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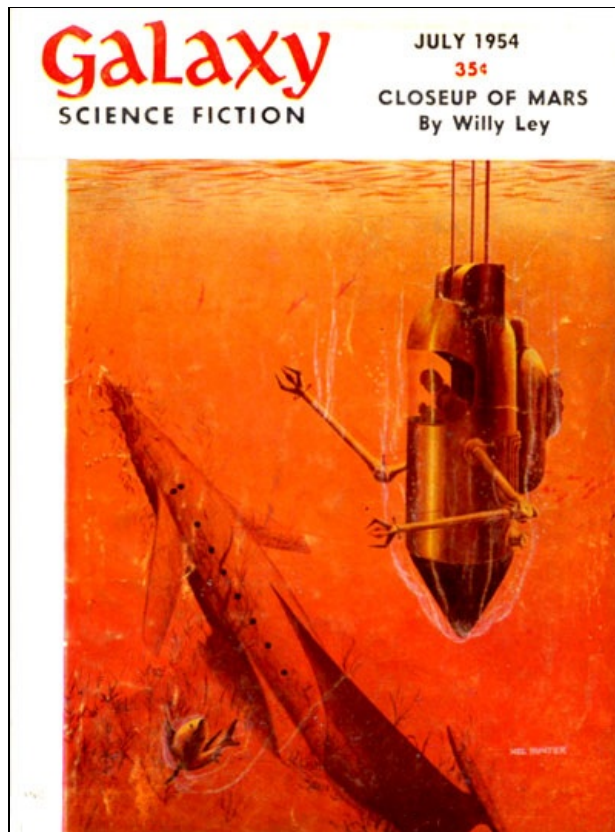
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FELONY

By JAMES CAUSEY

Illustrated by VIDMER

Vogel started with crossword puzzles ... and worked his way up to Man's greatest enigma!

When he was nine, Vogel almost killed another boy who inadvertently scattered his half-completed jigsaw puzzle.

At sixteen, he discovered the mysteries of the Danish Gambit, and cried.

At twenty-two, he crouched in a foxhole on Okinawa, oblivious to the death bursting about him, squinting in a painful ecstasy at the tattered fragment of newspaper on his knee. His sergeant screamed in agony, then died at his elbow. Vogel's face lit up. "Slay," he said happily, scribbling. As crossword puzzles go, it had been a toughie.

At thirty, he was Production Manager of Sachs Fixtures. His men hated him. The General Manager loved him. Tall, gaunt and ruthless, he could glance at any detail print and instantly pinpoint the pattern of final assembly, total man-hour budget and fabrication lead time.

Once, he made a mistake.

On a forty-thousand-dollar job lot he estimated too high on production scrap. When the final assemblies were completed, they had two feet of bulb extension left over. It disturbed him. He spent that evening in his den brooding over chessmen. His wife let him alone.

Next day, he hired Amenth.

Personnel called that morning and apologized. "No experience, but amazing shop aptitude. He's coming down to you for an interview."

"I want," Vogel said into the phone, "three bench men. By noon. *With* shop experience."

Personnel was sorry. Vogel snarled and hung up.

"Hello, please, sir," said a voice.

Vogel stared, icily.

Meekness cowered in front of his desk. Meekness in the form of a small birdlike person with beseeching amber eyes.

"I am Amenth," he said, cringing.

Vogel eyed the olive skin, the cheekbones, the blue-black hair. "A wetback," he said. "Three men short and they send me wetbacks. You know sheet metal, buster?"

"I am not of the understanding," Amenth offered. "Experience, no." He beamed. "Aptitude, yes."

Fighting apoplexy, Vogel took him out into the shop. Amenth cringed at the howl of air tools and punch presses. Vogel contemptuously took him by the arm and led him to a workbench where a wizened persimmon of a man performed deft lightnings with rivets and air wrench.

"Benny, this is Amenth. He's new." Vogel pronounced it like a curse. "Get him some goggles from the crib, a rivet gun."

Vogel returned to his office scowling. The phone rang almost instantly.

"Boss," said Benny, "he's from nothing—all thumbs with an air wrench and he don't know alclad from stainless."

"Be right out," Vogel said, hanging up.

Before he had a chance to fire Amenth, the Fabrication Super came in with a production problem. Vogel solved it, but it was almost an hour before he returned to Benny's bench—and stared.

Amenth was a blur of motion. His Keller chattered like a live thing.

A furious sweating Benny snapped at Vogel, "You playing practical jokes? Look, this guy's gone crazy, he's fifty per cent under standard! Tell him to slow down before I file a grievance."

Amenth beamed. "I am of the aptitude," he said.

A queer deep tingle went through Vogel. The crystal delight of challenge he felt when confronted by an apparently impregnable fianchetto.

That was the first day.

