

# Weird Tales



JULY, 1946

Cover by Matt Fox

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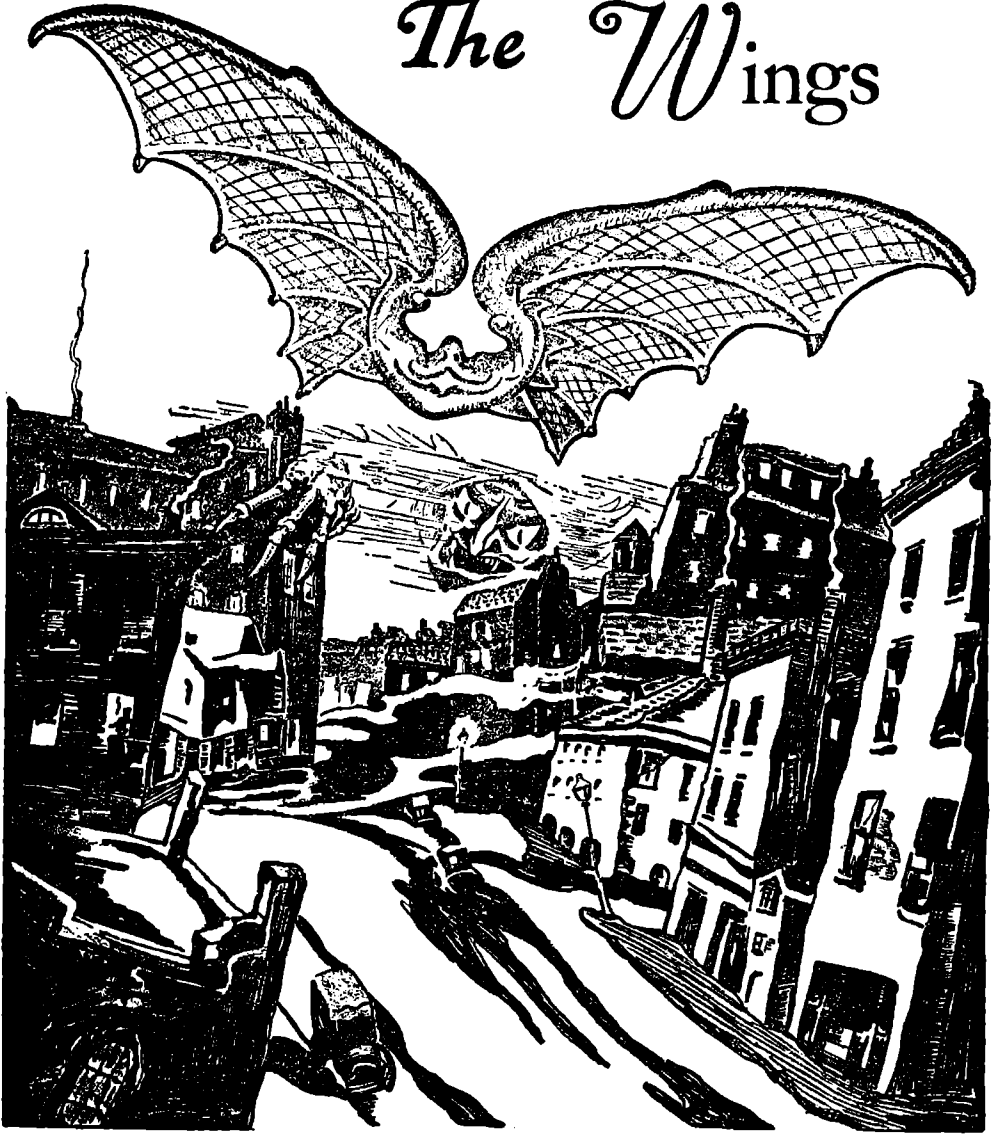
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# The Wings



BY ALLISON V. HARDING

**T**HE light at the top floor rear of 103 North was alone in the darkness of the sleeping city. But the two marooned uniformed members of Reconstruction Police who stood on the cobble-

stoned street below exchanged only amused glances.

"It is Professor Cronkiet talking to his eagle," one of them said, tapping the side of his head significantly.

*There is incalculable evil abroad and much of it in men's hearts!*

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

The other nodded, his lips drawing back in a wolfish grin. "They should put the foolish old man to death. He will never learn new ways. Herman Cronkiet and his eagle!"

"Perhaps he stays upstairs with the bird because he is afraid of his wife," his companion interjected.

