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THRILLING WONDER STORIES

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction



Vol. XXVI, No. 2
Fall, 1944

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FOG OVER VENUS

A Novel of
Pioneer
Space Adventure

By
ARTHUR K. BARNES

PI IN THE SKY

A Hilarious Novellet

By
FREDRIC BROWN

STOP, THIEF!

A Prize-Winning Amateur
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By **FOX B. HOLDEN**
Plus Many Others

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THE ETERNAL NOW

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ON THE COVER: Painting by Rudolph Belarski depicts a scene from BEYOND THE VORTEX, by Frank Belknap Long.

Published quarterly by STANDARD MAGAZINES, INC., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Copyright, 1944, by Standard Magazines, Inc. Subscription (12 Issues) \$1.80, single copies 15c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Entered as second-class matter May 21, 1936, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

November, 1944, Issue

Read our Companion Science Fiction Magazine—**STARTLING STORIES**



They were completely

*An Amazing
Novelet*

THE LAST MAN

CHAPTER I

The Jersey Charlatan

IN NEARLY every newspaper office in the country, every once in a while, a reporter is assigned the rather dull job of covering a story about the end of the world. Now first off it sounds exciting, but it isn't. It consists of interviewing some crackpot who insists he has special inside information having to do with the whole world going down the drain on some odd Thursday.

New York reporters, in particular, kick at

the assignment because it has one other serious drawback. Nine out of ten times the prophet to be interviewed has his home in some completely inaccessible spot, usually in New Jersey. On second thought, perhaps this is logical.

Joe Dunn, reporter on "The Telegram," was given such an assignment early one morning in October, 1954, and discovered, to his dismay, that the current prophet, who was named by the way, Fletcher B. Fletcher, was living at Berry Meadows, New Jersey. Joe Dunn was quick to point out—"a likely place for the end of the world."

Joe Dunn and Julie Are the Sole Survivors



alone in a deserted world

IN NEW YORK By PAUL MacNAMARA

As a matter of fact, it was a natural assignment for Joe. He could give an amusing twist to small stories—he even made weather reports good reading. Therefore, a small “end of the world” story would be his meat. The boss also assigned a photographer—a gal—to go with him.

Her name was Julie Crosby. She also owned a car. She hoped she was kind of a Margaret Bourke-White. She was younger and really quite pretty—if you bothered to take a second look. She wore glasses which somehow fooled folks into thinking she was rather plain. Her legs, though, were mod-

eled along the true Dietrich lines—and they more than counteracted the effect of the glasses. She had graduated from Bennington a couple of years ago, and was bound and determined she was going to be a successful news photographer.

She took her job very seriously, and as a result, got a terrific kidding from the boys. She had a mind like a heckler out of the Club 18, so the kidding didn't bother her in the least. And everybody agreed she was very fast on her conversational feet.

Joe Dunn's feeling was that she wouldn't be bad looking if she didn't wear the glasses

in a Vast City of Silence and Death!

—and didn't take her work so much to heart, and gave up those sensible flat-heeled shoes, and combed her hair in some other way, and was a little less on the wise side. Then, as a matter of fact she might be all right.

"Might be," he always said. Joe Dunn was also completely conscious of why the boss had assigned her to go with him—it was because she owned a car, and it would save the expense account. But so far as the story was concerned, it would never rate a picture.

JULIE secretly liked Dunn, although she never gave him anything but the back of her hand. She was a firm believer in the Rockne theory that a good offense is the best defense.

As they emerged from the Holland Tunnel on the New Jersey side, Dunn bent toward Julie.

"Have you any ideas about Jersey at all?" he asked her.

"Yes, I have, but I don't think I know you well enough to go into that."

There was more discussion as they drove along, about the best route to take. Joe Dunn suggested they stop and ask a cop. Julie refused, insisting she knew the way. Furthermore, she offered to bet they would "hit Berry Meadows on the nose." Joe took a dollar out of his pocket. "A buck you have to ask before you get to Berry Meadows, or, and it's now ten-twenty, you don't get there before one o'clock."

Julie, without taking her eyes off the road, took her right hand off the wheel, grabbed Joe's hand.

"It's a bet," she told him.

Some time later, as they came to an intersection and Julie slowed up, a sign read:

**BERRY MEADOWS
2 MILES**

Joe, without a word, stuffed a bill in her pocket. Julie smiled.

"That'll teach you to play cards with strangers on trains."

Just ahead was the Reverend Fletcher B. Fletcher's establishment, a dilapidated old school house, its only ecclesiastical note a neat plastic sign swinging over the gate arch which admonished the observer to "Trust In The Universe Master."

"That," observed Joe, "is a new one. I take it this is not a conventional religious cult. By the way, how did you happen to know about this location?"

The girl wrinkled her brow thoughtfully. "I just knew where Berry Meadows was," she answered. "I don't know anything about Fletcher and this Universe business. Let's go in and see."

She turned the car in at the driveway, and a photo-selenium cell opened the gate for them.

"Uummmm—up to date attachments, anyway," observed Joe. "This is beginning to interest me slightly."

Julie parked the car without answering, and they climbed the steps to the rickety porch in silence. As they approached the weatherbeaten door the barrier swung noiselessly open for them.

"More electric eye stuff, eh?" muttered Joe. "Darned if I like this much."

The girl shivered slightly but did not speak. She fumbled with her photographic paraphernalia.

"Enter, please," a deep, sonorous voice bade them.

Startled, the pair did so hesitantly, peering about for the owner of that resonant voice. And seeing nobody. Then they forgot the voice in the wonder of their surroundings.

As they crossed the threshold, the door swung silently back into place behind them. But instead of the interior of a rotting country school house, they found themselves in a huge room which gave an impression of greater size and vagueness. This was because there was no perceptible border to the area. No wall or ceiling was distinct. There was a hazy shimmering effect around the edges of the central space, and a soft fluorescent glow of light—coming from no recognizable point—filled the space with bluish-white luminescence.

After they left the place the two newspaper representatives had an impression that there had been a thick and resilient carpet on the floor, a big desk and some chairs scattered around, and the feel that there was efficient office machinery and equipment somewhere in the unseen background—but they could recall no details. Not even of the color and design of the visible furniture. It was queer.

But they had little time now to consider such matters. From beside the huge desk a man was approaching them. And what a man! He must have been six and one-half feet tall, with broad shoulders and athletic bearing. His age might have been anywhere from thirty to fifty. All they could remember about him was his iron-gray hair, brushed in pompadour fashion, and his keen and flashing black eyes. He must have been

conventionally clad, because they could later recall no outstanding eccentricity of dress.

"Welcome to the Master's way-station," he greeted. "You wished to see me?"

Julie reached for her flash bulbs, but Joe grabbed her arm.

"Not yet," he murmured. "Let me talk to the old boy first." Then: "Yes. That is, if you are Reverend Fletcher B. Fletcher."

"I am," admitted their host, "although the title 'Reverend' is really a misnomer. It simply approximates the Earthly conception of my duties and office. I am actually the representative of the Universe Master."