A week later, Vogel was compiling a progress report from completed shop travelers. Abruptly he scowled at one traveler, then said, "Charlie!"

"Yes, sir," one of the planners said.

"Why didn't these galley panels go out for drop hammer?"

Charlie peered at the form and whistled. "Somebody must have changed the planning sheet."

"Get me the story!"

Charlie went hurriedly out into the shop.

Some time later he returned with a pale dazed look. "It's this guy in assembly," he said. "Name is Amenth. He didn't even read the traveler. Just looked at the attached detail print and decided to miter the edges, then reverse the flange with a weld." He threw the completed part on Vogel's desk. "Go ahead, check those tolerances," he said whitely. "Right on the money."

Vogel walked over to a calculator and figured. There was a dreamy expression in his eyes. He said softly, "All fabrication in our own shop. A net saving of 93 cents per unit, or eight hundred dollars total. I believe you planned this item, Charlie."

Vogel fired him.

That same afternoon Amenth came into the office on Vogel's order. "Sir?"

"Don't you know how to read a traveler?" Vogel asked sternly.

"It was a lucky accident." Amenth looked terrified. "I just read the print—"

"And did what seemed logical." Statement, then a very quiet question. "What happened to your accent?"

The little man looked blank.

Vogel took a slow deep breath. "I've got a material planning job open," he said tightly. "Thirty-five to start. Interested?"

For a moment he thought Amenth would lick his hand.

The little man took to planning sheets like a duck to water. He pored feverishly over blueprints, turning out travelers in a steady flood.

Vogel watched him. He went over to Personnel, requested Amenth's employment application, read it and scowled. It was a masterpiece of anonymity. Birthplace: New York. Former Occupation: Laborer. Hobbies: None. He memorized Amenth's address and returned the application.

Vogel always ate lunch in the office with his expeditors. That noon two of them got into an argument about the planets.

"I say there is life on Mars," Pete Stone insisted stubbornly. "When the polar ice cap melts, the water runs along the canals and traces of green from growing vegetation can be spotted."

"Which proves nothing," Harvey Lamb yawned. Lamb was chief expeditor. "Man couldn't live there, anyway. There's not enough oxygen."

"You would be amazed," Amenth said quietly, "at the adaptability of Man."

Vogel set down his thermos and leaned forward. "You mean Martians, for instance, could live here, assuming they existed and had spaceships?"

Amenth's smile was infinitely bitter. "Until they'd go mad."

The talk turned to baseball. Vogel lit his pipe and gave Amenth a surreptitious glance. The little man slumped in the corner, bleak and withdrawn.

This was delicious.

Vogel left the shop and drove across town to Amenth's address. It turned out to be an ancient rooming house on the West Side. Mrs. Reardon, the landlady, was an apathetic woman who brightened when he asked her about Amenth.

"He moved in just three weeks ago." Her face softened in recollection. "He was like a lost dog coming in out of the rain. Couldn't hardly speak English and he wanted me to trust him for the

rent. I must have been crazy." Her nostrils flared. "Not that he hasn't paid up. Are you a cop?"

Vogel nodded as he took out his wallet. In it was his honorary sheriff's badge, but he doubted if the woman would know the difference. She didn't. She led the way upstairs to Amenth's room, worrying, and Vogel assured her they were only looking for a hit-and-run witness, that it was strictly routine.

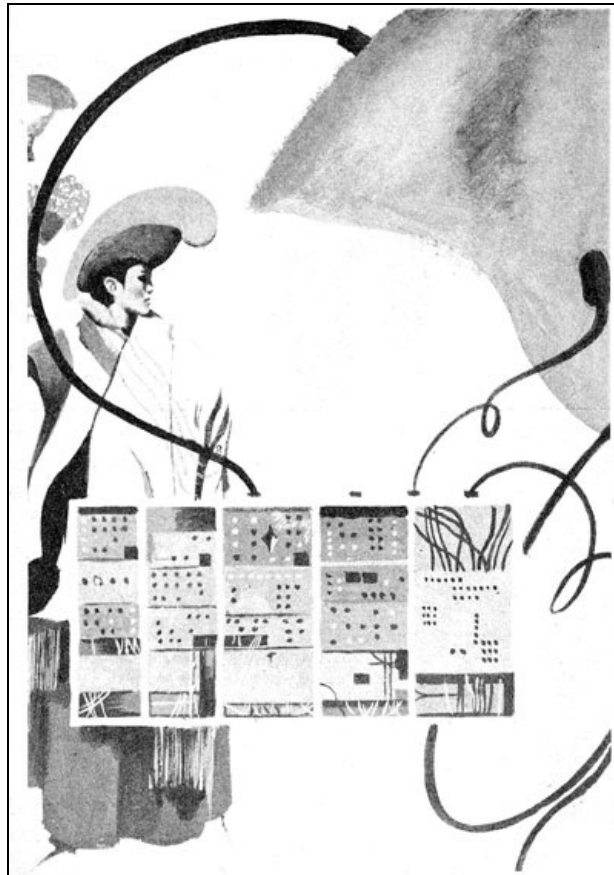
Amenth's room was incredibly aseptic, barren of pictures, ash trays, dirty laundry, any of the normal masculine debris. Vogel got the stark impression of a convict's cell. In the bleak dresser were two pair of socks, underwear, one tie. In the closet hung one white shirt ... period. Everything wore an indefinable patina of newness. Two books graced the top of the dresser. Vogel recognized one of them, a text on fabrication and design which Amenth had borrowed from his office. The other was a child's primer of English.

