

SECOND COMING

by Frederik Pohl

All the good science-fiction editors I knew when I was trying to learn the trade spent a lot of their time thinking of tricks, devices, and subtle manipulations designed to get writers to write stories for them that might not otherwise have got written. You might think they didn't have to do that. After all, writers are in the business of writing; why not just let them get on with it and take what comes as it comes? Because they might be spending their time writing something unsuitable, for one reason. Because they might be writing it for Someone Else is the other. So John Campbell, Horace Gold, Bob Lowndes, Don Wollheim-and I-would pass out story ideas, mail off Xeroxes of covers that needed stories written around them, dream up 'theme' issues-anything at all that would prod a lazy writer into producing a story instead of whatever else he had planned to do with his time that day. The art has not been lost. Ellen Datlow, fiction editor of *Omni*, wasn't even born when John Campbell began practicing that art, but she has thought of devices even the Master never knew. Not long ago, for instance, she called up half a dozen of her favorite writers to announce that she was going to publish a special fiction issue containing a story by each of them, all limited to a maximum of five hundred words. Five hundred words! It takes me five hundred words to answer the phone! However, these little behavior-modification tricks do work their magic, and so I sat down to try. I tried at least half a dozen story ideas without luck, because after the first page and a half each one of them convinced me that it wanted to be a full-sized story if not indeed a three volume novel sequence. Then my son, Fred the Fourth, out of the kindness of his heart, gave me an opening sentence, and the other 469 words followed easily after.

I guess, just as with the Kennedy assassination, everybody can remember exactly where he was and what he was doing on the day the space people brought Jesus back to Earth.

I was aboard Air Force One with the President-I'm Secret Service-and when Major Manley radioed the unbelievable message from the orbiting space shuttle we turned right around and headed straight for California. Beat the shuttle down, and waited, parked at the end of the landing strip, watching TV.

Of course, business had stopped all over the world. Everybody was watching the pictures from the big telescope on Mauna Kea -what a brute that spaceship was, half a mile long!-and listening to replays of Manley's message.

Well, the shuttle made its turn and came down, and they got the crew out and into Air Force One while the ground people were still purging the fuel vapors. "Yoursure it's Jesus?the President demanded.

"That's what they say, Mr. President. I took a picture of Him-see for yourself. And he passed over a Polaroid.

The President winced. "I didn't think He'd look like *that*.

"Well, He's Jewish, you know-

"No, I mean He's so *young*. It's been nearly two thousandyears ! "

Major Manley explained, "They were traveling at light speed almost all this time-you know, time dilatation? After they rolled away the stone and took Him out of the cave- "They *kidnapped* Jesus?"

"They don't look at it that way, Mr. President. He was not in very good shape. They figured we were through with Him. So they took Him to their planet, where they have a place to keep specimens of life forms from all over the galaxy-

"They put *Jesus* in a zoo? Manley shrugged. "What's He doing now?"the President asked.

"They say He's watching TV mostly. Doesn't much like what He sees, they say, but I didn't talk to Him myself-I don't speak Aramaic. Anyway, I was glad to get out of there, because that ship's pretty scary. You just wouldn't *believe* all the nasty kinds of weapons they've got!

The President's eyes gleamed, and the secretary of defense exulted."New weapons! What a bargaining chip!

The President glanced around the room, and the expressions of delight were unanimous. There remained only one thing to do. He crooked a finger and his secretary turned on her recorder. "Take a decree, Mabel. I, the President, and so on, do hereby proclaim that Jesus Christ is come again, and-uh-

"And He's ours!the secretary finished.And then, raptly, "Thank God.

It looked pretty good there. Of course, the other countries were screeching their heads off. *Pravda* raged. The Chicoms canceled a trip by their soccer team, and the Israeli ambassador practically had a heart attack trying to argue that He was, after all, one of their nationals by birth. That didn't matter; we were *first*, and NASA cleared the Canaveral runways for His landing. But He requested all three networks to provide thirty minutes for a primetime telecast, and that was when it all went sour. Never mind He didn't look right. Never mind He spoke in Aramaic, which practically nobody understood. It was what He said that was the bad part-that, and the fact that before we got the translation, there was a priority call from the Mauna Kea telescope people to say the ship was breaking out of orbit and heading back out into space. "But what did He *say*?"moaned the President, and the translator, sweating, shook his head.

"Something about He doesn't like the way we've spoiled His planet, he croaked. "Says He told us what to do, and we haven't done it-we've messed everything up-

"Hell, shouted the President, "we can fix that up. Call Him back. We can make a deal. We'll give Him His own TV station so He can preach to the multitudes, let pilgrims come visit Him-anything He wants!

But the translator was shaking his head again. "He doesn't want that. He says He's going back with the space people. They've got a better-class zoo.