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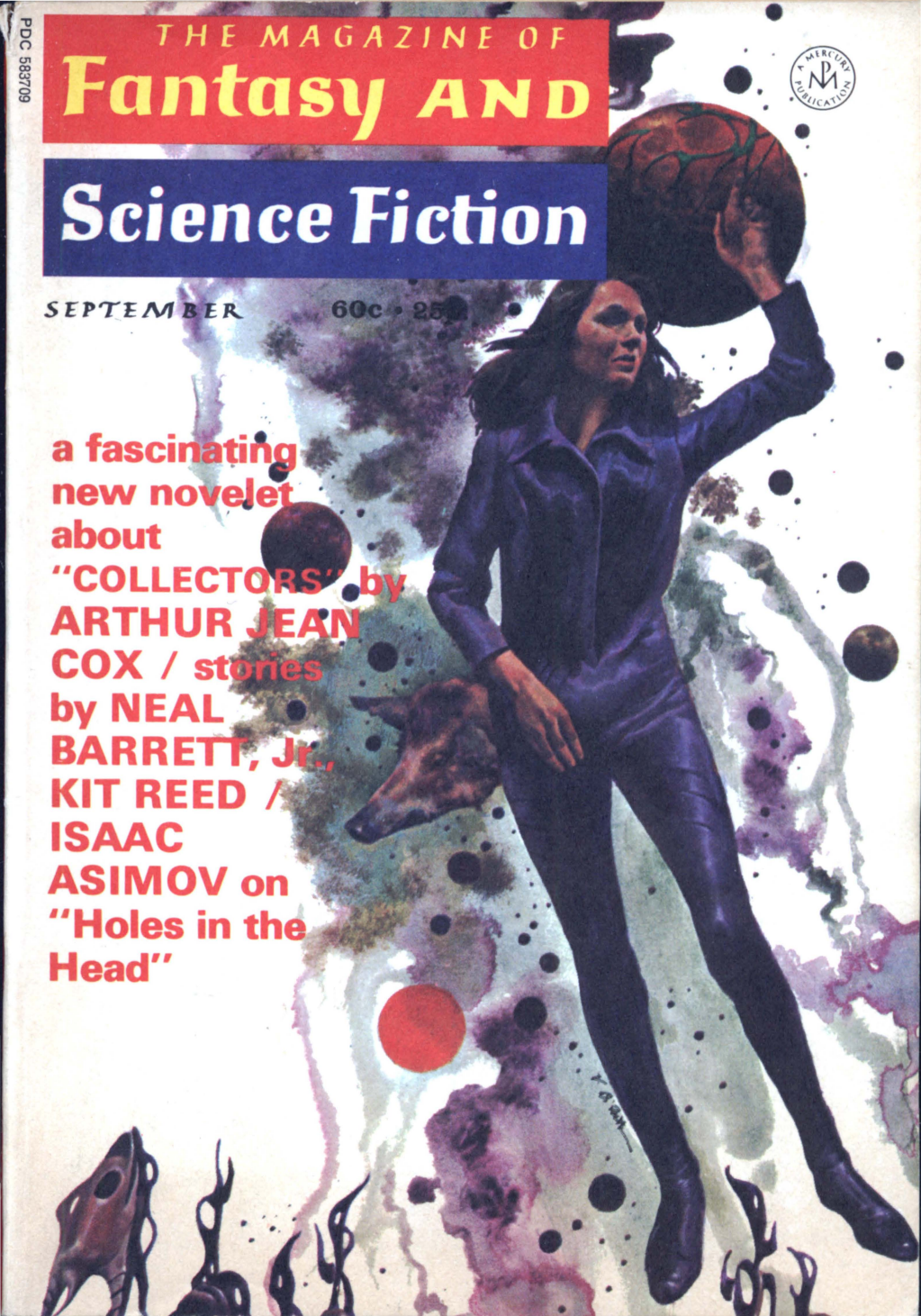

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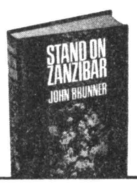

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As a sidelight to the fascinating story you are about to read, Mr. Cox writes: "The late Adolphe de Castro, who collaborated with Ambrose Bierce, told me some years ago that he had gone to Mexico to try to discover what had happened to Bierce and that Pancho Villa had told him that he, Villa, had personally shot Bierce. But this explanation of Bierce's disappearance has not been accepted by everyone as final." Charles Fort, for instance, theorized that somebody was collecting Ambroses, and that is the starting point for Mr. Cox's story about a trio of contemporary collectors.

A Collector of Ambroses

by ARTHUR JEAN COX

THE AMBROSIA BOOKSTORE, ON a quiet side street in Glendale, was the cleanest, neatest, best lighted bookshop in the whole wide world. Its merchandise—and this might have surprised someone wandering in casually off the street—consisted almost entirely of old pulp magazines, comic books and comic strips, Big Little Books, and movie posters. But so neatly was everything wrapped (in cellophane) and displayed that the word which would be least likely to suggest itself to this casual wanderer would be the word "trash." No other word in the English language was so defied, so set at a distance; the immaculate shop was its very antonym. But if this visitor, possibly middle-aged and sour of face and, moreover, abysmally ignorant of the livelier arts, was unimpressed by the crisp and crinkly setting and unintimidated by the poster of King Kong glowering down from the wall—if this visitor, on seeing the mint copy of the first issue of *Superman* proudly displayed in the glass case, had felt that word rising to his lips like a bubble of gas from his dyspeptic stomach, he would quickly have choked it down again on seeing the price tag ($200) also displayed. And looking around, he would have seen other things that would fill his soul with awe: comics for sale at prices that would deprive him of all power of laughter; and old science fiction magazines for

which were asked amounts that might well have evoked their exclamatory titles—*Amazing! Startling! Astounding!*

What sort of person, he might wonder, paid such amounts? Did anyone pay them? Well . . . there were customers in the shop, mostly, though not exclusively, boys and young men. He would hear none object to the prices, see none express astonishment. Watching and listening, not obtrusively but furtively and feeling rather like a spy, he would discover that many of the customers were known to each other and to the proprietors: that here was a society of sorts, a little world of gossip and of curious esoteric knowledge, of ambitions satisfied and aspirations thwarted. If he wished to know more, he could easily strike up a conversation with one of the browsers in the store, a young man, for instance, in horn-rimmed glasses and a black bow tie, artfully eliciting from him information about the owners, their names, ages, and so on. This young man would cheerfully answer the questions at first; but gradually becoming conscious of something peculiarly insistent (say in the stranger's manner), he would study him curiously and then drift away among the counters. After which, our visitor would wander outside again and, standing on the sidewalk in the bright California sunshine, would look around as if to get his bearings and, Glendale being a small town, would very likely see an acquaintance—a senior citizen, perhaps, loitering in a straw hat on the opposite side of the street—and would nod to him, as if in recognition, and then walk away, the neat little magazine store slowly fading from his memory like a dream. Stranger things have been known to happen.

But behind him, the store itself would not fade away but go quietly about its business. Or quietly enough, making allowance for a rather large amount of chatter.

The Ambrosia Bookstore was presided over by a young couple named Ambrose. Bill and Coolanthe Ambrose. They were very much alike, so much so that they had more than once been mistaken for brother and sister. Both were blond, blue-eyed and delicate and with remarkably fresh complexions. They were, as someone had once said, mint copies. They even had the same last name. This might not have struck anyone as odd, inasmuch as they were married, but Mrs. Ambrose had been a Miss Ambrose, and there had been for a time some sticky business with the registrar's office back in Minneapolis (their native town) before they had managed to prove that they were not barred from obtaining a license by any traceable consanguinity.

Their marriage had not been blessed with issue (nor was such an issue in store), and yet they were not alone. Not only had an eager horde of collectors found the way

to their door, but they had a faithful friend who was very particular in his attentions to them. He was so much in their confidence that he had free access even to the Back Room— that so mysterious, so wonderful, Back Room, upon the momentarily opened portal of which (opened to admit *him*) a hundred young fans and collectors had turned their wistful eyes. So Bill and Coolanthe were not surprised one Thursday afternoon when the store was otherwise quiet and deserted—the calm before the storm, Bill afterwards said— and they were puttering in the Back Room, to see a familiar figure come through the tinkling front door of the shop and present itself a moment later at the generously gaping entrance of that sanctum sanctorum.

"Greetings, Sid!" called out Bill, gaily. "Have you seen the Dweller in the Closet lately? Would he like to visit again? Is he prepared to pay rent?"

This was a reference to the famous Closet Incident, which could never be mentioned too often and which ordinarily couldn't fail to evoke a smile from Sidney. The Dweller in the Closet had been Jack McMinion. Jack was a writer in a modest way, with a dozen or so stories scattered through the various science fiction and fantasy magazines. These had never been collected in book form, and he was fond of saying that few things were so rare as a complete Jack McMinion. The Ambroses didn't much care about that. What had brought Jack to their attention was that he had a closet, a Magic Closet, as he had humorously and affectionately termed it, from which he had one day extracted and offered for sale some fifteen years' accumulation of old magazines and books. This they couldn't overlook. For curiously enough, the Ambroses were fighting a far-flung, many-sided war against all other dealers in the field. Their conversation consisted of a running commentary on the eccentricities and suspect practices of all dealers other than the Ambroses; and they had a habit of seizing upon one particular person, electing him Enemy of the Month, and concentrating all their scorn upon him until they had demolished him to their own satisfaction. They devoted the Merry Month of May to this new "competitor," Jack McMinion.

The Ambroses called Jack one day early in May and asked him to stop by. They had something to discuss with him which might be to his interest. He came in and they greeted him graciously, even effusively. Bill draped his arm about Jack's shoulder and invited him into the Back Room, a rare privilege. Jack was touched and gratified; he felt that he had misjudged the Ambroses . . . for he had heard stories. They said with a smile that they too had a Magic Closet, the one right

here. Wouldn't he step in and examine the rarities it contained while they attended to some urgent business in the shop? He could take his time; they were in no hurry. Jack stepped in—and Sidney, who had held himself in abeyance behind a book case, glided forth and clapped the door shut and locked it. The Ambroses then walked into the shop, which was crowded, it being Saturday afternoon, and announced that they had just had "the good fortune to acquire a complete Jack McMinion."

Coolanthe released Jack after an indefinite period of time. She says twenty minutes; he says half an hour. Jack was rather heated and flustered. He indignantly used the phrase "unlawful confinement," but the Ambroses merely laughed at that, saying that after all it had just been an accident— the door had swung to and the latch had caught. He couldn't prove otherwise, could he? And he hadn't been harmed, had he? And wasn't he being just a wee bit humorless? This last was a point that they developed extensively in print, and very effectively. Sidney disarmed criticism further by writing a sonnet in Lovecraft's manner, "The Dweller in the Closet," which was mimeographed in the pages of *Serendipity*, a publication for collectors, and much admired.

"Would he like to lease or buy?" persisted Bill. "Does he know what property taxes are like these days?"

But this time his humorous sally failed to get a grin from Sidney. Sidney was grave. Sidney was unusually grave as he came forward and wordlessly handed Bill what appeared to be a piece of a page torn from a newspaper.

"What's this? A dealer? . . . advertising in a neighborhood throwaway? Must be some kind of—"

Bill was probably going to say "junkshop," a favorite phrase of contempt with him, but he was struck speechless in an instant. He stared.

" 'The Winter 1928 *Amazing Stories Quarterly* . . . 25¢.' 25¢! That must be a misprint for $25. And what's this? 'First issue of *Weird Tales*, 25¢.' 'Various issues of *Superman*, *Batman*, etc., 1939, 1940, 1941 . . . 10¢ each'! This guy must be insane! Who the hell is he, anyway?"

He glanced at the top of the column, in which the name of the dealer was printed in block letters.

"A. I. Sorbma? Never heard of him. Wait a minute! Wait! Wait . . ."

The knowing Sidney waited.

"A. I. Sorbma . . . A. I. Sorbma!" Bill's scalp crawled, visibly. *"Why—that's Ambrosia spelled backwards!"*

Coolanthe hung on Bill's shoulder, mouth open, eyes wide. "It's probably some trick of that Flowers creep," she said, Flowers being the name of their chief competitor.

"I'll bet there's no such place even," said her husband. "Only,

there's an address given . . . in Burbank, not far from here. No phone number. Hmmm, there's a mystery here," mused Bill, fingering his hairless chin. "I think Coo and me should take a run over there and look at the place and maybe have a few words with this fellow, if he's real. Why don't you come along, Sid? You can lend moral support."

"That's why I'm here," said their friend.

This friend's name was Sidney Fergus.

Sidney was not very pleasing to look at. He had a swarthy complexion, further darkened by a perpetual five o'clock shadow, large eyes, a crooked mouth and, somehow, although he was barely thirty—the Ambroses, of course, thought "poor old Sid" was over the hill—a battered and weathered look. In other words, he was definitely not a mint copy; but despite this, he possessed a degree of charm that had made him many friends and admirers. He had a way of bestowing his full attention upon whomever he was speaking to, which, combined with a grave and yet whimsical courtesy, rendered him irresistible. And he had also something that particularly intrigued the ladies: a touch of iron in his very suavity, a glowing little spark that looked as if it might, under some circumstances, flame into violence.

Sidney's relationship with the Ambroses was puzzling to some of the fellows in the front room, but others had rightly made out that it was of a half-intimate, half-business nature. He was useful to them in various ways, and they rewarded him with small items from their stock, either at discount prices or as outright gifts. He had an insatiable appetite for fantasy, particularly the more fanciful kind, but it was sometimes observed that he indulged this taste with a slight air of condescension, as if conscious of an inward superiority to such reading. Perhaps this was because he was more than a mere collector of old copies of *Weird Tales*. He had a serious literary interest. He was, by his own confession, the World's Foremost Authority on Ambrose Bierce.

Yes, *Ambrose* Bierce. One of the things that had most recommended him to the Ambroses when he first met them was his saying to them in his most charming manner that *he* was that collector of Ambroses mentioned by Charles Fort. Whereupon Bill explained to the blankly enquiring Coolanthe that Ambrose Bierce—

"The great writer Ambrose Bierce," amended Sidney.

—The great writer Ambrose Bierce had disappeared in Mexico in 1913 and that another man named Ambrose . . . Ambrose—

"Small," supplied Sidney.

—Ambrose Small had disappeared about the same time, and

so the eccentric genius Charles Fort had theorized that somebody was collecting Ambroses.

Bill and Sidney were both very much amused by this, but Coolanthe didn't join in the laughter. Her brow was . . . not exactly furrowed, but touched with shadow.

"Coo's probably wondering," said Bill, "why anyone would want to collect Ambroses."

"Perhaps," speculated Sidney playfully, "he's tried collecting Joneses and found they won't do. Or maybe he collects Ambroses because nobody else does—it gives him a clear field and no competition. Or maybe he's looking for the right one and simply gathers in any Ambroses he runs across in the hope of getting that one. Or better yet, maybe he collects all Ambroses to cover up the fact that he's really just interested in one particular Ambrose—and perhaps, my dear, that one is *you.*"

But the sunny beam he directed her way failed to dispel the shadow on Coo's brow; so Sidney, modulating his tone downward, said that of course such a notion as to why Ambrose Bierce had disappeared was not to be taken seriously. He himself knew something of the subject. He had looked into the matter. He had written a book, a book which the Establishment press had not seen fit to publish, in which he presented irrefutable proof that Ambrose Bierce had not been shot by Pancho Villa, as some thought. No, that had been a cover story to deceive the dreaded *Federales.* In fact, hinted Sidney, his grey eye taking in both the Ambroses, Bierce had lived on for some time and had been, secretly, the mastermind and guiding spirit behind the Mexican Revolution, drawing upon his experiences in the American Civil War to lead the Mexican people to victory.

Bill was much edified by this, but Coolanthe was *still* puzzled. Sidney naturally supposed that she was pondering the plausibilities of his statement, but what she finally brought out was:

"Do you think there really is such a thing as a 'great writer'?"

Sidney gazed upon her a moment or two, smiling politely, and then turned aside to Bill and to a new topic.

Sidney was certain there was one great writer, at least. His admiration for his favorite was unbounded and unqualified. Rumor said (and Rumor was right for once) that he had quarreled brutally with his best friend when that friend had dared to assert that in his opinion Bierce was not of the first rank. "Not even," that friend had added (and Rumor, whose information was all second-hand, failed to quote this), "not even among fantasy writers." This was a remark for which Sidney had never forgiven Jack—for that friend had been, indeed, Jack McMinion. Jack had said more than that, though, much more.

"You will notice," said Jack, pacing back and forth in a green shirt as Sidney sat listening, "that every story by Bierce ends in the same way, with a blow on the head. Or its equivalent, you understand. It's almost as if he had a program. What he does is he takes up one by one in his short stories the various virtues and sentiments, such as patriotic courage, childish innocence, the faithful love of a sweetheart, and so on, and then administers to each that blow on the head which is, *he* thinks, the period to every sentence and the sum of every transaction. He admires courage and so he's rather wistful when he gives it the ol' knock on the block, like he does in 'A Son of the Gods,' but he gives it, nevertheless. What he's doing, of course, is debunking romance and sentiment, but he goes after bigger game than that. For instance, in 'Parker Adderson, Philosopher,' what he knocks down is philosophical detachment. And in 'Moxon's Master'—one of his better stories, by the way—he manages to identify intellectual excitement with chess playing and then gives it those same five knuckles on the skull— gives the abstract a taste of the concrete. Bierce would refute Bishop Berkeley—or Beezlebub—not with his foot but with his fist."

Jack laughed a little at this, as if to deprecate his own eloquence. He glanced at Sidney . . . who smiled. He went on to say, as Sidney sat waiting with his fists on his knees, that Bierce's relation to fantasy was peculiar and his reputation among fantasy readers rather curious. "Consider what I think is his most powerful story, 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge'—you remember it, don't you, Sidney?"

Sidney, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on Jack, nodded his head twice, slowly. He remembered it. It was the story of a civilian being hung by Union troops during the Civil War. He is dropped, a rope about his neck, from a bridge towards the river below. We see what occurs to him: The rope breaks and he plunges into the river unharmed; he works out of his bonds in the water, escapes from a hail of bullets by swimming downstream, makes it to shore and runs through the woods to his house, sees his wife on the veranda, runs towards her, reaching out his arms, and—"there was a stunning blow at the back of his neck." He is hanged. All these "occurrences" were his wishful daydream as he dropped through the air to the end of the rope.

"Notice," said Jack, raising a finger, "that even the sensation of being hanged is described as a blow—if not exactly to the head. But my point is this: What story ever so desperately embodied the impulse to *fantasize*? And what story ever brought that impulse so abruptly and so brutally up short? And yet it is characteristic of Bierce's entire practice. He takes

romance, sentiment, fancy, gives each just enough rope, and then . . . that sickening thud. It's as if he were saying that this, in the end, is what everything comes to, this blow on the head; and since it must all end that way, nothing is really real except it. Everything else is just pretense, vanity, words, idle show. He thinks the Good and the Beautiful are discredited because they must succumb at last to that fatal blow. It's a form of power worship, isn't it? He's siding with what is stronger and not with what is better. It's narrow. It's the reverse of generous. It's pro death. And when you come right down to it, it's anti the spirit of fantasy. I think that's something for you to think about, Sidney," mused Jack, pausing speculatively before his friend, "that you, who like fantasy so much, should have placed this writer at the center of your imaginative life." Sidney smiled again, ever so slightly.

Jack went on to talk about the pedantry of Bierce's style, his brutality, and even the phenomenal ugliness of his mistresses, all of which, he argued, was relevant to the discussion. Oh, he admitted that Bierce had his strengths as a writer and his virtues as a man, but he concluded by comparing him to the gentle Nathaniel Hawthorne, much to Bierce's disadvantage. "In short," said Jack, who had spoken at some length, "I wouldn't trade one Nathaniel Hawthorne for a dozen Ambrose Bierces. That's putting it a little strongly, I know, but I think," he said, turning his innocent and mild gaze upon the waiting Sidney, "that the best way to give an opinion is to express what you feel as firmly as you can. Making all due distinctions, of course. Er . . . what do you think of all this, Sidney?"

And Sidney rose from where he sat and administered to Jack a blow on the head which felled him to the floor!

Their friendship was somewhat strained after this. They had been partners in a small publishing venture, to which Jack had supplied the capital, the management and the labor, and Sidney had supplied the genius. The venture came to an end, and Jack was bankrupted because Sidney declined to pay his share of the costs, saying that he had never been a partner in any real sense (which was true enough). Jack felt he couldn't hold him to anything because they had had no written contract. "A handshake," Sidney had declared magnanimously at the time of the agreement, "is good enough for *me*." As indeed it was. Jack even came to believe in time that a handshake was entirely too good for Sidney.

So Jack was ruined. Reduced by necessity, he rummaged in his closet and brought out his science fiction and fantasy collection and offered it for sale in the pages of *Serendipity*. The ad caught the eyes of Sidney and the Ambroses simulta-

neously and became the occasion for their alliance—for that little stack of paper Jack had offered to the public at a sacrifice had been large enough to excite the greed, envy and malice of the Ambroses. Sidney supplied them with many little bits of information about their "competitor's" foibles and weaknesses and shared their laughter, a generous action which cemented his friendship with them and showed them the way in which he might be useful. He had far more wit than they, and he composed for them three or four laughable broadsides (such as LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM, in which he sent up a pyrotechnical display of puns on their chief rival's name) and which were published in the guise of advertisements for the Ambrosia Bookstore. In addition to his other talents, he had a happy knack of finding out people who had items or collections to sell (dirt cheap) or money to spend (for items that were not dirt cheap) and bringing them around to the store.

The Ambroses were not ungrateful for these attentions. A fitful stream of magazines, books, and even small checks flowed, or trickled, from their hands to his; and he, in turn, was inspired to further efforts. He not only put at their service such gifts as he had, but sometimes his moral support—as he was going to do in the present case of this mysterious dealer, Mr. A. I. Sorbma. Bill and Coo would make the frontal assault on that fellow, if he actually existed. It would be *his* job to bring up the flank—that's why he was being taken along. Sidney, loitering on the sidewalk as his new friends carefully locked up their shop, knew this as well as he knew that he had shamefully treated a former friend.

Not that he bothered to explicitly mention either fact to himself.

"Sid, you'll have to sit up front with Coo and me. I've got the back seat filled." Sidney peered into the back of the Ambroses' old grey Plymouth and saw sprawling piles of comic books of the more prosaic kind, nothing that would interest him. "I don't care to bring such trash into the shop," said Bill. "They'll get a little frayed back there before I get around to dumping them on a junkdealer, but the creeps who buy that kind of crap won't care."

They drove towards Burbank. It was a bright sunny day. The tree-shaded street stretched peacefully before them, the light glowing at its far end like a promise. "Have you heard Bierce's definition of a road?" asked Sidney, as they paused at an intersection. "It's 'a strip of land over which one travels from where it was futile to have been to where it is useless to go.' " He chuckled, but that was more or less out of old habit. He was not completely unconscious that on such a beautiful day there was something about this

specimen of wisdom that rather grated on the ear.

"Honey!" shrilled Coo. "The light has changed."

But Bill's eyes were fixed on two young boys on the sidewalk diagonally across the intersection from them. "Do you see what I see? That kid has an early *Batman*. A *very* early *Batman!*" He stepped on the gas, swerved the car across the intersection, and came to a squealing halt beside the two boys.

"Well, young man," said Bill, leaning his head out the window with a most winning smile, "what are you doing with that funny book?"

The two boys, each about six years old, stared at this strange man, suspiciously. The freckled boy with the Snoopy sweater and the *Batman* said, "Selling it. It's mine."

"Of course it's yours, young man," said Bill, soothingly. "I'd like to buy it myself. I like funny books, I do. Here—" shifting his weight to reach into his pocket—"here's a dime for it."

"No. I want one million dollars for it."

Bill turned a disgusted face towards Coo and Sidney. "Has everybody gone crazy today? First, a guy who's giving them away and now . . . this! All right, kid—how about a quarter? I'll give you a quarter for that comic book."

The boy stuck out his lower lip, obstinately. "One. Million. Dollars."

Bill and Coo looked at each other. Both smiled slightly. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do for you, kid," said Bill, reaching into the back and picking up two comics at random. "You see these two funny books? They're worth half a million dollars each." The child stared at the *Love Comics* and the *Bob Hope Comics*, seeming to find them suspect. "Now, two half million dollar books are worth one whole million dollar book—right? Here, take them." He thrust them into the boy's right hand, deftly plucked the *Batman* from the other. "A deal's a deal, kid," he said, and drove off—leaving behind a little boy in tears on the sidewalk.

"Ha, ha!" said Bill. "What a stupid brat! They ought to keep comic books out of the hands of children, anyway. They just abuse the privilege. Put that into the glove compartment, will you, Coo?"

Sidney glanced sideways at the faces of the Ambroses. Both wore the same slight, self-satisfied smile, as if they had just swallowed something particularly agreeable. Sidney was silent, wondering within himself whether A. I. Sorbma would be so easily dealt with as that six-year-old boy.

He didn't have to wonder long, for they hadn't far to go. The address given in the clipping proved to be a short and narrow side street (which they came upon almost by chance) a mile or so from the NBC studios. It was paved with bricks

and looked to be much older, incongruously older, than the surrounding streets. It had originally been some sort of private driveway, perhaps, and was now hardly more than an alley. At first they saw nothing resembling a bookstore. One side of the narrow street, or alley, was completely taken up by a storage warehouse. Opposite, reading back from the corner, was a Sunland filling station, a disused garage, a boarded-up feed and grain store, a small white clapboard building with—this was it—the name A I SORBMA painted in black letters over the door, and a fenced-in vacant lot or yard.

Bill parked the car in the alley, and they walked across the crumbling bricks to the shop front. Piled on a window seat or ledge before the one large window were several magazines and books, as if thrown there casually. They bent their necks and peered in through dirty, flyblown glass, saw several tables stacked and heaped with magazines in no apparent order, the whole place very dark and obviously very dirty.

The Ambroses drew back. Their lips curled in unison. *"It's a junkshop!"*

But Sidney's eyes glittered. It was in just such a place as this, unknown to other collectors and run perhaps by an ignorant old man or woman, stacked with magazines and books emptied out of some forgotten cellar or attic where they had lain untouched for decades, that he might hope to find—oh, anything! *The Tarzan Twins* for a dime, *The Outsider* by Lovecraft for fifty cents, sundry issues of *Unknown Worlds* for a nickle each . . . or even that one wonderful thing, that nameless book or magazine, the existence of which he would learn only when he found it, so rare that no one had even heard of it and more glorious even than those specific titles for which he had haunted second-hand bookshops, Good Will and Salvation Army stores, and miscellaneous rummage sales for years, and which would be *the* treasure, *the* acquisition, never to be duplicated by anyone else in a lifetime of searching.

He straightened and turned away to the door, hoping his friends hadn't noted his excitement or prolonged scrutiny. "We may as well go in . . ."

"It looks like it's deserted," said Coo. "There's no one inside."

But pinned to a half-drawn blind behind the dirty glass door was a scrap of paper on which was scrawled:

PLEASE STEP IN
—*The Spider* (10¢ ea.)

"Ten cents each!" cried Bill, outraged. "He's giving *The Spider* away too! That magazine's hot right now."

Sidney turned the knob and pushed. There was a drawn-out creaking, like the sound effect of an opening door on the old Inner

Sanctum radio program. He stepped inside. Bill and Coo crowded in behind him and closed the door. They stood looking about. The place was dark, except for that portion of the afternoon sun reflected from the white-washed wall of the warehouse opposite—so that even its sunlight was second-hand. But it was enough to strike from the covers of the magazines stacked in the shadowy interior murky little patches of color, like the gleams from riches heaped in a pirate's cave. They listened. Silence. Coo turned her head and sneezed, and the dust went flying from the table nearest at hand, disclosing the covers of old *Science Wonder Stories*, remarkably bright and unfaded under their mantle of dust.

There was, curiously enough, an answering sneeze . . . from somewhere offstage. Sidney had for a moment the oddest impression that it was mocking and derisive.

Some shabby drapes at the back of the shop parted, and an old man came into view, summoned either by Coo's sneeze or by the creaking of the door. Old? He was terribly old. Also, terribly thin, completely bald, short, stooped and potbellied. He was wearing baggy pants held up by suspenders, a tweed vest over a grey flannel shirt, and spectacles of a very antique design, but this last was the only modern touch about him.

The gnome came forward. "May I help you?" Sidney was surprised and even embarrassed to see something very like his own collector's avidity mirrored in the gnome's face. It was, he decided, an eagerness painfully restrained, as if the old man were desperately hungry for customers but afraid of frightening them away by the nakedness of his desire. "I have," said this individual, "old books, magazines and comics, first editions and back numbers. As you can see," he added, making a whimsical little bob, "I'm quite a back number myself."

"We're collectors," said Bill in a suave, modulated drawl. "Of old magazines and comic books, don't you know, and we're interested in seeing what you have, Mr. . . . Mr. Sorbma?"

"Yes, I am Mr. Sorbma."

"Mr. A. I. Sorbma, I believe," said Bill, taking the fragment of newspaper from his pocket and unfolding it.

"Correct," said the old man, looking upon Bill and the clipping with a dreadful suspense, as if Bill were a lawyer in search of a long-lost heir and that heir was—

"Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma."

"Ambrose?" Bill raised an eyebrow. "*Our* name is Ambrose."

"You don't say!" cried the old man, falling back and flinging up his withered hands—a gesture such as an actor on the Victorian stage might have used to express extreme astonishment. "All three of you—?"

"No, no. The lady and I are Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose. The other gen-

tleman is our friend, Mr. Sidney Fergus. No relation."

"And I," said Coo, with a saucy toss of her head, "was a Miss Ambrose before I married Bill and became Mrs. Ambrose."

"Then, my dear," said the ancient one, his eyes glittering behind his thick spectacles, "you are double-dyed in Ambrosiana."

"But, you know, Mr. Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma," went on Bill, "there is something even more amazing than that. We have a bookstore, Mrs. Ambrose and I—"

"A fellow laborer in the dusty vineyard!" cried the old man, clasping his hands.

"—And do you know the name of our bookstore?"

"No. Pray tell me the name of your establishment."

"Ambrosia," said Bill, leaning close and leering significantly. "The Ambrosia Bookstore."

"A clever name," said Sorbma, cocking his head thoughtfully to one side. "Ambrose . . . Ambrosia, ambrosia being the food of the gods, conferring immortality. Very clever. But 'amazing'? *Nooo* . . . I wouldn't say it was amazing."

"I didn't mean that! What's amazing is this: A. I. Sorbma is ambrosia spelled backwards!"

"No!" The old man repeated his former action of falling back and flinging up his hands—but this time the gesture was accompanied by a rapid little dance, a gleeful (and rather unexpected) soft-shoe shuffle. "What a coincidence!"

"You said it!" sneered Bill. "A bit too much of a coincidence, if you ask me. You don't know a man named Flowers, do you?"

"Flowers . . . Flowers?" Sorbma rubbed his chin. "Knew a man named Rose back in '39. Archibald Michael Bassett Rose. Not that it matters."

"How about McMinion?" put in Sidney, absently, his gaze loitering about the tables of magazines. "Jack McMinion."

Sorbma turned his spectacles upon him; the white of his eyes seemed to fill the lenses. "I believe, sir, that *you* are not an Ambrose? No? Neither first nor last name? I see." He turned away . . . as Sidney might have turned from a damaged copy of a title he already had. Sidney's wandering attention was arrested. Any resentment he might have felt at this snub was swallowed up in the larger consciousness that there was something curiously, almost disturbingly, impressive here. It struck him suddenly that Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma was worth looking at. The old fellow was ugly and badly dressed—his suspenders didn't prevent his underwear (boxer shorts with a fleur-de-lis pattern) from showing above the trouser line on the left side—but he possessed . . . what should it be called? A murky glow? No. An aura . . . Yes. An aura of indefinable power. Definitely. Like the high lama in *Lost Horizon*. That painful trembling ea-

gerness had passed, and he was now simply overwhelmingly confident of himself. More than that, he was elated, he was arrogant. He breathed, however dustily, an air of triumph. He was, in fact, a man who could be dangerous, if he had a mind to be. His recklessness made him so.

