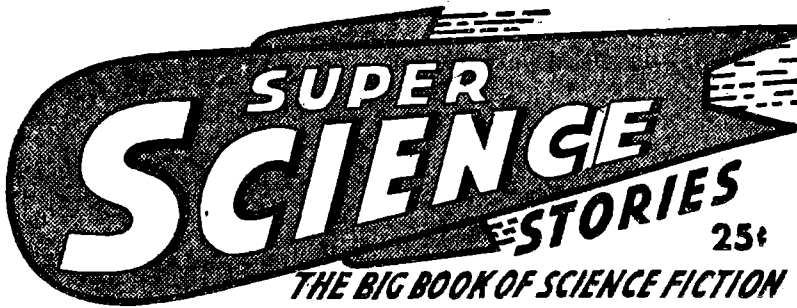


THE BEST IN SCIENCE FICTION



VOL. 5

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NO. 1

A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE

THE BLACK SUN RISES ..... Henry Kuttner 8
'We have slowly begun to realize that this is the end of a day—and there will be years perhaps, of darkness before another morning.'

THREE SCIENCE-FICTION NOVELETTES

MOONWORM'S DANCE ..... Stanley Mullen 34
Pursued by all the horrors of Creation, mankind humbled itself at last before the only creature which could save it—the Evolutionary Ultimate, whose only desire was death!

THE BOUNDING CROWN ..... James Blish 60
One against the Venus nightmare, Heywood sought his last strange haven—Charybdis Cauldron, where no Earthman had ever survived!

A HANDFUL OF STARS ..... Walter Kubilius 76
Explanation? Theories? There is only one rule to astronomy—strive as you will, you'll never solve the secrets of a handful of stars!

FOUR SHORT STORIES

THE SILENCE ..... Ray Bradbury 30
Think long and think deep—do you really rule your own planet?

THE OTHER ..... Sanford Vaid 52
One man, and only one, dared to answer the flaming challenge of the meteor.

THE SKY WILL BE OURS ..... Manly Wade Wellman 94
Two against Eternity, they took off on the strangest of all voyages—to blaze a new frontier for tomorrow's world!

CABAL ..... Cleve Cartmill 110
Outlawed from one world, prey of another, he thundered his defiance: 'You can train a people to peace, but their souls know the answer to tyranny. I am going to destroy your dictator!'

DEPARTMENTS AND FEATURES

FANDOM'S CORNER ..... Conducted by James V. Taurasi 6

FINLAY PORTFOLIO ..... 33

SCIENCE FICTION QUIZ ..... Simpson Ritter 51

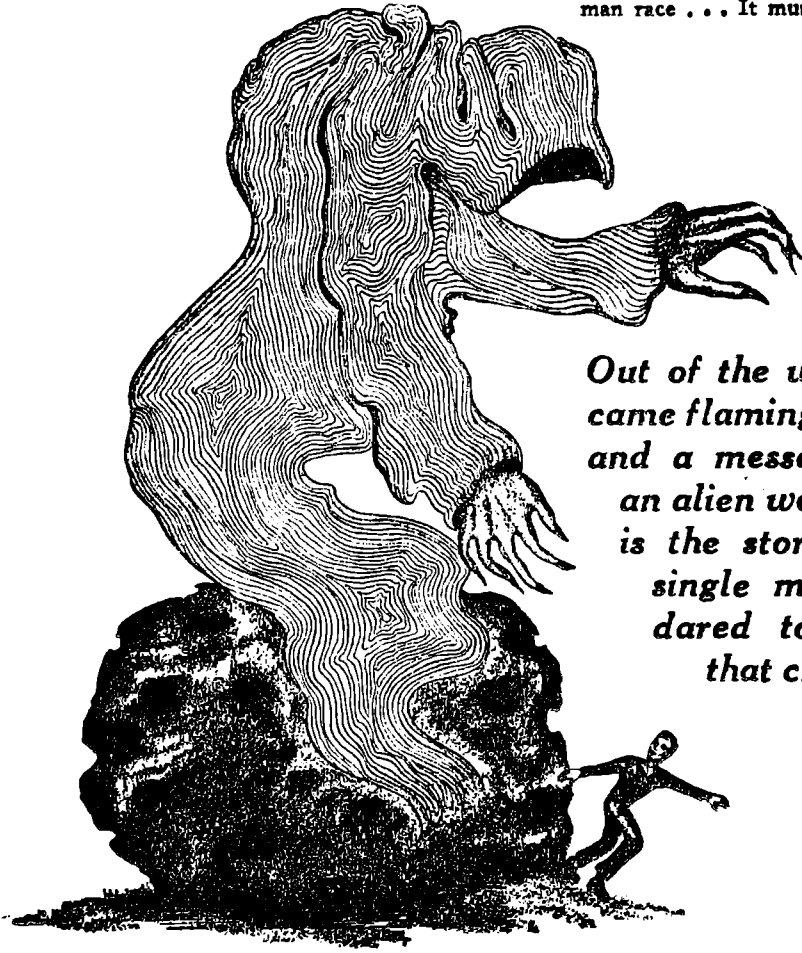
THE SCIENCE FICTIONEER . Conducted by Frederik Pohl 91

MISSIVES AND MISSILES ..... The Readers 107

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"It is a ghastly threat to the human race . . . It must not escape!"



