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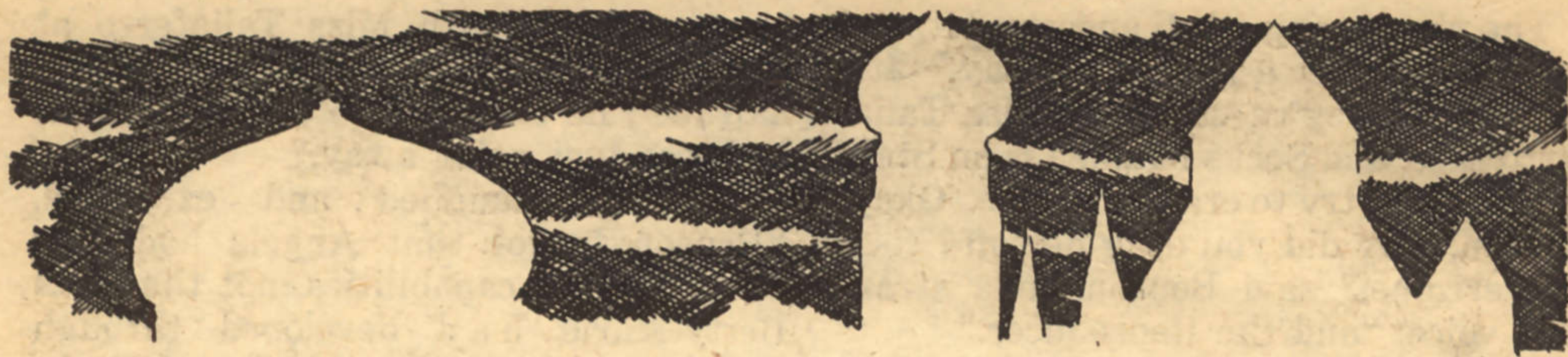
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Time stopped for Piridov, deferring his death-sentence while the bullets were yet in midair, and in that endless—

MOMENT without TIME

—he became the most dangerous man in Moscow!

A Novelet by **JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS**

I

PIRIDOV was facing the firing squad in the execution cellars when the solution hit him.

It was the answer he needed, the answer to the mathematical relation of time to the three spatial dimensions. It came to him in the form of an equation, as simple as the German's historic energy-mass formula—"e=mc²", where "c" represents the speed of light.

" $T = \frac{a}{\pi \frac{e}{6}}$ " was the answer; it came to him as if written in blinding white letters on a blackboard before his eyes.

With "a" representing the absolute—Infinity, or Creation, or the First Cause, however it might be expressed in various inexact concepts.

There were points of reference to be determined, of course. Ordinates and abscissas, plus or minus. The detailed calculations might take years, even with the amazing electronic computators of the Americans. The practical application would be thereafter the task of technicians and mechanics, and it might take an even longer time. The energy-mass formula itself hadn't resulted till almost



four decades after the first crude atomic fission.

But the equation was the thing. All the essential mathematical steps leading up to it fitted into place instantly in Piridov's mind.

Being a man of imagination, as all great mathematicians are, he saw it also as a picture: Time was a like a sword-blade of infinite thinness cutting at infinite speed through water.

The molecules of the water are not altered by the swift sweeping of the blade. They continue in their constant attrac-

tion and repulsion, with their constituent atoms hooked unchanged together, electrons revolving around their nuclei, neutrinos like sparks from a whirling grindstone being born constantly and dying, the whole great ocean which the water droplets form rising and falling in its semi-diurnal tides, with luminous fish swimming in the profound depths, waves on the surface moving back and forth with the wind—all untouched and unaware of the infinitely thin sword slicing at its infinite speed. But the sword has swept, is always sweeping, through

all dimensions, intangible to matter; and the edge of it is Time.

The equation was so obvious, in terms known to any schoolboy, that it seemed almost incredible no one had hit on it before. Piridov pulled at his thin beard—an unconscious habit in moments of supreme concentration—with his eyelids still closed on the bright figures which explained all. His tired and broken body seemed light as a balloon. He felt ridiculously like shouting, "Heureka!", in the classic tradition of old Archimedes rushing naked from the bath.

He must communicate it to the Italian and the Dane at once. To the Englishman and the German and the American. They would grasp the vista which it unfolded instantly, would get to work on the calculations in proof without delay. There was no time to waste.

No. There was no time for anything, he realized with profound despair. No time at all.

He had been aware of a voice, rapidly and tonelessly reading off the judicial decree—"Death to the cannibal and traitor Piridov, intellectual deviationist and enemy of the people! By order of the People's Democratic Supreme Court. Approved by Malenko, Political Bureau"—the voice of a nightmare. He had seen the leveled muzzles ten feet off, the narrowed sighting eyes in the grim Tartar faces, the squishing hose of the one-eyed janitor in the corner washing down the floor anticipatorily around his very feet. Involuntarily he had closed his eyes at the shout of "Fire!", uttered with a flash of descending hand by the squat noseless execution sergeant—Diadka Smert, they called him, Sergeant Death, with his terrible flame-mottled face.

And in that flashing instant, as he closed his eyes, he had seen the bright equation.

PERHAPS he hadn't even been the first to perceive it, he thought. It might have been precisely what had been in the great Greek's mind, crouching at the sea edge and absorbedly writ-

ing his figures in the sand with a stick, at the very moment the savage Roman spears had thrust into his body. Yet if so, the next lapping of the waves had wiped the figures out with saltwater and blood, beside his sprawled lifeless hand, beyond all reading.

A great and regrettable obliteration. More almost than could be borne. Piridov's hand, soon also to be lifeless, dropped from his beard in a gesture of bitter futility.

What he had been condemned for he didn't quite know. They hadn't discovered the tenuous round-about correspondence which he had maintained with the Italian and the Dane—he was sure of that. They hadn't made any reference to it. With even a suspicion of such forbidden scientific communication, they would have made it a hundred times worse for him.

