About how strange the whole business was, like fiction. He felt—and wasn't it trite to say it—as though he had known her all his life. He had so much he wanted to say, and yet, yet there was the quieting conviction that she *knew*, she *understood*, and that words between them were unnecessary. Of all the things he wanted to say, he spoke of very few. But always they were of a like and congenial mind. This could not be true, he said out loud. But it was.

They sat that way for a long time. Staring out into the night, looking back the way they'd come, the dark miles that stretched

between this precious hill and the roaring hot, noisy city they'd left hours earlier. Looking back too, they told one another, of the useless past moments of their lives—before they'd known one another. And so the dialogue went.

AS they sat and looked at the sky, a wondrous finger of light appeared on the farthest horizon. It was faint-silver at first. As it fanned out, it grew into darker, redder shades. Finally it came to resemble a giant bubble of multi-colored light. The encore came fractional seconds later; the sound of thunder rolling towards them from miles away, like colossal waves breaking on some distant shore. The far-away sound was muffled as the burst of light was diffused over the long way they'd traveled.

As they watched, wordless, other huge bubbles of light appeared here and there on the horizon, to the left and right of the original burst. It was like watching the kaleidoscopic growth of some new world, a multi-colored panorama that belonged in imagination or dream, anywhere but here in our prosaic twentieth century night.

Finally they turned their wondering faces toward one another. Only then did he flick open the top of the small radio. There was an announcer—one of those tired all-night emcees from one of the small just-out-the-city stations. . . .

But for once he was not discussing the merits of Goodman, Condon, or Kenton. . . . instead the voice was tense, unmistakably scared . . . the words, the phrases came to their unwilling, unbelieving ears . . . *"a catastrophe which officials believe could be caused only by the multiple explosion of atomic bombs . . . can only presume that some unidentified foreign power . . . a state of national emergency . . . authorities ask that all those who are . . . medical services . . . so far . . . no word from Washington but we expect . . ."* At that precise point the radio went dead . . .

* * * * *

IN THE tiny, private projection room, young Stockton could fairly feel the tension mounting in the figure next to him as the film unfolded before them. President Trump of Magna-Acme was not pleased, Stockton could tell. As the reel continued,

he could sense from the uneasy shifting next to him that Magna-Acme picture's head was not enjoying himself.

Finally the picture came to its shocking, climatic end. The lights came up. Frank Stockton looked at his employer. The other man was grim of face.

"This time, Alkerhaus has gone too far," the president wagged his head. "I could forgive that sort of unconventional love affair. Boy meets girl, you know what I mean. But I couldn't possibly release a film like this. The public wouldn't stand for it. It would shock them, scare the youngsters, you know what I mean, Frank?"

Stockton nodded. "It is a little ominous. I wonder *why* he goes in for these outre ideas. I'm still a little uncomfortable. Doesn't leave a very nice taste in your mouth."

"Thing is," the big executive chewed his lip miserably, "M. Alkerhaus is mighty important to us. I can't very well tell him it's no good. And that isn't even it. Damn, Frank, I never get anywhere with that man, trying to argue with him. I always have the feeling he's laughing at me."

The two sat in silence for a while. Frank leaned back and contemplated the ceiling of the small projection room. The picture had bothered him too. It was amazing what an ability Alkerhaus had to do just that. To bother you. To get under your skin. To make you gulp or cry, or—like this one—scare you plenty.

"Who are these people? The man seemed more than vaguely familiar."

"The actors?" Trump shrugged. "You know as well as I do the way he works. None of our regulars. People he gets, digs up here and there particularly for the job."

It was true. Although in some of the pictures M. Alkerhaus had done he'd worked with M-A stars, usually he preferred to find his own cast, claiming that he knew exactly what he wanted and often they were not to be found on the casting lots. That was another bone of contention between his company and himself. But a man with Alkerhaus' ability usually won his points. Other companies would have jumped at the chance to get him. And his pictures made money. To the astonishment of the gray, ulcers-and-whiskey little men of the trade

who thought in their staccato way (the only way they ever had) that they knew all the answers to What The Public Wants. That was before M. Alkerhaus came along.

