THE YEAR OF THE JACKPOT

Illustrated by WILLER

By ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Occasionally, a story has to be clearly labeled fiction. Here is one instance—

AT first Potiphar Breen did not notice the girl who was undressing.

She was standing at a bus stop only ten feet away. He was indoors, but that would not have kept him from noticing; he was seated in a drugstore booth adjacent to the bus stop; there was nothing between Potiphar and the young lady but plate glass and an occasional pedestrian.

Nevertheless he did not look up when she began to peel. Propped up in front of him was a Los Angeles *Times*; beside it, still unopened, were the *Herald-Express* and the *Daily News*. He was scanning the newspaper carefully, but the headline stories got only a passing glance.

He noted the maximum and minimum temperatures in Brownsville, Texas, and entered them in a neat black notebook. He did the same with the closing prices of three blue chips and

two dogs on the New York Exchange, as well as the total number of shares.

He then began a rapid sifting of minor news stories, from time to time entering briefs of them in his little book.

The items he recorded seemed randomly unrelated — among them a publicity release in which Miss National Cottage Cheese Week announced that she intended to marry and have twelve children by a man who could prove that he had been a lifelong vegetarian, a circumstantial but wildly unlikely Flying Saucer report, and a call for prayers for rain throughout Southern California.

Potiphar had just written down the names and addresses of three residents of Watts, California, who had been miraculously healed at a tent meeting of the God-is-All First Truth Brethren by the Reverend Dickie Bottomley, the eight-year-old evangelist, and was preparing to tackle the *Herald-Express,* when he glanced over his reading glasses and saw the amateur ecdysiast on the street corner outside.

He stood up, placed his glasses in their case, folded the newspapers and put them carefully in his right coat pocket, counted out the exact amount of his check and added fifteen per cent. He then took his raincoat from a hook, placed it over his arm, and went outside.

BY now the girl was practically down to the buff. It seemed to Potiphar Breen that she had quite a lot of buff, yet she had not pulled much of a house. The corner newsboy had stopped hawking his disasters and was grinning at her, and a mixed pair of transvestites who were apparently waiting for the bus had their eyes on her. None of the passers-by stopped. They glanced at her, and then, with the self-conscious indifference to the unusual of the true Southern Californian, they went on their various ways.

The transvestites were frankly staring. The male member of the team wore a frilly feminine blouse, but his skirt was a conservative Scottish kilt. His female companion wore a business suit and Homburg hat; she stared with lively interest.

As Breen approached, the girl hung a scrap of nylon on the bus stop bench, then reached for her shoes. A police officer, looking hot and unhappy, crossed with the lights and came up to them.

"Okay," he said in a tired voice, "that'll be all, lady. Get them duds back on and clear out of here."

The female transvestite took a cigar out of her mouth. "Just what business is it of yours, officer?" she asked.

The cop turned to her. "Keep out of this!" He ran his eyes over her getup, and that of her companion. "I ought to run both of you in, too."

The transvestite raised her eyebrows. "Arrest us for being clothed, arrest her for not being. I think I'm going to like this." She turned to the girl, who was standing still and saying nothing, as if she were puzzled by what was going on. "I'm a lawyer, dear." She pulled a card from her vest pocket. "If this uniformed Neanderthal persists in annoying you, I'll be delighted to handle him."

The man in kilts said, "Grace! Please!"

She shook him off. "Quiet, Norman. This *is* our business." She went on to the policeman, "Well? Call the wagon. In the meantime, my client will answer no questions."

The official looked unhappy enough to cry and his face was getting dangerously red. Breen quietly stepped forward and slipped his raincoat around the shoulders of the girl.

She looked startled and spoke for the first time. "Uh — thanks." She pulled the coat about her, cape fashion.

The female attorney glanced at Breen then back to the cop. "Well, officer? Ready to arrest us?"

He shoved his face close to hers. "I ain't going to give you the satisfaction!" He sighed and added, "Thanks, Mr. Breen. You know this lady?"

"I'll take care of her. You can forget it, Kawonski."

"I sure hope so. If she's with you, I'll do just that. But get her out of here, Mr. Breen — please!"

The lawyer interrupted. "Just a moment. You're interfering with my client."

Kawonski said, "Shut up, you! You heard Mr. Breen — she's with him. Right, Mr. Breen?"

"Well — yes. I'm a friend. I'll take care of her."

The transvestite said suspiciously, "I didn't hear *her* say that."

Her companion said, "Grace! There's our bus."

"And I didn't hear her say she was your client," the cop retorted. "You look like a — " his words were drowned out by the bus brakes — "and besides that, if you don't climb on that bus and get off my territory, I'll . . . I'll . . . "

"You'll what?"

"Grace! We'll miss our bus."

"Just a moment, Norman. Dear, is this man really a friend of yours? Are you with him?"

The girl looked uncertainly at

Breen, then said in a low voice, "Uh, yes. He is. I am."

"Well . . ." The lawyer's companion pulled at her arm. She shoved her card into Breen's hand and got on the bus. It pulled away.

Breen pocketed the card.

KAWONSKI wiped his forehead. "Why did you do it, lady?" he said peevishly.

The girl looked puzzled. "I — I don't know."

"You hear that, Mr. Breen? That's what they all say. And if you pull 'em in, there's six more the next day. The Chief said —" He sighed. "The Chief said — well, if I had arrested her like that female shyster wanted me to, I'd be out at a Hundred and Ninety-sixth and Ploughed Ground tomorrow morning, thinking about retirement. So get her out of here, will you?"

The girl said, "But —"

"No 'buts', lady. Just be glad a real gentleman like Mr. Breen is willing to help you." He gathered up her clothes, handed them to her. When she reached for them, she again exposed an uncustomary amount of skin. Kawonski hastily gave the clothing to Breen instead, who crowded them into his coat pockets.

She let Breen lead her to where his car was parked, got in and tucked the raincoat around her so that she was rather more dressed than a girl usually is. She looked at him.

She saw a medium-sized and undistinguished man who was slipping down the wrong side of thirty-five and looked older. His eyes had that mild and slightly naked look of the habitual spectacles-wearer who is not at the moment with glasses. His hair was gray at the temples and thin on top. His herringbone suit, black shoes, white shirt, and neat tie smacked more of the East than of California.

He saw a face which he classified as "pretty" and "wholesome" rather than "beautiful" and "glamorous." It was topped by a healthy mop of light brown hair. He set her age at twenty-five, give or take eighteen months. He smiled gently, climbed in without speaking and started his car.

He turned up Doheny Drive and east on Sunset. Near La Cienega, he slowed down. "Feeling better?"

"Uh, I guess so Mr. — Breen?"

"Call me Potiphar. What's your name? Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"Me? I'm — I'm Meade Barstow."

"Thank you, Meade. Where do you want to go? Home?"

"I suppose so. Oh, my, no. I can't go home like *this*." She clutched the coat tightly to her.

"Parents?"

"No. My landlady. She'd be shocked to death."

"Where, then?"

She thought. "Maybe we could stop at a filling station and I could sneak into the ladies' room."

"Maybe. See here, Meade — my house is six blocks from here and has a garage entrance. You could get inside without being seen."

She stared. "You don't *look* like a wolf!"

"Oh, but I am! The worst sort." He whistled and gnashed his teeth. "See? But Wednesday is my day off."

She looked at him and dimpled. "Oh, well! I'd rather wrestle with you than with Mrs. Megeath. Let's go."

HE turned up into the hills. His bachelor diggings were one of the many little frame houses clinging like fungus to the brown slopes of the Santa Monica Mountains. The garage was notched into this hill; the house sat on it.

He drove in, cut the ignition, and led her up a teetery inside stairway into the living room.

"In there," he said, pointing. "Help yourself." He pulled her clothes out of his coat pockets and handed them to her.

