

## FLAME

by Bill Bridget

Little Oren, at age five, took the magnifying glass that his mother used to read, went out to the back porch and began frying ants. He built a five inch high pyre of cindered black Hymenoptera and ate them. His mother gave him a whipping with a newspaper.

When he was six years old, Oren climbed into the back seat of the family car and lit a box of kitchen matches. The garage burned down, and his father beat him with the buckle end of a cowhide belt.

A year later he burned up Mommy and Daddy, and the homes of six neighbors, when he put a lighted candle into the oven and turned the gas on to see how long it would take for the stove to go "Pop!"

Oren went to live with his grandparents in Phoenix. Grandpa Molotov was an austere patriarch, a hard-core Baptist. The basic element of this family creed Oren was able to assimilate, directly out of experience: water puts out fire. Thus, there was conspicuously little friction between members of the household.

As he grew, the new passions burning within him centered themselves around Oren's cousin Bernice. She was a fetching wood nymph of a child, with brown-amber eyes and flaming red hair . . . a little firebrand of twelve, just one year his junior. Though Oren was inept and untried, his ardor was matched at last by her desires. Haltingly, fumblingly, they sought their consummation. At last, in a hay loft, they enacted their final moment of childhood, the age old ritual. But when Oren tried to set her panatella afire, he set his paramour's hair ablaze.

Volunteers followed the bitter-sweet odor of combustion to find Oren standing in her ashes, performing her final absolution with his disconsolate tears, making mud on his shoes which he scraped off and kept in a jar in his room. When the winds came out of the desert night, blowing sand and other trash, he often would press his face against the attic window and, with a soft cry, remark "That's Bernice, all over."

With his first love's tragic return to dust, Oren's will to go on likewise flickered and waned. Filled with acid remorse, he fervently longed in his consummate bitterness to have his own life snuffed-out.

But, as a life is not easily extinguished, gradually Oren's immersion in his studies, in spite of his insulating himself from social relationships, crumbled armor tempered with regrets.

He had a flair for the sciences. Brilliant insights in the ordinarily dull routine of Chemistry I and II, that were not designed merely to be flashy, were the product of zealous attention to the disciplines and a methodical fusion with the elements of laboratory technique. Yet a characteristic hesitation in Oren against showing off skills which could have enlightened his peers caused more than one professor to flare-up and remonstrate him not to "conceal his light. . . ."

Predictably, the emotional bombardment penetrated the unshielded nucleus of his personality, accelerating Oren's naturally active imagination and undampened enthusiasm. . . .

The inevitable did occur: a device incorporating a modification of the principle referred to as the "Solar-Phoenix" fried that city as effectively as would the mid-day sun a broken, raw egg upon the literally-burning desert sands.

The Phoenix does not always arise from its pyre renewed.

What news, then, of the young trailblazer? It was not in his stars for Oren Molotov to be consigned to the eternal inferno. Stranger fates yet awaited him, a new dawn.

It is in the nature of any explosion that all forces are directed outward. It was in Oren's nature to be at the center of things. He came down no more than a mile off shore, a bit put-out but otherwise unharmed, at a place called Fire Island.