

After a short spell in jail, the result of his last adventure ("Under the Lemonade Hat," Science Fantasy No. 53) Hek Belov returns to the world of computers gone mad and Emilio Batti's excellent cooking, only to land in yet another jam.

MOBIUS TRIP

BY EDWARD MACKIN

'If they give you paper with lines on,' a great revolutionary once said, 'write the other way.' In other words, friends, assert your precious individuality. Make things as awkward as you can for the uniformed bully, the know-it-all psychiatrist, and that curious busybody, the sociologist. Nowadays, these latter two are sometimes combined in the psychosociologist, and I was being interviewed by one.

She sat across the desk from me, and read through a document in a thin folder, glancing at me from time to time. Finally, she replaced it in the drawer to her left, and fixed me with her pale blue eyes, a washed-out forty trying not to look fifty.

"Mr. Belov," she said, "you are being released tomorrow after serving three months imprisonment. What do you intend to do? Have you any plans?"

I nodded. "I'm going to make a wax effigy of the Governor, and stick pins in it."

She looked startled. "Surely you don't believe in that ridiculous mumbo-jumbo," she said, and when I didn't answer. "Well, do you?"

"It's just a hobby," I answered, evasively.

“ I don’t suppose the Governor will lose any sleep over it,” she said, forcing a smile.

“ He will when I send it to him,” I told her. “ Particularly when he sees where I’ve stuck the pins.”

“ That will do,” she snapped, getting to her feet. “ I’ve had enough of your nonsense. Lie on the couch, and relax. I have some questions I’d like answered.”

I lay on the couch as directed and relaxed as much as I could, letting my arms hang over the sides, slackening my jaw, and half-closing my eyes.

She suddenly lost her temper. “ For heaven’s sake !” she protested. “ Do you have to look like a congenital idiot ? I just want you to relax, that’s all. You men are all the same. I ask you to relax, and immediately you jettison your intellects.”

I de-relaxed, and waited.

She finally got a grip on herself. “ To grapple with the problem of your vindictiveness,” she said, drawing on her oxygen reserves, “and the grudge you have against society, we shall have to go back to your childhood. Just tell me all you can about this period. Were there any traumatic experiences ? Anything that shocked you ?”

“ Plenty,” I told her. “ But there is one incident that really stands out in my memory. I was little more than an infant at the time.”

She leaned towards me with a concentrated frown, eager to catch every word. Heaven knows what she expected, friends. “ Yes ?” she said, pencil poised at the ready. “ Just take your time, and tell me all about it.”

“ Well, it’s easily told. I was in the local pleasure park, enjoying myself in the innocent way children do, when my nanny pushed me into the duck pond, and limped out of my life forever.”

“ That must have been a simply terrifying experience for one so young,” she said, writing it all down. “ Have you any idea why she did it ?”

I nodded. “ It may have been because it was the third time that morning that I had succeeded in giving her the hotfoot.”

“ Quite,” she said, icily, and tore up the paper she had been writing on. “ Mr. Belov,” she added, “ my report on you will point out that you are an incorrigible liar, a malingerer, and a confirmed cynic.”

I grinned at her. “ I didn’t think you cared,” I said.

Just before I was released the following day, I received a lecture from the welfare officer, a young man who took his job very seriously.

"See if you can't make a fresh start," he wound up. "This might help you a little."

I found myself holding a pound note.

"God bless you, Mr. Copperfield!" I said, touching my forelock. "But aren't you afraid I might move in on the National Bank, or make a bid for European Holdings?"

He whipped the pound from my fingers. "Get out!" he said, simply. "Your kind are completely irreclaimable!"

I snapped my teeth at him. "That thought will keep me warm all winter," I told him.

I could have said a lot more, but I wanted to get out of that place. Later I sent him an urgent flash card, care of the Governor. It said: "The twins are sick. When are you going to let me have some money? Your loving Iris."

With the few shillings I had left I was on my way to Emilio's restaurant when I was stopped on Fourth Level by a large man wearing tinted glasses. His pale, moon face was expressionless as he asked: "Aren't you Hek Belov?"

For a sickening moment I wondered which of my many creditors had caught up with me. The proportions, and the voice were familiar somehow. And then I had it. "Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "Harry! Harry Schultz as ever was. I didn't recognise you in the blinkers."

He nodded. "I hardly knew you through them. It's the current mark of distinction. They have a built-in set of idiot cards, in the form of a film, on any subject you like." He took them off, and showed me.

By pressing a tiny feed-button, scraps of information, formulae, and other similar rubbish could be made to appear on the outer surface of either lens, and because of the composition of the material was suitably corrected for viewing without an added screen or illuminant.

"You can have a speech prepared and itemised by the suppliers," Schultz said, enthusiastically. "It's a boon to the busy executive."

