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A Complete Novel

THE MULTILLIONTH CHANCE

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

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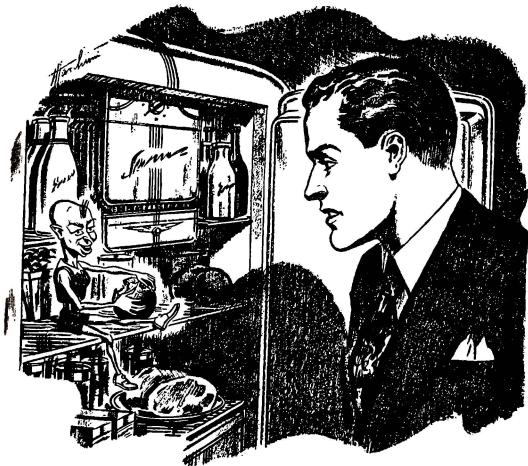
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Read Our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—STARTLING STORIES



"I may look like a human being, but I'm not," said the fachi

THE GOOD EGG

By **ROSS ROCKLYNNE**

Square Root, the little imp from outer space, gets the number of some racketeers, and does some fast figuring!

IF THE egg, little can be said, or much can be said, according to the way you look at it. For the egg either existed or did not exist.

Doc Ferris got a big kick out of the egg. He held it in his fat hand and his laughter came out richly.

"See?" he chortled. "Hold it this way and it sorta runs together at the curves, turn it sharp and you get a rectangular egg. See?

Then it disappears. Ho! Good trick, eh?"

Bernice was bored and showed no interest in her father's sleight-of-hand, which had figured in company entertainment as long as she could remember. In a way, that was all to the good, for she had successfully escaped the chilling experiences which many little children go through. Never before house guests had she been forced to recite such cruel nursery rhymes as the ones about

Jack and Jill, and Humpty Dumpty, and four-and-twenty blackbirds undergoing the Jap-like torture of being baked in a pie.

On the other hand, it was pretty much to the bad. Being part of her father's stage-setting for prestidigitation, her illusions crashed about her at an early age. Now that she was grown she didn't believe in anything.

Bernice yawned. She sent to her boyfriend a veiled command. Hugh Grant jumped up like a shot, scraping his chair noisily back from the dinner table. He had broad shoulders, a sandy complexion and a brush hair-cut. His gray eyes were mild. He had just been discharged from the Army and he was in civilian clothes.

His eyes were wide on the disappearing egg, but Bernice's signal had reacted automatically on his brain. Though he didn't want to leave just yet, he was pretty much Bernice's slave.

"Sorry, Pop," Bernice said, demurely sure of herself. "We'll be running."

A few moments later, she was snuggling up to Hugh in his car. It was some minutes before his mind could struggle back to its normally inquisitive channels.

"Pooh," she sniffed in answer to his question. "Don't worry about a silly old egg. Put your arm around me."

"It was amazing though," he murmured into her hair while the car somehow got along with the meager assistance of one hand and one eye.

"Nothing amazing about it, dearie. Dad's full of corny riddles like that. Kiss me."

"The car might run into something."

"Kiss me anyway," Bernice said.

On the way back that night, Bernice suddenly became concerned with Hugh's future.

"Hugh, you haven't found a job yet, have you?" she said. "Well, don't accept any offers. I think I'm going to be able to swing something for you through—a business friend of mine."

HUGH smiled. He wouldn't hold his breath waiting for Bernice to find him a job. She had a remarkable flair for—well, for exaggeration.

He dismissed her remark from his mind.

Doc Ferris was still up, reading a book on magic. He looked old and querulous and grumpy, but Hugh wanted to talk to him. Bernice kept on throwing out hints for Hugh to run along home, but Hugh ignored them. Finally Bernice yawned and announced sar-

cistically that she was going to bed so her company could depart. She went up the stairs.

Hugh sat nervously on the edge of his chair and cleared his throat.

"About that egg, sir."

"Eh?" Ferris fumbled with his glasses.

"Oh, yes, the egg. What about the egg, young man?"

"That was a mighty good trick, sir."

"Just average, my boy. Just average."

