

"COME in, gentlemen," Dobbs called amiably from the rear of the spacious bedroom. There was an unobtrusive man in a dark suit with him, but he left immediately.

Now that he was face to face with the enigmatic Mr. Dobbs, Flinn felt a momentary sense of disappointment.

Malcolm Dobbs sat in a straight-backed chair beside the large bed. Next to him was a table laden with empty breakfast dishes. Dobbs was dressed in an ordinary bathrobe. He appeared to be in his mid-forties and had a full head of dark hair, slightly gray at the temples. His mild, undistinguished face was only slightly less tanned than Wilmer's, and he was of average size and weight. His dark eyes were the only things that belied the man's composed exterior; they were intelligent, interested, and intently watchful. A tiny smile lingered upon Dobbs' lips, as if he were sharing only with himself some form of immensely funny but eminently private joke.

Flinn's total impression of the man was that he was not the sort one would look at twice in a crowded room — under different circumstances.

"Another delegation?" Dobbs asked. "Hello, Jack, Hayes."

"Mal this is Mr. Dugan," Wilmer said, indicating Flinn. "He's from the government."

Even as he acknowledged the introduction, Flinn paused momentarily over the casual familiarity between the physicist and the apparent psychokinetic, until he was reminded that they were both nuclear physicists and had been together for weeks at the atoll. Flinn found himself wondering how close they had been and what thoughts must be going through Wilmer's mind at the moment. But he squelched his curiosity. He was here to scan Dobbs' mind, nobody else's.

"Be unobtrusive," he had been warned. "Stay in the background as much as possible and let Wilmer and Hayes carry the ball. And do the job quickly."

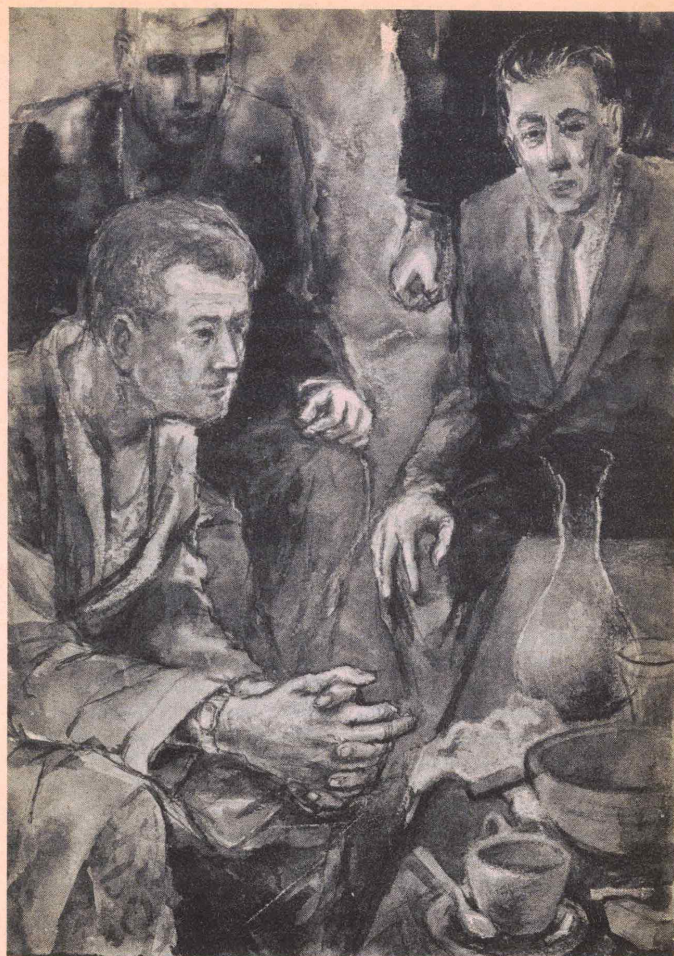
Dobbs looked Flinn over carefully, then seemed to dismiss him from his mind, as if he had decided Flinn was of no particular importance — or no immediate threat.

