

ASTOUNDING

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FOR VICTORY
BUY WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS

**OPPOSITES
REACT**

by

WILL STEWART

JANUARY • 1943

A STREET AND SMITH PUBLICATION

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TIME LOCKER

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett.

First published *Astounding Science-Fiction*, January 1943.

A useful little gadget. Stick anything in and it shrank, shrank to a point where it was invisible and totally concealed—but it would also shrink other things and permit curious sorts of crime—

Galloway played by ear, which would have been all right had he been a musician—but he was a scientist. A drunken and erratic one, but good. He'd wanted to be an experimental technician, and would have been excellent at it, for he had a streak of genius at times. Unfortunately, there had been no funds for such specialized education, and now Galloway, by profession an integrator machine supervisor, maintained his laboratory purely as a hobby. It was the damndest-looking lab in six States. Galloway had spent ten months building what he called a liquor organ, which occupied most of the space. He could recline on a comfortably padded couch and, by manipulating buttons, siphon drinks of marvelous quantity, quality, and variety down his scarified throat. Since he had made the liquor organ during a protracted period of drunkenness, he never remembered the basic principles of its construction. In a way, that was a pity.

There was a little of everything in the lab, much of it incongruous. Rheostats had little skirts on them, like ballet dancers, and vacuously grinning faces of clay. A generator was conspicuously labeled, "Monstro," and a much smaller one rejoiced in the name of "Bubbles." Inside a glass retort was a china rabbit, and Galloway alone knew how it had got there. Just inside the door was a hideous iron dog, originally intended for Victorian lawns or perhaps for Hell, and its hollowed ears served as sockets for test tubes.

"But how do you do it?" Vanning asked.

Galloway, his lank form reclining under the liquor organ, siphoned a shot of double Martini into his mouth. "Huh?"

"You heard me. I could get you a swell job if you'd use that screwball brain of yours. Or even learn to put up a front."

"Tried it," Galloway mumbled. "No use. I can't work when I concentrate, except at mechanical stuff. I think my subconscious must have a high I. Q."

Vanning, a chunky little man with a scarred, swarthy face, kicked his heels against Monstro. Sometimes Galloway annoyed him. The man never realized his own potentialities, or how much they might mean to Horace Vanning, Commerce Analyst. The "commerce," of course, was extra-legal, but the complicated trade relationships of 1970 left many loopholes a clever man could slip through. The fact of the matter was, Vanning acted in an advisory capacity to crooks. It paid well. A sound knowledge of jurisprudence was rare in these days; the statutes were in such a tangle that it took years of research before one could even enter a law school. But Vanning had a staff of trained experts, a colossal library of transcripts,

decisions, and legal data, and, for a suitable fee, he could have told Dr. Crippen how to get off scot-free.

The shadier side of his business was handled in strict privacy, without assistants. The matter of the neuro-gun, for example—

Galloway had made that remarkable weapon, quite without realizing its importance. He had hashed it together one evening, piecing out the job with court plaster when his welder went on the fritz. And he'd given it to Vanning, on request. Vanning didn't keep it long. But already he had earned thousands of credits by lending the gun to potential murderers. As a result, the police department had a violent headache.

A man in the know would come to Vanning and say, "I heard you can beat a murder rap. Suppose I wanted to—"

"Hold on! I can't condone anything like that."

"Huh? But—"

"Theoretically, I suppose a perfect murder might be possible. Suppose a new sort of gun had been invented, and suppose—just for the sake of an example—it was in a locker at the Newark Stratoship Field."

"Huh?"

"I'm just theorizing. Locker Number 79, combination thirty-blue-eight. These little details always help one to visualize a theory, don't they?"

"You mean—"

"Of course if our murderer picked up this imaginary gun and used it, he'd be smart enough to have a postal box ready, addressed to . . . say . . . Locker 40, Brooklyn Port. He could slip the weapon into the box, seal it, and get rid of the evidence at the nearest mail conveyor. But that's all theorizing. Sorry I can't help you. The fee for an interview is three thousand credits. The receptionist will take your check."

Later, conviction would be impossible. Ruling 875-M, Illinois Precinct, case of State vs. Dupson, set the precedent. Cause of death must be determined. Element of accident must be considered. As Chief Justice Duckett had ruled during the trial of Sanderson vs. Sanderson, which involved the death of the accused's mother-in-law—

Surely the prosecuting attorney, with his staff of toxicological experts, must realize that—

And in short, your honor, I must respectfully request that the case be dismissed for lack of evidence and proof of *casus mortis*—

Galloway never even found out that his neuro-gun was a dangerous weapon. But Vanning haunted the sloppy laboratory, avidly watching the results of his friend's scientific doodling. More than once he had acquired handy little devices in just this fashion. The trouble was, Galloway wouldn't *work*!

He took another sip of Martini, shook his head, and unfolded his lanky limbs. Blinking, he ambled over to a cluttered workbench and began toying with lengths of wire.

"Making something?"

"Dunno. Just fiddling. That's the way it goes. I put things together, and sometimes they work. Trouble is, I never know exactly what they're going to do. *Tsk!*" Galloway dropped the wires and returned to his couch. "Hell with it."

