

Not often does a science-fiction writer essay a love story. This is, in many ways, a love story. Of a man for a son, of a man for a woman, of a man for lost worlds and space and time. And of a woman's love for courage.

The HoneyEarthers by
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And Absalom rode upon a mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great oak, and his head caught hold of the oak, and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth;. and the mule that was under him went away.

—2 Samuel 18:9

THE kid thrilled as the first ice-grapnel hurtled forth from the *Ganymede's* belly gun and sank its giant fingers into the orbiting floe. The other members of the grapnel crew stood by indifferently, their faces stolid behind the visi-visors of their helmets; but the kid was only fifteen and this was his first trip to the rings, and for him there was magic in every moment of the day and night.

The floe gave a slight shudder when the belly-gun crew tautened the grapnel cable, but it did not deviate from its orbit. The ring floes ranged in size from the dimensions of a medium-sized mountain. This one was as large as a hill—as large, in fact, as the great green hill that rose beyond the junior citizen's home that the kid had run away from before lying about his age and getting a job as an apprentice grapnelman with one of the waterlanes companies. Unlike the orphanage hill, however, the floe wasn't green. It was gray.

The *Ganymede's* belly gun spoke again, and a second grapnel leaped through the glinting mist of ice particles that fringed the rings, and found the floe. Again, the floe shuddered when the cable slack was taken up; again, it remained true to its orbit. Beyond it, and before and behind and "below" and "above" it—and as far as the eye could see—other floes marched in the awesome orbital parade that had brought Saturn fame and Earthmen fortunes.

A third grapnel found its mark. A fourth and a fifth and a sixth. Now the time had come for the grapnel crew to go into action. The kid checked his knee-crampons, made certain that his ice-hook was within easy reach of his left hand. In his bulky spacesuit he felt as big and as capable as the other members of the crew. With them, he descended the six steel ladders that ran down the floe freighter's hull to the cable apertures, and with them he started crawling out over the cables toward the floe. His grapnel was no. 4. When he reached it he removed his ice-hook from his belt, took a bite with it, and dug his knee-crampons into the ice. Then he began stringing the reinforcing lines that were attached to the grapnel's "wrist". There were three of them altogether, and the object was to spread them out and secure their ends to the side of the floe that faced away from the freighter.

SATURN's massive bulk occulted the sun, but there was plenty of starlight to see by. The kid worked industriously, determined to prove that he was as fast as the next man. He got one line strung out, and secured it by means of the self-driving piton at its end. He got the second line into place, went back for the third. Stringing it, he looked around at the other grapnelmen. To his chagrin, he saw that their lines were already in place and that they were cramponing back toward the cables.

Angrily, he activated the final piton, and started cramponing "over the hill" himself. He'd show them! He'd—

He must have taken too big a bite with his ice-hook. He could not get his right knee far enough in under him to sink its crampon. Furious with himself, he gripped the underpart of the leg with his right hand

and added the strength of his biceps to the strength of his rectus femoris. It was the worst thing he could have done, and if he had been thinking clearly he would have known it. His left crampon broke free, and both knees went out from in under him and he was left clinging to his ice-hook with one hand.

He supplemented his hold with his other hand; then, to his horror, he felt the hook pull free. A moment later, he was drifting in space a few feet from the surface of the floe.

The feet might just as well have been miles. "May-day! May-day!" he shouted into his helmet transmitter. "Acknowledge! Acknowledge!"

Silence.

He shouted the words again. And again and again. Each time, the silence grew louder. Abruptly he remembered that all during the stringing operation the scattered small talk that usually went on among the older grapnelmen had been absent from his ears, and simultaneously he remembered he hadn't checked his helmet radio for days.

Well, he'd just have to wait till the rest of the crew missed him and came back for him—that was all. But suppose they didn't miss him soon enough? Suppose they didn't notice his absence until after the floe had been taken on board and dropped into the vat? Although he no longer had contact with the floe, he was a prisoner of its mass, and wherever the floe went, he would go too. And the floe was going into the *Ganymede's* vat. And the temperature of the *Ganymede's* vat during grapneling operations was maintained at an even 300 degrees.

The kid was only fifteen years old and this was his first trip to the rings and this was the first time he had ever looked upon the face of death. He did the only thing he could do under the circumstances—he panicked. And when the slow turning of his body brought his feet in line with the surface of the floe, he doubled up his legs and thrust out with them with all his might. His feet struck the floe solidly, and the resultant impetus sent him drifting into the rings.

How deep into the rings he went before he managed to sink his ice-hook into another floe, he did not know. But he knew that thanks to his impulsive action it was now next to impossible for the crew of the *Ganymede* to find him; that once they discovered he was no longer on the original floe, they probably wouldn't even try to find him. Such a search would be both impractical and time-consuming, and he was nothing but a homeless kid whom no one would miss anyway.

He dug his crampons into the floe and clung tightly to the ice-hook with both hands. Space-fright seized him and shook him till his brain seemed to implode; till the sound of his own screams caused him to go temporarily deaf. He closed his eyes, still screaming, still clinging to the glinting surface of the floe. Nothingness broke around him in great dark waves, and churned and swirled and eddied; and then, suddenly, the nothingness gave way to awareness, and he remembered where he was.

When he opened his eyes he saw that the floe wasn't as deep in the rings as he had thought. Then he saw the ship. He had known then that he wasn't going to die after all, but what he had not known was that part of him was already dead.

I

WHEN Aaron Price stepped from the lift onto the mobile boarding platform, she was standing among the HoneyEarthers, waiting for him. But she was not a HoneyEarther, nor was he. And yet he loved her. Loved her the way robins love spring rains, the way gulls love uplifting autumn winds, the way meadowlarks love the morning sun. For to him, Fleurette was all of these things—and many more.

She was carrying a small overnight bag that matched the blueness of her coat, and her willowy legs were like the stems of flowers. Behind her, the HoneyEarth Express pointed like a stubby finger toward the star-clad sky. Carrying his own overnight bag, he went over to her and said, softly so that he would not be overheard, "I'm glad you came. I wouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't."

"But I'd have blamed myself."

"It'll be all right. We'll have to take one of their famous double rooms, of course there aren't any others available. But I'll give you the golden key, and it'll be the same as staying in any other hostel."

"When did he run away?" she asked. "You didn't tell me over the phone."

"Last night."

"And you don't think he'll ever come back?"

Price shook his head. "I know he won't. He can't."

Her gray eyes misted, and she turned away. But not before he glimpsed the single tear that rolled starlike down her gentle cheek. The girlish lines of her nose and chin came through his sadness and touched his heart, and he found it hard to believe that she was nearing thirty. He rejoiced in the luster of her upswept dark-brown hair. Then he saw the faint bruise on her temple, and suddenly he wanted to cry and simultaneously he wanted to kill; but it was too late for crying, and he had already numbered the days of his life on the fingers of his hand.

