

The Strongholds

Moderan is a world where computer-directed wars are the pastime, the purpose in being, the religion, and the sport. When human feelings enter such a world, confusion and consternation are the result...

David R. Bunch's "Moderan" stories comprise one of the most distinctive and celebrated bodies of work in all of science fiction.

David R. Bunch

MODERAN

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INTRODUCTION

Quaint they were, these records, strange and ancient, washed to shore when the Moderan seas finally unthawed. Played in the old-fashioned machine way we, the beam people, the Essenceland Dream people, easily divined, they told of a very different world, a transition world, if you will, between what we are now and the death and defeat these people hoped to overcome. New metal man! It does have a ring. MODERAN! It did seem pretty great in concept, I'm sure, and, who knows, perhaps it had a reasonable chance for success. But all societies, all civilizations, all aspirations it seems must fail the unremitting tugs of shroudy time, finally, leaving only little bones, fossils, a shoe turned to stone maybe, a bone button in the sea perhaps, a jeweled memento of an old old love. In this case, tapes were left, wherein a great "King" had set down his story of hopes, fears, wars - yes, WARS! Perhaps this "King" was a writer of some skill, a kind of doomed King James. His prose does have a flair, although sometimes it turns tedious, I'm afraid; sometimes he belabors the obvious and becomes vague when he needs to elucidate; sometimes he's fat when he should be lean, lean when fat would be better. Or at least it seems to me these things are true. But then, I am the true machine efficiency, here as essence man, my perfections against his human flaws - quite unfair!

Yes, we are the essence people, a long way up the world from the world that these tapes told of. We truly have gained the immortality that these knaves could only dream of. CRUDE! Oh, yes, crude they were, and yet they had a certain verve and élan, surely, as evinced by these things a "King" set down, a kind of clown "King" certainly, but oh, so serious all the same. He was self-centered - who could doubt

it? He was running scared most of the time, scared of himself, scared of time, scared of his Enemies, all other men; scared of the White Witch - scared scared. And yet there is, we have to say, the matter of the very human redeeming grace in this shell of a man who could, so terribly encumbered, screw braggadocio to the sticking point and go windily through the world, crowing, "I am greatest I Am Greatest I AM GREATEST - and I'll prove it!" And "hearing" these tapes and setting these stories down for you, I have become more than doubly convinced that this man, this "King," if you please, this Stronghold #10, had somehow a concept of his own worth that at least equaled his arsenal of fears and overcame them. And that would have to be quite a concept of worth, and quite an overcoming, for his fears were truly great.

I have not given you all of the tapes, because, as most people before us have done, he tended to repeat himself in hammering home his fears, his aspirations, his accomplishments, his failures. To be truthful with you about what I have done, I have picked out the tapes that, while telling his "tale complete" made the greatest impression on me. That's pretty human, isn't it?

And, have no doubt, I am human. I'll tell you briefly a little more about who I am, and then we'll get on with the business of MODERAN. I am, as I said, essence-man, as almost all of us are now, with the exception of those in a little landlocked and sea-starved country that - YES! still calls itself Olderrun. I am from the big machines. I do not have to die. I and my kind are truly, if you will, the heirs of the MODERAN dream, as set forth in these stories I am going to give you from the tapes (give them to you essentially unaltered, although; certainly, I could improve upon them, for I am from the Machines! I am efficient). To be brief, it was discovered for us, nay! not discovered, evolved, a way to save man from the grave soil and the Eternal Dark. A real way to save him, not an abracadabra way of dreams or religion or any other myth-fakery - nay, not even the way of MODERAN, which almost won the game. This way we have is real and complete so long as those big machines keep rolling in the North to succor our beams. And of course they WILL! We have machines watching and keeping up machines. We have an entire hierarchy of spies and counterspies of the machines and the most complete machine-machine repair service ever dreamed up by either mortal or immortal man. They'd endure. I KNOW THEY WILL! (They just have to.)

When she and I, my dear love dream of the moment (we were paired by punched beams!) went on this beam excursion, transported by those big transmitters in the North, who would have thought we would come up with one of the rare literary finds of our, or any, generation? It was to have been just one of those routine love trips of the essence people, you know, just riding out to a dream love-place picked by the Love Dictator of Essenceland and having an essence time to break the monotony, a little petting of the sex beams, could be, a lot of beamish talk, surely surely, and, in short, a love picnic in the beamish essence times. And then I looked down at my beamish feet, and there it was! washed up from the thawed, once machine-frozen, Moderan sea, the tapes of this book. I whooped; I spilled my love and her beams into the sea water as I dropped her fast for this unique thing. Good sport that she was and is, she dried her beams and agreed with me that this possibly was more important than love. We gave the signal to be beamed home again, the Love Dictator gave his consent and we stayed up all the beamish night at her place; playing with this book, figuring out the tapes, marveling at the literary finesses of it. And from such a crude age too! Well, one never knows, does one?

An early tape, "No Cracks or Sagging," is a rather long, leisurely thing, but it does cover a lot of ground! It's a waggish tale, I fell in love with it - (those jammy-rams and their solemn mission so ridiculously executed!) - and I believe it is a key and dominant chapter to set the stage for your initial good concept and growing understanding of the Mighty Dream these Moderan people worked at. To coat the whole solid earth with plastic - imagine! To freeze the very oceans solid - whew! To tamp, anywhere and

everywhere, all the soft places... And my beamish hat off to them, they did it! They truly, in their world, one of the great great worlds in the long long history of man, had, for a time, "No Cracks or Sagging."

After "No Cracks or Sagging" came several tapes dealing with the "replacement" operations that set this man "firmly on the road to the Moderan Dream." But this man was generally so hung up on his own suffering and apprehensions through this period of his life that these stories came out to be generally in very poor taste, indeed. There wasn't a fingernail pulled out or a bone sawed in two or a new-metal part put in that this man didn't feel strongly about. Yet, he was no coward. Ah no, not this man who was ultimately to become the great Stronghold #10, "one of the greatest Captains in all wide Moderan." I believe he was set in the teeth with as much bravery and determination as any man who has ever lived.

After that dreary nine months in the hospital, during which time our man was repeatedly sawed, hacked and "replaced," which he more or less summarizes in the gruesome tape "The Butterflies Were Eagle-Big That Day" (in the name of all squeamishness, I've heavily cut and censored that one), we see him up and out in the generally more hopeful one, "New Kings Are Not for Laughing" and claiming his fort in "One Time a Red Carpet..." In these, understand, he has already become a man of Moderan, "the bulk of him new-metal man now, his flesh-strips few and played-down, his organs ever-last engines, his brains ingenious green fluids sloshing in pans."

Not long had he been out of the nine-months nightmare of the operations and fully ensconced in his fort than, like true lust-man that he was, he set out to get it. What I mean is, with the wife-nuisance problem due to be settled for him, as well as for all the Stronghold masters of Moderan, he went for his new-metal doll, his "tin can mistress," if you will, his "Faithful Fun." It was his due, it was not as unseemly as it may somehow seem, and he was not really a bad man and a dirt-head all-the-time, not by the standards of his age. And we see, in the tapes, implications that he had suffered some reverses on the "field of love," long before he became a new-metal man. So I for one am rather glad, I feel good in my beams, I mean, that he could so love a tin can doll (a new-metal mistress, you know) that he could give all his Big-Joy-Time to it if he so chose and never tire of it. And then, if he did tire, he did not have to explain. The OFF switch would just place the night down in that sweet cog-wheeled brain of his sweet metal doll, and he could be about more manly things then, such as blasting a neighbor's Wall down, say, or smearing a whole continent away. CONVENIENT!

So "New-Metal Mistress Time" to you!

But lest you gain the false notion of universal new-metal mistress bliss and no sex-worry in Moderan, it was, I must in fairness hasten to amend, not always quite that way. Our man it seems, being human, was a walking welcome mat for many problems. However much he might try not to, wherever he went, whatever much percentage of steel he might attain to (except 100%, I suppose, which sublime state he never quite reached), he would, sooner or late, feel that cold hand clutch the shoulder and hear that hard voice command, "Come with me, man, I have some human-type adversities for YOU to battle." So it was with a new-metal mistress he became more than just a little unwisely fond of. Yes, in "Remembering" we see him in the love-anguish wringer just as much as any all-flesh man might be. His new-metal mistress of the current moment has run away. With a tin man? With another Stronghold master? With a rival? With a stranger? Whom? whom? What? what? How? how? and why? why? It's a wry little thing, really. I mean, truly it's something to think that a mighty Stronghold master could become so enamored of a tin can woman that, upon betrayal, he'd spend long dormant months just thinking up punishments for her. The more I think about this little sketch and certain other stated and implied attitudes that keep cropping up in the other tapes, some of which I have set forth for you, some of which I have kept back for one reason and another (considerations of personal likes and dislikes, mostly, because I'm so human yet), the more I'm SURE that this man HAD suffered former great reverses on the "field of love." His Armies of Amour had, I believe, been betrayed, tricked, surrounded for ignoble capture, sent flying in

panic rout, fought to terrible losses and standstills just about every adverse condition, I mean, that could happen to a pressing force. And he probably had become almost incapable of self-confidence or trust, out on the flesh-fouled fields. Then to find, as new-metal man, exactly what he wanted, something manufactured to his very own specifications and a thing that he could really enjoy and count on (he thought!) and then to have this become strayed, stolen or ignobly enticed - it did quick-boil his brains. And I don't wonder!

And so, "Remembering" to you too...

But let me not neglect to emphasize that all these new-metal mistress times were possible because very early in Moderan the mighty Stronghold masters had solved for themselves the flesh-woman question, or, to be more precise, the wife-nuisance roadblock. And for that I honor them. I mean, my beamish hat is off to them, for that was QUITE a solving! We have no such problem, of course, in the essence times. If I don't like the beams of the woman I'm with, or if I like too much the beams of the woman I'm with and she won't reciprocate, I just signal back to the Love Dictator's office my discontent and he orders one of his little clerk mechanics to call the old beams home, and the Love Dictator then transmits me, personally, a new package. It does work out! But remember, these were crude times and crude people. You have to know they were. But WhiteWitchValley was a step in the right direction, as, indeed, Moderan generally was steps in the right direction. "And So WhiteWitchValley "...

There was a multitude of tapes concerning the home life of the little clutter-people of Moderan, who were, many of them, not so fortunate as to have complete husband-wife segregation. Now, I, to tell you true was surprised to learn that Moderan, even at its height, was not entirely free of the burden of the rag-tag flesh people. Our man of Stronghold 10 deplored it, as you will see, yet he, finally, could not have found the strength, it appears, had he been possessed of the final say, to have made it different. This seems to me somehow to sum up the failure of both flesh-man before him and this new-metal man we have here. Neither could bring himself, finally, to rid himself of the eternal war that was in himself, the old old tug and fracas between what he naturally wanted to do (which was therefore "right" for him to do) and what he somehow had been led to believe he should do because of conscience, that foul unnatural and totally impossible contrived concept. It kept man, even this new-metal man, in such a constant dither of debate and "can't-do want to" frustration as to make him finally just a spotted, soggy mass of compromises and self-invented shames. Oh, it was not so noticeable in new-metal times, but it was there. As long as the foul softness of even one flesh-strip was there, this terrible immobilizing flaw of trying to be good, according to conscience, would be there. Good!? And what is good? Hmmmpppphhh... It is nothing really but the false trying toward the falsest notion that has ever crossed man's mind. Could he early on have torn this notion from him in flinty chunks and sent it clattering in broken death to the native-natural ground, or whammed it totally from him in some big explosion of foul gas and sent it riding up to heaven in phantom balloon-sacks where it supposedly was to be some GREAT DAY gathered whole - what a difference it could have made to man - natural! But he apparently couldn't quite do it. It remained for us, the essence people, finally to do it. But be not in doubt, there were nuts during the great formative stages of us, the beam people, who argued for conscience beams and moral clutter and therefore the perpetuation of the foul self-defeating debate of natural man versus contrived man forever and forever. But natural man won out in the end, and we have, finally, the real man - self distilled, if you will, in our essence beams. YAY! essence man, natural beam man, the finally true man, live forever!

But I got carried away! Forgive me my digressions. I started out to explain to you about the provisions for the rag tag people of Moderan. And thus I chose "Bubble-Dome Homes" for your education here and, we trust, some entertaining reading too. Also, I chose other tapes from the many concerning home life in Moderan some revealing that this "King" in his anguish, divorced from that regular pose of the regular Stronghold master, which pose was mostly hate and war, war and hate, with some times truce-and-Joy times and periods of Universal Deep Thinking thrown in - divorced from all that he would

oftentimes unmask his human feelings. And who, for instance, can withhold a kind of cold rational pity from him upon reading such a strange little story as "Was She Horrid?"? (So strong he was, so scared he was, so weak he was - and she got him with a doll in the very heart of his complex!) But mostly he set down the home life of Moderan in tight little third-person classics that, while revealing the common life of "common" Moderan, revealed, also his considerable authorial skills. For instance "A Husband's Share," "It Was in Black Cat Weather" and "A Little Girl's Xmas in Moderan" I considered three literary jewels of such a fine cut that I left them word for word, comma for comma, exactly as he set them in the tapes!

Then came those great stories that are "Intimations of the End." There seems a note of searching and sadness through these, a bit of "listening," if you will, a kind of quiet crying and a yearning bigger than all Moderan, bigger than the world. You somehow see a man a victim of his age, and the profiteer of his age, the sufferer and the rewarded, finally asking WHY? and WHAT GAINS IT? and TO WHAT PURPOSE ANYHOW? Then too there is this grudging note of admiration through many of these last stories, admiration for the "man from the past" who will hold the course. I could feel this note strongly through such pieces as "The One from Camelot Moderan," "Reunion" and "Has Anyone Seen this Horseman?" But the great GREAT stories in this group have to be, if not "Reunion" and "How It Ended," then "Interruption in Carnage" and "The Miracle of the Flowers." In "Interruption in Carnage" we see our man for the first time right up against natural-causes death and appallingly aware, for the first time, that it could, despite all the Great Dream, happen to a man of Moderan. I'm man enough to admit that I cried a little in my beams when I saw how he tried so very hard to repair this death in another, needed so very much to fix it and couldn't do it. Finally up against The Wall, and remarkably close to total chaos in the mind, he made the adjustment, bargained his deal with reality, re-entered the current general war, won himself another world shoot-out and helped sack once more the great battle dead. (Yay for new-metal man! yay for Moderan!) In "The Miracle of the Flowers" we see how he is ready to believe, at least just a little, in something more subtle, and perhaps a little more rewarding, than fortresses and guns. But the world outside the fortresses and the guns is a diddling world, finally, and our man is diddled by a craftsman at diddling, the man with the flower hand!

It is no wonder, really, considering all that our man had passed through, that he came at last to a "Final Decision." And what he might have done for himself if he had followed through on "Final Decision"! What he might have done for the world! Let's admit it. All the way up from those fighter apes (who, I am convinced, were our true ancestors) to the Essenceland beams, and we still don't know the answer to that Riddle he might have solved for us. (We still don't know! And I'm man enough to admit it.) And because we still don't know, that's why I'm on the knees of my beams more often than you would ever guess. Oh yes! silent prayers, beam prayers, prayers that fill the universe with my silent fears and wonder - asking mostly that those great machines keep firing in the North. So that I may stay, stay with a life I know. And not risk that other, or NO other, or what other, oh! risky risk! But sometimes on beamish windy days when the earth roils up in stormy weather, or on silent-sun days when all the universe seems locked in a quiet hug, or on days when the wind and the silence play intermittently together it will grab me in the throat of my beams, this Thing. Then I will be caught with an anger at this man, this person of Moderan, this individual like bacon strips and steel plate a long long time ago, this human being who had a chance to go out there and KNOW for us all, and didn't do it. I cannot blame him really, but I CAN be sorry that he didn't go. It does seem that an excellent chance passed, slipped by, rode on into that vast irretrievably-dark wasteland of human missed-chances; and I have to confess that we even here in Essenceland Beam have not a plan yet to match his. Sometimes I think essentially that we just ride our beams and dawdle around. (NO! that's not true.) But we must plan to do better. Tomorrow. TOMORROW!...

But hey! Let me not forget now to emphasize that this man had hate. It plays through the stories like a cold cold wind, a hot all-searing flame and a leaking ball of acid that put all human endeavor and aspirations to the test of gall. In fact, it seemed at times that he almost was consumed by, or at least was

fully absorbed in, his hates, which he gave full play to as almost a kind of virtue. When he sat back in his war Room with his fort on the status of continuous blast, his blamm guns turned to world objectives, his doll bombs inexorably walking that walk to programmed target, the White Witch rockets firing, "the high-up weird screaming wreck-wrecks homing in to kills," it seems to me, thinking back in my beams, that in all the long history of warring man there had never been another human being who had gunned so successfully. Or so futilely either, for this man's wars, according to these documents I have, were continuous wars, broken only by small traces spent, you guessed it, in preparing for more wars. I am somehow hypnotized by this idea, and yet I have to see it as not quite right, not quite. Were they just being their true-bad selves is Moderan? Well, there are statements in the tapes to substantiate this thinking, where war was their "main play" and hate their "chief virtue." And yet, there must be something a little wrong in fighting all, or substantially all, of the time. And I don't mean morally, conscience-wrong. Pshaw phhooooee phaw phaw and pshaw phhooooee phi phi - of course I don't mean that. I mean wrong, somehow, in emphasis on something unnecessarily aggressive and violent that undercut man's slickness in the universe and made him laughably jagged and out of phase in the world scheme. (Just look at us! slick beams that slide over all the world now and prowl the universe in harmless splendor, from those big engines in the Earth North to all the ports of Place and Space and timeless Time...) But our man rode his all-consuming hates, sometimes sublime, oftentimes tawdry, right on into "How It Ended." He never learned...

It was between "Final Decision" and the deciphering of "How It Ended" that we became tired a little from the book, not bored, you understand, but a bit lethargic from so much work, and dreamish, and suddenly I remembered that my companion had very beautiful beams. Or, taken all together, it would not be wrong to say, "She was, and is, a very beautiful beam!" Her name had been Beatrice, I had been told, in the Old Life before she had gone down to have her essence copied in the "copy kitty" machines for eternal transmission from "the big transmitters in the North."

Though we were under direct surveillance by the Love Dictator's office, since we had applied for and been granted "visas" for a love excursion to the coast (and now later, this permission to stay up all night with a book), I still thought it might be possible to be a bit romantically-exciting on the sly. I believe man will never be refined enough that he will not continue to try to find out ways to "beat the system." It's part and parcel of being man, I believe. In this case, some of us had learned that by a slight warping and bending of our beams, our essences, as it were, we could communicate desires and other informaion to each other, without alarming the particular monitoring office of the moment. Our monitoring office in this instance would be, of course, one of the Love Director's many stations. In this case, I planned, through the warping and bending of my beams, to tell Beatrice that something had come over me, due to the cozy scene at her place probably, together with our working so well as a team all night long, and now I hoped for a little more than conversation and companionship to show for our long time together, in such close effort!

Her beams were warped and bent for receiving, just as mine were warped and bent for sending. She got the message! Now, what I aimed to do when she said "YES" was not any kind of a rational plan. Is it ever!? I was not, for instance, remembering that one of the big monitoring walls on one of the Love Dictator's many stations would pinpoint our actions. We would show up "like a sore thumb," to employ an old expression, as we bumped the charts and humped the graphs, making love. I was just thinking how NICE! it would BE! to be WRAPPED! in Beatrice's BEAMS! That's all. YES! And Beatrice? Well, I don't know. I don't know at all what she was thinking or what she really wanted. Do we ever? I only know that with her warp she whammed my warp a tremendous rap and said, "Cheap chaser! What do you take me for? One of those hot joy-slams? NO!"

So we went back to work to wrap up this book. And we soon saw that "How It Ended" was really how it ended!

The Beginnings

THINKING BACK (OUR GOD IS A HELPING GOD!)

Flesh seemed doomed that year; death's harpies were riding down. The once-beautiful, sweet and life-sustaining air was tinged with poison now, and man drank at his peril from the streams that had once been pure. He prayed to a God that was said to be in all things good, true and beautiful, but especially was thought to be all sternness and goodness, justice and loving-care, in some milk-white place far away, "On High." And those prayers if answered were answered very obliquely indeed. For the air got deeper in poison from the tinkering with lethal things the flesh-man indulged in when not praying, and the water got fuller with danger as each new explosion pounded the bomb-fevered air. There was talk of the End; great discussions were handled in great halls across the land. Treaties were signed among statesmen to help the air get better, to allow the streams to recover and run pure once again. But even as the flesh-hands grasped the pens to scrawl the marks of good faith in some countries, fear lashed at capitals in other countries. Arsenals were tested anew. Things done were undone. The air got sicker; the streams ran not pure but pure danger - There seemed no chance for flesh-man, and his God seemed entirely silent wherever He was, wherever His white throne was. The HOPELESS signs were out everywhere. Little children asked that they be allowed to go quickly and not grow up hurting and maimed. Adults in what should have been the full flower of brave manhood and fair womanhood quaked, looked heavenward for some hopeful sign and, finding none, fell down and cried bitterly. The aged ones, quavering and whining now, finally decided that yes, truly they were most glad that they were so very old. The flesh billions courted at the Palace of Danger so ardently had turned against them and the mass wedding of Death and Destruction seemed now all but assured.

And then - and then this chance! Offered to all. It came first as small hope, the rumor of it, a faint faint breath of a chance seeping through the flesh-fouled metropolises. And then it was confirmed as glowing fact when the tour went round that year, year of the Greatest Darkness. And yet - and yet they scoffed, scoffed by the billions at this man working his hinges and braces, would not believe his heart was an ever-last one, had no credulity for his new wonderful lungs that could breathe him a forever-life even in bomb-tainted air. When they saw that his hands were steel they yelled robot! robot! When they saw that his eyes were wide-range, mechanism-helped, and that he'd aphfluggee-phflaggee button on his talker that he pressed from time to time to aid in his speech expression they laughed and yelled...

Somewhere in the wide blue space heavens there are this day a billion laughs still going, a billion raw guffaws orbiting, each closely chased by a shriek, a yelled scream that never quite catches the laugh it matches. Those strange laughs and scream nose cones that circle, and must forever, make a queer motion-monument to the unbelievers who could but laugh when they had the great dream shown them plain and who screamed over a chance that was gone when the swift black wagons of death came with death's own personal cloth-lined boxes. But some of us SAW! We BELIEVED! We came over to theNewLand . We submitted our bodies for help. We were not disappointed.

Consider the dreams we have captured here in New Processes; think of the fears turned back now inNewLand ; stand up and bow the head for Moderan. And know it has changed our outlook from quaking oh-God-help-us fear to massive and stalwart non-fear. Now we have Time! We can hold Time in our firm sure hands and regard it as the brightest brightest candle, one that will never burn down. We have Time arrested and shackled, imprisoned in our "replacements." Though it run with the speed of light a million times over, though it run with inexpressible speed, it is as though it stayed just with us here. A million years of it can slip past our ever-last hinges and we nod, wave, ride on deep in our hip-snuggle chairs and give thanks. To our god. For YES! when we captured Time we placed it in the ribcage of each man and sealed it there in each man's calm-beating heart. And should a heart falter in the rib cage of any man, it is not the worry of a piffle's worth. We have but to send off to the Big Parts Warehouse where, with other spare parts, gleaming hearts rest in rows, acres and acres of beating hearts, warmed-up and idling, ready to see a man through, each man having at least ten replaceable good ones in full repair at all times. YES, we, The Believers, intend to keep what we have; we'll never let go! We have Time, once the arch enemy of all, like a babe in a basket - calm. We have taken an old man's scythe blade; his long, dirty beard we have shorn. He still stands gaunt with his gloomy clothes wrestled about him, sardonic and wishing for a chance at us, to do harm. But his hourglass is out at both ends now and for us, endless, the endless sands roll through.

Our god? YES! Let us speak of our god. Once, in a long-ago almost-forgotten time, there was this Truce of the Dozen Days among the Stronghold folk while all of us made the pilgrimage. By foot or tunnel car or roll-go all of us came to the great plastic plain of the Dream Realized, and in one massive movement, at a prearranged signal in Time, told by our carefully synchronized etern-tells, all of us toggled our knee switches over to the setting marked Kneel Down. And with a crash and tinkle that thundered through the red vapor shield of that happy September we were all folded down. Some thought he bestowed a blessing on all of his children that day. Some said that he waved and nodded, and still others held that he smiled. And some there were who would swear through all the rest of their lives, eternal lives, that YES! there had been this miracle, when the voiceless gave voice in thunder, when the eyeless gazed rays of lightning through the gay and thick pink air. But I heard only the silence that day across the wide shimmering acres of gleaming radiant folk all folded down, beheld only a sharp sheen as of silver when the sun slid through for a little as some small hitch came about in a place far away where many great drive wheels and drive shafts were supplying our vapor-shield power.

So we see what we need to see, hear what our needs make us hear. Something deep in the flesh-strips of some of them required a vision, a man-like thing smiling, reassuring them, and so they "saw" a smile. Some needed a nod, a fatherly wave of the hand, and some required words even from essentially a silent god. But for me it was enough to behold - silent, adamant, marvelous - the calm strength of the moveless voiceless gleam and be reassured. Yes, he was our silent great god on the wide plastic plain of the Dream Realized, a massive reminder to homage, and our guide star since a time whenNewProcessesLand was very new.

And when you think of all we are delivered from by his wonderful workability and help, you will not smirk at that gleaming presence, that shining shimmering wonder, the very substance of Deliverance, tall and pure. For a tall god stands in our country to remind us always of the greatest deliverance from fear ever conceived in this world. See a New Processes man in all of his staunch stainlessness, deep in his hip-snuggle chair, sitting calm as a cold bowl of oil. Know his heart is set to Dormant Cool, and know his flexi-flex New Processes lungs are breathing him just enough of the skull-and-cross-bones air to keep him calm-cool alert. Further know he is happily, languidly, working on some Universal Deep Problem for his truce-time amusement until Big Shoot starts up again and his Stronghold can shudder to action once more, happily, totally involved with total war. And furthermore be firmly reassured, that New Processes man has no worries pounding his think-tapes to gray, no anxiety about Time going by, no apprehensions concerning surprises at war, no fears in the pale green "blood" of his brain pans - none at all.

And then the flesh-man - oh, consider. CONSIDER him - the sick few that are left. Please do. Then perhaps you will see why we in our new-shining glory, flesh-strips few and played-down, pay homage to a massive stick of new-metal placed as our guide star when New Processes Land, our great Moderan, was new!

NO CRACKS OR SAGGING

Sometimes, from the brink of our great involvements, we move in our minds back to remember things of seemingly small-bore significances that loom, in the recalling times, extra-large. The day I crossed over, the day I went in to Moderan, out in the rolled and graded fields, far as the eye could reach, were these long-legged tamping machines. Essentially they were huge black cylinders swung spinning between gigantic thighs and calves of metal. There seemed an air of casualness about these strange black monsters as they loafed on their tall-thighed legs and twirled their cylinders about in what appeared to be, at times, almost totally contrived, excessive and meaningless nonchalance. Then, at no signal that I could detect, at no prompting that I could learn of, one or another of the machines would rush right over to a spot of ground and, seeming to bend forward a little at the waist, unleash the fury of its cylinder at the fresh earth underneath as though in great glee and highest concentration. The two-legged machine, once started, would really pummel that spot of earth with the front end of its cylinder for upwards of, say, thirty minutes or maybe even three-quarters of an hour, increasing its battering motion as the minutes passed. Then, appearing to know without any guessing when enough was plenty, and withdrawing a dirt-caked cylinder-end, the machine, as it erected to full height from its leaned position, would wander away and rejoin other loafing, waiting machines as though nothing of any consequence had really occurred at all.

Once two machines started for the same spot of earth, and it was quite a show to watch them both hunch into battering position at the same time, take aim at the same place and start battering each the other's cylinder almost as much as they pummeled the ground. An overseer for tamping machines watched this ridiculous punching contest for awhile before he went over and drummed each machine on the rump just enough to break up the rhythm of their misdirected jab-jab-jab and send them both packing off twirling their cylinders as though they hadn't really wanted to use them anyway. The job was awarded to a third machine, a troubleshooter reserve type who soon hunched into position and went about poking away at the place as though the world were entirely new and jolly to him and heigh-ho, jig-jig, holiday, holiday, go Go GO!

"What goes WHAT GIVES!?" I asked the overseer of tamping machines, my voice with wonder like a child's, my eyes surely bulged out like, in the Old Days, a frog's.

"Time goes, life stays, heigh-ho heigh-hey," he recited. And then he said. "What are you, some kind of a humorist, or something? What do you mean, what goes, what gives?"

"What goes, what gives? Explain these grim, grotesque and altogether hilarious actions. I wish to be instructed. I want to understand. I see nothing but burlesque here. Is there more?"

"Is there more!? Man, is there more!!" Then he looked at me more closely. "Why! you're from Out There! Old Times!" he ejaculated. "Perhaps you really do not understand at all. Maybe you really do mean, 'What goes, what gives?'"

"I mean WHAT GOES, WHAT GIVES!" My fists were doubled by now and I saw I could easily go into my punch-now talk-later mood for sure.

"Travel far?"

"I came far enough. In miles. In time. In blasted hopes and withering dreams. In tear I came. In trouble. YES, I came far enough. And now to find, near the place of my chartered destination, if I came on course and if I drew my lines correctly on the charts they gave, a kind of antic Silly Farm. Where big two-legged machines that are essentially, as I see it, just contrivances for carrying around those big proddy rammers, at wholly random instances and to no practical purpose at all, try to have sexual intercourse with the soil."

"You're quite a talker. Why don't you cut through, more? Go direct to your statement and pummel your meaning? Be more like these machines? You can see, when they get that signal, they don't beat around the bush. They go right over there and then it's, just phoo phoo phoo, jig jig jig, bam bam bam, until the job's done."

"WHAT JOB? WHAT'S DONE?"

"The solution is to cover the pollution. The answer is to get rid of the cancer. Ho ho ho."

I moved in on him and I was ready to punch him down. Then I saw he had a strange look. He stared me back with gleaming, beaming, funny eyes, and there was about him something of the manner of, not a man, but more a machine-man. "This is Moderan," he said. "We're building NewLand here. When these misters detect a soft place in our soil, they rush right over and batter it into submission. They look random and nonchalant, I know. But really they're not. When they seem to be just standing, they're sampling things from 'way off, maybe. You see, they own very sensitive feet. It's built in. If there's a soft place in their sphere of detection, they'll get it through these sensors in the feet. Treading here, they'll get a vibration from a hollow place out there. They're programmed to hate hollow places. They rush right over and stick in the jammy-ram cylinder when they get wind of a hollow place. By hollow place, I mean a piece of the land surface that isn't as hard as it should be."

"Oh, yes! And that's important!?"

"VERY." Then he looked at me cold-eyed. "Maybe you'd better come with me. I can leave these machines for awhile. These jammy-rams are programmed so that really all I have to do is put in my time. And take care of unusual occurrences, like when two signals cross at the juncture of spheres of detection. This happens but rarely, but when it does, whoooo! look out ! we have, as you saw, the strange, hilarious and altogether inefficient phenomena of two jammy-rams going for the same hole. (By hole, I mean a piece of the land surface that isn't as firm as it should be.) Very hard on jammy-rams and also it doesn't make for a good tamping job at the hole either. And when you're building for forever, that's one of the things you really do want and must have - a good tamping job at the hole." He wasn't kidding. I saw he wasn't kidding.

We got into his flap-hap airabout scoot that he used to check on plans and we went up high. And far as the eye could gaze I saw the flats. All dotted with jammy-ram monsters was about three-quarters of this far-as-I-could-see area of the flats, brown-black scraped-off earth speckled with the darker, wandering and nonchalant spots that were machines doing, I had just been told, a very efficient and important piece of detection work and finalization execution at the hole. Then far down near the horizon, and at the edge of the dots that were jammy-rams, I saw how the brown-black changed to a blur that was gray or

grayey-white. He slipped me a pair of long-rangers for the eyes and I zeroed in on the blur. "The new ice age!"

"Not at all!" he returned. "Or maybe just precisely, if you want to see it so. But this ice age, if you want it so - go ahead, call it that! - is for the species, not against it. You'll never see this ice age rolling up boulders or creeping along with mammoth bones in its teeth. This ice age is covering up dirt, not just rearranging it. That's plastic you're looking at, man! I'm out here as an advance guard for plastic. It's a friendly deadly-competitive hell-for-plastic devil-take-the-hindmost race between my jammy-rams and me on one side and that creeping gray edge on the other. And we're gaining!" He smirked with satisfaction. And if I hadn't already decided he was some kind of a Great One, I would have suspected right now that he was just some kind of a small jackass overseer type taking a lean satisfaction from staying on top of his small-small job. But surely not. Surely this was a Planner, a mover, a shaker and a rearranger of the World Scheme. At least a mover, a shaker, and a rearranger of the surface of the earth.

"Why - what - ?" I sputtered. Yes! I was snowed in just now, as deep back in the murk as I ever like not to be.

He looked hot-eyed with little bulbs at me. He really bored in hard. He seemed to be making some kind of a tough decision about whether I really existed or not. Anyway, I got that impression, so hard was his bright-bulb stare. "Say, you are cleared for this," he finally said, "aren't you?"

I remembered some gates and some guards I had passed many days and many many miles long back. Far down at the edge of the place where things were old and wrecked, I remembered that hard cross-questioning, and the lie detectors, and the probing, the probing in - "I think I'm cleared," I answered. "Would I have got this far if I had not been? Some things like tin eagles have hung over me all the long way, as it is, circling, circling, as I came slowly on my tired shank's mares... I take it you people are taking no chances whatsoever with what you've got down here."

"We take no chances! Show me, if you've got it!"

I rolled up my sleeves and showed him the two bright-orange M's that had been stamped on my lower arms, at the clearing gates a long while back. I thought that might be what he wanted to see, and it was. "You're cleared! And you're a whole lot more than that!" He peered more closely at the M's. "You probably don't know it now, but you're a whole lot more than just cleared!" There was in his voice a note of admiration that I couldn't believe was faked. Yes, he meant it. He pointed at some small symbol lender each M. "You probably don't know exactly what those mean," he mused, "but I do. I really do." Then he shook his head in what I had to read as sadness, and he seemed to slip in memory a long way down. "Too old," he muttered, "too old and too many bridges gone crackling down in the floods, the flames and the always-present wrecking of the days, before this thing came up for me. But you - you're just right! You're young and apparently you passed your tests with colors flying, really whipping out there in the breeze. I bet you're stamped just about all over under your clothes."

"Yeah; they stamped me up pretty well. Then they told to get going. Pointed me a road, gave me maps and charts and said, 'Get on up there. They're a-building, and you're sure to be in time' Is this what they meant?"

"NOOO. Not for you! This is what I qualified for. I was Moderan Early-Early. But I was too old and time-ravaged event-hurt before this gold chance came up for me. But you, you're young and right and on the mark. I can tell you now, you'll be a Stronghold master, one of the elite-elite, if you can stand those operations. And there's no reason why you can't. I stood what ones they allowed me to, in good shape. And you're to be allowed the maximum. I can read it by those small marks under the M's.

CONGRATULATIONS!" Impulsively he let go of the controls of the flap-hap and grabbed my right hand with both of his hands. I really got a steel handshake that day!

After awhile we landed, back at the place where we had started, and there were two jammy-rams going for the same hole again, so it was altogether to the good that we had arrived back at this station when we did. He rushed right over and straightened things out by slapping the two silly yammers on their rumps, with a certain rhythmic beat, as I had seen him do in that other instance. "A very bad spot, this here," he announced, coming back. "Something about the spheres of detection right here at this locale, which you'll notice is a little bit of a depression, taken on the large, causes tangling of the spirals. Really not the fault of the machines, not at all, for they just do what they're programmed for and that's it."

"You really know how to do it!" I exclaimed, for something intuitively told me now that here was just a little serving man, really, a victim, who could do with some praise.

He swelled a lot with good pride as his chest came up a notch. "You know, I developed that technique myself - slapping them on the rump that way with a certain beat. Breaks up their rhythm, jiggles the connections and they just wander away for awhile, not knowing what in hell else to do. After a short time, though, they settle right back down again, the rhythm of their programming is restored and they're good serviceable jammy-rammers once more."

"Anyway, I think that's neat, slapping these big earth fornicators on the rump that way to send them off just twirling their dirty cylinders at the air, all puzzled and deranged. Sort of shows man's mastery somehow. Yet - huh?"

"YEAH! Thought it up myself, kind of by accident really. Saw it'd work when my foot slipped and I fell against one of them one time, flailing my arms for balance. Adopted the method. All against procedures, naturally. SAY! you should see what I'm really supposed to do when something like this comes up. About twenty-five to thirty forms to fill out giving the pinpoint time and place and my ideas on why the foul-up. I'm furiously filling out the forms, see, after I've immediately and at once sent in the signal to headquarters that two jammyrammers are at the same hole, COME WITH ALL SPEED! About sixteen big shots hop off their new-metal mistresses up at headquarters, their secretaries, you know, jump in their flap-hap airabout jet scoots and slam off out here as though hell itself were inside coming out. All this time the two poor jammy-rams with their signals crossed are beating hell out of each other's rammers, making a bigger scarred-up soft place in the graded surface than there was before, and generally compounding futility to the top degree. But the big shots get there fast, in about two to five minutes - I will say this for them, they're prompt - and they rush out of their jet-slap airabout scoots and have their big cigars fired up and are clearing their throats and considering things almost before the two mixed-up jammy-rams are scarcely one-third through with their programmed cycle of earth ramming. Which makes it harder, really, because naturally being big-deal men of action, these headquarters fellows (do something, even if it's wrong! you know) signal off out there at once for the Separator task forces, which come in on the heavy transports in about ten minutes more, and these Separator troops throw big chain links around the intensely working jammy-rams and drag them away from the hole, the jammy-rams still fighting to finish the cycle, naturally, of course. Ever try to pull a jammy-ram by force away from the hole before he'd finished his cycle?"

"No. Never did that."

"No," he laughed, "course you didn't. But it can be done with enough horsepower pulling at the jammy-rams and strong enough chains. Tears up the jammy-rams though and causes them to have to be sent away many many miles to the repair stations. Then I just complete the filling out of the forms, and procedures are maintained, and everything's unstrained, happy and satisfied with the headquarters boys."

I laughed. He laughed, "Yeah, if I hewed to the line of procedures in every way, that long ice-edge of the plastic would be covering me up but completely! Along with my jammy-rams, in no time at all. I run my show out here, the big-deal headquarters men can log more time on their new-metal secretaries, I stay ahead of the plastic, and who's to care if I cut a few procedural corners right in twain?"

"Nobody should care," I agreed.

He looked at me, and a half-smile toyed at the corners of his mouth, this proud, vain, little man. "You know what'd happen, if they found out, if they ever found out how I slap those jammy-rammers on the rump with a certain beat to short-cut procedures? Why, I'd be riding out of here in chains in just minutes, that's what'd happen. Yeah! Procedures are the god in NewLand. It's got to be that way, of course - but still, once in awhile, I think a practical mind is best. I usually give those jammy-rams a little extra oiling, or a polish-and-pet with the 'slick up, shine up' kit to help them get back straight and forget their humiliation, and it works out." And suddenly, I had a dazzling flash of insight. This man was really pretty usual! Procedures were for everyone but him. All at once I found myself not admiring his cunning little rump-slapping transgression of the rules quite as much as I thought I would. But then, as I've found out in the past, all people disappoint me, soon or late. They just don't measure out. "What about that plastic? What about those jammy-rams, for that matter?" I yelled. "You've flown me over wide expanses of scraped and graded earth swarming with milling, wandering and soil-fornicating jammy-rams. You've also flown me over wide areas of whitey-gray plastic that was smooth and cold as ice from where I sat. There's some reason for all this? You seem to think it's important. Outside of being your job, is it important?"

His eyes went hard-bright. He was not a friendly man just then. But soon he relaxed, when something had clicked in his mind, I guess. "Sure," he answered, "it's very much of importance. But being so lately from OldLand, and coming a far way from where all is wrecked and cindered, as I understand it, I guess you wouldn't know. Forgive me. I was getting a little flame-hot at you just then. I thought you were ridiculing. But I know now, remembering your background, it's ignorance. And ignorance can be admirable, if the person came by it honestly. Flippant, flyblow, half-baked wisecracking is about the worst thing in the world, compared to honest ignorance."

"Thanks," I said. "Thank you."

"Now, to answer your question about the scraped-off rolled-down land, the jammy-rams and the plastic: You see, we're moving down toward where you came from. We'll get it all in time. Surely you must know that the earth is poisoned. From what I've heard, where you are from is not only poisoned, but wrecked and cindered as well. We stopped just short of that havoc up here; therefore there is this place for you from OldLand to come to. But our land was poisoned by science 'progress' as much as yours was. So we're covering all with the sterile plastic, a great big whitey-gray envelope of thick tough sterile plastic over all the land of the earth. That's our goal. It's a mammoth task, but for mammoth tasks man has behemoth machines. The mountains go into the valleys, the creek banks go into the creeks, the ditch sides go into the ditches, the golf courses are smoothed, the mine tailings are scattered - and all is coated. At the necessary places we make the reservoirs for runoff and freeze it solid. The oceans we will deal with in our own time, our own time and well enough. There are several plans, one being to use our scientific knowhow to freeze the oceans solid, another being to shoot the oceans out into space in capsules and be done with all that surplus water forever. The new-metal man, which I am to a degree, and which you are to become to a much much higher degree, will need very little water... But now it's the land we're doing. The water is a later task. But when we get all through, I visualize an earth of such tranquility and peace in nature that it must be the true marvel of all the ages. The surface of our globe will be a smooth tough grayey-white hide. When our water plans are finalized the rainfall will be no more. No

more will man be fleeing floods anywhere in the world. In cloudless heavens the winds will have died in our even temperatures; no more will man go sky high in the twisters. The air will hang as a tranquil envelope over essentially a smooth gray ball, the smoothness being broken only by the Strongholds and the bubble-dome homes. Trees, if we want them, will spring up from the yard holes at the flick of a switch. The flowers will bloom just right and on time in wonderful bloom-metal. Animals - there will be no animals, unless we should want a few tigers and lions and such, all mechanical of course, for a staged jungle hunt. Yes! it will be a land for forever, ordered and sterilized. That's the Dream!"

"But you still haven't told me why those jammy-rams ram at the soil in such a ridiculous way!" Yes, I could listen to the grandest plan in all the universe and still feel the bones of a jagged ragged uncomfortable question nag at my dissenting throat. And anyway, I felt he owed me an answer on less grandiose terms. Anyone could have a big puff-ball dream about how to make the earth into such an ordered place as almost to stump the imagination. But would it ever happen? Well, I for one would call it more than a small cosmic miracle if man, a spark of life tediously evolved from the dead cold elements himself, should so organize his forces as to rearrange those elements to have essentially a dead cold planet again before he departed. It would seem to me a dismal, and more than a little depressing, closing of the ring, for sure. "Tell me about the jammy-rams!" I shouted.

"Well, as you should have guessed awhile back, the jammy-rams are just clever and sophisticated machines, science's marvels, you might say, for making sure that the surface we're coating is packed and solid everywhere. We want no cracks or sagging in the plastic. The mammoth graders and rollers do the big smoothing and packing jobs, and they're now miles on beyond. And miles back the other way, as we saw in our flap-hap airabout scoot ride, is the ice edge of the plastic this whole thing is all about. And my jammy-rams and I are in between, the artistic effort really, the ones who care, seeing that the whole thing comes not to naught because of small soft places left untended to make an improper bedding for the plastic. YES! we're the crux of it!" I could see that his was a proud calling.

I looked about and far and wide strolled still on that smoothed and rolled-down earth the tall cylinder-carrying monsters, and many was the jammy ram that was hunched into the position and having a go at the jug-jug-jug, phoo-phoo-phoo, bam-bam-bam that was its main mission. "How long will I be in that hospital," I asked abruptly, thinking now of my future and many things.

"Nine months," he answered at once, gently rump-stroking a nearby jammy-ram that was having a go at a soft place in the hard hide of the soil. "That's the full transformation, and you're scheduled for it, from the markings I read under the orange M's." He stuck out a hand, and I shook it, felt its cold steel. "Good luck, boy, with the operations. When we meet again, if we meet again, you'll be a Stronghold master, one of the elite-elite. Youth will be served. I missed my chance, failed my hunt, ordered my gray battalions on to the impossible fields too late and lost - due to no fault of my own. It was age - and fate." He turned away, and I knew he was fighting a battle.

I went on up toward the place where the operations were nine-months long, where according to rumor, iron nurses, sterile and capable, ran on spur tracks up to the edges of beds, where a man, if of the CHOSEN, might receive enough part-steel to be a king in his times.

[THE BUTTERFLIES WERE EAGLE-BIG THAT DAY](#)

I passed through a gate of glowing orange M's and went up to a man who stood guardlike, watchful and stiff. He had a butcher's clothes on, or was it a scientist's neat smock a bit loose-and-hanging on a watchman's ramrod pose?

"You may cut me in! I came to join! If you're the butcher -"

He eyed me through two cold and passive globes that jumped about half a foot out from his face on sticks and glinted like sheet steel can. But when he drew them to him I noticed that these eye globes were really just some pretty ordinary ice-blue steel eyeballs. "Let us not be mind-reading." He said it very calmly, evenly; the voice had a machine sound. "Nor wild-guessing neither. I'm dressed as a butcher, yes, one way you look at it. And a scientist too, I'm sure you must agree. But I do not make cuts; nor do I experiment. I'm a guardsman and a symbol. I mainly stand here just inside the gate of the M's of Moderan, to greet you as you come stumbling in from Old Land. I listen to your very best personal story of adversity and woe, if you want to tell me it. And I check you for the M's that you must have, from that other gate along way back, if you're to stay here."

"I'VE GOT THEM! I really have the M's!" And I moved in to the total strip-down so that he might see how really much I was M-ed up.

He looked quizzical. The ice-ball blue eyes jumped about six inches out, each on its own stick again, and they nodded, but not in unison. It was one at a time, like alternate crazy winking. "WOW! WOW! WOW!" he finally said, "WHOOEE! ZOWEE! and WUP! WUP! you really do. And I'm programmed to give you the wow! wow! wow! whooe! zowee! wup! wup! when I see something like this. It's not too unusual, and yet it's not everyday either. What I mean is, you're to be a Stronghold master, right up as far as anyone can do it. That is, if you can stand the operations. Each M is a major awful cut, you may or may not know."

"I have the M's," I said simply, humbly as I could. "I'll try to honor them in every way that courage, steadfastness, bravery, common true grit, love of country, and respect for my ancestors can do for any cause. And if that be not enough, I'll throw in some generous portions of élan and a lot of spirit of the corps! I WILL NEVER SURRENDER." Sure, I was half scared to death, as I most usually am in unsure situations, but I wasn't about to let anyone but me know a thing about it. Especially was I not going to show the white feather to this talking tin can dressed up as a butcher-scientist-guardsman and poking blue-glass in-out abracadabra crazy unearthly eye globes at me. And besides, pose and all, fears and all, braggadocio and bluff on the rocks - I had parlayed it all one time all the way up to Chief-in-Chief of the Bangs, in the Old Life. Not exactly a nobody... I could do it!

While I was standing there being scared and determined not to show it, indeed committed even to being courageous, the guardsman simply stamped on a switch and where we stood became at once a roll-go. We moved along swiftly past houses shaped like bubbles, past bubble-dome homes, toward a tall building a short way in, and during the small ride he dutifully helped me regain my clothes. While he was doing that he gave me the wow! wow! wow! whooe! zowee! wup! wup again, and that made me feel better. Near the entrance to the tall building he handed me my certification, the forms of which I suppose he already had made up in big duplicate stacks which he carried in some secret space just under the door to his breastplate. I noticed that the certification was a very simple orange card carrying on one side, in heavy lettering in midnight black, the code w! w! w! w! z! w! w! (which I saw no reason whatsoever to try to translate) and on the other side the simple typed notation saying, "Entitled to full schedule."

"I hope every last M is a big Big BIG success and each and every awful cut worthwhile." He just said it in his strange machinelike voice, surely programmed, as I headed toward the doors of the tall white building and he reversed the roll-go to ride back to the gate of M's. I never saw him more.

Do you like to watch blood? Do you like to watch your own blood? Do you like to watch any blood spurting, gurgling, gushing, falling into very clear clean glass containers, missing and falling on to the floor sometimes, going all over until everything is that funny foamy red color, with all your towels, rugs, cloths and sponges soaked and the smell...? Do you? Do you like to watch flesh being snipped, sliced, carved, shredded and made over. Do you? Do you like to watch your own flesh? How about bones? Do you like to see bones sawed? I mean, like butchers in a butcher shop? Do you like to watch live near-relative bones being gone after with big axes? Do you like to see own bones slipped out of flesh and skin? (Oh, they seem strange, so unhomed wet and slick!) I mean, do you like personal boning? Do you ?

Two doctors, steel-spliced, tall and coldly no-nonsense business got after me right soon. I don't mean I was running, but I did intend to move in slow-on-slow on the white building, reconnoiter, take my time, rubberneck a little, scout the washrooms, the furniture, the iron bedpans and the steel nurse corps. But the doctors soon led me away, one of them eagerly snatching from me the card of "full schedule."

We went in to where the lights were blue and cold. I was walking with all my flesh-self going for the last time that day. I had my mind closed in close as I could about me, cold and tight-holding, my body tucked in small, to walk into the Terrors Total and the hell of the Blue Unknown. What a mispicture it is, this scene of the big bluff fighter striding in tall into his danger, chest puffed, shoulders winged, and breast being battle-drummed, tom-tommed, if you will, in a rousing challenge of pure defiance. A nice painting, this! But give a man some ultimate testing and see how he fares in. He crouches in all low, small, shrunken, clutching and clawing his keepsakes in the pockets and the mind, scared-scanning eyes trying to see every direction at once, talking to himself, cursing, praying, muttering, crying, and hoping with all the hope he owns one of two things he may do - get through it with some honor to see another day, or die without too much dishonor and brave the Total Night.