The two RP men laughed boisterously at that and walked off down lonely sidewalks until the sound of their merriment was small in the distance.

Upstairs in the rudely furnished attic room of 103 North, Professor Cronkiet paused briefly in his work at the sounds from below. He sat for a moment in the wicker chair near the window. On the other side of the room, its taloned feet gripped around the cross-bars of a rough wooden perch Cronkiet had built, was the tame eagle. A powerful creature, with grace and strength apparent in its body and wings, the bird had turned up with Cronkiet one day.

In one of his walks on the cliffs above the city Cronkiet had come upon the creature lying helpless, its wing broken from some mishap, possibly with the secret Night Fleets that roared over the city. Despite the jeers of his neighbors and wife, the professor had brought the bird upstairs to his attic workshop and, with his more than rudimentary knowledge of medicine, had helped it regain use of its wings. Now the animal was entirely tame with the professor and would never fail to return to the attic window from its occasional soaring flights. But the eagle resisted with a ferocity that ruffled the white feathers of its head and neck any advances from others. Once Ludwiga, Cronkiet's wife, had reached out for the bird roughly only to have its hooked beak rake her big forearm.

Long since the bird would have been cheerfully shot and the attic ransacked of its scientific books and outre apparatus except that, in the opinion of the High Secretariat, Cronkiet was, to quote them "most useful." And so he was humored—in his completely harmless way.

Because of his scientific standing and known sympathies, Cronkiet's was the place in this district where the gentlemen from the Patrol came every three months for International Inspection. The outer world knew and thought well of Professor Her-

man Cronkiet; consequently, reasoned the Secretariat, he was a most splendid "front" man, no?

PATROL for this district was taken care of by a Mr. Edward Boskins of Peoria, Illinois, U. S. A. Middle-sized in stature and over-sized in stomach, with a round, red twinkling face Boskins was a sharp contrast to the spare, almost emaciated and frail figure of the professor. The difference in the two men's minds was as marked; Boskins was not dull, but certainly unimaginative. His chronic cheerfulness and optimism about the world was dulled only by his homesickness at having to leave his beloved Peoria, Illinois, U. S. A. Cronkiet, of course, had the quick, agile and brilliant mind of a gifted scientist.

Yet between the two a bond sprang up. It was of such a deep nature that some time ago when Boskins arrived for one of his Patrol visits and was told of the professor's mishap his pink face lost all its color and he was not able to eat the fine spread Ludwiga had set for him (with the help of special rations from the Secretariat) but instead rushed to his friend and put his arms around him.

"How did it happen, you poor old fellow," he asked although obviously a man who had newly lost his tongue would not be able to answer.

"Industrial accident," supplied Ludwiga tight-lipped. A member of Reconstruction Police who happened to still be there after guiding Boskins from the air terminus nodded acquiescence.

The plump little man looked from one to another and back to Cronkiet. "Dear friend," he murmured, "I am so sorry."

Cronkiet reach for the pad and pencil near his elbow and wrote in large letters, while the three watched closely, "It is all right. I do not mind so much."

But Boskins was so upset that he was unable to start on his investigation tour of this district. By nature the little man was fond of people but he found himself disliking Ludwiga and wondering more than ever why Cronkiet had married such a person.

She seemed so, well, disinterested in her husband's plight. Boskins thought affectionately of how his wife back in Peoria would feel if he had such an accident and

the thinking almost brought tears to his eyes. He found himself fascinated by Ludwiga's stature as she sat across from him, near the professor. Her legs were muscular and huge like tree trunks, her body broad and solid and her big red arms powerful. Boskins pitied the frail professor so. But there was no accounting for tastes and that was not his business anyway.

The "industrial accident" which had rid Herman Cronkiet of his tongue was the idea of Ludwiga and the High Secretariat. The old scientist was so inescapably and hopelessly allied with the old days and old traditions. How many times had he been heard to remark—in front of RP men and officials even—that "State-ism in any form is a violation of the rights of individual's" and prattlings about the "brotherhood of men," and so on?

But beyond that there was the important matter of Mr. Boskins and his trips to the city. These patrol investigations, to be sure, were carefully planned so as to avoid certain "areas" where smoke from underground factories might be apparent or where stores of material for anti-photo reconnaissance construction were collected.

**S**TILL the High Secretariat felt that the situation was so delicate; a careless word by Professor Cronkiet, a hint—although surely the scientist knew that any overt action would result in the immediate disappearance of both Boskins and Cronkiet in some "tragic plane crash." It would take so little, though. A slip of the tongue—that was all.

