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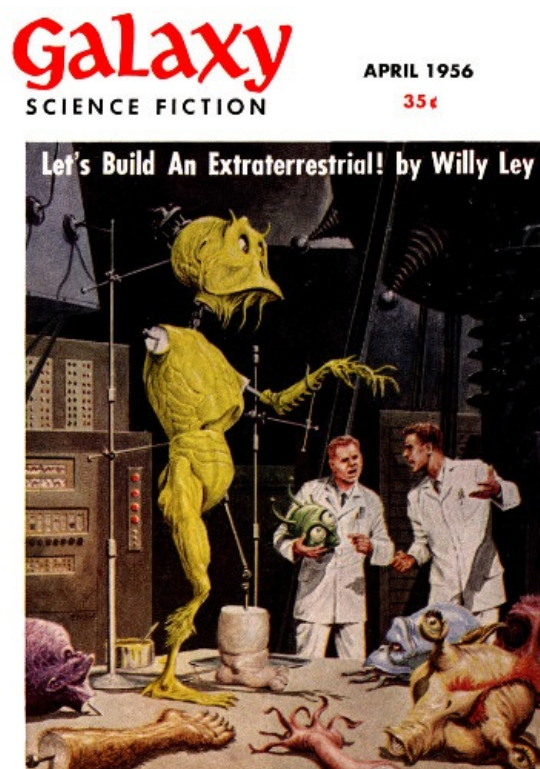
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK POINT OF DEPARTURE ***



Point of Departure

By VAUGHAN SHELTON

Illustrated by WEISS

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By VAUGHAN SHELTON

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As if Donner's troubles weren't bad enough—they were a repetition of something that had created chaos thousands of years ago!

"Halleck, for Pete's sake, sit down! You act as if you were ready to attack Donner with your bare hands." The president of the Research Foundation removed an expensive cigar from its plastic cocoon and lit it from young Taplin's eagerly offered lighter.

Halleck sat down. "Sorry, G. W. This business has me on edge. I feel responsible for Donner's activities—and for the missing \$300,000, too. The whole thing reeks of larceny."

"You *are* responsible, Hal." The president's tone was crisp but not accusing. "That's what a general manager gets paid for. Isn't it time Donner showed up?"

"He's to be here at ten, Mr. Caples. The girl will buzz us as soon as he comes in." Orville Taplin was a very good secretary, but his eagerness to prove it sometimes irked his superiors. "Shall I order some coffee sent up, Mr. Caples?"

"Not just now. Look, Hal, have you checked on this Simon Kane that Donner mentions in his letter? He doesn't sound quite real. Do we know if there is such a person?"

Taplin interrupted the general manager to answer the question. "Yes, sir. There really is a Simon Kane. I talked to Dr. Reed by transatlantic telephone last night. He said Kane was public relations man on his first expedition to Egypt in 1958."

"Why the blazes didn't you let *me* talk to him?" Halleck was on his feet again, a sharp-faced, balding man with a temper that suggested ulcers. "G. W., I—"

"Forget it, Hal! What else, young man?"

"Well, Dr. Reed said he fired him at the request of the Egyptian government and sent him back to the States. He said it was a long story and he didn't want to get into it on the phone."

Leaning across the wide mahogany desk and tapping the blotter for emphasis, Halleck said, "Look, G. W., Kane doesn't matter. He's just a name. The Utah Flats plant is short \$300,000. Let Donner explain it in court. If Kane or anyone else was involved, let Donner prove it."

The buzzer wheezed and Orville Taplin's finger shot to the key. "Yes?"

"Mr. Donner is here."

G. W. Caples nodded to the question in the secretary's face. "Send him in."

The man in the doorway was tall, sandy and rather stooped for early middle age. His straight lined features looked competent, but the mouth was compressed to a narrow hyphen, as if he had lived through this ordeal many times in anticipation and always come out of it badly. His gray business suit was wrinkled with travel.

"Good morning, Mr. Caples. Gentlemen."

Although he closed the door gently, the click of it sounded loud in the silence. "I hope I'm not late."

"Right on the dot, Ray. Glad to see you. Pick a comfortable chair." The president smoothed the crumpled letter in front of him on the desk and waved the silent Halleck to a seat. "You can order

that coffee now, young man."

When Taplin had called for the coffee and started the recording machine, G. W. Caples addressed the newcomer again with heavy, executive affability. It was authentic enough to ease the watch-spring tension in the room.

"Before we start, Ray, keep it in mind that this isn't a trial or anything like that. I, for one, have an open mind. If your record hadn't been beyond reproach, you wouldn't be a research plant manager in the first place."

"Thank you."

