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The Goblin Reservation

Clifford D. Simak

1

Inspector Drayton sat, solidly planted behind the desk, and waited. He was a rawboned man with a face that looked as if it might have been hacked, by a dull hatchet, out of a block of gnarled wood. His eyes were points of flint and at times they seemed to glitter, and he was angry and upset. But such a man, Peter Maxwell knew, would never give way to any kind of anger. There was, behind that anger, a bulldog quality that would go plodding on, undisturbed by anger.

And this was just the situation, Maxwell told himself, that he had hoped would not come about. Although, as now was evident, it had been too much to hope. He had known, of course, that his failure to arrive at his proper destination, some six weeks before, would have created some consternation back here on the Earth; the thought that he might be able to slip home unobserved had not been realistic. And now here he was, facing this man across the desk and he'd have to take it easy.

He said to the man behind the desk: "I don't believe I entirely understand why my return to Earth should be a matter for Security. My name is Peter Maxwell and I'm a member of the faculty of the College of Supernatural Phenomena on Wisconsin Campus. You have seen my papers...

"I am quite satisfied," said Drayton, "as to who you are. Puzzled, perhaps, but entirely satisfied. It's something else that bothers me. Would you mind, Professor Maxwell, telling me exactly where you've been?"

"There's not very much that I can tell you," Peter Maxwell said. "I was on a planet, but I don't know its name or its coordinates. It may be closer than a light-year or out beyond the Rim?'

"In any event," said Drayton, "you did not arrive at the destination you indicated on your travel ticket."

"I did not," said Maxwell.

"Can you explain what happened?"

"I can only guess. I had thought that perhaps my wave pattern was diverted, perhaps intercepted and diverted. At first I thought there had been transmitter error, but that seems impossible. The transmitters have been in use for hundreds of years. All the bugs should have been ironed out of them by now."

"You mean that you were kidnaped?"

"If you want to put it that way."

"And still will tell me nothing?"

"I have explained there's not much to tell."

"Could this planet have anything to do with the Wheelers?"

Maxwell shook his head "I couldn't say for sure, but I don't believe it did. Certainly there were none of them around. There was no indication they had anything to do with it."

"Professor Maxwell, have you ever seen a Wheeler?"

"Once. Several years ago. One of them spent a month or two at Time. I caught sight of it one day."

"So you would know a Wheeler, if you saw one?"

"Yes, indeed," said Maxwell.

"I see you started out for one of the planets in the Coonskin system."

"There was the rumor of a dragon," Maxwell told him. "Not substantiated. In fact, the evidence was quite sketchy. But I decided it might be worth investigating..."

Drayton cocked an eyebrow. "A dragon?" he demanded.

"I suppose," said Maxwell, "that it may be hard for someone outside my field to grasp the importance of a dragon. But the fact of the matter is that there is no scrap of evidence to suggest such a creature at any time existed. This despite the fact that the dragon legend is solidly embedded in the folklore of the Earth and some of the other planets. Fairies, goblins, trolls, banshees-we have all of these, in the actual flesh, but no trace of a dragon. The funny thing about it is that the legend here on Earth is not basically a human legend. The Little Folk, as well, have the dragon legend. I sometimes think they may have been the ones who transmitted it to us. But the legend only. There is no evidence..."

He stopped, feeling a little silly. What could this stolid policeman who sat across the desk care about the dragon legend?

"I'm sorry, Inspector," he said. "I let my enthusiasm for a favorite subject run away with me."

"I have heard it said that the dragon legend might have risen from ancestral memories of the dinosaur."

"I have heard it, too," said Maxwell, "but it seems impossible. The dinosaurs were extinct long before mankind had evolved."

"Then the Little Folk..."

"Possibly," said Maxwell, "but it seems unlikely. I know the Little Folk and have talked with them about it. They are ancient, certainly much more ancient than we humans, but there is no indication they go back that far. Or if they do, they have no memory of it. And I would think that their legends and folk tales would easily carry over some millions of years. They are extremely long-lived, not quite immortal, but almost, and in a situation such as that, mouth-to-mouth tradition would be most persistent."

Drayton gestured, brushing away the dragons and the Little Folk. "You started for the Coonskin," he said, "and you didn't get there."

"That is right. There was this other planet. A roofed-in, crystal planet."

"Crystal?"

"Some sort of stone. Quartz, perhaps. Although I can't be sure. It could be metal. There was some metal there."

Drayton asked smoothly. "You wouldn't have known, when you started out, that you'd wind up on this planet?"

"If it's collusion you have in mind," said Maxwell, "you're very far afield. I was quite surprised. But it seems you aren't. You were waiting here for me."

"Not particularly surprised," said Drayton. "It has happened twice before."

"Then you probably know about the planet."

"Nothing about it," said Drayton. "Simply that there's a planet out there somewhere, operating an unregistered transmitter and receiver, and communicating by an unlisted signal. When the operator here at Wisconsin Station picked up their signal for transmittal, he signaled them to wait, that the receivers all were busy. Then got in touch with me."

"The other two?"

"Both of them right here. Both tabbed for Wisconsin Station."

"But if they got back..."

"That's the thing," said Drayton. "They didn't. Oh, I guess you could say they did, but we couldn't talk with them. The wave pattern turned out faulty. They were put back together wrong. They were all messed up. Both of them were aliens, but so tangled up we had a hard time learning who they might have been. We're still not positive."

"Dead?"

"Dead? Certainly. A rather frightful business. You're a lucky man."

Maxwell, with some difficulty, suppressed a shudder. "Yes, I suppose I am," he said.

"You'd think," said Drayton, "that anyone who messed around with matter transmission would make sure they knew how it was done. There's no telling how many they may have picked up who came out wrong in their receiving station."

"But you would know," Maxwell pointed out. "You'd know if there had been any losses. A station would report back immediately if a traveler failed to arrive on schedule."

"That's the funny thing about it," Drayton told him. "There have been no losses. We're pretty sure the two aliens who came back dead to us got where they were going, for there's no one missing."

"But I started out for Coonskin. Surely they reported..."

Then he stopped as the thought struck him straight between the eyes.

Drayton nodded slowly. "I thought you would catch on. Peter Maxwell got to the Coonskin system and came back to Earth almost a month ago."

"There must be some mistake," Maxwell protested weakly.

For it was unthinkable that there should be two of him, that another Peter Maxwell, identical in all details, existed on the Earth.

"No mistake," said Drayton. "Not the way we have it figured. This other planet doesn't divert the pattern. What it does is copy it."

"Then there could be two of me! There could be..."

"Not any more," said Drayton. "You're the only one. About a week after he returned, there was an accident. Peter Maxwell's dead."

2

Around the corner from the tiny room where he'd met with Drayton, Maxwell found a vacant row of seats and sat down in one of them, rather carefully, placing his single piece of luggage on the floor beside him.

It was incredible, he told himself. Incredible that there should have been two Pete Maxwells and now one of those Maxwells dead. Incredible that the crystal planet could have had equipment that would reach out and copy a wave pattern traveling faster than the speed of light- much faster than the speed of light, for at no point in the galaxy so far linked by the matter transmitters was there any noticeable lag between the time of transmittal and arrival. Diversion-yes, perhaps there could be diversion, a reaching out and a snatching of the pattern, but the task of copying such a pattern would be something else entirely.

Two incredibles, he thought. Two things that should not have happened. Although if one of them had happened, the other surely followed. If the pattern had been copied, there would, quite necessarily, have been two of him, the one who went to the Coonskin system and the other who'd gone to the crystal planet. But if this other Peter Maxwell had really gone to Coonskin, he should still be there or only now returning. He had planned a six weeks' stay at least, longer if more time seemed necessary to run down the dragon business.

He found that his hands were shaking and, ashamed of this, he clasped them hard together and held them in his lap.

He couldn't go to pieces, he told himself. No matter what might be facing him, he had to see it through. And there was no evidence, no solid evidence. All that he had was what a member of Security

had told him and he couldn't count on that. It could be no more than a clumsy piece of police trickery designed to shake him into talking. Although it could have happened. It just could have happened!

But even if it had happened, he still had to see it through. For he had a job to do and one he must not bungle.

Now the job might be made the harder by someone watching him, although he could not be sure there'd be someone watching. It might not, he told himself, make any difference. His hardest job, he realized, would be to get an appointment with Andrew Arnold. The president of a planetary university would not be an easy man to see. He would have more with which to concern himself than listening to what an associate professor had to say. Especially when that professor could not spell out in advance detail what he wished to talk about.

His hands had stopped the trembling, but he still kept them tightly clasped. In just a little while he'd get out of here and go down to the roadway, where he'd find himself a seat on one of the inner, faster belts. In an hour or so he'd be back on the old home campus and then he'd soon find out if what Drayton said was true. And he'd be back with friends again-with Alley Oop and Ghost, with Harlow Sharp and Allen Preston and all the rest of them. There'd be rowdy midnight drinking bouts at the Pig and Whistle and long, slow walks along the shaded malls and canoeing on the lake. There'd be discussion and argument and the telling of old tales, and the leisurely academic routine that gave one time to live.

He found himself looking forward to the trip, for the roadway ran along the hills of Goblin Reservation. Not that there were only goblins there; there were many other of the Little Folk and they all were friends of his-or at least most of them were friends. Trolls at times could be exasperating and it was rough to build up any real and lasting friendship with a creature like a banshee.

This time of year, he thought, the hills would be beautiful. It had been late summer when he'd left for the Coonskin system and the hills still had worn their mantle of dark green, but now, in the middle of October, they would have burst into the full color of their autumn dress. There'd be the winy red of oak and the brilliant red and yellow of the maples and here and there the flaming scarlet of creeping vines would run like a thread through all the other colors. And the air would smell like cider, that strange, intoxicating scent that came upon the woods only with the dying of the leaves.

He sat there, thinking of the time, just two summers past, when he and Mr. O'Toole had gone on a canoe trip up the river, into the northern wilderness, hoping that somewhere along the way they might make some sort of contact with the spirits recorded in the old Ojibway legends. They had floated on the glass-clear waters and built their fires at night on the edges of the dark pine forests; they had caught their fish for supper and hunted down the wild flowers hidden in the forest glades and spied on many animals and birds and had a good vacation. But they had seen no spirits, which was not surprising. Very few contacts had been made with the Little Folk of North America, for they were truly creatures of the wilds, unlike the semicivilized, human-accustomed sprites of Europe.

The chair in which he sat faced the west and through the towering walls of glass he could see across the river to the bluffs that rose along the border of the ancient state of Iowa-great, dark purple masses rimmed by a pale blue autumn sky. Atop one of the bluffs he could make out the lighter bulk of the College of Thaumaturgy, staffed in large part by the octopoid creatures from Centaurus. Looking at those faint outlines of the buildings, he recalled that he had often promised himself he'd attend one of their summer seminars, but had never got around to doing it.

He reached out and shifted his luggage, preparing to get up, but he stayed on sitting there. He still was a little short of breath and his legs seemed weak. What Drayton had told him, he realized, had hit him harder than he'd thought, and still was hitting him in a series of delayed reactions. He'd have to take it easy, he told himself. He couldn't get the wind up. It might not be true; it probably wasn't true. There was no sense in getting too concerned about it until he'd had the chance to find out for himself.

Slowly he got to his feet and reached down to pick up his luggage, but hesitated for a moment to plunge into the hurried confusion of the waiting room. People-alien and human-were hurrying purposefully or stood about in little knots and clusters. An old, white-bearded man, dressed in stately black-a professor by the looks of him, thought Maxwell-was surrounded by a group of students who had to come to see him off. A family of reptilians sprawled in a group of loungers set aside for people such as

they, not equipped for sitting. The two adults lay quietly, facing one another and talking softly, with much of the hissing overtones that marked reptilian speech, while the youngsters crawled over and under the loungers and sprawled on the floor in play. In one corner of a tiny alcove a beer-barrel creature, lying on its side, rolled gently back and forth, from one wall to the other, rolling back and forth in the same spirit, and perhaps for the same purpose, a man would pace the floor. Two spidery creatures, t heir bodies more like grotesque matchstick creations than honest flesh and blood, squatted facing one another. They had marked off upon the floor, with a piece of chalk, some sort of crude gameboard and had placed about upon it a number of strangely shaped pieces, which they were moving rapidly about, squeaking in excitement as the game developed.

Wheelers? Drayton had asked. Was there any tie-up with the crystal planet and the Wheelers?

It always was the Wheelers, thought Maxwell. An obsession with the Wheelers. And perhaps with reason, although one could not be sure. For there was little known of them. They loomed darkly, far in space, another great cultural group pushing out across the galaxy, coming into ragged contact along a far-flung frontier line with the pushing human culture.

Standing there, he recalled that first and only time he had ever seen a Wheeler-a student who had come from the College of Comparative Anatomy in Rio de Janeiro for a two-week seminar at Time College. Wisconsin Campus, he remembered, had been quietly agog and there had been a lot of talk about it, but very little opportunity, apparently, to gain a glimpse of the fabled creature since it stayed closely within the seminar confines. He had met it, trundling along a corridor, when he'd gone across the mall to have lunch with Harlow Sharp, and he recalled that he'd been shocked.

It had been the wheels, he told himself. No other creature in the known galaxy came equipped with wheels. It had been a pudgy creature, a roly-poly suspended between two wheels, the hubs of which projected from its body somewhere near its middle. The wheels were encased in fur and the rims of them, he saw, were horny calluses. The downward bulge of the roly-poly body sagged beneath the axle of the wheels like a bulging sack. But the worst of it, he saw when he came nearer, was that this sagging portion of the body was transparent and filled with a mass of writhing things which made one think of a pail of gaily colored worms.

And those writhing objects in that obscene and obese belly, Maxwell knew, were, if not worms, at least some kind of insect, or a form of life which could equate with that form of life on Earth which men knew as insects. For the Wheelers were a hive mechanism, a culture made up of many such hive mechanisms, a population of colonies of insects, or at least the equivalent of insects.

And with a population of that sort, the tales of terror which came from the far and rough frontier about the Wheelers were not hard to understand. And if these horror tales were true, then man here faced, for the first time since his drive out into space, that hypothetical enemy which it always had been presumed would be met somewhere in space.

Throughout the galaxy man had met many other strange and, at times, fearsome creatures, but none, thought Maxwell, could match fearsomeness with a creature that was a wheel-driven hive of insects. There was something about the whole idea that made one want to gag.

Today outlandish creatures flocked to the Earth in thousands, to attend the many colleges, to staff the faculties that made up that great galactic university which had taken over Earth. And in time, perhaps, thought Maxwell, the Wheelers might be added to this galactic population which swarmed the colleges of Earth-if only there could be some kind of understanding contact. But so far there hadn't been.

Why was it, Maxwell wondered, that the very idea of the Wheelers went against the grain, when man and all the other creatures in the galaxy contacted by the humans had learned to live with one another?

Here, in this waiting room, one could see a cross section of them-the hoppers, the creepers, the crawlers, the wrigglers, and rollers that came from the many planets, from so many stars. Earth was the galactic melting pot, he thought, a place where beings from the thousand stars met and mingled to share their thoughts and cultures.

"Number Five-six-nine-two," shrilled the loudspeaker.

"Passenger Number Five-six-nine-two, your departure time is only five minutes from now. Cubical

Thirty-seven. Passenger Five-six-nine-two, please report immediately to Cubical Thirty-seven."

And where, Maxwell wondered, might No. 5692 be bound? To the jungles of Headache No. 2, to the grim, windswept glacial cities of Misery IV, to the desert planets of the Slaughter Suns, or to any of the other of the thousands of planets, all less than a heartbeat away from this very spot where he stood, now linked by the transmitter system, but representing in the past long years of exploratory effort as discovery ships beat through the dark of everlasting space. As they were beating out there even now, slowly and painfully expanding the perimeter of man's known universe.

The sound of the waiting room boomed and muttered, with the frantic paging of late or missing passengers, with the hollow buzz of a hundred different tongues spoken in a thousand different throats, with the shuffling or the clicking or the clop of feet across the floor.

He reached down, picked up his luggage, and turned toward the entrance.

After no more than three steps, he was halted to make way for a truck carrying a tank filled with a murky liquid. Through the cloudiness of the liquid, be caught a suggestion of the outrageous shape that lurked within the tank- some creature from one of the liquid planets, perhaps, and one where the liquid was not water. Here, more than likely, as a visiting professor, perhaps to one of the colleges of philosophy, or maybe one of the science institutes.

The truck and its tank out of the way, he went on and reached the entrance, stepped through the opening onto the beautifully paved and terraced esplanade, along the bottom of which ran the roadway belts. He was gratified to notice that there were no waiting lines, as often was the case.

He drew a deep breath of air into his lungs-clean, pure air with the sharp tang of frosty autumn in it. It was a welcome thing after the weeks of dead and musty air up on the crystal planet.

He turned to go down the steps and as he did he saw the signboard just beyond the gate to the roadway belts. The sign was large and the lettering was in Old English, screaming with solid dignity:

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, ESQ.
Of Stratford-on-Avon, England
"How It Happened I Did Not Write The Plays"
Under the sponsorship of Time College
Oct 22, 8 P.M. Time Museum Auditorium

Tickets available at all agencies

"Maxwell," someone shouted and he swung around. A man was running from the entrance, toward him.

Maxwell put down his luggage, half-raised his hand in greeting and acknowledgment, then slowly dropped it, for he realized that he did not recognize the man.

The man slowed to a trot, then a rapid walk.

"Professor Maxwell, isn't it?" he asked as he came up. "I'm sure I'm not mistaken."

Maxwell nodded stiffly, just a bit embarrassed.

"Monty Churchill," said the man, thrusting out his hand. "We met, a year or so ago. At one of Nancy Clayton's bashes."

"How are you, Churchill?" Maxwell asked, a little frostily.

For now he did recognize the man, the name at least if not the face. A lawyer, he supposed, but he wasn't sure. Doing business, if he recalled correctly, as a public relations man, a fixer. One of that tribe that handled things for clients, for anyone who could put up a fee.

"Why, I'm fine," said Churchill happily. "Just back from a trip. A short one. But it's good to be back again. There's nothing quite like home. That's why I yelled out at you. First familiar face I've seen for several weeks."

"I'm glad you did," said Maxwell. "You going back to the campus?"

"Yes. I was heading for the roadway."

"No need of that," said Churchill. "I have my flier here. Parked on the strip out back. There's room

for both of us. Get there a good deal faster."

Maxwell hesitated. He didn't like the man, but what Churchill said was true; they would get there faster. And he was anxious to get back as quickly as he could, for there were things that needed checking out.

"That's very kind of you," he said. "If you're sure you have the room."

3

The motor sputtered and went dead. The jets hummed for a second and then fell silent. The air sighed shrilly against the metal hide.

Maxwell glanced swiftly at the man beside him. Churchill sat stiff-perhaps in fear, perhaps only in astonishment. For even Maxwell realized that a thing like this should not have happened-was, in fact, unthinkable. Fliers such as the one in which they rode were regarded as foolproof.

Below them lay the jagged rocks of the craggy cliffs, the spearlike, upthrusting branches of the forest covering the hills, clinging to the rocks. To the left the river ran, a silver ribbon through the wooded bottom lands.

Time seemed to drag, to lengthen out, as if by some strange magic each second had become a minute. And with the lengthening of time came a quiet awareness of what was about to happen, as if it might be happening to someone else, Maxwell told himself, and not to him, a factual and dispassionate assessment of the situation by an observer who was not involved. And even as he knew this, he also knew, in a dim, far corner of his mind, panic would come later and when that came time would take up its usual pace again as the flier rushed down to meet the forest and the rock.

Leaning forward, he scanned the terrain that stretched ahead, and as he did he caught sight of the tiny opening in the forest, a rift in the dark ranks of the trees and the hint of green beneath.

He nudged Churchill, pointing. Churchill, looking where he pointed, nodded and moved the wheel, slowly, carefully, tentatively, as if he were feeling for some response of the craft, trying to determine if it would respond.

The flier tilted slightly, wheeled and swung, still falling slowly, but jockeying for position. For a moment it seemed to balk at the controls, then slid sidewise, losing altitude more rapidly, but gliding down toward the rift between the trees.

Now the trees rushed upward at them and, close above them, Maxwell could see the autumn color of them-no longer simply dark, but a mass of red and gold and brown. Long, slender spears of red reached up to stab them, clawlike hands of gold grasped at them with an angry clutch.

The plane brushed the topmost branches of an oak, seemed to hesitate, almost to hang there in midair, then was gliding in, mushing toward a landing on the small greensward that lay within the forest.

A fairy green, Maxwell told himself-a dancing place for fairies, but now a landing field.

He switched his head sidewise for a second, saw Churchill crouched at the controls, then switched back again and watched the green come up.

It should be smooth, he told himself. There should be no bumps or holes or hummocks, for at the time the green had been laid down, the blueprints would have called for smoothness.

The craft hit and bounced and for a terrifying moment teetered in the air. Then it was down again and running smoothly on the green. The trees at the far end of the grass were rushing at them, coming up too fast.

"Hang on!" Churchill shouted and even as he shouted, the plane swung and pivoted, skidding. It came to rest a dozen feet from the woods that rimmed the green.

They sat in deadly silence, a silence that seemed to be closing in on them from the colored forest and the rocky bluffs.

Churchill spoke out of the silence. "That was close," he said.

He reached up and slid back the canopy and got out Maxwell followed him.

"I can't understand what happened," Churchill said. "This job has more fail-safe circuitry built into it than you can well imagine. Hit by lightning, sure; run into a mountain, yes, you can do that; get caught in turbulence and bounced around, all of this could happen, but the motor never quits. The only way to stop it is to turn it off."

He lifted his arm and mopped his brow with his shirt sleeve.

"Did you know about this place?" he asked.

Maxwell shook his head. "Not this particular place. I knew there were such places. When the reservation was laid out and landscaped, the planning called for greens. Places where the fairies dance, you know. I wasn't looking for anything, exactly, but when I saw the opening in the trees, I could guess what might be down here."

"When you showed it to me," said Churchill, "I just hoped you knew what you were doing. There seemed to be no place else to go, so I did some gambling..."

Maxwell raised his hand to silence him. "What was that?" he asked.

"Sounds like a horse," said Churchill. "Who in the world would be out here with a horse? It comes from up that way."

The clattering and the clopping was coming closer.

They stepped around the flier and when they did, they saw the trail that led up to a sharp and narrow ridge, with the massive bulk of a ruined castle perched atop the ridge.

The horse was coming down the trail at a sloppy gallop. Bestriding it was a small and dumpy figure that bounced most amazingly with each motion of its mount. It was a far from graceful rider, with its elbows thrust out on either side of it, flapping like a pair of wings.

The horse came tearing down the slope and swung out on the green. It was no more graceful than its rider, but a shaggy plow horse, and its mighty hoofs, beating like great hammers, tore up clods of turf and flung them far behind it. It came straight at the flier, almost as if intent on running over it, then at the last moment wheeled clumsily and came to a shuddering halt, to stand with its sides heaving in and out like bellows, and snorting through its flabby nostrils.

Its rider slid awkwardly off its back and when he hit the ground, exploded in a gust of wrath.

"It is them no-good bummers!" he shouted. "It is them lousy trolls. I've told them and I've told them to leave them broomsticks be. But no, they will not listen. They always make the joke. They put enchantment on them."

"Mr. O'Toole," Maxwell shouted. "You remember me?"

The goblin swung around and squinted at him with red-filmed, nearsighted eyes.

"The professor!" he screamed. "The good friend of all of us. Oh, what an awful shame! I tell you, Professor, the hides of them trolls I shall nail upon the door and pin their ears on trees."

"Enchantment?" Churchill asked. "Do you say enchantment?"

"What other would it be?" Mr. O'Toole fumed. "What else would bring a broomstick down out of the sky?"

He ambled closer to Maxwell and peered anxiously at him. "Can it be really you?" he asked, with some solicitude. "In the honest flesh? We had word that you had died. We sent the wreath of mistletoe and holly to express our deepest grief."

"It is I, most truly," said Maxwell, slipping easily into the idiom of the Little Folk. "You heard rumor only."

"Then for sheer joy," cried Mr. O'Toole, "we three shall down great tankards of October ale. The new batch is ready for the running off and I invite you gentlemen most cordially to share the first of it with me."

Other goblins, a half dozen of them, were running down the path and Mr. O'Toole waved lustily to hurry them along.

"Always late," he lamented. "Never on the ball. Always showing up, but always somewhat slightly late. Good boys, all of them, with hearts correctly placed, but lacking the alertness that is the hallmark of true goblins such as I.,'

The goblins came loping and panting down onto the green, ranged themselves expectantly in front

of Mr. O'Toole.

"I have jobs for you," he told them. "First you go down to the bridge and you tell them trolls no more enchantments they shall make. They are to cease and desist entirely. Tell them this is their one last chance. If they do such things again that bridge we shall tear apart, stone by mossy stone, and those stones we shall scatter far and wide, so there never is a chance of upbuilding that bridge yet again. And they are to uplift the enchantment from this fallen broomstick so it flies as good as new.

"And some others of you I want to seek the fairies out and explain to them the defacement of their green, being sure to lay all blame for such upon them dirty trolls and promising the turf shall be all fixed smooth and lovely for their next dancing when the moon be full.

"And yet another of you must take care of Dobbin, making sure his clumsy self does no more damage to the green, but letting him crop, perchance, a mouthful or two of the longer grass if it can be found. The poor beast does not often get the chance to regale himself with pasturage such as this."

He turned back to Maxwell and Churchill, dusting his hands together in symbolism of a job well done.

"And now, gentlemen," be said, "you please to climb the hill with me and we will essay what can be done with sweet October ale. I beg you, however, to go slowly in very pity of me, since this paunch of mine seems grown large of late and I suffer most exceedingly from the shortness of the breath."

"Lead on, old friend," said Maxwell. "We shall match our steps with yours most willingly. It has been too long since we have quaffed October ale together."

"Yes, by all means," said Churchill, somewhat weakly. They started up the path. Before them, looming on the ridge, the ruined castle stood gaunt against the paleness of the sky.

"I must beforehand apologize," said Mr. O'Toole, "for the condition of the castle. It is a very drafty place, conducive to colds and sinus infections and other varied miseries. The winds blow through it wickedly and it smells of damp and mold. I do not understand in fullness why you humans, once you build the castles for us, do not make them weathertight and comfortable. Because we, beforetimes, dwelt in ruins, does not necessarily mean that we have forsook all comfort and convenience. We dwelt in them, forsooth, because they were the best poor Europe had to offer."

He paused to gulp for breath, then went on again. "I can well recall, two thousand years ago or more, we dwelt in brand-new castles, poor enough, of course, for the rude humans of that time could not build the better, being all thumbs and without proper tools and no machinery at all and being, in general, a slabsided race of people. And us forced to hide in the nooks and crannies of the castles since the benighted humans of that day feared and detested us in all their ignorance, and sought, in their ignorance, to erect great spells against us.

"Although," he said, with some satisfaction, "mere humans were not proficient with the spells. We, with no raising of the sweat, could afford them spades and clubs and beat their spells, hands down."

"Two thousand years?" asked Churchill. "You don't mean to say-"

Maxwell made a quick motion of his head in an attempt to silence him.

Mr. O'Toole stopped in the middle of the path and threw Churchill a withering glance.

"I can recall," he said, "when the barbarians first came, most rudely, from that fenny forest you now call Central Europe to knock with the hilts of their crude iron swords upon the very gates of Rome. We heard of it in the forest depths where we made our homes and there were others then, but dead long since, who had heard the news, some weeks after its transpirance, from Thermopylae."

"I am sorry," Maxwell said. "Not every one is as well acquainted with the Little Folk..."

"Please," said Mr. O'Toole, "you acquaint him, then."

"It's the truth," Maxwell said to Churchill, "or, at least, it could be. Not immortal, for they eventually do die. But long-lived beyond anything we know. Births are few-very few, indeed, for if they weren't there'd not be room for them on Earth. But they live to an extremely ripe old age."

"It is," said Mr. O'Toole, "because we burrow deep to the heart of nature and do not waste precious vitality of spirit upon those petty concerns which make wreckage of the lives and hopes of humans."

"But these," he said, "are dolorous topics on which to waste so glorious an autumn afternoon. So

let us fasten our thoughts, rather, with great steadfastness, upon the foaming ale that awaits us on the hilltop."

He lapsed into silence and started up the path again at a more rapid pace than he had set before.

Scuttling down the path toward them came a tiny goblin, his multicolored, too-large shirt whipping in the wind of his headlong running.

"The ale!" he screamed. "The ale!"

He skidded to a halt in front of the three toiling up the path.

"What of the ale?" panted Mr. O'Toole. "Do you mean to confess to me that you have been the sampling of it?"

"It has gone sour," wailed the little goblin. "The whole bewitched mess of it is sour."

"But ale can't go sour," protested Maxwell, grasping some sense of the tragedy that had taken place.

Mr. O'Toole bounced upon the path in devastating anger. His face turned from brown to red to purple. His breath came gushing out in wheezing gasps.

"It can, bedamned," he shouted, "with a spell of wizardry!"

He turned around and started rapidly down the path, trailed by the little goblin.

"Leave me at them filthy trolls!" shouted Mr. O'Toole.

"Leave me wrap my paws around their guzzles. I will dig them out with these two hands and hang them in the sun to dry. I will skin them all entire. I will teach them lessons they never will unlearn..."

His bellowing dwindled with distance to unintelligible rumbling as he scrambled swiftly down the path, heading for the bridge beneath which the trolls hung out.

The two humans stood watching, filled with admiration and wonder at such ponderous, towering wrath.

"Well," said Churchill, "there goes our chance at sweet October ale."

4

The clock in Music Hall began striking the hour of six as Maxwell reached the outskirts of the campus, riding from the airport on one of the slower, outer belts of the roadway. Churchill had taken another roadway and Maxwell had been glad of that. Not only that he felt a faint distaste for the man, but from the wish to be alone. He wanted to ride slowly, with the windshield down, in silence, without the need of conversation, to soak up the sight and feel of those few square miles of buildings and of malls-coming home again to the one place that he loved.

Dusk sifted through the campus like a mist of benediction, softening the outlines of the buildings, turning the malls into areas that could have been romantic etchings out of storybooks.

Knots of students stood about the malls, talking quietly, carrying their satchels or with books tucked beneath their arms. A white-haired man sat on a bench, watching a pair of squirrels playing on the lawn. Two reptilian aliens hunched along one of the misty walks, moving slowly and engrossed in talk. A human student strode smartly along the sidewalk, whistling as he went, the whistle waking echoes in the quiet angles of the buildings. Meeting and passing the reptiles, be lifted an arm in grave salute. And everywhere the trees, great and ancient elms that had stood since time forgotten, the sturdy sentinels of many generations.

Then the great clock started the ringing of the hour, the bronze clangor of it beating far across the land, and it seemed to Maxwell that in the clock the campus was bidding him hello. The clock was a friend, he thought-not to him alone, but to all within the hearing of it, the voice of the campus. Lying in bed, before he went to sleep, he had listened, night after night, to its chiming, its ringing out of time. And more, perhaps, than the ringing out of time. Rather a watchman in the night crying all was well.

Ahead of him the mighty complex of Time College loomed out of the dusk-looming up to dwarf the roadway and the mall, great blocks of plastic and of glass, with lights burning in many of its windows.

Squatted at the base of the complex crouched the museum and across its front Maxwell saw the wind-fluttered whiteness of a sign painted on white fabric. In the dusk and distance he could make out only one word: SHAKESPEARE.

He grinned to himself, thinking of it. English Lit would be beside itself. Old Chenery and all the rest of them had never quite forgiven Time for establishing, two or three years ago, that the Earl of Oxford, not Shakespeare, had been the author of the plays. And this personal appearance of the man from Stratford-on-Avon would be rubbing salt into wounds that were far from healed.

Far ahead, sitting on its bill at the west end of the campus, Maxwell could make out the great hulk of the administration section, etched darkly against the last faint brushing of red in the western sky.

The belt moved on, past Time College and its squatting museum with the sign fluttering in the wind. The clock ended its telling of the time, the last notes of the chimes fading far into the distance.

Six o'clock. In another few minutes he would be getting off the belt and heading for the Winston Arms, which had been his home for the last four-no, the last five years. He put his hand into the right-hand pocket of his jacket and his fingers traced the hard outlines of the small ring of keys tucked into the small key pocket inside the jacket pocket.

Now, for the first time since he'd left Wisconsin Station, the story of that other Peter Maxwell forged to the forefront of his thoughts. It could be true, of course-although it didn't seem too likely. It would be very much the kind of trick Security might play to crack a man wide open. But if it were not true, why had there been no report from Coonskin of his failure to arrive? Although, he realized, that piece of information also had come from Inspector Drayton, as well as the further information that the same thing had happened twice before. If Drayton could be suspect on one story, be also was suspect on the other two. If there had been other beings picked up by the crystal planet, he had certainly not been told of them when he had been there. But that also, Maxwell reminded himself, was no trustworthy evidence. Undoubtedly the creatures on the crystal planet had told him only those things they wanted him to know.

The thing that bothered him the most, come to think of it, was not what Drayton had said, but what Mr. O'Toole had told him: We sent the wreath of mistletoe and holly to express our deepest grief. If events had turned out differently, he would have talked with his goblin friend about it, but the way things went, there had been no chance to talk of anything at all.

