

THE POISON PEN

By MILTON LESSER

Perhaps, after finishing this story, you'll make the remark that "it couldn't happen here!"

Well, all we can say is that you may have the right answer and that's fine. But if you should be the type to read the morning Tribune carefully, you may learn that it not only could happen—but actually has!

18 March 1997

THERE'S dancing in the streets today! I'm so excited, I can hardly write these words, but we have a diary reading in our block at 2200 hours tonight, so I have to get something down. The Masters went as suddenly as they came. We don't know where they came from nor why they held the Earth for thirty years. We don't know yet why they decided to leave. Perhaps we'll never know, but does it matter? We're free. First reaction of everyone I met: sheer joy. The cold wind and driving rain doesn't stop them—they're dancing. But underneath it all, you can almost smell the fear and uncertainty on the air. I'm glad I was never a co-operationist.

It's time for the diary reading. More later.

2400 hours—The usual stuff at the diary reading. Mrs. Campbell, though, is thinking of divorce because her husband was a Co-op. You should have seen his face—obviously, it was the first he heard about it. Jack Tisdall seduced the Mallory girl two nights ago. Poor kid was blushing to beat the band, but she should have known it would come out at the reading. I'll bet every eligible bachelor—and some who are not—will try to date her. Mrs. Mallory practically dragged her from the reading room over at the public school. A pretty pink behind is going to be made pinker tonight, yes sir. Sam Faloney's business isn't doing too well.



Moral: keep a diary and the pen you use may be your suicide weapon!

Dr. Trillis caused the most comment, though. They just don't make people like Dr. Trillis anymore; but then, he was a mature adult before the Masters got here. The professor said there's going to be trouble because we're all exhibitionists. That was his word, exhibitionists. I'd like to look it up some time in some of his own books. From the cradle, he said, the Masters made us compulsive exhibitionists, and the older generation either had to go along with it or feel left out. Down to the smallest block in the smallest town the Masters could tell what was going on that way, he said. Then he dropped his bombshell.

We ought to get rid of diaries and diary reading. We ought to teach our children to keep secrets and we can start by not rewarding them for tattling. It might even be a good idea (said Dr. Trillis) to wear clothing in the summer time. I can't see the connection, but he claims it's part of the same exhibitionism. I don't claim to understand him more than anyone else did, but when Dr. Trillis speaks, I'll at least give him the courtesy of listening.

20 March

Nuts! I called Diane Mal-

lory for a date tonight and found myself number fifteen on a waiting list a mile long. That lucky stiff, Jack Tisdall. Diane was wearing lace paint to match her dark hair and a shimmering breast veil. Mrs. Mallory was there behind her, scowling at me throughout the conversation and scribbling busily in her diary. Already you can see the kind of stuff we'll have to put up with, thanks to Jack Tisdall. Diane's the prettiest girl on the block and this was the first time I ever saw her wearing the veil indoors.

21 March

Mrs. Campbell won't have to get her divorce after all. We had a near-lynching on the block today.

I was on my way to work this morning, when I saw a crowd near the subway entrance. Somehow you can tell when a crowd looks ugly, like the time when Bertie Schultz refused to read from his diary last year and everyone wanted to take a swat at him till he changed his mind.

Anyway, I started pushing my way through because I was going to be late, since I'd already missed the 7:48 for Manhattan.

"Watch out, Johnny Cooper!" someone cried. "You're

in the way. I can't see what's going on."

Probably, it had started with Mrs. Campbell hen-pecking her husband about how he'd been a Co-op with the Masters. He kept on saying he'd discuss it later and was going to be late and would she please let him catch his train. He's a little guy with thick glasses and bewildered-looking eyes and seemed more surprised than anyone when George Fuller from down on the corner poked an umbrella in his ribs and said, "Let the wife talk."

