

# THE GIFT OF NUMBERS

by ALAN E. NOURSE

*illustrated by* ORBAN

Strange things can happen when there is a switch of talents from one personality to another. Nobody can really understand such matters. But they do happen!

“MR. Avery Mearns,” the nurse-receptionist told the doctor, pointing her thumb daintily toward the floor.

When the patient walked in the doctor saw why. Everything about the man screamed of meek, reproachful resignation. His skinny neck extruded with apologetic bobs of his adam’s apple from a prim white collar. His fingers twitched occasionally. He sat on the edge of the chair, one hundred and forty pounds of quivering indecision.

A bookkeeper, the doctor thought, steeling himself. “You say you’re having some stomach trouble, Mr. Mearns?”

“Oh, it’s frightful.” Avery

Mearns was pathetically eager. “An ulcer, you know. May be ready to perforate any minute.”

“Mm! And how long have you had your ulcer?”

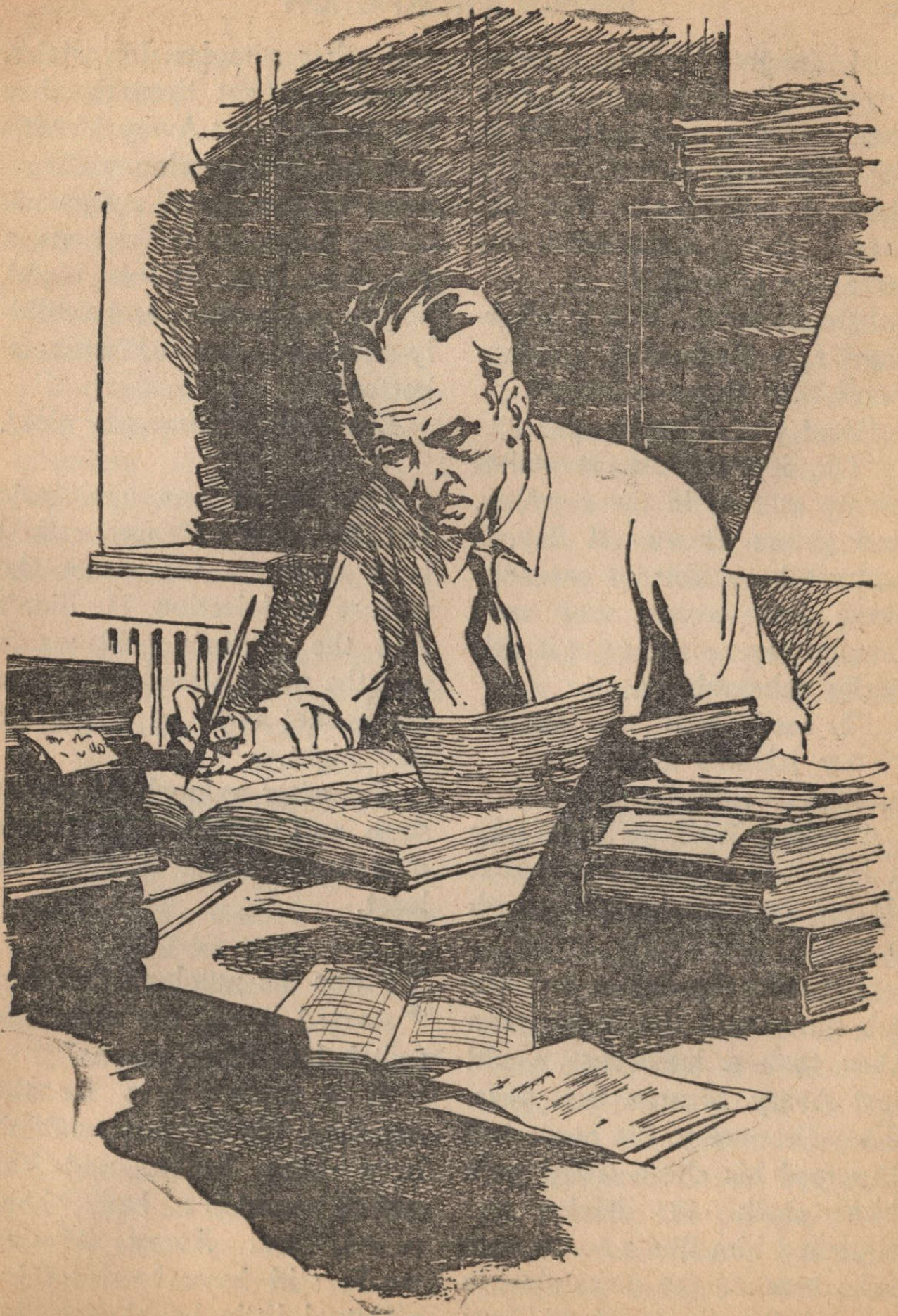
“Well, I can’t be *exactly* sure, you understand—”

“Of course, of course. But roughly?”