She blushed and took them, disappeared into his bedroom. He heard her turn the key in the lock. He settled down in his easy chair, took out his notebook, and started with the *Herald-Express*.

He was finishing the *Daily News* and had added several notes to his collection when she came out. Her hair was neatly rolled; her face was restored; she had brushed most of the wrinkles out of her skirt. Her sweater was neither too tight nor deep cut, but it was pleasantly filled. She reminded him of well water and farm breakfasts.

He took his raincoat from her, hung it up, and said, "Sit down, Meade."

She said uncertainly, "I had better go."

"If you must, but I had hoped to talk with you."

"Well —" She sat down on the edge of his couch and looked around. The room was small, but as neat as his necktie and as clean as his collar. The fireplace was swept; the floor was bare and polished. Books crowded bookshelves in every possible space. One corner was filled by an elderly flat-top desk; the papers on it were neatly in order. Near it, on its own stand, was a small electric calculator. To her right, french windows gave out on a tiny porch over the garage. Beyond it she could see the sprawl-

ing city, where a few neon signs were already blinking.

She sat back a little. "This is a nice room — Potiphar. It looks like you."

"I take that as a compliment. Thank you." She did not answer; he went on, "Would you like a drink?"

"Oh, would I!" She shivered. "I guess I've got the jitters."

He stood up. "Not surprising. What'll it be?"

She took Scotch and water, no ice; he was a Bourbon-and-ginger ale man. She soaked up half her highball in silence, then put it down, squared her shoulders and said, "Potiphar?"

"Yes, Meade?"

"Look, if you brought me here to make a pass, I wish you'd go ahead and make it. It won't do you a bit of good, but it makes me nervous to wait."

He said nothing and did not change his expression.

She went on uneasily, "Not that I'd blame you for trying — under the circumstances. And I *am* grateful. But . . . well, it's just that I don't — "

He came over and took both her hands. "I haven't the slightest thought of making a pass at you. Nor need you feel grateful. I butted in because I was interested in your case."

"My *case?* Are you a doctor? A psychiatrist?"

He shook his head. "I'm a mathematician. A statistician, to be precise."

"Huh? I don't get it."

"Don't worry about it. But I would like to ask some questions. May I?"

"Oh, sure! Of course! I owe you that much — and then some."

"You owe me nothing. Want your drink sweetened?"

She gulped the balance and handed him her glass, then followed him out into the kitchen. He did an exact job of measuring and gave it back.

"Now tell me why you took your clothes off," he said.

SHE frowned. "I don't know. I *don't* know. I don't *know*. I guess I just went crazy." She added, round-eyed, "But I don't feel crazy. Could I go off my rocker and not know it?"

"You're not crazy . . . not more so than the rest of us," he amended. "Tell me, where did you see someone else do this?"

"Huh? I never have."

"Where did you read about it?"

"But I haven't. Wait a minute — those people up in Canada. Dooka-somethings."

"Doukhobors. That's all? No bareskin swimming parties? No strip poker?"

She shook her head. "No. You may not believe it, but I was the kind of a little girl who undressed under her nightie." She colored and added, "I still do — unless I remember to tell myself it's silly."

"I believe it. No news stories?"

"No. Yes, there was! About two weeks ago, I think it was. Some girl in a theater — in the audience, I mean. But I thought it was just publicity. You know the stunts they pull here."

He shook his head. "It wasn't. February 3rd, the Grand Theater, Mrs. Alvin Copley. Charges dismissed."

"How did *you* know?"

"Excuse me." He went to his desk, dialed the City News Bureau. "Alf? This is Pot Breen. They still sitting on that story? . . . Yes, the Gypsy Rose file. Any new ones today?"

He waited. Meade thought that she could make out swearing.

"Take it easy, Alf — this hot weather can't last forever. Nine, eh? Well, add another — Santa Monica Boulevard, late this afternoon. No arrest." He added, "Nope, nobody got her name. A middle-aged woman with a cast in one eye. I happened to see it . . . who, me? Why would I want to get mixed up? But it's rounding into a very, very interesting picture."

He put the phone down.

Meade said, "Cast in one eye, indeed!"

"Shall I call him back and give him your name?"

"Oh, no!"

"Very well. Now, Meade, we seemed to have located the point of contagion in your case — Mrs. Copley. What I'd like to know next is how you felt, what you were thinking about, when you did it."

She was frowning intently. "Wait a minute, Potiphar. Do I understand that *nine other girls* have pulled the stunt I pulled?"

"Oh, no. Nine others *today*. You are — " he paused briefly — "the three hundred and nineteenth case in Los Angeles County since the first of the year. I don't have figures on the rest of the country, but the suggestion to clamp down on the stories came from the eastern news services when the papers here put our first cases on the wire. That proves that it's a problem elsewhere, too."

"You mean that women all over the country are peeling off their clothes in public? Why, how shocking!"

HE said nothing. She blushed again and insisted, "Well, it *is* shocking, even if it was me, this time."

"No, Meade. One case is shocking; over three hundred makes it scientifically interesting. That's why I want to know how it felt.

Tell me about it."

"But — all right, I'll try. I told you I don't know why I did it; I still don't. I — "

"You remember it?"

"Oh, yes! I remember getting up off the bench and pulling up my sweater. I remember unzipping my skirt. I remember thinking I would have to hurry because I could see my bus stopped two blocks down the street. I remember how *good* it felt when I finally — " She paused and looked puzzled. "But I still don't know why."

"What were you thinking about just before you stood up?"

"I don't remember."

"Visualize the street. What was passing by? Where were your hands? Were your legs crossed or uncrossed? Was there anybody near you? What were you thinking about?"

"Nobody was on the bench with me. I had my hands in my lap. Those characters in the mixed-up clothes were standing nearby, but I wasn't paying attention. I wasn't thinking much except that my feet hurt and I wanted to get home — and how unbearably hot and sultry the weather was. Then — " her eyes became distant — "suddenly I knew what I had to do and it was very urgent that I do it. So I stood up and I — and I — " Her voice became shrill.

"Take it easy!" he said sharply. "Don't do it again."

"Huh? Why, Mr. Breen! I wouldn't do anything like that."

"Of course not. Then what happened after you undressed?"

"Why, you put your raincoat around me and you know the rest." She faced him. "Say Potiphar, what were you doing with a raincoat? It hasn't rained in weeks. This is the driest, hottest rainy season in years."

"In sixty-eight years, to be exact."

"Sixty — "

"I carry a raincoat anyhow. Just a notion of mine, but I feel that when it does rain, it's going to rain awfully hard." He added, "Forty days and forty nights, maybe."

She decided that he was being humorous and laughed.

He went on, "Can you remember how you got the idea of undressing?"

She swirled her glass and thought. "I simply don't know."

He nodded. "That's what I expected."

"I don't understand — unless you think I'm crazy. Do you?"

"No. I think you had to do it and could not help it and don't know why and can't know why."

"But *you* know." She said it accusingly.

"Maybe. At least I have some figures. Ever take any interest in statistics, Meade?"

She shook her head. "Figures confuse me. Never mind statistics — *I want to know why I did what I did!*"

He looked at her very soberly. "I think we're lemmings, Meade."

SHE looked puzzled, then horrified. "You mean those little furry mouselike creatures? The ones that — "

"Yes. The ones that periodically make a death migration, untill millions, hundreds of millions of them drown themselves in the sea. Ask a lemming why he does it. If you could get him to slow up his rush toward death, even money says he would rationalize his answer as well as any college graduate. But he does it because he has to — and so do we."

"That's a horrid idea, Potiphar."

"Maybe. Come here, Meade. I'll show you figures that confuse me, too." He went to his desk and opened a drawer, took out a packet of cards. "Here's one. Two weeks ago, a man sues an entire state legislature for alienation of his wife's affection — and the judge lets the suit be tried. Or this one — a patent application for a device to lay the globe over on its side and warm up the arctic regions. Patent denied, but the inventor took in over three hundred thousand dollars in down payments on North Pole real estate before the postal authorities stepped in. Now he's fighting the case and it looks as if he might win. And here — prominent bishop proposes applied courses in the so-called facts of life in high schools."