It all could wait, he told himself. In just a little while, once he had gotten home, he'd pick up a phone and make a call-to any one of many people-and then he'd know the truth. Who should he call? he wondered. There was Harlow Sharp, at Time, or Dallas Gregg, chairman of his own department, or maybe Xigmu Maon Tyre, the old Eridanean with the snow-white fur and the brooding violet eyes who had spent a long lifetime in his tiny cubbyhole of an office working out an analysis of the structuring of myths. Or maybe Allen Preston, friend and attorney. Preston, probably, he told himself, for if what Drayton had told him should happen to be true, there might be some nasty legal questions stemming out of it.

Impatiently, he snarled at himself. He was believing it, he was beginning to believe it; if he kept on like this, he could argue himself into thinking that it might be true.

The Winston Arms was just down the street and he got up from his seat, picked up his bag, and stepped to the barely moving outer belt. Standing there, he waited, and in front of the Winston Arms got off.

No one was in sight as he climbed the broad stone stairs and went into the foyer. Fumbling in his pocket, he took out the key ring and found the key that unlocked the outer door. An elevator stood waiting and he got into it and pressed the button for the seventh floor.

The key slid smoothly into the lock of his apartment and when he twisted it the door came open. He stepped into the darkened room. Behind him the door swung shut automatically, with a snicking of the lock, and he reached out his hand toward the panel to snap on the light.

But with his hand poised to press, he stopped. For there was something wrong. A feeling, a sense of something, a certain smell, perhaps. That was it-a smell. The faint, delicate odor of a strange perfume.

He smashed his hand against the panel and the lights came up.

The room was not the same. The furniture was different and the screaming paintings on the wall-he had never had, he would never have paintings such as that!

Behind him the lock snicked again and he spun around. The door swung open and a saber-tooth stalked in.

At the sight of Maxwell, the big cat dropped into a crouch and snarled, exposing six-inch stabbing fangs.

Gingerly, Maxwell backed away. The cat crept closer by a foot, still snarling. Maxwell took another backward step, felt the sudden blow above the ankle, tried to twist away, but was unable to, and knew that he was falling. He had seen the hassock, he should have remembered it was there-but he hadn't. He'd backed into it and tripped himself and now he was going over flat upon his back. He tried to force his body to relax against striking on the floor-but he didn't hit the floor. His back smashed down into a yielding softness and he knew he'd landed on the couch that stood behind the hassock.

The cat was sailing through the air in a graceful leap, its ears laid back, its mouth half open, its massive paws outstretched to form a battering ram. Maxwell raised his arms in a swift defensive gesture, but they were brushed aside as if they'd not been there and the paws smashed down into his chest, pinning him against the couch. The great cat's head, with its gleaming fangs, hung just above his face. Slowly, almost gently, the cat lowered its head and a long pink tongue came out and slathered, raspingly, across Maxwell's face.

The cat began to purr.

"Sylvester!" cried a voice from the doorway. "Sylvester, cut that out!"

The cat raked Maxwell's face once again with its moist and rasping tongue, then sat back upon its haunches, with a half-grin on its face and its ears tipped forward, regarding Maxwell with a friendly and enthusiastic interest.

Maxwell struggled to a half-sitting posture, with the small of his back resting on the seat cushions and his shoulders propped against the couch's back.

"And who might you be?" asked the girl standing in the doorway.

"Why, I..."

"You've got your nerve," she said.

Sylvester purred loudly.

"I'm sorry, miss," said Maxwell. "But I live here. Or at least, I did. Isn't this Seven-twenty-one?"

"It is, indeed," she said. "I rented it just a week ago."

Maxwell shook his head. "I should have known," he said. "The furniture was wrong."

"I had the landlord throw out the stuff," she said. "It was simply atrocious."

"Let me guess," said Maxwell. "An old green lounger, somewhat the worse for wear-"

"And a walnut liquor cabinet," said the girl, "and a monstrous seascape and-"

Maxwell lifted his head wearily. "That's enough," he said. "That was my stuff that you had thrown out."

"I don't understand," said the girl. "The landlord said the former occupant was dead. An accident, I think."

Maxwell got slowly to his feet. The big cat stood up, moved closer, rubbed affectionately against his legs.

"Stop that, Sylvester," said the girl.

Sylvester went on rubbing.

"You mustn't mind him," she said. "He's just a great big baby."

"A bio-mech?"

She nodded. "The cutest thing alive. He goes everywhere with me. He seldom is a bother. I don't know what's got into him. It seems that he must like you."

She had been looking at the cat, but now she glanced up sharply.

"Is there something wrong with you?" she asked.

Maxwell shook his head.

"You're sort of frosty around the gills."

"A bit of shock," he told her. "I suppose that's it. What I told you was the truth. I did, at one time, live here. Up until a few weeks ago. There was a mix-up somehow..."

"Sit down," she said. "Could you use a drink?"

"I suspect I could," he said. "My name is Peter Maxwell and I'm a member of the faculty-"

"Wait a moment. You said Maxwell? Peter Maxwell. I remember now. That's the name..."

"Yes, I know," said Maxwell. "Of the man who died."

He sat down carefully on the couch.

"I'll get the drink," the girl said.

Sylvester slid closer and gently laid his massive head in Maxwell's lap. Maxwell scratched him behind an ear and, purring loudly, Sylvester turned his head a bit to show Maxwell where it itched.

The girl came with the drink and sat down beside him. "I still don't understand," she told him. "If you're the man who..."

"The whole thing," Maxwell told her, "becomes somewhat complicated."

"I must say you're taking it rather well. Shaken up a bit, perhaps, but not stricken in a heap."

"Well, the fact of the matter is," said Maxwell, "that I halfway knew it. I'd been told, you see, but I didn't quite believe it. I suppose the truth is that I wouldn't let myself believe it."

He raised the glass. "You're not drinking?"

"If you're all right," she said. "If you feel OK, I'll get one for myself."

"Oh, I'm all right," said Maxwell. "I'll manage to survive."

He looked at her and for the first time really saw her-sleek and trim, with bobbed black hair, long eyelashes, high cheekbones, and eyes that smiled at him.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I am Carol Hampton. A historian at Time."

"Miss Hampton," he said, "I apologize for the situation. I have been away-off planet. Just returned. And I had a key and it fit the door and when I'd left it had been my place..."

"No need to explain," she said.

"We'll have the drink," he said. "Then I'll get up and go. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you'd be willing to have dinner with me. Let's call it a way for me to repay your understanding. You could have run out shrieking."

"If this was all a pitch!" she said. "If you-"

"It couldn't be," he said. "I'd be too stupid to get it figured out. And, besides, how come I had the key?"

She looked at him for a moment, then said, "It was silly of me. But Sylvester will have to go with us. He won't be left alone."

"Why," said Maxwell, "I wouldn't think of leaving him. He and I are pals."

"It'll cost you a steak," she warned. "He is always hungry and he eats nothing but good steaks. Big ones- raw."

5

The Pig and Whistle was dark and clamorous and smoky. The tables were jammed together, with narrow lanes between them. Candles burned with flickering flames. The murmurous din of many voices, seemingly talking all at once, filled the low-ceilinged room.

Maxwell stopped and peered, trying to locate a table that might be vacant. Perhaps, he thought, they should have gone somewhere else, but he had wanted to eat here, for the place, a hangout of students and some members of the faculty, spelled the campus to him.

"Perhaps," he said to Carol Hampton, "we should go somewhere else."

"There'll be someone along in just a minute," she said, "to show us to a table. Everyone seems so

busy. There must have been a rush-Sylvester, cut that out!"

She spoke appealingly to the people at the table beside which they stood. "You'll excuse him, please. He has no manners, none at all. Especially table manners. He snatches everything in sight."

Sylvester licked his chops, looking satisfied.

"Think nothing of it, miss," said the man with the bushy beard. "I really didn't want it. To order steak is just compulsive with me."

Someone shouted across the room. "Pete! Pete Maxwell!"

Maxwell peered into the gloom. At a far table, inserted in a corner, someone had risen and was waving his arms. Maxwell finally made him out. It was Alley Oop and beside him sat the white-shrouded figure of Ghost.

"Friends of yours?" asked Carol.

"Yes. Apparently they want us to join them. Do you mind?"

"The Neanderthaler?" she asked.

"You know him?"

"No. I just see him around at times. But I'd like to meet him. And that is the Ghost?"

"The two are inseparable," said Maxwell.

"Well, let's go over, then."

"We can say hello and go somewhere else."

"Not on your life," she said. "This place looks interesting."

"You've never been here before?"

"I've never dared," she said.

"I'll break the path," he told her.

He forged slowly among the tables, trailed by the girl and cat.

Alley Oop lunged out into the aisle to meet him, flung his arms around him, hugged him, then grasped him by the shoulders and thrust him out at arm's length to stare into his face.

"You are Old Pete?" he asked. "You aren't fooling us?"

"I am Pete," said Maxwell. "Who do you think I am?"

"Well, what I want to know then," said Oop, "is who it was we buried three weeks ago last Thursday. Both me and Ghost were there. And you owe us twenty bucks refund on the flowers we sent. That is what they cost us."

"Let us sit down," said Maxwell.

"Afraid of creating a scene," said Oop. "This place is made for scenes. There are fist fights every hour on schedule and there's always someone jumping up on a table and making a speech."

"Oop," said Maxwell, "there is a lady present and I want you to tame down and get civilized. Miss Carol Hampton, and this great oaf is Alley Oop."

"I am delighted to meet you, Miss Hampton," said Alley Oop. "And what is that you have there with you? As I live and breathe, a saber-toother! I'll have to tell you about the time, during a blizzard, I sought shelter in a cave and this big cat was there and me with nothing but a dull stone knife. I had lost my club, you see, when I met the bear, and-"

"Some other time," said Maxwell. "At least, let us sit down. We are hungry. We don't want to get thrown out."

"Pete," said Alley Oop, "it is a matter of some large distinction to be heaved out of this joint. You ain't arrived socially until you've been thrown out of here."

But, muttering under his breath, he led the way back to the table and held a chair for Carol. Sylvester planted himself between Maxwell and Carol, propped his chin on the table and glared balefully at Oop.

"That cat don't like me," Oop declared. "Probably he knows how many of his ancestors I wiped out back in the Old Stone Age."

"He's only a bio-mech," said Carol. "He couldn't possibly."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Oop. "That critter is no bio-mech. He's got the dirty meanness in his eyes all saber-toothers have."

"Please, Oop," said Maxwell. "Just a moment, please. Miss Hampton, this gentleman is Ghost. A long-time friend of mine."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Ghost," said Carol.

"Not Mister," said Ghost. "Just plain Ghost. That is all I am. And the terrible thing about it is that I don't know who I am the ghost of. I'm most pleased to meet you. It is so comfortable with four around the table. There is something nice and balanced in the number four."

"Well," said Oop, "now that we know one another, leave us proceed to business. Let us do some drinking. It's lonesome for a man to drink all by himself. I love Ghost, of course, for his many sterling qualities, but I hate a man who doesn't drink."

"You know I can't drink," said Ghost. "Nor eat, either. Or smoke. There's not much a ghost can do. But I wish you wouldn't keep pointing it out to everyone we meet."

Oop said to Carol, "You seem to be surprised that a barbaric Neanderthaler can sling the language around with the facility I command."

"Not surprised," said Carol. "Astounded."

"Oop," Maxwell told her, "has soaked up more education in the last twelve years than most ordinary men. Started out virtually in kindergarten and now is working on his doctorate. And the thing about it is that he intends to keep right on. He is, you might say, one of our most notable professional students."

Oop raised his arm and waved it, bellowing at a waiter. "Over here," he shouted. "There are people here who wish to patronize you. All dying of slow thirst."

"The thing," said Ghost, "I have always admired about him is his shy, retiring nature."

"I keep on studying," said Oop, "not so much that I hunger after knowledge as for the enjoyment I get from the incredulous astonishment on the faces of those stuffed-shirt professors and those goofy students. Not," he said to Maxwell, "that I maintain all professors are stuffed shirts."

"Thank you," Maxwell said.

"There are those who seem to think," said Oop, "that Homo sapiens neanderthalensis can be nothing other than a stupid brute. After all, he became extinct, he couldn't hold his own-which in itself is prime evidence that he was very second-rate. I'm afraid that I'll continue to devote my life to proving-"

The waiter appeared at Oop's elbow. "It's you again," he said. "I might have known when you yelled at me. You have no breeding, Oop."

"We have a man here," Oop told him, ignoring the insult, "who has come back from the dead. I think it would be fitting that we should celebrate his resurrection with a flourish of good fellowship."

"You want something to drink, I take it."

"Why," said Oop, "don't you simply bring a bottle of good booze, a bucket of ice and four-no, three glasses. Ghost doesn't drink, you know."

"I know," the waiter said.

"That is," said Oop, "unless Miss Hampton wants one of these fancy drinks?"

"Who am I," asked Carol, "to gum up the works? What is it you are drinking?"

"Bourbon," said Oop. "Pete and I have a lousy taste in liquor."

"Bourbon let it be," said Carol.

"I take it," said the waiter, "that when I lug the bottle over here, you'll have the cash to pay for it. I remember the time-"

"Whatever I may lack," said Oop, "will be forthcoming from Old Pete."

"Pete?" the waiter glanced at Maxwell. "Professor!" he exclaimed. "I had heard that you..."

"That's what I been trying to tell you," said Oop. "That's what we're celebrating. He came back from the dead."

"But I don't understand."

"You don't need to," said Oop. "Just rustle up the booze."

The waiter scurried off.

"And now," said Ghost to Maxwell, "please tell us what you are. You are no ghost, apparently, or if you are, there's been a vast improvement in procedure since the man I represent shuffled off his mortal

coil."

"It seems," Maxwell told them, "that I'm a split personality. One of me, I understand, got in an accident and died."

"But that's impossible," said Carol. "Split personality in the mental sense-sure, that can be understood. But physically..."

"There's nothing in heaven or earth," said Ghost, "that is impossible."

"That's a bad quotation," said Oop, "and, besides, you misquoted it."

He put a hand to his hairy chest and scratched vigorously with blunt fingers.

"You needn't look so horrified," he said to Carol. "I itch. I'm a brute creature of nature, therefore I scratch. And I'm not naked, either. I have a pair of shorts on."

"He's housebroken," said Maxwell, "but just barely."

"To get back to this split personality," said the girl, "can you tell us what actually did happen?"

"I set out for one of the Coonskin planets," said Maxwell, "and along the way somehow my wave pattern duplicated itself and I wound up in two places."

"You mean there were two Pete Maxwells?"

"That's the way of it."

"If I were you," said Oop, "I'd sue them. These Transportation people get away with murder. You could shake them down for plenty. Me and Ghost could testify for you. We went to your funeral.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I think Ghost and I should sue as well. For mental anguish. Our best friend cold and rigid in his casket and us prostrate with grief."

"We really were, you know," said Ghost.

"I have no doubt of it," said Maxwell.

"I must say," said Carol, "that all three of you take it rather lightly. Here one good friend of three-"

"What do you want of us?" demanded Oop. "Sing hallelujahs, perhaps? Or bug out our eyes and be filled with the wonder of it? We lost a pal and now he's back again and-"

"But one of him is dead!"

"Well," said Oop, "as far as we were concerned, there was never more than one of him. And maybe this is better. Imagine the embarrassing situations that could develop if there were two of him."

Carol turned to Maxwell. "And you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "In a day or two, I'll take some serious thought of it. Right now, I guess, I'm putting off thinking about it. To tell you the truth, when I do think about it, I get a little numb. But tonight a pretty girl and two old friends and a great big pussy cat and a bottle of liquor to get rid of and later on some food."

He grinned at her. She shrugged.

"I never saw such a crazy bunch," she said. "I believe I like it."

"I like it, too," said Oop. "Say whatever you will of it, this civilization of yours is a vast improvement over the days of yore. It was the luckiest day of my life when a Time team snatched me hence just at the point when some of my loving brother tribesmen were about to make a meal of me. Not that I blame them particularly, you understand. It had been a long, hard winter and the snow was deep and the game had been very scarce. And there were certain members of the tribe who felt they had a score or two to settle with me-and I'll not kid you; they may have had a score. I was about to be knocked upon the head and, so to speak, dumped into the pot."

"Cannibalism!" Carol said, horrified.

"Why, naturally," he told her. "In those rough and ready days, it was quite acceptable. But, of course, you wouldn't understand. You've never been really hungry, I take it. Gut hungry. So shriveled up with hunger-"

He halted his talk and looked around.

"The thing that is most comforting about this culture," he declared, "is the abundance of the food. Back in the old days we had our ups and downs. We'd bag a mastodon and we'd eat until we vomited and then we'd eat some more and-"

"I doubt," Ghost said warningly, "that this is a proper subject for dinner conversation."

Oop glanced at Carol.

"You must say this much for me," he insisted. "I'm honest. When I mean vomit, I say vomit and not regurgitate."

The waiter brought the liquor, thumping the bottle and the ice bucket down upon the table.

"You want to order now?" he asked.

"We ain't decided yet," said Oop, "if we're going to eat in this crummy joint. It's all right to get liquored up in, but-"

"Then, sir," the waiter said, and laid down the check.

Oop dug into his pockets and came up with cash. Maxwell pulled the bucket and the bottle close and began fixing drinks.

"We're going to eat here, aren't we?" asked Carol. "If Sylvester doesn't get that steak you promised him, I don't know what will happen. He's been so patient and so good, with the smell of all the food..."

"He's already had one steak," Maxwell pointed out. "How much can he eat?"

"An unlimited amount," said Oop. "In the old days one of them monsters would polish off an elk in a single sitting. Did I ever tell you-"

"I am sure you have," said Ghost.

"But that was a cooked steak," protested Carol, "and he likes them raw. Besides, it was a small one."

"Oop," said Maxwell, "get that waiter back here. You are good at it. You have the voice for it."

Oop signaled with a brawny arm and bellowed. He waited for a moment, then bellowed once again, without results.

"He won't pay attention to me," Oop growled. "Maybe it's not our waiter. I never am able to tell them monkeys apart. They all look alike to me."

"I don't like the crowd tonight," said Ghost. "I have been watching it. There's trouble in the air."

"What is wrong with it?" asked Maxwell.

"There are an awful lot of creeps from English Lit. This is not their hangout. Mostly the crowd here are Time and Supernatural."

"You mean this Shakespeare business?"

"That might be it," said Ghost.

Maxwell handed Carol her drink, pushed another across the table to Oop.

"It seems a shame," Carol said to Ghost, "not to give you one. Couldn't you even sniff it, just a little?"

"Don't let it bother you," said Oop. "The guy gets drunk on moonbeams. He can dance on rainbows. He has a lot of advantages you and I don't have. For one thing, he's immortal. What could kill a ghost?"

"I'm not sure of that," said Ghost.

"There's one thing that bothers me," said Carol. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," said Ghost.

"It's this business of your not knowing who you are the ghost of. Is that true or is it just a joke?"

"It is true," said Ghost. "And I don't mind telling you, it's embarrassing and confusing. But I've just plain forgotten. From England-that much, at least, I know. But the name I can't recall. I would suspect most other ghosts-"

"We have no other ghosts," said Maxwell. "Contacts with other ghosts, of course, and conversations and interviews with them. But no other ghost has ever come to live with us. Why did you do it, Ghost-come to live with us."

"He's a natural chiseler," said Oop. "Always figuring out the angles."

"You're wrong there," Maxwell said. "It's damned little we can do for Ghost."

"You give me," said Ghost, "a sense of reality."

"Well, no matter what the reason," said Maxwell, "I am glad you did it."

"The three of you," said Carol, "have been friends for a long, long time."

"And it seems strange to you?" asked Oop.

"Well, yes, maybe it does," she said. "I don't know really what I mean."

Sounds of scuffling came from the front of the place. Carol and Maxwell turned around in their chairs to look in the direction from which the scuffling came, but there wasn't much that one could see.

A man suddenly loomed on top of the table and began to sing:

Hurrah for Old Bill Shakespeare;

He never wrote them plays;

He stayed at home, and chasing girls,

Sang dirty rondelays

Jeers and catcalls broke out from over the room and someone threw something that went sailing past the singer. Part of the crowd took up the song:

Hurrah for Old Bill Shakespeare;

He never wrote them...

Someone with a bull voice howled: "To hell with Old Bill Shakespeare!"

The room exploded into action. Chairs went over. There were other people on top of tables. Shouts reverberated and there was shoving and pushing. Fists began to fly. Various items went sailing through the air.

Maxwell sprang to his feet, reached out an arm and swept it back, shoving Carol behind him. Oop came charging across the tabletop with a wild war whoop. His foot caught the bucket and sent the ice cubes flying.

"I'll mow 'em down," he yelled at Maxwell. "You pile 'em to one side!"

Maxwell saw a fist coming at him out of nowhere and ducked to one side, bringing his own fist up in a vicious jab, hitting out at nothing, but aiming in the direction from which the fist had come. Over his shoulder came Oop's brawny arm, with a massive fist attached. It smacked into a face with a splattering sound and out beyond the table a figure went slumping to the floor.

Something heavy and traveling fast caught Maxwell behind the ear and he went down. Feet surged all around him. Someone stepped on his hand. Someone fell on top of him. Above him, seemingly from a long ways off, he heard Oop's wild whooping.

Twisting around, he shoved off the body that had fallen across him and staggered to his feet.

A hand grabbed him by the elbow and twisted him around.

"Let's get out of here," said Oop. "Someone will get hurt."

Carol was backed against the table, bent over, with her hands clutching the scruff of Sylvester's neck. Sylvester was standing on his hind legs and pawing the air with his forelegs. Snarls were rumbling in his throat and his long fangs gleamed.

"If we don't get him out of here," said Oop "that cat will get his steak."

He swooped down and wrapped an arm around the cat, lifting him by the middle, hugging him tight against his chest.

"Take care of the girl," Oop told Maxwell. "There's a back door around here somewhere. And don't leave that bottle behind. We'll need it later on."

Maxwell reached out and grabbed the bottle.

There was no sign of Ghost.

6

"I'm a coward," Ghost confessed. "I admit that I turn chicken at the sight of violence."

"And you," said Oop, "the one guy in the world no one can lay a mitt on."

They sat at the rude, square, rickety table that Oop once, in a moment of housekeeping energy, had knocked together from rough boards. Carol pushed away her plate. "I was starved," she said, "but not any more."

"You're not the only one," said Oop. "Look at our putty cat."

Sylvester was curled up in front of the fireplace, his bobbed tail clamped down tight against his rump, his furry paws covering his nose. His whiskers stirred gently as his breath went in and out.

"That's the first time in my life," said Oop, "I ever saw a saber-toother have more than he could eat."

He reached out for the bottle and shook it. It had an empty sound. He lumbered to his feet and went across the floor, knelt and raised a small door set into the floor, reaching down with his arm and searching in the space underneath the door. He brought up a glass fruit jar and set it to one side. He brought up a second fruit jar and set it beside the first. Finally he came up triumphantly with a bottle.

He put the fruit jars back and closed the door. Back at the table, he snapped the sealer off the bottle and reached out to pour drinks.

"You guys don't want ice," he said. "It just dilutes the booze. Besides, I haven't any."

He jerked a thumb back toward the door hidden in the floor. "My cache," he said. "I keep a jug or two hid out. Some day I might break a leg or something and the doc would say I couldn't drink..."

"Not with a broken leg," said Ghost. "No one would object to your drinking with a broken leg."

"Well, then, something else," said Oop.

They sat contentedly with their drinks, Ghost staring at the fire. Outside a rising wind worried at the shack.

"I've never had a better meal," said Carol. "First time I ever cooked my own steak stuck on a stick above an open fire."

Oop belched contentedly. "That's the way we did it back in the Old Stone Age. That, or eat it raw, like the saber-toother. We didn't have no stoves or ovens or fancy things like that."

"I have the feeling," said Maxwell, "that it would be better not to ask, but where did you get that rack of ribs? I imagine all the butcher shops were closed."

"Well, they were," admitted Oop, "but there was this one and on the back door it had this itty bitty padlock...."

"Someday," said Ghost, "you'll get into trouble."

Oop shook his head. "I don't think so. Not this time. Primal necessity-no, I guess that's not the phrase. When a man is hungry he has a right to food anywhere he finds it. That was the law back in prehistoric days. I imagine you still might make a case of it in a court of law. Besides, tomorrow I'll go back and explain what happened. By the way," he said to Maxwell, "have you any money?"

"I'm loaded," Maxwell told him. "I carried expense money for the Coonskin trip and I never spent a cent of it."

"On this other planet you were a guest," said Carol. "I suppose I was," said Maxwell. "I never did figure out our exact relationship."

"They were nice people?"

"Well, yes, nice-but people, I don't know."

He turned to Oop. "How much will you need?"

"I figure a hundred ought to settle it. There is the meat and the busted door, not to mention the bruised feelings of our friend, the butcher."

Maxwell took his billfold from his pocket and, counting out some bills, handed them to Oop.

"Thanks," said Oop. "Someday I'll pay you back."

"No," said Maxwell. "The party is on me. I started out to take Carol to dinner and things got somewhat upset."

On the hearth, Sylvester stretched and yawned, then went back to sleep, lying on his back now, with his legs sticking in the air.

Ghost asked, "You're on a visit here, Miss Hampton?"

"No," said Carol, surprised. "I work here. What gave you that idea?"

"The tiger," said Ghost. "A bio-mech, you said. I thought, naturally, you were with Bio-mech."

"I see," said Carol. "Vienna or New York."

"There is a center also," said Ghost, "somewhere in Asia. Ulan Bator, if my memory is. correct."

"You've been there?"

"No," said Ghost. "I only heard of it."

"But he could," said Oop. "He can go anywhere. In the blinking of an eyelash. That's why the folks at Supernatural continue to put up with him. They hope that someday they can come up with whatever he has got. But Old Ghost is cagey. He's not telling them."

"The real reason for his silence," said Maxwell, "is that he's on Transport's payroll. It's worth their while to keep him quiet. If he revealed his traveling techniques, Transport would go broke. No more need of them. People could just up and go anywhere they wished, on their own-a mile or a million light-years."

"And he's the soul of tact," said Oop. "What he was getting at back there was that unless you are in Bio-mech and can cook up something for yourself, it costs money to have something like that saber-toother."

"Oh, I see," said Carol. "I guess there's truth in that. They do cost a lot of money. But I haven't got that kind of money. My father, before he retired, was in Bio-mech. New York. Sylvester was a joint project of a seminar he headed. The students gave him to my dad."

"I still don't believe," said Oop, "that cat's a bio-mech. He's got that dirty glitter in his eyes when he looks at me."

"As a matter of fact," Carol told him, "there is a lot more bio than mech in all of them today. The name originated when what amounted to a highly sophisticated electronic brain and nervous system was housed in specific protoplasms. But today about the only mechanical things about them are those organs that are likely to wear out if they were made of tissue-the heart, the kidneys, the lungs, things like that. What is being done at Bio-mech today is the actual creations of specific life forms-but you all know that, of course."

"There are some strange stories," Maxwell said. "A group of supermen, kept under lock and key. You have heard of that?"

"Yes, heard of it," she said. "There are always rumors."

"The best one that I've heard in recent days," said Oop, "really is a lulu. Someone told me Supernatural has made contact with the Devil. How about that, Pete?"

"I wouldn't know," said Maxwell. "I suppose someone has tried. I'm almost sure someone must have tried. It's such an obvious thing for one to have a go at."

"You mean," asked Carol, "that there might really be a Devil?"

"Two centuries ago," said Maxwell, "people asked, in exactly the same tone of voice you are using now, if there actually were such things as trolls and goblins."

"And ghosts," said Ghost.

"You're serious!" Carol cried.

"Not serious," said Maxwell. "Just not ready to foreclose even on the Devil."

"This is a marvelous age," declared Oop, "as I am sure you've heard me indicate before. You've done away with superstition and the old wives' tales. You search in them for truth. But my people knew there were trolls and goblins and all the rest of them. The stories of them, you understand, were always based on fact. Except that later on, when he outgrew his savage simplicity, if you can call it that, man denied the fact; could not allow himself to believe these things that he knew were true. So he varnished them over and hid them safe away in the legend and the myth and when the human population kept on increasing, these creatures went into deep hiding. As well they might have, for there was a time when they were not the engaging creatures you seem to think they are today."

Ghost asked: "And the Devil?"

"I'm not sure," said Oop. "Maybe. But I can't be sure. There were all these things you have lured out and rediscovered and sent to live on their reservations. But there were many more. Some of them fearful, all of them a nuisance."

"You don't seem to have liked them very well," Carol observed.

"Miss," said Qop, "I didn't."

"It would seem to me," said Ghost, "that this would be a fertile field for some Time investigation.

Apparently there were many different kinds of these-would you call them primates?"

"I think you might," said Maxwell.

"Primates of a different stripe than the apes and man."

"Of a very different stripe," said Oop. "Vicious little stinkers."

"Someday, I'm sure," said Carol, "Time will get around to it. They know it, of course?"

"They should," said Oop. "I've told them often enough, with appropriate description."

"Time has too much to do," Maxwell reminded them. "Too many areas of interest. And the entire past to cover."

"And no money to do it with," said Carol.

"There," declared Maxwell, "speaks a loyal Time staff member."

"But it's true," she cried. "The other disciplines could learn so much by Time investigation. You can't rely on written history. It turns out, in many cases, to be different than it actually was. A matter of emphasis or bias or of just poor interpretation, embalmed forever in the written form. But do these other departments provide any funds for Time investigation? I'll answer that. They don't. A few of them, of course. The College of Law has cooperated splendidly, but not many of the others. They're afraid. They don't want their comfortable little worlds upset. Take this matter of Shakespeare, for example. You'd think English Lit would be grateful to find that Oxford wrote the plays. After all, it had been a question that had been talked about for many years-who really wrote the plays? But, after all of that, they resented it when Time found out who really wrote the plays."

"And now," said Maxwell, "Time is bringing Shakespeare forward to lecture about how he didn't write the plays. Don't you think that's rubbing it in just a bit too much?"

"That's not the point of it, at all," said Carol. "The point is that Time is forced to make a sideshow out of history to earn a little money. That's the way it is all the time. All sorts of schemes for raising money. Earning a lousy reputation as a bunch of clowns. You can't believe Dean Sharp enjoys-"

"I know Harlow Sharp," said Maxwell. "Believe me, he enjoys every minute of it."

"That is blasphemy," Oop said in mock horror. "Don't you know that you can be crucified for blabbing off like that?"

"You're making fun of me," said Carol. "You make fun of everyone, of everything. You, too, Peter Maxwell."

"I apologize for them," said Ghost, "since neither one of them could summon up the grace to apologize, themselves. You have to live with them for ten or fifteen years to understand they really mean no harm."

"But the day will come," said Carol, "when Time will have the funds to do whatever it may want. All their pet projects and to heck with all the other colleges. When the deal goes-"

She stopped abruptly. She sat frozen, not moving. One could sense that she wanted to put her hand up to her mouth and was refraining from it only by iron will.

"What deal?" asked Maxwell.

"I think I know," said Oop. "I heard a rumor, just a tiny little rumor, and I paid no attention to it. Although, come to think of it, these dirty little rumors are the ones that turn out to be true. The great big, ugly, noisy ones-"

"Oop, not a speech," said Ghost. "Just tell us what you heard."

"It's incredible," said Oop. "You never would believe it. Not in all your born days."

"Oh, stop it!" Carol exclaimed.

They all looked at her and waited.

"I made a slip," she said. "I got all worked up and made a slip. Can I ask the three of you just please to forget it. I'm not even sure it's true."

"Certainly," said Maxwell. "You've been exposed this evening to rough company and ill manners and..."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "No, it's not any good to ask. I have no right to ask. I'll simply have to tell you and trust to your discretion. And I'm pretty sure it's true. Time has been made an offer for the Artifact."

Silence reverberated in the room as the other three sat motionless, scarcely breathing. She looked from one to the other of them, not quite understanding.

Finally Ghost stirred slightly and there was a rustling in the silence of the room, as if his white sheet had been an actual sheet that rustled when he moved.

"You do not comprehend," he said, "the attachment that we three hold to the Artifact."

"You struck us in a heap," said Oop.

"The Artifact," said Maxwell softly. "The Artifact, the one great mystery, the one thing in the world that has baffled everyone..."

"A funny stone," said Oop.

"Not a stone," said Ghost.

"Then, perhaps," said Carol, "you'll tell me what it is."

And that was the one thing, Maxwell told himself, that neither Ghost nor any one else could do. Discovered ten years or so ago by Time investigators on a hilltop in the Jurassic Age, it had been brought back to the present at a great expenditure of funds and ingenuity. Its weight had demanded energy far beyond anything so far encountered to kick it forward into time, an energy requirement which had made necessary the projection backward into time of a portable nuclear generator, transported in many pieces and assembled on the site. And then the further task of bringing back the generator, since nothing of that sort, as a matter of simple ethics, could be abandoned in the past-even in the past of the far Jurassic.

"I cannot tell you," said Ghost. "There is no one who can tell you."

