

fantastic

APRIL 1954
VOLUME 3 NUMBER 2

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
Editorial and Executive Offices
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

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The Letter

By DORIS E. KAYE

John Jones was just what his name implied — a nice little guy making an ordinary living in an ordinary way. Then some long-nosed joker sent him that letter; that mean, low, busybody's letter that could only turn him into a spy — a husband watching his own wife, the woman he'd sworn to love and trust. This started him on a trip completely out of this world. And one thing was certain — he would never be quite the same again.

IT WAS the kind of hazy morning that promised to be a scorcher, with a gray, heavy mist hanging low over the Sound. When the TV weather man had drawn a picture of it the night before, John Jones set himself an early alarm — “to beat the heat,” as he put it, in getting down to his office in midtown Manhattan.

But a much too good pocket-book mystery had kept him reading far past midnight, his usual hour to douse the light. It wasn't until all corpses were cold and the murderer safe in the hands of The Law that the head of the house

at Number 18 Hickory Lane slept the sleep of the innocent — while the alarm clock droned to exhaustion.

At best, that wasn't a tough thing to do; Jones had a habit of keeping the clock muffled in the drawer of his night-table. He didn't think it fair to get Alice up that early, especially when all he ever wanted for breakfast was a glass of prepared orange juice and a cup of equally prepared coffee. Forty-one years of bachelorhood had made him an expert at soloing for breakfast; there was no point in changing that after six months

of marriage to a new bride of twenty-four. A day hadn't passed since that he didn't want to pinch himself to make sure all this actually was happening to *him*. Old Jonesy, forty-two and balding — lucky enough to convince a pretty young doll like Alice that death alone would them part!

"Wow! Did I oversleep!" Jones growled at himself as he squinted a heavy eyelid at the window and pulled the reluctant clock out of the drawer. The sun had already broken through most of the thick haze and patterned the soft green broadloom in venetian-blind stripings. A quick glance at the other twin bed assured him that Alice was still deep in her own private worlds and so he swung out from under the thin summer sheet with husbandly caution. Well, he'd be late again, but if the heat kept up he couldn't get much work done anyway. Wedded bliss had made John Jones far more docile in the face of life's minor irritations than he had ever been before.

A sharp cold shower, a clean shave and a wardrobe of fresh, cool and sweet-smelling laundry sent him down to the kitchen in high spirits. While the water boiled for his coffee he made the rounds of the downstairs windows, closing the blinds against the day's sun, then stepped out to scoop the newspaper off the front porch. Fifteen minutes later he backed the car out of the garage and was

on his way to the station — one of those typically verdant little oases that flower along the banks of the New Haven and Hartford tracks in Suburbia, U.S.A. The daily pattern was unchanged, except for one thing. This day the mailman met him just as he was turning the car into the road.

"H'ya, Mike!" Jones called brightly. "All mine, or does it all go to Mrs. Jones? Guess you'd better slip hers in the slot; I'll take the rest. I'm pretty late today."

Strolling over to the car, the postman thumbed through the four pieces of mail addressed to Number 18. "All for you, Mr. Jones, except for a new laundry circular. Got one of those for every lady along the route."

"Okay. Thanks, Mike," Jones said, taking his mail. "Let her have that laundry thing. She reads the fool stuff like a timetable, afraid she'll miss the boat on some two-cent bargain!" The note of pride was unmistakable. No matter what the content of the comment, it always added up to "clever little gal, that wife of mine!"

Still smiling, Jones shoved the mail into his pocket, put his foot on the accelerator and started off for the station.

Comfortably seated on the shady side of the 9:23, Jones opened his letters. The first rated only a

quick run-through. His local political club was requesting his dutiful presence at a meeting of "utmost importance." Probably wind up in a good poker game. Alice was big about things like that; she always seemed to find something to do around the house when he wanted an evening with the boys. The second was a short note from Tony Markham, one of his old college buddies. Expected to be in town the week after next and would like to meet Alice. Fine! He'd ask him up to dinner. Jones had deliberately saved the third envelope for the last. Something about it provoked his curiosity. The handwriting was almost childish — an uneven scrawl. Jones flipped it over. No return address.

"What kind of a gag is this?" he thought. He tore the envelope loosely.

The customary salutary endearment was missing. "To John Jones," it began. "I consider it my duty to tell you this." Jones straightened up in his seat as his eyes dropped down to the bottom of the page. No signature. Beginning at the top again, he read on.

"To John Jones. I consider it my duty to tell you this. Strange things have been happening at your home while you are away each day. Men are visiting your wife, Mr. Jones. They drive up to your door, stay

anywhere from ten minutes to two hours and then leave. The last one always leaves about an hour before you get home. I won't say anymore. The rest is up to you. But as a respectable member of a respectable community, I think you should know this. Draw your own conclusions."