He became aware that the HoneyEarthers were staring at him—the HoneyEarthers from Earth, and the HoneyEarthers from Croewl and Fargastar and remote Guanlago who were sojourning on Earth and who, in a chronological sense, were as incongruous as he was. Well let them stare, he thought. Stares weren't stones, and men with partners young enough to be their daughters were no new thing under the sun.

The locks of the HoneyEarth Express swung wide, and a voluptuous "moonmaid" stepped into the glare of the gantry lights. "Loveflight 6235-B," she announced in crooning tones. "Departure time, 1900 hours; arrival time, 0102 hours. All aboard, you lucky lovers you!"

With her bare legs and her half-bare breasts, she reminded Price of the fun girls who walked the arcades of the lower cities. Why was it that society leered at HoneyEarthers? Why was it that HoneyEarth hostels like the Earthlight Inn deliberately discolored their services with excessive overtones of sex? Why was it that people were so eager to reduce love to the dimensions of a dirty joke and so reluctant to accord it its proper place in the sun?

CONFETTI-like synthi-rice was drifting down from an overhead dispenser as he handed the moonmaid the two tickets he had bought that afternoon. He was careful not to meet her eyes, for he knew all too well the calculating look she was giving his spaceburned aging face and the concomitant look she was giving Fleurette's young loveliness. In the ship, he followed Fleurette up the spiral stairway to the third level where their reserved seat was. It was more like a lounge than a seat, and the compartment contained three others just like it. After removing their coats and sitting down, they buckled their acceleration belts in place and looked through the portscope at the distant lights of Greater Boston. Presently Fleurette turned and faced him. "Poor Aron *pere*," he said softly. "He hurt you as much as he did me, didn't he."

Price nodded. "I'll never forgive him for what he did—never."

"But you *have* to forgive him. Ronny's your son."

"I can't forgive him. And when I've said what I have to say, you'll understand why."

"Then say it, Aron *pere*."

"I can't—not now. Not without a drink to see me through. I'll say it over starwine on the moon—that way, it won't be so bad."

"Is that why you're taking me to such an exotic place?"

"No," Price said. "I'm taking you there because Ronny should have and never did. And because I don't relish the publicity that always accompanies a tax scandal, and the moon is one of the last places in the cosmos the fax-ferrets will expect me to show my face."

She lowered her gaze to her hands. They lay upon her lap, as gentle as the first flowers of spring. At length, she said, "Did he put his divorce declaration through before he left?"

"He didn't have time. But I have it on my desk and I can put it through if you want me to. However, I'd advise you against it. If you remain his wife, his share of the company will automatically become yours

when he fails to return within ten years."

"You talk as though he's already left Earth."

He has," Price said. "This morning, he shipped on one of the company freighters as an ordinary spaceman. It was the only way he could elude the troopers. I'm sorry, Fleurette,"

She looked through the port-scope at the distant lights. Her shoulders shook for a moment, then grew still. He wanted to put his arm around them, but did not dare. Her eyes, reflected in the portscope, met his, and she must have seen his anguish, for she said, "It's all right, Aaron *pere*. I'm not going to cry. In a moment I'll be myself again, and then I'll turn around and everything will be the way it was before."

No, Fleurette, he wanted to say, but didn't, everything will not be the way it was before. The moving finger, having written, has moved on . . .

The three other seats in the compartment had been taken—two of them by couples from Guanlago and Fargastar and the third by a couple from Earth—and presently the moonmaid came mincing up the spiral stairway and then hack down it again, crooning the countdown as she checked to see whether all the acceleration belts were buckled. She winked at Price. "Twenty-five, you lucky lover you," she crooned. "Twenty-four, twenty-three, twenty-two . . ."

Price felt sick. Did his feelings for Fleurette lay naked in his eyes for the whole wide world to see? It would seem that way. There was no denying that the moonmaid had seen them, and apparently his son had known they were there all along.

Ronny's cutting words of the night before came back and slashed his thoughts, and he drove them into the dark corners of his mind. But they came scurrying out of the shadows the minute he turned his back, and despite all he could do to stop it the ugly scene that had spawned them began building up around him once again.

Blast-off was almost a relief. He had grown his space wings decades ago, but g-buildup was still enough to drive everything from his mind. Fleurette was still a fledgling, and when break-free finally came the lips that usually made him think of red raspberries were only a shade less gray than her face. After the gray unit went on, he rubbed her wrists till color came back into her cheeks and until her lips turned raspberry-red again, "It's all over now," he said. "Now we can sit back and enjoy the ride."

She turned toward the port-scope, gasped when she saw the stars. "They're beautiful out here, aren't they!"

He pointed. "That orange one over there is Aldebaran. That blue one's Achernar. Do you see those drops of light that look like drops of dew? They're the Pleiades . . ."

But only his eyes were on the stars. His thoughts were back on Earth.

II

THE lift had taken him to the 124th floor of the Peregrine White Building and opened its door on the first level of the luxurious quadruplex that Ronny had leased after walking out on Fleurette. He ran a gantlet of mechmaids and robotlers and let himself into his son's study and closed the door behind him. Ronny was sitting behind a chrome-topped desk, talking into a tape-typer. If he was surprised to see Price, he did not show it. He pointed to a chair beside the desk. "Sit down, dad."

Price walked across the room, but he did not sit down. He stood before the desk and looked across its gleaming surface at his son. Despite its lack of spaceburn, the face before him bore a strong resemblance to the face he saw each morning in the mirror when he shaved. But he found it impossible to find himself in those blue and barren eyes, found it impossible to understand how people could still look at Ronny and exclaim, "You look *so* much like your father!"

The blue eyes held their ground, but there was a telltale quivering in the right eyelid. "I suppose you're angry with me, dad."

Price shook his head. "Not with you. With myself."

"For what? For growing old? Everybody grows old."

"And the older they grow, the more incompetent they become."

"I didn't retire you because I thought you were incompetent. You know better than that. I retired you

because in another year you'll be fifty and would have had to retire anyway."

"I know," Price said. "The old have to move on to make place for the young. That's why I stepped aside two years ago and gave you the presidency of the company. But I never thought you'd retire me from the vice presidency behind my back. I thought you'd at least take the trouble to consult me."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"It's all right—forget about it. That's not the real reason I'm here. The real reason is Fleurette."

Ronny flushed. "I'm through with Fleurette, and you know it. So if that's why you came you can leave right now."

