

# Legwork

by **Eric Frank Russell, 1905-1978**

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As nearly as an Andromedan thought form can be expressed in print, his name was Harasha Vanash. The formidable thing about him was his conceit. It was redoubtable because justified. His natural power had been tested on fifty hostile worlds and found invincible.

The greatest asset any living creature can possess is a brain capable of imagination. That is its strong point, its power center. But to Vanash an opponent's mind was a weak spot, a chink in the armor, a thing to be exploited.

Even he had his limitations. He could not influence a mind of his own species armed with his own power. He could not do much with a brainless life form except kick it in the rumps. But if an alien could think and imagine, that alien was his meat.

Vanash was a twenty-four carat hypno, jeweled in every hole. Given a thinking mind to work upon at any range up to most of a mile, he could convince it in a split second that black was white, right was wrong, the sun had turned bright

green, and the corner cop was King Farouk. Anything he imposed stayed stuck unless he saw fit to unstick it. Even if it outraged common sense, the victim would sign affidavits, swear to it upon the Bible, the Koran or whatever, and then be led away to have his head examined.

There was one terminal restriction that seemed to have the nature of a cosmoswide law; he could not compel any life form to destroy itself by its own hand. At that point the universal instinct of self-survival became downright mulish and refused to budge.

However, he was well able to do the next best thing. He could do what a snake does to a rabbit, namely, obsess the victim with the idea that it was paralyzed and completely unable to flee from certain death. He could not persuade a Bootean appolan to cut its own throat, but he could make it stand still while he performed that service.

Yes, Harasha Vanash had excellent basis for self-esteem. When one has walked into and out of fifty worlds one can afford to be confident about the fifty-first. Experience is a faithful and loving servant, always ready with a long, stimulating draught of ego when required.

So it was with nonchalance that he landed on Earth. The previous day he'd given the planet a look-over and his snooping had set off the usual rumors about flying saucers despite that his ship resembled no such object.

He arrived unseen in the hills, got out, sent the ship up to where its auto mechanisms would swing it into a distant orbit and make it a pinhead-sized moon. Among the rocks he hid the small, compact apparatus that could call it back when wanted.

The vessel was safe from interference up there, high in the sky. The chance of it being observed telescopically was very remote. If the creatures of Earth did succeed in detecting its presence, they could do nothing about it. They hadn't any rocketships. They could do no more than look and wonder and worry.

Yesterday's preliminary investigation had told him practically nothing about the shape and form of the dominant life. He hadn't got near enough for that. All he'd wanted to know was whether this planet was worthy of closer study and whether its highest life form had exploitable minds. It had not taken long to see that he'd discovered an especially juicy plum, a world deserving of eventual confiscation by the Andromedan horde.

The physical attributes of these future slaves did not matter much right now. Though not at all bizarre, he was sufficiently like them to walk around, sufficiently unlike to raise a yelp of alarm on sight. There would be no alarm. In spite of a dozen physical differences they'd be soothed, positively soothed. Because they'd never get a true view of him. Only an imaginary one. He could be a mental mock-up of anything, anybody.

Therefore, the first thing to do was to find a mediocrity who would pass unnoticed in a crowd, get his mental image firmly fixed and impress that on all other minds subsequently encountered until such time as it might be convenient to switch pictures.

Communication was no problem, either. He could read the questions, project the answers, and the other party's own mind could be compelled to supply accompanying camouflage. If they communicated by making noises with their

mouths or by dexterous jiggling of their tails, it would work out the same. The other's mastered imagination would get his message while providing the noises and mouth movements or the appropriate tail-jiggings.

Leaving the landing place, he set forth through the hills, heading for a well-used road observed during his descent. A flight of primitive jet-planes arced across the eastward horizon. He paused long enough to watch them with approval. The trouble with prospective servants already discovered elsewhere was that they were a bit too stupid to be efficient. Not here, though.

He continued on his way, bearing no instrument other than a tiny compass needed for eventual return and take-off. No weapon. Not a knife, not a gun. There was no need to burden himself with lethal hardware. By self-evident logic, local weapons were the equals of themselves. Any time he wanted one he could make the nearest sucker hand over his own and feel happy to do it. It was that easy. He'd done it a dozen times before and could do it a dozen times again.

By the roadside stood a small filling station with four pumps. Vanash kept watch upon it from the shelter of thick bushes fifty yards away. Hm-m-m! Bipedes, vaguely like himself but with semi-rigid limbs and a lot more hair. There was one operating a pump, another sitting in a car. He could not get a complete image of the latter because only the face and shoulders were visible. As for the former, the fellow wore a glossy-peaked cap bearing a metal badge and uniformlike overalls with a crimson cipher on the pocket.

Neither example was suitable for mental duplication, he decided. One lacked sufficient detail, the other had far too much. Characters who wore uniforms usually took orders, had fixed duties, were liable to be noted and questioned if seen some place where they shouldn't be. It would be better to pick a subject able to move around at random.

The car pulled away. Peaked Cap wiped his hands on a piece of cotton waste and gazed along the road. Vanash maintained his watch. After a few minutes another car halted. This one had an aerial sticking from its roof and bore two individuals dressed alike; peaked caps, metal buttons and badges. They were heavy-featured, hard-eyed, had an official air about them. They wouldn't do either, thought Vanash. Too conspicuous.

Unconscious of this scrutiny, one of the cops said to the attendant, "Seen anything worth telling, Joe?"

"Not a thing. All quiet."

The police cruiser jerked forward and continued its patrol. Joe went into the station. Taking a flavor-seed from its small pack, Vanash chewed it and meditated while he bided his time. So they were mouth-talkers, nontelepathic, routine-minded and natural puppets for any hypno who cared to dangle them around.

Still, their cars, jet planes and other gadgets proved that they enjoyed occasional flashes of inspiration. In Andromedan theory the rare touch of genius was all that menaced any hypno, since nothing else could sense his existence, follow his operations and pin him down.

It was a logical supposition—in terms of other-world logic. Everything the Andromedan culture possessed had been born one by one of numberless revealing shafts of revelation that through the centuries had sparked out of nothingness in

the inexplicable way that such things do. But flashes of inspiration come spontaneously, of their own accord.

They cannot be created to order no matter how great the need. Any species could go nuts for lack of one essential spark and, like everyone else, be compelled to wait its turn.

The trap in any foreign culture lies in the fact that no newcomer can know everything about it, imagine everything, guess everything. For instance, who could guess that the local life form were a bunch of chronic fidgets? Or that, because of it, they'd never had time to wait for genius? Vanash did not know, and could not suspect, that Earth had a tedious, conventional and most times unappreciated substitute for touches of genius. It was slow, grim, determined and unspectacular, but it was usable as and when required and it got results.

Variously it was called making the grade, slogging along, doing it the hard way, or just plain lousy legwork. Whoever heard of such a thing?

Not Vanash, nor any of his kind. So he waited behind the bushes until eventually a nondescript, mousy individual got out of a car, obligingly mooched around offering every detail of his features, mannerisms and attire. This specimen looked the unattached type that are a dime a dozen on any crowded city street. Vanash mentally photographed him from every angle, registered him to perfection and felt satisfied.

Five miles to the north along this road lay a small town, and forty miles beyond it a big city. He'd seen and noted them on the way down, deciding that the town would serve as training-ground before going to the city. Right now he could step boldly from cover and compel his model to drive him where he wanted to go.

The idea was tempting but unwise. Before he was through with this world, its life form would become aware of inexplicable happenings in their midst and it would be safer not to locate the first of such events so near to the rendezvous with the ship. Peaked Cap might talk too loudly and too long about the amazing coincidence of a customer giving a lift to an exact twin. The victim himself might babble bemusedly about picking up somebody who made him feel as though looking into a mirror. Enough items like that, and a flash of revelation could assemble them into a picture of the horrid truth.

He let the customer go and waited for Joe to enter the building. Then he emerged from the bushes, walked half a mile northward, stopped and looked to the south.

The first car that came along was driven by a salesman who never, never, never picked up a hitcher. He'd heard of cases where free riders had bopped the driver and robbed him, and he wasn't going to be rolled if he could help it. So far as he was concerned, thumbers by the wayside could go on thumbing until next Thursday week.

He stopped and gave Vanash a lift and lacked the vaguest notion of why he'd done it. All he knew was that in a moment of mental aberration he'd broken the habit of a lifetime and picked up a thin-faced, sad and silent customer who resembled a middle-aged mortician.

"Going far?" asked the salesman, inwardly bothered by the weakness of his own resolution.

“Next town,” said Vanash. Or the other one thought he said it, distinctly heard him saying it and would take a dying oath that it really had been said. Sneaking the town’s name from the driver’s mind and thrusting it back again, Vanash persuaded him to hear the addition of, “Northwood.”

“Any particular part?”

“Doesn’t matter. It’s a small place. Drop me wherever you find convenient.”

The driver grunted assent, offered no more conversation. His thoughts milled around, baffled by his own Samaritanism. Arriving in Northwood, he stopped the car.

“This do?”

“Thanks.” Vanash got out. “I appreciate it.”

“Think nothing of it,” said the salesman, driving away bopless and unrolled.

Vanash watched him depart, then had a look around Northwood.

The place was nothing much. It had shops on one long main street and on two short side streets. A railroad depot with a marshaling yard. Four medium-sized industrial plants. Three banks, a post office, a fire station, a couple of municipal buildings. He estimated that Northwood held between four and five thousand Earthlings and that at least a third of them worked on outlying farms.

He ambled along the main street and was ignored by unsuspecting natives while practically rubbing shoulders with them. The experience gave him no great kick; he’d done it so often elsewhere that he now took it for granted and was almost bored by it. At one point a dog saw him, let go a howl of dismay and bolted with its tail between its legs. Nobody took any notice. Neither did he.

First lesson in pre-city education was gained inside a shop. Curious to see how the customers got what they wanted, he entered with a bunch of them. They used a medium of exchange in the form of printed paper and metal disks. That meant he’d save himself considerable trouble and inconvenience if he got hold of a supply of the stuff.

Moving to a crowded supermarket, he soon learned the relative values of money and a fair idea of its purchasing power. Then he helped himself to a small supply and was smart enough to do it by proxy. The technique was several times easier than falling off a log.

Standing unnoticed at one side, he concentrated attention on a plump, motherly shopper of obvious respectability. She responded by picking the purse of a preoccupied woman next to her. Sneaking the loot out of the market, she dropped it unopened on a vacant lot, went home, thought things over and held her head.

