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NOVEMBER

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MAN'S REACH by ANTHONY BOUCHER

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C. M. Kornbluth was seventeen years old and Frederik Pohl was not yet twent when the two began writing stories together. Their collaborations spanned a period of about twenty years and produced roughly 35 short stories and seven novels (including GLADIATOR-AT-LAW, WOLFBANE, and THE SPACE MERCHANTS). Cyril Kornbluth died in 1958, still a young man, but now that Fred Pohl is writing sf again we have this new story (based on notes made while Kornbluth was alive) to add to a memorable body of work under the most famous collaborative byline in sf.

The Meeting

by FREDERIK POHL and C. M. KORNBLUTH

HARRY VLADEK WAS TOO large a man for his Volkswagen, but he was too poor a man to trade it in, and as things were going he was going to stay that way a long time. He applied the brakes carefully ("master cylinder's leaking like a sieve, Mr. Vladek; what's the use of just fixing up the linings?"—but the estimate was a hundred and twenty-eight dollars, and where was it going to come from?) and parked in the neatly graveled lot. He squeezed out of the door, the upsetting telephone call from Dr. Nicholson on his mind, locked the car up and went into the school building.

The Parent-Teachers Association of the Bingham County School for Exceptional Children was holding its first meeting of the term. Of the twenty people already there, Vladek knew only Mrs. Adler, the principal, or headmistress, or owner of the school. She was the one he needed to talk to most, he thought. Would there be any chance to see her privately? Right now she sat across the room at her scuffed golden oak desk in a posture chair, talking in low, rapid tones with a gray-haired woman in a tan suit. A teacher? She seemed too old to be a parent, although his wife had told him some of the kids seemed to be twenty or more.

It was 8:30 and the parents were still driving up to the school, a converted building that had once been a big country house—almost a mansion. The living room was full of elegant reminders of that. *Two* chandeliers. Intricate vine-leaf molding on the plaster above the dropped ceiling. The pink-veined white marble fireplace, unfortunately prominent because of the unsuitable andirons, too cheap and too small, that now stood in it. Golden oak sliding double doors to the hall. And visible through them a grim, fireproof staircase of concrete and steel. They must, Vladek thought, have had to rip out a beautiful wooden thing to install the fireproof stairs for compliance with the state school laws.

People kept coming in, single men, single women, and occasionally a couple. He wondered how the couples managed their baby-sitting problem. The subtitle on the school's letterhead was "an institution for emotionally disturbed and cerebrally damaged children capable of education." Harry's nine-year-old Thomas was one of the emotionally disturbed ones. With a taste of envy he wondered if cerebrally damaged children could be baby-sat by any reasonably competent grownup. Thomas could not. The Vladeks had not had an evening out together since he was two, so that tonight Margaret was holding the fort at home, no doubt worrying herself sick about the call from Dr. Nicholson, while Harry was representing the family at the PTA.

As the room filled up, chairs were getting scarce. A young couple was standing at the end of the row near him, looking around for a pair of empty seats. "Here," he said to them. "I'll move over." The woman smiled politely and the man said thanks. Emboldened by an ashtray on the empty seat in front of him, Harry pulled out his pack of cigarettes and offered it to them, but it turned out they were nonsmokers. Harry lit up anyway, listening to what was going on around him.

Everybody was talking. One woman asked another, "How's the gall bladder? Are they going to take it out after all?" A heavy balding man said to a short man with bushy sideburns, "Well, my accountant says the tuition's medically deductible if the school is for psycho*somatic*, not just for psycho. That we've got to clear up." The short man told him positively, "Right, but all you need is a doctor's letter; he recommends the school, refers the child to the school." And a very young woman said intense-

ly, "Dr. Shields was very optimistic, Mrs. Clerman. He says without a doubt the thyroid will make Georgie accessible. And then—" A light-coffee-colored black man in an aloha shirt told a plump woman, "He really pulled a wing-ding over the weekend, two stitches in his face, busted my fishing pole in three places." And the woman said, "They get so bored. My little girl has this thing about crayons, so that rules out coloring books altogether. You wonder what you can do."

Harry finally said to the young man next to him, "My name's Vladek. I'm Tommy's father; he's in the beginners group."

"That's where ours is," said the young man. "He's Vern. Six years old. Blond like me. Maybe you've seen him."

Harry did not try very hard to remember. The two or three times he had picked Tommy up after class he had not been able to tell one child from another in the great bustle of departure. Coats, handkerchiefs, hats, one little girl who always hid in the supply closet and a little boy who never wanted to go home and hung onto the teacher. "Oh, yes," he said politely.

The young man introduced himself and his wife; they were named Murray and Celia Logan. Harry leaned over the man to shake the wife's hand, and she said, "Aren't you new here?"

"Yes. Tommy's been in the school a month. We moved in from Elmira to be near it." He hesitated, then added, "Tommy's nine, but the reason he's in the beginners group is that Mrs. Adler thought it would make the adjustment easier."

Logan pointed to a sun-tanned man in the first row. "See that fellow with the glasses? He moved here from *Texas*. Of course, he's got money."

"It must be a good place," Harry said questioningly.

Logan grinned, his expression a little nervous.

"How's your son?" Harry asked.

"That little rascal," said Logan. "Last week I got him another copy of the *My Fair Lady* album, I guess he's used up four or five of them, and he goes around singing 'luv-er-ly, luv-er-ly.' But *look* at you? No."

"Mine doesn't talk," said Harry.

Mrs. Logan said judiciously, "Ours talks. Not *to* anybody, though. It's like a wall."

"I know," said Harry, and pressed. "Has, ah, has Vern shown much improvement with the school?"

Murray Logan pursed his lips. "I would say, yes. The bedwetting's not too good, but

life's a great deal smoother in some ways. You know, you don't hope for a dramatic breakthrough. But in little things, day by day, it goes smoother. Mostly smoother. Of course there are setbacks."

Harry nodded, thinking of seven years of setbacks, and two years of growing worry and puzzlement before that. He said, "Mrs. Adler told me that, for instance, a special outbreak of destructiveness might mean something like a plateau in speech therapy. So the child fights it and breaks out in some other direction."

"That too," said Logan, "but what I meant— Oh, they're starting."

Vladek nodded, stubbing out his cigarette and absent-mindedly lighting another. His stomach was knotting up again. He wondered at these other parents, who seemed so safe and, well, untouched. Wasn't it the same with them as with Margaret and himself? And it had been a long time since either of them had felt the world comfortable around them, even without Dr. Nicholson pressing for a decision. He forced himself to lean back and look as tranquil as the others.

Mrs. Adler was tapping her desk with a ruler. "I think everybody who is coming is here," she said. She leaned against the desk and waited for the room to quiet down. She was short, dark, plump and surprisingly pretty. She did not look at all like a competent professional. She looked so unlike her role that, in fact, Harry's heart had sunk three months ago when their correspondence about admitting Tommy had been climaxed by the long trip from Elmira for the interview. He had expected a steel-gray lady with rimless glasses, a Valkyrie in a white smock like the nurse who had held wriggling, screaming Tommy while waiting for the suppository to quiet him down for his first EEG, a disheveled old fraud, he didn't know what. Anything except this pretty young woman. Another blind alley, he had thought in despair. Another, after a hundred too many already. First, "Wait for him to outgrow it." He doesn't. Then, "We must reconcile ourselves to God's will." But you don't want to. Then give him the prescription three times a day for three months. And it doesn't work. Then chase around for six months with the Child Guidance Clinic to find out it's only letterheads and one circuit-riding doctor who doesn't have time for anything. Then, after four dreary, weepy weeks of soul-searching, the State Training School, and find out it has an eight-year waiting list. Then the private custodial

school, and find they're fifty-five hundred dollars a year—without medical treatment!—and where do you get fifty-five hundred dollars a year? And all the time everybody warns you, as if you didn't know it: "Hurry! Do something! Catch it early! This is the critical stage! Delay is fatal!" And then this soft-looking little woman; how could she do anything?

She had rapidly shown him how. She had questioned Margaret and Harry incisively, turned to Tommy, rampaging through that same room like a rogue bull, and turned his rampage into a game. In three minutes he was happily experimenting with an indestructible old windup cabinet Victrola, and Mrs. Adler was saying to the Vladeks, "Don't count on a miracle cure. There isn't any. But improvements, yes, and I think we can help Tommy."

Perhaps she had, thought Vladek bleakly. Perhaps she was helping as much as anyone ever could.

Meanwhile Mrs. Adler had quickly and pleasantly welcomed the parents, suggested they remain for coffee and get to know each other, and introduced the PTA president, a Mrs. Rose, tall, prematurely gray and very executive. "This being the first meeting of the term," she said, "there are no minutes to be read; so we'll get to the committee work reports. What about the transportation problem, Mr. Baer?"

The man who got up was old. More than sixty; Harry wondered what it was like to have your life crowned with a late retarded child. He wore all the trappings of success—a four hundred dollar suit, an electronic wrist watch, a large gold fraternal ring. In a slight German accent he said, "I was to the district school board and they are not cooperating. My lawyer looked it up and the trouble is all one word. What the law says, the school board may, that is the word, may, reimburse parents of handicapped children for transportation to private schools. Not shall, you understand, but may. They were very frank with me. They said they just didn't want to spend the money. They have the impression we're all rich people here."

Slight sour laughter around the room.

"So my lawyer made an appointment, and we appeared before the full board and presented the case—we don't care, reimbursement, a school bus, anything so we can relieve the transporation burden a little. The answer was no." He shrugged and remained standing, looking at Mrs. Rose, who said:

"Thank you, Mr. Baer. Does

anybody have any suggestions?"

A woman said angrily, "Put some heat on them. We're all voters!"

A man said, "Publicity, that's right. The principle is perfectly clear in the law, one taxpayer's child is supposed to get the same service as another taxpayer's child. We should write letters to the papers."

Mr. Baer said, "Wait a minute. Letters I don't think mean anything, but I've got a public relations firm; I'll tell them to take a little time off my food specialties and use it for the school. They can use their own know-how, how to do it; they're the experts."

This was moved, seconded and passed, while Murray Logan whispered to Vladek, "He's Marijane Garlic Mayonnaise. He had a twelve-year-old girl in very bad shape that Mrs. Adler helped in her old private class. He bought this building for her, along with a couple of other parents."

Harry Vladek was musing over how it felt to be a parent who could buy a building for a school that would help your child, while the committee reports continued. Some time later, to Harry's dismay, the business turned to financing, and there was a vote to hold a fund-raising theater party for which each couple with a child in the school would have to sell "at least" five pairs of orchestra seats at sixty dollars a pair. Let's get this straightened out now, he thought, and put up his hand.

"My name is Harry Vladek," he said when he was recognized, "and I'm brand new here. In the school and in the county. I work for a big insurance company, and I was lucky enough to get a transfer here so my boy can go to the school. But I just don't know anybody yet that I can sell tickets to for sixty dollars. That's an awful lot of money for my kind of people."

Mrs. Rose said, "It's an awful lot of money for most of us. You can get rid of your tickets, though. We've got to. It doesn't matter if you try a hundred people and ninety-five say no just as long as the others say yes."

He sat down, already calculating. Well, Mr. Crine at the office. He was a bachelor and he did go to the theater. Maybe work up an office raffle for another pair. Or two pairs. Then there was, let's see, the real estate dealer who had sold them the house, the lawyer they'd used for the closing—

Well. It had been explained to him that the tuition, while decidedly not nominal, eighteen hundred dollars a year in fact, did not cover the cost per child.

Somebody had to pay for the speech therapist, the dance therapist, the full-time psychologist and the part-time psychiatrist, and all the others, and it might as well be Mr. Crine at the office. And the lawyer.

And half an hour later Mrs. Rose looked at the agenda, checked off an item and said, "That seems to be all for tonight. Mr. and Mrs. Perry brought us some very nice cookies, and we all know that Mrs. Howe's coffee is out of this world. They're in the beginners room, and we hope you'll all stay to get acquainted. The meeting is adjourned."

Harry and the Logans joined the polite surge to the beginners room, where Tommy spent his mornings. "There's Miss Hackett," said Celia Logan. That was the beginners' teacher. She saw them and came over, smiling. Harry had seen her only in a tentlike smock, her armor against chocolate milk, finger paints and sudden jets from the "water play" corner of the room. Without it she was handsomely middle-aged in a green pants suit.

"I'm glad you parents have met," she said. "I wanted to tell you that your little boys are getting along nicely. They're forming a sort of conspiracy against the others in the class. Vern swipes their toys and gives them to Tommy."

"He *does?*" cried Logan.

"Yes, indeed. I think he's beginning to relate. And, Mr. Vladek, Tommy's taken his thumb out of his mouth for minutes at a time. At least half a dozen times this morning, without my saying a word."

Harry said excitedly, "You know, I thought I noticed he was tapering off. I couldn't be sure. You're positive about that?"

"Absolutely," she said. "And I bluffed him into drawing a face. He gave me that glare of his when the others were drawing; so I started to take the paper away. He grabbed it back and scribbled a kind of Picasso-ish face in one second flat. I wanted to save it for Mrs. Vladek and you, but Tommy got it and shredded it in that methodical way he has."

"I wish I could have seen it," said Vladek.

"There'll be others. I can see the prospect of real improvement in your boys," she said, including the Logans in her smile. "I have a private case afternoons that's really tricky. A nine-year-old boy, like Tommy. He's not bad except for one thing. He thinks Donald Duck is out to get him. His parents somehow managed to convince themselves for two years that he was kidding them,

in spite of three broken TV picture tubes. Then they went to a psychiatrist and learned the score. Excuse me, I want to talk to Mrs. Adler."

Logan shook his head and said, "I guess we could be worse off, Vladek. Vern giving something to another boy! How do you like that?"

"I like it," his wife said radiantly.

"And did you hear about that other boy? Poor kid. When I hear about something like that— And then there was the Baer girl. I always think it's worse when it's a little girl because, you know, you worry with little girls that somebody will take advantage; but our boys'll make out, Vladek. You heard what Miss Hackett said."

Harry was suddenly impatient to get home to his wife. "I don't think I'll stay for coffee, or do they expect you to?"

"No, no, leave when you like."

"I have a half-hour drive," he said apologetically and went through the golden oak doors, past the ugly but fireproof staircase, out onto the graveled parking lot. His real reason was that he wanted very much to get home before Margaret fell asleep so he could tell her about the thumb-sucking. Things were happening, definite things, after only a month. And Tommy drew a face. And Miss Hackett said—

He stopped in the middle of the lot. He had remembered about Dr. Nicholson, and besides, what was it, exactly, that Miss Hackett had said? Anything about a normal life? Not anything about a cure? "Real improvement," she said, but improvement how far?

He lit a cigarette, turned and plowed his way back through the parents to Mrs. Adler. "Mrs. Adler," he said, "may I see you just for a moment?"

She came with him immediately out of earshot of the others. "Did you enjoy the meeting, Mr. Vladek?"

"Oh, sure. What I wanted to see you about is that I have to make a decision. I don't know what to do. I don't know who to go to. It would help a lot if you could tell me, well, what are Tommy's chances?"

She waited a moment before she responded. "Are you considering committing him, Mr. Vladek?" she demanded.

"No, it's not exactly that. It's—well, what can you tell me, Mrs. Adler? I know a month isn't much. But is he ever going to be like everybody else?"

He could see from her face that she had done this before and had hated it. She said patiently, " 'Everybody else,' Mr. Vladek, includes some terrible people who just don't

happen, technically, to be handicapped. Our objective isn't to make Tommy 'like 'everybody else.' It's just to help him to become the best and most rewarding Tommy Vladek he can."

"Yes, but what's going to happen later on? I mean, if Margaret and I—if anything happens to us?"

She was suffering. "There is simply no way to know, Mr. Vladek," she said gently. "I wouldn't give up hope. But I can't tell you to expect miracles."

Margaret wasn't asleep; she was waiting up for him, in the small living room of the small new house. "How was he?" Vladek asked, as each of them had asked the other on returning home for seven years.

She looked as though she had been crying, but she was calm enough. "Not too bad. I had to lie down with him to get him to go to bed. He took his gland-gunk well, though. He licked the spoon."

"That's good," he said and told her about the drawing of the face, about the conspiracy with little Vern Logan, about the thumb-sucking. He could see how pleased she was, but she only said: "Dr. Nicholson called again."

"I told him not to bother you!"

"He didn't bother me, Harry. He was very nice. I promised him you'd call him back."

"It's eleven o'clock, Margaret. I'll call him in the morning."

"No, I said tonight, no matter what time. He's waiting, and he said to be sure and reverse the charges."

"I wish I'd never answered the son of a bitch's letter," he burst out and then, apologetically: "Is there any coffee? I didn't stay for it at the school."

She had put the water on to boil when she heard the car whine into the driveway, and the instant coffee was already in the cup. She poured it and said, "You have to talk to him, Harry. He has to know tonight."

"Know tonight! Know tonight," he mimicked savagely. He scalded his lips on the coffee cup and said, "What do you want me to do, Margaret? How do I make a decision like this? Today I picked up the phone and called the company psychologist, and when his secretary answered, I said I had the wrong number. I didn't know what to say to him."

"I'm not trying to pressure you, Harry. But he has to know."

Vladek put down the cup and lit his fiftieth cigarette of the day. The little dining

room—it wasn't that, it was a half breakfast alcove off the tiny kitchen, but they called it a dining room even to each other—was full of Tommy. The new paint on the wall where Tommy had peeled off the cups-and-spoons wallpaper. The Tommy-proof latch on the stove. The one odd aqua seat that didn't match the others on the kitchen chairs, where Tommy had methodically gouged it with the handle of his spoon. He said, "I know what my mother would tell me, talk to the priest. Maybe I should. But we've never even been to Mass here."

Margaret sat down and helped herself to one of his cigarettes. She was still a good-looking woman. She hadn't gained a pound since Tommy was born, although she usually looked tired. She said, carefully and straightforwardly, "We agreed, Harry. You said you would talk to Mrs. Adler, and you've done that. We said if she didn't think Tommy would ever straighten out we'd talk to Dr. Nicholson. I know it's hard on you, and I know I'm not much help. But I don't know what to do, and I have to let you decide."

Harry looked at his wife, lovingly and hopelessly, and at that moment the phone rang. It was, of course, Dr. Nicholson.

"I haven't made a decision," said Harry Vladek at once. "You're rushing me, Dr. Nicholson."

The distant voice was calm and assured. "No, Mr. Vladek, it's not me that's rushing you. The other boy's heart gave out an hour ago. That's what's rushing you."

"You mean he's dead?" cried Vladek.

"He's on the heart-lung machine, Mr. Vladek. We can hold him for at least eighteen hours, maybe twenty-four. The brain is all right. We're getting very good waves on the oscilloscope. The tissue match with your boy is satisfactory. Better than satisfactory. There's a flight out of JFK at six fifteen in the morning, and I've reserved space for yourself, your wife and Tommy. You'll be met at the airport. You can be here by noon; so we have time. Only just time, Mr. Vladek. It's up to you now."

Vladek said furiously, "I can't decide that! Don't you understand? I don't know how."

"I do understand, Mr. Vladek," said the distant voice and, strangely, Vladek thought, it seemed he did. "I have a suggestion. Would you like to come down anyhow? I think it might help you to see the other boy, and you can talk to his parents. They feel they owe you something even for going

this far, and they want to thank you."

"Oh, no!" cried Vladek.

The doctor went on: "All they want is for their boy to have a life. They don't expect anything but that. They'll give you custody of the child—your child, yours and theirs. He's a very fine little boy, Mr. Vladek. Eight years old. Reads beautifully. Makes model airplanes. They let him ride his bike because he was so sensible and reliable, and the accident wasn't his fault. The truck came right up on the sidewalk and hit him."

Harry was trembling. "That's like giving me a bribe," he said harshly. "That's telling me I can trade Tommy in for somebody smarter and nicer."

"I didn't mean it that way, Mr. Vladek. I only wanted you to know the kind of a boy you can save."

"You don't even know the operation's going to work!"

"No," agreed the doctor. "Not positively. I can tell you that we've transplanted animals, including primates, and human cadavers, and one pair of terminal cases; but you're right, we've never had a transplant into a well body. I've shown you all the records, Mr. Vladek. We went over them with your own doctor when we first talked about this possibility, five months ago. This is the first case since then when the match was close and there was a real hope for success, but you're right, it's still unproved. Unless you help us prove it. For what it's worth, I think it will work. But no one can be sure."

Margaret had left the kitchen, but Vladek knew where she was from the scratchy click in the earpiece: in the bedroom, listening on the extension phone. He said at last, "I can't say now, Dr. Nicholson. I'll call you back in—in half an hour. I can't do any more than that right now."

"That's a great deal, Mr. Vladek. I'll be waiting right here for your call."

Harry sat down and drank the rest of his coffee. You had to be an expert in a lot of things to get along, he was thinking. What did he know about brain transplants? In one way, a lot. He knew that the surgery part was supposed to be straightforward, but the tissue rejection was the problem, but Dr. Nicholson thought he had that licked. He knew that every doctor he had talked to, and he had now talked to seven of them, had agreed that medically it was probably sound enough, and that every one of them had carefully clammed up when he got the conversation around to whether it was right. It was his decision, not theirs, they all said, sometimes just by their

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silence. But who was he to decide?

Margaret appeared in the doorway. "Harry. Let's go upstairs and look at Tommy."

He said harshly, "Is that supposed to make it easier for me to murder my son?"

She said, "We talked that out, Harry, and we agreed it isn't murder. Whatever it is. I only think that Tommy ought to be with us when we decide, even if he doesn't know what we're deciding."

The two of them stood next to the outsize crib that held their son, looking in the night light at the long fair lashes against the chubby cheeks and the pouted lips around the thumb. Reading. Model airplanes. Riding a bike. Against a quick sketch of a face and the occasional, cherished, tempestuous, bruising flurry of kisses.

Vladek stayed there the full half hour and then, as he had promised, went back to the kitchen, picked up the phone and began to dial.

JAMES BLISH

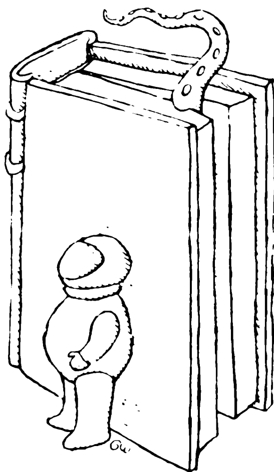
BOOKS

THE MOMENT OF ECLIPSE, Brian W. Aldiss; Doubleday, $4.95

THE EDGE OF FOREVER, Chad Oliver; Sherbourne Press, $7.50

FOUR FUTURES, ed. Robert Silverberg; Hawthorn Books, $5.95

NEW DIMENSIONS 1, ed. Robert Silverberg; Doubleday, $5.95



AS A GENERAL RULE, writers of genre fiction don't change very much as they get older. They may become technically better, and perhaps even take a flyer or two into some other kind of fiction entirely, but in subject matter and approach it's usually not easy to tell a new story by a given author from one he wrote twenty years ago.

In our field, one of the most conspicuous of the exceptions is Brian W. Aldiss, who has been growing and changing steadily and consistently. Some evidences of this change could be seen in his 1965 BEST SF STORIES OF BRIAN W. ALDISS (published here a year later as WHO CAN REPLACE A MAN?), in which only a few stories could be called traditional science fiction, and even these few could have been written by nobody else. And the change is the most striking feature of his new collection.

It is difficult to be specific about it without sounding glib, but briefly, while other writers and critics have been talking about sf moving toward the mainstream, Aldiss has been doing it. Of the 14 stories in this book, eight first appeared in sf magazines, or anthologies of original sf stories; the others come from such remote territories as *Harper's Bazaar*,

Punch, *Queen* and *London Magazine*. And of those first published in the more traditional places, two are nevertheless not sf at all. One of these is the title story, which is also one of the best; it is a chilling performance, with all the effect of a genuinely terrifying fantasy, yet there is no fantasy in it.

What seems to have happened since 1965—or rather, what has continued to happen—is that Aldiss' interest has been moving away from the ideas to the people. Even when the science fiction content is there, the emphasis is upon both social and fundamental emotional complexes: the Human Condition, as he half-mockingly calls it in one of the lighter pieces. Of course he is far from being the only modern sf author who has tried to bring greater depth of characterization to the field, but many if not most such attempts from other hands have produced little more than a gallery of grotesques—the Cruel Fat Man, the Born Victim, the Anti-Hero, Captain Ahab in a spaceship. Aldiss' people are genuine individuals, sometimes seen in depth, sometimes struck off with a single almost Dickensian stroke.

In addition to this continuity of tone, this collection offers an unexpected continuity of narrative, for two of the longest stories, *The Circulation of the Blood. . .* and *. . .And the Stagnation of the Heart*, deal with the personal problems of extreme longevity, and have the same central characters. Moreover, the story which follows this 48-page duo, *The Worm that Flies*, could easily be regarded as a sequel to it, for it is about the ultimate end-product of longevity, thousands of years in the future when mankind has gone through many strange somatic modifications and both birth and death no longer exist even in memory.

Don't wait for the paperback; this is a volume for your permanent library.

The Chad Oliver collection contains six stories dating from 1952 to 1959, a downright reverent introduction by William F. Nolan, seven pages of "Afterthoughts" by the author, and a checklist of his science fiction—as much an act of *homage* as a book for reading.

The collection is subtitled "Classic Anthropological Science Fiction". In two of the stories, *The Ant and the Eye* and *Didn't He Ramble*, the contributions of this science (which Oliver practices) are invisible to me. The anthropology is present, all right, in the other pieces, but despite this, Oliver does not seem to be

conspicuously more convincing at building a future or an alien society than many non-specialist writers have been.

Nevertheless, all the stories are entertaining, although a bit wordy for my taste. Classics they certainly are not. We don't have many of those in our field yet, but one test for them is that the stories don't date, despite the fact that the scientific content inevitably does. These Oliver stories show their age; they are examples of the standard fare—not the spectacular exceptions—that *Astounding Stories* was serving up in the 1950's, good but unmemorable. They might have found a new and suitable audience today as half of an Ace Double, but I don't think they deserved having a monument raised for them.

Also back in the 1950's, Twayne Publishers conceived a project called the Twayne Triplets, an original combination of the theme anthology and the anthology of new stories. Each Triplet began with a short introduction in which a scientist, or sometimes two, described in detail an imaginary planet or whole solar system, which was supposed to be both consistent and provocative. This background was then given to three authors, each of whom constructed, independently of the others, a 30,000-word story based on the background. (A CASE OF CONSCIENCE got its start for one of these; you will find the background, by John D. Clark and Willy Ley, printed as the Appendix to that novel.)

The books didn't catch on and were killed off; a number of stories written for volumes that weren't published found their way, like mine, into the magazines, and that was that. But in 1969, Robert Silverberg revived the idea with the unimaginatively titled THREE FOR TOMORROW, which contained an introduction suggesting a very general idea (the potentialities for man-made disaster in our technological environment) by Arthur C. Clarke, and stories built around it by Silverberg, Roger Zelazny and me.

Evidently the times were now ripe for such a project, for the new venture was a substantial success, financially and otherwise. Now Silverberg has done it again, FOUR FUTURES has a foreword by Isaac Asimov, proposing first of all that the population increase will have levelled off by about 2025, and then, four consequent themes: the Illegitimate Child, the Child as Embryo, the Child as Young God, and the Other End. The resulting stories are *Ishmael into the Barrens* by R. A. Lafferty, *Braver New*

World by Harry Harrison, *How Can We Sink When We Can Fly?* by Alexei Panshin, and *Going* by Silverberg himself.

No previous writer of introductions for anthologies of this specialized kind has been so specific as Asimov in telling the writers of the stories what to do; and I am a little dubious of the claim that each of the four authors independently selected a different one of the four themes, without any pre-arrangements to avoid duplication. Nevertheless, the book works. The stories are all strong ones, and furthermore very different from each other. Superficially, the Lafferty is the most unconventional, but readers familiar with his work will recognize that he is here being only his usual baroque self, and rather more coherently than I, at least, have come to expect of him. Harrison's story is straightforward narrative, and though it is the one of the group which clings to its Asimov theme the most literally, drive and complication keep it going satisfyingly. The Silverberg is a sort of collage of memories and events, in 28 sections, so cunningly fitted together that most readers probably won't even be aware that there is anything unconventional about it.

The real surprise is Panshin's story. For most of its length, it is anchored to the present and furthermore seems not to be a story at all, but an autobiographical account of the difficulties the author encountered in trying to fulfill his assignment. Then the science fiction begins, and it turns out that the autobiography is an integral part of it. As if this weren't a difficult enough technical feat to pull off, the work as a whole is also unabashed propaganda, an impassioned editorial in the form of a complex parable. Usually, even in science fiction, which is peculiarly suited to social moralizing, so much outright Message kills the story, but here it blends the personal with the fictional in precisely the right proportions.

I hope the spirit of Fletcher Pratt, who conceived the Twayne Triplets, somehow is able to see that it turned out to be a viable scheme after all.

Robert Silverberg is an indefatigable anthologist as well as an enormously productive author, so it's not surprising that this time we have two of his editorial jobs to hand; in fact I'm more surprised that it hasn't happened before. NEW DIMENSIONS 1 is a somewhat more familiar kind of production than FOUR FUTURES: 14 original stories with no central theme except that of execution, which, the editor tells us, is intended to steer a middle

ground between the older adventure or puzzle sf and the outright unintelligible extremes of some of the most recent experimentalists. Four of the 14 authors—no, 15, for one story is a collaboration—have been with us for more than a decade, which after all is not a long enough period to make anyone a veteran (though most are; the range here is from Doris Pitkin Buck to Harlan Ellison). At the other end of the scale are two firsts, one by Alex and Phyllis Eisenstein, the other by Robert C. Malstrom. In between are pieces by some only slightly known authors, and some who have made their mark upon sf in what in retrospect seems to have been an astonishingly short time (such as Josephine Saxton, Ursula K. LeGuin, R. A. Lafferty, Barry N. Malzberg and Thomas M. Disch).

Though there are a few fairly far-out stories in the book, it isn't for the most part self-consciously *outre*, and in fact some of its contributions, as Silverberg says, would have been at home in the magazines twenty years ago. Yet he is also quite right in saying that in the very act of choosing middle-of-the-road stories from writers unknown prior to about 1960, he has been able to offer a showcase of the ways in which sf has changed in only a dozen years. What we see now as the middle ground—competent, accessible, familiar, perhaps even becoming safe—would have made readers' and editors' teeth rattle all through the relatively long period which produced all the stories in the first SFWA "hall of fame" anthology (also edited by Silverberg). Even a wire-walking act like this book, or, for that matter, much of Silverberg's own much-admired fiction of the past decade, reveals that sf has been through another drastic change in character, which is not to be undone by nostalgic jihads or critical resistance. And a good thing, too; such changes are the best possible evidence that what we're doing is alive.

Phyllis Eisenstein's first story for us (BORN TO EXILE, August 1971) concerned a teleporting minstrel named Alaric, and it drew so many favorable comments that we asked the author for a sequel. That the result is as engrossing as the first while managing to be quite different is a tribute to Mrs. Eisenstein's ability.

Inn of the Black Swan

by PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

LIGHTFOOT'S YOUNG rider, Alaric the minstrel, was tired and hungry, and he wished mightily that he, like his steed, could derive nourishment from the limp, brownish grass exposed at the edge of the road by melting snowdrifts. He let the animal veer left or right as it pleased, to crop the meager growth. Formerly, the horse had been well-fed, cared for in royal stables; he had even worn gaudy heraldic trappings on a few appropriate holidays. Now, his ribs showed, his neck drooped, his mane and tail hung matted with neglect.

Alaric's worn knapsack, which dangled from the pommel of his saddle, contained an extra shirt and three lute strings, but not a scrap of bread. He had ridden since sunrise on an empty belly, hoping to find a patron, no matter how low in station, who would be willing to trade a meal for an evening's entertainment. In three long days, he had passed no cultivated land, nor any sign but the meandering road itself that civilization had ever traveled this way. He was tempted, sorely tempted, to turn back lest he fall off the edge of the world, which this near-impenetrable forest would surely hide until the final, fatal moment. Yet the road existed, its earth trampled flat by countless hooves and feet; it must lead somewhere. To Durman, a small kingdom on the banks of a vast river—so said the head of a great house on the fringes of the forest, but his tone was uncertain, as if the

place were merely legendary. Still, Alaric pressed on, for there was nothing behind to keep him.

A white rabbit, its fur blending so well with a patch of snow that Alaric had glanced directly at the creature without seeing it, bounded into the air as Lightfoot's hoof passed near. The minstrel plucked his dagger from its sheath, tossed it with the determination of hunger, and missed as the cottontail scrambled for the sheltering shadows of the trees. Alaric dismounted and retrieved the knife with a grimace, regretting for the hundredth time that he was such a poor hunter. Dall had always downed a bird or deer on the rare occasions when the minstrel pair could find no work in large house or small or in village square. His had been the hawk's eye and the sure hand; the bow was buried with him—Alaric, whose aim never improved, had no use for it.

As a furtive, half-feral child, he had stolen his food and other things as well: clothing, money, trinkets that he would hoard squirrel-like in his bower in the woods. Dall had broken him of the habit and shown him how to earn his living honestly. Minstrelsy had turned from labor to pleasure during the years they spent together, but Alaric had never forgotten how to steal.

He tethered his horse near a particularly large clump of grass and removed the heavy saddle. He doffed his cloak and the lute he wore beneath it, gently wrapping the instrument against the chill air and laying it across the saddle, so that only the tip of its sharply angled neck touched the damp ground. Then he backed off till he was out of sight—Lightfoot, having been trained for combat, did not shy easily, but his master preferred to take no chances. He stepped behind a tree and disappeared.

For an instant, the hen house was silent; then all bedlam broke out as the startled birds scattered in every direction, flapping their wings and squawking in terror, bouncing off walls and perches and Alaric's body, clawing each other and shedding clouds of feathers. Alaric grabbed a small one and vanished.

In the depths of the forest once more, he wrung the creature's neck and began the tedious task of plucking it. This was the second bird he had stolen from that hen house—the only hen house he knew well enough to travel to in his own peculiar manner—and he felt vaguely guilty about doing so The peasant to whom it belonged owned more fowl than he could, perhaps, count, but he had been a kindly man,

not the sort Alaric preferred to steal from. Some weeks earlier, he and his family had guested the minstrel for two days and nights, exchanging their wholesome food and a clean straw bed for entertainment and a bit of help with their chores. Gathering eggs and sweeping up the litter of droppings and feathers had given Alaric an excellent opportunity to memorize the contours and location of the hen house

Memory had served him well in the forest, else he would have gone hungry. But he knew that the theft must not continue. Eventually, the peasant would notice that he had too few chickens; perhaps he would assume that a quick-witted fox, emboldened by the isolation of the farm, was raiding the coop. He would set traps, he might even mount a guard, and ultimately he would discover that the marauder was a witch who was just as vulnerable to injury and death as any predator, though a bit more agile than even the lithest cat. Alaric had no desire to pit his agility against the skill and speed of a bowman.