He put the card away hastily. "Here's a dilly — a bill introduced in the Alabama lower house to repeal the laws of atomic energy. Not the present statutes, but the natural laws concerning nuclear physics; the wording makes that plain." He shrugged. "How silly can you get?"

"They're crazy."

"No, Meade. One like that might be crazy; a lot of them becomes a lemming death march. No, don't object — I've plotted them on a curve. The last time we had anything like this was the so-called Era of Wonderful Nonsense. But this one is much worse." He delved into a lower drawer, hauled out a graph. "The amplitude is more than twice as great and we haven't reached peak. What the peak will be, I don't dare guess — three separate rhythms, reinforcing."

She peered at the curves. "You mean that the lad with the arctic real estate deal is somewhere on this line?"

"He adds to it. And back here on the last crest are the flagpole sitters and the goldfish swallow-

ers and the Ponzi hoax and the marathon dancers and the man who pushed a peanut up Pikes Peak with his nose. You're on the new crest — or you will be when I add you in."

She made a face. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I. But it's as clear as a bank statement. This year the human race is letting down its hair, flipping its lip with a finger, and saying, *'Wubba, wubba, wubba.'* "

She shivered. "Do you suppose I could have another drink? Then I'll go."

"I have a better idea. I owe you a dinner for answering questions. Pick a place and we'll have a cocktail before."

She chewed her lip. "You don't owe me anything. And I don't feel up to facing a restaurant crowd. I might — I might — "

"No, you wouldn't," he said sharply. "It doesn't hit twice."

"You're sure? Anyhow, I don't want to face a crowd." She glanced at his kitchen door. "Have you anything to eat in there? I can cook."

"Um, breakfast things. And there's a pound of ground top round in the freezer compartment and some rolls. I sometimes make hamburgers when I don't want to go out."

She headed for the kitchen. "Drunk or sober, fully dressed or — or naked, I can cook. You'll see."

HE did see. Open-faced sandwiches with the meat married to toasted buns and the flavor garnished rather than suppressed by scraped Bermuda onion and thin-sliced dill, a salad made from things she had scrounged out of his refrigerator, potatoes crisp but not vulcanized. They ate it on the tiny balcony, sopping it down with cold beer.

He sighed and wiped his mouth. "Yes, Meade, you can cook."

"Some day I'll arrive with proper materials and pay you back. Then I'll prove it."

"You've already proved it. Nevertheless, I accept. But I tell you three times—which makes it true, of course — that you owe me nothing."

"No? If you hadn't been a Boy Scout, I'd be in jail."

Breen shook his head. "The police have orders to keep it quiet at all costs — to keep it from growing. You saw that. And, my dear, you weren't a person to me at the time. I didn't even see your face."

"You saw plenty else!"

"Truthfully, I didn't look. You were just a — a statistic."

She toyed with her knife and said puzzled, "I'm not sure, but I think I've just been insulted. In all the twenty-five years that I've fought men off, more or less successfully, I've been called a lot of names — but a 'statistic?' Why, I ought to take your slide rule and beat you to death with it."

"My dear young lady — "

"I'm not a lady, that's for sure. But I'm *not* a statistic, either."

"My dear Meade, then. I wanted to tell you, before you did anything hasty, that in college I wrestled varsity middleweight."

She grinned and dimpled. "That's more the talk a girl likes to hear. I was beginning to be afraid you had been assembled in an adding machine factory. Potty, you're really a dear."

"If that is a diminutive of my given name, I like it. But if it refers to my waist line, I definitely resent it."

She reached across and patted his stomach. "I like your waist line; lean and hungry men are difficult. If I were cooking for you regularly, I'd really pad it."

"Is that a proposal?"

"Let it lie, let it lie. Potty, do you really think the whole country is losing its buttons?"

He sobered at once. "It's worse than that."

"Huh?"

"Come inside. I'll show you."

THEY gathered up dishes and dumped them in the sink, Breen talking all the while.

"As a kid, I was fascinated by numbers. Numbers are pretty things and they combine in such interesting configurations. I took my degree in math, of course, and got a job as a junior actuary with Midwestern Mutual — the insurance outfit. That was fun. No way on Earth to tell when a particular man is going to die, but an absolute certainty that so many men of a certain age group would die before a certain date. The curves were so lovely — and they always worked out. Always. You didn't have to know *why;* you could predict with dead certainty and never know why. The equations worked; the curves were right.

"I was interested in astronomy, too; it was the one science where individual figures worked out neatly, completely, and accurately, down to the last decimal point that the instruments were good for. Compared with astronomy, the other sciences were mere carpentry and kitchen chemistry.

"I found there were nooks and crannies in astronomy where individual numbers won't do, where you have to go over to statistics, and I became even more interested. I joined the Variable Star Association and I might have gone into astronomy professionally, instead of what I'm in now — business consultation — if I

hadn't gotten interested in something else."

"'Business consultation?'" repeated Meade. "Income tax work?"

"Oh, no. That's too elementary. I'm the numbers boy for a firm of industrial engineers. I can tell a rancher exactly how many of his Hereford bull calves will be sterile. Or I can tell a motion picture producer how much rain insurance to carry on location. Or maybe how big a company in a particular line must be to carry its own risk in industrial accidents. And I'm right. I'm always right."

"Wait a minute. Seems to me a big company would *have* to have insurance."

"Contrariwise. A really big corporation begins to resemble a statistical universe."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I got interested in something else — cycles. Cycles are everything, Meade. And everywhere. The tides. The seasons. Wars. Love. Everybody knows that in the spring the young man's fancy lightly turns to what the girls never stopped thinking about, but did you know that it runs in an eighteen-year-plus cycle as well? And that a girl born at the wrong swing of the curve doesn't stand nearly as good a chance as her older or younger sister?"

"Is *that* why I'm still a doddering old maid?"

"You're twenty-five?" He pondered. "Maybe, but your chances are improving again; the curve is swinging up. Anyhow, remember you are just one statistic; the curve applies to the group. Some girls get married every year."

"Don't call me a statistic," she repeated firmly.

"Sorry. And marriages match up with acreage planted to wheat, with wheat cresting ahead. You could almost say that planting wheat makes people get married."

"Sounds silly."

"It *is* silly. The whole notion of cause-and-effect is probably superstition. But the same cycle shows a peak in house building right after a peak in marriages."

"Now that makes sense."

"Does it? How many newlyweds do you know who can afford to build a house? You might as well blame it on wheat acreage. We don't know *why;* it just *is.*"

"Sun spots, maybe?"

"You can correlate Sun spots with stock prices, or Columbia River salmon, or woman's skirts. And you are just as much justified in blaming short skirts for Sun spots as you are in blaming Sun spots for salmon. We don't know. But the curves go on just the same."

"But there has to be some *reason* behind it."

"Does there? That's mere assumption. A fact has no 'why.' There it stands, self-demonstrating. Why did you take your clothes off today?"

She frowned. "That's not fair."

"Maybe not. But I want to show you why I'm worried."

HE went into the bedroom, came out with a large roll of tracing paper.

"We'll spread it on the floor. Here they are, all of them. The 54-year cycle — see the Civil War there? See how it matches in? The eighteen and one-third-year cycle, the 9-plus cycle, the 41-month shorty, the three rhythms of Sun spots — everything, all combined in one grand chart. Mississippi River floods, fur catches in Canada, stock market prices, marriages, epidemics, freight-car loadings, bank clearings, locust plagues, divorces, tree growth, wars, rainfall, Earth magnetism, building construction, patents applied for, murders — you name it; I've got it there."

She stared at the bewildering array of wavy lines. "But, Potty, what does it mean?"