Undoubtedly he had been a little slow, and not particularly vociferous, in applauding the latest twist in party-line mathematics and joining in condemnation of the Germans as warmongering and counter-revolutionary. They had cited that against him. But probably his great mistake had been to give a minimum passing grade in the Institute doctorate exams last month to Malenko's idiot son, instead of very highest honors.

His crime had evidently not been regarded as too important, though. They hadn't even bothered to arrest Anna when they had come for him, though she had made a sobbing nuisance of herself, poor sentimental woman, clinging to him with her frail night-clad arms until they tore her away. Andrei, taken from his wife and children that same night, had been given only a twenty-four hour grilling, according to the prison grapevine, and then allowed to return to his employment in the Research and Experimental Division of the Paper Trust, with merely a notation on his otherwise impeccable record that he was the son of a condemned state enemy.

For himself, the interrogation had lasted no more than a minimal ten days,

and had been routine in form. A simple confession that he believed in God and had prayed to God for peace against the Red Army—that had amused them—and in general had been a saboteur and wrecker, had sufficed them. They had given him a special firing-squad of his own, in deference to his Hero of Soviet Science decoration, and had permitted him to stand facing it this way, rather than receive the single pistol-shot of mass execution while kneeling against the wall.

For the ease and brevity of it he was

While Death Waits—

THE HOURS of our lives run out all too swiftly. And man, seeing his time ever shorten and shrink as he watches, cries out for the Moving Finger to pause, to wait just a little moment while he scrambles to do the thing he has left undone. But for no man has time ever stopped—except for Piridov. For him even Death waited, giving him all the time in the universe, but no time to live.

This is a grim and memorable story, done by a master craftsman.

—*The Editor*

very thankful. He was a frail-boned and sensitive man. He had never stood pain well.

Only for the sudden coming to him of the time solution, too late to add it to the sum of human knowledge, did he feel regret in this final instant. An equation of blinding whiteness on his closed eyelids. But soon to be lost with him . . .

Sergeant Death had shouted "Fire!", it seemed to Piridov, minutes ago. The waiting was painful. Slowly and reluctantly, he opened his eyes on the cellar scene.

THE white-painted walls lit by thousand-watt bulbs, the four rifle muzzles pointed at him, the squinted eyes behind the sights, the taut retracted trigger-fingers, squat thick-chested Sergeant Death standing to one side with his hand down at his thigh in the conclusion of the sweeping ax-blade gesture with which he had accompanied the command to fire, the bullets coming at his breast. Four of them, straight at his heart, not more than twelve to fifteen inches away; while from the corner, out of the range of fire, the one-eyed scavenger directed the stream of water around his feet to wash his blood away.

No, the bullets weren't coming. They were motionless in space. The eyes behind the sights were motionless. The water hosing over his feet was motionless, both the stream and the up-splattering drops of it. The red second hand of the electric clock on the wall above the steel door was motionless, the minute and hour hands straight up and down at six.

Piridov brought up a numb hand and felt his throat.

"What's happened?" He moved his throat and lips.

No sound. Absolutely no sound he could hear. The silence and motionlessness remained.

He was immediately both amazed and frightened. He experimented. As if afraid of breaking a spell, he made—or tried to make—a sound not obviously an experiment—a deep breath. It should have sounded in his throat, his nostrils. But it didn't.

Only a crystal silence.

Belatedly, and with a good deal of confusion in his mind, the realization came over him that somehow, in grasping the mathematics of the time dimension, he had momentarily arrested it.

The whirling sword-blade of infinite thinness was forever cutting at infinite speed through all the spatial dimensions. He was on the edge of it. As all men, all things, always are. But for him, within this instant—though how think of in-

stants when there was no time?—the blade had stopped. Stopped, humming, against the breast of Piridov.

How long the timelessness would continue he didn't know. There was only one urgent thought in his mind: to set the equation down before the infinitely swift blade resumed its sweeping.

He fumbled hastily, a little frantically, through all the pockets of his shirt and trousers. Not a stub of pencil, not a paper scrap. Nothing. Not even a stick and a wave-washed sand to write it on, in the moment before the spears. Not even the Greek's last hope.

The white cell walls themselves! If he only had time to reach the one back of the firing-squad, the whitest and cleanest, and only had something to mark or scratch with. A knife or a nail, or anything. Quickly! Before the swift instant moved on.

The four bullets were poised in space in front of him, like a flight of miniature wingless jets irregularly spaced. They were slightly flattened at their heads by the massed air in front of them, slightly oblate axially in their rifled spin. They were lead, he saw, for hitting power and spread, not steel.

With a breathless terror in him, watching the motionless eyes for indication that his gesture was being detected, he reached his thumb and finger up, and picked the nearest bullet from in front of his breast. He took a tentative step to the side away from the other three that remained suspended in their swift flight.

As his head moved through the motionless sound-waves around him, he heard his own startled whisper in reverse:

“—*dnepah-h Stahwuh*—”

The water hosing the cement floor where his feet had been remained in motionless stream from the nozzle directed by the one-eyed janitor. Only the outlines of his feet were dry, surrounded by water frozen in ripples like glass, beneath spray that hung like diamonds in the air. Piridov thought, a little

numbly, of a phrase he had somewhere heard—“Footprints . . . in time . . .”

With the bullet clutched against his breast he tiptoed shakily past the terrible eyes of Sergeant Death glaring at him. Near the muzzles of the riflemen his ear-drums came in contact with the first shattering sound-wave of the volley. But with a movement of his head he was out of the circle of it, its outside rim not yet having spread more than a foot away.

He had reached the wall behind them still undetected. He stretched his arm up, standing on tiptoes. In breathless but careful haste he began to scratch the stupendous equation:

“ $T = \text{—}$ ”

He had it down! He leaned against the wall, limbs shaking as if he had run a nightmare race, with feet planted in cement, from the huge swift shadow of oblivion just behind him.

Dim and gray, only a faint marking on the white paint, seven feet above the floor, just beneath the ceiling. With the next coat given to the cellar, possibly even with the next thorough hosing-down, the dim letters would be wiped out.