He thought again of giving up the trek, of turning back to regions better known, where he could sing to fill his clamorous belly. But something drew him west: the stars, the setting sun, his own curiosity, or the vagrant whim of his horse. Something made him roam with a restless yearning, and what it was that he yearned for, beyond the woman left far behind, he could not guess.

Roasted on a spit, the plump chicken was succulent and delicious. By the time Alaric had buried the well-picked bones and gathered a store of wood sufficient for the night, the gloom of the forest had deepened till the boughs overhanging the road were merely vast dark masses among which an occasional star glinted. He pushed the fire aside with a large, forked branch, added some kindling to keep it alight in its new location, and settled himself on the bare spot it had warmed. Wrapped in his cloak and blanket, his battered cap pulled low to shield his hair from the splashing offspring of thawing icicles high above, he plucked a plaintive melody from his lute. Apart from his own music and the endless dripping that formed steep-sided, finger-wide holes in the moist snow of winter's end, the forest was silent; even the wind, which often blew gustily at this time of year, could not penetrate the multitudinous trees.

He sang a song of wandering, one he had often sung during this season—so often that his voice no longer required his

brain to remind it of the words. His thoughts rambled, cued by a phrase here and there, to his footloose, aimless childhood, to Dall, and to Castle Royale and Solinde. He was thinking of her before he realized it, remembering too well the last time they had been together, in her father's court. He could see her grieving eyes, hear her futile declaration of love. As so often before, he fought the impulse to return—he knew every step of the way, he could be there in a heartbeat, he could see her face and kiss her sweet lips.

His fingers tightened on the lute. Inside was Solinde's keepsake, her kerchief, embroidered with her own hands in honor of Dall but given for remembrance to *him*. Her farewell gift. Alaric had no doubt that a maid or two slept in the princess's chamber every night now, to make certain no eager young man crept into her bed. Nor was she alone in daylight; even in the old days, a maid or a flock of giggling playmates had followed her almost everywhere during waking hours. To chance that she might be accompanied by no one but her brother or the dwarf—the only other living souls who knew Alaric's secret—was to chance branding her with the stigma of having loved a witch.

Or of bearing a witch's child. It was unlikely, he knew, but not impossible.

He recalled his own foster mother, who, though she had not borne him herself, had nevertheless earned the fear and suspicion of her neighbors by taking him into her hut. Thereafter, people began to come to her for charms and potions, though she always insisted she knew nothing of magic. She was fortunate, he learned when he was much older, that no young, seemingly healthy cows sickened and died mysteriously while she was raising her foster son.

What would the king, that witch-burner of great reknown, do if his own daughter bore a witch's babe? Kill the child, of course, but also kill *her*, the fruit of his own body? Or would he trust his faithful magician to cure her of the enchantment and ever after wonder how effective the cure had been?

No, it was best not to take the chance of being caught, best for Alaric and best for Solinde. He told himself so over and over, especially late at night, when his desire for her was most intense. He had thought that a few months would heal the raw wound of exile—he had never cared, before, where he stayed or where he went—but it had not; the wound was deeper than that. He knew with dead

certainty that someday it would drive him back to her. Someday he would kneel at her feet and beg her to fly with him. He, a wandering minstrel with no possessions but the clothing on his back and a mangy horse that had once belonged to her father. What kind of life could he offer a woman accustomed to servants, vast chambers lined with tapestries, furs, satin, and jewels? None. She would be a fool to accept. And he feared that of the two of them, she was not the fool. Perhaps, distracted by the diversions of court life, she had already forgotten him.

One more night passed in which he stayed away from Castle Royale.

Late the next afternoon, he came upon a clearing on the left side of the road; poking out of the drifted snow were naked stalks that had once, not so many months before, been heavy with grain. Wondering if the planter still lived nearby, Alaric shouted and whistled, rising in his stirrups to scan the field. Movement caught his eye: a head cautiously raised above the bent and broken stubble.

"Hallo," Alaric said in a pleasant tone. He smiled and spread his arms wide to show that he held no weapon. "Can you tell me how much farther the forest continues west?"

The head rose higher; it belong to a thickset man of middle age. He walked forward, slapping aside with one arm the wet stalks that blocked his way. He was dressed in drab brownish homespun, and he carried a scythe on his shoulder. "Not much farther. Who would you be?"

"Alaric is my name, a poor minstrel looking for honest work and a meal."

"I see a scabbard peeking out behind you. Is there a sword inside?"

"There is, but I'm no bandit, rest assured. Can you spare a crust, good farmer, or a bowl of gruel?"

"There are rabbits in the woods."

Alaric sighed and slid off his horse. "I am no hunter, I fear. Since my knapsack emptied, I've been hungry, and poor Lightfoot has seen too little grass for his liking."

"I have no food to spare, but there is an inn half a day's journey westward, where the road passes near the river."

"Good sir, the sun will soon set, and my mount and I are tired and hungry. In the name of common humanity, let me work for our meals and sleep warm this night, even if it must be with your cows or sheep."

The peasant considered this for a long time, looking Alaric up and down as if to see some

sign of good or bad will upon his body. He frowned mightily and stroked the blade of his scythe but at last he said, "Perhaps you are too young to be dishonest. Come along this way." Instead of leading, he motioned for Alaric to cross the field of stubble ahead of him.

Lightfoot made one attempt to crop the rotting straw, but Alaric urged him onward, and either because he was well-trained or because the straw was exceptionally poor fodder, he obeyed.

Beyond the field, enough forest land had been cleared to accommodate a small group of buildings. Nearest the road was the sturdy, windowless wooden barn; a fence attached to it formed an enclosure for three cows, a calf, and a bull. Next was the hen house, from which emanated not only the cackle and flutter of chickens but also the dreamy cooing of doves. Farther on stood the stone and plank cabin which served the peasant as living quarters; its tall chimney spewed a comforting volume of dark smoke.

The man rapped loudly on the cabin door, and in a few moments it opened a crack, revealing a dim interior and a bright eye set in a fair-skinned face.

"An extra bowl of supper," said the peasant, jerking a thumb toward Alaric.

The eye bobbed to indicate comprehension, and the door slammed shut.

"Now, if you are really willing to work for your supper, follow me."

They put Lightfoot in the barn with a pile of hay, and the peasant selected an ax from the rack of farming implements in the rear of the building. At the edge of the clearing, where trees stripped of their lower branches showed that firewood had been gathered there, he handed Alaric the ax and bade him chop. Then he stood back, too far away for easy conversation, and pretended to be busy with his scythe and something close to the ground. Actually, he did nothing but watch the minstrel, clearly uneasy about an edged weapon in unpredictable hands. He only called a halt and claimed the ax when the last rays of the sun were about to fade behind the forest.

Alaric stumbled to the already sizable woodpile with the fruits of his labor, barely able to stack it in some semblance of order. His arms felt if they were about to drop off, and his back was a pillar of fire; he hadn't had so much exercise since the days of his battle training in the courtyard of Castle Royale.

For supper, he was not allowed inside the house; instead, a bowl of gray porridge

and a chunk of brown bread was passed through the partially open door. He saw a little more of that blue eye and fair face this time—they belonged to a woman no longer in the first flush of youth, just the proper age to be the peasant's wife, but perhaps a trifle too attractive to be allowed out of the house when a stranger was around. Alaric shrugged painfully; if his host's intention had been to so exhaust him that he could feel no lust for any woman, let alone such a wife, the man had succeeded completely. Alaric went to the barn with his food and sat down stiffly beside Lightfoot, who was still nibbling hay. He was not surprised to hear the outside bolts shot home as the barn door closed behind him—the animals were snugly locked into individual stalls, but the human beast was not.

When he finished eating, he curled up in the hay with his own blanket, comfortably warm. He slept lightly, as usual, and no suspicious noises interrupted his slumber.

He was saddling his horse when the barn door unlocked and the peasant entered, carrying a small loaf of bread.

"May your journey be pleasant," he said, handing over the loaf. He had the scythe again, and a dagger at his waist as well, and he waved pointedly toward the road which led westward.

"You were going to tell me how much farther the forest continues to the west."

"Two days or three."

"When do I come into Durman territory?"

The peasant frowned. "The forest belongs to no one, that is all I know."

"And this inn is half a day onward?"

"Yes."

"Is it large?"

"Large enough."

"Have you been there?"

"Once or twice."

"What is the owner's name?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I may seek work there, and I would like to know for whom to ask."

"His name, I believe, is Trif."

"Thank you, sir, and long life to you." Alaric mounted and spurred Lightfoot to a trot. He felt he had given a great deal of work for paltry food and less information, but tearing answers from the taciturn peasant was more than he cared to waste his time at. There was an inn ahead, down this winding trail, where, perhaps folk would be more talkative. In any event, there would probably be a hearth, a soft bed, and an audience.

A white and gray dove flapped across the road in front

of him, flying low to avoid branches and marauding hawks. Alaric viewed it as an omen of spring and new beginnings, and he began to hum.

The first indication that he was approaching an inn was a signpost at the right side of the road: a white rectangle upon which a black swan and an arrow pointing ahead were painted. Beneath, in large letters none too neatly drawn, were the words "Inn of the Black Swan." Alaric puzzled them out slowly; Dall had known how to read and had taught his apprentice something of it, but it was still a slow process and a skill for which Alaric seldom found any use. His songs he had learned by listening to his master sing them.

A short distance beyond the sign, a gust of north wind brought the scent of water to Alaric's nostrils—doubtless the river which the peasant had mentioned. A bit later, a side road branched off the main highway, and a second sign, identical to the first, marked it as leading to the inn. Quite near the mouth of the new road, a burly man, muffled in furs and scarves so that his face was quite invisible, was chopping down a tree; and when he saw Alaric, he suspended his activities and leaned on his ax.

"Good morrow," he said cheerily.

"Good morrow," said Alaric. "You're a traveler?"

"That I am."

"All alone?"

"Yes, all alone."

"What, no other travelers on the road yet?"

"I haven't seen any. Is there truly an inn here?"

"Yes, there is, just as the sign says. If you doubt it, ride up this road a hundred paces, and you'll see the place."

"Do you work there?"

"I do."

"Is there a man named Trif who owns the place?"

The man cocked his head to one side. "There is a man named Trif. What would you want of him?"

"I would want a place as minstrel at the inn, but if there's no room for such, then honest work will do, for my horse and I must eat."

"It's a good man who thinks of his horse in the same breath as himself. I'm Trif, and if you'll come with me, I'll give you a meal in return for a song."

"A human being at last. My former host demanded that I chop wood."

Trif laughed. "We've plenty of hands for work here, but no voice worth a copper." He rested the ax on his shoulder and beckoned Alaric to follow him.

The Inn of the Black Swan

was a tall structure of stone and wood, set in a wide clearing in which only a few tree trunks remained to indicate that it had once been part of the forest. Alaric tied his mount at a rail near the watering trough and, tucking his bedroll and knapsack under either arm, strode with Trif through the main entrance of the building.

Inside, the largest room on the first floor was furnished for dining with long tables and benches. The hearth blazed cheerfully, and, after settling his burdens on a handy table, Alaric crossed the room to partake of its warmth. Three people raised their heads in silent greeting: two blond men playing draughts on a scarred board before the fire and a dark-haired woman who knelt, scrubbing the hearthstone. The minstrel smiled amicably as he warmed his fingers. A moment later, Trif—portly even divested of his bulky furs, with a round, red face and a drooping black mustache—seated himself in a nearby chair.

"So," he said, "as soon as you are ready, we will judge your skill. These are Oldo and Gavver," indicating the draught players, "and Mizella," the woman.

Seldom had he had so attentive an audience. As he pulled himself up on a table and strummed a few notes to loosen his fingers, the two men suspended their game and sat as still as two matching statues, elbows on the board, chins cupped in their palms. The woman pushed her soapy rags aside and sat down; legs drawn up, feet tucked neatly under her long skirt.

He sang about the brave travelers on the western sea and how they fell over the edge of the world into fire and mist. It was a sad song, perhaps not one he should have chosen for a first impression, but he liked the melody—indeed, it showed his voice off to best advantage; and his voice, better even than Dall's, was his merchandise.

"I don't see why we shouldn't keep you," said Trif. "Of course, you'll have to work like the rest of us while the inn is empty, but when travelers come by, you can consider minstrelsy your only occupation."

"And when do travelers come by?"

"Once a week, perhaps, or more often as the weather improves. We are not at a great crossroads here, although boats do come down the river and stop with us as well as parties bound to and from Durman on the road. Between times, Oldo and Gavver hunt and trap; the rest of us—some, too, you haven't seen yet—care for the animals. And in the summer,

Mizella has a garden. We are, you see, like a family, though not related to each other by blood, and each of us has some tale of woe that brought him to nomansland. Perhaps you can compose some songs for us, eh?"

"One tale of woe is like another," Alaric replied. "Doubtless I have a song already that would fit each of you. But if someone should have a truly new complaint, I would gladly add it to my bag."

"Come, sing another, and Mizella shall start supper while you entertain us."

The woman rose obediently. She was eight or ten years older than the minstrel, small and light-boned, though well-proportioned, and she walked as softly as a cat. At the door to the kitchen, she paused, glanced back, and smiled at Alaric. She had a pretty face, and her lips in particular were beautifully formed. Alaric smiled back and sang about the milkmaid who married a prince and lived happily ever after. It was a shame, he reflected, that such things never happened in the real world.

Two men and four more women joined the group for supper. The women chattered among themselves in low voices, except for Mizella, who served the throng silently. Thorin and Wenk, the new men, smelled exactly like the pigs and goats they cared for. They clanked their trenchers, called the girls loud obscene names, and argued with each other so heatedly that at last Trif was obliged to shut them up by knocking their heads together. They settled down, then, muttering through clenched teeth instead of shouting.

When Mizella finally seated herself, it was opposite Alaric, and although she paid equal attention to the other men at the table, she seemed to reserve her most coquettish glances for him. He had half-formed plans for the night, wondering what she would say when she discovered he had no money, when a knife struck the table before him, its point sticking in the wood. He looked up sharply and saw Oldo towering over the far end of the board, his arm still outstretched.

"She is mine tonight, stranger," he said. His tone was bland, his expression completely without malice.

Trif was picking his teeth with a long thumbnail. "Come now, Oldo. He's just arrived, and she seems to fancy him."

"Let him take one of the others. She is spoken for."

"I would not wish to cause strife," said Alaric, rising from the table. "Permit me to retire alone."

"So be it." Trif pushed away

from the board and motioned for the minstrel to follow him. They mounted a winding stairway at the rear of the room. Alaric looked back once and caught Mizella's eyes on him.

"When we have no guests, as now, you are welcome to sleep on the second floor," said Trif, "where the rooms are private and the beds soft and reasonably free of fleas and lice. The chamber of the green lozenge, to the left of the stairs, is not used by any of the others."

The bedroom upon whose door was painted a lopsided green diamond was tiny, cramped, and airless, and although the bed was soft, it was also musty.

"And where do you sleep when the inn is full?" asked Alaric.

"Upstairs in the loft."

"Then I choose the loft."

At the top of the stairway, one small partly shuttered window shed late sunlight on a large open area crowded with boxes, barrels, and sacks. Hearthless—though the stones of the chimney showed in one wall—it was damp and chill, but less so than outdoors. The ceiling, merely the inside of the gabled roof, was missing a shingle or two, and puffs of cold air entered through the gaps to mingle with the equally frigid drafts from the window.

Alaric dropped his belongings in an empty corner; the sword, which had been wrapped in his blanket, slid half out of its handsome scabbard, clanking heavily against the bare floor.

Trif bent to look without touching it. "No shield nor armor, yet you have a fine sword. Sir minstrel, would you be a knight as well?"

"No, indeed. The sword was a gift from a wealthy patron who thought I might have some use for it. He underestimated my skill, I fear, but I could not refuse."

"A squire, then. Perhaps you are too young to be a knight yet. Come, sir, I will keep your secret. Sent by the Lord of Durman to claim this territory for his crown? We have no law here; Durman's protection would be of great value to us."

"I swear to you, I have no connection with Durman, nor am I either squire or knight, but simply a minstrel looking for his fortune."

Trif rocked back on his heels, hands clasped behind himself. "You have great courage. Few men dare to travel these woods alone."

Alaric shrugged. "I knew nothing evil of these woods; therefore it took no courage to travel them."

"A cautious man might assume that robbers lurked in an unclaimed area."

"What robber would stop a traveler as threadbare as I?"

"Threadbare in cloth, perhaps," the landlord said. "Yet a man who wears such a sword must know how to use it, lest it be taken from him for its own sake."

Alaric smiled and shook his head. "I do not *wear* the sword. If I did, people would fear me. Where is the profit in that? Possibly I should sell it at my first opportunity and rid myself of an inconvenience that must be hidden in a bedroll, but I loved the one who gave it to me, and I cannot toss aside his gift so soon." He scooped a mound of straw into a single pallet and unrolled his blanket on top of it. "Your words imply that you need another arm; surely the five men you already have would be proof enough against the dangers of this forest, else you would not have the courage to stay here yourselves."

Trif shrugged. "Another sword would not be undesirable."

"I saw a peasant half a day's journey back easterly. His farm is lonely; is he not afraid?"

"I recall him, but my impression has been that he has nothing worth stealing."

Alaric forbore to mention the wife. If the peasant had wished his wife shown to the world, Trif would know what he had that was worth stealing.

"Here are candles," said the landlord, indicating a high shelf upon which rested a cracked dish and a stack of stubby, brownish cylinders. "If you should want something, go downstairs; someone will be watching the hearth all night."

"I thank you."

"Rest well."

Alaric lay on his pallet and watched the sky darken. He was lulled to sleep by muffled noises from the lower floors and by the soft cooing of doves in a small cote beside the window.

A rustling sound near his left ear roused him. Letting his eyelids lift slightly, he glanced around without moving his head. Someone—a woman, by her voluminous garb—was rummaging in his knapsack.

His first impulse was to flee; he quashed it, having learned a bit of self-restraint in recent months. Had the intruder been a man, he would not have been so tranquil; but a woman, weaponless as far as he could see, seemed less of a danger. He tried to think of what Dall would have done in such a situation. He corrected the thought: what Dall *had* done. He, himself, Alaric had been the thief, eleven years old, slipping a deft hand beneath Dall's mattress to purloin his silver. Dall had lain still, feigning

sleep, and watched the child use his witch's power to escape with the money.

Alaric allowed the search to continue until he could hear the consternation in her movements, and then he said, "You'll find nothing, for I haven't a copper."

Rather than starting, she looked up slowly. Dim moonlight, slanting through the half open window, revealed her face: Mizella.

"So I see," she said.

"A good thief makes less noise."

"You sleep lightly."

"Yes, when I sleep alone."

"I apologize for trying to steal what you don't have."

"You didn't believe I was a poor, starving minstrel?"

"No."

He touched her arm. "I will forgive your disbelief if you stay with me now. I can't pay you, but I can give you a song."

She laughed mirthlessly. "You think the others pay me?"

"I would if I could."

"*Customers* pay. Trif says you are to be one of us."

"For a while. I don't know how long."

"We all came here for a while. . .and here we are still. That is how things happen in the forest. If you stay long, you will stay forever."

"It would be pleasant to stay if there were something to keep me."

"As for that," she murmured, "I couldn't say," and slid into his arms.

At breakfast, he was still puzzling over her behavior. Stealing from patrons he could understand; they might not notice the theft until the inn was far behind them; and then, if it were only a matter of a few coppers, they might shrug it off as not worth returning for. But stealing from one's fellow workers, members of the same household, was a different—and more foolish—matter. It was bound to cause discord. Yet Trif's actions at dinner the previous night indicated strongly that he allowed little discord in his "family."

It was not mere theft, then. Mizella, shaking out every fold of cloth, probing every corner of his knapsack, had been searching for something. She, or more probably all of them, did not trust him, suspected he was more than he admitted. And they were afraid, else they would never bother with such a blatant investigation. She had even peered at his clothes while undressing him.

Afraid of what? What could one lone man possibly do, trapped in a house full of armed defenders?

The landlord had spoken of robbers and of the desirability

of Durman claiming this forest, lending its protection. Were there, perhaps, gangs whose scouts insinuated themselves into the good graces of a household and then attacked from the rear as their cohorts attacked from the front? But what could they have been looking for in his knapsack that would identify him as such a scout? Hidden wealth? Weapons? He decided to end his uncertainty by asking point-blank.

"What were you searching for last night, Mizella?"

Everyone at the table looked up, and the abrupt cessation of chatter was startling.

Mizella shrugged. "I don't know. I would have recognized it if I'd found it."

"And you didn't find it?"

"I didn't find anything."

Alaric glanced sharply at the landlord. "Then you are satisfied that I am what I say I am?"

Trif smiled slowly. "No man is what he says he is."

"Well, I'm not a villain, come to murder you in your beds!"

"No? Ah, I feel much better now you've said that." He laughed and scooped up the last of his porridge. "Come outside, minstrel, and I'll show you a few things that need to be done for the common comfort. And we won't even mount a guard on you."

The laugh seemed genuine enough, and Alaric decided that he must have passed whatever test had been administered. If the forest were as dangerous as Trif insisted, he could hardly blame the man for entertaining some suspicions about a stranger.

Alaric was assigned some light tasks which passed the time agreeably enough. In the course of accomplishing them, he pried into every room of the inn, memorizing details of their arrangement, storing the information in his capacious memory almost without conscious effort. After dinner he played a pair of songs for the whole company.

Mizella came to his pallet again, earlier this night. "I told Oldo you asked for me. I'll make a bed in the other corner if you prefer to sleep alone."

"Whatever you like. I have no hold over you."

"Then I'll stay here."

"I thank you for the flattery. Do you find me a better lover than Oldo?"

"I don't know yet, but I like a man who doesn't order me about."

"How can I order you about when I hardly know you?"

She shrugged. "I'm a whore."

"A man who pays nothing has little right to make demands."

"The others pay nothing, yet I *am* paid, in the food I eat, the roof over my head, and the clothes I wear. If you stay long and add your share to the common pot, you'll be paying me, too."

"How did such a pretty girl as you come to a wilderness place like this? I would think to see you with a strong husband and fat children."

"Now you ask for a tale of woe, minstrel. Did you not say you had heard them all?"

"And I also said I was always open to a new complaint."

"You'll find nothing new here. Once, I lived with my parents and my brothers and sisters on a large manor. We farmed, as did all our neighbors, and it was neither a pleasant nor an unpleasant life. As the eldest, it was my duty to carry the excess milk to market one day a week. Our marketplace was the manor courtyard, and there, sitting in a high seat, the lord would oversee the bartering and resolve disputes among his vassals. He was a large man, with great shoulder muscles from swinging a sword and carrying heavy armor, and his face was always red. I first saw him when I was very little, and he was just the same then as ten years later.

"Well, I came of an age to marry. The suitor my parents chose for me was ugly and a fool—when he came round to our hut, I threw clods of dung to drive him away. Truly, there wasn't a man in the district, either married or free, that I would have taken as a husband, but *that* one especially I hated. My parents argued and screamed and beat me, but that only made me more certain of my mind. At last, the lord of the manor came one night, drove my mother and father out of our home, and talked to me alone. I had often seen his eyes on me in the marketplace, but I had never dared to speak to him; yet there he was, not three paces away from me, sitting on our best chair—our only chair, in fact—whispering to me. And of what did he speak? Of the delights of his bed that awaited me when he claimed his right of the first night of my marriage. *That*, he said, would be worth wedding an ugly fool. Bah!

"I pretended to change my mind, and everyone was happy. I could see his lordship sweating lust for me as he took his leave. In a few days, he thought, he would bed me. But when my parents slept that night, I left with just the clothes on my back, not even taking the new chemise my mother had woven for me.

"I ran, and when I could not run, I walked as quickly as possible, and by daybreak I was on a strange road, among

strange fields. I wandered, offering to work for my meals and lodging, begging when I had to. Many people were kind—when I told them I was an orphan. Still, it was not long before I lost my virginity. I had to eat."

"Trif?"

"No. I don't remember the man. It was ten years ago, I think, or perhaps nine. I met Trif only last winter, in a town in Durman, and he persuaded me to come here with him and join his 'family'."

"Not my notion of a family."

"The men remind me of my brothers, who always fought at the table until my father cuffed them. And now: what calamities have brought you to this outpost of nowhere?"

He was stretched out on his back now, one arm around her, her head cradled in the crook of his elbow. He looked for a moment toward the window, where the gibbous moon was just peeking over the sill. As once or twice before, he had the urge to confide the whole truth to her willing ears, to tell of his childhood experiments with the witch's power, to reflect aloud on the mystery of his origin. Not since Dall died had he done so, and the secrets bottled up inside him throbbed to be set free. Yet the scent of danger was strong; to bed a woman was not to know her—Dall had said that once. Mizella, whose dark tresses lapped across his chest, was a stranger. He censored his saga, then censored it more heavily as he realized that a woman, even a whore, might not appreciate certain of his exploits.

"It must be sweet," she said when he had finished, "to have a gift like yours, to be welcome everywhere because you have something that no one else can offer."

"There are other minstrels."

"A few. But when I think of how many other women there are. . .all I can offer is my body, and any wench has that. If I were a minstrel, people would value me as more than a hole to be filled. Oh, teach me your art! I swear to bed with you every night if you will!"

"If I did, I would soon find myself without employment; an inn scarcely needs more than one minstrel." He laughed softly, then his voice became serious. "There is no fortune in such a life; I haven't a copper to my name, as you well know. One must learn to sing and to play the lute or some other easily portable instrument, and one must carry a thousand songs in his memory—not the simplest task in the world."

"You have done it."

"To be sure, but one must have a natural inclination as

well as a desire to learn. One's voice must be pure and flexible, his fingers nimble and deft."

"Ah, minstrel, let me try. Give me a lesson."

"Stubborn woman. Tomorrow, then. Not tonight, lest we wake the household; I need no quarrel with your 'brothers' to ease my rest."

"Sweet minstrel. Let me kiss you."

He let her do more than that.

Sunny midmorning found Alaric finished with his earliest tasks and settled by the hearth with his lute. Gavver was there, tending the fire and whittling a new set of draughtsmen, standing watch in case some customer arrived. The other men were gone; after breakfast, Trif had climbed to the loft to feed the doves, his morning habit, and returned with a bundle of broad-bladed hunting arrows—a silent indication of his plans for the day. Alaric had pleaded ineptitude, and the landlord did not press him to join the party.

A hand on his shoulder startled him. Mizella. Intent on his song, he had not heard her approach.

"Now?" she said. She carried a dusty lute by the neck.

"Ah, where was *that* hiding?" Alaric wondered.

"Up in the storeroom. It's different from yours."

"Yes, well, I made mine myself, and it is not quite a true lute. Yours has a rose, as it should." He pointed to the intricately carved pattern of perforations in the center of the new-found instrument's sounding board. His own bore a simple round hole instead. "I had too little patience. The tone is fuller, I think, with the large hole, though the other is prettier. And without the rose, a coin dropped inside shakes out much easier."

Mizella's brow wrinkled. "What is *that?*"

"What?"

Her fingers dipped between the strings and plucked from the innards of his lute a length of black cloth which was embroidered in red, blue, and purple.

"A kerchief," he replied.

"How beautiful. Loving fingers did this work."

"Yes. Yes, they did."

"Your mother?"

"No. A friend." He took it from her, tucked it back inside. "You're ready for your lesson now?"

She sat at his feet, cradling the dusty lute in her lap. She traced an idle design in the grime. "Yes, my lesson."

"Well, first you must be able to sing. Without that, the best lute playing in the world is worthless. Sing for me."

She looked down at the

floor. "I don't know any songs."

"What, none at all? A children's song, surely. A simple rhyme. No? Well, then, I'll teach you one:

Over the river and over the hill
And over the moon I fly,
To foreign lands and silver sands
While safe in my bed I lie.

Come, sing it with me."

She tried. She tried several times, but the result was less than satisfactory. She had no ear for music and lost the melody with ease, improvising her own—quite out of tune—and thinking it the same as the original.

After a considerable time, Alaric called a halt. "I don't know. Perhaps it will come with practice, but perhaps one must be caught young. I was eleven when I began."

"I am. . .quite a bit older than eleven."

She said that in such a forlorn tone that the minstrel looked up sharply to search her face for some reason. Her eyes were downcast, and for the first time, he saw tiny crows' feet at their corners. She would never pass for eighteen, certainly, but there was youth in her smile and in her step, and she was more than a decade younger than Dall had been when he died. Yet, there was despair in her voice, as if her life were almost over.

He reached out and took her hand. "And much more attractive than if you were only eleven."

She shrugged.

"Perhaps you'll have better luck with your fingers."

She shook her head, pulling away from him. "I have work waiting for me in the kitchen. Another time, minstrel."

"If that's what you wish."

She walked toward the kitchen, hips swaying, but she stopped halfway across the room and turned. "Is she still alive?"

"Who?"

She pointed toward his lute, which was propped up against a chair. "The friend who gave you the kerchief."

"As far as I know, yes."

"Young?"

"Near my own age."

"Not a sister?"

"No."

"You love her?"

Alaric touched the neck of his lute, drew a murmur of sound from one string. "I will probably never see her again," he replied. He looked away as Mizella walked on to the kitchen.

He was still by the fire when the hunting party returned, bearing not deer and rabbits but boxes and bundles, which they silently took up to the loft.

"A strange hunt," Alaric said to Trif.

"Oh, we saw a boat on the river and quickly traded our game for things we can't get so easily. When one lives in the wilderness, one must take advantage of every opportunity that presents itself."

"Indeed, how fortunate you were, then, that a boat happened to pass when you had a substantial supply of meat to offer."

Trif smiled. "Yes. How fortunate."

The smallest container was opened that evening and produced a talecloth, linen napkins, and fine steel knives for carving the dinner joint. Perhaps in celebration of these acquisitions, the entire company had scattered to their private stores to effect a transformation for the meal. Trif, at the head of the table, sported a white shirt trimmed with lace at throat and wrist. His fellows wore hand-tooled belts, colorful silken scarves, and slender silver hoops as earrings and bracelets. They ate and chattered with a gusto greater than usual.

Mizella was the last to enter and seat herself for dinner. She had put on a fresh dress and combed her hair back, the better to show off a chain of intricate gold filigree about her neck.

"What a lovely piece of workmanship," Alaric said as she sat down beside him. He touched the necklace, lifted it, found it feather-light. "I marvel at the number of carcasses this must have cost."

"None. It was a gift."

"Then you've had rich guests in this forlorn spot."

"We have," she replied, and then a startled expression passed over her face. She turned slowly and stared at Oldo, who sat on her opposite side. Her lips compressed to whiteness, and with slow deliberation she picked up her water glass, took a single sip of its contents, and splashed the rest in his face.

Oldo sprang to his feet, almost upsetting the table, and seized Mizella by her hair.

"Be thankful it wasn't red wine, you oaf!" she shouted.

Trif halted the clash with a word, and the combatants sank into an uneasy truce which was punctuated only by silent glares of anger.

Later, the diners paired off and drifted upstairs, leaving the landlord, Alaric, and Mizella alone.

"Go on to bed, minstrel. Mizella and I have words to exchange in private." Trif was circling the room, extinguishing the hanging lights.

Alaric shrugged; he felt no claim on the woman. Bidding them good night, he picked a

brand from the fire for a torch and started toward the stairs. At the first landing, he stopped. The voices that drifted upward from the main room were low, the words unintelligible, but the tone was angry. He crushed the brand with his foot and moved silently back down the stairs until, kneeling, he could see into the room.

They were standing by the hearth. Trif had Mizella by one arm, and as he spoke, he shook her, though not violently. His attitude was too benign to imply danger but too menacing for love.

Alaric scanned the hall. Only firelight remained to illuminate it, and the shadows were deep. Behind the table, particularly—where the darkness cast by the fine new cloth was as absolute as any in the forest—was the perfect spot from which to listen to their conversation. Instantly, he was there.

Now the voices were clear, and Alaric could see the speakers through the gap left where the tablecloth did not quite reach the floor.

"If he ever *ever* kicks me under the table again, I will not let you keep me from scratching his eyes out!" Mizella was saying.

"Little fool, you trust this minstrel too much too soon. You saw how quickly he noticed the difference of degree between a new shirt and a gold necklace. A good thing it was that Oldo warned you to shut your mouth. Do you think that all this time I have been trying to convince him that we are *rich?*"

"If he hasn't seen what's in the loft by now—"

"Bah! The loft is nothing. Would I let *him* sleep there if there were anything left to see?"

"He is an innocent boy, nothing more. He won't cause any trouble. I would stake my life on it."

"I don't care if you stake your own life on it, but *my* life means a great deal to me. Therefore, you will hide your little baubles for a while longer yet, unless you've already shown them all." He twisted her arm a little, and she grimaced in pain.

"No, nothing else. Tonight was the first time."

"You're getting clumsy with this 'innocent boy,' Mizella. Perhaps talking a bit too much? I have trusted you, Mizella; don't betray that trust!"

"Let go of me. I've said nothing I shouldn't say." He released her arm, and she rubbed the marks his fingers left. "He is very sweet and very young, and I feel motherly toward him."

"Motherly?" He laughed. "Well, then, go on to your

incestuous bed, little mother, and bear in mind what we've said here."

She turned away angrily and strode toward the stairway.

Alaric was lying on his pallet, pretending to be half asleep, when she reached the loft. She molded her body to his back, and he felt the necklace biting into his shoulder.

"I thought you were staying with Trif," he yawned.

"I make my own choices," she replied, and her hands began to move on him.

Much later, they were still awake. Alaric toyed lazily with her hair, twining the strands around his fingers, brushing them across his cheek. He thought about the hearthside conversation, heard it once again in the ears of his mind, and wondered when, if ever, Trif would really relinquish the suspicions that prowled behind that smiling facade. Of the whole household, only Mizella seemed to accept him unreservedly. Did she truly feel maternal toward him? From his present, naked viewpoint, he could hardly credit it. But the notion made him curious.

"I have been thinking of your 'family' here," he said. "It seems strange that with all these. . .affectionate women in the household, there should be no children. Had you stayed with a peasant husband on your lord's manor, you'd have half a dozen by now, clinging to your skirts at every turn."

"I have borne children." He could not see her expression in the dark, but there was a curious flatness to her voice.

"What happened to them?"

She hesitated a long time before replying, and when she spoke, it was in a barely audible tone. "I lived in hovels, in soldiers' barracks, sometimes even in ditches. I had no home, no family, no skill but one, if that can be called a skill. I learned quickly that chance acquaintances care little for squalling babes, and so a whore encumbered by children eats less often than one who is not. I told myself I could only feed one mouth with the pittance I earned at my trade. I wish I could see your face now—do you think me an unnatural mother?"

"Did you kill them?"

She sat up suddenly; her silhouette was a dark blotch against the moonlit window. "Kill them? I carried them in my body; how could I kill them? No! I wrapped them up against the night chill and left them as foundlings. I left them and ran. . . Ah, minstrel, they screamed and cried, but they were my babies."

He touched her arm, followed it upward to her hand,

which was covering her face. "Many?"

"Two. A boy and a girl. They would be seven and eight now, and they don't even know their mother."

"Would they be happy as a whore's children?"

