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Shadow of Wings (<i>short novel</i>)	by ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING	3
Some Facts About Robots (<i>verse</i>)	by LEONARD WOLF	24
The Doom of London	by ROBERT BARR	25
Recommended Reading (<i>a department</i>)	by THE EDITORS	34
The Accountant	by ROBERT SHECKLEY	35
Epitaph in Avalon (<i>verse</i>)	by SHERWOOD SPRINGER	42
Careless Love	by ALBERT COMPTON FRIBORG	43
The Gods of the Dana (<i>verse</i>)	by LEAH BODINE DRAKE	60
My Boy Friend's Name is Jello	by AVRAM DAVIDSON	61
Star LummoX (<i>conclusion</i>)	by ROBERT A. HEINLEIN	65
Infinite Resources	by RANDALL GARRETT	114
The Lysenko Maze	by DAVID GRINNELL	118

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Elisabeth Sanxay Holding is noted for subtle fantasy (surely you remember Friday the Nineteenth, F&SF, Summer, 1950?) and psychological mystery novels. Now she turns to straight science fiction with results more chilling than her fantasies, more perturbing than her mysteries. This is the story of a disturbance in ecology and its terrible impact upon our civilization; and it's an examination, too, of a basic psychological weakness in this proud civilization and in ourselves. This strange tale of the Year When The Birds Stopped Eating should lead you to the classic emotions of pity and terror . . . and also to a certain amount of disquieting self-examination.

Shadow of Wings

by ELISABETH SANXAY HOLDING

ILLUSTRATION BY NICK SOLOVIOFF

IT WAS LATE in the afternoon of a happy day that Stan Dickson first saw the shadow. He had just finished clipping the hedge, and he was sitting on the steps that led up to the veranda, looking out at the little tidal creek across the road. There was a small boat yard there, and an elderly man was using a hammer, with a clinking sound; down the street, someone was mowing a lawn. Celia was upstairs, putting the children to bed; he could hear her voice, and little Jenie's voice, loud and urgent; Jenie was four years old now, and filled with an almost desperate impatience. It no longer satisfied her to listen to a bedtime story; she wanted to compose her own, with someone to listen.

It made him smile to hear the jumbled story in that loud little voice, a bad wolf, a bad, *bad* witch, a naughty little rabbit, a good fairy, a beautiful princess. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lit one; he smoked, well-pleased with his own life and with the tranquil Summer world. Maybe by the time little Pete grows up, there won't be any more wars.

The orange sun was swimming above the horizon, in a pale-green sky, throwing a fiery bar across the gray-green water of the creek. The old man's hammer clinked, but the lawn mower had stopped, and Jenie's voice had died away. There was another sound, somewhere in the offing; a plane, he thought, and watched for it. And then the shadow came across the face of the sun, a great flock of birds, some small, some with great wide wings beating. He

heard a mewling cry, like that of a gull, he heard a fluty twitter, another unknown note; then they went sweeping past, and out of sight.

City-bred, he knew next to nothing about birds, and he frowned at the queer uneasiness that stirred in him. Damn nonsense! he told himself. Maybe this is the time of year they migrate; something of the sort, something perfectly natural.

He finished his cigarette, and went into the house. Celia was in the kitchen, beginning to dish up their early dinner. Libby was coming to sit with the babies, and they were going to the movies in the nearby town; they had made this a part of their sedate and cheerful routine. Stan did not mention the birds to Celia, but when she had gone upstairs to dress, he strolled into the kitchen where young Libby was washing the dishes. A nice girl she was, rosy and good-tempered.

"You know about these things," he said. "Do a lot of different kinds of birds often fly together in the same flock?"

"My goodness!" cried Libby. "Don't talk to *me* about *birds*, Mr. Dickson! My uncle Joe — he's got a truck farm, you know — why, he's creating and carrying on about the birds, from morning till night."

"Mean they're eating up the crops?" Stan asked, a little uncertainly. Because what did he know about birds? Only that farmers put up scarecrows, didn't they, to keep birds away?

"Oh, it's *lots* worse than that!" said Libby. "Why, it's even in the papers, Mr. Dickson, and the Government's sending people to find out about it. You see, the birds just aren't coming at all!"

"Coming where?"

"They aren't coming *anywhere*," Libby explained. "The crops are dying, and the trees are dying, because the birds aren't killing any of the insects. Why, you wouldn't believe how bad things are getting! The flowers, and even the grass . . ."

"I didn't know that birds were so useful," said Stan. "Maybe that's why our garden is so — let's call it unspectacular. Why have the birds quit on the job, Libby?"

"Nobody knows," she said. "Haven't you read about it in the papers, Mr. Dickson? Or heard people talking about it?"

"Well," said Stan, "the people in an advertising agency don't seem to talk much about birds."

"They'd ought to," said Libby, severely. "My father, and my Uncle Joe, and everybody, they all say there'll be a real famine in this country, in a few months, if the birds don't come back and kill the insects — worms, and beetles, and caterpillars, and goodness knows what — why, they're crawling all over the place."

"But I saw a big flock of birds, just a little while ago."

"I know," said Libby. "Everybody sees them — the biggest flocks of birds that ever came over here. Only, they don't stop. Not a one of them."

"But why not? They have to eat something somewhere, don't they?"

"Well . . ." Libby said. "Of course, I don't know if there's anything to it, but — well . . . some people say it's the Russians."

Stan bent his head, and flicked an ash off his sleeve, fighting back a grin.

