

The Lady Vanishes

Charles Sheffield

What is wrong with this picture?

Colonel Walker Bryant is standing at the door of the Department of Ultimate Storage. He is smiling; and he is carrying a book under one arm.

Answer: Everything is wrong with this picture. Colonel Bryant is the man who assigned (make that consigned) me to the Department of Ultimate Storage, for reasons that he found good and sufficient. But he never visited the place. That is not unreasonable, since the department is six stories underground in the Defense Intelligence facility at Bolling Air Force Base, on a walk-down sub-basement level which according to the elevators does not exist. It forms a home for rats, spiders, and me.

Also, Walker Bryant never smiles unless something is wrong; and Walker Bryant never, in my experience, reads anything but security files and the sports pages of the newspaper. Colonel Bryant carrying a book is like Mother Theresa sporting an AK-47.

"Good morning, Jerry," he said. He walked forward, helped himself to an extra-strength peppermint from the jar that I keep on my desk, put the book next to it, and sat down. "I just drove over from the Pentagon. It's a beautiful spring day outside."

"I wouldn't know."

It was supposed to be sarcasm, but he has a hide like a rhino. He just chuckled and said, "Now, Jerry, you know the move to this department was nothing personal. I did it for your own good, down here you can roam as widely as you like. Anyway, they just told me something that I thought might interest you."

When you have worked for someone for long enough, you learn to read the message behind the words. I thought might interest you means I don't have any idea what is going on, but maybe you do.

I leaned forward and picked up the book. It was *The Invisible Man*, by H.G. Wells. I turned it over and looked at the back.

"Are you reading this?" I wouldn't call Walker Bryant "Sir" to save my life, and oddly enough he doesn't seem to mind.

He nodded. "Sure."

"I mean, actually reading it — yourself."

"Well, I've looked through it. It doesn't seem to be about anything much. But I'm going to read it in detail, as soon as I get the time."

I noted that it was a library book, taken out three days before. If it was relevant to this meeting, Colonel Bryant had heard something that "might interest you" at least that long ago.

"General Attwater mentioned the book to me," he went on. He looked with disapproval at the sign I had placed on my wall. It was a quotation from Swinburne, and it read, "And all dead years draw thither, and all disastrous things." I felt it was rather appropriate for the Department of Ultimate Storage. That, or "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

"He's a bit of an egghead, like you," Bryant went on. "I figured you might have read *The Invisible Man*."

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“Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”

“He’s a bit of an egghead, like you,” Bryant went on. “I figured you might have read *The Invisible Man*. You read all the time.”

The last sentence meant, You read too much, Jerry Macedo, and that’s why your head is full of nonsense, like that stupid sign on your wall.

“I’ve read it,” I said. But the meeting was taking a very odd turn. General

Jonas Attwater was Air Force, and head of three of the biggest “black” programs, secret developments with their own huge budgets that the American public never saw.

“Then you know that the book’s about a man who takes a drug to make him invisible,” Bryant said.

“Three of General Attwater’s staff scientists were in the meeting this morning, and they swear that such a thing is scientifically impossible. I wondered what you think.”

“I agree with them.”

He looked crushed, and I continued, “Think about it for a minute and you’ll see why it can’t work, even without getting deep into the physics. The drug is

supposed to change human tissue so that it has the same refractive index as air. So your body wouldn't absorb light, or scatter it. Light would simply pass through you, without being reflected or refracted or affected in any way. But if your eyes didn't absorb light, you would be blind, because seeing involves the interaction of light with your retinas. And what about the food that you eat, while it's being digested? It would be visible in your alimentary canal, slowly changing as it went from your esophagus to your stomach and into your intestines. I'm sorry, Colonel, but the whole idea is just a piece of fiction."

"Yeah, I guess so." He didn't seem totally upset by my words. "It's

impossible, I hear you.”

He stood up. “Let’s go to my office for a while. I want to show you something — unless you’re all that busy.”

It depended on the definition of “busy.” I had been browsing the on-line physics preprints, as I did every morning of the week. Something very strange was going on with Bose-Einstein Condensates and macroscopic quantum systems, but it was evolving too rapidly for me to follow easily. There were new papers every day. In another week or two there ought to be a survey article that would make the development a lot clearer. Since I had no hope of doing original work in that field, the reading

delay would cost me nothing. I followed Bryant in silence, up, up, up, all the way to the top floor. I want to show you something sounded to me an awful lot like Gotcha!, but I couldn't see how. His staff assistants didn't react to my arrival. Colonel Bryant never came down to see me, but he summoned me up to see him often enough. It's a terrible thought, but I actually think the colonel likes me. Worse yet, I like him. I think there is a deep core of sadness in the man. We entered his office, and he closed the door and gestured me to a chair. At that point we could just as well have been in the sub-basement levels. So many highly classified meetings were held in this room that any thought of windows was a

complete no-no.

