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ISAAC ASIMOV
Pompey and Circumstance

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The Bear With The Knot On His Tail
by STEPHEN TALL

LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.
BARRY MALZBERG
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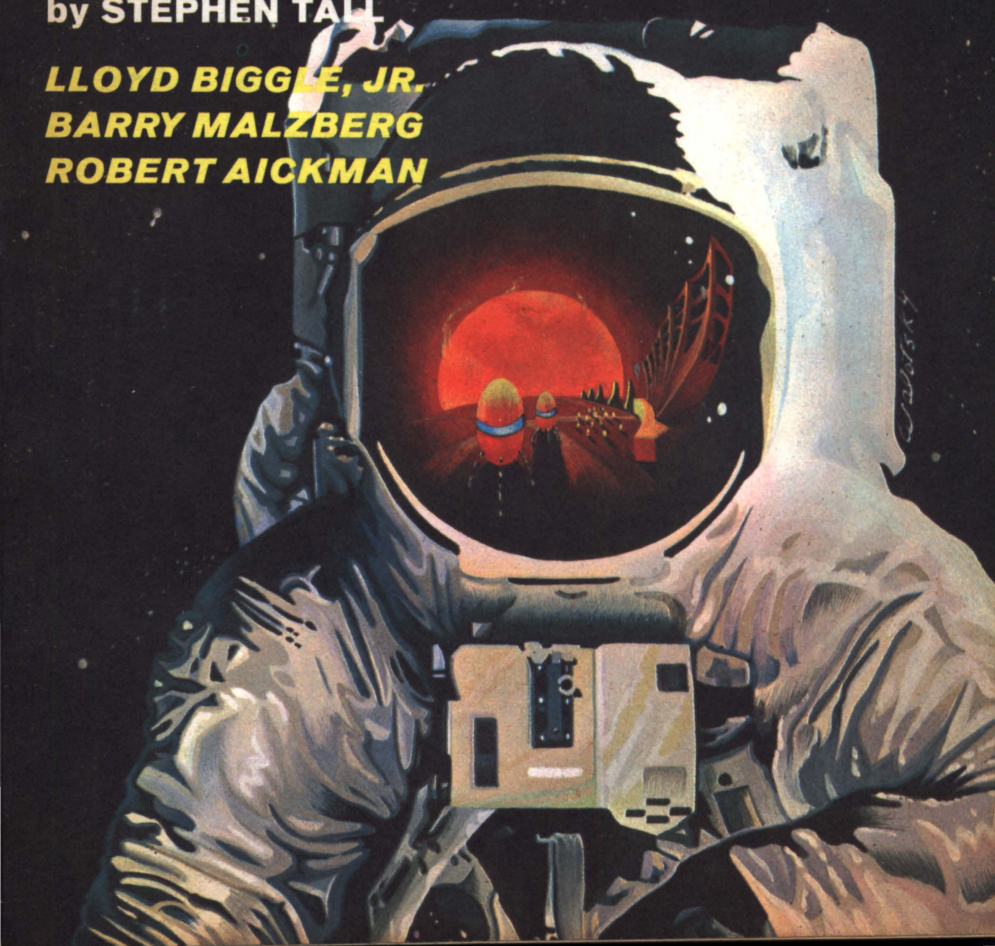

Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Cover by Ronald Walotsky for "The Bear With The Knot On His Tail"

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This suspenseful tale of deep-space science fiction is centered about the colorful crew of the research ship Stardust. *The ship has been receiving an alien broadcast for more than a month but has been unable to determine the meaning or even the source of the transmission. The mystery begins to unravel as one of the crew, an artist, does a painting of the constellations, a familiar painting with one odd exception: Ursa Major, the Great Bear, was looking decidedly unhappy.*

THE BEAR WITH THE KNOT ON HIS TAIL

by Stephen Tall

WE SWEPT IN COMFORTABLE wide orbit around Earth, thirty thousand miles beyond the Moon. Cap'n Jules Griffin kept us in the Moon shadow, the umbra, a pleasanter location in which to drift and listen than out in the raw yellow radiance of Sol. Only a few degrees away from the Moon's vast shadowy disc the full Earth hung like a color plate, blue, cloud-shrouded, the most majestic object I've ever seen from space.

And I've been around. We all have. It's our job.

Ultraspan made us possible. A discovery that must have been an accident—or almost. How can matter move faster than energy? Or can it? Ultraspan eliminates time; so our position in space can be anything Cap'n Jules wills it to be. Not that he understands what he does. Especially not that. He knows every pulse of the timonium engines that move us in finite space, but Ultraspan he takes on faith. Like religion. Like magic. Like the things that happen in dreams.

We've tested it. For the past nine years the research ship *Stardust* has done with ease what was not possible before Willoughby's Hypothesis, that strange variant of an Einsteinian concept that divorces space from time. You don't know

what I'm talking about? Neither do I—but it works. Harnessed, implemented, it's Ultraspan.

Life aboard the *Stardust* is comfortable, but for me it's not the good life. I really come alive when we drop in, break out of orbit, and drift down to the surface of some unknown world, some planet that from space shows that it will tolerate us long enough for a look-see. And I did say drift down. The searing outpourings of combustion energy that first took us into and out of space are all a part of our history now. Gravity is no longer a problem. If the conditions required it, Cap'n Jules could bring our fifteen-hundred-foot laboratory-home down over any planet surface at ten miles an hour. We have conquered the attraction of mass for mass.

"Dreaming, Roscoe?"

I don't like to be touched or backslapped, but the hand on my shoulder now was a notable exception to that. Especially when the owner slipped around my easy chair and plumped her luscious self into my lap. I put my arms around her, and we both sat watching the wide screen on which the Earth hung in misty glory.

"The Old Homestead," Lindy said. "If I can just see it once in a while, like now, I'm perfectly content with space. But that's the ultimate, that beautiful blue-green marble out there. We can search all our lives and we'll never find anything like it."

"It's a point of view," I admitted. "Statistically, though, probably not defensible. Somewhere in our Galaxy of hundreds of millions of stars, with space only knows how many planets around them, the Earth has to have a twin. We're still babes in the cosmic woods, and already we've come close. You haven't—say you haven't!—forgotten Cyrene?"

She hadn't forgotten. How could she? And the star Cyrene was a Sol-type sun. Its yellow rays on the surface of its fourth planet could easily have been mistaken for Sol's rays. But Planet Four had had a strange and simple ecology, and life forms so different that they had made me famous. Yes, I'm that Kissinger. *A Different Evolutionary System*, by Roscoe Kissinger. The lettuce-cube-mill-wheel food chain. So now when I'm on Earth, I have to make speeches. And I don't much like to speak. I'm a field ecologist. I like to do.

But that's not why Lindy remembered Planet Four. It was there, after many invitations, that she finally decided that to be Mrs. Kissinger might be a good thing. Maybe it was the homelike atmosphere. For Planet Four of the star Cyrene *was* Earthlike.

Lindy twisted in my lap and faced me, her classic features, green eyes, and red lips not six inches from my more or less Neanderthal visage. So I did what any man in the Galaxy would have done, and

when I had finished she was properly breathless.

"Necking again!" Pegleg Williams growled. He came rolling across the lounge, his slight limp accentuated. He does that when he wants to attract attention. He took the chair next ours.

"Don't you two ever fight, like normal couples? You'll both develop space diabetes, living in a sea of sugar like you do."

Lindy giggled. I kept my grin down to respectable proportions.

"You're in good form," I said. "So what's bugging you?"

Pegleg shrugged and hunched down in the chair. After a moment he waved a hand at the screen.

"Ennui!" he said. "Boredom! We've been lying doggo out here in the Moon shadow for a month. We've listened and we've listened—and if anybody has learned anything, they've carefully kept it from me!"

We're used to Pegleg. We wouldn't even like him any way but the way he is. Occasionally he'll put your teeth on edge, but whenever I undertake a field mission where the chips are really down, Pegleg's the other man. We complement each other like salt and vinegar. Pegleg's one of the great geologists—and as an ecologist, I'm not so bad. So I knew what he meant.

"Don't blame it on Mother Earth." I said. "Blame Johnny Rasmussen. He has an itch. You know that. And he's never had one yet where the scratching didn't turn out to be fun."

Pegleg sprawled deeper in the chair. Reflectively he stared at the screen and automatically flexed his plastic knee joint. He does this when he's thinking. It was while we were scratching one of Rasmussen's itches that he lost that leg, bitten off smooth by a plesiosaur-like critter in a little lagoon on a planet I'd just as soon forget. That one had been only partly fun.

But as I said, I knew what he meant. A geologist hasn't got much going for him in space. He's got to have something to set his feet on, rocks to swing his hammer against. And the ecologist is no better off. Oh, I suppose I could get concerned about the space biome. But it's not me. I need my habitats tangible, my biota solid enough to feel and see.

Lindy rolled out of my lap and stood looking down on us both.

"I think," she said casually, "that I've become supernumerary. I recognize the symptoms. You two want to sit and deplore your respective futile situations. You may forget that I, too, am temporarily unemployed."

Lindy's genius with extraterrestrial microforms is such that we wouldn't dare a landing without her. She was Dr. Linda Peterson, microbiologist extraordinary, long before she was Mrs. Roscoe Kissinger. In fact, Johnny Rasmussen has never recognized the marriage,

even though he performed the ceremony. He still carries her on the roster as Dr. Peterson.

"Sit down, Lindy," Pegleg said. "We couldn't gripe with effect without you."

"No," said my gorgeous wife. "When discontent's the topic, it's still a man's world. Or should I say universe? I think I'll go run a diabetes test on myself."

Even Pegleg grinned.

But it started then, and almost unwillingly we listened. Not that it was unpleasant. It wasn't at all. It was strange, weird, haunting. The sounds came rolling out of the speakers with a curious lack of rhythm, with no pattern that could be pinned down. In fact, that was what was driving the sound boys out of their skulls.

Here were no pulsars, no monotonously repeated patterns of any of the several types of sound we're getting now from space. Here was infinite sound variety, constantly changing tone and pitch, sometimes like soft music, sometimes raucous, but with a compelling completeness, point and counterpoint. It went from laughter to pleading, from murmur to roar. And yet the overall feel of it was alien. As sophisticated and endlessly changing as it was, no one even considered that it might have human origin. It was from space, from deep space, and no tests that we had yet made could tell us even the direction from whence it came.

I say "we" because that was the way Dr. Johannes Rasmussen regarded every mission the *Stardust* undertook. Each job was a team job. Sitting out here in the Moon shadow, swinging with the Moon in its orbit around Earth, an elaborate organization of explorer specialists, Earth's finest space teams, had only one mandate, one directive. Everyone, regardless of concern or training, was asked to listen to the sounds, to the always different medley our energy dish was picking up from the great disc on the Moon.

At intervals that never varied, nineteen hours and thirteen minutes thirty-seven seconds, the cosmic broadcasts poured from the speakers. They lasted exactly fourteen minutes seven seconds. From the first decibel they had been carefully and completely recorded, and each staff member was urged, in addition to his other duties, to listen to the tapes whenever he had the chance. Since our duties were minimal, to be charitable, we had heard a lot of replays. They hadn't helped a bit.

So we listened now. Lindy dropped back into my lap, and we held hands and sat quietly while the speakers gurgled and cried and moaned.

"They're unhappy," Lindy murmured. "They're in danger and frightened and alone. They're begging for help. They're not frantic yet, but they hope we'll hear them. They know they can't help themselves."

"They?" Pegleg and I said it together.

"They!" Lindy said firmly.

" 'One giant step'," Pegleg quoted. "Have you told Johnny Rasmussen? He'll be delighted. He'll be especially interested in how you know."

Lindy gestured helplessly and squirmed on my lap.

"He'll be like you," she said in disgust. "Literal. Obtuse. But I *feel* it! That's not just contact. That's urgent contact. They need us!"

Pegleg shifted his gaze to me.

"Your wife makes a nice appearance in public, but she's subject to hallucinations. I hope it doesn't interfere with your home life."

"Helps, really," I deadpanned. "She thinks I'm handsome."

"That proves my point," Pegleg said.

If this dialogue seems out of character to you, just know that it's the way we are. It's the smoke screen behind which we think. We've been doing it our way for years, and in general things have come out all right. See the thick sheaf of research papers under each of our names in any library worthy to be called a library. We've all got oak-leaf clusters on our Ph.D.s.

But we weren't trained for this. And the sound boys and the cryptographers and the language experts were beginning to suspect that they weren't either. Especially befuddled were the communications specialists. For the medley of sounds, picked up by the fifty-acre reception disc on the Moon as though it were originating just beyond the next hill, was directionless. After a full month of trying, they still had no clue. The great disc received the sounds equally well whether phased for north or south, east or west; whether focused critically on Polaris, Deneb or Arcturus. And we, hanging in space thirty thousand miles away, found that even their relay was hard to orient.

We listened until the end. As always, there were familiar elements in the broadcast that I felt the cryptographers should have been able to use. But each transmission was different, and since Lindy had suggested it, I fancied that the tone of each was special. Somewhere, beings with an advanced technology were telling a story to the Galaxy. Hoping, hoping, that somewhere there were beings who could hear. These were feelings, too. My feelings. Only the variety, complexity and timing of the broadcasts could be used for support for them. So I kept them to myself.

The last notes of the transmission, a plaintive, appealing series of wails, died away.

Lindy shifted in my arms. She sighed gently.

"The Music of the Spheres," she said.

Pegleg and I were silent. There was nothing to say.

Of the personnel of the *Stardust*, of all the assorted specialists that made up the Earth's most elaborate space organization, one person was never out of a job. Pegleg and I could gripe; Lindy could sigh for new space bugs; Bud Merani could fidget because there was nothing for an archaeologist to explore out there in the Moon shadow. But Ursula Potts was busy.

Ursula was nothing you'd expect to find in a starship. Little, skinny, old, with weasel features and a great bun of gray hair, she looked like her usual mode of transportation ought to be a broom. To see her strolling the corridors in sneakers, knee-length shorts of red or yellow or green, and an old gray sweater that she wore inside or out, hot planet or cold, was enough to make you wonder if it wasn't time for your annual checkup. I mean you, of course. Not us. We knew her well; knew her and respected her, and sometimes were even a little afraid of her.

Ursula painted. Painters are traditionally kooks, and Ursula abused even that privilege, but she also was a mystic—and a genius. Johnny Rasmussen spent more time looking at Ursula's paintings than he did reading my reports. And I didn't resent it. Somehow, Ursula saw things nobody else saw. She pulled together the results of a look-see.

She beckoned to me as I passed her studio door. She didn't do that to everybody. But we'd seen some strange things together, she and Lindy and Pegleg and I. She was with us at Armageddon on Cyrene Four. So I slid back the door and stepped out into the studio; out into the raw depths of space. Or so it seemed.

"What do you see, Roscoe?"

No greeting. No nothing. She didn't even wave at the big painting on her easel. But that's what she wanted me to look at. Her strange eyes were glinting in a way I recognized. Ursula was excited about something.

A big, decorated star map. That was my first impression of Ursula's painting. Not her usual thing at all. But when I looked closer, I could see what she'd done. It wasn't a star map. Actually, it was a series of isolated sketches on one canvas. They would have been familiar to any schoolchild.

The old constellations. From our position out there in the Moon shadow, they showed little distortion, and Ursula had simply noted them down, perhaps almost idly, as little dots of yellow and blue and red and white. But then she'd done more. Around the clusters she had sketched the old mythological figures, filling them in as her interest grew, supplying detail and emphasizing it with color until each sketch seemed almost alive.

Old Orion seemed just ready to step off, his club held high, his lion's skin across his shoulder, and the short blade gleaming in his belt. Be-

hind him prowled the Greater and Lesser Dogs, tongues lolling, eyes eager. One was a German shepherd and one was a Great Dane. Pegasus swept his great wings across more than his share of the canvas as he stretched out into what seemed to be a level run, nostrils flared, foam flying from his mouth. In spite of the wings, he wouldn't have been out of place at Churchill Downs.

I chuckled as I skipped from figure to figure. They were clever, done with the technique only a great artist can command, but I couldn't see anything more. They were superficial. I enjoyed them, but that was all.

I looked at Ursula, and her insistent gaze sent me back to the painting again. I was missing something. There sat Cassiopeia on her throne. Draco pushed his ugly head up toward where the northern bears hung with their ridiculous tails pointing to and away from the Pole Star. And then I got it. The Little Bear looked plump and contented, and Ursula had skillfully painted a honeycomb in his mouth. But old Ursa Major was unhappy. He was gaunt and thin. His lips writhed back from his fangs as though in pain. And no wonder! Out near the end of his long, unbear-like tail Ursula had painted a big, livid, and obviously uncomfortable knot.

"I see it," I said. "Why?"

"Don't know," Ursula said. "Just happened. Didn't look right any other way."

I peered at the knot. Two visuals gleamed in the middle of the bruised and purple lump, one yellowish and one white.

"Mizar and Alcor," I said. "Could be three visuals. A little magnification will bring out another one."

"Know it. Put in another one. Didn't look right. Took it out."

"It would scarcely be visible," I protested. "It couldn't make any real difference in the picture, could it?"

"Did, though. Wasn't happy with it in."

I have mentioned stepping out into Ursula's studio. That was literal. When we were in space, Ursula painted in a transparent bubble, a small, room-sized blister that could be extruded from the apparently featureless side of the *Stardust*. There, in radiation-shielded, air-conditioned comfort, Ursula interpreted the Galaxy.

From deep in the umbra of the Moon, the constellations gleamed like on a summer night on Earth, but with far greater scope. The Great Bear literally hung before us. I picked up Ursula's binoculars, a 12x pair she had evidently been using to verify visuals. I focused on Mizar and Alcor, the region of the knot, the Horse and Rider of some mythology. The third visual came faintly into view, just as I remembered.

"It's there," I said. "Hasn't changed a bit."

"Know it," Ursula said. "Still can't put it in. Doesn't feel right."

"And the knot?"

"Belongs. Got to be. Don't know why."

She looked at me for a moment, then suddenly turned back to her easel, her skinny fingers unerringly selecting the right brush from the collection thrust handle-end first into the large gray bun on the back of her head. It was dismissal. But as I slid back the door, she looked up briefly.

"Think about it, Roscoe."

She didn't have to say it. I was thinking.

There hadn't been one for all the time we had spent in the Moon shadow; so when it came, it was overdue. After looking at Ursula's picture, though, I knew I had been expecting it.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The voice of Stony Price, communications chief, purred sedately out of our speakers. It was evident that he had been given a formal communique and told to stick with it. "Dr. Rasmussen requests the pleasure of the company of all senior and supervisory staff at dinner this evening. Appetizers at 1800. —Be it known I've consulted the cook. It's a good menu!"

The last, of course, was pure Stony Price. He never stuck to a script in his life.

Johnny Rasmussen's dinners were a tradition aboard the *Stardust*. They all had the same format, the same formal lack of formality. That doesn't sound right. But it says what I want. And a dinner always meant more than it appeared to mean. It always preceded a crisis, or a big decision, or with the same deadpan gentility, it occasionally was a celebration. The *raison d'etre* was never mentioned. Attendance wasn't compulsory. But nobody missed Rasmussen's dinners. They were where big things happened.

"I feel twitchy," Lindy said. "My radar is jumping. This dinner is going to be a weirdy!"

She was selecting a dinner gown, of course. She was busy at that ten minutes after the communique came through.

I knew what she meant. The dinner would be toothsome, as always, the company familiar and comfortable. It was the reason for it that she was talking about.

She strolled back and forth between two creations she had hung on opposite sides of her dressing table. One was gray, a living, almost ominous gray, streaked through with long diagonal flashes of vivid blue. The other was like a flame hung on the wall. And that was the one she turned to, more and more often.

No red-haired, green-eyed woman can wear a blazing red formal and get away with it. False. One can. She did, too; and with her curls piled high in a strange coiffure, a rope of milk pearls across

the scenic splendor of her breasts, and a white orchid at her left shoulder, she looked like some barbaric princess on a world we'd just discovered. Actually, that's literary fudging. Since the *Stardust* first passed Pluto, we've found plenty of life, but none of it human or humanoid. Certainly nothing that remotely resembled Lindy.

I seated her proudly, as I always do. The women all tried, and several of them looked pretty spectacular, but I had the queen and everybody knew it. And that's fair to good going for a guy who looks as rough as I do. Even a dinner jacket and a close shave can do only so much for a body like a storage tank, long, thick arms, pillar legs, and black hair showing everywhere hair *can* show except on the top of my head. Add a face that could have been chopped out with a dull hatchet—and you wonder about Lindy. It must be my beautiful eyes.

Dr. Johannes Rasmussen made his entrance, on cue, exactly at 1800 hours. Tall, slender, tanned, immaculate, his mustaches waxed to points, he stood behind his chair and gazed with pleasure down the long table. Then, starting at his right, he named names:

"Captain Griffin, Mr. Cheng, Miss Potts, Dr. Kissinger,"—on around the table. When he got back to himself he said, "I'm happy to have you here this evening. Won't you please be seated?" He could have done the whole bit in his sleep. And so could most of us.

The men sat, and we all pitched in without ceremony. Utensils clinked. Conversation builded from a polite murmur to a contented waterfall roar, punctuated occasionally by a deep laugh, or perhaps Lindy's high-pitched giggle.

Next to me Ursula Potts dug into her baked fish like a hungry terrier. Ursula loves to eat as well as I do, which is no faint praise. Ursula's dinner dress was a sullen russet, with no ornamentation. Her skinny fingers were heavy with rings. But her wizened face and strange eyes were the same against any backdrop. She flicked those eyes up and down the table and chewed steadily. She wasn't missing a thing.

"Good fish, Ursula," I said. "Must be Friday."

She licked her thin lips.

"Barbaric reference, Roscoe. No connection between food and the days of the week."

"Not to me," I admitted. "I eat anything any day. But a lot of people still connect Friday and fish."

"Day of mourning among the fish," Ursula said drily. "Quit beating around the bush, Roscoe."

"Okay." I shifted my tone. "What's this bash about, Ursula? Any premonitions? Better still, any information?"

Ursula slurped her Chablis with appreciation.

"Don't know. Can guess,

though."

"Give!"

"We're going out."

Rasmussen's seating seemed to confirm it. Cap'n Jules Griffin was on his right, and he wasn't there for his sparkling conversation. Cap'n Jules is the dullest man in space. I can't talk to him for five minutes. Usually he sits far down the table. But he's the genius who implements Ultraspan. He gets us where we want to go.

And Moe Cheng sat next to him, a big-nosed, slant-eyed little man who knows more about the Galaxy than any man has ever known. So it *was* logistics! But Ursula was next, and then I. We weren't there by accident either. Johnny never does anything at random.

We ate, and Rasmussen exchanged polite amenities with those of us within range, like the correct, formal English gentleman he is. I did say English. Forget the name. In the nineteenth century he would have been one of the boys. To him, dinner wouldn't taste right if he weren't dressed for it. Dinner jacket. Black tie.

When the coffee arrived, big fragrant cups of it, and delicate shells of good brandy on the side, Johnny unwrapped the baby. Without seeming to do so, he raised his genteel voice, just enough so that the people at the far end of the table could hear him clearly.

"Ladies and gentleman, a brief but important announcement."

He paused, and the talk died.

"Miss Potts has painted a picture."

Again that pause, but this time the silence was from astonishment.

"Well, good for her!" Pegleg's sour voice was low, but it carried. "But that is Miss Potts' business, painting pictures. If Miss Potts had won the high jump, that might be news!"

Rasmussen's eyes twinkled, but he kept the faith. He didn't smile.

"This particular picture is important to all of us," he said. "On the basis of it I have made a decision. Dr. Kissinger, you have seen the picture. Would you describe it, please?"

I was as out of it as anybody, but I can go along with a gag.

"I suppose you mean the knot on the bear's tail," I said.

"Proceed."

So I went over the picture verbally and wound up with gaunt old Ursa Major, with his unhappy look and the painful lump on his caudal appendage. I played it straight, but people began to snicker. Everybody thought it was a yuk. For that matter, so did I.

"I would prefer tangible data," the chief said, "but we don't have them. We tried everything we know. With the help of the Luna Reception Center—the Big Dish, if you will—we have monitored and analyzed and been frustrated by the sounds from space that Dr. Peter-

son has called the Music of the Spheres. It has been impossible to determine direction of origin."

Johnny had curled his long fingers around his brandy glass, warming it, and now he raised it, barely wetting his lips.

"Miss Potts has sensed a disturbance in Ursa Major. She has even been specific as to location. Now we know that this is not evidence admissible anywhere in any scientific context. But most of us also know that Miss Potts has—shall we say—unique gifts." (What he meant was that the old witch *was* a witch!) "She has been a staff member on every flight of the *Stardust*, and I have never known her painted analyses to be entirely without foundation."

A delicate sip of coffee, then more brandy.

"I have therefore notified the International Space Council that the sounds appear to emanate from *zeta Ursae Majoris*, colloquially called Mizar, and have received clearance to proceed there to investigate."

There wasn't even a murmur the entire length of the table.

"The distance is eighty-eight light-years. Captain Griffin has assured me that we have the capacity to span it in seven stages. Mr. Cheng has plotted these stages. For seventy-two hours we will renew supplies at Tycho Base on Luna, during which time R. and R. leave will be granted to all personnel not involved in these activities. If any individual feels disinclined to make this voyage, he may separate without prejudice, and we will understand. That *is* a very angry-looking knot on the bear's tail!"

He couldn't have bound them any closer to the ship if he had put chains on them. And well he knew it.

He rose and stood tall, the brandy glass still in his hand.

"It has been a pleasure to have you here this evening. There will be further refreshment in the main lounge, where the picture is on display for your examination. Good evening!"

The old formula again. He didn't wait to take a bow, just slipped out the way he always does. And the press toward the lounge was faster than usual. If space people didn't have curiosity, they probably wouldn't be space people.

Well, that was the program, and that's the way it happened. The *Stardust* bestirred herself, swept out of the Moon shadow in a long ellipse and into the bright unfiltered glare of Sol. Cap'n Jules took the scenic route, orbiting the Moon once as we spiraled in to our spot at the Tycho docks.

The landscape below us hadn't changed much. The dome clusters were few and far between. For the most part the long stretches of bleak, jumbled, cratered surface were just as three billion years had left them. I had been over them

hundreds of times, but I still took a moment to stand straight and mentally salute two truly brave men in a tiny, flimsy, spider-legged craft who came safely to rest for the first time in that empty wilderness below. Countless messages have come to Earth from space since 1969, but none will ever again have the thrilling impact of the cheerful announcement:

"The Eagle has landed!"

But enough of reminiscence and history. The *Stardust* eased gently into her slip, her thousands of tons completely nullified by her new timonium antigravs. Cap'n Jules brought her in like a feather on a breeze. She lay full length, a vast metal sausage, blunt-nosed, blunt-sterned and featureless. No onlooker could have imagined the variety of handy little gadgets that could be extruded at need from her glistening hide, from jumper platforms to Ursula Potts' studio. Nor was there any hint of the full fifty openings that could be activated; personnel ports, cargo ports, great shutter-like openings that could each discharge a four-man scoutboat into space.

The personnel ports were promptly put to use as all but a handful of our researchers and crew streamed into the pressurized corridors and out into the big-city attractions and fleshpots of Tycho Base. Pegleg and Lindy and I went along. I couldn't have cared less about Tycho's charms, but it did feel good to get my feet back on terra firma once again. I said as much.

"Luna firma," Lindy corrected. "Terra is thataway."

And so it was, hanging resplendent, high in the Lunar northern sky. The great central dome of Tycho arched over the sector of shops and hotels and entertainment places in one graceful, lofty sweep. It filtered out hard radiation and gave a soft, ghost-like quality to the sunlight it allowed to come through. And it changed the celestial view. We looked up at a luminous green Earth, and behind it the northern constellations were picked out in icy dots. The Great Bear was in view. For a moment I could almost see his gaunt, unhappy look, and the swelling knot on his long tail.

We prowled the grass-bordered streets, looked into shop windows, sniffed at the doors of eating places. We sat on the benches in Tycho's famous Aldrin Park, where oaks and beeches and pines and dogwoods pretended, like the people, that they were still on Earth. A mockingbird sang from a holly tree near where we sat. Cardinals and bluebirds flashed as they flew. I wondered what effect the lessened gravity had on their flight. They seemed happy and normal.

It was a pleasant little interlude. Pegleg left us on affairs of his own, which I suspected had to do with a slumberous-eyed, darkhaired little

stewardess he knew on one of the shuttle runs to Earth. The nature of man changeth not. I felt smug, for I'd put all that behind me. Or, to put it more correctly, I liked my arrangement better.

Lindy and I had dinner at the Earthview, not Tycho's biggest or grandest restaurant, but I knew from experience that you couldn't beat the food. And that's why I go to eating places. We had oysters Luna, a pale green soup that smelled like a breath of the jungle, reindeer steaks from Lapland, artichokes and spinach from Texas, and three kinds of wine. There were fruits from Malaya, a French dessert, and finally coffee and a heavenly clear liqueur, a specialty of the house. And all served by a blonde goddess six feet tall and magnificently topless!

"Eyes are for looking," Lindy said, "but don't neglect your food. Would you like to bet I couldn't take her job?"

"Why," I asked reproachfully, "would you want to put a poor girl out of work? You already have a job. One that's yours as long as you want it, and when you don't want it any more, I'll close the position out for good. Now may I look?"

Her green eyes danced. She reached across the little table to put a hand on mine.

"Stare away," my wife said. "I don't see how it can hurt you."

If you're thinking that this is irrelevant, that it's all digression, don't you believe it. That little touch of R. and R. was important. We needed the supplies they were loading into the *Stardust*, but no more than we needed that touch of solid ground beneath our feet, the renewed contact with the substrate that periodically we all have to have. Still, the seventy-two hours were enough. When the *Stardust*, herself rested, lifted gently like a living thing from her berth and the Moon dropped away, we were all aboard, and we were all glad.

Earth was in our viewports for a brief while. Then, under full timonium drive we flashed across the Solar System and into deep interstellar space beyond Pluto's orbit. Yet we were simply checking, getting ready for the journey. Light-minutes were nothing, even at the terrific finite speeds of which we were capable. Light-years were ahead of us. Eighty-eight of them. And that meant Ultraspan.

We were in the hands of three unlikely geniuses—they abound on the *Stardust*—and I'm sure I've been more concerned for my life in a Paris taxi.

Moe Cheng planned the stages. Cap'n Jules stood by to implement them, one by one. Johnny Rasmussen structured the patterns at the end of each stage, move by move. This was new space, and we were tracking sounds in a direction not determined by any scientific data. We could never have justified ourselves to any logical inquiry. Still,

that didn't disturb me either. Computers can goof, but I'd never known Ursula's weird sixth sense to be entirely wrong.

An Ultraspan stage can't be described. Nevertheless, I'll try. You are conscious in stage, but nothing has either importance or meaning. In effect, according to one school, during the jump you cease to exist as an entity, and the Nirvana-like consciousness is like a shadow projected forward, your id stripped of all concerns and without a home. I don't know. There is a perceptible time-span in stage, and you know it's there. Yet theoretically time does not exist, and with the effect of time suspended, one space is as likely as another. Still, stages can be plotted and the target space occupied. We've been doing it for years.