"How would they manage that?" he asked, with polite earnestness.

"Well, I don't understand much about things like that," Libby answered.

"But my father, he thinks they —" She paused, and putting her hands behind her, she leaned back against the sink. "What he calls it is 'deflecting,'" she said. "Pop says that could be done, maybe. Something could be sort of sprinkled down from planes, something that would keep birds away."

Stan looked at her with a faint frown, a little impressed by her tone, and words. But only for a moment. Now, look here! he said to himself. These Russians "deflecting" the birds . . . Come, come!

He went upstairs to wash, and when he came down, Celia was waiting for him. "Hello, Perfect!" he said to her, and he thought that she was just that, a tall girl, straight and proud, in a tailored white cotton dress that well set off her olive skin, her long dark eyes, her rich dark hair. She was handsome, she was intelligent, she was good-tempered, and she was superbly capable, as a mother, a housekeeper, an organizer. He was certain of a good dinner, and served on time.

"Celia," he said, "have you heard any talk in the village about birds?"

"Not in the village," she said. "But the old man from the boat yard stopped me in the street yesterday. He's a very nice old fellow, you know, and he often stops to speak to the children. But yesterday I couldn't get away from him. He went on and on about how the fish were gettin 'out of control,' he called it. I couldn't quite follow him, but as far as I could make out, the gulls and the other sea-birds had stopped catching fish, and the inlet, he said, is teeming with them. And some species, that the birds used to eat, are getting so numerous they're crowding out the others. He was very much worried. He said the balance of nature was being upset."

"I wouldn't know. . . ." said Stan. "Maybe nature changes its balances now and then. Think so?"

"Stan, I'm just a child of the city streets. I don't know about nature. Only, I've read that when new species are introduced into a place, they can do a lot of harm. Rabbits in Australia, for instance."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I've heard of things like that. You think, then, that maybe some new species of bird has come here, or been brought here, that's driving out all the other kinds?"

"Stan, I'm afraid I didn't take the old man's talk very seriously. Is it serious?"

"I don't know. We might take a look in the evening paper," he said.

"Do you think it's important enough to be in the newspapers?"

"Probably not," he said.

He wanted it not to be that important; he wanted to laugh at the whole thing. But it was there, on an inside page, and he realized that the heading was one which, even this morning, he would have skipped without reading.

SCIENTISTS STUDYING BIRD MYSTERY.

Scientists from the Department of Agriculture have asked the assistance of ornithologists in making a survey of the changed habits recently observed in the bird life of the New England States, and now reported to be spreading rapidly to other parts of the country.

The birds, which are an important factor in insect-control, have within recent weeks ceased to destroy various pests which formerly constituted their normal diet, and in consequence reports are pouring in to the Department of Agriculture of ruined crops, and, in some localities, of valuable timber forests succumbing to blights.

Unusually large flocks of birds, frequently composed of species hitherto regarded as inimical to one another, have been reported as flying over many areas, in a northwesterly direction. Observation planes report having occasionally seen these large flocks halting for brief periods of time in barren and inaccessible tracts, and then continuing their mysterious pilgrimages.

Scientists admit that at present they are at a loss to explain these unprecedented and increasingly serious phenomena.

BATS REPORTED JOINING BIRDS

Observers in Ohio report that vast numbers of bats have been seen flying in the wake of the great bird migrations. Mosquitoes in that region, formerly the prey of bats, are increasing to the dimensions of a plague. . . .

There was more about grasshoppers, and worms, boll weevils, caterpillars, other insects with names unknown to Stan; he glanced through them, and handed the newspaper to Celia. She read it, frowning a little.

"Well . . ." she said. "The scientists will find something — some new sort of spray to control the insects."

"They'd better," said Stan.

But lying awake that night, he remembered the flock of birds he had seen that afternoon, the cries he had heard, the sweep of wide wings, the flutter

of small ones, the inexorable onward rush of this multitude, and he was filled with wonder and dismay.

The next day, people were talking about birds in the office. "Too damn bad the pigeons don't go away with the rest of them," Anderson said. "We could do without them, all right, but they're still around."

"But only in parks, and places where they're fed by human beings," said Miss Zeller, the receptionist. "It said so, on the radio."

"Very good; there's the solution," said Anderson. "If people want the birds back, then feed 'em. Strew bread crumbs all over the place, and whatever else they eat."

"No, but we need them to destroy *insects!*" said Miss Zeller, indignantly.

"Well, they've gone on strike," said Anderson. "They're tired of eating insects, and worms. I don't blame them."

There were other people who took his joking tone about the matter; there were others who showed a serious, but quite academic interest. But more and more people were growing worried.

When Stan went out to lunch, in a little restaurant near the office, the waitress brought him a menu with an anxious smile.

"There's an awful lot of things crossed out," she said. "But it just seems like things didn't come in to the market this morning."

Green peas. Crossed out. Corn on the cob. Out. Strawberry shortcake. Out. Purple lines through one item after another.

"They say it's the birds," said the waitress. "They're eating up everything — or something like that. Well, I guess the scientists will fix *that* up."

The evening newspaper Stan opened in the train had an article by a scientist, an ornithologist. It was, he said, erroneous to speak of the present phenomenon as a "migration."

Our birds have not, in any area under observation, deserted their natural habitat, nor are they anywhere less numerous than usual. Nidification is normal. The remarkably large flocks of birds, comprising species never before observed in association, make from one to two flights daily, leaving their customary areas at fairly definite times, and returning after a fairly definite interval, ranging from three to eight or nine hours.