And what was equally amazing to Sidney was that his two friends were completely unconscious of, or unimpressed with, that power. Their bland faces expressed an innocence that he might have found frightening if Sorbma had been more immediately and unmistakably threatening. Even as it was, a current of alarm tingled through him—rather pleasantly, really, for it give a slight piquancy to the situation. It was a good thing, thought Sidney, raising his hand to scratch his nose and watching the three others with an amused speculation from behind that cover. It was a good thing he had come along. Bill and Coo might need more than his moral support before this interview was over. They might need his strong right arm.

"I would like to know," mused Bill, regarding the shopkeeper with a watchful, speculative and faintly smiling contempt, "just who put you up to this. Frank Flowers? The Micawber Bookstore? Or Jack McMinion?"

"Those names again," sighed the old man. "Sir and madam, I'm not interested in your playmates—neither in your little friends or your little enemies. I'm in business for myself. There is no one," he said, casting a glance back over his left shoulder, "behind me."

"You look to me like an intelligent old man," said Bill, his eyebrows giving the lie to his words, "and maybe we can make you a better deal than they have."

Sorbma sighed again, exaggeratively. "Sir, I am not open to any deals, except one. You can buy anything—or everything—in the shop at the asked-for prices."

Bill caught at this. "Everything, you say? Well," looking around him, "that shouldn't come to much. But if we bought everything, you'd be out of business, wouldn't you?"

"Not at all. There's much more where this came from?"

"I'll bet there is!" sneered Bill. "I notice you've got one of everything here, but only one of everything. And I know what that means. You've got hold of someone's Lifetime Collection,"—he visibly capitalized the words; he had gotten hold of one or two Lifetime Collections himself, to his immense gratification—"and you're peddling it in this dingy hole. You obviously don't even know the value of the stuff; so it was probably stolen. I wouldn't be surprised if it was. You just don't see that many Lifetimes."

Whereupon Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma threw back his throat, revealing unsightly wattles, and crowed. It was both a laugh and a

shameless exulting shout. Never had Sidney heard such a gleeful outpouring of triumph, such a cock-a-doodle-doo of victory, as came from the throat of that old bird! This spontaneous cry lasted about half a minute and was brought to a close only by its author stamping four times, very hard, on the floor, as if nothing else could possibly give expression, and therefore relief, to his exultation and, perhaps also, his sense of the ludicrous. It was succeeded by a moment of silence . . . broken by Bill:

"What the Devil does the old jerk mean!"

"I think," suggested Sidney, "that Mr. Sorbma is amused by a private joke. Something about his own age, perhaps?"

Bill was at first blank. Then, picking up on this: "Yes, I don't doubt he's seen quite a few lifetimes of that sort. He looks like he's outlived the class of '98."

And Coo made a remark about "age feeding on youth," which was possibly even more apt than she thought, though in a different way: for Sidney's mind flashed back, unbidden, to that little boy left crying on the sidewalk . . . and the expression on her face, and on Bill's, as they drove off. Sorbma himself seemed much taken by the remark. He leaned towards Coo and, rolling his eyes to express the keenest relish, ostentatiously licked his chops.

"Ugh," said Bill. Adding: "These things can be traced, you know. I can find out where this stuff was stolen from, and if you don't return it yourself, I'll take the matter up with the police."

Sidney wondered at Bill. He seemed to have no idea but that this scrawny old man was some harmless and helpless scrap of humanity, a waste product of the social organism. Bill had his nerve, of course—always—but the nerve wasn't connected to any muscle: if he should see that Sorbma was capable of attacking him physically, he would moderate his tone quickly enough. Sidney was pretty sure of that. He well remembered the manner in which Bill had declined an offer by Jack to punch him in the nose. But, just now, his friend didn't see anything. As for the scrawny old man, he regarded the young man with an amused and delighted absorption, as if here were a rare specimen indeed.

"I think we've wasted enough time on you," said the rare specimen. "You'll be hearing from us. Come, dear. Come, Sid."

The dear was quite ready to go, but Sid couldn't wrench himself away. Here, on this table, were Gernsbach *Amazings;* here were *Astoundings* of the Tremaine period; and here, most wonderful of all, some *Weird Tales* of the '30s, with glowing sensuous covers by Margaret Brundage.

"No, Bill," he said, "I think I'll stay and look around. I see several things here I might wish to buy."

The proprietors of the Ambrosia Bookstore stared at him. "But we're leaving . . ."

"Yes. I understand. Don't worry about me. I can make my way home all right. There's a bus line just two or three blocks from here, isn't there? I'll drop around in the morning."

The Ambroses exchanged a look which plainly said, "We should have known."

To which Bill added, aloud: "Don't bother dropping around in the morning. You either come with us now or stay away all together. I don't like a traitor."

"A traitor? Come now, Bill, isn't that a trifle melodramatic? I merely want to buy a few magazines here."

Coo, as if long pent-up, burst out with: "So you think you've found someone better than us to milk, do you? We knew all along what you were really after. You'd sell your best friend down the river for a 1932 *Weird Tales.*"

Bill grinned satirically. "How's Jack these days?"

Sidney was stung. It was outrageously unfair that they, of all people, should present the matter in that light. After all, if he had sold anyone down the river (and he didn't admit that he had), who was it who had aided and encouraged him? But he had something in reserve too. Jack had once made some remarks which he had pooh-poohed at the time but which somehow he had never forgotten. He now pointed out to the Ambroses how much that accusatory stance which they showed towards all other dealers in their field resembled the hatred which so many small shopkeepers and marginal businessmen felt towards the Jews. It was based, he said, on the same mechanism of projection, the same habit of aggressing against others for faults that might be charged against oneself. "Ask yourselves why you—who are, when you come right down to it, essentially retailers of old paper products—ask yourselves why you should be so fond of words like 'trash' and 'junkshop'? Ask yourselves why you are so quick to accuse other dealers, like Mr. Sorbma here, of dishonesty. Ask yourselves—"

"Why should we put up with this? Come, Coo, let's go."

Bill backed to the door, smiling contemptuously, his eyes playing between Sidney and the old man. He reached back for the doorknob . . . and groped. "What the—?" Looking around: "The damned door has no knob!"

"Ah! Yes!" cried Sorbma, mincing forward. "Meant to mention that. The door can't be opened from the inside. No knob and the latch always catches. Must have that fixed someday."

"How do we get out?" demanded Coo.

"By the back way, Come. Despite your uncouth remarks, I, one of nature's gentlemen, am all affability."

The two glanced at each other, disgustedly, but prepared to follow him. Not, however, before Bill got in a parting shot at Sidney. "Are you going to leave this fellow here unwatched? I never leave a collector alone in *my* shop."

"Ahh," said Mr. Sorbma, "I fully trust Mr. Non-Ambrose. And, besides, there's only one way out. Look around, sir," said he, making a bow to Sidney, "until I return. I have quite a few treasures here, if you know such when you see them. I make a specialty of first issues and first editions, and that should interest you; for unless I am much mistaken, sir, you are always on the lookout for Number One."

Sidney tried to show how lightly and easily he deflected this dart by returning the bow and asking drolly, "Have you any Ambrose Bierce?"

He immediately felt this to be a very stupid response. Sorbma cast a quick and very shrewd glance at his face, as if supposing his archness to hide some other meaning. Then, seeing that it did not: "Why, yes, sir. In fact,"—throwing a similar archness, mockingly, into his own manner—"*I have a complete Ambrose Bierce.*"

Sidney was instantly reminded of "the complete Jack McMinion" of the Closet Incident, and his left eye, before he could quite check the impulse, flashed his amusement in the direction of the Ambroses, where the signal met with two unreflecting surfaces. Yes, of course . . . These little jokes, which had been the chief delight of their intercourse, were not to be shared with them now—no, never again.

"Back this way, Mr. Ambrose and Miss-Mrs. Double-Ambrose. Step into my parlor." And Sorbma, with a hospitable grin, held aside the dusty shop curtain, which was not unpatronized by spiders, judging by the strands of dry spittle that drooled from the top of the frame. Sidney glimpsed a dark area beyond. "My modest sitting room," explained Sorbma. "Admittedly, it's not much. But wait until you see my kitchen! There are people who can't tear themselves away from my kitchen!"

The curtain drooped back into place, and the three were gone from Sidney's sight as he turned, both eagerly and deliberately, to the tables of magazines. So much for Bill and Coo! He wouldn't even look up as they drove past the window. He heard his former friends and the shopkeeper go down some steps, still talking, heard their words chopped off by the sudden closing of a door—with a sound as sharp and final as the drop of a guillotine blade.

He was alone. Alone with treasures that he *would* know when he saw them . . . and he saw them all around. His hands actually trembled as he fanned through the *Weird Tales*. There seemed to be a

complete set here. It took him some time to realize that, because the copies were so sloppily piled and mixed up . . . and yet each copy was in good-to-mint condition. How much was Sorbma asking for them? Twenty-five cents each! He checked his wallet and right hip pocket. $10.38. Hardly enough to buy them all. Perhaps he could gull Sorbma into accepting a check? He cast a brief side-glance in that direction as he browsed through the Tremaine *Astoundings* on another table, but somehow it didn't seem to be a feasible idea. Strange old man. He had such a penetrating glance! What did he mean when he said—

Hello! What's this? Copies of *Strange Tales*. And *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*. And a complete set of *Unknown Worlds!* Good God, he had to have them all! But how could he buy them all? Was there—he shot a wild glance at the closed door—any other way? It didn't seem so.

And so far he had fluttered only over the tables. There were shelves too, on the left-hand wall, as he faced towards the back of the shop, shelves filled with hundreds of books. He moved across the room towards them . . . paused, peered. Long moments passed as he tried, almost vainly at first, to take in the titles. Was he dreaming? Here was the fantasy library of his . . . of his fantasies. He had often imagined the thrill of finding some one book, such as this copy of *The Outsider* by Lovecraft (marked, as he found on opening it, 50¢ on the flyleaf; he somehow had known it would be)—but to find not only that but everything else he had ever wanted was really too much to take in. It was almost disturbing. Beneath his mounting excitement was an undercurrent of something very like depression. But the excitement mounted.

Here was the finest Lovecraft collection he had ever seen, but there was much else besides Lovecraft. There were books by Dunsany, Blackwood, Machen, LeFanu, Merritt, Chambers, Cabell, James, Bulwer-Lytton and Poe—the Honor Roll of Fantasy. And here was an 1897 copy of *Dracula* by Ambr—that is, by Bram, derived from Abraham—Bram Stoker. A first edition, he supposed. Inside the front cover was a personal bookplate: *Ex Libris A. Small.* A. Small? A bell rang somewhere, distantly.

His eye was caught by some large *Oz* volumes on the bottom shelf, and it occurred to him that that might be the children's shelf and, if so, where he would find *The Tarzan Twins*. He was right. It was marked—really, this was too much!—10¢ on the flyleaf. He didn't put this one back onto the shelf but laid it aside, under one of the tables, as being claimed. It was the first time he had allowed that laying-aside reflex to express itself, his natural instincts having been

swamped hitherto by the wealth of what was offered him. He noted, while he was down there, that there were not only several fine editions of the *Alice* books but a good many books about King Arthur and Merlin, some of them far too old and too heavy to be of much interest to children.

There was more by the author of *The Tarzan Twins*. The second shelf swarmed with the Primal Horde, the bound magazine serials and first editions, of Burroughs novels. The third shelf was given over to science fiction, much of it antedating Wells and Verne, including a few titles that he had never so much as seen. For instance, here, next to Wells' *The Food of the Gods* was *The Fixed Period* by Anthony Trollope. He knew generally what that one was about, though, a country of the future (the future of the past) in which anyone attaining the age of 60 was routinely put to death. Ha! That might not be a bad idea in some instances.

Having looked at the lowest shelves, he looked at the highest and saw that the top shelf supported a complete set of Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianae*. That was a little out of place in a library such as this, perhaps . . . although its inclusion might be defended on the grounds that "imaginary dialogues" were fantasy. On the shelf just below were some titles he didn't recognize. He reached one down, the thought crossing his mind that maybe this was that fantasy so rare he had never even heard of it. He was disappointed to find that it was merely a nonfiction account of a certain Archbishop Ambrose of sixteenth-century Moscow, who was barbarously slaughtered for sacrilege. Well, that didn't belong in this collection, surely, and neither did the books next to it, which seemed to be preoccupied with the doings of some saint of the early church. It was a pity so much space was sacrificed to religion. But, he reflected wryly, it had its good side too. It meant he wouldn't have to buy everything in the store, after all.

What were these books here? Magnificent old volumes with marble covers and gilt lettering on the spines. Gothic novels, by the look of them. He ran his finger along the first half dozen titles. Weren't these . . .? Yes, these were the gothic novels so lightly mentioned by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* and so long supposed to be fictitious. And here was not only the fabulously rare *Varney the Vampyre* by Thomas Pickett Prest, but also *Wagner the Were-Wolf* by G. W. M. Reynolds. Wouldn't it be something if he showed up at the next monthly meeting of the Frankenstein Fraternity with these under his arm? Well . . . it would be, if he could have gotten them under his arm. And here was *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis, obviously the first edition. Odd . . . Something tugged at his memory. It re-

minded him of something. Was it of *The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter* by—Ah! Here was a book he liked much better, the marvelous *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Robert Maturin. He pulled the first volume off the shelf, breaking a cobweb, and handled it lovingly. Melmoth, the Immortal Man, wandering everywhere, seeking someone who would exchange fates with him! Was it a first edition? Perhaps not, but it was very old, for inside was an inscription: *First Prize in English Composition Awarded to James Ambrose Cutting, December 1824.* James Ambrose Cutting? That was a name he had heard before in some connection. Something to do with . . . with photography? That's right. His old studies in that field blurred back into focus. Cutting was that nineteenth-century photographer who invented a method of making long-lasting pictures on glass, which he called ambrotypes. Not after his middle name. No. The word was derived from the Greek *ambrotos*, meaning (*am*—not; *brotos*—mortal), immortal. But the inventor himself hadn't proved to be quite so long lasting, had he? He had come to a bad end, in an insane asylum.

Sidney put *Melmoth* back onto the shelf. A spider scuttled away. He stood staring at the backs of the books. Something was missing . . . His eyes moved along the shelves, restlessly, and were snagged by a name. Of course! ". . . How could I forget thee?" Here, at the corner of the room, on the fourth shelf from the floor, was quite a little outcropping of Ambrose Bierce. Yes, here were the full twelve volumes of the *Collected Works*—this must be "the complete Ambrose Bierce" the old man had boasted of. It would have been disappointing, as he had that of course in his own library, but there were earlier Bierce printings as well, including a first edition of *In the Midst of Life.* He opened that and discovered inside the front cover an inscription in ink: *"To be a Gringo in Mexico—ah, that is euthanasia!"* And beneath that, a signature: *Ambrose Bierce, January 1914.* Bierce's autograph! This was a real find! But . . . 1914? Bierce had disappeared in 1913. No news of him had been heard since that time.

The author of *The Secret Life of Ambrose Bierce* (for such was the title of Sidney's unpublished book) stared at the inscription. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind that it, the signature and date, were in Bierce's handwriting. He had come into possession of several holographic letters by Bierce and would recognize that hand, with its characteristic cramped energy, anywhere. Sidney's own hand trembled. This was proof! Bierce had been alive as late as 1914, and perhaps later.

He turned to the other books by Bierce. Perhaps there was more evidence here, evidence that would

enable him to prove that Bierce had survived in Mexico for some time and was the secret genius and unsung hero of the Mexican Revolution. If he could prove that, if he could snatch from the backward abyss of time that credit his hero so richly deserved, then his own name would be inextricably linked with Bierce's for all time to come. He opened the copy of *Can Such Things Be?* Something dropped out from between its pages which he snatched out of midair with an alacrity that surprised himself. It was a photograph, an autumnal photograph, rather faded and sere. Not an ambrotype. It showed several men, Mexican guerrillas or bandits, easily recognizable as such from countless old movies, clustered around an ancient touring car. There were two figures in the foreground. The one on the right, a mustachioed Mexicano, wore a wide sombrero and had a belt of cartridges strapped over each shoulder and crossing on his broad stomach. Villa. Yes, thought Sidney, it was Pancho Villa, himself! He faced the camera, smiling gravely, but his body was half turned and his right foot rested on the running board of the old car . . . a romantic, if shabby, figure. But the other man! That lean, taut body, that cold, hard, pale gaze direct into the camera from beneath the "cowboy hat," as if he were trying to stare the viewer out of countenance—that was Ambrose Bierce!

He, Sidney Fergus, now held in his hand an unpublished photograph of Ambrose Bierce! And one showing Bierce with Villa! He looked around the silent, deserted shop. He was alone. The dusty curtain hung so inertly that it looked as if it hadn't been so much as stirred by a breath of air in years. He could easily salvage this picture for his higher purpose. Better that it should be in his collection than stuck here, unseen, in the pages of a book in a grimy shop off an alley. His hand flickered in the direction of the inside breast pocket of his coat, almost involuntarily, but he pulled it back. For something had again snagged at his attention.

He looked again at the picture—at a third person, a figure not so prominent as the first two. An old man seated at the wheel of the ancient touring car, one hand raised near his grinning mouth, his eyes twisted sideways towards the camera. In fact, it was What's-his-name, the owner of this shop. Sorbma. Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma. So . . . So Sorbma had known Bierce personally? No wonder he had had such a loaded reaction when Bierce's name was mentioned. Well, the old fellow hadn't changed much since that time. Wait a minute! Since that time . . .? Something was wrong there. Let's see . . . Villa was killed in 1923; so the picture had to be that old at least and was possibly several years

older. Say it was made in 1915 or thereabouts. That was considerably more than fifty years ago. Sorbma now looked to be in his eighties. If he were, then fifty years ago he would have been in his thirties! If, on the other hand, he were in his eighties when the picture was taken (as he certainly seemed to be), he should now be in his—*one hundred and thirties!*

Sidney stared at the photograph, with blank lapses of thought. Sorbma, one hundred and thirty years old? There seemed to be no way to take hold of such a notion. Perhaps—he told himself—perhaps the man in the picture was Sorbma's father? Yes, that was it . . . wasn't it? He tried to hang onto that possibility, that this was a picture of Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma, Senior. But he knew better. There were identical twins but no such thing as identical father and son; the mother's genetic contribution always counted for something. He could *see* that the Sorbma he knew and this old man behind the wheel of the car were one and the same. Which meant that Sorbma was old, incredibly old. But how could that be? If he were that old and had aged naturally in a community of his fellows, he would be famous. And he wasn't. Here he was, living obscurely in a dirty little shop, hiding in a dark corner like a spider that dreads the light.

What did it mean? It was at once baffling and curiously suggestive. Here, thought Sidney, as he tucked the photo away in his right breast pocket. is a mystery.

A mystery connected with Ambrose Bierce . . . which reminded him, not unnaturally, of Jack's reservations concerning that man's greatness as a writer. Sidney grimaced, recalling that, recalling also, vividly, his rising from his seat (seeing it from the outside, as if it had happened to someone else) and striking that so-telling blow that had felled his friend—that had felled Jack—to the floor. "A blow on the head!" That was Jack's criticism. All of Bierce's stories ended with that blow on the head. Well, how else should they end? A story, after all, had to have a strong ending, and what stronger ending could one have than a shock ending? That sudden blow, unexpected ·and catastrophic, which, striking down the hero himself, if need be, writes an irreversible *finis* to the story? Who but a ninny would want a story to end any other way? "Ha! Who but Jack McMinion!"

He was startled by the sound of his own voice . . . for he had made this last comment aloud. That sobered him, quieted him. In the reflective pause that followed he saw, he couldn't help seeing, that he had pursued this little side path about Jack, and pursued it so noisily, to distract himself from something. He had been averting his gaze.

He stood now, staring at the backs of the books, actually seeing nothing, but listening . . . listening for what? Not a sound was heard. Never had he been in so silent a place! He was touched by something, a tingling little anticipation, a fear of fear. But what should he be afraid of? Wasn't he the man who had arisen from where he sat and struck Jack McMinion such a blow on the head that he had felled him to the floor? He was made of stern stuff. He was easily a match for that old fellow.

A match for that old fellow? What old fellow? Why . . . Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma, of course.

Now what in the world did he mean by thinking something like that? A match for that old fellow, indeed! Why should he be on his guard against Sorbma? The old man was no threat to *him*. To . . . *him*? Why should the tottering, elated old derelict be a threat to anyone? He wasn't. And he certainly wasn't to Sidney Fergus, who was, after all—what was it Sorbma himself had called him? Oh, yes—

"Mr. Non-Ambrose!"

He flinched away from the thought, or tried to flinch away, but it was too late. That small step he had taken, a step so natural and so easy to take, had brought him face to face with the very thing, the very recognition, he had been trying to avoid:

Sorbma was the Collector of Ambroses!

This dingy old man, lurking in this out-of-the-way hole, was that being whose existence had been so shrewdly divined by Charles Fort.

"I think," said Fort playfully, "someone is collecting Ambroses."

Someone was.

Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma.

Those disturbing impressions that had so lightly troubled his mind as he browsed revolved again into view . . . and converged.

"Ex Libris A. Small." The name of the other man Fort had written about, the man who disappeared about the same time Bierce did, was Ambrose Small. Sorbma had at least one of his books here, perhaps more. But then the shelves were crowded with the name of Ambrose. James Ambrose Cutting, for instance. There, the middle name was the one of final importance. But apparently the name would do in any form, condition or accent. Such as Archbishop Ambrose of Moscow. And the hero of *The Monk* was named Ambrosio—but, no, he was a fictitious character. Sorbma couldn't have had any connection with him. Ambrosio . . . Ambrosius. The original name of Merlin the Magician had been Ambrosius. But he was a fictitious character too . . . wasn't he? Probably. Who else—going on with the roll call—was there? Ambrose Bierce, of course. Sidney turned a look, mournfully speculative, upon the Bierce books by his elbow. Did all this mean . . .? Very likely it

did. But he needn't think about that just now. Who else. Well, there was—

Bill and Coolanthe Ambrose!

But they had left! Hadn't they? He cast an alarmed look at the inertly hanging drapery. How long had they been gone? He glanced at his wrist. Five o'clock! But that meant he had been browsing here for more than three hours! Three hours! Good God, it had seemed more like three minutes. What might not have happened in three hours! Surely, the Ambroses weren't still in the store?

Sidney's eye revolved, as if drawn by an outside force, toward the front of the shop and the dirty, fly-specked window. The afternoon sun glared from the white-washed brick wall of the warehouse across the alley. He moved slowly in that direction, unseeingly past those piles of colorful magazines that such a short time before had seemed almost excruciatingly desirable . . . moved to the window and peered, rather anxiously, out. What he dreaded to see, he did see. He expected it, and yet he was unable to suppress a little start of horror.

The Ambroses' old grey Plymouth was still parked down and across the alley.

It was there. Which meant they were still in the shop. They had to be. They had been . . . detained . . . by Sorbma in the back.

That advertisement in the throwaway—why, why, why had he shown it to them? It had been an enticement, bait, to lure them to this place. He hadn't even run across it by accident; he had found it in his mailbox. He had been made to act, unwittingly, as a Judas goat. (It struck him suddenly, guiltily, that there was a dreadful appropriateness in that.) He glanced at the door beside him. How simply it had all been done! How easily the trap had been sprung! There had been no way out for the Ambroses, except through that back kitchen. Back kitchen? God, what a grisly picture that phrase abruptly brought before him. It was like a sudden splatter of blood.

He tried to steady himself by thinking the matter through. There was so much here that didn't make sense. Why should Sorbma want to collect Ambroses? Was he interested in all Ambroses? That hardly seemed likely. The name of Ambrose, all considered, was legion. He must be interested only in such Ambroses as had attained some notoriety, or who had somehow attracted his attention, or only in those who met certain specifications. Collectors were notoriously fastidious and often in ways inexplicable to the noncollector. But that didn't answer the essential question: Why should he want to collect any Ambroses, regardless of their qualifications?

Sidney's mind groped among the possibilities.

(1) He, Sorbma, is an Ambrose-

hater. He once received some unforgivable, as he thinks, insult or injury from an Ambrose and now revenges himself against other Ambroses. (But he "collects" them—that certainly suggests ambivalent feelings.)

(2) He is himself an Ambrose. That is, he is a member of a family (in the sense that the Mafia is a family), or of a cult (say, of some alchemical cabal surviving from the Middle Ages, or from the days of Merlinus Ambrosius), or of a religious sect (those shelves devoted to religion hinted of such a possibility). Anyway, Sorbma is, or was, himself an Ambrose, and he has caused other Ambroses to disappear so that his own disappearance would not be attributed to disaffection. He has done this to deceive certain watching eyes or to elude searchers—those of the family, fraternity, cult or sect, who didn't look with favor upon defectors or backsliders. This was a very tenuous speculation, but it was evident that Sorbma was hiding here, in this dark corner and under a concocted name, from someone or something.

(3) He needs Ambroses, not for themselves but because they are the raw material from which he distills . . . well, the essence of Ambrose, which would be, naturally—*ambrosia!* And what was ambrosia? What did this terrible and terribly old man say it was? "The food of the gods, conferring immortality."

Sidney felt that with this last answer he had set his foot upon the right path to the solution of the mystery. For this man, this grinning man of the old picture, must have done something to preserve—not his youthfulness, but his old age—into perpetuity. He must have taken something . . . and what should that life-prolonging something be called but "ambrosia?" And how odd that that this partaker of ambrosia should be "interested" in Ambroses. There had to be a connection.

Looking ahead, he saw that this path converged easily with the two others. There was a small clearing, he found, where the three paths came together, one large enough for him to turn around in and get his bearings. That secret of immortality probably wasn't Sorbma's, or Sorbma's alone. He hardly seemed to be a medical, chemical or alchemical genius. It must be the property of that secret and ancient society of immortals. Secret and ancient? Yes, secret—for who had ever heard of it? And probably very ancient—people who knew they were immortals were not likely to have been born yesterday. Sorbma certainly wasn't. Anyway, the fact and method of immortality was probably the secret of that fraternity or cult, and Sorbma had fled, taking it with him. He would have to lie low, for surely any society with such a potent secret, one they didn't care to

share with the rest of mankind—aye, there was the nub!—wouldn't allow dropouts. The only egress from a society of immortals would be death.

What Sorbma needed, of course, was not Ambroses but simply people from whom to contrive his elixir. His favoring persons named Ambrose was simply his little joke, a bit of fancy footwork, a capering and a thumbing of the nose behind the broad back of that dread fraternity, whose name was probably something like the Ambrosian Society or the Brotherhood of Ambroses. *He* would do something like that. He was a mirthful old man. He loved his japery. And why not? There was no logical reason why the collecting of and feeding on Ambroses shouldn't be a thing of joy.

And it came to Sidney, as his gaze strayed around the shop, that perhaps Sorbma particularly relished collecting those Ambroses who were themselves collectors . . . whenever he could find any. That would be the cream of the jest, perhaps; his idea of poetic justice. It would explain how he had come into possession of such a library as this. He must have gotten his hands at times on the collections as well as the collectors. If he did particularly covet collectors, then Bill and Coo would be naturals for him. He must have heard of them somehow, or have seen their advertisements. Everything, their family name, their position in the fantasy-collecting world, even the name of their store, would render them ludicrously desirable.

Poor children, he wouldn't be able to resist them!

Children. That's what Sorbma had called them, and that's what they were. They had been innocent. Their sanguine innocence had led them blindly into a trap laid and sprung by a Being whose conception of Evil vastly overshadowed anything they might imagine. They had toddled forward, hand in hand, into the lowering gloom, like babes in the wood.

Sidney's eye again sought the old grey Plymouth. However uncertain his speculations might be in detail, there was nothing uncertain about that car. It sat stolidly and incontrovertibly there, its empty, alarming presence confirming every fear.

The Ambroses had never left the shop.

He glanced again at the shop curtain. They were back there somewhere. Were they still alive? Maybe. Because Sorbma hadn't "remembered" him yet. He must still be . . . feeding . . . off them, or disposing of their bodies. But did he actually *eat* his victims? That sounded like something from the worst sort of horror movie. And how could mere human flesh and blood impart immortality? No, he must do something else. Perhaps he absorbed—absorbed? *Sorbma?*—per-

haps he absorbed something from them? Perhaps he somehow fed on suffering? Perhaps he aroused his victims to paroxysms of fear, horror and loathing, and vampirishly ingested the floods of hormonal juices? Perhaps—

But all this was fantasy. It was enough that the Ambroses *might* be alive. Imagine what they must be feeling if they were lying back there helpless, unable to cry out, but knowing that he was browsing a few yards away in the shop.

He had, suddenly, an almost sickening vision of water twisting down a dark drain, the lives of the Ambroses going down the drain.

He had to do something. He had to save them. He *would* save them—even if saving them meant only ending some unspeakable suffering.

Now.

Moving with the stealth of a cat burglar, he padded to the back of the shop. He pushed aside the curtain and peered into the chamber beyond. It was a room about the size of the shop. The left-hand side was obviously used only as a corridor; there was a stretch of bare and dusty floor and a short flight of steps leading down to a door. The right hand half was actually Sorbma's parlor or sitting room. Its fittings were almost picturesquely shabby. There was an ancient desk, its roll top jammed open by accumulated papers, including copies of *Serendipity*, the familiar covers of which he could recognize from where he stood; a swivel chair, with one caster missing; a Morris chair, horribly decomposed and stinking and yet showing signs of recent usage—it was littered with the broken bits and crumbs from a half-empty cellophane package of crackers lying on one of the arms (which meant that Sorbma didn't live on Ambroses alone); a small but once-rich rug, trod underfoot now for decades; a sideboard with a flaky iron teakettle on a trivet; and against the right-hand wall, under a papered-over window, an army cot—the most modern thing in the room, and yet that probably a veteran of World War I. So this was where Sorbma eked out a paltry eternity? But it was not . . . not his workshop. That must be on the other side of that sunken door there. That was the Back Kitchen, into which he had led Bill and Coo like lambs to the slaughter. And that's where *he* had to go.

Sidney stood staring at the kitchen door, half in the shop and half in the parlor, the curtain held aside with one hand—like a figure in an allegory. His watch ticked loudly. He cast a glance, almost involuntarily, back towards the shop window and the alleyway. His eyes fed hungrily on the light coming in through the window and the bottom unshaded part of the door. He swayed. There crept into his brain a stealthy thought: If I can escape, I

can bring help and save the Ambroses that way, without going through that door.

Escape . . . ? Yes. How it might be done occurs to him suddenly. He sees it all at once. It is easy, or given desperation, easy enough. He runs from the spot he is at, past the tables of magazines, to the front of the shop. He snatches the shade and its roller off the door. He drapes the blind before him as a shield, with his left shoulder forward, his head lowered to one side, his eyes closed; and running three or four steps, he strikes the glass very hard. It shatters outward. He had meant only to break the glass and step through, but he finds himself falling forward amid a shower of sharp fragments. He allows himself to fall, snatching his legs up and away from the bottom of the door, to avoid the standing shards of glass there. He strikes the bricks of the alleyway hard, taking the main force of the blow on his shoulder. But he is young, wiry and tough. He is hardly down when he is up again. He is a little shaken, his shoulder is bruised, and there is a cut on his cheek, but he is not otherwise hurt. He takes to his feet, runs down the long alley, past the car of the ill-fated Ambroses—best to leave it where it is—and towards the open street beyond, towards light, air, safety, freedom. He *is* free, his heart pounding, his lungs expanding with joy, free of that horrible shop and its loathsome back rooms and . . .

There was a tingling at the back of his neck. A shudder went through his whole body, spreading from that point. With a voiceless cry, he twisted, slapped with his hand, brushed something from his neck. A spider. It lay on the floor of Sorbma's parlor like a knot of brown thread. It had let itself down, he shudderingly saw, from the top of the door—a single silken strand still trailing from the curtain rod, its lower end wispily touching the bare skin just above his collar. He shuddered again and, brushing at his neck, ducked out from under the doorway into the parlor, brutally crushing the corpse of the spider under his heel as he did so.

This small incident was peculiarly unnerving. But despite it and despite the means of escape that had occurred to him (his flight of fancy), he was still resolved to go through that door. Bill and Coo, in whatever condition, were still on the other side of it. It might not be the only way out of the shop, but it was the only way out of his uncertainty and suspense. And wasn't it what Ambrose Bierce would do?

The thought of that, the memory of the great courage Bierce had shown in the Civil War and, for that matter, all his life, flooded through him. It was unexpectedly restorative. He had never realized what an exemplar his hero had been to him in that respect. Bierce, he knew, would flinch from nothing. Sidney straightened (for he found

that he had been stooping or ducking away from the low ceiling, as if something might again drop on him) and stepped towards the door.

