

SECOND ENDING - A NOVEL OF ETERNITY

FANTASTIC

JUNE

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

THE COSMIC RELIC

A Fantasy Classic by E.F. Russell

THE FACE IN THE MASK

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ALEX SCHOMBURG



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NOVELET

THE COSMIC RELIC
By Eric Frank Russell 80

SHORT STORIES

A SMALL MIRACLE OF FISHHOOKS AND STRAIGHT PINS

By David R. Bunch 51

THE FACE IN THE MASK

By Estelle Frye 54

I.Q.

By Mack Reynolds 63

ONE BAD HABIT

By Arthur Porges 122

SERIAL

SECOND ENDING

By James White 6
(First of two parts)

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 5

COMING NEXT MONTH 129

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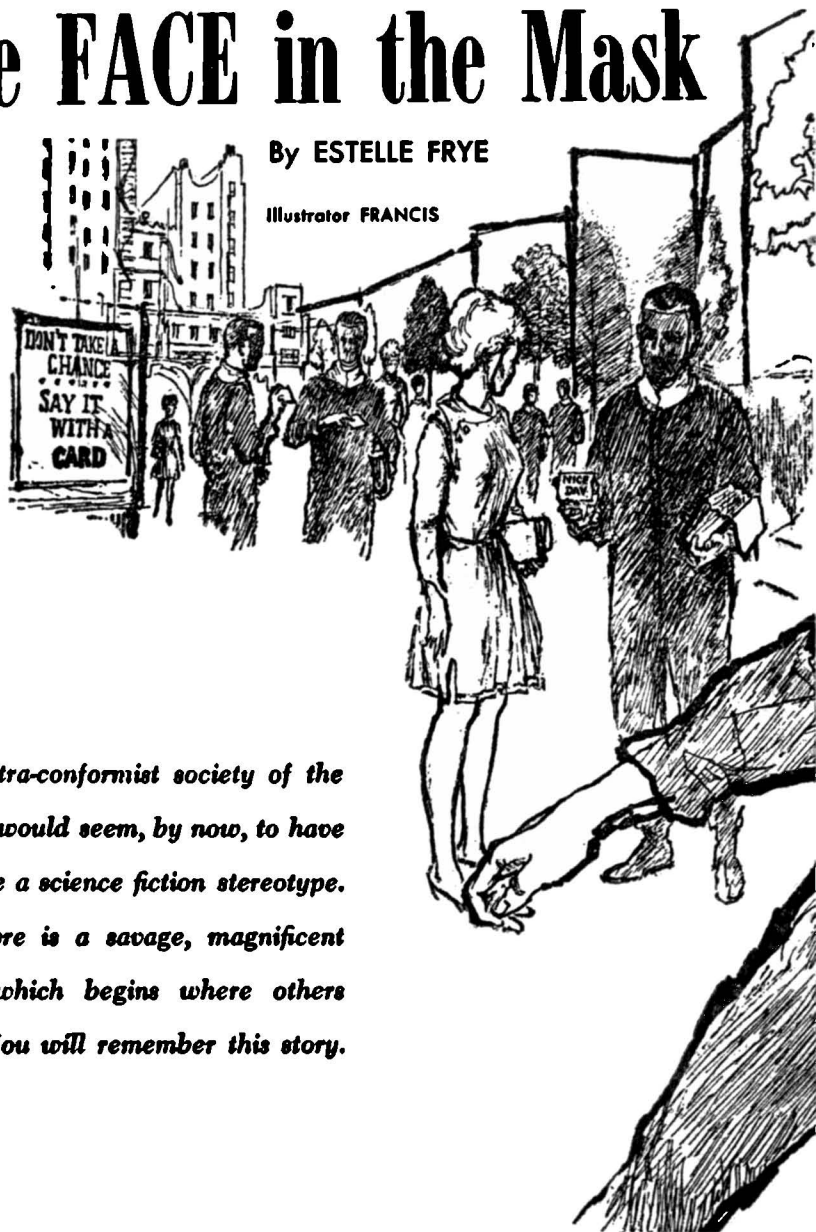


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the FACE in the Mask

By ESTELLE FRYE

Illustrator FRANCIS



The ultra-conformist society of the future would seem, by now, to have become a science fiction stereotype. But here is a savage, magnificent story which begins where others stop. You will remember this story.



JOHAN PEEL snapped the shaver back in its slot and pulled down his masker. He was late this morning. The Voice gave a melodious whir and said, "You now have ten minutes to catch your car, John." He slid the masker down his cheek, smoothing the pale gray plastic over his face. Halfway down it sputtered,

and the liquid came out in uneven drops.