The disturbing factor in these hitherto unexplained movements is that the birds are no longer feeding upon the insects and grubs which normally constitute their diet, and, in consequence, the *Insecta* are menacing crops, orchards, and all forms of plant life.

It has been suggested that our birds are now being fed by what in marine life is known as "plankton." In the ocean, this consists of a

continual rain of more or less invisible matter, drifting down from the surface through various strata of the sea, and providing nourishment for an amazing variety of marine life. It is suggested that some cosmic disturbance is causing a similar condition in the atmosphere, so that in certain regions the birds are now receiving sustenance from the air, ample and varied enough to satisfy their needs.

The man sitting beside Stan in the smoker had a different newspaper, and a different theory. "This fellow —" he said. "This scientist — he says here that experiments with the atom bomb have produced a radiation which makes insects poisonous to birds. And he says, 'Unless we can immediately find some effective method of insect extermination, this planet which we inhabit will become a desert.' The insects, he says, are going to take over."

Celia was on the veranda with the two children when he got home. "What's up?" he asked, surprised by this variation in routine; the children were always upstairs being put to bed at this hour.

"I wanted to see the birds," Celia said. "Stan, look! Here they come!"

They were visible now above the woodland across the inlet; they came sweeping on, across the face of the setting sun, casting a shadow on the calm green water; they flew over the road and past the house, mewing, twittering, honking, wide wings flapping, tiny wings spinning.

"Chickie . . . ?" said little Pete.

"Those aren't *chickens*," said his sister, scornfully. "They're big, big, *big* owls, and they eat little bunnies and —"

"Come on, children!" said Celia.

Libby was not here this evening, but Celia, as usual, had everything organized. She came downstairs, neat and fresh and pretty. But Stan, who knew her so well, saw something new in her face.

"Was it hot in the city, Stan?" she asked.

"Hot enough," he said. "What's on your mind, Perfect?"

"Oh . . . Well . . . The dairy sent around a notice that they'll have to cut down the milk supply, starting tomorrow. 'The destruction of large areas of pasture land by insects has seriously affected the production of milk in our herds.' But you don't catch *me* napping, no, sir! I had a bright idea. Right away, as soon as the notice came in the mail, I took the children in the car, and drove down to the village to buy up some cases of canned milk. Only, other mothers had had the same idea, all the mothers in a twenty-five mile radius. It was — absolutely primitive, Stan! All of us fighting for cases of evaporated milk, telling how many children we had, and how extra-delicate they were, and then bidding against each other, offering two, three, five times the regular prices."

"But you got some," he said.

"Yes. Only, I don't like to remember how — how *fierce* I was. And the price . . . ! Stan, I'm sorry, but I haven't got a very nice dinner for you. I couldn't get any tomatoes, or lettuce, or green vegetables —"

"Take it easy, Cecily," he said, uneasy himself to see how disturbed she was under her air of good-humored amusement.

"And meat is getting scarce, too," she said. "And eggs. Stan, we'd better dig down into the old sock, and buy enormous stores — of everything."

"Yes . . ." he said.

But you can't beat the game, he thought. If it's going to be like that, we haven't that kind of money.

After dinner Cecily got a news broadcast on the radio. Experts in the nation's capital predict an early solution to the so-called 'bird-mystery' . . . In the meantime, citizens are urged to take immediate steps to control insects by thoroughly spraying all dwellings and outbuildings. Then foreign news, domestic politics, and then a little human interest story, told in the commentator's celebrated whimsical style.

"From Vermont. A farmer, Leonard Bogardus, was arrested early today for firing a shotgun from the roof of his barn at Department of Agriculture planes. 'They came once before to spray that stuff all over my land,' Mr. Bogardus told representatives of the press, 'and after they had gone, I wrote to Washington, and I saw the mayor of Stoneham, that is our township, and I warned them that I would not let them come again. I tacked signs up on the trees, and one on the chimney. Planes Keep Out. Last time they came, their dratted spray killed my heifer and my cat and her kittens, and there isn't a *leaf* left on my fruit trees. No, sir! I'll fight these plaguy insects my own way. They don't do near as much harm as them scientists and their poisons.' Well, folks, the Spirit of Seventy-six seems to be still alive in Vermont."

And later. "Stop: Over three hundred deaths have been reported throughout the country from insecticides. The great majority of the victims are children, but some adults have succumbed after eating fruit or vegetables coated with certain sprays. The public is seriously warned to take every precaution —"

"Oh, switch it off!" said Celia. "Let's get some music, something silly. It's — the whole thing is probably exaggerated. And anyhow, the scientists will cope with it."

"The scientists," Anderson said the next morning in the office, "are a damn sight more of a menace than the bugs."

"They're the *only* hope we have!" said Miss Zeller. "They're just doing everything they can think of. They're sending planes to follow the flocks

of birds to find out where they go, but the birds get scared and go into the woods. I — well, honestly, I'm *frightened*."

So was everyone else, whether frankly or secretly. The threat was developing with dreadful speed. There was something close to a panic in Wall Street as the stocks of the giant meat-packing and canning companies plummeted downward. And the lumber companies, the paper manufacturers, the publishing and textile companies were shaky.

