

FEB. 19

STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

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DEAD CENTER!

by S. D. Gottesman

THIRTEEN O'CLOCK

by Cecil Corwin

THE KEY TO CORNWALL

by David H. Keller

Charles R. Tanner, Clark Ashton Smith,
James Blish and others

SCIENCE-FICTION and FANTASY

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Dead Center!

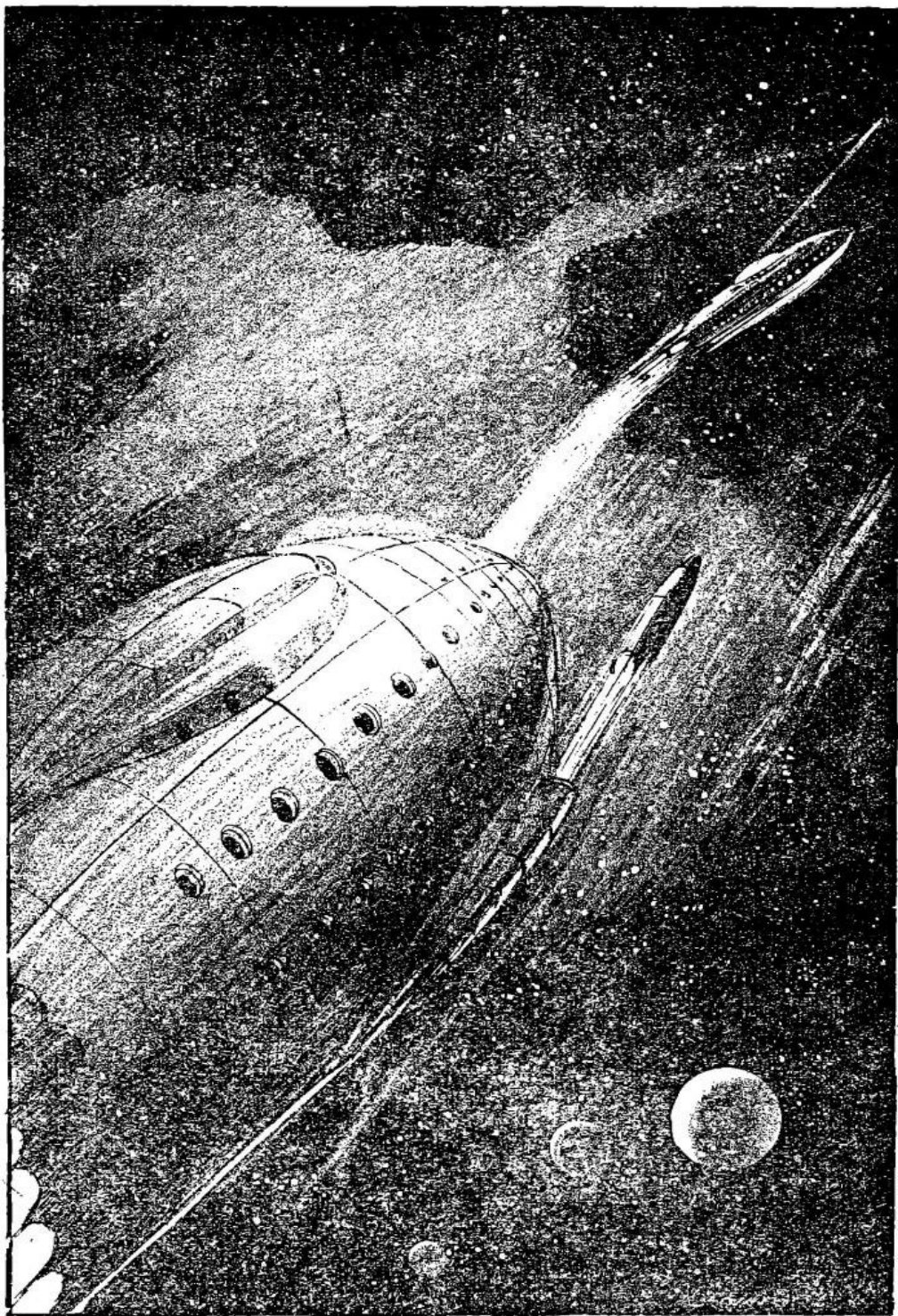
Cyril M. Kornbluth

Writing under the pseudonym S. D. Gottesman.

(Author of “Before the Universe,” “Trouble in Time,” etc.)

**Where is the exact dead center around which the entire cosmos revolves?
For whoever can get there first can control the universe!**

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CHAPTER I

The chilled-steel muzzle of the old-fashioned automatic swerved not an inch as Angel Maclure spoke: "I'm at your service, gentlemen. What can I do for you?"

"Put that gun down," advised the shorter man easily. "We just didn't want any fuss. You have our blasters—we won't try anything."

Maclure grinned and lowered his pistol. "Right," he said. "I wasn't sure whether you'd mistaken me for a banker or somebody who deserved killing." He gestured at the blasters which he had wrenched from his assailants' hands. "Pick 'em up, boys." They did, and pocketed the deadly little tubes. "Now what did you want?"

The shorter, softer-spoken man began: "Excuse my friend—he's new in our service. He doesn't realize that we should have asked you first and then pulled the tubes. Understand?"

"All forgiven," said Maclure shortly. "I just didn't expect to be jumped two minutes after I get off a liner. It usually takes months before the police hear that I'm around. What's the service you mentioned?"

"Let's wait before I tell you anything," said the shorter man. He smiled confidently. "You'll find out enough to blow your top off. Now, Mr. Maclure, you're supposed to come with us—whether of your own free will or by force. Understand?"

"Sure. Call me Angel. What's your tag?"

Maclure walked off down the street, flanked by the other two. He knew that their pocketed hands fingered blaster tubes, and that a false move might cost him a foot or arm. But he was interested by the distinctly peculiar set-up he had seemingly blundered into. The last year he had spent on Venus doing a big engineering job—barracks and installation—for one of the wildcat land promoter outfits. The new scar on his jaw he had acquired when he had stormed into the company offices with a pay-slip that he wanted cashed in full. He still carried the scar, but he had got his due amount, and with it a bit of interest lying in the back of the blasted safe. His trip to Earth again had been in quest of some much-needed relaxation; he had not taken kindly to being jumped by two strangers.

