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# STARTLING STORIES

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EARLE BRIDLEY

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

**TETRAHEDRA  
OF SPACE**

*A Hall of Fame Classic*  
By P. SCHUYLER  
MILLER

FEATURING

*What*  
**MAD**  
**UNIVERSE**  
*An Astonishing  
Complete Novel*  
By FREDRIC BROWN

Starting Next Issue: THIRTY-TWO ADDITIONAL PAGES!

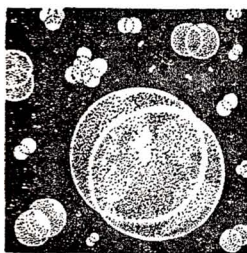
# STARTLING STORIES

Vol. 18, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

September, 1948

## A Complete Novel



## What Mad Universe

By FREDRIC BROWN

*When the first moon rocket fell back to earth with a flash, Keith Winton found himself catapulted into a world that couldn't be—a fabulous globe where men in jalopies were space masters!* 11

## A Hall of Fame Novelist

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*Only a quartet of Earthmen stood between the Mercurian invaders and planetary conquest! A classic reprinted by popular demand*

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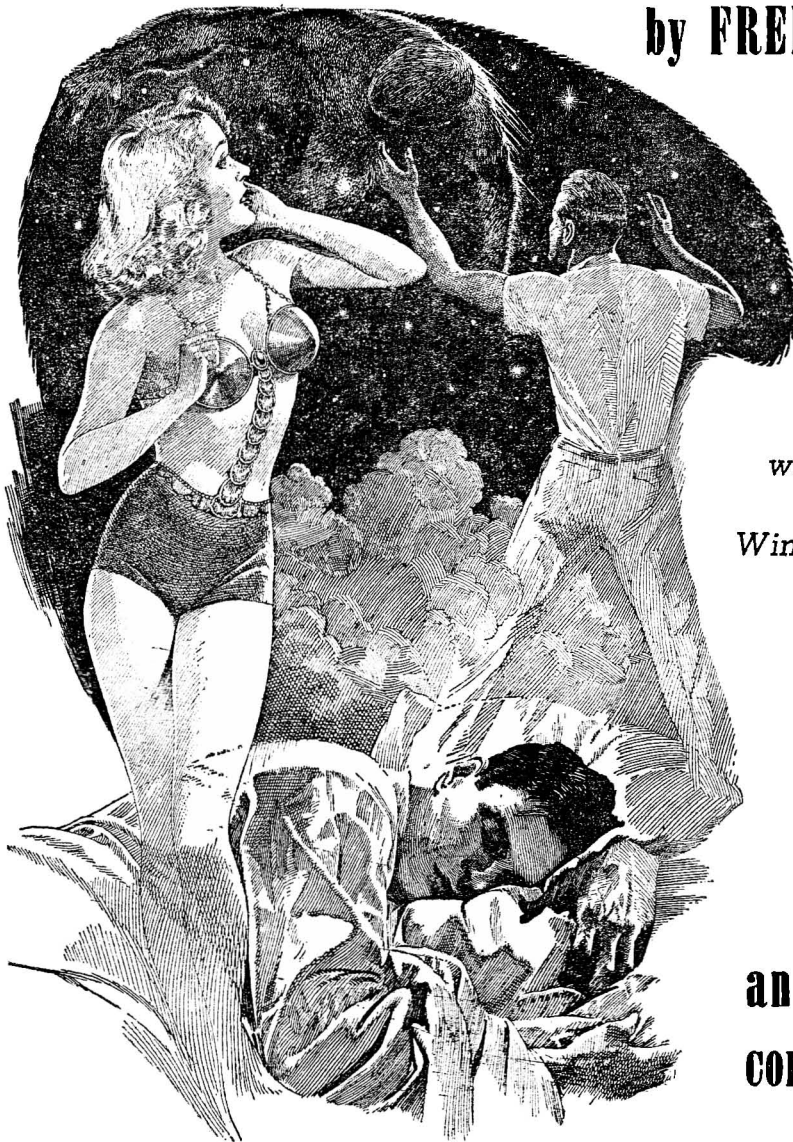
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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.



# WHAT MAD UNIVERSE

by FREDRIC BROWN



*When the first  
moon rocket fell  
back to earth  
with a flash, Keith  
Winton found himself  
catapulted into  
a world that  
couldn't be!*

**an astonishing  
complete novel**

## CHAPTER I

### *The Moon Rocket*

**T**HE first attempt to send a rocket to the moon, in 1952, was a failure. Probably because of a structural defect in the operating

mechanism, it fell back to Earth, causing a dozen casualties. Although not containing any explosives, the rocket—in order that its landing on the moon might be observed from earth—contained a Burton potentiometer set to operate throughout the journey through space to build

# The Planet of Dopelle Is the Fabulous Globe

up a tremendous electrical potential which, when released on contact with the moon, would cause a flash several thousand times brighter than lightning—and several thousand times more disruptive. Fortunately, it came down in a thinly populated area in the Catskill foothills, landing upon the estate of a wealthy publisher of a chain of magazines. The publisher and his wife, two guests and eight servants were killed by the electrical discharge, which completely demolished the house and felled trees for a quarter of a mile around. Only eleven bodies were found. It is presumed that one of the guests, an editor, was so near the center of the flash that his body was completely disintegrated. The next—and first successful—rocket was sent in 1953, almost a year later.

\* \* \*

**K**EITH WINTON was pretty well winded when the set of tennis was over but he tried not to show it. He hadn't played in years and tennis—he was just realizing—is definitely a young man's game. Not that he was old by any means—but at thirty-one you get winded unless you've kept in condition. Keith hadn't. He'd had to extend himself to win that set.

He extended himself a bit more, enough to leap across the net to join the girl on the other side. He was panting a little but he grinned at her.

"Another set? Got time?"

Betty Hadley shook her blond head. "Fraid not, Keith. I'm going to be late now. I couldn't have stayed this long except that Mr. Borden promised to have his chauffeur drive me to the airport at Greenville and have me flown back to New York from there. Isn't he a wonderful man to work for?"

"Uh-huh," said Keith, not thinking about Mr. Borden at all. "You've got to get back?"

"Got to," she said emphatically. "It's an alumnae dinner. My own alma mater and, not only that, but I've got to speak. To tell them how a love story magazine is edited."

"I could come along," Keith suggested, "and tell them how a science-fiction book is edited. Or a horror book, for that matter—I had *Bloodcurdling Tales* before Borden put me on *Surprising Stories*. That job used to

give me nightmares. Maybe your fellow alumnae would like to hear about it, huh?"

Betty Hadley laughed. "They probably would. But it's strictly a hen party, Keith. And don't look so downhearted. I'll be seeing you at the office tomorrow. This isn't the end of the world, you know."

"Well, no," Keith admitted. He was wrong in a way but he didn't know that.

He fell into stride beside Betty as she started up the walk from the tennis court to the big house that was the summer estate of L. A. Borden, publisher of the Borden chain of magazines.

He sighed. "You ought to stay around to see the fireworks, though."

"Fireworks? Oh, you mean the moon rocket. Will there be anything to see, Keith?"

"They're hoping so. Read much about it?"

"Not a lot. I know the rocket is supposed to hit the moon like a flash of lightning or something. And they're hoping it'll be visible to the naked eye and everybody's going to be watching for it. Sixteen minutes after nine, isn't it?"

"Right. I'm going to be watching for it anyway. If you get a chance—watch the moon dead center, between the horns of the crescent. It's a new moon, in case you haven't been looking, and it'll hit in the dark area. Without a telescope it'll be a faint small flash, like somebody striking a match a block away. You'll have to be watching closely."

"They say it doesn't contain explosives, Keith? What is it that will make the flash?"

"Electrical discharge—on a scale nobody's ever tried before. There's a new-fangled outfit in it—guy by the name of Professor Burton worked it out—that uses the kickback of the acceleration and converts it into potential electrical energy—static electricity, of a kind. The rocket itself will be something on the order of a monster Leyden jar with a tremendous potential.

"When it hits the surface of the moon and busts up the insulating layer outside—well, it'll make the grand-daddy of all short circuits. It'll be like a flash of lightning, only probably three or four thousand times stronger than the biggest lightning bolt that ever hit earth."

"Sounds complicated, Keith. Wouldn't



## Where Men in Jalopies Are Masters of Space!

an explosive charge have been simpler?"

"In a way, yes, but we'll get a lot brighter flash from this—weight for weight—than even from an atomic warhead. And what they're interested in is a bright flash, not an explosion. Of course, it *will* tear up a little landscape—not as much as an A-bomb, though more than a block-buster—but that's incidental. And they expect to learn a lot about the exact composition of the surface



BETTY HADLEY

of the moon by training spectroscopes on the flash through every big telescope available. They—"

They'd reached the door of the house and Betty Hadley interrupted by putting her hand on his arm. "Sorry to interrupt you, Keith, but I *must* hurry. Honestly, or I'll miss the plane. 'Bye."

She put out her hand for him to take but Keith Winton put his hands on her shoulders instead and pulled her to him. He kissed her and, for a breathless second, her lips yielded under his. Then she broke away.

But her eyes were shining—and just a bit misty. She said, "'Bye, Keith. See you in New York."

"Tomorrow night? It's a date."

She nodded and ran on into the house.

Keith stood there, a fatuous smile on his face, leaning against the doorpost.

**I**N LOVE again, he thought. And this time it wasn't quite like anything else that had ever happened to him. It was as sudden and violent as—well, as the flash on the moon was going to be at nine-sixteen tonight.

He'd known Betty Hadley only three days, seen her only once before this marvelous weekend—that had been Thursday when she'd first come to Borden Publications, Inc. The magazine she edited, *Perfect Love Stories*, had just been bought by Borden from a lesser chain. Part of the purchase contract had been that he could hire the editor who had done so well with it.

*Perfect Love Stories* had been a profitable magazine for three years now, due to Betty Hadley. The only reason the Whaley Publishing Co. had offered it for sale was that they were changing to exclusive publication of slicks. *Perfect Love* was their only surviving pulp.

So he'd met Betty Hadley on Thursday and, to Keith Winton, Thursday now seemed just about the most important day in his life to date. Friday he'd had to go to Philadelphia to see one of his writers, a guy who could really write but who'd been paid in advance for a lead novel and didn't seem to be doing anything about writing it. He'd tried to get the writer started on a plot, and thought he'd succeeded.

Anyway, he'd missed seeing Joe Doppelberg, his prize fan, who'd picked Friday to happen to be in New York and to call at the Borden offices. Maybe that was a gain, judging from Joe Doppelberg's letters.

And then, yesterday afternoon, he'd come out here at Borden's invitation. And just another weekend on the boss's estate (this was the third time Keith had been here) had turned into sheer magic when Betty Hadley turned out to be one of the other two guests from the office.

Betty Hadley—tall and lithe and golden blonde, with soft sun-tanned skin, with a face and figure that belonged on the television screen rather than in an editorial office—how *she* ever got to be an editor—

He sighed and went on into the house. In

the big walnut-paneled living room, Borden and Walter Callahan, head accountant for Borden, were playing gin rummy.

Borden looked up as he came in. "Hi, Keith. Want to take over after this game? It's nearly finished. I've got some letters to write and Walter would probably as soon take your money as mine."

Keith shook his head. "Got to do some work myself, Mr. Borden. I'm smack against deadline on the Rocketalk Department; I brought my portable and the letter file along."

"Oh, come now. I didn't bring you out here to *work*. Do it at the office tomorrow."

"Wish I could," Keith said. "But it's my own fault for getting behind and the stuff has to go to the printer tomorrow morning at ten sharp. They're closing the forms at noon. It's only a couple of hours work and I'd rather get it done now and be free this evening."

He went on through the living room and upstairs. In his room he took his typewriter out of its case and put it on the desk. From his brief-case he took the file-folder that held the incoming correspondence addressed to Rocketalk Department or, in the case of the less inhibited letters, to The Rocketeer.

On top of the stack was Joe Doppelberg's letter. He'd put it there because it had said Joe Doppelberg was coming to call in person and he had wanted to have it handy.

He worked paper into the typewriter and put down *Rocketalk* as a heading, then took a deep breath and dived in.

Well, fellow space-pilots, tonight—the night I'm writing this, not the night you're reading it—is the big night, *the* big night, and the *ole* Rocketeer was out there to see it. And see it he did, that flash of light on the dark of the moon that marked the landing of the first successful missile launched through space by man.

He looked at it critically, then yanked the paper out of the machine and put in fresh. It was too formal, too stilted. He lighted a cigarette and wrote it again and it came out better—or worse.

**I**N THE pause while he read it over he heard a door open and close and high-heeled footsteps clicking down the stairs. That would be Betty, leaving. He got up to go to the door and then sat down again. No, it would be anticlimactic to say good-bye

again, now, with the Bordens and Callahan around. Much better to leave it on the note of that quick but breathless kiss and the promise of seeing him tomorrow evening.

He sighed and picked up the top letter. It said:

Dear Rocky-Tear: I shouldn't ought to write you at all, because your last ish stinks to high Arcturus, except for the Wheeler yarn. Who ever told that mug Gormley he could write? And his space-navigation? The big bohunk couldn't peelot a rowboat across Mud Crick on a sunny day.

And that Hooper cover—the gal was okay, more than okay, tho what gals aren't on covers? But that thing chasing her—is it supposed to be one of the Mercurian devils in the Wheeler story? Well, tell Hooper I can think of scarier BEMs than them, cold sober, without even a slug of Venusian sappy-sap.

Why don't she just turn around and chase *it*? Keep Hooper on the inside—his black and white stuff is okay—and get somebody else for covers. How about Rockwell Kent or Dali? I'll bet Dali could make a dilly of a BEM. Get it, Rocky? Dali-dilly.

Lookit, Rocky, get the Uranian bug-juice ready and iced because I'm going to beard the lyin' in his den, come Friday. Not coming to Spaceport N'Yawk just to see you, Rocky, don't flatter yourself on that. But because I got to see a Martian about a dog-star anyway, I'll be in town, and I'm going to see if you're as ugly as they say you are.

One recent idea of yours, Rocky, is tops. That's running half-col pix of your best and regularest correspondents with their letters. So I got a surprise for you. I'm sending mine. I was going to bring it, but this letter'll get there before I do and I might miss an ish going to press in between.

Ennahoo, Rocky, kill the fatted moon-calf, because I'll be seeing you Friday.

Joe Doppelberg.

Keith Winton sighed again, and picked up his pencil. He marked out the paragraph about the trip to New York—that wouldn't interest the other readers and he didn't want to give too many of them the idea of dropping in at the office. He could waste too much time that way.

He penciled out a few of the cornier phrases in the other parts of the letter, then picked up the snapshot that had come with the letter and glanced at it again.



Joe Doppelberg didn't look like his letter. He was a not bad, rather intelligent looking, kid of sixteen or seventeen with a nice grin. Sure, he'd run it with the letter. Should have sent it to the photoengraver before but there was still time. He marked the copy to be set with a half-column runaround for a cut, wrote " $\frac{1}{2}$ -col Doppelberg" on the back of the photograph.

He put the second page of Joe's letter into



Keith pulled free of the Lunan and ran  
(CHAPTER III)

the typewriter, thought a moment and typed at the bottom:

"So okay, Doppelberg, we'll get Rockwell Kent to do our next cover. You pay him. But as for having the glamour-gals chasing the BEMs, it can't be done. Gals in stf are always chaste. Get it, Doppelberg? Chaste-chased. And that ain't half as bad as your Dali-dilly, either."

He took the page out of the typewriter, sighed and picked up the next letter.

He finished at six, which left him an hour before dinner. He took a quick shower and dressed and there was still half an hour left. He wandered downstairs and out the French doors that led to the garden.

It was just turning dusk and the new moon was already visible in the clear sky. The seeing would be good, he thought. And, darn it,

that rocket-flash had *better* turn out to be visible to the naked eye or he'd have to write a new opening paragraph for the Rocketalk Department. Well, there'd be time for that after nine-sixteen.

He sat down on a wicker bench beside the main path through the garden, and sniffed deeply of the fresh country air and the scent of flowers all about him. He thought about Betty Hadley, and just what he thought about her doesn't need to be recorded here.

But it kept him happy—perhaps happily miserable would be a better description—until his mind wandered to the writer in Philadelphia and he wondered if the so-and-so was actually working on that story or was out getting plastered.

Darn it, he really needed that novel for the October book. Borden had okayed the pay in advance but just the same it had been his, Keith's idea and Borden was going to blame him if the story didn't materialize.

He thought about Betty Hadley again and then he thought about all the criticisms the Hooper covers had been getting and wondered if he *could* find a cover artist who'd be really good on both beautiful heroines and horrible monsters. Hooper was a nice guy but he just didn't have bad enough nightmares to please the customers. Like Joe Doppelberg, most of the fans seemed to want—

The rocket, falling back to Earth, was traveling faster than sound and he neither saw nor heard it, although it struck only two yards away from him.

There was a flash.

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## CHAPTER II

### *The Purple BEM*

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**T**HERE was no sense of transition, of movement, nothing of lapse of time. One instant, Keith Winton had been sitting upon a wicker bench; in the same instant, it seemed, he was lying flat on his back staring up at the evening sky.

There had been the flash and *this*—simultaneously.

Only it couldn't have been merely that the wicker bench had collapsed under him—or even vanished from under him—because it had been under a tree and there was now

no tree between him and the sky.

He raised his head first and then sat up, for the moment too shaken—not physically but mentally—to stand up. Somehow he wanted his bearings first, before he quite trusted his knees.

He was sitting on grass, smoothly mowed grass, in the middle of a yard. Behind him, when he looked around, was a house—a quite ordinary house, but it wasn't Mr. Borden's house. It had the look, somehow, of a vacant house. At least, there was no sign of life, no light at any window.

He stared at the house wonderingly, then turned back to look the other way. A hundred feet away, at the edge of the lawn on which he sat, was a hedge and at the other side of the hedge were trees—two orderly rows of them, as though on each side of a road. They were tall poplars.

He stood up a bit cautiously. There was a momentary touch of dizziness but, outside of that, he was all right. Whatever had happened to him he wasn't hurt. He stood still until the dizziness passed and then started walking toward the gate in the hedge.

He looked at his wrist watch. It was five minutes of seven and that was impossible, he thought. Because it had been five minutes of seven, just about, when he'd been sitting on that bench in Mr. Borden's garden. And wherever he was now he couldn't have got here in nothing flat.

He held the wrist watch to his ear, and it was still ticking. But that didn't prove anything. Maybe it had stopped from—from whatever had happened and had started again when he had stood up and started walking.

He looked up again at the sky. No, it had been dusk then and it was dusk now. Not much time could have elapsed, if any. And the crescent moon was in the same place—at least it was the same distance from the zenith. He couldn't be sure here (wherever *here* was) about his bearings and directions.

The gateway through the hedge led to an asphalt-paved three-lane highway. As he closed the gate he looked again at the house and saw something he hadn't noticed before—a sign on one of the porch pillars that read *For Sale. R. Blaisdell, Greenville, N. Y.*

Then he must still be near Greenville, which was the nearest town to Borden's estate. But that was obvious anyway—the real question was how he could be anywhere at all out of sight of where he'd been sitting



only minutes ago. It was only seven o'clock, even now.

He shook his head to clear it. Amnesia? Had he walked here, wherever here was, without knowing it? It didn't seem possible, particularly in minutes or less.

He looked uncertainly up and down the asphalt roadway, wondering which way to walk. There wasn't another building in sight anywhere that he could see. But across the road were cultivated fields. If there was a farm there'd be a farmhouse. He decided to cross beyond the far row of poplars and see if he could see it from there. If not, he could just walk. Sooner or later he'd come to a place where he could ask questions and get his bearings.

He was halfway across the road when he heard the sound of the approaching car, still out of sight beyond the next rise. He went on to the far edge of the road, turned and waited. It wasn't coming fast from the sound of it and maybe—

It came into sight, then, a Model T of ancient vintage that just barely seemed to make the top of the hill it had been climbing. Then, as it chugged and began to gather speed again coming toward him, Keith stepped out into the road and held up his hand. The Ford slowed down and stopped beside him.

The man at the wheel leaned over and lowered the window on Keith's side. "Want a lift, mister?" he asked. He looked, Keith thought, almost too much like a farmer to be one. He was even chewing a long yellow straw, just the color of his hair, and his faded blue overalls matched his faded blue eyes.

**K**EITH put a foot on the running board and leaned his head into the car through the open side window. He said, "I'm afraid I'm lost. Do you know where L. A. Borden's place is?"

The farmer rolled the straw to the opposite corner of his mouth. He thought deeply, frowning with the effort.

"Nope," he said, finally. "Never heard of him. Not on this road. Mebbe over on the pike. I don't know all the farms there."

"It isn't a farm," Keith told him. "A country estate. He's a publisher. Where does this road go?"

"Greenville ahead, ten miles, or so. Back t'other way it hits the Albany Highway at Carteret. Want a lift to Greenville? Guess you can get your bearing there, find out

where this Borden lives."

"Sure," Keith said. "Thanks." He got into the car.

He was going to be late for dinner but at least he'd know where he was. In Greenville he could phone Borden and then hire a car to drive him out. He'd be there by nine at the latest.

The old car chugged along the winding road. His benefactor didn't seem to want to talk and Keith was glad of that. He wanted to think, instead, to try to figure out what possibly could have happened.

Borden's estate was a big one. If the driver of the ancient jalopy knew everybody along the road he couldn't possibly not have heard of Borden's place if it were very close. Yet it *couldn't* be more than twenty miles away, because it was ten miles from Greenville—and so was the spot where he'd been picked up along the road. Even if those ten-mile distances were in opposite directions. And even that far was silly, since it had been a matter of minutes at the most.

They were coming to the outskirts of a town now and he looked at his watch again. It was seven thirty-five. He looked out of the window of the car at the passing buildings—they were on a business street now—until he saw a clock in a window and compared his watch with it. The watch was right. It hadn't stopped and started again.

The jalopy swung into the curb and parked. "This is about the middle of town, mister," the driver said. "Guess you can look up your party in the phone book and you'll be all right."

"Sure—that's my best bet. Thanks a lot."

Keith went into the drugstore on the corner and to the phone booth at the back. There was a slender Greenville phone book hanging by a chain from one side of the booth and he leafed through it to the B's, and to—

There wasn't any Borden listed.

Keith frowned. Borden's phone was in the Greenville exchange. He remembered having called the number a time or two from New York City. And it had been a Greenville number all right.

Could it be an unlisted number? That was possible, of course. Wait a minute—he ought to be able to remember it—it had been three numbers all alike—ones. That was it—Greenville 111. He remembered wondering if Borden had used pull with the phone company to get himself a listing like that.

He pulled the door of the booth shut and

found a nickel out of the change in his pocket. But the phone was a type he hadn't seen before. There didn't seem to be any slot for a coin to go in. Maybe they didn't have coin phones in these little upstate towns, he decided, and he'd be supposed to pay the druggist for the call.

He picked up the receiver and, when an operator's voice asked, "Number, please?" he gave it. There was a minute's pause and then the operator's voice came back. "There's no such number listed, sir."

For a second, Keith thought he must be going crazy. Then he shook his head. He asked, "You have a phone listed for L. A. Borden? I thought that was the number. Can't find him listed in the phone book but I know he's got a phone."

"One minute, sir . . . No, there is no such name on our listings."

"Thanks," Keith said and put the receiver back.

He still didn't believe it. He stepped out of the booth and picked up the phone book again. He looked in it again and there still wasn't any L. A. Borden listed.

Suddenly he snapped the book shut and looked at the cover. It read, *Greeneville, N. Y.* A momentary suspicion that he was in the wrong Greeneville died and another fainter suspicion died before it was born when he read the smaller type—*Spring, 1952.*

He still didn't believe it somehow. He wanted to open that book and go through the B's again.

**I**NSTEAD, he walked forward to the soda counter and sat down on one of the old-fashioned wire-legged stools. Behind the counter the druggist—a little gray-haired man with thick spectacles—was polishing glasses. He looked up. "Yes, sir?"

"A Pepsi, please," Keith said. He wanted to ask questions but he didn't know what questions to ask. He watched while the druggist drew the Pepsi.

"Beautiful night out," the druggist said.

Keith nodded. He'd have to remember to watch for the flash of that moon rocket, whatever else happened. He looked at his watch. Almost eight—another hour and a quarter and he'd be outside, watching the dark of the moon.

He drank the Pepsi almost at a gulp. It tasted cool and good but it made him realize he was getting hungry. Eight o'clock—why,

dinner was over by now at the Bordens' place! He looked around back of the soda fountain for any signs indicating that the druggist served sandwiches or other food. Apparently he didn't.

Keith took a quarter out of his pocket and put it on the marble top of the soda fountain.

It rang metallically and the druggist dropped the glass he had been polishing. Behind the thick glasses the druggist's eyes got wide and scared, and he stood there without moving his body but his head swiveled back and forth from one end of the store to the other. He didn't seem to realize or notice that he'd dropped and broken a glass. The towel too fell from his fingers.

Then his hand went forward, covered the coin and picked it up. Again he looked both ways as though making sure he and Keith were alone in the store. Then, shielding the coin deep in his cupped hands, he stared at it, moving it close to his eyes. He turned it over and studied the other side.

Then his frightened eyes went back to Keith's face.

"Beautiful!" he said. "Hardly worn at all. And a nineteen twenty-eight." His voice was so soft it was almost a whisper. "But—who sent you?"

Keith closed his eyes and opened them again. "Either I'm crazy," he thought, "or he is."

"Nobody," he said.

The little druggist smiled slowly. "You don't want to tell. It must have been K. Well, never mind that, in case it wasn't. I'll take a chance. I'll give you a thousand credits for it."

Keith didn't say anything.

"Two thousand, then. I know it's worth more but that's all I can give you. If my wife—"

"All right," Keith said.