The food situation had grown appallingly dangerous. The government issued stern warnings about hoarding; Congress was asked to rush through a bill imposing penalties for this, and authorizing a system of emergency rationing. In the meantime, prices rose and rose; Stan paid three dollars for his lunch of a ham sandwich, a cup of coffee, a piece of apple pie.

He read an evening newspaper over this lunch, read it with a cold and leaden fear. Red Cross Rushing Food Supplies to Cities. The first call had come from Pittsburgh, followed almost at once by New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle. Speculators had hurried to buy up all available food supplies, dealers were charging fantastic prices, 'the low-income groups' were unable to pay for what few staples were left. There were babies without milk, sick people without nourishment; riots were reported here and there. A meeting of scientists, including ornithologists, meteorologists —

That's it, Stan said to himself. That's the matter with us, today. We all believe there are experts around, to fix up anything and everything. Soil erosion, rivers deflected, droughts, forests destroyed, natural resources wasted away. Never mind. Scientists will make food, control soil, or water. Plagues? Let 'em come; polio, flu, anything. Scientists will cope with them. They'll also deal with crime, insanity, sex, family rows.

But we're trained to look for an expert, in any sort of trouble. Don't try to do anything for yourself, ever. Don't monkey with the buzz-saw. Don't you try to fix your own television set; you'll spoil it. Don't you try to figure out what sort of education and training your own children need. You'll ruin their lives. Call in a psychiatrist.

This is famine. Here and now. You've heard about it. You've read about it. But you thought it was something in Oriental countries, or something from the Dark Ages. Here it is. Here and now. Famine means death, and plagues, riots, insanity, and chaos. It's worse than earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, tidal waves, because it's slower. But don't *you* try to do anything, little man. *You* can't do anything. Can't grow your own food, or go hunting for it, can't make your own clothes, build your own shelter. Can't even work for a living, unless someone else runs a train or a bus for you, and installs electric lights and telephones. Shut up! You're in the army now, little man. And there's no discharge in this war.

When he got to Grand Central at half past 5, it was like a dream in a fever. His train was going to be late in leaving; all the trains were late, either in leaving or arriving. Loud-speakers gave hoarse, furious announcements, as if to impertinent children who were trying to interrupt. Because of the serious food situation, it has been necessary to re-route freight and refrigeration trains in many sections. . . . The public is requested to accept minor transportation delays with patience. Food First. They were making a slogan out of that. Food First.

There were fights, genuine hand-to-hand fights about the telephone booths. Stan gave up trying to call Celia, to tell her he would be late, and he was an hour late. The train was jammed; half or more of the commuters were carrying bags of food, anything they could get; one elderly woman had twelve cans of loganberries, a man had five pounds of cucumbers, and a gunny sack of brown sugar; a fellow Stan knew was sweating under the weight of a suitcase full of gin and rye bottles. All the liquor'll be gone in a day or two, he said.

Cigarettes were difficult to get, or cigars, or pipe mixtures. The tobacco crop was hard hit. The late editions of newspapers were strangely flimsy and small. Because of the pulp shortage, we can give our readers only the essential news at this time. And, of course, the baseball scores, the race track finals. The scientists . . . Hydroponics seen as possible solution. . . . Closed-seeding successful, say Kentucky farmers. Food supply ample for present, say experts, if hoarding is stopped. Share the food. Food First.

I hope Celia's not too much worried about my being late, he thought. But probably she's heard, on the radio, or from the neighbors, that the trains are late. It's damn hard for her, all of this. The women with children have the worst of it.

When he went up the steps of the veranda, she did not come to open the door for him. He entered, and stood listening, but he did not hear her upstairs with the children. He found her in the kitchen, where it was incredibly hot; she had a white scarf tied over her forehead, like a stoker; her hair was wet, and her dark lashes; she looked pale and strange.

"I've — been baking. . . ." she said. "Making bread. Fourteen loaves. . . . I — never tried making bread before, but . . . Libby's aunt and one of her children died."

"Come out of here!" he said, sharply. "Come into the sitting room and I'll turn on the fan."

"I've got to — I've got to see . . ." she said, and opened the oven door. A blast of heat came out, and a sour smell.

"Two more loaves . . ." she said.

"I'll watch them. Come out of here!"

"Libby's aunt died, and her little boy . . ."

"That's too bad. Only I've never seen Libby's aunt, so I can't take it too hard."

"She bought ten pounds of rye flour. But there was something wrong with it. Something . . . It makes you go crazy. It kills you."

"All right. We'll cut out the rye flour."

"I bought ten pounds myself. . . . Ten pounds . . . I had to throw it all away. Ten pounds . . . This . . . This is all the other kinds of flour I could get. Buckwheat, potato flour, rice flour . . . I — baked it quick — before it could spoil."

"Any dinner?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, with an attempt at cheerfulness. "Some nice home-made pea soup and — I've forgotten, but something else . . . Oh, yes! Some nice — parsley . . . And some delicious mint jelly I made. . . ."

"Good!" said Stan.

I'm not a scientist, he thought. I'm not an expert, in anything. But, by God, I'm a man. I can try.

The plan came to him, then and there, before they sat down to that dinner. After they had gone to bed, he lay in the hot darkness and thought out the details. He did not feel in any way restless; he did not want to sleep.

At 4 o'clock he got up, very carefully and quietly. He dressed in the bathroom, and went down the stairs, carrying his shoes in his hand. In the hall closet which they kept locked he had a rifle and a box of ammunition. He had learned in the Army how to use a rifle; he was a pretty good shot, and when they moved out here, he had bought this rifle, with the idea of going hunting some time with some of the men he knew.