DUNN could not repress a smile. "All of which sounds like the double talk of the last decade," he said frankly. "I don't understand it. In fact, there's a lot of strange stuff I don't understand." And he indicated the queerly lighted room, with a gesture of his arm.

"But that," said Reverend Fletcher, "is not why you have come to see me. You are—?"

Joe Dunn introduced himself and Julie as reporters from "The New York Telegram."

"We have come out here to interview you," he concluded. "We understand that you have prophesied the end of the world, and we'd like a story on it. Also a picture," Joe added as an after-thought, while Julie glared at him.

"My poor friends," said Mr. Fletcher, "there will be no papers, radio, or telecasts tomorrow. Nothing tomorrow—nothing at all. Tonight is the last night on Earth for all humanity. It is the end of this project."

This was typical mumbo-jumbo stuff, and Joe Dunn shifted quickly into character. "Ah, but Reverend Fletcher! This is for today's paper—the final editions. I'll telephone the story in from the nearest town."

Reverend Fletcher looked at him pityingly. Then he shrugged faintly. "Very well. I suppose it is quite natural to carry on until the final gasp. Probably will prevent panic. I was sent here as the special envoy of the Universe Master to settle this account and select, if possible, a few deputy agents for field work in other departments. How your newspaper heard of the business was an accident which could be explained several ways. But to get to the point. On the eighth day of October, this year of Nineteen Hundred and Fifty-four, Earth time, the books will be closed. Promptly at twelve o'clock, midnight. That is all."

"Who is this—this Universe Master?"

asked Julie. "Do you mean God?"

"That, my dear child, you wouldn't understand," replied Reverend Fletcher. "There is no time to instruct your minds on the subject now."

"But that's no story," objected Joe Dunn. "Tell me more about yourself. Where did you come from? How long have you been in New Jersey? Where did you get this information? How do you arrive at your rather drastic conclusions? What—the eighth of October! That's tonight!"

"Quite true," agreed Reverend Fletcher. "Definitely. I regret that I can offer you no refreshment, but this is a very busy day for me, as you might infer."

"Space-dizzy!" said Joe Dunn under his breath. Which reminded him of something. "But the world can't come to an end now. We are on the verge of spatial travel. The Cravenaugh development of the rocket principle has barely started."

"There will be no space travel from Earth," interrupted Reverend Fletcher firmly. "There will be—nothing."

For one of the few times in his life, Joe Dunn felt at a loss how to proceed. This was one of the screwiest interviews he had ever tried to get. It was like punching at the empty air. He simply couldn't come to grips with a crackpot like this. Julie was more practical.

"Reverend Fletcher," the girl asked suddenly, "please, could I take a picture?"

"Certainly, my child, if you care to," replied Fletcher amiably. And he assumed a slight pose.

This was more like it, reflected Joe Dunn a bit cynically. It took a woman and some personal publicity to soften some of these I.Q. erratics up.

The flash bulb lighted up the immediate area. Reverend Fletcher got into the mood of things quickly. He posed obligingly as Julie directed, and the girl shot half a dozen good pictures.

"I doubt if the pictures will do you any good," said Fletcher at length. "Certainly, they will serve you no purpose. And now, if you will excuse me, I have a host of details which must be attended to."

Joe took the hint. He was ready to leave, anyway. "Let's go—er—Julie," he said. "You've got enough pictures. If I stay here I'll be believing this stuff myself."

Reverend Fletcher favored him with a slight smile. "You know, it's just possible that you might do as a special deputy," he said slowly. Then, "But we will see about

that later, Mr. Dunn. I must bid you good afternoon. We may meet later—if the Universe Master so wills."

"Where will you be later, Reverend Fletcher?" Joe asked curiously. "Where will you be tonight? Here?"

"No, my son, I will be at the exact point in the world where Latitude forty degrees, forty-seven minutes North crosses longitude seventy-three degrees, fifty-nine minutes West."

Joe wrote it down in his notebook which had so little else. Then he realized suddenly just what he had taken down.

"I beg your pardon, but where would that be?" he asked.

"Young man, every intelligent person should know the heavens," said Reverend Fletcher with his first show of impatience. "Good day, and may the Universe Master be with you."

With a wave of his hand he dismissed them, and they found themselves walking out into a normal world once more. As they stepped off the rickety porch into ordinary sunlight it was difficult to believe they had come out of a place of such queer light and confines which somehow defied the accepted laws of plane and solid geometry.

"What are you doing?" demanded Julie as Joe Dunn turned and craned his neck to survey the outlines of the old school house.

THE reporter's face had a baffled expression. "I don't see how Fletcher achieved such an atmosphere of large space inside that building," he said. "It's only a one-story house."

"Don't let that worry you. You should know of the latest advancements in the use of light. Or don't you read the scientific journals? Get in and let's be going."

Joe complied. As Julie started the car and drove out onto the county road, he was still grumbling.

"I think that guy was kidding me—giving directions on a longitude and latitude basis. Who does he think I am? Captain Future?"

Julie's answer was quick. "He might. He spoke of possibly making you one of the Futuramen. Shall I stop at the next town and let you telephone in the story?"

Joe snorted. "And make the City Editor froth at the mouth? That was just rocket gas I was feeding Fletcher to get him to talk. And that's all I got out of him. Rocket gas!"

Driving back to New York, Joe Dunn speculated on how people get that way.

"Imagine predicting the end of the world!" The more Joe thought about it the more burned up he was about people like the Right Reverend Fletcher. "Upset a lot of people, work them into a frenzy, and then, it never comes off."

Joe wondered what people do and say after making a prediction of that kind, when nothing happens. What do they do, all sit around looking at their watches until midnight, and then put their fingers in their ears and shut their eyes. At five minutes after twelve, would they start to heckle the Reverend? What can he say? What explanation could he give?

"It certainly must wash him up in his racket," Joe decided. "I'd like to have a look at that old faker at say five minutes after twelve, at latitude whatever it was!"

Julie gave him an idea. If he wanted to see the Reverend with his face red, why not find out where latitude whatever-it-was did cross longitude so-and-so? The more they talked about this, the better the idea seemed. The picture of Mr. Fletcher holding the bag might even make a column in the paper. When he mentioned his idea he learned Julie wasn't so stupid. Julie, with a practical follow-through, pulled in to a road-side stand and told Joe to call the office and get some one to give him the spot the Reverend Fletcher had indicated so quaintly.

Joe's conversation with his boss was not without incident. At first the City Editor thought Joe Dunn was drunk, and when he was finally convinced Joe wasn't, he agreed to call him back.

In ten minutes Joe got the call from the Ship's Editor who had run down the information as to where Longitude 73°59' West crossed Latitude 40°47' North.

"It's approximately a spot between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, between Forty-ninth and Fiftieth Streets."

During the drive into New York they speculated on the Radio City angle. Could it be a promotion stunt? Where would the exact spot be? It might mean the Skating Rink, or it might mean the Rainbow Room. The only thing to do when they got in town was to go there and have a look around for a likely spot. "At the top" they agreed would be the most logical place.

Joe arranged to meet Julie at seven-thirty at Louis', a little restaurant in the Village where Joe could cash checks. It was late in the afternoon, and Julie dropped Joe off near a subway station to a nearby studio to develop her films, and then went on home.