The hand that held—and concealed—the coin dived into the druggist's pocket like a prairie-dog popping into its hole. Unnoticed glass crunched under the druggist's shoes as he walked down to the cash register at the end of the counter and punched a key. *No Sale* came up behind the glass. He came back, counting bills, and put a pile of them in front of Keith Winton.

"Two thousand," he said. "Almost breaks me but I guess it's worth it. I'm a little crazy, I guess."

Keith picked up the bills and looked long and hard at the top one. There was a fa-





The match flame revealed a hideous scarred face—and above it a club raised to strike (CHAPTER V)

miliar picture of George Washington in the center of it. The figure in the corners was 100 and under the oval portrait of Washington was spelled out *One Hundred Credits*.

And that was silly, too, Keith thought. Washington's picture belonged only on *one* dollar bills. Unless things were different here. *Here?*

He looked again, read more printing. *United States of America*, he read. *Federal Reserve Note*. And it wasn't a new bill. It looked worn and circulated and genuine. There were the familiar little silk threads. A serial number in blue ink. To the right of the portrait, *Series of 1935*, and a reproduced signature, *Fred M. Vinson*, over fine type, *Secretary of the Treasury*.

Slowly, Keith folded the little stack of bills and put them into his coat pocket.

He looked up, and his eyes met those of the druggist, looking out at him through the thick spectacles, looking anxiously. The druggist's voice was anxious, too.

He said, "It's—it's all right, isn't it? You're not an agent? I mean, if you are you've *got* me now, for collecting and you might as well arrest me and get it over with. I took a chance and, if I lose, there's no use keeping me in suspense, is there?"

"No," Keith said slowly. "It's all right. Can I have another Pepsi, please?"

This time some of the Pepsi slopped out as the druggist put it down on the marble. And, as glass again crunched under the drug-

gist's shoes, he smiled nervously and apologetically at Keith, got a broom from the corner and began to sweep behind the counter.

**K**EITH sipped his second Pepsi and thought. If, that is, one could call the whirl of things inside his head thinking. It was more like a ride on a pinwheel. He watched until the druggist had finished with the broom.

"Look," he said. "I'd like to ask you a few questions that may seem—uh—crazy to you. But I've got a reason for asking them. Will you answer them, no matter how they sound to you?"

The druggist looked at him carefully. "What kind of questions, mister?"

"Well—what is the exact date?"

"June tenth, nineteen fifty-two."

"A. D.?"

The druggist's eyes got wider again, but he said, "Of course."

"And this is Greenville, New York?"

"Yes. You mean you don't know—"

"Let me ask," Keith said. "Do you know a man named L. A. Borden who has a big estate near here? A magazine publisher?"

"No. Of course I don't know everybody around here."

"You've heard of the Borden chain of magazines that he runs?"

"Oh sure. We sell them. New issues just came in today of some of them. Over on the stand there. The July issues."

"And the moon rocket? This is the night it lands?"

"I don't understand what you mean, 'This is the night.' It lands every night. It's in by now. We'll be getting customers any minute. Some of them drop in on their way to the hotel."

Again, for a moment, Keith closed his eyes. He thought, "I'm crazy or he is."

He opened his mouth to ask another question, closed it again. He was afraid. He wanted something familiar to reassure him and he thought he knew what it would be. He got up off the stool and walked over to the rack of magazines. He saw *Perfect Love Stories* first, and picked it up. The cover girl reminded him a little of the editor, Betty Hadley—only she wasn't as beautiful as Betty. How many magazines, he wondered, had editors more beautiful than their cover girls? But Betty Hadley—

He shoved Betty Hadley resolutely to the back of his mind and looked for *Surprising*

*Stories* and saw it. He picked it up too.

Yes, the July issue. Just the same as—

*Was* it? The cover was the same scene but the art work wasn't quite the same. It was better, more vivid. It was Hooper's technique, all right, but as though Hooper had been *taking lessons*. The gal on the cover was more breathtakingly beautiful than he'd remembered her to be from the cover proofs and the monster—he shuddered.

In general outline, it was the same monster but there was a subtle difference, a horrible difference, that he couldn't put his finger on—and felt he wouldn't *want* to put his finger on. Not even wearing asbestos gloves.

But the signature was there—when he was able to tear his eyes away from the monster. A tiny crooked characteristic H that was Hooper's way of signing all his pics.

And then, in the logo at the bottom right corner, he saw the price. It wasn't 20c.

It was 2 cr.

*Two credits?*

What else?

Very slowly and carefully he folded the two magazines, the two incredible magazines (for he saw now that *Perfect Love Stories* was also priced at 2 cr.) and put them into his pocket.

He wanted to get off somewhere by himself and study those two books, read and digest every word of them.

But first, he'd have to pay for them and get out of here. Two credits? How much *was* two credits? The druggist had given him two thousand credits for a quarter, but that could hardly be a criterion. That quarter, for some reason he'd have to learn, was a rare and precious object to the man who had bought it from him.

**N**O, THE magazines were a better clue. If their value were an approximate criterion, then two credits was roughly equivalent to twenty cents. And if that were true the druggist had given him the equivalent of—let's see—two hundred dollars for a quarter in hard money.

He shouldn't have done it—he should have been more careful—but the shock of seeing that almost-but-not-quite cover for the July book of his own doing made him a bit slapphappy for the moment. Change rattled in his pocket as he walked back to the soda counter. His hand plunged into his pocket and found a half dollar.

How would the druggist react to *that*?

Casually, he tossed it down on the marble. "I'll take the two magazines," he said. "Got change for a half?"

The druggist reached out a hand for the coin and the hand trembled.

Suddenly, Keith felt ashamed of himself. He shouldn't have done that. And it would lead to conversation, inevitably, that would keep him from getting off by himself to read the magazines.

He said gruffly, "Keep it. You can have them both—the quarter and the half—for what you gave me." He turned and started out of the store.

He started—that was all.

He took one step and froze. Something was coming in the open doorway of the drug-store. Something that wasn't human.

Something that was over seven feet tall—so tall that it had to stoop slightly to get through the doorway—and that was covered with bright purple fur except for its hands, feet and face. Its hands feet and face were purple, too. Its eyes were flat white disks, pupil-less. It didn't have a nose, but it had teeth, plenty of teeth.

And suddenly, from behind, a hand grabbed Keith's arm and the druggist's voice, suddenly fierce and shrill was shouting:

"Nineteen forty-three! *A fake!* And the other must be a fake, too. He's a spy! An Arcturian. Get him. Lunan. Kill him!"

The purple thing in the doorway made a shrieking noise that was almost supersonic in pitch. It spread its purple arms and came toward him looking like something out of a nightmare that Gargantua might have.

The druggist, yelling, "*Kill him! Kill him, Lunan!*" was climbing up Keith's back but—in the face of what was coming at him from the front of the store—Keith hardly noticed that.

He turned and ran the other way, to the back of the store, losing the druggist en-route. There *had* to be a door at the back of the store. If there weren't he had a feeling he'd *make* one.

He pulled free, heard his coat rip. He slammed the door and heard a yelp of pain—not a human one—behind him. But he didn't turn around. He ran.

He didn't turn until, half a block away, he heard the sound of a pistol report behind him and felt a sudden pain as though a red-hot poker were being drawn across his upper arm. He turned his head then, just for a second. The purple *thing* was coming after him. It was about halfway between the door he'd just left at the back of the store and Keith. But, despite its long legs, it seemed to run slowly and awkwardly. Apparently he could outdistance it easily.

The purple thing carried no weapon. The shot that had seared Keith's shoulder, he saw, had come from the little druggist who, a big old-fashioned revolver in his hand, was standing just outside the door. The pistol was aiming for another shot. He heard the shot as he dived into the areaway between two buildings—but the bullet must have gone past him harmlessly for he didn't feel it.

Then he was between the buildings and, for a moment, he thought he had run into a blind alley. There was only a blank brick wall at the end of the areaway. But there were doors to the buildings on either side and one of them was standing ajar. He closed and locked it behind him.

He stood there in the dimness, panting, and looked about him. He was in a hallway. Toward the street, stairs led upward. In the other direction, there was another door. That would lead to the alley.

Sudden hammering sounded on the door he had just entered—hammering and the babble of excited voices.

Keith ran to the back door, opened it and was out into the alley. He ran between two buildings that would front on the next street. He slowed down his pace as he neared the sidewalk and emerged at a normal walk.

He turned in the direction that would take him to the main street, half a block away, then hesitated. It was a fairly crowded, busy street. Was there safety or danger in crowds? He stood in the shadow of a tree a dozen paces short of the corner and watched.

It looked like normal traffic on a normal small city main street—for a moment. Then, walking arm in arm, two of the purple-furred monsters went by. The people before and after them paid no attention to them. Whatever they were, they were—*accepted*. They were normal. They belonged here.

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## CHAPTER III

### *Shoot on Sight*

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**T**HERE was a door. Something clawed down his back as he went through it.



*Here?* But where, what, when was *here*?

What mad universe that took for granted an alien race more horrible looking than the worst Bem that had ever leered from a science-fiction magazine cover?

What mad universe in which he was given what seemed to be the equivalent of two hundred dollars for a quarter and attacked when he offered a half-dollar? Yet whose credit-currency bore a picture of George Washington and current dates and which had provided—they were still folded in his pocket—current and only subtly different issues of *Surprising Stories* and *Perfect Love Stories*?

A world with asthmatic Model T Fords—and space-travel? There must be space travel. Those purple things had never evolved on Earth—if this were Earth. The druggist had said, about the moon rocket, "It lands every night."

And then—what was it the druggist had shouted just before the Bem had attacked him? "*An Arcturian spy?*" But that was absurd. Arcturus was light-years away. The druggist had called the monster *Lunan*. A proper name—or an inhabitant of Luna?

"... It lands every night. It's in by now. We'll be getting customers any minute. Some of them drop in on their way to the hotel."

Suddenly Keith was aware that his shoulder hurt him and that there was a wet, sticky feeling on his upper arm. He looked down and saw that the sleeve of his sport jacket was soaked with blood, looking black rather than red in the twilight and the shadow of the tree. And there was a deep gouge in the cloth where the bullet had creased it.

**H**E NEEDED attention for that wound, to stop the bleeding. Why not walk out there, look for a policeman—were there policemen here?—and give himself up, tell the truth?

The truth? What was the truth? Tell them, "You're all wrong. This is the United States, Earth, Greenville, New York, and it's June, nineteen hundred fifty-two, all right—but there isn't any space travel except an experimental rocket that hasn't landed yet and dollars are the currency and not credits—even if they've got Fred M. Vinson's signature and Washington's picture—and there aren't any purple Bems and a guy named L. A. Borden lives near here and will explain who I am."

Impossible, of course. From what he'd

seen and heard there was only one person *here* who would believe any of that and that one person would promptly be locked up in a nuthouse if nothing worse.

No, he didn't want to do that. Not yet, anyway—not until he'd had time to orient himself a little better and find out what it was all about.

Somewhere, blocks away, sirens wailed, coming closer. Police cars, if that siren-sound meant the same thing here that it did in more familiar surroundings.

Quickly he crossed the quiet side street, went through another alley and then, keeping in the shadows as much as possible, put another few blocks between himself and the main street. He shrank back into the shadow of another areaway as a squad car turned the corner with siren shrieking. It went past.

He had to find sanctuary somewhere, even though there was risk in finding it. He couldn't wander long this way without being seen—not with blood on his sleeve and the back of his coat, he remembered now, torn.

There was a sign *Rooms for Rent* in the window of the next building. Did he dare take a chance? The feel of blood running down past his elbow told him he'd have to.

Keeping in the shadows as much as he could, he went to the door and looked in through the glass. Perhaps, if he kept his bad side away from the clerk . . .

But there wasn't any clerk at the desk inside the door. There was a push-bell on the desk and a sign, *Ring for Clerk*. Perhaps . . .

He opened the door as quietly as he could and closed it the same way. He tiptoed to the desk and studied the rack behind it. There were a row of boxes, some with mail, a few with keys in them. He looked around carefully and then leaned across the desk and picked the key out of the nearest box. It was numbered 201.

He looked around again. No one had seen him. He tiptoed to the stairs. They were carpeted and didn't creak and 201 was right at the head of them.

Inside the room he locked the door behind him and turned on the light. Now, if only the occupant of 201 didn't come in within the next half hour, he had a chance.

He stripped off his coat and shirt and studied the wound. It was going to be painful but not dangerous. The gouge was half an inch deep but the bleeding was already slowing down.

He made sure by looking in the dresser

drawer that the missing occupant of 201 had shirts—within half a size of his own—and then he ripped apart the shirt he had just taken off and used it to bandage the arm, winding it around and around so that the blood would soak through slowly if at all.

Then he appropriated a dark shirt from the dresser—picking a dark one because his own had been white—and a necktie from the rack. One of three suits that hung in the closet was dark blue, a perfect contrast to his own light tan and he put it on. There was a straw hat too. At first he thought it too big for him but, with a little paper folded under the sweat-band, it served.

He made a quick estimate and translation of the value of the things he'd taken, and left a five-hundred-credit note on the bureau. Fifty dollars should be ample. The suit, the main item, was neither new nor expensive.

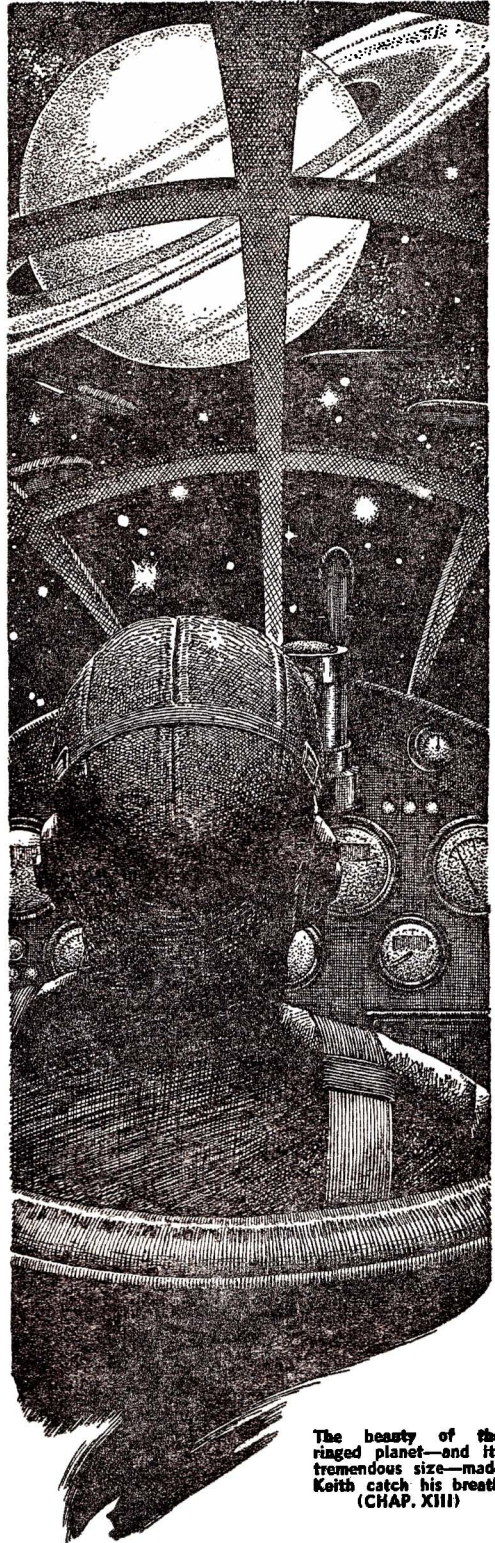
He made his own clothes into a bundle, wrapped with some newspaper that had been in the closet. Much as he wanted to study and read those newspapers, he knew that getting out of here and to a safer place came first.

He opened the door and listened. There was still no sound from the little lobby downstairs. He went down the stairs as silently as he had come up them and was safely outside again. Now, with a complete change of clothing, with no blood visible from his wounded arm, he needn't fear the prowling cars. Only the druggist—or the Lunan—could identify him and he'd give the drugstore a wide berth.

He got rid of his bundle in the first handy waste receptacle and then, walking as nonchalantly as he could, ventured onto the crowded main street of the town.

**N**OW, with his appearance reasonably changed, he dared look for sanctuary for the night—and a place where he could study at leisure the two magazines in his pocket. He had an idea those were going to be the most interesting magazines he'd ever read.

He walked in the direction opposite that of the drugstore where disaster had so nearly befallen him. He passed a man's haberdashery, a sporting goods store, a theater at which was playing a picture he had seen in New York two months before. Everything seemed normal and ordinary. The people about him were normal and ordinary. For a moment, he wondered if—



The beauty of the ringed planet—and its tremendous size—made Keith catch his breath (CHAP. XIII)



Then he came to a newsstand with a rack of newspapers in front of it. The headline read:

ARCS ATTACK MARS; DESTROY KAPI

Earth Colony Unprepared

Dopelle Vows Vengeance

He stepped closer to read the date. It was today's issue of the *New York Times*, as familiar typographically as the palm of his hand. He picked the top copy off the rack and went into the store with it. He handed the newsdealer a hundred credit note and got ninety-nine credits in change—all in bills like the ones he had except in smaller denominations. He stuffed the paper in his pocket and hurried out.

A few doors farther on was a hotel. He checked in, signing—after a second's hesitation while he picked up the pen—his right name and address. There wasn't any bell-hop. The clerk handed him the key and told him where to find the room, at the end of the corridor on the second floor.

Two minutes later, with the door closed and locked behind him, he took a deep breath of relief and sat down on the bed. For the first time since whatever had happened in the drugstore he felt safe.

He took the newspaper and the magazines from his pocket, then got up again to hang his coat and hat on the hanger inside the door. As he did so, he noticed two knobs and a dial on the wall beside the doorway, above a six inch circular area of cloth—obviously a built-in radio with the cloth covering a speaker outlet.

He turned the knob that looked like a rheostat and it was. A faint hum responded immediately. He turned the tuning dial until a station came in clear and strong, then turned down the volume a little. It was good music—sounded like Benny Goodman, although he didn't recognize the tune.

He went back to the bed, took off his shoes to be comfortable and propped pillows up against the head of the bed. He picked up, first, his own book, *Surprising Stories*. He stared again, with growing wonder, at the cover—incredibly the same picture, incredibly different.

He opened it quickly to the contents page and didn't even glance at the table of contents until he read the statement of owner-

ship. *That* was what came first.

. . . Borden Publications, Inc. . . . L. A. Borden, Editor and Publisher. Keith Winton, Managing Editor.

He found he'd been holding his breath a little. He belonged here then (wherever *here* was) and he still had a job. And Mr. Borden too—but what had happened to Borden's country estate, the estate that had literally fallen out from under him?

Another thought struck him, and he grabbed up the love story book and almost tore it getting it open to the contents page. Yes—Betty Hadley was Managing Editor.

It still read Whaley Publishing Co., of course. This issue was before Borden had bought the magazine.

Whatever mad universe this was, he had a job here and Betty Hadley was here.

He sighed a little with relief. Betty Hadley—this couldn't be too bad a place.

The tune on the radio stopped suddenly, as though someone had shut off a record. A voice cut in:

"Special news bulletin. Second warning to citizens of Greenville and surrounding territory. The Arcturian spy reported half an hour ago has not yet been apprehended. All railway stations and spaceports are being closely guarded and a house-to-house search is being instituted. All citizens are requested to be on the alert.

"Go armed. Shoot on sight. Mistakes may be made but again we remind you that it is better that a hundred innocent people die than that the spy escape to cause the loss, perhaps, of a million Terrestrial lives.

"We repeat the description . . ."

SCARCELY breathing, Keith Winton listened to that description. About five feet nine . . . one-sixty pounds . . . tan suit, white sport shirt open at the collar . . .

He let his breath out slowly. They hadn't discovered his change of clothes then. And there was no mention of his being wounded. The druggist, then, didn't know that one of the shots he'd fired had hit.

The physical description was fairly close but that couldn't be too dangerous if they didn't know the clothes he was wearing now or the fact that his upper arm would be bandaged. If only the man whose room he had burgled at the rooming house didn't come home and find the dark suit missing,



and tie it in with the broadcasts—

But—ye gods, what had he walked into? "Shoot on sight!"

At least that ended but definitely his half-formed intention to go to the police with the truth as soon as he'd oriented himself a bit. Somehow, he was in deadly danger here and there wouldn't be any chance to explain. Somehow he'd have to get back to New York, and—but what would New York be like? As he knew it or otherwise?

It was getting hot and stuffy in the room. He went over to the window and opened it, then stood looking out at the street below. So ordinary a street, such ordinary people. And then three of the tall purple monsters, arm in arm, came out of the theater lobby across the way and nobody on the street paid any attention to them.

He stepped back suddenly from the window, for one of the purple things might, for all he knew, be the one that had seen him in the drugstore; they all looked alike to him but it might recognize him if it saw him at the window.

He was trembling a little at a sudden thought. Was he crazy? If so, it was the craziest form of craziness he'd ever heard of and he'd studied abnormal psychology at college. And, if he were crazy, which was the delusion—this world he'd just discovered or his memories of a world without space travel and purple Bems?

Were all his memories wrong? Or—*what?*

There were footsteps along the corridor outside his door, footsteps of three or four people.

There was a knock at his door. A voice said, "Police."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Manhattan Madness*

**K**EITH took a deep breath and thought fast. The radio had just told him that a house-to-house search was being made. Probably that's all this was. As someone who'd just checked into the hotel he'd be investigated first, of course. Aside from his time of checking in, they could have no grounds for suspicion.

Was there anything on him that would

give him away if he were searched? His money—money that was in dollars and cents instead of credits. That was all. Quickly he took from his pocket the change he had left—a quarter, two dimes and some pennies. From his billfold he took the bills—three tens and some singles—that weren't credit bills. He wrapped the change in the bills, making a small tight wad, and reached out through the window, putting them on the corner of the window ledge out of sight.

Then he went and opened the door of the room.

Three men, two of them in police uniform, stood there. The uniformed ones held drawn revolvers in their hands. It was the other, the man in a gray business suit, who spoke.

He said, "Sorry, sir. We're making a routine check-up. You've heard the broadcasts?"

"Of course," Keith said. "Come in."

They came in, ready and alert. The muzzles of the pistols were aimed at his chest and they didn't waver a bit. The cold suspicious eyes of the man in gray didn't waver from his face either. But his voice was polite.

"Your name?"

"Keith Winton."

"Occupation?"

"Editor. Managing Editor, that is, of *Surprising Stories*." Keith gestured casually at the magazine lying on the bed.

The muzzle of one of the revolvers dropped a little and a broad grin came across the face of the man behind it.

"The heck!" said the uniformed man. "Then you run the Rocketalk Department, don't you? You're The Rocketeer?"

Keith nodded.

"Then maybe you remember my name? John Garrett. I've written you some letters and you published two of them." Quickly he transferred his pistol to his left hand and stuck out his right.

Keith shook it. "Sure," he said. "You're the guy who keeps trying to talk us into running color on our inside illustrations, even if we have to raise the price a d—" He caught himself quickly. "—a credit."

The man's grin got broader and his pistol dropped to his side. "Sure," he said. "That's me. I've been a fan of your magazine ever since—"

The man in gray cleared his throat. He said, "That'll do, Sergeant. We're on business, remember?"

But his attitude was more relaxed as he

smiled at Keith, and some of the stiffness had gone out of his face and voice. "Guess you're all right, Mr. Winton. But, as routine, do you have identification?"

Keith nodded and started to reach for the wallet in his hip pocket, but the man in gray said, "Wait. If you don't mind—"

And, whether Keith minded or not, he stepped around behind Keith and ran his hands swiftly over all of Keith's pockets, ending by removing the wallet himself, glancing inside it and then handing it back.

"Okay," he said, "if—"

He went to the closet, opened the door and looked inside. He opened the dresser drawers, looked under the bed, made a quick but reasonably thorough search.

"You have no luggage?"

Keith said, "Didn't expect to stay here overnight. Came on business and it took me longer than I expected."

**T**HE man in gray finished his search. He said, "Sorry to have bothered you. Mr. Winton. By the way, I'm Captain Hoffman. If there's anything I can do for you—you're going back to New York tomorrow morning?"

Keith had been thinking about that. Sometime tonight the man whose suit he was wearing was going to discover it was missing and possibly report it to the police. It might be better if he could run the gauntlet of the railroad station now, while things looked good.

He said, "I've been thinking about that, Captain. Going back in the morning, I mean. It'll get me in at the office so late; I think I'm going to change my mind and go back tonight. I was tired when I decided to stay over here but I'm feeling better now. Will I have any trouble at the station?"

"Possibly. They're screening pretty close at all the outlets. I'll write you a note if you like."

"Fine," Keith told him. "I'll appreciate it."

Half an hour later, he was on an uncrowded train to New York. He had a seat to himself and two hours of leisure to read the two magazines and the newspaper he had bought.

The newspaper came first.

ARCS ATTACK MARS; DESTROY KAPI

That was the news, the big news. He read

it carefully. Kapi, it seemed, was an Earth colony on Mars established in 1939, the fourth of the seven colonies established there. It was smaller than most of the others. There had been eight hundred and forty Terrestrial colonists. All had been killed as well as an estimated hundred and fifty Martian laborers.

Then, Keith realized, there must be Martians as distinguished from Terrestrial emigrants. What were they like? There wasn't any clue in the news article. Were they Bems—bug-eyed monsters like the purple beings from the Moon?

He read on. A single ship of Arcturians had somehow got through the cordon of spaceguards, and had launched a single torpedo before the Dopelle fighters had detected it. They had attacked at once and, although the Arcturian vessel had switched to interstellar flight, they had pursued and destroyed it.

Preparations were being made for a counter-raid. The details were, of course, a military secret.

