

Jack Vance

John Holbrook Vance (1916-) is one of the premier stylists of science fiction, popular world-wide and influential on other writers for six decades. His book *The Dying Earth* (1950), set in a fantastically distant future, is one of the classics of genre science fiction. It is also one of those genre-stretching works that blur the borders between science fiction and fantasy, in the manner of the *Weird Tales* writers of the 1920s and '30s. He has written award-winning mysteries under his full name, and as Ellery Queen (many of the later novels of Queen were written by SF writers such as Theodore Sturgeon, Avram Davidson, and Vance). He is a huge man, a lover of hot jazz and writing, but also a carpenter by trade who was still, in the 1980s, building and rebuilding his own house.

Vance found his writing voice early and hit his stride in the 1950s. Since then he has produced a continuing stream of exquisite work, much of it brilliant. Critics often praise his intricacies and ironies, his subtle wit, his settings and atmospherics. Yet his characters are usually motivated by common passions, no matter how nicely expressed, and his plots are clever. He is still writing distinctive novels of fantasy and SF and winning genre awards in the mid-'90s. He is most often at his best in the novel form, but this piece is one of his later novellas, pure Vance compressed and distilled.

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RUMFUDDLE

I

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rom *Memoirs and Reflections*, by Alan Robertson:

Often I hear myself declared humanity's preeminent benefactor, though the jocular occasionally raise a claim in favor of the original serpent. After all circumspection I really cannot dispute the judgment. My place in history is secure; my name will persist as if it were printed indelibly

across the sky. All of which I find absurd but understandable. For I have given wealth beyond calculation. I have expunged deprivation, famine, overpopulation, territorial constriction: All the first-order causes of contention have vanished. My gifts go freely and carry with them my personal joy, but as a reasonable man (and for lack of other restrictive agency), I feel that I cannot relinquish all control, for when has the human animal ever been celebrated for abnegation and self-discipline?

We now enter an era of plenty and a time of new concerns. The old evils are gone: we must resolutely prohibit a flamboyant and perhaps unnatural set of new vices.

* * * *

The three girls gulped down breakfast, assembled their homework, and departed noisily for school.

Elizabeth poured coffee for herself and Gilbert. He thought she seemed pensive and moody. Presently she said, "It's so beautiful here... We're very lucky, Gilbert."

"I never forget it."

Elizabeth sipped her coffee and mused a moment, following some vagrant train of thought. She said, "I never liked growing up. I always felt strange - different from the other girls. I really don't know why."

"It's no mystery. Everyone for a fact is different."

"Perhaps... But Uncle Peter and Aunt Emma always acted as if I were more different than usual. I remember a hundred little signals. And yet I was such an ordinary little girl... Do you remember when you were little?"

"Not very well." Gilbert Duray looked out the window he himself had glazed, across green slopes and down to the placid water his daughters had named the Silver River. The Sounding Sea was thirty miles south; behind the house stood the first trees of the Robber Woods.

Duray considered his past. "Bob owned a ranch in Arizona during the 1870s: one of his fads. The Apaches killed my father and mother. Bob took me to the ranch, and then when I was three he brought me to Alan's house in San Francisco, and that's where I was brought up."

Elizabeth sighed. "Alan must have been wonderful. Uncle Peter was so grim. Aunt Emma never told me anything. Literally, not anything! They never cared the slightest bit for me, one way or the other... I wonder why Bob brought the subject up - about the Indians and your mother and father being scalped and all... He's such a strange man."

"Was Bob here?"

"He looked in a few minutes yesterday to remind us of his Rumfuddle. I told him I didn't want to leave the girls. He said to bring them along."

"Hah!"

"I told him I didn't want to go to his damn Rumfuddle with or without the girls. In the first place, I don't want to see Uncle Peter, who's sure to be there..."

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From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

I insisted then and I insist now that our dear old Mother Earth, so soiled and toil-worn, never be neglected. Since I pay the piper (in a manner of speaking), I call the tune, and to my secret amusement I am heeded most briskly the world around, in the manner of bellboys, jumping to the command of an irascible old gentleman who is known to be a good tipper. No one dares to defy me. My whims become actualities; my plans progress.

Paris, Vienna, San Francisco, St. Petersburg, Venice, London, Dublin, surely will persist, gradually to become idealized essences of their former selves, as wine in due course becomes the soul of the grape. What of the old vitality? The shouts and curses, the neighborhood quarrels, the raucous music, the vulgarity? Gone, all gone! (But easy of reference at any of the cognates.) Old Earth is to be a gentle, kindly world, rich in treasures and artifacts, a world of old places - old inns, old roads, old forests, old palaces - where folk come to wander and dream, to experience the best of the past without suffering the worst.

Material abundance can now be taken for granted: Our resources

are infinite. Metal, timber, soil, rock, water, air: free for anyone's taking. A single commodity remains in finite supply: human toil.

* * * *

Gilbert Duray, the informally adopted grandson of Alan Robertson, worked on the Urban Removal Program. Six hours a day, four days a week, he guided a trashing machine across deserted Cuperinto, destroying tract houses, service stations, and supermarkets. Knobs and toggles controlled a steel hammer at the end of a hundred-foot boom; with a twitch of the finger, Duray toppled powerpoles, exploded picture windows, smashed siding and stucco, exploded picture windows, smashed siding and stucco, pulverized concrete. A disposal rig crawled fifty feet behind. The detritus was clawed upon a conveyor belt, carried to a twenty-foot orifice, and dumped with a rush and a rumble into the Apathetic Ocean. Aluminum siding, asphalt shingles, corrugated fiber-glass, TV's and barbecues, Swedish Modern furniture, Book-of-the-Month selections, concrete patio-tiles, finally the sidewalk and street itself: all to the bottom of the Apathetic Ocean. Only the trees remained, a strange eclectic forest stretching as far as the eye could reach: liquidambar and Scotch pine; Chinese pistachio, Atlas cedar, and ginkgo; white birch and Norway maple.

At one o'clock Howard Wirtz emerged from the caboose, as they called the small locker room at the rear of the machine. Wirtz had homesteaded a Miocene world; Duray, with a wife and three children, had preferred the milder environment of a contemporary semicognate: the popular Type A world on which man had never evolved.

Duray gave Wirtz the work schedule. "More or less like yesterday - straight out Persimmon to Walden, then right a block and back."

Wirtz, a dour and laconic man, acknowledged the information with a jerk of the head. On his Miocene world he lived alone, in a houseboat on a mountain lake. He harvested wild rice, mushrooms, and berries; he shot geese, ground-fowl, deer, young bison, and had once informed Duray that after his five-year work-time he might just retire to his lake and never appear on Earth again, except maybe to buy clothes and ammunition. "Nothing here I want, nothing at all."

Duray had given a derisive snort. "And what will you do with all your time?"

"Hunt, fish, eat, and sleep, maybe sit on the front deck."

“Nothing else?”

“I just might learn to fiddle. Nearest neighbor is fifteen million years away.”

“You can’t be too careful, I suppose.”

Duray descended to the ground and looked over his day’s work: a quarter-mile swath of desolation. Duray, who allowed his subconscious few extravagances, nevertheless felt a twinge for the old times, which, for all their disadvantages, at least had been lively. Voices, bicycle bells, the barking of dogs, the slamming of doors, still echoed along Persimmon Avenue. The former inhabitants presumably preferred their new homes. The self-sufficient had taken private worlds; the more gregarious lived in communities on worlds of every description: as early as the Carboniferous, as current as the Type A. A few had even returned to the now-uncrowded cities. An exciting era to live in: a time of flux. Duray, thirty-four years old, remembered no other way of life; the old existence, as exemplified by Persimmon Avenue, seemed antique, cramped, constricted.

He had a word with the operator of the trashing machine; returning to the caboose, Duray paused to look through the orifice across the Apathetic Ocean. A squall hung black above the southern horizon, toward which a trail of broken lumber drifted, ultimately to wash up on some unknown pre-Cambrian shore. There never would be an inspector sailing forth to protest; the world knew no life other than mollusks and algae, and all the trash of Earth would never fill its submarine gorges. Duray tossed a rock through the gap and watched the alien water splash up and subside. Then he turned away and entered the caboose.

Along the back wall were four doors. The second from the left was marked “G. DURAY.” He unlocked the door, pulled it open, and stopped short, staring in astonishment at the blank back wall. He lifted the transparent plastic flap that functioned as an air-seal and brought out the collapsed metal ring that had been the flange surrounding his passway. The inner surface was bare metal; looking through, he saw only the interior of the caboose.

A long minute passed. Duray stood staring at the useless ribbon as if hypnotized, trying to grasp the implications of the situation. To his knowledge no passway had ever failed, unless it had been purposefully closed. Who would play him such a spiteful trick? Certainly not Elizabeth. She detested practical jokes and if anything, like Duray himself, was perhaps a trifle too intense and literal-minded. He jumped down from the

caboose and strode off across Cupertino Forest: a sturdy, heavy-shouldered man of about average stature. His features were rough and uncompromising; his brown hair was cut crisply short; his eyes glowed golden-brown and exerted an arresting force. Straight, heavy eyebrows crossed his long, thin nose like the bar of a T; his mouth, compressed against some strong inner urgency, formed a lower horizontal bar. All in all, not a man to be trifled with, or so it would seem.

He trudged through the haunted grove, preoccupied by the strange and inconvenient event that had befallen him. What had happened to the passway? Unless Elizabeth had invited friends out to Home, as they called their world, she was alone, with the three girls at school... Duray came out upon Stevens Creek Road. A farmer's pickup truck halted at his signal and took him into San Jose, now little more than a country town.

At the transit center he dropped a com in the turnstile and entered the lobby. Four portals designated "LOCAL." "CALIFORNIA." "NORTH AMERICA," and "WORLD" opened in the walls, each portal leading to a hub on Utilis. [Utilis: a world cognate to Paleocene Earth, where, by Alan Robertson's decree, all the industries, institutions, warehouses, tanks, dumps, and commercial offices of old Earth were now located. The name Utilis, so it had been remarked, accurately captured the flavor of Alan Robertson's pedantic, quaint, and idealistic personality.]

Duray passed into the "California" hub, found the "Oakland" portal, returned to the Oakland Transit Center on Earth, passed back through the "Local" portal to the "Oakland" hub on Utilis, and returned to Earth through the "Montclair West" portal to a depot only a quarter mile from Thornhill School, [Alan Robertson had proposed another specialized world, to be known as Tutelar, where the children of all the settled worlds should receive their education in a vast array of pedagogical facilities. To his hurt surprise, he encountered a storm of wrathful opposition from parents. His scheme was termed mechanistic, vast, dehumanizing, repulsive. What better world for schooling than old Earth itself? Here was the source of all tradition; let Earth become Tutelar! So insisted the parents, and Alan Robertson had no choice but to agree.] to which Duray walked.

In the office Duray identified himself to the clerk and requested the presence of his daughter Dolly.

The clerk sent forth a messenger who, after an interval, returned alone. "Dolly Duray isn't at school."

Duray was surprised; Dolly had been in good health and had set off to school as usual. He said, "Either Joan or Ellen will do as well."

The messenger again went forth and again returned. "Neither one is

in their classrooms, Mr. Duray. All three of your children are absent.”

“I can’t understand it,” said Duray, now fretful. “All three set off to school this morning.”

“Let me ask Miss Haig. I’ve just come on duty.” The clerk spoke into a telephone, listened, then turned back to Duray. “The girls went home at ten o’clock. Mrs. Duray called for them and took them back through the passway.”

“Did she give any reason whatever?”

“Miss Haig says no; Mrs. Duray just told her she needed the girls at home.”

Duray stifled a sigh of baffled irritation. “Could you take me to their locker? I’ll use their passway to get home.”

“That’s contrary to school regulations, Mr. Duray. You’ll understand, I’m sure.”

“I can identify myself quite definitely,” said Duray. “Mr. Carr knows me well. As a matter of fact, my passway collapsed, and I came here to get home.”

“Why don’t you speak to Mr. Carr?”

“I’d like to do so.”

Duray was conducted into the principal’s office, where he explained his predicament. Mr. Carr expressed sympathy and made no difficulty about taking Duray to the children’s passway.

They went to a hall at the back of the school and found the locker numbered 382. “Here we are,” said Carr. “I’m afraid that you’ll find it a tight fit.” He unlocked the metal door with his master key and threw it open. Duray looked inside and saw only the black metal at the back of the locker. The passway, like his own, had been closed.

Duray drew back and for a moment could find no words.

Carr spoke in a voice of polite amazement. “How very perplexing! I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anything like it before! Surely the girls wouldn’t play such a silly prank!”

“They know better than to touch the passway,” Duray said gruffly. “Are you sure that this is the right locker?”

Carr indicated the card on the outside of the locker, where three names had been typed: “DOROTHY DURAY, JOAN DURAY, ELLEN DURAY.”