"Could you do the same trick with the same egg, sir?"

Doc Ferris sat quite still for a moment. He was falling asleep. Then he jerked, his lower jaw clamping shut.

"Of course I could do the same trick with the same egg or any other egg. But I'm not going to. Er, good night, young man."

Hugh stood up. He felt desperate. He couldn't get the egg off his mind. And he knew the Ferrises had bacon and eggs every morning for breakfast—if they could find any bacon.

"You mean it's just like any other egg? Like the ones you'd keep in the refrigerator, for instance?"

Doc Ferris' head went drowsily up and down. Hugh said nothing more. He waited until the old man fell asleep. His heart was pounding as he tiptoed softly into the hall, then went swiftly toward the kitchen. He was about to commit a crime.

He was going to steal an egg.

In the kitchen, Hugh didn't find the remarkable egg, at first. He found two dozen eggs in cartons, none of which showed any remarkable characteristics. He turned them this way and that. He put them through their paces. He did everything but stand on his head to make the eggs turn rectangular and then disappear.

He was chagrined. Then he saw another egg, one he had failed to take from the refrigerator.

It was right in plain sight, near the frost-coated refrigerator coils. It was a beautiful egg. A perfect egg. Its shell was translucent. Around it danced weird little motes of light.

Hugh picked it up breathlessly and, notwithstanding its proximity to the freezing coils, it was warm to the touch. Slowly he revolved the egg on its long axis. The egg disappeared.

Hugh took the egg back to his apartment, never dreaming that some day it might hatch.

He didn't tell Doc Ferris he had taken the

egg. He didn't tell Doc Ferris that for an hour after he found the egg, he had completely forgotten himself and had sat there in the kitchen playing with the egg, watching it turn into a cornered object, then sort of sliding away out of sight into a strange compartment of space.

It would slide away, but Hugh could still feel it between his two fingers.

Then he would turn the egg and it would come back.

After he took the egg to his apartment and stowed it away in the refrigerator, he didn't see Bernice for two days. One morning, astoundingly, she called him up. Called up him, Hugh Grant! He felt a delicious tingle at the sound of her honeyed voice. He was in love with Bernice and he knew he always would be. He liked her impertinence—because he could never be impertinent. He liked her boldness and her sneers—because he was not bold and never sneered at anything. He liked her cynicism—because he was naive.

Yet if he had not been naive, he would have laughed off Doc Ferris' exhibition with the egg.

"Darling, we're going to the Club Spanish tonight!" Bernice Ferris said.

"Are we?" he said huskily.

"Oh, Hugh!" She was excited. "You remember I told you I might be able to open up a wonderful business opportunity for you? Well, Mr. Morrow is going to be at the Club Spanish tonight, and he wants to meet you. You can pick me up at nine."

He hung up, giddy with the crooning intoxication of her voice, but at the same time he was doing mental arithmetic which involved dollars and cents. His cash reserve couldn't compete with Bernice's lack of emotion where money was concerned.

When Bernice came tripping down the stairs, he made polite inquiries about her father. Her lively face froze over.

"Let's don't discuss unpleasant subjects, Hugh, please."

"Unpleasant?"

"You know what I mean," she said crossly. "Dad must be in his dotage. He's been worse these last couple of days. Yesterday I caught him on the phone ordering fifteen crates of Grade-A large-size eggs. Luckily I stopped him."

AT THIS, Hugh's heart sank. He felt his first twinge of conscience. Above Bernice's protests, he looked for Ferris and

found him in the kitchen.

Ferris tried to hide what he was doing. All he accomplished was to drop several eggs in squashy messes on the checkered floor as he was trying to get them out of sight into the refrigerator. Papa Ferris looked down at the yellow puddles, and sniffed. Two big tears ran down his face. He choked up.

"It's gone!" he sobbed. "It's gone!"

Hugh felt better about his theft of the remarkable egg by the time they reached the Club Spanish. Bernice saw to that. He emerged from the car with an accelerated blood-stream and mussed-up hair. He had told Bernice he loved her, and she had told him she loved him too.

At the back of his head lurked a nagging distrust of her sudden ardor, but for his peace of mind he was willing to let it stand.