With an almost suffocating pounding in his throat and his lips pressed tight back against his teeth, Jones re-read the note. He cupped it closer in his hands, and looked up, his eyes darting sharply from one passenger to another. After the quick, horrifying realization of the contents, he wanted to make sure that the whole train wasn't reading over his shoulder. A message like that seemed to scream out loud.

His hands shaking, he folded the letter back into its envelope and stuffed it into his pocket. He needed a cigarette. But more than that, he needed to get away from what suddenly loomed up at him as a train-full of prying eyes. The fact that every face was burrowed deep in its own newspaper didn't connect at all. He just couldn't sit there. Although the train was still twenty-five minutes from Grand Central station, Jones rushed out to the car platform, fumbled nervously for a cigarette and pressed his body close to the dusty window. The letter seemed

to rub against a network of loose nerve ends jutting out from his trembling chest.

Like a drowning man whose entire life unfolds in that one interminable moment before eternity, the life of John and Alice Jones (nee Brady) swept before his shattered mind. . . .

Going to that seance on a miserable, rainy night eight months before had been pretty much of a gag. One of the men at the office had suggested Jones try it, just for kicks. All you did was write your initials on a piece of paper, drop it into a box held by a sleazy-looking blonde who stood at the door and collected your fifty cents, concentrate on the question you wanted answered by the "Swami" and then wait. The room itself, on the first floor of an old red-brick office building, was no more than twenty feet square, the walls hung with faded green brocade drapes, a low dais at the far end. About ten rows of squeaky wooden folding chairs completed the appointments. Jones felt like such a fool even being there that he didn't dare look around at the rest of the small congregation. If there happened to be someone there he knew, he'd never live it down! He first spotted Alice during the "sermon." Yes, he remembered it started with a weird sort of sermon, something about an "all-seeing Power" who guided your

destinies if you truly and sincerely believed in Him. "Let no other thought cross your mind but that one which troubles you, and He will answer and guide you."

Jones found himself concentrating over a new contract he was working on, but promptly laughed it off when he took another good look at the guy on the dais. Instead he decided to put his attention on a most provocative profile in the next row. It was framed in shoulder-length, soft brown hair that turned in at the nape of the neck with careful carelessness, and from time to time he was able to catch a glimpse of a more than lovely face.

Jones' question, of course, went unanswered; and if the girl's did too, he had no way of knowing it. Even when the Swami called out the initials, the bearer just listened without giving any sign of recognition.

When the session ended, to Jones' intense relief, the congregation filed out silently, the girl directly ahead of him. He remembered how pleased he was at the time to find that she was small in stature. Not a tall man himself, Jones was always conscious of height in others, especially of women.

He was walking a few feet behind her as they descended the outer stairs. On the last step Alice tripped and Jones rushed to her aid. When she tried to stand up it

was obvious she had hurt her ankle. So, with a tenderness that gave him unexpected pleasure, he carried the girl into his car and home to her neat one-room apartment in the East 50's.

They were married just one month later. Alice was an orphan with no relatives or close friends in New York, and Jones' family, back in Everett, Washington, couldn't make the trip east. So the ceremony was a quiet, business-like one at the Municipal Court Building. Jones knew little about Alice's job — she told him she was an expeditor for a firm of electronic engineers — but since they planned on moving to the suburbs immediately after their honeymoon, she was giving that up to become a full-time housewife. That suited Jones fine! He had always wanted a home and now, more than ever, he wanted the wife to go with it.

The train was burrowing through the Park Avenue tunnel when John Jones came to the end of his personal flashback. Through it all lurked the persistent, nagging realization that he really knew very little about Alice! Who was she? Where had she come from? She was still only a kid. Kids did crazy things.

An impatient line of commuters coaxing him off the train woke Jones to the realization that he was in the city. Walking through

the station to the Madison Avenue exit, he felt like a Zombie adrift in space, swollen far beyond his size with the tortured questions that festered inside him.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones," said his secretary. "Oh!" she added quickly, "aren't you feeling well?"

Jones stared at her belligerently. "Why?"

The girl backed away. This wasn't like him. When she spoke again her eyes were lowered and her voice softer. "Why, nothing, Mr. Jones. It's just that you're so pale!"

Jones bit hard on his lip. "I must be crazy!" he thought, tossing his hat on the clothes rack. "What could *she* know about this? Why snap at *her*?"

Aloud, and somewhat apologetically he added, "I'm sorry, Miss Riley. Guess you're right; I'm not feeling so good today. No calls, please. You take whatever comes in and cancel any appointments."