But a thought caused him to falter on the very brink of the steps. The flood of confidence ebbed from him, leaving him stranded in dismay.

For hadn't Ambrose Bierce, that exemplar of courage and strength, been defeated by the man behind that door?

His wavering hand unconsciously touched the outside of his breast pocket, where the photograph reposed, very much as he might have touched his cheek if he had a toothache. He was conscious of a pang, an inward void, the loss of that glorious epic he had imagined with Bierce as the hero of the Mexican Revolution. What *had* happened to Bierce in Mexico? He wondered. The true story might never be known . . . unless Sorbma chose to tell.

Bierce. The man who was afraid of nothing, the man who had not only looked Death in the face but had shaken his hand, claiming him as a lifelong companion, and who yet, recognizing and accepting Death, had managed to preserve his own fierce will and energy—*that* man had succumbed to this . . . this relic, this scarecrow, this grinning Grandfather Smallweed. The dragonfly had been caught in the web of the spider. But of course Sorbma had an even smaller and drier air than Bierce himself. Was that the secret? Did Sorbma prove to be stronger than Bierce because he had entered into an even closer partnership with Death than Bierce had desired to enter while in the midst of life? Could it be that Bierce, beneath that hard crust, had some betraying touch of weakness, some touch of . . . well, fantasy?

Sidney himself liked fantasy, especially romantic fantasy. He was partial to *A Dreamer's Tales* by Lord Dunsany, the lush fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith, the glittering narratives of A. Merritt; his favorite Lovecraft story (although he had never mentioned it) was *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath.* But he felt this liking to be suspect. He indulged it in periodic, even frequent, debauches of reading, but he had a secret contempt for it. It was connected in his mind with something that he thought was a weakness in himself, a tendency to dreaminess, romantic longing, softness, and so he sometimes turned to its opposite. Chiefly, to Bierce. He admired Bierce because he was so tough. But, really, wasn't there more to it than that? There were several hard-boiled writers of mystery and adventure whom he liked, but he had never made so much of any of them as he had of Bierce. He saw now that Jack hadn't been far off. What he liked about Bierce was that this hard man was attracted to romance, idealism and fancy. That reductive, debunking impulse, to be realized

strikingly in fiction, had to be played off against its opposite, the spirit of romantic fantasy. But even that was a kind of accommodation with fantasy, based on a covert liking.

Yes, concluded Sidney (for this was a moment for facing truths), Bierce had had that subverting touch of weakness, of fantasy. Possibly that was what Sorbma had had to work upon. Then, could *he* succeed where Bierce had failed? Not likely. He had very much the same make-up as Bierce, but with a larger streak of softness for fantasies. He was even more vulnerable. But he would have to try, anyway. Because of Bill and Coo. They were soft, very soft, and would have no chance without him.

He stood at the topmost of the three descending steps, which went down to a level about three feet below that on which he stood. He stared at the door. It was a wooden door, divided into four panels and covered with a cream-colored enamel paint that was now peeling and scabbing off. "Leprous," Lovecraft might have called it. It seemed to Sidney a sinister door, sinister in its very shabbiness, reminding him somehow of a photograph he had seen of an ax murderer standing on the wooden porch of a dilapidated clapboard house. Nonsense, he told himself, it's just an ordinary door, no different from a thousand other doors. It wasn't, for example, at all unlike that door he had clapped to on Jack McMinion, imprisoning him in the closet, while the Ambroses stepped into the shop and announced—

A shudder went through Sidney. His hand reflexively went up to his neck . . . but this time there was no spider there.

Sorbma had said, *"Yes . . . I have a complete Ambrose Bierce!"* And that's what he had meant! That's what that look, so penetrating, so arrogantly shrewd, had meant! He actually had in his possession Ambrose Bierce himself. Not alive—no. Preserved. There flashed before Sidney's vision a picture as from a Hammer horror film, with Sorbma as a mad doctor with row upon row of waxen corpses at his disposal. Generations of Ambroses. If so, when he looked then into that grisly kitchen, he, Sidney Fergus, the world's number one fan of Ambrose Bierce, would gaze upon the countenance of his author. It would be a consummation devoutly to be dreaded, the grotesque culmination of his personal literary life and surely one of the most bizarre japes in the history of literature.

The possibility, the almost certainty, of this was like the anticipation of a blow, a crushing blow, suspended or delayed. It was one more reason to shrink from opening that door. And one more reason why he had to do so.

He started forward, put his foot on the topmost step. It groaned un-

der his weight, loudly, as if he had accidentally stepped on a tortured man in a dungeon. The effect was so startling that he turned and ran several quick steps back to the curtain before he caught himself. He turned, grimacing. He was deeply ashamed; he cringed, as it were, from his own cowardice.

He faced the steps and the door again, bravely, determined to face Sorbma as resolutely. He put his foot on the top step. It groaned, perhaps as loudly as before, but this time he kept his footing and his head. Sorbma must not have heard it. He was so deeply absorbed, perhaps, in what he was doing—or, it may be, so deeply absorbing—that he could be roused by no sound or disturbance. The second step. Which groaned or creaked at a lower pitch. The third, which groaned in bass. He was going down the scale. And then the solid floor, the blessedly silent, solid floor. He breathed a deep sigh of relief—

—And stiffened, froze. For from behind the door came a high-pitched scream.

Followed by another.

And another.

Good God! He hadn't known that Coo could scream like that! Or that Bill could scream like that! And what screams! They were cries of fear, but not of fear only. They were shrieks of despair and of something like outrage—an insupportable outrage being smothered by horror. He felt the blood draining cold from his face.

To the rescue! His strong right arm was needed! Now was the moment to step forward, push open the door, and dash into that Back Kitchen and fall upon Sorbma, taking him by surprise. But like a dreamer in a nightmare, he was unable to move. His knees had turned to water. They wobbled. He remained standing, but in the same spot; to take a step would be to risk pitching forward on his face against the door.

The screams ceased as suddenly as they began. They were succeeded by a sound, low and faint, but distinctly recognizable as a chuckle, a prolonged chuckle. That sound fell on Sidney's ears as the most diabolical they had ever heard, following as it did on those screams. It was the chuckle, fat and self-satisfied, of someone supping on horror, growing stronger on someone else's suffering. It made his blood run cold again—but in the opposite direction. His legs steadied themselves. That chuckle was intolerable. Anger checked his fear and made it possible to move.

He took a long step forward. He was at the door. He reached out his hand; his heart knocked at his ribs. Now was the moment of truth. He would twist the knob, push the door open, and . . . but his hand was stayed a moment by yet another picture, that of a grinning Sorbma waiting just on the other side of

that opaque barrier, waiting to take the door from his grasp the moment he touched the knob. And waiting with him, peering fixedly over his shoulder, the mounted and waxen corpse of Ambrose Bierce.

What a blow that would be!

But . . . what nonsense it was! Sidney shook off his paralysis and reached for the knob. His hand never grasped it. The door swung open suddenly—towards him—the knob striking the tips of his fingers. The blazing yellow light of the Back Kitchen fell full upon him. Ambrose Ichabod Sorbma stood before him. And there, peering at him over Sorbma's shoulder—

Sidney reeled away and with a cry flung up his arms, as if to ward off that dreaded blow. Which fell, and struck him to the floor.

"What the Devil!" said a familiar voice. Sidney looked up, past his forearms, to see Bill Ambrose standing in the kitchen door, with Sorbma. "What are you doing?" demanded Bill. Then, with a grin: "Ah, I see. Took you by surprise, did we?"

"He was spying on us," shrilled Coo in delight, peeping over Bill's shoulder. "Caught in the act!"

The Ambroses were not only unharmed, they were in remarkably good spirits. Not so the old fellow with them. He was baffled, confused, lost. He stood with one hand pressed to his forehead, his eyes turning this way and that, as if he were looking about for that triumphant, exultant Sorbma of a few hours ago. He didn't find him . . . and neither did Sidney, who stared at this defeated ancient with doubtful recognition.

He had fallen over backwards onto the steps and had presence of mind now, barely, to pick himself up. The Ambroses brushed by him contemptuously. Sorbma stood for a moment in the kitchen door, which gaped open as if in dismay, and Sidney saw that the inside of that outwardly shabby portal was unexpectedly opulent. It was covered with a thick red baize and studded with brass nails—the cloth possibly being meant to stifle sounds, which it did, a little. And he saw into the kitchen itself. He saw the interior of that mysterious workshop, den and lair. The blazing yellow light seemed to burn everything into his memory at a glance. On the wall was a turning circle of swirling black lines, like water going down a drain, a device such as hypnotists are reputed to use. And there were charts on the walls, antique maps and strange pictures—representations of dissected human bodies but so schematized that they were more like designs than anatomical studies. There was a pot bubbling and boiling on an antique black iron stove and a table crowded with enough oddly shaped bottles to delight the eye of a bottle fancier. Lying on the floor before the table were two very large transparent plastic bags, like

those used for garbage. The blazing light hurt his eyes so that they instinctively sought for relief in the dark aperture at one side of the room. It was a door slightly ajar, and he could see into the shadowy interior of what was probably a pantry, where he dimly discerned a host of waiting featureless objects, like discarded clothes-dummies in an attic or basement storeroom.

Sorbma saw that he saw and shot him the strangest glance—of astounded, outraged, defeated, hopeless appeal. "Oh, sir!" he cried, closing the door behind him and falling upon Sidney, as if for support. "Oh, sir, if only *you* were an Ambrose!"

"Here, now!" cried Sidney, struggling to disengage himself.

"They can't take a hint!" cried Sorbma, clutching desperately at Sidney's lapel. "They have no imagination. Fear," he added in a strangled whisper—and he glanced tremblingly back over his left shoulder, as if to demonstrate what he meant, "fear is everything. Without fear, nothing."

The fearless Bill and Coo led the way out of Sorbma's parlor and into the shop. Behind came Sidney. Behind came Sorbma. Like a parade of conquerors and their dazed captives. The Ambroses, smirking, marched across the shop to the front entrance.

"Now," said Bill, "for this screwy business of the door." He put his finger into the hole where the shaft of the knob had been . . . and pulled. The door came open. "*Voila!*" Bill looked around, slyly, at Sidney. "You want to know how I knew? Elementary, my dear Fergus. There's no back way out of this place. The damned thing's a firetrap! And I knew this old jerk had to have some way of getting in and out, so—*Voila!*"

Sidney stood looking at the bricks of the alleyway, touched slantwise by the declining sun. Freedom.

"A deal's a deal, right?" said Coo to the hapless Sorbma, who stared dumbly. "You sell us the shop at the price we agreed on, or we'll spread your name and description over all the local papers and in every collector's publication and fanzine in the country."

"You'll be famous," promised her husband. "And a fellow like you must be hiding from something."

"It can't be the draft board," said Coo.

"So it must be bill collectors," said Bill, looking around him with an unspeakable complacency.

"Your aged grandmother in Kokomo," went on Coo, with a fine scorn, "will be able to find you after we're through with you."

"In the dark," added Bill.

"Ohh, I wouldn't care for that," murmured Sorbma, casting another look back over his left shoulder. "She's old, old, old! And I much prefer the company of youth."

The two youths at the door

turned a slowly revolving glance around the store, smiling in unanimous proprietary self-satisfaction. Their moving gaze came at last to Sidney and rested on him. The man and wife exchanged an amused glance.

"You look like a fish out of water," said Bill. "Hop in,"—with a backward hitch of his head in the direction of the car—"and we'll give you a lift back to civilization."

Sidney, longing for freedom from the shop and still somewhat confused, did as he was bid and followed the Ambroses into the alley, leaving the terrible Mr. Sorbma standing in the doorway.

"That old jerk," said Bill, as they walked across the bricks, "has a thing about Ambroses. I wonder where he was dug up at?"

"You should have heard him scream," said Coo, "when we twisted his arm."

Sidney stumbled on the uneven surface. "Twisted his arm . . .?"

"That's a metaphor, silly! Don't you know anything? I mean, when we told him what we were going to do to him if he didn't sell us the shop at a fair price."

Bill chuckled. "I don't see why he's so worried about losing the shop. He can always get a job at the Hollywood Wax Museum." He held the rear door of the Plymouth open. "Won't you step into the back, Mr. Sidney?" Mr. Sidney climbed in and deposited himself among the litter of comic magazines. "Where you belong," muttered his host, as he slammed the door. "With the trash!"

Bill was soon in the driver's seat (where Sorbma had been long ago—but no more) with Coo beside him, and the car moved down the alley, past the shabby building with the big black letters over the front. The man to whom those letters referred stood in the door of the shop, which was to be his for such a short time now, looking after them with an expression Sidney couldn't quite decipher, but his self-possession was evidently returning.

"You know," said Bill, with a glance at his passenger in the rear-view mirror, "I think your friend Jack McMinion is behind all this."

"Jack McMinion!" Sidney stared at Bill's right ear, supposing that his own ears had played him false.

"Sure," explained Bill, with an almost unutterable scorn for Sidney's obtuseness and a glance of contempt in the mirror. "Frank Flowers or Micawber's wouldn't try to depress prices like that. It would just be cutting their own throats. But a pip-squeak like McMinion can pull the temple down upon his own head. He's got nothing to lose."

Sidney continued to stare, but his stare became after some moments more moderate and comfortable; it softened into a gaze of speculative wonder. It came home to him that the Ambroses were terrible people. Yes, they were terrible in their way.

For if he, that horrible old man who clung so desperately to existence by feeding on other persons' lives, if *he* were terrible, then they, in being equal to him (at least), were equally terrible. Their moral unimaginativeness made them so. They were untouchable in the innocence of their malice. They were soft and yet heartless. Sorbma had thought to conquer them with his greater power, and they had conquered him with their incapacity—but was that so very surprising? Wasn't it true that in every quarrel between a bright man and a dull man, the dull man always wins? Poor Sorbma! He had had nothing to work with, or to work upon, in dealing with the Ambroses. There was in their breasts no responsive chord that he could strike to awaken that spiritual or metaphysical dread he had sought to inspire in them. He might possibly have succeeded in intimidating them physically, but he could never make them feel awe. He had tried—and they had sneered. He had shown them a backward reach of time and a range of evil intention far beyond their small experience—and they had smirked, knowingly. They had looked into the abyss—and found it shallow. He, Sidney, had always thought himself to be made of sterner stuff than they and had felt an amused and rather affectionate condescension to them on that score. But they, these dumb, malicious children in the front seat, had defeated the man who had defeated Ambrose Bierce.

Did he envy them? Did he admire them? Did he want to be like them? No, he decided. turning his gaze out the window to the long street. No, somehow he didn't. Looking into the distant perspective, he seemed to make out, if only sketchily, the outlines of a few things he had barely glimpsed before. This whole question of weakness and strength and their relation to fantasy, romance and imagination was a bit more complicated than he had thought. Perhaps what he had taken for strength was merely hardness with its attendant weaknesses of rigidity and inflexibility. Perhaps what he had taken for weakness was another kind of strength, or, if not that, one of those graces without which life would be worthless and therefore all strength pointless. Perhaps (*ah, perhaps!*) Jack had been right and he had too often confused what was stronger with what was better—and not only in his reading.

They stopped a few blocks away at a service station. As they eased out onto the street again, Sidney looked back in the direction of Sorbma's den and saw thick black smoke roiling up into the darkening sky from the spot where he judged the shop to be. He watched it, thinking with a pang of all those first editions, those Finlev and Bok covers—but it wasn't a very sharp pang. It was wistful, rather, for in

his mood of the moment such things seemed to him to be part of the vanities of this world.

They drove on. The Ambroses happily congratulated themselves on their coup of the day and discussed how they might best meet the bill for Sorbma's shop tomorrow, paying no more attention to their kidnaped passenger in the back than they did to the blaring fire engines which, shuddering redly, shouldered their way past them through the rush-hour traffic.

They released Sidney in front of their store. "Well," said Bill with a malicious grin, as he came around from the other side of the car to the sidewalk, "in a few days you'll be able to buy everything you wanted back there. From us. At our prices."

"I think not," said Sidney. "I certainly wouldn't want them in their present charred condition."

It was their turn to stare. He walked away down the tree-lined street, without looking back.

That was some time ago. It has been noted, with a conjecturing wonder, by the frequenters of the Ambrosia Bookstore that Sidney never comes there any more. They have also noted that Sidney's book on Ambrose Bierce is still not published, and they have heard rumors (for people do see him elsewhere) that he seldom mentions the name of that writer these days. They have even heard that he has sold his entire Bierce collection, including some manuscript letters and a very rare photograph, and has given the proceeds to Jack McMinion in payment of some old debt. But they are all agreed that *that* is very unlikely.

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JAMES BLISH

BOOKS

RINGWORLD, Larry Niven; Ballantine, 342 pp., 95¢
CHRONOCULES, D. G. Compton; Ace, 255 pp., 75¢
TOMORROW IS TOO FAR, James White; Ballantine, 183 pp., 95¢

Larry Niven's RINGWORLD has already won a Nebula as the best sf novel of its year, and I would be prepared to place a large bet that it will walk off with the Hugo as well; most of the comments I have heard or read, at least, have been enthusiastic. Their general tenor has been, "Now this is the kind of sf I *like* to read," which I take as intended to set it off from the determinedly literary or otherwise eccentric products in all lengths which have won most of the 24 Nebulas from 1965 on.

RINGWORLD is, in fact, determinedly old-fashioned; it is one of those sagas of the supercolossal earlier exemplified by Smith's Lensman series, or the Arcot/Morey/Wade/Fuller novels of Campbell. About half of its science and engineering content is the real thing as of date of writing, and the other half consists of standard old sf devices like mystery metals and hyperdrive. To this mixture has been added a large dollop of straight fantasy: a girl who has been bred, successfully, to be lucky. Various friendly aliens of bizarre shape play large roles, and the substance of the story is an enforced trek-cum-encounters.

As almost everybody reading this probably knows by now, the Ringworld of the title is a hoop-shaped artificial planet with a habitable surface with three million times the area of the Earth, presumably built to solve a population problem. This implies a people technologically advanced over any known race, and hence the Ringworld is scouted. Part of the motive for scouting it is fear; if these people are also aggressive, knowledge around which to build defenses against them will be needed. Moreover, the heart of the galaxy has exploded; to outrun and survive this oncoming disaster will require every scrap of knowledge that can be gained from any source.

Both these motives simply disappear about halfway through the book. The Ringworlders have forgotten their science and are in no position to teach anybody anything. As for the expedition's own research, all it manages to come back with is several million miles' worth of impervium thread, which doesn't seem likely to be very useful against a galactic explosion.

By this time, the mainspring of the story has become a moderately complex pattern of intrigue, both interpersonal and interspecies, which is revealed piecemeal. To this part of the plot the Ringworld is quite superfluous; and despite its ingenuity, it isn't one half so interesting as the Ringworld in its prime would have been—had the author not avoided the problem of showing that.

At page 133 there is a crash landing, and the rest of the book is a flight across the width of the Ringworld in search of help. Up to this point, I still had some hope for the book, remembering what marvelous things Jack Vance did with BIG PLANET; here was a world a million times as big—what a succession of disparate cultures one might encounter even on an edge-to-edge journey (in itself a trip of nearly a million miles)! But the encounters in RINGWORLD, or rather on it, do not show a tenth the richness and ingenuity of those in BIG PLANET; the best of them is not with a culture at all, but with a storm. All those millions of miles of surface area, like all the possible riches of Ringworlder technology at its height, are simply thrown away. The backdrop is a staggering invention, but what is happening in the foreground is mostly conventional to the point of pettiness. Even the charming nonhuman members of the expedition have by midpoint had all their peculiarities exploited beyond the possibility of further surprise.

The expedition is saved, eventually, by a long string of coincidences brought about by their female good-luck charm. This device I view with an incredulity bordering on indignation. It is not only unbelievable in itself, but as soon as it becomes evident that this is what the author is doing, what little suspense the story has goes out the window, to be replaced at best by a mild curiosity about what rabbit will come next out of the girl's unvaryingly lucky hat.

There are several smaller holes, too. If the author ever explained how the Ringworlders happened to be nearly human—which he admits is wholly unlikely—my eyes must have been glazed over completely by the time the explanation went by. I am quite sure that the fate of one of his major characters is left hanging in midair. And on a still smaller scale, I remain unconvinced that a herbivore could develop high intelligence; as Dr. Jack Cohen has repeatedly remarked, it doesn't re-

quire much intelligence to creep up on a blade of grass.

The text is highly repetitive; sometimes entire explanations (such as the one about the way the expedition's armament could be shown to have harmless uses) are repeated nearly verbatim. And as a final, but annoying nit: Most of the longer speeches are paragraphed at the end of the first sentence. I don't know where Niven picked up this mannerism—I've never encountered it before, anyhow—but it's functionless and I wish he'd drop it.

In summary, as a novel this is a shapeless blob, redeemed only by its major idea, two charming critters, and quite a lot of humor, plus an approach conservative enough to be comfortable to sf readers whose tastes in the field were formed prior to about 1945. Nothing that I can say will take its prize(s) away, nor would I want to do any such thing—after all, I might be dead wrong about it; nevertheless, I think the response indicates at least in part an anti-literary reaction, a swing of the pendulum of taste back in the direction of the pulps. I wonder (none of us in England got a SFWA ballot, thanks to the postal strike) whether anybody noticed that 1970 was the year of eligibility of Lem's SOLARIS? Or, for that matter, of Aldiss' BAREFOOT IN THE HEAD?

CHRONOCULES, the third Compton novel I have had the good fortune to read, is, like the other two, the story of a secret research project, and a study of the moral responsibilities of scientists; this time, the objective of the project is time travel.

Most of the few good time-travel stories I have read involve an exploitation of the circular causality paradox, and indeed I think it's nearly impossible to handle the subject honestly without confronting this paradox head-on. Compton does so, raising the issue early together with all its attendant problems. His original theory of time—which is as good as anybody else's, as long as we allow "What is Time?" to be a meaningful question at all—requires that events be conserved, and this principle is never violated, despite the fact that one strand of the plot is indeed circular.

The main body of the story, however, takes place early in the course of the experiments, several of which are shown, and deals with the effects of the various tensions of the project upon its staff and upon the outside world, which in turn reacts to the project. The official time is about 1986, by which time sex has been separated entirely from marriage, pollution is even more rampant, government has lost control except in emergencies and the police find it difficult to protect even themselves, let alone anybody else; but to the characters this is their expected environment, so they neither goggle at nor recoil from it.

There is a large cast and Compton shifts viewpoints around among them freely. In this case I don't see how the various conflicts could have been handled in any other way, and the author turns what is usually a beginner's mistake into a strength by using it to build each of the many characters from the inside outward, as well as showing what the moral stresses are.

It's a thoroughly good novel, every element in it essential and carefully crafted, and I'm glad Ace put my endorsement (originally for another Compton book) on the back of it. And I hugely enjoyed the sly comment called "Interjection" (pp. 129-134), in which Compton offers a quite familiar form of typographical trickery in part to establish a couple of minor plot points, but in larger part to show you how well he can do without such crutches.

James White is a Scots author who has been publishing sf short stories and novels since the early 1950's without attracting much attention; he is probably best known for his novels about a space-borne hospital, an obviously promising notion which somehow didn't seem to come to much. The general impression his work gave me was one of quiet competence but very little imaginative pressure.

TOMORROW IS TOO FAR should change all that. Superficially, it bears a number of startling—and necessarily accidental—resemblances to CHRONOCULES. It too deals with a top-secret research project; the project turns out to have something to do with time travel of a very odd sort; and one of its leading characters (in this case, the viewpoint character throughout) is the project's security officer. But its effect, though it is almost equally well written, is quite different.

It's a difficult book to talk about because in structure it is a conventional novel of counter-espionage which derives much of its suspense from the gradual revelation of its secrets; indeed, as the Ballantines' blurb accurately says, the main secret is "so secure that it was being kept from the Security Chief." The book has as a secondary lead a character who (like one in CHRONOCULES) appears to be feeble-minded, but unlike Compton's character, gradually begins to seem like a supernally clever spy, and then as someone even more complicated than that.

There's a scattering of minor characters, all quite well realized, or anyhow as well as they need to be; but it is on these two men, Carson, the Security Chief, and Pebbles, the apparent moron, that the main burden of the story falls. Carson's motives are initially no more than professional curiosity and the desire to keep his job, but as he becomes more interested in Pebbles, human sympathy takes over as it appears more and more likely that

Pebbles is the once-complex but ruined victim of something over which he had no control—and who may be put through it again. By the time the machinations are almost over, Carson himself is about to become the victim—

Which is absolutely all I am going to say about the plot, all the surprises being properly left to the author. It includes a female psychologist for the love interest, with whose none-too-welcome aid the novel ends in a sudden burst of sentimentality; but the performance is otherwise mature and in good control, and you may be impelled to finish it, as I was, in one sitting.

Maybe James White is what his lady doctor would have called a slow developer. Whatever the reason, TOMORROW IS TOO FAR shows that we'd better pay closer attention to him from now on.

Reprint note: Ballantine has returned to print both of Lester del Rey's only novels for adults, NERVES and THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT. I hope nobody needs any introduction to NERVES, a masterpiece which first appeared as a magazine story in 1942, and was expanded and revised into a novel in 1956. THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT, on the other hand, was first published secretly in 1962 by a Midwestern paperback house whose chief desire seemed to be to go out of business as fast as possible; and again, del Rey has taken the opportunity to revise it. To the best of my knowledge, it was the first of all sf novels to center upon the population explosion, and is still one of the best. The Commandment of the title is actually the one before the first, which reads "Be fruitful and multiply"; and del Rey has created a State church which is insanely enforcing it. The earlier book, about a runaway nuclear reactor, has even more bite after the Chalk River and Fermi near-disasters, and its prediction of nuclear packing to create super-heavy elements (a product of the 1956 revision) is in some fundamental respects even more startling; but even more important, it is a true novel, beautifully organized and peopled. NERVES is 75¢, THE ELEVENTH COMMANDMENT is 95¢. Be sure you have both.

Howard Myers has written sf under his own name as well as the pen name "Verge Foray." He writes: "I'm a southerner of hill-billy stock, 47 years old. Since 1937 a regular reader of sf magazines, wrote and sold a couple of pieces in 1951, but then went into newspaper work until a few years ago. Since then I've been free-lancing full time." Shortly after buying Mr. Myers' suspenseful story about dogs that breathe, even *live on* smog, we saw a news item that made the story even more convincing. It stated that packs of dogs (formed after the animals fled their homes during the California earthquake) had been killing and eating other dogs and even attacking people. The news story went on to say that "the problem of dog packs is mounting daily as the canines become hungrier . . ."

Fit For A Dog

by HOWARD L. MYERS

A PLANE WAS DOWN FIFTEEN MILES from Cleveland Dome, with twenty-three passengers and crewmen trapped aboard.

Glitter heard the muffled clatter of the descending plane. Slav had left the ruins of the '93 Buick which served as their den only minutes earlier, on a predawn trip to the Dome to get meat for the growing pups. Glitter had not gone back to sleep. Now she sat up to look out the window while she sniffed the air.

She saw the blurred lights of the plane as it came down in a wobbly glide. The lights vanished as the plane dropped behind the rim of a low hill. She heard it meet the ground with a grinding, drawn-out crunch.

Glitter leaped out the window and then to the top of the car. From this vantage point she still could not see, smell, or hear anything of the plane. That told her something. If the plane were afire, the air would be reflecting its glow. But the only light was the dim beginning of the new day.

She could tell it was going to be a beautiful day, though, with a dense, invigorating smog.

While standing on the car, Glitter bayed out the news of the downed plane. Then she jumped to the ground while her neighbors repeated her call, relaying it to more distant neighbors who would, in turn, bay it out to a still wider radius. Soon every dog within five miles east, south and west—and to the border of Bog Erie on the north—would know of the plane. Many of them would be hurrying to the scene.

Also, the message would catch up with Slav, long before he reached the Dome, and bring him loping home.

The pups were whining with curiosity. The car would not be a safe haven for them with humans about. Copters from the Dome might soon be circling overhead, and the flyers might fire at the old car. They often shot at anything which appeared, from the air, to offer concealment for dogs.

Glitter called the pups out and herded them through the weeds and into a deep bone-burrow Slav had dug in the bank of a nearby erosion ditch. She bared her teeth at them and growled a warning that they were to stay in the bone-burrow, and they huddled obediently against the back of the hole.

Satisfied that they were out of harm's way, Glitter trotted off toward the downed plane.

As she neared the hilltop, she dropped to her belly and crawled into hiding behind the concrete-block foundation of a long-vanished house. Now she could smell hot metal and freshly vaporized oil quite plainly, but she could not smell any humans. That meant the crash landing had sprung no big leaks in the plane's airtight cabin.

Carefully she peered around a corner of the crumbling foundation and down the hill. There lay the plane, its wings, crumpled by the landing, on either side of the long, fat metal body. Light glared out of the windows, and the humans inside were plainly visible. They were milling about in their slow way, and looking disorganized. Some were putting on filter masks while others were taking them off, as if they didn't know what to do. Their sounds came dimly through the hull as they made cries and words at each other.

An antenna near the nose of the plane was transmitting; Glitter could feel the tingle in the back of her head that strong radio signals always produced. Rescuers would be coming out from Cleveland Dome, and that was good. Otherwise, a lot of meat would go to waste here.

She could sense no indication of gunnery, so there was no need to remain in hiding. Probably the humans could not see very well, looking through the windows at the outside gloom, anyway, although dawn was coming rapidly now. She stepped out into the open and moved alertly down the hill toward

the plane, eyeing the lighted windows as she approached. Close up, she studied the humans inside.

Most of them, she saw, were young men and women . . . more of these than were usually found in a grounded plane. Three pairs of them appeared to be mates from the way they huddled together. And one female clutched a small child but had no mate in evidence. Only four that Glitter could see looked to be past breeding age. But sight was not to be depended upon in classifying humans. The sorting-out would have to wait until they were out of the plane and could be investigated by smell.

A questioning bark told her that the neighbors were beginning to arrive. She responded softly. Too much loud baying could spook the humans, already upset by the crash-landing. It was best for them to become aware of the dogs gradually.

The neighbors knew this. As the day brightened, they trotted about, not getting too close to the plane, conversing in quiet yelps. None simply sat and stared at the plane, because nothing would panic the humans quicker than that.

Of course there were some terrified screams and yelling from the humans as they discovered that the plane was surrounded by thirty or forty dogs, but these dwindled as the humans reconciled themselves to the situation, and the dogs made no immediate threatening moves.

But it was not safe to wait too long. A copter might arrive soon, and the humans had to be brought out of the plane before that. Presently four of the dogs, Clog, Blackeye, Brist, and Paddler, ambled nonchalantly to the plane's tail assembly, leaped up onto it, and then worked their way forward on the slippery metal to a spot directly over the passenger cabin. Glitter caught the sharp change in their smell as they prepared to vomit acid.

Inside, there was another flurry of near-panic as the humans heard the clatter of hard claws above their heads. Calm was restored shortly, however. The humans moved away from the area beneath the spot where the four dogs were working on the roof. Glitter could see dull fright and acceptance in their faces when they peered out the windows. There would be no wasteful stampede, she decided.

A plane was down fifteen miles from Cleveland Dome, and Rescue Unit 502 scrambled.

That meant Joe Cosman, for one. His half of the bed tilted suddenly, sliding him into the mouth of the chute tube before he could wake up. Wheels were mumbling beneath him and a tinny voice was briefing him on details of the mission as he sat up and began dressing in his rescue gear. He listened while wondering if the scramble had awakened Doris. Sometimes the bed decanted him into the tube

without her knowing anything was going on.

The tinny voice stopped for a moment, then asked, "Any questions?"

"Yeah," Cosman grunted, tugging on his jacket. "How many copters are going out to cover us?"

"The dispatch of copters is being taken under advisement," the voice replied. "Other questions?"

Cosman's lips tightened in anger. "No more questions," he snapped.

The tube disgorged him a minute later at Westside Emergency Park. He jogged across the concrete apron toward his armored bus 502, putting on his filter mask as he went because the air this close to the Dome wall was somewhat stenchy from exhaust pipe leaks. The wall itself, with its vast triangles of tough plastic, rose in the gloom a dozen yards away from his bus.

Mike Mabry was trotting ahead of him, making hard going of it. Cosman caught up with the older man at the door of the bus, and could hear Mike wheezing.