"But your letter here mentions an unauthorized experiment that cost \$300,000, a missing man—two missing men, in fact—your fear of ugly publicity and—well, various other details that leave me thoroughly confused. Now, you're going to give us all the facts—not as a culprit, but as a trusted official."

"I appreciate that, sir. Shall I begin at the beginning?"

"Yes. Forget the letter. Begin where you like."

"Well, first, you know Dr. Wilson Reed, the archeologist. Top man in the field. He made the Yucatan discoveries and located the Poseidon Tablets in the vaults under the Sphinx—the newspapers called him the 'Columbus of the Past.' But I don't need to tell you that. This all began with a letter I had from Dr. Reed shortly after he left for his second expedition to Egypt."

Caples nodded. "I know his reputation, but I never met the man."

"That's one of the many things I don't understand, Mr. Caples." Raymond Donner sat on the edge of the leather lounge chair and kneaded his long, thin hands. "You see, the letter asked me to cooperate with Simon Kane in every way and there was an interoffice memo from you enclosed, instructing me to do so, written in your own handwriting."

Caples leaned across the desk, startled. "A memo from *me*! Now see here, Ray—Where is the memo? Where's the letter?"

"They're gone, Mr. Caples. They were stolen."

The buzzer sounded and a cheerful redhead brought in a tray with four cups, cream and sugar bowls and a large aluminum coffee urn. It remained untouched on the desk when she had gone.

"I see. They were stolen." The president's casual manner was gone and the tension returned unchecked. "Go on."

"I'm sorry, sir. But the letter and memo were the keys to the whole business. And I want to remind you at the beginning that I'm not a scientist or an aviation engineer, but an administrative officer—"

"Maybe we should say you *were*."

"Shut up, Halleck! Let him go on."

The president glanced at the recorder spinning silently and drew short, angry puffs on his cigar.

"And I want to remind you, too, gentlemen, that I'm here of my own volition. My fears are for the Foundation's reputation, not for myself alone. After all, there's no motive for murder and—"

"Murder!" The two executives looked frozen. Taplin, starting to reach for the coffee, changed his mind.

"—and, to put it bluntly, no dead body. But let me take it from the beginning."

"As I said, the letter and memo came in May, just after Dr. Reed left for Egypt again. A week after that, Simon Kane phoned from Salt Lake City to make an appointment for the following afternoon.

"He turned out to be a dark-featured, very distinguished type in his late forties. His eyes were an intense black, heavily browed and, though he wasn't big, his voice was deep and arrestingly modulated. Listening to him, it was easy to lose track of what he was saying. His mouth was wide and—well, sympathetic.

"We talked for about an hour that first day, mostly about Dr. Reed's marvelous discovery in Egypt. Kane said the Poseidon Tablets described a magnificent civilization, scientifically advanced, that had flourished on an equatorial continent until it was destroyed by the Biblical Flood—around 10,700 B.C.

"He spoke of Dr. Reed as an intimate friend and said he had been greatly impressed with you, Mr. Caples."

The president scowled. "I've never heard of the man. But it seems pretty strange that he should

have turned up when Halleck was in Persia and I was in Europe on atomic-inspection duty and Reed was off to Egypt."

"Looking back at it, I agree with you," said Donner, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. "But it didn't occur to me at the time."

"Well, get on with it."

"If I could give you a better idea of Kane's remarkable voice, its hypnotic quality—but I guess I can't. Maybe that's just an excuse. I wish I'd thrown him out of the office the first day.

"When we got around to the reason for his call, he asked if there was any chance of our being overheard. I assured him there wasn't and he told me his weird story.

"It seemed Dr. Reed had found another series of fourteen tablets along with the others, but these hadn't been publicized. A translation of the first half dozen showed that they concerned an outstanding—perhaps the ultimate—scientific achievement of the Poseidon civilization: a small solar energy converter, able to deliver such fantastic power that it made our nuclear sources look as primitive as the windmill.

"When I said the invention wouldn't be very welcome in a country where the entire economy was geared to atomic power, Kane agreed and said that explained the secrecy. He said you, Mr. Caples, and Dr. Reed felt the device should be tested under wraps and then turned over to the government, since private ownership of a dirt-cheap power source—if it worked—might precipitate economic chaos."

G. W. Caples sat stiffly in the same position. "The whole idea is pure nonsense, the most transparent fraud. A child wouldn't swallow it."

"You may be right. It was my misfortune not to be a child."

"Simon Kane made it sound completely plausible. He said two good men could build the gadget in a month. He agreed to bring the specifications to my office the next morning and I showed him out, feeling very excited about the thing. I had a lot to learn about Mr. Kane.

"In the morning, I called in Ruhl and Heiniger and told them they were to work on a project involving 100% security. They agreed, of course. The hush-hush jobs are usually the most interesting. Then Kane came in with his sheets of specifications and gave them the details. Their faces were—I was going to say like children viewing their first Christmas tree.