Ghost was right. No one had been able to make any sense of it at all. A massive block of some sort of material that now appeared to be neither stone nor metal, although at one time it had been thought to be a stone, and later on, a metal, it had defied all investigation. Six feet long, four feet on each side, it was a mass of blackness that absorbed no energy and emitted none, that bounced all light and other radiation from its surface, that could not be cut or dented, stopping a laser beam as neatly as if the beam had not existed. There was nothing that could scratch it, nothing that could probe it-it gave up no information of any sort at all. It rested on its raised base in the forecourt of Time Museum, the one thing in the world about which no one could even make a valid guess.

"Then," asked Carol, "why the consternation?"

"Because," said Oop, "Pete here has the hunch it may, at one time, have been the god of the Little Folk. That is, if the lousy little stinkers had the capacity to recognize a god."

"I'm sorry," Carol said. "I am truly sorry. I didn't know. Perhaps if Time knew..."

"There's not enough data," Maxwell said, "to make any talk about it. Just a hunch is all. Just a feeling from certain things I've heard among the Little Folk. But even they don't know. It was so long ago."

So long ago, he thought. For the love of God, almost two hundred million years ago!

7

"This Oop," said Carol. "I can't get over him. That funny house he has out at the end of nowhere."

"He'd be offended," said Maxwell, "if he heard you calling it a house. It's a shack and he's proud of it-as a shack. The jump from cave to house would have been too great for him. He'd have felt uncomfortable."

"A cave? He really lived in a cave?"

"Let me tell you something about old friend Oop," said Maxwell. "He is an awful liar. You can't believe all the stories that he tells. The cannibalism, for instance..."

"That makes me feel a little better. People eating one another!"

"Oh, there was cannibalism, all right. There is no doubt of that. But whether Oop himself was headed for the pot is another matter. On items of general information, he is reliable enough. It's only when he gets to yarning about his personal experiences that you should begin to doubt him."

"It's funny," said Carol. "I've seen him around and have wondered a bit about him, but I never thought I'd meet him. Never really wanted to, in fact. Certain people I can draw a line at, and he was one of them. I imagined he would be uncouth..."

"Oh, he's uncouth," said Maxwell.

"But charming, too," said Carol.

Clear autumn stars shone frostily deep in the darkened sky. The roadway, almost unoccupied, wound its way along the ridge. Far below gleamed the far-spreading campus lights. The wind, blowing up the ridge, carried the faint smell of burning leaves.

"The fire was nice," said Carol. "Why is it, Peter, that we don't have fires? It would be so simple. A fireplace wouldn't be so hard to build."

"There was a time, several hundred years ago," said Maxwell, "when every house, or almost every house, had at least one fireplace. Sometimes several. The whole thing, the whole business of having fires, was a throwback, of course. Back to the days when fire was a protection and a warmth. But, finally, we outgrew it."

"I don't think we did," she said. "We just walked away, is all. Turned our back upon this one segment of our past. We still have need of fire. A psychological need, perhaps. I found that out tonight. It was so exciting and so comfortable. Primal, maybe, but there still must be some of the primal in us."

"Oop," he told her, "couldn't live without a fire. The lack of a fire was the thing that bugged him most when Time brought him back. He had to be held captive for a time, of course, when he first was brought here-closely watched over, if not actually confined. But when be became his own master, so to speak, he got hold of a piece of land out at the edge of the campus and built himself the shack. Rough, the way he wanted it. And, of course, a fireplace. And a garden. You should see his garden. The idea of growing food was something new to him. Something that no one back in his day had ever thought about. Nails and saws and hammers, and even lumber, also were new to him, as was everything. But he was highly adaptable. He took to the new tools and ideas without a single hitch. Nothing astonished him. He used hammer and saw and lumber and all the rest of it to build the shack. But I think it was the garden that seemed the most wonderful to him-to grow one's food and not hunt for it. I suppose you noticed-eve n now he is impressed with the sheer bulk and the easy availability of food."

"And of liquor," said Carol.

Maxwell laughed. "Another new idea that he took to. A hobby of his, you might almost say. He makes his own. He's got a still out in the back of his woodshed and be runs off some of the worst moonshine that ever trickled down your throat. Pretty vile stuff."

"But not to guests," said Carol. "That was whiskey tonight."

"You have to be a friend of his," said Maxwell, "before he'll allow you to drink his moon. Those fruit jars he set out..."

"I wondered about those. They seemed to have nothing in them."

"Clear, rotgut moonshine, that was what was in them."

"You said he was a captive once. And now? Just how closely is he tied to Time?"

"A ward of the college. Not really tied at all. But you couldn't drive him off. He's a more loyal partisan of Time than you are."

"And Ghost? He lives here at Supernatural? He's a ward of Supernatural?"

"Hardly. Ghost is a stray cat. He goes anywhere he wishes. He's got friends all over the planet. He's big stuff, I understand, at the College of Comparative Religions on the Himalayan Campus. But he manages to drop in here on a fairly regular basis. He and Oop hit it off from the moment Supernatural made its first contact with Ghost."

"Pete, you call him Ghost. What is he, really?"

"Why, he is a ghost."

"But what's a ghost?"

"I don't know. I don't think anybody does."

"But you're with Supernatural."

"Oh, sure, but all my work has been with the Little Folk, with emphasis on goblins, although I have

an interest in every one of them. Even banshees and there's nothing that comes meaner or more unreasonable than a banshee."

"There must be specialists in ghosts, then. What do they have to say about it?"

"I'd guess they might have a few ideas. There are tons of literature on spookery, but I've never had the time to go into it. I know that back in the early ages it was believed that everyone, when they died, turned into a ghost, but now, I understand, that no longer is believed. There are certain special circumstances that give rise to ghosts, but I don't know what they are."

"That face of his," said Carol. "A little spooky, maybe, but somehow fascinating. I had a hard time to keep from staring at him. Just a dark blankness folded inside his sheet which, I suppose, is not a sheet. And at times a hint of eyes. Little lights that could be eyes. Or was I imagining?"

"No. I've imagined them myself."

"Will you," asked Carol, "grab hold of that fool cat and pull him in a foot or so. He's slipping out onto the faster belt. He has no sense whatever. He'll go to sleep any time, at any place. Eat and sleep is all he thinks about."

Maxwell reached down and tugged Sylvester back into his original position. Sylvester growled and mumbled in his sleep.

Maxwell straightened and leaned back into his chair, looking up into the sky.

"Look at the stars," he said. "There is nothing like the skies of Earth. I'm glad to be back again."

"And now that you're back?"

"After I see you safely home and pick up my luggage, I'm going back to Oop's. He'll have one of those fruit jars all unscrewed and we'll do some drinking and sit and talk till dawn, then I'll get into the bed he has for guests, and he'll curl up on his pile of leaves ..

"I saw those leaves over in the corner and was consumed with curiosity. But I didn't ask."

"He sleeps there all the time. Not comfortable in a bed. After all, when for many years a pile of leaves has been the height of luxury..."

"You're trying to make a fool of me again."

"No, I'm not," said Maxwell. "I'm telling you the truth."

"I didn't mean what will you do tonight. I mean what will you do? You are dead, remember?"

"I'll explain," said Maxwell. "I'll continually explain. Everywhere I go there'll be people who'll want to know what happened. There might even be an investigation of some sort. I sincerely hope there won't, but I suppose there may have to be."

"I'm sorry," Carol said, "but, then, I'm also glad. How fortunate it was that there were two of you."

"If Transport could work it out," said Maxwell, "they might have something they could sell. All of us could keep a second one of us stashed away somewhere against emergency."

"But it wouldn't work," Carol pointed out. "Not personally. This other Peter Maxwell was a second person and-oh, I don't know what I mean. It's too late at night to get it figured out, but I'm sure it wouldn't work."

"No," said Maxwell. "No, I guess it wouldn't. It was a bad idea."

"It was a nice evening," said Carol. "I thank you so much for it. I had a lot of fun."

"And Sylvester had a lot of steak."

"Yes, he did. He'll not forget you. He loves folks who give him steak. He's nothing but a glutton."

"There is just one thing," said Maxwell. "One thing you didn't tell us. Who was it that made the offer for the Artifact?"

"I don't know. Just that there was an offer. Good enough, I gather, for Time to consider it. I simply overheard a snatch of conversation I was not supposed to hear. Does it make a difference?"

"It could," said Maxwell.

"I remember now," she said. "There was another name. Not the one who meant to buy it, or I don't think it was. Just someone who was involved. It had slipped my mind till now. Someone by the name of Churchill. Does that mean anything to you?"

8

Oop was sitting in front of the fireplace, paring his toenails with a large jackknife, when Maxwell returned, carrying his bag.

Oop gestured with his knife toward the bed. "Sling it over there and then come and sit down with me. I've just put a couple of new logs on the fire and I have a jug half finished and a couple more hid out."

"Where's Ghost?" asked Maxwell.

"Oh, he disappeared. I don't know where he went; he never tells me. But he'll be back again. He never is gone long."

Maxwell put the bag on the bed, went over to the fireplace and sat down, leaning against its rough stone face.

"You played the clown tonight," he said, "somewhat better than you usually manage. What was the big idea?"

"Those big eyes of hers," said Oop, grinning. "And just begging to be shocked. I am sorry, Pete. I simply couldn't help it."

"All that talk about cannibalism and vomiting," said Maxwell. "That was pretty low."

"Well," said Oop, "I guess I just got carried away. That's the way folks expect a crummy Neanderthal to act."

"The girl's no fool," said Maxwell. "She planted that story about the Artifact as neatly as I have ever seen it done."

"Planted it?"

"Sure, planted it. You don't think it just slipped out, do you, the way she pretended that it did?"

"I hadn't thought of that," said Oop. "Maybe she did. But if she did, why do you think she did it?"

"I would guess she doesn't want it sold. Figured that if she told it to a blabbermouth like you it would be all over the campus before noon tomorrow. A lot of talk about it, she might figure, would help to kill the deal."

"But you know, Pete, that I'm no blabbermouth."

"I know it. But you acted like one tonight."

Oop closed the jackknife and slid it in his pocket, picked up the half-empty fruit jar and handed it to Maxwell. Maxwell put it to his mouth and drank. The fiery liquid slashed like a knife along his throat and he choked. He wished, he thought, that for once he could drink the stuff without choking on it. He took it down and sat there, gasping for breath, shivering just a little.

"Potent stuff," said Oop. "Best batch I've run off for quite a while. Did you see the bead on it?"

Maxwell, unable to speak, nodded.

Oop reached out and took the jar, tilted it up, lowered its level by an inch or more. He took it down and held it lovingly against his hairy chest. He let out his breath in a whoosh that made the flames in the fireplace dance. He patted the bottle with his free hand.

"First-rate stuff," he said.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and sat, staring at the fire.

"She couldn't, certainly, have taken you for a blabber-mouth," he finally said. "I notice that you did some fancy skating of your own tonight. All around the truth."

"Maybe because I don't entirely know the truth myself," said Maxwell. "Or what to do about it. You set to do some listening?"

"Any time," said Oop. "If that is what you want. Although you don't need to tell me. Not out of friendship. You know we'll still be friends if you tell me nothing. We don't even need to talk about it. There are a lot of other things we could talk about."

Maxwell shook his head. "I have to tell you, Oop. I have to tell someone and you're the only one I would dare to tell. There's too much of it for me to go on carrying it alone."

Oop handed him the fruit jar. "Take another slug of that, then start any time you want. What I can't figure out is the goof by Transport. I don't believe it happened. I would make a guess that it was something else."

"And you'd be right," said Maxwell. "There's a planet out there somewhere. Fairly close, I'd guess. A freewheeling planet, not tied to any sun, although I gather that it could insert itself into a solar system any time it wishes."

"That would take some doing. It would mess up the orbits of all the other planets."

"Not necessarily," said Maxwell. "It wouldn't have to take an orbit in the same plane as the other planets. That would hold down the effect of its being there."

He lifted the fruit jar, shut his eyes, and took a healthy gulp. The top of his head came off and his stomach bounced. He lowered the jar and leaned back against the roughness of the masonry. A wind was mewing in the chimney-a lonely sound, but a sound shut outside by the rough board walls. A log fell in the fireplace and sent up a shower of sparks. The flames danced high and ifickering shadows chased one another all about the room.

Oop reached out and took the jar out of Maxwell's hands, but did not drink immediately. He held it, cuddled, in his lap.

"So this other planet reached out and copied your wave pattern," he said, "and there were two of you."

"How did you know that?"

"Deduction. It was the most logical way for it to happen. I know there were two of you. There was this other one who came back before you did. I talked with him and he was you-he was as much Pete Maxwell as you are, sitting there. He said there was no dragon, that the Coonskin business had been a wild-goose chase, and so he came home ahead of his schedule."

"So that was it," said Maxwell. "I had wondered why he came back early."

"I'm hard put to it," said Oop, "to decide if I should rejoice or mourn. Perhaps a bit of both, leaving some room for wonderment at the strange workings of human destiny. This other man was you and now he's dead and I have lost a friend-for he was a human being and a personality and that humanity and personality came to an end with death. But now there's you and if, before, I'd lost a friend, now I have regained that lost friend, for you are as truly Peter Maxwell as that other one."

"I was told an accident."

"I'm not sure," said Oop. "I've been doing some thinking about it.

Since you came back, I'm not so sure at all. He was getting off a roadway and he tripped and fell, hit his head..."

"You don't trip when you're getting off a roadway. Unless you're drunk or crippled up or awkward. That outside belt is barely crawling."

"I know," said Oop. "That's what the police thought, too. But there was no other explanation and the police, as you well know, require some sort of explanation, so they can close the file. It was in a lonely place. About halfway between here and Goblin Reservation. No one saw it. Must have happened when there was almost no one traveling. Maybe at night. He was found about ten o'clock in the morning. There would have been people traveling from six o'clock on, but probably they'd have been on the inner, faster belts. They wouldn't have seen too much on the outside of the belt. The body could have been lying there for a long time before it was found."

"You think it wasn't an accident? That it may have been a murder?"

"I don't know. The thought has occurred to me. There was one funny thing about it-.something that never was explained. There was a funny smell about the body and the area. A strange sort of odor, like nothing anyone had ever smelled before. Maybe someone found out that there were two of you. For some reason, someone may not have wanted two of you."

"But who could have known there were two of me?"

"The people on that other planet. If there were people..."

"There were people," Maxwell said. "It was a most amazing place...."

It all came back as he sat there talking, almost as if he were there again. A crystal place-or that

had been what it had looked to be when he first had seen it. An extensive crystal plain that ran on and on and a crystal sky with crystal pillars reaching from the plain and upward, apparently to the sky, although the tops of them were lost in the milkiness of sky-pillars soaring upward to hold the sky in place. An empty place, to make one think of a deserted ballroom of extensive size, all cleaned and polished for a ball, waiting for the music and the dancers who had never come and now would never come, leaving the ballroom empty through all eternity, shining in all its polished glitter and its wasted graciousness.

A ballroom, but a ballroom without any walls, running on and on, not to a horizon, for there seemed to be no horizon, but to a point where the sky-that strange, milk-glass sky-came down to meet the crystal floor.

He stood astounded in the vast immensity, an immensity not of boundless sky, for the sky was far from boundless, nor from great distances, for the distances were not great, but immensity that was measured as a room would be, as if one were in a giant's house and lost and were looking for a door, and without a clue as to where a door might be. A place with no distinguishing features, with each pillar like the next, with no cloud in the sky (if it were a sky), with each foot, each mile like every other foot and mile, level and paved with a crystal paving that stretched out in all directions.

He wanted to cry out, to ask if anyone were there, but was afraid to cry out-perhaps in the fear, although he did not realize it then and only thought it later, that a single sound would send all this cold and shining splendor shimmering into a cloud of frosty dust. For the place was silent, with no slightest whisper of a sound. Silent and cold and lonely, all its splendor and its whiteness lost in the loneliness.

Slowly, carefully, fearing that the scuff of his moving feet might bring this whole world into dust, he pivoted and out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse-not of motion, but the flickering sense of motion, as if something had been there, but had moved so fast that his eye had failed to catch it. He halted, the short hairs prickling on the back of his neck, engulfed by the sense of utter strangeness rather than of actual danger, apprehensive of a strangeness so distorted and so twisted out of the normal human context that a man gazing at it might go mad before he had a chance to jerk his eyes away.

Nothing happened and he moved again, pivoting inch by cautious inch, and now he saw that he had been standing with his back turned on what appeared to be an assemblage of some sort-an engine? an instrument? a machine?

And all at once he knew. Here was the strange contraption that had brought him here, this crazy crystal world's equivalent of a matter transmitter and receiver.

But this, he knew at once, was not the Coonskin system. It was no place he had ever heard of. Nowhere in the known universe was there a place like this. Something had gone wrong and he had been hurled, not to the Coonskin planet which had been his destination, but to some far, forgotten corner of the universe, to some area, perhaps, where man would not penetrate for another million years, so far away from Earth that the distances involved became unimaginable.

Now again there were flickering motions, as if living shadows moved against the crystal background. As he watched, the flickering flowed into shifting shape and form and he could see that there were many moving shapes, all of them, strangely, separate entities that seemed to hold, within the flicker of them, individual personalities. As if, he thought in horror, they were things that had once been people-as if they might be alien ghosts.

"And I accepted them," he said to Oop. "I accepted them-on faith, perhaps. It was either that or reject them and be left there, standing all alone upon that crystal plain. A man of a century ago, perhaps, would not have accepted them. He would have been inclined to sweep them out of his mind as pure imagination. But I had spent too many hours with Ghost to gag at the thought of ghosts. I had worked too long with supernatural phenomena to quibble at the idea of creatures and of circumstances beyond the human pale.

"And the strange thing about it, the comforting thing about it, is that they sensed that I accepted them."

"And that is it?" asked Oop. "A planet full of ghosts?" Maxwell nodded, "Perhaps that's one way of looking at it. But let me ask you-what really is a ghost?"

"A spook," said Oop. "A spirit."

"But what do you mean by spook? Define a spirit for me."

"I know," said Oop regretfully. "I was being a bit facetious and there was no excuse for it. We don't know what a ghost is. Even Ghost doesn't know exactly what he is. He simply knows that he exists-and if anyone should know, he should. He has mulled over it a lot. He's thought about it deeply. He has communed with fellow ghosts and there is no evidence. So you fall back upon the supernatural..."

"Which is not understood," said Maxwell.

"A mutation of some sort," suggested Oop.

"Collins thought so," said Maxwell. "But he stood alone. I know I didn't agree with him, but that was before I was on the crystal planet. Now I'm not so sure. What happens when a race reaches an end, when, as a race, it has passed through childhood and middle age and now has reached old age? A race dying as a man does, dying of old age. What does it do, then? It could die, of course. That's what one would expect of it. But suppose there was a reason that it couldn't die, suppose it had to hang on, had to stay alive for some overriding reason, that it could not allow itself to die?"

"If ghostliness really is a mutation," said Oop, "if they knew it was a mutation, if they were so far advanced they could control mutation-"

He stopped and looked at Maxwell. "You think that's what might have happened?"

"I think it might," said Maxwell. "I am beginning to think very much it might."

Oop handed across the fruit jar. "You need a drink," he said. "And when you're through with it, I'll have one, myself."

Maxwell took the jar, holding it, not drinking right away. Oop reached out to the stack of wood, lifted a chunk in one massive fist and threw it on the fire. A spray of sparks gushed up the chimney. Outside the night wind moaned along the eaves.

Maxwell lifted the jar and drank. The splash of liquid ran down his gullet like a torrent of lava. He choked, wishing that he could drink the stuff, just once, without choking on it. He handed the jar back to Oop. Oop lifted it, then took it down again without drinking. He squinted across its rim at Maxwell.

"You said something to live for. Some reason that they couldn't die-that they had to keep on existing, any way they could."

"That's right," said Maxwell. "Information. Knowledge. A planet crammed with knowledge. A storehouse of knowledge-and I would doubt that a tenth of it duplicates our own. The rest of it is new, unknown. Some of it material we have never dreamed of. Knowledge that we may not ferret out short of a million years, if we ever ferret it. It is stored, electronically I suppose-arranging atoms in such a manner that each atom carries a bit of information. Stored in metal sheets, like the pages of a book, stacked in great heaps and piles and each layer of atoms-yes, they are arranged in layers-carries separate information. You read the first layer and then go down to the second layer. Again, like pages in a book, each layer of atoms a page, one stacked atop the other. Each sheet of metal-don't ask me, I can't even guess, how many layers of atoms in each metal sheet. Hundreds of thousands, I would suspect."

Oop lifted the jar hastily, took a tremendous gulp, part of the liquor spraying out across his woolly chest. He let out his breath in a lusty belch.

"They can't abandon this knowledge," said Maxwell. "They have to pass it on to someone who can use it. They have to stay alive, somehow, until they pass it on. And that, for the love of God, is where I come in. They commissioned me to sell it for them."

"Sell it for them! A bunch of ghosts, hanging on by their very toenails! What would they want? What's the price they ask?"

Maxwell put up his hand and wiped his forehead, which had sprouted a sudden mist of sweat. "I don't know," he said.

"Don't know? How can you sell a thing if you don't know what it's worth, if you don't have an asking price?"

"They said they would tell me later. They said to get someone interested and they'd get word to me on what the price would be."

"That," said Oop, disgusted, "is a hell of a way to make a business deal."

"Yes, I know," said Maxwell.

"You have no hint of price?"

"Not the faintest. I tried to explain to them and they couldn't understand, maybe they refused to understand. And since then I have gone over it and over it and there's no way I can know. It all boils down, of course, to what a gang like that might want. And for the life of me, I can't think of a thing they'd want."

"Well," said Oop, "they picked the right place to make their sales pitch. How do you plan to go about it?"

"I'll go up and talk to Arnold."

"You pick them tough," said Oop.

"Look, I have to talk with Arnold and to no one else. This can't go up through channels. There can't a word of it leak out. On the surface, it sounds harebrained. If the communications media or the gossip-mongers got hold of it, the university wouldn't dare to touch it. If it were known and they did consider it and the deal fell through-and, believe me, working in the dark, as I have to work, the deal could well fall through-there'd be just one loud guffaw all the way from here clear out to the Rim. It would be Arnold's neck and my neck and..."

"Pete, Arnold is nothing but a big stuffed shirt. You know that as well as I do. He's an administrator. He's running the business end of this university. I don't care if he has the title of president or not, he's just the manager. He doesn't give a damn about the academic end of it. He won't stick out his neck for three planets full of knowledge."

"The president of the university has to be an administrator...."

"If it could have come at any other time," mourned Oop, "you might have had a chance. But as it stands right now, Arnold is walking on a crate of eggs. Moving the administration from New York to this jerkwater campus..."

"A campus," put in Maxwell, "with a great liberal tradition and-"

"University politics," declared Oop, "doesn't care about liberal traditions or any other kind of traditions."

"I suppose not," said Maxwell, "but Arnold's the man I have to see. I could wish it were someone else. I have no admiration for the man, but he's the one I have to work with."

"You could have turned it down."

"The job of negotiator? No, I couldn't, Oop. No man could have. They'd have had to find someone else and they might get someone who'd bungle it. Not that I'm sure I won't bungle it, but at least I'll try. And it's not only for us, it's for them as well."

"You got to like these people?"

"I'm not sure just how much I liked them. Admired them, maybe. Felt sorry for them, maybe. They're doing what they can. They hunted for so long to find someone they could pass the knowledge on to."

"Pass it on? You said it was for sale."

"Only because there is something that they want or need. I wish I could figure out what it is. It would make everything easier for everyone concerned."

"Minor question-you talked with them. How did you go about it?"

"The tablets," said Maxwell. "I told you about the tablets. The sheets of metal that carried information. They talked with me with tablets and I talked with them the same way."

"But how could you read..."

"They gave me a contraption, like a pair of glasses, a pair of goggles, really, but bigger than a pair of goggles. It was a sort of bulky thing. I suppose it had a lot of mechanisms in it. I'd put it on and then I could read the tablets. No script, just little jiggles in the metal. It's hard to explain. But you looked at the jiggles through the contraption that you wore and you knew what the jiggles said. It was adjustable, I found out later, so you could read the different atomic layers. But to start with, they only wrote me messages, if wrote is the word to use. Like kids writing back and forth to one another on slates. I wrote back to them by thinking into another contraption that was tied into the pair of goggles that I wore."

"A translator," said Gop.

"I suppose that's what it was. A two-way translator."

"We've tried to work one out," said Oop. "By we I mean the combined ingenuity not only of the Earth, but of what we laughingly call the known galaxy."

"Yes, I know," said Maxwell.

"And these folks had one. These ghosts of yours."

"They have a whole lot more," said Maxwell. "I don't know what they have. I sampled some of what they had. At random. Just enough to convince myself they had what they said."

"One thing still bugs me," said Oop. "You said a planet. What about the star."

"The planet is roofed over. There was a star, I gather, but you couldn't see it, not from the surface. The point is, of course, that there needn't be a star. You are acquainted, I think, with the concept of the oscillating universe."

"The yo-yo universe," said Oop. "The one that goes bang, and then bang, bang again."

"That's right," said Maxwell. "And now we can quit wondering about it. It happens to be true. The crystal planet comes from the universe that existed before the present universe was formed. They had it figured out, you see. They knew the time would come when all the energy would be gone and all the dead matter would start moving slowly back to form another cosmic egg, so that the egg could explode again and give birth to yet another universe. They knew they were approaching the death of the universe and that unless something were done, it would be death for them as well. So they launched a project. A planetary project. They sucked in energy and stored it-don't ask me how they extracted it from wherever they extracted it or how they stored it. Stored somehow in the very material of the planet, so that when the rest of the universe went black and dead, they still had energy. They roofed the planet in, they made a house of it. They worked out propulsion mechanisms so they could move their planet, so that th ey would be an independent body moving independently through space. And before the inward drifting of the dead matter of the universe began, they left their star, a dead and blackened cinder by this time, and set out on their own. That's the way they have been since then, a holdover population riding on a planetary spaceship. They saw the old universe die, the one before this one. They were left alone in space, in space that had no hint of life, no glint of light, no quiver of energy. It may be-I don't know-that they saw the formation of the brand-new cosmic egg. They could have been very far from it and seen it. And if they saw it, they saw the explosion that marked the beginning of this universe we live in, the blinding flash, far off, that sent the energy streaking into space. They saw the first stars glow red, they saw the galaxies take shape. And when the galaxies had formed, they joined this new universe. They could go to any galaxy they chose, set up an orbit about any star they wished. They could mov e anytime they wanted to. They were universal gypsies. But the end is nearing now. The planet, I suppose, could keep on and on, for the energy machinery must still be operative. I imagine there might even be a limit to the planet, but they're not even close to that. But the race is dying out and they have stored in their records the knowledge of two universes."

"Fifty billion years," said Oop. "Fifty billion years of learning."

"At least that much," said Maxwell. "It could be a great deal more."

They sat, silent, thinking of those fifty billion years. The fire mumbled in the chimney's throat. From far off came the chiming of the clock in Music Hall, counting off the time.

9

Maxwell awoke.

Oop was shaking him. "Someone here to see you."

Maxwell threw back the covers, hoisted his feet out on the floor, groped blindly for his trousers. Oop handed them to him.

"Who is it?"

"Said his name was Longfellow. Nasty, high-nosed gent. He's waiting outside for you. You could see he wouldn't risk contamination by stepping in the shack."

"Then to hell with him," said Maxwell, starting to crawl back into bed.

"No, no," protested Oop. "I don't mind at all. I'm above insult. There is nothing that can faze me."

Maxwell struggled into his trousers, slid his feet into his shoes and kicked them on.

"Any idea who this fellow is?"

"None at all," said Oop.

Maxwell stumbled across the room to the bench set against the wall, spilled water from the bucket standing there into a washbasin, bent and sloshed water on his face.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"A little after seven."

"Mr. Longfellow must have been in a hurry to see me."

"He's out there now, pacing up and down. Impatient."

Longfellow was impatient.

As Maxwell came out of the door, he hurried up to him and held out a hand.

"Professor Maxwell," he said, "I'm so glad I found you. It was quite a job. Someone told me you might be here," he glanced at the shack and his long nose crinkled just a trifle, "so I took the chance."

"Oop," said Maxwell, quietly, "is an old and valued friend."

"Could we, perhaps, take a stroll," suggested Longfellow. "It is an unusually fine morning. Have you breakfasted yet? No, I don't suppose you have."

"It might help," said Maxwell, "if you told me who you are."

"I'm in Administration. Stephen Longfellow is the name. Appointments secretary to the president."

"Then you're just the man I want to see," said Maxwell. "I need an appointment with the president as soon as possible."

Longfellow shook his bead. "I would say offhand that is quite impossible."

They fell into step and walked along the path that led down toward the roadway. Leaves of wondrous, shining yellow fell slowly through the air from a thick-branched walnut tree that stood beside the path. Down by the roadway a maple tree was a blaze of scarlet against the blueness of the morning sky. And far in that sky streamed a V-shaped flock of ducks heading southward.

"Impossible," said Maxwell. "You make it sound final. As if you'd thought about it and come to your decision."

"If you wish to communicate with Dr. Arnold," Longfellow told him coldly, "there are proper channels. You must understand the president is a busy man and-"

"I understand all that," said Maxwell, "and I understand as well about the channels. Innumerable delays, a request passed on from hand to hand and the knowledge of one's communication spread among so many people-"

"Professor Maxwell," Longfellow said, "there is no use, it seems, to beat about the bush. You're a persistent man and, I suspect, a rather stubborn one, and with a man of that bent it is often best to lay it on the line. The president won't see you. He can't afford to see you."

"Because there seems to have been two of me? Because one of me is dead?"

"The press will be full of it this morning. All the headlines shouting about a man come back from the dead. Have you heard the radio, perhaps, or watched television?"

"No," Maxwell said, "I haven't."

"Well, when you got around to it you'll find that you've been made a three-ring circus. I don't mind telling you that it is embarrassing."

"You mean a scandal?"

"I suppose you could call it that. And administration has trouble enough without identifying itself with a situation such as yours. There is this matter of Shakespeare, for example. We can't duck that one, but we can duck you."

"But surely," said Maxwell, "administration can't be too concerned with Shakespeare and myself as compared to all the other problems that it faces. There is the uproar over the revival of dueling at

Heidelberg and the dispute over the ethics of employing certain alien students on the football squads and-"

"But can't you see," walled Longfellow, "that what happens on this particular campus are the things that matter."

"Because administration was transferred here? When Oxford and California and Harvard and half a dozen others-"

"If you ask me," Longfellow declared stiffly, "it was a piece of poor judgment on the part of the board of regents. It has made things very difficult for administration."

"What would happen," asked Maxwell, "if I just walked up the hill and into administration and started pounding desks?"

"You know well enough. You'd be thrown out."

"But if I brought along a corps of the newspaper and television boys and they were outside watching?"

"I suppose then you wouldn't be thrown out. You might even get to see the president. But I can assure you that under circumstances such as those you'd not get whatever it may be you want."

"So," said Maxwell, "I'd lose, no matter how I went about it."

"As a matter of fact," Longfellow told him, "I had come this morning on quite a different mission. I was bringing happy news."

"I can imagine that you were," said Maxwell. "What kind of sop are you prepared to throw me to make me disappear?"

"Not a sop," said Longfellow, much aggrieved. "I was told to offer you the post of dean at the experimental college the university is establishing out on Gothic IV."

"You mean that planet with all the witches and the warlocks?"

"It would be a splendid opportunity for a man in your field," Longfellow insisted. "A planet where wizardry developed without the intervention of other intelligences, as is the case on Earth."

"A hundred and fifty light-years distant," said Maxwell. "Somewhat remote and I would think it might be dreary. But I suppose the salary would be good."

"Very good indeed."

"No, thanks," said Maxwell. "I'm satisfied with my job, right here."

"Job?" asked Longfellow.

"Why, yes. In case you have forgotten, I'm on the faculty."

Longfellow shook his head. "Not any longer," he said. "Have you, by any chance, forgotten? You died, more than three weeks ago. We can't let vacancies go unfilled."

"You mean I've been replaced?"

"Why, most certainly," Longfellow told him nastily. "As it stands right now, you are unemployed."

10

The waiter brought the scrambled eggs and bacon, poured the coffee, then went away and left Maxwell at the table. Through the wide expanse of window, Lake Mendota stretched away, a sheet of glassy blue, with the faint suggestion of purple hills on the other shore. A squirrel ran down the bole of the gnarled oak tree that stood just outside the window and halted, head downward, to stare with beady eyes at the man sitting at the table. A brown and red oak leaf planed down deliberately, from branch to ground, wobbling in the tiny thermal currents of air. On the rocky shore a boy and girl walked slowly, hand in hand, through the lakeshore's morning hush.

It would have been civilized and gracious, Maxwell told himself, to have accepted Longfellow's invitation to eat breakfast with him, but by that time he had had all that he could take of the appointments secretary and all that he wanted, at the moment, was to be alone, to gain a little time to sort out the situation and to do some thinking-although probably he could not afford the time for thinking.