M. Alkerhaus was a genius. Even his enemies thought so. But he was a frightening little man. He frightened you with his eyes. And he frightened you with his thoughts. His thoughts were not the same as other people's; they couldn't be because he was so very different.

He might have been a fisherman in the Red Sea, or a drifter along the quays of the Seine or the proprietor of a "poorly" store somewhere across the world. Instead, he was M. Alkerhaus, movie creator and director.

HOW he had popped up at Magna-Acme pictures was something of a mystery even to those few who felt they knew the most about him. But there he was, small-statured, with set pieces of pale blue for eyes, the black cape he was never without, like a villain from the "silent" days, one detractor sneered. He admitted readily enough that "M. Alkerhaus" was a taken name. It might just as well have been "P. Okretech" or "N. Tobisech." Something unusual as the man—or nothing!

Stories were somewhat confused, but the most reliable had it that Alkerhaus had just appeared at Magna-Acme, demanded an interview with its president—and that he had immediately got it was as entirely believable to those who came to know him as it was unbelievable to those who know the ways of movie companies, and Magna-Acme particularly. He then proceeded to exhibit a short film he had brought with him; presumably a sample of his work. At any rate, J. C. Trump, President Trump of Magna-Acme had emerged from the private projection room greatly excited. He spoke to his staff members of "startling new techniques." He waved his hands enthusiastically for more than an hour. Alkerhaus was given a contract.

But these things, the mysterious way he suddenly appeared from nowhere, and then getting one of the top jobs in moviedom, these were not a measure of his greatness. It was his pictures. His ideas and the way he developed them. To begin with they were startling, amazing—and more than all the

other adjectives of the industry rolled together. They surprised and amazed people who'd been working in the medium for years. And although many, in the beginning, claimed that the techniques were "far above the head of a public which demands cheese-cake, excitement, young love, and very little more," surprisingly enough, movie-goers began to take to Alkerhaus productions. Soon his films rated high and were moving higher on the "earnings" sheets. So even his enemies came to admit that M. Alkerhaus had something. Just what, nobody quite knew or dared to put into words!

There were times when President Trump was worried. And he would call M. Alkerhaus into conference. But that never seemed to get anybody anywhere—especially Trump. His prize performer would still go on making the sort of pictures he wanted to make.

Frank Stockton also worried. Frank was Trump's vigorous aide-de-camp, young and enthusiastic, who "yessed" often enough to keep his job but not so much that he lost his personal integrity.

Stockton got into movies as so many do. He'd been a writer of only moderate success. But he'd written something that Magna-Acme and some of the other studios bid for.

He woke up one morning to find he was considerably richer by virtue of a movie sale . . . and the property of M-A. He'd been miserable working on obscure grade C serials, but he'd been paid nicely. So nicely that when he came disgustedly to resign, Mr. Trump (in person) had sent for him. Next thing Stockton knew, he was a sort of combination "leg" man and confidante of the owner himself.

THEY made a strange duo. Trump on the other side of sixty; short, fat and dark, with a round, grimacing face. Stockton was young, not more than middle thirties, tall, sensitive and still well able to take care of himself on a tennis court or at the Trump Magna-Acme conferences.

From the beginning, young Stockton had championed Alkerhaus. The strange little man was precisely what Hollywood needed, he felt. For in a colony built of, and on, superlatives, there was little that was truly

superlative. But M. Alkerhaus filled that description.

Early in his association with Magna-Acme, other directors and "powers" in the company, recognizing the small, black-caped eccentric as a threat to their own painfully built-up prestiges, attempted to discredit Alkerhaus, his suggestions and his work.

Although the man personally repelled and rather awed him, Frank Stockton, more than once found himself alone standing at the side of M. Alkerhaus—and it was almost as though he too were the butt of thinly concealed sneers and derisive looks.

ON ONE particularly memorable occasion, there had been a heated discussion on the question of utilizing pseudo-surrealistic effects for a scene in a horror picture Alkerhaus was doing. One scene showed the villain standing atop a cliff, swearing vengeance on pursuing mobs below. He is holding in his hands a branch, still green as when he'd torn it from the tree to use as the only available weapon. Then, in the picture, the branch fades and becomes a child.

"Now *really!*" argued Sam Opal, a rival director. He looked and talked his disgust. "We're going *forward* in the cinema, not backwards! This is silly, unreal. Impossible!"