"Since it was all Greek to me, I left the three of them to discuss the project and went off about some other business. Kane was gone when I got back and had left a note inviting me out to his house for a cocktail or two that afternoon.

"When I could get away, I drove out to his place, a great, sprawling ranchhouse he'd rented a few miles from the plant. No one else was there, but Kane was an ingratiating host and a couple of hours passed very pleasantly. I kept wondering why he wanted such a big place, way out in the hills, just for himself.

"Around five, I phoned Ruhl at the plant. He's rather a stolid type ordinarily, but he was stuttering with excitement. He said the power unit was revolutionary and might change the course of history.

"Kane laughed when I repeated that to him. 'Maybe it already did,' he said. 'A few thousand years ago.'"

"We shook hands at the door and agreed to meet the next morning and get to work.

"As I was walking along the house toward the drive where my car stood, a movement at one of the windows near the end of the building caught my eye. I paused and looked up—into the face of one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen."



"She was youngish, not over 27 or 28, pale in coloring with rich, black hair piled up behind her neck. The large, dark eyes were looking squarely into mine. I must have stopped and stared for several seconds, for, in addition to her beauty, I thought I saw a great dread written in the girl's face. Then she was gone.

"All the way home, I kept wondering why Simon Kane hadn't mentioned the woman in his house. The silly thought that she was being held captive there kept coming to me, no matter how often I dismissed it."

Caples poured a cup of coffee and made a face when he sipped it. "Donner, I don't know why you have to ornament this yarn with hypnotic-voiced villains and captive girls. Can't you just tell us if your expensive gadget worked?"

Halleck slumped glumly. Taplin fluttered over the cold coffee and ordered some more.

"The device *did* work, Mr. Caples. I set Ruhl and Heiniger up in the isolated shop at the west corner of the plant area and they had it functioning in three weeks. We brought in a skilled glass-cutter to form the big, faceted eye to receive the Sun's radiations. Naturally, he didn't know what it was for.

"By the time the eye was ready, they'd assembled the conversion elements. They rigged the thing to deliver electrical current through a series of step-down transformers. The result was appalling. Until the current was reduced to a tiny fraction of the potential, it blew out every testing gauge they plugged into it.

"Up to this time, I think all three of us—Heiniger, Ruhl and myself—had been kept hopped up by curiosity and Kane's infectious confidence. Now it was evident that something incredible had been produced. Think of it—two men could lift the converter between them, yet its potential was as great as any atomic pile we have!"

"It sounds crazy." Caples was getting restless. "Are you sure you didn't dream all this, Donner?"

"That story will sound great in court—but it doesn't account for the \$300,000." Halleck's laugh was thin, with no amusement in it.

The buzzer sounded. "Here's your hot coffee, Mr. Caples," said Taplin. When the girl had gone again, Donner continued patiently, speaking in Halleck's direction without anger.

"So far, we had spent less than three thousand dollars, including salaries, materials, overhead, everything. The experiment seemed to be finished. I wrote up my report and showed it to Kane before filing it in the project folder with Reed's letter and the memo and everything else concerned. I supposed Kane would be on his way east and I'd be expected to verify his statement of the results. But he didn't come in to say good-by.

"One morning, I stopped in at the isolated shop and found Heiniger still working with the power unit. Naturally, I asked what he was doing.

"Getting it ready to mount in the projectile, Mr. Donner,' he said.

"I said, '*What* projectile?'

"Then he explained how Kane (and I) had leased a surplus one-man rocket from the White Sands Project and that he and Ruhl were to rig the solar unit in it. Rather than let Heiniger know something was wrong, though I felt like blowing my top, I asked him how on Earth an electrical plant could power a rocket.

"There's nothing to it,' he said. 'It's all in Mr. Kane's translations of those tablets of his.'"

"I was beginning to wonder if this was really happening or if I *was* dreaming. Heiniger described some sort of method for setting up a magnetic field in *front* of the rocket so that it could be *pulled*, rather than pushed, at almost any speed through the atmosphere that the pilot wished—five, ten, twelve thousand miles an hour—whatever the pilot could take.

"It was hard to believe an experienced man like Heiniger would swallow that. I said, 'It's ridiculous! The skin would melt!'

"Oh, no,' said Heiniger. 'Mr. Kane has the formula for an alloy that won't melt at any speed in atmosphere. His tablets tell how it was used way back there for the same kind of flight. He's having a special sheath of it made for the rocket in Santa Fe.'"

President Caples stabbed his cigar into the ashtray. "Donner," he said, "what do you take us for? You're making it almost impossible for the Foundation to back you up, coming in here with such a fairy story."