Only, I don't really want to go killing rabbits, squirrels, anything, he thought. I dare say I got an allergy in the Army toward shooting, or being shot.

He left the house by the back door. It was still dark, but he had a flashlight with him; he crossed the road, to the little ship yard, and a dog began to bark frantically. Shut up! he said to it, under his breath. You make me nervous. I don't want to have to shoot *you*. I know you, and you're a rather nice dog. Shut up!

He got into one of the rowboats tied up there; he unfastened the painter, and began to row across the inlet, and, in the hot, dark silence the noise of the oars seemed to him amazingly loud; squeak, dip, squeak, dip, a splash . . . Shut up! he said to the oars. I want this kept quiet.

He stopped in midstream, and waited. A cigarette is a risk, he thought. But I'll take a chance that nobody sees it, or smells it.

He was intensely wide-awake, not tired, not impatient. Just ready. And



little by little the sky was growing light, a gray and secret light. There's the east, he thought, but there's no sun yet. Maybe there won't be any today. But if it rains, then what? Will they come anyhow? Or what if it's too late, and they never come again?

Ten minutes to 5. No sun; only that gray light. And no hint of that sound he was waiting for; no sounds but the queer ones that come in the dark water, a little ripple, a little splash, something that seemed to jump up, and fall back; the whisper of leaves in the woodland. Five minutes to 5.

Here they come! he said to himself. And they came with a rush, like a great wind, twittering, mewing, cawing, wide wings flailing, tiny wings humming. He set the flashlight on end, and took aim, and the shots were deafening, horrifying, as if the sky cracked open. Six shots, and he brought two of them down, tumbling into the water. He rowed after one, and picked it up, and it flapped wildly on the boards by his feet. The other bird was swimming, slowly and clumsily, and he rowed after it.

It climbed out of the water by the boat yard, and he jumped out of the boat and followed it, carrying the other wounded bird in his arm.

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing?" shouted the old man.

"Let me alone!" said Stan.

The dog came rushing at him, barking.

"Call off your dog, or I'll have to shoot him," said Stan. "Let me alone."

"I'll get the police on you!" cried the old man. "Shootin' off a gun and —"

"Shut up!" said Stan, casually.

The bird that had been swimming was flapping across the road now; as he came near it, it took off, with an effort, flying low. It crossed his own garden, and he followed it; across a neighbor's garden, across another road, a field, and into a little wood. There he lost track of it, could not see it or hear it. He put the other wounded bird on the ground, and it struggled forward a little, and collapsed. He stirred it with a stick, and it moved again, and again lay flat. He gave it a merciful end with a bullet, and the sound of the shot made something stir in the bushes. It was the first bird, and once more it rose into the air and began to fly, slowly and clumsily.

I'm sorry, he told it. I'm damn sorry. But I've got to try. The sun was up, a blazing sun; the bird could make only short flights now, and then collapse. He followed it, through fields and woods, along roads and lanes, up hills, down hills. There were tears on his face when he stirred the wounded creature to go on again; he was glad when at last it died. He sat down beside it, exhausted, sick with pity, and contrition; he did not know where he was, or how far he had come, and for the moment he did not care.

Then he heard them. All through this monstrous journey, whether in the fierce sun, in the shade of trees, in gardens, in meadows, he had not once heard the sound of a bird; he had not been aware of this, but only of something strange and desolate in the summer world. And now he heard them, a multitude of them.

But we can't live without them! he cried aloud. They don't need us, but we've got to have them.

He did not know where he was; on a hilltop somewhere, overlooking a river. He listened, trying to decide the direction of the sound; then he left the dead bird lying in the sun and started down the hillside, over parched grass that was slippery underfoot. His rifle felt heavy, very heavy, but he must take it, wherever he was going. He must be ready to do whatever he might have to do.

That afternoon, a man walked into a garage in a little Connecticut township.

"I want to rent a car for twenty-four hours," he said. "Drive it myself."

He was dirty, his shirt was torn, his flannel trousers were muddy and wet up to the knees, his face was badly scratched, and he walked with a heavy limp.

"Got references?" the garage owner asked him.

"No. I don't know anyone here. But I'll give you a hundred dollar deposit."

"Got your driver's license?"

"Yes. But — I don't want to show it just now. This is — private business. A hundred and fifty deposit."

"Sorry, man, but that's not good enough," said the owner. "My cars are all worth a lot more than that."

Some hours later, after it was dark, the man came back, and this time he had a rifle with him. He found the owner alone; he tied him up, and gagged him, and drove off in a small car, leaving two \$50 bills on the desk.

The owner got himself free, and called the police, gave them a description of the car, and its license number. A little before 11 that night, a car with those license plates was intercepted, and the driver arrested.

But they let him go, in a hurry. He was a doctor, a well-known and respectable one. He had been sent for by a patient, and when he left the patient's house, he had got into his car and started home.

"Certainly I didn't look at my license plates!" he shouted. "Never thought of such a thing. If you policemen were worth your salt, things like this couldn't happen. Someone must have come along while I was with my patient, and stolen my plates and tacked on his own. It's an outrage!"

He was going to sue everyone, the police Captain, the Mayor of the town, the Governor of the state; he was going to write to all the newspapers, expose everyone; he was very tired, and he was furious.