"You boys should have been here last night," Dobbs smiled. "We had quite a party." His smile faded and he added petulantly: "The only thing — some of the girls weren't as cooperative as I had hoped."

"We'll be more selective next time," Hayes promised quickly.

"See to it," Dobbs said.

They seated themselves, Hayes and Wilmer close to Dobbs, and Flinn just far enough away to seem deferential without raising suspicion.





"Now, what can I do for you?" Dobbs queried. "Another demonstration, I assume?"

"That's right," Wilmer said. "How about that disappearance thing again?"

DOBBS sighed. "You boys just can't get it through your skulls that what I do isn't some sort of trick, can you? Even faced with the evidence of the bomb."

Wilmer raised his hands. "It's not that so much, although what you can do, you'll have to admit, is rather unbelievable. It's the fact that Mr. Dugan here has never seen any evidence of your powers, and the report he will deliver to his superiors may cause even more commotion in high places — to your advantage."

Flinn was amazed that such a flimsy appeal to the appetites and ego of a man as intelligent as Malcolm Dobbs could be successful. Yet it not only could, it was,

Dobbs looked again at Flinn, the strange smile playing upon his lips; then he reached across the table, picked up an opaque glass water carafe, poured out its remaining liquid into an empty cereal bowl, and replaced it on the table.

"We don't want water spilled over everything, do we?" he said.

Wilmer slipped one arm behind the back of his chair and signaled urgently to Flinn.

Since entering the room, Flinn

had been gathering all his resources for a quick and powerful effort, and, at the sight of Wilmer's waving fingers, he began.

He was startled that, despite the interaction and interference of the other thought patterns in the room, he was able to make so quick a contact. Just before reaching Dobbs' mind, the thought impressed itself upon Flinn that the reason was the immense mental power that was building within, and generating from, Dobbs. It was the simplest piece of telepathic scanning with which Flinn had ever been involved.

For a matter of seconds, nothing happened. Then the water carafe abruptly disappeared, its passage into apparent nothingness coincident with a faint "pop" as the air of the room rushed in to fill the vacuum.

Dobbs turned triumphantly and saw Flinn still in the trancelike stupor of the telepath-in-contact. Hayes stood up to screen him, but Flinn shook his head and managed to clear his mind quickly.

"Your friend seems somewhat astounded," Dobbs chuckled.

"My God!" was all Flinn could say.

Wilmer and Hayes looked at him questioningly, and Hayes muttered: "I think he's seen enough. Let's get out of here."

"Come back anytime, gentlemen," Dobbs said.

His laughter followed them as they retreated through the door and down the hall to the stairs.

"WELL?" Wilmer said.

They sat around the table in the room just off the kitchen, steaming cups of coffee in front of them. The three security agents who had been in the room were gone now to their respective duties.

Flinn gazed down into the dark depths of the coffee, trying to organize his thoughts; trying to interpret and evaluate what he had seen.

Wilmer and Hayes sipped their coffee, waiting with forced patience for the parapsychologist to speak.

Presently, Flinn shivered and looked up at them. "If he says he can control a critical mass, or erase Washington, D. C., or destroy the nation, you'd better believe him."

"He's telling the truth then," Hayes said grimly.

"Yes," Flinn answered. "Here are my findings. Somehow Dobbs has established rapport with the atom. Any atom. Probably any number of atoms. I doubt if he can move one single mass in the ordinary conception of psychokinesis. That is, I doubt if he can cause a pebble, say, to shift one millimeter. What he can control are the forces that bind atoms into molecular structures, or that hold nuclei together. Do you understand what I mean? For example, what he did up there just

now was to get rid of the space between atoms in the molecules of that water carafe. I saw it clearly; there's no mistake. The space ceased to exist, the atoms crashed in upon each other, and the carafe seemed to disappear. The mass is the same. It's simply in a different form."

He paused and scanned the numb faces of the government agent and the nuclear physicist beside him.

