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ARTICLES

Cars: Collect More on Your Insurance . . .	Edwin E. McBrayer	7
Raise Your Average 20 Pins	Andy Varipapa	18
Men You Never Know: Gas Station Operator	Harold Mehling	36
Your Future Is Safer than You Think! . . .	Sidney Margolius	62
How to Flip a G.I. Lid	Pfc. Bill Safire	67
I Was Afraid of My Daughter	Fletcher D. Slater	84

STORIES

The Man from Chicago	Walter S. Tevis, Jr.	11
The Public Hating	Steve Allen	24
Five Seconds to Death	Charles Flanagan	28
The Past Master	Robert Bloch	48
No Panga for Pieters	F. W. Holiday	72

NOVEL

The High Passes	John Reese	89
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FEATURES

Politics Is People	Robert Bendiner	2
Pro and Con		3
Editor's Note		6
Angler's Almanac	Robert C. McCormick	46
Read All About It: Clocks	John T. Dunlavy	61
Medical Report	Lawrence Galton	81
Man Around the House	John Sharnik	82
What Would You Do?	Paul Faron	129
Bluebook's Cover	Frank McCarthy	

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The Past Master



BY ROBERT BLOCH

The tall man with the hypnotic stare came out of the sea carrying six million in cash. Only four people could furnish clues to his mysterious behavior. Here are their stories.

Statement of Dorothy Laritzky

HONESTLY, I could just *die*. The way George acts, you'd think it was *my* fault or something. You'd think he never even *saw* the guy. You'd think *I* stole his car. And he keeps asking me to *explain* everything to him. If I told him once, I told him a hundred times—and the cops too. Besides, what's there to *tell* him? He was there.

Of *course* it doesn't make sense. I already know that. Honest to Pete, I wish I'd stayed home Sunday. I wish I'd told George I had another date when he called up. I wish I'd made him take me to the show instead of that old beach. Him and his convertible! Besides, your legs stick to those leather seats in hot weather.

But you should of seen me Sunday when he called. You'd think he was taking me to *Florida*



or someplace, the way I acted. I had this new slack suit I bought at Sterns, with the plaid top, sort of a halter, like. And I quick put on some more of that Restora Rinse. You know, George is the one down at the office who started everybody calling me "Blondie."

So anyhow he came around and picked me up about four, and it was still hot and he had the top down. I guess he just finished washing the car. It

looked real snazzy, and he said, "Boy, it just matches your hair, don't it?"

First we drove along the Parkway and then out over the Drive. It was just *packed*, the cars, I mean. So he said how about it if we didn't go to the beach until after dinner.

That was all right by me, so we went to this Luigi's—it's a seafood place way south on the highway. It's real expensive and they got one of those

big menus with all kinds of ozzy stuff like pompanos and terrapins. That's a turtle, like.

I had a sirloin and French fries, and George had—I can't remember, oh, yes I do—he had fried chicken. Before we ate we had a couple drinks, and after we just sat in the booth and had a couple more. We were sort of kidding back and forth, you know, about the beach and all, and waiting until after dark so we could go swimming on account of not bringing any suits.

Anyways, *I* was kidding. That George, *he* just as soon do anything. And don't think I didn't *know* why he was feeding me all those drinks. When we went out he stopped over at the bar and picked up a pint.

The moon was just coming up, almost full, and we started singing while we drove, and I felt like I was getting right with it. So when he said let's not go to the regular beach—he knew this little place way off somewhere—I thought, why not?

It was like a bay, sort of, and you could park up on the bluff along this side road, and then walk down to the sand and see way out across the water.

Only that's not why George picked it. He wasn't interested in looking at water. First thing he did was to spread out this big beach blanket, and the second thing he did was open up his pint, and the third thing he did was to start monkeying around.

Nothing serious, you understand, just monkey-

ing around, kind of. Well, he's not so bad-looking, even with that busted nose of his, and we kept working on that pint, and it was kind of romantic. I mean, the moon and all.

It wasn't until he really began *messing* that I made him stop. And even then, I practically had to *sock* him one before he figured out I wasn't kidding.

"Cut it out," I said. "Now see what you've done! You tore my halter."

"Hell, I'll buy you a new one," he said. "Come on, baby." He tried to grab me again, and I gave him a good one, right on the side of his head. For a minute I thought he'd—you know—get tough about it. But he was pretty canned up, I guess. Anyhow, he just started blubbering. About how sorry he was, and that he knew I wasn't that kind, but it was just that he was so crazy about me.

I almost had to laugh, they're so funny when they get that way. But I figured it was smarter to put on an act, so I made out like I was real sore, like I'd never been so insulted in all my life.

Then he said we should have another drink and forget about it, only the pint was empty. So he said how about him taking a run up to the road and getting some more? Or we could both go to a tavern if I liked.

"With all these *marks* on my neck?" I told him. "I certainly will not! If you want more, *you* get it."

So he said he would, and he'd be back in five minutes. And he went.

Anyhow, that's how I was alone, when it happened. I was just sitting there on the blanket, looking out at the water, when I saw this thing sort of moving. At first it looked sort of like a log or something. But it kept coming closer, and then I could see it was somebody swimming, real fast.

So I kept on watching, and pretty soon I made out it was a man, and he was heading right for shore. Then he got close enough so's I could see him stand up and start wading in. He was real tall, *real* tall, like one of those basketball players, only not skinny or anything. And so help me he didn't have any trunks on or anything. Not a *stitch!*

Well, I mean, what could *I* do? I figured he didn't see me, and besides, you can't go running around screaming your head off. Not that there was anyone to hear me. I was all alone there. So I just sat and waited for him to come out of the water and go away up the beach or someplace.

Only he didn't go away. He came out and he walked right over to me. You can *imagine*—there I was, sitting, and there *he* was, all dripping wet and with no clothes. But he gave me a big hello, just like nothing was wrong. He looked real dreamy when he smiled.

"Good evening," he said. "Might I inquire my whereabouts, Miss?"

Dig that "whereabouts" talk!

So I told him where he was, and he nodded, and then he saw how I was staring and he said, "Might I trouble you for the loan of that blanket?"

