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Fantasy AND Science Fiction

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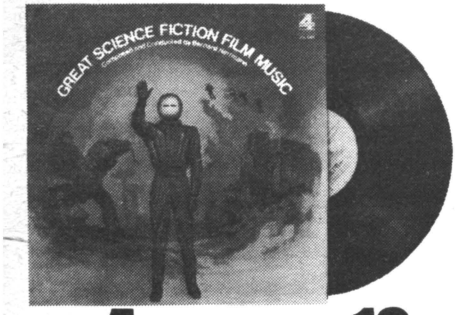

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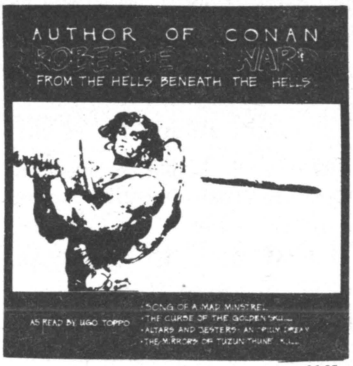

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The Hertford Manuscript

by RICHARD COWPER

The death of my Great-Aunt Victoria at the advanced age of 93 lopped off the longest branch of a family tree whose roots have been traced right back to the 15th Century — indeed, for those who are prepared to accept "Decressie" as a bonafide corruption of "de Crecy," well beyond that. Talking to my aunt towards the end of her life was rather like turning the pages of a Victorian family album, for as she grew older the England of her childhood seemed to glow ever more brightly in her mind's eye. In those far-off days it had been fashionable to accept the inevitability of human progress with a wholeheartedness which is almost impossible for us to imagine. In the 1990's life presented *Homo sapiens* with a series of "problems" which had to be "solved." It was as simple as that. The Edwardians merely gilded the roof of that towering pagoda of Victorian optimism which collapsed in smithereens in 1914.

James Wilkins — Great-Aunt Victoria's husband—died of trench fever in the Dardanelles in 1916. They had no children and she never married again. I learnt later from my aunt that James had been a keen member of the Fabian Society. He had also been an active partner in the antiquarian book business of Benham & Wilkins which owned premises off Old Bond Street.

Shortly after James's death, and much to her family's astonishment, Victoria announced her intention of taking over her husband's share of the business. She very soon proved herself to be an extremely capable business woman. She made a specialty of English incunabula, and throughout the 20's and 30's she built up a thriving trade with

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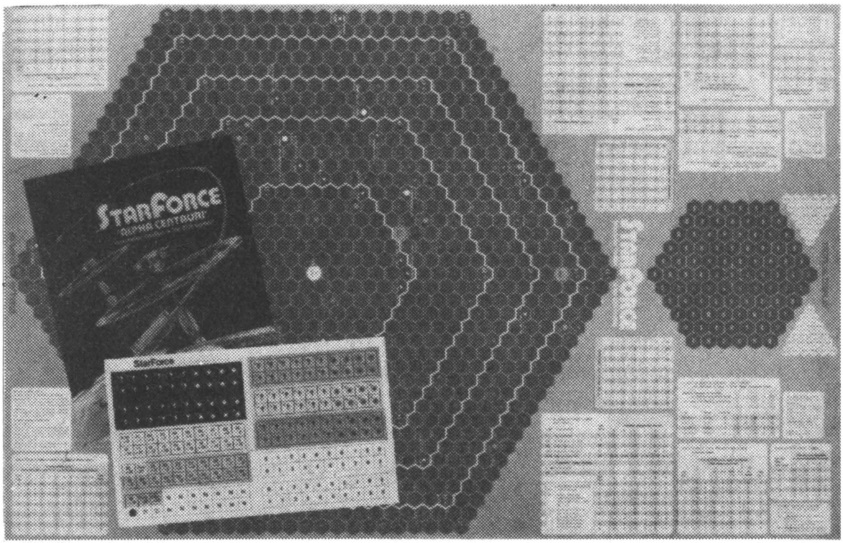

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countless museums and university libraries all over the world. When the vast Hertford Collection was sold off to pay death duties in 1938, Great-Aunt Victoria had her seat reserved in the front row of the auction gallery throughout the two weeks of the sale, and in the price register published afterwards the name Wilkins was prominent among the list of buyers.

In October, 1940, a direct hit from an incendiary bomb destroyed the premises and much of the stock of Benham & Wilkins overnight. She was close to sixty at the time, living alone in Hampstead, and I remember receiving a letter from her in which she told me that she had decided to sell out. She did not sound particularly regretful about it. "No doubt it had to happen," she wrote, "and I consider myself fortunate that it did not happen to me too." I discounted the unfamiliar note of fatalism in her words as being due to shock.

She lived on in her house in Well Walk, growing perceptibly frailer as the years advanced, but with her mind still alert. I used to make a point of calling in to see her whenever I was up in town and was invariably offered China tea and caraway-seed cake for which she had a lifelong passion. On one occasion, in the late 50's, she told me she had once been "propositioned" by H.G. Wells.

"I had no idea you knew him," I said. "When was that?"

"Oh, at about the time he and Shaw and the Webbs were squabbling over the future of the Society."

"The Fabian Society?"

"Yes, of course. 1907, I think it was."

"And what was the proposition?"

She laughed. "The usual one, I gathered. He said he wished me to help him with a book he was writing on the emancipation of women." She paused and gazed out of the window. "He was a strangely attractive little man."

"But you didn't accept?"

"No. Perhaps I should have done. Of course I had met him before that — at the Huxley's. Everyone was talking about him." She paused again and seemed for a while to lose herself in reverie, then she remarked, 'Did you ever read a story of his called 'The Chronic Argonauts'?"

"I can't recall it," I said. "What was it about?"

"About a man who invents a machine which will carry him through Time."

"Oh, you mean 'The Time Machine,' Aunt."

"Indeed I don't. I'm quite sure that was the title. I'd never seen 'chronic' used in that way before. It was a serial he was writing for a

magazine. He showed me a copy of the first installment. You see we both knew the man it was based on."

"I'm surprised it was based on anyone," I said.

"Oh, yes," she assured me. "A Doctor Robert Pensley. He lived in Herne Hill. Like all of us in those days he too was a great admirer of Professor Huxley."

I helped myself to another slice of seed cake. "And what did the doctor make of young Wells's portrait of him?" I asked.

"As far as I know he never read it."

"Oh? Why not?"

"He disappeared."

I blinked at her. "Just like that?"

She nodded. "It created quite a stir at the time. There were rumors that he had skipped off to America."

"And had he?"

"*I* don't think so. And neither did Wells." She chuckled — a strangely youthful sound from lips so old — and added: "I remember H.G.'s very first words to me when he learnt what had happened: 'By God, Vikki; don't you see? He's done it!'"

"And what did he mean by that?" I asked.

"Traveled in Time, of course," said Aunt Victoria in the matter-of-fact tone she might have employed in saying: "Caught the 10:15 to Portsmouth."

I am ashamed to say I laughed.

She gave me a darting, sidelong glance from her clear, grey eyes. "You think it quite impossible, of course."

"Oh, quite," I said, setting down my tea cup and wiping the cake crumbs from my fingers with my handkerchief.

"Wells didn't think so."

"Ah, yes," I said. "But then he wrote science-fiction, didn't he?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"Well, I presume he'd just appreciated that he had the material for an excellent story. After all, he wrote it, didn't he?"

"He wrote it *down*," she said.

"Well, there you are then. And no doubt Doctor Pensley's descendants are living happily in America to this day."

Aunt Victoria smiled faintly and let the subject drop.

I was in Melbourne, Australia, right on the other side of the globe, when I received a letter telling me that Aunt Victoria had died. The news did not come as any great surprise because I knew she had been in poor health ever since catching a severe dose of flu in the early spring, but the sense of loss I felt was real enough. Her death seemed to nudge me appreciably

nearer to my own grave.

When I returned home to England, some six weeks later, it was to discover that my aunt's mortal remains were nourishing the rose bushes in Highgate cemetery and the house in Well Walk had already been sold. I also discovered a letter awaiting me. It was signed by her bank manager, who, it appeared, was the executor of her will, and it informed me that I had been left a legacy of a thousand pounds together with "a particular token of the regard in which the late Mrs. Wilkins held you."

I lost no time in traveling up to town from my house in Bristol and presenting myself at the bank manager's office. After the formal exchange of polite regrets for the sad nature of the occasion, I was handed a brown paper parcel, securely tied and sealed, with my own name written upon it in Aunt Victoria's quite remarkably firm hand. I signed the official receipt, was presented with an envelope containing a cheque for 1000 pounds, and stepped out into the street. I was not consumed by any overwhelming curiosity to discover exactly what "token of regard" the parcel contained. From the shape of it I guessed that it must be a book of some kind, and I had a shrewd suspicion that it would prove to be the photograph album which Aunt Victoria and I had often looked at together when I visited her in Well Walk.

There being nothing further to detain me in London, I took a taxi to Paddington and caught the first available train back to Bristol. Having decided to invest a modest portion of my windfall on a first-class ticket, I had the unfamiliar luxury of a whole compartment to myself, and seated there, relaxed and extremely pleased with myself and the world, I finally got round to untying the string which, I did not doubt, Aunt Victoria had fastened with her own capable hands.

I soon realized that I had been mistaken in my previous assumption. The book which emerged from beneath the layers of brown paper and newsprint in which it was wrapped had certainly been old long before the invention of photography. It measured roughly 12 inches by 9, was bound in dark brown leather, and had a heavily ridged spine of the kind which I believe is known in the antiquarian book trade as "knuckled." There was no tooling of any kind either on the covers or on the spine, in fact nothing at all on the outside of the book to indicate what its contents might be. For the life of me I could not conceive why Aunt Victoria should have left it to me.

As I turned back the front cover, I found, lying inside, a sealed envelope, inscribed with my Chris-

tian name and bearing at the bottom right-hand corner a date — June 4th, 1958.

I laid the book down on the seat beside me, slit open the envelope and extracted two sheets of the tinted notepaper which my aunt had always favoured. I put on my spectacles and read the following:

Wednesday evening

My dear Francis,

There was a point during our conversation this afternoon when I was sorely tempted to march upstairs and fetch down this book. Though I am sure you don't realize it, there was something about the way in which you dismissed the very idea of time travel as being 'Quite impossible!' that struck me as almost unbearably smug. However, second thoughts being, as usual, better than first impulses, I have decided instead that I shall leave you the book in my will. So by the time you read this letter I daresay you will already have become accustomed to thinking of me as your late Aunt rather than your Great Aunt! I confess that it makes me smile even as I write it.

From the ex-libris plate inside the front cover you will see that this book comes from the Hertford Library which was sold up in 1938. It was part of a lot consisting of some half a dozen miscellaneous 17th Century Registers which I obtained for the proverbial song simply because no one else seemed interested in them. It was not until I was going through them to make out entries for our Overseas catalogue that I noticed that one of them had stitched into the back of it about twenty flimsy sheets of paper which were quite different in texture from those which make up the rest of the volume. Since the binding itself was indisputably 17th Century workmanship and all the other entries concerned the years 1662-1665, I started to examine these odd pages with some interest. I discovered, to my astonishment, that they constituted a sort of rough journal or diary, written in pencil, and covering a period of some three weeks in August and September, 1665.

I will not spoil my own pleasure in imagining your expression as you read them by telling you what I believe them to be. All I will *say is that the Register was entered in the Hertford Catalogue in 1808 as having been purchased along with two others 'from the Estate of Jonas Smiley Esq.' To the very best of my knowledge they lay there in the library of Hertford Castle gathering dust for the next 130 years.*

I trust you will find it as interesting and as instructive as I did.

Yours most affectionately,

Victoria.

I re-read the letter from beginning to end in total bewilderment. At first, I confess, I could only assume that I was the victim of some extraordinary practical joke she had chosen to play upon me, but it was so *unlike* Aunt Victoria to do anything of the kind that, in the end, I simply shrugged and picked up the book. Sure enough, pasted inside the front cover was an engraved bookplate depicting two remarkably well-developed mermaids holding aloft a shell in which reclined a grinning skull, a quill pen and an hourglass. Circumscribing this somewhat ill-assorted gathering was a fluttering banner emblazoned with the legend *EX LIBRIS HERTFORDENSIS*. So at least there seemed to be no doubt about that part of Aunt Victoria's story. I turned over the stained flyleaf and found myself contemplating an ornate sepia script which informed me that this was ye Register opened on November 20th 1662 for ye Hostel of Saint Barnabas in ye Parish of Wapping of which ye Recording Clerk was one Tobias Gurney. The first entry on the next page read: *Decd. at the 4th hr. Agnes Miller, fem. age indet. of ye fev. quot. tert.*

I ran my eye down the column which appeared to consist almost entirely of records of deaths and then flicked on through the yellowed pages till I reached those leaves which Aunt Victoria had spoken about. I saw at once why they had caught her attention. For one thing they measured little more than 6 inches by 4, and the paper, besides being badly faded at the edges of the sheets, was ruled with faint lines. But even more striking was the difference in the handwriting. These pages were covered in a minute, cramped, cursive script quite unlike the hand of the recording clerk. If I had to select one adjective to describe it, the word would be "scholarly." In fact the tiny writing put me immediately in mind of that of J.E. Lawless, my erstwhile tutor at St. Catherine's; there were even some of the identical abbreviations — "tho." for "though"; "wd." for "would"; "shd." for "should" — which I remembered he had favored. Settling myself firmly into the corner closet to the window, I raised the book to catch the maximum amount of daylight and began to read.

Some twenty minutes before the train was due at Bristol I had reached the last entry. I find it quite impossible to describe accurately my precise state of mind at that moment. I remember becoming conscious of an acute headache, the onset of which I had, presumably, ignored while I was engrossed in my reading. I remember too that as I unhooked my spectacles and gazed out of the window I exper-

ienced a most extraordinary sense of disorientation — perhaps "displacement" would be the better word — as though the green fields and cosy Wiltshire farms beyond the tract had become mysterious, insubstantial, illusory things; mere tokens of stasis in some fantastic temporal flux. The moment passed quickly enough — the discipline of a lifetime's ingrained habit of thought soon reasserted itself — but I was left with the same excessively unpleasant sense of inner quivering that I had once endured after experiencing a minor earthquake in Thessaloniki. To say that I doubted what I most firmly believed would be putting it too strongly; to say that my philosophical foundations had been temporarily shaken would not be putting it quite strongly enough.

It will, I am sure, be maintained that I am either the instigator of — or the victim of! — some elaborate hoax. The first contention I shall perforce ignore, since, knowing it to be untrue, it does not particularly concern me. To the second I am forced to return a reluctant verdict of "Not Proven." I have had the Register examined by two separate experts in such matters and both have assured me, to my own total satisfaction, that the notebook pages which have been incorporated within it were stitched into the binding at the time when the book itself was bound up, i.e., not later than the middle of the 18th Century and, in all likelihood, a good half-century earlier. *Yet the paper of the notebook itself is, indisputably, of a type not manufactured before 1860! Ergo,* either somebody is lying or the notebook is genuine.

If we assume that some person (unknown) had wished to perpetuate such a hoax, when could it have been done? From the internal evidence certainly not before 1804. Therefore this anonymous hoaxer must have had access to the Hertford Library, have inserted his spurious material into the Register, have replaced it on the library shelf and then *done nothing at all to draw attention to it.* Since, presumably, the whole point of a hoax is to deceive as many people as possible, this strikes me as just about the most pointless hoax ever devised.