She wanted to change her clothes, too.

Joe continued on down to the office and wrote his story.

CHAPTER II

City of Frozen Time

JOE DUNN got to Louis' early. By the time Julie had arrived he had choked down two old-fashionedes. Julie came up behind him at the bar. At first Joe Dunn didn't notice her. She was wearing a good-looking black dress. For a second in the mirror Joe had a flash impression that somehow she looked smarter.

As he turned, Julie was putting on her glasses. Joe gulped and turned back to the bar. "Well?" he said, with a rising inflection.

Julie smiled behind his back and climbed up on the next stool.

"What's the idea of the delayed take?"

"I didn't know you without your glasses."

Julie replied, with slight annoyance that people refused to take her seriously without them. Joe shook his head without comment, but his eyes were eloquent. Then Julie said something which changed his mood.

"Joe, listen—the strangest thing! I developed those shots I made of Reverend Fletcher. And every one of them came out blank. There wasn't a thing on a single film! Nothing!"

Joe almost choked on his third drink. His shoulders began to shake, and then he was laughing out loud.

"It's not funny!" she said furiously, her eyes flashing. "I suppose you wrote your old story, and I fell down on the pix assignment."

"I wasn't laughing about that. I was laughing at the dumb stunt of a usually smart photog. You simply forgot to take the cover off your lens."

"Idiot!" she snapped. "I did not. I didn't have a lens cover with me. I shot eight perfect pictures. And I got eight perfect blanks. There wasn't even any background detail. It was just like unexposed film. I tell you it's crazy!"

Joe had his own opinion on the matter, but he prudently dropped the subject. "I'm sorry," he said contritely. "There has to be some explanation, of course. But let's have dinner now."

Dinner proved to be fun. Julie recovered

from her worried, angry mood, and they began speculating on just what would happen if the world somehow did come to an end.

Julie had an interesting contribution on what would happen. It was based, she said, on some inside information she had been able to get from Sherman Billingsley.

"Suddenly, the whole world will be overrun with storks, temporarily, of course. The storks that brought us will come and take us away. It's all very simple."

They discovered it was eleven o'clock, so they left the restaurant and walked over to Fifth Avenue and took a bus uptown. They went into the R.C.A. Building of Radio City and took an elevator up to the observation platform. There was a small bar, and only a few people in the room, so they felt as if they almost had it all to themselves. The night had clouded over, and it was warm and a little sultry for late October.

Perched on stools at the bar, they ordered a highball and kept looking around the room for Mr. Fletcher, who as yet had not shown up. Julie walked out to the parapet and came back to report.

"There's some lightning off towards New Jersey."

Joe looked at his watch. It was eleven-forty-five. Still no Mr. Fletcher. It was beginning to rain, and one of the waiters had shut the door that led out on to the parapet.

By this time there was a first-rate electrical storm crackling over the city. Julie was standing looking out at the storm through the glass doors.

"Looks like we've drawn a blank, like your pictures," said Joe Dunn. "Shall we go out and have a last look at New York?"

Julie sniffed at the allusion but pushed through the swing door. Joe grinned and followed. They walked out on the parapet into a rising wind that promised to blow into a small gale. There was a splattering of rain. The walkway was quite wet and slick.

New York lay spread out below them, a fairy city of lights and graceful towers. Central Park was a postage stamp to the north, and Times Square seemed right below them on the left. They made their way against the wind around the parapet. It was one minute of twelve, and New York was wide awake, beautiful—and throbbing with life.

"This is getting us nowhere, Julie, and we're getting wet," Dunn said finally. "It's dangerous to stay out here in the wind. Let's go back inside."

SHIVERING slightly, the girl took his arm. As they leaned back against the wind to head for the door there was a vivid flash of lightning, a sudden shift of the wind, and a stinging patter of icy raindrops. The parapet simply slipped out from beneath their feet like soaped glass, and they crashed flat on their backs, their heads cracking against the flooring of the balcony.

Instantly things went black for Joe Dunn. He didn't even know he had been knocked unconscious. . . .

When Joe Dunn came to, which didn't seem to be anytime at all, he lay still for a moment to orient himself. Then he remembered, and he felt quickly for Julie. She wasn't there beside him. He tried to get up, but the wind was too strong and he was still woozy from his fall.

His hat was gone, too. But the clouds were opening up to show a bright moon. The worst of the storm seemed to have passed. Joe finally got to one knee, and with one hand on the parapet rail, stood up. There was not a living soul in sight around him. He seemed to be utterly alone atop the R.C.A. Building. But Julie couldn't have been blown overboard.

Grimly he started for the door, working his way slowly along until he was opposite it, using all his strength and weight against the whistling wind. Suddenly the wind stopped—dead. Just like that. He was like someone pushing against a door when someone on the other side suddenly opens it. He nearly fell on his face.

He caught his breath for the first time and stood fully erect. The sky was sharply clear. It was a beautiful moonlight night. Even the few clouds had ceased to move. They were frozen against a star-studded firmament.

Joe Dunn looked at his wrist watch and discovered it had stopped. The hands pointed exactly to twelve o'clock. That would have been about the instant he had fallen. So now he had a five-dollar repair job at the jewelers to charge up to this Fletcher business.

Rubbing the bump on the back of his head, he walked slowly to the east side railing and stared down at Fifth Avenue. There it was—New York complete. But no, there was something different. Surely he was dreaming. There was something strange about it. There were no lights, no sounds, no—no motion.

Then he got it. That smack on his head had somehow unnerved him and deadened

his senses. Everything just seemed dark and still.

Joe grabbed the railing with both hands and looked down again. That was it—there was no sound of cabs—no traffic sounds at all. It was quiet, and completely dark except for the light of the moon. It was beautiful, but it was too still.

He walked around to the southern edge of the platform where he could look south and west, and noticed the clock on the Paramount Building had also stopped. It looked to be about twelve o'clock—same time his own watch had stopped.

"My gosh, did everything stop at twelve o'clock?"

He went shakily into the bar. The moon gave a little light, filling the place with funny shadows. He lighted a match and tried to find a switch. It was over by a door which apparently led into a kitchen. Of course, it didn't work. Joe knew it wouldn't. It brought on his first touch of panic.

"Hey, Julie!" he yelled. The sound echoed around the room and he felt a shiver up and down his spine. His head ached like the devil. He rushed back to the door leading out to the platform and looked up and down for Julie. There was no sign of her. There was no sign of anybody.

He struck another match and walked around in back of the bar, grabbed a bottle and poured himself a big drink. It made him feel better, and he went out to look again.

The Waldorf-Astoria showed up clear and bright and silvery in the moonlight, but there were no lights in any of the rooms. To the south he could see the outline of buildings down at the Battery. That's it, he thought, blacked out, like in war times a decade previous.

Joe Dunn now knew he was up against something abnormal. Maybe that smack on his head when he fell had done something to him. Maybe he was crazy. Suddenly panic struck him, and he rushed through the door toward the elevator and pressed the button. But everything was dead. He hurried back and tried to open the door leading to the stairs. It was stuck. Joe shoved, and it gave. He went down a whole flight, then stopped, came back up to the bar and grabbed the bottle of Scotch. He looked around once more and then started down the stairs.