Mr. Campbell tried to push his way through to the subway stairs, but George Fuller stood in his way, using the umbrella almost like a sword. A couple of youngsters started pushing Mr. Campbell from behind and yelling, "Co-op, dirty Co-op," and it looked like the little guy might fall down the stairs, only George Fuller was in the way with his umbrella.

"We didn't know they'd leave," he wailed. "None of you liked them, I heard it at the diary readings. Please, I'll be late."

Then George Fuller leered at him and said, "Go ahead, Co-op. Catch your train"—and stepped out of the way. The kids shoved again, and

poor Mr. Campbell went tumbling down the stairs. Mrs. Campbell made a quick notation in her diary—and plenty of other people were doing some furious writing too—then ran downstairs after him, still nagging.

The crowd followed and surrounded Mr. Campbell at the bottom of the stairs, taunting him. Every time he tried to get up and brush off his torn overcoat, someone would shove him down again. There was a lot of ugly talk and a couple of express trains flashed by while the kids who'd done the pushing started to kick Mr. Campbell.

"None of you liked them," he cried again. "Neither did I. It's in my diary. You can see it."

Someone said, "But we weren't co-operationists."

"It's in my diary." More kicking. "Stop. It hurts." His lips were swollen, his nose was leaking blood.

He seemed outraged that they wouldn't believe what was in his diary. It was a point and I was beginning to wonder what Dr. Trillis would make of it, but also wishing they'd leave Mr. Campbell alone. Then the professor came to catch his own train to where he teaches at Columbia University. He's got a

quick mind to go with his scholarly looks, that Dr. Trillis. He began a long harangue about how we should all work together after the Masters had gone, and let bygones be bygones and how, if it was in Mr. Campbell's diary that he didn't like the Masters, it must have been true, even if he had been a Co-op. Well, Dr. Trillis got the crowd to feeling sheepish, even George Fuller. Me and Jack Tisdall had to manhandle the two kids who were doing the kicking, though.

I told Dr. Trillis I'd foot the bill for his favorite dinner tonight, baked stuffed ham, if he'd answer some questions. He said "yes" fast. I guess professors are underpaid.

Incidentally, the reason Mrs. Campbell doesn't have to get a divorce after all is because her husband is leaving town, and under the old Master laws where labor had to be relocated and such, an annulment is automatic.

2200 hours—Dr. Trillis was quite willing to answer any question I asked him. Only trouble was, each answer led to half a dozen more questions. But the biggest surprise of all came right at the beginning of the meal.

"We'd better not leave here

together, Johnny," Dr. Trillis said. "I broke up the mob. You helped. There's talk about some people being too sympathetic to the Masters—us included."

"But that's crazy. We just stopped them from maybe killing him, that's all."

Dr. Trillis shrugged and washed down some ham with beer. "In one way, it's a good sign. They're not taking for granted everything they hear on reading night. Otherwise, it's all bad."

"Where will it lead to?" I asked him.

"Hard to say, Johnny. You see, the Masters could keep tabs on all the people by means of our diaries. It's a form of exhibitionism, which is why all forms of exhibitionism have been not only condoned and approved, but encouraged. But now the Masters have departed."

"Where'd they go?" I asked. "And why?"

"We don't even know where they came from or why—except that they were peeping Toms of a sort. They're on the way home now, with whatever information they wanted. Their home may be one of the familiar stars in a constellation we know; it may be a star we've never seen, not even with the biggest tele-

scope. Some day, I like to think, we'll go out there looking for them. But we've got to take into consideration first things first."

I said I didn't understand.

"Well, some people are more naive than others. There will be some who suddenly realize we'll have to put an end to exhibitionism—"

"You mean, like you?"

"—and others who will realize that exhibitionism and diaries are on the way out but right now can still make mighty potent weapons. It's these we'll have to look out for, Johnny. If they're unscrupulous, they can turn the diaries to their own advantage. Remember, we believe everything we see in them. If it was written in your diary, for example, that you were thinking of committing suicide and then someone murdered you—chances are he'd never be looked for, let alone found."