The other Magna-Acme importants joined in to support Opal.

M. Alkerhaus seemed not to listen, and this further infuriated his critics, particularly Opal.

Finally President Trump stirred the man into a reply. The somber, tiny figure arose, in black cape as usual—"silly affection" they'd sneered—and said simply:

"Gentlemen, the expression of an idea is not restricted to the rules of this day alone. As for reality, well, who is to say what is real and what is unreal."

That phrase stuck in Frank's mind. Stuck in the days and weeks and months that followed during which Opal did his best to make trouble for M. Alkerhaus while the others temporized.

Then came Opal's tragedy. And this broke the man completely, taking from the scene Alkerhaus' most vociferous, powerful critic and enemy.

YOU may recall what happened. It made page one. How a demented escapee from the county asylum had crept into Opal's house, stolen Opal's only child, his little daughter, from her crib. The helpless youngster was later dashed to her death by the madman from a mountain side as a wary posse closed in. Some papers carried on-the-spot pics of the deranged man holding Opal's child just before he hurled her to her death.

But,—and what a coincidence everybody clucked at the time—there was this particular scene almost exactly like the real case in a latest horror movie. Too gruesome! Just to think. Made by the company that employed Opal, too. Wouldn't it be just *too terrible if he . . .* but no. The director was not Opal—M. Alkerhaus, the credit read. After all, coincidences can go just so far, can't they!

Stockton got an uncomfortable feeling every time he viewed a new Alkerhaus picture after that. It was not something he could definitely put his finger on. There is a discomfort, an uneasiness that is so vague that it is not possible to pin it down to one causative.

Young Frank, in his capacity as assistant to Trump, viewed all the new films in the tiny projection room just off the president's office. He and Trump saw many of the movies before other staff members. And he and Trump talked them over.

It was that way with No. 67-A. No. 67-A was an Alkerhaus. And so, as it had become Mr. Trump's habit, he would give the film a very careful once-over. The executive was bothered by a recurring thought. And although they never got together to discuss the thing, it was the same imponderable that worried Stockton. Beyond their admiration for his undeniable skill and the great and valuable asset of M-A he was, Trump, like Stockton felt there was something here that did not meet the eye.

It was not that they thought of those things that are obvious and commonplace. Some producers and directors pad accounts, get into all sorts of snarls in the production of their pictures, and oftentimes some funny business in the finances may be demonstrated. But here there was another, totally alien factor. Alkerhaus, with his silent ways,

his knowing look that was not condescension, Alkerhaus with his unmistakable air of mystery.

ONE tangible Frank and Mr. Trump had to work on. Early in his association when, routinely and politely, the strange new director had been asked about his past; inoffensive questions, from whence had he come and so forth—he had replied curiously.

"Oh," he had answered with a wave of his small, yellow-skinned hand, "I come from a great many places."

But when one of the Board had insisted, he had said after a moment, "Paris."

The occasion arose later to check on that story. He was unknown in Paris. It startled Trump and Stockton, though they never mentioned it again. But no one ever found, either then or later just where Alkerhaus was from.

There were other only slightly less puzzling discrepancies. M. Alkerhaus would disappear, yes, literally disappear for days on end. Never, mind you, when in the process of doing a picture. Concerning such professional responsibilities he was meticulous. But in between, Trump or Stockton or one of the others would call up his place and there would be no answer. Alkerhaus would be gone. Gone from his house, gone from his familiar haunts and the circle of persons, none of them at all really intimate, who considered themselves the mysterious director's closest contacts. And then as unaccountably, he would show up again. Always bland, uncommunicative—and it would be as though the earth which had swallowed him had suddenly opened up its jaws and disgorged him.

But Magna-Acme knew they had something. In an industry that toadies to eccentricity, and in fact exploits it and puts a premium on it, M. Alkerhaus was certainly one of the more eccentric. He was also one of the most valuable. And that covers a multitude of eccentricities.