I knotted my thoughts that day to all the fists I had ever owned in the whole perilous world of men and events. I flashed a message to my nerves to be as solid as cement pipes if ever they could for just ten minutes now of testing in Total Time. But what gains it? Why try so hard? What could it matter, ever, in the face of the Total Dark, whether or not one more little flesh bum flew his life ship into the Wall, pretending to be somewhat jaunty? Yes, I thought I had been tricked for the Journey all the way in to Death's big sky, and I was determined to go there as bravely as any man. can do it. I just didn't know... what really was... in store...

How do you like push-button surgery? How do you like WATCHING push-button surgery? How do you regard being marked off in cuts and boning plans more than ever was a side of Angus in the Old Days? How do you get along with the idea of conferences about the orange M's, huddling with the steel-spliced doctors-battle-planning for pain-before they'd go for you each day with the overhead-rigged knives?

For know, we took it M by agony M, bleeding by bleeding cut, starting in early November, for nine months, I and the steel-spliced medicos. (Without a shadow of a doubt they were surgeons of keenest skill.) I watched every cut of the flesh, every nick of the bones, every taking out of a member, every putting in of an implant, for that was part of the plan. The doctors would not make a move, would not so much as scratch the boundary of an M, unless I was fully awake, competently aware. To be born again! and to feel and see how that you were born again. YES! For some time, some later Moderan time, when you stood up tall at your buttons of war, your fort on the status of continuous blast and all the world gunned in against you and each other, it would not prove out well for you to prove out squeamish. To be a Stronghold master was a duty and a trust, not to mention a terrific opportunity. And it might as well be found out in the bed of the cutting-in whether or not a candidate had the "guts." So ran the thinking of the

Planners of Moderan.

Oh, sure, there were deadeners, but never quite enough. Always just on the edge of all the hurt you could take, clamped down in a stark white bed in a cold blue room and watching from a box of glass that separated your head from the rest of you, the box of glass being very clear for viewing and, with the sized slot for your neck, fitting quite snugly and putting your head in a still still world of its own. To watch pain! Do you like to watch pain, the surgical refinements poised above you, high on ceiling tracks, and the not-quite-human doctors working the buttons and smirking, and you wondering where it would fall, oh God, where would it next fall? and it falling and bringing up blood, always the blood, and a part of you and holding that part of you for the too long time just right for you to observe through the box of glass... the blood dripping, always the blood... and when it came time for the move up to head, they made that move, planned the points-and-edges adjustments, changed the tracks, got settings so right-on-the-nose precisely right that the gleaming knives would fall... and thus they made the move up there to do MY head! to work on the face flesh-strips, the brain slosh pans and the green brain fluids, the knives falling and flicking and snicking like cold silver rain in that area of former sanctuary-stillness where the glass box had been... Did I see it? DID I SEE IT!? They flashed it all, almost realer than real, on a wall viewer, and the only part I didn't get to see all the way at the doing was the doing over of the eyes, when they gave me that miraculous wide-range Moderan eyesight. But I heard that all on the provided screen: "Knives in left-side eye socket; knives in right-side eye socket; coring out left-side eyeball now; coring out right-side eyeball now; and folks, there's blood! don't think there isn't blood comes up and out when you core eyeballs; always the blood " And sure, later they played all of it over for me, in accent colors, on the biggest wall viewer they had...

The bones were special special rock-bottom hurt, like drilling a thousand dozen teeth all at one time for you might be and all drills touching nerves - WEEEA AOOOHHH... WEEEA AOOOHHH... WEEEA AOOOHHH... OOOHHH... OOOHHH... It was at the boning of bones that I discovered that the hospital was providing me with special things in my foods and beverages so that I might experience more pain per second without losing consciousness - WEEEA AOOOHHH... WEEEA AOOOHHH... WEEEA AOOOHHH... OOOHHH... OOOHHH... than I would have otherwise been able to do... (It is well known that the ordinary everyday average person in the Old Days went through his entire average-Joe or average-Jane life without scratching the surface even of the solid experiences of physical pain that the human body can be made capable of. And that was of course, in a way, a total-experience loss.)

I will say in passing (and I will admit this had had me concerned at first) that they did a little-miracle splendid job on my penis and other sex parts - all complexities of the system being left responsive and vibrant, and yet all parts of the complex done to forever-last. BRAVO!

...while the sterile steel hard-driving nurses ran efficient and cold on spur tracks up to the edges of beds...

Finally it was over, the whole pain-crammed rebuilding thing, OVER! I guess I stood it quite well, really, looking back. I stood it! And that was the main thing. I was true to the orange M's. I became a Man of Moderan! My flesh-strips were few and played down now and the "replacements" of new-metal alloy were the bulk of my bodily splendor. And no matter to what high posts of honor and power I may attain in the world now, which is my oyster, I'll always remember with special fondness and a jaunty pride the day I crossed over, the day I passed through the gate of the Moderan M's, the day that the butterflies of apprehension and resolve were eagle-big in my stomach and my mind.

NEW KINGS ARE NOT FOR LAUGHING

Out of the hospital, out of the nine-months mutilation, out of the nine-months magic, released and alone. The steel-spliced doctors knew they had made a monster. They were proud of me, their monster, as doctors must always be proud of successes in their field; but they knew that now I was a kind of King, and they were merely doctors. Their arrogance was small-town lording now, their lording outlarded, as it were. No matter how born or made, a King WILL be a King. They got rid of me. They loaded me out. They quick-shifted me into the seething yeasty world; and with almost no parting ceremony. And with the very minimum of instructions and equipment (which was load plenty-enough) to stand me down on my trip. But somehow a King must be a King, know how to behave as a Captain of his times and domesticate his wild situations, no matter what the odds.

With my portable flesh-strip feeder, my book of instructions for new-metal limb control, my plastic mechanical tear bags (for even a King must sometimes cry, you will allow) and all the other paraphernalia to get me started, or at least to sustain me until I should attain my Stronghold sanctuary, I sailed out from the hospital steps, the arrogant doctors watching. Something like a small iron frigate from the Old Days, I guess I was, loaded to the gunwales and standing forth on end.

Walking was easy, really. Plop-plip-plap-plop - one foot in front of the other, pick-them-up-and-plunk-them-down, toggle your hinges and braces, go with the arm swing for balance, flail the air with those blades when you go to tumble down - determine, determine, DETERMINE! determine that you will move along. Go for the tear bags when things get too uncertain, stop-think-cry (oh yes, a King can cry), curse if you want to, and hate, hate, hate. But keep on walking, don't let those steel-spliced doctors see, don't let anyone see how it is.

GOD! being a new-metal man wasn't going to be easy. Let me tell you here and now, being a new-metal man was going to take some swinging. BUT I WOULD.

According to the little packet of special maps and instructions the steel-spliced ones had slung around my neck at our parking, I was to be Stronghold 10. I looked at that number and at first it meant nothing. Nothing at all. Then I thought more, the new green juices in the fresh-made brain pans sloshing and fuming, and I thought, STRONGHOLD 10! YES! STRONGHOLD 10 FOREVER! Stronghold 10 must never disgrace Moderan. Stronghold 10 must achieve. Stronghold 10 must win honors. Stronghold 10 must be heroic. Stronghold 10 must be brave. Stronghold 10 must be the strongest, toughest, meanest, most hateful, most arrogant, loudest mouthed, most battle-hungry hellion-hearted Stronghold in all the wide wide world. YES!

But first, just right now, soon, THE NEXT ORDER OF BUSINESS! Stronghold 10 must find his Stronghold.

After five hours of walking hard and going perhaps a stingy mile and a half, and some of that in circles, I stood lost in a little plastic draw, and quite bewildered. The vapor shield was scarlet August that burning month, the tin flowers were up in all the plastic plant holes, the rolling ersatz pastures were all aflutter with flash and flaunt of blooms. A sheen was in the air, a shimmer, and a million devils of heatstroke walked out and wrapped me close in my shell. And I was lost on this seventh day of hot August.

I'll always remember him, the way he came walking, a big man all shrunken in the torso, all bent down

along the back curve, all sere and wrinkled in the face areas, so very terribly black-brown, like meat cooked too long on the bone. He had surely been through some maximum havoc - fire maybe, maybe fire and wind together, maybe flood too, wife-trouble and relatives thrown in could be, almost surely a war, possibly all standard disasters known to man, and some not so standard. He looked that bad. Yes, truly. THE WAR mostly-probably. And when he talked, I knew some problem surely had wrecked him even past what showed. Perhaps he had lost some parts that really counted one time. Anyway, his voice was a womanly squeak now as he said, "Lost, mister?"

I swiveled to take him in fully, practicing coming down to hard-stare with my new wide-range Moderan vision, and I thumbed at the book, seeking the page on speech. (Oh, remember, I was new new-metal and the hospital had not kept me over for many practice runs. Not in any phase, let alone speech.) But it wasn't so hard really. NO! of course not. All one had to do was be a mechanical genius to run oneself, a broadcaster speech specialist in order to talk, and a few other things to be able to operate as a new-metal man smoothly and with elan. Mostly, for just right now, forget the refinements and just try to find the right buttons. When I pushed thephfluggee-phflaggee too hard and it shouted, I mean I shouted, "SURE AM," he jumped about five in the air. I could guess he wasn't used to that voice-button shouting, and I could also suppose he expected lip movement (I learned to do that later) and maybe better inflection too (which I learned later, as well). I tried again and said, passably I hoped,phfluggee-phflaggee voice going smoother, "I'm looking for Stronghold 10. I AM Stronghold 10. When I get there." Then I tried a little voice-button laugh, just for kicks, and it came out "HA! Huk!"

"OH!" he said, wet slop slopping, gristle-meat tongue doing a dance, wind in the windpipe working, GOD! what an old-fashioned method just to communicate a few verbal salutes. Hadn't we needed improvement for quite a long time there? "I think I know," he finished, squeak-voiced and all, and still scared, "but you look so funny! Like a polished-up scrap heap, sort of. And all that load!" His fried-like wrinkled cheeks puffed then and he was consumed for awhile with a tiny squeaky belly laugh.

"Well, I'm not funny," I snapped, furiously working the buttons, "not funny at all. I'm to be a King. I AM A KING! If I can just find where. And this stuff is all stuff I need to get me started, be sure of that."

"I guess I know," he piped up, stopping the laugh off tight. "I mean, you said Stronghold 10. And well, there's a big pile up there of stuff. I mean, it's a castle, really. WOW! I mean it's like nothing I ever saw!" And he stood entranced, thinking, I had to guess, on what he'd seen.

"HOO! it's got a big 10 on it that shines out day and night. That 10 must be in jewels. Or maybe just some kind of paint. But it's too much for me. I've walked by just to look at that 10 sometimes. And usually things would happen. Or I should say ALWAYS, here of late, things would happen. I guess they've got all that BLAM! stuff working and perfected now. And all those walls and towers!"

"YEAH?" Iphfluggee-phflaggeed . "Really?"

"Yeah! Last time I's by - yesterday, it was, late, I mean - they must have had ALL of it systems-GO! When I move in close I activate something. I've found that out, found it out months past, and I've been teasin' 'em for months, too. But I guess they didn't mind, 'cause it gave 'em a chance to test. And practice. And yesterday, WHEE! I have to believe everything was ready. Such a bedlam, such a warning display, such a response for just a harmless lost human wreck-pile like me, who's 'ad it and 'ad it really. I mean, I'm done. THE WAR, you know. And all."

"Sorry," I push-buttoned at him the very best that I could. "Really sorry. But go on about what happened. The response, I mean."

"The response? - YEAH! Well, if you were in THE WAR, we have some background for conversation. Were you in THE WAR?"

"Yes, VERY!"

"Were you in on the response at Landry, say, or the push-button flattening of Whay. Happened all in just seconds, you know. That's where I got it, got it bad and really - at Landry, and lost the parts that, being gone, cause me to squeak at my conversation just right now. Know what I mean?"

"Know what you mean. And yes, I was in on the things you mention. In fact, I was the young Bangdaddo, the Commandaddo, the Chief-in-Chief of the Bangs, who pushed the buttons on Whay. My job, you know, just doing my job." God, maybe I was the one who had ripped him.

He looked at me straight-on and a sun came out of either eye just then and shone at me with a million warm little pats of adoration. "YOU'RE HIM!" he squeak-voice shouted. And I thought I knew what he meant. Yes, I had been very BIG at the response on Landry and the pushbutton flattening of Whay. I had been the First Bangdaddo, THE COMMANDADDO.

"And now they've fixed you to be one of the BIG ones here! That figures."

"I'm lucky. And I'm sorry you got it, got shot up so badly. Truly sorry. No one won, finally, you know. NO ONE. Maybe they can fix you."

"Nah. Once gone like this is gone GONE. For me it's down hill to the bone hill. But I'm staying as long as I can!" And I had to admire him for that last little singing out of the bones-in-the-teeth determination. "Just to see what happens to you guys who made it," he finished.

"But now," I asked "would you be kind enough to lead me to my castle? So I can get started on whatever it is I'm supposed to be. I'd be ever so grateful to you."

"I'll do it, and gladly. And if you don't know by now why GLADLY, I guess you never will." He looked at me with not a begging look, just a quiet questioning look from eyes that didn't waver now, and I guessed that within this wreck pile there had once been a very proud human being. Something about that stance, the set of the once-champion shoulders, the head lowered a little more now with the eyes peep-glaring out, the fists ready to hammer the world down to tiniest wreck-size pieces - and a bulb flashed on, far deep in the reaches - "MORGBAWN!" I shouted, hitting all thephfluggee-phflaggee buttons I had, and suddenly we were clasping each other while time had rolled quite away. "Oh God, what happened HAPPENED?"

I remembered him as he had not-too-long-ago been, a man quite up among men, tall and giant-seeming in his neat uniform of the BANGS, just before Landry, where everything for him and for me went wrong. I had lost him, my great Second-in-Command, in the hell and the flame and the noise of Landry, where I thought he had been blown to high skies and all winds. I had escaped by the merest chance of a miracle myself, to try the retrieval of all on Whay. There was no retrieval of anything that war, and especially not on Whay. YES! I had flattened it with the launchers and the big zump-blasters, but the other side took me out just as badly. And right after that all the world seemed to turn to flame as everyone gunned in.

"To start again!" I said to Morgbawn. "Maybe we can both start again."

"No," he replied in the very smallest of piping voices, quite eerie, "I'm nothing but the dust now. Essentially. It's just a matter of a very small small while until whatever I was must lie and lie and lie,

grave-housed - FOREVER. The battles can never be joined again for me."

Then an idea took me, a great boiling steaming kind of thought, the kind that could, when I was all flesh in the Old Days, give me goose crinkles along the brain. My new-metal shell now rasped and wrinkled and roared as my flesh-strips and new green blood reacted while the brain pans steamed. "Come be my weapons man!" I cried with the button-crying, "and we'll flatten the world! as we once hoped we could do it when we were fresh and deadly in our new uniforms of the BANGS. It's a chance to fight again and maybe win it all, maybe make up our losses. Every Stronghold master, as I understand it, has a head weapons man. You'll be my lead!"

The look from his haggard killed fried-meat face was wan and wintry through storms of glooms. And yet, I thought I detected a very tiny pinpoint spark of yearning hope too, deep back, struggling behind his gaze. But he said, "Ah no, I've been here long enough to know what a weapons man is in Moderan. He's a moving bit of mechanical servant nonsense meaning nothing, nothing at all. I think I'd rather lie out in my grave than to rejoin the battles that way. Not even one flesh-strip!"

"I'll see that you get one. I swear it. One of mine!"

"Ah no, what could it mean? One flesh-strip. HA ha. Why, a person has to have a whole network, with the blood coursing, to be anything. Otherwise it means nothing. You have to admit it, God still made the best people. One flesh-strip! HA! Why, I'd have to have a built-in pickle jar to keep it alive."

"We'll do it. A built-in pickle jar!"

"Ah, no." But there was still that tiny spark of hope, and I thought I detected it stronger now. YES! I was beginning to wonder if Morgbawn wasn't finding it a worlds better idea, that of being up and moving with even just one flesh-strip in a pickle jar rather than to lie totally quiet out there, The Battles finally and forever completely renounced for him.

"How about it?"

"Maybe!" he said. "I don't know. Come find me where I fall. We'll keep in touch, maybe. It shouldn't be long now. When I feel myself finally going, wherever I am, I'll head for your place. I'll struggle in as close as I can get. Come find me -" His face retreated and commenced to break up then, he started to move away, and I think in that one anguished moment I understood just a little better than I ever had before what it might be like to be, as Morgbawn surely was, at the very brink of the Forever Total Dark. He was far down the plastic draw, the heart-rending wreck of my once great Second-in-Command, before I came back to the moment of now and remembered that he could have helped me find my way home. Ah well, it was near. He had said so. And maybe, after nightfall, that glowing 10 he had told me of would reach out and beam me in. I turned all the settings on LOW, fixed the alarm at a time for awakening and, surrounded by my equipment and instructions, simmered into sleep right there on the plastic that very hot summer eve, to awake, I hoped, in the light of a gleaming 10.

[ONE TIME, A RED CARPET...](#)

I awoke to the light of a gleaming 10. The sharp rays from the great numeral kicked my face hard and

whammed me up to consciousness there where I lay on the plastic, surrounded by my equipment and the several maps and instructions. Gaudy night-sight arms on the small face of my wrist-based etern-tell proclaimed that it was not yet midnight. So it was still the seventh day of great August, my day of days! in my month of months! the time I began the Battle. And now to move into a new phase, clothed in steel and ready READY...

The bedlam ripping and screaming, I hove in close, plop-plip-plap-plop over the homeless track. Had ever a King moved in more ignominiously? On his birthday!? Had ever a King on any day moved in more determinedly, or with better armor to last him through the long fray? The armor was I, in this case, new-metal the bulk of my bodily splendor, with flesh-strips few and played-down. The bedlam was the warning devices screaming and crying that some unidentified object was moving in toward Stronghold 10's outermost wall. And that unidentified object had well better be no worse than neutral when it reached the "warning of the line" or it would be less than NOTHING in less time than thinking of it would require in the fastest new-metal brain.

I was SOME better than neutral! I was the owner of Stronghold 10. I WAS STRONGHOLD 10! - in a certain manner of thinking, according to the Moderan plan. But how tell them? GOD, let us not be losing this battle before an issue was joined. GOD, let us not be felled in front of the castle, shot and shelled, Dear God, to ultimate riddled NOTHING for nothing; let us not be blown to high skies and all winds before we have seen our throne. My thoughts started working the chances; my brain started sloshing hard. Why had the doctors not told me? Had I missed some instructions? Was it a trick? Was it some grim coalition of Fate and Mischance meant to undo me before I should be a King?

I saw myself dead, just for a moment, a scrap pile done and down cold in front of the Promise, a sprawled wronged voyager, innocent killed, misjudged. It was tempting. YES! it was tempting to let them do it. Self-pity was working hard. Oh, something there is within us sometimes, in each of us, that makes us WANT to fall mangled before the foe, to just lie there, to let the just world come and cry at the wrong, the terrible wrong. The whitest knight of them all down on sword and shield, the shadowy things laughing and all the decent world doing its tears - how satisfying! To think of for a little while. Then my real rock self came back, the granite cliffs closed ranks, all the ledges, precipices, boulders, and big saw-toothed outcroppings stood up in thunder to be counted to the world and shadows were cast and lours big and dark as they could be were done while I push-button roared HELL'S FIRE! and HELL'S FIRE! In this case there wouldn't be anything to weep over, nothing tangible in front of the guns, when the terrible blasting was done. And even should there be, they'd just scoop me into some old disposal pot for scrap metal for a flesh-strip cook-off boil. To keep up and moving; never fall to the ground; never let them see any sign of a weakness - that's the only way to deal with this real world of evil, danger and antagonism most sore.

I came back to the self that had bluffed them all the long way, that had stood them off in their cowardice all the miles up to Landry and beyond. I filled the breath bags full as they would stick of the scarlet vapor-shield air, worked hinges and braces of legs to stand me to tallest tall, brought the wide-range Moderan vision down to alternate pinpoint scowl and arrogant look of dare-you-now, flexed my new-metal flailers in purest nonchalance, like the champion boss cat on the block lazily blinking and shooting his claws in and out of sheath in the Old Days, toyed a bit at my breastplate door, meaning to hint that dire things of havoc might be there stored, and moved on down toward the "warning of the line," knowing full well that it was high noon in my career now and the sun now could set very fast and send my future to the dark... Did I hear a titter somewhere of new-metal robots laughing?

The "warning of the line" was coming up COMING UP - NOW. I had read enough about Moderan to know what that meant. It meant the last chance to turn back, if you were alone and vulnerable. If you had great power behind you, somewhere over the way, anticipatory, sneak-placed, back of a hill, it was the

time to beam them there that secret signal and the exact coordinates to thump the foe, then stand aside while your blasters took out this arrogance that had dared to confront you with a "warning of the line." If you were alone and vulnerable you might just stop and stare for awhile, a safe distance back, give them some minor obscene gesture that probably wouldn't be enough to prompt them to wipe you out, and then perhaps you could pop up a taunt balloon you had taken out of the baggage space just under your breastplate door and let them know you'd be back with the blaster battalions later and two hand guns of your own, at some subsequent time - CREEPS, SCUM, COWARDS! YES!

But I had a "different" problem. I had a problem that was for laughs, really, except it was the kind of predicament that could get one pulverized, and that with no reconsiderations at all. Perceiving the bristling gun lids raised, the launchers poised all ready and all the walls alive with jumping strident wailing of warning and threat.

I decided not to laugh. But being a person aware of the basic comedy in all things in this ridiculous world, I couldn't help a tight little smile on thinking how things were. Here was I, Stronghold 10 itself in a certain manner of thinking, according to the Moderan plan, part and parcel of the threat that now stood me off, moving in on myself and being held at bay by myself, perhaps to be blown to NOTHING by this self if I persisted in my defiant forward march toward myself. A man killed by his own self before he could reach himself, stood off and threatened in front of the glorious union of selves. Well, that has happened, and often, I suppose. But this seemed, at least potentially, a little different kind of killing of one's self. And yet, could I retreat from myself now, and ever face myself again in any mirror anywhere? Chancing, in the long years to come, by reservoirs for run-off, say, the water calm and placid, fixed for mirrors, what would I do? Run screaming? Turn off my head? Switch my eyes dark? Oh, when one cannot face the mirrors anywhere, what of a man is left?

So I kept walking, moving in on myself, moving down toward Stronghold 10, inching inexorably toward the "warning of the line." The bedlam intensified as I moved nearer, the high loud alerts increased in number until they meshed and were a strange piercing buzz. Oh, weird unearthly high drone like no sound ever that I had ever heard before. What a music to die by! It lifted me in spirits and resolve until I accepted my death and thought of its appropriateness dispassionately. A man moving down to himself, defying all his warnings to retreat, go back! - something about that moved me is my motion, tightened my lips for the grim and final smile, and sent me on, oh, so happily! into the warn wail and the guns.

YES! we moved on toward the "warning of the line," fixed in mind and all resolve to die. It might be long and tedious tedious years - wild crying, much praying, high yelling in the night and the gut-sickening fears that claw the hours - before we would attain this readiness again. So I increased the tempo of my going, set my hinges and traces to MAX and moved on to seize THE MOMENT at the "line" of Death. OH GOD... I was ready to KNOW... come zump blaster, come walking doll bomb, come high-up weird screaming wreck-wreck, come Death... come DEATH...

And do you know what they did? Just as my lead foot lurched into the area of the "line," just touching the out-guard orange stripe, my mind set to drink finality to the very lees, arms a little spread to receive now the last GREAT VISITOR and his embrace, eyes and face lifted skyward from an old conditioning, THEY filled the air with soft eagles, bright rubber spheres, little feather-bright warblers and flowers, flowers everywhere, flowers spewing from the gun lids, flowers erupting from the launch slings, flowers cascading from the parapets. Not tin flowers, not at all; flowers made of velvet, flowers made of stuffed satin, flowers made of all the soft and costly fabrics and gold, I learned later. FLOWERS! FLOWERS! Balloons! birds! flowers! Well! what does one do now?

I just stood there, right at the edge of the "line," that same little smile on my face that I had fixed for death, my pose as kingly as I could make it, while the flowers fell and fell, velvet flowers, silk-satin

flowers, other flowers, until flowers almost covered a steel man. Amidst the soft soft fall of the blossoms ultimately I became aware that the noise of warning had stopped, and there was almost dead silence now as I stood and received my floral homage while the gaudy gas bags ascended toward heaven until at a certain height they each stopped to add each its own color and mass to a balloon cloud canopy of brightest hues under which soft eagles flew above small warblers flitting and flitting EVERYWHERE!

A speaker finally said, its amplified voice cracking wide a general stillness, playing a tape of vast somber volume through musical tones: WELCOME, STRONGHOLD 10, TO STRONGHOLD 10, YOURSELF, MOST WELCOME TO YOURSELF, TO OCCUPY NOW YOURSELF, OUR LEADER MAGNIFICENT AND MAGNIFIED, MAN-AND-FORTRESS, ONE-FORTRESS-MAN, ONE-MAN-FORTRESS, THE SAME AND INSEPARABLE FOREVER AND FOREVER, TO RULE BY THE GRACE OF OUR GOD, MAKER, THAT MASSIVE STICK OF NEW-METAL, ON THE GREAT PLASTIC PLAIN OF THE REALIZED DREAM, PLACED WHEN MODERAN WAS NEW...

The next thing I knew a thread of deep red was spilling toward my stance. Out of the very lips of Stronghold 10, it seemed, a red softness spewed and fell, rolled down, tumbled down, flooded down the slope of the sturdy hill at the foot of which I stood. There was a sudden snap, and the tumbling red invasion smoothed until the edge of it just touched the foot that I had extended to the out-guard edge of the "warning of the line." Such precision! Of course it was grandly but the mechanical red carpet of WELCOME sent out to get me, and soon it rolled me home.

(Later I was to learn that the steel-spliced doctors had beamed the tin men inside my fort the news that I was completed and on the way. In other words, be on the alert for a metal King made of walking steel and trying to deliver himself to the glories of his reign. The bedlam and threats of harm were parts of a little joke traditionally played on a Stronghold master nearing his fort for the first time. When he reached the "line," the WELCOME unrestrained and, totally elaborate, prepunched in the tapes, flooded out and brought him home to his due.) YES!

BATTLE WON

When I handed that big orange switch to ON and the power grabbed our complex, it was a day for pride. Up tall. The light went on in our flag tower as our pennon seized its space high over Stronghold 10 and we were on our way; committed. And announced. Through the iron brushes on their feet, standing or walking the weapons men drew power from the power floor, my own metal began to hum and seethe, and my flesh-strips were force fed an exhilarating elixir of GO. This special moment of moving up to King can happen only once in the life of a Stronghold man; time, it will never stop by quite the same. I lived my moment to the top-top brim.

On tiptoe was I with my sense of mission and my sense of pride. To stand in the house of the mighty, to be a KING! It was a time for thinking of old defeats; it was a time for remembering all old shame; it was a time for knowing how the debts should all be paid. With shot, shell, shock and obliteration. In all good relish. Written off. YES! To be forever a metal maul with just a few flesh-strips playing my tough self down! DEATH lay defeated! TIME stood trounced, Stronghold-whipped. FEAR was a thing shot down. I would have aeons and aeons and aeons in which to shake the culprit world for its cupidity, for the fears caused, for the total aspects of doubt. I would have unlimited time in which to expend my rage,

exact my revenge. And it might take that; it just might take that long.

Consider the thing that man was from the flesh-fearful day of his birth. CONSIDER. Not a second passed, not an atom moved, not an action transpired in space - ANYWHERE! - that was not totally of gross threat to man. How he cowered through the clawy world, under the giant talons of danger, pulpy, entirely vulnerable - and afraid. He could not make a move, he could not try for any prize but that the fear dogs howled and the standback jackals moved in to say, STAND BACK! NOT FOR YOU! And the more he tried to win and the harder he strove to effectively attack, the faster he moved deeper in toward the total defeat of his grave. There was no victory! I envied the rocks, in those days; I envied stone pillars; I envied old bones; I envied the very air. I envied animals, even, for they did not know, I thought, how total was to be their defeat on the bonepile of death. Only man knew. HE KNEW! And yet he threw himself again and again and again upon the iron gates of assured disaster in the little life that he steered. Admirable? Not at all! Stupid? YES! Incomprehensible. Uncalled for. Why do it?

I had no answer in my pulpy days. I had only fears. Long fears. Short fears. Medium fears. Parts of fears. Total fears. Fragmented fears. Figments of fears. Unreasoned fears. Unreasonable fears. All the kinds of all the fears.

And yet - and yet, I had a kind of courage in those days. Oh, yes. A kind of bravado. Don't tell me that I did not. To go to sleep at night sometimes took all the courage that I could find in all my total pack. To face that dark, not knowing, silent and asleep, without my usual sensory sentinels out, more vulnerable, if possible, than all my waking total vulnerability - oh total TOTAL risk. And yet I went to sleep almost every night at one hour or another. So I faced Death every night. Night, each night, my little death to face. Don't tell ME I didn't have problems in those days. And then to awake. Oh, what a relief, for just an instant, to find I had not died. Don't tell ME I didn't have my victories in those days! But then the defeats closed in quick-following on the instant, all old and sad and black, accumulated defeats, to slam me back to non-victory. Let once ten pulses quick-falter in the shaky house of man's blood and see what shows up next. A coffin edged in black and a man the main star in it on a coffin day. What monster god of chance put together this faltering contrivance, designed to fail and fail and fail and fear - shake us through the taloned days and the doubly-taloned nights? Where laughs he now and why?

WHERE LAUGHS HE NOW AND WHY? He does not laugh now, not at me! and I'll tell why. I am a Stronghold master, BIG, in the armor plate of total invulnerability. My ammo is stacked in heaps roundabout, and I can win ANY war. My blasters stand itchy on the GO pad, ready, at the speed of a metal thought, to launch for TOTAL SMACK. As it whirls the world in space our planet stands out bold now and surely indestructible, coated as we have plasto-coated it, with nothing to grind it away at the big middle and nothing to wear it out at the far hubs. And I do not have to envy stones now, nor stone pillars. Nor animals either. I am harder than the stones were and more mind-set than the animals. SCIENCE HAS MADE A MAN! NEW METAL MAN! Science has coated and made clean the dirty EARTH ball for him to stand on.

YAH! good Science plan, come bring your old white head and let me shake your grip. You've lifted me from the pit. You've saved me from the gummy dark, the ground-wet and the worms. I'm honored to be MAN now, new-metal MAN. Whereas once I was dishonored to be man, mocked at, jeered at, put upon by a god or gods who sat out laughing somewhere in a mystic mystery sky or high on smoky mountain tops and jotted me down in ledgers of harsh light. The balance to be used against me as I crept toward Judgment. And I once believed all that!?! And let it be said forever to the total credit of man that though he believed these primitive and freaky things and counted the hopeless odds, he came out fighting, every time! Truly something indestructible in man must have saved him for this complete victory that I know now, the triumph of new-metal, the godhead of the chosen few, the total forever-security of the "replacement" Kings! (Too scared to leave, too scared to stay, caught on untenable ground, he gulped

the air for battle in the spitting mouths of death, knotted his courage to all the fists he owned and prayed for endings that would not be unbearable. And sometimes, quite surprisingly, he won a little skirmish, even in the inkiest night of his despair. Sometimes he came through with flags flying and trumpets blasting to look the winner for sure. And sometimes he made speeches to say it was all feasible and worthwhile. But mostly it was not feasible, and never worthwhile. And you flesh-bums out there know what I mean. All victories to you must be hard-won and temporary, and hardly worth the candle. For down from it all looms the biggest, the most unwinnable, the most conclusive battle of all battles. Any win claimed there HAS to be conditional and entirely smoky lanterns surrounded by the blackest black of dark. FORGET IT, you flesh-bums. YOU won't win there, and you know it. In the deepest marrow of your trembly fear-sick bones, you know you won't win the Battle of Death - not even if you're Pope.)

But now we do not have to win the Battle of Death. That battle for us will never be waged - NEVER, for we have overwhelmed the Adversary ahead of the battle he planned. YES! We are the moving, functioning substance of the Moderan Dream. Long ago our scientists, those great clear-eyed Kings of the laboratories, where theories were put to the test-tube test, saw that flesh life and plant life were essentially intolerable, improbable, implausible and probably impossible on our Earth ball home. If we had not had these cool clear-eyed men growing along with the puddlers and the muddlers and the myth magicians that were our other vaunted progress, I do not, quite frankly, know what we should ever finally have done. Here on this ball that was our threatened, improbable, unpredictable and near-impossible home.

But now we're in the clear, thanks to science, our once-dirty Earth ball clean now, coated with plastic, our hardly-used air, mostly a decoration now, colored in beauty with a different hue each month (oh, lovely vapor shield!), our once garbage-wrecked oceans frozen to solid, with any surplus space-hauled long ago, and our temperatures as quiet and as changeless as ever we want them to be, through Season Control in Central. And the birds! The birds are colored tin now! And the animals all are engined. While the trees in ersatz leap through the planned Earth holes and bloom us up "real" leaves that last the course. AH MODERAN! Land where leaves do not drop; land of the plasto-coated land - sweet sweet my shard-hard home.

HEAD THUMPING THE TROOPS

I didn't know then that the Stronghold would run itself, all fixed in the tapes of "automatic administration," and that my main function would be to war with neighborhood Strongholds, gun worldly at times (when required), enjoy the standard Joys of the ruling-class new-metal man and engage in such splinter other diversions as I might want to dream up on my own from time to time for kicks. Oh, no, I was a new King and a new King WILL be a King. I called them out, about as soon as I was "home," for verbal head thumping, to let them know first-off that one King, and ONE King only, existed at Stronghold 10. YES!

"Men," I said to my crew assembled, phfluggee-phflaggee voice on STERN, but still a little bit emotional, "you play ball with me and I'll play ball with you." (GOD! what a thing for a King to say.) I thumped the tapes. "Just an old expression," I apologized and laughed, "Ha huk! Disregard it, and let's start again. MEN! Don't play ball with me and I'll shove the bat up." (GOD! so this was going to be one of THOSE days.) "MEN! Cooperate and all WILL be well. Do what I say and we'll have a good life here, and maybe even a little bit of fun. OBEDIENCE is the first consideration. Respect for law is THE FIRST law. And your King, I, is THE LAW!" Did I hear a metal robot laughing? Or did I hear a long silence

from my assembled crew resting on the laurels of their cold silent switches?

At any rate, with the newness of my metal ringing in my mechanized ears, and not just a little bit confused and unsure, I rambled on, saying the things I thought a new Commander should say to let the troops know that the new regime was HERE! gung ho and it was NO NONSENSE now and GO! GO!! GO!!! all the way. "When I find a man not pulling his weight," I said, "when I find a man not giving ME one hundred and twenty-five percent, at least, effort, I've found an enemy. If that man IF THAT MAN, THAT RAT, cannot come to me and show me health reasons why he's lagging, God help him to his grave. He'd better wish his father and mother, nay twenty-five hundred forebears farther back removed than that, had never been born, much less him. I'll flay him clear back to Adam far his ancestry, if need be!" (And God, these were just little metal people, but I was off and running now.)

"I'll ask my Corps of Engineers to install some of the most sophisticated snoop gear in the history of mankind. I'll have them install signals and graphs and all kinds of metering devices. And as a fair little warning to you, let me say, and let it not be misunderstood, that I have never in all my life been fooled in my own personal estimate of an individual, his potential, his behavior, his overall utilization of self. Not that I'll need it, but I'll tell you ahead of time what I'm having put in to verify to all what I will know already. It will be called the 'Beep for Record' plan. When any man ANY MAN! is remiss in any one of the many categories in which a man can be remiss, throughout all this great new Stronghold a giant BEEP will sound, alerting all. Then that man's name - you do have names, I trust, or numbers - anyway, that man's designation will be loudmouthed throughout all this vast fort; his designation will reverberate from wall to wall, from hall to hall, from ceiling to floor, ALL EVERYWHERE, as a miscreant. Let each man EACH MAN, please, now make a silent vow to keep his personal part of the 'Beep for Record' silent. Then he'll know he's doing what he should be doing anyway, without this threat. That's all. Just what he should be doing anyway. He can expect no prizes for his silent BEEP. It will only mean that he is functioning adequately. Is that understood?

"For prizes? Well, I have BIG plans for that, which we'll go into at some better, later time. But for just right now, I'd much rather that you get clear that this is a no-nonsense place, and we mean business at this Stronghold. I'm King here and you are my subjects. I mean to be the greatest King in Moderan and that will mean that you will be the greatest subjects in Moderan. Let's work hard. Our goals are simple. To be first First FIRST, those are our plans. Let no man shirk. Heaven HEAVEN help him if he does. Do I want a happy Stronghold? Ha phaw! Happy Strongholds are for old women warriors. I want a steel-driven Stronghold. I want a cold Stronghold. I want a Stronghold such that when the steel birds hit our air they'll feel a chill along the very wings they flap to flee our space. I want no mollycoddles. And I'll not be a mollycoddle's nursemaid. I'll take heads off; I'll melt people down. It could well be that the most obedient man in all the Stronghold will inexplicably one bleak day find himself in the pot. He won't know why; I won't know why, except that these things work out. Strength answers to strength. Let no one feel secure. Yet let every man go at that special speed which leaves no room for acceleration. What I mean, you'll be at MAX at all times and all the way. When you wear out I'll replace you with no thought whatsoever concerning what you were. The GOAL of the overall effort is the ALL that counts. The little component parts mean nothing NOTHING, except they contribute. And then their meaning is only in their time of function. I HOPE I HAVE MADE MY POSITION PERFECTLY CLEAR."

I was quite exhausted along my flesh-strips and tired around the rims of my loins as I thumbed the phfluggee-phflaggee to SILENT. Was I trying too hard? Is a speech from the heart ever "trying too hard"? Were the troops fired up? Had I impressed them? A silence greeted me in a stopped Stronghold, a complete cessation that could mean ANYTHING, EVERYTHING or NOTHING. I walked over and touched one of them and even through my steel hand such a coldness was transferred that I rejoiced and thought of a million acres of ice. I touched another and it was quite the same.

NEW-METAL MISTRESS TIME

Every Stronghold master had one. It was part of the game in the land of the "replaced" people, where the parts were mostly new-metal, with the flesh-strips few and played-down. In the days when I was a neophyte Stronghold master, one of the elite-elite brand new, just out of the nine-month series in that hospital where they rebuilt people mostly to new-steel, it came my time. So I moved out to get it.

An idealist still, as always, I thought it could be the mending time of the Dream. For us all. But to see them there, the snot-punky kids, pulling on their Moderan bigbite longer stronger goofy-fags, and leering lasciviously, I thought of little pimply punks slipping smokes in dark back alleys and drawing sex on smeared board fences and scarred stone walls. In the Old Days. And telling dirt-color jokes.

Even change them to steel, can you change them!? I retreated my thoughts and hopes and hopeful dreams across old disappointments grounds and into Sadness Field. (Were these the ONES CHOSEN - they to become the battle-great and power-tall renowned feared masters of Stronghold Moderan!?) I went back home to total woe. Almost. For but one small small while. Then I rallied back up out of the Despair Darkness, pulled by a Light like that from our wonderful star, the sun - propelled by a thought, holding to the point, filled with a wholesome gladness like spring coming to the long-night fields of snow. I had my Dream MY DREAM! Let others cling to their baseness and be kings on the field of shame. I'd move into the Light with MY DREAM.

MY DREAM was the pedestal woman, part imagined, part actual and always walking away. But now was my chance! To have THE DREAM! From old memories, long-carried tight-held, I had sent in the specifications to the new-metal mistress shop, along with the photos I had with great effort and tedious pains kept safe through all danger and despair - heart-shatter, mind-havoc, even unto world destruction, the conflagrations of war. And now, for my Stronghold haven, to have the Dream in a package that I could take home with me! Has ever man had more?

Through the punks lounging by the wall (these were Stronghold masters!?), eagerly awaiting tryouts and a field day of selection in the new-metal mistress store, I moved up to the warehouse window. I handed in my card and the clerk-type new-metal warehouseman looked a little out at sea, sort of misted in, a wee bit PUZZLED. "You mean you just want to take a chance!? You don't want tryouts and selection, the same as the others!? You actually mean you want me to just go back there to the pile and pick a random package!? Why you might get a-a-a-uh, a redhead. Ha ha. Or a bleach-bottle platinum blonde. Even a wig! Ugh!"

"Read the instructions; look at the card," I said, as coldly as I could. He looked. His face trembled open and horrified through confused miles and areas of surprise. When he had recovered a little he said, "Oh, yes, sir! I should have looked, sir. These forms all look so much the same, sir. I just assumed -"

"Assume nothing, guess nothing, check everything," I recited to add salt and acid to his little open boil of confusion.

So we took her home in the truck, which was really the Moderan new-metal mistress delivery van driven by a noncommittal new-metal fellow who was rumored to be absolutely without settings that would tempt him to stop for awhile and turn on the goods, should he happen to be delivering on a lonely stretch. I

guess you could call him a new-metal eunuch. Yes, I guess you could.

When at last we were alone, I fell to unwrapping her. In my hurry I snarled the cords; I drew loose knots tighter; I made knots where no knots had been before. YES! When a man has the key to heaven for the very first time, he is not apt to be calm. My heart, despite the settings staying solid, catch-locked on CRUISE, was pounding away like a big mallet hitting a one-pound sack of marshmallows in the Old Days. For one terribly giddy moment of sickness I thought I might lose consciousness altogether. But calling on all the forces of determination in the flesh-strips I still owned I hung in there doggedly and fought with the knots in the twine...

Now, with my new-metal mistress at last unwrapped, and for the very first time all mine... I think it only necessary, and fitting, to tell you that we had a very nice time... the first time... and each and every time subsequently and thereafter we had a very nice time. The rest is personal, private and not necessarily for publication at all.

And yet, and yet - something loose in the flesh-strips I still own somehow nags at me, pushes at me, asks me to set down this greatness, tell how it was... share... even brag a little of the truth... be fair with those less fortunate... keep nothing back... enrich the world with the telling of a great GREAT moment in love. OH! YES! YES, I WILL!!

The cords all in scattered snarls and little tangle-ball heaps now... the shredded paper torn hastily, frantically from and in its own wild piles now... The room a shambles, but THE DREAM there cool... the blonde doll all turned on, the real and true-copied image of an old Dream in the mind... there waiting in the body that science had made, the little bow of a mouth all moist and rosy red, the blue eyes blue-bulb blue and like small glass globes sliced carefully nut of that heaven when June was all clear-and-bright... and now here to look at me like two sweet queens from paradise, light and language and love-bespeaking-love for this empress come visiting from heaven... no more than a body's length away... SO I MOVED INTO THAT MOMENT... snatching away what was necessary to snatch away of her clothes... my heart on MAX entirely now, hers on LOVE ME COOL... factory set...

Oh, God! was I sailing a kite in a pinhole, was I riding a vernal moon in a summer storm, all snow; was I scratching the lobes of my ears with the second joints of my toes? WOW! and WOW!! Were all things impossible, possible now?...jug-jug-jug, phu-phu-phu, bam-bam-bam, jug-jug-jug, gaaru-gaaru-gaaru, phu-phu-phu, gaaru-gaaru-gaaru - possible now...? All the people who had written and overwritten about this thing - in the Old Days - old Mailer and Hemingway, say - had they been right all along? I believed now that they had (for the tiniest moment in all the world, I believed)garu-garu-garu, wham-wham-wham-bam-a-bam-wham - WHAAMMM-A-BAMMM-WHAAMMM - OOOh-OOOhhh-OOOOOhhhhh-OOOOOOHHHHH - uh ...

Then switch-off - all through when over, another moment of truth gone into the irretrievable blanks of time. But a great one, a truly GREAT moment of truth this time one surely gone down now to petition admittance somewhere at a Gate where a Book is kept in a Castle of Pure Light, and that Castle all of a Purpose to keep safe the record of those moments that tell the Great Story and never die.

YES! That's how it was! The day I got my new-metal mistress from the new-metal mistress store in the Land of the New Time.

[AND SO WHITE WITCH VALLEY](#)

When Moderan was all beginners-new and the plans not set-mold, it was envisaged that a few outstanding, very special wives might be "replaced" and allowed to share the Stronghold forever-life with their Stronghold master husbands. But there were, on science grounds, long and bitterly contested debates as to whether any female of the species would be strong enough to stand that nine-months battery of the "replacement" operations. Finally, in a spirit of benevolent bravado and what-the-hell charity and choice, the panel, all men, all great new-metal scientists trained in every aspect of surgery and flesh-strip care, and all, so it chanced, bachelors, said, "Give it a whirl! What-the-hell! What's to lose?" WHAT'S TO LOSE!!?? Hey!! Now!!!

Out of the shambles of Back There she came, like walking doom come down, all the way out of the havoc, the bomb smear, the fallout far and everywhere, through the utterly-destroyed countryside, a game little woman walking, surely impelled the long way by the one rhythmic vow: "He'll never get away; I'LL FIND HIM; he'll never escape from ME."

It was months after I, fully certified as Stronghold-master material, had left the hospital and was comfortably ensconced in my fort. I had learned already how to behave passably as one of the elite-elite new-metal masters, had gunned through a couple of triple-try-out Max Shoots to establish honors fine and ashine, had come to enjoy the ordinary Joys of the ruling new-metal man, had even chosen and got delivery on my new-metal mistress doll, that marvel of science and love from "an old dream in the mind." THEN IT HAPPENED! Like blockbusters. Like retribution. Like, in the Old Days, red-hot knives cutting toes off and fingers off and ears off and the nose off and the chin off and the testicles off and winches pulling the guts out to grind them while the eyeballs fell back in the blasted and blackened brains and baked there and the blood turned to hot boiling concrete in a pot on a laser beam stove. GOD! Like learning of conscription for a Great War in the Times Past. Like confirmation of cancer and less than a year to go. Like OH, YES, definitely - congratulations, you two! kootchy-koo - a POSITIVE report on that unmarried pregnancy long ago. Like OH CHRIST! Like OH GOD!! Like OH GOD GOD DAMN!!!

"GREETINGS," it said. It came delivered by transmail, a night letter kind of thing, like from the Old Times, flashed on my Viewer Screen in the midst of a perfect day. I had just fought the new-metal kitten against the diamond-tooth tiger cub for a variety time thrill-and-Joy diversion of pure savagery and fun. I had just learned by Official Announcement from my War Room Speaker Wall that General War would resume all over Moderan next Tuesday and I had been chosen IN. (A heady honor this, for a new-metal Stronghold man - after only two triple try-out Max Shoots and one Stand-Down Inspection for Rate to be chosen IN for War!) Oh, didn't LIFE in MY GARDEN look budded-up for bloom!?

Then "GREETINGS"! Just as I, in honor of all the other good things that had befallen me that day, had decided to cap it with new-metal mistress Joy, it had sounded. Thattweetle andtwootle warning of domestic announcement and nagtweetle-twootled throughout all my fort. Oh, disgusting, disrupting, uncouth, uncultured, cluttered sound, that - so unlike the great sturdy BOONK ZOONK BOONK alerts from my War Room Speaker Wall, and usually presaging some minor nigglenaggle announcement or directive from the Needle Building and its Court Men Most High. They surely dreamed day and night there on how to nag us citizens to distraction on small counts.

"GREETINGS: STRONGHOLD 10," it said, and I, interrupting VERY RELUCTANTLY my settings for passion-and-love for new-metal mistress doll, switched to boredom-and-yawns awaiting a Court Man's routine directive to paint-and-fix, shape-up! at the Stronghold, or perhaps a gentle nudge in bold letters toward contributing more strongly and with surer elan next vapor shield to the Court Men's

Welfare Fund. Then my wide-range Moderan vision narrowed in to scoop off the message coming through on the wall. And the mountains crumbled down to the seas again! The sky collapsed like a sledge-hammered egg! My new-metal shell shrank until I was crushed, a shard in a metal world. I died... YOUR WIFE... ARRIVED LAST EVENING... OPERATIONS GOING FINE... YOU WILL SOON BE A TEAM... AGAIN... BEST WISHES...

Was there a smirk in that BEST WISHES, a snicker-sneer implied from a Court Man Most High remembering mountainous problems and nagging times most sore a long long while ago? Was someone laughing, saying, "Better you than I, old chump chump, ha HA!" of my plight? Whatever or however, let it be known that from the time of that fatefultweetle andtwottle message I lived nine months dead, I was paralyzed, I had no spark nor spunk, I enjoyed nothing, I was a new-metal zombie going cold and cold and cold on a cold routine, a true case of the walking death dying stiller, going chillier, waxing more unresponsive to any of life's halloo. And when she arrived - and oh God, she did arrive, that tough strong little woman with the ice-blue terror eyes, having stood those very serious and stark operations nine months like a summer breeze on shore - she arrived to RUN the Stronghold! Oh, yes, the full take-over. No partnership here. Had there ever been? Ha!...

My case was not unique. All over Moderan that spring, when we were beginners-new and the plans not set-mold, they came walking in, struggling, falling down, getting up to come on, most of them with one aim in view - not to let that disappearing surviving rat husband get away with a thing. I'M YOUR WIFE, seemed, in their minds, to say it all and leave no questions of any kind. Doom was final; doom was sealed-down doom. That gray twilight terror-life of wife-husband husband-wife (WEEA000HH YEEA000HH 00HH OHH) must never be changed, not even by the ending of a world.

Well, we fellows in Moderan did not stand that nonsense. We had other ideas. Moderan was man country with man aims and man views. When it became stark-clear that the forever-life was not feasible with a flesh-strip helpmate of female steel that could not be turned-off turned-on, we moved them out. It was as simple as that. We formed a Commission for the Relocation of old New-Metal shrews. We moved them to a place prepared for them, the walled province of White Witch Valley. The walls are high there; it is a prison, vast and maximum-security; the guards, we hope, will never sleep there, nor relax on their rounds on the walls. My God help us all if there ever is a prison break from the walled province of White Witch Yalley!

[THE BIRD MAN OF MODERAN](#)

It was early along in my Stronghold reign, after I had won me a couple of world Max Shoot-Outs and had established myself as the current Greatest Man, that I began to think again of other things; I began to think of... aspects... Purpose... Beauty... Community Interest...