Later in the evening, Bernice jumped excitedly from her chair.

"Mr. Morrow! Mr. Morrow!"

A man was just coming into the night club. He smiled and made his way toward their table. Mr. Morrow was handsome, but not offensively so. He was a couple years older than Hugh, but the chief difference between him and Hugh was the difference between a polished and an unpolished shoe. Everything about Morrow was in place, and Hugh suspected that if there were a spot of lint on one cuff he would find it mate on the other cuff. Yet Morrow was virile, and Hugh decided to like him. He shook hands firmly.

After quite a bit of chit-chat, terminated by the arrival of Morrow's drink, Morrow lost his quick smile and fixed dark eyes on Hugh.

"I told Ber—that is, Miss Ferris, that I'd be here this evening and that I'd be glad to discuss a business proposition with you," Morrow said. "I understand you were with a cavalry outfit before your medical discharge?"

"Well, yes. I saw some action in the Libyan desert and, later on, I fought in Italy."

"Of course. The important thing is that you understand horse equipment. Saddles and such. Mr. Grant, I'm a business man. I own a small, fairly profitable saddle and harness manufacturing establishment. Or rather, it was profitable until I found myself without essential materials. I didn't have a Government contract, and hence could get no priority. Now I've been left high and dry. That's where you can help me. And in exchange, I offer you a partnership."

"Wait a minute. You're going too fast.

How can I help you?"

"First, I need an associate who understands horses and horse equipment. Second, you're a discharged veteran and, as such, can go before a War Priority Board and secure a priority for the four tons of cured leather I need to keep me in business. You understand now?"

Hugh was not normally suspicious, but he felt doubtful. "That doesn't sound legal, somehow."

Morrow stood up, his eyes genial.

"Mr. Grant, I like a forthright person. I want you to think it over, though. As for the legality of the question, let the WPB decide that. You're setting yourself up in business as my partner. As a returned veteran, you have a legal right to a priority on essential materials. However, I'll be here most of the evening, and if you agree you can look me up."

He left, crossed the ballroom and sat down at a table with a couple of men. Hugh frowned. Somehow he didn't like the looks of those men.

Before the evening was over, however, Bernice had talked him into making an appointment with Morrow the next day, when temporary partnership papers would be drawn up. Before she and Hugh could marry, she pointed out, they had to have a recognizable income. She didn't, somehow, come right out and say they would be married. Oh, no. But the inference was certainly there, and Hugh was walking on a cloud.

Meantime, back in Hugh's apartment, there was an egg. It was right up against the freezing coils of the refrigerator, but, since there was a current of sub-spatial energy flowing into the egg from another place, the egg was fairly warm.

The outward manifestations of the sub-spatial energy were the motes of light dancing around the egg's translucent shell.

The creature inside the egg was thinking. One thing he thought about a lot was why he hadn't been born yet. He had an idea why. Once before—so his inherited ancestral memories told him—one of the *fachi*, who live in a dimension alien from that of Earth, of course, had accidentally laid an egg in a sub-space ether-warp. That *fachi* had been purged for his thoughtlessness.

It didn't matter that the eggs of the "chicken," a fowl peculiar to the Earth-dimension, sometimes showed through the ether-warp and might be mistaken for a heap

of *fachi* eggs. The point was that the purged *fachi* should have inspected the heap of "chicken" eggs before he made the serious mistake of depositing his own egg thereon.

A long time later, the *fachi* who had hatched from the mis-laid egg showed up, explaining he had just been born.

TO THE *fachi* who listened, he evolved the highly plausible theory that in the Earth-dimension it took a longer time to be born than in the place. In the place, therefore, the time-stream of childhood flowed swiftly while that of older age slowed down. It was the opposite in the Earth-dimension, where the years of youth seemed to last forever, and the years of age passed lamentably fast.

Notwithstanding his fine contribution to scientific learning, the just-born *fachi* was killed too. He had, naturally, been contaminated by human thoughts.

In view of all this, the *fachi* in the egg knew that when he was born, he could never go back to the place.