Blast! He fumbled for a fresh tube, took a precious minute to refill the masker. Stripped off the right cheek and started over. Sometimes it could be bonded together, but he didn't want to take a chance on being caught in public with a crack showing.

He gave himself an embarrassed grin at the thought. The mirror with its subliminal message flashing, "You are a handsome and virile male," reassured him. He finished masking, then stared at his face again. His eyes, alive in the gray mask, stared back at him, seemed to ask, "Who am I?" His lips parted slightly and he leaned forward as if to listen for the answer, but there was no reply except the message from the mirror repeating itself a thousand times a second.

The Voice, now strident with alarm, said, "You have five minutes to catch your car!"

He whirled and ran into the sleeping room, snatched up his gray coverall with its gleaming white collar, and threw it on.

It was not until he was on the station platform, surrounded by the grayness of the other masked and coveralled men and the pink that was the women, that he realized that instead of his briefcase of cards he held a piece of toast in his right hand. His stomach, resentful at being left

without breakfast, had betrayed him into grabbing the toast from the breakfast slot instead of the card case from its rack.

Oh, well, he thought, *what difference does it make if I don't talk? I never say anything anyway.* Shocked at himself, he glanced hastily at the city mural painted on the walls. The subliminal hidden in the skyline soothed him. "I am going to catch a clean and speedy train to my pleasant place of work," it said. The tension in his stomach subsided. He saw a woman eyeing the piece of toast and stuck it in his pocket.

ABOARD his car he hurried to the men's compartment to eat his toast. As he chewed the dry stuff he wondered resentfully why he should have to hide, though of course he knew it was because chewing might crack his mask. He glanced in his wrist mirror, then went down to the Artists' Car.

Hawkins sat in his usual seat. He nodded at Peel, flipped open his briefcase and pulled out a card reading, "Nice day."

Peel nodded uncomfortably. Hawkins clearly expected some response, so Peel cleared his throat and averted his face. Scarcely moving his lips he murmured, "Forgot my cards."

Hawkins' hand dived into the case, came up with a card read-

ing, "So sorry to hear it. Know how you must feel."

Peel stared out the window at the Painted Forest. He tried to pick out the pine trees he had worked on, but it was impossible with so many others. He felt tired and out of sorts. Why shouldn't a man be able to find the trees he had painted? He purposely kept his eyes from the sky even though he knew the subliminals there would make him feel better. That was the trouble with working for Scenery. When you were onto it all, it took some of the pleasure out of it. He knew the messages by heart: "I'm lucky to have such a good job." "I'm well paid." "I'm happy." At the little country village they changed to: "I'm going to work hard today." "No wasted time." "I'm glad I'll be doing my part."

The waterfall came into sight. *There was something wrong with that fall*, he thought irritably. He wasn't in water himself, but every time he saw that cascade leaping down the rocky cliff he felt vaguely disturbed. He frowned at it till it was out of sight.

He turned to find a small man across the aisle looking steadily at him. Peel's hand strayed over his mask. Was something wrong? Who was the fellow? Why was he watching him?

No matter. Today, he decided, he was going to paint a droop-

ing branch on one of his pines. He could see it in his mind's eye. He would tip the needles ever so slightly brown. After all, trees shouldn't always be straight and green. Why didn't they understand that? Not much, or the inspector would catch it, but just a little. He could see just how it would be. Then he'd be able to spot it from the train, too. For the first time that morning he felt good.

The Car Voice called his station and he got up and went to the exit, brushing past the Security man on duty. It seemed to him that this man, too, stared at him. His right hand felt strangely empty without his card case.

At work he sketched in the pine tree as he had planned. Glanced covertly around, picked up his brown paint and mixed in a touch of gold. Delicately he lengthened a branch, drawing it downward, touching the tips of the needles with golden brown paint. Just a little, to show the branch was dying, the needles ready to fall.

IN the men's cafeteria at noon the music was on and the Voice would cut in with announcements: "Bowling teams will practice at 7 P. M." or "We have now had 26 days without an accident!" but still there was a barely audible sibilant undertone. Someone was talking. Peel

looked around, but whoever it was wasn't moving his lips. Cards flashed as men held them up to each other.

At his table it was the ball game. "I think the Dogers will win," read Johnson's card. "Want to bet on that?" Martin's card answered. Johnson held up a five dollar bill. The other nodded. Without his cards Peel was out of it.

There was the little fellow who had stared at him on the train, seated with a big burly man. Peel passed them on the way out. The smaller man held up a card, "How's everything going?" Peel shrugged, showed his empty hands.

"I'm Mitchell," the man said in a low voice. "Who are you?"

Peel tried to look away, but both of them were staring at him fixedly, their eyes bright, and his own glance was caught and held. "Peel," he mumbled, then looked around to see if anyone had noticed him talking. He ducked his head and hurried back to work.