The take was forty-two dollars. Vanash counted it carefully, went to a cafeteria, splurged some of it on a square meal. By other methods he could have got the feed for free, but such tactics are self-advertising and can be linked up by a spark of inspiration. To his taste, some of the food was revolting, some passable, but it would do until he’d learned how to pick and choose.

One problem not yet satisfactorily resolved was that of what to do with the night. He needed sleep as much as any inferior life form and had to find some place for it. A snooze in the fields or a barn would be inappropriate; the master does not accept the hay while the servants snore on silk.

It took a little while to find out from observation, mind-pickings and a few questions to passers-by that he could bed down at an hotel or rooming house. The

former did not appeal to him. Too public and, therefore, too demanding upon his resources for concealment. In an hotel he'd have less opportunity to let up for a while and be himself, which was a welcome form of relaxation.

But with a room of his own free from constantly intruding servants armed with master-keys, he could revert to a normal, effortless state of mind, get his sleep, work out his plans in peace and privacy.

He found a suitable rooming house without much trouble. A blowzy female with four warts on her florid face showed him his hideout, demanded twelve dollars in advance because he had no luggage. Paying her, he informed her that he was William Jones, here for a week on business, and that he liked to be left alone.

In return, she intimated that her joint was a palace of peace for gentlemen, and that any bum who imported a hussy would be out on his neck. He assured her that he would not dream of such a thing, which was true enough because to him such a dream would have all the makings of a nightmare. Satisfied, she withdrew.

He sat on the edge of the bed and thought things over. It would have been an absurdly simple trick to have paid her in full without handing her a cent. He could have sent her away convinced that she had been paid. But she'd still be short twelve dollars and get riled about the mysterious loss. If he stayed on, he'd have to fool her again and again until at last the very fact that his payments coincided exactly with her losses would be too much even for an idiot.

A way out would be to nick someone for a week's rent, then move and take another boob. That tactic had its drawbacks. If the news got around and a hunt started after the bilker, he would have to change identities.

He wasn't averse to soaking a muttonhead or switching personalities, providing it was necessary. It irked him to have to do it frequently, for petty reasons hardly worth the effort. To let himself be the constant victim of trifling circumstances was to accept that these aliens were imposing conditions upon him. His ego resented such an idea.

All the same, he had to face a self-evident premise and its unavoidable conclusion. On this world one must have money to get around smoothly, without irritating complications. Therefore, he must acquire an adequate supply of the real thing or be continually called upon to create the delusion that he possessed it. No extraordinary intelligence was needed to divine which alternative gave the least trouble.

On other worlds the life forms had proved so sluggish and dull-witted, their civilizations so rudimentary, that it had not taken long to make a shrewd estimate of their worth as future foes and subsequent slaves. Here, the situation was a lot more complicated and required lengthier, more detailed survey. By the looks of it he'd be stalled quite a time. So he must get hold of money in quantities larger than that carried by the average individual. And when it ran out, he must get more.

Next day he devoted some time to tracing the flow of money back to a satisfactory source. Having found the source, he spent more time making careful study of it. In underworld jargon, he cased a bank.

The man lumbering along the corridor weighed two-fifty, had a couple of chins and a prominent paunch. At first sight, just a fat slob. First impressions can be very deceptive. At least half a dozen similarly built characters had been world heavyweight wrestling champs. Edward G. Rider was not quite in that category,

but on rare occasion he could strew bodies around in a way that would make an onlooking chiseler offer his services as manager.

He stopped at a frosted glass door bearing the legend:

UNITED STATES TREASURY—INVESTIGATION.

Rattling the glass with a hammerlike knuckle, he entered without waiting for response, took a seat without being invited.

The sharp-faced individual behind the desk registered faint disapproval, said, "Eddie, I've got a smelly one for you."

"Have you ever given me one that wasn't?" Rider rested big hands on big kneecaps. "What's it this time? Another unregistered engraver on the rampage?"

"No. It's a bank robbery."

Rider frowned, twitched heavy eyebrows. "I thought we were interested only in counterfeit currency and illegal transfers of capital. What has a heist to do with us? That's for the police, isn't it?"

"The police are stuck with it."

"Well, if the place was government insured they can call in the Feds."

"It's not insured. We offered to lend a hand. You are the boy who will lend it."

"Why?"

The other drew a deep breath, explained rapidly, "Some smartie took the First Bank of Northwood for approximately twelve thousand—and nobody knows how. Captain Harrison, of the Northwood police, says the puzzle is a stinker. According to him, it looks very much as though at long last somebody has found a technique for committing the perfect crime."

"He would say that if he feels thwarted. How come we're dragged into it?" "On checking up with the bank Harrison found that the loot included forty one-hundred dollar bills consecutively numbered. Those numbers are known. The others are not. He phoned us to give the data, hoping the bills might turn up and we could back-track on them. Embleton handled the call, chatted a while, got interested in this perfect crime thesis."

"So?"

"He consulted with me. We both agreed that if somebody has learned how to truck lettuce the way he likes, he's as much a menace to the economy as any large-scale counterfeiter."

"I see," said Rider, doubtfully.

"Then I took the matter up at high level. Ballantyne himself decided that we're entitled to chip in, just in case something's started that can go too far. I chose you. The whole office block will sit steadier without your size fourteen boots banging around." He moved some papers to his front, picked up a pen. "Get out to Northwood and give Chief Harrison a boost."

"Now?"

"Any reason why it should be tomorrow or next week?"

"I'm baby-sitting tonight."

"Don't be silly."

"It's not silly," said Rider. "Not with this baby."

"You ought to be ashamed. You're not long married. You've got a sweet and trusting wife."

"She's the baby," Rider informed. "I promised her faithfully and fervently that I'd—"

"And I promised Harrison and Ballantyne that you'd handle this with your usual elephantine efficiency," the other interrupted, scowling. "Do you want to hold down your job or do you want out? Phone your wife and tell her duty comes first."

"Oh, all right." He went out, slammed the door, tramped surlily along the corridor, entered a booth and took twenty-two minutes to do the telling.

Chief Harrison was tall, lean and fed up. He said, "Why should I bother to tell you what happened? Direct evidence is better than secondhand information. We've got the actual witness here. I sent for him when I learned you were coming." He flipped a switch on the desk-box. "Send Ashcroft in."

"Who's he?" Rider asked.

"Head teller of the First Bank, and a worried man." He waited for the witness to enter, made an introduction. "This is Mr. Rider, a special investigator. He wants to hear your story."

Ashcroft sat down, wearily rubbed his forehead. He was a white-haired, dapper man in the early sixties. Rider weighed him up as the precise, somewhat finicky but solid type often described as a pillar of the community.

"So far I've told it about twenty times," Ashcroft complained, "and each time it sounds a little madder. My mind is spinning with the thoughts of it. I just can't find any plausible—"

"Don't worry yourself," advised Rider in soothing tones. "Just give me the facts as far as they go."

"Each week we make up the payroll for the Dakin Glass Company. It varies between ten and fifteen thousand dollars. The day before, the company sends around a messenger with a debit-note calling for the required sum and stating how they want it. We then get it ready in good time for the following morning."

"And then?"

"The company collects. They send around a cashier accompanied by a couple of guards. He always arrives at about eleven o'clock. Never earlier than ten to eleven or later than ten past."

"You know the cashier by sight?"

"There are two of them, Mr. Swain and Mr. Letheren. Either of them might come for the money. One relieves the other from time to time. Or one comes when the other is too busy, or ill, or on vacation. Both have been well-known to me for several years."

"All right, carry on."

"When the cashier arrives he brings a locked leather bag and has the key in a pocket. He unlocks the bag, hands it to me. I fill it in such manner that he can check the quantities, pass it back together with a receipt slip. He locks the bag, puts the key in his pocket, signs the slip and walks out. I file the receipt and that's all there is to it."

"Seems a bit careless to let the same fellow carry both the bag and the key," Rider commented.



Chief Harrison chipped in with, "We've checked on that. A guard carries the key. He gives it to the cashier when they arrive at the bank, takes it back when they leave."

Nervously licking his lips, Ashcroft went on, "Last Friday morning we had twelve thousand one hundred eighty-two dollars ready for the Dakin plant. Mr. Letheren came in with the bag. It was exactly ten-thirty."

"How do you know that?" inquired Richer, sharply. "Did you look at the clock? What impelled you to look at it?"

"I consulted the clock because I was a little surprised. He was ahead of his usual time. I had not expected him for another twenty minutes or so."

"And it was ten-thirty? You're positive of that?"

"I am absolutely certain," said Ashcroft, as though it was the only certainty in the whole affair. "Mr. Letheren came up to the counter and gave me the bag. I greeted him, made a casual remark about him being early."

"What was his reply?"

"I don't recall the precise wording. I'd no reason to take especial note of what he said and I was busy tending the bag." He frowned with effort of thought. "He made some commonplace remark about it being better to be too early than too late."

"What occurred next?"

"I gave him the bag and the slip. He locked the bag, signed the slip and departed."

"Is that all?" Rider asked.

"Not by a long chalk," put in Chief Harrison. He nodded encouragingly at Ashcroft. "Go on, give him the rest of it."

"At five to eleven," continued the witness, his expression slightly befuddled, "Mr. Letheren came back, placed the bag on the counter and looked at me sort of expectantly. So I said, *Anything wrong, Mr. Letheren?* He answered, *Nothing so far as I know. Ought there to be?*"

He paused, rubbed his forehead again. Rider advised, "Take your time with it. I want it as accurately as you can give it."

Ashcroft pulled himself together. "I told him there was no reason for anything to be wrong because the money had been checked and rechecked three times. He then displayed some impatience and said he didn't care if it had been checked fifty times so long as I got busy handing it over and let him get back to the plant." "That knocked you onto your heels, eh?" Rider suggested, with a grim smile. "I was flabbergasted. At first I thought it was some kind of joke, though he isn't the type to play such tricks. I told him I'd already given him the money, about half an hour before. He asked me if I was cracked. So I called Jackson, a junior teller, and he confirmed my statement. He had seen me loading the bag."

"Did he also see Letheren taking it away?"

"Yes, sir. And he said as much."

"What was Letheren's answer to that?"

"He demanded to see the manager. I showed him into Mr. Olsen's office. A minute later Mr. Olsen called for the receipt slip. I took it out of the file and discovered there was no signature upon it."