*Out of the wasteland  
came flaming thunder  
and a message from  
an alien world. This  
is the story of the  
single man who  
dared to answer  
that challenge.*

# THE OTHER

By Sanford Vaid

**A**LMOST any newspaper in the country dated during the last two weeks of August will give you the popular details of what they call "The Meteorite Murder Case."

Haubert Heine, a refugee scientist from Austria — and a damn good one — shot and killed his assistant, Charles Packer, over a newly-fallen giant meteorite in the Arizona sands.

I referred above to "almost any paper": there were four that did not run amok in screaming type — the small chain I work for. Our four papers, dailies, scattered across the continent, represented the "unpopular" side of the affair because we insisted upon giving the principal figure a square deal. Such a thing was frowned upon by my brothers-in-arms; such

tactics sold fewer papers than the hue-and-cry angle.

Our papers gave Heine a break for two good reasons: one, JayCee Whipple, owner of the chain and my boss, had sponsored Heine's importation into this country when the late, unlamented Adolph made life uncomfortable for Heine and his friends.

And two: because I alone, of all that sensation-seeking horde, happened to believe Haubert Heine when he said it was self-defence.

Heine confided to me that he felt the meteorite was the cause of the tragedy. He claimed the huge stone—twice the height of a man and weighing nearly seven tons—"lived." That is the exact English word he used.

The meteorite was not magnetic, nor did it hold a latent force of static electricity. Heine did not use the word "lived" in any allegorical sense.

I thought I understood him where no one else did. I believed I could follow his cramped thinking, his old-world romanticism, and his often-amusing tangled English in noisy, unromantic, 1947 America.

I sat in the warden's office of the state prison, waiting to see Heine, and went back over the case history of the crime.

A bedraggled one-mule prospector was the lone witness to the meteorite's fall. Out of curiosity and hoping for a reward, he ambled across the sands the next morning "to hev a look at that there shootin' star."

He found it almost completely buried in red sand, only a few square feet of its bare, topside surface exposed to the Arizona sun. A couple of arm-jarring swings at its unyielding hard face with a pickaxe convinced the

old man that it was useless to him and unlikely to give up the riches he sought. Accordingly, on a trip into town for supplies two months later, he sent a collect telegram to the Institute, giving location and date of the fall, and hinting rather broadly that his remuneration for the information should be promptly forthcoming.

He subsequently received a formal letter of thanks from the Institute's directors along with a two-dollar check for his services, and stepped out of the picture until reporters found him later for "exclusive interviews." A hundred and twenty newspapers and two picture magazines ran his picture standing beside the mule, with captions in large type pointing out which was which.

**H**AUBERT HEINE and Charles Packer moved out into the Arizona sands to pitch their tent beside the meteorite in mid-August. They had with them the modern, electrically powered equipment of the Institute. After digging a work-trench completely around the stone almost down to its base, they prepared for the sinking of test holes in the rock's interior.

Packer started up the gasoline motor that operated the drill, and tapped over the surface with a wooden-handled hand-axe, spotting likely places to drill.

At length he found a spot that seemed to present a good surface for drilling. It was hot in mid-August in Arizona. He was wearing nothing but shorts, a wide-brimmed straw hat and protecting goggles. His tanned body rippled in the sun.

Heine had on but little more — a long flapping shirt to cover his thinness, and straw slippers to protect his feet. He watched, fascinated, as Pack-

er placed the tip of the drill on one of the chalk marks and squeezed the double trigger.

The drill bit in.

Heine, alternately watching the slender rod boring into the rock and the jiggling, vibrating effect of the powerful tool upon Packer's body, was startled to see a change spread over the young man.

Packer was standing with his feet braced wide apart in the sand, putting pressure on the drill. Abruptly a white cloud flowed up to his arms to the jiggling tune of the machine, crept across his shoulders and flooded his face. He raised one hand to snatch off his goggles, revealing the pupils of his eyes dilated horribly. The dead-white hue of his skin was alarming. The muscles of his arms and legs bulged and surged as if seeking to break the bonds of flesh that held them. Suddenly, Packer slackened pressure on the drill, and the machine ground harmlessly in the hole it had already made.

