

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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# THE INTIMATE INVASION

***She was young; she was lovely; she was in love—and he: well, what was he?***

**By SAM MERWIN, JR.**

LIKE ANY brother worth his salt, Tom Lynch had come to recognize through experience, if not exactly to respect, certain symptoms which meant his sister was in love again. For with Marie, as with most females under twenty-five, the process followed a definite behavior pattern. Marie was twenty-three.

So when, after asking three times for her to pass him the sugar for his strawberries, he was handed the salt and pepper shakers, Tom knew it was on once more. He knew better than to ask for the sugar a fourth time. Instead, he

stretched halfway across the dining-room table that, like the house itself and everything in it, was much too large for just the two of them, and sugared his own berries.

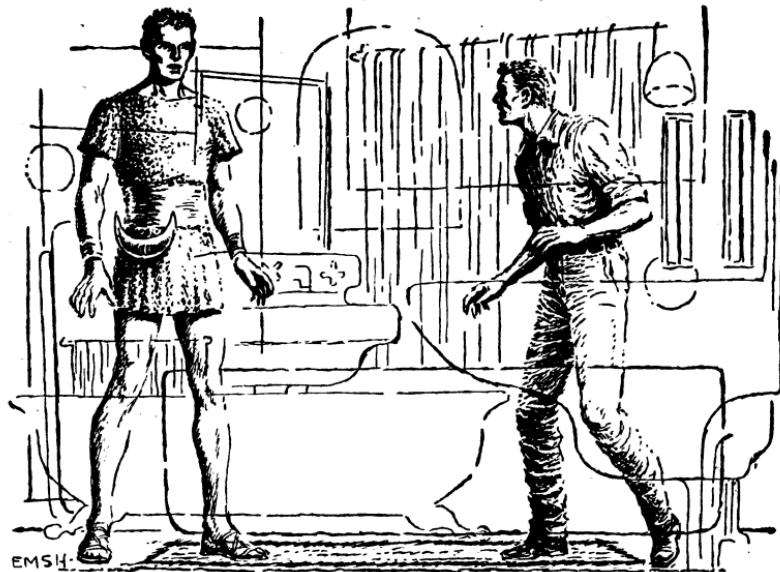
Marie, usually a stickler for manners, failed to notice his rudeness. Which was enough to turn speculation into certainty; this time, the kid-sister had it bad.

"Using the car tonight?" Tom asked her a moment later.

"What, Tom?" Her hazel eyes came briefly into focus.

When he repeated the question, she shook her auburn head absent-ly, peppered her own berries,

**illustrated by EMSH**



dreamily swallowed a spoonful. To her numbed senses, it appeared to be as bland as junket. She said, "No, I'm staying home; you do whatever you want to."

Tom, who had intended to spend the evening putting in his basement workshop-studio over his hexagonal canister design, decided the house was no place for him that evening. He said, "Okay, I think I'll run out for awhile. Anything I can get you?"

A barely-perceptible shake of Marie's pretty head was all the response he got. Shaking his head over the hopelessness of females

in general, and his sister in particular, he put down his napkin and got out of the house.

It was, he had to admit as he toolled the sedan out of the driveway, a night for romance. Soft June elm-laden darkness, asparkle with fireflies doing their seasonal stuff—even the familiar homely, comfortable late Victorian and Edwardian facades of Allensburgh were awash with glamour as revealed by occasional street and porch and driveway lights.

But Tom was in no mood for romance. He was worried—worried about himself and his appar-

ently arrested-career; about Marie and her future, to say nothing of her emotional vagaries; about the king-sized old house. It was comfortable, and it was home, but it was damnable expensive to keep in repair—to say nothing of heat in winter. No one wanted to buy such a white elephant, or to rent it at a worthwhile fee. And unless he could rent it, he could not afford to take Marie and himself to New York, where he could get on with his career and where his sister might meet some new and more suitable males.

Which brought him back to the little matter of whom she could have fallen in love with this time. Since the senior Lynches had died four years earlier in an auto-crash, Tom had nursed Marie through more-or-less violent crushes with a quarter-witted halfback from the State University, an editor of the Allensburgh *Weekly Register* who had chronically dirty fingernails and had long since decamped with the subscription-receipts, a visiting fifth-rate concert pianist and Alan Ladd.