I went down to see him that apple-green spiced day, riding the roll-go road like any little man, like a citizen of Old Times, gliding through Moderan's fixed and automatic spring. It was May. Everything was up; everything was out; Central Seasons had handed that big iron switch to ON to send old winter reeling once again. The plastic snow sheets had turned over and under as wheels spun deep in the ground, and the spring yard sheets had come up and over on the drums in that fair and equal exchange that makes seasons switch no problem in our great Moderan. How Nature used to struggle to bloom those poor blooms up! Everything in conflict, fighting for a toe hold, beating the frost nip down or being beaten

down... petty struggle... to nothing... and all so unnecessary. Now we have it all on giant drums with yard sheets, divided into four - winter part, spring part, summer part and fall - and turning a season up in plastic is just play now where once old Nature struggled... hard.

I got off at the place marked RESTRICTED AIR, BIRD FIELD, just stepped from the roll-go road and worked my hinges and braces across to where IT was. Like any common man. Sightseeing. Rubbernecking. A citizen interested in a phase. The bird guards tried to stop me well out on the plastic plains, read me the Book of Security, told me their jobs, started to draw snub weapons. I flashed then #10's great eagle-studded seal, eyed them as a king eyes rats and kept on walking, pleased at the way their glances curdled when the awful thought struck home, wondered if years on they might not hand voice tapes to steel guardchildren, telling how on one awful day in May grandsire had bungled, had in his impetuous little duty rounds challenged a King... and lived.

Even so, the warnings went up and out from the Complex of Birds, and there was a bit of a flurry overall that the greatest battle man in all wide Moderan should so come down. To see birds! Usually they went in in ersatz, the great steel Stronghold chiefs, sending an aide-de-camp to do this thankless chore of seeming to be interested in the birds, community betterment, the flowers, the vapor shield color change and other such homely procedures network in the Plan. They only did it for points, most of these Stronghold clowns, knowing that the snoop cars of the Evaluators were always up and out, checking to see what a man did for Community interest when the guns were gone all silent and the truce-stopped war loads swung free and easy in the launch slings, ON HOLIDAY!

But I went because I wanted to. And you can believe this or not - I'm always seeking something. I search for it day and night. Even when the heavens are all ablaze with war fire, I keep thinking. Not that I'm a soft man or a candidate for bloom man. Nor am I a fright man. Nor even the King of Good Wishes. Essentially I'm a doubt man, out-search and looking. And except in war, when all is beautiful and killing, strength and anger gone solid action, everything channeled to knowable goals, I'm edgy.

I stamped in, steel-on-steel. I salvaged my voice into the Welcome Wall speaker cone, "STRONGHOLD 10 IS HERE TO SEE A LAUNCH. And perhaps understand more about the world. I understand the war part of it. And well I should I guess!" I felt my head and neck and face flesh-strips blushing, going modest. "This is Stronghold 10," I blundered on, "the greatest Stronghold in all wide Moderan. Winner of the war plaques for destruction and the emblem of the crossed bombs for excellence. I'VE BEATEN THEM ALL! I find peace sometimes hard to take. In peace, when the birds go and the flowers bloom and the trees pop-shoot back, surfacing out of the yard holes, couldn't we have a kind of peace warfare overall? I mean, like you, your part of it, wouldn't it be more in keeping if you launched the birds all up in a kind of Battle-Stations-for-Beauty? This sending them up to tweetle and twootle and flap and float a bit of color through the already colored air, what's the sense? Man! you could have a big bird rally for each district of Moderan, each bird could do its battling best to stay up against all the other birds, and the last one up would be the strongest, the staunchest, and therefore the most beautiful. Huh? I bet an eagle or a condor'd win it, huh? I'm condor-built myself, cross taloned with eagles - big, strong, tough - mean as battling hell. But I think you know that, seeing as how I'm Stronghold 10, the world's current Greatest Man." I eased back on thephfluggee-phflaggee then, because I really had been talking too much, and perhaps I might regret. And besides, I was here as a visitor, not a braggart-suggester. It was not my place, I'm sure, to revise Moderan in peace just because I happened to be the current greatest war man. What an upstart Captain I might be thought, a Stronghold master popping off down here to see the bird shots, alone, without proper security clearance, even, and wasting no time in coming up with my own ideas for revision. "I'm sorry," I said. "Just show me a launch of warblers, pewees or some such, and I'll head on back to my guns."

To tell you the truth, I was uncomfortable - as I always am - on a mission of peace. I'm better with anger

and blasters. Much better. Always was. And yet, I'm always wanting something, as I said, something else, and it drives me on, down to the wedge end, into the corners of search. Even now I tingled with the hope of it, my flesh-strips writhed and remembered, my steel parts seethed, rasped, wrinkled and shouted, so disturbed they were by the flesh parts quivering. YES! I was a jelly mess as I waited, the current greatest Captain of all wide Moderan (winner of the first-place Plaques of Destruction and the crossed bombs for excellence in the latest total world gun-down) quivering like some old granny dame of Old Times anticipating a granny thrill. I was anticipating a thrill, all right, the thrill of the discovery of a little part of the secret of Soft Beauty in the world. And scared I was that it might too much unsettle me, might prove too much for me to see this man, this Captain of Birds, this prince on fire with a mission of peace, an Apostle of Soft Beauty and surely one against guns in the world. I felt clumsy all at once; my plaques at home seemed nothing all at once; I felt I almost would trade my entire Stronghold just now for one glimpse of the true secret of the birds and sweet beauty in the universe. YES! I'd go barefoot in metal across the trouble-boiling world, a clanking clunking Messiah, all unarmed, ungunned, to lecture to them - amidst shot and shell one Light-seeing evangel Captain standing tall as trees, all bared to danger, shouting, "NO! NO! THAT'S NOT THE WAY!"

I needn't have worried. He came on in dirty steel, a short-stump man, hangdog, a mere district Captain of Birds, a reduced Stronghold master in very fact, and one, I supposed, plotting to get back a fort. He looked all around in confusion until at last his mechanical widerange Moderan eyes discovered me. Fastening on to my substance they narrowed in to evaluate, and he looked, I thought, like some stubby iron goose quick-swiveling its head as he pressed a button that squawked, "Welcome, Stronghold 9, welcome to Bird Launch." When I started to wave and to shout my protest, he narrowed in more with his eyes and tried again and this time, hitting the right button, it came out, "Welcome, Stronghold 10, welcome to Bird Launch, and excuse. And Stronghold 9, excuse, if monitoring." Then some of his all-metal help glided up on the power floor and without further ceremony hustled ME! as if I were anyone! into an iron cylinder at the forward edge of the room. It was the bird launch observation cylinder and I soon saw that I had a very good view of a wide expanse of uncluttered vapor-shield distance. Perhaps Beauty would soon appear there and sound would tell me how. I waited all wrinkly and undone. For Beauty's showing.

Soon a flurry of dark fast-moving spots appeared in the vapor-shield distance of my view area. "Warblers' launch," a metal voice said, most mechanically, "warblers' launch for Twelfth District. Stay on cue for sparrows. Pewees next." And so it went, all through the launch of many kinds of mechanized, metal birds. My view area would fill with dark, swift-arrowing spots, and soon a mechanical voice would tell me what was awing. We went with this from warblers, sparrows, pewees, all through past eagles and were just ready for condors when something deep in me gave way to outrage. "Hell's fire!" I shouted, and I thumped on the sides of the view cylinder, "let me out of here. I came down here in good faith, and all I'm getting is spots before my eyes. Hell's fire!"

"Retrieve Stronghold 12," the recall voice said - "excuse, retrieve Stronghold 5, excuse, retrieve - retrieve Stronghold? - Stronghold of current viewing - retrieve retrieve..."

So they took me out of the metal view cylinder, and I confronted the hangdog man. I was really burned and ready; my explosion tolerance, never too far underground, was up and ready to blow. I put the button on YELL and I let it blast: "Here I, Moderan's greatest current man, take time off from my duties - hell, I could be home supervising fusing for the next world shots - to come down here and show Community Interest and maybe pick up a few points as well as a few pointers that might do me some good. And what happens? Hell! Your metal dunces cram me into the view tube and you let on like it's a big deal. And hell, you don't even remember more'n half of the time who I am. And what do I see? Spots! Warblers' launch. Spots! Sparrows' launch. Spots! Pewees' launch. Spots! And on through past eagles. HELL! I could've stayed home and drawn spots on pieces of paper. And waved that before my

eyes. Hell's fire! Blast! Damn! and THUNDERATION!"

"Now, now, don't be so touchy-tough. We ail have our little problems. Yours seems to be one of misunderstanding. You came down here expecting to see beauty at the launch. For the Tenth District. Where you should have gone to see beauty at the launch for the Tenth District was to the Twelfth District. WHERE WE SHOOT IT AT is where the beauty is. Not where from. See? Now, if you'll just hustle your tail right on out of here, you might just get over there in time to see the condors come in. To Twelfth District. In fact, if you'll take a flash car and rush-ass it, I'll make an exception and hold up condor launch for a few secs. Just for you! I'll fake a slight malfunction after eagles. O.K.?"

"No, it's not O.K. I think I've been had. Someone told me when looking for beauty to go to the birds. But I think I've misunderstood something. I've been pretty busy at war, though."

"Sure you have. And being a war man, what we do with the birds should grab you pretty much. I mean, it should appeal to your sense of the rightness of things. The citizens, generally, don't know it, but by and large we don't send the birds up for nothing. Not for beauty, and that's for sure. It's really a little training exercise they go on, each time we launch. Just suppose we should ever need to change bird heads for warheads, huh?" And his bulb eyes gleamed as he leered, and he nudged through the air toward me, like a conspirator.

"OH! NO," I said involuntarily, with thephfluggee phflaggealmost off the dial on LOUD, "That's for Stronghold men, not for birds. We'll do the fighting!"

"But just suppose," he pursued, "that by some simple wrong calculation, or some very complex, completely right calculation, HA HA! you Stronghold masters all gun one another down to the plastic yard sheet ground at the precise same instant. I mean, you really smear each other. Rub each other in the rubble, as it were! Nothing left! Then at just that precise same instant in history the Spacehop troop bowls come blasting in backed up by their gun saucers from Out There, fixed to really tear old Earth down to its underdress, ha ha. Wouldn't it be good to know we had the capability of peppering them with a little bird shot just then, just to give you gun guys a little time in which to rebuild your sets and repel the upstarts with your blasters? But if you're going to make condor time in Twelfth, you'd better blast your tail, man! I mean NOW! I mean hurry! I can't hold up too long. We're really, as I've hinted, on rather complex maneuver time every time we launch."

"Don't hold up condors another micro-instant!" I yelled. And I left then, headed back for my guns, not sure that I'd ever bother to try to intercept any other kind of Beauty ever again.

BUBBLE-DOME HOMES

The bubble-dome home, the live-alone houseball, was as much a part of the total Moderan scene as was, say, a Stronghold. Or a flesh-strip. Or a roll-go. The bubble-dome home was for underprivileged country, where lived until they died, the millions on millions who had not qualified for Stronghold country. As has been told before, only the elite-elite went up to that big-deal scene where the defense complexes were eleven steel walls thick, where kill-kill of all description swung easy and handy-down under the gun lids, and the cone balls rolled all day all night high in the vapor shield over the Strongholds, testing for danger, testing for war! NO! not everyone could qualify for that scene. Only the young males, usually, the

finest of the breed, moved up to that chance. The old ladies, the middle ladies, the young girls, the maimed men, the weak and the weary men of all description - all lived in mediocrity, each in his or her own live-alone houseball, watching the days go, seeing a life ebb, knowing that the course had to be collision with the Terrible Date. For not one of these rabble people had qualified for enough of the operations to be of and for forever.

It was a waste. All pandering to weakness is a waste. What a country we could have had in Moderan, what greatness and what Joy, had it been all the elite-elite up in Stronghold country firing those big guns at each other, the high exhilaration of war broken only for small truces and great Joy.

But Central was weak. Ruthless Central was weak, here - once. Those nine old shells, with their flesh-strip percentages that could equal or outdo any Stronghold master's (in fact, they had all been Stronghold masters before their elevation; I expect in due time to be elevated) were weak. I can imagine how they chewed at their smoke ropes long and long up there in the L-Towers of the Needle Building that day, how they spat at the gold-banded jeweled cone spittoons all day up there, how they argued and almost fought in their frustration. Nine old men, nine old shells - faced with a battle that they could not win.

Of course the flesh-strips of humanity told these nine high ruling judges to save the people, let them live, build them homes, give them the operations to the very limits of their capacities to absorb and survive those operations. But the new-metal steel charisma of these leaders placed most high must have argued for sanity. And the sane course had to be to let these people die. At once! They could never excel; they had not, not one of them, even the smallest slightest chance of ever absorbing enough operations to be of the elite-elite. They could only clutter the Moderan Dream. With one important exception. The young boys! YES! They would, some of them, surely grow up to challenge us in their turn. And that might have been the one overriding consideration, the young boys, that caused those nine old hulls when Moderan was a very new country to render that hard-argued five-to-four decision: LET THE COMMON PEOPLE LIVE.

It was a bum decision! That was my unqualified sane opinion at the time, and I think it had to be the unqualified sane opinion of anyone who was already at the top, a Stronghold master. Who needed more people? Not us, and that was for sure. We were already set in our Hate Leagues, we had just enough for dandy wars all of the time, with the exception of the small time outs for truces and Joys, and we were designed for forever. That seemed a set and final fine set of conditions, so far as I am concerned.

But the decision was rendered; we had to live with it. Oh, there was talk of marching on the Needle Building, of firing at the L-Towers, and a lot of other wild irresponsible letting off of steam, talkwise, was done. But nothing came of any of it, finally. The Moderan Dream was left irrevocably saddled with these rheumatic old ladies, these bummy old men, these meaningless-fututed young girls and all the rest of the under-par ragtag of humanity. Until they should die. Which they would, eventually, because they were not physically strong enough to stand that battery of operations that would move them up to the land of the forever Dream. But these nine old human hulls in a five-to-four further dog-fit of humanity had decreed that all these people should not only be allowed to live out their natural spans, but should also be certified to receive the Moderan operations to the physical limits of their capabilities to receive them and to absorb them. WHOOFF! Thus compounding and prolonging the blot on the Moderan Dream for ages and ages.

Oh, so easily could this all have been taken care of directly. To mollify their outdated feelings of humanity these nine old nut hulls could have, after voting more realistic convictions, appended this Order from the Court: LET THEM GO GENTLY. In a trice these people could have gone then. Oh, it would have taken but the very minimum of planning. BEAUTIFUL! Central could have decreed a compulsory

Joy Day for all the underprivileged people in the land. Then all over Moderan gigantic Joy Stadiums could have been thrown together, hurriedly made and of the very flimsiest of construction materials. For a one-time use. On Joy Day they would have come in their thousands then to the Joy Stadium of their choice, usually, of course, the one nearest them. Not one of the underprivileged people would have been excused from participation in this massive Joy day celebration. The common people - men, women and children in out-of-bed health, the bedridden, the wheel-chaired, the halt, the blind, all of them, even the criminals from their prison cells - all would be transported in for Joy. At a common instant, at a signal from some watch-ball on high perhaps, a steel finger in Central would touch a small jolly-color orange button marked GO GENTLY. Each Joy Stadium and its thousands of celebrators then would simply in a twinkling be a POUFF! a FLASH! and then a small black smudge-blot on the plastic. Which smudge-blot could be easily and simply wiped off by a steel roving-custodian of the Land Surface Upkeep Forces. BEAUTIFUL! YES! We have the know-how for such solutions.

Then, and also, we have nine old nut heads scratching, very reluctantly, I'm sure, a flesh-strip small itch of conscience. So, as a result, in their millions and millions the bubble-dome homes, the live-alone houseballs, housing for the mediocre millions, sprang up all over stern and mighty Stronghold-centered Moderan, in almost any spot that wasn't in direct interference with the firing periphery of a Stronghold.

YES! What a waste! All that time, all that energy, all that expenditure - oh, think what it could have meant toward the betterment of our life, the advancement of the Moderan Dream, if it all could have been used correctly! Better defense, maybe, swifter-firing Strongholds, almost surely, or perhaps even experimentation and study for a science breakthrough for more steel in the elite-elite new-metal man, and less flesh-strip - this always core and central to the Moderan Dream. There was a lot of time, energy, expense and know-how went into those bubbledome homes, and don't you ever think otherwise!

And yet - and yet all honesty, even here by my Wall of Steel, makes me confess a thing. Some nights, in a time of quiet, when the high cone balls of my warning complex twirl round and round and say nothing, when every battle flag hangs limp on its pennon pole, when the weapons men, having no duties whatsoever to perform, make not even the smallest scratch-scratch sound of metal moving on metal within my Walls, I think stark thoughts. I think of people in their live-alone houseballs enjoying the services of gad-goes, waited upon by automatics, and fighting each his own personal unwinnable Battle of Time. I think of my father and mother and five sisters somewhere OUT THERE, each one in a personal bubble-dome home. I think of two little children, Little Brother and Little Sister. And ultimate ultimate piercing thought - That Woman! in White Witch Valley. I walk my mile in the night then - pounding, ringing, clattering across the silent battlements, round and round on the lookout ledge of my Stronghold's highest roof. And sometimes in the moonshow - cold and weird and cluttered now with conquest, that pale chill light wan through the vapor shield - I ask myself THE QUESTION. And sometimes, rather than answer THE QUESTION, I lift a truce up early and gun in all the Strongholds for a big Max-Up of Hate. But sometimes I answer THE QUESTION, and the answer makes me sad. No, I answer, very softly, no and no. Very softly. I pound my flesh-strips then, I claw at my soft percentages, I wish for more steel! But it's still NO. No, I wouldn't have voted with the minority up in that L-Tower. I too, finally, would have voted to give the common sub-par people more time to think about, and try to get ready for, each his own personal Terrible Date. And thus the failure of it all and the Dream diminished by even me, until I can get more steel - MORE STEEL!

[ONE FALSE STEP](#)

All winter they worked in those far-flung mechanism-clogged tunnels under the land, four bulb-bummers for a district repairing spring. Slogging around in their space boots down there in the, dark and cold they were fixing the broken leaves, adding new flips to the root stocks and retouching iron petals so that all would be in readiness in their sector for a perfect automatic season to leap through the yard holes at a nod from the Central Commission for Beauty. They hated the unmanly work, and they did not love one another. But they loathed one another with a sufferance that allowed for an exchange of agonies. All four of them had fallen from something, and he had fallen farther than any of them.

Today, for perhaps the twentieth time this winter, he felt he must out with his story, for sometimes to live, after the fall, is a thing past quiet bearing. They paused by a leaf they were mending, and the others extended him deference, for there lingered with them still the reminder of what he had once been above ground, as well as the fact that he was Captain here.

"To have fallen to leaf mender," he said. "To have toppled to bulb duty and stem repair! Oh MAC, MAC!" He cried it in anguish, and MAC was the three-letter deity, origin shrouded in mystery, antiquity and a thousand conflicting legends, but perhaps it was merely a short saying of machine. "As you know, I was once of the proud Population Fixes," he bragged, recovering his composure somewhat. He let the bright buttons on his space jacket tighten as his chest heaved full and he took that special relaxed guardsman's stance in his glistening patent space high-tops. "My service, called Grinder Control, and more usually just the Grinders, was top glamour, there's no doubt. Now, let us pause here by this leaf to be mended and review my fall." They could but comply since he was a Captain for Spring Mending, in other words the straw boss of this grubby detail. The other three, in their less well-cut space jackets and their shorter boots of the fall from the lesser commissions, stood like sullen dogs. Had he come to crying on such shoulders? Oh yes!

"It was in autumn," he began. "A time for falling? YES! I had worked up through the advancements until now I commanded a big Grind-5, the largest and finest of the machines for controlling the populations, as you know. I had worked hard, and while in the ranks I thought I was 'proofed' against temptation. But perhaps the leisure of command gave me too much time." He looked down the rows of the leaves; he regarded the metal calyxes. He came back to the silent three, standing like sullen dogs still, but he knew they were enjoying not working. "Somewhere I softened!" He cried it in truest agony.

"It was in autumn, as I have said, but a bright day. It was one of the most beautiful automatic autumn days that we have ever had in this land, thanks to a strong administration in Central Season Control that year. The metal geese were moving-South, just right, with that special honk-squawk in their tapes; the leaves were all painted. There was a tang to the air, and once, calling up a far-back memory, I thought I smelled chilled apples on a tree, and I'm sure, unless my senses played me tricks, we rolled between two fields of metal pumpkins. Either I was dreaming or the Autumn Commissions had really gone all-out. But anyway, somehow I'm sure my senses received false stimuli and I softened."

The three stood abject and silent, still facing a broken leaf, and for a moment he even suspected they were sleeping. He wanted to rush to them and slap them until their faces broke. He wanted to pull their eyes out an extra inch, cup their ears to megaphones and set the three of them up on metal flowers to listen to him. He wanted to cry, "Regard! you ears and eyes and brains of blockheads who have fallen from nowhere, regard and respect a giant fallen to 'die' among you!" But they nodded after awhile, ever so slightly, all three of them, to show that they were still with him, and he let it go. "We were getting behind! They were increasing so fast! Maybe it was the strain of duty." And he remembered that black bright day.

"We had received a call to 'fix' a district, delinquent in the southern-west, a district so overcrowded that

the surplus people were starting to get in the way of the operation of the machines. My crew was chosen because we had the best record, measured in the only way such records can be measured, in pounds delivered to Central Meat. Our Grind-5 rolled out on those big balloon-ball wheels that day, quiet as a rubber cat padding through rubber leaves. We homed in on the delinquent district, all six-man crew of us, and I was the Captain. The decisions were mine!" His flat space-guard's stomach knotted in pain anew and fresh-remembered remorse was his for all the lost opportunity, all the fallen prestige, gone with everything those last four words implied: "The decisions were mine."

In the delinquent district, as he related, the preliminary work had already been done (as was usual) and the candidates for Grind were preselected, courtesy of the local administration. The victims were being held in a gray building of bare plastic walls reinforced by viciously barbed steel rods, and a shimmer of light all around the inside of the prison room, keeping prisoners well back from the walls, told where meshed knife blades whirled like banks of fans. Not a reassuring place in which to stand accused! NO! Presumably the people selected to go were those who had made the lesser contribution to living in a crowded land. They were the delinquents who, in the opinions of local officialdom, had not paid for their living space by inventing enough time-saver devices. As goes without saying, time-saver devices were the main obsession as people flaunted their space clothes and space blue prints and dreamed of the Conquest. Baffled and turned back still, they longed for the big Space Victory and went on filling a small crowded planet with petty gad-goes.

"But my course was plain that day in the southwestern district; I was the Captain and duty was routine. All I had to do was spring down in my black guard's boots and my space jacket colored like night, with all my achievement and extra poundage medals gleaming like stars, and salute the local dignitaries with the proper deal of snap and preciseness. Then my men would know what to do; they would set up to sausage the people who stood accused of not inventing enough gadgets. I would not have even to murmur the orders." He looked to the three not-listening dogs for a sign of sympathy and found none. But he did not care now.

"The rest is history. All of you know, have read how Blonk's Grind-5 stood for three full days idle in a delinquent southern-western district. While some of the best execution potential of all times - my crew - worked like women, searching through papers and records. Before grinding a single man! And how the poundage was under for that mission, and how the quota had to be revised in all the other districts, and how some men had to go to the Grind who were not listed by LOCAL DECISION. And of course you know, have read, have heard! how I was removed - Blonk, once the most awesome of all the Captains with the poundage record gleaming on his chest - drummed out! For what they called 'Unseemly vacillation and indecisiveness.' Oh, for one soul-struck moment, to lose all. What happened? MAC, MAC! what happened?"

He rushed over to the three sleeping knaves, who had fallen from lesser things, and he shook them to awareness. Blinking and yawning there in the gloom, there among the rootstocks, the metal leaves and the buds of the automatic season they were fixing, one of them said the cue, asked the question, and by a great strength of will he refrained from beating them with his green and red striped swagger stick loaded with lead. "What did you do?"

Again he relived that moment, that bright black day in the autumn season, and the autumn - nay! winter, as it turned out - of his glory. "The big Grind-5 was drawn up near the gates of the compound - polished to gleaming as befit the machine of the Grinder ace, he who had stormed the very gates of fame's splendor with his good records. My men were in their special blue uniforms of the ace crew of the Grind, with the unit citation in the form of a startling red jewel, shaped like a falling blood drop, pinned to their tunics. And I was in my high boots and the night-black garb of the Captain with the efficiency record gleaming in gold. What did I do!?"

"I strode down slowly from the Captain's turret that day, stood for awhile in the door to survey the autumn weather, drew myself up to my full height, my shoulders so broad then in my uniform in the time of my splendor, my chest so full and rib-sprung as to seem almost unreal. I stood looking at the local dignitaries and knew they were seeing a god. Then -" His mind surely reeled and almost faltered to blankness in recalling what he had done. Although it was clearly written that every Captain of Crew held the invested right, the thing was not a thing to be done. "After standing for awhile godlike before them and surveying the autumn metal, I patted my night-black gauntlets together in a moment of unseemly contemplation, walked leisurely down the ramp, saluted in a manner of calculated cynicism and then - and then I issued the strange terrible order!"

He looked at them and saw they were wide awake now and wide-eyed with fear, for, after twenty recitals, they knew when the story was ending. He rushed to them, and he started to beat them with his green and red striped swagger stick loaded with lead, as they expected him to do, as he always did in his wrath just before the end of the story. As he whacked them, they kept dutifully asking, hoping for easier blows, "What did you do - what was the strange terrible order?" But he did not answer at once; he was enjoying too much the bludgeon-blows he was raining down on these flinching and shivering men. After awhile each one lay in a fine pool of blood, gasping and miserable at the foot of some metal plant. And through the froth bubbles on each man's quivery lips it was evident that they were still framing the proper and dutiful question, as they knew they should do, as they knew he required of them, "What did you do - what was the strange terrible order?"

Then in that icy-calm-stillness which always followed his awesome display of wrath, he gave the cold-steel order for each prostrate and blood-soaked man to resume his feet and his stem-and-bulb duties at once. And as he moved to a table to fill out the required and proper forms for them each, after duty hours, to appear at Central Whip for punishment due ("for blood stains on uniform"), he answered their question, recited like litany the scope and terrible depth of his fall: "I once questioned LOCAL DECISION for fairness; I once issued the order for JUSTICE; I once dillydallied before grinding men." And as, idly, musingly, he wrote and underlined twice, heavily, on each man's proper form, the reason for punishment due at Central Whip - "Careless and excessive bleeding on uniform without proper cause" - Blonk suddenly knew he was cured. He had the hang of it again! By the great god MAC, if he could only get them to believe him up there! He was ready for topside and the world of MEN again!

[SURVIVAL PACKAGES](#)

Never before had a species faced with extermination prepared so elaborately for survival. All over the world they came up that spring, burst through our plastic yards, spread confusion around our Great Walls, even broke out in our very forts if that was where they happened to have been planted.

Our Warners were helpless out on the Early Line. They came from underground! We had to depend on the "ears" of our Strongholds for warning, and that meant the Boxheads were sometimes less than yards away at the first alert. The "ears" of my Stronghold are big velvety coneballs with millions of tiny reactors set in the cones. These hover in orbit - some dozens of them - over my fortress permanently, and they listen day and night for even the tiniest variation in the normal sound-buzz. When things are usual there is a quiet humming emanates from the gently-working mechanisms of the automation that serves me, and the cone-balls ride in their glinty majesty like big silvery eyes whirling, testing always for my safety. The

Warning Room sleeps quietly with the big screens empty then, and the megaphones gape silent. Then all is well.

But the day that crunching rending sound came from below! One of the cone-balls froze in its orbit and hung there sending the dread signal of invasion through the speakers in the Warning Room. I rushed all my available weapons men to the indicated place at once, and I brought the walking missiles down with great dispatch. I wheeled in the White Witch rockets and deployed them, and I thumbed back the doors where the hand bombs were, all as I had rehearsed it many times in my war games. On top of all this I opened the speaker tube to the demolition box in the Mountain of the Lost Hope Stand. In other words, in the ultimate contingency when all seems otherwise at length but really lost, I'll whisper the Word into the speaker tube, and that will signal the demolition box far away in the Mountain of the Lost Hope Stand. Then my fortress will blow - I, my enemy, everything. I do not intend to lose alone, you see.

The thing came through while we watched the spot under the warning cone-ball between my Tenth and Eleventh walls. With a crash like house sides falling, the floor of my fort lifted up between the two walls and, as the floor shattered, a square metal head, followed by massive shoulders and arms of what seemed tubular steel, came through a hole in the ground. It did not seem warlike, but who could know what the tricks, what the awful slyness and the terrible intents afoot in that box-shaped head? It squatted by the hole and dropped its hands inside. The hands, which were made of huge hinged rods, grasped something, and the tubular arms and shoulders heaved strongly until a capsule came through. The capsule was about the size of a one-man space boat, and in shape it was not much different, with the cylindrical form and beautiful lines of a sun rocket.

My weapons men stood nervous. All my metal parts clanked and zinged, and the flesh-strips holding me together flooded cold sweat. Though my entire fortress was alerted, and at a nod from me, I felt, this visitor and his capsule could be shattered, I was scared. I wanted to give the signal to blast him at once, yet something stayed me. Perhaps it was the way he worked, this Boxhead, so sure, so preplanned seeming, so inevitable. There is something chill, something particularly arresting about any behavior that proceeds without deviation, completely oblivious to surroundings and as though part of a destiny. When he had the full long length of the capsule out of the hole, he laid the ponderous object down gently on a level stretch of plastic. Then he went back to the hole, peered inside and seemed to be signaling. I grabbed two weapons men for support and stood with the horror beating about me. And then the second one climbed through, a carbon copy of the first Boxhead. They exchanged no word or greeting that I noticed, but turned at once to the capsule. After a short while of testing for center they went one to each end and, twisting opposite ways, gently they opened the capsule into two parts. From the front part of the halved capsule they extracted a cylinder of a clear wax-like substance containing what looked to be a misshapen flesh-colored ball with shriveled flesh-colored attachments. Working on without a pause in their peculiar hitch-jerky motions the two Boxheads found tools in the lower half of the-capsule with which to chip away the wax and free the strange shriveled object from its waxy bed. When they had the misshapen ball and its attachments like some small weird scarecrow of the Old Days full-length along the plastic, they returned to the lower half of the capsule and, hitch-jerky, inexorably, unstoppable-seeming, they extracted many smaller objects. With things from these smaller objects - fluids, pumps and gases - they went to work inflating the scarecrow form.

I watched them patiently. I let them alone. I was not scared now. Something old in my mind was remembering a year long ago when man had accepted Doomstime. I was young then, a mere child just starting to be conditioned by the blasting, when the "things" were planted down. But I remembered. YES! When the Boxheads were through I signaled them to bury the capsule, fix back the plastic yard sheets as best they could and go. I let them out through the Eleventh Gate into the void of our plastic-yard-sheet world, and deep in my flesh-strips I almost felt tears turn to rain as three things wandered away, two Boxheads and between them a weird plump scarecrow, dazed, blinking and, I

suspected, sore afraid.

And this went on all over the world that spring, in every quarter of our plastic globe. The Boxheads came through like flowers, one might say, like spring flowers used to come bursting up through the vulgar soil. Of course now, thanks to the bulb-bummers, we bloom flowers up through the lidded yard holes at a nod from the Central Commission for Beauty, pushbutton them up when it's time, and they nod on spring-metal stems in the plastic fields of summer until it's autumn.

But these - oh, so grimmer than flowers - were man's hope at Doomshour, planted away in the time capsules and swung between two powerful robots, sunk deep down in the earth and set in the tapes of the robots to come up after a sleep of a hundred years. All the lands of the earth had done this, that is all of the lands that were sophisticated enough in their sciences to have the robots, the timed tapes and the time capsules. Those that were not sophisticated went on lying in the sun on small islands, perhaps, or pattered about in the snow in far northern places, maybe, or slept in the jungles trees, not knowing or caring how unsophisticated they were, how out of the race they were, how terribly blank were their zeros in the great advancement of man. While the advanced ones, the sophisticated ones, after planting the capsules down, made last minute check on their blasters, thumbed the lids back from their silos, issued their ultimatums and sprang the war birds up, screaming, SCREAMING!! For the Great Five Minutes of War.

But somewhere and many-where's was blunder. Missiles wandered away and did not home in on their towns. Minds faltered at the critical second-of-GO-zero. Ships-Captains slid underseas in their crafts with the missiles and took stock of terrible choices, and some dilly-dallied. Manned warbirds found themselves somehow late at the right places of drop and at the wrong places early. And key men in command posts all over the world cracked just a little with the awesome weight of it all. In short, the beautiful, precision that was blueprinted to destroy the world in a clean five minutes of blasting was bungled.

Man, at his own funeral, was late and unsure and imprecise and unreliable, as usual. The Great Five Minutes, boggled, dragged on into Five Terrible Years, five years shaking the world with demolition. And man changed in those five years. And the world changed. You may even say there was progress. But - well...? Just say things moved... on.

Flesh and blood became commodities of the impossible past almost, what with all the pollution of the air, sea and soil. We "replaced" the human body after the Big Five Years, when we found flesh that was properly conditioned by explosions. Even vital organs could be replaced we learned, down to a minimal amount of the flesh-strip, or shored up and made to last with new-metal. We fed ourselves introgen, and it worked! Our small hard hearts became engines that drove a thin green blood through tube-miles in thin flesh-strips. Sentiment was soon quite gone from us, and our souls, if ever we had them, were surely now no more. But fears we retained - they were with us large and small and LARGE. YES! We kept normal fears and abnormal fears and normal desires and abnormal desires. We desired to live; we feared to die. We desired to kill; we feared to die. We defended ourselves. We did live!

After the Big Five Years only those could go on who had been revised of course. And our planet - we could part with much of it now. Being creatures of only a little flesh and blood we had small use for the seas and even smaller use for the air. We space-signaled the Martians our willingness to part with most of our atmosphere any time they found a way to space-lift it up to their place. And the bulk of the oceans would have been up for grabs except we might need them for certain minerals and to keep us balanced as we should be in the System. The polluted soil we of course covered - hills and valleys and plains - with cool white plastic. YES! Ours is a clean place now, except for the contaminated purplish air and the poisoned green-black seas, which we are freezing.

The plump scarecrows between the twin robots all over the world that year? Children! SURVIVAL CHILDREN! All of us remembered them when they came bursting up that spring, remembered how a chosen few million, their blood drained, their lives made dormant, had been planted away in the wax, like strange seeds, that time so long ago when man had accepted Doomshour. But we had forgotten them in the years since of our fears and our constant watchfulness. They were children, strange, from another century. We tried, but we found we could not help them. Their flesh had not been seasoned enough by the explosions. They would not fit into our Program. With their robots they wandered homeless over our white land, strange children born twice into a terrible place, confused, and a century out of their time, until death overtook them. And now only the robots wander, in strange twos, up and down; and sometimes, true to something punched in a metal brain long ago, you will see the twin robots carrying the complete bones of a child between them, wandering-wandering far and wide. And they go confused. It will pass. The metal punched in their brains must sooner or later give way. It was metal of a century ago. Then not even the robots will wander. And we will be left to only our own fears and only our own Deep thinking, each in our own fortress Walls, warily watching each other, half expecting a sneak fatal attack from a neighbor at any time, but "knowing" a massive overwhelming space-strike from some far galaxy may be our final fate, after all. But living! LIVING! And dedicated to the survival of man at all costs.

NEW-METAL

We called it new-metal and sometimes new-metal steel. Was it some sorcerer's dream come actual? pure magic turned true-real? or was it science all the way? I think it was some of all three, but mostly, and grandly! science-all-the-way. It was our god. It was the substance, really, of the Modern Dream, that and plastic. But plastic was not magic. Plastic was mundane. Plastic was merely the workhorse everyday foundation that gave our earth-ball its tough gray pearly hide of sterilized beauty for us to stride on.

But new-metal steel was us, so much of the bulk of us, the moving living substance of the Dream that had Time standing back, Time with its scythe blade broken, Time with its white flag up, head-hung, death-beaten on the silent Field of Surrender. Yah! new-metal man, give old Time a kick! New-metal would never become as living flesh, OH NO!, and that was well, for our strength and our durability were mainly founded on our lack of flesh and our abundance of "replacement." New-metal steel had this main wonderful wonderful quality. Up in the big-engine parts of us, where were housed the mighty apparatuses of our existence-the lungs, the heart, the guts big and small, the liver, the kidneys and all the rest-new-metal could fuse with the flesh and "replace" us down to a minimum of flesh-strip holding our forms in shape and keeping us linked to the human. The mighty-engine parts of our existence, placed in this flesh-strip and new-metal housing, were simply, in the parlance of the day, implants. They were new-metal everlast engines - the flexi-flex new metal lungs, the bang-boom heart with the changers, the kidneys With the vapor drain, and all the rest. The legs and arms, the feet and hands were new-metal too, but with a different ratio of new-steel. When we flailed by with our arms clanging, our steel boots on our steel feet moving over the plastic, ta-rap ta-rump ta-rump tump tumpa tump , no one and not anything questioned our passage. Yah! new-metal man, the living moving substance of the Dream come actual.

Oh, we could have been all weapons men, and that easily, those meaningless mechanical apparatuses that looked and walked and talked like men but were no more than metal monsters, though necessary and most useful to our plan. Most wonderful in a way they were, efficient and brave in invasion, tenacious

and utterly implacable in a siege, and not at all inclined to cut and run or give up hope when outnumbered and under fire from far out; or close in, being surrounded and pounded, they stood their ground well enough. Yah! new-metal monsters, our wonderful weapons men.

But we were MEN! and a gulf of cosmic distance swung between and was the difference that existed between a new-metal monster and a new metal man. When our beautiful plans for war went alive in the world and roared aloft in tangible reality - the White Witch rockets firing, the wow bombs grandly falling, the wreck wrecks trajectoring, the missiles far and wide homing and all the other hardware of our Joy-at-War beautifully functioning - we knew what we were doing. We lived, we felt, we responded to the emotions of it all. But the weapons man did not. He was simply a cold lump at plain killing, an unfeeling clod at general carnage, and as for the destruction and flattening of Strongholds he brought to that game none of the warm human emotions at all. Blah! New-metal monster, you weapons man, you have no soul at all!

So, though we could all have become, and easily - through our sciences - mechanical men, with engines in us that would have talked and smiled and swore for us, that would have made all the human gestures far and wide for us and that would have been able to repair themselves and build their kind all new for us, what would all that have proved? It would have proved that man had developed a very clever and sophisticated batch of science know-how indeed. And for sure!

But we didn't want it that way. Fists knotted at the sky, eyes all wild and hammers pounding the earth of our base and our subjection, we did not want it that way. By God, we'd take God into custody with our efforts and our cUnning ways as men. We'd see Him bow, hear Him cry out, "My children have outdone me! While I slept away, they have moved each to a godhood of his own, everlasting and timeless all! My work is done."

OF HAMMERS AND MEN

I always carried one; I had them in every size. I had the special everyday-war size, one that I carried two at a time, each on either side, slung down, low and handy-down easy, like old gunfighter guns just nudging the tips of my steel fingers where they swung when I, plop-plip-plap-plop, walked over the homeless plastic. Then I had the little friendly size, the dress-up Sunday size, I guess we would have said in the Old Days, a compact somewhat inconspicuous thing that I carried one at a time in my steel Sunday belt and which would, if necessary, and swung right, slice a small bit of a man down, a bit about the size of half an ordinary man's face. It would not do, as you can see, for heavy disagreements. But for a Sunday stroll it was, I thought, jUst fine. Then I had, and inevitably we must come to this, my war hammer, the special offense-defense instrument, a device that came apart, had spare parts, and could be fitted and adjusted to the occasion. I carried a cart load of these in a special-tracked vehicle called, after the Old Day's weapons carrier, the hammer carrier, and had ten weapons men to sponsor these when I passed through heavy country. In a Truce Time!

YES! let it be known, they gave wide berth to The Hammer. Even on a Sunday they ("my friends") usually waved only from the tops of hills or from other and sundry wide distances, and that usually upon the point of just separating away.

JUST THE WAY iT SHOULD BE. COULDN'T HAVE BEEN BETTER. YAY! FOR THE

HAMMER.

And sometimes in a kind of celebration I would make a heap of all my hammers, the Stronghold would be emptied, every nook and cranny would be outsearched for them and my weapons men would come carrying hammers to make that lovely mound of thousands of these in orange. And while the Big-Punch missiles swung slow and easy in the launch slings and all the other dread devices of my dominance and danger rested dormant for a Truce, I'd dance around my hammers, the tripping, but necessarily heavy, dance of the wonderful new-metal man.

Why hammers? Why the celebration? Two reasons, and perhaps more. One reason, and perhaps the most enjoyable - when I had my shriek-orange hammers all out, mounded on display and I dancing around them, with all my weapons men polished and drawn up for a review, there was no doubt that a shudder went through all the neighboring Strongholds that viewed this as symbolic and a preparation, as some great American Indian Chief of the Old Days might hold a war dance, with his face painted, just prior to Scalp Harvest.

YES! another reason. To me bladed hammers are quite emblematic of a considerable quantity of all man's great progress to his GREAT TOP place of today. Take away the cutting and pounding, implicit in the symbolic cutting hammers, my own special symbol, and, without it, see how much would be forever given away. Left out! Have we not cut and pounded (and fitted) our ways to the top? YAY! cutters, pounders and fitters, give old defeat a kick. You've won the game!

And on the TOP what happens? We sit there and kick our heels of steel at all the world. On TOP we snarl. We dare them to come get us. We lay plans to go for them. It is all conflict. The living time of man is conflict and essentially nothing else. The living time of any life is conflict and essentially nothing else. By even the littlest wriggle into the most rudimentary "becoming" of life the substance that wriggles had issued the biggest challenge of all up to the universe. This substance that wriggles has designed to be able to get up and move itself across its environmental space and place, all against the meant stability-instability of its environmental home. Even a tree and even the smallest smallest plant struggling toward the sky fit this. In other words a new and VERY STRANGE force had entered the seethe and writhe and twist and change of the cosmic dead things that moved to their own Lawed pattern. Life truly is the outlaw, the cosmic maverick, and, being so, its time must be forever a fleeing of the dread sheriffs of dead-substance laws, those constables of the dead laWed order-disorder of the Universe that could not have foreseen this VERY STRANGE accident.

So we (THEY, our wonderful science-men) have picked up the VERY STRANGE accident (life) at its highest development (man) and have turned it to its ultimate durability, which is the eternity-durability of new-metal man. YES! We (THEY) caught it just in time, those science-men. How lucky we to have had those top-dog giants waiting in the labs at that grand time in history to pick up the VERY STRANGE accident (life) at its ultimate flesh-needs development (man) and freeze it for all times. YAY! good science plan, take your bows now, you good old Saviour Men, you've won the game for sure.

Now, to turn tedious for a time, this is what happened. Flesh-man had developed to that place on his random Earth-ball home where it was to be the quick slide down to oblivion. All the signs were up, the flags were out for change for man and the GO was DOWN. To ENDING. Flesh-man was at the top, far as he could climb as flesh-man, and from there he was certainly due to tumble. But he had. the luck to have these brave good white-maned men in the white smocks, the lab giants, the shoulders, and great-bulged thighs of our progress (what matter if they were weazened, probe-eyed, choleric, scheming, little men sometimes more often than not, REALLY?!) authors of so much of man's development and climb to that place where he was just due to die, expire, destroy himself and his home. These great good lab giants then froze man and his Earth-ball home at this grand stage of development to make new-metal

man and set him in the Strongholds upon the plasto-coated Earth that had once been man's random and inefficient home. New-metal replaced the flesh (down to the few flesh-strips and those, we hope, may soon be gone) the bones were taken out and new-metal rods, hinges and sheets put in (it was easy) and the organs all became engines and marvelous tanks for scientifically controlled functional efficiency forever. YAY! Don't you see?! Our scientists made of life-man (the VERY-STRANGE-accident man) essentially a dead-elements man, one who could now cope with eternity, but he certainly was not a dead man. AH! heavens no! He was alive! with all the wonderful science of the Earth ages, and just as functional as anyone could wish. YAY! science, take your plaudits now! You've shown what was meant from the beginning for the VERY-STRANGE-accident man.

But I imagine God stands stunned at your successes, your versatility, not to mention your audacity. And if God should happen to be dismayed and displeased too much, I further imagine you could just dismiss him, write him out of the sky, pull his plugs, as it were. You then could make your own very personal God, out of rods and sheets and those wonder chemical changes you are so capable of, as, for instance, the brain pans of man. But who needs a God, other than "our god," that massive stick of new-metal placed, when Moderan was very new, on the great plastic plain of the Dream Realized? We're all gods now, or parts of - new-metal gods! I stand a-tiptoe in my optimisms now and I touch all the stars. We've got it made, you good old leaned-down dogs, you relentless racers of scientific knowledge, you keen thin blade-sharp minds of elemental thought, you keen kings, you lab technicians! I thank you for the death of my "life" (my poor-flesh weaknesses) and I commend you for the resurrection of my essence in steel. You kept the main essence of man - man the fighter - and now we'll prove that good hard worth through all eternity. WE'LL FIGHT! We'll fight each other. We'll make harsh monsters, set them loose and fight such monsters across all our space. We'll move with engines and hard, programmed thoughts. We'll make all manner of dragons for our involvement, and we'll overcome them. For we'll program the conquests a little more carefully than we'll feed in the threats. But mostly we'll just fight each other - each other and ourselves, the truly tireless enemies.

AH SCIENCE! AH MAN! AH ETERNAL STRIFE, life of our life. In Moderan...

THE STRONGHOLD

The Stronghold - under its steel roof hangs all that we are meant. It is a place that corners off the mind, new-metal mind. Some days I tour my Stronghold and that is all I will do, just gloating on the power that I own and the indestructible presence that it and I comprise. From the top down she is wonder, fixed in steel-concrete and new-metal steel. She is protection. She is threat. She is "don't tread on me" but "I definitely WILL tread on you!" You cannot trust a Stronghold unless you are in it and it is yours. Then you can trust a Stronghold. The tours will be enjoyable then, from the top down, from the bottom up.

As you perhaps do not know, my Stronghold is walled cylinders tipped with cones, the tops of which stick far far up toward where heaven is not, nor ever was, although once thought to be, yes, strongly thought to be! Atop the tips my flags stack up like challenges, like chins stuck out, like threats, like braggadocio, like accomplishments. They are all these. And more. They are the coal black pennons emblazoned with the glowing-glinting-gleaming number 10. And sometimes, in a manufactured wind, when they all fly and flap it is a show!

Other than the glowing-glinting-gleaming number 10 there is on the pennons one decoration and one

only, a cruel, big-bladed war hammer in shrieking orange. It is a tool to pound the world down and, while pounding, slice it.

2064, OR THEREABOUTS

He was just a tall spot moving slow out of the Down Provinces when first I picked him up on the Warn. But he came on dogged and inexorable until he stood dour and spent seeming, frowning at my armored gates, the noon sun of a sun-flashing day glinting upon his sheathed face.

I allowed him through my gates one by one, when the weapons report and all the decontaminators signaled he was clean, and I saw that his heart was exposed as well as some of the gears activating the breath bags. There were tatters of flesh, and torn metal, over half of his upper shell. It was as though some giant claw, I thought, had ripped him across the chest in some accidental quick encounter. Or more it was, I thought, like a madman might work and rip at himself after some long time of frustration.

"You're hurt!" I impulsively said, a strange compassion working through me as I stared into his rusted sorrowing eyes.

"NO!" he said, putting down the small easel he carried, "not the way that you think I am hurt. The heart works well still, and the covering being off the gears of the chest does not slow them one whit. But I am hurt, deep-wounded, daily killed by the long unrewarded years of looking, not finding." He dropped his head forward then and his shoulders were bent, and I knew enough about burdens to know that he had one. "Each of us seeks for his own view of the Dream," he went on, "each in his limited way, each to his own degree of time-spent-in-searching looks for his Ultimate. Mine has been almost a total involvement, and the years seem growing late now, mine and the world's. That's why when you saw me, though perhaps I did not seem to be, I was speeding. I was up almost to total maximum with my hinges and braces working, oh, I was on the trail of the Dream again, hotly. Coming down here"

"But why" I stammered, "why have you, an artist, come to this place of an obvious involvement in strength, a citadel of real firmness? I suppose you are en route?"

"NO!" He snapped his head up, the old shoulders straightened and the white metal strings in his beard trembled. His head shook on the spring-strips in his neck. "No, I am not en route, except in that larger sense that we are always en route as we wander here and look here. But I hope I am Here now, arrived. I hope I have found - after this to wander no more the Long Search."

"I - I don't understand." In my general uncertainty and surprise I trembled more than I meant to. Instinctively I looked to the better positioning of weapons men and edged a little nearer a steel sentry who stood nearby. "This is no artist's colony," I blurted, "nor an old painter's rest home. This is a working Stronghold, and we hold no dances for maimed Dream Seekers here. I would hope not to have to be unkind."

He ignored my words almost entirely. "Through the Down Provinces," he continued, "word spread of a most wonderful armed place by the plastic land of the steel dogs near the Valley of Witch. A man was in a citadel there, according to rumors passed round, a New Processes man of New Processes Land, replaced, metal-shored, flesh-stripped to the very minimum of flesh allowable for mortal man. That man

sat serenely living, month in month out, years long, decades long, never influenced by family or friend or enemy, completing his great self through the days of his living, really living a Life. Surrounded by so many security devices and Walls and all the Wonderful Appliances of the Sciences that serve and nourish mankind in this year of Our Discoveries, 2064, he lounged like a superb nut, a giant seed in a great shell, ripening day by day to new Meanings. After wandering life-long, frantically, the fear-tossed world and not finding - well, to see such beautiful calm - and Life-Meaning - I must before I die!

"Yes, I have been of the wanderers," he talked on, "the lost and searching wanderers, who sometimes never find because we pick, to look for, a Dream too shining to ever be." He plucked a small raveling piece of metal loose from his malleable nose. "Yes, they replaced me, metal-alloyed me, gave me there at the last mostly a mechanical metallic heart, one perhaps as faultless and smoothworking as yours or your great master's. But I was never content to go behind some weapons and a Wall to live with the Wonderful Appliances. In short, I could never quite find my place in the stability of the New Processes society. Something writhed unfed, always.

"Frantically it seems I was always chasing the wind to the edges of frightening bottomless caverns of Despair, while such as your great master, with what must have been a surer grasp of The Values, slipped with effortless beautiful calm into the chair of The Dream. I have longed to make some enduring monument; I have hungered after the Great Painting; ever haunted by questions I have tried throughout a long failure to express the Life-Meaning, the essence of YOU and ME. And now, changing my course a little, I have come to do it as a single portrait, one of your great firm master calmly in his chair! Right here in this Stronghold!"

