

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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## ● NOVEL

**MADE TO ORDER** ..... *Frank Belknap Long* 67  
John Tabor had desirable traits, according to the Big Brain, only there were already too many like him. So...his application for marriage permission was denied. But there was an alternative...

## ● SHORT STORIES

**SOLITARY** (illustrated on cover) ..... *Robert Silverberg* 4  
All the logical answers to Charcot's escape and disappearances had come up...but why should an escaped convict be logical?

**THE IN-BETWEENS** ..... *Richard Wilson* 22  
Robert Blane became the most ubiquitous of man ever...

**SINFUL CITY** ..... *Christopher Anvil* 52  
An edifying and unlifting tale of vice defeated and iniquity crushed.

**THE MILE** ..... *John Tara* 110  
Now if unborn children were capable of reflection on the human lot...

**NIGHTMARE CALL** ..... *Carol Emshwiller* 121  
A strange and unusual story, by the author of "Bingo and Bongo".

## ● FEATURES

**THE EDITOR'S PAGE** ..... *Robert A. W. Lowndes* 19  
Actually, just what is "Destructive Criticism"?

**MORE MAD MEN OF SCIENCE** (article) .....  
..... *L. Sprague de Camp* 40  
They weren't "mad" in the "mad monster" sense — just plain batty!

**READIN' AND WRITHIN'** ..... *Book Reviews* 113  
L. Sprague de Camp looks over recent scientific non-fiction.

**DOWN TO EARTH** (department) ..... *The Readers* 127  
Letters from readers, plus editorial comment.

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# The In-Betweens

by Richard Wilson

(author of "One Man's Inch").

*Dr. Antioch's discovery resulted in one Robert Blane becoming the most ubiquitous man ever. (Notes: If you've forgotten the meaning of the word, "ubiquitous", as your editor had, that's all to the good. Don't look up, until you've read this story, please!)*

**T**HE CHAPLAIN said, "I'm a man of God, not a man of science, so I'll be able to tell you only part of what you ought to know."

Then he had to leap back to avoid the fist that swung at him through the bars.

"There's no reason for you to try to hurt me," he said. "I'm only trying to make you understand why you're here."

"I'll kill you," said the man behind the bars. His face was contorted by hate as he strained to reach the other, who stood just out of range.

"There's been enough killing," the chaplain said.

"Let there be one more, Padre," the prisoner said mockingly. "Let it be you."

"You're evil," the chaplain said unemotionally. "You're all evil, literally. You killed the doctor and the others. It wasn't your fault, but it was you who did it and you must pay for it, under society's law. I'll try to explain that to you, if you'll listen."

He wondered if there was a shred of tortured sanity left in the prisoner. He sought it in the blazing eyes but could find only blind hate.

"I'll kill," the prisoner said. "That's what I do best. I'll ex-



"Listen, and I'll explain it all to you..."

plain that to *you*, if *you'll* listen."

"All right," the chaplain said. He seemed gratified at the response. "I don't want to monopolize the explanations. I'll listen to you first and then you listen to me."

"I've killed with a gun and with a club, but the best way is with the hands. Then it's all you doing the killing, nothing intermediate. That brings the most satisfaction. It eases the pressure longest."

"I pray God will have mercy on your soul."

**T**HE PRISONER spat. "Pray for yourself. I'll kill you if I can. With my hands. I'll strangle you till you're purple, then I'll give you air for a moment and let your eyes sink back into their sockets. Then I'll strangle you again, my thumbs in your windpipe. Suddenly you'll be limp. Then you'll be dead and I'll feel at peace, briefly."

"There are other ways to find peace."

"None so good. There is torture, but it is too subtle for me. I am not a subtle man. The fine points of inflicting pain do no interest me. It is only in the climax that I find satisfaction. While you live, however painfully, I am frustrated. Death and death alone provides fulfillment."

"You are articulate, at least."

"I know my needs."

"Do you know why?" the chaplain asked.

"No. I've told you I'm not interested in subtleties. Does the starving man inquire into the makings of a loaf of bread? Does a drowning man ask why a life preserver floats?"

"I believe what you say, much as I deplore it. But you should know why you're as you are. There may be some comfort in it. Or maybe only remorse. Anything would be better than unalloyed hate. Do you know *who* you are?"