There simply weren't any current possibilities around town—unless he counted Morty Keener. And Morty had been mooning around Marie for all of five years, to no avail. It was hardly likely that she...

All the same, Tom decided to look up Morty.

**M**ORTY WAS behind the counter of the soda fountain at Keener's Drug Store, on Front Street. Morty regarded him with owlish wariness enhanced by his horn-rimmed glasses, mixed him an orange squash without comment. He looked even more disconsolate than usual. Tom didn't believe the fact that the store was empty was the cause—it would fill up enough once the early show ended.

Tom said, "Hey, Morty, how come you're using the old milkshake mixers? Customers squawk at the ones I rigged up for you?"

Morty sighed, rested an elbow on the imitation marble counter, put his chin in a cupped hand. He said, "They squawked. Not that they minded getting free drinks—they just didn't like getting them all over their clothes. Seems that dingus of yours made this into a real soda fountain—sprayed the stuff all over everything."

"Very funny," said Tom. "Very funny!" He scowled. "They shouldn't have done that. Morty, I'll lay odds you forgot to cut the current down to half. My design doubles the power."

"I should crawl under the counter to cut the switch every time a chick wants a super-duper," said Morty scathingly. "Listen, Tom, you've got great ideas—but they're just a little too big for this town."

"You're telling me," said Tom,

feeling as disconsolate as Morty looked. Then, to change the subject, "What's with you and Marie lately?"

Morty switched arms, rested his chin in his other palm. "Don't ask me," he said gloomily. "The other night—you remember, the time I took her to the movies while you were doing something to the house—I thought maybe she was beginning to soften up a little. She didn't even beef when I kissed her good night. But since then—" he picked up a cloth, made a vicious swipe at the pseudo-marble—"nothing."

"Damn! I'm sorry, Morty," said Tom. While the druggist was not his beau ideal of a brother-in-law, still, he was a nice guy as well as a solid citizen, and Marie could do a lot worse. He wondered who the devil it could be—but knew better than to broach his sister's condition to Morty. He went to the movies alone instead.

When Tom got home and walked upstairs after locking the house for the night, he was just in time to see his sister emerge from the bathroom. She was wearing the peach-satin negligee he had let her buy herself for her birthday in March and her whole being was aglow with a rapture that carried her past him without seeing him as she fluoresced slowly to her room at the end of the hall.

He said, "Good night, Marie."

There was no answer.

He thought, *What the hell?*—and went into the bathroom himself.

His first reaction was that he had somehow blundered into the wrong house. Not that the Lynch bathroom wasn't remarkable in itself. In part, at any rate, it was the oldest piece of inside-plumbing still extant in Allensburgh. Tom and Marie's grandparents had had it put in decades earlier, in what had originally been a sewing-room overhanging the *porte cochere*. With the *porte cochere* long gone, it now merely overhung.

**T**HE ROOM was long and narrow, with a sort of terrace running the length of it, into which both tub and washbasin were sunk. Its remainder, backed by a mirror, offered a fair imitation of a dressing-table. Thus, it was a remarkable bathroom by any standards in its own right.

However, something new seemed to have been added. Seen a trifle off-focus, as if through a glass lightly, were softly-gleaming walls and artifacts of some alabastine substance that made Tom feel as if he had stepped into the heart of a crystal. Artifacts whose purpose eluded him, even as the beautiful functionalism of their design enthralled him, lay on every hand.

Involuntarily, he extended a

hand to touch the subtly-curving lip of what seemed to be some sort of tub. His hand passed through it—not as if nothing were there, but as if the atmosphere had been thickened to that of a light tapioca pudding. It was real—but it wasn't real. Tom wondered what Morty had put into his orange squash.

Taking a deep breath, he walked through the tublike object toward the bowl, feeling its slight density against his thighs, and turned on the water in the basin. It seemed to work normally. He batted his forehead hard with the heel of a hand, but the odd illusion refused to fade. He decided he must be going crazy.

Then the tall young man came in. He was dark, sensitive-looking, and moved with an odd articulation as if his joints were subtly different from those of other folk. He wore an unusual singlet of shimmering pale blue, which looked as if it might have been spun of satin chainmail. About his waist was a broad belt or girdle, that appeared to be moulded to his body, with a soft, brown, crescent-shaped pouch.

