

**THRILLING**

SEPT.

# WONDER

**STORIES**

5¢

FEATURING

**WEST POINT OF  
TOMORROW**

A Novel of the  
Planet Patrol  
By **ARTHUR  
J. BURKS**



THRILLING  
STORIES

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* The Vanishing Men

*Date of first publication:* 1940

*Author:* Ray Cummings (1887-1957)

*Date first posted:* Sep. 4, 2021

*Date last updated:* Sep. 4, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20210909

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/American Libraries.

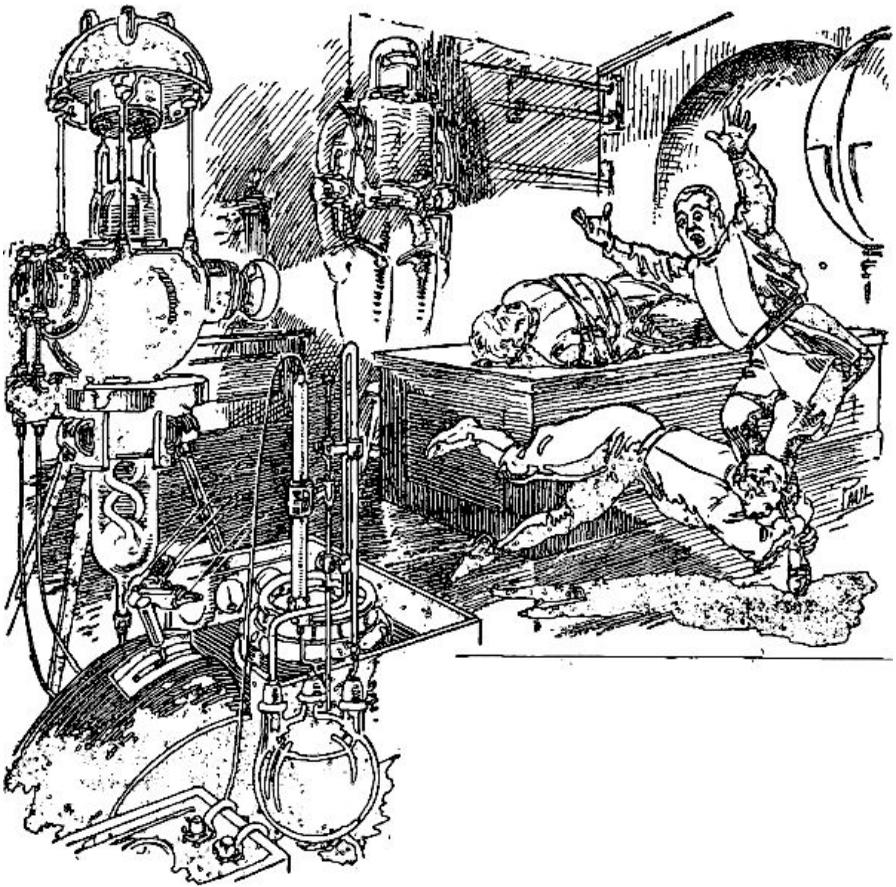
# THE VANISHING MEN

By RAY CUMMINGS

*Author of "The Thing from Mars," "Secret of the Sun," etc.*

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, September 1940.

*A Sinister Scientific Invention Catapults Its Victims Across the Continent—Within  
Minutes!*



*It was a ghastly, frenzied moment for Wils as he fought before the invisible ray*

The twelve cabinet directors of the Audiphone Company of America rose majestically from the conference table.

“I’m very glad that you have sided with me, gentlemen,” the thin gray-haired president said. “That merger really would have been ridiculous.”

The conference room of the cabinet, here in the A. C. A. Building in midtown New York City, was cool and pleasant, its massive windows were shrouded to exclude the late afternoon summer sunlight. With the final vote taken, the cabinet directors were leaving.

One of them—James Atkins, a big, stalwart, handsome white-haired man—went to the window. Idly lighting a cigar he stood gazing moodily out over the great terraced city. The dying beams of sunlight gleamed on the huge metal structures. Then, as the last of the men went out, leaving only the president in the room, James Atkins turned from the window and quickly entered a small alcove at the other end of the room. A television lens, microphone and lights were installed there. He touched a switch and a brilliant light bathed him.