That leaves, as far as I am concerned, only my Great-Aunt Victoria. She had custody of the Register from the time of the sale in 1938 until the day of her death — ample opportunity certainly in which to have "doctored it" to her heart's content. Furthermore she, with her professional connections, would have been ideally situated to carry out such a plan had she wished to do so. This would have entailed forging the whole "diary" itself on suitable paper, having the Register broken down and the

forged diary incorporated, reassembling the whole and restoring it to its original condition in such a way as to totally deceive two vastly experienced and disinterested professional experts. She would also have had to insert (or have caused to be inserted) two completely spurious entries into the Register proper, doing it in such a way that there was no observable discrepancy between those false entries and the ones which preceded and followed them. The only way in which this could have been done would have been by removing two of the original sheets, obtaining two blank sheets of the identical 17th Century rag paper, forging the entries to correspond *exactly* with those in the rest of the book, and then reassembling the whole. I am prepared to admit that all this *could* have been done, but nothing will ever succeed in convincing me that it was. Nevertheless, since such a thing is conceivably possible, I must to that extent acceed to the verdict of "Not Proven" on the second of my two counts.

Having said that, all that remains is for me to transcribe *in toto* the contents of this extraordinary document and to add, by way of an appendix, the relevant entries from the Register itself together with a few concluding observations of my own.

Although the transcript is a faithful word-for-word copy of the original text, I have taken the liberty of expanding the author's abbreviations, inserting the paragraphs, and tidying up the punctuation where I think it is called for. The diary commences at the top of the first page, and it is possible that a preceding page or pages were lost before the others were incorporated in the Register.

* * *

It is, of course, utterly pointless to go on cursing myself for my idiotic complacency, yet has there been a single waking hour in the last 48 when I have not done so? To assume, as I did, that the Morlocks* had done no more than carry out an investigation of the superficial structure of my Machine was an inexcusable indulgence in wishful thinking, bolstered, unfortunately, by my successful onward voyage and return. Yet even now I am by no means certain that the Morlocks were responsible for that microscopic fracture of the dexter polyhedron. Could it not equally well have occurred during that final frenzied battle within the pedestal of the White Sphinx? Indeed it seems more than likely. What is utterly unforgivable is that I should have failed to detect the flaw when I carried out my detailed check on

**For this and similar references see* The Time Machine *by H.G. Wells. —Ed.*

Friday. Well, few men can ever have paid more dearly for wanton carelessness.

I knew that something was amiss the moment I had recovered sufficiently from my initial vertigo to scan the dials. Instead of circling smoothly around the horologe the indicator arm had developed a perceptible and disquieting lurch, first slowing and then accelerating. I realized at once that two of the quartz pillars in the quincunx were out of phase and I suspected some minor fault of alignment which it would be but the work of a moment in the laboratory to correct. Although the dials on the fascia showed that I was already well back into the 17th Century, a glance at my pocket watch informed me that my journey was less than two minutes old. Very gingerly I coaxed the right-hand lever towards me and was much alarmed to observe that the pulsation of the needle at once became far more pronounced. This, together with that indescribable nausea which is seemingly an unavoidable concomitant of Time travel, produced in me a sensation that was uncomfortably close to panic. Nevertheless, I kept my head sufficiently to observe that I was not about to enter into conjunction with some massive external object and, very gently, I brought the lever back into the neutral position.

The machine was resting on the bare hillside, its brass runners buried in grass and buttercups. Above me the sun was blazing down out of a cloudless sky, and from its position relative to the meridian I judged the hour to be early afternoon. Some way down the slope of the hill below me two brown and white cows were grazing placidly, flicking their tails at the flies. As I glanced away I saw one of them raise its head and regard me with mild curiosity. So much for the 17th Century, I thought, and with a silent prayer on my lips I thrust forward the left-hand lever which would send me winging forward through the centuries to 1894. *And nothing happened!* I tried again and even risked further pressure on the right-hand lever. The result was exactly the same.

My emotions at that moment were all but identical with those I had experienced when I first looked down from the gazebo on the hill-crest above the Hall of Eloi and found my Machine was no longer standing where I had left it on the lawn before the White Sphinx. It is the fear that grips the marooned mariner when he sees the topsail finally dip below the horizon. For a minute or two I surrendered to it cravenly and then, thank Heaven! reason reasserted itself once more. I had successfully surmounted the earlier crisis: I should survive this too.

I climbed out of the saddle, stepped down into the grass, unclipped the aluminum cover and peered into the womb of the quincunx. One glance was sufficient to tell me what had happened. Of the four polyhedral quartz prisms, the second dexter one had *fractured clean in two along its plane of cleavage!*

For a long moment I simply stared at it in disbelief while the full implication of the disaster gradually dawned upon me. With it came an overwhelming awareness of the grotesque and inescapable irony of my predicament. There, a mere ten paces from where I was standing, lay my workbench, and lying upon that workbench were no fewer than *four identical quartz polyhedra,* any one of which could have been fastened into place within a matter of moments! Ten paces or two hundred and thirty years! Compared with my previous voyage it was hardly a hairs-breadth of Time, and yet, for all that, those vital components might just as well have been engulphed in the swamps of the Jurassic.

I reached into the quincunx, unscrewed the two halves of the broken rod, withdrew them and examined them. I thought I could detect a minute scratch ending just where the fracture began. 'Ah, fool,' I castigated myself bitterly. 'Crass, unmitigated fool!'

I sat down in the grass with my back resting against the framework of the Machine, and tried to marshal my fragmented thoughts. It was plain enough that my only hope of escape was to obtain a replacement for that broken prism. I even derived a mite of consolation from the wry reflection that had it been the neodymium dodecahedron which had shattered I should have been lost indeed since that — chronically speaking — essential element had been discovered only in 1885! But how to set about obtaining a replacement?

I rose to my feet and consulted the fascia dials once more. A brief calculation told me that I was now in the year 1665 A.D. The date did indeed touch some faintly disturbing chord in my memory, but I was too concerned with finding a solution to my immediate problem to spare any time on tracking it to its source. Reaching into the pannier below the saddle, I next drew out the canvas knapsack and my kodak. Then, mindful of my experiences with the Morlocks, I unscrewed the two control levers, thus still further immobilizing my already impotent Machine. That done, I carefully removed the second of the dexter prisms, reasoning that, if a replacement were ever to be obtained, a complete artifact would provide a more satisfactory pattern than a broken one.

These practical actions, small enough in themselves, did much to help me take that first imaginative step on the far side of the gulf, which is imperative if a traveler in Time is to preserve the full effectiveness of his intellectual faculties.

My next move was to take stock of my useful possessions. I was, it is true, somewhat better equipped than when I had first launched myself so impulsively into the Future, but since I had planned for a brief expedition into the early Holocene, it was open to question whether a patent pocket compass, a kodak, a specimen case, or a notebook and pencils would be of very much service to me in my present predicament. Far more to the point was the handful of loose change, which, by a fortunate oversight, I was still carrying in one of the thigh pockets of my knickerbockers. It amounted in all to two sovereigns, three florins, a sixpence and some assorted coppers. Apart from my fob watch, the other pockets surrendered little more than a small tin of licorice cashews, my tobacco pouch and pipe, a box of lucifers, a twin-bladed penknife and a brass-sheathed pocket lens. This latter I put to immediate use by verifying what I had already suspected concerning the microscopic cause of the fracture in the prism.

The warmth of the summer sun was striking full upon me. So I loosened the belt of my Norfolk jacket, hoisted the knapsack over my shoulder and, after bidding my Machine a truly heartfelt *au revoir,* settled my cap square on my head and set off, striding out through the buttercups across the flank of the hill in the direction of the Camberwell.

The plan of action I had settled upon was simple enough — to get to London as soon as I possibly could. It was there, if anywhere, that I might hope to find a skilled lapidary artificer whom I could prevail upon to fashion me a 4-inch polyhedral rod of rock crystal sufficiently accurate for my needs. An exact replica was obviously too much to hope for, but I reasoned that I had already sufficiently demonstrated how even a flawed rod would serve its purpose long enough to enable me to effect my return to the 19th Century.

Ten minutes brisk walking brought me within sight of the Thames basin, though the river itself I could perceive only as a tremulous silver flickering in the distance towards Rotherhithe some four miles to the northeast. I was astonished by the amount of woodland which clothed the south bank of the river from Battersea to Greenwich. Although it was largely dispersed in the form of small coppices and outgrown hedgerows,

the spaces between those closest to me were filled by others yet more distant so that the general effect was to screen the city from my sight. Had I chosen to ascend to the crest of Herne Hill, I would doubtless have obtained a view of the whole panorama, but time was too precious. Leaving the hilltop windmill on my left, I descended by means of a dry and rutted cart track towards the untidy huddle of houses which I guessed must be ancient Camberwell.

The track led me down into the road, which I recognized as connecting Camberwell with Dulwich, and so I turned to my left and headed in the general direction of Walworth. As I rounded the corner which brought me in full view of the hamlet, I was surprised to observe that a rough stockade had been erected across the road. The centerpiece of this makeshift barrier was formed by a large hay wain, on the top of which were seated three men, one of whom appeared to be shouldering a musket. I paused for a moment to take stock of the situation; then, able to make nothing of it, I approached and called out to ask whether I was on the London road. "Aye!" shouted one of the men, rising to his feet. "And keep a-going, stranger! We're all sound bodies here and by the Lord's grace will stay so."

Perplexed in the extreme, I continued moving steadily towards them, whereupon the same man shouted again, "Not one step further upon thy life!"

I halted in my tracks and stared at him — or rather at the musket which he was now pointing directly at my head! — and raised my hands to show that I carried no weapon. "I wish you no harm, good people," I cried.

"Nor we you, mister," responded the spokesman. "So get ye gone."

"But this is most uncivil," I protested. "I have urgent business to transact in London."

"Aye, and the Angel of Death likewise!" cried one of the others. "Four thousand souls been culled at last week's billing."

This extraordinary remark did what nothing else in the exchange had so far achieved. The significance of the final figure registered upon the dials of my Machine reverberated through my stunned mind like an electric alarm bell. *1665. The year of the Great Plague!*

My hands dropped to my sides as though paralyzed, and I stood transfixed, wonderstruck, staring at the three men. One of them raised his fingers to his lips and whistled shrilly. A moment later I caught the excited yelping of dogs. There was an urgent cry of "Sic him! Sic him!" whereat I spun

about and fled precipitately with a pack of eager curs snapping at my flying heels.

No sooner had I regained the sanctuary of the cart track than the dogs, with a few backward looks and admonitory snarls, trotted off towards the village, leaving me with a painfully racing heart and the realization that my predicament was far worse than even I could have imagined. My historical knowledge of the effects of the Plague was woefully sketchy, though I did recollect from a childhood reading of Pepy's Diary that commercial life of some sort had continued in the city throughout the visitation. My longing to be quit forever of this benighted age increased a hundredfold. I resolved to strike out at once across the fields in the general direction of Southwark, avoiding, as far as humanly possible, the vicinity of any of the scattered farms or hamlets I might encounter on the way.

An hour (and several wearisome detours) brought me within sight of the Old Kent Road, along which I perceived a number of covered carts and several head of cattle being driven in the direction of London Bridge. I skirted round the edge of a cornfield, thrust my way through the hedge and, having gained the highway, set off at my best pace in the wake of this motley caravan. I soon came up with a young cattle drover, who eyed me somewhat oddly, no doubt on account of my dress, though in truth my tweed knickerbockers were perfectly recognizable descendants of his own leather breeches and woolen hose. The most obvious anachronism was my checkered cloth cap (all the men I had seen so far had been wearing either the broad-rimmed "wideawake" or the high-crowned "steeple" style of headgear favored by the Puritans). So on the pretense of wiping the sweat from my brow I removed the questionable article, stowed it away in my pocket, and gave the youth a good day. He returned my greeting civilly enough and enquired what I was traveling in. My look of perplexity led him to say, "Are ye not a pedlar?"

It seemed prudent to agree that I was, and I asked him whether he knew of any jewelers or instrument makers still trading in the city.

He shook his head and said he supposed they must all have fled if they had the means to do so. Realizing I should get no useful information from him and anxious to push on with all possible speed, I wished him a good journey and strode off in the wake of the carts.

I was by now within plain sight of Southwark Cathedral and the Old Bridge, and for the first time since setting foot in this grim century I found myself gazing

about me with real curiosity. The great river — sparkling, green, and clear in a manner all but unimaginable in 1894 — was crowded with vessels of every conceivable shape and size from tiny skiffs to quite substantial merchantmen. Indeed, further down stream below the Tower I counted no fewer than 23 large craft moored out in midchannel, while a host of small rowing boats fussed around them like water beetles. As to the city itself I think what struck me most forcibly was, firstly, the grisly row of several heads adorning the battlements of the Bridge Gatehouse and, secondly, the gaiety and brightness of the waterfront houses, each decorated individually to its owner's whim. The sight of those bright reflections shimmering on the sunny water affected me so strongly that it was with a real sense of impotence and loss that I suddenly realized how, within a mere twelvemonth, the ravages of the Great Fire would have destroyed forever most of what I was now seeing. That it must be so I acknowledged, but it caused me none the less of a pang for that.

As I approached the Gatehouse, I observed a group of watchmen armed with pikes and muskets examining the contents of the incoming carts and questioning the drivers. Since pedestrians did not appear to be attracting the same attention, I strode on purposefully, only to be halted by one of the guards demanding to know my business. I told him I was a pedlar-mechanician seeking out instrument makers in the city and added that I would be obliged if he could assist me with directions.

He looked me up and down, scrutinizing my woolen necktie and my stout Highland brogues with obvious suspicion. "And whence come ye, master pedlar?" he asked.

"Canterbury," I replied glibly, offering the first likely name that came to mind.

"Be ye of sound health?"

"Indeed I am," I said, "and hopeful to remain so."

"Aye," he muttered, "with God's blessing, so are we all. Be advised by me, master, and look to peddle your wares elsewhere."

"I have no choice in the matter," I replied. "My trade is too rare." So saying, I slid my hand into my trousers pocket and jingled my coins meaningfully. "Would you happen to know of any jewelers still trading in the city?"

He squeezed his nose thoughtfully between his finger and thumb. "Ludgate's their common quarter. But the sickness lies heavy thereabouts they say. More I know not."

I thanked him for his help, drew out a penny from my pocket and handed it to him. As I hurried on to the bridge, I glanced back and saw

him turn the coin doubtfully between his fingers before tapping it against the steel blade of his pike.

I crossed the river without further incident, picked out the gothic spire of Old St. Paul's soaring high above the roofs to my left and knew that Ludgate lay immediately beyond it, hidden from my view. I passed through the gate at the north end of the bridge and stepped down into the city.

No sooner had I done so than the waterside breeze died away and I was assailed by a most terrible stench from the heaps of garbage and human ordure which lay scattered all down the center of the street, baking in the sun and so thick with flies that the concerted buzzing sounded like a swarm of angry bees. I felt my stomach heave involuntarily and clutched my handkerchief to my nose and mouth, marveling how the other pedestrians seemed able to proceed about their business seemingly oblivious to the poisonous stench.

I had covered barely 200 yards before I came upon a house, securely shuttered and barred, with a clumsy cross daubed upon its door in red paint and the ominous words *Lord, have mercy upon us* scrawled above it. Dozing on a stool beside it was an old man with a scarlet wooden staff resting across his knees. I observed that my fellow pedestrians were careful to give the area a wide berth, and at the risk of fouling my shoes I too edged out towards the center of the street, glancing up as I did so in time to see a small white face peeping fearfully down at me from behind one of the high leaded windows. In spite of the heat I shivered and quickened my pace, taking the first available turn to the left and hurrying down what is still, I believe, called Thames Street. As soon as I saw the cathedral spire rising to my right, I turned again and headed towards it.

As I made my way along the narrow alley, I scanned the sign-boards on either side and eventually saw one which bore a representation of a pair of compasses. I hurried towards it only to discover that the shop was locked and barred. I squinted in through the leaded window at the selection of terrestrial globes, astrolabes, hour-glasses and astronomical rings and felt my heart sink. What earthly hope had I of finding anyone capable of supplying my needs in an age which was only just beginning to emerge from the shadows of the mediaeval? As I turned dispiritedly away, I saw an elderly gentleman emerging from a door further up the street. I waited until he came abreast of me and then accosted him politely and asked whether he knew of any instrument maker or optician still working in

the neighbourhood.

Perhaps something in my manner of speech or my dress intrigued him because he peered at me shrewdly from beneath the broad brim of his hat and asked me if I would care to specify exactly what it was I was looking for.