“No mistake,” said Carr, “and I’m afraid that I can’t help you any further. Are you in common residency?”

“It’s our private homestead.”

Carr nodded with lips judiciously pursed, to suggest that insistence upon so much privacy seemed eccentric. He gave a deprecatory little chuckle. “I suppose if you isolate yourself to such an extent, you more or less must expect a series of emergencies.”

“To the contrary,” Duray said crisply. “Our life is uneventful, because there’s no one to bother us. We love the wild animals, the quiet, the fresh air. We wouldn’t have it any differently.”

Carr smiled a dry smile. “Mr. Robertson has certainly altered the lives of us all. I understand that he is your grandfather?”

“I was raised in his household. I’m his nephew’s foster son. The blood relationship isn’t all that close.”

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From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

I early became interested in magnetic fluxes and their control. After taking my degree, I worked exclusively in this field, studying all varieties of magnetic envelopes and developing controls over their formation. For many years my horizons were thus limited, and I lived a placid existence.

Two contemporary developments forced me down from my “ivory castle.” First: the fearful overcrowding of the planet and the prospect of worse to come. Cancer already was an affliction of the past: heart

diseases were under control: I feared that in another ten years immortality might be a practical reality for many of us, with a consequent augmentation of population pressure.

Secondly, the theoretical work done upon "black holes" and "white holes" suggested that matter compacted in a "black hole" broke through a barrier to spew forth from a "white hole" in another universe. I calculated pressures and considered the self-focusing magnetic sheaths, cones, and whorls with which I was experimenting. Through their innate properties these entities constricted themselves to apexes of a cross section indistinguishable from a geometric point. What if two or more cones (I asked myself) could be arranged in contraposition to produce an equilibrium? In this condition charged particles must be accelerated to near light-speed and at the mutual focus constricted and impinged together. The pressures thus created, though of small scale, would be far in excess of those characteristic of the "black holes": to unknown effect.

I can now report that the mathematics of the multiple focus are a most improbable thicket, and the useful service I enforced upon what I must call a set of absurd contradictions is one of my secrets. I know that thousands of scientists, at home and abroad, are attempting to duplicate my work: they are welcome to the effort. None will succeed. Why do I speak so positively? This is my other secret.

* * * *

Duray marched back to the Montclair West depot in a state of angry puzzlement. There were four passways to Home, of which two were closed. The third was located in his San Francisco locker: the "front door," so to speak. The last and the original orifice was cased, filed, and indexed in Alan Robertson's vault. Duray tried to deal with the problem in rational terms. The girls would never tamper with the passways. As for Elizabeth, no more than the girls would she consider such an act. At least Duray could imagine no reason that would so urge or impel her. Elizabeth, like himself, a foster child, was a beautiful, passionate woman, tall, dark-haired, with lustrous dark eyes and a wide mouth that tended to curve in an endearingly crooked grin. She was also responsible, loyal, careful, industrious; she loved her family and Riverview Manor. The theory of erotic intrigue seemed to Duray as incredible as the fact of the closed passways. Though for a fact, Elizabeth was prone to wayward and incomprehensible moods. Suppose Elizabeth had received a visitor who for some sane or insane purpose had forced her to close the passway?... Duray shook his head in

frustration, like a harassed bull. The matter no doubt had some simple cause. Or on the other hand, Duray reflected, the cause might be complex and intricate. The thought, by some obscure connection, brought before him the image of his nominal foster father, Alan Robertson's nephew, Bob Robertson. Duray gave his head a nod of gloomy asseveration, as if to confirm a fact he long ago should have suspected. He went to the phone booth and called Bob Robertson's apartment in San Francisco. The screen glowed white and an instant later displayed Bob Robertson's alert, clean, and handsome face. "Good afternoon, Gil. Glad you called; I've been anxious to get in touch with you."

Duray became warier than ever. "How so?"

"Nothing serious, or so I hope. I dropped by your locker to leave off some books that I promised Elizabeth, and I noticed through the glass that your passway is closed. Collapsed. Useless."

"Strange," said Duray. "Very strange indeed. I can't understand it. Can you?"

"No... not really."

Duray thought he detected a subtlety of intonation. His eyes narrowed in concentration. "The passway at my rig was closed. The passway at the girls' school was closed. Now you tell me that the downtown passway is closed."

Bob Robertson grinned. "That's a pretty broad hint, I would say. Did you and Elizabeth have a row?"

"No."

Bob Robertson rubbed his long aristocratic chin. "A mystery. There's probably some very ordinary explanation."

"Or some very extraordinary explanation."

"True. Nowadays a person can't rule out anything. By the way, tomorrow night is the Rumfuddle. and I expect both you and Elizabeth to be on hand."

"As I recall," said Duray, "I've already declined the invitation." The Rumfuddlers were a group of Bob's cronies. Duray suspected that their activities were not altogether wholesome. "Excuse me; I've got to find an

open passway, or Elizabeth and the kids are marooned.”

“Try Alan,” said Bob. “He’ll have the original in his vault.”

Duray gave a curt nod. “I don’t like to bother him, but that’s my last hope.”

“Let me know what happens,” said Bob Robertson. “And if you’re at loose ends, don’t forget the Rumfuddle tomorrow night. I mentioned the matter to Elizabeth, and she said she’d be sure to attend.”

“Indeed. And when did you consult Elizabeth?”

“A day or so ago. Don’t look so damnably gothic, my boy.”

“I’m wondering if there’s a connection between your invitation and the closed passways. I happen to know that Elizabeth doesn’t care for your parties.”

Bob Robertson laughed with easy good grace. “Reflect a moment. Two events occur. I invite you and wife Elizabeth to the Rumfuddle. This is event one. Your passways close up, which is event two. By a feat of structured absurdity you equate the two and blame me. Now is that fair?”

“You call it ‘structured absurdity,’ “ said Duray. “I call it instinct.”

Bob Robertson laughed again. “You’ll have to do better than that. Consult Alan, and if for some reason he can’t help you, come to the Rumfuddle. We’ll rack our brains and either solve your problem or come up with new and better ones.” He gave a cheery nod, and before Duray could roar an angry expostulation, the screen faded.

Duray stood glowering at the screen, convinced that Bob Robertson knew much more about the closed passways than he admitted. Duray went to sit on a bench... If Elizabeth had closed him away from Home, her reasons must have been compelling indeed. But unless she intended to isolate herself permanently from Earth, she would leave at least one passway ajar, and this must be the master orifice in Alan Robertson’s vault.

Duray rose to his feet, somewhat heavily, and stood a moment, head bent and shoulders hunched. He gave a surly grunt and returned to the phone booth, where he called a number known to not more than a dozen persons.

The screen glowed white while the person at the other end of the line scrutinized his face... The screen cleared, revealing a round pale face from which pale blue eyes stared forth with a passionless intensity. "Hello, Ernest," said Duray. "Is Alan busy at the moment?"

"I don't think he's doing anything particular - except resting."

Ernest gave the last two words a meaningful emphasis. "I've got some problems," said Duray. "What's the best way to get in touch with him?"

"You'd better come up here. The code is changed. It's MHF now."

"I'll be there in a few minutes."

Back in the "California" hub on Utilis, Duray went into a side chamber lined with private lockers, numbered and variously marked with symbols, names, colored flags, or not marked at all. Duray went to Locker 122, and, ignoring the keyhole, set the code lock to the letters MHF. The door opened; Duray stepped into the locker and through the passway to the High Sierra headquarters of Alan Robertson.

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IV

From Memoirs and Reflections:

If one basic axiom controls the cosmos, it must be this:

In a situation of infinity every possible condition occurs, not once, but an infinite number of times.

There is no mathematical nor logical limit to the number of dimensions. Our perceptions assure us of three only, but many indications suggest otherwise: parapsychic occurrences of a hundred varieties, the "white holes," the seemingly finite state of our own universe, which, by corollary, asserts the existence of others.

Hence, when I stepped behind the lead slab and first touched the button. I felt confident of success; failure would have surprised me!

But (and here lay my misgivings) what sort of success might I

achieve?

Suppose I opened a hole into the interplanetary vacuum?

The chances of this were very good indeed; I surrounded the machine in a strong membrane to prevent the air of Earth from rushing off into the void.

Suppose I discovered a condition totally beyond imagination?

My imagination yielded no safeguards.

I proceeded to press the button.

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Duray stepped out into a grotto under damp granite walls. Sunlight poured into the opening from a dark-blue sky. This was Alan Robertson's link to the outside world; like many other persons, he disliked a passway opening directly into his home. A path led fifty yards across bare granite mountainside to the lodge. To the west spread a great vista of diminishing ridges, valleys, and hazy blue air; to the east rose a pair of granite crags, with snow caught in the saddle between. Alan Robertson's lodge was built just below the timberline, beside a small lake fringed with tall dark firs. The lodge was built of rounded granite stones, with a wooden porch across the front; at each end rose a massive chimney.

Duray had visited the lodge on many occasions; as a boy he had scaled both of the crags behind the house, to look wonderingly off across the stillness, which on old Earth had a poignant breathing quality different from the uninhabited solitudes of worlds such as Home.

Ernest came to the door: a middle-aged man with an ingenuous face, small white hands, and soft, damp, mouse-colored hair. Ernest disliked the lodge, the wilderness, and solitude in general; he nevertheless would have suffered tortures before relinquishing his post as subaltern to Alan Robertson. Ernest and Duray were almost antipodal in outlook. Ernest thought Duray brusque, indelicate, a trifle coarse, and probably not disinclined to violence as an argumentative adjunct. Duray considered Ernest, when he thought of him at all, as the kind of man who takes two bites out of a cherry. Ernest had never married; he showed no interest in women, and Duray, as a boy, had often fretted at Ernest's overcautious restrictions.

In particular Ernest resented Duray's free and easy access to Alan Robertson. The power to restrict or admit those countless persons who demanded Alan Robertson's attention was Ernest's most cherished perquisite, and Duray denied him the use of it by simply ignoring Ernest and all his regulations. Ernest had never complained to Alan Robertson for fear of discovering that Duray's influence exceeded his own. A wary truce existed between the two, each conceding the other his privileges.

Ernest performed a polite greeting and admitted Duray into the lodge. Duray looked around the interior, which had not changed during his lifetime: varnished plank floors with red, black, and white Navaho rugs, massive pine furniture with leather cushions, a few shelves of books, a half-dozen pewter mugs on the mantle over the big fireplace—a room almost ostentatiously bare of souvenirs and mementos. Duray turned back to Ernest: "Whereabouts is Alan?"

"On his boat."

"With guests?"

"No," said Ernest, with a faint sniff of disapproval. "He's alone, quite alone."

"How long has he been gone?"

"He just went through an hour ago. I doubt if he's left the dock yet. What is your problem, if I may ask?"

"The passways to my world are closed. All three. There's only one left, in the vault."

Ernest arched his flexible eyebrows. "Who closed them?"

"I don't know. Elizabeth and the girls are alone, so far as I know."

"Extraordinary," said Ernest in a flat metallic voice. "Well, then, come along." He led the way down a hall to a back room. With his hand on the knob, Ernest paused and looked back over his shoulder. "Did you mention the matter to anyone? Robert, for instance?"

"Yes," said Duray curtly, "I did. Why do you ask?"

Ernest hesitated a fraction of a second. "No particular reason. Robert occasionally has a somewhat misplaced sense of humor, he and his

Rumfuddlers. He spoke the word with a hiss of distaste.

Duray said nothing of his own suspicions. Ernest opened the door; they entered a large room illuminated by a skylight. The only furnishing was a rug on the varnished floor. Into each wall opened four doors. Ernest went to one of these doors, pulled it open, and made a resigned gesture. "You'll probably find Alan at the dock."

Duray looked into the interior of a rude hut with palm-frond walls, resting on a platform of poles. Through the doorway he saw a path leading under sunlit green foliage toward a strip of white beach. Surf sparkled below a layer of dark-blue ocean and a glimpse of the sky. Duray hesitated, rendered wary by the events of the morning. Anyone and everyone was suspect, even Ernest, who now gave a quiet sniff of contemptuous amusement. Through the foliage Duray glimpsed a spread of sail; he stepped through the passway.

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V

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

Man is a creature whose evolutionary environment has been the open air. His nerves, muscles, and senses have developed across three million years in intimate contiguity with natural earth, crude stone, live wood, wind, and rain. Now this creature is suddenly - on the geologic scale, instantaneously - shifted to an unnatural environment of metal and glass, plastic and plywood, to which his psychic substrata lack all compatibility. The wonder is not that we have so much mental instability but so little. Add to this the weird noises, electrical pleasures, bizarre colors, synthetic foods, abstract entertainments! We should congratulate ourselves on our durability. I bring this matter up because, with my little device - so simple, so easy, so flexible - I have vastly augmented the load upon our poor primeval brain, and for a fact many persons find the instant transition from one locale to another unsettling, and even actively unpleasant.