"How you doing, Mike?" he asked.

"Hi, Joe," Mabry responded hoarsely.

Inside, Cosman climbed behind the wheel and Mabry mounted the ladder to the gun turret on the foreroof. "What's keeping Dego?"

"Here he comes," Mabry replied, sounding less winded. "No . . . it ain't Dego. It's somebody else."

Whoever it was boarded the bus and dropped into the second driver's seat beside Cosman, who eyed the man curiously.

"I'm John Haddon," the man said, "subbing for Diego what's-his-name. Your second driver."

Cosman nodded curtly, not sure he liked this guy and wondering what was wrong with Dego. "I'm Joe Cosman, and that's Mike Mabry up in the nest." He flipped a switch on the dash and spoke into the mike. "Bus 502 crewed and ready. Open up!"

"Okay, 502," the speaker responded. "Move out."

Cosman put the bus in gear and rolled forward. The inner door of the Westwall Emergency Lock folded aside as the bus approached. When it was passed, the door closed and the outer door, a hundred feet ahead, swung apart. The bus passed through it and into the swirling blackness of the outdoors.

He heard Haddon gasp at the sudden darkness and wondered if this was the man's first mission. "The smoke thins when we get a few hundred yards from the Dome," he said, keeping his attention on the dashboard instruments.

"How . . .?" Haddon started, then apparently thought it better to leave his question unasked.

Cosman nursed the bus along, partly by feel and partly by the radarscope which revealed the position of the guidewall along the edge of the ramp. After a couple of minutes he

brought the bus onto the South Sandusky Dome expressway, switched on the autopilot, and sat back.

"Your first mission, Haddon?" he asked.

"Well . . . the first real one. I've had mock-up training, of course."

"Okay. You know where the coffee is?"

"Oh, certainly!"

"Fine. That's part of the second driver's job. Go get us some. Make mine black."

"Mine with white and sweet," said Mabry.

Haddon got up and moved out of the cockpit, back into the passenger section. Cosman and Mabry watched him go; then the driver looked up at the gunner. Mabry shrugged elaborately and chuckled. Cosman spread his hands in a gesture of hopelessness and the gunner chuckled again and nodded.

After a moment Mabry asked, "How close can we get on the expressway?"

"To within a couple of miles, I think." Cosman got out his road map, triangulated the position he had been given for the downed plane, and marked the spot on the map. "Yeah. A little less than two miles. Plenty of old roads there. We probably won't need to use the tracks to get in."

Haddon returned with the covered coffee mugs in time to hear the end of that.

"Is it in . . . dog country?" he asked.

Mabry answered, "Everything outside is dog country, bud. Everything except the Bog."

"Oh." Haddon handed a mug up to the gunner, then brought Cosman his.

"In fact," Mabry went on, "even inside the Dome seems to be dog country."

Cosman frowned. Old Mabry had his good points, but holding his tongue wasn't one of them. Remarks like that one shouldn't be made. They could get a guy in trouble. Especially in front of a stranger like Haddon, who might blab.

"No coffee for yourself?" he asked to change the subject.

"It might tense me up," said Haddon, peering at the blank blackness of the windshield.

Mabry guffawed. "Good thinking, bud! You gotta stay loose to be a rescueman. Some folks say the dogs pick the people who smell afraid to pull down. So don't get in a sweat and you'll be okay."

Haddon turned to look up at the gunner, and Cosman could see the look of dislike in his eyes. "You don't know what you're talking about!" Haddon sniffed.

Mabry laughed, pulled his mask aside, took a long swig of coffee, and replaced the mask.

Cosman activated the windshield washer and switched on the headlights. The heavy trucks rumbling past the bus on the fast inside lane now became visible . . . huge dark

forms running on their automatic controls, each one sending its spout of black exhaust up to mingle with the thinner smog of the dawn-touched sky.

"Won't the lights tell the dogs this is a manned vehicle?" Haddon asked uneasily. "I mean . . . not that I think the dogs are *intelligent*, or anything like that . . ."

"For whatever reason, the dogs never bother a bus on its way to a rescue," Cosman replied evenly. He was becoming angry in spite of himself. This effeminate kid Haddon did not belong in rescue work, that was for damned sure. The Labor Draft Board had either goofed badly or was scraping the bottom of the barrel. And old Mabry wasn't making things any better by putting the kid on.

And no copters on this mission. That was the worst annoyance of all. It was . . . surrender. It was letting the dogs have things their way, without even an attempt to fight them off. It was admitting defeat.

"Not that I think the dogs are *intelligent*, or anything like *tha-a-at*," Mabry gurgled, mimicking Haddon, "it's just that they're so *fa-a-ast*. That's because they can metabolize smog when they ain't metabolizing people. You know why they ain't eaten me and Joe, boy?"

Haddon, with tightly pursed lips, kept a frigid silence.

"Because we're too sexy!" Mabry answered his own question. "The dogs don't bother good breeders, and they know that's me and Joe, because they can smell woman-sweat on us. Right, Joe?"

"If you say so, Mike," Cosman said with what he hoped was discouraging indifference.

"So if you want to last long, boy," Mabry ran on, "you better get yourself a broad to rub against. That's what it takes to stay alive, boy, and it might even make a man out of you. Ain't that right, Joe?"

"You're doing the talking, Mike, not me," Cosman grunted.

This silenced Mabry for a while. Then he grumbled, "Everybody's afraid to know anything, too damn scared to put two and two together. Well, everybody can go to hell, far as I'm concerned!"

"Some people think they know it all!" snapped Haddon. Cosman winced, because that remark would start Mabry up again just when the old gunner had settled into a glum silence.

"Some people know a few things," Mabry replied. "Me, I used to read, back when it was still all right to read. I read about evolution, for one thing . . ."

"Big deal!" snorted Haddon.

"They didn't teach you as much about evolution as you think, boy. They told you about the origin of species in school, didn't they? But did they tell you that for a hundred years after evolution was discovered nobody saw a new species get originated? Thousands and thousands of species, but not a

single new one in a whole century! What do you think of that, boy?"

"I don't think of it at all!" Haddon said.

"Well, you ought to. Because after the smog rolled in, there were new species all over the place. That was something old Darwin didn't figure on, kid . . . that species changed when the world around them changed. Because they *had* to change. So now there's dogs who don't just breathe smog. They can *live* on the stuff when meat's scarce. What do you think makes 'em so strong?"

"You're blabbering nonsense!" Haddon retorted with desperation in his voice. "Dogs breathe smog because they're used to it! That's all."

Mabry chuckled and yawned. "I sure could've used a couple hours more sleep," he said.

Cosman glanced at Haddon. The young man's face was pale with fear and anger. Well, the kid would have to learn to ignore old Mike's crackpot theorizings, as he had himself, if he became a regular in bus 502.

Because it was no good, trying to figure out the dogs. The best thing was not to even think about them. A guy could drive himself nuts wondering how dumb animals could do what the dogs did . . .

He took the bus off autopilot and swung it off the expressway onto a cracked, weed-grown ramp. There was a lot of light outside now, with the sky a lighter gray than it ever was over the Dome, even at midday. He glanced at the map again, picking out the markings which were likely to still represent recognizable roads that would lead to the vicinity of the plane.

"Ain't you going to get a copter to talk us in?" asked Mabry.

"No copters this trip," he grunted.

"Ah! The brass hats must be wising up," said the gunner with evident satisfaction.

"You mean we're . . . unprotected?" Haddon quavered to Cosman.

"We'll be okay," Cosman assured him. "Mabry can work that gun on the roof as fast as he can his mouth, when he has to."

Mabry laughed. "That I can, kid. And it's a great kick, shooting at our betters. I just wish they wasn't so damn hard to hit!"

Slav had returned, and Glitter hunched down beside him as they watched the humans help each other climb out of the plane. Clog, Blackeye, and Paddler were inside, having dropped through the acid-cut hole in the roof, snarling and snapping at the laggards. But there was no smell of fresh blood; the dogs inside had not had to slash anybody to get their obedience.

Brist had been inside, too, but he had leaped back through the hole to stand on top of the plane. He was looking down at the people milling

around outside and barking happily. He was a young dog, feeling the vigor of full adulthood for the first time, and was plainly excited.

Glitter called Slav's attention to him, and her mate rose to walk indifferently past the humans, who drew back nervously at his approach. He stared up at Brist and growled warningly. A dog alone on top of the plane would be a perfect target, not only for a copter but even for a bus gunner.

Brist gave a nonchalant yap, but after a moment he skittered back to the tail assembly and jumped to the ground.

Thinking of copters, Glitter looked at the ground around her. She spotted several stones of about the right size—small enough for a dog to grasp by the teeth and sling high in the air, but large and heavy enough to reach the rotor blades through the heavy down-current of air, and damage those blades when they struck them.

All the humans were out of the plane now, and the dogs were beginning to move among them. They had stood in a tight clot at first, but this broke up as they drew apart to give the dogs plenty of room. Soon they were sufficiently scattered for the sorting-out process to begin and so thoroughly mingled with the dogs that a copter gunner would not dare try to shoot.

The sorting did not take long, and the results were somewhat disappointing. As Glitter had noted the first time she looked into the plane, most of these were young people . . . good breeding stock. But there were the four older ones, who ought to be tough and tasty, plus a hulking young female who did not have the breeder smell.

These five were gradually herded away from the others but did not seem to realize immediately what was happening. When they saw the distance between themselves and the other passengers, they created the usual uproar. Two of the old ones, a male and a female, fainted, but both revived quickly when jaws closed on their shoulders to drag them away.

Another of the old ones flung off his filter mask and started running in the general direction of Cleveland Dome. Three of the dogs trotted after him, knowing he could not go far.

The young female clenched her fists but allowed herself to be herded away. Glitter guessed that one would try to fight when slaughtering time came.

The remaining humans by the plane were silent during all this. Now one of them giggled loudly, and then all of them were laughing and making words to each other. They tried to clot up again, but a few growls from the dogs kept them in their places. The female who was clutching a small child sat down on the ground, looking fearfully at the nearest dog as she did so, but plainly too weak to stay on

her feet. The dog, Highleg, ignored her. Soon the other humans were sitting, too.

Brist was making a show of his discontent with the small number of humans the sorting had yielded. Glitter watched him with more amusement than admiration—and he was plainly playing for the admiration of all the bitches in hearing distance as he yowled about how he could eat a whole human by himself, and be ready to eat another tomorrow.

He was a robust young dog, without doubt, but Glitter suspected that Slav could make him scamper if the need ever arose.

The roar of the approaching bus brought the humans to their feet, and Glitter found herself a safe position in their midst. She wondered briefly at the absence of copters. If any were coming, they would have arrived before the bus. So there would be no copters, with crews to augment the meat supply if the copters dropped low enough for the gunners to aim and for their rotor blades to be smashed with slung stones.

"I hear a mutt yowling," remarked Mabry. "We getting close?"

"We must be," said Cosman. He was homing on the plane's radio beam now, and had a good idea of its location. The trick was to reach the spot while staying on low ground—in hopes that Mabry could get a good shot at some dog on a hillside—while avoiding getting the bus stuck in mud or bog.

"Hey! I saw somebody on the ground!" yelled Haddon.

"Where?"

"The headlights swept over him! Can you swerve back to the left?"

Cosman slowed the bus almost to a stop and eased it to the left. The lights caught the prone form of a man, not more than twenty feet away but invisible in the smog until the bright illumination struck him.

"Dog meat," Mabry muttered.

"I guess so," said Cosman. He pulled the bus up alongside the motionless form and switched on his exterior speaker. "*Hey, mister*!" he called into the mike.

The man made no move. Cosman noticed that he was not wearing a filter mask. After a moment he shrugged and started the bus forward again.

"Aren't you going to bring him in?" Haddon demanded.

"Can't do it. He's probably dead, anyway."

"We don't *know* he's dead," Haddon persisted.

"Okay, would you like the job of going out and dragging him in?" Cosman demanded crossly.

Haddon was quiet for a moment. "What would happen if I did?" he asked.

"The dogs would be all over you."

"Oh . . . But I didn't see any dogs."

"They're there. You didn't see the man till the lights hit him, did you?"

"No."

"Okay. Just keep in mind we're out here to collect live people, not dead meat. And we don't jeopardize them by trying to take away a body the dogs have claimed."

"That's one way dogs ain't changed," Mabry threw in from his perch. "Try to take a bone away from one and you got a fight on your hands."

"Don't you see anything on your infrared?" Cosman asked him with impatience.

"Nope, not through this muck. "Yeah . . . there they are. We're heading straight for them!"

Cosman slowed the bus to a creep. He heard the people yelling before he could see them. Then there they were in his lights, standing and waving their arms, and the dogs slouching about among them.

"Good morning, folks," he said into the mike, speaking slowly and calmingly. "There's no need for hurry or panic. In a moment I will open the door of the bus, and all of you will be permitted to come aboard. Just move toward the door in an orderly fashion, without any crowding, when I give the word. All of us will be having breakfast in Cleveland Dome in half an hour. Okay?"

He heard muffled yells of assent from outside. "Good," he approved, and activated the door switch.

Almost instantly there was a crash behind him as the door between the passenger compartment and the cockpit section was torn open.

Cosman whirled in his chair to stare numbly at the gleaming eyes and bared teeth of a giant dog.

Haddon screeched and Mabry roared "*Good Godamighty*!" Cosman started to fumble for his sidearm but froze when the dog made a snarling lunge at him.

There was a moment during which the three men and the dog were motionless. Then the men stayed that way while the dog rose on his hindlegs to sniff briefly at Mabry's trousers. Next he dropped down to smell Cosman's face, and the driver felt the hair on his neck stiffen as the dog's hot breath moistened the skin around his filter mask.

Then the dog moved over to Haddon and gave him a similar inspection. The muzzle moved down Haddon's arm, and teeth clamped on his trembling hand. Cosman could see blood start to ooze.

"Oh," Haddon said softly in response to the pain. "Oh."

The dog tugged on the hand and Haddon came swiftly to his feet, grimacing. The dog backed out of the cockpit, pulling the young man along.

"W-wait, dog," Haddon was beginning to whimper. "Let me go, dog. I admit I . . . don't like girls . . . but I'll get one. Really I will, dog. I promise! Have lots of babies.

That's what you want, don't you? Please . . . lots of babies, dog . . ."

The pleadings had been making Cosman cringe. It was a relief when Haddon was led beyond earshot.

Mabry wheezed and coughed.

"I thought the kid was just . . . kind of prissy," he said in a weak voice. "They know better than send a homosexual out here. Ought to, anyway."

"Maybe he wasn't good on any other job," said Cosman when he found his voice. "Bottom of the barrel." After a moment he added sharply, "Why the hell didn't you cover the door, Mike?"

"How was I to guess a damn dog would come aboard? They don't usually do that," Mabry said defensively. "Doubt if I could've hit him anyway, fast as they move . . . look at him out there! Acting awful damn proud of hisself! Maybe I can get him yet!"

"Careful," Cosman warned as the gun turret swung about. He too had caught a glimpse of the dog that had taken Haddon frisking about, but an older looking dog had growled at it, and it had moved out of sight among the people. Mabry cursed, and his gun remained silent.

"Okay, folks, don't be alarmed," Cosman said into the mike, "and start coming aboard."

The people outside began moving warily toward the bus, and when the dogs made no objection, they moved faster. But nobody was trampled, although there was some pushing and shoving at the door before all were inside. Haddon was not among them.

And the dogs had melted away into the smog. By the time the people were safe inside, no targets were left for Mabry.

"Hell!" he grunted. "Let's go home."

Cosman started the bus moving. It was full day now, but the headlights helped visibility enough to be left on. He checked his map for an underpass to the eastbound side of the expressway.

"I wish I hadn't picked on the kid," Mabry muttered.

Cosman said nothing.

"We're all such damn fools," Mabry went on angrily. "Always lousing ourselves up! This whole mess we're in . . . the world didn't get like it is by itself. We brought it all on ourselves, by our damn stupid mistakes! You know that, Joe?"

Cosman shrugged, and wished Mabry would shut up.

"We made our mess and now we got to live with it. Ain't you ever thought about it, Joe? How different things might be if we'd used some sense, or if our granddaddies had, I mean? It was way back then, when they put domes over the towns and everybody moved inside to get out of the smog.

"Have you ever thought, Joe, what damn fools they were? All they had to do was take all the dogs inside with 'em, or make sure they killed every damn mutt in the coun-

try. But they didn't! That was the damn foolishest mistake anybody ever made!"

Cosman nodded slowly. Old Mabry talked a lot of nonsense, but sometimes he hit the nail squarely on the head.

"I guess that's right, Mike," he said. "I can't imagine anything stupider than that."

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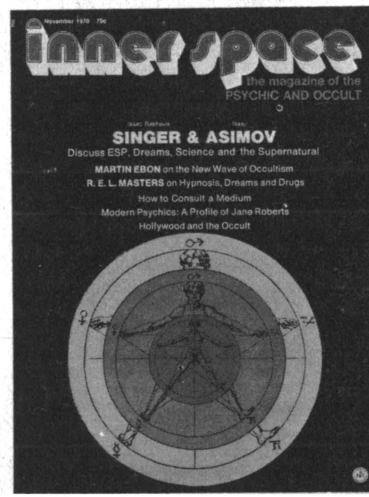

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If you have been with us for a while, you'll recall some of Kit Reed's superior contributions to F&SF such as "The Wait," April 1958, "Automatic Tiger," March 1964 and "The Vine," November 1967. Her most recent novel is ARMED CAMPS (Dutton), a book which, like the story below, is set against the background of a War that continues eternally.

Underground

by KIT REED

LORD, I DON'T WANT TO GO TO Nineveh. John could see himself as from a distance, hunched over on the seat with his elbows on his knees and his head drooping between his shoulders; there would be a fine grey light playing on him as he rode away from the pressures of the world. Not in this century; instead, he was upright, held in place by bodies jammed on all sides. The subway car was filled with the heat of their flesh and all their exhaled breath; the air was rank and cut through by a thin, high hum which might have been a wail. A thought flickered through his mind: the cattle trains, Dachau, but he had always thought of those trains as running in the winter, misery enclosed in ice; this was summer and these were all comfortable Americans who had paid to get on; those were the singing violins of Muzak poisoning the air. The hand holding the strap was asleep, and he tried to shift arms, but the man next to him rattled his paper in quick impatience, jamming him with an elbow, and on the other side a woman began to grumble, clamping her heel down on his toe. What the hell, he told himself, trying to justify his decision, it might help this planet to have a major war. He envisioned the sweltering ranks thinned by a holocaust; any life remaining would have great value and that alone would be something new; he could imagine the world's ghettos and garbage dumps all purified by fire.

John was aware of a certain vacuum, as of the intake of many breaths, and, turning his head, he saw that the man next to him had stopped reading his paper and was staring at him with an expression of dawning discovery. *I guess this is it.*

He didn't know how the papers could have picked it up so quickly, but he knew more or less what the story would say, and he could have written the headline himself:

HEAD NEGOTIATOR FLEES
ON EVE OF PEACE TALKS

Not content to stop at headlines, the man next to him must have read on down as far as the description; there was probably a blurred photograph, or one of those primitive, graceless drawings: Artist's Conception. There would be a reward.

Maybe he could break and run. Not a chance, not even if he tried to stampede the crowd by yelling FIRE. They were all packed back to belly to belly to back, and there was no place for them to go. Until the train stopped and the doors opened, they were prisoners together under the delusion that they were, rather, people of some importance going someplace that mattered. If this man with the paper accused him, he might be able to bluff: I don't know what you're talking about. Or he could take the offensive: Help, this man has gone mad. If he was lucky, they would reach the next stop in another minute, and he could worm his way to safety before his accuser noticed that he was gone. He could imagine himself sprinting along the subway tunnel, with all those doomed Americans pelting down the platform, shouting: After him. If he was lucky, there would be a roar in the tunnel; and before they could reach him he would be flattened like a starfish against the front of an oncoming train.

As it was he had no choice; he was enclosed, surrounded, the crowd had shifted slightly so that now he was face to face with the newspaper reader, who would be matching him up with the description or the photograph. In another second he would accuse him.

His accuser spoke. "Hey, I don't think we're moving."

John said, quickly, "Don't jump to conclusions; I'm not who you think."

"The goddamn car has stopped."

"I just *look* like him."

Around them, other voices chimed in a murmuring rise.

John said quickly, "Listen, everybody, I'm not who you think."

Nobody was paying any attention to him.

"I'm just a wayfaring stranger."

They only rustled and fluttered in a rising distress.

"Well what if I *am* running away," John said defensively. "It's my life."

But the man opposite kneed him. "Shut up, buddy, you're using too much air."

John doubled up, and as he straightened, he became aware that the car had stopped, and along with it the blowers and the Muzak; but the doors had not opened, and as far as he could tell, there was nothing but tunnel wall on either side, with no station and, apparently, no hope

ot a station. The lights were flickering, and although they had little to talk about and nothing in common, he was united with the people in this car. They were all sealed together some miles beneath the surface of Manhattan. Either the lights had gone out in the car ahead of them or there was no longer a car ahead of them. The people nearest that door were tapping and scratching, but in the painful listening periods which followed, there was no responding sound. Around John, people were struggling and complaining, and some woman he could not see had begun to cry. Someone said, "It'll only be a minute," and somebody else said, "If we don't get moving in a minute, they'll send someone down after us," but undercutting all the cheerful little speeches were the beginning sounds of panic. John was aware that although there was not room for anyone to lift an elbow, everybody in the car was swaying slightly, all of them moving backward and forward en masse as if the rolling motion of their bodies would be enough to start the car. Somebody broke out a box of cookies and passed it around as far as it would go; there were scuffles over the crumbs, and John found himself clutching a scrap of waxed paper with YES-YES written over the three-color picture of the best civilization had to offer: a nut-and-coconut chewy with chocolate laid over it in stripes.

Somebody said, "Maybe it's some kind of a test."

"Maybe we're on Candid Camera."

"It's probably a strike."

"Maybe we're overweight."

"Like, there are too many people in this car."

"Yes," John said, "maybe there are too many people in this car."

He knew at once what he would have to do, but he couldn't bring himself to make the offer because he felt so safe even here, no more than one body among several dozen others. As long as he stayed here, he wouldn't have to go back to the peace talks; they couldn't make him go back; he couldn't get there even if conscience gripped him by the throat and he had to go. So long as he was enclosed in this car, he was safe from the long speeches and immediate misunderstandings, the offers which ended in nothing, the hopes which could be dashed by a hand-twitch or the clearing of a throat. Hope was his particular talent, and it was what had finally ruined him. He could not stop himself from hoping; he would go in to the peace talks each time thinking maybe this is it; and each time, either his side or the other side or both sides together, all operating from the best of intentions, would blunder into misunderstanding and find some way to dash his hopes.

Somebody was saying, "If one or two guys would get off."

"Even one guy. He could go into

that workman's hole and wait."

"He wouldn't even have to be there long."

"We would send somebody back for him."

"Yeah, but who would do a thing like that?"

"Not me, I've got a wife and children."

"I've got a mother to support."

"I have a very important appointment."

"We'll have a lottery, all the men."

"Lowest number goes."

"Never mind," John said, with a sigh of great patience. "I've got nothing to lose. I'll go."

They all loved him at once. They got together supplies, candy from a ten-year-old, a second box of YES-YES cookies—the owner had been holding back—knishes from somebody who had been to visit his mother, and a pint bottle from a wino's paper sack. They put it all together in a shopping bag and tied it to his wrist with an old lady's chapel veil, and then somebody kicked out a window, and they lifted him and passed him over their heads, jamming him through the broken window without much caring that the broken edges scraped his back. "Good luck," they cried, as they got him through the window, and "Good luck" again as they tapped his fingers because he was dangling from the window sill and couldn't quite bring himself to let go. "Holocaust," he muttered, dropping to the cinders, "the sooner the better." He was still muttering as he boosted himself into the little cranny, the workman's hole scooped out of the side of the tunnel. Then, miraculously, as if that had been all that was necessary, the car began to move, and John, touched by a fear that it was all more personal than he had thought, watched the train go winking off down the track.

"You can forget your cheap tricks," he yelled into the darkness, without being sure who or what he thought would hear him. "I'm not going back."

For the first few minutes or hours he sat hugging his knees, staring into the blackness with a sense of relief. He threw his penknife at the third rail. Nothing; it was dead. So he was safe. There would not be another train along to pick him up; there was no way for Sarris to reach him and make him come back. If they wanted to go on with that charade in the UN building, they would have to find some other fool to take his place. He could sit here in his safe dream of darkness until the food was gone and the whiskey ran out; and if the world had not burned itself out by that time, then he supposed he would have to die of exposure, or starvation, which in the long run might not be so bad.

Still, it was colder in here than he would have thought, and he ate the candy bar and drank more of the pint than he would have intended

because it turned out to be whiskey. Then he must have sunk into a dream, or delirium, because afterward he could not be sure how much was remembered and how much imagined. He was back at the preliminary session, surrounded by all those good, grey statesmen with axes to grind, and Sarris was pressing him. "You, John, you and you alone," and, "John, they'll listen to you," and he was saying no.

Then Sarris took him aside. "You have to do it. I may be dying."

"Then find somebody else."

"Nobody else has your gift." Sarris fixed him with fading blue eyes. "You were my best student."

"I wish I'd never heard of you."

"You are my hope."

In the end he had to agree because they all seemed to want what he wanted; they had all seemed harried and sincere. It was released to all the papers: WHITE HOPE TO LEAD PEACE TALKS; and almost as soon as he agreed, the others seemed to withdraw, talking behind their hands so he couldn't hear. Then he had happened upon the portfolio marked CLASSIFIED; and because it was, after all, his business too, he defused the explosive alarm and opened it, discovering what he had more or less suspected: that he might be the only person in the mission who honestly wanted peace, and peace alone; that his country wanted, rather, the advantage and would march into or start bombing on the one hand even as Sarris prodded him and he first opened his mouth, proffering all good intentions on the other. When he taxed Sarris with it, Sarris only nodded and buried his face in his hands. John remembered running down the halls of the UN building, shouting; but if he was shouting, nobody listened. His voice simply left his throat and disappeared. He was screaming, running along the ridges of some enormous, unheeding ear.

No. This was the tunnel. Roused by his own voice, he shook his head and came back to himself, the food and the bottle, the sweating stone of the ledge.

He had made some sort of declaration, or speech, just as he broke and ran; he couldn't remember what he had said. "Serve you right," probably, or, "You're no better than the rest of them," but he did remember Sarris, who had not denied the charge. "It's probably going to happen anyway, but it will happen faster without you."

Well, let it. He was sick of lies and clinging hands and poison, hopeful, craven grins; and because he was cold through and cramped beyond endurance, he swigged off at least half the remaining whiskey and lay at full length on the rock, composing himself carefully because he would just as soon never wake up; and he wanted to present a dignified picture when they found him, if they ever found him. As he lay there, a dream, or vision, of the holocaust took him, and he saw en-

tire countries swept away, buildings twisted and melting and all those craven smiles eaten out by fire. The world was filled with the sound of shrieking winds, but John found that he was not purged or satisfied by the vision, which promised: *soon.* Instead he wanted to cry out: *Not yet.* It was all so much worse than he would have expected that he drew away, trying to escape into wakefulness; but the nightmare gripped him and he was forced to see Sarris, his face boiling, and then the head of a girl he had once loved. Her face was still pretty and she was alive, trying to speak to him, but the back of her head was gone and there were rats running in her skull. At last John woke in a sweat of terror, crying, "Stop it, stop it, *wait.*"

Then he came to himself again, in the tunnel still, and he sat up and said, sullenly, "Well what the hell am I supposed to do about it," and he remembered Sarris at that first meeting, saying, "As much as you can."

He was colder than he had ever been; and because he was going to die in another minute if he didn't warm up a little, he jumped down onto the track and ran a few yards, flapping his arms, turning in a sudden panic that he might not be able to find his way back to the workman's cranny and the food. He would have to grope around in there and see if he could come up with a tarpaulin or an old pair of overalls to keep himself from freezing. There was nothing except a box full of cleaning rags, and John stuffed several into his shirt, thinking that would help a little. Then he ate the knishes, and before he could stop himself, he rifled the cookie box in an uncontrollable gesture toward survival, finishing them off along with the pint.

If he dreamed, it was not so much a dream as a vision of certitude: there was, somewhere in this tunnel, a rich man's fallout shelter, a snug, warm hideaway in which he would find fresh clothes and food enough to last him for as many years as he cared to live. He could envision himself on a plushy zebra-striped sofa, bent over the coffee table, which would be big enough for a plate of hot food and the typewriter he knew he would find. Safe in comfort, spared the company of all the failures in the world, he could write his book. Of course there would be nobody around to read his book, nobody to share the food, nobody to tell . . . he had a quick picture of himself bent over the typewriter, weeping with loneliness; and then he woke, weeping—with loneliness? He was going to die soon if he didn't find someplace warm and something to eat; worse, he was going to die if he didn't hear another human voice.

"All right, all right," he said aloud, although he could not have said who he thought was listening.

He would have to get moving.

He would make his way along the tunnel until he found somebody or died in the attempt. He knew he could find the hidden opening of that fallout shelter within a few minutes, but he understood with the same certitude that he would pass it by because he needed the others, which meant he was no better than the others, and if negotiating was the price he had to pay, then he would have to pay. He said, aloud, "It won't be a drop in the bucket," but he could almost hear Sarris: Well, we have to try.

Groping along the stone ledge, he found a cookie which had fallen from the box, and instead of finishing it, he stuffed it in his pocket; he would need it for the trip. He took the rest of the cleaning rags to line his shoes because he had no idea how long the walk would take him, or how many miles he would have to cover before he found his way out. He let himself down from the ledge with a certain reluctance and began to walk along the track.

For the first second or two he was not sure whether he saw or imagined the two men trundling toward him on the handcar, and then they spoke.

"The ambassador."

"There he is."

"Hey, ambassador, there you are."

"Yeah," he said, and found himself leaning against the tunnel wall because he could no longer stand without help. His voice was unsteadier than he would have expected. "I guess you guys are just in time."

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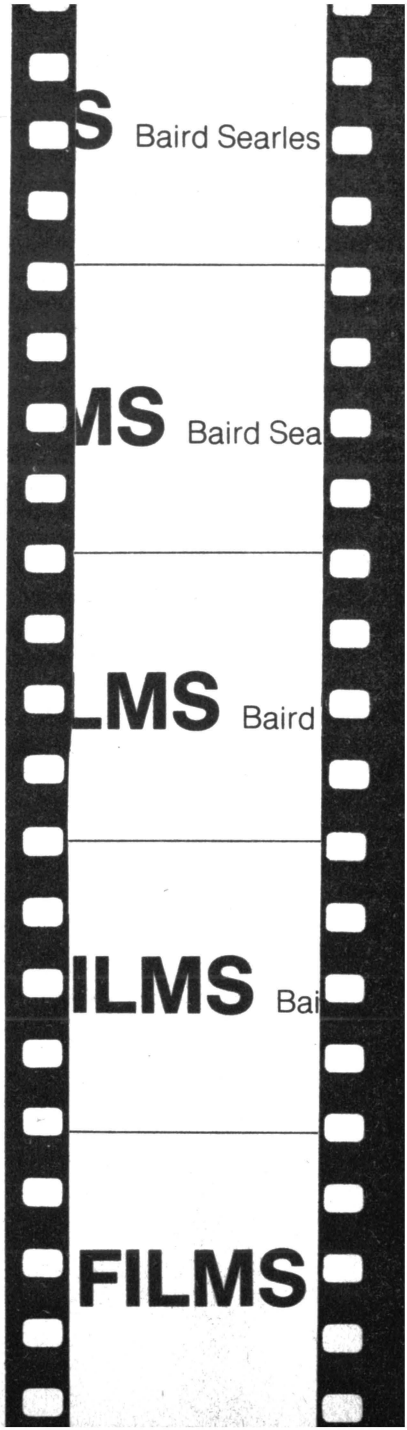
The House that Dripped Blood (Cinerama Releasing Corp.) is an omnibus film of four stories all laid in a single house. The quality is even more inconsistent than most portmanteau films (and by quality I mean both good/bad and the film's character) because the unifying factor of the house leads one to expect some sort of coherence that is not there—though there is a lame sort of tacked-on explanation at the end as to why all these things happened in this house that is so patently invented as to be insulting.