Having nothing to gain by not doing so, I told him I had urgent need of some skilled artificer capable of fashioning for me a small rod or cylinder of rock crystal.

"Why, sir," he said, "if you seek a lens grinder, then Master William Tavener is your man. His shop lies hard by St. Anne's in Carter Lane." He indicated with his cane the direction I should take, adding that he could not vouch for it that the man had not fled the City, though he believed not.

I thanked him warmly for his assistance and made haste to follow his directions. Ten minutes later I had found the shop, exactly where he had described it, with a large gilded spectacles frame hanging above it for its sign. I glanced briefly at the small display of reading lenses in the window, realized that this or nothing was what I had been seeking, and with a painfully racing heart reached for the door latch. To my inexpressible relief the door opened and I stepped over the threshold into the shop.

A small brass bell was standing on the wooden counter, and, after waiting for a minute or so, I picked it up and rang it briskly. I heard a door bang somewhere in the back regions of the shop and the sound of approaching footsteps. Finally a young woman appeared holding a baby in her arms. She stood gazing at me somberly for a moment then asked, "What is it ye seek, master?"

"Is Mr. Tavener in?" I asked. "I have some urgent business for him."

A distant voice called out: "Who is it, Bessie?"

"Robert Pensley," I supplied. "*Doctor* Robert Pensley."

I thought I detected a faint quickening of interest in her face as she passed on this information. "He'll be down to you in a minute, sir," she said.

"Does he work alone, then?"

"Th' prentices have flown this month past," she said. "I warrant I'd have followed them had it not been for father. Plague or no plague, he'll not budge."

"Have you any rats in your house?" I enquired.

"Aye, some I daresay. What house hereabouts hasn't? They swarm up from the fleet like black heathens."

"Their fleas are the plague carriers," I said. "Rid yourself of the rats and you'll be safe."

She laughed. "Lord, sir, the

beasts are dying without any help from us! I found two lying stiff in the jakes this very morning."

"You didn't touch them?"

"Not I," she said. "Father hoisted them with the furnace tongs and flung 'em over the wall into the ditch."

"On no account handle them whatever you do," I said. "One bite from an infected flea and that could well be the death of you. Believe me, I know."

"They do say as it's the foul air," she said. "There's orders posted abroad for the watch to burn night fires at every street crossing — and all day long in the open yards. But father says the London air's always been as foul even when there was no plague."

"He's right," I insisted. "So do as I say, Bessie, and promise me you'll touch no dead rats; then you and your babe will both live through it safely."

She smiled. "Me, I hate the ugly brutes. Hark ye, here comes father now."

A middle-aged man with a bald crown to his head and sparse brown hair touched with grey came shuffling out of the passage at the back of the counter and nodded to me. "We've not met before, I think, sir," he said. "What is it ye seek?"

I lifted my knapsack on to the counter, unbuckled it and drew out the complete prism and the two broken pieces. "I want you to cut me an eight-faced crystal prism to these identical dimensions, Mr. Tavener," I said. "Can you do it?"

He took the whole crystal from me and held it up, twisting it this way and that as he squinted at it. "May I asked who fashioned this for ye, sir?"

"I had it cut in Italy."

"'Tis fine workmanship. I've seen none better." And with that he handed it back to me with a smile.

"But you must keep it, Mr. Tavener," I insisted. "It is to be your pattern. The dimensions are vital, I do assure you."

"I'm sorry to disappoint ye, Doctor," he said, "but seemingly that's what I must do. Single-handed I'm so tardy in my work that it would be the best part of a three-month before I could even consider it. Why, I have grinding in hand upstairs for Master Hooke, due last month, that bids fair to keep me till the middle of next."

"Mr. Tavener," I cried desperately, "I have not traveled all this way to find you, only to be denied! Will you tell me how long it would take to cut such a prism?"

He lifted the rod again and turned it over speculatively between his fingers. "Cut *and* polish?" he enquired.

"Of course."

"Two or three days. Depending on how fine ye wanted it."

"And what would you charge?"

"A guinea a day for the skilled labour."

"I'll pay you ten," I said, and the words were no sooner out of my mouth than I realized what I had said.

He peered up at me quizzically over the crystal. "Ten guineas?" he repeated slowly. "Ye'd pay me *ten gold guinea pieces?*"

I nodded. "I will. Providing you'll put the work in hand for me at once."

He looked down again at the prism and traced its beveled contours with his fingertips. I could see he was wondering what kind of man I was to have brought him such a proposition. "D'ye mind telling me why the matter is so urgent, sir?"

"You'd not believe me if I did, Mr. Tavener," I said, "but I assure you it could well be a matter of life or death. Time is of the essence."

"Well, there again, sir," he said, "I know not whether I even have such a blank to suit. Like all else, good crystal's hard to come by in these black days. But perhaps you'd care to step up into the workshop and see what there is."

"Then you *will* undertake it?"

"If I have no satisfactory blank, sir, then no amount of willing on my part will make ye one," he said. "So you'd best come up and see for yourself."

I followed him through the shop, up some dark stairs and into a long, low-beamed workroom which must surely have been cantilevered on to the back of the house. Windows ran round three sides, and two of them looked out over the graveyard of the church next door. The early evening sunlight was slanting in through a dusty drapery of cobwebs. An antique wooden treadle lathe stood against one wall. Suspended above it was a rack of tools. Instead of a fireplace there was a charcoal oven-furnace and a glass-making crucible. The whole place was depressingly reminiscent of a Dürer engraving of an alchemist's glory hole, but while Mr. Tavener was routing in the depths of a cupboard, I examined two lenses I found lying on a bench and discovered them to be of astonishingly high quality.

Tavener emerged clasping a chunk of quartz which he brought across to the bench and laid before me. "That's Tintagel pebble," he said. "Would it do?"

I picked up the crystal and held it to the light. As far as I could tell, it was flawless. I handed it back to him and expelled my breath in a long sigh. "It will do perfectly, Mr. Tavener," I said.

At that very moment the clock in the church began to sound a chime, and without thinking I pulled my watch from my fob

pocket, intending to set it by the prevailing time. I had just clicked open the gold face-guard when I noticed that Tavener's gaze was riveted on the instrument. I smiled. "You will not have seen a watch like this, I daresay, Mr. Tavener?" I detached the chain clip and held the instrument out to him.

He took it from me and turned it round wonderingly in his fingers, rather as the guard at the bridge gatehouse had turned over the penny I had given him. Then he lifted it to his ear and a look of the most profound astonishment suffused his face. It is, in truth, a fine timepiece, made by Jacques Simenon of Paris and given to me to mark my 21st anniversary by my dear mother and father. I took it back from him, opened the case with my thumbnail and showed him the jewel precision movement within. "Why, sir," he breathed, "that is a true miracle! God's truth, never in my life did I dream to see such a thing."

"I warrant it is the only one of its kind in the world today," I said.

"That I can well believe, sir. I doubt the King himself hath such a treasure."

"Mr. Tavener," I said slowly, "would *you* like to own that watch?"

He looked at me as if I had gone clean out of my mind and said nothing at all.

"I mean it," I said. "So anxious am I to have the prism cut that I am prepared to give you my watch in exchange for it. It is worth far more than ten guineas. Make for me a perfect copy of that prism, put it into my hand, and I will put the watch into yours. See, here is my hand in pledge of it."

Tavener looked down at the watch ticking away merrily on the bench with the yellow sunlight winking from the jeweled balance. It almost seemed to have hypnotized him. "Well?" I said. "Isn't it a fair bargain?"

"Aye, sir," he agreed at last. "I must suppose ye best know what ye are about," and with that he joined his palm to mine and we shook upon the contract.

"And when can you start?" I asked him.

"Tomorrow, God willing. But I shall have to ride to Edmonton first for pumice powder and rottenstone. I'm clean out of both of them."

"How long will that take?"

"All day, most like. 'Tis ten mile there and no less back."

"And those things you must have?"

"Aye. For cutting pebble. 'Tis not like your whoreson glass. The other grits I have enough of."

"It's not for me to teach you your business, Mr. Tavener," I said. "All I can do now is to wish

you God speed."

"Believe me, I'll not tarry, sir. As it is, the lass won't care to be left."

I picked up the watch and clipped it back onto its chain. "I am just newly arrived in London, Mr. Tavener," I said, "and as yet have no lodgings. Could you perhaps recommend me to some inn close by?"

He scratched his chin. "*The Three Keys* in Lower Wharf Street is a clean house," he said. "It's just down alongside Paul's Steps. I daresay that would suit ye. The air is more wholesome by the water."

So I took my leave of him with my heart feeling a good deal lighter than it had for many hours. I soon found The Three Keys and prevailed upon the landlord to rent me an attic room overlooking the river, paying for one week's rent and board in advance with the first of my two sovereigns. I told him that the coin was a Polish *thaler* — Henderson the numismatist once told me that this coin bore a superficial resemblance to our modern sovereign — and he accepted it cheerfully enough, no doubt on account of his having frequent dealings with sailors from foreign ports. I drank a mug of ale with him and ate an excellent mutton pasty while he regaled me with horrific stories of the ravages the "visiation" was wreaking upon the city. He also told me that the ships I had seen drawn up in midstream were filled with wealthy citizens who had embarged their wives and families and would permit no one else to set foot aboard, all their daily needs being supplied by boatmen who purchased food on shore, rowed out with it, and loaded it into baskets which were then hauled up on deck.

Soon after this I retired to my room intending to take a short nap, but whether from the unaccustomed effect of the strong ale or by simple reaction to the day's exertions, I fell deeply asleep and did not wake until the next morning, though I seem dimly to recall having my dreams invaded by the sound of a handbell being rung in the street below and the jarring clatter of iron-shod cart wheels upon cobble stones.

Apart from a brief excursion this morning along the waterfront, during which I purchased for myself a less anachronistic hat with one of my three florins and a plain-fronted, linen bib shirt with another, I have spent the whole day closeted in my attic writing up this record of what must surely be one of the most extraordinary days ever spent by a 19th Century gentleman.

August 28th.

To Tavener's early, only to find the shop locked up. I waited for

over half an hour hoping that at least his daughter would put in an appearance but saw nobody. I made my way round to the back of the premises and peered up at the workshop windows. The whole place seemed utterly deserted. The rest of the morning I spent wandering about the city in an agony of apprehension. Finally I returned to Carter Street, knocked on the door of the house adjoining the shop and inquired whether they knew anything of the man's whereabouts. The woman told me that Tavener, accompanied by his daughter and her child had set out early the previous morning in a small pony cart and had not been seen since. Telling myself they had been delayed at Edmonton and would surely return that afternoon, I wandered into the cathedral and, despite my own anxiety, was deeply moved by the sight of hundreds of people all kneeling in silent prayer. I read a printed proclamation which I found nailed up in the cathedral porch. It was signed by the Lord Mayor and the Sheriffs and gave a series of orders to the citizens, some of which explained the odd noises I had heard — handbells, horns blowing and the rest. Nothing more desperately ironical than the directions *to kill all dogs and cats!* — the one slender hope of keeping some of the rats out of the houses! Returned to Tavener's three times more, then finally back here feeling thoroughly depressed.

August 29th.

Spent a wretched night lying awake listening to the melancholy cries of the bellmen — *Bring out your de-a-a-d! Bring our your de-a-a-d!* Resolved to try to speak to the Mayor or the Sheriffs and attempt to persuade them to at least rescind the order for the destruction of dogs and cats. Heard the squeaking of mice — or rats! — behind the wainscot and broke out into a cold sweat of pure terror. Would I not be better advised to seek lodgings south of the river?

(later)

Still no sign or word of Tavener. Wrote him a note which I thrust under his door, urging him to contact me immediately he returns. Found another lens grinder in Cheapside, but lacking the prisms which I had left with Tavener, I could only give him a rough description of what I wanted. Since he had no suitable crystal anyway, it was so much wasted effort. However he told me that William Tavener was "a true man of his word" and that my business could not be in better hands. Consolation of a sort, I suppose, if only I could be sure that my business *was* in his hands!

A thoroughly unnerving encounter in a street (Bread St.?)

linking Cheapside with Watling Street. Saw a man I took for a drunkard staggering towards me. Just before he reached me, he pitched over and fell full length on the cobbles. I hurried up to him — he was lying on his face — turned him over and saw to my horror that he had all the signs of the plague, gross swellings at the sides of his neck and dark blotches under his skin from internal bleeding. There was a trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth, though this may well have been a result of his fall. He was still breathing — a throaty, rasping sound — and as I bent over him, he vomited up a black, evil-smelling bile — shuddered once, violently, and lay still. I looked up and saw that the narrow street, which had been busy enough when I entered it, was now completely deserted. All round me I heard the staccato sounds of doors and window shutters being clapped to. I felt for the poor devil's pulse and found nothing. I left him lying there in the street and hurried away.

When I had recovered something of my composure, I made my way straight to the Mansion House and asked if I could speak to one of the Sheriffs or some other person of authority upon a matter of great urgency. Finally I was granted an audience with a Mr. Robinson, the Private Secretary to Sir Charles Doe. He listened patiently while I poured out my reasons for at least rescinding the order for the destruction of cats and dogs. Having heard me out, he thanked me politely and then told me that I was mistaken since it had been proved quite conclusively that the plague was transmitted by the "evil miasma" which was inhaled by these very animals and then breathed out upon their unsuspecting victims! Besides, he added with a charming smile, did I really suppose that such a tiny creature as a *flea* could carry all the monstrous weight of such appalling infection? Furthermore, if extra proof were needed, could any man deny that fleas had been skipping around London for years before the outbreak of the present calamity? "Bubonic plague," I said, "is carried by the black rat in the form of an invisible bacterium, *bacillus pestis.* When the rats die of the infection, their fleas seek out other hosts and by sucking their blood transmit the infection to them. Would you be so good as to record that fact and see that it is conveyed to Sir John Lawrence? If the authorities act promptly, thousands of innocent lives may yet be saved." Mr. Robinson smiled and nodded and scribbled something on a piece of paper. "I will see that your message is conveyed to His Lordship, Doctor Pensley," he said.

"And now I really must beg ye to excuse me, for I have a great deal of most pressing business to attend to." And that was that.

August 30th.

It is now three whole days since I spoke to Tavener and still nothing. Last night, for the first time, I found myself the victim of a most dreadful depression, which I could not shake off. All day long a heavy pall of cloud has hung over the city, and my eyes are still red and inflamed from the sulfurous smoke of those infernal bonfires they light *to sweeten the air!* This afternoon I was assailed by an ungovernable panic fear that my Machine had been discovered and removed. I ran down to the waterside, paid a boatman sixpence to ferry me over to Southwark and made my way back across the fields to Herne Hill. My relief at discovering my Machine still standing exactly where I had left it — and, apparently, untouched — quite overwhelmed me. I sank down in the grass beside it and wept like a child. While I was making my return, a violent thunder storm broke, and by the time I eventually got back to the inn I was soaked to the skin. The landlord persuaded me to drink a stiff tot of hot Hollands punch, which, though it may not be the universal specific he claims, certainly seems to have done something to lift my leaden spirits.

August 31st.

Tavener is returned!! The serving maid who attends on me in my room brought up my clothes, which had been drying overnight in the kitchen, and told me that Tavener's daughter had brought word to the innkeeper. My spirits soared like a sky lark. I was out of bed, had dressed, and was on my way to Carter Street within minutes of hearing the news. Bessie came to the shop door herself and told me that her father was already at work upstairs on my commission. Not wishing to delay him still further, I asked her to tell me what had happened. Whereupon she invited me through into their parlor and told me how they had been stopped at Stanford by a barrier across the road, similar in all respects to that which I had encountered at Camberwell. Unable to persuade the villagers to let them through, they had been forced to make a detour as far westward as Palmer's Green before they could circle back by a maze of by-lanes towards Edmonton. They had spent that night under a haystack and, on resuming their journey next morning, had reached Edmonton around noon only to find to their dismay that there a similar barricade had been erected. Her father had spent

most of that afternoon parleying with the constables and had eventually prevailed upon them to allow him through. But their troubles were still not over. The dealer who normally supplied him with materials had shut up his works for the duration of "the visitation" and gone to lodge with his sister in Newmarket! Having got so far, the resourceful Tavener was not to be denied. He forced an entry into the store shed, helped himself to whatever he wanted, left some money to pay for it together with a note of explanation and, next morning, the three of them were on their way back to London.

