

MUGWUMP 4 (1959) by Robert Silverberg the complete text of this fine science fiction story

This is a nice tight little science fiction story. It's pretty much about a normal guy who gets tangled up with forces way beyond his understanding. It's a cute little comedy and fun recreational reading during these hot July afternoons.

Enjoy.

MUGWUMP FOUR

Al Miller was only trying to phone the Friendly Finance Corporation to ask about an extension on his loan. It was a Murray Hill number, and he had dialed as far as MU-4 when the receiver clicked queerly and a voice said, "Come in, Operator Nine. Operator Nine, do you read me?"

Al frowned. "I didn't want the operator. There must be something wrong with my phone if—"

"Just a minute. Who *are* you?"

"I ought to ask *you* that," Al said. "What are you doing on the other end of my phone, anyway? I hadn't even finished dialing. I got as far as MU-4 and—"

"Well? You dialed MUgwump 4 and you got us. What more do you want?" A suspicious pause. "Say, you aren't Operator Nine!"

"No, I'm *not* Operator Nine, and I'm trying to dial a Murray Hill number, and how about getting off the line?"

"Hold it, friend. Are you a Normal?"

Al blinked "Yeah—yeah, I like to think so."

"So how'd you know the Number?"

"Dammit, I *didn't* know the number! I was trying to call someone, and all of a sudden the phone cut out and I got you, whoever the blazes *you* are."

"I'm the communications warden at MUgwump 4," the other said crisply. "And you're a suspicious individual. We'll have to investigate you."

The telephone emitted a sudden burping sound. Al felt as if his feet had grown roots. He could not move at all. It was awkward to be standing there at his own telephone in the privacy of his own room, as unbending as the Apollo Belvedere. Time still moved, he saw. The hand on the big clock above the phone had just shifted from 3:30 to 3:31.

Sweat rivered down his back as he struggled to put down the phone. He fought to lift his left foot. He strained to twitch his right eyelid. No go on all counts; he was frozen, all but his chest muscles—thank goodness for that. He still could breathe.

A few minutes later matters became even more awkward when his front door, which had been locked, opened abruptly. Three strangers entered. They looked oddly alike: a trio of Tweedledums, no more than five feet high, each wide through the waist, jowly of face and balding of head, each wearing an inadequate single-breasted blue-serge suit.

Al discovered he could roll his eyes. He rolled them. He wanted to apologize because his unexpected paralysis kept him from acting the proper part of a host, but his tongue would not obey. And on second thought, it occurred that the little bald men might be connected in some way with that paralysis.

The reddest-faced of the three little men made an intricate gesture and the stasis ended. Al nearly folded up as the tension that gripped him broke. He said, "Just who the deuce—"

"We will ask the questions. You are Al Miller?"
Al nodded.

"And obviously you are a Normal. So there has been a grave error. Mordecai, examine the telephone."

The second little man picked up the phone and calmly disemboweled it with three involved motions of his stubby hands. He frowned over the telephone's innards for a moment; then, humming tunelessly, he produced a wire-clipper and severed the telephone cord.

"Hold on here," Al burst out. "You can't just rip out my phone like that! You aren't from the phone company!"

"Quiet," said the spokesman nastily. "Well, Mordecai?"

The second little man said, "Probability one to a million. The cranch interval overlapped and his telephone matrix slipped. His call was piped into our wire by error, Waldemar."

"So he isn't a spy?" Waldemar asked.

"Doubtful. As you see, he's of rudimentary intelligence. His dialing our number was a statistical fluke."

"But now he knows about Us," said the third little man in a surprisingly deep voice. "I vote for demolecularization."

The other two whirled on their companion. "Always bloodthirsty, eh, Giovanni?" said Mordecai. "You'd violate the Code at the snap of a meson." "There won't be any demolecularization while *I'm* in charge," added Waldemar.

"What do we do with him, then?" Giovanni demanded. Mordecai said, "Freeze him and take him down to Headquarters. He's *their* problem."