There were a lot of names and things that meant nothing to him. Somehow it struck him strangely when he came across a familiar one—General Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, in charge of Venus Sector.

Then there were words and references that puzzled him—the phrase "all-city mist-out" and frequent references to "the renegades" and "the Nighters."

He went through the paper from first page to last, hunting clues to the differences between this world and the one he knew. There seemed to be so amazingly little difference on the domestic scene—so amazingly great a difference on the cosmic scale.

The society news was there, the sport news—St. Louis was leading one major league and New York the other—and the ads were the same except that prices were given in credits instead of dollars. But basically the same merchandise was offered—no slightly-used space ships, no Little Wonder Atomic Kits for the kiddies.

He studied the want-ads particularly. The housing situation seemed a bit better than he remembered it—occasionally a flat or house was offered for sale with the comment, "Emigrating to Mars," and one Pets for Sale ad offered a Venus cologne and another a moon-pup.

It was one o'clock when his train pulled into Grand Central. There were the usual

lights in the station, Keith noticed as he got off the train but there was something different otherwise in the atmosphere of the station—something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He realized, too, as he walked along with others down the long walk between the tracks to the main hall of the station, that the train had not been crowded. His car had been only a third filled.

There weren't any other trains unloading and all the redcaps seemed to have gone. Just ahead of Keith, a little man was struggling to carry three suitcases, one in each hand and one under his arm. He was having heavy going.

"Give you a hand with one of those?" Keith asked.

The little man said, "Sure—thanks," with real gratitude in his voice as he relinquished one of the suitcases. A twinge in Keith's left shoulder reminded him in time not to take the suitcase with his left hand.

He moved around to the right side of the little fellow and said casually, "Not much traffic tonight, is there?"

"That was the last train in, I guess. Shouldn't really run 'em *that* late. What's the use of getting in if you can't go home? Oh, sure, you got a better start in the morning, but—"

Keith said, "Sure," and wondered what they were talking about.

"Eighty-seven killed last night!" the little man said. "Sixty-some the night before. Just in New York and that's just the ones killed outright. Heaven knows how many got dragged down alleys and beat up but not killed." He sighed. "I remember when it was safe even on Broadway."

**H** E STOPPED suddenly and put down the suitcases. "Got to rest a minute,"

he said. "If you want to go on just leave that other one." He flexed his hands, cramped from the handles of the suitcases.

"No hurry," Keith said. He was casting about in his mind for ways in which he could ask questions without arousing suspicion. "Uh—I haven't heard a newscast for a while. Have you? Anything new?"

"Arcturian spy in the country. That was on early in the evening. That's worse news than Kapi." He shuddered slightly.

Keith nodded. "Haven't heard a newscast but I heard someone mention that. What's it about? I mean, how do they know there's one loose, if they didn't catch him?"

"*Catch* him? Lord, mister, you don't *catch* Arcturians; you kill 'em. But this one got away. Upstate in Greeneville. Tried to sell somebody some banned coinage and one of the coins was one of the Arc counterfeits, one of the wrong-dated ones."

"Oh," Keith said. It *had* been the coin, then. He'd felt pretty sure of it. He'd have to watch the rest of those coins he had. Maybe it would be smarter to get rid of them as soon as he could, down the nearest sewer. It would be so easy to forget and hand one to someone when he bought something small, instead of one of the credit bills.

Right now the coins, wrapped tightly in his dollar currency so they wouldn't rattle, made a hard and suddenly uncomfortable lump in his right trouser pocket. Maybe, he thought, he should have left them on the windowsill of his hotel room in Greeneville instead of recovering them, as he had, by pretending to lean out the window for a look around before he closed it and left the room with the Greeneville policemen.

No, that might have been dangerous, too. If he'd left them and they'd been found—

[Turn page]



well, they'd seen his name in his wallet; there'd be a tie-in between Keith Winton and the Arcturian spy they were looking for. And then the New York police would be looking for Keith Winton. Yes, it was well that he'd recovered them temporarily.

The little man flexed his hands again and picked up the two suitcases. "Guess I can make it the rest of the way," he said. "If you're ready—"

Keith picked up the other suitcase and they started along the tracks again toward the station lobby.

"Hope there are cots left," the little man said.

Keith opened his mouth and shut it again. Any question he asked might give him away—if it were a question to which he should know the answer without asking. He said, "Probably won't be," in a humorously pessimistic voice that could be taken as a joke if it was the wrong thing to say.

They were nearing the lobby now and a redcap came toward them. The little man sighed with relief and put down the suitcases and Keith handed over the one he'd been carrying.

"Cots?" the redcap asked them. "A few left."

"Yes," Keith's companion said. "For me, anyway." He turned to Keith. "You're not—uh—"

"Thanks, no," Keith said. "Think I'd better get home."

The little man shook his head slowly and sadly. "Too much of a chance for *me* to take. I'd rather be sure of seeing tomorrow. Well—good luck and thanks for the lift with that suitcase."

"Don't mention it," Keith said.

They were walking through now into the main lobby of the station. Keith almost stumbled.

There were army-type cots as far as he could see, in neat orderly rows in the dimly lighted lobby. On most of the cots people lay asleep.

Could the housing situation be *this* desperate? he wondered. No, it couldn't be that, not for the number of for-rent ads in the newspaper in his pocket. But what then? Why else were thousands of people sleeping uncomfortably and unprivately in Grand Central station?

If only there were some way he could ask questions without drawing attention and suspicion.

He threaded his way through the dimness, walking as quietly as he could so as not to awake the sleepers he passed, heading for the 42nd Street entrance. As he neared it he saw there were two policemen posted at each of the doors.

But he couldn't stop now. The ones he was approaching had seen him coming and were watching him. He tried to walk past them casually. He noticed now that the glass panels of the doors had been painted black on the outside.

The bigger of the two policemen spoke as Keith reached for the door to open it. But his voice was courteous, respectful—even, Keith thought, a little awed.

"Are you armed, sir?" he asked.

"No."

"It's pretty dangerous out there," the policeman said. "We haven't the authority to make you stay, but we advice it."

**D**ANGER! Was it some danger of which he knew nothing that kept these thousands of people, the late arrivals on the last trains from here and there, inside the station? What had happened to New York? But it was too late for him to back down now. Besides, he thought grimly, he was in danger *anywhere* until he knew the score and the ropes a lot better than he did.

He said as casually as he could, "Haven't far to go. I'll be all right."

"It's your business," said one of the cops. And the other grinned. "We hope it ain't your funeral. Okay, mister." He opened the door.

Keith almost stepped back. It hadn't been black paint on the outside of the panes. It had been—blackness. A kind of utter black darkness he'd never seen before. Not a glimmer of light showed anywhere. The dimmed lights inside the station didn't seem to cut into that blackness at all. Looking down, he could see the paving of the walk for only a foot or two beyond the edge of the open doorway.

And—was it his imagination, or was a little of that outside blackness drifting into the station itself, through the open door, as though it weren't darkness at all but a palpable blackness, a mist, a pall?

But he couldn't admit—whatever was out there—that he hadn't *known* about it. He had to go through that open doorway now, whatever it led to.

He walked through and the door closed be-

hind him. It had been like walking into a closet. This was a blackout beyond blackouts. It must be—he remembered that phrase—"the mist-out," one of the many things he'd wondered about while reading the newspaper. *This* must be it.

He looked up, and there wasn't a sign of moon or star—and it had been, in Greenville at least, a bright clear night. Yes, undoubtedly this wasn't darkness. It was a black mist.

Reaching out to touch the building and trailing his hand along it as he walked, groping with his free hand before him, he started walking west, toward the Vanderbilt Avenue corner. He kept his eyes open, straining against the black, but he might as well have closed them for all the good they did him. He knew now how a blind man felt. A cane, to tap ahead of him on the invisible sidewalk, would have been welcome.

Why hadn't he followed the little man's lead and taken a cot in the station?

His trailing hand encountered emptiness, the corner of the building. He paused a moment, wondering if he should go on at all. He couldn't go back into the station but why not just sit down here on the walk, his back to the building, and wait for morning—if morning *did* bring dissipation of the black mist?

Certainly getting to his bachelor apartment down in the Village was out of the question. Taxicabs *couldn't* be running. He had a hunch no other form of transportation would be running either. Only fools like himself would even be trying to get anywhere in soup like this.

But he decided against the sidewalk. There might be police patrols that would question him, wondering why he was outside the sanctuary of the station.

Now with only his shuffling feet to guide him, he made his way to the curb and out into the street. If there was any traffic—but there *couldn't* be.

He found the curb on the far side by falling over it, shuffled across the sidewalk and again was able to touch solidity with a guiding right hand as he groped along 42nd Street. Forty-second Street, only a few blocks from Broadway and Times Square, and he might as well have been in the deepest, darkest forest of Africa. There wasn't a sound, either.

Except the soft shuffle of his own footsteps and he realized that, for no conscious

reason, he was walking on tiptoe to disturb that awful quiet as little as possible. He traversed the short block to Madison, crossed it, and began to grope his way toward Fifth Avenue. Where *was* he going?

Well, why not Times Square? Unless he just sat down in the open, he had to be going somewhere and why not to the center of things? If there was anything going on in New York at all it would be there. And if Times Square were as bad as this he'd see if the subways were open. It might be light down in the subway stations—as in Grand Central—even if the trains weren't running.

Anywhere, out of this blackness.

He'd been trying every door he'd passed. They were all locked. He thought of the Borden Publishing Co. office, only three blocks south—and he had the key to it. But no, the outer door of the building would be locked. All these other buildings he'd been passing were locked.

He crossed Fifth Avenue. Across the street from him now would be the Public Library. For a moment he thought of going to it, and spending the night on the steps there. He'd try Times Square and the subway first.

He tried another door—locked, as had been all the others—but in the brief instant when his footsteps paused as his hand tried the knob, a soft sound came to his ears. The sound of footsteps approaching him from the direction of Broadway. Footsteps that were even more soft and cautious than his own, stealthy footsteps. Something inside told him that there was danger in them, deadly danger.

## CHAPTER V

### *The Nighters*

AS HE stood still the footsteps came closer. Whoever, whatever it was—there wasn't any way of avoiding a meeting, unless he turned and worked his way back the way he had come. It was, it seemed to Keith suddenly, a one-dimensional world. There was only forward and backward in it as long as they each—he and the unknown—groped their way along the building fronts. Like ants crawling along a string they must meet and pass unless one of them turned.

But before he made up his mind to turn it was already too late—a groping hand had touched him and a whining voice was saying, "Don't rob me, mister. I ain't got no money," and Keith sighed with relief.

"Okay," he said. "I'll stand still. You go around me."

"Sure."

Hands touched him lightly, and a strongly alcoholic breath almost made him gasp as the man groped past him.

There was a chuckle in the blackness. Just an old space dog on a spree," the voice said. "And rolled already. Look, mister, I'll give you a tip. The *Nighters* are out. A gang of twenty or thirty of 'em, over Times Square way. You better not keep on the way you're goin'."

The man was past him now. His hand still touched Keith's arm to maintain contact.

"They're the ones who robbed you?" Keith asked.

"Them? Mister, I'm *alive*, ain't I? Would I be if the *Nighters* had got me? I ask you."

"That's right," Keith said. "Maybe I'd better not go that way after all. Uh—are the subways open?"

"The *subways*? Man, you *really* want trouble, don't you?"

"Where is a safe place to go?" Keith asked.

"Safe? A long time since I heard that word. What's it mean?" A drunken laugh. "Mister, I was on the Mars-Jupe run in the days of the plat rush, when they said the last rites over us before they closed the airlocks. I'd as soon be back there as messing around this mist-out and playing tag with *Nighters*."

"How'd you know I wasn't a *Nighter*?"

"You kidding? How could one guy be a *Nighter*, when they go in armlock gangs and you can hear 'em tapping. We're fools to be out in this, mister. You and me, both of us. If I wasn't drunk—say, got a match?"

"Sure," Keith said. "Here's a box of them. Can you—?"

"I got the shakes, mister. Would you light one for me? And then, when I get a fag going, sure, I'll tell you a safe place we can hide out in for the rest of the night."

Keith scraped a match along the side of the box and struck it. The sudden flame made gray dimness out of the black mist for a radius of about a yard.

It revealed a hideous, leering, scarred face—and above it a club raised to strike. The

club started to come down the instant the match flared.

There wasn't time to duck that blow. Keith stayed alive in that instant by reacting quickly, instantaneously. He stepped in under the blow, thrusting the flaming match into that ugly face. The man's forearm, not the club, struck Keith's head a glancing blow. The club dropped and struck the sidewalk.

Then they were struggling, wrestling in the dark, with strong hands trying for Keith's throat, foul breath in his face and fouler words in his ears. He managed to avoid those strangling hands. He stepped back and struck. His fist connected solidly in the dark.

He heard his assailant fall—not knocked out, for he was still cursing. Under cover of that sound, Keith took three light, quick steps backward, away from the wall, out into the open blackness, and stood there quietly, not making a sound.

He heard his attacker scramble to his feet, breathing hard. For half a minute, perhaps, that breathing was the only sound in the world. Then there was another sound, a new one. It was a distant, soft tapping, like the tapping of a blind man's cane, but faster and manifold—as though a company of blind men were coming tapping through the dark, fast. The sound came from the direction he had been going—from the direction of Broadway and Times Square.

He heard a subdued mutter, "*Nighters!*" and the quick shuffle of footsteps as his former assailant started off. His voice, no longer cursing or even belligerent, came back: "*Run, pal. Nighters!*"

And the shuffle and scuffle of his footsteps died away as the tapping got louder and nearer. It was getting nearer incredibly fast.

**W**HAT were *Nighters*? Human beings? He tried to piece together the few things he'd heard about them. What had the man with the scarred face said about them? "When they go in armlock gangs and you can hear 'em tapping."

A gang of murderous ("Them? Mister, I'm alive, ain't I? Would I be if the *Nighters* had got me? I ask you?") desperadoes organized to prey in the superblackness of the mist-out?

Armlock? A row of them with locked arms, perhaps, from one side of the street to the other, so their prey couldn't escape?

The tappings was close now, only yards away. Coming faster than men can walk in



the dark, almost at a run. They had a system, somehow, that gave them speed.

Keith turned and ran, diagonally toward the line of the building fronts until his hand, outthrust, made scraping contact, and then along the buildings. Despite the risk of falling over some obstacle he couldn't see, he ran.

The danger behind seemed greater. The fear that had been in the voice of the man with the scarred face was contagious. That man—and he was no coward, however foul he was—had *known* what Nighters were, and he'd been afraid, plenty afraid.

Keith ran thirty or forty paces, then stopped to listen again. He'd gained. The tapping was farther off, maybe twenty yards away instead of five or ten. He could outdistance them then, as long as he dared to run. He went forward again, this time at a rapid walk for a counted twenty steps, and stopped again to listen. Yes, he'd held his distance even at that pace.

He started again, a little faster. He wanted to gain, not to stay even. Another twenty steps, again a pause to listen.

*Tapping*—from the opposite direction, ahead of him.

Quite a way ahead—he must be halfway down the block now. And that other sound could come from near the far corner—but definitely it was the same kind of sound as behind him, only more distant.

Two lines of them, coming from opposite directions, and he was in between. He stopped, his heart beating wildly now. He knew now what fear was. He could taste it in his throat.

The Nighters—whatever Nighters were—had him in the middle.

He stood there, hesitating, until the tapings behind him were so close he *had* to start running again—running toward the more distant danger to escape the closer one. Again, this time, he ran, blindly except for a hand trailing along the building fronts.

He ran about fifty paces before he stopped again to listen. There was the tapping from both directions now—and about equally distant either way. No use to run farther!

He crouched back into a doorway, caught. They'd have him within a minute now. Unless—

He groped for the handle of the door he leaned against, and tried to turn it. It was locked, of course. His frantic hands ran over the front of the door, felt the glass panel.

In desperation he swung his fist at the bottom corner of the glass and it shattered.

He should have cut his fist badly, but he didn't. As though luck had decided to give him a break at last, a small area of glass fell neatly inward. He had a glimpse of light inside as a thick curtain drawn down over the pane swung inward. He reached through the opening, turned the knob from the inside, and stumbled through the door.

The light inside almost blinded him as he slammed the door shut behind him.

A voice said, "Stop or I'll shoot."

Keith stopped, partly raising his hands. He blinked and could see again. He was in the lobby of a small hotel. Across the desk, a dozen feet from him, leaned a white-faced, very frightened looking clerk, holding a repeating shotgun whose muzzle looked as big as a cannon and was aimed straight at Keith's chest.

He said, "Don't come a step closer. Get back out. I don't want to shoot you, but—"

Without lowering his half-raised arms, Keith said, "I can't. *Nighters*. They're—"

The clerk's face got whiter. They could both hear the sounds of tapping.

The clerk's voice was just above a whisper, and it trembled. "Back up against that door. Hold the curtain fast against the break, so no light shows."

**K** EITH took a step backward and leaned against the door.

He and the clerk were both very silent. Would they see—or, groping, feel—that hole he had made in the glass? Was a knife or a bullet or something going to come through that hole and into his back. His skin crawled.

But nothing came through the hole. For a minute there was tapping, muffled voices. Human voices? Keith thought so. Then the sounds outside died away.

Neither of them spoke for almost three minutes. Then the clerk said, "Now get out. They've gone."

Keith kept his voice pitched as low as he could and still make it audible to the clerk. He said, "They're still nearby; they'll get me if I go out again. I'm not a robber. I'm not armed. And I've got money. I'd like to pay for that window I broke—and I'd like to rent a room if you've got one. If you haven't a room, I'll even pay to sit in your lobby all night."

The clerk studied him uncertainly, without lowering the gun. Then he asked, "What

were you doing—out there?"

"I came in from Greeneville—last train into Grand Central. I'd had word my brother was seriously sick and I took a chance on getting home—a dozen blocks. Hadn't realized quite how bad it was out there."

The clerk studied him closely. Finally he said, "Keep your hands up." He lowered the shotgun down to the counter, but kept his hand on it and his finger inside the trigger guard while, with his free hand he took a pistol out of a drawer behind the desk. "Turn around—your back toward me. I'll be sure you're *not* armed."

Keith turned and stood still while he heard the clerk come around the end of the counter. He stood even stiller while the business end of the pistol pressed into the small of his back and the clerk's hand ran over his pockets.

"Okay," the clerk said. "I guess you're all right; I'll take a chance. I *would* hate to send a dog out into—that."

Keith sighed with relief, and turned. "How much for the window, and a room?"

"A hundred creds will cover both. That rack of magazines and pocket books—give me a hand to put it in front of the door. It's high enough—it'll block off the break in the glass."

He took one end of the rack and Keith the other. The rack blocked off the door perfectly. Keith's eye was caught by the titles of some of those pocket books—one in particular. He noticed the price too—2½ cr. Apparently the rule of one credit to ten cents held pretty well.

And a hundred credits—ten dollars—for the pane of glass and a room for the night was reasonable enough. Not that he would have quarreled at a thousand credits, rather than go out again into the horror that was Forty-second Street.

He followed the clerk back to the desk and signed a registration card. He took a hundred-credit note and a fifty from his wallet. He said, "I'm going to pick out two or three of those pocket books to read. You keep the change."

"Sure, thanks. Here's your key. Three-o-seven—third floor front. You'll have to walk up and find it yourself. I've got to stay here on guard."

Keith nodded and pocketed the key. He walked quickly back to the book rack and picked a book called *Is the Mist-out Worth It? That one, for sure.*

His eye ran over the other titles. Some of them were familiar, others were not. H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*—he grabbed that one quickly. He could get a lot he needed to know out of that book. What for third choice? There was lots of fiction but he didn't want that. He wanted redder, more concentrated meat. *Dopelle, the Man, The Story of Dopelle, Dopelle, Hero of Spacewar.*

There were half a dozen books on Dopelle—and where had he heard that name before? Oh, sure—in the newspapers, the general in charge of Terrestrial space fleets. Well, if there were that many books about him out of only a few dozen titles, then maybe it would be well to skim through one of them. He picked *The Story of Dopelle*—it didn't even surprise him to notice that it was by Paul Gallico.

The walk up to the third floor told him how tired he was. His wounded shoulder was beginning to ache. So, for that matter, did the knuckles of his right hand. The glass had not cut them by a miracle but they were bruised and sore.

He found the room by the dim light in the hall, went in and turned on the light. It was a pleasant, comfortable room, with a nice soft bed that he looked at longingly. But he didn't dare get into it until he'd found out a few things he might learn from the books he'd bought in the lobby.

He undressed enough to be comfortable and sat down to read. First, *Is the Mist-out Worth It?* That one he was going to skim fast but he wanted to find out what the mist-out was. Luckily its history was fairly well summarized in the opening chapter.

**T**HE mist-out, he learned, had been perfected by a German professor in 1934, shortly after the destruction—by Arcturian action—of Chicago and Rome. The destruction of Chicago—in which eight million people had died—had happened early in 1933.

Immediately, every large city in the world had enforced a strict blackout but, later in that same year, another Arcturian vessel slipped the cordon and Rome—perfectly blacked-out—had been destroyed. Fortunately, however, that particular Arcturian ship had been captured with a few members of the crew still alive.

Through the use of something or someone called Mekky—the author assumed that all of his readers knew all about Mekky, and failed to explain—it had been learned from

the surviving Arcturians that they had detectors which picked up hitherto unknown rays—other than light rays—emitted by electrical incandescence.

They could thus locate a city through the lights burning within closed buildings, for the buildings were as transparent to the so-called epsilon rays as they were to radio waves.

For a while it seemed that the only safety for Earth's cities lay in going back to candles or gaslight for illumination at night. (Electric lights could be used for interior daylight lighting, for sunlight damped out the epsilon rays before they left the atmosphere.)

But Dopelle had retired to his laboratory and worked on the problem. From his findings of the nature of epsilon rays a German professor had worked out the epsilon gas which constituted the mist-outs which were now required by the Greater Earth Council for all cities larger than a hundred thousand population.

It was a substance of strange properties indeed. Odorless, harmless to life, it was impervious to light and to epsilon rays. Inexpensively made from coal tar, one plant could turn out enough in a few hours each evening to mix with the air and blanket a city completely. Sunlight disintegrated it at dawn in the space of a few minutes.

Other Arc ships had been through the cordon since then but no major city of Earth had been damaged. Undoubtedly the mist-out had saved many millions of lives. There was no sure way of knowing how many Earth cities would have been destroyed without it.

But it had taken lives too. Law enforcement agencies in many major cities had found themselves almost completely helpless to combat growing crime waves. Under cover of the mist-out, the streets of big cities had become no-man's-lands. In New York, for example, five thousand policemen had died.

The situation was aggravated by the strong tendency of combat veterans who had fought in space to turn to crime, a psychosis to which possibly a third of them succumbed. Finally, in many of the larger cities, attempts to maintain order at night had been abandoned.

Respectable citizens were simply warned to keep off the streets at night. Even the police stayed under cover from dusk to dawn and vicious gangs held sway. Some gangs, such as the Nighters of New York, the

Bloodies of London and the Lennies (Keith wondered if the name came from Lenin's) in Moscow, had adopted specialized techniques and seemed fairly well organized.

Hundreds died nightly. The situation would have been worse except for the fact that the hoodlums killed and robbed one another more often than honest citizens, who stayed home.

The mist-out was, therefore, a big price to pay for immunity to space attack. Possibly a million people had died in the mist-out—but probably twenty to fifty million lives had been saved. The author pointed out the destruction by Arcturian ships of fifteen towns and small cities—too small to have mist-outs, too small to be not expendable—and reasoned, that except for the mist-outs, those fifteen flaming hells would have been cities of from a million to ten million people.

Keith shivered a little as he put down *Is the Mist-out Worth It?* If he'd bought that book in Greeneville he'd have known better than to have left Grand Central Station. He'd have taken a cot there or slept on the floor. Night life on Broadway wasn't what it had been where *he'd* come from.

He walked to the window and stood looking—well, not *out*, exactly, but at the blank blackness that was the pane. The curtain wasn't pulled down, but that didn't matter on any but a first floor window.

Six feet away, outside, one wouldn't be able to see the lighted window at all. It was an uncanny kind of blackness. And what was going on down below there on Forty-second Street, only a block and a half from the center of the universe?

Criminals taking over Forty-second Street! Spaceship runs to Mars, war with Arcturus. What mad universe was he in?

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Sewing Machines Rampant*

**W**ELL, wherever, whatever it was, he was here and he was stuck with it and he was going to be in continuous danger until he learned the ropes well enough so that he wouldn't risk making a break every time he did or said anything.

Breaks weren't safe in a spot where you could get yourself shot on sight as a spy

on no provocation at all, where you could get yourself killed by being foolish enough to try to walk from Grand Central Station to Times Square after dark.

Resolutely, he picked up the pocket edition of H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*. He was too tired to sit up any longer. He'd lie on the bed to read and, if he went to sleep—well, he'd finish reading in the morning and find out as much about things as he could before going out to face them.

He picked up the Wells book and started to read, skimming lightly through the early chapters. There was no difference in them. They even had the same pictures. He'd happened to reread the book recently and was familiar with it. The Egyptians, the Greeks, the Roman Empire, Charlemagne, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Columbus and America, the American Revolution, Civil War, the Industrial Revolution . . .

#### *Into Space.*

That was the chapter heading, nine-tenths of the way through. He quit skimming and leafing over pages and started to read.

Nineteen hundred and three. An American scientist at Harvard had discovered the spacewarp drive. Accidentally! Working on, of all things, his wife's sewing machine, which had been broken and discarded. He was trying to change it around so the treadle would run a tiny home-made generator to give him a high-frequency low-voltage current that he wanted to use in some class experiments in physics.

He'd finished his connections—fortunately he remembered afterwards just what they'd been and where he'd made his mistake—and he'd worked the treadle a few times when his foot stamped unexpectedly on the floor and he nearly fell forward out of his chair. The sewing machine, treadle and generator and all, just wasn't there any more.

