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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK I AM A NUCLEUS \*\*\*



# **I am a Nucleus**

**By STEPHEN BARR**

**Illustrated by GAUGHAN**

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**No doubt whatever about it, I had the Indian  
sign on me ... my comfortably untidy world had  
suddenly turned into a monstrosity of order!**

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When I got home from the office, I was not so much tired as beaten down, but the effect is similar. I let myself into the apartment, which had an absentee-wife look, and took a cold shower. The present downtown temperature, according to the radio, was eighty-seven degrees, but according to my Greenwich Village thermometer, it was ninety-six. I got dressed and went into the living room, and wished ardently that my wife Molly were here to tell me why the whole place looked so woebegone.

What do they do, I asked myself, that I have left undone? I've vacuumed the carpet, I've dusted and I've straightened the cushions.... Ah! The ashtrays. I emptied them, washed them and put them back, but still the place looked wife-deserted.

It had been a bad day; I had forgotten to wind the alarm clock, so I'd had to hurry to make a story conference at one of the TV studios I write for. I didn't notice the impending rain storm and had no umbrella when I reached the sidewalk, to find myself confronted with an almost tropical downpour. I would have turned back, but a taxi came up and a woman got out, so I dashed through the rain and got in.

"Madison and Fifty-fourth," I said.

"Right," said the driver, and I heard the starter grind, and then go on grinding. After some futile efforts, he turned to me. "Sorry, Mac. You'll have to find another cab. Good hunting."

If possible, it was raining still harder. I opened my newspaper over my hat and ran for the subway: three blocks. Whizzing traffic held me up at each crossing and I was soaked when I reached the platform, just in time to miss the local. After an abnormal delay, I got one which exactly missed the express at Fourteenth Street. The same thing happened at both ends of the crosstown shuttle, but I found the rain had stopped when I got out at Fifty-first and Lexington.

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As I walked across to Madison Avenue, I passed a big excavation where they were getting ready to put up a new office building. There was the usual crowd of buffs watching the digging machines and, in particular, a man with a pneumatic drill who was breaking up some hard-packed clay. While I looked, a big lump of it fell away, and for an instant I was able to see something that looked like a chunk of dirty glass, the size of an old-fashioned hatbox. It glittered brilliantly in the sunlight, and then his chattering drill hit it.

There was a faint bang and the thing disintegrated. It knocked him on his back, but he got right up and I realized he was not hurt. At the moment of the explosion—if so feeble a thing can be called one—I felt something sting my face and, on touching it, found blood on my hand. I mopped at it with my handkerchief but, though slight, the bleeding would not stop, so I went into a drugstore and bought some pink adhesive which I put on the tiny cut. When I got to the studio, I found that I had missed the story conference.

During the day, by actual count, I heard the phrase "I'm just spitballing" eight times, and another Madison Avenue favorite, "The whole ball of wax," twelve times. However, my story had been accepted without change because nobody had noticed my absence from the conference room. There you have what is known as the Advertising World, the Advertising game or the advertising racket, depending upon which rung of the ladder you have achieved.

The subway gave a repeat performance going home, and as I got to the apartment house we live in, the cop on the afternoon beat was standing there talking to the doorman.

He said, "Hello, Mr. Graham. I guess you must have just have missed it at your office building." I looked blank and he explained, "We just heard it a little while ago: all six elevators in your building jammed at the same time. Sounds crazy. I guess you just missed it."

Anything can happen in advertising, I thought. "That's right, Danny, I just missed it," I said, and went on in.

Psychiatry tells us that some people are accident-prone; I, on the other hand, seemed recently to be coincidence-prone, fluke-happy, and except for the alarm clock, I'd had no control over what had been going on.

I went into our little kitchen to make a drink and reread the directions Molly had left, telling me how to get along by myself until she got back from her mother's in Oyster Bay, a matter of ten days. How to make coffee, how to open a can, whom to call if I took sick and such. My wife used to be a trained nurse and she is quite convinced that I cannot take a breath without her. She is right, but not for the reasons she supposes.

I opened the refrigerator to get some ice and saw another notice: "When you take out the Milk or

Butter, Put it Right Back. And Close the Door, too."

Intimidated, I took my drink into the living room and sat down in front of the typewriter. As I stared at the novel that was to liberate me from Madison Avenue, I noticed a mistake and picked up a pencil. When I put it down, it rolled off the desk, and with my eyes on the manuscript, I groped under the chair for it. Then I looked down. The pencil was standing on its end.

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There, I thought to myself, is that one chance in a million we hear about, and picked up the pencil. I turned back to my novel and drank some of the highball in hopes of inspiration and surcease from the muggy heat, but nothing came. I went back and read the whole chapter to try to get a forward momentum, but came to a dead stop at the last sentence.

Damn the heat, damn the pencil, damn Madison Avenue and advertising. My drink was gone and I went back to the kitchen and read Molly's notes again to see if they would be like a letter from her. I noticed one that I had missed, pinned to the door of the dumbwaiter: "Garbage picked up at 6:30 AM so the idea is to Put it Here the Night Before. I love you." What can you do when the girl loves you?

I made another drink and went and stared out of the living room window at the roof opposite. The Sun was out again and a man with a stick was exercising his flock of pigeons. They wheeled in a circle, hoping to be allowed to perch, but were not allowed to.

Pigeons fly as a rule in formation and turn simultaneously, so that their wings all catch the sunlight at the same time. I was thinking about this decorative fact when I saw that as they were making a turn, they seemed to bunch up together. By some curious chance, they all wanted the same place in the sky to turn in, and several collided and fell.

The man was as surprised as I and went to one of the dazed birds and picked it up. He stood there shaking his head from side to side, stroking its feathers.

My speculations about this peculiar aerial traffic accident were interrupted by loud voices in the hallway. Since our building is usually very well behaved, I was astonished to hear what sounded like an incipient free-for-all, and among the angry voices I recognized that of my neighbor, Nat, a very quiet guy who works on a newspaper and has never, to my knowledge, given wild parties, particularly in the late afternoon.

"You can't say a thing like that to me!" I heard him shout. "I tell you I got that deck this afternoon and they weren't opened till we started to play!"

Several other loud voices started at the same time.

"Nobody gets five straight-flushes in a row!"

"Yeah, and only when you were dealer!"

The tone of the argument was beginning to get ugly, and I opened the door to offer Nat help if he needed it. There were four men confronting him, evidently torn between the desire to make an angry exit and the impulse to stay and beat him up. His face was furiously red and he looked stunned.

"Here!" he said, holding out a deck of cards, "For Pete's sake, look at 'em yourselves if you think they're marked!"