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Duray stood on the porch of the cabin, under a vivid green canopy of sunlit foliage. The air was soft and warm and smelled of moist vegetation. He stood listening. The mutter of the surf came to his ears and from a far

distance a single birdcall.

Duray stepped down to the ground and followed the path under tall palm trees to a riverbank. A few yards downstream, beside a rough pier of poles and planks, floated a white-and-blue ketch, sails hoisted and distended to a gentle breeze. On the deck stood Alan Robertson, on the point of casting off the mooring lines. Duray hailed him; Alan Robertson turned in surprise and vexation, which vanished when he recognized Duray. "Hello, Gil, glad you're here! For a moment I thought it might be someone to bother me. Jump aboard; you're just in time for a sail."

Duray somberly joined Alan Robertson on the boat. "I'm afraid I am here to bother you."

"Oh?" Alan Robertson raised his eyebrows in instant solicitude. He was a man of no great height, thin, nervously active. Wisps of rumped white hair fell over his forehead; mild blue eyes inspected Duray with concern, all thoughts of sailing forgotten. "What in the world has happened?"

"I wish I knew. If it were something I could handle myself. I wouldn't bother you."

"Don't worry about me; there's all the time in the world for sailing. Now tell me what's happened."

"I can't get through to Home. All the passways are closed off. Why and how I have no idea. Elizabeth and the girls are out there alone; at least I think they're *out there*."

Alan Robertson rubbed his chin. "What an odd business! I can certainly understand your agitation... You think Elizabeth closed the passways?"

"It's unreasonable - but there's no one else."

Alan Robertson turned Duray a shrewd, kindly glance. "No little family upsets? Nothing to cause her despair and anguish?"

"Absolutely nothing. I've tried to reason things out, but I draw a blank. I thought that maybe someone - a man had gone through to visit her and decided to take over, but if this were the case, why did she come to the school for the girls? That possibility is out. A secret love affair? Possible but so damn unlikely. Since she wants to keep me off the planet, her only

motive could be to protect me or herself or the girls from danger of some sort. Again this means that another person is concerned in the matter. Who? How? Why? I spoke to Bob. He claims to know nothing about the situation, but he wants me to come to his damned Rumfuddle, and he hints very strongly that Elizabeth will be on hand. I can't prove a thing against Bob, but I suspect him. He's always had a taste for odd jokes."

Alan Robertson gave a lugubrious nod. "I won't deny that." He sat down in the cockpit and stared off across the water. "Bob has a complicated sense of humor, but he'd hardly close you away from your world... I hardly think that your family is in actual danger, but of course we can't take chances. The possibility exists that Bob is not responsible, that something uglier is afoot." He jumped to his feet. "Our obvious first step is to use the master orifice in the vault." He looked a shade regretfully toward the ocean. "My little sail can wait... A lovely world this: not fully cognate with Earth - a cousin, so to speak. The fauna and flora are roughly contemporary except for man. The hominids have never developed."

The two men returned up the path, Alan Robertson chatting lightheartedly: "Thousands and thousands of worlds I've visited, and looked into even more, but do you know I've never hit upon a good system of classification. There are exact cognates - of course we're never sure exactly *how* exact they are. These cases are relatively simple but then the problems begin... Bah! I don't think about such things anymore. I know that when I keep all the determinates at zero, the cognates appear. Overintellectualizing is the bane of this and every other era. Show? me a man who deals only with abstraction, and I'll show you the dead futile end of evolution." Alan Robertson chuckled. "If I could control the machine tightly enough to produce real cognates, our troubles would be over... Much confusion, of course. I might step through into the cognate world immediately as a true cognate Alan Robertson steps through into our world, with net effect of zero. An amazing business, really; I never tire of it..."

They returned to the transit room of the mountain lodge. Ernest appeared almost instantly. Duray suspected he had been watching through the passway.

Alan Robertson said briskly, "We'll be busy for an hour or two, Ernest. Gilbert is having difficulties, and we've got to set things straight."

Ernest nodded somewhat grudgingly, or so it seemed to Duray. "The progress report on the Ohio Plan has arrived. Nothing particularly urgent."

"Thank you, Ernest, I'll see to it later. Come along, Gilbert; let's get to

the bottom of this affair.” They went to door No. 1 and passed through to the Utilis hub. Alan Robertson led the way to a small green door with a three-dial coded lock, which he opened with a flourish. “Very well, in we go.” He carefully locked the door behind them, and they walked the length of a short hall. “A shame that I must be so cautious,” said Alan Robertson. “You’d be astonished at the outrageous requests otherwise sensible people make of me. I sometimes become exasperated... Well, it’s understandable, I suppose.”

At the end of the hall Alan Robertson worked the locking dials of a red door. “This way, Gilbert; you’ve been through before.” They stepped through a passway into a hall that opened into a circular concrete chamber fifty feet in diameter, located, so Duray knew, deep under the Mad Dog Mountains of the Mojave Desert. Eight halls extended away into the rock; each hall communicated with twelve aisles. The center of the chamber was occupied by a circular desk twenty feet in diameter; here six clerks in white smocks worked at computers and collating machines. In accordance with their instructions they gave Alan Robertson neither recognition nor greeting.

Alan Robertson went up to the desk, at which signal the chief clerk, a solemn young man bald as an egg, came forward. “Good afternoon, sir.”

“Good afternoon, Harry. Find me the index for ‘Gilbert Duray,’ on my personal list.”

The clerk bowed smartly. He went to an instrument and ran his fingers over a bank of keys; the instrument ejected a card that Harry handed to Alan Robertson. “There you are, sir.”

Alan Robertson showed the card to Duray, who saw the code: “4:8:10/6:13: 29.”

“That’s your world,” said Alan Robertson. “We’ll soon learn how the land lies. This way, to Radiant four.” He led the way down the hall, turned into the aisle numbered “8,” and proceeded to Stack 10. “Shelf six,” said Alan Robertson. He checked the card. “Drawer thirteen... here we are.” He drew forth the drawer and ran his fingers along the tabs. “Item twenty-nine. This should be Home.” He brought forth a metal frame four inches square and held it up to his eyes. He frowned in disbelief. “We don’t have anything here either.” He turned to Duray a glance of dismay. “This is a serious situation!”

“It’s no more than I expected,” said Duray tonelessly.

"All this demands some careful thought." Alan Robertson clicked his tongue in vexation. "Tst, tst, tst." He examined the identification plaque at the top of the frame. "Four: eight: ten/six: thirteen: twenty-nine," he read. "There seems to be no question of error." He squinted carefully at the numbers, hesitated, then slowly replaced the frame. On second thought he took the frame forth once more. "Come along, Gilbert," said Alan Robertson. "We'll have a cup of coffee and think this matter out."

The two returned to the central chamber, where Alan Robertson gave the empty frame into the custody of Harry the clerk. "Check the records, if you please," said Alan Robertson. "I want to know how many passways were pinched off the master."

Harry manipulated the buttons of his computer. "Three only. Mr. Robertson."

"Three passways and the master - four in all?"

"That's right, sir."

"Thank you, Harry."

* * * *

VI

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

I recognized the possibility of many cruel abuses, but the good so outweighed the bad that I thrust aside all thought of secrecy and exclusivity. I consider myself not Alan Robertson but, like Prometheus, an archetype of Man, and my discovery must serve all men. But caution, caution, caution!

I sorted out my ideas. I myself coveted the amplitude of a private, personal world: such a yearning was not ignoble, I decided. Why should not everyone have the same if he so desired, since the supply was limitless? Think of it! The wealth and beauty of an entire world: mountains and plains, forests and flowers, ocean cliffs and crashing seas, winds and clouds-all beyond value, yet worth no more than a few seconds of effort and a few watts of energy.

I became troubled by a new idea. Would everyone desert old Earth

and leave it a vile junk-heap? I found the concepts intolerable... I exchange access to a world for three to six years of remedial toil, depending upon occupancy.

* * * *

A lounge overlooked the central chamber. Alan Robertson gestured Duray to a seat and drew two mugs of coffee from a dispenser. Settling in a chair, he turned his eyes up to the ceiling. ““We must collect our thoughts. The circumstances are somewhat unusual; still, I have lived with unusual circumstances for almost fifty years.

“So then: the situation. We have verified that there are only four passways to Home. These four passways are closed, though we must accept Bob’s word in regard to your downtown locker. If this is truly the case, if Elizabeth and the girls are still on Home, you will never see them again.”

“Bob is mixed up in this business. I could swear to nothing, but-”

Alan Robertson held up his hand. “I will talk to Bob; this is the obvious first step.” He rose to his feet and went to the telephone in the corner of the lounge. Duray joined him. Alan spoke into the screen. “Get me Robert Robertson’s apartment in San Francisco.”

The screen glowed white. Bob’s voice came from the speaker. “Sorry, I’m not at home. I have gone out to my world Fancy, and I cannot be reached. Call back in a week, unless your business is urgent, in which case call back in a month.”

“Mmph,” said Alan Robertson, returning to his seat. “Bob is sometimes a trifle too flippant. A man with an under-extended intellect...” He drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. “Tomorrow night is his party? What does he call it? A Rumfuddle?”

“Some such nonsense. Why does he want me? I’m a dead dog; I’d rather be home building a fence.”

“Perhaps you had better plan to attend the party.”

“That means, submit to his extortion.”

“Do you want to see your wife and family again?”

“Naturally. But whatever he has in mind won’t be for my benefit, or Elizabeth’s.”

“You’re probably right there. I’ve heard one or two unsavory tales regarding the Rumfuddlers... The fact remains that the passways are closed. All four of them.”

Duray’s voice became harsh. “Can’t you open a new orifice for us?”

Alan Robertson gave his head a sad shake. “I can tune the machine very finely. I can code accurately for the ‘Home’ class of worlds and as closely as necessary approximate a particular world-state. But at each setting, no matter how fine the tuning, we encounter an infinite number of worlds. In practice, inaccuracies in the machine, backlash, the gross size of electrons, the very difference between one electron and another, make it difficult to tune with absolute precision. So even if we tuned exactly to the ‘Home’ class, the probability of opening into your particular Home is one of an infinite number: in short, negligible.”

Duray stared off across the chamber. “Is it possible that space once entered might tend to open more easily a second time?”

Alan Robertson smiled. “As to that, I can’t say. I suspect not, but I really know so little. I see no reason why it should be so.”

“If we can open into a world precisely cognate, I can at least learn why the passways are closed.”

Alan Robertson sat up in his chair. “Here is a valid point. Perhaps we can accomplish something in this regard.” He glanced humorously sidewise at Duray. “On the other hand - consider this situation. We create access into a ‘Home’ almost exactly cognate to your own - so nearly identical that the difference is not readily apparent. You find there an Elizabeth, a Dolly, a Joan, and an Ellen indistinguishable from your own, and a Gilbert marooned on Earth. You might even convince yourself that this is your very own Home.”

“I’d know the difference,” said Duray shortly, but Alan Robertson seemed not to hear.

“Think of it! An infinite number of Homes isolated from Earth, an infinite number of Elizabeths, Dollys, Joans, and Ellens marooned, an infinite number of Gilbert Durays trying to regain access... The sum effect might be a wholesale reshuffling of families, with everyone more or less

good-natured about the situation. I wonder if this could be Bob's idea of a joke to share with his Rumfuddlers."

Duray looked sharply at Alan Robertson, wondering whether the man was serious. "It doesn't sound funny and I wouldn't be very good-natured."

"Of course not," said Alan Robertson hastily. "An afterthought - in rather poor taste, I'm afraid."

"In any event, Bob hinted that Elizabeth would be at the damned Rumfuddle. If that's the case, she must have closed the passways from this side."

"A possibility," Alan Robertson conceded, "but unreasonable. Why should she seal you away from Home?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to find out."

Alan Robertson slapped his hands down upon his shanks and jumped to his feet, only to pause once more. "You're sure you want to look into these cognates? You might see things you wouldn't like."

"So long as I know the truth, I don't care whether I like it or not."

"So be it."

* * * *

The machine occupied a room behind the balcony. Alan Robertson surveyed the device with pride and affection. "This is the fourth model, and probably optimum; at least I don't see any place for significant improvement. I use a hundred and sixty-seven rods converging upon the center of the reactor sphere. Each rod produces a quantum of energy and is susceptible to several types of adjustment to cope with the very large number of possible states. The number of particles to pack the universe full is on the order of ten raised to the power of sixty; the possible permutations these particles would number two raised to the power of ten raised to the power of sixty. The universe, of course, is built of many different particles, which makes the final number of possible, or let us say, thinkable states a number like two raised to the power of ten raised to the power of sixty, all times x , where x is the number of particles under consideration. A large, unmanageable number, which we need not consider, because the conditions we deal with - the possible variations of planet Earth - are far fewer."

“Still a very large number,” said Duray.