The shorter man hesitated. "I don't know," he said. "Perhaps you've heard of me. Baldur Gaussman."

"Yeah?" asked Angel, impressed. "You did that first floating weather-station on Uranus, didn't you?"

“That’s right,” said Gaussman. He halted before a curtained taxi. “We get in here,” he said quietly. And they did.

As the taxi took off Angel didn’t even try to figure out the direction they were taking; he knew that the involved loops and spins would hopelessly confuse him. He faced Gaussman quizzically. “This must be something awfully big,” he said. “I mean using high-grade extra-terrestrial engineers for muscle-men on a simple pick-up job. Unless I guess wrong this is concerned with some pretty high finance.”

The taller man took out his blaster again. “Don’t try anything this time,” he said thickly. “And don’t get nosey before you’re supposed to. You can get hurt doing that.”

“Yeah?” asked the Angel, mildly eyeing him. “That struck home? Okay, pal.” He turned again to Gaussman. “You must have been in this for several years, whatever it is,” he said.

“That’s right. My last job in the open was for Pluto Colony Corporation. I handled their mining in full.” He glanced at his watch. “We’re here,” he said. As he spoke the muffled hum of the plane stopped abruptly and Angel felt it being swung about by a ground crew or turntable. He grinned.

“As I figure it,” he said, “we’ve come about seventy-three miles due East after swinging around four times to throw my sense of direction off the track. I think we’re in the heart of the New York financial district, on about the twentieth floor of a very high building.”

“I’ll be damned!” exclaimed Gaussman, open-mouthed. “How did you do that?”

“Long years of training at the hands of my late beloved father, rest his martinet soul,” said Angel. “You behold the only practical, authentic superman. No short cuts, no royal road—just hard work and development of everything I was born with. Let’s go.” He gestured at the door, which had opened to reveal a dim, luxurious corridor.

“Okay,” said the taller man. “Hand over your gun.” Maclure obeyed, smiling. “When I pass in front of the metal-detector,” he said, “remember the eyelets in my shoes. They’re a beryllium alloy.”

“That’s all right,” said Gaussman. “We use an X-ray.”

“Oh,” said Angel shortly. “Then I might as well tell you now that I have a saw in my shoe and a gas-capsule in my zipper.” He produced them and handed them over as he got out of the taxi.

“Thanks,” said Gaussman. He pointed. “Through that door, Angel. You go in alone.”

As the door—heavy as a bank-vault’s—closed ponderously behind him, Maclure instinctively recoiled at the terribly moist heat of the room he was in. In the dim red glow that came from the ceiling he could see little curls of steam in the air. His clothes were sopping wet. Absently he wiped his face with a soaked handkerchief.

A voice rang through the air—a thin, feeble whisper, magnified over a PA system. Normally it would be so faint that one could not even strain to hear it. It was the voice of an old man—a man so terribly old that intelligible speech was almost lost to him. It said: “Sit—there, Angel Maclure.” A boxy chair glowed for a moment, and the young man sat. He was facing a soft sort of wall, which was red beneath the ceiling lights—a dull, bloody dried red. It slid aside slowly and in absolute silence.

This room was certainly the quietest place in all the world, Maclure thought. He could hear not only his heartbeat but the little swish of air passing through his bronchial tubes and the faint creaking of his joints as he moved his hand. These were sounds which the most elaborate stethoscope could bring out but faintly. Perhaps it was the quiet of the room, he thought, and perhaps it was the faint and mysterious aura which the figure, revealed by the sliding wall, diffused.

It was the shape of a man—had been once, that is. For it was so terribly old that the ordinary attributes of humanity were gone from its decrepit frame. It could not move, for it was seated with legs crossed and arms folded over the shrivelled breast, these members held in place by padded clamps. The dully-glowing tangle of machinery about it bespoke artificial feeding and digestion; a myriad of tiny silvery pipes entering into its skin must have been man-made perspiration ducts. The eyes were lost behind ponderous lenses and scanning devices, and there was a sort of extended microphone that entered the very mouth of the creature. Sound-grids surrounded it in lieu of ears that had long since shrivelled into uselessness.

The lips unmoving, the creature spoke again: “You know me?” it whispered penetratingly.

Maclure dredged his memory for a moment, following the clue of the high, crusted brow of the creature. “You must be Mr. Sapphire, it seems,” said Angel slowly.

“Excellent,” whispered the creature. “I am Mr. Sapphire—of Planets Production Corporation, Extra-terrestrial Mines. Amusements Syndicate, Publishers Associated—can you complete the list?”

“I think so,” said Angel. “In spite of the very clever management it’s almost obvious—after a rather penetrating study—that there is one fountainhead of finance

from which springs almost all the industry and commerce and exchange in the system today. I had not suspected that you were at the head and still alive. One hundred and eighty years, isn't it?"

"Yes," whispered the creature. "One hundred and eighty years of life—if this is it. Now, Maclure, you do not know why I called you. It is because I am a proud man, and will not be humiliated by death. I shall live, Maclure. I shall live!" The voiceless whisper was still for a moment.

"And," suggested Angel, "you want me to help you?"

"Yes. I followed your childhood in the hands of your father. I saw you at twelve the equal of men four times your age, physically and mentally their actual equal. And I know that after the death of your father you chose to disappear. I knew you would do this, Maclure, for a while. It was your intention to slip into the way of the world and forget that you were the infinite superior of your fellows. Well—you succeeded, in your own mind, at least. You are well on the way to forgetting that to those around you you are as a man among apes. That is so of all men except you—and me."

Angel grinned bitterly. "You struck it," he said. "I think you and I stand alone in the world. I was the victim of my father's ambition. What are you?"

"Life eternal," sounded the voiceless whisper. "To watch the world and its aspects—to mould it as I will, and eventually—destroy it! Destroy it and fashion another! Maclure, medicine has done all for me that it can. I am the final example of the surgical art. Once my brain was transplanted into a youthful body, but even I could not stand the shock. I died, and was revived only with the greatest difficulty.

"Three times since then I have died. The last time it took three hours to revive me. Ten minutes more and I would never have lived again. Under the laws of nature I can last no longer. And so you must come to my rescue."

"How am I to do that?" demanded Angel.

"For me," breathed Mr. Sapphire, "you will suspend these laws. Do not interrupt. I can give you only a few minutes more before I retire for a treatment.