“Thirty-eight hours and seventeen minutes,” said Avery Mearns, sneaking a look at his wrist watch. “Give or take five minutes, I’d say.”

The doctor blinked. “You’re talking about your ulcer now?”

“That’s right. It isn’t strictly *my* ulcer, though. Belongs to an acquaintance of mine, you might say.”



"I might!" The doctor gripped his chair arms tightly and peered across the desk at the quivering little man. "I think I missed the first act here. Let's try again. What was your line of work?"

"Bookkeeper. Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker. Twenty years with them—so far."

"And you're having pain?"

"Oh, it's terrible. It wakes me up at four in the morning, and gnaws at me all day. I haven't been able to eat anything but cream soup and crackers ever since I got it. It's really unbearable."

"I see," said the doctor. "Your friend's ulcer."

"That's right."

"Indeed. Well, we'll just take a look." One thing about that doctor, he could go along with a gag.

Between the doctor and the lab nurse and the X-ray man they took a look that would last Avery Mearns ten years. They listened to his heart and thumped his chest. They gave him chalk to drink, and squeezed him like a toothpaste tube beneath the dispassionate eye of the fluoroscope. They rushed blood samples upstairs

and other samples downstairs. When they got through, they had learned that Avery Mearns had flat feet, a serious enlargement of the heart, congestion of the lungs, turgid kidneys, a sluggish liver, tired blood, polyps in his colon, and a mildly-advanced case of weavers' bottom.

But he didn't have any ulcer.

The doctor was apologetic but firm. Avery Mearns walked back down to the street the picture of dejection. He didn't find the doctor's gold watch and the nurse's sorority pin in his pocket until he got home that night.

But after a lunch of cream soup and crackers, the ulcer quit hurting. For a while, at least.

**I**T was the numbers that had started it all, the night the switch had taken place.

If it hadn't been for the numbers, the Colonel wouldn't have been broke, and the switch wouldn't have happened, and Avery Mearns would still have been an ineffectual little bookkeeper instead of the most dangerous

guy in seven countries, even if he didn't know it.

The Colonel had a way with numbers like no other guy around. It was sort of an inward and spiritual grace with him, which was pretty lucky because the Colonel didn't have any other inward and spiritual graces to speak of. He could pick a number and make it break out and sing MOTHER MACHREE spinning on its tail and strumming a ten string banjo. Nobody knew how he did it. If the Colonel himself knew, he wasn't telling anybody. He had a steady string of greenbacks hurrying into his pocket, and that was all he worried about.

The fact that he was almost always broke wasn't the fault of the numbers. The Colonel was just a little extravagant, was all.

"One would think," he was saying to George the bartender that night, "that you would be eager to advance me a small sum to enter a gentlemanly wager on the fight tonight. Five dollars would hardly strain your exchequer. And it isn't that I'm on the breadline, you know. It's just that my assets

are temporarily frozen."

"Sure, sure," said George. "Like my right arm. Can't quite reach the cash register." He glanced up at the preliminary bout on the TV and a look of great craftiness stole across his face. "What numbers would you want to bet, by the way?"

"My dear fellow!" said the Colonel, nursing his glass of milk. "Would you have me betray a sacred trust? In the vernacular of the street, would you ask me to welch on the Almighty?" He brushed a fleck of dust from his London-tailored suit and smoothed his mustache gently. It was a pretty extravagant-looking suit, just like the fancy words he used and the fancy car he drove. "Anyway, I haven't any numbers for the fight, yet. The moment of divine inspiration has not come. Creativity must be sparked, you know."

"Yeah," said George.

"And there's no spark quite like the clink of coin." The Colonel's eyes rested thoughtfully on the meek little man drinking beer down the bar. "Like that gentleman, for instance. No doubt of the fierce flame that lingers there, eh?"

That look of transport, of communion with rapture—”

Avery Mearns blinked doubtfully. “Me?”

“My dear fellow, outward appearances deceive,” said the Colonel, moving down a stool or two. “In you I can sense the artist in agonies of creation, drinking the dew of heaven before dashing forth to translate ecstasy for the masses. Don’t tell me, now—a writer? Artist? Musician?”

“Bookkeeper,” said Avery apologetically.