"Let's get down to specifics," he continued. "What's his trump card? What is it he's holding over our heads?"

"The atmosphere," Wilmer said painfully.

"Oxygen," Flinn mused. "Suppose Dobbs concentrated upon the oxygen atoms all around us and caused their nuclei suddenly to fuse. What would happen?"

"Nobody on the face of the Earth would know what hit him," Wilmer said. "The Moon would probably be blasted out of its orbit. And if there is any intelligent life on Mars, they'd be treated to a sight they'd never forget — if they survived it."

"Well, then," Flinn said, "we've done what we came here to do. What's the answer?"

Hayes' face set into a hard mask. "There'll be a meeting of the brass, of course. But I can tell you what the result will be. I'll be assigned to kill him."



A BUZZ of excited conversation filled the Pentagon conference room. Flinn sat in one of the several dozen chairs between Wilmer and Hayes and looked at a glass ashtray that lay on the part of the long table just in front of him. One day perhaps he, too, might be able to influence the molecular structure of such an object. Or, more likely, one of his descendants, because he would never be able to discover the short-cuts now.

Planned murder. All the resources and brains of the government, the champion of the rights and dignity of the individual, gathered together to plot the deliberate destruction of one man.

It filled Flinn with sadness. It was inevitable. It had to be done. No one had the right to put himself above the rules of social conduct and the welfare of several billion innocent souls. And yet—

He found himself wondering what the Founding Fathers would think of such a move. ". . . all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights . . . Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Executions of criminals were the result of lengthy legal processes, during which all the rights of the individual were scrupulously observed. But this—was he also one of the judges? Let the punishment fit the crime. What about the judging?

"Isn't there some other way?" Wilmer broke into his thoughts. "That's what you're thinking, correct?"

Flinn managed a faint smile. "And I'm supposed to be the telepath."

"Let's be entirely rational about it," Wilmer said. "Dobbs is a brilliant man, granted. But he is also a lecher and a coward."

"There's some of the pig and the wolf in every man," Flinn said.

"Depends on the extent," Wilmer went on. "Dobbs is way overboard. And he's a craven. I know it's hard to picture a man who voluntarily crosses a bridge into the unknown as anything but brave. I suppose there is a sort of bravado in it. But when he turns that bridge into a club to threaten the rest of mankind — is this courage?" He turned to the FBI man. "What do you think about it, Fred?"

Hayes pulled himself out of the shell of disciplined impassivity into which he had retreated shortly after passing his own unofficial death sentence upon Dobbs. He looked at the physicist and the parapsychologist.

"Nothing," Hayes said bluntly. "Absolutely nothing. I'm just one of the expendables."

"Aren't we all?" Wilmer said. He shrugged at Flinn. "That's why we were chosen originally. Me because I was there at the atoll when

all this started, and was acquainted with Dobbs, and capable of understanding the implications of his acts. Hayes because—"

"Because I've a good enough record to be above suspicion, and because I'm young enough not to be missed," the agent said.

"And you, Pat," the physicist said to Flinn, "because of your unique talents. But now we're all under the gun."

THERE was a lapse in the background noise, and the three turned to see the President's representative rise and signal for order. He was a tall, graying man, beautifully dressed, and, as he spoke, there was a note of sad resignation in his voice.

"So, gentlemen, since reasoning with Dobbs has proven to be useless, we find ourselves in agreement. All that remains is to select the time and the method. And, by the way, Mr. Hilliard—" he nodded at the Director of the FBI — "has assured me there is no need to deviate from our original plan, at least so far as the human element is concerned. Agent Hayes will remain our — messenger. He seems to be ideally suited for the job."

There was a visible stir down the length of the table as the top men from the government tried not to look at Fred Hayes. None of them succeeded. Under their

brief, self-conscious but probing scrutiny, Hayes' hard face betrayed not a flicker of emotion.

