

# TIGER

**by the tail**

**By ALAN E. NOURSE**

*Where do objects go when they vanish  
and can never be found again? Well,  
here's one answer you can't disprove!*

**Illustrated by JEAN FAWCETTE**

**T**HE department store was so crowded with the post-season rush, it was surprising that they spotted her at all. The salesgirl at the counter was busy at the far end, and the woman was equally busy at her own end, slipping goods from the counter into the large black purse. Kearney watched for several minutes in growing alarm before he motioned over the other section manager.

"Watch that woman for a min-

ute," he said in an offhand whisper. "She's sorting that hardware like she owns the store!"

"A klepto? What are you waiting for?" asked the other. "Let's have a talk with her—"

Kearney scratched his head. "Watch her for a moment. There's something damned fishy—"

They watched. She was standing at the kitchenware counter, her hands running over the merchandise on the shelf. She took three cookie cutters, and popped them into the pocketbook. Two large cake tins and a potato masher followed. Then a small cake-safe, and two small pots. Then a large aluminum skillet.

The second man stared in disbelief. "She's taken enough junk there to stock a store. And she's putting it all into that pocketbook. Kearney, *she couldn't get all that junk into a pocketbook!*"

"I know," said Kearney. "Let's go."

They moved in on her from opposite sides, and Kearney took her gently by the arm. "We'd like to speak to you, madam. Please come with us quietly."

She looked up blankly, then shrugged and followed them into a small office. "I don't know what this means—"

"We've been watching you for fifteen minutes." Kearney took the pocketbook from her arm,

unsnapped it, glanced inside, and shook it in alarm.

He looked up, eyes wide and puzzled. "Jerry, *look at this!*"

Jerry looked. When he tried to speak, there just weren't any words.

The pocketbook was empty.

FRANK COLLINS parked his car in front of the Institute of Physics, and was passed by a fingerprint into the lab wing. Evanson met him in the corridor.

"Glad you got here," Evanson said grimly.

"Listen, John, what is this about a pocketbook? I hope it's not your idea of a joke."

"Not this gadget," Evanson promised. "Wait till you see it."

He led the way into one of the large lab sections. Collins eyed the shiny control panels uneasily, the giant generators and boosters, the duocalc relay board with its gleaming tubes and confused wiring. "I can't see what you want with me here. I'm a mechanical engineer."

Evanson walked into a small office off the lab. "You're also a troubleshooter from way back. Meet the research team, Frank."

The research team wore smocks, glasses, and a slouch. Collins nodded, and looked at the pocketbook lying on the table.

"Looks just like any other pocketbook to me," he said. H

picked it up. It felt like a pocketbook. "What's in it?"

"You tell us," Evanson said.

Collins opened it up. It was curiously dark inside, with a dull metallic ring around the inside, near the top. He turned it upside down, and shook it. Nothing came out.

"Don't reach around inside," Evanson cautioned. "It's not safe. One fellow tried, and lost a wrist-watch."

Collins looked up, his bland full face curious. "Where did you get this?"

"A couple of section managers spotted a shoplifter down in the Taylor-Hyden store a couple of days ago. She was helping herself to kitchen hardware, and was stuffing anything and everything into the pocketbook. They nabbed her, but when they tried to get the hardware back out of the pocketbook, they couldn't find any. One of them lost a wrist-watch groping around in it."

"Yes, but how did you wind up with the purse?"

Evanson shrugged. "Ever since the end of the war in '71, when they organized Psych, they've turned shoplifters over to them. This woman was taken to Psych, but when they jarred her into remembering who she was, she couldn't recall having the purse. After Psych had looked at the pocketbook, they naturally sent it



over to us. Here, I'll show you why."

Evanson picked up a meter stick, and began to push it into the pocketbook. It went in about ten centimeters, to the bottom of the purse—

And kept on going.

It didn't poke out the bottom. It didn't even bulge the purse.

Collins goggled at it. "Holy smoke, how'd you do that?"

"Maybe it's going somewhere else. Fourth dimension. I don't know."

"Nuts!"

"Where else, then?" Evanson laid the meter stick down. "Another thing about that pocketbook," he added. "No matter what you do, you can't turn it inside out."

Collins looked at the dark inside of the pocketbook. Gingerly he stuck his finger in, rubbed the metallic ring, scratched it with his nail. A shiny line appeared. "That's aluminum in there," he said. "An aluminum circle."

Evanson took it and looked. "All the stuff she was stealing was aluminum," he said. "That's one reason we called you. You know your mechanics, and you know your metals. We've been trying for three days to figure out what happens here. We can't. Maybe you can."

"What have you been doing?"

"Pushing stuff in. Checking

it with all the instruments, X-ray, everything. Didn't tell us a thing. We'd like to know where that stuff goes that we push in."

Collins dropped an aluminum button into the purse. It went through the aluminum circle and vanished. "Say," he asked suddenly, scowling, "what do you mean, you can't turn this thing inside out?"

"It's a second-order geometric form." Evanson lit a cigarette carefully. "You can turn a first-order form, like a sphere or rubber ball, inside out through a small hole in the surface. But you can't turn an inner-tube inside out, no matter what you do."

"Why not?"

"Because it's got a hole in it. And you can't pull a hole through a hole. Not even an infinitesimal hole."

"Well?" said Collins, frowning.

"It's the same thing with that purse. We think it's wrapped around a chunk of another universe. A four-dimensional universe. And you can't pull a chunk of another universe through this one, without causing a lot of trouble."

"But you can turn an inner-tube inside out," Collins protested. "It may not look like an inner-tube any more, but it will all come through the hole."