He was, Vanning reflected, an odd duck. Galloway was essentially amoral, thoroughly out of place in this too-complicated world. He seemed to watch, with a certain wry amusement, from a vantage point of his own, rather disinterested for the most part. And he made things—

But always and only for his own amusement. Vanning sighed and glanced around the laboratory, his orderly soul shocked by the mêlée. Automatically he picked up a rumpled smock from the floor, and looked for a hook. Of course there was none. Galloway, running short of conductive metal, had long since ripped them out and used them in some gadget or other.

The so-called scientist was creating a zombie, his eyes half closed. Vanning went over to a metal locker in one corner and opened the door. There were no hooks, but he folded the smock neatly and laid it on the floor of the locker.

Then he went back to his perch on Monstro.

“Have a drink?” Galloway asked.

Vanning shook his head. “Thanks, no. I’ve got a case coming up tomorrow.”

“There’s always thiamin. Filthy stuff. I work better when I’ve got pneumatic cushions around my brain.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“It is purely a matter of skill,” Galloway hummed, “to which each may attain if he will. . . . What are you gaping at?”

“That—locker,” Vanning said, frowning in a baffled way. “What the—” He got up. The metal door hadn’t been securely latched and had swung open. Of the smock Vanning had placed within the metal compartment there was no trace.

“It’s the paint,” Galloway explained sleepily. “Or the treatment. I bombarded it with gamma rays. But it isn’t good for anything.”

Vanning went over and swung a fluorescent into a more convenient position. The locker wasn’t empty, as he had at first imagined. The smock was no longer there, but instead there was a tiny blob of—something, pale-green and roughly spherical.

“It melts things?” Vanning asked, staring.

“Uh-huh. Pull it out. You’ll see.”

Vanning felt hesitant about putting his hand inside the locker. Instead, he found a long pair of test-tube clamps and teased the blob out. It was—

Vanning hastily looked away. His eyes hurt. The green blob was changing in color, shape and size. A crawling, nongeometrical blur of motion rippled over it. Suddenly the clamps were remarkably heavy.

No wonder. They were gripping the original smock.

“It does that, you know,” Galloway said absently. “Must be a reason, too. I put things in the locker and they get small. Take ’em out, and they get big again. I suppose I could sell it to a stage magician.” His voice sounded doubtful.

Vanning sat down, fingering the smock and staring at the metal locker. It was a cube, approximately 3 x 3 x 5, lined with what seemed to be grayish paint, sprayed on. Outside, it was shiny black.

“How’d you do it?”

“Huh? I dunno. Just fiddling around.” Galloway sipped his zombie. “Maybe it’s a matter of dimensional extension. My treatment may have altered the spatio-temporal relationships inside the locker. I wonder what that means?” he murmured in a vague aside. “Words frighten me sometimes.”

Vanning was thinking about tesseracts. “You mean it’s bigger inside than it is outside?”

“A paradox, a paradox, a most delightful paradox. *You tell me.* I suppose the inside of the locker isn’t in this space-time continuum at all. Here, shove that bench in it. You’ll see.” Galloway made no move to rise; he waved toward the article of furniture in question.

“You’re right. That bench is bigger than the locker.”

“So it is. Shove it in a bit at a time. That corner first. Go ahead.”

Vanning wrestled with the bench. Despite his shortness, he was stockily muscular.

“Lay the locker on its back. It’ll be easier.”

“I . . . *uh!* . . . O. K. Now what?”

“Edge the bench down into it.”

Vanning squinted at his companion, shrugged, and tried to obey. Of course the bench wouldn’t go into the locker. One corner did, that was all. Then, naturally, the bench stopped, balancing precariously at an angle.

“Well?”

“Wait.”

The bench moved. It settled slowly downward. As Vanning’s jaw dropped, the bench seemed to crawl into the locker, with the gentle motion of a not-too-heavy object sinking through water. It wasn’t sucked down. It melted down. The portion still outside the locker was unchanged. But that, too, settled, and was gone.

Vanning craned forward. A blur of movement hurt his eyes. Inside the locker was—something. It shifted its contours, shrank, and became a spiky sort of scalene pyramid, deep-purple in hue.

It seemed to be less than four inches across at its widest point.

“I don’t believe it,” Vanning said.

Galloway grinned. “As the Duke of Wellington remarked to the subaltern, it was a demned small bottle, sir.”

“Now wait a minute. How the devil could I put an eight-foot bench inside of a five-foot locker?”

“Because of Newton,” Galloway said. “Gravity. Go fill a test tube with water and I’ll show you.”

“Wait a minute . . . O. K. Now what?”

“Got it brim-full? Good. You’ll find some sugar cubes in that drawer labeled ‘Fuses.’ Lay a cube on top of the test tube, one corner down so it touches the water.”

Vanning racked the tube and obeyed. “Well?”

“What do you see?”

“Nothing. The sugar’s getting wet. And melting.”

“So there you are,” Galloway said expansively. Vanning gave him a brooding look and turned back to the tube. The cube of sugar was slowly dissolving and melting down.

Presently it was gone.

“Air and water are different physical conditions. In air a sugar cube can exist as a sugar cube. In water it exists in solution. The corner of it extending into water is subject to aqueous conditions. So it alters physically, though not chemically. Gravity does the rest.”

“Make it clearer.”