"All creation is in motion, we know. So we are taught. Earth moves about the sun, sun about the great hub of the galaxy, the galaxy in a mighty circle about its own directrix—space itself, 'ether,' so called, is like a mighty ball rolling and tumbling through unimaginable chaos. To this outside of space we cannot attain, for to go to the end of space is to return to the starting point.

"But there is another locus in space—wholly unique, wholly at variance with any other time-and-space sector that may be marked off. Can you conceive of it?"

Angel, his brows closely knit, shot out: "The vortex! The hub around which space revolves—space at rest and absolutely without motion!"

With the faintest suggestion of mockery in his voice Mr. Sapphire whispered, “The celebrated superman has it. Utterly unique and lawless—or perhaps with laws of its own? At any rate it must be obvious that the limitations which bind matter in space are removed in this vortex of Dead Center.”

“And I am to find it and release a certain amount of matter, your body, from certain restrictions, that is, human decrepitude?” countered Angel.

“That is it. You will work for me?”

“Damn right I will,” exploded Angel. “And not for your money or anything you have to offer—but just for the kick of finding your quiet spot and doping it out!”

“That,” whispered Mr. Sapphire, “is how I had estimated it.” The wall began to slide back into place again, hiding his shriveled body and tangle of machinery, when he spoke again: “Use the metal tab lying on that table.” He was gone.

Angel looked about, and as a table lit up with a little flash, he picked a tag of some shiny stuff from it and pocketed the thing. He heard the ponderous door grind open behind him.

CHAPTER II

Angel, his mind buzzing with figures and colossal statistics, had aimlessly wandered into the proving room. Assistants leaped to attention, for he was known as a captain in the Tri-Planet Guard. And the ship and plotting were, of course, official business. That was only one of the many ways in which his work had been made easier. But work it still was—the hardest, most gruelling kind of work of which any man could be capable. The first job he had ordered had been the construction of immense calculating machines of a wholly novel type. He could not waste his own time and his own energy on the job of simple mathematics. He just showed up with the equations and theoretical work well mapped out and let the machines or his assistants finish it off.

“At ease,” he called. “Get back to work, kids.” He ambled over to the main structural forge and confronted the foreman. “Rawson,” he said, “as I planned it this job should be finished by now.”

Rawson, burly and hard, stared at the Angel with something like contempt. “You planned wrong,” he said, and spat.

Angel caught him flat-footed. After one belt on the chin Rawson was down and out. “How much longer on this job?” he asked a helper.

“Nearly done now, sir. Who’s stuck with the proving-ground tests?”

“Nobody’s stuck. I’m taking her out myself.”

With something like concern the helper eyed Maclure. “I don’t know, sir,” he volunteered. “In my opinion it isn’t safe.”

“Thanks,” said the Angel with a grin. “That’s what we aim to find out.” He climbed into the ship—small and stubby, with unorthodox fins and not a sign of a respectable atmospheric or spacial drive-unit, and nosed around. He grunted with satisfaction. No spit-and-polish about this job—just solid work. To the men who were working a buffer-wheel against the hull he called, “That’s enough. I’m taking her out now.” They touched their caps, and there was much whispering as Maclure closed the bulkhead.

With a light, sure touch he fingered the controls and eased the ship inches off the ground, floating it to the take-off field, deeply furrowed with the scars of thousands of departing rockets. There was no fanfare or hullabaloo as he depressed the engraved silver bar on the extreme right of the dash. But in response to that finger-

touch the ship simply vanished from the few observers and a gale whipped their clothes about them.

Maclure was again in the black of space, the blinking stars lancing through the infinitely tough plastic windows. And he was travelling at a speed which had never before been approached by any man. “Huh!” he grunted. “I always knew I could work it out.” He saw the moon in the distance—about a million miles behind and to starboard.

Deliberately he cut into the plane of the ecliptic, determined to take on any meteorites that might be coming. He had a deflection device that needed testing.

Through the clear window before him he saw a jagged chunk of rock far off, glinting in the sun. Deliberately he set out to intersect with its path. As they met there was a tension in the atmosphere of the ship that set his hair on end. But there was no shock as he met the meteorite; he did not meet it at all, for when it was about a yard from the ship it shimmered and seemed to vanish.

Maclure was satisfied; the distortion unit was in order. And the chances of meeting anything so freakish as a meteorite were so small that he did not need any further protection. He was whistling happily as he headed back to Earth.

Then, abruptly, there was a peculiar chiming resonance to the idling whisper of the drive-units. And in the back of Angel’s head a little chord seemed to sound. It was like something remembered and forgotten again. Scarcely knowing what he was saying and not caring at all he called softly: “I can hear you!”

The chiming sound mounted shrilly, seemed to be struggling to form words. Finally, in a silvery tinkle of language he heard: “We’re superhet with your malloidin coils. Can’t keep it up like this. Full stop—all power in malloidin for reception. Okay?”

That, at least, he could understand. Someone had performed the almost impossible task of superhetrodyning some sort of nodular wave of constant phase-velocity into a coil set up as an anchor-band! He groaned at the thought of the power it must have taken and flung the ship to a halt, reversing his power to flow through the anchoring coil that was receiving the message. It sounded again: “That’s better. Can you make it 7:7:3, please?”

He snapped insulated gloves on his hands and adjusted the armature windings. “God knows where they get their juice from,” he thought. “But I hope they have plenty of it.”

“We can’t hear you, Angel Maclure,” said the voice from the coils. “This must be going through to you, though, because you’ve followed our requests. I can’t get detailed, because this little message will burn out every power-plant we have. Do not

return to Earth. Do not return to Earth. Do you get that? Come instead to coordinates x-3, y-4.5, z-.1—get that? three, four point five, point one. We'll be able to contact you further there. But whatever you do, don't return to Earth. Signing off—”

The metallic voice clicked into silence. Maclure, mind racing, grabbed for a star-map. The coordinates indicated in the message were those of a fairly distant and thinly-filled sector of space. He hesitated. Why the hell not? No man had ever been beyond Pluto, but was he a man?

He grinned when he remembered his tight-fisted, close-mouthed father who had made him what he was with a gruelling course of training that began actually before he was born.

Yes, he decided, he was a man all right, and with all of a man's insatiable curiosity he set his course for the distant cubic parsec that was indicated by the coordinates he had so strangely heard through a drive-unit receiver. And with all the fantastic speed of which his craft was capable he did not want to drive it beyond its capacity. Having set the controls he relaxed in a sort of trance in preparation for his week-long trip.

