

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1948

Cover by Boris Dolgov

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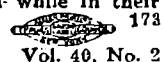
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*Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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# The Frightened Engineer

THE motorist was pleased with his shiny black sedan. It was new, within a week to be exact, and he congratulated himself as he headed into the feed road that led to the new Trans-state Turnpike that he hadn't had to slip in several hundred dollars as extra "bonus" for the vehicle.

Too, it was a nice day. The kind of sparkling clear early winter morning on which a drive anywhere, and certainly along a perfectly engineered and scenic highway, is a joy for the most jaundiced veteran of the wheel.

It was this overall feeling of self-satisfaction and contentment, probably, that caused the driver to do something he rarely, under any circumstances, would consider. Still, the man by the side of the road had a workman's honest face. The shiny car slowed and stopped and the ride-thumber, a man in his early fifties with a tanned face, jumped in mumbling thanks. The motorist shifted gears, enjoying the surge of power as the automobile sped from the ramp into the three-lane smoothness of the turnpike.

Not more than a few minutes had passed before the passenger said, "Thanks a lot, mister."

Already the motorist was doubting his generosity, for the hitchhiker had brought into the car with him the unmistakable and strong odor of liquor. A sidelong glance revealed that the man had been drinking.

That only goes to show you it's a bad practice to pick hikers up. Once you do, you can't stop suddenly and say, "I've changed my mind. I'd like you to get out." Especially when your passenger's been drinking. That's when you get the nasty experiences. Oh well, the motorist philosophized. He had only a hundred miles or so to travel on the

pike. That would take considerably less than two hours.

THE passenger had something on his mind, and by nature he was obviously loquacious. A loquacious man with a few drinks aboard needs very little encouragement.

"I helped build this highway," he announced. "Yup." He looked across the trim grass divide and squinted up the white concrete stretch ahead.

The motorist pricked up his ears. There was no telling. Maybe this guy had worked on the pike.

"It was no easy job," the workman wagged his head. "It took a lotta men to do it includin' the greatest engineer of 'em all. Didja ever hear of him? Angus Mullen?"

The name was vaguely familiar. It was associated with a bridge or a skyscraper.

"Had to get Mullen in before they were through, they did," he confided, "an' it was all ta do with Hill 96!"

The way he said it, with the brightness of the morning and the sunshine, it was ominous nevertheless.

"Old Hill 96," the hiker mused, almost as though to himself, but there was a look in his eyes the motorist with a quick glance ascertained that had nothing to do with imbibing.

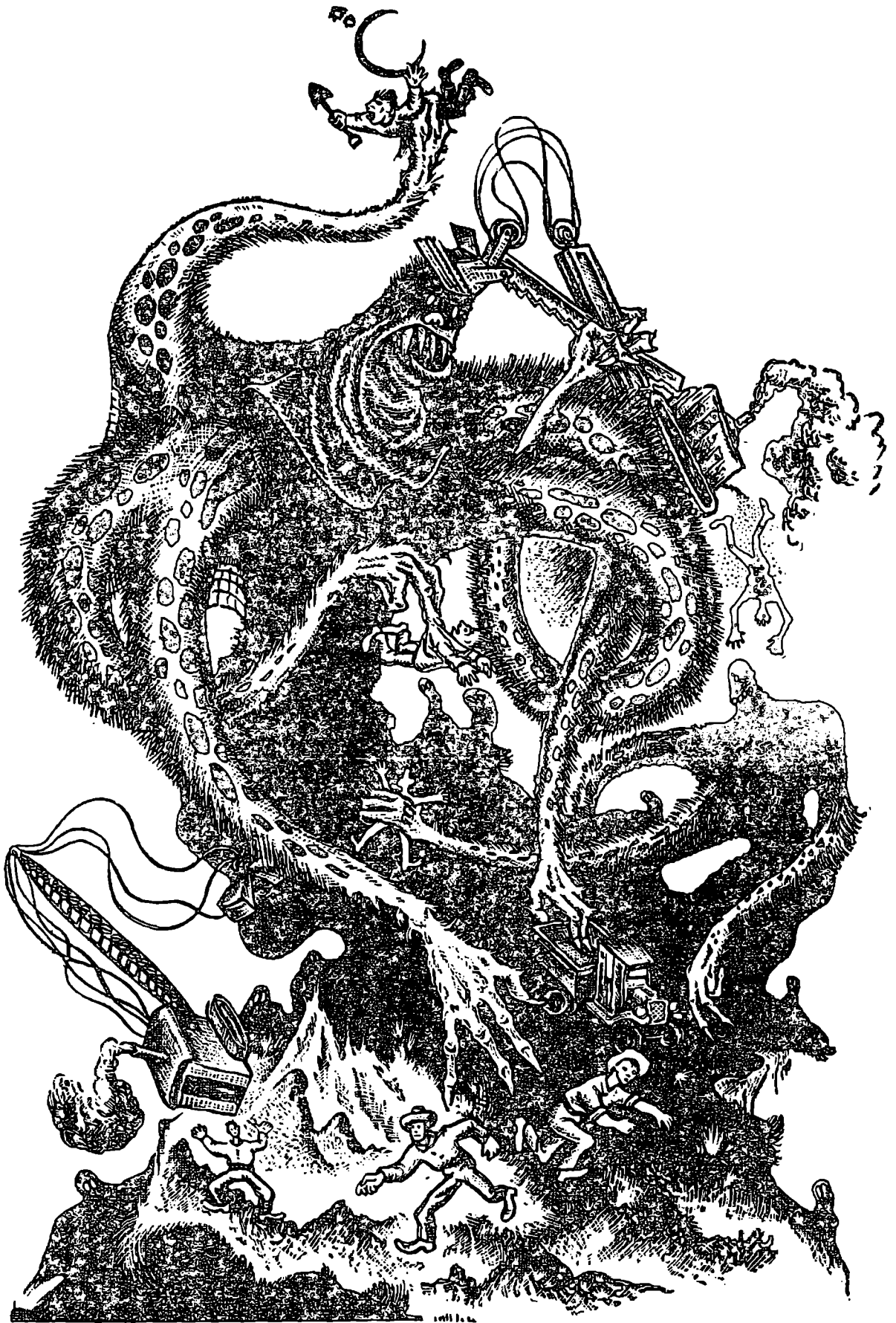
"It's up at the other end," he continued. "You know the idea on these here highways. Keep her straight. Make all your curves gradual."