"It was blank?"

“Yes. I can’t understand it. I watched him sign that receipt myself. Nevertheless there was nothing on it, not a mark of any sort.” He sat silent and shaken, then finished, “Mr. Letheren insisted that Mr. Olsen cease questioning me and call the police. I was detained in the manager’s office until Mr. Harrison arrived.”

Rider stewed it over, then asked, “Did the same pair of guards accompany Letheren both times?”

“I don’t know. I did not see his escort on either occasion.”

“You mean he came unguarded?”

“They are not always visible to the bank’s staff,” Harrison put in. “I’ve chased that lead to a dead end.”

“How much did you learn on the way?”

“The guards deliberately vary their routine so as to make their behavior unpredictable to anyone planning a grab. Sometimes both accompany the cashier to the counter and back. Sometimes they wait outside the main door, watching the street. Other times one remains in the car while the other mooches up and down near the bank.”

“They are armed, I take it?”

“Of course.” He eyed Rider quizzically. “Both guards swear that last Friday morning they escorted Letheren to the bank once and only once. That was at five to eleven.”

“But he was there at ten-thirty,” Ashcroft protested.

“He denies it, said Harrison. “So do the guards.

“Did the guards say they’d actually entered the bank?” inquired Rider, sniffing around for more contradictory evidence.

“They did not enter on arrival. They hung around outside the front door until Letheren’s delay made them take alarm. At that point they went inside with guns half-drawn. Ashcroft couldn’t see them because by then he was on the carpet in Olsen’s office.”

“Well, you can see how it is,” commented Rider, staring hard at the unhappy Ashcroft. “You say Letheren got the money at ten-thirty. He says he did not. The statements are mutually opposed. Got any ideas on that?”

“You don’t believe me, do you?” said Ashcroft, miserably.

“I don’t disbelieve you, either. I’m keeping judgment suspended. We’re faced with a flat contradiction of evidence. It doesn’t follow that one of the witnesses is a liar and thus a major suspect. Somebody may be talking in good faith but genuinely mistaken.”

“Meaning me?”

“Could be. You’re not infallible. Nobody is.” Rider leaned forward, gave emphasis to his tones. “Let’s accept the main points at face value. If you’ve told the truth, the cash was collected at ten-thirty. If Letheren has told the truth, he was not the collector. Add those up and what do you get? Answer: the money was toted away by somebody who was not Letheren. And if that answer happens to be correct, it means that you’re badly mistaken.”

“I’ve made no mistake,” Ashcroft denied. “I know what I saw. I saw Letheren and nobody else. To say otherwise is to concede that I can’t trust the evidence of my own eyes.”

“You’ve conceded it already,” Rider pointed out.

“Oh, no I haven’t.”

“You told us that you watched him sign the receipt slip. With your own two eyes you saw him append his signature.” He waited for comment that did not come, ended, “There was nothing on the slip.”

Ashcroft brooded in glum silence.

“If you were deluded about the writing, you could be equally deluded about the writer.”

“I don’t suffer from delusions.”

“So it seems,” said Rider, dry-voiced. “How do you explain that receipt?”

“I don’t have to,” declared Ashcroft with sudden spirit. “I’ve given the facts. It’s for you fellows to find the explanation.”

“That’s right enough,” Rider agreed. “We don’t resent being reminded. I hope you don’t resent being questioned again and again. Thanks for coming along.”

“Glad to be of help.” He went out, obviously relaxed by the end of the inquisition. Harrison found a toothpick, chewed it, said, “It’s a heller. Another day or two of this and you’ll be sorry they sent you to show me how.”

Meditatively studying the police chief, Rider informed, “I didn’t come to show you how. I came to help because you said you needed help. Two minds are better than one. A hundred minds are better than ten. But if you’d rather I beat it back home—”

“Nuts,” said Harrison. “At times like this I sour up on everyone. My position is different from yours. When someone takes a bank, right under my nose, he’s made a chump of me. How’d you like to be both a police chief and a chump?”

“I think I’d accept the latter definition when and only when I’d been compelled to admit defeat. Are you admitting it?”

“Not on your life.”

“Quit griping then. Let’s concentrate on the job in hand. There’s something mighty fishy about this business of the receipt. It looks cock-eyed.”

“It’s plain as pie to me,” said Harrison. “Ashcroft was deluded or tricked.”

“That isn’t the point,” Rider told him. “The real puzzle is that of *why* he was outsmarted. Assuming that he and Letheren are both innocent, the loot was grabbed by someone else, by somebody unknown. I don’t see any valid reason why the culprit should risk bollixing the entire set-up by handing in a blank receipt that might be challenged on the spot. All he had to do to avoid it was to scrawl Letheren’s name. Why didn’t he?”

Harrison thought it over. “Maybe he feared Ashcroft would recognize the signature as a forgery, take a closer look at him, and yell bloody murder.”

“IF he could masquerade as Letheren well enough to get by, he should have been able to imitate a signature well enough to pass scrutiny.”

“Well, maybe he didn’t sign because he couldn’t,” Harrison ventured, “not being able to write. I know of several hoodlums who can only because they got taugt in the jug.”

“You may have something there,” Rider conceded. “Anyway, for the moment Ashcroft and Letheren appear to be the chief suspects. They’ll have to be eliminated before we start looking elsewhere. I presume you’ve already checked on both of them?”

“And how!” Harrison used the desk-box. “Send in the First Bank file.” When it came, he thumbed through its pages. “Take Ashcroft first. Financially well-fixed, no criminal record, excellent character, no motive for turning bank robber. Jackson, the junior teller, confirms his evidence to a limited extent. Ashcroft could not have hidden the Dakin consignment any place. We searched the bank from top to bottom, during which time Ashcroft did not leave the place for one minute. We found nothing. Subsequent investigation brought out other items in his favor I’ll give you the details later on.”

“You’re satisfied that he is innocent?”

“Almost, but not quite,” said Harrison. “He could have handed the money to an accomplice who bears superficial resemblance to Letheren. That tactic would have finagled the stuff clean out of the bank. I wish I could shake down his home in search of his split. One bill with a known number would tie him down but good.” His features became disgruntled. “Judge Maxon refused to sign a search warrant on grounds of insufficient justification. Said he’s got to be shown better cause for reasonable suspicion. I’m compelled to admit that he’s right.”

“How about the company’s cashier, Letheren?”

“He’s a confirmed bachelor in the late fifties. I won’t weary you with his full background. There’s nothing we can pin on him.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Judge for yourself. The company’s car remained parked outside the office all morning until ten thirty-five. It was then used to take Letheren and his guards to the bank. It couldn’t reach the bank in less than twenty minutes. There just wasn’t enough time for Letheren to make the first call in some other car, return to the plant, pick up the guards and make the second call.”

“Not to mention hiding the loot in the interim,” Rider suggested.

“No, he could not have done it. Furthermore, there are forty people in the Dakin office and between them they were able to account for every minute of Letheren’s time from when he started work at nine o’clock up to when he left for the bank at ten thirty-five. No prosecutor could bust an alibi like that!”

“That seems to put him right out of the running.”

Harrison scowled and said “It certainly does—but we’ve since found five witnesses who place him near the bank at ten-thirty.”

Meaning they support the statements of Ashcroft and Jackson?”

“Yes, they do. Immediately after the case broke I put every available man onto the job of asking questions the whole length of the street and down the nearest side-streets. The usual lousy legwork. They found three people prepared to swear they’d seen Letheren entering the bank at ten-thirty. They didn’t know him by sight, but they were shown Letheren’s photograph and identified him.”

“Did they notice his car and give its description?”

“They didn’t see him using a car. He was on foot at the time and carrying the bag. They noticed and remembered him only because a mutt yelped and went hell-for-leather down the street. They wondered whether he’d kicked it and why.”

“Do they say he *did* kick it?”

“No.”

Rider thoughtfully rubbed two chins. “Then I wonder why it behaved like that. Dogs don’t yelp and bolt for nothing. Something must have hurt or scared it.”

“Who cares?” said Harrison having worries enough. “The boys also found a fellow who says he saw Letheren a few minutes later, coming out of the bank and still with the bag. He didn’t notice any guards hanging around. He says Letheren started walking along the street as though he hadn’t a care in the world but after fifty yards he picked up a prowling taxi and rolled away.”

“You traced the driver?”

“We did. He also recognized the photo we showed him. Said he’d taken Letheren to the Cameo Theater on Fourth Street, but did not see him actually enter the place. Just dropped him, got paid and drove off. We questioned the Cameo’s staff, searched the house. It got us nowhere. There’s a bus terminal nearby. We gave everyone there a rough time and learned nothing.”

“And that’s as far as you’ve been able to take it?”

“Not entirely. I’ve phoned the Treasury, given them the numbers of forty bills. I’ve put out an eight-state alarm for a suspect answering to Letheren’s description. Right now the boys are armed with copies of his pic and are going the rounds of hotels and rooming houses. He must have holed up somewhere and it could have been right in this town. Now I’m stuck. I don’t know where to look next.”

Rider lay back in his chair which creaked in protest. He mused quite a time while Harrison slowly masticated the toothpick.

Then he said, “Excellent character, financial security and no apparent motive are things less convincing than the support of other witnesses. A man can have a secret motive strong enough to send him right off the rails. He could be in desperate need of ten or twelve thousand in ready cash merely because he’s got to produce it a darned sight quicker than he can raise it by legitimate realization of insurance, stocks and bonds. For example, what if he’s got twenty-four hours in which to find ransom money?”

Harrison popped his eyes. “You think we should check on Ashcroft’s and Letheren’s kin and see if any one of them is missing or has been missing of late?”

“Please yourself. Personally, I doubt that it’s worth the bother. A kidnaper risks the death penalty. Why should he take a chance like that for a measly twelve thousand when he endangers himself no more by sticking a fatter victim for a far bigger sum? Besides, even if a check did produce a motive it wouldn’t tell us how the robbery was pulled or enable us to prove it to the satisfaction of a judge and jury.”

“That’s right enough,” Harrison agreed. “All the same, the check is worth making. It’ll cost me nothing. Except for Ashcroft’s wife, the relatives of both men live elsewhere. It’s just a matter of getting the co-operation of police chiefs.”

“Do it if you wish. And while we’re making blind passes in the dark, get someone to find out whether Letheren happens to be afflicted with a no-good brother who could exploit a close family likeness. Maybe Letheren is the suffering half of a pair of identical twins.”