The nearest man struck them up from his hand. "Okay, Houdini! So they're not marked! All I know is five straight...."

His voice trailed away. He and the others stared at the scattered cards on the floor. About half were face down, as might be expected, and the rest face up—all red.

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Someone must have rung, because at that moment the elevator arrived and the four men, with half frightened, incredulous looks, and in silence, got in and were taken down. My friend stood looking at the neatly arranged cards.

"Judas!" he said, and started to pick them up. "Will you look at that! My God, what a session...."

I helped him and said to come in for a drink and tell me all about it, but I had an idea what I would hear.

After a while, he calmed down, but he still seemed dazed.

"Never seen anything to equal it," he said. "Wouldn't have believed it. Those guys *didn't* believe it. Every round normal, nothing unusual about the hands—three of a kind, a low straight, that sort of thing and one guy got queens over tens, until it gets to be *my* deal. Brother! Straight flush to the king—every time! And each time, somebody else has four aces...."

He started to sweat again, so I got up to fix him another drink. There was one quart of club soda left, but when I tried to open it, the top broke and glass chips got into the bottle.

"I'll have to go down for more soda," I said.

"I'll come, too. I need air."

At the delicatessen on the corner, the man gave me three bottles in what must have been a wet bag, because as he handed them to me over the top of the cold-meat display, the bottom gave and they fell onto the tile floor. None of them broke, although the fall must have been from at least five feet. Nat was too wound up in his thoughts to notice and I was getting used to miracles. We left the proprietor with his mouth open and met Danny, the cop, looking in at the door, also with his mouth open.

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On the sidewalk, a man walking in front of Nat stooped suddenly to tie his shoe and Nat, to avoid bumping him, stepped off the curb and a taxi swerved to avoid Nat. The street was still wet and the taxi skidded, its rear end lightly flipping the front of one of those small foreign cars, which was going rather fast. It turned sideways and, without any side-slip, went right up the stoop of a brownstone opposite, coming to rest with its nose inside the front door, which a man opened at that moment.

The sight of this threw another driver into a skid, and when he and the taxi had stopped sliding around, they were face to face, arranged crosswise to the street. This gave them exactly no room to move either forward or backward, for the car had its back to a hydrant and the taxi to a lamp.

Although rather narrow, this is a two-way street, and in no time at all, traffic was stacked up from both directions as far as the avenues. Everyone was honking his horn.

Danny was furious—more so when he tried to put through a call to his station house from the box opposite.

It was out of order.

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Upstairs, the wind was blowing into the apartment and I closed the windows, mainly to shut out the tumult and the shouting. Nat had brightened up considerably.

"I'll stay for one more drink and then I'm due at the office," he said. "You know, I think this would make an item for the paper." He grinned and nodded toward the pandemonium.

When he was gone, I noticed it was getting dark and turned on the desk lamp. Then I saw the curtains. They were all tied in knots, except one. That was tied in three knots.

All *right*, I told myself, it was the wind. But I felt the time had come for me to get expert advice, so I went to the phone to call McGill. McGill is an assistant professor of mathematics at a university uptown and lives near us. He is highly imaginative, but we believe he knows everything.

When I picked up the receiver, the line sounded dead and I thought, *more* trouble. Then I heard a man cough and I said hello. McGill's voice said, "Alec? You must have picked up the receiver just as we were connected. That's a damn funny coincidence."

"Not in the least," I said. "Come on over here. I've got something for you to work on."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I was calling up to ask you and Molly—"

"Molly's away for the week. Can you get over here quick? It's urgent."

"At once," he said, and hung up.

While I waited, I thought I might try getting down a few paragraphs of my novel—perhaps something would come now. It did, but as I came to a point where I was about to put down the word "agurgling," I decided it was too reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan, and stopped at the letter "R." Then I saw that I had unaccountably hit all four keys one step to the side of the correct ones, and tore out the page, with my face red.

This was absolutely not my day.

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"Well," McGill said, "nothing you've told me is impossible or supernatural. Just very, very improbable. In fact, the odds against that poker game alone would lead me to suspect Nat, well as I know him. It's all those other things...."

He got up and walked over to the window and looked at the hot twilight while I waited. Then he turned around; he had a look of concern.

"Alec, you're a reasonable guy, so I don't think you'll take offense at what I'm going to say. What you have told me is so impossibly unlikely, and the odds against it so astronomical, that I must take the view that you're either stringing me or you're subject to a delusion." I started to get up and expostulate, but he motioned me back. "I know, but don't you see that that is far more likely than...." He stopped and shook his head. Then he brightened. "I have an idea. Maybe we can have a demonstration."

He thought for a tense minute and snapped his fingers. "Have you any change on you?"

"Why, yes," I said. "Quite a bit." I reached into my pocket. There must have been nearly two dollars in silver and pennies. "Do you think they'll each have the same date, perhaps?"

"Did you accumulate all that change today?"

"No. During the week."

He shook his head. "In that case, no. Discounting the fact that you could have prearranged it, if my dim provisional theory is right, that would be *actually* impossible. It would involve time-reversal. I'll tell you about it later. No, just throw down the change. Let's see if they all come up heads."

I moved away from the carpet and tossed the handful of coins onto the floor. They clattered and bounced—and bounced together—and stacked themselves into a neat pile.

I looked at McGill. His eyes were narrowed. Without a word, he took a handful of coins from his own pocket and threw them.

These coins didn't stack. They just fell into an exactly straight line, the adjacent ones touching.

"Well," I said, "what more do you want?"

"Great Scott," he said, and sat down. "I suppose you know that there are two great apparently opposite principles governing the Universe—random and design. The sands on the beach are an example of random distribution and life is an example of design. The motions of the particles of a gas are what we call random, but there are so many of them, we treat them statistically and derive the Second Law of Thermodynamics—quite reliable. It isn't theoretically hard-and-fast; it's just a matter of extreme probability. Now life, on the other hand, seems not to depend on probability at all; actually, it goes against it. Or you might say it is certainly not an accidental manifestation."

"Do you mean," I asked in some confusion, "that some form of life is controlling the coins and—the other things?"

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He shook his head. "No. All I mean is that improbable things usually have improbable explanations. When I see a natural law being broken, I don't say to myself, 'Here's a miracle.' I revise my version of the book of rules. Something—I don't know what—is going on, and it seems to involve probability, and it seems to center around you. Were you still in that building when the elevators stuck? Or near it?"

"I guess I must have been. It happened just after I left."

"Hm. You're the center, all right. But why?"