Price leaned forward and gripped the edge of the desk with his hand. "I didn't turn *all* my stock over to you, in case you've forgotten, and I still have a certain amount of prestige. I don't know how you talked the other stockholders into voting me out today, but I'll bet I can talk them into voting you out tomorrow just as easily. And I'll do it Ronny, so help me I will, if you declare a divorce against Fleurette!"

THE residue of boyhood that remained in Ronny's eyes departed. He stood up. "Go ahead then, old man! Talk them into it if you can. The declaration's all drawn up, and whether you succeed or not I'm putting it through in the morning!"

"It's she who should divorce you!" Price said. "And if the law read the way it used to, you'd get a divorce no other way. *You're* the adulterer—not her!"

For some time Ronny stood motionless. Then a slow trembling seemed to go through him, and he stepped back from the desk. His smile was as cold and foreboding as the ice floes of Saturn. "Am I now, old man?"

"Yes!" Price shouted. "Ten times, twenty times over. Do you think I don't know it? Do you think *she* doesn't know it? We've known it all along! But we thought you'd change. We never dreamed that associating with wantons would make you want to marry one—make it impossible for you to live with a decent girl."

"I should think you'd want me to declare a divorce, old man."

This time, it was Price who stepped back from the desk, "*Want* you to? That doesn't even make sense."

"Doesn't it, old man? I think it makes a lot of sense. I've got eyes, too. I've seen the way you look at her. Why old man, you've been in love with her for years. Do you remember that time we were staying at your chalet in Colorado? Do you remember how you went on one of those rare binges of yours and danced with her all one evening? Do you remember how I came out on the patio and saw the two of you standing in the moonlight? You were looking at her like a love-sick schoolboy! If I hadn't already guessed the truth, I'd have guessed it then. Not guessed it—known it. Some father you turned out to be!"

Price felt himself sway, and he took a wider stance to keep from falling. He knew that his face was gray—gray even through the spaceburn with which the stars had darkened it . . . The stars and the years and the loneliness came back to him, and the loneliness rose up in him and cried, *Why didn't you let them, go, Aaron Price? Why did you try to get them, back? Why didn't you leave well enough alone and make the best of what you had left to spend?*

Ronny was speaking again. Through the years and across the distances, Price heard his words: "So you see, old man, you'd only be working against yourself if you tried to get me voted out to stop me from divorcing Fleurette. In your heart, you want me to divorce her, and you know it."

"No," Price said weakly, "it's not that way at all. I want you to have her. To love her the way she loves you. That's all I've ever wanted. For you to have her and to love her forever—even though I've known all along that it could never be."

Sadly, he turned away and started walking toward the door. But the accumulated slings and arrows of the years had yet to exhaust themselves, and just before he reached the door, it opened, and brown-uniformed troopers carrying arachnid guns and wearing brassards with the letters IRS stamped on

them stormed into the room.

IRS troopers were called in only when Grand Evasion was involved. Shocked, Price faced his son. "It must be a mistake, Ronny. Tell them it's a mistake!"

But it wasn't a mistake. Ronny's face said so, and his actions shouted the fact. He ran for the study window and threw the sash switch. One of the arachnid guns spat its web, and he eluded the filamentous fingers as he climbed up on the sill. Price saw then that he was wearing an anti-gray vest. That was all he saw. One of the troopers knocked him down, and when he regained his feet Ronny was gone.

III

THE Guanlagoan couple were making love. No one would have known it, though—no one except someone who had been to Guanlago.

Aaron Price had been to Guanlago. He had lived on Guanlago for more than two years.

He turned sideways on the lounge-seat, shutting off Fleurette's view. He knew that there was no need for him to, but the protective instinct that she aroused in him was forever making him do needless and quixotic things. One way or another, he had been trying to protect her ever since Ronny had brought her home.

That had been ten years ago. Ten years . . . It didn't seem like ten years. It seemed like yesterday. Fleurette said, "You're awfully quiet, Aaron *pere*."

"I know. The world is too much with me, I guess—even though we've left it behind . . . Have you made any plans, Fleurette? About what you're going to do, I mean."

"No. I—I have no plans at all."

"If I put the divorce through, the annuity Ronny had to set up for you in order to get the declaration drawn up would be more than enough to take care of you. But as I said, it'll be better not to, because if you remain married to him you'll automatically acquire his share in the company in ten years' time . . . Of course, there isn't really any problem with respect to your support, because I—"

"Yes?"

The near slip-of-the-tongue made him furious with himself. Naturally there wasn't any problem! How could there be when she was going to inherit everything he owned in a matter of a few days? "Because I can get you a good job with the company as soon as we get back to Earth," he extemporized, "and you can go right on enjoying the same standard of living you're accustomed to."

"But won't I be liable for Ronny's tax deficit? Won't they—"

Price shook his head. "I've taken the necessary steps to make up the deficit myself. They won't touch you."

"Then there wasn't really any need for him to run away! Oh Aaron, why did he?"

"Because he would have had to stand trial whether the deficit was made up or not and he'd have gotten a ten-to-fifteen year sentence." Price sighed. "But he'd have run away anyway. It was in the books for him to run away. He could no more have stopped running away than the sun could stop coming up in the morning."

"I—I don't understand."

IT'S funny," Price went on, "how a person can know something is *going* to happen—that it's bound to happen—and still manage to go on pretending that it won't. How he can convince himself so completely that he's actually surprised when it does happen. That was the way it was with me. I knew that when the day came Ronny would leave and that there would be a bona fide reason for his doing so. And I knew that there would be nothing I could do to stop him. I even knew approximately what day he would leave, and yet I was able to go on living as though that day would never come to pass. I didn't even recognize it when it came. I didn't want to recognize it, you see—and then, too, there was always the possibility that the pattern might change. As though it could: In a way, it was like your marriage, Fleurette. I knew that it wasn't working out, but I wouldn't recognize the fact. I refused to. And when

heard that Ronny was declaring a divorce, I was shocked!"

She turned away, gazed through the portscope at the slow drifting of the stars. "I was, too," she said. "I wouldn't face the truth either. Not even when he left me,"

Impulsively, Price said. "You shouldn't have loved him so much. He isn't worth it. He isn't fit to buckle your shoes!"

She whirled so quickly that particles of starlight lingered in her eyes. "Don't say that. Aaron *pere*—don't ever dare say it again! He's your son, and I love him. I've always loved him and I always will!"

Helplessness gripped him, made him want to cry out in unendurable pain. Miserably, he looked beyond Fleurette's lovely head to where the Pleiades lay upon the face of space like fresh-shed tears. "All right," he said at last, "I'll never say it again."