So it was decided that there would be no slips of Professor Cronkiet's tongue! After the "industrial accident" the professor was cautioned that any inappropriate use of pencil and paper would surely result in another mishap, this time perhaps involving the eyes—or worse!

As Herman Cronkiet sat in the chair and peered out the casement over the sleeping city, his thin, blue-veined hands clasped in his lap, he thought of these matters.

In a few days more Edward Boskins would be arriving for his quarterly inspection. Cronkiet looked forward to these visits from the round, jolly little man. Far more than threats against himself made by the Secretariat, the professor feared what

would be done to unsuspecting Boskins if officials detected the slightest hint of "communication" between the two. Aside from that, Boskins was prosaic, unimaginative. His mind on the business at hand, which was the driving through a certain number of streets and the inspection of certain areas—and then home to Peoria as fast as he could go.

No, there was no solution that way. And yet there was the need for communicating so much to the outside world. A world as totally unsuspecting as little Boskins. It was too late in the world's destiny for hints; Cronkiet had thought of notes slipped into Boskins' belongings but the chances of getting away with such a bald trick were nil. Systematically, the two men were kept under constant surveillance; a "guard of honor" Boskins was told. Too, the little man's effects were searched regularly.

Herman Cronkiet must present the facts himself before the outside world. There was no other way. Even if he were able somehow to transfer some of his own sense of foreboding and urgency to Boskins, the little man would never be able to win without proof positive the sober attention of a complacent world, secure in its Patrols and elaborately set up air photo-reconnaissance.

The decision was easily arrived at, Professor Cronkiet recalled. He would walk quietly down the stairs of 103 North. He would stride along the cobblestone streets, past the grimy-faced building to the Avenue, hail the bus there and take it to the air terminus. He knew the route so well from the old, old days when Professor Herman Cronkiet was a man of his own free destiny. The way was where it had always been, the steps were there to be taken; a few yards, a few miles to the broad pastures upon which were stretched out the neat concrete patterns of air strips.

It might as well be the miles to the furthest star, Cronkiet thought. He could see it in his mind's eye. If he were very careful and evaded hulking Ludwiga he would make the street, perhaps the corner and then one, two, three maroon-uniformed RP men would fall in at his side, hands on his elbow.

"Not *that* way, Professor."

Guiding him, turning him around, showing him gently back in the direction he'd come.

"That's it, Professor. You've got the eagle to talk to, remember?" Laughter.

And there would be Ludwiga waiting for him, ham hands on her gigantic hips, grinning at him, leering, hating.

So there was no escape . . . no escape. . .

**C**RONKIET sat in the window, his tired head between his old hands. Somewhere a light blinked into being. Chimney smoke showed against a dawn streaked east. Early shift workers getting up to man the underground factories.

As he had so many other times, the professor speculated on the tragic implications of what he saw and sensed around him. A country preparing secretly, stealthily, in the night, to loose the horrendous horrors of science and man's fanaticism against the unawakened world. In the distance he could hear the sound of booted feet on the pavements. It was, he knew, platoons of Reconstruction Police relieving their comrades in outlying posts. Now it was this old, beloved city of his that echoed to marching feet; soon it would be all the continents if the strong arms and blast furnaces and cunning minds had their way.

There was so little time, Herman Cronkiet knew. So little time to walk down his stairs, passed the strong, cruel grasp of Ludwiga his wife—well, his watchdog. So little time to run along the street to the avenue, over the bridge that spanned the dear, serpentine river he fished as a boy so many years ago.

When Cronkiet got up stiffly the dawn had blossomed in the sky and there were early risers in the street below. The professor crossed to where the eagle perched. He rubbed the tips of his fingers affectionately over the white head feathers of the bird.

As he did he heard the heavy steps on the stairs that led up to the attic. Then he heard his wife's harsh voice calling.

"Herman! Come down here."

The steps continued till they stopped outside his door to be punctuated by a thunderous knocking.

"Herman! You lost your ears as well as your tongue? Open!" The pounding on the heavy oak door increased.

Cronkiet paid no heed until he had thrown open the large casement next to the eagle's perch and gently shooed the bird.

The eagle teetered for a moment, hunched its massive shoulders and then propelled itself into the morning sky with flappings of its broad wings. Cronkiet, leaning far out, watched the bird's flight until it disappeared beyond the farthest chimneys, factory stacks and smoke spirals.