“The analogy’s clear enough, dope. The water represents the particular condition existing inside that locker. The sugar cube represents the workbench. Now! The sugar soaked up the

water and gradually dissolved it, so gravity could pull the cube down into the tube as it melted. See?"

"I think so. The bench soaked up the . . . the x condition inside the locker, eh? A condition that shrank the bench—"

"*In part*, not *in toto*. A little at a time. You can shove a human body into a small container of sulphuric acid, bit by bit."

"Oh," Vanning said, regarding the cabinet askance. "Can you get the bench out again?"

"Do it yourself. Just reach in and pull it out."

"*Reach* in? I don't want my hand to melt!"

"It won't. The action isn't instantaneous. You saw that yourself. It takes a few minutes for the change to take place. You can reach into the locker without any ill effects, if you don't leave your hand exposed to the conditions for more than a minute or so. I'll show you." Galloway languidly arose, looked around, and picked up an empty demijohn. He dropped this into the locker.

The change wasn't immediate. It occurred slowly, the demijohn altering its shape and size till it was a distorted cube the apparent size of a cube of sugar. Galloway reached down and brought it up again, placing the cube on the floor.

It grew. It was a demijohn again.

"Now the bench. Look out."

Galloway rescued the little pyramid. Presently it became the original workbench.

"You see? I'll bet a storage company would like this. You could probably pack all the furniture in Brooklyn in here, but there'd be trouble in getting what you wanted out again. The physical change, you know—"

"Keep a chart," Vanning suggested absently. "Draw a picture of how the thing looks inside the locker, and note down what it was."

"The legal brain," Galloway said. "I want a drink." He returned to his couch and clutched the siphon in a grip of death.

"I'll give you six credits for the thing," Vanning offered.

"Sold. It takes up too much room anyway. Wish I could put it inside itself." The scientist chuckled immoderately. "That's very funny."

"Is it?" Vanning said. "Well, here you are." He took credit coupons from his wallet. "Where'll I put the dough?"

"Stuff it into Monstro. He's my bank. . . . Thanks."

"Yeah. Say, elucidate this sugar business a bit, will you? It isn't just gravity that affects the cube so it slips into a test tube. Doesn't the water soak up into the sugar—"

"You're right at that. Osmosis. No, I'm wrong. Osmosis has something to do with eggs. Or is that ovulation? Conduction, convection—absorption! Wish I'd studied physics; then I'd know the right words. Just a zoot stoop, that's me. I shall take the daughter of the Vine to spouse," Galloway finished incoherently and sucked at the siphon.

"Absorption," Vanning scowled. "Only not water, being soaked up by the sugar. The . . . the *conditions* existing inside the locker, being soaked up by your workbench—in that particular case.

"Like a sponge or a blotter."

"The bench?"

"Me," Galloway said succinctly, and relapsed into a happy silence, broken by occasional gurgles as he poured liquor down his scarified gullet. Vanning sighed and turned to the locker.

He carefully closed and latched the door before lifting the metal cabinet in his muscular arms.

“Going? G’night. Fare thee well, fare thee well—”

“Night.”

“Fare—thee—well!” Galloway ended, in a melancholy outburst of tunefulness, as he turned over preparatory to going to sleep.

Vanning sighed again and let himself out into the coolness of the night. Stars blazed in the sky, except toward the south, where the aurora of Lower Manhattan dimmed them. The glowing white towers of skyscrapers rose in a jagged pattern. A sky-ad announced the virtues of Vambulin—“It Peps You Up.”

His speeder was at the curb. Vanning edged the locker into the trunk compartment and drove toward the Hudson Floatway, the quickest route downtown. He was thinking about Poe.

The Purloined Letter, which had been hidden in plain sight, but re-folded and re-addressed, so that its superficial appearance was changed. Holy Hutton! What a perfect safe the locker would make! No thief could crack it, for the obvious reason that it wouldn’t be locked. No thief would *want* to clean it out. Vanning could fill the locker with credit coupons and instantly they’d become unrecognizable. It was the ideal cache.

How the devil did it work?

There was little use in asking Galloway. He played by ear. A primrose by the river’s rim a simple primrose was to him—not *Primula vulgaris*. Syllogisms were unknown to him. He reached the conclusion without the aid of either major or minor premises.

Vanning pondered. Two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. *Ergo*, there was a different sort of space in the locker—

But Vanning was jumping at conclusions. There was another answer—the right one. He hadn’t guessed it yet.

Instead, he tooted the speeder downtown to the office building where he maintained a floor, and brought the locker upstairs in the freight lift. He didn’t put it in his private office; that would have been too obvious. He placed the metal cabinet in one of the storerooms, sliding a file cabinet in front of it for partial concealment. It wouldn’t do to have the clerks using this particular locker.

Vanning stepped back and considered. Perhaps—

A bell rang softly. Preoccupied, Vanning didn’t hear it at first. When he did, he went back to his own office and pressed the acknowledgment button on the Winchell. The gray, harsh, bearded face of Counsel Hatton appeared, filling the screen.

“Hello,” Vanning said.

Hatton nodded. “I’ve been trying to reach you at your home. Thought I’d try the office—”

“I didn’t expect you to call now. The trial’s tomorrow. It’s a bit late for discussion, isn’t it?”

“Dugan & Sons wanted me to speak to you. I advised against it.”

“Oh?”