While he lay thinking these thoughts, Hugh Grant entered the apartment, whistling gaily. The egg heard him and felt a convulsion of dread. He steeled himself for the ordeal, but in the meantime he tried to grab hold of Hugh's mind and beg him to desist. But, not having been born yet, the *fachi* could read Hugh's mind but could not communicate with him.

The refrigerator door was flung open. Hugh picked up the egg, and the egg was—*twisted*.

It was no ordinary twist. It was a wrench, without knowledge of the multi-dimensions. The egg would have screamed with pain if he could, as for minute after minute he was tortured, parts of him sticking into one dimension and parts into another. But finally Hugh put the egg back in the refrigerator and went to bed, still whistling.

Hugh forgot about the egg during the next few days. One day he came home and, when he didn't come to the kitchen, but went straight to the telephone, the egg experienced relief. While Hugh was dialing the number, the egg, who felt nothing but friendliness toward Hugh in spite of the way Hugh had treated him, sent out some thought-tentacles and snooped through Hugh's mind. The egg was dismayed by what he saw.

"Sucker!" the egg marveled.

Hugh was talking to Bernice now. "Yes, darling, it's all set. Morrow has the priority slip. He's getting the order out right now.

Well, the usual red tape, but not too much. They routed me to the Separation Center first off, and the GI counsellor thought it was a good opportunity. He did put in a call to Morrow—a formality. After that it was duck soup."

There was some more conversation. Hugh asked Bernice when he could see her. Her answer obviously disappointed Hugh. Crestfallen, he said he'd call her next week.

"Sucker!" the egg thought.

Three days later, the egg hatched.

At that particular moment, when the *fachi* was undergoing the exhausting process of punching his way out of the stubborn egg-shell, Hugh Grant was drawing his convertible to a stop at the curb in front of a dilapidated building. Its ground-floor store-front sported a sign which read:

MORROW HARNESS & SADDLE CO.

Hugh was discouraged. Added to the fact that Bernice had been unable to see him since that night at the Club Spanish, was the equally disconcerting note in Morrow's voice when he had called Hugh a scant hour ago. Morrow had told Hugh he had bad news for him.

Hugh had gone to see him. Morrow had risen from a scarred, cheap desk and had shaken Hugh's hand. He appeared glum, uncertain.

"I guess our little business venture has fallen through, Mr. Grant," he said reluctantly. "So it's just as well I had you sign only temporary partnership papers."

"What do you mean?" Hugh snapped. "Didn't the order go through?"

"Like clockwork. Here, I'll show you." Morrow took Hugh through a door and into a warehouse behind the office where a strong smell of tanned leather prevailed. Stacked around the walls were piles and piles of cured cowhide.

"We've got the leather, Grant," Morrow said. "Four tons of it. See?"

"Then what's the trouble?"

Morrow didn't look virile any more. He seemed to be harried, worried, nervous.

"I've been playing the market, Grant, and I was unfortunate enough to pick the wrong stocks," he said simply. "I'm busted. I have to liquidate the business in order to break even."

Hugh was nettled.

"It seems to me you're a flop as a busi-

ness man."

Morrow's dark eyes flashed. He drew himself up.

"You don't have to get huffy about it," he answered coldly. "I'm putting it to you straight. After all, you ought to be mighty glad the partnership papers didn't have time to go through. Then you'd be equally responsible."

FOR a moment the two men glared at each other. Hugh knew he was being unreasonable. The real reason for his irritation was Bernice's refusal to see him, his inability to understand why.

"Okay, Morrow," he said shortly. "We'll let it go at that. Better luck next time."

Without shaking hands, he went back into the office. Just as he started through the door, the two unsavory-looking men who had been with Morrow at the Club Spanish came in. They had the same sort of baby-direct stare that Hugh had seen in movie-gangsters. Hugh brushed past them uncivilly, got into his car and drove away.

He spent the rest of the day tracking down jobs. One out of every seven returned service men, he knew, were taking advantage of the GI Bill of Rights to set themselves up in business. But not Hugh Grant. He had decided he didn't have a good business head anyway.