“If he is,” growled Harrison, “he’s also an accessory after the fact because he can guess how the job was done and who did it, but he’s kept his lips buttoned.”

“That’s the legal viewpoint. There’s a human one as well. If one feels disgrace, one doesn’t invite it. If you had a brother with a record as long as your arm, would you advertise it all over town?”

“For the fun of it, no. In the interests of justice, yes.”

“All men aren’t alike and thank God they’re not.” Rider made an impatient gesture. “We’ve gone as far as we can with the two obvious suspects. Let’s work out what we can do with a third and unknown one.”

Harrison said, “I told you I’ve sent out an alarm for a fellow answering to Letheren’s description.”

“Yes, I know. Think it will do any good?”

“It’s hard to say. The guy may be a master of make-up. If so, he’ll now look a lot different from the way he did when he pulled the job. If the resemblance happens to be real, close and unalterable, the alarm may help nail him.”

“That’s true. However, unless there’s an actual blood relationship—which possibility you’re following up anyway—the likeness can hardly be genuine. It would be too much of a coincidence. Let’s say it’s artificial. What does that tell us?”

“It was good,” Harrison responded. “Good enough to fool several witnesses. Far too good for comfort.”

“You said it,” endorsed Rider. “What’s more, an artist so exceptionally accomplished could do it again and again and again, working his way through a series of personalities more or less of his physical build. Therefore he may really look as much like Letheren as I look like a performing seal. We haven’t his true description and the lack is a severe handicap. Offhand, I can think of no way of discovering what he looks like right now.”

“Me neither,” said Harrison, becoming morbid.

“There’s one chance we’ve got though. Ten to one his present appearance is the same as it was before he worked his trick. He’d no reason to disguise himself while casing the job and making his plans. The robbery was so smooth and well-timed that it must have been schemed to perfection. That kind of planning requires plenty of preliminary observation. He could not cotton onto Dakin’s collecting habits and Letheren’s appearance at one solitary go. Not unless he was a mind reader.” “I don’t believe in mind readers,” Harrison declared. “Nor astrologers, swamis or any of their ilk.”

Ignoring it, Rider ploughed stubbornly on, “So for some time prior to the robbery he had a hideout in this town or fairly close to it. Fifty or more people may have seen him repeatedly and be able to describe him. Your boys won’t find him by circling the dives and dumps and showing a photo, because he didn’t look like the photo. The problem now is to discover the hideout, learn what he looked like.”

“Easier said than done.”

“It’s hard sledding, chief, but let’s keep at it. Eventually we’ll get ourselves somewhere even if only into a padded cell.”

He lapsed into silence, thinking deeply. Harrison concentrated attention on the ceiling. They did not know it, but they were employing Earth’s on-the-spot substitute for a rare flash of genius. A couple of times Rider opened his mouth as if about to say something, changed his mind, resumed his meditating.

In the end, Rider said, “To put over so convincingly the gag that he was Letheren he must not only have looked like him but also dressed like him, walked like him, behaved like him, smelled like him.”

"He was Letheren to the spit," answered Harrison. "I've questioned Ashcroft until were both sick of it. Every single detail was Letheren right down to his shoes." Rider asked, "How about the bag?"

"The bag?" Harrison's lean face assumed startlement followed by self-reproach. "You've got me there. I didn't ask about it. I slipped up."

"Not necessarily. There may be nothing worth learning. We'd better be sure on that point."

"I can find out right now." He picked up the phone, called a number, said, "Mr. Ashcroft, I've another question for you. About that bag you put the money into—was it the actual one always used by the Dakin people?"

The voice came back distinctly, "No, Mr. Harrison, it was a new one."

"*What?*" Harrison's voice purpled as he bellowed, "Why didn't you say so at the start?"

"You didn't ask me and, therefore, I didn't think of it. Even if I had thought of it of my own accord I wouldn't have considered it of any importance."

"Listen, it's for me and not for you to decide what evidence is, or is not, important." He fumed a bit, threw the listening Rider a look of martyrdom, went on in tones edged with irritation. "Now, let's get this straight, once and for all. Apart from being new, was the bag identically the same as the one Dakin uses?"

"No, sir. But it was very similar. Same type, same brass lock, same general appearance. It was slightly longer and about an inch deeper. I remember that when I was putting the money into it I wondered why they'd bought another bag and concluded that the purpose was to let Mr. Letheren and Mr. Swain have one each."

"Did you notice any distinguishing mark upon it, a price tag, a maker's sticker, initials, code letters, serial number, or anything like that?"

"Nothing at all. It didn't occur to me to look. Not knowing what was to come, I—"

The voice cut off in mid-sentence as Harrison irefully slammed down the phone. He stared hard at Rider who said nothing.

"For your information," Harrison told him, "I can say that there are distinct advantages in taking up the profession of latrine attendant. Sometimes I am sorely tempted." He breathed heavily, switched the desk-box. "Who's loafing around out there?"

Somebody replied, "It's Kastner, chief."

"Send him in."

Detective Kastner entered. He was a neatly attired individual who had the air of knowing how to get around in a sink of iniquity.

"Jim," ordered Harrison, "beat it out to the Dakin plant and borrow their cash-bag. Make certain it's the one they use for weekly collections. Take it to every store selling leather goods and follow up every sale of a similar bag within the last month. If you trace a purchaser, make him prove that he still possesses his bag, get him to say where he was and what he was doing at ten-thirty last Friday morning."

"Right, chief."

"Phone me the details if you latch onto anything significant."

After Kastner had gone, Harrison said, "That bag was bought specifically for the job. Therefore, the purchase is likely to be a recent one and probably made in this town. If we can't trace a sale through local stores, we'll inquire farther afield."

"You do that," Rider agreed. "Meanwhile, I'll take a couple of steps that may help." "Such as what?"

"We're a scientific species, living in a technological age. We've got extensive, well-integrated communications networks and huge, informative filing systems. Let's use what we've got, eh?"

"What's on your mind?" Harrison asked.

Rider said, "A robbery so smooth, neat and easy is something that begs to be repeated *ad lib*. Maybe he's done it before. There's every likelihood that he'll do it again."

"So—?"

"We have his description, but it isn't worth much." He leaned forward. "We also have full details of his method and those *are* reliable."

"Yes, that's true."

"So let's boil down his description to the unalterable basics of height, weight, build, color of eyes. The rest can be ignored. Let's also condense his technique, reduce it to the bare facts. We can summarize the lot in five hundred words."

"And then?"

"There are six thousand two hundred eighty banks in this country, of which slightly more than six thousand belong to the Bank Association. I'll get Washington to run off enough handbills for the Association to send its entire membership. They'll be put on guard against a similar snatch, asked to rush us full details if any get taken despite the warning or already had been taken before they got it."

"That's a good idea," Harrison approved. "Some other police chief may nurse a couple of items that we lack, while we're holding a couple that he wants. A get-together may find us holding enough to solve both cases."

"There's a slight chance that we can take it farther still," said Rider. "The culprit may have a record. If he has not, we're out of luck. But if he's done it before, and been pinched, we can find his card in no time at all." He pondered reminiscently, added, "That filing system in Washington is really something."

"I know of it, of course, but haven't seen it," Harrison commented.

"Friend of mine down there, a postal inspector, found it handy not long ago. He was hunting a fellow selling fake oil stock through the mails. This character had taken at least fifty suckers by means of some classy print-work including official looking reserve reports, certificates and other worthless documents. There was no description of him. Not a victim had seen him in the flesh."

"That's not much to go on."

"No. but it was enough. Attempts by postal authorities to trap him had failed. He was a wily bird and that in itself was a clue. Obviously he was a swindler sufficiently experienced to have a record. So this friend took what little he'd got to the F.B.I."

"What happened?"

"A *modus operandi* expert coded the data and fed it into the high-speed extractor, like giving the scent to a hound. Electronic fingers raced over slots and



punch holes in a million cards a darned sight faster than you could blow your nose. Rejecting muggers, heistmen and various toughies, the fingers dug out maybe four thousand confidence tricksters. From those they then extracted perhaps six hundred bond-pushers. And from those they picked a hundred who specialized in phony oil stocks. And from those they took twelve who kept out of sight by operating through the mails.”

“That narrowed it down,” Harrison conceded.

“The machine ejected twelve cards,” Rider continued. “An extra datum might have enabled it to throw out one and only one. But that was as far as it could go; it couldn’t use what it hadn’t been given. Not that it mattered. A quick check of other records showed that four of the twelve were dead and six more were languishing in the clink. Of the remaining two, one was picked up, proved himself in the clear. That left the last fellow. The postal authorities now had his name, mug-shot, prints, habits, associates and everything but his mother’s wedding certificate. They grabbed him within three weeks.”

“Nice work. Only thing I don’t understand is why they keep dead men’s cards on file.”

“That’s because evidence comes up—sometimes years later—proving them responsible for old, unsolved crimes. The evil that men do lives after them; the good, if any, is interred with their bones.” He eyed the other, ended, “The slaves of the filing system don’t like cases left open and unfinished. They like to mark them closed even if it takes half a lifetime. They’re tidy-minded, see?”

“Yes, I see.” Harrison thought a while, remarked, “You’d think a criminal would go honest once on the files, or at least have the sense not to repeat.”

“They always repeat. They get in a rut and can’t jack themselves out of it. I never heard of a counterfeiter who turned gunman or bicycle thief. This fellow we’re after will pull the same stunt again by substantially the same method. You wait and see.” He sighed to the phone. “Mind if I make a couple of long-distance calls?”

“Help yourself. I don’t pay for them.”

“In that case I’ll have three. The little woman is entitled to some vocal fondling.”

“Go right ahead.” Registering disgust, Harrison heaved himself erect, went to the door. “I’ll get busy some place else. If one thing turns my stomach, it’s the spectacle of a big man cooing a lot of slop.”

Grinning to himself, Rider picked up the phone. “Get me the United States Treasury, Washington, Extension 417, Mr. O’Keefe.”

Over the next twenty-four hours the steady, tiresome but determined pressure of Earth technique was maintained. Patrolmen asked questions of store owners, local gossips, tavern keepers, parolees, stool pigeons, any and every character who by remote chance might give with a crumb of worthwhile information. Plainclothes detectives knocked on doors, cross-examined all who responded, checked back later on any who’d failed to answer. State troopers shook down outlying motels and trailer parks, quizzed owners, managers, assistants. Sheriffs and deputies visited farms known to take occasional roomers.