"But I don't want to kill myself!"

"You're taking me too literally. Before I came here tonight, my diary was stolen. I think I can tell you this, Johnny: I'm afraid. I think that diary is going to turn up some day with things in it I never wrote. That's why I think we'd better not be seen

together. It's you I'm thinking of."

There was more talk and more food, then I paid the bill with nearly half a week's wages and went home. I had the strange feeling I was being followed, but every time I turned around, the street seemed dark and deserted.

4 April

Tonight's my date with Diane Mallory. Zowie!

5 April

I don't care if Jack Tisdall teases me and says she told him the same things or not, but here are some of the things Diane told me. I'm more of a gentleman than the other guys on the block. I dance better. She likes the feel of my hand on her shoulder. She was hoping I'd do more than just kiss her goodnight on our first date. It might be weeks before she could see me again. I smell of leather and pipe smoke—so like a man, she said. She was delighted to have a nightcap in my apartment. Her mother was up to all hours in her place, anyway. (She was wearing only the painted lace this time, under her evening wrap.)

The hell with Jack Tisdall. Let him snicker if he can

when he reads this. I don't have to envy him any more over Diane Mallory, not one little bit.

Incidentally, I'm writing this in a brand new diary because I must have misplaced the old one. Looked everywhere, but can't seem to find it. Well, it'll turn up one of these days.

7 April

I'm getting worried. I looked all over for my old diary, but can't find it anywhere. It's not in the apartment, that's for sure. It's not anyplace in the neighborhood I might have been. It's not in my office. Every time I think of what Dr. Trillis said, I get scared. Maybe someone will be able to give me information about it at reading night the day after tomorrow.

9 April

Just got back from the diary reading — and what news! Dr. Trillis didn't show up, which is bad enough—but they found *his* diary. I don't know what to believe.

Here are some excerpts which I took down word for word:

"The Masters are a power for good, not evil. We're too backward a race to recognize this fact, and it wouldn't sur-

prise me if one of these days they turned their backs in disgust and let us stew in our own juice. That would be a black day for humanity." (That doesn't sound like Dr. Trillis at all.)

"The only thing bad about being a co-operationist is you can't tell the people. It's the one thing you can keep secret, or so the Masters say. Since I'm going to write this down but not read it at the reading, I don't have to be afraid of what I say. Of course I'm a co-operationist, and proud of it. We used to call co-operationists quislings at first, but the Masters made us stop. Connotations, they realize, can be pretty damaging to reputations." (Jack Tisdall pointed out that anyone—anyone at all—might have been a co-operationist since, according to Dr. Trillis, the Masters encouraged secrecy on that one item. So now, on circumstantial evidence alone, they can accuse people of being Co-ops. But what purpose it will serve I can't quite figure. I'm sure Dr. Trillis would know. And I *still* don't think he was a co-operationist, despite what Tisdall and the others read from his diary.)

"Today, without warning, the Masters left. We shall miss them sorely."

"Poor Mr. Campbell was almost lynched this morning. The outrage of trying to harm a co-operationist leaves me almost sick to my stomach. Only the rabble hate co-operationists."

"I wonder if I will be able to pick up the pieces of a now-meaningless life? The Masters are gone; the rabble takes over. I wonder, is life worth living?" (Now, that certainly isn't the professor talking, I don't care what they say. He was a humanitarian all the way, and he loved life. Is this what he meant by compulsive exhibitionism? I realize I'd be wiser not to write this down because people are going to hear it, but I've got to write it because this is the way I feel. Like Diane Mallory removing the breast veil as soon as she leaves her mother's sight?)

"I'd better destroy this diary while I still have the opportunity. If it's read, I haven't a chance." (And Jack Tisdall explained how he found the professor's diary, smouldering but not ruined, on the edge of our block's incinerator. Looked burned, too.)