Why couldn't he get a job in some research laboratory? He was interested in science. That was one reason why he had been so infernally curious about Doc Ferris' magic egg. Come to think of it, why didn't he do some serious research into the whys and wherefores of the egg's remarkable behavior? Why, it might even lead to something big!

Hugh no sooner got to his apartment and opened the refrigerator door than his ruddy face blanched. He uttered a strangled sound and fell back against the kitchen table.

Sitting on the edge of a top refrigerator grated shelf was a little imp. The imp was busily tearing into an orange, meanwhile looking at Hugh with bright scarlet eyes.

Then words seemed to form in Hugh's mind, just as if they were spoken words.

"Everything's okay," said the *fachi*, who had half of his bald head buried in the orange. "Relax. I just hatched from that egg you and Doc Ferris got such a kick out of—and I didn't. You remember? Doc Ferris—the father of the gal who twists you around her little finger."

Hugh made another sound, leaned against the table.

"Nope, Hugh, I'm not a human being," the *fachi* continued. "I may look like one, sort of a toy-size human, but I'm not one. I'm a *fachi*. *Fachi* live in a—well, in a *place*. If you horve the rapsol on miscars, you've got a pretty good idea where the *place* is. But if you can't walk a straight pidder from here to the bollin without govin doot, then it's no use. I'll have to fall back on some corny explanation like Flatland or the fourth dimension."

A whole minute passed while Hugh's blue eyes rested on the *fachi*'s scarlet ones—scarlet eyes just a shade lighter than his cherry-wood colored skin.

"Why not put down the orange?" Hugh said faintly. "Half of what you're saying doesn't make sense."

"Put down the orange? Good Heavens, man, I was just born. I'm starving! Anyway, the orange doesn't interfere with my telepathic powers, does it?"

"I can't walk a straight pidder from here to the bollin without govin doot?" Hugh said, still clutching the table.

"That's what it looks like," the *fachi* said glumly, at last removing the orange.

He wiped his tiny hands on his tiny thighs, and looked much discouraged. He stood up.

"I'm plus, now, see?" he said, turned and his outlines blurred. "See? I just walked a straight pidder." He turned some more, became vaguer of outline. "Just now I reached the bollin." He disappeared. "And I *didn't* govin doot! So I'm minus."

He came back.

"See?"

Hugh sat down, mainly because he had to. He spoke in a faint voice. "Okay, Square Root."

"What? What did you call me?"

"Square Root. The square root of minus one is plus or minus one. You're the Plus Or Minus One—hence Square Root."

The *fachi* mulled that over. "Okay. You can call me Square Root."

"That's fine, Square Root," Hugh said grimly, and he stood up. There was dark color under his skin. "Now. What was that you said about Bernice Ferris?"

Square Root blanched a little.

"Huh? Why—why I just said she was—uh—playing you for a sucker. The reason I—"

Hugh lunged forward and grabbed Square

Root under the armpits, using a thumb and index finger.

"Now!" he roared. "What was that?"

"Don't!" The manikin's voice was a tiny lost scream of terror. He began to sob and blubber. He began to kick and wave his arms and scream and shed tears. "Don't! Don't twist me! Don't twist me! You miss the bollin every time. It hurts, Hugh. Oh, you don't know how it hurts!"

"You slandered her," Hugh thundered. "Somebody you don't even know. Go on back to your own *place*, wherever that is. Get out of my refrigerator!"

HE PUT Square Root down. Square Root continued to weep, in growing horror.

"I can't go back," he whispered. "You wouldn't be cruel enough to send me back. Hugh, why can't I stay here? What have I ever done except to get mis-laid?" Blubberingly, he explained to Hugh why they'd kill him if he ever came back. "I'll do anything for you, Hugh, if you let me stay. I'll even—I'll even *prove* what I said about that slick-chick of yours."

"Slick-chick?" Hugh snarled.

"Slick-chick!" the *fachi* shouted excitedly. "A drum-bum. A skirt-flirt. A kiss-miss. A pass-lass. Hugh, when are you going to realize that Bernice shoved you into Morrow's scheme just because she's in love with Morrow?"

Hugh closed his eyes. His mind swam sickeningly. With smashing impact, two and two began to add themselves. So that was why Bernice hadn't been anxious to see him!