Hatton’s thick gray brows drew together. “I’m prosecuting, you know. There’s plenty of evidence against MacIlson.”

“So you say. But peculation’s a difficult charge to prove.”

“Did you get an injunction against scop?”

“Naturally,” Vanning said. “You’re not using truth serum on my client!”

“That’ll prejudice the jury.”

“Not on medical grounds. Scop affects MacIlson harmfully. I’ve got a covering prognosis.”

“Harmfully is right!” Hatton’s voice was sharp. “Your client embezzled those bonds, and I can prove it.”

“Twenty-five thousand in credits, it comes to, eh? That’s a lot for Dugan & Sons to lose. What about that hypothetical case I posed? Suppose twenty thousand were recovered—”

“Is this a private beam? No recordings?”

“Naturally. Here’s the cut-off.” Vanning held up a metal-tipped cord. “This strictly *sub rosa*.”

“Good,” Counsel Hatton said. “Then I can call you a lousy shyster.”

“*Tch!*”

“Your gag’s too old. It’s moth-eaten. MacIlson swiped five grand in bonds, negotiable into credits. The auditors start checking up. MacIlson comes to you. You tell him to take twenty grand more, and offer to return that twenty if Dugan & Sons refuse to prosecute. MacIlson splits with you on the five thousand, and on the plat standard, that ain’t hay.”

“I don’t admit to anything like that.”

“Naturally you don’t, not even on a closed beam. But it’s tacit. However, the gag’s moth-eaten, and my clients won’t play ball with you. They’re going to prosecute.”

“You called me up just to tell me that?”

“No, I want to settle the jury question. Will you agree to let ’em use scop on the panel?”

“O. K.,” Vanning said. He wasn’t depending on a fixed jury tomorrow. His battle would be based on legal technicalities. With scop-tested talesmen, the odds would be even. And such an arrangement would save days or weeks of argument and challenge.

“Good,” Hatton grunted. “You’re going to get your pants licked off.”

Vanning replied with a mild obscenity and broke the connection. Reminded of the pending court fight, he forced the matter of the fourth-dimensional locker out of his mind and left the office. Later—

Later would be time enough to investigate the possibilities of the remarkable cabinet more thoroughly. Just now, he didn’t want his brain cluttered with nonessentials. He went to his apartment, had the servant mix him a short highball, and dropped into bed.

And, the next day, Vanning won his case. He based it on complicated technicalities and obscure legal precedents. The crux of the matter was that the bonds had not been converted into government credits. Abstruse economic charts proved that point for Vanning. Conversion of even five thousand credits would have caused a fluctuation in the graph line, and no such break existed. Vanning’s experts went into monstrous detail.

In order to prove guilt, it would have been necessary to show, either actually or by inference, that the bonds had been in existence since last December 20th, the date of their most recent check-and-recording. The case of *Donovan vs. Jones* stood as a precedent.

Hatton jumped to his feet. “Jones later confessed to his defalcation, your honor!”

“Which does not affect the original decision,” Vanning said smoothly. “Retroaction is not admissible here. The verdict was not proven.”

“Counsel for the defense will continue.”

Counsel for the defense continued, building up a beautifully intricate edifice of casuistic logic.

Hatton writhed. “Your honor! I—”

“If my learned opponent can produce one bond—just one of the bonds in question—I will concede the case.”

The presiding judge looked sardonic. “Indeed! If such a piece of evidence could be produced, the defendant would be jailed as fast as I could pronounce sentence. You know that very well, Mr. Vanning. Proceed.”

“Very well. My contention, then, is that the bonds never existed. They were the result of a clerical error in notation.”

“A clerical error in a Pederson Calculator?”

“Such errors have occurred, as I shall prove. If I may call my next witness—”

Unchallenged, the witness, a math technician, explained how a Pederson Calculator can go haywire. He cited cases.

Hatton caught him up on one point. “I protest this proof. Rhodesia, as everyone knows, is the location of a certain important experimental industry. Witness has refrained from stating the nature of the work performed in this particular Rhodesian factory. Is it not a fact that the Henderson United Company deals largely in radioactive ores?”

“Witness will answer.”

“I can’t. My records don’t include that information.”

“A significant omission,” Hatton snapped. “Radioactivity damages the intricate mechanism of a Pederson Calculator. There is no radium nor radium by-product in the offices of Dugan & Sons.”

Vanning stood up. “May I ask if those offices have been fumigated lately?”

“They have. It is legally required.”

“A type of chlorine gas was used?”

“Yes.”

“I wish to call my next witness.”

The next witness, a physicist and official in the Ultra Radium Institute, explained that gamma radiations affect chlorine strongly, causing ionization. Living organisms could assimilate by-products of radium and transmit them in turn. Certain clients of Dugan & Sons had been in contact with radioactivity—

“This is ridiculous, your honor! Pure theorization—”

Vanning looked hurt. “I cite the case of Dangerfield vs. Austro Products, California, 1963. Ruling states that the uncertainty factor is prime admissible evidence. My point is simply that the Pederson Calculator which recorded the bonds could have been in error. If this be true, there were no bonds, and my client is guiltless.”

“Counsel will continue,” said the judge, wishing he were Jeffries so he could send the whole damned bunch to the scaffold. Jurisprudence should be founded on justice, and not be a three-dimensional chess game. But, of course, it was the natural development of the complicated political and economic factors of modern civilization. It was already evident that Vanning would win his case.