“Lois Doberman,” he said. “What can you tell me about her?”

What could I tell, and what I was willing to tell, were two different things. Bryant knew that I had been Dr. Lois Doberman’s boss when she first joined the Agency and we were both in the Office of Research and Development. Since then she had gone up through the structure like a rocket, while I had, somewhat more slowly, descended.

“You know what they say about Lois?” I was stalling a little, while I decided what I wanted to say. “If you ever make a crack suggesting that she’s a dog, she’ll bite your head off.”

Not a trace of a smile from Bryant.

Fair enough, because it didn't deserve one.

“Academic record,” I went on. “Doctorate from UCLA, then two post-doc years with Berkner at Carnegie-Mellon. She had twenty-eight patents when she joined the Agency. Lord knows how many she has now. Properties of materials and optics are her specialty. I don't know what she's working on at the moment, but she's the smartest woman I ever met.”

I considered the final statement, and amended it. “She's the smartest person I ever met.”

“Some might say you are not an unbiased source. Staff Records show that you dated her for a while.”

“That was nearly a year ago.”

“There’s also a strong rumor that you two were sleeping together, though that is not verified.”

I said nothing, and he went on. “It was outside working hours and you both had the same clearances, so no one’s worried about that. The thing is, General Attwater’s staff thought you might know more than anyone else about her personal motives. That could be important.”

“I don’t see how. Her life and mine don’t overlap any more.”

“Nor does anyone else’s. That’s the trouble.” And, when I stared at him because this was a message that I definitely could not read, “Lois

Doberman has disappeared. One week ago. Sit tight, Jerry.”

I had started to stand up.

“She didn’t just disappear from home, or something like that.” He was over at the viewgraph projector and video station used for presentations. “On Tuesday, June 25th, she went to work in the usual way. She was on a project that needed a special environment, and the only suitable place locally is out in Reston. Absolute top security, twenty-four-hour human security staff plus continuous machine surveillance. Only one entrance, except for emergency fire exits that show no sign of being disturbed. Anyone who goes into that building has to sign in and sign out, no

matter how they are badged. Arrivals and departures are all recorded on tape.

“Sitting on the table in front of you is a photocopy of the sign in/sign out sheet for June 25th. Don’t bother to look at it now” — I was reaching out — “take my word for it. Dr. Doberman signed in at 8:22 A.M., and she never signed out. Not only that, I have here the full set of tapes for arrivals and departures. The video-recorder is motion-activated. If you want to study the record, you can do it later. Here’s the bottom line: there’s a fine, clear sequence showing her arrival. There’s nothing of her leaving.”

“Then she must be still inside the building.” That thought was terribly disturbing. If Lois had been inside for a

full week, she must be dead.

“She’s not inside, either dead or alive,” he said, as though he had been reading my mind. “This is a fairly new building, and Attwater’s office has exact detailed plans. There are no secret cubby-holes or places where someone could hide away. The whole complex has been searched four or five times. She’s not in there. She’s outside. We don’t know how she got out.”

“Nor do I.”

Which actually meant, All right, but why are you talking to me? I guess that message-reading goes both ways, because Bryant said, “So far as we can tell, you are the last person with whom Dr. Doberman enjoyed a close personal

relationship. I don't know if you can help, but I feel that you must try. As of this morning, sponsored by General Attwater's office, you and I have access to three additional SCI clearances."

I shifted in my chair. SCI. Special Compartmented Information. I had too many of those clearances already.

Walker Bryant turned on the viewgraph projector and put a transparency in place. "These briefing documents show what Dr. Lois Doberman had been working on at Reston. In a word, it's stealth technology in the area of imaging detection."

He glared at me, and on cue, I laughed. After *The Invisible Man*, his final comment had all the elements of

farce. The whole idea of stealth technology is to make the object difficult to see. But it's usually either primitive visible-wavelength stuff, like special paints that match simple backgrounds, or else it's the use of materials with very low radar back-scatter. Most systems use active microwave — radar — for detection, so that's where most of the effort tends to go. The B-2 bomber is a wonderful example of failed stealth technology, since at most wavelengths it's as visible as Rush Limbaugh. But that didn't stop it being built, any more than the fact that stealth technology doesn't work well in visible wavelengths would stop a barrel of money being spent on it.