More than a trifle alarmed now I looked at the gauntness of him where he stood trembling, his rusted metal flexing, sending up small squeaks and screams. And I noted how his flesh-strips with the years had gone all wrinkled and sere. There was a stench about him of old grease in the hinge joints, and certainly he needed an oil bath to brighten his metal shell. What poor specimens profess to our greatest dreams and questions, I reflected. This smelly vagrant, I thought with the greatest contempt, peasant-robot-thing, probably doesn't have a single Wall or weapons man to his name, and yet he staggers addle-waddle over the countryside, with his easel and paint brushes, talking about his Ultimate, talking about Meaning. As though such as he had any right to question and conjecture! But when his rusting eyes with all their piercing sorrow looked into mine again, I felt a queer watery feeling, that was not fear, flood through my flesh-strips. "Perhaps you have not had your introven," I said. "Perhaps you have food-hunger." I went for a needle and a cup of the special fluid that serves to nourish our flesh-strips, that small part of mortality the Rebuilders have had to leave between metal and metal, even here in Moderan.

When I came back he was lying along the floor, looking like the small beginnings of an interesting stack of scrap steel. His hands were over his face, the fingers spread, and except his eyes gleamed through his fingers like two brown fires, I would have thought him entirely "done with it all." With the snap of a rusty spring he came to a sitting position. "I do not wish to dine," he said. "I am quite well and strong, really. It's just that so near to Dream's find, to trail's end, to final realization one grows a little fluttery in the dream bag, a little tight in the think box, oh God! oh God! A kind of tightening around the mind cups it is; a kind of great hammering of the heart that has waited so long comes on. And a throbbing beats just under the gears of the eyes to make one see phantom wings. One feels suddenly tired and close to death on the brink of the Great Jubilation. That's why I lay down."

He stood erect, just unfolded up from the floor with a snap of all his joints. In some ways it reminded me of an way they do when spring comes round to Big Calendar and someone thumbs the switch to Green Things in Season Control. "Take me to him," he cried, "for it grows late, late in my years as well as old in the years of the automatic tree coming out of the plastic earth-shell, the world. Let us waste no more time. Take me to your great master, that man who sits living like a great firm nut, a splendid seed, the

earth's finest fruit, ripening in the hull of his Walls, guards and guns. His Meaning I would record; such an adaptation, such a fearless calm in the face of the ever-lurking Disaster is surely the Beauty I have sought."

Unfortunately, at that juncture I had one of my panic times. Certain wheels had spun round, the slots had been spread, and in my mind now it was time for my cowardice. While he stood there waiting to be conducted to the Great Calm Face, I passed totally into the Trembly Country of Fear, my own personal Nation of Dread. While he stood watching, wondering, I went completely into my Cycle of Anguish, and I could not help how it was. I trembled violently; metal parts clanked and zinged; my face steel became so gaunt and distorted that metal-complaint started up a high shriek-and-whine. I started wildly to think of all the happenstance things that might befall me and my fort. Though the sound-buzz was constant now, meaning that all was well in the Wonderful Appliances that often served me so well, how long would it be so? Let a wheel falter a thousand miles away, let a shaft break where a billion phantom buckets dropped uncountable billions of power droplets upon a blade, upon a thousand blades, and lights would blink, the wonderful buzz would go scratchy, and my fort would cough and catch its breath and flounder like a bent-down sick old man. And the sun! What of the sun, the giver of all? The sun burns up! The sun falls out of the sky! A bigger sun comes flying flaming out of the Great Yon and burps and my sun is wafted away, or even it eats my sun, opens up like some great boa mouth and gulps a small flaming egg. Fears, Fears, FEARS! In my personal cycle, far in the Kingdom of Dread, I think of all the fears, fears founded, fears unfounded, fears old, fears new, fears not before dreamed up perhaps by any man. An attack! a space launch from far-off dangerous old Mars! Some strange metal-rot works all unknown, unsuspected, in my hinge joints for years! I fall into chaos and parts. Suddenly. What else is there but fears ever for any reasonable man? What? WHAT?

When I came back to a calmer place and found somehow the small firm Fortress of Hold in my groping mind I saw how he waited and stared. A pounding as of hammers on huge steel tubes filled my metal ears then; wave on wave of shame washed up from my mortal strips. I clung to two steel men and braced my feet hard on a pillar of iron fitted around marble slabs. Fighting hard I managed to meet the intensity of his gaze. "There's no one here but me - I swear," I finally said, "I'm master here. I'm the one you would paint! Shall we move to my calmness chair?"

For a moment too intense to measure in the long hurling on of Time the brown balls of his eyes seemed awash in his battered head. His face steel wrinkled and screamed, the white threads of his beard trembled as if a sharp wind passed through. I watched the Dream finally die in the iron face of a man, and being what I was there was no thing I could do. "I'm sorry," I heard him say as from some immeasurably great distance, and I felt something of how sorry he really was for us all.

After awhile he left, clutching his empty unused easel in a kind of greater desperation, it seemed - out through all the launchers and the Walls, the weapons tracking him, and seeing him go I felt I was watching a Dream at the very end of its road. He reeled toward the plastic valley of the steel dogs, and I went deeper into my complex to take me a calmness bath, and later I aimed to try with new nerve-strip rays to stay that trembling that had started up again all through my flesh-and-steel shell. Later I heard how he was met at the edge of the Valley by a little masquerade new-metal dog carrying the barest of plastic bones marked THIS FOR THE MEANING SEEKER. Of course it was a wide joke sent up from the Palace of the Witch, and that was why the air over the White Valley was suddenly alive with big clown-faced. balloons and the long guns of laugh salvoing out a full Ho-ho salute. The masquerade dog, the gears and the punched cards in his head working perfectly, backed carefully away while the artist examined his bone. Handling it in other than the one prescribed way, of course, the artist caused the mined bone to explode, and his heart and colors and empty easel, as well as his metal shell and the few flesh-strips he owned, for a moment joined the Ho-ho salute and the big-balloon clown carnival high over White Witch Valley.

Considering his high seriousness, as well as the intensity of his try, it did seem, even to me, a most unsatisfactory way for him to go.

PENANCE DAY IN MODERAN

So the announcement went out by leaflet from Central that early-season day: ANNUAL SERVICES OF PENANCE - BRING TEARS.

It was just coming April when we moved through our fortress Walls and on out to the parade grounds of green plastic-all the great Stronghold masters of solemn-procession assembling. The vapor shield was white that day, with narrow strips of red strung through the sky, which strips we were reminded were of the ancient color of blood. And some of us could remember, though our blood is pale green now as, driven by our ever-last hearts, it hammers through our flesh-strips to nourish not only the flesh-strips but also to lubricate the new-metal alloy "replacement" and joints hinging flesh to steel.

We were a strange crew under a strange vapor shield that day, with the tin birds up from Central filling the ersatz sky, and the trees popping out of the yard-holes and bursting forth tin leaves of bright green as we passed. We hobbled toward the east, plop-plip-plap-plop over the glistening plastic, sometimes in ragged order by twos, for we were supposed to be in procession, but more often in huddles and lumps and knots of great masters fumbling toward the east as we struck rough ground, for we were not good at walking. Sometimes I wondered if Central did not do this each year just to humiliate us, and also to renew our faith in our Strongholds, for out of our Strongholds we, the great ones, are nothing.

Being Stronghold 10 I walked by Stronghold 9, when I was properly in procession. Stronghold 9 is situated my nearest most-adjacent enemy, and it was strange to be there so friendly-walking him, steel elbow to steel elbow, each with our tears dangling and jiggling in little plastic bags swung down from our new-metal hands. He was taller than I, but not so massive, and for one flesh-strip tingling moment of purest hate I felt sure that if it came to a stand-up go between us I could take him down with my two bare hands. But that was silly, of course, because we do not war that way in Moderan. It's always just a matter of lying back at our panels and letting go with the launchers, seeing the walking doll bombs roll, hearing the Honest Jakes scream by and letting the high-up weird shrieking Wreck-Wrecks home down to the kill. So when the moment passed and I did not hate him closely, or want to take him down with my two bare hands, I said, "Greetings, Stronghold 9. In next week's war I have some surprises for you. My Corps of Experimentation, you know -" I left it dangling, and he turned to me a sour face that was made more gruesome because it included a flesh strip nose, a big and what was surely a family hallmark one that he had elected to keep. Most of us had long ago elected to take the new-alloy all-metal nose, because it was usually better shaped, withal more efficient and obviated cleaning problems. His little new-metal eyes fixed on me with unmasked hate. "So that's why you have such a small bag of tears for the Day of Penance," he suggested, his voice toned to ridicule. "On the Week of Atonement, instead of making tears, you prepared a blaster!"

"My bag of tears is adequate," I said. "I am adequate in all things, as you know. And considerably better than adequate in those things on which we are scored."

He turned away and burned, seethed with a rage, I knew, because I had told him right. I was the

acknowledged mean-master of our province, my Stronghold with more major wars certified in the Book of Wars than any other Stronghold in our sector. Each year I received the Medal of Wars with my Stronghold number on it and the year engraved in gold. I dangled the latest one carelessly as we walked. "Next week," I said as though talking to nothing in particular, "next week!"

Then we were caught in a jumble of masters as we hit rough ground again, straining hard in our hinge joints to walk with metallic precision, but finding it hard to go at all in our flesh-strips and steel parts, being not really designed for walking but more designed for sitting in war rooms of Strongholds and pressing the buttons of launchers. When we unscrambled I was walking by Stronghold 2.

Stronghold 2 was a very young master, as such things are reckoned in Moderan. He had not had his flesh-strip ratio firmed and his Stronghold awarded him longer than ten years. But we had had some dandy wars in that time, he and I, and he was certified in the Book as a comer. He was about my size and build, and I liked the open look of his face and the way his wide-set new-metal eyes regarded all things with a stare of reliable hate. A man to count on. But though I did not hate him more than the good clean necessary hate of our times, I decided to give him the needle, just for the fun of it. "Greetings, Stronghold 2," I said. "Next week I expect to have my new blaster ready to go on the line. It's a really new break-through in pulverization. My Corps of Experimentation, you know -" I let it dangle for awhile, while he walked on chewing his thoughts. "Let's see," I said after a bit, pretending to ruminate, "I believe - yes, I'm sure - they've assigned you and me to a Go. Next week."

He turned those wide-set good eyes at me and said in a level voice, "We war, I know - next week."

"Yes, we war." Then I nudged his chest flesh-strip sharply with the point of my steel elbow in a friendly way and said, "You have not much to lose. You are a young Stronghold and have not much tradition. They probably assigned you to me and my new blaster because they want your plot smoothed down for a proposed museum of trees."

"When they make yard-holes for trees in the plot where my Stronghold stands, your Walls will be not even remembered dust." He looked at me full and steady with his new-metal eyes then. "I thought we could get along," he continued, "have nice wars and all. I see I was fooled. But I guess this new invasion principle I've worked out -" And he left it there, hanging. We hobbled on in silence, toward the east. I liked this guy.

When we arrived at the place of the ceremony, I found I was alongside Stronghold 20, an ancient man of no more than passable record at war, and I, by hurrying, had just time to threaten him well-and-plenty with my new blaster. Then the ceremony started, and a most humiliating thing it was, as always. A little point-face man in a black robe, who was reputed to be able to live with ten per cent less flesh-strip than any Stronghold master, got up and told us the long dreary story about why the sky had red stripes for this day, what red blood was, how lucky we were not to have it, and all the tedious dull details of how we had come safely through a time when love and all the unreliability of it had tried to dominate man's thinking. Then it was just a matter of listening to recordings of hate music for what seemed hours on end and between record changes hearing the little guy in the black robe rant at us about our duty to start the spring season, truly the beginning of the year, off with some really significant blasting.

When the last strident jumping note of the hate music had died away into the red-striped vapor shield and the embarrassing silence had settled over the vast amphitheater it was time for the most earnest act of our humiliation. We were to march, single file, to the central dais where stood a tall black vessel and deposit our tears there. We went in the reverse order of our rank for the past year of blasting, which put me in our overall humiliation proudly last, as I alone had the War Medal for my greatness. It was an awesome and proud moment when I stood alone on the platform in all my past accomplished glory and

dumped in my plastic bag of tears, as a symbol that even I, as man can never be, had not been perfect. The ceremonial tears, manufactured to exacting specifications in our Strongholds as an act of deepest humility, were a kind of penance for things we hadn't done, blasters we hadn't come up with, invasions we hadn't made.

When the last of my tears had trickled into the vessel, the point-face man, enraptured now, standing by a control box at a far wall, pressed a button which caused a dark figure of truly magnificent features of reliability and hate to rise slowly out of the black vessel as though floated from terrible degradation on our penance tears. Then a second button was pressed to blast him high-skyward into the white, red-stripped vapor shield as a symbol of our risen hopes and dedication to being better haters. It was, as always, the solemn high moment of our humiliation and penance, ending on a note of hope for our atonement and greater worthiness in war. Now we had before us of the day's events only the tedious and vexing hard walk home, which we, now that the ceremony was over, could do as stragglers.

On the way back I plotted to walk for awhile with most of the Stronghold masters I hadn't walked with on the way over. I dangled my War Medal nonchalantly and told them in an offhand way of my new blaster (which I didn't really have at all) and talked of the good wars we had coming up with each other. Some shuddered noticeably in their flesh-strips and "replacements" while the others bluffed it out and told me of new blasters they were about to come up with and new theories of invasion and breaching of walls. All of us were bluffing, I felt sure, but it was a good idea and didn't hurt a thing to exchange threats on this day, and withal I felt this had been a really successful pilgrimage of tears and truly a good sendoff for the great spring season of war.

STRANGE SHAPE IN THE STRONGHOLD

It was to be a usual busy-busy day in the Stronghold, I thought, as I seated myself at the switch panel and glanced at the first part of my day-circle graphed and racing on the wall. I had sent some of the "boys" down to Lower Quarters to hack away at Special Worries, others were due for "replacements" and must be scheduled to Operations for the sawing out of the flesh and the fusing in of the "replacement" new-metal alloy, and still others, who had completed their "replacement" course and had hacked away at Special Worries for enough time to be thinking clean, must pack little Go-Now bags for departure into Middle Moderan.

Out of no sense of duty, and for the amusement of it all - in case you're wondering - I'm using my Stronghold now as a training and "replacement" depot for lucky refugees from the Old Life in Far Wide. When they flee the Moral Know and blast in all flesh-blood-eagerness for their Joy and the forever-life of Automatics I set up their program straight away; standing no nonsense I let them know right off that they will be "replaced" with new-metal alloy right down to a minimum of flesh-strip holding them in shape. (The whole idea of our behavior and endurance in Moderan, it seems to me, is workable only through our great "replacement" program. I can think of no other way.) Should they show a conscience trend or come complete with moral-sense mental block trailing them like a black anchor dragging sand from the Old Life, I arrange for a Special Worries and a Slogans Course to set them thinking clean. In other words, I change these flesh-humpy, moral-quibbler slobs from Far Wide into lean clean citizens who can pack a Go-Now bag and slip into Middle Moderan to be part of the Program.

Mid-morning I lounged at the panel, very relaxed, and watched my day-circle still racing its schedule on

the wall. I pulled a bit of air into my flexy-flex new-metal lungs and heaved a little gasp of utter satisfaction. Hard work, I thought, this changing slobs into lean clean citizens for the Program, but worth it. What a Joy to be in Moderan away from the mental clutter of the Moral Know and the heavy sand-drag anchor of conscience. And what an added Joy to be able to contribute to the Program and send my lean disciples into the middle of Joy Land, knowing that they, conscience-freed and moral-cleared, can blast a Wall down or hammer a neighbor's head flat with the best of them.

But it must not be all work for the master. No! He must have his Joy too each day or he cannot stay properly moral-cleared for his conscience cutting and the block blasting. When the thin wedge of my day-circle colored up Rllax-Time Special-Joys Period, I swiftly ran a mental thumb through my range of choices. Among other things, I could match-fight the new-metal kitten and the diamond-tooth tiger cub again for my Rllax-Time amusement. What a contest that usually made! I could destroy a piece of a new neighbor's Wall, perhaps, and desk fight him till all the "limited" destruction buttons of my Stronghold were thumbed to ON and all the air was filled with ugly shrieking havoc and the walking missiles were racing for his moat. What Joy! Or I might take the Statue Woman out from under the bed-the blonde and blue-eyed Miss Statue Woman out from under the bed!!!

Just as I had about settled on the latter as the top choice for my Joys, and the pale green blood in my flesh-strips was just starting to thicken and sing, as it always does when I think closely of the curves and hinges of the blue-eyed blonde Miss Statue Woman, who is my new-metal mistress, I, with the instinctive caution of the successful long-term refugee from destruction, turned to my Viewer. Because once I am with my blue-stared lady and have thumbed her life switch to ON there is no turning back for me. Not even to save my Stronghold am I sure I could stop once my pale green blood has thickened and she is looking at me-blue eyes, dear blue metal eyes!

But blast; oh, ultimate Big Wreck irritating Joy-killer blast! A last sweep of the Viewer before I could turn to Joys caught an Approach. The plains of Far Wide were dormant and safe, oh true; all White Witch Valley lay quietly sleeping with no movement at all breaking the patterns of sparkles emptying constantly skyward from that iron and plastic place. But the corridors of Folly Man! From there was bloomed a shape! It came on as I put the Miss Statue Woman completely out of my mind and settled to the grim business of survival. I thumbed all my weapons to Alert-Ready, put my weapons men on Stand-By. And I stood there trembling; in the middle of my eleven walls I died the little fright-deaths, as I always do when something is coming in to get me.

It was a vague shape. It walked upon the screen; it danced upon the screen. It struggled at times, it seemed, to be a shape at all. I worked with the tuner; I tried to sharpen him in; I tried to get dimensions. He came on, dancing, disappearing, appearing, but ever nearing in down the tight corridor between White Witch Valley and the blue-mist plains of Far Wide. My flesh-strips were raining cold sweat, my Warner was on and off, my weapons men were vibrating where they stood in doubt and I was clanking and tinkling against everything that I touched. My blood was so thin and watery now with apprehension, and I was so bent on saving myself at all costs, that I'm sure if the Miss Blue-Eyes could somehow have risen out from under the bed and turned her life switch full to ON and kissed me I would have remained as cold as old graves. But my Stronghold stood, all eleven Walls of it, high and adamant-thick, like a great iron-stone arsenal in the midst of threats wavering in.

I lost him completely. I swept the perimeter; I tuned again and again through the full range; I sent my Ultimate Contingency antennas high-skyward on their balloons. I tried everything; he was not there. And finally I did all that I knew to do. My "boys" were out there, some of them, with their little Go-Now bags, headed for their place in Middle Moderan. I knew that. But finally I did all that I knew to do. And when I am my real true self, normal and thinking clean, I would do this thing to forestall danger to me even if my blonde blue-eyed Miss Statue Darling were out there, all her charms flash-dazzling, her life switch full to

ON, in front of my first blasting gun. With me, it's survival first, then Joys.

I rushed to that little room of thick-wall steel and lead, and there, amidst the rubber pads and the walls lined with cork-and-velvet puffs I handed the big orange switch to ON. It was, of course, the end for everything - my "boys" out there, birds, vegetation, stray mutants wandering the homeless plastic, spring-metal "wild" flowers bloomed by Season Control to soften the barren truce land - everything within a hundred miles and more swept clean, destroyed, unless behind the defenses of a Stronghold or in White Witch Valley. When I arose from the cork-and-velvet couch, where I had flung myself face-downward with steel fingers in my ears to lessen the shock from the weapons, and came out into the living space, I felt a great exhilaration. I always feel toned up after a Maximum Fire. It seems to me the ultimate great accomplishment of man, this release of great forces he has learned to control for his protection, to safekeep himself from his enemies, all other men. What else has man -?

And then I saw him! Standing over by the control bank of one of my Little Wrecks, a light missile of limited range, but almost ultimate destruction (I use it in war games with my toughest near neighbors), he was not looking at any of the dials. He was looking at - well - have you ever gone down a long tight corridor of mirrors in the Old Life after a long time of Special Bad? If you have, you will know. He was looking at me! Strange-eyeballed, evaluating, staring, he seemed to accuse. I was looking back, straight into his look, and suddenly knew, like knowing the signs of a flesh-strip dying, that nothing would do any good. I thought of Big Din, when I press buttons and a hell of noise breaks out all over my Stronghold; I thought of Sweet Sing, when I flip switches and for awhile it seems that one time there must really have been the angels and this is their sweet captured speech; I thought of Last-Go, when I'll say the secret word to the concealed holes in the ceiling, the floor and the sides of the inmost room of my Stronghold and that will signal the demolition box in the mountain of the Last Hope Stand and my Stronghold will BLOW!!! I rejected all these ideas.

"Hello!?"

He didn't say anything. He came on closer, still looking, staring.

"You're that little wavering thing," I shrieked, for suddenly I knew. "You're out of the corridor of Folly Man!"

I thought he smiled a little. He didn't say anything, I was sure of that. But he moved, came nearer, until he almost touched me.

"How did you get in through all that firing? Through the Walls? My guards and devices?" By now I was not only yelling, scared to death, I was curious as I could be. I thought I heard a tinkly bubbling laugh. Or perhaps it was but the clanking of my metal in great fear. "WHO ARE YOU?" I cried.

When he gave only a smile for reply and stared at me with his hard no-quarter eyes, I suddenly trembled so with my flesh-strips that I lost control of my brain and fell down. I saw he was sitting atop my chest bouncing up and down to the piston blasts of my heart when I regained some control of my mind and looked out. And I seemed to hear several voices chirping like tiny new-metal beetles sound from far, and then nearer, "I'm your conscience, Your Conscience, YOUR CONSCIENCE. You left me, thought you left me in Folly Man, ON THE ROAD TO MODERAN." Voices like that scared me so much that I leaped to my feet and sent the vague blurred shape tumbling toward a Wall. He landed right-side-up and stared at me straight-on. He kept staring...

"Listen," I said, because my brain ached around its flesh-strips so much and at the roots of the joints that I knew I couldn't go on like this, "I'll make a deal. You say you're my conscience. O.K. I don't more than

half believe you here in Moderan at this late year. But O.K. And I KNOW I can kill anything I don't like. I KNOW -" He stood there grinning. "O.K." I hastened to say, "I'll let you stay if you'll promise to let me tie you up and put you under the bed. I'll use you then, whenever I need to. Like I do the Miss Statue Woman. And I won't need you," I muttered under my breath. "I won't, I won't."

I thought he agreed. I remember trussing something up with chains and a big wire. And then I must have collapsed and lay there several days while the Stronghold ran on Automatic, the way it does when I sleep... the way it does...

Sometimes, thinking it all over, I, could almost decide that nothing had happened at all.

At other times I'd feel sure Someone was there, watching me, evaluating me. And then I'd have that weird crazy feeling, like I didn't even want to go blast down one of my neighbor's Walls or enjoy the discomforts of the new-metal kitten, and the diamond-tooth tiger child. And ever since I'd made that agreement about putting him under the bed, I had left the Miss Blue-Eyes strictly alone, though I had wanted her madly. But the plain truth was we were not wed.

Then came the day I shut my eyes and was thinking clean and I "knew" it had all been a strange dream. He couldn't have got through that Max Fire, and past all my guards and devices. With the relief of knowing again that the ways of Moderan were safe and right I felt my blood lose its thinness and I thought again of my work - and my Joys! I raced to the bed under which lay my darling one and I unfolded down on my hinges, and the eagerness flooding my flesh-strips made me tinkle in all my new-metal parts. But as I was pulling her toward me, breathing hard and fumbling for her life switch madly, something hit me, hit me with hard baffling fact. My Miss Statue Woman, my Blonde Blue-Eyes, my Darling One, somehow had got herself trussed up... with chains and a big wire... And between me and a couple of Little Wrecks something wavered and smiled and started up talking, like new-metal beetles, like voices from far... "I'm your conscience, YOUR CONSCIENCE..."

Well, it's Last-Go, I may as well tell you, Ultimate Contingency and Final Fire. Unless something can be done. Something strange is in this Stronghold and I can't go on with it thus. Before I'll live with conscience I'll say the secret word! I'll signal the demolition box in the mountain of the Last Hope Stand. I'll blow my Stronghold, me, him, Everything, into the uncountable skies, into all the eternities - I who had hoped to live forever with my Stronghold and my Joys.

GETTING REGULAR

Disgrace! A Stronghold in disgrace! I awoke that gray-shield morning to the taste of old green brass in my throat and the heavy pistoning of my heart as I lay on my hard bed remembering. And let me say here, I am not prepossessing as I lie on my bed of levers playing the mechanism to lift me; at my ease I do not look like a god. I must look more like a suit of old armor once would have looked if it had in the ancient days rolled in some thick-sliced bacon and then gone to bed on a bridge truss. Yes, we look like walking steel shells with flesh piping, in Moderan, and we think of wars and good pounding. To live forever, to be our true bad selves - those are our twin destinations.

And now to face the Court Most High and explain of disgraceful demeanor, of deviation - that was what I had to do. Oh, I could stand them off for awhile, perhaps forever, if they would play the fair game by

way of the frontal attack. I could lie behind my eleven steel walls in my Stronghold, put the fort on the status of Continuous-Blast, let the missiles roll, let the walking doll bombs go, let the Honest Jakes and the high-up weird screaming Wreck-Wrecks launch and perhaps stand off hell and the Courts till time itself grew old. But they wouldn't attack fair; I knew that. In fact, they wouldn't attack at all, what you could call attack. And that was the galling thing. There I'd lie with all that kill potential hanging, ready to go at the press of the big orange switch in my War Room. And what would the Court men, the Hall men, do? They'd hint. They'd lounge in the L-towers up there in their big-deal offices at their Best-View window desks in the Needle Building that's so tall and high-spired that the pennon pole pierces the vapor shield. They'd swap the stories, chew at the big smoke ropes, spit at the diamond-speckled gold spittoons, smile their new-alloy teeth and perhaps turn off my trees. Or, allowing the trees to stand, they might not let the tin birds come down to sing in them. Or, say they left my trees and birds alone, what about flowers? Perhaps they'd use their influence to get the people at Central to turn off my flowers. And how would I look? There I'd be with the only Stronghold for miles around sitting there with the heavy ammo bristling and in heaps and no pretty flowers blooming round about on spring-metal stems to soften the horror. How would I look? How would I feel? Or perhaps they'd send over their bomphlateers with the hint specials, those subtle little leaflets saying something like STRONGHOLD 10 NOT IN ACCEPTABLE CITIZENSHIP STATUS AGAIN THIS VAPOR SHIELD. STRONGHOLD 10 IN ARREARS FOR VAPOR SHIELDS BACK. STRONGHOLD 10 URGED PLEASE TO GET REGULAR. Just that. Well, I know who Stronghold 10 is. Stronghold 10 is me. And I know what a vapor shield is, even if once I mightn't have: A vapor shield is a month. Each month is a different vapor shield in Moderan, and I don't quarrel with that. May is green, October is bright orange, just to illustrate. The gray one I'm in now is March, very sad and full of threat potential I'll have you know.

So suppose I get a leaflet raid. And once they start leaflets, they don't usually just shower you with one leaflet. Oh my, it's a dozen anyway, usually. So one morning lying there on my lever bed playing the risers and slingers to lift me there's suddenly ten of my tin men around me, each with a leaflet. And they're acting solemn, but really looking happy and pleased that the boss man has got himself in a spot of trouble. So I take the hint pages they hand me and I crumple said pages into a twelve-leaf crumpled-leaflet paper ball and I fling that crumpled-leaflet twelve-page hint ball disdainfully over toward a couple of Little Wrecks on the missile line. Have I fooled anybody? I have not. Those tin men know when the boss man hasn't acted right. They know when Stronghold 10 is on the run.

So I'm thinking - that gray March morning of realization there on my lever bed thinking back - I guess I owe it to myself and my men to get regular. I sure didn't owe it to Central or those crooks up in the L-towers of the Needle Building looking at the view, chewing at the big smoke ropes, pot-shooting the diamond-speckled gold spittoons and acting like pieces of God.

So, arising from my lever bed much later that Gray March morning, I went up to the Needle Building. I took no one with me, for let me say here, I alone am Stronghold 10 when it comes to dealing with the outside world; I am the complete master at Stronghold 10; I am the only one with a flesh-strip and what you might call a reasonable brain. Even my blonde blue-eyes, my real darling, my complete mistress, my sweetheart doll - cause of all my present dilemmas and my future in doubt - did not have a flesh-strip. She was all loving steel, as you might say, even when her life-switch was thumbed full to ON and we were sweethearting. But I'll admit she had me going one time, so mixed up that I aimed to defy all the powers that be, give her part of one of my lesser flesh-strips (I swear I aimed to do this) leave her life-switch full to ON and make her queen of my Stronghold forever, my wife! It would have got me expelled from the Society of Stronghold Masters, I have no doubt, and perhaps brought war, terrible and continuing, between me and the Authorities. Well, it didn't happen. I aimed to do it, but I waited too long. I dillydallied while she pleaded; I demurred while she begged. And now it is too late; she is gone. To where, I know not. One brown-vapor-shield thoughtless time I left her life-switch to ON carelessly, when we were through loving, and she went - over the eleven steel walls somehow - maybe with the help

of the tin men. But I digress; she is gone. Perhaps it is better so. The gray-green cloud of all these ill events she engendered overwhelms me even now, and I must right things.

So, as I was saying, I went up to the Needle Building, alone. I told my head weapons man, Slag Morgbawn, nominal second in command, and commander of the Stronghold when I am gone, to wait a full day and a night and then come for me if I had not by that time come back. You never know what you'll meet out there on that mutant-milled plastic. Usually nothing, for it will recently have been swept by a Maximum Weapons Fire. (So I'm taking a chance, you say, on the weapons man? But not so much as you'd suppose. He'd need my flesh-strips before he could be a king, acceptable to the Society of Stronghold Masters. My flesh-strips are his hope. Yes, he'd come for me, dead or alive. I was sure of that.)

The eleven gates rolled back and I passed from my Stronghold; I toddled over the homeless plastic, plop-plip-plap-plop, a Stronghold man out of his Stronghold, walking hard but going slow in his hinges, as helpless and defenseless almost as a new baby bird out of the shell in the old days. You would think I should go with an iron cover of missiles; you would think I should have steel escorts and threats in explosives walking hard by my side. But that suggests a complete, almost hopeless misunderstanding of Moderan and the way we play out here in this greatest of all modern lands. You see, outside my Stronghold I am no longer a force; my neighbors do not regard me. When I am out of my fortress my aura of status attends me only in so far as I must go to deal with powers extraordinary, such as the Courts and the Hall men. To the others Stronghold 10 is always whoever is at the moment manning the eleven steel walls and directing the terrible weapons.

I had advised my lieutenant, the head weapons man, not to break out any thoughtless war or any war of zest while I walked the homeless plastic. And I knew he would not break out a plot war, because one blast of the launchers would pick me utterly clean with not even a flesh-strip left to show, and my flesh-strips, as I was saying, were his one and only hope for ever being more than a weapons man. Vain, senseless, empty hope, of course. But you see how forces balance, ambition sometimes checkmates treachery, and some things are dismally usual even in Moderan.

So I reached the Lid and did not get caught in a cross-fire, my one fear really, that two peripheral Strongholds would start a zest war, or a plot war, and catch me, the innocent victim. The Lids were where, all over the Empire, you took the small tunnel cars up to Capitol. I kicked the switch, the Lid slowly rose and I eased down a flight of steps to the small black car in the pressure tube. Setting the General switch to Capitol and the Specific Destination switch to NB125 I was whisked with incredible swiftness through a thousand black miles. I was dumped gently at the landing pod in front of Room NB125, sky high in the Needle Building.

The door swung silently open and a small screening man looked at me. He was a service mechanism and did this small, almost useless task of screening for the Hall men, who were chewing the smoke ropes, aiming nonchalantly at the diamond-speckled gold spittoons, relaxing and playing God. I say this was almost useless screening, because that wasn't the way we played the game, to take a blaster when we went up to see the men in the Needle Building. We went in cringing and fear. If they said we weren't good citizens and hadn't been for a certain number of vapor shields past, that was the story. All we could do was hope for terms. How they got to be a collective known as the Needle Building is too involved for me to relate to you here.

Needle Building FIP Z-U was the tall sad-eyed god-piece assigned to deal with my omissions. Through perforations in the new-metal alloy of his face "replacement" he had a real moustache growing that was bristly and sad-color brown; his peeping new-metal eye globes were cloudy-blue. Let me say here, being looked at by Needle Building FIP Z-U was something like being looked at by two small balls of used

bath water on top of a scrub brush in the old days. Slender sawtoothed particles of string-metal slime seemed to float across those sorrowing cold eyes to accentuate their threat and true deadliness.

"Stronghold 10!" he said like the voice of God and doom all at once.

"Yes SIR," I said and hated my heart its pistoning terrible lunging, hated my flesh-strips their cold rancid sweat.

"Stronghold 10, your war record is in a sad, abused state, showing neglect. Why, there have been whole weeks when you have not once warred against a neighbor. And internally, according to our daily survey conducted by the new Spy-Ray method, which I have not the slightest reason to doubt in accuracy, you have not come up to any acceptable standard either." He looked at me, letting the cold cloud-blue spots not waver. He ticked his metaled throat in a way to have done honor to ten times the great dignity of a board chairman in the old days. "As a higher-culture man," he rasped, "living in the Age of Truth where war is the measuring stick and destruction the achievement by which we award prizes, what do you have to say for your laggard conduct, by way of explanation, or perhaps - expiation?"

I gulped. I tried to adjust my heart to be calm. I launched into a great explanation of how I intended to clear my record and get regular. I told him of wars I had in the blueprint stage, some ready to go, if need be, early as tomorrow. Warming to the subject I explained an intricate plan I had for drawing ten neighbor Strongholds into one grand conflict against me, explaining how my central location would make such a course feasible. And, in effect, many of them could claim conflict credit for themselves in warring against each other while they were blasting at me, thereby bringing greater overall battle glory to our sector. Not only was I going to make up for my irregularity the past six months, I was going to do extra. Even through their muddy dead color I saw his sad eyes gleam a little. And I felt then that his was a heart that would joy really only for a man of dedicated hate and destruction potential.

"So I give you more time for getting External in order," he said, the words walking lean and clean, like fighters that can get you either high or low, "what about Internal?"

I had hoped he would soon ask that question, for it is in Internal that I used really to shine. In fact, before my retrogression, I was well on my way toward having in Internal the best overall mean-record of any in our sector. I was inventive. I could think of ways. And then came the terrible retrogression.

My heart was calm now; I was breathing a regular flex-flex of my new-metal lungs; I knew what he listened for, and I was prepared to soon say it, "SIR," I said, "in Internal I expect to resume almost immediately the Stronghold 10 Backstobbin. You know, the plan that proved so successful in the past." He nodded, and I continued. "In that plan, as perhaps you'll recall, every day is a contest. My 'people' are mean to each other from morn to night, and far into the late hours. The person with the most mean points, and I've worked out an almost infallible scoring system, will not only get to stay up all night in the Stronghold and be mean on his own, he'll be day mean-master until outscored. SIR, as I've found it, it's a startlingly efficient method of getting the help to be really mean to each other. They have not only the basic incentive implicit in their natures, they have this added incentive of winning prizes. Of course, we'll award ribbons... Also, I'll be mean myself, Internally."

His eyes were showing his happiness and pleasure; the saw-toothed metal pieces were swishing madly in what looked like watery void. "Stronghold 10," he said, "we once had high hopes for you. And now you have almost rekindled fully all those hopes with your terrible and fine plans. But before I made a decision, will you tell me what happened to spoil your great record? I think I know, but I want to know if you know."

"SIR," I said, "she's gone now and her silly sad talk of love -" And he nodded; it was so little a nod, but

it had that firm special all-important quick little hitch of the neck-strips that told me this god-piece, this FIP Z-U, really understood and was with me again.

"We'll let you go," he said, "and good luck. I didn't really want to take your Stronghold from you and award your flesh-strips to another, you with such a good record once and with now - I can tell - such a really great sadism in you." He nodded again, that little neck-jerk nod, and I knew it was an endorsement.

So I left the god-piece and summoned a tunnel car. I was swished in a twinkling more than a thousand steel miles eastward, back to the Lid. I rested for awhile in the comfort room of the small station, more relaxed and at peace with my times than I'd been for many a vapor shield past. After awhile I fed myself introven from my portable flesh-strip feeder. It was full night when I passed out of the Lid and, the vapor shield being retired for those hours, the cold stars in a numb moonless sky seemed to speak to me of unlimited ways to be cruel and a really good Stronghold master in Moderan, if I'd just set my heart and brain to it. I vowed to try to be worthy of the hopes of FIP Z-U. Never again would I let the god-pieces in Capitol be so disappointed with me that they could think of awarding my flesh-strips to another. Let a thousand temptresses come in the forms of a thousand new-metal mistresses - let evenher come back and talk of love - I'd not digress. For me now it's onward in meanness and cruelty.

THE WALKING, TALKING I-DON'T-CARE MAN

Since I had made my terms with the Court men, and especially FIP Z-U, the days had danced for me, they had played music, they had passed like dreams of mean...

I remember I was feeling especially good on a day; the worries were all cut back, a sheen was in the air, a shimmer, as the sun beat through the lean white vapor shield of August and smote our plastic yard sheets. I was wondering what for diversion, what for Joys, what summer sport should I choose to program into my Sched, the big brain that served me, tweetle and shimmer and flare.

But who knows, just because the day dawns fair, with worries cut back to dormant, a fine sheen of sun and the tin birds turned on in the silver trees who knows? There are clouds that wander the world, there are storms that walk in the land, there are disgruntled men who would hammer-stroke the very face of omnipotent God if it got in their walking way.

He was such a one.

I knew that a lot of new-metal was headed down the track; my warner set up that almost-steady whine. There were very few bleep-outs, those smaller softer sounds that jag at the metal drone of danger and indicate flesh-strip. I envied him in a way, for perhaps he was more metal than I; I think I did not fear him, for I had all the Stronghold guns at my beck and the other great kill potential at my call. But I accorded him an honor that usually is from fear, an honor generally reserved for armies, or new invasion principles my Enemies send in to get me, or men I know as deranged. I set him up for Study, flashed him on the Close Look. And in a way, by so doing, I had him awesome and dread while he was still a long way out.

But it did no hurt; he was awesome and dread while still a long way out. YES! Truly. His head was

shaped more like a hammer's head than a human head, and he seemed to peck and tap and pound at the distances as he came on steadily, a huge sun-glinty shape, not hurrying, not loitering, but just coming on at a dogged peck, peck, peck. Straight and gradual he came, not looking aside at all, right down the slot. And I began to wonder if he was coming to see me, or if I and my great complex of weaponry just happened to be flat athwart the road he had chosen to peck, peck, peck. But soon it would be time to know, for soon it would be time to stop him and either open the gates or not open them. He could be God's own Chosen or Satan's righthand help, either one, and he couldn't come on down this close to me and my fort and not be judged. The time for turning aside he had passed a good while back, when the orange flares went up and the warning leaflets pattered down. It was the generally understood Warning of the Line that we used in the Stronghold country. And if ever it was ignored, I had just seen it ignored by this hammer-headed shape. A man? Well -? Who could say?

All the warning formalities slid past him as though they had never been; the greeting, if heard, was flagrantly left unreturned. He came on, pressing up to the gates, which I allowed him to do since I had checked him well on the Close Look, and the weapons and decontamination reports had both given him clear sail. But even against the closed gates he did not stop; he continued his dogged footwork and the peck, peck, peck of his head. CRAZY! Well, I suppose.

I eased the gates back gently with the OPEN power on SLOW and he passed through the hollow square. When he came close to where I stood half down from my peep-box of steel, but with one foot, for safety, still in the door, he seemed to sense my presence and he swiveled his head a very few degrees from the straight-on that seemed to be his choice.

"Owner?" The voice was a raspy drone; he was still moving.

"Yes. And halt!"

For a surprise he halted, stopped dead in his pecking tracks, then spun until he faced me. "Just passing through. I hurt not where I walk. I respect the life-rights of others. But generally I do not deviate. My mission? If I have one - well, it's very hard to know."

"I am Master of Stronghold 10," I said, "the fortress with the best war record in all this wide land. Your coming on past the flares and the dropping leaflets was my choice to give; your pecking past the gates was my choice to allow; your going at all, unblasted, past the Warning of the Line was my choice to extend. I hope for no misunderstand -"

"If I've found God, then this is the end of the trail!" He reached at a tin belt that seemed low on his solid waist, and faster than I could follow he held a huge black hammer lightly in either hand. My face could almost feel them crashing through metal and flesh-strip and bone. Then strangely he laughed, a cracked unbelievable sound that was hardly of mirth, and he returned the hammers to the tin belt where they hung like two black questions, I could not help thinking. "I'd almost given up finding God." Then he laughed again. "But all jesting aside, and satire, let us not speak of God. He's why I've gone over to metal for the rest of the Long Trip."

"Are you an iron minister?" I asked. "Do you speak up for an old faith sometimes? Do you cry out for redemption of a world?" I meet them all here in the slot where the Big Travel goes past my fort, and I'm ready to make allowances for them all. But with him I thought maybe I had gone too far when I saw long steel hands turn to hunting birds in stoop and then become snake heads as they fell. He rested them on the hammers lightly where they hung.

"Mister," he said, "I'm in your Stronghold not by choice, certainly not as a guest. And yet I would not be

mocked at either. You opened the gates. I didn't ask it. If you had left them closed I'd still be pecking at them, with my feet going. I'd use the hammers after awhile. I was once stopped a year at a little mountain cliff, down province, a whole pecking year. After that long the cliff began to crumble, and I walked on through. With me it absolutely doesn't matter - pecking at a Stronghold here, battering a mountain cliff down province, or walking on through cleared and free in the open vapor-shield air. I'll wear out time until I'm tired of time, and then I'll just turn off the knobs I move by. I have absolutely no faith, no known purpose for being, and if I find God's face, or any part of that face, I'm programmed to strike it with both hammers as fast as I can hit, and as hard. There are reasons for all this, which I fully explain about once every twenty-five years." He looked at an elaborate time device swung down from his new-metal neck and I knew years, months, weeks, days, hours - all of it down to the last second-tick were commingled there in a jumble of calendars and red whirling blades. If metal can grin - well, he grinned, an open kind of smirk. "You just missed the big recital by a year, some six weeks, five days and a certain assorted amount of ticking seconds, round minutes and dragging jumbly hours," he said.

"Maybe you could camp here until the time comes up to talk, and then I could hear your tale," I said, because I had my humor about me as well as one of my feet in safety, in the door of the peep-box of steel.

"Just say I found the Answers," he said. "Just say you've seen the walking-talking Don't-Care man, one being who has escaped The Grip. It wasn't easy, it took a long time, and planning, but I think I've achieved it finally, the ultimate resolution of that built-in agony, the Life-Death Predicament of Man."

That was a big statement he'd just loaded out there at the last. "YES! the walking-talking Don't-Care man rests well at night. He just leans, up somewhere against a post, a creek bank, a tree, an old missile launching shell, anything - turns off the switches and leaves it programmed so that he'll be turned back on at a suitable morning time. And always in him there's the assurance of the wonderful option; at any time the walking-talking Don't Care decides to, he can, when he shuts down the switches at night, neglect to program his awakening, and it'll be all over - OVER!"

"But here!" I could not help suggesting, "hasn't any kind of a man, at any time in history, in effect always had that option, to not awake in the morning? Self-death is just a little less old than life. Or did I miss something?"

"YES!" he howled in derision, "you missed it almost all. The walking-talking Don't-Care man is different because he is so indifferent. I've outsmarted God by a long and slow maneuver. I've left myself on a hundred dozen operating tables, down the days, down the line. The flesh I was and the soul I was supposed to be have left out through a hundred dozen hospital garbage pails and thus were scattered on many many big rivers and many many refuse-burning fires. And now I'm all 'replacements' - heart, brain, blood, nerves, everything - all metal now, all automatic, all programmed - wonderful! And you know something? I never dream at night. How could I dream at night? I'm all turned off when I turn in. HA!"

This fellow had a point. I began to see his plan. The rest of us new-metal folk, with our flesh-strips few and played-down, had schemed to defeat the Predicament of Man, the agony of his transience and long-death fears in the world, by simply living forever. We'd conquer the big conundrum by never facing it. YES! But truly I was beginning to see how that could turn tedious. And now this one, who styled himself the Don't-Care one, had come up with a new and shining plan that beat ours very much. Man slowly turned to metal, with all his thoughts, actions, needs programmed! Well, that certainly would seem to have solved the Great Mystery and the Great Fear in a logical scientific way. The flesh-body and the soul so piecemeal gone that neither existed now anywhere at all, neither to be held accountable and neither to be up for redemption. And who could say he had transgressed? Had he killed himself? Ho! He had merely transformed him self. And when he turned off the switches for the last time and, tiring of it all,

did not program another day, could you say he then had killed himself? I think you could not reasonably charge metal with suicide, not logically. Then a question took me as he stood there so bland and self-assured, his two snake-head hands lightly on the hammers where they swung. "Why, since He has allowed you to solve it, The Problem, would you wish to strike at His face with those two hammers, if you met that face ever, partly or in whole?"

For awhile he just stared at me, and, if metal can hate, I would say that he hated. He whipped out the two black hammers and stood there, each one threat-posed. For all his metal bravado and the total-defiance stare the voice seemed old when he spoke: "Intelligence was not left out when they built my head back together. My thoughts are metal now, but they work out. Don't I know who put me in The Predicament in the first place? Don't I know!? And the fact that He allowed me to change, warns me that He could probably change me back. And by God, I'll go down fighting, striking until these hammers are all worn down and my arms are all metal shreds, before He'll change me back to a man!"

Then he left me, pecking through the walk-out part of the Stronghold square. When he attained the far side, I thumbed the gates back for his leaving. He went out still pecking, going going - for his ending. Who - what knows where?

Everyday Life In Moderan

[TO FACE ETERNITY](#)

I think most of us knew that to face Eternity on its own terms we'd need a host of gimmicks, or one BIG never-failing master gimmick to see us through. That's a lot of time out there - forever! Of course we had our new-metal mistresses, the diamond-tooth tiger cubs and the newmetal kittens to fight them, the skirmish trees that came through the yard holes and fought each other for supremacy, the steel birds of Moderan (with war heads substitutive for bird heads), the different-colored vapor shields and a clutch of other diversionary phenomena to grab the mind and make for us variety times in Joys.

But we needed really some bread-and-butter diversion to ease us across the long haul, something that we could do or watch or count or accomplish or make-love to over and over and over and it would all still seem fresh and rewarding. New-metal mistresses are fine. They're just great little sports and they add a bit of Joy and groovy-goo to even the most cold and metallic of situations. Their settings are various and they can be arranged and rearranged to suit any man's taste and changing taste as to size, vital-statistic measurements, color of hair, general deportment and overall love technique. And when you consider the super-luxury special-made new-metal mistress kit - WOOOO WOOOO WOW WOW WOW WOWEEEE!!!!!!

STILL, I do not think making love to a tin can, no matter how great and versatile and playful the tin can is, can, by itself, see a man through the long-haul of Eternity. The only thing, we finally decided, that

would see us through was war, total and continuing war. Plotting for each the other's total destruction and coming up with countermeasures to protect each his own new-metal hide at all costs are the kinds of human enterprises that put the human animal up close to godliness. Gods, as everyone knows, are both destructive and create. On destruction we have always been strong qualifiers. And the only kinds of beings that can actually cope with Eternity on anything like easeful and self-assured terms are gods. So we must destroy and create as gods.

YES! we lived each as a god in a great steel-and-concrete redoubt. We hurled the thunderbolts and took on the task of trying to destroy everything but ourselves, with great relish. There were no lengths to which we would not go if we thought we could do even a new-metal flea's worth toward destroying a neighborhood man, and establishing our own supremacy. Even though our own Strongholds might be severely damaged in the process. Then, to be creative, we'd all start shoring up and rebuilding in a truce time.

Actually, as steel men we were essentially but extensions of what man has always been. The essential man had been extended, I'm trying to say. The essence of normal man was and is and always will be the feeling of, "I AM the greatest and most deserving thing in ail the Universe and I should have preference wherever I go." This is true collectively and it is equally true individually. There was never normal man so lowly but what he, if given the smallest smallest chance to rise, would start regarding himself as a winner for sure. The domain of his aspirations will have no NO ceiling and no NO walls: The whole universe will be his pumpkin, his and his alone. A ghastly, slimy, ungodly contrivance he, in many ways, is. But he has, let's face it, one saving grace. He is to be counted on to be his ghastly, rotten, slimy, true-bad self until the end. He is reliable, let us say, in that his total badness is assured. And in that he is godly.

IN THE INNERMOST ROOM OF AUTHORITY

It was a ball-round new-steel marvel deep-swung in the very exact mathematical center of my complex. And the center of gravity of my hip-snuggle chair, the throne of authority and of good rest, was positioned in the very exact mathematical center of this ball-round place. The walls were the rind of a room-orb, shiny new-metal skin-orb, so perfect in its globular perfection that I used to gloat on the number of perfect circles that must be thus enclosed - nay, not only enclosed, but part and parcel of the room-orb. Sometimes I sat for days, near-hypnotized, but imagining, "counting" the perfect circles that must be thus enclosed and part and parcel of this great steel onion. It staggered the brain, even a Moderan man's brain, honed to the precision of a billion computers of the Old Days, each one of the billion computers complementing the others to make completely unfathomable to any ordinary mind the power by which a Moderan man's brain outclassed the computer from the Old Days. And yet I could not "count" the perfect circles that had to be there contained in the room-orb.