Evanson eyed the pocketbook on the table. "Maybe so. A sec-

ond-order geometric under condition of stress. But there's one hitch to that. *It won't be an inner-tube any more.*"

EVANSON pushed the fourth item made of aluminum into the purse. He shook his head tiredly. "I don't know. *Something* is taking that aluminum—" He pushed in a wooden ruler; it popped right out again. "And it wants *only* aluminum. Nothing else. That detective had an aluminum military watch, which disappeared from his wrist, but he had two gold rings on that hand, and neither one was touched."

"Let's play some thinking games," Collins said.

Evanson looked up sharply. "What do you mean?"

Collins grinned. "*Whatever* is on the other side of that pocket-book seems to want aluminum. Why? There's an aluminum ring around the mouth of the purse—all around it. Like a portal. But it isn't very big, and it doesn't use much aluminum. They seem to want lots more."

"They?"

"Whatever takes the metal, but pushes back the wood."

"Why?"

"We could venture a guess. Maybe they're building *another* opening. A large one."

Evanson stared at him. "Don't be silly," he said. "Why—"

"I was just thinking out loud," said Collins mildly. He picked up a steel meter stick. Taking a firm grip on one end, he pushed the other end into the purse.

Evanson watched, puzzled. "They don't want it. They're trying to push it back."

Collins continued to insert the stick, with pressure, and suddenly the end appeared, coming back out. Like a flash Collins grabbed it, and began tugging both ends at once.

"Watch it, watch it!" Evanson snapped. "You're making their universe conform to our geometry!" The purse seemed to sag inward.

One end of the rod suddenly slipped out of Collins hand. He fell back, grasping the stick. It was straight.

"Evanson!" he snapped excitedly. "Can you get a winch up here?"

Evanson blinked dully, and nodded.

"Good," said Collins. "I think I know how we can hook onto their universe."

THE big three-inch steel bar rolled easily into the lab on a dolly. The end of the bar, for six inches, was covered with shiny aluminum tubing, and bent into a sharp hook.

"Is the winch ready?" Collins asked excitedly.

Evanson told him it was.

"Then slide the purse onto the end of the bar."

The end of the bar disappeared into the pocketbook.

"What are you trying to do?" Evanson asked uneasily.

"They seem to want aluminum, so we're going to give them some. If they're building another opening through with it, I want to hook onto the opening and pull it out into this lab. They'll be putting the aluminum on this bar with the rest. If we can hook onto that aluminum, they'll either have to cut it free and let us retrieve it, or open it into this lab."

Evanson scowled. "But what if they don't do either?"

"They *have* to. If we pull a non-free section of their universe through the purse, it will put a terrific strain on their whole geometric pattern. Their whole universe will be twisted. Just like an inner-tube."

The winch squeaked as Collins worked the bar to and fro inside the purse.

"Up a little," he said to the operator.

Evanson shook his head sourly. "I don't see—" he began. The bar twanged under sudden pressure.

"Hold it! You've got it hooked!" Collins shouted.

The winch squealed noisily, the motor whining under the strain. The steel bar slid slowly out of

the purse, millimeter by millimeter, pulled as taut as a piano wire. Every ten minutes one of the technicians made a chalk mark on the bar by the mouth of the purse.

Frank Collins filled a pipe and puffed nervously. "The way I see it," he said, "these beings pried a small fourth-dimension hole into our universe, and somehow got that woman under a suggestive trance. They made her collect aluminum so they could build a bigger opening."

"But why?" Evanson poured coffee out of a thermos. It was late, and the whole building was silent and deserted except for this one lab section. The only noise in the room was the whine of the winch, straining at the other universe.

"Who knows? To get more and more aluminum? Whatever the reason, they want to get through to our universe. Maybe theirs is in some danger or other. Hell, the reason may be so alien that we couldn't possibly understand it."

"But what's the idea of hooking onto them?" Evanson's eyes were worried.

"Control. We pull a non-free chunk of their universe into ours, and they can't use the opening. It'll be plugged up. The more we pull through, the more strain on the structure of their universe.



"They'll have to listen to our terms then. They'll have to give us their information so that we can build openings, and examine them properly. If they don't, we'll wreck their universe."

"But you don't even know what they're *doing* in there!"

Collins shrugged, made another chalk mark on the bar. The bar was humming.

"I don't think we should take the risk," Evanson complained. "I didn't have permission to try this. I just let you go ahead on my own authority, on data—" he shuddered suddenly—"that's so damned vague, it makes no sense at all."

Collins knocked out his pipe sharply. "It's all the data we have."

"I say it's wrong. I think we should release the bar right now, and wait till Chalmers gets here in the morning."

Collins eyed the winch with growing uneasiness, lighting his pipe with a match held in unsteady fingers. "We *can't* release the bar now. The tapered sheaves are under too much tension. We couldn't even burn through that rod with an oxy-torch in less than twenty minutes—and it would jolt the whole building apart when it broke."

"But the danger—" Evanson stood up, his forehead beaded with perspiration. He nodded to-

ward the creaking winch. "You might be gambling our whole universe."

"Oh, calm down!" Collins said angrily. "We don't have any choice now, or even time to talk it over. We're *doing* it and that's all there is to it. When you grab a tiger by the tail, you've got to hang on."

Evanson crossed the room excitedly. "It seems to me," he said tensely, "that the tiger might have the advantage. If it went the wrong way, think what *they*

could do to *our* universe!"

Collins blew smoke from the corner of his mouth. "At any rate, I'm glad we thought of it first—" He trailed off, his face slowly turning white.

Evanson followed his stare, and his breath came in a sharp gasp. The thermos clattered noisily to the floor. He pointed at the second chalk mark, sliding *into* the pocketbook.

"You mean you hope we did," he said.

—ALAN E. NOURSE

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