"Are they happy now? Are they even *alive?* At least if I had kept them, I would *know.*"

He sat up, put his arm around her. "Perhaps you did the best thing."

"A man cannot understand how a woman feels, especially a very young man. Years ago, I felt as you do. I didn't care about them; they were a yoke around my neck."

"Then why do you care now?"

"Because there won't be any more children for me." She bent her head against his shoulder. "I was sick some years ago, and after that. . .barren."

He stroked her hair.

"When I was younger, I thought that someday I would not be a whore any more. I dreamed of a tall handsome man who would take me away with him to a land of happiness. A childish dream. Even if such a man existed—a man who could forget my past—a man wants sons, and *those* I can never give." She sighed deeply.

"Sons are not everything," said Alaric.

"I was a daughter, and I know how much his sons meant to my father."

"A man who wanted you for your own sweet self would not care about sons."

"You have a heart, minstrel, for speaking so even though you know what I have done."

"I cannot pass judgment on you. I was abandoned as a child, left on a hillside to die beneath the cold moon, and who is to say that my fate would have been better if my parents had kept me? Perhaps my mother, too, was a whore and thought much as you did. If so, I thank her for it. My life has not been a smooth one, but I have memories I would not part with." He lay back, pulling her with him. "Is there a person alive, I wonder, who would not change the past if he could? I have a thousand songs on that theme."

Mizella pressed closer. "You are very wise for one so young."

"Not nearly as wise as I wish. And if you call me 'young' once more, I shall be forced to demonstrate my maturity."

"Yes, do. You make me forget I'm an evil old hag."

He made love to her gently, then, for she was crying.

The days passed easily, and as the weather warmed, more and more of the household

activities were extended out of doors. The men began construction of a new chicken house to replace the old one, which had barely survived the winter even though it had been in a sheltered spot behind the small barn. The women laundered and mended clothing, hanging it to air in the light breeze that blew continuously from the river.

One particular day, Alaric's task was to shape shingles for the roof of the inn, to cover those chinks through which the winter gale had entered the loft. He lazed on a bench that circled the well in the rear courtyard, his back against roughly dressed stones, his feet propped up on a stump. He worked sporadically, his attention constantly diverted by nearby movement: Gavver splitting rails for the new coop, a curious fox peeking out of the woods, a gray dove flapping about the roof before settling in the dovecote. A disorderly stack of finished shingles grew beside him; occasionally, the topmost one would slide off and clatter to the ground—after the third time, he left it there.

Mizella was scrubbing floors. He had watched her all morning as she made regular trips outside to toss dirty water into the woods and draw fresh buckets at the well. She smiled at him and ruffled his hair with one hand while turning the crank with the other. Once, she kissed his forehead.

He was pleased with the sight of her and yet not pleased at all. Her walk was a silent, barefoot dance that reminded him of her lithe, boneless movements of the dark hours. She had come to him every night, ignoring the other men, ignoring their pointed glances, their suggestive whispers, even their blunt queries. She clung to him as if he were her man, and that disturbed him. In spite of his protestations, he knew in his heart that he *was* young—too young for a woman like her. Certainly too young and too weak to hold her if someone else wanted her. Very obviously, Oldo wanted her. It was only a matter of time before he lost patience and offered to fight. Sword to sword, knife to knife, hand to hand—Alaric knew who would lose *that* game. Oldo had a scar or two on his face, and the way he had tossed a knife the very night of their acquaintance left no doubt that he had ten times the experience of a sixteen-year-old minstrel.

Mizella was a puzzle. That she loved him, he could not quite believe. She had seen too much of life to swoon over a stripling boy, even though he listened kindly to her sorrows and tumbled her in a satisfac-

tory manner. Nor could he believe that maternal emotions could inspire such physical desire. His songs—that vast reservoir of unrequited passion and rueful hindsight—suggested she was using him to make another jealous. Oldo? She hated him vigorously—was that merely the obverse of love? Did she realize her behavior was likely to tear the household apart?

Yet when he saw her smile, he felt it was not a false or calculated smile, and when she came to him at night, her hunger seemed as real as hunger had ever been.

He did not love her. He had never said he loved her. He supposed that many a casual bedmate had mouthed such words in her ear, meaning nothing by them, but his compassion forbade it. He liked her, found her skilled and lovely, but, primarily, he was using her—and, indeed, his whole existence at the inn—as a defense in his battle against a dreamland of might-have-been to which he dared not yield. To maintain that defense, to keep the household running smoothly and himself a part of it, he would very soon have to insist that she mollify Oldo. He wondered what she would say to that.

He was on the roof nailing a shingle into place when he heard a number of human voices and snorting, plodding horses in the yard below. Inching his way to the peak of the gable, he looked down and saw Trif leading a party of men toward the inn. He counted five strangers and four extra pack animals, heavily laden. Thinking he would be wanted soon, Alaric scrambled to the ladder and met Oldo, who had been dispatched to call him.

"Trif says to clean up and come entertain the guests."

Alaric drew a bucket of water from the well, washed hastily, and headed for the main hall, where he had left his lute earlier in the day.

Mizella caught him at the kitchen doorway; she held the instrument in her arms. "I picked it up just before they came in. I thought you wouldn't want them handling it."

"Exactly," he said and squeezed her shoulder gratefully.

"I can't come to you tonight. The guests. . ."

"Of course."

"Perhaps very late. . ."

"Won't the others be sleeping up in the loft tonight? We wouldn't have much privacy."

She looked over her shoulder into the large room. "Yes. Yes, that's true." Then she brushed past him and joined the other women at food preparation.

The new arrivals had shed their cloaks and caps and were gathered around a table near the fire by the time Alaric entered the room. They were ruddy-cheeked outdoor men of varying ages, and three of them resembled each other enough to be brothers. They talked of their route beyond the forest, into Durman, and one man was sketching an imaginary map on the tabletop. They looked up as the minstrel drew near.

"Good eve, fair sirs," he said. "May I offer a song while you wait for the fine dinner I have just seen being prepared for you?"

"What's this—a minstrel?" cried the eldest man. "Why, one would think this inn at the center of the world instead of its edge."

"I saw a couple of wenches in the kitchen, too, Derol," said one of his companions. "I hope they don't tire quickly."

Alaric grinned as he perched himself atop the next table, his feet on its bench.

"A song. Surely, a song," said Derol.

The minstrel obliged, and soon he had them listening eagerly to a rather long saga concerning an enchanted prince who fell in love with the young witch who had laid the spell upon him; too late, the hapless noble discovered that the only means of nullifying the enchantment was to destroy the enchantress, and so he ended his days as a rooster in her farmyard, preferring such a fate to the murder of his beloved. At the finish of the tale, the travelers immediately launched into a discussion of what each of them would do if confronted with the same situation; only the youngest, who was not much older than Alaric, maintained that the prince had acted properly.

"You'll learn, my boy," said Derol, "after you've been in and out of love a time or two. No woman's worth giving your life up for."

"He didn't give up his life," the youngster pointed out.

"He gave up his *human* life, which, in my eyes, is quite the same thing. Am I right, minstrel?"

"I prefer to sing the song and allow the listener to interpret it as he will."

"Oho, a slippery fellow," said the man who had mentioned females in the kitchen. "He'll live a long time by refusing to take sides in an argument."

At that moment, the five women of the household entered, each bearing a steaming platter heaped high with meat and vegetables. Trif brought up the rear with a tray of bread trenchers and metal cups and a jug of wine.

The women served, giggling all the while—even Mizella, who was normally the soberest of the lot. They had eaten earlier, and now they could lavish their attentions on the customers, chattering gaily, joking, smiling open invitations. Before the meal ended, each had chosen and confirmed her man for the night. Mizella paired off with Derol, who balanced her on his lap while he quaffed his second cup of wine.

Alaric found his own, less engrossing skills ignored, and he drifted away from the boisterous group soon after the meal was served. In the kitchen, he found Oldo, Thorin, Gavver, and Wenk quietly attacking a dinner slightly less sumptuous than that offered the guests. He shut his lute into a high empty cabinet—where no clumsy fingers were likely to disturb it—and joined them. Though the kitchen door was snugly shut, they could still hear the merriment of the main room. Their meal was disposed of and an entire round of draughts between Oldo and Gavver completed before the din receded, signifying that the diners were retiring for the night.

Trif came into the kitchen. He carried the wine jug. "They've gone upstairs." Tilting the carafe to his lips, he drained the last drops of fluid. "Clear the table, and then you can all go to bed."

Up in the loft, the four men who did not habitually sleep there made themselves straw pallets. The landlord remained downstairs, watching at the hearth.

Alaric fell asleep quickly.

A wild, piercing shriek woke him.

At first, he thought it the scream of some animal in the woods, perhaps a cat in heat. Then, when he realized he was alone in the loft, he knew it for a human cry, though he had never heard such a sound issue from a human throat before. He groped for his boots and his sword.

Pausing at the top of the stairs, he listened. Below, the building was silent, except for some muffled noises that might be amorous couples moving in their beds or might be only the wind. A few faint but rhythmic footsteps echoed, as if someone were trying to pace away the boredom of insomnia. The commotion which would surely have ensued if someone had fallen, screaming, from a window or merely awakened from a nightmare with that horrifying cry on his lips was absent.

Yet something had lured his loft companions from their slumber.

He gripped the sword with

sweaty fingers and cautiously descended three steps. A board squeaked loudly under his feet, and he froze, waiting for some reaction to that small sound, waiting for a voice to challenge him. Nothing happened. Had he, perhaps, wakened long after the shriek—merely *thinking* that he had wakened immediately—long after the rest of the household and the guests had dashed off to investigate, leaving only one or two of their number to guard the hearth? Was the inn so silent because it was almost empty?

Or was the real reason uglier than that?

Alaric thought of the brigands the landlord had feared. Perhaps, in the depths of darkness before moonrise, they had fallen on the inn, murdered the men, raped the women. Perhaps the shriek had been a cry of mortal agony torn from Trif's own throat. Alaric peered into the gloom of the stairwell but could not penetrate it. He was afraid to descend, afraid that the inn was in cruel enemy hands and that he would be plunging, unarmored and alone, indifferently trained in the martial arts, into their midst. He imagined arrows, spears, swords, and knives, all pointed toward himself, and his faith in his witch's agility was not strong enough to propel him downward. His heart hammered wildly. No longer could he stand, unshielded, at the head of the stairs, a perfect target silhouetted against the faintly lit loft.

He was at the bench beside the well, alone but for his sword and the long shadow cast him by the gibbous moon.

The inn was dark except for a knife's edge of illumination beneath the kitchen door. Alaric crept closer, flattened his body to the ground, and attempted to peer into the room through the narrow crevice. He saw a floor-sweeping skirt. A moment later, several pairs of boots came into his field of vision, and he retreated apprehensively to the cover of the wall.

The door opened, and Wenk and Gavver emerged, carrying between them a bulky cloth-wrapped bundle. Oldo and Thorin followed closely with a similar burden. They passed near Alaric, who circled the well to keep out of sight, and entered the forest.

Mizella had held the door for them; chancing that she would be companionless now, Alaric knocked softly, standing aside so that he could not be seen from the room's interior. The stout oaken panel swung back slightly, and Mizella peeked out.

"Are you alone?" he whispered.

She started at the sound of his voice. "How did you get outside?"

"Are you *alone?*"

"Well, yes, for now."

"Will they be back soon?"

"No, not too soon."

"Where's Trif?"

"Upstairs."

"All right." He slipped into the kitchen and closed the door securely behind him.

"You were in the loft, and Trif is watching the stairs. How did you get outside?"

"I climbed out the window."

"Did they see you?"

"No."

"You've got to go back, pretend you were never out, Please, you *have* to."

"Why? What's going on? I heard a scream—"

Mizella moaned and sank back against the worktable, which was still piled high with dinner's refuse. "I knew you'd hear it. Oh, please, take your horse and go, right now. Don't stop for anything. I won't tell them I saw you. With luck, they won't look in the loft till. . .till dawn." She caught sight of the sword, half hidden behind his right thigh. "You can't hold them off. There's only one of you. *Please.*"

His free hand clutched her shoulder. "*What is going on?*"

"They're killing the travelers. Now, will you go before they find you?"

"Too late for that, my dear," said Trif, stepping through the door from the dining room. "You whisper a bit too loudly." He carried a sword in one hand and a bloody dagger in the other.

"No, Trif, no, he's just a boy," Mizella cried, clinging to Alaric. "Nothing more, just a boy!"

"I am still not convinced of that. In any event, knight, squire, or nothing, we simply cannot trust him. Nor you, I fear, now that you feel so strongly about him."

Mizella paled. "I wish he *were* a Durman knight, sent to discover what happened to all those travelers who never arrived at their destinations."

"The world is cruel," Trif replied. "Crueler than even you, my fluff, can imagine." He crossed the floor in two sudden steps, sword raised high.

Alaric lifted his blade in a desperate, awkward parry of the stroke an armored man would meet with his shield. He had no shield save Mizella, a fleshly, too vulnerable covering for his left side. Trif's dagger snaked toward her middle as his sword slid against Alaric's, its point tilting downward for a thrust.

The minstrel locked his free arm about Mizella's waist and threw himself backward, lifting her clear of the floor and

slamming both of their bodies into the unyielding kitchen door. Thinking them trapped and off balance, Trif lunged forward to follow through with his two thrusts. . .

. . .and met empty air.

The forest sprang up around Alaric and Mizella.

Alaric's sword fell from his numbed fingers, thudding twice as it hit the ground tip first, then hilt. He held Mizella tightly, afraid that if he let her go she would crumple. He had never carried another human being when he traveled in his special way; the extra instant of concentration he had allowed for enveloping her with his power might have been too long, might have let Trif's dagger reach her. Or it might have been too short and left part of her body behind. A long moment passed before he could bring himself to face the possible gruesome truth.

"Mizella," he whispered.

He felt a violent tremor pass through her body.

"Are you injured?"

Her voice was tiny, muffled by his shoulder. "No."

He relaxed then, loosened his grip on her waist, and let her toes touch the earth. "We're safe now."

She raised her head, gazing at him with terror-wide eyes.

"There's nothing to fear," he told her.

She pushed his encircling arm aside and moved a few steps back. Above, she saw the moon peeking through high branches, and at her feet, gnarled roots and the moist fragments of winter's waning snowdrifts. All about were numberless trees; she stared at them as if trying to read some message in their shadowy forms. "Where are we?" she whispered.

"On the road about half a day's journey east of the inn."

She spun around to face him. "Am I dreaming, or. . . *What are you?*"

"Don't be afraid of me, Mizella." He stretched a hand toward her, palm outward, as if warding off a blow.

"You're a witch."

He planted his left foot firmly on the hilt of his sword, which lay on the ground between them. He didn't want her to try anything rash. "I have a certain talent that other people lack," he admitted. "But I prefer to use it as little as possible."

"A witch." In the darkness, he could barely see her hug herself with crossed arms. "I've touched a witch, kissed, bedded—"

"Mizella, no! A minstrel, a boy, just as you said. Nothing more. If it hadn't meant our lives, you would never have known I was anything else.

Don't think of me as a witch."

"But I must; you are!" She fell at his feet, clasping his knees. "Let me serve you, lord!"

Thrown off balance, he staggered and caught at her wrists to right himself. "What?"

"I am not afraid."

"Get up, Mizella; the ground is cold and damp."

"Don't turn me away, lord. There's blood on my hands already; I won't shy from your bidding!"

"What are you saying?" He stepped back, but she crawled after, clinging to his legs.

"I'm a murderess, as surely as if I'd killed them myself."

"Who? The travelers?"

"Yes! Those of last night and others—many others! Did you think this was the first time we'd slain our guests as they lay sated and sleeping? The river and the road were our domain, and the travelers who were too rich now lie scattered through the forest in unmarked graves. My necklace, that you liked so well, was the gift of a dead man!"

He had assumed. . . He wasn't sure that he had assumed anything during those fleeting moments of battle—his mind had been too occupied with escape for rational thought. His arms, his flesh, his bones had decided that whatever had happened, Mizella, who warned him of the danger, was faultless. The notion that she was a consenting part of an elaborate scheme to waylay hapless travelers jarred him, and he searched for some shred of the innocence he had supposed.

"But *yourself*, you killed none."

"No, I lulled them with my body till Trif could come upstairs and slit their throats. Is that not close enough to murder? Lord, I have the courage to perform any evil deed you would require!"

"Stop calling me lord!" He jerked her to her feet and picked up the sword, over which she had heedlessly scrambled in her haste to hold him fast. "This bloody work—did you enjoy it?"

She glanced at the naked blade, then tried to back away, but he gripped her forearm securely. "Please. . . I tried to save your life. . .please. . ."

"I shall not forget that. Answer the question."

"I've heard of witches. . . that they always see a lie."

"Then speak the truth."

Her voice quavered as she said, "At first, I didn't know. Trif said a home, permanent employment, no more lying in ditches or dark alleys. There was no talk of murder. But later, there *was* murder—butchery of sleeping men. I confess I didn't like it. I tried to run

away—three or four times—but they always caught me. I was. . .punished, and after a few punishments, I did as I was told, whatever it was."

"What did they do to you?"

"Beat me, burned me, especially my back. The scars don't show when my clothes are on, and in the dark, no one would notice."

He felt sudden sympathetic pains, but he maintained a stern demeanor. "And the answer to my question?"

"The travelers were nothing to me, nothing but bodies in the darkness, all with the same groans of pleasure, the same sweat. They were nothing. . . But still, I could not help thinking that they were men with families somewhere, families that waited for them forever. Lord, I can't answer your question any better than that."

His fingers fell away from her.

"Lord, I have had a kindly thought or two. Who has not? But a woman who would desert her own children is surely evil enough for your purposes."

He sighed. "What do you know of my purposes?"

"Please. . .if you forsake me, I have nowhere else to turn."

"Why did you warn me? You could have stayed where you were, safe as a bear in its winter den. You could have slammed the door in my face, screamed for Trif, betrayed me and been exactly as you were before."

"No. You were a boy, I thought, too young to be involved in such a grisly game. And Trif was too sure Durman had sent you to spy; eventually, he would have killed you. Had I known you were a witch, I would not have worried so." She paused. "A witch in Durman's pay?"

"As suspicious as your former master!"

"The murderer sees a knife behind every tree."

Ah, we have something in common, he thought, but he did not say it aloud. "Well, I am not in Durman's pay, as I've said before."

"The Dark One pays well enough, I should think."

"Nor in the Dark One's."

"How not? You're a witch!"

"Let us settle this matter now: I cast no spells, lay no curses, and make no potions. I have no evil tasks for you to perform, and I *want* none, and so you can stop trying to convince me of your desirability as a servant."

"None at all?"

"None at all."

"You're testing me."

"No."

"You're. . .a good witch?" The turmoil in her mind was evident in her voice.

"Neither good nor bad. I am a minstrel, and I have no desire to be otherwise. What happened tonight, you must forget. Come, I'm chilled to the bone. We're not far from the hut of a peasant I once chopped wood for; surely he'll let us sleep in his barn in return for a bit of work. Then, tomorrow, we'll travel afoot southward, as far as we can, and in the night, when the household has settled down, I'll go back for my lute and my horse."

"Wait; this peasant lives a half day's journey east of the inn?"

"Yes."

"Then I know him. He must not see me."

"Why not?"

"In return for a share of the booty, four families watch the road and the river for Trif. They greet unwary horse and boat men, recommending that they stop at the inn; then they free a dove, which flies home to its birthplace, the dovecote in the loft. A notched thong tied to the bird's leg tells how many travelers and which direction they come from. A black thong is a call for help, and if he did nothing else, your peasant would surely dispatch *that* as soon as he caught sight of me, for he knows that I am not allowed away from the inn."

"A well-organized forest this is!"

"Trif is no fool. If he trusts these people, then we cannot."

Alaric sighed and took her arm to guide her southward. "Then we'll begin our travels now and hope that walking heats our blood."

"Where are we going?"

"Out of the forest. After that, I don't know. Shall I take you back to your parents?"

"No, please, not that. What would they do with a whore but spit on her?"

"What shall I do with you, then?"

"Let me be your companion."

He made no immediate reply.

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "I see... I was wrong. You're truly not—what I thought. Not like the tales old women tell late at night. I should have known, merely by looking at your face, that you couldn't be...evil. And now I've shown that *I*...I am too foul to be a good man's companion." She shivered. "Perhaps you're thinking you shouldn't have saved me."

"No. I can't blame you for the deeds you were forced to commit. One's own survival, after all, is always most important." He laughed a dry, humorless laugh. "How well I know it."

"Then you don't...loathe me?"

"I think perhaps you loathe yourself enough for two."

Her voice caught in a sob. "I will cook your meals and mend your clothes and warm your bed—"

"Mizella, I rescued you because you were there, because you were a human being in danger, and because in recent times I have learned to be a little less selfish than I once was. I don't want you to think there was anything else involved."

"I know," she whispered. "You don't love me. I don't expect it, not the kind of love you reserve for *her*. But that doesn't mean we can't be together. Ah, minstrel, don't drive me away; I won't try to replace her in your heart. You once said that I was attractive. . .Have you changed your mind so soon?"

"No."

"Then what is the difference between lying with me in the loft and lying with me in the forest or beyond?"

He glanced at her, saw only sparkling eyes in a shadowy face. She seemed very small and vulnerable at that moment, and he felt a surge of responsibility—almost guilt—for having removed her unasked from the life she knew, ugly though it was. He clutched at that responsibility, grateful for its existence, and held it firmly between himself and the past. "No difference at all," he said. "Stay with me, then, and we'll see how well we travel together."

Her step was lighter now. "Perhaps along the way, you could teach me something about being a witch."

He shook his head. "I don't know how. I think I must have been born a witch; I've had this special ability as long as I can remember."

"How did you discover it?"

He poured out his story, then, and she walked close to his side, clinging to his arm. Not Solinde, not the girl his thoughts constantly turned to, but someone to keep the lonely wind away.

Gahan Wilson

"Never mind, Nurse, I've spotted the boy!"

In the introduction to John Sladek's Asimov parody, we forgot to mention an earlier take-off on the work of J. G..Ballard. So that this is actually the fourth in the series (Ballard, July 1968; Heinlein, August 1972; Asimov, Sept. 1972). Upcoming: Philip K. Dick, Hugo Gernsback, Harlan Ellison.

Joy Ride

by R*Y BR*DB*RY

IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES.

It was the worst of times.

It was the waiting time, before the ride to come. The airport was furiously busy. Two butterflies had just come in for a landing, and one dragonfly was taking off, while overhead a swarm of brown, honey-heavy bees flew lazy holding patterns. And right smack in the middle of it sat three human beings, warming their human skins at the Indian summer sun.

The old man took a flask of rhubarb wine from one of his forty-seven pockets, tipped it and drank solemnly to the health of all his companions—not omitting a distant gopher on Runway Three. The girl wandered off to investigate this great open place, while the boy hunkered down in the sand to hear a story from his grandfather.

"The old days were good days, boy. They were people days. No one had to be afraid of anyone, ever, and folks used to even leave their doors unlocked. There were good people everywhere, and they were all neighbors.

"Oh, they didn't all speak the same language, and they didn't all sing to the same God on Sundays, but they were neighbors, just the same. Real neighbors.

"Money was real, too. Real silver, not plastic. It rang true. And ice cream, cold as a puppy's nose, cost just one thin silver dime of it." He paused, raising his sky-colored eyes to look approval at his granddaughter. Barely seventeen summers old, she was out on the concrete runway gathering flame-bright autumn leaves.

The boy spoke. "Gosh, Grandpa, what was this 'ice cream' like?"

"Oh, delicious! It was as tasty as a seventeenth summer. As scrumptious as the smell of lavender rain. Yummier than

freedom itself. In fact, the only taste I liked as well as the taste of stamps."

The girl was nailing a festive swatch of leaves to the airport door, covering its KEEP OUT sign with autumn beauty.

"Did you eat stamps, too?" asked the boy.

The old man laughed, moving all the kind wrinkles that fanned across his cheeks like the veins in autumn leaves. "No, my boy, you *licked* a stamp and stuck it on a letter. Then the government carried the letter anywhere in the world you wanted, and the postman gave the letter to the neighbor you wanted to write to."

"Didn't you have phones?"

His grandfather didn't answer; he was calculating. It was more than an hour since he and the young 'uns had ripped off their mandatory personal phones. By now a telco computer was figuring probable places to look for them. Maybe twenty minutes remained, before the telco police would be here.

"Yes, some of us had phones. But writing was more private. Nobody could listen in—and there are some things you can put in writing that just can't be said any other way. You need time to get it just right *before* you say it. Thinking always takes time. That's why we closed the post offices."

The girl began decorating the rest of the airport building with autumn leaves. Now she called out from the tower, asking the old man if it were time, yet.

"Not yet, my dear. Soon. We'll be leaving soon. That's what I mean," he added, winking at the boy. "Impatience. It built this airport—and it destroyed it again. This place is all concrete now, hard as headstones, but I knew it when it was all soft, breathing grass, sweet as a bee's keister. And then they came with their impatience, the fast-flying folks, the efficiency folks, and they built an airport so they could get from one pigsty city to another in less time.

"Then they abandoned this airport to go off and build a bigger one somewhere else, so's they could go even faster. They won't be satisfied until they get to be everywhere at the same time, and maybe not even then. Because when you start a race with your own self, you know you have to lose.

"Anyway, now they've left, and the sweetness is coming back. Dame Nature is gathering this place to her bosom again—repairing all their damage."

He sipped silently for a moment more, then went on. "Impatience. When the telco—

telephone company—took over the government, it was because the fast folks couldn't take time to write or read letters. So they stopped teaching writing in the schools, and they closed the post offices, and they locked up all the libraries. Those who objected found out nobody could (or would) read their letters. Then they took away our art galleries and universities . . .and worse."

The boy scratched a freckle. "You mean they took away your holograms?"

"Worse still. I knew an old French woman once, name of Madame Faience, who had the sweetest postage stamp collection you could ever imagine: Birds, flowers, famous people—why, it was a little art gallery all by itself. My boy, they *burned* it."

He looked up at the control tower, which the girl had now covered with an oriflamme of autumn leaves. Behind it stretched humpy white clouds, like a line of ivory elephants.

"Yep, *burned* it. And though the whole fire wasn't much bigger than an autumn leaf, Madame Faience managed to throw herself into it and burn up with her collection. Call it sentimental, maybe, but. . ."

"The French *are* like that," the boy agreed. "Are any stamps left anywhere?"

"A few." His grandfather reached into one of his many pockets and came up with a cracked leather case. "This is my own stamp collection, boy. It's small, but it's something to hold, something to have, something—real." He passed it over.

"This is your collection? One stamp?"

"That's a picture of Abe Lincoln, my boy. He wrote a famous speech on the back of an old letter. One of our sweetest presidents."

"Did he write many letters, Grandpa?"

"Everybody did. They wrote to the papers, so everybody could see what they thought. They sent greeting cards, valentines, gas bills, draft notices, telegrams. . . The first novel was written in the form of an exchange of letters. And part of the Bible—the most famous book ever written—part of it was just letters from Paul to his neighbors."

"But why did they stop writing?"

"Impatience again! Why spend time thinking, reading and writing, when you can watch ghosts?"

"You mean holograms?" asked the boy again. This time the old man nodded.

"The ghastly, ghostly holograms! Why *read* Plato when you can conjure up an image of some actor impersonating him?

Why study hard thinking when you can get it all boiled down into flattering conversation? Why learn, when the telco knows it all anyway?"

By now, the old man realized, the computers would have figured on this airport. Ten minutes to go, maybe.

"That's why you and me and your sister took off our phones and ran away," he explained. "And that's why we're going for that joy ride I promised you. Now a joy ride, remember, isn't just a ride from A to B. It's more, much more—"

"Grandpa!" the girl shouted from the tower. "They're coming. I can see the dust, way off."

"We have time for one more question, my boy."

The boy thought for a second. "What was it like, getting letters, Grandpa?"

As they walked over to the rusty hangar, the old man told him, in a voice fine and true. He told of waking up one winter morning to the smell and hiss of bacon frying, running outside to lie down in the snow and fan his arms, making an "angel" imprint. Then meeting the postman with a big stack of Christmas cards from all your neighbors. "And there were angels on the Christmas cards, too, and on the stamps at Christmas," he added, "like the first angelic postman who brought good news to a girl of Nazareth. Help me with this hangar door, will you? I'm. . .a little tired, today."

The time of waiting was over.

The boy and the girl both helped push open the creaking door of corrugated iron, rusted the color of autumn leaves.

Inside was an airplane.

Scraps of fabric hung from two pairs of angelic dragonfly wings. Thick dust and mildew spotted the fat body with Nature's camouflage. And yet, peering through the cobwebs that had long since replaced wire struts, they could still make out the words painted on her side: AIR MAIL SPECIAL.

"Come on, young 'uns. Get on board."

"How can it go?" asked the boy, pointing to the broken, worm-pierced stubs of the propeller. "Where can we go in that heap?"

"Just for a joy ride, boy. We won't go far. In fact, we won't go anywhere at all. Sometimes that's the best ride of all. We. . ."

The old man coughed, seizing a wing brace to steady himself. It came away in his hand. "Well, hop in!"

The boy took the pilot's seat, while the other two shared the observer's place, behind.

"Contact!" yelled the old man. "Roger! Off we go!"

"But nothing's happening," the boy complained. "It's just pretend!"

"No, it isn't," shouted his sister, breathless. "I can feel it moving now. It's lifting. . .it's lifting. . ."

And then the boy too heard the silent engine roar. The plane was taxiing, floating up, right through the roof of the rusty hangar, floating up and free.

Outside, the telco police car stopped, and four doors were slammed. But here, inside, the three were aloft, riding the wind for joy. High about the ivory-elephant clouds, the boy clutched his stamp collection and looked down to see the world, small and lovely and perfect. And there, at the edge of the world. . .

"Come out of there, you three! We'll give you ten seconds to come out, before we laser the place!" shouted the telecommunications police.

But the boy was too far away to hear. "I can see it, Grandpa!" he cried. "Just like you said: There's a carnival and cotton candy and the Cub Scout weenie roast and a band concert in the park. It's a fine day and the flag's flying over the schoolhouse and kids are playing sandlot baseball and Mom's making popcorn balls. . ."

"Five seconds!" brayed rude cops.

Grandpa and the girl were both breathing hard back there. "Don't turn around, boy. Keep looking ahead. What else do you see?"

"I see. . .the angel postman! He's got valentines and Christmas cards, birthday presents from Mom and Dad, something for everyone! The secret message ring I sent for, and comics, lots of 'em.

"For you, Sis, a silver blackhead remover and some movie magazines. For Grandpa a *Reader's Digest* and a mail order catalog of a thousand pages! Oh, Grandpa, now you can order that truss you wanted!"

"TIME'S UP. ARE YOU COMING OUT OF THERE?"

"Gosh, Grandpa, and now the angel postman's bringing a big, big package! Nothing can stay him from his extra special rounds now—here he comes—here he comes—"

Grandpa and Sis were snorting like crazy back there, and bumping around in their compartment. The boy had to shout louder to make himself heard. "O angel postman, I know you're no ghost, you're really, really real! Oh golly, the package is for all of us, Grandpa and Sis! It's a big box of—"

The lasers worked their telecommunications magic, and the old hangar went up in one great flame.

"Funny," said one cop. "Thought I heard that kid scream: 'Stamps on approval.' "

They climbed into their car and drove away fast, not looking back at the hangar, which was turning red and orange and yellow, all the colors of autumn.

—JOHN SLADEK

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This issue is not really intended as a nod to the 1950's, but we should point to the spectacular growth in the quality and quantity of sf in that decade and mention that it was due in no small part to the contributions of four men whose work appears in this issue: writers Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth, artist Ed Emshwiller, and founding editor of F&SF Anthony Boucher. Tony Boucher also wrote several fine stories in the field, and we're pleased to be able to offer this never before published tale.

Man's Reach

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

HE LISTENED CAREFULLY to the baritone's opening phrases and after a moment jotted down the word *robust* on the pad in front of him. In another moment he added four letters to make it read *robustious.*

The voice rang big in the audition hall:

> To saddle, to saddle, to spur, and away
> In the gray of the glancing dawn,
> When the hounds are out with a treble shout
> And the whip and spur of the merry rout. . .

"A treble shout," he reflected, would nicely characterize that last dramatic soprano . . .The baritone sang on, as big as the hall itself; and as empty. Dear God, how long was it since anyone even here on Terra had indulged in the absurdity of fox hunting, and when would concert baritones stop singing about it?

An attendant was shoving a broom down the aisle, unperturbed by the baritone or anything else—even, apparently, by the fact that the aisle was perfectly clean. There was nothing to sweep away in front of his broom; yet oddly a scrap of paper remained behind it.

Jon Arthur was careful not to catch the attendant's eye as he let his hand slip down and gather in the scrap. He tucked it under the pad and resolutely kept his gaze on the baritone.

The hunting song ended. The baritone paused, made an effort to adjust himself to the logical fact that there is no applause at auditions, and launched into his second number.

Jon Arthur grinned. He had won a bet with himself; he knew that so robustious a man

would be bound to select Rhysling's *Jet Song.* The familiar words boomed worth with that loving vigor of all baritones who have never seen deep Space.

> Feel her rise! Feel her drive!
> Straining steel, come alive. . .

It was safe to unfold the scrap of paper now. Arthur read the four simple words and knew that the pattern of his life was changed:

Kleinbach is at Venusberg

It was the finest rice paper, of course, and easy to swallow. Gulping, he looked at his fellow critics and wondered how many of them would vote in the election (the last election?) with one tenth of the care with which they were now considering their audition ballots. And whether, if he did not reach Kleinbach at Venusberg, it could possibly matter a damn how carefully they voted.

Jet Song was over, and it was clear from all expressions that this baritone, at any rate, would *not* get the scholarship to Mme. Storm's Resident Laboratory. There was one more contestant, and Arthur grudgingly cursed the waste of even that much time before he could get started.

The girl looked like nothing much. Nobody had explained to her how unfortunate this year's styles were for tall women. Then she began to sing.

Jon Arthur hastily consulted the audition list and noted the name Faustina Parva. He began to make a note on the pad, then let the pencil rest idle in his hand while his whole being lived in his ears.

The music was almost as inconsequential as the baritone's hunting song—an arrangement of one of the waltz-like Martian *kumbus.* But the voice. . .

It was not only the rich solidity of its lower notes, its ease in the upper register, the unbroken transition over what must be damned near two and a half octaves, but the absolute clarity and facility with which it handled every trick in the conceivable repertory of the voice. It was cold; you might even say it was mechanical; but it was, Jon Arthur realized, the first time in his life that he had heard absolutely perfect singing.

He looked at the faces of the other critics. Good, there'd be no time wasted in balloting. The audition was settled, and he could stop being a music critic and take up the more important (and, his observing mind could not help commenting, somewhat more absurd) task of striving single-handed to save man and his system.

He always thought of the

penthouse in the Eighties, complete with view of the Hudson, as "Headquarters." It was another of the small touches of melodrama that he liked to insert to keep himself sane.