The strange director was, it seemed to most observers, rather more impressed with the seamier side of life. Witness his insistence on doing the horror film that so strikingly paralleled the Opal tragedy. He refused to be connected with musical comedies. Once he had been asked to direct

an M-A film starring Dorah Deline the "legs" girl and Tiny Trinket, popular child luminary. He had refused. No noise, no words. Just a flat "no." It had stuck only because at the time Alkerhaus was finishing a sea story in which took place a terrific sequence of two colliding ships. It worked out so splendidly that even Trump, who did not care for insubordination from any of his employees, forgot the "No" and decided "so works genius!"

The sea movie was another uncanny instance of the way M. Alkerhaus clicked with timely events. The famous and tragic S. S. Gillespie collision with a second passenger liner came just at a time when his sea picture was being released. There was a strange, almost preposterous similarity between fact and fiction, critics remarked.

AND this same correlation between the pictures Alkerhaus worked on and events to come was true. Not once or twice, but again and again. There was the famous and fabulous story woven about the railroad empire, "Steel Road to the Horizon." That took a long time to make. And when it was finally released some years later, simultaneously in the big cities, its opening corresponded almost to the month with the tragic crash on the Southern Union of the crack Coast Flyer with another string of Pullmans.

In Alkerhaus' picture, there was an almost exact replica of the train accident. There were other similar cases.

There was no wonder why then, that there was some covert pressure behind the scenes to get Alkerhaus to "brighten up" a bit and concern himself with things that weren't so morbid.

The conference with M. Alkerhaus about No. 67-A was three-cornered. Stockton, Trump and Alkerhaus. The president did not believe in the system used by many cinema companies of elaborate confabs, replete with all directors and executives of the company—and their relatives.

Jake Trump, with considerable beating around the bush, Stockton thought, finally came to the point.

He addressed himself to the director. "I don't feel that this company can release No. 67-A. I know you've worked hard on

it and for some time, but it's taken a turn that I didn't anticipate. Remember, Alkerhaus, we don't supervise what you do, so we're not responsible if something isn't in keeping with the policies of this company."

Trump paused to see how his remarks were being taken by the director. The little man had said nothing. But his close-set, remarkable eyes watched the president's face closely.

The head of Magna-Acme continued. "It's a splendid film from a technical standpoint. Frank and I got quite lost in the story and spirit. But, my dear Alkerhaus, we are not in business to scare the living daylights out of people. Remember quite some years ago that invasion from Mars business that frightened everybody so? It's bad, I tell you."

Alkerhaus inclined his head with that typical small motion of his. "As you wish," he replied. "I'm sorry you do not like it." The capable director fixed Stockton with his exotic eyes.

"It's not that we don't *like it*, Mister Alkerhaus," Frank Stockton hastily put in.

"Not at all," reinforced Trump. "We're not hidebound as a company but, well, with something like this we'd have everything from the women's clubs to the churches down on our necks. It's a little startling, you know what I mean? Tell you what, Alkerhaus, get started on something else. Sky's the limit. Do what you want. Take any of our people, take as long as you want. But let's forget about No. 67-A."

Alkerhaus smiled a little then. His old, wise face looking strangely unusual. "There will be no other pictures," he stated simply.

TRUMP reddened, gulped at that. "Now look here, man. I don't intend to be dictatorial. You know what I mean; now don't let's take this thing in the wrong spirit. If it's . . . in fact, I think we should. Yes. I think it's about time you got a substantial pay boost. I was talking to Frank. . . ."

"Whether you released my film or not, it was to be the last," Alkerhaus repeated. He rose, inclined his head again and walked towards the door. Trump rose too, then nodded frantically to Stockton, his face agitated.

Frank followed the director out the door.

He caught up with him just outside and they walked down the long corridor that led to the gate fronting the M-A motion picture building. He took the little man's arm gently.

"Listen, please, Mister Alkerhaus. Try to take a look at Trump's side of this thing. God knows we *hate* to have to worry about the silly reactions that the public manifests at certain types of films. But this is a little brutal, a little hopeless in theme. The people wouldn't understand. Now the last thing in the world Mister Trump wants is your resignation. Why, only the other day he. . . ."

"Stockton," the director turned opaque eyes upon the young aide, "shall I tell you the why of this situation? This was a picture I *had* to do. It was a picture that *had* to be done. Like all the rest of them. You will come to understand this. Especially you.

