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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

ness to let the world—and certain individuals know about it. These particular individuals learned to fear the prophecies in a very special sort of way. They usually died . . .

"THE Moving Finger Writes—And Having Writ." The first four words of this couplet are the title of an unusual novelette by Berkeley Livingston. The story concerns the hand of fate writing across the pages of time. It seems that there was one man who could read what was written on those pages, and he made it his busi-



The old man was a crackpot all right, and he proved it by prophesying the death of his scoffers.

The funny thing was, the scoffers died . . .

DICK BAGLEY'S Adam's apple bobbed up and down like a yo-yo. He had the horrible feeling it was going to pop out of his throat and fall right on the editor's desk.

"Get out of here and get me a story," the editor yelled at Dick. That was putting it mildly. Shrieked, would have been the more appropriate term.

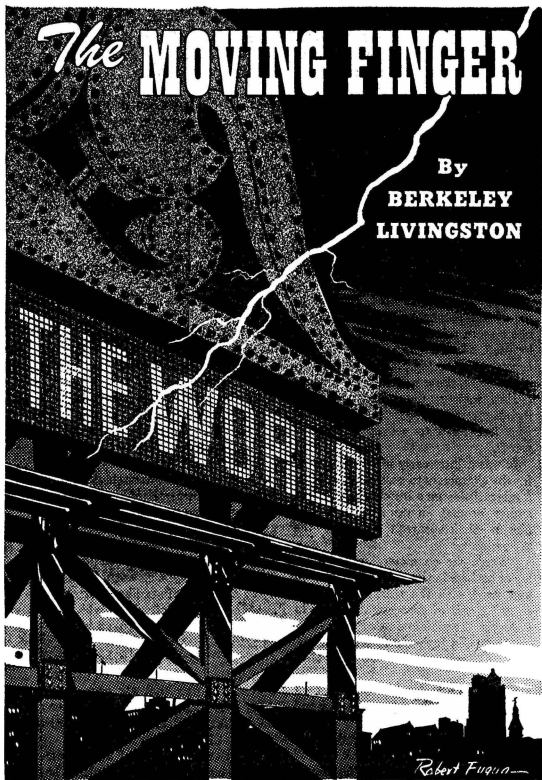
Bagley was in the editorial dog-house. He was a feature writer on *The Blade*,

Chicago's most widely read morning sheet. For three straight weeks now, he hadn't been able to write about anything more interesting than the weather. So the editor claimed, and more.

"Get this, Bagley," the editor said, in a voice as calm and collected as a tropical storm, "I hired you to do the human interest yarns. We've got society, court, sports and weather reporters. So don't bring in any more stories about cute little society belles

The MOVING FINGER

By
**BERKELEY
LIVINGSTON**



"The wrath of the Lord is upon you!" he screamed as the lightning struck

who go around offering to marry the champ riveter of a ship yard. Mr. Winchell does a far better job of that. You know what I want of you, so get out of here and get it!"

Bagley got out, but fast. The editor was a hell of a swell guy, telling him *what* to get. If only he had told him *where* to get it.

Why Bagley picked that circular plot of grass, pigeons, benches and bums, which bore the popular name of Looney Circle, he never knew. Somewhere in his subconscious, lay the thought perhaps, that here, among the flotsam and jetsam, the crack-pot and crank, was a story.

It was not listed as Looney Circle in the city directory. There, it bore a name more relevant to its history and location. But through the years it had become a gathering place for the soap-box orators, those who had a grievance against society; those who had a religious message to offer; and last, those who just liked to get up and spout words.

It was a little early in the afternoon for the characters to come around. But Bagley, sitting on a bench, saw a crowd gather around someone who looked like a Shakespearean actor of the "Nineties."

"Who's the character," asked Bagley of his benchmate. A face, unshaven and lined with the marks of hunger, turned a pair of expressionless eyes in Bagley's direction and said:

"Dat's Old Joe—the finger man."

"The finger man? Don't get it. Mind explaining?"

"Sure," the face said, "but it'd be a waste of time. Whyn'cha walk over and bend an ear."

"Ya' got something there, bud," Bagley replied with a smile, "think I will."

On closer inspection, Old Joe proved to be a tall, cadaverous looking indi-

vidual, with a haggard face and the hottest, most brilliant eyes Bagley had ever seen. They wore the brilliance of insanity—or genius.

HE STOOD on a square, wooden box and his extreme height enabled him to drive whatever message he was delivering, to every person in his audience. That didn't take much. His audience consisted just then, of a dozen people in various stages of somnolence.

"Remember this, my friends," Old Joe ranted, "that the moving finger, having writ, moves on, nor . . ."

". . . Say Joe," a voice, hoarsely raucous, floated in from beyond the crowd, "what's the finger writing today?"

Bagley could not see the voice's owner. He was beyond the farthest edge of the small crowd and hidden from Bagley's view.

Another voice, deep, resonant with power, joined the first:

"Yes Joe, tell us the wonders of the moving finger."

With the first words of the second voice, Bagley began to circle the crowd, to find their owners. At the same time he kept an eye on Old Joe. The old man on the soap box had looked a little mad when Bagley had first laid eyes on him. But now, he looked positively demoniac. His hair, worn long, was flying around his face, like a horse's tail swishing away flies, as he whirled to face the two who had broken in on his harangue.

"Scoffers; Unbelievers!" he screamed in a voice, suddenly high and uncontrolled. "Know that for such as ye, there shall be a judgment. A judgment, which, like Belshazzar's, shall be writ in words of fire."

"That's telling 'em Joe," a third voice joined the others. "Fiery words. That oughta burn 'em up."

A laugh went up from the crowd. But the pun had another effect on the soap box orator, however. It made him speechless with anger. But only for a few seconds. And in those few seconds, Bagley reached the three he was seeking.

They were seated on a bench which gave them a clear view of Old Joe. Bagley sat down beside them and looked at them with interest.