The office mail had been opened and laid out neatly on the top of his desk. He tried to read through it but it was no use. The words blurred and nothing made much sense. All he could see was "Alice — Alice — Alice —" and a stag line at the door of his bedroom. He jabbed his head into his fists, his nails digging hard into his glossy pink scalp, his eyes pressed tight against the torturing picture.

This was stupid! He just couldn't sit there driving himself out of his mind. *He had to find out!*

With a decision reached, he felt calmer now than he had for the past hour. "I think I'd better get some air," he said to Miss Riley as he went for his hat. "Might even stop in at the doctor. You'd better say I'm gone for the day." He wouldn't tell her he was going home. Alice might call and that would tip her off.

"Take care of yourself, Mr. Jones," his secretary said with genuine concern. "You really don't look right at all. And don't worry; I'll take care of everything."

"Thank you, my dear," he said absently. "I'm sure you will."

The outer door closed behind him.

The train carried only a handful of passengers. Jones found a seat in the smoker without any trouble. He made an effort to re-read the letter but gave it up when sight of the envelope brought back the pounding in his throat. He figured it would be better to concentrate on a plan.

Walking over to the parking lot for his car, he kept his head lowered so as not to have to greet anyone. But the few people around the station were all on the New York side; mostly women going in town to shop. He got into the car and rode off.

Their home was the last in the Lane — a gently winding street that was part of a fairly new development about five hundred feet from the Sound. The young trees planted five years before had thrived, giving some shade and a degree of permanence to the setting. Neatly trimmed hedges outlined each lot. Alice had chosen the house herself, even though he had pointed out at the time that it was pretty remote. The bus line was four blocks away and he needed the car every day. They still couldn't afford two, like most of his neighbors. But Alice didn't mind. She loved the house, he loved Alice, and things equal to each other added up to the down payment.

It was unwise to park too close, so he left the car on the next street and walked the distance to within a hundred feet of Number 18, taking his sentry post behind one of the higher hedges across the road. The family were away for the summer and he knew he wouldn't be noticed.

He sat down on the grass and waited.

Not long afterward, a sound brought him quickly to his feet. But it was only a grocery truck, making a delivery at the other end of the Lane. Twenty minutes later he saw a dark green sedan turn into his driveway. Jones spread the foliage and watched a

large man, dressed in a nondescript dark suit got out of the car, reach back for a heavy, square package and walk to the front door. Alice answered the bell, gave the man a quick smile of recognition, and they disappeared into the house. Jones waited. Half an hour later the stranger came out, without the package, got back into the car and drove away. An hour later practically the same process was repeated. This time the vehicle was a small black panel truck. It bore neither trade name nor insignia. Two men got out of the front seat, unlocked the doors and pulled out a large steel crate. Apparently Alice was expecting them. Before they had a chance to ring the bell she was at the front door.

"Better take that one through the back, boys," she called pleasantly.

They carried it up the driveway and disappeared through the side door. It was almost another hour before this pair was out and away — without the crate.

"That guy must be nuts!" Jones thought, recalling his nameless informer. His confidence was beginning to return. "Alice must be surprising me with something she's been buying. That's all it is! Damn nose-y neighbors!"

It was past lunch time now, and his stomach was beginning to complain. Debating the advisability of calling the whole deal off, grabbing some lunch in the village and

going back to the office took another ten minutes. He reached into his pocket for the time-table just as another car hummed down the Lane. This was a big, sleek job — with driver to match. No parcel.

His heart began pounding again. No, he couldn't leave; he had to see this thing out. In about forty minutes the visitor left. Alice walked out to the car with him and they seemed to have a few words of an obviously pleasant conversation before he drove away.

The procession lasted all day. They were always men: some alone, some in pairs. A few carried packages. All were neatly dressed and personally welcomed by his wife. By four o'clock Jones had enough. Every bone in his body ached, his head throbbed and a nauseous hunger racked his stomach. He went back to the car and drove to his favorite bar near the station. It was still too early to meet anyone and he needed a drink. Besides, he didn't want to meet anyone. He'd have a couple of fast ones and tell Alice he decided to knock off a little earlier because of the heat. A phone call to the office assured him she hadn't called there all day.

He felt a little steadier with the drinks under his belt and turned back to Number 18 Hickory Lane.

"Hello darling!" his wife greeted him, kissing him lightly. "Ah-hah!

Baby's had a nip of his bottle, hasn't he?" she laughed, as the unmistakable flavor of good bourbon rubbed off on her lips. There was no censure in her voice, just amusement.