"Robert Blane. A meaningless name. It would be more appropriate if it were Samuel Hall. Did he really exist?"

"Samuel Hall?"

"My name is Samuel Hall. I hate you one and all — damn your eyes."

"I don't know. I think he existed, but that a legend was built up around him. You sound almost as if you have a sense of humor."

"I HAVE NO humor. I killed the humorous one."

"So you did. Do you remember his name?"

"No."

"It was Robert Blane," the chaplain said. "You killed him first."

"I didn't know he had the same name. It wouldn't have mattered, of course. I shot him. Grinning and laughing all the time. I think he was the worst."

"What do you remember before that?"

"There weren't any before that," Blane said. "I killed the others later."

"I don't mean the killings," the chaplain said. "Don't you remember a time when you didn't want to kill?"

"I woke up wanting to kill."

"Before you woke up."

"Was there a before? I don't know."

"Do you know how old you are, Robert?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Do you remember anything of the first twenty-seven years of your life?"

"I was twenty-eight when I woke up," Blane insisted.

"But twenty-eight years ago you were *born*."

"I suppose I was; I know a great many things that I didn't learn actively after I woke up. There must have been some kind of life before that. But all this talk bores me. Come in a little closer, Padre. My hunger to kill is growing more acute."

"One would almost think you were joking. But I'll stay where I am while I tell you what made you wake up at

the age of twenty-eight at Lost Oaks."

**L**OST OAKS was an estate. The great house in the center of its fifty-odd acres was built in the boom years of the twenties, abandoned by its once-wealthy owner in the depression years, and sold for taxes in the forties. To reach it you drove sixty miles out of the city on a main highway, followed a second-class road for ten miles beyond the reservoir, an unimproved road for four miles more, then turned off that onto a private dirt road that ended at locked iron gates in a high stone fence.

Dr. Norvell Antioch was the man who had bought Lost Oaks for taxes. It was when he retired, that he went there to live, taking with him from the faculty of the university a worshipful young laboratory assistant, Robert Blane. Antioch told Blane he had picked him to be his colleague, but instead he made him his guinea pig.

Antioch also took from the university a belief that cellular matter contained within itself all the attributes of the organism as a whole. He believed that a living cell, taken from the muscle tissue of the forearm, for instance, had the makings not only of other forearm muscle tissue cells, but that the cells, properly fed,

could reproduce themselves and that the resulting colonies eventually could be persuaded to take the form of the whole creature.

And Dr. Antioch, who had spent forty years studying the nucleolus, the dense area inside a cell's nucleus, thought he knew, finally, how to persuade it to do just that.

**F**ORTUNATELY, he had a private income, in addition to his pension, to help him devote the rest of his life to this goal.

Robert Blane gladly gave up the cells from his forearm and helped Antioch pare one of them down to the linin network. Antioch took it from there, alone.

Blane was kept busy thereafter with the mental work of a housekeeper, and Antioch kept a sloppy house. There were twenty-two rooms, from cellar to attic, and Antioch used every one of them. He slept in one, ate in another, did his reading and kept his journals in a third, relaxed with recordings or motion picture films in others, cluttered up the bathrooms, threw his dirty clothes out in the hall and, in general, behaved like a pig.

Poor, devoted Blane cleaned up after him many hours each day. He prepared the meals,

did the dishes, fetched supplies from town in the station wagon, saw that two generators were switched over every twenty-four hours—a crotchet of Antioch's—to guard against an electricity failure, stacked away the phonograph records, rewound the films and did the laundry.

It was backbreaking work and only rarely did Blane find time to visit the lab to see how the experiment was coming along.

**I**T WAS COMING along very well. Antioch, pig though he was in his personal habits, was a demon biologist. He had got down to the nucleolus. What he did next, exactly, was described in the code Antioch used in his journals.

What he ended up with, as far as any layman could see, was half a dozen small covered glass dishes. Whatever was in them certainly was growing; because, from week to week, it had to be transferred to larger dishes, then to deep jars and finally to huge vats.

Blane had run all around the county in the station wagon looking for vats of suitable size and shape and when he'd found them he'd had to lug them up the two flights of stairs to the lab by himself. Antioch never

allowed any outsider beyond the gates of Lost Oaks.