It was as black as a pocket—there were no windows. He began to get the rhythm—twenty-eight steps, turn—three steps—twenty-eight steps, turn—three steps—twenty-eight steps, turn . . . He began to count the

floors. Finally, at about the fiftieth he ran into trouble with a door that was stuck. This took a great deal of time. Joe's shirt was soaked through, his head pounded, and he was scared!

WHAT seemed like hours later, exhausted, he walked into the lobby. Sun shone through the windows, and he walked into the street.

Broad daylight! It must have been later than he thought when he started down, or else it had taken him longer than he thought. He crossed the street and walked over and looked down at the skating rink. There were no skaters. There were a couple of cars parked over by the American Airlines office, and he walked over toward Forty-ninth Street and then east toward Fifth Avenue.

Standing in the middle of Fifth Avenue at Forty-ninth Street, for the first time he noticed that there was quite a grade down to Forty-second Street.

The sun was hot. It must have been around eleven o'clock. He took off his coat and started to walk slowly uptown, along the white line that divided Fifth Avenue in the middle.

As Joe walked along he wondered. "Where did everybody go? Maybe this is the end of the world. Maybe that guy over in Berry Meadows was right."

Joe, for the moment, couldn't remember his name.

He looked at the statue of Atlas opposite the Cathedral. He was a little surprised that Atlas hadn't set the world down to stretch his arms.

"He'll never have a better chance," muttered Joe.

At Fifty-second Street he turned east. At Madison he felt for cigarettes, turned and walked into a drugstore, and took two packages of a popular brand.

He noticed again the stillness, the bright sunshine, the cloudless sky, the lack of human beings. But not a breath of air stirred. Joe walked across Park, east past Lexington, under the Elevated, across Second Avenue and down the block to his house.

He got out his key and discovered the downstairs door was open. He noticed a wrong-side-out umbrella on the fire escape on the first floor. He ran up the stairs to his fourth floor apartment.

Bill Nolan, the chap he lived with, had shut the window, but the rain had seeped in somehow and soaked the floor in front of the window. Bill, of course, had gone. Joe looked

around for a note—in the typewriter—on the mantle over the fire-place. He looked at himself in the mirror.

Somehow it gave him a start. For a moment Joe had the funny feeling that he didn't look as he had always believed he did. That bang on the head had certainly knocked him lopsided. He turned his head in an effort to inspect the bump in the mirror. It was right over his right ear and he touched it gingerly. A good bump, but no blood. Joe rubbed his chin. He needed a shave.

He went out and opened the icebox. The light didn't go on. He got out a bottle of milk and started to pour some, but discovered immediately that it was sour, very sour.

"That's funny," thought Joe. "It shouldn't be sour."

He looked at the date on the cap. "Bottled Wednesday, October 8th," it said.

"That was yesterday," muttered Joe. An odd expression came over Joe's face. He wondered if it was only yesterday. "I couldn't be a Twentieth-Century Rip Van Winkle. No, I'd be hungrier."

A can of beer was okay. Some crackers that were kind of soggy gave Joe some sustenance. He put down the beer glass and walked out of the apartment. By the time he got to the second floor he was going down three steps at a time. Joe Dunn was scared again—good and scared!

Joe slowly walked over toward the river where he sat down on a bench in a little park which was actually the end of the street right at the river's edge. He was beginning to realize that apparently he was the last person in New York—maybe the last man in the whole world, and through some fault in the Universe Master's bookkeeping he had been overlooked.

"What does a fellow do who is the last man in New York. Where does he live? What does he do and whom does he see? I can live anywhere. There are hundreds of apartments and hotels. I can live in a different one every day, so far as that goes. There's probably enough canned goods in New York to keep me going for a thousand years. That's a nice idea—a thousand years all alone!"

He had to find somebody else—somebody to talk to—Joe Dunn was lonesome!

He lighted another cigarette and walked over to the railing and started to flip the match into the East River, then stared.

There were no whirlpools, no rushing water. The East River was stagnant, just dirty, still water. Already pieces of wood that floated above the water were drying in the

sun. There was something strange about the sun, now that he looked at it. The sun didn't appear to have changed its position since early morning. It was in the same spot it had occupied at forenoon.

"This must be my imagination," muttered Joe.

He took out a handkerchief, wiped his forehead and walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER III

Desert of Loneliness

AFTER a while, Joe Dunn decided to go down to his office and see what happened there. It took him two hours, and by the time he got to South Street the curbstones seemed to be two feet high, he was that tired. When he sat down at his desk his shirt was wet. In the top drawer was a little notebook with telephone numbers.

He took out a folding checkbook, looked at the balance which was two-hundred sixty-six dollars, but noticed there were two stubs which he neglected to fill out. He stuck the checkbook in his pocket and walked down the hall to the publisher's office.

He had never been in this inner sanctum, and it looked pretty much the way he imagined it would. It was paneled. There was a big leather over-stuffed chair in which, as you swiveled around, you could look out over the East River. There was a freighter tied up at the Pier right across the street, silent, deserted—motionless.

Joe walked back to his own desk, rummaged around in the bottom drawer and found an old pipe he had forgotten about. He walked over to Julie's desk and opened the top drawer. There was a small broken mirror, a ten-cent tube of cold cream, a U. S. Camera book dated nineteen forty-nine, some miscellaneous papers and one of those plastic hair curlers which was clipped around some bills. The top one was from Bloomingdale's. Joe took down her address. It was Twenty-two Grove Street.

On his way out of the building he went down into the basement where the presses were. The room was still and dark and damp. The presses looked big and black and oily. He went over to where the papers feed out, and climbed upon the roller to see what edition had been running when they stopped. It was the City Edition. As

he leaned over sideways to look at the headline, which was in twenty-four-point type, he read:

ELECTRICAL STORM PARALYZES CITY
All Communications To New York
Go Dead As Odd Disturbance
Moves In From Southeast

As Dunn started to climb down he noticed a little story in the lower left hand corner of Page One. It looked strangely familiar. He started to read it.

It had a Berry Meadows, New Jersey, October 8th, dateline. The story was intended to be an amusing account of the goings-on of a Fletcher B. Fletcher, an odd Evangelist who predicted the end of the world Wednesday night at twelve o'clock.

It concluded: "However, up until a late hour tonight everything was going on in customary fashion throughout the world, in spite of Mr. Fletcher. Taxes are too high, helicopters are still too expensive and synthetic foods still lack natural flavor. Apparently Fletcher has been too busy ending the world to attend to minor details."

Joe read it again and climbed down off the roller. He brushed himself off.

"Very funny," he muttered, and left the office. The sun was still bright. "By Jupiter!" he marveled. "The rivers are stagnant, the sun doesn't move."

Joe began walking back uptown along Fourth Avenue. Through Grand Central and on up Park to the Waldorf. He went in through the Park Avenue entrance and up the broad steps and into the main lobby. Complete exhaustion had finally caught up with him. He looked around one of the lower floors and found a room that was open, and there prepared to spend the night.