Well, what else could I do? I got up and gave it to him and he wrapped it around his waist. That's the first I noticed he was carrying this bag in his hand. It was some kind of plastic, and you couldn't tell what was inside of it.

"What happened to your trunks?" I asked him.

"Trunks?" You'd of thought he never heard of such things the way he said it. Then he smiled again and said, "I'm sorry. They must have slipped off."

"Where'd you start from?" I asked. "You got a boat out there?" He was real tan, he looked like one of these guys that hang around the Yacht Basin all the time.

"Yes. How did you know?" he said.

"Well, where else would you come from?" I told him. "It just stands to reason."

"It does, at that," he said.

I looked at the bag. "What you got in there?" I asked.

He opened his mouth to answer me, but he never got a chance. Because all of a sudden George came running down from the bluff. I never even seen his lights or heard the car stop. But there he was, just *tearing* down, with a bottle in his hand, all ready to swing. *Character!*

"What the hell's going on here?" he yelled.

"Nothing," I told him.

"Who the hell is this guy? Where'd he come from?" George shouted.

"Permit me to introduce myself," the guy said. "My name is John Smith and—"

"John Smith my foot!" yelled George, only he didn't say "foot." He was real mad. "All right, let's have it. What's the big idea, you two?"

"There isn't any big idea," I said. "This man was swimming and he lost his trunks, so he borrowed the blanket. He's got a boat out there and—"

"Where? Where's the boat? I don't see any boat." Neither did I, come to think of it. George wasn't waiting for any answers, though. "You there, gimme back that blanket and get the hell out of here."

"He can't," I told him. "He hasn't got any trunks on."

George stood there with his mouth open. Then he waved the bottle. "All right, then, fella. You're coming with us." He gave me a wise look. "Know what I think? I think this guy's a phony. He could even be one of those spies the Russians are sending over in submarines."

That's George for you. Ever since the papers got full of this war scare, he's been seeing Communists all over the place.

"Start talking," he said. "What's in that bag?"

The guy just looked at him and smiled.

"Okay, so you want to do it the hard way, it's okay by me. Get up that bluff, fella. We're gonna take a ride over to the police. Come on, before I let you have it." And he waved the bottle.

The guy sort of shrugged and then he looked at George. "You have an automobile?" he asked.

"Of course, what do I look like, Paul Revere or something?" George said.

"Paul Revere? Is he alive?" The guy was kidding, but George didn't know it.

"Shut up and get moving," he said. "The car's right up there."

THE guy looked up at the car. Then he nodded to himself and he looked at George.

That's all he did. So help me. He just *looked* at him.

He didn't make any of those funny passes with his hands, and he didn't say anything. He just *looked*, and he kept right on smiling. His face didn't change a bit.

But George—his face changed. It just sort of set, like it was frozen stiff. And so did everything. I mean, his hands got numb and the bottle fell and busted. George was like he couldn't move.

I opened my mouth but the guy kind of glanced over at me and I thought maybe I'd better not say anything. All of a sudden I felt cold all over, and I didn't know *what* would happen if he looked at me.

So I stood there, and then this guy went up to George and undressed him. Only it wasn't exactly undressing him, because George was just like one of those window dummies you see in the stores. Then the guy put all of George's clothes on himself, and he put the blanket around George. I could see he had this plastic bag in one hand and George's car keys in the other.

I was going to scream, only the guy looked at me again and I couldn't. I didn't feel stiff like George, or paralyzed, or anything like that. But I couldn't scream to save my neck. And what good would it of done anyhow?

Because this guy just walked right up the side of the bluff and climbed in George's car and drove away. He never said a word, he never looked back. He just went.

Then I could scream, but good. I was still screaming when George came out of it, and I thought he'd have a hemorrhage or something.

Well, we had to walk back *all* the way. It was over three miles to the highway patrol, and they made me tell the whole thing over and over again a dozen times. They got George's license number and they're still looking for the car. And this ser-

Illustrated by ED VEBELL

geant, he thinks George is maybe right about the Communists.

Only he didn't see the way the guy looked at George. Every time I think about it, I could just die!

Statement of Milo Fabian

I SCARCELY GOT the drapes pulled when he walked in. Of course, at first I thought he was delivering something. He wore a pair of those atrocious olive-drab slacks and a ready-made sports jacket, and he had on one of those caps that look a little like those worn by jockeys.

"Well, what is it?" I said. I'm afraid I was just a wee bit rude about it—truth to tell, I'd been in a perfectly filthy mood ever since Jerry told me he was running up to Cape Cod for the exhibit. You'd think he might at least have considered my feelings and invited me to go along. But no, I had to stay behind and keep the gallery open.

But I actually had no excuse for being spiteful to this stranger. I mean, he was rather an attractive sort of person when he took that idiotic cap off. He had black, curly hair and he was quite tall, really immense: I was almost afraid of him until he smiled.

"Mr. Warlock?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"This is the Warlock Gallery, isn't it?"

"Yes. But Mr. Warlock is out of the city. I'm Mr. Fabian. Can I help you?"

"It's rather a delicate matter."

"If you have something to sell, you can show me. I do all the buying for the Gallery."

"I've nothing to sell. I want to purchase some paintings."

"Well, in that case, won't you come right back with me, Mr. —"

"Smith," he said.

We started down the aisle together. "Could you tell me just what you had in mind?" I asked. "As you probably know, we tend to specialize in moderns. We have a very good Kandinsky now, and an early Mondrian—"

"You don't have the pictures I want here," he said. "I'm sure of it."

We were already in the gallery. I stopped. "Then what was it you wished?"

He stood there, swinging this perfectly enormous plastic pouch. "You mean what kind of paintings? Well, I want one or two good Rembrandts, a Vermeer, a Raphael, something by Titian, a van Gogh, a Tintoretto. Also a Goya, an El Greco, a Breughel, a Hals, a Holbein, a Gauguin. I don't suppose there's a way of getting *The Last Supper*—that was done as a fresco, wasn't it?"

It was positively weird to hear the man. I'm afraid I was definitely piqued, and I showed it. "Please!" I said. "I happen to be busy this morning. I have no time to—"

"You don't understand," he answered. "You buy pictures, don't you? Well, I want you to buy me some. As my—my agent, that's the word, isn't it?"