Only then did he turn, trudge wearily to the heavy door and open it on the huge, frowning figure of Ludwiga. She came lumbering in, her big body brushing him rudely aside. Her lips curled in scorn as she glared at the vacant perch where the eagle had recently been. She went to the still-open window and looked out. Then Ludwiga came back to the center of the room and glowered at the professor.

"That eagle is flying again. I would kill that hell-bat creature if I had my way," and her hands made expressively destructive motions. "You are to come downstairs now and eat for we are going early to the High Secretariat!"

Cronkiet nodded his head resignedly. Ludwiga looked idly around the room as he arranged some of his materials and tools. It always secretly amused him to surreptitiously watch the sneer and puzzlement on her face as she gazed at his books and the strange, useless-looking objects and articles he fashioned to "pass the time."

"Hurry up," she ordered harshly as he pattered aimlessly.

He came with her then, and the two descended the creaking stairs from the attic room. Ludwiga had a meager breakfast laid out and bade him eat. Herman Cronkiet did so slowly, his mind working over the news she had brought him. So they were going to see the High Secretariat. That meant big things in the offing. But then he had expected that the fateful moment was drawing near from the frenzied preparations he'd seen.

**T**HE all-night labor groups that manned the hidden, underground factories had been greatly augmented. If one knew where to look for it, it was easy to detect that the smoke from secret, buried blast furnaces was thicker—and constant now. The Night Fleets roared overhead on rocket maneuvers with increasing regularity. Preparations on the Anthrax Bomb in the Germ Warfare

laboratories went on apace. Oh, the signs were plain to see if one but looked—and cared.

As a scientist he knew full well the awful impact of these fiendish new weapons which were being made ready to loose on an unsuspecting world. There was no other conclusion to come by but that the outside world would be wiped out beyond recognition within a week or two. A warned world would be able to take steps to guard itself, in an instant it could wipe out this festerspot of evil; unwarned its plight was hopeless. And this knowledge—the haunting thoughts of what would happen to Peoria, Illinois, U. S. A., to Boskins, and to all the Peorias and Boskinses of the world—was with Cronkiet constantly, to darken each day for him, to dim the bright sun shining over what had once been his dearly-loved land.

The time after breakfast passed slowly. Cronkiet sat idly, with his eyes closed, with Ludwiga lolling opposite. Finally he heard a motor in the street, then some steps outside the door of 103 North, the clang of the bell. Ludwiga rose quickly. The professor sat motionless, until maroon-colored trousers stood before him. Cronkiet looked up, putting on the foolish disarming smile he had cultivated during the last few years.

There were three Reconstruction Police in the room. Ludwiga said for them, "We are going to the High Secretariat."

Cronkiet stood up, still smiling, and fell in between two of the men. Ludwiga and the other led the way out the door and into the motor car that waited at the curb.

The vehicle pulled away into the street and sped along the avenues and through squares until it slowed and stopped in front of the grim granite facade of the High Secretariat building.

The party of five went inside, their steps echoing along the carpetless halls, until they finally paused outside a door labeled simply Commissioner. The leader knocked and another RP man inside peered out, then threw open the door and motioned them to enter.

**A**T THE far end of the room, almost vault-like in appearance, a man sat behind a desk piled high with official-looking papers. He went on working at his desk and the party newly ushered into the room sat

down on rude wooden benches arranged around the room.

Finally the Commissioner looked up and uttered the single word, "Ah." He got up from the mahogany desk and paced back and forth in front of them.

Cronkiet knew him. Timish was his name. He had been one of the first in the People's Freedom Movement, that bogus organization which had swept through the country, first underground, and then as it gathered sufficient strength unto itself, openly. From its nucleus the present Statist regime had been formed.

Timish was small, blocky in build, with thick dark hair that came down so low on his forehead that it left but a thin channel of skin between eyebrows and hairline. He had been known for his splendid work in "convincing" those with opposite views. Higher ups had commended his imagination in improvising ways to convert the disbelievers. The numbers of knifings, garrottings and shootings to his credit were beyond counting.

Finally the Commissioner stopped his paces and paused directly in front of Herman Cronkiet. He stared at the professor for a moment and then retired behind his desk again.

"I have brought you here, Herman Cronkiet, because we are on the eve of great events." Timish used language as though he were not entirely sure of it. He was not primarily a talker or a thinker and was at his worst doing these. He owed his position of prominence to his actions for the Cause, which had always been more vigorous and violent and devastating for the opposition.