"And now the time and the method." The Presidential assistant cleared his throat and scanned the faces of the men before him. "I should think as soon as possible." A murmur of assent swept the room. "There remains the problem of method. Dr. Wilmer cautions that it must be done very efficiently. If Dobbs even suspects that his life is to be forfeit at a predictable time — well, I hardly need tell you the danger. Director Hilliard suggests that we leave it up to Agent Hayes, since he knows his own capabilities better than anyone else. Mr. Hayes?"

The tall, athletic agent rose, reached under his coat to his right hip and produced a short-barreled revolver. He held it up. "With this," he said laconically. "In the head. Death will be instantaneous."

There were sudden protests from the military representatives.

Hayes holstered the revolver and looked at his chief. Hilliard nodded, and Hayes walked to the end of the room. From a carton, he lifted a small bullet trap and placed it against the wall. The safe area inside the trap was about the size of an opened magazine. Then he moved to the conference table, picked up one of the ashtrays, returned to the trap, and propped the tray against it.



Appropriately, the tray was about the width of a man's head.

Agent Hayes stood up, buttoned his coat and began walking leisurely away from the trap. At twenty paces, he whirled. It was almost too fast for the eye to follow, but the individual actions were these:

With his left hand, Hayes unbuttoned his coat. With his right, he swept open the coat, turned in a crouch, simultaneously drew the revolver, and fired. The ashtray assumed a new identity — a scattered pile of broken glass.

It all happened in measurably less than a second.

There was a collective expiration of breath from the men around the table.

**B**EFORE breakfast the next morning, there wasn't a single one of the small group of men intimately involved with the top-priority problem who did not know that Hayes had failed.

This was shocking enough in itself, but what made it even more so was the fact that Hayes was still alive to tell it—and that anyone else was there to hear him.

"I came as close as hell to swearing," Hayes said dully to Wilmer and Flinn.

Neither of them needed any special powers of observation to see that the young agent was shaken. The three sat in the small

Pentagon office. Coffee had been served, and they were waiting now for a quorum of the governmental officials to gather.

"I had it lined," Hayes continued. "I'd waited half the night for everything to be just right. I was in a good position, close and to one side. Dobbs was as relaxed as I've ever seen him. I was just telling myself 'Now' when Dobbs looked directly at me and grinned. 'If you're planning on doing anything rash, my friend, don't. You can't possibly kill me swiftly enough to keep from destroying yourself, every person in this room, every man, woman, and child in this city, and every living thing on the face of this Earth.' *What could I do?*"

"Thank God you didn't figure it was just a bluff!" Wilmer exclaimed. "Pulling that trigger would have been the greatest blunder in history."

"Move and countermove," Flinn mused. "It was our gambit and we were checked before we started."

"So I got on the open line and told the boys to fetch Flinn as quickly as possible," Hayes went on. "But I still don't understand. I'd swear that man read my mind."

"I don't think so," Flinn said. "I've had two mental contacts with Dobbs, and neither time did I get the least suggestion that he was telepathic."

"No need for him to be," Wilmer said. "It doesn't take a smart man to put two and two together and arrive at four. And this man is more than merely smart."

"I suppose you're right," Hayes said, "but it sure knocked the props out from under me."

**T**HEY were all in attendance, most of them looking rumpled and gritty from lack of sleep and the realization that they had been beaten.

"I just don't know," a senator said wearily. "First a man who can influence matter, then one who reads minds, and now the latter tells us the former is inviolable. It's too much for me."

"I refuse to accept defeat!" a fleet admiral thundered, bringing his fist down upon the table explosively. He was an erect, bristling man with an aggressive combat record in two wars. "We've lost the first round — so what? There will be others."

"I quite agree," the Presidential assistant said. "This man *must* be destroyed. Already he's beginning to make impossible demands."

"But how do we go about it?" a congressman said. "Personally, I think we're licked. As far as I can see, the best thing to do is let him have his head and hope for the best."