After locating himself among the unfamiliar stars of his destination he rearranged his coils. “That wasn't necessary,” they said almost immediately in the metallic chimes. “We're coming out for you.” Then they fell silent. But minutes later a craft hove alongside and fastened onto his hull with a sort of sucker arrangement. It was no larger than his own, but somehow sleeker and simpler in its lines.

They had clamped right over his bulkhead and were hammering on it. He opened up, trusting to luck and logic that their atmosphere was not chlorinous. “Come in,” he called.

“Thanks,” said the foremost of three ordinary individuals. “My name's Jackson.”

“Yeah?” asked Maclure, staring at him hard. He was dressed exactly as Maclure was dressed, and his features were only slightly different.

Jackson smiled deprecatingly. “You're right,” he said. “But you can call me Jackson anyway. I'd rather not show you my real shape. Okay?”

“You should know best,” shrugged the Angel. “Now tell me what's up.”

“Gladly,” said Jackson, settling himself in a chair with a curiously loose-jointed gesture. “You're not very much of a superman, you know.”

“Pardon the contradiction,” said the Angel ominously, “But I happen to know for a fact that I'm very far above the normal human being.”

“Intellectually,” said Jackson. “Not emotionally. And that's very important. You

don't mind my speaking plainly?"

"Not at all."

"Very well. You're much like an extremely brilliant child. You have a downright genius for mechanics and physical sciences, but your understanding of human relationships is very sub-average. That must be why you were so badly taken in by Mr. Sapphire."

"Taken in?" reflected the Angel. "I don't think he fooled me. I knew that he'd try to get me out of the way—murder or otherwise—as soon as he got what he wanted from me. I trusted myself to take care of him."

"Good, but not reasoned far enough. Did it ever strike you that Mr. Sapphire—as you persist in thinking of him—was not a free agent? That he was—ah—grinding somebody else's axe?"

"Holy smokes!" yelped Maclure. The strange discrepancies which he had bundled into the back of his mind suddenly resolved themselves into a frightening pattern.

"Exactly," smiled Jackson. "You are the key piece in the problem. Both sides must take care of you, for if you are lost the game is at an end. Shall I begin at the beginning?"

"You'd better," said the Angel weakly.

"Very well," began Jackson. "Our opponents are known to us as the Morlens; we are the Amters. For some thousands of your years there has been an intermittent warfare going on between us. You must take my word for it that it is they who are bent on destroying us and that we act only in self defense. They are situated about nine parsecs away from us, which makes attack a difficult and dangerous undertaking, yet they have not hesitated to risk their entire generations in desperate attempts to wipe us out.

"Of late there had been little of that; when our spies reported they informed us that an intensive psychological campaign was going on against us. This we could repulse with ease. But we could not very well block their attempts to gain mental domination of Earth and its solar system. They did not, of course, control every individual, but they reached sufficient key-persons like Mr. Sapphire to be nearly masters of your world."

"One moment," interrupted the Angel. "I can assure you that Mr. Sapphire knew that they were at work on him. I also believe that he only pretended submission. His ends were his own."

"Perhaps," Jackson shrugged. "At any rate, what they needed was mechanical and physical genius. And you, Angel Maclure, are the outstanding mechanical and

physical genius of the universe. You can solve problems that no other mind could even approach. And the first of such problems was the one of Dead Center, which we have been investigating for many generations.”

“Investigating?” snapped Angel. “How?”

“Purely psychological investigations, such as the projection of minds within the region of the Center. This has been actually a desperate race against the Morlens, for we believe that who is master of the Center is master of the universe.”

“That’s probably true enough,” said Maclure thoughtfully. “And so you make your bid for my support?”

“We do,” said Jackson somberly.

“That’s nice,” snapped the Angel viciously. “Now get this and get it straight: I’m not playing anybody’s game but my own, and if helping you out against the damn Morlens helps me out I’ll do it. On those terms—okay?”

“Okay,” said Jackson gravely. “And you’d better begin helping us out pretty fast, because your benefactor Sapphire either relayed to or had his mind read by the Morlens, and they know the results of your calculations. They know where the Center is and, in a way, how to get there.”

“Yeah,” jeered the Angel. “Give me a piece of land and some tools and I’ll build you a space-ship that’ll make this thing look like a waterbug for size and speed!”

“Haw!” laughed Jackson, “More damn fun!”

CHAPTER III

Maclure had mostly duplicated the calculating work he had done back on Earth, working speedily and accurately though somehow depressed by the strangeness of the planet on which he had landed. Not yet had he seen the actual shapes of the Amters; they preferred to show themselves as almost replicas of his own face and body. Jackson had become his guide and companion.

“Look,” said the Angel, glowing with pride. “Something new.” He indicated a little sphere of silvery metal that looked somehow infinitely heavy. It rested ponderously on a concrete table well braced with steel beams, and even that sagged beneath it.

Jackson inspected the thing. “Weapon?” he asked.

“Darn tootin’, friend! I found this as a by-product of warp-synthesis. The base is osmium, the heaviest by volume of any natural element. And over that is a film one molecule thick of neutronium itself. How do you like it?”

“How do you use it?” asked Jackson cautiously.

“Mix up about a hundred of these things and when you get near enough to an enemy scoot them out into space. And unless they have a damned efficient screen they’ll be riddled by simple contact with the things.”

“Um,” grunted Jackson. “Child’s play, of course. When does the real job begin?”

“Any minute now, if you mean the ship. And I have some bad news for you,” Maclure added grimly. “You boys’re supposed to be the prime exponents of hypnotism and telepathy in the galaxy, right?”

“I think we are,” snapped Jackson.

“Well, laugh this off. I happened to get curious about the Morlens so I rigged up a projection gimmick that traces interferences of the eighth magnitude. Or, to translate my terms back into yours, a thought detector.”

“Go on, Angel. I think I know what you found,” said Jackson slowly. “The Morlens—they’re at it?”

“Right,” said the Angel. “My set-up showed a complete blanketing spy system. The minds of all workers on the calculators were being picked over carefully. In some cases they even substituted Morlen personalities for the workers’ and used their eyes. Naturally the Morlens didn’t try to tap your mind or mine; we would have known it. I did what I could—put up a dome screen of counter-vibrations that seem

to shut off our friends. But—what do you think?”