With considerable difficulty, he was persuaded to accept apologies and go home, and the police were now alerted to find the car with the doctor's license plates. This they were not able to do at once, for it was then in a most unlikely spot. It was parked outside a police station in New Haven.

"I want to see the chief of police here — and quick!" said the young man who had driven it.

"He's home. You can tell me the tale," said the sergeant at the desk.

"I want your chief," said the young man. "This is way out of your class."

He was dirty, and muddy, with a torn shirt, a scratched face; it was obviously difficult and painful for him to walk. Nuts, that's it, thought the sergeant. And wouldn't the chief take me apart, if I called him up, this hour of the night, for some loony, or hop-head, or whatever he is.

"Listen!" said the young man. "This is the biggest thing that's ever happened."

"Sure! Sure! And you're Napoleon, aren't you?"

"Listen!" said the young man, again. "Come out and see what I've got in my car."

The sergeant went with him out into the quiet tree-lined street. He turned on the light in the car, and he saw it.

"Jeeze!" he said.

Then he went back into the station, and called his chief. The chief was with them within half an hour, and he listened to the young man's story.

"My God . . . !" he said to the sergeant. "I don't know. . . . I don't know whether the man's insane, or not, but I'm not taking any chances. I'm calling Washington. Get McCorkle there for me."

He went back to the young man, and found him asleep, with his head on the desk. He shook him, until he opened his heavy eyes.

"Now, the best thing," he said, "is to get you right to the hospital —"

"No!" said the young man. "I'm going home."

"Be reasonable!" said the chief. "You've hurt your leg, and you've got some bad scratches on your face. You need treatment, and a good night's rest."

And a bath, he thought. You need a bath worse than anyone I ever came across before in my life.

"No. I'm going home," said the young man.

"Now, look!" said the chief. "You come driving up here, with — with *that* in your car, and a story which — well, which hasn't yet been substantiated in any way. If you refuse to go to the hospital voluntarily, there's nothing for it but to put you under arrest. But if you'll be reasonable . . . There are a couple of men flying here from Washington to see you tomorrow —"

"All right!" said the young man, after a moment. "Maybe these men from Washington will have enough sense to see the importance of this. I'll have to call my wife, though."

"We'll attend to that," said the chief.

"Don't tell her I'm in a hospital," said the other. "Say I'm detained in New York, on business."

So Stan went off, to a nice little private room in a hospital. There was a policeman sitting just outside his door all night, but he didn't know that. He was given a bath, his injuries were dressed, and he got an injection that sent him to sleep for over ten hours.

When he waked, a doctor came to look him over, and a nice young nurse brought him a pot of hot coffee, and orange juice, and fried eggs, and bacon, and toast, and he ate and drank all of it. Then the nurse lit a cigarette for him, and in a moment the men from Washington came into his room.

There were four of them. He was never to learn their names, or their functions, but they had, all of them, an air of authority. And a certain hostility. He felt that, at once, and it gave him a cold, queer feeling.

"This isn't an easy story to tell," he said. "In a way, I wish I — couldn't remember it."

"Take your time," said one of the older men.

"I went out early in the morning — yesterday, was it? Seems longer . . . I took my rifle, and I rowed out into the middle of the inlet, and waited for the birds to come over. Then I shot down a couple of them."

"Why?" asked another of the men.

"I thought that if I could manage just to injure one of them, I might be able to follow it. But I . . . They both died. I kept them going, as long as I could. . . . Drove them. Forced them on, until they both died. They were — I don't know what kind of birds, but they were pretty. One was gray. One had blue wings, and a white breast. I drove them on. . . ."

"Yes," said the second man.

"But the last one brought me to where I could hear the whole flock. And I found them. Down on the bank of the river. A very lonely place. There was a sort of pit dug there, in the mud. The birds were just leaving, after their morning feed, but there was still quite a lot of . . . It's pretty nearly impossible to — describe it. Insects, worms, a mass of crawling, creeping things moving at the bottom of the pit. Phosphorescent. Green, blue, yellow . . . And a stench like nothing you can imagine. I — feel as if I could never wash it off. . . ."

"Yes," said the second man.

"I was sitting down for a moment. Tired. I suppose I was pretty well hidden by the rocks, because the three men didn't see me. If they can be called men. They came down with parachutes. So small . . . But you saw the one in my car."

"Go on," said a third man. "You wish to assert that you saw three men descend by parachute? Descend from what? Did you see or hear a plane overhead at any time?"

"No."

"A balloon?"

"No. Nothing. They came down — very slowly. Their shoes — the things they had on their feet — were tremendously heavy. . . . They were not more than — say — three feet high, and wrinkled. Like raisins. They came down. . . . They had big containers full of these stinking insects — grubs — whatever they were, and they started emptying them into the pit. I got up then, and . . . This is the hardest part to tell. . . . Two of them were silent, all the time, but one of them . . . I can't tell you, because I'm damned if I know whether he talked to me in our language, or whether . . . I don't know if it's possible, is it? I mean, to get what's in someone else's mind without — any common language."

"What do you think this man was saying, or trying to convey to you?" asked the fourth man.

"He said —" Stan paused. "All right," he went on. "I'm going to put it that way. I'm going to tell you he said all this. Because whether or not he spoke, I — got it. He said that the place they came from —"

"Where was this place?"

"I don't know. Either he couldn't tell me, or he didn't want me to know. Anyhow, he said that their population had increased, and the place where they lived was too small and too poor to support them comfortably. They want to live here, on Earth. But they don't want us around. But they want everything else unchanged, the animals, the birds, the fish. The oceans, the mountains, the rivers. The trees, the flowers . . . He made it sound like Paradise. And he thought it could be like that. Without us."