Sometimes I thought that this must surely be that highest thing for which man was made up, to finally sit, completely invulnerable as forever-man, in the innermost part of the onion of his world, a Stronghold hollow ball, and pull the final count of the layers of his onion home in an innermost room of meditation and authority of the self. For each circle of that gleaming globular room must be a kind of final closing of our safety, emblematic of our Victory, our total win through Great Science Plan over all the inadequacies that once were US. YES! And yet the skins were not infinity, although they were close, very close to that. Given the right instrument, or instruments, to augment my billion-computered brain, surely these circles could be counted, no matter how they crossed and spiraled and tangled and were each part of

many others in the room-orb. For this was a thing with limits, I could, with the help of ladders (or tin men to hold me, sometimes making great pyramids of tin men with me at the top for the high parts) touch it, feel it all over on the inside to my heart's content. And then I could, toggling my hinges and braces, "dash" out and with that inside feeling still warm in my steel hands and my steel mind take tin men, or extensions of ladders and tin men, and feel the room all over on the outside - with, necessarily, a bit of tough climbing. So I had it contained! There was an Inside and there was an Outside. In a word, it was a Thing in my hands. So therefore, the circles must be countable. Although it almost staggers MY brains to think of the true difficulty of the task of the counting.

The large circles of these circular walls are quite quite many in number, when you really consider them with a clear-headed brain. And then each material circle is filled with those pesky atoms, which of themselves are not the end (it's perfectly conceivable - to me, at least - that within each of these pesky atoms there may be a peopled Stronghold, complete with "little" tin men, all organized for war and fighting, as we in Stronghold 10 are organized for war and fighting; it staggers the mind, even a Stronghold master's mind, really does, but I can think of it - sometimes) and each of all this would have a goodly number of its own circles. And when we had done all this - OHHOHHHWEEOOOH! - think of the tasks not done. There would still be the hollow space around me and under my hip-snuggle throne in this Innermost Room of Authority that, alas, was not quite empty-hollow space, but was beset with the common air, a gas containing countables. So each perfect circle in the particles of the gas would have to be taken the measure of after the larger circles of the room and air had all been tabulated in this not-quite-hollow place. But it can be done by a dedicated man, and I am a dedicated man, a new-metal man! This is not any kind of infinity, because, as I have just told you, I can "feel" the walls on the inside. And I can "feel" the walls on the outside. Anything that I can thus contain must be such that I can take its measure, full-number it and mentally bring it to account.

So do you wonder that I sit in my hip-snuggle throne in the Innermost Room of Authority, sometimes for days on end, calm as a cold bowl of oil, my heart on REST, my brain on MAX and think on Universal Deep Problems? I have so many problems! We have so many problems, inlooping problems, intertwining problems, interwoven problems. And, really, how to do these circles is not even a beginning of THE PROBLEM.

THE PROBLEM

THE PROBLEM really is this: Can we last forever? That is our dream in Moderan. That is the whole Big Moderan Dream, the Forever-lasting Dream. Will the hinge joints hold? Oh, yes, the hinge joints will hold. The whole new-metal complex will hold. The everlast lungs will go on and on, and the heart will piston that steady life-beat throughout the centuries, throughout the millenniums - FOREVER. For these parts are of and for forever, though all replaceable. Yes, should a part prove not to be of and for forever (there is always the chance of a flaw, you know, so shore up the chances) a multitude and plenty of big warehouses hold spare parts for each and every new-metal man. Should a heart, say, falter in a Moderan forever-man, it will be a simple matter to send out for a pump change, and the Problems-Circulatory warden for that district can soon slip the new unit in, close the housing, put on the official seal and send his big bill up to Central Health.

Even the flesh-strips, I believe, can be shored up with new-metal alloys and made to last forever. At least, we have to believe that they can, for they are, in a way, all that we have. And these may be the one

small, not-to-be-remedied, flaw that will finally do us down and clear back to reality. But we have to believe that it will not. I look at my flesh-strips sometimes, when I am alone, and I'm mostly alone, for I am a King (due that Splendid Isolation that is a King's great due), and I cannot believe I CANNOT BELIEVE all that is therein implied in the flesh-strips, all that is purported, in the Old Days, to have happened in that pulpy mass, all that, they say, even now transpires. It is MIRACLES, it is MAGIC, it is witchcraft! And to think that once I lived as all of this - miracles walking, magic talking and witchcraft transpiring within me every part of every second of every day. Weeooohhhh! WeEoOhHhH!! WEEOOHHHH!!! It is a wonder that I lasted until noon of the first day. It is a wonder -

We have to keep working on improving the introven, the only flesh-strip food that will do. We have to keep experimenting to discover ways to cut the flesh-strips down. (The flesh-strips are our godliness, in a way, and yet we have to keep working to cut our godliness down to become more godly. It does seem a paradox. But a Moderan man with his Great Science Plan understands. YES! And it is not a paradox. NO!) We have to keep watching day and night for better ways to care for the flesh-strips we own. Flesh-strip hygiene must become a major science. Hypochondria must become an honored thing. No more must we point the finger of scorn and say, "HAH, hypochondriac!" Health worrying must become a national second occupation (our main occupation is war) for every man, not the preoccupation of the few nerve-nuts it is now considered to be. For only by complete and dedicated fervent health worrying can we be sure that throughout all our waking hours we'll be fully conscious of, and properly worried about, the dangers that beset our flesh-strips. It must not be fidgety finicky thought-worrying only; it must be bold and forthright physical worrying to the extent that we'll turn on gut disturber buttons to the chancy world and yearn seriously. We'll feel out our flesh-strips, thump them and pinch them at any hour of the day or night, to see if all is yet well. Or is something going wrong!? And perhaps we'll call in neighbors to substantiate our fears and claims. We'll check out each the other's flesh-strips at any hour of the day or night that a health checkup seems to offer some chance of turning up a flaw. That must become a call that must be always answered. We must pass laws to make it a high crime not to check out a neighbor's flesh-strips whenever he calls for our assessment of his situation. (Or in times when no one calls, go over and volunteer a checkout anyway; assess them gratuitously as a good-neighbor turn.) Even in grimmest grandest war, when the wreck-wrecks are out and homing in for the kill, when the White-Witch rockets are on the line and launching, when the doll bombs are taking that staunch straight-and-steady targetward stroll, it must not be unusual for a neighboring Stronghold Captain to drop over for a flesh-strip feel-out. What we must own is that we are all in this together, in it together to such an extent that nothing NOTHING must deter us from protecting each the other's flesh-strips in a logical medical scientific and neighborly way. That we must become a ONE-WORLD of health-worriers is to put it mildly, indeed. We must be more than mere worriers. We must be alarmists where our flesh-strips are concerned. We must go with every fad that may offer some chance of turning up a weakness in a flesh-strip. Only by such extreme means can we protect and cherish that most precious of our possessions and, I regret to say, the most vulnerable.

Ah, yes! To one not of Moderan it might seem most unusual to contemplate the situation: We are in, say, a grim all-out all-universe to-the-last-death war. All the blow-and-bang stuff is trying for kills. But we'll not wait for any truce time for us to keep check on each the other's godly parts. Maybe some hot all-out shot-out time I'll see old neighboring Stronghold to my left scoot out from his eleventh, outermost Wall. I'll see him "hurrying" to me, slow, slow as we go toggling our hinges and braces. I'll not let up for a moment my bombardment of his fort. I'll not recall even one walking doll bomb walking in to blow up him and his Walls. And he'll not expect me to. Should I do it he'd no doubt be extraordinarily, even extremely, embarrassed. For the war must go on in all its grim inevitability. But we must try for long life too. And that may be a paradox to the lesser peoples. But not to a Moderan man. OH, NO! It is as logical as progress itself.

And should, some fine truce day, say, old neighboring Stronghold to the east beam me a message telling

me that he is well and feels fine, I'll not let him get away with it. I'll beam right back at him the question: How can you be sure, man!?! Then I'll go on to beam him a whole multitude of suggested conditions, things he probably never would think of on his own, maybe things that his medical steel men have not even thought of for him, but things which in part or in total may tend to convince him that he is most probably not as well as he feels, and maybe not even well at all.

PLAYMATE

It was on a July Monday that Little Sister was under his window, very early, with a big box in her arms. The vapor cover that day was pink, as indeed it would be for all of July; as set by the Central Vapor Shield Control and the Vapor Light Saving people. The temperature was controlled to a pleasant 70 degrees F. inside and outside, and he, as usual, was working on a formula.

"My little playmate came," she shouted, "my little sister! Come see."

He, plastic-legged and iron-x "replaced," arose from his hip-snuggle chair and went to the edge of his door. "What's the nonsense?" he asked, metal-fogged and weary. "Why aren't you napping? Or behaving with Mox?" Mox was her iron man who looked after her needs like a mother, in the red plastic hut where she lived apart from other folk while awaiting the age of "replacements."

"It's my little companion!" Little Sister shrieked. "I sent for her. She came today, in the mail."

He rubbed his eyes with the backs of his gold-seal hands. He tried to think across the metal fields. A man of Advanced Times, he had submitted to many iron-x, and a few gold-seal "replacements" since coming up from Olderun, in a move toward durability, in a move to conquer immortality for the corporeal self. But sometimes this metal self, that was fast becoming his main self, dominated the flesh-strips to such an extent that he found it difficult to force thoughts to track the petty paths of everyday. Across the pathless fields of the high dimensions he was a keen hot hound on the scent of formulae. With what was left of his family, Little Sister, he sometimes found it hard going even to converse on plain terms. "Tell me slowly," he pleaded.

She took a deep breath. Her good full chest swelled in a triumph of flesh and bone. Her brown eyes were sparkle-bright when she said, "I mustn't grow up alone, even if I am the last little girl. As I await the age of 'replacement' I must have a companion, which same just came in the mail, Daddy. And you will put her together, Daddy, so we can play. I have named her already - Little Slots."

Slots was a box full of slotted metal, a few wires, some power wafers, many tapes, a head, various curved pieces of white plastic, certain parts that were almost flesh and the printed sheet of directions. Slots was a pile of junk and a headache confronting a man dedicated to solitude, eternity and calm, companionless thinking on universal deep problems. Slots as she was, unassembled, had cost five hundred thousand dollars cash by gift certificate from the Organization for the Entertainment of Little Flesh People.

There was a clatter in his joints, of metal scraping on metal and the wincing of the flesh-strips, as he knelt to one knee there on the gray bare yard and took up the box that contained Slots. He opened the box and saw a waxwarm face smirking up at him, an enigmatic face that could have been a nine-year-old

girl's face, or a much older girl's face, made of plastic and wreathed in real hair. The mechanical mouth tumbled open and beautifully formed white teeth gleamed out of the rubbery lips. "I'll bite your big feet off if you aren't good to me," the beautiful flirtatious head threatened right away, mechanically and pleasantly enough. Then a clamor started up, "Change the tape, change the tape..."

He jumped like a bucket full of the sun had just come high-boiling down through all those miles, through all the pink vapor shield, to spill on a jot of his flesh. When he jumped, pieces of Slots and the box in which she had been mailed scattered fanwise across the gray yard. But the head sitting smiling in the middle of the scattered pieces had a tape for the situation. "Butterfingery old cold widower and a half-wit moron, girl," it said. Then it spent about five minutes bouncing up and down on the plastic yard sheet and screaming, "Shame, shame... foul, foul... save me, save me!" After that the head, very businesslike, rolled about picking up its parts and slotting everything together until a pleasingly tall and slim fair girl of metal and white plastic stood smiling in the cool rose glow of the pink vapor shield of July. "Well, and where's the bogs?" She deftly stooped to tear out the white nylo-wov lining of the box in which she had been mailed. She wrapped the long piece of snowy cloth about her in such a way that it was tastefully full and loose in places and taut across other places to enhance her fine plastic curves. "Always pays to please the bogs."

"The bogs?" said Little Sister, bewildered and still somewhat dazed by the performance she had just seen. "What do you mean, bogs?"

"The oggosite rex. Like the meg for the wogen... Damn! faulty tape." She made a sour face. Then she said with a throaty voice and a new clear tape, "I mean where are the boys? The opposite sex. Like the men for the women. I'm a girl!" She smiled.

"You're to be my little playmate until I'm ready for 'replacements,'" said Little Sister, simply and with a heart full of love for the warm metal and plastic thing towering over her. "I've got ever so many card-wov cut-out dollies. You can have one. And two changes of clothes for her. Today!" Little Sister's face shone beatific from the beautiful gesture and the open-hearted strain of such hard giving. "And I'll let you color a little with my ray spray, if you'll promise, cross your heart, not to bust it."

Slots was coldly eyeing Little Sister, distaste and boredom and pitying amusement in every stare. "Aw go grow up!" She was gritty voiced with the tape for the occasion. "I'm here to play with your dad. I think." Little Sister was near to tears.

But Father, eager as ever, he thought, to get the silly diversion over with, get Little Sister back to her place and himself in his hip-snuggle chair for more formula thinking, had been scientifically and purposefully reading the directions, after he had recovered from the initial shock of hearing Slots talk and seeing her put herself together. He remembered that the first of these dolls was at least ten years old now, and the idea for them was much much older, and all this helped him regain his confidence in the all-rightness of things. When he came to the CAUTION part of the instructions, he just slipped over quickly, caught Slots firmly by an arm, took the long sections out of her legs and proceeded to secure her range-change to the place calibrated LITTLE-GIRL-PLAYMATE-COMPANION. "We ship them from our factory on BIG-GIRL-LOVEMATE-DIVERSION," the directions stated, "the calibration of widest versatility and greatest demand. But they function quite as well on LITTLE-GIRL-PLAYMATE-COMPANION, if wired to it securely after first being relieved of the long sections of the legs." And Slots, down to Little Sister size now, was busily rewinding her dress to make up for her new status in stature. Then she said, a little dully it seemed, with the tape for the occasion, "Let's go play cut-outs. And really, I'd love to use your ray-spray coloring thing, if I may."

So Little Sister and Little Slots went arm-in-arm off across the gray plastic yard toward Little Sister's

red hut, and Father, with the long sections of legs tucked firmly under one arm, hastened fast as he could back to his hip-snuggle chair and his big desk for thinking. But just as he feared might be the case, he found that he was not now thinking clean on universal deep problems. YES! he had this other problem now that would have to be solved before he could get his heart out of the bumps and jumps and back to universal cool-gear smoothness. Oh, why did these things have to happen? Why couldn't Little Sister have just behaved with Mox, her iron man, instead of ordering this silly doll playmate? But Father, like the dogged fighter he had always been, did not dodge the issue; he got right to grips with the problem, even if his heart was not yet quite as smooth and reliable as it should have been. Then too he had to work with a mind that was really not much good now at pertinent flesh-type questions, but he would decide. YES! Should he order a doll of his own, or just change the legs back and forth on this one when Little Sister was sleeping?

A HUSBAND'S SHARE

It was in hopeful April that he stirred. The vapor shield had been turned off for that beautiful and rainy month, and when the sun shone bright on Moderan there was a touch of heaven in that iron and plastic place. A few true flowers, red and yellow and purple, peeped up at the edges of plastic yards; a sprinkling of grass sprigs lanced through at places of join and wear cracks in the gray surfacing of the yards and fields. How many other seedlets and bulbs and grass blades must have broken their heads against the steel-gray crust of Moderan, seeking to come to the sun!

Like a young man dreaming of his love, like a man of old going on carpets of peacock feathers and rose-pink scented air, he came in his imagination across the slate-gray yard. But in reality it was plunk plunt tap ta-rap tunk tunka tap that his iron feet went on the plastic, and his silvered joints responded in their own way to the urgency of his need.

He had started at sunrise on this bright Easter Sunday, had whistled the three sharp notes that opened the door of his house and had inched out jauntily, remembering a promise given at Xmas. By noon he was almost half to her, with hard walking. On down the yard he went through the hours of the afternoon, jaunty in his mind and hopeful as songs of birds, but shackled in movement to inch-along progress by the metal that had "replaced" him. "Maybe by Easter I can't walk," he remembered saying at Xmas. And she, his wife, had promised then to see him. At her place. To talk a bit at Easter. If Jon got through in time. Jon? Jon was her plastic man.

Sweat oozed up, from his great need, out of the urgency, out of the terrible exertion, to the flesh-strips on his face. Fatigue was coming in him, all the flesh of him, like a giant hand of lead slowly pulling him back and down. But his keen "replaced" eyes and the scientific detached brain noted clearly that he was making progress; the join cracks of his yard inexorably were inching by, or rather, he was passing across them in his bold struggle. If she ever would want me again, he thought, if she regularly wants me. again, he thought, I'll have to have a Roll-go put in the yard. He wiped the flesh-strips of his face. I wonder if she can walk now, he mused, and then dismissed the thought. It had been years since he had seen her in any pose except reclining or sitting on her white plastic bed. He remembered her reclining. He recalled the deep richness of the nylo-wov gowns she wore, the dancing ever-changing sheen of them. He thought of her legs "replaced" just enough and in just the places to bring them up to most-beautiful-legs-in-the-world standards. He remembered them in the rich sun-nylons, and how she would sit sometimes, coy legs dangled off bed edge, her small feet decorated with slippers of milky glass,

the tall stemmy heels of which were clear, usually, glowing and shouting with diamonds. A tiny ball of pink or red feathers, expensively woven from plumage of some exotic bird kept from the Old Days, sometimes enhanced each slipper. If with straps, these were of new-gold mesh, either white or yellow or green gold.

He fought on down the yard until he came, very late in the afternoon, to a place beneath her bedroom window. He forced back the cold and clammy metal wish in him that made him want to flee across the yard, back the way he had come, back to his hip-snuggle chair and his thinking work, the formulas, the pleasant baffling precision of Universal Deep Problems. The hot wants of the flesh that was still his mastered the metal wish that was fast becoming his true cold preference, and he forced his very accurate "replaced" eyes to go from looking at the gray yard up to pry into her window. The yellow fear, the bitter taste of gold (his larynx had been worked in that against cancer) was rank in his throat as questions tattered the flesh of him to shreds of apprehension and doubt. Had Jon got through? Would she talk? Had she remembered?

Then he saw her! His very accurate eyes found her. He gripped the walls of the house with his metaled hands. She lay upon a white-lace coverlet upon her white bed. The full skirt of her white dress was arranged, fanned-out, in a perfect half-moon arc, just cutting across the centers of her knees, fabulous in dark nylons, with the tip of the half-moon centered precisely on either edge of the bed. She was fully dressed even to very tall-heeled glass slippers sparkling with many diamonds, and a little hat of green gold scales and chains slanted charmingly toward one blue eye. Her breasts were two round hills that came to summits, shape of berries, and the sheer valley between narrowed and widened, narrowed and widened, in a way to bring madness.

"Marblene!" he cried, "oh, Marblene!"

She stretched slowly, like some indolent new-metal cat. She turned her head when she was ready and gazed out the top half of the window, and across her face came a look of majestic and very haughty boredom. And bewilderment. He called again.

"I'm here, Jon," she said. "Where are you, Jon? Oh hurry Jon. It hurts worse than it has."

His hands slipped on the wall; he almost fell. All the sounds of metal were in his ears, and all the tastes on metal choked his throat. All the air seemed to burst in flame and had an acrid smell. He saw Jon. The tall plastic Jon came through her bedroom door, and he had a length of glass broomstick in his hands. It was warmed and perfumed and set with many gems. In his halting hinge-joint way the plastic one strutted about the room for awhile, rubbing and caressing the piece of glass broomstick and applying a warm liquid to it. Then carefully he was over her. He fumbled at fastenings. He worked a long time at fastenings in what looked like hot hurry. And, at the end of it all, Jon had removed her glass slippers. He fell to rubbing the soles of her feet then, violently, with the glass rod. After awhile, with her moaning in contentment, he arose and hurried into another room. He came back carrying eight small glass sticks which he promptly inserted between all her toes and then swayed back and forth in a gentle sawing motion with the sticks. "So much better, Jon," she murmured. "So good to me, Jon. So good for me, Jon. I'll probably sleep some in awhile."

"MARBLENE!" he shouted then, all the frustrations of many months and this immediate jealousy of the plastic man welling up in him to bring this great yell. She turned her head a little to look out the lower half of the window, and Jon kept up the gentle motion at her toes. She saw him, her husband, hanging on to the wall, and there was no expression anywhere on her face to show that his being there meant one thing or another. "Jon's not through," she said. "He'll be activating at my toes a great while yet. Now that you've seen me for Easter, why don't you try again? At Halloween?"

He slipped and fell on down to the plastic yard. He crawled on around her house, and at the back, where she couldn't see him, he struggled to his feet. Then, plunk plunt tap ta-rap tunk tunka tap , he set off again across the steel-gray yard toward home, a pathetic figure of a little flesh and much of the new-metal new-alloy "replacements," destined, if the hopes and promises of Moderan were true, to live forever. About midnight a tin man in Seasons pressed the Central button for rain and a cold one started up to make more miserable the condition. Chilled and wet and throbbing with disappointment he reached his place in the very early hours of Monday morning. He went immediately to his hip-snuggie chair where his work awaited him, the formulas and the pleasant baffling precision of Universal Deep Problems. Somehow, oh, somehow, he must keep busy and make his flesh-strips forget her. At least until Halloween.

THE COMPLETE FATHER

He saw her, far across the ice-bright fields of plastic, a bouncing shape come toddling to show him her new-metal hands. And deep in his flesh-strips he felt a love tear try to surface, but of course it could not, because he had new metal eyeballs.

"My little girl! Growing up!" he said.

"Since you're my father," she said, "and it's my first, Mother said I should come show you."

Half past four she was. He looked at her. Half past four. "Growing up," he said. "My latest little girl!" Yes, they had brought her to them four and one-half years ago from the place where they kept the live womb-shells. Her mother and he had agreed by long-range conference over their mull-viewers one day - she in her bubble home lounging, he across five fields in his own thinking stronghold - that perhaps it would be all right to have a last child. The ten others had all gone nicely-five sturdy lads and five lasses they were, well on toward being "replaced" now, all in domes of their own now, thinking along Universal Deep Problems. Yes, for a last child before they "replaced" him down there and before the womb-shell should be taken from the line of the actives and destroyed, or it might be returned to his wife as a memento if she wished. It was bright sunny May, he remembered, when he went down with his last packet to the long glass hall where the Commissioner of Incubation accepted the germs. His wife had followed him all along on her multi-viewer, so he did not feel alone. When the Incubator man said, "Which?" and the prospective father said, "Girl," and they joshed a bit, since it was no secret that it was to be the eleventh, it seemed that the wife was there too, so smiling was her picture. "You're a brute for punishment," the man said, and the father-hopeful said, "Yes!" although a bit later he said, "Nothing like children to keep the family alive!" The Incubator man agreed, and the wife smiled big.

When he came down to the place where they did it to the wombs she was soon there too, come whirring in on her beams to set her picture down by his side. In the cool clean, nearly airless, womb-room it seemed he could almost hold hands with her, so good were her beams that day, and he did not feel lonely while the miraculous act was done. In fact, who would say that it wasn't the best of conceptions - he, his wife's clear smiling picture, his wife's womb, the packet of germs and the efficient nearly-all-plastic ward boy administering things and making the right adjustments?

But that was more than five years ago. How time blasts off and rockets by! And here was Little Sister.

"Hello, Little Sister." As four-and-one-half-year-old-like she gulped for her greeting he thought of how it had been, how they had all come across the white fields between him and their mother's place to show off their new-metal things. And how inevitably they had all been so proud of their first "replacements." "Growing up! My little boy!" Or, "My little girls!" He had said it to each of them in their turn. And then they had chatted on a bit about the newest in spaceships, or some Universal Deep Problem, the child not understanding, he knew, but it was all he had to talk on, and certainly he wanted to show his interest and be a complete father. And then after things had grown tedious - in about five minutes, say - when they were tired of him and he was sick of them, it would be back across the yard to Mother's place, toddling, but walking proud always, glad of the new things they had got. And then it would take perhaps a year before they would be back again to pester, the occasion some major "replacement" from the Rebuilders - and he would have been free of them all that time to sit thinking in his hip-snuggie chair. Yes, he sat in a castle of thought while far away, across five fields, their mother reared them by automatics over in the nursery dome where she pressed the do-a-tot buttons.

She looked up at him, her blue eye intent out of a face of beautiful flesh. And a tear tried again for his surface while he thought fast thoughts of new spaceships and longed for the tears to stop trying. What an odd irritating little discomfort it was. "Little Sister," he said, "if you can't stop looking at me so, you'll have to fire up and blast off."

"Daddy! Mother says I can't come back to see you for about a year. Not until I get my feet changed by the Rebuilders. And since you're my really Daddy, don't you think that's a too-long-time? I want to look at you!"

"No," he answered, not thinking, "about a year. That's about right. That's probably the way your 'replacement' program has been set up. It's the usual."

"But daddies are supposed to be Daddies," she said all at once in a burst. "I've been hearing on the Programs..."

CRASH! His hip-snuggie chair hit its other two feet down from where he had them tipped for his thinking and instantly he was on his feet, clanking and rattling and sweating. "YOU'VE BEEN HEARING ON THE PROGRAMS?!" Then he knew how the wife had betrayed him. As a last final chance to get to him she was playing tricks with the little girl's training, pressing the old tot buttons, letting her hear some of the ancient garbage of love, togetherness, and the family stew. "Little Sister!" he gasped, and he knew today he would not speak much of spaceships, nor the problems of the Red Galaxy, nor the space run to Marsoplan. "Little Sister, you'll have to hear me. And remember what I have said. Let your young mind cling to these things for your future may well depend on them all.

"Once, long ago, in an age of horror, living conditions were as your mother has let you hear on the old tot tubes in that abandoned nursery. People lived together in clusters of rooms, whole families lumped not only in each other's consciousness, but together in sight and smell as well as feel. Their personalities were untrue; their characters developed twisted; they were walking nightmares of contradictions because they warped one another by their proximities. They even ate together, food such as, thank all the powers of Thinking, you have never seen - sustenance that often times came in great chunks which they took by mouth and actually had to chew and swallow by their own power. Now, who would have time for that today, what with the need for power mentalics and the overriding necessity for using all our abilities for Universal Deep Thinking? And remember. **THEY WALKED IN THE WEAKNESS OF FLESH ALL THE DAYS OF THEIR LIVES!**"

Little Sister was dabbing at her eyes with her steel fingers, and for some unaccountable and wholly disgusting reason he felt the love tear deep inside him trying again to embarrass him. "It sounded so

wonderful," she said. "Daddies loved their little girls. And sometimes at Xmas... What's love? What does it mean?"

BANG BANG BOOM!!! He pressed the button for Big BIG Din to start, for this second IT, a minor "ultimate contingency," and all over his plastic stronghold things rapped together, making a worse sound surely than thunder and shore batteries and field pieces at cannonade in the old days before we shipped our atmosphere, most of it, out toward Marsoplan. When Big BIG Din was over and he had pressed the all-done things she just stood there, a frightened little girl with steel fingers in her ears. "Love!!!" he said in a quiet exclamation, and his voice filled up with horror to attain the complete effect, "let us not hear of that word again, ever, that nasty impossible word again, for which if ever again you mouth it here, your mouth will be rinsed out with plain boiling lead.

"Now, let us get on. A few of the horrors of the past I have hinted at such as living together, having to chew actual horrible chunk food, and running around in flesh all the time with no hope of, or very little hope of-metal!" To strike a point home he leaped over suddenly until his steel feet were close to her and he gave her a horrible sharp little pinch on the face with one steel hand while he dug a steel fingernail into her ribs with the other, not injurious but painful enough that she felt it. While she shrieked and screamed getting over it he talked on matter-of-factly. "You see, Little Sister, in all the old days they had no hope. Flesh all the time and no chance of getting out of it, and the horrible pinchings and fingernail jabblings they must have done on each other all the time! How the blood must have flowed! And the screamings. Oh, horror! But you, Little Sister, have the fine hope of one day being nearly all new-metal alloys with the very minimum of flesh-strip holding you together, and that can be cleverly sheathed and camouflaged until almost no one can tell where to pinch you and jab you. And besides, sometime, who knows, the way women's rights keep going, you may well have a Stronghold almost as good as mine, with all the weapons men and the warmers to help you, and then you'll be nearly safe from all the pinchers and the jabbers because you can blast them from a long way out. And in these complete and fun-filled days of the automatics, when almost nearly everyone sits expertly served by gad-goes and thinks generally on Universal Deep Problems, who goes visiting anyway? Except little girls perhaps, for a very short while, showing something new to their daddies."

He thought she might take the hint, stop screaming, show him her new hands again and then blast off for the bubble-dome home of her mother. But not Little Sister! She stopped screaming, jabbed at a couple of watery blue eyes and fixed him with a blunt stare. "I came for a good long talk," she said, "Daddy. And then you'll just have to walk me home, because by that time it'll be night, and I'd be SCARED to go across all that plastic in the dark by myself. And besides you need to go over anyway to help press some of the buttons. Mama says she's getting fedup having to do all those do-a-tots by herself."

Oh, horrors! Woe! Worry! Damnation! Grief! What a pest are little girls, he thought. "I CAN'T DO ANY OF THE DO-A-TOTS," he said, screaming fast. "Besides, the agreement was, if I'd take the germs down to the incubator for you your mother'd do the do-a-tots and rear you. And anyway, there's trouble in the Red Galaxy lately and the space ran to Marsoplan has been strangely deviating currently and requires that we all think clear. I'm sorry, but I've work here to hold me. You'll just have to let dark not catch you, and your mother'll have to do the do-a-tots herself. Because the Great Thinking of the Universe cannot be held up for any one child."

She started one of the fits then that he had hated so in the rest of the children. She threw herself on the floor. She jumped up and down on her knees. She made her new-steel hands do a tattoo against each other. She started to take off her clothes. And through it all she was yelling, "I want Daddy! I want Daddy!" Rotten vile little flesh creature, showing all this embarrassing emotion. But the upshot was he was soon out in the ice-bright plastic yard, dressed in an old throw-away space snuggle, headed toward Mother's place, and Little Sister was jumping up and down chortling beside him, "Daddy's going to do a

do-a-tot, Daddy's going to do a do-a-tot." And far overhead, somewhere out in the dark blue of the gathering darkness, he knew he was neglecting the troubles in the Red Galaxy and the space run to Marsoplan was in need of his best mental time. Thinking of all their Deep Problems and watching Little Sister so happily ignorantly flesh-ridden beside him he felt a tear come up from somewhere deep away in an almost forgotten flesh-strip, and, breaking across multiple lenses then, it made a blur in some depth quite negating the marvelous precision of his wide-sweep mechanized eyeballs. Unable now to see clearly - indeed for awhile quite blacked-out - he clutched Little Sister's steel hand and they dug in staunchly, and he moved on through the slick yard with her, tear-blind in the coming of darkness.

WAS SHE HORRID?

I picked her up on my early warning line when she was still a long way out - just a speck on the last of my plastic hills where I watched for the Enemies. I tracked her all the way in, all the long way in as she came, little-girl wanderingly, something cradled in her baby arms. For a moment my mind reeled back and I thought, "It's just Little Sister come carrying the Littlest Angel up to my door." Then my thoughts snapped up to NOW as she rattled the gate, and I flicked the weapons button till all of the launchers were directed at my Outer Wall.

"The password! Quickly!" I shouted, and I really hoped she could give the right one. Otherwise I would have to go with the launchers. And it might not be one of the ground-level creeping missiles I had heard Witch had developed in the great laboratories of her plastic valley. It possibly wasn't a camouflaged walking doll-bomb designed to blow me to high skies and all winds. It might be really Little Sister truly having forgotten the secret password.

"Morning-glory-fit-and-fancy," she lisped, sharp as a little tack, and her big-big eyes I noticed were real, and there was love, I thought, sparkling through. It was a little girl!

"Advance to Gate 10 and he recognized!" Relieved, I flicked the eleventh, outer gate open. She came on through the walls as I thumbed the gates back. "Stand by for decontamination," I directed, speaking all along over the Big Address, when she stood before the last gate but two, fatty-round in her play spacesuit. She was jigging little-girl joyfully; she was going to see her daddy. But I had to watch. It might be tricks and booby traps. I directed all my inspectors and decontaminators on her as I let her through the last gate but one, tracking her closely with my weapons. When she stood before the last gate I asked her, "Do you have a pass to be here? Did Witch write you out a paper?"

"I slipped off from Witch and hopped on the roll-go road," she said and giggled. That pleased me. Witch was the wife, living over a dozen plastic hills from me, with, it had been reported from time to time, more than a dozen different plastic men. But it wasn't just for Witch that I had all the launchers and the Seeing Wall. Witch was only part of my troubles, the very most minor part almost now, things being what they are in the world; she lived in White Witch Valley with her plastic men and we saw each other infrequently indeed. Sometimes at Xmas we would exchange a frozen greeting - "Merry Xmas over there!" - over our multi-viewers; sometimes at Halloween I would send old broomsticks as a token of my love. And once, on a very recent Easter - I could never explain - we found ourselves both outside our walls peering our pocko-scope viewers to ward each other's strongholds just as the pink sun shot over the ice-like plastic hills. When I looked directly into her glass with my glass and saw the weird blue ball that was her newest eye I aged ten years just thinking, thinking of all the icy people-hatred in the world. And so who could

wonder that the walls out there have the pillboxes eight feet thick and the steel men waiting? It is not odd that I fear the creeping missiles, the walking doll-bombs and the White Witch rocket's flash, realizing that all I have to pit against them is constant vigilance and all the weapons I can get. But she had my children - little boy and little girl - long ago in that other world. He has gone over to the side of the plastic men now and works mostly with his space toys... and hardly ever sees his daddy. He's satisfied to be away from me, his daddy.

But as I said, Witch wasn't the only threat now. I didn't regard her as even the major threat now. She was a gadfly. The implacable Enemies were somewhere over farther hills, and then there was Time... Time trying to get through to my flesh-strips before I could get through to the Ultimate.

"Hello, Little Sister." The decontaminators had given her a clean bill; the weapons report had indicated that she was clear - RELIABLY as to her person, and a blurred CONDITIONAL was indicated for what she carried. I saw she carried the Littlest Angel so I thought it a reasonable risk - a little girl and her space dolly. I let them through. And now she stood before me, a tiny cherub of three, all flesh and bone and blood, her own, as yet, except her teeth, which were steel. And that was as far as the Rebuilders of Moderan had replaced her as yet, in deference to her years. By the age of twelve, if she lived, she would have all metal limbs, and perhaps, by that time, some of her organs would be plated. (I'm ninety-two and one-half percent metal alloys myself, designed to last forever!) "How are you, Little Sister?"

She lisped, jiggling in glee, "I came to live with you, Daddy. I ran away from Witch. You need love!"

"Oh no!" I was taken aback and thoroughly stunned. I rose from my hip snuggie chair and stood trembling, all my flesh-strips flooding cold sweat. All my metal parts, where they had rebuilt me, clanged and zinged. A little girl living with me! What would it do to my thinking? My work? Wouldn't she try to follow me into the Atmosphere Room of the Primitive where the walls were stone and bright blood colored...? Wouldn't she want to know how it was in the White Room of the Innocents when the two tons-heavy black metal balls moved on the chains...? Wouldn't she wish to be included, embarrassingly, as help when I went to feed my flesh-strips the complicated fluids of the introgen? And what if, some capricious day, I not knowing, she wandered alone into the horrors of the Tube of the Million Mirrors where amid awesome flashing desolation I search for my true reflection?

"Little Sister," I cried, and I held on to all the things I could reach, and I based my knees against two weapons men who stood by me, so that I hardly clanked and zinged at all now, "do you know, Little Sister, what I could do with you with but the press of a finger? Do you know that this is an armed place as well as an armored place, Little Sister? Do you realize that if you were to hold me, or tie me up, I could still throw a sign to one of my automatic weapons men and he would do the right thing to get you? And in the ultimate contingency, Little Sister, if all seemed otherwise at length but really lost, I could say a certain phrase at any one of all these tubes in the ceiling, all these tubes in the sides or the floor, and that would start a chain reaction in a stronghold I have hidden in a mountain far away from these walls. And all of this would blow up! You wouldn't win, you see, even then!" I was trembling against the weapons men who stood nearby; for all I tried not to, my hands made a tinkling sound where I held to two steel posts. And the little monster just stood there, a tiny girl in a play spacesuit laughing up at me, two blue eyes of ridicule it seemed, and she was still holding what I could see was the Littlest Angel. "You wouldn't win, Little Sister!" Sweat from my flesh-strips was falling down to the floor.

"You wouldn't want me?"

"I couldn't have you. Don't try to force me. It would interfere with my deep thinking. I would be entirely a different person with you about. I couldn't search through to the Ultimate!" I found I was almost screaming.

"I'll go then. I thought you needed love."

"Love!!! No, a visit's fine. Ten minutes or so, since you're an immediate member of the family, if you didn't bring anything to hurt me. But love - well, it would be a bother - so unrealistic. And I might forget to watch for the Enemies."

"I'll go now!" Her lower lip pouting out indicated that she thought her feelings had been hurt. Or else she was acting. With little girls it's hard to say.

"I'm glad you could come," I said. I fear I said it a trifle stiffly. I never could unbend at such times. But since I could see the end of the visit was at hand I found I wasn't clanking anymore. "Now, if you must go -" I said. "Witch will probably be worried, you know," I said. "Some other truce time, maybe - come again -"

She left then, out through all the gates, with the weapons tracking her. And I noticed that she kept looking back over her shoulder, but there weren't any tears in her eyes, and I wondered vaguely why her steel teeth were bared in what seemed to me a little girl's devilish grin. Then I saw on the floor where she had left the puffed and bulbous space doll, Littlest Angel, and I stooped to take it and rush it to her. When I touched the Littlest Angel both my hands blew off up to the shoulders. And the paw of a giant seemed to lift me and hurl me through ten rooms. Mined! But I wasn't hurt badly. I recovered in time to see Little Sister riding a roll-go up the last of my plastic hills. When she turned and waved just at the top of the last rise, just windmilled a fat tubular arm of a play spacesuit in my direction before she turned down into the Valley of the Witch, I suppose I should have blasted her with the launchers. For I suppose she was meaning to be waving a last greeting at the place where she thought her daddy was dead. But I didn't have my arms fixed back yet to press the buttons, and who could say that Little Sister was actually to blame for the mining of the Littlest Angel?

Perhaps it was mostly Witch and that was why the loud bands played and a flurry of flags and victory flares broke out on the air over her valley while I lay on the black stumps of my shoulders, gasping.

And besides, I face other Enemies, bad implacable Enemies whipping their wings through the milky air, watching me from a brown distance. They sharpen horns and claws and teeth full of danger and they shake reptilian tails for the whirring pounce that will end ME! Oh yes! Tomorrow I must stand even closer to my launchers and seek a way to redouble my vigilance on the hills.

[A GLANCE AT THE PAST](#)

Because they had much leisure time in automatic New Processes Country, and also because the roll-gos, those fast expensive conveyor roads of the kingdom, would certainly have been inadequate for such a pilgrimage, the people came walking. Under the red-brown vapor shield of hot July they swept across the yards and fields, bunched, like locusts going toward wheat in the old days. Tap-a-tap tarrump-tarrump tap-a-tap they came on their metaled feet, many all together, until the sound of metal striking plastic was a steady and ominous roar.

Word had spread fast that morning in mid-July. In less than two hours everyone knew of the curious

thing's arrival and shortly thereafter almost everyone was in headlong movement toward it. At the request of the Green Council, airmen from Olderan had flown it in during the very early hours of morning, down a transglobal air corridor under cover of darkness, to the very gates of the Building of Ancient Customs. They had moved it carefully in its cushioned case, from the controlled climate of the ship from Olderan. And they established it, in its specially prepared glass display ball, on a black plastic dais in the Building of Ancient Customs. Then solemnly the Green Council pushed the buttons that advertised the display on all the picture walls in the land, and they declared a week in the queer thing's honor.

Across the yards and fields the hordes of the curious swept on, in the peculiar iron-on-plastic roar, toward the doors of the Building of Ancient Customs. And conversations were heard among the mightily metaled folk of New Processes Country. One sturdy lady of "replacements" that were mostly of the fairly old alloy known as iron-x was heard to remark to a younger thing of the new gold-seal alloys that according to the stories handed down and handed down her great-great-great-grandfather's father had been possessed of a little monster gadget much like this they were going to see, and had made constant good use of it too.

"As recently as that! Imagine!" she honked and squawked out of her iron throat that had been worked in iron-x against cancer long ago. She exhibited that universal good feeling common to women everywhere when they are able to impart some fairly scandalous bit of information to another woman.

"As far back as we've cared to search," the other replied, all in haughty good fellowship, "we're clean as a flame on that score. But of course I want to see this thing anyway. You know some of my ancestors, 'way 'way back, in the space age probably, must have had these things, must have depended on them. How awful!"

"Well, they say my ancestor got awfully good service out of his, took it wherever he wanted to go, employed it all the time," iron-x lady remarked in a gesture at ancient family loyalty. "But I guess he would have had it 'replaced' as everyone else was doing then, except he was out of the country so much of the time, on space service, to the Million Saucer Battles on Mars, and that awful purple thing on Venus, you know, where they stopped our boys with sheets of purple dust. Just never had time for the change-over, it seemed. And 'tis said he was heard to remark once that because of the things he'd seen, at battles and places, I guess - probably that awful purple thing on Venus, especially - he didn't want to live forever anyway. Can you imagine anyone saying a thing like that?"

The other one couldn't imagine it and said so with appropriate honking and ticking and clucking from her gold-seal larynx.

"But of course that was before people had things like we do here in New Processes Country," the iron-X one kept on, bent still on explaining things for her ancestor. "Imagine not having beautiful and sanitary plastic yards with color-change, and a live-alone house-ball for each person to dwell in. Think if you can back on a time before the time of universal daisies, when it wasn't possible to bloom a whole metal garden through the yard holes just at the flick of a button. My ancestor probably never even saw one of the beautiful mechanical flowers, such as we take for granted today. And he didn't have the tin mandolin men nor even one of the great plastic trios that I can have in my music grotto tonight just at the whim of a beam. The air he breathed was not conditioned unless he was in a room, and then, nine times out of ten, it wasn't flavored. He didn't know the glories of the shape men with their nightly panoramas, nor the color throwers we find so diversionary. He didn't have the different colored vapor shield each month that makes such a pretty world for us. For him it was always blue sky and that awful yellow sun, unless he had clouds, and then gray.ugh! He didn't even have a sex machine! Just think how much we have that he didn't have, and maybe you'll understand."

"Oh, yes," the other agreed, wishing to mollify her companion, "and at the time your ancestor lived no one thought much about living forever anyway. Probably. 'Replacements' were just then getting well started, I imagine. Why, I'll bet at that time no one in the whole world could have claimed for more than fifty percent 'replacement.' And if he did, it would probably just have been some rebuilt battle victim, or a haphazardly put back together auto-wreck case. And not scientific. But look at you and me. You're about up to ninety, aren't you? And scientific!"

"Ninety-one," her companion lied. "And with these new quick-seal alloys that fuse with the flesh so easily I may be able to go higher. But even now, with only nine percent of me flesh-strip and human blood, I don't figure there's much chance I'll die."

"I should hope not," the other agreed. "Of course I'm ninety-two and one-half myself, and I'm starting new treatments tomorrow!" (She too was lying!)

Tap-a-tap tarrump-tarrump tap-a-tump they walked on without talking more, toward the Building of Ancient Customs, part of a horde that swept on all day until very late in the afternoon the vanguard came to the outer gates of the building. Officers from the Society for the Better Understanding of Ancient Customs allowed them to go in single file through an entrance gate that was hung heavily with ersatz moss and tin ivy. They passed on into a room where a small round shell of clearest glass rested on an ancient black velvet cover. And each of the curious folk of New Processes Country was allowed to stare a few seconds at the glass ball and its queer occupant that, in a carefully controlled climate, was alive and slaving diligently away at a task that was unreal now, real to it maybe over a hundred years ago. Next week or so the Society for the Better Understanding of Ancient Customs would write the letter of thanks and appreciation for the loan of the old-fashioned display. And a generous check would be enclosed for Olderan, that little mountain-and-sea-locked country whose devout queer people clung to ways of flesh and the past.

As they stood side by side watching the quaint outmoded little battler staunchly pound away for their amusement, the iron-x lady was heard to read from a pamphlet describing the unique display: "Today, after viewing this monstrosity, you and I must feel great pity for all our ancient ancestors. It was their poor fortune to be born so long ago and inhabit a world where such a thing as this was everyone's common danger, not the clowning mutant exception, but the common sober rule. No wonder they were wavery and unsure, mushy and vulnerable, scared half to death most of the time and prone to be softheaded. Let us forgive them, the weak-hearted. Think of the lurking terrors, the anxieties, the insecurities, the deaths! they had to endure - when the little monster decided to have a bad day."

"Yes!" gasped her gold-seal companion.

Then, in a great outpouring of good feeling and good fellowship, and poignantly aware of their common bond of good luck, they decided, right there in the late afternoon, to recite the Morning Pledge, the early morning salute, a thing usually reserved for day start. Together they intoned: "From this day forward, and forever, I truly thank that great iron and plastic idol we have raised in our own image and set to circle our world always on a red and yellow satellite - I thank him truly for my iron and plastic - my everlasting - heart !"

[EDUCATIONAL](#)

They were going across the plastic fields and yards of Moderan, on carnival. There was an air of circling and picnicking and old last-days-of-school as they wentta rap ta rump tump tumpa tump in their metal-on-plastic way. They were going to the fabulous new shopping district set up in the northwest corner of a Moderan province by the Committee for Better Understanding of Old Times.

They came after a hard-walking trip - they had decided, since this was an outing jaunt, a pleasure sojourn, not to clutter the hard-pressed roll-gos - to a little rise of plastic ground and topping that they could look down a gentle slope to a town of neon. Arrows darted hither and yon under the high-blue vapor shield of June and all over Neon Town spots danced, long lines waved, short lines ran up and down lengths of gay air, squares and diamonds and circles formed and disappeared and formed again, cans of coffee bloomed full-tinned in the sky, tea bags were outlined in red and yellow and blue, life insurance was sold by the hatful by big block letters that ran spelling in the sky and then erased and spelled again in a brighter color until such brightness was reached that the eye begged for relief, and that came in the form of dancing spots of brown and wavy lines of gray where sprightly diet cola was being madly merchandised alongside rock-solid mortuary goods from a nearby undertaker's establishment. Not to mention articles of wearing apparel of all description, lawn mowers, house trailers, new cars, toy machine guns, burial markers, health plans, exercise schemes and hundreds of dozens of other things that MUST be sold.

The picnickers of Moderan, two tall spare old ladies of Many iron-x and a few gold-seal "replacements," stood spellbound on the gentle slope leading into Neon Town. For awhile they could not speak but could only look and wonder. Then the tallest sparest one, of mostly iron-x, but one or two gold-seal "replacements," pushed herphfluggee-phflaggee button and said in a high tight phfluggee-phflaggee voice, "Have you your guide book, Emm?"

"Yes, Luu," replied the other in a voice-button voice that was really jumping now, "isn't this just too much!? EXCITING!"

So they tapped on down into the neon-sparkling place, and they were met there by no one. "You mean we just go on in?" they wonderingly asked each other. "I thought there would be admission - and committees," they both thought. Emm thumbed at her guide. "The book says, 'When you are in the shopping district, you are to feel as free and relaxed as though you were in your own livealone bubble-dome house-ball having your calmness bath in a soof-air tub. There will be no NO compulsion nor pressuring toward buying, and no attempt whatsoever to set up a false merchandising aspect will be made,'" Emm recited on, her face cut and slashed and danced upon by the merchandising neons cavorting prettily. "'Stop at the bank and arrange for whatever financing you will reasonably expect to need.'"

On the first block of First Street in Neon Town they came to an ancient building, a thick-walled boxy structure of concrete and old-made steel. Tubed pale blue neon said it was THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK AND TRUST COMPANY, and bright red tubed neon said dancingly a figure of assets that was fully past any sensible meaning. Luu and Emm gasped at the dancing numbers and allowed phfluggee-phflaggee wise that assets were certainly up well at FIRST NATIONAL.

They went in to cool sterility and a kind of clean mustiness, sensed often in the past in such places as First Nationals, and they saw the well-groomed, efcient, surface-smiling little zero-man, the bank clerk borrowed from Olderan for the exhibit. Emm, with Luuta-rumping hard behind her, tapped toward his window. The total zero behind the window waited patiently, quietly smiling his zero smile, toying a little at his shirt cuffs and drumming his well-done fingers a little on the counter, nervously, as bank clerks are always apt to do while waiting for old ladies to make that long hitchy walk across the foyer. But withal he

seemed altogether well-adjusted to waiting patiently for old depositors and old withdrawers. There was no problem.

After a long and hardta-rumping time Emm and Luu reached the window. "We seek financial counsel and advice," Emm recited from her guide. "What would you consider adequate for our downtown shopping tour? Remember, this is our initial encounter and first contest with your lights and slogans." There was no smile upon zero-man now. He was dealing in financial advice, and already, no doubt, he reminded himself of some great bank vice president advising two old female tycoons. He eyed the two metal ladies as though they were as detestable as bugs might have been in the Old Days, on the spotted plants along the foyer. After eyeing them coldly awhile and giving the impression of efficient calculation by making some meaningless straight parallel lines and some very pretentious X's on a sheet of paper that he carefully kept concealed, he came up with a bleak smile. "How about securing a loan and setting up a checking account of five hundred million dollars for each of you?" he said.

"We have no collateral," Emm recited. "We are just come down from Upper Moderan for an educational shopping tour in this Old Place, this transplanted bit of Olderan." The little bank clerk smiled a more real smile now, relieved that his part of the act was over, handed them two blank checkbooks and wished he were back home in Olderan for some good-hole golf. "Good luck. Don't overbuy!" he called at the backs of the hardta-rumping Luu and Emm.

They went upon the streets and it was noon and the flesh ribbon clerks, the flesh five-and-dimers, the flesh file people, the flesh type thumpers and ail the many other office achievers common to Olderan were darting at the hamburger places, fretting in line at the cafeterias and hoping to do everything in a great hurry so they could have a little shopping time on their thirty-minute noon "hour." To compensate a little for their daily indigestion and those big heart attacks later to come! "Well, I never!" said Luu to Emm. "What are they doing?" Emm leafed at her guide. "If you happen to be caught in the noon crush," she recited "the flesh people will be eating." And Luu and Emm looked through the steamy windows of "joints" and saw the people rudely gulping great plump hamburgers and daintily fingering out brown sticks from heaped saucers of French fries. "Well! I never!" gasped Luu to Emm.

Then, since it was near the center of the day, they remembered that it was time for something for themselves. They looked wildly about and they looked wildly at each other. "The guide, the guide," gasped Luu.

"Of course," replied Emm, calmer now, "it'll tell... Near the center of the day," she read, "at the normal period for lube and introven, you are to enter any one of the numerous comfort stations, marked in the usual Moderan way FE for the use of those of female descent, MA for the male types. A full line will be available for your convenience, if you forgot your totem bag."