"Center of what?" I asked. "I feel as though I were the center of an electrical storm. Something has it in for me!"

McGill grinned. "Don't be superstitious. And especially don't be anthropomorphic."

"Well, if it's the opposite of random, it's got to be a form of life."

"On what basis? All we know for certain is that random motions are being rearranged. A crystal, for example, is not life, but it's a non-random arrangement of particles.... I wonder." He had a faraway, frowning look.

I was beginning to feel hungry and the drinks had worn off.

"Let's go out and eat," I said, "There's not a damn thing in the kitchen and I'm not allowed to

cook. Only eggs and coffee."

We put on our hats and went down to the street. From either end, we could hear wrecking trucks towing away the stalled cars. There were, by this time, a number of harassed cops directing the maneuver and we heard one of them say to Danny, "I don't know what the hell's going on around here. Every goddam car's got something the matter with it. They can't none of them back out for one reason or another. Never seen anything like it."

Near us, two pedestrians were doing a curious little two-step as they tried to pass one another; as soon as one of them moved aside to let the other pass, the other would move to the same side. They both had embarrassed grins on their faces, but before long their grins were replaced by looks of suspicion and then determination.

"All right, smart guy!" they shouted in unison, and barged ahead, only to collide. They backed off and threw simultaneous punches which met in mid-air. Then began one of the most remarkable bouts ever witnessed—a fight in which fist hit fist but never anything else, until both champions backed away undefeated, muttering identical excuses and threats.

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Danny appeared at that moment. His face was dripping. "You all right, Mr. Graham?" he asked. "I don't know what's going on around here, but ever since I came on this afternoon, things are going crazy. Bartley!" he shouted—he could succeed as a hog-caller. "Bring those dames over here!"

Three women in a confused wrangle, with their half-open umbrellas intertwined, were brought across the street, which meant climbing over fenders. Bartley, a fine young patrolman, seemed self-conscious; the ladies seemed not to be.

"All right, now, Mrs. Mac-Philip!" one of them said. "Leave go of my umbrella and we'll say no more about it!"

"And so now it's Missus Mac-Philip, is it?" said her adversary.

The third, a younger one with her back turned to us, her umbrella also caught in the tangle, pulled at it in a tentative way, at which the other two glared at her. She turned her head away and tried to let go, but the handle was caught in her glove. She looked up and I saw it was Molly. My nurse-wife.

"Oh, Alec!" she said, and managed to detach herself. "Are you all right?" Was *I* all right!

"Molly! What are you doing here?"

"I was so worried, and when I saw all this, I didn't know what to think." She pointed to the stalled cars. "Are you really all right?"

"Of course I'm all right. But why...."

"The Oyster Bay operator said someone kept dialing and dialing Mother's number and there wasn't anyone on the line, so then she had it traced and it came from our phone here. I kept calling up, but I only got a busy signal. Oh, dear, are you *sure* you're all right?"

I put my arm around her and glanced at McGill. He had an inward look. Then I caught Danny's eye. It had a thoughtful, almost suspicious cast to it.

"Trouble does seem to follow you, Mr. Graham," was all he said.

When we got upstairs, I turned to McGill. "Explain to Molly," I said. "And incidentally to me. I'm not properly briefed yet."

He did so, and when he got to the summing up, I had the feeling she was a jump ahead of him.

"In other words, you think it's something organic?"

"Well," McGill said, "I'm trying to think of anything else it might be. I'm not doing so well," he confessed.

"But so far as I can see," Molly answered, "it's mere probability, and without any over-all pattern."

"Not quite. It has a center. Alec is the center."

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Molly looked at me with a curious expression for a moment. "Do you *feel* all right, darling?" she asked me. I nodded brightly. "You'll think this silly of me," she went on to McGill, "but why isn't it something like an overactive poltergeist?"

"Pure concept," he said. "No genuine evidence."

"Magnetism?"

"Absolutely not. For one thing, most of the objects affected weren't magnetic—and don't forget magnetism is a force, not a form of energy, and a great deal of energy has been involved. I admit the energy has mainly been supplied by the things themselves, but in a magnetic field, all you'd get would be stored kinetic energy, such as when a piece of iron moves to a magnet or a line of force. Then it would just stay there, like a rundown clock weight. These things do a lot more than

that—they go on moving."

"Why did you mention a crystal before? Why not a life-form?"

"Only an analogy," said McGill. "A crystal resembles life in that it has a definite shape and exhibits growth, but that's all. I'll agree this—thing—has no discernible shape and motion *is* involved, but plants don't move and amebas have no shape. Then a crystal feeds, but it does not convert what it feeds on; it merely rearranges it into a non-random pattern. In this case, it's rearranging random motions and it has a nucleus and it seems to be growing—at least in what you might call improbability."

Molly frowned. "Then what *is* it? What's it made of?"

"I should say it was made of the motions. There's a similar idea about the atom. Another thing that's like a crystal is that it appears to be forming around a nucleus not of its own material—the way a speck of sand thrown into a supersaturated solution becomes the nucleus of crystallization."

"Sounds like the pearl in an oyster," Molly said, and gave me an impertinent look.

"Why," I asked McGill, "did you say the coins couldn't have the same date? I mean apart from the off chance I got them that way."

"Because I don't think this thing got going before today and everything that's happened can all be described as improbable motions here and now. The dates were already there, and to change them would require retroactive action, reversing time. That's out, in my book. That telephone now—"

The doorbell rang. We were not surprised to find it was the telephone repairman. He took the set apart and clucked like a hen.

"I guess you dropped it on the floor, mister," he said with strong disapproval.

"Certainly not," I said. "Is it broken?"

"Not exactly *broken*, but—" He shook his head and took it apart some more.

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McGill went over and they discussed the problem in undertones. Finally the man left and Molly called her mother to reassure her. McGill tried to explain to me what had happened with the phone.

"You must have juggled something loose. And then you replaced the receiver in such a way that the contact wasn't quite open."

"But for Pete's sake, Molly says the calls were going on for a long time! I phoned you only a short time ago and it must have taken her nearly two hours to get here from Oyster Bay."

"Then you must have done it twice and the vibrations in the floor—something like that—just happened to cause the right induction impulses. Yes, I know how you feel," he said, seeing my expression. "It's beginning to bear down."

Molly was through telephoning and suggested going out for dinner. I was so pleased to see her that I'd forgotten all about being hungry.

"I'm in no mood to cook," she said. "Let's get away from all this."

McGill raised an eyebrow. "If all this, as you call it, will let us."

In the lobby, we ran into Nat, looking smug in a journalistic way.