“Ah,” said the Colonel, seeking inspiration in his milk glass. “But a troubled bookkeeper, none the less.” He shot a furtive glance at the TV screen as the second prelim began.

“I’ll never finish in time, is all,” mourned Avery. “I’ve got tax statements due, and inventories to audit, and payrolls to check, and a seven-day deadline I’ll never make. They’ll fire me next, and then what am I going to do?”

“Let me buy you a beer,” said the Colonel. “Somewhere a solution lies within our grasp.” A beer appeared for Avery and a milk for the Colonel. “Ulcer, you know.

Nasty thing. Alcohol crucifies it. Hmmm, yes! As a custodian of accounts, you have the Gift of Numbers, no doubt.”

“Well—I can add and subtract, if that’s what you mean.”

“Nothing so crass, my good man! With the Gift of Numbers the columns of figures should take care of themselves. Numbers have a powerful quality of cohesion, you know. No number is an independent member, but only a member in relation to its fellows—you follow?”

“Oh, yes,” said Avery, taking a swallow of beer.

“So if you yourself can enter into the cohesion, the numbers become a part of you and you a part of them. They can’t help but obey you.”

“Sounds pretty nice,” Avery admitted. “I guess I’ll just have to go on adding.”

“Nonsense,” said the Colonel. “You have a column of numbers to balance—it’s balanced!” He waved his hand airily. “An error to find on the page? A mere nothing—one look, and there it is!”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

Avery licked his lips. “With

me, I've got to spend hours. And then I have more errors than I started out with."

"Obviously you're a man who *needs* the Gift. It's fortunate that it's transferrable," said the Colonel. "I say, bartender—one minute and twenty seconds of the fifth for this bout. Mark it now."

"How was that again?" said Avery.

"The fight. I just saw the outcome in a flash. One minute and—"

"No, I mean before that."

"Oh, transferrable? Oh, yes."

"You could transfer part of your gift to me?"

"Certainly. It isn't all one way, of course—you'd transfer some of your bookkeeping tendencies to me at the same time. It's a function of higher cerebral centers, you understand. Constant high-frequency synaptics from the transthalamus and the hippocampus, communicating with the frontal and parietal cortical layers. Very close contact must be made, of course—a form of supratentorial juxtaposition."

"Come again?" said the bar-

tender, who was getting interested.

THE Colonel took out a slip of paper and wrote the words in large block letters:

### SUPRATENTORIAL JUX- TAPOSITION

Avery blinked at the words. "Of course," said the Colonel, "I couldn't consider anything permanent. The transfer is too deep-seated. Some authorities claim it's a basic subtotal somatic and psychomatic interchange—"

"But for just a day or so!" Avery cried. "If I could make numbers behave like you say—"

The crowd was cheering and the announcer's voice broke through: "—by a knockout, in just one minute and twenty seconds of the fifth round—"

"You see," said the Colonel.

Avery was nodding eagerly, throwing caution to the winds. "All I'd need would be twenty-four hours! Enough to clear up the year's accounts—why, I'd be ahead of deadline. They might even give me a raise. If

you'd ever consider it, I mean—"

"Perhaps for a small consideration," said the Colonel. "Not for me, you understand! Merely to aid you in concentrating. Say twenty dollars, perhaps?"

Avery fumbled for his wallet while the bartender hid his mouth with his hand. "Will I feel anything?"

"Oh, no pain. A moment of exhaltation, perhaps. A strange prickling at the base of the spine. And of course you must concentrate with your whole mind."

He began writing the block letters again.

### SUPRAJUXTA TENTORIAL POSITION

"No, no, that's not right," he muttered. Then:

### SUPRAPOSITIONAL JUX- TATENTORIUM

and:

### JUXTATENTORIAL SU- PRAPOSITION

"I can't seem to do it," the Colonel said.

"Try, try!" cried Avery. The Colonel's fingers flew as Avery watched wide-eyed:

"You're following?"

Avery nodded, his eyes growing a little glassy.

"But not quite yet, I can see—wait, wait—I have it!"

### SUPRATENTORIAL JUX- TAPosition

"That's it!" cried Avery. He felt a moment of exhaltation, a strange prickling at the base of his spine. "You've done it, just like you said—"

The Colonel slipped the twenty into his pocket with a solemn wink at the bartender. "See you at the fights," he said, and was gone, leaving Avery, sans tie-clip, staring glassily at the scrap of paper on the bar.

It wasn't until he shook his head groggily and took another swallow of beer that he felt the twinge in the pit of his stomach—

**T**HE change was little short of miraculous. Previously, an unbalanced account book had produced a deep sense of weariness and revulsion in

Avery Mearns, blinking up at him from his desk like some kind of alien intelligence—defying him, as it were, to do anything about it.