Steele Morrison maneuvered his pulleys and the outsize boatswain's chair swung across the room to greet him. "Sure," Morrison always answered the frequent protests, "I know with modern prosthetics I could walk as good as anybody. But then I'd get exercise and I'd lose weight; and every time I weighed in for spaceflight, I swore once I retired I'd be the fattest man in New York."

Jon Arthur shook the vast hand and marveled, as always, at the unflabbiness of its grip. "Somebody's tracked him down," he said without preamble. "He's at Venusberg."

"We do get some breaks, baby, don't we?" Morrison zoomed the boatswain's chair across its network to the bar. "Straight?"

"As usual."

"How soon you going?"

"This damned audition deal ties in like a dream. Since I was on the committee, it'll be a natural to sell the paper on a follow-up story on Mme. Storm's colony at Venusberg."

Morrison nodded as he traveled back with the drinks. You never went to the part of the room where Steele Morrison was; it hurt his feelings not to be able to zoom back at you. "Don't know why—had a hunch and did a little reading on Mme. Storm. Rumors of something nice and tender back in her great days between her and Kleinbach. Use it for what it's worth."

"She was a great singer. I've heard her tapes."

Morrison shrugged. "Something else too, I guess. Can a man fall in love with a voice, baby?"

Jon Arthur gave a little silent and serious consideration to his drink and (surprising himself) to the question.

"Matter? Did I say something?"

"No, just thinking. Making plans. The audition winner," Arthur carefully sounded as indifférent as though it had been the baritone, "leaves next Monday. I can set up the deal by then. Think it's worth one last crack at Weddergren in the meantime?"

Steele Morrison zoomed for a corner and traveled back with an election pamphlet in the familiar aseptic blue and white of the Academy. "Here's his latest, baby. It's out in the open now: no more elections, that's for sure. Antiquated and unscientific, seems as how. *The system is Man's laboratory*, he read, *in which he conducts the*

greatest of all his experiments: the shaping of his own destiny. To run this laboratory by democratic politics is as absurd as to base its experiments upon the 'laws' of alchemy and astrology. That's what the man says."

"The worst of which is that it so damned near makes sense."

"Baby," said Morrison, "I've got kind of a vested interest in this system. With one leg buried on Mars and the other on Venus you might say I sort of straddle it. All our kind of people a hundred years ago, they thought once we forgot nationalism and got world government everything was going to be as easy as a high jump on Mars. Well, we've got world government, no phony league but an honest Federation based on the individual as a unit—and that Federation is smack up against the most important election in its history without any possibility of electing the right party. If the Academy wins, we're a laboratory—which I give maybe one generation before it becomes a technological autocracy. If the Populists win—and may their jets clog forever for stealing that fine old word—we'll have book burnings and lab smashings and a fine fast dive into the New Dark Ages. And in between are the guys who don't care, the guys who can't be bothered, the guys who'd like to *but*. . ."

"And us," Arthur concluded, "keeping underground so we won't wind up in the Belsens of either side. . . I'm seeing Weddergren tonight," he suddenly announced his decision. "We've got to make one more try."

The system's greatest scientist but one, the Academy's candidate for President of the World Federation, was surprisingly accessible to Jon Arthur. A technician (the Academy was firmly opposed to a servant class, but a man needs technical assistants) ushered Arthur into the study the moment he heard his name.

Dr. Weddergren advanced, white mane and all, to greet him warmly. "Delighted, my boy! I was hoping you'd come around in person to congratulate me on my pupil."

This seemed a peculiar gambit even for an Academy politican. "Your pupil?"

"The Parva. Faustina Parva. The contralto who—"

For a moment Arthur was distracted from his mission. "Phenomenal," he admitted. "The greatest voice, I swear, that I have ever heard. But your pupil. . .?"

Dr. Weddergren allowed himself a patronizing smile. "So

you didn't know? You're like the rest, eh? The Weddergren Drive. . .the Weddergren Orbit Calculator. . . The shoemaker should stick to his last, perhaps, as those unscientific Populists keep striving to assert?"

Arthur had never quite realized that *unscientific* could be the most obscene term of invective in the language. "I knew, of course, that you were fond of music. . ." he began.

"Fond?" There was a brief glimpse of a sincerity which the Weddergren features had never revealed on a telescreen. "You might say that. You might also, if you wish, say that it is my life—in a way that the Weddergren Drive or even the Academy can never be. And this part of my life," his features took on again their reasonable persuasiveness, "offers fresh evidence of the nature in which science can guide and mold life in any of its aspects. As a music critic, you are, I imagine, somewhat familiar with vocal training and its methods?"

"I am." Arthur smiled. "It is difficult to imagine a less scientific field."

"Precisely. And yet what is its objective? To enable a machine to produce optimum results. The nature of that machine is exactly and minutely known. There is not the slightest mystery attached to the functioning of any of its parts. Yet instead of feeding into that machine an accurately punched tape, furnishing it with complete instruction on the control and articulation of each of its parts for every specified result desired, what do vocal teachers do? They teach by example, by metaphor, by analogy, by feeling and intuition! It is as though, instead of allowing a calculator the normal functioning of its binary synapses, you read it a lecture on the mystique of the theory of numbers!"

"There's something in what you say," Arthur admitted, with an eerie echo of his partial agreement with the doctrine of the System as Laboratory.

"The Parva," Weddergren announced, "is my proof. A good vocal organ to start with, of course. One does not waste time on a shoddily constructed machine. Careful analysis of the precise physiology of the voice. A long and detailed course of training, on strictest scientific principles with no mystical flubdubbery. Intensive hypnopedagogy until the mind has learned in sleep every minutest aspect of the volitional control of the vocal apparatus. That is all, and the result you heard this afternoon."

Jon Arthur's mental ear heard again the beauty, the perfection. . .and the hint of coldness. It was that hint which

enabled him to say, "Music is so often allied with science, isn't it? One has read of Einstein, and wasn't Kleinbach much interested too?"

Again Weddergren nearly forgot to be telegenic. "Kleinbach..." he said softly. "I studied under him, you know. I suppose if this century has produced a great man..."

"I've met others of his pupils, but they never could explain him to me. Perhaps you can, Dr. Weddergren. Do you understand why he did...what he did?"

"Vanish, you mean? Remove himself? To think we do not even know whether he is alive or... Frankly, I think I do. He understood the necessity for the Academy and for the steps that we shall take after the election. But he could not bring himself to face those steps in actuality. With all his greatness he was...a romantic, shall we say? Perhaps even an atavist. And yet I have sometimes thought... It was an equation of Kleinbach's, you know, that started me on the road to the Drive. And it was Kleinbach taking me to hear Storm that first aroused my interest in the voice. If I could talk to him, I've sometimes thought... If after the election he... My boy," Dr. Weddergren suddenly observed to a nonexistent telecamera, "I have no desire to talk anything but music with you. I so rarely have such an opportunity to indulge myself. You thought you heard something extraordinary this afternoon—as indeed you did. How would you like, now, to hear the only *perfect* voice in the world?"

Jon Arthur was all affable interest and musical companionship. He had learned what he needed to know.

It was as he left Weddergren's, still a little dazed by what the scientist had displayed, that the first attempt was made on his life.

It was a clumsy attempt and undoubtedly Populist in origin. An Academy assassin might simply have brushed against him and deposited a few bacilli; it was fortunate that the Populists' abhorrence of science extended even to its criminal uses.

The plan had obviously been to insert a knife between his ribs. The moment he sensed the rush of his attacker, he set hi muscles in the Fifth Position of *juzor*—that extraordinary blend of Terran *judo* and Martian *zozor* on which he had spent so many months under Steele Morrison's eye, with Steele's sharp tongue keeping him going whenever he was tempted to point out the absurdity of a peace-loving music critic as a *juzor*-expert secret agent.

Somewhat to his amazement, the Fifth Position worked. The Populist lay sprawled on the sidewalk, looking like a not too bright but rather friendly young man who has just passed out amiably. Arthur did not stop to check if the skull was fractured in the precise spot indicated in the book of instructions; he simply pocketed the knife and, once he had convinced himself there was not another on his tail, hurried to "Headquarters."

"So now maybe you'll begin to think it's serious," Morrison grunted after the third drink. "Until you reach Kleinbach and get back with his message—if he'll give you one—your chances of enjoying good health are about as good as for a bonfire on an airless asteroid. Especially watch it on the liner; they're bound to have somebody aboard."

They did, but it was a week before Jon Arthur spotted him.

The liner was one of the new de luxe fleet, completely autogravitized and hyperjetted to the point where the trip to Venus was cut down to three months. With the election seven months off, a half-year's round trip left him one month to find Kleinbach and persuade him; that was timing it as fine as writing music for split-second telecast tapes.

But all the time-tension would come when they hit Venusberg. For three months on the liner there was nothing to do but enjoy himself—and, incidentally, stay alive.

The latter task seemed to offer no difficulties at the moment; certainly neither did the former, once he began to become really acquainted with Faustina Parva.

The audition winner had at first treated him merely with the courtesy due to a judge who had cast one of the votes that sent her to Venus. The slight coldness that he had detected in her singing was accentuated in her speaking personality, and he was more than willing now to believe that she was Dr. Weddergren's creation.

Then, one week out, came the episode of her practicing.

Whether it was consideration for others or the sense of relaxation that strikes all space voyagers, Jon Arthur was uncertain; the first seemed a little unlikely. But for a week she had refrained from practicing. Now she began.

The most beautiful voice in the world (which it was quite possible that the Parva possessed) is somewhat lacking in appeal when it practices scales, when it takes one single phrase of great technical difficulty and scant musical interest and repeats it, worries it, frets it

until at last the phrase is perfect and the accidental listener is cutting out paper dolls.

No space crew in history has ever mutinied, but few space crews have traveled with a contralto whose tremendous voice can fill an amphitheater—or a space liner.

What made Jon Arthur pause in front of the captain's cabin was the unusual quality of intense emotion in the Parva's voice.

"You can't do this!" she was saying, toward the very top of her extensive range. "I *have* to practice. If I go three months without practicing, I'll land at Venusberg in such shape that Mme. Storm will wonder why they ever picked me!"

"If you go three months *with* practicing, my dear young lady," the captain announced, "there won't be a man on this liner capable of landing you at Venusberg!"

It was a pretty impasse, Arthur thought. Both parties were unquestionably right. It seemed a problem to which there was no key...

Key...

Key...!

Jon Arthur pushed open the door. "Pardon me, I couldn't help overhearing the discussion. Wouldn't it solve the problem," he hurried on before he could be interrupted, "if Miss Parva were assigned one hour a day in which she might practice in one of the air locks?"

Both captain and contralto stared at him, then turned to each other with broad smiles.

"So the key *was* the lock," Arthur was saying to the Parva later in the bar. "Vacuum-sealed, soundproof..."

"I'm afraid I'm very much indebted to you." She sounded as though she really regretted the fact. "First the audition, now this..."

"Honestly, I'm indebted to you." Why had he thought her plain at that audition? "Simply for existing with the voice that you have."

"Do you mind?" a man's voice asked. "Since we're all going to the same place, why not get acquainted now?"

The Parva seemed not to place him, but Arthur's mind rang instantly with sounds about saddles and hounds and the treble shout of the merry rout. The robustious baritone introduced himself as Ivor Harden, explained that though he'd lost out on the scholarship he had scraped up barely enough money to make it on his own, paid the Parva a pretty compliment on winning, and still without having allowed the interposition of a word ended with, "And what's that you're drinking, Mr. Arthur?"

"Bourbon over ice," said

Arthur, thinking that the least the baritone could do to atone for his interruption was to buy a round.

But Harden simply beckoned the steward and ordered one bourbon over ice. Resignedly Arthur ordered another and a Deimos Delight for the girl, and hastily threw the conversation back to her with a reference to Dr. Weddergren.

For the first time he felt a warm devotion in her as she spoke of the scientist who had molded her voice. The transference with singer and vocal teacher is not unlike that with patient and psychiatrist, and even Weddergren's purely scientific method seemed to have evoked the same phenomenon.

"He's wonderful!" she said. "There isn't a man alive who understands the voice as he does—and can make you understand it too."

"*My* teacher," said Harden, "says it's bad to understand too much; you should *feel.*"

"Nonsense!" Faustina Parva announced flatly. "You sound like a Populist!"

"That's bad?" the baritone snapped.

It was as well that the drinks arrived then; Populist-Academist arguments were never safe, and especially uncomfortable to Arthur in his loathing of both sets of extremists. By the time the drinks were signed for, the Parva was safely back on vocal training.

"And did Dr. Weddergren show you Marchesi?" she asked.

"He did—damnedest experience I've ever had, not even excepting," he added, "your audition." *(Was the corner of his eye tricking him, or had the baritone just dropped something into his own bourbon over ice?)*

"Please!" She was imperious. "Don't be gallant!"

"I'm not. Just factual." He looked at her for a moment with intense and concentrated devotion. *(Which allowed the move which he had next expected; with sleight of hand worthy of such legendary figures as Robert-Houdini or Rawson, the baritone had switched the two bourbons.)*

"Who is Marchesi?" Harden asked.

"You don't know the name?"

"Never heard it."

"That's odd." And it was, for a singer. "Considered the greatest vocal teacher of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and possibly of all time."

"Until now," the Parva interrupted.

"As you will. And Weddergren has his Marchesi too. Look over at the bar, Harden; you see

that electronic mixer?" Harden looked. *(And the bourbons changed places again;* juzor *training develops one's aptitude for sleight of hand.)*

"What about it?" Harden asked.

"It's a fine example of a usuform robot, made to do one thing superlatively well. Weddergren has made a *singing* robot—a precise reproduction of the ideal human vocal apparatus, but incapable of human errors."

"Not quite precise," the girl corrected him. "It has a slightly larger uvula than any human being. Dr. Weddergren thinks that's important; one reason he chose me to train was my uvula. Look—it's extraordinarily well developed."

She opened her generous mouth. Now the face which had begun to seem oddly beautiful to Arthur was distorted into a comedy mask; he leaned forward and peered, honestly interested professionally in this odd physiological fact. *(For one instant even the corner of his eye was observing nothing but a singular uvula.)*

"And does this Marchesi sing well?" the baritone asked.

"Perfectly," said the Parva.

"I'll agree," Arthur added. "But I'm not sure that's a desideratum. The voice is free of human errors—and of humanity." *(If I were Harden... He could have switched them then; if he did I should switch them back. But is he counting on that? Did he leave them alone so that I would switch them back and feed myself whatever he's slipped in there?)*

"Freedom from errors," the girl said a trifle sharply, "should be humanity's goal."

"Please! Let's stay away from politics and keep to music." *(Or is it indeed my turn to switch anyway? Where is it now? First he... Then..)*

The girl's glass was empty. "Gentlemen, neither of you's even sipped his drink. And I shouldn't have had two Deimoses; they're too sweet. I want a taste of whisky to clean my mouth. Which of you will be so kind?"

(Which glass is it? Which was the last switch? And if it is mine and I offer it, will he let her...?)

As if actuated by one control button, the two men rose, neatly upsetting the table. The two streams of bourbon, toxic and intoxicant, mingled on the floor.

It is not within the scope of this narrative to detail the three months of the trip. That scene in the bar was in its way typical enough.

Conversations, in and out of the bar, with Faustina Parva followed the same pattern. The

two were drawn together by their common deep devotion to singing, and held apart by the difference in their attitudes. And at the moment when Arthur was struggling hardest to repress a sharp retort to some philosophical echo of Weddergren, he would find himself wondering why he had never noticed before that she had unusually deep dimples, which lent a curious softness to an otherwise almost severely carved face.

There was no doubt that Ivor Harden was a Populust agent, and that his singing career was a fraud. His inadequacy as a vocalist did not prove it; some of the least talented can be the most career-minded. But it was significant, for instance, that he bothered to avail himself of an air lock for practice only twice in the course of the trip.

It was also not without significance that the steward reported his presence in Arthur's corridor just before the incident of the Martian sand adder in the bedclothes, and that he had left his palmprints on the cargo box which so nearly decapitated Arthur when the captain (his warmest friend since the lock-solution) was showing him over the hold.

Typical Populist scorn of the methodology of any science—criminalistics, in this case—not to know that palmprints are as sure as fingerprints, nor to realize that Arthur would long ago have unobtrusively secured all the baritone's prints (smiling to himself with the pleasant notion that something might be solved by means of the big toe).

The last attack came on the night of the captain's dinner. In the concert that followed, Arthur heard Parva sing (other than in practice) for the first time since the audition. She did not choose to unleash her pyrotechnics for this somewhat indifferent audience. She merely sang a few popular songs, and the dark rich purity of her voice was as clean and deep as Space itself.

When Ivor Harden began (he had the incredible nerve to sing *Jet Song* to the spacemen who had grown up on it), Arthur slipped out to the smoking chamber. Parva's singing had stirred him deeply (what was it Steele had said about Kleinbach and Storm?), but that was partly because he was a specialist, a connoisseur. He had watched the unmoved faces of the average listener. . .

The attack came from a direction which indicated the defensive use of the Seventh Position of *juzor*—which was also advisable because it was reasonably certain to leave the attacker alive. . .and in no mood to argue.

Arthur retrieved the weapon—one of those damnable South Martian thorns, as long as your forearm and instant death once the bloodstream meets it—and looked down at the gasping understeward. The door was still open; Harden was off to hounds with a treble shout for an encore.

Arthur weighed the thorn suggestively and nodded toward the source of the voice. "He hired you to do it, didn't he? So he'd have an alibi from the whole ship's company."

Nerve-wrenched and feeble though he was, the steward protested. "He didn't have to hire me. I'm as good a Populist as he is any day! The hell with science! Let's be men again!"

"And all have a jolly time sticking thorns in each other... Get out! Tell him he'll have to try again—oh, and another message: Tell him he's still flatting on his G's."

Tomorrow they would land. Ivor's opportunities should be plentiful on a strange planet. Now to stay alive until he found Kleinbach...

Irita Storm had been (Arthur had seen early stereos) as enchanting a soubrette as ever graced operetta and opera, with a voice whose light brilliance had been supported by a strong lower register. Now at 65, she retained only her middle voice, but with so complete a command of style and musicianship that you hardly regretted the absence of necessary notes. And she had so perfected the soubrette's art of coquetry that you could enjoy it as an abstract technical triumph without concern over the more physiological aspects of the male-female relationship.

But there was little coquetry evident, even though she was alone with a man, when she talked with Jon Arthur after first hearing the Parva. Her professional concern was too strong.

"Of course you were right as a judge to select her," she pouted. "It's one of those voices that make legends. It's in the tremendous tradition—Pasta, Mantelli, Schumann-Heink, Geyer, Supervia, Pharris, Krushelnitsa...and now Parva. And she's trained to perfection—nothing for me to do there. But my dear young man, can you imagine the greatest voice in the world with the emotional and interpretive warmth of a carefully constructed robot?"

"I can," Arthur smiled, "because I've heard it. The robot, I mean, and I will say that Parva comes closer to humanity than that."

"I'm furious, do you hear me? There's never been a voice so perfected—and so wasted! It's high time she came here!

Give me six months. That's all I ask, young man—six months, and you won't know her!"

Six months, Jon Arthur reflected as he left, and you may not know the system. . .

He had met one impasse after another since his arrival on Venus. He had expected to receive almost immediately one of the familiar rice-paper messages; he had received nothing. Even, in its way, more perturbing: he had expected the necessity of holding his guard high against Ivor Harden and his allies; he had moved unharmed through an apparently tranquil existence.

The cliff he was strolling along, the surf far below, reminded him of the Big Sur country in California. Venus had, in most respects, proved surprisingly Terra-like after the great project of the gyro-condensers had removed the vapor layer. But it was to him a Never-Never-Terra in which his tensions and problems seemed to have removed themselves—and thereby agonizingly increased his anxiety.

No clue anywhere to the retreat of Kleinbach, and yet the message had been so specific—and someone should have contacted him at once. There had been, he'd learned, two recent "accidental" deaths on the staff of the Storm Resident Laboratory. That might explain the lack of contact—but then what explained his own charmed life? Why not an "accident" to—

He heard a soft chuckle behind him and sprang around through one hundred and eighty degrees of arc so that he should be no longer between the sound and the cliff.

Ivor Harden smiled at him almost patronizingly. "These cliffs are dangerous," he observed. "You should be more careful." And he walked off with as strictly ham a laugh as any baritone ever emitted at the end of the creed in *Otello.*

Jon Arthur stared after him. In his preoccupation he had almost invited Harden to kill him. The opportunity had been perfect. But the baritone had declined it, and even made a point of stressing his forbearance.

Therefore. . .

"He's either dead or dying," he said flatly to Mme. Storm. "They don't even care now whether I reach him. But they're stupid—they may have guessed wrong; there may still be a chance. You *must* take me to him."

Mme. Storm fluttered her eyelashes with a skill rarely attained at an age when they are worth fluttering. "My dear boy," she murmured with the faintest hint of throatiness,

"flattering though it is to be accused of having a lover hidden away. . ."

"You're the only one of his former intimates on Venus. He loved you once. He'd turn to you when he was alone and dying. I've explained why I must see him. I'm forced to trust you. And you see what it can mean to—"

The deft gesture of Mme. Storm's right hand evoked a nonexistent fan, over which her old eyes shone with a far from old warmth. "Please, my dear. Don't make another noble speech. You see, you've done it. When you said he loved me *once.* I have to correct that: He still loves me."

"Then he *is* here!"

"Come," she said, and moved from the room like a bride.

The great and dying Kleinbach was trying to listen; Jon Arthur could see that. The mechanisms of bones and veins which had once been hands plucked senselessly at the covers, and the pallid eyes stared at the face of Mme. Storm (with the mouth of a coquette and the eyes of a widow) or at nothing at all. But Arthur could feel, almost extrasensorily, the desire to respond.

"You can save us," he insisted. "An authentic message from you—I'll take care of identity checks that will satisfy every expert. You're the man that they'll *all* listen to. To the Academy, you're the one man that even Weddergren feels damned near humble before. To the Populists—maybe not to their leaders, but to the millions who act and vote—you're a symbol, as Einstein was before you and as no Academist is: a symbol of something wonderful and strange but very human. You're the bridge, the link, the greatness that synthesizes opposites. A word from you—and the Center falls together behind that word, leaving the extremists where they belong, on the sidelines of man's march. . ."

"Shh!" Mme. Storm whispered. She had sensed the effort in the sunken face before Arthur could realize that the old man intended to speak.

The first words were in German: "*Es irrt der Mensch. . .*"

The emaciated voice dwindled to nothing. Arthur remembered the passage from *Faust;* something about how man must still strive and err as he strives. . .

The next words were in English, and were two: "*Man's reach. . .*"

Then there was silence in the little room. From some faraway world, certainly no nearer this than the orbit of Mercury, came

sounds of scales and vocalizing, those jarring preliminaries to beauty which characterize a school of singing.

Arthur never knew how long the room was silent before he realized that it was too silent.

There had been three different rhythms of breathing. Now there were two.

Mme. Storm looked up at him, at once older and younger than he had yet seen her. "It's all right," she whispered. "Don't blame yourself. You didn't. . . It was only days, perhaps hours. . ."

He leaned over and kissed her on the thin roughed lips. "From him," he said. He looked at the dried thing on the bed. "Cover his face," he said gently. "He died old."

To musicians, artists, writers, Venusberg means The Colony; to spacemen it means the most wide-open port in the system.

The first aspect had afforded Jon Arthur his excuse for coming; the second provided oblivion against the tragic failure of a mission.

It was two weeks before he even attempted to sober up. It was another week before he emerged from the pea soup fog of his hangover.

He emerged to find a batch of cryptically phrased spacegrams from Steele Morrison, whose general tenor was "any luck?" and another batch from his managing editor, whose general tenor was "Where the hell is the first article of the series on Storm?" He tore up both batches unanswered.

"The dark night of the soul" is a phrase invented by a great mystic to describe a certain indescribable and enviable state of mystic communion and dissolution, but it sounds as though it described what a less mystic religious writer called "the Slough of Despond."

It was night in Jon Arthur's soul, a night of blackest indifference. Not even despair, which implies a certain desperate striving; but a callous inability to sense the importance of anything now that the Great Importance had collapsed.

Weeks passed and the election was held on Terra and the Academy won and Dr. Weddergren became President and 720,000 people were killed on both sides (and on neither) in the Populist riots which the Academy's military technicians (the Academy did not believe in soldiers) finally quelled and Dr. Weddergren announced again that the system is Man's laboratory and as a token thereof canceled the municipal elections about to be held in Greater Hollywood and Jon Arthur did not give a damn.

More weeks passed and the

spacegrams kept coming and the last one said it was the last one because music critic and correspondent Arthur was no longer employed and Jon Arthur did not give a damn.

He had a few hundred credits left and the abandoned hut on the beach cost nothing and the hangovers were relatively shorter when you timed the bouts more carefully and there was much to be said for simply watching the waves to pass the time while staying sober.

So many people had come and gone in the hut on one night or another—Parva, Steele Morrison (with both legs), Kleinbach (reading a volume of Browning), Ivor Harden, even Marchesi once—that Arthur felt little surprise to see Irita Storm standing before him.

"You placed the quotation of course?" he remarked, as though they had just been discussing that scene in the little room.

"Of course," she said. "*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp—*"

"*—Or what's a heaven for?* Good question, that. *Andrea del Sarto.*"

"Very good question. Question that leads me, young man, to ask you to come to see me."

Jon Arthur decided that it was permissible to leer at imaginary elderly coquettes. He did not feel it fair of imaginary elderly coquettes to deal him an almost convincingly unimaginary slap.

"When you're sober." There was no coquetry in the voice. "If ever. For one thing, I want you to hear Parva. I'd really value your opinion—when you think I can get it."

It took almost two days for Arthur to convince himself that the brief scene had really taken place. At the end of another two he was neither trembling nor thirsty. . .at least not very much.

But he was trembling a little when Mme. Storm came into the side room where she had placed him.

"I didn't want her to know you were here," she explained. "It might have made her either very much above or very much below her usual form."

"I don't see why," he asserted argumentatively.

"Don't *fish!*" snapped Mme Storm—and then answered his fishing with an odd little smile that could have made her even greater than she was in her youthful career as soubrette. "But what did you think?"

"Astonishing," he answered soberly. "She's not only singing. . .she's living and feeling and. . .and *being.* She's cut the duralloy cord that tied her to Weddergren and Marchesi."

Mme. Storm looked smug. "I don't think," she said, "that the

President is going to like me."

Gradually the night began to clear. Music meant something more than the surf. And there might be meaning even in a life without Kleinbach, even in a life under the Academy.

And there was Faustina.

Most of her nonworking time they now spent together. Casually they ignored the fact that he was no longer the Great Critic who could build her career. They talked as fellow workers in music, planning productions, discussing repertory, making notes on the new translations he would prepare for some of her roles.

He decided to move from the hut to the Resident Laboratory when Mme. Storm asked him to give her pupils a series of lectures in music history. It was by then quite natural that Faustina should help him move such few possessions as he had.

And afterwards when they were sitting on the cliff she said, "I listened today to some of the tapes I made when I first came here. You know, I don't think I like that girl."

"That's funny," he said. "I was in love with her, in a way."

"She's too much like Mar— You were what?"

"In love with her."

"I must say this is a fine time to mention it!"

"Hardly realized it myself till now. Of course it wasn't anything comparable to being in love with *you.*"

She took both his hands in hers. "And you are, aren't you?" she said gravely. "You'd better be. . . It's ridiculous, I've learned so much from Mme. Storm, I think I've even learned how to be *me* from her, but I haven't learned how to flirt." He kissed her hands gently. "So I'd better," she went on, "just plain say I love you, and we'll both know where we are."

"We are," he said quietly, "on a cliff on Venus which might well be the Big Sur on that blue star up there. That far an Academist might go. But of course the correct answer is simply *We are*, period."

After a long time, when her mouth was finally not otherwise occupied, she began to sing. She started with *Plaisir d'amour:* "Love's pleasure lasts but an instant, love's regrets for a lifetime. . ."

There is such a voluptuous sweetness to sad songs when you are unbearably happy.

And she sang this and that, and *Greensleeves* and *Stardust.* And the beauty of her voice and the beauty of her body and the beauty of her love were one.

That night had ended the night.

The next day Jon Arthur knew what he must do, and it was not to give a series of lectures on the history of music.

Mme. Storm protested. "You, yes, young man. Do what you will. But not Parva. I'm not through; she's only great, she—" But she capitulated finally. "If you promise to bring her back—and as many other robots that well trained as you can find. I'll make wonderful people of them too." And the invisible fan bestowed a parting benediction.

The spaceliner office protested. "Last minute reservations are just impossible. Two cabins— We might be able to arrange one double. . ."

The captain protested. "Never heard of performing a ceremony on the first day out! I don't care if you can't go to your cabin without it. . .!" But he capitulated too, after a jocular suggestion that Faustina could stay respectable by occupying her old air lock.

They themselves protested, both of the Arthurs, against the inactive three months forced upon them by Space. But they too capitulated; a honeymoon is a honeymoon.

Steele Morrison protested, shooting himself around Headquarters like a schizophrenic yo-yo. "You'll never even get in to see him! And you'll do no good if you do. The idea's crazy; drop it and try to make the best of what we have!"

A series of domestic technicians and secretarial technicians protested. But once the message reached him, President Weddergren eagerly insisted on an immediate interview with Faustina Parva Arthur.

Excellent journalist though he was, Jon Arthur would never have attempted a description of the reactions of Weddergren as he listened to his pupil—for of course his first desire, before any such trifles as felicitations on marriage, was to hear her after her sojourn with Storm.

Surprise, resentment, perplexity—those were certainly, in order, the first reactions to this blend of Weddergren perfection with Storm humanity. After that the emotions were more complex. . .

At the end of the brief recital there was a pause. Then the President observed, "My dear, I sent you to Venus as the greatest *voice* in the system. You have returned as the greatest *singer.*"

And that was all.

It was the next day that the letter came—addressed not to Faustina but to Jon Arthur.

Their tenth reading of it was to Steele Morrison, who actually hung immobile for its duration:

Dear Mr. Arthur:

You are indeed a clever man, to realize the one thing that means so much to me that I can even, in its terms, understand an allegory that goes against my beliefs.

Yes, your nonallegoric suggestion is agreeable to me. The pressures of my office leave me little time to participate in the work myself; but my technicians will instruct you fully in my theories of physiology, in the demonstrative uses of Marchesi, and in the methods of hypnopedagogy. With these you may return to Venusberg and aid in establishing the Venusberg school of singing, the Weddergren-Storm ["She'll never accept that billing," Arthur interpolated] method, in which each contributor has something uniquely valuable to impart.

As to your unstated but implicit allegorical suggestions: I had known, of course, through our Academy agents, that you were working for some nebulous Third Force, and that you hoped to save the world with some message from Kleinbach. I knew even that you were present at Kleinbach's deathbed (Did it never occur to you that that baritone was too typically Populist to be anything but an Academy agent among Populists?) I had not expected the message to come in this form, or with this, to me, peculiarly forceful impact.

Science and humanity have made of Parva something which she could never have become without science—and yet something which the more absolutely perfect Marchesi could never become at all.

The analogy may be worth pursuing.

Respectfully yours,
James Weddergren

As Arthur finished, Steele Morrison zoomed across to the unsorted welter of papers which he termed his filing cabinet.

"I got me a letter today too, babies," he stated, brandishing a leaf of the same official note paper. "At first—hell, I don't know—I thought it was a rib maybe. It's about would I consider a cabinet post—*me* yet! And would I call at my earliest convenience with any suggestions as to psychological methods of preparation for a possible reintroduction of elections. . ."

Faustina opened her mouth and her throat. A three-octave run was as good a comment as any.

"Damn it," Arthur exclaimed, "I feel like singing myself. Something great and stirring and human and free—*Battle Hymn of the Republic* or *Thaelmanns-Kolonne* or *La Marseillaise!*"

Faustina began it. Her voice

was Man's freedom, technically freed by science, spiritually free in its own ardor. "*Allons, enfants de la patrie!. . .*"

"Hell!" shouted Steele Morrison, zooming toward the bar. "I know how to translate that: *Come on, kids, let's have a party!*"

So they did.

Venture clearance

We still have a few copies left of the following four issues of Venture Science Fiction (the February 1970 and May 1969 issues are now out of print). Each issue includes a complete novel plus several short stories.

- August 1969 — The League of Grey-eyed Women by Julius Fast
- November 1969 — Plague Ship by Harry Harrison
- May 1970 — Hijack by Edward Wellen
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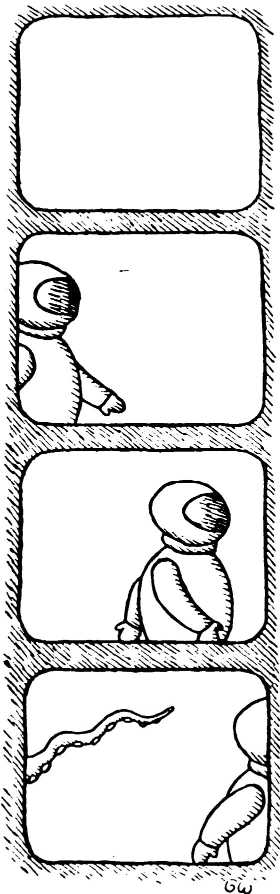
BAIRD SEARLES

FILMS



Dinner at 8 for the Mud People

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE was a tribe called the Mud People who lived in the forest and decorated themselves with leaves, vines, bones, and, naturally enough, a good deal of mud. They were happy, grubbing for food and burning and inhaling the smoke of their sacred leaves. One day at the climax of a particularly sacred ceremony (wherein the high priestess causes her year-consort's head to be bashed in), a croquet ball came flying through the air. Awestruck, the tribe abandoned their ceremony and went to seek from whence this mystic object came. On the way, they captured a girl of an alien tribe, the Seed Mashers. They come upon a classic Packard, and then an abandoned. mansion, gabled and pillared on the outside, fully furnished inside.

They settle in, lighting their fire in the library and curiously experimenting with the clothes they find. By midday, they have progressed into using language, playing croquet, wearing afternoon frocks and plus fours, and flirtations. The high priestess is the hostess of this weekend house party, the Seed Masher girl is the maid, the rest of the tribe the guests. At dinner, the height of civilization

is reached, the men in tails (formal, not physical), the women haute couture'd, all discussing the affairs of the world. A financier and a member of the nobility conspire, a foreign adventuress practices seduction, a musician talks about the popularization of art. After dinner, during a swimming session at the pool, "...the masks are off," as a subtitle declares. The company experiments with sex, drugs and mysticism; the pool and drawing room are abandoned for a mattressed crash pad in the cellar. Two of the more sensitive guests do themselves in. By dawn, the rest are reduced to speechlessness and an anarchic croquet game, batting balls senselessly about the grounds. The Seed Masher girl escapes to her own people, and the Mud People gibberingly follow the croquet balls into the forest where they have driven them. The musician, who has been practicing all night (once refusing to open the door to one of the sensitive types who later kills herself) emerges from the house, still formally dressed, and follows the tribe.