But it was there, legible at close inspection. Someone's eye would certainly light on it before it was obliterated. Someone who might understand a little, however inadequately, the profound significance of the figures. Someone who, going out of this place afterwards, would communicate it to the few minds in the world who could work it out and prove it.

Not just to die in this ugly cellar.

Yet, Piridov thought despairingly in the next moment, not one man in a hundred thousand, perhaps a million, would understand the equation's importance even to that extent! And even if, against all odds, such a man might happen to see it, he would know nothing of the devious way of communicating with the Italian or the Dane. Nor did anyone except the executioners and the necrotomists ever go out of this place alive.

It was not enough. He must try to

get it started on its way himself.

Breathlessly he put his hand on the smooth-polished latch-handle of the steel door beside him, easing it open silently on its oiled hinges, watching the motionless forms in the cell. Had the janitor's blind white eye followed? Not yet. He went tiptoeing past the guard standing with cradled burp-gun on the other side of the steel door, hunching his shoulders beneath the cold unwinking gaze upon him.

AT A sprawling, stumbling pace he hurried forward along the brightly-lit corridor, past cell doors he dared not look into, towards the door at the far end, likewise sentry-guarded. He opened it beneath the marble gaze and went up stairs and through another steel door at the top, tensed with each hurried step for the sudden shout of reawakened time around him.

The way out was long and multiple-guarded, but not labyrinthine. Four separate flights of stairs, a dozen doors, a thousand silent hurrying steps, and he was in the front receiving lobby of the huge old granite czarist prison—historic Moscow landmark, from which all the modern underground extensions stemmed—and crossing the worn flagstones. Out through the grim barred entrance doors, leaving them open behind him like all the others, past the last machine-gun boxes beneath the stone archway.

In a moment more he was mingled with the motionless throngs of Lubianka Square, beneath the red sunset sky.

He went along at a zigzagging lope, keeping to the sidewalk edges and gutters, heading for the Institute beyond Red Square. A couple of late copies of the Soviet Mathematical Journal should be lying on his desk there, on whose contents page he might pinprick the tiny dots which would spell out the Piridov equation.

Then to get them wrapped and addressed to his friends the good Bolshevik scientists in Bucharest and Helsinki, and

put them in the outgoing mail-box, ready to be started on their way with the next collection! In a week, or two or three, after time began again, the figures should reach the Italian and the Dane.

If not thrown into a bonfire, in transit, by a downed mail-pilot to warm his fingers. If not appropriated by some train-crewman to wipe his greasy fingers on after eating his lard and black-bread sandwich. If the pinprick method of communication remained still undiscovered, a possibility which hung over all of them all the time.

He had emerged into the early office-letting-out and food-queue hour. His weaving pace took him in and out through unrelated words, "*Nyet—*", "*Bog—*", caught in air on the stopped edge of the whirling blade. Though what the "*No*" was about, and what the "*God*", he could not know. The previous words were already beyond this moment in time. Those to follow lay still unspoken.

If now suddenly time should begin again, all those hundreds of marble eyes would be filled with light and movement, all those incompleting words would turn into a great single roar, "*Traitor! Beast!*", with the motionless arms he was brushing past reaching spontaneously to seize him. Piridov! Here on the street running, Piridov, condemned! Stop the dog! Stop him! Stop!

Not again for him, if that happened, the mercifully swift bullets of the rifle-squad back in the cellar, in this timeless moment stopped. But hours which would be centuries, months which would be eons of undying agony, while they tried to get from his wracked body and screaming mind the secret of how he had got away, which he would not be able to explain in any manner which they—or he himself—could fully understand.

But let it not happen yet. Only give him a half hour more. A half hour, Piridov thought grimly, more vital than life itself—vital to all men.

II

H E HAD reached the broad marble steps of the Commissariat of Culture and Information, where the broadcasting studios of Radio Moscow were housed across from the great pale pink brick walls of the Kremlin on troop-filled Red Square, and was starting to go past, when abruptly the realization came to him there might be a much swifter and more certain way of communicating—if the timeless moment only held. He veered, running up the wide steps.

It was a building with which he had no acquaintance, staffed and guarded relentlessly by the MVD. But in all bureaucratic organizations there are signs on office-doors. Beyond the vigilant guards in the doorway, who checked with careful eyes the permits which incoming and out-going queues were patiently waiting to extend to them, there was a desk marked "Information" at the foot of the broad stairs. An old man with a scraggly white mustache was seated behind it, smoking a pipe whose fog hung frozen in air, his eyes fixed upon a mimeographed page on the metal desk-top in front of him.

Piridov paused and bent over the old man's shoulder. Carefully he lifted the hand which concealed part of the top sheet, pulling nervously at his beard as he read down:

*BROADCASTING, FOREIGN
LANGUAGES, FLOORS 4-8*

*Abyssinian—
Afghanastani—*

He peered at the page below.

*English, 4th Floor, Corridor 1,
Sections A-K*

English would be best. He knew the language better than German—he had got a bronze medal for English proficiency his last year in the university, long ago. There were always English broadcasts going out, moreover, to the British Isles and Scandinavia, the

North American sector, India, South Africa, the Anzac sector, twenty-four hours a day without stop. There must be, even in this timeless moment some newscaster in the act of speaking.

He found the lettered door three flights up, near the head of the stairs. Beyond a paneled reception room there was a large room like a newspaper press-room, he imagined—shirt-sleeved man grasping at batteries of phones on desks, rows of glass-eyed typists with fingers motionless in swift flight above their keys, trousered and skirted maniacs with bulletins in their hands caught in swift crisscross rush over the floor. His ear-drums moved through a toccata of teletypes and typewriters, ping of bells and burr of buzzers, a mingled inchoate jabber of half-words.

Beyond plate-glass windows at one side there was a control-room with monitors and engineers in it, half a dozen broadcasting booths with announcers in all but one of them, red lights above four of their doors.