He reached for some small object on one of the translucent walls, saw Tom and stayed his hand. He said, "You must be Tom—Marie's...brother. She has told me of you." His accents were inex-

plicably odd, and his voice, which was muffled, seemed to come from the drain in the real washbasin.

Tom said, "What is this—and who in hell are you?"

"Eggers," said the stranger. "Call me Eggers. Don't be alarmed—I couldn't hurt you if I wished, which I don't. Nor can you hurt me. Sorry, but it's time to break contact."

With which he touched the object on the wall and vanished—along with the alien bathroom.

Dazed, Tom stood bewildered for a long moment. Then he walked slowly down the two flights of stairs to his basement workshop-studio, dug out a half-empty bottle and a glass, and poured himself a far stiffer slug of whiskey than usual. He downed it, and another, and then one more.

He eyed the row of Lynch-designed objects on what he called, ruefully, the discard-bench. The beautifully simple handipack jigsaw, which could do everything but turn corners—the easilift eggcrate, which lifted easily enough but scalped the eggs while doing so—the waterproof navel watch for Bikini bather-wearers, which kept out the water as planned but removed most of the navel after swimming.

And, of course, his latest, the hexagonal canister, guaranteed to save vast amounts of packing-space

over the usual cylindrical shape, thanks to its honeycomb design.

Which would be an almost certain winner if he could figure out a proper airtight top, or one that would permit regulation can-openers to work on it easily.

Truly, the way of the designer was hard, at least in Allensburgh, without proper testing-facilities. Tom felt a twinge of self-pity course through him. Then, almost fiercely, he forced himself to think again of the incredible incident in the bathroom.

Considering himself hypothetically sane, for the moment, he wondered how the impossible had happened. Certainly, granted that what he saw *had* happened, it must be of recent vintage. Tom had spent too much of his twenty-six years in the odd hybrid-chamber not to have been aware of anything of long duration—anything as unexpected as a superimposed alien bathroom, to say nothing of Egg-ers.

Why, only last Thursday evening, he had rigged a new set of fluorescent lights in there, following Marie's long-term plaint of being unable to see anything in the mirror—or at least to see clearly enough for make-up purposes while preparing for an evening out. Tom had rather prided himself on the ingenuity of his arrangement, of his use of the long-

dead gas-lamp system for the new wiring.

A neat, practical, economical job of home carpentry. He had used the same principle of power amplitude that had caused minor disaster at Morty Keener's soda fountain downtown. He had...

**A** NUMBER of separate wheels of thought meshed and began to revolve in gear beneath his scalp. He got up, put the bottle firmly back in its place behind the oilcan on the shelf, climbed the stairs again to the second floor of the old house, walked to the end of the hall and poked his head through his sister's door.

She said, "Go away, Tom. I'm asleep."

He said, with true brotherly tact and consideration, "The hell you are—you're lying there in the darkness, thinking sickening thoughts about that two-dimensional creep in the bathroom. What's his name—Egghead?"

She said, "Oh!" in the reproachful voice of a doe pierced by a hunter's bullet. She sat up and added, "I might have known a beautiful thing would be merely an object for stupid derision to a Yahoo like you." Then, more practically, "How'd you find out?"

"He forgot to switch himself off just now," said Tom bitterly. "He walked in on me just after you came to bed."

There was silence, the sort Tom could only think of as pregnant—a word which made him glad their visitor was not three-dimensional. Which in turn made him wonder, for the first time, just what Eggers was anyway, where he came from. He asked Marie.

She said, in her small little-girl-in-love voice, "It's like magic—he's from a world much like ours in both time and space, yet separated by the infinity of the atom. That's what he says it is, anyway." This last in a tone of self-defence.

"I get it," said Tom. "A parallel time-track." Curiously enough, he thought, it made sense after a fashion. Granting, of course, that the whole business wasn't some sort of 3-D illusion gone amok. He added, "But why the hell should he turn up in our bathroom?"

"Because," Marie said patiently, "something happened recently that enabled him to get through. Oh, you know I never could pass second-year algebra. It's way beyond me."

"Yeah." Tom scratched his nose. "I know. Now, how long have you known this creature from another world?"

"Oh..." Marie, now sitting up in bed, made a theatrically-vague sweep of her bare arms. "What does time matter? Have I known him a night or a thousand? All I know is I've known him forever."