And he did. The jury was directed to find for the defendant. On a last, desperate hope, Hatton raised a point of order and demanded scopy, but his petition was denied. Vanning winked at his opponent and closed his brief case.

That was that.

Vanning returned to his office. At four-thirty that afternoon trouble started to break. The secretary announced a Mr. MacIlson, and was pushed aside by a thin, dark, middle-aged man

lugging a gigantic suedette suitcase.

“Vanning! I’ve got to see you—”

The attorney’s eyes hooded. He rose from behind his desk, dismissing the secretary with a jerk of his head. As the door closed, Vanning said brusquely, “What are you doing here? I told you to stay away from me. What’s in that bag?”

“The bonds,” MacIlson explained, his voice unsteady. “Something’s gone wrong—”

“You crazy fool! Bringing the bonds here—” With a leap Vanning was at the door, locking it. “Don’t you realize that if Hatton gets his hands on that paper, you’ll be yanked back to jail? And I’ll be disbarred! Get ’em out of here.”

“Listen a minute, will you? I took the bonds to Finance Unity, as you told me, but . . . but there was an officer there, waiting for me. I saw him just in time. If he’d caught me—”

Vanning took a deep breath. “You were supposed to leave the bonds in that subway locker for two months.”

MacIlson pulled a news sheet from his pocket. “But the government’s declared a freeze on ore stocks and bonds. It’ll go into effect in a week. I couldn’t wait—the money would have been tied up indefinitely.”

“Let’s see that paper.” Vanning examined it and cursed softly. “Where’d you get this?”

“Bought it from a boy outside the jail. I wanted to check the current ore quotations.”

“Uh-huh. I see. Did it occur to you that this sheet might be faked?”

Madison’s jaw dropped. “Fake?”

“Exactly. Hatton figured I might spring you, and had this paper ready. You bit. You led the police right to the evidence, and a swell spot you’ve put me in.”

“B-but—”

Vanning grimaced. “Why do you suppose you saw that cop at Finance Unity? They could have nabbed you any time. But they wanted to scare you into heading for *my* office, so they could catch both of us on the same hook. Prison for you, disbarment for me. Oh, hell!”

MacIlson licked his lips. “Can’t I get out a back door?”

“Through the cordon that’s undoubtedly waiting? Orbs! Don’t be more of a sap than you can help.”

“Can’t you—hide the stuff?”

“Where? They’ll ransack this office with X rays. No, I’ll just—” Vanning stopped. “Oh. Hide it, you said. *Hide it—*”

He whirled to the dictograph. “Miss Horton? I’m in conference. Don’t disturb me for anything. If anybody hands you a search warrant, insist on verifying it through headquarters. Got me? O. K.”

Hope had returned to MacIlson’s face. “Is it all right?”

“Oh, shut up!” Vanning snapped. “Wait here for me. Be back directly.” He headed for a side door and vanished. In a surprisingly short time he returned, awkwardly lugging a metal cabinet.

“Help me . . . *uh!* . . . here. In this corner. Now get out.”

“But—”

“Flash,” Vanning ordered. “Everything’s under control. Don’t talk. You’ll be arrested, but they can’t hold you without evidence. Come back as soon as you’re sprung.” He urged MacIlson to the door, unlocked it, and thrust the man through. After that, he returned to the cabinet, swung open the door, and peered in. Empty. Sure.

The suedette suitcase—

Vanning worked it into the locker, breathing hard. It took a little time, since the valise was larger than the metal cabinet. But at last he relaxed, watching the brown case shrink and alter its outline till it was tiny and distorted, the shape of an elongated egg, the color of a copper cent piece.

“*Whew!*” Vanning said.

Then he leaned closer, staring. Inside the locker, something was moving. A grotesque little creature less than four inches tall was visible. It was a shocking object, all cubes and angles, a bright green in tint, and it was obviously alive.

Someone knocked on the door.

The tiny—thing—was busy with the copper-colored egg. Like an ant, it was lifting the egg and trying to pull it away. Vanning gasped and reached into the locker. The fourth-dimensional creature dodged. It wasn’t quick enough. Vanning’s hand descended, and he felt wriggling movement against his palm.

He squeezed.

The movement stopped. He let go of the dead thing and pulled his hand back swiftly.

The door shook under the impact of fists.

Vanning closed the locker and called, “Just a minute.”

“Break it down,” somebody ordered.

But that wasn’t necessary. Vanning put a painful smile on his face and turned the key. Counsel Hatton came in, accompanied by bulky policemen. “We’ve got MacIlson,” he said.

“Oh? Why?”

For answer Hatton jerked his hand. The officers began to search the room. Vanning shrugged.

“You’ve jumped the gun,” he said. “Breaking and entering—”

“We’ve got a warrant.”

“Charge?”

“The bonds, of course.” Hatton’s voice was weary. “I don’t know where you’ve hid that suitcase, but we’ll find it.”

“What suitcase?” Vanning wanted to know.

“The one MacIlson had when he came in. The one he didn’t have when he went out.”

“The game,” Vanning said sadly, “is up. You win.”

“Eh?”

“If I tell you what I did with the suitcase, will you put in a good word for me?”