Just before quitting time the supervisor handed him a card: "You're wanted in the office."

There were two of them waiting for him, Security men, their eyes as cold and bleak as their gray coveralls.

The first card read: "You spoke to someone on the train."

Peel turned his face aside. "I forgot my cards."

"Do you forget them often?" the first one asked aloud.

Peel shook his head. *Do many people forget?* he wondered.

"Do you know a man named Barr?"

He shook his head again.

"Are you sure? You were seen with him in the cafeteria."

"Everyone's in the cafeteria," Peel mumbled. "They all look alike."

The second one pounced. "Shouldn't they?"

"No. I mean, yes."

The second one wrote busily on a pad.

"What do you talk about?"

He shrugged. "Nothing."

The two rose; the interview was over. The first one handed him a card. "Remember," it said, "we have ears everywhere."

The lips in the gray masked face parted slightly and he stared straight at Peel as he asked, "Do you want to be declared PARIAS?" Then they were gone.

Peel shuddered. To be PARIAS was to be cut off completely—one would even give you a card.

He hurried back to work. The gray figures around him seemed to turn their backs. Had that man on the train—Mitchell—reported him? Peel tried to catch someone's eye, but to no avail.

Running for the car after work, he saw Mitchell again, caught his sleeve.

"Who are you?" he asked in a low, urgent voice.

"Who are *you*?" Mitchell retorted and turned to join the same big man who had been with him in the cafeteria. Together they got on the train.

Peel rode back to the city sunk in gloomy thoughts. Getting off, he made his way to one of the moving sidewalks on each side of the downtown street. The walk was crowded; he had to shoulder his way on. The men and women standing there were silent except for the faint hiss and click of cards being exchanged. Their bodies seemed tense and stiff, and he noticed that most of them would ride to the end of one walk, then transfer to another going back the other way. Like him, they seemed reluctant to go home to their boxy little rooms. At each corner a Speaker was on; music swelled to a crescendo as the corner neared, then dwindled away in the center of the block.

EVERYONE stared at the lighted shop windows. A display of white-collared gray coveralls blazoned, "Everybody's a white collar worker now!" For the women there were pink tunics, window after window of them. "Be a rosy girl," the message flashed electronically. As far as Peel could see, the women were all obeying; their pink tu-

nics fluttered in the evening breeze.

The card shops were still open. In one window a placard asked: "Why take a chance on saying something yourself? Let a card say it for you." Below was a giant blown-up card showing a woman crying. Printed above the anguished face was the legend: "You forgot our anniversary!"

At the end of the store section Peel stepped off the sidewalk, wandered off afoot. On a side street an old woman approached him, pulled out a tattered card. Holding it before him, she peered up into his face. Her mask was half peeled off, the skin underneath dirty and wrinkled. "Can you spare a dime?" the dog-eared bit of cardboard read.

Instead of revulsion Peel felt pity for the woman and even admiration. How had she kept from being institutionalized?

He thrust a silver dollar into her hand. "Here," he said brusquely. "Enjoy yourself."

She gaped at him, and her tired eyes filmed with tears. "Mister," she said in a hoarse and creaking voice, "you're the first person who's spoken to me in weeks. Aloud, I mean." The tears ran down her cheeks. "You don't know what it means. Thanks for the dollar, that was nice of you—but thanks for talking even more."

"Say," he asked, "do you re-

member when people used to talk?"

"I'm not that old, but I remember my father used to tell me when he was a boy people spoke right up, said whatever they wanted to. Then . . ."

A door slamming nearby made them both turn in alarm, and when Peel turned back to the old woman she was gone, already almost out of sight in the gloom as she scuttled up a side street.

He looked back toward the bright streets behind him. Silhouetted against the light he saw two figures, one small, one large, coming toward him. He hesitated, then plunged on into the darkness.

A HEAD of him, light streamed from a doorway. The sign over it read *Vordy's Place, Talking and Eating House*. He had heard of them but he'd never been in one. They were not really illegal, but they were on the thin edge and every morning he read of one being raided.

He heard footsteps from the corner and ducked in the door. Inside, the air was heavy with smoke, the tables crowded. He sat down at a small table. Spotlights focused on a small stage and a group of girls came on, dancing. At the end of their dance they pulled off their masks, threw them up in the air. Their faces were painted, chalky white

cheeks and red lips. The men in the room roared with approval.

Peel slumped in his chair and drank wine. He stared around through the smoky haze. What kind of people were these who talked, ate in public, watched women unmask? A girl walked up to his table. One of the dancers. With a negligent air she handed him a card: "Want to buy me a drink?"

"Sure," he said.

"Well, look who's talking," she drawled. "I didn't think you were the type." Her eyes were knowing, the lids blue-painted, the eyelashes gilded.