This is a brief account of the action of James Ivory's Savages, a film just calculated to set off all my negative responses. It is a parable, it is Meaningful, it is surreal, and at times it is downright obscure. Nevertheless, because I'm a sucker for croquet, old mansions and vintage films (I'll explain that tie-in later) and because the film is made with much intelligence and wit, I enjoyed nearly every moment of it.

It's the style that does it, of course, and the predominate stylistic usage is that of old films. The main titles are marvelously art deco, and the primitive sequence is done monochromatically (aping the tinted stock often used before color) and silently, with "informative" silent film type title cards. The ladies have a great deal of frizzy hair, and the men, despite an overlay of mud and paint, sport Valentino eye make-up.

The early "civilized" section has the dippy naivete of certain 20s films, though sound is used. And the dinner sequence is the height of 30s chic, slinky gowns, brittle conversation and all. Specific references range from *One Million B.C.* to Von Stroheim to *Dinner at 8.* As things go rapidly to pieces, the film style becomes more "straight," i.e. contemporary; you can judge for yourself Mr. Ivory's view of today's world. Agree or not, it's all great fun. There are moments of pure madness as when Carlotta, the hostess, wrapped in black like Snow White's step mother, is divining with a peach after

dinner, and sees in its convolutions an endless list of inane things ("duplicity. . .fly paper . . .weevils in the tea. . .trouble down the line. . ."). And not the least of *Savages*' charms is the wonderful house Ivory has found for a location, a house I happen to know personally. Not a mansion in the strictest sense, it's an endless structure, added to by generations, sporting an octagonal library at one end, a boat house at the other, *two* pillared porticos a la Tara, and true attics with slanting roofs, tiny windows and ancient trunks straight out of a classic children's story. I'm glad to see it used so well.

So if we must have satiric parables, let's hope they are all as skillful as *Savages.*

Things to come dept. . . Film productions of *Alice* never seem to come singly. Twenty years ago Disney's version appeared at the same time as a British puppet version (neither captured Dodgson's inspired madness). Now in the works are two more versions, one starring Peter Sellers and produced by the Mormon Church, the other designed by Peter Max and possibly scripted by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. The 30s version, starring W. C. Fields as Humpty Dumpty and Gary Cooper as the White Knight, is going to be hard to beat. . . Rumor hath it that next season on TV will bring forth an s-f series to out-Startrek Startrek. Let's hope.

Late, late show dept. . . Among CBS's crop of late movies was one unknown to me called *Eye of the Devil* (1967). Starring Deborah Kerr and David Niven, it's a neatly understated, intelligent thriller about the survival of pre-Christian king-must-die rituals on a huge estate in France. Having read the book on which it was based, I was terrified they'd fudge it with a happy ending. They didn't.

I can't resist ending this column with an anecdote I'd like to share. . .seems that last Easter a TV station in the Northwest was showing *King of Kings* and followed the kiss of betrayal by Judas immediately with the Certs commercial that goes "If he kissed you once, will he kiss you again?"

Jesse Bier (NO VACANCY, April 1972) offers a suspenseful account of a probe sent to the planet Zero-Four to investigate the disappearance of an earlier expedition. They find one survivor, alive and well, and yet disturbingly different. . .

The Man on Zero-Four

by JESSE BIER

BLAKE PHONED IN ON THE communicator that he was receiving a strong audio signal and asked us to hurry back to the ship. Four of us were in the recon car, and we turned to come in.

As we pulled around, Illyavitch cried, "Look," pointing to his left.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I saw something—there," Illyavitch pointed outside, "that boulder near the groves. Something either near it, or the boulder itself moved. An illusion, no doubt." He shook his head. He was still breathing hard, after we had just tried the atmosphere on direct exploration outside.

Lahnu asked, "We're on the *fourth* planet from Solarus?"

I said, "Exactly. Solarus is the same magnitude as our sun, in a system with almost the precise configuration of our own."

Illyavitch said, "This is one of the mathematically predictable replicas of Earth's solar system: 'Zero' for little or no change, except that here Three is not inhabited but Four probably is."

"That's bound to be true," I said. "At least it has plant life and a thin but tolerable oxygen level. The thing is, it's been thirteen years since the first fleet ship, with Claude Berniers commanding, landed here somewhere and has never been heard from again."

Lahnu reminded us, "We can't stay long. We have to find out whatever we can pretty soon. What did you mean, it was 'bound to be true,' then, that Zero-Four is inhabited?"

"You weren't in the control room when we made our approach," I said. "There's a network of silver rail lines or glass-inclosed tubes—their 'canals' or cities, further ahead—that must have been constructed by somebody. Besides, these stalks we're passing are set in long regular groves, obviously planted that way."

"And remember," Illyavitch added, "those slight indentations we noticed along each side of one of the lanes in there."

"Made by some vehicle," Lahnu guessed.

"Maybe," I said. "Or by the creatures who harvest the crop."

"Why didn't we head right on to one of their cities?"

"Because this is a paramilitary operation, especially when we're suspicious. We're scouting. Why isn't Berniers answering us, if he's alive? And if he's dead, who destroyed him and why? He was one of the most brilliant and reliable men ever sent out on our expeditions, and in his case, no news is *not* good news. We can't lose too much time, but we better not be careless."

We reached the *Socrates*, and Blake lowered the ingirding platform stages for us. We went inside.

"I've got a fuzzy but strong signal now," Blake said. "I think there's a voice in it."

He went back to the console. The rest of us watched him. Then it came through—the auditory signal first: "*Allo, allo. . .*"

"Not only human," said Petrov Illyavitch, "but English!"

"It's a French accent," I said. "That must be Berniers himself."

"*. . .Allo, allo, allo. . .*"

Then the telescreen image appeared.

Blake handed me the microphone bar.

"Professor Berniers, can you read us? We receive you well. Can you read us? Over!"

"Yes, this is Claude Berniers speaking. I hear you. Welcome to Zero-Four!"

"Thank you, sir. This is Ethan Powell, Acting Captain of the Second Probe. . .commissioned, among other things, to contact you. We're very happy to see you, and so soon after we've arrived."

"Yes, yes."

"We want to meet you soon. There are five of us, and we have no more than a three- or four-day supply of oxygen to remain here. That's in addition to our reserve for the trip back,

as you may remember. Can we find you?" I went on. "Will you join us? Are you well? Over."

"Yes, yes," he answered fast. "My crew is not alive, but I am quite well as the only survivor. And amongst friends. Now, will you trace a course of 70 degrees azimuth and proceed one hundred and sixty calibrated km's west, where I shall meet you? There is a hangar near there for your craft, and we—"

I clicked in again. "Sorry, I can't do that. We'll meet you halfway, though, say eighty km's due west of our present position. . .You have us plotted, then? Over."

"Yes, yes. . .but what is the matter?"

"Nothing, probably. But I can't trust your situation, under the circumstances. You could be under duress, for all we know."

Romero Castrillo, at the controls, nodded vigorously. I was doing everything right.

"No, no," Berniers replied. Then: "All right. All right, I shall meet you there in approximately forty minutes your time. Have no fear," he added. "It is good to see and talk to you."

"We'll meet you in a short time, sir. Out." Then I said to Romero, "Let's go!" And to Petrov, "Hold the weapons manual."

We took off. We moved at about 1000 altitude, just skimming, most of the time gazing at the endless high-domed groove of glass, or whatever it was, parallel to us, brilliant and impressive but impenetrable. We could not see into it.

At the rendezvous point, we waited a full fifteen minutes, watching. Then the radar signaled. Telescreen picked it up, a good way off on ground level.

"A car," Krishni Lahnu said, "like ours. In the grovebed."

Now the car stopped. Berniers: Earth's prodigy, believed annihilated in space, now trotting briskly up to welcome us on the next planet out from our twin world.

"He's alone," Petrov remarked.

Harris Blake lowered the platform stages, and we took him aboard. A long minute passed while he came up and we waited, expectant.

Berniers appeared. He held a small black box along his left arm, with his right hand spread on it protectively. He was much greyer and seemed more drawn or deep-lined and perhaps more abstracted than old pictures of him showed.

"Claude Berniers," he said, putting down the box he carried, advancing, and then one by one ceremoniously

shaking the hands of all of us.

In the silence and deliberateness, we were all affected. Later I remembered the impression or the thought, which I did not quite reach at the time: For a Frenchmen, why didn't he embrace us? But there are Frenchmen and Frenchmen, really the hardest to stereotype, and it was of no consequence.

I grasped his hand a moment longer when he took mine. "It's not easy to tell you how—"

Harris Blake broke in, "—Marvelous to see you, he means! And an honor."

Recovered, Berniers turned to the box he had placed on a console top. He opened it, producing a kind of crystal flask and a half dozen glasses of the same substance.

"My stars, a drink!" Blake said. "We're in civilization."

Berniers lifted up the flash for everyone's laughing appreciation, and then he poured out a kind of clear liquor.

"It must be vodka," Petrov Illyavitch said.

"Harris Blake said 'civilization'," I joked. "How could it be vodka?" I turned to Berniers. "It's more like absinthe. Which makes the heart grow fonder."

Then I raised my glass. "To reclaiming the man on Zero-Four, Claude Berniers."

"Thank you," he bowed. "And to this fond reunion."

We had a second drink. Harmless in taste, but not bad when it settled, really not bad.

"Well," I said, lifting my emptied glass high over my head, a trifle flamboyantly, and letting it drop to the floor to see if it would break, sure it wouldn't. It didn't. "It's not glass. What is it?" I asked Berniers. "And that long dome, alongside us, what's that. . .? And everything?"

He smiled, a little indulgently. "In time," he answered me. "Everything. . .in time." Then he turned to the other four as well. "I have a veritable palace waiting for you all. There will be an official reception and—"

"Where are your friends?" I asked, coming back again, "our hosts?"

"Captain Powell," he said. "I appreciate your altogether proper military suspicion. I understand that, of course. But there is, really, much too much to explain, at least all at once. It must come out in its due time, slowly. I am overwhelmed. And here, where the solar year, as on Mars, is more lengthy, I am no longer accustomed, anyway, to hurry. If you forgive me. . ." he added. I did not know whether that was a question or a declaration.

"But we are in a hurry to see, and to leave," I said explicitly. "Unless there is air in the cities or somewhere?"

"No, I am sorry, there is not sufficient oxygen for you. There are some specially fabricated oxygen cells—rooms—but that is of no long-term consequence, after all."

"But you, sir?" Krishni interrupted.

"I have become. . .adjusted, by now. But," he brightened, "there is so much to tell, come."

"And you'll be returning with us, after?" I repeated.

"Yes," he said. "I told you, yes. Your captain," he confided to the others, "has the virtue of willfulness—no, I'm forgetting my English—of persistency, that is it, *n'est-ce pas?* A generally fine characteristic, especially in a commander."

I was finding his manner a little bizarre by now. "I'll take that as a compliment. Excuse me," I said, turning to Blake, "push up the temp stat, will you please? It's getting chilly in here."

"That's odd," Blake said, "it ought to be at normal level." He went over to the temperature control unit.

"I must leave a man on guard, on general principles," I went on with Berniers, "but the rest of us will go with you."

"Something's wrong," Blake interrupted. "We're out of power."

Castrillo tried some other units. No luck.

"Impossible," Illyavitch said, moving forward toward Castrillo and Blake. "A reactor failure?" he added, unconvinced himself. "Except that we have independent units."

"That means simultaneous failures," I said. "Well, maybe, it's a short circuit. I knew we should have installed an old-time fusebox; we could fit an American penny in it now."

"This is not at all amusing," Petrov said, with controlled but intense concern. "It's. . .it is impossible."

"The inhabitants of Zero-Four, I may assure you," Berniers volunteered, "are far superior to human beings in such things. If they cannot find the trouble here in a single hour, they could build you a ship in a day. Do not be alarmed."

"Oh, no?" I said. I made up my mind. "Just the same, now I am going to leave these four here for the moment, and join you alone." I turned to the others, "Give Petrov a hand."

"But I insist," Berniers said. "Let us not change plans."

"Plans? *What* plans, *whose* plans?"

"I simply mean, let us all go, and we can arrange help afterwards. It is *facile*, easy. We need not further complicate matters."

"They just became complicated," I said. "No, sir. I'll go

with you alone." To Krishni, next to succeed me: "Give me two hours on the Earth-timer." And then, "After you, Professor." We used a spring-locked door on the aft side, and I followed Claude Berniers out of the *Socrates* onto Zero-Four. "We can always get help anyway," I said, "can't we?"

He nodded, though he seemed touched by a nicely controlled exasperation, or disappointment, I could not tell which. Anyhow, I took my helmet and then an H-rifle from a forward rack, as we left.

"You don't need what I think you have there," said Berniers.

"I know," I said. "But that's all right."

"You have seen the plants where you landed and all around us here," Berniers explained, "very precious. They are watered by incredibly heavy dews at morningtime, but just now there is something of a drought, rather serious."

We turned left at a juncture of two wide groves and then right at another. Ahead now loomed close above us a section of the domed glass tunnel or "canal" city. It ran continuously from left to right immediately before us, a few hundred yards ahead, with a height of about three hundred and fifty feet. Opaque glass or crystal.

Berniers said, "Zero-Four is rather cool, with never more than a maximum of about -3° Centigrade. These city walls absorb and elevate what little heat the day has supplied. And though these creatures have large eyes, they see poorly and appreciate enhanced light, too." He reviewed for me how each glass city encircled the planet, housing the whole population. With their high technology and ideal society, they moved from world-city to world-city, with their seasons and crops. "I call these cities," he said, "capitals, capitals of the universe."

"I begin to think it may not be so easy to tear you away from here," I said.

He did not bother to answer, and I looked ahead, admiring the big structure directly before us. We rode up to an apparently doorless side of the glass dome.

The wall surfaces were perfectly smooth and homogeneous, not constructed in blocks. Up close this way, they were still opaque, and I could not see further. We waited.

Very soon a minute split occurred in the wall surface, and the glass opened both ways, though I had no sight of hinged doors or any device as normal as that, only a sudden cracked aperture, widening. Then we drove through. Behind us, the wall seemed to solder itself together again. We were inside.

Now we were conducted on soundless sliding ramps, twelve feet wide, along the inside margin of the wall we had entered. Then we stopped before what I learned later was an invisible partition. When it opened, it produced a wedge of sporadic yellow neonic light, the double fringes of the opening door shaped like an upside-down "v", widening at the bottom to permit passage. We glided through into an enormous palatial room. Berniers motioned me to remove my helmet.

"These glass walls," he confided, "operate as a thick, self-regulating epidermis over the tube of any of their eight cities. I have not grasped all the principles involved. But I mean to say that it is with achievements of such cogency and magnitude that this species of creation fills its rational life. This particular apartment has been built and furnished especially for me."

"My," I said. "There's a Coleridge poem in my mind, but I don't remember any lines to suit the interior decoration."

Berniers' chambers measured about fifty feet in radius, with a beamless, vaulting ceiling high overhead. Among its furnishings were luxurious foam-blocks of material, designed in simple cubes for chairs and in rectangles for couches; an oval ebony-like piece with three columnar stanchions or legs, the whole set as a table in the middle of the room; on the inner walls a telescreen, globes of various sizes, and designed surfaces, inset; and to my left, on a raised dais, a small and ingenious replica of the solar system and next to it a modest planetarium that, Berniers told me, threw pictures on the vaulting ceiling.

"Astronomical movies," I said. "Do you have coming attractions?"

"What? Oh. No. . .I am afraid I do not remember earthly details quickly enough to appreciate all your wit, Captain."

He motioned me to sit at the table with him.

"Oh, I'm a very entertaining man. But observant," I said. "What are we about to eat?"

"Do you really think it may be poison?" he asked me.

"I was just asking."

"Allow me to sample it for you, as I did the liquor aboard ship." He ate, making a little demonstration out of it. "This is meat of dinosauric lizards, which you might have glimpsed in the fields. They feed, themselves, on a species of aphid that preys on the plants. Fortunately, they feed so well on the aphids that the plants are kept safe for the inhabitants."

"Not exactly a varied diet for everybody concerned, but a pretty balanced life?"

"Precisely. Simplicity, isolation and equilibrium. Now and then, of course, there are slight upsets, such as the drought just now. Also, from time to time, one of the reptiles collides with the inhabitants, and must be—"

"—Killed."

"—Neutralized."

"What's the difference?"

"All in good time," Berniers replied, smiling again. "But, yes, there is some killing: for this meat, for me. This is a great concession to me. Is it palatable, Captain?"

"I think so. Tender even, for monsters. But go on."

"It is a great sacrifice of their ethics, actually, and it makes me doubly humble before them."

"Well, I haven't seen one of them yet—anywhere, and there isn't exactly a crowded reception in here. You'll have to excuse me, but since I haven't been away all of thirteen years, on a strange planet, I have not yet lost some of my earthly directness: Just where are your friends? Where is the population of Zero-Four?"

Berniers put down his spoon, heaved a short sigh, and shook his head perceptibly. Then he stood up and walked to the wall on the right, touched a place with his fingers, and a vitreous section turned silently around. It revealed a simple machine with a kind of rubbery attachment that I thought was a mask, but it turned out to be a mouthpiece into which he spoke. His words were garbled sounds, producing after each sentence a series of electrical hums and bleeps in a kind of musical scale, mysterious but not unpleasant. He finished, replaced the machine, and came back.

"What I say," he explained, "is transcribed audioelectrically and instantly relayed to our perpetual hosts. The telemetric process is reversed for me to hear them—"

"Why did you say 'perpetual,' what was that for?"

"I meant something else. It's my English. Do you speak French?"

"I'm sorry, no. It's been very. . .social to talk with you, Professor Berniers, but you have a way of starting extra conversation until the question is lost, almost. How about these Martians?"

"Here is the point, then, Captain Powell. There are certain. . .peculiarities. . .in the inhabitants. One of them is a curious formality or ceremoniousness on first meeting. Accordingly, knowing you are five, they have insisted on a banquet—here, for instance," he pointed about us, "with all of

you present as a sign of your friendship and courtesy. They will simply *not* appear in the flesh before such a confrontation takes place. I have just reminded them that you are here now, but that won't quite do. I assure you, they are very mild people with vagaries which we really *must* indulge."

"Is that it?" I said, getting up and ready to leave. "Would they mind—or would you—terribly much if I feel a little put off? Meanwhile, I have to get back now. It's time, and I worry about my ship."

"May I suggest," Berniers said, speaking slowly, "that if you do discover a continuing emergency on board, your only hope may be in these superlatively skillful mechanics here?"

"Yes, their help—almost what I came here for." I looked directly at him. "If you weren't so famous a human being and a loyal one, I would have—right now—the feeling of being almost blackmailed. But," I added, "that couldn't be possible, could it?"

He shrugged elaborately.

"I'll compromise," I said. "I'll go to the ship now and send back the others. After they get back to me from the big welcome, *with* mechanical help, if we find that still necessary, I'll return for my own. . .courtesy with our hosts. It is as far as I'll go."

"Well—"

"In the meantime, I remind you—also purely extra—that I'll have all five H-rifles that depend on no circuitry and could, on full blast, vaporize anything in the way. You may remember we were on our way to such compact progress before you left. That's my decision. It misses unadulterated friendship a little, I suppose. Tell them I'm nervous after a long trip out there, they'll understand." I took up my helmet. "Now they—whatever they are—and you, too, have to indulge *me.*"

He went back to the wall transcriber. It took him a few minutes until he came back.

"*D'accord*, all right. A most regrettable modification, but a fair decision. Perhaps even predictable." He led the way. "After you, Captain."

Petrov was completely thwarted on the *Socrates.* If you knew him, you could tell that he was frightened. The other three were not exactly celebrating either.

They did not like my keeping all the rifles, but I insisted. . .I could mount four around each side of the ship, holding one in my hands, watching the screen constantly for anything on any side. I thought that was best, with my view out there, the longer

perspective. . .The way I put it was that I had not quite seen them, but had been inside, all right, and weapons would be considered a very unfriendly act, especially when I had been promised help. All in all, they felt relieved enough, beginning to thaw out and act a little gay, Romero Castrillo with his sunny face especially. And then they left with Berniers.

I sat down before the telescreen right afterwards. My palms were sweating; you carry your humanity with you.

All of a sudden I jumped up.

The telescreen, of course, was not working, nor the radar. Nothing. How could I have made a mistake like that? Very easy. There had not been any alternative, that was all, and my wishes had temporarily overtaken some facts.

What facts? I was not quite sure, of course. If Berniers were honest and sane, there was no trouble—it was all my own imagination, and it was a coincidence that the ship was now disabled. If there was not any coincidence, however, we were close to being helpless. Except that I had four guns on board and one to carry. Well, I thought, I have two hands. And I picked up another gun.

Then I left the ship, going down the platforms. My palms were moist, and I felt my neck cold where the hairs were up, and I told myself that it could not all be my imagination.

I spent an hour outside patrolling around the ship, feeling better going around like that rather than staying inside and looking out. It began to get darker. That, too, I had not judged right.

Then I mounted the platform stages and, operating the manual hydraulic lever, lowered the little atomic car to the ground. I turned on the lights, especially a big brilliant circling one at the top of it. I was debating whether to go riding around the ship for another senseless hour or stay put, when I heard something.

No, I did not exactly hear anything. I sensed something. Trying more and more to reason myself into calmness, I wondered whether or not my oxygen pressure had gotten actually quite low and made me really light-headed, and that was all. Or maybe there was a leak in my helmet. But I could not stop my feelings and especially the one feeling, or sensing, now—*now*—that there was something.

I placed the guns inside the car and got in, intending to drive around the ship after all. I started it up and moved it about a quarter of the way around. Then my top light, the big circling one, shone on a rock, and I maneuvered the car

to place the front lamps on it, too. A fat, heavy boulder. I did not remember one in that position. Not the kind of thing you would necessarily remember, however, or even notice in general. Still, something. . . .

I halted the car there and got out, taking one of the rifles. I had the rock centered in three trained beams, and all the while I studied it as I approached it. It was over ten feet wide at the base, six feet thick or high.

Suddenly, either my eyes blinked or I saw the rock move or, rather, *palpitate.* I held the rifle at hip level; then simultaneously I was distracted by a sort of low, brushing sound to my left, under some plants, and I shouted out loud, "What?" thinking or wishing it could have been an outsized lizard to my left, while aiming again at that rock and now certainly seeing it move—breathe with its whole underside—heaving a little. I meant to fire a control blast straight ahead, but the something on my left was another rock and it fixed me and I was done. I was absolutely paralyzed, falling rigid. I saw the circling light of the car against the darkening Zero-Four sky, and then I was being transported slightly aloft somewhere. Then I went unconscious.

I had met Them, and I was Theirs.

I awoke in a room resembling Berniers' apartment, only smaller. My "cell." I was no longer paralyzed. My helmet was off, the chamber being well-oxygenated.

I was startled by an almost noiseless but extensive movement at my back. Turning, I saw the walls split characteristically and Berniers enter, the partition resoldering itself behind him.

"Pretty good neutralizing," I said.

"Yes, for you," he answered, and he sat in front of me. He sighed almost genuinely as his only apology and the briefest preface to preliminary explanation.

"You were tracked in by the network of incredibly accurate radar here from a long distance out. The plan we formulated was to entice you, ship and all, into a hangar lower down the line, where further guile might have saved all of us unnecessary trouble. It was your sense of military form or caution which has cost the extra difficulty. . . and reversed the strategy."

"Terribly awkward of me. Human nature too, Professor Berniers. Remember?"

He shrugged and sighed again.

"The only apparatus with a mild ray discharge, one of my own designing primarily, was used on you. While you were at

the ship, we had to decide to subdue your colleagues here, with the more potent devices usually employed on the lizards when they're obstreperous. Unfortunately, the Russian and Brazilian, I am sorry to relate, died immediately. . .the other two somewhat later. The same sort of thing happened to my crew on the first probe when they preceded me out of the ship. In effect, they ran interference for me, and I was saved. And then I made the adjustment."

"And you're in great hopes for me, aren't you?"

"You are out of radiational paralysis. A great success, that. You have been unconscious for two days, you see, and I didn't know whether—Well, the nutritional problem seems as favorable for you as it has been for me. And as for the atmosphere, later on, we can only wait and hope for the best."

I did not answer.

"Captain, the inhabitants regret these peremptory measures, as menacing as they regard Earthmen, very much. I assure you of that. For, though you cannot believe me or understand me quite yet, they are reverent and gentle—as humanoids have seldom really been anywhere in the universe."

"I think you're either crazy or brainwashed."

"Only, at last, sincere, Captain. Honest." He stood up now. "Shall we pay our respects to your friends and then perhaps adjourn to my chambers?"

"Never mind the sad voice, Professor. Just open up the wall like that again, and let's go."

"My only corrupting contribution, I trust, to this Martian life," Berniers said afterwards in his apartment, pouring his crystal liquor. "I have worked out a distilling process for the outer stalk juices of the plant."

"Your only recommendation," I said. There was a self-collecting pause. "I might as well tell you what you know. I'll kill you or something the first chance I get."

"I know nothing of the kind."

"I told you that you were out of your mind."

"But I am not at all," he said. "I have never been more in my right mind since I've come here." He leaned over to me. "And you will come around—to your senses—too, in time. For now, I simply rely on the fact that I am—necessarily—invaluable to you."

"Don't exaggerate your importance."

Now he smiled. "If that is a general remark, I never do any more, Captain Powell."

There was another long pause.

"The inhabitants," I changed the subject, "are those. . .rocks? I am asking as a matter of information rather than sociability."

"They are more like great mantas," he answered directly, "with an appearance of rock while at rest. The large expanse of their underside constitutes their lungs, above which is a cranial organ about six times the size of man's. Thus, physiologically, they are almost all lung and brain."

"Do they have a heart?"

"Now," he grinned swiftly and broadly, "I *am* laughing. For all there is between us now, I rather appreciate you, Captain Powell."

"Just don't get familiar, that's all. Go on about these Zero-Four Martians."

"They are very strong, healthy and long-lived. . . though, like the plants, highly inflammable, inventing elaborate precautions consequently against combustion of any kind. A contributory excuse, you may understand, for their fears of any invasion or even visit. They are also telepathic."

"—And they're superior, of course. And I suppose that you, yourself, have 'developed' and that they trust you, since they obviously allow you to supervise and maybe educate me, for instance. You've been converted to their view of universal life, haven't you? And elevated to their opinion of—how would it go?—inferior human nature."

"You are rather quick, Captain. Good. All right," he admitted. "But it is *not* an opinion, as you put it. It is a conviction! Of the beasthood of mankind, of all humanoids everywhere. Yes. All the human histories of incurable egoism, of the dangerous compulsion to impose the will—all these inherent human traits are well-known to them by inference as well as by long-range observation."

"I said you were crazy."

"Am I?" He stood up, abruptly. "Allow me to instruct you graphically about something." He walked briskly to two globes at the back wall. "The planet Zero-Three," he said. "In the vast eons of astronomical time, Captain, only an infinitesimal remove from our own Earth in age—about one hundred and fifty years. Otherwise a parallel to our development. Look at before and after, Captain. Look!"

I went over to where he was. "I see," I said.

"With your eyes only," he replied. "Take it in with your whole being. As I have. Look at that one of the year 2108. And this one, next, of twenty years later, after the final destruction."

I looked at the shrunken land masses, the disappearance of coasts, islands, isthmuses. And so on.

"It is as if," Berniers said, "a demented person who thought he was Amerigo Vespucci drew a childish, bitten-off, forgetful map of his world, the way this second replica compares with the first. Only. . .it is the authentic one now. And it is not at all my solitary nightmare inculcated all alone up here, but the perverted reality created by our counterparts on Zero-Three: only one hundred and fifty years, give or take orbital variations, a century or so ahead of us."

I moved back evasively, retreating toward the center of the room.

"You go too far," I said "We know something cataclysmic happened to Zero-Three, and it is radiationally off-limits, but—you overgeneralize."

He came forward to me, in a sudden surge of passionate expression.

"I do, do I? I call the mass of humanoids insane. And also dangerous. With that," he indicated again the globe behind him, "and their world wars before that and with all the centuries of waste and homicide before *that*—go back, in any comparable system, as far as you like. Inferior human nature, yes! but nonetheless—or all the more—violent and very dangerous. I'll rest my case on these superlatively modern times, however, including a cobalt bomb some nation down there exploded on their moon and the resulting flood and quakes and perpetual radiation . . .You have seen the past—and the future, Captain. Now, with your whole being."

"But we've come a longer way on Earth, our Earth—"

"Since I left?" Berniers laughed sarcastically. "But before I left. . .do you remember a curious world-wide plague in 1977—they called it, at last, a neuro-plague? So many human beings affected, people's nerve ends becoming uncountable hot needles all over the body. And all the other symptoms. Neurotic payment for a life too embattled, too contradictory, and too guilty for over half the human race to bear." Agitated, he pressed his fingers to his temples. "I, myself, was afflicted. Only now," he took down his hand, "am I in proper, higher health. . .But let me test you on a more recent situation. You and your crew, your own people—"

"What do you mean?"

"Your trip consumed how much time, in your insulated Utopia?"

"Ninety-one days."

"Oh. Five men," he made a long division sign mockingly in

the air, "ninety-one days. And how well did your superastronauts get along?"

I sat down tensely. "Why. . .as good as could be—Normal, everything was. . .normal."

"Are you commenting because you are afraid to report?"

"No!"

"Well, just confess it, say it out, then."

He stood or loomed over me, pressing for the truth he wanted.

"We. . .developed some minor irritations. But that wasn't abnormal. All right, then! There got to be. . .arguments, as we went on."

"And little 'insignificant' shifting alliances, perhaps?"

"Yes. Maybe *yes!* But it was all temporary—"

"No."

". . .Resolvable trouble—"

"No."

"—Just overextended. What I mean is ordinary human—" I was staring at him.

"Human. . .*what?*"

"Damn it, we were still functioning!"

"Except that a little more time—another two weeks, maybe days?—would have produced five different violent mutinies in five different senseless directions? Isn't that the truth?"

"No!"

"And in the excitement of the landing here, you were all simply pulled together for the moment again. . .? 'No' is right, your select five failed, too. You are correct about one thing: It was, precisely, because you were human." He relented, stepping back. "Now, shall we return to your quarters?"

I got up to go with him. "I can recognize what probably amounts to an order," I said.

He flushed for a quick second or two and then he laughed good-naturedly. "Why, you are a man after my own heart," he said.

"Oh, no, I'm not."

We went back.

At what had become my "place" now, I asked, "And how was our ship disabled, after all?"

"It was 'staticized'," he answered, "with a certain magnetic instrument that disrupted all power, that is all."

"And the instrument was where?"

"Let us keep that my secret for now," Berniers smiled indulgently, "I shall tell you by and by. For now, *au revoir.*"

We were, a few days later, in a huge hangar for Zero-Four spaceships, land wharfs, really. We stood a long while on a suspended platform halfway to the roof, looking down from a height of over 150 feet to the hangar floor below.

"Their spacecraft are as big as—steamships: incredible," I said.

"I thought you'd think so," Berniers replied. "Come, let me take you to the telescope, too, as I promised."

Our transportation consisted mostly of moving ramps and, two or three times, a kind of void elevator or vertical pneumatic corridor. We arrived finally at a Zero-Four observatory.

Inside, it was immense, constructed in successive perimeter levels that had no visible buttress or central support, making room for a telescope reflector three times as large as the one we built at Antarctica. When his adjustments and preparations were complete, Berniers motioned me forward for a look. It was early evening, the northern quadrant of stars and outer planets quite stark in this Martian sky.

With such a view, what eventually caught and fastened my eye was a miniature but unmistakable Milky Way, whitening the heavens in an irregular sweep relatively close by. I backed up, glancing inquisitively at Berniers to explain what I had never seen or even heard of before. He motioned me forward again, smiling.

I looked once more. Beyond this proximate filmy band of starlight I noticed a huge boreal effect, scarcely believing either the clarity or meaning. I stepped away decisively and looked at Berniers.

"What you see represents a field force," he explained, "debris of collision stars or some gigantic implosion from within the neighboring galaxy; we can't judge that for sure. But we can tell this for sure: It is a wall of nebula radiation and cosmic lightning, impossible to pierce. It unmistakably bounds this side of the universe."

"We had no idea—"

"Of the fact? It is momentous, Captain Powell. The fact is this: These inhabitants, advanced as they are, cannot venture into far, outer space. Because those forces, quite visible from this planet, represent bars! These Martians have tried, but it is hopeless to pass beyond, even for radio waves and present technics of time warp. Absolutely hopeless! We are all—human beings and Martians of every stage of evolution—*limited*, Captain. Our will is confined by an insuperable reality, here at last. And such limitation must be categorically—and maturely—*accepted.*"

He paused. The prickly hairs on the back of my neck seemed to be vibrating. Now Berniers' eyes narrowed fanatically, and his voice turned tremulous

though he declared himself strongly.

"Here at the nether reaches of the whole galactic system we are at last brought up to our limits. How about this unthinkable possibility: that we ultimately cannot transcend those limits or ourselves, that we can*not?!* And that there are not infinities for us, which we dearly love to believe, but. . . bars? All Earthling imagination is infantile, proceeding from ignorant apes of men, willful and unrestrained and dangerous."

He shook his head and then turned to retract the telescope.

I waited near a transparent section of the outer wall. When he was finished, I signaled to him to come over to where I was waiting. I pointed outside. "The *Socrates,*" I said, "only about a kilometer away."

"Yes, it has been towed in close, waiting momentarily for expanded room in the hangar that houses my old ship."

"Waiting for its place in a museum, you mean. To mark the final end of something."

"Say it is a museum-garage, if it makes you feel better. And now, don't be so grim. You stand here at a beginning, not an end. Accept that, and believe it."

"Well, well," I said, walking out ahead of him, "there's your first cliché, Professor."

Back at his apartment, he continued over drinks, determinedly. At the very least, who could blame the man on Zero-Four after all those years of his solitary confinement?

"But what I said before was the truth. You still do not like the full truth. . .Ah, all of you always choose the wrong optimism or the wrong pessimism. . .I begin to see your humanity more like self-deceiving ants than even ignorant simians, come to think of it."

"*My* humanity? Are you—" I caught myself short. "Anyway, ignorant of what more than you've told me already?"

"Of the general scheme of creation, of this gigantic cage of nature, over all systems, of the keepers who abide the skies."

You could feel the man himself, as well as his words, on the ascent again. "Keepers?" I stared at him. But he was on his way now, soaring.

"What are those stars, those suns, out there?" He stood up, waving half to his model of the solar system in the corner and half to the vaulted ceiling and the heavens above our heads. "They are energy, the irreducible reality. Incalculable energy, massed intelligence—that which all life depends on and is made of—peering, in their incredible dimension, out of the immeasurable arc of void above us, like eyes. Immeasurable to us, as

ants do not comprehend the vast earth and sky around their all-in-all ant hill. I tell you that we are watched out of that vastness by those eyes, here on this or any other crusted hill of rock and nickel, in our fastness, in our cage. And our particular sun is our singular ward-keeper, fixing us with his eye. We are in a universal zoo, peered at by gods who are all eyes!"