It was a comfortable room, with a double four-poster bed. A "Do Not Disturb" sign hung on the doorknob. Before he got into bed, with a pencil he marked out the word "not," so the sign read "Do Disturb," and hung it outside of his door. He was tired, but the strange daylight kept him awake. Finally he got up and pulled down all the shades. . . .

WHEN he awoke in the morning he got a start before he remembered where he was. He needed some shaving equipment as he now had a two-day's beard. He could also do with a clean shirt.

On his way downstairs he decided he might as well get a suite. There must have been at least 1200 rooms in this hotel, and

no need of his having only one room.

"Gosh, I can have a floor if I want it," said Dunn.

In the big kitchens he collected a five-gallon jug of Bear Spring Water, a chafing dish, some canned goods, knives and forks, and took them up to a two-room suite on the third floor.

Later that day he began systematically to explore this strange New York without people. It needed strenuous leg work, and the next day Joe stayed in bed until late. He wasn't sure what time it was, because of the odd breakdown in mechanics. His watch didn't appear to be broken, but it wouldn't run. He wound it, but it didn't tick, and the hands wouldn't move. He smoked a couple of cigarettes and thought about things.

Later, when he did get up, he decided to walk across town. As he passed Abercrombie and Fitch's window he decided he ought to have a gun—why, he had no idea. He wasn't even sure that a gun would work. He was sure there was some kind of a general mechanical mixup. His watch wouldn't work, and a taxicab, with the key in the switch never moved a gear tooth when he stepped on the starter. For some reason wheels just wouldn't go around. He borrowed a monkey wrench from the car and smashed the door glass of the store. The crash seemed loud but was quickly stifled in the aching silence.

Entering, Joe walked through the archery department of Abercrombie's looking for the gun counter. On his way, he took down a bow and solemnly aimed an arrow at a clothes dummy which was standing near the doorway in a hunting costume. He missed the dummy, and the arrow shot through the shattered door into Madison Avenue and clattered across the street to stop against the opposite curb. Gloomily, he went on and found a gun he liked. It was a thirty-eight Colt automatic.

Late that afternoon, back in his room, he put the gun and the box of shells on the dresser. He never did try to fire it. As a matter of fact, he never carried it again. He didn't want to find out that it wouldn't work.

A couple of days passed. With his exploring Joe had pretty well covered the midtown section of Manhattan. He went into apartment houses along Park Avenue, and shops on the Avenue, breaking his way in whenever necessary, and never once setting off a burglar alarm. One day he stopped in the University Club and sat in an overstuffed chair, looking out over Fifth Avenue, and pretending. But it was no fun alone. Noth-

ing was. He wanted to talk to somebody beside himself. His voice seemed to have a funny sound in his ears.

He began to lose track of time, of course, in this city of changelessness with the sun frozen in one spot in the morning sky. But the equivalent of a week must have gone by, during which time he had walked across Queens Bridge to Long Island City, had gone aboard one of the big ships tied up in the North River, and otherwise sought occupation as well as an answer to this ghastly enigma.

That the end of the world had come was ridiculous. For here the world was, and he with it. But something had happened to people and animals and insects—and time! Time? Time hadn't been completely frozen, or else there had been a slip of cogs in the machinery of the Universe Master. For it had changed from night to midmorning while Joe had descended from the R.C.A. tower.

Which reminded Joe of something. He hadn't been back to the top of the R.C.A. Building. There might be something he had missed or overlooked up on the balcony. Maybe Julie was still there. She had been with him at the moment he fell. She had fallen, too. Where the devil was Julie? Why wasn't she trapped in this terrible nightmare with him?

It took more than three hours to climb to the top of Radio City's tallest building. Many times Joe had to stop and rest. When he finally walked out on to the parapet he was exhausted and trembling. He had to sit down on a bench and get his wind back before he felt up to doing any exploring.

For a long time he sat there, glancing now and then up at the sun. It hung like a picture. He reached out his foot and placed the toe of his shoe on the exact edge of the shadow. He waited for an interminable period, but the shadow never moved. This only told him what he already knew. The world was dead and time had simply ceased to exist. Only Joe Dunn was still alive.

RESTLESSLY he got up and walked around the parapet, looking over the city for some sign of life, of smoke—even a moving cloud in the sky. There was nothing.

Returning inside, he walked in back of the bar, picked out a fresh bottle of Scotch, turned to put it on the bar—and nearly dropped in his tracks. There, standing in the middle of the bar was another bottle. Someone had pulled the heavy lead foil off

the top, and apparently had taken one drink out of it.

Joe, without taking his eyes off the bottle, walked slowly around the bar, carrying his bottle of Scotch by the neck, and climbed up on a stool. He continued to stare at the bottle on the bar. It was a brandy bottle. While Joe looked at it, he automatically opened his bottle of Scotch and poured himself a drink. Someone had opened a bottle of brandy after he had left. He was sure there had been no bottle on the bar when he had come in off the platform that night.

Maybe it was Julie! Maybe Julie had been out there on that platform after all. Maybe he hadn't walked all the way around. Maybe he just thought he had. Joe poured himself another drink, and for the first time since the storm, he felt right. There was somebody else in town. Now all he had to do was find that somebody.

Joe carefully examined everything in the room, went slowly around every foot of the parapet, but there wasn't any other sign or clue. There was nothing more to do up there. He'd better start to find out who it was.

Before long he was using the old rhythm—twenty-eight steps down, turn, three steps, and so on. Only this time he was going faster.

Joe Dunn was out to find another human being!

CHAPTER IV

Message in Soap

SUDDENLY, on the count of twenty-six Joe stepped on something that turned under him. He grabbed for the railing, missed and fell the last two steps to land on his hands and knees. He got up, gingerly rubbed his knees and thought about what might have happened.

"A fine time for a broken leg!" he growled.

Lighting a match to see what had thrown him, he got a surprise. There on the bottom step was a heel off a gal's slipper. "By glory, somebody else is living here in New York—and it's a dame! A girl who has a heel off her slipper."

Joe put the heel in his pocket and proceeded more carefully down the rest of the way, and out on the street.

Standing in front of the building in the bright sunshine, Joe examined the heel care-

fully. "It must be Julie's, yet this can't be off Julie's shoe because she always wears those tug-boat type. Perhaps she's changed her style, but I can't be sure. Maybe she did have this kind of shoe on that night. She went home after it happened. Twenty-two Grove Street."

Grimly Joe Dunn started walking downtown toward Grove Street with the heel of the slipper in his hand.

"Maybe that bottle of brandy was on the bar the night I took the bottle of Scotch," thought Joe. "No, I'm sure it wasn't. Anyway, what about the heel? Maybe it wasn't Julie's. Maybe it was some other gal's. Anyway, it was somebody's."

If it wasn't Julie's whose was it? Dunn began to wonder what she might look like. He studied the heel to try and get some idea. It wasn't scuffed and it wasn't run over. It looked as if it came off a good shoe, a slim, narrow shoe. There was still the mark of a little sticker that had been pasted on the inside. Someone had carefully pulled it off with a long, manicured nail, Joe hoped.