Oop had been right; it was apparent now that to see the university president would be no easy task, not only because of that official's busy schedule and his staff's obsession of doing things through channels, but because for some reason, not entirely understood, this matter of twin Peter Maxwells had assumed the proportions of a scandal from which Arnold had the fervent wish to be disassociated. Maxwell wondered, sitting there and gazing out the window at the popeyed, staring squirrel, whether this attitude of the administration might go back to the interview with Drayton. Had Security zeroed in on Arnold? It didn't seem too likely, but it was, Maxwell admitted, a possibility. But be that as it may, the depth of Arnold's jittery attitude was emphasized by the hurried offer of the post on Gothic IV. Not only did administration want nothing to do with this second Peter Maxwell, it wanted him off the Earth as well, buried on a planet where in the space of a little time he would be forgotten.

It was understandable that his post at Supernatural had been filled after the death of the other Peter Maxwell. After all, classes must go on. Gaps could not be left in the faculty. But even so, there were other positions that could have been found for him. The fact that this had not been done, that the Gothic IV position had been so quickly offered, was evidence enough that he was not wanted on the Earth.

Yet, it all was strange. Administration could not have known until sometime yesterday that two Peter Maxwells had existed. There could not have been a problem, there'd have been no basis for a problem, until that word had been received. Which meant, Maxwell told himself, that someone had gotten to administration fast-someone who wanted to get rid of him, someone who was afraid that he would interfere. But interfere in what? And the answer to that seemed so glib and easy that he felt, instinctively, that it must be wrong. But search as he might, there was one answer only-that someone else knew of the hoard of knowledge on the crystal planet and was working to get hold of it.

There was one name to go on. Carol had said Churchill-that Churchill somehow was involved in the offer that had been made to Time for the Artifact. Was it possible that the Artifact was the price of the crystal planet's knowledge? One couldn't count on that, of course, although it might be so, for no one knew what the Artifact might be.

That Churchill was working on the deal was no surprise at all. Not for himself, of course, but for someone else. For someone who could not afford to have his identity revealed. It was in deals such as this that Churchill might prove useful. The man was a professional fixer and knew his way around. He had contacts and through long years of operation undoubtedly had laid out various pipelines of information into many strange and powerful places.

And if such were the case, Maxwell realized, his job became much harder. Not only must he guard against the rumormongering that was implicit in administration channels, he must now be doubly sure that none of his information fell into other hands where it might be used against him.

The squirrel had gone on down the tree trunk and now was busily scrounging on the slope of lawn that ran down to the lake, rustling through the fallen leaves in search of an acorn he might somehow have missed before. The boy and girl had walked out of sight and now a hesitant breeze was softly rumpling the surface of the lake.

There were only a few others at breakfast in the room; most of those who had been there when Maxwell entered had finished now and left. From the floor above came the distant murmuring of voices, the scuffling of feet as the daily flow of students began to fill the Union, the off-hours gathering place of undergraduates.

It was one of the oldest structures on the campus and one of the finest, Maxwell told himself. For over five hundred years it had been the meeting place, the refuge, the study hall of many generations and in the course of all these generations it had settled easily and comfortably into the functional tradition that made it a second home for many thousand students. Here could be found a quietness for reflection or for study, here the cozy corners needed for good talk, here the game rooms for billiards or for chess, here the eating places, here the meeting halls, and tucked off in odd corners little reading rooms with their shelves of books.

Maxwell pushed back his chair, but stayed sitting, finding himself somehow reluctant to get up and leave-for once he left this place, he knew, he'd plunge into the problems he must face. Outside the window lay a golden autumn day, warming as the sun rose in the sky-a day for showers of golden leaves,

for blue haze on the distant hills, for the solemn glory of chrysanthemums bedded in the garden, for the quiet glow of goldenrod and aster in the fields and vacant lots.

From behind him he heard the scurrying of many hard-shod feet and when he swung around in his chair, he saw the owner of the feet advancing rapidly across the squared red tiles toward him.

It looked like an outsize, land-going shrimp, with its jointed legs, its strangely canted body with long, weird rods-apparently sensory organs-extending outward from its tiny head. Its color was an unhealthy white and its three globular black eyes bobbed on the ends of long antennae.

It came to a halt beside the table and the three antennae swiveled to aim the three eyes straight at Maxwell.

It said in a high, piping voice, the skin of its throat fluttering rapidly beneath the seemingly inadequate head, "Informed I am that you be Professor Peter Maxwell."

"The information happens to be right," said Maxwell. "I am Peter Maxwell."

"I be a creature out of the world you would name Spearhead Twenty-seven. Name I have is of no interest to you. I appear before you in carrying out commission by my employer. Perhaps you know it by designation of Miss Nancy Clayton."

"Indeed I do," said Maxwell, thinking that it was very much like Nancy Clayton to employ an outlandish creature such as this for an errand boy.

"I work myself through education," explained the Shrimp, "doing anything I find."

"That's commendable," said Maxwell.

"I train in mathematics of time," declared the Shrimp. "I concentrate on world-line configurations. I am in tizzy over it."

The Shrimp didn't look as if it were in any sort of tizzy.

"Why all the interest?" Maxwell asked "Something in your background? Something in your cultural heritage?"

"Oh, very much indeed. Is completely new idea. On my world, no thought of time, no appreciation such a thing as time. Am much shocked to learn of it. And excited, too. But I digress too greatly. I come here on an errand. Miss Clayton desires to know can you attend a party the evening of this day. Her place, eight by the clock."

"I believe I can," said Maxwell. "Tell her I always make a point of being at her parties."

"Overjoyed," said the Shrimp. "She so much wants you there. You are talked concerning."

"I see," said Maxwell.

"You hard to find. I run hard and fast. I ask in many places. Finally victorious."

"I am sorry," Maxwell said, "I put you to such trouble."

He reached into his pocket and took out a bill. The creature extended one of its forward legs and grasped the bill in a pair of pincers, folded it and refolded it and tucked it into a small pouch that extruded from its chest.

"You kind beyond expectation," it piped. "There is one further information. Occasion for party is unveiling of painting, recently acquired. Painting lost and gone for very long. By Albert Lambert, Esquire. Great triumph for Miss Clayton."

"I just bet it is," said Maxwell. "Miss Clayton is a specialist in triumphs."

"She, as employer, is gracious," said the Shrimp reprovingly.

"I am sure of that," said Maxwell.

The creature shifted swiftly and galloped from the room.

Listening to its departure, Maxwell heard it clatter up the stairs to the street level of the building.

Maxwell got up and headed for the stairs himself. If he were going to witness the unveiling of a painting, he told himself, he'd better bone up on the artist. Which was exactly, he thought with a grin, what almost every other person invited to Nancy's party would be doing before the day was out.

Lambert? The name held a slight ring of recognition. He had read somewhere about him, probably long ago. An article in a magazine, perhaps, to help pass an idle hour.

11

Maxwell opened the book.

"Albert Lambert," said the opening page of text, "was born in Chicago, Illinois, January 11, 1973. Famed as a portrayer of grotesque symbolism, his early years gave no promise of his great accomplishments. His initial work, while it was competent and showed a skillful craftsmanship and a deep insight into his subject matter, was not particularly outstanding. His grotesque period came after his fiftieth year and, rather than developing, burst into full flower almost overnight, as if the artist had developed it secretly and did not show his canvasses of this period until he was satisfied with this new phase of his work. But there is no evidence that this actually was the case; rather, there seems to be some evidence that it was not..."

Maxwell flipped over the text pages to reach the color plates and leafed quickly through examples of the artist's early work. And there, in the space of one page to the next, the paintings changed-the artistic concept, the color, even, it seemed to Maxwell, the very craftsmanship.

As if the work had been that of two different artists, the first tied intellectually to some inner need of orderly expression, the second engulfed, obsessed, ridden by some soul-shaking experience of which he tried to cleanse himself by spreading it on canvas.

Stark, dark, terrible beauty beat out of the page and in the dusky silence of the library reading room it seemed to Maxwell that he could hear the leathery whisper of black wings. Outrageous creatures capered across the outrageous landscape, and yet the landscape and the creatures, Maxwell sensed at once, were not mere fantasy, were no whimsical product of a willful unhinging of the mind, but seemed to be solidly based upon some outré geometry predicated upon a logic and an outlook alien to anything he had ever seen. The form, the color, the approach and the attitude were not merely twisted human values; one had the instant feeling that they might be, instead, the prosaic representation of a situation in an area entirely outside any human value. Grotesque symbolism, the text had said, and it might be there, of course, but if so, Maxwell told himself, a symbolism that could only be arrived at most tortuously after painful study.

He turned the page and there it was again, that complete divergence from humanity-a different scene with different creatures against a different landscape, but carrying, as had that first plate, the shattering impact of actuality, no figment of the artist's mind, but the representation of a scene he once had gazed upon and sought now to expurgate from mind and memory. As a man might wash his hands, Maxwell thought, lathering them fiercely with a bar of strong, harsh soap, scrubbing them again and yet again, endlessly, in a desperate attempt to remove by physical means a psychic stain that he had incurred. A scene that he had gazed upon, perhaps, not through human eyes, but through the alien optics of a lost and unguessed race.

Maxwell sat fascinated, staring at the page, wanting to pull his eyes away, but unable to, trapped by the weird and awful beauty, by some terrible, hidden purpose that he could not understand. Time, the Shrimp had said, was something that his race had never thought of, a universal factor that had not impinged upon his culture, and here, captured in these color plates, was something that man had never thought of, had never even dreamed.

He reached out his hand to grasp the book and close it, but he hesitated as if there were some reason he should not close the book, some compelling reason to continue staring at the plate.

And in that hesitancy, he became aware of a certain strangeness that might keep him staring at the page-a puzzling factor that he had not recognized consciously, but that had been nagging at him.

He took his hands away and sat staring at the plate, then slowly turned the page and as he glanced at that third plate, the strangeness leaped out at him-a brushed-in flickering, an artistic technique that made an apparent shimmer, as if something of substance were there and twinkling, seen one moment, not quite seen the next.

He sat, slack-jawed, and watched the flickering-a trick of the eye, most likely, a trick of the eye encouraged by the mastery of the artist over paint and brush. But trick of the eye or not, easy of

recognition by anyone who had seen the ghostly race of the crystal planet.

And through the hushed silence of the dusky room one question hammered at him: How could Albert Lambert have known about the people of the crystal planet?

12

"I had heard about you," Allen Preston said, "and it seemed incredible, of course. But the source of my information seemed unimpeachable and I made an effort to get in touch with you. I'm a bit worried over this situation, Pete. As an attorney, I'd say you were in trouble."

Maxwell sat down in the chair in front of Preston's desk. "I suppose I am," he said. "For one thing, it appears I've lost my job. Is there such a thing as tenure in a case like mine?"

"A case like yours?" the attorney asked. "Just what is the situation? No one seems to know. Everyone is talking about it, but no one seems to know. I, myself..."

Maxwell grinned wryly. "Sure. You'd like to know. You're puzzled and confused and not quite sure you're sane. You sit there wondering if I'm really Peter Maxwell."

"Well, are you?" Preston asked.

"I am sure I am. I wouldn't blame you, or anyone, if you doubted it. There were two of us. Something happened to the wave pattern. One of us went to the Coonskin system, the other somewhere else. The one who went to Coonskin came back to Earth and died. I came back yesterday."

"And found that you were dead."

Maxwell nodded. "My apartment had been rented, my possessions all are gone. The university tells me my position has been filled and I'm without a job. That's why I asked about the tenure situation."

Preston leaned back in his chair and squinted thoughtfully at Maxwell. "Legally," he said, "I think we'd find that the university stands on solid ground. You are dead, you see. You have no tenure now. Not, at least, until it can be reestablished."

"Through a long process at law?"

"Yes, I would suspect so. I can't give you an honest answer. There is no precedent. Oh, sure there are precedents in the case of mistaken identity-someone who is dead being mistakenly identified as someone who is still alive. But with you, there's no mistake. A man who undeniably was Peter Maxwell is undeniably dead, and there is no precedent for reestablishing identity in a situation such as that. We'd have to set our own precedent as we went along, a very laborious beating through the thickets of legal argument. It might take years. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure where or how to start. Oh, it could be developed, it could be carried forward, but it would take a lot of work and thought. First, of course, we'd have to establish, legally, who you are."

"Who I really am? For God's sake, Al, we know who I am."

"But the law doesn't. The law wouldn't recognize you as you are today. You have no legal being. Absolutely none. All your identification cards have been turned in to Records and have been filed by now-"

"But I have those cards," said Maxwell quietly. "Right here in my pocket."

Preston stared at him. "Yes, come to think of it, I suppose you have. Oh Lord, what a mess!"

He got up and walked across the room, shaking his head. At the wall, he turned around and came back. He sat down again.

"Let me think about it," he said. "Give me a little time. I can dig up something. We have to dig up something. And there's a lot to do. There's the matter of your will..."

"My will? I'd forgot about the will. Never thought of it."

"It's in probate. But I can get a stay of some sort."

"I willed everything to my brother, who's with the Exploratory Service. I could get in touch with him, although it might be quite a chore. He's usually out with the fleet. But the point is that there'll be no trouble there. As soon as he knows what happened..."

"Not with him," said Preston, "but the court's a different, matter. It can be done, of course, but it may take time. Until it's cleared, you'll have no claim to your estate. You own nothing except the clothes you stand in and what is in your pockets."

"The university offered me a post on Gothic IV. Dean of a research unit. But at the moment, I'm not about to take it."

"How are you fixed for cash?"

"I'm all right. For the present. Oop took me in and I have some money. If I had to, I could pick up some sort of job. Harlow Sharp would help me out if I needed something. Go on one of his field trips, if nothing else. I think I might like that."

"But don't you have to have some sort of Time degree?"

"Not if you go as a working member of the expedition. To hold a supervisory post of some sort, it would take one, I suppose."

"Before I start moving," Preston said, "I'll have to know the details. Everything that happened."

"I'll write out a statement for you. Have it notarized. Anything you want."

"Seems to me," said Preston, "we might file action against Transportation. They put you in this mess."

Maxwell hedged. "Not right now," he said. "We can think of it later on."

"You get that statement put together," Preston told him. "And in the meantime, I'll do some thinking and look up some law. Then we can make a start. Have you seen the papers or looked at television?"

Maxwell shook his head. "I haven't had the time."

"They're going wild," said Preston. "It's a wonder they haven't cornered you. They must be looking for you. All they have as yet is conjecture. You were seen last night at the Pig and Whistle. A lot of people apparently spotted you there last night, or thought they did. The line right now is that you've come back from the dead. If I were you, I'd keep out of their way. If they should catch up with you, tell them absolutely nothing."

"I have no intention to," said Maxwell.

They sat in the quiet office, looking silently at one another."

"What a mess!" said Preston, finally. "What a lovely mess! I believe, Pete, I might just enjoy this."

"By the way," said Maxwell, "Nancy Clayton invited me to a party tonight. I've been wondering if there might be some connection-although there needn't be. Nancy used to invite me on occasion."

Preston grinned. "Why, you're a celebrity. You'd be quite a catch for Nancy."

"I'm not too sure of that," said Maxwell. "She must have heard I had shown up. She'd be curious, of course."

"Yes," said Preston dryly, "she would be curious."

13

Maxwell expected that he might find newsmen lying in wait for him at Oop's shack, but there was no one there. Apparently the word hadn't spread that he was staying there.

The shack stood in the drowsiness of late afternoon, with the autumn sunlight pouring like molten gold over the weatherbeaten lumber scraps of which it had been built. A few bees buzzed lazily in a bed of asters that grew outside the door, and down the stretch of hillside above the roadway a few yellow butterflies drifted in the hazy afternoon.

Maxwell opened the door and stuck in his head. There was no one there. Oop was off prowling somewhere and there was no sign of Ghost. A banked fire glowed redly in the fireplace. Maxwell shut the door and sat down on the bench that stood before the shack.

Far to the west one of the campus four lakes shone as a thin blue lens. The countryside was painted brown and yellow by dead sedges and dying grasses. Here and there little islands of color flared in scattered groups of trees.

Warm and soft, thought Maxwell. A land that one could dream in. Unlike those violent, gloomy landscapes that Lambert had painted so many years ago.

He sat wondering why those landscapes should stick so tightly, like a bur against his mind. Wondering, too, how the artist could have known how the ghostly inhabitants of the crystal planet flickered. It could not be merely happenstance; it was not the sort of thing a man might readily imagine. Reason said that Lambert must have known about those ghostly people, reason just as plainly said it was impossible.

And what about all those other creatures, all those other grotesque monstrosities Lambert had spread with an insane, vicious brush across the canvasses? Where did they fit in? Where might they have come from? Or were they simply mad figments of imagination, torn raw and bleeding from a strangely tortured mind? Were the people of the crystal planet the only authentic creatures Lambert had depicted? It did not seem too likely. Somewhere or other, somehow or other, Lambert must have seen these other creatures, too. And was the landscape pure imagination, brushed in to maintain the mood established by the creatures, or might it have been the landscape of the crystal planet at some other time, before it had been fixed forever in the floor and roof that shut it in against the universe? But that, he told himself, was impossible, for the planet had been enclosed before the present universe was born. Ten billion years at least, perhaps as much as fifty billion.

Maxwell stirred uneasily. It made no sense at all. None of it made any sort of sense. He had trouble enough, he told himself, without worrying about Lambert's paintings. He had lost his job, his estate was locked in probate, be didn't have a legal standing as a human being.

But none of that mattered too much, not right now, anyhow. First came the matter of the hoard of knowledge on the crystal planet. It was a knowledge the university must have-a body of knowledge that most certainly was greater than the total of all knowledge in the known galaxy. Some of it would duplicate what was already known, of course, but there would be, he was certain, other huge areas of understanding which were yet unthought of. The little that he had had the time to see bolstered that belief.

Once again, it seemed, he was hunkered down before the table, almost like a coffee table, on which he'd piled the metal sheets he had taken from the shelves, and with the contraption that was a reader, an interpreter, call it what one might, fastened to his head.

There had been the sheet of metal that talked about the mind, not in metaphysical or philosophic terms, but as a mechanism, employing terms and concepts that he could not grasp. He had struggled with the terminology, he remembered, for he knew that here was a treatise on an area of understanding no one yet had touched, but after a time had put it to one side, for it was beyond him. And there was that other piece of metal, that other book, which appeared to be a basic text on the application of certain mathematical principles to the social sciences, although some of the social sciences that were mentioned he could only guess at, groping after the concepts as a blind man might grope after flitting butterflies. There had been histories, he recalled, not of one universe, but two, and natural history which had told of life forms so fantastic in their basic principles and their functions that they seemed unbelievable, and a very thin sheet of metal, so thin it bent and twisted, like a sheet of paper, when he handled it, that had been so far beyond his understanding that he could not quite be sure what it was about. And a thicker piece of metal, a much thicker piece, wherein he read the thoughts and philosophies of creatures and of cultures long since gone to dust that had sent him reeling back, frightened, disgusted, outraged and dismayed, but still full of a fearful wonder, at the utter inhumanity expressed m those philosophies.

All that and more, much more, a trillion times more, was waiting out there on the crystal planet.

It was important, he reminded himself, that he carry out the assignment that he had been given. It was vital that the library of the crystal planet be attained and, probably, although no time limit had been placed, that it be done quickly. For if he failed there was, he felt sure, a good possibility that the planet would go elsewhere to seek another market, to offer what it had, out into another sector of the galaxy, perhaps out of the galaxy entirely.

The Artifact, he told himself, could be the price, although he could not be sure of that. The fact that an offer had been made for it, and that Churchill somehow was involved in it, made that seem reasonable.

But at the moment he could not be sure. The Artifact might be wanted by someone for some other purpose, perhaps by someone who might finally have figured out exactly what it was. He tried to imagine exactly what they might have found, but he had no facts to go on, and he failed.

A flight of blackbirds came swirling down out of the sky, skimming just above the roof of the shack, sailing over the roadway. Maxwell watched them settle into the dying vegetation of a stretch of marsh, balancing their bodies delicately on the bending stems of rank-growing weeds, come there to feed for an hour or so before flying off to roost in some secluded woodland they had picked as a bivouac on their migration southward.

Maxwell got up and stretched. The peace and the quiet of the tawny afternoon had soaked into his body. He'd like a nap, he thought. After a time Oop would come back home and wake him and they'd have something to eat and talk for a while before he went off to Nancy's.

He opened the door and went into the shack, crossing the floor to sit upon the bed. Maybe, he thought, he ought to see if he still had a clean shirt and an extra pair of socks to don before the party. He reached out and hauled his bag off the floor and dumped it on the bed.

Opening the catches, he threw back the lid and took out a pair of trousers to get at the shirts that were packed beneath them. The shirts were there and so was something else, a contraption with a headband and two eyepieces folded up against it.

He stared at it in wonder, recognizing it. It was the translator which he had used on the crystal planet to read the metal tablets. He lifted it out and let it dangle in his hand. Here was the band to clamp around the head, with the power pack in the back, and the two eyepieces one flipped down into position once the device was fastened on the head.

He must have packed it by mistake, he thought, although be could not, for the life of him, remember packing it. But there it was and perhaps no harm was done. It might even be used at some future time to help substantiate his claim he had been on the planet. Although, he realized, it was not good evidence. It was just a gadget that had an ordinary look about it, although it might not, he reminded himself, seem so ordinary if someone poked around in the mechanism of it.

A light tapping came from somewhere and Maxwell, surprised by so small a noise, stiffened and held himself rigid, listening. Perhaps a windblown branch, he thought, tapping on the roof, although it had a slightly different sound than a branch against the roof.

The tapping stopped and then began again, this time not a steady rapping, but rather like a code. Three quick taps and then a pause, followed by two rapid taps and then another pause, with the pattern of the tapping repeated once again.

It was someone at the door.

Maxwell got up from the bed and stood undecided. It might be newsmen who had finally tracked him down, or thought they'd tracked him down, and if that should be the case, it might be best to leave the door unanswered. But the tapping at the door, it seemed to him, was not boisterous enough, not demanding enough, for a newsman, or several newsmen, who had finally run him to his lair. The taps were soft, almost tentative, the kind of tapping that might be done by someone who did not want to advertise their presence, or who, for one reason or another, was not quite sure of purpose. And if it were newsmen, Maxwell realized, it would do no good not to let them in, for in a little while they'd try the door and find it open and then come bursting in.

The tapping, which had stopped for a moment, took up again. Maxwell trudged to the door and threw it open. Outside stood the Shrimp, a ghostly, gleaming white in the wash of sunlight. Beneath one of his limbs, which now served as an arm rather than a leg, he clutched a paper-wrapped bundle tight against his body.

"For the love of God, come in," said Maxwell sharply, "before someone sees you here."

The Shrimp came in and Maxwell closed the door, wondering what it was that had caused him to urge it in.

"You need no apprehension," said the Shrimp, "about news harvesters. I was careful and I noticed. No one followed me. I'm such a foolish-looking creature no one ever follows me. No one ever accords to me any purpose whatsoever."

"That is a fortunate thing to have," said Maxwell. "I think that it is called protective coloration."

"I appear again," said Shrimp, "on behalf of Miss Nancy Clayton. She knows you carried little on your trip, have had no chance to shop or have laundry done. No wish to embarrass-charging me to say this with goodly emphasis-but wish to send you clothes to wear."

He took the bundle from underneath his arm and handed it to Maxwell.

"That is nice of Nancy."

"She is thoughtful person. She commissioned me to say further."

"Go ahead," said Maxwell.

"There will be wheeled vehicle to take you to the house."

"There is no need of that," said Maxwell. "The roadway runs right past her place."

"Once again apology," said the Shrimp, with firmness, "but she thinks it best. There is much hithering and thithering, by many types of creatures, to learn your whereabouts."

"Can you tell me," asked Maxwell, "how Miss Clayton knows my whereabouts?"

Said the Shrimp, "I truly do not know."

"All right, then. You'll thank Miss Clayton for me?"

"With gladness," said the Shrimp.

14

"I'll take you around to the back," the driver said. "There is a swarm of newsmen hanging around out front. They'll be gone later on, but now they're there in droves. Miss Clayton suggested you might not want to meet them."

"Thank you," Maxwell said. "It is thoughtful of you." Nancy, he told himself, had taken over, as was her usual practice, viewing it as her prerogative to order people's lives.

Her house stood on the low bluff that hemmed in the western edge of the lake. Off to the left the water gleamed softly in the early moonlight. The front of the house was ablaze with light, but the back was dark.

The car turned off the highway and climbed slowly along a narrow driveway lined by massive oaks. A startled bird flew, squawking, across the roadway, a flurry of desperately beating wings caught for a moment in the headlights. A pair of dogs came raging down the hollow tunnel of the drive, split and swung on either side of the car.

The driver chuckled. "If you were walking, they'd eat you alive."

"But why?" asked Maxwell. "Why, all at once, must Nancy be guarded by a dog pack?"

"Not Miss Clayton," the driver said. "It is someone else."

The question came to Maxwell's tongue, but he choked it back.

The driver swung the car into a curved driveway that ran beneath an open portico, and pulled up to a halt.

"In the back door," the driver said. "You don't need to knock. Then straight down the hall past the curved staircase. The party's up in front."

Maxwell started to open the car door, then hesitated.

"You need not mind the dogs," the driver told him. "They recognize the car. Anyone who steps out of it is OK with them."

There was, in fact, no sign of the dogs, and Maxwell went swiftly up the three steps of the stoop, opened the back door, and stepped into the hall.

The hall was dark, A little light filtered down the winding staircase-someone apparently had left on a light on the second story. But that was all; there were no other lights. From somewhere in the front of the house came the muffled sound of revelry.

He stood for a moment without moving and as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he could see that the hall ran for some distance toward the center of the house, past the foot of the winding

stairs and beyond. There was a door back there, or perhaps an abrupt turn in the hall, that would take him party-ward.

It was strange, he told himself. If Nancy had instructed the driver to bring him to the back, she would have had someone there to greet him, or at least she would have seen that there was a light so he could find his way.

Strange, and very awkward, to arrive this way, to grope his way along the hall in search of the others who were there. For a moment he considered turning about and leaving, making his way back to Oop's place. Then he remembered the dogs. They would be out there and waiting and they looked like vicious brutes.

This whole business, he told himself, was not at all like Nancy. Nancy wouldn't do a thing like this. There was something very wrong and he did not like it.

He moved cautiously down the hall, alert for chair or table that might be there to trip him up. He could see a little better now, but the hall was still a tunnel without any details.

He passed the stairs, skirting around their base, and now, with the light from the stairway partially cut off, the hall became darker than it was before.

A voice asked, "Professor Maxwell? Is that you, Professor?"

Maxwell stopped in mid-stride, balancing on one leg, then carefully put his lifted foot down against the floor and stood, not stirring, while goose bumps prickled on his skin.

"Professor Maxwell," said the voice, "I know that you are out there."

It was not a voice, actually, or it didn't seem to be. There had been no sound, Maxwell could have sworn, yet he had heard the words, not so much, perhaps, in his ear, as somewhere in his brain.

He felt the terror mounting in him and he tried to fight it off, but it didn't go away. It stayed, crouched somewhere out there in the dark, ready to rush in.

He tried to speak and gulped instead. The voice said, "I've waited here for you, Professor. I want to communicate with you. It is to your interest as much as it is to mine."

"Where are you?" Maxwell asked.

"Through the door just to your left."

"I do not see a door."

Good common sense hammered hard at Maxwell. Break and run, it said. Get out of here as fast as you can go.

But he couldn't break and run. He couldn't bring himself to do it. And if he ran, which way should he run? Not back to the door, for the dogs were waiting out there. Not clattering down the darkened hall, more than likely to bump into something and raise a terrible clatter, to alert the guests up there in front and to be found, when they investigated, disheveled and bruised and sweating with his fear. For if he ran, he knew, fear would pounce upon him and he'd give way to it.

It was bad enough sneaking in from the back door on a party without being found in a condition such as that.

If it had been just a voice, any kind of voice, it would not have been so frightening, but it was a strange kind of voice-there was no intonation to it and there was about it a certain raw, mechanical, almost rasping quality. It was not a. human voice, Maxwell told himself. There was an alien in that room.

"There is a door," the flat, hard voice said. "Step slightly to your left and push against it."

The whole thing was becoming ridiculous, Maxwell told himself. Either he went through the door or he broke and ran. He might try to simply walk away, but he knew that the minute he turned his back upon that hidden door, he would run-not because he wanted to, but because he had to, running from the fear he had turned his back upon.

He stepped to the left, found the door, and pushed. The room was dark, but from a lamp somewhere in the yard outside, some light filtered through the windows, falling on a roly-poly creature that stood in the center of the room, its pudgy belly gleaming with a writhing phosphorescence, as if a group of luminescent sea-dwellers had been imprisoned in a bowl.

"Yes," the creature said, "you are quite right. I am one of those beings that you call a Wheeler. For my visit here I have given myself a designation that falls easy on your mind. You may call be Mr.

Marmaduke. For convenience only, I suspect you understand, for it's not my name. In fact, none of us have names. They are unnecessary. Our personal identity is achieved in another way."

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Marmaduke," said Maxwell, speaking slowly, the only way he could, since his lips had become, like the rest of him, slightly stiff and frozen.

"And I you, Professor."

"How did you know who I was?" asked Maxwell. "You seemed to have no doubt at all. You knew, of course, I'd be coming down the hall."

"Of course," the Wheeler said.

Now Maxwell could see the creature a bit more clearly, the bloated body supported on two wheels, the lower part of the body gleaming and twisting like a pail of worms.

"You are Nancy's guest?" he asked.

"Yes," said Mr. Marmaduke, "certainly I am. The guest of honor, I believe, at this gathering she has."

"Then, perhaps, you should be out with the other guests."

"I pleaded tiredness," said Mr. Marmaduke. "A slight prevarication, I must admit, since I am never tired. So I went to rest a while-"

"And to wait for me?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Marmaduke.

Nancy, Maxwell thought. No, Nancy, he was sure, wasn't in on it. She had a frothy brain and all she cared about were her everlasting parties and she'd be incapable of any kind of intrigue.

"There is a subject we can talk about," said Mr. Marmaduke, "with some profit, I presume, to the both of us. You are looking for a buyer, I believe, for a large commodity. I might have some passing interest in that commodity."

Maxwell moved back a step and tried to find an answer. But there was no ready answer. Although he should have known, he told himself, or at least have suspected.

"You say nothing," said Mr. Marmaduke. "I cannot be mistaken. You are, without fail, the agent for the sale?"

"Yes," said Maxwell. "Yes, I am the agent."

There was no use denying it, he knew. Somehow or other, this creature in the room knew about the other planet and the hoard of knowledge. And he might know the price as well. Could it have been the Wheeler, he wondered, who had made the offer for the Artifact?

"Well, then," said Mr. Marmaduke, "let us proceed immediately to business and a discussion of the terms. Not forgetting, in the course of it, to mention the commission that will be coming to you."

"I am afraid," said Maxwell, "that is impossible at the moment. I do not know the terms. You see, I was first to find a potential buyer and then-"

"No trouble whatsoever," said Mr. Marmaduke, "for I have the knowledge that you lack. I am acquainted with the terms."

"And you will pay the price?"

"Oh, without any question," said the Wheeler. "It will take just a little time. There are certain negotiations which must be terminated. Once those are done, you and I can complete all business and the matter will be done, without any fuss or trouble. The only thing, it would appear to me, is a determination of the commission which you will have earned so richly."

"I would imagine," said Maxwell bleakly, "that it might be a good commission."

"We had in mind," said Mr. Marmaduke, "of naming you-shall we say librarian?-of the commodity we purchase. There will be much to do working out the various commodities and codifying them. For work of this sort we will need a creature such as you, and I imagine that you might find the work highly interesting. And the salary-Professor Maxwell, we pray you name the salary and the conditions of employment."

"I would have to think about it."

"By all means," said Mr. Marmaduke. "In a procedure such as this, a little thought is good. You will find us most disposed to generosity."

"That's not what I meant," said Maxwell. "I'll have to think about the deal. Whether I'd be willing to arrange a sale for you."

"You doubt, perhaps, our worthiness to purchase the commodity?"

"That might be it," said Maxwell.

"Professor Maxwell," said the Wheeler, "it would be advisable for you to lay aside your doubts. It is for the best that you entertain no doubt of us at all. For we are most determined that we shall obtain what you have to offer. So, in the best of grace, you should deal with us."

"Whether I want to or not?" asked Maxwell.

"I," said Mr. Marmaduke, "would have not put it quite so bluntly. But you state it most correctly."

"You are not in the best position," Maxwell told him, "to speak in that tone of voice."

"You are not aware of the position that we hold," the Wheeler said. "Your knowledge goes out to only a certain point in space. You cannot know what lies beyond that point."

There was something in the words, something in the way that they were said, that sent a chill through Maxwell, as if from some unknown quarter of the universe a sharp, frigid blast of wind had blown through the room.

Your knowledge goes only to a certain point in space, Mr. Marmaduke had said, and what lay beyond that point? No one could know, of course, except that in certain areas beyond the shadowy frontier of man's probing it was known the Wheelers had staked out an empire. And seeping across that frontier came horror stories, such tales as any frontier might inspire, stemming from man's wonder concerning that unknown which lay just a little way ahead.

There had been little contact with the Wheelers and there was almost nothing known of them-and that in itself was bad. There was no thrusting out of hands, no gestures of goodwill, either from the Wheelers or from the humans and their friends and allies. The frontier lay there, in that one great sector out in space, a silent, sullen line that neither side had crossed.