"He stays in his room almost every night—reads mostly, and he speaks English much better now," said Mrs. Reardon. "A good tenant—I can't complain—and he's quiet and clean." She described Amenth and Vogel shook his head.

"Our man is about sixty, with a beard," he said. "Funny coincidence. It's a strange name."

Mrs. Reardon agreed.

Vogel drove back to the shop, whistling.



He did not go to his chess club that night, but went to the library instead. He read about Flying Saucers, about space travel, about the possibility of life on other planets. Sometimes he chuckled. Once he frowned deeply and bit his lip.

That night in bed, listening to his wife's shallow breathing, he said, "Alice."

"Yes?"

"Supposing you were lost on a desert island. What would you do?"

"I'd build a raft," she said sleepily.

Vogel smiled into the darkness.

Next day he made a systematic tour of the stockroom, scanning the racks of completed sub-assemblies, the gleaming fixture components, the rows of panels, brackets, extrusions, all waiting like soldiers to march from the stockroom into final assembly.

Vogel suddenly grunted.

There, half hidden behind a row of stainless-steel basin assemblies, was a nine-inch bowl. He examined it. The bowl was heavy and shiny. There was no part number stamp, and the metal was not alclad, not stainless, not cad nor zinc. Five small copper discs had been welded to the lower flange.

Vogel carefully scraped off a sample with a file. Then he replaced the part in the stock rack and

went into his office where he placed the sample in an envelope.

That afternoon he ranged the shop like a hound.

In the shipping crib, he found a half-completed detail that struck a chord of strangeness. Two twisted copper vanes with a crumpled shop traveler signed by Amenth. The next operation specified furnace braze. Vogel squinted at the attached detail print. It was a current job number.

He spent the next two hours in the ozalid room, leafing through the print files. The job number called for a deep-freeze showcase, and there were exactly two hundred and seven detail drawings involved.

Not one of them matched the print in shipping.

After an almost silent dinner at home, he sat smoking his pipe, waiting for the phone to ring. It rang at eight.

"It's platinum," Carstairs said. Tim Carstairs was a night-shift chemist. "Anything wrong, Mr. Vogel?"

"No." Vogel paused. "Thanks, Tim." He hung up, glanced at his fingers. They were shaking.

"You," Alice said, "look ready to call mate in three."

"I'm going over to the shop," he said, kissing her. "Don't wait up."

He was not surprised to see the light on in the parts control section. Amenth was writing planning sheets.

"I don't believe we authorized overtime," Vogel told him mildly, hanging up his coat.

"Just loose ends." Amenth's smile was nervous. "Tying up these burden charts. I'm on my own time."

"Thought I'd set up next month's budget." Vogel sat at his desk. "By the way, what did you do before you came here?"

"Odd jobs." Amenth's lips twitched.

"Your family live on the coast?"

Sweat glistened on the little man's forehead. "Ah—no. My folks passed on years ago."

Cat and mouse.

"You've done good work lately." Vogel yawned, studying the progress chart on the wall. Behind him he heard a soft exhalation of relief, the furtive rustle of papers as Amenth cleaned off his desk.

When Amenth finally left, Vogel went over to his desk and methodically ransacked the work in process file. It took him two hours to find what he was looking for.

One: A schematic detail on graph paper which resembled no type of circuit Vogel had ever seen.

Two: Fourteen completed shop travelers on which were typed clearly, *Call Amenth upon completion*. That was not unusual; most expeditors wanted to be notified when a hot part hit Inspection. The unusual part was that no inspection stamp had been placed opposite the final operation of *Inspect, Identify, Return to Stock*. Ergo, Amenth had inspected and stocked the parts himself.

Three: A progress chart with dates, indicating four detail parts still remaining in fabrication. Final assembly date—tomorrow!

The following afternoon, Vogel sat alone in the conference room. The door opened and Amenth came in. "You sent for me, sir?"

"Sit down, Amenth. Let's talk a while."

Amenth sat down uneasily.

"We're considering you for promotion," Vogel said, silencing the little man's protests with a deprecating wave. "But we've got to know if you're ready. Let's talk about your job."

Amenth relaxed.