"I've been put on the story—who could be better?—I live here. So far, I don't quite get what's been happening. I've been talking to Danny, but he didn't say much. I got the feeling he thinks you're involved in some mystical, Hibernian way. Hello, McGill, what's with you?"

"He's got a theory," said Molly. "Come and eat with us and he'll tell you all about it."

Since we decided on an air-conditioned restaurant nearby on Sixth Avenue, we walked. The jam of cars didn't seem to be any less than before and we saw Danny again. He was talking to a police lieutenant, and when he caught sight of us, he said something that made the lieutenant look at us with interest. Particularly at me.

"If you want your umbrella, Mrs. Graham," Danny said, "it's at the station house. What there's left of it, that is."

Molly thanked him and there was a short pause, during which I felt the speculative regard of the lieutenant. I pulled out a packet of cigarettes, which I had opened, as always, by tearing off the top. I happened to have it upside down and all the cigarettes fell out. Before I could move my foot to obliterate what they had spelled out on the sidewalk, the two cops saw it. The lieutenant gave me a hard look, but said nothing. I quickly kicked the insulting cigarettes into the gutter.

When we got to the restaurant, it was crowded but cool—although it didn't stay cool for long. We sat down at a side table near the door and ordered Tom Collinses as we looked at the menu. Sitting at the next table were a fat lady, wearing a very long, brilliant green evening gown, and a dried-up sour-looking man in a tux. When the waiter returned, they preempted him and began ordering dinner fussily: cold cuts for the man, and vichyssoise, lobster salad and strawberry parfait for the fat lady.



I tasted my drink. It was most peculiar; salt seemed to have been used instead of sugar. I mentioned this and my companions tried theirs, and made faces.

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The waiter was concerned and apologetic, and took the drinks back to the bar across the room. The bartender looked over at us and tasted one of the drinks. Then he dumped them in his sink with a puzzled expression and made a new batch. After shaking this up, he set out a row of glasses, put ice in them and began to pour.

That is to say he tilted the shaker over the first one, but nothing came out. He bumped it against the side of the bar and tried again. Still nothing. Then he took off the top and pried into it with his pick, his face pink with exasperation.

I had the impression that the shaker had frozen solid. Well, ice *is* a crystal, I thought to myself.

The other bartender gave him a fresh shaker, but the same thing happened, and I saw no more because the customers sitting at the bar crowded around in front of him, offering advice. Our waiter came back, baffled, saying he'd have the drinks in a moment, and went to the kitchen. When he returned, he had madame's vichyssoise and some rolls, which he put down, and then went to the bar, where the audience had grown larger.

Molly lit a cigarette and said, "I suppose this is all part of it, Alec. Incidentally, it seems to be getting warmer in here."

It was, and I had the feeling the place was quieter—a background noise had stopped. It dawned on me that I no longer heard the faint hum of the air-conditioner over the door, and as I started to say so, I made a gesture toward it. My hand collided with Molly's when she tapped her cigarette over the ashtray, and the cigarette landed in the neighboring vichyssoise.

"Hey! What's the idea?" snarled the sour-looking man.

"I'm terribly sorry," I said. "It was an accident. I—"

"Throwing cigarettes at people!" the fat lady said.

"I really didn't mean to," I began again, getting up. There must have been a hole in the edge of their tablecloth which one of my cuff buttons caught in, because as I stepped out from between the closely set tables, I pulled everything—tablecloth, silver, water glasses, ashtrays and the vichyssoise-à-la-nicotine—onto the floor.

The fat lady surged from the banquette and slapped me meatily. The man licked his thumb and danced as boxers are popularly supposed to do. The owner of the place, a man with thick black eyebrows, hustled toward us with a determined manner. I tried to explain what had happened, but I was outshouted, and the owner frowned darkly.

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One of the waiters came up to the owner and tapped him on the shoulder and started to tell him about the air-conditioner, thus creating a momentary diversion, which did not, however, include the fat lady.

"He must be drunk!" she told her companion, who nodded contemptuously. A man carrying a stepladder came down the aisle from the back, his eye on the air-conditioner, but not, it seemed, on the stepladder, which bumped the owner of the restaurant on the shoulder just as he was turning back to me.

It was not a hard bump, but it threw him off balance, so that he more or less embraced the waiter. Then he turned around and it was obvious he thought I had struck him. The room was now divided into two groups: ourselves and our audience, and those who were too far away or intent on other matters to have noticed the fracas, the chief of these being the man with the stepladder, who was paying undivided attention to the air-conditioner. The owner was very angry with me.

"Mister, I think *you'd* better leave!" he said.

"He will not!" Molly said. "It was an accident, and *you*," she added to the fat lady who was about to interrupt, "keep quiet! We'll buy you some more soup!"

"Maybe it was an accident like you say," the owner declared, "but no one's going to push me when my back is turned! Out you go, mister! The drinks are on the house."

"We haven't had any drinks yet," I said. "There was salt in them."

"What d'you mean, salt? My bartenders—"

The air-conditioner suddenly let out a loud whirring and I glanced up. The stepladder which the man was on began to slide open like an acrobatic dancer doing a split. I stepped past the angry restaurateur and put out my hand to stop it, but as I did, the extension-bar that was supposed to hold it together parted and it came down with a rush, knocking over several tables. The repairman pulled part of the works out with him as he fell and the fan-belt broke. The motor raced and black smoke poured out.

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"What're you trying to *do!*" the owner yelled at me over the loud whine of the machinery. "Goddam it, haven't you done *enough* already?"

I took two steps back, in dismay at what I was accused of, and stepped on the skirt of the fat lady's green evening gown. She in turn took two steps and was, as it were, laid bare.

The previous hubbub was as nothing to what now resulted and the smoke was becoming thicker. Then the door opened and, to my horror, Danny and his lieutenant came in, and I was the first thing their eyes fastened on. Everyone started shouting at once and pointing at me.

Then the sprinkler system went on.

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The cell was clean, although very hot, and I was not treated badly. There was, in fact, an air of superstitious respect, almost. A cop gave me some magazines and, against regulations, a late paper, but it was not late enough to carry the story of the restaurant mob-scene. In it, however, was a garbled account of our traffic jam and a reference to the six elevators simultaneously and unaccountably stuck in the I.T.V. Building, but no connection was suggested.

My mind was in too much of an uproar to read, and I paced up and down. It seemed hours since McGill had called my lawyer Vinelli; some fantastic mishap must be holding him up, I thought. Then I happened to bump into the door of the cell and found the lock hadn't caught.