Blane huffed and sweated and got the vats in place, then was locked out while Antioch transferred the contents of the jars to the vats. Blane listened outside the door and heard a sloshing sound. Antioch was talking to himself and the sloshes punctuated his almost inaudible monologue. Blane waited for the sixth slosh, then had to go to his room and lie down. His heart was hammering from the exertion of carrying the huge vats upstairs.

Blane died the next day, as he was carrying a basketful of wet wash from the tubs to the clothesline. Antioch cursed when he found the body. He buried it, grudgingly and not very deep, a few steps from where it had fallen.

**A**NTIOCH went directly back to the lab. He must have been a little off by this time.

"Die on me, will you?" he said to the semicircle of vats. "No matter. One Robert Blane is gone—but I'll soon have six more."

He chuckled and mumbled as he went from one vat to another, carefully measuring out something green and liquid and pouring it onto the semi-gelatinous blob of each. He stepped

back then and said over his shoulder, as if to the ghost of his late assistant: "That's you all over, Robert Blane." He chuckled again as a phrase struck him. "The ubiquitous you!"

He gave each vat a final inspection for the morning and went up to the attic for an hour's relaxation in his film library. On the way he unbuttoned his stained smock and dropped it behind him in the hall.

When the creatures were full size, Antioch slid them from the vats onto a portable table and washed them off. Antioch weighed them. Each was 145 pounds. They were exactly alike in build and muscular development; they were duplicates of the late Robert Blane in every way but one. Their faces were different, each from the other, although they had a family resemblance.

**A**NTIOCH fretted over that, but not for long. It was a minor flaw in a major achievement.

He started them breathing with a pulmotor but they didn't waken immediately. He trundled each to a separate room. He'd been so confident of success that he'd prepared the rooms and bought clothing for them. Robert Blane, the origi-

nal, had been fitted at the tailor shop. He'd wondered at the time why Antioch was buying him a dozen suits, and wondered later why he'd never seen them again after they'd been delivered.

Antioch grunted and sweated and got each of the men in a bed. Then he gave each an injection which, among other things, would result in their waking at separate times so he could observe their individual reactions.

The study was a mess. Antioch grumbled around and finally located his journal under a pile of papers in an armchair. He sat down with it at his desk and was making a coded entry when he heard footsteps in the hall. He whirled in his chair and saw the door open.

One of the new Robert Blanes came in, smiling broadly. He walked confidently toward Antioch.

Antioch took a revolver out of the desk drawer and said, "Just stay where you are."

Blane laughed. "That's a gun, isn't it?" He veered away from Antioch and sat down in a chair, first pushing a stack of books off it onto the floor.

"I know what a gun is and I assure you you won't have to use it on me," he said. "I know lots of things in a general way, but"—he chuckled—

"when it comes to particulars I'm pretty vague."

Antioch still held the revolver, but he rested it in his lap when Blane sat down. "That's interesting," he said. "Just what do you know in particular?"

**B**LANE LAUGHED again. There were furrows in his cheeks which suggested a great deal of past laughter and crinkles at the corners of his eyes. His attitude, even as he sat relaxed in the chair, was one of tremendous good will and vitality.

"In particular," Blane said, "I know I'm Robert Blane and that I'm twenty-eight years old. I know it's good to be alive. That's about all." He laughed again. "Silly, isn't it, to be so lacking in vital statistics? I don't know who you are, or where I am, or how I got here. I suppose I've had a touch of amnesia."

"You might say so," Antioch said. "What do you know about biology?"

"Biology? That's a science, isn't it? Must have had a bit of it in school, but I can't remember for sure. Can't even remember having gone to school, though I must have, mustn't I?" He laughed. "Embarrassing, in a way. Is this an institution?"

"Not exactly," Antioch said.

"Do you know how to drive a car? Can you operate a generator?"

"A car? Why, yes. I can't remember having driven one but somehow I know I can. And the same thing applies to a generator. I can run one, I'm sure."

"Motor skills retained," Antioch muttered. "But no carry-over of specific intellectual training. Though I dare say your motor skill would take charge if I were to ask you to cut up a frog. But personality? That isn't Blane's personality at all. He was no laughing boy."

"*Laughing Boy*, by Oliver LaFarge," said the new Blane. "A novel, about Indians. *Laughing Boy Blues*, by Woody Herman, a swing record. More generalized knowledge, I suppose? But I don't know your name. Should I?"