In one of the booths the newscaster was glancing at the clock, lips compressed, script in hand—he hadn't begun his broadcast yet, it seemed; his red light must have just flashed on. The newscaster in another of the red-lit booths had his face turned from his mike, his script at his side—his quarter or half hour must have been just completed; his light in the next second would flash off. In a third booth the newscaster's mouth was frozen in contortion, his right hand lifted, his gaze on the script in his left hand—he must be broadcasting in the moment. The man at the microphone in the other red-lit booth appeared also to be in the midst of speech, although less certainly.

PIRIDOV opened the glass door and tiptoed in beside the man with the lifted arm. In the air-wave against the microphone, bending his ear to catch it, he heard the English word "Peace—". Between it and the newscaster's open maw there lay the word "loving". Close

against his lips, filled with steel teeth and curled-back tongue, there was the syllable "pe—".

Carefully Piridov pulled back the broad thumb which held the script, removed the top page. Roman type. Triple-spaced for easier reading—for easier editing, also, with a few words inserted here, a line or two blue-penciled there. Headed: "North American 10,543 10/10, 17:55-18:35, Salovitch, Sapronsky monitor". With various stamps of approval.

He glanced down it swiftly, seeking the clue phrase.

On the next to last line of the page, at the conclusion of a paragraph, there were the words he was hunting for; "peace-loving peoples."

"—And we promise a bloody nose and a cracked head to any warmongering cannibals who dare oppose the glorious Red Army of our great peace-loving peoples!"

The phrase, although a much-worn cliché of radio and newspapers, occurred nowhere else on the page. That, precisely, marked the point of the frozen instant of speech.

Piridov hurried back out with the page. A Roman-type machine was momentarily unoccupied at one of the battery of typewriter tables. He started to sit down before it.

The monitor! Everything must be thought of. Always check and counter-check. One of the monitors in the control-room would have a carbon, following it to see that no word not in the approved script was injected. Ready to cut off the broadcast instantly if any should be.

He tiptoed hastily into the control-room. Found the hand which held the carbon duplicate, and removed the top sheet.

Beside the typewriter there was a sheet of partly used carbon paper, of about the same blackness as the one which had made the monitor's copy, so near as he could gauge it. He placed it between the two script sheets, and rolled them in the machine down just below

the paragraph ending "peoples".

He searched his mind for the English words, composing them with care, then hunted for the keys.

His method of typing was the one-fingered style. Beneath the last line of the paragraph, above the next one beginning "The great Stalin—", he pecked laboriously:

"The Soviet mathematician Piridov has just formulated the equation t equals a divided by the sphere of e —"

He thought of adding something more. A farewell, perhaps, to the Italian and the Dane, his brothers in science. But it would be needlessly dramatic. Mathematics was impersonal, or should be. One man did not matter, in its bright pure truth and immensity. Nor was there space to add anything more between the lines.

He rolled the sheets out, laying the carbon paper down again. He stood up. Reentering the broadcast-booth, he replaced the script page on top of the others in the newscaster's hand, clasp- ing down the upthrust thumb on it. He went into the control-room, and restored the carbon to the hand of the monitor who was following it with concentrated gaze. He closed both doors behind him this time as he went out.

It was done! The instant the sweeping of the blade began again, the newscaster would hurl forth the syllable already formed by his curling tongue. Then in the next breath, with eyes bent on the script, he would broadcast through Moscow's powerful voice to a quarter of the world's surface, at c speed, the interpolated equation.

No matter if none of the few minds who could understand the blindingly bright concept might be tuned in. In a hundred listening-posts beyond the curtain the broadcast was being recorded on tape, for later analysis of meaning, motive, purpose, word by word. By keen and anxious men seeking some clue in great imperial Moscow's blatant voice to what lay in the dark mind of the Great One in the Kremlin. The shadow of the

day and hour. The life and death of millions. . . .

Piridov felt tired. Oh, very tired. He closed the studio doors behind him and went stumbling down the stairs. Out the building entrance, onto Red Square.

THE armored regiments on parade still filled the thousand-yard long square. Through the towered archway of the Spasskiye Votora, the Gate of Salvation, the long line of black armored cars was still entering. "Above Moscow nothing but the Kremlin; above the Kremlin nothing but the sky." Beyond the high grim walls rose the golden onion domes, the Tower of Ivan lifting three hundred feet, containing the great Tsar Kolokol, the emperor of bells. Above them all the motionless sunset sky.

He turned away, began to walk toward the Paper Trust building in the Kitai Gorod section, only a few short blocks away to the east. Andrei would still be in his chemical laboratory there—he had been developing a new kind of swift-fading paper for special police work, and seldom left before seven or eight o'clock. The day he had lost last week while being grilled would have put him farther behind. A little incoherently Piridov thought of asking the boy to try to hide him away—

Yet instant reason told him that there was no place to hide. No time to do it in. Still, being in the vicinity, he must take advantage of the paused instant to see the boy, if only for a moment.

He went a little slowly down the narrow crooked streets of the old Chinese quarter, whose ancient edifices now housed the teeming communist offices of the brave new world. He entered the dark doorway of the crumbling old brick building where he had visited Andrei a number of times over the past dozen years. Never graciously received, but not kicked out. Andrei, the good and loyal party man, the pious canter of all the slogans, with his dark and sullen eyes.

The door of the boy's office—at the

other end of the chemistry lab on the top floor—was shut, Piridov saw with a surge of alarm. The stony faces of the workers at the tables were all turned that way. At his desk just outside the door Sirradian, Andrei's stocky assistant, was rising swiftly from his chair, his brachycephalic Armenian head bristling with short hairs like a dog's. No need to be told that Sirradian belonged to the secret police—Andrei knew it, and the whole laboratory force. Now the door of Andrei Piridov's office, which should be open always, was closed.

With a kind of breathless sob caught in his throat Piridov rushed forward down the length of the laboratory and burst the door open—

The boy was at the window across the room, with his hands on the frame which he had up-thrust, one foot on the sill. A blank piece of paper was motionless in the air beside his ear. His face was turned back over his shoulder, distorted with a frozen grief, it seemed. Beyond the low window ledge on which his foot was placed, the cobbled pavement was thirty feet down.

He felt himself responsible, Piridov thought with pain. He had been brooding. So many went out the window that way, pushed beyond endurance by the unseen hands. Andrei!