"*Hope for the best?*" a man from a security agency echoed in-

credulously. "It's power Dobbs wants — recognized power. He wants to be feared and worshipped. Sooner or later he'll let everyone know. His egotism will force it. Can you conceive of what that would mean? For myself, I'd rather see the entire human race disappear in one flash of fire without ever knowing what hit it than live under the thumb of the fear of destruction!"

"Gentlemen!" The Presidential assistant rapped for order. "Let's examine the situation rationally and seek out the flaws. There must be some somewhere. Nothing in the mind of man is perfect."

"Well, this comes as close as anything," Wilmer interjected. "You ask what's wrong with the direct approach — why not shoot him while he sleeps? Well, I'll answer with some questions. Have any of you died as the result of a bullet in the brain? Have you ever questioned anyone who has been killed in that manner? Then how do we know there isn't a microsecond of awareness before life is extinguished? And even — or especially — on the subconscious level, isn't this enough time for a preset signal? What's the time-lag between countdown zero and the explosion of a thermonuclear bomb?"

"Apparently he has us blocked in every way," Flinn picked up Wilmer's argument. "Asleep or



awake. Conscious or unconscious. It's all the same. Think of it as a special circuit in his mind. Destroy Dobbs, the circuit shorts, and this preset signal to the oxygen atoms is sent, their nuclei fuse, and that's the end of everything."

He scanned the faces of the men around the conference table. "Or think of it as a hypnotic suggestion. Under hypnosis, an individual is given a certain order that he is to carry out whenever a certain set of circumstances or stimuli occurs. No matter when this happens, no matter what he is doing or thinking when the moment arrives, the subject reacts according to the order buried in his subconscious."

"But for every move there is a countermove," the admiral argued. "This is a situation. A fantastic one, but a situation. There has to be an answer."

"I think there is," Flinn said carefully, "but it could be very risky."

**I**T was up to the committee now. The decision rested squarely in the lap of the United States Government. Flinn had stated his ideas, presented his plan, and tried to give the odds — although in his heart he knew that was impossible — so it was now out of his hands.

Or was it?

The parapsychologist lay on

the bed in his hotel room, trying to relax, trying to store up energy for the ordeal that might be imminent. Hayes and Wilmer were in the room, too, awaiting word from the heavily guarded conference chamber in the Pentagon.

The thin physicist paced up and down, his tanned face a study in strain. Wilmer had been with this as long as anyone, except Dobbs, and Flinn found himself wondering what deep inner resources the man had tapped to retain his sanity.

The big federal agent slouched in a chair, looking at nothing. He had lapsed again into the welcome protection of training and discipline.

Several times during the past thirty hours, since presenting his plan, Flinn had had to restrain himself from probing the minds of his two associates. At a time like this, no one had the right to invade another's privacy. And curiosity had to give way for another reason — just one look into either of their minds might be enough to weaken or shatter his own resolve.

The classic dilemma. Do nothing and face a living hell. Act and court destruction. The very simplicity of the alternatives made the problem intolerable.

Telehypnosis — the untried hypothesis.

*Good Lord!* Flinn told himself.

*I'm not even proficient as a telepath yet!*

Outside, he could hear the murmur of the city — the traffic, the people, moving along their separate paths to their own destinations in the humid afternoon heat.

Well, anyway, once the complete curtain of security had fallen, there had been no more leaks. Proving that if a secret was big enough, it could be kept.

Another classic problem. Do the people have the right to be informed? Does forewarned really mean forearmed? And how about the other nations of the world?

**A**N hour after the dinner dishes had been cleared away by the government agent dubbing as a room-service waiter, the telephone rang with an awful insistence.

Wilmer was the closest, but Hayes beat him to it by a full stride.

After identifying himself, Hayes listened in silence. Then he said, "All right," and replaced the receiver.

He nodded at Wilmer and Flinn.

"It's go ahead." He paused and his face seemed to change—to relent somehow. "And they wanted me to relay this message: The President says, 'May God be with you.'"

Flinn felt very alone and very

close to something terrible.