Lindy and I held hands for the first stage, programmed for ten light-years. I was nothing and she did not exist, yet somehow I knew that we were sitting in our quarters in the *Stardust*, and that we were holding hands. It seemed days and weeks, and yet it seemed only a minute or two. Our view screen showed an alien pattern of stars. My wife's hand was warm in mine. The starship barely had headway, perhaps no more than a thousand miles an hour. We were in pattern after the stage, orienting, checking, verifying. And the life of the ship went on as though it had not been interrupted. Which, indeed, perhaps it had not. We use Ultraspan, but we may never really understand it.

"There'll come a day," Lindy said, "when I won't want to tolerate that any more."

She got up and walked restlessly across the room.

"It's painless," I said.

"Of course. It isn't that. It's—it's just that it seems to take me away from me! You dig? With all my problems solved, all my curiosities satisfied, all my challenges met, maybe sometime I won't want to come back. To go ten light-years in space without time lapse isn't for man. It's—it's ag'in nature!"

"Karma," I said. "Nirvana. Maybe we have found the way. And what, after all, is ag'in nature? What's nature?"

Lindy turned, and suddenly she smiled at me. It was the quick change of mood that all women show. Or I suppose they all do. I could see the strain go out of her face, the confidence return.

"You and me together! That's nature, friend. Pay me no attention, Roscoe. I go gloomy, but I'll always come back."

I rose and started for her. And our speaker rattled, cleared its throat, and the Music of the Spheres poured out of it.

It was different. There was more discord, more harshness, than in any broadcast before. It throbbed and pulsed and wailed. Where before only Lindy could detect urgency,

now it seemed to me that anyone could. And I thought I knew why. We were closer. Whatever was impending, whatever motivated those calls to the Galaxy, to whomever or whatever would listen—whatever it was, it was nearer. If we had stayed at our base near Earth, we wouldn't have heard this broadcast for ten years yet.

The signal was no stronger. It came in plainly, though, and here we were dependent on our own sensors. We didn't have the enormous backing of the Big Dish on the Moon. As I listened, conviction grew. We were headed exactly right. We were on the beam.

After an Ultraspan stage, Rasmussen always activated a twenty-four hour pattern. This gave time for a rest period, time for all data to be processed, time for all personnel to adjust. For the feel of one sector of space is not the feel of another. I can't explain that. But it's so.

We staged again, fourteen light-years. There was no star pattern on our view screens then. They were awash with brilliant light, all radiation screens were activated, and not twenty-five million miles away lay the awesome grandeur and tossing energy of a flaring sun. It was as close as we had ever come to a primary energy unit, but it was no mistake. We were where Moe Cheng intended we should be.

The broadcast came through. Fragmented by the roiling radiation, we still picked up most of it. And fourteen years had made a difference. There was panic in the music now, fear, desperation, and the first faint threads of despair. If anyone had doubted that our direction was right, they didn't any more.

Five stages later—five memorable stages—and the *Stardust* drifted at the edge of a spectacular star system. Not large, as such systems go, not as colorful as the red giants are, but with an attraction for us that I suppose was at least partly historical. Since man first had raised his eyes toward the heavens, he had known this little twinkling dot in space. It was a part of the complex by which travelers found their way. Ancients had used it as an eye test. For this was Mizar.

I don't have to instruct you. Any schoolboy knows the double-triple systems of this brighter one of the Alco-Mizar duo. But no schoolboy or anyone else of human origin had ever had our view of them. The first human visitation. And the last.

Our astronomers probed and measured and explored and verified, while we sat impatiently watching the view screens. They made it easy for us. The triple system of Mizar B, three bluish suns, moved slowly along the paths of their complex orbits around their common center in space. From Earth they simply melded to form a dim blue point. But it was Mizar A, the double, that had been our objective, though we had not known it. Here, somewhere here, was the

point of origin of the Music of the Spheres.

The smaller component of Mizar A lay far in the distance across the system, a blue-white sun that glimmered cheerily and normally. Its relatively giant twin, a bright yellow on the charts, was no longer that. It hung in space before us, an ominous, shifting, sullen orange, a vast, savage celestial furnace, unstable and threatening. We knew its nature and its fate before the sounds came through once more, exactly on time.

You have listened to a requiem. You know the sounds of a dirge. The Music of the Spheres was still music, but there was in it no hope, no calls for help, no panic and no fear. The time was past for these. Whatever made the music was saying good-bye, was expressing thankfulness for having lived, for the wonders of having been sentient. There was even a gentle speculation that this was not the end after all—that somewhere, in an unimaginable future, there might be something more.

Now I'm not sensitive, as Lindy is. Certainly I have no touch of the mysticism that allowed Ursula Potts to feel crisis across the light-years. And Pegleg is worse. Yet all of us, sitting in the small lounge listening to that broadcast, all of us heard just what I've described. We felt it so plainly that we could put it into words, as I've done here. And there was one thing more we could detect. It was regret. Regret that before life ended it had not known other life, other beings that knew the joys of thought and achievement, beings that it believed existed, and to whom it had sent its music pulsing out among the stars.

Ursula Potts sat small and still in her chair as the broadcast ended, her strange eyes glowing. Tears flowed down Lindy's cheeks. Pegleg twisted uncomfortably as he sat. Automatically he flexed his plastic knee joint. I got up and paced.

"All personnel, attention please!"

Dr. Johannes Rasmussen never speaks on intercom, but they were his cultured tones that came out of the speakers now.

"This is a summary, for your information. The sun Mizar A-1 is in unstable condition, prenova. It will disintegrate in thirty-three hours. It has a single planet. Dr. Frost has recorded all vital physical data; so let it suffice to say that it is appreciably larger than Earth, has an atmosphere, and every evidence of varied and complex life. The music has originated there."

Johnny paused, and I could imagine him sitting, his face calm and apparently untroubled, reflecting on how to phrase his next sentence.

"We have time. We will proceed immediately to the planet, orbit and descend to the surface unless conditions make that impossible. Radiation is already high, many times human tolerance, but far less than the shielding capacities of our

ship, or even our spacesuits. Unless the music is mechanically produced, life still exists on the planet's surface. But probably you all detected finality in the last broadcast. Remarkable, really!"

Johnny seemed to be saying the last two words to himself.

"The planet is now on your screens. We will keep it there during approach. Please consider what part you would care to play in our brief reconnaissance. The brevity is occasion for regret, but it is fortunate that we have arrived before the system destroys itself. We will allow ourselves a safety margin of three hours, and we will stage thirty hours from this time. Thank you."

Nobody but Rasmussen could have made the most dramatic experience man had ever known sound as routine as a weather report.

The planet was a small bright dot on our screens as we flashed toward it and toward its glowering sun. It grew steadily, though. Cap'n Jules wasn't wasting time. Before long the dot was a sphere; shadows showed and drifted on its surface; colors glowed. Finally it hung before us in majestic blue-white splendor, suffused over all by the deepening orange light of the sullen sun. Doomed planet!

"What a pity!" Lindy murmured. "What a terrible, horrible, hard-to-understand, unbelievable fate! Roscoe, if I didn't remember Earth, *that* would be the grandest object we've ever seen from space!"

"Location, distance from its primary, rotation rate, revolution rate, light quality and intensity, all ideal." I said. "And there's plenty of water, an oxygen atmosphere, a deep and varied planetary crust. Just the kind of cradle life would have to have."

I had been running down Doug Frost's physical data tables. Like I said, everything was perfect. If you had set out to build a model planet, this was probably how it would have looked when you had finished. Then add countless eons of evolution! The results at least were life forms so sophisticated, so learned, that they could send complicated musical messages far into the Galaxy. How far, we had no way of knowing.

And now the source of its life was sick, stricken with an incurable illness, a slowly progressing loss of balance in its atomic furnaces. In thirty-three hours the story would end. Thirty-one hours, now. We had taken two hours to approach the planet. For the life on that beautiful world out there, thirty-one hours until the end of time!

As we swept into high orbit, three thousand miles above the planet's surface, speakers came alive all over the ship. Johnny Rasmussen was calling the makers of music, and he wanted us all to hear. Every characteristic of the celestial broadcasts had long ago been analyzed. I could imagine the care

with which Stony Price was matching element to element, intensity to intensity, frequency to frequency. But it was Rasmussen's voice that was going out. His message was simple. He knew that if it was detected it would not be understood, but his neat soul squirmed if all ends were not carefully tied.

"This is the starship *Stardust*, from the Sol system, eighty-eight light-years from your own. We have come in response to your messages. We see the condition of your sun. We will meet with you if it is possible. Please respond."

The speakers were silent. I probably held my breath for a full minute before I remembered to exhale. But nothing happened. After a brief time lapse Johnny repeated his message. Again nothing. Then he spoke to us, to the personnel of the *Stardust*.

"I had hoped that we might establish the location of the transmitting installations and home directly on them. It was a remote hope, at best. Some hours remain before the next scheduled broadcast, if in fact another ever will be made. A pity. As you may now see from the building complexes on your screens, life has indeed reached a high level here. We have not before encountered any forms so advanced."

He paused, doubtless rearranging his next sentence into a form that pleased him better. He never got a chance to use it.

The music came softly, hesitantly, wonderingly, as if its maker or makers didn't really believe. To our knowledge, they had been sending their calls out across the Galaxy for nearly a hundred years. And now, when time had almost run out, they were answered! The tones deepened, strengthened. We could hear the exultant questions in them: "*Who are you? Where are you? Speak to us again*!"

Pegleg was at our screen, adjusting for a better view, and we all could see the image whirl as the *Stardust* changed direction. Cap'n Jules had shifted course with the first pulse of sound.

"This is the *Stardust*," Rasmussen said. "We hear you. Speak again! Speak again! Speak again!"

The response poured from the speakers like a hymn of thanksgiving, like the sound of a choir in a great cathedral. I'm no musician, but any field man can sort our sounds. I could tell that that volume came from many sources. Then it died away into soft, happy whispers and only one tone remained, a clear, resonant soloist. That tone went up and down the scale, repeated and doubled back on itself in amazing patterns. And I knew, everybody knew, that it was speech.

The *Stardust* swept down into the atmosphere in a fluid, ever-decreasing glide. She knew where she was going, now. The computer had solved the location of the trans-

mitter in seconds, for the unrelayed sound no longer lacked direction. Clouds briefly blurred the view screens. Then we were cruising smoothly and slowly over a landscape like nothing we had ever seen before. Still, it was familiar. All the elements of cultured, civilized occupancy were there. Only the forms were different.

It was not Earthlike. There were no trees, no grass, no flowers. Color was there, and variety, and I suppose I sorted things out pretty quickly. In the presence of proper stimuli I began to function automatically. If you put food before a hungry animal, it will salivate. Put an ecologist in a new ecosystem and he will start to analyze. Pavlovian. Inevitable.

All over the ship the same thing was going on. Johnny Rasmussen issued no orders. It wasn't necessary. Every researcher, every team, had gone into a structured behavior pattern, preparing, planning, anticipating. Each knew better than anyone else what his own part should be in this strange, brief, and tragic exploration.

I was in my lab, without remembering how I got there. Lindy undoubtedly was scooping up samples, assaying the life in the atmosphere. Pegleg was readying to go out at first touch down. And there was no doubt that Ursula's studio was extruded and that she was hard at work.

My view screen flickered as the scoutboats went out. Four swishes. Sixteen men. Geographers and meteorologists probably. They would range for hundreds of miles around the mother ship, their cameras recording everything from horizon to horizon, packing in raw data about this world that would be studied and analyzed long after the planet had ceased to be. We knew this. We all faced it. But there was no other thing we could do. Here life had evolved to high level—but all life must end sometime.

I changed into field gear. It wasn't much, just shorts, a jersey, sandals and a gear harness. Outside was going to be awkward and tricky, for we would be in spacesuits. The strange landscape looked tranquil and peaceful, but the radiation was lethal. We'd never worked under such conditions before. The suits anticipated them, though. We had a wide margin of safety.

"Shame about that blasted radiation." Pegleg read my mind. I hadn't even noticed him come into the lab. I was scooting my chair on its track back and forth along the row of sensor consoles that reported and recorded a variety of basic abiotic data. "As you can see, the air is sweet. More oxygen than we're used to."

"I've been checking the sources," I said. "Photosynthesis, as you'd expect from all the green. Funny thing, though. *Everything* seems to be photosynthesizing. Haven't

picked up a flicker of what you might call animal life."

"Nothing looks like it either." Pegleg studied my screen. We were cruising at two thousand feet and at fifty miles an hour. First reconnaissance pattern. As eager as we were to contact the dominant life, the makers of music, still Johnny Rasmussen held to the pattern. We had time. We learned as we went. By now we all knew that the transmitter was a thousand miles away, but we'd spend an hour in this pattern, then flash to our destination in minutes. It was midmorning on the land below us, the last midmorning it would ever see.

"Animals are more sensitive to radiation," I suggested. "Could be they're already dead."

"The broadcast boys are still on the ball. Are you hinting that they're plants too?"

"We're shielded," I pointed out. "Why shouldn't they be? Somehow they haven't developed the know-how to escape their planet, but I predict that in many ways they'll be as advanced as we are. We couldn't have sent out the Music of the Spheres."

Pegleg's narrow face had its usual suspicious expression, as though he smelled a dead mouse.

"Smart enough, maybe, to take over the *Stardust*, and leave us here in their places to face Eternity in the morning?"

"This is a planet bigger than Earth," I said drily. "The *Stardust* would be just a mite overloaded."

Pegleg snorted.

"Genghis Khan would only have picked a few passengers. Hitler wouldn't have taken everybody. Just a lady friend, maybe, and a few zealots to do the work. Don't be an ass, Roscoe. Even so-called kindly life forms want to keep on living. It's a pretty basic urge. The hand of brotherhood should be backed up by a club, just in case."

"If I know Johnny Rasmussen, it will be. He doesn't look or act as ornery as you do, but I do sometimes get the impression that he's sadly lacking in faith. Taking the *Stardust* would require a gambit we can't even imagine. You know that as well as I do."

"A comforting thought." Pegleg subsided, but he still grumbled. "Just the same, when we finally go, that'll be the reason. 'Love thy neighbor' is an impossible assignment. All it does is to leave the door unlocked so he can knock you on the head or steal you blind."

This was standard Pegleg philosophy, and how much of it he actually believed I suppose I'll never know. What I do know is that if and when I ever do get trapped in a last extremity, there's no man I'd rather have backing me up than Pegleg Williams.

We concentrated on the view screen. The ship was traversing a tremendously wide valley, and in length it seemed to go on and on. There were surfaced roads that

swept in sinuous curves, water courses that undulated, and wherever road met river there was a gracefully arching bridge. Everything was curved. There wasn't an angle anywhere.

Nothing seemed to fit the specifications of a town. There were buildings, always in clusters, always piled masses of brightly colored domes. Too big for family dwellings, as we understand families, I still felt that they housed the builders and users of the roads and bridges. The green mounds arranged in orderly curved patterns over wide areas became plants in fields in my thinking. The green was chlorophyll. So the life pattern was below us, at least for this portion of the planet, but never a sign of the dominant forms, never a hint of movement. Either they were already dead from the radiation, or the *Stardust* had spooked them. If they were alive, they must have heard that their space broadcasts had been answered. So I reasoned, but nothing I could see gave much support to my speculations.

The first reconnaissance hour passed. Johnny Rasmussen gave the word, the ship nosed upward slightly, and the land below us began to blur. In an hour we had traveled fifty miles. In the next few minutes we went almost twenty times that far. Then the *Stardust* cut speed and peeled off in a long sweeping glide. The structure we had come eighty-eight light-years to seek spread out ahead of us. It was, it had to be, the transmitter complex, and just to see it was worth the trip.

It rose out of a level plain, row on row and tier on tier of multicolored domes, piled on and against each other in a fashion that looked fearfully unstable, but which must have represented the ultimate in fine engineering. From a distance it looked like an oriental fan or a peacock's tail, spreading outward and upward from a narrow base, the cantilevered domes like beads on strings, thousands and thousands of them, each as large as family dwellings on Earth. Two miles into the sky the great fan spread, the weirdest and most beautiful artifact of my experience.

We swung slowly around it, drifting in a twenty-mile circle. Cameras and sensors were probing and recording the whole improbable complex. My info board also told me that the *Stardust* was enveloped in a force field that would require incredible energy to penetrate. Pegleg needn't have worried. Rasmussen wasn't underestimating anybody—or anything.

Our peerless leader was at his microphone.

"We're here, friends. We're coming in for a landing. Do you see us? Give us a sign! Can you hear us? Give us a sign!"

Perhaps the last was because we had heard nothing since we dropped into the atmosphere. And I

found myself wearing a humorless grin. Even in this last extremity, they mistrusted us as well.

The domed dwellings were scattered in patterns outward from the base of the fan, multicolored, brilliant. There were many hundreds of them, and roads curved in from all directions. Everything was there—except the life forms; except the "people."

Cap'n Jules picked the closest empty spot and set the *Stardust* down gently, without a jar. Pegleg and I were suiting up, checking again and again the shielded protective coverings we had never had a chance to use before. Johnny's voice came at intervals from the speakers. No response. Suddenly we were too strange, too alien for the inhabitants of this world, some of whom had to be still alive and watching us at this moment. But they gave no sign.

Rasmussen has imagination. He wasn't getting through and he knew he was being heard. He changed tactics. The next sound that came from the speakers was very familiar and soothing to me. I had heard it under many circumstances, and on at least twenty worlds. Often in my quarters, after a good meal, it relaxes me as nothing else ever could. For Lindy strummed her guitar and sang softly, sang a baby lullaby from old Earth, eighty-eight light-years away.

That did it. Throbbing musical chords broke from the speakers. Sounds ran up the scales and peaked in little questioning tones. Lindy answered with chords of her own, always gentle, always changing. We could feel the answering excitement as the responses caught up each note, elaborated it, and flung it back, every time with the question so plain it was almost in words.

"I wonder what I'm really saying to them," Lindy murmured. "I do hope it's not insulting." She struck a series of soft notes and crooned a paraphrase of an old movie song, a fairy tale from back in the twentieth century: *"Come out, little people, wherever you are, and see the nice spaceship that came from a star!"*

But the little people did not come out. The musical dialogue continued, but nothing moved. By now, though, we had more information about them. The physiologists had activated their delicate metabolic probes and were searching the dwellings and working their way up and down the fan. There were life forms behind every wall, forms with complicated metabolisms, apparently all one species. They were shy or frightened or suspicious, but they were there.

Pegleg and I were ready. Johnny gave his okay and we went out through the locks, the first human beings to walk on this doomed world. We barely beat out Bud Merani and his team of archaeologists. If Merani can't find ruins, new,

strange buildings will do. They swarmed out behind us, spread toward the nearer dwellings. In our bulky white suits and gleaming helmets we may have looked like a pretty formidable invasion, if Lindy's continuing concert wasn't reassuring enough. I rather hoped she wouldn't accidentally say the wrong thing. Undoubtedly the local inhabitants could use energy concentrations, if they chose. We each were protected by a force field, but as you would expect, it was minimal. It would be a minor deterrent, at best.

Pegleg saw them first.

"Roscoe! Bud! Heads up!" Pegleg's communicator was set for universal output; so he rasped in everyone's earphones.

Large oval doors were sliding open all along the base of the transmitter complex. Out of them small cars came rolling, one after another, a veritable fleet of them. Like the houses, their colors glistened. They came steadily toward the starship, falling into lines as the roads fanned out.

We had set down between two wide highways. In a few minutes each was choked with the little vehicles for the entire length of the *Stardust*. There were hundreds, maybe thousands of them, identical except for color, and each with its single occupant. And the reason for that was simple enough. One was all a car could hold. A hitch-hiker would have been out of luck.

Each little car moved on four fat, balloon-like wheels. Each car body was a short, thick flat oval, and the driver fitted down into it like an egg into an eggcup. You'd be surprised how apt that was. The driver *looked* like an egg. Well, maybe not exactly, but they were the same shape. The old idea that intelligent life forms would inevitably be human or humanoid just hasn't panned out for us. We've never found any that *were*. Thinking it over, why should they be?

I walked slowly over to the nearest line of cars, the idea forming in the back of my mind that perhaps the beings couldn't leave their transportation. I could see no limbs, no outgrowths of any sort. They had them, though, as one of them quickly proved. It extended tentacles, pushed itself up out of its nest between the wheels, and climbed down, shooting out extensions wherever it needed them, retracting them again when the need passed. It rolled toward me on multiple outgrowths, each flattening at the tip as weight was put on it.

The thing was perhaps five feet tall. It was a uniform pale olive-green. Longitudinal striations showed on the body surface from top to bottom. Across the upper third of the body, on the side kept toward me, was a conspicuous, eight-inch ribbon-like strip, delicate and glistening and rosy pink in color. It came to a halt six feet away, raised itself up on three stiff-

ened tentacles, tripod-like, and a well-defined oval section in its middle began to vibrate. The flute-like tones were familiar enough. We had been listening to them for many weeks. They were pleasing, varied, and the being produced them in what was evidently a formal manner. We were being welcomed. Or I hoped we were.

"The keys to the city, Roscoe." Pegleg seemed to have the same impression.

I bowed to the egg-like dignity.

"We thank you very much, sir or madam, as the case may be. We understand you're having some trouble with your sun. I regret to say that there's not a blasted thing we can do about it, but we're at your service if you can think of something. Johnny, do you have any suggestions for dealing with our little friends?"

"Play it by ear. You're doing fine!" Rasmussen's voice was in my earphone. The egg couldn't hear him. It was already speaking again. Its voice was rich with overtones and rose and fell with undoubted emotion. Then it paused and stood as high as its tripod would allow, the pink strip across its upper front rippling and intensifying. I suspected that this was an organ of vision, a suspicion later verified.

I bowed again.

"It has made some kind of a profound pronouncement." I spoke clearly. "I think Lindy's guitar can give the best answer. Play something, Lindy." I turned and gestured toward the spaceship.

From twenty speakers Lindy's series of musical chords flooded out. Then, one note at a time, she picked out the first phrase of a simple tune, totally inappropriate and three hundred years out of date:

"Oh, the Moon shines bright tonight along the Wabash!"

Out of date or not, it was a sensation. The beings all swiveled back and forth in their cars, their vision strips rippled, and a whole array of tentacles sprouted and waved and were retracted again.

"Oh, dear!" Lindy sang. "I hope I haven't promised them anything we can't deliver. Would you say they're pleased or angry?"

"If I had a month, I'd be able to tell you." I glanced upward at the savage, sullen sun, and once again was aware of the murderous orange overglow. "This is a shame! To us they look ridiculous, but they know what the problems are. Here's culture and learning and joy of living—and this time tomorrow it will all be gone. They know we know. And they know we can't help. Kismet!"

"In that case," Johnny Rasmussen said in my ear, "they'll find satisfaction in knowing about us. Invite him in!"

A lot of things were happening. Squads of white-suited, helmeted figures were pouring out of the exits as team after special team implemented its investigation pattern. They expected full cooperation

from the inhabitants, which had nothing at all to lose, and certainly knew it. There was no time for diplomatic sparring, for evidences of good faith. The only verity was the dwindling time.

The little cars left the roads and scurried like beetles over the fields around the *Stardust*. The featureless hide of the ship changed. Rasmussen opened viewpoints, extruded platforms and a veritable forest of sensors, anything he could make visible without danger from the deadly radiation. I saw a whole circlet of the small vehicles ranged around Ursula's transparent studio, the vision strips of the drivers fixed on the strange figure dabbing away at the big canvas. What they must have thought unfortunately will never be known.

The first of the returning scoutboats circled the transmitter and planed in to ease itself into its slip through a briefly opened orifice. Each boat would be decontaminated as it entered. That the boat caused excited comment from the egg-beings was obvious, for the volume of sound rose and peaked as it came in. They were talking among themselves continuously now, like a vast orchestra tuning up.

Three more beings had left their cars and came rolling across to join the official greeter, if that is what he/she was. I beckoned, waved toward the starship, took a few steps. They got it immediately. They faced each other in a circle, fluted softly back and forth, then turned again to me. I led on and they followed.

As we went through decontamination, I worried. What it would do to them we couldn't even guess. But we were all lethally hot and it had to be done. As it happened, I was wasting my concern. It didn't inconvenience them in the least.

They were more concerned when Pegleg and I shucked our spacesuits and appeared as vastly different creatures emerging, like insects, from our bulky white chrysalides. They twittered and fluted in what was without doubt astonishment. The four of them rolled around and around us, nervously extruding and extending tentacles, almost touching us, but never quite making contact. When the purple all-clear light showed in the little room, we led them through the sphincter into the locker room beyond and then into the corridors of the *Stardust*.

"Bring them up to main."

Rasmussen's voice came from a speaker on the wall, and our guests responded with a series of organ tones. Evidently they recognized the voice. The corridors were empty; the automatic lift opened when we needed it, and there were no sounds. The ship was quiet. Since the egg-beings had no faces, it was pretty hard to read their reactions, but their vision strips were rippling and pulsing wildly, changing from palest pink to cloudy violet.

Dignity is a universal trait.

Don't think of it as human. You've seen it in the confident pace of a fine horse, in the gracious, condescending mien of a full-fed lion, in a tabby cat lying in the sun. Dignity projects and demands respect. And our guests, or hosts, depending on how you look at it, had it in full measure.

We ushered them into the big main lounge, with its easy chairs scattered as in a retirement club and wide multiview screens everywhere. Just about every chair was occupied. All rose to their feet as we entered. Johnny Rasmussen came forward with the brand of dignity that is *his* special trademark, tall and well-groomed and elegant. And the egg-beings matched him, gesture for gesture, tone for tone. They knew he was The Man.

"Welcome aboard the *Stardust,*" the chief said.

The egg-beings responded in unison, a pleasing medley of sounds.

Johnny hesitated for a moment, then lowered himself into the nearest chair. He had nothing comparable to offer to them, but it was an experiment, just the same. It meant: *Let's communicate.* And they weren't at a loss. They ranged themselves in a half-circle before him, retracted all extrusions, flattened themselves on their bases, and sat, after their fashion. They looked like a half-moon of outsized paperweights, motionless except for their rippling vision strips.

Communication, though, wasn't that easy. Somehow, we hadn't been able to stumble on the key that would give meaning to their music. It was reasonable to suppose that they were trying and had had no better luck with our speech. Except for gestures, it was a stalemate. And there was no time.

After a few minutes of unintelligible amenities, Rasmussen made his decision.

"We will show them the ship, Dr. Kissinger." He still seemed to be chatting with his guests. "We'll show them quarters, labs, machinery, communications, libraries. We'll make things work. Project a tape for them. Show them how we prepare food and eat it. Let them look at view screens and through telescopes. Everything we can think of. Many physical principles are universal. They're bound to recognize something. Sooner or later we'll get a common denominator."

I could hear Pegleg's almost inaudible growl beside me. Rasmussen sensed it.

"Don't worry, Dr. Williams. We'll stay alert."

"See that we do, Johnny," Pegleg said "No dopes built that transmitter out there. They may have us pretty well cased already."

"A possibility," Rasmussen admitted, "and a chance we have to take. You've never been exactly the conservative type, Pegleg."

Johnny *never* uses Pegley's nickname.

"I'm almost tempted to hope," Pegleg said, "that I get a chance to say 'I told you so!' It doesn't make sense that they will cheerily tell us good-bye and then sit flat on their bottoms like they're doing now and await disintegration. 'Tain't lifelike. 'Tain't human!"

"Neither are they," I said.

We showed them the ship. As we progressed, I could sense the astonishment that they first exhibited give way to keen, understanding scrutiny. I was sure that they grasped the purposes of most equipment we showed them. They twittered and whistled and fluted over each new situation, with an occasional chord thrown in. When I spoke into a microphone and indicated by gestures that my voice was being heard by the thousands outside, they made the connection immediately. As you'd expect. Communication was probably their area of greatest technical competence.

One of them, perhaps the First Greeter, though I never could be sure, rolled before the mike and showed plainly that he wanted to use it.

"Oh, oh!" Pegleg said.

But Johnny waved a hand. The egg-being seemed to swell; his vision strip flickered frantically; and he launched into a long series of clear tones, modulated, muted, and then occasionally ringing. It was quite a speech, and it took him several minutes.

"Complete report," Pegleg said in disgust. "Those boys now know more about how this ship ticks than I do. May I timidly suggest that you don't show them Ultraspan?"

"I always like to hold something back," Rasmussen said drily. "It would take perfect communication even to project the idea of Ultraspan. No, I think we're safe. There was another reason for that speech. Look at them."

The panoramic view screen in the communications room showed the base of the great transmitter, the roads leading from it, and all the car-packed area between it and the ship. Our four visitors clustered around the screen, flattened their bottoms, and sat watching.

The little cars swirled and circled like colony ants. Many of them swung about and rolled back toward the entrances in the base of the complex. The roads cleared. The traffic departments in some of our Earth cities could have learned a lot from the neatness and dispatch with which they sorted themselves out.

By the time the roads were open, cars were again issuing from the transmitter base. They came slowly, each pulling a small four-wheeled trailer behind it, and each trailer was piled high with multicolored oval packages. Without hesitation they rolled toward the ship and on up to the port through which we had entered.

Our four visitors tried earnestly

to explain. Their fluting notes were persuasive and pleading. They extruded more tentacles than we had yet seen, rolled around the communications room, paused to harangue each of us in turn.

"Well, I'll be—!" Pegleg said. "That's a cold-blooded bit. They want to load on supplies and go along. To heck with the peasants!"

Somehow that didn't seem valid to me. Rasmussen, too, looked dubious. Lindy had joined us on our tour of the ship but had stayed in the background. Now she moved forward, her guitar slung into position, her green eyes and bright hair shining. I felt it a shame that our guests had no basis for appreciating her.

They felt her sympathy, though. They clustered around her, all speaking together, a medley of musical frustration. She plucked single, somehow questioning notes. They responded with a flood of sound.

"I don't know what I'm saying," she said, "but maybe it will give them ideas. They make no sense at all out of our vocal sounds. They're more at home with the strings."

She pointed to the loaded trailers on the screen, then to the egg-beings themselves, then swept her hand in a wide arc to indicate the ship. She plucked a single sharp inquiring note on the A string. And the visitors grew completely quiet. There was no way to substantiate it, but to me they seemed appalled.

Suddenly one of them, surely the First Greeter, extruded tentacles in clusters and rolled swiftly to the wall of record files the rows and rows of cabinets from which we had taken the tapes we had projected. He touched them, rolled to the screen, and pointed to the carts. A single, infinitely dignified tone came from him.

"Records," Lindy said. "They're giving us their history. They're doomed, but they'd like the Universe to know that they've lived, that they've learned and achieved and enjoyed. They're willing to go. They just don't want to be forgotten."

I don't know how she does it. But we all sensed that she was right. The egg-beings sensed it too. They had got through. Their soft medley of sound was thankful and contented.

"Run out a loading belt, bring in a trailer load," Johnny ordered. "We'll have a look."

"A *good* look," Pegleg muttered.

But that's what they were. Many of the bright boxes were filled with tapes, rolls and rolls of them, each inscribed with wavering lines in bewildering and complete confusion. Some were packed with metallic sheets thinner than the thinnest paper, but sturdy and resistant. From edge to edge they were covered with symbols in many colors. Records. The records of a planet. Of a race. Of an evolution. A Galactic treasure beyond imagining.

Rasmussen gave the order; load-

ing belts ran out all along the ship, and hour after hour the little trailers rolled up and discharged their loads onto the endless moving surfaces. We're an explorer ship. We have space for the specimens, the artifacts of an intensive look-see. So storage was no problem. I could imagine how eagerly the archaeologists, the historians, the mathematicians, the cryptologists were eyeing this treasure trove. But it depressed me. When we got down to the point of interpreting them, the beings who had recorded, compiled and packed them would be no more, would be part of a tenuous mass of gas outrushing into the depths of the Galaxy.