More of the same! But there didn't seem any point in trying to escape. Where would I go? Besides, I would have to leave through the desk room, where there would be at least the desk lieutenant and a sergeant on the phone. I began to wonder what effect it would have if I were to call out and tell them.

"Hey!" I shouted, but my voice was drowned out by a blast from the radio in the squad room. It died down immediately; someone must have hit a loud spot on the dial. I had an idea.

"Hey!" I shouted again, and again was drowned out. I opened the barred door and looked up and down the corridor. No one was in sight. Without making any unnecessary noise, but not stealthily, either, I walked as naturally as I could past the door to the squad room, where all heads were turned away, listening to the sensational pronouncements of Bill Bart, the radio gossip.

"... and in your commentator's view, this man is dangerous! After attacking a woman and setting fire to a restaurant, he was arrested and is being held for investigation, but I predict that the double-domes and alleged scientists will come up with some more gobbledegook and we ordinary citizens will be left in the dark as to why or how Graham is causing all this trouble. So far, fortunately, no one has been seriously injured, but I predict...."

I left and went on down the corridor.

So Bill Bart was giving me a play! What kind of crazy guess-work was he foisting on his public, I wondered, and came to the desk room. I looked in at the door. On one side, a sergeant was talking to an elderly worried-looking couple and never turned his head. On the other, a gray-haired lieutenant sitting at the raised desk dropped his glasses as I came in. They fell on the floor and smashed.

"Mother of God!" he muttered and gave me a cursory glance. "Good night, Doctor," he said. "Not that there's anything good about it." He was fumbling in the desk as I walked out of the door.

---

On the other side of the street, in the shadows, was a man who crossed over as I came down the steps. It was McGill.

"I had a hunch this might happen," he said, taking my arm. "The car's up ahead. Vinelli came here as quick as he could, but he slipped coming along the street and broke his ankle."

"Judas!" I said. "I *am* sorry! I feel responsible. Where are we going?"

He didn't answer me at first; he just kept hurrying me along. One of those New York siroccos was pretending to cool the city, and at the corner I saw his old coupe with the parking lights on. A saloon next to us was closing up and a few late customers came out onto the sidewalk. One customer, on seeing me, stopped and turned to the others.

"That's the guy I was telling you about! That's Graham!"

I saw then that it was our telephone repairman from the afternoon. He looked reasonably sober, but his friends did not.

"Oh, yeah?" one of these said, eying me belligerently. "I thought we just heard Bill Bart broadcast the cops had him."

"Right," said another of them. "He's escaped! I'll hold him and you go on in and phone 'em."

"Nah, the joint's closed. Police station's right around the corner. I'll go tell 'em. Hold onto him now!"

The repairman and three of his pals began to advance warily and the other one ran down Charles Street, but at that moment we heard excited yapping and a small dog chasing a cat came tearing up the street. The cat had a fish head in its mouth and, ignoring us, ran through the middle of the group, dropping the fish head. The dog followed almost instantly, only he ran between the repairman's legs, upsetting him. In falling, the repairman tripped his neighbor, who fell on him, and another one fell on top of them. The remaining one stepped on the fish head.

"Black cat!" he cried as he joined the others on the sidewalk. "Crossed my path!"

We got into McGill's car and he pulled away fast. As I looked back, the four men were flailing around, but they saw the direction we took. I also thought I saw the street lamp behind us go out.

"That was a lucky break!" I said. "I mean the cat and dog."

"Don't give it a thought," McGill said, driving fast but carefully up Hudson Street. "You're being watched over and protected. We're going up to my office and have a conference and we're going to drive like hell. I have an idea this thing may not be able to do much more than hang onto you. Maybe we can even shake it."

"Hang onto me?"

"Yes, you're the nucleus."

---

We were at the top of the ramp to the Westside Highway and he abruptly put on more speed: no traffic was in sight.

"But what is it?" I asked a little wildly. "How's it doing it? Why pick on me?"

"I don't know, but I'd say it picked you as the nucleus because you had just been the subject of various flukes—the taxi and subway and so on—so you represented a sample of what it's made of—flukes. I have a hunch you'll continue to be protected."

"Did you happen to catch Bill Bart's broadcast?"

"Yes, I did. On the car radio coming over. Not good. He said—"

In the rear-view mirror, I saw a police car overhauling us. We were doing a good sixty-five. "Here come the cops," I interrupted, but before McGill could answer, there was a faint pop and the police car wobbled and slowed to a stop, and was quickly out of sight.

"Blowout," I said.

"See what I mean?" McGill answered, and turned on two wheels into the 125th Street exit. Then he added, "Molly's waiting for us in my office."

I felt better.

We drove through some immortal gateway and McGill moderated his speed. He pulled up in front of a darkened building and we climbed the steps. It seemed cooler here and the wind was very strong. McGill tried the door, but it was locked. Then he felt in his pocket and swore.

"No key?" I asked.

He shook his head and then shook the door, and went through his pockets again. I reached forward and shook the door, too. The lock clicked and we went in. I made an apologetic gesture and McGill raised his eyebrows.

We climbed a flight of stairs, all dark except for a faint glow that came in from the campus lights, and then along an echoing hallway to an office in which were Molly and some unimportant items, among them a desk radio that she turned off as we came in.

She gave me her professional nurse's smile and I sat down next her. Molly's professional nurse's smile is not a phony "Everything's going to be all right," but a signal. It's supposed to mean "Never mind what these cretins are saying about you. You're okay."

I was a little puzzled that she showed no surprise to see me.

"Well," McGill said, "my hunch was right. He got out."

"So I see," said Molly, smiling at me proudly. "What happened? Knock over one of the jailers?"

I shook my head and told her, including the cat-and-dog episode and the police car blowout.

"Don't forget the lock downstairs," McGill said, and when I told her that, too, he added, "You see, I think it's beginning to take sides. I think it's watching out for its nucleus. Alec ought to be rather lucky right now."

"Well, I don't feel it," I said. "I feel hemmed in."

---

Molly glanced at me anxiously and turned back to him. "What do we do now?"

"First, before any more funny stuff happens, I want to rig up a few tests and see what's with Alec, if anything. I'll even test for EMF, Molly, just for the sake of satisfying you."

"For what?" I asked.

"Electromagnetic force. Come and give me a hand, Molly. Alec, you stay put and relax. We'll call you when we get set. I only hope to God the cops and the news-hawks don't tumble to where we are."

They left and I went to the window and looked out at the wind blowing papers and dust into miniature tornadoes in the dim light, and wondered whether it was going to storm. A few belated students on the way to their dormitories evidently were wondering the same thing, for they were all looking up at the sky. I went to the desk and turned the radio on, low.