The professor, Wells humorously pointed out, had been sober at the time but he quickly remedied that. After he sobered up he borrowed his wife's new sewing machine, and lost that. He didn't know where they were going.

He rigged up a third one and this time he got witnesses, including the president and the dean of the university. He didn't tell them what they were going to witness. He just told them to watch the sewing machine. They did and then the sewing machine wasn't there to watch.

They didn't know what they had, but they

knew they had something new. They relieved Professor Yarley (that was his name) of his teaching duties and gave him a grant to finance his experiments. He lost a few more sewing machines and then quit using sewing machines and began to get the thing down to the essential minima.

He found he could use a clockwork motor—connected that particular way—to the generator. The treadle wasn't necessary. He didn't have to use a bobbin but the shuttle was necessary and had to be of ferrous metal. And an electric motor running the generator canceled something out; it wouldn't work.

Foot-power through a treadle, hand power, clockwork or his son's toy steam engine. He got it down to a comparatively simple layout of stuff mounted on a box—boxes were cheaper than sewing machines—he'd wind a spring, release the lever and—well—it went *somewhere*.

Then one day there was a news story that something at first thought to be a meteor had struck the side of a tall building in Chicago. Upon subsequent examination it proved to be what was left of a wooden box and some oddly assorted clockwork and electrical apparatus.

Yarley took the next train to Chicago and identified his handiwork. He knew then that the thing moved through space and he had something to work on. Nobody had timed the striking of the object against the Chicago building to an exact second but, as nearly as he could get it timed, Yarley decided that the object had traveled from Harvard to Chicago in just about nothing flat.

The university gave him some assistants then and he began experimenting in earnest, sending out the things in considerable numbers, with identifying serial numbers on them and with an accurate record kept of variations in number of windings, the exact amount of power applied, the direction in which it had been facing and all such data. Also, he publicized what he was doing and got people watching for them all over the world.

Two were reported. By comparison with his records he learned some important things. First, that the machine traveled in the exact direction of the axle of the generator part—second, that there was a relationship between the number of windings and the distance it traveled.

Now he could really go to work. By 1904



he had determined that the distance the machine traveled was proportionate to the cube of the number of turns or fractional turns on the generator and that the duration of the trip was actually and exactly nothing flat. By cutting the generators down to toy size he could send a machine for a comparatively short measured distance—a few miles—and make it land in a particular field outside of town.

**I**T MIGHT have revolutionized transportation in general, except that the machines were always damaged seriously, internally and externally, when they landed. Generally there was barely enough of them left for identification, not always that much. And it wasn't going to make much of a weapon; explosives sent never arrived. They must have exploded enroute, somewhere in the warp.

In three years of experimentation, they got it worked out to a nice formula and even began to understand the principles back of it as well as to be able to predict the results. They determined that the reason the things were destroyed was their sudden materialization, at the end of the journey, in air.

Air is pretty solid stuff. You can't displace a quantity of it in nothing flat without damaging whatever does the displacing—not only damaging it as an object, but damaging its very molecular structure.

Obviously, the only practical place to which an object could be sent was into space, open space. And, since the distance increased as the *cube* of the windings, it wouldn't take a very large machine to reach the moon, or even the planets.

Even interstellar travel would not take a really monstrous one, especially as the thing could be done in several hops, each taking no longer in time than it took the pilot to press a button.

Furthermore, since time was a zero factor, no trajectories need be calculated. Simply aim directly at a visible planet or the moon, adjust the distance factor, and there you were, materializing in space a safe distance from the planet and ready to descend and land.

How to land took them a few years to work out—the science of aerodynamics hadn't been solved yet and, anyway, there wasn't supposed to be any air on the Moon, the first and most obvious objective. But in

1910 the first man landed on the Moon and returned safely. The habitable planets were all reached within the next year.

The next chapter was *The Interplanetary War* but Keith Winton couldn't read it. It was three-thirty in the morning. He'd had a long day and things had happened to him. He simply couldn't hold his eyes open. He reached out and turned out the light and was asleep almost before his head dropped back on the pillow.

It was nearly noon when he awakened. He lay there for a moment before opening his eyes, thinking of the crazy dream he'd had about a world with space-travel and Bems and war with Arcturus. And mist-outs and—

He rolled over a little and his shoulder hurt so that he opened his eyes and saw an unfamiliar ceiling over his head. It was a shock, and it made him fully awake and he sat up in bed quickly. He looked at his wrist watch. Eleven forty-five! Rats, he was late for the office. Or was he?

He was horribly mixed up, unoriented. He got out of bed, and walked over to the window. Yes, he was on Forty-second Street, on the third floor, and there, across the street, was the Public Library. The street was filled with normal traffic and the sidewalks were crowded as ever, with ordinary-looking people wearing ordinary clothes. It was the New York he knew.

He stood there, puzzling, trying to fit his *being* here in New York into the scheme of things. The last thing he remembered that really made sense was his sitting in a chair in Mr. Borden's garden. After that—

*Could* he have come back to New York other than in the way he seemed to remember it—and have supplied, somehow, a nightmare for his memories of the trip? If so he was overdue to see a psychiatrist. Was he crazy? He must be. Yet *something* had happened to him yesterday. He put his hand to his shoulder gently and it was plenty sore under the bandage.

Well, he'd get out of here, go home and—well, he couldn't plan any further than that just yet. He'd go home first.

He turned around and walked to the chair where he had put his shirt and trousers. Something on the floor beside the bed caught his eye. It was a copy of H. G. Wells' *Outline of History*.

His hands trembled a little as he picked it up and opened it to the contents page.

That would be the quickest. The third last chapter was *Into Space*, the second last *The Interplanetary War* and the last chapter *Struggle Against Arcturus*.

The book dropped out of his hand. He reached to pick it up and saw another one slid slightly under the bed. It was called, *Is the Mist-out Worth It?*

He sat down in the chair and didn't do anything for a few minutes except to think, to adjust his mind to the fact that whatever had happened had *really* happened. The mist-out last night with its jungle savagery, the—

He reached back for his trouser pocket and got his wallet. There were credit bills in it and not dollars. A little over a thousand credits, which would be a little over a hundred dollars.

**S**LOWLY he dressed and walked back over to the window. It was still Forty-second Street and still ordinary but it didn't fool him now. He remembered what it had been like at one o'clock last night and shuddered a little.

He caught a flash of purple in the crowd below and across the street and looked closer. It was a purple Bem, all right, walking into the library—and nobody was paying any more attention to it than they would have paid to a bank clerk or an insurance salesman.

He sighed deeply, put the H. G. Wells pocket book and the Paul Gallico one on Dopelle into his coat pockets and decided to leave the one about the mist-out. He knew all he really had to know about the mist-out—stay indoors out of it.

He went downstairs and out through the lobby. A different clerk was on duty at the desk and didn't even glance at him.

Now that he was fully awake he was hungry. Eating was the first order of business. He hadn't eaten since noon yesterday.

A quiet little restaurant a few doors west looked inviting. Keith went in and sat at a little table along one side. He studied the menu. There was a choice of a dozen entrées, and nine of them were familiar. The other three were the most expensive items—Martian *zot a la Marseille*, roast *kraïl* with *kapi* sauce and *gallina de luna*.

That last, if Keith remembered his Spanish, would be moon chicken. Some day, he decided, he was going to eat moon chicken, Martian *zot* and roast *kraïl* but right

now he was too hungry to experiment. He ordered goulash.

Goulash didn't require concentration and, while he ate, he skimmed through the final two chapters of Wells. Wells was bitter about the so-called interplanetary war. He saw it purely as a war of conquest with Earth the aggressor.

The inhabitants of the Moon and of Venus had proved friendly and exploitable—and had been exploited. The intelligence of the lunans (yes, they were the purple Bems) was about that of an African savage of Earth but they were much more docile. They made excellent laborers and still better mechanics, once they had been introduced to the mysteries of machinery.

The Venusians, although almost as intelligent as Earthmen, were creatures of a quite different order. Interested solely in philosophy, the arts and abstract mathematics, they had welcomed the Earthmen, avid for exchange of cultures and ideas. They had no practical civilization, no cities (or even houses), no possessions, machines or weapons.

Few in number, they were nomads who—aside from the life of the mind—lived as primitively as animals. They offered no barrier and every assistance—aside from work—to man's colonization and exploitation of Venus. Earth had established four colonies there, aggregating a little short of a million people.

But Mars had been different.

The Martians had the silly idea that they didn't *want* to be colonized. They had, it turned out, a civilization at least equal to ours, except that they had not yet developed space travel (which, after all, had been an accidental discovery on Earth—if it hadn't been for the Professor's sewing machine the space warp principle might not have been discovered, mathematically, for a millenium).

The Martians had greeted the first arrivals from Earth gravely and courteously (the Martians did everything gravely; they had no sense of humor) and suggested they return home and stay there. They'd shot the second arrivals and the third.

And, although they'd captured the space ships in which these parties had arrived, they'd not bothered to use or copy the machines. They had no desire to leave Mars, ever. In fact, Wells pointed out, no Martian had ever left Mars alive even during the interplanetary war.

A few, captured alive and put on Earth-bound ships for demonstration and study here, had willed themselves to death as soon as the ships had left the thin atmosphere of Mars. The same was true of Martian plants and animals. They could not or would not live anywhere else. No single specimen of Martian flora or fauna graced botanical gardens or zoos of Earth.

The so-called interplanetary wars, therefore, were fought entirely on the surface of Mars, and had been a bitter struggle in which the Martian population had been several times decimated. They had, however, capitulated short of annihilation and permitted colonization of Mars by Earthmen.

Only Earth and its moon, Venus and Mars had turned out to be inhabited by intelligent beings in the Solar System. Saturn supported plant life of a strange sort and a few of the moons of Jupiter bore plant life and wild animals.

Man met his match—an aggressive, colonizing race of intelligent beings—only when he went beyond the Solar System. The Arcturians had had the space drive for centuries. It was only by chance—for the universe is wide indeed—that they had not yet visited the Sun's planets. Having learned of us through an encounter near Proxima Centauri, they set about to remedy that omission.

The current war against Arcturus was, on Earth's part, a defensive war—although it involved such offensive tactics as we could muster. And thus far it had been a stalemate. Defensive tactics on both sides being more than adequate against known offenses. By fortunate early capture of a few Arc ships Earth had quickly overcome the technical handicap of a few centuries under which it had started the war.

Currently, thanks to the leadership of Dopelle, Earth had, in some ways, a slight advantage—although it was still a war of attrition.

Dopelle! That name again. Keith put down the H. G. Wells book, and started to take *The Story of Dopelle* out of his pocket when he realized that he had long since finished eating and was attracting curious glances just sitting there.

He paid for his meal and went out. The steps of the library across the street looked inviting. He could sit there and read some more. But there was his job to be considered.

Did he work for the Borden Publishing Co.—here and now—or didn't he? If he did,

having missed a Monday morning might not be unforgivable. Missing a whole day might be. And it was well after one o'clock already.

He walked east and then south, to the office building in which—on the tenth floor—Borden Publications was located.

He took the elevator up.

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## CHAPTER VII

*Mekky*

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THAT beautiful outer door was very familiar, one of those modern ones that look like nothing more than a sheet of glass with a futuristic chrome handle on it; you couldn't even see the hinges. The lettering *Borden Publications, Inc.* was just below eye height, small and chaste, in chrome letters suspended right inside the thick glass.

Keith took the handle very carefully so he wouldn't fingerprint that beautiful sheet of nothingness, opened the door and went in.

There were the same mahogany railing, the same pictures—hunting prints—on the walls and the same plump little Marion Blake with the same pouting red lips and upswept brunette hairdo, sitting at the same stenographer-receptionist desk back of the railing.

It gave him a funny little thrill to see her there—not because Marion herself could give him any thrill but because she was familiar. She was someone he *knew* and she was the first person he'd seen since—gosh, was it only since seven o'clock yesterday evening? It seemed like ages!

He'd seen familiar things and familiar places but not a familiar face. True, the address in the copy of *Surprising Stories* (at 2 cr.) had told him that Borden Publications was still here, but it wouldn't really have surprised him to find a purple Bem at Marion's reception desk.

For just a second, the familiar sight of her there, and the office being so completely usual, so completely as he remembered it, made him doubt his memory of the past eighteen hours.

It couldn't be, it simple *couldn't*—

Then Marion had turned and was looking up at him and there wasn't a trace of recognition in her face.

"Yes?" she asked, a bit impatiently.

Keith cleared his throat. Was she kidding? Didn't she know him or was she just acting funny?

He cleared his throat again. "Is Mr. Keith Winton in? I'd like to speak to him, please." That could pass as a gag to counter hers; if she grinned now, he could grin back.

She said, "Mr. Winton has left for the day, sir."

"Uh—Mr. Borden. He in?"

"No, sir."

"Is Be—Miss Hadley in?"

"No, sir. Nearly everybody left at one. That's the regular closing this month."

"The regu—oh," he stopped himself in time before he could pull a boner by being incredulous about something he undoubtedly should know. "I forgot," he finished lamely. Why, he wondered, would one o'clock in the afternoon be the regular closing (she must mean the regular closing *time*) and why this month in particular?

"I'll be in tomorrow then," he said. "Uh—what would be the best time to catch Mr. Winton?"

"About seven."

"Se—" He caught himself starting to repeat incredulously again. Did she mean seven in the morning or in the evening? No, it couldn't be seven in the evening. It'd be almost time for the mist-out then.

Suddenly he guessed the answer and wondered why he hadn't thought of it sooner. The mist-out, of course—in a New York in which the streets were sudden death after dark, a New York without night life at all, the hours of work would *have* to be different in order to give employes any personal lives of their own at all.

It would change things completely when you had to be home before dark—probably well before, in order to assure safety. The working day would be from six or seven in the morning—an hour or so after early sunrise dissolved the mist—until one o'clock in the afternoon. And that would give people afternoons which would be the equivalent of evenings.

Of course—it would have to be that way. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it himself. Then Broadway wasn't dead, and there would still be shows and night clubs and dance halls and taverns—but their time to howl would be afternoons.

And everybody would be safely home in bed by, say, seven or eight and sleep until about four o'clock so they'd be up and dressed

by dawn—and, of course, that's what she meant by one o'clock being the closing time *this month*.

It would have to vary somewhat according to the seasons, as the days shortened and lengthened. And probably regulated by local law, because Marion had expected him to know it, had looked surprised that he hadn't.

Marion, he noticed, was putting things into the drawer of her desk, getting ready to leave. She looked up again as though wondering why he was still there.

He said, "Isn't your name Blake—uh—Marion Blake?"

Her eyes widened a little. "Why, yes, but—"

"I thought I was remembering you." Keith was thinking fast, things he'd heard Marion say, girl friends he'd heard her mention, where she lived, what she did.

He said, "A girl named Estelle—I forget her last name—introduced us at a dance—wasn't it Queens?" He laughed a little. "Isn't it funny I can't remember Estelle's last name but I remember both *your* names?"

**S**HE dimpled at him for that compliment. "Well, I live in Queens, and I guess you mean Estelle Rambow, but I don't remember—"

"I wouldn't have expected you to remember my name," Keith assured her. "It's—Karl Winston. And we danced just once that night. I remember, though, that you told me you worked for a magazine publisher but I didn't know that it was here. And you told me you wrote—poetry, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't really call it poetry, Mr. Winston. Just verse, really."

"Call me Karl," Keith said, "since we're old friends, even if you don't remember it. You're leaving now?"

"Why, yes. I just had two letters to finish after one o'clock and Mr. Borden said if I'd finish them I could come in half an hour late tomorrow, and—"

"Good," he said. "I mean, I'm glad you were late. Will you have a drink with me?"

She hesitated. "Well—just a quick one, maybe. I've got to be home by two-thirty. I've got a date then."

"Fine," Keith said. And he meant it. Over one drink he could find out a few things he wanted to know and he didn't want to be stuck with Marion for the whole afternoon.

They took the elevator down and he let Marion choose the place, a little bar around



the corner on Madison.

Over a pair of cocktails he said, "I think I mentioned to you that night that I'm a writer—doing feature stuff up to now. I've decided, though, to take a flyer at some pulp fiction. I've done a little of it, not much. But that's why I was up at your office. I wanted to find out just what kind of stuff they want right now, lengths and so on."

"Well, I think they're fairly well stocked on the detective stories. I guess Miss Bradley is looking for short lengths for her love book, and I understand they can use both short *and* long stuff for the adventure books."

"How about science-fiction? I think I'd be best at that."

Marion Blake looked up in surprise. "Oh, you've heard about that then?"

"About what?"

"That Borden's going to start a science-fiction magazine."

Keith opened his mouth, and closed it again. He thought, "I've got to remember not to be surprised whatever anyone says." So, in silence, as though thinking out an answer, he wondered why Borden would be starting a (not *another*) science-fic when he still had a copy of *Surprising Stories* with the Borden imprint in his pocket.

He said cautiously, "I did hear a rumor to that effect."

"It's true. They've got one issue dummied up. They'll start it as a quarterly with a fall issue. And they've filled only that first issue. They *are* looking for material beyond that."

Keith nodded and took a sip of his drink. Casually, he reached into his back pocket and took the folded copy of *Surprising Stories* from it—the copy he'd bought in Greeneville and hadn't yet read because he'd spent all his reading time first on a newspaper and then on *Is the Mist-out Worth It?* and H. G. Wells. Casually he put it down on the table to see what comment Marion might make about it.

She said, "Oh, I see you've been reading our top adventure book. Thinking of writing for that one, too?"

He said, "A guy named Keith Winton edits this one, I see. That's why I asked for him. Could you tell me something about him?"

"Why—what do you want to know?"

"Oh, anything to give me a line on him. What's he look like?"

Marion frowned a little. "He's tallish—a little taller than you—and slender. Dark.

Wears shell-rimmed glasses. About thirty, I think. Serious-looking, kind of." She giggled a little. "Guess he's more serious than usual lately."

"Huh? Why?"

"I think he's in love," she said archly.

Keith managed a smile. "With you?"

"*Me?* He never even *sees* me. No, with our new love book editor. Not that it does him any good, of course."

Keith wanted to know why but that "of course" warned him off. When people said, "Of course," it meant you were already supposed to know. But how could he be supposed to know something about Betty Hadley, other than her name as editor of the love book mag? Still, if he could keep Marion talking —

"Kind of tough on him, huh?" he said.

"I'll say." Marion sighed deeply. "Gee, any girl in the world, I guess, would give her eye-teeth to trade places with Betty Hadley."

"Would you?"

"Would *I?* Are you kidding, Mr. Winston? To be fiancée of the greatest man in the world, the most handsome, the most romantic, the most—*golly!*"

"Oh," said Keith, a bit flatly in spite of himself. He gulped the rest of his drink and raised a finger to signal the waitress. He wondered who Betty's fiancée was. How, without revealing ignorance of something he ought to know, could he get his girl to keep on talking? He didn't have to.

"Gee," she murmured. "*Dopelle!*" It sounded almost like a prayer it was so reverent.

Well, he knew now. And anyway, he thought, she's only engaged, not married. Maybe there was a chance yet.

**M**ARION BLAKE glanced at her wrist watch. "Got to go," she said. "Thanks for the drink, Mr. Winston. You'll be in at the office tomorrow?"

"Or the next day," Keith told her. He paid for the drinks and walked with Marion to the subway.

Then he headed for the public library and took a seat at one of the tables. He took the three publications he had left in his pockets out of them and put them on the table before him—the copies of *Surprising Stories* and *Perfect Love*, and Gallico's *The Story of Dopelle*.

He glanced at the latter bitterly. From the

little he'd heard or read—little only because he'd *been* in this screwy place less than twenty-four hours—this mug Dopelle had it in his pocket. He was the hero of the whole solar system and, to top everything else, he had Betty Hadley, too. Darn the guy!

He picked up the pocket book and put it down again. Once he started it he wanted to read it through, and that would take all afternoon. There was a comparatively minor matter he could settle first—what had Marion Blake meant by saying that Borden was going to start a science-fiction book?

He picked up *Surprising Stories* and verified the Borden imprint on it and on the contents page. Borden *did* have a science-fiction magazine. He glanced down the table of contents, remembering the names of most of the writers, names almost as familiar as the name Keith Winton listed as managing editor in the fine type at the bottom. A few of the titles were familiar—they'd been in his own version of that issue.

He leafed through it, first glancing at the illustrations. They were better than his, definitely, even though some of the artists were the same ones. They were more vivid, had more action. The girls were more beautiful and the monsters more horrible.

He started reading one of the stories, the shortest one. He finished it, still vaguely puzzled although a light was beginning to dawn. He dipped into a few other stories, skimming—and suddenly he knew what Marion Blake had meant.

This *wasn't* a science-fiction book! They were mostly stories of the Arcturus-Sol war, although some were stories of adventure on Mars and Venus—but the backgrounds were consistent and the backgrounds fitted what little he'd heard and read of Mars and Venus and Arcturus and—

Well, these *were* adventure stories. It stunned him for a minute.

He smacked the book down on the table, drawing a reproving glance from a librarian.

But, he thought, there must *be* science-fiction books here or Borden wouldn't be starting one. But if these stories were fact what would be science-fiction be? Well, time-travel, for one thing and—what else didn't they have here? Well, he could read some science-fiction and find out.

He picked up the Dopelle book and stared at it bitterly again. *Dopelle!* He hated the guy. Anyway, now he knew how to pronounce his name, having heard Marion say

it—it was pronounced as though it were French—Dough-PELL, with only two syllables and the accent on the second.

He sighed. That book came next, definitely, on his course of reading. But should he start it here and now? No. There were more important things to do and they all had to be done before dark. He had to find a place to stay and a way to make money to live.

He took out his wallet and counted what he had left out of the two thousand credits—the two hundred dollars approximately—the Greeneville druggist had given him. There was about half of it left. Enough maybe, to last him a week if he was careful—certainly not longer than that, since he'd have to buy himself some shirts and sox and a toothbrush and a razor and comb and heaven knows what else, starting from scratch.

Or did he, in this universe, still have a closet and a bureau full of clothes in a nice little two-room bachelor apartment down on Gresham Street in Greenwich Village? He considered the possibility and discarded it.

If this universe were equipped with a Keith Winton (who obviously didn't even resemble him) who had his job at Borden Publications, then this wasn't a universe with a neat hole for him to fit into, anywhere.

No, here and now he had to be Karl Winston and make a niche for himself—at least until he found out what it was all about. He'd be walking a tightrope for awhile too—one mistake and it would be too bad.

But *how, what, where?*

**H**E SHOVED those wonderings resolutely aside. There must be an answer, maybe even a way back. But survival came first and his mind must be free to plan and to plan intelligently. How could he parlay a hundred bucks worth of credits into a future?

He thought, and figured and planned. After awhile he went to the desk and borrowed paper and a pencil from the librarian. Returning to his table he began to make a list of things he'd need and its length appalled him. But, he thought, when he had it finished that he could do it for about forty dol—four hundred credits—he corrected himself—and have six hundred to live on for awhile.

Outside he saw with relief that some of the stores were still open—although it was three o'clock in the afternoon now.

He found a dime-store that was operating

and started there, realizing that he couldn't afford to be fastidious about little things and things that wouldn't show. He started with a small cardboard suitcase, the cheapest he could find. He went on from there to socks and handkerchiefs and razor and toothbrush and on down the list.

Gauze bandage and an antiseptic for his shoulder—pencils and a ream of paper—the list seemed endless and, when he had added a few shirts from a cheap haberdashery shop, the suitcase was almost full.

He had the suit he was wearing sponged and pressed while he waited in a cubicle at the back of a cleaner's shop and he had his shoes shined.

His final purchase, and it left him almost exactly five hundred credits, was an armful of pulp magazines of various kinds. He took his time picking them out, especially for the purpose he had in mind.

It was while he was making that final purchase that the crowd must have gathered. When he came out of the drugstore where he'd bought the magazines the edge of the sidewalk was lined half a dozen deep and, from down the street a block or so, came the sound of wild cheering.

He hesitated a moment and then stood still, backed against the window of the drugstore. Whatever was coming he could see better there than by pushing up against the crowd at the curb.

Something or someone was coming. The cheering grew nearer. Keith saw that all traffic had stopped and pulled toward the curbs. Two policemen on motorcycles came along and behind them was a car with a uniformed man at the wheel.

There wasn't anyone in the back seat of the car but above it, floating in midair about ten feet above the car and keeping pace with it, was *something*. It was a round, featureless, blank metal sphere the size of a basketball.

The cheering grew as it came nearer.

Keith stared, incredulous. Other people had backed up alongside him to see better.

He heard words now that were part of the cheers and recognized one of them. "Mekky! Mekky! MEKKY!" And someone beside him yelled, "Get the Arcs for us, Mekky!"

But over or under the cheering, Keith suddenly heard a voice that *wasn't* a cheering, yelling voice. It was a calm, clear voice that seemed to come from everywhere or nowhere.

"Very interesting, Keith Winton," it said. "Come and see me some time."

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## CHAPTER VIII

### *Advice from a Sphere*

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KEITH started violently and looked around him. No one near him was looking at him. But the suddenness with which he turned made the man to his right turn and stare.

"Did you hear that?" Keith demanded.

"Hear what?"

"Something about—about a Keith Winton?"

"You're crazy," the man said. His eyes left Keith's and went to the street again, and he yelled at the top of his voice, "Mekky! 'Ray for Mekky!"

Keith stumbled out from the building into the open area of walk between the crowd at the back of the sidewalk and the crowd at the curb. He tried to keep pace with the car and the thing that floated above it, the basketball-sized sphere. He had the strangest feeling that it was that *thing* which had spoken to him.