"I think this has gone about as far as it's going to go," Al exploded at last. "However you three creeps got in here, you'd better get yourselves right out again, or—"

"Enough," Waldemar said. He stamped his foot. Al felt his jaws stiffen. He realized bewilderedly that he was frozen again. And frozen, this time, with

his mouth gaping foolishly open.

he trip took about five minutes, and so far as Al was concerned, it was one long blur. At the end of the journey the blur lifted for an instant, just enough to give Al one good glimpse of his surroundings—a residential street in what might have been Brooklyn or Queens (or Cincinnati or Detroit, he thought morbidly)—before he was hustled into the basement of a two-family house. He found himself in a windowless, brightly lit chamber cluttered with complex-looking machinery and with a dozen or so alarmingly identical little bald-headed men.

The chubbiest of the bunch glared sourly at him and asked, “Are you a spy?”

“I’m just an innocent bystander. I picked up my phone and started to dial, and all of a sudden some guy asked me if I was Operator Nine. Honest, that’s all.”

“Overlapping of the cranch interval,” muttered Mordecai. “Slipped matrix.” “Umm. Unfortunate,” the chubby one commented. “We’ll have to dispose of him.”

“Demolecularization is the best way,” Giovanni put in immediately.

“Dispose of him *humanely*, I mean. It’s revolting to think of taking the life of an inferior being. But he simply can’t remain in this fourspace any longer, not if he Knows.”

"But I *don't* know!" Al groaned. "I couldn't be any more mixed-up if I tried! Won't you please tell me—"

"Very well," said the pudgiest one, who seemed to be the leader. "Waldemar, tell him about Us."

Waldemar said, "You're now in the local headquarters of a secret mutant group working for the overthrow of humanity as you know it. By some accident you happened to dial our private communication exchange, MUtant 4—"

"I thought it was MUgwump 4," Al interjected.

"The code name, naturally," said Waldemar smoothly. "To continue: You channeled into our communication network. You now know too much. Your presence in this space-time nexus jeopardizes the success of our entire movement. Therefore we are forced—"

"To demolecularize—" Giovanni began.

"Forced to dispose of you," Waldemar continued sternly. "We're humane beings—most of us—and we won't do anything that would make you suffer. But you can't stay in this area of space-time. You see our point of view, of course."

Al shook his head dimly. These little potbellied men were mutants working for the overthrow of humanity? Well, he had no reason to think they were lying to him. The world was full of little potbellied men. Maybe they were

all part of the secret organization, Al thought.

"Look," he said, "I didn't *want* to dial your number, get me? It was all a big accident. But I'm a fair guy. Let me get out of here and I'll keep mum about the whole thing. You can go ahead and overthrow humanity, if that's what you want to do. I promise not to interfere in any way. If you're mutants, you ought to be able to look into my mind and see that I'm sincere—"

"We have no telepathic powers," declared the chubby leader curtly. "If we had, there would be no need for a communications network in the first place. In the second place, your sincerity is not the issue. We have enemies. If you were to fall into their hands—"

"I won't say a word! Even if they stick splinters under my fingernails, I'll keep quiet!"

"No. At this stage in our campaign we can take no risks. You'll have to go. Prepare the temporal centrifuge."

Four of the little men, led by Mordecai, unveiled a complicated-looking device of the general size and shape of a concrete mixer. Waldemar and Giovanni gently shoved Al toward the machine. It came rapidly to life: dials glowed, indicator needles teetered, loud buzzes and clicks implied readiness.

Al said nervously, "What are you going to do to me?"

Waldemar explained. "This machine will hurl you forward in time. Too bad we have to rip you right out of your temporal matrix, but we've no choice. You'll be well taken care of up ahead, though. No doubt by the twenty-fifth century our kind will have taken over completely. You'll be the last of the Normals. Practically a living fossil. You'll love it. You'll be a walking museum piece."

"Assuming the machine works," Giovanni put in maliciously. "We don't really know if it does, you see."

Al gaped. They were busily strapping him to a cold copper slab in the heart of the machine. "You don't even know if it *works*?"

"Not really," Waldemar admitted. "Present theory holds that time-travel works only one way—*forward*. So we haven't been able to recover any of our test specimens and see how they reacted. Of course, they *do* vanish when the machine is turned on, so we know they must go *somewhere*."