The motorist had decided by this time that his companion was far from drunk. He'd had some all right but he was evidently not drunk in the real sense of the word. His speech was coherent. It made sense, at least it seemed to—

"Ya don't do much in the way of going

*How do we know what is down there, deep . . . inside the earth?*

BY ALLISON V. HARDING



Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

down into valleys or up over hills," the ex-construction worker advised. "Ya build your valleys up to road level; ya cut your hills down. Ya go through 'em! So it's a constant business of blastin', cuttin'; levelin'. That's the tough part, mister. Anyone can lay the cement on, ya know, after the gradin's been done. Hill 96? That was the headache on this whole job. That's what I'm gonna tell ya about.

"See, I was in on the buildin' of this Trans-state Turnpike from the beginning. I was there, mister, up at the near end the day the governor came out and they handed him a shovel and he took the first dig. Ya know those ceremonies. Oh, that was a long time before Angus Mullen came on the scene. You wouldn't think a highway would need the services of the biggest-shot engineer in the country, would ya, and certainly nobody thought so in the beginning.

"Things went swimmingly for a while. And then? Then we came to Hill 96. Ya see, we number these things. There's valley this number and hill that number. We were a few days ahead of schedule when we hit old 96. Now she didn't look tough from a distance. Not even much of a hill and nice and gentle lookin' with a lot of greenness and shrubbery and trees. The plans called for the road to blast right through the middle of it. Fac', it seemed too bad. Sometimes even a construction worker feels bad about fillin' up a nice glen or rammin' through what was once somebody's property, but if the plans call for it, you do it, and anyway the men who go aroun' buyin' up for the right of way get the real headaches. That's not our problem.

"But Hill 96 sure was—with a vengeance. Ya see, 96 didn't take to us kindly. 96 wouldn't be blasted, 96 wouldn't be leveled!"

**T**HE public ride on a spanking new highway, sometimes admires it, rarely thinks of it as a splendid engineering feat, never considers the many construction difficulties that had to be overcome in the making. Joe Creel, construction foreman, on the new Trans-state highway contemplated that between puffs on a cigar and looks at map blueprints.

"Let 'em take their shiny autos and come

over here now," he grumbled to himself. "Let 'em worry about bulldozing and gettin' the dynamite up front fast enough and the waste carted away."

As his father had said to him once years ago when Joe had evinced an interest in following in the paternal footsteps, "Construction is tough, Joe. You waste time plannin' against things that never happen, and most the time you're held up by what you didn't expect—and couldn't help even if you did!"

Still, I shouldn't kick, Creel thought to himself. So you put on dirty clothes and sometimes from a distance nobody can tell you from a ditch-digger but it's a good living, a mighty good living, and he liked working with the land. He liked the feel of earth or rock beneath him. He liked building Nature's patterns to man's and he liked the finished product, the highway, just long enough to keep him contented until he could look around and find something else to do.

And so the Trans-state rolled like a great brown snake at first, a swathe through the countryside, taking trees and hills and valleys in its stride, and dressing its tail up, as the boys back down the line poured concrete into the molds, preparing for the final finished surface that would speed cars safely at sixty and seventy miles an hour across the country.

They were three or four days ahead of schedule to the county border when Ed Foley, lantern-jawed, square built, reliable, with whom Creel had worked before, lumbered into the temporary shed that never spent two straight nights, Joe thought satisfiedly, resting on the same piece of God's earth.

"Joe," said Foley. (These two had known each other long enough to be on first-name basis) "We've run into just a little bit of a problem up ahead."

The construction foreman looked up. "I thought we figgered it would be clear sailin' to the river. That Timms' Valley, maybe? I figgered the bottom belly might be kinda soft. Take up more to fill her solid?"

"You're still in a horse and buggy," Foley replied with pride. "We're way beyond Timms'. Guess ya haven't been out today yet."

Creel shook his head. "What is it then?"  
"Hill 96."

Joe consulted his maps, identified the spot with a thick finger. "That it?"

Foley looking over his shoulder, nodded.

"Funny," mused Creel half aloud. "Supposed to be more an earth mound than a real hill. Soft stuff. Didn't figger dynamite on that. Is that what's wrong, Ed? You need dynamite?" The other man crinkled up his broad freckled brow.

"It's not that, Chief. 96 is soft. Why, ya could take the stuff out with shovels and wheelbarrows."

"Well?"

"I don't get it," Foley said. "I'm sure I've been figgerin' right, but the more we take away, the more there is! It's like the hill didn't wanna give up!"

Creel snorted. But no armchair construction foreman, he, and within the hour he was standing with Ed Foley just below 96 watching the thundering, groaning shovels attack it, their tooth-lined scoops steam-driven into the soft rich-looking earth. Drive, scoop, swivel, dump. And then repeat, over and over.

"Looks okay," Creel shouted over the din.

"Sure," Foley said dubiously. "Looks okay. But c-mon over here and just look at this stuff."

THEY walked to the first slow rise of 96. There from the trucks hurrying up and down the incline, some of the earth from the heart of the hill itself had spilled. Foley picked up a clod of it. It was thick, dark, spongy material.

"Wassa matter, Ed?" Creel harangued good-naturedly. "You turnin' young naturalist on me? The shovels are workin', aren't they? We're eatin' earth outta her, aren't we? Watcha worryin' about?"

Creel eyed the promontory of the hill which still must be leveled before the broad bottom of the silver highway-to-be could arrow through it.

"Forget it, Ed. Just keep 'em chewing." He nodded at the steamshovels and walked off despite Foley's doubtful shake of the head.