"I see what you mean," said



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Tom. "Let's say you've known him since last Thursday night; that about it?"

"Oh—I guess so. Yes, it was

last Thursday, when I got home from my date with that horrible Morty Keener." Marie hugged herself, abruptly lay down once more, added, "Now go away, won't you?"

"Okay," said Tom. "Just one more question—when does he manage to *get* through?"

"Hah!" came the derisive retort. "I should tell *you*!"

"I want to talk to your new friend," Tom told her.

"You just want to get rid of him the way you have all my other men-friends except for that horrible Morty Keener!" she said dramatically, sitting up once more. "I think you're a Freudian case."

Tom KNEW when he was licked, where Marie was concerned. He retired with none of the honors of war. Why, he wondered, hadn't he had the wit to reply, "I was only trying to save them from a fate worse than death—marriage to you!" He pulled off his other sock and, on impulse, padded back to the bathroom.

*Talk about your intimate invasions!* he thought.

But the real question was—how did this bridge between parallel time-tracks, if that's what it was, work? Something very evidently had been activated by his fluorescent-wiring of the previous Thursday. Just what, was the point. It was going to be next to impossible

to figure, since there must have been work done by the other side.

He checked his homemade wiring all the way to the fuse-box in the basement, next to the furnace—nothing. Tom took another slug from the rapidly-waning bottle, then began tracing it backwards, determined not to let recent events get the best of him.

This time, at ground-floor level, he found an oddity. Since both the town and the house still used gas for its kitchen stove, the supply had not been cut off. However, the long-obsolete gas-lighting system had been sealed away from the main outlets.

In running his new wiring system from basement to upstairs bathroom, Tom had inadvertently punctured the seal. Sniffing, he could smell the faint acridity of the aeriform stuff. He sniffed again and frowned and again scratched his nose.

By all rights, the house should be reeking with the gas. But, save for that one spot, it was absolutely free of any taint. Tom went into the kitchen and tested the stove. Pilot-light, range and oven, all worked perfectly. He went back to the basement and had another drink; then he went upstairs and fell into bed.

When Tom awakened the next morning, his mouth was full of angora wool and a malicious grem-

lin was snapping rubber bands in back of his eyeballs. He had overslept, and Marie had left a note on the upstairs hall-table, informing him that she was spending the day working in the library.

The bathroom looked almost distressingly prosaic.

He breakfasted after a fashion on a three-day-old piece of Danish pastry from Morty Keener's drug-store, and a cup of tepid coffee. There was just one good thing about the real or fancied happenings of the night before, he decided. If he was crazy, it ran in the family—for Marie was certainly a matching nut.

Tom's first impulse was to make as if nothing had happened. It hardly could have. But, recalling his sister and her ways when in love, he made a trip back upstairs and did a little fixing of the lock on the bathroom door. If what he thought couldn't have happened again, he had no intention of being shut out.

When he returned to the ground floor, the mail was in. A long, official-looking envelope informed him that the United States Patent Office had chosen to grant him a patent on the hexagonal canister, thus affording him protection against any other inventor who might subsequently come up with a similar idea.

*Great!* he thought. Protection

against any inventor as cracked as himself, who might come up with a similar idea that wouldn't work. Sure, they could fix it with a self-sealing strip, like those found on canned hams and the costlier—if not coffier—coffees. But that would up the cost right out of the mass-level consumer, who would find the space-saving of a hexagonal can profitable.

And you couldn't screw off or on a hexagonal top.

**B**Y THREE o'clock he gave up on it as a bad job and drove out to the golf course for some exercise. He shot a juicy 99—his usual score was in the high 80's—and managed to lose four new balls. All in all, it was a miserable day, even though the sun was shining, the humidity was low and the breeze gently delightful.

Marie was still in her fog. She cooked the mushrooms with the stewed tomatoes, the okra with the chops. There was cornstarch in the coffee, and the pudding was unbearably formless and sweet. Tom's squawks might as well have remained unuttered—they bounced off his sister's romantic shell like cannonballs off the armored turret of the *U. S. S. Monitor* in 1862.

He finally sought surcease at Morty Keener's, in a double hamburger and a malted. Morty said,

"What's Marie doing tonight, Tom?"

Tom said, "As far as I know, she's taking a bath."