"And as for the rest of the world," he spread his hands wide, "there is good in many people, there is thought and action that needs to come out but which is being saved for a misty tomorrow. My picture would have made millions see that now is their tomorrow. If people had just a little time and no more, what wondrous things they could do with their lives."

The director would say no more but turned his mysterious eyes away.

It was less than a week later that the news came. Trump was still highly agitated by the loss of Alkerhaus.

"I keep waiting to see an announcement that he's working for Super-Productions or Twenty-First Century, Inc. I'll sue. I swear I will. Even Alkerhaus can't bust a contract like that!" The executive went back to plucking at his fingernails.

It was then that the message came through. Mr. Alkerhaus had died at his home the previous night of apparently natural causes! There was no elaboration. After the initial shock Trump quieted down. The nail-biting stopped. Finally the big executive allowed himself a smile.

"You know, Frank. Of course I hate losing him. But in some ways, this solves things. At least if he won't make pictures for us, he damn well won't be making them for a competitor!"

AND so it ended. There was a footnote and it created quite a stir for a while. On the day after his death Alkerhaus' body disappeared from the undertaker's. Nobody had a theory except the police. Theirs was that one of his fanatical fans had "hoisted" the corpse. This poor idea was the best one that anybody had. The episode was hushed up as police failures are and eventually forgotten.

Trump was no longer interested in the disposition of No. 67-A. Now that M. Alkerhaus was hardly in a position to make films for rivals, the executive gave the order to have it destroyed.

"Don't want to clutter up our files with stuff like that. It's not Magna-Acme at its best. Why, some of our boys might get the wrong idea and start dreaming up this morbid, fatalistic stuff themselves! Better forget it all."

But Frank Stockton, young and sensitive with thoughts other than just the making of money in his head, did keep thinking for a time. He'd always had a desire to know Alkerhaus better. The man did not invite friendships; he was as forbidding as midnight in a graveyard. But Stockton the writer—rather than Trump's aide-de-camp—was intrigued. But there were other things, other problems, and gradually the episode and the very name of Alkerhaus began to fade from his and many other minds.

IT WAS an unseasonably warm April evening that brought it all back. Trump had toted his money-made stomach trouble and high blood-pressure to the mountains. Stockton was at loose ends. He amused himself as best he could during the day; then in the evening it was a toss-up whether to go and see some competitor's film or go home. He was walking around the theater district when it happened.

Nothing up till that moment, mind you. Not a premonition, not a reminiscent chord. So that when it happened, it came all the more strikingly. A circumstance that speeded his heart, squeezed at his breathing—and felled those intervening years with the sharp, quick axe of sudden recollection.

She stood squarely before him, the blonde girl. A complete stranger, and yet as he

watched her full red lips form a word, he knew what that word would be. It was his name she spoke. "Frank!"

Then the other pieces fell in like a mathematical equation as Stockton toted up the "now" against the distant but stronger-growing memory. For there in his hand was the portable radio; and the same flowered dress over her big, perfectly proportioned frame!

As in a dream, they talked and laughed by the newsstand, at the midget, sniffed the popcorn; then they both paused outside the music shop and Barbara (she'd told him her name as he knew she would and what it was, too) turned to him as the record started, her lips parted, and even as he recognized with horror the strains of "If You Were the Only Girl in the World," even as an awful fear choked him, there was this something else, and even stronger. Barbara. Her face, her lips that he wanted suddenly to kiss, there in front of milling hundreds on the hot city sidewalk.

"Reminds me," she said. He nodded. Murmured something about nothing like a song to take you back. Kept saying to himself, which is the dream . . . this or that other? This or the memory? He grabbed her hand then. Painfully aware that he was acting out his prescribed part.

Some of him, still heeling to reason, to a dreadful sense of his own terrible responsibility, made him make a frantic attempt. But the policeman he spoke to gave him a hearty slap on the back and winked broadly at Barbara standing just out of earshot.

"Now, don't you be worrying, me boy. Nobody's gonna *blow up* you nor me nor this city or they'll hafta answer to officer O'Reegan. Maybe I should tell your missus to count your beers the next time, eh?"