“Indeed yes. But again the sheer unmanageable bulk is swept away by a self-normalizing property of the machine. In what I call floating neutral, the machine reaches the closest cognate - which is to say, that infinite class of perfect cognates. In practice, because of infinitesimal inaccuracies, ‘floating neutral’ reaches cognates more or less imperfect, perhaps by no more than the shape of a single grain of sand. Still, ‘floating neutral’ provides a natural base, and by adjusting the controls, we reach cycles at an ever greater departure from base. In practice I search out a good cycle and strike a large number of passways, as many as a hundred thousand. So now to our business.” He went to a porthole at the side. “Your code number, what was it now?”

Duray brought forth the card and read the numbers: “Four: eighteen/six:thirteen:twenty-nine.”

“Very good. I give the code to the computer, which searches the files and automatically adjusts the machine. Now then, step over here; the process releases dangerous radiation.”

The two stood behind lead slabs. Alan Robertson touched a button; watching through a periscope, Duray saw a spark of purple light and heard a small groaning, gasping sound seeming to come from the air itself.

Alan Robertson stepped forth and walked to the machine. In the delivery tray rested an extensible ring. He picked up the ring and looked through the hole. “This seems to be right.” He handed the ring to Duray. “Do you see anything you recognize?”

Duray put the ring to his eye. “That’s Home.”

“Very good. Do you want me to come with you?”

Duray considered. “The time is now?”

“Yes. This is a time-neutral setting.”

“I think I’ll go alone.”

Alan Robertson nodded. “Whatever you like. Return as soon as you can, so I’ll know you’re safe.”

Duray frowned at him sidewise. "Why shouldn't I be safe? No one is there but my family."

"Not *your* family. The family of a cognate Gilbert Duray. The family may not be absolutely identical. The cognate Duray may not be identical. You can't be sure exactly what you will find - so be careful."

* * * *

VII

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

When I think of my machine and my little forays in and out of infinity, and idea keeps recurring to me which is so rather terrible that I close it out of my mind, and I will not even mention it here.

* * * *

Duray stepped out upon the soil of Home and stood praising the familiar landscape. A vast meadow drenched in sunlight rolled down to wide Silver River. Above the opposite shore rose a line of low bluffs, with copses of trees in the hollows. To the left, the landscape seemed to extend indefinitely and at last become indistinct in the blue haze of distance. To the right, the Robber Woods ended a quarter mile from where Duray stood. On a flat beside the forest, on the bank of a small stream, stood a house of stone and timber: a sight that seemed to Duray the most beautiful one he had ever seen. Polished glass windows sparkled in the sunlight; banks of geraniums glowed green and red. From the chimney rose a wisp of smoke.

The air smelled cool and sweet but seemed - so Duray imagined - to carry a strange tang, different - so he imagined - from the meadow-scent of his own Home. Duray started forward, then halted. The world was his own, yet not his own. If he had been conscious of the fact, would he have recognized the strangeness? Nearby rose an outcrop of weathered gray field-rock: a rounded mossy pad on which he had sat only two days before, contemplating the building of a dock. He walked over and looked down at the stone. Here he had sat; here were the impressions of his heels in the soil; here was the pattern of moss from which he had absently scratched a fragment. Duray bent close. The moss was whole. The man who had sat here, the cognate Duray, had not scratched at the moss. So then: The world was perceptibly different from his own.

Duray was relieved and yet vaguely disturbed. If the world had been the exact simulacrum of his own, he might have been subjected to unmanageable emotions - which still might be the case. He walked toward the house, along the path that led down to the river. He stepped up to the porch. On a deck chair was a book: *Down There: A Study of Satanism*, by J. K. Huysmans. Elizabeth's tastes were eclectic. Duray had not previously seen the book; was it perhaps that Bob Robertson had put through the parcel delivery?

Duray went into the house. Elizabeth stood across the room. She had evidently watched him coming up the path. She said nothing; her face showed no expression.

Duray halted, somewhat at a loss as to how to address this familiar-strange woman. "Good afternoon," he said at last.

Elizabeth allowed a wisp of a smile to show. "Hello, Gilbert."

At least, thought Duray, on cognate worlds the same language was spoken. He studied Elizabeth. Lacking prior knowledge, would he have perceived her to be someone different from his own Elizabeth? Both were beautiful women: tall and slender, with curling black shoulder-length hair, worn without artifice. Their skin was pale, with a dusky undertone; their mouths were wide, passionate, stubborn. Duray knew his Elizabeth to be a woman of explicable moods, and this Elizabeth was doubtless no different - yet somehow a difference existed that Duray could not define, deriving perhaps from the strangeness of her atoms, the stuff of a different universe. He wondered if she sensed the same difference in him.

He asked, "Did you close off the passways?"

Elizabeth nodded, without change of expression.

"Why?"

"I thought it the best thing to do," said Elizabeth in a soft voice.

"That's no answer."

"I suppose not. How did you get here?"

"Alan made an opening."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. "I thought that was impossible."

“True. This is a different world to my own. Another Gilbert Duray built this house. I’m not your husband.”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped in astonishment. She swayed back a step and put her hand up to her neck: a mannerism Duray could not recall in his own Elizabeth. The sense of strangeness came ever more strongly upon him. He felt an intruder. Elizabeth was watching him with a wide-eyed fascination. She said in a hurried mutter: “I wish you’d leave, go back to your own world; do!”

“If you’ve closed off all the passways, you’ll be isolated,” growled Duray. “Marooned, probably forever.”

“Whatever I do,” said Elizabeth, “it’s not your affair.”

“It is my affair, if only for the sake of the girls. I won’t allow them to live and die alone out here.”

“The girls aren’t here.” said Elizabeth in a flat voice. “They are where neither you nor any other Gilbert Duray will find them. So now go back to your own world, and leave me in whatever peace my soul allows me.”

Duray stood glowering at the fiercely beautiful woman. He had never heard his own Elizabeth speak so wildly. He wondered if on his own world another Gilbert Duray similarly confronted his own Elizabeth, and as he analyzed his feelings toward this woman before him, he felt a throb of annoyance. A curious situation. He said in a quiet voice, “Very well. You and my own Elizabeth have decided to isolate yourselves. I can’t imagine your reasons.”

Elizabeth gave a wild laugh. “They’re real enough.”

“They may be real now, but ten years from now or forty years from now they may seem unreal. I can’t give you access to your own Earth, but if you wish, you can use the-”

Elizabeth turned away and went to look out over the passway to the Earth from which I’ve just come, and you need never see me again.”

Duray spoke to her back. “We’ve never had secrets between us, you and I - or I mean, Elizabeth and I. Why now? Are you in love with some other man?”

Elizabeth gave a snort of sardonic amusement. "Certainly not... I'm disgusted with the entire human race."

"Which presumably includes me."

"It does indeed, and myself as well."

"And you won't tell me why?"

Elizabeth, still looking out the window, wordlessly shook her head.

"Very well," said Duray in a cold voice. "Will you tell me where you've sent the girls? They're mine as much as yours, remember."

"These particular girls aren't yours at all."

"That may be, but the effect is the same."

Elizabeth said tonelessly: "If you want to find your own particular girls, you'd better find your own particular Elizabeth and ask her. I can only speak for myself... To tell you the truth, I don't like being part of a composite person, and I don't intend to act like one. I'm just me. You're you, a stranger, whom I've never seen before in my life. So I wish you'd leave."

Duray strode from the house, out into the sunlight. He looked once around the wide landscape, then gave his head a surely shake and marched off along the path.

* * * *

VIII

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

The past is exposed for our scrutiny; we can wander the epochs like lords through a garden, serene in our purview. We argue with the noble sages, refuting their laborious concepts, should we be so unkind. Remember (at least) two things. First: The more distant from now, the less precise our conjunctures, the less our ability to strike to any given instant. We can break in upon yesterday at a stipulated second; during the Eocene, plus or minus ten years is the limit of our accuracy; as for the Cretaceous or earlier, an impingement with three hundred years of a given date can be considered satisfactory. Secondly: The past we broach is never our own past but at best the past of a cognate world, so

that any illumination cast upon historical problems is questionable and perhaps deceptive. We cannot plumb the future; the process involves a negative flow of energy, which is inherently impractical. An instrument constructed of antimatter has been jocularly recommended but would yield no benefit to us. The future, thankfully, remains forever shrouded.

* * * *

“Aha, you’re back!” exclaimed Alan Robertson. “What did you learn?”

Duray described the encounter with Elizabeth. “She makes no excuse for what she’s done; she shows hostility, which doesn’t seem real, especially since I can’t imagine a reason for it.”

Alan Robertson had no comment to make.

“The woman isn’t my wife, but their motivations must be the same. I can’t think of one sensible explanation for conduct so strange, let alone two.”

“Elizabeth seemed normal this morning?” asked Alan Robertson.

“I noticed nothing unusual.”

Alan Robertson went to the control panel of his machine. He looked over his shoulder at Duray. “What time do you leave for work?”

“About nine.”

Alan Robertson set one dial and turned two others until a ball of green light balanced, wavering, precisely halfway along a glass tube. He signaled Duray behind the lead slab and touched the button. From the center of the machine came the impact of 167 colliding nodules of force and the groan of rending dimensional fabric.

Alan Robertson brought forth the new passway. “The time is morning. You’ll have to decide for yourself how to handle the situation. You can try to watch without being seen; you can say that you have paperwork to catch up on, that Elizabeth should ignore you and go about her normal routine, while you unobtrusively see what happens.”

Duray frowned. “Presumably for each of these worlds there is a Gilbert Duray who finds himself in my fix. Suppose each tries to slip

inconspicuously into someone else's world to learn what is happening. Suppose each Elizabeth catches him in the act and furiously accuses the man she believes to be her husband of spying on her - this in itself might be the source of Elizabeth's anger."

"Well, be as discreet as you can. Presumably you'll be several hours, so I'll go back to the boat and putter about. Locker five in my private hub yonder; I'll leave the door open."

* * * *

Once again Duray stood on the hillside above the river, with the rambling stone house built by still another Gilbert Duray two hundred yards along the slope. From the height of the sun, Duray judged local time to be about nine o'clock - somewhat earlier than necessary. From the chimney of the stone house rose a wisp of smoke; Elizabeth had built a fire in the kitchen fireplace. Duray stood reflecting. This morning in his own house Elizabeth had built no fire. She had been on the point of striking a match and then had decided that the morning was already warm. Duray waited ten minutes, to make sure that the local Gilbert Duray had departed, then set forth toward the house. He paused by the big flat stone to inspect the pattern of moss. The crevice seemed narrower than he remembered, and the moss was dry and discolored. Duray took a deep breath. The air, rich with the odor of grasses and herbs, again seemed to carry an odd, unfamiliar scent. Duray proceeded slowly to the house, uncertain whether, after all, he was engaged in a sensible course of action.

He approached the house. The front door was open. Elizabeth came to look out at him in surprise. "That was a quick day's work!"

Duray said lamely. "The rig is down for repairs. I thought I'd catch up on some paper work. You go ahead with whatever you were doing."

Elizabeth looked at him curiously. "I wasn't doing anything in particular."

He followed Elizabeth into the house. She wore soft black slacks and an old gray jacket; Duray tried to remember what his own Elizabeth had worn, but the garments had been so familiar that he could summon no recollection.

Elizabeth poured coffee into a pair of stoneware mugs, and Duray took a seat at the kitchen table, trying to decide how this Elizabeth differed from his own - if she did. This Elizabeth seemed more subdued and

meditative; her mouth might have been a trifle softer. "Why are you looking at me so strangely?" she asked suddenly.

Duray laughed. "I was merely thinking what a beautiful girl you are."

Elizabeth came to sit in his lap and kissed him, and Duray's blood began to flow warm. He restrained himself; this was not his wife; he wanted no complications. And if he yielded to temptations of the moment, might not another Gilbert Duray visiting his own Elizabeth do the same... He scowled.

Elizabeth, finding no surge of ardor, went to sit in the chair opposite. For a moment she sipped her coffee in silence. Then she said, "Just as soon as you left, Bob called through."

"Oh?" Duray was at once attentive. "What did he want?"

"That foolish party of his - the Rubble-menders or some such thing. He wants us to come."

"I've already told him no three times."

"I told him no again. His parties are always so peculiar. He said he wanted us to come for a very special reason, but he wouldn't tell me the reason. I told him. 'Thank you but no.' "

Duray looked around the room. "Did he leave any books?"

"No. Why should he leave me books?"

"I wish I knew."

"Gilbert," said Elizabeth, "you're acting rather oddly."