The next day Joe Creel was busy at his figures. Supplies had to be certificated for the bookkeepers, so it wasn't until the day

after that the construction boss had a chance to get back on his road again. He rose early as the inspection tour was to be meticulous. One of the company owners was coming up to the "front line" on the morrow to see what progress was being made.

Everything was fine—until Creel crossed beyond Timms' Valley and looked ahead.

"Hell!" burst explosively through his teeth.

This was a fine thing, with the Big Boss coming up within twenty-four hours. They'd been three days ahead. That was two days ago. And Hill 96? Why, damn it, it looked just the same when he'd been up here all of forty-eight hours ago.

Creel yelled for Foley and the other man finally came. A worried, distraught Ed Foley with lines in his face that the construction foreman had not noticed there before. Foley's obvious distress tempered Joe's blast. He held the reins on his temper and asked as quietly as he could:

"What's wrong here, Ed? We're not movin'."

The other man shrugged shoulders already sloped with defeat.

"Honest, Chief, we've been slugging ever since you left here day before yesterday, so help me, but there's always more *stuff* (Foley leaned on the word) to cart away."

"Hell, that's impossible!" Creel burst forth, his angry eyes flicking to the work area ahead. "That hill's the same size it was when I was here before!"

"I know it seems funny," Foley's voice was low and his eyes almost pleading, like a faithful dog's. "I tell you, Joe, it's kinda scary, and you know, some of the men, they're gettin' the idea they don't wanna work on 96! One of 'em claims he started to go down in the soft earth."

"You mean like a bog, or quicksand?"

"He claims," Foley's voice went even lower, "it was like somethin' around his ankle pullin' him down."

Creel snorted, "If I didn't know you, Ed, I'd think you'd been——"

But Foley went on, interrupting him as though he'd hardly heard the implication.

"Tell ya, Joe, it's like Hill 96 was alive!"

The other man put his hands on the foreman's arm, "Stay up here and watch, Chief. You'll see what I mean!"

Creel nodded. "I was goin' to anyway."

Fat chance that he'd miss a trick with the Big Boss coming up. No lousy little black blob of a hill was going to mar the record his gang had compiled through much tougher land than this!

He went to work with faithful Ed Foley always at his elbow. He directed, he yelled, he pleaded, and he snarled.

The bulldozers pushed and the shovels reached and gouged, and always the trucks came and went full to the brim with thick sponge-like earth.

LATE in the day Creel gave the word and Foley passed it down the line. "The foreman wants dynamite!" and the precious powerful little sticks came up in their neat bundles. The fuses were laid, the men scattered, and the muffled, thundering roars went off in the still late-afternoon air. Black earth geysered up again and again and the shovels came back, attacking now, as machines and men worked on overtime.

It was twilight when Creel sat down on a Mack truck's running-board. One by one the machines moved away to rest for the night and the men left too, hot, dirty, sweat-streaked. Creel looked at Foley and then at the hill. Old 96 was silhouetted against the purple evening sky and it was as much of a hill as it had been before that long day of fighting and digging and dynamiting and carting away.

Creel spread his hands wide and his eyes were very dark and wide.

"I've never seen anythin' like it," he breathed. "That's the toughest devil of a hill I ever tackled!"

Foley smiled the smile of a man who has been exonerated.

"It's a devil of a hill, all right, Joe, and it's alive!" Foley left then, vanishing into the darkness, leaving behind those words in Creel's head, "It's alive!" and he stared fascinatedly at 96, and in his mind's eye the innocuous-looking mound of earth seemed to rise and writhe a bit in the gloom.

Creel shook himself out of that state of mind. He'd have another go at it tomorrow of course, but in his heart of hearts, he knew that he'd tried everything today; he also knew that Ed Foley was a competent work-

man, a man who knew **all the** tricks and who wouldn't have overlooked a single one in the construction slogger's battle against natural barriers.

Creel's mind hopped to other possibilities. This was no longer strictly his realm. With his methodical, practical reasoning, he saw it this way: If 96 would not level, if it would not humble itself to the usual tools and methods for whatever reason, then that was that, and yet the alternatives were breathtaking. The road-to-be routed around this point which had so finely been surveyed by the draftsmen who'd laid out the course would be a major task. The line would have to be broken somewhere back of Timms' Valley. Remembering that no precipitous curves are allowed in this type of modern highway engineering, it would take days to gradually bend the Trans-state over a new bed through Timms' Valley and thence around 96.

That would mean, Creel quickly figured, not a few days behind schedule but weeks, maybe more. It was a move that the boss would never make.

Creel shook his head and walked back to the pick-up parked on highway earth. He knew the construction company owner would be there tomorrow and he knew he would have to tell him the problem frankly as Foley had done, and he suspected that the Big Boss' reaction would be very much the same as his own.

This was an important job for the company. There was but a hill standing between them and success. It was as Creel had predicted to himself. The boss was pleased with the progress of work, pleased mightily when the little cavalcade of official party reached 96. The boss slapped Creel heartily on the shoulder.

"Right on time, Joe! Right on time. There's going to be a nice bonus in this for you!"

And then even before they'd gotten out of the car, Creel told the story as straight as he could. How they'd been stuck at 96 now for three or four days, and the boss' large florid face became a delicate pink and then white and then purple. He got out of the car without a word. He walked through the groups of workers with Creel at his side, but he said nothing. You don't berate a

subordinate, you don't call him incompetent in front of his men.

The boss looked at the hill and snorted, and Joe Creel couldn't help but remember and sympathize, and the boss, who'd come up the hard way in construction, took off his fitted coat, rolled up his sleeves and started to yell orders.

THE trucks ran and the shovels dug and twice as much dynamite was used. At the end of the long day the construction owner clambered down 96, the dark soft earth staining his trousers up to his knees. Finally he shook his head, rolled his sleeves down, wiped his brow and put his coat back on, and he drove with Creel back to the nearest company headquarters.

There he perused copies of reports, reports on right-of-ways, on the topography of the land, surveyors' notations. He turned from them finally and said to the foreman, "You understand, Creel, that starting tomorrow we're one day late, stuck right up at that hill. The next day it'll be two days, and so on."