“You have more to tell me,” said Jackson. “Go on.”

“At it again?” asked Maclure with a grin. “Okay, mind-reader. Lamp this gimmick.” He opened a cabinet and produced a small, flimsy device. “The engineering’s pretty sound on this,” he said, “but I’m still shaky on the psycho-manipulation you folks taught me last week. We’ll see if it works.”

He plugged leads and conductors into ponderously insulated power-pickups and laughed as Jackson laid a worried hand on his.

“That’s fixed,” he said. “I need all the juice I can get to bring over a vidio beam. Not wanting to blow out your power stations again I built a little thing of my own.” Angel patted a stubby little casing of thick, tough glass. “Underneath that baby’s hide,” he said, “is 3⁹ volts. Not that I’ll ever need anything near that.”

The Angel’s deft fingers made minute adjustments within the spidery frame of his new gimmick; finally he connected it with a standard television screen. “Lights out,” he said as he snapped the switch. The room went dark.

Slowly, with writhing worms of light wriggling across the ground glass screen, the scene illuminated and went into full color. Maclure grimaced at the fantastic spectacle. The things he saw—!

The Morlens on whom he had focused, nine parsecs away, were hideous creatures. Like giant crabs in a way, and partly suggestions of octopi, they sprawled horribly over machinery and furniture. “That them?” he asked hoarsely.

“The Morlens,” said Jackson. “Do you wonder that I have used my hypnotic powers to mask from you my own form?”

“I suspected that you were the same race,” said Maclure. He turned again to the screen, and cut in the sound factor. A dull, clacking babble sounded from the speaker. “You know their language?”

Jackson shook his head. “They aren’t talking language. It’s a code that can’t be broken without a key. They don’t underestimate you, Angel. What else has the gimmick got?”

“Psycho circuit. If the damn thing works we won’t need to break their code. We’ll be able to tap their thoughts. Shall I try it? The most I’ve done before was to scout around back on Earth. Couldn’t find much there, though. Okay?”

“Okay,” snapped Jackson. “You only live once.”

Delicately, with the most painful precision, knowing well that a too sudden and too amplified projection of the Morlens’ minds would blow his mind out the way a thunderclap could deafen him, he turned the tiny screws of the gimmick.

The Angel winced and set his jaws as a surge of hate filled the room. It was the Morlens, far across the galaxy, who were the source. Like the pulsing roar of a dynamo the undersurge of detestation and the will to destroy beat into his brain. Hastily he turned down the psycho band, and concrete thoughts emerged from the welter of elemental emotion that rushed from the screen.

It took Maclure only a moment to solve the unfamiliar thought-patterns of the Morlens. One of them, in some commanding position, was addressing the rest in cold, measured tones. The Angel's mind strained at the effort of encompassing the weird concepts and imagery of the creatures.

“. . . increase of destruction,” the Morlen was saying, “Not very well-pleased with the technique displayed; he has come to lend the weight of his personality and training to our efforts. I remind you that I am his direct representative. I remind you that any sort of rebellion is futility, for his innate ability is such and his immense experience is such that he can cope with any problem set him. It was he who devised the spy system which was successfully operated on the Amters up to a short time ago when their prodigy from Earth began to understand. It was he who devised the penetration-proof screen which shields us from any outside detection, either physical or intellectual.”

“They think so,” interjected the Angel grimly. He averted his eyes from the screen.

Jackson stirred at his side. “Look!” he gasped.

There was a slow motion on the wall of the room in which the Morlens were gathered. And there entered a crawling vehicle of glass, surrounded by a tangle of machinery slick with moisture. Within the glass Maclure saw, obscured by moisture and drifts of steam, the shriveled, lofty, crusted brow of Mr. Sapphire.

The eyes, behind their ponderous lenses, turned directly on the Angel. “Maclure,” the voiceless whisper rang out. “Now you should know who is your adversary. I cannot hear you, but I know you have a one-way set-up on this room. A man does not meditate for one hundred years without a moment's pause and fail to learn many things about his own mind and the minds of others. To you I was a financier, I think. Now learn your error.

“It is true that my passion is for life and being. And I will brook no opposition in the way of that end. I waited the long years for you to reach the full colossal apex of your genius; a genius so profound that you yourself do not realize one tenth of its capacities.

“Maclure, you will come to heel or be crushed. You have fulfilled your mission.

You have plotted the course to Dead Center, and you have given me the faster-than-light drive which enables me to see for the first time that race of beings over whom I have for half a century been unquestioned master. My Morlens are my hands; they will duplicate for me the drive which you have devised for the Amters. Now I offer you your choice:

“Either cut your Amters dead, for from them you have nothing to gain, or refuse me and suffer the terrible consequences. For you have nothing to offer me, Angel. All you can do with the Center I now know. Only on the chance that you will in the future be of use to me do I offer to spare you. What is your answer?” The aged monster whispered in a tone of mockery: “I shall know by your actions. Within the hour I start for the Center in a perfect duplicate of the ship you have devised for your friends. Follow or oppose and you shall take the consequences. Now cut off!”

And from the ancient creature’s mind there radiated such a stream of destructive hate that the Angel winced and shut off the machine at its power lead. “Mr. Sapphire,” he meditated aloud, “is not all that I had thought him to be.”

Jackson grinned feebly. “What’re you going to do, Maclure?”

The Angel said thoughtfully: “Mr. Sapphire must not get to the Center before us. You heard that he was starting—we must follow. And we must work on the way.”

“He’s terribly strong,” said Jackson. “Terribly strong now that he has his own mind and a good part of yours in his grasp. How do we lick his psychological lead?”

“The only way I can and with the only weapons I got, chum. Cold science and brainwork. Now roll out that bus we have and collect the star-maps I got up. Round up every top-notch intellect you have and slug them if you have to, but at any cost get them into the ship. We’re going to Dead Center, and it’s a long, hard trip.”

Comfortably ensconced in the cabin of the *Memnon*, which was the altogether cryptic name Maclure had given the Center ship, Jackson was listening worriedly.

“The directive factor in the course,” said Angel, “is not where we’re going but how we get there. Thus it’s nothing so simple as getting into the fourth dimension, because that’s a cognate field to ours and a very big place. Dead Center is wholly unique, therefore there’s only one way to get there.”