"I brought mine," volunteered Luu. "I know it's clean."

"I never like the public ones either," agreed Emm swinging her own totem bag as theyta-rumped on down to find a place marked FE. Once inside the comfort station they each took out their own little bottle of lubricant and oiled well the metaled parts, with an especially liberal application at all the places of jointure. "Wouldn't it be nice if this were all we had to do," sighed Luu. But it was not. Now came the more involved thing of feeding the flesh-strips that held together the "replacements." This involved much dissolving of tablets and many fractionings of many wafers, many grains from many big and little capsules and drops from bottles of diverse sizes and colors and shaking all this well before assembling the tubes and the needles and the feeding jars. First Luu lay upon the feeding strip, a black steel slab pulled out of the wall and fixed perfectly level, and Emm "fed" her by sticking one of the nutriment needles into each of her flesh-strips. Luu lay as though dead while feeding, which was the correct pose at "mealtime" in

Moderan. When Luu's "meal" was through, she arose vigorously and "fed" Emm. Not that each lady couldn't have "fed" herself, if need be, but they cooperated today to save more time for shopping.

When they emerged from the comfort station, they found that the streets were quieter. The workaday people of Olderan had gulped their hamburgers and French fries, had drunk their colas and their coffees, had grabbed their few minutes of shopping time from their thirty-minute lunch "hour" (to do something, some little something, even, in buying to ease the ache from the lure of all those signs) and then they had dashed gally back to their challenging stimulating endeavors. YES!

Luu and Emm went shopping in Neon Town. While there was nothing for sale there that they needed or could possibly use, ever, let it be known that the compulsion of the merchandising was so subtle and so aggressive and so compelling and so friendly and so entirely completely effective there that these two good old new-metal ladies were swept loose from their sales-resistance moorings almost completely. They bought lawn mowers and trash cans and panty girdles and nylon stockings and life insurance and Easter hats and Christmas cards and Halloween pumpkins and birds in cages and men's suits and the latest apparatuses and aids for feminine hygiene, not to mention fabulous foods and drinks and birth-control pills that they could not possibly in, any way need to employ, ever.

After a long and thoroughly educational and completely stimulating day in Neon Town the tired but happy Luu and Emmta-rumped back to their homes in Moderan, leaving all their purchases at a building provided just for that, near the outer gate. "Well! I never!" gasped Luu to Emm. "I never could have believed it either, if I hadn't seen it," agreed Emm.

IT WAS IN BLACK CAT WEATHER

It was in black cat weather and jack-o'-lantern times that she stood beneath his window, hallooing, holding five long slim boxes stacked in her scabbing arms. A vague iron shadow over by the fence was holding some object that a little resembled a boat.

"Daddy," she yelled, "come see what we have brought to you. And there's lots more. Over in Good Long Rest. And think how many more - all over, in all the others. And think how many more... Come see!"

Of course he knew that her five boxes contained nothing really, at least not anything you could - well, not anything. And of course iron Mox was carrying one of the THINGS out of Good Long Rest. Entirely forbidden...

He arose from his hip-patty chair, the good den lounge, the gentle undulator, where he sat mostly now, one-childed and wifeless, the Calm Waiter, and thought on Universal Deep Questions, problems of the world. He chewed at his throat with the fixer, probing and prying, trying to ease some at the place that was worked all in gold against cancer, and he said in his preplanned speech, working hard with his mouth, following along with the tapes, "Daphalene! you are not to take the iron Mox with you anymore to Good Long Rest. Because he gets the THINGS! Even though I set him on Dumb Servant, Alternate Set, he still somehow changes to Human Set and goes for the THINGS. I don't care if you want to take those long stocking boxes down there alone day in and day out three hundred and sixty-five days a year for the twenty-five next years and bring back - well, bring back whatever it is you say you find down there. But

no more of this stuff of Mox and the big dirty damp THINGS. Understand?

"And Mox!" Mox came lumbering in on his blunt boat-shaped feet, holding a big box lightly out as though it contained something much wanted. When it was not taken at once, Mox dropped the box resoundingly to the ground and shook his arms high up into himself until his iron hands were hanging like calm leaves from his shoulder beams, a strange shrug. Then he flapped his hands and flashed his bulb eyes on and off in his usual greeting manner. "Skip the fawn stuff. Flick off your Human switch, Mox, and go on Dumb Servant, Alternate Set switch. NOW!" He complied. "Pick up that dirty THING you dropped almost on my feet." He did that. "Back to Good Long Rest! And fix! Fix so no one knows you've disturbed."

They disappeared into the black cream night, and his throat being tired from the shouting, and without tape fixed now to yell Daphalene to come back, they both walked away, an iron thought-tape thinker and a little girl wading into the shadowless thick dark under a moonless low sky and clouds on the edge of late October rain. She was Daphalene, his daughter Daphalene in the monster times, in the times when strange machines and strange mutants roamed the homeless plastic of Moderan, juggling their switches and angers. In an age past the age for virtue, or even a try, he let her run with the iron tape-fed thinker as the lesser of many evils, in her springtime, gathering what experiences she would against, in those times, the dark tendency toward hopelessness wide and thick and tall as the rubbery wet sky above. He tried to teach her nothing. In due time she would grow to "replacements" and part by part her flesh would go for metal and plastic in the new great surgery and what remained would be fed with the introven. But now let her, motherless, go with her stocking boxes into the deep night following the thought-taped thinker, and let her cope with her loneliness and her grown-up problems as best she might until, finally, hard and firm and unshockably "replaced" she'd be a woman to survive!

Good Long Rest was a cemetery. When she came back, perhaps he would leave his hip-patty chair long enough to go to her. Perhaps, faking, he would take one of her stocking boxes and look inside, pretending interest. And perhaps there would be, for once, lightning bugs fluttering and flashing in the long hollow dark of the stocking box. And then he could say with the fatherly tape, against the gold block for the cancer, "Why Daphalene, how nice! You have been out catching the bug lights in the great night of this cemetery world like a normal little-child-player should. Just as I told you to do. Against the long dark a little spark. How nice! And you have brought them, in boxes burning and chafing your scabbing little arms, all up to me, your daddy. How nice nice nice nice..."

He found it best to have his speech preset these days, the tape tape-planned, so all would go smoothly around the gold block for the cancer. Sometimes, caught off balance, the tape wrong or not ready, and circumstances changed, his words would go past a situation in a kind of silly commentary, and weird beyond all imagining, because circumstances, for which one cannot always preplan, can change speech need. Circumstances should not do that to him, he felt, but they did. And whereas overall, he should have been, cautiously, saying less and less these days, he found himself loudly saying more and more all the time, making his plans in hopes and letting the comments flow up the gold flue in a challenge at black conditions - pleas, really.

Against the noise of iron feet in the night and the soft chuff-chug of little-girl shoes moving, he let his monster throat start its trial run. His words beat like flailing clods in the gold stovepipe where should have been supple workings of thought sound. "HELLO," it shouted at the dark. And then they were lumps in view. Mox was a tall square hump over by the plastic pear tree; she was a much smaller and slenderer blob in the dark, a little apart from her iron friend. He sprang toward his daughter, his mouth going hard at the words he had planned. "Why Daphalene, how nice nice nice... You have been -"

She thrust a stocking box up to him, and for one ice-struck ice-stark moment her eyes fathomed into his

under the rays of the beamo light that was just then circling past from his rooftop. The beamos were cutting across the yard from the other rooftops too, crisscrossing the tops of him and her in alternating shakes of light and thick dark. Mox stood fluttering his hinge arms up and down in his shoulder holes. She was straining quietly as a stone.

The stocking box in his hand was heavy. Nothing fluttered in it; no lights pulsed in its housed darkness. He waited for the next sweep of his rooftop's beamo, holding the box where he thought the ray would pass. It swept across something white and cold and dead of eye in the box. Daphalene waited, upthrust there like a pedestal, with her scabbed hands wrap-twisted. Mox was hinging, and unhinging the full length of his arms still. And a throat, strangely, felt an old ache that was not all from the gold part of a voice trough.

He let the beamo pass again across the white thing in the box, and amidst an ice-mist feeling along all of his flesh-strips quivering he suddenly realized. At the third sweep he held it out until he could see the jag places where Mox had sundered it from its spot where it had for five years rested upon a gravestone flower-and-angel-burdened in Good Long Rest. At the fourth sweep he threw it hard as he could at the iron sheet he stood on. The whizzing beamos from the many rooftops caught flashes of shattering white, and his throat ached so from an old ache that he could not finish his preplanned conversation. And a white eye smote him with a smooth chalky star of cold - cold. Then the iron Mox, suddenly quitting that silly business of hinging and unhinging his arms, bent squarely, through the big hinges in his waist loop only, and lifted a THING from the ground. "It's her!" Daphalene shrieked with a cry of celebration. "You had his switch on Servant, so I just ordered him to do it. He's found Mother!"

As he collapsed quietly across the white dust of an angel, the iron Mox and the frightened little girl again slipped cemeteryward, into the gummy dark, guessing they had not pleased him.

SOMETIMES I GET SO HAPPY

Thinking of those still in the plight of the family stew, with their many flesh burdens and tortures, sometimes I get so happy with my steel condition - I laugh. I clap out beats with my big steel hands and I thump and stamp with my heavy new-metal feet until, tired, I go to throw a long steel log on the fire in some massive new-metal fireplace of my mind. And then I sit in my hip-snuggie chair and draw on recorded tapes of contentment for hap-thinking...

But it has not always been so easy nor so fine. NO! Let me tell you... I remember one stark and tragic time in Olderan before I was "replaced." The rotations and revolutions had gone once more according to the Track, the orbiting had all styled in as fine and fixed as anyone could ask, and so once more it was all blue and gold and green of days-and spring. I walked, walking a pet beige bulldog, into a gentle liquid wind that was sowing the air with seed floats, petals, old husks of leaf buds and, of course, perfume. And grimly, yes, grimly, I was on time for a chance meeting. YES! One minute either way, ONE! and the fount of the Old Earth's agonies would have stayed emptier by two big heartfuls. One minute out of all the eternities of the seconds, sixty of them were our need. But some jokesmith god of love denied us our need.

So I went on into the encounter at the street cross. And life cross. And suddenly there's my pet beige bulldog growling and groaning and clawing the general ground in a very tall excitement. Yes, we've come

to the Meeting, but I'm still yonder, thinking as usual on Universal Deep Problems, Questions of the World. I have my gleam ships all lofted in the liquid wind, routed on runs to star-tracked Marsoplan, and all the White Galaxies of heaven are joining a union of Suns. I'm manning all the Ramparts of Light with new sun scopes for some final smash on Darkah, dreaming. But there's my real and solid, though quite impractical now, old beige bulldog grunting and groaning and whining at the ground in a high-fever state of a very tall excitement. Well, on the groundward end of a purple-jeweled dog lead there is this small French dog, hair carved to a poodle do, neck all beribboned and body all perfumed, thus explaining in full the whole intent of my bulldog's grunts and groans. For yes, yes, she's a fine big girl for a dog. YES! On the heavenward end of this purple-flashing dog strap, slanted up to hands so small pale and fine-all ringless on the left-well, what's to say? Just say, there holding a small French dog by an amethyst-studded tether stood the blue-gold goddess of all tall-heaven dreaming, face pointed athwart the liquid wind and me. And there stood I, dazed and dream-vulnerable, holding the slack chain lead of a huge old Boston bulldog who has just collapsed in a kind of ecstasy and is even then sprawling on the sidewalk, breathing hard, lapping his tongue about (you could almost see those dog brains go) thinking of that little French poodle dog.

But how did I - so long ago in Olderan, flesh-encumbered, dream-burdened, fuzzy-brained and woolly-minded - make out with the heavenward end of that purple-jeweled dog strap? Sometimes I'm tempted to tell you how it was, how the sky fell down in great blue diamond pieces that day of the tragic beautiful instant, how a whirlwind blew three rages through the mind there in the soft liquid air with the seed floats, and how a million sunburst voices spoke of greatest GREATEST Joy. At other times I'm tempted to rattle my steel-ball eyeballs at you, pump up and down on my new-metal all-weather knee joints, juggle a hundred new-metal bubble globes all at once with my new-metal hands, stick out my plate tongue at you each and everyone and press thephfluggee-phflaggee button on my talker at you one and all - BLAAHHH!!!

But just say there was this blue-eyed instant. Say there was this place made out of that one instant, and in it was the all-that-matters world. For it was spring and there stood I, young and dream-vulnerable. And there stood she, all ringless on the left, pushing blue and gold and white, outdoing the very flowers with her own expensive color tones and scents.

After that, just say all the legions were committed, all the ships sailed and the skies were filled with airplanes. We kept back nothing in the grim encounters that our love was, for remember we were flesh that year, all dream-bothered flesh; we moved in to destroy each other with more than usual fervor, for our passion was great and most unique in Olderan that season. Or so at least we thought it. But there were no winners. Are there ever?

Came the time, far down the days of agony of our trial by love, when I had sickened. The long months of pursuit, the heart palpitations, the doubts, the searing hopes, the prizes thrust out to dangle and then be denied by iittles - that whole grim business - had worn me thin. We both saw how it was. She for pity married a business man who owned five factories, a private road, ten cars and a railroad train. And I, seeing my chances and sensing the way the winds of progress were listing, set sail with all remaining energy and fastest possible speed to join the Bangs to fight the world wars that were just then forming up. After the great loss at Landry and the end of our world as we knew it I came out of the bomb smear, the havoc far and everywhere, to have myself done over right down to a minimum of flesh-strip holding me in shape. I not only got rid of all the love-befuddled tissue, I went much further and had healthy flesh snipped out for "replacement" until finally, testing out at almost ninety-two and one-half per cent good new-metal steel, I knew I was SOLID!

She and the factory owner have been dead many many years let me say. Even their flesh ways of living have mostly been bypassed by progress now, and their land has been invaded and transformed by

steadily growing, massively encroaching Great New Processes Land. His factories have been converted to warehouses; they store parts for men now. I, in on the ground floor by being a New Processes Early, have climbed a mountain of greatness I never thought I'd approach. I am respected and powerful. My blasters, armed with the latest in megatons, are ready to flip their volcanoes around this world and any nearby others in times of war. In times of peace I may sit in a hipsnuggie beach loafing chair beside a pool of clear colorless oil, the paddling and wading-sports place of the New Processes new-metal man whose status is good.

Butch is my new-metal dog now. Sometimes I activate him and he's ready then to chew the world down to comfortable dog-size pieces. But most times I just leave him hunched up by the wall, as cold and dead then as a turned-off launch site, a memento of the past.

And love? We have no trouble with love in Great New Processes Land and never use it except as a diversionary time in Joys. And if a Joy grows tedious we know what to do with Joy; we give it to the torches; we turn the life switches to OFF on the gleaming New Processes maidens, the chic and capable mistresses with the lustrous string-metal hair. And if a form still haunts us, if a steel smile yet seems sweet and troublesome and stuff for dreams to hurt on, we fill the air with flame throwers; we cut them down like enemies, press on thephfluggee-phflaggee buttons, pump up and down on our new-metal all-weather knee joints and laugh and laugh... while they burn. And sometimes, as I said, I get so happy... with my steel condition... YES!

REMEMBERING

So, after a fighting year, the autumn came. Finally. The tin birds screamed south under the orange vapor shield and a made moon floated splendiferously over our land. The trees folded up and collapsed into the yard-holes, and the big bags went aloft from Central, the big brown leaf-filled bags floating high in the air and ready to shower us with ersatz autumn at the press of a switch in Seasons. And those brown bags, emptied and collapsed, would float to earth and, looking like the biggest of all fallen leaves, perhaps be found by tin men, or Go-Now men, or strange bleary mutant men roaming the homeless plastic.

And then the winter passed in a gutter of made snow and crystal, and the men in Seasons, working hard and over-stepping the bounds of good taste, I thought, went far back and made us a Christmas. It was a simple thing, but hard work, and withal poor taste, I felt, this clothing the regular trees with a sheath of green plastic and springing them up in the yard-holes in December with a strange-haloed star. Who could care? Oh, who could care?

And then it was spring again. And I knew how much I had lost. Through the tag-end days of summer, through the autumn, through powdery winter - my Stronghold on Automatic, my needs expertly served by the self-run ever-ready Gad-Goes - I had sat in my hip-snuggle chair watching the months go, watching the antics of Central. Not even bored; not even amused. For I had set my blood to low-low and my flesh-strips to dormant, and I had remained the long days through almost as quiet in every part of the new-metal in all my 'replacements'

But the spring - something happens in spring. The world slips round to unrest and something dormant shakes off the cold coils, slithers up and stares you silly with beady eyes. Or did a tin man, while I slept, jog a bit at my heart switch? It is a thing I cannot tell you, truly. One month I'm sitting calm as a cold ball

of lead, thinking on Universal Deep Problems, my heart pistoning a slow steady Moderan rhythm designed to last me forever, my world a flat sea of smooth-time for me to float on. The next I'm in the crash waves, my heart pistoning a blast-beat, my thin green blood coming up to swell the tubes in my throat and choke me. I am thinking of her! And the summer day that she left me.

Or was it night? I have not been so well since she has gone. Or is it pride? Who can say, on such things, what would mean anything to another?

Sometimes I think I will rise to power in this land. Why not? I'll make scientists out of my weapons men. And the tin men. We'll throw this Stronghold into one grand laboratory of experimentation. We'll come up with an Ultimate Contingency weapon to make other Ultimate Contingency weapons look like toyland fuzz bombs. We'll come up with such a blaster that just by thinking into the ON-OFF place I can obliterate whole countrysides. And then I'll say to Central, "Central," I'll say, "you have given me your last hard time. No more spring, see. Likewise, no more summer, see. Check?" And check they better will, or else. Oh, after that, I'll be a benevolent ruler. We'll sit in autumn and winter, all of us. For spring and summer are really dead, you know. All gone. But perhaps I do not make myself clear. Who can, perhaps, to another?

At other times I think I'll make snakes. I have the blueprints. I'll throw my Stronghold into one big green-plastic snake factory. And let them crawl all over a gaunt land. Snakes! That is the symbol. What better to say what I have to say to all the world? And I'll train one special one to go and sit upon the roof which she is under. With him.

But perhaps all this will make you think that I am mean. Or jealous. It is not that not that at all. But I am outraged by her stupidity, and I am hurt by something that moves and turns in the cold sections of my heart box when it comes spring in the wheel of the world's sad journey. I think it is mostly her stupidity that so outrages me. You see, she left me for one much inferior to me! You must take my word for that. You must, you must -

It was not that I did not treat her well. She was my new-metal mistress for many a happy month. And then, as such things go, I guess she learned to love me. And I cannot blame her for that. Certainly that was not part of her stupidity. But, as women will, she wanted more and more, more and more of the time. What I mean to say is, she wanted to share my life, even help run, or perhaps run! the Stronghold. She wanted me to leave her lifeswitch to ON! But I explained patiently, as to a child, how it was better for her to have her life-switch to ON only while we were loving. And then we could flip it to OFF when we were not loving and she could go to lie under the bed and rest there like a stick of steel, or old plastic shoes, until I needed her again most sorely. Any other arrangement, as I explained to her time and time again, would perhaps lead to a lessening of my mind-force in Universal Deep Thinking. I thought she understood.

And then one day - it was summer, the heavy flowers were up all about and the ersatz baby robins were testing their tender wings and throbbing little new-learned songs - that day I grew careless. I guess I left her life-switch to ON when we were through. I remember it was a time of heavy thinking. There was terrible trouble again in the Out World on the space run to Marsoplan, and the Red Galaxy was again posing problems. I guess I left her life-switch to ON. Or perhaps one of the tin men... But I must not grow too suspicious. Even now it seems that every eye I look into is somehow guilty. Sometimes I wonder if they were not all making love with her when my back was turned in thinking. And when I think this, the green blood comes up in my flesh-strips so hotly that it is all I can do not to blast the countryside with a Maximum Weapons Fire just to let off my feelings.

But the upshot was, she left me that day while I was in my thinking room, busy. I know they must have

helped her get over my Stronghold's eleven steel walls. They must have. I am, even now, still thinking up punishment for those traitor servants, and no punishment seems big enough to fit them. When I find out who they are - Oh, my revenge-needs grow and grow and overwhelm me.

And when I find her! which I will! I hope I have my revenge schedule ready. My "boys" are out even now infiltrating all the neighboring Strongholds, where the inferior masters are, to find out which inferior master was the nature of her stupidity. And when I find her!!!

But you know, I have a hope. Even in this heart hurt spring, flat place in the wheel of the sad world's journey, I have a hope. That she'll come back? Ah, no. I have a hope that she'll be found outside a Stronghold. Maybe wandering over the homeless plastic, saying my name. Or perhaps "living" in some yard-hole for trees, hoping I'll come to her to say, "Come back!"

But would I take her back? Could I take her back? There seems a guilt in every eye I look into. I'm caught with my green blood. I think of snakes, and will until I know. And who can know? About such things? So it is full ahead with all my punishment schedules. And when she's found - and she will be found! - I hope it does not find my schedules wanting. I'll rush that new machine through to completion. I'll leave her life-switch to ON! I'll let her "live" while this new machine hammers her "life" down to jellied atoms. For stupidity - well, stupidity is a most terrible thing, you know - especially in the judging of ME against another - and must have a massive pounding.

[A LITTLE GIRL'S XMAS IN MODERAN](#)

It was in Jingle-Bell weather that Little Sister came across the white yard, the snow between her toes all gray and packed and starting to ball up like the beginnings of two snowmen. For clothing she had nothing, her tiny rump sticking out red-cold, and blue-cold, and her little-jewel kaees white almost as bones. She stuck up ten stiff fingers, and she said. "Daddy! Something is wrong at my place! Come see!" She lisped a little perhaps and did not say it all as precisely as grownups, because she was just past four.

He turned like a man in the bottom third of bad dreaming; he pointed two bored eyes at her. Damn the kid, he thought. "What the hell deal has Mox got us into now?" he said. And he sang the little rhyme that made the door come open. Then as she stepped toward him he saw the snowballs on her feet. They were melting now, making deep furrows in the green rug spread across his spacious thinking room. The tall nap, like flooded grass now along little canals bending away from her feet, was speckled white here and there with crumpled paper balls. His trial plans and formulas peeped out like golf balls.

Coming back across the iron fields of nightmare that always rose to confront him at such times, he struggled to make the present's puzzling moment into sense. Damn the kid, he thought, didn't wipe her feet. All flesh, as yet her own - and bone and blood, and didn't wipe her feet. The snow melts!

He motioned her to him. "Little Sister," he began in that tired dull-tinny voice that was his now, and must be his, because his larynx was worked all in gold against cancer, "tell me slowly, Little Sister. Why don't you stay in your plastic place more? Why don't you use the iron Mox more? Why do you bother me at all? Tell me slowly."

"Daddy!" she cried and started to jig up and down in the fits that he hated so, "come over to my place,

you old boogie. Something needs fixing."

So they went across the big white yard to her place, past Mother's place, past Little Brother's place, with her snow-hurt limping and naked, and him lumbering in strange stiff-jointedness, but snug in a fire-red snuggie suit of fine insulation with good black leather space high-tops. Arrived at her place he whistled at the door the three sharp notes. The door moved into the wall and Mox the iron one stood sliding the iron sections of his arms up into one another until he had only hands hanging from shoulders. It was his greeting way. He ogled with bulb eyes and flashed his greeting code.

"What would you have done," her father said, "if I had not come with you? You brought no whistle for the door." Three sharp notes sprang at him from the normal holes of her head, and the heavy door rolled softly out of the wall until it shut them in the gay red-carpeted room with a Xmas tree - the father, the naked little girl and the iron Mox. And she was impishly holding the whistle between her teeth, grinning up at him. "I had it all along," she said and dropped the whistle into the tall red grass of her room's carpet.

She wiped the waning snowballs from her feet and sidled her icy-cold rump over toward the slits where the heat came through the wail, soft and perfumed like an island summer. Her knees turned knee-color again and her rump became no longer vari-colored cold. It became the nicest of baby-pink little-girl rumps, and she stood there a health-champion of a little miss, all flesh and bone and blood - as yet - pointing at an angle toward the ceiling. "The star!" she said. "The star has fallen down." And he noticed that she was pointing toward the tree.

"What star?" he started to say, across the fog that always smelled like metal in his mind these last few years, and then he thought, Oh hell, she means the Xmas star. "You came across all that yard," he asked incredulously, "to annoy me with a thing like that, when Mox -?"

"Mox wouldn't," she broke in. "I asked him and asked him, but he wouldn't. It's been down since the fifteenth. You remember when those dumb students went home in their jets early and fast and broke the rules and shook the houses down. BOOM! and the star fell down. Just like that. Well, he'd just do silly when I asked him, like you just now saw him, just shake his arms up into his shoulders and ogle. Pretty darn dumb, if you ask me."

"But what about your mother?"

"I asked her when I was over to her place, over a week ago. But she's been too busy and tired. You know how Mama is, always having that plastic guy rubbing parts of her, that she says hurt, and jumping on the bed at any little thing. Sometimes I think that guy's in love with Mama. What's love?"

"What?! What's love? Should I tell you, did I know? Love is - is not an iron ceiling on a plastic... But-oh, never mind! Hell! - How's her star?"

"Twinkle twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are, up above the world so high, like a mama in the sky. Heard that on the programs advertising diamonds."

"Just answer the questions. How's her star?"

"Up real shiny, last I saw. But heck, Mama probably never even looks at her star, because that plastic guy -"

"And Little Brother's star?"

"Humph, Little Brother! Beat his star up about a week after we put 'em up. Said it was just what he needed for the rear end of his space tube. You know how Little Brother is about space."

"And so yours is the only star that has fallen. Mother's is still up, though she doesn't have time to look at it, you think. Little Brother took his down in the interest of space. Yours just fell."

"Daddy, where is your star, Daddy?"

He looked at her, and he thought, Damn these little girls. Always so much sentiment. And so schemy, too. He said "I had Nugall store my star away. It's somewhere with the tree, in a box. It interfered with my deep thinking. I've got to have entirely a bare room, so far as Xmas trees are concerned, for my deep thinking, if you don't mind."

For just a moment he thought she was going to get the sniffles. She looked at him, float-eyed, her face ready to buckle and twist into tearful complaint. But she held and stared at him more sternly, and he said, "Sure I'll fix the damned star for you. Drag me a chair over. And then I must rush right back to my place." (Dangerous, this being together too much. And so old-fashioned. And besides, he had been really cooking on a formula when she burst in.) So he stood on the chair she dragged to him, and he fixed the frosti-glass star to its hook in the iron ceiling and he adjusted the star until it was almost impossible to tell that it wasn't attached to the green plastic tree. Then he whistled at the door.

Just as he was passing through the opening, leaving, he felt something tug at a leg of the fire-red suit. Damn! It was she again. "What now?" he asked.

"Daddy!" she piped, "you know what, Daddy? I thought, what if we'd go over to Mother's and Little Brother's places, since it's Xmas. And you've got on your red suit. Isn't this a very special day? I've been hearing on the programs -"

"No," he said, "it isn't a very special day. But if you want to - and you'd probably do a fit about it if you didn't get to - come on." So after she had put on a green snow suit, they trudged across the white yard, a strange study in old Xmas colors, and they stopped first at Little Brother's place, who was just past five.

Dressed in a pressure suit and sturdy beyond all sense, from the weight lifting and the vitamin taking and the breakfast-of-champions eating, he wanted to know what the hell all the nonsense of a visit was about so early. And he let them know that Nogoff, his iron man, was taking care of everything at his place very well, thank you. Then he strode about in his muscles, sturdy beyond all meaning, and he showed them the new jet tube part he had hammered out of the star, and they left pretty soon from his surliness. On the way over to Mother's place Little Sister suggested that she thought Little Brother thought too much about rockets and jets and space. Didn't Father think so? Father agreed dully that maybe he did, he didn't know, but really, could one ever think too much about rockets and jets and space?

As they walked along, over the yard to Mother's place, she kicked up snow and chortled and laughed and told off-color jokes - she had heard them on the programs - almost like a normal little girl should. Father tracked dourly through the unmarked snow under the featureless gray sky and thought only how all this nonsense of walking so early was making the silver parts of his joints hurt, and before he'd had his morning bracer, too. Yes indeed, Father, for the most part, was flesh only in those portions that they had not yet found ways to replace safely. He held on grimly, walking hard, and wished he were back in his hip-snuggle thinking chair where he worked on Universal Deep Problems.

At Mother's place they found her having one of her plasto-rubs from the plastic man, who did truly act a little odd about Mother. Do you suppose he wasn't really all machine but was a man who had been

replaced part by part until it was impossible now to tell where the man left off and the robot plastic began? Father worried about it for half a second and then dismissed it. So what if he was? What could he do to Mother? And what if he did, what would it matter? Mother - new alloys now in almost all the places.

Little Sister yelled MERRY XMAS! at the top of her good flesh lungs, and Mother turned through the waist only, as though on a swivel in that portion, and Father coughed dry in the metal of his embarrassment.

"'Twas Little Sister's idea," he mumbled. "So sorry, Marblene. I guess Mox hasn't been watching her programs right, her insisting on Xmas trees and all this year, and now the idea of a visit among the folks of the family. I'm sorry, Marblene." He coughed again. "So out of date."

Mother blazed at him from her very plain blue eyes that were almost all 'replaced' now. It was clear that she wished to continue her rub with the plastic man as soon as possible. "Well?" she demanded.

"That's all," he mumbled, "if Little Sister's ready." Then for some silly reason - he couldn't explain it afterwards, unless it was because he wasn't all 'replaced' yet he said a silly thing, something that would obligate him months hence. "Do you - I mean, would you - I mean, could I," he stammered, "could I see you a couple of minutes, maybe at Easter? Our places are just across the yard from each other, you know. Maybe when I'm all 'replaced' I won't be able to walk." He hated himself for pleading.

She airily tossed her left hand, and fluttered those fabulous 'replaced' plastic fingers, and great rays of light shot and quavered and streamed from rings of 'moderne' diamond. "Why not?" she said resignedly. "What's to lose? If Jon's through in time -" Jon was her plastic man "we'll talk a bit on Easter."

And so it was done, and over, and soon they were again outside in the yard. "I guess I won't have to walk you back, will I? You have your whistle, don't you?" he said.

"No," she said, "I dropped it in the red rug. I just remember I did. I heard it. It squished down in the wet. While the snowballs were melting. Maybe I could come to your place!"

Damn these little girls, he thought. So tricky. Always scheming. He'd have to start having her 'replaced' as soon as he could after Xmas.

"There's nothing of interest at my place," he hastened to say. "Just my hip seat and my thinking space and Nugall." He didn't see any use to tell her about Nig-Nag, the statue woman who wasn't quite all metal, that he kept under the bed until he needed her so much that he had to... There were some things you just didn't tell a daughter, not until she was much older or well on the road toward being all 'replaced.' "Tell you what we'll do," he said. "I'll walk you back to your place and I'll whistle at the door and you can go in to Mox. Your star's all fixed and everything. You've had quite a Xmas!"

So they walked back through the iron-cold snow to her place, under a sky that was rapidly thickening in a day turning black. And as her door glided open he felt so relieved that he stooped and kissed her on top of the head, and he tapped her playfully a little on her good flesh buttocks as she passed through the plastic entrance. When she was gone he stood there thinking a little while outside her house. Like an old man in the starting third of good dreaming, he stood nodding, prompted perhaps by things from a time before the time of 'replacements,' wondering maybe if he had not paid some uncalculated and enormous price for his iron durability.

While he stood thus idly musing, a light high and wee came up suddenly - from eastward, from toward

the coast airports - and moved fast down the murky sky toward him, gaining speed. Soon the countryside all around recoiled from a giant blow as the barrier burst. He heard Little Sister behind him scream and beg for him to come back, and he knew without looking that her star was off its iron hook again. Like some frightened monster eager to gain its lair he dug in harder with his metal feet and lumbered off across the yard to his place, anxious to rest again in his hip-snuggle chair, desirous to think further on Universal Deep Problems.

The light, unswerving, went on down the sky, high and wee, like a fleeing piece of star, like something for somewhere else in a great hurry.

THE FLESH-MAN FROM FAR WIDE

I had just nailed the mice down lightly by their tails to the struggle board, was considering how happy is happy, and was right on the point of rising from my hip-snuggle chair to go fetch forth the new-metal cat when my warner set up a din. I raced to my Viewer Wall where the weapon thumbs all were, set the peep scope to max-sweep and looked out, wide-ranging the blue plastic hills. And I saw this guy, this shape, this little bent-down thing coming not from the Valley of the White Witch, my main area of danger now, but coming from the Plains of Far Wide, from which I had not had a visitor for nigh on to five eras.

Was he sad, oh, was he sad! He came on, this little toad-down man, tap-tap, mince-mince, step-walk-step, but with tense carefulness in his slowness, as if every inch-mince were some slipping up on a bird. It made me itch just to see him, and to think how walking should be, great striding, big reaching, tall up with steel things clanking long-down by your side and other weapons in leather with which to defy your world. And your wagons coming up with maces and hatchets on end. Though I go not that way myself, truth to say, for I am of Moderan, where people have "replacements." I walk with a hitch worse than most, an inch-along kind of going, clop-clip-clap-clop, over the plastic yards, what little I walk, for I still have bugs in the hinges. I was an Early, you know, one of the first of Moderan. But I remember. Something in the pale green blood of my flesh-strips recalls how walking should be - a great going out with maces to pound up your enemies' heads, and a crunchy bloody jelly underfoot from the bones and juices of things too little even to be glanced at under your iron-clad feet.

But this guy! Hummph. He came like a lily. Yes, a white lily with bell-cone head bent down. I wondered why my warner even bothered with him. But yes, I knew why my warner bothered with him. My warner tells me of all movement toward my Stronghold, and sometimes the lilies - "Stand by for decontamination!" He was at my Outer Wall now, at the Screening Gate, so I directed my decontaminators and weapons probers to give him the rub-a-dub. To be truthful, two large metal hands had leaped out of the Wall to seize him and hold him directly in front of the Screening Gate, so my call to "Stand by for decontamination!" was merely a courtesy blab. When the Decontamination and the Weapons Report both gave him a clean bill I thumbed the gates back in all my eleven steel walls and let the lily man mince through.

"Hello, and welcome, strange traveler from Far Wide."

He stood trembling in his soft-rag shoes, seeming hard put on how actually to stop his inch-mince walk. "Forgive me," he said, "if I seem nervous." And he looked at me out of the blue of his flesh-ball eyes while he tugged at a cup-shaped red beard. And I was appalled at the "replacements" he had disallowed,

the parts of himself he had clung to. For one wild blinding moment I was almost willing to bet that he had his real heart, even. But then I thought ah, no, not at this late year and in Moderan. "This walking," he continued, "keeps going. You see, it takes awhile to quiet. You know, getting here at last, I cannot, all of me, believe I am really here. My mind says yes! My poor legs keep thinking there's still walking to do. But I'm here!"

"You're here," I echoed, and I wondered, what next? what goes? I thought of the mice I had nailed and the new cat waiting and I was impatient to get on with my Joys. But then, a visitor is a visitor, and a host most likely is a victim. "Have you eaten? Have you had your introven?"

"I've eaten." He eyed at me strange-wide. "I didn't have introven."

I began to feel more uneasy by the minute. He just stood there vibrating slightly on thin legs, with those blue-flesh-ball eyes peeking my way, and he seemed to be waiting for me to react. "I'm here!" he said again. And I said, "Yes," not knowing what else to say. "Would you wish to tell me about your trip," I asked, "the trials and tribulations?"

Then he started his recital. It was mostly a dreary long tune of hard going, of almost baseless hopes concerning what he hoped to find, of how he had kept coming, of how he had almost quit in the Spoce Mountains, of how something up ahead had kept him trying, something like a gleam of light through a break in an iron wall. "Get over the wall," he said, "and you have won it, all that light. Over the wall!" He looked at me as though this was surely my time to react.

"Why did you almost quit in the Spoce Mountains?"

"Why did I almost quit in the Spoce Mountains!? Have you ever tried the Spoce Mountains?" I had to admit that I had not. "If you have never tried the Spoce Mountains -" He fell in to a fit of shaking that was more vivid than using many words. "Where are all the others?" he asked when the shaking had stopped a little.

"All the others? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, yes. There must be great groups here. There must be long lists waiting." His white cone-shaped face lit up. "Oh, they're in the Smile Room. That's it, isn't it?"

My big steel fingers itched to crush him then like juicing a little worm. There was something about him, so soft, so trustful and pleading and so all against my ideas of the iron mace and the big arm-swing walk. "There's no Smile Room here," I blurted. "And no long lists waiting."

Unwilling to be crushed he smiled that pure little smile. "Oh, it must be such a wonderful machine. And so big! After all the other machines, the One, the ONE - finally!"

Great leaping lead balls bouncing on bare-flesh toes! What had we here? A nut? Or was he just lost from home? "Mister," I said, "I don't know what you're driving at. This is my home. It's where I wall out danger. It's where I wail in fun. My kind of fun. It's a Stronghold."

At the sound of that last word his blue eyes dipped over and down in his white-wash face; his head fell forward like trying to follow the eyes to where they were falling. And out of a great but invisible cloud that seemed to wrap him round his stricken mouth gaped wide. "A Stronghold! All this way I've come and it is a Stronghold! You have not the Happiness Machine at a Stronghold. It could not be.

"Oh, it is what kept me going - the hope of it. I was told. In the misty dangerous weird Spoce Mountains when the big wet-wing Gloon Glays jumped me and struck me down with their beaks I arose and kept coming. And on one very sullen rain-washed hapless morning I awoke in a white circle of the long-tusk wart-skin woebegawngawns, and oh it would have been so much easier, so very much less exacting, to have feigned sleep while they tore me and opened my soul case with death. But no! I stood up, I remembered prophecy. I drew my cloak around me. I walked. I walked on. I left them staring with empty teeth. I thought of my destination. And now - It was a dream! I am fooled! Take me to your happiness machine!"

He was becoming hysterical. He blabbed as how he wanted to go and sit in some machine gauged to beauty and truth and love and be happy. He was breaking down. I saw I must rally him for one more try, to get him beyond my Walls. "Mister," I said, "you have, no doubt, known the big clouds and the sun failing and the rain washed gray dawn of the hopeless time. You have - I believe it stood up in disaster amid adversity's singing knives and all you had going for you was what you had brought along. There were no armies massing for you on other fields, no uncles raising funds in far countries across seas; perhaps there were no children, even, coming for Daddy in the Spoce Mountains, and with death not even one widow to claim the body and weep it toward the sun. And yet you defied all this, somehow got out of disaster's tightening ring and moved on down. I admire you. I truly am sorry I do not have what you want. And though you are a kind of fool, by my way of thinking, to go running around in flesh looking for a pure something that perhaps does not exist, I wish you luck as I thumb the gates back and make way for your progress. You may find, up ahead somewhere, across a lot of mountains, and barren land, these Happiness Machines for which you cry." He trembled when I spoke of mountains, but he moved out through the gates.

And though I was sure he would find nothing the way he was going, I have not been entirely able to forget him. What would prompt such a creature, obviously illequipped for any great achievement, to hope for the ultimate and impossibly-great achievement, happiness? And such an odd way to expect it, happiness dispensed by some magic machine gauged to beauty and truth and love. In a resplendent place at the end of a long trip.

To hear him talk you'd think happiness could be based on lily-weak things. How weird. Power is joy; strength is pleasure; put your trust only in the thick wall with the viewer and the warner. But sometimes, in spite of myself, I think of this little flesh-ridden man and wonder where he is.

And when I'm at my ease, feeding my flesh-strips the complicated fluids of the introven, knowing I can live practically forever with the help of the new-metal alloys, a vague uneasiness comes over me and I try to evaluate my life. With the machines that serve me all buzzing under neath my Stronghold and working fine - yes, I am satisfied, I am adequate. And when I want a little more than quiet satisfaction, I can probe out and destroy one of my neighbor's Walls perhaps, or a piece of his warner. And then we will fight lustily at each other for a little while from our Strongholds, pushing the destruction buttons at each other in a kind of high glee. Or I can just keep home and work out some little sadistic pleasure on my own. And on the terms the flesh-man wanted - truth, beauty, love - I'm practically sure there is no Happiness Machine out there anywhere at all. I'm almost sure there isn't.

THE ONE FROM CAMELOT MODERAN

One of them was coming! I had heard of them; I hadn't more than half believed it. But there he was on a big metal horse riding straight at my Warner--out of a long far-back time, a strange medieval shape. All that metal set up a din as I watched him riding, slow and parade-like. Or was it the funereal movement of sadness? Who could say as the slow hoofs rose and fell, clop-clip-clop, clop-clip-clop, making the ears of my Stronghold shudder with the thunderous sound of Approach? It might be a hoax; it might be all kinds of tricks. Or it might be one of them, truly.

I alerted everything. We went on stand-by with the weapons men posted and all my launchers armed and at ready, just in case. And of course if the screening gates gave him a bad mark on either contamination or weapons we'd blast him without so much as a hello. But he passed the tests with small trial; he was clean as a new-metal tooth. When he had ridden the distance to nothing and that great metal steed was through the eleven walls of my Stronghold and reined up at the final circle where I stood in my peep-box of steel, I saw it truly was what I had suspected. Or say it was more than I had suspected, for I had heard the stories without half believing them.

Yes, he was of the Red Rose Lancers, from that strange colony of Evol-on-the-Coast in what we sometimes derisively termed the State of Camelot Moderan. But why did he have that set stare to him, his eyes dead in his face? Why did he have that heart clutched in a steel gauntlet, and the look of a great wounding that did not bleed? Had he lost a tournament in Evol; had he done himself less than knightly on some far field?

"Hello," I said from my peep-box, "and welcome, rider from Evol. Do you wish to fit here to tilt against Launch Switch Valley?" I asked that more as a wide, coarse joke, because I knew, as only a Stronghold man of Moderan can know, that Evol was of the past, that Evol, even if no more than half the stories were true, was a pathetic small province of eccentrics allowed to continue some romance in their lives because - well, so long as they lived apart from the rest of us they could do no real harm to our thinking. But to ride in an armorsuit against the reality of Launch Switch Valley, ha. Imagine, if you can, a small quantity of flesh-strip being flung into that big solar cooker they are completing in the South, the same one that can at a single boiling purify enough introven to feed the flesh-strips of all Moderan for the next ten eras. Having imagined that, perhaps you can picture all the riders of Evol riding into the plastic hell of the Valley where every other square foot of a thousand acres of weapons space has an ON switch for a launcher. About the question of fitting for Launch Switch Valley he didn't answer me, my strange horseman from Evol; he didn't even smile. He just sat there; the horse stood. Two frozen shiny figures of contradiction they were in my Stronghold that advanced year of the Greater Reality.

I suspected I had angered him. "I'm sorry," I said. "Forgive me the coarse jest about tilting against Launch Switch Valley. Light down, get off, dismount, or whatever it is you do from one of those things, and I'll have one of my 'boys' oil him up where he needs it and file his hoofs if they're getting saw-toothed. You and I can have introven and a talk."

Something whirred in him, his eyes moved and he started to talk. "I come not to bandy words," he said. "I come not to oil my horse or have his hoofs filed down. I come not to tilt against Launch Switch Valley even, if all goes well, although I'm sure it and almost all the lands I've passed through should feel the sting

of my lance! But all that must wait for another time, for the heart is gone out of me for the nonce." The whirring ceased, he stopped talking and held up his heart. "It hurts too much inside," he said, the whirring again on a little, "too much to stand, inside."

What a man has to take! What a man has to hear! Oh, the imagined troubles of the world! I came out of my peep-box, for I wasn't scared of him now. What he needed, I suspected, was to get with the Greater Reality. He had probably lost a dream or two, flubbed up a joust, or some other petty something had given him heart pains. Maybe a lady of his fancy had jammed her ON switch to OFF and wouldn't give him the GO. But to worry about it - that could only come in Evol. "Would you like to tell me what gnaws your happiness, what vast dragons of smoke and flame are prowling across your pink moon-towns, what weird wind of witches' doings is blowing smog upon your gay outlooks?" Drawing on all my powers I tried the knightly beautiful manner of talking, because I thought it would please him. But I don't believe it did; I believe it angered him. I half expected him, any time, to lift that tall metal horse to action for a leap over my walls. Instead morosely, he fiddled with the settings of his heart, trying to get it more comfortable, I supposed, and probed at me with his death-taken disdainful eyes.

"When you talk about her," he said, whirring away hotly, "don't use words like gnaw and witches' doings and clouds. I'll thank you to be more respectful, or I'll put my heart back in, though it hurt worse than a million hells' burnings, and we'll see who's got a Stronghold!" I was too stunned to react. I didn't even laugh. So he really thought he had a chance down in this country? But I didn't become angry. Who can be angry with the hopeless?

"So it's woman trouble? I mean, your lady - she has chosen a stronger knight?"

He lowered his head, from the waist bent down toward his horse and looked at the ground for a long time, as if searching for some YES answer. When he straightened, I thought he must be lifting all the heavy sky overhead up a higher inch, or so. "When the woman goes, the man is gone in my country. There is no heart of man but woman's heart must beat its rhythm too, or he cannot be whole man. Oh, there was time when I and my Lanire had the same heart settings to multiply our strengths. Riding out to tournaments I would feel her rhythms coming into me, feel her heart wheels turning into mine, her valves opening and closing as mine did, until there was no knight who could stand against the golden knight. She was gold and blue then, so I wore golden armor and her blue lacy favors, and Tronser was a golden horse. The three of us and Greatness were one thing then in Evol-on-the-Coast the gold and blue Lanire, I and Tronser."

He stopped; the whirring went to a grindy moan, and then nothing. I looked at him and I couldn't decide whether I wanted to laugh or whether that itchy burny feeling was a tear deep in my flesh-strips trying to bring my eyes rain. My nature being now of Moderan, usually there is no trouble with romance, and the Greater Reality takes up my best thinking time. And yet and yet - at times, at small fearful times, a nagging something filters into my new-metal brain and probes there until I am no longer sure I'll live forever with my "replacement" new-metal alloys, and I am no longer sure of the exact validity of the Greater Reality. At such times I am betrayed into questions that should hold no interest for me. "Who was the great knight who beat the Golden Knight? What the great beauty of his lady? And he must have been horsed on quite a horse - a stallion of steel and dragons, if better than your Tronser!"

"He was not a great knight," he answered me. "He had no beauteous lady. And if you say he rode a tall black horse - well, that would be mostly fancy. But I was not on any field that he wasn't there against me. Riding down to tilt he was always there in range, or close alongside. And even in my bed before the great engagements, when I'd feel my heart strong and ready and gathering strength from her heart, he'd be right outside my window, watching me like a jealous dog. And then we'd go saddle Tronser, and he, that Thing, would watch us; he'd watch the testing of lances."

"For a knight," I murmured, completely taken in by the intensity of his manner, "he behaved right strangely."

"He was not true knight!" he shrieked. "He was a cur, a dog. He was a long black rat sneaking death out after the sun went down. His greatest jealousy was when we were on top. Oh, he moved against us then, he ran against us then. And finally he got my Lanire, and now he must get me."

I thought of a fearsome monster ravaging a lady, on a coast in Moderan and I said aghast, "He's got your lady, and you're here, the Golden Knight, gabbing with me!?"

He didn't answer me right off. Pain lines were in the flesh-strips his face showed, and he was running through the full range-change of his heart's settings. "Not yet," he kept saying to himself, "not yet. I guess never. It's no use." Then he turned to me, and I saw some cavern had got him; some place too darkly-deep for his sick and dead-fish-eyes was pulling down his brain. "Talk to me of great knights," he cried. "Talk to me of the sun measuring us with fire and shadows. Talk to me of that endless sand-grain storm and ticking of the sky. Have you counted the snow? Lately? Lanire! Lanire! Lanire! - Have you seen her lately? I have not! I only feel her heart in its great pain."

Then he fell down from his horse, and I thought maybe he was dying as he rolled. But he was not, and I forgave him the indignity of his pain, sensing how great was his need. When he arose from his rolling in my yard and was once more mounted up on Tronser, he was again the complete knight. "Forgive me," he said, "if I have shamed your sense of seemly conduct. I like to feel it was not entirely ignoble what I just then did, though I must have looked quite undone, so all unhorsed and all. But falling and rolling on the ground for one you love so much is a sweet pride's falling. Perhaps it is meant for the highly mounted to do that at least once before they go. And now we'll say no more about humility."

His mouth closed down like a trap catching the air, and I thought, listening to that deadly silence, that perhaps he would not whirl and talk again. But he did, soon, almost pleasantly, though with something of the quality of some one discussing the details of a battle lost over a thousand years ago. "You see, a part of her heart gave way with the passage of time, and when they made repairs it changed the settings of her range-change until they no longer match mine. We no longer complement each other, and when we try to it brings only great pain. In my country hearts are matched only once, and that when we are young and our flesh hearts are being 'replaced' with the greater-lifetime new-metal ones compulsory to Moderan. And then when something happens to alter one or both of the new hearts, it would be a very great miracle if ever they were truly matched again. I had thought I and Lanire might be that miracle, but well, I guess not. I thought I'd stop here on the brink of Launch Switch Valley and wait to make one more try. You see, today they were to adjust her again - the last time. It is past the hour of the heartsmith's tinkering and I have just run through the full range of the changes. I felt only pain."

Somehow I half expected him to fall down and roll on the ground again. But he didn't. He held, rigid and brave as a statue threatened with the indignity of birds. After awhile his mouth hinges snapped like a couple of Little Wreck missile switches going to ON, and whirringly he said, "I always somehow knew there must be an end; all greatness, all love, all things must feel the sandy coast slip out. And there you are, you're in the bath, the cold sea of Ending that washes us to bigger sea storms than we are trimmed and lashed for. But though I'm sick with riding and the pain, I will sail on, my horse aswim in Ending... But my brain jogs! Open your gates! I will bother you no more. And Lanire! Lanire no more!... It's onward!"

So I watched him go, head up and lance up and Tronser full ahead. I knew he was doing what he had to do, for his type of man, and I won't say I didn't feel a little thrill of unexplainable deep pride, watching him

sweep full atilt, and oh, so hopelessly, toward Launch Switch Valley. And I knew - for him - he'd won, somehow won, when I saw that little puff of smoke, for a moment solidified into a definite shape, high over the Valley, a horse and its hopeless rider at lance point with the sky.