Joe nodded miserably.

Changing the path of the highway is also impossible. The time element makes it prohibitive. Aside from that, we're contracted for to do a job along a certain prescribed right-of-way. We have nothing to do with the course the excavation must take. We merely follow it."

Creel again nodded. The boss sat for a long time looking out the window. Joe cleared his throat.

"Don't you think somebody else oughtta take a shot at this? I mean, get an engineer to look the thing over. 'Course I know my men, my own assistant, is as good as they come, but still——"

"Just what I was thinking," said the boss. "No reflection on you, Creel. I saw for myself. There's something tricky here. I've had in my mind the possibility of some volcanic process, and yet you'd think they'd have let us know." His voice trailed off. "I think you're right though. No reflection on any of us or the company. We'll get in the best person we can. What do you think of Angus Mullen?"

"He's the best," Creel replied.

It was a name associated with many of the

great engineering feats of our generation. Bridges, skyscrapers and viaducts, in addition to highways in many sections of the country.

"If I can get him, I will."

"And as soon as possible," breathed Creel.

"But pass the hill in the meantime," the boss ordered. "Forget it until I can get Mullen on the job. Send your men on ahead. That way we'll save time until we see what can be done about making 96 behave."

Creel nodded and left the company's office with more hope than he'd had in a couple of days. True to the owner's orders, he turned the men loose beyond Hill 96 and they were a happier lot pushing ahead beyond that black bump that stuck up in their path. The hope rose a little more when Creel got a telegram from the company boss announcing that "Mullen has accepted my offer. Will join you this week."

CREEL'S first glimpse of Angus Mullen was a disappointment. The man was tall and spare, his face even leaner than the rest of him. Close-cropped graying hair sat on a thin skull of a head. Like everything else about the face, his eyes were hollow, and when the two men shook hands, Creel was caught by the fire in those eyes, their intensity. There was something in their quality that spoke of the marvels Mullen had accomplished and would still accomplish.

Without preliminaries Creel sat down in the shack, spreading maps and plans around on the table and explained to Mullen precisely what the problem was. Here and there the engineer interjected a remark or a question, and Creel realized with an almost uncomfortable admiration that the man's mind was even more intense and alive than the eyes.

"Well," said Mullen when they'd concluded the conference, "so that is it." He almost seemed to clap his hands in anticipation. "I shall look forward, Mister Creel, to seeing your Hill 96 tomorrow, the hill your worthy assistant has called 'Alive!'"

Mullen showed detached interest the next morning on their drive up to the forward reaches of the highway excavation. Creel, with pardonable pride, pointed out

here and there some of the difficulties that had been overcome in the grading and filling and leveling, but the eminent engineer, although nodding courteously and occasionally putting in a generous word of commendation, seemed only half-attentive.

His energy showed itself though, when before their vehicle had fully stopped rolling at the base of Hill 96, he leaped from the car, and with long-legged strides went forward. Creel strode rapidly after him until they both stood on the earthen sides of the promontory.

"Hmm," said Mullen, and again, "Hmm. You've got good equipment, I see."

"Nothin' but the best!" stoutly maintained the construction forman. "We've got the tools and the men."

"You told me you tried dynamite several times?"

Joe nodded. "No good."

One of the giant shovels was working at the crown of 96, and Angus Mullen with amazing agility, clambered to the side of the steam monster. He watched the operations intently, now and again bending abruptly to scoop up a handful of the thick rich earth, frowning down at it and squeezing it between his fingers. He watched three, four, finally five truckloads of earth—filled and carted away.

**T**HEN he motioned the shovel operator to cease while he scrambled down into the hole that had been made. His quick thin hands poked around like a bird picking for worms. When he climbed out of the depression, Creel wondered if the engineer noticed that the hole was not as deep as it had been a few minutes earlier. Mullen was too full of thoughts and actions to be bothered by a question, Joe thought.

"How about water? Have you tried water wash?" the tall spare consultant queried.

Creel admitted no, and Mullen went down the incline waving his arms and shouting. In a few hours the equipment was on hand. Heavy hoses of flood diameter were run from the nearest available outlet up the hill, and the water spilled over the peak. Muck sluiced down 96 and was carried away by hastily built and strategically placed wooden troughs.

Before Creel's startled eyes the profile of

the hill's peak began to change. It was first imperceptibly and then definitely lowering, leveling off somewhat. At the end of the work day, the construction forman was of a happier frame of mind. This guy knew his business! That damn lump of earth was giving in! Whatever it had been, peculiar formation or pressure from underground, still the water wash had begun to work.

His own crew of men were knocking off with the louder oaths and noisier remarks of the more optimistic. Things were beginning to go their way. If they kept rolling, Joe Creel could guarantee that the Trans-state would be back on schedule before many a day had passed.

The consulting engineer and Creel parted company that night with a congratulatory handshake. Joe was filled with admiration for this man. But the spare Mullen wagged his head and offered a word of caution.

"It looks a little more hopeful, Mister Creel, but days taken singly in this business can be deceptive. We must wait and see." And then he went off for the trip back to the nearest hamlet where his room was.

The foreman had got into the habit of sleeping on a rough army cot in his shack. It took too much valuable time to go back to a nearby town and get a regular room, and he didn't like to be that far away from the job.

**H**E was asleep, trying hard to pretend that his hard cot was an airform mattress when the shaking forced itself into his consciousness. He woke with a start and stared up into the face of Ed Foley. The light was still small from outside. It must be very early. But what streaks of gray from the morning did steal into the little shack's sleeping cubicle touched Foley's face and lit it enough for Creel to see the expression there.

"What is it, Ed?" Creel almost instinctively was out of bed reaching for his clothes, thinking of wash-outs, explosions and the thousand and one other tragedies that can occur on a job of this magnitude.

"It's one of the shovels, Chief. It's disappeared!"

Creel stopped in mid-dressing. "What!"