So far as that went, Julie had long, well-shaped nails. Joe was walking faster. As a matter of fact, Julie wasn't bad looking. Nope, as a matter of fact, Julie was quite attractive. Yes, indeed!

Twenty-two Grove Street was a made-over brownstone. Inside the door was a Brass mailbox, with the names of the tenants alongside little black push buttons. Kraft, Michaelson, Jessie Brandix—Julie A. Crosby! Joe pushed the button and then, without waiting, pushed open the front door and walked into a little hall. As soon as he did he knew that Julie wasn't home.

In Julie's apartment was the hat she had worn the morning they drove out to New Jersey. The reversible coat she had worn that same morning was tossed over a chair. Joe looked in a clothes closet, hoping to find a slipper with a heel off. There were lots of shoes, but none there with a heel off. Joe picked up a black slipper and examined it. It had a heel like the one he held in his hand.

"Wonder why she wore those other shoes when she had all these little slippers in her closet?" Disconsolately he walked out, down the stairs and into the street. He was at a new low.

On his way uptown he had trouble keeping his hopes up about the possibility of someone else being in town, and tried to sell himself on the idea that he mustn't get discouraged.

"You've got to keep trying," he said to

himself. But he was depressed.

Late that night, exhausted, he partially convinced himself that there might be someone else besides Julie. He would have a look around tomorrow.

In the morning, as he was shaving, he accidentally rubbed some soap on the mirror. He snapped his fingers, and hurried through his dressing. He took the bar of soap from his bathroom and put it in his pocket. Everywhere he went that day he wrote on the windows with the soap, "Did you lose your heel?"

Half-way through his work he realized he had given no instructions, and started to retrace his steps, adding to his message:

"Come to the Waldorf."

Next morning Joe left the hotel around noon and walked across town to the Broadway section. He wrote a note on the window of the Times Building, doing so more as a matter of habit than anything else. He was convinced that there was no one beside himself in New York.

DISCONSOLATELY Joe Dunn sat down on a bench in that little triangle of concrete in front of Father Duffy's statue and looked at all the signs. How silly they looked without any lights or motion.

"New York in your vest pocket, eh?" He went back to his old game of seeing if the sun had moved. He held his finger right on the edge of a shadow and waited, but the shadow never changed.

Several cigarettes later he started walking back across town. He judged it should have been late afternoon as he walked slowly through the Park Avenue entrance of the Waldorf and up the broad steps into the main lobby. On the top step Joe froze. Sitting primly in one of those big lobby chairs was a girl. She stood up, and neither of them spoke for a long unbelievable minute.

"Julie!" exclaimed Joe. He tried to shout it, but there was a huskiness to his voice and a queer, constricting ache to his throat. "Julie Crosby!"

"Hello," said Julie in a strained, tentative way. "I—I wondered if it would be—be you."

"Julie," Joe repeated in a steadier voice. Then he was moving forward to reach her, his hand outstretched hesitantly—as though the girl would suddenly disappear before he could touch her.

And then Julie was in his arms, clinging desperately to him, and sobbing hysterically against his chest.

"Joe! Joe!" she sobbed brokenly. "It's—it's been so terrible. What on earth has happened?"

Joe held her tightly. He felt like crying himself. He was trembling all over, with hot and cold flashes using his spine for a signal beam.

"Gosh only knows, Julie," he said. "But where have you been? I remember that we seemed to fall down up there on the R.C.A. Building, but when I regained my senses I couldn't find you. I couldn't find anybody. What became of you?"

"That's what I was going to ask you," she answered after she had quieted down. "We fell, and I must have fainted. When I woke up you were gone and I was all alone. So terribly alone. I finally opened a bottle of brandy and took one drink. Then—"

"Was it night or daylight when you recovered?" demanded Joe quickly.

The girl shuddered. "It was just like it is now—late morning. The sun hasn't moved an inch since then. I've lost track of time, but it must have been days and days. I think I have slowly been going crazy."

"Somehow we got separated up there, and I missed you," figured Joe. "It was night when I woke up—and daylight when I finally reached the street. I've tried vainly to understand what has happened, but I couldn't. I've looked everywhere for the least sign of life and found nothing. I was down to your Grove Street place twice. Where have you been hiding?"

"In—in the Astor Hotel," she replied faintly. "I was afraid to walk the streets for three days. Since then I've spent all my time either in my hotel room, the kitchen, and the Public Library. I've been trying to find some sort of explanation for what has happened from scientific books. But it is all sort of a hopeless muddle, and I've been so—so afraid."

She started crying afresh. This made Joe feel more the protector.

"Here, here, that won't do," he counseled. "Let's pick it up from here. I never thought about going to the Library. I doubt if we'll find any answers there. We've got to find Reverend Fletcher again. Meanwhile, Miss Crosby, if you have no previous engagement, how about dinner with me tonight?"

Julie smiled through her tears. Then, solemnly: "I'd love to, but I have a date—a big dinner party at the St. Regis, and then on to the opening performance at the opera. I wish I could break it, but I made it weeks ago."

"Why can't you call your friends up and tell them you are indisposed?" Joe suggested gravely.

"I might," she paused. "But we're sure to run into them somewhere around town." They both smiled again, and Julie continued: "Oh, well, I'll do it. We'll take a chance. Shall we dress?"

"Dress?" Joe answered. "Of course we dress. Always dress in the jungle—white man's burden—keeping up morale and all that stuff."

Julie was now feeling so much better she laughed. "Fine. Why don't you pick me up at my place and we'll have a cocktail, say about seven?"

"Wonderful. I hope your suite is no higher than the third floor. The elevator service is terrible lately."

She gave him the number of her room on the second floor of the Astor, shook hands gaily to carry out the farce and then departed, to dress for dinner. At the entrance her fears returned.

"Joe—don't take too long, please."

BUT Joe had a problem. His wardrobe didn't include a dinner coat. A quick shopping trip, which included a clothing store and a small shop in the hotel, took care of his problem.

Later, as he walked up and down shaking a cocktail in Julie's suite and talked to her through the door as she was dressing, Joe glanced at himself in a mirror, and smiled with approval.

When Julie appeared, Joe realized at once that only some artist like Hattie Carnegie could have designed that little number. Joe stopped in mid-shake and stared at her in genuine amazement.

"Wonderful!" he admired. "I never realized you were so gorgeous, Julie. You should have worn clothes like that always."

"On my salary?" she came back. "But I'm so glad you like it. I've been saving it for a special occasion like this—in the shop downstairs."

Joe nodded and then turned slowly about before her. "What do you think of my dinner coat? The pants are a trifle long, but this is a spare tux I picked up today—right off a hanger over in Fifth Avenue."

They both laughed, and Joe filled their glasses. Gravely he offered her a toast.

"Thank God, I found you," he said fervently.

"Thank God," she echoed.

Two cocktails and several thousand words

later, Julie having related all the empty nothingness that had befallen her, and Joe having done the same, but with the embellishments befitting a newspaperman, the girl surveyed him thoughtfully.