So, that's about it. The block's vigilante committee has a warrant for Dr. Trillis' arrest. The charge: co-opera-

tionist, not reading his complete diary, trying to destroy his diary. I'd hate to be in his shoes, but I can't help feeling sorry for him and believing that he didn't write all that business they said he did.

I dreamed about Diane Mallory last night.

13 April

Friday the 13th, and if ever Dr. Trillis believed in black cats and broken mirrors and walking under ladders and the like, he believes it double now. Ordinarily, the vigilante committee doesn't have jurisdiction off our block, but special arrangements were taken and Dr. Trillis was captured while leaving a classroom at Columbia University in Manhattan today. The Columbia committee didn't help in the capture—but didn't hinder it, either.

They brought the professor back and have him, under guard, in the basement of building 6 down near the corner. By "they" I mean Jack Tisdall and the other members of our vigilante committee. So far, the professor's being held incommunicado, but you'd be putting a noose around your own neck if you tried to talk with him, anyway.

Diane Mallory—who's been leading me a merry chase, by

the way—seems to know more about what's going on than most people, since she spends a great deal of time with Tisdall, the lucky so-and-so. Maybe I'll call her later tonight and try to find out.

I had that odd feeling I was being followed again last night, but the more I looked for whoever it was, the less sure I was that I was being followed. Probably my imagination, but I sure hope no one decides to "find" my diary. I still don't see how I could have lost it.

LATER—Diane wasn't at home. Mrs. Mallory admitted she was out with Jack Tisdall. Strangely, Mrs. Mallory isn't so mad about Diane and Jack—or Diane and anyone else—any longer. It's as if she didn't like it but now thinks it will do her girl more good than harm. Worth looking into, if I had the time.

16 April

I've had it. Wish I didn't have to stop to scribble this thing down. My goose is cooked. More later. I have to find a place to hide. Damn this writing compulsion. And damn Diane Mallory too, for that matter.

17 April

A warrant's out for my

arrest, as I suspected. Someone almost saw me yesterday. Have to be careful. There's the old Myers shack, three blocks north of here. Should make a good hiding place. I hurt my leg pretty bad in that fight at the diary reading, but at least I got away. You can't miss this limp, though.

18 April

I guess they're looking for me, but they haven't thought to come north three blocks and try the old Myers shack. It gets pretty cold in here at night, with the wind whipping in through torn shingles on the roof. If it rains, I'll be drenched. I've spent most of the night hours scrounging around for food. Never put on weight that way, but at least I'm not starving.

I'm going to take this breather to write down what happened on the night of April 16. Not very pretty, but I guess Dr. Trillis was right. I got to the diary reading as usual and was going to await my turn and explain what I was doing with a brand new diary, when Diane Mallory popped up and gave me a shock. She held my old diary in her hand, claiming she found it in my apartment and it was her duty as a loyal citizen of the block to read some

excerpts. I protested that I'd always read everything I wrote but Jack Tisdall took the floor and asked me, "In that case, what do you have to worry about?"

I grumbled and listened as Diane started to read. I never wrote those things! I never said, "I hope it's all a mistake. I hope the Masters decide to come back, because we need them." I never wrote, "If the people on the block ever find Dr. Trillis' diary, he's done for. His only hope is that the incinerator fire did a good job. The people—the vapid, blundering people—can't realize, or won't realize, or don't want to realize that the Co-ops are the best friends they ever had. Aside from the Masters, of course." I've never been a Co-op. I never even thought like a Co-op. Someone wrote those things there after Diane Mallory had stolen my diary. I'm not one to go around accusing people, but any way you looked at it, the finger pointed at Jack Tisdall.

"Those are nothing but lies!" I cried, standing up and trying to take the diary from Diane's hands. Men stood between us, pushed me away, shoved me back in my chair. "Someone's trying to frame me!" I shouted. "Don't ask me why. I don't know why. I de-

mand to see that diary. I can show you it's not my handwriting, just like Dr. Trillis never wrote all those things you said he did."