His voice became high and querulous now, breaking over his words. He was seized by his own conviction, insane or eloquent or both together, and I listened transfixed.

"It is they who out of their visioning mind send us, in distant waves, these half-thoughts of our condition. And that is the only true freedom—that miniscule understanding, that divining—which we may register dimly. For the rest, we are *barred* in, and all—all here below—are watched through all the nights of space and time. And we imagine that *we* look at the stars, as through a lens, at those enormous winking eyes there in the enveloping darkness. *They* look at us!" He dropped his voice, coming toward me again, subdued. "And we must kneel to them." He paused, finishing. "There's your true belief—accurate and astral."

But I had an altogether different revelation, for which I was thankful and wonderfully deceitful.

"Marvelous!" I told him.

"You understand, you begin to perceive?" he asked, triumphantly.

I took it up. "Yes—I think I do. Yes. But it's difficult to grasp completely. Listen, now that you've got me going, that observatory—could we go back there?" My private and real excitement helped my dissimulation. "I want to look again, I mean, from this new angle."

"Good. All right, we can do that."

"I mean, at daytime, especially. Then I can take in the full impact of the machinery itself, study it for a while, so that I'll know I'm not being hypnotized, but that the instruments are really as stupendous as they seemed there, and the meaning of the view, too. Can we go back like that? I'm beginning to be impressed."

"Well, all right. I do not quite understand if you are more impressed by the technology or the view, however?"

"Oh, yes, the view. I meant, we'll get there in the daylight and stay naturally for the viewing. Of course. Everything depends on what we'll see. We can start early in the day, however. Even about noon, say?"

"But the interior lighting

facilities are adequate at any time, I find."

"Maybe so, especially for you, after your eyesight has been modified here all these years. But I still need more light on the subject, in all ways."

"*Bon!* After all, it's new to you."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"So soon? Really you surprise me—"

"I'm burning with interest."

"Well, I confess that I expected a rather longer wait for your—shall we say?—illumination."

"Yes, let's put it that way."

"You're a volatile man, Captain Powell."

"But what's wrong with a man suddenly fired up by enthusiasm? Let's go back. Soon?"

"Well, if you insist. Back to the observatory tomorrow noon."

"Good!" I took up my helmet and moved to go quickly and then more deliberately, calming myself down as needed. "Very good."

The sun was just past its meridian according to the disctimer that I glanced at in the observatory. We came inside the big amphichamber of the telescope again.

I walked around slowly with Berniers, a suspended and painful interlude, while I examined this device and that, going about with Berniers at my elbow. Most of the equipment was guided by electron streams, Berniers informed me, talking eagerly all the while. He was really very happy to have an audience at last. We stopped, finally, at the console desk for the big lens and reflector.

"This control system looks very complicated," I said, nervously enthusiastic about it.

"Does it? On the contrary, it is the least complex of all units, merely a series of activators for the computer banks. Rather simple to operate."

"Yes? Can you give me a short demonstration again? I wasn't focusing yesterday."

"But of course. Here we go."

He showed me. I missed nothing.

"They have any bigger ones than this?" I asked.

"Actually, this happens to be one of their bigger ones, having probably the most powerful lens with absolutely no spherical or chromatic distortion and the largest paraboloidal mirror."

"And secondary reflecting mirrors?"

"Why. . .yes."

"Do you mind if I try the feeling of budging it myself?"

"Of course not," he said, "I am right here to help if needed."

Then I tried it. I was

perspiring, my hands were very moist, and my temples were running under the helmet I wore. I calmed my hands.

"This switch over here," I said, "and then that pedal, and now this." The telescope whirred, turning. "And this for elevation, correct?"

"Yes. Easy now," he said. "That is getting it a trifle too perpendicular. You had better release."

"And it's this series," I went on, "that revolves the paraboloid mirror and the secondaries."

"You must release the elevation control," he said very loudly, beginning to shout.

So then, I had it.

"I *must?*"

"Yes!"

He moved forward quickly—but I caught his wrist with my left hand now and punched his bare face with my right. He went straight down. The fact is that I had hit him twice as hard as I could have done on Earth. There are certain advantages to any Mars.

I went back to the elevation switch until I had pointed the telescope directly at where I gauged the sun to be, where it was beaming straight on the closed roof slit. I moved very swiftly. There would not be much time before they either discovered the queer and menacing direction of lift when I got the telescope out or otherwise learned what I was doing. Then, again from the control desk, I maneuvered the mirror surface down to about 60°, then better and right at exactly a 72° incline. After that, I managed to place the whole reflector close up to one of the telescope's broad eyepieces. . .so broad and quite big for those wide-angled manta eyes to look through—and for me now to do what I wanted to do.

I removed the protective sleeves and guards at the lower end. Now I fumbled at the desk for some moments to discover the correct switch for retracting the top guards at the external terminus of the telescope. Then I found it. And then I ran to the other side of the observatory and pressed the palm-sized button for the roof. It opened. I came back and located the thrust knob for the telescope. Then—I held my breath.

I had no weapons, no H-rifle, nothing. But I could still think—dangerously enough—but why apologize for surviving? I also remembered the uses of a magnifying glass. The sun was weak, I knew, but the lens might be willing, And the mirror, that magic mirror.

The beam was focused on the surface curving away to my left, way down at the base of the central wall of the

structure. Within seconds, the area began to heat and steam. I took a short, moving ramp down from the perimeter level where I stood to the floor below, running with the descending ramp.

When I got down there, the wall was peeling rapidly, a big hole already being bored through, the edges of it folding back with slightly pink and green traces of flame. It was hot and I could not approach very near it. Let 'er rip! Let her rip—wide enough for me to pass through. I could count on Berniers. He was resting soundly. But them? Hurry up, I said to my hole in the crystal wall, really widening now and burning all around its expanding circumference. Hurry up, hurry up.

When the hole grew big enough, quite through what I saw now were many successive layers of membrane in the crystal glass, just then I heard a kind of humming noise. I did not understand immediately. The hot circumference of the bored hole began to cool, although the lens-to-mirror beam still played upon the area. Then I knew.

I ran with the ramp up to the control level again. I switched off the necessary buttons, fumbling, fumbling. Then I went back down, running again with the ramp. Luck, luck, luck! Their fire controls, built into the walls, were cooling the area, the cooling timed just right to allow my getting through now, without delay. Fireman, save my soul! I began to squirm and thrust myself through the passage.

The thickness of the wall, I saw, measured from seven to eight feet. The hole, perfectly symmetrical, was about a yard wide, although it seemed curiously less than that as I slid myself along, crawling through, now reaching the center portion of the little tunnel about four feet in. It was getting tighter, tighter—with the outside not far away from me. I could not seem to make it. I pushed and forced myself another foot, and another few inches, nearer and nearer to the outer edge, but very cramped, squeezed. It was closing, the wall was closing!

They not only had automatic, built-in fire control, but a crystal glass that healed itself. Kubla Khan!

I got my head out, pushing, pressing and wriggling all the time, almost swallowed alive. Help me! I asked Something, Somebody, Some Star. I got my hands and arms free, and with leverage on the outside surface I pushed and pressed again, twisting and forcing, until I pulled out my hips and then my thighs, aching, feeling crushed;

and then I slipped out one whole leg and finally, not knowing where I got my strength, pulled out the other and fell to the ground close beneath me.

Then, the process being one of acceleration, the hole closed up more and more rapidly to about six inches, to three, one, and then nothing. Healed and shut.

You've got to go, I argued with myself, don't lie here. Please don't be crippled.

I stood up, wobbly. My helmet was bent and dented, yet whole, but my suit was torn and shredded. I was in one piece, however. My flesh was tumefied with bruising, but no bones were crushed. I ached everywhere, especially in my hips and thighs. But I was out.

I was out.

At the ship, I sank to the ground for a long moment, still aching, tinsel in the knees, trembling all over. In that twilit Martian daylight I had stumbled into stalks left and right on my way, cutting myself further in the confused collisions and falls. But I had made it. Then I got up.

Orangutan, I told myself: go on, go on.

I pulled the ship's manual lever and got out the car. Then I went up the platform stages to the ship. I was pump-plunging my leg muscles to keep myself upright and moving as I got into the ship and went over to the supply closets. I searched one and then another and still another, but my eyeballs pained so near to splitting that I could hardly see. I found the transistor-amplifier tube and a speaker cone, picked up two hand communicators and went out.

I connected the little cables of tube and cone to the special attachments on the small nuclear reactor pile under the car's hood. I worked, concentrating as well as I could, but my fingers kept slipping. I cursed my stupid hands. Baboon fingers. I made the connections finally, and then I took the communicators over to the other side of the roadbed and simply opened them up and put their thick convex covers together to form a lens and focused Zero-Four sunbeams on the broad leaves of over a dozen big green and some slightly tan, and all wonderfully dry, plants. Their plants. For good measure, I burned about ten more above the place where I had started and then again below. They all took off fine.

After that, I dragged myself back on my hands and knees. Two peeled strips of the styrofoam plastic covering on my crushed helmet spiraled down over my forehead, limp

antennae before my eyes. I crept back to the car—like an ant now.

I took the speaker cone. I shouted in it, though my voice was hoarse and weak. But the amplifier tube caught and held it, and it carried far, far enough.

"Berniers! You'll hear me now, someway, don't ignore me.

"Free this ship! Free this ship!

"Or I'll burn everything. I'll burn it all!"

He came in, on one of his own. Or maybe it was on telepathic microwaves or something else; I couldn't know. I didn't care what they had.

"You wild man," he said.

"You'll be turning to all the clichés now. You—you triple-timing prodigy, Berniers. They must have lobotomized the common sense right out of you sometime, and you never knew. . .free this ship, free it, or I'll burn everything. You hear me?"

"Powell, you are precisely reverting to type. Acting in sheer violence and from panic. This is savage—"

"I'm covered with guilt." I was sagged down—from fatigue. "Stop talking."

"Stop firing the groves."

I heard him. I let go of the speaker cone, edging over to the right side of the road now, down behind the ship. I lit up some more plants on that side. Then I crawled back.

"I'm taking off the chill. Can you see some more going up, wherever you are? You see that?"

"Stop. Stop it!"

"Listen. I'm going to get in this car. And then I'm going to go along the whole lane and into every alley grove I can find, taking every turnoff I can, everywhere. I'll burn it all, fast enough, before they get me. Or maybe they won't get me so fast, with this fire around here, right?"

"You have to stop it."

"I'm getting into the car, Berniers. I'm in it now. You hear me? Now I'm starting. . ."

"Wait. Don't! All right."

So. They had not quite perfected fire control in the fields. That would have covered a whole planet and taken maybe another million years. I happened just a little too early for them.

"I told you I'd do *something*," I said. "Quick: de-staticize, or whatever you call it, this ship of mine."

"Go inside," he said. "You have some education, but you forgot your Homer. That box I brought in the first time, with the welcoming flask in it, it has a false bottom. Smash the coil inside the mechanism there or throw out the box. . .I can only

regret not to have had it carved like a horse."

"Don't anybody come near here yet," I said, and then I left the car for the ship.

I got the box. I smashed the coil in it and I threw all of it out. Then I turned on switches. Everything worked, the gyros whirring and the accelerometers registering. I didn't even bother taking up the car, but I pulled up the platform stages, pressed the central control knobs for starting and computer operation, and then grabbed hold of the atomic weapons portable switchboard, holding it wherever I went in my rounds.

Even the rations were still on board. So was the oxygen supply all right, untouched. I could not have lasted much longer without it. I spoke to Berniers over the heterodyne now.

"We all kept forgetting details," I told him, "at different times, which shows that *everybody* is limited, all right." He was not answering. "It's getting hot all around here. I'm taking off. Remember that I have a weapons switchboard in my hands and that I trust you and your Martian mantas as far as I can throw a comet."

I was set. I pushed in the steering engagement.

"By the way," I said, "you can always still hope for a meteor collision, at that. Maybe I won't make it back. Does that cheer you up?"

He still did not say anything. I took off.

The ship launched perfectly, right up.

They came at me in thirty minutes, but they had no advantages out there.

The radar picked up the first one, closing in all of a sudden and very fast, but still far enough away. There is a crimson glow on the central radar scope for warning that targets are too close for explosion. I saw it coming in just as the scope window was beginning to tint, and I hit it then. There was an intense ball of purple fire on the telescreen, where the picture arrived now, and then I did not need to look any more.

Two more came in ten minutes later. Watching the scope, I centered one of the pair and caught him also.

I thought I had time for the third, but he powered through, the scope all blushed up crimson now, and all I could do was maneuver. I banked the steering and set its automation control to move the ship radically up and then, with a safety margin for myself inside, down again. I hoped that would do it, and I belted myself before the scope, waiting. He

came in, looming very large. All I could do was wait. The ship had banked and now was rocketing up. One, two, three, four. . .I counted up to ten, and then the *Socrates* plummeted down again. I sat, lashed in the contour seat, in front of the scope. The target object practically filled the scope window now. I squeezed my eyes shut for a long moment, ready for impact and a sense of eternity, and then—nothing. Nothing happened. And I looked again and the image was smaller, shrinking, on the scope. The telescreen showed it, too, a tremendous ship, going away. At our speeds he must have missed me only by about fifteen miles, very close.

Now I waited again, the radar tracking him uninterruptedly. When the crimson began to fade, I still had him centered, and I got that one, too.

I took the prepared black coffee from the pantry and drank all I could of it, trying to stay awake. I ate some protofat and then I swallowed intermittently about four or five dextro-myoline capsules. And then I waited. . .

It was a smaller ship, all right. Like mine. The radar caught it first. I got ready, my fingers on the portable switchboard, poised.

Then Berniers telecast in, appearing on the screen.

"You must not get back," he said at once, without formality. "You must not."

"I am receiving you well," I answered. "Go home. . .out."

"Look at all that has happened," he said. "What can we expect later?"

"I've had my philosophy with you," I said.

I kept watching the scope, the center grille lines.

"You are the babies of the system," Berniers said, "willful and destructive!"

"You did all right with my friends, though."

"I explained that. Oh, it is hopeless. And you are all treachery and murder."

I was waiting for him to be centered. He was getting there.

"We haven't had time enough. Maybe some of the ancient history of Zero-Four Martians isn't so pretty either. Go home and read their memoirs. Get out of here, Berniers!" I did not want to do it, maybe.

"Return here," he said. "You will never be the same, yourself, back there, anyway. After this."

He was just about centered now.

"I. . .know myself. Don't. . . tell me what to do. I'm telling you. *You* go back there. You. Now! *Now*. . ."

He was just right now, and I

had him, and I let go—

It was. . .it was a duel, and I shot first. Because there was no referee. That is the way it was.

I watched the screen, not being able to help myself. A ball of purple fire, just right, turning light blue, with streams of black, then all of it cloud-white, then gone.

All gone.

According to the Earth-timer on board, it is May 6, 1990.

I feel held together by hot splintered filaments, and my eyes ache.

I am in a state of modified shock, but my mind is clear. . .clear. If there are no further attacks, I shall arrive in eighty-seven more days.

But I hereby report—*now*—that as captain and survivor of the Second Expeditional Probe, I have contacted—and escaped from—Zero-Four, and met—and destroyed—Claude Berniers. I have killed the man on Zero-Four in self-defense and in the interests of humanity. That is my service.

This is my fear: What I shall not be able to remember sufficiently for the intelligence people or be able to explain to the doctors when I arrive. That I have atomized him into the stars, made him a part of the skies of each night I shall ever see. A ghost with a billion eyes.

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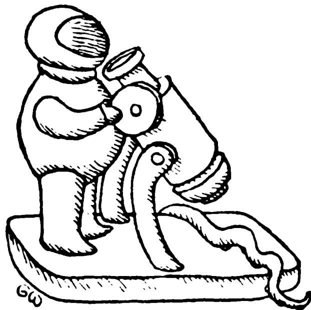

THESE ESSAYS CAN COMplicate my life. Writing one each month on any subject I choose makes me sound like an authority on everything. For instance, a couple of years ago I touched on astrology in one of my articles. (See THE STARS IN THEIR COURSES, F & SF, August 1970.) The consequence was that I was instantly pinpointed as an expert on the subject, and one who wasn't afraid to speak out against astrology, too (something apparently not easy to find).

So, about a month ago, a newspaper reporter invaded my office with a tape-recording device, turned it on, and proceeded to ask me questions. I obliged and talked quite forcefully on the subject of rationalism versus mysticism—with myself, as all my readers know, on the side of rationalism.

When we were through and the reporter was packing up, I said on impulse, "I will give you a practical example of the difference between mysticism and rationalism. A mystic would accept the fact that that

little object has recorded our voices just because you say so. A rationalist would say, 'Let me hear the voices before I believe.' "

The reporter smiled. He said, "I have recorded hundreds of interviews, and this tape-recorder has never failed me."

"I'm sure of that," I said, "but just to humor my rationalism, play it back and let's make sure."

So, still smiling, he played it back and he had done something wrong and no voices were recorded. (So help me, it's a true story.)

He was chagrined, of course, but not a tenth as chagrined as *I* was. Had I let it go, he would have gone on home and not discovered the flaw for days, and it would then have been too late to do anything. As it was, just because of my inane desire to show how rational I was, I had to go through the entire interview a second time.

Oh well, it turned out to be a pretty good interview.

But it got me to thinking how mystical even rationalists are. It is impossible to check everything personally; it is impossible to make sure that everything is personally understood by our own personal brain. We have to accept many things on faith for sheer lack of ability to do otherwise, and sometimes we repeat certain catchphrases so often that they become unquestionable.

And then—as in the case of the tape-recorder that never failed in hundreds of interviews—it becomes fun, once in a while, to question them.

For instance, chemists divide chemistry into two sections, "organic" and "inorganic," where the former deals with compounds containing the carbon atom, and the latter deals with compounds containing any or all the remaining 104 kinds of atoms, but excluding only the carbon atom.

Is this not a strangely unequal division? Yes it is, but not in the way it might seem.

As it happens, there are more molecules containing the carbon atom, *far* more, than there are of all the remaining 104 elements as they combine among themselves in any conceivable fashion with only the restriction that they avoid the carbon atom. And any additional discoveries can only increase the disproportion still further in the direction of carbon.

What's more, the carbon-containing compounds, some with small molecules, some with middle-sized ones, some with large ones, and some with giant ones, are the basis of life (which is why this class of compounds is called "organic").

Those of us who aren't chemists may have heard of this, and, if so, we have had to accept it without question. Carbon atoms can form chains and rings of all sizes and complexities, and on this fact rests the complexity and versatility of life. We accept that.

But is carbon indeed the only element with atoms capable of combining into compounds various enough, complex enough, delicate enough, versatile enough, to possess the amazing properties we associate with life? Couldn't some other element do it, too, with a little encouragement perhaps? How does it happen that carbon is so different from all other elements?

Fair enough. Let's look into the matter.

There are 105 elements altogether, each with its own variety of atoms. We are asking ourselves which of these 105 different types of atoms can form chains and rings among themselves of all kinds, large and small, that are versatile enough to be the basis of life.

Can we eliminate any offhand?

To begin with, we can eliminate all those elements which lack stable isotopes, and which possess only radioactive atoms. After all, if radioactive atoms are bound into chains and rings, those chains and rings can't possibly maintain themselves. Sooner or later one of the atoms will emit an extremely energetic particle. What is left of the atom will recoil energetically and break any chain or ring of which it is part. It is hard to see how life can be built up out of molecules that change in random ways at random intervals.

That removes 24 elements from the list of possibles and leaves 81 stable elements; 81 elements, that is, that include at least one non-radioactive isotope, the atoms of which can conceivably form chains and rings.

As it happens, though, of the 81 elements, 5 (the noble gases: helium, neon, argon, krypton and xenon) are made up of atoms which do not link up with each other under any circumstances.* In elementary form these noble gases exist as single atoms. We certainly cannot have chains or rings of these elements, and we therefore eliminate them. That leaves us with 76 stable elements other than the noble gases that are still candidates to serve as the basis of life.

** That's right. I have not forgotten the noble gas compounds. Atoms of krypton and xenon will attach to other kinds of atoms; fluorine and oxygen, for instance. Two krypton atoms or two xenon atoms will not link up, however, under any laboratory conditions.*

Atoms of these 76 elements can link together by sharing electrons with each other. The nature of this sharing depends on how many electrons a particular atom has which are available for donation to a shared pool, and how much room each atom has for accepting shares of electrons. Many types of atoms have very few electrons to donate, but appetites for the acceptance of many. Under such conditions, the most stable situation for the element is one in which a great many atoms get together so that all can share in the few electrons available. You then have an orderly array of atoms with a few electrons moving about almost freely from atom to atom, giving each atom a small share of itself.

The presence of these mobile electrons makes it possible for a conglomeration of atoms of that particular element to carry an electric current and to conduct heat with great ease. It also lends the element other properties we associate with metals. In fact, any element made up of atoms that tend to share a few mobile electrons *is* a metal.

In order to share the mobile electrons, the atoms of a metal must stick closely together, and they are said to be held together by a "metallic bond."

The metallic bond can be powerful indeed, and it can take a great deal of energy to pull the atoms of a metal apart against the stickiness associated with the desire to stay near those mobile electrons. The easiest way of adding energy to the atoms is to raise their temperature, and one measure of the tightness with which atoms cling together is in the level of the boiling point—the temperature at which the atoms are torn apart and sent tumbling into independent motion as a gas. Tungsten has a boiling point of 5927° C., the highest for any element. The surface of the Sun is just barely hot enough to keep tungsten gaseous.

The metallic bond works best, however, where many atoms are clinging together. It will produce the equivalent of giant molecules, but not small ones, and living tissue needs small molecules as well as large ones. Let us, therefore, eliminate all metallic elements from consideration.

That represents a major reduction in the possibilities, for it eliminates 58 elements, and leaves us with the 18 stable non-metals, excluding the noble gases, as the remaining candidates for serving as the basis of life.

In these 18 elements, the ability to donate an electron and the ability to receive one is well-balanced. Two atoms of such an

element can each donate an electron to form a two-electron pool in which each can share. The participation in such a shared pool results in greater stability than would be the case where the two atoms move independently. In order to keep the shared pool, the atoms must remain in close proximity, and the result is a "covalent bond" holding the two atoms together.

The simplest way of representing such a covalent bond is to place a dash between the symbols for the elements to which the atoms belong, as X-X.

Particular atoms, depending on the number and arrangement of the electrons they possess, can form different numbers of covalent bonds with other atoms. Some can form only one, some two, some three, and some as many as four. Among the 18 elements with which we are still dealing, there are some that fall into each class, and they are listed, by classes, in Table 1. In each class the elements are listed in order of increasing atomic weight.

Table 1

Stable Non-Metals Capable of Forming Covalent Bonds

1 bond	*2 bonds*	*3 bonds*	*4 bonds*
Hydrogen	Oxygen	Boron	Carbon
Fluorine	Sulfur	Nitrogen	Silicon
Chlorine	Selenium	Phosphorus	Germanium
Bromine	Tellurium	Arsenic	Tin
Iodine		Antimony	

(You may notice that some of the elements in Table 1 are commonly considered metals—tin, for instance. However, there are no sharp boundaries in nature, and tin has pronounced non-metallic properties as well.)

Let's consider those elements that form only one covalent bond, hydrogen, for instance. Two hydrogen atoms, each represented by the chemical symbol, H, can be linked so, H-H.

Where only hydrogen atoms are involved, that is *all* that can happen. Each hydrogen atom in the H-H combination has used up its only covalent bond and can form no covalent links with any

other atom. This means that if a large mass of hydrogen atoms are brought together under ordinary conditions of temperature and pressure, they pair up in these two-atom combinations, or hydrogen molecules, very often written simply as H_2, and nothing else.

The hydrogen molecules are held together by very feeble attractions called "Van der Waals forces" after the Dutch physicist who first considered them in detail. These are enough to hold the molecules together and keep hydrogen liquid, or even solid, but only at very low temperatures. Even at a temperature as low as −253° C. (only twenty degrees above absolute zero), there is enough intensity of heat to counter the Van de Waals force and send hydrogen molecules spinning off independently into gaseous form. Thus, −253° C. is the boiling point of liquid hydrogen.

We can't expect hydrogen atoms to form by themselves, then, any chain made up of more than two atoms. No matter how important hydrogen atoms may be to life, they cannot form the skeleton of complex molecules. —So we eliminate hydrogen.

As a matter of fact, the situation is the same for any one-bond atom. Fluorine, chlorine, bromine and iodine all form two-atom molecules and nothing more: F_2, Cl_2, Br_2 and I_2.

To be sure, the larger the mass of the molecule, the stronger (in general) the Van de Waals forces between them and the higher the boiling point. Thus, the fluorine molecule has nineteen times the mass of the hydrogen molecule, and liquid fluorine, therefore, has a boiling point of −188° C., which is sixty-five degrees higher than that of liquid hydrogen. Chlorine, with molecules more massive still, has a boiling point of −35° C., bromine 58° C., and iodine 183° C. At ordinary temperatures, fluorine and chlorine are gases, bromine is a liquid, and iodine is a solid.

Whether gas, liquid or solid, none of these one-bond elements can possibly form a chain of atoms, linked by covalent bonds, that is longer than two atoms. All five one-bond elements are eliminated as possible bases for life.

Let's pass on to the element with atoms capable of forming two covalent bonds each. You can imagine a chain of oxygen atoms, for instance, that look like -O-O-O-O- and so on, with any number of oxygen atoms in the chain. This gives us our first glimpse of a possible chain of atoms; short, middle-sized, long, or giant. The only trouble is that it doesn't happen.

To understand that, we have to consider bond energies. We can

measure the energy we must pour into a two-atom combination in order to break the covalent bond between them. Or we can measure the energy liberated when those two atoms abandon independence and form a covalent bond. By the law of conservation of energy those two energy measurements must be, and are, equal, and that is the energy content of that particular covalent bond.

Bond energies are usually given in units of "kilocalories per molecule" but it is not necessary to hug that unit to the chest. We are just going to compare one bond energy with another, and for that the number alone is sufficient.

For instance, the energy of the covalent bond between two osygen atoms (O-O) is 34. (This varies somewhat with conditions, but 34 is a good representative value.)

This property is additive. That is, suppose, you imagine four oxygen atoms at the points of a square, each attached to its two neighbors by a bond: There would be four bonds altogether and the total bond energy would be 4 × 34 = 136.

Suppose, however, that two oxygen atoms used both their bonds for mutual attachment. The oxygen atoms are then linked by a "double bond" thus: O=O. In that case the bond energy becomes 118. This is not equal to twice the bond energy of a single bond but to about 3.5 times as much.*

This means that if four oxygen atoms are combined into a four-atom molecule with four single bonds, the total bond energy is 4 × 34 = 136, but if they are combined into two-atom molecules with two double bonds, the total bond energy is 2 × 118 = 236.

The natural tendency is for atoms to take up those configurations that place bond energies at maximum. (This is similar to the natural tendency of balls to roll downhill.) Consequently, when oxygen atoms are brought together, all without exception form the two-atom, double-bonded molecule, usually written O_2, and neither atom in the molecule has any covalent bonds left over to do anything else with. Only Van der Waals forces hold them together, and the boiling point of liquid oxygen is −183° C.

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* *Why? In a way, it doesn't matter why. This is a measured fact and must be accepted whether we know why or not. However, there exists a mathematical treatment called quantum mechanics which explains the why of many atomic facts of life. But please, if you love me, don't ask me to go into quantum mechanics.*

This eliminates oxygen from consideration at once, but does it mean we can eliminate the other two-bond elements similarly?

Not quite. In general, the larger the atom, the less closely they can approach, center to center, in forming a covalent bond, and the smaller the bond energy. The oxygen atom, which is the smallest of the two-bond atoms, can form a spectacularly energetic second bond. A similar but larger atom such as those of sulfur, selenium or tellurium, cannot. The second bond, if formed, would not be particularly energetic, and there is nothing to force the atoms into a double-bonded situation in place of a single-bonded one.

Sulfur, for instance, can easily form a chain or ring of atoms. In liquid sulfur, the molecule is made up of a ring of eight sulfur atoms.

However, the sulfur chain or ring, just by existing, uses up all the valence bonds available to the sulfur atoms under ordinary circumstances. (Oxygen or fluorine atoms can force the sulfur atoms to donate additional electrons and form additional covalent bonds, but these are limited effects that would not lend the chains or rings sufficient versatility for the requirements of life-molecules.)

So we eliminate all the two-bond elements after all and go on to the three-bond ones.

If we consider nitrogen, its situation is very much like that of oxygen. The single bond between two nitrogen atoms has a bond energy of 38, but a double bond between them raises that energy to 100, two and a half times that of a single bond.

And suppose the nitrogen atom used all three of its covalent bonds for the attachment to another nitrogen atom, forming a "triple bond." Now the bond energy becomes 225, which is more than twice as high as the double bond and *six* times as high as the single bond.

When nitrogen atoms are brought together, therefore, they form the two-atom, triple-bonded molecule at once; and the nitrogen molecule that results, usually symbolized N_2, can form no further valence bonds. The molecules are held together by Van de Waals forces, and the boiling point of liquid nitrogen is $-196°C$.

Nitrogen is eliminated as a possibility, but again, the larger atoms of the same sort—phosphorus, arsenic and antimony—must be considered separately. They can form singly bonded chains. (Phosphorus vapor, for instance, contains molecules made up of four phosphorus atoms.)

We can imagine a phosphorus chain— -P-P-P-P—with a third valence bond available at every phosphorus atom. This third valence bond could be attached to still other phosphorus atoms, or to other kinds of atoms, and molecules of all stages of simplicity and complexity can be conceived. This means we cannot eliminate phosphorus from consideration as a possible skeleton for life-molecules. Nor can we eliminate arsenic and antimony at this point.

Boron, the remaining three-bond atom, does not belong to the nitrogen family, but it has the capacity for forming chains, too.

That leaves us with the final group of elements, the four-bond ones. Of these, carbon has the smallest atom. Can we follow the lead of oxygen and nitrogen and consider two carbon atoms attached by all four bonds, forming the molecule C_2 with a quadruple bond?

No, we can't. A quadruple bond does not exist, and carbon atoms can be linked together only by single bonds, double bond and triple bonds. In any of these cases, the carbon atom will still have covalent bonds available for attachment elsewhere. Even if two carbon atoms are attached by a triple bond, each has a fourth bond left over. It would seem then that carbon chains are not only possible, but almost unavoidable.

But which is the bond of choice in the case of carbon atoms? The bond energy of a single bond between carbon atoms is 82; that of a double bond is 146; and that of a triple bond is 200. Notice that two single bonds have a total energy of 164 and three single bonds a total energy of 246. Carbon atoms therefore achieve the greatest bond energies if they link up the way of single bonds only.

The energy differences aren't enormous. Carbon atoms connected by double bonds or triple bonds can and do exist, and sometimes special conditions increase the bond energies to the point where they are particularly stable. In most cases, however, double and triple bonds are comparatively unstable and they can be altered to single bonds with little effort.

The typical situation in the case of the carbon atom can, therefore, be expressed most simply by presenting it as a chain of indefinite length— -C-C-C-C-—with each carbon atom possessing two additional valence bonds for attachment to other atoms. The two additional bonds can be attached to other carbon atoms, forming branched chains, or to other places in the chain, forming rings.

This offers all the chances for complexity I mentioned earlier in connection with the phosphorus atom, compounded to a much higher level since there are two spare bonds per atom rather than one. The situation is the same for the other members of the carbon family; silicon, germanium, and tin.

We have now reduced the number of elements that can conceivably serve as the basis of life from the total number of 105 to a mere 8. Of these 8 remaining candidates, 4 are three-bonded (boron, phosphorus, arsenic, and antimony), and 4 are four-bonded (carbon, silicon, germanium, and tin).

How can we judge among them? Is there any way we can show that some are more hopeful candidates than others? What are the criteria?

In the first place, we can say that the four-bonded atoms are surely superior to the three-bonded ones, since the former can clearly produce more complicated molecules, all things being equal.

In the second place, we might consider the single-bond energies for each of these eight elements. It would seem fair to consider that the stronger the bond energies, the more stable the chains and rings built up of their atoms and the more likely these will do as the basis for life. In Table 2, I give the energy of the single bond connecting two atoms of each candidate element.*

Table 2

Element	*Bond Number*	*Bond Energy*
Carbon	4	82
Boron	3	69 (?)
Silicon	4	53
Phosphorus	3	51
Germanium	4	38
Tin	4	34
Arsenic	3	32
Antimony	3	30

** The only bond energy I couldn't find in my library was that for boron, and I was forced to make a rough estimate from other data I could dig up. I am often asked why I don't research my articles outside my library when my library falls short, and that thought may be occurring to you right now. My answer is a simple one—I consider that cheating.*

If we consider Table 2, we see at once that by the two criteria I've mentioned, carbon is clearly the best candidate for the position of serving as a basis of life. It is four-bonded, and it has a considerably stronger bond than any of the others so that it forms the most stable and complicated chains by far.

But that only means that carbon is the best of a number of possibilities, and that's not enough. Is there any way we can show that it is the only possibility altogether?

All right, let's approach the situation from another direction. The three most common types of atom in the universe are, in order, hydrogen, helium, and oxygen. Helium forms no covalent bonds, so we can forget it. It seems to me, then, that every sizable planet that exists is going to have either a preponderance of hydrogen (and helium) or a preponderance of oxygen.

If it is a large cold planet like Jupiter, it is bound to have a preponderance of hydrogen simply because there is so much of it. If it is a smaller, warm planet like Earth, and fails to retain most of the available hydrogen (and helium) as it forms, it will then have to have a preponderance of oxygen. It's one or the other.

In that case, it is not enough to talk about chains and rings of atoms of a particular element as though that element exists in isolation. What would happen to those chains and rings if atoms of other elements were present? What would happen, in particular, if atoms of hydrogen or oxygen, one or the other, were present in large excess?

If atoms of a particular element formed a stronger bond with either oxygen or hydrogen, or both, than it does among its own atoms, then it isn't likely to form long chains or rings of its own atoms.

Consider silicon, for instance. It is four-bonded and has a bond energy that is fairly strong, even if not as strong as carbon's. (In science fiction, the possibility of "silicon-life" has often been considered.) The silicon-silicon single bond has an energy of 53, but the silicon-oxygen bond has an energy of 88 (66 percent stronger) and the silicon-hydrogen bond has one of 75 (42 percent stronger).

In the presence of a large excess of either oxygen or hydrogen, silicon atoms simply would not attach themselves to one another. They would hook on to either oxygen or hydrogen instead. On Earth, which is oxygen-excessive, you do not find silicon-silicon bonds in nature. Never! Every silicon atom found in the Earth's crust is attached to at least one oxygen atom.

We can go through the entire list of elements in Table 2 from the bottom up and show that all are more likely to exist in combination with oxygen than with themselves, and that complicated chains and rings of them are not at all likely to exist in nature.

Until we come to carbon. What about carbon?

The carbon-carbon single-bond energy is 82. The carbon-hydrogen bond is 93 (or 13 percent stronger) while the carbon-oxygen link is 85 (or only 4 percent stronger).

