

Little Dog Gone

The ground beneath his back was frost-cold. During the night the coldness had climbed into his arms and shoulders and condensed in his chest, and now he was a part of the ground itself, an almost indistinguishable part that must soon break free or forever be lost.

Through will alone he drove the last of the garish nightmares away, turned on his side and opened his eyes. It had been a binge to beat all binges. It had begun in a little bar off Teletheatre Square in Old New York City, and it had blasted off into space and taken root among the stars. Now, after strutting and fretting its hour upon the stage, it had come to an end.

Dawn had emerged from her gray dwelling in the east and was lighting pink candles to illumine the big back yard of the world. It was a world that Nicholas Hayes could not remember. He knew, though, that he had seen it before, seen it from the distorted depths of drunkenness ... through the mists of no-pain and non-remembrance ... from the false heights of Never Come Tomorrow ... seen it, and forgotten it.

He was lying in a field. Rows of dead stalks alternated with parallel swaths of frost-wilted weeds. On either side were similar fields, and in the distance, woods. Beyond the woods, hills showed.

He could see his breath. He could see something else, too—a small animal of some kind. It was crouching in the weeds a dozen yards away, and it was watching him.

He wondered whether it was inside or outside his head. Painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow, picked up a loose clod of earth and heaved it in the animal's direction. The animal promptly disappeared.

He patted his pockets in the vain hope of finding a bottle. Raising his eyes, he saw the animal again. It had reappeared in the same spot, and had resumed watching him. "Go 'way!" he shouted hoarsely, and closed his eyes. When he re-opened them, the animal was still there.

It looked as though it might be a dog of some sort, but he could not be sure. Perhaps it was real after all. Working himself into a sitting position, Hayes went through his pockets. They contained his billfold, which was empty, his Teletheatre Guild membership card, which was void, his passport, a large handful of change and a concentrated chocolate bar. Unwrapping the bar, he broke it in two and tossed one half to the animal. Again the animal vanished; but this time, thanks to the growing light, he saw it reappear some fifty yards beyond its original position. As he sat there, staring, it vanished once more, rematerialized in the very same spot it had occupied before, and gobbled down the chocolate.

Hayes rubbed his eyes. Still the animal would not go away. Moreover, it was looking at him as though it momentarily expected him to toss it another piece of chocolate. He held out the remaining half of the bar. "If you want it, you'll have to come and get it," he said.

The dog—for a dog of some kind it seemed to be—flattened out on its belly and inched its way forward. Dawn had lighted the last of her pink candles, and now her son, the day, was coming out to play. In the brighter light Hayes saw that the dog was about the size of a miniature poodle. Its hair was quite thick, though not in the least curly, and was the color of the rising morning mist. Its slightly oversize paws suggested that it had not completely grown out of puppyhood, and the sad, eager-to-be-loved look in its slightly slanted golden eyes more or less substantiated the suggestion. The rather long but blunt muzzle lent a comical pug-nose effect, and the tatterdemalion ears hung down on either side of the head like a pair of frayed bar-rags. By far the most remarkable feature about the animal was its tail—on the bushy side, terminating in a white tuft. But instead of wagging, it rotated, first clockwise and then counterclockwise, somewhat in the manner of a spring winding itself up and letting itself mn down. A star-shaped white mark blazed in the middle of the animal's forehead.

Obviously the dog had not been eating very well of late, or perhaps, like any puppy, it was eternally hungry. It made short work of the second piece of chocolate, and gazed eagerly up into Hayes' eyes as though expecting a third. Tentatively, Hayes tweaked one of the rag-like ears. "Well, anyway, at least you're real," he said.

But if the dog *was* real, why had it disappeared?

Hayes let the question ride for the moment. Too many other questions had priority over it. For one

example, where was he? For another, what was he doing here?

He could remember choosing a planet at random and booking passage for it at the Great Eastern Spaceport, and he could vaguely remember boarding a subspace liner and long hours spent in the starbar, talking with other passengers now and then, but mostly to himself. But that was all he could remember. Sometime during the voyage he had reached the point of no-pain and non-remembrance. Somewhere along the line he had scaled the heights of Never Come Tomorrow and thumbed his nose at the cosmos.

And now, tomorrow had come. And the heights were hopelessly behind him.

He forced himself to his feet. His head was one vast gnawing ache, his body, a lump of clay supported by unfeeling stilts that once had been a pair of legs. Hatless. coatless, begrimed of slacks and shirt, he tamed and faced the way he must have come. There was a road of sorts not too far distant, and presently he was walking along it toward a misted huddle of buildings that spelled a town.

A soft whimpering sound came from behind him. He stopped and turned. The little dog stopped, too. It fixed him with a forlorn eye. "Well, what do you know?" Hayes said. And then, "Come on, Bar-rag. If you'll promise not to disappear on me again, I'll stake you to a meal."

"Rowp!" the little dog answered, and rotated its tail. Hayes waited till it caught up to him, then tamed and continued on his way.

II

He was sweating when he came to the first house, and yet he was shivering, too. By the time he reached the business section, his chest was paining him so acutely that he could barely breathe.

The business section was still asleep, but it informed him by means of its unpretentious facades and crude wooden walkways that the town was an out-planet settlement. How-ever, there were thousands of out-planet settlements. This could be any one of them. The place-name, when he finally spotted it on the facade of the only hotel, told him nothing:

THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

He headed for the hotel, Bar-rag trotting at his heels. The doors were open, but there was no one on the immediate premises. He looked around. If he had ever been there before, the memory eluded him. He stepped into the bar. That at least ought to be familiar, and familiar it turned out to be. However, the bell that the big raftered room with its old-fashioned tables and chairs rang in his mind was faint indeed. While he knew that he had been there recently, he could not remember any detail of his visit.

He chose a table at random and sat down. Bar-rag, obviously disconcerted by its new surroundings, slipped beneath the table and curled up at his feet. The room was as devoid of decor as it was of people. Two high windows looked out into the street, a liana-like rope looped incongruously down from a centrally-located rafter to a small gallery on the wall opposite the bar, and there was a doorway in the rear that presumably led to the kitchen.

Hayes pounded on the tabletop. Someone ought to be up at least.

Someone was: a tall girl with shoulder-length blonde hair, rattler wide hips, and nice legs. She advanced purposefully into the room through the doorway at the rear, her blue eyes bright with indignation. "Breakfast isn't served till eight-thirty!" she snapped. "Just who in hell do you think you are, mister?" Abruptly she stopped in her tracks. Then, slowly, she covered the remaining distance to the table, eyes no longer indignant. "I'm sorry, Mr. Hayes," she said. "I didn't recognize you."

She had a full, oval face, but her rather high cheekbones and the way she wore her hair made her cheeks seem thin. Hayes judged her to be somewhere in her late twenties or early thirties, which put her pretty much in his own age-category. However, he did not know her from Eve. "When did we meet?" he asked.

"We didn't, but I know you from your teletheatre roles. Last night when you came into the bar I recognized you right away." Briefly, she lowered her eyes. She was wearing a knee-length floral dress that covered most of her shoulders, and her hair lay upon the false flowers like morning sunshine.

"You—you might say I'm one of your many admirers."

"Did anyone else recognize me?"

"I don't think so. I'm afraid even taped teletheatre hasn't got to Black Dirt yet."

Black Dirt, he thought. That would be Procyon 16. Now why in hell had he come here? Aloud, he said, "I'm a little foggy on a few points. By any chance did I happen to mention how I got here?"

"I heard you tell the bartender that you'd come in from Port-o'-Stars by airbus, and that you were recently arrived from Earth. Don't you remember, Mr. Hayes?"

"How long did I hang around?"

"Till nearly closing time. I—I wanted to talk to you, but I didn't have enough nerve. Then suddenly I looked around and you were gone. I checked your bag and your coat in the lobby. I thought perhaps you'd gone somewhere else to sleep."