All had gone well until, while they were descending Stanford Hill, the axle of their hired pony-cart broke. Tavener was somehow able to effect a temporary repair which enabled them to crawl back to Wood Green where they had spent the rest of that day finding a wheelwright and persuading him to replace the broken axle. This meant still further delay, and by the time the job was finished it was too late to continue to London. They spent that night in Wood Green and had set out the following day, arriving back at Carter Lane at about the same time as I was on my way back from Herne Hill.

I have recounted here briefly what Bessie Tavener spent an animated hour in describing, painting a remarkably vivid word picture of the pathetic bands of fugitives from the city whom they had encountered roaming the forest round Woodford — "living like gypsies, poor souls, with nary a scanthing of provender to keep their bones from rattling." I was moved to ask her whether she regretted having to return to London, but she said there were already many cases of plague in the outlying districts and if she was fated to die of it she would rather draw her last breath in her own house than lost among strangers. I repeated my stern warning about the rats and extracted a solemn promise from her that she would keep well clear of any place where fleas might be caught. She gave me her word readily enough, but I suspect it was more to humor me than because she believed me.

I looked in briefly upon Tavener before I left and told him how inexpressibly relieved I was to see him back. He merely nodded, gave me a shy grin, and returned to his lathe. As I stepped out into the street, which smelt mercifully sweeter for the deluge yesterday evening, I felt as though a huge and suffocating burden had been lifted from my shoulders.

Sept. 1st.

The soaking I received in the thunderstorm seems to have left me with a chill. Hardly surprising.

However, I have before me one of the landlord's excellent "Hollands tonics," which is a great source of comfort. Shortly before noon I called round at Tavener's to see how the work was progressing only to find him engaged in packing up a box of lenses for a little hunchbacked fellow in a grubby wig. Tavener introduced him to me as Master Hooke. As I shook him by the hand, I thought, by way of a joke, to say: *"ut tensio sic vis,* Mr. Hooke." He gave me a most extraordinary look as if to say: "Who is this madman I have by the hand?" and the thought crossed my mind that perhaps he had not yet formulated that shortest of all Physical Laws which posterity would link to his name. Thereafter we chatted in a desultory way about the plague until he hobbled off with his box of lenses under his arm.

After he had gone, Tavener showed me how the work on the prism was progressing. The blank is already two-thirds shaped in rough, and he hopes to have that part of the work completed by this evening. Then the labor of polishing begins. In spite of my pressing him he would not give me a definite date for completion on the grounds that Tintagel pebble was notoriously slow to take a fine polish, being "hard nigh unto diamond." He is certainly a most meticulous craftsman, who obviously takes a profound — though somewhat inarticulate — pride in the quality of his work.

Sept. 2nd.

A violent bout of sweating in the night left me with a feeling of great lassitude and a severe headache. I arose late, dressed myself, went out into the street and was overcome with a fit of giddiness not unlike the vertigo I have experienced while Time traveling. I have no doubt at all that it is an unwelcome aftereffect of the chill, but I could well do without it. On my returning to the inn the landlord made my blood run cold with a story of some poor pregnant girl in Cripplegate who was nailed up in her house when one of her sisters contracted the plague. All the rest of the family were stricken down one after the other until finally, when only she was left alive, she gave birth and, with no one on hand to help her, died, not of the plague, but of a hemorrhage! With her self-delivered infant in her arms! The sheer, wanton cruelty of this policy of sealing up houses is almost beyond belief. No phrase sickens me more than the pious: "'Tis God's will," and I must be hearing it in one form or another twenty times a day.

Sept. 3rd.

Little doubt in my mind but that I've caught a really nasty dose

of influenza. I have passed all the day lying in bed, and despite the sun beating down on the tiles overhead making this attic as hot as an oven. I have spent much of the time shivering violently. When the servant girl came up to make my bed, I told her I had caught a bad chill and asked her to be good enough to fetch me up a mug of strong spiced ale. That was over three hours ago and still she has not returned.

Sept. 9th?
Hostel of St. Barnabas.

Days of nightmare. What is memory? What dream? Grey-Morlock figures bending over me, prodding at my chest, thrusting me into my clothes, carrying me downstairs with a rag soaked in brandy stuffed into my mouth. A boat. Stars swirling round in the sky above me. Squeaking of oars. Voices whispering. Waking again to find the sun hammering nails into my naked eyes. My knapsack is lying on the sand beside me. Where am I? My fumbling fingers explore my body as though it is a stranger's. My joints are all on fire, and my head feels as though a red-hot gimlet is being screwed into my brain. Beneath my armpit the outline of an unfamiliar lump. Another in my groin. *Buboes!* Pain gives way to sheer, mindless terror. I am falling backwards down the black well-shaft that has no bottom. Voices. Hands lifting me. Hands carrying me. Falling, falling without end. I open my eyes to see a stone vaulted roof arching above me. As I stare up at it, a cowled face swims into my field of vision. Its lips move. "Welcome, stranger." "Where am I?" (Is that really my own voice?) "The hostel of Saint Barnabas." "I have the plague?" the cowl nods. "Am I dying?" "We think not." Time passes. I sleep; I dream; I wake. Sleep; dream; wake. Strong, firm, gentle hands raise me and prop me back against straw-filled sacks. Soup is spooned into my mouth and a worried voice urges: "Drink, Robert." I swallow and choke. "Again." I swallow. "Again. Good i'faith. Most excellently done." "Who brought me here?" "Who knows, Robert? Friends to be sure. They could have drowned ye in the river like a puppy, for all ye could have stayed them." A pause, then: "Who is Weena?" "Weena?" "Aye. Ye called on her by the hour in your raving. Dost wish me to send word to her that ye lie here?" "She's dead." He rises from my bedside and sketches a token blessing over me. "My knapsack," I croak. "Fear not, Robert. 'Tis here." He lifts it onto my bed and then moves off down the ward. I fumble the buckle undone, extract my notebook and force myself to write a

note to Tavener. Then I sleep again. When I wake next, I make this entry. It has taken me nearly three hours to complete it.

Sept. 11th.

Today Brother James trimmed my beard for me and has promised to see that my note is delivered to Tavener. He assures me too that "through God's infinite mercy" I have successfully weathered the worst of the storm. Twenty-four patients have died since I was brought in. The bell in the chapel never seems to stop its mournful tolling.

Sept. 12th.

The superstitious fear of infection is presumably what I have to thank for the fact that I still have all my possessions down to the last pencil — that and the fact that the innkeeper's livelihood was at stake. Had word got out that I had the plague, The Three Keys would now be a "sealed house."

Sept. 13th.

This afternoon I spent half an hour trying to persuade Brother Dominic, the physician, that the infection is transmitted primarily by rats and their fleas. I had hardly more success than I had with Secretary Robinson even though I thought to cite Harvey to illustrate how the bacillus was carried through the bloodstream. B.D. told me he thought it was an interesting theory but that proof was lacking. I told him that if he swabbed out his wards with a 250/1 solution of sulfuric acid, he'd soon have all the proof he needed. "And what is sulfuric acid, Robert?" On my telling him it was another name for oil of vitriol he nodded, but I suspect he was really no more convinced than Robinson had been.

Sept. 14th.

A message was brought in to me by a walking patient that a Master William Tavener was without and would speak with me but was fearful of entry. He sent word to say that the work was finished and that he had it now upon him. On hearing this I crawled off my bed, staggered the length of the ward like a drunkard and so, by painful degrees, proceeded to the hostel gate. "Tavener?" I croaked. "Is that you, man?" He stood a little way off and stared in at me. "In God's name, Doctor Pensley, ye are sadly changed!" "I'm recovered now," I said, clutching at the iron rails of the gate for support. "It's quite safe to come close." "That I durst not, Doctor," he called. "Go ye back a way and I'll push them through to ye." I did as he said, though how I contrived to remain standing is a miracle. Whereupon he ran to the gate and quickly

thrust a bundle wrapped in cloth through onto the flagstones. I picked it up, unwrapped it with shaking hands and found, lying inside, swaddled in lambswool, the two whole prisms together with the two broken pieces. *And for the life of me I could not tell the copy from the original!* My eyes filled with tears I was quite powerless to prevent. "God bless you, William Tavener!" I cried. "You are indeed a master among craftsmen!" and taking out my watch and chain, I held them up so that he could see them plainly, then laid them down upon the flagstones. He let the watch lie there while I stepped back; then he darted forward and scooped it into a leather bag he had ready for the purpose. "Farewell, Doctor," he called. "God be wi'ye!" and he was gone. Somehow I managed to stagger back to the ward and there collapsed upon my cot.

Sept. 15.

Feel too weak to write much. Obviously overdid things yesterday. The prism is a true marvel — a perfect replica. No doubt at all it will fulfill its function.

16.

Vomiting all last night. Feel v. weak.

17.

Diarrhea and vomiting.

disgust

* * *

There it ends. The last entry is so faintly penciled that it is very difficult to decipher. The word could possibly be read as "despair." However, the Register itself leaves us in no doubt as to the final outcome. One of the two entries for September 20th, 1665, reads: *Decd. at ye 5th hr, one Rbt. Penly* (sic) *of med. yrs. of ye black flux.* It is matched by a previous entry for September 5th: *Admi. one Penly, sick nigh unto death.*

In the weeks which followed my initial perusal of the Hertford Manuscript I took certain steps to ascertain, for my own satisfaction, whether the journal was in fact nothing more than an elaborate and pointless forgery.

My first problem was to obtain a specimen of the true Doctor Pensley's handwriting. I wrote to Somerset House and inquired whether he had left a will, only to be informed that there was no one of that name in their probate records for the years 1894-1899. I then thought to try the civil records for Herne Hill and wrote to the Camberwell Town Clerk, but again drew a blank. I could find no

Pensley in the London telephone directory, and a discreet advertisement placed in the personal column of *The Times* proved just as unrewarding. However, these initial disappointments served only to spur my determination. I contacted an old friend of mine in Cambridge and asked him to consult the university records on my behalf. Within a fortnight I learnt that Robert James Pensley had been admitted to Emmanuel College as an Exhibitioner in the year 1868.

I traveled down to Cambridge and there in the college records I found at last what I had been seeking. It was not very much certainly — a mere signature — but when I laid it beside an entry in the Hertford text where the author had written out his own name, I was convinced that the writing was by the same hand. My instinctive conviction has since been confirmed by the opinion of a professional graphologist.

My next move was to consult the back files of local newspapers. The only one which still survives is *The Dulwich and District Observer,* and there in the yellowed print of the issue for the week of June 18th, 1894, tucked away among advertisements for safety bicycles and patent knife powder, I found: *Puzzling Disappearance of Well-Known Amateur Scientist.* The account, written in an excruciatingly "literary" style, described how Doctor Robert Pensley, the only surviving son of James and Martha Pensley, had vanished from his home in Herne Hill on the morning of June 7th and had not been seen or heard from since. There was a thinly veiled suggestion that the doctor had been suffering from severe mental strain brought on by overwork. His housekeeper, in an exclusive interview with "our Reporter," described how her employer was in the habit of vanishing into his laboratory "for hours on end, bless him, and all night too sometimes." There the article ended, and since I could find no further references to the mystery in any later issue, I can only suppose that the matter had been purposely hushed up.

But I could not let the matter rest there. Some strange, haunting quality in that penciled manuscript beckoned to me like a forlorn will-o'-the-wisp, and I resolved to track down as many of the historical references as it was possible to do after an interval of over three hundred years. During the past eighteen months, whenever I have had the opportunity, I have consulted ancient documents in the Guildhall, the Stationers' Hall, the British Museum, and the London Records Office in an attempt to verify what I already *felt* to be true, namely that in some wholly inex-

plicable manner Robert Pensley *had* succeeded in transferring himself backwards in time to the 17th Century and had there perished.

My first notable success was in establishing that one William Tavener, a member of the Guild of Spectacle Makers, had occupied premises next to the Church of St. Anne in Carter Lane. The date given was 1652. A further entry recorded that two apprentices had been bound to the aforesaid Master Tavener at premises in New Cheapside in 1668! So he, at least, seems to have escaped both the plague and the fire.

In a Victorian handbook entitled *The Inns of Elizabethan London* I came upon a reference to The Three Keys of Lower Wharf Street. Like most of the other establishments mentioned it was destroyed in the Great Fire of 1666.

The Hostel of Saint Barnabas — a Franciscan Charity Foundation — is reasonably well documented. It functioned until the early 19th Century when it was pulled down to make way for a new dockyard.

Last May, in the archives of the Mansion House, I unearthed the name of one Samuel Robinson, Esq., recorded as having been appointed to the post of *amanuensis privatus* to Sir Charles Doe, Sheriff, in the year 1663.

In 1665, Robert Hooke was certainly in London, working as "curator of Experiments" for the newly founded Royal Society, and I have no reason to doubt that he would have called upon the services of Master Tavener to supply him with his optical apparatus. Incidentally, it might not be inappropriate to point out that Robert Hooke, as well as formulating his famous Law, has also been credited with a multitude of other discoveries, among them the invention of the spring balance wheel without which the science of horology (not to mention navigation) would doubtless have languished for many years longer in the Dark Ages!

Yet, when all is said and done, such "facts" as I have been able to disinter seem to raise more questions than they answer. I feel I am forever condemned to pace the circumference of a circle which turns out to be not a circle at all but a spiral — my point of arrival is never the same as my point of departure. For to accept the Hertford Manuscript at its face value must surely mean accepting a concept in which Time is both predetermined and yet infinite, an endless snake with its tail in its own mouth, a cosmos in which the Past and the Future coexist and will continue to do so for all Eternity.

How then is it that I both *can* and *do* believe that Robert Pensley's journal, written in his

own hand in the year 1665, was already lying there gathering dust on a shelf in the library of Hertford Castle for fifty years before its author had drawn his first infant breath in the year 1850? Or that he died, most horribly, on a straw pallet in a charity hospital in the district of Wapping, beside the silver Thames, clutching in his stiffening fingers a fragment of polished rock crystal which he had staked his life to obtain, only to lose the wager at the very moment when he must surely have believed that he had won?

OUT OF DICKINSON BY POE
or
THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF EDGAR & EMILY

Strange tryst was that from which stillborn
I still knew life midsummer morn,
And son of Emily/Edgar both
Did suck dry teat and swill sour broth,
And midnight know when noon was there,
And every summer breeze foreswear.
Gone blind from stars and dark of moon
This boychild grew from wry cocoon;
For I was spun from spider hands
And misconceived in Usher Lands,
And all of Edgar's nightmares mine
And Em's dust-heart my valentine.
Thus mute old maid and maniac
Then birthed me forth to cataract -
That whirlpool sucked to darkest star
Where all the unborn children are.
So I was torn from maelstrom flesh
And saw in x-ray warp and mesh
A sigh of polar-region breath
That whispered skull-and-socket death.
Em could not stop for Death, so Poe
Meandered graveyards to and fro
And laid his tombstone marble bride
as Jekyll copulated Hyde
And birthed a panic-terror son.
And thus was I, mid-night, begun.