Morty said, "Oh!"—vaguely—and moved on to another customer.

Although there had been a change of bill at the Tivoli, Tom didn't go to see it. Instead, he returned home, entering far more quietly than was his wont.

As he sneaked upstairs, he saw that the bathroom door was shut. He could hear Marie's voice through the door. He hesitated. Even sisters had some rights when it came to using the bathroom.

Then he heard Eggers' voice faintly, unintelligibly, from within. He grasped the knob, turned it and entered.

The alien room was back in all its translucent glory, and Marie and the stranger in the gleaming blue singlet were as close together as the variance in their dimensions permitted. In fact, to Tom's somewhat jaundiced gaze, they seemed to overlap a trifle fuzzily.

She said, "Tom, I was just going to try to find you. Eggie wants to talk to you." She moved away from her semi-material lover with obvious regret.

Eggers said, in the faint voice that seemed to be piped through the washbowl drain, "Yes; I want you to do something for me."

Tom sat down on the edge of the tub and lit a cigarette. No sense in letting his inner excitement show. He said, "I want you to do something for *me*, Eggy. I'd like to know how you arranged this—contact. And why the bathroom? Why *our* bathroom?"

Eggy's shoulders rippled faintly in what might have been a shrug. Marie's hazel eyes sought her brother's. Her face wore an isn't-he-wonderful expression. Eggy said, "We've been trying to get through to your plane for what you call years. We've been watching you, studying you, whenever we managed to make observation contact."

He paused but Tom was watchfully, Marie rapturously, silent. Eggers added, "It appears to have been merely a matter of luck that we made conversation semi-materialization with your bathroom. And it is lucky—since the bathroom, as you call it, appears to be the most truly functional room in your dwellings."

"You can say that again," Tom told him. "But why *ours*?"

"Because of the *schmorko-conflict* bridge you created," said Eggers.

"Come again?" Tom asked, bewildered.

"Oh—sorry." The alien smiled politely. "You would call it a gas-fluorescent blend, I suppose," he

added. "It is the only chemical or material means of spanning our planes. We've had our *replooskae*—our contact-chambers—set up and ready for generations, waiting for someone on your side to create a bridge. You have done so."

"Oh, Tom!" breathed Marie ecstatically. "How wonderful!"

"Yeah," said Tom, rapidly readjusting his mental gunsights and taking a quick azimuth on himself, "but why this bathroom-to-bathroom deal? Or is the room you're in a bathroom?"

"Of course." Eggers smiled again. "We long ago decided to meet your end of the bridge, whenever it was created, with a matching end of ours—to make the transition point less radical, of course."

"I see," said Tom, scratching his nose and agreeing silently that Marie's half-lover made sense of a sort, "but why the evening-only appearances?"

"Because you don't turn on your lights in the daytime," was the devastating reply. Then, again, "I want you to do something for me. I want you to make an actual physical transfer possible. I have promised your sister..."

"You want in here?" Tom asked dubiously. He hesitated, turned to Marie, added, "Scram, kid—I'll call you when we've got things settled."

"If you think I'm going to sit outside while you and Eggy..." she began, outraged.

"It might be wiser," said the alien, unexpectedly.

"Yes, dear," Marie said meekly. She left.

**T**OM FOLDED his arms and leaned back against the edge of the ancient tub. "Now, just why do you wish to cross into our plane?"

"Because," said the alien, "I love your sister. There are insurmountable differences between us of which she knows nothing. I wish only to embrace her briefly, to *schnoggle* her—"

"To what?" Tom almost shouted.

Eggers made a deprecatory gesture. "You would term it a kiss," he said. "I assure you I cannot remain long in your atmosphere—nor can I exist at all in your plane outside of a bowl of force which will be limited to this room. Incidentally, I am glad you selected the bathroom for your end of the bridge. It's the only truly romantic room. And your sister's beauty..." He sighed, reminding Tom of Marie.

"You are different," said Tom. "What do women in your world do when they want to meet a man—drop the cleanex instead of a hand-

kerchief? Or snap their bobby-pins?"

"I don't understand." The alien frowned politely.

"Forget it," said Tom. "But if you make physical transfer to this plane, what's to prevent you from kidnapping Marie and taking her back with you for a real *schnoggle* session?"