"That's the word," I told him. "But surely you can't be serious. Have you any idea of the cost involved in acquiring such a collection? It would be simply fabulous."

"I've got money," he said. We were standing next to the deal table at the entrance, and he walked over to it and put his pouch down. Then he zipped it open.

I have never, but simply never, seen such a fantastic sight in my life. That pouch was full of bills, stack after stack of bills, and every single one was either a five- or a 10-thousand dollar denomination. I mean it; he had this huge pouch filled with five- and 10-thousand dollar bills. Why, I'd never even seen one before!

If he'd been carrying twenties or hundreds, I might have suspected counterfeits, but nobody would have the audacity to dream of getting away with a stunt like this. They looked genuine, and they were. I know, because—but that's for later.

So there I stood, looking at this utterly mad heap of money lying there, and this Mr. Smith, as he called himself, said, "Well, do you think I have enough?"

I COULD have just passed out, thinking about it. Imagine, a perfect stranger, walking in off the street with 10 million dollars to buy paintings. And my share of the commission is five percent!

"I don't know," I said. "You're really serious about all this?"

"Here's the money. How soon can you get me what I want?"

"Please," I said. "This is all so unusual, I hardly know where to begin. Do you have a definite list of what you wish to acquire?"

"I can write the names down for you," he told me. "I remember most of them."

He knew what he wanted, I must say. Velázquez, Gorgione, Cézanne, Degas, Utrillo, Monet, Toulouse-Lautrec, Delacroix, Ryder, Pissarro—

Then he began writing titles. I'm afraid I gasped. "Really," I said. "You can't actually expect to buy the Mona Lisa!"

"Why not?" He looked perfectly serious.

"It's not for sale at any price, you know."

"I didn't know. Who owns it?"

"The Louvre. In Paris."

"I didn't know." He was serious, I'd swear he was. "But what about the rest?"

"I'm afraid many of these paintings are in the same category. They're not for sale. Most of them are in public galleries and museums here and abroad. And a number of the particular works you request are in the hands of private collectors who could never be persuaded to sell."

He stood up and began scooping the money back into his pouch. I took his arm.

"But we can certainly do our best," I said. "We have our sources, our connections. I'm sure we can at least procure some of the lesser, representative pieces by every one of the masters you list. It's merely a matter of time."

He shook his head. "Won't do. This is Tuesday, isn't it? I've got to have everything by Sunday night."

Did you ever hear of anything so ridiculous in all your life? The man was stark staring.

"Look," he said. "I'm beginning to understand how things are, now. These paintings I want, they're scattered all over the world. Owned by public museums and private parties who won't sell. And I suppose the same thing is true of manuscripts. Things like the Gutenberg Bible. Shakespeare first folios. The Declaration of Independence—"

Stark staring. I didn't trust myself to do anything but nod at him.

"How many of the things I want are here?" he asked. "Here, in this country?"

"A fair percentage, well over half."

"All right. Here's what you do. Sit down over there and make me up a list. I want you to write me down the names of the paintings I've noted, and just where they are. I'll give you \$10,000 for the list."

Ten thousand dollars for a list he could have acquired free of charge at the public library! Ten thousand dollars for less than an hour's work!

I gave him his list. And he gave me the money and walked out with the list.

By this time I was just about frantic. I mean, it was all so *shattering*. He came and he went, and there I stood—not knowing his real name, or anything. Talk about your eccentric millionaires! He went, and there I stood with \$10,000 in my hand.

Well, I'm not one to do anything rash. He hadn't been gone three minutes before I locked up and stepped over to the bank. I simply *hopped* all the way back to the gallery.

Then I said to myself, "What for?"

I didn't have to go back now, really. This was

my money, not Jerry's. I'd earned it all by my little self. And as for him, he could stay up at the Cape and rot. I didn't need his precious job.

I went right down and bought a ticket to Paris. All this war-scare talk is simply a lot of fluff, if you ask me. Sheer fluff.

Of course Jerry is going to be utterly furious when he hears about it. Well, let him. All I have to say is, he can get himself another boy.

Statement of Nick Krauss

I WAS DEAD on my feet. I'd been on the job ever since Tuesday night and here it was Saturday. Talk about living on your nerves!

But I wasn't missing out on this deal, not me. Because this was the pay-off. The pay-off to the biggest caper that was ever rigged.

Sure, I heard of the Brink's job. I even got a pretty good idea who was in on it. But that was peanuts, and it took better'n a year to set up.

This deal topped 'em all. Figure it for yourself, once. Six million bucks, cash. In four days. Get that, now. I said six million bucks in four days. That's all, brother!

And who did it? Me, that's who.

Let me tell you one thing: I earned that dough. Every lousy cent of it. And don't think I didn't have to shell out plenty in splits. Right now I can't even remember just how many was in on it from beginning to end. But what with splits and expenses—like hiring all them planes to fly the stuff down—I guess it cost pretty near a million and a half, just to swing it.

That left four and a half million. Four and a half million—and me going down to the yacht to collect.

I had the whole damn haul right in the truck. A hundred and forty pieces, some of 'em plenty heavy, too. But I wasn't letting nobody else horse around with unloading. This was dynamite. Only two miles from the warehouse where I got everything assembled. Longest two miles I ever drove.

Sure, I had a warehouse. What the hell, I *bought* the thing! Bought the yacht for him, too. Paid cash. When you got six million in cash to

play with, you don't take no chances on something you can just as well buy without no trouble.

Plenty of chances the way it was. Had to take chances, working that fast. Beat me how I managed to get through the deal without a dozen leaks.

But the dough helped. You take a guy, he'll rat on you for two-three grand. Give him 20 or 30, and he's yours. I'm not just talking syndicate, either. Because there was plenty guys in on it that weren't even in no mob—guys that never been mugged except maybe for these here college annual books where they show pictures of all the professors. I paid off guards and I paid off coppers and I paid off a bunch of curators, too. Not characters, curators. Guys that run museums.

I still don't know what this joker wanted with all that stuff. Only thing I can figure is maybe he was one of these here Indian rajahs or something. But he didn't look like no Hindu—he was a big, tall, youngish guy. Didn't talk like one, either. But who else wants to lay out all that lettuce for a bunch of dizzy paintings and stuff?