“And finding out that way,” interjected Jackson, “was what had you in a trance for thirty hours mumbling and raving about matrix mechanics and quintessential noduloids. Right?”

“Right,” admitted Angel, shuddering a little at the recollection. “Half of the math was the most incredibly advanced stuff that you have to devote a lifetime to, and the rest I made up myself. Look.” He gestured outside the window of the ship.

Obediently Jackson stared through the plastic transparency at the absolute, desolate bleakness that was everywhere around them. In spite of the small, sickening sensation in the stomach they might as well have been stranded in space instead of rushing wildly at almost the fourth power of light's speed into nothing and still more nothing. He tore his eyes away. "Quite a sight," he said.

"Yeah. And do you know where we're going?"

"As far as I can see you've nearly reached the limit of space, Angel. Unless my math is greatly at fault you're going to find that we've been traveling for a month to find ourselves back where we started from. What's the kicker you're holding?"

"The kicker, as you vulgarly call it," said Maclure, "is a neat bit of math that I doped out for myself. A few years ago I stumbled on the interesting fact that there is a natural limit to the speed-direction ratio as such. I mean, there are certain directions we can go in as long as we stay beneath this limiting constant, which I refer to as J after my Uncle Joe. Anyway, when you scrounge around with some triple integration you find out what this limiting constant is. I have found it to be the speed of light to the fifth power.

"Once you go over that the fences are down. You have another direction you can go in, and that's the direction we're going to take. Reason I went way out here, nearly to the end of space, is because when we go in that direction something spectacular ought to happen to any surrounding matter. Ready to increase speed now you know?"

"Okay," said Jackson briefly. "You're the boss, Murphy!" Another of the Amters, who was handling the controls, nodded. "Over the top?" he asked grinning.

"Darn tootin', Murph," said Angel. "Hold fast, friends."

Murphy depressed the little silver bar still farther, in one savage stab. Actually they felt the ship leap ahead colossally, its beams straining under the unimaginable atomic stress and bombardment to which it was being subjected. Angel, his eyes on the port, gasped as he saw the jet black of space writhe with a welter of colors. "This is it," he snapped thinly. He turned a wheel at his hand, spinning it into the wall.

There was a throbbing of valves and pistons as great directive pumps ponderously went into action, grasping out to grip onto the very fabric of space itself. The ship changed direction then, in some weird and unexplainable manner. Speaking mathematically, the equation of the ship's dynamics altered as the factor J inoperated conversely. But from what Angel saw he doubted all his math and science. This firmest mind in the galaxy wondered if it were going mad.

CHAPTER IV

Beneath them swam an incalculably huge plain, curiously dim under a diffused light from high overhead. The vast expanse stretched as far as the eye could see, and there were moving lumps on its surface that shifted strangely without seeming to move.

Jackson screamed grotesquely. Then, as Angel caught his eye and held it he smiled sheepishly. "Imagine!" he grinned. "Me going off my rocker! But this place looks like hell to me, Angel—honest it does. What do you make of it?"

"Don't know," said the Angel quietly. "But it's more than appearances that makes an Amter scream that way. What did you pick up?"

"Can't fool you, I guess. I felt something—a very strong, clear thought band. And I didn't like it one little bit. Now that's unusual. There isn't a single thought-pattern in creation that's that way. Usually your feelings are mixed. Once you really get into a person's mind you find out that you can't hate him. You're bound to find something good.

"Even Mr. Sapphire, that horrid old octopus, has a spark of worship in him, and a very fine, keen feeling for beauty. But the band I just got—" Jackson shuddered and looked sick.

"We're soaring, Murph," directed Maclure. The ship skimmed lightly over the plain, the Angel busily staring through the ports. "Whatever the damn things are," he commented, "they don't move in any normal perceivable manner. They don't traverse space, I think. Just see they're in one place and then in another. You meet some very strange people in these parts, I think."

Crash! The ship came to a sickening halt. Angel, not wasting a word, pulled his blue-steel automatics. "The only original and authentic superman," he said in hard, even tones, "feels that dirty work is being done."

The *Memnon* settled to the ground and was surrounded by the big, grey lumps with the disconcerting ability to move without moving. Jackson shuddered. "That's it," he whispered. "Thoughtband of pure evil and hate. I could kill them for just existing."

"Hold it," said the Angel quietly. "See if you can get a message from them. I think something's coming through."

They must have been concentrating on the occupants of the craft, for even he could feel it without effort, and to the psychologically trained and sensitive Amters it

came as a buffeting blow. "Come out!" was the message, sent with deadly dull insistence and power. "Come out! Come out! Come out!"

Angel pocketed his guns. "We'd better," he said. "If I make no mistake these people can back themselves up. And if they had any intention of destroying us right out I think they could have done it."

The seven Amters and Angel filed from the ship into the chill, sweetish air of the dim plain. The grey lumps surrounded them, confronting Angel. He studied the creatures and saw that they had rudimentary features. As he guessed at their evolution they must be the end-product of an intensely intellectual and emotional race. All this, of course, subject to alteration by the unguessable influence of their surroundings.

The stolid, battering thought-waves came again. "Mr. Sapphire told us of you. He has threatened us and we know that he is powerful. We shall hold you for his disposal. He said that you were swifter than he but not as powerful and we should not fear you. If you do not wish us to believe that you must prove otherwise."

"Ask him," Angel said to Jackson, "how Mr. Sapphire threatened them."

Jackson knit his brows and Maclure could feel the pulsing communication. Promptly the creatures answered: "He locked us into time. He is very wise and knows things about time that we do not."

They were either primitive or degenerate, thought Maclure, and probably the latter from their advanced physical make-up. Perhaps he could try the time stunt himself. He whipped out a minute set of tools and selected a fairly complicated little projector. He varied the pitch of its lenses and filaments rapidly and addressed the creatures directly: "As Mr. Sapphire has done I can too. See!"

He snapped on the device, praying that his estimate of the natural properties of this half-world had not gone awry. And he had not prayed in vain, for all those creatures whom the little beam of ionized air impinged on froze stiffly into a full-fledged stoppage in time. "Let Mr. Sapphire beat that!" he grunted, releasing them.

Crash! The titanic detonation of a trinite bomb shattered the ground a half-mile away into a soft-spreading fog. Through the trembling air there spread the terrible whisper of the master of Morlens: "Can and will, Angel! I warned you. You were faster, but I got to them first. Look up!"