"When is the man Boskins due in this district?" Timish addressed himself to the captain of RPs who had let Cronkiet's party in.

"He flies here on Tuesday morning next, Commissioner," the RP captain answered promptly, after consulting a typed square of paper in his hand.

"Ah," replied Timish and smiled satisfiedly. "Then he will not be back for three months, that is correct?"

"Correct, Commissioner."

Timish rocked in his swivel chair for a moment. Then he spoke to the room. "My good comrades, our offensive against the

stupid world will start, I have the honor to reveal, right from this very town. It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that the man Boskins have one of his most successful visits. He must find things in an entirely innocent state this time—and of course there will be no other time. For by the time another three months rolls around the man Boskins and his world will be utterly destroyed," and Timish pounded one fist into the other as he finished, his lips came back from snag teeth in a fiendish grin.

The Commissioner fixed the professor with his baleful eyes. "You, Herman Cronkiet, are a considerably important man now." He mused on, "I am sorry you have not been more convinced as to the greatness of this new country of yours. But I think you will do very nicely for us, for you can do nothing else." Timish cackled.

Cronkiet sat there nodding, a fixed smile on his face. An RP man nudged him roughly.

"Commissioner's talking to you."

Timish waved his hand. "Let him be. It is strange that a man with no tongue, with no mind even, should be so useful to the Regime.

"There will be RP stationed in the basement of One hundred three North during the Boskins visit, in addition to the usual guard of honor," the Commissioner went on. "You," he gestured to Ludwiga, "will stay with Professor Cronkiet constantly, to aid him in getting over to this fool Boskins the splendid and happy condition of our peace-loving country." It was something to smile at.

For a moment, then, Timish sat in silence, his low, broad forehead puckered in thought. Finally he gestured with his hand that Cronkiet was to be taken outside. Two of the RP men escorted the professor to a bench in the adjoining room and the heavy door closed on Timish and Ludwiga.

**H**ERMAN CRONKIET knew what would be said between them; to himself he could visualize the scene. They would look at each other, the woman and Timish, talk in the facile way that two people who are much alike can. They shared a hatred of him, he knew. The deep, smoldering hatred that is the compliment

mediocrity pays to pre-eminence. Both of them were completely insensitive, brutal types, without a vestige of imagination. It was not their will that he was let alone this long.

He could even figure what they were saying.

Timish would be leaning forward. "It is getting to be the zero hour. All must go well with this Boskins visit."

Ludwiga would nod her head, "All will go well, Commissioner."

Then she would say, "After this is over, what about Cronkiet?"

Timish would hesitate, then: "I think he should take a long vacation as a reward—with you." They would glance at each other and the meaning was quite clear.

Then she would say, her ponderous mind turning like some gigantic slow-moving water wheel, "Commissioner, I sometimes wonder if he is as 'touched' as he lets on." The height of subtlety for her massive mind.

Timish would consider this thought carefully, with all the fine mental processes that had enabled him to destroy 300 women—all unfortunately non-believers in the People's Freedom Movement—in an "unaccountable" detention dormitory fire, or to have liquidated several dozen children who thankfully did not realize (but not for lack of the High Commissioner's trying) that the chamber they were rudely pushed into was one of those that does very nicely without air, using gas instead.

And Timish would say something like: "Well, what can the old fool do. Without writing something he is unable to communicate with Boskins. After this week we will no longer need to keep up any pretense."

And they would of course agree that he not be allowed to write anything at any time, especially around Boskins—who was a fool, they kept saying—without the most careful scrutiny.

Finally Ludwiga came out of Commissioner Timish's room and when Herman Cronkiet looked everything he had imagined was written on her broad, fleshy face. With a curt nod of her head Reconstruction Police pulled at his arm and the party headed for their car outside the government building.

On the trip home the vehicle sped past more than the usual numbers of troop and police divisions. These contingents with their spades were called "labor battalions" but of course the spades could be easily replaced by the latest automatic rifles, rocket guns and flame throwers.

They reach 103 North, and the car stopped. Ludwiga and one of the RP got out and accompanied Herman Cronkiet into the building. As the front door shut behind the professor it was as if an era had ended then and there. Cronkiet's footsteps were heavy as he made his way upstairs.

**T**UESDAY morning next arrived and with the noon of the day came Boskins. Bubbling over, hustle-bustle little fat man, Boskins as usual.