ANYWAYS, he showed up Tuesday night with this pouch of his. How he got to me, how he ever got by Lefty downstairs I never figured out.

But there he was. He asked me if it was true, what he heard about me, and he asked me if I wanted to do a job. Said his name was Smith. You know the kind of con you get when they want to stay dummied up on you.

I didn't care if he dummied up or not. Because, like the fella says, money talks. And it sure hollered Tuesday night. He opens this pouch of his and spills two million bucks on the table.

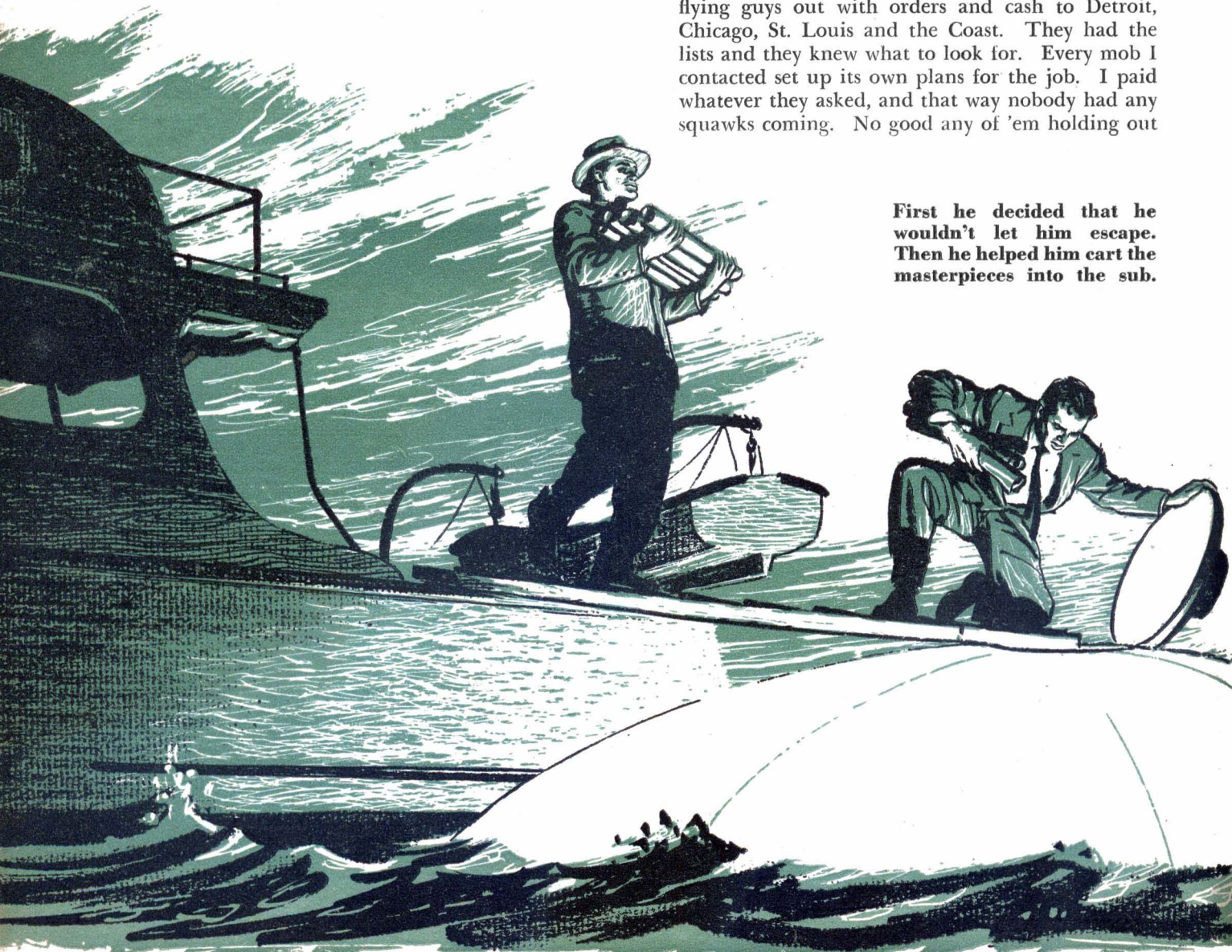
So help me, two million bucks! Cash!

"I've brought this along for expenses," he said. "There's four million more in it if you can cooperate."

Let's skip the rest of it. We made a deal, and I went to work. Wednesday I had him on that yacht, and he stayed there all the way through. Every night I went down and reported.

I went to Washington myself and handled the New York and Philadelphia end, too. Also Boston, on Friday. The rest was by phone, mostly. I kept flying guys out with orders and cash to Detroit, Chicago, St. Louis and the Coast. They had the lists and they knew what to look for. Every mob I contacted set up its own plans for the job. I paid whatever they asked, and that way nobody had any squawks coming. No good any of 'em holding out

First he decided that he wouldn't let him escape. Then he helped him cart the masterpieces into the sub.



on me—where could they sell the stuff? Those things are too hot.

By the time Thursday come around, I was up to my damn neck in diagrams and room plans and getaway routes. There was six guys just checking on alarm systems and stuff in the joints I was suppose to cover. We had maybe 50 working in New York, not counting from the inside. You wouldn't believe it if I told you some of the guys who helped. Big professors and all, tipping us off on how to make a heist, or cutting wires and leaving doors unlocked. I hear a dozen up and lammed after it was over. That's what *real* dough can buy you.

Of course I run into trouble. Lots of it. We never did get a haul out of L.A. The fix wasn't in the way it was supposed to be, and they lost the whole load trying for a getaway at the airport. Lucky thing the cops shot up all four of the guys, the ones who made the haul. So they couldn't trace anything.

All told, must of been seven or eight cashed in; the four in L.A., two in Philly, one guy in Detroit and one in Chicago. But no leaks. I kept the wires open, and I had my people out there, sort of supervising. Every bit of the stuff we did get came in by private plane, over in Jersey. Went right to the warehouse.

And I had the whole works, 143 pieces, on the truck when I went down for the pay-off.

It took me three hours to cart that stuff onto the yacht. This guy, this Mr. Smith, he just sat and watched the whole time.

