

Infinity

SCIENCE FICTION

FEBRUARY, 1956

Vol. 1, No. 2

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COVER, illustrating Kenneth Bulmer's *Quarry*, by Ed Emsh.

ILLUSTRATIONS by Emsh, Engle, Remington, Stallman and Wilimczyk

Publisher—IRWIN STEIN

Production Manager—HELEN SKALET


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INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION, published bi-monthly by Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th St., New York 17, N. Y. Single copy, 35¢; subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, \$3.50; elsewhere, \$4.50. Copyright 1955 by Royal Publications, Inc. Application for second class entry pending at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.  173

Had any bad nightmares lately? That's nothing; you'll be afraid to dream at all after you read . . .

traumerei

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

Illustrated by REMINGTON



AT THE sound, Henry Ritchie's hand jerked. Most of the martini sloshed out over his robe. He jumped up, swabbing furiously at the spots. "Goddam it!"

"Hank!" His wife slammed her book together.

"Well, what do you expect? That confounded buzzer—"

"—is a perfectly natural normal buzzer. You're just terribly upset, dear."

"No," Mr. Ritchie said, "I am *not* 'just terribly upset, dear'—for seven years I've been listening to that banshee's wail every time somebody wants in. Well, I'm through. Either it goes—"

"All right, all *right*," Mrs. Ritchie said. "You don't have to make a production out of it."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

Mr. Ritchie sighed ponderously, glared at his wife, set what was left of the martini down on a table and went to the door. He slipped the chain.

"Be this the marster of 'arfway 'ouse?"

Mr. Ritchie opened the door. "Max—what the devil are you doing up at this hour?"

A large man, well built, in his forties, walked in, smiling. "I could ask you the same question," he said, flinging his hat and scarf in the direction of a chair, "but I'm far too thoughtful."

They went back into the living room. Mrs. Ritchie looked up, frowned. "Oh, swell," she said. "Dandy. All we need now is a bridge four."

"Ruth's just terribly upset," Mr. Ritchie said.

"Well," the large man said, "it's nice to see unanimity in this house for once anyway. Hi, Ruth." He walked over to the bar and found the martini mix and drained the jar's contents into a glass. Then he drained the glass.

"Hey, take it easy!"

Max Kaplan turned to face his hosts. He looked quite a bit older than usual: the grin wasn't boyish now. "Dear folkses," he said, "when I die, I don't want to see any full bottles around."

"Oh, ha-ha, that's just so very deliriously funny," Mrs. Ritchie said. She was massaging her temples.

"I am glad to see her ladyship amused." Kaplan followed Mr. Ritchie's gaze. "Hickory dickory dock, the mice looked at the clock..."

"Oh, shut up."

"Oop, sorry." The big man mixed up a new batch silently, then refilled the three glasses. He sat down. The clock's tick, a deep sharp bass sound, got louder and louder in the room. Kaplan rested his head on the couch arm. "Less than an hour," he said. "Not even an hour—"

"I knew it." Mrs. Ritchie stood up. "I knew it the minute you walked in. We're not nervous enough, oh, no, now we've got to listen to the great city editor and his news behind the news."

"Very well!" Kaplan rose shakily. He was drunk; it showed now. "If I'm not welcome here, then I shall go elsewhere to breathe my last."

"Never mind," Mrs. Ritchie

said. "Sit down. I've had a stomach full of this wake. If you two insist on sitting up until X-hour like a couple of ghouls, well, that's your business. I'm going to bed. And to sleep."

"What a woman," Kaplan muttered, polishing off the martini. "Nerves of chilled steel."

Mrs. Ritchie looked at her husband for a moment. Then she said, "Good night, dear," and started for the door.

"See you in the morning," Mr. Ritchie said. "Get a good sleep."

Then Max Kaplan giggled. "Yeah, a real good sleep."

Mrs. Ritchie left the room.

THE BIG man fumbled for a cigarette. He glanced at the clock. "Hank, for Chris-sake—"

Henry Ritchie sighed and slumped in the chair. "I tried, Max."