"Hello, dear friend," he greeted the old professor fervently. The solicitous attitudes of the Reconstruction Police were something to see as they escorted the little man from the U. S. A. up the stairs of Cronkiet's house to his room on the second landing.

The inspections went as scheduled in the next few days. As Edward Boskins was driven through the streets, along the winding alleys and down the broad avenues that made up the ancient city Cronkiet himself was amazed at the peaceful aspect of the scene. And that peacefulness was mirrored in the plump face and watery eyes of the patrolman. But why not? For certainly nowhere was there the slightest indication of the teeming underground factories, even now as they drove along the cobblestone streets turning out the outlandish tools of a super-science war. Nowhere the smallest evidence of hidden airfields, rocket pits or bomb caches.

The night before Boskins left, the professor, having seen his American friend to bed, was toiling late in his attic room. Yes, it was true what they sneered about him. He *did* talk to the eagle. Softly; it was a mannerism as he worked. And he would rub the great bird's head occasionally, with worked-cramped fingers. The eagle had served him a fine purpose; it was a form of companionship too, the only kind he had had in years.

The night outside was black and still ex-

cept for the occasional lights of an official car or the boot treads of police. For the first time Cronkiet found himself able to relax a bit. There had been an electric tension at the evening meal. Boskins' tours were coming to an end and the town authorities were almost over-doing the cordiality. Once at the table, attended this night by none other than Timish himself, Boskins had leaned over and plucked playfully at Cronkiet's elbow.

"Let's you and me join the eagle upstairs and I can look towards home," he'd said. Oft times the little man had gestured out the attic window, pointing west to where far away his beloved Peoria lay beyond the horizon and the ocean. It was meant as a joke. But the others and Timish, who had been bombarding the gathering with pronouncements of friendship for all mankind, had frowned. Boskins, even happy go lucky as he was, realized the remark had fallen flat. The professor had smiled wanly but the others had merely glowered.

Herman Cronkiet tensed. Moving on thick rubber tires two cars moved along the street and slid to a stop outside 103. Dark figures stepped from the vehicles and then there was the muted sound of the door opening and closing. The professor stiffened and turned from the window as the steps rose on the stairs outside the attic door . . . coming slowly, carefully . . . many pairs. The eagle on its perch turned its massive shoulders and head as though in a shrugging movement. Then came a muted tapping on the door and the single word—spoken in the unmistakable tones of Timish—"Open!"

They came tramping in led by the Commissioner, four RP, and Ludwiga. Timish's eyes were small, crafty. He gestured to one of the men to close the door gently.

"We have been thinking," and his lips smiled but not his eyes. He crossed to the perch where the eagle was. The bird rocked his head menacingly and Timish stepped away quickly.

He turned toward Cronkiet, "No noise, professor, if you please. We want your friend Boskins to sleep soundly for his return trip home tomorrow." As he finished speaking he abruptly drew a heavy calibre gun with silencer from his pocket. He



leveled it quickly at the eagle and pulled the trigger before Cronkiet could spring forward. And as the professor lunged he was caught and held in the strong arms of two of the police.

The bird crashed to the floor from its perch, its huge wings twitching as red spread across its breast feathers, taloned feet flaying. Cronkiet struggled furiously but his thin form was as nothing to the two who held him. Timish leveled his revolver again and again came the *spat* from the silenced weapon. The mighty bird's struggles suddenly grew weaker and finally subsided. Ludwiga, still wary of the powerful beak, stepped forward then and delivered a vicious kick at the eagle's head. Timish laughed and pointed a stubby finger at Cronkiet.

"No one likes the bird except you, eh?"

The professor struggled again and this time tore loose from his captors. He took only three steps, though, toward the startled Commissioner when the others closed in on him again. As the police held him Ludwiga struck for his face with her hamlike fist. He never felt that blow for one of the men hit him from behind with a rubber truncheon and he crumpled to the floor, as numbing paralysis spread quickly through him.

THE passing of time is meaningless to the unconscious. Not until those first glimmerings of thought and impression of the semi-conscious state does one begin to swim upwards back to life and the world. The professor was happy. He was a boy, walking barefoot, along the hot cobblestones to the river where he could let his parched, dust-caked feet thirst in the cool swirling currents and watch the barges go by with their singing, rough, jolly boatmen. Then he was a university student and showing the first evidences of the great scientific genius that was later destined to make him one of the most respected men of the world. Then war, wars—the uselessness, the pain and pity. The hopes for peace. His country's sad plight and the solution. The solution—how bitter that was—the new party that rose under forged banners of freedom. The planning, the gathering of strength. . . .