"Yes, I suppose I am." For a fact Duray's mind was whirling. Suppose now he went to the school passway, brought the girls home from school, then closed off all the passways, so that once again he had an Elizabeth and three daughters, more or less his own; then the conditions he had encountered would be satisfied. And another Gilbert Duray, now happily destroying the tract houses of Cupertino, would find himself bereft... Duray recalled the hostile conduct of the previous Elizabeth. The passways in that particular world had certainly not been closed off by an intruding Duray... A startling possibility came to his mind. Suppose a Duray had come to the house and, succumbing to temptation, had closed off all passways except that one communicating with his own world; suppose then that Elizabeth,

discovering the imposture, had killed him... The theory had a grim plausibility and totally extinguished whatever inclination Duray might have had for making the world his home.

Elizabeth said, "Gilbert, why are you looking at me with that strange expression?"

Duray managed a feeble grin. "I guess I'm just in a bad mood this morning. Don't mind me. I'll go make out my report." He went into the wide cool living room, at once familiar and strange, and brought out the work-records of the other Gilbert Duray... He studied the handwriting: like his own, firm and decisive, but in some indefinable way different - perhaps a trifle more harsh and angular. The three Elizabeths were not identical, nor were the Gilbert Durays.

An hour passed. Elizabeth occupied herself in the kitchen; Duray pretended to write a report.

A bell sounded. "Somebody at the passway," said Elizabeth.

Duray said, "I'll take care of it."

He went to the passage room, stepped through the passway, looked through the peephole - into the large, bland sun-tanned face of Bob Robertson.

Duray opened the door. For a moment he and Bob Robertson confronted each other. Bob Robertson's eyes narrowed. "Why, hello, Gilbert. What are you doing home?"

Duray pointed to the parcel Bob Robertson carried. "What do you have there?"

"Oh, these?" Bob Robertson looked down at the parcel as if he had forgotten it. "Just some books for Elizabeth."

Duray found it hard to control his voice. "You're up to some mischief, you and your Rumfuddlers. Listen, Bob. Keep away from me and Elizabeth. Don't call here, and don't bring around any books. Is this definite enough?"

Bob raised his sun-bleached eyebrows. "Very definite, very explicit. But why the sudden rage? I'm just friendly old Uncle Bob."

"I don't care what you call yourself; stay away from us."

“Just as you like, of course. But do you mind explaining this sudden decree of banishment?”

“The reason is simple enough. We want to be left alone.”

Bob made a gesture of mock despair. “All this over a simple invitation to a simple little party, which I’d really like you to come to.”

“Don’t expect us. We won’t be there.”

Bob’s face suddenly went pink. “You’re coming a very high horse over me, my lad, and it’s a poor policy. You might just get hauled up with a jerk. Matters aren’t all the way you think they are.”

“I don’t care a rap one way or another,” said Duray. “Good-bye.” He closed the locker door and backed through the passway. He returned into the living room.

Elizabeth called from the kitchen. “Who was it, dear?”

“Bob Robertson, with some books.”

“Books? Why books?”

“I didn’t trouble to find out. I told him to stay away. After this, if he’s at the passway, don’t open it.”

Elizabeth looked at him intently. “Gil - you’re so strange today! There’s something about you that almost scares me.”

“Your imagination is working too hard.”

“Why should Bob trouble to bring me books? What sort of books? Did you see?”

“Demonology. Black magic. That sort of thing.”

“Mmf. Interesting - but not all *that* interesting... I wonder if a world like ours, where no one has ever lived, would have things like goblins and ghosts?”

“I suspect not,” said Duray. He looked toward the door. There was nothing more to be accomplished here, and it was time to return to his own

Earth. He wondered how to make a graceful departure. And what would occur when the Gilbert Duray now working his rig came home?

Duray said, "Elizabeth, sit down in this chair here."

Elizabeth slowly slid into the chair at the kitchen table and watched him with a puzzled gaze.

"This may come as a shock," he said. "I am Gilbert Duray, but not your personal Gilbert Duray. I'm his cognate."

Elizabeth's eyes widened to lustrous dark pools.

Duray said, "On my own world Bob Robertson caused me and my Elizabeth trouble. I came here to find out what he had done and why and to stop him from doing it again."

Elizabeth asked, "What has he done?"

"I still don't know. He probably won't bother you again. You can tell your personal Gilbert Duray whatever you think best, or even complain to Alan."

"I'm bewildered by all this!"

"No more so than I." He went to the door. "I've got to leave now. Goodbye."

Elizabeth jumped to her feet and came impulsively forward. "Don't say goodbye. It was such a lonesome sound, coming from you... It's like my own Gilbert saying good-bye."

"There's nothing else to do. Certainly I can't follow my inclinations and move in with you. What good are two Gilberts? Who'd get to sit at the head of the table?"

"We could have a round table," said Elizabeth. "Room for six or seven. I like my Gilberts."

"Your Gilberts like their Elizabeths." Duray sighed and said, "I'd better go now."

Elizabeth held out her hand. "Good-bye, cognate Gilbert."

* * * *

IX

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

The Oriental world-view differs from our own - specifically my own - in many respects, and I was early confronted with a whole set of dilemmas. I reflected upon Asiatic apathy and its obverse, despotism; warlords and brain-laundries: indifference to disease, filth, and suffering; sacred apes and irresponsible fecundity.

I also took note of my resolve to use my machine in the service of all men.

In the end I decided to make the "mistake" of many before me; I proceeded to impose my own ethical point of view upon the Oriental lifestyle.

Since this was precisely what was expected of me, since I would have been regarded as a fool and a mooncalf had I done otherwise, since the rewards of cooperation far exceeded the gratifications of obduracy and scorn, my programs are a wonderful success, at least to the moment of writing.

* * * *

Duray walked along the riverbank toward Alan Robertson's boat. A breeze sent twinkling cat's-paws across the water and bellied the sails that Alan Robertson had raised to air; the boat tugged at the mooring lines.

Alan Robertson, wearing white shorts and a white hat with a loose, flapping brim, looked up from the eve he had been splicing at the end of a halyard. "Aha, Gil! You're back. Come aboard and have a bottle of beer."

Duray seated himself in the shade of the sail and drank half the beer at a gulp. "I still don't know what's going on - except that one way or another Bob is responsible. He came while I was there. I told him to clear out. He didn't like it."

Alan Robertson heaved a melancholy sigh. "I realize that Bob has the capacity for mischief."

"I still can't understand how he persuaded Elizabeth to close the passways. He brought out some books, but what effect could they have?"

Alan Robertson was instantly interested. "What were the books?"

"Something about satanism, black magic: I couldn't tell you much else."

"Indeed, indeed!" muttered Alan Robertson. "Is Elizabeth interested in the subject?"

"I don't think so. She's afraid of such things."

"Rightly so. Well, well, that's disturbing." Alan Robertson cleared his throat and made a delicate gesture, as if beseeching Duray to geniality and tolerance. "Still, you mustn't be too irritated with Bob. He's prone to his little mischiefs, but - "

" 'Little mischiefs'!" roared Duray. "Like locking me out of my home and marooning my wife and children? That's going beyond mischief!"

Alan Robertson smiled. "Here, have another beer: cool off a bit. Let's reflect. First, the probabilities. I doubt if Bob has really marooned Elizabeth and the girls or caused Elizabeth to do so."

"Then why are all the passways broken?"

"That's susceptible to explanation. He has access to the vaults; he might have substituted a blank for your master orifice. There's one possibility, at least."

Duray could hardly speak for rage. At last he cried out: "He has no right to do this!"

"Quite right, in the largest sense. I suspect that he only wants to induce you to his Rumfuddle."

"And I don't want to go, especially when he's trying to put pressure on me."

"You're a stubborn man, Gil. The easy way, of course, would be to relax and look in on the occasion. You might even enjoy yourself."

Duray glared at Alan Robertson. "Are you suggesting that I attend the

affair?"

"Well - no. I merely proposed a possible course of action."

Duray drank more beer and glowered out across the river. Alan Robertson said, "In a day or so, when this business is clarified, I think that we - all of us - should go off on a lazy cruise, out there among the islands. Nothing to worry us, no bothers, no upsets. The girls would love such a cruise."

Duray grunted. "I'd like to see them again before I plan any cruises. What goes on at these Rumfuddler events?"

"I've never attended. The members laugh and joke and eat and drink and gossip about the worlds they've visited and show each other movies: that sort of thing. Why don't we look in on last year's party? I'd be interested myself."

Duray hesitated. "What do you have in mind?"

"We'll set the dials to a year-old cognate to Bob's world, Fancy, and see precisely what goes on. What do you say?"

"I suppose it can't do any harm," said Duray grudgingly.

Alan Robertson rose to his feet. "Help me get these sails in."

* * * *

X

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

The problems that long have harassed historians have now been resolved. Who were the Cro-Magnons; where did they evolve? Who were the Etruscans? Where were the legendary cities of the proto-Sumerians before they migrated to Mesopotamia? Why the identity between the ideographs of Easter Island and Mohenjo Daro? All these fascinating questions have now been settled and reveal to us the full scope of our early history. We have preserved the library at old Alexandria from the Mohammedans and the Inca codices from the Christians. The Guanches of the Canaries, the Ainu of Hokkaido, the Mandans of Missouri, the blond Kaffirs of Bhutan: All are now known to us. We can chart the

development of every language syllable by syllable, from the earliest formulation to the present. We have identified the Hellenic heroes, and I myself have searched the haunted forests of the ancient North and, in their own stone keeps, met face to face those mighty men who generated the Norse myths.

* * * *

Standing before his machine, Alan Robertson spoke in a voice of humorous self-deprecation. "I'm not as trusting and forthright as I would like to be; in fact I sometimes feel shame for my petty subterfuges, and now I speak in reference to Bob. We all have our small faults, and Bob certainly does not lack his share. His imagination is perhaps his greatest curse: He is easily bored and sometimes tends to overreach himself. So while I deny him nothing, I also make sure that I am in a position to counsel or even remonstrate, if need be. Whenever I open a passway to one of his formulae, I unobtrusively strike a duplicate which I keep in my private file. We will find no difficulty in visiting a cognate to Fancy."

Duray and Alan Robertson stood in the dusk, at the end of a pale white beach. Behind them rose a low basalt cliff. To their right, the ocean reflected the afterglow and a glitter from the waning moon; to the left, palms stood black against the sky. A hundred yards along the beach dozens of fairy lamps had been strung between the trees to illuminate a long table laden with fruit, confections, punch in crystal bowls. Around the table stood several dozen men and women in animated conversation; music and the sounds of gaiety came down the beach to Duray and Alan Robertson.

"We're in good time," said Alan Robertson. He reflected a moment. "No doubt we'd be quite welcome; still, it's probably best to remain inconspicuous. We'll just stroll unobtrusively down the beach, in the shadow of the trees. Be careful not to stumble or fall, and no matter what you see or hear, do nothing! Discretion is essential; we want no awkward confrontations."

Keeping to the shade of the foliage, the two approached the merry group. Fifty yards distant, Alan Robertson held up his hand to signal a halt. "This is as close as we need approach; most of the people you know, or more accurately, their cognates. For instance, there is Royal Hart, and there is James Parham and Elizabeth's aunt, Emma Bathurst, and her uncle Peter and Maude Granger and no end of other folk."

"They all seem very gay."

“Yes, this is an important occasion for them. You and I are surly outsiders who can’t understand the fun.”

“Is this all they do, eat and drink and talk?”

“I think not,” said Alan Robertson. “Notice yonder. Bob seems to be preparing a projection screen. Too bad that we can’t move just a bit closer.” Alan Robertson peered through the shadows. “But we’d better take no chances; if we were discovered, everyone would be embarrassed.”

They watched in silence. Presently Bob Robertson went to the projection equipment and touched a button. The screen became alive with vibrating rings of red and blue. Conversations halted; the group turned toward the screen. Bob Robertson spoke, but his words were inaudible to the two who watched from the darkness. Bob Robertson gestured to the screen, where now appeared the view of a small country town, as if seen from an airplane. Surrounding was flat farm country, a land of wide horizons; Duray assumed the location to be somewhere in the Middle West. The picture changed to show the local high school, with students sitting on the steps. The scene shifted to the football field, on the day of a game - a very important game, to judge from the conduct of the spectators. The local team was introduced; one by one the boys ran out on the field to stand blinking into the autumn sunlight; then they ran off to the pregame huddle.

The game began; Bob Robertson stood by the screen in the capacity of an expert commentator, pointing to one or another of the players, analyzing the play. The game proceeded, to the manifest pleasure of the Rumfuddlers. At half time the bands marched and countermarched, then play resumed. Duray became bored and made fretful comments to Alan Robertson, who only said: “Yes, yes; probably so” and “My word, the agility of that halfback!” and “Have you noticed the precision of the line-play? Very good indeed!” At last the final quarter ended; the victorious team stood under a sign reading:

THE SHOWALTER TORNADOES
CHAMPIONS OF TEXAS
1951

The players came forward to accept trophies; there was a last picture of the team as a whole, standing proud and victorious; then the screen burst out into a red and gold starburst and went blank. The Rumfuddlers rose to their feet and congratulated Bob Robertson, who laughed modestly and went to the table for a goblet of punch.