"Okay, you caught me!" Jones answered tersely while he managed to avoid looking directly at her. This "act" was going to be even tougher to disguise than the bourbon! He sat down heavily in his chair — a red leather job she had bought especially for his comfort. God, but his legs ached! Must have been that business of squatting on the grass all day. "I made an earlier train — the city was really brutal today — so I decided to air-condition myself in Joe's place before I scorched up the house. What you just got, my pet, was the memory of two fast ones!"

"Good for you, baby. Think nothing of it. I'd have been shocked to death if you came in any earlier, anyway." Then, quickly, she added, "I mean I just got out of the shower myself, and you know how disconcerting it can be to hear the door open when you're running around in nothing flat!"

Jones attempted a smile. Damn right she'd have been shocked.

Alice was still talking. "But how about a wee nip now, with your Truly Beloved? I could stand a drink myself. Only, if you don't mind, darling, I'll make mine gin. Bourbon's too heavy for me in this weather." She lifted his feet up off

the floor and set them on the matching red leather ottoman. "Come on there, fella, off with those hot, heavy shoes! I'll get your straw slippers and then we'll both get beautifully poluted. Sound like a good idea?"

"Okay, honey. You mix 'em and we'll fix 'em. I'll just close my eyes for a minute until you're ready with the grog."

The moment Alice left the room Jones' eyes darted across every inch of it, including the ceiling. Nothing had changed. Nothing missing, nothing added. Soon Alice returned with a tray of drinks, a can of peanuts and a dish of his favorite cocktail crackers.

"There now, darling," she said, setting it on the coffee table. "You'll feel better after this."

"Maybe," he agreed, picking up his glass. "Well, Mrs. Jones, what kind of a day did *you* have?" He thought his voice sounded nonchalant enough, but he still didn't trust his eyes.

"Oh, nothing very exciting, Johnny. It was too hot to do much, so I just read most of the day. Fixed my stocking drawer, but that didn't take long. And oh, I did a terrific job on my nails. How do you like it?" She displayed her hands like a magazine ad. "Didn't have the energy to sit through a manicure in the vil-lage."

"Very nice," he conceded, looking but not quite seeing. "Anybody stop by? Sometimes I think it must be pretty damn dull for you, stuck way out here all day long."

"Oh no, darling! I love every minute of it! Nobody bothered me, no callers, no phone calls. I just took it easy and wallowed in the solitude! You know, Johnny, I'm afraid you're going to wind up with a very fat and lazy wife by the time she's forty. Do you mind?"

"You? Not a chance!" Jones answered, a little more sharply than he expected to. But a quick glance assured him Alice hadn't noticed. She was still too busy admiring her fingernails while the rest of her was curled up comfortably in one corner of the bright chintz sofa.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Pretty rough. I'd rather not even talk about it."

"Then we won't, darling. Besides, I think you need some nourishment. You know what I have for you for dinner tonight? A great big luscious lobster salad! That sound good?"

"Fine! Let's eat."

Dinner went off uneventfully, with some small talk about the men's club meeting, the patch of grass that wouldn't grow on the shady side of the house, and a new

refrigerator that makes cubes without a tray. In his preoccupation with the day's happenings, Jones forgot completely about his classmate's proposed visit to New York. The meal over, he suggested that Alice watch television while he looked into the business of weatherproofing the house "so that I'll know what those robbers are charging me for when I get them in here." Alice agreed readily as she settled back on the sofa and Jones started for the attic.

On the way up he stopped in their bedroom and the guest room, quietly and methodically opening all closets and dresser drawers. Nothing that hadn't been there a day, a week, a month before. The attic was equally as unrevealing. All they kept there anyway were their two trunks and a half-dozen pieces of small luggage. He opened everything, and found nothing.

On the way to the basement, Alice called to him. "Aren't you through yet, Johnny? There's a good show coming up next."

"Be there in a minute, honey. Have to check on those leaky windows downstairs. We're too near the Sound to take any chances with the fall rains."

"Okay, dear, but hurry. You won't want to miss this."

At the foot of the short flight of wooden stairs that led to the basement Jones stopped to think.

There *were* packages — he saw them himself! Big devils too! You just can't slip anything like that in your side pocket. And she wasn't the least bit concerned about him prowling around the joint! That's what had him stymied. If there *were* men coming in here all day, and they *did* carry a bunch of stuff, what in hell did she do with it? Jones bit his lip furiously. "Well," he decided, rubbing his damp palms against his trousers, "let's get on with it!"