"Glory hallelujah!" I said. "What next?" He put them back on again, and smiled at me. "Throw them over the Level," I advised him. "What you can't remember was never worth saying anyway."

He shook his head. "That's where you're wrong. Unless you are prepared to surround yourself with all the trivia of our civilisation, and bow the knee to the gimcrack, you are out of step with the age, and that could prove most unfortunate. You could find yourself permanently penurious, and forever clobbered by circumstance."

He had a meaningful look for me, of course, the swine !

"How true," I said, wondering how to approach him for the loan of a fiver. "You have the makings of a philosopher, old friend. You have indeed. So you are in the chips, eh? Well I always said you were a great man, Harry. I wonder if you could possibly help me over a very trying period. A fiver would do."

He took out his wallet, and handed me a small, white card. "Come and see me at this address. I'd like you to have a look at, er—some equipment."

He was making off when I grabbed him by the arm. "You forgot the retaining fee," I reminded him.

"I led into that, didn't I?" he said with a faint grin. He extracted a five pound note from his wallet and handed it to me. "I'll expect you tomorrow. Is that all right?"

"I'll be there today," I promised. "I just cancelled all my engagements."

He looked at me speculatively and sighed. "I hope I'm doing the right thing," he said.

I patted him on the shoulder, reassuringly. "Don't you worry, old friend. It was a lucky break your meeting me. Your troubles are practically over—whatever they are."

He shrugged, and took the south strip. I went on my way to Emilio's. A good meal was what I needed more than anything else just then.

Two hours later I was outside the Anderson Development Foundation, West 42, Third Level, which was the address on the card Schultz had given me. It was a great, untidy looking place, built for the most part of sand-tinted pre-cast. Inside I encountered a rather officious commissionaire, who wore a bright blue uniform with gold trimmings, which looked like something out of an early twentieth-century musical, and was almost certainly designed by a woman. He had a face like a sick ferret, and a reedy voice to go with it.

"Yes?" he asked.

I showed him the card. He turned it over and over distastefully, and handed it back to me.

"Please state your business," he demanded, surlily.

"I have an appointment with a Mr. Harry Schultz," I said, patiently.

"Mr. Schultz is out," he told me, and went into a little room on my left, closing the door after him.

There was a window marked *Enquiries*. I opened this and looked in at him. "You should do something about those ingrowing toenails," I said. "They must be right the way through to your liver."

He slammed the window down, and we glared at each other through the glass. Then I felt a tap on my shoulder, and turned to see who it was. Schultz beamed at me.

"Take no notice of Sergeant Trinkle," he told me. "He's all right when you get to know him."

"Like a broken leg," I said. "Have you tried setting fire to him?"

Schultz smiled. "Never mind. Wait till you see the job I've got lined up for you. Come on."

He pushed open a door, and I followed him down a long corridor. Near the end we went through another door, and into a small, well-furnished office where a blonde stenographer typed delicately on an electric machine. She looked up as we entered, and a tiny frown creased her forehead.

Schultz smiled at her. "Ask Mr. Anderson if he can spare a few minutes," he said. "Tell him I've got Mr. Belov with me. He'll understand."

She indicated the door behind her with a slight movement of her head. It had a glass panel on which was inscribed the words *Chief Technician*. "Mr. Anderson is in conference, Mr. Schultz." The little frown vanished and was almost replaced by a smile. "He said he wasn't on any account to be disturbed; but if it was important you could try the day after tomorrow."

Schultz nodded. "Fine. That means he is practising his swing. Come on, Hek. Mr. Anderson will see us at once."

The blonde gave a little shrug of her elegant shoulders and went back to her typing. I leaned over as I passed her.

"The Andromedans just landed at Thames Reach." I informed her. "Great hairy beasts with ten arms, and a partiality for blondes. Don't you care?"

“Not if the roof fell in,” she said, coolly. “I’ve got a fully comprehensive.”

“Come on,” urged Schultz, standing by the door. “Haven’t you ever seen an iceberg before?”

“I never talked with one,” I said. “It’s an experience.”

He opened the door, and we both ducked, simultaneously. Something small and white shot over our heads, and rolled across the carpet. I took a quick glance. It was a ball of paper. I followed my friend into the office of Mr. Anderson. A tall young man was standing with his legs splayed, swinging a golf club. He regarded us with some slight annoyance.

“I can’t be disturbed,” he told us. “Get out.”

“Later,” said Schultz, imperturbably. “This is Hek Belov.”

“Is he really,” said the young man, with a brief glance in my direction. “For heaven’s sake, Schultz,” he added, peevishly, “can’t you see I’m busy? I’m practising my swing.” He changed his grip slightly, and concentrated on the six balls of paper laid out in a row on the carpet, driving them expertly one by one against the door.