"What was so objectionable in us?"

"He must have been here often, or heard a lot, or studied a lot. He said we ruined everything we touched. He said we've wiped out whole species of beautiful and valuable animals and birds. He said we use an incredible amount of our time, and energy, and ingenuity to finding new ways for destroying one another. He said we were too dangerous to keep around. So they've decided to get rid of us, and then take over."

"By warfare?"

"No. They don't go in for that. He said it seemed plain idiocy to them, to risk their healthiest young men in a war. No. They think we can be destroyed by getting the birds off the job. He said they had eleven pits like this one all over the country, and that what they put into them would lure all the birds away from any other food. He said it should be obvious why they started on this country, and after they had proved the method here, and they were proving it, they could go on to the rest of the planet. I asked him where the other pits were, and . . . He didn't want to answer that one, but he did. I mean, it was all there, like a map —"

"All where?"

"Well, in his mind, I suppose," said Stan, with a growing reluctance. "I know how that must sound, but that's the way it was. He looked at me, stared at me. And somehow he knew he'd told me — let me know. And I could see — oh, hell! I can't help how it sounds. I'm giving it to you the way it was. I could see that he felt I knew entirely too much, and that this was one time when some killing had to be done. He didn't have any sort of weapon, and he was only half my size. But he was quick, and he was surprisingly strong. He jumped at me, and he brought both those metal boots, or whatever they were, down on one of my feet. Broke a couple of small bones, the doctor says. I knew what he meant to do."

"Yes? What did you think he meant to do, Mr. Dickson?"

"I didn't think! I knew. He wanted to throw me into that — that foul, stinking pit. He got hold of me around the knees, but I pulled away. And I shot him."

"And the other two who were with him?"

"They . . . I don't know how they did it. I can just tell you what happened. They did something with their parachutes, and — they went up into the air again."

"And you allowed them to escape?"

"Yes," Stan said. "They — looked like birds. And — I didn't feel like doing any more shooting that day."

"Are you prepared to give us directions for reaching this pit, Mr. Dickson?"

"Well, I can tell you where it was. But I don't think you'll find anything much left of it. After the other two were gone, I — went — a bit berserk. I dug at the bank of the river with sticks, branches, my rifle, stones, anything, until I'd made holes to let the river run in and flood it. It — you see — the smell of it was — a bit too much."

"Then this pit which you claim to have discovered is not in existence, Mr. Dickson?"

"I don't think so. I hope it's completely flooded out."

"Then you have no evidence to offer, in corroboration of your story, Mr. Dickson?"

"No. What about the dead man in my car?"

"There's nothing in your car, Mr. Dickson."

"Look here!" cried Stan, sitting up straight in his bed. "Both the Chief and his sergeant saw that body."

"No detailed examination was made, Mr. Dickson. They are not prepared to testify that what they saw in your car was a body of any sort. It might have been a puppet, a toy of some sort."

"Where is it now?"

"There is no report of anything having been found in your car, Mr. Dickson," said the elderly man. "Moreover, we've received information that you had stolen the car you were driving."

"Look here! I left a hundred dollars deposit for that car."

"There is no record of that, Mr. Dickson. Furthermore, you were using license plates stolen from another car."

"Yes, I did that. I didn't want to be stopped by the police. I was in a hurry, to tell my story, and to show that body. To give someone in authority the location of the other pits. It seemed to me about as urgent as anything could be."

"Are you prepared to give us the locations of these alleged pits, Mr. Dickson?"

"Not offhand. But I wrote down all I could remember, while it was fresh in my mind. I made a plan, a sort of little map, on the back of an envelope."

"Where is this envelope, Mr. Dickson?"

"In my wallet."

"As a matter of routine procedure, Mr. Dickson, the contents of your wallet, and all your pockets were examined and listed. There is no record of such an envelope, with a map or plan drawn on it."

"Look here!"

The fourth man spoke now, for the first time, a stout, sandy-haired man with pale-gray eyes.

"Mr. Dickson," he said, "we're willing to accept this episode as a temporary aberration, caused probably by drinking."

"Provided," said the elderly man, "that we are assured it is 'temporary.' If any symptoms of a permanent obsession develop, we shall be obliged, of course, to take steps."

"What 'steps'?" Stan demanded. But he knew, by this time, what they meant.

"We can't have the public morale undermined by wild rumors," said the sandy-haired man. "The situation is bad enough, as it is. But it can be handled by the Government, and the scientists and experts employed by the Government, and it will be. Unauthenticated rumors might cause a panic to develop. And we can't allow such rumors to circulate."

"Meaning —?" said Stan. "That if I tell my story, to anyone, any time, I'll be locked up in some mental institution?"

"If a permanent obsession develops —" said the elderly man.

There was a silence.

"Any objection to my going home now?" Stan asked.

"None whatever, Mr. Dickson," said the first man. "And you can rest assured that, unless you persist in some course detrimental to public morale, no charges will be brought against you."

"Damn white of you," said Stan.

He took a train home, and a taxi from the station.

I've got to have a story for Celia, he thought. But not the truth. I'll have to lie to her, and that won't be easy. It ought to be a good lie, only I don't seem very bright, just now. Could be I'm tired. . . . She'll probably know I'm lying, and that'll hurt her. But I can't tell her the truth. She couldn't believe it. Nobody ever will. I don't want to tell anybody. I don't want to think about it, or remember it. I don't want to talk at all.