— Ray Bradbury

From sf's most unpredictable talent, not one, but twenty-six *stories for this special anniversary issue, along with a behind-the-scene afterword on how this piece came to be written.*

From A to Z, in The Chocolate Alphabet

by HARLAN ELLISON

A is for ATLANTEAN

Their science predicted the quake. There had been two centuries of warning temblors. With the aid of genetic engineering they began a return to the ocean. It would not be a lost continent; it would be an abandoned continent. And throughout the ages that followed, humankind would search for "lost" Atlantis, never realizing that when the earth split and the fires of the underworld seared the land, the Atlanteans would already have developed gill breathing and useful membranes. See, then: Krenoa, capital city of undersea Atlantis. Snug and secure at the bottom of the Maracot Deep. Towers of porphyry and adamantine, lit with lambent flames from within; walls of sea weeds and kelp, altered by chemical means to retain their flexibility yet suitable for buildings; flying bridges and causeways all hollow and shimmering. Krenoa, beautiful beyond belief. And lying in a public square, an enormous lead canister, split open and holding darkness. An alien object dropped into Krenoa from above. See, now: the Atlanteans. Pale blue and great-eyed, gentle expressions and wisdom in their open, staring, dead eyes. What God and Nature could not destroy, the inheritors of the Earth did.

B is for BREATHDEATH

It's waiting for them when they reach space. It grows on virtually every world but the Earth. It is common as weed. The little black flower with the soft red bulb in its center. Its spores fill the atmosphere of gray planets circling yellow stars and burned-out cinders. When the last of the atmosphere has been drawn off into space, the spores will settle. But they will still

kill. It is a lovely flower. If one stares into its center, one can see many things, disturbing things. Until the aneurysms stop the visions and the blood bursts forth. There is a race on a far star that believes the breathdeath can be ground up and cut with various juices and consumed, and it will give eternal life. No one has ever tried the recipe. It waits.

C is for CUSHIO

When he was ten, he was savaged by a forest creature they had thought extinct thousands of years before. They killed the beast and put it on display in the largest museum of their world. The boy was taken to Regeneration, and they rebuilt him with machine parts and soft things that had been flesh in other bodies. He grew up half-human and thus never understood what humans wanted. He killed his first when he was fifteen. By his twenty-first year he ruled the continent with a guard of mercenaries as ruthless as himself. He went into space with an armada at the age of thirty and left behind him a route of road markers that had been lives and cities and thriving markets. The route of embers and mass graves. They stopped him near Aldebaran, and space was littered with wreckage beyond the range of even the most sensitive sensors. They took him alive, and they encased him in amber, and they embedded him in the earth of the homeworld, with cameras that never shut down and never left him out of their sight. And there he stayed, forever. The regenerators of his world had done their work well. He would live forever. And mothers of the homeworld, who desired their children to go to sleep, invoked the name of Cushio. They said, "Cushio will take you if you don't do good." And the children were too young to know that could never be.

D is for DIKH

He is sick. He writes his books in the lowest level of a deep labyrinthine grotto. His books are filled with things no one ever wanted to know. Unsettling things. He became part mushroom many years ago, but even the small lizards who come and feed off his body never realize he was once a man. If he were on a desert island, he would write his awful stories and send them out in bottles. But there, deep in the grotto, no one will ever read a word he has written; written with shards of sharpened stone in the blood of lizards; written on walls that go deep into the earth. But one day they will need fossil fuels, and they will break through a wall of his grotto, and they will find the books, written on endless walls. And they will find the thing with a tormented

face, growing in the moist soil of the underworld.

E is for ELEVATOR PEOPLE

They never speak, and they cannot meet your gaze. There are five hundred buildings in the United States whose elevators go deeper than the basement. When you have pressed the basement button and reached bottom, you must press the basement button twice more. The elevator doors will close, and you will hear the sound of special relays being thrown, and the elevator will descend. Into the caverns. Chance has not looked favorably on occasional voyagers in those five hundred cages. They have pressed the wrong button, too many times. They have been seized by those who shuffle through the caverns, and they have been... treated. Now they ride the cages. They never speak, and they cannot meet your gaze. They stare up at the numbers as they light and then go off, riding up and down even after night has fallen. Their clothes are clean. There is a special dry cleaner who does the work. Once you saw one of them, and her eyes were filled with screams. London is a city filled with narrow, secure stairways.

F is for FLENSER

Among all the paranormals, the flensers are the most kind. They read minds, they are empathic, and they see all the anguish in those they pass. They wipe clean the slates of the minds they encounter. And for this, they suffer a great isolation. They are the pale people whose socks fall down, the ones you see standing on street corners. They are the ones with pimples and odd conversation. Theirs is a terribly lonely existence. Every day they crucify themselves. Be kind to the pale old ladies and the mumbling scrawny boys you pass in the drug store. They may save you from the terrors of your past.

G is for GOLEM

The golem are *goyim* that always wanted to be Jewish. But they never suffered enough guilt.

H is for HAMADRYAD

The Oxford English Dictionary has three definitions of hamadryad. The first is: a wood nymph that lives and dies in her tree. The second is: a venomous, hooded serpent of India. The third definition is improbable. None of them mention the mythic origins of the word. The tree in which the Serpent lives was the hamadryad. Eve was poisoned. The wood of which the cross was made was the hamadryad. Jesus did not rise, he never died. The ark was composed of cubits of lumber from the hamadryad. You will find no sign of the vessel on top

of Mt. Ararat. It sank. Toothpicks in Chinese restaurants should be avoided at all costs.

I is for ICE CRAWLER

When the exit from the polar icecap was sealed by nukes and thermite, a few of them managed to escape. They were tracked by land and by air, but their thick white skins concealed them from all but chance discovery. With the end of the supply of good skins, the fashion died quickly and the return of stripped corduroy-and-velour soon followed. Those that had escaped found channels in the permafrost and tried to return to their land. They had never known violence; it had come to them slowly, only as a desperate last measure; and only a few had learned the lesson well enough to crawl back to their blasted domain. The hunting parties that had come after them had slaughtered thousands before there had been the slightest retaliation. At first they had believed the warm people from the light had come to establish relations. But when their piping language fell on deaf ears, and the harpoons were thrown, they knew they had been discovered to their ultimate undoing. Those who survived crawled back and ate burrows for their dead. Then they slithered away from that place to a deeper level and began to breed. They would teach their children what they had learned. And perhaps one day they would wear fashionable skins in four or five different colors.

J is forf JABBERWOCK

India conceals many secrets. In the Hindu Kush there is a monastery far back in the low mountains where a sect of monks worship the last Jabberwock. It is a fearsome creature; much smaller than one would expect from reading "Alice." It has bat wings whose membranes between the struts are tattered and torn. It is deep red in color and covered with bristly fur from its shoulders to its buttocks. It resembles a bat-eared, winged jackal with incredibly sharp teeth and one good eye. The other eye has two pupils and is a most malevolent thing to behold. Its claws can tear rock, and it screams constantly. The monks are the holiest of holy men. They have tried to mate the Jabberwock to preserve its presence in their midst. They have mated it with a pig and produced a thing that can neither walk nor see. They have mated it with a camel, and the offspring was born dead but would not decay. They mated it with swans, with ibis, with auks and with jackals. The monks keep the children in glass cages, but they seldom go to look. They mated it with a young girl, a virgin stolen from a small village. The girl died

but the child still lives. They must change the soft cloth in the bottom of its nest three times a day. It sweats blood. The holy monks hope they will be able to find a mate for the Jabberwock before another hundred years passes. What they do not know is that the Jabberwock has sentience; it is a thinking, feeling creature for all its awesome menace. What they do not know is what the Jabberwock thinks, what it wishes. The Jabberwock wishes it were dead.

K is for KENGHIS KHAN

He was a very nice person. History has no record of him. There is a moral in it somewhere.

L is for LOUP-GAROU

Had Šaša Nováček's parents come to America from Ireland or Sweden or even Poland, he would not have realized that the woman next door was a werewolf. But they had come from Ostrava, in Czechoslovakia, and he recognized the shape of the nostrils, the hair in the palms of her hands when she loaned him a cup of nondairy creamer, the definitive S-curve of the spine as she walked to hang her laundry. So he was ready. He had bought a thirty-ought-six hunting rifle, and he had melted down enough twenty-five cent pieces to make his own silver bullets. And the night of the full moon, when the madness was upon her, and she burst through the kitchen window in a snarling strike of fangs and fur, he was ready for her. Calmly, with full presence, and murmuring the names of the best saints, he emptied the rifle into her. The coroner was unable to describe the condition of the body on a single form sheet. The coin of the United States of America, notably the twenty-five cent piece, the quarter, has less than one per cent pure silver in it. Times change, but legends do not.

M is for MUU-MUU

One should always wear one if one has more than six or seven arms.

N is for NEMOTROPIN

Irl and Onkadj were the last to enter the Tunnel of Final Darkness. The competition had been more fierce this Contest than any nemotropin could remember. The gladiators had fallen, spears in their thoracic vitals, mandibles shattered, eyestalks ripped out, claws sliced off... until only Irl and Onkadj had survived. Now they were closed off in the Tunnel to decide which of them would have to suffer the penalty. The Contest among the nemotropin was the only way they had to rid themselves of undesirables. And as the nemotropin were universally judged the

most evil, warlike race in the galaxy, the level of undesirability was a marvel even to the most vicious brigands and hellspawned marauders. They were forced to produce everything they needed for their existence; no other planet or confederation of planets would undertake to trade with them. They were staked off-limits and permitted to breed and kill and live as best they could. But they could not leave their nameless world. With one exception. Thousands of years before, a mission from the Heart Stars Federation had come to their world and tried to civilize the nemotropin. They had been granted the right to send one of their number offworld. The mission had no way of knowing that time and ritual would alter this grant as an excuse for the nemotropin to weed out those even too despicable for existence in a society of killers and reavers. The nemotropin were at least sane enough never to reveal the nature of their awful duplicity. And so, periodically, they would hold the Contest, and the worst of their number would slaughter and slay and attack each other till only one was left standing. And he would be sent to the shape-changing satellite the Federation maintained and would be sent to the pilgrim world where he could do no more harm among the nemotropin. And so Irl and Onkadj went into the Tunnel of Final Darkness with their shell shields covering the soft vulnerable spot beneath which rested the gliomas of their brains. Irl wielded a pair of cutters, and a pair of poison bags were strapped to his right side, protecting his wounds from earlier battles. Should Onkadj strike in that area, the bags would spurt poison and kill him. Onkadj was the younger of the combatants, and without peer in use of the broiler spear. Helmeted, their hooves coated with retardant to keep them from slipping on the mossy stones of the Tunnel, they faced each other and the final combat began. It raged for three days and three nights, and on the morning of the fourth day, Onkadj emerged without one of his four arms, but carrying Irl's lower mandible. He was sent to the shape-changing satellite, made malleable, altered into the form of the superior indigenous life-form of the host-planet, and sent away. On the host-planet, Onkadj did very well. It was a very different world than that of the nemotropin, and Onkadj functioned well in the body. He became a prominent figure. There *is* an explanation for Attila, for Haman, for Cortez, for Cesare Borgia, for Christie and Specht and Manson and Nixon. For Torquemada. But only the nemotropin know. And they smile as best they can with bloody mandibles.

O is for OUROBOROS

Banished from the Earth, the great worm coiled ever so tightly and went to sleep. One day he will awake. The moon will writhe.

P is for POLTERGEIST

Essentially very well-coordinated. Very few people remember, because of the Black Sox scandal, but in 1919 the Chicago White Sox carried a pitcher named Fred Morris who won thirty games; pitched seven perfect no-hit, no-run games; struck out twenty-five batters in one contest; and replaced every divot in the outfield without moving from home plate. He played only one season, his heart was broken when Shoeless Joe Jackson turned up a creep, and vanished from whence he came. He was a poltergeist with a whole lot of love for the sport. Hardly anyone remembers Fred Morris.

Q is for QUETZALCOATL

He did not come from space. He was not an alien. He did not build Toltec or even Aztec pyramids as landing beacons for flying saucers. His most obvious bad habit was a rather nasty appetite for freshly excised, still-pulsing hearts. It is not true what they say about Quetzalcoatl and the virgins. Take it or leave it.

R is for ROQ

The flying city of Detroit (it's up there) was in the midst of its Founder's Day celebration when the great golden roq came to feed. It settled down over the Caliph's Dome (where the roller derby semi-finals were in progress) and thrust its ebony beak through the formed plastic and steel girdering. It dipped again and again, bringing up masses of writhing spectators (and blocker "Rumpy" Johansson), their screams feeding into the P.A. system and causing an overload. The great bird's appetite could hardly be satisfied with a few sports fans, however. It rose on enormous, beating pinions, its pink tongue vibrating and its shriek of joy shattering all the facets of the Esso Tetrahedron. The roq's shadow swam across the gigantic flying metropolis as the bird dove on the Servitor Factory. What could have made it seek out such an inedible attraction no one in Detroit (or even Bombay, floating over there a little way off) could ever say. But it settled and began to eat the entire plant, robot parts and all. And when it had finished consuming the factory, and the millions of individual bits of incipient robot, it slaked its thirst in the Crystal Falls for the better part of a day. And when, hours later, it fell (crushing a lot of stuff), and it died, the residents of Detroit were stunned and waxed

extremely wroth. The great golden roq of the sky had rusted itself to death, and the meat wasn't worth a damn thing, not even for hot dog casings.

S is for SOLIFIDIAN THE SORCERER

I was an invited guest at the elegant fund-raising party where Solifidian performed his miracles. I'd received the engraved invitation to the party several weeks earlier but had not planned to RSVP, because I knew they'd be hitting us up for contributions to the political war chest of a city councilman whose position on rapid transit I considered really fucked. But Penny Goldman called first and tried to embarrass me into coming, and when that didn't work, Leslie Parrish called and said it had been so long since she'd seen me, why didn't I come, and I wanted to see Leslie again, so I went. It was held at Larry Niven's new home out in Tarzana, and Larry and Marilyn had really outdone themselves in setting up the buffet and hiring the caterers to erect the big party tent on the grounds out back. The minute I came through the door, a committee worker for the councilman handed me a pledge card, which I promptly folded and put in my side jacket pocket. I'd probably give the slob a few bucks, but I'd make damned sure I spent a few minutes telling him if he didn't get off his ass and start formulating plans for a new rapid transit district in Los Angeles he was going to find himself facing a *new* committee... one I'd form to beat his backside at election time. So I wandered around and made small-talk with people I knew, and tried to corner Leslie, who was buzzing around doing organizational things; and finally the entertainment started in the tent. George Carlin and Richard Pryor took turns ruining my mind, and then they got together and did an ad-lib routine in tandem, which has to be the funniest thing since Ross Martin delivered the line, "Leslie the Great escaped with a *chicken!?!*" in *The Great Race.* Then there was a break while Tom Hensley got set up with the Roto-Rooter Good Time Christmas Band, and I saw Solifidian for the first time. He looked just like Mandrake the Magician. He was about seven feet tall, as thin as a Watergate alibi; he had one of those hairline mustaches that always made me think of Simon Legree in a stage production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin;* and he had the slimmest, whitest, most beautiful hands I'd ever seen. Brain surgeon fingers with polished nails. He wore a tux with tails and a top hat. If I'd owned a diner, I'd have hired him on the spot as a sandwich-board man. And after Tom's band had

blown everyone away, Solifidian was introduced by "the Candidate" himself, and the sorcerer — because that was what he clearly was — asked the audience to tell him their most secret desire. Nothing big, just something that was personally important to each person. At first no one would speak up, but finally a woman said, "I have a very painful, difficult period every month. Can you do anything about that?" Everyone was startled, but when I realized it was Georgina Voss, I smiled; she'd say *any*thing. But Solifidian didn't seem to think it was outrageous, and he pointed a long white finger at her and said, "I think you'll find it all better now." Querulously, Georgina looked at him, and then a big smile came over her face, and she stood up and said, "Oh my *God!*" and, laughing like a loon, she rushed off into Larry's house, presumably to the bathroom, to check herself. But no one in the crowd doubted that Solifidian had rearranged her parts so she wasn't in pain. Then I said, "I can't get a decent shave. My beard is like barbed wire and my skin is like a baby's instep. When I even use an electric razor, I cut myself and get ingrown hairs, and then I look like a forty-one-year-old kid with acne. Can you take care of that, sir?" Solifidian nodded, pointed a finger at me, and, as everyone gasped in awe (and not a little horror), every follicle on my face wormed its way out of my skin, carrying with it the root and whatever it is that makes the hair grow back. It all fell on my jacket, and I brushed it off and rubbed my jaw, and I was as smooth as if I'd just come from the barber at the Plaza. I led the applause. There was more, much more. He performed a dozen similar miracles in the space of mere minutes. He gave one woman a sensational nose job, made a talent agent's penis larger, cured one guy's color blindness, gave Bill Rotsler back the sense of smell, and restored hair to the bald pate of the Candidate. He was amazing. Never saw anything like it. He was in the middle of performing a vasectomy on Marty Shapiro when a stout woman wearing an improbable hat came stalking into the midst of the crowd. She stood there staring at him with her chubby hands on her hips until he was finished. And when he looked around to see who was next, he saw her, and his face fell. "So this is where you are, you asshole," she snarled. He began to fumfuh and wave his hands around helplessly. "Harry Solifidian, get your lazy ass in gear! There's work to be done at the house and no time for you to be fooling around with these schmucks! Now come *on!*" He looked sheepish, but he followed her docilely. They walked through the crowd, that parted for

them without a murmur, and in a moment they were gone. And that was that. You know, to this day I'm always amazed at the magic hold women have over men.