The *fachi* sat down again, impertinently swinging his legs which looked so much like bumpy cherry-tree twigs.

"Y'see, Hugh, as an egg I used to relieve my boredom by reading your mind. When Doc Ferris had me, I'd read Bernice's mind. That Bernice! You should have whaled the living daylights out of her. Then she would have some respect for you. As it is, she just hasn't any respect for anybody, except herself and Morrow, maybe."

"I'm going to wring her neck!" Hugh said.

"Morrow's some kind of racketeer," the *fachi* went on. "I don't know what his game is exactly, but it isn't on the level. He's pretty smart. He makes the acquaintance of cute kids like Bernice, works the old charm, then asks 'em if they've got any ex-GI boy-friends. Nine times out of ten they have. After that, it's a cinch."

"But what does he get out of it?"

"A-one priority materials."

"Then what?"

The *fachi* frowned. "I don't know."

"I know!" Hugh said savagely. He whirled.

"Okay, Square Root, thanks. I'll be back!"

"Hey!" The *fachi* sailed in a long, frantic arc from the refrigerator. He caught onto the edge of Hugh's coat pocket.

"Where are you going?"

Hugh was in a towering rage. He didn't answer. He left the apartment, and was hardly aware that Square Root levered himself pantingly into Hugh's side coat-pocket. He got into his car and took off with a rush and roar that broke the speed limit.

Patriotism! It was to laugh! While GI's like Hugh were fighting on battlefields and getting a bullet in the stomach, people like Morrow were thinking up rackets back home.

Hugh headed at furious speed for Bernice's home. Just as he turned into her street, her coupe came bumping out of the driveway, picked up speed, turned the corner in the other direction.

Hugh started as Square Root's thoughts came.

"Hah! She's probably going to meet Morrow, Hugh."

"Okay," Hugh said, grimly. "Then we'll kill two birds with one stone."

Bernice led him a troublesome trail, at first. But he finally surmised where she was bound. As the *fachi* had suggested, she was headed for Morrow's office on Corkin Boulevard.

Hugh parked his car around the corner, about a half block from an alley which he figured led to the back of Morrow's warehouse. He entered the alley, moving in shadow as much as he could. There was a big enclosed truck the size of a moving van backed up into the warehouse. Hugh moved along the side of the moving van, looking into the warehouse. Nobody was around. Hugh stepped into the warehouse. His jaw set.

The truck was half-loaded with leather. The piles of leather in the warehouse were lower. Some of it had already been trucked away to its destination.

"Careful!" Square Root warned him, nervously, as Hugh went padfooted to the office door at the far end of the warehouse and put his ear to the door. "This might be dangerous."

But Hugh heard Bernice's voice, very ob-

viously coming around a piece of over-chewed gum.

"I don't understand," she protested. "You can't leave town! Not after the way you talked about caring for me. Oh, can't we talk alone, without these men in here?"

Morrow sounded annoyed.

"Whatever is to be said can be said now. Did I make you any promises? No."

"You did!" she cried with sudden hysteria. She stamped her foot. "You did, you did, you did! You said we'd get married as soon as your business got on its feet. You can fool Hugh by that nonsense of how you're going to liquidate, but you can't fool me. You're a dirty, mean sneak of a man and I'm going to the police and snitch!"

SUDDENLY she yelped. There was a scuffle.

"Got her, boss," a deep throaty voice said. "It's disgusting. Can't trust no dame. We better knock her out, gag her and scam."

At that point, despite Square Root's protests, Hugh yanked on the door and plunged into the office.

There were three men in the office besides Morrow. They were in dirty, leather-smelling work-clothes. One was holding Bernice, his stained hand over her purpling face. She was kicking and gurgling.

"Let her go!" Hugh shouted.

Suddenly he suspected that his heroics were out of place. It was the way the men were looking at him. It was the way Morrow was looking at him, with annoyed frustration making dimples at the corners of his clamped lips.

"Grant," he said in tired tones. "You make it hard for me. You make it plenty hard. Why didn't you stay home?"