Cronkiet opened his eyes. He was in his bed. It must be day for light streaked the walls of the small room. He turned his throbbing head painfully, made a face at the strange taste in his mouth. An RP man sat at the foot of the four poster idly looking out the transom window. The professor lay there, trying to gather his strength. The brutal scene in the attic came back to him and he winced at its memory. So they had decided suddenly, with their small cruel brains that the eagle was dangerous. Cronkiet could imagine the mouthings, unfortunate about Boskins casual remarks, *Let's you and me join the eagle upstairs*, harmless as it had been. They had got their small minds together. The eagle! Could it not be used in some way? Boskins mentioned it. Perhaps when it flies . . . messages . . . messages to Boskins, the outside world. No one must know until zero hour. Eagle must be destroyed . . . last link crazy professor has with outside world . . . world which will soon be ours . . . must destroy eagle.

Yes, that was how it had been. Certainly Boskins could not have known. That his remark had cost Cronkiet his only true companion. . . . Cronkiet was glad of some things, though. And at least he was still alive. With his information that must be gotten to the world. Oh, Boskins if you could only know what is going on, what is in store for your world. . . .

There were steps outside the door and Timish came in with Ludwiga and Boskins. The professor turned his head with an effort and an unaccustomed odor assailed his nostrils. Surely Boskins would see he had been bludgeoned. Would not the little man go away then with knowledge that something dreadful was wrong and bring a squadron of International Patrol troops here?

Timish was talking . . . what, what was he saying!

"Since his industrial accident . . . feels that he cannot do all he should be able to for his country . . . deplorable that a man of his calibre . . . of course we don't let anyone know. . . ."

Suddenly the strong taste in his mouth, the odor that revolted Cronkiet was identified. And the whole crude, appalling scheme showed itself.

“. . . the fall was a mean one,” Ludwiga was saying. “A man of his years, drinking,” she shook her head with feigned sorrow and placed a hand on his bed in what was meant to be for Boskins a gesture of affection.

**C**RONKIET’S stomach turned over . . . from the blow on his head and from the strong odor of whiskey that came up from his bed . . . diabolically soaked with spirits. How could Boskins believe this . . . and yet, yet, what would someone believe?

The little fat man crossed to the bed and sank down on the coverlet.

“Dear friend,” he said and a great tear came to the corner of his eye. The professor tried to smile but the effort was a poor one. The little man’s nose wrinkled faintly in distaste as the whiskey spirits evaporated from the strategically soaked pillow.

Timish hastened to add: “He’s not at all himself. I’m sorry you should see him like this.” The Commissioner turned away, looking forlorn and Cronkiet had to admire his acting.

“It’s time, Mr. Boskins,” one of the RP men interjected, “to leave for your connections.”

Timish, Ludwiga and Boskins stood at the door, the little man looking back and sighing. Finally he said, “Good-bye dear friend.”

“You must leave for the air strip,” Ludwiga admonished Boskins and, her face wreathed in smiles, “You don’t want to miss your connections for Peoria, Illinois, U. S. A.”

Boskins bestirred himself then. He looked helplessly around.

“I wish I could take him with me,” he spoke half to himself.

“He is a soldier of his country,” supplied Timish. “He would not be happy away from here any more than you are happy away from your home, eh?”

Boskins nodded to that, but turning on the other two he implored, “Take good care of my dear friend, please.”

Ludwiga’s broad red face smiled again, “Certainly we will care for him. Everything. What is a few drinks like he has had. Soon he will be over that. Really we must leave immediately.”

Timish nodded and put his arm on Boskins’ and led him from the chamber.

For a long time after the sound of Boskins’ car had receded and died in the distance the professor lay there. Finally he gathered strength enough to rise on his elbows. The effort made him very sick, very dizzy, but he forced himself to reach out for the paper and pencil at his side. If he could write a few words, make his hands work, steady himself. The RP man watched curiously as the old man forced his shaking hands to steady. The minutes ticked away and the lengthening shadows outside came into the room and darkened it. Later, returned from the airport, he heard the sound of Ludwiga’s and Timish’s voices downstairs, hearty with triumph.

It grew into dusk. The RP man was relieved and the sound of plates and glasses wafted up from downstairs. No food appeared from below for Cronkiet.