If so, it had called him by name and no one else had heard it. Now that he thought of it that voice hadn't seemed to come from outside at all. It had been inside his head. And it had been a flat, mechanical-sounding voice. It hadn't sounded like a human voice at all.

Was he going crazy? Or *was* he crazy?

But whatever the explanation, he had a blind impulse not to lose sight of—of whatever the basketball was. It had called him by name. Maybe it knew the answer to why he was here—to what had happened to the world as he, Keith Winton, knew it—to the world in which there'd been two world wars but no interplanetary ones, to the world in which he'd been editor of a science-fiction magazine which—*here*—was an adventure magazine and was edited by someone who had the name of Keith Winton but didn't even look like him.

Was the basketball-sized sphere Mekky?

Maybe Mekky had the answers. Mekky had said, "Come and see me some time!"

He stumbled into people, his suitcase banged legs, he drew sharp looks and sharp

words—but he kept going, not quite keeping up with the pace of the car out in the street but not losing much ground either.

And the voice came inside his head again. "*Keith Winton,*" it said. "*Stop. Don't follow. You'll be sorry.*"

Keith started to yell his answer. "Why? Who are—" and realized that, even over the cheering, people were hearing him and turning to stare.

"*Don't attract attention,*" the voice said. "*Yes, I can read your thoughts. Yes, I am Mekky. Do as you have planned and see me later—three months from now.*"

"Why?" Keith thought. "Why so long?"

"*A crisis in the war,*" said the voice. "*The human race is at stake. The Arcturians can win. I have no time for you now.*"

"What shall I do?"

"*As you have planned,*" the voice said. "*And be careful. You are in danger every minute.*"

Keith tried desperately to frame a question that would give him the answer he sought.

"But what happened? Where am—"

"*Later,*" said the voice. "*Later I will try to solve your problem. I perceive it through your mind but I do not know the answer yet.*"

"Am I crazy?"

"*No. And do not make one fatal mistake. This is real—it is not a figment of your imagination. Your danger here is real and if you are killed here you are very dead. I have no time now. Stop following.*"

Abruptly in Keith's mind, before he could again hear the sounds of cheering and the other noises, there was a sudden sensation of silence. Whatever had been in his mind had withdrawn. He knew that without knowing how he knew. He knew there wasn't any use framing another question there. There wouldn't be any answer.

Obedient to the last order he stopped walking. He stopped so suddenly that someone bumped into him from behind and snarled at him.

He caught his balance and stood staring down the street, over the heads of the crowd, at the sphere that was floating away from him, out of this life. What was it? What kept it up there? Was it *alive*? How could it have read his mind? And it seemed to know who he was, what his problem was—but not the answer.

He didn't want to let it go. Wait three months? Impossible when he could get the

answer now! But he couldn't keep up with that car through the crowd while he was burdened with the suitcase and the armful of magazines. He looked about him wildly and saw that he was in front of a cigar store.

He darted in and put the suitcase and magazines down on a soft drink cooler near the entrance. He said, "Back in just a second. Thanks for watching these," and ran out again before the man could protest.

OUTSIDE again he could go faster. He held his ground half a block behind the car and the motorcycles and even gained a little. They turned south on Third Avenue, west—just around the corner—on Thirty-seventh Street. And there was a big crowd gathered there. The motorcycles and the car stopped at the edge of the crowd.

The sphere that had floated above the car didn't stop. It floated on and up, over the heads of the people. Up, up, to the open window.

It was Betty Hadley.

Keith Winton got to the edge of the crowd and stopped. No use pushing his way farther—he could see better here than closer in against the building. The cheering was tremendous.

Besides "Mekky," he heard "Dopelle" and "Betty" in with the cheers. The sphere floated up until it was level with the open window, beside Betty Hadley's shoulder. It paused there, hovering.

It spoke. This time, Keith knew instinctively, it was not speaking to him alone, as it had back there when it had first passed him. He knew somehow that the words he was hearing inside his head were echoing in the heads of all who stood there.

The cheering didn't even stop. It didn't have to, Keith realized. The words that formed inside his head, in that mechanical voice, were different in nature from the sounds that came through his ears. He could hear both at once and one didn't interfere with the other.

"*Friends,*" said the voice, "*I leave you now to bear a message from my master Dopelle to Miss Hadley. A private message, of course. I thank you for the courtesy you have shown. And, from my master, these words to all of you—'The situation is still critical, and we must all do our best. But be of good cheer. There is hope for victory. We must win—we shall win.'*"

"Mekky!" the crowd roared. "Dopelle!"



"Betty!" "Victory!" "Down With Arcturus!" "Mekky, Mekky, MEKKY!"

Betty Hadley, Keith saw, was smiling, her cheeks and throat flushed with embarrassment. Now she bowed once and withdrew her head and shoulders inside the window. The sphere floated in after her.

The crowd began to disperse.

Keith groaned. He tried to hurl a thought at the sphere but he knew it was too late. It wouldn't pay any attention to him if it heard him, if it received the thought.

Well, it had warned him. If it had been inside his mind it must have known that he loved Betty and it had warned him not to follow. It would have saved him the despair and bitterness that he was feeling now.

It hadn't meant much—not too much, that is—when Marion Blake had told him that Betty was engaged. As long as she wasn't actually married there was hope for him, he'd thought. He'd hoped he could make her forget this dope Dopelle. But—what a chance!

Far more than anything he'd read about that magnificent hero, the exhibition he'd just seen had made him realize what a romantic celebrity Dopelle must be! "My master Dopelle," the sphere had called him. And all New York was cheering him when he wasn't even there.

What a chance he, Keith Winton, had to take away the fiancée of a guy like that!

He walked back moodily to the cigar store where he'd left his suitcase and magazines and apologized to the clerk for the manner of his leaving them.

The streets were beginning to empty when he came out of the cigar store. He realized it must be getting near dusk and that he must find a place to stay.

He hunted until he found an inexpensive

little hotel where—for a hundred and twenty credits in advance—he took a room for a week.

In his room he picked up one of the pulp magazines. Now for the plan—and the voice that had been Mekky, the sphere, had told him to go ahead with his plan.

For awhile, a long while, he couldn't really concentrate. Betty Hadley's face with its aura of blonde hair, its smooth creamy skin and kissable red lips, kept getting in the way. Why hadn't he had sense enough to obey the sphere's orders not to follow it—and get himself in a mood like this, just when he had to be able to think hardest.

Thinking of the hopelessness of his ever getting Betty made what he was doing seem futile and useless. But after awhile, in spite of himself, he began to get interested in the magazines. And he began to see that his plan was really possible.

Yes, he thought he could make a living for himself writing—for some of these magazines, at any rate. Five years earlier, before he'd started working for Borden, Keith had done quite a bit of free-lancing. He'd sold a number of stories and he'd written several that hadn't sold.

In fact, his batting average had been about fifty-fifty and—for a writer who wasn't too prolific, and who had difficulty plotting—that hadn't been too good. Besides, his stories hadn't come easily. He'd had to sweat them out painfully. So, when a steady job at a fairly good wage had been offered him, he'd quit writing.

**B**UT now, with five years of editing under his belt, he thought he could do better at it than he had before. He could see

[Turn page]

now what a lot of his mistakes had been—laziness among them. And the laziness, at least, was curable.

Besides, this time he had plots to start with—the plots of all of the unsold stories he could remember. He thought he could do better with them now than he had five years ago, a lot better.

He went through magazine after magazine, skimming all the stories, reading some of them. It got dark and the black blankness of the mist-out pressed against the pane of his window but he kept reading.

One thing became increasingly obvious to him—he couldn't and didn't dare try to place stories in a setting with which he was as unfamiliar as he was with the world about him. He'd make mistakes, little mistakes, that would give him away, things that would show his unfamiliarity with the little details of life here.

Fortunately that left him two fields. From his reading of Wells' *Outline of History* he knew that the differences here all dated from those vanishing sewing machines of 1903. On any story—adventure, love or what have you—written as a costume piece and placed before 1903, he was on sure ground. Luckily, too, he'd been a history major at college and was pretty familiar with the subject—particularly American history.

He noticed with satisfaction that the love and adventure magazines both carried a fair percentage of costume pieces—more than the love and adventure magazines of where he'd come from. Possibly because there was a wider difference here between life of a hundred or two hundred years ago and life of today, the settings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seemed more romantic and interesting.

Even the love pulps—he was both surprised and satisfied to learn—carried historical stories, love tales put in Civil War, Revolutionary War and pioneer settings.

The other field he could tackle was, of course, pure fantasy. He'd bought only one fantasy magazine but he'd seen that there were others on the stands. And in pure fantasy—or semi-science-fiction adventures in far and non-existent galaxies—he couldn't go wrong. Nor in stories of the distant future. As long as he avoided the present, the recent past and the near future, he'd be all right.

He finished his study of the magazines by ten o'clock and, from then until midnight,

he sat at the little desk in his room, pencil in hand and paper before him, jotting down notes of all the stories he could remember having written and not sold. He was able to remember twenty stories.

Of the twenty, six had been historical costume pieces and those were *in*—particularly the shorter ones that he could re-write comparatively quickly. Another six he picked out as being fairly easy to translate into historical or fantastic settings.

A dozen stories, then, to start on, as soon as he could get hold of a typewriter—if he could sell one or two of them quickly, he'd be all right. If not—well, there were still the coins in his pocket. A quarter had brought him two thousand credits in Greenville. But he'd got himself into a jam. He wasn't going to take that risk again unless he had to—and then not without studying up on the subject and learning what the pitfalls were.

By midnight he was sleepy. But he hadn't finished all he wanted to do yet. He picked up *The Story of Dopelle* by Paul Gallico and started to read.

Now to find out what the competition really was—

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Dope on Dopelle*

**T**HE competition, he learned within the next hour, was not only terrific. It was impossible.

Dopelle (he didn't seem to have a first name at all) was simply unbelievable. He was Napoleon and Alexander the Great and Einstein and Edison and Philo Vance and Galahad all rolled into one. And he was only twenty-seven years old.

The sketch of the first seventeen years of his life was brief. He'd been brilliant in school, skipped a lot of grades and had been graduated by Harvard (*magna cum laude*) at the age of seventeen, president of his class and the most popular man of his class despite his comparative youth.

Prodigies aren't usually popular, but Dopelle had been an exception. He hadn't been a grind. His high standing in his classes was due to his ability to remember perfectly everything he read or heard, obviating the necessity for hard study.

Despite his heavy schedule of classes (he'd taken about everything Harvard had to offer) he'd had time to captain an undefeated and untied football team. He had worked his way through school (and become financially independent in the process) by writing, in his spare time, six adventure novels which had become best sellers at once and still rated as top classics in their field.

The wealth these books brought him enabled him to own his own private space-cruiser and his own laboratory where—during his last two years of college—he had already made several important improvements in the technique of space travel and space warfare.

That was Dopelle at the age of seventeen, just an ordinary young fellow. His career had started then.

He'd gone from Harvard to a Space Officers' Training School, emerged a lieutenant and had jumped grades rapidly for a year or so. At twenty-one he was in charge of counter-espionage, and was the only man who had successfully been to the Arcturian system and lived among the Arcs. Most Earthly knowledge of the Arcturians had been obtained by him on that trip.

He was an incredibly good space-pilot and fighter. Time and again his squadron had turned back Arcturian attacks with Dopelle spearheading as well as directing the fighting. The brass had begged him not to fight personally because his scientific knowledge was invaluable—but he fought anyway (by this time he was apparently above authority) and seemed to bear a charmed life. His bright red space-ship, the Vengeance, was never hit.

At twenty-three he was general of all the Solar forces but command seemed to be the least important of his activities. Except during times of crises he delegated authority and spent his time having exciting adventures in espionage and counter-espionage or in working in his secret laboratory on the Moon. The list of his scientific accomplishments in that laboratory was almost unbelievable.

The greatest of them, perhaps, was the creation of a mechanical brain, Mekky. Into Mekky Dopelle had put powers of thought not possessed by human beings. Mekky wasn't human but he (actually *it*, of course, Gallico pointed out, but nevertheless always referred to as *he*) was super-human.

Mekky could read minds—including Arcturian minds—and could perform thought-transference. Also he could solve (as an

electronic calculating machine can solve) any problem, however difficult, given all the factors.

Into Mekky also was built the ability to transfer himself instantaneously through space without the necessity of having a space-ship to ride in. This made him invaluable as an emissary, enabling Dopelle, wherever he was, to keep in touch with his space fleets and with the governments of Earth.

Briefly and touchingly near the end of the book Gallico told of the romance between Dopelle and Betty Hadley. They were, it seemed, engaged, but had decided to wait until the end of the war to marry.

Meanwhile Miss Hadley continued to keep her job as editor of the world's most popular love story magazine, the job she had held when she and Dopelle had met while he was in New York incognito on an espionage job. They had fallen in love immediately and deeply. Now the whole world loved them and eagerly awaited the end of the war and the day of their marriage.

Keith Winton frowned as he put down the book. Could anything possibly be more hopeless than his loving Betty Hadley?

Somehow, it was the very hopelessness of things that gave him hope, a shred of hope. The cards just couldn't possibly be stacked that badly against him. There might be a catch somewhere.

It was after one o'clock when he undressed for bed but he phoned the desk of the hotel and left a call for six. Tomorrow was going to be a busy day. It had to be if he were to keep on eating after a week.

**A**ND he went to sleep and dreamed—the poor goof—of Betty. Of Betty dressed (more or less) in one of the costumes worn by girls on the cover pictures of science-fiction magazines, being chased by a purple Bem.

Only he, Keith, was the purple Bem and he was thwarted when he almost caught Betty by a tall dashing romantic young man who had muscles of steel and who must be Dopelle, although he looked uncommonly like Errol Flynn.

Dopelle picked up the purple Bem that was Keith and said, "Back to Arcturus, spy!" and threw him out into space and he was spinning head over purple heels out among the planets and then among the stars. He was going so fast that there was a ringing sensation in his ears. The sound got louder

and louder until he quit being a purple Bern and realized that the ringing was the telephone.

He answered it and a voice said, "Six o'clock, sir."

He didn't dare lie down again or he'd go to sleep, so he sat on the bed awhile, thinking, remembering the dream.

What *did* Dopelle look like? Like Errol Flynn, as he had dreamed? Why not?

If he ever saw Dopelle would it be any more improbable than anything else that Dopelle should look like Errol Flynn, or even *be* Errol Flynn? Wasn't this, maybe, a fantastic movie or a story or a book he'd tangled himself in?

Why not? Dopelle, he thought, was almost too perfect, almost too fantastic a character to be true. Good Lord, he sounded like something out of a—no, not out of a pulp magazine. As editor, Keith would have rejected any story which had so improbable a character. Like something out of a comic book, maybe.

But wait—hadn't the mechanical brain, Mekky, in brief contact with him, anticipated that very thought?

*"... do not make one fatal mistake. This is real. It is not a figment of your imagination. Your danger here is real—"*

Mekky—fantastic as Mekky himself was—was right. This universe and the spot it had put him in were real enough—as real as his hunger for breakfast right now.

He dressed and went out. At six-thirty in the morning the streets of New York were as busy as—in that other universe he'd been in—they would have been at ten or eleven o'clock. The short day necessitated by the mist-out demanded an early start.

He bought a *Times* and read it while he ate breakfast. The big news story was, of course, the visit of Mekky to New York, and the reception that had been given him. There was a picture splashed over a quarter of the front page of the sphere poised in midair outside the open window and Betty Hadley leaning out of the window, bowing to the crowd below.

A boxed item of ten-point boldface type gave the words Mekky had spoken to the crowd, just as Keith had heard them there, inside his head. "*Friends, I leave you now to bear a message from my master Dopelle to—*"

Yes, word for word. And apparently that had been the only public statement from the

mechanical brain. An hour later it had returned to "somewhere in space" as the news story put it.

He skimmed the rest of the paper. There was no news of the war—no mention of the crisis Mekky had said (privately to Keith) was impending in the war. If things were going badly, apparently it was being kept from the public. If Mekky had told him a military secret it must have been because Mekky realized that he was in no spot to spread it farther, even if he wished to.

An item on an inside page about a man being fined two thousand credits and costs for possession of a coin interested him. He read it carefully but didn't find any answer to the problem of why possession of coins was illegal. He made a mental note to look it up as soon as he had time. Not today—he had too much to do today.

First thing was to rent a typewriter. By taking a chance on using the name Keith Winton, for which he still had identification in his wallet, he got one without having to leave a deposit and took it to his room in the hotel.

He put in the hardest day's work he'd ever done in his life. At the end of it—he was dead tired by seven o'clock and had to quit then—he'd finished seven thousand words. A four thousand word story and a three thousand worder.

True, they were both rewrites of stories he'd written before, long ago, but he'd done a better job on them this time. One was a straight action story in a Civil War setting, the other a light romance set against the background of early pioneer days in Kansas.

He fell into bed, too sleepy to phone down to the desk and leave a call for in the morning.

**B**UT he awoke early, just after five o'clock. Back in his room after coffee and doughnuts, he read over the two stories and was more than satisfied with them. They were *good*. What had been wrong with them before hadn't been the plots—it had been the writing and the treatment and five years as an editor had taught him something after all.

He could make a living writing—he was sure of that now. Oh, he couldn't bat out two stories a day except while he was re-writing his old stuff from memory but he wouldn't have to. Once he'd rewritten the dozen or so stories he'd picked out he'd have



a backlog. Two shorts or a novelet a week would be plenty once he'd used up his available old plots and had to think up new ones.

One more, he decided, and he'd start out to peddle them— And start, of course, with Borden Publications. They were good for quick checks if they liked the stories.

For his third rewrite job, he picked a science-fiction, remembering that Marion Blake had told him they were in the market for stuff for a new book in that field. He had one that wouldn't require any revamping at all—a time-travel story about a man who goes back to prehistoric times.

It was told from the point of view of the cave man who encounters the time-traveler and none of it was in a modern setting—so he couldn't go wrong.

He started batting the typewriter again and had it finished by nine o'clock.

Half an hour later he was smiling down at Marion Blake across the reception desk. She smiled back. "Yes, Mr. Winston?"

"Brought in three stories," he said proudly. "One I want to leave with Miss Hadley for her book and—who's running this new science-fiction book you told me was starting?"

"Keith Winton. Temporarily anyway. After it's really on the stands they may put someone else on it."

"Good, I'll want to see him too, then. And—I had a copy but I forgot to notice—who's running *War Adventure Stories*?"

"Keith Winton edits that, too. That and *Surprising Stories* are his regular books. I think he's free now. I'll see if he can talk to you. Miss Hadley's busy but maybe she'll be free by the time you've talked to Mr. Winton, Mr. Winston. Uh—your names are a lot alike, aren't they?"

"Almost a coincidence—same initial, too." He laughed. "Maybe he'll want me to use a different by-line if he buys the stories. He may figure some of his readers will think Karl Winston is a nom de plume of Keith Winton."

Marion Blake had pushed a plug into the switchboard and was talking into the mouth-piece. She pulled the plug. "He'll see you now," she said. "I—uh—told him you were a friend of mine."

"Thanks a lot."

After he'd started for Keith Winton's office he realized that he wasn't supposed to know the way until he was shown, but it was too late then, so he kept on going.

A moment later, Keith Winton sat down opposite Keith Winton, reached across the desk to shake hands and said, "I'm Karl Winston, Mr. Winton. Have a couple of stories to leave with you. Could have mailed them, of course but I thought I'd like to meet you while I was in New York."

Keith was studying Winton as he spoke. He wasn't a bad-looking guy, about Keith's age, an inch or so taller but a few pounds lighter.

His hair was darker and a little curlier. Facially, there wasn't any particular resemblance.

"You don't live in New York?"

"Yes and no," Keith said. "I mean, I haven't been, but I may be from now on. Been working on a paper in Boston—and doing a lot of free-lance feature writing on the side." He'd thought out his story and didn't have to hesitate. "Got a leave of absence for a while and—if I can make a go of things free-lancing here—I probably won't go back."

"I brought in two shorts I'd like you to consider—one for *War Adventure* and one for the new science-fiction book Miss Blake tells me you're starting. I'd appreciate a decision as quickly as I can get it—because I want to write some more I have planned along these lines and don't want to start until I know your reaction to these."

Keith Winton smiled. "I'll keep them out of the slushpile." He glanced at the upper right corners of the two manuscripts Keith had put on the desk.

"Three and four thousand. Those are lengths we need and both books you mentioned are wide open."

"Fine," Keith said. He decided to crowd his luck a little. "I happen to have an appointment in the building here on Friday, the day after tomorrow. Since I'll be so close, would that be too soon for me to drop in to see if you've made a decision?"

Keith Winton frowned a little. "Can't promise for sure that soon but I'll try. If you'll be in the building anyway drop in."

"Thanks a lot." Keith didn't crowd his luck any farther than that. He stood up. "I'll be in Friday then about this time. Good-bye, Mr. Winton."

He went back to Marion Blake's desk.

"Yes," she said, "Miss Hadley is free now. You may go in her office." This time Keith remembered to wait until she pointed out the proper door to him.

**H**E FELT as though he were walking through thick molasses on the way to the door. He thought, "I shouldn't do this. It's crazy. I should have my head examined. I should leave the story for her—or take it to some other love story magazine editor."

He took a deep breath and opened the door.

And then he *knew* he should have stayed away. His heart did a double somersault when he saw her sitting there at her desk, looking up at him with a slight impersonal smile. She was twice as beautiful as he remembered. But of course that was silly—

Wait—*was* it silly? This was, somehow, another universe. It had a completely different Keith Winton in it.

Why shouldn't it have a completely different Betty Hadley?

Only she wasn't different really. She was just more beautiful. He couldn't tell exactly where the difference lay. It was as subtle as was the difference between the girls on the magazine covers back there and the ones on the covers here. They were the same girls in the same costumes but they had more—well, you name it.

It was like that with Betty—she was the same girl but subtly more beautiful and more desirable. He was twice as much in love with her.

Her smile faded and she said, "Yes?" Keith realized that he must have been staring.

He said, "My name is Kei—uh—Karl Winston, Miss Hadley. I—uh—"

She saw he was floundering and helped him out. "Miss Blake tells me you are a friend of hers and a writer. Won't you sit down, Mr. Winston?"

"Thanks," he said, taking the chair opposite her desk. "Yes, I brought in a story which . . ." And he went on talking, or rather his tongue did, now that he'd got it back, telling her substantially the same story he'd told Keith Winton.

But his mind wasn't on what he was saying at all.

And then, somehow, he was making his getaway without falling over his own feet and the interview was over and he was out of the door. And he knew he'd never again torture himself by coming that close to her again. Not that it wouldn't be worth the torture if there was a chance in a billion but there wasn't—there couldn't be.

He was so miserable that he almost walked

blindly past the receptionist's desk without speaking but Marion Blake called out, "Oh, Mr. Winston."

He turned and managed to make himself smile. He said, "Thanks a lot, Miss Blake, for telling them—"

"Oh, don't mention that. That's all right. But I have a message for you from Mr. Winton."

"Huh? But I just talked to—"

"Yes, I know; he just left to keep an important appointment. But he said he wanted to ask you something and he'll be back by twelve-thirty and could you telephone him then?"

"Why, sure. I'll be glad to. And again, thanks a lot."

He started for the door, wondering what Keith Winton wanted to talk to him about so soon. He'd been in Betty Hadley's office less than fifteen minutes. Winton couldn't possibly have read even one of the two stories.

But—well, why wonder? He'd know when he phoned at half past twelve.

As he walked toward the elevators in the hallway outside Borden Publications, Inc., the door of one of the elevators slid open. Mr. and Mrs. L. A. Borden emerged and the door slid shut behind them.

Caught unaware, Keith nodded and spoke to them. Each of them nodded slightly and Mr. Borden murmured something inaudible, as one does when spoken to by someone whom one can't recall.

They went past him and into the offices he'd just left.

Keith frowned as he waited for a down elevator. Of course they didn't know him and he shouldn't have spoken. It was a very slight slip but he'd have to be on the alert to avoid even slight ones.

He'd made one back in Betty's office, too, when he'd started to introduce himself as Keith Winton instead of Karl Winston. And, now he thought of it Betty had given him a very peculiar look when he'd made that slip. Almost as though—but that was silly. He put the thought out of his mind.

It came to him again, as he walked into the elevator, that the similarities of this universe might be more dangerous to him than its differences, might make him give himself away more easily. He worried about it a little.

He'd have worried about it more if he'd known that he already had.

## CHAPTER X

*Slade of the W. B. I.*

**K**EITH WINTON didn't feel like going back to his hotel and grinding out another story just yet. This afternoon and evening, maybe. He had a good start with three stories but three stories, even fairly short ones and rewritten, are plenty for two days. He knew those stories were good and he wanted to keep up the quality and not go stale. The rest of today, then, he'd take off and wander around a bit.

Tomorrow, another story or two, so he'd have something to take in on Friday when he kept his appointments at Borden. It was funny, he thought, to be on the opposite side of the fence there—to be taking stories in instead of having writers and agents bring them. Maybe he should get himself an agent—no, let that wait until he had a sale or two he could report and a foot inside the door.

He strolled over to Broadway and down to Times Square. He stood looking at the Times Building, wondering what was strange about it—then realized that the strips of current news headlines in electric lights weren't flashing around as they should have been. Why not?

Oh sure—because daytime New York used a minimum of electric lighting. Those whatever-they-were rays emitted by electric lights and detectable by the Arcturian space-ships were blanked out at night by the mist-out but by day they weren't.

That was why, then, most places he'd been in had seemed so dimly lighted compared to the offices and stores and restaurants he'd known. Come to think of it, there hadn't been any artificial light at all in most of them.

He'd have to watch little things like that, to keep from giving himself away. He'd had the electric light on in his hotel room most of the time he'd been working. Luckily, he hadn't been called on it. Hereafter he'd move the desk and typewriter over closer to the window and leave the light off.