"My dear fellow!" Eggers looked hurt. "Our love is one of those romances that is fated to exist only in our memories and heart. But I would like to leave her some small token..."

Tom thought it over, decided to play along for a while. He said, "Okay, what do you want me to do?"

Eggers went to the translucent wall, laid a finger on the odd device he had switched off the previous night. He said, "I'm going to show you a plan of this transmitter. I want you to *phrenglich*—photograph—it, if you will. Then I want you to make one, following the circuits accurately. When you turn it on, I shall be able to come through. It will be the most *plar-buist* event of our twin universes."

"I can see that," said Tom. "But how about my being able to get through to your world?"

"You'd need protective covering, I fear," said Eggers. "Our atmosphere is hardly salubrious for your species."

"But how about you in ours?" Tom asked.

The alien made another deprecatory gesture. "We have taken necessary precautions," he said.

Although he disliked a number of Eggers' implications, Tom went and got his camera. He also brought one of his hexagonal cans, showed it to the alien and explained its function—also its difficulties. Eggers said, "I believe I can solve it for you. I'll have to consult some of our *milschwasses* though."

"What are they?" Tom asked suspiciously.

"Oh—you'd call them experts," said Eggers. "Now—I hope you make a faithful record."

Tom photographed the strange device, which, opened, looked like a cutaway diagram of an electric-shaver. Then he left and told Marie to return to her *schnoggling* lover from another plane.

He spent most of the night and all the next day in his workshop-studio, laboring over the circuits of the alien gadget. It was ingenious, economical, operating on aluminum print in a strangely convoluted order. The only hitch lay in the power of the original, which apparently tapped any nearby electric current without plug or battery. He thought of using dry cells, then decided to put the entire sys-

tem into an empty electric shaver shell and plug it in the wall.

**I**N THE BASEMENT, nothing happened—nothing alien, that is—when he turned it on. However, the device gave off a not-unpleasant warmth and whirred softly as it did whatever it did. Hoping he had made no mistake and, if he hadn't, that he wasn't exposing either the world or his sister to alien invasion, he took it upstairs and plugged it into the wall-socket alongside the cabinet over the basin. By that time Marie had dinner ready.

In his own abstracted condition, Tom failed to realise until much later that she had basted the broiler with mayonnaise and used whipped butter instead of mayonnaise on the salad. Afterward, hand-in-hand and intensely silent, they entered the bathroom together.

As he reached for the light-switch, Tom said, "Remember, kiddo, I want the answer to my question before I bring him through."

"Just don't take too long," she replied, looking at him but not seeing him at all.

Tom pressed the switch, waited breathlessly while the fluorescent lights flickered, then came on full power. At once, the alien room, popped into view. Eggers was standing there, waiting for them,

looking at Tom rather than Marie. He said, "Now—try it."

"As soon as you answer my question," said Tom.

"Your question? Oh, the canister," said the alien. He sighed, added, "I have your answer, of course. A brief vertical toggle will do the trick. But your device is not space-saving, I fear."

"Why not? It's modeled after the most economical packing-job we have—the honeycomb," Tom insisted.

"Ah, yes—your insect device," said the other, nodding. Then, "But the bees use the hexagon to contain round holes. The square is the only truly economical pack. I believe your dairymen have proved it with milk-cartons."

Tom gave a yelp of anguish and smote his brow. Eggers said, "I am sorry, but I've fulfilled my promise. Now fulfill yours."

Numbly, Tom pushed the starter on the converted electric shaver. Marie, her eyes glued on her alien lover, saw nothing of what he did.

There was a curious flickering effect, but the other room took on a new reality and, suddenly, Eggers was with them. Or was he? As he stepped to Marie and took her into his arms he seemed to flicker off and on like an old-fashioned movie storm-effect. He said, in oddly staccato tones, "My dear, I want you to have this, to guard it with your life," and placed the

crescent-shaped pouch from his belt in her hands.

Then Marie said, "Ugh!" Wrinkling her nose, she pushed clear of her love, gasping and choking, and stumbled for the door.

Eggers, still flickering on and off, gaped after her. Then he too let out a cry—"Varshminkle!"—and scrambled back toward the far wall, his face contorted with anguish. A sizzling sound began to gain in volume, the alien scene and its occupant flickered more violently.

And then the other-plane bathroom flashed out of sight with a violent clicking snap!