"Antioch." He looked at the amiable man, then got up. "I don't know why you woke so early. But if you did the others might, too. I'd better go see. Stay here."

"Of course, Mr. Antioch," Blane said agreeably. "There are others, then? The more the merrier, I always say."

"You don't know the half of it," the old man said grimly. "And it's *Doctor* Antioch."

"Anything you say, Doctor. I'll be right here."



**A**NTIOCH hurried out of the room, looking anxiously at his watch.

He hadn't been gone long when another Robert Blane came into the study. This one was scowling. He wore pants, an undershirt, shoes and socks only, in contrast to the amiable man, who had dressed meticulously, with the tie neat between the collar points and suit jacket buttoned.

The scowling man said, "Who the hell are you?"

"An amnesia victim," the other said cheerfully. "Dr. Antioch is treating me. Come in, come in."

"I *am* in. I don't need any grinning idiot to tell me what to do." He went to the desk and pawed through the papers on it. He pulled open drawers and in the bottom one he found a revolver, a mate to the one Antioch had taken. He hefted the weapon with satisfaction.

**"D**R. ANTIOCH might not like you going through his desk that way," the amiable man said with an ingratiating smile. "Might have his little secrets, you know." He laughed.

The scowling man whirled on him. "Don't tell me what to do, you hyena!" he yelled.

The other continued to laugh. "That's good," he said. "Dr. Antioch called me Laughing Boy and you say I'm a

hyena. That's another laughing animal, you know. That's very good." His laughter rolled out.

"Stop that!" The scowling man swung the revolver so it pointed at the other's chest. "Nobody laughs at me."

"I can't help it. You look so droll now, like the late Humphrey Bogart being a menace." Peals of laughter came from him. "All right, Louie, drop the gun." He laughed and laughed.

The shot doubled him over. His last laugh became a gurgle as he slumped in the chair.

"Nobody laughs at Robert Blane," his killer said.

The shot brought Dr. Antioch at a run. He came around the doorway with his revolver in his hand and jerked it up when he saw the scowling man. He was too late; the bullet caught him in the heart and he fell with a little moan.

Robert Blane, the killer, inspected the bodies for signs of life. He found none. He eased into the hallway, cautiously. It was empty. Pointing the revolver ahead of him, he walked down the hall, swerving at each open door.

He found no one and became bolder. There was one more door before the stairway at the end of the hall and he approached it carelessly. As he went by a hand thrust out. It was holding a stove poker,

which cracked on Blane's wrist. The gun fell.

"I want that," the man with the poker said. He was a duplicate of Blane, but his features were sharper, his eyes narrower. His lips were pulled back in a greedy smile and his whole expression was one of acquisitiveness.

**H**E STOPPED and retrieved the revolver. Blane lunged at him in the same instant and fell across the bent back. The other straightened and Blane went over his shoulder and fell in a heap behind him. He must have fallen on his injured wrist because he howled with pain.

The other whirled and covered him with the revolver. He held it in his right hand, having transferred the poker to his left.

Blane leaped to his feet but then stood still, looking at the gun and the man behind it.

They were in a room that was a miniature museum. There were oil paintings on the wall and statuary in the corners. Here and there stood glass cases displaying pottery and ancient jewelry.

"Who are you?" asked Robert Blane, massing his wrist and scowling. "Another laughing one?"

"I'm Robert Blane," the other said, "and I hardly ever laugh. Who are you?"

"I'm Robert Blane."

"What?" the other said. "You took my name? You can't have it!" His thin features trembled with emotion. He edged toward the other, the gun quivering in his fist.

**T**HE SCOWLING man moved backward until he was stopped by a mantelpiece. His hand groped along it and found a bronze figurine, one of a pair.

"Put that down," the greedy man said. "I want that, too." He jerked forward and picked up the mate to it with the hand holding the poker. He managed to get it into his coat pocket, then transferred the poker to his right armpit. With his free hand he began gathering up other knickknacks from the mantelpiece and stuffing them into his pockets.

"These are mine," the greedy man said. "All of them. You give that back, do you hear? I need it. It goes with the other one and I want both of them."

As he spoke his eyes found a display of cut stones in a glass case. He trembled at the sight of the treasure and used the revolver to smash the case. He smashed it repeatedly until the glass lay in splinters in the case and on the floor.