Raymond Donner seemed to shrink in his clothes and he slumped deep in his chair. "I *know* how it sounds. I'm a fool—I admit it. But Heiniger isn't, nor Ruhl. They were convinced they were working on the modern world's first practical spaceship."

"I left the plant with my head spinning and drove out to Simon Kane's place. I was determined not to go any farther with this without authority from you, even if I had to chase you all over Europe.

"When I reached the house, Kane's car was in the driveway. He met me on the patio and pushed me inside before I could say my piece. There was a young man in the drawing room whom he introduced as Porter Hays. He was a handsome chap in his middle twenties with cropped, blond hair and an engaging candor about him. I guessed he was a flier by the recklessness about his mouth and eyes. He seemed very excited.

"They took me to a table spread with photographs and typed sheets and, for the first time, I saw pictures of the original tablets. The typed sheets were translations.

"Porter has agreed to fly the ship,' said Kane, as if I knew all about that. 'He's with the Pan-Columbian Project and has flown all the other types that have been developed so far.'

"But this is the one that will make history, Mr. Donner!' I looked at Hays closely and saw that he meant it. 'This will fly anywhere in our solar system—and probably clear out to most others—without carrying a fuel supply. And the best thing about it is the absolute guarantee of a return trip. Those geniuses down at Pan-Columbia have plenty of ideas for getting you out there, but very few for getting you back.'

"I realized the Simon Kane magic had been at work on the young man. He was sold completely and—considering the possibilities and that he was willing to risk his life on them—the objections I intended to make seemed rather puny at the time. Still, I was about to ask Kane to see me in private when the young pilot spoke up.

"He said, 'Say, Mr. Kane, where's the last tablet? There are only photos of thirteen here.'

"Why, that's right,' Kane said. 'I forgot to mention it. The first thirteen take us through the construction of the unit and the ship and the inventor's successful trial flights. Number fourteen hasn't been translated yet—it takes about a month to decipher each tablet.'

"Porter Hays had a disarming way of asking anything he wanted to know. 'And who does it? Do you, Mr. Kane?'

"No. That is, it's a special gift, takes years of study—'

"Then who *does* decipher them?'

"Well, you see—' It was the first time I'd seen Simon Kane uneasy and at a loss for words. 'My wife does it. She's Egyptian, a scholar in her own right, daughter of one of Egypt's foremost antiquarians.'

"Hays insisted upon meeting her and, although Kane tried every evasion, he finally left the room and was gone quite a while. During the wait, I talked with young Hays and confirmed my high opinion of him. I wondered how he'd react to Mrs. Kane if she turned out to be the beautiful girl I'd seen in the window a few weeks earlier.

"I soon found out, for Kane came back leading the girl by the hand. I might have said 'dragging,' but it wasn't quite that obvious. At closer view, wearing a sort of chiton-draped white dress, she was even more lovely than I'd thought. The long lashes veiled her eyes, except when she acknowledged Kane's introductions with a quick glance and a murmured, 'How do you do.' Her name was Najja.

"Hays was obviously impressed and, in his uninhibited way, said, 'Good Lord, Kane! If I had a dream like this at home, I wouldn't hide her. I'd keep her out on display to make the other guys jealous.'

"The girl gave him a grateful look and just a flicker of a smile, but said nothing.

"Simon Kane's reaction was curious. The color drained from his face and hostile was the only word for his expression. Then he seemed to get under control and became his genial self. 'My dear,' he said to his wife, 'we thought you could give a hint about the text of the fourteenth tablet. Are you far enough along?'

"Her voice was low and throaty, with a slight British accent. 'I'm sorry. I have only just started.'

"'Have you no idea what it's about?'

"'Only that it seems to be some sort of testimonial. The language symbols are a little different than the others and it's difficult to read.'

"Then she was gone and Porter Hays stood looking at the door through which she had passed, as if he had just seen a vision."

"Wait a minute, Donner," Caples cut in. "How's that tape holding out, young man?"

"Fine, Mr. Caples. At least an hour more to go."

"All right. Go ahead, Donner. Can't you leave out some of the side issues and get to the finish of this?"

"They're all related to the outcome of the matter, Mr. Caples. It wouldn't make any sense at all without them."

"Nor with them," said Halleck sourly, staring out the window.

"Kane was to drive Hays back to Salt Lake, so I only had a moment alone with him. When I told him I wanted to hold up everything until I'd checked with my superiors, he just laughed it off. He said that you, Mr. Caples, had seen all thirteen translations and your memo covered the whole works. I'm sorry to say this convinced me.