He spoke into a local transmitter.

“Clear the air on Sender Three for my two-minute announcement,” he ordered. “I have the results of our decision on the merger.” He waited patiently, ready to make known the awaited news.

To Franklin Grant, aged president of the important television company, the amazing thing happened so lightning-quick that he wasn’t certain how much of what he saw was an actuality, and how much the product of his own startled, horrified imagination.

He was over at the door, saying good-by to several of the other men. Then as he closed the door he walked toward the little studio-alcove. The giant figure of James Atkins seemed to glow in actinic light as he faced the television senders.

Suddenly Grant stopped, and stared with stupefied amazement, then horror. The man under the television light seemed transparent! Like a ghost standing there.

The president’s gasp caught in his tightened throat. And as he stared, the pallid thing which had been Atkins was fading, dissolving. For a vague instant it seemed to stagger, as though Atkins himself was stricken with the horrifying knowledge of what was happening to him. In another second the body of Atkins was only a thin wisp of smoke, like a spiral of melting fog.

Franklin Grant shook off the numbness that gripped him and rushed forward. But the television lights glared down upon nothing but empty space! James Atkins was gone!

---

A large beach in southern California was crowded with bathers on that same hot, cloudless afternoon. By the sun it was nearly three hours earlier than when Atkins had vanished from the A. C. A. studio in New York City. But actually it was just two minutes and forty-seven seconds later. Not one among the festive crowd on the beach could be located to testify to the exact time that the falling object had first been observed. Some said they had noticed a little dot, like a speck overhead. All were agreed that no passing aircraft was seen at the moment—nothing from which the object could have fallen.

---

But most certainly, from a height of at least ten thousand feet, a dark thing came hurtling down from the sky. It struck the beach, scattering the terrified crowd. But it did not claim a single life.

It was the body of James Atkins!

A few days later—this was in the summer of 1990—young John Wils, Assistant Transcontinental Traffic Director for the Audiphone Company was seated at his desk in the A. C. A. Building. The mirror-grid beside him buzzed insistently, then lighted. It was his sister Grace. She looked frightened. Her face was pallid, framed by her chestnut hair.

“John,” she gasped. “I—we want you to come here, right away!”

Behind her John Wils saw the face of Wilma Plantet, Grace’s dearest friend. Wilma’s brother, Henry Plantet, held a big chunk of A. C. A. stock. He had once been an important laboratory worker during those trying years when television was being perfected. Henry had become immensely wealthy by contributing some of the basic patents upon which the gigantic structure of the Audiphone Company of America was reared.

“It’s about Henry,” Grace was saying. “He was here just a minute ago, and now he’s vanished!”

She said, in short gasps, that they were in Plantet’s living room. It was about nine P. M. and Henry had been with them. Then he had gone into the library alcove of the room—a recess with walls racked with his technical books. Wilma and Grace had not paid much attention to him, then suddenly they saw he wasn’t there. There wasn’t any exit from the alcove, except to walk through the living room. And, being seated there all the time, Grace was positive he didn’t leave the room.

“He went past you and you didn’t notice him,” Wils suggested calmly.

But Wils himself was fast becoming uneasy. Was this another case like John Atkins?

The image of Wilma Plantet crowded on the television screen.

“He didn’t come past us,” Wilma said quietly. “I’m certain. Very certain.”

“Please come,” Grace urged, then lowered her voice. “There’s something I want to tell you—something ghastly.”

Wils wasn’t long in getting there. At the entrance to the Plantet home he met Carter Cone, Wilma’s fiancé.

“What’s all the excitement?” Cone demanded. He was a big fellow and was the head of Consolidated Commercial Television, which he recently established. “I was down watching the midjet fliers when I suddenly saw my name flashed on the page board marked urgent.”

Cone seemed genuinely worried, but once inside he cast that somber look from his face. When the girls told him about the mysterious disappearance of Henry, Cone laughed heartily and tried to reassure them.

“We’ll find him, all right,” he said, putting his arms around the blond Wilma. “Don’t worry.”