He drank some more wine, the girl drinking too. Her pink tunic clung to her body. Below it, her knees curved softly as if they were boneless under the soft and silken skin.

"You're beautiful," he said. "without that damn mask on." His hand reached out to touch her knee.

A sweet smile curved her lips, then froze into a grimace. She barely moved her head, and Peel looked around.

Two figures had paused by the table. "You're Peel, aren't you?" the smaller one asked.

"What do you want?" Peel got to his feet.

"Sit down, let's have a drink together," the big one said.

Peel's mind raced. Were they Security men? He felt knowing

and crafty. "Order me a drink," he murmured, "I'll be back in a minute." He walked toward the rear of the room, down the hallway to the toilet, kept going till he came to the kitchen, through it out to the alley.

No one noticed him. He raced down the alley, made his way by side streets to the edge of the city. He was afraid to go back to his apartment.

Nearly every one these days lived in the city in the towering beehive apartments. Great walls of painted scenery surrounded the town and lined the speedways. He found a gap in the wall where a board had crumbled and earth had been dug away. Probably children had played here, had scrambled under the walls to adventure. He wriggled through, stumbled across a weed-grown field to a narrow road. The glow from the city behind lit his way. Here and there he could see abandoned houses slowly decaying. When he was tired he walked over to one of them, pushed open the rotting door and slept on the floor within. He woke in the morning, stiff and sore. His clothes were rumped, his beard was sprouting against his mask.

HE wandered on through the countryside till he came to a little shack of weathered gray wood. An old man sat on a bench

in front of it. He wore no mask, his hair was long and shaggy. He had a white beard and was dressed in a shapeless coverall. He was barefooted, his feet gnarled and horny.

Peel stopped. "Good morning," he said. The words sounded shockingly loud.

The old man opened his mouth. "Are you the Beast from the East?" he asked. His eyes brightened and gleamed.

"I come from the city," Peel said.

"Sodom and Gomorrah," the old man said. He got to his feet, bent to pick up a crooked stick. "Don't come near me."

"Wait," Peel said, "I just want to talk. You don't wear a mask."

"Every man wears a mask," the old man said. "The day will come when they shall be ripped from them and the face of the beast revealed." The shaggy head lowered. "Are you a spy?"

"I'm just a man," Peel said. "Here, I'll take off my mask." He was making the ultimate gesture—here under the open blue sky to unmask, to talk to a stranger. The air was sweet and clear. Peel lifted a hand to his face.

"No," the old man said. He cowered away. "I don't want to see your face. Go away. You're a beast set upon me!"

Peel ripped off his mask. "I'm just a man," he said again.

But the old man covered his

eyes with his hand and brandished wildly with the stick.

"Go away!" he screamed. "Go away!"

Peel turned and walked off. Behind some trees he took out his pocket masker and spread a film of plastic over his face.

He might as well go back; there was nothing for him out here but decay and madness. He trudged back to the city, scrambled back under the wall, went to his apartment to clean up. He was surprised they weren't there waiting for him.

He wasn't going to sit there and wait. Let them come for him at work. He picked up his card case, caught the train, almost empty at this time of day.

No one spoke to him or passed him a card. He came to the waterfall, looked at it with dull eyes. "Who am I?" he thought suddenly.

As he walked through the locker room a small figure moved to intercept him. At his elbow was the big man, his shadow.

"We've been looking for you," the big man said softly. "My name is Barr. We want to talk to you."

Numbly he let them lead him aside to a corner. "Why me?" he asked.

"We saw you noticed the waterfall," the big man said. "That was my work. Mitchell here is in rocks. And you're in trees."

A WEEK later Peel again watched out the window of the car as it sped toward Scenery. There was the grove of birch trees he'd painted, their white trunks standing out amidst the evergreens. They had calculated they would draw attention.

He transferred his gaze to the other passengers. Hawkins lifted his hand and rubbed it irritably over his face mask. There was a little stir of movement as other hands lifted to faces. The subliminal on the birch grove, installed the night before by Barr and an inspector from electronics, read, "This mask itches."

Peel smiled secretly. Even the Security man was poking at his cheek.

Further on was the outcropping of limestone, Mitchell's work. "I'd like to talk to somebody," it flashed. There was an anxious stir in the car. No one spoke, but several men pulled out cards, shoved them at their seat mates. A throat was cleared.

New York wasn't built in a day, Peel thought. Tomorrow he'd speak to someone, aloud. Tomorrow, or the next day, he bet they'd answer.

The last secret subliminal was Barr's waterfall. "Who are you?" it asked as the false water poured down the painted cliff.

Peel sat up straighter. *I'm John Peel*, he thought proudly. *John Peel. Myself.* **THE END**