At first the search of the basement promised to turn up nothing more than the rest of the house. He was ready to give up the whole damn thing and confront her openly with what he had seen from across the road — it seemed the only thing to do to keep from going completely nuts — when a disturbingly clean area of flooring behind the oil burner caught his attention. He rubbed his hand lightly over the floor. Not a particle of dust. He tried it on the opposite side of the room. His hand came up black. He could feel the sweat gathering on his forehead. The back of his shirt clung wet and cold between his shoulder-blades, aggravated by a trickle that stopped at his belt. He stood there for a minute, looking at his upturned palms, then walked back to the laundry sink, washed his hands vigorously and returned to the spot behind the oil burner.

There was no doubt about it. That piece of flooring had been washed or waxed — and recently too. Lowering himself to his knees, he searched every inch of the area. Still nothing. The cement was solid; not even a crack.

His eyes wandered up along the wall. Now, for the first time, he noticed that this section of the plaster was smoother and cleaner than any other. Searching the strip he found that it extended from the floor to the ceiling. This was no ragged area either; the slick plaster was set off from the rest as precisely as though it had been ruled by an expert draftsman. Jones stood there staring at it.

The area around the floor offered nothing; could it be the ceiling? He looked up. With just a few inches more reach he could make it. A discarded footstool brought the answer. Standing on it he was able to grab hold of the low-hanging beams. As he hung there, his arms fairly pulling out of their sockets, it happened. A pale, translucent glow fanned out across the wall, giving the plaster the bluish-white cast of the radium dial on a clock. He dropped back on the footstool. The light faded. He leaped up again, this time running his fingers swiftly across the upper side of the beam until they touched a steel slab that sank slightly into the wood under his weight.

Again the light. Only now it was accompanied by a faint hum that gradually swelled into a loud rasping and insistent buzz. Jones blanched. Suddenly there was no wall. Instead he found himself gazing bug-eyed into a huge storeroom, at the far end of which a large picture window revealed a rolling countryside, ribboned with gleaming white highways.

He swallowed hard, against a throttling lump in his throat that was choking him. Walls just didn't disappear. Not *his* walls, anyway! And that room. How the hell could it *be* there? The basement was sunk in earth. He knew that. Goddammit, he *knew* that! He dropped to the floor, the breath hissing between his slack lips in hard short gasps. There it was again — nothing but a plaster wall. A too-clean plaster wall. A too-damn-frightening plaster wall!

There must be some way to find out — some way to break through. Jones' eyes probed frantically around the basement. Alice was always so neat about the basement. Never left any empty boxes around, no excess boards even though they had bought plenty of the stuff to build extra shelves.

Suddenly he spotted a long stout curtain rod that had been discarded when they installed the traverse type in the living room. He ran to get it. With one end aimed directly at the wall and his fists clenched tight around the

other, he poised himself for the attack.

The basement door opened with a sharp noise.

"Johnny, darling, what in the world are you doing down there all this time? You're missing a simply gorgeous gory mystery!"

Her words were like the impact of a boot in his face and the rod clattered to the cement.

It took a few seconds before he could answer. Thank God she made no attempt to come down the stairs!

"Oh nothing, honey. Nothing. Just checking on these basement windows. I'm coming right up now. Go on, don't miss your program. I'll be right there." His voice sounded like it had been plucked from a thin taut wire. He coughed nervously, to put it back in place.

There were figures on the TV screen that night. Yes, there were men, women, a couple of kids, and even a story. But you couldn't prove any of it by John Jones. A million dollars in talent and production went down the drain for all he saw, or cared to see. Yet he sat out the evening until Alice turned off the set with the close of the weather report.

"Ready for bed, Mr. Jones?" she asked with mocking politeness.

He stretched out of the chair, pulling painfully at his arms. Hanging from that rafter hadn't

done them much good. Jones was a "desk" man. "If you don't mind, dear, I'll read a while down here. The light might disturb you in the bedroom and it's still a little too warm for me to turn in. Couldn't sleep anyway." He kissed her gently on the forehead. "Go on, darling. You go to bed and get a good night's rest. I'll come up in an hour."

"Okay. But don't sit up all night. You'll be no good for anything in the morning. You know how you feel when you don't get enough sleep."

Jones smiled weakly. "Yeah, I know. Don't worry, I'll be up soon." He gave her a light, good-night kiss and sank back in the chair.

Nearly half an hour passed before Jones was ready to begin his investigation. First he tip-toed upstairs to be sure his wife was asleep. All was in order there. Closing the door softly he descended the two flights to the basement. There he picked up the curtain rod and went out the cellar door to the side of the house facing directly opposite the section of disappearing wall. He dug the rod deep into the ground. It hit nothing but soft, yielding, perfectly normal earth.