"Because I'm on to your game," Hugh snapped tensely. "You stand to grab about one hundred per cent profit on that four tons of leather, through the Black Market. That's right, isn't it?"

"Hey, that's good," Square Root said excitedly. "Listen. Here's the rest of it." His rapid thoughts came.

"And you work the same deal over and over again," Hugh said. "You set up four or five 'businesses,' get each business listed in the telephone book with the same address but a different name. It just happened to be the Morrow Saddle and Harness Company when I came along. This office has outlived its usefulness though, so you're movin' to

another city."

The four men looked at each other.

"That's too bad," Morrow answered gently. "That's just too bad."

He gave a signal. Two of the men instantly jumped at Hugh. Hugh whirled and, using the sides of his hands, executed a blurred series of jiu-jitsu jabs.

He knocked the wind out of one man but another thug came up behind him and hit him on the back of the neck with a sandbag. Hugh fell. Through the roaring emptiness in his skull, he could hear Bernice's protests.

"You can't," she kept crying. "It isn't his fault. Please! Let him go and I'll talk to him. I'll make him promise never to say a word. I can wind him around my little finger."

Then his senses blanked out. . . .

Somebody was sitting on Hugh's forehead when he awoke. It was Square Root. Under Hugh was a vibration, the smooth jouncing rumble of truck wheels. To his nose came the suffocating odor of tanned leather.

Square Root's face was disconsolate. He leaned over and looked down into Hugh's immense right eye.

"You shouldn't have busted into Morrow's office like that, Hugh," Square Root complained. "They've got you and Bernice tied hand and foot with baling wire. As soon as the truck gets to the edge of town, they're going to dump you off into the river. You and Bernice know too much. They have to get rid of you."

Hugh was lying on a stack of smelly leather. Behind him he could hear Bernice.

"I want to die!" she whimpered.

"You will," Square Root said encouragingly.

Bernice screamed as she saw Square Root. Square Root took it upon himself to explain himself in tedious detail. Hugh cut him short.

"Don't just sit there!" he bawled. "Do something. Free us. Get a wire-cutter!"

Square Root paled. Suddenly he was blubbering with fright.

"No, Hugh," he pleaded. "Anything but that. Don't you see, if I get a wire-cutter, they'll see me."

Hugh glared.

"Do you want us to die? What's so hard about getting a wire-cutter?"

Horror was in the *fachi's* scarlet eyes.

"All right, Hugh," he groaned. "But if I don't come back, you'll know I'm dead."

Before Hugh's eyes, Square Root walked a straight piddler, reached the bollin, and didn't govin doot. Which is to say, he disappeared.

Square Root didn't come back, and didn't come back. Suddenly the truck hit a down-grade.

"The river's only two miles from here, Hugh," Bernice whispered. "What are we going to do?"

Hugh scowled at her. "Maybe you should have thought of that in the first place."

She wept.

"I thought it was all on the up-and-up. I didn't have any idea he was in the Black Market."

"I'll bet!" Hugh snapped, much discouraged. Knowing she was telling the truth, he relapsed into silence. Then he felt something crawling up his leg, slowly and with difficulty.

"Square Root!" Hugh cried.

THE *fachi* reached Hugh's chest. He was covered with dried green blood. He was suffering. He had got into one devil of a fight with somebody.

"The *fachi* got me," his telepathed words came weakly. "I went back to the *place* for a wire-cutter. My brother *fachi* saw me and naturally tried to kill me. I had to kill some of them, using the wire-cutter." He held up a tiny tube with a lens in the end. "This will cut wire."

"Square Root, you're a good egg," Hugh said around the lump in his throat.

The *fachi* crawled to Hugh's ankles. There was a crackling, a burst of daggered brilliance. Hugh felt the wires around his ankles give way. He rolled over and let Square Root work on his wrists. As they came free, he felt the truck hit the bottom of the hill and then slow down as it took the curve to the river bridge.

Hugh came to his knees in the lurching van, then to his feet. His feet were numb lumps of bone and flesh. He fought to keep erect. He looked around for Square Root. The *fachi* was lying on the truck bed. He had fainted. The "wire-cutter" was still gripped tight in his tiny red hand.