"Yes, I took a drink of brandy out of that bottle you found on your second trip," she said. "Then on my way down I broke my heel off and had to limp the rest of the way. I'm trying not to think about it right now, with you here, but I finally wound up in the Astor. I just stayed. I was never so tired in all my life. Tomorrow we can start to try to figure things out, but tonight, if it is night, was that dinner invitation of yours really on the level?"

Joe poured the two last drops out of the shaker into Julie's glass.

"Finish that, my good woman, and I'll have Burton whisk us to the Plaza where I have made all arrangements for some fine groceries. The wine is, at this moment, chilled to the exact degree."

Julie put down her glass. "Who is Burton?"

"Burton's my chauffeur. Who did you suppose Burton was? By the way, why not dine here?"

"Let's," agreed Julie. "And give Burton the night off."

"A good idea. I've had him out every night for a week . . . have your maid call the desk and tell him, will you?"

In the hotel kitchens, Julie, holding up her long skirt and Joe climbing on tables to look in high cupboards, they finally assembled a meal. With candles and the soup on a table, they stepped back into the lobby and walked in again bowing to imaginary friends on their way to the table. When they sat down Joe leaned across and hissed at her.

"Isn't that Manny Tomville with Meggy Jopkins Hoyce sitting over there?" And as Julie started to turn, "Not now—they're looking at us."

Dinner was fun. Once Joe pushed back from the table and looked long and hard at Julie. The girl looked up, and her eyes were filled with a curious expectancy.

"Anything the matter?"

Joe came around to her side of the table and moved the candles so that more light fell on her face. "No, but I can't get over how lovely you are, and how I could have been so blind not to have noticed it. You fooled me completely with that work in the office, photographer, career woman, low-heeled shoes, and glasses."

CHAPTER V

Accounts Are Balanced

FINALLY they walked back up to Julie's apartment. She asked him up for a nightcap and went to the bar table to pour Scotch into glasses.

"Soda?" she asked. "Oh, no, I remember—it's plain water, isn't it?"

"It used to be," Joe said, "but I think the bottled variety's safer now. That stagnant river doesn't make me too happy about the reservoirs."

This unhappy remark sobered them for a while. For a moment they sipped their drinks in silence, and then Julie got up for a cigarette.

"Tonight was fun, wasn't it?" she said wistfully.

"Tonight was maybe the best fun I've ever had."

Julie acknowledged this with a small appreciative bow and went back to her chair. Joe lighted her cigarette for her and then sat facing her. He regarded her solemnly, then narrowed his eyes and squinted at her.

"You know, it's funny."

"What's funny?"

"That, out of all the people who might have been left, it's you who are here. That, lady, comes under the heading of fool's luck for me, no matter how you look at it."

A little embarrassed by his own speech Joe drained his glass and inspected its emptiness. Julie gestured toward the bar table, and Joe mixed himself another drink. The girl still didn't say anything. For a time they sat in silence.

"Where do you suppose they all went, Joe?" she asked faintly. "Now that you are here with me I'm getting a firmer grip on myself. I'm not so scared anymore, but what's it all about? What has happened to us? And why?"

"I don't know," admitted Joe slowly. "If we had only got more information out of that Fletcher instead of laughing up our sleeves at him."

"I wasn't laughing while we were in that—that queer room."

"Neither was I. Frankly, that man baffled me. But what the devil did he mean about that Universe Master business? I haven't been a particularly religious man, but I know that none of that stuff jibes with any part of the ideology of the entire world. I just

don't get it!"

"That room in that school house was like no room I ever saw before," mused Julie.

"No, it wasn't. It was more like—like a focused spot in space. Like being inside a cloud—or something." Joe was groping for words to express this intangible and abstract idea.

"Exactly," agreed Julie. "Joe, the only thing to do is for us to go back to Berry Meadows and find Fletcher. He's simply got to be there! And we've got to make him explain—make him right all this—this crazy business, if he really had anything to do with it."

"It's a long walk," commented Joe significantly.

"I know," she said. "But we'll have to face it. But we don't have to start out right away. Let's rest up and explore New York first. Perhaps Fletcher will come to us. He said he would be at the latitude and longitude of Radio City once. Anyway, we have plenty of time—all the time in the world."

Her shoulders began to shake, and Joe could see that she was on the verge of hysteria again.

"Fine idea," he said promptly. "We'll play around for a few days. How about lunch tomorrow?"

"Lunch would be swell. We can both sleep late—this no darkness stuff has thrown me off in my sleeping habits. But where shall I meet you? How will we know what time?"

"I'll come for you here. Goodnight, Julie."

She arose and held out her hands. He took them firmly. He wanted to kiss her, but he did not. There was too much else worrying him. He just pressed her fingers tightly and then released them.

"Goodnight, Joe," she said bravely.

He picked up his hat and, with a little encouraging wave of his hand, went out. Julie stood for quite a while at the door, watching and staring long after his figure had passed out of sight down the stairs. . . .

During the next few days Julie and Joe really covered the elite spots of the town. They did all the things and saw all the places every visitor and worker in the metropolis once had wanted to do and see. They went backstage at the Music Hall, visited every famous nightclub they could reach without too much walking, stopped in at the American Express and arranged an imaginary trip around the world. They even went behind the scenes at such places as the Automat to learn how pies and sandwiches used to

slip out through the little glass doors.

But none of this was fun. No mechanism would work for them, and the utter absence of other people made all pretense futile and vain.

They turned from this to shopping, but aside from picking out an occasional article of clothing they disturbed nothing. What point could there be in selecting furniture, bric-a-brac, jewelry, money—or anything—and carrying it from one place to another? Didn't they own the whole of the city, perhaps the entire world? Why lug stuff around? Just use it where they found it.

IN the course of time a trail of broken windows and smashed doors furnished mute evidence of their various excursions about Manhattan.

"Enough charges of breaking and entering to send both of us up for two hundred years," observed Joe. And this remark gave neither of them a laugh.

Such places as grill-protected establishments they made no attempt to enter. Why waste time and effort to cut through metal grills to get to something for which they had no use?

And all the time they knew they were simply putting off the necessity of a hundred-mile walk to a place called Berry Meadows because they were afraid they wouldn't find Fletcher B. Fletcher when they got there. And with this final hope vanished there would be absolutely nothing left for them but madness. There was a sort of intimacy between them, yes. They knew they were falling in love with each other, but they never spoke of such things. They were like two babes lost in a modern wilderness, still groping to adjust themselves to a condition that was too vast and too shocking to believe fully.

Then came that priceless moment they were strolling up Fifth Avenue toward Central Park, pretending they were in the Easter parade. As they crossed Fifty-sixth Street Joe became aware of a sudden dizzy feeling. He almost reeled, and he noticed that Julie did the same thing. It was as though the earth beneath them had shuddered. Not a local surging or buckling of the pavement. Not even as an earthquake ripple. It was more as though an immense body had sluggishly started to move. Like a subway train starting up, only on a far vaster scale.

They steadied each other and looked around fearfully.

"Look!" said Joe, pointing upward at a

tiny patch of cloud that had hung in the same spot in the sky like Coleridge's "painted ship upon a painted ocean."