"Did you? Did you try—I mean with everything?"

"With everything. Might as well face it: the boy's going to burn, right on schedule."

Kaplan opened his mouth.

"Forget it. The governor isn't about to issue a commutation. With the public's blood up the way it is, he knows what it would mean to

his vote. We were stupid even to try."

"Lousy vultures."

Ritchie shrugged. "They're hungry, Max. You forget, there hasn't been an execution in this state for over two years. They're hungry."

"So a poor dumb kid's got to fry alive in order for them to get their kicks. . . ."

"Wait a second now. Don't get carried away. This same poor dumb kid is the boy who killed George Sanderson in cold blood and then raped his wife, not too very long ago. If I recall, your word for him then was Brutal Murderer."

"That was the paper. This is you and me."

"Well, get that accusatory look off your face. Murder and rape—those are stiff raps to beat, pal."

"You did it with Beatty, you got him off," Kaplan reminded his friend.

"Luck. Public mood—Beatty was an old man, feeble. Look, Max—why don't you stop beating around the bush?"

"Okay," Kaplan said slowly. "They—let me in this afternoon. I talked with him again."

Ritchie nodded. "And?"

"Hank, I'm telling you—it gives me the creeps. I swear it does."

"What did he tell you?"

Kaplan puffed on his cigarette nervously, kept his eyes on the clock. "He was lying down when I went in, curled up tight. Trying to sleep."

"Go on."

"When he heard me, he came to. 'Mr. Kaplan,' he says, 'you've got to make them believe me, you've got to make them understand—' His eyes got real big then, and—Hank, I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I don't know. Just him, maybe. I'm not sure."

"He carrying the same line?"

"Yeah. But worse this time, more intense somehow . . ."

Ritchie tried to keep the smile. He remembered, all right. Much too well. The whole story was crazy, normally enough to get the kid off with a life sentence in the criminally insane ward. But it was a little *too* crazy, so the psychiatrists wouldn't buy.

"Can't get his words out of my mind," Kaplan was saying. His eyes were closed. "Mister, tell them, tell them. If you kill me, then you'll all die. This whole world of yours will die. . . ."

Because, Ritchie remembered, you don't exist, any of you, except in my mind. Don't

you see? I'm asleep and dreaming all this. You, your wives, your children, it's all part of my dream—and when you kill me then I'll wake up and that will be the end of you. . . .

"Well," Ritchie said, "it's original."

Kaplan shook his head.

"Come on, Max, snap out of it. You act like you never listened to a lunatic before. People have been predicting the end of the world ever since Year 1."

"Sure, I know. You don't have to patronize me. It's just that—well, who is this particular lunatic anyway? We don't know any more about him than the day he was caught. Even the name we had to make up. Who is he, where'd he come from, what's his home?"

My home . . . a world of eternities, an eternity of worlds . . . I must destroy, hurt, kill before I wake always . . . and then once more I must sleep . . . always, always . . .

"Look, there's a hundred vagrants in every city. Just like our boy: no name, no friends, no relatives."

"Then he doesn't seem in the least odd to you, is that it? Is that what you're telling me?"

"So he's odd! I never met a murderer that wasn't!" Ritchie recalled the lean hairless face, the expressionless eyes, the slender youthful body that moved in strange hesitant jerks, the halting voice.

THE CLOCK bonged the quarter hour. Fifteen to twelve. Max Kaplan wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"And besides," Ritchie said, somewhat too loudly, "it's plain ridiculous. He says—what? We're a dream, he's having, right? Okay—then what about our parents, and their parents, everybody who never heard of the kid?"

"First thing I thought of. And you know his answer."

Ritchie snorted.

"Well, think it over, for God's sake. He says *every* dream is a complete unit in itself. You—haven't you ever had nightmares about people you'd never seen before?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but—"

"All right, even though they were projections of your subconscious — or whatever the hell it's called—they were complete, weren't they? Going somewhere, doing something, all on their own?"