Duray said disgustedly, "Is this one of Bob's famous parties? Why does he make such a tremendous occasion of the affair? I expected some sort of debauch."

Alan Robertson said, "Yes, from our standpoint at least, the proceedings seem somewhat uninteresting. Well, if your curiosity is satisfied, shall we return?"

"Whenever you like."

* * * *

Once again in the lounge under the Mad Dog Mountains, Alan Robertson said: "So now and at last we've seen one of Bob's famous Rumfuddles. Are you still determined not to attend the occasion of tomorrow night?"

Duray scowled. "If I have to go to reclaim my family. I'll do so. But I just might lose my temper before the evening is over."

"Bob has gone too far," Alan Robertson declared. "I agree with you there. As for what we saw tonight, I admit to a degree of puzzlement."

"Only a degree? Do you understand it at all?"

Alan Robertson shook his head with a somewhat cryptic smile. "Speculation is pointless. I suppose you'll spend the night with me at the lodge?"

"I might as well," grumbled Duray. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

Alan Robertson clapped him on the back. "Good lad. We'll put some steaks on the fire and turn our problems loose for the night."

* * * *

XI

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

When I first put the Mark I machine into operation, I suffered great fears. What did I know of the forces that I might release?... With all adjustments at dead neutral, I punched a passway into a cognate Earth. This was

simple enough - in fact, almost anticlimactic... Little by little I learned to control my wonderful toy; our own world and all its past phases became familiar to me. What of other worlds? I am sure that in due course we will move instantaneously from world to world, from galaxy to galaxy, using a special space-traveling hub on Utilis. At the moment I am candidly afraid to punch through passways at blind random. What if I opened into the interior of a sun? Or into the center of a black hole? Or into an antimatter universe? I would certainly destroy myself and the machine and conceivably Earth itself.

Still, the potentialities are too entrancing to be ignored. With painstaking precautions and a dozen protective devices, I will attempt to find my way to new worlds, and for the first time interstellar travel will be a reality.

* * * *

Alan Robertson and Duray sat in the bright morning sunlight beside the flinty-blue lake. They had brought their breakfast out to the table and now sat drinking coffee. Alan Robertson made cheerful conversation for the two of them. "These last few years have been easier on me; I've relegated a great deal of responsibility. Ernest and Henry know my policies as well as I do, if not better; and they're never frivolous or inconsistent." Alan Robertson chuckled. "I've worked two miracles: first, my machine, and second, keeping the business as simple as it is. I refuse to keep regular hours; I won't make appointments; I don't keep records; I pay no taxes; I exert great political and social influence, but only informally; I simply refuse to be bothered with administrative detail, and consequently I find myself able to enjoy life."

"It's a wonder some religious fanatic hasn't assassinated you," said Duray sourly.

"No mystery there! I've given them all their private worlds, with my best regards, and they have no energy left for violence! And as you know, I walk with a very low silhouette. My friends hardly recognize me on the street." Alan Robertson waved his hand. "No doubt you're more concerned with your immediate quandary. Have you come to a decision regarding the Rumfuddle?"

"I don't have any choice," Duray muttered. "I'd prefer to wring Bob's neck. If I could account for Elizabeth's conduct, I'd feel more comfortable. She's not even remotely interested in black magic. Why did Bob bring her

books on satanism?”

“Well - the subject is inherently fascinating,” Alan Robertson suggested, without conviction. “The name Satan derives from the Hebrew word for ‘adversary’; it never applied to a real individual. ‘Zeus,’ of course, was an Aryan chieftain of about 3500 B.C., while ‘Woden’ lived somewhat later. He was actually ‘Othinn,’ a shaman of enormous personal force who did things with his mind that I can’t do with the machine... But again I’m rambling.”

Duray gave a silent shrug.

“Well, then, you’ll be going to the Rumpfuddle,” said Alan Robertson, “by and large the best course, whatever the consequences.”

“I believe that you know more than you’re telling me.”

Alan Robertson smiled and shook his head. “I’ve lived with too much uncertainty among my cognate and near-cognate worlds. Nothing is sure; surprises are everywhere. I think the best plan is to fulfill Bob’s requirements. Then if Elizabeth is indeed on hand, you can discuss the event with her.”

“What of you? Will you be coming?”

“I am of two minds. Would you prefer that I came?”

“Yes,” said Duray. “You have more control over Bob than I do.”

“Don’t exaggerate my influence! He is a strong man, for all his idleness. Confidentially, I’m delighted that he occupies himself with games rather than...” Alan Robertson hesitated.

“Rather than what?”

“Than that his imagination should prompt him to less innocent games. Perhaps I have been overingenuous in this connection. We can only wait and see.”

* * * *

From *Memoirs and Reflections*:

If the past is a house of many chambers, then the present is the most recent coat of paint.

* * * *

At four o'clock Duray and Alan Robertson left the lodge and passed through Utilis to the San Francisco depot. Duray had changed into a somber dark suit; Alan Robertson wore a more informal costume: blue jacket and pale-gray trousers. They went to Bob Robertson's locker, to find a panel with the sign "NOT HOME! FOR THE RUMFUDDLE GO TO ROGER WAILLE'S LOCKER, RC 3-96, AND PASS THROUGH TO EKSHAYAN!"

The two went on to Locker RC 3-96, where a sign read: "RUMFUDDLERS: PASS! ALL OTHERS: AWAY!"

Duray shrugged contemptuously, and parting the curtain, looked through the passway into a rustic lobby of natural wood, painted in black, red, yellow, blue, and white floral designs. An open door revealed an expanse of open land and water glistening in the afternoon sunlight. Duray and Alan Robertson passed through, crossed the foyer, and looked out upon a vast, slow river flowing from north to south. A rolling plain spread eastward away and over the horizon. The western bank of the river was indistinct in the afternoon glitter. A path led north to a tall house of eccentric architecture. A dozen domes and cupolas stood against the sky; gables and ridges created a hundred unexpected angles. The walls showed a fish-scale texture of hand-hewn shingles; spiral columns supported the second- and third-story entablatures, where wolves and bears, carved in vigorous curves and masses, snarled, fought, howled, and danced. On the side overlooking the river a pergola clothed with vines cast a dappled shade; here sat the Rumfuddlers.

Alan Robertson looked at the house, up and down the river, across the plain. "From the architecture, the vegetation, the height of the sun, the characteristic haze, I assume the river to be either the Don or the Volga, and yonder the steppes. From the absence of habitation, boats, and artifacts, I would guess the time to be early historic - perhaps 2,000 or 3,000 B.C., a colorful era. The inhabitants of the steppes are nomads; Scyths to the east, Celts to the west, and to the north the homeland of the Germanic and Scandinavian tribes; and yonder the mansion of Roger Waille, and very interesting, too, after the extravagant fashion of the Russian baroque. And, my word! I believe I see an ox on the spit! We may

even enjoy our little visit!”

“You do as you like,” muttered Duray. “I’d just as soon eat at home.”

Alan Robertson pursed his lips. “I understand your point of view, of course, but perhaps we should relax a bit. The scene is majestic; the house is delightfully picturesque, the roast beef is undoubtedly delicious; perhaps we should meet the situation on its own terms.”

Duray could find no adequate reply and kept his opinions to himself.

“Well, then,” said Alan Robertson, “equability is the word. So now let’s see what Bob and Roger have up their sleeves.” He set off along the path to the house, with Duray sauntering morosely a step or two behind.

Under the pergola a man jumped to his feet and flourished his hand; Duray recognized the tall, spare form of Bob Robertson. “Just in time,” Bob called jocosely. “Not too early, not too late. We’re glad you could make it.”

“Yes, we found we could accept your invitation after all,” said Alan Robertson. “Let me see, do I know anyone here? Roger, hello!... And William... Ah! the lovely Dora Gorski!... Cypriano...” He looked around the circle of faces, waving to his acquaintances.

Bob clapped Duray on the shoulder. “Really pleased you could come! What’ll you drink? The locals distill a liquor out of fermented mare’s milk, but I don’t recommend it.”

“I’m not here to drink,” said Duray. “Where’s Elizabeth?”

The corners of Bob’s wide mouth twitched. “Come now, old man; let’s not be grim. This is the Rumfuddle! A time for joy and self-renewal! Go dance about a bit! Cavort! Pour a bottle of champagne over your head! Sport with the girls!”

Duray looked into the blue eyes for a long second. He strained to keep his voice even. “Where is Elizabeth?”

“Somewhere about the place. A charming girl, your Elizabeth! We’re delighted to have you both!”

Duray swung away. He walked to the dark and handsome Roger Waille. “Would you be good enough to take me to my wife?”

Waille raised his eyebrows as if puzzled by Duray's tone of voice. "She is primping and gossiping. If necessary I suppose I could pull her away for a moment or two."

Duray began to feel ridiculous, as if he had been locked away from his world, subjected to harassments and doubts, and made the butt of some obscure joke. "It's necessary," he said. "We're leaving."

"But you've just arrived!"

"I know."

Waille gave a shrug of amused perplexity and turned away toward the house. Duray followed. They went through a tall, narrow doorway into an entry-hall paneled with a beautiful brown-gold wood that Duray automatically identified as chestnut. Four high panes of tawny glass turned to the west filled the room with a smoky half-melancholy light. Oak settees, upholstered in leather, faced each other across a black, brown, and gray rug. Taborets stood at each side of the settees, and each supported an ornate golden candelabra in the form of conventionalized stag's heads. Waille indicated these last. "Striking, aren't they? The Scythians made them for me. I paid them in iron knives. They think I'm a great magician; and for a fact, I am." He reached into the air and plucked forth an orange, which he tossed upon a settee. "Here's Elizabeth now, and the other maenads as well."

Into the chamber came Elizabeth, with three other young women whom Duray vaguely recalled having met before. At the sight of Duray, Elizabeth stopped short. She essayed a smile and said in a light, strained voice, "Hello, Gil. You're here after all." She laughed nervously and, Duray felt, unnaturally. "Yes, of course you're here. I didn't think you'd come."

Duray glanced toward the other women, who stood with Waille, watching half expectantly. Duray said, "I'd like to speak to you alone."

"Excuse us," said Waille. "We'll go on outside."

They departed. Elizabeth looked longingly after them and fidgeted with the buttons of her jacket.

"Where are the children?" Duray demanded curtly.

"Upstairs, getting dressed." She looked down at her own costume, the festival raiment of a Transylvanian peasant girl: a green skirt embroidered with red and blue flowers, a white blouse, a black velvet vest,

glossy black boots.

Duray felt his temper slipping; his voice was strained and fretful. "I don't understand anything of this. Why did you close the passways?"

Elizabeth attempted a flippant smile. "I was bored with routine."

"Oh? Why didn't you mention it to me yesterday morning? You didn't need to close the passways."

"Gilbert, please. Let's not discuss it."

Duray stood back, tongue-tied with astonishment. "Very well," he said at last. "We won't discuss it. You go up and get the girls. We're going home."

Elizabeth shook her head. In a neutral voice she said, "It's impossible. There's only one passway open. I don't have it."

"Who does? Bob?"

"I guess so; I'm not really sure."

"How did he get it? There were only four, and all four were closed."

"It's simple enough. He moved the downtown passway from our locker to another and left a blank in its place."

"And who closed off the other three?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because Bob told me to. I don't want to talk about it. I'm sick to death of the whole business." And she half whispered: "I don't know what I'm going to do with myself."

"I know what I'm going to do," said Duray. He turned toward the door.

Elizabeth held up her hands and clenched her fists against her breast. "Don't make trouble - please! He'll close our last passway!"

"Is that why you're afraid of him? If so - don't be. Alan wouldn't allow

it.”

Elizabeth’s face began to crumple. She pushed past Duray and walked quickly out upon the terrace. Duray followed, baffled and furious. He looked back and forth across the terrace. Bob was not to be seen. Elizabeth had gone to Alan Robertson; she spoke in a hushed, urgent voice. Duray went to join them. Elizabeth became silent and turned away, avoiding Duray’s gaze.

Alan Robertson spoke in a voice of easy geniality. “Isn’t this a lovely spot? Look how the setting sun shines on the river!”

Roger Waille came by rolling a cart with ice, goblets, and a dozen bottles. He said: “Of all the places on all the Earths, this is my favorite. I call it Ekshayan, which is the Scythian name for this district.”

A woman asked. “Isn’t it cold and bleak in the winter?”

“Frightful!” said Waille. “The blizzards howl down from the north; then they stop, and the land is absolutely still. The days are short, and the sun comes up red as a poppy. The wolves slink out of the forests, and at dusk they circle the house. When a full moon shines, they howl like banshees, or maybe the banshees are howling! I sit beside the fireplace, entranced.”

“It occurs to me,” said Manfred Funk, “that each person, selecting a site for his home, reveals a great deal about himself. Even on old Earth, a man’s home was ordinarily a symbolic simulacrum of the man himself; now, with every option available, a person’s house is himself.”