He walked past a news stand slowly, and read the headlines:

FLEET BLASTS ARC OUTPOST

Big Victory for Solar Forces

That ought to give him a kick, Keith thought, but it didn't. He couldn't hate Arcurians—he didn't even know what they looked like. This *was* real, yes, but it couldn't *seem* real to him yet. It still seemed like a dream he might wake up from. Dream? No, more like a nightmare. It was a world in which the only woman he'd ever really loved, head over heels, was engaged to somebody else.

He stood staring moodily at a window of hand-painted neckties. Something touched his shoulder and he turned around. He jumped back, almost striking the glass of the window. It was one of the big purple hairy Lunans, a Bem, no less.

It said, "Pardon me, do you have a match?"

Keith wanted to laugh, but his hand trembled a little as he handed over a package of matches and then took it back when the Lunan had lighted a cigarette.

It said, "Thank you, sir," and walked on.

Keith watched his back and the way he walked. Despite his bulging muscles he walked like a man wading through waist-high water. Heavy gravity, of course, Keith thought—on the Moon he'd be strong enough to throw Gargantua around. And he was slumped down, pulled together by that gravity. Not an inch over eight feet tall. On the Moon he'd probably be eight and a half.

But wasn't there supposed to be no air on the Moon? How could Lunans breathe? And they must breathe, because he'd lighted a cigarette. Anything that doesn't breathe couldn't smoke.

Suddenly, and for the first time, something occurred to Keith. He could *go* to the moon! *Mars! Venus!* Why not? In a universe with space-travel why not take advantage of it? A little chill of excitement went down his spine. Somehow he hadn't, in the few days he'd been here, thought of space-travel in connection with himself. Now the idea hit him like a ton of bricks.

It would take money, of course. He'd have to write plenty—but why couldn't he?

And there was another chance, once he had learned the ropes well enough to take a chance. Those coins he still had. If a nineteen twenty-eight quarter had brought him two hundred dollars, maybe one of the other coins he had would turn out to be a rare one, and bring him big money on whatever black market the secret coin collectors used. But for now, that was too dangerous.

He strolled up Broadway as far as Forty-sixth, and then saw by a clock in a window that it was almost twelve-thirty. He went into a drugstore and phoned Keith Winton at Borden Publications.

Winton's voice said, "Oh, yes, Mr. Winton. Thought of something else I wanted to talk to you about, something you might do for us but it's a bit complicated to discuss over the phone. Are you free this afternoon?"

"Yes," Keith said.

"Wonder if you could drop up to my place. We can discuss it over a drink, maybe."

"Fine," Keith said. "Where and when?"

"Four o'clock all right? And I'm in Apartment six at three-one-eight Gresham, down in the Village. You'd probably better take a cab unless you know the district down there."

Keith grinned, but kept his voice serious. "I think I can find it all right," he said. He ought to be able to. He'd lived there for four years.

HE PUT back the receiver and went out to Broadway again, this time walking south. He stopped in front of the window of a travel agency.

*Vacation Trips*, the sign said. *All-Expense Tours to Mars and Venus. One Month, 5,000 Cr.*

Only five hundred bucks, he thought. Dirt cheap, as soon as he could earn five hundred bucks. And maybe it would take his mind off Betty.

He went back to his hotel, walking fast. He jerked paper and carbon into the typewriter and started working on the fourth story. He worked until the last minute, then hurried out and caught a subway train south.

The building was familiar and so was the name *Keith Winton* on the mailbox of Apartment 6 in the downstairs hallway. He pressed the buzzer and waited, with his hand on the latch, until it clicked.

Keith Winton—the *other* Keith Winton—was standing in the doorway of the apartment as Keith walked back along the hall.

"Come in, Winston," he said. He stepped back and opened the door wider. Keith walked in—and stopped suddenly. A big man with iron-gray hair and cold iron-gray eyes was standing there in front of the bookcase. There was a deadly looking forty-five automatic in his hand and it was pointed at

the third button of Keith's vest. Keith stood very still, and raised his hands slowly.

He heard the door close behind him.

The big man said, "Better frisk him, Mr. Winton. From behind. Don't step in front of him. And be careful."

Keith felt hands running lightly over him, touching all his pockets.

"May I ask what the idea of this is?" Keith managed to keep his voice steady.

"No gun," Winton said. He stepped around where Keith could see him again. He stood there looking at Keith with puzzled eyes. He said, "I owe you an explanation, sure. And then you owe me one. Okay, Karl Winston—if that's really your name—meet Mr. Gerald Slade of the W. B. I."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Slade," Keith said. What, he was wondering, was the W. B. I.? World Bureau of Investigation? It seemed like a good guess. He looked back at his host. "Is that all the explanation you owe me?"

Winton glanced at Slade and then back at Keith. He said, "I thought it best to have Mr. Slade here. You brought me two stories this morning at the Borden office. Where did you get them?"

"Get them? I wrote them."

"You mean you *rewrote* them. They were stories I wrote five or six years ago. You did a nice rewrite job on them—I'll say that for you. They were better than the originals."

Keith opened his mouth, and closed it again. The roof of it felt dry and he thought he'd make a croaking noise if he tried to say anything. It was so obvious, now that he thought of it.

Why *shouldn't* the Keith Winton of this universe have written the same stories since he had the same job, lived in the same flat—everything the same except physical resemblance? Why hadn't he thought of the possibility?

He moistened his lips with his tongue. He had to say *something*. He said, "Lots of stories have similar plots. There have been lots of cases where—"

"These aren't just cases of *similar* plots. Too many of the minor details are identical. In one story, the names of the two main characters are the same as in my original of that story. Coincidence won't wash, Winston. Coincidence could account for similar basic plots, but not for identical bits of business.



"Those stories were plagiarized. I've got copies in my files to prove it."

He stared at Keith, frowning. He went on, "I suspected something before I finished reading the first page of one story. When I'd read all of both stories I was sure of it. But I'll admit I'm puzzled. Why would a plagiarist have the colossal gall to try to sell stolen stories to the very man who wrote them? However or whenever you stole them, you must have known I'd recognize them. And—is Winston your real name?"

"Certainly."

"That's funny, too. A man calling himself Karl Winston offering stories written by a man named Keith Winton. What I can't understand, if it's a fake name, why you didn't pick one that wasn't so close."

Keith wondered about that himself.

The man with the automatic asked, "Got any identification with you?"

**K**EITH shook his head slowly. He had to stall, somehow, until he could figure an out—if there was one. He said, "Not with me. I can prove my identity, of course. I'm staying at the Watsonia Hotel. If you phone there—"

"If I phone there," Slade said, "I'll be told a man named Karl Winston is registered there. Sure, I phoned there already. That's the address on the manuscripts." He cleared his throat. "That doesn't prove anything except that you've been using the name Karl Winston for the two days you've been there."

He clicked the safety catch on the big automatic. His eyes hardened. He said, "I don't like to shoot a man in cold blood, but—"

Keith involuntarily took a step backwards. "I don't get it," he said. "Since when is plagiarism—even if I were guilty of it—something to shoot a man for?"

"We're not worried about plagiarism," Slade said grimly. "But we're under orders to shoot on sight anybody suspected of being an Arc spy. And there's one loose, last seen in Greeneville upstate. We got a kind of punk description but you could fit it. So—"

"Wait a minute," Keith said desperately. "There's a simple explanation of this somewhere. There's *got* to be. And, if I *were* a spy, wouldn't pulling a dumb stunt like stealing an editor's stories and trying to sell them back to him be the last thing I'd do?"

Winton said, "He's got something there, Slade. That's what puzzled me most about

the whole thing. And I don't like the idea of shooting him down unless we're sure. Let me ask him one or two more questions."

He turned to Keith. "Look, Winston, you can see this is no time to stall. It won't get you anything but bullets. Now, if you're an Arc, heaven only knows why you'd have brought me those stories. Maybe I was supposed to react differently—do something else besides call a W. B. I. man. But if you're *not* an Arc, then there must be some explanation. Can you give it?"

Keith licked his lips again. For a moment, a desperate moment, he couldn't remember any of the places he'd submitted those stories to when he'd first written them. Then he remembered.

He said, "There's only one possibility I can think of. Did you ever submit those stories to the Gebhart chain of pulps in Chicago?"

"Yes—one of them anyway. Both, I guess. I've got a record of it."

"About five years ago?" Keith pressed.

"About that."

Keith took a deep breath. He said, "Five years ago I was a reader for Gebhart. I must have read your stories when they came in. I must have liked them and passed them, even if the editors over me didn't buy them. My subconscious mind must have remembered them." He frowned.

"If that's true I'd better quit writing—fiction, anyway. When I wrote those stories recently I thought they were original. If it was my subconscious memory of stories I'd read five years ago—"

He saw with relief that Slade's grip on the pistol wasn't quite so tight. Slade said, "Or you could have taken notes on those stories, intending to swipe them sometime later."

Keith shook his head. "If it had been deliberate plagiarism, wouldn't I have changed at least the names of the characters? And—" He started to say "the titles," but realized in time that he wouldn't be supposed to know whether the titles were the same or not. He turned to Winton and asked, "Did I use the same titles?"

"On one of them. On the other you had a better one." Winton leaned back against the table behind him and looked at Slade. He said, "That sounds reasonable to me, Slade. I'm inclined to believe him. And, as he says, if he were deliberately plagiarizing, he'd have changed them more than he did."

They were well written—the actual writing is better than mine was, I'll admit." He took a deep breath. "It *could* be true and you almost shot the guy."

"I still should," Slade said. "You know as well as I do we aren't supposed to take chances with possible Arcs. In any case, I'm not taking this gun off him till we check forty ways for Sunday. For a start, you can put through a long distance call to this Chicago publisher and—wait, they'd be closed now, even if it's an hour earlier there."

Winton said, "Just a minute, Slade. I've got an idea. When I frisked him, I was looking for a gun and he hasn't got one. But I did feel a billfold."

Slade's eyes got even harder as he stared at Keith. "And no identification in it?"

There was, Keith thought bitterly, plenty of identification—but not as Karl Winston. All too clearly now he saw all the mistakes he had made. And it was too late now to try to correct any of them. Maybe he had only seconds to live.

The W. B. I. man didn't wait for him to answer. Obviously he wasn't going to believe him anyway. He said to Winton, without taking his eyes off Keith, "Get the wallet. And see if he's got anything else in his pockets. That's the last chance we'll give him."

The other Keith Winton circled to approach him from the back. Keith took a deep breath. This was going to be *it*. Besides the identification in that wallet he still had the incriminating coins, wrapped—so they wouldn't clink together—in money that was in dollars instead of credits. He hadn't dared leave the stuff in his hotel room. Well, it didn't matter. The wallet alone would be enough.

This was *it*. Either he was going to die here and now or else—Heroes in the stories he had bought back in a sane universe where he'd been a Borden editor instead of an Arc-turian spy always managed to jump a gun. Was there a chance in a thousand that it could really be done?

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## CHAPTER XI

### *The Blacker Dark*

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THE man who was searching him was behind him now. Keith stood very still with the muzzle of the pistol aiming right at him. His mind was going like a millrace but it wasn't thinking of anything that would save him from being shot within the next minute or two. As soon as the other Keith Winton opened that wallet and read the identification in it. . . .

All Keith's attention was on the automatic. A gun like that, he knew, shot steel-jacketed bullets that would go right through a man. If Slade fired now he'd probably kill both of them, both Keith Wintons.

And then what? Would he wake up back on Borden's farm in Greeneville in a sensible world? No, not according to what Mekky, the mechanical brain, had said—"*This is real. . . . Your danger here is real. If you are killed here . . .*"

And, wildly improbable as Mekky himself was, he knew somehow that Mekky was dead right. Somehow there were two universes and two Keith Wintons but this one was just as real as the one he'd grown up in. The other Keith Winton was just as real as he was. And would the fact that one shot might kill them both delay the W. B. I. man's finger a second on the trigger? It might or it might not.

A hand was reaching into his hip pocket. It came out, holding the billfold. Keith found he was holding his breath. A hand went into his side trouser pocket—apparently his host was going to finish the search before opening the billfold.

Keith quit thinking and moved.

His hand closed on Winton's wrist, and he pivoted and swung Winton around in front of him, between himself and Slade. His trouser pocket ripped. Over Winton's shoulder he saw the W. B. I. man moving to the side to get a clear shot. He moved, keeping Winton between them.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a fist coming for his face and he jerked aside, letting it pass over his shoulder and then stepped in low, butting his head against Winton's chest. Then, with both hands and with all the weight of his body and the momen-

tum of his forward rush, he shoved Winton backward against Slade, following close.

Slade stumbled backward into the bookcase and glass crashed. The automatic went off, making a noise like a blockbuster in the confined space of the room.

Keith clung to Winton's lapels with both hands while his foot kicked up alongside Winton at the automatic. The toe of his shoe hit Slade's wrist and the automatic went out of Slade's hand. It clunked against the carpeted floor and Keith gave a final shove against Winton's chest and then dived for the gun. He got it.

He backed off, holding it to cover both of them. He was breathing hard and—now that the immediate action was over—his hand was trembling.

There was a knock on the door, and a sudden hush inside the apartment. Then a voice called, "Are you all right, Mr. Winton?" and Keith recognized the voice—that of Mrs. Flanders, who had the adjoining apartment. He made his voice sound as much like that of the other Winton as he could.

He called, "Everything's okay, Mrs. Flanders. Gun went off while I was cleaning it. The recoil knocked me over."

He stood still, waiting, knowing she'd be wondering why he didn't open the door. But all his attention had to be on the two men in front of him and he didn't take his eyes off them a second. He saw the puzzlement in Winton's eyes. Winton was wondering how he knew Mrs. Flanders' name and had recognized her voice.

After a few seconds he heard Mrs. Flanders' voice again. "All right, Mr. Winton. I just wondered." And her steps going back along the hall to her own apartment. She was still wondering, of course, why he hadn't opened the door—and there'd been a lot more noise than his falling over from a recoil could have made. But she wouldn't call copper right away. She'd keep on wondering awhile first.

But some other tenant might not. He had to do something quickly about Winton and the W. B. I. man. He couldn't just shoot them but he couldn't just walk out and leave them to start a chase after him. He needed at least a few minutes' grace to start his getaway. Getaway to where? he wondered, then shoved that thought out of his mind. Right now he couldn't figure more than minutes ahead.

"Turn around," he ordered, making his

voice sound grim and deadly. He stepped in close to them, keeping the muzzle of the gun in the W. B. I. man's back—he was more afraid of Slade trying something than Winton—and felt Slade's hip pockets. Yes, there was a pair of handcuffs there. He took them, stepped back.

He said, "All right, step over by that post in the archway. You, Winton, reach through it. Then cuff yourselves together. Wait a second; first toss me your keys, Slade."

**H**E BACKED to the door when they had followed his orders. He started to tell them not to yell, then realized they would anyway and didn't bother. He slid the gun into his pocket and went through the door.

He heard their voices behind him as he went down the hall to the stairs and doors were popping open. He walked fast but wouldn't let himself run. Nobody, he thought, would actually try to stop him, although somebody would be phoning the police by now.

Nobody did stop him. He made the street and kept up his fast walk. He was a block away when he heard sirens. He slowed down instead of hurrying faster but he turned off Gresham Street at the next corner.

Within ten minutes squad cars would be cruising the neighborhood with his description. But by that time he could be on Fifth Avenue, walking north from Washington Square and they wouldn't be able to pick him out of the crowd. Or better yet—

A taxi went by, empty, and he started to hail it, then swore at himself as he realized he had forgotten to get his billfold back, in Winton's apartment. On top of everything else now, he was broke. He couldn't even take the subway.

A dozen blocks away, he felt safe from the squad cars that were undoubtedly looking for him. He was walking north on Fifth Avenue then and the sidewalks were fairly crowded.

He stepped up his pace a little when he noticed that most of the others were walking faster. Above all, he didn't dare to be inconspicuous. And there seemed to be hurry in the air.

The realization of the reason for it struck him almost like a blow. It was becoming twilight.

It was going to get dark pretty soon. *Dark?* That wasn't the word for it. The

blackest dark, the mist-out. All these people were hurrying because they were scurrying home to get under cover for the night. The doors would be locked and barred and the streets left to crime and banditry and scavenging.

For the first time since he'd made his getaway from the apartment he stopped, wondering where he was going. Not back to his hotel, of course. They'd be waiting for him there. He'd given his right address on those manuscripts he'd turned in to Winton.

And that meant he'd lost everything—the clothes, the suitcase, the toilet articles. Again and more bitterly he thought of his stupidity in not getting his billfold back after Winton had taken it. There hadn't been a lot in it but enough that he could have taken a room for the night, enough to have lived on for at least a few days until there was a chance for him to figure a new plan for living in this mad world. Writing was out but maybe there was another way.

*Broke*, flat broke, what chance did he have? Somehow he'd give himself away at every turn. Of course there were the few coins from a sensible universe and he was glad now he hadn't dared to leave them in his hotel room. But they represented danger as well as possible capital. He shrugged. What difference could a little thing like that make now? If the police got him he was dead anyway, coins or no coins.

Slowly he started walking again, still northward. He knew where he was going now. Thirty-seventh Street, just off Third Avenue. The fifth floor.

It was dusk when he got there and the few people left on the streets were hurrying, almost running. It was deeper dusk because the street lights had not gone on as they should have by this time in the evening. And the street lights weren't going to go on.

A janitor was just reaching to lock the outer door as Keith opened it. The man's hand went quickly to his back pocket, but he didn't pull the gun. He asked, suspiciously, "Who you want to see?"

"Miss Hadley," Keith said. "Just staying a minute."

"Okay."

He walked back to the self-service elevator but the janitor's voice came back after him. "You'll haveta walk. Juice is off already, mister. And hurry down if you want me to take a chance on opening the door

to let you out."

Keith nodded and took the stairs instead. He went up them rapidly and had to stop on the fifth floor landing to get his breath back. Then he rang the bell of the front apartment.

After a moment Betty's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"Karl Winston, Miss Hadley. It's important."

**T**HE door opened on the chain, and Betty's face looked at him through the three-inch opening. Her eyes were a little frightened. He said, "Awfully sorry to bother you so late, Miss Hadley, but I've got to get in touch with *Mekky*. Is there any way it can be done?"

The chain slid out of the groove and the door opened. She said, "Come in, K-Keith Winton."

Scarcely daring to breathe, Keith stepped into the room. She'd called him by name, by his *right* name.

He stood with his back against the door, scarcely believing, staring at her. The room was dim, the shades already pulled down. The light came from a candle in a candlestick on the table behind Betty. Her face was shadowed but the dim light behind her made a golden aura of her soft blonde hair.

She asked, "You're in trouble? They found you out?"

He nodded.

"You haven't mentioned *Mekky* to anyone else? No one would think of your coming here?"

"No."

She turned and Keith saw for the first time that a colored maid was standing in the far doorway. Betty said, "It's all right. Della. You may go to your room."

"But, Miss—"

"It's all right, Della."

The door closed quietly behind the maid and Betty turned back to Keith.

He took a step toward her. He asked, "Do you—remember—uh—I don't understand. *Which* Betty Hadley are you? How could you have known—"

It sounded inarticulate and confused even to him.

She said, "Sit down, Mr. Winston. I'm going to call you that, to avoid confusing you with the other Keith Winton. What happened? Was it Keith Winton who found you out?"



"Yes." Keith laughed a little bitterly. "The two stories I gave him were his own stories. I didn't even try to explain—and I'd have been shot first if I'd tried. And by the way, tear up that story I left with you. It's both an original and a plagiarism. But that's not important, now. What about Mekky?"

She shook her head slowly. "You can't reach Mekky. He's back with the fleet. The Arcs are—" She stopped short.

"Going to attack, I suppose," Keith said. "Mekky told me there was a crisis in the war." He laughed a little. "But I can't get excited about the war—I can't believe in it enough. What I want to know is what Mekky told you about me?"

Betty Hadley looked at him thoughtfully. "Not much," she told him. "He didn't know much himself. He hadn't time to go under the surface of your mind. But he learned that you were from—somewhere else. He didn't know where. He knew that where you came from you were called Keith Winton, although you don't look like the Keith Winton I know.

"He knew you were in a jam here because—well, because you don't know enough about things not to make mistakes. He knew you were not an Arc spy but that you'd get shot for one unless you were awfully careful."

Keith leaned forward. "What is Mekky? A robot, a thinking machine?"

"That—and a little more than that. Dopelle made him that but—I don't know. Even *he* doesn't understand—he has emotions too. Even a sense of humor."

The way she said the name Dopelle, Keith thought—the way she emphasized the pronoun—almost capitalized it. She's more than in love with him, Keith thought—she worships him.

He closed his eyes a second and when he opened them he didn't look at her. He hardly heard what she was saying, until he realized she was asking a question.

"What can I do? Mekky told me he saw in your mind that you might come to me for help. He said it would be all right if I didn't take any risk myself."

"I wouldn't let you do that," Keith said. "And no one followed me here or could even suspect I'd come here. But I don't know how you can help unless you can get in touch with Mekky. My masquerade here has blown up higher than a kite. And I haven't got any

answers for the questions the cops would ask—even if they stopped to ask questions. Mekky, I hope, could give me the answers—and vouch for them."

She nodded. "But there's no way you could get in touch with Mekky unless you could get to the fleet."

"Where's the fleet?"

HE hesitated, frowning, before she decided to speak. "Near Saturn. But you couldn't get there. You'll have to wait it out somehow. Have you money?"

"No, but I don't—wait, there's something you can tell me. I might be able to look it up at the library or somewhere, but I can find out from you quicker. What's the score on coinage—metal coins?"

"Metal coins? There haven't been any since nineteen thirty-five. They were called in then."

"Why?"

"The Arcs were counterfeiting them—and paper money, too. They had a network of spies here then. One of the things they did was try to disrupt Earth's economic systems by flooding the world with counterfeit money. It couldn't be told from real money even by experts.

"A bad inflation started and everything would have gone smash. So the war council of the nations got some scientists together and they figured out a kind of paper currency that couldn't be counterfeited. I don't know what the secret is. Nobody does, except a few scientists.

"Something they use in the paper gives off a faint yellowish glow in the dark or in deep shadow. Anybody can spot counterfeit money because no counterfeiter—nor the Arcs—has been able to duplicate paper that gives off that glow."

Keith asked, "Was that when the change was made from dollars and cents to credits?"

"Yes—in all countries. Each country backs its own coinage but it's all in credits and all kept at par so it's interchangeable."

Keith said, "So after the old money had been called in for exchange, it was illegal to possess any. But there are coin collectors who do?"

"Yes. It's illegal and there's a pretty stiff fine. But there are coin collectors, plenty of them. It's not considered a real moral crime."

"Like drinking during Prohibition?"

Betty looked bewildered. "Like what?"

"Skip it." Keith took the little wad of money out of his pocket, the coins wrapped in the bills. He opened them out and studied them. He said, "I've got five coins here and two bills that are dated before nineteen thirty-five. About what would they be worth?"

He handed them to Betty, who glanced at them. She said, "I don't know just what prices are paid. I'd guess about ten thousand credits—a thousand dollars by the old scale. What are those other coins and bills?"

"Dated *after* nineteen thirty-five. So they're impossible. I nearly got myself killed giving one to a druggist in Greenville."

"But how *could* they be dated after—"

Keith sighed. "I don't know either. But I'll drop them down the sewer as soon as I leave here. The others are dangerous enough. Look—about Arcturian spies. Are Arcturians human beings? Can't they tell an Arcturian from an Earthman?"

"They're horribly different." The girl shuddered. "Monsters. More like insects in appearance, bigger of course, and as intelligent as we are. But back in the early days of the war they captured a lot of people alive, on some of their first raids. They can—*take over* people, put one of their minds into a human body and use it for a spy.

"There aren't so many now. Most of them have been killed. Sooner or later they give themselves away because their minds are alien. And since those early days they haven't been able to capture many humans alive."

"But even so," Keith said, "why shoot on suspicion? Why aren't they arrested and, if their minds are actually alien, a psychiatrist should be able to prove or disprove that they're Arcturians. Don't a lot of innocent people get killed?"

"Yes, maybe a hundred for every real spy. But—well, they're *so* dangerous, especially now that the war is in the current stage, that it's better, really *better*, that a thousand people die than that an Arc spy should stay at large.

"If they got a few of our secrets to add to their own science it could change the tide of the war. And that would mean the end of the whole human race, the death of billions. So it's not considered a crime to kill a human being by mistake if there's cause to think he's an Arc. Don't you see?"

"Not completely. If you could capture them and be sure first wouldn't that be just as good?"

"It's too dangerous. Too many of them have escaped on the way to jail or even after they were locked up. They have special powers, physical and mental."

**K**EITH grinned wryly. "So one of them could maybe take the gun away from the W. B. I. man who was holding it on him. Well, if they had any doubts before in my case, they haven't now."

He stood up. For a long moment he stared at Betty Hadley, then turned his head and looked at the window. It was black, blank.

The mist-out was on.

He said, "Thank you. Good-bye."

She stood, too. Her eyes went to the window, as his had. "But where are you going to go? You might take a chance for a block or two if you're careful, but—"

"I'm armed."

"But you haven't any place to go. You can't stay here, of course; there's just Della and I. But there's a vacant apartment on the floor below. I can fix it with the janitor so—"

"No!"

Keith's answer was so explosive that he felt foolish after he had said it.

"But tomorrow I can talk to the W. B. I. I can explain that Mekky vouched for you to me. It won't be safe until Mekky is back a few months from now, for you to be running loose—but on my word for it they might hold you in protective custody until he does come back."

Possibly there was a shade of uncertainty on Keith's face, for she kept talking, pressing the point. She said, "They will believe me enough to give you the benefit of the doubt. Because I'm Dopelle's fiancée—"

She couldn't have known it, but it had been the wrong thing to say. Keith shook his head slowly.