In the gloom of the darkened bedroom that adjoined Dobbs', he could see Wilmer silhouetted against the meager light that came through the curtained window from the street lamp outside and Hayes was out in the hall. But the knowledge of the proximity of the two men did nothing to lessen Flinn's loneliness. The committee had even couched it as an order, trying to relieve him of that small burden, but if he failed, who would remain to accept the blame?

A few times in his forty-two years had Flinn wondered how it would feel to have the fate of the world riding upon his shoulders. Now he knew and wished he didn't.

The door opened silently and Hayes eased in.

"He's asleep," the agent breathed in a barely audible voice. "You can start anytime now."

The plan was simple, deceptively so.

Since Dobbs' block was a kind of self-hypnotic thing, why not countermand it with a deeper hypnotic suggestion introduced by telepathy? If it could be done and was strong enough, the second would counteract the first. At least for a short time.

There were terrifying flaws — the first one obvious, the second not so easily seen.

Suppose Dobbs' block had in-





herent within it an anti-disturbance feature that might react to any interference, including hypnotism in any form? Then the result would be an immediate "short-circuit" and — disaster.

Trembling with the responsibility that was upon him, Flinn forced himself into a deep concentration, an almost cataleptic trance. All details of the room

faded from his consciousness. There was the familiar gray, swirling mist, and, for what seemed an intolerably long time, he fought to make contact with the sleeping man's mind. He almost sobbed aloud from the effort.

Then at last he found it, entered, and gradually pushed down through the subconscious.

**H**E was seeking now, probing for the deep-seated level of the block that he had discovered the second time he had investigated Dobbs' mind.

It was very difficult with the sleeping man and, before he found it, more than once he felt himself standing on the precipice of the unknown, close to slipping away into a fright-filled nothingness.

Finally, he had it, clear and cold. The strange, unhuman, inscrutable area that was in diabolical rapport with the basic stuff of one element of the atmosphere. Flinn lingered there for a while, wondering again why he could not read it completely, then forced himself on and on, deeper and deeper, until at last he felt the limit had been reached.



His own warning thought intruded, telling him that this was the place. And the time for the first test was at hand. He could not afford the luxury of another pause. His resolve might crack...

The thought arced like a high-voltage spark, the preamble of the counter-suggestion: *You are to do nothing. No matter what happens, no matter what is done to you, you are to take no action whatsoever. You are not to react. You are to do nothing. You are to disregard every thought but this.*

The battle had been joined. The interference had bridged the gap — yet the block remained dormant!

The first hurdle had been cleared.

For the better part of three hours, Flinn continued to transmit the counter-suggestion. Although he was not aware of it, sweat rolled from every pore of his body and his nerves spasmed in unfeigned agony.

Something happened.

Flinn lost contact as a shrill of warnings welled through Dobbs' mind.

A second later, the door opened and Hayes' voice hissed: "He's awake!"

Flinn returned to awareness slowly. First he was conscious only of how tired he was, and then he knew that a voice was trying to reach him, and he felt a handker-

chief swabbing at his face.

Wilmer bent over him in the gloom.

Hayes said in Flinn's ear: "Dobbs is awake. He knows something's wrong. He's moving around in there."

"Then go ahead," Flinn heard his voice say. "There won't be a better time."

"Maybe we should wait," Wilmer cautioned.

"No! Do it now. Hurry!"

The agent stiffened, stepped back, and disappeared.

They heard the door to Dobbs' room open and close and the sound of voices.

There was an exclamation, then Dobbs' voice shouting: "What are you doing? Are you crazy? I warn you, *I'll take every one of you with me!*" Then a sudden explosion, muffled, but still shockingly loud, and the thump of a heavy object falling.

Flinn could not bring himself to move a muscle.

**T**HE silence seemed absolute. It was as if even the house itself were listening, straining, preparing itself for the inevitable.

One second passed.

Two.

Five.

Ten.

*Nothing happened.*

Abruptly, Wilmer shouted: "It's all over!"