"... are doing all they can, which doesn't seem much," Bill Bart was saying breathlessly. "He was last seen speeding uptown on the Westshore Drive, but the cops lost him. The town is gripped in superstitious fear—it is now known that Graham was responsible for the elevators jamming in the I.T.V. Building this morning—but how did he do it? I ask you: how? And how has he turned off all the electric power in Greenwich Village? I contacted the power company for an explanation, but I was put off with the usual doubletalk. I say, and I repeat, *this man must be caught!* He is...."

I turned him off. So that was what the street light going off had meant.

In a little while, Molly came back. "All right, duck, come and be measured. He's got galvanometers and electronic devices and stuff, and he'll be able to detect anything you're emanating down to a milli-micro-whisker."

I followed her into the lab where I was sat down, taped up and surrounded with gadgets. McGill tried various things and read various dials. There were buzzing sounds and little lights blinked on and off, but at the end he shook his head.

"Nothing," he announced, "You're married to a non-ferrous, non-conducting, non-emanating, non-magnetic writer, Molly."

"He is, too!" she said. "He's as magnetic as the dickens."

"Possibly, but he isn't emanating anything. The damn thing apparently just likes him. As a nucleus, I mean."

"Is that bad?" Molly asked. "Could it be dangerous?"

"It's bad," I put in morosely.

"Also it could be good," McGill said, with a gleam of scientific enthusiasm, "Why, it wouldn't surprise me, Alec, if you could do anything you wanted to that involved chance."

---

I didn't like the guinea-pigs'-eye view of him I got, and told him so. "Except for a couple of minor escapes, it's been highly inconvenient," I said. "I don't want to seem ungrateful, but I wish it would go and help somebody else."

"But, my God, man! Do you realize if you went to the track tomorrow, your horse probably couldn't lose?"

"I wouldn't get that far," I grumbled.

"And I bet if somebody threw a knife at you, it would miss!" McGill went on, ignoring me. "Here, I'd like to try an experiment...."

"Now, hold on!" I said.

"*McGill!* Are you *crazy?*" Molly cried, but he ignored her also and opened his desk drawer, from which he took a pair of dice.

"Roll me some sevens, Alec," he said, handing them to me.

"I thought we came here for a conference," I protested. "And I don't know whether you know about it, but there's been a Village-wide electric power failure and I'm being blamed, according to Bill Bart."

"Holy cow! When did you hear that?"

"On your radio just now. Furthermore, he says the whole town is gripped in 'superstitious terror.'"

"That could be true," McGill answered. "Most people haven't progressed beyond the Dark Ages. Look what happened with Orson Welles' broadcast about the Martians."

"Maybe we ought to leave town for a while," Molly said. "We could go to Oyster Bay or somewhere." Then she glanced up. "What's that noise?"

Outside, I now noticed, mingled with the sougning of the wind, a susurrus of many voices. We went to the lab windows. A crowd of two or three hundred people was standing in the campus, staring up at the sky over us.

"What are they looking at?" McGill asked. "No one can possibly know we're here."

I started to lean out of the window, twisting up my head to see what it could be.

"Don't do that, Alec! They'll see you!" McGill warned, and I pulled my head in.

"Can we get on the roof?" I asked, but Molly suddenly said, "Look who's here." Three squad cars drove up and several policemen got out.

"Perhaps we ought to sort of very gently turn the lights off," I suggested.

Molly immediately snapped off the shaded bench lamp, which was all that was on in the lab. This left McGill's office light, and I started toward it.

"Hadn't we better run for it?" Molly said, but a loud banging on the front door downstairs answered her.

"I hope that damn lock doesn't give again!" McGill breathed.

"They'll break it down!" Molly gasped.

"Like hell. It's University property and they can't possibly have gotten a search warrant so quickly at this time of night."

---

From outside came a loud voice: "Alec Graham! Are you in there?"

"Don't answer," said McGill. "And keep away from the windows. I guess they saw the light in my office." He leaned out. "What do you want?" he shouted.

"This is the police. Open up!"

"I won't unless you have a warrant!"

There was no more shouting. They seemed to be parlaying among themselves, but the crowd had a menacing sound. A brilliant light suddenly hit our windows, illuminating the lab ceiling—a police searchlight. I saw that Molly had disappeared and I assumed she had gone into McGill's office.

"These guys mean business," he said, "but what the hell brought them?"

"Something on the roof. That's what they're all looking at, so why don't we go up and see?"

"All right, but you'd better stay down here. There's no parapet and they'll see you."

He started for the door and I decided to follow—at least as far as the trapdoor, or whatever gave onto the roof—when Molly came in from the hall. She looked scared.

"My God! I climbed an iron ladder and took a look outside. There's a small cyclone over us—a ton of torn papers and dust and junk whirling around like a waterspout! They'd be able to see it for blocks!"

"Oh, great," McGill groaned. "Now it's playing tricks with the wind. That's how they spotted us."

"We've got to get out of here, McGill," said Molly.

"Maybe the best thing would be for me to give myself up to the cops," I said.

"I don't know whether they'd be able to get you through that mob," McGill replied. "Just listen to them. I only wish I could think of some way to satisfy the damn crystal or whatever it is. I have the feeling it wants something. It can't be merely fooling around for no reason. But there doesn't seem to be any motive beyond the fact that it's apparently on your side. How did it start? That's what I wish I knew."

He absently turned the bench lamp on again. I shrugged unhappily and scratched my cheek. In so doing, I pulled the piece of pink adhesive tape loose and it began to bleed again.

"Cut yourself shaving, darling?" Molly asked me.

"No," I said. "As a matter of fact, it was a kind of freak accident."

"Oh?" McGill lifted his head interestedly. "Anything involving you and a fluke I want to hear about. Tell Papa."

I did and McGill began to get his dedicated look. "You say this piece of glass just blew up? What did it look like? How big was it?"

"I only saw it for a second. It was dirty and I'd say about two feet across—more or less round and with flat places all over it."

---

McGill came toward me in a state of great excitement. "That piece that hit your cheek—did it merely nick you or is it embedded? If it *is* embedded...." He picked up a bottle of alcohol and a piece of cotton and took a lens out of a drawer. "Molly, there's a pair of tweezers in my desk. Will you fetch them?" He tilted the light up onto my face and dabbed the cut with the alcohol.

"Ouch!"

"Keep still. It'll sting a little.... Yes, I think I can see it." He took the tweezers from Molly, who had returned, and neatly removed something from the cut. He held it under the light and looked at it through the lens. Then he rinsed it under the water faucet, dried it on a piece of filter-paper and looked at it again. "Well, it looks like glass. I don't know. Maybe it's the nucleus of the glass chunk and...." His voice trailed off and he frowned at nothing in particular, putting the fragment down on the filter-paper.