“But,” Wilma protested, “when I remember the Atkins case—”

“Don’t be silly,” Cone soothed her. “It isn’t.”

But it was!

---

Within a minute the audiophone in the living room buzzed. It was for Wilma, but Wils answered. It was the police of San Francisco. The body of Henry Plantet had been found dead on a roadside just outside of town! Not more than five minutes ago!

“You’re crazy,” Wils said. “Henry Plantet was here in New York City, fifteen minutes ago.”

“The identification signature on his forearm looked genuine,” the officer said. “We haven’t had time yet to check his fingerprints and measurements. Look here, I’ll switch you out to the body. You can have one of his relatives make the identification.”

Carter Cone and Wils herded the girls back from the receiver. It was a weird scene out there in California—a little group of men huddled under a tree where a crumpled man's body was lying.

"I know Henry Plantet very well," Wils told the police officer, a catch in his throat. "Give me a close-up."

Cone and young Wils stared blankly. It was Henry Plantet—or if it wasn't, it was someone who looked so much like him that no living person could have told the difference. Then they heard the details. The body was still warm. Death evidently had come only a minute or so before he was found by a passing motorist. The body was broken as though by a fall; the tree branches overhead were smashed.

"He must've been climbin' in the tree an' fell out," the officer explained. "The fall is what killed him—but if a body ever got smashed up like this by fallin' fifty feet, I'm a motor-oiler."

It was Henry Plantet. It was later checked and verified beyond any doubt. At nine o'clock he had been in his library in New York City. Ten minutes later he had fallen out of, or down through a tree, and killed himself out in California, three thousand miles away! Killed himself? Carter Cone and Wils discussed it with blank, numbed amazement. Had Henry Plantet been able to do that? By what scientific phenomena could a man transport himself three thousand miles in a few minutes?

Later that evening John Wils sat back in his office, still wondering. The newscasters were blasting the news now. The air reeked of it. Had Henry Plantet—research television technician—discovered some scientific means of transporting human beings at such a speed? Had he been experimenting—with James Atkins, perhaps—and then been mad enough to try the thing on himself, and had met his death in landing? They were crazy thoughts.

Wils had a vision of Henry's body hurtling through space like a rocket bomb hundreds of miles a minute—and crashing violently as he landed. Idiomatic perhaps, but how had he gotten out of that alcove without being noticed? The thing was a fact. Not magic; and so it had to have a scientific explanation. . . .

"Working tonight, Jimmy?" Wils asked. Three of the television company's young technicians were passing his office door, going into Plantet's laboratory across the hall.

"Orders to finish Mr. Plantet's cathod-ray tube testings," Jimmy Blaine called back. All three of the young fellows looked solemn, as though it was eerie to work among the deceased's things.

The room's single door closed upon them. Wils turned back to his routine work, checking and recording the varying loads on the main transcontinental senders. All of the outlets and receivers, everywhere in the country, were running heavy. The strange mystery of James Atkins, and now Henry Plantet seemed to be making millions of people want to call their friends to discuss it.

---

A soft step sounded behind Wils. It was his sister, Grace. There had been so much commotion at Plantet's home that she had been unable to see him alone. Now, with poor Wilma prostrated by the shock, made comfortable for the night Grace had come to Wils' office.

"I wanted to tell you what I saw when Henry vanished," she murmured.

Plantet hadn't done the weird thing to himself; Grace was sure of it. And what she had to tell, she was afraid to have anyone else hear. She and Wilma had been seated at the center table in the Plantet living room when Grace had chanced to glance into the alcove.

"I saw Henry there," she told him. "He was standing by a bookshelf, holding a book in his hand. But he wasn't—wasn't normal-looking."

"What do you mean?" Wils demanded.

But Grace could only stammer, half coherent. The thing had been so weird, she seriously believed that it was really a trick of her own imagination. No wonder she had hesitated at telling anyone else! Henry Plantet, when she had glanced at him, had looked like a ghost. A tenuous, wraithlike, pallid figure, with the bookshelves of the further wall showing through it!

A fading ghost. She had taken only that fleeting glance—at a ghost which itself looked so startled that it seemed to stagger, clutching the book to its chest. Then it was only a little wisp of pallid outline—and then it was gone, faded into nothingness!