It was obvious from their dress that none of them were here from necessity. The evident relish, with which they were interrupting the old man made Bagley think it wasn't the first time this had occurred. And Old Joe merely played in their hands when he became angry.

He had drawn himself up to his full height. He looked at the three on the bench; then pointing dramatically with an extended hand, said in a voice pregnant with prophetic doom:

"Aye, in words of fire, were they writ. 'Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting.' So shall ye remember Daniel's judgment when death comes to seek ye. For each of ye . . ." here, his hand pointed to each of them in succession, ". . . shall see the hand writing on the wall before ye die. And the words *will be writ in letters of fire.*"

THE words were greeted with laughter by the three. This was what they and the crowd had evidently been waiting for. Shouts went up:

"Dat's puttin' the finger on 'em, Joe."

"Show 'em the way to hell, Joe."

And the three men on the bench were doubled up with laughter. Even Bagley found himself laughing, for Old Joe, after his sudden dramatic denunciation had put both hands on his hips, looked over to them and spat out a single word:

"Phooie!!"

The change from the theatrical manner to the human one was so amusing, Bagley had to laugh.

And Old Joe, as though realizing the futility of carrying on in the face of his tormentors, got down from the box and stalked away.

The shortest and thinnest of the three wiped away the tears, which laughter had brought to his eyes, and said:

"That guy gives me the biggest kick of all the nuts around here."

"Yeah? Why?" Bagley asked. Not that the other had addressed his remark to him. But because Bagley wanted to hear more of Old Joe.

"Well," the other replied, "because all the others around here talk with a tongue in cheek, so to speak, but not Old Joe. His message never changes. First the moving finger, then Belshazzar's feast, then . . ."

". . . We give him a little ribbing," broke in the one with the hoarse voice. "And then comes judgment. We see the fiery letters and die."

"I see," Bagley said. His eyes were thoughtful. Already a story was forming in his mind. He went on:

"Why the theatrical get up? Why does he wear his hair that way? And his clothes. They look like the kind a country preacher wore way back in the eighteen nineties. And I'll swear he was wearing eye shadow to make his eyes look darker."

"You're very observant," the third man said. Bagley recognized his voice. It was the resonant and purposeful voice of a dominant character.

"But tell us this. Why the interest in this charlatan?"

"I'm a reporter for *The Blade*. Do human interest stuff. And I can see story possibilities in the old duck, if I had a little background," Bagley re-

plied with a smile.

THE other got up and stood in front of Bagley, on hearing that. The other two moved closer to the reporter as the one standing began to talk:

"Who knows what he or any of the others, who get up to talk, have been. Most of them are frauds, with shills passing the hat for contributions, after they're through. Old Joe is a little different. He has his one quotation from Omar Khayyam and dream interpretation of Daniel's, the one which goes, 'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin.'"

He paused reflectively for a moment, then went on:

"Where he gets his money or how he lives, no one knows."

Bagley rubbed his chin with caressing fingers and asked:

"How come you guys rib the old geezer that way?"

The other smiled at Bagley's question.

"By the way," he said, "let us introduce ourselves. I'm Thaddeus Wilson. The thin fellow is Ed Carney and the other is Tom Jones."

Bagley shook hands all around; then Wilson continued:

"It all started out as a joke. Tom and Ed are regular visitors to the circle. I'm a comparative newcomer. Well, Bagley, I'm the sort of man, who, when he hears anything which goes against the grain of reasoning, wants to argue about it. Tom and Ed are the same kind of men as I. And very often some of these screwballs who get up to talk have a hell of a good argument to give. And since it's sort of an open discussion club, we have a swell time."

"You mean *you* have, don't you Mr. Wilson?" Bagley asked, smiling.

Wilson looked hard at Bagley, then smiled also.

"I see you know who I am. Well

let me say that I have far more fun here than at my clubs. Besides, my doctor prescribed fresh air and something to take my mind from business.

"This serves both purposes. Now as to why we kid Old Joe so much. He's the only one who can't take it. The others not only can take it. They can give as well as take."

Bagley sat there a few minutes longer, then excusing himself, got up and left. He didn't listen to the other speakers, who had begun to gather, but headed directly for *The Blade*.

"AND so three men: Thaddeus Wilson, Ed Carney, and Tom Jones were weighed in the balance and found wanting. Found wanting by a man who, even though he stood there on a soap box in a little park known for its collection of lunatic spellbinders, did not seem as the rest. No; Old Joe, standing their pronouncing his words of doom, was in that moment, a fanatic imbued with a prophetic power. Will his judgment come to pass? Will those three men who scoffed, die as he prophesied?"

Sandra Lee's pleasant voice was a little breathless as she finished reading.

Dick Bagley looked very pleased with himself, sitting in the easy chair of her apartment. She sat on the arm of the chair, beside him. On her lap was the first morning edition of that day's *Blade*.

"That's a darn good story, honey," she said.

Bagley laughed aloud.

"Well, that makes it practically unanimous. The editor liked it, you like it and of course, I like it," he said, his voice amusingly smug.

She pinched his nose, as a reminder that a complacent Bagley was the least desirable of all men, then said:

"But did you really mean that about

this Old Joe being a prophet of doom?"

"No. But it makes good reading. And, as the editor said last night, 'the public'll lap it up.'"

"I don't know about the public, Dick," she said thoughtfully, "but I had the strangest feeling while reading the story. As though it was all so real and will happen just as he prophesied."

"Sandy, my girl," Bagley said, as he got up from the chair, "you have just paid me a very great compliment. And to show my appreciation of it, I'm going to dispel this curtain of witchery I have created, and take you to dinner and a movie."

THE night was so pleasant, they decided on a walk after leaving the movie.

"Let's walk down Michigan Ave.," she suggested.

That was all right with Bagley. He would have walked to the moon if she asked him to.

They were approaching Randolph Street, where it goes east past Michigan to the outer drive, when Sandra pointed to the huge electric sign on the northwest intersection and said:

"I never could understand the reason for that. I don't see how they can get a return on the money they spent for it."