"Oh," Al said weakly.

He was trussed in thoroughly. Experimental wriggling of his right wrist showed him that. But even if he could get loose, these weird little men would only "freeze" him and put him into the machine again.

His shoulders slumped resignedly. He wondered if anyone would miss him. The Friendly Finance Corporation certainly would. But since, in a sense, it was their fault he was in this mess now, he couldn't get very upset about that. They could always sue his estate for the three hundred dollars he owed them, if his estate was worth that much.

Nobody else was going to mind the disappearance of Albert Miller from the space-time continuum, he thought dourly. His parents were dead, he hadn't seen his one sister in fifteen years, and the girl he used to know in Topeka was married and at last report had three kids.

Still and all, he rather liked 1969. He wasn't sure how he would take to the twenty-fifth century—or the twenty-fifth century to him.

"Ready for temporal discharge," Mordecai sang out.

The chubby leader peered up at Al. "We're sorry about all this, you understand. But nothing and nobody can be allowed to stand in the way of the Cause."

"Sure," Al said. "I understand."

The concrete-mixer part of the machine began to revolve, bearing Al with it as it built up tempokinetic potential. Momentum increased alarmingly. In the background Al heard an ominous droning sound that grew louder and louder, until it drowned out everything else. His head reeled. The room and its fat little mutants went blurry. He heard a *pop!* like the sound of a breaking balloon.

It was the rupturing of the space-time continuum. Al Miller went hurtling forward along the fourspace track, head first. He shut his eyes and hoped for the best.

When the dizziness stopped, he found himself sitting in the middle of an impeccably clean, faintly yielding roadway, staring up at the wheels of vehicles swishing by overhead at phenomenal speeds. After a moment or two more,

he realized they were not airborne, but simply automobiles racing along an elevated roadway made of some practically invisible substance.

So the temporal centrifuge *had* worked! Al glanced around. A crowd was collecting. A couple of hundred people had formed a big circle. They were pointing and muttering. Nobody approached closer than fifty or sixty feet. They weren't potbellied mutants. Without exception they were all straight-backed six-footers with full heads of hair. The women were tall, too. Men and women alike were dressed in a sort of tunic-like garment made of iridescent material that constantly changed colors.

A gong began to ring, rapidly peaking in volume. Al scrambled to his feet and assayed a tentative smile.

"My name's Miller. I come from 1969. Would somebody mind telling me what year this is, and—"

He was drowned out by two hundred voices screaming in terror. The crowd stampeded away, dashing madly in every direction, as if he were some ferocious monster. The gong continued to clang loudly. Cars hummed overhead. Suddenly Al saw a squat, beetle-shaped black vehicle coming toward him on the otherwise empty road. The car pulled up half a block away, the top sprang open, and a figure clad in what might have been a diver's suit—or a spacesuit—stepped out and advanced toward Al.

"Dozzinon murrifar volan," the armored figure called out.

"No speaka da lingo," Al replied. "I'm a stranger here."

To his dismay he saw the other draw something shaped like a weapon and

point it at him. Al's hands shot immediately into the air. A globe of bluish light exuded from the broad muzzle of the gun, hung suspended for a moment, and drifted toward Al. He dodged uneasily to one side, but the globe of light followed him, descended, and wrapped itself completely around him.

It was like being on the inside of a soap bubble. He could see out, though distortedly. He touched the curving side of the globe experimentally; it was resilient and springy to the touch, but his finger did not penetrate.

He noticed with some misgiving that his bubble cage was starting to drift off the ground. It trailed a rope-like extension, which the man in the spacesuit deftly grabbed and knotted to the rear bumper of his car. He drove quickly away—with Al, bobbing in his impenetrable bubble of light, tagging willy-nilly along like a caged tiger, or like a captured Gaul being dragged through the streets of Rome behind a chariot.

He got used to the irregular motion after a while, and relaxed enough to be able to study his surroundings. He was passing through a remarkably antiseptic-looking city, free from refuse and dust. Towering buildings, all bright and spankingly new-looking, shot up everywhere. People goggled at him from the safety of the pedestrian walkways as he jounced past.