REUNION

It was back in the times when the hours were shooting me down daily, by the minutes, by the seconds, that I had seen him last... a long long span ago. We were both flesh then and he was stronger than I, flesh stronger, will stronger, and firmer in faith and mind. He had battle dreams then of how to win with the flesh, how to conquer through to the soul, how to go up at last to the Street where the round Smiles sat beatific all folded in wings and the blissful hands stroked gold, for certainly the harps would be gold. Yes, he went with the big Paper Shield, the Promises couched in the Word, and I said NO! And we parted, though we had been close.

It wrenched me to part from this man, for we had indeed been close, far closer than friends, nearer the battlefield troops who had divided a bomb blast together and somehow lived. Yes, we had divided our own bomb blast together and somehow lived, the terrible bomb blast of a childhood of fear. And we had lived to it different. He had become stranger in faith, more reliant and sure of the Promises, the things that couldn't be proved, but were there, surely there - he said. I became one to question; all shaken, I needed the things I could touch. With the slightest hint of a threat I would reach for the ball peen of steel to hammer-stroke the Insolent Face of the Fears, not talk of a Beautiful Hour. So we were different who had once been much the same. Our lives went their different ways.

I came over to New Processes Land to become mostly "replacements" and he stayed with the big Paper Shield, the Word and the long pulpit fight for souls. And now, after all the long span, to see him once again - the comparisons! - it filled me with certain dread. But there was no mistaking - it was not a flesh mutant, it was not a vegetable walking, it was not a masquerade. It was what it was. Dreadfully. As soon as he came on the Warn -

So I took me a calmness bath with the hot rays and the cold. I put the Small Noises on high. I dialed the bravery poems out of the Stronghold wall and thought of all the lines that might somehow help me now, all of the high words of the mind in anguish and courage set on TRY. For I had known he must one day come to where I cowered in my innermost Stronghold den, perhaps even in the cowardly-careful peep-box of steel. Even in the days of my highest triumphs, when many a fortress rocked from my Big War guns and my Stronghold was winning, I had had this whiplash of dread. Some time to be visited, and evaluated, by the Calm Eyes looking - yes, I knew.

What could I say when he came? How set the widerange mechanized sight of New Processes Land to stare such a calm look back? What tapes would I use to beat his arguments down to our plastic-yard-sheet ground? I would not blast him out on the open reaches as he came on in,bleep and bleep andbleep , the soft flesh-sound on the Warner like a faucet in old days leaking the night hours down, when you could not sleep -bleep andbleep andbleep . No, I would not blast him. Though I could, easily could.

Why would I not? How easy to blast him and have done with one whiplash of dread. Out of all the whiplashes one cancel to give just that much more time to practice to be brave for the others. As simple

as one small gun going, a little flick of a steel thumb at a knob, and thebleep andbleep andbleep must be gone from my Warner potential, gone from my memory - GONE! But would it? NO. Not gone from my memory, unless I tore out MEMORY and cast it forever out. And I could not do that. NO! Too much depended-all the splendid place and the great gain, all New Processes Land was built upon memory. Was it not? YES! All New Processes was an escape from old, remembered things, and implicit in the very escape was the memory. No, I could not throw out MEMORY from the banked tapes in my mind. So I lived with remembering and the many dreads.

And this, save death, was the blackest prince of dreads, the one that dragged me kicking, crumbling up inside, steel-hollow and steel-weak, with the scream tapes going, with the coward times full high, out of all my triumph beds. DOUBT. Doubt of my own worthiness, doubt of the rightness of my choice of the new-metal steel adventure, doubt of how I would stand comparisons now - doubt Doubt DOUBT! Why had I not killed him a long long time ago - this measurer, this yardstick?

Yes, I had a chance once. I believed I had a chance once. If I had killed him clean when I killed me, the soft, pulpy and flesh-down-burdened me, and came to New Processes Land to take up my steel parts - it might have worked. Or why had I not brought him along? Well, there were reasons - REASONS: Why does not one, one day, one sportive full-blown decision-type Accomplishment Day, pick up a full-grown mountain and cast it into the sea? REASONS!

Certainly the poems out of the wall were not helping me much now. All the high words of soul were not succeeding in putting me back together where I waited all crumpled-up and broken-wide in my fears. My calmness bath of the hot rays and the cold had failed me a greater more dismal fail than it had ever failed me before. I looked at my steel palms, for indeed it felt as though they were sweating. But was that not silly? Steel palms nervously sweating! Or was it silly? This was the ultimate dread, save one, save ONE -

So how did he find me? I pressed all the buttons for flags, I flicked all the switches for noise, I turned on the dancers. I let a flurry of balloons go up through my armored roof, up through the gun lids. I filled a picnic sky with soft eagles. I turned on the rainbow air and fixed him a holiday. For he was a special man. Amidst that carnival he found me as two panic eye slits looking, wide-range, out of a peep-box of steel.

"Sorrow to sorrow!" So he said as he came up toward my eyes - in the shimmering haze of my fears and trembling reluctance, a beautiful flesh form walking, and YES! he had on no clothes. I had left the main gates open. But I had not meant to let him know so exactly how I could not face him well. Oh sometimes in my panic times, in my own personal Nation of Dread, I shrink to less than a hero. "Sorrow to Sorrow," he said again as he came on slowly - sadly, it seemed - walking toward the eye slits.

He was a beautiful man - and by some miracle in agelessness he appeared not much older than when I had left him, a long long span ago. Indeed he seemed in many ways but a picture of me before I had crossed down for steel, and yes, we had been in appearance once quite the same. Was it but a copy of me before the new-metal steel adventure? How my head ached now from the steel drums that would not stop beating!

As I moved out to meet him there was a wild hollow sound in both of my new-metal ears, but my eyes held to his steady look. "Sorrow to sorrow?" I said, and he said, "Yes! And doubt." Then suddenly, strangely, there was no distance at all between us as we stood there and wept and said nothing. He seemed to be weeping real tears from eyes that were a dark depthless stare, while I used the mechanical tear bags with my wide-range mechanized sight, in the manner of New Processes times. But my hurt and my deep anguish were surely not less than his, that day of our reunion, as I held him so gently, being careful with metal arms, that I sometimes held but the air. And him holding me I could not feel through the

intricate thickness, and weight, of my new-metal shell. But our conversation continued in tears, unlesened, under the garish picnic sky, amidst the holiday noise and the wild movements of dancers I had set whirling in a false try at being gay.

So the man from the pulpit had come! The soul gatherer, the crier out for the Light. Was it true that he brought me only the tears for a message? I had expected that when he came he would bring a long sermon and perhaps harsh admonishment for the turn I had taken to steel. And surely there would be words about a long road back. But we merely cried for awhile there together, like two entirely lost shipmates, and nothing at all was said. Then he moved out after awhile and at the very far edge of my Stronghold just before the last, open gate he turned and his lips formed, "Brother!" although with my ears on VERY HIGH I swear I heard no sound. But I made the same word at him and all at once he was gone, a beautiful flesh-form walking, naked, striding the homeless plastic. Or was it but a reflection, and truly he was upside down in the sky?

I turned on a few more dancers, put fresh balloons through the roof and placed the Big Noise HIGH-HIGH. Then in my own personal Area of Silence, amidst all the noise and the havoc of the steel dancers, I suddenly remembered that it was near to two-hundred years, two-hundred steel-driven years, since I had last seen my twin brother, the preacher, the man who had staked it all on the strength of the big Paper Shield. Well, how had he fared with the War? Why was he walking naked now along our plastic-yard-sheet ground? And why did he, the man of Faith, a prince of the long war fought in the change-winds on the doubt-swept plains of bad souls, bring me only a message of tears? Sorrow to sorrow? Was he telling me how sorry he was at my condition, each new-metal part of me but a faucet to turn on his tears? Or was he trying to say that sorrow and doubt were all, after all, either his way or mine? Had my brother not found, had he truly not found more than a Shadow in the shade of his big Paper Shield? Had he leaned it against a stone one time out there in a big showdown for souls, taking a breather, and had old Satan seized that shield and run laughing?

The message was unclear...

But as so often happens with me, from the Low Valley some toughness hurled me aloft, my fears put out their fight banners once again and doubts stood up long spear points to the air; weak knees that had but a moment before seemed not capable of even a decent stance drove forward and were brave. YES! we shut off the holiday and thumbed dead all the steel dancers. The gun lids closed out their carnival and the soft cellophane eagles collapsed in the rainbow air, even as we turned it all to a darkness. Since we lived, since we existed, we would act and play out the game. YES! that's what we did. With almost no warning at all we declared war on all the roundabout Strongholds, and soon amidst the stern havoc, the hard contest demands and all the real problems of carnage, there was not time for either doubt, ghosts, or fears.

THE WARNING

They were out there, all right. Though we hide in our inmost rooms, our heads under beds, our thoughts turned to trees popping up and tin robins singing and spring coming through the yard-holes, they were out there, all right. Maybe they had always been there. Times when we paused in our wars, we would see their airborne displays, see their threats shooting, the dazzling sky-borne crosses, the winged halos, and know they were massing their armor... under banners... oh, the soft-symbol banners...

From the land of the threats into the Stronghold country an old man came back one spring day. Walking slowly he came, plop-plip-plap-plop over the homeless plastic, working his hinges and braces, for he was a Moderan man. The flesh-strips he had kept in his face had grown him a gray long beard and with his arms jerking in that hitch way of his walk I thought of a man scything; I thought of Father Time of the Old Days. But there is no Father Time in Moderan. We are timeless in Moderan, designed for forever!

It was in a period of truces that the man with the beard came back. He walked into April and no guns fired. The walking doll-bombs rode lightly in their launch slings, the missiles poised on their pads, and the White Witch rockets, with no one handing the big orange switch in his War Room to ON, hung silent as painted death. Not many remembered him. He had once been a Stronghold master, long ago, but some minor difference or other with the Authorities had caused his Stronghold to be blasted down as a cleared place for trees, and he had been given the hard choice between banishment and what would have been, for him, essentially death - having his flesh-strips awarded to another. He, choosing banishment, had fled in the night under a small truce, and Moderan had all but forgotten him in the time that had passed.

We watched him go now while the days of our spring truce lasted. Up and down and across the lines of our fire he walked day and night, keeping our warners dinning, and it was an eerie thing, even for Moderan. Sometimes in the dead of night a small dull sound on the plastic or the sharp clink of a hinge joint working by would tell a late-up Stronghold man, perhaps looking to some better positioning of launchers or arming a doll bomb, that the silent one was near, having moved through the warner. No one offered him introven for his flesh-strips' hunger. No one paid him mind. Once banished, for us, was banished; he was nowhere. Then, too, when the truce-time lifted and we were once again busily and happily at war we knew he would, at the first go of the launchers, be blasted without a trace. So what was to worry?

And yet, at high day, the vapor shield not too thick and he alongside a Stronghold, peering - something about him! Partly it was, of course, the mawkish fascination of seeing the dead come back, seeing the banished break banishment, knowing some strange deep kinship with the dead and the banished and yet not being able, or willing, even remotely to own that kinship. Not in Moderan!

Then one day, one vapor-purple day, when the spring truce was near to lifting, with my steel hands trembling, my flesh-strips throbbing and the hate needs rising thick and good in my throat for getting on with the war, I heard him clinking near. My Warner set up a close in as he sought admittance through my Walls. Gaunt and wrecked and rusted he appeared in my viewer - a thing of no concern, banished and nowhere. And yet - and yet who can say no when the dead come back with a message, or even with a look? I directed Decontamination and Weapons Search to give him the usual, and when he proved clean I thumbed the gates back in eleven steel Walls for his entrance.

He stood before me, his beard looped around his waist. His face pieces went into chaos and at last his mouth came open for speech. "I come to you," he said, "completely without motive of gain. I have been back to the old place where my Stronghold was once. I have lain among the tin trees that 'grow' there now in a little park for birds and plastic dogs. How much better, I think, were it still a thriving Stronghold, and I in it, to take part in the great spring wars due soon to commence. But that is merely, and of no moment, what I think. Once banished is once banished, and as you know there is no road back." He dropped his head for a little and I said, "There, there," or whatever it is one says when there is really nothing to say and everyone knows it. I thought of offering him introven for his flesh-strips' hunger. I thought of saying sorry, sorry. Really I did almost nothing, said almost nothing, and at last his head swayed up and the face pieces went into storm again.

"I come with hands that seek no gain," he cried. "At first I thought only to find the old haunts again,

before it is too late, enjoy my heart's lacerations for the time of the truce and then pass slowly southward, south into the Wanderers' Country ahead of your heavy barrage. But seeing again this pleasant gray domain of such well-ordered hate and firm-planned war I was seized with an old allegiance. I chose your Stronghold to plead in because you have one of the best, if not the best, records of any Stronghold. If I can warn you in time, perhaps we may just save a heritage, by an example."

I thanked him for the kind words about my Stronghold, told him modestly that perhaps other Strongholds were nearly as good, and he continued, almost screaming now. "Have you not seen those displays in the north, the south, the east, the west? The wings, the dancing sickening grimness of their grinners, the deadly cherub smiles, the sunshine men and never a vapor shield on their halos? Do you not know what's massing over the hills? Are the threats not plain, bold-plain?"

"Rumors have flown," I said, "word has spread, alerts have come down and we have seen. And yet, what can we do? We live our life out here, the Stronghold life, proving the workability of hate and the efficacy of good clean blasting when everyone knows what to expect from a neighbor and a friend - a missile in the back unless you're shooting first or guarding. And yet there are always some - some forces - that would beguile reality, transform the proved and proving into something guesslike and dreamlike. They'd put a flower on cleanest clearest Truth, a cross, a haloed star - and call it Love. Whatever that could mean. But we'll keep sharp watch here, blast always at one another and when the big need comes be ready to turn our kill know-how on the invading hordes."

"My friend," he said, "my friend, you do not know what they can do, to what great lengths they'll go. Sickening! Terrible! I've lived among them, on the edges of their country. Having no country, after my banishment, I went up there. I've learned." For a moment his eyes were dreadful in a face gone ghastly-gaunt; the flexi-holes opened big and the steel balls of his wide-range Moderan vision swished and clinked. In the Old Days that look was perhaps approximated in the face of one who had just seen all his children done and down in an especially dramatic street wreck. "They'll stop short of no lengths!" he cried. "They'll move in at some truce time with their slogans. They'll come cantering, chantering over the hills through a Max Fire. They'll move down in the night, or at high vapor-shield noon, swiftly. You'll see. They'll spread a deadly, planned disorder when they come. They'll engage you in innumerable head-on slow-down encounters and set up disorganization and diversionary sideshows behind your back. They'll clap a needle to you when you're not watching and shoot you with metal softener. And where will you be then? Your fine steel heart that is so hate-sure now will become a soft debater. Not knowing where to stand you'll stand nowhere, and yet everywhere; jumping and jiggling from stance to stance you'll be a waverer then, you hypocrite, then!"

His face became a horror-mask, his beard shook and something he was thinking caused him to be seized with a bad case of honest metal-trembles. His fine steel mouth was a gray opening where shiny new-metal saber-teeth danced and gleamed when he shrieked, "They'll even stoop to putting truth serum in the introven - their truth. Give me, rather, the blasting - honest, honest blasting."

He calmed, the billowing beard lay quiet upon his chest, and somehow, looking at his still face - the calm that had recently been so choppy - I thought of a sea, or a sky perhaps that had in the Old Times just shaken out all its storm. "And now I go," he said, "through here to my way south, south to the Wanderers' Country, ahead of your wonderful barrage. An old old man am I who was, when young, perhaps not worthy of your great hate leagues and so was banished. But I would save Moderan as a place to come back to, to hurt in, for the pleasant heart lacerations. I hope I do not hope unfounded. I trust I've warned you well, and in time. And now I think I'll go. Some trigger-happy Stronghold might lift the truce up early and catch me in a crossfire."

He stood looking a little moment directly into my eyes with his face now unstormed completely, and for

a heartbeat instant I was tempted to offer him a place as one of my weapons men, thinking perhaps we could coat his flesh-strips with plate and make him nearly all-metal newmetal alloy, at least acceptable to the Authorities at the next year's screening of weapons men. But I didn't seize the moment, and perhaps it was just as well. He probably wouldn't have accepted.

Soon after he left, out through the eleven steel Walls and over the homeless plastic, plop-plip-plap-plop, working his hinges and braces slowly southward to the Wanderers' Country, some trigger-happy Stronghold did lift the truce up early. But I hoped, and believed, he had got clear. Most of us in the interests of last-minute preparations and a better Open-Fire! held up until next day when the truce officially lifted, and with the blasting sharper than I had ever remembered it I thought perhaps his fears were all unfounded. So what if they were massing heart symbols and togetherness displays and smile battalions over the hills and preparing for a great Crusade and a Friendship League? We are pretty solid behind our hates here in Moderan. We know how to live. And unless they have something more awesome to wage with than their weakvalentine philosophies and white-grin slogans, they don't stand a chance, these hymn chanters and smile-league battlers. We'll blast them on the perimeters; we'll cut their infiltrators to thinnest flesh-strip ribbons; we'll execute their spies, without a thought. We'll stand them off, so help us, until Time itself grows old!

[HAS ANYONE SEEN THIS HORSEMAN?](#)

One moment outside the eleventh, outer Wall of my Stronghold I'm sitting calm as a cold ball of lead, my heart tuned to low low, my pale green blood on dormant, barely washing through the tube miles of my flesh-strips, my wide-range Moderan vision turned to casual-sweep, and scouring across homeless plastic into the red-brown vapor shield of mid-July. I am thinking of nothing; I am looking for nothing; I am between wars, and resting, but properly alert as always, as befits us here...

It struck me hot-cold and cold-hot how he came riding. My hip-snuggle chair seemed to strike its two front feet down like explosion, sharp down to the plastic from where I had them tilted in air when I was leaned back against my eleventh Wall in my resting. His horse surely filled up a hill when I first saw him, bold on that tenth rise to my left. If I had been on punch-introven, the spiked flesh-strip feeding, I would have thought it a drunken vision, a thing bred in my muzzy sight and born in the red-brown vapor shield as mirage. But I was stark sober and the vapor was the usual and intended one for mid-July.

My Warner was beginning now its din, and standard prudent Moderan procedure called for my planned withdrawal. A Moderan man sensing danger works his hinges and braces and drags his hip-snuggle chair back through Walls towards launchers. But sometimes one is drawn, held, bemused - even in firm-planned Moderan. A vision clamped me and a horseman came - cantering - in a place where there should be no horse and no rider at all. The rider reined up in a slow uncertain stopping, and I saw at once that the huge brown horse was without sight. Nay, he was not only blind - he had no eyes at all; there were two round red holes and a little stick of dried or drying blood hanging from the lowest arc of each hole. I noted especially how a cold little breeze through Moderan shook the frail blood sticks and how the horse, bracing into the breeze, snorted lustily. I had the strange chill feeling that here was the horse that would walk right into Walls and, not seeing them, pass on through in a casual inexorable cantering. Just a feeling, of course, but it persisted.

The rider was not of Moderan. I saw that all at once. There was no mark of flesh-strip join upon him.

There was no steel. He was as all-flesh as his horse and, in his way, just as odd for these times. He did not have that mutant look about him, though his horse, perhaps, did. As near as I could tell; frantically thinking back to the Old Days, this was a flesh man who had not been "replaced"; not having the flesh-strips join about him, neither did he have steel arms nor the hinges and braces for walking of the "replaced" peoples. But why? And why here?

Suddenly, and without my seeing how or from where, he had in his hands two glittering gemmy balls about the size of tennis balls in the Old Days. "When we move into that City, he won't be blind," he said and gestured at his nag. "I keep these wrapped in oil against the day when my horse must have some kind of showing eyes."

My mouth chopped hard up and down and made no sound. I stared and gulped. "We came across the blind fields," he said, "mile on mile of sterile homeless plastic. And some strange metal bird hung high and on our track all the tedious way. I thought it might be a tin buzzard. I noticed it roosted down somewhere in the Stronghold country."

He looked at me hard and asked answer. "We have metal birds of detection here," I said.

"Are they warlike? Do they eat people?"

"Everything is apt to be warlike here. No, they do not eat people."

"I'm glad. I would not wish to be eaten by a tin buzzard. Detection does not concern me."

"Detection is for our wars," I said. "You are not of us, I see, and you do not concern us. However, when the truce lifts up, you and your horse will be blasted. Our business here is war, in the Stronghold country, and little flesh-flimsy people and big blind meat-huge horses have no place. I do not wish to be unduly blunt."

"If you're telling me to move, you're wasting speech. And time. I'm tied to this big horse. His movements are not preplanned. Neither are they stoppable. I thought I should tell you this. I too do not wish to be blunt. Nor do I wish to be unfriendly."

I looked, and indeed he was tied on his horse. Two lengths of soiled much-traveled-looking rope, not connected, went under the horse's belly and lashed the rider on, being knotted above the knees.

"Who - who trussed you on like this?"

"Many things, let us say, and tradition. But it was my own choosing hands that knotted the ropes to my knees. Each rope is conscience, if you wish to think it so., My horse is duty, if you like comparisons. Otherwise, just think of me as a man on a blind horse who has ridden the blind fields as he must And now this Stronghold country! Would you in this land know aught of such talk?"

"We have not talked so since we have come of age. That sounds like flesh talk and flesh thinking. We are 'replaced'. We hate and war by trade; our needs are served by Gad-Goes. We are completely modernized in Moderan. We are 'replaced' to live forever and have no need of bargain deals for heaven. We are our own eternity. It seems to me all these things would of necessity make senseless your talk of conscience and duty - too much concerned with emotions and heart palpitations and guesswork, which we have down-played here."

He dropped the future horse eyes into long leather pouches on either side his saddle and he stared me

with a bold and steady look. My steel eyes smote his flesh ones and there was no give. "I could tell you how my horse is sometimes gaunt," he said. "Some centuries he has been all knobs, indeed. But now he's fat and ready, and I'm tied on. I am his eyes, as much as he can have eyes just now. He is my legs. I feel it in my bones we're near some bright unveiling. I must confess right now I'm riding a little dark, although I'm looking all ways for a sign. Seeing none, it's onward. That's all I know. But confidentially, soon I expect a star to point out something."

"There'll be star shells out and big missiles up and doll bombs walking, I'm warning you," I said. "And whether you're clear or not to me is of no worry at all. But I'd just as soon you were, I guess, given a choice. What little flesh-strip I own compels me to say this, although I'm not sure I'm altogether happy with it said. And since it's come to a discussion, I guess I'm happiest when I'm steel. I guess I'm happiest when I'm in my War Room handing the big orange switch of war to ON and pressing the buttons of launchers. Or, to put it another way, I'm not unhappy or worried or asking questions then - and I'll settle for that."

"To a man twice tied by conscience on this blind horse of duty that seems a settlement of convenience. And your fight is all a makeshift sham then - purposeless, something to fill out time?"

"My fight is what I am designed for. And if you stir me, I'll blast your horse myself. With just a nod of my head it can be done."

"Blast him," he said, and a steel-cold flesh-eye looked at me and so looking stared me down. My head fell forward in shame and deep deliberation, and I thought I heard him continue, "For every piece he's torn to there'll be a new and bigger horse grow up and a rider lashed upon him." Then I snapped my head up to answer and no one - nothing - not even a shadow, a leaf, a bird or a blowing cloud was there between me and the red-brown vapor shield of mid-July. My Warner was dinning that the truce was lifting, my weapons men as they raced for their battle stations were setting up that strange dry sound of metal hurrying inside the Walls, and immediately I had things more real than a horse and a hopeless rider to think about, or a mirage talking about conscience and duty.

The war, let me say, that followed was a tremendous success; the doll bombs homed with dispatch down to the kill, the White Witch rockets flashed far and wide over steel-topped Moderan, and the high-up weird shrieking Wreck-Wrecks were never better. But next truce time I could hardly wait to get on the viewer-talk and ask all around at the Strongholds if any had seen this huge blind horse and his rider. The negative replies I received and the quizzical, odd, lifted-eye looks on the viewer-talk told me it was perhaps not best to inquire of this strange horse and his rider again.

[INTERRUPTION IN CARNAGE](#)

What massive thing had gone wrong, what tremendous, perhaps irretrievable, error had been committed in all our images? In Moderan. What cardinal principle of the land transgressed - VIOLATED! to put the mighty dream down low? Yesterday he was something, one of us - snarling, grinning, looking for Joys, hiding at his time of terror in his peep-box of steel, mounting his wars, making good his plans to invade us, going about his day, with an eye out for the ever-lurking Disaster or the always possible Win, being entirely a fits-in "right" man of his times. But today! TODAY!!!???

It was just at first salvo that we had discovered it, or at least had started to suspect. By second and third salvos the mounting fear was in us as coldly we eyed our View. There was a hole in the kill stuff going out, a blank place in the noise of firing, some imbalance over all. And we had planned such a perfect war! The weak Strongholds had been ruled out, and the perfect boxes were formed, with the big Strongholds in lined order and at the four corners the super Strongholds (of which I was one) going with the strong stuff, symmetrical for massive murder. Junior wars were out, major wars were in; and this was to be almost a total commitment of the kill capabilities of the world.

As leader Stronghold and Grand Marshal of the carnage I called a halt in our battle and went over personally to see why there was a hole being left in our firing. The other Stronghold masters all came over in their beams, some even sending their pictures, for this was a most unusual thing and we all wondered. By merely sending their beams and their pictures to parley, and staying home themselves, busily, bravely in the Stronghold, I knew they were shoring up things for better battle progress later, taking advantage of me, of course, wishing to topple me, but of such is the cross of leadership, and I tried to bear it nobly, and certainly without mean-malice, for, given their chance, unquestionably I should have been doing as they - THE SAME THING!

What a work of science is a metaled man - yesterday. Today... with both wide-range mechanized eyes staring at some distant far-far nothing, or some nothing close as those iron shutters there that once he could shade down across his head holes, when he wanted to turtle down, close the iron gates up to the eye cores and say he was not home, not home to anyone... But mostly he was home, this man, home to living, home to Joys, home to hate, an easy, open man, not closed and mean unto the world - good, a reliable, large man, one who would at the littlest need of a carnage put his Stronghold on the ready footing of total war-all out! and max-effort fight it until all the rockets, the bombs, the walking missiles and the doom doom flares were loosed upon the world. And now - Today ore dumps and flesh-strip morgues are full of him.

Just under his gun lids he lay, half smiling, a cool death-smirk upon his iron face, one of his iron hands clutching some little odd-faced totem, an unimportant looking voodoo doll, it seemed to me, but perhaps some charm piece, to him, of total luck, a happy-omen thing that he had had in better days when the wars had gone good, GOOD for him, and he was - entirely uncutting his neighbors - WINNING! The other hand was flung out in an odd ungraceful flinging, cockangted toward a gun tube, bespeaking a quick surprise, I thought, and the iron fingers were all sprangled out and splayed upward, as though reaching, or warding, or wanting to receive some offer. I wondered. Who knows about that moment - who knows? WHO KNOWS ABOUT THAT MOMENT THAT FINALLY COMES?

As always happened in the distant past, and still happens perhaps in those small pockets of retardation, the simple flesh-fouled countries, we milled for awhile and were, confronting the totally-terrible fact, undecided. They were all there with me at this chief's ending-side, albeit I was the only one there in my actual corporeal image. But their beams and their pictures were so adequate and brisk that all could be decided here, and they could be home, as they should be, as I most certainly should have been, given their chance, preparing a bigger battle for later. The question was what to do with this man who had died, it appeared, a natural-causes death (a thing entirely out in Moderan) thus shattering us all to the very core of the foundation of our Mighty Dream. YES! With our flesh-strips few and played-down, and the bulk of us new-metal-man now, had we not conquered death, that is, did we not now control death? Well, we had certainly dreamed so. Though we might bring it to ourselves, and millions, in some great carnage for a proud or a playful cause, had we not bested that death that came so steadily! like night stealers, that breakdown kind of death that crept so slowly dark-thieflike, backdoors-way through the life tubes, encroaching year on year until finally, all darkly, it took command and the news flashed out like explosion, "DEATH CAME FROM NATURAL CAUSES"? That old-fashioned, quaint, disgraceful, degrading, unmanly kind of death - OH NO!

"I'LL TAKE HIM HOME!" I said. What an impulsive thing to say, what a difficult impulse to indulge! "I may be able to fix him," I said and immediately I had said it I felt a cold gray shame flush up around my new-metal head holes - the ear shafts, the nostril tunnels, the eye cores - all the places where my head flesh-strips were reacting. What an odd-ball thing to say of a man, another human soul, "I may be able to fix him!" "I'll hope to get him well," I blurted. "I'll try."

Was I a doctor? No, I was not a doctor. Was I one skilled more than most others in new-metal man maintenance, metal-wound repair or flesh-strip starvation correction? Indeed I was not. Was I one to feel the Great Dark grab me when one of us was down, down not to rise again, graceless, woundless, spit-hung in Ending, the caked death-froth cold on the iron lips and the two wide-range New Processes eyes spewing their sightless courses at heaven, at hell, at NOTHING? Indeed I was. Indeed, I was that.

So, reluctantly, they gave me a week, voting there in conclave with their brisk beams and their pictures, a week of total hole in the action, a cessation, the Truce! although some, mostly the young, naturally were impatient. To get on with the shooting, the launching, the firing of all was their passion.

Once home I thought of putting some engine in him, slyly... on the sly... in the deep night, shutting out all the prying beams, the lead curtains up everywhere, and he and I alone deep in the Stronghold, in my innermost Corrector Room - the quick and the dead confronted. It was tempting. It could have been done, of course, oh, it could have been easily done, and done so well that he would walk again, his eyes would seem to see again, and yes, he could talk to us. He could rejoin his Stronghold and continue the war! But he would be then really only a weapons man, devoid of all human quality, and I would know it. NO! I could not be that false, not to him, not to them, not to any of us. Although it might be best for them to dream on in their mighty death-masking fool's dream. But to engine him up again with only his own lean juice, his own flesh-strips - to make him rise up natural, to give him back to hate and all the human wants, the grins, the snarls, the grunts, the groans, the chatter of living, the pleasure and displeasure, to put him on the human plane again in total defiance of the Big Dark of the Cold Nothing - that's what I wanted to do.

The dream went pretty, prettily - in my mind. The thoughts went like hope-gardens, all flowers in bud or bloom. But he went - NOT -

My head tracked it awhile - how many hours, how many days, I do not know. But they found me, near the end of the week they had given me, out on the homeless plastic. I had loaded him in a little iron-wheel wagon, somehow in a little iron-wheel utility wagon, the kind my weapons men use sometimes for short-hauling BLAMM shots up to the launch slings. And they asked me, out there with their beams and their pictures - where? where going? "Going - GOING?" I said, looking at them a million incomprehensions. "GOING!?" I cried. And I looked. at the iron color of the dome that was over us, the finally inescapable bowl of the limitless prison-wall sky, gray and gray and gray, time's unlimited smothery murk. "GOING????!!!" I shrieked, and I looked into my own smoky thoughts far as I could go toward some possible port of arrival. "GOING????!!!"

They were kind. I will say this, they were kind. They had me, they finally had me, and they knew it. But they didn't use it so, and for that I honor them. Perhaps they made allowances for my derangement because they were certain that I was fighting their battle too, and privately I believe they knew that we had all lost. But they persuaded me differently, put on a brave show with their dancing faces and beams and told me that there had been no loss, a horrible hardly-explainable accident maybe, but no loss, and we were not diminished.

A little sheepishly I took him back, hauling in a common iron-wheel wagon, the kind used sometimes for

short-hauling BLAMM shots in Strongholds, what had once been a lordly Stronghold master, an iron cock-of-the walk, a man refined to the lastest last refinement, a man not made for natural-causes death, a man to LIVE! and bring the lordly monster-death of broiling grandiose war to a whole world if he so chose. He was awkwardly placed in the wagon, too big for it anyway, and his arms and legs were all akimbo, and some of these things were dragging, however much I might regret that, and I was working my hinges and braces furiously in the awkward hurry-walk of the new-metal "replaced" people, plop-plip-plap-plop, over the homeless way, hauling this dead hunk of metal and flesh-strip, that had once been a man, back for a decision. Their beams followed us, some of their likenesses shepherded us along, and we made quite a picture there, I suppose.

Later we had to decide what best to do - there were many questions. Should we give this man, the whole man, a decent old-fashioned burial, prayers and all to go with his old-fashioned death or should we, as was quite permissible in a clear-cut case of mighty-battle-death, award his flesh-strips to another Stronghold master to be used, where applicable, as spare parts for longer wear at war. In this latter case we would give this resigning - not dead, just resigning! - Stronghold master the short, in absentia, strictly honorary laudatory awards-type service, and CERTAINLY! without prayers and heaven-promise. And we could melt his metal down in a little ceremony and send it to that place on the Great Plastic Plain of the Dream Realized where he could be joined to his god - our god - a massive stick of new-metal set as our guide star when Moderan was new. To me just then, looking at this definite sprawled quietus, it didn't seem really to make much difference how we disposed of him. If it went the Moderan way, the metal shell of him melted down could go to join the Great Shaft, that massive stick that grows and lives and talks to us, a fact to count on, a god substantial, tall on the Great Plastic Plain. Or, if we by vote decided it, the metal shell of him could go on to become merely a weapons man, with an engine in him, a functional bit of pleasant moving nonsense meaning nothing at all, nothing at all. If it went the quaint old-fashioned heaven-promise way, with the full burial, the prayers, the talk of Something that would arise, Something far lighter than mist or air, Something that, of such frailty, was Eternal - well, I suspected that down in his long home he would heavily lie, sightless eyes looking toward his stopped toes forever.

"WHAT MEANS IT ALL AT ALL?" I shrieked in awful-frenzy shriek, retrogressed again toward madness shout, "THIS MAN IS ALL-GONE GONE! As we must in time ALL be. Come Faith or kidding Dream." But they reasoned with me again, right out there with their beams in front of me, talking, and some of them with their pictures sent out dancing, all of them really trying to stress how unseemly it was that I, a super Stronghold master, should so break down and be felled by natural-causes death. In Moderan. Where, officially, there was no natural-causes death. So finally I relented, gave in to the pressure and was persuaded.

What really happened, I suppose, was that I began to feel guilty. Why should I, I asked myself, just because I thought I had looked so deep and had seen so plain the clear NOTHING, hold up these good iron-purposed people who wanted to get on with the shooting, the launching, the firing of all? I had no right! They were dancy and brim-up with temporary aims, all entirely decent folk wanting to get on with the Big Battle, the killing marathon, and hurl contestful death at each other night and day in the big world hurly-burly. Why should I turn sour-heart and tell them there was nothing at the end of all this but this - the definite blank quietus? "He grew careless," I shouted, "probably, and didn't ply the rules and play the game. Didn't feed himself the right intoven maybe. His flesh-strips likely starved. Or maybe they just turned mouldy and unhealthy around the metal and flesh-strip joins because he didn't practice Moderan hygiene properly. Why should we care if he corroded? Should we let one careless, shiftless, entirely unworthy member of society completely blockbuster a central dream? Or hold up our contest? WE SHOULD NOT! We'll just store him in some old back-century chapel, shove him into a crypt until this war is over. Then we'll decide what to do with a bum who winged it and wouldn't fight." And the cheers started up, what would have been salvo upon salvo for me, from the beams and the pictures.

But just as the wild salvos for me were getting well underway, a young and vigorous little Stronghold captain, who had been watching and listening from a long way out, stepped in closer, just straightened his hinges and braces jauntily, flexed his kneecaps about twice and sent his beams out dancing with his picture shooting fire to blurt there an indictment and an offer that beat my suggestions very very much. I had to admit it. "THE BUM!" he cried. "Not one wound, not one single gash of the battle for his death badge! BUM! BUM!! BUM!!! If he had died a battle-damage death, his Stronghold all caved in, all the gun tubes hanging and the launch pads jammed - snarling up to the surface of his rubble and ready to go at us all, at everything! with just his two bare metal hands - BRAVO!! But this useless, guileless, gutless, hateful, grandma kind of death of the smiling hate-gone quitter - pshaw!"

Then the beams of the little captain and his picture raised hands to plead that we listen sharply, and lie went on, a little less impassioned now but in a voice that told that all of his substance and being was entirely back-up for what he said. "Since he didn't ply the rules and play the game," he reasoned, "this thief, this failure, this unspeakable blot who would steal our Dream and set us, back-hoped to NOTHING, on the terrible waves of Time to die - he is not one of us, not truly, could not ever have really been one of us. Therefore, let us strike him out of the League. We'll blackball him through Forever! We'll burn his image and flay his name before the stars on high. That'll take care of him. Then, just to be sure, we'll dump him in that big underground Zero Corrector machine, you know, the new one in the North, the one that can chew whole fortresses to a powder finer than dust in less than five seconds flat. Then all we have to do is fix our minds the right way. Cling to the fact that he never happened. So our Dream, our death-conquering sacred Dream, our Plan of life forever through flesh-strip, new-metal and intoven, will be fixed whole again, patched new, fine as it has ever been! And you can get on then with that grand war that, though I am not worthy to be in it, I watch and learn in every day, and I thrill to every death-weighted shot. And some day, maybe, when the iron invitations go out and mighty mechanized trumpets make their call, the sweetest of all music in this world, then maybe -"

Burst upon burst of wildly appreciative applause broke forth for the little captain then, for him whose clear-headed and wise suggestions had solved our dilemma about natural-causes death in Moderan. Yes, we'd fix this bum who had embarrassed us so badly, fix him so that it would be in fact that he had never been. We'd vote him out. We'd burn his image and flay his name before the Universe's high heaven. And then, just to make sure, we'd grind him underground in our own sure device for reducing to powdery dust all unwanted and unworthy things. YES! Yea, little captain!

So we moved up this wise little captain who, in fact, had been gunning for long for major rank, beamed him a notice to get ready for war, he was in! the fight would resume next Wednesday, which was tomorrow. So, in the end, near disaster to our Mighty Dream brought Joy to one, and if I do say so, albeit a little reluctantly, new blood in the lists probably didn't hurt us a bit, and our war was as successful as any I'd ever seen. And just to set the record straight, in deference to Mighty Truth, all ways and always, I must record that once again I recovered well and came back strong to refute a general and growing suspicion that before too many years more I might be ready for the Zero Machine, the Great Corrector, myself. Amidst the relentless havoc and the general shambles of all our shattered Strongholds I stood up once more as the Tall One and, walking proud-up around among the stacked great battle dead, accepted my prizes humbly as I could - "most efficient warrior of all," "most courageous battler in show," "best planner of strategy overall, by far," and finally the final accolade for one who would "steadfastly and without question use it all in unswerving and uncompromising holocaust to bend the world in battle to his own tall will."

[THE MIRACLE OF THE FLOWERS](#)

We were having an old-fashioned March-month in Moderan that year; Central had turned off Weather and was letting the big ball roll out its own. I was sitting outside my Stronghold in a Truce time, enjoying a storms-up time, the wind gusts whirling about my steel arm pit hinges, being tuneful in my new-metal nose, and withal howling at my tin ear shafts a pleasant enough spring song. It may be that I slept, but I do not think that I slept. I think the start that took me was not from sleep, but from wakefulness to greater wakefulness. And when you see what looks like a windmill walking away from a wind -!

He came on at a walking windmill's pace, if you can imagine an old windmill got loose from its place over an old well and come walking down the wind. As he came nearer I saw it was not a windmill at all, but just a tall sprangly man flailing his long new-metal arm shafts and walking the difficult four-corner walk of the "replaced" flesh-strip people, plop-plip-plap-plop, over the homeless way.

I had my bravery about me a little that day, so I did not all at once break scared for the Stronghold Wall. I sat and watched him, thinking how wild he was, how flailing the arm swing, how difficult the feet went to move him into his Journey. At the crossways he wavered, jiggled on his steel step-outs, flapped his hands in a paddler's way and, I judged, made the decision. The decision was to pass through the Big Place on the Y, my place! the big steel citadel where fingers reached up to high heaven, probing fingers of search beams, where hinges opened up orange halves of skin steel to disclose the bristling launch pads, and the gun lids, light and easy on the gun tubes, were always ready.

It was strange that he whistled a tune as he came down the great plastic way leading up to my fortress. Just at the farthest edge of my powers to hear it, with the Aid on Very High, I could catch that tune, a churchly kind of thing, but not of the church militant, gutty and strike them dead for God, but more of the church entreating, suppliant, begging of man some preposterous, impossible, never-to-be-gained concession - indeed, a very disturbing thing. But for anyone to whistle any tune while walking so hard at my gun points, even in Truce time, was a thumbed nose at the whole house of my logic, and almost I could not believe it. Curses and dark looks and the howl box going would be more the expected thing. But he was a whistler, a smiler, and he carried a small bouquet! I noticed as I studied him on my medium-X pocko-scope viewer while he was yet a long way out. A man in the Stronghold country carrying a small bouquet?! Better should he be with laser-beam guns low and easy on the waist, foul mean tricks under the breastplate, steel-dissolving acids in secret recesses of the thumbs, to punch at the eyes of strangers, and a couple of wedge-shaped hammers to hammer a man apart if ever he got him down. A small bouquet! Well, we wouldn't trust that either!

As a belated gesture at prudence my better brains took hold and I broke for the Stronghold Wall. Cursing ourselves for slowness we started the check-out probe, broke out the latest in, look tubes, put the new Scan Scope on fine-tooth-comb, evaluated his whole potential, put our entire vast complex of weaponry on steady alert, GO-NOW , just in case, and we canceled the leave of a couple of weapons men who, I happened to know, had been seeing much too much anyway of some women robot community workers in town. In addition to all this, with a great swing to the dark side of bravery, I raced for my peep-box of steel. If he was coming to take me with some tricks wrapped up in a set of steel daffodils - well, he wouldn't find me out there in my long gray hair like some old grandma knitting a doll bomb's cloak. NO!

But duly checked he proved clean, the bouquet was indeed a harmless one-little blue spring jump-ups made of steel, and some tin rose buds, quite out of season of course, and a couple of scraggly daffodils, new-metal and a shade off-color, I thought, but, all things considered, a very versatile and a pleasant enough bouquet. I wouldn't have minded to have had it, just out of sentiment, but I couldn't, with trying,

think of any awards I had coming just now, and the committees in town were jealous, so they wouldn't be sending me any tributes, floral or otherwise. Perhaps he was en route to some shrine and votive candles down the wind, and, with his walking, by about Xmas he'd get there. But why shouldn't a windmill-shaped man spend the better part of a year walking toward a shrine and some votive candles down the wind? By about Xmas Eve he could be on the outskirts and camp there, and dead on the twelfth bong of midnight, with sharp timing, he could lurch in with his metal handful and fling it down at the feet of a stuttery startled keeper of candles, and perhaps he would wish to yell at the candle keeper, "FOR THE BIRTHDAY!" - whatever that could mean? Years have been spent in worse ways. YES!

They handed me the report through a slit in the peep-box of steel, and, since the evaluation was entirely negative on danger, I gave the three signed orders, official and duly sealed, to open the gates on SLOW. When he was just alongside the peep-box, but still far out in the spacious Stronghold square, I invited him to halt. He turned toward me, whirled his flowers in a circle of rainbow hues and kept on coming, grinning, slapping the cold March air with his glinty windmill arms and the steel-and-tin blooms. I turned to my peep-box security, saw the triple locks were on and ran through my mind again the things to do in a time of maximum danger to ME. Ultimate contingency! And the bouquet kept on walking! Should he not stop! I was already deep in that personal commitment to trigger the trip-box ground and let him fall to his doom. He or I again, the old question, and I a great Stronghold master not even considering a lapse that would let me be taken by a man with a steel-and-tin nosegay. Though all my security devices had cleared him while he was still outside, how could I be absolutely sure that he had not smuggled some terrible acid through in each cute petal and stamen and stem of a very evil bouquet? And he would thrust that acid through at my eyes, aiming all too accurately at the slit in the peep-box steel. OH!...

But just as I could almost feel that evil explosive acid slamming into my innocent eyes and jumping the eyeballs out, he halted. And not a second too soon! One steel toe just was touching the line that marked the last small place he could go in his present direction without a terrible reversal at right angles - downward - to where certain devices, that for security reasons I cannot fully describe to you, would grind him in less than five seconds flat to a powder finer than dust. Yes, I could open the ground up under him at any given place in the Stronghold square.

"I bring to you my flowers," he said, as I swam back to the present from the near commitment of a terribly violent deed. Let it be said about me, I have never quite got used to it. And sometimes I think my rating as the strongest and bravest of all the Stronghold masters is only a big blatant sham. A man with that rating should be able to do it easily, with one mind tied behind him, so's to speak, and the minimum in concentration, almost as he breakfasted, as he tossed off his orange introven. (Here in Moderan, you understand, we, the new-metal flesh-strip people, must have all our food in a juice, with special flesh-strip nutrients.) An army of common men then done in before egg soup, and the giants along with the toast juice, and the spies and the lady guerrillas sent down along with the introven tea - sitting there calmly, you know, just casually thumping the buttons, sending my enemies down to the grind grind grind. Oh, I have got through it. Naturally, I have had to. I have sent whole captured armies down through my floor, all down, even to the last silly camp-follower girl, down to my secret hacking and grinding devices, and I have mailed the dust back home in giant-size envelope bags, back to their state ministers, with some clever notation such as, "Returning your army; reduced to reduce mailing costs." But mostly I just sent them back with a simple "Man dust - could not use" and the correct department address scrawled on the big mailing bags. And of course I always submitted a bill to them later for mailing and shipping costs, which, I regret to say, for it says so very much of the human shortcomings, was very seldom paid. Oh such are the ways of disgruntled backward countries, reduced from their honor, all honor almost, by defeat. But, as I started to point out, I have never done any of this destruction without the terrible tensions settling in, without a maximum concentration of my powers to do the necessary correct thing. And sometimes, therefore, I thought perhaps I wasn't cut out for this greatness. But I have kept on at it, and no one can in truth say that I haven't made a good show.

"I bring to you my flowers." No, his voice was not scratchy and harsh, as an old windmill needing an oil bath might sound, as I had expected. His voice was a soft silken prayer, a prayer to be friends, but what treachery can be wrapped up in that too, I reflected.

I was back now from the terrible place where my terrible deeds are done. I was back to the day and the air and the man in front of me, I was back from death. For - yes, I die just a little always when the dread-black deeds are done. But I was back now to slyness, canniness, sharpness, suspicion, slickness - the human relation on the level of everyday. I would have to feel him out.

I thumbed the triple locks open, pushed my peep-box door a small slit ajar and confronted him in this more open way. "Are you out from a committee in town?" I asked. "Have they evaluated me and decided I should receive some special token for deeds? Have they at last come awake?"

A small frown crossed on his face plates just where the face flesh-strips fused to his new-metal head. He flung out his new-metal arms in a gesture that made me in some ways wish that he had that toe just a little bit over the line, the destruction line, so that I in all conscience could drop him down to the knives and the grinder devices to bring that look and that contemptuous mockery-in-arm-swing to the total status of dust. But I didn't do it, of course. Out of curiosity, and some strong sense of fairness, I endured him. "A world of gusty gutty deeds with guns wishes for rewards," he said. "But I have a larger aim. When I say, 'I bring to you my flowers,' I mean I bring to you the essence of my flowers. Indeed, I do not bring you actually this bouquet. For this bouquet, if you care to know, is one of my hands!"

Well, that shook me. Somehow that jerked me up and slammed me down more times, harder, than if he had suddenly revealed that he had a new-metal arm that ended in a built-in knife or a gun. In this world where a person needs all the good steel hands he can get, why would a man deliberately cut himself down by one-half? Or was it deliberate? "Is this some punishment?" I asked. "Did you do a cowardly deed one time and so to forever set you apart in a world of courage and gritty deeds they cut off one of your hands and replaced it with a small floral display? HA."

The look he gave me, hard scowl all down the face flesh-strip and steel, made my prudent courage edge my thoughts back toward trip levers for a floor block's quick drop-down. But I didn't drop him down, of course. I listened when he said, "So you've got hands to grasp levers, fingers designed to the buttons and fingernails to scratch a steel conscience, perhaps, that perhaps does not exist at all. And yet I think you have a conscience, man! That's why I'm here; that's why I'm walking. And I'll walk on down across this bristling world right into the gun points if I may, and of course I may - I'll have to! until your conscience, and all like it, make of all these guns a giant flower pot. You think I'm joking. Oh, to come to such a world where such an aim seems joking." With that last he flung himself, all quite unexpected by me, quite flat before me on the ground, and he began to beat his floral hand upon the yard sheets. The pale blue of the spring jump-ups, the deep red of the all-out-of-season rose buds and the yellow of the mangy daffodils made flashing bright small color arcs as he beat them one-two-three, one-two-three, a hypnotic maddening cadence, on the ground.

When he was through with it he lay quite spent, face-down, his beautiful, but now shattered, hand stretched out at greatest length toward me, his chest bellows of the standard New Processes everlasting lungs going at quite a rate to catch him up, and he looked, all things taken into consideration, mostly like some interesting old heap of discard. I noted casually that, though his shattered hand was stretched out at maximum toward me, not even a piece of the farthest-out shredded daffodil was across the danger line. I relaxed, breathed easier and could not help asking, "How many bouquets do you wear out, man, in the average year?"

He came up off the ground like some old fallen tall scarred sunflower lifted up by a magic sun to stand again. A glow was in him and all round him, and I do guess he could turn on switches for effect; he fixed me with a pious man's pure pious stare. "I do not wear out any. God takes care of me, and, among all the miracles He shows, I do not think it too much to ask of you to accept that after each performance my metal hand grows back. And now if you'll read these, and play sometime with these - during next Truce Time, perhaps, or even this one - I will not, perhaps, have occasion to bother you again this year." Then he handed me, from some baggage space under his breastplate, about the usual standard things to read - pamphlets that held out such very dubious allegations as the flat statements that flowers were better than guns, that love was better than hate and that human understanding was more to be strived for than a Stronghold full of bully-bombs. Also, there was the usual promise that God was coming to strike us down because we had been so mean. Well, sure, I'd seen it all before, but I thanked him as I glanced at the pamphlets he'd handed me. And the little things to play with - they weren't so very much either, I thought. Mostly they were standard pieces of dogma, a gaunt bearded man hanging down in the usual they-know-not-what-they-do way (and you wondered why, as a price for going up there, he had not fought them until his muscles were all torn blood, until at least some of those eyeballs were out and rolling down that hill and intestines, at least in some measure, were wrapped around lance sticks and trees) and The Child of course (and you fought not to have the reflection that if you cared for the world enough, and trusted the world enough to ever be caught out without enough hammers on your side, they were sure, in the end, to nail you up to a limb). And the usual black beads were there on strings which he said he hoped I would not take too lightly, they were not meant to be pull chains, but were meant to be fondled and clutched about, each bead, as I thought of a nice personal wish, pious of course. I thanked him for all and was courteous about these things, from some deep-set far-back urge to be hopeful about these things, and something in his steel stare was not to be lightly taken.