After that, they were silent for a long time. Now and then, the ship creaked as it sped on lunar trajectory. The couple from Earth gave birth to sporadic giggles, and a sad sweet susurrus came from the couple from Fargastar. The Guniagoans were still.

At length, Price said, "Soon, we'll see the moon."

It edged slowly into sight, half in darkness, half in light. At this distance, the craters and the "seas" had a pale gold cast, but before long they would take on a tinge of silver. Fleurette gasped with delight, and leaned closer to the portscope, and he saw the reflection of her face in the glass. The eyes were wide now, like a child's, and her sense of wonder had brought an added fullness to her cheeks. It was the same face he had seen the night his son had brought her home all those wary years ago.

"Over there," he said, pointing, "you'll see the Leibnitz Mountains. They're just beyond the twilight belt. The Earthlight Inn stands at their feet,"

"Where? I can see the Mountains, but I can't see the Inn,"

He laughed. "Of course you can't, *jeune fine*. We're much too far away. But when we orbit in you'll be able to if you look real hard. Although it won't really be the Inn you'll see, but the gleam of Earthlight on its dome. The pleasure-dome, it's called."

HER face was so close to the portscope now that her nose was pressed against the glass. *Dad*, a voice cried in his mind, *Dad, dad!*

"A pleasure-dome," she said. "Why, it's a little like *Kubla Khan*." Suddenly, she turned and faced him. "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree." "where Alph, the sacred river, ran through caverns measureless to man down to a sunless sea!"

Her gray eyes were enormous, her lips more than ever reminiscent of the wild raspberries he had gathered as a boy. *Dad, dad!* the voice cried again. *Wait'll you see, dad—wait'll you see!* "I'm afraid there aren't any rivers on the moon," he said, "Not even subterranean ones,"

"Well I don't care!" She turned back toward the portscope. "Rivers or not, the moon puts Xanadu to shame!"

Dad! Dad!

"I've heard it said," he went on desperately, "that in twelve years' time the Inn has paid for itself twelve times over. But I'm inclined to doubt it."

*Dad Dad! Wait'll you see—*He gave up then, and let the moment come through.

* * *

"—my wife! Wait'll you see her, dad!"

Price Past rotated his fireside chair and got to his feet. The library door had opened, and Ronny was standing on the threshold. "Wait'll you see her, dad!"

Wife? . . . The word cart-wheeled and somersaulted about his mind, eluding his bewildered attempts to capture it. He was sure it wasn't the right word anyway, It *couldn't* be. Why, the boy was only nineteen! He had not even finished college yet. And what was he doing *home* from college? Surely, he hadn't gone out and—and—

A girl stepped into the room. She had dark-brown hair. She was tall and slender. She had gray eyes and a round full face. The girlish dress she was wearing began below her shoulders, and the firelight had already fallen in love with her smooth clear skin. Meadow flowers grew around her, and her mouth had the redness of the wild raspberries that grew in the fields of his youth. Spring resided in the dew-brightness of her eyes; her cheeks held the hue of frost-kissed leaves. Spring, summer, fall and finally winter in the snow-whiteness of her hands.

"This is Fleurette, dad. She's an exchange student from New France, and we met at school. Fleurette, this is my father,"

She came like a summer Wind across the room and kissed him, and he knew the fields once again: the fields and the woods and the warm summer sun, and the red and succulent berries that had stained his lips and filled his mouth with sweetness. "Aaron *pere*," she said, looking up into his eyes. "I will call you that—okay?"

He must have nodded, for she went on, "And Aaron Junior—I will call him Aaron *fils*. That way, there will never be confusion in the house of Price."

"But dad calls me Ronny for the very same reason," Ronny objected. "You'll be creating the very confusion you're trying to eliminate."

She faced him. "And I will also call you Ronny—when I get to know you better. But you—" and she turned back to Price—"I will always call Aaron *pere*."

"Why?" Price asked.

"Because I am French and like people to know it, and when I learn to speak your language better they will forget unless I remind them. It will be difficult to call you *pere*, though. You seem so young."

"To someone as young as you, I should seem as old as Methuselah."

"Methuselah, indeed! With such brisk blue eyes and such dark-gold tan, you could never seem old to anyone!"

Ronny said, "That's spaceburn. Dad used to be a spacer, and spaceburn never fades."

The gray eyes grew large.

"You have been all the way up to the stars? To the Other Planets?"

Price nodded. "To Fargastar and Guanlago. And oh yes—to Alphagagar, too. But aren't we straying too far afield from the subject on hand?" He looked at Ronny. "Why didn't you let me know you were getting married?"

"We made up our minds in a hurry. And I guess we were afraid somebody would try to stop us."

"Fleurette's parents?"

"She hasn't any. She's an orphan. I guess it was you we were afraid of."

"You had good reason to be. You still have. I can get the marriage annulled in two hours' time."

Fleurette stepped close to him and gazed up into his face. "But you would not dare do such a disastrous thing. Aaron *pere*! I am the girl for him, and you know it. Look into my eyes and tell me that I am not."

He didn't need to look. All he needed to do was to listen to his heart. He went over to the liquor cabinet and got a bottle of brandy. He poured three glasses, handed one to his son and one to his daughter-in-law. He raised his own. "To you, *jeune file*," he said to Fleurette. "To you, Ronny," he said to his son. "Many happy returns of the day."

IV

THE HoneyEarth Express came down on an Earthbeam and settled to rest on the great plain that spread out from the ragged foothills of the Leibnitz Mountains.

In the immediate foreground, the huge dome of the Earthlight Inn contrasted jarringly with the awry rock-formations of the foothills. Fronting the Inn proper were three smaller domes. The foremost was the landing-area dome, and from it a long enclosed ramp led to the two others, one of which housed the air-locks and the other, of which housed the power-room. From the air-locks a larger enclosed ramp led

to the ground floor of the Inn.

Earth was almost at the full, and her rich light had painted domes and plain and foothills in pale and dream-like grays. The stars lay like twinkling drops of morning dew on the black uprising fields of space. Moments after the ship landed, a big bus-cat came out of the landing-area dome, rolled across the intervening distance, and connected itself to the locks with a collapsible gang-tube. The locks opened then, and the HoneyEarthers filed down the tube and into the cat, and the cat recollapsed the tube and rolled back to the dome. Thence, it rolled up the ramp to the air-locks, passed through them, and discharged its passengers.