After about ten minutes the car halted outside an imposing building whose facade bore the words ISTFAQ BARNOLL. Three men in spacesuits appeared from within to flank Al's captor as a kind of honor guard. Al was borne within.

He was nudged gently into a small room on the ground floor. The door rolled shut behind him and seemed to join the rest of the wall; no division line was apparent. A moment later the balloon popped open, and just in time, too; the air had been getting quite stale inside it.

Al glanced around. A square window opened in the wall and three grim-faced men peered intently at him from an adjoining cubicle. A voice from a speaker grid above Al's head said, "Murrifar althrosk?"

"Al Miller, from the twentieth century. And it wasn't my idea to come here, believe me."

"Durberal haznik? Quittimar? Dorbfenk?"

Al shrugged. "No parley-voo. Honest, I don't savvy."

is three interrogators conferred among themselves—taking what seemed to Al like the needless precaution of switching off the mike to prevent him from overhearing their deliberations. He saw one of the men leave the observation cubicle. When he returned, some five minutes later, he brought with him a tall, gloomy-looking man wearing an impressive spade-shaped beard.

The mike was turned on again. Spadebeard said rumblingly, "How be thou hight?"

"Eh?"

"An thou reck the King's tongue. I conjure thee speak!"

Al grinned. No doubt they had fetched an expert in ancient languages to talk to him. "Right language, but the wrong time. I'm from the *twentieth* century. Come forward a ways."

Spadebeard paused to change mental gears. "A thousand pardons—I mean, *sorry*. Wrong idiom. Dig me now?"

"I follow you. What year is this?"

"It is 2431. And from whence be you?"

"You don't quite have it straight, yet. But I'm from 1969."

"And how come you hither?"

"I wish I knew," Al said. "I was just trying to phone the loan company, see. . . anyway, I got involved with these little fat guys who wanted to take over the world. Mutants, they said they were. And they decided they had to get rid of me, so they bundled me into their time machine and shot me forward. So I'm here."

"A spy of the mutated ones, eh?"

"Spy? Who said anything about being a spy? Talk about jumping to conclusions! I'm—"

"You have been sent by Them to wreak mischief among us. No transparent story of yours will deceive us. You are not the first to come to our era, you know. And you will meet the same fate the others met."

Al shook his head foggily. "Look here, you're making some big mistake. I'm not a spy for anybody. And I don't want to get involved in any war between you and the mutants—"

"The war is over. The last of the mutated ones was exterminated fifty years ago."

"Okay, then. What can you fear from me? Honest, I don't want to cause any trouble. If the mutants are wiped out, how could my spying help them?"

"No action in time and space is ever absolute. In our fourspace the mutants are eradicated—but they lurk elsewhere, waiting for their chance to enter and spread destruction."

Al's brain was swimming. "Okay, let that pass. But I'm not a spy. I just want to be left alone. Let me settle down here somewhere—put me on probation—show me the ropes, stake me to a few credits, or whatever you use for money here. I won't make any trouble."

"Your body teems with microorganisms of disease long since extinct in this world. Only the fact that we were able to confine you in a force-bubble almost as soon as you arrived here saved us from a terrible epidemic of ancient diseases."

"A couple of injections, that's all, and you can kill any bacteria on me," Al pleaded. "You're advanced people. You ought to be able to do a simple thing like that."

"And then there is the matter of your genetic structure," Spade-beard continued inexorably. "You bear genes long since eliminated from humanity as un-

desirable. Permitting you to remain here, breeding uncontrollably, would introduce unutterable confusion. Perhaps you carry latently the same mutant strain that cost humanity so many centuries of bloodshed!"

"No," Al protested. "Look at me. I'm six feet tall, no potbelly, a full head of hair—"

"The gene is recessive. But it crops up unexpectedly."

"I solemnly promise to control my breeding," Al declared. "I won't run around scattering my genes all over your shiny new world. That's a promise."

"Your appeal is rejected," came the inflexible reply.

Al shrugged. He knew when he was beaten. "Okay," he said wearily. "I didn't want to live in your damn century anyway. When's the execution?"

"*Execution?*" Spadebeard looked stunned. "The twentieth-century reference—yes, it is! Dove's whiskers, do you think we would— would actually—"

He couldn't get the word out. Al supplied it.