“Why . . . yeah. Where—”

“I ate it,” Vanning said, and retired to the couch, where he settled himself for a nap. Hatton gave him a long, hating look. The officers tore in—

They passed by the locker, after a casual glance inside. The X rays revealed nothing, in walls, floor, ceiling, or articles of furniture. The other offices were searched, too. Vanning applauded the painstaking job.

In the end, Hatton gave up. There was nothing else he could do.

“I’ll clap suit on you tomorrow,” Vanning promised. “Same time I get a habeas corpus on MacIlson.”

“Step to hell,” Hatton growled.

“ ’By now.”

Vanning waited till his unwanted guests had departed. Then, chuckling quietly, he went to the locker and opened it.

The copper-colored egg that represented the suedette suitcase had vanished. Vanning groped inside the locker, finding nothing.

The significance of this didn't strike Vanning at first. He swung the cabinet around so that it faced the window. He looked again, with identical results.

The locker was empty.

Twenty-five thousand credits in negotiable ore bonds had disappeared.

Vanning started to sweat. He picked up the metal box and shook it. That didn't help. He carried it across the room and set it up in another corner, returning to search the floor with painstaking accuracy. *Holy—*

Hatton?

No. Vanning hadn't let the locker out of his sight from the time the police had entered till they left. An officer had swung open the cabinet's door, looked inside, and closed it again. After that the door had remained shut, till just now.

The bonds were gone.

So was the abnormal little creature Vanning had crushed. All of which meant—what?

Vanning approached the locker and closed it, clicking the latch into position. Then he reopened it, not really expecting that the copper-colored egg would reappear.

He was right. It didn't.

Vanning staggered to the Winchell and called Galloway.

"Whatzit? Huh? Oh. What do you want?" The scientist's gaunt face appeared on the screen, rather the worse for wear. "I got a hangover. Can't use thiamin, either. I'm allergic to it. How'd your case come out?"

"Listen," Galloway said urgently, "I put something inside that damn locker of yours and now it's gone."

"The locker? That's funny."

"No! The thing I put in it. A . . . a suitcase."

Galloway shook his head thoughtfully. "You never know, do you? I remember once I made a—"

"The hell with that. I want that suitcase back!"

"An heirloom?" Galloway suggested.

"No, there's money in it."

"Wasn't that a little foolish of you? There hasn't been a bank failure since 1949. Never suspected you were a miser, Vanning. Like to have the stuff around, so you can run it through your birdlike fingers, eh?"

"You're drunk."

"I'm *trying*," Galloway corrected. "But I've built up an awful resistance over a period of years. It takes time. Your call's already set me back two and a half drinks. I must put an extension on the siphon, so I can Winchell and guzzle at the same time."

Vanning almost chattered incoherently into the mike. "My suitcase! What happened to it? I want it back."

"Well, I haven't got it."

"Can't you find out where it is?"

"Dunno. Tell me the details. I'll see what I can figure out."

Vanning complied, revising his story as caution prompted.

“O. K.,” Galloway said at last, rather unwillingly. “I hate working out theories, but just as a favor. . . . My diagnosis will cost you fifty credits.”

“What? Now listen—”

“Fifty credits,” Galloway repeated unflinchingly. “Or no prognosis.”

“How do I know you can get it back for me?”

“Chances are I can’t. Still, maybe . . . I’ll have to go over to Mechanistra and use some of their machines. They charge a good bit, too. But I’ll need forty-brain-power calculators—”

“O. K., O. K.!” Vanning growled. “Hop to it. I want that suitcase back.”

“What interests me is that little bug you squashed. In fact, that’s the only reason I’m tackling your problem. Life in the fourth dimension—” Galloway trailed off, murmuring. His face faded from the screen. After a while Vanning broke the connection.

He re-examined the locker, finding nothing new. Yet the suedette suitcase had vanished from it, into thin air. Oh, hell!

Brooding over his sorrows, Vanning shrugged into a top coat and dined vinously at the Manhattan Roof. He felt very sorry for himself.

The next day he felt even sorrier. A call to Galloway had given the blank signal, so Vanning had to mark time. About noon Madison dropped in. His nerves were shot.

“You took your time in springing me,” he started immediately. “Well, what now? Have you got a drink anywhere around?”

“You don’t need a drink,” Vanning grunted. “You’ve got a skinful already, by the look of you. Run down to Florida and wait till this blows over.”

“I’m sick of waiting. I’m going to South America. I want some credits.”

“Wait’ll I arrange to cash the bonds.”

“I’ll take the bonds. A fair half, as we agreed.”

Vanning’s eyes narrowed. “And walk out into the hands of the police. Sure.”

MacIlson looked uncomfortable. “I’ll admit I made a boner. But this time—no, I’ll play smart now.”

“You’ll wait, you mean.”

“There’s a friend of mine on the roof parking lot, in a helicopter. I’ll go up and slip him the bonds, and then I’ll just walk out. The police won’t find anything on me.”

“I said no,” Vanning repeated. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It’s dangerous as things are. If they locate the bonds—”

“They won’t.”

“Where’d you hide ’em?”

“That’s my business.”

MacIlson glowered nervously. “Maybe. But they’re in this building. You couldn’t have fenagled ’em out yesterday before the cops came. No use playing your luck too far. Did they use X rays?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I heard Counsel Hatton’s got a batch of experts going over the blueprints on this building. He’ll find your safe. I’m getting out of here before he does.”