Hayes grimaced. "I did. Though I imagine my original intention was confined to a walk beneath the stars."

At this point, Bar-rag poked its head from beneath the table. The girl jumped. "Where in the world did you get hold of a doggone, Mr. Hayes?" she said. "I thought all of them had been frightened back into the hills."

"A doggone?"

"That's the settlers' name for them. First you see them, then you don't. They're capable of teleportation."

"Well, no wonder!" Hayes said. "For a while there when I first woke up I thought I was seeing things. He followed me back to town for some reason or other—probably a free meal. Do you think you could fix him up with something?"

"Of course. He must like you, Mr. Hayes. Usually when a doggone sees a human being, he teleports himself as far away as he can get. Or perhaps I should say 'it.' They're bisexual, you know, and reproduce by parthenogenesis." She looked at Hayes closely. "You're shivering, Mr. Hayes. Shall I turn the heat up?"

"No. Just bring me a triple shot."

He downed half of it a second after she set it before him. A shudder began deep within him and spread upward. The room very nearly turned upside down, but he steadied it just in time by gripping the edge of the table with both hands. Presently he became aware that the girl was leaning over him. "Are you all right, Mr. Hayes?" she asked.

He drank the rest of the whiskey. "I will be. By the way, what's your name?"

"Moirra. Moirra Blair."

"Bring me another triple shot, Moirra."

There was concern in her blue eyes. "Do you think—"

"I do. Bring it."

After she brought it, she went into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later bearing a plate of meat scraps. She set the plate on the floor, and the little doggone came out of hiding and dug in. "Does he have a name yet, Mr. Hayes!"

"Bar-rag." Hayes tossed off the second triple shot and removed the handful of change from his pocket. He piled it carefully on the table. "This cairn of coins you see before you, Moirra, represents the last of the tangible assets of one Nicholas Hayes," he said. "You will keep bringing him drinks till it is gone, after which it is to be hoped that you will have the good sense to throw him out into the gutter where he belongs."

"Please let me help you, Mr. Hayes."

"Why?"

"Because it isn't fair for you to—to be like this. When I was still living in New North Dakota, Mars and had access to live TTV, I saw you in all your teletheatre roles, both Debuts and Encores. I saw you as Tambourlaine. I saw you as Cyrano. I saw you as Hamlet. I saw you as Edward II. I saw you as Willy Loman. And you were wonderful. You still are! You always will be."

"Aha! but you didn't see me as Milton Pomfret, did you? You didn't see me in the Debut of *The Two-Sided Triangle*. Even if you were still living in New North Dakota you wouldn't have seen me."

Hayes crashed his fist on the table. "And do you know why you wouldn't have seen me, Moira? You wouldn't have seen me because on Debut night, I showed up as drunk as a spaceman on three-weeks' leave and got myself thrown out of teletheatre. And it was just what I had coining, too. Because you see, Moira my dear, that was far from the first time I had shown up as drunk as a spaceman on three-weeks' leave—

far from the first time Humpty Dumpty Hayes had had a great fall. Only this time, Christopher King's horses and Christopher King's men didn't bother to put Humpty Dumpty back together again with alco-antidotes and souped-up sugar pills. By this time they were as sick of him as he was of himself. So they told him that if he wanted to be put back together again, he would have to do the job himself. So he burned his bridges behind him, invested in a super-binge, climbed aboard and blasted off for the stars on a mission he has since forgotten and no longer wants to remember. For God's sake, bring him a bottle and let him bow out in peace!"

It was the flattest, most uncompromising "no" that Hayes had ever heard in all his life. It brought him to his feet—and to his undoing. This time, when the room started to turn upside down, he could not stop it. Giddiness washed over him like gray surf, and beyond the surf, blackness roiled ... And now, the blackness began swirling around his legs. Up, up, it swirled, and he called out "Leslie!" in a semi-strangled voice. However, it was not sophisticated dark-haired Leslie who leaped through the gathering night to his side, but a tall blonde girl with anxious eyes. He felt strong arms supporting him as he sank into nothingness, and just before the nothingness became complete, he felt her fingers touch his face.

There were jumbled phrases of warmth and cold, of darkness and light. Sometimes the bedroom in which he lay played host to a blonde girl wearing a print dress—and once in a while to the same girl wearing a jaguar-skin sarong—and frequently to a coarse, bearded man with chest-prodding fingers—and always, it seemed, to a small, mist-gray animal with bar-rag ears, rotating tail, and worshipful golden eyes. Finally there were late mornings and long, sunny afternoons, and sometimes snow falling lazily beyond diamond-patterned window-panes.

The bedroom was not a large one. Strictly speaking, it was not a bedroom at all, but a commandeered living room. There was a sofa and there were chairs and there was a small table on which stood a lamp, a clock and a copy of R. E. Hames' *Stellar Geography*. The only incongruous item was the bed. It was high and narrow and it had obviously been borrowed from the local frontier hospital. It stood out among the endemic furniture like a bedsheeted barge floating down a nonexistent river.

One night, the girl in the jaguar skin came out of the shadows and gazed down upon his face. "Dr. Grimes says you're much better," she said. "I'm glad."

"You're Moira, aren't you?" Hayes said.

"Not when I wear my costume. When I wear my costume I'm Zonda of the Amazon, the Amazon in this case being the big river of the same name in the wilds of Alpha Centauri 9. Haven't you ever heard of Zonda of the Amazon, Mr. Hayes?"

"I can't say as I have."

"She was the main character of an earthside 3V show of the same title. They chose me for the role because they needed a big blonde and didn't in the least mind if she fell considerably short of being a second Sarah Bernhardt. I used to swing through trees on fake grapevines and win friends and influence animals and utter sparkling lines such as 'Zonda hungry' and 'Zonda save you—you no fear.' For a poor girl from New North Dakota, Mars, who couldn't act her way out of a plastic bag, I did all right for myself for a while. And then the series was canceled, and I found myself out in the cold, because big blondes who can't act are no more in demand in Videoville than they used to be in Hollywood. But I'd saved enough money to last me until the reruns began and checks started coming through again. And after the reruns came the repeat-reruns. And after that the series was sold successively to just about every earthside station on the network, and I began making personal appearances in local studios for the benefit of the kids who still remembered me. Then the series was sold successively to the Martian stations, and I made more personal appearances, and eventually the tapes were shipped off to out-planets like Black Dirt that didn't have 3V yet but that did have local theatres where the tapes could

be run along with old, old movies, and, well, I tagged along as usual for more personal appearances and finally I ended up here in *The Last Of The Mohicans* where the proprietor of the local hotel offered me a job for life if I'd play Zonda of the Amazon once a week for the benefit of his bar trade. By that time I was sick of being Zonda. But I was even sicker of traveling from one sad stand to another, so I took him up on his offer."

"What do you have to do?" Hayes asked.

"Three times each Saturday night I swing across the barroom on a make-believe grapevine, land on the bar, give the victory cry of a Centaurian jungle girl, and fight off the dirt farmers."

"Is this your living room?"

She nodded. "But don't feel that you're inconveniencing me, Mr. Hayes. I never use it."

"Why didn't you pack me off to the nearest charity ward and have done with me?"

"I thought you'd be better off here. Out-planet hospitals are understaffed and half of the time they don't even have the medical supplies they need." She glanced at the clock on the table. "I'll have to be going now, Mr. Hayes. It's almost time for Zonda's first aerial maneuver. Bar-rag will keep you company till you fall asleep. Won't you, Bar-rag?"

At the sound of its name, the little doggone materialized on the bed, joyously winding and unwinding its tail. "Rowp!" it said to Hayes, and licked his cheek. Hayes grinned. "I need a shave, don't I?" he said.