The lobby extended throughout the entire ground floor of the Inn, and it was as varied as it was huge. There were souvenir stands where you could buy love charms that came from all over the civilized sector of the galaxy. There was a gleaming automat where you could dial any dish under the seventeen suns. There was a small 3DT theatre where you attend a continuous performance of the latest histori-hit play, *Richard and Elizabeth*. There was a chrome-topped autobar at which you could sit on contour stools and drink from diapason steins that sang songs to suit your every mood. There was an electronic bowling alley where you could bowl 300 simply by regulating a dial. And lastly there was the long, altar-like counter where you signed your name in the famous HoneyEarth book and received your golden key.

PPRICE proceeded directly to the counter, Fleurette walking at his side. The clerk was a mech-man, but the smile he wore seemed sincere enough, and the hospitality that radiated from his synthi-face was all the more pleasant for its tangibility. He accepted Price's money with a polite bow, opened the big register, and Price wrote *Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Price, Earth* on the artificially yellowed page. He was in full command of himself now, and when the clerk handed him the gold-plated key that opened the door that connected his room to Fleurette's and that was supposed to remain in his possession during the HoneyEarth and to be retained by her as a keepsake afterward, he accepted it with the precise degree of tremulousness that Terran society—and meth-men, who were geared to the Terran *Zeitgeist* and who were triggered to sound an alarm at the first sign of atypical behavior—expected in a new Terran husband on his Honey-Earth night.

In the lift that carried them aloft to the HoneyEarth rooms, he handed the key to Fleurette. She accepted it without a word and dropped it into her purse. As they were stepping from the lift into the fifth-floor corridor, a soft voice spoke to them from a hidden speaker. "There's to be entertainment in the Earthlight Room half an hour from now, you Two," it said. "The management cordially invites you to be there."

"We *are* going to be there, aren't we?" Price asked.

"Of course, Aaron *pere*. But first I must freshen up."

Their HoneyEarth Nest—the Inn advertisements never referred to the highly publicized double rooms by any other term—had all the conveniences of home, and then some. At least his half of it did—he didn't enter hers. There were hidden lights that adapted the hue and the intensity of their radiance to your mood. There was a chair to sit on, a chair to recline on, and a chair that turned into a bed. There was a round table that served you coffee and sandwiches and salads. There was a square table that functioned as a checkerboard, a chessboard, a parchesi board, and a ouija board. There was a small 3DT screen on which you could view authentic portrayals of the meetings of David and Bathsheba, Solomon and Sheba, Paris and Helen, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Launcelot and Guinevere, Tristram and Isolde, Dante and Beatrice, Stendhal and Mathilde, Robert and Elizabeth, Richard and Elizabeth, and Entharkane and Guilla. There was a small bar with two flower-like stools in front of it, one of them labeled HERS, the other labeled HIS. And there was an adjoining bath where precious water from the rings fell like summer rain.

Showering, Price thought of space and stars and Fleurette. He dreaded the ordeal that lay before him, and yet in a way he looked forward to it He deserved to suffer for what he had done. He wanted to suffer. But the point was, why should Fleurette have to suffer also?

Hadn't she suffered enough?

The memory of Ronny's philandering made him wince. But it wasn't the boy's philandering that had awakened his hatred. It was the first bruise he had seen on Fleurette's gentle face.

RONNY had laughed when he had accused him. Laughed and lied. And Price had believed him. At first. And then, months later, he had seen the second bruise. When Ronny had laughed and lied again, Price had nearly killed him. After that, he had seen no more bruises—

Until tonight.

Probably she had tried to stop Ronny from walking out on her. That would have provided him with enough provocation to strike her. Lord knew he would not have needed very much.

On the surface, it didn't make sense. At first, Ronny had been happy with his lovely young wife. They had finished college together, and Price had set them up in a swank triplex and taken the boy into the company. He expected to find in him the same ambition he had found in himself, and he found it, too; but unlike his own ambition, Ronny's wasn't tempered by integrity or common decency. It wasn't tempered by anything at all. And the same could be said for his other natural inclinations. As soon as he hit his stride, he began to lie, to cheat; to chase. And he had been lying and cheating and chasing ever since.

Underneath the surface, however, Ronny's conduct made a kind of sense. He had had a silver spoon thrust into his mouth when he was too old for silver spoons. Human as well as concrete structures require foundations, and Ronny had had none. He had had to build on sand, and inevitably his house had gone awry and come tumbling down around him.

Shaving, Price regarded the reflection of his spaceburned face. "Why didn't you leave the years alone?" he said aloud. "All men lose their youths at one time and in one way or another. Wise men forget about the loss—only fools try to redeem it."

But perhaps he couldn't have left the years alone even if he had wanted to. Perhaps, in the final analysis, man's free will was a part of the price he had had to pay for the stars.

IT was after 0200 hours when they went down to the Earthlight Room. Fleurette gasped when they stepped out of the lift. Even Price was impressed.

The "room" took up one third of the dome's interior. The entire rear wall was given over to tiers of balconies, which were reached by tendril-like steel stairways. Opposite the balconies, a huge view-window looked out upon the plain and the ragged Leibnitz foothills, and framed in the window—centered in it, almost—was Earth. Blue-green and beautiful, clad in a lacy negligee of clouds, she rained down her pale and dreamlike radiance, and the soft gray light lay upon the moonscape and filled the room, giving the effect of a three-dimensional painting done in chiaroscuro.

The floor was on three levels. The lowest level constituted the dance floor. Tables ringed it, and it was separated from the intermediate level by a low wall. On the intermediate level, tables stood along the base of the view-window, and this arrangement was repeated on the third level. Most of the tables were occupied, some by the couples, both Terran and alien, who had arrived on the last Express, and others by first and second HoneyEarthers who had come in earlier. A quartet of spotlights on the lofty ceiling of the dome created a little lake of brightness in the center of the dance floor, and in the brightness an itinerant ballet troupe was performing an ultra modern version of Stravinski's *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

Price chose a table on the third level that was close enough to the dance floor to afford a good view of the performance and far enough away from the nearest loud speaker to keep the taped music deep in the background. They ordered starwine when the mech-waiter came, and after it arrived in iridescent glasses they sipped it looking into each others' eyes. By Earthlight, Fleurette was even lovelier than she had been on that long-ago night in the light of the Colorado moon. Her décolleté gown left her shoulders bare, affording an ideal playground for Earthbeams, and chiaroscuro heightened, even while it softened, the poignant beauty of her face. "I never told you before," he said, "and perhaps I shouldn't be telling you now. But when Ronny brought you home and said you were his wife, I think I was as happy about it as he was."

"I know," she said. "I knew the minute I kissed you."

What else did she know? Price wondered. He had betrayed his feelings to Ronny. Had he betrayed them to her, too? He did not think he had. "Did Ronny ever tell you how I found him?" he asked.

She nodded. "Lots of times. When we were first married, it was all he used to talk about. About how brave you were. About—about how you'd lost your hand saving his life. Why did you adopt him, Aaron *pere*?"