In Washington, six thousand leaflets poured from a press while not far away another machine addressed six thousand envelopes. Also nearby, electronic fingers sought a specific array of holes and slots among a million variously

punched cards. Police of half a dozen towns and cities loped around, checked on certain people, phoned their findings to Northwood, then carried on with their own work.

As usual, first results were represented by a stack of negative information. None of Ashcroft's relatives were missing or had been of late. There was no black sheep in Letheren's family, he had no twin, his only brother was ten years younger, was highly respected, bore no striking likeness and, in any case, had an unbreakable alibi.

No other bank had yet reported being soaked by an expert masquerader. Rooming houses, hotels amid other possible hideouts failed to produce a clue to anyone resembling Letheren's photograph.

The silent searcher through the filing system found forty-one bank swindlers, living and dead. But not one with the same *modus operandi* or anything closely similar. Regretfully it flashed a light meaning, "No record."

However, from the deductive viewpoint enough negatives can make a few positives. Harrison and Rider stewed the latest news, came to the same conclusions. Ashcroft and Letheren were well-nigh in the clear. The unknown culprit was a newcomer to crime and his first success would induce him to do it again. Such a master of make-up had previously concealed himself under some identity other than that now being sought.

First break came in the late afternoon. Kastner walked in, tipped his hat onto the back of his head and said, "I may have something."

"Such as what?" asked Harrison, his features alert.

"There's no great demand for that particular kind of bag and only one store sells them in this town. Within the last month they've got rid of three."

"Paid for by check?"

"Cash on the nail," Kastner responded with a grim smile to the other's look of disappointment, went on, "But two of the buyers were local folk, recognized and known. Both made their purchases about three weeks ago. I chased them up. They've still got their bags and can account for their time last Friday morning. I've checked their stories and they hold good and tight."

"How about the third buyer?"

"That's what I'm coming to, chief. He looks good to me. He bought his bag the afternoon before the robbery. Nobody knows him."

"A stranger?"

"Not quite. I got a detailed description of him from Hilda Cassidy, the dame who waited on him. She says he was a middle-aged, thin-faced, meek sort of character with a miserable expression. Looked like an unhappy embalmer."

"Then what makes you say he's not quite a stranger?"

"Because, chief, there are eleven stores selling leather goods of one kind or another. I've lived here quite a piece, but I had to hunt around to find the one handling this kind of bag. So I figured that this miserable guy would have had to do some going the rounds, too. I tried all the stores a second time, giving them this new description."

"And—?"

"Three of them remembered this fellow looking for what they don't stock. All confirmed the description." He paused, added, "Sol Bergman, of the Travel Mart,

says the guy's face was slightly familiar. Doesn't know who he is and can't make a useful guess. But he's sure he's seen him two or three times before."

"Maybe an occasional visitor from somewhere a good way out."

"That's how it looks to me, chief."

"A good way out means anywhere within a hundred-mile radius," growled Harrison. "Perhaps even farther." He eyed Kastner sourly. "Who got the longest and closest look at him?"

"The Cassidy girl."

"You'd better bring her in, and fast."

"I did bring her. She's waiting outside."

"Good work, Jim," approved Harrison, brightening. "Let's see her."

Kastner went out and brought her in. She was a tall, slender, intelligent person in her early twenties. Cool and composed, she sat with hands folded in her lap, answered Harrison's questions while he got the suspect's description in as complete detail as she was able to supply.

"More darned legwork," Harrison complained as she finished. "Now the boys will have to make all the rounds again looking for a lead on *this* guy."

Rider chipped in, "If he's an out-of-towner, you'll need the co-operation of all surrounding authorities."

"Yes, of course."

"Maybe we can make it lots easier for them." He glanced inquiringly across the desk toward the girl. "That is, if Miss Cassidy will help."

"I'll do anything I can," she assured.

"What's on your mind?" Harrison asked.

"We'll get Roger King to lend a hand."

"Who's he?"

"A staff artist. Does cartoon work on the side. He's good, very good." He switched attention to the girl. "Can you come round early and spend the morning here?"

"If the boss will let me."

"He will," put in Harrison. "I'll see to that."

"All right," said Rider to the girl. "You come round. Mr. King will show you a number of photographs. Look through them carefully and pick out distinguishing features that correspond with those of the guy who bought that bag. A chin here, a mouth there, a nose somewhere else. Mr. King will make a composite drawing from them and will keep altering it in accordance with your instructions until he's got it right. Think you can do that?"

"Oh, sure," she said.

"We can do better," Kastner announced. "Sol Bergman is the eager-beaver type. He'll be tickled to death to assist."

"Then get him to come along too."

Kastner and the girl departed as Rider said to Harrison, "Know a local printer who can run off a batch of copies within a few hours?"

"You bet I do."

"Good!" He gestured to the phone. "Can I hoist the bill another notch?"

“For all I care you can make the mayor faint at the sight of it,” said Harrison. “But if you intend to pour primitive passion through the line, say so and let me get out.”

“Not this time. She may be pining somewhat, but duty comes first.” He took up the instrument. “Treasury Headquarters, Washington, Extension 338. I want Roger King.”

Copies of the King sketch were mailed out along with a description and pickup request. They had not been delivered more than a few minutes when the phone whirred and Harrison grabbed it: “Northwood police.”

“This is the State Police Barracks, Sergeant Wilkins speaking. We just got that ‘Wanted’ notice of yours. I know that fellow. He lives right on my beat.”

“Who is he?”

“Name of William Jones. Runs a twenty-acre nursery on Route Four, a couple of hours away from your town. He’s a slightly surly type, but there’s nothing known against him. My impression is that he’s pessimistic but dead straight. You want us to pick him up?”

“Look, are you sure he’s the fellow?”

“It’s his face on that drawing of yours and that’s as far as I go. I’ve been in the business as long as you, and I don’t make mistakes about faces.”

“Of course not, sergeant. We’d appreciate it if you’d bring him in for questioning.

“I’ll do that.”

He cut off. Harrison lay back, absently studied his desk while his mind juggled around with this latest news.

After a while, he said, “I could understand it better if this Jones was described as a one-time vaudeville actor such as a quick-change impressionist. A fellow operating a nursery out in the wilds sounds a bit of a hick to me. Somehow I can’t imagine him doing a bank job as slick as this one.”

“He might be just an accomplice. He got the bag beforehand, hid the cash afterward, perhaps acted as lookout man while the robbery was taking place.” Harrison nodded. “We’ll find out once he’s here. He’ll be in trouble if he can’t prove he made an innocent purchase.”

“What if he does prove it?”

“Then we’ll be right back where we started.” Harrison gloomed at the thought of it. The phone called for attention and he snatched it up. “Northwood police.” “Patrolman Clinton here, chief. I just showed that drawing to Mrs. Bastico. She has a rooming house at 157 Stevens. She swears that guy is William Jones who roomed with her ten days. He came without luggage but later got a new bag like the Dakin one. Saturday morning he cleared out, taking the bag. He’d overpaid by four days’ rent, but he beat it without a word and hasn’t come back.”

“You stay there, Clinton. We’ll be right out.” He licked anticipatory lips, said to Rider, “Come on, let’s, get going.”

Piling into a cruiser, they raced to 157 Stevens. It was a dilapidated brownstone with well-worn steps.

Mrs. Bastico, a heavy featured female with several warts, declaimed in self-righteous tones, “I’ve never had the cops in this house. Not once in twenty years.”

“You’ve got ’em now,” informed Harrison. “And it gives the place a touch of respectability. Now, what d’you know about this Jones fellow?”

“Nothing much,” she answered, still miffed. “He kept to himself. I don’t bother roomers who behave.”

“Did he say anything about where he’d come from, or where he was going to, or anything like that?”

“No. He paid in advance, told me his name, said he was on local business, and that was that. He went out each morning, came back at a decent hour each night, kept sober and interfered with nobody.”

“Did he have any visitors?” He extracted Letheren’s photograph. “Someone like this, for example?”

“Officer Clinton showed me that picture yesterday. I don’t know him. I never saw Mr. Jones talking to another person.”

“Hm-m-m!” Harrison registered disappointment. “We’d like a look at his room. Mind if we see it?”

Begrudgingly she led them upstairs, unlocked the door, departed and left them to rake through it at will. Her air was that of one allergic to police.

They searched the room thoroughly, stripping bedclothes, shifting furniture, lifting carpets, even unbolting and emptying the washbasin waste-trap. It was Patrolman Clinton who dug out of a narrow gap between floorboards a small, pink, transparent wrapper, also two peculiar seeds resembling elongated almonds and exuding a strong, aromatic scent.

Satisfied that there was nothing else to be found, they carted these petty clues back to the station, mailed them to the State Criminological Laboratory for analysis and report.

Three hours afterward William Jones walked in. He ignored Rider, glowered at the uniformed Harrison, demanded. “What’s the idea of having me dragged here? I’ve done nothing.”

“Then what have you got to worry about?” Harrison assumed his best tough expression. “Where were you last Friday morning?”

“That’s an easy one,” said Jones, with a touch of spite. “I was in Smoky Falls getting spares for a cultivator.”

“That’s eighty miles from here.”

“So what? It’s a lot less from where I live. And I can’t get those spares anyplace nearer. If there’s an agent in Northwood, you find him for me. ”

“Never mind about that. How long were you there?”

“I arrived about ten in the morning, left in the mid-afternoon.”

“So it took you about five hours to buy a few spares?”

“I ambled around a piece. Bought groceries as well. Had a meal there, and a few drinks.”

“Then there ought to be plenty of folk willing to vouch for your presence there?”

“Sure are,” agreed Jones with disconcerting positiveness.

Harrison switched his desk-box, said to someone, “Bring in Mrs. Bastico, the Cassidy girl and Sol Bergman.” He returned attention to Jones. “Tell me exactly where you went from time of arrival to departure, and who saw you in each place.” He scribbled rapidly as the other recited the tale of his Friday morning shopping trip. When the story ended, he called the Smoky Falls police, briefed them swiftly, gave them the data, asked for a complete check-up.

Listening to this last, Jones showed no visible alarm or apprehension. "Can I go now? I got work to do."

"So have I," Harrison retorted. "Where have you stashed that leather cash-bag?"

"What bag?"

"The new one you bought Thursday afternoon."

Eying him incredulously, Jones said, "Hey, what are you trying to pin on me? I bought no bag. Why should I? I don't need a new bag."