"Put me to death?"

Spadebeard's expression was sickly. He looked ready to retch. Al heard him

mutter vehemently to his companions in the observation cubicle: "Gomirn def larriraog! Egfar!"

"Murrifar althrosk," suggested one of his companions.

Spadebeard, evidently reassured, nodded. He said to Al, "No doubt a barbarian like yourself *would* expect to be—to be made dead." Gulping, he went gamely on. "We have no such vindictive intention."

"Well, what *are* you going to do to me?"

"Send you across the timeline to a world where your friends the mutated ones reign supreme," Spadebeard replied. "It's the least we can do for you, spy."

The hidden door of his cell puckered open. Another space-suited figure entered, pointed a gun, and discharged a blob of blue light that drifted toward Al and rapidly englobed him. He was drawn by the trailing end out into a corridor.

It hadn't been a very sociable reception, here in the twenty-fifth Century, he thought as he was tugged along the hallway. In a way, he couldn't blame them. A time-traveler from the past was bound to be laden down with all sorts of germs. They couldn't risk letting him run around *breathing* at everybody. No wonder that crowd of onlookers had panicked when he opened his mouth to speak to them.

The other business, though, that of his being a spy for the mutants—he couldn't figure that out at all. If the mutants had been wiped out fifty years ago, why worry about spies now? At least his species had managed to

defeat the underground organization of potbellied little men. That was comforting. He wished he could get back to 1969 if only to snap his fingers in their jowly faces and tell them that all their sinister scheming was going to come to nothing.

Where was he heading now? Spadebeard had said, *Across the timeline to a world where the mutated ones reign supreme*. Whatever across the timeline meant, Al thought.

He was ushered into an impressive laboratory room and, bubble and all, was thrust into the waiting clasps of something that looked depressingly like an electric chair. Brisk technicians bustled around, throwing switches and checking connections.

Al glanced appealingly at Spadebeard. "Will you tell me what's going on?" "It is very difficult to express it in medieval terms," the linguist said. "The device makes use of dollibar force to transmit you through an inverse dormin vector—do I make myself clear?"

"Not very."

"Unhelpable. But you understand the concept of parallel continua at least, of course."

"No."

"Does it mean anything to you if I say that you'll be shunted across the spokes of the time-wheel to a totality that is simultaneously parallel and tangent to our fourspace?"

"I get the general idea," Al said dubiously, though all he was really getting was a headache. "You might as well start shunting me, I suppose."

Spadebeard nodded and turned to a technician. "Vorstrar althrosk," he commanded.

"Murrifar."

The technician grabbed an immense toggle switch with both hands and groaningly dragged it shut. Al heard a brief shine of closing relays. Then darkness surrounded him.

Once again he found himself on a city street. But the pavement was cracked and buckled, and grass blades shot up through the neglected concrete.

A dry voice said, "All right, you. Don't sprawl there like a ninny. Get up and come along."

Al peered doubtfully up into the snout of a fair-sized pistol of enormous caliber. It was held by a short, fat, bald-headed man. Four identical companions stood near him with arms folded. They all looked very much like Mordecai, Waldemar, Giovanni, and the rest, except that these mutants were decked out in futuristic-looking costumes bright with flashy gold trim and rocketship insignia.

Al put up his hands. "Where am I?" he asked hesitantly.

"Earth, of course. You've just come through a dimensional gateway from the continuum of the Normals. Come along, spy. Into the van."

"But I'm *not* a spy," Al mumbled protestingly, as the five little men bundled him into a blue-and-red car the size of a small yacht. "At least, I'm not spying on *you*. I mean—"

"Save the explanations for the Overlord," was the curt instruction.

Al huddled miserably cramped between two vigilant mutants, while the others sat behind him. The van moved seemingly of its own volition, and at an enormous rate. A mutant power, Al thought. After a while he said,

Could you at least tell me what year this is?"

"It is 2431," snapped the mutant to his left.

"But that's the same year it was over *there*."

"Of course. What did you expect?"