"Next day, a carload of equipment came in for testing and I didn't see Simon Kane for about a week, though I learned things weren't going so well. There was some trouble with the alloy. The rocket was shipped in, though, and turned out to be a very recent model with the latest developments in shock and pressure compensation, oxygen plant, homing-beam navigation and all that. The credit to White Sands was only \$32,000, including insurance, so I authorized it without misgivings, figuring that the persuasive Kane had swung a good deal.

"Ruhl got back from Santa Fe and said they'd licked the alloy problem, though it had been hard to avoid publicity. The metal could only be worked in a molten state, so the fabricator was casting the nose sheath and three overlapping girdles with rivet holes, also rivets and fin shields of the same stuff. It sounded heavy to me, but Ruhl said that would eliminate all possibility of vibration. This metal casting accounted for most of the \$300,000.

"During the next two weeks, I was too busy with other things to worry much about the project, but two incidents happened that had a bearing on it.

"On a visit to Salt Lake, I was dining at the Pioneer Arms one evening and spotted Porter Hays at a table across the room. He was with a young lady who looked familiar to me, even from the back. They were deep in conversation. Hays looked up and saw me just as the waiter brought my dinner. His expression was far from friendly. When the waiter moved out of the way, I looked over and saw that Hays and the girl were gone.

"A little later, a bellboy brought me a note. It read, 'I expect you'll be guided by your own ideas of honor in a case like this. But if you can conscientiously keep your goddam mouth shut, you may help to correct a great injustice. Hays.'"

Caples had joined Halleck at the window. Now he interrupted. "I suppose this note and the bill of lading on the rocket were stolen, too?"

"I tore up that note myself, Mr. Caples. The bill of lading, though—the second incident concerns it."

Young Taplin had begun to fidget.

"On July 19, Kane telephoned and said the airship was all rigged and ready to go. He had chosen a spot in the desert for the test and had scheduled it for the next morning. He'd engaged an expert communications man—a friend of Ruhl's—and the ship and all ground equipment were loaded on a trailer under canvas, ready to leave at nightfall. Ruhl, Heiniger and the radio man would ride out there together in the trailer.

"I was irked not to have been consulted on the arrangements. Kane wanted me to pick up Porter Hays and follow the trailer out, saying he'd be delayed, but would be there at dawn. I told him I had an appointment for dinner—some government brass—but would be there in time for the test.

"Kane seemed to become furious at this. He railed about the lack of cooperation and how he'd had to work out the details of the project almost single-handed, in spite of a clear directive from my superiors. It ended by my hanging up on him.

"Driving home around eleven that night, I passed the plant and noticed a light burning in the darkened office building. Before I reached the gate, it struck me that the light was from my own office. The guard at the gate had just come on duty, but his clip-board had no incoming signatures on it. So I went to take a look. I turned the knob of my office door and Kane was standing by the desk with his briefcase in one hand and his hat in the other.

"I was shocked at the change in him. His eyes were sunken and deeply rimmed with shadow. He looked ten years older than the last time I'd seen him.

"But he wasn't at all abashed. He walked around the desk and took my hand, saying, 'Raymond, I've been waiting here an hour. Felt sure you'd stop by. Wanted to apologize in private for my disgraceful performance this afternoon.'

"Kane must have seen I wasn't satisfied. 'The strain of this undertaking has been greater than you realize,' he added. 'So much is at stake, such a great responsibility to Dr. Reed, your foundation, the whole world—'

"I mumbled something about forget it and told him to come along to my place for a bracer and we'd ride out to the site together. But he said he had a couple of matters to attend to and we parted at the plant gate."

Halleck came back and sat down. Caples took his seat at the desk. "I have a feeling," he said, "that we are about to learn if this prehistoric spaceship of yours ever got off the ground."

"Shall I order some more coffee, Mr. Caples?" asked Taplin eagerly.

"No. Just shut up, you idiot! Are you too young to appreciate this breathless, *undocumented* melodrama Mr. Donner's describing for us? This last incident explains the lack of documentation, doesn't it, Donner?"

"I'm afraid it does. I discovered later that the folder with all the papers relating to the project was missing from my files, but I have other evidence to offer—a witness." He glanced at his wristwatch. "If my witness is prompt, I'll just have time to finish this."

"Please do! Does the next scene take place at the launching site?"

"Yes. I got there a little late—missed the turn off the highway and went a long way past it. When I found the place, everything was ready and they were waiting for me.

"The aircraft lay on its side, looking fat and very ungainly, I thought, because of its increased girth. Porter Hays seemed tense, but eager to get on with it. He wore no flight garb except his helmet with the earphones. Standing there in slacks and sweater, smoking a final cigarette, he didn't look theatrical enough for such an occasion. I thought of telling him I'd kept my goddam mouth shut, but didn't get a chance.