Wils could only stare at Grace humbly. Grant, the president had said nothing publicly about what he had seen when Atkins vanished.

Wils' mind flashed back to that televised scene, out there on the California roadside. That book had still been clenched in Henry Plantet's lifeless hand.

"Why, good Lord, Grace," he murmured. "If what you say is—"

The words caught in his throat. Out in the corridor dim footsteps were sounding. Retreating footsteps. Someone had been listening at the door.

Wils dashed out. A vague shadow was turning a distant angle of the blue-lit passage. He ran fast but the cross corridor was empty when he got there. A dozen doorways into studios and offices, most of them unoccupied tonight, showed where the eavesdropper might have fled—rooms through which he could pass into other parts of the big building. For Wils to chase him now would obviously be futile.

When Wils got back to the frightened Grace, from another doorway to the office a man was just entering. It was William Rider, Treasurer of the Audiphone Company. He was a big, six foot six fellow, about forty, and had a head of iron-gray hair.

"Oh, you Wils," he greeted. "I heard that your sister was here. I want to know if she can give any more details of that ghostly thing that happened to Plantet."

For a time the two discussed it. Wils didn't know why, but he flashed Grace a warning look. She said nothing to Rider of the ghostly shape that she had seen vanishing.

"Well," Rider said at last, in his big booming voice, "there's some scientific explanation, of course. Poor Henry—a victim of his own experimental genius, no doubt. He probably tried his mad scheme on Atkins first and failed."

Suddenly, Franklin Grant called on the televisor.

"I've been looking for your sister," he told Wils. "Can she throw any light on this? She's there with you now, isn't she?"

"Yes, sir," Wils replied, "she is."

"Well, tomorrow I want her to see me." The president's thin, lined face was grim. "She and Wilma Plantet. By God, I'm going to get to the bottom of this, Wils. Henry was working on some pretty important stuff for us—"

---

Old man Grant, at least, didn't think that Henry Plantet had killed Atkins and then himself.

"And Wils," Grant added, "I understand orders were given to have three of our technicians work on Plantet's cathod-tubes tonight. Have them stop it. I want nothing in that laboratory touched. The men of the Shadow Squad are coming for an official investigation."

"All right, sir," Wils agreed. "I'll tell them."

The president disconnected. With Grace and the big William Rider following him, Wils crossed the corridor, opened the laboratory door. Too late!

To Wils it seemed that there were three ghostly, transparent shapes in the room. Then they were gone from sight. The windowless laboratory, with only this one door, was empty!

Blaine, Robinson and Jones—three of the company's best technicians—three more victims! Gone forever? Everyone thought so. But later in the night news came that the body of Blaine had been picked up by a freighter—Blaine's body, floating in the South Pacific Ocean. A little earlier, Robinson, too, had been found. His body had come hurtling down from the stratosphere over Quito, Ecuador!

And young Jones? There was an explosion earlier that night—only a few minutes after the men disappeared—an explosion in the outskirts of San Diego, in southern California. A building had mysteriously collapsed, by what was said to be an explosion in its cellar.

It was two days later, when in the tumbled ruins, portions of the mangled body of young Jones were discovered—a queerly, gruesomely destroyed body, intermingled, blended with the shattered rocks of that office building's foundations!

"Close those windows, Grace," Wils murmured. "By God, I know a lot more now about this thing than I did before."

"Oh, John," Grace sighed, "I've been so worried about you."

It was about ten o'clock at night—the evening following the day when young Jones' body was found intermingled with the ruins of the house in San Diego. Wils had just returned to the small apartment where Grace and he lived alone. Certainly, Wils realized, Grace had good reason to be afraid for his welfare.

He was one of the minor, but important officials of the Audiophone Company of America. And this plot was against the company! How could anyone doubt it? The Federal Shadow Squad men from Washington were thick as flies here now—invisible flies buzzing around; but so far their activities seemed to have yielded nothing.

And just that afternoon Franklin Grant had inexplicably vanished out of his home! Another victim never to be heard from again? Or would his body be found, reported soon from some far-flung corner of the earth? It was weird, mysterious; but Wils thought now that at least in part he understood it.