Flinn heard footfalls upon the stairs and the sound of excited voices.

Hayes burst into the room and turned on the light, the .357 magnum still in his hand. His face was pale; his mouth worked, but no sound emerged.

Flinn found that his muscles would obey him now, and he stood up and headed for the door. He felt numb, drained. He stepped out into the hall. Every special agent and security man on the premises was crowded there.

Flinn turned back to Hayes.

"I never thought to ask before," Flinn said. "Dobbs — did he have any close living relatives? A wife? Children?"

Hayes shook his head.

"Thank God for that!" Flinn said.

He started down the hall toward the stairs. The men there grew silent as he approached and moved

soundlessly out of his way.

He went down the stairs, through the room off the kitchen, and outside to the driveway. He looked up at the dark sky.

*It's over, he told himself. And now I'm a murderer. All of us are. A guilt shared by the few to save the many. But the few are the product of the many, just as each individual is, so where are we to place the blame?*

Twenty years of research, and where had it led?

Somewhere he had failed as society had failed, and, even in success, Flinn could feel no flush of victory.

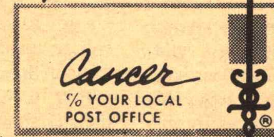
The Earth was safe, but every human upon it had died a little without even knowing it.

Yes, *it's over*, Flinn thought finally. *For now. Until the next time.*

He could see no stars. In a while it would be dawn.

— JIM WANNAMAKER

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(Continued from page 7)  
terms what these gifts of the laboratory will mean.

Who's going to try it?  
How about you?

FOR there is a turnover in magazines that seems to run in a five or ten-year cycle. Every magazine knows it. Sometimes the period is longer, sometimes less; but over a few years there will be almost a whole new body of readers and a corresponding change in the names appearing on the contents pages.

Science fiction is peculiarly fortunate in hanging onto some of its best people — Clifford D. Simak and Murray Leinster, who go back almost to the very beginning of magazine science fiction; Heinlein, Asimov, Pohl and a number of others with more than twenty years of service. But these are the exceptions. The magazine of a decade ago will show a major fraction of names which no longer appear on any contents page in the field.

Some go on to other fields, turning to writing books or even turning away from writing altogether. Some just don't have the stamina or the ingenuity to keep up. A few (including, in the recent past, some of the very best, like Kuttner and Kornbluth) are lost to us through death.

Tomorrow's writers come from today's readers. We know that in any given month from ten to a

hundred readers will sit down at a typewriter, shrug, say, "Why not?" and plunge ahead.

Why not, indeed? But let's make it easy on both of us. There's ideas enough for a million stories (give or take a few hundred thousand) in the new developments of today's exploding technology. Let's use them!

**PIPELESS** pipes and screens of magneto-hydrodynamic force, lighting from windows, interstellar travel. Sound familiar? They do to oldtimers, for that sort of thing occurred in the science fiction stories of a few years back. Now that we've got them, let's find out what they're going to do to our way of life . . . and then let's go on to the things that aren't in the laboratories yet.

For science fiction has to stay ahead of fact. Once we've absorbed the technical reports, we have to extrapolate to the next big jump. It aqua-therms work in water, can something of the sort work to provide spacemen with air? If we can get light from windowpanes, can't we get it from the ambient atmosphere itself?

And then — what happens to the people involved, their habits and their conflicts?

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— H. L. GOLD  
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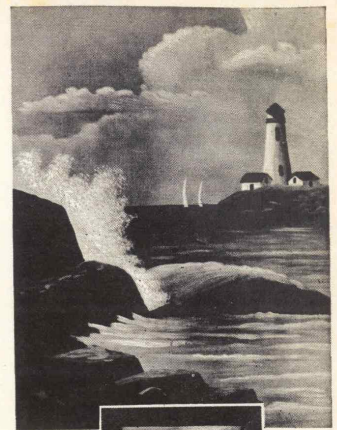
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