"I'll have a barber come in tomorrow. While he's at it, he can give you a haircut, too." Moira dimmed the light. "Good night, Mr. Hayes."

"Good night," Hayes said.

After site had gone, he let his head sink deep into the pillow. He was weary and he was weak, and he felt as though he could go on lying there forever. There was no sound save for the remote thumping of a stereo in the bar below, and the soft susurrus of Bar-rag's breathing. Beyond the diamond-patterned windowpanes, a streetlight caught glistening particles of gently falling snow ... In Old York, it would be summer. It was always summer in Old York, with balmy winds blowing in from the rerouted Gulf Stream and breathing up the revamped avenues. The open-air little theatres around Teletheatre Square would be in full swing. NOW PLAYING: *The Two-Sided Triangle*, with Leslie Lake and Humpty Dumpty Hayes. No, not Humpty Dumpty Hayes. Humpty Dumpty Hayes had had a great fall—remember? And all the King's horses and all the King's men hadn't bothered to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

Hayes closed his eyes against the sudden bleakness of the ceiling. Desperately, he reached out and touched Bar-rag's glossy back. The little animal curled up in the crook of his arm. It was all right then, and he knew that tonight at least he could sleep. NOW PLAYING, he thought drowsily: *The Last of the Mohicans Hotel*, with Bar-rag, Zonda of the Amazon, and Humpty Dumpty Hayes ...

III

There were times after that when he wanted a drink, when he begged for a drink, when he cried out for a drink and raved when Moira would not bring him one and locked the door behind her. Once when she came upstairs after her Zonda routine he was waiting for her in the shadows, and when she came into the room, he seized her throat and went tumbling with her to the floor, threatening to kill her unless she promised to go back down to the bar and get him a bottle.

He was still pitifully weak. It would have been no trick at all for her to have broken his grip and flung him aside but she didn't. Instead, she lay there immobile, and after a while, she said, "Go ahead, Nick—choke me. What are you waiting for?" His hands fell away then, and he sat there sick and ashamed on the floor till she got up and helped him back into bed.

When she brought him his breakfast the next morning, she sat down beside the bed and talked to him as though nothing had happened. He couldn't stand it. "For God's sake, why don't you throw me out and have done with me!" he said.

Her eyes were soft upon his face. "Nights are the worst, aren't they?" she said.

"Nights I'm someone else. Or maybe it's the other way around. It doesn't matter—neither one of us is any good."

"I think you're someone in between. Like me. I'm someone in between Zonda of the Amazon and Moira Blair."

"It's not the same, and you know it," Hayes said. Then, "How long have I been cooped up in here?" he asked.

"Three weeks. But the doctor says you'll be on your feet in a few more days. I guess you know by now that you very nearly died."

Suddenly Bar-rag materialized between them on the edge of the bed. There were particles of ice clinging to its paws, and a little ridge of snow lay along the top of its nose. Hayes gave the little animal a piece of toast. "I wonder where he's been," he said.

"Home in the hills, I imagine," Moira said. "They have an infallible sense of direction, and I've heard that they can teleport themselves millions of miles. I think they could even teleport themselves from one planet to another if they took it into their heads."

"If they did, they'd be dead. Teleportation may be instantaneous in one sense, but it's still subject to the velocity of light—unless it employs subspace."

"It doesn't—which is probably why doggonos never leave Black Dirt. They probably sense what would happen to them if they were to spend several minutes in an absolute-zero vacuum. The way an ordinary dog knows enough not to jump over a cliff."

"Rowp!" Bar-rag said.

Hayes laughed. "I almost believe he knows what we're talking about."

"It wouldn't surprise me. They're remarkably intelligent." She stood up. "I must go now, Nick."

"Between Moira of the Kitchen and Zonda of the Amazon, you put in a pretty long week."

"I don't mind. It's good to keep busy." She picked up the breakfast tray. Just as she did so, Bar-rag disappeared from the bed, and a split second later, scratching sounds came from the hall. She went over to the hall door and opened it, and there was Bar-rag standing proudly on the threshold. "Why I do believe you're showing off," she said. "Bar-rag, you're a born ham!"

"Rowp!" Bar-rag said, and teleported itself back to the bed.

Hayes stared at the roguish face. "Moira," he said excitedly, "I just remembered why I came to the stars! I was going to tour the out-planet towns and support myself by giving Shakespearean soliloquies. It was a corny idea, and I thought of it when I was drunk, and it never would have paid off in a million years. But now I've got a better idea. Would you bring me a pad and pencil before you go back down stairs?"

"Sure, Nick."

He did not begin to write right away, but sat there thinking, his pillow propped behind his back, the pad resting on his knees. To accomplish what he had in mind, he would need first of all the right sort of skit.

Perhaps he could adapt it from a passage of a well-known play that was in the public domain. The idea appealed to him, and he began going over the plays he knew by heart. The process could very well have taken the rest of the morning if *The Two-Sided Triangle* hadn't come immediately to mind. When that happened, he knew he needed to go no further: the play was a good sixty years old, it was perennially popular and part of it at least should prove ideally suited to his needs.

He knew it by heart. Now he began thinking it through, word for word, line by line, scene by scene. It concerned a young executive named Milton Pomfret whose wife Glenda was determined to find out whether he was a philanderer or a perfect husband. Enlisting the services of a phoneticist and a face-and-figure specialist, she made arrangements with each to have herself temporarily changed into another woman, after which she told her husband she was going to visit her mother for a few weeks, packed her things and rented a downtown apartment under the name of Mary Lou Johnson. She had her face and figure altered over the weekend, and with the phoneticist's help, practiced and perfected a subtly different mode of speech. Then on Monday morning, she got a secretarial job in her husband's office and went on the make for him. On several occasions she almost became his "mistress," but each time, something happened to interrupt the proceedings, leaving her no wiser than she had been before.

Eventually the husband fell madly in love with her and asked her to marry him—a development she

had failed to foresee—and in order to keep him, she had to divorce him as her original and remarry him as her second self.

The scene which Hayes finally settled on was one of the most popular ones in the play. It opened with Milton Pomfret stopping off at Mary Lou's apartment after a date and sitting down beside her on the big sofa in her living room. By this time, Milton's defenses had crumbled and he was ready to make love and as for Mary Lou, she was more than ready. However, each time they were about to go into a clinch an interruption occurred. In the play, the interruptions were ironic in nature; in the version which Hayes presently set down, they were farcical and amounted in each case to the materializing of Bar-rag between the two lovers each time they were about to embrace. The first time the little animal appeared, Mary Lou put it outside and locked the door; the second time, she put it outside and locked the windows as well as the door; the third time she put it outside, locked the windows and the door and activated the anti-housebreak field; and the fourth time, with Milton's help, she got a suitcase and a trunk out of the closet, put the little animal into the suitcase, locked the suitcase and secured the straps, put the suitcase into the trunk, closed and locked the lid, dragged the trunk outside, came back in, locked and barricaded the door and reactivated the anti-housebreak field. Then, certain that they would not be interrupted again, the two frustrated lovers returned to the sofa, only to have Bar-rag pop into being between them for the fifth and final time. In addition to these changes, Hayes made the revisions that were necessary to make the skit an independent unit, but otherwise he kept the dialogue and the action intact.

He was just completing the polished version when Moira brought him his lunch. He was so enthusiastic that he could hardly eat.

"Read it," he said, handing her the script. "Picture yourself as Mary Lou, me as Milton Pomfret and Bar-rag as himself. See what you think."

Her blue eyes brought a summer sunrise to mind when she raised them from the final page. "You—you want *me* to act this with *you*?"