I picked it up. It seemed like a bit of sand, only brighter.

McGill's concern over this new object of interest had been so intent that for a few minutes our attention was diverted, but now Molly began to pace up and down. There didn't seem to be anything for us to do, and unlike most nurses, waiting makes her nervous. She was looking at the display of various chemicals and reagents on the shelves.

"What's that stuff?" she asked, pointing to a large jar of black powder labeled Deflocculated Graphite. "I bet those cops have gone for a search warrant."

"Finely divided carbon," McGill said. "Damn, I wish I could think of something! A chunk of glass ... blowing up...."

"Graphite is carbon?" Molly said. "You don't think they'd actually *do* anything to Alec, do you?"

"It's another form of carbon. A diamond is still another: the rare crystalline form," he said. "I wouldn't put it past that mob to do anything."

"Oh, yes. I remember that in chemistry," Molly said. "But the police wouldn't let them, McGill, would they?"

"I've got an idea—" I tried to break in.

"They might not be able to stop them," McGill replied.

"We've got to get *out* of here!" Molly said for the second time.

"If a diamond—" I began.

"With a helicopter, we might," McGill said. "Right now, we're surrounded."

"How about hiding Alec?" Molly asked. "You and I could act innocent."

"I don't *want* to be hidden," I objected. "My idea is—"

"Or better yet, we could act guilty. That would appeal to them, wouldn't it, McGill?"

"They'd tear the place apart if they got in," McGill said.

---

I took a surreptitious look out of the windows again. It seemed to hit me that our being surrounded was an exaggeration; most of the crowd was centered about the police car directly in front of the main door. They had an ugly look, and while I didn't like the idea of being alone, neither did I relish the thought of my presence possibly causing my wife and my best friend to be the victims of mob violence, for although the police might, in the absence of a warrant, refrain from breaking in, the mob might not. So I decided to leave, confident that some bizarre manifestation would lead them away from the lab, and that no matter where I went, I could hardly be worse off. To keep moving was my best bet.

Molly and McGill were still discussing the situation as I tip-toed into the hall. There surely would be a back door—probably in the basement—and I went down three flights to a cement-floored corridor. Then, with lighted matches, I found my way to a door at the back of the building, at the end. I opened it and peered out, to see a retaining wall and stone steps leading up to ground level. I eased out into the areaway and pulled the door shut, noticing that I still held the folded filter-paper with the fragment in it. The lock clicked and I realized that my bridge was, as they say, burned behind me.

Two cops were talking together a little way to my right, but their backs were turned and they were looking up. I, too, looked and saw the whirlpool of debris, which was exactly as Molly had described and quite as attention-calling. Clutching the filter-paper like a talisman, I climbed the steps and gumshoed away to the left, but as I got to the corner, I met a group of young men, also looking up.

One of these was saying, "That's a lynch mob, if ever I saw one! I don't get it."

"Mob psychology, that's the answer," explained another.

My heart congealed, but they walked right by me. It suddenly occurred to me that any newspapers that had carried the story would scarcely have been able to dig up a photograph of me yet. All I had to do was to walk out of the campus, for who would recognize me? Where I would go then was something I could decide later.

So I started out with more assurance, but I took the precaution to act like an onlooker by glancing up over my shoulder now and then at the airborne maelstrom.

As I got to the other side of the open space, I had another shock. A few yards ahead was another group of policemen, one of whom, I saw with dismay, was the lieutenant from Charles Street, and he was beginning to turn around. I barely had time to duck into a doorway to avoid being seen. I had the feeling of a member of the I.R.A. in Dublin during the Troubles, and I crouched against the door.

I could now hear the lieutenant's voice: "Of course he's up there! Maddigan'll be here with a warrant any minute now and we'll ...." His voice faded away.

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Behind me, the door suddenly opened and I almost fell. A young student holding some notebooks emerged.

"Sorry," he said, and walked toward the crowd.

The door had not yet closed and I slipped in, with my heart irretrievably contracted to the size of a buckshot. I could just make out in the dim light that I was at the bottom of the fire stairs, so I climbed to the third floor and went into a classroom, then on into an office somewhat like McGill's, that faced toward the lab building.

From here, I had a perfect view of the crowd, the police, the upper facade of the labs, brightly lit by the searchlight and, over all, the spinning papers and dust, which even as I looked began to die down. I was unable to see Molly or McGill and wondered whether they had noticed my absence and were worrying.

I saw a phone on the desk at my side and considered calling up McGill's office, but first I wanted to think over my new idea. I pulled down the shades and turned on the reading lamp, by the light of which I re-examined the fragment I had been carrying around all day. It sparkled brilliantly. On the desk, beside an onyx pen-set, a golf trophy and a signed golf ball, was a leather-framed photograph of a blank-faced young woman holding a pudgy little boy. I picked it up and rubbed the glass with the tiny fragment. It left a faint but undeniable scratch. So I was right about one thing.

Then I called McGill's office. In a few moments, I heard the receiver lifted, but no voice. "This is the nucleus," I said, and I heard of sigh of relief from McGill.

"Where in hell are you?"

"Across the way. Look, out of your window and I'll turn my light off and on again." I did so.

"You're in Professor Crandal's office. Why did you leave?"

"We'll go into that later. McGill, that fragment is a diamond."

"What!"

"At any rate, it scratches glass."

"Why didn't you tell me that before? And where is it? I couldn't find it anywhere."

"I was sidetracked. I've got it here. Now my idea—"

"A diamond! I begin to see light. Give with the idea, Alec."

"Well, there was all this talk of crystals and then you were telling Molly about carbon and diamonds, and it occurred to me that what we have is something trying to crystallize—something that once *was* a crystal, and got broken up and wants to re-form. It keeps trying with playing cards and pigeons and automobiles, but it's no go. Why don't we give it some carbon to play with, McGill?"

---

There was a short silence. I looked across at the office, but I couldn't see him. I noticed a piece of dirty newspaper that had fallen out of the maelstrom and had caught on a thick wire that stretched from one of the lab windows to immediately below mine—some kind of aerial, I imagined. Then I saw that the maelstrom, rather than breaking up, as I had thought, was moving over in my direction. I would be pointed out again.

"You mean the graphite, I suppose," McGill said. "Why in hell did you leave and take the fragment with you?"