Bagley looked up at the huge affair, ablaze with various colored bulbs and read aloud:

"'At The Bend Of The Drive, The World's Largest Sign. Drink Old Joel's Bourbon.' Yep that's what it says, the world's largest and brightest sign. There must be an awful lot of whiskey being drunk to make that kind of advertising bring a return."

They had been walking on the east side of Michigan Ave. and so had a clear view of what happened a few seconds later.

Two cars, in different traffic lanes, approached Michigan Ave. The driver on the outside lane in trying to make the turn north on Michigan cut in front of the other car. And before the other could brake or swerve out of the way, they had locked fenders, with disastrous results.

The car, which had been trying to make the turn, was hurled up against the curbing. So hard had been the collision, that it teetered back and forth for a second, then with a grinding scream of ripped metal it turned over spewing flaming gasoline all over the sidewalk.

Sandra screamed once, then clamped a hand over her mouth. But Bagley hadn't even heard her. He was tearing across the street to the scene of the accident. So was the traffic cop on the corner and a dozen others, who were nearby.

But it was already too late. For that which Bagley had seen and Sandra hadn't, was the man who had been standing at the curb where the accident happened. He had been deluged by the flaming gasoline.

Bagley had torn off the sport jacket he was wearing and had thrown it over the flaming, writhing, screaming figure, but it was too late. He had inhaled the flames, which had so suddenly enveloped him. When Bagley removed the smoking wreck of a sport jacket, he saw the man was dead. And he saw who it was. Ed Carney. The little thin man who had scoffed at Old Joe and for whom Old Joe had prophesied a death, "writ in letters of fire."

THE traffic cop had pulled the driver from the overturned car. Already the first piece of fire apparatus had arrived. Bagley walked up to the policeman and the shaking figure he was holding up and after showing his press

card, said:

"What the hell were you trying to do? Commit suicide?"

"But listen—I saw—" the driver began hysterically. Bagley slapped him hard. The cop nodded approvingly. The slap did the trick. When they asked him again how the accident happened, he was coherent in his answer. But it didn't make sense. For what he said was:

"I started to brake my car and let the other guy go past so I could make a turn, when I happened to look up at the big sign. I thought I was seeing things: All the lights in the thing were out except a few. And those read—*the end of—*"

"The end of what," demanded Bagley.

"That's all. Just, the end of," was the bewildered and bewildering reply.

And that was his story. Nor did the threats of the policeman or the further questioning of Bagley make him change it in the least.

Sandra took one look at the subdued and worried reporter and knew something was wrong.

"What's the matter, Dick?"

He told her about Carney and also what the driver had said about the sign. They both looked up at it again. There it blazed and flashed above them. Nor was there a single bulb which failed to light.

Bagley noticed the little shed-like affair on the roof of the building on which the sign was built.

"There's only one way to find out how true the driver's story is. I'm going up to that shed on top. That's where the electrician for the sign has his place," Bagley told the girl.

The electrician proved to be rather young, and very much interested in his work. When Bagley asked about the sign going dark in any part, he

shrugged.

"Well, it's possible but not on nights like this."

"Why not on nights like this?"

"Because," the electrician replied, "the only time I've ever known any number of bulbs to go out has been on stormy nights or nights where there is a high wind. On a clear night such as this, I've never known more than forty of the bulbs to go dark. And there are eighty-two thousand bulbs in this sign."

"And you're sure no part of the sign went dark?"

"Impossible. Do you see that cat-walk up there?" the electrician pointed to a steel ladder-like affair which was strung across the face of the sign.

Bagley nodded his head.

"Well," the electrician went on, "it's my duty to go up on that walk four times a night. My last inspection took place an hour ago. And you can see for yourself that everything is all right."

WHEN Bagley returned again to Sandra, he said:

"Come on, honey. Let's get to a drug store. I want to call somebody. And then I'll take you home."

"A story?" she asked.

"Unh huh," he grunted softly.

The telephone directory told him that Thaddeus Wilson lived in the exclusive South Shore district.

Wilson had a butler or servant, who had seen too many movies with English butlers. His accent was so strong, Bagley found it difficult to understand.

"Is Mr. Wilson in," Bagley asked.

"Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Tell him Bagley of *The Blade* is calling."

Bagley waited for a couple of minutes, then Wilson came to the phone. He sounded impatient, as he said:

"Hello, Bagley. I'm sorry that I can't give you much of my time since I'm entertaining some guests. So if you'll make it short, I'll appreciate it."

"Sure, Mr. Wilson," Bagley drawled. "I just wanted to tell you that Ed Carney was killed tonight."

"WHAT!!"

"Yep. And there were letters of fire there. Just as Old Joe said there'd be."

"Bagley, you're mad. That's impossible!"

"That's right Wilson. It's impossible. And that's what I'm going to write in my next feature. The amazing coincidence of the letters of fire and Ed Carney's death."

"Bagley, you can't print that. It's too sensational, too incredible."

"Don't forget, Wilson, in the morning's *Blade*. Read it!" the reporter said, hanging up.

Sensational was too mild a word for Bagley's story. From the moment the paper hit the stands, the newspaper's telephone switchboard had a record day. And all who called asked the same questions.

"Was the story true and was Old Joe really a prophet?"

Bagley sat in the editor's office. From the smile on the editor's face, as he read the cut-out feature on the desk before him, it was evident that Bagley was no longer in the dog-house.

"Bagley," the editor said, looking up, "this is the best thing you've ever done. By far. You've got people talking, asking whether Jones or Wilson will die the same way. Keep that interest at white heat. Remember the ending of your story," the editor began to read again, this time aloud, "'Except for those three words, *the end of*, the rest of the sign was dark. The driver swore to that. No one else saw the sign go dark. Perhaps the driver is subject to hallucinations. Perhaps it was just a

horrible coincidence that Ed Carney was at the curb, when the accident happened. Perhaps it is an excessive use of our imagination to say that that huge electric sign foretold Carney's death. Of that we know—nothing. But this we do know. Carney died, as Old Joe said he would. Whether the Old Man of Looney Circle is a prophet, reincarnated to play his role in modern times, or a Charlatan giving way to his senile anger, remains to be seen. One died, because he scoffed; the other two—'"

The editor finished reading, his voice satisfied.