"I would be better able to come to some decision," Maxwell said, "if my knowledge did extend, if we could know more about you."

"You know that we are bugs," said Mr. Marmaduke, and the words fairly dripped with scorn. "You are intolerant-"

"Not intolerant," said Maxwell angrily, "and we do not think of you as bugs. We know you are what we would call hive mechanisms. We know each of you is a colony of creatures similar to the life forms that here on Earth we think of as insects, and that sets us apart from you, of course, but no more distant from us than many other creatures from many other stars. I do not like the word 'intolerant,' Mr. Marmaduke, because it implies that there is ground for tolerance and there is no such thing-not for you, nor me, nor any other creature in the universe."

He found that he was shaking with his anger and he wondered why he should suddenly become so angry at a single word. He could remain calm at the thought of the Wheeler buying the knowledge of the crystal planet, then flare with sudden anger at one specific word. Perhaps because, he told himself, with so many different races who must live together, both tolerance and intolerance had become dirty words.

"You argue well and amiably," said Mr. Marmaduke, "and you may not be intolerant-"

"Even were there such a thing as intolerance," said Maxwell, "I cannot understand why you'd resent it so. It would be a reflection upon the one who had exhibited it rather than upon the one toward whom it was directed. Not only a reflection upon good manners, but upon one's basic knowledge. There can be nothing quite so stupid as intolerance."

"Then if not intolerance," asked the Wheeler, "what makes you hesitate?"

"I would have to know how you meant to use the commodity. I would want to know your purpose. I would need to know a great deal more about you."

"So that you could judge?"

"I don't know," said Maxwell bitterly. "How can one judge a situation such as this?"

"We talk too much," said Mr. Marmaduke. "And the talk is meaningless. I perceive you have no intention to make a deal with us."

"At the moment," Maxwell told him, "I would say that you were right."

"Then," said Mr. Marmaduke, "we must find another way. You will cause us, by your refusal, a great deal of time and trouble and we'll be most ungrateful to you."

"I have a feeling," Maxwell said, "that I can bear up under your ingratitude."

"There is a certain advantage, sir," warned Mr. Marmaduke, "in being on the winning side."

Something big and moving swiftly brushed past Maxwell and out of the corner of his eye he caught the sudden flash of gleaming teeth and the streak of tawny body.

"No, Sylvester!" Maxwell shouted. "Leave him alone, Sylvester!"

Mr. Marmaduke moved swiftly. His wheels blurred as he spun and swept in a quick half-circle, skirting Sylvester's rushing charge and heading for the door. Sylvester's claws screeched as he turned, swapping end for end. Maxwell, seeing the Wheeler bearing down upon him, ducked out of the way, but a wheel grazed his shoulder and brushed him roughly to one side. With a swish, Mr. Marmaduke went streaking out the door. Behind him came Sylvester, long and lithe, a tawny shape that seemed to flow smoothly through the air.

"No Sylvester!" Maxwell screamed, flinging himself through the door and making a quick turn in the hall, his legs pumping rapidly as he skidded on the turn.

Ahead of him the Wheeler was rolling smoothly down the hall, with Sylvester close behind him. Maxwell wasted no more breath in yelling at the cat, but drove his body forward in pursuit.

At the far end of the hall, Mr. Marmaduke swung smoothly to the left and Sylvester, almost on top of him, lost precious seconds as he fought, and failed, to make as smooth a turn. Warned of the turning in the hall, Maxwell took it in his stride and ahead of him he saw a lighted corridor that led to a short marble staircase and beyond the staircase a crowd of people standing about in little knots, with glasses in their hands.

Mr. Marmaduke was heading for the staircase, going very fast. Sylvester was one leap ahead of Maxwell, perhaps three leaps behind the Wheeler.

Maxwell tried to yell a warning, but he didn't have the breath and, in any case, events were moving much too fast.

The Wheeler hit the top step of the staircase and Maxwell launched his body through the air, arms outstretched. He came down on top of the saber-tooth and wrapped his arms around its neck. The two of them sprawled to the floor and out of the corner of his eye, as he and Sylvester cartwheeled down the corridor, Maxwell saw the Wheeler bouncing high on the second step and beginning to tip over.

And then, suddenly, there was the screaming of frightened women and the yells of startled men and the crash of breaking glasses. For once, thought Maxwell grimly, Nancy was getting a bigger boot out of her party than she had bargained for.

He piled up against a wall, at the far edge of the staircase, and somehow or other, Sylvester was perched on top of him and reaching down to lap fondly at his face.

"Sylvester," he said, "this was the time you did it. You got us in a mess."

Sylvester went on lapping and a rasping purr rumbled in his chest.

Maxwell pushed the cat away and managed to slide up the wall to a sitting position.

Out on the floor of the room beyond the staircase, Mr. Marmaduke lay upon his side, both wheels spinning crazily, the friction of the wheel that was bottom-most making him rotate lopsidedly.

Carol came running up the steps and stopped, with fists firmly on her hips, to stare down at Maxwell and the cat.

"The two of you!" she cried, then choked with anger.

"We're sorry," Maxwell said.

"The guest of honor," she screamed at them, almost weeping. "The guest of honor and you two hunting him down the halls as if he were a moose."

"Apparently we didn't hurt him much," said Maxwell. "I see he is intact. I wouldn't have been surprised if his belly broke and all those bugs of his were scattered on the floor.

"What will Nancy think?" Carol asked accusingly.

"I imagine," Maxwell told her, "that she'll be delighted. There hasn't been this much ruckus at one of her parties since the time the fire-breathing amphibian out of the Nettle system set the Christmas tree

on fire."

"You make those things up," said Carol, "I don't believe it happened."

"Cross my heart," said Maxwell. "I was here and saw it. Helped put out the fire."

Out on the floor some of the guests had laid hold of Mr. Marmaduke and were pulling him over to stand upright on his wheels. Little serving robotics were scurrying about, picking up the broken glass and mopping up the floor where the drinks had spilled.

Maxwell got to his feet and Sylvester moved over close beside him, rubbing against his legs and purring.

Nancy had arrived from somewhere and was talking with Mr. Marmaduke. A large circle of guests stood around and listened to the talk.

"If I were you," suggested Carol, "I'd skin out of here the best way that I could. I can't imagine that you'll be welcome here."

"On the contrary," Maxwell told her, "I'm always welcome here."

He started walking down the staircase, with Sylvester pacing regally beside him. Nancy turned and saw him, broke through the circle and came across the floor to meet him.

"Pete!" she cried. "Then it's really true. You are back again."

"Why, of course," said Maxwell.

"I saw it in the papers, but I didn't quite believe it. I thought it was a hoax or a gag of some sort."

"But you invited me," said Maxwell.

"Invited you?"

She wasn't kidding him. He could see she wasn't kidding.

"You mean you didn't send the Shrimp..." "The Shrimp?"

"Well, a thing that looked like an overgrown shrimp."

She shook her head and, watching her face, Maxwell saw, with something of a shock, that she was growing old. There were many tiny wrinkles around the corners of her eyes that cosmetics failed to hide.

"A thing that looked like a shrimp," he said. "Said it was running errands for you. It said I was invited to the party. It said a car would be sent to fetch me. It even brought me clothes, because it said-"

"Pete," said Nancy, "please believe me. I did none of this. I did not invite you, but I'm glad you're here."

She moved closer and lay a hand upon his arm. Her face crinkled in a giggle. "And I'll be interested in hearing about what happened between you and Mr. Marmaduke."

"That I'm sorry about," said Maxwell.

"No need to be. He's my guest, of course, and one must be considerate of guests, but he's a really terrible person. Pete, he's basically a bore and a snob and-"

"Not now," Maxwell warned her softly.

Mr. Marmaduke had disengaged himself from the circle of guests and was wheeling across the floor toward them. Nancy turned to face him.

"You're all right?" she asked. "You really are all right?"

"Very right," said Mr. Marmaduke.

He wheeled close to Maxwell and an arm extruded from the top of his roly-poly body-a ropelike, flexible arm more like a tentacle than arm, with three clawlike fingers on the end of it. He reached out with it and draped it around Maxwell's shoulders. At the pressure of it, Maxwell had the instinct to shrink away, but with an exercise of conscious will, forced himself not to stir.

"I thank you, sir," said Mr. Marmaduke. "I am most grateful to you. You saved my life perhaps. Just as I fell I saw you leap upon the beast. It was most heroic."

Pressed tight against Maxwell's side, Sylvester lifted his head, dropped his lower jaw, exhibiting his fangs in a silent snarl.

"He would not have hurt you, sir," said Carol. "He's as gentle as a kitten. If you had not run, he'd not have chased you. He had the fool idea that you were playing with him. Sylvester likes to play."

Sylvester yawned, with a fine display of teeth.

"This play," said Mr. Marmaduke, "I do not care about."

"When I saw you fall," said Maxwell, "I was fearful for you. I thought for a moment you would burst wide open."

"Oh, no need of fear," said Mr. Marmaduke. "I am extremely resilient. The body is made of excellent material. It is strong and has a bouncing quality."

He removed his arm from Maxwell's shoulder and it ran like an oily rope, writhing in the air, to plop back into his body. There was no mark on the body surface, Maxwell noticed, to indicate where it might have disappeared.

"You'll excuse me, please," said Mr. Marmaduke. "There's someone I must see." He wheeled about and rolled rapidly away.

Nancy shuddered. "He gives me the creeps," she said. "Although I must admit he is a great attraction. It isn't every hostess who can snag a Wheeler. I don't mind telling you, Pete, that I pulled a lot of wires to get him for a house guest and now I wish I hadn't. There's a slimy feel about him."

"Do you know why he'd be here-here on Earth, I mean?"

"No, I don't. I get the impression that he's a simple tourist. Although I don't imagine such a creature could be a simple tourist."

"I think you're right," said Maxwell.

"Pete," she said, "tell me about yourself. The papers say-"

He grinned. "I know. That I came back from the dead."

"But you didn't, really. I know that's not possible. Who was that we buried? Everyone, you must understand, simply everyone, was at the funeral and we all thought it was you. But it couldn't have been you. Whatever could have-"

"Nancy," said Maxwell, "I came back only yesterday. I found that I was dead and that my apartment had been rented and that I had lost my job and-"

"It seems impossible," said Nancy. "Such things just don't happen. I don't see how this happened."

"I'm not entirely clear about it all myself," Maxwell told her. "Later, I suppose, I'll find out more about it."

"Anyway," said Nancy, "you are here and everything's all right and if you don't want to talk about it, I'll circulate the word that you would rather not."

"That's kind of you," said Maxwell, "but it wouldn't work."

"You don't need to worry about newspapermen," said Nancy. "There are no newspaper people here. I used to let them come. A handpicked few, ones I thought that I could trust. But you can't trust any of them. I found that out the hard way. So you won't be bothered with them."

"I understand you have a painting..."

"You know about the painting, then. Let's go and look at it. It's the proudest thing I have. Imagine it, a Lambert! And one that had dropped entirely out of sight. I'll tell you later how it happened to be found, but I won't tell you what it cost me. I won't tell anyone. I'm ashamed of what it cost me."

"Much or little?"

"Much," said Nancy, "and you have to be so careful. It's so easy to be swindled. I wouldn't even talk of buying it until I had it examined by an expert. In fact, two experts. One to check against the other, although I suppose that was unnecessary."

"But there's no doubt it is a Lambert?"

"No doubt at all. I was almost sure, myself. No one else ever painted quite like Lambert. But he could be copied, of course, and I had to be sure."

"What do you know about Lambert?" Maxwell asked. "Something more than the rest of us? Something that's not found its way into books?"

"No. Really not a great deal. Not about the man himself. Why do you ask?"

"Because you are so excited."

"Well, really! Just finding an unknown Lambert is enough, of course. I have two other paintings of his, but this one is something special because it had been lost. Well, actually I don't know if lost is the word or not. Never known, perhaps, would be better. No record of his ever painting it. No record that survived, at least. And it is one of his so-called grotesques. You would hardly think one of them could be

lost or mislaid or whatever happened to it. One of his earlier ones, that might be understandable."

They worked their way across the floor, skirting the little clustered groups of guests.

"Here it is," said Nancy.

They had pushed their way through a crowd that had been grouped in front of the wall on which the painting hung. Maxwell tilted his head to stare up at it.

It was somehow different than the color plates he had seen in the library that morning. This was because, he told himself, of the larger size of the painting, the brilliance and the clarity of color, some of which had been lost in the color plates. But this, he realized, was not all of it. The landscape was different and the creatures in it. A more Earth-like landscape-the sweet of gray hills and the brown of the shrubby vegetation that lay upon the land, the squatty fernlike trees. A troop of creatures that could be gnomes wended their way across a distant hill; a goblinlike creature sitting at the base of a tree leaned back against the bole, apparently asleep, with some sort of hat pulled down across his eyes. And others-fearsome, leering creatures, with obscene bodies and faces that made the blood run cold.

On the crest of a distant, flat-topped hill, about the base of which clustered a large crowd of many kinds of creatures, a small black blob stood outlined against the grayness of the sky.

Maxwell drew in his breath in a startled gasp, took a quick step closer, then halted and stood stiff and straight, afraid to give himself away.

It seemed impossible that no one else could have noticed it, he told himself. Although, perhaps, someone had and had not thought it worth the mention, or had been unsure and thus reluctant to say anything about it.

But for Maxwell there could be no doubt. He was sure of what he saw. That small black blob on the distant hilltop was the Artifact!

15

Maxwell found a secluded corner, a couple of chairs screened by a huge flowering plant of some sort, planted in a marble tub of generous proportions. There was no one there and he sat down.

Out beyond the corner where he sat, the party was drawing to its close, beginning to dwindle down. Some people had left and those who still were there seemed to be less noisy. And if one more person asked him what had happened to him, Maxwell told himself, he'd belt them in the jaw.

I'll explain, he had told Carol when she had asked the night before-I'll explain over and over again. And that was what he'd done, not entirely truthfully, and no one had believed him. They'd looked at him with glassy eyes and they had figured that either he was drunk or was making fools of them.

And he, he realized, had really been the one who had been made a fool. He had been invited to the party, but not by Nancy Clayton. Nancy had not sent him clothes to wear and had not sent the car that had let him out at the back door to walk down the hall, past the door where the Wheeler waited. And ten to one, the dogs had not been Nancy's either, although he had not thought to ask her.

Someone, he realized, had gone to a lot of trouble in a very awkward and involved manner to make sure the Wheeler had a chance to talk with him. It was all so melodramatic, stinking so of cloak and dagger, that it was ridiculous. Except that, somehow, he couldn't quite bring himself to think of it as ridiculous.

He coddled his drink with both his hands and listened to the clatter of the dying party.

He peered out around the greenery of the plant roosting in the tub and he could not see the Wheeler, although the Wheeler had been around for a good part of the evening.

He passed the drink, absentmindedly, from one hand to the other, and he knew he didn't want it, that he'd had a touch too much to drink-not so much, perhaps, too much to drink, as the wrong place to be drinking it, not with a warm, tight group of friends in a friendly room, but with too many people who were either strangers or only slightly known, and in a room that was too large and too impersonal. He was tired, more weary than he'd known. In just a little while, he'd get up on his feet and say good night to

Nancy, if she were around, and stumble back to Oop's shack, the best way that he could.

And tomorrow? he asked himself. Tomorrow there were things that he should do. But he'd not think of them tonight; he'd wait until tomorrow.

He lifted the drink over the rim of the marble tub and poured it on the soil.

"Cheers," he told the plant.

Carefully, bending slowly so as not to loose his balance, he set the glass upon the floor.

"Sylvester," asked a voice, "do you see what we have here?"

He twisted around and there, on the reverse side of the plant, stood Carol, Sylvester close beside her.

"Come on in," he invited them. "It's a hideaway I found. If the two of you stay very quiet..."

"I've been trying to get you by yourself all evening," Carol told him, "but there never was a chance. I want to know what was this routine of you and Sylvester hunting down the Wheeler?"

She came farther back into the corner and stood waiting for his answer.

"You were no more surprised than I was," he said. "Sylvester's showing up fairly left me gasping. I had no idea-"

"I get invited around a lot," said Carol coldly. "Not for myself, of course, since I suppose you're wondering, but because of Sylvester. He makes a good conversation piece."

"Well, good for you," said Maxwell. "You're one up on me. I was not invited."

"But you got here just the same."

"But don't ask me how. I would be somewhat pressed for an explanation."

"Sylvester has always been a decent cat," she said accusingly. "Perhaps a little greedy sometimes, but a gentleman."

"Oh, I know," said Maxwell. "I'm a bad influence on almost everyone."

She came all the way around the plant and sat down in the other chair. "Are you going to tell me what I asked?"

He shook his head. "I don't know if I can. It was somewhat confusing."

"I don't know," she said, "that I've met a more exasperating man. I don't think you're being fair."

"By the way," he said, "you saw the painting, didn't you?"

"Why, of course I did. That was what the party was all about. The painting and that funny Wheeler."

"Did you notice anything unusual?"

"Unusual?"

"Yes, about the painting."

"I don't think I did."

"Up on the hill there was a tiny cube. Black, sitting on the hill. It looked like the Artifact."

"I missed it. I didn't look that closely at it."

"You saw the gnomes, I presume."

"Yes, I noticed them. Or, at least, they looked like gnomes."

"And those other creatures," Maxwell said. "They looked different, somehow."

"Different from what?"

"Different from the other creatures Lambert usually painted."

"I didn't know," she said, "you were a Lambert expert."

"I'm not," he said. "I went to the library this morning, after I learned about this party and the painting Nancy had and hunted up a book that had plates of his paintings."

"But what if they were different?" Carol asked. "A painter surely has a right to paint anything he wants to."

"Of course he has," said Maxwell. "There's no question of that. But this painting was of Earth. Or, at least, if that was the Artifact, and I think it was, then it was of Earth. But not this Earth, not the Earth we know. Perhaps the Jurassic Earth."

"And you don't think his other paintings were of Earth? They'd have to be of Earth. When Lambert lived, there was no other place to paint. There wasn't any space travel-not any real space travel, just out

to the Moon and Mars."

"There was the space travel of imagination," Maxwell told her. "Space travel and time travel of the mind. No painter ever has been circumscribed by the here and now. And that's what everyone had thought, of course-that Lambert painted in the realm of imagination. But after tonight I wonder if he might not have been painting actual scenes and actual creatures-places where he'd been."

"You may be right," said Carol, "but how could he have gotten there? This business of the Artifact is exciting, of course, but-"

"It's something that Oop is always talking about," he explained. "He remembers the goblins and the trolls and all the rest of the Little Folk from Neanderthaler days. But there were others then, he said. Others that were worse. They were more malicious and mischievous and the Neanderthal people were scared to death of them."

"And you think some of these things in the painting may be the creatures Oop remembers."

"It was in my mind," he admitted. "I wonder if Nancy would mind if I brought Oop here tomorrow so he could see the painting."

"I don't imagine that she would," said Carol, "but, actually, it's not necessary. I took pictures of the painting."

"But you..."

"I know, of course," she said, "that it's not the proper thing to do. But I asked Nancy and she said she didn't mind. What else could she say? I didn't take the pictures to sell or anything like that. I just took them to have them for my own, for my personal enjoyment. A sort of pay, perhaps, for bringing Sylvester with me so people could have a look at him. Nancy knows what the score is and there wasn't anything that she could do about the picturetaking. If you want Oop to have a look at them..."

"You mean you would?" he asked.

"Why, of course I would. And don't blame me, please, for taking the pictures. It's a way of getting even."

"Getting even? With Nancy?"

"Not with her, particularly, but with all these other people who invite me to their parties. With everyone who does. For they don't want me, really. It's Sylvester they invite. As if he were a trained bear or a clown of some sort. And, of course, to get him to their parties, they must invite me, too. But I know why they're inviting me and they know that I know and they keep on inviting me."

"I think I understand," he said.

"I think," she said, "it's very patronizing of them."

"So do I," he said.

"If we're going to show Oop the pictures," she said, "perhaps we'd best get going. This party is dying on its feet. You are positive you won't tell me what happened with the Wheeler."

"Later on," he said. "Not right now. Maybe later on." They left their place behind the potted plant and walked across the floor, heading for the door, threading their way through the thinning clusters of guests.

"We should hunt up Nancy," Carol suggested, "and say good-bye to her."

"Some other time," said Maxwell. "We can write her a note or phone her to say we couldn't find her and thank her for the evening, say how much we enjoyed it, how her parties are the ones we try to never miss, how much we liked the painting and how clever it was of her to get hold of it and-"

"Cut out the clowning," Carol said. "You are forcing it too much. You're not very good at it."

"I know it," Maxwell said, "but I always try."

They came to the door and started down the long flight of wide, curving stone stairs which led down to the roadway.

"Professor Maxwell!" cried a voice.

Maxwell turned. Coming down the stairs was Churchill.

"Just a moment, Maxwell, if you please," he said.

"Yes, what is it, Churchill?"

"A word. Alone, if the lady doesn't mind."

"I'll wait for you at the road," Carol said to Maxwell. "Don't bother," Maxwell said. "I'll settle him real fast."

"No," said Carol, "I'll wait. I don't want any trouble."

Maxwell waited while Churchill came swiftly down the stairs. The man was slightly out of breath and he reached out a hand to grab Maxwell by the arm.

"I've been trying to get to you all evening long," he said, "but you were always with a crowd."

"What is it that you want?" Maxwell asked him sharply.

"The Wheeler," Churchill said. "You must pay no attention to him. He doesn't know our ways. I didn't know what he intended to do. In fact, I told him not to-"

"You mean you knew the Wheeler might be laying for me?"

"I told him not to," Churchill protested. "I told him to leave you alone. I'm very sorry, Professor Maxwell. Believe me, I did my very best."

Maxwell's hand shot out and grabbed Churchill by the shirt front, twisting the fabric and pulling the man close to him.

"So you're the Wheeler's man!" he shouted. "You're fronting for him. It was you who made the offer for the Artifact and you made it for the Wheeler."

"What I did," declared Churchill angrily, "was my own business. I make my living representing people."

"The Wheeler isn't people," Maxwell said. "God knows what a Wheeler is. A hive full of insects, for one thing. What else we do not know."

"He has his rights," said Churchill. "He's entitled to do business."

"And you're entitled to help him," Maxwell said. "Entitled to take his wages. But be careful how you earn them. And don't get in my way."

He straightened his arm and flung Churchill from him. The man staggered, lost his balance, fell and rolled down several steps before he could catch himself. He lay there, sprawled, not trying to get up.

"By rights," said Maxwell, "I should have thrown you down the stairs and broken your filthy neck."

He glanced up toward the house and saw that a small crowd of people had collected at the door and were staring down at him. Staring and muttering among themselves.

He turned on his heel and went stalking down the stairs.

At the bottom Carol was clinging desperately to a frantic cat.

"I thought he was going to get away and go up there and tear that man to pieces," she gasped.

She looked at Maxwell with disgust written on her face.

"Can't you get along with anyone?" she asked.

16

Maxwell got off the roadway at the point where it crossed the mouth of Hound Dog Hollow and stood for a moment, staring at the rocky cliffs and bold headlands of the autumn bluffs. A short distance up the hollow, he caught a glimpse, through the red and yellow of the tinted leaves, of the bare rock face of Cat Den Point and up there, high against the sky, standing just back of the most prominent of the headlands, he knew he'd find the castle of the goblins, with one O'Toole in residence. And somewhere in that wilderness lay the mossy bridge that served as a den for trolls.

It was still early in the morning, since he had started out well before the dawn. A frosty dew lay upon the grass and twinkled on clumps of weeds the sun had not yet found. The air had a winy flavor to it and the sky was so faint and delicate a blue that it seemed to have no color and over all of it, over the entire landscape, hung a sense of strange expectancy.

Maxwell walked across the high-arched foot bridge that spanned the double roadway and on the other side he found a path that led him up the hollow.

The trees closed in around him and he walked through a fairy land that held its breath. He found

himself moving slowly and very carefully so that no quick movement or noise would break the forest hush. Leaves came planing down from the canopy above, fluttering wings of color falling gently to earth. Ahead of him a mouse ran, humping in its haste, moving through and over the fallen leaves, but making scarcely a rustle in its fleeing. Far up the hollow a bluejay screeched, but among the trees the screech was muted and robbed of its customary harshness.

The path forked, with the left-hand fork continuing up the hollow, while the right-hand fork angled up the bluff. Maxwell took the right-hand path. Ahead of him lay a long and wearying climb, but he would take it easy and stop to rest at frequent intervals. It would be a shame on a day like this, he told himself, not to stop to rest as often as he could, begrudging the time that eventually would take him out of this place of color and of silence.

The path was steep, with many turnings to dodge the massive boulders crouched upon the ground, anchored in the soil, gray-bearded with their crops of lichens. The tree trunks crowded close, the rough, dark bark of ancient oak, the satin whiteness of the birches, showing little tan blotches where the thin bark had peeled off but still clung, fluttering in the wind. In the cluttered trash of the surface rose the fat red pyramid of the jack-in-the-pulpit fruit, the shriveled hood drooping like a tittered purple robe.

Maxwell climbed slowly, saving his breath, stopping often to look around, to soak in the feel of autumn that lay all about. He reached, finally, the fairy green where Churchill's flier, with himself as passenger, had come crashing down under the spell of the trolls' enchantment. Just up the hill a ways lay the goblin castle.

He stood for a moment on the green, resting, then took up the climb again. Dobbin, or another horse very similar to him, was cropping at the scanty grass which grew in ragged bunches in a pole-fenced pasture. A few doves fluttered about the castle's turrets, but there were no other signs of life.

Sudden shouts shattered the morning's peace and out of the open castle gate came a gang of trolls, moving rapidly and in curious formation. They were in three lines and each line had a rope across its shoulders, exactly, Maxwell told himself, like the old painting he had seen of the Volga boatmen. They charged out onto the drawbridge and now Maxwell could see that the three ropes were attached to a block of hewn stone which bounced along behind them, raising a hollow, booming racket when it hit the drawbridge.

Old Dobbin was neighing wildly, kicking up his heels and galloping madly around the inside perimeter of the fence.

The trolls, their fangs gleaming against the brown, wrinkled viciousness of their faces, their roached hair seeming to bristle more stiffly than was the usual case, came pounding down the path, with the massive stone bouncing along behind them, raising puffs of dust as it gouged into the ground.

Boiling out of the gate behind them came a cloud of goblins, armed with clubs, with hoes, with pitchforks, apparently with anything they could lay their hands upon.

Maxwell leaped out of the path as the trolls bore down upon him. They were running silently and with vast determination, their weight bent against the ropes, while the goblin horde pursued them with wild war whoops and shrieks. In the forefront of the goblin band, Mr. O'Toole ran heavily, his face and neck violet with his anger, a two-by-four brandished in his fist.

At the point where Maxwell had leaped out of the way, the path took a sudden dip, toboganning downward in a rocky slide to the fairy green. At the top of the dip the block of stone took a mighty leap as its forward edge struck a rocky ledge. The ropes hung slack and the block came down and bounced and then, with the ropes flying, started pinwheeling down the hill.

One of the trolls looked behind him and shouted a frantic warning. The trolls dropped the ropes and scattered. The block of stone went tearing down the slope, gaining speed with every revolution. It struck the fairy green and gashed a great hole in it, made one last bounce into the air, mushed down into the grass and skidded, ripping up the sod, tearing an ugly gash across the place of dancing. Crashing into a large white oak at the far end of the green, it finally came to rest.

The goblins went roaring down the hill in pursuit of the trolls, scattering out into the trees to hunt down the stealers of the stone. Hoots of fear and yelps of rage floated up the hill, intermingled with the

sound of many bodies thrashing through the underbrush.

Maxwell crossed the path and walked over to the pole fence. Old Dobbin now had quieted down and stood with his lower jaw resting on one of the topmost poles, as if he needed it to prop him up. He was staring down the hill.

Maxwell reached out a hand and stroked Dobbin's neck, pulled gently at one ear. Dobbin slanted a gentle eye toward him and whuffled his upper lip.

"I hope," Maxwell said to him, "that they won't expect you to drag back that stone. It's a long, steep pull."

Dobbin flicked one ear languidly.

"If I know O'Toole," Maxwell said, "I don't expect you'll have to. If he can round up the trolls, they'll be the ones who'll do it."

The uproar down the hill had quieted now and in a little while Mr. O'Toole came puffing up the path, carrying the two-by-four across one shoulder. He still was purple of face, but apparently from exhaustion rather than from rage. He hurried from the path toward the fence and Maxwell walked out to meet him.

"My great apology," said Mr. O'Toole, in as stately a voice as he could manage with the shortness of his breath. "I glimpsed you and was happy of your presence, but engaged most earnestly and very urgently. You witnessed, I suspect, the low-down happening."

Maxwell nodded.

"My mounting stone they took," raged Mr. O'Toole, "with malicious intent of putting me afoot."

"Afoot?" asked Maxwell.

"You comprehend most feebly, I see. My mounting stone, up which I must scramble to get astride Old Dobbin. Without a mounting stone there gets no horseback riding and I must trudge afoot unhappily, with much pain and puffing."

"I see," said Maxwell. "As you say, at first I did not comprehend."

"Them dirty trolls," said Mr. O'Toole, grinding his teeth in fury, "at nothing will they stop. After the mounting stone it would have come the castle, piece by piece, stone by stone, until there be no more than the bareness of the rock upon which it once had roosted. It is necessary, in such circumstance, the bud to nip with quick determination."

Maxwell jerked his head in a downhill direction. "How did it come out?" he asked.

"We root them out," said the goblin with some satisfaction. "They scatter like the quail. We dig them out from under rocks and from hiding in the thickets and then we harness them, like so many mules, of which, indeed, they bear a striking likeness, and they drag the mounting stone, most laboriously, I think, back to where they found it."

"They're getting back at you," said Maxwell, "for tearing down their bridge."

Mr. O'Toole jigged in exasperation. "You are wrong!" he cried. "Out of great and misplaced compassion, we refrained from the tearing of it down. Just two little stones is all-two tiny little stones, and much effective roaring at them. And then they betook the enchantments off the broomstick and also off the sweet October ale and, being simple souls much given to good nature, we let it go at that."

"They took the enchantment off the ale? I would have thought that impossible once certain chemical changes..."

Mr. O'Toole fixed Maxwell with a look of contempt. "You prate," he said, "in scientific lingo, which brings no more than errant nonsense. I fail to fathom your engagement in this science when magic you could have for the asking from us and the willingness to learn. Although I must confess the disenchantment of the ale left something for desire. It has a faintly musty touch about the tasting of it.

"Although," he said, "it is a notch or two improved upon no ale at all. If you would only join me, we could do a sample of it."

"There has been nothing all day long," said Maxwell, "that sounds as good as that."

"Then leave us retire," cried Mr. O'Toole, "to the drafty halls built so inexpertly by you crazy humans who thought we doted upon ruins and regale ourselves with foaming mugs of cheer."

In the drafty great hall of the castle, Mr. O'Toole drew the foaming mugs from a mighty cask set

upon two sawhorses and carried them to the rough-hewn table before the large stone fireplace in which a smoldering and reluctant fire was smoking rather badly.

"The blasphemy of it," said Mr. O'Toole, as he lifted his mug, "is that this preposterous outrage of the mounting stone was committed at a time when we goblins were embarked upon a wake."

"I'm sorry," Maxwell said. "A wake, you say. I had not been aware..."

"Oh, not one of us," Mr. O'Toole said quickly. "With the possible exception of myself, in disgusting good health is all the goblin tribe. We were in observance of it for the Banshee."

"But the Banshee is not dead."

"Not dead," said Mr. O'Toole, "but dying. And, oh, the pity of it. He be the last of a great and noble race in this reservation and the ones still left elsewhere in the world can be counted upon less than the fingers of one hand."

He lifted the mug and buried his muzzle in it, drinking deep and gustily. When he put it down there was foam upon his whiskers and he left it there, not bothering to wipe it off.

"We die out most notably," he said, in somber tones. "The planet has been changed. All of us Little Folks and some who are not so little walk down into the valley, where shadows hang so densely, and we are gone from the ken of all living things and that is the end of us. And the very shame of it makes one tremble when he thinks upon it, for we were a goodly people despite our many faults. Even the trolls, before degradation fell upon them, still had a few weak virtues all intact, although I would proclaim that, at the moment, they are destitute of virtue. For surely the stealing of a mounting stone is a very low-down trick and one which clearly demonstrates they are bereft of all nobility of spirit."

He put the mug to his mouth again and emptied it in several lusty gulps. He slammed it down on the table and looked at Maxwell's mug, still full.

"Drink up," he urged. "Drink up, then I fill them yet again for a further wetting of the whistle."

"You go ahead," Maxwell told him. "It's a shame to drink ale the way you do. It should be tasted and appreciated."

Mr. O'Toole shrugged. "A pig I am, no doubt. But this be disenchanted ale and not one to linger over."

Nevertheless he got to his feet and shuffled over to the cask to refill his mug. Maxwell lifted his mug and took a drink. There was a mustiness, as Mr. O'Toole had said, in the flavor of the ale-a tang that tasted not unlike the way that leaf smoke smelled.

"Well?" the goblin asked.

"It has a strange taste to it, but it is palatable."