"I forgot it was in my hand," I said, dodging the first part of the question. "Nobody on the campus recognized me, so I guess I can walk back." Then I remembered the locked basement door and the fact that I could scarcely be let in by McGill, with the cops standing around, but I was feeling light-headed and damage-proof. It was protecting its nucleus, which, even if I wasn't any more, I had in my hand. My crystalline rabbit's foot.

"Hold on a second," I said. "I've got another idea."

I put down the receiver, and picked up the golf ball from the desk, and put it on the floor. I stood up and put my right foot on it and, holding my breath, I raised my other foot. In any event, I would not have far to fall—but I did not fall. I remained upright, holding the filter-paper and wobbling a little. Then I relaxed and closed my eyes—still I did not fall. The rabbit's foot was working, just as McGill said. I stepped down two inches and picked up the phone.

"I'm coming across," I said. "That is, if the wire that runs over here from the lab is strong enough to hold me."

"Alec! You're nuts!" McGill said, and I hung up. (Diamonds of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your nucleus.)

I took a look over the sill at the wire. It was held by a powerful steel eye-bolt, securely attached to the brickwork. Clutching the diamond fragment in its paper, I climbed over the sill and put a foot on the wire and felt immediately seasick. The wire vibrated like a harp-string, but did not give noticeably, and I put my other foot on it. Then I almost blacked out and closed my eyes.

When I opened them again, I found I had progressed some distance into the void. Nothing was holding me from over-balancing, but my body seemed to right itself automatically, as if I were a veteran tightrope walker.

In a frozen daze, I edged along, keeping my eyes fixed on the distant window in which I could see McGill and Molly watching me with white faces.

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When I was about half way, the crowd caught sight of me and yelled. A man with a broad-brimmed hat ran out from the others and, to my horror, pulled out a gun. Another man picked up a stone, wound himself up like a sand-lot pitcher, and hurled it just before the other pulled his trigger. They were excellent shots: the stone was hit by the bullet and both disintegrated. The man's gun jammed at his second try and the two heroes were grabbed by the police.

With my heart pounding, I kept going, until, about four yards from safety, my foot caught, and I looked down again. There was a splice in the wire, sticking up from which was a sharp end. I staggered and righted myself ... and let go of the filter-paper.

By now, the maelstrom was directly over me and my talisman was caught in the up-draught. It did not fall, but I did. After a sickening instant, I was brought up with a jerk that nearly strangled me. The back of my coat had caught on the projecting wire and I swung there like an unused marionette.



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The crowd shouted and milled around, and the cops called out directions to each other. One order was to send for the Fire Department. I found I could breathe, but I could not look down.

The all-important paper was fluttering around near the lab window and McGill was making grabs



at it. Then it suddenly blew right in by him. His head reappeared and he shook his clasped hands at me. Molly remained at the window, her eyes round, the fingers of each hand crossed. I essayed a debonair smile, which she tried to answer. In the distance, I heard the owl-sound of approaching fire engines.

From behind Molly there suddenly came an intense blue light, which rapidly increased until she became a dark silhouette, and I could just make out McGill looking at the glare, his eyes shielded by what I took to be a deep-blue bottle. His stance suggested elation. There appeared to be a terrific in-draught—all the window shades were blowing straight into the lab and Molly's red hair streamed behind her.

In what was actually almost no time, I heard the Fire Department turn into the campus, and one piece of equipment skidded to a stop directly under me. There was the sound of a winch and then I felt something touch my foot. At that moment, my jacket gave way with a tearing sound, Molly closed her eyes, and I landed like an oversize tarantula on top of the fireman's ladder.

Firemen and cops were climbing toward me, alternated like meat and tomatoes on a shish-kebab. First to reach me was my friend the lieutenant. He re-arrested me and pulled. I shook my head to his earnest entreaties and hung on with the tenacity of the unbrave. It seems to be impossible to detach a determined man from a ladder when you are also on it.

He and his friends gave up finally and ordered the ladder lowered, but one last fluke intervened—if it was a fluke. The machinery refused to work and we drove away, with me swaying grandly on my perch.

---

The lieutenant had the hook-and-ladder driven to a distant police station, where in due course Vinelli, the lawyer, arrived with his foot in a cast, and I was bailed out. The cops showed me surprising consideration; it turned out they were furious at the irresponsible riding they had been getting from Bill Bart. A scientific big-shot that McGill knew, named Joe Stein, convinced them I was in no way to blame, and the case was dropped. Professor Stein gave a wonderfully incomprehensible but tranquilizing statement to the press, and Molly and I went to Oyster Bay.

"In two weeks, everybody'll have forgotten all about it," the lieutenant told us. "You may even be a hero. I don't know."

Before we left, we went with McGill to the lab and saw the diamond. It sat on a bench, gleaming brilliant, smooth-faceted and without a flaw. It was at least two feet across, about the same as the chunk of "glass" on Fifty-first Street.

"The cops never recognized what it was," McGill said, "it being so big."

"Who would?" Molly asked. "McGill, I've got an idea—"

"All I had to do," McGill said, ignoring her, "was to put the graphite on some cinder blocks and the fragment on the graphite. Then I turned a bunsen flame on it and it caught fire with a terrifically bright flame—very small—I guess you saw it." I nodded. "It didn't give off any heat," he went on. "Adiabatic process. And it got its necessary pressure from the random motions together of the graphite particles. Some random motions! When that was used up, it started on the cinder blocks and then the CO<sub>2</sub> in the air. That's what caused the suction: the blinds were blown straight in. You probably missed that." I shook my head. "Anyway, this thing—"

"McGill," Molly interrupted, "I've got an *idea*!"

"—this thing has got to be dumped out at sea."

"Oh," Molly said, looking crest-fallen. "I was just going to say why don't we break a piece off and sell it in Amsterdam?"

"Good God, no! That would only start it up all over again!"

"Just a *little* piece, McGill?"

"NO!"

With Stein's help, McGill convinced the police that the thing had to be dumped, and we dropped it off a police launch beyond Sandy Hook, to their bored perplexity. They would have been still more puzzled if they had known what it was.

McGill came down to Oyster Bay for the weekend and we played a game of gin rummy—a truly memorable game, because the cards behaved and I even lost a little.

He congratulated me in a pre-occupied way, which annoyed me. "I should think you'd be gladder than that," I told him.

"I am," he said. "But there's something else—"

"What's that?" asked Molly, worried.

"The schools of fish are traveling head to tail. I'm wondering if that's just the beginning of another mess."

We went back to playing gin rummy, but our minds weren't on what we were doing. They haven't been since. Just yesterday, an ocean liner chased its berthing tugboats away and went sightseeing up the Hudson River.

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

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