He began scooping up the stones with his left hand, but was able to take only a few at

a time. Panting and shaking, he used his right hand, too, but the revolver made it awkward. He thrust the weapon into his pocket and used both hands to take the stones.

Then Robert Blane, the killer, laid open the skull of the greedy man with the bronze figurine.

The lazy man had not stirred from the bed in which he'd awakened. Robert Blane killed him there, more as a matter of inertia than of plan.

**R**OBERT THE GOOD awoke with a minimum of memories but with a sense of well-being that made him smile as he stretched in his bed. After a while he got up and dressed in the clothing he found in the closet.

He opened the door, then stopped as he heard the sound that was the dying gasp of the lazy man in the adjoining room. He looked into the room as the killer stepped back, panting from the emotion of the murder.

Robert the Good moved backwards softly, then turned and walked to a bend in the hall, where he stopped and watched. The killer came into the hall. He looked weary. He massaged the back of his neck and, with his head bent, went to his room.

Robert the Good crept to the

open doorway. The killer had thrown himself face down on his bed and was already asleep.

The good man went to the room of the lazy man. Tears came to his eyes as he examined the corpse. He crossed the hands on the chest and pulled the sheet up over the face. He said a prayer.

He explored the rest of the house and found the other three corpses. He did what he could to make them less ugly in death.

Robert the Good visited the room where the vats had spawned him and the other five. Some uncoded notes left by Dr. Antioch lay in a corner where they had fallen unnoticed. He read them. He made another tour of the great house and bit by bit began to know what had happened.

Somewhere there was another Robert Blane, in addition to the dead ones, their killer and himself. He went back to the hall that led to his room and behind one of the closed doors he found the sixth Robert Blane still asleep.

Robert the Good closed the door behind him and, finding no lock, placed a chair under the knob. He awoke the sleeper.

**L**ATER, IN the laboratory. Robert the Good said: "That's why I got you out of

there so fast. Here's your tie, if you want to finish dressing."

"A homicidal maniac?" the other asked, buttoning his shirt.

"Strictly speaking, no. Not a maniac. He's a killer because he was made that way. The other parts of his personality—the ones that would balance or cancel out the killer instinct that may be in everyone—have been distributed among the other five of us. As I've reconstructed it, he'd killed Greed, Laughter and Sloth, which dominated three of his other selves, and Dr. Antioch."

"That would leave two other duplicates of the original Robert Blane. You're one of them, I suppose. Which one?"

"I seem to be the good one," Robert the Good said, "basing the premise on an admittedly short period of self-analysis. Now the question remains—which one are you?"

The other had knotted his tie into a wide Windsor. He let Robert the Good help him into his coat.

"I'm not one of you, I'm sure," he said, adjusting the length of his shirt cuffs. "My name is Hillary Manchester."

**R**OBERT THE GOOD smiled indulgently. "Your name is Robert Blane, the same as the rest of us. It's a disappointment to you that you're not the

good one; I can understand that. But then you're not the evil one, either. Apparently you're amoral, which is unfortunate. But that's only the lack of an attribute. We must try to learn what your dominant characteristic is, Robert."

"Hillary Manchester's the name," the other said. "You may call me Hillary. And you needn't be so smug about being good, if that's what you are. Goodness unrelieved by any other trait can be pretty insufferable."

"We've no time to quarrel. It really doesn't matter what you choose to call yourself. What we've got to do is team up and overcome the killer. Otherwise he'll pick us off separately."

"You say he's killed four people already. How do you know?"

"I'll show you the corpses, if you like."

"I grant you there are corpses," Hillary said. "My point is that they weren't necessarily all killed by the same man. Some of them might have killed each other. Lord knows this place is weird enough for anything to have happened." He looked around at the vats. "As apparently it did."

Robert the Good furrowed his forehead. "It's true that I have no proof that they were all killed by the same man, but

somehow I know they were. It's as if there were some kind of link among all us duplicated men. As if the common cell from which we sprang gave us a common memory. You and I must have that faculty, then. Do I communicate anything to you? Do you get anything from me?"

"Only a lot of blather. I've told you I'm not one of your biological freaks. I'm Hillary Manchester, the—the explorer and big game hunter, among other things." He managed to look at Robert as if from a height, though they were of identical build.