“Hek, this is Arthur Drobworth Anderson the younger,” Schultz told me. “He masquerades as our chief technician. Mr. Anderson, please, if you would just lend me your attention, Mr. Belov is here to sort out—we hope—you know what.”

Arthur Drobworth Anderson raised one eyebrow to indicate attention. “Do I?” he said, vaguely. “Well that’s probably important, too. Let me know if there’s any progress; but not for a week or two. Goodbye, Mr. Belov. It was nice meeting you. You should take up golf.”

“I’m caught up in the bigger game,” I told him.

He evinced some slight interest. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Survival,” I said. “Throw your money away. You’re missing all the fun.”

“Like falling downstairs,” remarked Schultz. “Come on, Hek. The Foundation can’t afford more than one incumbent.”

We headed out and as we passed the iceberg I glanced at what she’d just typed. It said: “Look me up again when you’ve made your first million.”

I looked at her, and she smiled sweetly. “Honey,” I said, very conscious of some scent or other that she was wearing, “by that time the million won’t matter either.”

"You should try harder," she advised, huskily, and suddenly my collar felt rather more than tight.

"The incentive's there all right," I admitted, just about keeping my hands off her; "but you've caught me on one of my off days. Meet me outside the Great National Bank tomorrow. I'll have it in five bags." I shambled out after Schultz. "I should be playing the big league." I told him. "I have such taste."

"Forget it," he grinned. "It's all in the packaging. Anyway, I didn't get you here to make sheep's eyes at our Miss Humbit. I want you to have a look at Project 713. It didn't turn out quite as we expected. Here, through this door."

He held it wide for me, and I went in. It was a fairly large room with benches down on one side, and several tables on which reposed a varied assortment of electronic hook-ups. All along one wall was a gleaming mass of switchgear, and at the end of the room was that monstrosity the Watkins-Gore Multiple Computer and Translater. This is the one that can break down speech forms in any language, bung out a free translation, and then go on to process it through several stages until it is reissued as a mishmash of mathematical equations along with a whole lot of hoo-ha, including what the semantists call trend lines.

"A nice place," I said. "What happened to the staff?"

Old Belov wasn't born yesterday. It wasn't just the lack of staff. I'd noticed that everything was switched off; not a green light anywhere, and not the faintest suggestion of cyclic hum.

"Well," said Schultz, fingering his chin, "as a matter of fact they left a week ago. You know, one of those lightning disputes that are apt to flare up in the best regulated organizations."

"Quite," I said, looking round. "Tell me, old friend, which one did the lightning strike?"

He laughed, a shade uneasily. "You always were a shrewd operator, Belov. Yes, something did happen to a member of the staff. I should have told you about it in the first place because you can't tackle the problem without knowing all the details. Stupid of me."

"Write to me about it," I said, moving off. "Any time within the next ten years will do. I shall probably change my address."

The way I saw it, with jobs so hard to get these days, for a whole staff to voluntarily quit their posts some king-sized horror must have caught up with one of their number.

"Surely you wouldn't desert an old friend," wheedled Schultz. "Things may not be quite as bad as you imagine. After all, I'm still here, aren't I?"

That was a point. As I remembered him, in the few odd spots we had been in together, whenever danger threatened Schultz could always be found running the other way.

"All right," I said, "tell me. What did happen to the late lamented?"

"There you go again," he complained, "jumping to unwarranted conclusions. The fellow isn't actually dead. It's hard to say what he is really, apart from being a damned nuisance! Anyway, it was his own fault. Project 713 should never have been started."

"There was some obvious danger?"

"No, it wasn't that. Just between you and me we had a good number here, plodding along well-established lines of research; but we spent half-a-million of the Foundation's money and the pressure went on for something spectacular to show the principal backer, John Heathwaite, because it was felt that he was cooling off."

I nodded. "Heathwaite of *Heathwaite Supplies Inc.* I did a small job on a computer for him about three years ago. It took me two years to get the fee. A mean man. A very mean man."

"Well, you see what we were up against. The project I initiated was, I am afraid, largely spurious. We were just playing for time."

"Heathwaite wasn't the only backer," I pointed out. "If I remember correctly there is a great deal of public money involved, and you just can't play ducks and drakes with public monies. It's criminally dishonest. Have you no ethics?"

Schultz elevated his shoulders. "I know," he said. "I don't sleep sometimes thinking about it; but I don't sleep sometimes anyway. Let me explain about the project."

"It won't do you any good. You may not have any ethics to speak of; but my code of conduct has always been impeccable."

"You're just windy," he sneered. "Look, Hek. Sort this lot out and you've got a job for life with the Foundation. I'll personally see to it. How does that sound?"