But over all that my reason told me to laugh, fling the little dolls and their beads at him, make a small snowstorm of the pamphlets and, for taking up my time, drop him down to the stones where the big grinders would teach him this world's true terms soon enough. But instead I compromised. I told him his performance had been interesting. I hoped he would be able to find a metal worker who would fix his hand back together without too much trouble, and yes, I wished him Godspeed on down to the next Stronghold square.

He turned to me and stood with his head bowed for a long instant, his shoulders twitching and shaking, and I wondered if truly he prayed some sobbing shoulder-twitch prayer for all the sins to be lifted from what in his mind must seem a tragic and near-hopeless world of real day-to-day metal strength. (These dreamers, these pamphleteers, these bead pushers usually don't like that day-to-day metal strength; they'd rather talk of a Day.) Or had I hurt his feelings and that shoulder-twitch was just sobbing? When he turned again, slowly, ever so slowly, his flowered hand was uplifted, and - yes! YES! it was a hole! It was fixed back! Not shattered, not shattered at all. NOT SHATTERED! And he stared at me the straight locked-on stare of what I suddenly thought must be the true-true stare of a new-metal snake in love, and he edged his toes over the line, inexorably over the forbidden never-never line. While I stood and did nothing; under that stare I did nothing.

My flesh-strips were congealed; my hands were heavy as two huge hammers that a giant could never lift up. And he kept coming, inches over the line now and still moving, the eyes holding and the miracle flowers about eye-high and slowly turning. Oh... OH... It may be that terrible screams tore up from the very bottom sacs of my breath space; it may be that they did not. I only know that after a while I could not stand it, and long before he attained reach-handed distance of the peep-box of steel I rushed from the door and slow, slow as we go, I hurried to him, the slow hurry of the 'replaced' flesh-strip people, but the very best we can do. And when we met, after all the hard striving to close the gap, I embraced the rough beautiful petals and over and over I cried, "A miracle! A Miracle! A MIRACLE!" And he wisely eyed me with the loving-snake stare and said nothing. But after a while, when I was able to release

the flowers, he gave me what passed for his blessing and slowly he backed away. Back over the line. There he gave me a little talk, explaining how glad he was that he could bring me this exaltation, God's own true showing, and he hoped I would never be without it. Then he explained how God's work truly somehow gets done, but to get done better sometimes it were better that the benefited help a little to send him of the flower hand on down to the next God-needful plug. In short, it cost money, and could he have some, not to pay him -NEVER! but to help him help? Of course I gave him a generous gift from my treasure, and I directed that a weapons man bring, in addition, a very special and valuable blood-red gem that I hoped he, the pious one, could fit into his bouquet as a forever remembrance of this, for me, great day. "Oh NO!" he said, but he took it and put it, the valuable gem, for hard times (he said) along with the other treasure, under his breastplate. And I noticed for the first time then, without really being much shaken by it, an odd thing: the hand with which he put away the money and gem was nearly all flesh yet, a beautifully-shaped sensitive mostly-flesh hand, one you would think of as clasped over its gentle brother in gentle prayer, always in prayer... PRAYING HAND!

Then he was gone out through the Stronghold square, and, as a last order just before I collapsed and lay for many many days in a beautiful heavenly dream, I directed that the gates be opened so that this wonderful miraculous man could go on his wonderful miraculous way.

Of course it hit me, in the very first half hour after I had awakened from my long dreamy sleep, rested and ready to be of the world again - it hit me how it was!HOW IT MUST HAVE BEEN! At first I was all fired up to beam my neighboring Stronghold the warning, for the man with the flower hand was probably, with his walking, about due for there. But then I thought NO, let old neighboring Stronghold get it too. Probably do him good. And didn't we all have it coming? But I couldn't help wondering how long it would be before someone figured it out in time, and all on his own, that when old windmill flower-hand man turned for an instant to seem solemnly to pray, that jerky shoulder-twitch praying for the sins of the world, he was really, from the supply he carried in the baggage room under his breastplate, just changing hands. YES!! that dexterous flesh-hand had screwed on another bouquet!

INCIDENT IN MODERAN

In Moderan truly we are not often between wars, but this was a truce time. A couple of Strongholds in the north had malfunctioned - some breakdown in their ammo-transport belts, I think - and we had all voted to hold up the war a day or so to give them a chance to get back in the blasting. Don't get me wrong - this was no lily-white flower-heart fair-play kind of thing or love-thy-neighbor-Stronghold sort of hypocrisy, like might have been in the Old Days. This was a hard-neck common-sense compromise with reality. The bigger and better the war, the bigger and better the chance to hate voluminously and win honors. It was as simple as that.

But at any rate, it was between wars that I was doing some odd-job things just outside the eleventh, outermost Wall of my Stronghold. To be right truthful, I was mostly just sitting out there in my hip-snuggle chair, enjoying the bleary summer-sun through the red-brown vapor shield of July and telling my head weapons man what to do. He was, so it chanced, polishing an honors plaque that proclaimed on Wall 11 how our fort, Stronghold 10, was **FIRST IN WAR, FIRST IN HATE, AND FIRST IN THE FEARS OF THE ENEMY.**

Things were getting tedious. What I mean is, it was getting dull, this sitting around between wars,

directing the polishing of plaques and dozing in the filtered summer sun. Out of sheer boredom, and for the amusement of it all, I suppose, I was just about ready to get up and start beating my weapons man with my new-metal swagger stick loaded with lead. Not that he wasn't doing an excellent job, you understand, but just to have something to do. I was saved this rather stupid and perhaps pointless, though not altogether unpleasant, expedient by a movement on the ninth hill to my left. Quickly I adjusted my wide-range Moderan vision to pinpoint look, threw my little pocko-scope viewer up to my eyes and caught a shape.

When it got there, it was a shape, all right! I immediately saw it was one of those pieces of movement - man? animal? walking vegetable? - well, what are we going to say for most of these mutant forms that roam the homeless plastic in Moderan? When he stood before me, I felt disturbed. Strangely I felt somehow guilty, and ashamed, that he was so bent and twisted and mushy-looking with flesh. Oh, why can't they all be hard and shining with metal, and clean, like we Stronghold masters are, with a very minimum of flesh-strip holding them in shape? It makes for such a well-ordered and hate-happy life, the way we masters are in Moderan, so shiny and steellike in our glory, with our flesh-strips few and played down and new-metal alloy the bulk of our bodily splendor. But I suppose there must always be lower forms, insects for us to stride on... I decided to try speech, since I couldn't just sit there with him staring at me so with those flesh eyeballs. "We're between wars here," I said conversationally. "Two of the mighty Strongholds of the north broke down, so we decided to hold up."

He didn't say anything. He was looking now at the honors plaque on Wall 11 and at the weapons man polishing the proud words. "It's just a kind of fill-in in-between job," I said. "Besides, it gives me a chance to doze out here in this filtered summer sun while the weapons man does the work. But it gets tedious. Before you came, I was right on the point of getting up to start beating him with my new-metal swagger stick loaded with lead, even if he is all-metal new-metal alloy, and doing an excellent job, and probably wouldn't have felt the beating anyway. But just to have something to do, you know. As you perhaps realize, a Stronghold master mustn't do any real work in Moderan. It's against the code." I laughed a little, but strangely I felt nervous in my flesh-strips and vague along the rims of my joints. Why did he look at me that way? Even so, why should the stares of such an insignificant piece of life affect me at all?

Could he talk? He could. Blue soft lips parted and a yellow-pink piece of gristly meat jiggled up and down in wet slop in his mouth that was raw-flesh red. When this somewhat vulgar performance of meat and air was through, I realize he had said, "We had a little funeral for Son a while ago. We hacked away at the plastic with our poor makeshift grave kits and put him under the crust on time. We hurried. We knew you couldn't guarantee much truce. I come to thank you for what you did."

I shook a little at this strange speech and turn, then recovered myself quickly and waved a steel hand airily. "Consider that I'm thanked. If you wish a steel flower for a decoration, take one."

He shuddered in all his loose-flesh parts. "I came to thank you," he told me in what I supposed passed for blunt speech in his tribe, "not to be ridiculed." In his stare there was a look of puzzlement and doubt now.

Suddenly I found the whole thing growing quite ludicrous. Here I was, a Moderan man between wars, minding my own business, sitting outside the eleventh outermost Wall of my Stronghold, waiting for the war to resume, and some strange walking lump of sentimentality that I didn't even know existed hurries across from the ninth hill to my left to thank me for a funeral. "You had a good one?" I suggested. Frantically I tried to remember things from the Old Days. "The mourners stretched down for a mile? Music - a lot? Flowers - banked all about?"

"Just us," he said, "I and his mother. And Son. We hurried. We were sure you couldn't give much time

from all the busy times. We thank you for what you did - for the decency."

Decency? Now, what an odd word? What could he mean by decency? "Decency?" I said.

"The rites. You know! We had time for a little prayer. We asked that Son be allowed to live forever in a happy home."

"Listen," I said, a little fed up already with all this; "I don't more than half remember from the Old Days enough about this to discuss it. But you poor flesh mutants bury your dead and then ask that they be allowed to rise and live again about twenty-five times lighter than a dehumidified air bubble. Isn't that about it? But isn't that taking quite a chance? Why don't you just get wise and do it like we Moderan masters do? Just have that operation while you're young and vigorous, throw away what flesh you don't need, 'replace' yourself with all-metal new-metal alloy 'replacements' and live forever. Feed yourself this pure honey-of-introven extract we've come up with and it's a cinch, you'll have it made. We know what we've got, and we know how to live... And now, if you'll excuse me, according to that report arriving at this very moment over the Warner, those Strongholds that aborted the war seem to be fixed up again. We stopped the blasting because of them so we'll just have to really move now to make up hate-time. I would guess the firing may be a little heavier than you've ever seen it."

Through the last parts of this speech I watched what looked like puzzlement and doubt flicker strangely across his flesh-encumbered countenance. "You stopped the war because - because those two Strongholds aborted in the north? You - you didn't really do it then so we could bury Son and have the decency?!" A cold thought must have wrapped him round; he seemed to shrink and shrivel and go inches shorter right there on the plastic. I marveled anew at the great hard times these flesh things gave themselves with their emotions and their heart palpitations. I thumped my "replaced" chest in a kind of meditation and thanked the lucky iron stars in our splendid new-satellite heavens for my calm-cool condition. "In a little while," I said, "we'll open up this blasting. We're clearing the lines now for first countdown and a general resumption. You see, we try to start even. After that it's every Stronghold for itself to just blast away and make the most expeditious use of the ammo."

He looked at me a long time for some sign of joking. After a while he said in a tone that I supposed with the flesh things passed for great sadness and great resignation, "No, I guess you really didn't stop it so we could bury Son and have the decency. I guess it truly was the aborted Strongholds in the north. I see now I read something true and fine into it and that true and fine something wasn't there at all. And so I - I came across to thank you for a decency - for nothing -"

I probably nodded ever such a little, or possibly I didn't, because I was hearing the Voice now, hearing the Warner say that all was about in readiness for Great Blast to go and for the masters again to take their positions at the switch panels of War Rooms. "That's it!" I said to no one and nothing in particular. "It'll be double firing now and around-the-day launching of war heads until we make up our time in hate units."

Just as, bidding my weapons man not to forget the hip-snuggie, I was about to turn and go, hustle off to my War Room and resume Great Blast, a cold sound struck through my steel. What was that high whimpering along the plastic? Then I saw. It was the little flesh-bum. He had lost control of his emotions, had fallen down and was now blubbering real tears. "It's okay, don't be scared," I shouted at him as I turned to hurry. "Keep low in the draws, avoid even halfway up hills and travel swiftly. You'll make it. We fire only at peaks, first go."

But as I passed through the Wall and was bidding the weapons man make all secure, I noticed the little flesh-fellow remained prone, blubbering along the plastic. He was not making any effort to get clear and

save himself! And suddenly old Neighboring Stronghold to the east let loose with such a cheating early burst that the little flesh-bum was quite pancaked down - indeed even far further than pancaked, as it got him with a deadly Zump bomb that I'm sure was capable of punching him to the center of the earth even as he was being vaporized to high sky and all winds, and I was ever so glad this had fallen just a little bit short of my complex. But as I glanced at the smoking havoc and a large patch of nothing now, where a moment before had been the good plastic earth-cover, I could not help but rejoice that the war was certainly again GO. For the flesh-bum I didn't even try for tears, and nothing in my mind could bring my heart rain as I raced on to the War Room to punch my launch knobs down.

THE FINAL DECISION

Steel you can be rid of. Easily. You just lay it by. Metal is a fine thing to leave stacked in corners or along ditches of roads. Or melt it down. When you're THROUGH. Our new-metal alloy "replacements" - what a fine deal... to live forever, ho!!!

To live forever; to be our true bad selves. How fine it sounded. What a grand plan! But have you ever lain back at the switch panel in your War Room with your fort on the status of Continuous Blast for weeks on end? Karoom karoom karoom . How it palls. How it tires. How you begin to ask yourself, this is for what? what purpose, hey? But you pause once - you rest just a little before the general amnesty goes out with the white flags up and you're dead, your walls flattened, your Stronghold crushed to dust. So what's to do? Year after year you lie back in your Stronghold and ride with the general plan. They want war, you war. They decide to peace it awhile, you send up your white flag along with the jolly rest. And you smile your teeth at the seasons and let time roll. After all, you have a lot of it - time. In Moderan.

One morning, say - it's a June Wednesday - the vapor shield is blue in memory of those old blue skies, the rockets are firing arroump arroump arroump , the walking doll bombs are rolling out toward all the Enemies and the Honest Jakes are homing down just fine to the kill - in fact, it's a perfect war. Then what? Suddenly your heart kicks up in its settings and you feel like doing some poems or sorrowing to go love your neighbor and tell him how up an ode or two. Or you want to go love your neighbor and tell him how wrong is the war. Can you do it in this society? In Moderan! You dare! And anyway, what is TRUTH - the poems or the war? Telling your neighbor it's wrong, or smiling your teeth bare while his poor green blood spots the plastic?

But before I tell you what I've decided to do concerning this TRUTH-PURPOSE Big Question, let me say I've tasted the sweets. I've been the top war man for many a vapor shield. (A vapor shield is a month, in Moderan, in case you hadn't heard). I've had them all at bay, my rockets beautifully firing for many a Moderan year. I've done the civic thing too. I've helped the poor struggling Stronghold against the bully one. I've ganged up on the arrogant to blast them down for trees. (A fine metal park now "grows" and glows with shining shrubs where many a bully Stronghold once stood and defied our happy laws.) I've trained ever so many boys, refugees from Old Life in Far Wide, made them lean clean citizens for the Program, cleared them of Conscience Clutter and Moral Know, got them ready for Joys. I've sung the hymns on Gads Sonsday, done my prayers to the Needle Building, the Court men, the Hall men, the God-pieces far and wide. And each and every penance day has found me with my little plastic bag of penance tears slung down from a new-metal hand, my latest war medal around my neck, marching with my battle opposites -plop-plip-plap-plop over the homeless plastic - going to the ceremonies, doing

penance because as a man I had not; as indeed no man has, been perfect. Yes, I had won all my wars, but well, who ever wins them as well as he might have won - who ever had as many as he might have had with a little more hard trying? And now let me try a confession. (I'm not ashamed. I've sought Truth). Let me confess that along with all these high accomplishments of war I've also been a lover. Ah yes, I know it's unusual. I know I shake you, somewhat. But I reach for Truth - all Truth. I, the greatest of all the Stronghold masters, with my war medals stacked case on case, here on the brink of an Ultimate Decision I confess that I have known, have felt, have been among that unreasonable, unreliable word "love." I am guilty, but I am not sorry; I am not ashamed. Here in this steel-ribbed land, this plastic-coated iron and concrete new metal place, where we practice strength and speculate on armor, dedicated to the high principle that only hate is reliable and finally true, I was a lover! I seem to brag. Perhaps I do brag.

It started out as Joys. Joys, let me say, are fine in Moderan. Joys are what we live for, Joys and wars, and wars are, in a way, of course the ultimate Joys. But when a Joy turns into love, you're on dangerous ground. No longer thinking clean, you may be cluttered. You do not have, perhaps, that sharp precise decision about you that you had when you were clear and knew that hate was the only reliable emotion. Perhaps, in the final thinking, my greatness was truly my temporary downfall.

It began at the great awards festival that year in Warwington, the first year I won the double honors, the one of the crossed missiles and the award of the eleven steel walls. The award of the crossed missiles was given me because I was the top blaster in Moderan that year, having leveled more recalcitrant Strongholds as cleared places for trees, having fired more nuisance missiles without knockout harm to the Strongholds that lived clear-and-true by the rules of honorable war. The award of the eleven walls was pinned because my inventiveness had come up with a plan that had allowed my servants to be meaner to each other, that is, they had piled up more hate points per capita than had the servants of any other master. Well, there I was, supreme abroad and supreme at home, the acknowledged mean-master of all the lands of Moderan. It was a heady eminence; it was a feat to bloat the ribs and stand the man up taller.

So I went to get my awards that day in Warwington. At the glittering Banquet of Honor I inched out bold when my name was called; plop-plip-plap-plop . I wavered toward the dais, slow slow as we go working our hinges and braces. But no one laughed, for they were steel men too. What a price we have paid for our iron durability; what a bounty went to some cruel god of reality when we took the path of "replacements," accepted the new-metal parts and played our flesh-strips down. How I longed that shining day for one stretch of good striding, one minute with firm young flesh on my steel-rod legs and real feet in my high-polish war boots to reach me forward in a jaunty step.

Amid the heartbreak waiting of the jealous Stronghold masters at last I attained the dais. I stood there waving my joints in a little matter of mockery, lined my leg "replacements" up to stand me to tallest tall, pulled full my new-metal lungs and stared down into the honorable hating faces. Then the applause broke out, salvo on salvo of honor done by steel hands beating steel hands. Outside in the parks the honor missiles fired. Yes, as I said earlier, I have tasted the sweets.

On the dais that day occurred the unusual thing for me the double-honors winner. And it was ultimately my temporary downfall. While I stood chest-proud and tall-up for the pinning on of the honors, someone flicked on the ladies. What I mean to say is, while the ceremonial master was fastening my medals to me, a servant type rose up, a stagehand kind of person, and went all around on the dais and flicked to ON the life-switches of all the new-metal ladies that decorated our ceremonial area. Ordinarily it would have meant nothing, for our urges along those lines are not usually more than a fight lukewarm in Moderan, and we have other things to do of a more consecrated nature. A lady for variety in Joys maybe once or twice a year, but other than that - phoo! But tonight I turned and of such small things are our lives twisted and warped and arrested, and made full. My medals gleaming in gold, I caught the eye of a charmer. I was

stunned to blue-gold and heaven-madness of dreaming, my heart pistoning hard while I stared. Later on in the show, when in eulogy they were giving me Everything - the world for my greatness, all the verbal blah about how a people should be proud, how much truly they owed for my double-win example - I said, trying hard for calm, going big for the cool non chance while my heart hammered-pointing, "Throw in the little blue-eyed goldy-blond one. I've a spot for her in my statuary." So they loaded my war cars with ladies when I readied for my home. All of them I quickly melted down, except the ONE!

But the ONE! Here on the brink of the Final Deciding, after all the eras, after all the monotonous years of tasting the sweets of honor, how I see her, thinking back. Small and gold and blue - how they molded her, how her hinges were set in smooth! So I had taken her home and had looked at her long and well once and had set her among my statuary and had forgot her - all would have still been safe. Or I could have admired the mechanics at great length, or a little while, rubbed the rivets and weld joints well and then melted her down with my torches. What's to harm? But no, I couldn't do the prudent thing. Not me!

But I was young then, for Moderan. Perhaps I was feeling a little ego-bloated that night after the gaudy event in Warwington, winning the double honors. Perhaps they had spiked the punch-introven that they served at the Table of Heroes, and not being used to it could be it lingered long in my flesh-strips. Or maybe it was just that time for something long dead in my heart-box to shudder again to life and confound me. At any rate, I did not take her home, look at her long and well once and then set her among my statuary, the ball men, the string-metal maidens and the other monstrosities of art that delight me. I did not feel her rivets and weld joints well and then melt her down to a lump, either! Ah no, not old double-awards winner mush head me. I flipped her life-switch to ON! And there stood the goldy-blond maiden, my darling, my sweetheart - ONE! I knew all at once, somehow that things would never be the same, not quite, for me. But I will not bore you with the full-rose song of our love. How it would delight me to tell! How it, perhaps, would pall on you to read, for there are not words for its justice, and where there words - well, who is a master chooser? Let the measure of the event be read by you, between the lines, as it were, of what happened to my fort.

Stronghold 10, my fort, was expected, after the big deal of the double-awards win, to blossom and bloom into the terror of all Moderan. No one would believe otherwise. After all, I was young then (for Moderan) and a world of war and hate seemed full of promise for a young man and his fort. Ultimately we fulfilled all the hopes of our well-wishers, but that was - well, ultimately. Right after the Warwington ceremonies, when I went home with my wagons full of ladies and melted them all down but the ONE! Stronghold 10 passed into almost total eclipse. Disgraceful? Sure! My missiles moulded in their launchers, the walking doll bombs did not walk, the cold winds whirled through the holes the enemy warheads made in my ramparts. But it was warm, warm! in one inmost room of my Stronghold where I dallied. The head weapons man would beat a tattoo on my door day and night to report the battle damage, to tell of our walls being honeycombed. "In hell's name, sir, shall we fire?" he'd shriek. "Fire? Fire!? What fire?" I'd mumble, warm and dazed with love, and then it'd be back to the lips of my new-metal mistress to work the lever bed in our great ecstasy and leave the head weapons man wringing hands and wailing because I would not give the order to fire. How could I? I, give the order to fire in war! I had the great blaze of my own right there in bed, the big bonflame of love.

But ultimately, of course, I came to my senses. Everything palls in awhile, even the Joys of a new-metal mistress, and you find you want something else, even if she is your ONE-darling, your sweet-honeydoll, the one great bang-boom of your heart. I wanted honors. The way to get honors in Moderan was to let the doll Bombs roll, let the Honest Jakes scream out, let the high-up weird shrieking Wreck-Wrecks home to targets far and wide. The morning I finally turned her life-switch to OFF I was a madman; I was everywhere at once, ordering here a wall shored up, here a missile fired and here a doll bomb armed with a greater blaster head. I covered miles that day in the Stronghold, in my little runabout scoot, and the world shuddered with war. Yes, Stronghold 10 was again in the lists, battle-joined. Just say I made up

enough hate ground that year to offset the laggard months and again won on points the award of the crossed missiles and stood down in Warwington for the tinsel Banquet of Heroes. The award of the eleven steel walls, given for internal meanness, eluded me that year, and would until the departure of the ONE. But later we got that fixed up too.

And now perhaps you'll wonder why I stand here on the brink of a Final Decision, as I mentioned earlier, and why I make this Decision, I the greatest, most honored man in all Moderan. Not to be long-winded, just say I'm quitting, here to search a larger field. Temporarily, I hope, but it could very well be permanent. Why? Perchance - nay, not perchance - most surely I do not know why, clearly, I go. And surely the conjecturing should rest right here. But something nags me, nay, compels me, as it has man for long, to talk much about that I know of least. It is an urge not to be denied, a thing of must-do, surely.

Not to confuse you at the outset, when I speak of quitting, I mean QUITTING. I mean DYING! Oh, didn't it seem fine when first we discovered the trick of "replacements" and knew, with new-metal alloy the bulk of our bodily splendor and our flesh-strips few and played down, we could live, could be, endlessly? How the world in our dreams opened up like a sweet-trance song going forever. What a chance to win honors. How much time for the blasting, and time to improve the techniques of blasting. Well, I think we came through on that point. We have improved the techniques of blasting. And honors - many honors were won. But though we talk on and nibble in for a million words, how blast to the heart of the problem? What's to say? I could say I'm tired. I'm not tired, not physically. New-metal alloy doesn't tire. I could say I'm full up with honors, quite bloated with achievement and have no more worlds to conquer. That's nearer the truth, but that's not quite it not the last part, at any rate. There is a world left to conquer, or be conquered by, or slip into quietly like a new-metal mouse holing behind a wall. There is a world -

And now I'm faced with it, by my own Decision. I may as well tell you. The greatest in Moderan to be the first to crack in Moderan? Irony! Irony! Irony! But the years have piled up on my flesh-strips, the honors have come, have come, the blasting has gone on and goes on year after year, the truth of hate in our land goes beautifully, and yet the final thing comes no closer to a settlement. Purpose? PURPOSE! That I would know. Must know.

By my own hand - and this is MY Decision - I shall disassemble myself. I have one trusted servant. None of you know him. I keep him in a box in a most secret far place. At my signal he will come, at midnight from that far place through a secret tunnel, along an ancient and forgotten tube, up through a lid in the floor. He will help me with the last rivets. Perhaps we'll jest a bit - who knows? while we're taking my body down. Perhaps a last toast taken in introven. And then we'll - oh Lord, only he will, the thought disturbs me though I try to mash it down - only he will stack my body along a wall! All except the flesh-strips. Those he will take with him quietly that night, stored in preservative, back through the secret floor hole and along the dim tunnel miles to store "me" (my flesh) with him in the box, all according to my prearrangement of commands on a tape I have prepared. And I will go - who, what knows HOW I will go? Some how at the separation of the last flesh-strips, the last nerve strand and the last rivet. Who, what knows WHERE I will go?

But I must go. To find out PURPOSE. The years have brought me finally to that decision. My Stronghold I will put on dormant for the planned duration of my departure. I have let my truce credits accumulate until I have, in funds, many white flags. As the top blaster in Moderan, far ahead of war, I have no battle commitments that are crucial.

Will I come back? I plan to. I plan to come back and tell all of you of my travels. If I do not come back? If I am trapped out there, held in some stillborn quietness, some hanging immensity of voice,

incomprehensible, space-locked stillness of stillness, oh God? Well, that has been arranged for, for indeed it is a possibility. After a certain time, all commanded in the tape of my prearrangements, the little servant man will return from the secret box in the far place. I expect to be back then waiting to help him put me, my body, back together. But if I am not back then, I will not be back, then. (Oh, let us pun a little here even on the brink of Death.) My flesh-strips will go to my head weapons man then, in a different arrangement, of course, for he cannot, must not, be me, and Stronghold 10 will go on, almost as before, into a new era of blasting.

So you see this Final Decision is indeed a final decision. But if the risks are high, the stakes are indeed of the highest. I take this course freely here on the eminence of my heaped honors. I have sought TRUTH and found it existed for me not only in the fine clean hates of the Moderan Strongholds but also in the fine hot love of a new-metal mistress long ago, when I was very young. I now seek a higher thing - PURPOSE. Since I have not found out PURPOSE completely in the blasting, the Joys, the loves, the hates, the life of Moderan, I'll seek it across the line . May fortune smile on my venture. Oh yes, for us all!

WILL-HUNG AND WAITING

I never went...

I waited, will-hung in fear, to implement my "Final Decision" dream. Old graveyards, black coffins and white tombstones strung in my memory down for a thousand miles. It seemed. Generation upon generation of normal death-fearing ancestry spoke through my pale green blood and said don't got DON'T GO! The flesh-strips writhed and remembered, cowered and fear-shriveled to panic-fright all up and down my new-metal shell and would not come on brave. YES! it was a sorry show for the great Stronghold 10, I'm sure, but I'm afraid, in the final analysis, the very best I could do. Having beaten the Mighty Adversary with my flesh-strips, new-metal and the introven, was I now to go to him by my own hand and give him the chance to keep me forever and forever?

All the great victories, all the fine honors, all that heavy fact of my great GREAT love - all were finally nothing now, faced with this final hour. I laid it all in dust, and it was dust! Nothing to keep, nothing whatever to keep. Final Decision was a fine decision. But...

I found, faced with the most personal personal fact of my own possible stark going down irrevocably to never-coming-back, I longed for a Final War! One more great shoot-out and a world gun-down to prove anew my lusty strength and presence as mortal man! Let all my enemies, all other men, go up in battle smoke this war. Let parts of men blown high-skyward fill the air once more, and better than ever this time. One more war, one more, to complete my Final Victory as a Man of Earth. Then I would go, with no man left at my back to betray me, to seek that final condition, Purpose, across the line... OH GOD...

I never went... I vacillated year after year after year, while the seasons turned and turned on Moderan's great Central Seasons Control, Drum of the Changes, and ran one into another. I lingered on in the lists as mighty battle-man war after war after war, and so did my contemporaries, pulsating to the battles and the truces in Moderan. Purpose, alas, we might have found it out...

HOW THEY TOOK CARE OF SOUL IN A LAST DAY FOR A NON-BEGINNING

The defection started on a drowsy early-summer Monday. One of the lesser metal-and-people people of Moderan (a peotal) found a soul. Or rather, to be quite correct, it was only a piece of a soul. It was not even a very good piece of a soul, perhaps, having been lost in Moderan for quite a few long years. But it was what it was, and it set the others searching. They looked beneath the plastic yard sheets and under the iron pear trees and around the spots where the steel pansies came through the garden holes. And every once in awhile they would in fact, or imagining it, turn up another piece of soul. These were exciting things to find, or even imagine, because they were so intangible and different there among the iron power-towers, the whirling precise gogos and the shining accurate monster gears that drove the complicated apparatuses of this land.

They played all day with the pieces they had found of souls. They would toss them up in the air and catch them and wear them on their sleeves for awhile, or in their buttonholes for a space, and think at them and gaze and gaze. The peotals who had found pieces of soul did this. Other peotals, who had not found pieces of soul, came over and looked through the sparkling green-hued air that was controlled to a precise humidity and a precise temperature and a precise flavor by a gigantic air-conditioning system. And these peotals could not see anything unusual except that some of their neighbors were slapping at the healthy controlled atmosphere and catching pieces of it in quite an odd way indeed in front of their bubble-dome homes.

But a soul, or even a piece of one, can be, to the finder, a very moving thing. When soulless peotals came over to ask what all the senseless slapping and aimless hitting and lively jumping were about and were told that pieces of soul had been found, naturally these peotals said, "Hah? What's soul? And so what if found?" And the peotals who had found the soul parts became at once evangels and told all the others about soul, speaking especially loud and clear upon significances.

Of course news of such curious nature would spread rapidly, and when it reached the Needle Building in the Pale White Capital, where the Council of the Palest Greens sat mulling, there was consternation. The Council members were all "replaced" people - graduate Stronghold masters, of course - metal except for minor flesh-strips holding them together and feeding the oversize brains held suspended in green blood in metal brain-pans. Because their flesh-strips were the smallest, their blood the palest, and because they had been longest away from souls, they were preeminent of course. But they knew about souls, from old records, and they knew how dangerous such interesting intangible things might be to this precise, mechanical, and very automatic land that was designed to be forever. So they laid their plans; they called for the counter measures. Maximum diversion! was the cry.

The Council pressed the buttons. And these were the buttons of total war on defection. The Maximum Diversion Birds arose from a million bird "boxes" on the perimeter of this land that was called Moderan. With bomb bags of blue oil and bomb sacks of pink sand the Birds started salvoing the peotals. The Birds screamed and red fluids strung from their keening mouths, and the gleam of their shiny wings all together was an awesome thing to see as they stepped higher and ever higher into the lime-vanilla air and whirled in the tight formations of the bird daisies. Far below this show in the clear air tin mandolin men strummed madly in the yards. Tinnily they yelled the go-go-go songs and brassily they hummed the

try-try-try tunes about a strong state living forever where tin robots worked brother-brother together. The perfume men ran in all the streets and alleys of the bubble-dome homes, across all the yards and fields of Moderan, with the most heady of scents, with the most delicious odors yet put together. The form men shot the sky full of a panorama so diversified and delightful that its like may never be seen again, making a curtain of shapes above the Birds, frantically bombing the petals with bags of blue oil and sacks of pink sand. Then, in a gesture that tried to fake love, some hand in the Pale Council pushed the button marked FLOWERS, and with a great rush, with a mighty whoosh, the tin blooms whoofed through the yard holes and waved gaudy metal petals at the feet of tin mandolin players still yelling about a state of tin comrades getting along brother-brother together, without soul. And a made sun peeked pleasant speckles through the shape men's work and the bird daisies holding their order. But all this did no good. The petals still clutched the pieces they had found of souls and refused to be diverted. And they organized the trains, ten long jet-pushed soul movers.

Up from the south the great trains came, jet-hustled, stream-lined swifties, but loading strange cargo. All day they whistled across the land, ten great white trains. Though the Central Council of the Palest Greens broadcast an urgent plea for yet another try at pleasing the petals, yet another chance at diversion, the doom cars came on down. And yet they were cars of hope, too.

Stalog Blengue, petal first-class, flesh-robot overseer of a block of air-conditioning machines for many a soul-lost year struggled up to a train. "How we have used ourselves!" he shrieked. "How we have been put upon by 'discoveries'" He tore off a piece of "replacement" and held it up in tin fingers. The green blood seeped from the arc where the "replacement" alloy had joined flesh. "Under sentence of life forever!" said Stalog Blengue. "Or so the Pale Council thinks. Ha. ha. If that's life I've lived for these many soulless years - for my work, watching these tin air digesters sort the natural air for flaws; for my pleasure, oiling my metal joints so I'd not creak when I hovered pipe-wrench watchful among the tin air sorters; for my food sticking myself with the introven, putting the complicated fluids in all the poor-flesh places - if that's life I've lived for these terrible, inhuman years -" He fell to shrieking then in a kind of fit as he tore himself apart.

The petals then, with a stripped-down Stalog Blengue yelling in the lead engine, ran the soul trains down to the cold white capital city. They let the soul trains stand all day in front of the Needle Towers of the ice stark government palace of the cold white capital city of the Palest Greens. Near the end of the day, when the shrinking colding sun was falling down the last stretches of the lime-vanilla air over Moderan, Stalog Blengue walked his iron shoestoward the tallest blankest door of the ground floor of the Capitol Building. The metal parts of him clanked eerily; the green blood of his flesh-strips boomed urgently around the tin parts of his ear. "Hello, the Capital," he called at the blank of the tallest door. "Hello, the Council," he cried, and a sound like striking a hollowed anvil crept up a long time out of him and up through the hollow spaces of the tall spires of the Capitol Building, for the voice of Statog Blengue had been worked long ago in iron, against cancer, in a "discovery."

Slowly the long door opened and the "giant" standing there was so tall he had tiptoed to try average height. Back of this doorman, in the reflectors, the Council of the Palest Greens sat sorting their brains in tin brain-pans, many stories away. "I wish to see the Head Man!" cried Stalog Blengue.

When he arose from the honored place of the raised dais of chairmen, splinters of wan green stars seemed to fall from him for a time. A sheen of emerald flashes was all about him palely. And this at last was the very palest of the Palest Greens! He said no word at all, but, skimpy and clanking metal, he stood just right for the reflectors to send his image down through all those stories to Stalog Blengue.

"We have come with our once discarded souls," explained Stalog Blengue. "It is our fondest wish that you shall go at once so that we may start the long job of repairing these weathered souls and the world. If

you choose to stay, you leave us no hard decision; we'll but run our soul trains through your buildings and smash you down! With soul power! So choose."

The palest of the Palest Greens said nothing, indeed, gave no token of hearing, except there was the recorded sound of the merest clink of one tin brain-pan going against another, high and far away, and the eyes gleamed in the big reflectors green and cold and entirely evil for a little while. And Stalog Blengue knew the message had been received where the brains swam in their tin brain homes. "We will wait no longer than midnight of this must day for you to go," the hollowed-anvil voice said and withdrew.

Stalog Blengue clanked his iron shoes back to the trains of his soul-strong friends. "He heard," said Stalog Blengue. "The head pale-pale man heard. I could tell by the way his eyes gleamed in the big reflectors, green and cold and very evil for a little while, that he heard. He'll tell the others and I think, seeing all the hands moving on the walls, they'll go. All of them MUST go!" A great cheer went up from the soul-strong people then from all the ten soul trains. After awhile Stalog Blengue lifted a misty hand up high and asked for silence. "Now," said Stalog Blengue, "let us begin to be ourselves again, ourselves with good souls. With hard trying and hard praying let us make for our souls good homes, even here hard embattled as we are in these steel times. And perhaps with ten million years of good effort we and the world can begin to hope to be allowed to start in to come back toward that place all of us left on the way of our wrong 'discoveries.' At least we are not without hope, for our souls have again been taken up..."

And all the trains cheered again...

Next day, early, meaning business, the Birds went up again - this time wing loaded to optimum with Final Arguments. The trains simply left high-skyward in the flimsiest gas imaginable - from direct hits from the Arguments - enough bubble-dome homes were leveled to merely smudge marks on the plastic to be example, and this silly sad talks of soul was never heard from again in Moderan.

[HOW IT ENDED](#)

The end of the world started small that day. Casually, in high greeny-blue summer...

I remember well what I was doing - even what I was thinking - that precise instant it started. It was in the time of the Summer Truces. We had completed late our great Spring Wars that year and we were all somewhat exhausted, though deliciously happy. Many honors had been won, many Strongholds shattered to shambles and many the gun lids that were hanging, and the ramparts in many places were crying for shoring. But we were a fulfilled group that last summer, we who had survived, hate-happy to the extreme, ready for Joys and in all cases planning for mean points in our own Stronghold complexes. Yeahh! Summer Truces!!

Then a wump bomb hit far to the north. I heard it on my detectors and it made a queer dry sound. I knew right away it had hit something that wasn't properly a wump bomb target. And in all Moderan truth it should not have been out there at all, not in the Truces. And what were those strange littleblips and bleeps coming across on my Viewer Plate? I would have thought them from shattered slivers and shards of thin new-metal, but that seemed unlikely. No one in his right Moderan mind would use a wump bomb on a flimsy metal objective. The wumps were for ultimate ultimate blasting and heaviest waves of destruction. They were designed for the Strongholds and the deep-down bunkers of concrete and

new-made steel.

There were many points of conjecture. Out here thinking it over on this small last mountain of plastic, leaving these notes on the permotapes in my mind as a last record, watching the flesh mutant men finish tearing our once great land back to where it all began, I cannot be sure. I can only replay the conjectures. Privately, I think it might have been an accident. I think it might have been that a bomb-happy Stronghold master was just firing a jubilee leftover wump to the far void in celebration of the end, finally, of the long spring season of war; it had stretched on through early summer. And this wump could have hung in the launch sling just for that too-long instant. (It happens, but it happens usually in war, and who could care then?) Instead of winging then on that beautiful far trajectory that a normal firing would have insured, it fell then, crazily off course, really on no course at all, into a neighbor's tin flower bed. And in that flower bed a thing more precious to him than Strongholds was... So it's rumor and conjecture. But so many times in all the history of the world an accident has been so much more pertinent than all the careful plans. And I think it was again.

I do remember, and I remember well all that happened in those few quick instants that settled the fate of us all - I remember a frantic garble on my Warner Phone. I could not translate, but I recall having the thought that it sounded not so much like a warning full of hate as much as it sounded like an apology, or an argument for understanding. "Forgive, FORGIVE, and let's enjoy the Summer Truces," I remember thinking in those first few seconds, though I was much occupied. Of course I had no way of knowing then even a conjecture toward the enormity of the transgression that might have been, and my only hint was those strange out-of-placeblips andbleeps on my Viewer Plate.

The transgressed Stronghold replied, of course. Even in the pleasantest times of the Summer Truces you couldn't let old neighboring Stronghold to the right or to the left, in front or behind, have at you with a wump bomb. Retaliation, swift and sure, was right in any season. Retaliation brought reply in deadly earnest, but even so, in those first few moments, we might have limited the war. We could have enjoyed a little show on our Viewer Expanders rather than two red-hot sorehead Strongholds having a GO when they should have been in deep truces. But we didn't act when action was of the essence. Just say that statesmanship was at a low ebb that day with us all. We muffed the ball. We played with our new-metal mistresses; we stroked the new-metal kittens, stacked the cards of indifference and "drank" the punch-introven when we should have been saving the world.

Treaties were honored honored and honored. Oh, how they honored those treaties in the north! And the war spread swiftly south. In five minutes we had all entered and Moderan awoke to the terrible knowledge that it was high tide and rising. (I will say this, I far to the south was the last to get in the blasting. But honesty, always and all ways, makes me hasten to admit that it was not statesmanship. Where is she now? Oh, what lump of cindered metal now in some far lost place is she with whom I played those fateful crucial instants when I should have been saving the world? But I will say, with her life-switch full to ON and I toggled to passion-frantic, she was very good that day. Oh, all for love and the world - well?)

Our world went down, DOWN, that war. It was the END. From a small, casual, and I say accidental, start of one wump bomb in the wrong place that day, it built fast through the mounting moments of havoc. Thinking of it now, far in the last retreatable corner of our lost world, I cannot say just why it built to such forcible ruin. We had fought many many wars in our glorious past and had come through with our great battle-dead, honors, and our Strongholds only partially shattered to shambles. But in ten minutes this time Moderan was gone.

Most of us quite early, thinking fast and doing the right planned thing, even in the midst of hard-pressed final war, had delivered our families out. And that might have been truly our finest instant. I, after deep

self-debate, even thumbed loose the wump zeroed to White Witch Valley, where the wife lived and plotted with the last of her plastic men. The mercy shots had already gone home to the country of Little Brother and Little Sister, shattering them to high skies and all winds in that province where they awaited the hours of "replacement." And with mercy taken care of we settled down to war.

It was ultimate ultimate gunning, ultimate hate hardware on the wing or walking. Whatever else may be said, it is true that we brought the world to a high starry state of development not only in hate attitude but also in the hardware to make that attitude so much more than an empty dream or a gesture. And I'll always, even to the last of my introven, even unto that final final instant just before the flesh-strips starve and I become a few shaped metal parts in some flesh-mutant's dusty brag museum, remember that beautiful moment. A moment, whose like the world may never see again, when the air over all the world was almost one solid sheet of explosives. Rockets were hitting their brother rockets on the wing and bringing off tremendous detonations. The mighty wumps, engineered to stand such midair collision and still home on to their designated programmed kill were nudging each other mightily in the air. The walking doll bombs, those magical horror-things designed to take the low road to their rendezvous with destruction, fought each other on the plastic. Some passed on safely and well to their programmed assignation of find-and-destroy; some in the thickness of this traffic fought each other so staunchly for the right of passage that they exhausted their horror and left their punch right there with each other. Some mighty battle god sitting far in the vapor shield on a cloud shaped like pillage that day could probably have had himself the one show of his life. (All vaunted feats of fire-power and destruction in the Old Days - even Dresden under the bombers, Tokyo with the firebombs and Hiroshima and Little Boy - all these rolled into one flame-and-bang must have been only as the front leg kick of a sick lightning bug compared to this. YES! we were really blasting that day!) But I'm convinced there was no god for us anywhere that day - just the sick greeny blue vapor shield of poisoned August standing out there in a sky gone suddenly for us endless and terrible, far-spreading and indifferent witness to the self-destruction of a world.

And seeing the game was gone truly for the showdown I turned at last to my GRAND GRAND ULTIMATE. It was the GRANDY WUMP, a weapon so terrible that I had to set my brain to Cold Thoughts Wide and Heedless to be able even to stand the knowledge that I held such dread firepower in the palm, as it were, of my new-metal hand. This thing my Corps of Engineering for the Final Solutions of Problems had discovered for me just a few whiles back, and I had been saving it tight to spring as SURPRISE, or for some future practical need. Or perhaps just as an argument of conquest. I had been debating. But now the debate seemed over; the GRANDY was forced to my hand. To come out alive, with some semblance of my world left, was still my aim. Only my Stronghold would be left, and that a thing much shaken, but from that we could rebuild. So I thumbed it loose from where it nestled in its launch gear deep in the guts of my great Stronghold, the Grandy Wump, a thing so much improved over the common wump that the comparison could be that of a feather in the Old Days falling on to a common mountain as opposed to another mountain falling on that mountain. And so you see?

To guard well the secret of the Grandy Wump I had installed it which I felt sure was the one-and-only of its kind in all the world-deep in the center of my great defense-offense complex. Naturally I was aware that its launching would tear floors and perhaps lift the entire roof from my Stronghold. But for complete secrecy and to be the lone possessor of such power I was willing to pay the price. Yes! nearly anything. The moment of its thumbing loose HAD to be a heady moment for me; my new-metal heart, without any manual change in its settings, raised up such a great bang-and-boom beat as I have never known before. TO HAVE THE WORLD! my brain and heart thought together as my thumb flicked to the launch knob.

What happened? WHAT HAPPENED? To have the world and then not to have the world. WHAT HAPPENED!?! I do not cry for understanding. I do not cry for sympathy. I do not cry. Oh God, god or gods, I do not. But I must leave it here on the tapes - WHAT HAPPENED?

The second I thumbed it loose, I knew. Oh, how I knew! when the air started filling with rooftops. Words and sounds I do not have to speak of this vile deed vilely enough; this thing defeats all language of the world. But I must try - for the tapes: Sticky-fingered, conniving, cheating, dishonest, lying, untrustworthy, dishonorable, low LOW, flesh-encumbered little new-metal vile Stronghold masters who would steal, how had they? Oh God or gods, or whatever, if ever, tribunal or agency of higher judgment ever anywhere, judge them, judge them now! Grind their memory under heaviest wheels of Justice; take any good deeds, if ever, ever done by them and regard those out-of-character happenings as amongst the most heinous monster-jokes that have ever been. Oh, this limited language! With its strongest words of indictment much too weak I cannot demean these people even a thousandth part of a small fraction of their deserts enough. But let's ask all agencies of Justice, if any there be or any hint of any, and let these agencies, if any there be, or any hint, chase the flesh-strip ghosts of these vile Stronghold masters, now deceased, throughout all the universes of coming time and ask them, ask them like cold winds down icy valleys of snow mountains in chilliest places, like conscience in the Old Days, "HOW DID YOU STEAL THE SECRET OF THE GRANDY WUMP from honorable Stronghold 10?" (I was Stronghold 10.)

Yes, world to come, they did that. When my roof went with the Grandy, and almost immediately I saw other roofs start lofting to the skies, I knew. Not only had they stolen my secret, but vile, vile to the last and plotting, apparently they had installed detective devices to steal my moment of firing. Oh, how, close I came to being caught asleep then. What if they had fired first? It does give one pause, doesn't it? Monstrous men!

For I believe truly that the eye-blink moment of my firing first saved me. I cannot explain it in any other way, either that or sheerest sheerest luck and a miracle, and, as you should know, I do not believe in either of these. I believe in hardware, firepower abundant and the smack to the Stronghold first. But being saved, the last surviving Stronghold master, what gains it? My world is gone, all flattened and in rubble, even my Stronghold, everything finished by the most sophisticated weapon ever made, the Grandy Wump.

From somewhere, within hours, the little flesh-mutants came, howling over the rubble. Where had they been? Yes, we had known that a certain number of them existed. Even in the highest-shining times of shining Moderan a few flesh-mutants were always around, gibbering over the plastic, hiding in deep-down holes, living in cracks and crevices of our plastic-yard-sheet land. A few of us had them in our Strongholds from time to time, for laughs, for diversion, amused as they talked their nonsense out of hissing holes instead of communicating by our good Moderan methods of mechanical voice boxes and phfluggee-phflaggee buttons in the hands. But none of us regarded them seriously, I believe, or gave the least thought to how they lived. At least and for sure I didn't. I, one of the shining masters of the world, grand in the high per cents of my new-metal steel "replacements" with my flesh-strips few and played down - I had no serious time for such filthy, soft, mushy creatures.

And now the mutants come from everywhere, rolling on in, tearing it all back to NOTHING. In one howling onslaught just by being, they are carrying the Dream far back past darknesses we had been far in advance of even on the first full day of shining Moderan. To watch them must be my punishment, I suppose, as I wait on the last plastic mountain (though I do not know why I should receive punishment). I, the greatest and last of the great GREAT Stronghold masters (once very staunch in my new-metal steel "replacements"), the most refined thing that had ever been... going down before this wave of evil flesh coming and still coming...

But wait! Before they reach this totally exposed little stronghold that is left me, my little plastic mountain, and claw it down in their howling brutish momentum that seems unstoppable now, let me set one thing straight in the tapes. If there had been honor in the world, amongst my neighbors, if they had not stooped to the vile theft of my war secret, perhaps to save their unworthy selves, I should have won the war. Then

my Stronghold would have been left to me, and these mushy creatures out here would have meant nothing. Any time I chose I could have swept them back to their deep-down holes and their crevices with a maximum weapons fire. They would have served as my clowns and diversion then, not my executioners. Oh, they would have kept to their places, all right. So you see, it is evil in others that seals one down, especially one's thieving neighbors stealing war secrets.

And another thing, since my mind goes clear here at the last and I'm thinking of everything, what was it in that tin garden when the wump bomb hit, what thing was it the Stronghold master regarded higher even than Strongholds? Don't laugh, don't laugh! I think it was his new-metal mistress out for a small summer stroll in the tin flower beds, and before he had enjoyed his Joys. And that explains the strong little blips and bleeps on my Viewer Plate. Small bits of new-metal would have shown thus; tin bits from tin flowers would not have registered at all.

Thus I leave you, for the mountain shakes now at the base. If these tapes survive, and if there is any creature anywhere, in the future times, who has a machine sophisticated enough to give them life, perhaps it will be worth conjecturing why Moderan was ended. Was it because of evil in the world and common theft? Or perhaps you'd rather think of it as all the fault of a woman who should have been serving her function in her master's great bed rooms instead of strolling in the flower beds. Or if you've a simpler turning of mind you may see the end as a happening inevitable for soon or late, the natural result of all that firepower. But I say no, NO! to that - no, to the end - not if my neighbors had played fair! I would have, from the GRANDY WUMP safety of my superior, specially endowed Stronghold, been able to shatter them to high skies and all winds then in relative security, thus winning ME the war and saving ALL the world!