But now all that was changed.

The columns balanced like magic.

The errors on the pages lit up like neon signs and winked at him enticingly. Quite suddenly he found himself feeling a sense of warmth, of kinship, with those pretty little numbers that tracked up and down the page. Almost as though they were blood brothers, you might say.

But that wasn't all.

When he finished the tax returns and the inventories and the payrolls and everything he was going strong, just beginning to feel the bit in his mouth. The numbers beckoned to him, urging him on to greater things, even as his stomach screamed for a vanilla milkshake. He dug in, his fingers flying on the adding machine, immersing himself deeper and deeper into the columns of numbers.

When he came up the first time, he had discovered a way

to bring the figures from column A over into column B, and the figures in column B over into column A, and save Bundy, Burbage, and Brubecker \$40,000 on their income tax. It was simply incredible that he had missed it all this time.

Cream soup and crackers for lunch.

When he came up the second time he had found a way to apply some inspired numerical foresight and save them \$80,000 on their next years' income tax.

It was wonderful.

When he came up the third time, he had devised a method of relieving B, B, & B of \$160,000 in small increments over a six month period, with B, B, & B none the wiser. He had also, in a moment of transport, sensed the exact combination to the office safe and the exact fence value of Miss Capaccio's pearl necklace.

He had gained a touch of larceny along with the Gift of Numbers and the ulcer, it seemed.

He fled from his desk in horror and went down to the bar. He tried a beer, but beer was



poison. He had to settle for milk.

"Funny thing," George the bartender chuckled, "you drinking milk and the Colonel drinking beer. Almost a miracle, like, the way his ulcer left him all of a sudden."

"Oh, yes?"

"Couldn't figure it out. Said he even ate a steak and onions and nothing happened. Said he never felt better in his life."

"Well, I could figure it out for him. Where is he?"

"You thinking about that twenty, you might as well forget it, friend."

"No, not the money, the other thing. It's beginning to get out of hand."

"Sure, sure," said George. "I'll tell him. When I see him, that is. He was talking about getting a job as a bookkeeper somewhere, but I could tell he was just joking."

Avery went out and bought some bicarbonate of soda. As he reached for his change, he found the boss's cuff links in his pocket. He also found Miss Capaccio's garter.

That was when he really started worrying.

UNFORTUNATELY, the numbers and the ulcer and the pickpocketry were not all. The second evening Avery found himself in an all-night poker game. He was not there by choice. The compulsion to gamble was simply unbearable. He lost three weeks' pay in three and a half hours and they escorted him to the street by the seat of his pants.

Next day he bet on the horses, the football pool, the basketball pool, and a tall Nordic channel swimmer. But the basketball pool paid off on his football number, and his basketball number should have been riding on Hopeful Harry in the eighth at Belmont.

The worst of it was, he couldn't stop betting.

He arrived at work half an hour early, he was so eager to get back to his numbers again. He was like a bloodhound on the trail. He lost contact with all else, and the more he worked at the books, the more the numbers seemed to take control of themselves. It was high noon when he jerked awake again, with a dull aching pain in his middle. He de-

cided to see a doctor without delay.

Of course, the doctor couldn't find the ulcer—and Avery couldn't find the Colonel. The Colonel, the bartender reported, had stopped in to say good-bye. Said he was feeling so good he thought he'd take a little jaunt to Florida. He'd heard they needed bookkeepers down there—

Bookkeepers with the Gift of Numbers, he'd said.

Avery was just leaving to hunt up another poker game when the cops pinched him. Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker had just discovered what a bookkeeper with the Gift of Numbers and a touch of larceny could do with a set of the company's books.

It seemed they didn't like it so much.

**T**HE police sergeant was very sympathetic.

"Sure, sure," he said. "I know how it is. It's just sort of a compulsion. You keep thinking how nice it would be until you can't help yourself any more, so then you go lift a couple hundred thousand. It happens all the time."

"But I didn't," Avery wailed. "It wasn't really me at all. That is, I didn't mean to. I wouldn't dream of such things under ordinary circumstances, except—"

"Sure, sure," said the sergeant. "Now just tell us how you planned to cart off the money."

"I didn't plan it. It was planning me. I switched with this man, just temporarily, in order to use his Gift of Numbers for a while, and now I've got his ulcer, and his gambling compulsions and everything."

"Mm," said the sergeant, deftly retrieving his wallet as it slid into Avery's pocket. "Switched, you say."