IT WAS done, the pathetically futile attempt. And now Frank rushed on through the streets, keeping the timetable of the deadly schedule, Barbara at his side, obedient, happy. He knew, as he stopped at the garage and got his year-old convertible, that before they had driven many blocks toward the Tube—oh yes, how *nice* it would be on such a hot spring evening to drive into the country—that she would turn toward him and say:

"I can't understand all this, Frank. I mean, coming up to you and knowing your name. It's well, *strange*. And I'm *not* the kind of girl. . . ."

Of course you're not, Barbara, he thought to himself. But on this fated night, you couldn't help yourself, any more . . . any more than I could. He let the car almost drive itself. The Tube and then the highway leading away into the country on the other side of the river, the lights becoming less frequent, the road narrower, Barbara oohing at the cool air.

The things they talked about were the things he knew they would talk about. What young people do talk about, but with a subtle difference. If she said something or gave an opinion, it was his thought almost exactly and the way he felt about things. And vice versa. It was uncanny.

They drove on through the night, going higher and higher. And at precisely the right time Barbara flicked open his portable. Of course it was playing "If You Were the Only Girl in the World." Neither of them said, "Funny," but they both thought it.

He stopped at the side of the road well out into the black countryside. He put his arms around her, around her firm, strong shoulders, and he kissed her and it was as perfectly right as he knew it should be.

Finally Stockton turned into the deserted almost indiscernible rutted trail that led up the mountain. They stopped on top. They sat and looked out at the night, the blonde girl's head on his shoulders.

He saw then the figure on the outjutting promontory, and Barbara, feeling his stiffening muscles, looked too, but, as he knew already it was to be, she saw no one.

He said his piece about "local spooners" and they sat happily together watching the darkness and the stars. Frank had quieted the turbulence within him. It was too far along now to stop anything. He allowed himself to be carried flowingly along those familiar halls of time and events.

SO THAT he was not the one to start when the sudden fanning living streaks and bubbles of light shot up on the horizon, followed by an ominous rumbling. Barbara's face was pale as she wondered. Her fingers clutched his. Then he flicked open

the portable in time for the hysterical announcements . . . followed by silence.

"It's here the thing leaves me," Frank thought. "Here the pattern—my part of it—is broken." He helped the trembling girl out of the car, supported her as they watched the horizon ablaze. They watched for a long time and the light and noise even at these many miles was incredible. The planned pattern had left *him* now, though, Frank knew. It was elsewhere. Everywhere. He could visualize the cities, *all* the *cities* and *towns* and *nations* and *places* across the world. Ablaze, razed, destroyed as dying countries retaliated against each other blindly even in their final death throes.

Frank Stockton turned then, he knew not why, and saw the dark figure stalking toward them on the road. He instinctively put Barbara behind him. Then in fractional seconds he recognized the black cloak and the wise, timeless face. A face that for the brief moment he beheld it fully, had set in it all the hope and hopelessness, the wisdom and suffering of generations dead, born and unborn.

It was M. Alkerhaus. The old man walked by, slowly and with dignity, and disappeared down the trail toward the blazing horizon.

Stockton became aware of Barbara tugging at his sleeve.

"What is it, you're acting so strangely, as though, as though you *saw* someone?"

He shook his head. For a long time he held the trembling girl in his arms.

"What'll we do," she kept saying over and over.

He did not tell her of the things he knew. Knew, knew, knew—just as he had known since years ago about this night . . . even if he had forgotten for so long. He could see it all, the pictures in his mind more brilliant than the fiery scene actually before them. The flaming capitol and countries of the world, the everywhere that was no more—even now as they stood unharmed on this wild mountain.

Barbara turned her tear-stained, shocked face back to the city and said, "God, Frank, thousands, millions must have been killed and *we were just there!*" He squeezed her tighter.

She was silent for a moment, watching the ring of flames that almost circled them like Brunhilda's bier.

"Do you suppose, do you suppose *anybody* got out of there alive . . . do you suppose *anybody's* left. . ."

Frank lifted her face and kissed her, tasting the salt tears on her lips as he did, but feeling her shaking die away.

And as they stood like that, the song came into his mind. It played in his head around and around. Their song. Truly. He pushed her gently from him and hummed the first stanza. She smiled and hummed the last.

" . . . and you were the only boy. . . ."