"It means that these things all happen, in regular rhythm, whether we like it or not. It means that when skirts are due to go up, all the stylists in Paris can't make 'em go down. It means that when prices are going down, all the controls and supports and government planning can't make 'em go up." He pointed to a curve. "Take a look at the grocery ads. Then turn to the financial page and read how the Big Brains try to double-talk their way out of it. It means that when an epidemic is due, it happens, despite all the public health efforts. It means we're lemmings."

She pulled her lip. "I don't like it. 'I am the master of my fate,' and so forth. I've got free will, Potty. I know I have — I can feel it."

"I imagine every little neutron in an atom bomb feels the same way. He can go *spung!* or he can sit still, just as he pleases. But statistical mechanics work out all the same and the bomb goes off — which is what I'm leading up to. See anything odd there, Meade?"

She studied the chart, trying not to let the curving lines confuse her.

"They sort of bunch up over at the right end."

"You're dern tootin' they do! See that dotted vertical line? That's right now — and things are bad enough. But take a look at that solid vertical; that's about six months from now—and that's when we get it. Look at the cycles — the long ones, the short ones, all of them. Every single last one of them reaches either a trough or

a crest exactly on — or almost on — that line."

"That's bad?"

"What do you think? Three of the big ones troughed back in 1929 and the depression almost ruined us . . . even with the big 54-year cycle supporting things. Now we've got the big one troughing — and the few crests are not things that help. I mean to say, tent caterpillars and influenza don't do us any good. Meade, if statistics mean anything, this tired old planet hasn't seen a trend like this since Eve went into the apple business. I'm scared."

She searched his face. "Potty, you're not simply having fun with me? You know I can't check up on you."

"I wish to heaven I were. No, Meade, I can't fool about numbers; I wouldn't know how. This is it. 1952 — The Year of the Jackpot."

MEADE was very silent as he drove her home. When they approached West Los Angeles, she said, "Potty?"

"Yes, Meade?"

"What do we *do* about it?"

"What do you do about a hurricane? You pull in your ears.

What can you do about an atom bomb? You try to outguess it, not be there when it goes off. What else can you do?"

"Oh." She was silent for a few moments, then added, "Potty, will you tell me which way to jump?"

"Huh? Oh, sure! If I can figure it out."

He took her to her door, turned to go.

She said, "Potty!"

He faced her. "Yes, Meade?"

She grabbed his head, shook it — then kissed him fiercely on the mouth. "There, is that just a statistic?"

"Uh, no."

"It had better not be," she said dangerously. "Potty, I think I'm going to have to change your curve."

II

RUSSIANS REJECT UN NOTE
MISSOURI FLOOD DAMAGE EXCEEDS 1951 RECORD
MISSISSIPPI MESSIAH DEFIES COURT
NUDIST CONVENTION STORMS BAILEY'S BEACH
BRITISH-IRAN TALKS STILL DEAD-LOCKED
FASTER-THAN-LIGHT WEAPON PROMISED
TYPHOON DOUBLING BACK ON MANILA

MARRIAGE SOLEMNIZED ON FLOOR OF HUDSON

New York, 13 July—In a specially constructed diving suit built for two, Merydith Smithe, cafe society headline girl, and Prince Augie Schleswieg of New York and the Riviera were united today by Bishop Dalton in a service televised with the aid of the Navy's ultra-new—

AS the Year of the Jackpot progressed, Breen took melancholy pleasure in adding to the data which proved that the curve was sagging as predicted. The undeclared World War continued its bloody, blundering way at half a dozen spots around a tortured globe. Breen did not chart it; the headlines were there for anyone to read. He concentrated on the odd facts in the other pages of the papers, facts which, taken singly, meant nothing, but taken together showed a disastrous trend.

He listed stock market prices, rainfall, wheat futures, but the "silly season" items were what fascinated him. To be sure, some humans were always doing silly things—but at what point had prime damfoolishness become commonplace? When, for example, had the zombie-like professional models become accepted ideals of American womanhood? What were the gradations between National Cancer Week and National Athlete's Foot Week? On what day had the American people finally taken leave of horse sense?

Take transvestism. Male-and-female dress customs were arbitrary, but they had seemed to be deeply rooted in the culture. When did the breakdown start? With Marlene Dietrich's tailored suits? By the late nineteen-forties, there was no "male" article of clothing that a woman could not wear in public—but when had men started to slip over the line? Should he count the psychological cripples who had made the word "drag" a by-word in Greenwich Village and Hollywood long before this outbreak? Or were they "wild shots" not belonging on the curve? Did it start with some unknown normal man attending a masquerade and there discovering that skirts actually were more comfortable and practical than trousers? Or had it started with the resurgence of Scottish nationalism reflected in the wearing of kilts by many Scottish-Americans?

Ask a lemming to state his motives! The outcome was in front of him, a news story. Transvestism by draft dodgers had at last resulted in a mass arrest in Chicago which was to have ended in a giant joint trial—only to have the deputy prosecutor show up in a pinafore and defy the judge to submit to an examination to determine the judge's true sex. The judge suffered a stroke and died and the trial was postponed — postponed forever, in Breen's opinion; he doubted that this particular blue law would ever again be enforced.

Or the laws about indecent exposure, for that matter. The attempt to limit the Gypsy Rose syndrome by ignoring it had taken the starch out of enforcement. Now here was a report about the All Souls Community Church of Springfield; the pastor had reinstituted ceremonial nudity. Probably the first time this thousand years, Breen thought, aside from some screwball cults in Los Angeles. The reverend gentleman claimed that the ceremony was identical with the "dance of the high priestess" in the ancient temple of Karnak.

Could be, but Breen had private information that the "priestess" had been working the burlesque and nightclub circuit before her present engagement. In any case, the holy leader was packing them in and had not been arrested.

Two weeks later a hundred and nine churches in thirty-three states offered equivalent attractions. Breen entered them on his curves.

This queasy oddity seemed to him to have no relation to the startling rise in the dissident evangelical cults throughout the country. These churches were sincere, earnest and poor—but growing, ever since the War. Now they were multiplying like yeast.

It seemed a statistical cinch that the United States was about to become godstruck again. He correlated it with Transcendentalism and the trek of the Latter Day Saints. Hmm, yes, it fitted. And the curve was pushing toward a crest.

BILLIONS in war bonds were now falling due; wartime marriages were reflected in the swollen peak of the Los Angeles school population. The Colorado River was at a record low and the towers in Lake Mead stood high out of the water. But the Angelenos committed communal suicide by watering lawns as usual. The Metropolitan Water District commissioners tried to stop it. It fell between the stools of the police powers of fifty "sovereign" cities. The taps remained open, trickling away the life blood of the desert paradise.

The four regular party conventions—Dixiecrats, Regular Republicans, the Regular Regular Republicans, and the Democrats—attracted scant attention, because the Know-Nothings had not yet met. The fact that the

"American Rally," as the Know-Nothings preferred to be called, claimed not to be a party but an educational society did not detract from their strength. But what was their strength? Their beginnings had been so obscure that Breen had had to go back and dig into the December 1951 files, yet he had been approached twice this very week to join them, right inside his own office—once by his boss, once by the janitor.

He hadn't been able to chart the Know-Nothings. They gave him chills in his spine. He kept column-inches on them, found that their publicity was shrinking while their numbers were obviously zooming.

Krakatoa blew up on July 18th. It provided the first important transPacific TV-cast. Its effect on sunsets, on solar constant, on mean temperature, and on rainfall would not be felt until later in the year.

The San Andreas fault, its stresses unrelieved since the Long Beach disaster of 1933, continued to build up imbalance—an unhealed wound running the full length of the West Coast.

Pelee and Etna erupted. Mauna Loa was still quiet.