"You mean you want me to be a party to your nefarious conduct?" I was disgusted, I can tell you. "What's the salary?"

Well, one has to live.

"I knew you'd see it my way," he grinned. "Seven-thousand per annum. Welcome to the Anderson Development Foundation. Our proud motto is 'What Can Be Done Will Be Done—Someday.'"

"And a very fine motto, too," I said. "I only hope I can live down to it. All right, Schultz, you can lay it out for me, now. What was the horrible thing in the woodshed?"

"Bragden," Schultz informed me. "Raymond Aloysius Bragden. He had the bright idea of pursuing a line of research he had flirted with when he was younger. It was based on some crazy notion he had about projecting an image without the aid of light. Apparently he had some small success; but there didn't seem to be any commercial application for his discovery, and only Bragden could tell the difference between a normal image and this molecular image in any case. Just about this time funds ran out, so that was that. Well . . ."

"Before you go any further," I broke in, "you might explain the term molecular image."

"Sorry," he apologised, "you're not in the picture there, are you? A molecular image, according to our friend Bragden, is a solid surface representation of the object used. In other words, this machine projects a thin skin of molecules which, when they contact the screen or anything else, in fact, remain as a permanent impression or image, although it can be pushed around."

"Even after the machine is switched off?"

He nodded. "Bragden did a series of modifications; the aim being to get a clearer and thicker image. We used a pound note at first. I think we had some idea of reproducing them by the hundred, forgetting that we were limited to the thickness of the note itself. On one of the projection tests we found ourselves left with the image; but no note. For some reason Bragden had taken hold of the note by one corner, possibly to shift it, and the next thing is that his image is on the wall to one side of the screen. Of Bragden himself there was no trace either. You see, this thing doesn't project in the way that light projects. It sets up a vibration that apparently loosens

the surface molecules, and then the power end cracks in with a split-second surge that's way up in the millions, and the loose image is sloughed. It shoots outwards until it encounters a solid surface, and there it sticks. I suppose Bragden was subjected to the same molecular strain because he contacted the object under stress."

"Where's the Bragden image now?"

"In another room, still holding the pound note. We were able to slide him along the wall through the door, and along the passage-way. Would you care to see him?"

"No," I said. "That might make me an accessory after the fact, or something. I don't suppose you've been to the police?"

"I'm not altogether stupid. Of course I've been to the police. They've searched the whole place from end to end. I believe they regard the whole thing as a leg-pull. It never hit the news. The police blocked it for some reason. They've listed Bragden as a missing person. He was a bachelor living alone, and we haven't been able to turn up any relatives. There the matter rests as far as the outside world is concerned. The rest of the staff handed in their notices right away, and I haven't seen any of them since. They had an idea that if the molecular vibration could be transmitted by just taking hold of the object there was a good chance that it might be transmitted through the floor they were standing on."

"That's alarmingly feasible," I said, looking around the big lab. "Which is the projector?"

"Over here," said Schultz, moving diagonally across the room. He paused by something that looked rather like a giant polaroid camera, except that there was no lens, only a mass of steel strings where the lens might be, all radiating outwards, and then continuing onwards at right angles into the bowels of the thing.

Schultz pointed out the holding frame they had used for specimens, and then indicated the control unit, which was situated at a short distance from the machine.

"Voltage, vibration, molecular tuning and focus are all controlled from here. Any questions?"

"Yes. Are you sure that the damned thing is off?"

"Not only off, but disconnected. We're as safe here as anywhere."

I didn't bother to work that out. Instead I went round to the rear of the thing, and pulled the inspection panel away. Most of the rig was unfamiliar ; but I could follow the circuits through. Just one thing puzzled me. This was a big, screened block on the top rack. All the fine, steel wires found their way into this, and there were three separate, but associated, circuits that took it in.

"What's in the big meat can ?" I asked. My own guess was a K unit, with high-vacuum equipment. "It looks important."

"A mass of coils, capacitors, and a couple of multipliers. Something like a K unit. All high-vac. There's a vibro-coupler, too. That was Bragden's baby."

It was more or less what I'd expected. Give me one end of a circuit, and I'll draw you the rest. It's a gift. You either have it, or you haven't. I think in terms of solid circuitry, and the whole thing had fallen into place now. I flipped the layout over, as the inner eye cut in, just like flipping over the pages of a book. It was all so crystal clear, and yet . . . There was something odd about it. Something that didn't add up. A circuit error ? Possibly ; but I didn't think so. It all fitted so beautifully.

"Well, any ideas ?" asked Schultz.

"One or two," I said. I had a million ; but mostly on how to spend seven-thousand pounds, supposing I got it. "Just leave me with it for a while."