Hugh scooped him up tenderly and wobbled back to where Bernice lay. He pried the wire-cutter from Square Root's fingers. He pressed a button on the instrument and stifled an exclamation when a shimmering, polka-dotted beam leapt out. If that could cut wire, it could burn human flesh, too. It

must be a disintegrator ray. Maybe he could get a patent on the gadget. If they got out of this alive.

He used the instrument to free Bernice, then thrust Square Root at her.

"Hold him," he commanded.

There was something in his voice so stern that she grew meek right away.

"Yes, Hugh."

She took Square Root gingerly.

Hugh's face was grim as he worked his way through the aisle formed by stacks of leather. At the front of the truck was a dirty window, through which he found himself looking into the driver's compartment.

There were three men in the cab. Morrow sat next to the window, face set and determined. Hugh scowled blackly, wrapped his handkerchief around his fist and jammed it through the window.

As the glass crashed, the heads of the three men jerked around.

"Grant!" Morrow yelled.

Hugh pointed the "wire-cutter" at the driver.

"Pull over to the side of the road!" he roared.

The driver was dumbfounded. He suddenly cramped the wheel, hard. Hugh reeled sharply to one side. He pressed the button on the tube. A crackling, radiant beam leaped out. Hugh never saw where it hit, but he was sure it struck the wheel, for the van was abruptly turning over and over and Hugh was turning with it.

Tons of cowhide promptly pinned him down, almost suffocating him. He gasped chokingly, fought his way free, and plunged straight toward a gaping diamond of light. The truck doors were warped off their hinges. Hugh burst through, found himself hip-deep in rank green weeds. The truck was lying at a crazy angle. It had trundled off into the ditch.

From the bank there was a scrambling sound. Hugh saw Morrow, struggling up the bank toward the road. Hugh raised the "wire-cutter" and fired. The beam didn't hit Morrow. But it disintegrated the shelving earth he was standing on. He yelled despairingly and came whirling down the slope of the ditch.

Hugh jumped on him, and Morrow turned into a keg of dynamiting arms and legs. Hugh, incredulously, found himself pinned underneath. He saw Morrow's savagely determined face against the sky and Morrow's

powerful face, come smashing down.

Hugh got his elbow in the way at the last second. His own fist went jabbing up. It hit Morrow's jaw. Morrow seemed to rise straight into the air for a foot or so. He looked surprised. Then he rolled off of Hugh, trembled with a strange shuddery motion and lay still.

Hugh now went into the truck and found Bernice. He advanced on her, his jaw out.

"Hugh!" she screamed.

But he grabbed her, laid her across his knee, and began to pound. After that, he threw her aside and, with great satisfaction, lighted a cigarette. He found Square Root and dropped him back in his own pocket. He walked around the truck and in the driving compartment were Morrow's two pals. They were hunched up, unconscious, with bad cuts on their heads. The wheel of the car was just a shapeless mass of melted metal.

Well, the three of them would soon be in the hands of the FBI. Hugh walked up the slope of the ditch to hail a passing car. . . .

MANY, many hours later, Hugh escorted Bernice ahead of him through the door into her home. He shoved her toward the stairs. She was discouraged, thoroughly chastened, and she was crying. At the top of the stairs she turned.

"Call me soon, Hugh," she begged him.

Hugh glared at her and ignored her. He went through the house looking for Doc Ferris.

Square Root's gleeful thoughts came to Hugh. "You can twist her around your little finger now, Hugh," the imp said. "If you think she's worth it, that is."

Hugh sighed heavily.

"I don't know," he muttered. Still, he reflected, maybe she had received the treatment she needed.

Hugh found Doc Ferris in the kitchen. The kitchen was a mess. Squashed eggs were all over the place. Egg crates and paper egg cartons were scattered everywhere. In the midst of this havoc stood Doc Ferris, grinning triumphantly.

"I found it!" he cried. "And I've been looking for it so long! See? See? Hold it this way and it sorta runs together at the curves, gets rectangular—and then disappears! Ho! Good trick, eh?"

Square Root's tragic thoughts reached Hugh. "Hugh, this is terrible. One of the fachi has mis-laid another egg."