Flying Saucers seemed to be landing daily in every state. Nobody had exhibited one on the ground—or had the Department of Defense sat on them? Breen was unsatisfied with the off-the-record reports he had been able to get; the alcoholic content of some of them had been high. But the sea serpent on Ventura Beach was real; he had seen it. The troglodyte in Tennessee he was not in a position to verify.

Thirty-one domestic air crashes the last week in July . . . was it sabotage, or was it a sagging curve on a chart? And that neopolio epidemic that skipped from Seattle to New York? Time for a big epidemic? Breen's chart said it was. But how about bacteriological warfare? Could a chart *know* that a Slav biochemist would perfect an efficient virus-and-vector at the right time?

Nonsense!

But the curves, if they meant anything at all, included "free will"; they averaged in all the individual "wills" of a statistical universe — and came out as a smooth function. Every morning, three million "free wills" flowed toward the center of the New York megapolis; every evening, they flowed out again—all by "free will" and on a smooth and predictable curve.

Ask a lemming! Ask *all* the lemmings, dead and alive. Let them take a vote on it!

BREEN tossed his notebook aside and phoned Meade. "Is this my favorite statistic?"

"Potty! I was thinking about you."

"Naturally. This is your night off."

"Yes, but another reason, too. Potiphar, have you ever taken a look at the Great Pyramid?"

"I haven't even been to Niagara Falls. I'm looking for a rich woman, so I can travel."

"I'll let you know when I get my first million, but—"

"That's the first time you've proposed to me this week."

"Shut up. Have you ever looked into the prophecies they found inside the pyramid?"

"Look, Meade, that's in the same class with astrology — strictly for the squirrels. Grow up."

"Yes, of course. But, Potty, I thought you were interested in anything odd. This is odd."

"Oh. Sorry. If it's 'silly season' stuff, let's see it."

"All right. Am I cooking for you tonight?"

"It's Wednesday, isn't it?"

"How soon will you get here?"

He glanced at his watch. "Pick you up in eleven minutes." He felt his whiskers. "No, twelve and a half."

"I'll be ready. Mrs. Megeath says these regular dates mean that you are going to marry me."

"Pay no attention to her. She's just a statistic and I'm a wild datum."

"Oh well, I've got two hundred and forty-seven dollars toward that million. 'By!"

Meade's prize to show him was the usual Rosicrucian comeon, elaborately printed, and including a photograph (retouched, he was sure) of the much disputed line on the corridor wall which was alleged to prophesy, by its various discontinuities, the entire future. This one had an unusual time scale, but the major events were all marked on it—the fall of Rome, the Norman Invasion, the Discovery of America, Napoleon, the World Wars.

What made it interesting was that it suddenly stopped—in 1952.

"What about it, Potty?"

"I guess the stonecutter got tired. Or got fired. Or they hired a new head priest with new ideas." He tucked it into his desk. "Thanks. I'll think about how to list it."

But he got it out again, applied dividers and a magnifying glass.

"It says here," he announced, "that the end comes late in August—unless that's a fly speck."

"Morning or afternoon? I have to know how to dress."

"Shoes will be worn. All God's chilluns got shoes." He put it away.

She was silent for a moment, then said, "Potty, isn't it about time to jump?"

"Huh? Girl, don't let *that* thing

affect you! That's 'silly season' stuff."

"Yes. But take a look at *your* chart."

Nevertheless, he took the next afternoon off, spent it in the reference room of the main library, confirmed his opinion of soothsayers. Nostradamus was pretentiously silly, Mother Shippey was worse. In any of them you could find whatever you looked for.

He did find one item in Nostradamus that he liked: "The Oriental shall come forth from his seat . . . he shall pass through the sky, through the waters and the snow, and he shall strike each one with his weapon."

That sounded like what the Department of Defense expected the commies to try to do to the Western Allies.

But it was also a description of every invasion that had come out of the "heartland" in the memory of mankind.

Nuts!

When he got home, he found himself taking down his father's Bible and turning to Revelations. He could not find anything he could understand, but he got fascinated by the recurring use of precise numbers. Presently he thumbed through the Book.

His eye lit on: "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth."

He put the Book away, feeling humbled, but not cheered.

THE rains started the next morning.

The Master Plumbers elected Miss Star Morning "Miss Sanitary Engineering of 1952" on the same day that the morticians designated her as "The Body I Would Like Best to Prepare," and her option was dropped by Fragrant Features.

Congress voted $1.37 to compensate Thomas Jefferson Meeks for losses incurred while an emergency postman for the Christmas rush of 1936, approved the appointment of five lieutenant generals and one ambassador and adjourned in less than eight minutes.

The fire extinguishers in a midwest orphanage turned out to be filled with nothing but air.

The chancellor of the leading football institution sponsored a fund to send peace messages and vitamins to the Politburo.

The stock market slumped nineteen points and the tickers ran two hours late.

Wichita, Kansas, remained flooded while Phoenix, Arizona, cut off drinking water to areas outside city limits.

And Poptiphar Breen found that he had left his raincoat at Meade Barstow's Rooming house.

He phoned her landlady, but Mrs. Megeath turned him over to Meade.

"What are you doing home on a Friday?" he demanded.

"The theater manager laid me off. Now you'll have to marry me."

"You can't afford me. Meade—seriously, baby, what happened?"

"I was ready to leave the dump anyway. For the last six weeks the popcorn machine has been carrying the place. Today I sat through *The Lana Turner Story* twice. Nothing to do."

"I'll be along."

"Eleven minutes?"

"It's raining. Twenty — with luck."

It was more nearly sixty. Santa Monica Boulevard was a navigable stream; Sunset Boulevard was a subway jam. When he tried to ford the streams leading to Mrs. Megeath's house, he found that changing tires with the wheel wedged against a storm drain presented problems.

"Potty!" she exclaimed when he squished in. "You look like a drowned rat."

He found himself suddenly wrapped in a blanket robe belonging to the late Mr. Megeath and sipping hot cocoa while Mrs. Megeath dried his clothing in the kitchen.

"Meade, I'm 'at liberty' too."

"Huh? You quit your job?"

"Not exactly. Old Man Wiley and I have been having differences of opinion about my answers for months—too much 'Jackpot factor' in the figures I give him to turn over to clients. Not that I call it that, but he has felt that I was unduly pessimistic."

"But you were right!"

"Since when has being right endeared a man to his boss? But that wasn't why he fired me; it was just the excuse. He wants a man willing to back up the Know-Nothing program with scientific double-talk and I wouldn't join." He went to the window. "It's raining harder."

"But the Know-Nothings haven't got any program."

"I know that."

"Potty, you should have joined. It doesn't mean anything. I joined three months ago."

"The hell you did!"

She shrugged. "You pay your dollar and you turn up for two meetings and they leave you alone. It kept my job for another three months. What of it?"

"Well, I'm sorry you did it; that's all. Forget it. Meade, the water is over the curbs out there."

"You had better stay here overnight."

"Mmm . . . I don't like to leave *Entropy* parked out in this stuff all night. Meade?"

"Yes, Potty?"

"We're both out of jobs. How would you like to duck north into the Mojave and find a dry spot?"

"I'd love it. But look, Potty, is this a proposal or just a proposition?"

"Don't pull that 'either-or' stuff on me. It's just a suggestion for a vacation. Do you want to take a chaperone?"

"No."

"Then pack a bag."

"Right away. But pack a bag *how?* Are you trying to tell me it's *time to jump?*"

He faced her, then looked back at the window.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "but this rain might go on quite a while. Don't take anything you don't have to have—but don't leave anything behind you can't get along without."

He repossessed his clothing from Mrs. Megeath while Meade was upstairs. She came down dressed in slacks and carrying two large bags; under one arm was a battered and rakish teddy bear.

"This is Winnie," she said.

"Winnie the Pooh?"

"No, Winnie Churchill. When I feel bad, he promises me blood, sweat, and tears; then I feel better. You did say to bring anything I couldn't do without, didn't you?" She looked at him anxiously.