I took an inspection lamp, and examined the circuits minutely. When I turned to speak to Schultz he wasn't there. So I sat back on my heels and swore. The front end of the K-can had gone. Probably sloughed off gradually by the inter-molecular vibrations. Some of the metal had been deposited across the terminal points of an adjacent choke. That meant a tremendous rise in voltage and a consequent strain on the reservoir capacitor, an electrolytic, which had gone o.c. Result, no power. Switching the thing off had been superfluous. No-one had dared examine the thing, of course. Not since Bragden had got plastered, as it were.

I went in search of Schultz. The delectable Miss Humbit told me that he'd gone for lunch, and that I'd find him in the "Kit Kat," on the same block. When I walked in he was picking at a plate of chicken.

"Sit down," he invited. "What would you like ?"

"If you're paying I'd like a lobster salad," I said, "with all the trimmings."

"Did you sort it out?" he asked.

"It was too easy, and I've got a suspicious mind. The obvious is seldom the total answer."

He avoided my eyes. "We'll talk about it later," he said, and poured himself a glass of dry sherry.

A rather leggy brunette, wearing the shortest of short skirts took my order. "What are you doing tonight, sweetheart?" I asked.

"I'm bathing the twins," she told me. "Would you like to wash or dry?" She gave me an acidulated look and walked away.

Schultz laughed. "Don't look so put out," he said. "I've been trying to date her up for a month."

"A married woman? Shame on you."

"Penny's not married. That twin stuff is just part of the routine brush-off."

After we'd finished our lunch I took an envelope from my wallet, re-addressed it, stuck a piece of scrap paper inside, and on the way out I gave it to Penny.

"Get the twins a rocking horse," I said, patting her on the rear.

"Oh, thank you, sir," she giggled.

I shot after my friend and practically dragged him along the Level.

"Hold on," he protested. "What's the idea?"

Just then there was the characteristic sound of a pie hitting a man, and an amazed Schultz scraped meat off the back of his neck while he looked back at Penny.

"You cheapskate lousy bums!" she shouted. "You ever come here again and you'll regret it!"

"For heaven's sake," he said, still scraping the debris from around his neck and ears, "what's the girl on about?"

"It's the weather," I said, pulling him out of the line of fire down a sideway. "It affects Celts in that peculiar way. Did you notice she had a slight Irish brogue?"

"But she threw a pie at me," he complained, lugubriously. "Why should she throw a pie at me?" He looked at me as though I might be able to provide the answer.

"Are you sure you didn't order it?" I asked him.

“Of course I didn’t damned well order it!” he shouted. “Do you think I’m in the habit of having my pies delivered in that fashion? The girl must be mad.”

When we got back the young Mr. Anderson was putting his golf clubs in his hoverjet, which he had parked near the entrance.

“Oh, there you are,” he remarked, with a smile. “I’m just going to the links for a couple of rounds. I’ve left a note for you. It’s to let you know that my father will be over this afternoon to see what progress has been made on the new project. He’s bringing old Heathwaite along with him.” Arthur Drobworth Anderson the younger placed a well-manicured hand on the shoulder of Schultz. “Do your best, there’s a good fellow. I shouldn’t mention Bragden, if I were you. There’s a good chance he still doesn’t know.” He turned Schultz around, and looked at the back of his neck. Bits of pie still clung there. “You’re a terribly messy eater,” he said, distastefully. Then he climbed into the jet, and waved to us. We watched him take off, and went inside.

I stood looking at the projector. Schultz sighed. “All good things come to an end,” he said. “I’m going to have a wash, and change my shirt,” he added. “See you in about half-an-hour. I don’t know what we are going to do about Heathwaite. I really don’t.” He went out.

I wasn’t very sure myself; but I had the makings of an idea. What we wanted, of course, was a molecular projector that worked, and a valid application for such a useless invention. We also wanted Bragden; but he’d have to wait.

The thing was to convince Heathwaite that we had something worth developing. A little chicanery was perhaps permissible here. After all, the whole of the Anderson Development Foundation was at stake, and a lifetime of well-paid scientific dilettantism for the lucky staff. I might well be one of that happy number. Not that that weighed with me, of course; but one has to live. However, after further consideration, I decided against it. I’ve got a yellow streak of honesty down my back a yard wide since my last stay in gaol.

Schultz was positively nervous as we waited for the elder Anderson to show up with Heathwaite. After nearly an hour, during which I managed to fit a new K-unit, with suitable

modifications, including an additional reverse-bias circuit, Schultz sent out for a bottle of Scotch. We had this three parts drunk when Anderson and John Heathwaite walked in.

"Afternoon, Schultz," said Anderson. "This is Mr. Heathwaite. He'd like to know how the project is coming along. So would I for the matter of that."

Then he noticed me. "Who the devil's this?" he asked.