He said, "No. I'm going out. You—you're really in love with this Dopelle?"

She said only, "Yes," but the way she said it was enough.

"Good-bye then, Miss Hadley," Keith said.

She held out her hand to him but he pretended not to see it. He didn't trust himself to touch it.

He went out quickly.

## CHAPTER XII

*The Moon*

IN HIS way down the stairs he began to realize how foolish he had been and to be glad that he had been foolish. He was mad—not at anybody but at everything. He was tired, very tired, of being pushed around. He'd been as cautious and careful as he knew how and it had kept getting him into worse and worse trouble.

Now he was going to quit being cautious. It would probably get him killed, and quickly, but—well, what did he have to lose?

In the downstairs hallway the man with the gun was still there. He said, "Y'ain't going *out*, are you, mister?"

Keith grinned at him. "Yes. Got to see a man about a sphere."

"You mean *Mekky*? Gonna see *Dopelle*?" There was awe in the man's voice. He went to the door, gun ready in his hand. He said, "Well, if you're a friend of *his*—and I shoulda guessed it if you were seeing Miss Hadley—maybe you know what you're doing. I hope so."

Keith said, "We both hope so." He slid through the doorway and heard the door slammed and bolted behind him.

He stood there in the utter blackness of the mist-out, and listened. There wasn't a sound from any direction. He felt his way to the curb and took off his shoes, tying the laces together and hanging them around his neck. Without them on, nobody would be able to hear and stalk him.

He shifted the forty-five automatic to his coat pocket and kept his hand on it.

It was easy, if awkward, to follow the curb line by walking with one foot on the curbing and the other down in the street. The feel of a sewer grating under his foot reminded him of the coins and bills he had to get rid of, the ones dated after nineteen thirty-five. He'd put them back in a different pocket. He shoved them through the grating of the sewer.

With that out of the way, he went on, listening.

Funny, he thought; he wasn't afraid. Maybe because now, tonight, he was the hunter and not the hunted.

He was three blocks south of where he

had turned onto Fifth Avenue before he heard a quarry. Not footsteps—whoever it was either was standing still against the front of a building or else he had, like Keith, taken off his shoes to walk silently. The sound Keith heard was a slight, barely audible snuffle.

He stood very still, scarcely breathing, until he heard it again, and then he knew the man was moving, going south. The second sound had come from that direction.

Keith hurried his steps, almost running, in the direction he'd already been going until he was sure he was well ahead of his victim. Then he cut diagonally across the sidewalk and groped with his hands ahead of him until he came to the building fronts. Then he drew the automatic from his pocket and stood, waiting.

Something bumped into the muzzle of the pistol, and Keith's left hand darted out and caught the front of a coat to keep the man from pulling away. "Don't move," he said sharply, and then, "Turn around, very slowly."

There'd been no answer but a sharp intake of breath. The man turned. Keith's left hand groped, crossed over, and pulled a revolver out of a right hip picket. He put it into his own pocket.

He said, "Don't move, or I'll shoot. We're going to talk. Who are you?"

A tight voice said, "What do you care who I am? All I got on me is about thirty credits and that rod. You got the rod. Take the dough too and let me go."

"I don't want your thirty credits. I want some information. If I get it straight I might even give your rod back. Do you know your way around here?"

"What do you mean?"

Keith said, "I don't know the ropes here. I'm from St. Lou. I got to find me a fence."

There was a pause, and the voice was a little less tight now. "Jewelry—or what?" it asked.

"Coins. A few bills, too, pre-thirty-five dollars. Who handles the stuff here?"

"What's in it for me?"

Keith said, "Your life for one thing. Your gun back. And—if you don't try to cross me—maybe a hundred credits. Two hundred, if I get a fair price."

"Peanuts. Make it five hundred."

Keith chuckled. "You're in a swell position to bargain. I'll make it two hundred and thirty. You already got the thirty; consider

I took it away from you and gave it back."

**S**URPRISINGLY, the man laughed too. He said, "You win, mister. I'll take you to see Ross. He won't cheat you any worse than anybody else would. Come on." "One thing first," Keith said. "Strike a match. I want a look at you. I want to know you again, if you make a break."

"Okay," the voice said. It was relaxed now, almost friendly. A match scraped and flared.

Keith's captive, he saw, was a small, slender man of about forty, not too badly dressed but in need of a shave and with slightly bleary eyes. He grinned, a bit lopsidedly.

"You'll know me," he said, "so you might as well have a handle. It's Joe."

"Okay, Joe. How far is this Ross guy?"

"Couple blocks. He'll be in a game." The match died. "Look, how much worth of stuff you got?"

"Somebody told me ten thousand credits."

"Then you might get five. Ross is square. But listen—gun or no gun, you'll do better to cut me in. There'll be other guys there. We could take you easy."

"Okay, Joe, maybe you've got something there. I'll cut you in for a fifth—a thousand if we get five thousand. Fair enough?"

"Yeah, fair enough."

Keith hesitated only a second. He'd need a friend, and there was something in Joe's voice and there had been something in Joe's face that made him think he could take a chance. His whole plan—if you could call it that—was a desperate gamble.

Impulsively, he took Joe's revolver out of his pocket, groped for Joe's hand, and gave the gun back to him.

But there wasn't any surprise in Joe's voice when he said, "Thanks. Two blocks south. I'll go first."

They single-filed along the building fronts, locked arms while they crossed two streets. Then Joe said, "Stick close, now. We go back the areaway between the second and third buildings from the corner. Keep your hand on my shoulder."

Back in the areaway, Joe found a door and knocked—three times and then twice. It opened and light blinded them momentarily. A man at the door lowered a sawed-off shotgun and said "Hi, Joe," and they went in.

Four men were sitting around a poker table. Joe said to the man who was putting down the shotgun, "Friend of mine from

St. Lou, Harry. Got some business with Ross." He nodded at one of the men at the table, a swarthy, stocky man with cold eyes behind thick lenses. "He's got coinage, Ross."

Keith merely nodded and, without speaking, put the coins and bills on the table in front of the stocky man.

Ross examined each one carefully, and then looked up. "Four grand," he said.

"Five," Keith said. "They're worth ten."

Ross shook his head. Keith felt a touch on his arm. Behind him, Joe said, "I should have told you. Ross is one-price. If he offers you four grand, he won't give you four thousand and one. You take it or leave it."

"And if I leave it?" Keith asked over his shoulder.

"I know a couple more guys. But I'm not sure we can find 'em tonight. And I doubt if they'd do better than Ross."

Keith nodded. "Okay," he said, "four grand, if it's cash and you've got it with you."

"I got it with me." Ross pulled out a bulging wallet and counted out two thousand-credit notes and twenty hundreds. He folded Keith's coins carefully inside the bills again and put them in his vest pocket.

"Sit in a while on the game?"

"Thanks, no," Keith said. Counting the money, he glanced at Joe, who almost imperceptibly shook his head to indicate he didn't want to take his cut here.

The man who'd let them in picked up the shotgun again before he opened the door to let them out.

Outside, in the blackness again, they moved out of earshot of the door and then Joe said, "A fifth of four thousand's eight hundred. Want me to light a match so you can count it?"

"Okay—unless you know somewhere we can have a drink and talk a few minutes. We might do some more business."

"An idea," Joe said. "A little farther south in this same block. I could use a snort of moonjuice."

Again Joe led the way and again he led back into an areaway and knocked measured knocks on a door. Again light blinded them momentarily, and then they were in the back room of a tavern. There were a few others there ahead of them, not many. It was still, Keith reflected, comparatively early in the evening.

They took a table and Joe ordered moon-



juice. Keith nodded that he'd take the same. While the aproned bartender was bringing them from the front Keith counted out eight hundred-credit notes and passed them across to Joe.

Joe nodded and shoved his hat back on his head. "You're a right guy," he said. "Hope we can do more business. But you're a fool."

"For what? Giving you back your rod, back there?"

"Yeah. Well—maybe you weren't. If you hadn't done that, I'd probably have taken you. If I'd given the signal back there at the game you wouldn't have lasted—"

**H**E BROKE off as the bartender came back with two shot glasses of transparent fluid. "On me," Joe said, and put down one of the bills Keith had just given him. He raised his glass, "Death to the Arcs."

Keith touched glasses, but took a cautious sip of his first. He'd wondered whether "moonjuice" was a nickname for some drink he already knew, or whether it was as exotic as it sounded.

It wasn't like anything he'd ever dreamed of, let alone tasted. It was thick, almost syrupy, but it wasn't sweet. And, paradoxically, it was cool and hot at the same time. It left a cool taste in his mouth at the same time it burned a passage down his gullet.

He saw that Joe had only sipped his, so he didn't down it.

"The real stuff," Joe said. "Got much of it out west?"

"Some. Not much."

"How are things out there?"

"Fair," Keith said. He wished that he could talk more, but there was always the risk of saying something wrong. He'd have to appear taciturn.

"Where are you staying here?" Joe asked, after another sip.

"Nowhere yet. Just blew in. Should have holed in before the mist-out, but I—had something to do."

"I can take you to a place. Whenever you're ready. The evening's a pup."

Keith nodded. They finished their drinks and Keith ordered a second round. Whatever moonjuice was he liked it. It seemed to clear his head rather than otherwise. He wished he could ask questions about it but of course he couldn't. This was the last one,

though, he decided. The stuff might be tongue-loosening and he couldn't risk that.

After a sip from the second glass of it, he leaned forward across the table. "Joe," he asked, "where can I find an ex-space pilot who'd like to make a thousand credits on the side?"

Joe's eyes narrowed a little. "You kidding?"

That meant it had been a bad question but Keith couldn't see why. Anyway, he might as well go ahead now. There were only half a dozen people in the place; he might be able to shoot his way out, even if he gave himself away.

"Why should I be kidding?" he demanded.

To his relief, Joe grinned. He jerked a thumb at his lapel. Following the gesture, Keith noticed an emblem there, about the size of and rather similar to the ruptured duck he himself had worn for a while.

"Oh," he said and moved his hand away from the pocket with the automatic in it; he hadn't made a major boner after all. "Didn't notice it, Joe. How long you been out?"

"Five years. Based out of Kapi, Mars. Glad I wasn't there a few days ago." He shook his head slowly. "Guess there isn't much left of Kapi."

"We'll get back at them for that," Keith said.

"Maybe."

Keith said, "You sound pessimistic."

Joe lighted a cigarette, slowly. He said, "There's a showdown coming. A big one. Oh, I don't know anything except what I read between the lines but when you've been out there you get the feel of things. There's a full scale attack coming—I don't know which, us or them. But one way or the other it isn't going to last forever."

Keith nodded gravely. He remembered he'd better stick to the point and talk as little as necessary. He couldn't discuss the war very intelligently, so he'd better skip it. He asked, "Been to the Moon recently?"

"Year ago." Joe's lips twisted. "Hadn't started mist-outing then, yet. Thought I could make an honest living like a chump. Piloted a rich guy there in his own boat. What a brawl that was."

"Bad?"

"Six of 'em in the party, and drunk as lords. A six-year-old kid could peelot one of those Ehrling jobs, but none of 'em was

sober enough to do it. I was driving a cab, picked 'em up one afternoon on Times Square and drove 'em over to Jersey to his private port and he offered me a thousand to take 'em there.

"I hadn't been off Earth in two years and I just abandoned my cab and took 'em. We went to Habcrul and stayed a week." He shook his head sadly. "My grand lasted less than a day, but they kept me with them."

Keith asked, "Those Ehrlings much different from the hot jobs?"

Joe laughed. "Same difference as between a kiddy car and a midget racer. All visual. Direct sight on your objective, push the button. Spread your wings and coast in. Complicated as drinking moonjuice. Have another?"

"Thanks, no. Let's talk business. Want to make a thousand, Joe? I want to get to the moon."

Joe shrugged. "Why pay a thousand, pal? Every hour on the hour from LaGuardia. Ninety credits round trip."

Keith leaned forward. "Can't Joe. I'm hot—dodgers out from St. Lou and they'll be watching all the ports. Besides, some St. Lou friends of mine might be expecting me there. I'd just as soon walk in their back door."

"That way," said Joe, reflectively. "But—pal, for a thousand credits do you expect me to steal a private boat and take you there?"

"No. I want you to help me steal a boat and show me how to run it. You don't have to go along. How long would it take you to show me the controls?"

"Half an hour. But swiping a boat, pal—that isn't peanuts if we're caught. It's ten years on Venus." His eyelids dropped a little and he stroked the back of one hand with the palm of the other. "I been to Venus once. I don't want to go back."

Keith made a rapid calculation. He said, "Three thousand credits, Joe."

Joe sighed. "It's a deal. When you want to go?"

"Tonight," Keith said.

Maybe it was the moonjuice, maybe it was his years of having read science-fiction, maybe it was just that he was human, but there was a sudden wild elation in him. The Moon!

And the other word that rounded out the magic of it. He said it again. "Tonight!"

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## CHAPTER XIII

### *The Song of the Spheres*

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JOE sighed again. "That's bad," he said. "But if it's got to be tonight, then it's got to be tonight. It'll be tougher getting out of town from under the mist-out than it will be to swipe the boat. That means I got to swipe a car too."

"You can though?"

"Oh sure. But we'll have to crawl in it, not much faster than walking. The mist-out doesn't taper off till three or four miles into Jersey either. Take us a good three hours to get that far."

"Sounds like pretty good time to me," Keith said.

"Aren't many guys could do it," Joe said modestly. "You were lucky you picked me. I'll show you a trick not many know—how to navigate a car by dead reckoning and a compass. What time is it?"

"A little after nine."

"We can get a car in half an hour or less. We'll be out of the mist-out by one then and the port we'll go to is about thirty miles into Jersey but we'll be in the open then. I'll have you there by two o'clock."

"The private port of this rich guy you mentioned?"

"Yeah. He's got two. One's a little two-place job—that'll be best for you if it's in. If it isn't you'll have to take the big one, the one we made that trip I told you about in. Guess they'll both be there, come to think of it. Read in the paper he's under fire from a congressional committee, so he'll stick to Earth for a while. He makes rajiks."

"Oh," said Keith.

"One more moonjuice and we'll go."

"If it's on me," Keith said.

He sipped it slowly, lingeringly. He was getting a little scared again in spite of the moonjuice. Thus far he'd been lucky—but he was still in Manhattan and Saturn was a long way off. Saturn and the space fleet and Mekky.

Then again they were in the almost impenetrable blackness of the mist-out. Again they went single-file, with Keith keeping his hand on the shoulder of the man walking ahead of him and Joe guiding them along the buildings with an outstretched arm.

At the first corner he stopped. "Wait here. I can get a car better by myself. I know where. Stick right here till you hear me coming."

And he was off again into the blackness, walking so silently that Keith couldn't hear a sound except, once, the faint snuffle that had enabled him to catch Joe in the first place. That slight cold of Joe's had been a break, for Joe was turning out to be a God-send.

He couldn't keep much track of time, standing there, for he didn't want to light matches to see his watch. But it seemed like less than a half hour before he heard a car coming, inching along the curb, the occasional scrape of rubber against the curbstone.

Keith waited until it stopped and then felt his way toward where the sound had last come from. He felt the side of a sedan, said Joe's name and got an answering, "Yeah." He got in.

Joe said, "Here's the trick. You got to use the flashlight." He pressed one into Keith's hand. "Turn it on and keep it aimed at the floorboards of the car. Now take this chalk and draw a line parallel with the wheelbase of the car, front to back, as straight as you can."

The flashlight, held within a foot of the floor, let Keith do that all right. "Good," Joe said. "Now here's the compass. Put it down by the line. Now wait till I turn the car south when we get a block over, to Sixth Avenue. I can go that far by the seat of my pants."

The car inched forward and Keith turned off the flashlight. A few minutes later Joe stopped the car. "Get out and catch a house number," he said. "We ought to be close to Sixth."

Keith got out and fell over the curb. He got up and groped his way to the line of building fronts. A minute later he was back in the car. "Just overshot it," he said. "Back up the width of one building and then head south."

Joe did, then drove ahead a little till they were out of the intersection.

"Now the flashlight again," he said. "From here on we can make ten miles an hour. Look, that's the line of direction of the car, see? Here's the compass. Now Sixth Avenue runs about southeast by south—all the straight streets do. Turns just a trifle more east at Minetta Place and then

goes straight again till we get to Spring Street.

"There we take that right into the tunnel. Now you keep the flashlight on that line and the compass and keep me going straight. I'll watch the speedometer and check distances. We can go ten miles an hour."

"What if we hit something?"

"Won't kill us at ten an hour. If we ruin the car we'll have to swipe another. We'll waver from one side of the street to the other, but if you keep close watch on that compass, we shouldn't scrape curbing oftener than every few blocks—and whenever we do, we realign ourselves. Ready? Here we go."

Joe was a skillful pilot, it turned out, and knew the streets and directions beautifully. They scraped rubber against the curb only twice before they reached Spring Street and only twice, on the Sixth Avenue leg of the trip, did he have Keith get out and check house numbers.

**D**NCE, in the Holland Tunnel Keith heard another car go by them, heading in from Jersey but they were lucky and didn't even scrape fenders.

Joe knew the Jersey side too and kept them on straight streets where they could navigate with the compass. After a mile or so he turned the headlights on and Keith could see that they penetrated ten or twelve feet into the blackness.

Joe said, "Okay, pal. It tapers off from here. You can lay off the compass now."

The headlights shot their beams farther and farther and before long it was an ordinary night they were driving through—an ordinary night with stars and a moon. Keith looked at the Moon and took a deep breath.

He thought, "This is a dream. I'm not really going there."

At one-fifteen by Keith's watch, Joe pulled the car to the side of the road. He said, "We're here, pal." He turned off the headlights and took the flashlight from Keith. "Across these fields. It's pretty isolated back there. We won't even have to be careful. Hope they don't swipe the car on me before I get back to it."

They started across the fields. The moonlight was so bright that they didn't need the flashlight. Keith said, "How'll you get back into town in the car alone? Can you man-age the car and the compass both?"

"I won't go back to New York tonight.

I'll drive the car into Trenton or somewhere and spend the night there. They might be watching for that car in the morning if it's reported early. So I'll go in by train and let them find it in Jersey. It's just past these trees."

He used the flashlight, going through the grove, and on the far side of it were a big landing field and a big all-glass building like a monster greenhouse. Through the glass, Keith could see the two space-ships Joe had told him about. They looked more like airplanes than space-ships. The big one was about the size of a transport plane and the little one not much bigger than a Piper Cub.

Joe said, "Wait here. I'll walk once around and be sure the coast's clear."

When he came back, he nodded. Keith held the flashlight while Joe opened the door with a picklock. "Good thing the little job will do. It's foolproof. I can show you how to run it in ten or twenty minutes. Know anything at all about space navigation?"

"Not a thing."

"Well, then it's good you won't want the Ehrling. It'd take me a while to teach you that one."

Keith was walking around the smaller space-ship. Now, at closer range, he could see it was less like an airplane than he had thought. The wings were shorter and stubbier. What had looked like canvas felt more like asbestos. And there wasn't any propeller.

"Here's the airlock," Joe said. "Just turn this handle. If you open it in space for any reason—and you'd better put on a space-suit first. There's two inside the ship. You got to open this valve first and let the air out of the ship first. Then, after you're back in, you start the airmaker and it builds up. I'll show you that. Get on in."

Keith sat at the pilot's seat and Joe, beside him, explained the controls. They were simple, Keith thought, much simpler than those on a light plane.

"Here's the sighter," Joe was saying. "Just aim that where you want to go. And these dials set the distance. Big one's in hundred-thou-mile units, next one in thousand, and on down to the little vernier in feet. That's for hangaring of course. Now for the Moon—you landing on this side or the far side?"

"This side."

"Then just sight on where you want to go, set this dial—the repulsor—for ten miles.

When you're ready, push this button and you dematerialize here and materialize ten miles above the moon. That's safe for the Moon. Better allow twenty miles for Earth, thirty for Venus, about fifteen for Mars.

"Minute you materialize there, you start falling. Put the nose in a steep glide and let yourself fall and the wings begin to take hold as you get down into the atmosphere. Glide in and land her like a glider. That's all.

"If you're going to miss your place or make a bad landing—well, you'll have your finger on the button and you push it and you flash back ten miles high again and start over. That's all there is to it, pal. Got it?"

"I guess so," Keith said. It sounded simple enough. Anyway he saw a clip on the inside of the airlock door with a book entitled *Manual of Instructions* under it so he could pick up anything he'd missed or forgotten to ask.

He took out his billfold and counted out the three thousand credits he'd promised Joe. It left him less than two hundred but he probably wasn't going to need any anyway.

"Okay, pal," Joe said. "Thanks—and luck. Look me up sometime when you're back. The place we had the moonjuice."

**A**FTER Joe had gone, he reached for the manual of instructions and studied it closely for nearly an hour.

It was even simpler than he'd realized. You aimed at your objective and guessed or roughly estimated the distance—and if you were wrong it didn't matter because, if you were short, you merely needed to press the button again and, if you were over, it didn't matter if you had the repulsor set for ten miles short of the object, because it would stop you there.

Gliding in didn't seem any tougher than making a dead-stick landing in a light plane, with the added advantage that you could flash back up in nothing flat and start over again if it looked as though your landing weren't going to be good.

He looked up through the glass panel in the top of the space-ship, through the glass roof of the hangar, through the atmosphere of Earth and the nothingness of space—at the stars and the Moon.

*Should* he go to the Moon first? There was no important reason for it. His almost hopeless destination—Mekky and the fleet



near Saturn—wasn't going to be any more accessible from there than from here. But he knew he stood a good chance of never getting to Mekky alive and he knew too that, if he did get there, he was going to try to get back to his own world.

Before he died or before he went back, one or the other, he wanted just once to set foot on the Moon. He'd skip the planets—but, just once, he wanted to stand on ground that wasn't that of Earth.

It wouldn't cost him much time, and there wouldn't—or shouldn't—be much risk. The paragraph on the moon in the manual of instruction had told him that the settlements, the fertile lands, were on the far side, where there was water and where the air was thicker. On the near side were only barren rock and a few mines.

He took a deep breath and strapped himself into the seat. He set the dials for two hundred and forty thousand miles and the repulsor dial for ten miles, checked his aim for dead center and pushed the button.

Nothing happened, nothing at all. He must have forgotten to turn a switch somewhere. He realized that he'd closed his eyes when he'd pushed the button and opened them again to look over the instrument panel. Nothing was wrong.

Or was it? There *was* something different, a sensation of lightness, of falling, of going down in a very fast elevator. He looked upward through the top panel and the Moon wasn't there any more but the stars were and they looked brighter and closer and more numerous than he'd ever seen them.

But where was the Moon?

He looked down through the glass panel in the floor and saw it rushing up at him, only miles away.

He caught his breath as he set the dials again, ready to flash him back to a point above the atmosphere, then took the stick and put his feet on the pedal controls. The wings seemed to be catching air now and the craft was at the right slant to go into a glide.

But it had been too sudden, too unexpected—he wasn't ready. He pressed the button and again nothing happened—apparently—except that suddenly the Moon was a little farther away again.

This time he waited it out, going into a glide. He kept his finger on the button until he cleared the edge of a crater and saw he was heading for a flat level plain on

which even a dub couldn't miss making a good landing.

He made one, and rolled to a stop. Slowly he unstrapped himself. He hesitated just a moment with his hand on the latch of the airlock, wondering if there really was air outside. But there had to be. He'd glided down.

He opened the door and stepped out. Yes, there was air, thin and quite cold, like the air atop a high mountain of Earth. He looked around, shivering, and was disappointed. He might have been standing on rocky, barren land on Earth, with mountains in the distance. It didn't look any different.

It felt, different, though. He felt unbelievably light. How high were you able to jump on the Moon? He took an experimental little hop that wouldn't have taken him over six inches high on Earth and went several feet into the air. He came down more slowly and lightly than he'd expected. But doing it gave him a queasy feeling at the pit of his stomach and he didn't try it again.

He looked up, wondering what was wrong in that direction. It looked like an ordinary Earth sky, except that the sun was brighter. But wasn't *that* wrong? Weren't you supposed to be able to see stars in daytime from the Moon? Shouldn't the sky, except for the bright ball of the sun, be dark?

But that was because scientists thought there wasn't any air on the Moon. Were they wrong on that—back there in his own universe, too? Or was that just another difference between this universe and his—that the Moon of this universe had air and his didn't?

He turned around slowly, then caught his breath at sight of what he'd forgotten to look for. The Earth, a monster yellowish ball, hung there in the sky, looking as the moon looks when seen from Earth in daytime but larger. And he could see the outline of continents on it. It looked like a big globe of Earth hanging there.

He stared at it wonderingly for a long minute, until the sharp feel of cold air in his throat and lungs reminded him that he'd freeze if he stood out here much longer. It must be close to zero and he was dressed for summer in New York.

Regretfully he took his eyes off the magnificent sphere in the sky, then got back into the space-ship and closed the airlock. The

air inside was thin and cold now, too—but now that the airlock door was closed the airmaker unit and the heater would bring it back to normal automatically.

He strapped himself back into the pilot's seat, thinking, "Well, I've been on the Moon."

It hadn't thrilled him as much as he'd thought and he believed he knew why. It was because—here, in this universe—it didn't seem completely real, however real this universe was. It was too easy. Much too easy.

Yes, he knew now, definitely, that what he wanted was to get *back*, back to the world he was born in and on which he belonged. Maybe he was too old to readjust himself to something like this. Maybe if it had happened when he'd been seventeen instead of thirty-one and if he'd been heart-free instead of head-over-heels in love, this universe would have been just what the doctor ordered.

But it wasn't now. He wanted back and there was only one mind—a mechanical one—that might be able to help him do that.

He set the pointer at Earth and the dial at only a hundred and twenty thousand miles, halfway between Earth and Moon. Out there in space, he could take his time about locating Saturn.