Oh, he mustn't be allowed to do it! Dull joyless fellow, born into a gray Marxist world, without dream and without hope, there might be nothing in life for him within his time. But he had his children, the hope of the future. Piridov rushed across the floor in desperation, in silence and sorrow, to pull him back.

How ridiculous his panicky haste! Andrei was motionless. Time was still stopped, or he himself would not be here. In some way, which he had not quite worked out yet, that was part of the equation's operation.

He halted before he had seized hold of the boy, wiping the sweat from his face. He picked the motionless sheet of paper from the air beside Andrei's head. It had probably blown from the boy's

hand, he realized, when the window had been opened. Andrei's distorted look over his shoulder was not suicidal grief, then, but simple annoyance at the paper wafted from his grasp, and at the door slammed shut by the same gust of air.

A label was pasted on the sheet. It was marked "X-811". The new paper which the boy had been absorbed in developing during these past months—perhaps a sample of the latest proof run. A paper whose particular quality, Piridov remembered the boy's having said, was that anything written on it vanished after a few seconds without trace, making it extremely valuable for police work and for agents in foreign countries in many ways.

He took it to the boy's counter-high work-desk against the wall, picked up a pen, and wrote:

My dear Son—

Don't feel yourself at all to blame for anything you told them. They had many things against me. It is much the best thing that happens to me, for I am tired and old.

Take care of the children. A special kiss to little Annusha. For them, it may well be, there will come a happier day.

Thy father, Peter.

He laid it against the windowpane, beneath the heel of the boy's palm on the frame. He put his arm around Andrei's heavy shoulders a light intangible instant. He turned, and went out.

III

HE WAS back on Red Square again. The sunset clouds were still unchanged, in the smallest atom of water vapor, above the great grim Kremlin walls that loomed under the painted sky.

Seat of all power, the unviewable, the terror of the world. Yet even that secret fortress was his to enter and wander through unseen, in this instant which had been given to him, on the edge of the infinitely swift blade. Why not? For

the time would not come again.

He crossed the vast square between the massed motionless ranks, around and in between the tanks and guns, like a shadow, towards the line of black cars entering. In the air around the huge gate great brazen bell-peals bonged against his ear-drums, rolling down from the English carillon in the turret which had rung for three hundred years the doom of prince and boyar. Ringing now on the first note of the four-times daily Internationale, at twelve and six o'clock.

Motionless guards with ever-watchful eyes of glass at the outer gate and beneath the arch. Piridov squeezed in between the brick arch wall and the cars, bending his knees and ducking beneath the half-leveled burp-guns. At the head of the line the innermost gate was just starting to open, beyond the invisible beams, the searching eyes, the muzzles of the guns.

He hurried, and squeezed on in through it. He was on wide Communist Avenue, the great citadel's single street, between the vast palaces and cathedrals—the Orujeynaya Palata, a scant century old, which was whispered to contain all the jewelry and gold plate of the looted monasteries, the great green three-century-old Poteshny Dvoretz, the pleasure dome, the fantastic bulbs and minarets and spires of the Pokrovsky cathedral, built by Ivan Terrible four hundred years ago.

Down the center of the wide avenue were garden plats filled with red roses, being watered by gun-carrying police gardeners in red-tabbed gray. Tens and tens of thousands of red roses, beneath the red sunset sky.

Anna had always loved red roses, he thought. If she could only see them now.

He went limping towards the white sprawling Great Kremlin Palace with its golden cupola, and in the entrance of the south wing, where—as even the most ignorant street-sweeper in Moscow knew—the great ones had their offices and

their living quarters.

He found Malenko just leaving the doorway of a room on the thickly carpeted third floor, with a sheaf of papers in his hand, between a pair of stiffly saluting guards. The famous Politboro chieftain's habitual double quotation marks of scowl were carved between his black beetling brows, his soft plump dark jowls were cleanly razored, the shadow of a smile was on his small moist lips, as he strode briskly forth without motion.

Favored heir of the Great One at the present. Holding the party and the army combined beneath his thumb. Malenko in the flesh, as fat and real as his scowling pictures.

Because of him, because of his idiot son, he, Piridov, was now dying.

"You did it, Malenko!" Piridov said with quiet bitterness.

Impotent and futile words. The beetling eyes glared back at him indifferently. The smile remained unchanged. In the motionless air the spasmodic accusation had no sound. Even if Malenko could hear it in this instant, and hear in one voice the bitter cry of all his twenty million other victims, it would move his smooth dark face only to deeper laughter. A tribute to his strength, his power. Sweet to hear.

Malenko! When the Great One died at last, old and full of evil, whether after five more years or ten, there would still be Malenko, no less dark, and no less evil. Andrei's children, and their children, would never see the day of liberation. Piridov fumbled his throat impotently. He knew, somehow, that in this silent and timeless place he could not touch Malenko in any way which would alter, or carry effect into, the next moment.

Impossible to touch Malenko, or any of them, this side of the grave. Armored against all mental or spiritual pain by sheer unfeeling. Armored against physical pain, as well, should all go against them; for like their blood brothers, dead Hitler's crew, each was rumored to carry a small vial of—

Piridov stiffened, tense.

Beyond Malenko's burly out-thrusting shoulder, in the small quiet room which he was leaving, there was the Presence.

NOT a double, but the Great One himself. Sitting at his wide polished desk inside, with thick gray hair roached back above his low forehead, with contented smile beneath his thick gray mustache. Malenko had just left him with some joke. His eyes were crinkled. His left hand was clasped about the neck of a green water-carafe which he was setting down on his desk, his right hand was lifting a tumbler to his lips which he had poured.

A shiver passed through Piridov.

Even Malenko, he thought! Even Malenko, like all the rest, must be prepared against the possibility, however remote in his case, of suddenly finding himself out of grace. Even he lived on the edge of the inquisitorial interrogation which makes a screaming out of men's bones. And had lived there for so long, that to be prepared against it had become a habit.

With shaky hands Piridov felt swiftly over Malenko's coat lapels, necktie, pockets.