Vanning patted the air. “You’re hysterical. I’ve taken care of you, haven’t I? Even though you almost screwed the whole thing up.”

“Sure,” MacIlson said, pulling at his lip. “But I—” He chewed a fingernail. “Oh, damn! I’m sitting on the edge of a volcano with termites under me. I can’t stay here and wait till they find the bonds. They can’t extradite me from South America—where I’m going, anyway.”

“You’re going to wait,” Vanning said firmly. “That’s your best chance.”

There was suddenly a gun in MacIlson’s hand. “You’re going to give me half the bonds. Right now. I don’t trust you a little bit. You figure you can stall me along—hell, get those bonds!”

“No,” Vanning said.

“I’m not kidding.”

“I know you aren’t. I can’t get the bonds.”

“Eh? Why not?”

“Ever heard of a time lock?” Vanning asked, his eyes watchful. “You’re right; I put the suitcase in a concealed safe. But I can’t open that safe till a certain number of hours have passed.”

“Mm-m.” MacIlson pondered. “When—”

“Tomorrow.”

“All right. You’ll have the bonds for me then?”

“If you want them. But you’d better change your mind. It’d be safer.”

For answer MacIlson grinned over his shoulder as he went out. Vanning sat motionless for a long time. He was, frankly, scared.

The trouble was, MacIlson was a manic-depressive type. He’d kill. Right now, he was cracking under the strain, and imagining himself a desperate fugitive. Well—precautions would be advisable.

Vanning called Galloway again, but got no answer. He left a message on the recorder and thoughtfully looked into the locker again. It was empty, depressingly so.

That evening Galloway let Vanning into his laboratory. The scientist looked both tired and drunk. He waved comprehensively toward a table, covered with scraps of paper.

“What a headache you gave me! If I’d known the principles behind that gadget, I’d have been afraid to tackle it. Sit down. Have a drink. Got the fifty credits?”

Silently Vanning handed over the coupons. Galloway shoved them into Monstro. “Fine. Now—” He settled himself on the couch. “Now we start. The fifty credit question.”

“Can I get the suitcase back?”

“No,” Galloway said flatly. “At least, I don’t see how it can be worked. It’s in another spatio-temporal sector.”

“Just what does that mean?”

“It means the locker works something like a telescope, only the thing isn’t merely visual. The locker’s a window, I figure. You can reach through it as well as look through it. It’s an opening into Now plus x.”

Vanning scowled. “So far you haven’t said anything.”

“So far all I’ve got is theory, and that’s all I’m likely to get. Look. I was wrong originally. The things that went into the locker didn’t appear in another space, because there would have been a spatial constant. I mean, they wouldn’t have got smaller. Size is size. Moving a one-inch cube from here to Mars wouldn’t make it any larger or smaller.”

“What about a different density in the surrounding medium? Wouldn’t that crush an object?”

“Sure, and it’d stay squashed. It wouldn’t return to its former size and shape when it was taken out of the locker again. X plus y never equal xy . But x times y —”

“So?”

“That’s a pun,” Galloway broke off to explain. “The things we put in the locker went into time. Their time-rate remained constant, but not the spatial relationships. Two things can’t occupy the same place at the same time. *Ergo*, your suitcase went into a different time. Now plus x . And what x represents I don’t know, though I suspect a few million years.”

Vanning looked dazed. “The suitcase is a million years in the future?”

“Dunno how far, but—I’d say plenty. I haven’t enough factors to finish the equation. I reasoned by induction, mostly, and the results are screwy as hell. Einstein would have loved it. My theorem shows that the universe is expanding and contracting at the same time.”

“What’s that got to do—”

“Motion is relative,” Galloway continued inexorably. “That’s a basic principle. Well, the Universe *is* expanding, spreading out like a gas, but its component parts are shrinking at the same time. The *parts* don’t actually grow, you know—not the suns and atoms. They just run away from the central point. Galloping off in all directions . . . where was I? Oh. Actually, the Universe, taken as a unit, is shrinking.”

“So it’s shrinking. Where’s my suitcase?”

“I told you. In the future. Inductive reasoning showed that. It’s beautifully simple and logical. And it’s quite impossible of proof, too. A hundred, a thousand, a million years ago the Earth—the Universe—was larger than it is now. And it continues to contract. Sometime in the future the Earth will be just half as small as it is now. Only we won’t notice it because the Universe will be proportionately smaller.”

Galloway went on dreamily. “We put a workbench into the locker, so it emerged sometime in the future. The locker’s an open window into a different time, as I told you. Well, the bench was affected by the conditions of that period. It shrank, after we gave it a few seconds to soak up the entropy or something. Do I mean entropy? Allah knows. Oh, well.”

“It turned into a pyramid.”

“Maybe there’s geometric distortion, too. Or it might be a visual illusion. Perhaps we can’t get the exact focus. I doubt if things will really look different in the future—except that they’ll be smaller—but we’re using a window into the fourth dimension. We’re taking a pleat in time. It must be like looking through a prism. The alteration in size is real, but the shape and color are altered to our eyes by the fourth-dimensional prism.”

“The whole point, then, is that my suitcase is in the future. Eh? But why did it disappear from the locker?”