T is for TROGLODYTE

They live under the city dump and they can eat almost anything except plastic containers. If it weren't for the troglodytes, we'd be *tuchis*-deep in garbage. There is a whole lot to be said for returnable glass bottles.

U is for UPHIR

Demon chemist and doctor, well-versed in knowledge of medicinal herbs, responsible for the health of demons, official apothecary and surgeon to the Court of Satan, Uphir recently had a rather unpleasant experience. Semiazas, chief of the fallen angels with Azazel (no need to go into the subject of office politics) came down with a serious charley horse in his tail. Uphir was called in, diagnosed the problem and applied the traditional incantations and a poultice of mole paws and liverwort. Just to be on the safe side, he gave Semiazas a shot of penicillin. How was he to know the demon was allergic to mole paws? An unlovely reaction, made even worse by the penicillin. Without volition, Semiazas began to make it snow in Hell. Instantly, hundreds of thousands of foolish promises, idle boasts, dire threats and contracts Satan had made containing the phrase "It'll be a cold day in Hell" (on which he never thought he'd have to deliver) came true. Uphir was punished by being submerged to his nose in a lake of monkey vomit, while a squad of imps raced motorboats around him, making waves. California is not the only place where it's difficult to get malpractice insurance.

V is for VORWALAKA

Count Carlo Szipesti, a *vorwalaka*, a vampire, having long-since grown weary of stalking alleyways and suffering the vicissitudes of finding meals in the streets, hied himself to a commune in upstate New York where, with his beard, his accent and his peculiar nocturnal habits, he fit right in with the young people who had joined together for a return to the land. For the Count, it was a guaranteed fountain of good healthy blood. The young people in the commune were very big on bean sprouts and hulled sunflower seeds. They were all tanned from working in the fields, and the blood ran hot and vibrant in their veins. When the Count was found dead, the coroner's inquest did not reveal that he had been a creature of darkness, one of the dread vampires of the old country; what it *did* reveal was that

he had died from infectious hepatitis. As the *Journal of the American Medical Association* has often pointed out, health is inextricably involved with morality.

W is for WAND OF JACOB

Alfred Jacobi, seventy-two years old and nearly blind, was accosted at one o'clock in the morning on the Sheridan Square station platform of the IRT subway. His grandchildren, Emily and Foster and Hersch, had been yelling at Alfred for years: "Why do you go out walking in this awful city late at night? You'll be mugged, killed. What's the matter with you?" But Alfred Jacobi had lived in New York for sixty of his seventy-two years, and he believed in the God of his forefathers, and — miraculously it seemed — he had never suffered even a moment's unpleasantness in the streets. Even though New York had become a prowling ground for the most detestable human predators urban America had ever produced, Alfred Jacobi was able to walk where he wished, even in Central Park at midnight, tapping his way gently with his specially carved cane, painted white to indiciate he could not see. But the cane, nor his age, did not deter the gang of young toughs with cans of spray paint who paused in their systematic defacement of white tile walls and poster advertisements to attack the old man. They came at him in a bunch, and he extended his cane, and there was a bright flash of light, and Alfred Jacobi was alone on the platform once more. The Wand of Jacob, the stick which preceded the magic wand, that forces spirits to appear or repulses them as did Moses' rod, his Wand of Jacob was still fully charged. If one ventures down into the Sheridan Square stop on the IRT, one can see a most marvelous example of native artwork. It is a frieze, apparently rendered by an unsung urban Michelangelo in spray paint, in many colors, extremely lifelike, of a gang of young men, screaming in horror. It's a refreshing break from all the obscenities and self-advertisements for CHICO 116 one finds in the New York subway system.

X is for XAPHAN

Demon of the second order. At the time of the rebellion of the angels, he proposed that the heavens be set on fire. For his perfidy he has forevermore stoked the furnaces of Hell. It is never good to have dissatisfied help working in one's company. Xaphan is steadily overloading the boilers. Pay attention to stories about the melting polar ice cap. Xaphan is programming for Armageddon, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it.

Y is for YGGDRASIL

The legendary Nordic ash tree with its three roots extending into the lands of mortals, giants and Niflheim, the land of mist, grows in Wisconsin. Legend has it that when the tree falls, the universe will fall. Next Wednesday, the state highway commission comes through that empty pasture with a freeway.

Z is for ZOMBIE

Howard Hughes died in 1968. It was not a spectacular death, down in flames in the "Spruce Goose" or assassinated by his next-in-command or frightened to death by an insect that found its way into his eyrie. He choked to death on a piece of steak during dinner one night in July of 1968. But wealth has its privileges. Johns Hopkins and the Mayo Clinic and the Walter Reed in Maryland sent their teams. But he was dead. DOA, Las Vegas. And he was buried. And Mama Legba, with whom Hughes had made a deal twenty years earlier in Haiti, came to the grave, and she raised him. The corporate entity is mightier than death. But the end is near: at this very moment, training in the Sierra Maestra, is an attack squad of Fidel Castro's finest guerrillas. They know where Hughes went when he evacuated Nicaragua one week before the earthquake. (Zombies have precognitive faculties, did you know that?) They will seek out and put him to final rest by the only means ever discovered for deanimating the walking dead. They will pour sand in his mouth with sailcloth twine. It would take a mission this important to get the fierce Cuban fighters to suffer all the ridicule: bayonet practice with dead chickens is demeaning.

A NOTE ON HOW THIS STORY CAME TO BE WRITTEN:

Eight years ago, letting my mind idle one day, I typed up a group of titles I thought I'd one day like to write stories around. One of them was "The Chocolate Alphabet." I had no idea what that meant; it just sounded good. I typed ten titles in all on that piece of paper. Over eight years I wrote nine of the ten stories. "The Chocolate Alphabet" was the last title on that sheet. The paper was torn off as I wrote each story until all I had left was a yellowing corner of paper with those three words on it.

Fade out; fade in: two years ago I was visited by San Francisco underground comix magnate Ron Turner and the extraordinary artist Larry Todd. You will remember Todd as the man who worked with the late Vaughn Bodé on so many projects, as the man who developed his own remarkable talent, and who now is considered one of America's premier visual technicians. They visited for the day, and asked me if I would write an eight-page comic story to be used in one of the books Larry was doing for Ron at Last Gasp Eco-Funnies. As Larry was the man who created the dynamite strip, "Dr.

Atomic," I said I'd be pleased to take a stab at it. Larry then gave me a four-color cover painting and suggested I write the story around it. (You will find that segment of the Chocolate Alphabet I wrote to go with the cover as *N is for NEMOTROPIN.*) The title of Larry's painting was "2 Nemotropin." Well, one thing and another happened, and the cover painting stood against the wall in my office for two years, and I never wrote the story. Fade out; fade in: five or six months ago, I offered to try something that had never been done before... I like doing that kind of thing... it upsets people. What I offered to do was to sit in the front window of a bookstore for a full week, and to attempt to write a complete story each day for six days. The store I offered to do this gig for is the famous sf shop in Los Angeles, *A Change of Hobbit* (1371 Westwood Blvd., dial 213-GREAT SF), owned and operated by Sherry Gottlieb and a staff of bright, enthusiastic young sf fans. The promotional gimmick was that anyone who bought over $10 worth of books on any given day that I was in the window, would get an autographed copy of that day's story. Six days, six stories, sixty bucks' worth of merchandise. Gift certificates could be purchased against future merchandise. On the sixth day, Sherry scheduled a big Saturday autograph party at which all six of the *original* manuscripts would be offered for auction. The stories were bound together with whatever source material had first prompted me to think of each story, and the entire package would go to the highest bidder, proceeds to help support the store. (We here in Los Angeles who work in the genre feel very protective about A Change of Hobbit, and we like to help out when we can.) The first day I wrote a 300-word story titled "Strange Wine," which appeared in the 50th Anniversary issue of *Amazing Stories.* That was Monday, February 23rd. As I prepared to leave my home for the store on Tuesday morning, February 24th — with no idea what I would write that day — I saw the painting Larry Todd had left with me two years before. Flashback: two weeks earlier, LA had had the worst rainstorm in years, after many months of drought. Because I was having an addition to my office built and because they had ripped out the footing around my office (which is in my home) so they could break out a wall to extend the room, my office was flooded and everything resting on the carpet was soaked. Larry's painting was one of those items. So I wanted to write the story and get the painting back to Larry as quickly as possible for repair. I took the now-waterlogged and furled painting with me to the store, climbed up in the front window, and stared at the two alien creatures having a duel. That was what "2 Nemotropin" was...a pair of lobsterlike aliens banging away at each other. I knew that would be Tuesday's story, but I had no idea what it would be. I sat for an hour and a half before the idea came to me that I couldn't think of an eight-page story that could be visually adapted to an underground comix book, that would also hold together as a publishable story, written around that damned cover (which I was now coming to despise). Suddenly, I remembered that title, "The Chocolate Alphabet." I have no idea why it came to me just then. But it did. And I knew instantly that though I couldn't write a long story about those warring aliens, I *could* do a sort of Fredric Brown short-short, a pastiche. And then I carried the thought a little further and

thought *Why not 26 pastiches?* And I typed on the cover sheet of the manuscript, "From A to Z, in the Chocolate Alphabet." Sadly, the idea was too big for one day. I was scheduled to sit in the Hobbit's window from 10:30 a.m., when the store opens, till 5:00 when Sherry Gottlieb goes off duty (though the store stays open till 9:00). I wrote all that day, and by 5:00 I was up to H. Sherry went home. I kept on writing. By 11:00 that night, with the cops cruising past and shining their spots into the window trying to figure out what that idiot was doing in there, I was up to R. I couldn't keep my eyes open. My back was breaking. Cramped in that damned window, I was spacing out. A day of having pedestrians gawking, of customers bugging me when I wanted to write, of having to think up a complete story for each letter of the alphabet had taken its toll. I crapped out and went home. I worked on another project I had in my typewriter at the office, a fantasy film script for ABC-TV, and finally got to bed about 2:30 a.m. I got up at 8:00 the next morning, went back to the typewriter to work on the script, and about 9:30, when I should have gone in to take my shower and get ready to go to the store, I suddenly thought what S should be. I didn't get in to the Hobbit till 11:30 but I was on U at that point. I finished the story on Wednesday, the 25th of February, a little after 1:30 p.m., and sent it off that night to Ed Ferman for publication in *F&SF*, as well as copies to Larry Todd and Ron Turner for translation into a comix book. Instead of giving Larry *a* story, I'd given him the crazy problem of illustrating *twenty-six* stories. And that, peculiar as it may seem, is how this story was written.

— Harlan Ellison

Although this is Ursula K. Le Guin's first F&SF story, she is, of course, one of sf's most accomplished talents, a multiple award-winner (Hugo, Nebula, National Book Award) and author of The Left Hand of Darkness, The Lathe of Heaven, The Dispossessed, *among many others.*

The Barrow

by URSULA K. LE GUIN

Night came along the snowy road from the mountains. Darkness ate the village, the stone tower of Vermare Keep, the barrow by the road. Darkness stood in the corners of the rooms of the Keep, sat under the great table and on every rafter, waited behind the shoulders of each man at the hearth.

The guest sat in the best place, a corner seat projecting from one side of the twelve-foot fireplace. The host, Freyga, Lord of the Keep, Count of the Montayna, sat with everybody else on the hearthstones, though nearer the fire than some. Cross-legged, his big hands on his knees, he watched the fire steadily. He was thinking of the worst hour he had known in his twenty-three years, a hunting trip, three autumns ago, to the mountain lake Malafrena. He thought of how the thin barbarian arrow had stuck up straight from his father's throat; he remembered how the cold mud had oozed against his knees as he knelt by his father's body in the reeds, in the circle of the dark mountains. His father's hair had stirred a little in the lake water. And there had been a strange taste in his own mouth, the taste of death, like licking bronze. He tasted bronze now. He listened for the women's voices in the room overhead.

The guest, a traveling priest, was talking about his travels. He came from Solariy, down in the southern plains. Even merchants had stone houses there, he said. Barons had palaces, and silver platters, and ate roast beef. Count Freyga's liegemen and servants listened open-mouthed. Freyga, listening to make the minutes pass, scowled. The guest had already complained of the stables, of the cold, of mutton for breakfast, dinner and supper, of he dilapi-

dated condition of Vermare Chapel and the way Mass was said there — "Arianism!" he had muttered, sucking in his breath and crossing himself. He told old Father Egius that every soul in Vermare was damned: they had received heretical baptism. "Arianism, Arianism!" he shouted. Father Egius, cowering, thought Arianism was a devil and tried to explain that no one in his parish had ever been possessed, except one of the count's rams, who had one yellow eye and one blue one and had butted a pregnant girl so that her child miscarried, but they had sprinkled holy water on the ram and it made no more trouble, indeed was a fine breeder, and the girl, who had been pregnant out of wedlock, had married a good peasant from Bara and borne him five little Christians, one a year. "Heresy, adultery, ignorance!" the foreign priest had railed. Now he prayed for twenty minutes before he ate his mutton, slaughtered, cooked, and served by the hands of heretics. What did he want? thought Freyga. Did he expect comfort, in winter? Did he think they were heathens, with his "Arianism?" No doubt he had never seen a heathen, the little, dark, terrible people of Malafrena and the farther hills. No doubt he had never had a pagan arrow shot at him. That would teach him the difference between heathens and Christian men, thought Freyga.

When the guest seemed to have finished boasting for the time being, Freyga spoke to a boy who lay beside him chin in hand: "Give us a song, Gilbert." The boy smiled and sat up, and began at once in a high, sweet voice:

King Alexander forth he came,
Armored in gold was Alexander,
Golden his greaves and great helmet,
His hauberk all of hammered gold.
Clad in gold came the king,
Christ he called on, crossing himself,
In the hills at evening.
Forward the army of King Alexander
Rode on their horses, a great host,
Down to the plains of Persia
To kill and conquer, they followed the King,
In the hills at evening.

The long chant droned on; Gilbert had begun in the middle and stopped in the middle, long before the death of Alexander "in the hills at evening." It did not matter, they all knew it from beginning to end.

"Why do you have the boy sing of pagan kings?" said the guest.

Freyga raised his head. "Alexander was a great king of Christendom."

"He was a Greek, a heathen idolator."

"No doubt you know the song differently than we do," Freyga said politely. "As we sing it, it says, 'Christ he called on, crossing himself.'"

Some of his men grinned.

"Maybe your servant would sing us a better song," Freyga added, for his politeness was genuine. And the priest's servant, without much urging, began to sing in a nasal voice a canticle about a saint who lived for twenty years in his father's house, fed on scraps. Freyga and his household listened in fascination. New songs rarely came their way. But the singer stopped short, interrupted by a strange, shrieking howl from somewhere outside the room. Freyga leaped to his feet, staring into the darkness of the hall. Then he saw that his men had not moved, that they sat silently looking up at him. Again the faint howl came from the room overhead. The young count sat down. "Finish your song," he said. The priest's servant gabbled out the rest of the song. Silence closed down upon its ending.