"You and Bar-rag. He'll be the star of course. The people on Black Dirt know about doggoness but the people on the other out-planets have probably never even heard of such an animal, and with them, the act will be twice as effective. We'll be combining old-fashioned thaumaturgy with broad out-planet humor and, even if we fail to get laughs, our audiences will at least be mystified. Sure I know that such a cornball setup would fall flat on its face in Old York, but we should worry about Old York with all the out-planet places we've got at our disposal. I'll turn out a few more skits to round out the show to about an hour and a half, then we'll go on tour, the three of us, and—"

"You—you want *me* to act with *you*?"

"Come off it, Moira, I'm not bestowing any honors, I'm merely suggesting a way for us to make some money. *I've* got to make some somehow, and acting, or at least some aspect of it, is the only means I have. If you're satisfied with your job here, I'll get someone else. But I'd much rather have you."

"Don't you *dare* get anybody else!"

He grinned. "All right, I won't," he said. "We can begin rehearsing right here in this room," he went on. "If you can scare up a trunk somewhere, we'll have all the props we'll need, and the room itself will serve as a stage. Our main problem is going to be Bar-rag. He's got to appear between us at exactly the right times, or the whole thing won't work. You'll notice that in the skit the last word Milton speaks before each interruption is 'darling.' That'll be Bar-rag's cue. Do you think we can get him to respond to it?"

Her eyes were shining, and there was a hint of tears in their corners. Hayes didn't believe he had ever seen anyone so happy in all his life. "I'm sure we can," she said. "Bar-rag, come here."

The doggone materialized in her arms, tail whirring like a small propellor. A tear tumbled down her cheek and dropped on the little animal's nose. NOW PLAYING, Hayes thought: Zonda of the Amazon, Bar-rag the Wonder Dog, and Nicholas Hayes in *Courtin' Mary Lou*.

IV

They began rehearsing the next evening, with Hayes playing Milton Pomfret and directing at the same

time. Moira and Bar-rag proved to be the two most co-operative players he had ever worked with. Within three days the skit was running smoothly, with the doggone appearing promptly on cue and Moira embracing the role of the beautiful but far from brilliant out-planet girl as though she had been preparing for it all her life. As for Hayes himself, he merely had to make a few minor changes in his portrayal of the old Milton Pomfret in order to become the new, after which he performed the part with his usual adroit mastery.

Between rehearsals, he dashed off three more skits, each embodying the sort of broad humor out-planet people went for, and he and Moira mastered these skits, too, with Bar-rag providing an enthusiastic if puzzled audience of one. Finally one evening they ran through the entire act, saving *Courtin' Mary Lou* till the last. The performance came off without a hitch. "Now," said Hayes, "we've got to have a sort of trial run right here in *The Last of the Mohicans*, just to make sure. For that, we'll have to rent the local theatre, and to rent the local theatre we're going to need money." He went into the bedroom, opened the dresser drawer where Moira had put away his things, and returned a moment later with a platinum figurine of Maurice Evans. Inscribed on the base were the words: *The Evans Telerheatre Award, given to Nicholas Hayes in this year of Our Lord 2186 for his outstanding contribution to the telestage in his role as Edward II.* He handed the figurine to Moira. "Take it into Port-o'-Stars tomorrow. You ought to be able to get a couple of hundred credits for it, which should be enough to get us started."

She stood there looking down at the figurine as though it were a crucifix. "I have money, Nick. There's no need for you to make such a sacrifice."

He flushed. "That's a chunk of platinum you're holding in your hands. Nothing more. You'll do as I say."

"But it's not fair, Nick."

"All right, I'll go myself!"

He reached for the figurine, but she drew it back. "I'll go," she said, not looking at him. "You're not well enough yet."

"Good. While you're gone, I'll get some advertising copy into circulation and rig up an anti-housebreak field generator. When you get back, we'll run through the act on a real stage. And in a couple of days we'll open!"

On the first night, they played before a full house. On the second. And the third.

Hayes was amazed till he remembered that out-planet towns like *The Last of The Mohicans* were virtually devoid of live entertainment, and that the same state of affairs endured in the surrounding areas. Even with Bar-rag as a known quantity, the *Courtin' Mary Lou* skit went over big, and the three skits that preceded it got their share of laughs, too. No, not laughs: guffaws—guffaws that made the skylights rattle. It was a new experience for Hayes, who was accustomed to sophisticated audiences, but he took it in his stride without undue difficulty. Moira took it in hers, too, and as for Bar-rag, it turned out to be the truest trouper of them all, and fell sound asleep in Hayes' arms while they were returning to the hotel after their first performance.

They could have played in *The Last Of The Mohicans* for a month running, but Hayes was anxious to get started on the itinerary which he had mapped out with the aid of Hames' *Stellar Geography*, and anxious also to sample an audience that had never seen a doggone. Hence he instructed Moira to give her employer a week's notice.

When the week was up, they packed their things, set out by airbus to Port-o'-Stars, cleared Bar-rag through customs and booked passage for Goshen, the twelfth planet of the blue star Sirius. Moira had sold the figurine for three hundred credits. Their take after expenses from *The Last Of The Mohicans* stand amounted to more than seven hundred more, giving them a combined working capital of some one thousand credits.

Things were looking up.

Their first stop on Goshen was a backwoods town called Down In The Valley.

The town itself harbored a mere handful of colonists, most of them merchants, but the first district that it serviced was as large as the Holland Land Grant and boasted a population of some ten thousand

immigrants and some two thousand natives. During the three weeks Hayes & Co. played at the Down In The Valley Grange Hall, all of them, immigrant and native alike, managed to get into town at least once to see the "disappearin' dawg."

Hayes should have been delighted. He wondered why he wasn't.

From Down In The Valley, the trio journeyed overland to Sheepdip, and from Sheepdip to Rise-n'-Shine, and from Rise-n'-Shine to St. Johnswort. In his room at the St. Johnswort Hotel, Hayes came across a discarded copy of *Spectrum*, and in it he found a review of *The Two-Sided Triangle*. The play had enjoyed a successful TTV Debut and was enjoying equal success during its Old York stand. According to the reviewer, it was a cinch for a TTV Encore. Leslie Lake's bravura in the portrayal of Glenda—Mary Lou had firmly established her in the upper echelons of stardom, and the part of Milton Pomfret was being played with a finesse seldom encountered in an understudy. Hayes threw the magazine in the wastebasket.

He walked over to the room's only window and looked down into the street. The hour was late, and no one was abroad. In the adjoining room Moira, weary from their long journey, was preparing for bed. He could hear drawers opening and closing as she put her things away, and the muted patter of her bare feet upon the floor. Behind him, Bar-rag lay fast asleep at the foot of the bed.

He felt suddenly, horribly, alone.

Leaving the room, he descended to the lobby. The lobby was empty. He stepped out into the street. There was a lingering tang of winter in the night air, but there was the scent of green things, too. In St. Johnswort, it was spring. Soon the lovely flowers that had given the little town its name would be nodding their yellow heads along roadsides and country lanes. Soon birds would sing.

He began to walk. St. Johnswort stood on a gentle mountainside, and below it lay a deep valley where the scattered lights of farmhouses shone. Above the valley lay the inverted valley of the sky, and here there were other lights, the lights of stars.

One of the stars was Sol.

In Old York, it would be summer. It was always summer in Old York. In Old York, there were many lights and much laughter, and never any need to be alone. In Old York, if you were good enough, you could step upon a magic stage and cameras would focus on you and multiply you by one hundred million ... and on Earth and on Mars you would step into millions of living rooms, and people would know you were alive. Out, out, brief candle! Out, out, the brief career of Nicholas Hayes.

The street along which he was walking came to an end. It did not debouch into another street the way most streets do when they die. It simply stopped existing because there was no further reason for it to be. Trees grew boldly up to its very edge, and in the darkness a phosphorescent sign said, *Dead End*.

Wearily, Hayes turned and began retracing his steps. He became aware then that he was not alone. Something was walking beside him—a little animal with a pug nose and golden eyes.