Heine stepped forward to peer at Packer, and Packer shut off the drill. The gasoline motor sputtered loudly in the new silence. Packer swung up his head to stare at Heine.

Heine confided to me that he felt the impact of a physical shock when Packer looked at him. He said that if Packer had struck him across the face with the back of his hand, the shock and pain would hardly have been greater.

"What is the matter, Charles?" Heine asked in alarm.

Packer did not answer but continued to glare at him as if he were an unearthly visitant, a stranger from nowhere.

"Charles!" Heine's bewilderment grew. He stepped over to the meteorite and braced himself against its surface. Packer watched him suspiciously but made no move.

"Are you ill? Why do you not continue drilling? Can I aid you? Why do you not answer — I demand to know!"

Packer took one step forward and the drill, still hanging in his free hand, came out of the hole. Heine noticed that the point of it was dull brown. He swung his eyes back to the young man's face.

Packer was slowly advancing around the meteorite, dragging the drill in the sand. His face was frightening. In his eyes, dilated as they were, Heine read a fearful resolve.

He turned and ran. Inside the tent was a loaded rifle, included in the equipment as a safeguard against diamondbacks and gila monsters. Heine snatched it up and peered out through the canvas flap.

Packer was still standing by the huge rock, holding the drill, staring away across the sands. He seemed to have forgotten his companion, until Heine stepped into sight again, the rifle ready in his hands.

Packer switched around to stare at him and then at the gun. At first there was no noticeable change of expression on the younger man's face, but slowly Heine saw recognition growing in Packer's eyes. Very slowly, as if recalling the memory of a gun from a previous incarnation, Packer recognized the weapon in Heine's hands.

He became enraged and fearful.

He retreated, braced a naked, tanned foot against the hot rock and watched Heine's slow, nervous advance with

the rifle. Charles Packer lifted the drill with one hand until it was high off the ground, swung his other hand down to grasp its fat, sleek middle, and brought it up, rifle-fashion across his arm, to aim the brown-stained point at Heine. The restless fingers of his other hand sought and found the double trigger on the drill handle.

Heine stopped ten feet from Packer and waited.

They stood there, the two of them in the broiling sun, facing one another like armed warriors.

Minutes sped by while each waited for the other to make the first move; while Heine—fear and incomprehension boiling inside him—waited for Packer to lunge with that deadly drill. The point would be flashing crimson in the sun, not brown, if Packer reached him, and Packer's body would again vibrate with the jiggling kick-back of the tool while the whirling bit ate into Heine's living body. It would run entirely through his body in a fraction of a minute.

Nervously, he shifted the rifle. Packer mistook the action. He squeezed the double triggers and lunged. Heine screamed.

**STILL** screaming, he found himself running towards the protecting bulk of the meteorite, his feet slipping in the loose sand at the bottom of the trench. Packer followed him slowly, as if this were something unexpected.

The chase continued for long minutes—then stopped abruptly.

Heine discovered that Packer had ceased following him. He was somewhere on the other side of the rock, silent and waiting. Heine watched for his shadow on the sands but saw nothing. He backed away a few feet,

to the limit of the trench, and wondered if he should leave altogether, run away across the desert for safety.

He would have to go without food and water unless he could get to the tent or to the truck parked in the sand on the other side of the tent. He didn't know how to drive, but he had watched Packer's motions and believed he could imitate them.

Where was Packer?

Again he searched for tell-tale shadows at either end of the rock, but there was nothing. He continued cautiously around the meteorite.

Packer was not there. The sound of the drill had ceased, and only the monotonous drone of the gasoline motor broke the desert stillness. Packer might have gone into the tent. There was no other weapon there, but he might have gone looking for one.

He saw the movement in the corner of his eye again.

Suddenly he discovered Packer, and screamed again. The man was atop the meteorite, braced there in the flaming sun and wind, arms swinging wildly, the drill in one hand, bending his knees to leap down upon him!

Still screaming, Heine threw up the rifle and fired. He pumped five shots at Packer before his finger slipped from the trigger, and the gun dropped to the ground.

Packer had fallen down across the top surface, bleeding profusely. The drill was beneath him. The blood dripped from his body, trickled down across the shiny belly of the drill and fell upon the meteorite.

Heine looked into Packer's eyes, terror-stricken. Packer's eyes were dying as his body died, but they were sane again.

**THAT'S** the story Haubert Heine told; that's the story I believed, and that's the story my four papers printed. I was damn near laughed out of the Press Club, but we stuck to it, Heine, my papers, and I.