Finally with a supreme effort, Herman Cronkiet forced himself out of bed. The policeman followed him indulgently as he tottered across the floor. At the landing Cronkiet leaned against the banister.

The RP man called below derisively, “Commissioner, I think the professor is coming down to visit you.”

**I**N A moment Timish and Ludwiga were out of the dining room standing at the foot of the stairs looking up. The scientist, with a great effort, forced his steps upwards, though.

“Let him go,” Timish yelled through the food he was still chewing as the RP man started in pursuit. The two mounted the stairs leisurely as Cronkiet disappeared into the attic room. The scientist pulled the heavy door shut and dropped the bar into place with a sigh of relief. At least that would hold them for a few precious minutes . . . minutes necessary to think, to remember. The carcass of the bird was gone, only a few dried blood stains remained to remind him of the scene not so many hours ago. But the rest of the room, he saw, thankfully, was as it had been. He dragged some of the flimsy, useless-looking paraphernalia into the center of the room and set to work feverishly. There was so little time to assemble all the pieces of this jig-

saw puzzle . . . the world, Peoria, Illinois, U. S. A. and all the Peorias. He wondered how far away Peoria was. . . .

Downstairs Timish and Ludwiga sat idly in the professor's room.

"It is always easier if they help us out," the Commissioner was explaining. "Herman Cronkiet is not so crazy I am thinking that he doesn't know what is coming to him," the man's lips curled back. "If he decides to save us the trouble, well, all is to the good. It is a sufficient jump from that attic to the street, you know."

"Quite sufficient," smiled Ludwiga. She reached over for the piece of paper Cronkiet had been scribbling on. It was nearly dark and she had to wrinkle up her eyes to study it. She passed it on to Timish.

"What is this foolishness?" He studied the square of paper. There were lines and circles—all meaningless. Then Timish spelled out, "Peoria. . . . Hah, doesn't he wish he were going there with his dear friend that fool Boskins, eh? To sound the warning against us, eh!"

Ludwiga was looking over his shoulder. "This other word, what is that? I—C—?"

Timish frowned. "I—C—A—, yes, what is that?"

"But he wrote nothing while Boskins was here," Ludwiga reassured.

"True; I am interested though. Some code, some message he hoped to get over to Boskins." A cunning look came into Timish's eyes. "Let us see what the old fool means."

They called a HDQ Secretariat number and Timish asked for Codes. After a considerable wait he got a response. He spelled the word out painstakingly and waited. The reply was not very satisfactory for when he hung up he was frowning. "Strange."

"What?"

"The educated gentleman at Codes"—Timish both despised and was in awe of persons with learning—"says this is no code but the name of some make-believe character. Very strange."

He sat for a moment more and then cocked an ear to one side. "We will go upstairs," he decided suddenly.

They mounted the steps to the attic door and Ludwiga plucked at Timish's arm.

"What did the Codes man say?"

Timish shook his head perplexedly. "I do not entirely understand. The word was I-C-A-R-U-S," he spelled it out unsurely with a look at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand. He pounded on the door.

"Open, Cronkiet!"

There was silence from within, then small stirrings.

"Open," with more thunderous poundings. "Hey, downstairs," he hailed and several RP men sprang up the flight to his support.

"Let us in, Cronkiet, or we break the door down," Timish roared.

The stirrings from within continued.

"But what is this all about?" pushed Ludwiga.

"I do not entirely understand," the Commissioner bobbed his low-browed ape's head. "These Codes men laughed, they say Icarus is one who made wings to fly. What does he mean, this crazy Cronkiet to write that?"

Ludwiga snorted then. "It is the blow on the head. He is more crazy than ever."

They both laughed, Timish a bit relieved. But he motioned his men forward at the door even as they laughed. As their shoulders hit the wood panels there was the distinct sound of a window going up from within the locked chamber. The RP men stopped momentarily; all listened and then out of the silence came another noise. Soft, indefinite . . . and then sure . . . a flapping . . . heavy rhythmic . . . flapping . . . faster . . . flapping. . . .

Ludwiga and Timish looked at one another. The RPs redoubled their efforts and the door quickly burst inward. Timish and the girl charged in.

The room was empty.

"He has jumped," burst through Timish's clenched teeth and they rushed for the open window.

But a swift glance showed there was no one on the court cobblestones below. Only then did they look up and see a giant bird disappearing through the dusk with incredible speed into the West.

Into the West where beyond the horizon and the ocean lay Peoria, Illinois, U. S. A.