"Because I loved him." Once, the admission would have embarrassed Price, but he was less sensitive to the shortcomings of the human race than he used to be, and to a considerable extent he had resigned himself to being a member of it—and part and parcel of its weaknesses—some time ago. "I loved him and wanted to do everything I could for him.

And he was so helpless. He was like a baby, almost. No memory—no identification even. He'd left his I.D. tags on the ship. He said there wasn't a ship, but I knew better. The minute I saw him, I wanted him to have everything I'd always wanted and never had the chance to get. And so I set about trying to destroy him,"

"Through love?"

"No. Through selfishness. I wanted to live through him. People always act out of selfishness—don't you know that by this time, *jeune fille*?"

"Don't try to pass yourself off as an egotistic hedonist on me, Aaron *pere*! I know better. An egotistic hedonist wouldn't sacrifice his hand to save someone else's life."

"Of course he wouldn't, But in a way that's beside the point. I didn't sacrifice my hand—I lost it accidentally. And if I'd known I was going to lose it, I'd probably have let the kid stay where he was."

"I don't believe that for one minute, Aaron *pere*."

Price didn't believe it for one minute either. "The only way I could get him off the floe," he went on, "was by sinking the anchor and going down the line. He was scared to death, poor kid—so scared he couldn't move. He had good cause to be, with those god-awful floes drifting all around him, with nothing but an ice-hook and a pair of knee-crampons to keep him from going adrift himself. I knew I had to get to him and get to him fast, before he panicked again ..."

V

SATURN'S diamond-bright rings, "so various, so beautiful, so new" when viewed from afar, had "really neither joy, nor love, nor light" when viewed at close range. "Dirty snowballs" were what the floe-men called them, and basically that was all they were—agglomerations of ice and snow and dirt, some the size of mountains and some the size of hills and some the size of rocks, orbiting a world that was even less hospitable than they were. And because they were ice and snow and dirt, they were more valuable to Earth than diamonds would have been. The dirt could be discounted, but the snow and ice meant water—fresh water to supplement the supply that Earth, at tremendous expense, processed from her seas to quench the thirst of her billions of people and to irrigate her dehydrated lands.

Floe freighters were leviathans. They had to be, because the demand for their cargo was so great that it had to be transported in tremendous quantities. They never touched down on the face of Earth—they couldn't. They were built in space, and in space they remained; and when they returned from the rings they rendezvoused with ground-to-space tankers that sucked them dry, and then they went back to the rings for another payload. And the payload was always there, for to all intents and purposes the rings were inexhaustible.

To obtain a payload, all a freighter need to do was to go into orbit on the fringe of the rings, match its velocity with that of the outermost floes, and help itself. Nevertheless, there was danger involved. Jet propulsion was efficient enough for spaceships but not for individual spacemen, and when a floe was grapneled men had to crawl across the cables to its surface and move about by means of ice-hooks and

knee-crampons while stringing the reinforcing lines. And sometimes ice-hooks broke free and sometimes knee-crampons didn't dig deeply enough, and then the grapnelman became a helpless piece of living flotsam, and a helpless piece of living flotsam he remained until his companions threw him a line. That was what had happened to the kid, only in the kid's case his companions hadn't thrown him a line. He had panicked and kicked himself into the rings before they missed him, and they had given him up for lost and the floe freighter had moved on to another lode. In the meantime, he had managed to sink his ice-hook into another floe and to dig in with his crampons. It was here that Price found him.

PPRICE wasn't on a freighter. He was piloting a floe-charter. A floe charter was a small ship used by the waterlanes companies, his own included, to spot and catalogue good ring lodes—i.e., areas where the majority of the floes contained a minimum amount of dirt and a maximum amount of ice and snow. Dirt was dross, and took up valuable space in the vats, and experience had taught the waterlanes companies that the expense of charting a ring region before sending in a freighter was negligible when compared to the expense of hauling home some ten or twenty tons of worthless clay.

The floe that the kid was clinging to was a relatively small one. It was located a good eighth of a mile within the periphery, and this made getting to him a problem in its own right. But Price was determined as he had never been determined before, and after a nerve-racking hour of changing his speed and alternating this trajectory, he succeeded in coming within thirty feet of his objective and in matching his velocity with the floe's. The next problem was to transfer the kid from the floe to the ship.

The kid had seen the ship by this time, and was staring over his shoulder at it with glazed eyes that even through his visivisor betrayed the space-fugue that had overtaken him. Immediately, Price began the ticklish task of sinking the anchor as close to him as possible without hitting him. He was so afraid of accidentally killing the kid that it took him nine shots to get a successful bite. He had suited himself beforehand and had attached a ten-foot life-line to his belt, so he was all set to go.

Stepping into the decompression compartment, he closed the inner locks and released the air valve. When the outer locks automatically opened with the final out-rush of air, he reached down and grasped the anchor-line at the point where it emerged from the hull and began pulling himself hand over hand toward the floe.

Reaching the surface, he tied the end of the life-line to the ring of the anchor; then he removed his ice-hook from his belt, took a bite with it, and began cramponing and hooking his way across the brief expanse of ice and snow and dirt that separated him from the kid. All the while, the kid's eyes clung to him as though seeking by the power of their gaze alone to keep him from "falling" from the floe. And maybe it was the tenacious gaze that did the trick—who could say? It had been years since Price had used an ice-hook or worn a pair of knee-crampons. In any event, he reached the kid's side without incident, and success seemed assured. Working with one hand, he fastened his belt to the kid's; then he signaled to the kid to let go of his ice-hook and to free his crampons. He had to signal three times before the kid obeyed. After that, Price let go of his own ice-hook, freed his own crampons, and, with the kid hanging on for dear life, pulled himself back to the anchor, untied the life-line, and started back "up" the anchor-line toward the floe-charter.

His first intimation that all was not as it should be came with the realization that the anchor line had gone taut. Since it was a good forty feet in length and since the distance from the floe to the ship was less than thirty, one of two conclusions had to be drawn. Either the line had shrunk or the distance had increased. As much as he wanted to, Price couldn't bring himself to believe that the first eventuality was the case, so he found himself saddled with the second. He saw the mountainous floe bearing down on the ship then, and understood what had happened. The nine recoils of the anchor-gun had disturbed the ship's orbit just enough to cause the floe-charter to drift into the path of the nearest floe.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't have been a cause for alarm. The orbital velocity of the floes varied of course, diminishing toward the inner edge of the rings and increasing toward the outer edge, but in both cases the variation was cancelled out by the difference in distance traveled. The floe in question, however, was what floe-men called a "renegade". Its velocity was in the process of building up, and

eventually it would build up to the point where the floe would either escape from the rings or break up in the attempt. At the moment, its velocity was only slightly in excess of its neighbors and the floe-charter, but the difference was enough to make a collision inevitable.