"I want to see!" Lindy said. "They'll show me. I'm special. I'm sure they will."

She got it across to them, too. At the screen she pointed to the great fan of the transmitter complex, to them and then to herself. They fluted with understanding—and beckoned. It was the last thing we could do, and most of the field units took advantage of it. Time remained. Rest and sleep could wait, while a planet lived its last hours.

Spacesuited again, we followed our guests, now our hosts, through the exit ports. Long lines of white-clad members of field teams swarmed out behind us. The egg-beings seemed not to object. There was no possible reason why they should. But we, as Lindy said, were special.

Our four guides climbed back into their little cars, fluted positive notes into the medley of sounds rising from their countrymen, and presto—we had transportation. A car with a trailer ranged alongside each of us, and we were beckoned to climb aboard. The flat trailer beds seemed as soft as sponge rubber, but they held us, one person to a vehicle. Promptly we rolled toward the great fan at a dizzying five miles an hour.

A description of that tour does not belong here. You've read it in Rasmussen's official report (*ISC Annals, Vol. 72, A. D. 2119. The Log of the Stardust*), or you've had it piecemeal in a hundred news media items. It's here only because it's part of a sequence, or an order of happenings, when we had to explore a star system, a planet, and a civilization in less than thirty hours. It's significant because it gave us the beginnings of our understanding of the level of technology which these odd little egg-beings had achieved.

For hours the little cars rolled noisely up the gently sloping ramps, switching back, detouring into lofty chambers packed with mazes of strange machinery, occasionally debouching onto wide outlook window spaces from which the country stretched away to a far horizon. The metallic length of the *Stardust* on the ground below grew smaller and smaller as we climbed, and the tiny cars were beetles swarming

around it. We spent half an hour on the highest point, on the very crest of the fan, a flat parking area that might have held a hundred or more of the little cars. And as I think back, we said almost nothing during the whole unreal experience.

The roiling, pulsing, unhappy sun was setting. This world would never see it set again. We watched it for a brief while, then followed our guides back down through the miles of sloping corridors, glowing with multicolored illumination, and finally out into an early darkness sprinkled with an alien canopy of stars.

The night seemed long. The *Stardust* teams worked with the structured efficiency that makes us the best, each team the extended arm of a master scientist. The *Stardust* gleamed like a giant glowworm. The brilliance of magnaflashes lit up the countryside for miles. Scoutboats darted in and away again. And over all, the many colors of the lights of the transmitter complex cast a strange, somber glow. In spite of the seething activity, it all seemed like an enormous wake. Which, in a way, I suppose it was.

I was glad when the night thinned, and finally the sullen orange sun climbed into view. I welcomed Stony Price's solemn announcement on intercom, "Official. Nova minus two hours. Staging minus thirty minutes." A sober Stony Price. No clowning with communiques now.

Outside the little cars still swarmed and scurried about in their thousands. But the last of our people came in. Personnel check was complete. The many checklists were finished and verified. We were ready.

"Staging minus sixty seconds!"

Lindy and I sat side by side, holding hands, watching the second sweep of the chronometer approach the sixty mark, waiting for the antigrav lift that would precede the familiar Nirvana-like state of Ultraspan.

And nothing happened.

Our fingers still clung while the chronometer made another sixty-second circle. The *Stardust* lay inert. No lift. No motion. Then the shaken voice of Stony Price on intercom. "Revision. Staging minus twenty minutes. A small difficulty."

In crisis, I am one of Johnny Rasmussen's four first-line replacements. Any one of us, in emergency, could take over operations and run the ship. Cap'n Jules Griffin, Moe Cheng and Pegleg are the others. I arrived at the control room last, but only by about a couple of seconds.

Cap'n Jules sat in his control chair as always, his square face unchanging. Rasmussen reported.

"There is an energy hold on the antigrav units. We can't lift."

Moe Cheng's slits of eyes gleamed with anger, but Pegleg looked almost happy. Or at least he looked vindicated.

"Outside energy! Applied where it counts! We showed them too much!"

"But why?" I protested. "We have their records. They want them saved. They want the Galaxy to know. I'd swear it!"

"Play-acting," Pegleg said. "If they can't live, why should we? They've analyzed our lift-off mechanism and nullified it. All the while that we've been gathering data, so have they. In an hour and a half, we all go together."

I've never admired Johnny Rasmussen more than at that moment. Impeccably dressed as always, his mustaches newly waxed, he could have been considering a minor detail of operation. His tanned face showed no stress. He seated himself, punched for a brandy from the console alongside. He said nothing until he'd had a sip.

"Cap'n Jules," he said quietly, "I think I know the answer, but why not Ultraspan direct? It has no relation to conventional energy application."

Cap'n Jules shook his white head stolidly.

"We're in contact; so essentially the *Stardust* is a part of the mass of the planet. Even Ultraspan couldn't stage a planet."

"So?"

"We'd disintegrate," the captain said. "Or theory says we would. Never been tried, of course."

"In an hour and twenty minutes we disintegrate anyway. That'll be our last resort, our last experiment. Meanwhile, we try to get them to release us. How, Roscoe?"

"I always get the easy assignments." I tried to keep a calm face, but it was a job to hold my voice steady. "Still, when I'm in deep trouble, I always look in the same direction. This time I think it's practical. Call my wife. Call Lindy—and her guitar."

"Of course." Rasmussen looked like he should have thought of it himself. He made the call. In a few minutes she came into the control room, a quiet, pale Lindy, but with live green eyes sparkling, and a faint wink for me as she passed.

"They're holding us, Dr. Peterson," Rasmussen said. "Somehow they've nullified the antigravs. Do you think you could find out why?"

Lindy looked from face to face. She saw nothing but chagrin and disillusionment, I'm afraid.

"Maybe I can't," she said slowly, "but if they're doing it, there *is* a reason. They don't want us destroyed."

"All the little atoms and ions that used to be me will take satisfaction in that as they blow out across the Universe," Pegleg said.

Lindy's eyes crinkled suddenly, deeply. She turned toward the waiting microphone. Johnny Rasmussen sipped his brandy, and his lean face was faintly quizzical. Pegleg's very sourness had lifted our spirits a little.

Lindy worked. How she worked!

Her guitar queried and scolded and pled. The egg-beings crowded around the starship, row on row and rank on rank of little cars. The illusion of the tuning orchestra was more complete than it had ever been. They answered her with flutings and bell tones and deep, majestic chords. But they showed no indication that they understood what she wanted. We couldn't detect any concern that we were overstaying our time. And all the while that time grew shorter.

At nova minus thirty minutes, Rasmussen admitted defeat.

"Thank you, Dr. Peterson. I'm afraid they've won. Our outlook now seems to be the same as theirs. But at nova minus ten we'll try our last experiment. Even in contact with the planet, we'll try Ultraspan."

I don't think Lindy heard the last part of that. Excitedly she grasped Johnny Rasmussen by the arm, almost spilling his brandy. And, even with disintegration staring you in the face, you just don't *do* that!

"That's it!" she cried. "Oh, of course that's it! The one thing we couldn't take away before! They want us to *feel* like they feel, to know what it's like to face the certainty of Eternity! They'll let us go, Johnny! They don't plan for us to die!"

And they proved it for her. Through the packed masses of little cars somehow a roadway opened. A pale blue car came through, hauling a blue trailer. On the trailer sat a large blue casket. The whole blue unit drew up at the location of the port nearest us. That was sealed, of course. No sign of it from outside. But they knew.

A single high clear note came from the thousands of diaphragms, a snaky forest of tentacles sprouted, waved and retracted.

"That's for Lindy," I said. I'd heard that note again and again.

Rasmussen gave the order; a loading belt extruded, and the blue casket came aboard. We broke the simple fastenings, and Lindy opened it there in the control room.

For a brief moment the contents of the casket made no sense at all. Then suddenly we knew. Even Cap'n Jules left his chair to join the circle looking down at the smooth, slightly quivering mass of clear gelatin that filled the box to the brim. Embedded in it were rows and rows of tiny green capsules, layer on layer of them. Thousands.

"They don't want to die," Lindy breathed. "They're saying, 'Find us a planet; find us a home with a healthy sun. Let our race and our culture and our knowledge live on.' "

"I don't understand, Dr. Peterson." Cap'n Jules Griffin's heavy, colorless voice was evidence that he didn't. Cap'n Jules is a genius, but he has no imagination whatever.

"These are their spawn, their babies." Lindy looked ready for tears. "Probably the most highly se-

lected genes they could arrange for in a hurry. They themselves will die, of course. But their race is here in this box. We can lift off now, Cap'n Jules. The antigravs are free. They want us to go."

And a moment later the *Stardust* stirred gently, raised herself like a soap bubble on a breeze, and swept slowly in a great circle around the magnificent fan of the transmitter, the thousands of tiny, colorful cars and their occupants dwindling to insect size.

"Nova minus fifteen minutes! Staging minus sixty seconds!" Stony Price sounded vastly relieved.

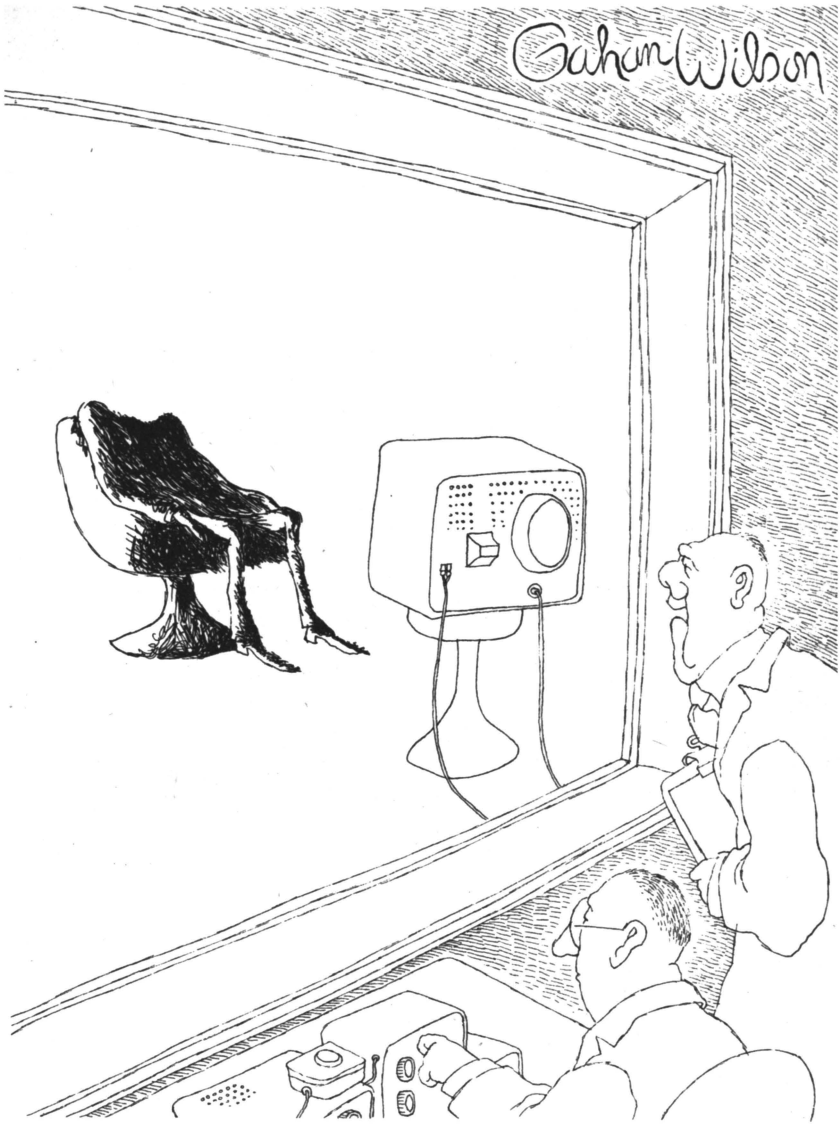
A sound began and grew and poured from our speakers, a single pure deep organ-tone. Benediction and good-bye!

Lindy and I held hands there in the control room; Pegleg and Rasmussen and Moe Cheng settled into chairs. Our senses blurred into the timeless nothingness of Ultraspan. Then reality returned. The *Stardust* floated in alien space. On our screens, four light-years away, the twin stars of Mizar A gleamed cheerily, although one of them seemed somewhat smudged and murky. But our view was four years old. We all winced when the chronometers swept past nova zero, then sat for a few minutes in a sort of numb sadness.

"They're gone," Lindy said. "Sun and planet snuffed out. Perhaps the other twin rendered unstable by the energy release. But the life and the wisdom it all made possible have escaped." She patted the blue casket.

It was tragedy. We knew them briefly, but they were our friends and we mourned. Yet we knew that such things happened often even in our Galaxy. How much more so across the Universe?

In perspective, this was simply a single blink of the Celestial Eye.



"Yes, the public* did *put up with color TV's radiation, but I think this is really asking an awful lot of them. Even for 3-D."

BOOKS

Jon Hartridge: BINARY DIVINE. Doubleday, 1970. 213 pp., boards, $4.95

Seven years ago, at the DisCon,* I ventured the generalization that British science-fiction writers at their best were better than their American counterparts, but their worst was much poorer than our worst. I can still point to Brian Aldiss to support the first half of that premise, and as evidence for the last half, this book will do nicely.

In 2080, the story has it, production has so far outstripped consumption that the machines are making things only to destroy them—including plastic pedestrians to be "killed" by robot automobiles in pre-programmed traffic jams. (This multiple absurdity is committed on the first page.) This has eliminated national states and wars, and there is no government; what little authority exists is vested in historians.

Forty years earlier, however, the world had been a tribalized, McLuhanesque community, created by construction of a central, all-wise computer which anyone could consult at any time via personal walkie-talkie. The machine still exists but is no longer in use. How the transition occurred is hidden in a universal amnesia called the Lost Month. A young historian attempts to find out what happened during that month, but is opposed and persecuted by his peers, on the insane grounds that the restoration of one month of history would cause them to lose their authority.

What actually did happen turns out to be as uninteresting and incredible as the frame. It is populated entirely by stick figures speaking wooden English. The main character is named Michael Farrowday, which means nothing at all, since it soon becomes evident that the author has never heard of electromagnetic induction, let alone of its famous British discoverer, or of either of the two units of electrical measurement named after him. Viewpoint switching is incessant, and made all the more confusing by the lack of characterization. The gimmick is mass insanity transmitted by a dis-

*21st World Science Fiction Convention, Washington, D.C.

guised form of telepathy; the cure is, literally, a blow on the head, which must be the deepest descent into bathos s-f has suffered in thirty years. At the beginning of the novel, we are given concrete examples of false or maliciously useless information given out by the computer; the solution says that people only imagined this to be happening.

This is a first novel. It is *not* promising.

Roger Zelazny: NINE PRINCES IN AMBER. Doubleday, 1970. 188 pp., boards, $4.50

This short novel is Zelazny's version of sword-and-sorcery, but it is not for addicts only. Zelazny has not borrowed the standard apparatus for this sort of thing, but has invented his own, and the result is an adventure story with real originality and zest.

True, the hero is suffering from amnesia after a blow on the head as the book opens, but this soap-opera ploy is milked so successfully for suspense that it is readily forgivable. As we find out, with the hero, more and more about his real situation, it becomes more and more evident that the smallest misstep will be fatal. Moreover, the author manages to create real doubt that he will win through, despite the almost insuperable handicap that he is telling his own story in the first person and therefore obviously did win through.

Amber, it develops, is a perfect world of which all others are imperfect copies or shadows. The hero, a soldier of fortune and popular song writer on Earth, is one of the nine princes of Amber; and the brother he most hates holds the throne. The novel deals with the hero's attempt to overthrow him.

In many respects, the story could have been set with no loss in an Italian court during the Borgia pontificate. The magic, however, is integral, not just pasted on. The language is the mixture of poetry and slang characteristic of recent Zelazny, but it is not jarring here, since it makes a perfect fit with the hero's double life.

And the ending reveals, among other things, how the author managed to create that illusion of doubt—and leaves the door wide open for a sequel. I'll be looking for it.

Frank Herbert: WHIPPING STAR. Putnam's, 1970. 186 pp., boards, $4.95

Nobody who has been reading science fiction and fantasy since 1931 should find anything preposterous any more, but this new Herbert novel pushed me pretty close to the edge. In fact, in its cut *Galaxy* version of the preceding year, I found it outright incomprehensible, though that wasn't the author's fault.

Even in this full version it is

highly compressed, packing into about the same number of words as NINE PRINCES IN AMBER a complete future of new creatures, customs and devices, of which only the "jumpdoors"—teleportation devices—are relatively conventional; and he has a new angle even on these. The major premise is far out indeed, and becomes steadily more so. To assimilate everything and make sense of it, or at least as much sense as there is in it, requires two readings, at least.

And there's the problem, for it's so sloppily written that getting through it even once requires also considerable deliberate deafness. On the minor technical level, after twenty years in the trade Herbert still switches viewpoints like a beginner, his speech tags present array after ragged array of egregious saidbookisms, and he punches out over-punctuated non-sentences and verbless one-line non-paragraphs until the reader with any love for the language becomes numb to what he's trying to convey. As for taste . . . well, his heroine is a star, a full-fledged astronomical-type star, and the hero calls her Fanny Mae; and she belongs to a race called Calebans, which turns out to be another non-reference like Hartridge's "Michael Farrowday." As a member of the New York Mets in their most hapless days once asked his fellows, can't *anybody* here play this game?

There is a much more important difficulty in re-reading WHIPPING STAR, as well. It doesn't turn out to be about anything. It's a wild, slambang, highly ingenious space opera, and that's all. If you have a tin ear, or can temporarily fake one, you'll probably find it confusing but exciting, like good early van Vogt. But also like good early vV, if you stop to listen to it or think about it, it has about as much staying power as a tune for comb and tissue paper.

I can see no reason for owning a hard-cover copy of this. Herbert's reputation guarantees that there will be a paperback. Try it; but don't expect it to be as good as DRAGON IN THE SEA, or even DUNE.

R. A. Lafferty: FOURTH MANSIONS. Ace Special, 1969. 252 pp., paper, 75¢

I am a little late in getting to this one, but it's probably still available and deserves your attention.

It is difficult to describe without burlesquing it. Its genre is rare but well known: Heraldic fantasy with religious intent, like the novels of Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis' Narnia books, or for that matter, Spenser's FAERIE QUEENE. I think Lafferty would feel at home in Spenser's company; his own style is cadenced without being pseudo-bardic, he relies heavily on extravagant metaphors, and he often bursts into verse, much of it original and all of it good (especially the sonnet on page 208).

Fundamentally, the novel is a retelling of the Parsifal story, that of the "pure fool" who resists all temptation, is made wise by suffering and thereby is enabled to take over the guardianship of the Grail from those who have been crippled by sin. His rôle is played by a reporter named Freddy Foley, who becomes involved successively with a small group of people who are trying to become supermen with the aid of a "mind-weave," a larger group which is using longevity to manipulate the world (but in turn seems to be possessed), a nascent dictator opposed to them, and a preternatural Christian brotherhood.

The correspondences are not exact, but the supermen, like Amfortas, are gravely wounded by misuse of their powers; the revenants, who create illusions of identity, resemble the magician Klingsor; and the brotherhood plays the part of the Knights of the Grail, guarding the Castle until men become worthy of entering it. The dictator's rôle is more difficult to match, but since he is doing the world a service necessitated by a fall from grace, he is at least a little like Kundry.

Lafferty himself labels the groups pythons, toads, unfledged falcons and badgers, all four of whom "assail man while pretending to love him," though actually only the badgers do love him. The pythons are monsters of evil (the group in the novel includes an actual demon), and thus are relatively less dangerous than the toads, who prefer the status quo and deal man a set-back each time he seems about to enter a higher spiritual level (the "mansions" of the title). The unfledged falcon resembles the python, but when grown becomes secular authority; even at its best it is "firm but doltish." In this scheme, the ordinary man becomes a worm.

This symbol-system has nothing to do with Parsifal, of course, and it repays close attention. It is consistent and pervasive, and without it the wild events of the novel would seem simply chaotic. With it, the book makes perfect sense.

It would never have occurred to me to mount any comparison with van Vogt here, since both in prose and in consistency FOURTH MANSIONS ranks far higher. However, the novel's inventiveness, and perhaps its (only apparent) chaos, moved Alexei Panshin to do so, in one of the back-cover blurbs, and there is indeed another strong resemblance: Most of the time, Lafferty's characters make speeches that could never come out of a human mouth, and though they emote a lot, the only ordinary human emotion any of them ever seem to feel is fear. Some others are recognizable, but in an advanced pathological state; the rest are simply inhuman.

But hardly anybody in the novel is an ordinary human being; they are deformed by their rôles. Laf-

ferty seems to recognize this deficiency and tries to cope with it, but the attempt doesn't come off. It is simply annoying to be told that one of the characters has "a helical passion" but never to be told what it is; or to be asked to like a female member of the mind-weave by calling her "a cinnamon cookie for Cerberus" and having her address the hero with a series of revoltingly cute pet names.

But despite this flaw and a whole lot of over-writing, it is fascinating straight through—and as a dividend, it is often funny.

Stanislaw Lem: SOLARIS. Afterword by Darko Suvin. Walker, 1970. 216 pp., boards, $4.95

As reported in my previous column, the five Lem stories included in Prof. Suvin's anthology OTHER WORLDS, OTHER SEAS seemed strangely thin for a writer with so enormous an international reputation. The present book suggests a possible reason: Lem may be much more at home in the novel.

This one, which dates back to 1961, is his sixth, and it is strikingly original and rewarding on virtually every level. Its central phenomenon is a planet-wide "ocean" which is actually a living creature of unguessably high intelligence; among other things, it has mastered gravitation and uses the knowledge to control the flight of its world around a double star in an orbit which otherwise would be unstable. It also constantly throws up immense temporary structures of various kinds, which, though easily classifiable into types, completely defy comprehension. Lem does not just say this, he shows it: his hero describes almost all of the types, clearly and in detail, so that the reader has a vivid picture of exactly what each is like—and is as far as ever from comprehending what possible purpose it could serve. Solaris (the name of the planet) makes most other descriptions of "alien" worlds you have read seem positively homelike.

All human attempts to communicate with this creature have failed, sometimes with great loss of life. The deaths were due to its apparent indifference to human beings, for it is not hostile. Yet, in a way, it is in touch with them, for from the recesses of each man's brain it recreates, in solid, living and sentient form, the one person to whom that man had done the most injury. Nobody ever finds out why it does this, either, or even whether it is aware of doing so; but the resulting emotional tensions are what make the novel go. They are handled with such tenderness and depth of insight as to make me wonder if the author of those short stories is some other Lem entirely.

A part of the other activities of the "ocean" is also mimetic; in effect, it mirrors what goes on in its vicinity. In the same way, each

man's inner nature is mirrored by his inescapable Phi-creature (not Psi, as the flap copy has it; they are completely real, they bleed and they suffer, though apparently they cannot be killed); and in the elaboration and evolution of Solaristic studies, Lem mirrors society, its institutions, and man's place in the universe. He is completely non-dogmatic about it; if he has anything to preach, it is that knowledge does not dispell mystery, but increases it.

Lem knows the sciences intimately; there is not a word of double-talk in the novel, although some kind of faster-than-light drive is assumed in order to be able to reach Solaris at all. The story is slow-moving in spots, but this is not a defect in a philosophical novel; when Lem slows down, he wants the reader to slow down too, and *think*.

Stylistically it also reads well, and my guess—based rather insecurely on its excellences in other departments—is that the style was distinguished in the original. What we have here is a British translation of a French translation from the original Polish. Prof. Suvin, who has more languages than he has fingers, doesn't mention the translation at all in his fine analytical Afterword, which may also indicate that it could have been better, but just as English it is better than most of what passes for that language in our field.

Buy the hard-cover book by all means, for you will want a copy that will stand up under many re-readings. This is going to become a classic; it is inherently one already.

—JAMES BLISH

THE PULPS, Tony Goodstone, editor
Chelsea House, $15

In the 1930's, when the pulpwood magazines were thriving, $15 would have bought you anywhere from 100 to 150 different pulps off the newsstands. Something like 25,000,000 words, or 50 rough-edged pounds, of reading

matter. I mention this not to demonstrate how the cost of cheap thrills has inflated since the Depression years, but to suggest that anyone attempting a representative anthology of pulp material has a monumental amount of stuff to try to distill. It's similar to the problem the blind men had with the elephant. Goodstone has made an admirable attempt at giving us some idea of what went on in the pulps, but his book is still a disappointment. He succeeds best at conveying what the pulp magazines looked like. The 48 page section of full-color (mostly red and yellow) cover reproductions, showing everything from *Argosy* and *Astounding* to *Sky Birds* and *Doctor Death*, is quite handsome. It is when Goodstone gets to the prose that he falters. There are ten sections, each devoted to a sampling of a particular type of pulp-adventure: detective, science fiction, etc. I get the impression he picked his stories with one eye on the box office. Since Chelsea House is supposed to have gone bankrupt during the production of this book, it may be his publishers who suggested including so many "big name" authors. In the pulps it was not always the writer whom everyone has heard of who did the best or even the most representative work. Edgar Wallace, Paul Gallico, William E. Barrett, Philip Wylie, MacKinlay Kantor and Tennessee Williams are authors who only passed through the pulps on the way to somewhere else. Goodstone comes closest to recapturing the flavor of a type of pulp in his detective section, which includes Dashiell Hammett, T.T. Flynn (a second-rate but typical hardboiled writer) and Robert Leslie Bellem. Bellem was, as is demonstrated by this adventure of his Hollywood private eye Dan Turner, beyond doubt the most entertaining lousy writer in the pulps. Science fiction readers may feel slighted. There are only two stories in the SF section—by Weinbaum and Harl Vincent. And the pulp heroes get only a montage at the end of the book. All in all I guess I enjoyed this book. Let me conclude by saying I recommend it half-heartedly.

— RON GOULART

George Alec Effinger has only been writing for a few years, has already sold a dozen stories, has a novel, WHAT ENTROPY MEANS TO ME, *coming from Doubleday. He writes: "I left Yale in June of 1966. Came to New York, spent many a cold night dragging for MacDougal Street coffee houses, kept my ears open, learned a lot, changed my mind about a lot. Went to NYU in 1968, back to Yale in '69. Left again." The story below grew from the New York/Village experience and provides a solid indication that Mr. Effinger's will be among the most interesting new voices in sf.*

A FREE PASS TO THE CARNIVAL

by George Alec Effinger

THE RESTAURANT WAS CROWDED, even though it was well past the usual mealtime, and some human customers were already beginning to arrive. The lords pushed back the black iron chairs and found their way out through the tables on the patio. A tour of the Village was included in the price of their dinner.

Traffic was heavy on Fifth Avenue. The lords boarded the chartreuse bus, filling about half the available seats. Most of them carried cameras, for their stay on Earth never exceeded three months; the lords were enthusiastic souvenir hunters. The straps of the cameras crisscrossed their naked bodies, dividing them into unequal portions.

Tossin shared a seat with his eggfather near the front of the bus. Behind him his spermfather and his mother also shared a seat. Tossin was a young adult, although his three parents treated him as if he were much younger; he was their only child. He thought New York was very exciting and not at all embarrassing, as did his mother, who resented the crassness of the humans. Tossin rode with his left arm hanging from the window; when he looked down at the street, he could see that the shade of his pale-blue skin clashed unpleasantly with that of the chartreuse bus.

They rode through the narrow streets. They churned the stagnating pond of people, leaving behind a short, clear wake which soon refilled with milling humans. Among

the pedestrians were very few lords. From time to time a human guide at the front of the bus announced that they were passing a place of interest or the site of a former famous attraction. As a rule the lords did not know the significance of these places, or they could not decide which of the many cramped buildings was meant, and they took few pictures. The human streets were not worth shooting (they were actually ugly), and the notoriety was impossible to capture. After thirty minutes the bus returned them to the restaurant. It was warm and humid, and their heads were beginning to ache.

Their cab was waiting for them, its human driver obviously impatient and staring at the silent meter. The four lords climbed into the car; Tossin noticed the dismay of the cabbie, who surely expected to be dismissed to find human and paying fares. They drove crosstown along West Ninth. The evening deepened; uptown, floodlights kindled the upper stories of the Empire State Building and lit the great clouds of haze that surged by. At Sixth Avenue the lords left the car and discharged the cabbie, who thanked them sourly.

They walked downtown along Sixth Avenue, strolling from store to store. Tossin pretended not to notice the confusion they caused among the humans. Occasionally the mother made a purchase; at these times she returned money for the articles she chose to take, because the parents' duties were ending and the family was soon to return home. When the articles or the service pleased her, she added a generous overpayment.

Tossin stood with his eggfather while they waited for the mother to choose some earrings as gifts for friends at home. Attractive handmade jewelry was difficult to find. Tossin asked his eggfather what was taking so long (he fingered the strings of beads impatiently; he jangled bells on chains). "I've been told that these humans have warehouses full of rubbish," he replied. "They live by trying to sell more of it to their fellows than they must accept themselves. They will attempt to fool us into thinking it is genuine. Human craftsmen are rare, their products are hidden away."

The eggfather stood beside him, restlessly watching the pointless traffic outside. The boy studied the shifting and resettling motions of his eggfather's body: the movements were mirrored across the shop by his spermfather. Their physiques were nearly identical—his eggfather's muscular arms as covered with the dark hair as his spermfather's, his spermfather's chest as deep and broad as his eggfather's, their penises nestled each in its own mat of dark hair. Tossin reached to touch the smooth skin of his eggfather's shoulder: how perfect it was, even here under the fluorescents. The pink skin of the hu-

mans showed every sign of the buried sicknesses they carried. Even in the best light the humans revealed only small uncovered and flawed areas, and under artificial light they became mottled pale and flush. The mother often remarked on this effect, and Tossin noted it now with new understanding.

The family left the store, walking east on West Third Street. Tossin walked quietly for a short time, observing the humans and their reactions. Before he arrived on Earth, he had had no clear idea of normal human behavior. Even after his first few weeks of the visit, he hadn't yet realized what made the humans so offensive. His spermfather had quoted to him the theory that human vulgarity was a racial characteristic.

Tossin held his arm close to his body, the fingers of his left hand tucked under his right arm, his right hand holding his left elbow. He thought as he walked, and he had no idea that he was forming his adult conceptions.

"Why are humans so obnoxious, then?" he asked.

"Our best scholars say that it's their sex," said his eggfather. "It is well-known that a human refers to the other sex as 'opposite.' He can expect sexual attention from only half of the total population. Humans frequently live out their lives in perpetual sexual frustration; so it shouldn't be surprising that it is sublimated into all areas of life: political, economic, and religious, as well as social."

On McDougal Street the lords found more of the same sort of shops. There was no greater variety; the store windows fought among themselves with weapons of leather, wax, paper, burned and smoking grease, cotton and corduroy: articles reproduced without affection in grimy combinations. Tourists crowded the lamplit walks; but whatever of the past's licentiousness remained, leering in the spinning, drug-dark doorways, rode on tourists' shoulders and was left under the Arch when they turned uptown. Tossin could not decide why one store seemed crowded with curious, fingering humans and another stood empty, its last customers apparently exhaled hours before.

As the shops grew more insistent, the lords found less of interest. The candles and clothing and jewelry were so obviously worthless. Tossin became aware of how little of the merchandise was acceptable. "Why would they allow these things to represent their own taste and craft?" he asked his eggfather.