"The plan was to take the ship up a few hundred feet and jockey around to test everything. If the equipment and ship were all right, Hays would whip her up a few hundred miles and cruise at his discretion. There was to be no long flight that day. Since we were far out of the traffic lanes, we didn't expect to attract any attention.

"At last the Sun came up full, there was a final conference, and Hays climbed into the ship's rotating cabin by the door at the rear. He waved and shut the door. He could see out with his tele-view of course, but we couldn't see him.

"While the radio man checked the ship-to-ground contact, the rest of us moved back out of habit, though there would be no blast here."

"Very slowly, the ship raised itself to a vertical position. It rose gradually to about ten feet, stopped, then shot up a couple of hundred and stopped again. It was incredible!

"Give me the phone,' said Kane. He was as white as paste and his eyes were fever-bright. 'How's it doing, Hays? Looked good from here. Is she powering right?'

"The answer must have been gratifying because Simon Kane's white teeth flashed when he heard it.

"After that, the ship bobbed around in swift dashes, stopping, then darting upward till it was only a dot, reaching unbelievable speeds. All this time, Kane was talking with Hays on the phone, asking questions, suggesting new maneuvers. Though he was trembling with excitement, his voice was calm, controlled and persuasive. I realized later that he was egging Hays on to try more and more spectacular tests of the ship.

"Suddenly it shot away in a steep climb toward the west and was out of sight in a matter of seconds. Kane laid down the telephone and turned to me.

"He's satisfied the craft works perfectly,' he said. 'He's going to take it straight out for four or five hours and then come back.'

"We all stared at him, for Hays wasn't to have stayed up over an hour. I said, 'He can't do that. There's too much he doesn't know about the ship. Tell him to come back!'

"Kane didn't look at me. 'The boy knows his business. Leave him alone. He's making history.'

"But the first time—'

"I'm going down the road a few miles to get some breakfast. Take turns talking to him, why don't you?'

"He got in his car and drove off."

"Exit the villain! Donner, you've got a talent, but you're in the wrong line of work." G. W. Caples dug a chubby fore-finger under his collar and worked the tie knot loose. "This scenario is worth every single cent of \$300,000."

Raymond Donner's mouth pressed a little tighter and his tongue pushed through to moisten his gray dry lips.

"He never came back," he said hoarsely. "And neither did Hays."

Something in the man's voice stopped the president from going on with his sarcastic attack.

"Did the ship crash?" he asked more soberly.

"No. It just flew away and never came back."

The silence hung like a shroud. All three of them—even the self-conscious Taplin—stared at Donner.

"We talked to Porter Hays in turns. We begged him to come back. But he just laughed and said he was having the ride of his life. After about two hours, his voice faded out suddenly—and that was the end of it."

"How long ago was this?"

"Four days."

"Have you notified the authorities, the police or—well, anyone?"

"No. I've been putting it off. You see, Hays gave us no hint of any trouble. The others are still sitting out there in the desert waiting for him, trying to make radio contact. The ship carried a standard survival kit with seven days' rations and water. If he's had no operational trouble, Hays could stay out at least a week."

"And what about Simon Kane?" demanded Caples.

"When Kane didn't come back by noon, I went to look for him.

"On the way to his home, I stopped at the office, on a hunch, and discovered the records were missing. At last it began to penetrate that there was something rotten in Denmark.

"Dusk had fallen and there were no lights in the Kane house when I got there. No one answered the doorbell. I called and pounded and finally climbed in a window to look for signs that the Kanes had packed and left. There were none. Everything was in order.

"Then, as I was leaving, I heard a knocking sound from the end of the building and traced it to the last room on the west side, a sort of study. The knocking came from a locked closet. The key was gone, so I had to smash the door.

"Nalja Kane was sitting on the floor, staring at me without seeming to see me. She looked frightful, with her hair awry and her eyes red and glassy.

"She sort of moaned as I helped her up. 'Did it happen? Did he fly the ship?'"

"I said, 'Yes, but something's wrong. Where is your husband?'"

"The girl seemed to go all to pieces, turning her head from side to side and repeating, 'Oh, no! Oh, no!'" Then she collapsed.

"I drove her to the hotel in the nearest town and called a doctor I knew. He said she had emotional exhaustion, needed rest rather than hospital care, and gave her a strong sedative. When I got home, I stayed awake long enough to write that letter to you and then fell into bed.

"The phone woke me around ten the next morning. It was Ruhl, calling from a gas station on the highway. He said Hays wasn't back yet and promised to call again at five.

"I mulled the whole thing over all day, trying to sort out the facts, but they just wouldn't add up to anything. When Ruhl called again with the same bad news, I decided to come on east and get it off my chest. It's all beyond me. I don't know what to do."

Donner searched in his pockets and pulled out a cigarette pack. It was empty and he crumpled it absently. Halleck patted his own pockets but couldn't find any.