“This is very true,” said Alan Robertson, “and certainly Roger need not fear that he has revealed any discreditable aspects of himself by showing us his rather grotesque home so the lonely steppes of prehistoric Russia.”

Roger Waille laughed. “The grotesque house isn’t me; I merely felt that it fitted its setting... Here, Duray, you’re not drinking. That’s chilled vodka; you can mix it or drink it straight in the time-tested manner.”

“Nothing for me, thanks.”

“Just as you like. Excuse me; I’m wanted elsewhere.” Waille moved away, rolling the cart. Elizabeth leaned as if she wanted to follow him, then remained beside Alan Robertson, looking thoughtfully over the river.

Duray spoke to Alan Robertson as if she were not there. "Elizabeth refuses to leave. Bob has hypnotized her."

"That's not true," said Elizabeth softly.

"Somehow, one way or another, he's forced her to stay. She won't tell me why."

"I want the passway back," said Elizabeth. But her voice was muffled and uncertain.

Alan Robertson cleared his throat. "I hardly know what to say. It's a very - awkward situation. None of us wants to create a disturbance - "

"There you're wrong," said Duray.

Alan Robertson ignored the remark. "I'll have a word with Bob after the party. In the meantime I don't see why we shouldn't enjoy the company of our friends, and that wonderful roast ox! Who is that turning the spit? I know him from somewhere."

Duray could hardly speak for outrage. "After what he's done to us?"

"He's gone too far, much too far," Alan Robertson agreed. "Still, he's a flamboyant, feckless sort, and I doubt if he understands the full inconvenience he's caused you."

"He understands well enough. He just doesn't care."

"Perhaps so," said Alan Robertson sadly. "I had always hoped - but that's neither here nor there. I still feel that we should act with restraint. It's much easier not to do than to undo."

Elizabeth abruptly crossed the terrace and went to the front door of the tall house, where her three daughters had appeared - Dolly, twelve; Joan, ten; Ellen, eight - all wearing green, white, and black peasant frocks and glossy black boots. Duray thought they made a delightful picture. He followed Elizabeth across the terrace.

"It's Daddy," screamed Ellen, and threw herself in his arms. The other two, not to be outdone, did likewise.

"We thought you weren't coming to the party," cried Dolly. "I'm glad you did, though."

“So’m I.”

“So’m I.”

“I’m glad I came, too, if only to see you in these pretty costumes. Let’s go see Grandpa Alan.” He took them across the terrace, and after a moment’s hesitation, Elizabeth followed. Duray became aware that everyone had stopped talking to look at him and his family, with, so it seemed, an extraordinary, even avid, curiosity, as if in expectation of some entertaining extravagance of conduct. Duray began to burn with emotion. Once, long ago, while crossing a street in downtown San Francisco, he had been struck by an automobile, suffering a broken leg and a fractured clavicle. Almost as soon as he had been knocked down, pedestrians came pushing to stare down at him. and Duray, looking up in pain and shock, had seen only the ring of white faces and intent eyes, greedy as flies around a puddle of blood. In hysterical fury he had staggered to his feet, striking out into every face within reaching distance, men and women alike. He hated them more than the man who had run him down: the ghouls who had come to enjoy his pain. Had he the miraculous power, he would have crushed them into a screaming bale of detestable flesh and hurled the bundle twenty miles out into the Pacific Ocean...

Some faint shadow of this emotion affected him now, but today he would provide them no unnatural pleasure. He turned a single glance of cool contempt around the group, then took his three eager-faced daughters to a bench at the back of the terrace. Elizabeth followed, moving like a mechanical object. She seated herself at the end of the bench and looked off across the river. Duray stared heavily back at the Rumfuddlcrs, compelling them to shift their gazes to where the ox roasted over a great bed of coals. A young man in a white jacket turned the spit; another basted the meat with a long-handled brush. A pair of Orientals carried out a carving table; another brought a carving set; a fourth wheeled out a cart laden with salads, round crusty loaves, trays of cheese and herrings. A fifth man, dressed as a Transylvanian gypsy, came from the house with a violin. He went to the corner of the terrace and began to play melancholy music of the steppes.

Bob Robertson and Roger Waille inspected the ox, a magnificent sight indeed. Duray attempted a stony detachment, but his nose was under no such strictures; the odor of the roast meat, garlic, and herbs tantalized him unmercifully. Bob Robertson returned to the terrace and held up his hands for attention; the fiddler put down his instrument. “Control your appetites; there’ll still be a few minutes, during which we can discuss our

next Rumfuddle. Our clever colleague Bernard Ulman recommends a hostelry in the Adirondacks: the Sapphire Lake Lodge. The hotel was built in 1902, to the highest standards of Edwardian comfort. The clientele is derived from the business community of New York. The cuisine is kosher; the management maintains an atmosphere of congenial gentility; the current date is 1930. Bernard has furnished photographs. Roger, if you please.”

Waille drew back a curtain to reveal a screen. He manipulated the projection machine, and the hotel was displayed on the screen: a rambling, half-timbered structure overlooking several acres of park and a smooth lake.

“Thank you. Roger. I believe that we also have a photograph of the staff.”

On the screen appeared a stiffly posed group of about thirty men and women, all smiling with various degrees of affability. The Rumfuddlers were amused; some among them tittered.

“Bernard gives a very favorable report as to the cuisine, the amenities, and the charm of the general area. Am I right, Bernard?”

“In every detail,” declared Bernard Ulman. “The management is attentive and efficient; the clientele is well-established.”

“Very good,” said Bob Robertson. “Unless someone has a more entertaining idea, we will hold our next Rumfuddle at the Sapphire Lake Lodge. And now I believe that the roast beef should be ready - done to a turn, as the expression goes.”

“Quite right,” said Roger Waille. “Tom, as always, has done an excellent job at the spit.”

The ox was lifted to the table. The carver set to work with a will. Duray went to speak to Alan Robertson, who blinked uneasily at his approach. Duray asked, “Do you understand the reason for these parties? Are you in on the joke?”

Alan Robertson spoke in a precise manner: “I certainly am not ‘in on the joke,’ as you put it.” He hesitated, then said: “The Rumfuddlers will never again intrude upon your life or that of your family. I am sure of this. Bob became overexuberant; he exercised poor judgment, and I intend to have a quiet word with him. In fact, we have already exchanged certain opinions. At the moment your best interests will be served by detachment

and unconcern.”

Duray spoke with sinister politeness: “You feel, then, that I and my family should bear the brunt of Bob’s jokes?”

“This is a harsh view of the situation, but my answer must be Yes.”

“I’m not so sure. My relationship with Elizabeth is no longer the same. Bob has done this to me.”

“To quote an old apothegm: ‘Least said, soonest mended.’ “

Duray changed the subject. “When Waille showed the photograph of the hotel staff, I thought some of the faces were familiar. Before I could be quite sure, the picture was gone.”

Alan Robertson nodded unhappily. “Let’s not develop the subject, Gilbert. Instead - ”

“I’m into the situation too far,” said Duray. “I want to know the truth.”

“Very well, then,” said Alan Robertson hollowly, “your instincts are accurate. The management of the Sapphire Lake Lodge, in cognate circumstances, has achieved an unsavory reputation. As you have guessed, they comprise the leadership of the National Socialist party during 1938 or thereabouts. The manager, of course, is Hitler, the desk clerk is Goebbels, the headwaiter is Goring, the bellboys are Himmler and Hess, and so on down the line. They are, of course, not aware of the activities of their cognates of other worlds. The hotel’s clientele is for the most part Jewish, which brings a macabre humor to the situation.”

“Undeniably,” said Duray. “What of that Rumfuddlers party that we looked in on?”

“You refer to the high-school football team? The 1951 Texas champions, as I recall.” Alan Robertson grinned. “And well they should be. Bob identified the players for me. Are you interested in the lineup?”

“Very much so.”

Alan Robertson drew a sheet of paper from his pocket. “I believe - yes, this is it.” He handed the sheet to Duray who saw a schematic lineup:

Duray returned the paper. "You approve of this?"

"I had best put it like this," said Alan Robertson, a trifle uneasily. "One day, chatting with Bob, I remarked that much travail could be spared the human race if the more notorious evildoers were early in their lives shifted to environments which afforded them constructive outlets for their energies. I speculated that having the competence to make such changes, it was perhaps our duty to do so. Bob became interested in the concept and formed his group, the Rumfuddlers, to serve the function I had suggested. In all candor I believe that Bob and his friends have been attracted more by the possibility of entertainment than by altruism, but the effect has been the same."

"The football players aren't evildoers," said Duray. "Sir Galahad, Charlemagne, Samson, Richard the Lion-hearted..."

"Exactly true," said Alan Robertson, "and I made this point to Bob. He asserted that all were brawlers and bullyboys, with the possible exception of Sir Galahad; that Charlemagne, for example, had conquered much territory to no particular achievement; that Achilles, a national hero to the Greeks, was a cruel enemy to the Trojans; and so forth. His justifications are somewhat specious perhaps... Still, these young men are better employed making touchdowns than breaking heads."

After a pause Duray asked; "How are these matters arranged?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I believe that by one means or another, the desired babies are exchanged with others of similar appearance. The child so obtained is reared in appropriate circumstances."

"The jokes seem elaborate and rather tedious."

"Precisely!" Alan Robertson declared. "Can you think of a better method to keep someone like Bob out of mischief?"

"Certainly," said Duray. "Fear of the consequences." He scowled across the terrace. Bob had stopped to speak to Elizabeth. She and the three girls rose to their feet.

Duray strode across the terrace. "What's going on?"

"Nothing of consequence," said Bob. "Elizabeth and the girls are going to help serve the guests." He glanced toward the serving table, then

turned back to Duray. "Would you help with the carving?"

Duray's arm moved of its own volition. His fist caught Bob on the angle of the jaw and sent him reeling back into one of the white-coated Orientals, who carried a tray of food. The two fell into an untidy heap. The Rumfuddlers were shocked and amused and watched with attention.

Bob rose to his feet gracefully enough and gave a hand to the Oriental. Looking toward Duray, Bob shook his head ruefully. Meeting his glance, Duray noted a pale blue glint; then Bob once more became bland and debonair.

Elizabeth spoke in a low despairing voice: "Why couldn't you have done as he asked? It would have all been so simple."

"Elizabeth may well be right," said Alan Robertson.

"Why should she be right?" demanded Duray. "We are his victims! You've allowed him a taste of mischief, and now you can't control him!"

"Not true!" declared Alan Robertson. "I intend to impose rigorous curbs upon the Rumfuddlers, and I will be obeyed."

"The damage is done, so far as I am concerned," said Duray bitterly. "Come along, Elizabeth, we're going Home."

"We can't go Home. Bob has the passway."

Alan Robertson drew a deep sigh and came to a decision. He crossed to where Bob stood with a goblet of wine in one hand, massaging his jaw with the other. Alan Robertson spoke to Bob politely but with authority. Bob was slow in making a reply. Alan Robertson spoke again, sharply. Bob only shrugged. Alan Robertson waited a moment, then returned to Duray, Elizabeth, and the three children.

"The passway is at his San Francisco apartment," said Alan Robertson in a measured voice. "He will give it back to you after the party. He doesn't choose to go for it now."

Bob once more commanded the attention of the Rumfuddlers. "By popular request we replay the record of our last but one Rumfuddle, contrived by one of our most distinguished, diligent, and ingenious Rumfuddlers, Manfred Funk. The locale is the Red Barn, a roadhouse twelve miles west of Urbana, Illinois; the time is the late summer of 1926;

the occasion is a Charleston dancing contest. The music is provided by the legendary Wolverines, and you will hear the fabulous cornet of Leon Bismarck Beiderbecke." Bob gave a wry smile, as if the music were not to his personal taste. "This was one of our most rewarding occasions, and here it is again."

The screen showed the interior of a dance-hall, crowded with excited young men and women. At the back of the stage sat the Wolverines, wearing tuxedos; to the front stood the contestants: eight dapper young men and eight pretty girls in short skirts. An announcer stepped forward and spoke to the crowd through a megaphone: "Contestants are numbered one through eight! Please, no encouragement from the audience. The prize is this magnificent trophy and fifty dollars cash; the presentation will be made by last year's winner, Boozy Horman. Remember, on the first number we eliminate four contestants, on the second number, two; and after the third number we select our winner. So then: Bix and the Wolverines and 'Sensation Rag'!"

From the band came music; from the contestants, agitated motion.

Duray asked, "Who are these people?"

Alan Robertson replied in an even voice: "The young men are locals and not important. But notice the girls: No doubt you find them attractive. You are not alone. They are Helen of Troy, Deirdre, Marie Antoinette, Cleopatra, Salome, Lady Godiva, Nefertiti, and Mata Hari."