So forgetting what could have been a marvelous takeoff point for a horror film, the four stories must be judged simply as four stories. The first two can be dismissed as not falling within the province of this column, since they are essentially suspense anecdotes having nothing to do with the supernatural, though number one does have a good moment or two of evoking that chilling feeling of I-am-alone-in-the-house-but-there-is-someone-else-here. It is still as predictable as anything Rod Serling writes for television, while number two, on the other hand, is so arbitrary that it is not only unpredictable, it is totally soporific.

Number three, however, is another matter. A governess is brought to the house by a widower to act as companion to the man's daughter, a girl of about seven. Something is obviously very wrong with the child and with the father's attitude toward the child, and it is only when he panics at discovering that some wax candles are missing that we begin to suspect what it is. Need I say more? Christopher Lee plays the father with his usual dour heaviness, but Nyree Dawn Porter (the lovely Irene of the Forsyte Saga) is fine as



the governess, and the child, whose name I did not grasp, is a credit to her generation.

Tale number four is essentially a bit of fluff, but a basic bit of fluff in the sense that it dramatizes a situation that probably most of us have wondered about, i.e., what happens if an actor who specializes in vampire films runs into the real thing? It's nicely done, though I might have enjoyed it more than most people since I have been involved with just that kind of actor, and with just that kind of film (herein called *Curse of the Bloodsuckers*).

As for the house itself, the real star of the film, it had just enough of an ominous quality photographed just competently enough to make you want more and better. One running reference was nice, however. Books that one recognized kept popping up as props, including Peake, Tolkien, and a volume on the horror film.

The House that Dripped Blood was greeted with joyous cheers by several of the more powerful New York critics—one wonders what they would do if a *really* good supernatural film came along. Or would they even recognize it?

Late, late show department . . . Whenever I mention that **Creation of the Humanoids** is a science fiction film that I respect, I either get a blank look or an outraged stare. Since I viewed it recently on television (I mention old films in this space only if I see them currently—memory is often untrustworthy), I'd like to take the opportunity to justify that. The film was made in 1962, and is presumably based on a Jack Williamson novel of similar title that I read so long ago that I can make no judgement on the adaptation. Acting and direction in the film are abominable; as for the production, I have no idea what the budget was, but I can only say that the look of the movie is that of a low budget stretched imaginatively as opposed to a large one used badly.

It concerns a post-atomic-war Earth where the human population is tiny, but knowledge and civilization have been preserved and almost all work is performed by androids. The hero is an officer in the Order Of Flesh and Blood, a society dedicated to the elimination of the androids. The "flesh and blooder's" KKK tactics and attitudes seem at first mere xenophobic prejudice, especially when the hero visits his sister and berates her for "contracting" with an android, an interesting variation on the would-you-want-your-sister-to-marry-one theme. However, things are not so simple, as it is revealed that the machines are taking things more and more into their own hands, making improvements on themselves, and controlling the choice of human leadership; all this as humanity is failing to replenish itself because of radiation poisoning and a kind of

apathy. I won't go into the complexities of the plot, save to say it has the kind of surprise ending typical of 40s sf—and that's not a put down.

Now what the film *does* have is an immensely sophisticated script, both in that it makes no concessions to the general public by constantly "explaining" things, and, relatedly, in using many of the conventions of sf which we buffs take for granted, but which do need some basic grounding in the field or a quick mind. A good example is the use of the word "contract" for marry; when the hero says, "I'm almost past the age for contracting," and the heroine replies that, nevertheless, she wants to contract with him, I'm sure half the audience was totally mystified. The film is literary rather than cinematic, a problem with most science fiction movies, as I mentioned in the last column. But it is *literately* literary rather than simple minded, and that is almost as hard to find as a hobbit in *Analog*. The concepts are stimulating, the dialogue intelligent (albeit badly delivered), and all in all, it has the quality of ideas at play that made the best of 40s sf so good.

Late, late, late show department . . . if you're a monster movie fan, but have given up trying to remember which ones you've seen (how do you tell Godzilla and Rodan apart in retrospect?), one man's recommendations are *Mothra*, for its sheer insanity, and *Gorgo*, a not-so-cheap British imitation of the Japanese, for its gimmick—and the fact that it's nice to see London trampled under foot instead of Tokyo for a change.

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Michael Bishop ("A Tapestry of Little Murders," June 1971) returns with a parable about a group of astronauts who have been to the Moon and a band of ancient gypsies who have been everywhere.

Spacemen and Gypsies

by MICHAEL BISHOP

BECAUSE MY HOUSE IS ON THE edge of a desert, I can look out through my patio doors and see the naked dunes standing as fluorescent as water under the moonlight. That particular night was a strange one, and my head ached with the arid murmurings of the sand. I had come into the desert to escape insomnia, to palliate the trauma of a recent loss. But my insomnia persisted; the loss continued to rankle in me, a gnawing sore.

I passed through the dark house and looked out the facing of glass, across the patio of inset marble tiles. Ordinarily my neatly structured gardens grade into the desert with a silent artfulness that makes one forget the distinctions between man's handiwork and nature's. But not on that night.

My view of the ineluctably rolling dunes was obstructed.

The butterscotch moonlight fell not on the desert—but instead on the hodgepodge of garish wagons that had encamped, without my knowledge, between the marble mosaic of my patio and the sheer edge of the desert itself.

For, you see, there were gypsies in my backyard.

I could see the chrysalises of their slumbering bodies, the dark mounds of their bedrolls, shadows under the painted wooden carts of their caravan.

But one gypsy stood guard. His figure was crooked, bent, grotesque in pantaloons and cap. He surveyed not the area around him, however, but the indigo skies, staring at the full orange moon that rocked and pitched, pitched and rocked, in the awesome night overhead. I determined to approach him and slid the patio doors aside. Although the

doors made no sound that I could detect, the gypsy turned his head and watched my robed figure emerge from the house, test the cold marble with my bare feet, and ascend toward him.

The gypsy's eyes reflected a moony sheen, like hard dark pieces of obsidian. In that long minute in which I approached him, his perspective became mine. I could tell that he was not at all disconcerted to see me coming.

Quietly, he greeted me, and we talked casually together, careful to let the others sleep.

The man's name was Lazarescu. Talking to him, I could see that he had lived more years than I had patio stones to count. The leathery flesh of his face had an ugly canaled quality, as if it had been tattooed from the inside of his mouth. His hands clasped and unclasped one another like amorous tarantulas. They held me fascinated, as Lazarescu told the following story; and I listened to him, neither impatient nor mystified, while all about us the desert and the wind conspired to cover my walkways and gardens with sand.

Lazarescu's voice was old, his English only faintly accented. In fact, he spoke like a learned scholar only recently estranged from his academy:

Yes, I am an old man. An old man with blear eyes and a memory which more and more frequently fails me. But I know what we are doing in this windy desert and why my people have chosen me to stand the watch. You, on the other hand, are a settled person; you require answers. Well, I have the voice to give them, the eyes to see through your astonishment, and the memory to relate this latest of our sufferings.

My name is Lazarescu.

In the days gone by, the people came to my summons, followed where I led, listened to my counsel. But latterly I have been the follower, an old man nodding on the wagon seat, going where the nomadic spirit of our newer gypsy blood has prompted. But tonight the new blood slumbers, the young men rest, and Lazarescu—bleareyed but worthy—stands the watch. I have asserted myself again.

But you would know why we have encamped by your home.

This is the story. During the April that is past our caravan crawled through the Balkans. We were coming down out of the upland mists that made us wish for heavier mantles, coarser shawls, drier climes. It was the thaw, and evil going. Wagons toppled. We set them right again. Two children were born, and we sang in our coming down with the force and joy of this new unbartered blood. In May we reached the Adriatic. The sky burned so fiercely blue that the air seemed alcohol on fire. Our wagons creaked on their newly thirsty wheels, and mouths turned black with the heat and water-lust. Still

we exulted. We exulted in the thirst we had chosen and in the pleasure of the road. On the last wagon rode Zoga, the tamer of bears, and his young wife Selena.

Zoga chose to bring up the rear of our ungainly convoy because attached to his own wagon, an additional weight for his finely curried horses, was the bear cart. The bear cart contained only one animal, but this one so nervous and excitable that it must ride last in our procession or else lacerate itself unmercifully against the bars of its cage—pawing and thrashing at the horses that pulled the trailing wagon. Therefore, Zoga and his wife came last.

But horse-drawn wagons were never made for such highways as the *gago* travel in their motorcars. People shouted from their speeding windows and shook their fists. When they drew up behind our clattering caravan and could not pass, they shouted obscenities about kettle-makers and pilferers. We kept to the road. We kept to the highway beside the hot blue shining sea and ignored the blaring horns. But the horns blew louder. Our horses stopped, alarmed and whinnying, as all around the noise billowed up: whinnying and swearing, horns and horses, so many noises that I trembled on the wagon seat. Zoga's bear growled ferociously.

Before the officials came, a brawny man got out of one of the stalled motorcars behind us, skirted the bear cart, and yanked Zoga down from his wagon. The brawny man smashed Zoga's face with his hard red hands and tore away his neckerchief and vest. I watched, leaning from my seat. Zoga's bear made heavy complaint. A shaggy black monster, it raged at the red-haired man and rocked its flimsy wooden cage. I dismounted and ran lamely, belatedly, to Zoga's aid. I could see the bear's whiplashing saliva, its matted black beard, and, on down the highway, the doors opening on the little Fiats and motor vans as red-faced people emerged to watch the fight. Some clearly wished to join in.

It was fortunate that the police arrived, for I am no fighter. The government officials and the police came just before the brawny man could kill Zoga, and they made us pull our caravan off the roadway. I do not know what they did with the man.

They questioned us. They would not believe that we had come all the way from the Stara Planina, the high mountains, to this roadway on the Adriatic in so short a time. But it was true. We were fewer than four hundred kilometers from Trieste, following our blood north along the west-winding sea. Nor would they permit us to leave the unsheltered encampment where they had forced us off the government roadway.

In the late afternoon a huge

truck growled into our midst. The driver wore a heavy revolver on his hip, and his two companions carried long, pointed sticks. We could do nothing against these uniformed men when, cursing all the Romany and prodding with their sticks, they transferred Zoga's bear from its flimsy cart to the cattle-sullied bed of their truck. It was rules, they said. So menacing a beast could not go about the civilized countryside in a mere cart. Growling, both the truck and Zoga's bear departed from us forever.

I was glad that the bruised tamer lay abed, unaware of this new duplicity.

Night came down on our wagons.

Zoga lay in his wagon on a pallet of straw; he moaned so that his voice had the plaintiveness of the Adriatic, the sorrow of a people infinitely old. Selena crouched over her husband, tending his wounds. All this I knew simply by moving steathily, with an old man's stealth, through the camp. Zoga's moaning continued. When I could support it no longer, I took action.

With my neckerchief I throttled the government official who had been assigned to stay beside us. One government official. He was unarmed, sleeping in his motorcar, and I do not believe that he ever awoke. But his stupidity was only an extension of the government's, and it was impossible to feel remorse.

Just as it is tonight, the moon was full and bright. I wasted no time.

From the old days I remembered how the blood ran when a man assumed the leadership of his people. The blood ran that way in me. I roused Rudolfo in the first wagon and told him that we had a journey to embark upon. Together we woke the others. In only a few brief minutes we had tied down all the rattling spoons, kettles, pots, and basins that hung from our carts. Silently we left the place of our forced encampment and began traveling north, true north, by that sort of wagon rut only a gypsy can find. Behind us the Adriatic moaned like a bereaved woman.

We traveled for a long period of time. A period of time which had no dependency on the markers of day and night. The air grew incredibly thin, and we bundled in our mantles and shawls against the cold.

At last we came down out of the naked gray mountains into the Mare Crisium, the deepest of all the moon's waterless seas, where the cold was not so penetrating.

Our horses always respond well to the lowland regions of Mother Luna, for their hooves touch but lightly in the inviolate powdered soil. And for us, of course, the Earth hangs in the sky like a blue crystal ball, clouded with possible misfortune. It is always good to go back to the moon. You, who possess this fine glass house, know what returning home accomplishes for the wanderer. Well, man, our people

have no home but Mother Luna, and to be sojourning in her seas is all we know of the settled man's homecoming.

We had resolved to span the Mare Crisium and pass leisurely from the moon's forward face to the dark. In that darkness of stars and crater shadows we would purge our bodies of the cloying Earth. Our crimson and yellow caravan would thread the passes of each of the three mountain ranges that encircle the Oriental Sea. That was the haven we sought. Darkness heals. We were in need of healing; and Zoga, who still carried the scars of his encounter with the brutish Yugoslav, had demanded that our destination be a dark-side sanctuary. Since he was yet in mourning for his bear, no one opposed him. Therefore, bathed in ambiguous Earthlight, we moved through the Sea of Crises.

But we had misgivings, and our misgivings bore fruit.

You see, when our ancestors plied the moon oceans, they feared nothing—not the cold, not the dark, not the void, not the perpetual hunger. A man had only to suffer these things, and Mother Luna granted him all her desolate privacy, the grandeur of her barrenness. In these days the gift has not been withdrawn. But it has been extended to others whose birthright includes nothing of either our hunger or our blood.

And a gypsy is a jealous creature.

We had traversed nearly half the sea's diameter when the crisis befell us. In the mare's surface we found a slump pit, a great cavity which would house us better than our wagons; and we encamped. On that lunar night no one stood watch. The necessity did not exist. But I am an old man who has difficulty sleeping; and when the thing that you would call a *module* came dropping from the pitchy sky, I saw nearly every moment of its descent. Enormous and squat. Spitting little tatters of fire. Dropping with no more grace than a clumsy silver octopus.

I climbed to the slump pit's rim and stood there in the numbing cold among the horses.

The module fell to its bed only a few kilometers from our camp. Three hours I stood on the parapet of our huddling place, staring through the black emptiness—until at last a speck of silver began rolling down the side of the sea bottom's bowl. What an unlovely speck it was. For the *gago* had invented a motorcar for the moon. It rolled like the ironclads which had growled up and down the Apennines many years ago. Such things have always frightened my people, and I awoke them that we might flee.

Our wagons struggled onto the sea bottom. The horses snorted indignantly at having to pull their burdens so soon again after our encampment. But the moon is a silent

place (we talk to one another with signs, free of such voices as this ancient croaky one that now assails you), a place where the rolling of wood over stone cannot by itself betray. Nevertheless, my friend, we looked back to see the spacemen's motorcar pursuing us, like a wolf hoping it will be mistaken for a pariah dog and fed. *A morsel,* the wolf asks, *some fallen morsel.* Not receiving that, the wolf runs ahead to nip at the horses' fetlocks.

So it was with the moon car. Following and then overtaking us, it halted our caravan and trembled metallically in our path. Without their voices, the horses screamed.

I was in the lead wagon beside Rudolfo, and the dust from the horses' scuffling sifted down on my hands and thighs. The spacemen's motorcar was big. It sat in our path like a boulder, but a boulder about to split open and loose bodiless demons. Rudolfo's face looked ashen in the blue light which earth gives, and I touched his knee.

Calm thyself, I said in signs.

For the demons which came out of the motorcar from its wing-like doors had no appearance of danger about them. Both men wore bulky suits and helmets—so that I could not help thinking of tired government officials, in overcoats and fedoras, trudging through the snow in Warsaw or Budapest. But the suits they wore were clean and white, like pieces of new soap, and I was ashamed of my fear. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to accept the lessons of Mother Luna's generosity, the fact that she now receives gentiles and gypsies alike.

What a confrontation, my friend.

It was a philosophic thing, the spacemen in their phosphorescent white suits staring at Rudolfo and me. How can I explain the events that followed if not by emphasizing the enmity that flowed between us? How tell you what the four of us felt, naked on the naked lunar sea? Gradually, our horses calmed.

But the spacemen argued with each other.

It was clear that the argument proceeded apace inside their helmets, like a bee buzzing back and forth between two jars. An invisible bee, for Rudolfo and I could hear nothing. Then the spacemen ceased gesticulating with their great gloved paws, and one of them came up to our wagon and stood beneath us, looking up. I was greatly afraid.

Inside the heavy helmet the spaceman's face seemed blue, as if daubed with the indigo dye of a Moslem nomad. But when the man turned his head and I saw the sweat on his brow, this comforting blueness faded away.

The man touched Rudolfo on the ankle. Rudolfo did not move. The other white-suited man approached a few steps.

The bee flew between their helmets.

Although the spacemen then moved very slowly to bring their

heavy square guns out of holster, neither Rudolfo nor I could do anything. Our horses began to skitter sideways in harness a little; I tightened the reins against them, an instinct. To have let the horses go skittering might have gained us an advantage, but I was bloodless, and cold, and too frightened to consider strategies.

Get down! Get down! the closest of the spacemen was signaling. Never before had a gypsy been ordered about on Mother Luna's surface. Consequently, it was only from earthly habit that Rudolfo and I got down from that high place and submitted to their orders. From earthly habit and from the always sublimated fear of a dying people. But, my friend, even a dying people may have faith in the resurrection of their genius; and when the nearest spaceman struck Rudolfo over the head with his weapon, I had just such a resurgence of implacable faith. I, Lazarescu, the goat-beared old wanderer! Even though I did nothing myself.

Because it happened as in a ballet.

Suddenly—at the very moment Rudolfo slumped into the slate-gray dust—my people came whirling and pirouetting from the wagons behind. Men and women alike. Spinning their blossomed sleeves, twirling crimson scarves between their sinuously supple hands. No ballet company of any state, my friend, ever performed more gracefully before its audience than did the people of our caravan. They encircled the two spacemen and danced a flowing rope between them. Such leaps and glides it is not possible to behold on Earth!

Terrified and enraptured at once, those spacemen stood spellbound by our pantomime. Their weapons were useless against us because the minds that wielded them had popped, like fuses in the glass temples where all such *gago* dwell. Even you, my friend.

The more furious the dancing, the more subdued our horses. Here was gypsy revelry, and they grew docile, gently rippling their flanks. The silence was boisterous.

Then came Zoga and Selena into the crowd of dancers. Husband and wife, they celebrated our blood with a rustic *pas de deux* which they performed between the two spacemen. I was standing near, and I looked through the helmet glass of the man who had struck Rudolfo. That man's face was white, white as a grub, and his eyes paled before the dance as if he were witnessing spirits where there should have been only solid flesh. Half his manhood had drained away. The other half stood there inside the fat, corrugated suit, stiffly unbelieving. Then I saw Zoga's face; he was well again, but his look—even in the act of dancing—was bitter.

The silent music faded.

Selena knelt and kissed Rudolfo on the forehead, but Zoga strode

disdainfully to each spaceman and removed the guns from their thick, insulated hands. Then he put the guns in the bottom of our wagon seat and returned to his wife. She was still kneeling over Rudolfo. No one danced any longer. Everyone stood beside our crimson wagon in the moon's immense chill, and waited. Waited for Selena to make some sign. At last she looked up.

On the indifferent ether she made the sign of the death's-head. She held her cupped hands out before her as if in supplication. My friend, you must try to imagine the manifold depths of Mother Luna's silence, for that tiny group of people on the floor of the Mare Crisium knew a profound silence indeed. No bees droned inside our heads, but still we listened.

This lasted briefly. Then Zoga flew into a rage, a fury of grimaces and gestures. On the Adriatic a gypsy might be beaten with impunity, but not on the primal Sea of Crises. The less demonstrative of the two spacemen Zoga killed outright, jerking tubes from his humpback and slashing the spongy sleeves of his suit with a tanner's knife. None of us intervened in this. Although it may be diabolical to admit such a thing, we experienced a calm satisfaction in watching the spaceman die. Zoga's impulsiveness spoke for all, and the outcome of his anger was purifying.

The more aggressive of the two men he dealt with differently. The bear cage at the end of our procession remained empty, and Zoga thought to remedy so unhealthy a circumstance by introducing the spaceman to a world of straw, wooden slats, and awkward jouncings. How like a bear the man already looked! A great white bear with a glass head and a humpbacked body. Zoga prodded the man with his knife, prodded him threateningly in his padded ribs, and smiled like Satan. Yes, like Satan himself, for the light-bearer also struck back when he had suffered humiliation.

We laughed bitterly, all our laughter silence.

Then we fell back from the circle in which the two dead men lay and watched Zoga prod that upright motorcar of a man into dance. It was not a thing that the spaceman took to readily, but we were not disappointed. Just as Zoga's old bear, the one stolen from us on Earth, had lumbered about our campfires with melancholy clumsiness, so the *gago* lumbered. He waltzed inelegantly, lifting one foot, then the other, letting his paws hang free like a puppet's arms. All the while, Zoga played his wooden flute and waved a neckerchief in front of the spaceman's great television set of a head. But the man could not be provoked or distracted; for the first time in his life, my friend, that dumbfounded creature—and this I swear to you—understood true spontaneity in the

discipline of a captive bear. He lifted one big foot, put it down again. He bowed and twirled. He dragged his encumbered body about to the soundless melodies of Zoga's pipes.

Such a formal spontaneity.

At the end everyone applauded, even old Lazarescu himself. And I had detected that the dancer's naturalness was in part an artificial thing; hypnotized, any man is sincere. When we had applauded the dance, Zoga took the spaceman and put him in the bear's cage.

Only much later did we begin to fear that others might miss the bees' voices humming from the moon and resolve to cut short our journey. And by then we had very nearly crossed the hairline shadow between light and dark.

We were merry. The wagons rolled well. Our horses pulled in harness gladly, as the Earth's blue seas tumble gladly in theirs. We left the moon car paralyzed, its doors open, in the middle of a lifeless sea. And about that we made hand signs to one another, silent mouthings, jocular obscenities. A gypsy does not mourn for long because he knows that the dead come back, always they come back. Even the dead of the pruned and civilized.

Rudolfo, lifeless, sat beside me on the wagon seat. Mother Luna does not require that the dead go several meters underground for preservation's sake, and many times Rudolfo had spoken of sitting out eternity atop a dark-side peak, moon boulders propping him erect that he might forever watch the coursing stars. It would be granted him, this boon; and that knowledge gave our people even less cause to mourn his death.

But we were careless of the spaceman.

He died. The oxygen in his humpback spilled away into his lungs, and was gone. It was many hours later before we found him slumped against the bars in the bear's cage, a white heap of canvas. We were passing through the awesome Cordillera Mountains, resting in a deep sluiceway, and Zoga went back to the cage to scoff at his dancing prisoner. That was when we discovered our carelessness, my friend, and all but the bear tamer repented of it.

Nevertheless, the man was dead. Zoga came to me with a scornful smile to report the accident but did not return with me.

Under the merciless stars I went into the cage and eased the man backward onto its straw-covered flooring. Then I removed his helmet, twisting it, unscrewing it like a bottle cap. When I saw the man's face, I felt a painful pity—for he was very young, freckled like a farm girl, shocked over with red hair brighter than fire. No one was with me in the cage, not even Zoga the keeper. I put the boy's helmet back on his head and went for help.

The others came. Together we

carried the body to a depression in the sluiceway. In only a few moments we had installed him there, like an appliance. Zoga removed his helmet again, against my remonstrances, and became enraged at the sight of the boy's flaming hair. He insisted with many gestures that we cover the spaceman with rocks, gravel, dust—anything to deprive his corpse of a view of the heavens. In the end we accomplished Zoga's will, for he would tolerate no gainsaying, not even from his wife Selena, whom he struck viciously across the mouth at her suggestion that the boy's burial place be granted a small marker.

When we at last recommenced our journey toward the Mare Orientalis, the bear cage was once more empty, and Zoga wore over his own stocking cap the dead man's alien helmet. It was a spoil, a prize of battle. My heart troubled me in this, for our people were long ago admonished of the Father never to war among nations.

Zoga behaved unnaturally. He wore the helmet every waking moment. His face warped into a sinister travesty of itself behind the glass, and Selena refused to share his wagon. Dancing and singing ceased altogether among us.

On the seventh Earth's day that we were in the Oriental Sea, we found Zoga dead. He lay in the bear cage, where he had gone more and more often of late to nurse his bitterness, his purpled fingers clutching at the base of the stolen helmet. No matter our combined exertions of will, we could not remove the helmet from Zoga's head. But a gypsy accepts such mysteries, my friend, and feels no need for questions.

It was fitting retribution.

Then we began to see lights crossing the sky above our sheltered encampment: pinpoints of fire. A good people come after their dead, seek to redress injustices. How were they to know that the injustices worked against their own foolish spacemen had already been atoned for? That Zoga the keeper lay dead? Even with their precious radios they did not know. Therefore, they had come with bright machines and fire-forged wills.

How cold my blood ran to witness this thing. I demanded that we leave, return to Earth to escape the camera eyes and weapons of these relentless adversaries. To my wonder, the people agreed; all showed a willingness to follow my directives. All but one, my friend, and that one was Selena. She refused to journey with us, claiming that a covenant bound her to the spirit of the very husband who had betrayed her. A covenant more binding in death than in life. She would walk the craters and rills of Mother Luna, she told us in signs, for as long as there were gypsies alive in a silent universe. She would make her complaint to the stars.

Therefore, we left her and embarked upon the void.

Yesterday we came into your desert, a people dying under the heel of change. This evening we encamped by your sprawling house. Now we ask only a little room in this vast new country, sterile as it may be. That is our only request.

That, my friend, is our story.

The moon was gone.

Lazarescu fell silent. I had stopped him once or twice during his narrative to ask a question, but for the most part he had engaged in a monologue. What you have just read was set down as nearly as possible in the flavor of his idiom, but Lazarescu's voice and my own have at many points melted into one another. That is not surprising.

For, you see, when Lazarescu stopped speaking, I bent down with great composure, picked up a rock which was braking one of the wheels on the old man's wagon, and struck him a terrible blow on the forehead. Then I caught the old man's body and lowered him to the sand so that he would not awaken the others. He looked at me with glazed but accepting eyes.

"Why?" he asked. The question did not accuse.

"Because those men were my friends," I said. "Because I am what you call a *spaceman:* an astronaut just like those others. It's impossible for me to forgive you the hideousness of their deaths. Tonight—for the first time in several weeks—I may be able to sleep. But only because I've done this."

Lazarescu said, "You have killed a part of yourself." Then he closed his eyes and died.

I stole through the sleeping caravan and entered my house. But I did not sleep. All that night I stared at the ceiling. Strange changes worked themselves in my body. In the morning I looked out my broad glass doors to see that the caravan had departed. Not a trace of the gypsies' night encampment remained. The wind had swept a layer of desert silt over the patio and gardens, and the dunes looked as if they were encroaching ever closer and closer on my house.

Three days have gone by. My phone lines are dead.

A moment ago I looked in the bathroom mirror and discovered that my face is no longer that of a young man. Brown and leathery, the skin presses against my skull with constricting force. That is not the most frightening thing, however. I keep remembering Lazarescu's words: "The dead come back, always they come back." For on the last two nights a monstrous white bear has come out of the sand dunes and stood on his hind legs against the glass of my patio doors. The animal is not clumsy. He is ragged, supple, insistent. And his eyes, which radiate small pinwheels of fire, are hard as obsidian, dark as smoked marble.

Meanwhile, my mind—my mind does not fit this ancient face.

B. L. Keller, whose last story here was a sparkling account of a head-on collision between the devil and youth culture ("Birdlime," March 1971), returns with something quite different, a strange and affecting story about an invisible child.

Out of Sight

by B. L. KELLER

ON THE HOTTEST DAY OF THE year Matthew Farragut's mother brought him bundled in an army blanket to Dr. Athanos' office.

"He is fading," she said.

Even before the nurse had the child completely stripped, it was evident that he was, indeed, fading. Through the transparent skin the hyacinth branchlets of blood vessels could be seen, the small pale heart contracting, expanding . . .

Miss Powell went into the bathroom and sat on the toilet with her head between her knees.

Neither an examination of Matthew nor a review of his history disclosed a clue. Dr. Athanos gave Catherine Farragut a prescription for pediatric vitamins and told her to call if the transparency persisted.

Two weeks later the examination table could be seen through Matthew.

The child's behavior in the hospital was in no way abnormal, his anxiety not inappropriate to a three-year-old institutionalized for the first time since birth.

Although he was a bright and gentle little boy, he upset the hospital staff.

By the time all of the tests which consulting physicians could suggest

were run and rerun, Matthew's veins were discernible only as the palest threads overlying the milky grey shadow of bone.

No diagnosis, no prognosis. The medical bills exceeded John Farragut's projected earnings for the coming three years.

Normally such a provocative case would be written up for the medical journals in no time. But the doctors involved with Matthew were affected by such uneasiness that they didn't refer to him again even among themselves.

Dr. Athanos, a man of some imagination, put it to the parents. "We have to assume the problem is physical, but only because we can't cope with the possibility that it may be metaphysical."

He continued to prescribe vitamins, but the time came when Matthew faded quite away.

It might have been so much less disturbing if he hadn't been present.

Of course, he'd been away from the company of adults and children outside the family since he began to fade noticeably. Even when he was still discernible, his condition made for so much tension that relatives stopped visiting and sending invitations. The long hospitalization, combined with the fear and guilt that he sensed in his parents, and the fact that he could no longer see himself, changed that cheerful, if mild, little boy into a withdrawn and thoughtful child. Even his physical growth was impaired; at five he was not much bigger than he had been at three.

The practical difficulties of tending an invisible child were staggering. Catherine had to confine him to his room, harnessed so that he might not slip out the door unseen and perhaps be lost forever when she entered or left.

His personality dwindled until he could be described only as a wispy child.

And then a terrible thing happend, confirming what few of us suspect, that there is always something worse.

His voice began to fade. Never boisterous, he gradually became inaudible, leaving the Farraguts with a silent, invisible child. Since he was no longer mischievous, he left no wake.

There was nothing for it but to confine him to his crib.

With no way to call attention to himself, he would climb out of the crib when he wanted company, only to end up dangling from the railing in his harness, weeping soundlessly. Not even his tears could be seen.

It demoralized Catherine to enter the room and see the harness dangling. She would gather up the child inside it, unbuckle him, and sit on the floor rocking him.

It became so upsetting to find him hanging that finally she tied a net over the top of the crib, and under the netting he stayed.

So it was not a happy home, and

one day John Farragut left for good.

Even before her creditors were out of patience, Catherine was distraught. She brought in newspapers from the incinerator room and studdied HELP WANTED—FEMALE, but she couldn't think of a way to find anybody to care for Matthew.

So there was nothing for her. What man would want a woman with an invisible child? She became dull and irrational, sitting on the floor for hours rocking Matthew. Anguish so seldom brings out the best in us.

But finally she tied the netting firmly to the crib rail and went for help. After half a day standing in lines and filling out forms, she was directed to the proper welfare agency.

At first she lied, saying she was childless. When she learned that this made her ineligible for assistance, she broke down and told the interviewer about Matthew.

Transferred to the acute psychiatric ward at the county hospital, she made such a fuss, insisting that somebody call Dr. Athanos when it was a Friday evening and any rational person would know that a doctor would not be available until Monday, that she had to be stupefied with Thorazine.

It was a bad night for Matthew. Trying to hallucinate for himself the comfort of his mother's presence, he huddled shivering under his net in a nest of wet bedclothes, his glance darting here and there, never lingering long enough to be caught by the terrors which watched from darkness.

When light came he dared to cry, sobbing in silence all morning. But however crippled his personality had become, his character had acquired in isolation a peculiar, almost Oriental resignation, resilience and strength; and he went to work, patient and intense, on one corner of the net. For most of the day he worked, stopping now and then to rest, or to sob briefly. When he untied one corner of the net, he climbed over the crib rail. He had lost so many skills. He fell out on his head.

He wept bitterly, but no one was disturbed.

He crawled to the door and rested, exhausted, regressing so far as to lie in the fetal position on the floor, sucking his thumb and staring into nothing. He lay still, wise enough not to move or cry out under the inexplicable, the mystery of unearned pain.

When it was light again, he stirred, numb with wet and cold, and for the first time in so long, pulled himself up to his full height, all his weight on his poor spindly legs.

He clutched at the door knob—and fell, but not before he turned the knob.

For he was fierce to find her and, though he could not comprehend it, to survive.

By midmorning he found the

strength and daring to pull open the door and crawl out of his room.

In the kitchen he pawed through the garbage, downing burned toast, egg shells, orange rinds, and sour milk.

When he was rested he found the bathroom. Invisible or not, he had been toilet trained—the most infinitesimal fry spawned in a cloud of brethern is not unaffected by the waters in which he is cast however casually.