He pushed the button.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Monster from Arcturus*

**H**E WAS used to nothing happening when he pressed that button. It didn't surprise him at all that suddenly the Earth was twice as big as it had been before. But it did surprise him that he himself felt so strange.

It surprised him until he realized that he was almost completely weightless here. What pull there was pulled him away from the straps in the seat, toward Earth overhead. Then the ship itself must have overcome its inertia and started falling in that direction and he felt completely weightless.

Well, it would take him a long time to fall a hundred and twenty thousand miles. More time than he thought he'd need.

He began, first through one panel and then

another, to scan the sky. It shouldn't be too hard to find Saturn. Out here in space, with no atmosphere to blunt vision, the stars were monstrous compared to the way they looked from Earth. Even on Earth rare people, with gifted eyesight, were said at times to be able to distinguish the rings of Saturn. From here, in space, normal eyesight ought to do it easily.

And he wouldn't have to search the entire sky, even though he didn't know Saturn's present position. He knew enough of elementary astronomy to recognize the plane of the ecliptic and Saturn would be in that plane.

He'd have to look along a line, not throughout the whole sky. Of course, if Saturn were on the other side of the Sun, he'd have to try from there. But from here the Sun was a fiery ball in a black sky and occulted only a small fraction of the line of the ecliptic.

It took him a minute to get his bearings because there were so many more stars here than he was used to seeing. They didn't twinkle, they glowed like luminous diamonds on a piece of black velvet. But he found the Dipper and then the belt of Orion and, after that, it was easy to locate the constellations of the zodiac.

He followed it around, carefully, studying each celestial object near the imaginary line. He got a little thrill out of seeing a reddish disk that must be Mars, a reddish disk with faint crackly lines on it.

He followed the line through about thirty degrees and there it was. The rings weren't quite edge-on but they were unmistakable. And there was only one object in the whole sky that had rings.

He put the pointer on it and reached for the manual of instructions, in which there was a table of orbital distances. Yes, there it was—Saturn. 886,779,000. It was in the same general direction from the sun as Earth was and that made it easy to figure.

Knock off the 93,000,000-odd miles of Earth's distance from the sun, and Saturn was 793-odd million miles away from him. And, if he overguessed, it wouldn't matter as long as he had his repulsor set. He set the dials at 800,000,000 miles, and the repulsor to stop him a thousand miles away from Saturn, checked the pointer again and pressed the button.

The beauty of the ringed planet—and its tremendous size from only a thousand miles away—made him catch his breath. He hadn't

realized how close a thousand miles was to a planet nearly 74,000 miles in diameter, about nine times the diameter of the Earth. It was a full minute before he could look away from it and start searching the sky for the Earth fleet, the war fleet.

He didn't find it—it found him. A voice startled him by saying, "Do not move." It was a physical, actual voice, not one inside his head as Mekky's voice had been. This wasn't Mekky. The voice said, "What are you doing here? Pleasure craft are forbidden outside the orbit of Mars."

He located it this time while the voice was speaking. It came out of a tiny speaker set into the instrument panel. He hadn't noticed it before. Alongside it was what looked like a pick-up mike.

Keith said, "I want to see Mekky. It's important." While he spoke he looked out through the vision panels and saw them—half a dozen oblong objects that globed him in at close range, occulting big chunks of the sky. He couldn't guess how big they were without knowing their distance nor their distance without knowing their size.

The voice said sternly, "Under no circumstances are civilians or occupants of civilian craft allowed to approach the fleet. You will be escorted back to Earth and turned over to the authorities for punishment. Do not attempt to touch your controls. Your ship is pinned. Have you a space-suit on?"

"No," said Keith. "But this is important. Does Mekky know I'm here? I must see him."

"Mekky knows you are here. He ordered us to englobe and capture you. Put on a space-suit so you can let the air out of your ship and open the lock. One of us will enter and take over operation of your ship."

"All right," Keith said, desperately, "but does Mekky—"

**T**HE voice was different this time. It spoke both ways at once, strangely, inside his head *and* through the speaker on the instrument panel. It was Mekky's voice. It said, "Keith Winton, I told you not to come here."

Keith answered aloud. If the voice had come through the radio too, then Mekky was dealing the others in on the conversation and he might as well.

He said, "I had to come now or never, Mekky. The plans went wrong. I was being hunted down as a spy and you're the only

one who *knows* I'm not. I wouldn't have lived a day longer on Earth."

"What is that to me? What is one *life* beside the defense of a solar system?"

"That's *why*," said Keith, trying to sound confident. "You know, from having studied my surface thoughts, that I'm from another universe. You've got a lot of things here in the way of science that we can't touch there. Space-travel and—and *you*, yourself. But how do you know we haven't got some things you've missed?"

"You're in a jam here. You're afraid of the next Arc attack. How do you know, without searching deeply into my mind, that you won't find something there that may be worth a lot more than the little time you'd have to give me?"

A calm but youthful voice said, "Maybe he's got something there, Mekky. Why not bring him over to the fleet? What have we got to lose?" It was a youthful yet deep voice—there were authority and confidence in it.

Keith had never heard it before but he knew somehow that it must be Dopelle's voice—Dopelle, with whom Betty Hadley, *his* Betty Hadley, was so hopelessly in love. The great Dopelle who held this universe—except for the Arcturians—in the palm of his hand. The mighty Dopelle. "Damn him," Keith thought.

Mekky's voice again said, "All right. Bring him to the fleet. To the flagship."

There was dull knocking on the outside of the airlock. Keith unstrapped himself quickly from the pilot's seat. He said, "Just a minute. Getting a space-suit on."

It was thick and awkward to handle but there wasn't anything difficult about putting it on. The helmet clicked automatically into place against the neck-ring. He opened the valve in the airlock that would let the air inside the ship outside. He heard it hiss. When it quit hissing in a few seconds he opened the airlock.

A man wearing a space-suit bigger and more cumbersome than his came in. Without speaking he sat down in the pilot's seat and began to work the vernier controls. He stood up again and motioned to the airlock. Keith nodded and opened it; they were up against, almost touching, the side of a big ship. From so close, he couldn't tell how big it was.

An airlock stood open and Keith stepped across into the closed compartment to which it led. Of course, he realized, a ship this size

couldn't exhaust all its air merely to let someone in at the airlocks. There'd be an intermediate chamber.

The outer door swung shut. Air hissed. The inner door swung open. A tall, very handsome young man with black hair and flashing black eyes stood there, just inside the inner door.

He stepped forward quickly and helped Keith take off the helmet. He said, "I'm Dopelle, and you're this Winton or Winton Mekky told me about. Hurry up and get that suit off." His voice was courageous, but worried. "We're in a jam. I hope you've got something we can use. Otherwise—"

Slipping out of the space-suit, Keith looked around him. The ship was big all right—the room he was in must be the main chamber. It was a hundred feet long by thirty or thirty-five wide. There were a lot of men in it, mostly working down at the far end of the room in what looked like a completely equipped experimental laboratory.

His eyes went back to Dopelle. There, just above Dopelle's head, hung Mekky, the basketball-sized sphere that was a mechanical brain.

Inside his head came Mekky's voice. "It could be, Keith Winton. Something about a potentiomotor. A man named Burton. Whatever it is, it's not known here. Do you know the details, the wiring diagram?"

"Don't bother answering, just think. Yes, you've seen diagram and formula. You don't know them consciously but they're there in your subconscious. I think I can get to them under light hypnosis. You are willing?"

"Yes, of course," Keith said. "What's the score?"

"The score is this," said Dopelle, answering for Mekky. "The Arcs are going to attack soon. We don't know exactly when but it may be within hours. And they've got something new. We don't know how to buck it yet. It's a single ship, not a fleet—but their whole effort for years has gone into it. That's good, in one way. If we can destroy it the way will be clear for us to take the fleet to Arcturus and end the war. But—"

"But what?" Keith asked. "Is it too big for you to handle?"

**D**OPELLE waved a hand impatiently. "Size doesn't matter, although it's really a monster—ten thousand feet, ten times the biggest thing we've ever tried to build. But it's coated with a new metal, im-

pervious to anything we know. We can A-bomb it all day and not scratch the finish."

Keith nodded. "We had that stuff, too—in our science-fiction magazines." He got the space-suit off as he finished speaking. "I used to edit one."

Dopelle's face lighted up. It was a nice face. Keith decided that—Betty Hadley regardless—he liked Dopelle. "I used to read them," Dopelle said, "when I was younger. Of course now—"

But something in the expression on Dopelle's face registered. He'd seen a face like it before, back—no, he hadn't seen the face, either. Just a photograph of it. A photograph of a younger and far less handsome edition. Dopelle was—

"*Joe Doppelberg!*" Keith said. His mouth fell open.

"What?" Dopelle's eyes were puzzled now. "What do you mean?"

"I know you now," Keith said. "I've got a clue to this set-up. You're *Joe Doppelberg*, a science-fiction fan of—of back there where I came from. Only you're older than he—and a thousand times handsomer and more intelligent than he and—you've got everything he wanted.

"You're what he would have dreamed himself to be. He—you—used to write me long letters, full of corny humor, to my Rocketalk Department, and you called me Rocky and you didn't like our Bems, and—"

He broke off and his mouth dropped open again.

Dopelle said, "Mekky, he's crazy. You won't get anything out of him. He's stark crazy."

"No," Mekky's voice said. "He isn't crazy. He's wrong of course but he isn't crazy. I can follow his thought processes and see why he thinks that. I can straighten him out on it. I see the whole thing now—except the formula and diagram we need.

"Come, Keith Winton, you must go under light hypnosis so I can get from your deep subconscious what I need. Then I'll tell you everything you want to know."

"How to get back?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure of that. But you will be doing a tremendous service. You may be the instrument of saving Earth from Arcturus—and Earth here is just as real as the one you know. You're not living in the dream of one of your science-fiction fans. I assure you of that.

"And that you may know what you're



saving Earth from would you care to see an Arcturian?"

"Would I—why sure. Why not?"

"Follow."

The sphere that was Mekky floated across the room, and Keith followed. The voice was saying inside his head, "This is one we captured in a scouting ship. The first we captured alive since the early days of the war. It was from its mind—if you can call it a mind—that I learned of the monster ship that is to come, and of the new armament it will have. After you see it—"

A door swung open, revealing a steel-barred door just inside it and a cell beyond the steel bars. A light flashed on within the cell.

"That," said the voice of Mekky, "is an Arcturian."

Keith stepped closer to look through the bars and then he stepped back even more quickly. He felt as though he were going to be sick at his stomach. He closed his eyes and swayed dizzily. Horror and nausea almost blanked him out.

The steel door swung shut.

"That," said Mekky, "is an Arcturian in its own body. Maybe now you understand why Arcturian spies are shot on suspicion."

Keith cleared his throat. "Yes," he said.

"That is what will destroy the human race and populate the Solar System, unless we can destroy the monster ship. And time is short. Come, Keith Winton."

## CHAPTER XV

### *Flashback*

**K** EITH WINTON felt a little dazed. He felt as though he'd been drunk and were just sobering up, as though he'd been under ether and were just coming out. Yet it wasn't quite like that either. Though he felt physically lethargic his mind was clear, crystalline in fact. It was just that too much strong meat was being fed to it all at once. It was having difficulty absorbing more.

He sat on a little steel-railed balcony, looking out over the big room of Dopelle's space-ship, watching Dopelle and a varying number of other workmen swiftly and efficiently making something that looked like a very large and quite modified edition of

something he'd seen a picture of in a science magazine back on Earth, his own Earth. It was a Burton potentiomotor.

The sphere that was Mekky floated above the operation, fifty feet away from Keith, but it was talking to Keith, in Keith's mind. Distance didn't make any difference, it seemed, to Mekky. And Keith had a hunch that Mekky was carrying on more than one of those telepathic conversations at the same time, that Mekky was directing Dopelle and the workmen even while he talked to Keith.

"You find it difficult to grasp, of course," Mekky's voice was saying. "Infinity is, in fact, impossible fully to grasp. Yet there are infinite universes."

"But *where?*" Keith's mind asked. "In parallel dimensions or what?"

"Dimension is merely an attribute of a universe," Mekky said, "having validity only within that particular universe. From elsewhere a universe—spatially infinite in itself—is but a point.

"There are an infinite number of points on the head of a pin. There are as many points on the head of a pin as in an infinite universe or an infinity of infinite universes. And infinity to the infinite power is still only infinity.

"There are, then, an infinite number of co-existent universes—including the one you came from and this one. But do you conceive what infinity means, Keith Winton?"

"Well—yes and no."

"It means that, out of infinity, *all conceivable* universes exist. There is, for instance, a universe in which this exact scene is being repeated except that you—or the equivalent of you—are wearing brown shoes instead of black ones.

"There are an infinite number of permutations of that variation, such as one in which you have a slight scratch on your left forefinger and one in which you have a dull headache and—"

"But they are all *me?*"

"No, none of them is you. I should not have used that pronoun. They are separate individual entities—just as the Keith Winton of this universe is a separate entity from you. In this particular variation, there is a wide physical difference—no resemblance, in fact.

"But you and your prototype here had roughly the same history. And, as you found out to your sorrow, you wrote the same stories once. And there are similarities be-

tween my master Dopelle here and a science-fiction fan named Doppelberg in your universe but they are *not* the same person."

Keith thought slowly, "If there are infinite universes, then all possible combinations must exist. Then, somewhere, *everything must be true*. I mean, it would be impossible to write a fiction story, because no matter how wild it sounds that very thing must be happening somewhere. Is that true?"

"Of course it's true. There is a universe in which Huckleberry Finn is a real person, doing the exact things Mark Twain described him as doing. There are, in fact, an infinite number of universes in which a Huckleberry Finn is doing every possible variation of what Mark Twain *might* have described him as doing. No matter what variation, major or minor, Mark Twain might have made in the writing of that book it would have been true."

Keith Winton's mind staggered a little. He said, "There are an infinite number of universes in which we—or our equivalents—are making Burton outfits to defeat attacking Arcturians? And in some of them we'll succeed and in others we'll fail?"

"Of course. And there are an infinite number of universes in which we don't exist at all. In which the human race does not exist. There are an infinite number of universes in which flowers are the predominant form of life. Infinite universes in which—in which the states of existence are such that we have no words to describe them. *All possible combinations must exist in infinity*."

"There are an infinite number of universes in which you're going to die in the next half hour, piloting a rocket against the monster ship from Arcturus."

"What?"

"Of course. You're going to ask to. It may get you back to your own universe. You want to get there. I can see it in your mind. Don't ask me if you will succeed in this particular universe. I cannot read the future."

**A** GAIN Keith shook his head. There were still a million questions though he could figure the answers to some of them himself. But he asked another one first.

"Explain again, please, what happened. How I got here."

"The moon rocket from your Earth must have fallen back and exploded—the Burton effect, that is. It isn't exactly an explosion—

when it struck Earth on L. A. Borden's estate a few yards from you. There are peculiar properties to such an electrical flash. Burton didn't know what he had. Anyone caught in it directly is *not* killed. He's knocked into another universe."

"How can you know that if the Burton effect is new here?"

"Partly by deduction from what happened to you, partly by analysis—deeper than was given it on your Earth—of the Burton formula. You're *here*. Q. E. D. And, from your mind, I can see why out of an infinity of universes you landed in this particular one."

"*Why?*"

"Because you were thinking about this particular universe at the instant the rocket struck. You were thinking about your science-fiction fan, Joe Doppelberg, and you were wondering what kind of a universe he would dream about, what kind he would like. And this is it.

"Analyze the differences and you'll see they fit, all of them. You didn't think this universe up, Keith Winton. It existed. It's real. Any universe you might have been thinking of would have existed, ready for you to be blown into by the Burton flash."

"I—understand," Keith Winton said.

It answered a lot of things. Yes, *this* was the kind of universe Joe Doppelberg would have thought of and dreamed of—with a romanticized hero named Dopelle practically running it, saving it. It even answered a lot of little details.

Joe Doppelberg had been at the Borden office. He'd seen Betty Hadley and probably been smitten by her. And so here Betty was in love with Dopelle. Joe knew of Keith Winton, had corresponded with him and had a mental picture of him, so there was a Keith Winton here.

"But Joe hadn't ever seen Keith Winton—he'd been out of New York the day of Joe's call—so the physical picture wasn't accurate. Joe had seen Borden, so Borden was here—but Joe didn't know of Borden's Greenville estate and there hadn't happened to be a Greenville estate here.

"It all fitted—even to the improvement of the Bems on the covers of *Surprising Stories*—bug-eyed monsters with the subtle horror that Doppelberg demanded in them.

A crazy Earth with everyday automobiles—and space-ships, too. Black adventure at night on Manhattan Island—and intergalac-

tic warfare. A Moon with air on it—and a super-marvelous mechanical brain as Dopelle had created it. Dopelle the super man, the only man who'd been to Arcturus and come back alive. Dopelle who was almost single-handed saving the solar system.

Universe à la Doppelberg! It fitted—everything fitted. It had to be.

The men in the big room down below the balcony were now putting the finishing touches on the thing they were making—a thing of complicated coils that still somewhat resembled the pictures he'd seen once of a Burton potentiomotor. Apparently Mekky had finished his telepathed instructions to them.

Mekky floated up to the balcony now and hovered near Keith's shoulder. In Keith's mind, he said, "They're installing it on a life-boat, a rocket-propelled craft. Someone must take the life-raft out and run it around a while until a tremendous charge is built up in the Burton apparatus. Then it will hover near the fleet until the monster ship from Arcturus materializes here to destroy us. They have the same space-drive we have.

"Then the life-raft must crash the monster. The Arc ship is inertialess. Any other ship we have can crash it without hurting it. Nothing in our armaments can touch it. It will blaze a path of death and destruction through the planets after it has destroyed our fleet. Unless the Burton apparatus—which is new to them as to us—can destroy it."

"Can it, though?"

"You'll know when you crash the life-raft into it. Yes, you will be given the privilege. Every man in the fleet would volunteer. Dopelle himself would love to do it but I talked him into letting you. I knew from your mind that you'd want to take the chance. It will—I believe—get you back to your own universe.

"The life-raft isn't a raft, of course. That's just a nickname for it. It's a small rocket-propelled ship. You've never seen one. I shall implant knowledge of its operation in your mind before you enter it. And you know what to do before the crash."

"What?"

"Concentrate on your own world. On a specific part of it; possibly on the very spot where you were a week ago when the moon rocket hit you. But not on that time, of course—upon that place in that universe, as of now.

"You don't want to get back there just in time to be blown away again by the moon rocket's landing. From there you can go to New York—the New York you know. And to Betty Hadley—*your* Betty Hadley."

Keith reddened a little. There was a disadvantage to having one's mind read that thoroughly even by a mechanical brain.

The men were wheeling off the thing they had made.

"Will it take them long to install it in the rocket?" he asked.

"Only minutes. Relax now and close your eyes, Keith Winton. I'll implant in your mind the knowledge of how to control a rocket-propelled craft."

Keith Winton closed his eyes and relaxed . . .

**T**HE life-raft hovered, ten thousand miles out from Saturn. A thousand miles from the Earth fleet. Keith could see the fleet in his visiplat, hundreds of ships of all sizes, the might of the Solar System, yet helpless against the thing to come.

And he, alone in this tiny cigar-shaped rocket only thirty feet long by six in circumference, could do what the whole fleet couldn't—he hoped. Well, Mekky thought it would work and Mekky would know if anybody or anything would know. No use worrying about it. It would work or it wouldn't and, if it didn't, he wouldn't live to worry.

He tested the controls, sending the rocket in a tight little circle only a mile across, coming back and to a dead stop at the point at which he'd started. A difficult maneuver but easy for him now. "*The Ole Rocketeer*," he thought. "If my fans of the Rockettalk Department could only see me now." He grinned.

Inside his head, Mekky's voice said, "It's coming. I feel ether vibrations."

He looked hard at the visiplat. There was a black dot just off the center of it. He touched the controls, got the dot on dead center and slammed on all the rockets, full power.

The black dot grew, slowly at first, then filled the screen. He was going to hit it in a second now. Quickly, desperately, he remembered to concentrate on Earth, *his* Earth, on the spot near Greenville, New York. On Betty Hadley. On currency in sensible dollars and cents and night life on

Broadway without the mist-out, on everything he'd known.

A series of pictures flashed through his mind, as is supposed to be the case with a drowning man. "But—Lord," he thought, "Why didn't I think of it sooner? It doesn't have to be exactly like that. I can make a few improvements. I can pick a universe almost exactly like mine but with a few differences that would make it better, such as—

The rocket hit the monster ship, dead center. There was a blinding flash.

Again there was no sense of a time lapse. Keith Winton was again lying flat on the ground and it was early evening. There were stars in the sky and a moon. It was a half-moon, he noticed, not the crescent moon of last Saturday evening.

He looked down and around him. He was in the middle of a big charred and blackened area. Not far away were the foundations of what had been a house, and he recognized the size and shape of it. He recognized the blackened stump of a tree beside him. Things looked as though the explosion and fire had occurred almost a week ago. "Good," he thought. "Back at the right time and place."

He stood up and stretched, feeling a bit stiff from his confinement in the little rocket-ship.

He walked out to the road, still feeling a bit uneasy. *Why* had he let his mind wander a trifle just at the last minute. He could have made a mistake doing that. What if—?

A truck was coming along and he hailed it, getting a lift into Greeneville. The driver was taciturn. They didn't talk at all on the way in.

Keith thanked him as he got off at the main square of town. He ran quickly to the newsstand to look at the headline of the current newspaper displayed there. "Giants Beat Bums," it read. Keith sighed with relief.

He realized he'd been sweating until he'd seen that headline. He wiped perspiration off his forehead and went into the newsstand. "Got a copy of *Surprising Stories*?" he asked.

"Right here, sir."

He glanced at the cover, at the familiar cover, saw that it said 20c, and not 2c. Again he sighed with relief—until he reached for change in his pocket and remembered there wasn't any there. And there'd be only

credit bills—a few of them—in his wallet. No use pulling that out.

Embarrassed, he handed the magazine back. "Sorry," he said. "Just realized I came away without any money."

"Oh, that's all right, Mr. Winton," the proprietor said. "Pay me any time. And—uh—if you came away without your money could I lend you some? Would ten dollars help?"

"It surely would," Keith said. "Thanks a lot. Uh—make it nine-eighth, so I'll owe you an even ten with the magazine."

"Sure. Gee, I'm glad to see you, Mr. Winton. We thought you were killed when the rocket hit. All the papers said so."

"Of course," Keith thought. "That's how he knows me. My picture would have been in the papers as one of Borden's visitors who was killed."

"Glad to say the newspapers got it wrong," he told the man. "Thanks a lot."

**H**E POCKETED the nine dollars and eighty cents, and went out again. It was getting to be dusk, just as it had been before on last Saturday night. Well, now to—now to what? He couldn't phone Borden.

Borden was dead—or maybe blown into another universe. Keith hoped it was the latter. Had the Bordens and the others who'd been on the estate, been near enough the center of the flash to have had that happen to them? He hoped so.

An unpleasant memory made him walk past the corner drugstore where—it seemed like years ago—he'd seen his first purple Bem. He went into the drugstore on the next corner and walked back to the phone booth. Often someone worked late in the Borden offices in New York. Maybe somebody would be working there now. If not, all the call would cost him would be a report charge.

He got a handful of change from the druggist and went back to the phone booth. How did one dial a long distance operator on a Greeneville phone? He picked up the Greeneville directory to find out and idly leafed it open to the B's first. The last time he'd handled one of these things there hadn't been any L. A. Borden listed.

This time, of course—just to reassure himself, he ran his finger down the column. There wasn't any L. A. Borden.

For just a minute, he leaned against the



back of the phone booth and closed his eyes. Then he looked again. Had some embryonic thoughts gone through his mind at the last minute and brought him back to a universe not quite the same as the one he left?

Quickly he yanked the copy of *Surprising Stories* out of his pocket and opened it to the title page. He ran his finger to the point in the fine print where—*Ray Wheeler, Managing Editor*, it read. Not Keith Winton but Ray Wheeler. Who the devil was Ray Wheeler?

Quickly his eyes swung to the name of the publisher—and it didn't read Borden Publications, Inc., at all. It read *Winton Publications, Inc.* It took him a full five seconds to figure out where he'd heard the name of Winton before. Then he grabbed for the phone book again and looked under the W's. There was a Keith Winton listed, Cedarburg Road, and a familiar phone number, Greeneville 111.

No wonder the newsdealer had known him, then. And he *had* changed things somewhat and somehow with those last minute thoughts in the rocket ship. This was almost the same universe but not quite. In it *Keith Winton* owned one of the biggest chains of publications in the country and had owned a Greeneville estate!

But what else—if anything?

He put a coin in the phone and said quick-

ly, "Long distance, please," before he remembered it was a dial phone.

His hands fumbled the directory before he could find out how to get a long distance operator.

Then he got one, and said, "New York, please. Have the New York operator see if there is a Betty Hadley listed and get her for me if there is. Quickly, please."

A few minutes later—"Your party, sir." And then Betty's cool voice saying, "Hello."

"Betty, this is Keith Winton. I—"

"*Keith!* We thought you—the papers said—what happened?"

"Guess I must have been in the explosion, Betty, but at the edge of it and just got knocked out. I must have had amnesia from the shock and been wandering around. I just came to myself. I'm in Greeneville?"

"Oh, Keith, that's wonderful! It's—I just can't say it! You're coming right to New York?"

"As soon as a plane will get me there. Want to meet me at La Guardia field?"

"Do I *want* to? Oh, *darling!*"

And a moment later, Keith Winton—with a dazed and somewhat silly look on his face—put the receiver on the hook and hurried out of the drugstore. A taxi to the airport and then—

*This*, he thought, was a universe he'd really settle for.