"They have no taste, Tossin. When our people first arrived, we found an exciting and vibrant culture, in some ways the rival of our own. But the sense of racial inferiority has proven deadly. Nothing original can be expected from humans as long as competing with our standard of living is the major inter-

est. Humans stupidly feel that mining their cultural heritage is in itself a valid creative act; as long as something old and beautiful remains, they are in no trouble. But look around: little is left, little is left."

A tired young man watched the group of lords. Tossin looked at him with less of his former interest in humans and more of his newly found scorn. The human's long hair was pulled tightly back and tied behind his head. Untrimmed and full, his beard hid his face; his expressions were fleeting approximations of emotion. His body coverings were busy layers of fringe and drapings. He gleamed from little eyes of buttons, studs, rivets, buckles. His voice scratched as the lords approached; he spoke to them without hope.

"Come on in off the sidewalk! Why beat your feet on the hot concrete, feeling lowdown, mean, and mangy? Come on into Ted Salomon's Four Seasons, the Village's first and last original basket house. No admission, no minimum, no cover charge. Women and servicemen served half price. Continuous live entertainment: folk, folk rock, and blues." He stopped.

"Come on in. Don't go home to your mother-in-law; you know what she'll do to you." He stopped again. He had no more to say.

The lords looked at him silently. There was disrespect in his words, and ignorance, but the human could not be punished for his people's foolishness. The family had been warned about such traps as the Four Seasons: dishonest drinks of fruit juices and rum extract, little entertainment, and for the human tourists, inflated prices and the mandatory "tip."

Behind the Four Seasons' drag were three steps up to the entrance. The door was open; the lords could hear guitar music, amplified and tinny through the inadequate speakers. Tossin walked past the drag and inspected the interior of the coffeehouse. It was dark; light streamed only from a spotlight shining full upon the small stage. Slowly and steadily changing through the rotating, multicolored gel, the light shuddered on the features of the girl performer. Small candles were placed on the long tables, and ashtrays, and there was nothing else to see besides the customers. The humans sat crowded on long benches, listening to the empty songs, sadly, angrily, knowing they had been taken. A few lords sat at another table; they smiled and talked to each other as they would anywhere on Earth. They indulged themselves, moving easily among the humans; they carried themselves as if they did not really believe the humans existed.

Tossin turned away from the door. He stood on the stoop, and from the coffeehouse behind, dim colors played changes around him. He looked down at the drag, who

was sorting out his ploys for the benefit of a young human couple.

"Are those songs authentic?" Tossin asked.

The drag stared over his shoulder, bewildered at being challenged by a lord. "Yeah. They write 'em themselves, don't they?"

"Tossin, come," said the mother. She disliked even the most business-like dealings with humans, and the tour was causing deep agitation.

"And the drinks—do you know that they have no alcoholic content?" Tossin walked down the steps and rejoined his parents. He continued to speak to the drag, but he no longer looked at the human. "Why don't you tell these people that, also?"

"Tossin!" The mother took his hand in hers, pulling him away. Tossin felt for the first time the meaning of being a lord among humans: he was a lord, a *Lord!*

"You should not speak so with a human, Tossin," the mother said. "It lowers you to the human level."

Yes, Tossin thought, *yes . . .*

A crowd of humans stood outside the button shop, tourists, uptown people astounded by the grossness of the printed buttons in the window. They laughed, pointing out favorites so that wives and business partners would not miss them. Some of the buttons were old: rusty pins stuck through a creased blue cardboard backing; all were inane, sterile in concept, triggered to lose all humor after ten minutes' exposure. Periodically someone would find a button with a specially striking message. At these times the shop's door would open; the pressure of the crowd on the sidewalk would force several people into the store along with the original customer.

The lords stopped to examine the display window. The mother quickly grew disgusted with the trivial buttons. Tossin found himself amused in spite of himself. He went into the store, his parents following; the laughter of the humans quieted. When the lords entered, the humans turned from the window and continued down the street; the humans inside the store left quietly.

The shop was very small, a bathroom-sized intrusion into the brick building. It was lined along three sides with gray metal cabinets with sliding drawers. A different button was taped to the front of each drawer. Above the cabinets were mounted posters which were also for sale. The lords found little to hold their attention, feeling that the buttons and posters represented the self-indulgent portion of the human culture. They browsed; the single human employee watched resentfully.

Tossin stood with his left fingertips resting gently on his right breast. His right hand moved lightly from one button to another, touching them absently while he read them. Occasionally he glanced at the girl who managed the store;

she returned his looks coldly, waiting for the lords to leave.

The girl was, in Tossin's opinion, very attractive by human standards. She was small, sitting on her stool and blinking like one of the lords' mythical elves. She had very long hair, much longer than the human fashion, and she wore it braided, draped over her left shoulder. Her eyes ticked off everything that happened in her store; she caught each detail, holding it against some mental checklist for identification. Tossin watched her watching; she was a new sort of human to him, the scarcest sort: she knew what she was doing. His interest bored and offended her. She turned her back to restock a glass case with cigarette papers.

A button caught Tossin's attention. Unlike the others, this one had no printed slogan. It was a simple button, divided in half vertically and colored light blue on the left half. The right half was further subdivided by horizontal lines into four sections, printed white, red, black, yellow. "What is this button?" he asked.

The girl scowled, her impatience and contempt in the click of her tongue, in the movement of her eyes. "That's for the Unity freaks."

"What is the Unity?"

"Yeah, you don't know? Me and you and the niggers are all brothers. We got to get it together. Wear the button and everything'll be okay." She began to count the money in her black apron.

The mother looked annoyed; her arms were clasped tightly around her waist as she paced the front of the shop. Tossin began to remove the Unity button taped to the front of the drawer. The human girl looked up and saw him. "The buttons are inside," she said.

Tossin glanced at her over his shoulder. She gave him a scornful look. "Don't do that! Open the drawer." Tossin took out four of the Unity buttons.

"I would like to purchase these," he said.

"Is that going to be all?"

"Yes."

"That'll be a dollar."

Tossin watched the ridicule flickering through her words. She expected the payment; in a way, she demanded it. Tossin's fresh feeling of superiority was shaken, but just a little. He was momentarily confused. He turned to his parents. "I like these, not because of the idea of Unity, but for the thin black dividing line." He took out a ten dollar bill. "How much tax is there?"

The human girl took the bill and put it in her apron. "I won't charge you tax." She gave Tossin eight singles in change. He held them stiffly for a moment, realizing that she had intentionally shortchanged him. She stared into his eyes; she was not mocking now, she was neither afraid nor insolent. He put the change away in his shoulder sling. The girl watched him carefully.

Tossin joined his parents. "Why

do they sell themselves?" he asked. "Do they put prices on everything they have and everything they are? They speak of Unity, but why do they obstruct unity with a totally marketable, totally valueless culture?"

The spermfather nodded toward the human girl. "I don't know. But no one is forcing her to live like this. She has her own reasons."

The eggfather opened the door of the shop. The parents walked back out into the evening, leaving Tossin inside with the girl. For a short time they regarded each other. The last thing Tossin saw before he turned to leave was the human, sitting on a high stool, eating a slice of cold pizza. Her brows were drawn together: in concentration, in hatred, in restraint? Her eyes followed his, striking into his mind somehow. She was smiling, coldly, with so much bitterness. "Good-by," she said. "Come again." At last he broke her hold and left.

After the next day he never thought of her again.

Raylyn Moore ("A Different Drummer," Feb. 1971) returns with an unsettling fantasy about Mercelia Corlew, editor of a magazine called Automation Age, *and what happens to her when the magazine, quite appropriately, starts running itself.*

IF SOMETHING BEGINS

by Raylyn Moore

If something begins, then it has begun. If it has begun, then it is that way.
—Gertrude Stein

CLEM WINNINGER'S UNEXPECTED death left Mercelia Corlew alone in the world. More alone than if he had been a relative, far more than if he had been her husband. For in either case his friends and family might have rallied to console her, to provide the human tie, however tenuous, that binds.

Mercelia had served Clem with scrupulous fidelity for ten years, and not just as his office assistant. In the extremity of passion he had often declared he couldn't live without her, which may well have been the truth. But as things turned out, he was never in a position to put his ardent assertions to a test.

He died in the down elevator one afternoon in early September while the operator was looking straight ahead and celebrating the greatness of Koufax. (Marichal? Walter Johnson? Carl Hubbell? Ha. Don't make me laugh.)

When Winninger, a friendly man, if not a true baseball aficionado, failed to answer, Frank turned to look at his passenger, in the same motion halting the car in the no man's land between fourteen and twelve. Mr. Winninger had slumped to the floor still gripping his attaché case.

Frank, who as an elevator operator knew a little about everything, having overheard twenty-five years' worth of random conversation on all conceivable subjects, tried his hand at first aid. Believing he felt a flutter of pulse, he made a strenuous attempt at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, which proved not nearly so easy as it had sounded from the comments of a class in life-saving which had met one year in

the building. Then he rushed on down to street level. But when they took Clem out in the lobby, he was dead.

During this time, Mercelia had been in the office that she and Clem shared on the twenty-second floor of the building, finishing off the week-long task of checking the subscription file of their magazine, *Automation Age*, for duplications and errors before turning the whole mess over to a data-processing outfit. She wanted to surprise Clem by having the job done when he came in from his afternoon appointment.

When he was not there by five, she stayed on doing odd chores until five forty-five. Clem, a punctilious, organized person, had never before in her experience failed to turn up either for business or pleasure without calling to explain. It was in fact the quality she most admired in him. On the other hand, Mercelia reasoned sensibly, putting the finished work on Clem's desk and preparing to leave for the day, presumably there was a first time for everything.

She stopped off in the ladies' room after locking the office, and a girl she recognized vaguely as an employee of some other twenty-second floor firm said, "Did you hear that a man died in the elevator this afternoon?"

A dream-like neutralization of sensation settled over Mercelia as she answered, "Why, yes, of course. That must have been my boss Mr. Winninger."

The girl looked at her oddly, but Mercelia had nothing more to say. And all she could think was: Ah, how right I was. There is a first time for everything.

Miss Corlew, editor and assistant manager of *Automation Age*, was a tall, pale young woman with no-color hair worn in a severe neat chignon, as prescribed by her employer. Her clothing, expensive, fitted her feminine angularities with utmost precision. Though she was not really attractive, Clem had claimed to find beauty in her awesome efficiency, her sense of niceness. For she was one of those women who put the same faith in their own ability to maintain order at high speed that others put in money, or serious drinking, or God.

In the next few days no one thought to notify Mercelia formally of Clem's death, and since there were no last rites by written request of the deceased, his assistant found it easy to revert to her state of mind on the fatal afternoon just before she'd heard the news.

At first she came to work every day, arriving exactly on time, answered the few routine phone calls—there was no call at all from Sylvia Winninger, who apparently gave as little thought to her husband's business now as she had in his lifetime—and began to coast through the office hours bolstered by the hazy, uneasy, but still hope-

ful feeling that Clem had gone out of the building to meet an appointment and was due back any minute.

It was the first of the month. The current issue was long since off press and in the hands of the mailing service. The data-processing people had, as agreed, picked up the subscription file, so Mercelia had no further obligations in the circulation department. In an earlier period of her job as factotum on a trade magazine, this would have been the week to send bills to the agencies and checks to the printer, the engraver, the rental company. But some months before, Clem had put the entire bookkeeping operation in the hands of the bank, which itself had become fully mechanized. Nor was there any need to sell advertising as in the old days; that was now arranged entirely by long-term contract, the agencies automatically allocating money to all small organs serving the readership in which their clients' interests lay, the contracts automatically being renewed so long as circulation remained stable.

At first it had bothered her, having less and less to do when she was so adept at doing everything, but she had begun to adjust to the change after she was assured it was part of Clem's long-range plan, the perfection of which she admittedly found beguiling.

"If we can once get the magazine functioning smoothly, it will begin running itself," Clem had promised.

"You mean figuratively."

"I mean actually. Why not? I'd still keep business hours, and we could use all that time for whatever we wanted to do. Free, absolutely free."

"How about the trade stories on new products and things, the convention reports, the puff stuff on potentates in the industry?"

"Since most of it comes ready-canned from the agencies and trade organizations, perhaps we could arrange to have it go from them direct to the printer. We'll arrange with the answering service to have them open the mail too. That'll take care of any stray problems that might pop up. Let their trouble-shooters handle our troubles. That's what they're in business for."

To Mercelia, who even after a decade didn't always know when to take Clem absolutely seriously, this ultimate refinement of the plot had seemed not unfeasible. Born in Nebraska, she had always viewed New York as something of a fantasy anyway. So neither did it appear an impossibility now, when she began to imagine herself going on and on into the future, continuing the publishing business in Clem's name, working alone on the top floor of a midtown office building with no one ever coming around to challenge her authority. It had something to do with inertia, she supposed. The magazine was like any other machine which, once turned on, is easier to leave running than

to risk whatever disasters its sudden stoppage might bring about.

It was this sense of risk, in fact, which kept Mercelia from giving herself a raise—Clem had made her an officer in the company; it would have been merely a matter of sending a note to the bank—when she first realized that in her changed situation she would need more money. For without Clem to pay her rent, she would either have to make some other arrangement or give up the apartment on Gramercy Park.

So on her days off, which were becoming more frequent as there was less to do in the office, she began apartment hunting.

Not wanting to go uptown into who knew what alien territory (like all New Yorkers she had become a xenophobe about neighborhoods), she finally found a place on Second Avenue just south of St. Mark's Place. It was nothing to get excited over, its only real charm being the fact that she could afford it. Because it was so small, she had to get rid of many of the things she and Clem had collected together over the years: occasional chairs, lamps and end tables, a small piano. When she signed the lease, she gave the name of Clem Winninger of Winninger Publications as a reference.

For a while, still using her extra time off, Mercelia turned her remarkable capacity for creating order into transforming her new home. When she had first moved in, paint flakes were snowing from the living room ceiling, a fetor of sewage rose through the bathroom ventilator, and the kitchen wall conveyed some carved-in-plaster information about the surprising dimensions of a private feature of one Raphaelo Lugo.

After a storm of cleaning, scraping, painting, and visitations from handymen, the apartment took on another shape entirely.

Only then did it occur to Mercelia to wonder if, with nothing much left either at the office or at home to claim her attention, there might be some emotional reaction to Clem's death which she had so far been too occupied to accommodate.

But, no, the weeks continued to pass, and she felt nothing, not even that remorse for real and imagined slights and omissions perpetrated in life which form the cornerstone of most grief. Nor was she bothered by accusatory memories, for in different rooms and with many of the old furnishings gone, it would not be possible to look into a corner and think: There's where he sat when he said such-and-such. Or: We made love on that sofa by the window the night we came home from our week in San Juan.

Additionally, she had recalled something Clem himself said once. "When a person is no longer needed, he ceases to exist."

At the time she had thought it an odd fancy, both platitudinous and

somehow pretentious. Remembering it now, however, seemed to give a rounded-off quality to Clem's life, making his death seem not nearly so precipitate as it had before. This notion afforded her a great deal of satisfaction, strongly appealing, as it did, to Mercelia's love for the correct, the tidy, the complete.

Conversely, it was precisely this sense that suffered most on fair days now, when Mercelia, to fill in all her free time and with spring coming on, began taking long walks. She looked into store windows, not really seeing what they contained; she studied faces in parks, but without real interest in them.

What she did see—could not avoid seeing—was the terrible cycle of rending and restoring, a merry-go-round that never stopped. Streets ripped up, buildings ripped down. All without warning, seemingly without forethought. A neighborhood she had walked through one week would have whole blocks gouged away the next. New buildings went up constantly; yet they always seemed in process, never finished, or if finished, still raw-looking, like a wound which does not heal. The fact was that she could never set foot in the same street twice, for it was never quite the same street, with always something either missing or partly added.

No doubt it had all been going on at the same rate throughout the more than ten years of her time in the city. Yet she had been not nearly so aware of its offensiveness as she was now. Between Clem's attentions and her job, there had been no time. Was it for such contemplation as this that Clem's plan had freed her? She decided finally to give up the walks, at least in daylight hours when the scars new and old appeared at their most unsettling.

The excavating and constant construction were then forced to her attention only when she rode the subway through the glistening white-tiled deadness of ghost stations long abandoned or picked her way around the litter of upheaval in those stations which, for no apparent reason, were being extended or improved.

Because of her alliance with Clem, Mercelia had cut herself off from people who in other circumstances might have become her friends. Not that Clem had ever asked that she remain aloof. He had in fact asked nothing (and promised nothing). It had just seemed easier that way, for evidently the same reasons that it had seemed easier to him never to introduce her to any of his own friends.

With more time to spend at home, however, she began to take a mild, watchful interest in her new neighbors. The building she had chosen was a warren of obscure corridors smelling of bug spray, incense, turpentine, and overripe bananas. Buzzer system and elevator

had long ago broken down; so the front door stood perennially ajar, and the four flights of stairs creaked day and night with the variegated tread of seemingly hundreds of residents of, and visitors to, the surrounding apartments.

But no one visited Mercelia, nor did anyone even seem aware of her presence in the building. She frequently found herself stepping aside in the narrow halls for a heavily bearded boy carrying a stretchered canvas or bag of groceries, realizing after a time that she wasn't always meeting the same boy, that there must be at least a dozen of them, indistinguishable in the faulty light cast by pale-burning bare bulbs.

There were invisible babies to be heard mewling in the gray nights, and there were girls, their granny skirts or stained slacks and sweaters either drab or outlandish, but even so no more individually demarked than the boys.

While she admitted to herself that she might like to know some of these people, it seemed unlikely she ever would. Inadequate to say that she was from another planet; more like it to admit that she was from another dimension, especially on those mornings when, in her Frank Bros. suit and impeccable white gloves, red silk umbrella hooked over a wrist, she walked briskly toward the uptown subway.

From time to time an obvious thought recurred. Why not reject the hungry, slipshod atmosphere of St. Mark's Place, a neighborhood into which she now saw that she had probably moved too hastily? Perhaps even quit her job as well, try to change the direction of her life before it was too late? (What did she mean, she asked herself, by too late? But she could think of no answer but the obvious one: she was getting no younger.)

She had in the past managed to make a favorable impression on strangers. Perhaps this time she could at last find the kind of work she had been seeking when she had come fresh to New York and had her search cut short by Clem. (His had been the top name on a list given her by a placement agency specializing in publishing jobs.)

Yet no sooner would her determination rise—once she was actually in a cab on the way to an appointment—than her practical caution would emerge to extinguish the foolish flame. The best she could hope for now, after all, would be a job similar to the one she already had, but without the advantages of voluntary hours and no supervision. For she was no longer a new player in a game which demanded fresh players every season.

Her baccalaureate degree was already a dozen years old and therefore greatly depreciated. Any job she really wanted would inevitably have just been reserved for a June graduate of Smith.

Finally Mercelia stopped thinking about it altogether.

On several evenings at about the same time, she tried to telephone Susanna, who had been her roommate very briefly, just before she met Clem, and later had lived in the same building on Gramercy Park. But there was no answer, which must mean that Susanna was spending her nights out or had gone to Europe or perhaps had even moved from the city. In a way the lack of answer was a relief, since she wasn't entirely sure why she was calling, or what she might have said had Susanna answered.

During the move from one building to another, Mercelia had, in the interest of keeping her life as neat and orderly as usual, discarded her meager file of personal correspondence. With good reason. Most of the names were people she no longer had current addresses for: school friends, chance acquaintances, an old favorite high school French teacher now dead, people she had met on trips.

There was only one unanswered letter of any timeliness, and this she had saved. It was from the one remaining member of her family, an aunt in Omaha. Usually the aunt and niece exchanged notes only at Christmas, and the aunt had faithfully written as usual in midwinter, the letter reaching town and being forwarded at the height of the renovation in the new apartment.

Now Mercelia took out her portable typewriter and dashed off a note which began, "Dear Aunt Louise, Do forgive my uncharacteristic tardiness in answering, but I have had several upheavals in my quiet existence and know you'll understand when I tell you that . . ." She found the letter in her own mailbox a few days later with a scrawled message under her aunt's name: "Addressee Deceased."

Mercelia began to sleep more, going to bed early and rising late, staying in bed until noon reading the books she brought home in shopping bags from the Ottendorfer Branch Library, or listening to music on the fm tuner.

Later, after dressing with slow care, she would go out and buy a *Post* and a few groceries, and then it would be midafternoon, with the day almost killed. And this was somehow a triumph, a ruse against fate.

On the days she still went to work, however, she made it a point to be on time as always. At her desk, which was curiously bare now, she sat one day staring in reflective satisfaction across Clem's equally empty desk top and off to the sectional view of Madison Square Garden afforded by the window. How beautifully tidy and restful the place had become. No telephone ever rang. No flutter of correspondence or galley proofs interrupted the emptiness. No one would suspect, now, that it *was* an editorial office with a magazine coming out every month. And she had accomplished it herself,

she thought with pride, simply by channeling everything elsewhere. Or rather she had finished what Clem had begun.

As if in contradiction, there was a sudden rustling at the mail slot and a thin envelope wafted through, settling to the floor at her feet as softly as a paper glider.

She opened it and found her paycheck, which was odd; long since, she had made arrangements with the answering and opening service—or was it the bank itself?—to forward the check to her apartment. Odder still was the printed pink slip that fell into her lap from the envelope. "Because the organization as presently constituted does not require the same number of personnel services as in the past, we regretfully inform you of your termination of employment two weeks from above date."

Mercelia was, in series, puzzled, wryly amused, then extremely annoyed. She dialed the bank and got a recording which directed her to leave a message at the sound of the bleep. Mercelia complained righteously about the pink slip and added, "It's perfectly insane. I can't be fired. I'm the only one here. I wouldn't fire myself would I?"

The recorded voice came on the line again to say that they would try to discover the answer to her question and call her back as soon as possible. After half an hour, when Mercelia was on the point of re-calling the bank to add a complaint about the recorded voice to her original reason for outrage, the bank did return her call, this time in the person of an executive officer in charge of Winninger Publications. The man explained placatingly that something had been amiss with the machines that did the processing, which accounted also for the reason her check had not come to her home as usual. When the foul-up had caused the checks to miss the usual mail delivery, the bank had dispatched them by messenger. He hoped Miss Corlew had not been discommoded.

The exchange with the bank reminded her of the niggling matter she had been trying to rectify for some months with the mailing service. After all her impeccable work on the subscription file the week Clem died, her checking copy of the magazine, also forwarded to her home address, had been coming through with her own name misspelled.

Certainly it was not a major problem, yet it threatened to be an insoluble one. The first time it happened she had contacted the mailing service immediately, pointed out that her name was not "Horlew," and requested they check their address plates and insert a corrected one for herself. She was promised the matter would be attended to at once.

Each time to follow, in fact, she had been made the same promise.

Yet next month there would be an error again. Never the same one. She became variously "Herlew," "Harlow," "Curlew," "Carlow," so that she never attained any fixed identity, even a mistaken one.

Infuriating. In former times, when she herself had been taking care of the list, any error—not to speak of error upon error—would have been unthinkable. Now she picked up the telephone again with every intention of getting to the bottom of the trouble once and for all, but the line at the mailers was busy.

As Mercelia hung up, she heard the Howard Johnson man in the hall trundling his aluminum cart bearing bagels and coffee, and she realized that an hour and a half must have passed since she entered the building. That was longer than she usually spent at her desk these days, and the longer she stayed, the more upset she was making herself. Better perhaps to give it up for today. Stealthily, so as not to disturb the thick layers of quietude all about her, she put the check into her purse, gathered up her jacket and umbrella, and let the doorlock slide soundlessly home behind her.

Her thirty-first birthday consisted of twenty-four hours during which Mercelia exchanged no word with another human being. Not that this was so unusual; she often went through a day at home without having occasion to speak to anyone. But now she was going again to the office after the lapse of still another week.

She discovered, not entirely to her surprise, that in her absence this time the office building, which was quite old and lagging considerably behind the times, had finally been converted to automatic elevators. She was thus relieved of the necessity of saying good morning to Frank, who, she presumed, must now be retired, ably succeeded by the small vertical keyboard of silent buttons.

While she was at her desk, as usual the telephone did not ring, and this time no messenger from the bank disturbed her peace. And finally, waiting to go back down, she was joined at the twenty-second floor elevator stop by two men whom she did not recognize.

"We just got back from Lynn, kids carsick all the way," reported one.

"Why Lynn?" said the other.

"I had this meeting. But really we went up to see Dorothea's family. She's from Swampscott. I met her in fifty-seven when I spent the summer there with a cousin of mine. That was the fall I was going to the Sorbonne. Used the money to furnish an apartment instead."

"How *is* Dot?"

"Not so good. Expecting again. Our fourth. And every one a Caesarean. Dot says her belly already looks like a parkway interchange. Ah—I happen to have some pictures of the other kids right here in my

wallet if you'd like to have a look—"

As an editor, Mercelia was impressed by this distillate of so much family history. She pictured Dorothea, wan after a seizure of morning sickness, following her brood as they bounded up the walk at her parents' house in Swampscott. She imagined Dorothea's husband driving alone back to his father-in-law's home after an exhausting sales meeting in Lynn, feeling the wind off the bay pressing against the closed car, wondering secretly, half guiltily, how things would have turned out if he had gone ahead to Paris back in that fatal year.

Dorothea's life seemed in some way more real to Mercelia than her own. She was still bemused by the incident when she got off the subway and neared her own building, seeing, as she did, a family emerging from the front door whom she was sure she recognized from her own floor: young man with long hair, a girl in bell-bottoms, child in a back pack. She half smiled, prepared to speak if they did.

They not only failed to speak but brushed past as if Mercelia didn't exist. As she went wearily up the stairs, the reason occurred to her. But of course, she thought, I'm over thirty now; for them I *don't* exist.

Several weeks went by before Mercelia again visited the office. She did start out one morning with every intention of going as far as Thirty-fourth Street, but after a fall down the steps of the Union Square subway station, she went home again. The fall was a highly enlightening experience. Somehow, at the top of the flight, before she actually tripped, she had known she would lose her balance. Yet it was certainly an accident; she caught her heel in the corrugation of a step and slid, rolled, and bumped her way to the bottom. At that hour the station was teeming, and as she lay crumpled on the floor, she had an opportunity to confirm what has already been said often enough of humankind, that a person can have an accident and even die in the midst of his fellows and none will lift a helpful hand.

As they eddied around her fallen body, she watched them pass, more in contemplation than anger, as if it were some kind of satisfaction to have proved a rule: a pair of nuns with coiffured hair and short skirts, another pair with wimples and long skirts, a rippling stream of cub scouts headed up by a skinny middle-aged man in badly wrinkled khaki shorts, a dour young black man in a red tarboosh, two aging Hasidim with payess and caftans, dozens of suited or sports-jacketed young males on the way to uptown offices, dozens of young girls with good legs on the way to uptown offices.

When she had finally pulled herself to her feet and recovered her purse, the station platform was momentarily empty, the crowd she

had just seen having been absorbed by the departing train.

Afterward, she did not go to a doctor since nothing seemed to hurt. For several days she felt stiffened as if she had done some unaccustomed violent exercise, or mysteriously aged overnight. Then the feeling was replaced by the indifference of normal health.

Once more she had trouble with the bank. This time her pay check for the month did not arrive at all. When it was a full week late, she thought of calling again but decided against it. She had been frugal with what money she already had and was not in need. If she waited long enough, the check would no doubt be along. Calling could lead only to the silly business of having to hear of still another mistake perpetrated by the accounting machine.

Sometimes she still thought of Clem, but her memory of him now was of something receding, like a scene slipping beyond the window of a train taking on speed. He seemed to be someone of whom she had read, or heard, long ago. Could she really have squandered an entire decade of her own inexorably numbered years on a person whom she now barely recalled? Ten winters of weekends in the islands, ten summers of semiclandestine rendezvous in the mountains, long conversations in the lush noon twilight of midtown restaurants, endearments exchanged over proofs in the office. And what had it all come to?

She almost never went out now except very late for a breath of air, for midsummer was upon the city. Silently, like a conspirator, she passed through neighborhoods she hadn't dreamed existed, returning as from a visit to a foreign capital, her memory festooned with exotic sights. Couples bedded on terraces and fire escapes, passion suspended over space. Perspiring bodies worshiping in a store-front church called The Little Congregation of Christ in God Incorporated. Children, at long past any reasonable bedtime hour, performing heaven knew what atrocities as they danced screaming between the opposite poles formed by the long shadows of buildings and the glare spilling from late-closing groceries and candy stores.

Once she passed a garage-like depot, the cavernous interior alive with crowds of Good Humor men checking in with pushcarts, returning packages of unsold ice-cream bars to refrigerators along the wall. The faintly sounding cart bells and the echoing talk and laughter of the men, all dressed alike, gave the scene a quality of fatuous, clumsy enchantment, as if she, an unbeliever, had suddenly stumbled upon Santa's workshop.

And then one day, which began in a blast of incandescence like all the other days, she rose early, dressed in her suit and gloves, and went to the office.

She had fumbled at the door for several minutes before she realized the lock had been changed. Her key no longer fit.

In gathering anger, she descended to the lobby searching for the superintendent, then realized she had no idea where to find him; she had never had occasion to confront him before. (Would he turn out to be a machine?) As she looked for his floor and room on the building directory, the number of her own office leaped out at her, 2222. And beside it, where the name of the occupant was supposed to be, were the words: MALDIVIAN PHILATELIC ASSN.

Frantically she rushed for the row of telephone booths and dialed the first familiar number that came to her, that of the out-of-town printer. The bell rang a long time. Finally a woman's voice, not that of the receptionist with whom Mercelia had done business in the old days, inquired if she would like to be helped.

"I certainly would," Mercelia said, recovering some of her poise. "Let me speak to the foreman in charge of printing *Automation Age.*" After another wait, the voice explained that it was that particular man's day off.

"Then someone else. Anyone. Anyone who can tell me where the copy comes from on that job; whom do you deal with? In short, where are the editorial offices?"

"Oh, I can tell you that myself, ma'am. They're in New York City."

"I *know.* But where? What address? They've moved recently, I believe. But where?"

The woman at the printer's suggested Mercelia call back the next day, when the person mentioned who was now absent would be on hand, then broke the connection.

Hopelessly now, knowing nothing would come of it, she put in another coin and dialed the number of the magazine itself. At least that had not changed. The answering service, another recorded voice, invited her to leave a message and call-back number. Mercelia hung up again.

In the street she tried to get a cab but it was impossible. Taxi after taxi darted past, many of them empty, but no driver would catch her eye.

It was midmorning now, and the subway car she finally stepped into was almost empty. She tried to calm herself as she sped back downtown, knowing that like everything else, the latest mix-up could be explained as someone's ridiculous mistake. What a travesty that she, who in all her career never made a serious error, should have fallen victim to so many made by others.

When she arrived home at last and heard voices in her own apartment, Mercelia turned crafty. Her knock produced a smothered expletive from inside then a shuffling. Finally a voice said, "Open it."

In the short time she had been

away, someone had totally, incredibly, vandalized the place. The walls had been painted an unrelieved purple. Her draperies had been removed from the windows and the panes obscured with pieces of wax paper torn from the roll and scotch-taped in place. Her furniture was nowhere in sight. But most surprising was the number of people inside. Distributed about the place on deteriorating chaise lounge pads and mattresses were as many as ten reclining youths and girls who gave every impression of belonging there.

Still depending on slyness, she told them, "I'm looking for Mercelia Corlew."

