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Ziff-Davis Publishing Company  
Editorial and Executive Office  
One Park Avenue  
New York 10, New York  
ORegon 9-7200  
Advertising Manager,  
Martin Gluckman

Midwestern and Circulation Office  
434 South Wabash Avenue  
Chicago 5, Illinois  
WAbash 2-4911

Western Office  
9025 Wilshire Boulevard  
Beverly Hills, California  
CRestview 4-0265

## NOVELETS

- SPAWN OF DOOM**  
*By Daniel F. Galouye . . . .* 8
- POINT**  
*By John Phillifent* 52

## SHORT STORIES

- THE LAST FRIDAY IN AUGUST**  
*By David Ely . . . . .* 44
- THE VOICE BOX**  
*By Allan W. Eckert* 114
- THE DEAD REMEMBER (Fantasy Classic)**  
*By Robert E. Howard . . . . .* 118

## FEATURES

- ACCORDING TO YOU** 6
- EDITORIAL** 7
- COMING NEXT MONTH** 128

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# the LAST FRIDAY in August

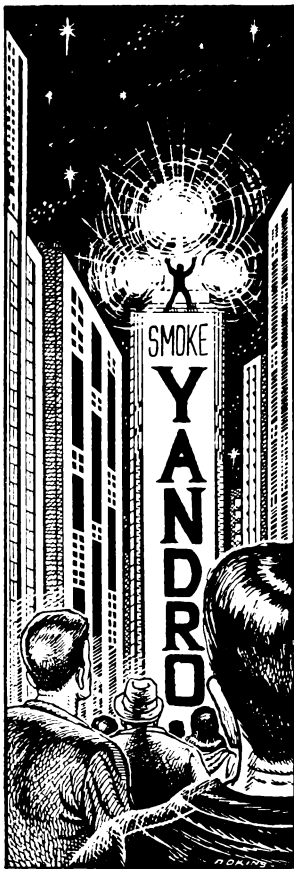
By DAVID ELY

Illustrator ADKINS

*Every day had always been the same for William until  
he found a way to turn his hatred for mankind  
into what he thought of as love.*

EVERY afternoon at 5 o'clock, William left the engineering office where he was a senior draftsman and squeezed into an elevator among perfumed secretaries and sweaty clerks—then, on the street, more perspiring bodies, bumping and jostling him, a river of rudely swinging arms and legs and human odors, all flowing in a viscous mass toward the subway entrances, where every thing became inexpressibly worse. In the dancing train, he stood rigid in his clean linen suit, but despite his efforts to remain upright, his body swayed with the joggling motion as if yielding to the command of some diabolical music, and to his disgust, he rubbed arms, legs,

buttocks, with his neighbors—especially the shop-girls who sucked their lower lips and wriggled responsively to his unintended trespasses, who sometimes let their dark little goat eyes rove up and down his slender neatness like fingers, unbuttoning and stroking and naughtily giggling, in violation of his will, as he stared furiously at the advertisements. Oh, how he loathed them, hated them all, the ones who could thus tyrannize over him when he was caught helpless, in this daily vise. And yet, to remain at the office until this horror abated would cut seriously into the time he devoted to the practice of his meditative system.



At 5:45, he reached his tiny rooms on the third floor of an apartment building: a living-room, a kitchenette with a dining nook and a bedroom, where William prepared himself for his daily ritual before the three huge matched mirror he had placed so carefully, even to the last fraction of an inch. First, he took off his linen suit and carefully folded it away in the closet. Then he removed the rest of his clothing and, quite naked, squatted down on his heels on the carpet, his arms folded over his chest, his head arched back. Thus he remained. By and by the street noises softened and faded, the rude jolts and thumps within the building itself died away, and William was left in peaceful solitude and quiet. Often he remained poised for hours this way, until he surrendered to a delicious weariness.

**I**T WAS release, release from the racket and noisome pressure of the crowd. The meditations taught William how to achieve tranquility, how to preserve the purity and control of his mind and body, in the midst of the city's chaos. Perhaps they would do even more. William wondered. Would his system not also some day extend its influence beyond his own individual compass? He thought possibly it would; it had done so much for

him already, surely it could go one step further and help others, too. Still, if others were to be helped, they first would need to be told about the system, to be shown and convinced, to try it out, perhaps—and how was this to be done, if William himself did not play the role of teacher? He recoiled at the thought. It would mean contact with other people, it would mean misunderstanding; ridicule, perhaps even persecution and public denunciation. Then, too, it had taken him twelve long years of patient daily application to his task to reach his present level of mastery. Could he hope to find others who would display a similar devotion? Would there be any at all? And suppose he did find a disciple—a dozen, even—what meaning would this have in the face of the many millions impossible to reach? It was hopeless. He would have to be content with his own salvation.