For a long moment, Tom feared he had blown a fuse, while the fluorescents waned and waxed. Then they settled into normal brightness, revealing, in a puddle of foul-smelling swamp water where Eggers had stood, the crescent-shaped pouch Marie had dropped.

From the door, the girl gasped, "How horrible, Tom! He got me soaking wet! Thanks for getting rid of him. He—smelled!"

"I wonder how we smelled to him," said Tom, more to himself than to Marie. He was puzzled by the odd way things had gone. His only deviation from instructions had been to use a wall-plug connection for the non-existent source of power in Eggers' gadget. He

picked up the shaver-shell and looked at it idly. His eyes picked up the *Works on AC or DC* legend. And then he had it.

**A**LLENSBURGH was an AC community. And, evidently, Eggers lived in a DC world. Furthermore, if it was as damp as indicated, the atmosphere itself might be an efficient conductor, which would explain the lack of a battery or plug in the gadget.

He laid it down on the basin, said, "Marie, better be careful with this thing."

She ran her fingers through hopelessly sodden hair, said, "Oh, I'm a mess. And that horrible thing!" She looked at the odd pouch on the floor. "It felt—alive."

"I'll get it out of here," said Tom. "You fix yourself up."

"I'll have to have a new permanent," she lamented. When Marie was through with a crush, Tom knew from experience, the finish was both quick and complete.

He picked up the pouch, which *did* seem to quiver with life of some sort, hefted it, took his departure. On the way down to the basement, he made a detour and turned off the gas. He'd seal up the puncture in the morning. No more alien worlds, if only for Marie's sake, he decided. Square canisters...

He had to use an electric-drill to open the pulsating sac, whose outer envelope was both resilient and tough, almost like some sort of rubberized steel. Inside, it was full of tiny, gelatinous blobs. Even as he looked at them under the light, he could see their substance shrivel away, exposing the wee, wriggling tadpole-like creatures within them. After awhile, their wriggling ceased.

Tom pulled over one of the photographs he had taken the night before and studied it. Viewed with new detachment, he could see some definite indications in the portions of Eggers his camera had caught. The width of mouth, the flat set and largeness of the eyes, the shortness of his arms, the great length of his legs. And he recalled the odd articulation of the alien's joints.

If Eggers was the dominant species of his world, it was a world of amphibians. It wasn't hard to guess why he had made the contact, why his world and species wanted it. The mess in the pouch was the answer. If Marie had reacted as expected, she would have guarded his gift preciously. And, if it operated with the efficiency of the rest of the aliens' devices, it would doubtless have inaugurated the birth of a new dominant species in this world.

Conquest might not have been their aim—indeed, superficially, it

seemed unlikely to Tom. But there would have been bound to be unpleasant repercussions with frog-men operating on both sides of the dimensional-curtain. No wonder, he thought, they found their bathroom the most functional chambers in their homes. Amphibians would.

He studied the now-empty pouch, cleaned it, thought, idly, it could be converted to a useful tobacco pouch. Then he wondered how he could give the alarm, in case any further contacts were made. He wondered who would believe him if he tried to relate what had happened. And then, with a sigh, he decided to keep quiet about it. It seemed unlikely any other gadgeteer would manage to come up with the same accidental combination that had led to the contact.

Depressed and let down, Tom went slowly back upstairs—and was greeted, on the landing, by a suddenly-radiant Marie. She held the converted shaver in her hand and, for a moment, Tom feared she had remade contact and been hypnotized by Eggers.

However, she said, "Tom, you darling! How like you to keep it a secret! I could almost strangle you..."

"Huh? What a secret?" he asked brightly, coming to a full stop.

"*This!*" she said, waving the shaver-shell with its trailing insu-

lated cord. "Oh, Tom, it's the most wonderful thing you ever thought of. It dries and waves and sets, all at once. Look!" She turned her head to display perfectly-arrayed auburn locks where, minutes before, she had looked like a lady caught in a cloudburst without a chapeau.

Tom sat down abruptly on the

top of the steps. He recalled the pleasant warmth of the gadget, its faintly whirring inner activity. He looked up at his sister and smiled and said, "Oh, Old Tom knows what he's doing."

He wondered if he could package the pocket beautician—which would have to be its name—in a hexagonal container.