I was shouted down. I could do my hollering at the vigilante tribunal next week.

I guess I lost my temper, because I hardly remember what happened next. Diane Mallory looked very self-righteous, more so than the rest of them. I think I yelled something about Jack Tisdall, for he smiled at Diane, then leered at me. All at once, we were fighting. I felt the knuckles of my right fist strike his face, felt the contour of his nose crunch, felt the good numbing pain shoot up my arm to the elbow.

Then, with Tisdall falling back into the crowd, his face an ugly red smear, I plunged out into the darkness. I heard Diane Mallory screaming, saw the others rising, their shapes silhouetted before the light, to pursue me.

I fled.

19 April

The rain, very cold. I'm drenched, and I've been coughing all day. I'm afraid to leave the Myers shack now, because they'll find me. I went out looking for food about an hour ago and found a dis-

carded newspaper, the neighborhood gazette, four pages of cheaply mimeographed paper. The headline was:

DR. TRILLIS FACES EXECUTION TONIGHT

If I remain here, they'll find me. I could leave the neighborhood—or leave the city entirely—but where would I go? There's so much I don't understand. Dr. Trillis could supply the answers, I'm sure. But this is Dr. Trillis' last night of life. They're going to kill him.

Because they fear him? Because, somehow, the Masters instilled in them a sickness which he doesn't share? I think so.

I've got to find out.

20 April

Dr. Trillis is not dead!

This will be my last entry in the diary. Dr. Trillis smiled when I told him I must write down what happened last night. It doesn't matter whether I set it down on paper or not: *they* will never see it.

The crowd gathered in the rain outside Building 6 last night. The rain drummed down on their umbrellas. It was dark and cold but they were tense and expectant,

like spectators at an athletic event. I slipped in among them, jostled by elbows and hips. It was the last place they would look for me. I listened:

“... already drawn lots. Five lucky stiffs are going to shoot him.”

“... of course he has to die. If a man doesn't write the truth in his diary—”

“What are diaries for?”

“Who said that? Traitor!”

I moved closer to the brick wall of the building. Most of the windows were dark, but a dull yellow glow came up from the cellar entrance. About half an hour after I got there, limping on my injured leg, I saw Jack Tisdall arrive. I couldn't help smiling with satisfaction when I saw the bandage across the bridge of his nose and the swelling under his left eye, but I stopped smiling when I thought of Dr. Trillis.

Tisdall disappeared down the ramp to the basement. A man carrying a carbine weather-slung across his right shoulder marched back and forth slowly, stolidly, keeping the crowd off the ramp.

If they kill Dr. Trillis, I told myself suddenly, they will have to kill me with him. A chill came over me, but it wasn't fear. All at once, I was not afraid. It was expectation

and I had never felt anything like that feeling.

I waited on the fringe of the crowd until they began to drift toward the basement entrance again. Someone said, "I think he's coming."

And, another voice:

"Hooray for Jack Tisdall!"

Tisdall came first, arrogant despite his disfigured face. Dr. Trillis was behind him, shoulders back, head up, unafraid. Two armed guards followed Dr. Trillis, smirking.

"Executioners, forward!" someone bellowed.

Five figures detached themselves from the crowd and a lane was cleared to the curb, where a man I didn't know opened the tailgate of an old station wagon and produced a rifle chest. It was opened and, in the light of a flashlight, five carbines slick and gleaming with oil were removed. The executioners were armed, checked their weapons, stood back.

I held my breath. My palms felt dry and hot. My heart was beating as loud and unsteadily as the uneven idling of the station wagon's engine.

They marched Dr. Trillis through the lane to the curb. At first I thought they would take him somewhere in the station wagon, but instead they went on marching across

the street with him and stood him against the brick wall of Building 7. Smirking, the five executioners began to follow them.