This sort of thing was one big reason why Lois and I had parted company. Once you are really inside the intelligence business, you know too much ever to be allowed to leave. You are there as firmly and finally as a fly in amber, and like the insect, not even death will free you. You are not allowed to say that some classified projects are absolute turkeys and a total waste of taxpayer money, because the party line is that they have value. Opinions to the contrary, expressed to Lois in long middle-of-the-night conversations, had convinced me that I would certainly fail my next polygraph (I didn't). She disagreed with me. Not about the waste of money, which was undeniable, but

about the possibility of escape. She said there must be a way out, if only you could find it. After dozens of arguments, in which she accused me of giving up and I accused her of useless dreaming, we had gone our separate ways; she ascending the management structure as though hoping to emerge from the top and fly free like a bird, me tunneling down deeper into the sub-basement levels like a blind and hopeless mole. Had she found it, then, the Invisible Woman, the magic way out that would break all intelligence ties forever?

I couldn't see how, and the presentation was not helping. "What does fiber optics have to do with this?"

I asked. That's what Walker Bryant

had been putting on the screen for the past few minutes, while I was lost in memories. The latest viewgraph was a series of hand-drawn curves showing how the light loss over thin optic cables could, thanks to new technology, approach zero. That would be useful in communications and computers; but Lois hadn't been working in either area. He shrugged at my question. "Damned if I know what any of these viewgraphs have to do with anything. I was hoping you might be able to tell me. These are taken straight from Lois Doberman's work books."

"They don't tell me anything so far," I said. "But keep going."

Unnecessary advice. Walker Bryant

had risen in the military partly because he had lots of sitzfleisch, the patience and kidneys and mental strength to sit in a meeting for as long as it took to wear down the opposition. He had no intention of stopping. I, on the other hand, think I suffer from an undiagnosed hyperactivity. I work a lot better when I am free to wander around. I did that now, pacing back and forward in front of his desk. He gave me another glare, but he went right on with the viewgraphs. Now they showed notes in Lois's familiar handwriting about new imaging sensors, pointing out that they could be built smaller than the head of a pin. I noticed that the page numbers were not sequential.

“Who decided what to pull out and show as viewgraphs?” I asked.

“Rich Williamson. Why? Do you think he might have missed something?”

“Rich is good — in his field. But he’s a SWIR specialist.”

“Mm?”

“Short-wave infrared. From about one to five micrometers. Visible light wavelengths are shorter, around half a micrometer. But if Lois made a tarnhelm —”

“A what?”

“Don’t worry about it. If Lois is invisible, then the visible wavelength region is where we ought to be looking. Anyway, I’d much rather see her original notebooks than someone else’s ideas as

to what's important in them.”

“It would have to be done out in Reston. The notebooks can't be removed.” He sounded and was disgusted. To Walker Bryant, everything important took place either on a battlefield, or inside the Beltway. Reston, twenty-five miles away from us, was a point at infinity.

“Fine. We'll go to Reston.”

“You can go there this afternoon, Jerry. You won't need me. But there are things outside the notebooks.”

He turned off the projector and went to the VCR next to it, while I kept pacing.

“I said we don't know how she got out,” he said. “It's more than that. We

have proof positive that she is outside. We learned today that she's still in the Washington area, and we even have some idea of her movements.”

Which must have been a huge relief to the Security people. They always have one big fear when someone vanishes. It's not that the person is dead, which is unfortunate but ends security risk. It's that the person is alive and well and headed out of the country, either voluntarily or packed away unconscious in a crate, to serve some other nation.

I shared their feeling of relief. From Bryant's tone, Lois wasn't a corpse being trundled from place to place. She was moving under her own volition.

“Stand still for a minute,” he went on,

“and take a look at this. We’ve patched together six different recordings from ATM devices at local banks, withdrawals made over the past four days. As you know, every time someone makes a deposit or a withdrawal at an ATM it’s captured on videotape. Standard crime-fighting technique. Withdrawals from Lois Doberman’s account were made at six different machines. Watch closely.”