"You're Robert the Liar, possibly," Robert the Good muttered to himself.

"I CAME HERE last night when my car broke down," Hillary said, not listening. "I had been on my way to a lecture engagement. Dr. Antioch was kind enough to put me up. As an overnight guest I suppose I have certain obligations, but they don't include participating in a manhunt. Especially when that man may be an innocent victim."

"What do you mean?" Robert the Good asked.

"What proof do I have that *you're* not the killer?"

Robert the Good drew himself up righteously. "You have

my word," he said. "And if that isn't sufficient, you have only to wait till the killer awakes. Or go wake him, if you're foolish enough, and see whether he strangles you on the spot."

Hillary fingered his neck. "I suppose I have to trust you. But if he's asleep, why don't we go and truss him up now, while we have the chance?"

"Mainly because it's taken me this long to persuade you that you are involved, distasteful as it may be to the mind of one who claims he is a Hillary Manchester. Another reason is that we can't afford to make a mistake. When he's aroused all his energies flow into his killing instinct and he may be able to overcome both of us, who lack that drive."

"You're afraid of him, then."

"Only afraid we might fail unless we planned it carefully. *We* know what he is; but if he overcomes us, he'll go out among people who do not know him. Then he might kill dozens before he was captured."

**H**ILLARY MANCHESTER leaned against a vat. "I'm reminded of the time I trapped a man-eating tiger in India," he said. "The beast had been raiding the village, killing goats and sometimes people. You may have read my account in the publication of the Adven-

turers Club. *A Beast There Was*, I called it."

"Pathological," Robert the Good commented to himself.

"I've made quite a name for myself as a writer of crime fiction, too," Hillary went on. "You're probably familiar with my private detective character, Ace Hillary, nemesis of crime. Fourteen novels, dozens of short stories and five—no, six films. Radio and television, too, of course. I recall the time a rich old recluse was burned to death in the cupola of his mansion. Accidental, the police supposed, and were prepared to close the case when I arrived on the scene."

"Listen, Hillary—"

"Call me Ace. Everyone does. So I said to the chief of police, 'There's more to this than meets the eye, Chief.' I said to him, 'I smell murder here—murder for gain—and I'd like you to round up all the old man's heirs. When I've done questioning them you'll have your killer.'"

"Walter Mitty," Robert the Good said. "Out of the sixth vat."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing."

"Oh. Well, needless to say—But this is neither here nor there, is it? The problem here is to capture your killer for you. Now—old Ace is clicking right along—here's what we'll

do. In the hall outside his room..."

Robert the Good listened resignedly. Even the help of this—this protean man, who changed personalities at the swerve of a conversation, would be better than no help at all.

**A**CE HILLARY MAN-CHESTER, or whoever he was (Robert the Good had no doubt that he was Robert Blane VI, multiple personality), was busy booby-trapping the basement stairs.

"The simplest snare is always the best," Hillary said. "I apply this bear grease"—it was really jellied soap—"to every second step. We know which ones to use—the first, third, fifth, and so on. But our friend the killer, in hot pursuit, gets his legs skidded out from under him and crashes down in a heap. Then he's ours."

"Oh, fine," said Robert the Good impatiently. "But why would he be chasing us? Why wouldn't he just shoot us?"

"Because," Hillary said, "he wouldn't have any guns; we'll have taken them away from him."

"If that's the case, why wouldn't we have him right then? Cover him with the guns and march him off to the authorities?"

"Think of yourself as being in Africa, with a pistol, a **cape**

and a killer lion. Is the lion going to slink into the cage simply because he's covered by your little gun? No. He's going to rush you. Same thing here. Ol' Killer Bob is going to come raging at us, no matter how much artillery we've got trained on him. So we've got to decoy him down here and hope that when he slips he lands on his head. If that doesn't knock him out so we can tie him up we've got to use Plan Two. How's the net coming?"

"I'M UNTANGLING it," Robert the Good said. "But isn't he going to notice it, all spread out at the bottom of the steps?"

"Never. The smell of blood will be too heady in his nostrils."

"Whose blood?"

"Nobody's. Figure of speech. So—the thrill of the hunt sends him pounding down here after us, he slips, falls, lands in the net and if that doesn't knock him out, we tangle him up. Check?"