The last one in line was Doug Lafferty, a plump middle aged man, proprietor of the neighborhood grocery. I waited until he had one foot off the curb, until the crowd began to flow in a quick tide around him and across the street.

"Doug," I said softly.

He turned around. He looked at me. He opened his mouth to shout, but I drove my left fist into his belly and he exhaled air instead. He had a puzzled look on his face. Puzzle and pain, I thought. It was the look of everyone since the Masters' unexpected conquest and since their abrupt departure. I hit him again and grabbed the carbine before it could clatter against the curb.

"Hey, that's the guy we've been looking for!" a man shouted.

I clubbed at his face with the butt of the carbine. I don't know if I hit him or not, but he disappeared in the gloom. They were all yelling by now, all turning from Dr. Trillis toward me.

"Run, Dr. Trillis!" I cried, and fired my carbine into the air.

Other shots answered it, but the crowd was still between me and Dr. Trillis' executioners. Frenzied and afraid now, the crowd broke. Two still figures were left on the pavement as I sprinted across the street. The carbines shattered the sudden silence and something knife-edged and hot slammed into my shoulder. I staggered but kept going. I thumbed the carbine to automatic and squeezed off half the clip blindly, then found myself on the other side of the street.

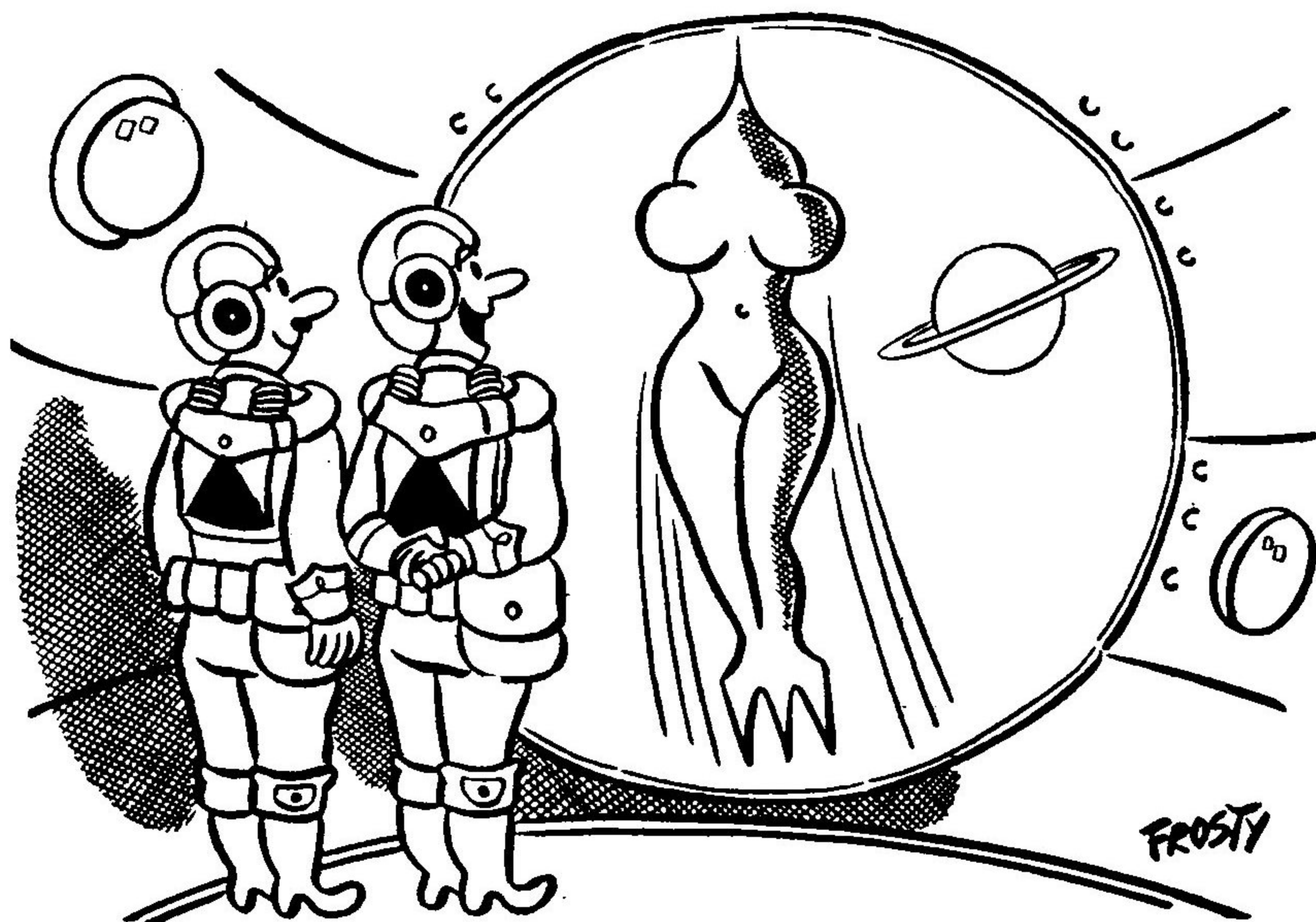
"The station wagon!" Dr. Trillis cried.