"Bar-rag," he said, "what're you doing out so late at night? You should be in bed."

"Rowp!" the little animal said, and looked up at him the way people used to look up at him at curtain call when he and his supporting cast stepped out upon the proscenium, and took their bows. Then it disappeared. Lord! he thought, if I could teleport, I'd be back on Earth as fast as the wings of light could carry me. And then he thought, Yes, and arrive there dead eight years from now. I'm as well off being dead, dumbly waltzing around up here among the stars.

Yes, but did he have to remain dead? Was he so stupid that he could devise no way to bring himself back to life? No, he was not stupid. Not he, Nicholas Hayes. It wasn't a matter of devising a means to gain his end. It was merely a matter of selection!

When he got back to his room, Bar-rag was fast asleep again at the foot of the bed. The adjoining room was silent. Should he wait till morning? he wondered. He decided not to. Tapping on the door, he said, "Moira, may I talk with you for a while."

There was a silence, and then the clicking of a lamp. "Yes, Nick, come in."

In the radiance of the bed lamp her hair was the color of evening primroses and lay like spring upon the pillow. Her eyes were bellflower-blue. "Are you all right, Nick?" she asked.

"Yes." He pulled a chair over to the side of the bed, and sat down. "I was walking tonight, and I got an idea. An idea for a theatre-ship."

"Yes, Nick?"

"Centuries ago on Earth, charlatans used to travel from frontier town to frontier town on enclosed wagons, giving what were called medicine shows. The shows themselves were free, designed to attract a crowd so that the charlatan could peddle his quack remedies. Thanks to too-rapid colonization brought on by the subspace drive, we have today a situation similar to that which existed in the old west. The settlers have spread out so rapidly and so widely that it's no longer possible to keep them supplied with everything they need, and this is particularly true with regard to medicine. So suppose, Moira, that you and I were to invest in a used space-freighter, remodel the interior so that we could live in it comfortably, stock it with all-purpose medicine kits, and install a stage. Then suppose that we were to limit our act to the *Courtin' Mary Lou* skit and were to peddle medicine kits instead of charging admission. We could sell them at a modest profit, and we'd never have to feel guilty about taking advantage of gullible people. Because far from taking advantage of them, we'd be helping them. Granted, we'd never get rich. But we'd make a reasonably good living, and, while we'd be traveling all the time, we'd never really be away from home because we'd have our home with us. What do you think, Moira?"

For a long while she was silent. Then, "Why do you want to do this, Nick?"

The time had come for the lie. He told it beautifully: "Because I've got to stop thinking of myself as an actor. Because somehow I've got to shed the past. I need a new identity, a totally different identity. Maybe being a 'medicine man' will bring me peace."

She looked away from his face; at the coverlet, at her hands. They were rather large hands, and hard work had broadened them; but they were full of grace. Presently she said, "I think it's a wonderful idea, Nick."

"Good. We'll do a one-week stand here, then we'll go to Mars. There's a big used-ship yard at Port-o'-Sands that ought to be able to supply us with the sort of ship we'll need." He stood up. "I'm sorry I had to wake you up, Moira, but I had to find out how you'd feel."

"It's all right, Nick. And Nick?"

"Yes?"

"Port-o'-Sands isn't very far from New North Dakota. Maybe we can visit the farm. And—and my folks."

"We'll make it a point to. Good night, Moira."

"Good night."

V

The freighter they finally settled for was an old washtub of a job, but the ion drive was still in good working order and the space-subspace correlator, for all its passe design, functioned as efficiently as the newer, more compact units. In common with the more modern merchantmen, the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer*, as they named the vessel, could be operated by one man. Just as important, the deck of the lower level was but several feet above ground level, and in conjunction with the retractable dock would provide an excellent stage.

To obtain more width, Hayes had the original cargo-locks removed, the aperture enlarged and wider ones installed. The power room occupied most of the rear section of the lower hold, but there was still a dressing room for Moira, one for Hayes and space for three compartments and a small storage room. Moira insisted that Bar-rag's name be painted on the storage-room door, saying that in view of the fact that the little doggone was the most essential member of the cast, it rated equal prestige at least. Grudgingly, Hayes gave in to her. Half of the upper hold, Hayes set aside for the Medicine kits, which had already been ordered from Earth, and for supplies. The other half he had converted into a large living room, a commodious kitchen and a small office. The pilots' quarters on the deck above made an excellent pair of upstairs bedrooms. As a finishing touch, he replaced the pilots' quarters and control room with a spiral steel stairway, after which he had the ship painted inside and out. Then he and Moira

went shopping for furniture.

By this time, the capital of Hayes & Co. had dwindled to an alarming low. They had purchased the ship on time, putting the loan through the Port-o'-Sands Manufacturers' and Traders' Trust Company; for everything else, however, they had laid down hard cash.

Consequently, they had to settle for something less in the way of furniture than they originally had had in mind. In the end, though, this worked to their advantage, for Moira proved to have a knack for refurbishing chairs, tables, beds and even appliances, and eventually the cheapest and most decrepit items they bought yielded both dignity and grace. Nor did Moira stop with the furniture. The rooms themselves got a going over, too, and when she was done, the living quarters could have passed for a late-twentieth century duplex—which in effect was what they really were.

All this while she and Hayes had been attending night school and learning how to pilot a spacecraft. The near-complete automation of ships like the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer* had long since relegated spaceship navigation to pretty much the same category as driving a late-twentieth century automobile. In many ways it was simpler; certainly it was less perilous. Nevertheless, there were certain basic steps that all would-be pilots had to familiar with, and in addition there were scores of rules to be memorized. Then Moira and Hayes had to take the training ship on a solo orbit apiece, after which each of them had to go on a trial correlation run to Alpha Centauri 4 and back. Neither ran into any trouble, and they received their licenses on the same day.

Meanwhile, the medicine kits they had ordered from Earth had arrived and had been loaded onto the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer*, bringing their business in Port-o'-Sands to a close. "If we're going to visit your folks, it's high time we were getting started," Hayes said after supper one night. "What did you say the name of your home town was?"

She placed the last of the supper dishes in the rinser and turned the unit on. "Red Spud. It's not a town, though. It's a hamlet, and not much of a one at that. But it's on one of the main airbus routes."

"Good. We can pack tonight and leave in the morning." She did not look at him. "All right."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic."

"Nick," she said to the stove, "do you think we could pretend to be—to be—"

"To be what?"

"Man and wife. For the duration of the visit, I mean. I—I know you've never thought of me that way, and I know I've no right to expect you to. But my mother and father are going to wonder. And probably they'll worry. So for their benefit could we make believe?"

Hayes looked out of the kitchen viewport into the cluttered darkness of the shipyard. Here and there, specks of wan light shone, and in the distance a night crew was dismantling an ancient SB-2. Marriage was an item that had not entered into his calculations. But would it do him any harm to marry Moira? True, he did not love her. But then he had never loved anyone, for that matter—save Leslie perhaps. And anyway, marriage wasn't the final step it used to be. There was a clause in every contract that made it possible for either party to walk out on the other during the first year without showing just cause—provided no children had been conceived during that period of time. *The Two-Sided Triangle* would come up for Encore long before a year.

So he said to Moira, "I remembered everything, didn't I? Except the most important thing of all. Will you marry me, Moira?"

Her eyes, when she raised them to his, brought Bar-rag's worshipful orbs to mind. "I didn't mean for you to ask me that."

"Nevertheless, I did ask it. So don't you think I rate an answer?"

"I'm the girl who used to swing on a grapevine in the Last Of The Mohicans Hotel—remember?"

"And I'm the drunk you rescued from the snakes."