A man I had never seen before was standing in front of the bank’s camera. He worked the ATM, stood counting notes for a moment, and left. Soon afterwards a woman — certainly not Lois — stood in his place. She made a deposit, adjusted her hat in the reflection

provided by the ATM'S polished front, and vanished from the camera's field of view.

I watched as the same scene was repeated five more times, with variations in customers as to age, height, weight, color, and clothing. Each sequence showed two different people making successive ATM

transactions. One man was immortalized in intelligence security files in the act of picking his nose, another hit the machine when something, apparently his account balance, was not to his liking. Of Lois Doberman there was not a sign.

“Normal operations at an ATM facility,” Bryant said when the tape

ended in a flicker of black and white video noise. “Except for one thing. In each case, Lois Doberman made a withdrawal from one of her bank accounts — she maintains several — between the people that you saw. We have the printouts of activity, which you can examine if you want to, and they are all the same: a normal transaction, with a picture of the person; then a Lois Doberman cash withdrawal, with no one at all showing on the videocamera; and then another normal transaction, including a person’s picture.”

“The Invisible Woman,” I said.

Bryant nodded. “And the big question: How is she doing it?”

It was the wrong question, at least for

me. I already had vague ideas as to a possible how. As I drove out of the District on my way to Reston, I pondered the deeper mystery: Why was Lois doing this?

I did not believe for a moment that she was any kind of security risk. We had long agreed that our own intelligence service was the worst one possible — except for all others. She would never work for anyone else. But if she stayed around the local area, she was bound to be caught. Fooling around with the ATM's, for half a dozen withdrawals of less than a hundred dollars each, was like putting out a notice: Catch me if you can!

Twenty-four-hour surveillance of the

relevant ATM's was next on the list. Her apartment was already under constant surveillance, so clearly Lois was living somewhere else. But I knew the lure of her own books and tapes, and how much she hated living out of a suitcase. I took my foot off the accelerator — I was doing nearly seventy-five — and forced my thoughts back a step. Was Lois living somewhere else? If she wanted to show off her new idea, what better way than living in her own place, coming and going under the very nose of Security and flaunting their inability to catch her?

And my inability, too. Lois surely knew that if she disappeared, I would be called in. We had been too close for me to be ignored. I could imagine her face,

and her expression as she threw me the challenge: Let's see you catch me, Jerry — before the rest catch on.

If I was right, others would catch on within the next few days. There were some very bright people in R&D, smarter than me and shackled by only one factor: compartmenting. The idea behind it sounds perfectly logical, and derives directly from the espionage and revolution business. Keep the cells small. A person should not be told more than he or she needs to know.

The trouble is, if science is to be any good it has to operate with exactly the opposite philosophy. Advances come from cross-fertilization, from recognizing relationships between fields

that at first sight have little to do with each other.

I had broken my pick on that particular issue, after fights with my bosses so prolonged and bitter that I had been removed completely from research programs. My job with Walker Bryant now allowed me to cross all fields of science, but at a price: I myself worked in none. However, I had not changed my mind. The afternoon at Reston gave me enough time for a first look-through of Lois's notebooks. She used them as a combined diary and work file, with a running log of anything that caught her interest. To someone who did not know her well they would seem a random hodge-podge of entries. Rich

Williamson had done his best, but he had not pulled out anything that seemed to him totally irrelevant. I knew how tightly the inside of Lois's head was interconnected. An entry about the skin of reptiles followed one about fiber optics. Human eye sensitivity and its performance at different ambient light levels shared space with radar cross-section data. A note on sensor quantum efficiency sat on the same page as an apparently unrelated diagram that showed the layout of a room's light sources and shadows, while specifications for a new gigacircuit processing chip lay next to a note on temperature-dependent optical properties of organic compounds.

Chances were, they all represented part of some continuous thought pattern.

I also knew that Lois was conscientious. Asked to look into stealth techniques, her days and much of her nights would have been devoted to the present — and future — limits of that technology. At five o'clock I drove back as far as Rosslyn and signed out a small piece of unclassified equipment from one of the labs. I ate dinner at a fast food place close to the Metro, browsing through Bryant's library copy of *The Invisible Man*. When I left I bought a chicken salad sandwich and a coke to take away with me. It might be a long night.