No one answered.

"Oh, please," she said now, hoping she wasn't going to be hysterical. "She lives here. Surely someone knows her." And she gave a sketchy description of herself.

When this was met with more silence, Mercelia decided she should get a policeman. She spun around, not bothering to close the door, and ran down the four flights to the street.

A distraught fifteen minutes later she was still in search of help. But not one person looked her way, nor did the traffic deviate one jot from its relentless southbound course, though she stood in the middle of Second Avenue at St. Mark's Place and screamed and screamed and screamed.

A mish mash of films this time—a little something for everybody, in fact. First off, that rarity, an animated film; a technique not often used these days because of the immense costs involved. This is a shame, because the potential of animation was never realized, particularly in handling serious themes away from the Disney mode. The current one to hand is not a change, but has some good things going for it nevertheless. **The Phantom Tollbooth** is a screen adaptation of Norman Juster's juvenile book, which gained a certain vogue some years ago with adult readers. The reason for this escaped me, since it's a rather heavy handed neo-Alice with obvious allegorical overtones. A bored little boy, Milo, goes into a never never land through a tollbooth that appears in his room to find two kings, Azaz of Dictionopolis, and the Mathemagician of Digitopolis, at odds as to whether words or numbers are the most important, and . . . well, you get the general idea. Luckily the film has enough visual style to carry this, and I must concede that the general level of literacy is a good deal higher than most of its ilk. Visually the film is delightful, particularly Dictionopolis, which is constructed of words—printed words—in the style of Steinberg's recent drawings for *The New Yorker*. Milo's road is a surrealist ribbon traversing and sometimes floating above a stylized landscape, and the finale in the Castle in the Air is a Merritesque burst of rainbow light. But why must every animated film have cute little songs? Again I would love to see one that breaks from the Disney pattern. But within that, *The Phantom Tollbooth* is above average, though not up to the wit and sophistication of *Yellow Submarine*, and if animation as an art interests you, seek it out . . . you may have to go to a kiddy's matinee; MGM doesn't seem quite sure of how they're going to release it.

Zachariah (Cinerama), like *Brewster McCloud* of some months back, is a parable for youth, but falls short of the earlier film in imaginative nuttiness. Its main claim to fantasy is the use of anachronism, a device that can be very funny when used by a T. H. White in *The Once and Future King* (remember Merlin and his set of the 14th edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica?). In this case, it's a group of contemporary types set in the mythical Old West—rock group Country Joe and the Fish as an inept gang of bandits, youthful rebels aiming at being gunfighters,

etc.—and much of the dialogue and plot is childishly corny (the bandits pursue a stagecoach carrying a trunk marked "Gold de Acapulco"). What saved it for me was the visual fantasy of the art direction and photography, which raises the whole question of visual fantasy and why so many fans of the literary genre are totally insensitive to it. I'll choose a more propitious time to go into that, but in the case of *Zachariah*, locations were chosen in arid, beautiful locales, small Western towns were built emphasizing the flat, wooden, cut-out fronts, a border bordello has the look of a country carnival, and particularly, a gunfighter's hideout high on a mountain, its walls decorated with hundreds of geometrically arranged animal skulls. This is the essence of the Western myth, and it's wonderfully done. There are also strange and subtle ingredients that tend to be submerged by some of the more obvious bits; a sinister prophetic fiddler in a ghost town, an old man of the mountain who guides the hero, and a homoerotic ending again evoking Western mythology.

TV made one of its rare excursions into sf with an episode of *The Name of the Game* called *L. A. 2017*, and actually scored. The author was Philip Wylie, which helps. One of the triumvirate of heroes of the series, on his way home from an ecology conference, is suddenly transported into 2017. The air is unbreathable, most of the world's population dead from pollutants and starvation, and the remains (1 million in the U.S., 11,000 in Los Angeles) have retreated underground into technocratic corporate states. Our hero refuses to play ball with the system (he is considered valuable propaganda material), gets into contact with the Underground's underground, goes through all sorts of chases and adventures, and eventually wakes—it was but a dream brought on by exhaust backup in his car and too much ecology for lunch. It was the production that made it; the ravaged landscape tinted a hideous orange, the claustrophobic tunnels and apartments of underground LA, the tragedy of a dead gold fish ("there are only four aquariums left"), the incomprehensible directions constantly coming over the loud speakers. Particularly effective was a holograph communicator, where the three dimensional image of the caller was always slightly out of focus (leading any number of viewers to wonder what had gone wrong with their sets, I bet). This is definitely one to watch for on summer reruns.

Finally, Warners' **When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth** is a pretty inept copy of *One Million Years B.C.*, rock people, shell people, and all. Added gimmicks are the moon splitting from the sun (I'm only reporting what I saw . . . rather fuzzily, I admit) and a mother dinosaur who adopts the heroine who had

taken shelter in one of her broken egg shells. *However*, another essay could be written on How to Enjoy Bad Movies without Feeling Guilty, and I got a couple of good giggles out of this one.

Department of Correction . . . Some months back, I noted that the Finnish film *Time of Roses* was a Gold Medal Winner at the '69 Trieste Science Fiction Film Festival, a fact supplied by the American distributor of the film. I have been informed by A Knowledgable Person (one of the judges) that the film did not win, but that the leading actress did. According to my thinking, and presumably the distributors, this still makes the film a prize winner, but apologies for any confusion on this vital issue.

A Final Note . . . of sorrow at the death of Virgil Finlay in late January. He was one of the all time great creators of visual fantasy.

Final, final, stop press note . . . I saw **The Andromeda Strain** (Universal) after completing the above. It is, of course, our old friend, the Contagious Awful from Outer Space, *but* . . . given a terrific production reminiscent in its clinical beauty of the central portion of *2001*. Lacking all the stereotyped inanities (not even a beautiful female biologist), how different our old friend looks! More on this next month unless something more immediate comes up.

Coming next month

"They Fly At Ciron" a novelet by **Samuel R. Delany** and **James Sallis.** It's the story of the bloody invasion of a people so peaceful that they quite literally do not know the meaning of the word "surrender," done in the tradition of heroic fantasy, with all the rousing action you might expect. Also, short stories by **Larry Niven, Richard Wilson; Isaac Asimov** on "The Eureka Phenomenon," and much more. The June issue is on sale April 29.

This fine fantasy, which transfers the legend of tree nymphs to a contemporary setting, comes from a 25-year-old who writes that "I spent most of my life in Wyoming, partly on a cattle ranch, partly in a small town. B. A. and M. A. degrees in English from Univ. of Wyoming. Took up freelancing over a year ago and have sold two dozen pieces, mostly sf."

HER LOVER'S NAME WAS DEATH

by Edward Bryant

COLD, THE TWIN-BLADED AXE BIT deep. Inaudible to the murderer, the scream keened across the grove. Again the blade rose, then fell heavily, and this time a limb split from Niobe's trunk. Her cry trailed off to a choked whimper, then rose again to a wail as the man with the axe severed another branch.

"Artemis, help me!" The appeal echoed into a cloudless sky and was lost. The axe continued to rise and strike. Niobe, once the most favored of Artemis's many daughters, died. Her slender trunk hacked through, the fir-clad dryad toppled to the ground. The axe-wielder, apparently unaware of his crime, gathered an armload of his victim's remains and set them on fire inside a ring of stones. The barbarity of this act horrified the remaining tree nymphs. At first the dryads could only observe the happenings in stunned silence—fear followed.

The query spread quickly, rustling from tree to tree: "Sisters, what will we do?"

Orithya: "We'll die. Our mother foretold it. The mortals will bring their fire and steel—"

Pomona: "They'll come here, to our final refuge. Desecrate—"

Caela: "They will kill us. All of us."

"No!" The dissenter was Dryope, a supple blue spruce. "We shan't die! There has to be a way." The whisper of her needles hissed as though swept by the north winds driving down the night. "The mortals—" Her voice shook with anger and she paused. "We've already fled their wanton rapine too many times. We have crossed too many oceans and centuries to find this

refuge. We're old now—we can't flee farther. For once we must stand and fight. It has to be here."

Through the rest of the grove rustled doubt and despair.

"But how can we?" whispered Chrys. "So long ago we were created for love. We can't fight men." Her twigged branches drooped slightly in token futility.

"We can," said Dryope. "We must."

"No, no." "We can't." "There is no way." The incredulous whispers rose and gained strength.

"You dried-up old bitches!" The new voice stung with scorn.

The grove murmured in astonishment. It was Lys. Young Lys, who could not remember the ancient sacred groves of Hellas. Barely mature Lys, fresh and vigorous in her dark green cedar robe; alone of the long-lived sisterhood, still virgin.

"Thank you, Lys," said Dryope. "I'm glad I've one sister still unwilling to bend her neck to the block."

"They disgust me," said Lys.

"They are fearful," said Dryope, as though that were explanation enough. She directed her voice to the rest of the grove: "Now listen, all of you. Life isn't as sweet for us as it once was. But I'd like to live a little longer. I think we all would. It looks as though I've volunteered to coordinate action against the mortal. But I'll need everyone's help."

"What do you want us to do?" said Caela.

"Nothing, yet. Perhaps we still have a period of grace. Let me think about a plan."

"Dryope, that was a wonderful speech," said Orithya, and then began to weep.

The dryads watched the mortal as he squatted beside the funeral pyre of Niobe. Watching the flames, he ate voraciously from a metal plate. A few yards beyond him was a pile of mysterious artifacts masked by olive-green wrappings. Beyond that was the squarish, metallic vehicle in which the man had arrived. It was stained yellow and upon the side was painted the inscription: K-M TIMBER SURVEY CORP.

"What an ugly brute," said Chrys. "He doesn't look at all like our old lovers."

"No?" Young Lys stared at the man. "He doesn't seem that unpleasing. He has two arms, both legs, the regular features you've all described before."

Chrys settled into indignant silence.

Dryope laughed wryly. "We're old and crabbed, Lys. All but you. It's been a long time since any of us has had a lover."

"No," said Chrys huffily. "Our lovers of old were darker than this creature, and shorter. Their hair was black. They were not like this one at all."

"No matter," mused Dryope. "Men are the same."

"From what Chrys describes, I like this man better." Lys laughed.

"This man would make a fine lover."

"What do *you* know?" grumbled Chrys.

I know, thought Lys, that I have never had a lover. I know that I want one. She watched the man finish his supper and get to his feet, muscles moving visibly even under his bright-colored, bulky clothing. Lys felt a tightness inside. Words appeared in her mind, a phrase she had never dared consider in the concrete: *I want you.* She savored the words, first individually, then together.

"Listen, everyone!" Dryope caught the attention of the grove. "I've got a plan to destroy the mortal." The sisters waited expectantly.

"Wait," said Lys. "There must be another way."

"Yes, little girl," said Chrys maliciously. "We could seduce him." The rest of the grove tittered.

"Shut up, you old—"

"Lys!" Dryope interposed herself calmly. "A little respect, please. We'll hear you out."

The youngest dryad waited a few moments until the angry knot in her throat raveled sufficiently so that she could speak. "You all say destroy. You want to kill him. Has it occurred to you that harming this mortal will only hasten the day his compatriots arrive?"

"Maybe not," said Pomona. "If he dies here at this isolated place, perhaps no one will ever follow him."

"Hush," said Dryope. "Let Lys speak."

"All you talk in is 'maybes'," Lys continued. "You don't know. You all fear dying so much, the first solution you reach for is more death."

"So what's your alternative?" said Chrys.

For the first time Lys sounded uncertain. "We must find some way to talk to the man. We've got to communicate—"

"Communicate!" The derision in Chrys's voice scorched. "Let's remember that we're all trapped in our green garments for the rest of the season. It will be months before we can assume our human shapes. Don't talk to us of communication with a mortal—"

"I'm afraid she's right," Dryope said to Lys.

"There has to be a way," said Lys. *There has to be,* repeated in her mind.

"There is!" someone called. "Kill the man."

So Dryope told them all her plan. Then she asked for debate and her sisters offered congratulations. All but Lys, who refused to say anything. Dryope called for a ballot on the plan. There were no dissenting votes, and only one abstention.

Later, as night pulled a hangman's hood over the forest, Lys ached with an inner cinder of anger as the dryads prepared to destroy the intruder. She watched as the man strung a hammock between two of her sisters. He pulled a blan-

ket over himself, then turned on his side and stared into Niobe's smoking embers for a while before falling asleep.

The dryads waited tensely.

"Now," said Dryope.

Sullenly, Lys turned her attention away. Then, suddenly fearful, she couldn't keep from watching.

The Song began low-pitched so as not to awaken the mortal. Subtly it spiraled upward beyond human audibility in a complex webwork of harmonies that were less than sound, but more than thought. The man's body twitched restlessly, but he did not wake.

High on the flank of the dark mountain which still blocked away the moon, two wolves sensed the resonance of the Song and howled. Tongues lolling and eyes narrowed with fear, they loped further up the mountainside.

"Now, sisters!" shrilled Dryope. "The Song's climax which will shatter the mortal's brain!"

But it didn't. The man slept on; he snored.

The dryads wilted with fatigue and failure. Dryope spoke with difficulty. "It was a good singing, sisters. But mortal sensibilities must have changed over the centuries. The man is more resistant to Artemis's powers than I expected. Rest now; tomorrow we'll think of something else."

All in the grove sank into exhausted slumber except Lys. The moon had risen and the dryad watched the man in the hammock. She watched as he moved slightly, listened as he mumbled words she couldn't understand. Again and again she thought, *I want you.*

Inside the ring of cold stones, Niobe's embers died blackly and became ash.

The early morning sun squandered riches across the forest. Lys was still awake and watching as gold bars dappled the ground beneath the trees. Some of the brightness spilled into the eyes of the sleeping man. He awoke, blinking, and turned over, away from the fire in the east. Then he looked at something of silver and crystal attached to his wrist.

The man rolled out of the hammock and leaned for a moment against Pomona, the dryad whose trunk supported one end. The sleeping nymph woke at the man's touch and recoiled, first in fear, then anger. The man didn't notice.

He turned toward the sunrise and stretched. "Beautiful," he said, the word riding far on the river of wind that poured continuously down off the mountaintops. The grove was hushed; no birds sang this morning.

"He's certainly muscular," said Dryope. "I'll grant him that."

Lys critically examined the naked man, the first she had seen. "It looks so soft and limp," she said. "I don't see how it can do what you said."

Dryope laughed. "In passion it

expands and hardens like winter ice."

Bemused by the concept, Lys thought of ice, and ice that became fire. She envisioned the man lying beside her in the summer grass, and she could see his face very clearly. But what he did, what he said to her, was vague. She had had over a century to develop her fantasies. Now, she thought, the long dreams are fading in one minute of reality.

They watched the man as he picked up branches from the tree he had chopped down the afternoon before. All the dryads were awake and their attention focused on the man as he kindled a fire. He walked up the mountain and brought back a bucket of spring water. He set a pan of ham and bread to frying on the fire. Then he went to his yellow vehicle and picked up a rectangular object from beside the seat.

"This is Charlie Lathrop," the man said to the object. "Anyone awake down there?"

There was a pause, then a crackle of sound. "Brock, here. How's it going, Charlie?"

"I'm on schedule," said Charlie. "Grid five twenty-one. Pretty good timber. I'll have a complete report tomorrow."

"Okay," said the voice. "I'll log it. Anything else?"

Charlie hesitated. "Brock, you go downtown last night?"

"Yeah," said Brock.

"You see Maggie?"

After a pause, Brock said, "Yeah."

"She with anybody?"

"Yeah."

"You're a talkative bastard," said Charlie.

"Yeah. Listen, I'm sorry—"

"Forget it," said Charlie.

"Listen," said Brock. "Forget her, huh? She walked out. All you'll do is hurt yourself—"

"Forget it," repeated Charlie. "Listen, I'm sorry I'm wasting company time. I'll report tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah," said Brock. "Talk to you then."

Charlie put the object back by the seat and returned to the fire.

"Was he talking to his muse?" said Orithya.

"Hardly," said Dryope. "I'm sure it's some kind of device for communicating with other men."

"We know his name now," said Lys. Charlie, she thought. I want you. She repeated it, a litany now complete.

Charlie ate rapidly. He wiped the last grease out of the frying pan with a slice of bread and got to his feet. Bread in one hand, overflowing cup of steaming coffee in the other, Charlie walked across the grove directly toward Lys.

"He's coming to me!" The youngest dryad's gasp was audible to each of her sisters.

Charlie halted in front of the cedar that masked the dryad. He gin-

gerly sipped from the side of the tin coffee cup.

"Hello, Charlie," said Lys.

"Hi, squirrel," said Charlie, looking past the nymph. He tossed a corner of his bread to the ground where a small brown animal cautiously approached it. The squirrel's bright eyes looked up at Charlie, then down at the bread.

"Charlie, look at me," pleaded Lys.

"Go on, squirrel," said Charlie. "Go ahead and eat it. It's free. No strings attached."

The squirrel dashed forward and sniffed at the bread, then nibbled a taste. It energetically devoured the entire piece and looked up at Charlie as though asking for more.

"Please look at me. Please hear me," begged Lys. The other dryads muttered disapprovingly.

"Lys, stop." It was Dryope. "The man is our enemy; you can't talk with him. He will bring us only unhappiness and pain and death."

"I can't!" wailed Lys. "I just can't. I love him."

Charlie, oblivious to the interchange around him, looked at the squirrel, and the squirrel looked back at Charlie. "Here," he said. "You might as well have the rest." He threw the remainder of the bread to the ground. The squirrel bounced forward, seized the slice in its jaws, and began to back up dragging the bread.

"That's it, squirrel," said Charlie. "Take it home. Store it for the winter or something." He watched the animal struggle with the food. "Hey, squirrel. You got a family to take that bread to? You got a lady squirrel waiting back in some hollow tree?" The animal's ears pricked up at the sound of the voice. Then it decided there was no danger and focused its attention back on the bread.

"Better hurry, squirrel. Better get that bread back to your lady friend. Else somebody's liable to come by while you're gone and promise her some cake." The squirrel dragged the bread through the grass, and Charlie stared after it. The animal and its burden had long disappeared in the brush when Charlie frowned and turned back to the fire.

"I could help him," said Lys. "I could replace that Maggie-whoever-she-is."

"I know," said Dryope quietly. "You would love him and comfort him when he's sad and give him strength. And you would save us all."

"I could," said Lys, and began to cry.

"You live out of your time," said Dryope. "Oh, Lys, I wish I could hug you and let you weep beside me."

Even Chrys had nothing acid to say.

After a while, Dryope spoke to the grove and her voice was somber. "The man has gone up the

mountain on some errand. He'll return. Tonight we will destroy him. I know how. There will be no failure." She paused. "There must be a sacrifice. I've consulted with our sisters Caela and Pomona and they've agreed. Their lives will be forfeit, but so will the life of the mortal."

I'm not going to cry, thought Lys. It is useless to weep because I love a man and cannot tell him so. There must be an alternative to tears. If I could only reach him!

She tried when Charlie returned from his trip up the mountain. While he fixed a simple supper, she whispered to him. She pleaded, begged, even screamed, but he did not hear her. The other dryads tried to ignore her. Dryope suffered silently.

Finally Chrys said with unaccustomed gentleness, "Little sister, please stop. It would be better if you wept."

"I'll warn him," said Lys. "I'll reach him somehow."

The moon's skull hung silver-white over the forest as Dryope issued her orders. "Caela, Pomona, listen to me. Exert the kind of effort you do in the autumn when you release your dead and dying needles. Concentrate, and use your strength to loosen the roots of your tree garments. Let your roots relax, allow them to part from each other and from the soil. Do you understand?"

"Of course," said Pomona.

"Good by, sisters." This time, Caela.

The grove bid them farewell clumsily, for they were unaccustomed to death. They watched in grisly fascination as the two dryads committed suicide. Pomona's tree supported the north end of Charlie's hammock; Caela's, the south. The minutes tortured every sister as Pomona and Caela gradually loosened their hold in the earth. In his hammock, the sleeper tossed uneasily.

Wake up, love, Lys thought. She screamed inside her mind: *wakeupwakeupwakeup! Can I do nothing?*

Tightly anchored roots relaxed their grip. Pomona and Caela felt the first vibrations of death distantly in the forest, and they shivered with the fear of losing the goodness which was life. They hesitated.

"All the sisters wish to live," said Dryope. "And all will die if you don't kill this man."

Pomona and Caela baited death closer. The two tall pines swayed against the star-frosted sky despite there—strangely—being no winds from the mountain. As their roots pulled free from the soil, the sisters began to lean toward each other in delicate balance, drawn together by the weight of the man.

Artemis, help me save this man! The cry was silent, so lost and so desperate. But perhaps Artemis heard. In her desperation, Lys sud-

denly *knew*. There was no thought of dying in her mind; only the knowledge of doing as she loosened her own roots. She was younger, her tree smaller. Her death would take less time.

She pulled free of the forest soil that had lent her life. I want— There were only fragments left in her mind. I feel— I love—

Charlie opened his eyes at the sound of Lys's death. He looked up. "What—" The stars were blotted by the two pines tipping toward him. Desperately he threw himself to the side and rolled. Then he was buried in a labyrinth of splintering branches. Something struck the back of his head, and he fell into darkness.

The man awoke and knew he was still alive. He could see the moon through a brittle lacework of twigs. With some difficulty he got to his feet and inspected the crushing cage of wood around his hammock.

Around him the dryads silently watched. "There are no lovers left for any of us," said Dryope, "except death."

Charlie touched the wound on the back of his head, and his fingers came away wet. He looked at the three fallen trees.

"Talk about luck," he said to himself.

Here is a story about the investigation of a murder before it is committed; the pre-killer and the victim are known, and the timing becomes all important. Ergo, a "whendunit," an ingenious blend of sf and detection from Mr. Biggle, whose most recent novel is THE WORLD MENDERS, *Doubleday.*

The Frayed String on the Stretched Forefinger of Time

by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

INSPECTOR-COMMANDER J. HARwell Graham sat at the center of his complex police web like a massive, bespectacled spider, alertly poised for frenzied action at the faintest electronic quiver—but Graham's actions were mental, and he *thought* his prey into entangling cocoons fashioned of their own intended misdeeds. The inspector-commander was a brain that plugged itself into the world during duty hours, and then, because he found defiance of the law in all men, withdrew defeated.

He finished his afternoon dictation with an intimidating glance at the clock. The dictowriter spat the final memorandum onto his desk. Graham scrutinized it, signed his name, fed it back to the machine for copying and distribution.

"Ten minutes to tour's end," he informed the box. "Let's see what Pre-Murder has picked up."

"Ready to roll, sir," his secretary answered immediately.

Graham thumbed a control, settled himself comfortably against yielding · pneumatic contours, and watched the day's accumulation of Pre-Murder information flash across the wall screen.

Newly appointed Assistant Inspector-Commander Roger Proller gaped at it. It was his second day on the job, and already he was stripped of illusions. The inspector-commander suspected that Higher Authority appointed assistants in the hope that one would prove capable of snatching his job. He treated them brutally and used up four a year, and for the wrong reason. Higher Authority considered the inspector-commander irreplaceable.

The assistants were told frankly: Guard him, save his energy whenever possible, and preserve him from failure at all cost because failure could destroy him.

Words and numbers flicked past so rapidly that Proller could only snatch at disconnected phrases: . . . WILL LUNCH IN LONDON TOMORROW WITH . . . CASE PM 2936 NO REPORT . . . HER ORDER FOR SEVENTEEN . . . CASE 3162 . . . FAILED TO ATTEND . . . ACTIVITY ROUTINE . . . NO REPORT . . . CASE 3299 . . . WILL NOT RETURN UNTIL . . . The inspector-commander, who not only read this minutiae but also memorized it and filed it away in his labyrinthine brain, would, as soon as the run was completed, mercilessly examine Proller's memory and find it wanting.

A red star flashed into view and the blurred procession of words slowed to a halt. CLINGMAN, WALTER, CASE PM 3497. PLACED ORDER FOR TWO DOZEN MANNEQUINS. DOCTOR STILTER AGAIN RECOMMENDS CLOSING FILE.

Proller consulted his notebook. Pre-Murder suspects were always odd, but this one seemed spectacularly so. He had invested a small fortune in plastic, life-sized images of a business rival, and he arranged them in various postures about his estate and each evening strolled around throwing knives at them. The doctors thought this a healthy purge of murderous impulses. The inspector-commander had a hunch that Clingman wasn't purging himself of anything; he was just having target practice.

"Clingman, Walter, Case PM 3497," Graham's voice rasped. "Medical recommendation declined. Continue surveillance."

Words and numbers flickered again, picked up speed. . . . 3545 ACTION ROUTINE . . . DISCHARGED THREE EMPLOYEES . . . CASE 3601 . . . VISITED LAW AGENT . . . RETURNED YESTERDAY'S PURCHASES . . .

Another red star. STAMITZ, CHRISTOPHER. CASE PM 3742. FELIX MANELLOW CALLED AT SUSPECT'S OFFICE AT 14:36 THIS DATE. LEFT AT 15:10. IMMEDIATELY APPREHENDED FOR QUESTIONING, CLAIMED HIS VISIT CONCERNED A PRIVATE BUSINESS MATTER, REFUSED FURTHER COMMENT.

Graham snarled at the box. "Sergeant Ryan! Immediately!"

Ryan appeared *almost* immediately. He had dived into the nulgrav shaft, and he floated into view head first. Graham kept his eyes on the screen while Ryan righted himself and came to a salute.

"Sit down, Ryan. So Stamitz has acquired a hand weapon."

"It's possible, sir. They should have searched Manellow *before* he saw Stamitz, but neither of the men on duty recognized him until he was leaving."

Graham gestured impatiently. "Manellow hasn't delivered a weapon personally for years. He

learned not to the hard way. How much money did he have?"

"One one hundred, three fifteens, and a seven. Two and a half in small change. He couldn't have collected more than a token down payment."

"Or a token last payment." Graham turned to the box. "I want a financial survey on Christopher Stamitz, PM 3742. Specifically, I want to know if he's been diverting money to an illegal account. He'll have been planning this for at least five years." He leaned back and fixed his gaze on Ryan. "Fifteen-ten. Stamitz has the weapon by now."

"The men are being very alert, sir."

"Correction. He has access to the weapon by now. Neither Manellow nor Stamitz are fools. The weapon will have been left at the place agreed upon. That constitutes delivery." Graham meditated for a moment, brow furrowed, plump fingers tapping his desk. "I'm a bit disappointed in Stamitz," he announced. "He's a scientific genius and the most brilliant Pre-Murder suspect we've ever had. I never suspected that he'd resort to a clumsy hand weapon." He pivoted toward Ryan. "Has Bryling been notified?"

"Yes, sir. He was offered full-time protection. He refused, of course. Made a joke of it. Not afraid of Stamitz, hand weapon or no. The usual."

"But he has his protection any way? Good. Excuse me while I finish the Pre-Murder run."

When the screen finally darkened Graham tilted to a half recline, eyes closed, and a moment later he pushed himself to his feet. "I'll have to see Stamitz. It may be premature, but I have no choice."

Proller bounded forward anxiously. "Couldn't I do it, sir?"

The inspector-commander thought this unworthy of comment. He said, "Come along. Both of you."

It was a street of old, old buildings of real brick, and odd, esoteric businesses: a furrier who brashly asserted that the trimmings on the garments he sold came "direct from the animal to you"; a natural food firm that claimed to have real coffee and sugar in stock, which puzzled Proller less than the implication that someone might want them; an old-fashioned medical doctor whose faded M.D. sign creaked in the slight breeze beside that of the inevitable apothecary who sold the concoctions the doctor foisted onto his unsuspecting patients; two antique shops, one catering to a clientele that had nostalgic yearnings for articles fashioned of plastic. None of the buildings had roof parking, and they had to walk from the nearest public arena. Graham set a waddling pace that belied his weight and age, and Proller, perspiring, watched him with concern.

Stamitz's business was as shabby and as esoteric as the others, but it looked to the future rather than the past. SUS-AN, the sign read, and it was Stamitz's fumbling attempt to compete with John Bryling's plush studio that displayed its multifaceted facade in the next commercial ward, LIFE SUSPENSION UNLIMITED. SUS-AN's display window contained only a few dusty pamphlets, but Graham paused to study them. Proller wondered if his chief was uncertain of how to proceed. An interview was the most touchy part of a Pre-Murder investigation. Handled properly and with correct timing, nine out of ten Pre-Murderers were jolted back to normality. Handled ineptly, months of solid police work could be ruined.

A buzzer sounded when Graham opened the door and cut off when Ryan closed it behind them. Stamitz sat at a desk in one corner of the room—a small, untidy, sad-looking person with too much hair on his head and not enough on his face. Few would accord him a second glance, many would overlook him entirely, but Graham had called him brilliant. Proller studied him curiously, wondering if this withered remembrance of a man was indeed capable of secreting his own web and watching it with the invincible patience of genius.

He scrambled to his feet and offered his hands, which Graham touched perfunctorily. "Christopher Stamitz," Stamitz said softly.

Graham quickly pronounced introductions and placed his credentials on the desk. Stamitz blinked at them and then regarded Graham with eyebrows arched innocently. "Really? Has one of your suspects popped himself into suspension?"

Graham scowled at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Please sit down," Stamitz said apologetically and dropped into his own chair. Graham and Proller occupied the two worn visitor's chairs; Sergeant Ryan was left standing. The only other item of furniture was a low table carelessly stacked with the same pamphlets they'd seen in the window.

"I've wondered about it," Stamitz went on. "Man commits a crime, puts himself into suspension until the statute of limitations expires. The way the present law is drawn, there's nothing that could be done. A legal suspension can't be cut short except for medical reasons, and in the single instance where a medical problem did develop, the suspendee was already dead. I take every reasonable precaution, but I have neither the time nor the money to properly investigate my customers. On the other hand, since suspension requires the presence of two medical technicians, an application certified by a registered law agent, and approval by a district justice, most criminals might think it a risky venture."

"The justice normally orders a

police investigation before approving an application," Graham said. "That's not my problem, though. I head the Pre-Detection Squad."

"Ah! You work on crimes before they're committed. Yes, I suppose it would be possible for someone to make all the arrangements for a suspension and then commit a crime on his way to the lab. He might be under before anyone knew there'd been a crime."

"Interesting idea," Graham murmured. "I'll look into it. Specifically, I'm investigating the pre-murder of John Bryling."

"Bryling? Bryling has been—"

"Not 'has been.' Is going to be. Naturally I intend to stop it."

"Naturally," Stamitz echoed, "but I don't understand—"

"Of course you do." Graham passed around his pack of smoke capsules, popped one into his own mouth, bit the seal, and puffed deeply. Stamitz blew a slender thread of smoke at the ceiling and turned an innocent gaze on Graham.

"I'm sympathetic," Graham said. "Morally, Bryling is a monster, but he's a law-abiding monster. He stole your company and your scientific processes, maneuvered you into bankruptcy, got you fined and imprisoned for doing private research on the processes you developed yourself, ruined your family in ways too obnoxious to mention—and he did all of that without breaking a single law. Now you have to lease the processes he stole from you in order to operate this scruffy enterprise, and lately he's been indulging in price cutting in an attempt to ruin you again. I haven't been able to figure out why. Have you?"

Stamitz smiled wistfully. "I think he's afraid of me—afraid I'll devise some scientific sleight-of-hand that will let me do unto him something of what he's done unto me." He smiled again. "I believe in a Higher Justice, Inspector-Commander. That's the only reason I've survived."