Julie stared. "Joe, it's moving!" she cried.

Joe placed the edge of his shoe right at the edge of the shadow of a building, and they stood there staring down. Minutes went by, and then imperceptibly the shadow moved up over the edge of the sole and slowly crept across the toe cap.

Joe straightened up and rubbed his leg to ease the aching muscles.

"What do you think that means?" asked Julie, frightened.

"We are in business again," said Joe, placing a coin a couple of inches inside the shadow and stepping back in the shade to watch.

Julie sat down on the curb to wait. After a while the shadow was eaten away and the coin lay glittering in the sunshine. The world was on its daily round once more.

"I think it is a good sign," said Julie. "Maybe a car would run again. Anyway, let's plan on setting out for Berry Meadows early in the morning—if there really comes a night and morning."

"It's a date, darling," agreed Joe promptly. "And do you know what we ought to do tonight? We should get up in some high place so that if there's anybody at all within miles of here we might see a light. If it stays as clear as this, they say—they used to say—you can see forty miles from the top of the R.C.A. Building. How about going back up there?"

"Right after dinner," said Julie.

Almost gaily they went on to the park and spent hours strolling through the expanse. While there were no animals in the zoo, no birds or squirrels or living and crawling and creeping things in evidence, there was a breeze, and the ground felt good and alive. And the afternoon shadows crept eastward in a perfectly normal manner.

They had dinner at dusk in a restaurant on Sixth Avenue, an almost pleasant business of canned stuff and bottled delicacies. Then they crossed to the R.C.A. Building and started their climb.

It must have been past eleven o'clock by the time they reached the top. It was a beautiful, warm night as they walked out on the parapet and sat on the bench to rest. Julie took off her shoes for a moment, while Joe relaxed and slid down on the end of his spine to gaze enraptured at the night sky.

They were facing west and could see the

Hudson which was a solid ribbon of silver in the moonlight. Beyond the Palisades the flat New Jersey meadows stretched out as far as the eye could see.

"Tomorrow," said Julie eagerly, "we go over there again. Isn't it wonderful, Joe, that there will be a succession of tomorrows again?"

"Yeah," said Joe, grunting as he sat up. "Tomorrow I want to get my hands on the Reverend Fletcher B. Fletcher. After that I must take the time to tell you how much I love you. Then, if people don't come back, we can plan what we are going to do, anyway. At last we'll be able to get somewhere if machinery will work again."

"You can tell me now if you like, Joe," said Julie, slipping her slim feet back into her shoes.

"Come on, Julie," said Joe, helping her erect. "Let's take a look around from all four sides while I get up enough nerve to speak."

Together they examined the city which was bathed in silvery moonlight. But there was no flicker or beam of any other sort. They were still completely alone in a deserted world. The wind was freshening and becoming gusty.

As they leaned against the rail and lighted cigarettes Joe put his arm around Julie and drew her close. She snuggled up next to him, and he thought he detected a faint shudder. The same thought was going through his own head. It was no use pretending or hoping any further. They were the last two persons on Earth.

CAREFULLY Joe took the final drag on his cigarette and flicked it out into space. Silently they watched it curve outward and then fall downward like a tiny meteor. The wind caught it and swept it against the building and out of sight.

"Look, Joe!" exclaimed Julie, pointing southward. "Lightning. A storm is approaching. And that's where the other storm came from. Remember?"

"Yes, I do," said Joe shakily. "It's already spattering rain."

He drew the girl close to him and she raised her face to meet his eyes. There was no fear in her features now.

"I love you, babe," whispered Joe. And he kissed her just as there was a tremendous clap of thunder. . . .

In a vast room of indefinable shape, surrounded by nebulous glimmerings of busy machinery and suffused with light from an

indeterminable source, three manlike figures gathered in conference around a huge desk. Beyond them was something akin to a door which was open and on which was the glowing sign:

THE UNIVERSE MASTER
Bookkeeping Department

Through the door could be glimpsed rows and rows of desks which stretched for miles. On each desk was a large, shiny, complicated looking adding machine. On the side of each desk was a tray filled with cards. The operators, all dressed alike and immobile of face, fed the cards into their machines, pushed buttons and pulled levers with deft speed.

But there was no sound. Even the supervisors made no sound as they walked along the aisles to pick up the tally sheets pouring from the machines and fed them into overhead pneumatic tubes which conveyed them to a giant machine at the near end of this gigantic room.

At first glance the colossal machine looked like an over-sized newspaper press. A second glance showed that it was a super-adding machine—an adding machine to end all adding machines. Atop this unbelievable pile of equipment which was more than five stories tall, a row of digits which ran into some sixty figures was constantly changing, increasing the growing total.

In the mistily outlined office the first man was speaking. He was highly annoyed.

"I don't want to hear any more about these so-called efficient machines. They are no good. Here we are working overtime for the seventh straight night, and still we can't balance the books. You, Fletcher!" And he pointed his finger at a tall and gloomy-faced individual. "You talked me into installing this machine business—this system.

"I have been closing out planets for the Universe Master for eons with good, simple, old-fashioned astral buttons—and never one bit of trouble. And the first time we try this efficiency method of yours, we can't strike a balance. If the total doesn't come out right on this run, we are going to junk all this stuff and go back to the old method."

Fletcher looked woebegone. "I am sorry, sir. I simply can't understand what has gone wrong. You called me back from a very important way-station in the Arcturus System. How much, may I ask, are we off tally? Did you deduct for the number of special deputy agents I listed?"

For the first time the third man spoke. He was apparently in charge of this particular department.

"Certainly," he snorted. "We do not make such elemental errors in this division, Fletcher." He went on to say their books showed a total balance of 7,768,984,435 homo sapiens, but that their pick-up showed only 7,768,984,433. "We are two short," he continued. "It isn't much, but we cannot close the books until they balance."

JUST then a fourth man came striding hastily into the office. He was carrying two cards in his hand.

"As per your orders, sir," he addressed the boss, "I started the Solar machinery once more to check the entire mechanism. Some stray pair might possibly have got away on an experimental rocket flight. But I think I found the trouble more simply. One of the operators found these two cards clipped together in the back of file box NY Seven-three-one-four. I think that is the file for a place called New York."

The boss took the two cards and read aloud. "Joseph Gordon Dunn, Three thirty-four East Fifty-third Street, New York City, U.S.A., Earth. Julia Marguerite Crosby, Twenty-two Grove Street, New York City, U.S.A., Earth."

"Of course!" exclaimed Fletcher, beaming. "That's the pair of humans I put at the foot of my list as alternate deputies. I made a notation to that effect in my report."

"Well," rumbled the boss, slightly mollified, "they had no business getting lost. Go get them, Fletcher, and place them in the active deputy file, and then you can return to your Arcturus survey. We will close the Earth account at once. And get rid of those infernal machines. They're a confounded nuisance. I could close out an entire galaxy with an abacus. . . ."

So, there was a loud clap of thunder just as Joe Dunn kissed Julie Crosby. And then, suddenly, the wind and storm froze into rigid silence. There was nothing left on the top of the R.C.A. Building to cast a human shadow.

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