“What about that little creature you squashed? Maybe he had pals. They wouldn’t be visible till they came into the very narrow focus of the whatchmaycallit, but—figure it out. Sometime in the future, in a hundred or a thousand or a million years, a suitcase suddenly appears out of thin air. One of our descendants investigates. You kill him. His pals come along and carry the suitcase away, out of range of the locker. In space it may be anywhere, and the time factor’s an unknown quantity. Now plus x . It’s a time locker. Well?”

“Hell!” Vanning exploded. “So that’s all you can tell me? I’m supposed to chalk it up to profit and loss?”

“Uh-huh. Unless you want to crawl into the locker yourself after your suitcase. Lord knows where you’d come out, though. The proportions of the air probably would have

changed in a few thousand years. There might be other alterations, too.”

“I’m not that crazy.”

So there he was. The bonds were gone, beyond hope of redemption. Vanning could resign himself to that loss, once he knew the securities wouldn’t fall into the hands of the police. But MacIlson was another matter, especially after a bullet splattered against the glassolex window of Vanning’s office.

An interview with MacIlson had proved unsatisfactory. The defaulter was convinced that Vanning was trying to bilk him. He was removed forcibly, yelling threats. He’d go to the police—he’d confess—

Let him. There was no proof. The hell with him. But, for safety’s sake, Vanning clapped an injunction on his quondam client.

It didn’t land. MacIlson clipped the official on the jaw and fled. Now, Vanning suspected, he lurked in dark corners, armed, and anxious to commit homicide. Obviously a manic-depressive type.

Vanning took a certain malicious pleasure in demanding a couple of plain-clothes men to act as his guards. Legally, he was within his rights, since his life had been threatened. Until MacIlson was under sufficient restriction, Vanning would be protected. And he made sure that his guards were two of the best shots on the Manhattan force.

He also found out that they had been told to keep their eyes peeled for the missing bonds and the suedette suitcase. Vanning Winchelled Counsel Hatton and grinned at the screen.

“Any luck yet?”

“What do you mean?”

“My watchdogs. Your spies. They won’t find the bonds, Hatton. Better call ’em off. Why make the poor devils do two jobs at once?”

“One job would be enough. Finding the evidence. If MacIlson drilled you, I wouldn’t be too unhappy.”

“Well, I’ll see you in court,” Vanning said. “You’re prosecuting Watson, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Are you waiving scop?”

“On the jurors? Sure. I’ve got this case in the bag.”

“That’s what you think,” Hatton said, and broke the beam.

Chuckling, Vanning donned his topcoat, collected the guards, and headed for court. There was no sign of MacIlson—

Vanning won the case, as he had expected. He returned to his offices, collected a few unimportant messages from the switchboard girl, and walked toward his private suite. As he opened the door, he saw the suedette suitcase on the carpet in one corner.

He stopped, hand frozen on the latch. Behind him he could hear the heavy footsteps of the guards. Over his shoulder Vanning said, “Wait a minute,” and dodged into the office, slamming and locking the door behind him. He caught the tail end of a surprised question.

The suitcase. There it was, unequivocally. And, quite as unequivocally, the two plain-clothes men, after a very brief conference, were hammering on the door, trying to break it down.

Vanning turned green. He took a hesitant step forward, and then saw the locker, in the corner to which he had moved it. The time locker—

That was it. If he shoved the suitcase inside the locker, it would become unrecognizable. Even if it vanished again, that wouldn’t matter. What mattered was the vital importance of

getting rid—immediately!—of incriminating evidence.

The door rocked on its hinges. Vanning scuttled toward the suitcase and picked it up. From the corner of his eye he saw movement.

In the air above him, a hand had appeared. It was the hand of a giant, with an immaculate cuff fading into emptiness. Its huge fingers were reaching down—

Vanning screamed and sprang away. He was too slow. The hand descended, and Vanning wriggled impotently against the palm.

The hand contracted into a fist. When it opened, what was left of Vanning dropped squashily to the carpet, which it stained.

The hand withdrew into nothingness. The door fell in and the plain-clothes men stumbled over it as they entered.

It didn't take long for Hatton and his cohorts to arrive. Still, there was little for them to do except clean up the mess. The suedette bag, containing twenty-five thousand credits in negotiable bonds, was carried off to a safer place. Vanning's body was scraped up and removed to the morgue. Photographers flashed pictures, fingerprint experts insufflated their white powder, X ray men worked busily. It was all done with swift efficiency, so that within an hour the office was empty and the door sealed.

Thus there were no spectators to witness the advent of a gigantic hand that appeared from nothingness, groped around as though searching for something, and presently vanished once more—

The only person who could have thrown light on the matter was Galloway, and his remarks were directed to Monstro, in the solitude of his laboratory. All he said was:

“So that's why that workbench materialized for a few minutes here yesterday. Hm-m-m. Now plus x—and x equals about a week. Still, why not? It's all relative. But—I never thought the Universe was shrinking *that* fast!”

He relaxed on the couch and siphoned a double Martini.

“Yeah, that's it,” he murmured after a while. “*Whew!* I guess Vanning must have been the only guy who ever reached into the middle of next week and—killed himself! I think I'll get tight.”

And he did.

THE END

[The end of *Time Locker* by Henry Kuttner (as Lewis Padgett)]