Above them was hanging a sister-craft to the *Memnon*, but a sickly green in hue. Said Sapphire: "Do not move or I shall release the second bomb. You underestimated these good people of mine. They are the Grey Watchers of the Silence. They are the ones to whom hate is all, and who will aid no good. With their

aid I located you in your little display and with their aid I reached this world only a moment after you. And with their aid I shall become master of the Center, Angel Maclure. Now speak if you wish.”

“Muscles,” prayed the Angel, “do your damndest!” Acting independently his two hands leaped from his pockets grasping the snub-nosed automatics that he knew so well. While the left hand blasted the closing circle of the Watchers into pulpy fragments, the right hand was pouring a steady stream of explosive pellets into the belly of the craft above. With such stunning speed had he acted that it was not the fifth part of a second before the grey circle around them had been broken wide open and the ship above was heeling over sickly with a gaping, shattered wound in its hull.

“Come on!” spat Maclure to the Amters. And in another fifth of a second they were in the ship and tearing wildly over the grey plain. “It’ll take them ten minutes at least to get going with what I did to them. Make tracks! In ten minutes we land and get to work!”

About them rose the gigantic ribs of the super-spacer that Angel Maclure had undertaken to build. Nervously he glanced at his watch to confirm his own acute time-sense. “Three hours since we landed,” he complained. “Can’t you put some steam into it?”

“They’re doing their best,” said Jackson. “We aren’t all supermen, y’know. About this statistics business here—how do you arrive at these coordinates?”

“Never mind,” snapped Angel. “If Maclure says it’s right you can bet your boots on it. We haven’t time to check.”

“Then that finishes the calculations,” yawned Jackson. “By your own words the Dead Center should rise from some unidentified spot in this damn plain some minutes hence.”

“Right. And what it’ll look like and how we’ll know we’ve found it is only one of the things I don’t know. That’s where Mr. Sapphire has the lead on us again. He’s hand-in-glove with the Watchers, and if any race is expert on the Center they must be. Suppose you turn your mind to the psychological problem of what in Hades these Watchers expect to get out of all this.”

“Evil, I think,” said Jackson slowly. “Nothing but their unalloyed instinct for mischief and destruction. You may find it hard to understand that line of thinking; I, being of the same basic stock as the Morlens do not. They are a shallow example of that perfection toward which the Watchers strive. This is a very strange land, Angel.”

“I know that,” snapped Maclure. “And I don’t like it one bit more than I have to. The sooner we get our work done and well done, I’m making tracks. And the

Center, once I've fixed Mr. Sapphire, can go plumb to hell and gone." He stared at the ship which was reaching completion. "Get that on!" he roared as a crew of three gingerly swung his original power-unit into place.

Jackson smiled quietly. "How much longer?" he asked.

"Dunno," said Angel. "But that's the last plate. Quite a hull we have there—what with transmutation and things. I didn't think it'd work with the elements of this world, but why not? Good job, anyway. Thousand yards from stem to stem, fifty yards from keel to truck. I don't see how they can crack her." But his face showed lines of worry.

"What's eating you?" asked Jackson.

"Mr. Sapphire," exploded Angel. "Always a jump ahead of us everywhere we turn—what do you make of it? How can we be sure there isn't a catch to the whole business?"

"I know the feeling," said Jackson. "Hey!" he yelled suddenly, looking up. One of the workers who had been spreading on a paste which dried to the metal of the hull, was gesturing horribly as though in a convulsive fit. His voice reached them in a strangled wail, and then suddenly he was himself again, waving cheerily.

"Thought I was going to fall!" he called.

"Yeah?" asked Jackson. He snapped a little tube from his pocket and cold-bloodedly rayed the Amter. He fell horribly charred.

The Angel incinerated the corpse with his own heat-ray and turned to Jackson. "You must have had a reason for that," he commented. "What was it?"

"He wasn't our man," said Jackson, shaken. "They've found where we are and got some other mind into his body. It was the other one that I killed; our man was dead already."

"Ah," said Angel. "Let's get out of this." He sprang into the half-finished ship. "Hold fast and keep on working," he roared to the men who were clinging to the framework. Then he took off, handling the immense control-board with the ease of a master.

In only a few minutes the rest of the men came inside. The ship was not luxurious but it was roomy and fast, and the hull was stored with weapons and screen-projectors of immense power. "Going up," said the Angel. Delighting in the smooth-handling speed of the immense craft he zoomed high into the thin air of the weird half-world.

"Look," whispered Jackson. And in the very center of the control room there was appearing a semi-solid mass that took the shape of Mr. Sapphire. It greeted Angel in the voiceless whisper that was its voice: "Maclure, can your mechanics

master this or even match it? You see a projection out of my body—once called ectoplasmic.

“With this implement and extension of me I could strangle you to death, for ectoplasm knows no limitations of cross-sectional strength. My Watchers have taught me much, and what they did not know I supplied from my century of meditation. We are the symbiosis of evil, Angel. Do you yield now?”

Maclure’s fingers danced over the immense keyboard that semicircled around him, setting up the combination of a snap-calculated field. “Beat this!” he taunted, plunging home a switch. And a plane of glowing matter intersected horizontally with the projection, cutting it cleanly in half.

“So!” rasped the whisper of Mr. Sapphire. “We shall do battle in earnest, Angel Maclure. I am coming for you!” The severed projection faded away.

CHAPTER V

Like a comet from nowhere a second ship roared into the sky, fully as large as the Angel's.

"Now how the hell did he manage to build that?" worried Maclure. "I thought I had the monopoly on transmutation and psycho-construction. Get a line on that, Jackson."

His sidekick, brow furrowed, answered slowly: "From what I can hear he did it the hard way—forged his metal and welded it together. But that must have taken him four or five months, at least. Wait a—that's it. The Watchers worked a stoppage of time for him so that he's been working on his armaments and ship for a year while we built our thing in three hours. Isn't that dirty?"

"Dirty as hell," said the Angel busily. He was feinting the ship this way and that, now closing in, now roaring a light-year distant. "Get the men at battle-stations, will you? Work it out among them. I want to be alone here."

The Angel zoomed in swiftly and shot out one sizzling beam of solid force as a feeler. It was to his surprise that it touched the ship and charred the hull. But, he worried, it should have more than charred it. He closed in again and shot out his very best repeller ray. It caught the other ship square amidships and heeled it over in a great spin for control. While it floundered he stabbed at it with a needle-ray.