"That's right. It's all a horrible mistake." Avery's fingers twitched spasmodically. "He said it was a higher cerebral transfer. Just the position of the super-tent or something—it's all hazy in my mind now, somehow. But now when I work with numbers I just can't control myself—"

**T**HE psychiatrist was very sympathetic.

"Been dropping money in

poker games," the sergeant told him, aside. "Horses, too. Affected his balance, you might say."

The psychiatrist nodded gravely and smiled at his patient. "Now, Avery! Tell me about yourself, Avery," he said.

Avery told him about himself.

"Very interesting," the psychiatrist reported. "Overwhelming guilt feelings. Pulsating inferiority. It isn't that he's got a complex—just naturally inferior. Fixations, too...like this man he says he 'switched' with. 'The Colonel'."

"Oh, oh," said the sergeant.

He called in Avery. "This friend of yours called himself 'the Colonel'?"

"Why, yes. Very pleasant fellow—"

"Tall skinny chap with fancy British clothes on?"

Avery's eyes lit up. "You know him?"

"Twenty-three states and four territories know him. Alias 'Numbers Gerrold', alias 'Bet-a-Million Beckworth', alias 'The Orange Kid', etc., etc., etc. This joker could con

an eighty year old grandmother out of her uppers. You've been had, my friend."

"Not this time," said Avery. "It *happened* this time. Maybe he thought he was feeding me a line but if he did he was wrong. Parts of it came across twisted up a little, but it came across. And now I sit around waiting for his ulcer to perforate while he robs the State of Florida blind and deaf."

The sergeant rubbed his chin, dubiously, and put out ten-state alarm. "You might just be telling the truth," he conceded, "though I don't know how Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker are going to take it."

"Just find me the Colonel and let me switch back again," moaned Avery, "before I start picking my own pockets to keep in practice."

Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker generously declined to press charges. They had taken another look at those tax return figures and realized that they couldn't permit a little matter of attempted embezzlement to cloud their appreciation of a faithful, devoted employee like Avery Mearns.

Avery went back behind his desk—with an assistant, of course, to monitor his work and keep his fingers out of the till. Every morning he plunged into his books like a man obsessed, and every evening he unloaded the day's loot from his pockets before departing for home. In a few short days he had totally exhausted the numerical resources of Bundy, Burbage and Brubecker, only to find an eager list of applicants waiting for his peculiar talents.

He was flown to Washington and confronted with a financial-economic snarl that had floored the most competent of giant computers; he waded through it like a knife through putty.

He was wined by General Motors and dined by U. S. Steel.

He received, through surreptitious channels, an offer to visit certain foreign capitals where the fact that capital was a naughty word didn't dampen the intensity of capitalistic endeavor. The Gift of Numbers, it seemed, was a pearl of great price—so great that accompanying irregularities could easily be overlooked—

Everyone was excited and happy about it except Avery Mearns. The more he immersed himself in numbers, the greater the compulsion to deeper immersion. As days passed it grew worse and worse: less and less of Avery emerged each evening and more and more of the Colonel.

"It's very simple," the psychiatrist soothed. "Merely a dominant personality overwhelming a recessive shadow." But it didn't make Avery feel any better, and it didn't cure the ulcer. His cheeks grew hollow and his eyes burned feverishly.

"You've got to find him," he pleaded with the sergeant. "I can't stand it much longer."

The sergeant was sympathetic but guarded. "Awfully hard to trace, you know. We'll call you the minute we find him."

But the call didn't come from the police. It came from George, the bartender.

"Better come down here quick," he said in a hoarse whisper. "The Colonel's back. He's gotta see you in a hurry, he says. A *real* hurry, he says. Urgent like."

"You mean he wants to change back?"

"Brother, you stated a truth. He even has the twenty bucks ready."

Avery didn't wait to break the connection. He was down the stairs in three graceful leaps. Even the ulcer cooperated. In a flash of horrible insight he had sensed the source of the urgency—

But he was too late.

The police sergeant met him at the door of the tavern, just as the two men carried out the

long sheet-covered stretcher and popped it into the ambulance. The sergeant shook his head wonderingly. "Some guys got all the luck," he said. "You're too late, you lucky man. And here all the time the Colonel thought *you* were the sucker."

"*But where are you taking him?*" Avery wailed.

"Morgue," said the sergeant. "He just dropped dead this very minute. Of your coronary, that is."

THE END

## OBEY THAT IMPULSE

Subscribe to

## SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

**12 issues delivered to your home for \$4.00**

Address: Subscription Dept. Super-Science Fiction  
1790 Broadway, New York 19, N.Y.