He saw her then, as the years fell from her shoulders, the way she must have been when she set out from New North Dakota long ago, tall and slender, girlish and soft; Zonda of the Amazon standing in a treetop and looking out over the wide, wide world, blue eyes filled with wonder. But it was Moira, not Zonda, who answered. "I'm not Leslie," she said. "I could never be Leslie Lake."

He stood his ground. "I wouldn't want you to be." Stepping closer, he placed his hands upon her

shoulders. "Well tied a justice of the peace tonight. We'll spend our honeymoon in New North Dakota." He paused. Terms of endearment had always been difficult for him to utter. He could never in real life give them the sincerity that was needed to put them across, the sincerity that came so natural to him on the stage. But it was imperative that he utter on now. "I'm sure we'll be happy, darling," he said.

Instantly, Bar-rag, who had been dozing on the couch in the living room, materialized between them. Moira laughed, and suddenly everything was the way it should be, and she was warm and wanted in his arms. Bar-rag, proud as a peacock for having remembered its cue, leaped ecstatically about their feet, tail rotating like a toy windmill.

New North Dakota was warmth on cold nights and red plains rolling away under pale Martian skies; it was rafted rooms and open fireplaces and strong coffee percolating on primitive stoves, it was *maklus* roasts browning in ovens, and brown gravy and baked beans; it was 3-V beamed all the way from Earth and viewed on long evenings in big living rooms; it was hikes in ocher hills and dances in bright community halls, and allemaine left and allemaine right; it was star-crisp nights walking home from warmth and laughter, camaraderie and good cheer; it was waking under eaves in gray dawnlight beneath feather ticks ten inches thick; it was a quaint little church standing like a steepled matchbox beneath a vastness of lavender sky, and the peace of pleasant people on pleasant Sunday afternoons.

When the time came to leave, Hayes was almost as sad as Moira's parents were. Moira cried. Bar-rag did not cry, of course; but the sadness in the little animal's slanted golden eyes said that it would have if it could.

However, the sadness was short-lived on both man and doggone's part. It lasted no longer than the airbus journey back to Port-if-Sands. After that, Hayes had piloting to occupy him, and Bar-rag, the exploration of the world of the ship.

The exploration had been begun before the trip to New North Dakota, and now it was resumed in earnest. Seemingly obsessed with a desire to be everywhere at once, the little animal kept teleporting itself from deck to deck, from hold to hold, from room to room, and for a while Hayes re-experienced the fear he had experienced during the Black Dirt-to-Goshen and Goshen-to-Mars run—that the doggone would miscalculate its distance and teleport itself beyond the life-and-death boundary of the hull. But it never did. Hayes came to the conclusion that, in common with its sense of direction, a doggone's sense of distance was infallible.

The first planet on the medicine-show itinerary was Golden Grain, the ninth satellite of the green star Castor. After clearing the ship at Port-o'-Plains, he began the series of hops that he and Moira had decided upon, the first of which brought them to One Leg To Stand On. Coming down in an uncultivated field a few miles outside of town, he started beaming a carefully prepared sales pitch over the local short-wave band: "NOW PLAYING: Nicholas Hayes, Zonda of the Amazon, and Bar-rag the Wonder Dog in *Courtin' Mary Lou*. Come one, come all—ADMISSION FREE. The place: the Theatre-Ship, two miles south of town. The time: starrise. See Bar-rag the Wonder Dog thwart the ardent lovers. See him appear out of Thin Air and spin his magic tail. See him, see him, see him! FREE! FREE! FREE!" If the "FREE" didn't get them, nothing would.

It got them all right—that, and the emptiness of their days. By the time the first star appeared, the section of the meadow in front of the ship was filled to capacity, and beyond. The starlit faces were gaunt and unimaginative for the most part, but there was curiosity in every pair of eyes, and in the children's, eagerness as well. Hayes turned on the footlights he had installed along the edge of the dock, and stepped from behind the maroon plastivelvet curtain Moira had made.

"Citizens of Golden Grain," he said, "we have not come here to defraud you of your hard-earned credits but to help and to entertain you. Whether or not you buy one of the medicine kits which I'm about to show you, you will be equally welcome to attend the show which will go on immediately afterward." He faced the curtain. "Zonda?"

Clad in her jaguar skin, her long legs flashing in the footlights, Moira stepped out on the dock carrying a small table on which several dozen medicine kits were piled. Setting the table down, she picked up the topmost kit and handed it to Hayes; then she turned and smiled warmly at the audience.

Hayes held up the kit and described its contents.

"None of the items I've mentioned is a panacea," he concluded, "but each of them will live up to the claims I made for it, and all of them should be in every single household in One Leg To Stand On. The kits sell for two credits apiece. Surely your physical welfare and the welfare of your children are worth that much to you!"

The kits sold surprisingly well, and Moira had to go upstairs twice for more of them. She and Hayes were elated when they retired behind the curtain to round up Bar-rag and get ready for their act. "I think we'd better tone it down a little, don't you?" she said, slipping into her Mary Lou dress. "There's a lot of kids out there."

"Good idea," Hayes said. "I'll keep my hands above the waist and leave out the leers, and you can eliminate the wiggles when you walk. Okay?"

"Okay."

Even toned down *Courtin' Mary Lou* went over big. In fact, the audience begged for an encore. Hayes and Moira gave it to them in the form of one of their abandoned skits. "Why don't you do something for them out of your repertoire?" Moira asked Hayes, when the people continued to linger hopefully about the platform.

"That's one way of getting rid of them, I suppose."

"I didn't mean it that way. Don't you see, Nick? You're as much obligated to elevate them culturally as you are to elevate them physically. You've sold them penicillin. Now sell them another kind of pill. Force it down their throats if they don't want to take it. You owe it to them, Nick. You owe it to yourself!"

He regarded her thoughtfully. It was an angle that hadn't occurred to him, and it just might provide the added something that he needed to round out the image he was trying to create. "All right," he said, "I'll give it a try."

Stepping out on the dock, he explained what had gone before the soliloquy he was about to render and what would take place afterward. Then he raised his arms

"What is a man, If his chief good and market of his time Be but to sleep and feed?

A beast, no more.

Sure, He that made us with such large discourse,

Looking before and after, gave us not

That capability and god-like reason

To fast in us unus'd . . ."

As he spoke, the stars stood out ever more vividly above his head, while their light rained down with ever greater intensity upon the upturned faces of his audience. The air was cool, bracing. One of Golden Grain's three moons had climbed into the sky and hung in the heavens like the eye of a camera.

He felt shackles slip from his wrists, fetters fall from his ankles. The "camera" captured his facsimile and started relaying it toward a hundred million living rooms, and he knew the fulfillment of distribution once again. His words climbed into the sky and spread out among the stars in rich and rounded syllables, hung there for all to hear even after he had finished speaking and there was no sound save the susurrus of the meadow grass beneath the feet of his awed and departing audience. And he stood there all alone, Nicholas Hayes did, the wind from the forest fresh against the words he had uttered as they sped outward into the immensities.

No, not quite alone. Moira had come out on the deck and was standing beside him, and Bar-rag had crept forth from behind the curtain and had curled up at his feet. Hayes was barely aware of either of them. "You were wonderful, Nick," Moira said, "and they knew it, too. They'll never forget, and neither will I."

The spell was broken. "It's getting cold," Hayes said. "Let's go inside."

VI

From One Leg To Stand On they hopped to Dutchman's Breeches, and from Dutchman's Breeches they hopped to Devil Take The Hindmost, and from Devil Take The Hindmost they hopped to A Pocket

Full Of Rye. The turnout in each instance was excellent, and the same enthusiasm that had been accorded them in One Leg To Stand On was accorded them thrice more. At the close of each performance Hayes rendered his soliloquy, and each time received the same rapt attention and the same symbolic fulfillment.