"Wind's coming up," a man said softly.

"An evil winter it's been."

"Snow to your thighs, coming through the pass from Malafrena yesterday."

"It's their doing."

"Who? The mountain folk?"

"Remember the gutted sheep we found last autumn? Kass said then it was an evil sign. They'd been killing to Odne, he meant."

"What else would it mean?"

"What are you talking about?" the foreign priest demanded.

"The mountain folk, Sir Priest. The heathen."

"What is Odne?"

A pause.

"What do you mean, killing to Odne?"

"Well, sir, maybe it's better not to talk about it."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, as you said of the singing, holy things are better, tonight." Kass the blacksmith spoke with dignity, only glancing up to indicate the room overhead; but another man, a young fellow with sores around his eyes, murmured, "The Barrow has ears, the Barrow hears...."

"Barrow? That hillock by the road, you mean?"

Silence.

Freyga turned to face the priest. "They kill to Odne," he said in his soft voice, "on stones besides the barrows in the mountains. What's inside the barrows, no man knows."

"Poor heathen men, unholy men," old Father Egius murmured sorrowfully.

"The altarstone of our chapel

came from the Barrow," said the boy Gilbert.

"What?"

"Shut your mouth," the blacksmith said. "He means, sir, that we took the top stone from the stones beside the Barrow, a big marble stone, Father Egius blessed it and there's no harm in it."

"A fine altarstone," Father Egius agreed, nodding and smiling, but on the end of his words rang out another howl from overhead. He bent his head and muttered prayers.

"You pray too," said Freyga, looking at the stranger. He ducked his head and began to mumble, glancing at Freyga now and then from the corner of his eye.

There was little warmth in the Keep except at the hearth, and dawn found most of them still there: Father Egius curled up like an aged dormouse in the rushes, the stranger slumped in his chimney corner, hands clasped across his belly, Freyga sprawled out on his back like a man cut down in battle. His men snored around him, started in their sleep, made unfinished gestures. Freyga woke first. He stepped over the sleeping bodies and climbed the stone stairs to the floor above. Ranni the midwife met him in the anteroom, where several girls and dogs were sleeping on a pile of sheepskins. "Not yet, Count."

"But it's been two nights now —"

"Ah, she's hardly begun," the midwife said with contempt. "Has to rest, hasn't she?"

Freyga turned and went heavily down the twisted stairs. The woman's contempt weighed upon him. All the women, all yesterday; their faces were stern, preoccupied; they paid no attention to him. He was outside, out in the cold, insignificant. He could not do anything. He sat down at the oaken table and put his head in his hands, trying to think of Galla, his wife. She was seventeen, they had been married ten months. He thought of her round white belly. He tried to think of her face but there was nothing but the taste of bronze on his tongue. "Get me something to eat!" he shouted, bringing his fist down on the board, and the Tower Keep of Vermare woke with a jump from the grey paralysis of dawn. Boys ran about, dogs yelped, bellows roared in the kitchen, men stretched and spat by the fire. Freyga sat with his head buried in his hands.

The women came down, one or two at a time, to rest by the great hearth and have a bite of food. Their faces were stern. They spoke to each other, not to the men.

The snow had ceased and a wind blew from the mountains, piling snowdrifts against the walls

and byres, a wind so cold it cut off breath in the throat like a knife.

"Why has God's word not been brought to these mountain folk of yours, these sacrificers of sheep?" That was the potbellied priest, speaking to Father Egius and the man with sores around his eyes, Stefan.

They hesitated, not sure what "sacrificers" meant.

"It's not just sheep they kill," said Father Egius, tentatively.

Stefan smiled. "No, no, no," he said, shaking his head.

"What do you mean?" The stranger's voice was sharp, and Father Egius, cowering slightly, said, "They — they kill goats, too."

"Sheep or goats, what's that to me? Where do they come from, these pagans? Why are they permitted to live in a Christian land?"

"They've always lived here," the old priest said, puzzled.

"And you've never tried to bring the Holy Church among them?"

"Me?"

It was a good joke, the idea of the little old priest going up into the mountains; there was a good deal of laughter for quite a while. Father Egius, though without vanity, was perhaps a little hurt, for he finally said in a rather stiff tone, "They have their gods, sir."

"Their idols, their devils, their what do you call it — Odne!"

"Be quiet, priest," Freyga said suddenly. "Must you say that name? Do you know no prayers?"

After that the stranger was less haughty. Since the count had spoken harshly to him, the charm of hospitality was broken, the faces that looked at him were hard. That night he was again given the corner seat by the fire, but he sat huddled up there, not spreading his knees to the warmth.

There was no singing at the hearth that night. The men talked low, silenced by Freyga's silence. The darkness waited at their shoulders. There was no sound but the howling of the wind outside the walls and the howling of the woman upstairs. She had been still all day, but now the hoarse, dull yell came again and again. It seemed impossible to Freyga that she could still cry out. She was thin and small, a girl, she could not carry so much pain in her. "What good are they, up there!" he broke out. His men looked at him, saying nothing. "Father Egius! There is some evil in this house."

"I can only pray, my son," the old man said, frightened.

"Then pray! At the altar!" He hurried Father Egius before him out into the black cold, across the courtyard where dry snow whirled invisible on the wind, to the chapel. After some while he returned alone. The old priest had promised to

spend the night on his knees, by the fire in his little cell behind the chapel. At the great hearth only the foreign priest was still awake. Freyga sat down on the hearthstone and for a long time said nothing.

The stranger looked up and winced, seeing the count's blue eyes staring straight at him.

"Why don't you sleep?"

"I'm not sleepy, Count."

"It would be better if you slept."

The stranger blinked nervously, then closed his eyes and tried to look asleep. He peered now and then under half-crossed lids at Freyga and tried to repeat, without moving his lips, a prayer to his patron saint.

To Freyga he looked like a fat black spider. Rays of darkness spread out from his body, enwebbing the room.

The wind was sinking, leaving silence, in which Freyga heard his wife moaning, a dry, weak sound.

The fire died down. Ropes and webs of darkness tangled thicker and thicker around the man-spider in the corner of the hearth. A tiny glitter showed under his brows. The lower part of his face moved a little. He was casting his spells deeper, deeper. The wind had fallen. There was no sound at all.

Freyga stood up. The priest looked up at the broad golden figure looming against darkness, and when Freyga said, "Come with me," he was too frightened to move. Freyga took his arm and pulled him up. "Count, Count, what do you want?" he whispered, trying to free himself.

"Come with me," Freyga said, and led him over the stone floor, through darkness, to the door.

Freyga wore a sheepskin tunic, the priest only a woolen gown. "Count," he gasped, trotting beside Freyga across the court, "it's cold, a man could freeze to death, there might be wolves —"

Freyga shot the arm-thick bolts of the outer gates of the Keep and swung one portal open. "Go on," he said, gesturing with his sheathed sword.

The priest stopped short. "No," he said.

Freyga unsheathed his sword, a short, thick blade. Jabbing its point at the rump beneath the woollen gown, he drove the priest before him out the gate, down the village street, out onto the rising road that led to the mountains. They went slowly, for the snow was deep and their feet broke through its crust at each step. The air was perfectly still now, as if frozen. Freyga looked up at the sky. Overhead between high faint clouds stood the star-shape with a swordbelt of three bright stars. Some called the figure the Warrior, others called it the Silent One, Odne the Silent.

The priest muttered one prayer after another, a steady pattering mumble, drawing breath with a whistling sound. Once he stumbled and fell face-down in the snow. Freyga pulled him to his feet. He looked up at the young man's face in the starlight, but said nothing. He shambled on, praying softly and steadily.

The tower and village of Vermare were dark behind them; around them were empty hills and plains of snow, pale in the starlight. Beside the road was a hillock, less than a man's height, grave-shaped. Beside it, bared of snow by the wind, stood a short thick pillar or altar built of uncut stones. Freyga took the priest's shoulder, forcing him off the road and to the altar beside the Barrow. "Count, Count —" the priest gasped when Freyga seized his head and forced it back. His eyes looked white in the starlight, his mouth was open to scream, but the scream was only a bubbling wheeze as Freyga slit his throat.

Freyga forced the corpse to bend over the altar, and cut and tore the thick gown away till he could slash the belly open. Blood and entrails gushed out over the dry stones of the altar and smoked on the dry snow. The gutted corpse fell forward over the stones like an empty coat, the arms dangling.

The living man sank down on the thin, wind-scoured snow beside the Barrow, sword still in hand. The earth rocked and heaved, and great voices went crying past him in the darkness.

When he lifted his head and looked about him, everything had changed. The sky, starless, rose in a high pale vault. Hills and far mountains stood distinct, unshadowed. The shapeless corpse slumped over the altar was black, the snow at the foot of the Barrow was black, Freyga's hands and sword blade were black. He tried to wash his hands with snow, and the sting of it woke him. He got up, his head swimming, and stumbled back to Vermare on numb legs. As he went he felt the west wind, soft and damp, rising with the day around him, bringing the thaw.

Ranni was standing by the great hearth while the boy Gilbert built up the fire. Her face was puffy and grey. She spoke to Freyga with a sneer. "Well, Count, high time you're back!"

He stood breathing heavily, slack-faced, and did not speak.

"Come along, then," said the midwife. He followed her up the twisting stairs. The straw that had covered the floor was swept aside into the fireplace. Galla lay again in the wide boxlike bed, the marriage bed. Her closed eyes were deep sunken. She was snoring faintly. "Shh!" the midwife said, as he

started to her. "Be quiet! Look here."

She was holding up a tightly wrapped bundle.

After some while, as he still said nothing, she whispered sharply, "A boy. Fine, big."

Freyga put out one hand towards the bundle. His fingernails were caked and checked with brown.

The midwife drew the bundle closer to herself. "You're cold," she said in the sharp, contemptuous whisper. "Here." She drew back a fold to show for a moment a very tiny, purplish human face in the bundle, then rewrapped it.

Freyga went to the foot of the bed and knelt, bending till his head was on the stones of the floor. He murmured, "Lord Christ, be praised, be thanked...."

The Bishop of Solariy never found out what had become of his envoy to the northwest. Probably, being a zealous man, he had ventured too far into the mountains where heathen folk still lived, and had suffered martyrdom.

Count Freyga's name lived long in the history of his province. During his lifetime the Benedictine monastery on the mountain above Lake Malafrena was established. Count Freyga's flocks and Count Freyga's sword fed and defended the monks in their first hard winters there. In the bad Latin of their chronicles, in the black ink of the lasting vellum, he and his son after him are named with gratitude, staunch defenders of the Church of God.

Robert Bloch received last year's World Fantasy Convention Life Award, an award that was not only richly deserved, but also seems to have happily generated a burst of writing from Mr. Bloch. Here is the first of several new tales we have on hand from the master of the contemporary weird tale.

A Case of the Stubborns

by ROBERT BLOCH

The morning after he died, Grandpa come downstairs for breakfast.

It kind of took us by surprise.

Ma looked at Pa, Pa looked at little sister Susie, and Susie looked at me. Then we all just set there looking at Grandpa.

"What's the matter," he said. "Why you all staring at me like that?'

Nobody said, but I knowed the reason. Only been last night since all of us stood by his bedside when he was took by his attack and passed away right in front of our very eyes. But here he was, up and dressed and feisty as ever.

"What's for breakfast?" he said.

Ma sort of gulped. "Don't tell me you fixing to eat?"

"Course I am. I'm nigh starved."

Ma looked at Pa, but he just rolled his eyes. Then she went and hefted the skillet from the stove and dumped some eggs on a plate.

"That's more like," Grandpa told her. "But don't I smell sausages?" Ma got Grandpa some sausage. The way he dug into it, they sure was nothing wrong with his appetite.

After he started on seconds, Grandpa took heed of us staring at him again.

"How come nobody else is eating?" he asked.

"We ain't hungry," Pa said. And that was the gospel truth.

"Man's got to eat to keep up his strength," Grandpa told him. "Which reminds me — ain't you gonna be late at the mill?"

"Don't figure on working today," Pa said.

Grandpa squinted at him. "You all fancied-up this morning. Shave and a shirt, just like Sunday. You expecting company?"

Ma was looking out the kitchen

window, and she give Grandpa a nod. "Yes, indeedy. Here he comes now."

Sure enough, we could see ol' Bixbee hotfooting up the walk.

Ma went through the parlor to the front door — meaning to head him off, I reckon — but he fooled her and come around the back way. Pa got to the kitchen door too late, on account of Bixbee already had it and his mouth open at the same time.

"Morning, Jethro," he said, in that treacle-and-molasses voice of his. "And a sad grievous morning it is, too! I purely hate disturbing you so early on this sorrowful occasion, but it looks like today's another scorcher." He pulled out a tape measure. "Best if I got the measurements so's to get on with the arrangements. Heat like this, the sooner we get everything boxed and squared away the better, if you take my meaning—"

"Sorry," said Pa, blocking the doorway so ol' Bixbee couldn't peek inside. "Needs be you come back later."

"How much later?"

"Can't say for sure. We ain't rightly made up our minds as yet."

"Well don't dilly-dally too long," Bixbee said. "I'm liable to run short of ice."

Then Pa shut the door on him and he took off. When Ma come back from the parlor, Pa made a sign for her to keep her gap shut, but of course that didn't stop Grandpa.

"What was that all about?" he asked.

"Purely a social call."

"Since when?" Grandpa looked suspicious. "Ol' Bixbee ain't nobody's friend — him with his high-toned airs! Calls hisself a Southern planter. Shucks, he ain't nothing but an undertaker."

"That's right, Grandpa," said sister Susie. "He come to fit you for your coffin."

"Coffin?" Grandpa reared up in his seat like a hog caught in a bobwire fence. "What in bo-did-dley blazes do I need with a coffin?"

"Because you're dead."

Just like that she come out with it. Ma and Pa was both ready to take after her but Grandpa laughed fit to bust.

"Holy hen-tracks, child — what on earth give you an idee like that?"

Pa moved in on Susie, taking off his belt, but Ma shook her head. Then she nodded to Grandpa.

"It's true. You passed on last night. Don't you recollect?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with my memory," Grandpa told her. "I had me one of my spells, is all."

Ma fetched a sigh. "Wasn't just no spell this time."

"A fit, mebbe?"

"More'n that. You was took so bad, Pa had to drag Doc Snodgrass out of his office — busted up the game right in the middle of a three-dollar pot. Didn't do no good, though. By the time he got here you was gone."

"But I ain't gone. I'm here!"

Pa spoke up. "Now don't git up on your high horse, Grandpa. We all saw you. We're witnesses."

"Witnesses?" Grandpa hiked his galluses like he always did when he got riled. "What kind talk is that? You aim to hold a jury trial to decide if I'm alive or dead?"

"But Grandpa—"

"Save your sass, sonny." Grandpa stood up. "Ain't nobody got a right to put me six feet under, 'thout my say-so."

"Where you off to?" Ma asked.

"Where I go evvy morning," Grandpa said. "Gonna set on the front porch and watch the sights."

Durned if he didn't do just that, leaving us behind in the kitchen.

"Wouldn't that frost you?" Ma said. She crooked a finger at the stove. "Here I went and pulled up half the greens in the garden, just planning my spread for after the funeral. I already told folks we'd be serving possum stew. What will the neighbors think?"

"Don't you go fret now," Pa said. "Mebee he ain't dead after all."

Ma made a face. "We know different. He's just being persnickety." She nudged at Pa. "Only one thing to do. You go fetch Doc Snodgrass. Tell him he'd best sashay over here right quick and settle this matter once and for all."

"Reckon so," Pa said and went out the back way. Ma looked at me and sister Susie.

"You kids go out on the porch and keep Grandpa company. See that he stays put till the Doc gets here."

"Yessum," said Susie, and we traipsed out of there.