"You'll be telling me next that you didn't hole-up in a rooming house on Stevens."

"I didn't. I don't know of any place on Stevens. And if I did, I wouldn't be seen dead there."

They argued about it for twenty minutes. Jones maintained with mulish stubbornness that he'd been working on his nursery the whole of Thursday and had been there most of the time he was alleged to be at the rooming house. He'd never heard of Mrs. Bastico and didn't want to. He'd never bought a Dakin-type bag. They could search his place and welcome—if they found such a bag it'd be because they'd planted it on him.

A patrolman stuck his head through the doorway and announced, "They're here, chief."

"All right. Get a line-up ready."

After another ten minutes Harrison led William Jones into a back room, stood him in a row consisting of four detectives and half a dozen nondescripts enlisted from the street. Sol Bergman, Hilda Cassidy and Mrs. Bastico appeared, looked at the parade, pointed simultaneously and in the same direction.

"That's him," said Mrs. Bastico.

"He's the man," indorsed the Cassidy girl.

"Nobody else but," Sol Bergman continued.

"They're nuts," declared Jones, showing no idea of what it was all about.

Taking the three witnesses back to his office, Harrison queried them for a possible mistake in identity. They insisted they were not mistaken, that they could not be more positive. William Jones was the man, definitely and absolutely.

He let them go, held Jones on suspicion pending a report from Smoky Falls. Near the end of the twenty-four hours legal holding limit the result of the check came through. No less than thirty-two people accounted fully for the suspect's time all the way from ten to three-thirty. Road-checks had also traced him all the way to that town and all the way back. Other witnesses had placed him at the nursery at several times when he was said to have been at Mrs. Bastico's. State troopers had search the Jones property. No bag. No money identifiable as loot.

"That's torn it, growled Harrison. "I've no choice but to release him with abject apologies. What sort of a lousy, stinking case is this, when everybody mistakes everybody for everybody else?"

Rider massaged two chins, suggested, "maybe we ought to try checking on that as well. Let's have another word with Jones before let him loose."

Slouching in, Jones looked considerably subdued and only too willing to help with anything likely to get him home.

"Sorry to inconvenience you so much, Mr. Jones," Rider soothed. "It couldn't be avoided in the circumstances. We're up against a mighty tough problem." Bending

forward, he fixed the other with an imperative gaze. "It might do us a lot of good if you'd think back carefully and tell us if there's anytime you've been mistaken for somebody else."

Jones opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. "Jeepers, that very thing happened about a fortnight ago.

"Give us the story," invited Rider, a glint in his eyes.

"I drove through here nonstop and went straight on to the city. Been there about an hour when a fellow yelled at me from across the street. I didn't know him, thought at first he was calling someone else. He meant me all right."

"Go on," urged Harrison, impatient as the other paused.

"He asked me in a sort of dumbfounded way how I'd got there. I said I'd come in my car. He didn't want to believe it."

"Why not?"

"He said I'd been on foot and thumbing a hitch. He knew it because he'd picked me up and run me to Northwood. What's more, he said, after dropping me in Northwood he'd driven straight to the city, going so fast that nothing had overtaken him on the way. Then he'd parked his car, started down the street, and the first thing he'd seen was me strolling on the other side."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said it couldn't possibly have been me and that his own story proved it."

"That fazed him somewhat, eh?"

"He got sort of completely baffled. He led me right up to his parked car, said, 'Mean to say you didn't take a ride in that?' and, of course, I denied it. I walked away. First I thought it might be some kind of gag. Next, I wondered if he was touched in the head."

"Now," put in Rider carefully, "we must trace this fellow. Give us all you've got on him."

Thinking deeply, Jones said, "He was in his late thirties, well-dressed, smooth talker, the salesman type. Had a lot of pamphlets, color charts and paint cans in the back of his car."

"You mean in the trunk compartment? You got a look inside there?"

"No. They were lying on the rear seat, as though he was in the habit of grabbing them out in a hurry and slinging them in again."

"How about the car itself?"

"It was the latest model *Flash*, duotone green, white sidewalls, a radio. Didn't notice the tag number."

They spent another ten minutes digging more details regarding appearance, mannerisms and attire. Then Harrison called the city police, asked for a trace.

"The paint stores are your best bet. He's got all the looks of a drummer making his rounds. They should be able to tell you who called on them that day."

City police promised immediate action. Jones went home, disgruntled, but also vastly relieved. Within two hours this latest lead had been extended. A call came from the city.

"Took only four visits to learn what you want. That character is well known to the paint trade. He's Burge Kimmelman, area representative of Acme Paint & Varnish Company of Marion, Illinois. Present whereabouts unknown. His employers should be able to find him for you."

"Thanks a million!" Harrison disconnected, put through a call to Acme Paint. He yapped a while, dumped the phone, said to Rider, "He's somewhere along a route a couple of hundred miles south. They'll reach him at his hotel this evening. He'll get here tomorrow."

"Good."

"Or is it?" asked Harrison, showing a trace of bitterness. "We're sweating ourselves to death tracing people and being led from one personality to another. That sort of thing can continue to the crack of doom."

"And it can continue until something else cracks," Rider riposted. "The mills of man grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly small."

Elsewhere, seven hundred miles westward, was another legworker. Organized effort can be very formidable but becomes doubly so when it takes to itself the results of individual effort.

This character was thin-faced, sharp-nosed, lived in an attic, ate in an automat, had fingers dyed with nicotine and for twenty years had nursed the notion of writing the Great American Novel but somehow had never gotten around to it.

Name of Arthur Pilchard and, therefore, referred to as Fish—a press reporter. What is worse, a reporter on a harum-scarum tabloid. He was wandering past a desk when somebody with ulcers and a sour face shoved a slip of paper at him. "Here, Fish. Another saucer nut. Get moving!"

Hustling out with poor grace, he reached the address given on the slip, knocked on the door. It was answered by an intelligent young fellow in his late teens or early twenties.

"You George Lamothe?"

"That's me," agreed the other.

"I'm from the *Call*. You told them you'd got some dope on a saucer. That right?" Lamothe looked pained. "It's not a saucer and I didn't describe it as such. It's a spherical object and it's not a natural phenomenon."

"I'll take your word for it. When and where did you see it?"

"Last night and the night before. Up in the sky."

"Right over this town?"

"No, but it is visible from here."

"I've not seen it. So far as I know, you're the only one who has. How d'you explain that?"

"It's extremely difficult to see with the naked eye. I own an eight-inch telescope."

"Built it yourself?"

"Yes."

"That takes some doing," commented Art Pilchard admiringly. "How about showing it to me?"

Lamothe hesitated, said, "All right," led him upstairs. Sure enough a real, genuine telescope was there, its inquisitive snout tilted toward a movable roof-trap. "You've actually seen the object through that?"

"Two successive nights," Lamothe confirmed. "I hope to observe it tonight as well."

"Any idea what it is?"



“That’s a matter of guesswork,” evaded the other, becoming wary. “All I’m willing to say is that it’s located in a satellite orbit, it’s perfectly spherical and appears to be an artificial construction of metal.”

“Got a picture of it?”

“Sorry, I lack the equipment.”

“Maybe one of our cameraman could help you there.”

“If he has suitable apparatus,” Lamothe agreed.

Pilchard asked twenty more questions, finished doubtfully, “What you can see anyone else with a telescope could see. The world’s full of telescopes, some of them big enough to drive a locomotive through. How come nobody yet has shouted the news? Got any ideas on that?”

With a faint smile, Lamothe said, “Everyone with a telescope isn’t staring through it twenty-four hours per day. And even when he is using it he’s likely to be studying a specific area within the starfield. Moreover, if news gets out it’s got to start somewhere. That’s why I phoned the *Call*.”

“Dead right!” agreed Pilchard, enjoying the savory odor of a minor scoop.

“Besides,” Lamothe went on, “others *have* seen it. I phoned three astronomical friends last night. They looked and saw it. A couple of them said they were going to ring up nearby observatories and draw attention to it. I mailed a full report to an observatory today, and another to a scientific magazine.”

“Hells bells!” said Pilchard, getting itchy feet. “I’d better rush this before it breaks in some other rag.” A fragment of suspicion came into his face. “Not having seen this spherical contraption myself, I’ll have to check on it with another source. By that, I don’t mean I think you’re a liar. I have to check stories or find another job. Can you give me the name and address of one of these astronomical friends of yours?”

Lamothe obliged, showed him to the door. As Pilchard hastened down the street toward a telephone booth, a police cruiser raced up on the other side. It braked outside Lamothe’s house. Pilchard recognized the uniformed cop who was driving but not the pair of burly men in plainclothes riding with him. That was strange because as a reporter of long standing he knew all the local detectives and called them by their first names. While he watched from a distance, the two unknowns got out of the cruiser, went to Lamothe’s door, rang the bell.

Bolting round the corner, Pilchard entered the booth, called long distance, rammed coins into the box.

“Alan Reed? My name’s Pilchard. I write up astronomical stuff. I believe you’ve seen a strange metal object in the sky. Hey?” He frowned. “Don’t give me that! Your friend George Lamothe has seen it, too. He told me himself that he phoned you about it last night.” He paused, glowered at the earpiece. “Where’s the sense of repeating, ‘No comment,’ like a parrot? Look, either you’ve seen it or you haven’t—and so far you’ve not denied seeing it.” Another pause, then in leery tones, “Mr. Reed, has someone ordered you to keep shut?”

He racked the phone, shot a wary glance toward the corner, inserted more coins, said to somebody, “Art here. If you want to feature this, you’ll have to move damn fast. You’ll run it only if you’re too quick to be stopped.” He listened for the click of the tape being linked in, recited rapidly for five minutes. Finishing, he returned to the corner, looked along the street. The cruiser was still there.

In a short time a flood of *Calls* hit the streets. Simultaneously a long chain of small-town papers took the same news off their wire service, broke into a rash of two-inch head-lines.

*Space Platform In Sky.  
Ours or Theirs?*

Late in the following morning Harrison ploughed doggedly through routine work. At one side of his office Rider sat with columnar legs stretched straight out and read slowly and carefully through a wad of typed sheets.

The wad was the fruit of legwork done by many men. It traced, with a few gaps, the hour by hour movements of one William Jones known to be not the real William Jones. He'd been seen wandering around Northwood like a rubbernecking tourist. He'd been seen repeatedly on the main street and examining its shops. He'd been seen in a supermarket around the time a customer's purse had been stolen. He'd eaten meals in cafes and restaurants, drunk beer in bars and taverns.