"I guess so," Robert the Good said doubtfully. "Couldn't we just call the police?"

"Never. Get his wind up. He'd be out and gone at the first flat footfall. Besides, you forget that old Ace Hillary is here. Always gets his man. Reminds me of a time in Black-

pool, when the Yard called me in for consultation..."

DUSK HAD come as they finished their preparations. At the top of the basement stairs they clicked off the light and crept silently through the darkening halls.

"Have you got the flashlight?" Robert the Good whispered.

"Yes, yes. Leave it to me, now. You don't have to do anything except stand by and, when the time comes, run like hell."

They reached the killer's door and listened. They heard nothing. Silently Hillary turned the knob and opened the door an inch. Then he kicked the door inward and stabbed the flashlight beam at the bed.

"We've come for you, Killer Bob!" Hillary thundered.

But the beam was shining on an empty bed. Their quarry was not in his room. "Oh, dear," Hillary said.

"There are the guns," Robert the Good said more practically. "He's left them behind." He picked up the revolvers from a corner where the killer had apparently tossed them. He gave one to Hillary.

"Where do you suppose he is?" Hillary asked.

"He could be anywhere. Maybe he's eating. The kitch-

en's one flight down, in the back."

He wasn't in the kitchen, either, but he had been there. A platter on the table had a gnawed ham bone on it and there were other signs that someone had raided the refrigerator. They themselves ate, realizing they were hungry, and as they discussed what to do next it began to rain.

**D**R. ANTIOCH had lived well. The refrigerator was crammed with leftovers the frugal Blane had saved and, next to it, an upright freezer held provisions enough for months.

The rain, carried by a gusty wind, pelted the kitchen window. "Time to be wary," Hillary said. "He could sneak up on us under cover of the elements. Time to move."

"Stop talking like one of your mythical books," Robert the Good said, irritated in spite of himself. "But I suppose you're right. Let's try the attic. He could be up there."

"What's in the attic?"

"You know as well as I do. But if you must pretend, it's Dr. Antioch's film library. He was a collector of classic films. I had almost as good a library as the Modern Museum."

"An old-time-movie buff, eh?"

I guess it takes all kinds. Projector and all?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if any of mine are up there. *Calling Ace Hillary* is my favorite. Huston did that one. Let's go up."

Robert the Good sighed and led the way.

**T**HEY HEARD a voice and paused on the stairs. It wasn't the evil man's voice, Robert the Good knew. It had a tinny, mechanical sound to it.

"It's Vince Barnett!" Hillary Manchester whispered.

"Who?"

"It's a movie. The telephone booth scene from *Scarface*. Listen." There was a burst of machine-gun fire. "Ol' Killer Bob is getting his violence vicariously. Everybody was in that one—Paul Muni, Georgie Raft, Boris Karloff. Listen. Poor old Vince is dying now, but he's still trying to take the message. Now's our chance."

"You mean rush him?" They crept up to the door.

"Right. His eyes'll be glued to the screen. I'll yank open the door. You rush in—you know the way. He'll jump at you. I'll slip in unnoticed and clobber him from behind."

"I'm not so sure that's—"

But Hillary had pulled open the door and pushed the other inside.



**R**OBERT BLANE, the killer, was sitting in one of the half dozen upholstered chairs. The only light was coming from the projector behind him and the square of screen at the other end of the room.

Robert the Good tripped over a folding wooden chair that went down with a clatter. The killer jumped up, Hollywood's violence forgotten. He leaped on the prone form, secured a throat-hold and hauled his namesake erect.

Hillary crawled silently across the room. Something on a mantelpiece caught his eye in the dimness. He lifted it, hefted it, then made his way toward the two men struggling in and out of the projector's beam. Hillary swung one, felt a crunch as of a skull, then swung again for good measure. The struggle ended.

Hillary held his weapon up in the beam, silhouetting it against Paul Muni. It was a lead copy of an Academy Awards Oscar. It had served.

**T**HE MAN in the garb of a chaplain said:

"And so you must pay, Robert the Killer Blane. Society demands it."

"You're no society. Where are the cops?"

"There are no police at Lost Oaks. We are a world—and a law—unto ourselves here. These bars aren't a jail; Dr.