Ritchie was silent.

"Where were they going,

what were they doing? See? The kid says every dream, even ours, builds its own whole world—complete, with a past and—as long as you stay asleep—a future."

"Nonsense! What about *us*, when *we* sleep and dream? Or is the period when we're unconscious the time *he's* up and around? And keep in mind that everybody doesn't sleep at the same time—"

"You're missing the point, Hank. I said it was complete, didn't I? And isn't sleeping part of the pattern?"

"Have another drink, Max. You're slipping."

"What will you wake up to?"

"My home. You would not understand."

"Then what?"

"Then I sleep again and dream another world."

"Why did you kill George Sanderson?"

"It is my eternal destiny to kill and suffer punishment."

"Why? Why?"

"In my world I committed a crime; it is the punishment of my world, this destiny . . ."

"Then try this on for size," Ritchie said. "That kid's frozen stiff with fear. Since

he's going to have to wake up no matter what, then why not sit back and enjoy it?"

Kaplan's eyes widened. "Hank, how soundly do you sleep?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I mean, do you ever dream?"

"Of course."

"Ever get hold of any particularly vivid ones? Falling down stairs like, being tortured, anything like that?"

Ritchie pulled at his drink.

"Sure you have." Kaplan gazed steadily at the clock. Almost midnight. "Then try to remember. In that kind of dream, isn't it true that the pleasure—or pain—you feel is almost as real as if you were actually experiencing it? I remember once I had a nightmare about my old man. He caught me in the basement with a cigarette—I was eight or nine, I guess. He took down my pants and started after me with his belt. Hank—that hurt, bad. It really hurt."

"So what's the point?"

"In my dream I tried to get away from my old man. He chased me all over that basement. Well, it's the same with the kid—except his dream is a hundred times more vivid, that's all. He knows he'll feel that electric chair, feel the

jolts frying into him, feel the death boiling up in his throat just as much as if he were honest-to-God sitting there. . . ."

Kaplan stopped talking. The two men sat quietly watching the clock's invisible progress. Then Ritchie leaped up and stalked over to the bar again. "Doggone you, Max," he called. "You're getting *me* fidgety now."

"Don't kid me," Kaplan said. "You've been fidgety on your own for quite a while. I don't know how you ever made the grade as a criminal lawyer—you don't know the first thing about lying."

Ritchie didn't answer. He poured the drink slowly.

"Look at you and Ruth, screaming at each other. And then there was the other tip-off. The way you defended the kid—brilliantly, masterfully. You'd never have done that for a common open-and-shut little killer."

"Max," Ritchie said, "you're nuts. Tell you what: at exactly 12:01 I'll take you out for the biggest, juiciest, rarest steak you ever saw. On me. Then we'll get loaded and fall all over ourselves laughing—"

Ritchie fought away the sudden picture of steak, rare steak, with the blood sputter-

ing out, sizzling on an electric stove.

The clock began to strike. Henry Ritchie and Max Kaplan stood very still.

HE UNCOILED. The dry pop of hardened joints jabbed wakefulness into him until finally the twenty-foot long shell lay straight upon the steaming rocks. He opened his eyes, all of them, one by one.

Across the bubbling pools, far away, past the white stone geysers, he could see them coming. Many of them, swiftly, giant slithering things with many arms and many legs.

He tried to move, but rock grew over him and he could not move. By looking around he could see the cliff's edge, and he remembered the

thousand bottomless pits below. Gradually the rest formed, and he remembered all.

He turned to the largest creature. "Did you tell them?" He knew this would be a horrible punishment, worse than the last, the burning, far worse. Fingers began to unhinge the thick shell, peel it from him, leaving the viscous white tenderness bare to the heat and pain. "Tell them, make them understand, this is only a dream I'm having—"

They took the prisoner to the precipice, lingered a moment to give him a view of the dizziness and the sucking things far below. Then nervous hands pressed him forward into space.

He did not wake for a long time.

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