When I was done I said, "That's the works. You satisfied now or do you want a receipt?"

He didn't smile or anything. Just shook his head. "You'll have to open them up," he said.

"Open 'em up? That'll take another couple hours," I told him.

"We've got time," he said.

"Hell we have! Mister, this stuff's hot and I'm hotter. There's maybe a hundred thousand honest johns looking for the loot—ain't you read the papers or heard the radio? Whole damn country's in an uproar. Worse than the war crisis or whatever you call it. I want out of here, fast."

BUT he wanted them crates and boxes open, so I opened 'em. What the hell, for four million bucks, a little flunkey work don't hurt. Not even when you're dead for sleep. It was a tough job, though, because everything was packed nice. So as not to have any damage, that is.

Nothing was in frames. He had these canvasses and stuff all over the floor, and he checked them off in a notebook, every one. And when I got the last damn picture out and hauled all the wood and junk up on deck and put it over the side in the dark, I come back to find him in the forward cabin.

"What's the pitch?" I asked. "Where you going?"

"To transfer these to my ship," he told me. "After all, you didn't expect I'd merely sail off in this vessel, did you? And I'll need your assistance to get them on board. Don't worry, it's only a short distance away."

He started the engines. I came right up behind him and stuck my Special in his ribs.

"Where's the bundle?" I asked.

"In the other cabin, on the table." He didn't even look around.

"You're not pulling anything, are you?"

"See for yourself."

I went to see. And he was leveling.

Four million bucks on the table. Five- and 10-thousand-dollar bills, and no phony geetus either. Wouldn't be too damn easy passing this stuff—the Feds would have the word out about big bills—but then, I didn't count on sticking around with the loot. There's plenty countries where they like them big bills and don't ask any questions. South America, such places. That part didn't worry me too much, as long as I knew I'd get there.

And I figured on getting there all right. I went back to the other cabin and showed him my Special again. "Keep going," I said. "I'll help you, but the first time you get cute I'm set to remove your appendix with a slug."

He knew who I was. He knew I could just let him have it and skid out of there any time I wanted. But he never even blinked at me—just kept right on steering.

We must of gone about four-five miles. It was pitch dark and he didn't carry any spot, but he knew where he was going. Because all at once we stopped and he said, "Here we are."

I WENT up on deck with him and I couldn't see nothing. Just the lights off on shore and the water all around. I sure as hell didn't see no boat anywheres.

"Where is it?" I asked him.

"Where is what?"

"Your boat?"

"Down there." He pointed over the side.

"What the hell you got, a submarine or something?"

"Something." He leaned over the side. His hands was empty, he didn't do anything but lean. And so help me, all of a sudden up comes this damn thing. Like a big round silver ball, sort of, with a lid on top.

I didn't even notice the lid until it opened up. And it floated alongside, so's he could run the gangplank out to rest on the lid.

"Come on," he said. "I'll help you. It won't take long this way."

"You think I'm gonna carry stuff across that lousy plank?" I asked him. "In the dark?"

"Don't worry, you can't fall. It's magno-meshed."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I'll show you."

He walked across that plank and climbed right down into the thing before I thought to try and stop him. The plank never moved an inch.

Then he was back out. "Come on, there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Who's afraid?"

BUT I was scared, plenty. Because now I knew what he was. I'd been reading the papers a lot these days, and I didn't miss none of the war talk. Them Commies with all their new weapons and stuff—well, this was one of them. It is no wonder he was tossing around millions of bucks like that.

So I figured ~~on~~ doing my patriotic duty. Sure, I'd haul his lousy pictures on board for him. I wanted to get a look inside that sub of his. But when I finished, I made up my mind he wasn't gonna streak out for Russia or someplace. I'd get him first.

That's the way I played it. I helped him cart the whole mess down into the sub.

Then I changed my mind again. He wasn't no Russian. He wasn't anything I ever heard of except an inventor, maybe. Because that thing he had was crazy.

It was all hollow inside. All hollow, with just a thin wall around. I could tell there wasn't space for an engine or anything. Just enough room to stack the stuff and leave space for maybe two or three guys to stand.

There wasn't any electric light in the place either, but it was light. And *daylight*. I know what I'm talking about—I know about neon and fluorescent lights too. This was something else. Something new.

Instruments? Well, he had some kind of little slots on one part, but they was down on the floor. You had to lay down next to them to see how they'd work. And he kept watching me, so I didn't want to take a chance on acting too nosy. I figured it wasn't healthy.

I was scared because he *wasn't* scared.

I was scared because he *wasn't* no Russian.

I was scared because there ain't any round balls that float in water, or come up from under water when you just look at 'em. And because he come from nowhere with his cash and he was going nowhere with the pictures. Nothing made any sense any more, except one thing. I wanted out. I wanted out bad.

Maybe you think I'm nuts, but that's because you never was inside a shiny ball floating in water, only not bobbing around or even moving when the waves hit it, and all daylight with nothing to light it with. You never saw this Mr. Smith who wasn't named Smith and maybe not even Mr.

But if you had, you would of understood why

I was so glad to get back on that yacht and go down in the cabin and pick up the dough.

"All right," I said. "Let's go back."

"Leave whenever you like," he said. "I'm going myself now."

"Going yourself? Then how the hell do I get back?" I yelled.

"Take the yacht," he told me. "It's yours." Just like that he said it.

"But I can't run no yacht, I don't know how."

"It's very simple. Here, I'll explain—I picked it up myself in less than a minute. Come up to the cabin."

"Uh uh." I got the Special out. "You're taking me back to the dock right now."

"Sorry, there isn't time. I want to be on my way before—"

"You heard me," I said. "Get this boat moving."

"Please. You're making this difficult. I must leave now."

"First you take me back. Then you go off to Mars or wherever it is."

"Mars? Who said anything about—"

He sort of smiled and shook his head. And then he looked at me.

He looked—right—at—me. He looked—into—me. His eyes were like two of those big round silver balls, rolling down into slots behind my eyeballs and crashing right into my skull. They came towards me real slow and real heavy, and I couldn't duck. I felt them coming, and I knew if they ever hit I'd be a goner.