"Someday that troll bridge I will take down," said Mr. O'Toole, with a surge of sudden wrath. "Stone by stone, with the moss most carefully scraped off to rob the stones of magic, and with a hammer break them in many smallish bits, and transport the bits to some high cliff and there fling them far and wide so that in all eternity there can be no harvesting of them. Except," he said, letting his shoulders droop, "so much hard labor it would be. But one is tempted. This be the smoothest and sweetest ale that was ever brewed and now look at it-scarcely fit for hogs. But it be a terrible sin to waste even such foul-tasting slop if it should be ale."

He grabbed the mug and jerked it to his face. His Adam's apple bobbed and he did not take down the mug until all the ale was gone.

"And if I wreak too great a damage to that most foul bridge," he said, "and should those craven trolls go sniveling to authority, you humans will jerk me on the rug to explain my thinking and that is not the way it should be. There is no dignity in the living by the rule and no joy, either, and it was a rotten day when the human race arose."

"My friend," said Maxwell, shaken, "you have not said anything like this to me before."

"Nor to any other human," said the goblin, "and to all the humans in the world, only to you could I display my feeling. But I, perchance, have run off at the mouth exceedingly."

"You know well enough," said Maxwell, "that I'll not breathe a word of it."

"Of course not," said Mr. O'Toole. "That I did not worry on. You be almost one of us. You're the closest to a goblin that a human can approach."

"I am honored," Maxwell told him.

"We are ancient," said Mr. O'Toole, "more ancient, I must think, than the human mind can wonder. You're sure you don't want to polish off that most foul and terrible drink and start another one afresh?"

Maxwell shook his head. "You go ahead and fill your mug up again. I'll sit here and enjoy mine instead of gulping it."

Mr. O'Toole made another trip to the cask and came back with a brimming mug, slapped it on the table, and settled himself elaborately and comfortably.

"Long years gone," he said, shaking his head in sadness, "so awful long ago and then a filthy little primate comes along and spoils it all for us."

"Long ago," said Maxwell. "As long as the Jurassic?"

"You speak conundrums. I do not catch the term. But there were many of us and many different kinds and today there be few of us and not all the different kinds. We die out very slowly, but inexorably. A further day will dawn to find no one of us. Then you humans will have it to yourselves."

"You are overwrought," Maxwell cautioned him. "You know that's not what we want. We have gone to much effort..."

"Loving effort?" asked the goblin.

"Yes, I'd even say to much loving effort."

Weak tears ran down the goblin's cheeks and he lifted a hairy, calloused hand to wipe them away.

"You must pay me slight attention," he told Maxwell. "I deep am in the dumps. It's this business of the Banshee."

"The Banshee is your friend?" Maxwell asked in some surprise.

"No friend of mine," said Mr. O'Toole. "He stands on one side the pale and I upon the other. An ancient enemy, but still one of us. One of the really old ones. He hung on better than the others. He dies more stubbornly. The others all are dead. And in days like this, old differences go swiftly down the drain. We could not sit a wake with him, as conscience would decree, but in the absence of this we pay him the small honor of a wake for him. And then these low-crawling trolls without a flake of honor in them-"

"You mean no one, no one here on the reservation, could sit the deathwatch with the Banshee?"

Mr. O'Toole shook his head wearily. "No single one of us. It is to the law contrary, to the old custom in violation. I cannot make you understand-he is outside the pale."

"But he is all alone."

"In a thorn bush," said the goblin, "close beside the hut that was his domicile."

"A thorn bush?"

"In the thorns," the goblin said, "dwell magic, in the tree itself..."

He choked and grabbed hastily at the mug and raised it to his mouth. His Adam's apple bobbed.

Maxwell reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out the photo of the lost Lambert that hung on Nancy Clayton's wall.

"Mr. O'Toole," he said, "there's something I must show you."

The goblin set down the mug.

"Let me see it, then," he said. "All this beating amongst the bushes, when there was something that you had."

He reached for the photo, bending his head to puzzle over it.

"The trolls," he said, "of course. But these others I do not recognize. As if I should, but fail. There be stories, old, old stories..."

"Oop saw the picture. You know of Oop, of course." "The great barbarian who claims to be your friend."

"He is my friend," said Maxwell. "And Oop recalls these things. They are old ones from the ancient days."

"But what magic is called upon to get a picture of them?"

"That I don't know. That's a picture of a painting, painted by a man many years ago."

"By what means...

"I do not know," said Maxwell. "I think that he was there."

Mr. O'Toole picked up his mug and saw that it was empty. He tottered to the cask and filled it. He came back with his drink and picked up the photo, looking at it carefully, although somewhat blearily.

"I know not," he finally said. "There were others of us. Many different ones no longer present. We here are the tail end of a noble population."

He pushed the photo back across the table. "Mayhaps the Banshee," he suggested. "The Banshee's years are beyond all telling."

"But the Banshee's dying."

"That he is," said Mr. O'Toole, "and an evil day it is and a bitter day for him, with no one to keep the deathwatch."

He lifted his mug. "Drink up," he said. "Drink up. Can one drink enough, it may not be so bad."

17

Maxwell came around the corner of the tumble-down shack and saw the thorn tree standing to one side of it. There was something strange about the tree. It looked as if a cloud of darkness had settled along its vertical axis, making it appear to have a massive bole, out of which emerged short and slender, thorn-armed twigs. And if what O'Toole had said was true, Maxwell told himself, that dark cloud clustered in the tree must be the dying Banshee.

He walked slowly across the intervening space and stopped a few feet from the tree. The black cloud moved restlessly, like a cloud of slowly roiling smoke.

"You are the Banshee?" Maxwell asked the tree.

"You've come too late," the Banshee said, "if you wish to talk with me."

"I did not come to talk," said Maxwell. "I came to sit with you."

"Sit then," the Banshee said. "It will not be for long."

Maxwell sat down upon the ground and pulled his knees up close against his chest. He put his hands down beside him, palms flat against the mat of dry and browning grass. Below him the autumn valley stretched to the far horizon of the hills north of the river-unlike the hills of this southern shore, but gentle, rolling hills that went up toward the sky in slanted, staircase fashion.

A flurry of wings swept across the ridge behind him and a flock of blackbirds went careening through the blue haze that hung against the steep ravine that went plunging downward from the ridge. But except for that single instant of wings beating in the air, there was a soft and gentle silence that held no violence and no threat, a dreaming silence in which the hills stood quiet.

"The others did not come," the Banshee said. "I thought, at first, they might. For a moment I thought they might forget and come. There need be no distinction among us now. We stand as one, all beaten to the selfsame level. But the old conventions are not broken yet. The old-time customs hold."

"I talked with the goblins," Maxwell told him. "They hold a wake for you. The O'Toole is grieving and drinking to blunt the edge of grief."

"You are not of my people," the Banshee said. "You intrude upon me. Yet you say you come to sit with me. How does it happen that you do this?"

Maxwell lied. He could do nothing else. He could not, he told himself, tell this dying thing he had come for information.

"I have worked with your people," he said, "and I've become much concerned with them."

"You are the Maxwell," said the Banshee. "I have heard of you."

"How do you feel?" asked Maxwell. "Is there anything I can do for you? Something that you need?"

"No," the Banshee said. "I am beyond all needing. I feel almost nothing. That is the trouble, that I feel nothing. My dying is different than your dying. It is scarcely physical. Energy drains out from me and there's finally nothing left. Like a flickering light that finally gutters out."

"I am sorry," Maxwell said. "If talking hastens-"

"Talking might hasten it a little, but I no longer mind. And I am not sorry. I have no regret. I am almost the last of us. There are three of us still left, if you count me, and I am not worth the counting. Out of the thousands of us, only two are left."

"But there are the goblins and the trolls and fairies..." "You do not understand," the Banshee said. "No one has ever told you. And you never thought to ask. Those you name are the later ones, the ones that came after us when the planet was no longer young. We were colonists, surely you know that."

"I had thought so," Maxwell said. "In just the last few hours."

"You should have known," the Banshee said. "You were on the elder planet."

Maxwell gasped. "How did you know that?"

"How do you breathe air?" the Banshee asked. "How do you see? With me, communicating with that ancient planet is as natural as is breath and sight with you. I am not told; I know."

So that was it, thought Maxwell. The Banshee had been the source of the Wheeler's knowledge and it must have been Churchill who had tipped the Wheeler to the fact that the Banshee had the information, who had guessed the Banshee might have knowledge no one else suspected.

"And the others-the trolls, the..."

"No," the Banshee said. "The Banshees were the only ones to whom the road was open. That was our job, that was our only purpose. We were the links with the elder planet. We were communicators. When the elder planet sent out colonies, it was necessary that some means of communicating should be established. We all were specialists, although the specialties have little meaning now and nearly all of the specialists are gone. The first ones were the specialists. The ones who came later simply were settlers meant to fill the land."

"You mean the trolls and goblins?"

"The trolls and goblins and the rest of them. With abilities, of course, but not specialized. We were the engineers, they the workers. There was a gulf between us. That is why they will not come to sit with me. The old gulf still exists."

"You tire yourself," said Maxwell. "You should conserve your strength."

"It does not matter. Energy drains out of me and when the energy is gone, life is gone as well. This dying I am doing has no concern with matter or with body, for I never really had a body. I was all energy. And it does not matter. For the elder planet dies as well; you have seen my planet and you know."

"Yes, I know," said Maxwell.

"It would have been so different if there had been no humans. When we first came here there were scarcely any mammals, let alone a primate. We could have prevented it-this rising of the primates. We could have pinched them in the bud. There was some discussion of it, for this planet had proved promising and we were reluctant at the thought that we must give it up. But there was the ancient rule. Intelligence is too seldom found for one to stand in the way of its development. It is a precious thing-even when we stepped aside for it most reluctantly, we still had to recognize that it was a precious thing."

"But you stayed on," said Maxwell. "You may have stepped aside, but you still stayed on."

"It was too late," the Banshee told him. "There was no place for us to go. The elder planet was dying even then. There was no point in going back. And this planet, strange as it may seem, had become home for us."

"You must hate us humans."

"At one time, we did. I suppose there still is hatred. But hate can burn out in time. Burn low, perhaps, but never entirely disappear. Although, perhaps, even in our hatred, we held some pride in you. Otherwise, why should the elder planet have offered you its knowledge?"

"But you offered it to the Wheeler, too."

"The Wheeler-oh, yes, I know who you mean. But we did not really offer it. The Wheeler had heard about the elder planet, apparently from some rumor heard far in space. And that the planet had something that it wished to sell. It came to me and asked one question only-what was the price of this commodity. I don't know if it knew what might be for sale. It only said commodity."

"And you told it the price was the Artifact."

"Of course I told it that. For at the time I had not been told of you. It was only later I was told I should, after a suitable time, communicate the price to you."

"And, of course," said Maxwell, "you were about to do this?"

"Yes," said the Banshee, "I was about to do it. And now I've done it and the matter's closed."

"You can tell me one thing more. What is the Artifact?"

"That," the Banshee said, "I cannot do."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Won't," the Banshee said.

Sold out, Maxwell told himself. The human race sold out by this dying thing which, despite what it might say, had never meant to communicate the price to him. This thing which through long millennia had nursed cold hatred against the human race. And now that it was gone beyond all reaching, telling him and mocking him so that he might know how the humans had been sold out, so that the human race might know, now that it was too late, exactly what had happened.

"And you told the Wheeler about me as well," he said. "That's how Churchill happened to be waiting at the station when I returned to Earth. He said he'd been on a trip, but there had been no trip."

He surged angrily to his feet. "And what about the one of me who died?"

He swung upon the tree and the tree was empty. The dark cloud that had seethed around its trunk was gone. The branches stood out in sharp and natural relief against the western sky.

Gone, Maxwell thought. Not dead, but gone. The substance of an elemental creature gone back to the elements, the unimaginable bonds that had held it together in strange semblance of life, finally weakening to let the last of it slip away, blowing off into the air and sunlight like a pinch of thrown dust.

Alive, the Banshee had been a hard thing to get along with. Dead, it was no easier. For a short space of time he had felt compassion for it, as a man must feel for anything that dies. But the compassion, he knew, had been wasted, for the Banshee must have died in silent laughter at the human race.

There was just one hope, to persuade Time to hold up the sale of the Artifact so he could have the time to contact Arnold and tell his story to him, persuade him, somehow, that what he told was true. A story, Maxwell realized, that now became even more fantastic than it had been before.

He turned about and started down the ravine. Before he reached the woods, he stopped and looked back up the slope. The thorn tree stood squat against the sky, sturdy and solid, braced solid in the soil.

When he passed the fairy dancing green a gang of trolls were grumpily at work, raking and smoothing out the ground, laying new sod to replace that which had been gouged out by the bouncing stone. Of the stone there was no sign.

18

Maxwell was halfway back to Wisconsin Campus when Ghost materialized and took the seat next to him.

"I have a message from Oop," he said, ignoring any preliminary approach to conversation. "You are not to return to the shack. The newspaper people seem to have sniffed you out. When they came to inquire, Oop went into action, without, I would guess, too much thought or judgment. He put the bum's rush on them, but they're still hanging around, on the lookout for you."

"Thanks," said Maxwell. "I appreciate being told. Although as a matter of fact, I don't imagine it makes too much difference now."

"Events," asked Ghost, "do not march too well?"

"They barely march at all," Maxwell told him. He hesitated, then said, "I suppose Oop has told you what is going on."

"Oop and I are as one," said Ghost. "Yes, of course he's told me. He seemed to take it for granted that you knew he would. But you may rest assured..."

"It's not that," said Maxwell. "I was only wondering if I had to recite it all again for you. You know, then, that I went to the reservation to check on the Lambert painting."

"Yes," said Ghost. "The one that Nancy Clayton has."

"I have a feeling," Maxwell told him, "that I may have found out more than I had expected to. I did find out one thing that doesn't help at all. It was the Banshee who tipped off the Wheeler about the price the crystal planet wanted. The Banshee was supposed to tell me, but he told the Wheeler instead. He claims he told the Wheeler before he knew about me, but I have some doubt of that. The Banshee was dying when he told me, but that doesn't mean that he told the truth. He always was a slippery customer."

"The Banshee dying?"

"He's dead now. I sat with him until he died. I didn't show him the photo of the painting. I didn't have the heart to intrude upon him."

"But despite this he told you about the Wheeler."

"Only to let me know that he had hated the human race since it first began its evolutionary climb. And to let me know that he was finally getting even. He would have liked to have said that the goblins and the rest of the Little Folk hated us as well, but he never quite got around to that. Knowing, perhaps, that I would not believe it. Although something that the O'Toole had said earlier made me realize that there probably is some ancestral resentment. Resentment, but probably not any real hatred. But the Banshee did confirm that a deal is being made for the Artifact and that the Artifact actually is the price for the crystal planet. I thought so from the first, of course. And what the Wheeler said last night made it almost a certainty. Although I couldn't be absolutely sure, for it doesn't seem that the Wheeler himself is actually sure of the situation. If he were, what would have been the point of waylaying me and offering me a job? It sounded to me as if he were trying to buy me off, as if he were afr aid that there was something I could do to louse up his deal."

"It looks fairly hopeless, then," Ghost observed. "My good friend, I am very sorry for this. Is there anything that we can do to help-Oop and me and perhaps even that girl who drank with you and Oop so staunchly. The one who has the cat."

"It looks hopeless," Maxwell told him, "but there are a couple of things that I still can do-go to Harlow Sharp at Time and try to convince him to hold up the deal, then crash in a door or two up at Administration and back Arnold into a corner. If I can talk Arnold into duplicating the Wheeler's offer in funding for Harlow's Time projects, I am sure that Harlow will turn down the Wheeler's offer."

"You will make a noble effort, I am sure," said Ghost, "but I fear for the results. Not from Harlow Sharp, for he's a friend of yours, but President Arnold is a friend of no one. And he will not relish the breaking down of doors."

"You know what I think," said Maxwell. "I think that you are right. But you can't tell until you try. It may be that Arnold will have a lapse of moral fiber and will, for once, set prejudice and stuff-shirtedness aside."

"I must warn you," said Ghost. "Harlow Sharp may have little time for you or for anyone. He has worries. Shakespeare arrived this morning-"

"Shakespeare!" yelled Maxwell. "For the love of God, I'd forgotten about him coming. But I do remember he speaks tomorrow night. Of all the lousy breaks. It would have to be at a time like this."

"It would seem," said Ghost, "that William Shakespeare is not any easy man to handle. He wanted at once to go out and have a look at this new age of which he'd been told so much. Time had a rough time persuading him to change his Elizabethan dress for what we wear today, but they positively refused to let him go until he agreed to it. And now Time is sweating out what might happen to him. They have to keep him in tow, but they can't do anything that will get his back up. They have sold the hall down to the last inch of standing room and they can't take the chance that anything will happen."

"How did you hear all this?" asked Maxwell. "Seems to me you manage to come up with campus gossip ahead of anyone."

Ghost said modestly, "I get around a lot."

"Well, it's not good," said Maxwell, "but I have to take the chance. Time is running out for me. Harlow will see me if he'll see anyone."

"It seems incredible," said Ghost sadly, "that such a dire combination of circumstances should have arisen to block what you try to do. Impossible that through sheer stupidity, the university and Earth should fail to obtain the knowledge of two universes."

"It was the Wheeler," Maxwell said. "His offer puts the pressure on, sets up a time limit. If I only had more time, I could work it out. I could talk to Harlow, could finally get a hearing from Arnold. And if nothing else, I probably could talk Harlow into a deal, Time, rather than the university, buying the planet's library. But there isn't any time. Ghost, what do you know about the Wheelers? Anything the rest of us don't know?"

"I doubt it. Just that they could be that hypothetical enemy we've always figured we would finally meet in space. Their actions argue that they, at least potentially, are that enemy. And their motives, their mores, their ethics, their entire outlook on life, must be different than ours. We probably have less in common with them than a man would with a spider or a wasp. Although they are clever-and that is the worst of it. They have absorbed enough of our viewpoints and manners that they can mix with us, can pass with us, can do business with us-and they have demonstrated that in the deal they are trying to make for the Artifact. My friend, it is this cleverness of theirs, this flexibility, that I fear above all. I doubt if the positions were reversed that man could do as well."

"You are right, I think," said Maxwell. "And that is why we can't afford to let them have what the crystal planet has to offer. God knows what's to be found in that library. I had a whack at it, but I could do no more than sample it, could barely touch the edge of it. And there was material that I couldn't come within ten light-years of understanding. Which doesn't mean that given time and skills that I haven't got, that perhaps I've not even heard of, man wouldn't be able to understand it. I think man could. I think the Wheelers can. Vast areas of new knowledge that we haven't any inkling of. That knowledge might just be the margin between us and the Wheelers. If man and the Wheelers ever come into collision, the crystal planet's knowledge just possibly could be the difference between our victory or defeat. And it might mean as well that the Wheelers, knowing that we had this knowledge, might never allow that collision to happen. It might spell the difference between peace and war."

He sat crouched in the seat and through the warmth of the autumn afternoon felt a chill that blew from somewhere other than the colorful land and the sky of China-silk that enclosed this portion of the earth.

"You talked with the Banshee," said Ghost. "Just before he died. He mentioned the Artifact. Did he give you any clue as to what it really is? If we knew what it really was..."

"No, Ghost. Not in so many words. But I got the impression-no, you'd better call that a hunch. Not strong enough to be an impression. And not at the time, but afterward. A funny feeling and no basis for the belief-if it is a belief. But I think that the Artifact is something from that other universe, the one before this one, from the earlier universe in which the crystal planet was formed. A precious thing, perhaps, preserved through all the aeons since that other universe. And something else as well-that the Banshee and the other Old Ones that Oop remembers are natives of that other universe as well, related somehow to the creatures on the crystal planet. Life forms that rose and developed and evolved in that past universe and came here, and to other planets as well, as colonists, in an attempt to establish a new civilization which could follow in the crystal planet's tracks. But something happened. All of those colonization attempts failed. Here on earth because man developed. For other reasons, perhap s, on the other planets. And I think that I know why some of those other attempts failed. Maybe races do die out. Quite naturally and for no other reason than that they must die out to make room for something else. A natural law of some sort that we don't understand. Maybe a race can only live so long. Maybe ancient creatures carry their death warrants with them. Some principle that we have never thought about because we are so young, a natural process that clears the way for evolution, so that no race can live forever and stand in the way of evolution."

"It sounds reasonable," said Ghost. "That all the colonies died out, I mean. If there had been a successful colony anywhere in the universe, it would seem likely the crystal planet would pass on its heritage to it instead of offering it to us or the Wheelers, to some race that had no connection with the crystal planet."

"What bothers me," said Maxwell, "is why the people of the crystal planet, so close to death that they are no more than shadows, should want the Artifact. What good will it do them? What use can they make of it?"

"Maybe if we knew what it was," said Ghost. "You're sure that you have no idea? Nothing that you heard or saw or..."

"No," said Maxwell. "Not the least idea."

19

Harlow Sharp had a harried look about him.

"Sorry you had to wait so long," he told Maxwell. "This is a hectic day."

"I was glad to get in any way at all," said Maxwell. "That watchdog of yours out at the desk was not about to let me."

"I've been expecting you," said Sharp. "Figured you'd turn up soon or late. Been hearing some strange stories."

"And most of them are true," said Maxwell. "But that's not what I'm here for. This is a business matter, not a social visit. I won't take much time."

"OK, then," said Sharp, "what can I do for you?"

"You're selling the Artifact," said Maxwell.

Sharp nodded. "I'm sorry about that, Pete. I know you and a few others had an interest in it. But it's been out there in the museum for years and, except as a curiosity to be stared at by visitors and tourists, it's done no one any good. And Time needs money. Surely you know that. The university holds the purse strings fast and the other colleges feed us tiny driblets for specific programs and-"

"Harlow, I know all that. I suppose it's yours to sell. I recall the university, at the time you brought it forward, would have no part of it. The cost of moving it was yours and-"

"We've had to scrape and beg and borrow," said Sharp. "We've worked up project after project-good sound, solid projects that would pay off in knowledge and new data-and submitted them and no one's buying them. Can you imagine it! With all the past to dig around in and no one interested. Afraid, perhaps, that we'll upset some of their pet theories they have worked out so nicely. But we have to get money somehow to carry on our work. Do you think I've liked some of the things we've done to get some extra money? Like this Shakespeare circus we are putting on-and a lot of other stunts as well. It's done us no good, I tell you. It's degraded our image, and the trouble-Pete, you can't imagine the trouble that we have. Take this Shakespeare, for example. He's out there somewhere, like a tourist, casing the joint, and me sitting back here with my nails chewed down to the elbow, imagining all the things that could happen to him. Can you envision the ruckus there would be if a man like Shakespeare should not be re turned to his proper age-a man who-"

Maxwell broke in to head him off. "I'm not arguing with you, Harlow. I didn't come to-"

"And then, suddenly," said Sharp, interrupting him, "there was this chance to sell the Artifact. For more money than we'll ever get from this crummy university in a hundred years. You must realize what this sale meant to us. A chance to do the job we've not been able to do because of the lack of finance. Sure, I know about the Wheelers. When Churchill came sucking around to sound us out, I knew he was working for someone behind the scenes, but I wasn't dealing with anyone behind the scenes. I nailed Churchill hard and refused to talk business until I knew who it was he was fronting for. And when he told me, I gagged a bit, but I went ahead, because I knew it was our only chance to set up a decent fund. I'd have done business with the Devil, Pete, to get that kind of money."

"Harlow, all I want to ask," said Maxwell, "is for you to hold up the deal, to give me a little time..."

"Time? Time for what?"

"I need the Artifact."

"You need the Artifact! Whatever for?"

"I can trade it," Maxwell told him, "for a planet-for a planet crammed with knowledge, with recorded knowledge, not from one universe, but from two, knowledge that may span fifty billion years."

Sharp leaned forward, then sank back into his chair.

"You mean this, Pete? You aren't kidding me? There are some funny stories that I've heard. There were two of you and one of you was killed. And you've been ducking the newsmen, perhaps the cops as well. You've gotten into some sort of hassle with the administration."

"Harlow, I could tell you all of it, but it wouldn't help. You probably wouldn't believe me. But what I say is true. I can buy a planet..."

"You? For yourself, you mean?"

"No, not myself. The university. That's why I need time. To get in to see Arnold..."

"And sell him on it? Pete, you haven't got a chance. You had a row of some sort with Longfellow, and Longfellow runs the joint. Even if you had a legitimate proposition..."

"It is legitimate. I tell you it's legitimate. I talked to the people on the planet, I saw some of the records."

Sharp shook his head. "We've been friends for a long, long time," he said. "I'd do almost anything for you. But I can't go along with this. I can't throw away this opportunity for Time. Besides, I'm afraid you came too late."

"Too late?"

"The purchase price was paid this afternoon. The Wheeler takes possession of the Artifact tomorrow morning. He wanted to immediately, but there was a hitch or two in arranging transportation."

Maxwell sat silent, stunned by what he'd heard.

"So I guess that's it," said Sharp. "There's not much I can do about it."

Maxwell started to get up, then sat back in the chair.

"Harlow, if I could see Arnold tonight. If I could talk him into duplicating the price..."

"Don't be ridiculous," said Sharp. "He'd faint when you mentioned the price."

"It was that much?"

"It was that much," said Sharp.

Maxwell got slowly to his feet.

"One thing I will say, however," Sharp told him, "you must, somehow or other, have thrown a scare into the Wheeler. Churchill was here this morning, nervous as a cat, frothing at the mouth, to close the deal at once. I wish you could have seen me earlier. We might have been able to work something out, although I can't imagine what it might have been."

About to turn away, Maxwell hesitated, turned back to the desk behind which Sharp was sitting.

"One thing more. About time travel. Nancy Clayton has a Lambert painting..."

"I heard she had," said Sharp.

"In the background there's a hill and a stone upon it. I could swear that stone is the Artifact. Oop says the creatures in the painting are like the ones he remembers from Neanderthal days. And you did find the Artifact on a Jurassic hilltop. How could Lambert have known about it being on that hilltop? The Artifact wasn't found until centuries after he had died. I think Lambert saw the Artifact and the creatures that he painted. I think he traveled back to the Mesozoic. There is an argument, isn't there, about a man named Simonson?"

"I see what you're getting at," said Sharp. "It's just barely possible. Simonson did some temporal investigation back in the twenty-first century and claimed some measure of success, but admitted he had problems in control. There is a legend that he lost a man or two in time-sent them back and couldn't get them out. But there always has been a question as to whether he had any actual success. His notes, the ones we have, aren't too revealing, and he never published. He carried the work on secretly because he seemed to have the idea that time travel would turn out to be a gold mine, that he could rent it out to scientific expeditions, transport hunters back to the big-game fields-stuff like that, you know. One idea that he seemed to have was going back in time to South Africa and clean out the Kimberley diamond fields. So he kept it secret; no one ever knew too much about what he really did."

"But it could have been possible," Maxwell insisted. "The time is right. Simonson and Lambert

were contemporaries and there's an abrupt break in Lambert's style-as if something had happened. That something could have been going into time."

"Sure it's possible," said Sharp. "But I wouldn't bet on it."

20

When Maxwell came out of the Time building, the stars were coming out and the night wind had an edge of chill. The great elms were clumped masses of a deeper darkness, blotting out the lights of the windows in the buildings across the mall.

Maxwell shivered and turned up the collar of his jacket close about his throat, and went quickly down the stairs to the sidewalk which flanked the mall. There were few people out.

He realized that he was hungry. He had not eaten since early morning. And that he should think of hunger when the last hope he had held had been shattered seemed to be amusing. Not only hungry, he thought, but roofless as well, for if he hoped to dodge the newsmen he could not go back to Oop's. Although, he reminded himself, there was no longer any reason he should shun the newsmen. Now there'd be nothing gained or lost in the telling of his story. But he shrank from the thought of it, from the thought of the incredulous expressions their faces would assume, from the questions they would ask, and then, more than likely, the tongue-in-cheek style they would employ in the writing of the story.

He reached the sidewalk and stood for a moment, undecided as to which direction he should go. He tried, vainly, to remember where he might find a café or restaurant which would not be frequented by any of the faculty who might recognize him. Tonight, of all nights, he had an aversion to facing the kind of questions they would ask.

Something rustled behind him and he turned quickly to come face to face with Ghost.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

"I've been waiting for you," Ghost said. "You were a long time in there."

"I had to wait. Then we got to talking."

"Do you any good?"

"None at all. The Artifact is sold and paid for. The Wheeler hauls it away tomorrow. I'm afraid that's the end of it. I could go up and try to see Arnold tonight, but there's no point to it. Not any more, there isn't."

"Oop is holding down a table for us. I imagine you are hungry."

"I am starved," said Maxwell.

"Then I lead the way."

They turned off the mall and with Ghost leading, wound their way for what seemed to Maxwell an unusually long time, through back streets and alleys.

"A place," Ghost explained, "where we won't be seen. But where the food is edible and the whiskey's cheap. Oop made a point of that."

They finally reached the place, walking down an iron staircase to reach the basement level. Maxwell pushed open the door. The interior was dim. From somewhere in the back came the smell of cooking.

"They serve family style here," said Ghost. "Plank it down upon the table and everyone helps himself. Oop is delighted with that way of serving."

Oop's massive figure moved out from one of the tables in the rear. He waved an arm at them. There were, Maxwell saw, only a half dozen or so other people in the place.

"Over here!" yelled Oop. "Someone for you to meet." Followed by Ghost, Maxwell made his way across the room. From the table, Carol's face looked up at him. And another face, a bearded, shadowed face-the face of someone that Maxwell felt he should remember.

"Our guest tonight," said Oop. "Master William Shakespeare."

Shakespeare got up and held out his hand to Maxwell. A white-toothed smile flashed above the

beard.

"I deem me fortunate," he said, "to have fallen in with such rough and rowdy fellows."

"The Bard is thinking of staying here," said Oop. "Of settling down among us."

"Nay, not the Bard," said Shakespeare. "I will not have you call me it. I be no more than an honest butcher and a dealer in the wool."

"A mere slip of the tongue," Oop assured him. "We have grown so accustomed..."

"Aye, aye, I know," said Shakespeare. "One mistake treads hard upon the footsteps of the one it follows."

"But stay here," said Maxwell. He shot a swift glance at Oop. "Does Harlow know he's here?"

"I think not," said Oop. "We took some pains he wouldn't."

"I slipped the leash," said Shakespeare, grinning, pleased with himself. "But with assistance, for which I acknowledge gratitude."

"Assistance," said Maxwell. "I just bet there was. Will you clowns ever learn..."

"Pete, don't carry on," said Carol. "I think it very noble of Oop. Here was this poor fellow from another time and all he wanted was to see how the people lived and-"

"Let's sit down," said Ghost to Maxwell. "You have the look of a man who could stand a good stiff drink."

Maxwell sat down, next to Shakespeare, Ghost taking the chair on the other side of him. Oop picked up a bottle and handed it across the table to him.

"Go ahead," he urged. "Don't stand on ceremony. Don't bother with a glass. We're informal here."

Maxwell tilted the bottle to his mouth and let it gurgle. Shakespeare watched him with admiration. When he took it down, Shakespeare said, "I cannot but admire your fortitude. I essayed a drink of it and it fair to shriveled me."

"After a time you get used to it," said Maxwell.

"But this ale," said Shakespeare, touching with a finger a half-filled bottle of beer. "Now, there is stuff soft to the palate and pleasing to the stomach."

Sylvester wormed his way behind Shakespeare's chair, squeezed in beside Maxwell and laid his head in Maxwell's lap. Maxwell scratched behind his ears.

"Is that cat bothering you again?" asked Carol.

"Sylvester and I are comrades," Maxwell told her. "We've been through wars together. We took on the Wheeler last night, you must remember, and we vanquished him."

"You bear a cheerful countenance," Shakespeare said to Maxwell. "I would presume that the business you have been about, and which had detained you until now, has gone favorably."

"The business did not go at all," said Maxwell. "The only reason I have a cheerful countenance is because I am in such good company."

"You mean Harlow turned you down!" exploded Oop. "That he wouldn't give you a day or two of time."

"There was nothing else for him to do," Maxwell explained. "He's already been paid and the Wheeler carts off the Artifact tomorrow."

"We have the means," Oop declared darkly, "to make him change his mind."

"Not any longer," said Maxwell. "He can't pull out now. The deal is done. He won't give back the money, be won't break his word. And if what you have in mind is what I think it is, all he needs to do is call off the lecture and refund the money for the tickets."

"I suppose you're right," Oop agreed. "We hadn't known the deal had gone so far. We figured we might pick up a little bargaining strength."

"You did the best you could," said Maxwell, "and I thank you for it."

"We had figured," said Oop, "that if we could buy a day or two, then all of us could go marching up the hill and bust in on Arnold and explain things to him by hand. But it's all over now, I guess-so have another drink and pass it over to me."

Maxwell had another drink and passed the bottle to him. Shakespeare finished off his beer and thumped the bottle back onto the table. Carol took the bottle from Oop and poured a couple of inches

into her glass.

"I don't care how the rest of you conduct yourselves," she said. "I will not go utterly barbaric. I insist on drinking from a glass."

"Beer!" yelled Oop. "More beer for our distinguished guest."

"I thank you, sir," said Shakespeare.

"How did you ever find this dump?" asked Maxwell. "I know," said Oop, "many of the backwaters of this campus."