"Right."

He took the bags. Mrs. Megeath had seemed satisfied with his explanation that they were going to visit his (mythical) aunt in Bakersfield before looking for jobs. Nevertheless, she embarrassed him by kissing him good-by and telling him to "take care of my little girl."

SANTA Monica Boulevard was blocked off from use. While stalled in traffic in Beverly Hills, he fiddled with the car radio, getting squawks and crackling noises, then finally one station nearby: "—in effect," a harsh, high, staccato voice was saying, "the Kremlin has given us till sundown to get out of town. This is your New York reporter, who thinks that in days like these every American must personally keep his powder dry. And now for a word from—"

Breen switched it off and glanced at her face. "Don't worry," he said. "They've been talking that way for years."

"You think they are bluffing?"

"I didn't say that. I said, 'Don't worry.' "

But his own packing, with her help, was clearly on a "survival kit" basis—canned goods, all his warm clothing, a sporting rifle he had not fired in over two years, a first-aid kit and the contents of his medicine chest. He dumped the stuff from his desk into a carton, shoved it into the back seat along with cans and books and coats, and covered the plunder with all the blankets in the house. They went back up the rickety stairs for a last check.

"Potty, where's your chart?"

"Rolled up on the back seat shelf. I guess that's all—hey, wait a minute!" He went to a shelf over his desk and began taking down small, sober-looking magazines. "I dern near left behind my file of *The Western Astronomer* and the *Proceedings of the Variable Star Association.*"

"Why take them?"

"I must be nearly a year behind on both of them. Now maybe I'll have time to read."

"Hmm . . . Potty, watching you read professional journals is not my notion of a vacation."

"Quiet, woman! You took Winnie; I take these."

She shut up and helped him. He cast a longing eye at his electric calculator, but decided it was too much like the White Knight's mousetrap. He could get by with his slide rule.

As the car splashed out into the street, she said, "Potty, how are you fixed for cash?"

"Huh? Okay, I guess."

"I mean, leaving while the banks are closed and everything." She held up her purse. "Here's my bank. It isn't much, but we can use it."

He smiled and patted her knee. "Good gal! I'm sitting on my bank; I started turning everything to cash about the first of the year."

"Oh. I closed out my bank account right after we met."

"You did? You must have taken my maunderings seriously."

"I always take you seriously."

MINT Canyon was a five-mile-an-hour nightmare, with visibility limited to the tail lights of the truck ahead. When they stopped for coffee at Halfway, they confirmed what seemed evident: Cajon Pass was closed and long-haul traffic for Route 66 was being detoured through the secondary pass.

At long, long last they reached the Victorville cutoff and lost some of the traffic—a good thing, because the windshield wiper on his side had quit working and they were driving by the committee system.

Just short of Lancaster, she said suddenly, "Potty, is this buggy equipped with a snorkel?"

"Nope."

"Then we had better stop. I see a light off the road."

The light was an auto court. Meade settled the matter of economy versus convention by signing the book herself; they were placed in one cabin. He saw that it had twin beds and let the matter ride. Meade went to bed with her teddy bear without

even asking to be kissed good night. It was already gray, wet dawn.

They got up in the late afternoon and decided to stay over one more night, then push north toward Bakersfield. A high pressure area was alleged to be moving south, crowding the warm, wet mass that smothered Southern California. They wanted to get into it. Breen had the wiper repaired and bought two new tires to replace his ruined spare, added some camping items to his cargo, and bought for Meade a .32 automatic, a lady's social-purpose gun.

"What's this for?" she wanted to know.

"Well, you're carrying quite a bit of cash."

"Oh. I thought maybe I was to use it to fight you off."

"Now, Meade—"

"Never mind. Thanks, Potty."

They had finished supper and were packing the car with their afternoon's purchases when the quake struck. Five inches of rain in twenty-four hours, more than three billion tons of mass suddenly loaded on a fault already overstrained, all cut loose in one subsonic, stomach-twisting rumble.

MEADE sat down on the wet ground very suddenly; Breen stayed upright by dancing like a log-roller. When the ground quieted down somewhat, thirty seconds later, he helped her up.

"You all right?"

"My slacks are soaked." She added pettishly, "But, Potty, it never quakes in wet weather. *Never.* You said so yourself."

"Keep quiet, can't you?" He opened the car door and switched on the radio, waited impatiently for it to warm up.

"—your Sunshine Station in Riverside, California. Keep tuned to this station for the latest developments. As of now it is impossible to tell the size of this disaster. The Colorado River aqueduct is broken; nothing is known of the extent of the damage nor how long it will take to repair it. So far as we know, the Owens River Valley aqueduct may be intact, but all persons in the Los Angeles area are advised to conserve water. My personal advice is to stick your washtubs out into this rain.

"I now read from the standard disaster instructions, quote: 'Boil all water. Remain quietly in your homes and do not panic. Stay off the highways. Cooperate with the police and render—' Joe! Catch that phone! '—render aid where necessary. Do not use the telephone except for—' Flash! An unconfirmed report from Long Beach states that the Wilmington and San Pedro waterfront is under five feet of water. I repeat, this is unconfirmed. Here's a message from the commanding general, March Field: 'Official, all military personnel will report—' "

Breen switched it off. "Get in the car."

He stopped in the town, managed to buy six five-gallon tins and a jeep tank. He filled them with gasoline and packed them with blankets in the back seat, topping off the mess with a dozen cans of oil. Then they started rolling.

"What are we doing, Potiphar?"

"I want to get west of the valley highway."

"Any particular place west?"

"I think so. We'll see. You work the radio, but keep an eye on the road, too. That gas back there makes me nervous."

THROUGH the town of Mojave and northwest on 466 into the Tehachapi Mountains—

Reception was poor in the pass, but what Meade could pick up confirmed the first impression—worse than the quake of '06, worse than San Francisco, Managua, and Long Beach lumped together.

When they got down out of the mountains, the weather was clearing locally; a few stars appeared. Breen swung left off the highway and ducked south of Bakersfield by the county road, reached the Route 99 super-highway just south of Greenfield. It was, as he had feared, already jammed with refugees. He was forced to go along with the flow for a couple of miles before he could cut west at Greenfield toward Taft. They stopped on the western outskirts of the town and ate at an all-night joint.

They were about to climb back into the car when there was suddenly "sunrise" due south. The rosy light swelled almost instantaneously, filled the sky, and died. Where it had been, a red-and-purple pillar of cloud was spreading to a mushroom top.

Breen stared at it, glanced at his watch, then said harshly, "Get in the car."

"Potty! That was—"

"That used to be Los Angeles. Get in the car!"

He drove silently for several minutes. Meade seemed to be in a state of shock, unable to speak. When the sound reached them, he again glanced at his watch.

"Six minutes and nineteen seconds. That's about right."

"Potty, *we should have brought Mrs. Megeath.*"

"How was I to know?" he said angrily. "Anyhow, you can't transplant an old tree. If she got it, she never knew it."

"Oh, I hope so!"

"We're going to have all we

can do to take care of ourselves. Take the flashlight and check the map. I want to turn north at Taft and over toward the coast."

"Yes, Potiphar."

SHE quieted down and did as she was told. The radio gave nothing, not even the Riverside station; the whole broadcast range was covered by a curious static, like rain on a window.

He slowed down as they approached Taft, let her spot the turn north onto the state road, and turned into it. Almost at once a figure jumped out into the road in front of them, waved his arms violently. Breen tromped on the brake.

The man came up on the left side of the car, rapped on the window. Breen ran the glass down. Then he stared stupidly at the gun in the man's left hand.

"Out of the car," the stranger said sharply. "I've got to have it."

Meade reached across Breen, stuck her little lady's gun in the man's face and pulled the trigger. Breen could feel the flash on his own face, never noticed the report. The man looked puzzled, with a neat, not-yet-bloody hole in his upper lip — then slowly sagged away from the car.