"I'm tellin' you," the words came faster now as Foley's face worked. "The big one



that was working up at the crest of 96 yesterday. You know, where you and Mullen was standin'. We left her on the hill and she's not there this morning. I thought I heard a noise, Joe——"

Foley always stayed as close to the "front" as he could, pitching a tent Indian-style, wherever the forward wave of excavation needed him.

"Anyhow, I got lookin' around. You know, there's been some highjackin' of dynamite and tools, and this big steamshovel has gone!"

"Now what dirty so-and-so would try to cop a steamshovel on us!" Creel exploded finishing his dressing.

They raced for the little jeep that Foley had come back in: It wasn't until the motor was running and they were jouncing along the unfinished highway that Foley put in his final point.

"Chief, nobody stole that shovel."

"How do you mean?"

"Unless it was Paul Bunyon with the biggest damn derrick in the world! We backed her a ways evening about halfway down Hill 96. Well, there were the tread marks where she sat, kinda mixed up as though she'd wriggled a bit in her sleep. But there's nowhere the shovel could've gone! That water sluicin' washed the tracks right off the bottom of the hill and around it. Joe, there are no new marks comin' off 96 on any side! I've looked. That shovel just disappeared on the hill!"

It was as Ed Foley had described, Creel found as he circled the hill in the brighter light of full early morning. The heavy treads of a steamshovel are unmistakable, and coming from the hill at its bottom there were none. Other shovels had been at work here and there and their tread marks were easily traced either to or from the giant machines, but nowhere were there marks to indicate where the missing steam monster had gone.

"You know as well as I do, Joe, no one making off with two tons of shovel, if anyone had such a crazy idea to begin with, would come around afterward and cover up all the tread tracks even if they could."

Creel said nothing. There was this place halfway up Hill 96 where the marks of the steamshovel's belted shoes stood plain and

deep. The "threshings" that Foley had spoken about might have been caused by the operator swerving his machine from side to side for some reason just before quitting time, but the tracks began and ended in that one spot. That part of it was reasonable enough. The water wash certainly would have obliterated the ascending marks of the shovel.

**B**UT long after the water had been turned off, the shovel had been there. It could leave easily enough by someone mounting the cab, breaking the lock and driving off. It was a long shot that anyone could do this without being observed, but there it was.

Still and all, the machine could not leave without leaving its deep heavy broad footprints for all to see and follow, and there were no such and there was no steamshovel.

The impossibility of it all went around and around in Joe Creel's head, a head which before this job had been concerned with the prosaic problems of blastings and levelings, supplies and time schedules. The vagaries but not imponderables of breaking and removing earth and stone.

This business, though, was beyond the construction foreman as it was beyond Ed Foley, who stood behind him, white-faced and frightened.

Creel left Hill 96 with great rapid steps. His only thought was to get back to his phone, reach Mullen and get him up here as soon as possible, if that worthy were not already on his way for the day's stint.

When Creel reached his base of operations, jiggled the phone and put a call in for Angus Mullen, there was no answer and a few moments later, the engineer arrived at the construction camp.

Creel spilled out of his shack at the sound of the motor, and within a few seconds was pouring his story out. Mullen listened without a word. Then with silent concentration, he bade Creel take him out to 96 where he went over the hill inch by inch. The lines of his long thin face deepened. The eyes had an opaque far-away look.

He mumbled curtly to the foreman, "I'm going into town. I may be back late this afternoon or tomorrow."

Creel shrugged.

Mullen returned the next noon. He was

accompanied by a small, mouselike little man with a sharp ferret face. Mullen introduced the man as Mr. Simpkins and explained later to Joe that he was "a geologist and volcanologist," a person "of great ability."

THE little man presented a rather ridiculous spectacle, Creel thought. He wore an old-fashioned driving cap several sizes too large and carried a huge briefcase, filled, the foreman found when they reached Hill 96, with Government maps, land surveys and other statistical miscellany. But Mullen followed the little fellow around as he fussed about the hill consulting his charts, examining the mound and its makeup.

Creel thought he got it after a while. The famous engineer must have decided that this formation that had given them so much trouble was a volcano. That was it, Creel reasoned. When he tried to ask questions during the day though, Mullen discouraged them and the mousy volcanologist kept his own counsel.

Back at headquarters that evening, Simpkins took the floor, speaking in a prim, exact manner.

"I can inform you, Mister Mullen," he said to the engineer, "that your hill is not a volcano. Volcanoes," he went on, pacing the floor pompously as he spoke, his oversized cap still on, "may be divided into three classes: Those that are active, and about these of course, there is obviously no question, for even the laity is scarcely unawares of an active volcano." He smiled as though secretly amused at his little joke. "The other two classes are dormant and extinct. In each instance, there is unmistakable evidence of past activity. A volcano reacts generally in only two ways. It either causes an explosive eruption in which gases and fragments of heated rock are violently expelled. Or the eruption is termed 'quiet'. In this case, there is a steady rise and outpouring of liquid lava."

"But," Mullen put in, "are there no exceptions? Are there no conditions from within the earth which would cause pseudo-volcanic action?"

"My dear Mister Mullen," Simpkins placed his tiny hands on his hips, "you must simply take my word for this. To answer your question directly, there are definite

signs to the volcanologist. You, I dare say from my slight knowledge of your estimable reputation, would know the signs of a poor bit of construction work which should be condemned. I, on the other hand, am quite competent to tell of the existence and type of a volcano. Cones are built up and these are detectable. Fragments expelled by volcanic action may vary from particles to chunks.

"They may be classified as volcanic dust, ash, lapilli or bombs. I would suggest, gentlemen, if you are interested, that you read the very fine work on these subjects of Scrope or Judd, or even the layman can find much enlightenment from C. W. Tyrell's 'Volcanoes'."

Engineer Mullen, Creel could tell, was in a black mood. Furthermore, Simpkins delivered the coup d'etat.

"Whereas it is true that weakness in the earth's crust with internal pressure is the cause of volcanic phenomena, modern volcanoes almost invariably are disturbed on the earth's surface in definite belts. Gentlemen, no such belt exists within hundreds of miles of this area.