"I must be going off my rocker!" he muttered darkly to himself, pulling out the rod and returning to the basement. Now

he inspected the wall more closely. There was no doubt about it: it looked different and it *was* different! He couldn't give up now. Dragging a step-ladder to the area, he climbed up for a better look at the beam. Now he could see it without any trouble — that steel strip he had pressed down on a few hours before. Closer inspection revealed that it could be locked into position. First he listened for any sounds that might be coming from upstairs, and hearing none, he breathed in deeply as though for a plunge.

He looked at his watch. It had stopped at 12:30. Sliding it off, he placed it on one of the rafters. Then he snapped the bar into place.

It all happened just as it had before. First the light, then the hum, then the buzz. And if ever there was a solid wall there, you couldn't prove it by sight alone.

Carefully, stealthily, Jones climbed down the ladder and walked into the huge room.

Packages, crates, boxes, packing cases everywhere. Some he recognized immediately as those he had seen being moved into his home earlier in the day. With furious energy he ripped off the covers, one after the other. This was really insane! A carton full of bobby-pins — thousands of bobby-pins! Tea-bags by the hundreds in another. A crate of oyster-forks. Bubble-bath by the hun-

dred-pound weight. One crate he couldn't budge held enough LP phonograph records to crash the sound barrier with Ravel and Debussy. This could mean anything. To John Jones of 18 Hickory Lane it meant precisely nothing! He ran to the picture window, his hands trembling with excitement.

Yes, it was there all right: the most magnificent vista of rolling countryside he had ever set eyes upon. The sky was cloudless. Visibility was a transport pilot's Sunday dream. Not only could he see for miles, but even the farthest objects were etched with a cold, brittle clarity. Off to the right a gleaming city of steel cut into the picture, complete with skyscrapers, piercing needle towers and elevated highways. An impossibly long suspension bridge leaped across a river with the grace of a ballet dancer.

But nowhere could he see any movement. No people, no cars. Just — that City.

Jones ran back into the store-room. His anger had now given way to interest; his fear to intense curiosity. He no longer felt tired, beat and aching through every muscle as he had a few minutes before. There was something remarkably stimulating about the air — almost a heady lightness, as though he were floating through rarefied atmosphere. He began his

inspection of the countless rooms that led in some intricate maze from the one he had first entered.

All were huge; each seemed to have its own purpose. One was solidly lined with control panels — gleaming spotless steel. Another was weighted with immense pieces of gleaming machinery. In another the floor was bare, while from the ceiling hung myriad balloon-like gadgets from which slim steel rods jutted in every direction. As Jones reached to touch one something grabbed his arms, pinning them tight to his body. Something strong enough to promptly warn him of the futility of struggling.

He stood there, frozen to The Thing.

With his heart pounding in his chest, he turned his head slowly to see his captor. It was faintly human — a machine made into the semblance of a man. The body of a bulldozer, hands like the claws of a derrick, bloodless themselves but powerful enough to squeeze blood out of a human like an orange in a press. Through the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of its head — a solid, bullet-like affair. For one crazy moment he remembered a new experimental car that was exhibited in one of the showrooms off Grand Central, with its bulging headlights and wide gaping grill. This thing's mouth was a grill.

Out of it came sounds — flat

mechanical sounds. "Go no further!" it commanded.

As though he could! If there was one small smile left in John Jones, he would have used it then.

A siren began to emit a sound that curdled whatever blood was still on active duty in his veins. A moment later he was confronted with two men. Only this time they *were* men! Handsomely built, towering males, dressed in brilliant gold togas which they wore with the ease of Greek gods. Their feet and ankles were strongly laced with gold straw-like sandals.

One of them spoke to the robot in a language Jones couldn't even faintly understand. But evidently it was an order to release him because the steel claws dropped away. The two men signaled Jones to follow them. He was led into still another room in the mysterious pattern; a tastefully appointed conference room with soft gray walls, a great deal of pale rose-and-chartreuse upholstery and chromium fittings. The men took places at either end of a table and motioned their captive to sit across from them.

One, obviously in command, spoke. "You're a long way from home, aren't you, Mister—?" he said with what might have passed for a smile.

"—Jones," John Jones said, finishing the implied question.

"Mr. Jones. You're English?"

"American."

"Well, that's about the same."

The cold smile thawed a degree. "They come here from all over the world, you know." He sat back with the complacency of a member of the Union Club.

Jones jumped up from his chair, the color flooding his face. "They? Who's *they*? And would you mind telling me just who *you* are, and where I am? I'm getting fed up with this!"

The silent partner placed a large smooth hand on his shoulder and gently but firmly slid him back in his seat. "Steady now, Mr. Jones. That will come in time. There are a few things *we'd* like to know too!"