He turned the faucets as he had seen his mother do, filled the bathroom glass and drank, then found a cloth and towel and cleaned himself anxiously and carefully. He'd become a fastidious little boy out of his conviction that all disasters could be traced to some fundamental transgression on his part.

He didn't dress. In summer Catherine gave up the nerve-wracking chore of dressing and undressing a child she couldn't see.

He lay on the bathroom floor recovering from his exertion.

At last, so piercing was his need for her, he pulled himself to his feet again and took the first faltering steps since he was three. Drunk with triumph and terror, he fell, rested, stood, all engrossed in the adventure, until he was recalled by hunger.

He crept to the kitchen, but this time, almost hysterical with the thrill, he climbed on the counter tops, opening cupboard doors. He found a few ounces of ground coffee, which he spit out, and a heel of pumpernickel bread. Getting off the counter, he lost his audacity and fell, splitting his forehead. Since his blood was invisible, he was more hurt than frightened.

Torn by an instinct to wait for Catherine and the need to find her, he was driven from the apartment finally by the seeping-in of evening, for deeper than his dread of the dark without her was his terror of passing a bright-lit night alone.

He unlocked the apartment door and made his way down the stairs and out to the street.

It was that evanescent time just before twilight when the air is purple tinged. There is a change in mood, a shifting into evening, and everyone is walking a little faster, the bars are beginning to pull in talkers, the first streetlights kindle, and in this city on that evening a great red winged horse advertising gasoline appeared as if suddenly pasted against the sky.

Overwhelmed, Matthew sank to the curb. But in a moment, not even waiting to recover, he went looking for his mother, sniffing like a dog for her scent.

He often tried to find his way back, but every night he was in another place.

He learned to follow heat, crept into basements, even unused beds. He slipped into apartments, markets, restaurants, and ate well.

At some time he realized he would not find his mother. But he

kept looking. He never stopped looking.

Watching children became his second obsession. He imitated them, even joined their games, never so much as brushing one of them. One night he had curled up against a woman he found sleeping in an unlocked apartment, and she woke in such screaming terror that he was himself unstrung for days.

Mesmerized by the children, he took the cold that came with the waning of summer stoically; he had forgotten to value comfort. When the cold made him stiff, he found a warm place to sleep and was awake with the first light, to look for food and then the children.

He followed them to the movies, temple, Sunday school, and was variously irritated, astonished, entertained. The morning the older ones came out scrubbed and neat, without their parents, he followed them, puzzled.

School was sometimes engrossing, sometimes a bore. After he learned not to get himself trapped in any classroom, he had good times in the library and the auditorium. Because children were around, because it was warm and humming, because the morning snacks and hot lunches were more convenient than foraging, he stayed in school.

Unhampered by pedagogy, he absorbed what interested him. Sometimes he lingered late using crayons and scissors and paints. Picture books delighted him. His ignorance of the print so frustrated him that he learned to read.

So his education, gnarled as it was, proceeded more rapidly than some, and he became a great reader and observer, discriminating in his choice of entertainment, coming back time

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after time to a film that intrigued him, spending evenings in cozy television viewing with families who never suspected his presence.

Deprived of normal relationships, he fantasized a great deal, and his visions, outlandish as they were, sometimes achieved a splendor quite extraordinary for a child so young.

Not daring to pray, the surgeon hesitates. Had he been right? Had he been right? The most infinitesimal error at this instant . . . and an unseen hand, gentle, cool, takes his, guides him with a swift and arcane skill.

The man who would make this world a garden is exhausted, crucified by the jackals, the greedy, the corrupt. He sits at his desk, empty, without words. And his hand is closed, firmly, around a pencil, and to his astonishment, the words take shape, the sublime and moving words that open the hearts of all men.

He fed the hungry, healed the tormented, reached out even to the wicked, this hero, this child.

The first man to establish telepathic communication with the gentler animals, he is presenting a plea for the enlightened use of this gift, when . . .

He had no business daydreaming, kicking along in the gutter.

Evening was coming on, workingmen eager to get home, and since nobody could see what had been struck, nobody stopped. He was run over again and again.

An appalling death, but no one was disturbed. Even the reek of his decay merged finally with the city's smells.

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Holes in the Head

A FRIEND SAID TO ME ONCE THAT HE would love to see my filing system. So I took him to my office and said, "This file is for correspondence. Here I keep old manuscripts. Here I have manuscripts in preparation. This is the cardfile of my books—of my shorter fiction—of my shorter non-fiction—"

"No, no, no," he said. "That's all trivial. Where do you keep your reference files?"

"What reference files?" said I, blankly. (I very often say things blankly. I think it's part of my charm—or maybe naivete.)

"The cards on which you list items you may need for future articles or books and then file according to various subjects."

"I don't do that," I said, growing anxious. "Am I supposed to?"

"But how do you keep things straight in your head, then?"

I was glad to be able to answer that one definitely. "I don't know," I said, and he seemed pretty annoyed with me.

Well, I *don't*. All I know is that I've been a classifier ever since I can remember. Everything falls into categories with me. Everything is divided and counted up and put into neat stacks in my mind. I don't worry about it; it happens by itself.

Of course, I sometimes worry about

isaac asimov

the details. For instance, what with one thing or another, the actual number of books I have published has become an issue. I am forever being asked, "How many books have you published?"*

But what's a book?

Yesterday, the second edition of my book THE UNIVERSE was published. Do I count that as a new book? Of course not. It's updated, but the updating doesn't represent enough in the way of change to make me consider the book "new." On the other hand, within the year, the third edition of my book THE INTELLIGENT MAN'S GUIDE TO SCIENCE will be published. I counted the second edition as a new book, and I intend to count the third edition as such because in each case the changes introduced were substantial and as time- and energy-consuming as a new book would have been.

You might think all this is something I can chop and change to please myself, but not exactly. In my book OPUS 100, I listed my first hundred books in chronological number, and that list became "official." But is it correct? Was I right in omitting this or that item from the list or, for that matter, including this item or that?

Unimportant? Sure, but it does help me sympathize with those classifiers who involve themselves with more intricate matters than a listing of books. For instance—

How do you tell a mammal from a reptile?

The easiest and quickest way is to decide that a mammal is covered with hair and a reptile is covered with scales. Of course, you have to be liberal in making this distinction. Some organisms we consider mammals don't have very much hair. Human beings don't—but we have *some* hair. Elephants have even less, but they have some. Whales have even less, but even they have some. Dolphins usually have anywhere from two to eight hairs near the tip of the snout. Even in those whales where hair is altogether absent, it is present at some time in the fetal development.

And one hair is, in this respect, as good as a million, for any hair at all is the hallmark of the mammal. No creature that we consider to be definitely a non-mammal has even one true hair. They may have structures that look like hair, but the resemblance disappears if we consider its microscopic structure, its chemical makeup, its anatomical origin, or all three.

A somewhat less useful distinction is that mammals (well, most) bring forth their young alive, while reptiles (well, most) don't. Some reptiles, such as sea-snakes, bring forth living young, but in doing so they merely retain the eggs within their bodies till they hatch. The developing embryos

* *The answer is 109 at the moment of writing, if you are dying of curiosity.*

find their food within the egg and the fact that the egg is within the body is a point for security, but not for nourishment.

Most mammals, on the other hand, feed the developing young out of the maternal bloodstream by means of an organ called the "placenta," in which the mother's blood vessels and the blood vessels of the embryo come close enough to allow molecules to seep across; food from mother to embryo, wastes from embryo to mother. (There is no actual joining of bloodstreams, however.)

A minority of mammals bring forth living, but very poorly developed, young, and these must then continue their development in a special maternal pouch outside the body. A still smaller minority of mammals lay eggs. But even the egg-layers have hair.

Also, mammals feed their newborn young on milk secreted by special maternal glands. This is true even of the non-placental mammals; even of the egg-layers. And this is *not* true for any animal without hair (not one!). Milk seems to be a purely mammalian product, and it is this, more than anything else, which seems to have impressed the classifiers. The very word "mammal" is from the Latin "mamma" meaning "breast."

Then, too, mammals maintain a constant internal temperature even though the environmental temperature may vary widely. Reptiles, on the other hand, have an internal temperature that tends, more or less, to match that of the environment. Since the internal temperature of mammals is close to 100° and is therefore generally higher than the environmental temperature, mammals feel warm to the touch while reptiles feel, by comparison, cold. That is why we speak of mammals as "warm-blooded" and reptiles as "cold-blooded," missing the essential point that the internal temperature is constant in the former case and inconstant in the latter.

(To be sure, birds are warm-blooded, too, but there is no danger in confusing a bird and a mammal. All birds, without exception, have feathers and all non-birds, without exception, do not have feathers. —And except for birds and mammals, all organisms are cold-blooded.)

I have by no means listed all the differences between mammals and reptiles; only those that the non-biologist can tell by looking at the creatures from a distance. If we want to indulge in dissection, we can discover others. For instance, mammals have a flat muscle called the "diaphragm" which divides the chest from the abdomen. The diaphragm, as it contracts, increases the volume of the chest cavity (at the expense of the abdominal cavity, which doesn't care) and helps draw air into the lungs. Reptiles do not have a diaphragm. In fact, no non-hairy organism does.

So far, so good. But now we pass on to extinct creatures that biologists

can study only in fossil form. Paleontologists (those biologists specializing in extinct species) have no hesitation in looking at a fossil and saying that it is reptilian or that it is mammalian. The question at once arises: How?

All the really obvious distinctions can't be used since, in general, all that the fossils offer us are the remains of what used to be bones and teeth. You can't look at a handful of bones and teeth and find traces of hair or breasts or milk or placentae or diaphragms.

All you can do is compare the bones and teeth with those of modern reptiles and mammals and see if there are strictly hard-tissue distinctions. Then, you might assume that if an extinct creature had bones characteristic of mammals, it must also have had hair, breasts, diaphragms and the rest.

Consider the skull. In the most primitive and earliest reptiles, the skull behind the eye was solid bone and on the other side of the bone were the jaw-muscles. There was a tendency, however, to expose the jaw-muscles and give them freer play, so that many reptiles had openings in the skull bounded by bony arches. The loss in sheer defensive strength was more than made up for by the improvement in the offense represented by larger, stronger jaws that could go snap! more firmly. On the balance, then, the reptiles which happened to develop these openings passed on to greater things.

(Yet evolutionary "advances" are never universal, and never the only answer. One group of reptiles that had no use for a hole in the head, managed to survive for hundreds of millions of years and flourish, after a fashion, even today, though many, many hole-in-the-head groups have vanished. I'm talking about the turtles, whose jaw-muscles are hidden under a solid wall of bone.)

The reptiles developed openings in their skulls in a variety of patterns and, indeed, are classified into groups according to those patterns.* This is not because this pattern is of overwhelming physiological importance in itself, but only because it is convenient, since if you have any part at all of a reptile, however long dead, you are likely to have its skull.

But what about mammals, which are descended from reptiles? They have a single opening on either side of the skull just behind the eye bounded on the bottom by a narrow bony arch called the "zygomatic arch."

So the paleontologist can look at a skull and from the nature of the openings tell at once whether it is reptilian or mammalian.

Then, again, the lower jaw of a reptile is made up of seven different

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* *See THE TERRIBLE LIZARDS, F & SF, August 1968.*

bones, fused tightly into a strong structure. The lower jaw of a mammal is a single bone. (Some of the missing bones developed into the tiny bones of the middle ear. This is not as strange as it sounds. If you put your finger at the point where lower jaw meets upper jaw and where the old reptilian bones existed, you will find you are not very far from your ear.)

As for the teeth, those of reptiles tended to be undifferentiated and all alike, of cone-like structure. In mammals, the teeth are highly differentiated, cutting incisors in front, grinding molars in back, with tearing canines and premolars between.

Since mammals evolved from reptilian forebears, is there any way of recognizing which group of reptiles possessed the distinction of being our ancestors? Certainly no living group of reptiles seems to be descended from anything mammalian or even approaching the mammalian. We must look for some group that left no reptilian descendants at all.

One such group now entirely extinct (as reptiles) is called the "Synapsida." These had a single skull opening on either side of the head and included members who showed the clear beginnings of mammalism.

There were two important groups of synapsids. The earlier, dating back some 300 million years, were members of the order "Pelycosauria." The pelycosaurs are interesting chiefly because their skulls seem to show the beginning of a zygomatic arch. Furthermore, their teeth show some differentiation. The front teeth are incisor-like and behind them are teeth that are rather like canines. There are no molars however. The rear teeth are reptilian cones.

After flourishing for 50 million years or so, the pelycosaurs gave way to a group of synapsids of the order "Therapsida." Undoubtedly, the therapsids were descended from particular species of pelycosaurs.

The therapsids are clearly further on the road to mammalism than any of the pelycosaurs were. The zygomatic arch is much more mammal-like among them than among the pelycosaurs; so much so, in fact, that the feature gives them their name. "Therapsida" is from Greek words meaning "beast-opening." In other words, the opening in the skull is beast-like where "beast" is the common term for what zoologists would call mammals.

Further, the teeth are much more differentiated among the therapsids than among the pelycosaurs. A well-known therapsid that lived about 220 million years ago in South Africa had a skull and teeth that were so dog-like that it is called "Cynognathus" ("dog-jaw"). The back teeth of Cynognathus are even beginning to look like molars.

What's more, while the chin of the therapsids was made up of seven

bones, in typical reptilian fashion, the center bone or "dentary," was by far the largest. The other six bones, three on each side, were crowded toward the joint of the lower jaw with the upper—on their way to the ear, so to speak.

In another respect, too, the therapsids showed a "progressive" feature. (We tend to call "progressive" anything that seems to move in the direction of ourselves.) Early reptiles, including the pelycosaurs, tended to have their legs splayed out so that the upper part, above the knee, was horizontal. This is a rather inefficient way of suspending the weight of the body.

Not so the therapsids. In their case, the legs were drawn beneath the body, with the upper parts, as well as the lower, tending to be vertical. This makes for better support, allows faster movement with less energy expenditure, and is a typically mammalian characteristic. Apparently, the superior efficiency of the vertical leg meant there was no virtue in particularly long toes. Primitive reptiles tended to have four or even five joints in their middle toes. The therapsids, however, had two joints in the first toes, and three joints in the others. Again, this is the way it is in mammals.

The therapsids, however, did not endure. While we may root for them as our great-ever-so-great grandfathers, the fact is that about 200 million years ago, the "archosaurs," the creatures representing what we loosely call dinosaurs, were coming into their own. As they (no ancestors of ours) rapidly grew in size and specialization, they crowded out the therapsids.

By 150 million years ago, the therapsids were clean gone forever, every single one of them extinct.

Well, not really! Some small therapsids remained, but they had grown so mammal-like, as nearly as we can tell from the very few fossil remnants left behind, that we don't call them therapsids any more. We call them mammals.

After the mammals came on the scene, they managed to survive through a hundred million years or so of archosaurian dominance. Then, after the archosaurs vanished, about 70 million years ago, the mammals continued to survive and burst into a flood of differentiation and specialization that made this latest period of Earth's existence the "age of the mammals."

The question now is: Why did the mammals survive when the therapsids generally did not? The archosaurs proved utterly superior to the therapsids; why not to those therapsidian offshoots, the mammals, as well? It couldn't have been that the mammals were particularly brainy because primitive mammals weren't. They are not very brainy even today, much less a hundred million years ago.

Nor could it be because of their advanced reproductive system; the

bearing of live young, for instance. The development of a placenta or even of a pouch, did not take place till near the end of the archosaurian dominance. For nearly a hundred million years the mammals survived as egg-layers.

It couldn't have been their advanced teeth or legs or anything skeletal that the therapsids had, generally, for none of that helped the therapsids, generally.

Actually, the best guess is that the trick of survival was warm-bloodedness; the development of a constant internal temperature. The control of the internal temperature meant that a mammal could withstand the direct rays of a hot Sun much more easily than a reptile could. It meant that a mammal was warm and agile on a cold morning when reptiles were cold, stiff, and sluggish.

If a mammal carefully confined his activity to the chilly hours or if he were trapped by a reptile in the heat and could escape by darting into the hot Sun—it would tend to survive. But for mammals to have survived in this fashion, their warm-bloodedness must have been well-developed from the start, and that couldn't happen overnight.

We might conclude, then, that in addition to those changes in the therapsids that we can see in the skeleton, there must have been additional changes that made warm-bloodedness possible. The mammals survived because of all the therapsids, warm-bloodedness had developed most efficiently among them.

Are there any signs of the beginnings of such changes among the reptilian precursors of the mammals? Well, a number of species of pelycosaurs had long bony processes to their vertebrae that thrust high into the air. Apparently, skin stretched across these processes so that pelycosaurs possessed a high, ribbed "sail."

Why? The American zoologist, Alfred Sherwood Romer, has suggested it was an air-conditioning device (like the huge fan-like ears of the African elephant). Heat is gained or lost through the surface of the body and the pelycosaurian sail can easily double the surface area available. On a cool morning, the sail will pick up the Sun's heat and warm the creature much more quickly than would be the case for a similar organism without a sail. Again, on a hot day, a pelycosaur could stay in the shade and lose heat rapidly through the blood-vessels engorging the sail.

The sail, in short, served to make the pelycosaur's internal temperature more nearly constant than was the case in other similar reptiles. Their therapsid descendants had no sails, however, and it couldn't be that they had abandoned temperature control, since their descendants, the mammals, had it in such superlative degree.

It must be that the therapsids had developed something better than the sail. A high metabolic rate to produce heat in greater quantity might be developed and then hair (which is only modified scales) to serve as an insulating device that would cut down heat loss on cold days. They might also develop sweat glands to get rid of heat on hot days in a more efficient manner than by means of a sail.

In short, could the therapsids have been hairy and sweaty, as mammals are? We can never tell from the fossils.

And did those species which best developed hairiness and sweatiness become what we call mammals, and did they survive where the less advanced other therapsids did not?

Let's look in another direction. In reptiles, the nostrils open into the mouth just behind the teeth. This means that reptiles can breathe with their mouths closed—and empty. When the mouth is full, breathing stops. In the case of the cold-blooded reptiles, not much harm is done. The reptilian need for oxygen is relatively low and if the supply is cut off temporarily during eating, so what?

Mammals, however, have to maintain a high metabolic rate at all times, if they are to be warm-blooded, and that means that the oxidation of foodstuffs (from which heat is obtained) must continue steadily. The oxygen supply must not be cut off for more than a couple of minutes at any time. This is made possible by the fact that mammals have a palate, a roof to the mouth. When they breathe, air is led above the mouth to the throat. It is only when they are actually in the act of swallowing that the breath is cut off and this is a matter of a couple of seconds only.

It is interesting, then, that a number of late therapsid species had developed a palate. This might be taken as a pretty good indication that they were warm-blooded.

It would seem then that if we could see therapsids in their living state and not as a handful of stony bones, we would see hairy, sweaty creatures that we might easily mistake for mammals. We might then wonder which hairy, sweaty creatures were reptiles and which were mammals. How would we draw the line?

Nowadays, it might seem, the problem is not a crucial one. All the hairy, warm-blooded creatures in existence are called mammals. —And yet are we justified in doing so?

In the case of the placentals and the marsupials, we are surely justified. They developed their placentas and their pouches about 80 million years ago after the mammals had already existed for some 100 million years. The early mammals must have been egg-layers and so, therefore, must have

been their therapsid forebears. If we want to look for the boundary line between therapsids and mammals, we must therefore look among the hairy egg-layers.

As it happens, there are still six species of such hairy egg-layers alive today, existing only in Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea, islands that split off from Asia before the more efficient placental mammals developed, so that the egg-layers were spared what would otherwise have been a fatal competition. The egg-layers were first discovered in 1792, and for a while biologists found it hard to believe they could really exist. It took a long time before they got over suspecting a hoax—hairy creatures that laid eggs seemed a contradiction in terms.

The best-known of the egg-layers is the "duck-bill platypus" (the last part of the name means "flat-foot," and the first part refers to the horny sheath on its nose that looks like a duck's bill). It is also called "ornithorhynchus" from Greek words meaning "bird-beak."

These egg-layers have hair, of course, perfectly good hair, but so (very likely) had at least some therapsids. The egg-layers also produce milk, although their mammary glands have no nipples and the young must lick the hair where the milk oozes out. However, some therapsid species might also have produced milk in that fashion. We can't tell from the bones.

In some respects, the egg-layers lean strongly toward the side of the reptiles. Their body temperature is much less perfectly controlled than those of other mammals, and some of them possess venom. The platypus, for instance, has a horny spur at each ankle which secretes venom; and though a number of reptiles are venomous, no mammals (other than the egg-layers) are.

Then, too, *because* they are egg-layers, they have a single abdominal opening, a "cloaca" which serves as a common passageway for urine, feces, eggs and sperm. All living birds and reptiles (also egg-layers) possess cloacas, but no mammals, other than those few egg-layers, do. For this reason, the egg-layers are called "monotremes" ("one-hole").

To most zoologists, the hair and the milk spell mammal unmistakably, but the eggs, the cloaca and the venom are sufficiently reptilian so that the egg-layers are placed in a sub-class "Prototheria" ("first beasts") while all other mammals, marsupials and placentals alike, are in the sub-class "Theria" ("beasts").

The question arises, though: Are the monotremes really the first of the mammals, or are they rather the last of the therapsids? Are they really reptiles that have the outer appearance of mammals, as did, perhaps, a number of late therapsid species; or are they mammals that have retained some reptilian characteristics?

This may sound like a purely semantic matter, but zoologists must make decisions in such matters and, if possible, come to agreement over it.

An American zoologist, Giles T. MacIntyre, has recently entered the fray, using skeletal characteristics as the criterion. (We have only the skeleton as direct evidence in the therapsid case.) He has concentrated on the region near the ear, where some of the reptilian jawbones became mammalian earbones and where you might expect some useful distinction between the two classes.

There is a "trigeminal nerve" which leads from the jaw muscles to the brain. In all reptiles, without exception, it passes through a little hole in the skull that lies between two particular bones that make up the skull. In all marsupial and placental mammals, without exception, it passes through a little hole that pierces *through* one of the skull bones.

Then let us forget about hair and milk and eggs and warm-bloodedness, and reduce it to a matter of holes in the head. Does the trigeminal nerve of the monotremes pass through a skull bone or between two skullbones? The answer has been: *Through* a skullbone.

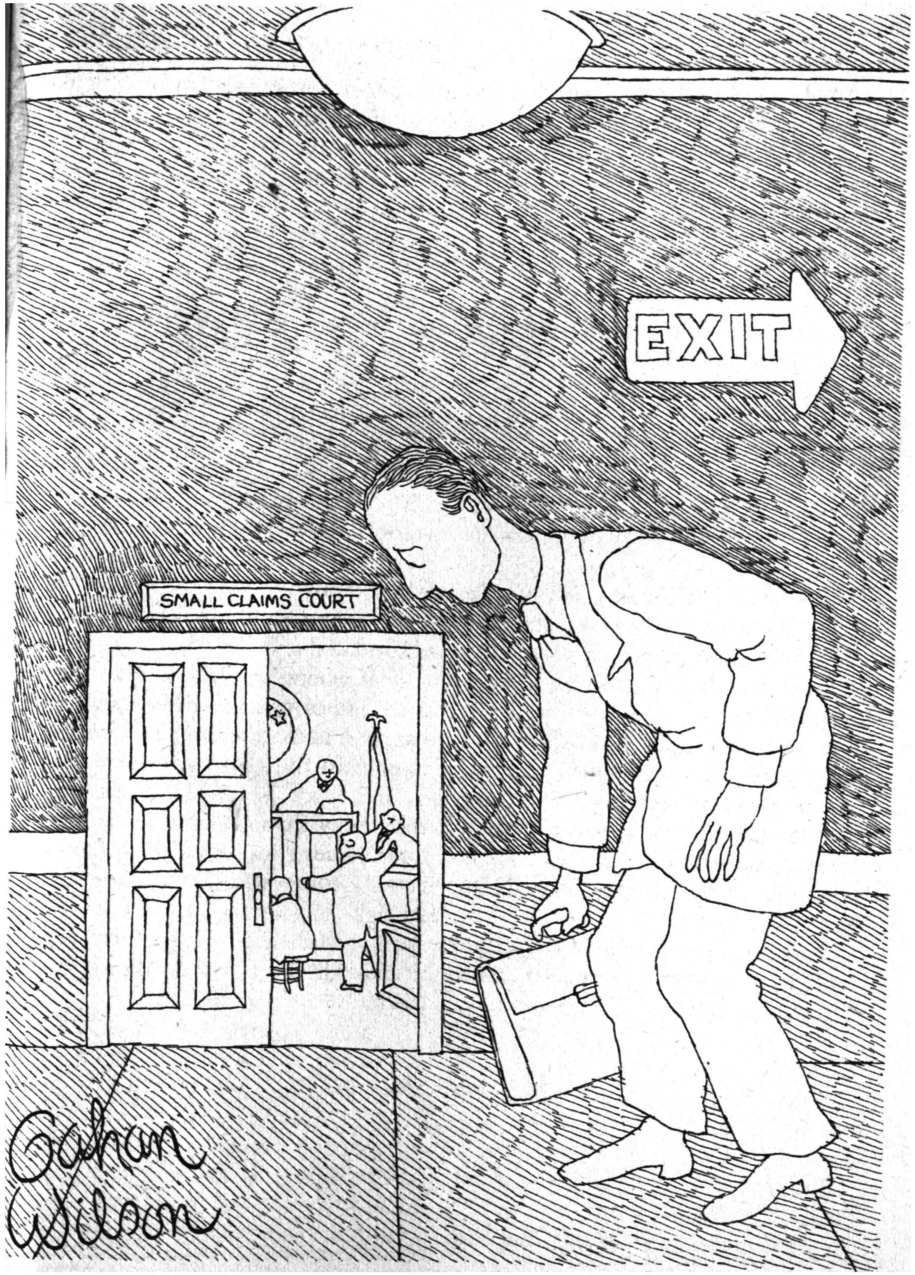
That would mean the monotremes are mammals.

Not so, says MacIntyre. The study of the trigeminal nerve was made in adult monotremes, where the skullbones are fused and the boundaries hard to make out. In young monotremes, the skull bones are not as well developed and are more clearly separated (as is true of young mammals generally). In young monotremes, MacIntyre says, it is clear that the trigeminal nerve goes between two bones and it is only in the adult skull that bone fusions obscure the fact.

If MacIntyre is correct, we may therefore say that the therapsids never became entirely extinct and that the monotremes represent living therapsids, living reptiles so similar to mammals in some ways as to have been considered mammals for nearly two centuries.

Does this matter to anyone but a few zoologists?

Well, it matters to me. Emotionally, I'm all the way on MacIntyre's side. I want the therapsids to have survived!


EXIT
SMALL CLAIMS COURT
Gahan Wilson

Here is an unusually inventive piece of science fiction that concerns a woman, an "Earthie," who joins the not-quite-human crew of a survey ship. The members of the crew have been "adapted" to give them a better chance of survival on the Outworlds, worlds such as the planet Toy, a deceptively pleasant place with a hidden menace.

A Walk On Toy

by NEAL BARRETT, JR.

MARA WAS TEETH-GRITTING MAD. . . .

There were tears, too, but mostly tears of relief—a few tears were called for, she decided, after two months in a stinking suit on a mud-ball planet.

She let her eyes climb the high column of the *Taegaanthe*, towering over Gara Station. Tightness welled up and caught in her throat. It was more than just a ship. It was hot food, clean clothes, safe sleep, human talk.

And it was a bath. God help that rusty can if it didn't have a good eight hours of hot water on hand!

She breathed a deep sigh and turned away from the closed hatches. Clenching her fists, she cursed whatever silent crew was aboard to the limits of her nearly unlimited vocabulary. Then she sat down again and waited. . . .

She was used to waiting. She had waited on Earth for an Outworld ship and endured the soul-draining trip to Krishna. And she had waited for the freighter at Krishna. And waited. . . .

The freighter was a ghost-tripper. Ninety-nine-plus percent cargo. Cabin doubling as quarters-mess-control room-lounge.

And Mara Trent-Hanse, raised in the ultraprivacy of Earth, lived eighteen inches from the pilot for twenty-two days. He was an old spacer named Haust, and he was doubly dedicated to the long, dark night, and life without "the confining burden of clothes."

A ghost-tripper towing four million miles of cargo doesn't emerge from subdrive to disembark passengers. Certainly not a passenger as uncooperative as Mara. The Trent-Hanse name meant nothing to Haust, and no name he could imagine was worth risking un-

countable megabucks in some warped envelope of space-time.

With a final friendly pinch, he loosed the escape capsule in what he hoped was the approximate orbit of Gara in real space and silently wished her luck.

Gara Station. Two months of staring through her faceplate at chlorine clouds on a flat brown horizon. Occasionally, a paddle-wheel mudder and its toad-gray crew, slapped across the dull surface, going slowly from nowhere to nowhere. . . .

She had been patient. It wasn't that easy, now. There was something else to look at besides mudflats. There was the high needle of the *Taegaanthe*, old and ugly, scarred by the winds of time—and the most beautiful sight on Gara or any other world.

When the hatch finally slid open, she caught herself—and walked leisurely toward the dark hull. Her heart pounded. Her knees were weak. And she'd be double-damned if she'd let them know it.

It was a long ten minutes before the face appeared in the small panel and the outer lock closed on Mara. Her helmet was off before the green light winked on, before the cool hiss of oxygen finished filling the chamber.

She filled her lungs and rolled her head in a lazy arc, letting the ecstasy of clean air sweep over her. Then she turned to the face in the panel. Tall, deep-featured. Heavy brows cragged over a strong nose, wide mouth, long jaw. She thought him crudely attractive except for the cold, tourmaline eyes.

The mouth opened. The voice came harshly over the speaker.

"All right—get the helmet back on."

Mara blinked. "What?"

His eyes closed patiently. "I said: Get the helmet back on. I can't spray it without you in it."

"Oh," she said, remembering. She snapped the thing back on her shoulders, flinching at the suit's smell. It was more fetid than ever after the tantalizing taste of pure air.

The germicidal spray jetted from six sides of the chamber, the hotness penetrating even through the protective insulation. Finally, fresh water washed boiling liquid away, and the man's nod signaled approval.

Mara needed little encouragement. She stripped off the heavy suit, opened a panel, and tossed suit and helmet inside. She heard the cleansing jets go to work. Then she turned back to the dark face.

He was watching, impatience pulling at the tourmaline eyes. Whatever he was waiting for, it was a mystery to Mara.

"Well—would you open *up*, please?"

His heavy brow rose, and one corner of the wide mouth lifted in amusement.

"In those?" He nodded toward

the filthy coveralls.

Mara felt color rise to her face. "I intend to bathe as soon as possible," she said icily. "I won't offend you for long. But I certainly can't do anything about it in here."

He laughed heartily. "Like hell you can't! Think I'm going to let you in like that? Son of a squid, girl, we'd have to abandon ship! Hurry up, now—strip and soap. I can't stand here all day."

Mara's eyes widened. "Stand here all—look, friend. I don't intend to—to—"

The face disappeared and the panel slammed in midsentence. A tube of soapy material plopped out of the wall, and warm water bombarded her from all directions.

Mara cursed and choked, then stoically closed her mouth. One grim eye on the closed panel, she unzipped the coverall and stuffed it down the disposal. It wasn't exactly what she'd anticipated for two long months. But it was water—hot water and soap, and it was over all too quickly. She closed her eyes and stretched, standing on tiptoe, letting warm jets of air flow over her skin.

There was a sudden *chink!* of metal on metal. She froze, opened her eyes and stared. The inner lock was open. He stood there letting his eyes take the grand tour. He tossed the clean, folded coveralls and boots with a grin, and left her standing with tight, balled fists and murderous eyes.

She slipped into the things quickly, masking her embarrassment with loathing. Then she grimly crossed through the lock into the ship.

She faced him squarely. Her eyes shot sparks of anger.

He smiled easily, leaning against the bulkhead with his arms folded across his chest.

"Well, you're not half bad with all the grime off you—even for an Earthie. Heard they all had figures like ore sacks, but I can't say that fits you. I'm Gilder. Are you contracted for the night? No, course not—you don't know anyone but me, do you?"

She slapped him hard and spat out a word in the common tongue. It meant alien-tainted-debauched-lecher. And more.

He grinned at her.

"On Earth," she said tightly, "I could have you *fixed* for that!"

He eyed her quizzically. "Why, it was a formal proposition, girl. N'more than common courtesy." He studied her another long moment, then jerked his head over his shoulder.