"In a word, to answer your question, Mister Mullen, Hill 96 is not a volcano—of active, dormant, or extinct variety!"

The pompous little man bowed as though in response to expected applause, and his ridiculous cap fell further over his ferret face.

FOREMAN Joe Creel saw little of Mullen the next few days. When he did appear, the engineer wore a harrassed look, his gaunt frame seemed to shrink even more and new hollows in his cheeks were evident.

One or two more abortive efforts were made to level 96, but the balance of the construction crew was already working on the other side of the hill, Foley among them. It was the latter who returned to camp one day with disquieting news. A stay-behind shift had been left at 96 to work on it as they could. This was Creel's idea. One part of his materialistic mind still unable to accept the thought that anything in the nature of earth and hill and rock could be beyond his weapons of construction and destruction. Mullen had given absent-minded approval.

Foley's breathing was fast when he con-

fronted Foreman Creel, perhaps from exertion, perhaps from fear. Joe was not sure. But there was an unpleasant feeling that knotted bigger and bigger in his stomach as his subordinate tried to find words.

"It's Benjus!" Foley at last gasped, "Jack Benjus. He's disappeared!"

Automatically Creel started to ask the usual questions, but the other man anticipated him.

"He was coming back with a couple of the other fellas from the grading job we're doin'. They had lunch t'other side of 96. Then Benjus was to come back in here for some supplies. Last anybody saw, Jack was walkin' past that damn hill! I tell ya, it ate him! Same as the steamshovel!"

"Don't be a fool, Ed! He's wandered off. Maybe he went to town to tank up."

Even as Creel said the words, the falseness of them weighed heavily. Benjus was a veteran, ultra-reliable, family man, not a drinker, and with a splendid record.

"Didya look?" Creel bellowed aggressively, trying to cover his own extreme uneasiness. "That's wild country around 96. He might've fallen, busted his leg, or sumpin' like that."

"We've looked everywhere," Foley wagged his head, the grayness of his face pushing through the outdoor tan. "We looked and looked. Ya see, Joe, we've got his steps, his footprints. They go right up ta 96 and start to cross over a part of it. That's the shortest way to the truck line. And then—they disappeared! I tell ya, Joe, it's like the steamshovel! There's sumpin' in that there hill, sumpin' that eats things!"

Creel turned away from Foley. There was nothing he could say to the man. He remembered his incredulity at the steamshovel episode. And fear. Well, there was fear now but not the incredulity.

**R**OUTINELY the foreman made a report to the home office of the company about Benjus' "apparent disappearance." And routinely he got in touch with state authorities. But even as he did so, he knew that Jack Benjus would not be picked up in a town or city somewhere shooting his bankroll on women, liquor, or gambling. Some easy-come easy-go construction men did that, but not a veteran.

"No," Creel summed up to Engineer Mullen with a dogged shake of his head, "there's something funny about that hill, I guess. Foley tells me the men are gettin' kinda shy of it too."

Mullen sat for a long time in silence as was his wont. Then he turned his long troubled face towards the window, watching the setting rays of the sun touch the green foliage that stood quiet in the pre-twilight hush wherein Nature prepares herself for night.

"I have an idea, Creel," Angus Mullen spoke at last. "I want a good-sized tent, some mountain-climbing equipment, the best you can get, belts, clasps, stout rope. And I want a volunteer or two, yourself and another man. This may be dangerous. I have no right to ask you, of course."

Creel nodded his willingness quickly.

"Ed Foley'll go along too. What's up, Mister Mullen?"

"We're going to camp by that hill," the engineer said. "We've going to get as close to it as we can and we're going to watch it—by day and by night."

Even as the foreman nodded—and the room was warm—a chilliness assailed him suddenly in every limb and part of his body. He had not until now admitted it to himself, but like the men, he had become superstitious about Hill 96.

The tent was rigged just at the bottom of the first level ground. It was an eerie site even in daytime with the swathe of cleared land leading directly up to the sudden knobby rise of ground. Construction crews were working along unimpeded, far enough ahead now so that even the loud growls and snarls of their tractors and bulldozers were inaudible. The truck line was off through the woods a mile or two away through an unbroken, desolate wilderness.

Around the three men as they settled down the afternoon of the day they'd pitched the tent was nothing but the supreme quietness and majesty of Nature.

"Can't you tell us a little more what we're lookin' for?" Foley asked the engineer.

Ed had volunteered to be the third member of the party willingly, but Creel noticed that the man was visibly agitated and hoped his own uneasiness was not as plainly detectable.

Mullen, as was his way, sat for a moment without answering and then said, "I don't know. I don't know what we're looking for, but that there is something, I am sure."

HE talked on as the light faded from the sky and the darkness seemed to come up from out of the ground around them, slowly inch by inch, creeping into the foliage, into the trees, up the hill, and finally touching the sky and blackening it.

Joe Creel had seen the sheaf of telegrams from the front office, advising, urging, querying, pleading. As 96 had held up the parkway construction, so did the company lose money; day by day as the delay continued. Creel rather guessed that Mullen's fee on this job was probably contingent on the meeting of exact time schedules. And yet the engineer did not give the impression of one who was worried about losing a fat sum of money or worried about the saving of precious minutes. There were things he could do. He could throw more of his time and effort up forward, forgetting 96 temporarily.

And yet Angus Mullen seemed wholly concerned with the hill. True, it stood like a sore thumb along their precious right-of-way. But what will be, will be, Creel philosophized. It was easier to philosophize though back in his shack at field headquarters with the bustle of countless men and machines coming and going constantly.

Out here, thinking was secondary to emotions.

Mullen continued talking at great length. Some of it, the foreman wondered, might not even be so much for him and Foley as for the sake of clarifying the engineer's own thoughts to himself. Mullen spoke of our world, the earth, the fact that it was two to three billion years old so far as the most careful estimates could judge. He spoke of the fact that the earth is approximately eight thousand miles through and that little precious little, was known about the interior of our globe.

Foley's face was a whitish blob against the backdrop of the dark night around them.