"Now listen, Bagley," he directed, "get out there to Looney Circle and interview the old nut. Check on Jones and Wilson. Follow them about if you have to. Nothing will happen of course, but you have enough material there for another two weeks."

BAGLEY stared in disbelief, when he arrived at the Circle. He didn't know until then what a furor his story had created. The crowd was so thick, the police captain of that district had had to place a half dozen policemen there to maintain order.

Bagley didn't need to ask where Old Joe was. Where the largest crowd was gathered, he could see Joe's long white hair swirling about his emaciated face. And even from where he stood, Bagley could almost feel the fanatic gleam of the old man's brilliant eyes.

Bagley was in luck. The old man had evidently just arrived. And from his first words, it was also evident he read the newspapers, particularly *The Blade*.

If nothing else, the old man was an actor. He spoke in a slow measured strain:

"'The moving finger writes, and having writ moves on.'" So it was writ-

ten. But know this also. That what the moving finger writes will be done in letters of fire. There shall be none of ye here who shall not be weighed in the balances. And many shall be found wanting."

Bagley almost laughed aloud, when he saw the effect the words created on the crowd. Awe was in every face, and fear also. It was as though they all had come to cast stones and with his first words, the old man had stopped them cold.

"The time has come," Old Joe was saying now, "when the unbelievers of this world, the scoffers and idolators shall know of their end. Aye; in letters of fire, writ high against the sky, shall the judgment be known. As I have prophesied for three, so, soon shall I prophesy for all."

Bagley whistled softly to himself. The old man had left his box. Slowly, the tall, white haired figure made its way through the silent crowd. And as Bagley watched Old Joe walk through one of the gates, he felt a thrill, a compound of fear and horror, take hold of him. The strange thought struck him that he might be helping to create a Frankenstein monster.

But at sight of a familiar figure seated on a bench, his thoughts took a different turn.

It was Thaddeus Wilson.

Wilson, silent and very much lost in retrospect, did not see Bagley approach. Just as the reporter was about to sit beside him, he heard him whisper:

"This is ridiculous. That old fake up there has ranted and raved so long he's become mad."

"Why?" Bagley whispered softly.

Wilson did not seem to hear, for he didn't turn to answer. Yet his next words were an answer to the reporter's question.

"Because Ed Carney died. And he

believes he foretold his death. And mine. And Tom Jones'."

HIS body shook in silent mirth. But the face that turned to Bagley had lines of worry; and of a new born fear, which had not been there the day before.

"Wilson, you're not afraid, are you?"

Wilson's lips, usually full, tightened to a thin pale line. His chin lifted to a stubborn, hard mound of flesh, as he looked the reporter full in the face.

"I was — a little — Bagley, until just now. Now I can see how silly I was. Your article did things for the old man. You gave him a certain spurious plausibility. And so today, he had an audience, an audience, which, because of the advertising you'd given him, helped him in playing his little role of prophet, as he never played it before."

Bagley surveyed the well dressed, heavy set figure of Wilson, with respect.

The reporter said: "What do you intend to do about it?"

"Go about my affairs, precisely as I have always done."

"And what about Jones?" Bagley asked.

"I talked to Tom this morning. He was very sorry to hear of Ed Carney's death, but pooh-poohed the business of 'the fingers of fire,'" Wilson replied.

They sat silent for a few minutes, then Wilson suddenly said:

"Bagley, I've a proposition for you, if you're interested."

"Shoot, I'm interested."

"How would you like to spend the rest of the afternoon with me? Then you can write of this afternoon, as being spent with one of the condemned men, if you want to call it that."

Bagley had his answer out before Wilson stopped talking.

"Thanks, Mr. Wilson. I'll accept your offer."

"O. K., then, let's go. I have my car in a garage near here. We'll drive."

WILSON'S car proved to be the kind which one generally associates with movie stars and jockeys. It was so long, that Bagley couldn't imagine Wilson making a U turn in the middle of the street.

But as Wilson explained:

"Some of my interests are out of town. And, since I don't like trains and there is no plane service to the towns where my factories are located, I use this car. When I give it the gun, you'll think you're flying."

They were passing through one of the suburbs to the south of Chicago, when Wilson asked:

"What is the date, today?"

"Well, if you didn't know," Bagley replied, "it's the Fourth of July. If it isn't then all those kids we saw shooting off those fireworks, were just celebrating Chinese New Year."

"That's what I thought. We'll have to stop at one of these roadside displays and pick up some fireworks for my nephew," Wilson said.

Shortly after, they passed one which seemed to be doing business. A large sign bore the message: "Fireworks at wholesale prices. Last day, last chance. Closing out and up."

It was a much larger stand than any they had seen before. A half dozen clerks were busily taking care of quite a number of customers. The two men got out of the car and walked over to the stand.

Wilson purchased whatever he thought would please his nephew and was waiting for his change from the clerk, when the warning shout came: "Watch out for those pin-wheels!"

Everyone's eyes turned in the direction of the warning voice. Bagley saw that a woman, who had been leaning

against a part of the stand which held some loose pin-wheels, had accidentally set one off. The cigarette dangling between her fingers had done the trick.

The pin-wheel, emitting sparks, had gone skipping over the counter and had fallen into a barrel marked, "Roman Candles." There was a sudden, vivid flash of flame and dozens of varicolored balls of fire flew out in all directions. In a few seconds the stand and the stock in it, was an exploding, flaming holocaust.

Then above the sound of crackling fire-works, there came the hysterical cry of a woman.

"Where's little Tommy?"

And someone replied, in a voice as hysterical as the woman's:

"He was behind the counter! Quick, someone. Anyone! Get him out!"