Yet somehow he knew it would not be so. There would be a way. He could feel a wild excitement stirring in his breast, and a powerful instinctive yearning that raced through his blood and tingled in his fingertips. Something was beginning to happen. A sense of joyful anticipation dizzied him: He was chosen, he was certain of that. He was chosen to lead them, to save them, perhaps by teaching, or by some other

means which he could not now fathom. It was not for himself alone that he had so rigorously prepared all these years; this he suddenly understood. He must wait, that was all. It would happen—soon—and he would be ready.

The summer days were oppressively hot. By noontime, the heavy air had borne the carbonaceous stench of the streets to the upper stories of even the tallest buildings. In the shimmering harbor, the ships lay stricken; the water was pressed flat and whitened by the relentless sun. Along the sidewalks, the crowds wandered in sullen exhaustion past doorways that sent forth tiny blasts of chill air and over gratings which oozed soot-laden miasmas. The passengers in the subways grunted in discomfort as each jolt of the trains brought their damp bodies unwillingly together. And yet William did not suffer as he had in summers past, for his excitement was growing, his mind was fixed on the stupendous promise about to be revealed, and he strode lithely, confidently, among the complaining people, toward his hidden goal. Soon he would know. Soon, too, the unsuspecting city would know—and everything would be changed. Instead of heat, there would be coolness; instead of the fierce headlong rush of tangling bodies, there would be peace and

stillness. Of this, William was certain.

**I**T HAPPENED on the last Friday in August. All day, William had been aware of great and irrevocable changes coming to pass which subtly charged the heated air with an electrical intensity. He bent over his drafting table, his eyes smarting with the effort of repressing tears of happiness. The lines on the paper seemed to blur and waver. When the telephone rang, he found he could scarcely hear it, for he was eagerly intent on the coming transformation of things and all his senses were straining to capture each tiny signal. From time to time, he would glance around the drafting room. The other men were working at their tilted tables, as always, but sometimes one of them would look up with a puzzled air and peer about anxiously, as if aware of some unseen presence. If his eyes met William's, he would gaze for a moment in a trancelike fixation, unblinking and unknowing; then, with a jerk of his head, he would duck down uneasily, back to his work. All of this William saw.

He also saw, outside, the remarkable flight of the birds: the pigeons and the starlings. Almost with one motion, they flapped and fluttered from their thousand perches on the roofs

and ledges; in lazy floating circles, around and around in great flocks, they glided toward the streets, drifting slowly down in unhurried patterns, like November snow, until the late afternoon shadows below hid them from William's view.

Below, too, the street noises, instead of quickening with the approach of the rush hour, began to soften. William could not see the streets, but he sensed what was taking place, and his heart was alive with quiet joy. Out in the harbor also, there was change. The tug boats were churning in toward the piers to rest beside the ships which lay berthed. One by one the boats docked, the last ones hurrying like tardy theater-goers rushing to their seats before an opening curtain. William's eyes swept across the water with exultation. The harbor was empty at last; the clamor of the narrow city streets had diminished to a faint, uneven hum. The city was preparing itself for the event.

The great church clock outside struck five. Each rolling stroke lingered in the stillness; each hollow echo cast down by the bell over the city settled like a soft blanket, an insulating palpable layer of sound, cooling and protective. William did not raise his head as the solemn notes were struck; he did not need to see what his heart had already per-

ceived. He bowed in prayerful thankfulness. The tolling of the great bell marked the end of what had been before. The triumphant shout of silence that followed was his signal. Now his work would begin. Everyone was waiting.

**W**ILLIAM raised his head. For a moment, he kept his eyes closed, dreamily savoring the prospect of realization. Then he allowed his gaze to rove across the room, so familiar in its thousand details and yet now so wonderfully altered. It was one minute past five, but there was no hurried rush for the doors, no hasty bangings of desks and chairs, no chatter from the secretaries and the youthful draftsmen. Everyone sat patiently in place, looking at William. Every head was turned his way, every pair of eyes was fixed on him. The well-known faces, so placid and expressionless now, suddenly became dear and beloved. William looked at each one in turn, his own eyes dimmed by tears of affection. He rose from his desk humbly, but yet with a secret pride in his heart. He paused, then moved slowly to the outer door, the heads all turning gently to watch. He could not stop to speak to them. He had no time. But as he opened the door and took one last look back, the faces seemed so loving and yet so sad

that he could not bear to disappoint them. "Follow," he told them, "follow behind me." And as William entered the corridor, the people in the office rose from their places quietly, and keeping at a respectful distance, filed out after him, silent and orderly.