Duray gave a dour grunt. The music halted; judging applause from the audience, the announcer eliminated Marie Antoinette, Cleopatra, Deirdre, Mata Hari, and their respective partners. The Wolverines played "Fidgety Feet"; the four remaining contestants danced with verve and dedication, but Helen and Nefertiti were eliminated. The Wolverines played "Tiger Rag." Salome and Lady Godiva and their young men performed with amazing zeal. After carefully appraising the volume of applause, the announcer gave his judgment to Lady Godiva and her partner. Large on the screen appeared a close-up view of the two happy faces; in an excess of triumphant joy they hugged and kissed each other. The screen went dim; after the vivacity of the Red Bam the terrace above the Don seemed drab and insipid.

The Rumfuddlers shifted in their seats. Some uttered exclamations to assert their gaiety; others stared out across the vast empty face of the river.

Duray glanced toward Elizabeth; she was gone. Now he saw her

circulating among the guests with three other young women, pouring wine from Scythian decanters.

“It makes a pretty picture, does it not?” said a calm voice. Duray turned to find Bob standing behind him; his mouth twisted in an easy half-smile, but his eye glinted pale blue.

Duray turned away. Alan Robertson said, “This is not at all a pleasant situation, Bob, and in fact completely lacks charm.”

“Perhaps at future Rumfuddles, when my face feels better, the charm will emerge... Excuse me; I see that I must enliven the meeting.” He stepped forward. “We have a final pastiche: oddments and improvisations, vignettes and glimpses, each in its own way entertaining and instructive. Roger, start the mechanism, if you please.”

Roger Waille hesitated and glanced sidelong toward Alan Robertson.

“The item number is sixty-two, Roger,” said Bob in a calm voice. Roger Waille delayed another instant, then shrugged and went to the projection machine.

“The material is new,” said Bob, “hence I will supply a commentary. First we have an episode in the life of Richard Wagner, the dogmatic and occasionally irascible composer. This year is 1843; the place is Dresden. Wagner sets forth on a summer night to attend a new opera, *Der Sanger Krieg*, by an unknown composer. He alights from his carriage before the hall; he enters; he seats himself in his loge. Notice the dignity of his posture, the authority of his gestures! The music begins. Listen!” From the projector came the sound of music. “It is the overture,” stated Bob. “But notice Wagner: Why is he stupefied? Why is he overcome with wonder? He listens to the music as if he has never heard it before. And in fact he hasn’t; he has only just yesterday set down a few preliminary notes for this particular opus, which he planned to call *Tannhduser*; today, magically, he hears it in its final form. Wagner will walk home slowly tonight, and perhaps in his abstraction he will kick the dog Schmutzi... Now to a different scene: St. Petersburg in the year 1880 and the stables in back of the Winter Palace. The ivory and gilt carriage rolls forth to convey the czar and the czarina to a reception at the British Embassy. Notice the drivers: stern, well-groomed, intent at their business. Marx’s beard is well-trimmed; Lenin’s goatee is not so pronounced. A groom comes to watch the carriage roll away. He has a kindly twinkle in his eye, does Stalin.” The screen went dim once more, then brightened to show a city street lined with automobile showrooms and used-car lots. “This is one of Shawn Henderson’s projects.

The four used-car lots are operated by men who in other circumstances were religious notables: prophets and so forth. That alert, keen-featured man in front of Quality Motors, for instance, is Mohammed. Shawn is conducting a careful survey, and at our next Rumfuddle he will report upon his dealings with these four famous figures.”

Alan Robertson stepped forward, somewhat diffidently. He cleared his throat. “I don’t like to play the part of spoilsport, but I’m afraid I have no choice. There will be no further Rumfuddles. Our original goals have been neglected, and I note far too many episodes of purposeless frivolity and even cruelty. You may wonder at what seems a sudden decision, but I have been considering the matter for several days. The Rumfuddles have taken a turn in an unwholesome direction and conceivably might become a grotesque new vice, which, of course, is far from our original ideal. I’m sure that every sensible person, after a few moments’ reflection, will agree that now is the time to stop. Next week you may return to me all passways except those to worlds where you maintain residence.”

The Rumfuddlers sat murmuring together. Some turned resentful glances toward Alan Robertson; others served themselves more bread and meat. Bob came over to join Alan and Duray. He spoke in an easy manner. “I must say that your admonitions arrive with all the delicacy of a lightning bolt. I can picture Jehovah smiting the fallen angels in a similar style.”

Alan Robertson smiled. “Now, then, Bob, you’re talking nonsense. The situations aren’t at all similar. Jehovah struck out in fury; I impose my restriction in all goodwill in order that we can once again turn our energies to constructive ends.”

Bob threw back his head and laughed. “But the Rumfuddlers have lost the habit of work. We only want to amuse ourselves, and after all, what is so noxious in our activities?”

“The trend is menacing, Bob.” Alan Robertson’s voice was reasonable. “Unpleasant elements are creeping into your fun, so stealthily that you yourself are unaware of them. For instance, why torment poor Wagner? Surely there was gratuitous cruelty, and only to provide you a few instants of amusement. And since the subject is in the air, I heartily deplore your treatment of Gilbert and Elizabeth. You have brought them both an extraordinary inconvenience, and in Elizabeth’s case, actual suffering. Gilbert got something of his own back, and the balance is about even.”

“Gilbert is far too impulsive,” said Bob. “Self-willed and egocentric, as he always has been.”

Alan held up his hand. "There is no need to go further into the subject, Bob. I suggest that you say no more."

"Just as you like, though the matter, considered as practical rehabilitation, isn't irrelevant. We can amply justify the work of the Rumfuddlers."

Duray asked quietly, "Just how do you mean, Bob?"

Alan Robertson made a peremptory sound, but Duray said, "Let him say what he likes and make an end to it. He plans to do so anyway."

There was a moment of silence. Bob looked across the terrace to where the three Orientals were transferring the remains of the beef to a service cart.

"Well?" Alan Robertson asked softly. "Have you made your choice?"

Bob held out his hands in ostensible bewilderment. "I don't understand you! I want only to vindicate myself and the Rumfuddlers. I think we have done splendidly. Today we have allowed Torquemada to roast a dead ox instead of a living heretic; Marquis de Sade has fulfilled his obscure urges by caressing seared flesh with a basting brush, and did you notice the zest with which Ivan the Terrible hacked up the carcass? Nero, who has real talent, played his violin. Attila, Genghis Khan, and Mao Tse-tung efficiently served the guests. Wine was poured by Messalina, Lucrezia Borgia, Delilah, and Gilbert's charming wife, Elizabeth. Only Gilbert failed to demonstrate his rehabilitation, but at least he provided us a touching and memorable picture: Gilles de Rais, Elizabeth Bathory, and their three virgin daughters. It was sufficient. In every case we have shown that rehabilitation is not an empty word."

"Not in every case," said Alan Robertson, "specifically that of your own."

Bob looked at him askance. "I don't follow you."

"No less than Gilbert are you ignorant of your background. I will now reveal the circumstances so that you may understand something of yourself and try to curb the tendencies which have made your cognate an exemplar of cruelty, stealth, and treachery."

Bob laughed: a brittle sound like cracking ice. "I admit to a horrified

interest.”

“I took you from a forest a thousand miles north of this very spot while I traced the phylogeny of the Norse gods, your name was Loki. For reasons which are not now important I brought you back to San Francisco, and there you grew to maturity.”

“So I am Loki.”

“No. You are Bob Robertson, just as this is Gilbert Duray, and here is his wife, Elizabeth. Loki, Gilles de Rais, Elizabeth Bathory: These names applied to human material which has not functioned quite as well. Gilles de Rais, judging from all evidence, suffered from a brain tumor; he fell into his peculiar vices after a long and honorable career. The case of Princess Elizabeth Bathory is less clear, but one might suspect syphilis and consequent cerebral lesions.”

“And what of poor Loki?” inquired Bob with exaggerated pathos.

“Loki seemed to suffer from nothing except a case of old-fashioned meanness.”

Bob seemed concerned. “So that these qualities apply to me?”

“You are not necessarily identical to your cognate. Still, I advise you to take careful stock of yourself, and so far as I am concerned, you had best regard yourself as on probation.”

“Just as you say.” Bob looked over Alan Robertson’s shoulder. “Excuse me; you’ve spoiled the party, and everybody is leaving. I want a word with Roger.”

Duray moved to stand in his way, but Bob shouldered him aside and strode across the terrace, with Duray glowering at his back.

Elizabeth said in a mournful voice, “I hope we’re at the end of all this.”

Duray growled. “You should never have listened to him.”

“I didn’t listen; I read about it in one of Bob’s books; I saw your picture; I couldn’t-”

Alan Robertson intervened. “Don’t harass poor Elizabeth; I consider her both sensible and brave; she did the best she could.”

Bob returned. "Everything taken care of," he said cheerfully. "All except one or two details."

"The first of these is the return of the passway. Gilbert and Elizabeth - not to mention Dolly, Joan, and Ellen - are anxious to return to Home."

"They can stay here with you," said Bob. "That's probably the best solution."

"I don't plan to stay here," said Alan Robertson in mild wonder. "We are leaving at once."

"You must change your plans," said Bob. "I have finally become bored with your reproaches. Roger doesn't particularly care to leave his home, but he agrees that now is the time to make a final disposal of the matter."

Alan Robertson frowned in displeasure. "The joke is in very poor taste, Bob."

Roger Waille came from the house, his face somewhat glum. "They're all closed. Only the main gate is open."

Alan Robertson said to Gilbert: "I think that we will leave Bob and Roger to their Rumfuddle fantasies. When he returns to his senses, we'll get your passway. Come along, then, Elizabeth! Girls!"

"Alan," said Bob gently, "you're staying here. Forever. I'm taking over the machine."

Alan Robertson asked mildly: "How do you propose to restrain me? By force?"

"You can stay here alive or dead; take your choice."

"You have weapons, then?"

"I certainly do." Bob displayed a pistol. "There are also the servants. None have brain tumors or syphilis; they're all just plain bad."

Roger said in an awkward voice, "Let's go and get it over."

Alan Robertson's voice took on a harsh edge. "You seriously plan to

maroon us here, without food?”

“Consider yourself marooned.”

“I’m afraid that I must punish you. Bob, and Roger as well.”

Bob laughed gaily. “You yourself are suffering from brain disease - megalomania. You haven’t the power to punish anyone.”

“I still control the machine, Bob.”

“The machine isn’t here. So now-”

Alan Robertson turned and looked around the landscape, with a frowning air of expectation. “Let me see. I’d probably come down from the main gate; Gilbert and a group from behind the house. Yes, here we are.”

Down the path from the main portal, walking jauntily, came two Alan Robertsons with six men armed with rifles and gas grenades. Simultaneously from behind the house appeared two Gilbert Durays and six more men, similarly armed.

Bob stared in wonder. “Who are these people?”

“Cognates,” said Alan, smiling. “I told you I controlled the machine, and so do all my cognates. As soon as Gilbert and I return to our Earth, we must similarly set forth and in our turn do our part on other worlds cognate to this... Roger, be good enough to summon your servants. We will take them back to Earth. You and Bob must remain here.”

Waille gasped in distress. “Forever?”

“You deserve nothing better,” said Alan Robertson. “Bob perhaps deserves worse.” He turned to the cognate Alan Robertsons. “What of Gilbert’s passway?”

Both replied, “It’s in Bob’s San Francisco apartment, in a box on the mantelpiece.”

“Very good,” said Alan Robertson. “We will now depart. Good-bye, Bob. Good-bye, Roger. I am sorry that our association ended on this rather unpleasant basis.”

“Wait!” cried Roger. “Take me back with you!”

“Good-bye,” said Alan Robertson. “Come along then, Elizabeth. Girls! Run on ahead!”

* * * *

XIII

Elizabeth and the children had returned to Home; Alan Robertson and Duray sat in the lounge above the machine. “Our first step,” said Alan Robertson, “is to dissolve our obligation. There are, of course, an infinite number of Rumfuddles at Ekshayans and an infinite number of Alans and Gilberts. If we visited a single Rumfuddle, we would, by the laws of probability, miss a certain number of the emergency situations. The total number of permutations, assuming that an infinite number of Alans and Gilberts makes a random choice among an infinite number of Ekshayans, is infinity raised to the infinite power. What percentage of this number yields blanks for any given Ekshayan, I haven’t calculated. If we visited Ekshayans until we had by our own efforts rescued at least one Gilbert and Alan set, we might be forced to scour fifty or a hundred worlds or more. Or we might achieve our rescue on the first visit. The wisest course, I believe, is for you and I to visit, say, twenty Ekshayans. If each of the Alan and Gilbert sets does the same, then the chances for a particular Alan and Gilbert to be abandoned are one in twenty times nineteen times eighteen times seventeen, et cetera. Even then I think I will arrange that an operator check another five or ten thousand worlds to gather up that one lone chance...”