Heine's trial was one of those occasional courtroom circuses that pop up in America, carefully fed and nurtured by a murder-mongering press, given daily hypos by hysterical New York columnists turned loose on the air-waves for the sake of bay rum, and neatly done to a turn by "experts" going over the testimony with fine-tooth combs from the comfort of their living rooms, and printed in weekly magazines.

Guilty or not, the luckless devil that falls afoul of this combination becomes the chief carnival attraction, and often has as much chance of gaining his freedom as a captured gorilla.

Heine had no chance. The newspapers tried and convicted him on their front pages daily, and the docile jury lifted their twelve individual right hands and said "Ja" dutifully.

A frozen-faced girl who served as the warden's secretary came in and handed me the blue slip of paper that said I could visit Heine in the death row. For half an hour.

I was searched as a matter of routine and my fountain pen and matches taken from me.

Heine looked up and smiled when the corridor door opened.

"Welcome, my friend, truly welcome!" And then his smile drooped. "My only friend."

"Not quite, chief. You have at least two. There's my boss."

He shrugged. I went into the cell and sat beside him on the bunk. A

guard placed a chair just outside the door and sat down to watch us.

"I am afraid," Heine continued moodily, "that I have only made much trouble for Mr. Whipple. And for you, too, young man. But for Mr. Whipple—" He spread his hands. "Public opinion, it is bad. They think he is responsible for my actions. They think—"

I cut in there. "Never mind what those dopes think! They think what other papers tell them to think. Those that are able to think for themselves don't read papers. I'm not worrying about it and you shouldn't." At once I saw that was a bad slip and tried to cover up. He saw through it and grinned.

"Do not mind, young friend. I have become acclimated to the idea. The warden visited me a short while ago. He brought me these." The old scientist displayed two choice cigars. "I do not smoke. But he asked if there was a last request. Tell me, is that something expected—this last request?"

I settled back in the bunk.

"Yeah, chief. Our time-honored method of—of ushering gentlemen out in style and contentment in these United States. You are given a last request—anything within reason and reach of the prison authorities. And a last meal. You can order anything at all that suits your fancy, in season or out, and I'll bet a silver dollar the chef downstairs has it on tap. Why, I covered a guy once—" and stopped. Heine wouldn't be interested in Big Jules from Brooklyn who ordered fried chicken and strawberries.

"Yes, he also explained as to the meal." Heine grinned at me. "I asked for wheatcakes and maple syrup. He seemed surprised. But the request—"

yes, I did make a so-called request. It seemed to startle him even more than the food I wanted."

"It did?" I turned so that I could look Heine in the face. The warden isn't easily startled. "Just what did you ask?"

"I want to visit the meteorite," Heine told me seriously.

I stared at him. "Why in the name of—Why do you want to do that?"

Heine looked at me very soberly for a long moment. Then he said, sighing, "I see you still do not completely understand."

I shrugged. "I think I understand some of it."

"But not fully." He went on, "So I will again explain. Here is my theory: This meteorite fell on our Earth for a purpose. It was no happening of chance, understand? Where it came from I do not know—except that it might have been a living, thinking mother world. A world of intelligent matter. But this intelligence is imprisoned, trapped, in rock — it cannot move about. It needs a human body—"

"To use as a means of locomotion?"

"Exactly. I believe this meteorite is not the first that will come. Perhaps this evil will spread—like a plague—from one human to the next, as soon as it finds a suitable 'home.'

"The thing in the meteorite thought it had one in Charles. But when I shot him, he fell across the top of the stone. The drill was beneath him. When this 'other'—this evil force—saw that Charles was dying, it went back into the meteorite—through the metal of the drill."

I frowned, puzzled; he explained.

"The metal is the contact, you see?

Metal in a human's hands gives it the bridge it needs—"

"But those other men," I objected. "There were scores of them. The workmen dug the rock out of the sand, crated it and shipped it here to the city. Other workmen mounted it. And the officials over at the Institute — what about them?"

He smiled slowly. "Water seeks water. Intelligence seeks intelligence. Again I can only guess. This thing was ultra-intelligent—it could not or would not pass into a body of lesser intelligence. The workmen — they used tools which had wooden handles, destroying the contact. Besides, the higher intelligence was missing.

"The officials at the Institute would have the intelligence — but how many of them would have metal between their flesh and the meteorite to make contact?"

HE PASSED a tired hand over his eyes. "My friend — there is no other way but that this evil thing die! It is a ghastly threat to the human race—it must not escape!