"Drive on!" Meade said in a high voice.

Breen caught his breath. "But you—"

"Drive on! *Get rolling!*"

They followed the state road through Los Padres National Forest, stopping once to fill the tank from their cans. They turned off onto a dirt road. Meade kept trying the radio, got San Francisco once, but it was too jammed with static to read. Then she got Salt Lake City, faint but clear;

"—since there are no reports of anything passing our radar screen, the Kansas City bomb must be assumed to have been planted rather than delivered. This is a tentative theory, but—"

They passed into a deep cut and lost the rest.

When the squawk box again came to life, it was a crisp new voice: "Air Defense Command, coming to you over the combined networks. The rumor that Los Angeles has been hit by an atom bomb is totally unfounded. It is true that the western metropolis has suffered a severe earthquake shock, but that is all. Government officials and the Red Cross are on the spot to care for the victims, but—and I repeat—there has *been no atomic bombing*. So relax and stay in your homes. Such wild rumors can damage the United States quite as much as enemy bombs. Stay off the highways and listen for—"

Breen snapped it off. "Somebody," he said bitterly, "has again decided that 'Mama knows best.'

They won't tell us any bad news."

"Potiphar," Meade said sharply, "that *was* an atom bomb, wasn't it?"

"It was. And now we don't know whether it was just Los Angeles—and Kansas City—or every big city in the country. All we know is that they are lying to us."

He concentrated on driving. The road was very bad.

AS it began to get light, she said, "Potty, do you know where we're going? Are we just keeping out of cities?"

"I think I know. If I'm not lost." He stared around them. "Nope, it's all right. See that hill up forward with the triple gendarmes on its profile?"

"Gendarmes?"

"Big rock pillars. That's a sure landmark. I'm looking for a private road now. It leads to a hunting lodge belonging to two of my friends—an old ranch house actually, but as a ranch it didn't pay."

"They won't mind us using it?"

He shrugged. "If they show up, we'll ask them. *If* they show up. They lived in Los Angeles."

The private road had once been a poor grade of wagon trail; now it was almost impassable. But they

finally topped a hogback from which they could see almost to the Pacific, then dropped down into a sheltered bowl where the cabin was.

"All out, girl. End of the line."

Meade sighed. "It looks heavenly."

"Think you can rustle breakfast while I unload? There's probably wood in the shed. Or can you manage a wood range?"

"Just try me."

Two hours later Breen was standing on the hogback, smoking a cigarette and staring off down to the west. He wondered if that was a mushroom cloud up San Francisco way. Probably his imagination, he decided, in view of the distance. Certainly there was nothing to be seen to the south.

Meade came out of the cabin. "Potty!"

"Up here."

She joined him, took his hand and smiled, then snitched his cigarette and took a deep drag. She exhaled it and said, "I know it's sinful of me, but I feel more peaceful than I have in months."

"I know."

"Did you see the canned goods in that pantry? We could pull through a hard winter here."

"We might have to."

"I suppose. I wish we had a cow."

"What would you do with a cow?"

"I used to milk four of them before I caught the school bus, every morning. I can butcher a hog, too."

"I'll try to find you a hog."

"You do and I'll manage to smoke it." She yawned. "I'm suddenly terribly sleepy."

"So am I. And small wonder."

"Let's go to bed."

"Uh, yes. Meade?"

"Yes, Potty?"

"We may be here quite a while. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, Potty."

"In fact, it might be smart to stay put until those curves all start turning up again. They should, you know."

"Yes. I had figured that out."

He hesitated, then went on, "Meade, will you marry me?"

"Yes." She moved up to him.

After a time he pushed her gently away and said, "My dear, my very dear — uh — we could drive down and find a minister in some little town."

She looked at him steadily. "That wouldn't be very bright, would it? I mean, nobody knows we're here and that's the way we want it. Besides, your car might not make it back up that road."

"No, it wouldn't be very bright. But I want to do the right thing."

"It's all right, Potty. It's all *right*."

"Well, then . . . kneel down here with me. We'll say them together."

"Yes, Potiphar." She knelt and he took her hand. He closed his eyes and prayed wordlessly.

When he opened them he said, "What's the matter?"

"The gravel hurts my knees."

"We'll stand up, then."

"No. Look, Potty, why don't we just go in the house and say them there?"

"Huh? Hell's bells, woman, we might forget to say them entirely. Now repeat after me: I, Potiphar, take thee, Meade—"

III

OFFICIAL: STATIONS WITHIN RANGE RELAY TWICE. EXECUTIVE BULLETIN NUMBER NINE—ROAD LAWS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED HAVE BEEN IGNORED IN MANY INSTANCES. PATROLS ARE ORDERED TO SHOOT WITHOUT WARNING AND PROVOST MARSHALS ARE DIRECTED TO USE DEATH PENALTY FOR UNAUTHORIZED POSSESSION OF GASOLINE. BIOLOGICAL WARFARE AND RADIATION QUARANTINE REGULATIONS PREVIOUSLY ISSUED WILL BE RIGIDLY ENFORCED. LONG LIVE THE UNITED STATES! HARLEY J. NEAL, LIEUTENANT GENERAL, ACTING CHIEF OF GOVERNMENT. ALL STATIONS RELAY TWICE.

THIS IS THE FREE RADIO AMERICA RELAY NETWORK. PASS THIS ALONG, BOYS! GOVERNOR BRANDLEY WAS SWORN IN TODAY AS PRESIDENT BY ACTING CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS UNDER THE RULE-OF-SUCCESSION. THE PRESIDENT NAMED THOMAS DEWEY AS SECRETARY OF STATE AND PAUL DOUGLAS AS SECRETARY OF DEFENSE. HIS SECOND OFFICIAL ACT WAS TO STRIP THE RENEGADE NEAL OF RANK AND TO DIRECT HIS ARREST BY ANY CITIZEN OR OFFICIAL. MORE LATER. PASS THE WORD ALONG.

HELLO, CQ, CQ, CQ. THIS IS W5KMR, FREEPORT. QRR, QRR! ANYBODY READ ME? ANYBODY? WE'RE DYING LIKE FLIES DOWN HERE. WHAT'S HAPPENED? STARTS WITH FEVER AND A BURNING THIRST, BUT YOU CAN'T SWALLOW. WE NEED HELP. ANYBODY READ ME? HELLO, CQ 75, CQ 75 THIS IS W5 KING MIKE ROGER CALLING QRR AND CQ 75. BY FOR SOMEBODY . . . ANYBODY!

THIS IS THE LORD'S TIME, SPONSORED BY SWAN'S ELIXIR, THE TONIC THAT MAKES WAITING FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD WORTHWHILE. YOU ARE ABOUT TO HEAR A MESSAGE OF CHEER FROM JUDGE BROOMFIELD, ANOINTED VICAR OF THE KINGDOM ON EARTH. BUT FIRST A BULLETIN—SEND YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO *MESSIAH*, CLINT, TEXAS. DON'T TRY TO MAIL THEM—SEND THEM BY A KINGDOM MESSENGER OR BY SOME PILGRIM JOURNEYING THIS WAY. AND NOW THE TABERNACLE CHOIR FOLLOWED BY THE VOICE OF THE VICAR ON EARTH—

—THE FIRST SYMPTOM IS LITTLE RED SPOTS IN THE ARMPITS. THEY ITCH. PUT PATIENTS TO BED AT ONCE AND KEEP 'EM COVERED UP WARM. THEN GO SCRUB YOURSELF AND WEAR A MASK, WE DON'T KNOW YET

HOW YOU CATCH IT. PASS IT ALONG, ED.