It wasn't going to be a head-on collision, though. Price saw that right away. Nor was it going to be a violent collision. The floe was going to nudge the ship in passing—that was all—and probably no great damage would be done. But unfortunately the point of contact was going to be in the region of the locks, and when it occurred the decompression compartment would fill with ice and snow, and he and the kid would be out in the cold—unless he could gain the compartment in time to close the locks.

He doubled his efforts. Tripled them. But his movements were hampered by the kid, who, eyes shut tight against further exposure to the vicious quirks of reality, was clinging to him like a frightened girl. Even so, he managed to beat the flow to the locks, and to pull himself and the kid into the compartment before “rendevous” took place. He grabbed the lever than controlled the locks, and threw it just as the gray cliff of the floe made contact. The ship shuddered, and snow and ice and dirt began spilling into the compartment. He thrust the kid behind him and shielded him with his body; then, instinctively he stretched out his arms and tried to push back the snow and the ice and the dirt. He didn't even know it when the locks came together on his right hand, He didn't know it till, realizing that the snow and the ice and the dirt were no longer piling up around him, he stepped back and saw the blood geysering from hi right wrist. Even as he looked, the blood froze and the geysering stopped; and then the whole cosmos wheeled, and he was turning, twisting . . . falling.

VI

HIS hand was throbbing again—throbbing as though the intervening fourteen years had never been. Without thinking, he looked down at it, saw the Earthlit synthi-linen tablecloth showing through the non-existent flesh and bones. Years ago, he had been fitted with an artificial hand, but he had never been able to bring himself to use it—why, he did not wholly understand. Perhaps it was because he to punish himself, wanted the evidence of his weakness to be apparent to the whole world.

When he raised his eyes, Fleurette's gentle gaze was on his face. “But how did you survive, Aaron *pere*? All alone up there among the stars? Ronny never told me about that part. How did you get out of the rings? How did you get back to Earth?”

“We wouldn't have if it hadn't been for him. In the strict sense of the word; he had no memory; but there are some things—language for one—that a person suffering from space fugue remembers without recourse to the past. Ronny remembered how to operate the controls of a decompression compartment, so he was able to me into the ship. My spacesuit was a self-sealing one, and it had sealed itself around the arm the moment the sleeve was severed along with my hand—otherwise, of course, his efforts would have been wasted. But, as it was, I came to long enough to tell him what to do next—and, just as important, what not to do. We stayed right there in the floe belt till I got some of my strength back; then, with me instructing him, he piloted the floe-charter out of the rings and headed it back toward Earth . . . it was during the trip, I guess, that I started thinking of him as my son and decided to adopt him. From the moment he took his helmet off and I got a good look at his face, I loved him. I may have loved him even before that, for all I know. I was lonely, for one thing. Over the years the loneliness of the long runs builds up in you, and afterward, you're never completely free from it. And for another thing I was only human. . . Now there's an expression for you. Because we *are* human, we set ourselves on a pedestal and look down our noble noses on all other living creatures and use them according to the whims of our appetites and our economy. And then the minute one of our innumerable weaknesses catches up to us, we excuse ourselves by saying that we're *only* human.”

“But it's true, Aaron *pere*, we are *only* human. If we weren't we wouldn't be capable of such a monstrous self-deception. But I don't see how it applies in your case.”

Silent, he looked down into his glass. It was empty. As empty as his life. But the glass, at least; could be refilled. “Waiter,” he said into the table-com, and the mechman brought more wine.

PRICE raised his glass and drank. He looked into Fleurette's gray eyes. "Do you remember when you and Ronny were staying at my chalet in Colorado?" he asked. "Do you remember when you and I stepped out on the patio to look at the mountains in the moonlight?"

"Yes," she said, "I remember."

"I tried to kiss you, didn't I?"

She shook her head. "No, Aaron. You didn't try—you did."

Dismayed, he said, "I hoped you'd slapped my face!"

"Slap your face indeed! Why, I wouldn't have dreamed of doing such a thing. It was a nice kiss, and it came from your heart. Besides—"

"Yes?" he said.

"Never mind. You wouldn't understand." She lowered her gaze to the table, then returned it to his face. "Tell me about the stars, Aaron *pere*. You've always said they were your undoing, but you've never once said why."

He tried to see into her eyes, beyond the quiet veils that hid the springtime hills and the autumn nights and the long hot summer days. But the vista was denied him. "Where shall I begin?"

"At the beginning, naturally. You mentioned that you were the captain of a free-lance floe freighter and that after you escaped you didn't return Earth for years. That was the beginning, wasn't it?—when you escaped."

Price sighed. "In a way," he said. The taped music raised its voice, and two of the dancers executed *grand jetés*, rising high above the floor in the tenuous lunar gravity. The Earthlight intensified and the blues and greens of Earth herself took on deeper hues. "I was only thirty at the time of my escape," he went on. "Life on board a pirate ship—that's what a free-lance doer amounts to, you know—had made me bold, and I thought that I could do anything. At any rate, I was willing to try. So I decided to become a deep-spacer, and shipped to Mars. That's where most of the Solar starports are. Escape velocity's a drop in the bucket on Mars, and blast-off comes in the large economy-sized package. I knew that if I wanted a berth on one of the trans-C starships, Mars was the place to get it."

THE first berth he had obtained was on the freighter *Bloemfontain*. She was Dutch and she was dirty, but on her he found his spacelegs, and, by skillfully questioning members of her crew, he was able to devise a means of circumventing the space-time equalization schedule. Her destination was Alphaghagar, and when she reached it he obtained his release by filing a land claim and applying for Alphaghagar naturalization papers. Then, when she left on the equalization trip back to Earth, he cancelled the land claim and withdrew the naturalization application and signed up with Japanese freighter *Kiyomi*, which was in stopover at the Alphaghagar starport on its way to far Guanlago.

On Guanlago, he obtained his release from the *Kiyomi* by filing another land claim and applying for Guanlago naturalization papers. This time, he retained the land claim and let the application go through, and after the *Kiyomi* departed he settled down ostensibly to wait out the three years that were required by Guanlagoan law for an alien to become a Guanlagoan citizen, but actually to wait out the two years and one week that would elapse before the Konfarway-Guanlago-Fargastar-Alphaghagar-Mars Express came through on its next run. Those two years, when added to the two he had lost already and the one he would lose on the trip back, brought the total to five, but there was nothing he could do about them, and anyway, five years was a small enough price to pay for fourteen.