Graham said dryly, "In spite of its many conspicuous failures, the only justice I have faith in is that defined by law. I have to protect Bryling, and by extension I have to prevent you from ruining what remains of your life. Are you willing to submit to hypnotic analysis?"

Stamitz blurted bewilderedly, "But why?"

"To expose the details of your plot against John Bryling."

Stamitz chuckled. "If I have a plot against Bryling, it's buried so deeply that I know nothing about it. I'd be as interested as you in finding out what it is. Of course I'll submit to your hypnotic analysis."

"When?"

Stamitz shrugged. "At your convenience. No, let's say at our mutual convenience. I can't afford to neglect the little business that I have."

"Tomorrow afternoon?"

Stamitz opened an appointment book and held it up to show a blank page. "Any time tomorrow."

"How about this evening?"

Stamitz turned a page. "I have two suspensions scheduled. My biggest day in months. But any time tomorrow—"

Graham scribbled on a card and handed it to him. "My office in Police Central. I'll make the necessary arrangements."

As they left the building and turned toward the arena, Proller observed, "He seems cooperative enough."

"He'll be cooperative enough *tomorrow*," Graham rasped savagely. "That was what I had to find out. He'll be cooperative tomorrow because he intends to murder Bryling tonight."

Higher Authority, more commonly known as Commissioner Eustace Jevan, glared at Proller and said testily, "If the inspector-commander says Stamitz is plotting murder, then you can take it that Stamitz is plotting murder."

"It seems so incredible," Proller protested. "Who can say why Manellow went to see Stamitz? Maybe he was getting an estimate on a suspension. The inspector-commander didn't even bother to ask Stamitz about that."

"In all of his long tenure, this jurisdiction has never had a premeditated murder," Higher Authority said coldly. "He intends to make certain that this case is no exception, and you make certain that he succeeds."

The private lake was ringed with tinted lights, their reflections rippling halos in the choppy water. The underground mansion's terrace was a square blotch of light on the dark expanse of forest. A police patrol guided Proller to a landing near the command van, which was parked in a small clearing.

The unit captain greeted Proller sourly. "Do *you* know what's going on?"

"Inspector-Commander Graham is preventing a murder."

"*He's* preventing a murder! Then what are *we* doing out in this wilderness?"

"Bryling is going to be murdered by a suspended animation expert named Stamitz," Proller said. "At this moment Stamitz is at his place of business in the central city, along with two medical technicians, a law agent, and a deputized clerk of the district justice. Stamitz is preparing two clients for suspension. Bryling, as you know, is at home entertaining friends. Neither of them will be going anywhere soon, but Stamitz has a hand weapon and could be plotting a proxy crime. Your job is to make certain that *no one* comes near Bryling tonight."

"Including his guests, I suppose," the captain said bitterly. "If I had four times as many men, I could do a sort of job—maybe. Headquarters

made the assignment on the standard meters-per-man formula, and headquarters has never heard of trees. I'm using every man I have, they'll have to spend the night out there without relief, and when I spaced them along Bryling's fence, they were so far apart that anyone with an infra detector could have walked right between them. The undergrowth is so thick that a man can see about as far as he can reach. I just ordered the men up to the clearing around the house, which means that they're trespassing, and Bryling will have all of us in court tomorrow. It's impossible to walk through that mess quietly, and every third step one of my men trips and falls with a crash, and Bryling and his guests jump up and spill their drinks. I'm surprised he hasn't called the police."

"The object is to have him alive tomorrow—in or out of court. What is it?"

"The inspector-commander wants to talk with you."

Graham's voice snapped at Proller. "Come on in. I've just canceled the watch on Bryling's estate."

"But why?"

"Aren't you fools in communication with the men on watch? Bryling took off in his private craft five minutes ago. He's headed for the central city. Stamitz placed a call to him, and Bryling left immediately, which is what we've been expecting. He's going to see Stamitz."

"Why did you expect that?"

"Because Stamitz was so smugly confident. He knew we could easily keep him away from Bryling, but he also knew there'd be no possible way for us to keep Bryling away from him if Bryling wanted to meet him. Obviously he was certain he had a way to make Bryling want to meet him."

"What did he say to him?

"We'll never know. Bryling's viewer is equipped with a classified scrambler, and Stamitz is evidently using one he built himself. The lab won't even try to decode it."

"Then there's nothing more to be done here?"

"No," Graham said. "Come on in. If Bryling can leave Stamitz's office alive, he won't need protection at home."

The old buildings seemed curiously shapeless at night. Only Stamitz's establishment was lighted; the closest reflector was a mile away, and the half moon, when the clouds did not cover it, provided almost as much light.

Proller crouched in the doorway of the furrier, watching Stamitz's windows and wishing Graham would hurry. The inspector-commander had gone looking for a justice from whom he might be able to coax a preventive-arrest order. He had nothing to offer in evidence except his own insights, and the prospect was not promising.

Bryling had arrived long before Proller, and he was followed shortly

by a man whom the watch detail identified as his law agent. There was now a conference in progress in Stamitz's office: Bryling, Bryling's law agent, the two medical technicians Stamitz had hired for his other cases, Stamitz's law agent, and the justice clerk were engaged in a long and apparently complicated discussion. Stamitz seemed to be playing no part in it, and when it finally concluded, with much flourishing and endorsing of papers, none of the papers were passed to him.

Stamitz waited, politely patient, until Bryling's law agent had ceremoniously folded the papers and tucked them into his folio. Then he produced his own stack of papers and the two law agents began to scrutinize them.

Two dim figures waddled along the shadowed street: Inspector-Commander Graham and a portly, petulant justice. "Justice Klinger," Graham said, performing introductions. "He wants to see the evidence himself before he issues an order."

Proller described what he had witnessed. The justice snorted. "Sounds as if Bryling is taking a suspension. Naturally there'd be a lot of papers—when a multimillionaire undergoes suspension, there are multitudinous contingencies to be provided for."

"With a competitor?" Graham demanded. "With his worst enemy?"

Even in the shadows the justice's massive shrug was visible. "Stamitz is the acknowledged authority, and a man of his professional stature is not likely to let personal considerations affect his work."

"In ordinary relationships, perhaps not," Graham agreed, "but when you ruin a man, common sense should tell you not to entrust your life to him."

"The law is not conceived as an instrument to force a man to act with common sense," the justice said dryly. "Let's go in."

They walked in on an array of blank faces that quickly sorted into contrasting expressions: irritation for the specialists, fury for Bryling, and mild amusement for Stamitz. Proller muttered to Graham, "He expected this."

Graham nodded.

Stamitz said mildly, "Our appointment is for tomorrow afternoon, sir."

"That was based on the assumption that Bryling would be alive tomorrow afternoon," Graham growled.

Bryling flushed and said angrily, "I told your men earlier today—when I want the police meddling in my affairs, I'll ask for them."

Justice Klinger waved for silence. "The inspector-commander has made a grave charge," he announced. "He wants a preventive-arrest order issued for Christopher Stamitz, attested reason being the protection of the life of John Bryl-

ing. Are you here of your own free choice, Mr. Bryling?"

"Certainly."

"Do you consider that your life is in danger?"

"Certainly not!"

"The assumption is that you're here to undergo suspension. For what term?"

"The maximum. Five hundred years."

"I now ask the witnesses: Is it your opinion that John Bryling is at this place and pursuing this action of his own free will?"

They nodded gravely and answered in chorus. "Yes."

The justice fixed the clerk in a stern gaze. "Are you prepared to certify that the subject's action is both legal and voluntary?"

"I have already done so."

The justice turned to Graham. "One of the witnesses is his own law agent. You may examine."

"When did you make this voluntary decision?" Graham asked Bryling.

"I've been considering it for years. Everyone connected with our profession does."

"You didn't answer my question. When did you finally decide?"

"This evening."

"This evening, in the middle of a party at which you were the host, you suddenly decided to take a suspension, and you contacted your business rival—"

"He contacted me. He said he was processing two cases; he had the necessary witnesses on hand and could do three as easily as two, and he reminded me that I'd told him long ago that someday—"

"What inducement did he offer?"

Bryling did not answer.

"What threat did he make?"

"None," Bryling said. "It was my own decision."

"There is no legal basis for interference," Justice Klinger announced.

"I have one request," Graham said. "I'd like to place the department's own medical expert as an observer."

"At whose expense?" Stamitz demanded.

"The department's."

"Then I have no objection. If he can get here within an hour, he can observe or take part or whatever he wishes."

"Is this satisfactory to you?" the justice asked Bryling.

"I don't see that it makes any difference," Bryling said.

"Very well. With the department's medical technician in attendance, the suspension can proceed. I so rule."

He nodded perfunctorily at Graham and waddled away.

"And that," Graham muttered, "is the best that I can do. Tomorrow, when Stamitz comes in for his hypnotic analysis, we'll find out what really happened."

The law agent was firm and politely contemptuous. "In return for

his cooperation with the incredible whimsies of your department, inspector-commander, my client was subjected to an outrageous and illegal harassment. I have here a justice order forbidding further interference with his lawful private and professional activities. Christopher Stamitz will *not* appear for hypnotic analysis, and you are commanded to abandon all surveillance of his person and property."

"I have a Pre-Murder authorization approved by three justices," Graham said stiffly.

"Since the alleged victim has taken a suspension, he hardly needs further protection from your department."

"Present your order to my secretary, and he will make the necessary arrangements," Graham said. The law agent departed, and Graham slumped forward in his chair and muttered, "Beaten!"

"Three medical technicians certified that the suspension proceeded normally," Proller observed.

Graham shook his head. "Bryling is dead."

"The postsuspension examinations have indicated that the subject took the suspension very well."

"No. He's dead."

Higher Authority glared at Proller. "Your only order," Commissioner Jevan remarked coldly, "was to make certain that he did not fail. Did I need to explain that you were also to make certain that he did not *think* he had failed?"

"No, sir," Proller said, "but at this moment all anyone *knows* is that something very peculiar happened. The inspector-commander's instinct calls it murder. The tests and procedures of the medical technicians show that Bryling took a normal suspension and is in perfect health. All I want is a requisition for lab work so I can find out the truth."

"If your tests are negative, nothing will be proved or disproved, and the inspector-commander will continue to think that he's failed. If your tests are positive, he'll *know* that he's failed. Kindly explain to me what these tests could possibly contribute to the carrying out of your assignment."

"But sir—"

"The inspector-commander has prevented hundreds of murders. He'll prevent more if only his career isn't terminated by this one ridiculous case. Your assignment, Proller, is to save the inspector-commander's career."

"Yes, sir."

Stamitz scowled. "You're Graham's assistant. I obtained a justice order—"

Proller waved his hand indifferently. "I'm not harassing you. I just stopped by to offer my sympathy."

"For what?"

Proller said soothingly, "After all Bryling had done to you, it must

have been a terrible feeling to have to preside over a suspension that would take him completely beyond the reach of justice. He'll be laughing at you when he revives."

"Your sympathy is wasted," Stamitz said. "I have no feeling at all about Bryling except that I'm grateful for the business he gave me. A maximum-term suspension is a highly profitable operation."

"I can't help wondering what he'll think when he opens his eyes five hundred years from now. 'I escaped! I have my millions compounded and Stamitz has been dust for hundreds of years and can't touch me!' What do you think he'll think?"

"I have no feeling about Bryling," Stamitz said again. "Like I told you before, I believe in a Higher Justice. I'm satisfied to leave Bryling to that."

"Does Higher Justice have a reach five hundred years long?" Proller asked.

Stamitz did not answer.

Proller burst into Graham's office and exclaimed, "Stamitz has confessed!"

"I doubt that," Graham said flatly. "Why would he?"

"To save his neck. He just took a suspension, and if that doesn't amount to a confession—"

"Stamitz? Took a suspension?"

"Yes, sir. Obviously he was afraid we'd find out what he did; so he popped himself completely out of reach of the statute of limitations."

"How far out of reach?"

"Four hundred ninety-nine years and eight months."

"You blithering idiot!" Graham leaped to his feet and paced the floor excitedly. "That's not a confession, that's an admission of failure! It proves the suspension was perfectly in order. Stamitz will be out just long enough ahead of Bryling to plan a murder. Since he invented the suspension process, the gullible scientists of the future will no doubt let him study its results, and he'll have great fun working with the team reviving Bryling!"

"Then—you were wrong about Bryling being murdered?"

"I was, and it's the kind of mistake I don't mind making," Graham said jubilantly. "I want you to place official information with Stamitz's medical records. The technicians who revive him should notify the authorities that Stamitz underwent suspension in order to commit murder. And you can close our file."

"Yes, sir. For what official reason?"

Graham smiled. "The principals are no longer in this jurisdiction."

The lab technician held only a grade-two rank, and he was torn between a desire to pull off a complicated analysis all by himself and a fear that he'd be skinned for unauthorized use and/or waste of government property. He said, "I ran all the tests again. It's got to be

mercury-base compound M 4939."

"If it's an industrial compound, where would Stamitz get ahold of it?"

"A research chemist of his stature could manufacture it in his sleep, and he had all the necessary chemicals."

Proller nodded thoughtfully. "He had the chemicals, and because that compound was once in common use, there'd be a quantity of medical literature concerning its toxic effects."

"For anything as complicated as a suspension, he'd need specific information."

"In the past two years he's used large numbers of experimental animals," Proller said. "He was licensed for work on a new suspension process."

"So how did he manage to fool three medical technicians and not you?"

"The technicians ran their own tests on each batch of fix as it was prepared. I swiped a few of Stamitz's test tubes, and when he wasn't looking, I took samples of each batch *after* he'd pumped it into Bryling. The poison was in the final batch. Obviously he managed to add it after the technicians completed their tests."

"So we have a murder to report."

"There hasn't been a murder," Proller said. "The contrary—Bryling is in perfect health."

"His life is in danger, then. Someone ought to do something."

Proller shook his head. "As long as he's in suspension, he's perfectly safe. When he's revived, whenever it is, he'll have only a few minutes to live after his bodily processes start again, and most of it will be excruciating."

"Then someone should get a justice order and have him pumped out."

"He's in deep freeze. You can't pump out any of him unless you thaw out all of him, and that means reviving him. It wouldn't help anyway—the poison has already reached his vital organs, and he went under just before the effects could be detected. Didn't I tell you Stamitz experimented with animals for two years? When he's revived, he'll live just long enough to die—painfully."

"How the devil did Stamitz get Bryling into his shop in the first place?"

Proller smiled wryly. "He had help—from us! He paid Manellow to make a social call, and Inspector-Commander Graham took the bait against his better judgment, which he had to do, and gave Bryling massive protection against the hand weapon Manellow didn't sell and Stamitz wouldn't have used anyway. All the protection accomplished was to scare Bryling half to death. Then Stamitz placed a scrambled call to Bryling and said, 'I have a quantity of hand weapons and men who can use them. They're watching you right now.'

And Bryling, who had just been listening to four companies of police clomp around in the forest near his terrace, probably came close to expiring on the spot. Stamitz gave him a choice of coming in at once for a maximum-term suspension or dying immediately."

"Sure," the technician said. "Why didn't he just run for cover?"

"The assassins in the forest would have shot him before he got to the house. He did just what Stamitz told him to—stayed in sight and made no false moves while notifying his law agent and ordering out his craft. Then he flew straight to Stamitz's office because Stamitz told him he'd be followed, and of course he was—by a whole police fleet. Once he got there, he knew weapons would be pointing at him from concealment; so even when the police came, he made no attempt to escape. He's been deathly afraid of Stamitz for years—it shows in everything he did. He'd be certain Stamitz would use a hand weapon if he had one, and the police told him Stamitz had one. He thought the only alternative to instant death was a suspension, and once he'd accepted that, of course he took the suspension voluntarily. He wanted it as quickly as possible."

"Why'd Stamitz take a suspension?"

"To have the supreme pleasure of watching Bryling die. Why else? For a time I thought I'd talked him into it, but that was before you finished your analysis. You've done a splendid piece of work, and I'm sorry I have to tear it up; but if Inspector-Commander Graham sees it, he'll know he's had his first Pre-Murder failure."

"We ought to do *something*," the technician said stubbornly.

Proller shook his head. "No. Nothing at all, and I'm ignoring Graham's order to place information with Stamitz's medical records. Look, we don't know—yet—what the natural mortality may be on long suspensions. Neither man may survive to be revived."

"That's so," the technician agreed.

"And either man may die shortly after revival due to the after effects of the five-hundred-year suspension."

"Maybe so, but a man was murdered, or is being murdered, or is going to be murdered. Shouldn't Commissioner Jevan decide something like this?"

"He already has. He gave me my orders, and I'm following them. I'm also thinking that the inspector-commander himself called Bryling a monster. He stole Stamitz's company and his scientific processes, maneuvered him into bankruptcy, got him fined and imprisoned for doing private research on the processes he developed himself, and ruined his family in ways too obnoxious to mention—all without breaking a law. He even made

Stamitz lease back his own stolen processes in order to operate a marginal business, and then Bryling tried to ruin him a second time by price cutting. All that, and the law is still on Bryling's side. What do *you* think?"

"I get you. A murder five hundred years in the future is nothing to lose sleep over, especially when the victim is a skunk like Bryling. In this case you and I will be the Higher Authority and tear up the records."

"Not 'Higher Authority,'" Proller said with a smile. "Higher Justice."

YEARBOOK

by Barry N. Malzberg

To Carol Asch Reals

PROLOGUE

I AM AT A STUDENT PROTEST RALLY which is being held on the quadrangle of the large Eastern university which I attend. Although I do not believe, strictly speaking, in student protest or mass assemblies, there is a lot of ass out here; and if nothing else, I can look at it for long uninterrupted periods while the speakers scream through the megaphones. The problem is the Dean of Women, who, for imagined abuses, has curtailed the curfews in all the women's dormitories and sorority houses; no late minutes will be allowed and weeknight curfews are a strict seven p.m. This last of a long series of abuses by this obese and vicious dean have forced the student government to action, and now, as I take in aspects of the rally, the president of the student body himself is speaking. "No more of this!" he shrieks, the megaphones turning his voice into a high whine, the kind of whine with which I imagine he talks sorority girls into bed. "No more of this servitude, no more of this arrogance, we demand our rights! Late minutes must be reconstituted, the seven p.m. curfew must go. Nine in the evening! Nine in the evening! No more compromises! We demand nine in the evening and off-campus drinking privileges!"

The students roar and clap, incited by his passion, and after a fashion I do so as well, but I am diverted suddenly by the appearance of two breasts in a tight black sweater bearing a sorority pin which I recall. As I stand looking at them in pure and simple wonderment, everything seems to slide away from me, and it is several years later, maybe a decade or so, that is on my mind.

I

To a class reunion, the tenth, I believe, the girl whom I loved hopelessly but silently for years has come, is standing quietly in the corner. The room is very large and there are hundreds of people, but the girl senses my presence instantly, gestures to me with a hand, and I come toward her slowly, my own wife ignored, somewhere in the eddy. This discourtesy to my wife is understandable; I met and married her long after college and have long felt that she would not have made a really top sorority, the kind of sorority of which this girl was an officer. "Yes," she says nodding at me, "you too, you've come back."

"Of course I've come back," I say, "what else was there for me to do? I needed to make this reunion." I had wanted to come off as distant, brusque, but this is impossible. For ten years now I have been haunted by the recollection of her flesh, slightly hard to the touch, I am sure (I never touched her), but opening up into a kind of yielding greater than any I have known. "You see, I loved you," I say, abandoning all postures with a flourish, "you couldn't understand that of course. There was no intersection, no sense of connection at all. We dwelt on these two different levels. But I couldn't help the feeling that it might have been different somehow, and I never got over it. Of course, one makes adjustments."

"Ah, yes," she says and looks downward; her glance is reserved yet woeful. Things have changed a great deal, but it does not seem as if she has aged much. "I understand, but I barely knew you. I only talked to you because you seemed to need a friend. I couldn't have gone out with you in those days, what with the sorority thing. You've got to understand. It's all meaningless, they burn down the campus every week these days."

"I know," I say, "it's a shame, but have you any idea of the *pain*—?"

"I mean, I'm not really responsible for the role I played in your psychological life," she says judiciously and tips her glass at me, the glass winks, the light bends, the room seems to shift, and she makes a gesture toward the corner of the room where a heavy man is standing alone, looking with some confusion at the cigar he holds in his hand. "That's my second husband," she says. "The boy I was going with then I had to marry not to hurt his feelings, but it all broke up overseas and then I met this salesman. He isn't very smart but he really has pots of money and we live very happily. I have to go back to him now because he doesn't know anybody here at all. He never went to any college." She pats me on the hand once, the first time we have ever touched, a gentle, springing clasp which I imagine on my genitals, and then she turns and leaves

me, shaking her ass. Over her shoulder I see her husband, who looks very much like me, but on the other hand, my wife looks very much like the girl. It is all quite unsettling, and so I decide to awaken, cheerful and willing to get on with the day.

II

Parked in a car near the cliff, looking out over the lights of the city, I am trying to reconstruct my senior year in college. My wife is patient but restless. I circle an arm around her shoulder, draw her against me, feel the soft, upper surfaces of her arm, imagine that her breast juts sharply into my side. "You see," I say, "I never had it, never had this kind of life in college. The thing to do was to come up here to the cliff and make out until curfew. This is what I missed, all of it," and I draw her against me, kiss her dry lips, run a hand through her hair, and try to envision a sorority pin. She shakes her head and withdraws. "For heaven's sake, I don't understand you," she says. "We have a perfectly nice home with a perfectly nice bed. Why do we have to come out here and be uncomfortable?"

"Because a bed isn't somehow the same," I want to say to her but only say, "Yes, you're right, it's no good at the cliffs any more," and hunch over the wheel to start the car, but I realize as I get the old motor going that I am caught in the sheets and listening to the even breath of my wife, who, I should point out, is carrying our second child or perhaps it is our first.

III

I am standing in the corridor of the journalism building with the Girl-Whom-I-Loved, etc.; the class has been canceled for some reason, and the students have left the building, all except the girl because she was supposed to meet her fiancé after class and might as well not make two trips, and me because she is there. But I have not come out and said this. I have, instead, contrived some insane errand, some necessity to see the dean after our conversation. She is leaning against the wall, holding her books in a posture of attention, a cigarette dangling from her lips, and I light this cigarette for her cautiously, feeling that she is staring at my dirty fingernails. "Oh, he's a fool," she says, talking about the absent professor. "I mean, I understand he cancels three classes a semester out of ceremony, just to keep his relationship to the class defined." She is a very bright girl, who later made Phi Beta Kappa and was a class marshal. "Of course I don't care, it's all a lot of nonsense," the cigarette winking against her palm as she removes it, flicks a couple of ashes to the floor, replaces it with a flourish. "It's all the same thing, you see, it doesn't matter a damn. I don't think there's

any future in anything anyway," and she laughs. It occurs to me that I may be making headway; after all, it is not very often that she laughs.

"I'd really like to go out with you," I say, seized by lunacy. "Could we go out this Saturday night? I know that you're engaged and so on and so forth, but maybe he wouldn't mind, and anyway we can keep it on any basis that you want. Any single basis."

"Oh," she says, flicking the cigarette under a heel and shrugging, turning to look down the corridor. "Oh, I'm really flattered, I mean it's very nice of you, and it doesn't matter that I'm engaged because infantile crushes can happen, but this is Sno-Ball Weekend. Winter weekend, you understand, all the fraternities are having parties, and where could you possibly take me? I mean it would be suicidal for me not to be at a party," and I can only nod, agreeing with this. The truth of it is profound, and I say, "Well, maybe another weekend soon," and she says, "You never know," and I say, "I love you," but here comes our fiancé wearing a tuxedo, coming to take her to the Sno-ball Weekend, which must be much nearer than I had thought because now she is wearing a strapless evening gown that looks very good on her, and I feel a seizure of fright more profound than any I have ever known, and I say, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," and she looks at me with eyes wide with passion, and the hall begins to waver, but before I can warn her my wife is saying, "It's late, it's late," and puts the coffee in my hand.

EPILOGUE

First the administration building goes down, then the ROTC headquarters, then the new chemical-industrial research complex. Gasoline is poured onto the quadrangle and the walkways are ignited. Speakers on a parapet call for the final assault. The Dean of Men is crucified on the lawn before the administration building and dies quarreling. The chancellor is hanged. Fraternity houses fall into the campus lake. In the midst of this, I dream that I am on the telephone with Iota Alpha Pi sorority trying to get through for a date.

POMPEY AND CIRCUMSTANCE

by Isaac Asimov

RATIONALISTS HAVE A HARD TIME OF IT, because the popular view is that they are committed to "explaining" everything.

This is not so. Rationalists maintain that the proper way of arriving at an explanation is through reason—but there is no guarantee that some particular phenomenon can be explained in that fashion at some given moment in history or from some given quantity of observation*.

Yet how often I (or any rationalist) am presented with something odd and am challenged, "How do you explain that?" The implication is that if I don't explain it instantly to the satisfaction of the individual posing the question, then the entire structure of science may be considered to be demolished.

But things happen to me, too. One day in April 1967, my car broke down and had to be towed to a garage. In seventeen years of driving various cars, that was the first time I ever had to endure the humiliation of being towed.

When do you suppose the second time was!—Two hours later, on the same day, for a completely different reason.

Seventeen years without a tow, and then two tows on the same day! And how do you explain *that*, Dr. Asimov? (Gremlins? A vengeful Deity? An extraterrestrial conspiracy?)

On the second occasion, I did indeed loudly advance all three theories to my unruffled garage-man. *His* theory (he was also a rationalist) was that

*It is the mystics, really, who are committed to explaining everything, for they need nothing but imagination and words—any words, chosen at random.

my car was old enough to be falling apart. So I bought a new car.

Let's look at it this way. To every single person on Earth, a large number of events, great, small, and insignificant, happen each day. Every one of those events has some probability of occurrence, though we can't always decide the exact probability in each case. On the average, though, we might imagine that one out of every thousand events has an only one-in-a-thousand chance of happening; one out of every million events has an only one-in-a-million chance of happening; and so on.

This means that every one of us is constantly experiencing some pretty low-probability events. That is the normal result of chance. If any of us went an appreciable length of time with nothing unusual happening, that would be *very* unusual.

And suppose we don't restrict ourselves to one person, but consider, instead, all the lives that ever lived. The number of events then increases by a factor of some sixty billion, and we can assume that sometime, to someone, something will happen that is sixty billion times as improbable as anything happening to some other particular man. Even such an event requires no explanation. It is part of our normal universe going about its business in a normal way.

Examples? We've all heard very odd coincidences that have happened to someone's second cousin; odd things that represent such an unusual concatenation of circumstance that surely we *must* admit the existence of telepathy or flying saucers or Satan or *something*.

Let me offer something, too. Not something that happened to my second cousin, but to a notable figure of the past whose life is quite well documented. Something very unusual happened to him, which in all my various and miscellaneous reading of history I have never seen specifically pointed out. I will, therefore, stress it to you as something more unusual and amazing than anything I have ever come across, and even so, it *still* doesn't shake my belief in the supremacy of the rational view of the Universe. Here goes—

The man in question was Gnaeus Pompeius, who is better known to English-speaking individuals as Pompey.

Pompey was born in 106 B.C., and the first 42 years of his life were characterized by uniform good fortune. Oh, I dare say he stubbed his toe now and then and got attacks of indigestion at inconvenient times and lost money on the gladiatorial contests—but in the major aspects of life, he remained always on the winning side.

Pompey was born at a time when Rome was torn by civil war and social turmoil. The Italian allies, who were not Roman citizens, rose in rebellion

against a Roman aristocracy who wouldn't extend the franchise. The lower classes, who were feeling the pinch of a tightening economy, now that Rome had completed the looting of most of the Mediterranean area, were struggling against the Senators, who had kept most of the loot.

When Pompey was in his teens, his father was trying to walk the tightrope. The elder Pompey had been a general who had served as consul in 89 B.C., and had defeated the Italian non-citizens and celebrated a triumph. But he was not an aristocrat by birth, and he tried to make a deal with the radicals. This might have gotten him in real trouble, for he had worked himself into a spot where neither side trusted him, but in 87 B.C., he died in the course of an epidemic that swept his army.

That left young Pompey as a fatherless nineteen-year-old who had inherited enemies on both sides of the civil war.

He had to choose and he had to choose carefully. The radicals were in control of Rome, but off in Asia Minor, fighting a war against Rome's enemies, was the reactionary general, Lucius Cornelius Sulla.

Pompey, uncertain as to which side would win, lay low and out of sight. When he heard that Sulla was returning, victorious, from Asia Minor, he made his decision. He chose Sulla as probable victor. At once, he scrabbled together an army from among those soldiers who had fought for his father, loudly proclaimed himself on Sulla's side, and took the field against the radicals.

There was his first stroke of fortune. He had backed the right man. Sulla arrived in Italy in 84 B.C. and began winning at once. By 82 B.C. he had wiped out the last opposition in Italy and at once made himself dictator. For three years he was absolute ruler of Rome. He reorganized the government and placed the Senatorial aristocrats firmly in control.

Pompey benefited, for Sulla was properly grateful to him. Sulla sent Pompey to Sicily, then to Africa, to wipe out the disorganized forces that still clung to the radical side there, and this was done without trouble.

The victories were cheap, and Pompey's troops were so pleased that they acclaimed Pompey as "the Great" so that he became Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus—the only Roman to bear this utterly un-Roman cognomen. Later accounts say that he received this name because of a striking physical resemblance between himself and Alexander the Great, but such a resemblance could have existed only in Pompey's own imagination.

Sulla ordered Pompey to disband his army after his African victories, but Pompey refused to do so, preferring to stay surrounded by his loyal men. Ordinarily, one did not lightly cross Sulla, who had no compunctions whatever about ordering a few dozen executions before breakfast. Pompey, however, proceeded to marry Sulla's daughter. Apparently, this won

Sulla over to the point of not only accepting the title of "the Great" for the young man, but also to the point of allowing him to celebrate a triumph in 79 B. C. even though he was below the minimum age at which triumphs were permitted.

Almost immediately thereafter, Sulla resigned the dictatorship, feeling his work was done, but Pompey's career never as much as stumbled. He now had a considerable reputation (based on his easy victories). What's more, he was greedy for further easy victories.

For instance, after Sulla's death, a Roman general, Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, turned against Sulla's policies. The reactionary Senate at once sent an army against him. The Senatorial army was led by Quintus Catullus, with Pompey as second in command. Until then, Pompey had supported Lepidus, but again he guessed the winning side in time. Catullus easily defeated Lepidus, and Pompey managed to get most of the credit.

There was trouble in Spain at this time, for it was the last stronghold of radicalism. In Spain, a radical general, Quintus Sertorius, maintained himself. Under him, Spain was virtually independent of Rome and was blessed with an enlightened government, for Sertorius was an efficient and liberal administrator. He treated the native Spaniards well, set up a Senate into which they were admitted, and established schools where their young men were trained in Roman style.

Naturally, the Spaniards, who for some centuries had had a reputation as fierce and resolute warriors, fought heart and soul on the side of Sertorius. When Sulla sent Roman armies into Spain, they were defeated.

So, in 77 B.C., Pompey, all in a glow over Catullus' easy victory over Lepidus, offered to go to Spain to take care of Sertorius. The Senate was willing, and off to Spain marched Pompey and his army. On his way through Gaul, he found the dispirited remnants of Lepidus' old army. Lepidus himself was dead by now, but what was left of his men were under Marcus Brutus (whose son would, one day, be a famous assassin).