Ashcroft, Jackson and another teller remembered a Joneslike stranger making idle inquiries in the bank the week preceding the robbery. Letheren and his guards recalled the mirror-image of William Jones hanging around when they made the previous collection. Altogether, the tediously gathered report covered most of the suspect's time in Northwood, a period amounting to days.

Finishing his perusal, Rider closed his eyes, mulled the details over and over while his mind sought a lead. While he was doing this a muted radio sat on a ledge yammered steadily, squirting across the office the reduced voice of an indignant commentator.

"The whole world now knows that someone has succeeded in establishing an artificial satellite up in the sky. Anyone with a telescope or good binoculars can see it for himself at midnight. Why, then, does authority insist on pretending the thing doesn't exist? If potential enemies are responsible, let us be told as much—the enemies already know it, anyway. If we are responsible, if this is our doing, let us be told as much—the enemies already are grimly aware of it. Why must we be denied information possessed by possible foes? Does somebody think we're a bunch of irresponsible children? Who are these brasshats who assign to themselves the right to decide what we may be told or not told? Away with them! Let the government speak!"

"Yeah," commented Harrison, glancing up from his work, "I'm with him there. Why don't they say outright whether it's ours or theirs? Some of those guys down your way have a grossly exaggerated idea of their own importance. A hearty kick in the pants would do them a lot--" He shut up, grabbed the phone. "Northwood police." A weird series of expressions crossed his lean features as he listened. Then he racked the phone, said, "It gets nuttier every minute."

"What's it this time?"

"Those seeds. The laboratory can't identify them."

"Doesn't surprise me. They can't be expected to know absolutely everything."

"They know enough to know when they're stuck," Harrison gave back. "So they sent them to some firm in New York where they know everything knowable about seeds. They've just got a reply."

“Saying what?”

“Same thing—not identifiable. New York went so far as to squeeze out the essential oils and subject remaining solids to destructive distillation. Result: the seeds just aren’t known.” He emitted a loud sniff, added, “They want us to send them another dozen so they can make them germinate. They want to see what comes up.”

“Forget it,” advised Rider. “We don’t have any more seeds and we don’t know where to find ’em.”

But we do have something darned peculiar,’ Harrison persisted. “With those seeds we sent a pink, transparent wrapper, remember? At the time I thought it was just a piece of colored cellophane. The lab say’s it isn’t. They say it’s organic, cellular and veined, and appears a subsection of the skin of an unknown fruit.”

*“...A tactic long theorized and believed to be in secret development,” droned the radio. “Whoever achieves it first thereby gains a strategic advantage from the military viewpoint.”*

“Sometimes,” said Harrison, “I wonder what’s the use of getting born.”

His desk-box squawked and announced, “Fellow named Burge Kimmelman waiting for you, chief.”

“Send him in.”

Kimmelman entered. He was dapper, self-assured, seemed to regard his rush to the aid of the law as a welcome change from the daily routine. He sat, crossed his legs, made himself at home and told his story.

“It was the craziest thing, captain. For a start. I never give rides to strangers. But I stopped and picked up this fellow and still can’t make out why I did it.”

“Where did you pick him up?” asked Rider.

“About half a mile this side of Seeger’s filling station. He was waiting by the roadside and first thing I knew I’d stopped and let him get in. I took him into Northwood, dropped him, pushed straight on to the city. I was in a hurry and moved good and fast. When I got there I walked out the car park and darned if he wasn’t right there on the other side of the street.” He eyed them, seeking comment.

“Go on,” Rider urged.

“I picked on him then and there, wanting to know how he’d beaten me to it. He acted like he didn’t know what I was talking about.” He made a gesture of bafflement. “I’ve thought it over a dozen times since and can take it no further. I *know* I gave a lift to that guy or his twin brother. And it wasn’t his twin brother because if he’d had one he’d have guessed my mistake and said so. But he said nothing. Just behaved offishly polite like you do when faced with a lunatic.”

“When you were giving him this ride,” asked Harrison, “did he make any informative remarks? Did he mention his family, his occupation, destination, or anything like that? Did he tell you where he’d come from?”

“Not a word worth a cent. So far as I know he dropped straight out of the sky.”

“So did everything else concerned with this case,” remarked Harrison, feeling sour again. “Unidentifiable seeds and unknown fruit-skins and—He stopped, let his mouth hang open, popped his eyes.

*“...A vantage-point from which every quarter of the world would be within effective range,” gabbled the radio. “With such a base for guided missiles it would be possible for one nation to implement its policies in a manner that—”*

Getting to his feet, Rider crossed the room, switched off the radio, said, "Mind waiting outside, Mr. Kimmelman?" When the other had gone, he continued with Harrison, "Well, make up your mind whether or not you're going to have a stroke." Harrison shut his mouth, opened it again, but no sound came out. His eyes appeared to have protruded too far to retract. His right hand made a couple of meaningless gestures and temporarily that was the most he could manage.

Resorting to the phone, Rider got his call through, said, "O'Keefe, how's the artificial satellite business down there?"

"You called just to ask that? I was about to phone you myself."

"What about?"

"Eleven of those bills have come in. The first nine came from two cities. The last pair were passed in New York. Your man is moving around. Bet you ten to one in coconuts that if he takes another bank it'll be in the New York area."

"That's likely enough. Forget him for a moment. I asked you about this satellite rumpus. What's the reaction from where you're sitting?"

"The place is buzzing like a disturbed beehive. Rumor is rife that professional astronomers saw and reported the thing nearly a week before the news broke. If that's true, somebody in authority must have tried to suppress the information."

"Why?"

"Don't ask me," shouted O'Keefe. "How do I know why others do things that make neither rhyme nor reason?"

"You think they should say whether it's ours or theirs seeing that the truth is bound to emerge sooner or later?"

"Of course. Why are you harping on this subject, Eddie? What's it got to do with you, anyway?"

"I've been made vocal by an idea that has had the reverse effect on Harrison. He's struck dumb."

"What idea?"

"That this artificial satellite may not be an artificial satellite. Also that authority has said nothing because experts are unwilling to commit themselves one way or the other. They can't say something unless they've something to say, can they?"

"I've got something to say," O'Keefe declared. "And that's to advise you to tend your own business. If you've finished helping Harrison, quit lazing around and come back."

"Listen, I don't call long-distance for the fun of it. There's a thing up in the sky and nobody knows what it is. *At the same time* another thing is down here loping around and imitating people, robbing banks, dropping debris of alien origin, and nobody knows what that is, either. Two plus two makes four. Add it up for yourself."

"Eddie, are you cracked?"

"I'll give you the full details and leave you to judge." He recited them swiftly, ended, "Use all your Treasury pull to get the right people interested. This case is far too big to be handled by us alone. You've got to find the ones with enough power and influence to cope. You've got to kick 'em awake."

He cut off, glanced at Harrison who promptly got his voice back and said, "I can't believe it. It's too farfetched for words. The day I tell the mayor a Martian did

it will be the day Northwood gets a new chief. He'll take me away to have my head examined."

"Got a better theory?"

"No. That's the hell of it."

Shrugging expressively, Rider took the phone again, made a call to Acme Paint Company. That done, he summoned Kimmelman.

"There's a good chance that you'll be wanted here tomorrow and perhaps for two or three days. I've just consulted your employers and they say you're to stay with us."

"Suits me," agreed Kimmelman, not averse to taking time off with official approval. "I'd better go book in at an hotel."

"Just one question first. This character you picked up—was he carrying any luggage?"

"No."

"Not even a small bag or a parcel?"

"He'd nothing except what was in his pockets," said Kimmelman, positively.

A gleam showed in Rider's eyes. "Well, that may help."

The mob that invaded Northwood at noon next day came in a dozen cars by devious routes and successfully avoided the attention of the press. They crammed Harrison's office to capacity.

Among them was a Treasury top-ranker, a general, an admiral, a Secret Service chief, a Military Intelligence brasshat, three area directors of the F.B.I., a boss of the Counter Espionage Service, all their aides, secretaries and technical advisers, plus a bunch of assorted scientists including two astronomers, one radar expert, one guided missiles expert and a slightly bewildered gentleman who was an authority on ants.

They listened in silence, some interested, some skeptical, while Harrison read them a complete report of the case. He finished, sat down, waited for comment.

A gray-haired, distinguished individual took the lead, said, "Personally, I'm in favor of your theory that you're chasing somebody not of this world. I don't presume to speak for others who may think differently. However, it seems to me futile to waste any time debating the matter. It can be settled one way or the other by catching the culprit. That, therefore, is our only problem. How are we going to lay hands on him?"

"That won't be done by the usual methods," said an F.B.I. director. "A guy who can double as anyone, and do it well enough to convince even at close range, isn't going to be caught easily. We can hunt down a particular identity if given enough time. I don't see how we can go after somebody who might have *any* identity."

"Even an alien from another world wouldn't bother to steal money unless he had a real need for it," put in a sharp-eyed individual. "The stuff's no use elsewhere in the cosmos. So it's safe to accept that he did have need of it. But money doesn't last forever no matter who is spending it. When he has splurged it all, he'll need some more. He'll try robbing another bank. If every bank in this country were turned into a trap, surely one of them would snap down on him."

"How're you going to trap somebody who so far as you know is your best and biggest customer?" asked the F.B.I. director. He put on a shy grin, added, "Come to that, how do you know that the fellow in question isn't *me*?"

Nobody liked this last suggestion. They fidgeted uneasily, went quiet as their minds desperately sought a solution some place.

Rider spoke up. "Frankly, I think it a waste of time to search the world for somebody who has proved his ability to adopt two successive personalities and by the same token can adopt two dozen or two hundred. I've thought about this until I've gone dizzy and I can't devise any method of pursuing and grabbing him. He's far too elusive."

"It might help if we could learn precisely how he does it," interjected a scientist. "Have you any evidence indicative of his technique?"

"No, sir."

"It looks like hypnosis to me," said the scientist.

"You may be right," Richer admitted. "But so far we've no proof of it." He hesitated, went on, "As I see it, there's only one way to catch him."

"How?"

"It's extremely unlikely that he's come here for keeps. Besides, there's that thing in the sky. What's it waiting for? My guess is that it's waiting to take him back whenever he's ready to go."

"So—?" someone prompted.