"Like what?" Jones growled.

"Like how you crossed over, for instance," the spokesman said significantly.

Irritation distorted the lines in Jones' face. "Crossed over? I suppose you mean how did I get here? Well, you got me there too, Buster! All I know is that I was down in my own basement, a perfectly decent, respectable basement, just about an hour ago, and all of a sudden I press a goddamn gadget and I'm out here in the middle of God only knows where, grabbed by some screwy zombie and now cross-examined by you guys. *Me* tell *you* how I got here? That's a howl!" And to prove it, he howled.

"Come now, Mr. Jones," the

alien said with a degree of patience reserved exclusively for a minus I.Q. "We're not as bad as all that! Why don't you sit back calmly and tell us the whole story, just as it happened? We may be able to help you."

Jones' eyes darted suspiciously from one man to the other. Then he fell back into his chair, his chest deflating. With his head lowered and his hands working nervously, he began his story from the night he met Alice at the seance. He told of their happy life together until the moment he opened the letter; of the long watch outside their home; of the search through the basement. And finally, he told of stepping across into the Room. The men listened with rapt attention. When he finished, Jones slumped back exhausted, his hands dropping down from the table into his lap.

The first alien spoke again. "Thank you, Mr. Jones. You've been most coöperative. We realize all this couldn't have been too easy for you."

Jones grunted, a tired lifeless grunt. "Easy" was sure putting it mildly. He felt like a limp dish rag. "Now, can you tell me where I am?"

"Jones," the alien said slowly, "what you've done is to stumble across something known to very few men of your world. You don't belong here, and we aren't going

to keep you. That's reserved for only the Selected — men or women, like your wife, who are receptive to our directives. Not many Earth creatures can fulfill our missions. Your wife happens to be one who can, one who was willing to cross over into our world, divest herself of all human emotion and dedicate herself to the perfect civilization."

A deep frown formed on Jones' forehead. He shook his head as though to clear it of confusion. "A perfect civilization? I just don't get it!"

The man smiled. "No, I suppose you don't. And I can hardly blame you. But let me go on . . ." He leaned forward. "How many times have you heard your people say 'I just can't get along without my car — I'm a slave to that automobile!' You've heard that, haven't you?"

"Heard it?" Jones came back quickly, "I've said it myself!"

"Well, multiply that a million times over and you have the key to our civilization here. This is slavery, Mr. Jones, but slavery in which all the so-called slaves are willing captives of a degree of living so vastly superior, so infinitely more efficient than anything you Earth people could even imagine that it takes an acutely mechanized, highly sensitized brain to understand it. This is a world of Pure Science, Jones, wherein Man is no longer his own

master. We brook no human frailties. The human equation never enters into our problems or our work. We do not destroy simply because to destroy is to retard. We tolerate nothing but progress. And in time we'll be ready. Yes, we will be ready!"

"Ready for what?"

"To take over the world!"

Looking into his eyes was like running head-on into a thousand-watt spotlight. Jones couldn't take it.

When he found his voice it was like something left over the 30-day limit at the cleaners. "But Alice? She's my wife, I love her! Where does she fit into this picture?"

The strange man spoke softly. "That, Jones, may come a little harder for you since you obviously are tormented by man-made emotion. Alice, your wife, does not and can not love you. As a subject of our scientific civilization she answers to no one but a superior mechanism. As our agent, she was appointed to marry you according to earth-bound ceremony merely to expedite the transfer of much needed commodities through the dimensions. You served our purpose; through another agent we directed you to that seance where Alice was ordered to arrange a meeting. We've learned that men weak enough to fall prey to that pseudo-mysticism can fall equally

easily into our hands. You did just that. The home Alice had you buy was carefully and deliberately selected as an outpost. We have many of those throughout your world. Yours was just another in the chain."

"But the letter? What about that?"

"Yes, the letter. That, unfortunately was an accident. And you surprised us by your ingenuity in investigating its contents."

From the other end of the table the second man spoke curtly. "Measures will be taken promptly on that matter, Sir!"

The other man nodded. "That's your department." To Jones, gnawing away on his lips, he continued, "But you, Jones, need have no fear. Your emotional softness as a human has progressed too far for us to be interested in you. We don't believe in harming or killing; we aren't even remotely concerned with your life. Besides, you proved yourself unfit for us by your unwillingness to be led."

"Then you won't destroy me? You won't keep me here as a prisoner?" Jones was half off his chair, his eyes mirroring hope.

"No, you shall return to your own world."

"But what if I tell the authorities? What if I show them the cross-over point?"

"We shall expect you not to do that."