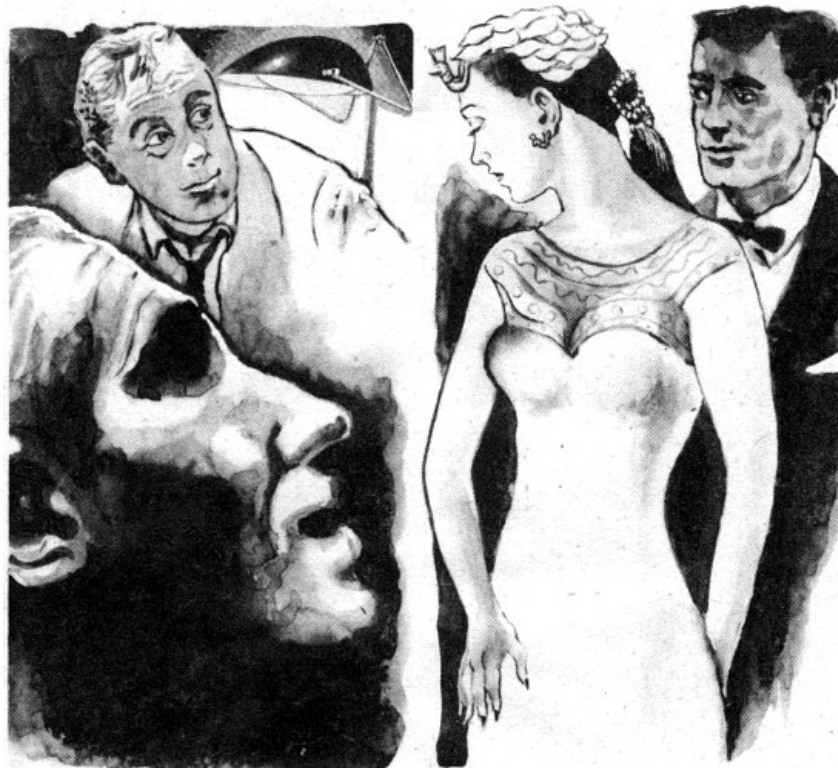
"Now take it easy, Ray," said Caples, walking around the desk with the humidor and holding it open. "This is the weirdest thing I've ever heard—yet I think I believe you. Leave it to you solid types to foul up on a grand scale! How about this witness you mentioned?"

"On the train—I wanted more time to think, so I didn't fly here—it occurred to me how flimsy this would all sound, without your memo or anything else to back it up. I couldn't even prove the tablets ever existed. In Chicago, I phoned Nalja Kane. She was much better and quite calm. When I told her the spot I was in, she agreed to take a plane in the morning and try to be here at 11:30 today."

Taplin's finger darted to the key panel, but Caples brushed him aside and opened the circuit himself. "This is Mr. Caples. Is there a lady in the outer office?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Simon Kane."

"Ask her to step in, please."



The four men rose before the door opened—Donner, slowly, with great weariness. She stood a moment, looking from one face to another, cool and regal in summer white with a small flowered hat. Faint purple circles gave her black eyes a brilliance.

Raymond Donner took her hand and led her to a chair. "Thank you for coming, Mrs. Kane. May I present Mr. Caples and Mr. Halleck, my superiors—and Mr. Taplin."

When they were seated, she spoke first in her low, passionate voice, without waiting for

questions. "I will tell you what I know of Simon Kane, gentlemen, though it may be less than you would expect from a wife. In return, I ask you to use all your influence to find him and bring him to justice. He is a monster and a murderer!"

"You have my word on it, Mrs. Kane," said Caples, "if you can supply the evidence that crimes have been committed. Taplin—the recorder. Move it closer."

As she began to speak, an occasional small break in her voice hinted at the emotional turbulence the girl was holding in tight rein.

"I married Simon Kane in Egypt in 1958. We met through my father, who represented the Egyptian government on Dr. Reed's excavation project. At first, Simon was charming and devoted. We left Egypt almost at once and entered upon a very pleasant, if secluded, life in this country. The only discordant note was my father's obvious dislike for Simon. His letters were stiff and infrequent, and finally stopped altogether.

"One day, after we had lived here about three years, my husband brought home two heavy cases and called me in when he opened them. These cases contained the fourteen tablets that Mr. Donner has probably mentioned. Simon told me Dr. Reed had turned them over to him to be deciphered.

"I knew at once that this was not true, since Dr. Reed is one of the world's foremost students of ancient writings and would have prized the tablets too highly to let my husband carry them around in his car. When Simon asked me to make the translations, I refused.