"How little do we know," the engineer went on. "We creatures, Man, live on the surface of the earth. Peoples' minds for

decades and centuries have turned upwards and outwards.

"We have known for years of the existence of a universe of which we are but one small part, but we are just beginning to take the first pitifully tiny steps to propel ourselves out into space for a few insignificant miles.

"But think for a moment how much less we know about the interior of this world of ours. Man has never penetrated more than a few miles down. He has theorized vaguely about the globe's content. Some concepts have claimed that the interior of the earth is molten; some that it is solid. Some insist that it consists of a series of concentric shells. Others say that beyond layers of ground and rock and structure might lie actual tubes and channels leading down into the very heart of our world. How can we be sure?"

It was a question neither Creel nor Foley could answer.

Mullen added abruptly, "Do either of you recall the writer, Jules Verne? He wrote a remarkable book once entitled, 'A Journey to the Center of the Earth.' It was, of course, considered pure fantasy at the time of its publication, but it was a fascinating work, its theme dealing with the presence of life in the interior of the earth and some explorers who found a way to excursion into that inner world of our globe." Angus Mullen fell silent then.

A SLIGHT breeze had come up and the leaves in the trees at the edge of the excavation area rustled softly. From the tilt of his head, Creel noticed after a while that Mullen was looking at Hill 96 as it rose beyond them, its black crown silhouetted against the less dark sky.

It was as though the three of them had become transfixed out there in the wilderness, Mullen's faced steadfastly towards the hill, Creel watching the engineer, and Foley sitting silently by. It was in some minutes, how many exactly Creel could not guess, that the foreman, his eyes thoroughly accustomed to the gloom, noticed Angus Mullen stiffen, his expression harden to one of extreme intentness. And the foreman, a grown man, waiting there with two other grown men, suddenly was terribly afraid, afraid to speak, afraid to ask what Mullen

had seen, afraid to move, but most of all, afraid to turn his head and look at Hill 96 himself.

It was Foley shifting uneasily and clearing his throat harshly that broke the engineer out of this seeming state of hypnotized fascination. Mullen jumped up.

"Quick!" he ordered. "Get the equipment! The belts and ropes!"

Action is the only thing to stay panic. On his feet fumbling with the heavy belts, catches and rope, Creel felt better. They made a strange procession when they were ready. Each man wore around his middle a reinforced belt of the strongest type with a rope running from it to the next one. Each carried a heavy stick and a torch.

Mullen led the way, Creel next, and Foley bringing up the rear. They scrambled up the soft earth, reaching the crown of the hill after some time, for Mullen had led them a circuitous course, stopping every now and then to paw at the loam with his hands, to cock his head on one side to the other and to poke with his stick.

At the top the three paused, and Mullen bent over.

"What was it you saw?" Foley's voice was hoarse.

For an answer the engineer bent over farther. Next he lay on his side. He lay like that for a minute and then motioned the others to lie down beside him. Creel bent over, frowned.

"What . . . ?"

The engineer waved imperatively for him to be quiet.

"Listen!" he hissed.

And then in a moment the foreman heard it, coming from the earth, from beneath it and below, from inside down in the ground. A hissing, gurgling, sucking noise, not loud but distinctly audible, rising and falling in volume, sometimes vanishing, but returning again.

"What is it?" Foley crawled closer to the other two.

But the answer was not Mullen's, and so there was only the blackness of the night and the faint wind rustling things on the surface of the earth here to speak in return. The sound from below seemed to grow then so that even when the three men stood and Engineer Mullen said hastily, "I think we'd

better get off this hill," they could still hear it, whereas before they'd had to put an ear to the ground.

Mullen took the first few steps, so that before Creel felt the tug on the goodly length of rope separating him from the engineer, the latter was some lengths away. Creel started sluggishly, his mind and body still transfixed by that strange subterranean sound.

It was then that the earth directly in front of Mullen, as he was leaving the crown of 96, seemed to rise up. The whole horrendous experience could only have consumed a few, few minutes but it seemed ages to Foreman Creel. The mind does that. That brain attempts to slow down unspeakable horror in an effort to protect an outraged and shocked mentality from insanity.

It was as though the earth, or a portion of the earth, came up in front of the engineer. And then Creel thought, no, there was a giant snake, a tremendous tentacle, perhaps. Whatever it was, it came from beneath them, and it was a live, writhing thing that settled its cylindrical folds around the engineer.

WHERE was, it seemed to Creel, no sound now, or perhaps it was the strange mesmeric slowing down of events and thoughts, and the scream that came from Mullen's lips sounded eternities later.

The foreman tried to spring forward, raising his stick to strike, but as he did, his foot caught and he fell heavily. Foley, though, leaped past and laid blows on the sinuous thing that was drawing Mullen into a black aperture of the earth from which it had forced its sinister length. Creel's instinct and his brain ordered him to rise and join the fray, but his fall had been heavy. He was stunned, and there was weakness, an evil in his body. And then a frightful thing happened, something that almost caused him to lose consciousness. Not five yards from his head as he lay stunned on the ground, a small area of earth heaved itself upward, and a round spherical body appeared. It was, Creel saw with growing horror, made in the image of a gigantic eye. It was turned away from him towards the two men struggling with the tentacled feeler. Its substance Creel could barely make out in the

gloom, but it seemed of membranous stuff with sinuous tendrils disappearing down into the earth to connect it with what demon's thing it belonged from below.

The eye, for so it unmistakably looked, fixed itself upon the fighting men for but a moment. Foley's efforts with the heavy lead-weighted club were strenuous indeed, and as each blow fell, there was a smashing, sucking sound. A portion of the serpentine length quickly detached itself from Mullen and snaked around Foley, pinioning the man's arms to his sides.

Then a horrific thing began to happen. Gradually, the tentacled length began to withdraw itself into the black loam of the hill. Foley disappeared, the sound of his wild screams, suddenly checked by the rich earth that encompassed him as the thing withdrew.