There was no trouble in handling the broken army, and Pompey offered Brutus his life if he would surrender. Brutus surrendered and Pompey promptly had him executed. One more easy victory, topped by treachery, and Pompey's reputation increased.

On to Spain went Pompey. In Spain, a sturdy old Roman general, Metellus Pius, was unsuccessfully trying to cope with Sertorius. Vaingloriously, Pompey advanced on his own to take over the job—and Sertorius, who was the first good general Pompey had yet encountered, promptly gave the young man a first-class drubbing. Pompey's reputation might have withered then and there, but just in time, Metellus approached with reinforcements and Sertorius had to withdraw. At once, Pompey called it a

victory and, of course, got the credit for it. Again, his luck held.

For five years, Pompey remained in Spain, trying to handle Sertorius and for five years, he failed. And then he had a stroke of luck, the luck that so far never failed Pompey. Sertorius was assassinated. With Sertorius gone, the resistance movement in Spain collapsed. Pompey could at once win another of his easy victories and could then return to Rome in 71 B.C., claiming to have cleaned up the Spanish mess.

But couldn't Rome have seen it took him five years?

No, Rome couldn't, for all the time Pompey had been in Spain, Italy itself had been going through a terrible time, and there had been no chance of keeping an eye on Spain.

A band of gladiators, under Spartacus, had revolted. Many dispossessed flocked to Spartacus' side, and for two years, Spartacus (a skillful fighter) destroyed every Roman army sent out against him and struck terror into the heart of every aristocrat. At the height of his power he had 90,000 men under his command and controlled almost all of southern Italy.

In 72 B.C., Spartacus fought his way northward to the Alps, intending to leave Italy and gain permanent freedom in the barbarian regions to the north. His men, however, misled by their initial victories, preferred to remain in Italy in reach of more loot. Spartacus turned south again.

The Senators now placed an army under Marcus Licinius Crassus, Rome's richest and most crooked businessman. In two battles, Crassus managed to defeat the gladiatorial army, and in the second one, Spartacus was killed. Then, just as Crassus had finished the hard work, Pompey returned with his Spanish army and hastily swept up the demoralized remnants. He immediately represented himself, successfully, as the man who had cleaned up the gladiatorial mess after having taken care of Spain. The result was that Pompey was allowed to celebrate a triumph, but poor Crassus wasn't.

The Senate, though, was growing nervous. They were not sure they trusted Pompey. He had won too many victories and was becoming entirely too popular.

Nor did they like Crassus (no one did). For all his wealth, Crassus was not a member of the aristocratic families, and he grew angry at being snubbed by the socially-superior Senate. Crassus began to court favor with the people with well-placed philanthropies. He also began to court Pompey.

Pompey always responded to courting and, besides, had an unfailing nose for the winning side. He and Crassus ran for the consulate in 70 B.C. (two consuls were elected each year) and they won. Once consul, Crassus began to undo Sulla's reforms of a decade earlier in order to weaken the

hold of the Senatorial aristocracy on the government. Pompey, who had been heart and soul with Sulla when that had been the politic thing to do, turned about and went along with Crassus, though not always happily.

But Rome was still in trouble. The west had been entirely pacified, but there was mischief at sea. Roman conquests had broken down the older stable governments in the east without having as yet, established anything quite as stable in their place. The result was that piracy was rife throughout the eastern Mediterranean. It was a rare ship that could get through safely, and, in particular, the grain supply to Rome itself had become so precarious that the price of food sky-rocketed.

Roman attempts to clear out the pirates failed, partly because the generals sent to do the job were never given enough power. In 67 B.C., Pompey maneuvered to have himself appointed to the task—but under favorable conditions. The Senate, in a panic over the food-supply, leaped at the bait.

Pompey was given dictatorial powers over the entire Mediterranean coast to a distance of fifty miles inland for three years and was told to use that time and the entire Roman fleet to destroy the pirates. So great was Roman confidence in Pompey that food prices fell as soon as news of his appointment was made public.

Pompey was lucky enough to have what no previous Roman had—adequate forces and adequate power. Nevertheless one must admit that he did well. In three *months*, not three years, he scoured the Mediterranean clear of piracy.

If he had been popular before, he was Rome's hero now.

The only place where Rome still faced trouble was in eastern Asia Minor, where the kingdom of Pontus had been fighting Rome with varying success for over twenty years. It had been against Pontus that Sulla had won victories in the east, yet Pontus kept fighting on. Now a Roman general, Lucius Licinius Lucullus, had almost finished the job, but he was a hard-driving martinet, hated by his soldiers.

When Lucullus' army began to mutiny in 66 B.C., just when one more drive would finish Pontus, he was recalled and good old Pompey was sent eastward to replace him. Pompey's reputation preceded him; Lucullus' men cheered him madly and for him did what they wouldn't do for Lucullus. They marched against Pontus' army and beat it. Pompey supplied the one last push and, as always, demanded and received credit for the whole thing.

All of Asia Minor was now either Roman outright or was under the control of Roman puppet governments. Pompey therefore decided to clean up the east altogether. He marched southward and around Antioch found the last remnant of the Seleucid Empire, established after the death

of Alexander the Great two and a half centuries before. It was now ruled by a nonentity called Antiochus XIII. Pompey deposed him, and annexed the Empire to Rome as the province of Syria.

Still further south was the kingdom of Judea. It had been independent for less than a century, under the rule of a line of kings of the Maccabean family. Two of the Maccabeans were now fighting over the throne and one appealed to Pompey.

Pompey at once marched into Judea and laid siege to Jerusalem. Ordinarily, Jerusalem was a hard nut to crack, for it was built on a rocky prominence with a reliable water supply; it had good walls; and it was usually defended with fanatic vigor.

Pompey, however, noticed that every seven days, things were quiet. Someone explained to him that on the Sabbath, the Jews wouldn't fight unless attacked and even then fought without real conviction. It must have taken quite a while to convince Pompey of such a ridiculous thing but, once convinced, he used a few Sabbaths to bring up his siege machinery without interference, and finally attacked on another Sabbath. No problem.

Pompey ended the Maccabean kingdom and annexed Judea to Rome while allowing the Jews to keep their religious freedom, their Temple, their high-priests, and their peculiar, but useful, Sabbath.

Pompey was 42 years old at this time, and success had smiled at him without interruption. I now skip a single small event in Pompey's life and represent it by a line of asterisks; one apparently unimportant circumstance.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Pompey returned to Italy in 61 B.C. absolutely on top of the world, boasting (with considerable exaggeration) that what he had found as the eastern border of the realm he had left at its center. He received the most magnificent triumph Rome had ever seen up to that time.

The Senate was in terror lest Pompey make himself a dictator and turn to the radicals. This Pompey did not do. Once, twenty years before, when he had an army, he kept that army even at the risk of Sulla's displeasure. Now, something impelled him to give up his army, disband it, and assume a role as a private citizen. Perhaps he was convinced that he had reached a point where the sheer magic of his name would allow him to dominate the republic.

At last, though, his nose for the right action failed him. And once having failed him, it failed him forever after.

To begin with, Pompey asked the Senate to approve everything he had done in the East, his victories, his treaties, his depositions of kings, his

establishment of provinces. He also asked the Senate to distribute land to his soldiers, for he himself had promised them land. He was sure that he had but to ask and he would be given.

Not at all. Pompey was now a man without an army, and the Senate insisted on considering each individual act separately and nit-pickingly. As for land-grants, that was rejected.

What's more, Pompey found that he had no one on his side within the government. All his vast popularity suddenly seemed to count for nothing as all parties turned against him for no discernible reason. What's more, Pompey could do nothing about it. Something had happened, and he was no longer the clever, golden-boy he had been before 64 B.C. Now he was uncertain, vacillating and weak.

Even Crassus was no longer his friend. Crassus had found someone else; a handsome, charming individual with a silver tongue and a genius for intrigue—a man named Julius Caesar. Caesar was a playboy aristocrat, but Crassus paid off the young man's enormous debts and Caesar served him well in return.

While Pompey was struggling with the Senate, Caesar was off in Sapin, winning some small victories against rebellious tribes and gathering enough ill-gotten wealth (as Roman generals usually did) to pay off Crassus and make himself independent. When he returned to Italy and found Pompey furious with the Senate, he arranged a kind of treaty of alliance between himself, Crassus and Pompey—the "First Triumvirate."

But it was Caesar and not Pompey who profited from this. It was Caesar who used the alliance to get himself elected consul in 59 B.C. Once consul, Caesar controlled the Senate with almost contemptuous ease, driving the other consul, a reactionary, into house arrest.

One thing Caesar did was to force the aristocrats of the Senate to grant all of Pompey's demands. Pompey got the ratification of all of his acts and he got the land for his soldiers—and yet he did not profit from this. Indeed, he suffered humiliation, for it was quite clear that he was standing, hat in hand, while Caesar graciously bestowed largesse on him.

Yet Pompey could do nothing, for he had married Julia, Caesar's daughter. She was beautiful and winning, and Pompey was crazy about her. While he had her, he could do nothing to cross Caesar.

Caesar was running everything now. In 58 B.C., he suggested that he, Pompey and Crassus each have a province in which they could win military victories. Pompey was to have Spain; Crassus was to have Syria; and Caesar was to have southern Gaul, which was then in Roman hands. Each was to be in charge for five years.

Pompey was delighted. In Syria, Crassus would have to face the re-

doubtable Parthian kingdom, and in Gaul, Caesar would have to face the fierce-fighting barbarians of the north. With luck, both would end in disaster, since neither was a trained military man. As for Pompey, since Spain was quiet, he could stay in Italy and control the government. Who could ask for more?

It might almost seem that if Pompey reasoned this way, his old nose for victory had returned. By 53 B.C., Crassus' army was destroyed by the Parthians east of Syria and Crassus himself was killed.

But Caesar? No, Pompey's luck had *not* returned. To the astonishment of everyone in Rome, Caesar, who, until then, had seemed to be nothing but a playboy and intriguer, turned out, in middle age (he was 44 when he went to Gaul), to be a first-class military genius. He spent five years fighting the Gauls, annexing the vast territory they inhabited, conducting successful forays into Germany and Britain. He wrote up his adventures in his "Commentaries" for the Roman reading public, and suddenly Rome had a new military hero.—And Pompey, sitting in Italy, doing nothing, was nearly dead of frustration and envy.

In 54 B.C., though, Julia died, and Pompey was no longer held back in his animus against Caesar. The Senatorial aristocrats, now far more afraid of Caesar than of Pompey, flattered the latter, who promptly joined them and married a new wife, the daughter on one of the leading Senators.

When Caesar returned from Gaul in 50 B.C., the Senate ordered him to disband his armies and enter Italy alone. It was clear that if Caesar did so, he would be arrested and probably executed. What, then, if he defied the Senate and brought his army with him?

"Fear not," said Pompey, confidently, "I have but to stamp my foot upon the ground and legions will rise up to support us."

In 49 B.C., Caesar crossed the Rubicon River, which represented the boundary of Italy, and did so with his army. Pompey promptly stamped his foot—and nothing happened. Indeed, those soldiers stationed in Italy began to flock to Caesar's standards. Pompey and his Senatorial allies were forced to flee, in humiliation, to Greece.

Grimly, Caesar and his army followed them.

In Greece, Pompey managed to collect a sizable army. Caesar, on the other hand, could only bring so many men across the sea and so Pompey now had the edge. He might have taken advantage of his superior numbers to cut Caesar off from his base and then stalk him carefully, without risking battle, and slowly wear him down and starve him out.

Against this was the fact that the humiliated Pompey, still dreaming of the old days, was dying to defeat Caesar in open battle and show him the worth of a *real* general. Worse yet, the Senatorial party insisted on a

battle. So Pompey let himself be talked into one; after all he outnumbered Caesar two to one.

The battle was fought at Pharsalus in Thessaly on June 29, 48 B.C.

Pompey was counting on his cavalry in particular; a cavalry consisting of gallant young Roman aristocrats. Sure enough, at the start of the battle, Pompey's cavalry charged round the flank of Caesar's army and might well have wreaked havoc from the rear and cost Caesar the battle. Caesar, however, had foreseen this and had placed some picked men to meet the cavalry, with instructions not to throw their lances but to use them to poke directly at the faces of the horsemen. He felt that the aristocrats would not stand up to the danger of being disfigured and he was right. The cavalry broke.

With Pompey's cavalry out, Caesar's hardened infantry broke through the more numerous but much softer Pompeian line and Pompey, unused to handling armies in trouble, fled. In one blow, his entire military reputation was destroyed, and it was quite clear that it was Caesar, not Pompey, who was the real general.

Pompey fled to the one Mediterranean land that was not yet entirely under Roman control—Egypt. But Egypt was in the midst of a civil war at the time. The boy-king, thirteen-year-old Ptolemy XII, was fighting against his older sister, Cleopatra, and the approach of Pompey created a problem. The politicians supporting young Ptolemy dared not turn Pompey away and earn the undying enmity of a Roman general who might yet win out. On the other hand, they dared not give him refuge and risk having Caesar support Cleopatra in revenge.

So they let Pompey land—and assassinated him.

And that was the end of Pompey, at the age of 56.

Up to the age of 42 he had been uniformly successful; nothing he tried to do failed. After the age of 42 he had been uniformly unsuccessful; nothing he tried to do succeeded.

What happened at the age of 42? What circumstance took place in the interval represented earlier in the article by the line of asterisks that might "explain" this. Well, let's go back and fill in that line of asterisks.

* * * * * * * * * * *

We are back in 64 B.C.

Pompey is in Jerusalem, curious about the queer religion of the Jews. What odd things do they do besides celebrate a Sabbath? He began collecting information.

There was the Temple, for instance. It was rather small and unimpressive by Roman standards but was venerated without limit by the Jews and differed from all other temples in the world by having no statue of a god or goddess inside. It seemed that the Jews worshipped an invisible god.

"Really?" said the amused Pompey.

Actually, he was told, there was an innermost chamber in the Temple, the Holy of Holies, behind a veil. No one could ever go beyond the veil but the high-priest, and he could only do so on the Day of Atonement. Some people said that the Jews secretly worshipped an ass's head there, but of course, the Jews themselves maintained that only the invisible presence of God was in that chamber.

Pompey, unimpressed by superstition, decided there was only one way of finding out. He would look inside this secret chamber.

The high-priest was shocked, the Jews broke into agonized cries of dismay, but Pompey was adamant. He was curious and he had his army all around him. Who could stop him? So he entered the Holy of Holies.

The Jews were undoubtedly certain that he would be struck by lightning or otherwise destroyed by an offended God, but he wasn't.

He came out again in perfect health. He had found nothing, apparently, and nothing had happened to him, *apparently.**

**Now re-read the introduction to this article.*

Mr. Aickman, who demonstrated his mastery of the supernatural chiller in his first U. S. appearance ("The School Friend," December 1970), returns with another fine macabre tale, this one about a nightmarish honeymoon.

Ringing The Changes

by Robert Aickman

HE HAD NEVER BEEN AMONG those many who deeply dislike church bells, but the ringing that evening at Holihaven changed his view. Bells could certainly get on one's nerves, he felt, although he had only just arrived in the town.

He had been too well aware of the perils attendant upon marrying a girl twenty-four years younger than himself to add to them by a conventional honeymoon. The strange force of Phrynne's love had borne both of them away from their previous selves: in him a formerly haphazard and easy-going approach to life had been replaced by much deep-planning to wall in happiness; and she, though once thought cold and choosy, would now agree to anything as long as she was with him. He had said that if they were to marry in June, it would be at the cost of not being able to honeymoon until October. Had they been courting longer, he had explained, gravely smiling, special arrangements would have been made; but, as it was, business claimed him. This, indeed, was true, because his business position was less influential than he had led Phrynne to believe. Finally, it would have been impossible for them to have courted longer, because they had courted from the day they met, which was less than six weeks before the day they married.

" 'A village,' " he had quoted as they entered the branch line train at the junction (itself sufficiently remote), " 'from which (it was said) persons of sufficient longevity might hope to reach Liverpool Street.' " By now he was able to make jokes about age, although perhaps he did so rather too often.

"Who said that?"

"Bertrand Russell."

She had looked at him with her big eyes in her tiny face.

"Really." He had smiled confirmation.

"I'm not arguing." She had still been looking at him. The romantic

gaslight in the charming period compartment had left him uncertain whether she was smiling back or not. He had given himself the benefit of the doubt, and kissed her.

The guard had blown his whistle, and they had rumbled out into the darkness. The branch line swung so sharply away from the main line that Phrynne had been almost toppled from her seat.

"Why do we go so slowly when it's so flat?"

"Because the engineer laid the line up and down the hills and valley, such as they are, instead of cutting through and embanking over them." He liked being able to inform her.

"How do you know? Gerald! You said you hadn't been to Holihaven before."

"It applies to most of the railways in East Anglia."

"So that even though it's flatter, it's slower?"

"Time matters less."

"I should have hated going to a place where time mattered or that you'd been to before. You'd have had nothing to remember me by."

He hadn't been quite sure that her words exactly expressed her thought, but the thought had lightened his heart.

Holihaven station could hardly have been built in the days of the town's magnificence, for they were in the Middle Ages; but it still implied grander functions than came its way now. The platforms were long enough for visiting London expresses, which had since gone elsewhere, and the architecture of the waiting rooms would have been not insufficient for occasional use by foreign royalty. Oil lamps on perches like those occupied by macaws, played light on the uniformed staff, who numbered two and, together with every other native of Holihaven, looked like storm-habituated mariners.

The stationmaster and porter, as Gerald took them to be, watched him approach down the platform, with a heavy suitcase in each hand and Phrynne walking deliciously by his side. He saw one of them address a remark to the other, but neither offered to help. Gerald had to put down the suitcases in order to give up their tickets. The other passengers had already disappeared.

"Where's the Bell?" Gerald had found the hotel in a reference book. It was the only one the book allotted to Holihaven. But as Gerald spoke, and before the ticket collector could answer, the sudden deep note of an actual bell rang through the darkness. Phrynne caught hold of Gerald's sleeve.

Ignoring Gerald, the stationmaster, if such he was, turned to his colleague. "They're starting early."

"Every reason to be in good time," said the other man.

The stationmaster nodded, and put Gerald's tickets indifferently in his jacket pocket.

"Can you please tell me how I get to the Bell Hotel?"

The stationmaster's attention returned to him. "Have you a room booked?"

"Certainly."

"Tonight?" The stationmaster looked inappropriately suspicious.

"Of course."

Again the stationmaster looked at the other man.

"It's them Pascoes."

"Yes," said Gerald. "That's the name. Pascoe."

"We don't use the Bell," explained the stationmaster. "But you'll find it in Wrack Street." He gesticulated vaguely and unhelpfully. "Straight ahead. Down Station Road. Then down Wrack Street. You can't miss it."

"Thank you."

As soon as they entered the town, the big bell began to boom regularly.

"What narrow streets!" said Phrynne.

"They follow the lines of the medieval city. Before the river silted up, Holihaven was one of the most important seaports in Great Britain."

"Where's everybody got to?"

Although it was only six o'clock, the place certainly seemed deserted.

"Where's the hotel got to?" rejoined Gerald.

"Poor Gerald! Let me help." She laid her hand beside his on the handle of the suitcase nearest to her, but as she was about fifteen inches shorter than he, she could be of little assistance. They must already have gone more than a quarter of a mile. "Do you think we're in the right street?"

"Most unlikely, I should say. But there's no one to ask."

"Must be early closing day."

The single deep notes of the bell were now coming more frequently.

"Why are they ringing that bell? Is it a funeral?"

"Bit late for a funeral."

She looked at him a little anxiously.

"Anyway, it's not cold."

"Considering we're on the east coast, it's quite astonishingly warm."

"Not that I care."

"I hope that bell isn't going to ring all night."

She pulled on the suitcase. His arms were in any case almost parting from his body. "Look! We've passed it."

They stopped, and he looked back. "How could we have done that?"

"Well, we have."

She was right. He could see a big ornamental bell hanging from a bracket attached to a house about a hundred yards behind them.

They retraced their steps and entered the hotel. A woman dressed in a navy-blue coat and skirt, with a good figure but dyed red hair and a face ridged with make-up, advanced upon them.

"Mr. and Mrs. Banstead? I'm Hilda Pascoe. Don, my husband, isn't very well."

Gerald felt full of doubts. His arrangements were not going as they should. Never rely on guidebook recommendations. The trouble lay partly in Phrynne's insistence that they go somewhere he did not know. "I'm sorry to hear that," he said.

"You know what men are like when they're ill?" Mrs. Pascoe spoke understandingly to Phrynne.

"Impossible," said Phrynne. "Or very difficult."

"Talk about Woman in our hours of ease."

"Yes," said Phrynne. "What's the trouble?"

"It's always the same trouble with Don," said Mrs. Pascoe, then checked herself. "It's his stomach," she said, "ever since he was a kid, Don's had trouble with the lining of his stomach."

Gerald interrupted. "I wonder if we could see our rooms?"

"So sorry," said Mrs. Pascoe. "Will you register first?" She produced a battered volume bound in peeling imitation leather. "Just the name and address." She spoke as if Gerald might contribute a résumé of his life.

It was the first time that he and Phrynne had ever registered in a hotel, but his confidence in the place was not increased by the long period which had passed since the registration above his.

"We're always quiet in October," remarked Mrs. Pascoe, her eyes upon him. Gerald noticed that her eyes were slightly bloodshot. "Except sometimes for the bars, of course."

"We wanted to come out of the season," said Phrynne soothingly.

"Quite," said Mrs. Pascoe.

"Are we alone in the house?" enquired Gerald. After all the woman was probably doing her best.

"Except for Commandant Shotcroft. You won't mind him, will you? He's a regular."

"I'm sure we shan't," said Phrynne.

"People say the house wouldn't be the same without Commandant Shotcroft."

"I see."

"What's that bell?" asked Gerald. Apart from anything else, it really was much too near.

Mrs. Pascoe looked away. He thought she looked shifty under her entrenched make-up. But she only said, "Practice."

"Do you mean there will be more of them later?"

She nodded. "But never mind," she said encouragingly. "Let me show you to your room. Sorry, there's no porter."

Before they had reached the bedroom, the whole peal had commenced.

"Is this the quietest room you have?" enquired Gerald. "What about the other side of the house?"

"This *is* the other side of the

house. Saint Guthlac's is over there." She pointed out through the bedroom door.

"Darling," said Phrynne, her hand on Gerald's arm, "they'll soon stop. They're only practicing."

Mrs. Pascoe said nothing. Her expression indicated that she was one of those people whose friendliness has a precise and never-exceeded limit.

"If *you* don't mind," said Gerald to Phrynne, hesitating.

"They have ways of their own in Holihaven," said Mrs. Pascoe. Her undertone of militancy implied, among other things, that if Gerald and Phrynne chose to leave, they were at liberty to do so. Gerald did not care for that either; her attitude would have been different, he felt, had there been anywhere else for them to go. The bells were making him touchy and irritable.

"It's a very pretty room," said Phrynne. "I adore four-posters."

"Thank you," said Gerald to Mrs. Pascoe. "What time's dinner?"

"Seven thirty. You've time for a drink in the bar first."

She went.

"We certainly have," said Gerald when the door was shut. "It's only just six."

"Actually," said Phrynne, who was standing by the window looking down to into the street, "I *like* church bells."

"All very well," said Gerald, "but on one's honeymoon they distract the attention."

"Not mine," said Phrynne simply. Then she added, "There's still no one about."

"I expect they're all in the bar."

"I don't want a drink. I want to explore the town."

"As you wish. But hadn't you better unpack?"

"I ought to, but I'm not going to. Not until after I've seen the sea." Such small shows of independence in her enchanted Gerald.

Mrs. Pascoe was not about when they passed through the lounge, nor was there any sound of activity in the establishment.

Outside, the bells seemed to be booming and bounding immediately over their heads.

"It's like warriors fighting in the sky," shouted Phrynne. "Do you think the sea's down there?"

She indicated the direction from which they had previously retraced their steps.

"I imagine so. The street seems to end in nothing. That would be the sea."

"Come on. Let's run." She was off, before he could even think about it. Then there was nothing to do but run after her. He hoped there were not eyes behind blinds.

She stopped and held wide her arms to catch him. The top of her head hardly came up to his chin. He knew that she was silently indicating that his failure to keep up with her was not a matter for self-consciousness.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

"The sea?" There was no moon, and little was discernible beyond the end of the street.

"Not only."

"Everything but the sea. The sea's invisible."

"You can smell it."

"I certainly can't hear it."

She slackened her embrace and cocked her head away from him. "The bells echo so much, it's as if there were two churches."

"I'm sure there are more than that. There always are in old towns like this." Suddenly he was struck by the significance of his words in relation to what she had said. He shrank into himself, tautly listening.

"Yes," cried Phrynne delightedly. "It *is* another church."

"Impossible," said Gerald. "Two churches wouldn't have practice ringing on the same night."

"I'm quite sure. I can hear one lot of bells with my left ear, and another lot with my right."

They had still seen no one. The sparse gaslights fell on the furnishings of a stone quay, small but plainly in regular use.

"The whole population must be ringing the bells." His own remark discomfited Gerald.

"Good for them." She took his hand. "Let's go down on the beach and look for the sea."

They descended a flight of stone steps at which the sea had sucked and bitten. The beach was as stony as the steps, but lumpier.

"We'll just go straight on," said Phrynne. "Until we find it."

Left to himself, Gerald would have been less keen. The stones were very large and very slippery, and his eyes did not seem to be becoming accustomed to the dark.

"You're right, Phrynne, about the smell."

"Honest sea smell."

"Just as you say." He took it rather to be the smell of dense, rotting seaweed, across which he supposed they must be slithering. It was not a smell he had previously encountered in such strength.

Energy could hardly be spared for talking, and advancing hand in hand was impossible.

After various random remarks on both sides and the lapse of what seemed a very long time, Phrynne spoke again. "Gerald, where is it? What sort of seaport is it that has no sea?"

She continued onwards, but Gerald stopped and looked back. He had thought the distance they had gone overlong, but was startled to see how great it was. The darkness was doubtless deceitful, but the few lights on the quay appeared as on a distant horizon.

The far-glimmering specks still in his eyes, he turned and looked after Phrynne. He could barely see her. Perhaps she was progressing faster without him.

"Phrynne! Darling!"

Unexpectedly she gave a sharp cry.

"Phrynne!"

She did not answer.

"Phrynne!"

Then she spoke more or less calmly. "Panic over. Sorry, darling. I stood on something."

He realized that a panic it had indeed been, at least in himself.

"You're all right?"

"Think so."

He struggled up to her. "The smell's worse than ever." It was overpowering.

"I think it's coming from what I stepped on. My foot went right in, and then there was the smell."

"I've never known anything like it."

"Sorry, darling," she said gently mocking him. "Let's go away."

"Let's go back. Don't you think?"

"Yes," said Phrynne. "But I must warn you, I'm very disappointed. I think that seaside attractions should include the sea."

He noticed that as they retreated she was scraping the sides of one shoe against the stones, as if trying to clean it.

"I think the whole place is a disappointment," he said. "I really must apologize. We'll go somewhere else."

"I like the bells," she replied, making a careful reservation.

Gerald said nothing.

"I don't want to go somewhere where you've been before."

The bells rang out over the desolate, unattractive beach. Now the sound seemed to be coming from every point along the shore.

"I suppose all the churches practice on the same night in order to get it over with," said Gerald.

"They do it in order to see which can ring the loudest," said Phrynne.

"Take care you don't twist your ankle."

The din as they reached the rough little quay was such as to suggest that Phrynne's idea was literally true.

The coffee room was so low that Gerald had to dip beneath a sequence of thick beams.

"Why 'Coffee Room'?" asked Phrynne, looking at the words on the door. "I saw a notice that coffee will only be served in the lounge."

"It's the *lucus a non lucendo* principle."

"That explains everything. I wonder where we sit." A single electric lantern, mass-produced in an antique pattern, had been turned on. The bulb was of that limited wattage which is peculiar to hotels. It did little to penetrate the shadows.

"The *lucus a non lucendo* principle is the principle of calling white black."

"Not at all," said a voice from the darkness. "On the contrary. The word black comes from an ancient root which means 'to bleach.' "

They had thought themselves alone at first, but now saw a small man seated by himself at an unlighted corner table. In the

darkness he looked like a monkey.

"I stand corrected," said Gerald.

They sat at the table under the lantern.

The man in the corner spoke again. "Why are you here at all?"

Phrynne looked frightened, but Gerald replied quietly, "We're on holiday. We prefer it out of the season. I presume you are Commandant Shotcroft?"

"No need to presume." Unexpectedly the commandant switched on the antique lantern which was nearest to him. His table was littered with a finished meal. It struck Gerald that he must have switched off the light when he heard them approach the coffee room. "I'm going anyway."

"Are we late?" asked Phrynne, always the assuager of situations.

"No, you're not late," said the commandant in a deep moody voice. "My meals are prepared half an hour before the time the rest come in. I don't like eating in company." He had risen to his feet. "So perhaps you'll excuse me."

Without troubling about an answer, he stepped out of the room. He had cropped white hair; tragic, heavy-lidded eyes; and a round face which was yellow and lined.

A second later his head reappeared round the door.

"Ring," he said and again withdrew.

"Too many other people ringing," said Gerald. "But I don't see what else we can do."

The coffee room bell, however, made a noise like a fire alarm.

Mrs. Pascoe appeared. She looked considerably the worse for drink.

"Didn't see you in the bar."

"Must have missed us in the crowd," said Gerald amiably.

"Crowd?" enquired Mrs. Pascoe drunkenly. Then, after a difficult pause, she offered them a handwritten menu.

They ordered and Mrs. Pascoe served them throughout. Gerald was apprehensive lest her indisposition increase during the course of the meal, but her insobriety, like her affability, seemed to have a very exact and definite limit.

"All things considered, the food might be worse," remarked Gerald, towards the end. It was a relief that something was going reasonably well. "Not much of it, but at least the dishes are hot."

When Phrynne translated this into a compliment to the cook, Mrs. Pascoe said, "I cooked it all myself, although I shouldn't be the one to say so."

Gerald felt really surprised that she was in a condition to have accomplished this. Possibly, he reflected with alarm, she had had much practice under similar conditions.

"Coffee is served in the lounge," said Mrs. Pascoe.

They withdrew. In a corner of the lounge was a screen decorated

with winning Elizabethan ladies in ruffs and hoops. From behind it projected a pair of small black boots. Phrynne nudged Gerald and pointed to them. Gerald nodded. They felt themselves constrained to talk about things which bored them.

The hotel was old and its walls thick. In the empty lounge the noise of the bells would not prevent conversation being overheard, but still the ringing came from all around, as if the hotel were a fortress beleaguered by surrounding artillery.

After their second cups of coffee, Gerald suddenly said he couldn't stand it.

"Darling, it's not doing us any harm. I think it's rather cosy." Phrynne subsided in the wooden chair, with its sloping back and long mud-colored mock-velvet cushions, and opened her pretty legs to the fire.

"Every church in the town must be ringing its bells. It's been going on for two and a half hours, and they never seem to take the usual breathers."

"We wouldn't hear. Because of all the other bells ringing. I think it's nice of them to ring the bells for us."

Nothing further was said for several minutes. Gerald was beginning to realize that they had yet to evolve a holiday routine.

"I'll get you a drink. What shall it be?"

"Anything you like. Whatever you have." Phrynne was immersed in female enjoyment of the fire's radiance on her body.

Gerald missed this and said, "I don't quite see why they have to keep the place like a hothouse. When I come back, we'll sit somewhere else."