The question floored Al. He was silent for perhaps half a mile more. Since the van had no windows, he stared morosely at his feet. Finally he asked, "How come you aren't afraid of catching my germs, then? Over back of—ah—the dimensional gateway, they kept me cooped up in a force-field all the time so I wouldn't contaminate them. But you go right ahead breathing the same air I do."

"Do you think we fear the germs of a Normal, spy?" sneered the mutant at Al's right. "You forget that we're a superior race." Al nodded. "Yes. I forgot about that."

The van halted suddenly and the mutant police hustled Al out, past a crowd of peering little fat men and women, and into a colossal dome of a building whose exterior was covered completely with faceted green glass. The effect was one of massive ugliness.

They ushered him into a sort of throne room presided over by a mutant fatter than the rest. The policeman gripping Al's right arm hissed, "Bow when you enter the presence of the Overlord."

Al wasn't minded to argue. He dropped to his knees along with the others. A booming voice from above rang out, "What have you brought me today?"

"A spy, your nobility."

"Another? Rise, spy."

Al rose. "Begging your nobility's pardon, I'd like to put in a word or two on my own behalf—"

"Silence!" the Overlord roared.

Al closed his mouth. The mutant drew himself up to his full height, about five feet one, and said, "The Normals have sent you across the dimensional gulf to spy on us."

"No, your nobility. They were afraid I'd spy on *them*, so they tossed me over here. I'm from the year 1969, you see." Briefly, he explained everything, beginning with the bollixed phone call and ending with his capture by the Overlord's men a short while ago.

The Overlord looked skeptical. "It is well known that the Normals plan to cross the dimensional gulf from their phantom world to this, the real one, and invade our civilization. You're but the latest of their advance scouts.

Admit it!"

"Sorry, your nobility, but I'm not. On the other side they told me I was a spy from 1969, and now you say I'm a spy from the other dimension. But I tell you—"

"Enough!" the mutant leader thundered. "Take him away. Place him in custody. We shall decide his fate later!"

Someone else already occupied the cell into which Al was thrust. He was a lanky, sad-faced Normal who slouched forward to shake hands once the door had clanged shut.

"Thurizad manifosk," he said.

"Sorry. I don't speak that language," said Al.

The other grinned. "I understand. All right: greetings. I'm Darren Phelp. Are you a spy too?"

"No, dammit!" Al snapped. Then: "Sorry. Didn't mean to take it out on you. My name's Al Miller. Are you a native of this place?"

"Me? Dove's whiskers, what a sense of humor! Of course I'm not a native! You know as well as I do that there aren't any Normals left in this four-space continuum."

"None at all?"

"Hasn't been one born here in centuries," Phelp said. "But you're just joking, eh? You're from Baileffod's outfit, I suppose."

"Who?"

"Baileffod. *Baileflod!* You mean you aren't? Then you must be from Higher Up!" Phelp thrust his hands sideways in some kind of gesture of respect.

"Penguin's paws, Excellency, I apologize. I should have seen at once—"

"No, I'm not from your organization at all," Al said. "I don't know what you're talking about, really."

Phelp smiled cunningly. "Of *course*, Excellency! I understand completely."

"Cut that out! Why doesn't anyone ever believe me? I'm not from Baileffod and I'm not from Higher Up. I come from 1969. Do you hear me, 1969? And that's the truth."

Phelp's eyes went wide. "From the *past*?"

Al nodded. "I stumbled into the mutants in 1969 and they threw me five centuries ahead to get rid of me. Only when I arrived, I wasn't welcome, so I was shipped across the dimensional whatzis to here. Everyone thinks I'm a spy, wherever I go. What are you doing here?"

Phelp smiled. "Why, I *am* a spy."

"From 2431?"

"Naturally. We have to keep tabs on the mutants somehow. I came through the gateway wearing an invisibility shield, but it popped an ultrone and I vizzed out. They jugged me last month, and I suppose I'm here for keeps."

Al rubbed thumbs tiredly against his eyeballs. "Wait a minute— how come you speak my language? On the other side they had to get a linguistics expert to talk to me."

"All spies are trained to talk English, stupid. That's the language the mutants speak here. In the real world we speak Vorkish, naturally. It's the language developed by Normals for communication during the Mutant Wars. Your 'linguistics expert' was probably one of our top spies."