"Just a wandering minstrel, sir," I told him, bowing low. "I'd give you a lay on my lute; but I had to hock it to pay the Performing Rights people their performing dues, and now that I've hocked it I can't perform. Have you ever known such vicious squares?"

Schultz laughed a trifle hysterically. "You kill me!" he said. "And you might as well," he added, suddenly sobering up.

Anderson forced a smile, and turned to Schultz. "They've been celebrating the successful completion of the project," he said. "Isn't that so, Schultz?"

"You mean they broke through on the reproducer?" said Heathwaite eagerly.

Heaven knows what he had in mind, or what Anderson had been feeding him.

"All the way" Schultz lied. "Allow me to introduce my colleague, Hek Belov. He was largely instrumental in providing the answers that led to our final success. Is that not so, Belov?"

"Quite," I agreed, wondering what the hell he was talking about.

We shook hands all round, and Heathwaite asked for a demonstration.

"Certainly," I said, and switched the molecular image projector on. I waited for it to warm up, completely forgetting that there was nothing in the frame to project. "I have—er—modified the original circuit to include an extra K-unit, positively biased, to provide reverse vibration," I told them. "I forget why."

I must have had a very good reason for doing it; but it had slipped my memory. I watched the meter needle rise towards maximum, my back to them, while I pondered this problem; but the whisky had a half-nelson on my brain, and all it wanted to do was lie down and give up. I turned to say something to

Schultz, and instantly my brain jumped into action, and rang every alarm bell in my system.

Schultz and the others were legging it for the door as fast as they could go. Curiosity is not one of my vices. Someone was running. I didn't need to know why. I overhauled them in grand style, and we reached the door in a bunch, finally bursting out into the passageway, and fighting our way into the room where the blonde sat, still typing. I nursed a bleeding nose, and watched Schultz's right eye redden up, and swell alarmingly.

"What the hell are we running for?" I asked him.

Anderson was locking the door with a key he had snatched from a rack on the wall. Heathwaite shook his head bemusedly. "Some reproducer," he said, and went out through the door that led to the lair of Sergeant Trinkle, and the outer world.

Miss Humbit left her desk, and regarded us a trifle cynically. "The last boat just left," she said. "What did we hit this time?"

Schultz was pointing back in the direction of the laboratory. He looked distraught. His mouth moved in some kind of explanation; but no words came out. The blonde took a cup of water from the dispenser and poured it over him. His voice came back as though someone had switched it on.

". . . more than fifty of him. For Pete's sake switch the damn thing off!"

"Of course," said Anderson. "The emergency switch." He raced across the room and opening a wooden box on the wall shoved his hand in and pulled down the handle of a large switch. "That's fixed it," he announced.

"Fixed what?" I asked.

"That," said Miss Humbit, "is the premier dollar question. Why don't you go and see what they're yammering about?"

"That's a pretty interesting question, too," I said.

"Aren't you going?" she asked me.

"Not to put too fine a point on it—no."

"Coward! Someone's got to pick up the pieces. Oh, for goodness sake, stay where you are. I'll go."

I must say it took a great deal of moral courage to watch a woman do a job that was really a man's; but I have never been short of this commodity. She was back in less than a minute. Anderson cautiously unlocked the door and let her in.

"You must have had a nightmare," she said. "I can't see anything out of the ordinary."

"It's hard to explain what we did see," Anderson said. "I was looking straight into the projection frame and quite suddenly every one of those wires seemed to mark off an impossible angle, stretching right back in a kind of tunnel . . ."

"That's right," Schultz interrupted. "It went way back; but it seemed to be reaching out to encompass us as well. There were some strange colours there, too. Some of them I'll swear I'd never seen before, and I can't remember now. That wasn't all, though. Advancing along every angle was a dimensional puzzle that had the vague outline of a man. It—they, if you liked, although they seemed to be a unity somehow—was Bragden. Another half second and I felt I'd be right in there with him. That's why I got out—fast."

Anderson nodded. "That's about the size of it. The question is what do we do now?"

The blonde took a coat from a steel locker, and slung it on. "I quit," she said. "I've got a rooted objection to spending the rest of my life in puzzle corner, and I've no yen to share a hypotenuse with some crumby square from the other two unrelated sides."

"Well spoken," I said, appreciatively. "You won't forget the Great National Bank, will you? I'm still working on it."

"Don't flip your top, Buster," she told me; "but I might just settle for the bare half-million." Then she breezed out, slamming the door after her.

I eyed the door, speculatively. "Yes," I murmured, "well . . ." I was beginning to be sorry I had taken that retainer. I glanced at the other two.

"The fellow that can straighten this out is in line for a substantial reward from the Foundation," Anderson said, loudly.

"A permanent position, too, I suppose, sir," put in Schultz.

"Naturally," agreed Anderson. They were both looking at me. "A permanent, well paid position," he added, carefully.