"It was exactly what we wanted," said Ghost. "Time will be beating the bushes for our friend. Did Harlow tell you he had disappeared?"

"No," said Maxwell, "but he seemed somewhat on edge. He mentioned that he was worried, but you couldn't tell it on him. He's the kind who can sit on the edge of an exploding volcano and never turn a hair."

"How about the newsmen?" Maxwell asked. "Still covering the shack?"

Oop shook his head. "But they'll be back. We'll have to find some other place for you to bunk."

"I suppose I might as well face them," Maxwell said. "The story will have to be told someday."

"They'll tear you apart," warned Carol. "And Oop tells me you are without a job and Longfellow's sore at you. You can't stand bad publicity right now."

"None of it really matters," Maxwell told her. "The only problem is how much of it I should tell them."

"All of it," said Oop. "Tear the thing wide open. Let the galaxy know exactly what was lost."

"No," said Maxwell. "Harlow is my friend. I can't do anything to hurt him."

A waiter brought a bottle of beer and put it down. "One bottle!" raged Oop. "What do you mean, one bottle? Go back and get an armload of it. Our friend here has a dry on."

"You didn't say," the waiter said. "How was I to know?"

He shuffled off to gather up more beer.

"Your hospitality," said Shakespeare, "is beyond reproach. But I fear I am intruding in a time of trouble."

"Trouble, yes," Ghost told him. "But you are not intruding. We are glad to have you."

"What was this Oop said about your staying here?" asked Maxwell. "About your settling down."

"My teeth are bad," said Shakespeare. "They hang loosely in the jaw and at times pain exceedingly. I have intelligence that hereabout are marvelous mechanics who can extract them with no pain and fabricate a set to replace the ones I have."

"That can be done, indeed," said Ghost.

"I left at home," said Shakespeare, "a wife with a nagging tongue and I would be rather loath to return to her. Likewise, the ale that you call beer is wondrous above any I have drunk and I hear tell that you have arrived at understanding with goblins and with fairies, which is a marvelous thing. And to sit at meat with a ghost is past all understanding, although one has the feeling here he must dig close at the root of truth."

The waiter arrived with an armload of beer bottles and dumped them on the table.

"There!" he said, disgusted. "That'll hold you for a while. Cook says the food is coming up."

"You don't intend," Maxwell asked Shakespeare, "to appear for your lecture?"

"Forsooth, and if I did," said Shakespeare, "they would forthwith, once that I had finished, whisk me home again."

"And they would, too," said Oop. "If they ever get their paws on him, they'll never let him go."

"But how will you earn a living?" Maxwell asked. "You have no skills to fit this world."

"I," said Shakespeare, "will surely devise something. A man's wits, driven to it, will come up with answers."

The waiter arrived with a cart, laden with food. He began putting it on the table.

"Sylvester!" Carol cried.

Sylvester had risen swiftly, put his two paws on the table and reached to grab two slabs of rare roast beef which had been carved off a standing roast of ribs.

Sylvester disappeared beneath the table, with the meat hanging from his jaws.

"The pussy cat is hungry," Shakespeare said. "He harvests what he can."

"In the matter of food," Carol complained, "he has no manners whatsoever."

From beneath the table came the sound of crunching bones.

"Master Shakespeare," said Ghost, "you came from England. From a town upon the Avon."

"A goodly country to the eye," said Shakespeare, "but filled with human riffraff. There be poachers, thieves, murderers, footpads, and all sort of loathsome folk..."

"But I recall," said Ghost, "the swans upon the river and the willows growing on its banks and-"

"You what?" howled Oop. "How can you recall?" Ghost rose slowly to his feet and there was something about his rising that made all of them fix their eyes upon him. He raised a hand, although there was no hand, just the sleeves of his robe, if robe it was.

His voice, when it came, was hollow, as if it might have come from an empty place far distant.

"But I do recall," he told them. "After all these years, I do recall. I either had forgotten or I had never known. But now I do..."

"Master Ghost," said Shakespeare, "you act exceeding strange. What queer distemper could have seized upon you?"

"I know now who I am," said Ghost triumphantly. "I know who I am the ghost of."

"Well, thank God for that," said Oop. "It will put an end to all this maundering of yours about your heritage."

"And who, pray," asked Shakespeare, "might you be the ghost of?"

"Of you," Ghost keened. "I know now-I know now-I am William Shakespeare's ghost!"

For an instant they all sat silent, stricken, and then from Shakespeare's throat came a strangled sound of moaning fright. With a sudden surge, he came out of his chair and leaped to the tabletop, heading for the door. The table went over with a crash. Maxwell's chair tipped back and he went sprawling with it. The edge of the tipping table pinned him to the floor and a bowl of gravy, skating off its edge, caught him in the face.

He put up both his hands and tried to wipe the gravy off his face. From somewhere above him he heard Oop's raging bellows.

Able to see again, but with his face and hair still dripping gravy, Maxwell managed to crawl from beneath the table and stagger to his feet.

Carol sat flat upon the floor amid the litter of the food. Beer bottles were rolling back and forth across the floor. Framed in the kitchen door stood the cook, a mighty woman with chubby arms and tousled hair, and her hands upon her hips. Sylvester was crouched above the roast, ripping it apart and rapidly swallowing great mouthfuls of meat before anyone could stop him.

Oop came limping back from the door.

"No sign of them," he said. "No sign of either one of them."

He reached down a hand to haul Carol to her feet.

"That rotten Ghost," he said bitterly. "Why couldn't he keep still? Even if he knew..."

"But he didn't know," said Carol. "Not until just now. It took this confrontation to jar it out of him. Something Shakespeare said, perhaps. It's something he's been wondering about all these years and when suddenly it hit him..."

"This tears it," Oop declared. "Shakespeare never will quit running. There'll be no finding him."

"Maybe that is what Ghost is doing now," said Maxwell. "That is where he went. To follow Shakespeare and stop him and bring him back to us."

"Stop him, how?", asked Oop. "If Shakespeare sees him following he'll set new records running."

21

They sat dejectedly about Oop's rough-lumber table. Sylvester lay on his back on the hearthstone,

with his front paws folded neatly on his chest, his back feet thrust up into the air. He wore a silly grin of satisfaction pasted on his face.

Oop shoved the fruit jar along the boards to Carol. She picked it up and sniffed. "It smells like kerosene," she said, "and, as I remember it, it tastes like kerosene." She lifted the jar with both her hands and drank, then pushed it across to Maxwell.

"I do believe," she said, "that after a time one could become accustomed to drinking kerosene."

"That is good booze," said Oop defensively. "Although," he admitted, "it could do with just a touch more aging. Seems that it gets drunk up quicker than I can get it made."

Maxwell lifted the jar and drank moodily. The hooch burned its way fiercely down his gullet and exploded in his stomach, but the explosion did no good. He still stayed moody and aware. There were times, he told himself, when there was no such thing as getting drunk. Pour it in two-fisted and you still stayed sober. And right now, he thought, he would dearly love to get sodden drunk and stay that way for a day or so. Maybe when he sobered up, life wouldn't seem so bad.

"What I can't understand," said Oop, "is why Old Bill should take this business of his ghost so bad. He did, of course. He was scared pink with purple spots. But the thing that bothers me is that he wasn't upset with Ghost. Oh, a little jittery at first, as one might expect of a sixteenth-century man. But once we had explained it to him, he seemed rather pleased with it. He accepted Ghost much more readily than would have been the case, say, with a twentieth-century man. In the sixteenth century they believed in ghosts and ghosts were something that could be accepted. He never got the wind up until he found that Ghost was his ghost and then..."

"He was quite intrigued," said Carol, "by our relations with the Little Folk. He made us promise we'd take him down to the reservation so he could get acquainted with them. As was the case with ghosts, he believed in them implicitly."

Maxwell took another hooker out of the jar and slid it across to Oop. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "Being free and easy with a ghost, with just any ghost," he said, "would come under a different heading than meeting up with one particular ghost that turned out to be your ghost. It is impossible for a man to accept, to actually accept and believe in, his own death. Even knowing what a ghost is..."

"Oh, don't please start that up again," said Carol.

Oop grinned. "He sure went out of there like a shot," he said. "Like you'd tied a firecracker to his tail. He went through that door without even touching the latch. He just busted through it."

"I didn't see," said Maxwell. "I had a bowl of gravy in my face."

"There wasn't anyone got anything out of the whole mess," said Oop, "except that saber-toother over there. He got a haunch of beef. Rare, the way he likes it."

"The cat's an opportunist," Carol observed. "He always comes out smelling pretty."

Maxwell stared at her. "I've been meaning to ask you. How do you come to be mixed up with us? I thought you washed your hands of us last night after the affair with the Wheeler."

Oop chuckled. "She was worried about you. Also, she is nosy."

"There's something else as well," said Maxwell. "How come you are mixed up in it at all? Let's take it from the first. You were the one who tipped us off about the Artifact-about it being sold."

"I didn't tip you off. I misspoke. It just-"

"You tipped us off," Maxwell declared. "I think you meant to do it. What do you know about the Artifact? You must have known something to not have wanted it sold."

"Yeah, that is right," said Oop. "Sister, you better start telling us what it is all about."

"A couple of bullies..."

"No," said Maxwell, "let's not turn it to a joke. This is something that's important."

"Well, I had heard about it being sold, as I told you. I wasn't supposed to know. And I was worried about it and I didn't like the sound of it. Not that there was anything really wrong with the sale of it, legally, I mean. I understood that Time had title to it and could sell it if it wished. But it didn't seem to me that a thing like the Artifact should be sold, even for umpteen billion dollars. Because I did know something about it-something that no one else knew about it and I was afraid to try to tell anyone what I

knew. And when I mentioned how important the Artifact was to other people, I could see that they couldn't care less. Then, that night, when you two talked about it and were so interested-"

"You thought maybe we could help."

"Well, I don't know what I thought. But you were the first ones who had shown any interest in it. Although I couldn't tell you. I couldn't come right out and tell you, because, you see, I wasn't supposed to know it and there was a matter of being loyal to Time and I was all mixed up."

"Were you working with the Artifact? Is that how..."

"Well, no," she said, "not working with it. But one day when I stopped to look at it-like any tourist, you understand, just walking through the inner court of the museum and stopping to have a look at it, because it was an interesting object and a mysterious one as well-and I saw something, or thought I saw something. I don't know now. I can't be sure. Although at the time, I remembered I was sure, I was absolutely certain that I saw this thing about it no one had ever noticed, or if they had noticed..."

She stopped and looked from one to the other of them. Neither spoke. They sat silent, waiting for her to go on.

"I can't be sure," she said. "Not now. Now I can't be sure."

"Go ahead," said Oop. "Tell us the best you can."

She nodded soberly. "It was just for an instant. So quick, so fast, and yet at the time there was no doubt I had really seen it. The sun was shining through the windows and the sunlight was falling on the Artifact. Maybe no one had ever looked at the Artifact before when the sunlight had been shining on it at precisely the angle it shone on it that day. I don't know. That could be the explanation, I suppose. But it seemed to me I saw something inside the Artifact. Well, really not inside of it, either. Rather, as if the Artifact was something that had been pressed or shaped into an oblong block, but you couldn't know this except when the sun shone just right upon it. It seemed to me that I could see an eye, and for just an instant, when I saw that eye, I knew that it was alive and that it was watching me and-"

"But that can't be!" yelled Oop. "The Artifact is like a stone. Like a piece of metal."

"A funny piece of metal," said Maxwell. "Something that you can't pry into, something that-"

"It's only fair to say," Carol reminded them, "that now I can't be sure. It might have been only my imagination."

"We'll never know," said Maxwell. "The Wheeler will haul off the Artifact tomorrow."

"And buy the crystal planet with it," said Oop. "It seems to me we shouldn't just be sitting here. If we could have held onto Shakespeare..."

"It wouldn't have done a bit of good," Maxwell told him. "This business of kidnaping Shakespeare-"

"We never kidnaped him," said Oop, outraged at the thought. "He came along with us very peaceably. He was glad to come. He'd been figuring all the time how he could lose this escort that Time had sent along. It was really his own idea. We only helped a little."

"Like clunking the escort on the head?"

"No, never," declared Oop. "We were genteel about it. We created what you might have called a mild diversion."

"Well, anyhow," said Maxwell, "it was a bum idea. There was too much money involved. You could have kidnaped a dozen Shakespeares and you'd never got Harlow Sharp to give up his deal for the Artifact."

"But even so," said Carol, "there should be something that we could be doing. Like rousting Arnold out of bed."

"The only way," said Maxwell, "that Arnold could help us is by giving Time the kind of money the Wheeler is paying Sharp. I can't see that, can you?"

"No, I can't," said Oop.

He picked up the jar, put it to his mouth and drained it, got up and went to the hideout in the floor and got another jar. Ponderously, he unscrewed the lid and handed the jar to Carol.

"Leave us settle down," he suggested, "to building up a hangover. The newsmen will be here by morning and I got to build up the strength for throwing them all out."

"Now, wait a second," said Maxwell. "I feel an idea coming on."

They sat and waited for the idea to come on.

"The translator," said Maxwell. "The one I used to read the records on the crystal planet. I found it in my bag."

"Yes?" asked Oop.

"What if the Artifact were simply another record?"

"But Carol says..."

"I know what Carol says. But she can't be sure. She only thinks she saw that eye staring out at her. And it seems improbable."

"That's right," said Carol. "I can't be absolutely sure. And what Pete says does make a crooked sort of sense. If he's right, it would have to be a very important record-and a rather massive one. Perhaps a whole new world of knowledge. Maybe something the crystal planet left here on Earth, believing that no one would ever think of looking for it here. A sort of hidden record."

"Even if that should be the case," said Oop, "what good will it do us. The museum is locked and Harlow Sharp is not about to open it for us."

"I could get us in," said Carol. "I could phone the guard and say I had to get in and do some work. Or that I had left something there and wanted to pick it up. I have clearance for that sort of thing."

"And lose your job," suggested Oop.

She shrugged. "There are other jobs. And if we worked it right..."

"But there's so little point to it," protested Maxwell. "It's no better than a million-to-one shot. Maybe less than that. I don't deny I'd like to have a try at it, but-"

"What if you found that it was really something important?" asked Carol. "Then we could get hold of Sharp and explain it to him and maybe..."

"I don't know," said Maxwell. "I would doubt that we could find anything so important that Harlow would renege upon the deal."

"Well," said Oop, "let's not waste time sitting here and talking about it. Let us be about it."

Maxwell looked at Carol. "I think so, Pete," she said. "I think it's worth the chance."

Oop reached out and took the jar of moonshine from in front of her and screwed on the cap.

22

The past surrounded them, the cabineted and cased and pedestaled past, the lost and forgotten and unknown snatched out of time by the far-ranging field expeditions that had probed into the hidden corners of mankind's history. Art and folklore objects that had been undreamed of until men went back and found them; still new pottery that had heretofore been known only as scattered shards, if even that; bottles out of ancient Egypt with the salves and ointments still imprisoned, fresh, within them; ancient iron weapons new-taken from the forge; the scrolls from the Alexandrian library which should have burned, but didn't, because men had been sent back in time to snatch them from the flames at the moment before they would have been destroyed; the famed tapestry of Ely that had disappeared from the ken of man in a long-gone age-all these and many more, a treasure trove of articles, many of them no treasures in themselves, snatched from the bowels of time.

The place was misnamed, Maxwell thought. Not Time Museum, but rather the Museum of No Time, a place where all ages came together, where there was no time distinction, a building where all the accomplishments and dreams of mankind might eventually be gathered, not aged things, but all fresh and new and shiny, fashioned only yesterday. And here one would not have to guess from old and scattered evidence what it had been like back there, but could pick up and hold and manipulate the tools and instruments and gadgets that had been made and used through all the days of his development.

Standing beside the pedestal which held the Artifact he listened to the footsteps of the guard as he tramped away again on his regular rounds.

Carol had managed it, and there had been a time he had doubted she would be able to. But everything had gone OK. She'd phoned the guard and told him she and a couple of friends had wanted one last look at the Artifact before it was carted off and he had been waiting to let them in at the little entryway set into one of the large doors that were opened when the museum was open to the public.

"Don't take too long," he grumbled. "I'm not sure I should let you do this."

"It's all right," she'd told him. "There is no need for you to worry."

He had shuffled off, mumbling to himself.

A bank of overhead spotlights shone down on the black block that was the Artifact.

Maxwell ducked beneath the velvet rope that guarded the pedestal and clambered up beside the Artifact, crouching down beside it, fumbling in his pocket for the interpreting apparatus.

It was a crazy hunch, he told himself. It was no hunch at all. It simply was an idea born of desperation and he was wasting his time, more than likely making himself somewhat ridiculous. And even if this wild venture should prove to have some point, there was nothing that he could do, at this late hour, about it. Tomorrow the Wheeler would take possession of the Artifact and of the knowledge stored on the crystal planet and so far as the human race might be concerned that would be the end of fifty billion years of knowledge dredged most laboriously and devotedly from two universes-knowledge that should have belonged to the University of Earth, that could have belonged to the university, but that now would be lost forever to an enigmatic cultural bloc which might, in turn, prove to be that potential cosmic enemy Earth had always feared would be found in space.

His start had been too late, he knew. Given a bit more time and he could have turned the deal, could have found the people who would have listened to him, could have gained some backing. But everything had worked against him and now it was too late.

He slid the interpreter onto his head and fumbled with it, for somehow it didn't want to fit.

"Let me help," said Carol. He felt her fingers manipulating it deftly, straightening out the straps, sliding them into place.

Glancing down, he saw Sylvester, seated on the floor beside the pedestal, sneering up at Oop.

Oop caught Maxwell's look. "That cat doesn't like me," said the Neanderthaler. "He senses that I'm his natural enemy. Some day he'll work up his nerve to have a go at me."

"That's ridiculous," snapped Carol. "He's just a little putty cat"

"Not the way I see it," said Oop.

Maxwell reached up and pulled the assemblage of the interpreter down across his eyes.

And looked down at the Artifact.

There was something there, something in that block of black. Lines, forms, a strangeness. No longer just a block of unimaginable blackness, rejecting all influence from outside, tolerating nothing and giving up nothing, as if it might be a thing that stood apart, sufficient to itself within the universe.

He twisted his head to try to catch the angle from which it might be possible to untangle what he saw. No lines of writing, surely-it was something else. He reached up to the headpiece and pushed over the wheel that increased the power, fiddled for a moment with the adjustment for the sensor.

"What is it?" Carol asked.

"I don't..." Then, suddenly, he did know. Then he saw. Imprisoned in one corner of the block was a talon, with iridescent flesh or hide or scale and gleaming claws that looked as if they had been carved from diamonds. A talon that moved and struggled to be free so it could reach out for him.

He flinched away, moving back to get out of reach, and he lost his balance. He felt himself falling and tried to twist to one side so he wouldn't land flat upon his back. One shoulder struck the velvet rope and the standards that held the rope in place went over with a clatter. The floor came up and smacked him hard. Striking the rope had served to twist him to one side and he came down heavily on one shoulder, but his head was protected from the floor. He struck at his forehead with an open hand, knocking the interpreter off to one side to free his eyes.

And there, above him, the Artifact was changing. Out of it something was rising-rearing up out of the oblong of blackness, jerking itself free. Something that was alive, a-throb with vitality and glittering in its beauty.

A slender, dainty head, with an elongated snout, and a sharp serrated crest that ran from the forepart of the head along the length of neck. A barrel-like chest and body, with a pair of wings half-folded, and shapely forelegs, armed with the diamond claws. It glittered blindingly in the spotlights that pointed at the Artifact, or, rather, where the Artifact had been, each gleaming scale a point of hard white light striking off the bronze and gold, the yellow and the blue.

A dragon! Maxwell thought. A dragon rising from the blackness of the Artifact! A dragon, finally risen, after long aeons of being imprisoned in that block of blackness.

A dragon! After all the years he'd hunted one, after all the years of wonder, here finally was a dragon. But not as he'd pictured it in his mind-no prosaic thing of flesh and scale, but a thing of glorious symbolism. A symbol of the heyday of the crystal planet, perhaps of the universe that had died so that this present universe could be born anew-ancient and fabulous, a fellow of those strange tribes of beings of which the trolls and goblins, the fairies and the banshees were the stunted and pitiful survivors. A thing the name of which had been handed down through generations that numbered into thousands, but never seen by any member of humanity until this very moment.

Oop stood out on the floor, beyond one of the tumbled standards that had held the velvet cord, his legs more bowed than ever, as if he'd started to sink into a crouch and had frozen there, with his hamlike hands hanging at his side, his fingers hooked like claws, while he stared upward at the terror and the wonder on the pedestal. In front of him, Sylvester crouched close against the floor, knotted muscles standing out along his furry legs, his great mouth agape, with the fangs exposed and ready for attack.

Maxwell felt a hand upon his shoulder and twisted around.

"A dragon?" Carol asked.

Her words were strange, as if she had been afraid to ask them, as if she'd forced them from her throat. She was not looking at him, but upward at the dragon, which now seemed to be complete.

The dragon switched its tail, which was long and sinuous, and out on the floor Oop tumbled down ungracefully to duck the sweep of it.

Sylvester squawled in anger and crept forward a foot or so.

"Cut it out, Sylvester," Maxwell said sharply to the cat.

Oop scrambled forward hastily on his hands and knees and grabbed Sylvester by one of his hind legs.

"Talk to him," Maxwell said to Carol. "If that fool cat tackles him, there'll be the devil to pay."

"Oop, you mean. He wouldn't tackle Oop."

"Not Oop," said Maxwell. "The dragon. If he takes off on the dragon-"

A bellow of rage came thundering out of the darkness, and the thump of running feet.

"What is going on in here?" howled the watchman, charging from the shadows.

The dragon spun upon the pedestal and came swiftly off it, switching around to face the running watchman.

"Look out," Oop yelled, still with a tight grip upon Sylvester's leg.

The dragon moved forward carefully, almost mincingly, its head canted at a questioning angle. It flourished its tail and the tail swept across the top of a display table, brushing off a half dozen bowls and jugs. The pottery thudded and gleaming shards went skating across the floor.

"Hey, you cut that out!" the watchman yelped and then, apparently for the first time, saw the dragon. The yelp turned into a howl of fear. The watchman turned and fled. The dragon trotted after him, not in any hurry, but very interested. His progress was marked by a series of thudding and splintering crashes.

"If we don't get him out of here," said Maxwell, "there'll be nothing left. At the rate he's going, there won't be a thing intact in less than fifteen minutes. He'll have the place wiped out. And, Oop, for the love of God, hang onto that cat. We don't want a full-fledged brawl breaking out in here."

Maxwell got to his feet, grabbed the interpreter off his head and stuffed it in his pocket.

"I could open the doors," Carol offered, "and we could shoo him out of here. The big doors, I mean. I think that I know how."

"How are you, Oop," Maxwell asked, "at dragon-herding?"

The dragon had blundered to the rear of the building and now had turned around and was coming back.

"Oop," said Carol, "help me with these doors. I need a man with muscle."

"What about this cat?"

"Leave him to me," said Maxwell. "He may behave himself. Maybe he'll mind me."

A long chain of crashes marked the progress of the dragon. Listening to them, Maxwell moaned. Sharp would have his scalp for this. Friend or not, he would be plenty sore. The whole museum wrecked and the Artifact transformed into rampaging tons of flesh.

He took a few tentative steps across the floor toward the crashing sounds. Sylvester slunk close against his heels. In the dimness, Maxwell could make out the dim outlines of the floundering dragon.

"Nice dragon," Maxwell said. "Take it easy, fellow."

It sounded rather silly and somehow inadequate. How in the world, he wondered, should one talk to a dragon?

Sylvester let out a hacking growl.

"You stay out of it," said Maxwell sharply. "Things are bad enough without you messing in."

He wondered what had happened to the watchman. More than likely phoning the police and building up a storm.

Behind him he heard the creaking of the doors as they came open. If the dragon would only wait until those doors were open, then he could be shagged outdoors. And once the dragon had been gotten out, what would happen then? Maxwell shuddered, thinking of it-of the great beast blundering down the streets and across the malls. Maybe it would be better, after all, to keep him penned in here.

He stood indecisively for a moment, weighing the disadvantages of a dragon caged with a dragon on the loose. The museum was more or less wrecked now and perhaps the complete wrecking of it would be preferable to turning this creature loose upon the campus.

The doors still were creaking, slowly opening. The dragon had been ambling along, but now he burst into a gallop, heading for the opening portal.

Maxwell spun around. "Close those doors!" he shouted, then ducked quickly to one side as the galloping dragon came charging down upon him.

The doors were partly open and they stayed partly open. Oop and Carol were racing off in different directions, intent on leaving plenty of room for the lumbering tons of flesh that were heading for the open.

Sylvester's thunderous roars boomed and echoed in the museum as he took off in pursuit of the running creature.

Off to one side, Carol was shrieking at him. "Cut it out, Sylvester! No, Sylvester, no!"

The dragon's sinuous tail flicked nervously from side to side as it ran. Cabinets and tables crashed, statues were sent spinning-a path of destruction marked the dragon's flight for freedom.

Groaning, Maxwell ran, following Sylvester and the dragon, although, for the life of him, he didn't know exactly why he should be running. He didn't, he was certain, want to catch the dragon.

The dragon reached the opening and went through it in a single leap, high into the air, and as it leaped, the wings unfolded and swept downward in a thrumming beat.

At the doorway Maxwell skidded to a stop. On the steps below the entrance, Sylvester also had spun to a sliding halt and now was straining upward, raging loudly at the flying dragon.

It was a sight to make one catch his breath. Moonlight on the beating wings, reflecting off the burnished scales of red and gold and blue, made a flashing rainbow that quivered in the sky.

Oop and Carol burst out of the door and stopped to stare into the sky.

"Beautiful!" said Carol.

"Yes, isn't it," said Maxwell.

And now, for the first time, he realized in full exactly what had happened here. There was no longer any Artifact and the Wheeler deal was dead. And, likewise, any deal that he could make in behalf of the crystal planet. The chain of events that had been started with the copying of his wave pattern when he had been launched for Coonskin had been canceled out. Now, except for that flashing rainbow in the

sky, it was as if nothing at all had happened.

The dragon was higher now, wheeling in the sky, no longer anything more than the flashing of the rainbow colors.

"This tears it," Oop declared. "What do we do now?"

"It was my fault," said Carol.

"It was no one's fault," said Oop. "It's just the way things happen."

"Well, anyhow," said Maxwell, "we loused up Harlow's deal."

"I'll say you did," a voice said behind them. "Will someone please tell me what is going on?"

They turned around.

Harlow Sharp stood in the doorway. Someone had turned on all the museum lights and he stood out sharply against the lighted oblong of the doors.

"The museum is wrecked," he said, "and the Artifact is gone and here are the two of you and I might have known. Miss Hampton, I'm astonished. I thought you had better sense than to become entangled in such low company. Although that crazy cat of yours-"

"You leave Sylvester out of this," she said. "He never had a thing to do with it."

"Well, Pete?" asked Sharp.

Maxwell shook his head. "I find it a bit hard to explain."

"I would think so," said Sharp. "Did you have all this in mind when you talked with me this evening?"

"No," said Maxwell. "It was a sort of accident."

"An expensive accident," said Sharp. "It might interest you to know that you've set Time's work back a century or more. Unless, of course, you somehow moved the Artifact and have it hidden out somewhere. In which case, my friend, I give you a flat five seconds to hand it back to me."

Maxwell gulped. "I didn't move it, Harlow. In fact, I barely touched it. I'm not sure what happened. It turned into a dragon."

"It turned into a what?"

"A dragon. I tell you, Harlow-"

"I remember now," said Sharp. "You always were blathering around about a dragon. You started out for Coonskin to find yourself a dragon. And now it seems you've found one. I hope that it's a good one."

"It's a pretty one," said Carol. "All gold and shimmery."

"Oh, fine," said Sharp. "Isn't that just bully. We can probably make a fortune, taking it around on exhibition. We can whomp up a circus and give top billing to the dragon. I can see it now in great big letters: THE ONLY DRAGON IN EXISTENCE."

"But it isn't here," said Carol. "It up and flew away."

"Oop," said Sharp, "you haven't said a word. What is going on? You are ordinarily fairly mouthy. What is going on?"

"I'm mortified," said Oop.

Sharp turned away from him and looked at Maxwell.

"Pete," he said, "you probably realize what you have done. The watchman phoned me and wanted to call the police. But I told him to hold up on calling the police and I'd come right down. I had no idea it would turn out as bad as it did turn out to be. The Artifact is gone and I can't deliver it and that means I'll have to hand back all that cash, and a lot of the exhibits have been smashed to smithereens-"

"The dragon did that," Maxwell said, "before we let him out."

"So you let him out? He didn't actually get away. You just let him out."

"Well, he was smashing all that stuff. I guess we weren't thinking."

"Tell me honest, Pete. Was there actually a dragon?"

"Yes, there was one. He was immobilized inside the Artifact. Perhaps he was the Artifact. Don't ask me how he got there. Enchantment, I would guess."

"Enchantment?"

"Enchantment really happens, Harlow. I don't know how. I've spent years trying to find out and I

don't know much more about it now than when I started out."

"It seems to me," said Sharp, "that there is someone missing. When all hell breaks loose, there usually is someone else who is tied into it. Can you tell me, Oop, where Ghost, that great, good friend of yours, might be?"

Oop shook his head. "He's a hard one to keep track of. Always slipping off."

"That isn't all of it," said Sharp. "There is still another situation that we should pay some heed to. Shakespeare has come up missing. I wonder if any of you could shed some light on his disappearance."

"He was with us for a while," said Oop. "We were just setting down to eat when he became quite frightened and lit out of there. It happened when Ghost remembered that he was Shakespeare's ghost. He's been wondering all these years, you know, who he is the ghost of."

Slowly, lowering himself one section at a time, Sharp sat down on the top step and looked slowly from one to the other of them.

"Not a thing," he said. "You didn't miss a thing when you started out to ruin Harlow Sharp. You made a job of it."

"We didn't start out to ruin you," said Oop. "We never had a thing against you. It seemed, somehow, that things started going wrong and they never stopped."

"By rights," said Sharp, "I should sue every one of you for every cent you have. I should ask a judgment-and don't fool yourself, I'd get it-that would keep all of you working for Time the rest of your natural lives. But the three of you together couldn't offset by a fraction, during your collective lifetimes, what you cost Time tonight. So there's no sense in doing it. Although I suppose the police will have to get into this ruckus. I don't see how they can be kept out of it. The three of you, I'm afraid, will have to answer a lot of questions."

"If someone would only listen to me," said Maxwell, "I could explain it all. That's what I've been trying to do ever since I got back-to find someone who would listen to me. I tried to talk to you this afternoon..."

"Then," said Sharp, "suppose you start right now by explaining it to me. I'll own to a slight curiosity. Let's go across the street to my office, where we can settle down and have a talk. Or might that inconvenience you? There's probably a thing or two you still have to do to finish up the job of bankrupting Time."

"No, I guess there isn't," said Oop. "I'd say, offhand, that we've done about everything we can."

23

Inspector Drayton rose heavily from the chair in which he had been sitting in Sharp's outer office.

"I'm glad you finally arrived, Dr. Sharp," he said. "Something has arisen-"

The inspector cut short his speech when he caught sight of Maxwell. "So it's you," said the inspector. "I am glad to see you. You've led me a long, hard chase."

Maxwell made a face. "I'm not sure, Inspector, that I can reciprocate your gladness."

If there was anyone he could get along without right now, he told himself, it was Inspector Drayton.

"And who might you be?" Sharp asked shortly. "What do you mean by busting in here."

"I'm Inspector Drayton, of Security. I had a short talk with Professor Maxwell the other day, on the occasion of his return to Earth, but I'm afraid that there are still some questions..."

"In that case," said Sharp, "please take your place in line. I have business with Dr. Maxwell and I'm afraid that mine takes precedence over yours."

"You don't understand," said Drayton. "I had not come here to apprehend your friend. His turning up with you is a piece of good fortune I had not expected. There is another matter in which I thought you might be helpful, a matter which came up rather unexpectedly. You see, I had heard that Professor Maxwell had been a guest at Miss Clayton's recent party and so I went to see her-"

"Talk sense, man," said Sharp. "What has Nancy Clayton got to do with all of this?"

"I don't know, Harlow," said Nancy Clayton, appearing at the doorway of the inner office. "I never intended to get involved in anything. All I ever try to do is entertain my Mends and I can't see how there's anything so wrong in that."

"Nancy, please," said Sharp. "First tell me what is going on. Why are you here and why is Inspector Drayton here and-"

"It's Lambert," Nancy said.

"You mean the man who painted the picture that you have."

"I have three of them," said Nancy proudly.

"But Lambert has been dead more than five hundred years."

"That's what I thought, too," said Nancy, "but he turned up tonight. He said that he was lost."

A man stepped from the inner room, urging Nancy to one side-a tall and rugged man with sandy hair and deep lines in his face.

"It appears, gentlemen," he said, "that you are discussing me. Would you mind if I spoke up for myself?"

There was a strange twang to the way he spoke his words and he stood there, beaming at them, in a good-natured manner, and there was not much that one could find in him to make one dislike the man.

"You are Albert Lambert?" Maxwell asked.