They talked shop for a few moments, then Vogel opened a folder, took out his watch. "Very good," he said. "Now let's check your initiative potential." As Amenth stiffened, Vogel reassured him, "Relax. It's a routine association test."

For the next ten minutes he timed Amenth's responses with a stop watch. Most of the words were familiar shop words and most of the responses were standard.

"Job."

"Escape," Amenth said instantly.

"*Blueprint.*"

"Create."

"*Noise.*"

"Hate."

"*Want.*"

"Home!"

It was all so childish, so obvious, and Amenth's eyes were frightened amber pools when Vogel dismissed him. No matter. Let him suspect. Vogel studied the reaction results with grim amusement.

Outside, the shop roared.

And Amenth's travelers sped the rounds: Issue material; Shear to size; Form on brake; Weld per print; Miter, drill, inspect, stock. One by one, the strange details were being formed, finished, to lie inert in the stockroom, to await final assembly.

Assembly.

Of *what?*

Tonight was project completion.

Midnight.

Vogel stood in darkness, leaning against the wall. He was tired. He had maintained this vigil for three hours. His right leg was numb and he started to shift position, then froze as he heard footsteps. Three aisles over, a light exploded, blindingly. He held his breath.

From outside in fabrication came the muffled clang of drill press and power brake, the sounds of the night shift. He waited. Three aisles over, something moved. Someone fumbled in the stock bins, collecting shaped pieces of metal, grunting with the effort of piling them on the salvage bench, now panting with impatience while assembling the parts. There was a hammering, a fitting together, a flash of light, a humming of power and finally a sob of relief.

Vogel's hand slipped into his coat pocket and grasped the gun. He moved silently.

Amenth stood at the salvage bench, adjusting studs and connecting terminals. Vogel stared at the final assembly.

It was a helmet. A large silvery helmet, connected to a nightmarish maze of wiring, mounted on a rectangular plastic base. It hummed, although there was no visible source of power. Amenth put on the helmet with a feverish haste. Vogel chuckled. Amenth stood motionless. Then as his hand darted toward a stand, Vogel said sharply, "Don't!"

Amenth stared at the gun.

"Take it off!" Vogel's voice was iron.

Amenth slowly took off the helmet. His eyes were golden with tears. "Please," he said.

"Mars or Venus?" Vogel said. "Which?"

"N-neither. You could not grasp the concept. Let me go. Please!"

"Where?" Vogel prodded. "Another dimension?"

"You would call it that," the alien whispered. Hope brightened his face. "You want something? Wealth? Power?"

It was the way he said the words, like a white trader offering his aborigine captors glass beads to set him free.

Vogel nodded toward the circuit. "That hookup—you tap the gravitational field direct? Cosmic rays?"

"Your planet's magnet force lines. Look, I'll leave you the schematic diagram. It's simple, really. You can use it to transmute—" He babbled on with a heartbreaking eagerness, and Vogel listened.

"In my own world," said Amenth brokenly, "I am a moron. A criminal moron. Once, out of a childish malice, I destroyed beauty. One of the singing crystals." He shuddered. "I was punished. They sent me here—to the snake pit. Sentence for felony. This—" he indicated the helmet—"would have fused three seconds after I used it. So, incidentally, would this entire shop. I had no time to construct a feedback dispersion."

"Tell me about your world," Vogel said.

Amenth told him.

Vogel's breath hissed softly between his teeth. All his life an unformed vision had tormented him, driven him toward perfection. Abruptly the vision was reality. He smiled, moved forward. "You shouldn't have told me."

Amenth saw the intent in his eyes and started to beg. Vogel clipped him behind the ear.

He put the helmet on, gingerly. The electrodes tingled against his temple and his grin was wry as he thought of Alice. Then he depressed the stud.

Vogel sobbed.

Color blinded him, rainbows blared in sweet, sparkling thunder. He whimpered, covering his eyes. The music drowned him in a fugue of weeping delight. Slowly he raised his head.

He stood ankle-deep in gold crystals that stretched out forever in a splendid sea of flame. The crystals sang softly, aching, to a silver sun in an emerald sky. A grove of blue needle trees tinkled in ecstasy on his left. And beyond those trees....

The city sang.

White spires foamed skyward in impossible cataracts of glory. A glissando of joy burned his eardrums, and he could not face that living splendor. It was the city beyond dreams, beyond legend, the city where all dreams end. He strode toward it, raptly.

The crystals screamed. The blue needle forest lashed wildly, and terror shivered through the air in shrieking dissonance.

From the blue forest, people ran. Beautiful people, with great golden eyes and scarlet tunics. They could have been Amenth's brothers and sisters. They stared, horror and revulsion twisting their faces. They started toward him.

Vogel understood.

If destroying beauty on this world was a crime, then killing ugliness must be a duty.

On this world, he was ugly—

—JAMES CAUSEY

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