The sharp-pointed, unbearably brilliant beam struck into the flank of the ship and bored fiercely. Then it was shaken off, and Maclure shot far and away out of range. Under cover of a cloud of smoke which he released from a jet he scattered a few hundred of the osmium pellets into space.

"Come on!" he muttered to himself, shooting a tractor ray at the other ship. He could hear trembling in the power room the tortured whine of his generators, and could see the agonizing vibrations of the other ship. Almost an impasse it seemed, when with a jerk the other ship lost ground and slid clean into the path of the artificial meteorites.

The Angel grunted with satisfaction as he saw myriad punctures appear in the hull. Then the already-battered ship disappeared behind a dull red glow. "Screens," he muttered. He snapped on his own, leaving open only a small observation-port. This, he noticed, the others did not have. His vantage.

From behind the screen of the other ship crept a tenebrous cloud. Angel backed away. He didn't like the look of the thing, whatever it was. In rapid succession he

rayed it with everything he had. But nothing happened. It could not be burned nor frozen, nor ionized, nor attracted nor repelled. With a sinister persistence it reached out farther yet as he backed off stalkily.

Almost in a panic the Angel aimed and released one of his preciously hoarded torpedos. The blunt, three-ton killer, packed solid with destruction, plunged squarely through the blackness and exploded colossally but to no avail against the red screen of the other ship. “Whatever it is,” brooded Maclure, “it can go through screens.” And that wasn’t good. He could do no more than watch hopelessly as it detached itself from the other ship by breaking the one slender filament which still connected it. From then on it seemed to be a free agent.

“Playing tag with a heavy fog,” mused Angel, dancing the ship away from the cloud. It was, he saw, assuming more solid form—condensing into a more compact and still huge mass. The thing was curiously jelly-like as it crawled sluggishly through space at a few hundred miles a second.

“Jackson!” the Angel yelled into a mike. “Get a line on that damn thing, will you? Try probing it en masse with the rest of your friends.”

“Oke,” came back the dry tones of his lieutenant. “We did already. That stuff is ectoplasm in the most elementary form. We aren’t sure how much it has on the ball, but it might be plenty. Watch yourself—we’ll try to break it down psychologically if we can.”

“Right,” snapped Maclure. He tried a ray on the thing again, and it seemed to be affected. Skillfully wielding the needle, he carved a hunk of the stuff off the major cloud. With incredible speed it rushed at him, and only by the narrowest of margins did he avert having the stuff plaster all over his ship.

With a steady hand he aimed the second of his torpedos, masking its discharge under a feinting barrage of liquid bromine. The tool sped through space almost undetected, finally lodged inside the cloud. The explosion was monstrous, but ineffectual. Though the cloud had been torn into about a dozen major pieces and numberless minor ones, it immediately reformed and began stalking his ship again.

As he drove it off with a steady barrage of repeller rays the thing seemed to expand and soften again. The agitated voice of Jackson snapped over the circuit. “Either we broke it down or it’s given up, Angel. But something’s brewing aboard their ship. They suddenly changed their major aim, somehow. Murphy says they’re looking for something—think it’s—?”

“Dead Center!” yelled Maclure. Almost under his very eyes the only unique phenomenon in creation had suddenly appeared.

It had risen from the plain with a splashing of colors and sounds, so violent a contravention of all the rest of the universe that his ship was transparent under its colors and the roaring, constant crash of its sound threatened to crystallize and rend the framework of his body. He could do no more than collapse limply and regard it in wonder.

The Center was, in short, everything that the rest of creation was not. In no terms at all could it be described; those which Maclure saw as light and heard as sound were, he realized, no more than the border-phenomena caused by the constant turmoil between the outer world and the Quiet Place that it surrounded.

Angel Maclure came to with a violent start. The ectoplasmic weapon had, he saw, been allowed to disperse. There was a strange quiet in space then. He snapped a tentative spy-ray on the other ship. Its screens fell away easily. The Angel blinked. "What goes on?" he muttered. The ray penetrated easily, and as he swept it through the ship he saw not one living figure. There was nothing at the barrage-relay but a complicated calculating device with shut-offs and a lead-wire to the control booth. And everywhere the ray peered he found nothing but machinery.

But in the booth from which the ship was guided his ray found and revealed Mr. Sapphire, alone and untended, his machinery pulsing away and the ancient, crusted skin dull and slack. In the faintest of faint whispers Angel heard Mr. Sapphire speak: "Maclure. My detector tells me you have a ray on us. Pull alongside and board me. You have safe-conduct."

Obeying he knew not what insane impulse the Angel heeled the ship around and clamped alongside the other. "Come on, Jackson," he called. Together they entered the ship and easily forced the door to the control booth.

"Mr. Sapphire," said Maclure.

"Maclure," sounded the whisper. "You have beaten me, I think. For I died more than three hours ago. I cannot keep this up much longer, Angel."

"Died," gasped Maclure. "How—"

With the feeblest semblance of mockery the ancient creature whispered: "A man does not meditate for a hundred years without a moment's pause without learning so simple a secret as the difference between life and death. I sought the Center, Maclure, that I might find youth and being again. There was not in me the urge to smash and create anew—the thing that is the trouble of every mind above the ape.

"I see that I have failed again . . . the Center is yours. You may do many things with it—operate its laws as wisely and well as you have the more familiar laws of the outer world. Now—"

"Stop my machinery, Angel Maclure. I am a proud man, and this mockery of life

in death is more than I can bear.”

Without another word the Angel’s nimble fingers danced among the tangle of tubes and found a petcock that he turned off with a twitch of his wrist. The machinery stopped in its pulsing, and there was no difference at all save in the complicated unit that had been Mr. Sapphire.

“And was it really you that complained against the grimness of life in this place?” asked Jackson with a smile.

The Angel, tapping away with lightning fingers at a vast calculating machine’s keyboard, looked up without ceasing from his work. “Could have been,” he admitted. “But there’s nothing like work on a grand and practical scale to make a man forget. This business of mapping out the laws and principles of a whole new kind of creation is what I might call my meat.”

“Yeah,” jeered Jackson, “The only original and authentic superman.”

“In person,” the Angel admitted modestly.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Dead Center!* by Cyril M. Kornbluth [as S. D. Gottesman]]