The difference is there, but it is not great. Carbon in the presence of oxygen *will* form carbon-oxygen bonds (and therefore burn) but only if it is heated sufficiently. Carbon in the presence of hydrogen *will* form C-H bonds (so that coal can be converted to petroleum) but only with considerable difficulty.

Neither change goes either easily or quickly. Carbon atoms will as soon link together with themselves, as with hydrogen or oxygen. Carbon *will* form chains, then, both long and short, straight or branched; and rings, both simple and complex; even in the presence of an excess of hydrogen or (as on Earth) oxygen.

We might still speculate on various elements serving as the basis of life in combination (silicon, oxygen and phosphorus, for instance) but these possibilities are highly speculative and unlikely.

If we stick to the reasonable, then carbon is the only element capable of permitting the formation of molecules, both simple and complex, of the kind characteristic of life. Not just the best, but the only.

The one and only.

Coming soon

Next month, in fact, are stories by Ron Goulart, John Christopher and Keith Laumer. Lots of other fine things on hand, including stories by Andre Norton, Avram Davidson, Barry N. Malzberg, Thomas Burnett Swann, Harlan Ellison and the final novel of Jack Vance's Durdane trilogy. All will be along within the next few months, and now is a good time to enter Christmas rate subscriptions for yourself and your friends. See page 4.

G. M. Glaskin is the author of nearly 200 published short stories and several novels, published here by Doubleday and Seymour Lawrence. He is a fifth-generation Australian (born near the country where this chilling story takes place) and is presently living in Holland working on a new novel for which he has received an Australian Literary Fellowship.

The Inheritors

by G. M. GLASKIN

FOR SOME OF HUMANITY—even if it *is* a very small section of it compared with the rest of the world—the first mention of it all was an item of only a few inches on (already a bad augury?) page 13 of Perth's morning newspaper, *The West Australian.* It read:

FARMER MAULED

> Farmer Victor E. Timms (47) of West Wyanilling collapsed unconscious from his vehicle which he had managed to drive 8 miles from his property to Wyanilling township after having received severe wounds to most of his body from savage mauling, presumably by wild dogs. He was taken by ambulance to the Narrogin District Hospital where his condition was said to be serious. At the time of this report, Mr. Timms, who lived alone on his property, had not regained consciousness to inform the investigating police officer as to where and by what he had been attacked.

I suppose the newspaper report is near enough to what must have happened, but what I wasn't at all sure about even then was the wild dogs bit. I mean, I know there are any amount of dingoes (or the Australian wild dog) in Australian countryside, and they were known to be savage enough when cornered or their young were being endangered. But by the look of that unfortunate farmer—and all four of us had had all too good a look—there had been several more than just the one dingo which had attacked him, if only by the number of bites all over his

body and the way his clothes were ripped to shreds so that there wasn't much of his body left unexposed.

Yet dingoes don't usually roam in packs; they're mostly loners. Also, having spent some time in wheatbelt country during my lifetime, I thought I knew a dingo bite when I saw one, or just an ordinary dog's bite, for that matter. And these bite marks hadn't at all looked like those from any kind of canine to me, not unless they had indeed been made by just the one animal and that particular animal had lost all of its upper front teeth.

For that was what had been so peculiar about the hideous wounds on farmer Timms when we reached him; each wound showed teeth marks where the flesh had been ripped away, but only on the one side of the wound. On the other side of it the skin was still left attached to the body, though bruised and torn of course. But there was no laceration or even a puncture mark on this upper side of the wound.

There were no dogs, wild or otherwise, that I knew of with natural mouth formations like this. This meant that if the wounds had indeed been made by a mouth with the upper front teeth missing, there must have been only the one animal; it would be too much of a coincidence for two of them—let alone more, no matter what they had been—to have had the same upper front teeth all missing. And yet if there *had* been only the one, why hadn't the farmer Timms been able to fend it off? How could even one dog, again wild or not, overcome a grown and able man by itself?

But of course we weren't ever to know what had happened to farmer Timms on his West Wyanilling property that Saturday afternoon, for he never recovered consciousness before dying in just a little over forty-eight hours afterwards. A bachelor, he'd lived alone on his property; so there was no one else either to have seen what had happened. But then, like most things, the apprehension aroused by this gruesome tragedy had soon died and been forgotten.

But that wasn't the only event that day which left us all with a very nasty sort of sensation that, for a while at least, was pretty well akin to fear, I should say—even terror.

I've already said there were the four of us, and so I'd better elaborate. There was a local interest in the possibility of filming one of my novels set in that part of the country, and so the four of us—Bill Cousins and his wife Jo, or Joanna, and

Beryl and myself—had driven down the 120 miles or so southwest from the city of Perth to see if the township of Wyanilling was still much as I had described it in a novel written over ten years before. It was almost *completely* unchanged, which didn't at all surprise me for that part of the country; it doesn't have the rest of the world's almost hysterical *need* to change. Even the pub was pretty much as it had been ten years before, and as I had described it in my book. Moreover, all of the local setting—from Wyanilling clean into the city of Perth 120 miles away—had shown very little change either. The film could be made with very little studio work, which would mean an almost unbelievably economical production budget.

And this is what, in a way, we'd been celebrating, the four of us, with a few beers for Bill and me and brandy crusters for the girls, in the very pub where we expected to be shooting film in the not too distant future. We were just about finished and deciding to move off when we'd heard the shouts and noises of alarm outside, and like everyone else in the pub we rushed out to see what was happening.

Even the drinks didn't really help us to get over the shock of seeing farmer Timms and the state he'd been in. He'd come swerving his vehicle down the street and straight towards us, only swinging it over at the very last minute; we still had to jump for it to miss us. Then his driving door had wrenched open and he'd come flying out—to be hurled bleeding spread-eagled along the road. He'd come to rest almost at our feet, and my *God*, he'd been in a mess.

But I've already told you about that. By this time it was getting near five, and so we thought we ought to start getting back to the city and dinner somewhere.

We'd gone only a few miles when Bill suddenly pulled up on a narrow and rather deserted piece of road before we had reached the main highway. As far as I could see, there was nothing but empty and barren paddocks with a few parched-looking trees here and there. There weren't even any stock—sheep, I mean—in sight. Yet Bill was getting out his 16mm camera and mounting it into its harness.

"Gawd! What you going to shoot here, Bill!" his wife, Jo, wanted to know. She'd just had her brandy crusters severely jerked, for one thing; and I suppose the shock of the savaged farmer hardly left her in the mood for absorbing, let alone filming, some of the local scenery. In any case, it all

looked pretty awful hereabouts. This wasn't surprising, as it was in about the worst state it had ever been known to be in, after the longest and severest drought yet recorded.

Bill was almost apologetic as he stood spread-legged a few feet off from the car and aimed and focused his camera.

"I need a few fill-in shots for a telly commercial," he said. He spoke almost as though he was being obliged to film some shots at a funeral. The camera whirred; then he moved off a few feet more, then another few feet, so that we all decided we might as well stretch our legs a bit, seeing we'd be about two hours getting back to the city; and once started, no doubt Bill wouldn't want to stop again till we got there. In any case, Joanna wanted to go behind a tree, she said; and so Beryl thought she'd better go with her. I can remember shouting something bawdy about not falling in, or something like that, more to break the mood of despondency which, very understandably, had set in on us after farmer Timms. I went off in another direction and then over to see what on earth—what on all this so *parched* earth around us—Bill could be finding to photograph.

"Nothing much," he said. "But it's just what I need—a jolly good stretch of parched earth!" As though to illustrate his point, he even kicked up a few clods with his dust-covered boots and took some C.U.'s (sorry, close-ups) of the dust he'd kicked up as it went drifting off on the cool but so lifeless evening air. It's a dreadful thing to see, a country in drought.

The girls were just returning from the other side of the road when Bill remarked to me about how he wished there had been at least a *few* sheep left around even though he knew it was damned near impossible for them to survive in the country as reduced as it was now. Most of the farmers had taken them to the abattoirs weeks before—or else had bulldozed the carcasses by the thousand into huge open graves they'd had to dig and then fill in again. We'd passed I don't know how many dams which normally didn't even need to be used at this time of the year; there was usually plenty of crop for feed, and water. But even the dams were dried out, cracked hard, like they usually are at the end of summer.

"Just a few sheep scratching up the dust in all this is all I need," Bill said.

It was almost uncanny the way they came, just as if they'd heard him.

The girls saw them first. They'd both come up behind

us, Jo shading her eyes against the last of the evening sun rays. Suddenly she pointed to the top of the hill where there was a dense clump of trees sticking out gaunt and stark against the green-gold skyline.

"Aren't those some sheep up *there*," she said, squinting.

And then we all saw them.

They were coming down slowly, very slowly, from the top of the hill, from out of that stark clump of gaunt dry trees that looked propped against the seared skyline. We might never have seen them if they hadn't been pointed out to us by Joanna; they were coated in dust and so were the same color as the dusty earth all around them. And they were moving so slowly that it might have been no more than a faint shadow moving across the earth with the last of the fast-setting sun. The most distinguishable thing about them was the dust they managed to stir up and set drifting off away from them, like a long low veil across the dust-colored earth. Even the sky was dust-colored.

"Yeah," Bill said, "they're sheep all right. But it'll be midnight before they make it down here, at the rate they're going. Unless I go up there to meet them. But I'm afraid I don't feel up to it. Oh, well! Too bad! They might have made a *few* good shots. . . ."

"That's funny," Beryl said.

"What?" I asked her.

"They've stopped."

"So they have," said Jo.

And they had. The cloud of dust was already drifting away from them. Then it started up again.

"No, they're coming on again," Bill said.

And they were. And once again it was pretty uncanny, as though they had not only materialized out of the dust and parched air, but now, just for Bill's sake, were getting energy from God knows where to stir themselves up into a kind of jog, then a trot, then a canter. And then, by God, they were suddenly—the whole lot of them—fair galloping towards us.

"Oh, you bloody little beauties!" Bill said enthusiastically, and soon had the camera whirring away.

It was amazing how they came down that hill. I don't suppose I shall ever forget it, even though I didn't at all know then, of course, what we all too grimly know now. It was almost like a landslide, an avalanche, the sheep the same dust-color as the parched earth all around them.

"I don't understand it!" Joanna was saying. "They usually run *away* from you, not *towards* you!"

"That's what *I* thought!" Beryl said.

I had to agree.

"Not since the drought," Bill told us, still working hard on his camera.

"How do you mean?" I asked him.

"They're being *hand*-fed, and hand-*watered*—those of 'em that are still alive."

"So?"

"Well, it only stands to reason, doesn't it? As soon as they see a vehicle these days—almost *any* kind of vehicle, I suppose—they think it means food and water, so they head straight for it. See? Just like they're doing now. Come on, you little beauties, you! Come on for Daddy Bill!"

And his camera went on whirring with his hand deftly zooming the lens in and out.

"Gawd!" he said after another moment or two. "I couldn't have got it better if I'd tried!"

It was an incredible sight, now that all those sheep were so much closer to use—close enough, now, to see the ribs sticking out through their wool, their thin sticks of legs. Some of them, poor bastards, must have fallen and ripped skin from themselves, and the flies had blown them. Even without that, they stank.

"My God!" Jo suddenly cried out. "Aren't they going to *stop!*"

I must say it looked as though they weren't. Bill was the only one on the other side of the fence, and he soon decided that all the film in the world wasn't worth being stampeded by a flock of frantic sheep. I've never seen him move so quickly as he did then, camera and all, vaulting the fence and hotfooting it back to the car. I think all four doors opened pretty well simultaneously, and all four of us felt considerably safer behind the frail-enough protection which is all that a modern-style car can offer—little more than cardboard-thick metal and only slightly thicker glass. All the same, it did manage to give at least *some* consolation.

For a moment I thought the sheep were going to come at us clean through the fence. Or even *over* it. I wasn't the only one. Joanna gave a little involuntary cry, and suddenly I could feel Beryl shaking against me.

But then, thank God, they did stop, though I feel sure it was only the fence that had stopped them. Even then, a good many of those in the front were still being pushed towards us by those at the back. I've never really studied sheep from close up before, and I suppose they were hardly sheep we were all gaping back at now, they were so emaciated from the drought. But what struck me

more than anything this time was their eyes, so rounded and red from being bloodshot, and at the same time quite dilated, as though from fear—or perhaps fearsomeness?

Bill was saying, "They think we've brought water for them, all right—the poor bastards! God, look at the way their mouths drool! And their tongues hang out!"

It was true. Some of them did drool, a kind of sticky mess that looked more solid than liquid, as though there wasn't enough liquid left in their bodies even to form saliva. I didn't want to look at them much longer; I don't suppose any of us did. I could still feel Beryl shaking, and crying too now, beside me.

"God, it's awful!" she said quietly. I could feel her nails biting into my arm.

Jo was saying, "I don't want to look at them any longer, Bill. For God's sake get us out of here!"

So he did.

I think the sight of those sheep had upset us even more than what they had almost made us forget—the savaged body of farmer Timms.

If we had thought that this was going to be the end of horrors for the day, then we were mistaken. Just before reaching the highway, we had to cross the railway line going south to Albany. There's probably only the one train a day—well, passenger train anyway, and admittedly this was a freight train—but *we* had to strike it. So we were held up at the crossing for about three minutes or so, three minutes we could all have done very well without.

It was Beryl who saw these other few sheep, just a few yards away from us in a corner of yet another parched paddock where the road and railway line and paddock fence all met together. There were only five or six of them, mostly full grown—if you could apply the term 'fully grown' to animals which were emaciated to almost half their normal size. But one of them was only a lamb—or rather it had been. I don't know whether it had been killed by some other means, or whether the grown sheep had killed it, though I'd never heard of sheep killing other sheep and nor do I know anyone who has. But whatever had happened to that lamb, the rest of them were making short work of it, rending it with their bloodied mouths while their small, almost sinisterly delicate little cloven hoofs pounded and pounded at the now-battered body beneath them. I could have sworn they were drinking the lamb's blood, as no doubt

they were. Was it possible, with this horrifying drought, that they had turned not only killers but cannibals as well?

I was almost tempted to get out of the car to go and look to find out, but the train had rumbled on past us; and before I could say anything, Bill was driving on again. In any case, Joanna had now seen them, and she suddenly cried out, "Oh, Christ! They're even killing them*selves*, now—to eat and drink!"

I'd hoped Jo wouldn't have seen, for I hadn't wanted Beryl to see it. As we drove on I felt her suddenly wrench, retching, beside me; but she did manage not to vomit. All the same, I wished she hadn't seen it. On the other hand, I couldn't help thinking to myself how it had been known in similar times of stress for even human beings to hack and rend each other, to eat their own kind's flesh, and drink their own kind's blood. So why not sheep? Lord knows, they have little enough brains. . . .

And there's all that Biblical stuff, of course—that also, now comes to mind:

"Blood of the lamb, pray for us. . . ."

Sacrificial lambs all through the Bible, all through the ages.

"Blood of the lamb, wash away our sins. . . ."

And Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, but then had instead taken a lamb, wasn't it?—and slit *its* throat instead. Which I suppose *had* been a little more humane of him.

"Blood of the lamb, wash away the sins of our fathers. . ."

And in a way I suppose they still do go to be sacrificed. But not just one at a time, now. By the hundreds. The thousands. All being led to the slaughter. I've heard them at the abattoirs, being herded bleating to each other along the pens and up the ramps to the hammer that, mercifully, does give them a belt on the top of the head before they're slaughtered, then skinned and drawn to be freighted off and then dissected ready for our dining tables. . . .

And once—and only the once, thank God—I've seen them brought in for shearing; sheep reared for their wool instead of their flesh. You'd think that would be so much better, wouldn't you? But if you do, then you couldn't be more wrong. It's worse. Much worse. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite so horrible, even though I well know it's the kind of inhuman cruelty which really *is* being kind.

It's called 'crutching'—and it's done on the young lambs

when they're brought in for the first time. Wool and excrement just don't go together very well, and so their tails have to be lopped off. Well, that isn't so bad, you might think, and neither it is. They just bleed and probably hurt for a short while, and that, you would think, would be that. But not so. There is still all the wool that grows long and thick all around their hindquarters, and this, too, gets in the way of their excrement. It sticks to the wool and then gradually accumulates. And in Australia there are always the bush flies; no matter where you are or what time of year it may be, you can never manage to escape the Australian bush flies. And these feed on anything, especially excrement. So they alight and feed on the excrement accumulated on the young sheep's backsides and then 'blow' it, or lay their eggs in it, and out hatch the maggots to feed on it in turn. Only the maggots don't stop at just the excrement; they eat down to the flesh and then into it. To hear a young sheep bleating because it is being eaten alive is almost as agonizing as anything I've heard.

But I've also heard them bleating to make the sky quake when they've been submitted to the prophylactic treatment which is all that, so far, man has devised for them. Not only the tail is lopped off; they're upended on a kind of rack, say half a dozen at a time, with a man standing behind each lamb, each man with a knife. The knife makes a deft and circular cut, without anesthetic, all around the sheep's anus for about the size of a saucer. Then the skin is wrenched off to leave the raw and bleeding flesh—about the size of a saucer, remember—which is then daubed with an antiseptic.

When they're released, they can do nothing but stand in their agony and bleat till you'd think they'd bleat their pathetic hearts out. I was standing on a sheep station at the time when I saw and heard this for myself. When nightfall came, they didn't stop. I had a bit of a respite from them when we were all inside for dinner, but only till the time came for me to leave my host and hostess and go over to the quarters they had kindly lent me for the two or three days I had intended staying there. As soon as I was outside, my ears were immediately smitten with those pitiful cries again. I couldn't help it, I lay awake listening to them. They were somehow all the more horrifying at night. I thought I'd never sleep. Yet I did; I did. But I also had the most horrifying dream. Instead of this operation being per-

formed on mere sheep (and note how one mammalian animal, man, can think of another as 'mere'), I dreamt that it was being performed, like circumcision perhaps, on small children. Even babies. No, I should think by the tone of the cries I heard in this nightmare that they could have been *only* babies. Anyway, I remember waking up from it in the middle of the night with a severe shock of horror.

It was even more horrifying to find that the *dream* might have ended, but the cries still continued. And my God, how like babies they sounded. Indeed, it took me a few moments before I could bring myself to realize that they *weren't* babies. They were just *sheep*, I had to tell myself. *Just sheep*. . . .

On the other hand, cruel as this may seem, you have to see the alternative for yourself, those flyblown and then maggot-ridden rumps, and hear the cries of agony that then come from the sheep to know what greater cruelty the alternative is. And it was God who devised *that* one. All the same, with all his science and anesthetics, analgesics and other marvelous inventions and things, you'd think that man could devise something at least a *little* less inhumane than *that* sort of treatment. . . .

Blood of the lamb
Pray for us!
Blood of the lamb
Wash away our sins!
Blood of the lamb
Wash away the sins of our fathers. . . .

I don't know why, I can only suppose that because I had seen farmer Timms in Wyanilling almost three weeks before, but when a second farmer—or, rather, a farmhand this time—met a similar fate in another outlying township of the wheat and sheep district, I felt compelled to go and see this victim as well. I had an almost proprietorial feeling about it, or attitude towards it. Not only that, but it was almost a sense of civic duty that compelled me to drive—alone this time—to East Dowernup where this second savaging had been reported.

This time the victim had already died by the time I got there. There had to be an autopsy, of course, but there was no actual morgue as such in so small a community. But because of the nature of the fatality, the police didn't want the body removed to a larger town which did have the proper facilities. So the body was accommodated in the freezer of the local butcher. Appropriate fate, it occurred to me, for someone who had earned his

living all his life breeding and rearing thousands upon thousands of other beings for exactly the same fate, with the addition of at least being spared the consumption of his own carcass by being eaten afterwards.

I thought I was going to be denied seeing the body, even in my capacity of a novelist using the pretext of wanting to see a body after such an attack for a possibly future or even present work. The policeman on duty, and possibly quite rightly so, wouldn't have a bar of it. It was only when I divulged to him that I had seen the body, though before death had occurred on that occasion, of farmer Timms who had died similarly that he finally relented. Even then it was mainly because, I could so easily see, the policeman thought he might be able to obtain some information and details which, it was even more obvious, were defying his powers of intelligence over this particular demise.

They were the same kind of marks precisely. Whatever had killed this young farmhand of not quite nineteen had possessed the same kind of mouth as that which had killed farmer Timms; there were no teethmarks left from the upper jaw of the mouth; but only the bruising and slight tearing of flesh as before. A mortician had not been called in to the body, of course, and so the dead face still bore the same terrible expression of horror and agony with which he had died. I was almost tempted to close his staring eyes myself, with the tips of two fingers, as I had seen so often done in films, if never in reality, and then to smooth away the terrible expression of agony and horror with the back or curve of my hand, as I had again seen done in films but never in reality. It was almost as though I had the feeling that the dead youth would not be able to rest in the peace so many of us seem to expect for ourselves on that other side of this life—not until such time as his agony and horror had been smoothed away from his features, so permitting them to assume an appropriate arrangement, and therefore suggestion, of repose.

But I did restrain myself. And when I pointed out the peculiar nature of the bite marks to the policeman, it did at least compel him to push back his cap and then scrape and scratch at that part of his head where it was obvious that a bald patch would not be long in appearing. He was also compelled to remark, "Yeah, I see what you mean. Makes you think, don't it!"

But that, of course, is

precisely, perhaps because of incapability, what he didn't do.

"Too small a bite to have been a bull or anything like that," he did manage to derive, still continuing with his scratching and scraping. "Don't know what else it could have been—'cept maybe one of them dingo bastards, with some of his upper teeth missing. . ."

But I, of course—like you long before this now, I trust—already had my suspicions, incredible as they might seem.

You'd never believe it, but I asked no less than five farmers who had been sheep farming for the better part if not all of their lives, and not one of those five could tell me what the inside of a sheep's mouth looked like. Some weeks later, at an agricultural show, I made yet another attempt and found that the first three I asked also hadn't the faintest idea. But sheep were being judged for prize giving, sheep which had been given what you might call almost a 'hothouse' looking-after, being the prize specimens they were. To be judged, they had to be inspected. And part of that inspection was the forcible opening of their jaws, with their rear quarters held firmly between the judge's own legs, for inspection of teeth and gums.

And so I was able to verify the matter for myself, despite having already looked it up in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Sheep have a full set of teeth in the bottom jaw, but there is only a long bony structure at the top front, like an external projection of the upper jaw, replacing what otherwise might have been four of perhaps even six upper teeth, much as most other mammals have, even that other herbivorous animal, the horse.

It seemed incredible, yet it was such a logical explanation—especially after, in the next few days, no less than six other men, two women, and a child, were to die in exactly the same horrible way. All had obviously been taken by surprise, although by now the whole rural countryside was keeping an unrelenting lookout for even the slightest sign of wild dogs or dingoes, or even just the one lone animal for that matter. How, then, had the victims been taken by surprise? It now seemed obvious to me—because their killers had been an animal which normally they wouldn't have even the slightest suspicion to fear. Who had ever been attacked at all, let alone fatally, by the gentle and, if anything, quite stupid sheep?

Gentle and quite stupid?

The next disaster was an

entire family—the parents and five children aged from a youth of seventeen to a baby girl of not quite two. None had survived. Moreover they had been dead and, worst horror of all, partly devoured for two or three days when they were found, and only then by their failure to answer an operator-handled instead of an automatic telephone.

The police found no footprints from dogs of any kind, though the farmhouse was surrounded by those from sheep, even though the sheep were, by the time of the discovery, some distance away from the farmhouse again.

This time, or so I was assured by the police officer in charge, all the bodies were much too disfigured to have mere bite marks discerned. Just about all the bulky part of their flesh, he told me, had been torn from the skeletons. Even the cheeks and limbs, the ears, had been eaten away—and especially the soft parts of the throat. The woman's breasts and the buttocks of all the victims had been eaten clean away. Some of the bones of the victims had been cracked and fractured, as though submitted to a relentless pummeling by some smallish but hard and perhaps even sharp objects. And I was immediately reminded of the smallish yet hard and sharp appearance of the sheep's hoof.

It might have occurred to *me* that it was sheep, driven in their dementia for food and drink, which were the savage killers of, by now, just under twenty people; but it certainly didn't seem to have occurred to anyone else. Or if it had, then no one had said anything about it. I suppose it was, as it had at first seemed to me, much too incredible. I even wrote a letter to *The West Australian* about it, but they declined to publish it, saying they had conferred on the matter with agricultural experts who had all disputed my suggestion, though admittedly having no other explanation to offer. I wrote again when yet another entire family and the three hired helpers they employed had all been found dead and partly devoured in and around the farmhouse. This time they must have been attacked in daylight instead of in their sleep as the first family had been, for a farmhand and two of the children who performed some of the lighter duties around the property had been found torn to pieces in the paddocks. The woman and two more of her six children had managed to escape the house, only to be overwhelmed within short distances from it. But even this second letter was returned to me with

nothing more than the customary "the editor regrets" slip.

It was now no longer the bleating of sheep which tormented me; it was the so much more hideous screams of their victims.

"Baa, baa black sheep, have you any wool?"

"Yes, sir! Yes, sir! Three bags full!"

I tried the agricultural department myself, and now I wish I hadn't. Even a layman shouldn't be inflicted with such scorn, such disdain, let alone if the said layman should have achieved a certain and quite respectable amount in his own particular field. However, as you may have gathered, I was first of all treated with a kind of reserve, then openly ridiculed. Consulting a veterinary scientist at the university, I fared little better. I wonder if any of them have since had a change of mind about the matter. On second thoughts, I wonder if any of them *could*. . . .

Just as it had been the telephone which had led to the discovery of an entire family having been the victims of these so far unexplained killers, it was also the telephone which led to the discovery of Wadjinup, an entire township—even if its population is (or *had* been, rather) only forty-odd people altogether—being attacked and left without a single survivor. One of the victims hadn't even been a resident of the town, but merely a traveling salesman passing through on his way back to the city. God knows why he'd got out of his car, unless it had been to shoo off a flock of erstwhile harmless sheep from the road so that he could pass. But he *had* got out, and that had been the end of him.

I was not the only one to have my convictions; fortunately Beryl thought exactly the same. We needed to discuss the matter for only a few minutes before it occurred to both of us to verify from the Australian Yearbook that the population of Australia was in the vicinity of only thirteen million—people, that is—whereas the number of sheep estimated to be in the country was *two hundred* million. If, like a disease bacillus, the killer instinct had suddenly become contagious amongst them all, it would be roughly fifteen demented killers to every man, woman and child on the *island* continent. An *island* continent, mind you. No way out of it except by sea or air. And nothing much else in the way of land near it for a few thousand miles.

The eastern states, with

more than 90 percent of the country's population, were safe enough, it seemed, with not only the desert but those extraordinary constructions, the rabbit-proof fences as well. But were these strong enough to confine sheep on the rampage? It didn't matter. The first report of a killing in New South Wales was soon followed by several, then countless, more.

The Prime Minister made a special announcement to the nation, within just a few hours of Western Australia's State Premier asking him for urgent aid. The whole nation, including the island of Tasmania, was declared to be in a state of emergency.

It took only a few seconds after this announcement for me to make our flight reservations for overseas for as soon as possible. Even then, we still had three days to wait. . . .

That night contact was lost with seventeen minor West Australian townships, two with a population over five hundred and one with over a thousand. Admittedly, all were confined to within the one area, once a great sheep-rearing district—but that didn't make the horror any the less. Besides, the district was only just a little over a hundred miles from the capital city of Perth.

The following day, just as the army's few tank units and mobilized troops were being moved down to what had been designated a disaster area, all communication was lost with the considerable-sized town of Narrogin and its population of nearly five thousand. It was now estimated that up to ten thousand people had died, or inexplicably disappeared. It had become very much worse in the eastern states.

The army tanks were able to radio back that they had been brought to a halt just before the location where many miles of bush along the highway suddenly gave way to more open country and fields just before the small town of Williams. The convoy had been brought to a halt by, the field commander said, thousands of sheep blocking the way across the road and inexorably advancing through the tanks and trucks. Some of the convoy's vanguard had tried to turn around, but in the confusion (which was obviously an understatement for sheer panic) three tanks had become interlocked while a fourth was overturned on a steep embankment.

Shortly afterwards, the field commander was abruptly cut off and couldn't be contacted again. The army radio operator taking the report told *The Daily News*, the evening newspaper,

that it had been difficult to hear any of what the field commander had been saying because of the incessant bleating of sheep. It had amounted, the radio operator had said, to almost a continual roar. He had never, he added, heard anything so terrifying in all his life.

That night all roads to the southwest portion of the state were cut off. Pinjarra, only 60 miles from the capital, and then the holiday resort town of Mandurah, went "dead," so to speak. News media reported that first hundreds and now thousands of panic-stricken refugees were streaming from the south into the city by the only two routes left open. Then the more inland of these was cut off and there was only the coast road left. The refugees were mostly in cars and trucks and commandeered buses, but some were on motorbikes and even bicycles. First arrivals in the metropolitan area said they didn't even dare think of what had happened to those who had been trying to escape on foot. And these first arrivals spoke with the same hysteria, the same gaping and frantic eyes, as they told of the onslaughts of sheep which had somehow suddenly acquired the appearance and terrifying characteristics of wolves. No one, now, dared make the old joke about sheep in wolves' clothing. . . .

Then the radio and television news sessions reported that even the West Coast Road had been cut off. So far as the city knew, so were all roads from the north and east. There was no communication beyond a fifty-mile radius of the city. *Beyond* that radius, it was presumed, there were now only sheep.

I can only suppose that the government was doing all it could to avoid panic, but the urgency of the situation couldn't be concealed any longer, and the State Premier, James Riskin, made an announcement in a special broadcast over both television and radio to the effect that he had appealed to the country's Prime Minister not only for more troops but also for fighter bombers from the Air Force to kill the sheep by machine gun strafing, bombing, or even chemicals.

The mention of chemicals led to an interview with Professor Sanders of the university, whose opinion was that the sheep had been suddenly struck by some kind of new virus which turned this normally docile animal into a ferocious carnivore, a common enough result obtained with laboratory experiments on guinea pigs, rats, dogs, monkeys and, yes, even sheep.

This was immediately followed by the national Minister for Foreign Affairs stating that it was now suspected that the virus was no accident but had been deliberately introduced by the Communists, though his department had not yet been able to verify as to whether the perpetrators of such an atrocity had been Russia or China. The implications of such a vile method in international warfare needed little further comment, he said, but he was confident that Australian scientists now working day and night on the problem would soon discover an antivirus which could be introduced, probably by spraying from the air, to prevent further spreading of the disease in the rest of the nation's sheep.

But it was only the following morning when Prime Minister Hawkins declared the entire nation to be in a state of emergency and that he had sought urgent help from both Britain and the United States. Meanwhile, the people were requested to keep calm, to remain in their homes with doors and windows securely closed and even locked, and, whenever it became necessary, to venture outdoors only in vehicles which could be securely closed and locked against outside attack.

It was then announced with regret that, as had already happened with schools, all hospitals were now closed. From now on all victims would have to fend for themselves.

All ships and aircraft were fully booked. People made offers of fortunes to those with reservations, some of whom were even fool enough to take them. But then ships which were expected were suddenly diverted from Fremantle. Albany and Geraldton, of course, had been long out of the question. People waited, now, at the airport, taking what provisions they thought they might need while they waited, and of course all their portable valuables. Deeds for property and real estate, however, were already considered of no value whatsoever.

And this was how Beryl and I found the airport when we arrived there to catch our plane—at long last. We'd both got to the stage where we thought we wouldn't make it, before either the planes were canceled for flights to Perth—or anywhere in Western Australia for that matter—or else the sheep would come down like wolves from the all too near hills.

We left the car just where we could, as most others had done. I didn't even bother to take the keys out of the lock. As it was, we still had quite a walk, hurrying as fast as we could—and always, always, looking around

us. Cars had been left abandoned as far back as the main highway flanking the airport, about a mile back. It was almost impossible trying to push our way through the crowd before the airport buildings. Armed police were everywhere, admitting only those with tickets for that evening's flights. But before getting through the police, you had to push your way through forests of desperately beseeching hands clutching notes and jewelry in quivering fingers, offering any sum you wanted to name for your plane tickets. Some, I saw, and tried to keep Beryl from seeing it, had had to be subdued by the police using their truncheons. There was a woman lying with her skull cracked open like an eggshell, her hand still clutching a sheaf of banknotes. No one bothered about them, *or* her, nor others who soon suffered the same fate. At least, I reflected, it was quick.

And yet I don't think this was the most horrible sight that was to confront us. There was almost as much bedlam inside the airport buildings as out. One of the worst things I was to see was a small girl clutching a doll to her as she swayed from side to side, singing to it:

"Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep
And doesn't know where to find them.
Leave them a—"

But the child got no further. A man—it might not even have been her father—suddenly turned on her in fury, and before anyone could stop him, he had felled the child with just the one blow. I can only presume, and hope, that she died instantly. I hadn't been able to stop Beryl from seeing that one either, but we were both becoming pretty immune to it all by this time.

The plane did get away just after midnight, over three hours late. But it was lucky to get away at all. The sheep had come down from the hills towards the city and started streaming across the airport. We had to make a run for it. Those trying to embark without having tickets to show at the steps were being shot and thrown bodily out of the way. Beryl and I only just made it; the steps were pulled away just after I'd been able to push us both in, the man behind us left frantic on the landing.

The people started to run for another plane warming up on the runway. Then some of them saw the sheep streaming towards them and started to run back towards the airport building. I didn't see any more. The door was slammed shut and the plane was already surging forward before we could even find our seats.

But seats hadn't been allocated. As it was, there were over a dozen more passengers than there were seats, and so we had to stand in the aisle—or try to. The plane lurched and bumped several times as it went down the runway, and I could only presume some of the sheep to have already been in its path. Yet we did manage to get off the ground, the last plane out of Western Australia.

I just got a glimpse of the other plane that was to have left immediately after us as we circled to gain height. It had tried to follow, but the sheep had balked its path. Through a window I saw it veer suddenly off the runway in its takeoff and just turn and tumble absurdly over, just like a child's toy. There was a little puff of light as it burst into flames; then it was cut off from view. Beryl had seen that, too; she was crying again. As had happened so often lately, I could feel her shaking and crying against me.

Eventually she said, "Is there any reason why it shouldn't be just the same at Adelaide? Or wherever we have to land next?"

"We don't go that way, thank God."

"We don't?"

"No. We go to Singapore."

"Don't—don't they have sheep there?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"And—and they can't swim?"

"Sheep? Not that far."

"Perhaps we should get off there, then. And stay there."

"We're not allowed. It's London or nowhere."

She was silent—just slumped against me, shaking again.

"What's the matter?" I asked her. "At least we've got *some* hope ahead of us—now. Not like all those other poor bastards we've left behind. . . ."

But then, for once, she'd thought of something before I had.

She said, "They've got sheep in England, too, haven't they?"

At Singapore we weren't allowed out of the airport building, and even then not beyond the barrier leading to where Singaporians and other transit passengers were allowed, and could be seen through the enormous windows. On the other side of those windows, rather like small and curious children, some of the local population—Chinese, Malays—pressed their faces, snubbing their noses, to look at us as though we were some kind of freaks. Then someone must have thought up what all of them were soon doing. It could have been meant as a joke, I suppose; but if it was, it was in pretty poor taste. Yet perhaps

it had been triggered off merely by somebody jeering. Whatever it was, they were all suddenly opening their mouths wide and bleating at us.