I nodded. My shoulder was numb now. I had fired the

light rifle with one hand and did not know if I had the strength to do it again.

Dr. Trillis took my arm, ran with me. Once I turned and saw Jack Tisdall leading half a dozen armed men after us. I stumbled, then hurled the carbine with all my strength into Tisdall's face. He screamed, fell back, momentarily halting the pursuit.

We gained the station wagon three or four strides ahead of the nearest men. I remember Dr. Trillis slamming the door shut on the driver's side. I was drifting off into a warm wet fog of forgetfulness and not caring. The tires screeched. The wag-



"Ah! There goes our sister ship!"

on lurched from side to side.

"Behind you!" Dr. Trillis cried.

Somehow, I turned around. Without thinking, I vaulted over the seat of the station wagon. A man was clinging to the tail gate, trying to lift himself up and inside. He snarled like an animal. I staggered toward him as the wagon skidded around a corner on the wet ground. I stamped on his hands with my heels. I placed my foot against his face and pushed. He fell back into the rain, screaming . . .

When I awoke, the sun was shining. It wasn't Dr. Trillis kneeling beside me. It was a beautiful young woman I had never seen before.

"You're all right now," she said. "You're safe. Everything's going to be all right."

"Dr. Trillis?" I said.

"He's here. He's safe, too. Rest."

But I sat up and looked around. Rhododendron and mountain laurel clung to the rocky hillside in front of me. "Where . . ." I began.

"In New Jersey. Dr. Trillis will tell you."

Her name was Lorie. Lorie. I vowed I would know her better. I watched her walk away, watched Dr. Trillis coming toward me.

"You saved my life," he

said. His voice was unsteady.

I grinned. "I had to. You were the only one who could answer my questions."

"It's like a peep show with them," he told me. "The Masters wanted it that way, so they could keep tabs on us, one man spying on another for them. But when the Masters left their training proved too strong. Humanity is sick, don't you see?"

"Yes," I said, "but—"

"The diaries shouldn't have meant a thing now. But they meant everything. It was as if the Masters hadn't returned to wherever they came from. It will be that way for a long time, except among the few people who somehow haven't been contaminated."

"Yes," I said, beginning to understand.

"Here in this settlement are some of those people. We have to prepare, and wait, and build—until one day . . ."

His words drifted on. "Good people," I said. "Like Lorie."

He smiled. "Like Lorie."

"And we have to build together?"

"Yes."

It was a wonderfully green and sweet-scented valley nestled in the hills. I stood up and went looking for Lorie.

THE END