Now William was on the street. He did not recall coming down in the elevator, and yet he must have descended that way, and the office people likewise, for they were there, behind him, in a patient attentive group, watching him trustfully. Then he noticed that there were more people there, too, from some of the other offices, also silent and watchful, looking at him with rapt, solemn faces.

The great street was still. The vehicles had stopped. Beside them, the drivers and occupants were standing, waiting for William. All up and down the thoroughfare, as far as he could see, it was the same. Everywhere, people were standing, their faces turned his way. In the little restaurants and shops, too, there were motionless clusters of figures near the windows, waiting for William to summon them. He walked up the street, knowing that the people were following, and, as he passed each building entrance where more throngs were waiting to join the procession, the multitude swelled. After a few blocks, William stopped

and turned around. The people stopped, too. By now, they were so numerous that their ranks spread across the street from sidewalk to sidewalk. And so quietly had these thousands marched, that not even a footstep had been heard. William surveyed them, his eyes moist with emotion, and they looked back at him unwaveringly; and although he was simply standing as they were, in the street, it seemed to him that he was at a considerable height, for he was unmistakably aware, observing that enormous gathering of faces, of each single one. He saw the eyes most particularly; the faces were less important. He could not distinguish between men and women, not because of the distance—the foremost rank stood perhaps only thirty yards behind him—but because he was concentrating on the eyes, the thousands and thousands of eyes that were fixed unblinkingly on his. He longed to speak, for he knew they were waiting to hear him, but it still was not yet time. He had to go forward; others ahead had assembled, too, and they must be permitted to join.

SO WILLIAM resumed his steady pace, and behind him came the massed silent marchers, their numbers growing with every step, as more slipped in from the sides. Overhead, the sun beat

down, but it was a cooling sun that imperceptibly chilled the summer air and drew away its dampness. There was no moisture. All was clear, cool, dry, and the still air was free of odor, except for a slight pleasant scent, pure and mild, as of lilies. The birds were hidden and did not sing, and although the street clocks moved their hands, they passed the hours without striking. William walked on, his feet seeming to float over the pavement without sensation, without sound. Along the curbs now, the people ahead had assembled in waiting ranks, only their heads moving as they watched William pass by; then patiently they stood until the crowd approached and it was appropriate for them to enter the march.

Now William reached a huge square in the heart of the city. This was the place. Without hesitation, he walked to one corner where there stood a majestic sign, many stories high, the largest display board in the world, seen by millions of persons every day. As the multitude entered the square and began to fill all the enormous empty space, William began climbing a slender steel ladder that ran up the full height of the sign, to giant floodlights on top, which at night played not only on the sign and the square, but over the entire city as well, and even on the stars in the sky.

The floodlights, now dim, were fitted into massive frameworks riveted on heavy steel bars running the breadth of the structure and supported by upright posts. In the very center, there was a broken place, evidently the result of a violent storm. There, the crossbar had snapped in two places and the center light had been blown away. But the post remained, holding up a short section of the broken crossbar, which was perhaps five feet above the roof of the sign.

In front of this, then, William would stand. From the top of the sign he would speak to the host assembled in the square. Even now, as he climbed effortlessly ever higher, he knew what he was to say, although the exact words would not occur to him, he realized, until the very moment of utterance. At the top he saw that the moon had risen, full and large, and hovered above near the sun. Both shed a soft light, and seemed alike, as twin stars, for the moon was unusually brilliant while the sun was now oddly subdued, so they appeared the same. They were like two eyes.

**H**UNDREDS of feet beneath him he could see the square spread out, covered by the thousands, the millions of upturned faces, which gazed under the

gentle radiance of the sky like a frozen phosphorescent sea, almost like tiny stars. William now could hardly distinguish between sky and earth, for above and below alike glittered with the countless pricks of light, and only the two huge staring eyes of sun and moon were different; and even as he perceived this, the sun and the moon moved closer, much closer, and the infinite lights all around began to fade and lose their brilliance. William knew then that he had to speak but when he opened his mouth and formed the first words on his tongue, no sound emerged to break the silence, and then, absorbed by the sight of the now swiftly-advancing eyes, he forgot the words entirely. In the intense cold glare, he pressed back against the steel bar. As he did, and felt the torn metal edges bite sharply into the flesh of his hands, he knew at once that he was too far away, too high, for his words to be heard, even if he could have spoken, and at almost the same instant he realized that it was not with words that he would teach them; no, it was to be the other way, and so, sobbing not in pain but in gratitude for this last flash of understanding, he leaned back, back with all his might, against the jagged steel.

**THE END**