—NO NEW LANDINGS REPORTED ANYWHERE ON THIS CONTINENT. THE FEW PARATROOPERS WHO ESCAPED THE ORIGINAL SLAUGHTER ARE THOUGHT TO BE HIDING OUT IN THE POCONOS. SHOOT—BUT BE CAREFUL; IT MIGHT BE AUNT TESSIE. OFF AND CLEAR. UNTIL NOON TOMORROW—"

THE statistical curves were turning up again. There was no longer doubt in Breen's mind about that. It might not even be necessary to stay up here in the Sierra Madres through the winter, though he rather thought they would. It would be silly to be mowed down by the tail of a dying epidemic, or be shot by a nervous vigilante, when a few months' wait would take care of everything.

He was headed out to the hogback to wait for sunset and do an hour's reading. He glanced at his car as he passed it, thinking that he would like to try the radio. He suppressed the yen; two-thirds of his reserve gasoline was gone already just from keeping the battery charged for the radio—and here it was only December. He really ought to cut it down to twice a week. But it meant a lot to catch the noon bulletin of Free America and then twiddle the dial a few minutes to see what else he could pick up.

But for the past three days Free America had not been on the air—solar static maybe, or perhaps just a power failure. But that rumor that President Brandley had been assassinated—it hadn't come from the Free radio and it hadn't been denied by them, either, which was a good sign.

Still, it worried him.

And that other story that lost Atlantis had pushed up during the quake period and that the Azores were now a little continent—almost certainly a hangover of the "silly season"—but it would be nice to hear a followup.

Rather sheepishly, he let his feet carry him to the car. It wasn't fair to listen when Meade wasn't around. He warmed it up, slowly spun the dial, once around and back. Not a peep at full gain, nothing but a terrible amount of static.

Served him right.

He climbed the hogback, sat down on the bench he had dragged up there—their "memorial bench," sacred to the memory of the time Meade had bruised her knees on the gravel—sat down and sighed. His lean belly was stuffed with yenison and corn fritters; he lacked only tobacco to make him completely happy.

The evening cloud colors were spectacularly beautiful and the weather was extremely balmy for December; both, he thought, caused by volcanic dust, with perhaps an assist from atom bombs.

Surprising how fast things went to pieces when they started to skid! And surprising how quickly they were going back together, judging by the signs. A curve reaches trough and then starts right back up.

World War III was the shortest big war on record—forty cities gone, counting Moscow and the other slave cities as well as the American ones — and then *whoosh!* neither side fit to fight.

Of course, the fact that both sides had thrown their Sunday punch over the North Pole through the most freakish arctic weather since Peary invented the place had a lot to do with it, he supposed.

It was amazing that any of the Russian paratroop transports had gotten through at all.

BREEN sighed and pulled the November 1951 copy of the Western Astronomer out of his pocket. Where was he? Oh, yes, *Some Notes on the Stability of G-Type Stars with Especial Reference to Sol,* by Dynkowski, Lenin Institute, translated by Heinrich Ley, F. R. A. S.

Good boy, Ski—sound mathematician. Very clever application of harmonic series and tightly reasoned.

Breen started to thumb for his place when he noticed a footnote that he had missed. Dynkowski's own name carried down to it: "This monograph was denounced by *Pravda* as 'romantic reactionaryism' shortly after it was published. Professor Dynkowski has been unreported since and must be presumed to be liquidated."

The poor geek! Well, he probably would have been atomized by now anyway, along with the goons who did him in. He wondered if the army really had gotten all the Russki paratroopers. He had killed his own quota; if he hadn't gotten that doe within a quarter-mile of the cabin and headed right back, Meade would have had a bad time. He had shot them in the back and buried them beyond the woodpile.

He settled down to some solid pleasure. Dynkowski was a treat. Of course, it was old stuff that a G-type star, such as the Sun, was potentially unstable; a G-O star could explode, slide right off the Russell diagram, and end up as a white dwarf. But no one before Dynkowski had defined the exact conditions for such a catastrophe, nor had anyone else devised mathematical means of diagnosing the instability and describing its progress.

He looked up to rest his eyes

from the fine print and saw that the Sun was obscured by a thin low cloud—one of those unusual conditions where the filtering effect is just right to permit a man to view the Sun clearly with the naked eye. Probably volcanic dust in the air, he decided, acting almost like smoked glass.

He looked again. Either he had spots before his eyes or that was one fancy big Sun spot. He had heard of being able to see them with the naked eye, but it had never happened to him.

He longed for a telescope.

He blinked. Yep, it was still there, about three o'clock. A *big* spot—no wonder the car radio sounded like a Hitler speech.

HE turned back and continued on to the end of the article, being anxious to finish before the light failed.

At first his mood was sheerest intellectual pleasure at the man's tight mathematical reasoning. A three per cent imbalance in the solar constant — yes, that was standard stuff; the Sun would nova with that much change. But Dynkowski went further. By means of a novel mathematical operator which he had dubbed "yokes," he bracketed the period in a star's history when this could happen and tied it down with secondary, tertiary, and quaternary yokes, showing exactly the time of highest probability.

Beautiful! Dynkowski even assigned dates to the extreme limit of his primary yoke, as a good statistician should.

But, as Breen went back and reviewed the equations, his mood changed from intellectual to personal. Dynkowski was not talking about just any G-O star. In the latter part, he meant old Sol himself, Breen's personal Sun—the big boy out there with the oversize freckle on his face.

That was one hell of a big freckle! It was a hole you could chuck Jupiter into and not make a splash. He could see it very clearly now.

Everybody talks about "when the stars grow old and the Sun grows cold," but it's an impersonal concept, like one's own death.

Breen started thinking about it very personally. How long would it take, from the instant the imbalance was triggered until the expanding wave front engulfed Earth? The mechanics couldn't be solved without a calculation, even though they were implicit in the equations in front of him. Half an hour, for a horseback guess, from incitement until the Earth went *phutt!*

It hit him with gentle melancholy. No more? Never again? Colorado on a cool morning . . . the Boston Post Road with autumn wood smoke tanging the air . . . Bucks County bursting with color in the spring. The wet smells of the Fulton Fish Market —no, that was gone already. Coffee at the *Morning Call*. No more wild strawberries on a hillside in Jersey, hot and sweet as lips. Dawn in the South Pacific with the light airs cool velvet under your shirt and never a sound but the chuckling of the water against the sides of the old rust bucket—what was her name? That was a long time ago—the S. S. *Mary Brewster*.

No more Moon if the Earth was gone. Stars, but no one to gaze at them.

He looked back at the dates bracketing Dynkowski's probability yoke.

"Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by—"

He suddenly felt the need for Meade and stood up.

SHE was coming out to meet him. "Hello, Potty! Safe to come in now—I've finished the dishes."

"I should help."

"You do the man's work; I'll do the woman's work. That's fair." She shaded her eyes. "What a sunset! We ought to have volcanoes blowing their tops every year."

"Sit down and we'll watch it." She sat beside him.

"Notice the Sun spot? You can see it with your naked eye."

She stared. "Is that a Sun spot? It looks as if somebody had taken a bite out of it."

He squinted his eyes at it again. Damned if it didn't look bigger!

Meade shivered. "I'm chilly. Put your arm around me."

He did so with his free arm, continuing to hold hands with the other.

It *was* bigger. The spot was growing.

What good is the race of man? Monkeys, he thought, monkeys with a touch of poetry in them, cluttering and wasting a second-string planet near a third-string star. But sometimes they finish in style.

She snuggled to him. "Keep me warm."

"It will be warmer soon—I mean I'll keep you warm."

"Dear Potty." She looked up. "Potty, something funny is happening to the sunset."

"No, darling—to the Sun."

He glanced down at the journal, still open beside him. 1739 A. D. and 2165. He did not need to add up the two figures and divide by two to reach the answer. Instead he clutched fiercely at her hand, knowing with an unexpected and overpowering burst of sorrow that 1952 was . . .

The End.

—ROBERT A. HEINLEIN