"And over here the mutants have won?"

"Completely. Three hundred years ago, in this continuum, the mutants developed a two-way time machine that enabled them to go back and forth, eliminating Normal leaders before they were born. Whereas in our world, the *real* world, two-way time travel is impossible. That's where the continuum split begins. We Normals fought a grim war of extermination against the mutants in our fourspace and finally wiped them out, despite their superior mental powers, in 2390. Clear?"

"More or less." Rather less than more, Al added privately. "So there are only mutants in this world, and only Normals in your world."
"Exactly."

"And you're a spy from the other side."

"You've got it now! You see, even though strictly speaking this world is only a phantom, it's got some pretty real characteristics. For instance, if the mutants killed you here, you'd be dead. Permanently. So there's a lot of rivalry across the gateway; the mutants are always scheming to invade us, and vice versa. Confidentially, I don't think anything will ever come of all the scheming."

"You don't?"

"Nah," Phelp said. "The way things stand now, each side has a perfectly good enemy just beyond reach. But actually going to war would be messy, while relaxing our guard and slipping into peace would foul up our economy. So we keep sending spies back and forth, and prepare for war. It's a nice

system, except when you happen to get caught, like me.”

“What’ll happen to you?”

Phelp shrugged. “They may let me rot here for a few decades. Or they might decide to condition me and send me back as a spy for *them*. Tiger tails, who knows?”

“Would you change sides like that?”

“I wouldn’t have any choice—not after I was conditioned,” Phelp said. “But I don’t worry much about it. It’s a risk I knew about when I signed on for spy duty.”

Al shuddered. It was beyond him how someone could *voluntarily* let himself get involved in this game of dimension-shifting and mutant-battling. But it takes all sorts to make a continuum, he decided.

Half an hour later three rotund mutant police came to fetch him. They marched him downstairs and into a bare, ugly little room where a battery of interrogators quizzed him for better than an hour. He stuck to his story, throughout everything, until at last they indicated they were through with him. He spent the next two hours in a drafty cell, by himself, until finally a gaudily robed mutant unlocked the door and said, “The Overlord wishes to see you.”

The Overlord looked worried. He leaned forward on his throne, fist digging into his fleshy chin. In his booming voice—Al realized suddenly that it was artificially amplified—the Overlord rumbled, “Miller, you’re a *problem*.”

“I’m sorry your nobil—”

"Quiet! I'll do the talking."

Al did not reply.

The Overlord went on, "We've checked your story inside and out, and confirmed it with one of our spies on the other side of the gate. You really *are* from 1969, or thereabouts. What can we do with you? Generally speaking, when we catch a Normal snooping around here, we psychocondition him and send him back across the gateway to spy for us. But we can't do that to you, because you don't belong on the other side, and they've already tossed you out once. On the other hand, we can't keep you here, maintaining you forever at state expense. And it wouldn't be civilized to kill you, would it?"

"No, your nobil—"

"Silence!"

Al gulped. The Overlord glowered at him and continued thinking out loud. "I suppose we could perform experiments on you, though. You must be a walking laboratory of Normal microorganisms that we could synthesize and fire through the gateway when we invade their fourspace. Yes, by the Grome, then you'd be useful to our cause! Zechariah?"

"Yes, Nobility?" A ribbon-bedecked guardsman snapped to attention.

"Take this Normal to the Biological Laboratories for examination. I'll have

further instructions as soon as—”

Al heard a peculiar whanging noise from the back of the throne room. The Overlord appeared to freeze on his throne. Turning, Al saw a band of determined-looking Normals come bursting in, led by Darren Phelp.

“*There you are!*” Phelp cried. “I’ve been looking all over for you!” He was waving a peculiar needle-nozzled gun.

“What’s going on?” Al asked.

Phelp grinned. “The Invasion! It came, after all! Our troops are pouring through the gateway armed with these freezer guns. They immobilize any mutant who gets in the way of the field.”

“When—when did all this happen?”

“It started two hours ago. We’ve captured the entire city! Come on, will you? Whiskers, there’s no time to waste!”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

Phelp smiled. “To the nearest dimensional lab, of course. We’re going to send you back home.”