"He became nearly insane with rage and finally told me he had persuaded my father to help him steal them a few weeks before our wedding. If I did not agree to translate them, he threatened to expose my father and disgrace him before the world. So I did as Simon demanded and it killed my love for him.

"In his twisted, possessive way, I think my husband continued to love me. Once the translation was under way, he tried very hard to win my voluntary cooperation. He said the device described in the tablets would upset the economy of the entire world. The government and industry, he claimed, would pay any price he asked for suppressing it, once it was tested and proved. We would live like royalty. But I told him that, if not for my father, I would expose him without the least hesitation.

"When we moved to Utah, Simon found an isolated house for us and I was virtually a prisoner."

Nalja Kane stopped. The danger signals of emotion breaking through showed in the swift, anxious breathing. The four men studied her helplessly and then it was Taplin who got the glass of water that bridged a difficult moment. She went on.

"The first day you came to our house, Mr. Donner, I wrote a note of warning. I intended to hand it to you through the window, but Simon came into the room behind me and I couldn't."

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Kane. You were obviously in trouble. I should have—"

"Perhaps it was better. It might have cost you your life to cross Simon at that point."

"Anyway, Porter Hays stopped by one day. My husband was out and I answered the door. He was a fine man, sensitive and kind, considering his adventurous temperament. He could see I was nervous—you know the disarming way he had of asking the most personal questions.

"I was afraid to talk there and asked him to drive me to Salt Lake. On the way, I told him the whole story. He was very sympathetic and promised to help—beginning by trying to contact my father. I hoped he would refuse to fly the ship when he knew about Simon. But he had absolute confidence in it and no fear at all. His plan was to complete the test and then ask you, Mr. Donner, to impound the ship and all the records on it.

"The day before the test flight, I put in the time completing the translation of the fourteenth tablet.

"Simon had shown no interest in this, believing it to be a summary of the others. As the sense of it began to emerge, I was horrified. By midnight, I had finished it and I sat down in the drawing room with a typed copy in my hand, waiting for my husband. I waited all night and must have fallen asleep around dawn.

"The door chime wakened me. It was a messenger with a note from Porter—Mr. Hays. A newspaper friend of his in Cairo had been checking and discovered that my father had been dead six months. The circumstances of his death were curious and Mr. Hays suggested contacting the Cairo police as soon as the flight was over.

"This news was a terrible blow, but the moment I read it, I was free of Simon Kane. I went to the phone and asked the operator for the police. While I was waiting for the connection, there was a slight sound behind me. I turned and Simon was crossing the room. He was in his dressing gown.

He must have come in while I was dozing. I ran for the door, but he caught me and pushed me into a chair.

"When he had hung up the phone, he read Mr. Hays' note without saying a word. His face was terrible and I knew I was in danger. Then I saw that the typed copy of the fourteenth tablet was gone.

"'You read it—the last tablet,' I said. 'And you know you've done all this evil for nothing. The flight can't take place. If you—if you stop me from telling the police, Porter will tell them. He knows everything.'

"He took my wrist and dragged me to the studio and forced me into the closet and locked the door. I could hear him crumpling and burning papers for a long time.

"At last he came close to the door and said, 'There, my dear! Try to prove that the tablets ever existed!'

"When he was gone, I screamed and pounded on the door until I was exhausted. A frightful thing was going to happen and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

"Only once—only one time since this all began have I opposed my husband successfully. And it had no effect on the outcome. When I typed up the text of the last tablet, I made a carbon copy and put it in my handbag. I have it here. I believe it will be evidence enough to prove that Simon Kane is a murderer."

Nalja Kane reached in her flat beaded bag and found a folded sheet, which she handed to Donner. He smoothed it on his knees with hands that trembled a little.

"May he read it aloud, Mrs. Kane?" asked Caples.

"Certainly, if he wishes. But the first part is technical data on a flight by an inventor named Axtel. The two last paragraphs contain the evidence I am offering you."

Donner nodded and ran his finger down the sheet. He read:

"The foregoing record is accurate and we acknowledge Axtel's superlative contribution to science. But we must admit that his greatest contribution is in the proving of an axiom: Where ultimate force is involved, it is better to know *none* of the laws than to know *most* of them.

"On the fourth day, the aircraft returned from far space to the point of its departure. It was in excellent condition—but empty. Nothing remained of Axtel but merely his clothing and his ring."

Nalja Kane covered her face with both hands and sobbed noiselessly.

The four men all gazed at the paper as it rustled in Donner's quivering hand.

Presently the buzzer ripped the silence like the tearing of a shroud.

After the second sharp buzz, G. W. Caples tripped the switch and croaked, "Yes?"

The girl's voice, bright and businesslike, answered, "There's a long-distance call from Utah for Mr. Donner. It's a Mr. Ruhl. He says it's urgent."

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