"Men wear too many clothes, darling," said Phrynne drowsily.

Contrary to his assumption, Gerald found the lounge bar as empty as everywhere else in the hotel and the town. There was not even a person to dispense.

Somewhat irritably Gerald struck a brass bell which stood on the counter. It rang out as sharply as a pistol shot.

Mrs. Pascoe appeared at a door among the shelves. She had taken off her jacket, and her make-up had begun to run.

"A cognac, please. Double. And a kummel."

Mrs. Pascoe's hands were shaking so much that she could not get the cork out of the brandy bottle.

"Allow me." Gerald stretched his arm across the bar.

Mrs. Pascoe stared at him blearily. "OK. But I must pour it."

Gerald extracted the cork and returned the bottle. Mrs. Pascoe slopped a far from precise dose into a balloon.

Catastrophe followed. Unable to return the bottle to the high shelf where it resided, Mrs. Pascoe placed it on a waist-level ledge.

Reaching for the alembic of kummel, she swept the three-quarters full brandy bottle on to the tiled floor. The stuffy air became fogged with the fumes of brandy from behind the bar.

At the door from which Mrs. Pascoe had emerged appeared a man from the inner room. Though still youngish, he was puce and puffy, and in his suspenders, with no collar. Streaks of hair laced his vast red scalp. Liquor oozed all over him, as if from a perished gourd. Gerald took it that this was Don.

The man was too drunk to articulate. He stood in the doorway, clinging with each red hand to the ledge, and savagely struggling to flay his wife with imprecations.

"How much?" said Gerald to Mrs. Pascoe. It seemed useless to try for the kummel. The hotel must have another bar.

"Three and six," said Mrs. Pascoe, quite lucidly, but Gerald saw that she was about to weep.

He had the exact sum. She turned her back on him and flicked the cash register. As she returned from it, he heard the fragmentation of glass as she stepped on a piece of the broken bottle. Gerald looked at her husband out of the corner of his eye. The sagging, loose-mouthed figure made him shudder. Something moved him.

"I'm sorry about the accident," he said to Mrs. Pascoe. He held the balloon in one hand, and was just going.

Mrs. Pascoe looked at him. The slow tears of desperation were edging down her face, but she now seemed quite sober. "Mr. Banstead," she said in a flat, hurried voice. "May I come and sit with you and your wife in the lounge? Just for a few minutes."

"Of course." It was certainly not what he wanted, and he wondered what would become of the bar; but he felt unexpectedly sorry for her, and it was impossible to say no.

To reach the flap of the bar she had to pass her husband. Gerald saw her hesitate for a second; then she advanced resolutely and steadily, and looking straight before her. If the man had let go with his hands, he would have fallen, but as she passed him, he released a great gob of spit. He was far too incapable to aim, and it fell on the side of his own trousers. Gerald lifted the flap for Mrs. Pascoe and stood back to let her precede him from the bar. As he followed her, he heard her husband maundering off into unintelligible inward searchings.

"The kummel!" said Mrs. Pascoe remembering in the doorway.

"Never mind," said Gerald. "Perhaps I could try one of the other bars?"

"Not tonight. They're shut. I'd better go back."

"No. We'll think of something else." It was not yet nine o'clock, and Gerald wondered about the Licensing Justices.

But in the lounge was another unexpected scene. Mrs. Pascoe stopped as soon as they entered, and Gerald, caught between two imitation-leather armchairs, looked over her shoulder.

Phrynne had fallen asleep. Her head was slightly on one side, but her mouth was shut, and her body no more than gracefully relaxed, so that she looked most beautiful and, Gerald thought, a trifle unearthly, like a dead girl in an early picture by Millais.

The quality of her beauty seemed also to have impressed Commandant Shotcroft, for he was standing silently behind her and looking down at her, his sad face transfigured. Gerald noticed that a leaf of the pseudo-Elizabethan screen had been folded back, revealing a small cretonne-covered chair, with an open tome lying face downward in its seat.

"Won't you join us?" said Gerald boldly. There was that in the commandant's face which boded no hurt. "Can I get you a drink? A brandy, perhaps?"

The commandant did not turn his head, and for a moment seemed unable to speak. Then in a low voice he said, "For a moment only."

"Good," said Gerald. "Sit down. And you, Mrs. Pascoe." Mrs. Pascoe was dabbing at her face. Gerald addressed the commandant. "What shall it be?"

"Nothing to drink," said the commandant in the same low mutter. It occurred to Gerald that if Phrynne awoke, the commandant would go.

"What about you?" Gerald looked at Mrs. Pascoe earnestly, hoping she would decline.

"No, thanks." She was glancing at the commandant. Clearly, she had not expected him to be there.

Phrynne being asleep, Gerald sat down too. He sipped his brandy. It was impossible to romanticize the action with a toast.

The events in the bar had made him forget about the bells. Now, as they sat silently round the sleeping Phrynne, the tide of sound swept over him once more.

"You mustn't think," said Mrs. Pascoe, "that he's always like that." They all spoke in hushed voices. All of them seemed to have reason to do so. The commandant was again gazing somberly at Phrynne's beauty.

"Of course not." But it was hard to believe.

"The licensed business puts temptations in a man's way."

"It must be very difficult."

"We ought never to have come here. We were happy in South Norwood."

"You must do good business during the season."

"Two months," said Mrs. Pascoe bitterly, but still softly. "Two and a half at the very most. The people who come during the season have no idea what goes on out of it."

"What made you leave South Norwood?"

"Don's stomach. The doctor said the sea air would do him good."

"Speaking of that, doesn't the sea go too far out? We went down on the beach before dinner but couldn't see it anywhere."

On the other side of the fire, the commandant turned his eyes from Phrynne and looked at Gerald.

"I wouldn't know," said Mrs. Pascoe. "I never have time to look from one year's end to the other." It was a customary enough answer, but Gerald felt that it did not disclose the whole truth. He noticed that Mrs. Pascoe glanced uneasily at the commandant, who by now was staring neither at Phrynne nor at Gerald but at the toppling citadels in the fire.

"And now I must get on with my work," continued Mrs. Pascoe. "I only came in for a minute." She looked Gerald in the face. "Thank you," she said, and rose.

"Please stay a little longer," said Gerald. "Wait till my wife wakes up." As he spoke, Phrynne slightly shifted.

"Can't be done," said Mrs. Pascoe, her lips smiling. Gerald noticed that all the time she was watching the commandant from under her lids, and he knew that were he not there, she would have stayed.

As it was, she went. "I'll probably see you later to say good night. Sorry the water's not very hot. It's having no porter."

The bells showed no sign of flagging.

When Mrs. Pascoe had closed the door, the commandant spoke.

"He was a fine man once. Don't think otherwise."

"You mean Pascoe?"

The commandant nodded seriously.

"Not my type," said Gerald.

"D.S.O. and bar. D.F.C. and bar."

"And now bar only. Why?"

"You heard what she said. It was a lie. They didn't leave South Norwood for the sea air."

"So I supposed."

"He got into trouble. He was fixed. He wasn't the kind of man to know about human nature and all its rottenness."

"A pity," said Gerald. "But perhaps, even so, this isn't the best place for him?"

"It's the worst," said the commandant, a dark flame in his eyes. "For him or anyone else."

Again Phrynne shifted in her sleep, this time more convulsively, so that she nearly awoke. For some reason the two men remained speechless and motionless until she was again breathing steadily. Against the silence within, the bells sounded louder than ever. It was as if the tumult were tearing holes in the roof.

"It's certainly a very noisy place," said Gerald, still in an undertone.

"Why did you have to come tonight of all nights?" The commandant spoke in the same under-

tone, but his vehemence was extreme.

"This doesn't happen often?"

"Once every year."

"They should have told us."

"They don't usually accept bookings. They've no right to accept them. When Pascoe was in charge they never did."

"I expect that Mrs. Pascoe felt they were in no position to turn away business."

"It's not a matter that should be left to a woman."

"Not much alternative, surely?"

"At heart women are creatures of darkness all the time."

The commandant's seriousness and bitterness left Gerald without a reply.

"My wife doesn't mind the bells," he said after a moment. "In fact she rather likes them." The commandant really was converting a nuisance, though an acute one, into a melodrama.

The commandant turned and gazed at him. It struck Gerald that what he had just said in some way, for the commandant, placed Phrynne also in a category of the lost.

"Take her away, man," said the commandant, with scornful ferocity.

"In a day or two perhaps," said Gerald, patiently polite. "I admit that we are disappointed with Holihaven."

"Now. While there's still time. This *instant*."

There was an intensity of conviction about the commandant which was alarming.

Gerald considered. Even the empty lounge, with its dreary decorations and commonplace furniture, seemed inimical. "They can hardly go on practicing all night," he said. But now it was fear that hushed his voice.

"Practicing!" The commandant's scorn flickered coldly through the overheated room.

"What else?"

"They're ringing to wake the dead."

A tremor of wind in the flue momentarily drew on the already roaring fire. Gerald had turned very pale.

"That's a figure of speech," he said, hardly to be heard.

"Not in Holihaven." The commandant's gaze had returned to the fire.

Gerald looked at Phrynne. She was breathing less heavily. His voice dropped to a whisper. "What happens?"

The commandant also was nearly whispering. "No one can tell how long they have to go on ringing. It varies from year to year. I don't know why. You should be all right up to midnight. Probably for some while after. In the end the dead awake. First one or two, then all of them. Tonight even the sea draws back. You have seen that for yourself. In a place like this there are always several drowned each year.

This year there've been more than several. But even so that's only a few. Most of them come not from the water but from the earth. It is not a pretty sight."

"Where do they go?"

"I've never followed them to see. I'm not stark staring mad." The red of the fire reflected in the commandant's eyes. There was a long pause.

"I don't believe in the resurrection of the body," said Gerald. As the hour grew later, the bells grew louder. "Not of the body."

"What other kind of resurrection is possible? Everything else is only theory. You can't even imagine it. No one can."

Gerald had not argued such a thing for twenty years. "So," he said, "you advise me to go. Where?"

"Where doesn't matter."

"I have no car."

"Then you'd better walk."

"With her?" He indicated Phrynne only with his eyes.

"She's young and strong." A forlorn tenderness lay within the commandant's words. "She's twenty years younger than you and therefore twenty years more important."

"Yes," said Gerald. "I agree . . . What about you? What will you do?"

"I've lived here some time now. I know what to do."

"And the Pascoes?"

"He's drunk. There is nothing in the world to fear if you're thoroughly drunk. D.S.O. and bar. D.F.C. and bar."

"But you're not drinking yourself?"

"Not since I came to Holihaven. I lost the knack."

Suddenly Phrynne sat up. "Hullo," she said to the commandant, not yet fully awake. Then she said, "What fun! The bells are still ringing."

The commandant rose, his eyes averted. "I don't think there's anything more to say," he remarked, addressing Gerald. "You've still got time." He nodded slightly to Phrynne and walked out of the lounge.

"What have you still got time for?" asked Phrynne, stretching. "Was he trying to convert you? I'm sure he's an Anabaptist."

"Something like that," said Gerald, trying to think.

"Shall we go to bed? Sorry, I'm so sleepy."

"Nothing to be sorry about."

"Or shall we go for another walk? That would wake me up. Besides the tide might have come in."

Gerald, although he half-despised himself for it, found it impossible to explain to her that they should leave at once, without transport or a destination, walking all night if necessary. He said to himself that probably he would not go even were he alone.

"If you're sleepy, it's probably a *good* thing."

"Darling!"

"I mean with these bells. God knows when they will stop." Instantly he felt a new pang of fear at what he had said.

Mrs. Pascoe had appeared at the door leading to the bar, and opposite to that from which the commandant had departed. She bore two steaming glasses on a tray. She looked about, possibly to confirm that the commandant had really gone.

"I thought you might both like a nightcap. Ovaltine, with something in it."

"Thank you," said Phrynne. "I can't think of anything nicer."

Gerald set the glass on a wicker table and quickly finished his cognac.

Mrs. Pascoe began to move chairs and slap cushions. She looked very haggard.

"Is the commandant an Anabaptist?" asked Phrynne over her shoulder. She was proud of her ability to outdistance Gerald in beginning to consume a hot drink.

Mrs. Pascoe stopped slapping for a moment. "I don't know what that is," she said.

"He's left his book," said Phrynne, on a new tack.

Mrs. Pascoe looked at it indifferently across the lounge.

"I wonder what he's reading," continued Phrynne. "Fox's *Lives of the Martyrs,* I expect." A small unusual devil seemed to have entered into her.

But Mrs. Pascoe knew the answer. "It's always the same," she said, contemptuously. "He only reads one. It's called *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World.* He's been reading it ever since he came here. When he gets to the end, he starts again."

"Should I take it up to him?" asked Gerald. It was neither courtesy nor inclination, but rather a fear lest the commandant return to the lounge, a desire, after those few minutes of reflection, to cross-examine.

"Thanks very much," said Mrs. Pascoe, as if relieved of a similar apprehension. "Room One. Next to the suit of Japanese armor." She went on tipping and banging. To Gerald's inflamed nerves, her behavior seemed too consciously normal.

He collected the book and made his way upstairs. The volume was bound in real leather, and the top of its pages were gilded, apparently a presentation copy. Outside the lounge, Gerald looked at the fly leaf: in a very large hand was written "To my dear Son, Raglan, on his being honoured by the Queen. From his proud Father, B. Shotcroft, Major-General." Beneath the inscription a very ugly military crest had been appended by a stamper of primitive type.

The suit of Japanese armor lurked in a dark corner, as the commandant himself had done when Gerald had first encountered him. The wide brim of the helmet con-

cealed the black eyeholes in the headpiece; the mustache bristled realistically. It was exactly as if the figure stood guard over the door behind it. On this door was no number, but, there being no other in sight, Gerald took it to be the door of Number One. A short way down the dim empty passage was a window, the ancient sashes of which shook in the din and blast of the bells. Gerald knocked sharply.

If there was a reply, the bells drowned it, and he knocked again. When to the third knocking there was still no answer, he gently opened the door. He really had to know whether all would, or could, be well if Phrynne, and doubtless he also, were at all costs to remain in their room until it was dawn. He looked into the room and caught his breath.

There was no artificial light, but the curtains, if there were any, had been drawn back from the single window, and the bottom sash forced up as far as it would go. On the floor by the dusky void, a maelstrom of sound, knelt the commandant, his cropped white hair faintly catching the moonless glimmer, as his head lay on the sill, like that of a man about to be guillotined. His face was in his hands, but slightly sideways, so that Gerald received a shadowy, distorted idea of his expression. Some might have called it ecstatic, but Gerald found it agonized. It frightened him more than anything which had yet happened. Inside the room the bells were like plunging, roaring lions.

He stood for some considerable time quite unable to move. He could not determine whether or not the commandant knew he was there. The commandant gave no direct sign of it, but more than once he writhed and shuddered in Gerald's direction, like an unquiet sleeper made more unquiet by an interloper. It was a matter of doubt whether Gerald should leave the book, and he decided to do so mainly because the thought of further contact with it displeased him. He crept into the room and softly laid it on a hardly visible wooden trunk at the foot of the plain metal bedstead. There seemed no other furniture in the room. Outside the door, the hanging mailed fingers of the Japanese figure touched his wrist.

He had not been away from the lounge for long, but it was long enough for Mrs. Pascoe to have begun again to drink. She had left the tidying up half completed, or rather the room half disarranged, and was leaning against the overmantel, drawing heavily on a dark tumbler of whiskey. Phrynne had not yet finished her Ovaltine.

"How long before the bells stop?" asked Gerald, as soon as he opened the lounge doors. Now he was resolved that, come what might, they must go. The impossibility of sleep should serve as an excuse.

"I don't expect Mrs. Pascoe can know any more than we can," said Phrynne.

"You should have told us about this—this annual event before accepting our booking."

Mrs. Pascoe drank some more whiskey. Gerald suspected that it was neat. "It's not always the same night," she said throatily, looking at the floor.

"We're not staying," said Gerald wildly.

"Darling!" Phrynne caught him by the arm.

"Leave this to me, Phrynne." He addressed Mrs. Pascoe. "We'll pay for the room, of course, Please order me a car."

Mrs. Pascoe was now regarding him stonily. When he asked for a car, she gave a very short laugh. Then her face changed, she made an effort, and she said, "You mustn't take the commandant so seriously, you know."

Phrynne glanced quickly at her husband.

The whiskey was finished. Mrs. Pascoe placed the empty glass on the plastic overmantel with too much of a thud. "No one takes Commandant Shotcroft seriously," she said. "Not even his nearest and dearest."

"Has he any?" asked Phrynne. "He seemed so lonely and pathetic."

"He's Don and I's mascot," she said, the drink interfering with her grammar. But not even the drink could leave any doubt about her rancor.

"I thought he had personality," said Phrynne.

"That and a lot more, no doubt," said Mrs. Pascoe. "But they pushed him out, all the same."

"Out of what?"

"Cashiered, court-martialed, badges of rank stripped off, sword broken in half, muffled drums, the works."

"Poor old man. I'm sure it was a miscarriage of justice."

"That's because you don't know him."

Mrs. Pascoe looked as if she were waiting for Gerald to offer her another whiskey.

"It's a thing he could never live down," said Phrynne, brooding to herself, and tucking her legs beneath her. "No wonder he's so queer, if all the time it was a mistake."

"I just told you it was not a mistake," said Mrs. Pascoe insolently.

"How can we possibly know?"

"You can't. *I* can. No one better." She was at once aggressive and tearful.

"If you want to be paid," cried Gerald, forcing himself in, "make out your bill. Phrynne, come upstairs and pack." If only he hadn't made her unpack between their walk and dinner.

Slowly Phrynne uncoiled and rose to her feet. She had no intention of either packing or departing, but nor was she going to argue.

"I shall need your help," she said, softly. "If I'm going to pack."

In Mrs. Pascoe there was another change. Now she looked terrified. "Don't go. Please don't go. Not now. It's too late."

Gerald confronted her. "Too late for what?" he asked harshly.

Mrs. Pascoe looked paler than ever. "You said you wanted a car," she faltered. "You're too late." Her voice trailed away.

Gerald took Phrynne by the arm. "Come on up."

Before they reached the door, Mrs. Pascoe made a further attempt. "You'll be all right if you stay. Really you will." Her voice, normally somewhat strident, was so feeble that the bells obliterated it. Gerald observed that from somewhere she had produced the whiskey bottle and was refilling her tumbler.

With Phrynne on his arm he went first to the stout front door. To his surprise it was neither locked nor bolted, but opened at a half turn of the handle. Outside the building the whole sky was full of bells, the air an inferno of ringing.

He thought that for the first time Phrynne's face also seemed strained and crestfallen. "They've been ringing too long," she said, drawing close to him. "I wish they'd stop."

"We're packing and going. I needed to know whether we could get out this way. We must shut the door quietly."

It creaked a bit on its hinges, and he hesitated with it half shut, uncertain whether to rush the creak or to ease it. Suddenly, something dark and shapeless, with its arm seeming to hold a black vesture over its head, flitted, all sharp angles, like a bat, down the narrow ill-lighted street, the sound of its passage audible to none. It was the first being that either of them had seen in the streets of Holihaven, and Gerald was acutely relieved that he alone had set eyes upon it. With his hand trembling, he shut the door much too sharply.

But no one could possibly have heard, although he stopped for a second outside the lounge. He could hear Mrs. Pascoe now weeping hysterically, and again was glad that Phrynne was a step or two ahead of him. Upstairs the commandant's door lay straight before them; they had to pass close beside the Japanese figure, in order to take the passage to the left of it.

But soon they were in their room, with the key turned in the big rim lock.

"Oh, God," cried Gerald, sinking on the double bed. "It's pandemonium." Not for the first time that evening he was instantly more frightened than ever by the unintended appositeness of his own words.

"It's pandemonium all right," said Phrynne, almost calmly. "And we're not going out in it."

He was at a loss to divine how much she knew, guessed, or imag-

ined; and any word of enlightenment from him might be inconceivably dangerous. But he was conscious of the strength of her resistance, and lacked the reserves to battle with it.

She was looking out of the window into the main street. "We might *will* them to stop," she suggested wearily.

Gerald was now far less frightened of the bells continuing than of their ceasing. But that they should go on ringing until day broke seemed hopelessly impossible.

Then one peal stopped. There could be no other explanation for the obvious diminution in sound.

"You see!" said Phrynne.

Gerald sat up straight on the side of the bed.

Almost at once further sections of sound subsided, quickly one after the other, until only a single peal was left, that which had begun the ringing. Then the single peal tapered off into a single bell. The single bell tolled on its own, disjointedly, five or six or seven times. Then it stopped, and there was nothing.

Gerald's head was a cave of echoes, mountingly muffled by the noisy current of his blood.

"Oh, goodness," said Phrynne, turning from the window and stretching her arms above her head. "Let's go somewhere else tomorrow." She began to take off her dress.

Sooner than usual they were in bed and in one another's arms. Gerald had carefully not looked out of the window, and neither of them suggested that it should be opened, as they usually did.

"As it's a four-poster, shouldn't we draw the curtains?" asked Phrynne. "And be really snug? After those damned bells?"

"We should suffocate."

"Did they suffocate when everyone had four-posters?"

"They only drew the curtains when people were likely to pass through the room."

"Darling, you're shivering. I think we *should* draw them."

"Lie still instead and love me."

But all his nerves were straining out into the silence. There was no sound of any kind, beyond the hotel or within it, not a creaking floorboard or a prowling cat or a distant owl. He had been afraid to look at his watch when the bells stopped, or since; the number of the dark hours before they could leave Holihaven weighed on him. The vision of the commandant kneeling in the dark window was clear before his eyes, as if the intervening paneled walls were made of stage gauze, and the thing he had seen in the street darted on its angular way back and forth through memory.

Then passion began to open its petals within him, layer upon slow layer, like an illusionist's red flower which, without soil or sun or sap, grows as it is watched. The languor of tenderness began to fill the

musty room with its texture and perfume. The transparent walls became again opaque; the old man's vaticinations, mere obsession. The street must have been empty, as it was now; the eye deceived.

But perhaps rather it was the boundless sequacity of love that deceived, and most of all in the matter of the time which had passed since the bells stopped ringing, for suddenly Phrynne drew very close to him, and he heard steps in the thoroughfare outside and a voice calling. These were loud steps, audible from afar even through the shut window, and the voice had the possessed stridency of the street evangelist.

"The dead are awake!"

Not even the thick bucolic accent, the guttural vibrato of emotion, could twist or mask the meaning. At first Gerald lay listening with all his body and concentrating the more as the noise grew, then he sprang from the bed and ran to the window.

A burly, long-limbed man in a seaman's jersey was running down the street, coming clearly into view for a second at each lamp, and between them lapsing into a swaying lumpy wraith. As he shouted his joyous message, he crossed from side to side and waved his arms like a bacchant. By flashes, Gerald could see that his weatherworn face was transfigured.

"The dead are awake!"

Already, behind him, people were coming out of their houses, and descending from the rooms above shops. There were men, women and children. Most of them were fully dressed and must have been waiting in silence and darkness for the call, but a few were disheveled in night attire or the first garments which had come to hand. Some formed themselves into groups and advanced arm in arm, as if towards the conclusion of a Blackpool beanfest. More came singly, ecstatic, and waving their arms above their heads, as the first man had done. All cried out, again and again, with no cohesion or harmony. "The dead are awake! The dead are awake!"

Gerald became aware that Phrynne was standing behind him.

"The commandant warned me," he said brokenly. "We should have gone."

Phrynne shook her head and took his arm. "Nowhere to go," she said. But her voice was soft with fear, and her eyes were blank. "I don't expect they'll trouble *us*."

Swiftly Gerald drew the thick plush curtains, leaving them in complete darkness. "We'll sit it out," he said, slightly histrionic in his fear. "No matter what happens."

He scrambled across to the switch. But when he pressed it, light did not come. "The current's gone. We must get back into bed."

"Gerald! Come and help me." He remembered that she was curiously

vulnerable in the dark. He found his way to her and guided her to the bed.

"No more love," she said ruefully and affectionately, her teeth chattering.

He kissed her lips with what gentleness the total night made possible.

"They were going towards the sea," she said timidly.

"We must think of something else."

But the noise was still growing. The whole community seemed to be passing down the street, yelling the same dreadful words again and again.

"Do you think we can?"

"Yes," said Gerald. "It's only until tomorrow."

"They can't be actually dangerous," said Phrynne. "Or it would be stopped."

"Yes, of course."

By now, as always happens, the crowd had amalgamated their utterances and were beginning to shout in unison. They were like agitators bawling a slogan, or massed troublemakers at a football game. But at the same time the noise was beginning to draw away. Gerald suspected that the entire population of the place was on the march.

Soon it was apparent that a processional route was being followed. The tumult could be heard winding about from quarter to quarter, sometimes drawing near, so that Gerald and Phrynne were once more seized by the first chill of panic, then again almost fading away. It was possibly this great variability in the volume of the sound which led Gerald to believe that there were distinct pauses in the massed shouting, periods when it was superseded by far, disorderly cheering. Certainly it began also to seem that the thing shouted had changed, but he could not make out the new cry, although unwillingly he strained to do so.

"It's extraordinary how frightened one can be," said Phrynne, "even when one is not directly menaced. It must prove that we all belong to one another, or whatever it is, after all."

In many similar remarks they discussed the thing at one remove. Experience showed that this was better than not discussing it at all.

In the end there could be no doubt that the shouting had stopped and that now the crowd was singing. It was no song that Gerald had ever heard, but something about the way it was sung convinced him that it was a hymn or psalm set to an out-of-date popular tune. Once more the crowd was approaching, this time steadily but with strange, interminable slowness.

"What the hell are they doing now?" asked Gerald of the blackness, his nerves wound so tight that the foolish question was forced out of them.

Palpably the crowd had completed its peregrination and was returning up the main street from the sea. The singers seemed to gasp and fluctuate, as if worn out with gay exercise, like children at a party. There was a steady undertow of scraping and scuffling. Time passed, and more time.

Phrynne spoke. "I believe they're *dancing.*"

She moved slightly, as if she thought of going to see.

"No, no," said Gerald and clutched her fiercely.

There was a tremendous concussion on the ground floor below them. The front door had been violently thrown back. They could hear the hotel filling with a stamping, singing mob.

Doors banged everywhere, and furniture was overturned, as the manic throng surged and stumbled through the involved darkness of the old building. Glasses went and china and Birmingham brass warming pans. In a moment, Gerald heard the Japanese armor crash to the boards. Phrynne screamed. Then a mighty shoulder, made strong by the sea's assault, rammed at the paneling, and their door was down.

"The living and the dead dance together.

Now's the time. Now's the place. Now's the weather."

At last Gerald could make out the words.

The stresses in the song were heavily beaten down by much repetition.

Hand in hand, through the dim grey gap of the doorway, the dancers lumbered and shambled in, singing frenziedly but brokenly, ecstatic but exhausted. Through the stuffy blackness they swayed and shambled, more and more of them, until the room must have been packed tight with them.

Phrynne screamed again. "The smell. Oh, God, the smell."

It was the smell they had encountered on the beach; in the congested room, it was no longer merely offensive, but obscene, unspeakable.

Phrynne was hysterical. All self-control gone, she was scratching and tearing, and screaming again and again. Gerald tried to hold her, but one of the dancers struck him so hard in the darkness that she was jolted out of his arms. Instantly it seemed that she was no longer there at all.

The dancers were thronging everywhere, their limbs whirling, their lungs bursting with the rhythm of the song. It was difficult for Gerald even to call out. He tried to struggle after Phrynne, but immediately a blow from a massive elbow knocked him to the floor, an abyss of invisible trampling feet.

But soon the dancers were going again, not only from the room, but, it seemed, from the building also. Crushed and tormented though he was, Gerald could hear the song

being resumed in the street, as the various frenzied groups debouched and reunited. Within, before long there was nothing but the chaos, the darkness, and the putrescent odor. Gerald felt so sick that he had to battle with unconsciousness. He could not think or move, despite the desperate need.

Then he struggled into a sitting position and sank his head on the torn sheets of the bed. For an uncertain period he was insensible to everything, but in the end he heard steps approaching down the dark passage. His door was pushed back, and the commandant entered, gripping a lighted candle. He seemed to disregard the flow of hot wax which had already congealed on much of his knotted hand.

"She's safe. Small thanks to you."

The commandant stared icily at Gerald's undignified figure. Gerald tried to stand. He was terribly bruised and so giddy that he wondered if this could be concussion. But relief rallied him.

"Is it thanks to *you*?"

"She was caught up in it. Dancing with the rest." The commandant's eyes glowed in the candlelight. The singing and the dancing had almost died away.

Still Gerald could do no more than sit upon the bed. His voice was low and indistinct, as if coming from outside his body. "Were they . . . were some of them . . ."

The commandant replied more scornful than ever of his weakness. "She was between two of them. Each had one of her hands."

Gerald could not look at him. "What did you do?" he asked in the same remote voice.

"I did what had to be done. I hope I was in time." After the slightest possible pause he continued. "You'll find her downstairs."

"I'm grateful. Such a silly thing to say, but what else is there?"

"Can you walk?"

"I think so."

"I'll light you down." The commandant's tone was as uncompromising as always.

There were two more candles in the lounge, and Phrynne, wearing a woman's belted overcoat which was not hers, sat between them, drinking. Mrs. Pascoe, fully dressed but with eyes averted, pottered about the wreckage. It seemed hardly more than as if she were completing the task which earlier she had left unfinished.

"Darling, look at you!" Phrynne's words were still hysterical, but her voice was as gentle as it usually was.

Gerald, bruises and thoughts of concussion forgotten, dragged her into his arms. They embraced silently for a long time; then he looked into her eyes.

"Here I am," she said, and looked away. "Not to worry."

Silently and unnoticed, the commandant had already retreated.

Without returning his gaze, Phrynne finished her drink as she stood there. Gerald supposed that it

was one of Mrs. Pascoe's concoctions.

It was so dark where Mrs. Pascoe was working that her labors could have been achieving little, but she said nothing to her visitors, nor they to her. At the door Phrynne unexpectedly stripped off the overcoat and threw it on a chair. Her nightdress was so torn that she stood almost naked. Dark though it was, Gerald saw Mrs. Pascoe regarding Phrynne's pretty body with a stare of animosity.

"May we take one of the candles?" he said, normal standards reasserting themselves in him.

But Mrs. Pascoe continued to stand silently staring, and they lighted themselves through the wilderness of broken furniture to the ruins of their bedroom. The Japanese figure was still prostrate, and the commandant's door shut. And the smell had almost gone.

Even by seven o'clock the next morning surprisingly much had been done to restore order. But no one seemed to be about, and Gerald and Phrynne departed without a word.

In Wrack Street a milkman was delivering, but Gerald noticed that his cart bore the name of another town. A small boy whom they encountered later on an obscure purposeful errand might, however, have been indigenous, and when they reached Station Road, they saw a small plot of land on which already men were silently at work with spades in their hands. They were as thick as flies on a wound, and as black. In the darkness of the previous evening, Gerald and Phrynne had missed the place. A board named it the New Municipal Cemetery.

In the mild light of an autumn morning the sight of the black and silent toilers was horrible, but Phrynne did not seem to find it so. On the contrary, her cheeks reddened and her soft mouth became fleetingly more voluptuous still.

She seemed to have forgotten Gerald, so that he was able to examine her closely for a moment. It was the first time he had done so since the night before. Then, once more, she became herself. In those previous seconds Gerald had become aware of something dividing them which neither of them would ever mention or ever forget.

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