A dozen triumphant Normals stood in a tense knot around Al in the laboratory. From outside came the sound of jubilant singing. The Invasion was a howling success.

As Phelp had explained it, the victory was due to the recent invention of a kind of time-barrier projector. The projector had cut off all contact between the mutant world and its own future, preventing time-traveling mutant scouts from getting back to 2431 with news of the Invasion. Thus two-way travel, the great mutant advantage, was nullified, and the success of the surprise attack was made possible.

Al listened to this explanation with minimal interest. He barely understood every third word, and, in any event, his main concern was in getting home. He was strapped into a streamlined and much modified version of the temporal centrifuge that had originally hurled him into 2431. Phelp explained things to him.

"You see here, we set the machine for 1969. What day was it when you left?"

"Ah—October ten. Around three thirty in the afternoon."

"Make the setting, Frozz." Phelp nodded. "You'll be shunted back along the time-line. Of course, you'll land in this continuum, since in our world there's no such thing as pastward time travel. But once you reach your own time, all you do is activate this small transdimensional generator, and you'll be hurled across safe and sound into the very day you left, in your own fourspace."

"You can't know how much I appreciate all this," Al said warmly. He felt a pleasant glow of love for all mankind, for the first time since his unhappy phone call. At last someone was taking sympathetic interest in his plight.

At last, he was on his way home, back to the relative sanity of 1969, where

he could start forgetting this entire nightmarish jaunt. Mutants and Normals and spies and time machines—

“You’d better get going,” Phelp said. “We have to get the occupation under way here.”

“Sure,” Al agreed. “Don’t let me hold you up. I can’t wait to get going—no offense intended.”

“And remember—soon as your surroundings look familiar, jab the activator button on this generator. Otherwise you’ll slither into an interspace where we couldn’t answer for the consequences.”

Al nodded tensely. “I won’t forget.”

“I hope not. Ready?”

“Ready.”

Someone threw a switch. Al began to spin. He heard the popping sound that was the rupturing of the temporal matrix. Like a cork shot from a champagne bottle, Al arched out backward through time, heading for 1969.

He woke in his own room on Twenty-third Street. His head hurt. His mind was full of phrases like temporal centrifuge and transdimensional generator.

He picked himself off the floor and rubbed his head.

Wow, he thought. It must have been a sudden fainting spell. And now his head was full of nonsense.

Going to the sideboard, he pulled out the half-empty bourbon bottle and measured off a few fingers' worth. After the drink, his nerves felt steadier.

His mind was still cluttered with inexplicable thoughts and images.

inister little fat men and complex machines, gleaming roadways and men in fancy tunics.

A bad dream, he thought.

Then he remembered. It wasn't any dream. He had actually taken the round trip into 2431, returning by way of some other continuum. He had pressed the generator button at the proper time, and now here he was, safe and sound. No longer the football of a bunch of different factions. Home in his own snug little fourspace, or whatever it was.

He frowned. He recalled that Mordecai had severed the telephone wire. But the phone looked intact now. Maybe it had been fixed while he was gone. He picked it up. Unless he got that loan extension today, he was cooked.

There was no need for him to look up the number of the Friendly Finance Corporation; he knew it well enough. He began to dial. MUrray Hill 4—
The receiver clicked queerly. A voice said, "Come in, Operator Nine.

perator Nine, do you read me?"

Al's jaw sagged in horror. This is where I came in, he thought wildly.

He struggled to put down the phone.

ut his muscles would not respond. It would be easier to bend the sun in its orbit than to break the path of the continuum. He heard his own voice say, "I didn't want the operator. There must be something wrong with my phone if—"

"Just a minute. Who *are* you?"

Al fought to break the contact. But he was hemmed away in a small corner of his mind while his voice went on, "I ought to ask you that. What are you doing on the other end of my phone, anyway? I hadn't even finished dialing. I got as far as MU-4 and—"

Inwardly Al wanted to scream.

No scream would come. In this continuum the past (his future) was im-

mutable. He was caught on the track, and there was no escape. None whatever. And, he realized glumly, there never would be.

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