Antioch once kept an ape here. Now they restrain you, though I would have preferred the ape."

"Come closer, Padre. Let me feel your throat."

"It's you who will die, my poor lost friend, not I. What means would you prefer? The pistol at the base of the skull? The noose? The electric chair, I'm afraid, is more than Lost Oaks can offer."

"You wouldn't kill me, you sanctimonious son; you're too holy."

"Poison, perhaps? It's rather painful. How about drowning?"

"Trying to give me a little hell on earth, Padre? Quit moralizing and call the cops."

The other wrote something on a pad. He'd done it before.

"What's that?" the caged man asked. "What are you writing?"

"Oh, you're curious, are you? Just a bit of dialogue. Yours, as a matter of fact. Rather good. I always strive for authenticity."

"Playing father confessor, you fake? You're no priest. You're just something out of a vat. I'll make a bargain with you, fellow experiment. Let me go and you can play-act in your turned-around collar till the saints come home. I don't have to kill you. There are others."

"No bargains with the devil."

THE CAGED man lunged, his hands reaching through the bars.

The other stepped back, smiling. "You're right about one thing. I am play-acting. You knew I was no priest, but here's something you didn't know — I'm not even Robert the Good."

The killer stared, his hands gripping the bars.

"You begin to see the implications of that? You said you didn't have to kill me. But I have to kill you, and I can. I have no sanctimonious compunctions. I'm not a pure killer, like you, but I'm no saint, either. Amoral, Robert the Good called me. You see, I'm the one out of the sixth vat."

He yanked off his collar. The caged man shuddered. With hate only? Or was there a trace of fear, as well?

The protean man went on: "I pretended with our good friend that I was Hillary Manchester, explorer-lecturer-writer. That was mostly to irritate him, he was rather stuffy. I don't have to pretend with you any more. I've picked your brains and taken what I need. Sure, I'm Robert Blane— and soon I'll be the sole survivor of the six of us. You've got to go, Killer Bob."

"Where's the good one?" There was a trace of panic in the killer's voice.

"Apparently you failed to notice my careful use of the past tense. Good grammar is also a characteristic of my books. Robert the Good has gone to his reward, poor fellow."

"You killed him?"

"OH, PURELY by accident. I was the one who hit you over the head up there at the theater party. Then I swung again, for the *coup de grace*. Unfortunately Good Robert's head got in the way. He was still among us while I hauled you down here to the celler but when I got back he had breathed his last, the dear soul."

The protean man, Robert Blane VI, the multiple personality, said: "So it's just you and me, old buddy, and pretty soon it'll be just me — Robert Ace Hillary Manchester Blane. I think I'll poison you, friend. Doc Antioch had quite a collection of the stuff. I'll put it in your food or your water, or both, and you can die that way or starve to death. I'm not particular. Good-by for now, Killer Bob. See you at feeding time."

"Wait!" the other called, but Robert Blane VI was gone.

ROBERT THE killer died of neither poison nor starvation. On the morning of the

third day, as Blane-Hillary arrived with a breakfast consisting of a bowl of oatmeal sprinkled with sugar and strychnine and a glass of milk laced with chloral hydrate, he found his prisoner hanging by the neck from his belt, which he had looped around one of the high horizontal bars.

Hillary, fearing a trap, merely set the tray down near the cage, as he had on each of the previous days, and went away. Twenty-four hours later, when he returned and found everything exactly as he had left it, he took down and disposed of the body.

**H**ILLARY MANCHESTER-BLANE, the noted biochemist, hummed as he worked.

His alter ego, the crack cryptographer, had been useful, his skills making the study on Dr. Antioch's coded journals a mere matter of sight translation.

A third facet of the man paused occasionally to write something down in a notebook.

Manchester-Blane, humming contentedly, worked deftly with the linen network, resisting the urge to scratch his bandaged forearm which had yielded the muscle tissue cells.

Next stop nucleolus. The half dozen small covered dishes were ready. So were the jars and vats.

Hillary Manchester was getting ready to repopulate Lost Oaks.

One thing he'd have to remember, though. Hillary the Killer must never be allowed to wake up. He could do without Hillary the Good, too. The four in-betweens, and himself, would be enough. A good amoral lot.

He supposed he was really doing all this for his favorite self, Ace Hillary. There ought to be a good story in it.