"Handel! Get your carcass in here!"

Mara turned curiously, then stiffened. She backed against the bulkhead and gripped it tightly.

The boy crept out of the corridor, naked except for thin black shorts. His body was thick with welts and heavy keloid. He had a tiny, bald head, watery eyes, and a

cut for a mouth. Gilder raised his boot and slammed it hard into bare ribs.

Handel moaned and trembled against the deck. Mara blinked in disbelief, and with a scornful stare at Gilder, bent and touched the boy's bleeding side. His face met hers. Mara jerked away. She read the meaning in his eyes, knew it for what it was. Dark, passionate loathing for her. For Gilder. . . .

The big man laughed. "He's a Painie—never see one before?" His eyes settled on her with dark amusement. "You can throw away the book here, girl. This is Outworld, and you're among Survey folk, now. It isn't Muh-ther Earth, it's Gara, Zybarr, and Deepsqueeze—an' about as far from Free City courtesy as you're likely to get."

He shook his head disdainfully. "Great Suns, what the hell are you doing out *here*, anyway?"

Mara was half listening, numb with fear and revulsion. "I'd—like to go to my quarters—*please!*"

If he'd keep silent, not speak, she might make it. And if the boy didn't look at her again. . . .

"Handel!" Gilder kicked the boy solidly in the head. Mara leaned weakly against the bulkhead. The corridor started to swim around her.

"Handel, lead milady to her quarters, eh?" He laughed softly, and Mara stumbled down the hall following the thin, shuffling feet.

Eridek awoke.

He lay on his bunk and watched the great chill drain from his limbs. The pump of his heart took hold; stilled blood began to move.

He opened his eyes and looked up at the gray ceiling. From the stillness beneath him, he judged they had landed and knew it must be Gara. He searched his senses, still feeble and unresponsive, probing for some thread that bound him from his state before the Dream and now.

A memory opened slowly, petaling to let tiny lights drift to the surface.

Gara.

Gara and a girl.

What about the girl?

Something flitted by, and was gone—a fleeting patch from the fading fabric of the Dream.

Eridek shrugged, sat up, and worked the tone back into his muscles. His mouth was dry and padded. He reached a shaky hand for a tube of water, sucked hungrily at its coolness, then closed his eyes and let the whole substance of the Dream unfold like a dark bolt of heavy cloth.

He remembered. . . .

He remembered the One who lived within the great darkness of the far nebula. For the timeless length of the Dream, Eridek had been behind that darkness and lived as another and seen things no other

man might possibly imagine.

Now, until the Dream came again, the One would look out upon the things that Eridek saw—and think them almost as strange as Eridek did the other.

He stood, walked to the long mirror, and stared at his naked reflection. Tall, lean-bodied, fair skin, even features, clear eyes. It was a handsome enough face, but he knew it lacked the strength of a man to whom "strength" had meaning.

For Eridek had no need for such a thing. Strong emotions denoted conflicts and tensions, and the One who shared his soul wished no harm or corruption in its resting place.

Eridek dressed. Once more, a fleeting thought of the girl came to his mind. He shrugged the thought aside. Whatever it was, it would come soon enough. Sooner than he'd care for, certainly.

Out of the room, among the familiar sounds of the ship, he found himself almost glad to be moving toward the company of others. He rounded the corner and saw the stunted figure of the boy a split second before Handel stumbled into him.

The boy whimpered. Eridek shook him off with a muttered warning. Then he saw the girl.

He glanced for a moment into dark, startled eyes, then jerked back as searing pain coarsed through his skull. He doubled up, gasped for breath.

When he looked up, they were gone. The pain dissolved as quickly as it had come, but Eridek stood against the bulkhead a long moment, letting his breath return, waiting for his hands to stop shaking.

It had been a bad one. Very bad. He pushed it hurriedly into a deep recess where it would fade from black to gray and, hopefully, lie dormant and unseen for awhile.

He stepped into the Common and quickly scanned the three faces. He breathed a quick sigh of relief. There was nothing significant about the future of Gereen deGeis—nothing except the shallow wave of pleasure-pain that was always there.

She turned and smiled as he entered, and Eridek flinched away and let his eyes sweep briefly over Gilder. Lanve-Hall, and then to Pfore, the man's alien Gantry Brother.

There was a brief shadow over Gilder, but whatever it was it was of no immediate concern. And there was nothing at all in the quiet, gray eyes of Pfore. The slim, azure-skinned creature did not even deign to look up.

Eridek ignored them all and mixed himself a drink. From behind him, Gilder said, "Have a nice Dream, Eri?"

Eridek's hand immediately tightened around his glass. Even before he turned, he could see the con-

tempt in the Gantryman's eyes.

Facing him, the contempt was still there, but Eridek no longer felt anger. He understood that anger too well. And the contempt, too. To erase that contempt was to erase Gilder, and the water world of Gantry, and the involved relationship of Gilder's forebears with Pfore's people.

And that, of course, he couldn't do—any more than he could change the way Gereen looked at a man, or the reason she bothered to look at all.

They sat together—Gilder, bare to the waist, drink in one hand, the other draped in easy familiarity over her shoulder. Her red hair hung in marvelous disarray, and the thin chemise revealed or covered as chance allowed.

It's a false picture, he told himself. He knew Gereen's sensuality was almost void of intent, just as Gilder's cruelty was as unstudied as a beast's. They are what they are. What they must be, he corrected.

As I must be what I am.

"Missed you, Eri," she said. She moved easily away from Gil and came toward him. "Why spend so much time by yourself, when your friends need you? Why, Eri?"

She touched his arm lightly. He smelled the closeness of her and turned away. He downed the drink quickly and made another.

Gil laughed harshly. "Sit down, Gereen. You can't compete with Eri's soulmate, for God's sake!"

Gereen frowned in mock disapproval. She leaned over a chair and cocked one eye at Eri. "Eri can't help what he is," she said softly. "Any more than you can, defiler of whales—"

Gilder laughed and choked on his drink. He reached out and pulled her to him. She landed in his lap and the silver bells on her ankles tinkled with her own high laughter.

Eridek said, "Who is the girl, Gilder?"

Gil looked up, mild annoyance beginning at the corners of his mouth. Then he seemed to sense something in Eri's voice. "What?"

"Who is she?" Eri repeated.

Gil shrugged. "From our noble captain's words, I take it she's the replacement for Hali Vickson. Why?" He grinned. "You taking an interest in new females?"

Eri ignored him. "I know she's Hali Vickson's replacement. But who is she? Where does she come from?"

Gil studied him a second before answering. Gereen looked from Gil to Eri, puzzlement crowding her face.

"She's an Earthie, no less," Gil said. "Cute little thing, too. High born and high—"

"What is it, Eri?" Gereen interrupted. Eri caught her eyes upon him. She was all seriousness, now. The wanton sparkle was gone. From the corner of the room, blue-skinned Pfore's saucer eyes blinked and opened.

"All right," Eri sighed, "I had a Telling."

Gereen paled. Her hand touched her bare throat with a life of its own.

"So. You had a Telling," Gil said too loudly. "So what?"

"Gil!" Gereen snapped.

Gilder mumbled something to himself, glanced at Eri, then turned away.

"I was in it, wasn't I, Eri?" Gereen was as white as death. "What's going to happen to me, Eri, what—"

"No!" Eri barked savagely. The girl relaxed slightly, but her fingers still wandered nervously over her body.

"If it was you, think I'd tell you?" Eri said irritably. "If you're going to get it, you're going to get it, Gereen. Don't come to me for your weight and fortune everytime I have a goddamn Telling!"

Gilder clapped and laughed loudly. Eri glared at him.

"You saw Hali Vickson," she said tightly. "You knew that, and you *told* him it would happen to him—"

"No," Eri said evenly. "I didn't."

"He—said he *thought* you knew," Gereen corrected. "It's the same thing, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry I mentioned it," said Eri. He faced her and smiled lightly. "Nothing will ever happen to you, Gereen—unless you put the wrong tube in the wrong vein."

Gereen suddenly laughed. The wanton sparkle was back. "You might try it with me sometime, Eri. If the Belt *allows* that sort of thing—"

Eri shrugged wearily, knowing the uselessness of battling wits with Gereen. He felt the first two drinks, and needed the third.

"The girl, now," Gilder said quietly. "She was in your Telling, Eri."

Eri felt muscles tighten with a quick fear. He glared narrowly at the Gantryman.

Gil made a face that mirrored disgust. "Come on, Eri, cut the outraged look. Doesn't your mighty Belt know I can't listen in on *that*?"

"The Belt knows you, Gil," Eri said solemnly, "but I don't."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He shrugged. "Suit yourself. It was the girl though, wasn't it?"

Eri remained silent. Gilder looked into his drink, then emptied it.

"Well, who needs Earthie girls!" Gereen laughed shrilly. Her voice was overly loud against the silence. "From what I understand . . ." She cupped her hand over Gil's ear and whispered. Gil laughed and pushed her away.

Gereen picked up one of the bottles and searched for a glass, then lifted the bottle itself. She whirled, a high turn that lifted the softness of the chemise, and then fell into Gilder's lap again. She squealed, tossing the bottle to Eri.

Eri caught it with a thin smile.

"Right," he said softly. "Who needs her?"

And who needed Hali Vickson? And Shered of Dorbek? And Tregalon? He drank and tossed the bottle to Pfore.

Or us? he added. Who needs any of *us*?

He watched Gereen from a sad corner of his mind, and the poetry of her reached down and touched a quiet, dormant segment of his soul untouched by the One—a tiny corner that still belonged to Eridek the man.

He was out of sight, but Handel still crouched against the bulkhead, shaking and white. His limbs jerked uncontrollably.

"Stop that, please!" said Mara. She bit her lip nervously. "Stop it, do you hear?"

Handel's eyes rolled back in his shiny skull. "Hnnnnnnn-n-n-n—Hhnnnnn!"

Mara felt the deep emptiness begin once more in the pit of her stomach. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

"All right. Get up. It's over," she said calmly.

Handel raised himself to a crouch and peered cautiously between his fingers at the empty hall. Then he looked fearfully at Mara.

"Come *on*," she said firmly.

"He—go?"

It was the first time she'd heard him speak. She flinched and held back her revulsion. His voice was the frantic thrashing of a fish out of water.

"Yes," she said. "He's gone. Who was he, and why did you—"

Handel shrank back. "He is Eridek, Lady! He wears the Belt of Aikeesh!"

Mara felt a cold chill begin at the back of her neck. "Nonsense," she said quickly, "there's—there's no such thing."

Handel shook his head dumbly. "He is no real-man, Lady! No man!"

She opened the door at the light knock. The girl raised a brow at her expression, catching the slight hint of hesitation, the caution in her eyes.

Gereen smiled. "God, I don't blame you. Our dear Gilder the diplomat welcomed you aboard—right?" She laughed lightly and extended a hand. "I'm Gereen, Mara. Okay if I come in?"

Mara nodded dumbly. The sight of Gereen had shaken her for a moment. Even on Earth, where faces and figures changed with the tide to meet the quick demands of fashion, the girl would be exotically beautiful. Red hair fell lazily over ivory shoulders. Deep, green eyes gazed at her above a sculptured nose and full lips. Her mouth and the tips of her eyes were delicately touched with silver.

"Really. You mustn't pay any attention to Gil." Gereen sank gracefully into a chair.

"Oh?"

She leaned back lazily and studied Mara. "He means well, but—Gantrymen aren't particularly famous for their manners. It's the way they are."

"I—noticed." Mara smiled thinly. She felt her face color at the thought of the morning's incident. Gereen looked at her questioningly, and Mara said quickly, "I'm very anxious to meet the rest of the crew. How many are on board?"

Gereen shrugged. "Gil, you've met—and me. And there's Eri—"

That would be the one, she thought . . . the man in the corridor . . . the one who scared the boy. . . .

"—And there's Pfore. He's Gilder's Gantry Brother. Not very sociable either, I'm afraid. But Eri, now—Eri's very nice." She laughed. "He'll talk to you without scowling. And then Handel—" She frowned distastefully. "And that's all. Oh, the captain, of course."

Mara straightened hopefully. "Yes! The captain." She leaned forward earnestly. "Should I call on him—I mean, what's the custom? Let him know I'm aboard? Is that the right thing? Or at dinner, maybe—"

An amused smile had begun to spread across Gereen's lips. It grew into a wide grin, and she threw back her head and laughed throatily.

"No, darling." She shook her head at Mara's puzzlement. "You'll see the captain, in time—but *not* at dinner. At least I hope not!"

She reached out to touch Mara's hand. "Sorry—you couldn't know, of course. Our good captain is—Q'sadiss—an alien. He doesn't eat with the crew."

She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Thank the gods for *that*. Sk'tai might possibly fornicate in front of the entire ship—but he certainly wouldn't share a meal with us." She smiled wryly. "And I'm sure the former couldn't possibly be as distasteful as the latter!"

"Oh," Mara said softly, "I see." She didn't, but she pushed aside the images forming in her mind.

Gereen stood up. "Anyway, welcome aboard," she said warmly. "I hope I haven't scared you off or anything. We're not a bad bunch, really." She winked broadly. "—For Outworlders, I mean."

Mara flushed. "Gereen—don't think I come equipped with a full set of Terran intolerances. We aren't all that way, you know."

Gereen looked at her a long moment, then shook her head absently. "No. Of course not. You wouldn't be here if you were. Would you?"

"No," said Mara evenly. "I wouldn't." It was easy to see that the girl didn't believe her, in spite of her easy smile.

"Anyway," said Gereen, "here. For your first dinner on the *Taegaanthe*. Unless things have changed a great deal, I *know* they

don't let a girl bring many pretty things to the Rim."

She pulled a small package from a fold in her gown and pressed a silver nail against its seam. The package blossomed like a flower, spilling shimmering petals of blue across her arm.

"It's a Palaie chemise," she explained, and caught Mara's questioning look. "Don't worry. It'll fit. You don't need to flow into a Palaie—*it* flows onto *you*!"

Mara reached out and held the almost weightless garment. "It's—lovely." She smiled warmly. "Thank you, Gereen. For thinking of me. I—"

Gereen shook her head. "See you at dinner. Oh, 1900 hours, by the way. Common's just down the hall to the right." And then she was gone, and Mara decided there was at least one person aboard who thought "Earthies" weren't the intolerable pariahs of the galaxy. . . !

Eri shook his head adamantly. "Serevan has more sense than that, Gil. Why plunder a few planets now and risk bringing the Rim in against him—when he can get his finger in the whole Outworld pie with a little patience?"

Gilder lowered his glass. His eyes flicked from Gereen deGeis, sitting across from him, to Mara Trent-Hanse at the end of the table. Yellow hair, tilted eyes and golden skin. She caught his glance, then, and turned away. Gil grinned.

"But Serevan *isn't* patient, you see?" He waved a finger at Eri. "As you say, a clever man would wait till his seat at the Council's bought and paid for; then he'd take a bite of this and a bite of that, and who's to know the difference?"

Eri nodded. "And that's what I say. He'll not risk everything now."

Gil spread his hands hopelessly. "Eri, Serevan's a *Rafpigg*—he'll try for the whole dish—and maybe choke on it."

He laughed and pushed his plate aside. "Hell's Gates, it's more likely the Rim'll sit back and let him have what he wants. If their own slice is big enough!"

Eri shook his head. Pfore shifted slightly, and his deep-azure skin caught highlights from the Common's lamps.

"Do you think, Brother, that the Outworlds will have nothing to say of this? It is of a time—"

Gil made a noise. "You think like a Sunperch, Pfore. The Outworlds have nothing to say. As usual. And nothing to say it with," he added bitterly.

"That's no longer quite true," Eri said softly.

Gil turned on him. "You're not talking about the Rim fleet, I hope?" He laughed incredulously and emptied his glass. "You think those day lilies would risk a spanking from Earth—just to help the *Outworlders*?" He shook his head darkly. "Not when it's easier to lean back and look the other way—and

fill their fat pockets right along with Serevan."

Mara bit her lip. She could hardly believe her ears. Why—it was Lord Serevan himself they were talking about—as if he were a common *thief* or something!

She'd met the man several times in her uncle's home. A tall, charming man—sun-dark with full patches of silver against his temples. He'd been a planetary governor even then, several years before he was mentioned for a seat on the Council.

Listening to Serevan, actually, had finally convinced her to try for the Outworlds. He'd told of the exotic worlds with black glass mountains and wine-red seas. Worlds of mile-high forests under feathery leaves as big as a whole room in Hanse House.

And he was a Vegan, too, she reminded herself, and that made him practically Terran stock, didn't it?

Mara stopped herself. That was the way they expected her to think, wasn't it? And she was showing them how right they were. . . .

All right, so it might take a while to shake an "Earthie's" scorn for the Outworlds. But—by damn, she'd do it—in spite of Gilder Lanve-Hall or a captain who couldn't eat with his crew!

"Mara," laughed Gereen, "have you left us, dear?"

Mara looked up quickly. "Oh. No, I—" She brought a hand nervously to the top of her chemise. "I'm sorry." She smiled around the table. "Thinking, I guess."

Gilder smiled amusedly. "Serevan hit too close to home, Lady?"

Mara flushed. "He—" She bit off her words and smiled politely. "You're entitled to your opinion of the Lord Serevan. And I imagine you might get a—different point of view in the Outworlds. But I'm sorry. I can't agree with you at all."

"Why?" Gil leaned forward intently, hands folded under his chin. "Because he's a Vegan? Or because I say he's an out-and-out planet stealer? Or both, maybe?"

Mara frowned thoughtfully. "Do you mean am I prejudiced because he's a Vegan? Probably, to be honest. That's not unexpected, is it? After all," she smiled, "you are prejudiced because he *is* one. Aren't you?"

"I detest him because he's a thief," Gil said simply. "He takes things that belong to other people."

Mara shook her head firmly. "I don't believe that. I believe he wants to see the Outworlds develop and grow—and not for himself, either. For the eventual benefit of the people of the Outworlds."

Gilder slapped his hand against the table and threw back his head in a raucous laugh.

"*Eventual benefit*, is it?" He glanced around the table. "Now there is a real Earthie for you, my friends. Be good children. Go find us some lovely worlds—preferably with a lot of fine metals on 'em.

And some sweet-smelling spices and maybe a new furry animal, something that we can cuddle and love but that doesn't *bite*. And—be sure it doesn't live too long, 'cause we tire easily of our toys here on Earth!"

"You're rather good at cliches," Mara said coolly, "and oversimplifications. It's easy to leave out the parts you don't like, isn't it?"

Gil leaned forward. She could almost feel the heat of his hatred.

"You really want to hear the parts I don't like? Try this one: If you find a world that's not too nice a place to live—a little too hot or cold, or full of things that don't take to humans, why—that's easy enough. *Just don't be human any more*!"

He shook his head sadly. "Don't you know how it was out here? Truly? Didn't they tell you at home—or have the history books taken care of that? If a world doesn't suit you, they told us—change to suit the world. Grow a tail or a pair of horns or a set of fine gills." He laughed.

"Gilder," said Eri.

Gil ignored him. "Look, Lady, you see?" He reached up and pulled his shirt away from his throat. Mara felt her heart pound against her chest. Pink, open slits pulsed on either side of his throat from below his chin to the base of his collarbone.

"Gil, Gill, Gilder," he smiled. "You see—Gantry didn't exactly have any *land* to settle on—but it had a lot of fine, high-grade ore on her sea bottoms. Ore that Mother Earth wanted." He looked around the table. Eri, Gereen and Pfore were staring into their glasses.

"As I say—if the world's not right—change to fit the world. And in six or eight generations, we'll let you *keep* a little of that ore for yourselves. But not too much. And none at all, if an Earthie pet like Serevan comes along and gets it first!"

"It's—not like that," Mara said numbly. "It's not like that at all."

Gil stood. He poured a glass of wine and toasted her grimly. "You're a hothouse flower, girl," he said harshly. "Come out in the fields and see how all the *weeds* are growin'!"

Mara got to her feet shakily. "Excuse me . . . please," she muttered, and fled from the room quickly. . . .

She sat on the edge of her bed, knees held tightly together, hands pressed against her sides.

It's not like that at all, she told herself.

She made herself say it. Again and again.

And if she said it enough, she knew she could make it true.

She straightened suddenly. *Make* it true? Do I have to *make* it true? Don't I believe it? Or do I think Gilder is right?

Certainly, Earth's a wealthy planet. No one ever said it wasn't. And why shouldn't it be? Earth sent out the ships that found the worlds, and it was Earth's children who tamed them.

Then why did these people think of themselves as "Outworlders"—people who didn't belong to Earth at all, who despised and hated their mother world with a paranoid passion?

All right, she told herself grimly. Turn it around. *Try* to see it the way they do.

They don't really know Earth. They're third, fourth, fifth generation—born nowhere near the hills of New Frisco, or Roma or Atlantia Complex. Home is Gantry, Hellfire, Styryxx and Lone. And—are they still children of Earth?

She wondered. When the body changed, what happened to the soul, the psyche, the inner man that was really what a man was. Did it change, too—become something else?

Certainly, there would be changes in a man born on a water world like Gantry—a man who had no dry-land heritage to remember.

She realized, suddenly, that it wasn't really a question of whether or not the Outworlders were children of Earth. They were not. They were children of their own worlds. What was she asking, then?

Not whether or not they're children of Earth . . . but whether they are still men. . . .

And she knew the hatred, the murderous image of Earth came from something deeper than that. It came from the real or imagined belief that Earth had cast its one-time children aside, turned them into something not quite human to be used and exploited to fatten a few billion distant cousins on a world they'd never see.

And that was the thing she would never let herself believe. If that were true, it meant that men like Serevan carried an unspeakable guilt upon their shoulders. And more than that. It meant that the Families of Earth, who ruled the commerce of the stars, bore an even greater guilt. Families, she reminded herself, such as the House of Trent-Hanse. . . .

Something was wrong with the Palaie chemise.

The pressfold she'd used to mold the gown about her was gone. The almost invisible seam should have fallen away with the slightest touch. It didn't. The more she searched and pulled, the tighter the garment wrapped itself around her.

Mara sighed and bit her lip in frustration. Gereen, maybe, could show her—

No. She'd sleep in the damn thing before she'd ask for help.

She crossed the cabin irritably and poured a glass of the pale white wine on the table. Of all the ridiculous—

Mara stiffened. The glass fell

from her fingers and shattered on the floor.

She stood perfectly still. She refused to let herself believe what was happening. There was some other explanation, some—

A chill rose along her back and touched the fine hairs at the base of her neck. Something moved. Lightly, softly up the side of her leg, smoothly over her thigh, warmly past her stomach to her breasts.

Mara gasped. She tore at the gown, trying desperately to rip it from her. At her touch, the dress responded fiercely. It caressed her with a wild, burning intensity. She threw herself against the wall, grabbed sharp scissors from the table, and cut at the thing with all her strength. The dress tightened about her. She cried out and the scissors jerked from her hand.

Then the word touched her mind with a sudden shock of horror. *Stimdress!* It was no Palaie chemise at all, and Gereen had known exactly what it was.

Sickness welled up into her throat and gagged her with a sour, burning taste. She realized what Gereen had in mind. And only because Mara had left the Common when she did. . . .

She screamed, strained for breath. She felt her grip on the wall give way as the thing tore her away and pulled her to her knees, forced her to the floor. Its living hands throbbed across her body, and she had no more strength to cry, to scream, to move.

She silently cursed Gereen in one sane corner of her mind. *Bitch! she yelled. Alien-tainted bitch! Damn you . . . damn all of you!*

Murky water roiled on the surface of the tank, and Pfore turned over in warm silt and smiled to himself.

A picture wavered, then crystallized in his mind. Handel. Thin limbs pressed against a hard surface. Metal? A roundness. Tunnel. Pipe.

The boy was in the ventilator shaft on the port side. The shaft ran by the engine room and then past stores and over the cabins.

Handel's vision was sliced by thin, vertical bars of blackness. Pfore recognized the blackness as the grids that looked down upon Gereen's room.

Beyond the grid, through Handel's eyes, Pfore saw the delicate blue tracery of veins against ivory flesh, the cold glint of shiny needles, and the serpentine coil of bright red tubing.

And on the wetness of Gereen's lips and the azure shadows of her closed eyes—Peace. Hate. Agony. Love.

Pfore read the thoughts in Handel's mind. They crawled over his consciousness like scuttering, mindless insects—tiny creatures who lived and died in quick seconds of unfulfilled intensity.

Pfore smiled. The image of Handel wavered, changed. Handel lengthened and swelled, and his eyes bulged into milky globes. His sleek, scaled body raced fearfully into the depths. Pfore circled silently above, his body cutting the green waters, his eyes on the frantic creature below.

The Sritafish jerked in and out of high coral castles. It knew that the blue thing above was a Hunter and that unless it found cover its life was measured in seconds.

Gills throbbed, and the pink membranes within shivered in fear. The fear grew, and the long body trembled in a flash of silver scales. No! Movement would only help the blue Hunter find him, would only—

The blue Hunter struck. Its impact drove razor teeth into the Sritafish's spine. The teeth snapped, and in a blinding second of pain it was over.

Handel screamed. . . .

The blue Hunter rolled lazily away. His stomach was full, the taste of blood-prey still tart upon his lips. Then the gray shadow loomed dangerously before him. The Hunter blinked, startled.

Gilder laughed. "He who dreams of the Sritafish had best keep an eye out for the shark, Brother!"

"There are no Sritafish here. Only filthy vermin in the ventilators."

"We will hunt the warm seas again. Soon."

"Will we, Brother?"

"Yes!" Gilder projected an angry, foam-flecked wave. It crashed against jagged red coral in splintering fingers of blue. Pfore caught the blue splinters, froze them into cold points of light, tossed them against blackness.

"You see? We swim in a dark and airless sea, Brother."

"It is necessary, now."

"Is it?"

"The airless sea holds our enemies, Pfore. Would you fight them here, or wait until they foul the waters of Gantry?"

"They already foul those waters. The herds were thin less than a two-period ago. What must they be like now?"

Gilder was silent.

"They want it all, Brother. It is as you say. There will be nothing but scraps left for the Gantrymen. And now there is even an Earthie in our midst. What is she here for? What does she want? Do the Terrans fear we will hide the Survey worlds from them? I do not like her here."

"I do not like her presence either. But she is here, and I did not bring her, Brother. She brought herself."

Pfore sighed and laughed lightly. "Ah, Gilder, I hear your words. But—does your Egg Brother see what you are blind to see?"

He lifted the image gently from Gil's mind. Golden hair. Wide, dark eyes. The fragile, slender figure. . . .

Gilder scoffed. He brought high winds and salt spray and the fronts

of sea trees together and superimposed them over the slim picture of Mara. Mara disappeared under a tall, full-breasted Gantrywoman with slate-blue eyes and dark hair flecked with spray.

"You paint fine pictures," Pfore said drolly. "If you wish, we shall pretend your Egg Brother was born upon the morning tide, and does not know a Pirishell from his breakfast."

Pfore turned over in his tank and Gilder lashed out angrily. His thoughts met only the dark shield of sleep. . . .

The hovercraft hummed high above yellow fields marbled with a dark tracery of stone. Mara leaned out and let the afternoon sun fall full upon her face, then pulled her head back into the cabin.

"What did you call it? Psi? Psi as in Old Greek?" She fluffed her thick hair into place.

Eri shook his head grimly. "No. Scythe. S-C-Y-T-H-E. As in slash, cut, slit, kill."

"Oh." Mara sank back in silence.

Eri looked at her. "We named it that after we left," he explained.

Mara turned to him questioningly. "The—ship's been here before?"

"Six months ago. This is where we lost your predecessor." He moved his head in a vague, downward direction. "Hali Vickson caught it over there—near that darkest ridge."

Mara looked. She could see nothing, but the sight of the low line of black rock gave her an uneasy shudder.

"There's an ecological shift going on here that's got 'em jumping back at Center," he said. "We've got a couple of snoopers planted around, but a snooper won't always catch what a man does. We have to come and take a look for ourselves now and then."

Eri turned the hovercraft in an easy curve, pressing Mara against the narrow hatch. "That yellow stuff that looks like dead wheat is dormant Sabregrass. The grass is what got Hali. He knew all about it. Had it neatly cataloged away. Slides, pictures, seed spores, growth patterns—the works. He had three weeks down there and plenty of research time in the ship. He never went out without body armor. So we got ready to leave, and Hali had to have one more look—something about a possible connection between a wide band of this and a short band of that. And that's when the Sabregrass got him."

Eri frowned darkly. "That's when something always gets you," he added, almost to himself. "When it's all over and you turn around and walk away from it, and it knows you're finished and not really watching any more."

He turned, suddenly, and stared at her with open puzzlement. "What are you doing out here, Mara? What do you want with us?"

There was anger in his voice—a deep, harsh resentment only partially masked by his even tones.

And that, thought Mara, was all that really made the difference between Eri and Gilder. Eri still wore the veneer of a few superficial niceties. Gilder no longer bothered, or never had. He wore his hatred like a banner.

She'd hoped Eri might prove to be different. Whether he wore the Belt, as Handel said, or not—he seemed less divorced from humanity than the others.

She had had little to do with either Gilder or Gereen since the incident at dinner, and the episode with the Stimdress. Both events still lingered like a dull horror in the back of her mind.

And that left Eri. Well, so the door was shut there, too.

"Is it so hard to believe," she answered him, "that I could just *be* here, Eri? Because I want to be?"

Eri shrugged. He kept his eyes on the low horizon. "Mâra, you talk as if it's an everyday thing to see an Earthie—a Terran, working in the Outworlds." He smiled dully. "*We* don't want to be here. Don't you know that? What do you expect us to think about you?"

She turned away. "Maybe," she said evenly, "I just expect to be accepted for what I am. That's asking too much, isn't it?"

"Probably," he said frankly.

She gave a bitter little laugh and shook her head. "Well, anyway, *all* the prejudice doesn't begin on Earth, I see."

"It's a waste of time to talk about such things," he said flatly. "Gilder tried to tell you about the Outworlds. You didn't believe him."

"I think the Outworlder's picture of Earth is probably no more accurate than Earth's view of the Outworld."

"That's hardly an answer."

"It is, though. How can I know the Outworlds unless I see them? And you. And Gilder and Gereen. Have any of you ever really *been* to Earth? Do you know what it's like? Or do you just think what you want to think because it's convenient?"

Eri jerked around. "Have I ever been—" He threw back his head and laughed. "You don't really know, do you?"

Mara frowned. "Know what?"

"Outworlders *can't* go to Earth. We're not allowed there. We're quarantined—fenced off. Keep the freaks out of sight so they won't upset the good citizens!"

"That's not true, Eri—now you sound like Gilder. I've *seen* Outworlders on Earth."

"You've seen what they wanted you to see. A few bought and paid-for flunkies. Showcase Outworlders from Vega or Alpha C. No more Outworlders than you are. But they make a hell of a lot better appearance than some wart-hided dwarf from Rigo."

Eri looked at her. "Settlement policies were different in the begin-

ning. When there were plenty of Earth-type worlds to go around, there was no need to bother with the Vulcans and Zeros. But the planets past the Rim weren't as easy to live on as Paradise and Dale. Heavy gravity, hard radiation, too hot, too cold—or worse.

"But the Outworlds had something most of the First Colony planets didn't. They were rich in the things desperately needed on Earth. Remember what Gilder said? If the planet's not right—change to fit the planet. He's right. Do you think Earth intended to let those worlds *go*—just because they weren't fit to live on?" He shook his head bitterly.

"Eri," Mara protested, "I know about the Adapters. No one forced the colonists to—change. They did it because they *wanted* those worlds!"

Eri laughed. He swung the hovercraft in a smooth arc that took them past sawtooth peaks and out over another broad expanse of bright-tipped Sabregrass.

"That's the textbook answer," he said. He spat out the words harshly. "Didn't they teach you in school where those colonists came from? Did you think they were bright-eyed pioneers, eager to conquer new worlds?"

He shook his head. "The people who submitted to the Adapters were misfits—throwaways. Ring War veterans too battered to work in the new cities. And women caught in first-wave radiation who didn't stand a chance of getting genetic clearance on Earth. But they could have their bodies altered for four-G living on Gelerax! And, hell, they were likely to breed monsters anyway—why not breed *useful* monsters?"

"Aren't you exaggerating, Eri?" she said reasonably. "There are always some—undesirables among colonists. But I won't believe that the Outworlds were settled solely by Ring War vets and GX women!"