And the someone, anyone, who leaped over the burning counter, to find the lost Tommy, was Wilson. It was all over in a few seconds. Wilson, the little boy under one arm, appeared through the smoke and flame and vaulted over the counter again, to safety. Bagley saw, that but for a few scorched spots on his clothes, the fire had not touched Wilson at all.

When the grateful mother had finished thanking him, and the admiring crowd had done with patting him, Wilson and Bagley walked back to the car.

"Ya' know," Bagley remarked, "when I saw you go over that counter, I looked all around to see if there were any letters of fire. Because, to tell you the truth, I didn't think you'd come out of that mess, alive."

"I suppose that proves one thing to you, Bagley," Wilson said, smiling.

THE reporter seated himself in the car and asked:

"Proves what?"

"Why, that Old Joe's prophecies are so much hoey."

"That might be," Bagley said, "but we still have another precinct to hear from. Jones. Besides, Old Joe specifically mentioned 'the letters of fire,' in connection with your demise."

"I'm afraid we'll have to wait too long a time to see those appear. Old Joe never did say just when those fiery letters would show up," Wilson said quizzically.

"They showed up mighty soon, for Carney," Bagley reminded the other.

"Sorry, Bagley, but I'm convinced that a series of coincidental circumstances created a plot situation, which your mind has built into a real possibility. I just can't believe it."

"Frankly, Mr. Wilson," Bagley said as they started off again, "I'm just a reporter, looking for a story. I got it when I heard three men kidding a broken old actor."

"Broken down actor?" Wilson interrupted.

"Yes. That's what Old Joe was. A ham actor playing Shakesperean roles. We've got pictures of him in our morgue. I thought I recognized him and when I got back to the paper I went to the trouble of looking him up. I also discovered other facts. One, in particular, should prove of interest. The old guy worked in Hollywood a few years ago. In the days when those religious pictures were the thing. He took the part of Daniel in a picture, then Hollywood washed its hands of him, because he began to think he was really Daniel come to life again."

Wilson nodded thoughtfully, and said:

"So that's it. He is really insane. The make-believe of movies became reality for him. He thinks he is Daniel and so must use Daniel's words."

They drove along in silence until

they reached the little town where one of Wilson's factories was located. Wilson transacted his business in an hour, while Bagley had coffee in the town's only restaurant.

As they started off again, Wilson, usually effusive, said quietly:

"I have the damndest, most irritating feeling of suspense. Probably the reaction setting in from the heroics of the fire. Still, I can't seem to get rid of it."

Bagley looked at him questioningly, then asked, as though the thought had just occurred to him:

"I wonder where Tom Jones is?"

"Well, I don't know where he is right now. But he's going to a lecture at Orchestra Hall tonight," Wilson answered.

"Maybe I'd of had better luck following him around," Bagley said, smiling.

AS THEY stopped off at several more places, the reporter noticed that Wilson was becoming more and more perturbed about something.

Finally whatever was bothering the man could no longer be held back. He said:

"It's not suspense I'm feeling. It's more of a feeling of doom—a doom which is hanging over my head and which is inevitable."

"Now take it easy," Bagley said warningly, "I thought we settled the problems of Old Joe for once and for all."

"Yes, we've talked it over, all right," Wilson replied, "but that feeling persists. So I'm going to drive you back to town. It's certain that I can't discuss business with anyone the way I feel."

It was about ten o'clock, when they reached Wilson's home on the South Shore.

Bagley decided to take an L train into the loop. His mind went over the whole of the two days which had passed.

"Nuts!" he exclaimed, "I knew I meant to ask Wilson several things. I shouldn't have gotten sidetracked that way. But then again, if I'd have asked him such questions as, what is the real reason for Old Joe choosing you three for his prophecy, or what have any of you had to do with the old guy in the past to make him feel so vindictive, Wilson would have thought I was crazy. Because with one breath I tell him the old man is a faker, and prove it. Then with the next breath. I show belief in the whole silly business."

As the train Bagley was on, pulled into the first downtown stop, he thought he recognized one of the people waiting there to board it. It was only a momentary feeling and soon passed. When he got off the train at Randolph Street, he walked over to the opened up part of the wall which looked over the Drive. He could see the huge sign on Michigan Avenue flashing its message into the night.

The huge, illuminated hand, with its pointing finger directed the onlookers' gaze toward the advertising which read, "At The Bend Of The Drive, The World's Largest Sign. Drink Old Joel's Bourbon."

Bagley watched the sign blink its thousands of lights for a few seconds, then turned to leave. Why he turned back again for another look, he was never able to explain. But what he saw made his eyes pop.

THE lights in the sign had blinked dark as usual. But instead of all the lights flashing on again, only a few did. And those few read: "*the end of*," Bagley rubbed his eyes hard. What he saw was impossible. As though in

verification, when he looked again, the sign showed the full message.

The scream, which split the night, was not imaginary, however. It swung him around, as though it held physical powers. His horrified eyes saw what happened.

A northbound train had come into the station platform. As usual, when a train pulled in, the waiting crowd began to mill and push forward. A contest seems to develop, the prize being an empty seat to whoever enters the train first. Now, however, someone pushed too hard. And a man went hurtling over the platform onto the tracks a few feet below. Bagley saw the body strike on hands and knees and topple forward to fall full across the third rail. A brilliant, crackling, blue flash flamed from under the body. An odor, compounded of scorched human flesh and burned ozone filled the air.

The crowd was horror-stricken. The engineer braked the train down and leaped from the cab onto the tracks. Bagley lost his feeling of revulsion in his desire to be first on the scene, and followed the engineer.

The tremendous shock of the electrocution had frozen the body on the track. It lay there across the third rail, face straining away from the steel rail which had brought death.

Bagley took one look at the blue face with the dead eyes almost popping from their sockets, and the black tongue showing between the swollen parted lips, and felt his stomach sicken. He recognized the horror mark. He remembered seeing it only a few moments before, when his train had pulled into the first Loop station. He remembered seeing it elsewhere before; its distended lips making mockery of an old man on a soap box.