But I'll have to talk. Stan, where have you *been*? Who, me? Oh, nowhere special. I was just having a temporary aberration. Much better now, thanks.

The little house looked almost unbelievably pretty, this hot afternoon; the trees stirred in the light breeze; it was so good to get back.

Before he reached the top of the steps, Celia opened the door.

"Hello, Stan!" she said.

His heart sank, at the sight of her, so slender and straight and lovely, in her blue linen dress, smiling at him. But her nonchalance was not convincing, and she was pale; there was a look of strain about her dark eyes.

"Cecily . . ." he said. "I'm sorry."

And if only we could let it go at that, he thought. If I could sit down beside her, with my arm around her, or even just sit in the same room with her, and not talk, not answer questions, not make up lies . . .

"Stan, listen!" she cried.

He raised his head, frowning a little.

"I don't hear anything," he said.

"It's the birds, Stan! They're back again! They didn't go away this morning!"

"Good!" he said with an effort. "Fine!"

"Stan, come on in! You're just in time for the 4 o'clock news on the radio."

"Well, no, thanks, Cecily. I don't —"

"Come on!" she said, and held out her hand, and he took it and went into the house with her. A big tree outside shaded the windows here, giving a cool, greenish light to the living room that was neat almost to primness. That's how Celia wants things, he thought. Order, and decency, and peace . . . Only not that portentous voice on the radio.

"Turn it off, Perfect!" he said.

"But I want you to hear it, Stan," she said. "I heard the news at 3, and maybe they'll have more about it now."

"These pits filled with insects have been formed, scientists say, by unusual climatic conditions. Yesterday one of these pits was discovered in Connecticut, and two more have been found and destroyed this afternoon, one in Idaho, one in Virginia. These discoveries were made possible by a method devised by Dr. Wilbur Jonas, world-famous ornithologist employed by the Government in the preservation of wild life. Dr. Jonas has demonstrated that a bird's wing may be clipped in such a manner as to render its flight slow enough to be followed easily. This has led the experts —"

"Turn it off, Celia!"

"When I got up yesterday, Stan," she said, "you'd gone. And you'd taken your rifle, and all our cash. I wasn't very happy, Stan."

"Celia, I'm sorry. But — I couldn't leave a note for you. I didn't know — just where I was going, or when I'd get back."

"Birds in the vicinity of the three destroyed pits have already returned to their normal and invaluable function of controlling insect pests," said the portentous voice, "and scientists now predict that within a few days' time the food crisis will be ended —"

"The old man from the boat yard came over yesterday morning," she said. "He told me you'd been shooting birds from one of his rowboats. He said you were crazy, threatening to shoot his dog, and so on. But I thought I was beginning to understand. Only, I was worried. . . . When the night came, and I hadn't heard . . . I was frightened."

"Celia . . . I'm sorry."

"Then this morning the head of the police here came to see me. Early, before we'd finished breakfast. He asked me where you were, and I said I didn't know, and didn't care."

"Celia!"

"He was surprised, too. He asked if that meant that you and I didn't get on together. And I said it meant just the opposite. I said we didn't need to ask each other questions, ever. I said that wherever you'd gone, it was all right with me. Then he told me he'd heard from the police in New Haven, and that you were being 'detained' there. He said you'd told them some story about having saved the earth from an invasion from another planet. I told him you didn't know how to talk that way, and he left. But he came back, in less than an hour. He said there was nothing at all in the story he'd heard, and please not to mention it to anyone, and that you weren't being 'detained,' but would be home very soon."

"And so —" boomed the portentous voice, "due to the knowledge and skill and unremitting vigilance of our Government scientists and experts, the pits are being discovered and rendered harmless, our birds are returning, and disaster has been averted. Let us all be grateful to these modest and unassuming men, whose selfless labors have —"

She turned off the radio.

"You had something to do with this, Stan," she said. "I was sure of that, as soon as the old man from the boat yard came over here. Because, you see, I know you're not crazy. And I know you're not the sportsman type who goes out to shoot birds before sunrise."

He said nothing.

"If you don't want to tell me, Stan," she said, "it's all right."

"It isn't a question of not wanting to," he said. I don't think I *can*."

"I guess there isn't anything you can't tell me, Stan. Want to try?"

"I don't know. . . ." he said.

He lit a cigarette, and sat down on the arm of a chair, and she sat in a corner of the sofa, and he told her. He was slow about it, at first, cautious, groping, but after the beginning it was not hard. She had asked him a few questions, but when he had finished, she was silent.

"Celia . . . ?" he said.

"You did it," she said. "You're exhausted, and half-sick, and you've hurt your foot. You'll never get any credit for it, or any thanks. Only — *I'll* always know, Stan."

"That's good enough," he said, quietly. "Celia, are you crying?"

"It's the — birds," she said. "Maybe all the rest of my life, I'll feel like crying — when I hear the birds getting ready for bed — or early in the morning —"

"Don't cry, Celia! Please!"

"In a moment," she said, "Libby'll bring the children home — and I'll watch her feeding them — and I'll cook dinner — for you and me — and I'll be very gay and silly — so that you won't suspect — what I'm thinking. Their father, and my husband. Our man."

He crossed the room and sat down beside her; he took her hand and laid it against his cheek. "That's what I want to be," he said.