By six o'clock I was sitting in my car

on Cathedral Avenue, engine off and driver's window open. It was a "No Parking" spot right in front of Lois's apartment building. If any policeman came by I would pretend that I had just dropped someone off, and drive around the block. I wasn't the only one interested in the entrance. A man sat on a bench across the street and showed no signs of moving, while a blue car with a Virginia license plate drove by every few minutes. Dusk was steadily creeping closer. Half an hour more, and the street lights would go on. Before that happened, the air temperature would drop and the open doors of the apartment building would close. The urge to look out of the car window was strong. I

resisted, and kept my eye fixed on the little oblong screen at the rear end of the instrument I was holding. It was no bigger than a camera's viewfinder, but the tiny screen was split in two. On the left was a standard video camera image of the building entrance. On the right was another version of the same scene, this one rendered in ghostly black and white. Everyone walking by, or entering the building, appeared in both pictures. Or almost everyone. At 6:45 precisely, a human form showed on the right hand screen only. I looked up to the building entrance, and saw no one. But I called out, softly enough to be inaudible to the man across the street, "Lois! Over here. Get in the car. Wait until I open the door

for you.”

I saw and heard nothing. But I got out, went around the car, and opened the passenger door. Then I stood waiting and feeling like a fool, while nothing at all seemed to be happening. Finally I smelled perfume. The car settled a little lower on its springs.

“I’m in,” whispered Lois’s voice. I closed the door, went back to my side, and started the engine. The man across the street had watched everything, but he had seen nothing. He did not move as I pulled away.

I glanced to my right. No one seemed to be there, because through the right-side car window I could see the buildings as we passed them. The only

oddity was the passenger seat of the car. Instead of the usual blue fabric, I saw a round grey-black patch about a foot and a half across.

“I’m alone and we’re not being followed,” I said. “Take it off if you want to. Unless of course you’re naked underneath it.”

“I’m not.” There was a soft ripping noise. “You already knew that if you think about it.”

I had to stop the car. It was that or cause a pile-up, because the urge to turn and watch was irresistible.

“I guessed it,” I said. “No clothes were found in the building in Reston, so you had to be able to put whatever it is over them.”

It was close to dusk, and I had pulled the car into a parking lot underneath a spreading oak tree. As I stared at the passenger seat, a patch of fair hair suddenly appeared from nowhere against the upper part of the passenger window. The whole background rippled and deformed as the patch grew to reveal Lois's forehead, face, and chin. As her neck came into view there was a final wave of distortion, and suddenly I was looking at Lois, dressed in a rather bulky body suit.

“Too much work for the microprocessors,” she said, and pushed her hair off her forehead with her hands. “When you put too great a load on them, they quit trying.”

She peeled off the suit, first down to her waist, then off her arms and hands, and finally from her legs and feet. She was wearing an outfit of thin silk and flexible flat-heeled loafers. In her hands the suit had become an unimpressive bundle of mottled gray and white. She stared down at it. “Still needs work. For one thing, it’s too hot inside.”

“That’s how I knew you were there.” I picked up the instrument I had been using. “I didn’t know how you were doing it — I really still don’t — but I knew a living human has to be at 98.6. This instrument senses in thermal infrared wavelengths, so it picked up your body heat image. But it didn’t show a thing at visible wavelengths.”

“Anyone in the suit is invisible out to wavelengths of about one micron — enough so they don’t show in visible light or near infrared.” She hefted the suit. “On the other hand, this is a first-generation effort using silicon sensors. I could probably do a lot better with something like gallium arsenide, but I’ll still have a thermal signature. And if I move too fast or make unusual movements, the processors can’t keep up and the whole system fails.”

“And it’s not a great idea to wear perfume. That’s when I was absolutely sure it was you. Want to tell me how it works? I have an idea what’s going on, but it’s pretty rough.”

“How much time did you spend with

my notebooks?”

“Half a day.”

“Take two more days, and you’d work it all out for yourself. But I’ll save you the effort.” She tapped the copy of *The Invisible Man*, sitting where I had left it on top of my dashboard. “Wells could have done better, even in 1900. He knew that animals in nature do their best to be invisible to their prey or their predators. But they don’t do it by fiddling around with their own optical properties, which just won’t work. They know that they are invisible if they look exactly like their background. The chameleon has the right idea, but it’s hardware-limited. It can only make modest color and pattern adjustments. It occurred to me that

humans ought to be able to do a whole lot better. You'd got this far?"

"Pretty much." I saw a patrol car slow down as it passed us, and I started the engine and pulled out into the street. "The suit takes images of the scene behind you, and assigns the colors and intensities to liquid crystal displays on the front of the suit. Somebody fifteen to twenty feet away will see the background scene. The suit also has to do the same thing to the back, so someone behind you will see an exact match to the scene in front of you. The problem I have is that the trick has to work from any angle. I couldn't see any way that fiber optic bundles could handle that."