The second judgment had come to

pass.

Tom Jones had died, when letters of fire were written in the sky. And he, Dick Bagley had seen the writing.

His mind was a tumult of thought, as he climbed back to the platform. Nor did he wait for the repair train to come in and release the body from the clutches of death, which had embraced it.

He made his way through the dense Loop crowds, in a sort of trance. Even the good-natured kidding of the reporting staff on *The Blade*, failed to pierce his reverie. He sat down at his desk and typed out his story, then he got up and left.

THE butler, with the imported accent, answered his ring. He had evidently been awakened by the summons of the bell.

"Yes, sir?" the two words condemned Bagley for breaking the rules of proper calling time.

"Will you tell Mr. Wilson that Bagley is here to see him."

"I don't think Mr. Wilson wants to be disturbed at this hour," the butler replied, his accent growing thicker by the second.

"Listen Arthur Treacher," Bagley said, "If you don't scam out of here and call your boss, your next job will be among the unemployed."

The butler looked his haughtiest—but did as he was bid. Bagley followed him in. His mind was so intent on what he was going to say, that he passed through the several luxuriously appointed rooms without being aware of the evident wealth which Wilson possessed.

The butler asked Bagley to wait in a sitting room. In a few minutes Wilson, attired in a sumptuous, silk dressing robe, made his appearance. He took one look at the drawn, haggard

looking face of the reporter and asked:

"Jones?"

"Yeah. Jones. Was shoved off an elevated platform onto the third rail. Before my very eyes." Bagley jerked the words out, as though he was in pain. He went on. "And the driver was right. About the words. Because, tonight, *I saw them*. That damned sign went out except for those three words, 'the end of!'"

"Bagley you're making it all up. I can't believe it," Wilson exclaimed hoarsely.

"No. It happened all right. And that sign has something to do with it. That is the craziest part of the whole thing. Which reminds me. I asked you once before, have any of you ever had anything to do with Old Joe? Not that it makes any difference. But I'd still like to know. And also, who were Ed Carney and Tom Jones."

Wilson sat down. His ruddy face was pale and he suddenly looked old.

"Believe me," he began in a low voice, "to my knowledge, none of us had ever seen the old man before that first day he appeared in the Circle."

He paused, searching back again in his memory for a clue which might solve the strange puzzle. But he could find nothing. In a few seconds he resumed:

"No. I'm sure he was a complete stranger to us. You want to know who Carney and Jones were. Well, Jones, whose full name was Thomas Philander Jones—the name should mean something to you—was a professor at one of our colleges here. Carney was a retired merchant. And from what you told me of Old Joe, I can't see any of us having crossed his path before."

WHEN Wilson spoke Jones' full name, Bagley remembered who he

was. One of the country's most famous historians. Carney, however, was a stranger to him. As for Wilson, Bagley was aware, as was the rest of the newspaper public, of the man's fame. Wilson was a public figure. Capitalist, club man, art lover, and possessed of several idiosyncrasies which had made newspapers before. One of his best known quirks was that of holding public debate with the characters of Looney Circle.

"Well Bagley," Wilson said, "what are you going to print now? Another fulfilled prophecy story? And if you are, where is it going to end?"

"Good guess, Wilson," the reporter answered, "That's how the story is going to run and"—a thought occurred to him which made him whistle, "Holy smoke! That reminds me. I've got to get back to the office. There's something in that story I want to kill. And for the love of God, Wilson, stay put or get a police guard. But whatever you do, stay out of public places."

Bagley left after that. He rode a cab back to *The Blade* offices. The editor was already there, when he arrived. There was a serious, questioning look on the editor's face, as he said:

"Bagley, the story you turned in is a masterpiece. But aren't you taxing the credibility of the public too much? You know. The business of you seeing those words. And too, the suddenly serious vein where you discuss the probability of the other prophecies coming true."

Sweat glistened on Bagley's face. He was in an excited, almost frightened mood.

"Mr. Todd," he gasped, "you haven't put that story to press yet have you?"

"Bagley," Todd exclaimed, "you should know what time this edition hits the presses."

"Too late to pull anything now?"

"Of course. They've probably run a hundred thousand by now. Why? What's wrong?"

"My story," Bagley said hopelessly. "It's got something in there that's going to"—

"—You mean about the old man's judgment in that crowd today?" Todd asked shrewdly.

"Yes."

"Well, I let that run. Your story is going to run, as written. But tell me one thing. Do you seriously believe in all this?"

Bagley's mouth was twitching.

"Yes," he said, "I do. The whole thing is like some crazy dream come true. Where it will end, I don't know." He was visibly shaken when he stopped talking.

The editor's lips were pursed coldly. He folded his hands together on the desk top.

"Now listen here, Bagley, we can't permit that!"

"Mr. Todd," Bagley pleaded, "Please, kill that story. Stop the presses. You must! That old man will run hog wild now. He's going to set that crowd's imagination on fire when he reads the story. And I know he's going to read it."

"Bagley," Todd stopped him. "You are crazy. Stop the presses! H'm, no indeed, but I am going to stop you! You're fired! When you've recovered your senses, come back. But not until then. And now, if you don't mind, Bagley, I'm very busy."

He returned to the reading of his clippings, with an air of finality.

BAGLEY walked the short distance to his apartment on the Near North Side and went to bed. But not to sleep. For whatever sleep he had was filled with a nightmarish procession of catastrophes, in which the cen-

tral character was a wildly fanatic madman, Old Joe. Fire rained from the sky. Floods filled the earth. And always he seemed to meet Wilson, running, trying to escape from his doom. Also, one other thing kept recurring in his dreams. The electric sign; but so immense it seemed to fill the whole sky. And always were the words shown in it, the same. "The End Of." . . .