"The thing is astronomical, Grace," he was saying tensely. He lowered his voice, glancing cautiously at the apartment windows. A pedestrian ramp was close outside them, and the yellow sheen of the city was a great mounting luminosity, into the distant summer night-sky.

"Astronomical?" Grace murmured.

"Yes," Wils continued. "I've been trying to figure how the thing might be done. I've just been to see old Jonathan Peterkin—you remember him? He retired from the management of the Annapolis Observatory last year. He's been making some calculations for me. It's an intricate thing, all right. No living person could figure it out with more than a general degree of accuracy.

"But we've got enough, Grace! Enough, so that undoubtedly the thing is astronomical. None of these victims were found to the east of New York. Always in general, westerly. And south-west. God knows Peterkin couldn't find anything more accurate than that. All the factors, in relation to each other are practically unknown. And the main one, wholly unknown, is that this murderer can't figure it—can't control it."

His sister was astounded by his statements.

“John, what in Heaven’s name are you talking about?” Grace demanded. In his excitement Wils didn’t realize that he was very incoherent. “You’re trying to tell me,” Grace went on, “that these men, astronomically are being flung to the west and south—”

“Of course not! They’re not moving, Grace! Not one of them moved an inch!” He tried to explain it to her. “It’s the earth that moves, not these vanishing men. Many people are apt to think, Grace, that a point on our revolving Earth moves only a thousand miles an hour. Any point on the equator does revolve at about that speed. But there are many other motions that have to be added to it. The Earth’s forward movement in its orbit, for instance. And—”

“You mean,” Grace murmured with awe, “these vanishing men stand still, and the Earth revolves under them—moves away from them at some unknown speed—in some unknown direction?”

“Exactly!” Wils exclaimed. “I figured it out that something has altered the basic material structure of these victims. Not their size; not their shape. But the inherent nature of them—so that they become a different form of matter. Then they no longer belong to our universe. They’re not subject to its laws—so that there’s nothing to move them along with the Earth in its flight through space—”

The audiophone on the table beside them suddenly buzzed, and turned luminous. Wils answered it.

“You—Wils?” It was the thin old voice of Jonathan Peterkin, whom he had left only half an hour before. A portion of his littered, musty laboratory showed behind him; his face was pallid, contorted with terror.

“Wils, I’ve learned something else,” he gasped. “Something quite definite about—what we were talking of. Good God, I can’t believe it!”

“What is it?” Wils demanded.

“Over the air—impossible. Even the air has ears.”

“You want me to come back to you?”

“Yes. I’ve something to show you. I can’t bring it to you.”

“I’ll be there right away,” Wils snapped.

Peterkin’s terrified face faded as he broke connection. Wils told Grace to stay locked in her room. With her white face staring after him, he went through the exit window onto the nearest moving ramp. And within a minute or two he was in a monorail express for the outlying North Westchester residential section. Peterkin’s small cottage was located there, in a grove of trees on a hillside overlooking the Hudson River.

It was a swift ride, but to young Wils it seemed like an eternity. His mind flashed back to what he thought must be the explanation of this strange thing, and which Peterkin’s astronomical calculations seemed now to have confirmed. An alteration of the material basic structure of these victims. He had called it that in trying to explain it to Grace.

Bentley and Adams, as Wils knew, in their famous London experiments back in 1974, had proven that all matter in our universe is built upon a basic vortex with certain vibratory characteristics. By altering them a material body would be disconnected, so to speak, from our spatial universe.

A different state of matter—to us invisible, imponderable, non-existent. But to itself—to everything else existing in that altered vibratory rate—it would still be stark reality. Bentley and Adams had not gone much further than theory, but it was universally accepted by scientists.

---

Wils tried to go beyond their work, to seek out that thing of doom which was now a reality surrounding him. Grace had had a fleeting vision of a wraith of Henry Plantet, had seen it fading to nothingness before her eyes. Suppose some vibratory ray from outside that room had been focused upon him. A vibratory ray of unknown qualities.