But symbolic fulfillment was not enough. And he knew it. From Golden Grain they proceeded to Acre In The Sky, the fifth planet of the blue star Achemar, where they made one-night stands in Potpourri, Sunrise, Venus Looking-Glass, Hereafter, Winding River and Jack Jump Over The Candlestick. Their stand in Jack Jump Over The Candlestick resulted in the accidental publicity which Hayes had gambled on gaining sooner or later. Mahatma McFadden, a leading correspondent for the IBS Special News Service, had come upon the scene to tape a peasant wedding, Acre In The Sky style, but when he heard about the medicine show and learned that none other than Nicholas Hayes was the medicine man, he taped the *Courtin' Mary Lou* performance, too. He also taped the spiel that preceded it and the soliloquy that followed it.

Hayes played his hand shrewdly. "I'm not sure I'd want that much publicity," he said when Mahatma came hurrying back stage, waving a waiver.

"Give me anything, but don't give me that, Mr. Hayes," Mahatma said. "Who ever heard of an actor who didn't want publicity!"

"I'm not an actor any more. I'm a medicine man." Mahatma guffawed. He was a thin, wiry little man with a hungry face and bright brown eyes. "Medicine smedicine. Once an actor, always an actor, I say. The trouble with you, Mr. Hayes, is you're sore because you got kicked out of the Guild. Sign here, and when they see the tape, they may even let you back in. You never can tell."

"Let me back in because I ran away and became a medicine man?" Hayes laughed a laugh with the precise amount of derision in it necessary to lend it a ring of truth. "Even if they would, I wouldn't consider it."

"All right, then. Look at the situation this way, Mr. Hayes. Eventually this tape will wind up in the out-planets and be played in two-bit theatres and barns—provided you sign the waiver, that is. Now, you want these people to know about you, don't you? You want them to look forward to your coming, don't you? Well, believe me, once they see you on tape, they *will* look forward, and if they happen to have seen you live already, they'll be all the more eager to see you live again. Publicity never hurt anybody, you know."

"I think he's right, Nick," Moira said.

"I know I'm right," Mahatma said.

"H'm'm," Hayes said.

The battle won, Mahatma handed him the waiver and an uncapped jet pen. "Right there, where it says 'signature of originator,' Mr. Hayes."

Two months later when Hayes and Moira and Bar-rag were touring Green Thumb, the tenth planet of the white star Beta Aurigae, Nancy Oakes, girl reporter for the interstellar magazine *Newstar* caught up to them in the little town of Lily of The Valley.

Miss Oakes was asparkle with excitement when she sought Hayes out in the *Dr. Albert Schweitzer* after the performance, and her portable tape-recorder was loaded and ready to go. "Mr. Hayes, you simply *must* let me write you up," she said. "Our readers will simply *devour* your story. Here, let me show you some of the stereophotos I took during your act. They're simply *terrific*."

Hayes looked them over with carefully disciplined curiosity. One of them showed him peddling medicine kits, with Moira standing beside him in her jaguar skin. Another showed him and Moira on the sofa, with Bar-rag between them. A third showed him standing on the starlit dock in the midst of his soliloquy. It was one of the best pictures he had ever had taken.

He handed the stereophotos back. Abruptly Bar-rag materialized on the living-room floor and jumped up on his lap. Miss Oakes gasped. "How in the world did you ever manage to train him like that, Mr. Hayes?"

"It wasn't difficult. He's not an ordinary dog, you see. He's a doggone."

"Really?" Miss Hayes activated the recorder with an unobtrusive flick of her finger. "Tell me what a doggone is, Mr. Hayes. It ought to make simply fascinating copy." Hayes complied. "And now," Miss

Oakes rushed on, "you must fill me in on your past. And Zonda's too, of course. Naturally, I know that you're a guest actor, but I'd like some personal items—things that will tie in with your deciding to become medicine man."

Hayes looked at Moira with feigned helplessness. "Shall we let her do the article?" he asked.

"Of course, Nick."

He faced Miss Oakes again. "Well, I guess we can't fight destiny, can we, Miss Oakes? Start throwing your questions." The issue with the article in it came out two months later, but two more months passed before the copy which the publisher sent Hayes caught up to him. The article began on page 14. He looked at the title: *Nicholas Hayes: the Dr. Schweitzer of the Spaceways*. He read the blurb: *How an exiled thespian has triumphed over alcoholism to bring the blessings of civilization to our neighbors in the sky.*

He threw the magazine into the wastebasket.

The next town they played in was Winter's Breath. At the close of the performance Hayes received a message that a certain party wished to see him in her room at the Winter's Breath Hotel. He walked through woods and over fields, beneath stars he no longer saw, then down a winding street and up dilapidated steps into a tired lobby. The room was number 204. He climbed stairs, turned right down a dingy hall. Leslie met him at the door. "Nick, darling, you're looking wonderful."

He went in and sat down on the nearest chair. She took the chair facing it. "I guess you know I've come to take you back," she said.

He raised his eyes. Her eyes were the same. Pale brown, with flecks of summer sunlight in them. Her hair was night-dark as always, sequined with latent stars that even unimaginative lamplight could elicit. Translucent of V-bodice she sat there, gold of abbreviated skirt. Strutting as always her little hour upon the stage. "Why didn't King come after me himself?"

"Because I asked him to send me. An appropriate gesture, don't you think? Imagine, Nick—we'll have cocktails in Laughter in the Afternoon just the way we used to. We'll go to those cute crummy places we used to eat in after shows. We'll—"

"I'm married," Hayes said.

She laughed. "So what? No one stays married any more. It's passe. In Old York, we've adopted the Muslim custom in such matters. You say 'I divorce you' three times and it's all over."

"Is it?"

She leaned forward. "Don't play noble with me, Nick. I can read between the lines when the lines concern you. I'm not Zonda of the Amazon. I'm Leslie of Laughter in the Afternoon. You didn't become a medicine man to help out-planet peoples. You became a medicine man to help yourself—to attract the favorable attention you needed to get yourself back into the good graces of the Teletheatre Guild and back into the good graces of Christopher King. Most of all, you became a medicine man so you could step before the teletheatre camera and be multiplied by one hundred million once again."

Hayes was looking at the floor. "I assume I'm already reinstated in the Guild. Does King have a part for me?"

"I knew you'd see the light, darling. Of course he has a part. He has *the* part — the part of Milton Pomfret. *The Two-Sided Triangle* is coming up for Encore next month and your understudy's contract runs out before that time. So you're all set, Nicholas dear. I can't say the same for Zonda, of course, since I'm still Mary Lou, besides which I doubt very much if she'd measure up to Chris' standards." Suddenly she giggled. "Tell me, darling, did she really swing on a grapevine in The Last of the Mohicans bar the way is says in the article?"

"Shut up!" Hayes said.

"And that ridiculous little dog with the windmill tail. Where in the world did you find *him*? Honestly, Nick, you're too precious for words!"

Hayes stood up. "You've reserved passage, I suppose."

"On the Great Eastern Express. We rendezvous out of Port-o'-Winds at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. So get a move on, darling. We've very little time."

"I'll be back in an hour," Hayes said, and walked out of the room

And down the hall and down the stairs and out into the street and down the winding street and through woods and across meadows, more field to where the dark pile of the ship showed against the stars ...

Moira was waiting up for him. Bar-rag fast asleep on her lap. Her face told him that she already knew. "You've known all along, haven't you?" he said.

"Don't feel bad, Nick. I wanted you to be reinstated, too." It was late in the day to ask it, but he asked it anyway. "Do *you* feel bad?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going back to New North Dakota, Mars, where I belong."

"I'll hire a pilot to go with you. It's no good piloting a ship alone. The *Schweitzer* ought to bring more than we paid for it if you can find the right buyer."

"I'm glad. Bar-rag and I will watch you."