I was out on my feet. Everything was numb. He just smiled and stared and sent his eyes out to get me. They rolled and rolled and I could feel them hit. Then I was—gone.

The last thing I remember was pulling the trigger.

Statement of Elizabeth Rafferty, M.D.

AT 9:30 SUNDAY MORNING, he rang the bell. I remember the time exactly, because I'd just finished breakfast and I was switching on the radio to get the war news. Apparently they'd found another Soviet boat, this one in Charleston Harbor, with an atomic device aboard. The Coast Guard and the Air Force were both on emergency, and it—

The bell rang, and I opened the door.

There he stood. He must have been 6-foot-4, at the very least. I had to look up at him to see his smile, but it was worth it.

"Is the doctor in?" he asked.

"I'm Dr. Rafferty."

"Good. I was hoping I'd be lucky enough to find you here. I just came along the street, taking a chance on locating a physician. You see, it's rather an emergency—"

"I gathered that." I stepped back. "Won't

you come inside? I dislike having my patients bleed all over the front stoop."

He glanced down at his left arm. He was bleeding, all right. And from the hole in his coat, and the powder-marks, I knew why.

"In here," I said. We went into the office. "Now, if you'll let me help you with your coat and shirt, Mr.—"

"Smith," he said.

"Of course. Up on the table. That's it. Now, easy—let me do it—there. Well! A nice neat perforation, upper triceps. In again, out again. It looks as if you were lucky, Mr. Smith. Hold still now. I'm going to probe. . . . This may hurt a bit. . . . Good! . . . We'll just sterilize, now—"

All the while I kept watching him. He had a gambler's face, but not the mannerisms. I couldn't make up my mind about him. He went through the whole procedure without a sound or a change of expression.

Finally I got him bandaged up. "Your arm will probably be stiff for several days. I wouldn't advise you to move around too much. How did it happen?"

"Accident."

"Come now, Mr. Smith." I got out the pen and looked for a form. "Let's not be children. You know as well as I do that a physician must make a full report on any gunshot wound."

"I didn't know." He swung off the table. "Who gets the report?"

"The police."

"No!"

"Please, Mr. Smith! I'm required by law to—"

"Take this."

He fished something out of his pocket with his right hand and threw it on the desk. I stared at it. I'd never seen a 5,000-dollar bill before, and it was worth staring at.

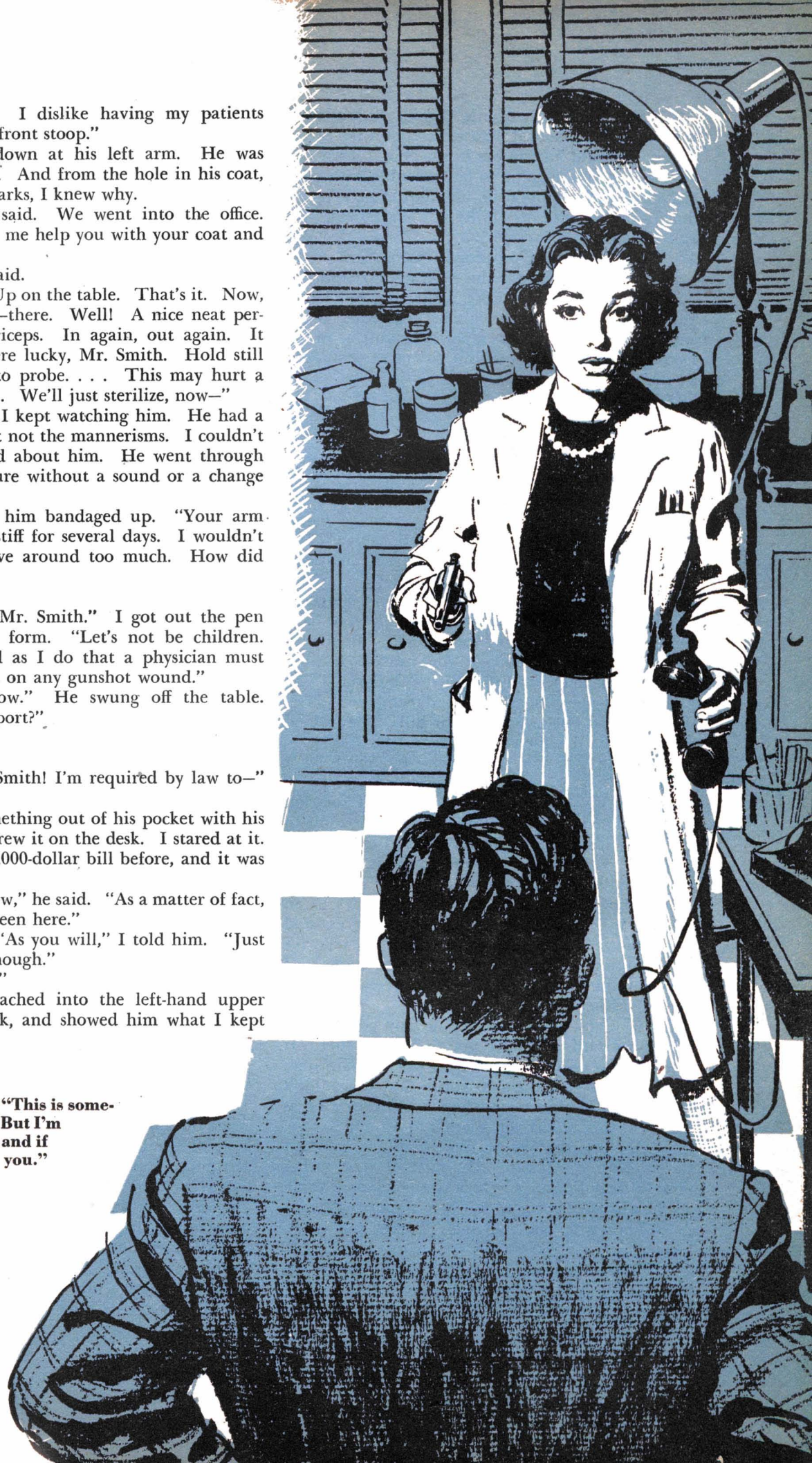
"I'm going now," he said. "As a matter of fact, I've never really been here."