"You're so sure, aren't you?"

How can you possibly be so sure you can trust me?"

The spokesman laughed widely from the back of his throat. "Of course we can trust you!"

A piercing beam of light thrust itself like a bullet into the eyes of John Jones. He slumped loosely into his chair. He never knew what hit him.

While John Jones slept in peaceful oblivion, his alarm clock droned to exhaustion. "Late again!" he grunted not too unhappily as he slid out from under the sheet and buried his toes in the soft carpet. Without waking Alice he shaved, dressed and tip-toed downstairs to prepare his simple breakfast of orange juice and coffee. While the water boiled he scooped the morning paper off the front porch.

He looked at the dateline. Wednesday, July 10.

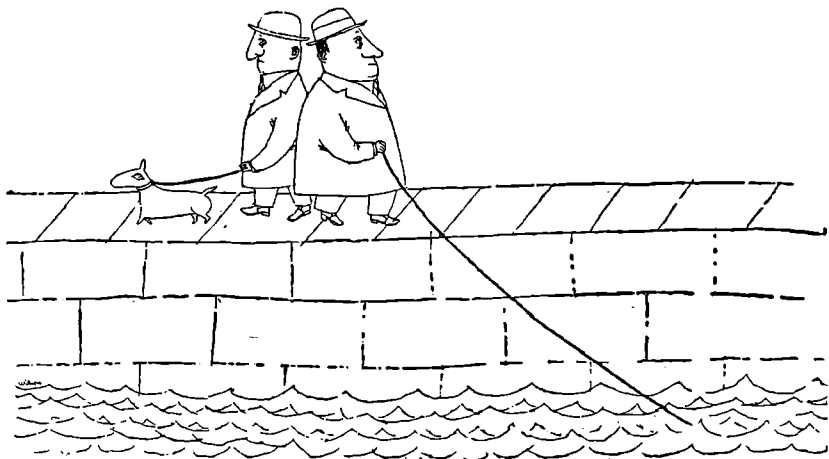
"Wednesday?" His eyes widened with disbelief.

But newspapers don't lie, so, with a resigned shrug of his shoulders he returned to the kitchen for breakfast. He scanned a few of the top headlines and then turned his wrist to check his watch for train-time.

"Now, where in hell did I leave that thing last night!" he blurted, discovering no watch on his wrist. "I'll really be good and late today!"

Back upstairs through the bedroom and the bathroom he searched carefully and quietly. He mustn't wake Alice. Poor kid, she was going to have a hot day!

Suddenly he stopped in the middle of the floor, listening to a ridiculous unspoken direction that pierced his thoughts. The basement? Why look there? He hadn't been down there in days!



But he did go down now. The ladder, normally set in the bin, was standing open behind the oil-burner. He climbed up, ran his fingers across the beam, and retrieved his watch.

As he backed the car out of the garage, he spotted the mailman coming up the Lane.

"Anything for me, Mike?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Jones," he said, walking to the car to make the delivery. "Three for you and one for Mrs. Jones."

"Slip hers in the slot, will you please, Mike? I'm terribly late today. Looks like I'll have to step on it to even make the 9:23!"

Jones stuffed the letters into his coat pocket and drove to the station.

Seated comfortably on the shady side of the train, he began reading his mail. A notice from the local political club: important meeting next Monday night. Sure, he'd go. Nothing like getting to know your neighbors when you're new in the community. Do Alice good too. She was home alone so much with so little to do, she'd love to meet the folks around. He'd get to know the men and then they'd come over with their wives. Besides, if he knew meetings, this one would wind up in a good poker game, just like all the rest. And how he missed that night of poker since he moved out of the city! A letter from Tony, the old bastard! We've

only seen each other half a dozen times since college. Expected to be in town soon and wanted to meet Alice? Great! We'll ask him up for dinner.

The handwriting on the third envelope was almost childish — an uneven, half-printed scrawl. Jones flipped it over. No return address.

"Well, what kind of a gag is this?" he thought, smiling to himself. A wrinkled dollar bill fell into his lap.

"To John Jones," it read. "Do not destroy this letter. It is worth thousands to you. This dollar bill is only the beginning. Copy this letter in triplicate, sending one, with a dollar enclosed, to each of three trusted friends, who will do the same. Do not break this chain!"

Jones returned the letter to its envelope and shoved both into his pocket. This was really one for the books! Gotta show it to the boys downtown. Yep, there's one born every minute. Sucker!

He eased the bill into his gold money-clip, shining it vigorously on his trouser leg before putting it away. Alice had given it to him as a wedding present. Wonderful girl, Alice!

He sat back comfortably and opened the newspaper and began to read.