Mullen, still trapped by an appendage of the monster tentacle, had the weighted stick, and as he began to go down, he spied the eye staring balefully. The engineer screamed. The sound was a mad echo of Foley's shouts. Creel by now had gotten to his feet, his knees still weak, but the heavy walking stick in his hand.

It was a matter of three, four steps, and then even as the eye swiveled on the spiny periscopic-like shaft that anchored it above the ground, even as the eye began to turn towards him, Joe Creel struck with all the strength of his hard, compact body and the weight of the lead stick.

The sound was an obscene plopping noise, and there was another noise from below, from the ground beneath that, a sighing, gurgling that rose to a high pitch. But it was not a scream, for a scream is human and this was not.

The directing eye was no more than a mass of gray membranous rubbish now, but a part of the long feeler still tugged furiously at Mullen, and the engineer was slowly being drawn down.

Creel, himself, felt an undeniable tug. It came from the rope at his midriff. The rope disappeared into the black ground at his feet, at the one end of which he knew was Ed Foley. The foreman fought with his strength and in the soft earth he stumbled and clawed, fell, scrambled to get back on his feet only to go down again, and each

time the swathe of soft earth on which he fought grew deeper.

MULLEN was screaming at him from a short distance away, and finally the words made themselves clear. Gasping and sobbing, Creel clawed the claspknife out of his pocket and severed the line. As he did so, the end of the rope whipped into the earth like a frightened snake.

Creel rushed for Mullen then. He raised his stick again and again and clubbed down folds of snake-like matter pressing the engineer into the ground. He plunged his knife again and again into the thickness of the feeler. He hacked at it, redoubling his efforts as an oily sticky substance flowed from the wounds.

Finally Mullen fell free, and the two men staggered and lurched off the hill, running as fast as they could before they collapsed from exhaustion on the healthy brown earth of the excavated land beyond.

It was an hour or more before the two were able to crawl to their tent. There were welts on Mullen's skin but the engineer waved away Creel's first-aid kit. Under the kerosene lamp, Mullen once again examined charts of the hill, and he began to figure. He filled page after page with calculations, writing in a small, cramped, furious hand. Creel watched, lying on the army cot, too tired to question, too tired to wonder. He fell asleep, even despite his fear of still being so close to that awful, accursed hill.

He woke fitfully in the small hours of the morning. Mullen was talking to him, a wild-eyed, gesticulating Mullen. The foreman listened.

The engineer spoke of construction plans, of what he was going to do, and immediately, to take care of Hill 96. And strangely, Creel found himself obeying without question, because there was a pressure and foreboding within him almost too terrible to bear.

The crew grumbled, and there were many raised eyebrows, questions, and sharp looks, but after all Joe Creel and Engineer Angus Mullen were the bosses, at least here in the construction area.

All day the tractors worked and the dynamiters and the trucks. Cement was brought up and steel girders and more

cement, and in a few days, more of the workers were uneasy and grumbling, and there was loud talk about the camp that "These guys must be nuts! What're they building—a monument or sumpin'?"

THEN somebody came from the front office, and that was the end. The somebody was the company president, Melkin.

"You're mad!" Melkin screamed. "You're insane, and you, too, Creel. Not one penny you'll get for this, Mullen! I'll break you both! I'll sue you!"

Mullen tried to explain as slowly as he could, but there wasn't too much coherence in the man now. He spoke more and more often of "monsters from below" and a strange, unusual weakness in the crust of the earth which here in this spot would allow the breakthrough which these creatures had been waiting for, for countless centuries.

They came to call it Mullen's Monument, and less than two months from the time it was completed, and that was the morning of the very day that Melkin had arrived on the scene, Angus Mullen was taken away to the Everhill Sanitarium for the insane, a hopeless deranged man.

With great trepidation Melkin had to suggest to the Highway Commission road contractors and surveyors and parkway officials that the course of the concrete lanes would have to be altered, altered rather abruptly to take a course which would curve around Hill 96. Of course the curve would be graded and as gradual as possible, but this was one of those things.

Joe Creel was busted completely. He would never again find work with any construction company in the country. That was the least they could do for his following along and countenancing the insane actions of a madman. They told a story up at the construction office about Creel as the years passed, how as a shiftless loafer, he still went on paying a pilgrimage to Mullen's Monument. Maybe he had caught some of that nuttiness, too. Kept telling people he had to inspect it, that ugly thing out in the wilderness. But he'd go there every so often. People had seen him. And he would examine the concrete inch by inch, go over the whole eyesore as though it was the

White House or a king's palace—or even more important.

The two men drove along the smooth ribbon of concrete. The new car purred happily. Finally they came to a sign marked "Timms' Valley." Just beyond the sign, the road began to curve.

The motorist turned his head. "Right here? Right here's the place you've been telling me about?"

The hitchhiker nodded. "You can let me out anywhere in here, mister, and thanks to you."

The car glided to a stop. The other man thumbed the door open. He was halfway out when the motorist, seeing it, hollered out, "Hey! Is that thing *it*? Mullen's Monument? It looks like a huge cap!"

Through the trees and across the land to the right, a great white square loomed up. The hitchhiker looked and smiled slightly.

"That's it, mister."

The motorist whistled. "Imagine that! Looks like the foundation of a huge skyscraper, only even solidier."

Even from this distance he could see the heaviness of the construction, the girder ends sticking out and the reinforced concrete work.

"He must have been crazy!" the motorist breathed.

"Mister Mullen?" the hitchhiker shut the door. "I wouldn't be too sure, mister. If you'd been there that night—" He started to turn away, heading into the underbrush at the side of the road towards the unsightly cap of concrete in the distance.

"Wait!" the motorist stuck his head out the window. "Are you—you must be——!"

But his passenger was into the shrubbery now, plunging purposefully towards that gigantic thing in the distance, the greatest engineering feat Mullen, or any other had devised.

It had been half a year since he'd been out here, he mentally noted. He'd have to go over it very carefully. He thought of what the motorist had said, that it looked like a lid. How near the man had come to the truth! It was a lid, protecting us from things from down below, a lid that must forever be kept tightly shut. And Joe Creel plunged on towards the Monument.