All vibrations communicate their inherent physical characteristics to any material body upon which they strike for any appreciable period of time. The fact, Wils knew, had been easily demonstrable. These unknown intricate vibrations focusing upon Henry Plantet would alter his physical basic nature into their own fashion. They would not affect the walls of the room, because they would be only active in their shallow field of focus.

How could anyone standing outside focus so accurately on Plantet inside the house? The Grantz fluoroscope finder could do it, of course. An X-ray image of Plantet, produced through the walls of his room. That, since the Grantz discovery of 1981, had been commonplace.

Wils could envisage then, Plantet's body, and all material objects—his clothes, their contents, that book—within its immediate human-magnetic field—being altered, transformed into a different state of matter. But it would of necessity be temporary. A pendulum, artificially accelerated, reverts to normality when the alien accelerating force is removed.

Bentley and Adams proved—in theory at least—that all material particles of our universe have an inherent vibratory nature characteristic and normal to our state of existence. That can temporarily be changed—but with the force removed, gradually they will revert to their normality.

That had happened to Henry Plantet and those others. And during the few minutes of disconnection, they had not moved from where they originally were stricken. Naturally not. Nothing would move them. They would not be subject to gravitation, to inertia, or any of our other natural laws. And it was our world, our whole material universe which was moved, so that when—after varying times, because doubtless of a varying intensity of the applied alien force—finally they materialized back into their normal existence. In relation to us, their location was vastly different!

How far, and in what direction, had a point on the Earth's surface moved in those few minutes? It was an amazing problem indeed, with a complexity beyond any human calculation. The Earth's rotation on its axis; the Earth's revolution in its orbit around the sun; the sun's drift in relation to its neighbor stars; and that star-cluster itself to which our solar system belongs, drifting in relation to other clusters! And the whole material starry universe, itself doubtless speeding somewhere in the great void of space! A combination of all those movements!

Peterkin had said that for every succeeding instant of time, it would be a different curving, unknown path. Impossible to calculate. At some moments, when the angles of movements chanced to be in the same general direction and thus the velocities would be added to each other, the total velocity of any given point on the Earth's surface might be very high.

But the Earth's rotation on its axis, Peterkin thought, undoubtedly would be the greatest single, contributing factor of direction, so that the bodies materialized in general to the west.

---

John Wils' subsequent experience proved that all these deductions were correct. The diabolical apparatus which was found proved it—an apparatus since destroyed by an intelligent government as too dangerous for existence.

But who would be the perpetrator of this fiendish plot? And why? Vaguely now, Wils had a general idea. Henry Plantet had been experimenting on valuable processes for A. C. A.

Those three young technicians in Plantet's laboratory could have been killed to keep them from disclosing what they might have discovered there—the murderer's theft of Plantet's secrets.

But far more than that: Plantet owned more than half the A. C. A. stock. He had always opposed a merger with Consolidated Television. So had James Atkins and Franklin Grant. But with them eliminated—and the other cabinet members also—things might be different.

With these thoughts pouring through his head, John Wils arrived at Peterkin's cottage. A dim light was burning in one of its lower oval windows. Wils had no idea what made him go to that laboratory window instead of to the main entrance. A premonition, perhaps. He peered cautiously in. On the laboratory floor the body of the aged astronomer was visible. He was roped and gagged, tied like an inert bundle.

Young Wils was no Shadow Squad man. That he had been lured to Peterkin's home never occurred to him. Seeing the old astronomer like that startled him so that he flung himself through the open window like a tiger. Peterkin's eyes tried to warn Wils. But it was too late!

From the shadows an ominous figure rose up—a figure with a Banning heat gun leveled at Wils.

"Easy now," a soft voice whispered. "Don't move."

It was Carter Cone!

Cone, about to marry Wilma Plantet, had cleverly got rid of Henry Plantet. With him in command of the Plantet fortune and controlling interest in A. C. A. he needed only to rid himself of Franklin Grant to be complete master of American Television!

"I've got you," Cone chuckled evilly. "So now you're going for a little trip. You became a little too inquisitive in my affairs, didn't you? Still, the other directors of A. C. A. must be removed before my plans are complete. When all of you are gone I'll be complete master of television, do you hear?"

Carter Cone laughed bitterly, then went on.