He looked down at the small gray head and the absurd, tatterdemalion ears. He raised his eyes to Moira's slender throat. A faint pulse beat there. He raised his eyes still further and caught the telltale twinkle of the runaway tear. He stood there, desperately trying to feel. He felt nothing at all except a desire to be gone. "Goodby, Moira," he said, and turned and ran down the spiral stairway and out into the night.

VII

In Old New York it was summer. It was always summer in Old York. He went with Leslie and King to Laughter in the Afternoon and sipped drab coffee while they gaily chatted over cocktails and said Nick this and Nick that, and Oh Nick, how good it is to have you back! He went to *Triangle* to rehearsals and picked up effortlessly where he had left off, and sometimes when he spoke his lines, he thought of starry nights on Green Thumb and Acre In The Sky, and cool winds wafting out of virgin woods and breathing upon the little stage.

He was not surprised when he began to drink again. It had been inevitable all along. He drank for the same reason he had drunk before. Only this time he knew what the reason was. But knowing did not help. What good did it do to know that you were incapable of loving anyone besides yourself if the incapability was incurable?

On Encore night the Teletheatre Bowl overflowed into the square. Encores were traditional, and Old Yorkers treasured traditions above the common sense that would have reminded them, had they listened, that they had already seen the play at least once, either on its teletheatre debut or in one of the various little theatres it had been playing in during the past year. But they did not listen, and came instead like lemmings to drown in a quasi-cultural sea.

"How does it feel to be in action again, medicine man?" Leslie said, as she and Hayes took their places for the first scene. "How does it feel to know that in a few seconds you'll be multiplied by one hundred million and will no longer be alone?"

He did not answer. Would Moira be watching? he wondered. Would Bar-rag? Abruptly he forgot both girl and doggone as the curtain rose and the cameras swung into place. Seated behind his desk, he said to his wife who had stopped off at the office on this sunny Friday afternoon to check up on him, "As you can see, Glenda, my dear, there are no secretaries sitting on my lap, none hidden in the filing cabinets, and none peering fearfully forth at you from behind the coffee-break bar," and the play was off to a smooth start with Leslie, as the suspicious Glenda, telling him that she had not come to count his amanuenses but to remind him that that night they were dining at the Croftons and to suggest that he skip his usual on-the-road cocktail and get home a little early so that for once they could avoid the usual last-minute confusion occasioned by his trying to shave, shower, and dress all at the same time.

At this point, a striking redhead minced into the office and told Hayes-Pomfret that he was wanted in the layout room, whereupon he followed her offstage. Glenda glared after them for a moment, then picked up the phone and put in a call to the face-and-figure specialist and told him what she wanted done, and why. Next, she put in a call to the phoneticist and told *him* what she wanted done, and why.

The following scene showed her as ravishing Mary Lou Johnson, applying for and obtaining a

secretarial job in her husband's office. The plot progressed. Hayes-Pomfret took his new secretary out to lunch. He took her out to dinner. At length he made a date with her and stopped off afterward at her apartment. They sat down side by side on the sofa in her living room. Mary Lou edged closer to him. I'll bet your home was never like this." she said, pouting her lips for the "first" kiss.

"Darling," Hayes-Pomfret said, "if home was like this, I'd never budge from the doorstep."

She moved even closer. "Prove it then."

"I will," Hayes-Pomfret said, and put his arms around her. The doorbell rang. "Darn!" Mary Lou said, and got up and left the room.

Her voice could be heard offstage as she argued loudly with a salesman who was trying to sell her a book called *Why You Should Never Trust Your Husband*. To get rid of the man she had to take the stand that all husbands *were* trustworthy and that therefore the book was a big lie. The interruption lasted a little over five minutes, during which time Hayes-Pomfret paced back and forth on the stage doing a humorous pantomime of a conscience-stricken husband trying vainly to free himself from the grip of an impatient lover. Upon Mary Lou's return, he resumed his seat on the sofa and she sat back down beside him.

"Darn old salesmen!" she said. "It's getting so people can't have *any* privacy any more!"

Hayes-Pomfret started to put his arm around her. Abruptly she screamed and leaped to her feet.

Hayes stared at the small object that had materialized beside him. He could not move.

The object had hair the hue of morning mists. Its tatterdemalion ears brought bar-rags to mind, and its glazed, protruding eyes lingered a hint of the gold that had once shone forth in love and adoration. Frozen blood flaked the once-roguish mouth, and the white-tufted tail was silent. The small star in the middle of the forehead shone no more.

He picked the little body up and cradled it in his arms. For a moment, he could not see.

"Shove it under the sofa quick!" Leslie, who had sat back down beside him, whispered. "Get on with your lines!"

Hayes hardly heard her. "Why, Bar-rag?" he said. "Why did you do it? You knew it was a cliff—why did you jump over it? It was forty million miles high, Bar-rag. Forty million miles!"

"Nick, for God's sake!" Leslie said. "Get rid of that horrible thing and get on with your lines!"

Still cradling Bar-rag in his arms, Hayes stood up. The bowl was filled with a vast whispering; ten thousand faces shimmered in the mist before his eyes. He walked away from Leslie. He walked away from himself. He died one hundred million deaths.

In the dressing-room corridor, King caught up to him. "Nick, come back! We can still save the show. Some stagehand pulled a dirty trick—that's all."

Hayes did not pause.

"Nick, you walk out that door, you'll never walk back in it again! I swear."

Hayes kept on walking.

Outside, it wasn't so bad. Outside, he could see Mars. Almost at perigee, it hung like an orange streetlight in the sky. He saw the red plains through his tears. He saw the steepled matchbox of the little church. He saw the rambling ocher hills. His gaze came back and rested on the little body cradled in his arms. Forty million miles, he thought. *Forty million miles!*

The house was a gentle pile of wood and windows in the starlight. Moira met him at the door. "Nick, I hoped, I prayed you'd come!"

"Were you with him when—when he—"

She nodded. "He was sitting at my feet. A second after you said 'darling,' he disappeared. At first I didn't understand what had happened. I never dreamed he'd recognize you on teletheatre. Then, several minutes later, he appeared on the screen, and—and I knew."

"I buried him in space," Hayes said. "Out among the stars. He belongs there, Bar-rag does. He was a star himself."

"Come into the living room, Nick. There's something I want to show you."

They walked down the hall. "The ship," Hayes said. "Did you sell it yet?"

"No—it's still at Port-o'-Sands. Mom and Dad just went to bed—shall I wake them so you can say

hello?"

"No. I'm going to be here for some time—if you'll put up with me."

In the living room, she knelt beside a small basket that stood by the fireplace. He knelt beside her. He saw the tiny tatterdemalion ears first, then the small mist-gray body and the little white-tufted tail. A pair of slanted golden eyes returned his astonished gaze, and above them on the forehead shone a little star. "Bar-rag!" he gasped.

"I told you they were parthenogenetic. He—she gave birth to him a week before she died."

Hayes tweaked one of the tatterdemalion ears, "Well, what do you know!" he said.

He straightened, and pulled Moira to her feet. Over her shoulder he saw the platinum figurine of Maurice Evans standing on the mantel. Yes, she had sold it all right. Sold it to herself. He looked into her eyes. He would have fallen in love with her long ago if love had not been beyond him. It was beyond him no longer. "We'll begin all over, Moira—if you'll do me the honor of being my leading lady again. We'll restock the ship and we'll go to all the places we didn't get to before. We'll go to Morning Glory and Far Reach and Lode—"

"And Meadow Flower and Forty-Niner and Frontier—"

"And when we complete our circuit, we'll go back to Black Dirt—"

"And go on from there to Golden Grain—"

"And Goshen—"

"And Acre In The Sky ..."

She was in his arms now, and he was kissing her. In Old York, it was summer. It was always summer in Old York. But in New North Dakota, Mars, it was spring.