Bagley awakened to find he was soaked in perspiration. The coverings, sheets and mattress were even wet with sweat. He looked at the small alarm clock on his dresser. The hands told him it was already noon. He dressed with almost frantic haste. He almost ran, in his hurry, to get to Looney Circle. He wanted to get there before Old Joe.

He stopped aghast, a block before the little park. The sidewalks and street itself, were packed with people whose objective was the same as his, Looney Circle. Today, the police captain had ordered out many more than the six patrolman, who had been sufficient the day before.

The press pass, which Bagley still had enabled him to gain a quick admittance through the crowd. But when he arrived at the little plot of grass, which served Old Joe as a podium, he found it unoccupied. Not for long though.

A murmur, hushed almost as quickly as it had come to life, ran through the crowd. The Old Man, dressed as always in the black suit which he affected, was being escorted through the crowd, by a guard of a half dozen blue clad policemen. They formed a sort of guard of honor around him, when he mounted his little box from which he spoke.

The immense throng, which filled the park from end to end, fell silent, as he looked it over a few seconds.

"And so," he began softly, yet in a voice which carried to the farthest reaches of the crowd, "judgment for another of the guilty, came to pass. 'Tis but the beginning. For the time has come—not far off—when all—aye, the whole world—shall hear its doom. There is yet another who must die. Then and not until then, shall my final judgment come to be. Be not impatient. Ye shall know, soon, my friends," he said in a solemn conclusion.

With that, he got off the box; the police formed their cordon about him, and away they went. Bagley found time to marvel at the wonderfully effective simplicity of the old man's theatrical gesture. No long-drawn out harangue. No pulling of people's emotions. Nothing but a simple promise. But a promise which held a threat of doom more real than any which they had imagined.

The third man had to die first, however. Wilson's address had been given in Bagley's story. All that night, and the next, and the next, the street in front and the alley behind the mansion where he lived, was filled with people. And all through those days and nights policemen guarded Wilson.

In the meantime, Bagley's former editor kept the reading public in a fever of speculation. He pulled the best known feature writer on the paper from the articles he was doing and put him to devising sensationally speculative articles on Old Joe and his prophecies. With each passing day the articles became more lurid and sensational. And soon their effect became noticed. Little notices began to appear in all papers. People were committing suicide. And all because of what *The Blade* was printing.

NIGHT and day, Michigan Avenue was crowded with people, who did

nothing but stare up at the sign. And nothing happened. It was as though a truce, temporary, yet a truce which was needed, had been declared between Old Joe and the gods.

Dick Bagley was one of those who came to stare at the sign, too. Sometimes he brought Sandra Lee along, but usually he came alone.

It was an almost unrecognizable Bagley, however. Deep, purple circles under his eyes attested to the strain he was under. And to the sleepless nights he had spent. For he felt he was to blame for the whole thing. It was he, who had played up the prophesies. It was he, who had brought to the public notice, the character known as Old Joe.

Every day he called Wilson. And every day he could detect a greater strain in Wilson's voice. The man was laboring under terrific tension. The never failing crowds the constant police guards, was almost too much to bear. And too, many religiously superstitious people had begun to make their appearance. Many of these had come to make public prayers for the safekeeping of Wilson's life.

A week passed and nothing happened. On the seventh night Bagley came down to look at the sign. Sandra was with him. They stood looking up at the sign for a few minutes then she said:

"It just doesn't seem possible. That that huge affair spelling out its advertising, can strike such terror in people's breasts. Honey," she said reflectively, "I thought the Old Joel Bourbon people were asked to stop their use of the sign."

Bagley sighed sorrowfully at the memory of what had happened. He had been the instigator of a public letter addressed to the distillers, asking them to keep the sign dark. But the

business men, who owned the product, had made fun of the letter. Besides, the articles had brought them much free publicity and a great influx of added business. No, the sign would remain alight, as far as they were concerned.

Bagley told her what had happened. He also gave his opinion of those people in no uncertain terms. They were standing so, talking over the probabilities of what would happen should the sign again go through its antics, when the bulbs began to flash on and off.

A wail arose from the crowd. Sandra gripped Bagley's arm so tightly it hurt. Above the bulbs in the sign began to go dark until only a few remained alight.

The crowd's exhortation to "look at the sign," was unnecessary. Bagley's eyes were unwaveringly riveted on it. In a few seconds those bulbs which remained alight spelled out their too familiar pattern. And Bagley knew that Wilson had died.

"All right, darling," he said to Sandra. "Let's go. Our vigil is over."

"Where are we going," she asked, as they walked north on Michigan.

"You mean, where am I going," he said.

"All right, then. Where are you going?"

"To transact a little business deal," he replied.

HE LEFT her off at her place and walked over to his apartment. From one of the drawers of his dresser he pulled an envelope. He didn't bother looking inside. He knew what it contained. Three thousand dollars, in bills. And from another drawer he took out a blue steel revolver. Bagley had come to a decision. Old Joe had to be stopped. In his pockets were the only two means he knew of.

And that was Bagley's destination. Old Joe lived in one of those red-brick, run-down houses with a short stoop and worn out, worried looking fronts, which line north Wabash, from the river to Chicago Avenue.

Although it was after midnight, Bagley hoped to catch the old man in. An old woman, who answered his ring, was in her glory when he told her for whom he'd come.

"Now isn't that wonderful!" she said with a coy simper, "that great man living here all this time and I'd never known it."

"Yes, lady," Bagley said. He still held the press card, so she could not help but see it constantly. "And I'm here for a personal interview. By the way, what is your name? I know the readers of our paper would be interested in your opinion of Old Joe."

Her opinion took fifteen minutes of telling. Bagley made a great deal of jotting down her ramblings. Then she said:

"I'm sorry, but he isn't in. He hasn't been in for two days now."

He sighed. "Well, can I see his room? Later I'll bring a photographer along and take pictures. Of you and the house."

She might have been wary of letting him up, but when he mentioned the photographers, she invited him in. Old Joe lived up one flight and straight back to the rear of the house. It was a narrow, dark and airless room. The walls were almost completely covered with hand painted mottos and sayings from the bible. Bagley noticed they were hand painted. And almost all were quotations from Daniel.