"Those undesirables you're talking about are my esteemed ancestors," he said dryly.

"I didn't mean—"

"I know. You didn't mean anything. You're an Earthie. You think like an Earthie thinks. Why shouldn't you? You've never been told anything different."

Eri shrugged bitterly. "No, I'm the one who's naive, Mara—not you. Eridek of Colmier VI explains the Outworlds to the daughter of Hanse House!" He laughed and locked himself in silence.

The hovercraft circled over the high, flat mesa, then turned into the wind to settle a hundred yards from the orange dome.

Eri jumped down without looking back. He walked quickly away through a veil of rising heat. Mara watched him a few moments, then grimly opened the hatch and stepped into a wave of stiffling air.

"Anything?" Eri asked.

Gil looked up. He was bare to the waist, sweat streaming from his neck and shoulders in small rivulets. He squatted before the dome and glared suspiciously at a green wave dancing palely about in the shaded scope.

"Something," he muttered darkly. "Don't know what the hell to call it, though." He looked up sourly at Eri. "Doesn't make sense. Pfore's down at Two Mile. There's no indication of any pulse like that on his side. That means the thing's localized—whatever it is—something's happening on my scope that's not happening on his. And that, friend, is impossible."

Eri frowned. "No malfunctions, I suppose."

Gilder made a noise. "No. Equipment's okay. What it means is that the organic life of Scythe is undergoing a dramatic change. Basically, it's centered about the Sabregrass, but everything's playing a part, you can bet on that. Now. Suppose you tell me why it's happening all over the planet, except in a 300-square-mile area over there?"

He spat disgustedly on the sandy ground. "I even changed meters with Pfore, just to make—"

Gilder stopped. He squinted past his scope, out over the broad mesa. He cursed silently, and his eyes moved up to Eri.

"What's she doing here?"

Eri shrugged. "She wasn't doing anything on the ship. I thought maybe she could make herself useful. As long as she's here," he added.

"And just what the hell did you figure she'd *do*, Eri? To make herself 'useful'?"

Eri held Gilder's gaze. The Gantryman's shoulders hung loose, relaxed, but his eyes smoldered with barely controllable anger.

"Take her back. Now."

"Any particular reason—or just a Gantryman's privilege?"

Gilder darkened. The narrow, pink slits in his throat fluttered nervously.

Eri let himself smile. "As you say, Gil." Gilder didn't like the smile, he knew. Eri turned and stalked away toward the hovercraft.

"Eri—"

Eri stopped and looked back.

"She doesn't belong here. She's got no business running around on Scythe."

Eri spread his hands. "Gil, she's got no business on the ship—but she's there. You didn't send for her and neither did I. Survey qualified her. Do we use her or don't we?"

Gilder's lips suddenly split into a wide grin.

"Goddamn, Eri—use her for what? What do you do with an Earthie girl on a Survey ship?" His blue eyes sparkled with amusement. "Any suggestions?"

"That's your department," Eri said blankly. "Not mine." He brushed moisture from his brow and turned away.

Before he turned, his eyes caught Gilder, and Gilder was looking past

him, at the girl. The amusement was gone. There was something else there. Eri couldn't say what it was.

Mara swallowed hard. She wondered whether anything as alien as Captain Sk'tai could possibly read a human expression. If he can, she thought, I'm in trouble already.

The bridge of the *Taegaanthe* was a hemisphere amidships, a smooth concavity bristling with multicolored lights and studded with pearl-gray buttons.

The greater part of the circle was filled with Captain Sk'tai himself. To Mara, standing behind the guard rail directly above, he seemed like a gigantic leather butterfly constantly emerging and retreating in its cocoon. A bewildering assortment of appendages brushed out to touch against the pearly buttons and flashing lights.

"Mara Trent-Hanse, is it?"

Mara started, as the human-sounding voice boomed all about her.

"Yes—sir," she said.

The captain chuckled. "Beauty. Such beauty. A flower of Old Earth in our midst. Wonders never cease, as they say."

Mara flushed.

"Been to Earth—or close to it, anyway. New Phoenix? Reykjavik Station? That surprise you?"

"Yes, sir. A little."

"It's no stranger than *you* being *here*, though. I guess you've heard that already."

"Several have—mentioned it, yes," Mara said tightly.

"And—?"

"I didn't expect a welcome-aboard party. I knew the Outworlder attitude toward Earth."

"But you came anyway."

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because I don't like to hear how something's supposed to be. I don't care to read about places or look at pretty pictures. And I've never cared a great deal about other people's opinions. In other words, I wanted to see the Outworlds myself."

"—And Outworlders," the captain added, with only a thinly veiled amusement.

"Yes," said Mara. "And Outworlders."

The captain sighed. The noise was like the wind from a great bellows.

"Well, you passed the tests at some Survey School or other—or wouldn't be here. Either that or you have considerable pull. Which is not unlikely with a name like Trent-Hanse."

Mara took a deep breath. "I was in High Range at Remoga. I can perform my duties." If you and the others will let me, she said to herself.

"Remoga, eh? And they trained you in—"

"I'm a Speaker, Captain. First Class," she added tightly.

Captain Sk'tai seemed to hesitate. "A—Speaker?" Some part of

the great bulk below seemed to shake its head incredulously.

Mara filled her lungs and launched into a partial double debate in High Treecoosh, stopped suddenly and gave him a sample of the impossibly complex Yaraday chittering, a smattering of Erebist, and finally, the ritual blessing of his own tongue—as unlikely a combination of sounds as she could imagine.

"Glory!" Sk'tai gasped. "I wouldn't have believed it!" He laughed soundly. "You speak with a northern tinge, know that? My own island, too—or near enough."

"I can give you the eastern ridge dialect if you prefer," she said calmly.

"Enough—I'm convinced."

"I was two years in surgical implant—three under hyp. I hope," she said dryly, "I can mumble a few languages."

"I sense more than a little bitterness—and in your own language, too," he said questioningly.

Mara laughed nervously. "Really, Captain? I can't imagine—"

"Look," he said, and his voice took on a firmer note. "You'd do well to face some realities. And you'd do well to face them now, I think."

Mara's hands tightened on the railing. She swallowed hard and, with a great effort of will, made herself speak without any hint of a tremor in her voice.

"I—have faced little else *but* realities, Captain. From the moment I stepped on board, realities have been served to me three times a day—"

She clenched her fists and felt the control drop away from her voice. "I am sick to death of—Outworld realities!"

The captain was silent a long moment. The leathery cocoon below fluttered, then stilled.

"You came to us, remember? No one asked for you."

"No. They didn't. But what is it I've done that—"

"—That makes them despise you?" he finished. "Simple. You've brought out the love-hate in Gilder. The sado-envy in Gereen deGeis. The oh-so-thinly buried Dream psychosis in Eri."

Sk'tai sighed. "Not because of what you do—simply because you're here. You remind them too much of things they would rather not remember.

"You're a backward child, Mara Trent-Hanse. From a backward world. Oh, the Terrans are clever and ruthless, when they want to be, and *that's* often enough. But in the Outworlds an Earthie's a crawling infant—no more than that. And you're a most dangerous infant to have around, I think, because you carry seeds of destruction within you—and they all see that! And miserable creatures though they be, none want that destruction!"

"I don't want to destroy anyone!"

Mara said hopelessly. "I want to *learn*!"

But she knew that learning had nothing at all to do with what he was saying.

"I can," she repeated lamely. "I can—if you'll let me."

"You can die," he said simply, "and perhaps destroy. I see nothing more that you can do aboard the *Taegaanthe.*"

Mara's heart stopped. "*Die*!" She shook her head in open-mouthed refusal. "I came here *to learn to live*, Captain!"

"Living isn't enough in the Outworlds. Don't you see? Can't you realize that is what they sense in you? *Survive* is the only word they've ever known out here. To *live* is what an Earthie does!

"You think Gilder a barbarian. A man with no more than lust and murder on his mind. He's much of that, granted. But more, too. Gilder and his Egg Mate were born on a world where trust meant death and murder meant another day of life.

"And Eri. Five hundred years ago his ancestors landed on Jaare, a world no more made for man than—than my own. The seeds of the Dreamers were already on Jaare when Eri's people got there. To stay, they accepted the Dreamer spore, and became more than men—and less.

"Gereen deGeis had the blood drained from her veins the day she was born on Tyson's world. To face what they found there, Tyson's people had to match the planet's eccentricities with their own. And so Gereen's drug cycle hands her a new metabolism twice a day—but she lives."

The captain sighed. "I know nothing of Handel, or how he comes to be what he is. We found him on Gellahell, more dead than alive. We saved him, and of course he hates us all for that. There's no way to say where he comes from, but you can bet it's a world where pain's the same as survival.

"Now tell me, Mara Trent-Hanse," he said gently, "tell me how it is they'll learn to—*accept you for what you are?*" He laughed hollowly. "That's the sad joke, you see? What you are is the one thing they can never accept!"

"I see no joke," she cried, "no joke at all—"

"There's more to it than you know, though," he told her. "The Q'saddis have some rare traits, Mara—I'm more than what you see slithering around below—I'm anything I want to be. Whatever I see, whatever crawls or flies or bounces about. Can you see the joke in that? I can taste your beauty, Mara, and desire you, too. You look at me with loathing, and you can do no more, being what you are. But *I'm* not the exotic creature aboard the *Taegaanthe*—it's your human-appearing companions *who are the real aliens here* . . . Do you see? Do you see what you've brought yourself into?"

Mara turned with a low, stifled cry and ran blindly down the corridor. She shut her door behind her, backed stiffly against it, and stared straight ahead at nothing.

"No," Gilder said flatly. He cursed under his breath and gripped the railing tightly.

Captain Sk'tai ignored him. "She will go with you," he said. "She's being paid to work; so she'll work. If the sensors are correct about C-71 there'll be a use for her."

Gilder was silent.

"You dislike her so much," Sk'tai said finally, "that you'd rather do without a talent you may need."

Gilder's mouth twisted into a frown. "I don't like or dislike the girl," he said irritably. "I have a job to do. My Brother and I can't do that job and—and keep our Earthie from falling in a goddamn hole or something at the same time."

The captain chuckled.

"You know how Pfore and I work," Gil protested. "You tell me how she fits.!"

"She goes with you, Gilder," the captain said patiently.

"If you think Pfore and I can't handle this—"

"I think nothing." The captain's patient tone had taken on a sharper edge. "I think Center sent us a Speaker, and who knows the ways of Center, or questions their reasons? It may be they had C-71 in mind."

"There's no one to talk to on C-71," Gil muttered.

"No, but there *were* beings there, were there not?" The captain sighed. "Gilder," he said wearily, "let us not pursue this. I give not one of your damns for your feelings about the girl. She is here. She is a Speaker. There is a most peculiar world awaiting you down there. It may be that she can shed some light upon its peculiarities."

"It may be that she can get us all killed." Gil muttered darkly.

Gil stood on the gentle hill and eyed his surroundings with narrow suspicion. The rise beneath him was a perfect quarter-sphere covered with neatly clipped grass. At the base of the hill, shorter grass abruptly gave way to another variety that was one unit higher and one shade darker.

Exactly one unit.

Exactly one shade.

He squinted out across the narrow horizon. The darker grass continued for a thousand units, then gave way again to the lighter variety. The light grass climbed a hill that was a duplicate of the one beneath his boots. . . .

It was as if a planet of overzealous gardeners had finished their work just that morning, cleaned their tools, and vanished into the ground.

Into the ground—or somewhere, Gil frowned scornfully. And when? Yesterday? A thousand years ago? Six months?

Only the former inhabitants of C-

71 could answer that, and they had neglected to leave word.

Gil reached down and ripped up a large handful of grass. It was a peculiarly pleasant sensation, and he allowed himself a half smile. Seconds ago there had been order and perfection. Now, one blemish scarred a small circle on the top of one hill in one quadrant of a perfect world.

He watched. Somewhere below, he knew, frantic signals pulsed out from the torn root system. A nutrient booster was even now flowing up to bathe and heal the damaged area.

Gil shook his head grimly as the blades began to quiver. Within thirty seconds, the new crop was entrenched. It stopped growing at the precise unit height of its mates.

He turned away and walked the few steps back to the dome. A tall whip aerial flashed from the silver console by the entry. To one side, Mara puttered with a collapsible table and chairs. He smelled the aroma of food from the small cook unit, grunted to himself, and passed her without looking up.

"Well," she said behind him, "what do you think of Toy?"

Gil stopped, one arm still crooked like a wing in his jacket. He squinted back over his shoulder, then faced her.

"What do I think of—*what?*"

Her half-expectant smile faded quickly. She looked away nervously and inspected the cook unit.

"I—thought it was rather appropriate," she snapped. "That's all. If you don't like it, for God's sake call it C-71!"

Gilder bristled. "Girl, look at me!"

Mara's eyes rose patiently.

"I don't care *what* you call this world," he said darkly. "It's what you're thinking that bothers me." He glared at her disdainfully. "Don't you understand? That kind of thing doesn't belong out here. It leads to carelessness, is what it does, and I'll not put up with carelessness where *my* hide's involved!"

He spat contemptuously at the close-cropped grass. "You're right. The name's appropriate—too damned appropriate as far as I'm concerned. An' when you start associating these cute little trees and phony hills with some Earthie fairy tale, you might as well shoot yourself full of sarazine and sit down and wait for it, 'cause you're as good as dead already!"

Suddenly, his eyes widened, and he jerked away. "Mara, behind you!"

She twisted aside and threw herself into a half crouch, clawing for the sidearm at her belt.

There was nothing at all behind her. She turned and flashed him an angry stare.

"Like I say," he said somberly, facing her, "start thinking of this place as 'Toy', and the next thing you know, you've forgotten all about Survey rules and set your pis-

tol on the goddamn cook unit!"

Mara flushed. Gil reached down and picked up the gold-barreled weapon, made a show of opening it and meticulously checking the charge. Then he jammed the pistol back into its holster and tossed it to her roughly.

"Put it on," he said flatly. "*Don't* take it off."

Mara gritted her teeth and said nothing. She buckled on the pistol and rolled the cook unit back into the dome and walked to the edge of the hill.

If there was a hidden menace on Toy, she decided grimly, it was probably the menace of monotony. An entire planet of precise lawns and duplicate hills. And cities, too. They'd flown over half a dozen that morning. Tiny squares of whiteness from the air—each exactly like the other. Each mathematically equidistant from the rest.

Mara shook her head. Could you ever really understand such a world? Divorce yourself from humanity and see Toy through alien eyes?

She remembered a lean, star-burned man, a teacher at Survey who looked twenty years older than he was. He had lost his arms at Stinger and had definite ideas on staying alive in the Outworlds.

". . . *There's one thing we can't teach you here—you'll learn it in the field or you won't. Forget where you came from. Forget who you are. Think and reason in alien terms, not your own. Assimilate every aspect of your surroundings and never turn your back on a strange world. It's not easy—but it's the only way a Survey man keeps alive. . . .*"

That was the answer, then. You learned. Or you died. And Mara wrapped her arms about her shoulders as a sudden chill struck her atop the low hill.

She *couldn't* think that way. She was Mara Trent-Hanse from Earth, and she could never become an Outworlder. And that meant Gil, Sk'tai and all the others were right.

I'm lonely again, she thought. I'm as lonely here as I was on Earth. I didn't belong there, and I'm not a part of the Outworlds, either.

Where am I supposed to be?

Toy's sun dropped behind perfect hills, and Mara spotted the small figure on the broad green plain below. She turned away and walked wearily back to the dome. Gilder sat over the dark, enameled box whose slow-moving needle recorded some mysterious segment of Toy's inner workings.

"Pfore's coming back," she said absently.

Gil frowned. He didn't look up. "Yes, I know."

"Oh," she said, "well, of course you do." She knew immediately that he'd taken her words in a different way than she'd meant them.

"You don't like him, do you?" He glanced away from the snail-pace

tape and grinned at her with amusement.

Mara tightened. "Don't, Gilder," she said calmly. "Please. Don't start something. I meant that you would know Pfore's coming before I did for the simple reason that you can—talk to him. You can. I can't. I forgot. It's no more than that—not unless *you* want to make something out of something that's not there. If you do, go ahead. Just don't include me!" she added hotly.

She turned and walked stiffly to her own segment of the dome.

"Greetings, seducer of mighty whales. What kept you?"

"What do you mean, what kept me?"

"I couldn't raise you," Pfore said idly. "I supposed you were deeply involved in some important project." He presented a lurid image of what he imagined that project to be.

Gil made a mental noise. "It's for certain you haven't been watching too closely, Mudfish, or you'd not come up with rubbish like that."

"No need to watch, Brother," Pfore said wryly. "I can read the purple tones of frustration a mile away."

Gilder's thoughts turned to ice. Pfore felt them, and backed away.

"There are times when you imagine too much, Brother."

"Perhaps," said Pfore. "After all, what does an Egg Mate know?" Then, he broke contact quickly, before Gilder could retaliate. . . .

Gereen made a wide sweep above the three small figures. Their presence on the green plain appeared as bright pulses of life on her screens. Behind them was the ever-present static of C-71's star, and the broader, darker wave that said there was a substantial amount of electronic and mechanical activity going on under the planet's surface.

The energy was fairly low and constant beneath the grassy lawns and low hills—higher under the cities. She expected that. The support systems under a living center *should* be more complex than the ones bringing food and water to plants.

The screens told Gereen a great deal about C-71's cities. The motionless blue lines said power—the lighter, nervous spiderwebs of aqua showed how that power was being used.

She was fascinated by the intricate patterns of energy. The automated facilities must be filling the cities' needs at a near capacity rate. Each area, she guessed, was turning out enough goods and services to support several million inhabitants—inhabitants who no longer required the systems' capabilities.

What happened to those things the planet produced? Cycled back to raw materials, probably, she thought. Made, destroyed, and made again.

Life support for millions—and

only three pulses of life on her screen—Gilder, Pfore and the Earthie. And in the distance, the white, too-perfect city. . . .

Eri watched duplicates of Gereen's screens in the dark Commpad of the *Taegaanthe*, circling C-71 a thousand miles away. He saw, and understood, the broad socio/geo structure painted by glowing lines and waves, but noted them only vaguely in one corner of his mind.

Something bigger worried at the edge of Eri's consciousness. So far, it was only an itch, an uncomfortable feeling. But it was moving about in the darkness, trying to shape itself into something real.

Eri knew what it was. The One who shared his soul saw something in Eri's universe that interested, stimulated, or disturbed its being. . . .

Captain Sk'tai held the image of the Survey Team on C-71 in some facet of his mind. Other facets noted the hull temperature of the *Taegaanthe*, the ship's speed, altitude, orbital path, and the fact that one and a quarter liters of coolant per tenday were leaking from the aft galley refrigeration system.

Three aspects of his being played an incomprehensible mathematical game with each other. He noted that one of those aspects was attempting to cheat the other. . . .

Handel slept, and dreamed of white mice with razor-chrome teeth. . . .

From the top of the last hill she looked down upon the city. Perfect, windowless white buildings set in a grillwork of even streets. A gameboard, she thought. A game with all the pieces set up shining and new, and all the players gone.

The outer perimeter began with neat, uniform structures four stories high. From there they progressed in symmetrical ascensions to a central, fifty-story tower. She decided it looked all the more like an alien chessboard—a giant, insane chessboard with all the pawns, knights and queens on the same side. . . .

"We should be back in two hours," Gil told her. "We won't go too far in on this first trek. It's just a look-see."

Mara shook her head. "Who's *we*, Gilder?"

He frowned, pretending not to understand. "Why, Pfore and I." He grinned foolishly. "Well, damn me—did you think you were goin' in with us?"

Mara set her jaw tightly. "And why not?"

Gilder shrugged and exchanged a quick look with Pfore. "Someone's got to mind the store," he muttered.

"You've got Gereen for that," she reminded him, "in the hovercraft."

"Gereen," he corrected, "and

you." He turned to his Gantry Brother, and they lifted light packs and started off down the hill.

"You're afraid something will happen to me," she said.

Gilder stopped. He turned, and an incredulous frown spread across his features. "Where in hell did you get an idea like that? What I'm afraid of is you'll get *me* killed—with some damn foolishness."

He chuckled disdainfully. "Course, there's not much to worry about, is there? Here on 'Toy', I mean."

Mara ignored him. She lifted her own pack and adjusted it to her shoulders. His brows rose in the beginning of refusal.

"I'm going, Gilder," she said quietly.

Mara felt strangely apart from herself—as if her mouth opened, while someone else she didn't quite know formed the words.

Gil studied her with no expression at all, then moved down the hill.

Mara glanced at Pfore out of the corner of her eye. His blue skin glistened like soft rubber in the sunlight. The flat, even features of his face reminded her of the bare beginnings of a sculptor's head—clay smooth and wetted for tomorrow's work.

He's never spoken to me, she realized suddenly. He's never once spoken or even looked in my direction since I've been aboard the *Taegaanthe*. I'm not even here.

She turned away and let her eyes touch the walls of the city. The pale slabs rose all around her—untouched, unblemished. Ahead, the black surface of the street disappeared under points of diminishing whiteness. There wasn't a mote of dust under her feet. Not a twig or a scrap of paper or a blade of grass.

Only what we've brought with us, she thought, and looked back at the three dull sets of footprints behind her.

She could hear her own breath magnified against the silence. The soft rustle of her clothing was a harsh, noisy intrusion.

Pfore shifted and Mara followed his glance. Gilder ducked and walked out of one of the low doors. He blinked in the sunlight.

"Nothing new," he said somberly. "It's exactly like the others. God!" He shook his head in wonder. "Apartments. Maybe a couple of million of 'em—an' every one the same, down to the last nit-picking detail."

He glanced meaningfully at Pfore. "I took some check measurements. There's something that looks like a bed in each place, and next to it there's a stool. There's not so much as a millimeter's difference between the way the stool sits from the bed in any room in this whole kookin' city."

"Irrational," said Pfore.

"Not really," said Mara. "Not

from their point of view, anyway."

They both glanced at her blankly, as if they'd forgotten she was there.

"What," Gil asked impatiently. "What's that, now?"

"I said the creatures who built this, and all of C-71 for that matter—probably thought this was the most *rational* world possible. It's—well, order, carried to the highest possible degree, isn't it?"

Gil laughed lightly. His mouth twisted into a slight grin. "I think we can all look around us and see the evidence of order, Mara."

She flushed at his tone. "Then it's not an irrational world!"

"It is to me," he shrugged.

"To you, Gil?" She raised a brow. "Really? I would have imagined that an experienced Survey man is capable of *projecting himself into the problem.*"

His ice-cold eyes fell on her a full second before his laughter echoed through the empty streets.

"I've seen it all, now, by the Stars—an Earthie quotin' Survey rules!" He walked off, slapping Pfore on the back, and Mara followed silently.

They turned a corner and came upon it suddenly; none of them expecting anything except the monotonous regularity of the streets and buildings.

Gilder gave a low whistle. He stopped, muttering something under his breath Mara couldn't hear.

The statue stood under a high arch atop a square column. Beyond, there was a tantalizing glimpse of a broad plaza and long walls covered with signs and symbols. But for the moment, none of them could take their eyes off the statue.

"Swine," Gil said almost to himself. "By God, swine standin' up on two legs."

"No." Mara shook her head. "*Mock* swine. What swine shouldn't be."

Gil looked at her. "What?"

"She is right," Pfore said, and Gil frowned and shaded his eyes at the statue again.

"Yeah," he bit his lip thoughtfully, "yeah, I guess so." He gave her a peculiar, appraising glance, as if he'd found himself suddenly agreeing with her and wasn't sure how to handle the new feeling.

Mara couldn't take her eyes from the squat, ugly figure. In hard stone, she saw only soft, yielding flesh and dark-pit eyes. Her mind reeled dizzily. Pig eyes. Little pig eyes just a step away from—*people* eyes.

Her heart pounded and the breath caught in her throat. Why? Why are they swine and not swine at all . . . ?

It's not right—not right at all . . . and I don't want to *be* here—not on Toy or Scythe or anyplace else I don't belong and don't understand. . . .

"Mara?"

She blinked, looked down with puzzlement at Gil's hand under her arm.

"What, Gil? What?"

"You all right, now?"

She looked up into the tourmaline eyes. Cold, a moment ago, and now—what? Concern? Was there concern there for a brief second?

She laughed to herself. Whatever it was, it was gone as quickly as it had come—if anything had been there at all.

The long, high walls rose nearly a hundred feet above the square. Light clouds moved against a pale sky and gave the illusion that the walls were leaning slowly in upon them.

"It's a script of some kind," Mara said. "But—the alternating rows are pictographs." She nodded excitedly. "Gilder, I'm almost certain. The pictographs tell the story of the words above them."

He looked at her doubtfully. "Can you read it?"

She frowned at the high wall and tapped one fingernail against her chin. "I don't know. It's not exactly my line, but—a Speaker picks up a certain feel for this kind of thing. Let's see . . ."

She moved off slowly down the wall. Gil and Pfore followed.

"There was at one . . . period, *enclosed* . . . . yes! A segment of time, then. Has to be that. At one time there was . . . see the little figures all—different?" She pointed. "And then that's negated very strongly on the right, to show the same figures—only in order, this time.

"At one time," she read slowly, "there was disorder, then came—whatever it is; I think it's the symbol for their race. Then came blank and there was order and—rightness . . ."

A cold shiver swept over her at the thought. She turned to Gilder.

"They're saying everything was 'out of order' at one time, and they came and made everything right. That—things can't be as they should be until there's no conflict. Until—*sameness* makes the ugliness of difference go away."

"A hive culture," Gil said grimly.

Pfore nodded. "But not a natural hive," he pointed out. "They picked up hive aspects along the way. They didn't start out like this."

"I wonder," Mara said almost to herself, "how it—*did* begin."

The question plagued her.

Why? she asked herself. Is it because I know and they don't—that Toy reminds me too much of Earth?

Earth never came close to Toy, she knew. But the pattern was there. In the sameness of people, the sameness of cities. In the way an overcrowded culture moved toward the—what? The dangerous security of identity?

No conflict . . . make the ugliness of difference go away. . . .

To be alike was to be without fear. And we almost made it—when the billions begat billions and there was no more room for persons. Only for people. Numbers. Inhabitants of the hive.

But it didn't happen on Earth. It didn't happen on Earth, she realized suddenly, *because the Outworlds brought our freedom. . . .*

Mara stopped—almost staggered with the weight of realization. It was true, wasn't it? There was no way to make it go away. The explosion to the stars gave Earth a wealth she'd never imagined. And more than that. Much more. The precious room to breathe. . . .

And wasn't this, really, why the Outworlds hated?

Not because we sent them to the stars and changed them—made them more, and sometimes less, than human . . .

. . . *But because we threw them away. Because we made them change so we could stay the same.* . . .

It happened quickly.

At the other end of the square, Gilder and Pfore were setting up the photo-recorders against the waning light. The squat machines glittered and whirred as they scanned the enigmatic walls of Toy.

Mara walked distractedly along the edge of the broad plaza. Her mind was light-years away, her eyes on the even blocks beneath her boots.

She looked up suddenly, blinking in surprise, to find she'd turned the far corner of the wall without even thinking where she was going. And then she saw the rows of bare white booths.

They were faced in thin sheets of milky glass, and she thought, idly, that it was odd they'd seen no glass besides this anywhere in the city, and maybe it wasn't glass at all, but a kind of plastic . . .

. . . And even as she walked the few steps to touch the cold surface, the thought brushed against her mind that she might be an Earthie, but she was also a qualified member of the *Taegaanthe's* Survey Team, in spite of what anyone said, and the alternate moment to this one flashed before her, where she backed away and called Gilder and didn't touch the glass at all. . . .

Gereen's eyes widened and she tensed and leaned forward, her hands automatically seeking knobs for adjustment as a new kind of wave pulsed wildly across her screens. . . .

Eri screamed as bright hooks of pain tore at his soul.

His fists smashed through the Commpad's monitor and came away bloody. His body jerked uncontrollably, flailing itself against steel walls in painful, erratic arcs. Finally, when the One who shared

his being gained control of muscles and tendons that had already pulled themselves through awful convolutions, Eri sank to the floor and curled up silently, arms folded across his chest, knees tight against his chin. . . .

Captain Sk'tai blinked an aspect of consciousness into being, and with the flexibility of his kind, experienced awareness from a new and unfamiliar viewpoint. . . .

In Handel's dream, the beautiful white rats with razor-chrome teeth came delightfully closer. . . .

Gilder was running before the high, short scream echoed and died across the plaza. He turned the wall, body low and angled to the smallest silhouette, pistol tight against the butt of his palm and thrust out before him.

He saw the brief flicker of movement as the milky panel whispered shut upon itself, and he knew. In a cold, frozen instant he knew all there was to know about the silent booths, and he put all his hate and anger and horror into his heavy boot and smashed the panel into a million white shards.

And of course she was gone, just as he knew she would be. . . .

"Cover!" He shot the mental command to Pfore, and Pfore moved. Gil bent low and melted the base of the booth until slag and steel hissed in poison clouds and forced him away.

"Too late, Brother—!"

"Shut up!"

"I can see, Gil."

"Probe, Pfore!"

"Too late—"

"No!"

"Gilder—"

"Deeper, Brother—deeper, damn you!"

Pfore sobbed—sent out deep mental fingers, and reeled back in agony. Gil caught him roughly, gripped his arm tightly.

"Pfore," he said aloud. "Pfore, once more. *I* can't go there—if I could—"

"They want me, Gil," Pfore said numbly, "and you—and all of us. They want us all."

"There's nothing *down* there!" Gil said savagely. "Machines, Brother, nothing more!"

"Gilder—"

Gil's teeth locked and he tasted blood. "Get—her—*out*, Pfore!" He held Pfore in steel. "Get—her—"

He saw it as it came around the far corner of the wall. His mind cried out and he cursed himself and wondered why he couldn't have known—with the grass, the hills and the city—why hadn't he seen this, too, because it was the logical thing to see and the final goddamn insanity of sameness. . . .

There was the ugliness of difference, and then there was order. . . .

And Gilder knew they'd finally

achieved it on Toy. The booths were the last answer, and there were no more answers after that, and no more questions or conflicts or disorder. . . . Only mirror-image citizens on a mirror-image world, and a statue to mock their madness.

It came around the wall and waddled toward him uncertainly on drunken pig legs. He saw the fish-belly flesh and the dark-pit eyes, and when the mouth tried to gasp itself into his name, he shut out the picture of a girl with dark hair on a green hill; and he squeezed the trigger and held it until there was nothing more of her to see.

And then he dropped the pistol and leaned against the high wall and retched. . . .

They had been sitting in the Common, and he hadn't spoken for a long time, and Gereen said, "You're thinking about the Earthie girl, Gilder."

And Gilder said, "I'm not thinking about anything at all."

"It was a long time ago, Gil."

She said nothing for a long moment, then, "She didn't belong, you know that, don't you? It's not the same as Eri on Tristadel or Ramy Hines on Butcher. They knew what to expect and it could have been you or me, don't you see? It's not the same, Gil. She didn't *belong.*"

For the first time in his life, Gilder felt the faint whisperings of fear, and he wondered if this was the way it had begun for Hali Vickson and Mara Trent-Hanse and Eri and Ramy and all the rest.

First the fear, then the sudden, chilling loneliness.

And finally, the knowledge that no one ever truly belonged—that you only really belonged to the last world that claimed you. . . .

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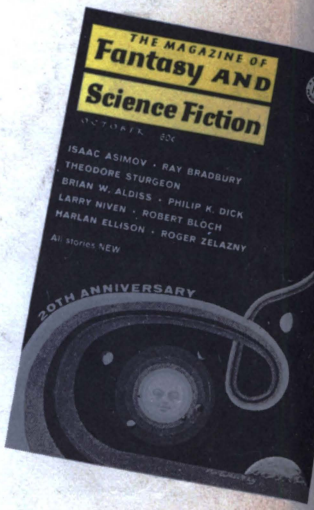

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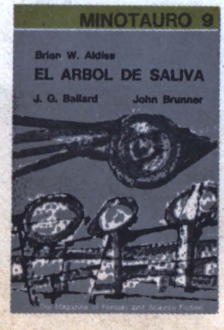

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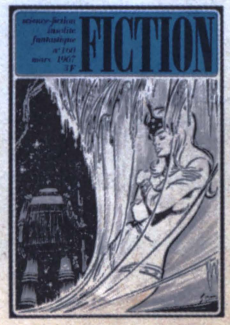

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