"Indeed I am," said Lambert, "and I hope I don't intrude, but I have a problem."

"And you're the only one?" asked Sharp.

"I'm sure that I don't know," said Lambert. "I suppose there are many other persons who are faced with problems. When you have a problem, however, the question is of where to go to have it solved."

"Mister," said Sharp, "I am in the same position and I am seeking answers just the same as you are."

"But don't you see," Maxwell said to Sharp, "that Lambert has the right idea. He has come to the one place where his problem can be solved."

"If I were you, young fellow," Drayton said, "I wouldn't be so sure. You were pretty foxy the other day, but now I'm onto you. There are a lot of things-"

"Inspector, will you please keep out of this," said Sharp. "Things are bad enough without you complicating them. The Artifact is gone and the museum is wrecked and Shakespeare has disappeared."

"But all I want," said Lambert reasonably, "is to get back home again. Back to 2023."

"Now, wait a minute," Sharp commanded. "You are out of line. I don't-"

"Harlow," Maxwell said, "I explained it all to you. Just this afternoon. And I asked you about Simonson. Surely you recall."

"Simonson? Yes, I remember now." Sharp looked at Lambert. "You are the man who painted the canvas that shows the Artifact."

"Artifact?"

"A big block of black stone set atop a hill."

Lambert shook his head. "No, I haven't painted it. Although I suppose I will. In fact, it seems I must, for Miss Clayton showed it to me and it's undeniably something that I would have done. And I must say, who shouldn't, that it is not so bad."

"Then you actually saw the Artifact back in Jurassic days?"

"Jurassic?"

"Two hundred million years ago."

Lambert looked surprised. "So it was that long ago. I knew it was pretty far. There were dinosaurs."

"But you must have known. You were traveling in time."

"The trouble is," said Lambert, "the time unit has gone haywire. I never seem to be able to go to the time I want."

Sharp put up his hands and held his head between them. Then he took them away and said: "Now, let's go at this slowly. One thing at a time. First one step and then another, till we get to the bottom of it."

"I explained to you," said Lambert, "that there's just one thing that I want. It's very simple really, all I want is to get home again."

"Where is your time machine?" asked Sharp. "Where did you leave it. We can have a look at it."

"I didn't leave it anywhere. There's no place I could leave it. It goes everywhere with me. It's inside my head."

"In your head!" yelled Sharp. "A time unit in your head. But that's impossible."

Maxwell grinned at Sharp. "When we were talking this afternoon," he said, "you told me that Simonson revealed very little about his time machine. Now it appears-"

"I did tell you that," Sharp agreed, "but who in their right mind would suspect that a time unit could be installed in a subject's brain. It must a new principle. Something that we missed entirely." He said to Lambert, "Do you have any idea how it works."

"Not the slightest," Lambert said. "The only thing I know is that when it was put into my head-a rather major surgical operation, I can assure you-I gained the ability to travel in time. I simply have to think of where I want to go, using certain rather simple coordinates, and I am there. But something has gone wrong. No matter what I think, I go banging back and forth, like a yo-yo, from one time to yet another, none of which are the times I want to be."

"It would have advantages," said Sharp, speaking musingly and more to himself than to the rest of them. "It would admit of independent action and it would be small, much smaller than the mechanism that we have to use. It would have to be to go inside the brain and... I don't suppose, Lambert, that you know too much about it?"

"I told you," Lambert said. "Not a thing. I wasn't really interested in how it worked. Simonson happens to be a friend of mine..."

"But why here? Why did you come here? To this particular place and time?"

"An accident, that's all. And once I arrived it looked a lot more civilized than a lot of places I had been and I started inquiring around to orient myself. Apparently I had never been so far into the future before, for one of the first things I learned was that you did have time travel and that there was a Time College. Then I heard that Miss Clayton had a painting of mine, and thinking that if she had a painting I had done she might be disposed favorably toward me, I sought her out. In hope, you see, of finding out how to contact the people who might be able to use their good offices to send me home again. And it was while I was there that Inspector Drayton arrived."

"Now, Mr. Lambert," Nancy said, "before you go any further, there is something that I want to ask you. Why didn't you, when you were back in the Jurassic or wherever it was that Harlow said you were, and you painted this picture-"

"You forget," Lambert told her. "I haven't painted it yet. I have some sketches and someday I expect-"

"Well, then, when you get around to painting that picture, why don't you put in dinosaurs. There aren't any dinosaurs in it and you just said you knew you were a long way in the past because there were dinosaurs."

"I put no dinosaurs in the painting," said Lambert, "for a very simple reason. There were no dinosaurs."

"But you said..."

"You must realize," Lambert explained patiently, "that I paint only what I see. I never subtract anything. I never add anything. And there were no dinosaurs because the creatures in the painting had chased them all away. So I put in no dinosaurs, nor any of the others."

"Any of the others?" asked Maxwell. "What are you talking about now? What were these others?"

"Why," said Lambert, "the ones with wheels."

He stopped and looked around him at their stricken faces.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, not at all," Carol said sweetly. "Go right ahead, Mr. Lambert, and tell us all about the ones with wheels."

"You probably won't believe me," Lambert said, "and I can't tell you what they were. The slaves,

perhaps. The work horses. The bearers of the burdens. The serfs. They were life forms, apparently-they were alive, but they went on wheels instead of feet and they were not one thing alone. Each one of them was a hive of insects, like bees or ants. Social insects, apparently. You understand, I don't expect that you'll believe a word I say, but I swear..."

From somewhere far away came a rumble, the low, thudding rumble of rapidly advancing wheels. And as they stood, transfixed and listening, they knew that the wheels were coming down the corridor. Nearer came the rumble, growing louder as it advanced. Suddenly it was just outside the door and slowing down to turn and all at once a Wheeler stood inside the door.

"That's one of them!" screamed Lambert. "What is it doing here?"

"Mr. Marmaduke," said Maxwell, "it is good to see you once again."

"No," the Wheeler told him. "Not Mr. Marmaduke. The so-called Mr. Marmaduke will not be seen by you again. He is in very bad disgrace. He made a vast mistake."

Sylvester had started forward, but Oop had reached down and grabbed him by the loose skin of the neck and was holding him tightly while he struggled to break free.

"There was a contract made," the Wheeler said, "by a humanoid that went by the name of Harlow Sharp. Which one of you would be Harlow Sharp?"

"I'm your man," said Sharp.

"Then, sir, I must ask you what you intend to do about the fulfillment of the contract."

"There is nothing I can do," said Sharp. "The Artifact is gone and cannot be delivered. Your payment, of course, will be refunded promptly."

"That, Mr. Sharp," the Wheeler said, "will not be sufficient. It will fall far short of satisfaction. We shall bring the trial of law against you. We shall bust you, mister, with everything we can. We shall do our best to poverty you and-"

"Why, you miserable go-cart," Sharp yelled, "there is no law for you. Galactic law does not apply with a creature such as you. If you think you can come here and threaten me..."

Ghost appeared, out of thin air, just inside the doorway.

"It's about time," Oop yelled angrily. "Where've you been all night? What did you do with Shakespeare?"

"The Bard is safe," said Ghost, "but there is other news." The arm of the robe raised and gestured at the Wheeler. "Others of his kind swarm in Goblin Reservation to try to trap the dragon."

So, thought Maxwell, somewhat illogically, it had been the dragon they had wanted, after all. Could the Wheelers have known all along, he wondered, that there had been a dragon? And the answer was that, of course, they would have known, for it had been they or their far ancestors who had done the work back in Jurassic days.

In Jurassic days on Earth, and how many others times on how many other planets? The serfs, Lambert had said, the horses, the bearers of the burdens. Were they now, or had they been, inferior members of that ancient tribe of beings, or had they been, perhaps, simply domesticated animals, harnessed biologically by genetic engineering, for the jobs they were assigned?

And now these former slaves, having established an empire of their own, reached out their hands for something that they may have reason to believe should be their heritage. Theirs, since nowhere else in the universe, except, perhaps, in scattered, dying pockets, was there left any trace of the great colonization project dreamed by the crystal planet.

And perhaps, thought Maxwell-perhaps it should be theirs. For theirs had been the labor that had engineered the project. And had the dying Banshee, laden with an ancient guilt, sought to right a wrong when he had doublecrossed the crystal planet, when he had sought to help these former slaves? Or had he, perhaps, believed that it was better that the heritage should go, not to some outsider, but to a race of beings who had played a part, however menial, however small, in the great project that had crumbled into failure?

"You mean," Sharp said to the Wheeler, "that the very moment you were standing here and threatening me, you had your bandits out..."

"He works all the angles that there are," said Oop.

"The dragon went home," said Ghost, "to the only home that he could recognize upon this planet. To where the Little Folk reside, so that he could see his fellows once again, flying in the clear moonlight above the river valley. And then the Wheelers attacked him in the air, trying to force him to the ground, so that he could be captured, and the dragon is fighting back most magnificently, but-"

"Wheelers can't fly," protested Sharp. "And you say there were a lot of them. Or you implied there were a lot of them. There can't be. Mr. Marmaduke was the only..."

"Perhaps," said Ghost, "they are not believed to fly, but they are truly flying. And as for the number of them, I am mystified. Perhaps here all the time, hiding from the view. Perhaps many coming in through the transport stations."

"We can put a stop to that," said Maxwell. "We can send word to Transportation Central. We can..."

Sharp shook his head. "No, we can't do that. Transportation is intergalactic, not of Earth alone. We cannot interfere."

"Mr. Marmaduke," said Inspector Drayton, speaking in his best official voice, "or whoever you may be, I think I'd better run you in."

"Leave off this blathering," said Ghost. "The Little Folk need help."

Maxwell reached out and picked up the chair. "It's time we put an end to fooling," he declared. He raised the chair and said to the Wheeler. "It's time for you to start talking, friend. And if you don't, I'll cave you in."

A circle of jets suddenly protruded from Wheeler's chest and there was a hissing sound. A stench hit them in the face, a terrible fetor that struck like a clenched and savage fist, that made the stomach somersault and set the throat to gagging.

Maxwell felt himself falling to the floor, unable to control his body, which seemed tied up in knots from the fearful stink that exuded from the Wheeler. He hit the floor and rolled and his hands went to his throat and tore at it, as if to rip it open to allow himself more air-although there seemed to be no air, there was nothing but the foulness of the Wheeler.

Above him he heard a fearful screaming and when he rolled around so he could look up, he saw Sylvester suspended above him, his front claws hooked around the upper portions of the Wheeler's body, his rear legs clawing and striking at the bulging and transparent belly in which writhed the disgusting mass of roiling insects. The Wheeler's wheels were spinning frantically, but something had gone wrong with them. One wheel spun in one direction and the second in another, so that the Wheeler whirled about in a giddy dance, with Sylvester clinging desperately and his back legs working like driving pistons at the Wheeler's belly. It looked for all the world, thought Maxwell, as if the two of them were engaged in a rapid and unwieldy waltz.

An unseen hand reached out and grasped Maxwell by the arm and hauled him unceremoniously across the floor. His body thumped across the threshold and some of the foulness diminished and there now was a breath of air.

Maxwell rolled over and got on his hands and knees and fought his way erect. He reached up with his fists and rubbed at his streaming eyes. The air still was heavy with the stench, but one no longer gagged.

Sharp sat propped against the wall, gasping and rubbing at his eyes. Carol was slumped upon the floor. Oop, crouched in the doorway, was tugging Nancy out of the fetid room, from which still came the screaming of the saber-tooth at work.

Maxwell staggered forward and reaching down, picked up Carol and slung her, like a sack, across one shoulder. Turning, he beat an unsteady retreat down the corridor.

Thirty feet away he stopped and turned around and as he did, the Wheeler burst out of the doorway, finally free of Sylvester and with both wheels spinning in unison. He came down the hall, wheeling crazily and lopsidedly-staggering blindly, if a thing with wheels could be said to stagger, slamming into one wall and caroming off it to smash into the other. From a great rent in his belly small whitish objects dropped and scattered all across the floor.

Ten feet from where Maxwell stood, the Wheeler finally collapsed when one wheel hit the wall and

caved in. Slowly, with what seemed to be a rather strange sort of dignity, the Wheeler tipped over and out of the torn belly gushed a bushel or so of insects that piled up on the floor.

Sylvester came slinking down the hail, crouched low, his muzzle extended in curiosity, taking one slow step and then another as he crept upon his handiwork. Behind Oop and Sylvester came the rest of them.

"You can let me down now," said Carol.

Maxwell let her down, stood her on her feet. She leaned against the wall.

"I never saw a more undignified way to be carried," she declared. "You haven't got a spark of chivalry to pack a girl around in a manner such as that."

"It was all a mistake," said Maxwell. "I should have left you there, laid out on the floor."

Sylvester had stopped now and reaching out his neck, sniffed at the Wheeler, all the while with wrinkles of disgust and wonder etched upon his face. There was no sign of life in the Wheeler. Satisfied, Sylvester pulled back and squatted on his haunches, began to wash his face. On the floor beside the fallen Wheeler, the mound of bugs were seething. A few of them started crawling from the pile, heading out into the hall.

Sharp swung out past the Wheeler.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here." The corridor still was sour with the terrible stench.

"But what is it all about?" wailed Nancy. "Why did Mr. Marmaduke..."

"Nothing but stink bugs," Oop told her. "Can you imagine that? A galactic race of stink bugs! And they had us scared!"

Inspector Drayton lumbered forward importantly. "I'm afraid it will be necessary for you all to come with me," he said. "I will need your statements."

"Statements," Sharp said viciously. "You must be out of your mind. Statements, at a time like this, with a dragon loose and..."

"But an alien has been killed," protested Drayton. "And not just an ordinary alien. A member of a race that could be our enemies. This could have repercussions."

"Just write down," said Oop, "killed by a savage beast."

"Oop," snapped Carol, "you know better than to say a thing like that. Sylvester isn't savage. He's gentle as a kitten. And he is not a beast."

Maxwell looked around. "Where is Ghost?" he asked. "He took it on the lam," said Oop. "He always does when trouble starts. He's nothing but a coward."

"But he said..."

"That he did," said Oop. "And we are wasting time. O'Toole could do with help."

24

Mr. O'Toole was waiting for them when they got off the roadway.

"I knew coming you would be," he greeted them. "Ghost, he said he would get you yet. And badly do we need someone who will talk sense to the trolls, who hide and gibber in their bridge and will listen to no reason."

"What have the trolls got to do with it?" asked Maxwell. "For once in your life, can't you leave the trolls alone?"

"The trolls," Mr. O'Toole explained, "filthy as they are, may be our one salvation. They be the only ones who, from lack of any civilization whatsoever, or any niceties, remain proficient in the enchantments of old times, and they specialize in the really dirty kinds of work, the most vicious of enchantments. The fairies, naturally, also cling to the old abilities, but all of their enchantments are of the gentle sort and gentleness is something of which we do not stand in need."

"Can you tell us," Sharp asked, "exactly what is going on. Ghost didn't hang around to explain much of it to us.'

"Gladly," said the goblin, "but leave us start to walking, and walking, I'll relate to you all the happenstance. We have but little time to waste and the trolls are stubborn souls and vast persuasion they will need to do a job for us. They lurk within the mossy stones of that senseless bridge of theirs and they titter like things which have lost their minds. Although, bitter truth to tell, them stinking trolls have little minds to lose."

They trudged in single file up the rocky ravine which lay in the notch between the hills and in the east the dawn-light had begun to show, but the path, buried in the trees and flanked by bushes, was dark. Here and there birds woke from sleep and twittered and somewhere up the hill a raccoon was whickering.

"The dragon came home to us," O'Toole told them as they walked, "the one place on Earth left for him to go, to be with his own kind again, and the Wheelers which, in ancient times had another name than Wheelers, have attacked him, like broomsticks flying in formation. They must not force him to the ground, for then they have him caught and can whisk him hence very rapidly. And, forsooth, he has made a noble fight of it, the fending of them off, but he is growing tired and we must hurry rapidly and with much dispatch if we are to give him aid."

"And you're counting," Maxwell said, "on the trolls being able to bring the Wheelers down like they brought down the flier."

"You apprehend most easily, my friend. That's what lingers in my mind. But these befouled trolls make a bargain of it."

"I never knew," said Sharp, "that the Wheelers could fly. All I've seen them do was trundle."

"Of abilities they have many," said O'Toole. "From their bodies they can grow devices without number and beyond imagination. Nozzles for the spreading of their nasty gas, guns to shoot the lethal bolt, jets to make them broomsticks that move with amazing speed. And never are they up to any good. Full of anger and resentment after all the ages, lying out there, deep in the galaxy, with rancor eating like a cancer into their putrid minds, waiting for a chance to be what they never can be-for no more than menials they are or ever will be."

"But why bother with the trolls?" asked Drayton, out of sorts. "I could have guns and planes..."

"Don't try to be any more of a fool than you already are," said Sharp. "We can't lay a finger on them. We can't create an incident. The humans can take no part in this. This is something between the Little Folk and their former slaves."

"But the cat already killed-"

"The cat. Not a human. We can-"

"Sylvester," Carol said, "was only trying to protect us."

"Do we have to go so fast?" protested Nancy. "I'm not used to this."

"Here," said Lambert, "take my arm. The path does seem slightly rough."

"Do you know, Pete," said Nancy, bubbling, "that Mr. Lambert has agreed to be my house guest for a year or so and paint some pictures for me. Isn't that a lovely thing for him to do?"

"Yes," said Maxwell. "I am sure it is."

The path had been climbing the hillside for the last hundred feet or so and now it dipped down toward the ravine, which was clogged with tumbled boulders which, in the first faint light of morning, looked like crouched, humped beasts. And spanning the ravine was the ancient bridge, a structure jerked raw from an old medieval road. Looking at it, Maxwell found it hard to believe that it had been built only a few decades ago when the reservation had been laid out.

Two days, he thought-had it been only two days since he had returned to Earth to find Inspector Drayton waiting? So much had happened that it seemed much longer than just two days ago. So many things had happened that were unbelievable, and still were happening and still unbelievable, but on the outcome of these happenings, he knew, might depend the future of all mankind and the federation that man had built among the other stars.

He tried to summon up a hatred of the Wheelers, but he found there was no hatred. They were too alien, too far removed from mankind, to inspire a hatred. They were abstractions of evil rather than actual evil beings, although that distinction, he realized, made them no less dangerous. There had been that other

Peter Maxwell and surely he had been murdered by the Wheelers, for when he had been found there had been a curious, repulsive odor lingering, and now, since that moment in Sharp's office, Maxwell knew what that odor was. Murdered because the Wheelers had believed that the first Maxwell to return had come from the crystal planet and murder had been a way to stop him from interfering with the deal with Time for the Artifact. But when the second Maxwell had appeared, the Wheelers must have been afraid of a second murder. That was why, Maxwell told himself, Mr. Marmaduke had tried to buy him off.

And there was the matter of a certain Monty Churchill, Maxwell reminded himself. When this all was finished, no matter how it might come out, he would hunt up Churchill and make certain that the score he owed him was all evened out.

They came up to the bridge and walked under it and halted.

"All right, you trashy trolls," Mr. O'Toole yelled at the silent stone, "there is a group of us out here to hold conversation with you."

"You hush up," Maxwell told the goblin. "You keep out of this. You and the trolls do not get along."

"Who," the O'Toole demanded, "along can get with them. Obstinate things they are and without a shred of honor and of common sense bereft..."

"Just keep still," said Maxwell. "Don't say another word."

They stood, all of them, in the silence of the coming dawn, and finally a squeaky voice spoke to them from the area underneath the far end of the bridge.

"Who is there?" the voice asked. "If you come to bully us, bullied we'll not be. The loudmouthed O'Toole, for all these years, has bullied us and nagged us and no more we'll have of it."

"My name is Maxwell," Maxwell told the speaker. "I do not come to bully you. I come to beg for help."

"Maxwell? The good friend of O'Toole?"

"The good friend of all of you. Of every one of you. I sat with the dying Banshee, taking the place of those who would not come to see out his final moments."

"But drink with O'Toole, you do. And talk with him, oh, yes. And give credence to his lies."

The O'Toole strode forward, bouncing with wrath.

"That down your throats I'll stuff," he screamed. "Let me get my paws but once upon their filthy guzzles-"

His words broke off abruptly as Sharp reached out and, grabbing him by the slack of his trouser-seat, lifted him and held him, gurgling and choking in his rage.

"You go ahead," Sharp said to Maxwell. "If this little pipsqueak so much as parts his lips, I'll find a pool and dunk him."

Sylvester sidled over to Sharp, thrust out his head and sniffed delicately at the dangling O'Toole. O'Toole batted at the cat with windmilling arms. "Get him out of here," he shrieked.

"He thinks you're a mouse," said Oop. "He's trying to make up his mind if you are worth the trouble."

Sharp hauled off and kicked Sylvester in the ribs. Sylvester shied off, snarling.

"Harlow Sharp," said Carol, starting forward, "don't you ever dare to do a thing like that again. If you do, I'll-"

"Shut up!" Maxwell yelled, exasperated. "Shut up, all of you. The dragon is up there fighting for his life and you stand here, wrangling."

They all fell silent. Some of them stepped back. Maxwell waited for a moment, then spoke to the trolls. "I don't know what's gone on before," he said. "I don't know what the trouble is. But we need your help and we're about to get it. I promise you fair dealing, but I also promise that if you aren't reasonable we're about to see what a couple of sticks of high explosives will do to this bridge of yours."

A feeble, squeaky voice issued from the bridge. "But all we ever wanted, all we ever asked, was for that bigmouthed O'Toole to make for us a cask of sweet October ale."

Maxwell turned around. "Is that right?" he asked.

Sharp set O'Toole back upon his feet so that he could answer.

"It's the breaking of a precedent," howled O'Toole. "That is what it is. From time immemorial us goblins are the only ones who ever brewed the gladsome ale. And drink it by ourselves. Make we cannot more than we can drink. And make it for the trolls, then the fairies will be wanting-"

"You know," said Oop, "that the fairies would never drink the ale. All they drink is milk, and the brownies, too."

"Athirst you would have us all," screamed the goblin. "Hard labor it is for us to make only what we need and much time and thought and effort."

"If it's a simple matter of production," suggested Sharp, "we certainly could help you."

Mr. O'Toole bounded up and down in wrath. "And the bugs!" he shouted. "What about the bugs? Exclude them from the ale I know you would when it was brewing. All nasty sanitary. To make October ale, bugs you must have falling into it and all other matters of great uncleanliness or the flavor you will miss."

"We'll put in bugs," said Oop. "We'll go out and catch a bucket full of them and dump them into it."

The O'Toole was beside himself with anger, his face a flaming purple. "Understand you do not," he screamed at them. "Bugs you do not go dumping into it. Bugs fall into it with wondrous selectivity and-"

His words cut off in a gurgling shriek and Carol called out sharply, "Sylvester, cut that out!"

The O'Toole dangled, wailing and flailing his arms, from Sylvester's mouth. Sylvester held his head high so that Mr. O'Toole's feet could not reach the ground.

Oop was rolling on the ground in laughter, beating his hands upon the earth. "He thinks O'Toole's a mouse!" Oop yelled. "Look at that putty cat! He caught hisself a mouse!"

Sylvester was being gentle about it. He was not hurting O'Toole, except his dignity. He was holding him lightly in his mouth, with the two fangs in his upper jaw closing neatly about his middle.

Sharp hauled off to kick the cat.

"No," Carol yelled, "don't you dare do that!"

Sharp hesitated.

"It's all right, Harlow," Maxwell said. "Let him keep O'Toole. Surely he deserves something for what he did for us back there in the office."

"We'll do it," O'Toole yelled frantically. "We'll make them their cask of ale. We'll make two casks of it."

"Three," said the squeaky voice coming from the bridge.

"All right, three," agreed the goblin.

"No weaseling out of it later on?" asked Maxwell.

"Us goblins never weasel," said O'Toole.

"All right, Harlow," said Maxwell. "Go ahead and belt him."

Sharp squared off to kick. Sylvester dropped O'Toole and slunk off a pace or two.

The trolls came pouring from the bridge and went scurrying up the hillside, yelping with excitement.

The humans began scrambling up the slope, following the trolls.

Ahead of Maxwell, Carol tripped and fell. Maxwell stopped and lifted her. She jerked away from him and turned to him a face flaming with anger. "Don't you ever touch me!" she said. "Don't even speak to me. You told Harlow to go ahead and kick Sylvester. You yelled at me. You told me to shut up."

She turned then and went scrambling up the hill, moving quickly out of sight.

Maxwell stood befuddled for a moment, then began the climb, skirting boulders, grabbing at bushes to pull himself along.

Up on the top of the hill he heard wild cheering and off to his right a great black globe, with its wheels spinning madly, plummeted out of the sky and crashed into the woods. He stopped and looked up and saw, through the treetops, two globes streaking through the sky on collision courses. They did not swerve or slacken speed. They came together and exploded on impact. He stood and watched the shattered pieces flying. In a few seconds there were pattering sounds among the leaves as the debris came raining down.

The cheering still was going on atop the bluff and far off, near the top of the hill that rose beyond the ravine, something that he heard, but did not see, came plunging to the earth.

There was no one else in sight as he began the climb again.

It was all over now, he told himself. The trolls had done their work and now the dragon could come down. He grinned wryly to himself. For years he'd hunted dragons and here finally was the dragon, but something more, perhaps, than he had imagined. What could the dragon be, he wondered, and why had it been enclosed within the Artifact, or made into the Artifact, or whatever might have been done with it?

Funny thing about the Artifact, he thought-resisting everything, rejecting everything until that moment when he had fastened the interpreting mechanism on his head to examine it. What had happened to release the dragon from the Artifact? Clearly the mechanism had had a part to play in the doing of it, but there still was no way of knowing what might have happened. Although the people on the crystal planet certainly would know, one of the many things they knew, one of the many arts they held which still lay outside the knowledge of others in the galaxy. Had the interpreter turned up in his luggage by design rather than by accident? Had it been planted there for the very purpose for which it had been used? Was it an interpreter, at all, or was it something else fashioned in a manner that resembled an interpreter?

He recalled that at one time he had wondered if the Artifact might not once have served as a god for the Little Folk, or for those strange creatures which early in the history of the Earth had been associated with the Little Folk? And had he been right, he wondered. Was the dragon a god from some olden time?

He began the climb again, but went slower now, for there was no need to hurry. It was the first time since he had returned from the crystal planet that there was no urgency.

He was somewhat more than halfway up the hill when he heard the music, so faint at first, so muted, that be could not be sure he heard it.

He stopped to listen and it was surely music.

The sun had just moved the top part of its disk over the horizon and a sheet of blinding light struck the treetops on the hill above him, so that they blazed with autumn color. But the hillside that he climbed still lay in morning shadow.

He listened and the music was like the sound of silver water running over happy stones. Unearthly music. Fairy music. And that was what it was. On the dancing green off to his left a fairy orchestra was playing.

A fairy orchestra and fairies dancing on the green! It was something that he had never seen and here was a chance to see it. He turned to his left and made his way, as silently as he could, toward the dancing green.

Please, he whispered to himself, please don't go away. Don't be frightened by me. Please stay and let me see you.

He was close now. Just beyond that boulder. And the music kept on playing.

He crawled by inches around the boulder, on guard against making any sound.

And then he saw.

The orchestra sat in a row upon a log at the edge of the green and played away, the morning light flashing off the iridescent wings and the shiny instruments.

But there were no fairies dancing on the green. Instead there were two others he never would have guessed. Two such simple souls as might dance to fairy music.

Facing one another, dancing to the music of the fairy orchestra, were Ghost and William Shakespeare.

25

The dragon perched upon the castle wall, its multicolored body glittering in the sun. Far below, in

its valley, the Wisconsin River, blue as a forgotten summer sky, flowed between the shores of flaming forests. From the castle yard came sounds of revelry as the goblins and the trolls, for the moment with animosity laid aside, drank great tankards of October ale, banging the tankards on the tables that had been carried from the great hall, and singing ancient songs that had been composed long before there had been such a thing as Man.

Maxwell sat upon a deep-buried boulder and gazed out across the valley. A dozen feet away the edge of the bluff cut off above a hundred feet of cliff and on the edge of the cliff grew a twisted cedar tree, twisted by the winds that had howled across the valley for uncounted years, its bark a powdery silver, its foliage a light and fragrant green. Even from where he sat, Maxwell could catch the sharp tang of the foliage.

It all had come out right, he told himself. There was no Artifact to trade for the knowledge of the crystal planet, although there was the dragon and the dragon, after all, probably had been what the people on that planet wanted. But even if this should not prove to be the truth, the Wheelers had lost out, and this, in the long run, might be more important than the acquiring of the knowledge.

It all had worked out OK. Better than he could have hoped. Except that now everyone was sore at him. Carol was angry at him because he'd told Harlow to go ahead and kick Sylvester and because he'd told her to shut up. O'Toole was sore at him because he'd abandoned him to Sylvester and thereby forced him to give in to the trolls. Harlow more than likely still was plenty burned up because he had messed up the deal for the Artifact and because of all the busted pieces in the museum. But maybe the fact that he'd got Shakespeare back might make up for some of that. And there was Drayton, of course, who still might want to question him, and Longfellow, at Administration, who wouldn't like him any better no matter what had happened.

Sometimes, he told himself, it didn't pay to care too much about anything or to fight for anything. Maybe it was the ones like Nancy Clayton who really had it made—feather-headed Nancy with her famous house guests and her fabulous parties.

Something brushed against him and he turned to see what it might be. Sylvester reached out a rough and rasping tongue and began to wash his face.

"Cut it out," said Maxwell. "That tongue of yours takes off hide."

Sylvester purred contentedly and settled down beside him, leaning hard against him. The two of them sat and gazed across the valley.

"You got an easy life," Maxwell told the cat. "You don't have any problems. You don't have to worry."

A foot crunched on some stones. A voice said, "You've kidnaped my cat. Can I sit down and share him?"

"Sure, sit down," said Maxwell. "I'll move over for you. I thought you never wanted to speak to me again."

"You were a nasty person down there," said Carol, "and I didn't like you much. But I suppose you had to be."

A black cloud came to rest inside the cedar tree.

Carol gasped and shrank against Maxwell. He put out an arm and held her close against him.

"It's all right," he said. "It is just a banshee."

"But he hasn't any body. He hasn't any face. He is just a cloud."

"That is not remarkable," the Banshee told her. "That is what we are, the two of us that are left. Great dirty dish-cloths flapping in the sky. And you need not be frightened, for this other human is a friend of ours."

"I wasn't a friend of the third one," said Maxwell. "Nor was the human race. He sold out to the Wheelers."

"And yet, you sat with him, when no one else would do it."

"Yes, I did that. Even your worst enemy could demand that you do that."

"Then, I think," the Banshee said, "that you can understand a little. The Wheelers, after all, were us, still are us, perhaps. And ancient ties die hard."

"I think I do understand," said Maxwell. "What can I do for you?"

"I only came," the Banshee told him, "to tell you that the place you call the crystal planet has been notified."

"And they want the dragon?" Maxwell asked. "You'll have to give us the coordinates."

"The coordinates," said the Banshee, "will be given to Transportation Central. You will want to go there, you and many others, to transfer the data. But the dragon stays on Earth, here on Goblin Reservation."

"I don't understand," said Maxwell. "They wanted..."

"The Artifact," the Banshee said, "to set the dragon free. He had been caged too long."

"Since the Jurassic," said Maxwell. "I agree. That is far too long."

"But we did not plan so long," the Banshee said. "You moved him before we could set him free and we thought that we had lost him. The Artifact was only to preserve and hide him until the colony on Earth could become established, until it could protect him."

"But protect him? Why did he need protection?"

"Because," the Banshee said, "he is the last of his race and therefore very precious. He is the last of the-I find it hard to say-you have creatures you call dogs and cats?"

"Yes," said Carol. "We have one of them right here."

"Pets," the Banshee said. "And yet much more than pets. Creatures that have walked the Earth with you from the very early days. The dragon is the pet, the last pet, of the people of the crystal planet. They grow old, they will soon be gone. They cannot leave their pet behind uncared for; he must be delivered into loving hands."

"The goblins will take care of him," said Carol. "And the trolls and fairies and all the rest of them. They will be proud of him. They will spoil him rotten."

"And the humans, too?"

"And the humans, too," she said.

They did not see him go. But he was no longer there. There was not even a dirty dishcloth flapping in the sky. The tree stood empty.

A pet, thought Maxwell. Not a god, but a simple pet. And yet, perhaps, not so simple as it sounded. When men had first made the bio-mechs, what had they created? Not other men, at least at first, not livestock, not freaks engineered to specific purposes. They had created pets.

Carol stirred against his arm. "What are you thinking, Pete?"

"About a date," he said. "Yes, I guess I was thinking of a dinner date with you. We had one once, but it never quite came off. Would you like to try again?"

"At the Pig and Whistle?"

"If that is what you want."

"Without Oop and Ghost. Without any troublemakers."

"But with Sylvester, of course."

"No," she said. "Just the two of us. Sylvester stays at home. It is time he learned."

They got up from the boulder and started back toward the castle.

Sylvester looked up at the dragon perching on the castle wall and snarled.

The dragon lowered its head on its sinuous neck and looked him in the eye. It stuck out at him a long and forked tongue.