"How terrible it is, I saw in Charles' face. Poor Charles, I know the human part of him must have wanted to warn me—while the alien part tried with all its strength to kill me! I believe when he saw the gun, and knew what it could do—this entity that had crept into him read the danger from his mind.

"But here, now, is the worst part. Supposing this evilness manages to hide itself in a human body, undetected? It is clever; it would know that to be as apparent as it was in Charles would mean its death—and there might not be a chance to return to its other body, the meteorite. It would guard against that. But the man—or men—"

it entered would become fiends beyond comprehension. This I know. This I believe."

I didn't quite recognize my voice as I asked, "And what do you mean to do?"

He regarded me with his brilliant, sad eyes.

"I want to go to the meteorite and let this intelligence possess my body. I want to have it die with me."

It probably has never been done before, and probably will never be done again—but JayCee Whipple got Heine the chance to go to the Institute.

At first Whipple laughed at me when I told him about the request, but an hour later he gave in. "Why not? Society is going to kill this man for a crime he never committed. Why can't he go see that rock if wants to?"

You see, I didn't tell Whipple the real reason. I know he wouldn't have believed me.

He phoned long-distance to the governor. I think JayCee applied a few secret screws—every good newspaper man keeps some in reserve.

Anyway, it was done, and there we sat in an armored car—the five of us—being whisked across town to the Institute.

Heine sat between two guards, shackled hand and foot. Another, with a sawed-off shotgun, sat by the door.

The scientist had insisted that the guards wear gloves, and JayCee had furnished them. With much grumbling they had put them on—the hand-cuffs over them.

Heine, however, wore no gloves—the cuffs met the bare skin of his thin wrists.

He did not speak to me, and I saw his command to remain silent, in his eyes.

The armored car pulled up at the side door of the Institute, and we all got out. Walking slowly, so as not to attract attention, we went inside. The place had been closed for the day.

There was a small group of officials standing around. Some of them smiled at Heine, others appeared indifferent.

The foyer was large—it had to be to hold that gigantic thing of pitted metal and menace. It lay there, mute, and to my flaming imagination, the damned thing appeared to be watching us.

Now Heine stood before it. His body was erect but seemed frail compared to the meteorite's bulk. I stood where I could watch his face. The moisture in my palms was the cold sweat of fear.

His eyes, brooding and wide, fastened on mine and his gaze held as he stepped forward, hands outstretched. The shackles clanked in the silence as his guards kept pace with him.

He smiled at me slightly and his shoulders squared. He took a deep breath — and extended a manacled hand toward the meteorite.

The metal touched with a small clink.

I saw the change come over him. We all saw it. Gradually an ashen pallor, gray as death, and as frightening, crept into his thin hands and through his wrists, vanishing up the coat-sleeves. I saw it reappear almost instantly above his collar and wash in a ghastly flood across his face.

The muscles of his throat were tight and choking with the scream that was caught there.

I saw the Thing crouching in his eyes. It was deadly beyond belief, horrible beyond all nightmare.



The scream in his throat came free and knifed through the air. With one mad lunge he recoiled from the meteorite—and the chains that held him snapped as if they were slender thread!

He leaped at me! His hands were curved, raking claws, and I stumbled backward from their grasp.

But his fingers touched my throat and a shock, as if from a high-voltage wire, sparked through me. I heard an insane screaming, but was only dimly aware that it was myself.

That was when they shot him. I heard the roar of the gun, felt his body sag away from me.

I must have lost consciousness for a while, because the next thing I remember I was lying flat on the cold floor.

The first thing I saw was the warden standing beside the meteorite. His gun was in his bare hand—and the metal of the barrel touched the stone!

"Get away!" I screamed. "It'll enter you. It'll—"

But nothing happened. The man shifted his gun, stared uneasily at the doctor bending over me. His eyes remained sober—and sane.

Heine had succeeded.

I sat up and saw the body covered

with a blanket. "He's dead?" I asked dully.

One of the guards was rubbing his sprained wrist. The horror of what had happened was still in his face.

"A madman," he said. "I always knew he was really a killin', butcherin'—"

I got to my feet, looked at him steadily. I knew that nothing I could say would change what these men thought of Haubert Heine. In their minds he had proven himself guilty.

But I said slowly, "He was a great man. A brave man. He was my friend."

NOW it is later, and I keep remembering what Haubert Heine said. What if this alien madness does manage to mask its evilness when it enters a human? What if it learns by failure, until we will not know who among us are still human . . . ?

But why worry, you ask? The thing died with the blaze of a gun that blasted life from a frail body, you say?

This is why: A second giant meteorite fell in the Arizona sands this morning.

Heine is gone—and where we can find another Heine I do not know . . .