"Baaaa! Baaaa!. . . ."

When we turned away, it was only to be confronted by the television screens—with the last films flown out of Perth being shown on closed circuit expressly for our benefit. I suppose cameras with telephoto lenses had been used from the comparative safety of armored tanks, or something like that. But it looked as though these terrifying animals were stampeding clean out of the screen to leap in amongst us all. Some of the women couldn't watch it; they either turned away or buried their faces in their hands. Some had started to moan. And some, of course, began to get hysterical again, especially at the scenes showing the sheep dragging people down and tearing and rending at them.

I remembered how I had once seen their mouths drool spittle from hunger and thirst; now they drooled blood.

And those little hoofs that kept on pounding and pounding. . . .

Before we arrived in England, the rest of Australia was already gone—*and* New Zealand.

Beryl and I are now settled in London as I write this. We wouldn't dream of living in the country, of course. Reading this through, I can see how disjointed it all is and not at all in my usual style. But, quite understandably, it took me nearly three months to get over a nervous breakdown; in fact, I'm not at all sure that I'm over it yet.

But I must leave this now to get on to something else—a letter to the editor of *The Times.* For that piece in this morning's issue just can't be left like that, about the Somerset farmer being attacked and killed by wild dogs. They *weren't* wild dogs. *I* know.

Of course I am glad to have seen those press reports proclaiming that the holocaust in Western Australia has supposedly come to an end, and that the sheep are apparently quite docile again. I even believe that those television pictures transmitted by satellite showing the sheep grazing peacefully once more were possibly authentic and maybe not faked as they could so easily have been. No doubt the sheep *are* returned to normal—now that there are no human beings (or human animals?) left there to antagonize them. But what would happen, I wonder, if some of those observers who have flown at low altitudes over the country from the east of

Australia to bring back those reports were to have their planes land and human figures step out to be seen by the sheep? Ah, that might be a very different tale—a very different tale indeed.

I realize that people won't listen to me. I even realize that they don't *want* to listen to me. After all, it's hardly a pretty prospect for them if they do. But surely at least *some* people must read those other newspaper reports, as small as they are, and nearly always tucked away in back pages?

Of all the Biblical prophecies, this is clearly the most horrible. But I suppose humanity does deserve it, and not only for what they've done to the humble sheep all through the ages—and more especially now—but more for what we've done to each other. We should have known, I suppose—for was there ever anything more meek to be the inheritors?

SF LIBRARY DISPLAY AVAILABLE

Science Fiction Writers of America has prepared a library display that features the winners of the 1972 Nebula Awards. The display includes copies of the winning works, photographs of the authors, quotes from the stories, and information on the winning authors and SF in general. The display is built around the awards, but SFWA has tried to design a display that will tell people something about the entire science fiction field and that will introduce them to the magazines, the SF book publishing scene, and several leading authors. The display includes the runners up in the novel category and it also includes a special section on science fiction as a literary form with quotes from a number of prominent authors.

Any librarian wishing information about the display should write Mrs. Joyce Post, 4613 Larchwood Avenue, Philadelphia, Pa. 19143. There is a four dollar handling charge for the display, and libraries are also asked to pay the cost of shipping it to the next library that wants it. Libraries interested in scheduling the display should send Mrs. Post three alternate dates and a check for the four dollar handling charge. (Checks should be made out to Mrs. Post.)

This is the first of several good stories we have from Mr. Coney, who has responded amiably to our request for biographical information as follows: "I am thirty-nine years old, married with two children, at present living in Antigua. Here I manage, with mixed success, I feel, the Jabberwock Beach Club. I sold my first sf story in 1968; since then I have sold some twenty-five short stories and recently sold my first novel to Ballantine. I am English and have lived for most of my life in Devon—which county, I have just calculated, is the setting for twelve of my stories, although frequently heavily disguised as Vega VI."

Susanna, Susanna!

by MICHAEL G. CONEY

LATE IN THE AFTERNOON I climbed the path which zigzags among the empty summer residences to the clifftop. It was out of season now and the garish, peeling wooden shacks were deserted, possessing that especially forlorn look which such buildings take in midautumn when the dead, wet leaves drift against their doors. Below, Falcombe harbor was empty of pleasure yachts, and the hoverferry trailed a lonely wake across the gun-metal water.

Out of breath from the climb, I paused and turned, gazing across the valley behind the little town. Although there were still two hours of daylight left, the fluorescent lights showed in the windows of the research station. The building was an anachronism in the valley, a stark concrete structure among the weathered stone of the centuries-old cottages and the dipping landscape of fields and hedges. A faint mist gathered in the hollows.

I climbed on through dripping trees and emerged onto the windswept, barren plateau of the clifftop. On the horizon a coaster trailed smoke, immobile with distance.

Soon I reached the granite plinth set into the headland

which signifies the highest point hereabouts. On the top of the plinth is a circular bronze plate engraved with a chart of the area and ringed with the points of the compass. The path becomes rocky here, and drops down to skirt a strangely shaped bay. Centuries ago a tea clipper was driven aground and disemboweled by the sharp rocks, and the outline of the vessel is still visible at low tide. The weeds have clung to the skeleton and give it a new life.

There is another sign of the past beside the small bay, where the path reaches its lowest point before climbing the opposite hillside to return to the clifftop. A rectangle of broken stones marks the place where a hermit built his isolated cottage. As I descended the steep path, I could see the remains of his chimney jutting above the ruins.

Sitting within the rectangle on a green plastic sheet, her back against the stones of the chimney, was a girl. She was dressed in slacks and a yellow anorak, and although she was looking in my direction, I had the initial impression that she was blind.

She was beautiful and somehow familiar, with that faintly tanned oval face and more than shoulder-length pale golden hair which suggests the Scandinavian. I was sure I had seen her somewhere before. This encouraged me to grin shortly as I walked up to her; then I muttered my greeting and made to pass on.

"Wait," she said.

"Yes?"

She seemed nervous. She had been reading a newspaper, which she placed on the sheet beside her. She looked up at me tentatively, as though wondering what to say. "I'd like to talk to you," she said at last, flushing. "That's all. Do you mind?"

We were two miles from Falcombe and four miles from Prospect Cove. A rough path leads inland from the small bay to the main road a mile away where there is a tourist hotel, closed at this time of year; the chimneys are visible among the trees. I wondered if she were connected with the hotel in some way. It is possible to get a high-lift hovercar down the path to the bay; I have seen farmers do it. Behind the ruins, overhanging them, are two huge trees, incongruous in the otherwise barren valley; but there was no sign of a parked hovercar.

"I don't mind," I said, hesitating as to whether I ought to sit beside her on the plastic sheet. "My name's John," I added lamely, omitting the surname, as seemed to befit this casual encounter.

"I thought so," she replied surprisingly. "John Maine, isn't it? Someone. . .pointed you out to me once. I'm Susanna. Please sit down, will you?"

I took the newspaper out of the way and sat beside her. A photograph caught my eye, the twisted confusion of a collapsed bridge. A girl stood in the foreground watching men digging in the rubble. There was a tenseness in her stand, and despair in the tilt of her head.

After the initial awkwardness had thawed, we discussed current affairs for a while, a curiously aimless series of topics, I felt.

The grey light was fading and the damp air becoming noticeably more chill. Imperceptibly, we moved closer to each other until our bodies touched from shoulder to thigh. We talked of portovees we had read, our faces close. It was an unreal conversation, while the sea sucked at the rocks nearby and the rising hillsides on either side of us grew dark.

Suddenly she said, "You'd better go, now," and I found myself getting to my feet and standing uncertainly above her. She smiled. She had a wide mouth and kissable lips. "I'll see you here again, the same time tomorrow, if you like," she said.

"Fine," I replied. There seemed to be nothing else to say, and since she was clearly waiting for me to go, I set off up the path, back the way I had come.

I called in for a drink at the Shipwright's Arms in Falcombe and was back on my houseyacht by eleven o'clock. As I went to sleep, I was thinking of Susanna and her wide, smiling mouth.

At nine o'clock the following morning I went ashore to pick up some groceries in the town. The weather had cleared during the night, and it was one of those mornings so rare in autumn, when the sun glows warmly from the light misty sky and the few permanent residents of the town greet one another with cheerful, echoing shouts across the narrow streets. Gulls wheeled overhead, yelling raucously. I collected my morning newspaper and made for the supermarket.

Here the girls of the skeleton off-season staff were cheerful and laughing, and consequently their bland young faces appeared almost attractive. I collected my purchases, dallied for a few pleasant moments with Esme at the cheese counter and was on the point of inviting her over to my houseyacht for the afternoon, when I caught sight of Susanna through the window. She was walking briskly up the street.

I paid my bill hastily and left, clutching my parcel of food. Susanna was nowhere in sight. I moved up the street, peering into the windows of the stores as I passed, but without success. After a while I became disheartened and went into the Harbour Bar of the Falcombe Hotel for a coffee.

The Harbour Bar has a wide picture window overlooking the water; there was an empty table here and I sat down, opening my paper. The front page dealt with the usual catalog of disasters. After noting briefly that six hundred had perished in the latest air accident, I turned to the sports page, congratulating myself on having that option. I have never taken out a subscription with Newspocket; I detest having to watch every piece of news appear on that tiny screen, before the items which interest me come up. Newspocket claims that their subscribers are the best informed in the country; and, on watching their glum faces as they scan their portovees, I have no doubt that this is true.

Glancing up as I sipped my coffee, I saw a small boat approaching the quay. A man stepped out, made the painter fast with deft competence and assisted a girl to the shore. I disliked the man on sight, partly because he was darkly handsome in gigolo style, partly because the girl whose arm he held so possessively was Susanna. I left the Harbour Bar and moved slowly on a converging course to that being taken by the couple. They were talking in animated fashion, but at least the dago had let go of Susanna's arm.

"Hello, Susanna," I said.

She looked at me on hearing her name, then her face showed blank nonrecognition. She turned back to the gigolo, and they resumed their conversation as they walked by, the man giving me a glance of mild curiosity.

I stood watching their receding backs, feeling foolish. They made for the carpark and the man assisted Susanna into a large hovervan.

I found myself drifting in their direction. The van rose from the ground with a whine of turbines and turned left into the street. Along the side were the words: FALCOMBE RESEARCH STATION.

Top-secret stuff. So that was it. It appeared that I was not supposed to know Susanna.

I wondered whether she would show up in the evening.

She was there. I approached the little bay from the landward side, heaving and swaying down the rough, overgrown path in my old hovercar just to prove to myself that it could be done. And, I admitted, in the hope

that she would accept a ride back.

She was sitting with her back against one of the two tall trees, and as the car sank to the ground and I climbed out, she waved a greeting and smiled her broad grin, which was encouraging. I sat down beside her.

"I hope I didn't embarrass you," I said. The staff of the research station have their own quarters and, I believe, are not supposed to form liaisons with the outside world. "I didn't realize you work at the station. I knew I'd seen you somewhere around the town, though. When I saw you on the quay, I thought I might be able to get you to join me for a coffee. If we could have got rid of your gigolo friend."

She had been regarding me with an expression of almost careful neutrality, which I found unnerving and which caused me to babble a little over the closing words.

"That would be Bill Stratton," she said. "I'm surprised you've never met him before. He's the director." She hesitated. "He wants to marry me, but. . . I'd keep out of his way, if I were you." There was something very serious about the way she said this. "How did you know I work at the station?"

"It said so, on the van."

She smiled, then. "Oh, of course. It's ridiculous, advertising the place on the van. This top-secret business is full of inconsistencies like that."

"What exactly do you do there?" I asked.

"You know I can't tell you that, John." There was amusement in her voice. "Tell me what you do, instead."

"I prowl the cliffs for beautiful girls."

"I meant in your leisure time."

"I write articles for yachting magazines. Illustrated with photographs of the latest runabouts with girls in bikinis sitting in them, looking like you. Care to pose for a shot or two? They're launching the first of a new class from the slipway tomorrow." I was more than half serious. "We could have drinks on my boat afterwards."

She looked genuinely sad; I suppose it's a lonely life at the station. "I'd love to. But you know how it is."

"I know."

A dense, low bank of dark cloud was moving in from the sea. A puff of cold, damp wind blew, dispelling the unseasonal warmth of the evening. Susanna shivered against me; I put my arm around her shoulders. She moved closer and we sat in silence for a moment; then, as if embarrassed by the sudden proximity, we began to talk animatedly.

We discussed Falcombe and its growth rate, and compared it favorably with the explosive cities to the east. We argued about the merits of the alternative sites for the new reservoir and the advisability of building a desalination plant. We spoke of the booming industry in small boat-building and how, in Falcombe, this had offset the slump in the tourist trade. For a while we enjoyed an interesting but profitless conversation.

We discussed everything except the research station, and love. I wondered if it would always be this way.

Suddenly it was quite dark, and the rain was falling.

I shifted my position, kissed her lightly and impulsively on the forehead, and stood. "We're getting wet," I observed.

She stayed where she was. "I'm all right," she said. "But it's time you were going."

"I've got the car here. I'll give you a ride back."

She shook her head. "I've got someone coming to pick me up. Thanks all the same, John."

She sat there looking up at me, waiting for me to go; and the rain was turning her golden hair streaky, and trickling down her face.

"Don't be silly," I said. "At least come and sit in the car, until he comes for you. It is a he, I suppose."

"I'd rather stay here," she said flatly. She wasn't smiling any more.

Glancing around helplessly I saw a figure approaching down the path from the main road; the hesitant figure of a girl in a light raincoat, walking aimlessly, pausing from time to time to stare at the sky. "What's the matter with her?" I asked.

Susanna was staring in the direction I indicated with an expression I couldn't fathom, but which seemed to contain a dawning realization and some fear. "Go now, John," she said urgently.

I reached down and pulled her to her feet. "You're being damned unreasonable," I said. "We're soaked already. For God's sake come in the car. I'm not going to rape you." Keeping a firm grip on her arm, I began to propel her over the grass towards the vehicle.

The girl on the path was watching us; she broke into an aimless, wandering run, heading towards us. It seemed she was familiar to me, but my mind refused to grasp what my eyes were telling me. Susanna was protesting as I dragged her along.

The rain was driving into our backs, thrusting us forward as it funneled through the gap in the cliffs. A blizzard of rusty leaves whirled down from the two tall trees. I hunched my head into

the collar of my jacket as I lunged towards the car.

Then suddenly the sky was clear and yellow-pink with the last rays of the sun; the clouds were gone and the grass was dry and rustling beneath my feet. Startled, I let go of Susanna's hand. The other girl had reached the car and she had her back to us now. It seemed that she had lost interest; she was staring in the opposite direction, at the chimneys of the hotel on the main road. Looking at her, I shivered.

I turned back to Suanna. She was not there. The trees stood still and quiet in the evening air, the ruins of the stone cottage lay near the water's edge like fossil vertebrae. And the grass was dry and it had never rained. And Susanna was gone.

I climbed into the car and sat for a minute, thinking. I pressed the starter, the engine whirred and the car rose from the ground. On an impulse I threw open the passenger door.

"Get in," I said. "I'll give you a ride back."

She climbed in without comment, this strange, quiet girl; and if she had been sleepwalking before, she was now awake; the fear and bewilderment were in her eyes. In Susanna's eyes.

Her hair was dry and silken, because it had not rained where she had come from. Although she had Susanna's mouth, she was not smiling.

I said, "I think you've had a shock. You'll be all right."

She looked at me, seeming reassured. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've never done anything like this before. I can't think what. . ." Her eyes focused. "I know you," she said. "You're the man who spoke to me on the quay this morning. I was with Bill Stratton."

The car swayed up the path. "That's right, Susanna," I said.

"And you know my name," she said wonderingly. "I'm sorry," she said again. "You must think me very rude. I just didn't recognize you this morning. Where did we meet, before? Somewhere in the city?"

Although the hotel closes in the winter, they keep the bar open to take advantage of any passing trade. I pulled up and led the girl inside. She didn't resist. She looked as though she needed a drink. I bought her a double Scotch and, after a moment's hesitation, the same for myself. I needed it, too. We sat in the corner of the deserted room away from the lackluster gaze of the barman.

"We've never met before," I told her. "I mistook you for that girl you saw me with this evening. Her name was Susanna, too."

"What girl?" she asked.

"When I. . .came to, or whatever, you were standing alone, near the trees."

I found that my glass was empty and ordered two more, and I found I was thinking my Susanna was gone, maybe forever. Yet this Susanna was here with me, and was there any difference? I had already suspected the truth, and I had a Susanna beside me. I looked at her; she had taken off her coat. I wondered: in circumstances like this, what exactly does love mean?

"Here we are in this bar," I said abruptly, "and we don't know what the hell to talk about. Something queer has happened, and we've each got our own reasons for not wanting to say much about it. Do you read the papers?"

She smiled at last, at last. "Most people do."

"Yesterday I had a surprise. I saw a photograph of the Trent Bridge disaster."

She looked mildly puzzled. "That's right. I saw it on this morning's portovee broadcast. What's surprising about that?"

"It happened today." A further two drinks arrived.

"What are you getting at?" Suddenly her expression was guarded.

"I'm getting at what you do at the research station."

"How do you know I work at the station?"

"It said so, on the van."

"Oh, of course. You know," she smiled again, "I sometimes wonder about the top-secret mentality. Wherever you look, there are inconsistencies."

Oh, Susanna, Susanna!

"You're beautiful," I said.

"And you're a damned fast worker. What's your name?"

I told her, and I told her about my job, and my boat, and we had some more drinks. I tried to tell her that her lapse of memory had been due to overwork at the station, and that she ought to take it easy and get around a bit, and meet people, like me. Temporary amnesia is a warning sign, I said. The next time, she might take a walk over the cliff. Relax, I said. And we had some more drinks.

But she wouldn't tell me about her work at the station, and when I suggested that we meet again tomorrow, she refused; regretfully, I think. She said she was engaged in an important project. She wouldn't tell me any more.

I spent the following day on the houseyacht. I read a bit, cooked a bit, and did some desultory painting where the summer sun had taken its customary toll of the cabin roof. I repelled a boarder in the form of a small boy who seemed to consider it his right

to fish from my deck and spread his noisome bait over my varnish. Esme from the supermarket talked to me from the quay for a while, then wandered off disappointed at not being invited aboard.

Later in the afternoon I went ashore, climbed into the car and drove off with a void of anticipation in the pit of my stomach.

I turned left at the hotel—it seemed a long time since yesterday—and whined and bumped down the path where the hills rose on either side and the sea gleamed steel-grey through the gap between the two trees.

She was standing, waiting for me. When I pulled up the car and got out, she stayed within the trees, not looking my way.

But when I stepped inside her charmed circle of territory, she threw her arms about my neck and we kissed, long and hard and soft, and it was as though I had never held a woman before. There was also a sadness in her kissing and the expression on her face, a desperation as though this first time was also the last.

We stood apart, breathless. "Hello," she said.

She was beautiful and I didn't want there to be any secrets. "I've brought you something," I said, handing her the newspaper.

She took it and looked at me uncertainly. "You know, then?"

"Some. Let's sit down. How much can you tell me?"

For a moment I thought she was going to cry. "Everything," she said quietly. "It doesn't matter, now. I didn't expect to see you today."

It was a dull day in her little world around the trees, and the clouds approaching were even darker, threatening thunder. We sat against the tree and she was quiet, wondering how to begin.

"You come from an alternative world," I said.

So she told me about the program at the research station, and how they had beamed their initial experiments onto this desolate spot, and a few others. "In case something went wrong," she said. "We didn't know, at first, whether the two worlds impinging might cause some sort of explosion."

"How different is your world?" I asked.

"It's much the same as yours," she told me. "The people are pretty much the same individuals, and events happen at nearly the same time. There's not the divergence we expected, although bits of recent history are slightly different. It seems there's a sort of averaging out, as though we're both heading for the same goal by slightly different paths

which coincide most of the time."

"But that's just your world and mine. What about the others?"

"We haven't reached them yet, although we've got several outposts in your world, like this place. Your world is the nearest. In time, we'll reach worlds which we don't even recognize."

I shivered, thinking of what might have happened in the past, of what *would* have happened, on a widely divergent alternative.

"You might reach these places before we do," said Susanna. "Your research station is identical to ours, and it's bound to be working on the same lines. For all I know, your people have visited my world already." Suddenly she smiled. "You've met my double in your world. Is she like me?"

"You saw her last evening. She came over and stood by the car."

She hesitated. "I guessed that happened, but I couldn't see her. Don't you understand? There's no way I can leave this circle of my world, or even *see* anything in your world. I have to wait for a suitable contact like you to bring me things and tell me things, then I report back. I'm sorry if it seems I've been pumping you for information, my darling."

"I still don't get it," I said.

"If I stepped outside this area, then I would be existing in your world in two places at once. Myself, and my double. Which is impossible."

My mouth was dry. A few drops of rain fell. "What would have happened if I had dragged you to the car yesterday?" I asked.

"My double would have appeared. *Must* have appeared. Did appear... And we would have met on the edge of the circle. And then... I don't know. We might have merged in some way, physically and mentally. But we couldn't have co-existed in the same world. I think we would both cease to exist. It's the only way."

"What's the point of all this?" I asked.

"We must learn, don't you see? And one day, there might be a point. There was an air disaster in your world, the day before yesterday. One of our contacts got hold of a newspaper. He found the flight had been delayed in our world. The plane hadn't taken off."

"So you were able to prevent the accident?"

"We prevented the plane taking off, but it exploded on the runway, inexplicably. Everyone was killed. It's like I said, our worlds are so similar that history tends to average out."

We talked about this for a long time, and I told her everything I could recollect in the way of recent events for the purposes of comparison with her world. I was ashamed of how little I knew of current affairs and resolved to pay less attention to the sports pages in future. We read the newspaper together, Susanna exclaiming over various discrepancies.

"I can bring you a paper each day," I said.

"History books might help as well," she said. "Although they're pretty inaccurate. One of our projects is to build up an entire history of your world, and its points of divergence from ours. But the differences are so slight that I doubt if general books would show them."

"Newspapers, then. That gives me an excuse to come and see you every day."

Again the desperate look was in her eyes. "John," she said quietly. "We won't be able to meet here much longer."

I looked into her face, then I kissed her. "I won't let you down," I said.

We kissed again, and as we kissed I saw the tears start. Her voice was muffled; she pressed her face against my shoulder as she spoke. "You don't know, John. . . There's so little time. So little time."

She stepped back from me, watching me almost hungrily as the tears fell down her cheeks and the rain began to lash in from the sea. Thunder rumbled in the distance as she fumbled with the zipper of her anorak. She shrugged the garment off, unhooked the bra and began to struggle out of her slacks, her body glistening with the rain. "Hurry, darling," she said, pushing her clothes aside and lying down on the plastic sheet, holding up her arms to me.

I stared at her and mumbled something about people being able to see us.

"Nobody can see us," she said. "Can't you understand, nobody can look into this circle of my world except you? We're alone here. We've had our talk and my world will be grateful for the information and. . .and any more you can bring. Now I want you to do something for me, because I love you. Please, John."

So I lay beside her, kissed her gently and told her I loved her, and we made love, slowly and with lingering delight, while the cold rain bathed our bodies and the thunder crashed about the black clouds.

I'm glad we did that, because there were no words I could think of to convey to Susanna what I felt for her. There is no way I could describe how she looked as she lay there glowing in the aftermath of love, her

face shining with love and raindrops. The words do not exist.

"It's time for you to go, my darling," she said.

I attempted to argue, but I knew it was no use. I pulled on my drenched, clinging clothes and we walked to the perimeter of the circle. I stepped into my world, which was dry, the sky clear, and looked back at Susanna in hers, where the wind flung her hair across her face and the rain sprayed from her body, to vanish mysteriously a yard from where I stood. I could still hear the thunder, rumbling muffled; and looking up, I saw the lightning sparkling above the tall trees.

I had a sudden presentiment. "Susanna!" I cried. "It's dangerous in there! Come on out!"

She smiled at me. "I can't," she said. "Remember?" She glanced at her watch. "Anyway, the station is due to take me back in just about a minute. I'll see you tomorrow, darling." Suddenly her face was grave again. "Look after yourself. And. . .keep away from Bill Stratton, won't you?"

Lightning arced across that sky of hers as I waited for her to go; the storm was close, too close. I looked around, looked up the path towards the hotel. The other Susanna was nowhere in sight.

Which meant that my Susanna would not step out of her world.

Is not stepping out of her world.

Had never stepped out of her world.

I turned back in time to see the brilliant, scorching flash, but I felt nothing. I saw the tree glow with St. Elmo's fire and the trunk explode like a bomb, and I saw the huge fragments flying, but they stopped short of my world, disappearing as they reached the dry, calm air. I heard the crash, but faintly; and I heard the faint scream too.

I saw Susanna glow like a torch in that damned cruel world of hers, then drop to the ground broken as a jagged bulk of timber smashed into her head.

I saw all this before her world winked out and the trees of my world were back, intact and tall, and the grass under them was dry.

And my Susanna was gone.

I woke with a blinding headache the following noon. I couldn't believe the time when I looked at my watch. Perhaps I hadn't gone to bed until the early morning; I certainly recollect walking along the clifftop at one point. I remember seeing the white foam on the black water far below, as the waves gulped at the sharp rocks. I remember the

face of a bartender too, shaking his head, and people muttering to my right, drawing away from me.

I rolled out of bed and mixed myself an Alka-Seltzer, drank it down and got dressed and shaved, trying not to think, trying to busy myself with trivial, mind- and time-consuming jobs about the boat. I lasted this way for an hour, then went into the town for a drink.

The bartender at the Shipwright's wore a guarded look. "How are you feeling, Mr. Maine?" he asked.

I mumbled something and got a double Scotch down, quickly. I took another glass to a table and sat down. I looked around at the faces of the customers and thought what a lousy, stinking lot they were, and what a lousy, stinking world they lived in. And I began to wonder about the other worlds. I had another drink.

I thought of my Susanna, dead. I thought of what she had said: history seems to average out. The people in one world are much the same as the people in another. I thought: right now, in world after world, to infinity, Susannas are dying, have died, will die, just to keep the records straight. Six hundred people die in a plane crash in world A, so the same six hundred people will die in world B. And world C. And D,E. And there's not a damned thing you can do about it. The people and the Susannas will die. . . .

So help me, it wasn't until then that I remembered the Susanna in my own world.

I left my drink, ran for the car, and drove for the research station, fast. The forecast rain had arrived, vision was obscured by a driving wetness, I was drunk, but I made it.

I gave my name to the guard at the gate. "I've got to see Mr. Stratton," I said. "Quickly."

Keep away from Bill Stratton, my Susanna had said. . . .

"Visitors are not allowed," replied the guard, secure on the other side of the fence, but I had seen Stratton at a window.

I shouted his name and he looked up. He frowned. He didn't recognize me; he had only seen me once before. I shouted again and he opened the window, wincing at the rain. "What do you want?" he called.

"Is Susanna there?"

"Susanna who? Who the hell is Susanna? And who the hell are you, yelling like this? This is a secret establishment."

Oh, my God. "If you don't listen to what I've got to say," I shouted back, "Susanna will die."

That got him. He arrived breathless at the gate. "I think

you'd better tell me what you're talking about," he said grimly.

And I got through to him. I'll say this for Bill Stratton, he was more intelligent than he looked. He grasped the situation and showed no surprise at the fact that the parallel world had been researching along the same lines. But it seemed I was too late.

"She's gone," he said. "We've started today's experiment. A ninety-minute trip. I can't bring her back. The whole space-time matrix is preset." He looked older, much older, suddenly, and very frightened. He was in love with her.

So we got hold of the station doctor, and loaded the car with oxygen cylinders and medical equipment, and drove for the coast while the lightning flickered across the dark sky and the downdraft flung a cloud of spray around us.

We waited on the edge of the bay, the ugly sea booming behind us as we watched that strange circle of nothingness, that small void of non-matter where a part of Earth had been transported to another Earth, and with it a girl. And every time the lightning flashed near, we flinched, and looked up.

"Why the hell use a girl like that?" I asked roughly. "Why?"

Stratton was looking at his watch. "It's time," he said.

And suddenly the stones of the ruined cottage were gleaming in the rain, and the trees were there, scattering dead leaves. And one tree was broken, split down the middle as though with a giant axe; and the girl lay twisted on the wet grass.

Moments later the doctor looked up, wiping rain from his face. "I'm sorry," he said.

Stratton carried the body of his Susanna to the car.

I left the doctor in charge and took Stratton back to my boat. It seemed the best thing to do. He couldn't face the station and the sympathy and the unspoken accusations, not yet. He needed quiet, and drink, and, I thought, the company of one who had also lost Susanna. . . .

And history required that he and I should be together at this time.

At one point he said, as though in his defense, "We had to use her, don't you see? She couldn't step outside the circle. She couldn't even see outside the circle. She had to be approached. She was pretty. . ."

"Did anyone approach her?" I asked. I knew the answer.

"No," he said. He was drunk, and he spoke carefully. "There's only one type of person who could see her and step inside her circle."

I was drunk too. I seemed to

have been drunk for days. "I know," I said.

"Who?" he asked.

"Me."

The rain drummed on the cabin roof as he watched me, his eyes strangely vacant. I wondered if he were, in some way, jealous of me. The other Susanna had loved me. Stratton's Susanna was identical, almost. The boat rocked gently on the heaving water.

"You're living on borrowed time, Maine," he said.

"I know that. I've been doing it for days." Nothing mattered now. We couldn't have saved his Susanna. I don't know why we tried. She was doomed from the moment my Susanna died. The parallel paths coincided. The girls died, worlds without end.

My Susanna had said: There's so little time. But she hadn't meant herself. She meant me.

If I could see her and step physically into her world, my Doppelganger must already have died. Two people cannot occupy the same world at the same time. And history will average out. Susanna knew this.

And she told me to be careful, to avoid Bill Stratton. Because she knew that in her world Stratton had been involved in the death of my double.

Stratton was weeping now, weak drunken tears. "I loved her," he mumbled. He watched me vacantly, eyes red-rimmed. "How many of her have we killed?"

Suddenly I was sick of him, sick of his whimpering. I stood. "The liquor's all finished," I said. "There's still time to get some from the town. You coming?"

It was raining hard, and the plank which spanned the gap between the boat and the quay was slippery. The tide was ebbing fast and the black water ran swiftly below. The lights of Falcombe gleamed through the veil of rain; I could see the sign outside the Shipwright's swinging wildly in the gusting wind.

The plank bounced and shuddered as Stratton walked unsteadily behind me.

REPORT ON COMPETITION 3

In our July issue we asked for misprints caused by the substitution or omission of one letter. We didn't say you could *add* anything, so you people who send in stuff like *I Will Fear No Evil* by Roberta Heinlein or *Sturgeon Is Alive and, Well. . .* just weren't listening. We have to stay tough or this thing collapses. Again, we're going to award prizes on a random basis from the below entries. The problem was that no one brought off 6 good entries that stayed completely within the rules while avoiding repeats. As for repeats, there were a lot of good ones: like Asimov's *The Naked Nun (Pun, Fun, Son)*, Ellison's *I Have No Couth and I Must Scream*, del Rey's *Helen O'Boy*, Zelazny's *A Nose For Ecclesiastes*, Niven's *Ringwormd*, Blish's and Knight's *A Torrent of Feces*, the latter being the tip of an iceberg of scatological and off-color entries. Which leads us to a special mention for restraint to Roy Schenck for offering Vonnegut's *The Big Space Duck*.

Some entries included a short subtitle or a source. We didn't ask for these, but in many cases they added something. Which prompts us to say: if you have a good idea for a competition, send it in. If we use it, we'll award a free subscription and put your name in lights on this page. And now, have you read:

Harry Harrison's *Bill, The Galactic Her* (sex change in space)

Arthur D. Hlavaty

Damon Knight's account of the quest for Santa Claus' lost reindeer, *In Search of Donder*

R. A. Boldt

L. Sprague de Camp's *Rogue Queer*

Lawrence A. Perkins

Harlan Ellison's *I Have No Youth And I Must Scream*, Alfred Bester's *The Stags, My Destination* (story of a man overcome by his lust for pornographic films)

Barry N. Malzberg

I Have Po Mouth and I Must Scream

Tom Purdom

John W. Campbell's *Astounding Sales of Space and Time*

Linda Workman

Jack Vance's *The Faceless Fan*

Deborah Hambly

Alfred Bester's *She Demolished Man*

Wesley Koehler

A. E. van Vogt's *The Weapon Masers* (Popular Science), *The Fixed Men* (Sexology), *The Book of Plath* (Saturday Review), *Slaw* (Family Circle)

Ralph Glisson

Ray Bradbury's *Something Licked This Way Comes*

Mark Hora
Peter M. Basch

"Once upon a time, there was a Marxian named Valentine Michael Smith. . ." from Heinlein's *Stranger In a Strange Land*

K. H. Burgett

Robert Silverberg's *To Jive Again*

Robert J. Morales

The Science Fiction Navel (four essays by Heinlein, Bloch, Kornbluth and Bester)

Ted Kriner

John Brunner's *The Whale Man* (hunting giant aquatic mammals), *The Day of the Star Cuties* (Earth invaded by glamorous alien girls), *To Conquer Chaps* (the technique of seduction), *Catch A Balling Star* (the blue movie business).

John Brunner

Competition 4

When he heard the news, Chief Pilot Johnny Draxton's reaction was instantaneous. "What?" he bellowed, "Me fly with some green kid just out of the Space Academy as my co-pilot? You think a green kid can co-pilot a double warp-powered GP-1077F2 interstellar attack bomber armed with a full rack of XX fusion bombs in spatial area 12BAA where a single mistake can mean instant death? Who is this kid?"

"General Deverell's son, sir," the tough grizzled old sergeant said.*

Above, the opening of a possible lead story in THE YEAR'S WORST FANTASY & SF, published by Oblivion Press. Send us other, original candidates (just the openings, please; limit 75 words).

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by December 1. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, *The Gods Themselves* (Doubleday) Isaac Asimov's new novel, autographed by the author. Second prize: National Zip Code Directory, 1969-1970. Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 4 will appear in the March issue.

*Thanks to Robert Sheckley

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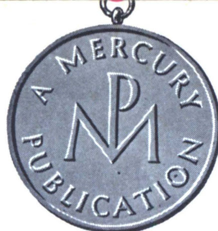

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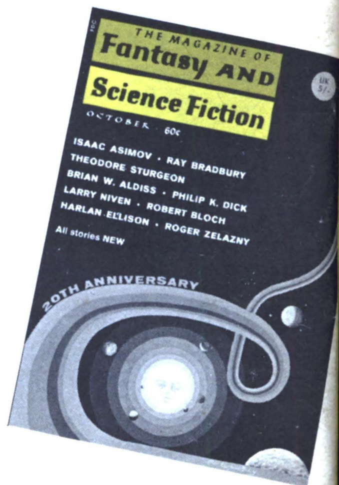

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