I shrugged. "As you will," I told him. "Just one thing more, though."

"What's that?"

I stooped, reached into the left-hand upper drawer of the desk, and showed him what I kept there.

"Sorry," she said. "This is something I hate to do. But I'm calling the police, and if you move I'll plug you."



"This is a .22, Mr. Smith," I said. "It's a lady's gun. I've never used it before, except on the target range. I would hate to use it now, but I warn you that if I do you're going to have trouble with your right arm. As a physician, my knowledge of anatomy combines with my ability as a marksman. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do. But you don't. Look, you've got to let me go. It's important. I'm not a criminal!"

"Nobody said you were. But you will be, if you attempt to evade the law by neglecting to answer my questions for this report. It must be in the hands of the authorities within the next twenty-four hours."

He chuckled. "They'll never read it."

I SIGHED. "Let's not argue. And don't reach into your pocket, either."

He smiled at me. "I have no weapon. I was just going to increase your fee."

Another bill fluttered to the table. Ten thousand dollars. Five thousand plus 10 thousand makes 15. It added up.

"Sorry," I said. "This all looks very tempting to a struggling young doctor—but I happen to have old-fashioned ideas about such things. Besides, I doubt if I could get change from anyone, because of all this excitement in the newspapers over—"

I stopped, suddenly, as I remembered. Five-thousand and 10-thousand-dollar bills. They added up, all right. I smiled at him across the desk.

"Where are the paintings, Mr. Smith?" I asked.

It was his turn to sigh. "Please, don't question me. I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want to go, before it's too late. You were kind to me. I'm grateful. Take the money and forget it. This report is foolishness, believe me."

"Believe you? With the whole country in an uproar, looking for stolen art masterpieces, and Communists hiding under every bed? Maybe it's just feminine curiosity, but I'd like to know." I took careful aim. "This isn't conversation, Mr. Smith. Either you talk or I shoot."

"All right. But it won't do any good." He leaned forward. "You've got to believe that. It won't do any good. I could show you the paintings, yes. I could give them to you. And it wouldn't help a bit. Within twenty-four hours they'd be as useless as that report you wanted to fill out."

"Oh, yes, the report. We might as well get started with it," I said. "In spite of your rather pessimistic outlook. The way you talk, you'd think the bombs were going to fall here tomorrow."

"They will," he told me. "Here, and everywhere."

"Very interesting." I shifted the gun to my left hand and took up the fountain pen. "But now, to business. Your name, please. Your real name."

"Kim Logan."

"Date of birth?"

"November 25th, 2903."

I raised the gun. "The right arm," I said. "Medial head of the triceps. It will hurt, too."

"November 25th, 2903," he repeated. "I came here last Sunday at 10 P.M., your time. By the same chronology I leave tonight at nine. It's a 169-hour cycle."

"What are you talking about?"

"My instrument is out there in the bay. The paintings and manuscripts are there. I intended to remain submerged until the departure moment tonight, but a man shot me."

"You feel feverish?" I asked. "Does your head hurt?"

"No. I told you it was no use explaining things. You won't believe me, any more than you believed me about the bombs."

"Let's stick to facts," I suggested. "You admit you stole the paintings. Why?"

"Because of the bombs, of course. The war is coming, the big one. Before tomorrow morning your planes will be over the Russian border and their planes will retaliate. That's only the beginning. It will go on for months, years. In the end—shambles. But the masterpieces I take will be saved."

"How?"

I TOLD YOU. Tonight, at nine, I return to my own place in the time-continuum." He raised his hand. "Don't tell me it's not possible. According to your present-day concepts of physics it would be. Even according to our science, only forward movement is demonstrable. When I suggested my project to the Institute they were skeptical. But they built the instrument according to my specifications, nevertheless. They permitted me to use the money from the Historical Foundation at Fort Knox. And I received an ironic blessing prior to my departure. I rather imagine my actual vanishment caused raised eyebrows. But that will be nothing compared to the reaction upon my return. My triumphant return, with a cargo of art masterpieces presumably destroyed nearly a thousand years in the past!"

"Let me get this straight," I said. "According to your story, you came here because you knew war was going to break out and you wanted to salvage some old masters from destruction. Is that it?"

"Precisely. It was a wild gamble, but I had the currency. I've studied the era as closely as any man can from the records available. I knew about the linguistic peculiarities of the age—you've had no trouble understanding me, have you? And I managed to work out a plan. Of course I haven't been entirely successful, but I've managed a great deal in less than a week's time. Perhaps I can return again—earlier—maybe a year or so beforehand, and procure more." His eyes grew bright. "Why not? We

could build more instruments, come in a body. We could get everything we wanted, then."

I shook my head. "For the sake of argument, let's say for a minute that I believe you, which I don't. You've stolen some paintings, you say. You're taking them back to 29-something-or-other with you, tonight. You hope. Is that the story?"

"That's the truth."

"Very well. Now you suggest that you might repeat the experiment on a larger scale. Come back to a point a year before this in time and collect more masterpieces. Again, let's say you do it. What will happen to the paintings you took with you?"

"I don't follow you."

"Those paintings will be in your era, according to you. But a year ago they hung in various galleries. Will they be there when you come back? Surely they can't co-exist."

He smiled. "A pretty paradox. I'm beginning to like you, Dr. Rafferty."

"Well, don't let the feeling grow on you. It's not reciprocal, I assure you. Even if you were telling the truth, I can't admire your motives."

"What's wrong with my motives?" He stood up, ignoring the gun. "Isn't it a worthwhile goal—to save immortal treasures from the senseless destruction of a tribal war? The world deserves the preservation of its artistic heritage. I've risked my existence for the sake of bringing beauty to my own time—where it can be properly appreciated and enjoyed by minds no longer obsessed with the greed and cruelty I find here."

"Big words," I said. "But the fact remains. You *stole* those paintings."

"Stole? I saved them! I tell you, before the year is out they'd be utterly destroyed. Your galleries, your museums, your libraries—everything will go. Is it stealing to carry precious articles from a burning temple?" He leaned over me. "Is that a crime?"

"Why not stop the fire, instead?" I countered. "You know—from historical records, I suppose—that war breaks out tonight or tomorrow. Why not take advantage of your foresight and try to prevent it?"