“They can’t. I tried that road for quite a while, but as you say, optical fibers don’t have the flexibility to look different from every angle. I only use them to allow me to see when I’m inside. An array of pinhole-sized openings scattered over the front of the suit feeds light through optical fibers to form images on a pair of goggles. Straightforward. The invisibility trick is more difficult. You have to use holographic methods to handle multi-angle reflectances, and you need large amounts of computing power to keep track of changing geometry — otherwise a person would be invisible only when standing perfectly still.”

Lois touched the bundled suit. “There

are scores of microprocessors on every square centimeter, all networked to each other. I figure there's more computing power in this thing than there was in the whole world in 1970. And it still crashes if I move faster than a walk, or get into a situation with complex lighting and shadows. Uniform, low-level illumination and relatively uniform backgrounds are best — like tonight.” She cocked her head at me, with a very odd expression in her eyes. “So. What do you think, Jerry?”

I looked at her with total admiration and five sorts of misgiving. “I think what you have done is wonderful. I think you are wonderful. But there's no way you can hide this. If I'm here a day or two

ahead of everyone else, it's only because I know you better than they do.”

“No. It's because you're smart, and compartmenting of ideas drives you crazy, and you refuse to do it. It would take the others weeks, Jerry. But I had no intention of hiding this — otherwise I would never have stayed in the Washington area. Tomorrow I'll go in to work as usual, and I can't wait to see their faces.”

“But after what you've done —” I paused. What had she done? Failed to sign out of a building when she left. Disappeared for a week without notifying her superiors. Removed government property from secure premises without approval. But she

could say, what better practical test could there be for her invention, than to become invisible to her own organization?

Her bosses might make Lois endure a formal hearing on her actions, and they would certainly put a nasty note in her file. That would be it. She was far too valuable for them to do much more. Lois would be all right.

“What now?” I said. “You can’t go back to your own apartment without being seen, even if you put the suit back on. It’s dark, and the doors will be closed.”

“So?”

“Come home with me, Lois. You’ll be safe there.”

That produced the longest pause since she had stepped invisible into my car. Finally she shook her head.

“I’d really like to, but not tonight. I’ll take a rain check. I promise.”

“So where do we go?”

“You go home. Me, you drop off at the next corner.”

I was tempted to say that I couldn’t do it, that she didn’t have her suit on. But living in a city with over half a million people confers its own form of invisibility. Provided that Lois stayed away from her apartment, the chance that she would be seen tonight by anyone who knew her was close to zero. And she still had the suit if she felt like using it.

I halted the car at the next corner and she stepped out, still holding the drab bundle. She gave me a little smile and a wave, and gestured at me to drive on.

Next morning I was in my sub-basement department exactly on time. I called Lois's office. She was not there. I kept calling every few minutes.

She was still not there at midday, or later in the afternoon, or ever again. This time there were no telltale ATM withdrawals, no hints that she might still be in the local area. Some time during the night she had been back to Reston, entered the building with its round-the-clock surveillance, and removed her notebooks. In their place sat a single sheet of white cardboard. It bore the

words, in Lois's handwriting, "I know why the caged bird sings."

That sheet was discussed in a hundred meetings over the next few weeks. It was subjected to all kinds of chemical and physical analysis, which proved conclusively that it was simple cardboard. No one seemed to know what it meant.

I know, of course. It is a message from Lois to me, and the words mean, It can be done. There is a way out, even from the deepest dungeon or highest tower.

I told everything I knew about the invisibility suit. Other staff scientists rushed off excitedly to try to duplicate it. I came back to the Department of

Ultimate Storage, to the old routine. But there is a difference — two differences. First, I am working harder than ever in my life, and now it is toward a definite goal. Not only is there a way out, but Lois assures me that I can find it; otherwise, she would never have promised a rain check.

The second difference is in Walker Bryant. He leaves me almost totally free of duties, but he comes frequently down from his office to mine. He says little, but he sits and stares at me as I work. In his eyes I sometimes detect a strange, wistful gleam that I never noticed before. I think he knows that there was more to my meeting with Lois than I have admitted, and I think he even

suspects what it may have been. I will leave him a message when I go. I don't know what it will say yet, but it must be something that he can understand and eventually act upon. Even Air Force colonels deserve hope.