There! In the righthand jacket pocket, lying loose, the bulge of a small vial.

He didn't have a handkerchief in his prison trousers, and Malenko seemed to have none, either. He whipped out his shirt tail. Draping it over his hand, he reached in and got the little bottle by the stopper rim.

Colorless liquid contents. He pulled the stopper out carefully with masked fingers. No smell. Probably tasteless, as well, or at the most with only a belated bitterness deep in the throat.

It might be only a cough-medicine or a heart stimulant. He would never know.

But this timeless moment had been given to him, and perhaps not without a purpose. He ducked past Malenko with the unstoppered bottle in his hand. On shaking knees he tiptoed across the floor inside, towards that gray figure with the

crocodile eyes behind the desk.

This was the instant when the sweep of time would begin again! His hands were shaking, his knees collapsing under him. But the moment stayed.

Numbly he emptied the little bottle into the glass of water which He was lifting to his lips. Still no movement of the eyes, the smile unchanged. Piridov put a finger in the glass, and stirred it around.

Only a glass of water still. He threw the little bottle and its stopper beneath the desk on the thick rug.

He tiptoed out past that burly self-confident figure again and the saluting guards, resisting the impulse to run screaming. Down the carpeted stairs again past unseeing eyes, and out beneath the sky. Only then did he take a deep painful breath, hurrying back towards Salvation Gate.

Yet for a moment he slowed his pace beside the roses in the center of the white sunset-lit avenue. Thinking of how Anna would have loved to see them. Remembering how in every poor place they had lived during the first years she had managed to get a red rose slip, trying to grow it in window-box or scraggly little plot of sunless ground.

Tending the dry brown sticks with continued hope, long after they were dead. Once, indeed, there had been a slip which had taken feeble root, and a small bud had come on it. But the bud had died soon after being formed, brown and shriveling, eaten by a worm. She had wept quietly over it. That had been long ago.

He had never thought of her fondness for roses particularly. Just a woman's foolish whim. So many things he had never thought of, remote from the pure world of mathematics where he had found his dream. The sad patient woman who had borne Andrei for him. Had gotten his meals, washed and ironed his one shirt each time so he would have a decent appearance at the Institute before his classes. Fading and wan. Long ago she had dissolved into the back-

ground of his awareness.

Poor Anna. It would be very hard for her.

They would never miss one rose of the many thousands. Piridov reached down in passing and picked one of the largest and most beautiful, with velvet crimson petals just unfolding, wet with its hosing as if with dew. He held it close against his breast as he slipped out through the narrow opening of the great arched gate past the black cars streaming in.

IT WAS a long way to walk, with the packed trams motionless on the silent-thronged streets, with the Metro frozen underground. Down to the grimy Khamoniviki district of slaughterhouses, gun-factories and gasworks, where they had lived for the past twenty years. A mathematics professor, purely speculative, had little value in any kind of world.

And he was more tired than he had ever been in his life before. They had broken the arch of his right foot during the grilling, he remembered now. His left knee dragged behind him in a curious kind of way. He went stumbling along the gray endless nightmare streets with bowed shoulders and sagging head—a scrawny aging man with a comical beard, with thin unkempt hair, with vague blue childlike eyes, dressed in coarse wet prison shoes with his shirt tail hanging out, carrying a red rose in his hand. Piridov, who had solved the time equation. But in any city, on any street, the most witless idiot who saw him would laugh.

So many miles to go, so many stairs to climb! But he had reached it at last, the door of the tiny attic room at the top of the rattletrap old wooden tenement, five flights up the vermin-eaten stairs.

In the dark shadows of the hall someone was at the door ahead of him. Verusha Petrovna, the house commissar, he saw, broad-beamed and duck-faced, in her knee-length grease-stained dress, with her stringy peroxidized hair. She

was reaching for the knob to pull it open, perhaps to enter in this moment and taunt Anna in her screaming voice. He brushed past the harpy, opening the door himself into the slope-ceilinged little hole which was his and Anna's home.

She was lying on her cot in the corner. She was asleep, he saw. Lying exhausted, with the barest breath.

He had not realized how wasted and wan she was. For years, perhaps, he had not really looked at her. Now in the shadows he could see. He knew, in that timeless instant, the mortal illness which had wasted her. Could tell almost to the month how long she had suffered the pain of it, in silence. The time, soon, when it would end for her.

He moved quietly to her side, not to wake her, looking down at her.

There was a curious thing which happened to him then. For this moment was timeless—he knew that well. Yet in the instant the paused blade seemed to sweep backward thirty years, and her hair was gold, her cheeks pink, her eyes laughing. And she was lying on the lake bank with him in the sweet dark summer night, in a time when all the world was roses. . . .

Aged Piridov bent over her, brushing his lips across her cheek.

"I have loved you very dearly, Anna," he whispered.

He laid the dewy rose beside her on the pillow. Just for the moment his heart was breaking.

There was nothing—nothing—that he could do for her. The rose itself must die. He must get away before the timeless instant ended, for her sake.

Yet at the door he paused, with blurred eyes and aching throat, looking back at her. There was something more which she would like to hear, he thought. Although it was not anything in his mathematics, it would do no harm for him to say it to her.

"I will see you soon," he told her.

He closed the door soundlessly behind him, and went past Verusha Petrovna,

and down the stairs.

The timelessness must end. It could not go on forever. He was so tired, yet he could not afford to rest for even the briefest moment, lest the suddenly resumed sweeping of the blade catch him there. And his mind was tired, even more than his tired body. As if it was his concentration on the equation which alone sustained the motionless instant. But at the price of a terrible exhaustion.

It was a very brilliant concept, the answer to all the riddles. But he was only a tired and aging man, and he would like to sleep.

He walked the long miles back, with bowed head and limping gait, towards the city's center and the great prison. He went in, closing the entrance doors behind him. He went through the other doors, closing each in turn, along the corridors, down the flights of stairs. At the end of the long brightly lit corridor in the deepest basement he went towards that farthest door. He went back in the cellar room, closing the door behind him.