"Then I'll be able to make enough money to perfect my pet invention if I can only find the secret of long-range effectiveness. It would give me possession of the most dangerous weapon in the world!"

In the distant corner of the poorly lighted laboratory Wils saw a strange-looking apparatus trained directly on him as he bent over the fettered body of Peterkin. Cone's diabolical ray, ready to fling him and Peterkin into eternity! But Cone had not seen fit to use it yet.

"Lie down!" Cone hissed. "I'll drill you if you don't!"

---

Wils took a desperate chance. It was daring, but it was his only way out. A rack of Peterkin's apparatus hung directly over him. He saw a space suit there—the one thing he needed to outwit this maniac. The light was above it, so that its shadow was on him. In the dim light, he knew that Cone would not be able clearly to see his body.

In a furious leap Wils lunged for Cone's ankles. In a blinding flash, the Banning heat gun spat its pencil-ray of death. But Cone's shot missed! And Wils' sudden leap caught him unprepared, sent him crashing to the floor. The heat gun flew from his hand.

As Cone came sprawling down on top of him, Wils heard a loud and angry hiss across the room. Cone's wild shot had hit his death machine, had wrecked it beyond repair!

Wils' senses reeled as the invisible rays struck him. The dark laboratory swayed with a dizzying swoop. Cone, too, undoubtedly realized what had happened. A cry of horror burst from him. He tried to rise up and escape; but the crashing fall, and now the swooping

dizziness, were too much for him. He dropped back, as Wils desperately tried to heave him off.

It was a ghastly, frenzied moment for Wils as he fought Cone while they were bathed by that invisible ray. The laboratory room was fading—walls, ceiling, the floor under Wils turning wraithlike, shadowy. Thoughts are instant things. Wils knew it was too late for him to escape now. Even if he could lunge beyond the focused vibrations, he might not be free. It would continue—a total disconnection of only a few seconds maybe, and then he would materialize. Where? Underground perhaps—to be gruesomely mangled as his materializing body struggled to find space again in this world—at a location where no space existed!

Too dangerous a chance! More than ever now, his salvation lay in that space suit. He fought with the frenzied, confused Cone; heaved him off, and though he still clung to one of Wils' legs, the desperately planning Wils rose up, seized the apparatus and pulled it down over him. It was an Erentz pressure-compensated, power-driven space suit. He kicked free from Cone's grasp, crouched and frantically donned the apparatus. Through its visor-pane he could see the fading laboratory outlines. A wraith of a room. Unreal now. There was no reality save himself inside the bloating suit; and the inert bodies of the bound old Peterkin and Cone beside him.

With reeling senses, Wils all but lost consciousness. The laboratory was gone. There was only a grayness, with the three of them floating together while the Earth and all our material universe sped on.

A minute? Five minutes? Wils had no way of telling. But Time—inexorable, unchangeable for everything of every possible state of existence—clicked past. To Wils there was nothing but the three of them here—not moving, just fixed in space, disconnected. But soon they would materialize. And in relation to Earth where would they be?

Wils had desperately planned that he must remain passive under the focused rays. The apparatus was so close to him that he figured its alien vibrations would be more potent. His disconnection would be longer than Henry Plantet and the other victims. The Earth would have had time to get completely away, and if that was so the space suit would save him. Wils prayed that it be true.

Then he was aware of distant spots—luminous, dark spots in a grayness that was turning jet black. The earth! Wils could see the giant outline of it, far down as it spread over all the lower firmament. It was just as he had planned!

He was in space, high above the stratosphere, with the great black firmament of blazing stars enveloping him. The three of them now were again subject to the natural laws of the Universe. Now they were dropping down, pulled by Earth's gravity.

Wils turned to look at his two companions through the visor-pane of the Erentz suit. It was a horrible sight—two ghastly skeletons, heaped with bloody foam! Their bodies, here in the vacuum of space, had exploded!

And as he stared open-mouthed they drifted toward him—three bodies mutually attracted so that they fell into the stratosphere in a hideous-looking huddled group.

It was almost a day later that Wils piloted himself down, guided by starlight, gently into the Java sea. A passing air-liner saw him, picked him up.

John Wils was the last of the vanishing men—the one who did not die.