There are times when I wish I wasn't so greedy. Safety lay through one door; but I strode to the other door, and opened it. "You just bought yourself a sucker," I said, bitterly. "Remind me to have my brains removed sometime. I'm getting into bad habits."

"Like courage and that?" asked Schultz, slyly.

I ignored him.

Everything seemed normal. That is to say, there was nothing in the room that might be termed unnerving. I went over to the projector, and switched off. "You can put the main switch on now," I told Schultz. "I'll want some light here."

He went out, and I snicked some of the light switches to the on position. After a while the lights blazed on, and Schultz returned.

"Okay," he said. "What's the drill? Have you any ideas?"

That's Schultz. Always asking other people for ideas, and using them as footholds to further his ambitions, the swine! As it happened the ghost of an idea had begun to tease my intellect.

"Ever heard of the Möbius strip?" I asked him.

"Of course. It's a way of traversing both sides of a plane figure without crossing the edge."

"Something like that," I said.

"The simplest form," said Anderson, "is a strip of paper given one twist and then made into a continuous band, and then . . ."

"All right," I said, impatiently; "so we all know what a Möbius strip is. Well, maybe you'll understand when I say that I believe Bragden went on a Möbius trip?"

They didn't, of course. I wasn't sure that I knew myself. Without knowing why I felt that Bragden had built better than he knew. Whatever it was it had illogical extensions that took it into another level of consciousness, and it had taken Bragden with it. It was really a corner of his mind translated into electronic units and synapses. A corner of his mind that led off into the realms of the subconscious, and the other side of the waking world. The other side of the strip that lies below the threshold of sleep. An error, based on a misconception—because he hadn't known where his inventive devil was leading—had provided the Möbius twist in the strip. Thither had gone poor Bragden—the incompetent, doodling, dithering damned idiot!

"What about that second K-unit you stuck in?" asked Schultz, suddenly. "What was that supposed to do? You never explained."

I bent it on to provide balance, or something. Instead it had put another twist in the strip, and a glimpse of what was going on underneath.

"Your mathematical brain wouldn't appreciate the off-beat reasoning behind it," I told him. "Better not try it. The hiatuses could get you if you didn't watch out. What's the betting I can spring him?"

"If you have to turn it on to do it I'm going," Anderson said.

We watched him walk rapidly to the door, and disappear, "Let's get started," I said to Schultz, who was looking worried. "Cowardice is a luxury we can't afford just now."

Still working close to my hunch, I adjusted the bias on the K-block, and switched on. We stood near the open door just in case; but I don't think either of us was prepared for what did happen.

A man suddenly appeared about three feet from the projector. He came towards us, and then another man, his twin, appeared in the same spot . . . and then another!

"Bragden!" exclaimed Schultz. "In triplicate!"

I belted for the main office where the emergency switch was located, and yanked it down. Schultz was right behind me. Again we locked the door; but curiosity overcame my fear, and I stood on a chair in order to look through the glass panel over the door. Outside six identical Bragdens looked up at me. I stepped down. We were besieged by simulacrum.

"Marvellous," I said. "Do you think you could hold them off while I go for the police?"

"Why bring them into it?" asked Schultz, peevishly. "They'll only end up by arresting us."

He had something there. We were stuck with the problem. Not for the first time I felt as though I had been caught up in the charge of the Light Brigade. They'd have had to tie me to the horse at that.

"God blast the crows!" I said. "Six similiar crumbs, and one of them could be the real Bragden. The question is which?"

The crowd of Bragdens in the corridor were becoming restive. There was a confused babble of voices, and a hammering on the door. I looked at Schultz, and he rubbed his hands together miserably and looked back at me. Then I clicked my teeth as inspiration struck me. I had it.

"There's just a chance we can sort them out," I said.

"Do you really think so?" asked Schultz, hopefully. "If you can pull it off I'll erect a statue to you with my own fair hands."

"Pay particular attention to the ears," I said. "They're my best feature."

"I'll give you four," he promised.

"That's damned generous of you," I said, shaking him vigorously by the hand. "You're a grand fellow; but someone should shackle you to a ghost. Anyway, this is the way I see it. Bragden's mind is open-tuned. Open over a broad period of time, that is. These doppelgangers, or whatever you like to call them, are the rough tuning of a slow mind. The problem is to speed it up, and make it more selective, fine-tune it to time."

"I get it, more or less," frowned Schultz; "but how do we tackle the situation? Speed his mind up, I suppose. Of course! That's it. Feed him some pep pills. The question is, though, which *is* Bragden? The real Bragden, that is."

"They all are," I told him; "but at different time settings. Get the dope, and I'll see if I can talk them into taking it."