The noseless fire-burned non-com, Sergeant Death, stood with his hand down-swung. The riflemen stood with their fingers squeezed on their triggers. The one-eyed janitor hosed down the floor in motionless stream and spatter.

Piridov went past them as quietly as a shadow. At the farther wall he turned, facing the squad, placing his feet carefully on the precise dry spots, in the empty spaces of the spattering water, which marked where he had been standing. The bullets in their swift rifled flight were poised twelve inches from his breast.

Piridov closed his eyes.

"I had a dream," he told himself. "A dream of a bright equation within a timeless instant. Of things I love and things I hate. Of a sword sweeping. A dream of water. But I am very tired. So let the dream be over."

And it was. . . .

IV

THE police officer in charge of Piri-

dov's execution, Sergeant Smert, had stiffened his belly muscles against his belt to the volley crash, as his hand descended. A thousand times he had heard it in the cellars, but it always jarred him a little. Now his belly relaxed and sagged.

He pulled out his pistol as the riflemen lowered their guns, at ease.

"Turn that infernal hose of yours away or you'll get me wet, Jughead," he told the one-eyed janitor. "You can wait till he's been hauled away to clean up. What's the rush?"

But the pistol wasn't necessary. Sergeant Smert grinned as he holstered it again.

"Honestly," he said, "the old goat gave me a laugh. Just as it hit him I swear I heard him say, 'What's happened?', as surprised as anything. And then his shirt tail flew out. Try to tie that!"

He adjusted his polished belt around his waist, and turned towards the clock above the door.

"On the dot," he said. "That's the way I like to do it. No lost time."

He frowned. On the white wall beside the door, just below the ceiling, there was some dim marking. He walked towards it, looking up. It looked as though someone had started to do an algebraic problem. He studied the figures, reading them aloud, for he had had algebra in high school, and was rather proud of it.

"T equals," he read profoundly, "a. Divided by pi. Times one-sixth e cubed. Say, which one of you half-witted characters wrote that there?"

The Tartar riflemen stared at him stolidly.

With an oath, Sergeant Smert stooped and picked up a bullet from the floor, examining it.

"One of you did," he said. "A fired rifle slug, bright on its point, used to mark with. Must have been fired into a bale of cotton or something—not mushroomed. What in hell goes on here? What's the gag? Speak up! No? All right, no more privileges of the women's

wing for you baboons, until whoever did it admits it. I guess that will have you tearing at each other's throats in about three days!"

"What does that junk mean, sarge?" said the one-eyed janitor. "That t, a, e junk?"

"Why, nothing," said Sergeant Smert. "Just gibberish. Swing your hose on it, Jughead, and wash it off."

Still he turned the bullet over in his hand. It was a puzzle. . . .

Andrei Piridov looked at the sheet of paper beneath his hand against the windowpane. He thought that he had lost his grasp on it when he had opened the window—the newest sample of X-811 which he had been examining. But apparently he hadn't.

He had a perfectly fantastic feeling that there was writing on the sheet, in that scrawling hand he knew.

"My dear Son—"

He stared at it with swimming eyes.

"—Thy father, Peter."

Nothing. The blank sheet of paper before him. He had been under too much of a strain, it was apparent. Things snapped back into place in his mind.

He turned his head to Sirradian coming swiftly in through the door behind him.

"Is everything all right, Comrade Director?" Sirradian said a little breathlessly. "I saw the door slam shut. I was afraid—it occurred to me—this is the hour—"

"What hour?" said Andrei Piridov.

"The Lubianka," Sirradian said, looking at him with intent eyes. "At this very moment—"

"Oh, yes," Andrei said, his face a mask. "It's the best thing for him, for he was tired and old. It was the wind which blew the door shut when I opened the window, comrade. Just examining the latest sample of experimental eight-eleven. I don't believe we can be certain of success with it, after all. I am not going to recommend the project."

"You are wise," said Sirradian softly.

"Nothing has been expended in it yet but your own time. If you recommended it, however, and it did not pan—*zook*, Comrade Director!"

"*Zook*?" said Andrei Piridov sullenly. "An odd word. There are many phrases you young fellows use which do not sound like good Russian to me. And why run your finger across your adam's apple? Perhaps I somewhat grasp your meaning, though, Comrade Assistant-Director."

He removed his foot from the window ledge, closing down the pane. Had he ever thought of going headlong out? He couldn't afford to. There were the children.

A blank piece of paper in his hand. A hallucination. But he felt more at peace, it seemed to him, than ever in his life before.

The MVD man was still looking at him with luminous gaze. "There will come a day," he said quietly.

"What day, comrade?" Andrei Piridov said dully again.

Sirradian measured him. The loyal party man, the faithful stooge. But Piridov's son. Perhaps someday a candidate for the liberation cell to which he himself belonged.

Their glances held. Not yet could they trust each other. But there was the dawning of an understanding between them. . .

MALENKO strode out through the doorway with the papers in his hand, between the saluting guards, with a sense of quiet elation.

The old man was beginning to fail somewhat, almost unquestionably. That story he had told the old man about his boy Bobo beaming Professor Piridov with a dead cat at the Institute had amused him. He had laughed, recalling his own idiotic mathematics instructor in the religious seminary he had attended as a boy, and the endless jibes and tricks he had played on the old goat, as he poured himself a glass of water from his carafe. Whenever the old man began

to reminisce about his seminary youth that way, one could be sure he was getting a little senile.

Not too unendurably long now, perhaps, though the old man was terribly tenacious. Malenko only wished that something would happen to push him on his way. Many times he had thought of doing it himself. If he only dared.

Piridov! A puttering harmless fool, it might seem, Malenko thought. But the miserable worm had impaired Bobo's whole future career by failing to give him a summa cum, out of sheer ignorance and inability, if not outright malignancy. A maggot like that must be trod on. Well, no more of Piridov.

Behind him, in the room he was just leaving, Malenko heard the old man utter a choking gasp. There was a thud like his water glass dropping on the desk.

His heart! If the laughter had brought it on! Malenko paused in mid-stride between the guards, starting to whirl, a soaring elation in him.