I CAN'T. The records are sketchy, incomplete. Events are jumbled. I've been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed. Nothing is clear on that point."

"But couldn't you warn the authorities?"

"And change history? Change the actual sequence of events, rather? Impossible!"

"Aren't you changing them by taking the paintings?"

"That's different."

"Is it?" I stared into his eyes. "I don't see how. But then, the whole thing is impossible. I've wasted too much time in arguing."

"Time!" He looked at the wall clock. "Almost noon. I've got just nine hours left. And so much to do. The instrument must be adjusted."

"Where is this precious mechanism of yours?"

"Out in the bay. Submerged, of course. I had that in mind when it was constructed. You can conceive of the hazards of attempting to move through time and alight on a solid surface; the face of the land alters. But the ocean is comparatively unchanging. I knew if I departed from a spot several miles offshore and arrived there, I'd eliminate most of the ordinary hazards. Besides, it offers a most excellent place of concealment. The principle, you see, is simple. By purely mechanical means I shall raise the instrument above the stratospheric level tonight and then intercalculate dimensionally when I am free of earth's orbit. The gantic-drive will be—"

No doubt about it. I didn't have to wait for the double-talk to know he was crazier than a codfish. A pity, too; he was really a handsome specimen.

"Sorry," I said. "Time's up. This is something I hate to do, but there's no other choice. No, don't move. I'm calling the police, and if you take one step I'll plug you."

"Stop! You mustn't call! I'll do anything, I'll even take you with me. That's it, I'll take you with me! Wouldn't you like to save your life? Wouldn't you like to escape?"

"No. Nobody escapes," I told him. "Especially not you. Now stand still, and no more funny business. I'm making that call."

He stopped. He stood still. I picked up the phone, with a sweet smile. He smiled back. He looked at me.

Something happened.

There has been a great dispute about the clinical aspects of hypnotic therapy. I remember, in school, an attempt being made to hypnotize me. I

was entirely immune. I concluded that a certain degree of cooperation or conditioned suggestibility is required of an individual in order to render him susceptible to hypnosis.

I was wrong.

I was wrong, because I couldn't move now. No lights, no mirrors, no voices, no suggestion. It was just that I couldn't move. I sat there holding the gun. I sat there and watched him walk out, locking the door behind him. I could see and I could feel. I could even hear him say "Good-by."

But I couldn't move. I could function, but only as a paralytic functions. I could, for example, watch the clock.

I watched the clock from 12 noon until almost seven. Several patients came during the afternoon, couldn't get in, and went away. I watched the clock until its face was lost in darkness. I sat there and endured hysterical rigidity until—providentially—the phone rang.

THAT broke it. But it broke me. I couldn't answer that phone. I merely slumped over on the desk, my muscles tightening with pain as the gun fell from my numb fingers. I lay there, gasping and sobbing, for a long time. I tried to sit up. It was agony. I tried to walk. My limbs rejected sensation. It took me an hour to gain control again. And even then, it was merely a partial control—a physical control. My thoughts were another matter.

Seven hours of thinking. Seven hours of *true or false?* Seven hours of accepting and rejecting the impossibly possible.

It was after eight before I was on my feet again, and then I didn't know what to do.

Call the police? Yes—but what could I tell them? I had to be sure, I had to know.

And what did I know? *He was out in the bay, and he'd leave at nine o'clock.* There was an instrument which would rise above the stratosphere—

I got in the car and drove. The dock was deserted. I took the road over to the Point, where there's a good view. I had the binoculars. The stars were out, but no moon. Even so, I could see pretty clearly.

There was a small yacht bobbing on the water, but no lights shone. Could that be it?

No sense taking chances. I remembered the radio report about the Coast Guard patrols.

So I did it. I drove back to town and stopped at a drugstore and made my call. Just reported the presence of the yacht. Perhaps they'd investigate, because there were no lights. Yes, I'd stay there and wait for them if they wished.

I didn't stay, of course. I went back to the Point. I went back there and trained my binoculars on the yacht. It was almost nine when I saw the cutter come along, moving up behind the yacht with deadly swiftness.

It was exactly nine when they flashed their

lights—and caught, for an incredible instant, the gleaming reflection of the silver globe that rose from the water, rose straight up toward the sky.

Then came the explosion and I saw the shattering before I heard the echo of the report. They had portable anti-aircraft, something of the sort. It was effective.

One moment the globe soared upward. The next moment there was nothing. They blew it to bits.

And they blew me to bits with it. Because if there *was* a globe, perhaps he was inside. With the masterpieces, ready to return to another time. The story was true, then, and if that was true, then—

I guess I fainted. My watch showed 10:30 when I came to and stood up. It was 11 before I made it to the Coast Guard Station and told my story.

Of-course, nobody believed me. Even D. Halvorsen from emergency—he said he did, but he insisted on the injection and they took me here to the hospital.

It would have been too late, anyway. That globe did the trick. They must have contacted Washington immediately, with their story of a new secret Soviet weapon destroyed offshore. Coming on the heels of finding those bomb-laden ships, it was the final straw. Somebody gave the orders and our planes were on their way.

I've been writing all night. Outside in the corridor they're getting radio reports. We've dropped bombs over there. And the alert has gone out, warning us of possible reprisals.

Maybe they'll believe me now. But it doesn't matter any more. It's going to be the way he said it was.

I KEEP thinking about the paradoxes of time-travel. This notion of carrying objects from the present to the future—and this other notion, about altering the past. I'd like to work out the theory, only there's no need. The old masters aren't going into the future. Any more than he, returning to our present, could stop the war.

What had he said? "I've been unable to discover just how the war began—or will begin, rather. Some trivial incident, unnamed."

Well, this was the trivial incident. His visit. If I hadn't made that phone call, if the globe hadn't risen—but I can't bear to think about it any more. It makes my head hurt. All that buzzing and droning noise. . .

I've just made an important discovery. The buzzing and the droning does not come from *inside* my head. I can hear the sirens sounding, too. If I had any doubts about the truth of his claims, they're gone now.

I wish I'd believed him. I wish the others would believe me now. But there just isn't any time. . .

—BY ROBERT BLOCH