

THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

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STORIES

VOLUME 11

MAY, 1960

NUMBER 2

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Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES

MARIE A. PARK, Asso. Ed.

DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.

SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, May, 1960, published bi-monthly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. 35c per copy; yearly subscriptions \$2.00. Printed in the U. S. A.

travelers

far

and

wee

by Donald

E. Westlake

A Fable of

Futurity

R OGER TURNED right on Eighth Avenue from Fourteenth Street and drove uptown. Phil was asleep in the seat on his right. Roger readjusted himself behind the wheel, cut between two cabs, barely missed a truck, gradually worked the car—this year's Oldsmobile, with the latest sanitary equipment—over to the left-hand side of the road. Eighth Avenue is one way, uptown, and Roger drove along the farthest lane over to the left. The lights were staggered, and Roger pushed the car at just under thirty miles an hour, clicking across each intersection just as the light snapped green.

He turned left on Forty Fifth Street, crossed Ninth Avenue, followed Forty Fifth Street down to the end, turned right and drove up the ramp to the Parkway. He speeded up to thirty five miles an hour, and glanced over at Phil. The poor guy was still asleep.

At One Hundred Seventy Fifth Street, Roger turned off and took the approach to the George Washington bridge. He drove across the bridge, rolled the window down, dropped a fifty cent piece into the toll

taker's hand. Rolling the window back up, he pulled out among the Jersey traffic.

Roger appeared to be about forty. Since it was a chill October day, he wore a tailored herringbone tweed topcoat, a gray hat and tan gloves. His face was full-fleshed, but not puffy. He didn't wear glasses, and he looked like a successful businessman.

Phil, asleep on the seat beside him, wore approximately the same clothing. Although his face had its own individuality, it gave the same impression as did Roger's. A man of means, an executive, a man who gives commands, a man of business and foresight and a good income.

Roger swooped the gray Olds halfway round a cloverleaf, swung gently and smoothly into a turn-off, barely touched the power brakes, and the car purringly decelerated as he drove into the tiny Jersey town.

The bank was on the main road of town. Roger turned into the driveway and parked behind the car waiting by the drive-in teller's window. He

took out checkbook and pen, wrote out a check to cash, and when his turn came, drove up to the window, rolled down the window at his side, and handed the check in to the teller. After a minute, the teller pushed a wad of greenbacks out to him. Roger took the money, tossed it carelessly on the seat between himself and Philip, rolled up the window, and drove around the modest brick bank building, out to the street, and turned back the way he had come.

ANOTHER fifty cents to the man at the tollgate, and Roger drove the car swiftly back across the bridge. This time, he took the "Local Streets" exit, turned north, drove until he came to the drive-in restaurant. He parked before the neon-coated, modernistic, glassed-in building, and waited until the chilly girl carhop came over to take his order. He asked for a hamburger, a cup of coffee, apple pie with ice cream. The carhop went away, and Roger picked up the cash that had been lying on the seat, counted it, shoved it into

the glove compartment with the rest of the money there, except for one ten dollar bill, and put that bill on top of the dashboard.

He ate his meal, handed the ten dollars to the carhop, and said, "Keep the change." He knew when he said it that it was a stupid thing to do, but he didn't really care. He backed out to the highway, leaving the carhop stunned behind him, and headed back toward the city.

He glanced at his watch. Almost four thirty. He had to get downtown soon. He drove down Ninth Avenue, keeping to the left, turned onto Fourteenth Street, over to Lexington, turned uptown again, cutting off a cab that was coming the other way on Fourteenth Street, and held traffic up for quite a while during which he executed some complicated maneuvering, making a left turn into Seventeenth Street.

At Seventeenth and Fifth, he had to stop for a red light. The light turned green, but he sat there daydreaming. A car behind him honked, raucously, impatiently. Roger came to

with a start, stalled the engine, got it going again, and turned right on Fifth.

The honking had awakened Phil. He sat up, blinking, rubbing his eyes, and said, "What time is it?"

"Not quite five."

"I might as well stay awake then." Phil looked out at the traffic and the crowds of pedestrians. "Pretty crowded," he said.

"Getting close to the Christmas shopping rush," said Roger.

"That's true. That's going to be a real mess."

"I'm not looking forward to it."

THEY DROVE in silence for a while. They went into Central Park, circled it, came out on West Seventy Second, turned right, drove up to One Hundred Twenty Fifth, turned right again, over to Seventh Avenue, headed back downtown.

They had a terrible time getting through Times Square. A cab driver rolled his window down and cursed Roger in two languages. Roger maintained

his dignity, stared straight ahead, drove on downtown.

As they turned into Fourteenth Street, Phil broke the silence. He waved out at all the traffic surrounding them, and said, "I wonder how many of them are like us."

Roger shrugged. "More every day, I suppose."

"Makes you stop and think."

"It does that."

They headed up Fifth Avenue again, amid the cabs and the groaning buses. As they crossed Forty Seventh, Phil said, "It's six o'clock."

"All right," said Roger. "I'm rather tired."

THEY WERE stopped by a red light at Forty Eighth. Roger put the emergency brake on and slid over to the right. Phil clambered over him and got behind the wheel. He didn't get there before the light changed. A cab behind blatted its horn at them.

Phil released the emergency brake and started forward, slowly. The cab blatted again. Phil swerved erratically, barely missing a cab on his right.

Roger relaxed in his seat,

leaning against the right-hand door. "I cashed another check this afternoon," he said.

"How much do we have left?"

"I don't know. Millions."

At Fifty Ninth, they were stuck behind a car trying to make a left turn. Phil laughed. "I bet *he's* one of us."

"More every day," murmured Roger. His eyes were closed.

They continued uptown, turned left at Seventy Second, over to Ninth Avenue, turned downtown.

Phil watched the other traffic. His face was tired, lonely, wistful. He watched the pedestrians hurrying along the sidewalk, bumping into one another, cursing one another, straining to be first to the corner.

They crossed Fifty Ninth Street just after the light changed. A cab slammed on its brakes. Phil looked in the rear view mirror, watched the cab cross the intersection. He smiled, faintly. He said, "Do you suppose we'll *ever* be able to get out of the car?"

But Roger didn't answer. He was asleep.