"To take him back that sphere has got to swing in from several thousands of miles out. That means it has to be summoned when wanted. He's got to talk to its crew, if it has a crew. Or, if crewless, he's got to pull it in by remote control. Either way, he must have some kind of transmitter."

"If transmission-time is too brief to enable us to tune in, take cross-bearings and get there—" began an objector.

Rider waved him down. "I'm not thinking of that. We know he came to Northwood without luggage. Kimmelman says so. Mrs. Bastico says so. Numerous witnesses saw him at various times but he was never seen to carry anything other than the cash-bag. Even if an alien civilization can produce electronic equipment one-tenth the size and weight of anything we can turn out, a long-range transmitter would still be far too bulky to be hidden in a pocket."

"You think he's concealed it somewhere?" asked the sharp-eyed man.

"I think it highly probable. If he has hidden it, well, he has thereby limited his freedom of action. He can't take off from anywhere in this world. He's got to return to wherever he has stashed his transmitter."

"But that could be any place. It leaves us no better off than before."

"On the contrary!" He picked up Harrison's report, read selected passages with added emphasis. "I may be wrong. I hope I'm right. There's one thing he could not conceal no matter what personality he assumed. He could not conceal his behavior. If he'd chosen to masquerade as an elephant and then become curious, he'd have been a very plausible elephant—but still obviously curious."

"What are you getting at?" demanded a four-star general.

"He was too green to have been around long. If he'd had only a couple of days in some other town or village, he'd have been a lot more sophisticated when in Northwood. Consider the reports on the way he nosed around. He was raw. He behaved liked somebody to whom everything is new. If I'm right about this, Northwood was his first port of call. And that in turn means his landing place—

*which is also his intended take-off point*—must be fairly near, and probably nearer still to where Kimmelman picked him up.”

They debated it for half an hour, reached a decision. The result was legwork on a scale that only high authority can command. Kimmelman drove nearly five miles out, showed the exact spot and that became the center of operations.

Attendants at Seeger's filling station were queried extensively and without result. Motorists known to be regular users of the road, bus drivers, truckers and many others to whom it was a well-used route, were traced and questioned. Dirt-farmers, drifters, recluses, hoboes and everyone else who lurked in the thinly populated hills were found and quizzed at length.

Four days hard work and numberless questionings over a circle ten miles in diameter produced three people who nursed the vague idea that they'd seen something fall from or rise into the sky about three weeks ago. A farmer thought he'd seen a distant saucer but had kept quiet for fear of ridicule. Another believed he had glimpsed a strange gleam of light which soared from the hills and vanished. A trucker had spotted an indefinable object out the corner of an eye but when he looked direct it had gone.

These three were made to take up their respective points of observation, sight through theodolites and line the cross-hairs as nearly as they could on the portions of skyline cogent to their visions. All pleaded inability to be accurate but were willing to do their best.

The bearings produced an elongated triangle that stretched across most of a square mile. This at once became the second focus of attention. A new area two miles in radius was drawn from the triangle's center. Forthwith police, deputies, troopers, agents and others commenced to search the target foot by foot. They numbered a small army and some of them bore mine-detectors and other metalfinding instruments.

One hour before dusk a shout drew Rider, Harrison and several bigwigs to a place where searchers were cloistering excitedly. Somebody had followed the faint tick-tick of his detector, lugged a boulder aside, found a gadget hidden in the hollow behind it.

The thing was a brown metal box twelve inches by ten by eight. It had a dozen silver rings set concentrically in its top, these presumably being the sky-beam antenna. Also four dials ready set in various positions. Also a small press-stud.

Experts knew exactly what to do, having come prepared for it. They color-photographed the box from every angle, measured it, weighed it, placed it back in its original position and restored the boulder to its former place.

Sharpshooters with night-glasses and high-velocity rifles were posted in concealed positions at extreme range. While data on the superficial appearance of the transmitter was being rushed to the city, ground-microphones were placed between the hiding place and the road, their hidden wires led back to where ambushers awaited stealthy footsteps in the dark.

Before dawn, four searchlight teams and half a dozen anti-aircraft batteries had taken up positions in the hills and camouflaged themselves. A command post had been established in a lonely farmhouse and a ground-to-air radio unit had been shoved out of sight in its barn.

For anyone else a roadblock set up by tough cops would have served. Not for this character who could be anyone at all. He might, for all they knew, appear in the dignified guise of the Bishop of Miff. But if he made for that transmitter and laid hands on it—

A couple of days later a truck came from the city, picked up the transmitter, replaced it with a perfect mock-up incapable of calling anything out of the sky. This game of imitation was one at which two could play.

Nobody got itchy fingers and pressed the stud on the real instrument. The time wasn't yet. So long as the ship remained in the sky, so long would its baffling passenger enjoy a sense of false security and, sooner or later, enter the trap.

Earth was willing to wait. It was just as well. The biding-time lasted four months.

A bank on Long Island got taken for eighteen thousand dollars. The same technique; walk in, collect, walk out, vanish. A high-ranking officer made a tour of the Brooklyn Navy Yard at a time when he was also attending a conference at Newport News. An official inspected television studios on the twentieth to twenty-fifth floors of a skyscraper while simultaneously tending to office work on the tenth floor. The invader had now learned enough to become impudent.

Blueprints were pored over, vaults were entered, laboratories were examined. Steelworks and armaments plants got a careful, unhurried look-over. A big machine-tool factory actually had its works manager conduct a phony visitor around the plant and provide technical explanations as required.

It wasn't all plain sailing even for someone well-nigh invincible. The cleverest can make mistakes. Harasha Vanash blundered when he flashed a fat roll in a tavern, got followed to his hide-out. Next day he went out without being tailed and while he was busily sneaking some more of Earth's knowledge, somebody was briskly plundering his room. He returned to find the proceeds of his last robbery had vanished. That meant he had to take time off from espionage to soak a third bank.

By August 21<sup>st</sup> he had finished. He had concentrated his attention on the most highly developed area in the world and it was doubtful whether anything to be learned elsewhere was sufficiently weighty to be worth the seeking. Anyway, what he'd got was enough for the purposes of the Andromedans. Armed with all this information, the hypnos of a two-hundred-planet empire could step in and takeover another with no trouble at all.

Near Seeger's station he stepped out of a car, politely thanked the driver who was wondering why he'd gone so far out of his way to oblige a character who meant nothing to him. He stood by the roadside, watched the car vanish into the distance. It rocked along at top pace, as though its driver was mad at himself.

Holding a small case stuffed with notes and sketches, he studied the landscape, saw everything as it had been originally. To anyone within the sphere of his mental influence he was no more than a portly and somewhat pompous business man idly surveying the hills. To anyone beyond that range he was made vague by distance and sufficiently humanlike to the naked eye to pass muster.

But to anyone watching through telescopes and binoculars from most of a mile away he could be seen for what he really was—just a thing. A thing not of this world. They could have made a snatch at him then and there. However, in view of



the preparations they'd made for him there was, they thought, no need to bother. Softly, softly, catchee monkey.

Tightly gripping the case, he hurried away from the road, made straight for the transmitter's hiding place. All he had to do was press the stud, beat it back to Northwood, enjoy a few quiet drinks in a tavern, have a night's sleep and come back tomorrow. The ship would come in along the transmitter's beam, landing here and nowhere else, but it would take exactly eighteen hours and twenty minutes to arrive.

Reaching the boulder he had a final wary glance around. Nobody in sight, not a sound. He moved the rock, felt mild relief when he saw the instrument lying undisturbed. Bending over it, he pressed the stud.

The result was a violent *poof*, and a cloud of noxious gas. That was their mistake; they'd felt sure it would lay him out for twenty-four hours. It did not. His metabolism was thoroughly alien and had its own peculiar reaction. All he did was retch and run like blazes.

Four men appeared from behind a rock six hundred yards away. They pointed guns, yelled to him to halt. Ten more sprang out of the ground on his left, bawled similar commands. He grinned at them, showing them the teeth he did not possess.

He couldn't make them blow off their own heads. But he could make them do it for each other. Still going fast, he changed direction to escape the line of fire. The four obligingly waited for him to run clear, then opened up on the ten. At the same time the ten started slinging head at the four.

At top speed he kept going. He could have lounged on a rock, in complete command of the situation, and remained until everyone had bumped everyone else—given that there was no effective force located outside his hypnotic range. He could not be sure of just how far the trap extended.

The obviously sensible thing to do was to get right out of reach as swiftly as possible, curve back to the road, confiscate a passing car and disappear once more among Earth's teeming millions. How to contact the ship was a problem that must be shelved until he could ponder it in a safe place. It wasn't unsolvable; not to one who could be the President himself.

His immediate fear was well-founded. At twelve-hundred yards there happened to be a beefy gentleman named Hank who found that a brazen escape during an outbreak of civil war was too much to be endured. Hank had a quick temper, also a heavy machine-gun. Seeing differently from those nearer the prey, and being given no orders to the contrary, Hank uttered an unseemly word, swung the gun, scowled through its sights, rammed his thumbs out its button. The gun went *br-r-r-r* while its ammo-belt jumped and rattled.

Despite the range his aim was perfect. Harasha Vanash was flung sidewise in full flight, went down and didn't get up. His supine body jerked around under the impact of more bullets. He was very decidedly dead.

Harrison got on the phone to pass the news, and O'Keefe said, "He's not here. It's his day off."

"Where'll I find him then?"

"At home and no place else. I'll give you his number. He might answer if he's not busy baby-sitting."

Trying again, Harrison got through. "They killed him... or it... just under an hour ago."

"Hm-m-m! Pity they didn't take him alive."

"Easier said than done. Anyway, how can you retain a firm hold on someone who can make you remove his manacles and get into them yourself?"

"That," said Rider, "is the problem of our Security boys in general and our police in particular. I work for the Treasury."

Replacing the phone, Harrison frowned at the wall. Beyond the wall, several hundreds of miles to the south, a group of men walked onto the dispersal-point of an airport, placed a strange box on the ground, pressed its stud. Then they watched the sky and waited.

The hordes of Andromeda were very, very old. That was why they'd progressed as far as they had done. Flashes of inspiration had piled up through the numberless centuries until sheer weight of accumulated genius had given them the key to the cosmos.

Like many very old people, they had contempt for the young and eager. But their contempt would have switched to horror if they could have seen the methodical way in which a bunch of specialist legworkers started pulling their metal sphere apart.

Or the way in which Earth commenced planning a vast armada of similar ships. A good deal bigger.

With several improvements.