Schultz went out, and was back again ten minutes later. He found me barricading the door with some of office furniture. "They were trying to break the door down," I explained. "Did you get the sharpeners?"

He showed me some little yellow tablets in a plastic box. "I don't know what they are," he said. "Drugs are not my field; but the chemist assured me that they would turn a two-toed sloth into a squirrel."

"That probably means something," I said. "Let's see what it does to Bragden."

I had to break a glass panel over the door to communicate with the Bragdens. I talked to them amidst a confused babble of voices, and after a while they listened to me. Then I threw a tablet down, and one of them caught it. Instantly they all had one. I watched them chew the things, and swallow as one man. After this we gazed at each other for a few minutes, waiting. I ignored Schultz, who was impatiently demanding information as to what was happening.

Nothing did happen until about five minutes had passed, and then I noticed that one of the Bragdens was becoming blurred. It was like someone seen in a bad light. Then it

happened to another, to three others, and I could see the corridor wall through two of them by this time. One by one they vanished altogether ; one by one except for one. I opened the door and let him in. By now his reactions had quickened to normal.

“ Welcome home,” I greeted him. “ What’s it like in the umpth dimension ?”

“ Like hell with the fires out,” he said, grimly. “ Where’s Anderson ?”

“ I’ll get him on the video,” said Schultz, smiling. “ He’ll be delighted to learn that we pulled you out of that mess.” He slapped me on the back. “ You have Belov to thank for it.”

Bragden grabbed my hand, and shook it enthusiastically. “ I’m very grateful,” he told me. “ I owe you a great deal ; but the best way I can repay you is by proffering a piece of advice.” He swung an arm towards the door. “ Get the hell out of here, and keep going ! I’m turning the whole damn boiling in for what tantamounts to fraud, including myself. We’ve been living on the fat for years, and the first time we attempt anything creative it blows up in our faces. I see it as a kind of judgment. I promised myself that I’d make a clean breast of it if ever I got out of that geometrical nightmare.” He closed his eyes, and clenched his fists in a paroxysm of horror. “ I promised,” he said.

Schultz essayed a sickly smile. “ You don’t have to keep your promise,” he suggested, hopefully. “ After all it was only to yourself.”

Bragden turned to me. “ He doesn’t understand, does he?”

I did. Bragden meant it. That was enough for me. He had a fanatical edge to his voice. I know the type.

“ I had no idea,” I said, frowning at Schultz. “ I thought everything was on the level.” I ranged myself alongside Bragden. “ You’ll keep that in mind, won’t you ?”

“ You’re a liar !” Schultz rasped. “ You knew all about it.. You were going to take that job knowing full well . . .”

“ A man of my integrity ?” I said. I was flabbergasted, I can tell you. As though old Belov would lend himself to anything even remotely dishonest, especially now that the skids were under it. “ Have you noticed his close-set, mean, shifty little eyes ?” I asked Bragden. “ He’s a villainous prevaricator. Ignore him.”

I don't think I've seen Schultz move so fast ; but I was faster. I managed to get through and close the door just as the typewriter crashed into it.

I had to pass the "Kit Kat" restaurant, and on a sudden impulse I went in. I sat down at a table. Penny came up and glared at me.

"Hullo, sugar !" I smiled. "What's your aim like today ? I'm feeling a bit peckish."

Without a word she went into the kitchen and came out with a sandwich on a plate. She put it in front of me.

"I made that myself," she informed me, evenly, "and I dare you to eat it. Without opening it," she added, and I drew my hand back.

I forced a grin. "All right," I shrugged, and picked up the sandwich. "Geronimo !" I breathed.

My first impression was that it tasted a bit like jugged hare. She watched me until I had consumed the last crumb, and then a strange smile spread over her face. I had the feeling that I had undergone something equivalent to an ordeal by fire.

"Did you like it ?" she asked, sweetly.

I nodded, a bit doubtfully. "What was it ?" I asked.

"Decomposed bat," she said, still with that sweet smile.

I had a fleeting feeling of sickness ; but in for a Penny in for a pounding, if you will forgive the pun. "The hell !" I said, recklessly. "Fetch me another."

She laughed, delightedly. If there's one thing a woman likes its *panache*. "You pass," she pronounced. "It wasn't a bit decomposed really. I'll get you something else. Something different."

How different, I wondered ? I smiled, and waved my hand airily ; but my nerve had broken. It occurred to me that there must be less wearing pastimes than playing Romeo to a girl like this. Playing last across the fast freight lane, for example, or jumping off one of the Levels. One thing I was certain of : I wasn't going to be there when she got back.

Outside I met an old friend.

"Belov !" he exclaimed. "What gives ? You look a bit white around the gills."

"I've been dining with Lucrezia Borgia," I told him. "Do you happen to have a stomach pump on you ?"