While waiting, he made good use of his time. Thanks to the extensive book-tape library that the *Kiyomi* had contained, he was *au courant* by this time, and thanks to the same source, he was fully acquainted with the way of life of the people among whom he had taken up residence. In addition, he turned out to be a natural businessman. The Guanlagoans were a lovely gentle people among whom cleanliness was a fetish, but they lived in shabby little huts that looked like pigsties. It was taken for granted by the Terrans who had already gone into business on the planet that the reason they lived in such dwellings was that they liked to. But instinctively Price knew better. The Guanlagoans only *thought*

they liked to live in pigsties, and the reason they thought so was that no one had ever taken the trouble to tempt them with superior dwellings. It was high time someone did.

He invested part of the accumulated wages of his two runs in the necessary materials and built a streamlined version of a typical Guanlagoan dwelling on the edge of his land claim where every Guanlagoan for miles around could see it. When they flocked around it like flies, he told them that they too could live in a streamlined pigsty if they wanted to, and explained to them how they could do so without financially inconveniencing themselves. They went for the idea, and Price headed for the nearest Terran bank to obtain the necessary backing. He got it, subdivided his claim, and began building in earnest. In six Guanlagoan years (480 Earth days), he was a rich man.

He expanded his activities, buying more land, and in three more Guanlagoan years he tripled his fortune. By then, the time had come for him to leave. Arranging passage on the Kon-fari,vay-Guanlago-Fargastar-Alphaghagar-Mars Express had entailed pulling a good many strings and arranging re-entry to Earth after he got to Mars had entailed pulling a good many more, and the overall cost of the strings had put a sizable nick in his fortune; but there had still been enough of it left to enable him to start a new waterlines company. On his first official trip to the rings, he had rescued Ronny. Finding him had been easy. He had simply followed the *Ganymede* at a discreet distance and moved in afterward. Returning to Earth, he had made profitable use of the experience he had acquired on the free-lance floer, and by applying futuristic techniques to his waterlanes operations he had soon left his competitors far behind him.

VII

A GAIN, two of the dancers executed lofty *grand jetés*. This time, Fleurette did not turn her head to look. "What is it that you're trying to tell me, Aaron Price?"

Silent, Price thought of the stars. Of the red stars and the blue stars and the green; of the Sol-type yellows that had given birth to planets similar to the Earth and had made it possible for intelligent life to develop there in a variety of ways.

But by far the most unique way it had developed of all was on the Earth.

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! ... In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! . . . The paragon of animals! ...

The paragon of fools! . . .

But he was being unfair. He was using himself for a criterion, and he was not an ordinary man. Ordinary men knew enough to leave their youths alone, to refrain from using the stars as stepping stones into the past—

Yes, but ordinary men knew *their* yesterdays. And he hadn't known his.

His had been a closed book—a book he had been unable to open without the stars.

And so he had used the stars and opened it. And now he wanted to close it because he could no longer bear what was written on the pages. And the only way he could close it was to die.

And so he was going to die. With his own hands—come Earth; come tomorrow or the next day—he was going to close the book.

"What is it, Aaron Price? What is it that you're trying to say?"

He met her eyes, and knew their gentle grayness. "Space-fugue," he said. "That's what I'm trying to say. It's not like ordinary fugue. It endures for years, and only spacefright can bring it on and only spacefright can drive it away. And the years in between are lost. When those years are your best years, you hate to lose them. And if you're like me, you try to get them back."

HE took a deep breath, held it for a moment before setting it free. His eyes found, and focused on, his empty glass. "In a few days," he said, "the floe freighter Ronny shipped on will begin orbiting the rings. I don't know exactly how it will happen, but probably it will be something like this: The freighter will grapnel a floe and Ronny will go out with the grapnel crew and help string the reinforcing lines. He'll be as

green at the job as he was before, and in addition he'll be completely out of practice. Somehow, he'll lose contact both with the floe and with the other grapnelers, and he'll become stranded on another floe and the freighter will give him up for lost and move on. Then, for the second time, spacefright will hit him, and the fourteen-year space-fugue period will be broken. And when he comes out of it, he'll instinctively think that the floe he's clinging to is the same one he was clinging to before the space-fugue period began. But it won't be."

"Look at me, Aaron Price."

"In a few hours," Price went on, "a free-lance fiber will spot him, take him on board, and impress him. He'll have no memory of me and no memory of you. He'll remember absolutely nothing about the years that intervened between the moment space-fright cancelled out the first fifteen years of his life and the moment spacefright brought them back. To him it will seem as though only minutes have passed since the first freighter—the Ganymede—left him to die, and he'll take it for granted that he's still fifteen years old—till he sees his face in a mirror and asks someone the date. He'll know then that he's twenty-nine."

"Why don't you look at me, Aaron Price?"

His eyes did not leave his empty glass. "I had to tell you this, *jeune fille*. I didn't want to, but it would have been unfair to you if I hadn't. But no one else knows, and there's no reason why anyone ever should. In ten years time, Ronny's share in the company will go to you, and I've made arrangements for you to inherit mine. That, at least, is as it should be."

For a while he was silent, and when he spoke again some of the anguish of Oedipus was in his voice. "Men should leave time alone. When they play with time they burn their fingers and sometimes they burn their lives. A space-fugue victim can never really relive his lost years. He enters them like a stranger, and when he interferes with them, as he invariably must, he affects their pattern and destroys himself. He can only put new ironies into old bottles and cry out, 'Absalom, my son, myself!' And if his Absalom had a wife, he can only go to her and say, 'All the sin Absalom's face is black with, my face is black with too.'"

When he looked at her; she was crying. Around them, the Earthlight fell like gray rain, and the rain became his years. It accumulated on his shoulders and weighed them down. It made September patterns on his aging spaceburned face and added streaks of grayness to his hair. He could not see the patterns and the streaks, but he knew that they were there. And all the while, Fleurette seemed more than ever like a little girl.

He turned his eyes away.

Out of the corners of them he saw her open her purse, withdraw a small object, and lay it on the table. Still crying, she stood up, and walked toward the lifts that led to the HoneyEarth rooms.

He stared at the object, and a tightness seized him, and he had to look away. He looked out over the moonscape—over the Earthlit foothills, over the Earthlit plain. He saw the fields then, and the great green hill rising into the sky. He felt the summer sun upon his back. A summer wind sprang up and caressed his spaceburned face.

Kneeling, he began gathering the red red berries, He tasted them, and they, sweet—sweet with the sweetness of hey lips. Still not quite believing, he came back from the fields, back from tomorrow, and looked at the object again. No, his eyes had not deceived him.

It was a golden key.

THE END