"You did it, Malenko!" a quiet voice said.

He didn't know if one of the guards had said it, or if it was only something in his own head. But suddenly terror was in Malenko at that accusing voice.

The eyes of the guards, heeling swiftly, were on him. They had heard it, too. With an incoherent shout Malenko struck out with both big soft fists at the stiffened faces and terrible eyes on both sides of him. He started running down the corridor like a hippopotamus, with bones turned to jelly, thrusting his hand in his side pocket for the small vial. But it was not there. . . .

Salovitch, newscasting in Booth 4, English Broadcast Section of the Radio Division of the Commissariat of Culture and Information, completed his sentence with the word, "peoples!"

The top page of his script slipped from his hand. His thumb had felt a sudden twinge in it—a little soreness, as if it had been bent back—which perhaps had caused him to release his grip on the

pages slightly. He had partially memorized the script, however, and the next sentence came to him, beginning the new paragraph.

"The great Stalin has just announced," he continued without pause, grabbing ineffectually for the falling sheet, "the appointment of Comrade Malenko—"

It had drifted down on his shoe, face up. A line had been interpolated before the paragraph he had started on, he saw. He glanced through the glass as he continued speaking, at Sapronsky in the control-room, who was monitoring him.

But Sapronsky hadn't noticed the omission. He had dropped his own page at the same moment, it seemed, and was reaching with one hand for it while his eyes followed the next page.

It was a lucky break. Some slight added item. He could append it at the conclusion of the script, if called on. It made no difference, he thought.

But his broadcast would be interrupted before the end, and he would never come to it. All broadcasts from great Radio Moscow that night would be cut off. . . .

Citizeness Verusha Petrovna, short-breathed from her climb, waddled swiftly to the door of the Piridovs' little attic room and seized the knob.

Inside, beyond the door, she heard a

man's voice:

"I will see you soon. . . I have loved you very dearly, Anna."

Quiet words quickly following each other. Verusha Petrovna leaned her ear against the door panel a moment, gloating. The pale frail woman who held her head so high. Verusha Petrovna had always hated her proud airs, never more proud than when a mask over hunger. She had rushed up specially in this moment to sink a claw or two.

Why, the sly deceptive thing had a lover! Verusha Petrovna pushed the door open with her burly shoulder, her stringy yellow hair about her face.

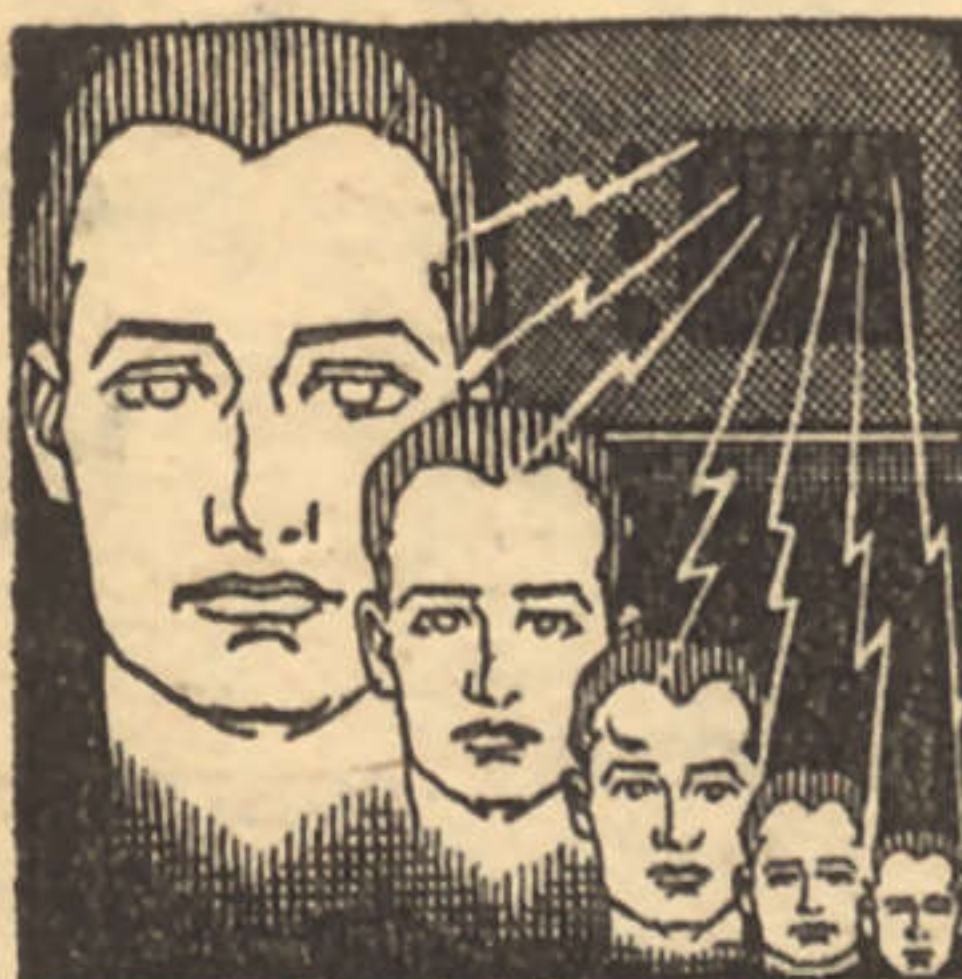
"What's going on here?" she shouted. "What's all this hoity-toity?"

But there was no man. No one. Only Anna Piridovna lying on her cot in the attic shadows.

There was a rose, a red rose, in her lax hand. Her lips were smiling, her pale sunken cheeks looked pink as a girl's, as if she were lying dreaming on a river's bank in the soft darkness of a summer's night, and had just taken her lover's kiss.

But she was not dreaming. It was not sleep.

Verusha Petrovna felt a chill rush through all her bones. She fell upon her knees, fumbling in her bosom for the secret medal which she kept hidden there.



FEATURED IN THE NEXT ISSUE

THE GADGET HAD A GHOST

A Novelet of Time's Paradoxes

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