"May I sit here for a moment?" he asked. "I want to get the spiritual feeling of the room. I'm sure you know what I mean," he added.

"Oh yes," she said. And sat down

in another chair.

He sat there busy in thought. So Old Joe hadn't shown up for the last few days. Where was he? Had he known of Wilson's death? And how had Wilson died?

Bagley did not even question that Wilson had died. All he was worried about was Old Joe's reactions. He noticed something peculiar about the illustrations and mottos. He became more and more convinced he knew where Old Joe would be found. But it would be useless to look tonight.

He got up then and left. And for the first time in a week he slept soundly. He took a *Blade* from the newspaper stand and read it over his breakfast. The entire front page was devoted to Thaddeus Wilson's life, achievements, and connections with Old Joe.

A single line told of his death. He had committed suicide.

BAGLEY left the restaurant and walked to Looney Circle. The morning's promise was being fulfilled. The sun had come up, a brazen ball in a blue-white sky. Now the afternoon had turned intolerably humid. The horizon was rimmed with a dark border of oily looking clouds. Every movement of his body reminded Bagley of the heat.

If that were possible, the crowd in the park was even larger than any he had seen before. An hour went by—another hour—and Old Joe did not show up. The suspicion which had taken root in Bagley's mind, when he was in the old man's room, was becoming a greater certainty with each passing moment.

Bagley waited another two hours, then left. As he walked along he felt of his pockets to see whether he had the money with him. The gun was

heavy in the waistband of his trousers.

Even the leaves on the trees in Madison Park drooped in weariness. Bagley felt uncomfortable in the light-weight jacket he wore. But because of the gun concealed, it remained around his shoulders.

Bagley walked from one animal house to another, searching for the old man. The doors of all were closed. They had been closed for several hours now. Already it was getting dark. There was only one place left to go in the entire park. He felt a tingle of horror caress his spine, at the thought. Yet, there and there only, was where Old Joe was. The open lion pit, near the outer drive.

Dusk made grotesque the shadows of vine and tree. Bagley found himself walking on tip toe, as he neared the iron barred pit. He knew it would be empty of any beast. The lions were fed before dark and the inner cages were opened for them.

He leaned against the fence and whispered:

"Daniel. Daniel."

There was no answering sound to his voice.

Again, this time a little louder:

"Daniel. Daniel, it is I!"

A voice from the dimness of the rock strewn pit answered:

"Aye, it is Daniel. Who calls?"

"A disciple, Master. The people await thee."

A white gowned figure came clamoring up. Old Joe had taken the last step on his road to madness. He was dressed in a sort of Arab costume, very much like the pictures of Daniel, which hung in his room.

Bagley had been right in his wild guess.

He had seen the black coat, the old man usually affected, flung over a chair in his room. He had speculated on the

reason for it. Then, as he saw the many illustrations of Daniel in the lions den, the wild idea that the old man had taken the last steps on the road to a lunatic belief that he was a reincarnated Daniel, was born.

The sight of the fantastically clad figure climbing over the fence, confirmed the belief. Old Joe grabbed him by an arm and said:

"The hour is at hand. I have had a dream. Now I must go to interpret the dream. Where the letters of fire shall show their portent."

"Master," Bagley said, "your disciple shall follow you."

THE two made a strange appearing couple walking down Michigan Avenue. For several blocks before the huge sign, the street was thick with people. It was as though they all had known, with Wilson's death, that Old Joe would appear to make known his last judgment.

A path was made for the two men. Old Joe stood, in a cleared space before the tremendous gathering and began to speak.

But Bagley, for once, was not listening. He had gone to put his plan into action. He mounted to the shack, where he found the electrician.

His knock was answered by the young fellow.

"Yes?" the electrician asked.

"Don't you remember me?" Bagley said, "I'm the reporter who was up here before."

"Oh yes. Of course. Well what can I do for you tonight?"

"What you can do for me is nothing. But what you can do for all those people is everything. Turn the lights off in the sign."

"Turn the lights off? You're nuts," the electrician exclaimed.

"Maybe. But I've got three thou-

sand dollars with me that says I'm not. And its yours if you'll turn them off."

The young electrician gulped.

"Sorry," he said at last. "No can do. Not even for three thousand."

"Then I'll have to turn it off myself," Bagley said, as he pulled the gun from its hiding place. "Now get out of my way."

The electrician backed away for a few steps. Then almost before Bagley was aware of his intentions, he had leaped forward. But he was a little too slow. The reporter sidestepped and swung the barrel of the gun hard against the side of his head. One blow was enough. The electrician went out cold.

Bagley leaped to the switches lining the wall. The biggest of them was marked, "Main Switch-Sign." The switch points sent out little flickers of blue light when he closed the circuit. And the darkness outside the shack was now complete.

Bagley hadn't noticed the change in the elements. Lightning flickered eerily in the heavens. A wind had risen, almost gale-like in its fury. Bagley leaned over the coping, to stare down on the crowd. The upturned faces

showed their wonder. Then someone pointed a finger upward. And Bagley saw where they were pointing. Old Joe had come up.

He stood before the darkened sign and throwing his arms wide, began to yell.

"I am Daniel, come to pass judgment. And this is my judgment—the world and all within it shall perish—so shall it be writ, in letters of fire!"

Bagley's eyes almost leaped from their socket. The sign had lighted up to read, *the end of the world*.

The old man had become absolutely mad. When he read the words in the sign, he began a mad capering dance. The lightning flickered and flamed above them. Thunder sent its mad crashes rolling down the streets. And the wind had become a tornado.

Suddenly, the lights formed a new pattern. New words flashed across it.

"The End Of Old Joe."

And as the words were formed there was a last thunderous report and—the sign began to sway—tremble—then, with a great ripping sound it fell.

To Bagley staring in a horrified stupefaction, Old Joe seemed to greet it with outstretched arms.