Sure enough, Grandpa set in his rocker, big as life, squinting at cars over on the road and watching the drivers cuss when they tried to steer around our hogs.

"Lookee here!" he said, pointing. "See that fat feller in the Hupmobile? He come barreling down the road like a bat outta hell — must of been doing thirty mile an hour. 'Fore he could stop, ol' Bessie poked out of the weeds right in front of him and run that car clean into the ditch. I swear I never seen anything so comical in all my life!"

Susie shook her head. "But you ain't alive, Grandpa."

"Now don't you start in on that again, hear!" Grandpa looked at her disgusted and Susie shut up.

Right then Doc Snodgrass come driving up front in his big Essex

and parked alongside ol' Bessie's pork butt. Doc and Pa got out and moseyed up to the porch. They was jawing away something fierce, and I could see Doc shaking his head like he purely disbelieved what Pa was telling him.

Then Doc noticed Grandpa setting there, and he stopped cold in his tracks. His eyes bugged out.

"Jumping Jehosephat!" he said to Grandpa. "What you doing here?"

"What's it look like?" Grandpa told him. "Can't a man set on his own front porch and rockify in peace?"

"Rest in peace, that's what you should be doing," said Doc. "When I examined you last night you were deader'n a doornail!"

"And you were drunker'n a coot, I reckon," Grandpa said.

Pa give Doc a nod. "What'd I tell you?"

Doc paid him no heed. He come up to Grandpa. "Mebbe I was a wee bit mistaken," he said. "Mind if I examine you now?"

"Fire away." Grandpa grinned. "I got all the time in the world."

So Doc opened up his little black bag and set about his business. First off he plugged a stethyscope in his ears and tapped Grandpa's chest. He listened, and then his hands begun to shake.

"I don't hear nothing," he said.

"What you expect to hear — the Grand Ol' Opery?"

"This here's no time for funning," Doc told him. "Suppose I tell you your heart's stopped beating?"

"Suppose I tell you your stethyscope's busted?"

Doc begun to break out in a sweat. He fetched out a mirror and held it up to Grandpa's mouth. Then his hands got to shaking worse than ever.

"See this?" he said. "The mirror's clear. Means you got no breath left in your body."

Grandpa shook his head. "Try it on yourself. You got a breath on you would knock a mule over at twenty paces."

"Mebbe this'll change your tune." Doc reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "See for yourself."

"What is it?"

"Your death certificate." Doc jabbed his finger down. "Just you read what it says on this line. 'Cause of death — card-yak arrest.' That's medical for heart attack. And this here's a legal paper. It'll stand up in court."

"So will I, if you want to drag the law into this," Grandpa told him. "Be a pretty sight, too — you standing on one side with your damnfool piece of paper and me standing on the other! Now which do you think the judge is going to believe?"

Doc's eyes bugged out again. He tried to stuff the paper into his pocket but his hands shook so bad he almost didn't make it.

"What's wrong with you?" Pa asked.

"I feel poorly," Doc said. "Got to get back to my office and lie down for a spell." He picked up his bag and headed for his car, not looking back.

"Don't lie down too long," Grandpa called. "Somebody's liable to write out a paper saying you died of a hangover."

When lunchtime come around, nobody was hungry. Nobody but Grandpa, that is.

He set down at the table and put away black-eyed peas, hominy grits, a double helping of chitlins, and two big slabs of rhubarb pie with gravy.

Ma was the kind who liked seeing folks enjoy her vittles, but she didn't look kindly on Grandpa's appetite. After he finished and went back on the porch, she stacked the plates on the drainboard and told us kids to clean up. Then she went into the bedroom and come out with her shawl and pocketbook.

"What you all dressed up about?" Pa said.

"I'm going to church."

"But this here's only Thursday."

"Can't wait no longer," Ma told him. "It's been hot all forenoon and looking to get hotter. I seen you wrinkle up your nose whilst Grandpa was in here for lunch."

Pa sort of shrugged. "Figgered the chitlins was mebbe a little bit spoiled, is all."

"Weren't nothing of the sort," Ma said. "If you take me meaning."

"What you fixing to do?"

"Only thing a body can do. I'm putting evvything in the hands of the Lord."

And off she skaddaddled, leaving sister Susie and me to scour the dishes whilst Pa went out back, looking powerful troubled. I spied him through the window, slopping the hogs, but you could tell his heart wasn't in it.

Susie and me, we went out to keep tabs on Grandpa.

Ma was right about the weather heating up. That porch was like a bake-oven in the devil's own kitchen. Grandpa didn't seem to pay it any heed, but I did. Couldn't help but notice Grandpa was getting ripe.

"Look at them flies buzzing round him," Susie said.

"Hush up, sister."

But sure enough, them old blueflies buzzed so loud we could hardly hear Grandpa speak. "Hi, young 'uns," he said. "Come visit a spell."

"Sun's too hot for setting," Susie told him.

"Not so's I can notice." He weren't even working up a sweat.

"What about all them blueflies?"

"Don't bother me none." Big ol' fly landed right on Grandpa's nose and he didn't even twitch.

Susie begun to look scared. "He's dead for sure," she said.

"Speak up, child," Grandpa said. "Ain't polite to go mumbling your elder."

Just then he spotted Ma marching up the road. Hot as it was, she come along lickety-split, with the Reverend Peabody in tow. He was huffing and puffing, but she never slowed until they fetched up alongside the front porch.

"Howdy, Reverend," Grandpa sung out.

Reverend Peabody blinked and opened his mouth, but no words come out.

"What's the matter?" Grandpa said. "Cat got your tongue?"

The Reverend got a kind of sick grin on his face, like a skunk eating bumblebees.

"Reckon I know how you feel," Grandpa told him. "Sun makes a feller's throat parch up." He looked at Ma. "Addie, whyn't you go fetch the Reverend a little refreshment?"

Ma went in the house.

"Well, now, Rev," said Grandpa. "Rest your britches and be sociable."

The Reverend swallowed hard. "This here's not exactly a social call."

"Then what you come dragging all the way over here for?"

The Reverend swallowed again. "After what Addie and Doc told me, I just had to see for myself." He looked at the flies buzzing around Grandpa. "Now I wish I'd just took their word on it."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning a man in your condition's got no right to be asking questions. When the good Lord calls, you're supposed to answer."

"I ain't heard nobody calling," Grandpa said. "Course my hearing's not what it use to be."

"So Doc says. That's why you don't notice your heart's not beating."

"Onny natural for it to slow down a piece. I'm pushing ninety you know."

"Did you ever stop to think that ninety might be pushing back? You lived a mighty long stretch, Grandpa. Don't you reckon mebbe it's time to lie down and call it quits? Remember what the Good Book says — the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away."

Grandpa got that feisty look on his face. "Well he ain't gonna taketh away me."

Reverend Peabody dug into his jeans for a bandanna and wiped his forehead. "You got no cause to fear. It's a mighty rewarding experience. No more sorrow, no more care, all your burdens laid to rest. Not to mention getting out of this hot sun."

"Can't hardly feel it." Grandpa touched his whiskers. "Can't hardly feel anything."

The Reverend give him a look. "Hands getting stiff?"

Grandpa nodded. "I'm stiff all over."

"Just like I thought. You know what that means? Rigor mortis is setting in."

"Ain't never heard tell of anybody named Rigger Morris," Grandpa said. "I got me a touch of the rheumatism, is all."

The Reverend wiped his forehead again. "You sure want a heap of convincing," he said. "Won't take the word of a medical doctor, won't take the word of the Lord. You're the contrariest old coot I ever did see."

"Reckon it's my nature," Grandpa told him. "But I ain't unreasonable. All I'm asking for is proof. Like the feller says, I'm from Missouri. You got to show me."

The Reverend tucked away his bandanna. It was sopping wet anyhow, wouldn't do him a lick of good. He heaved a big sigh and stared Grandpa right in the eye.

"Some things we just got to take on faith," he said. "Like you setting here when by rights you should be six feet under the daisies. If I can believe that, why can't you believe me? I'm telling you the mortal truth when I say you got no call to fuss. Mebbe the notion of lying in the grave don't rightly hold much appeal for you. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust — that's just a saying. You needn't trouble yourself about spending eternity in the grave. Whilst your remains rest peaceful in the boneyard, your soul is on the wing. Flying straight up, yesiree, straight into the arms of the Lord! And what a great day it's fixing to be — you free as a bird and scooting around with them heavenly hosts on high, singing the praises of the Almighty and twanging away like all git-out on your genuine 18-carrots solid golden harp—"

"I ain't never been much for music," Grandpa said. "And I get dizzy just standing on a ladder to shingle the privy." He shook his head. "Tell you what — you think heaven is such a hellfired good proposition, why don't you go there yourself?"

Just then Ma come back out. "We're fresh out of lemonade," she said. "All's I could find was a jug. I know your feeling about such things, Reverend, but—"

"Praise the Lord!" The Reverend snatched the jug out of her hand, hefted it up, and took a mighty swallow.

"You're a good woman," he told Ma. "And I'm much beholden to you." Then he started down the path for the road, moving fast.

"Here, now!" Ma called after him. "What you aim to do about Grandpa?"

"Have no fear," the Reverend said. "We must put our trust now in the power of prayer."

He disappeared down the road, stirring dust.

"Danged if he didn't take the jug!" Grandpa mumbled. "You ask me, the onny power he trusts is in the corn likker."

Ma give him a look. Then she bust out crying and run into the house.

"Now what got into her?" Grandpa said.

"Never you mind," I told him. "Susie, you stay here and whisk those flies off Grandpa. I got things to attend to."

And I did.

Even before I went inside I had my mind set. I couldn't hold still to see Ma bawling that way. She was standing in the kitchen hanging onto Pa, saying, "What can we do? What can we do?"

Pa patted her shoulder. "There now, Addie, don't you go carrying on. It can't last forever."

"Nor can we," Ma said. "If Grandpa don't come to his senses, one of these mornings we'll go downstairs and serve up breakfast to a skeleton. And what do you think the neighbors will say when they see a bag of bones setting out there on my nice front porch? It's plumb embarrassing, that's what it is!"

"Never you mind, Ma," I said. "I got an idea."

Ma stopped crying. "What kind of idea?"

"I'm fixing to take me a hike over to Spooky Hollow."

"Spooky Hollow?" Ma turned so pale you couldn't even see her freckles. "Oh, no, boy—"

"Help is where you find it," I said. "And I reckon we got no choice."

Pa took a deep breath. "Ain't you afeard?"

"Not in daylight," I told him. "Now don't you fret. I'll be back afore dark."

Then I scooted out the back door.

I went over the fence and hightailed it along the back forty to the crick, stopping just long enough to dig up my piggy bank from where it was stashed in the weeds alongside the rocks. After that I waded across the water and headed for tall timber.

Once I got into the piney woods I slowed down a smidge to get my

bearings. Weren't no path to follow, because nobody never made one. Folks tended to stay clear of there, even in daytimes — it was just too dark and too lonesome. Never saw no small critters in the brush, and even the birds kep' shut off this place.

But I knowed where to go. All's I had to do was top the ridge, then move straight on down. Right smack at the bottom, in the deepest, darkest, lonesomest spot of all, was Spooky Hollow.

In Spooky Hollow was the cave.

And in the cave was the Conjure Lady.

Leastwise I reckoned she was there. But when I come tippy-toeing down to the big black hole in the rocks, I didn't see a mortal soul, just the shadows bunching up on me from all around.

It sure was spooky, and no mistake. I tried not to pay any heed to the way my feet was itching. They wanted to turn and run, but wasn't about to be put off.

After a bit I started to sing out. "Anybody home? You got company."

"Who?"

"It's me — Jody Tolliver."

"Whoooo?"

I was wrong about the birds, because now when I looked up I could see the big screech-owl glaring at me from a branch over yonder near the cave.

And when I looked down again, there she was — the Conjure Lady, peeking out at me from the hole between the rocks.

It was the first time I ever laid eyes on her, but it couldn't be no one else. She was a teensy rail-thin chickabiddy in a linsey-woolsey dress, and the face under her poke bonnet was as black as a lump of coal.

Shucks, I says to myself, there ain't nothing to be afeard of — she's just a little ol' lady, is all.

Then she stared up at me and I saw her eyes. They was lots bigger than the screech-owl's, and twice as glarey.

My feet begun to itch something fierce, but I stared back. "Howdy, Conjure Lady," I said.

"Whoooo?" said the screech-owl.

"It's young Tolliver," the Conjure Lady told him. "What's the matter, you got wax in your ears? Now go on about your business you hear?"

The screech-owl give her a dirty look and took off. Then the Conjure Lady come out into the open.

"Pay no need to Ambrose," she said. "He ain't rightly used to company. All's he ever sees is me and the bats."

"What bats?"

"The bats in the cave." The Conjure Lady smoothed down her

dress. "I beg pardon for not asking you in, but the place is purely a mess. Been meaning to tidy it up, but what with one thing and another — first that dadblamed World War and then this dadgummed Prohibition — I just ain't got round to it yet."

"Never you mind," I said, polite-like. "I come on business."

"Reckoned you did."

"Brought you a pretty, too." I give it to her.

"What is it?"

"My piggy bank."

"Thank you kindly," said the Conjure Lady.

"Go ahead, bust it open," I told her.

She whammed it down on a rock and the piggy bank broke, spilling out money all over the place. She scrabbled it up right quick.

"Been putting aside my cash earnings for nigh onto two years now," I said. "How much is they?"

"Eighty-seven cents, a Confederate two-bits piece and this here button." She kind of grinned. "Sure is a purty one, too! What's it say on there?"

"Keep Cool With Coolidge."

"Well ain't that a caution." The Conjure Lady slid the money into her pocket and pinned the button atop her dress. "Now, son — purty is as purty does. So what can I do for you?"

"It's about my Grandpa," I said. "Grandpa Titus Tolliver."

"Titus Tolliver?" Why I reckon I know him! Use to run a still up in the toolies back of the crick. Fine figure of a man with a big black beard, he is."

"Is turns to was," I told her. "Now he's all dried-up with the rheumatiz. Can't rightly see too good and can't hear for sour apples."

"Sure is a crying shame!" the Conjure Lady said. "But sooner or later we all get to feeling poorly. And when you gotta go, you gotta go."

"That's the hitch of it. He won't go."

"Meaning he's bound-up?"

"Meaning he's dead."

The Conjure Lady give me a hard look. "Do tell," she said.

So I told. Told her the whole kit and kabodle, right from the git-go.

She heard me out, not saying a word. And when I finished up, she just stared at me until I was fixing to jump out of my skin.

"I reckon you mightn't believe me," I said. "But it's the gospel truth."

The Conjure Lady shook her head. "I believe you, son. Like I say, I knowed your Grandpappy from the long-ago. He was plumb set in his ways then, and I take it he still is. Sounds to me like he's got a bad case of the stubborns."

"Could be," I said. "But they's nary a thing we can do about it, nor the Doc or the Reverend either."

The Conjure Lady wrinkled up her nose. "What you 'spect from them two? They don't know grit from granola."

"Mebbe so. But that leaves us betwixt a rock and a hard place — 'less you can help."

"Let me think on it a piece."

The Conjure Lady pulled a corncob out of her pocket and fired up. I don't know what brand she smoked, but it smelled something fierce. I begun to get itchy again — not just in the feet but all over. The woods was darker now, and a kind of cold wind come wailing down between the trees, making the leaves whisper to themselves.

"Got to be some way," I said. "A charm, mebbe, or a spell."

She shook her head. "Them's ol' fashioned. Now this here's one of them newfangled mental things, so we got to use newfangled idees. Your Grandpa don't need hex nor hoodoo. Like he says, he's from Missouri. He got to be showed, is all."

"Showed what?"

The Conjure Lady let out a cackle "I got it!" She give me a wink. "Sure 'nough, the very thing! Now just you hold your water — I won't be a moment." And she scooted back into the cave.

I stood there, feeling the wind whooshing down the back of my neck and listening to the leaves that was like voices whispering things I didn't want to hear too good.

Then she come out again, holding something in her hand.

"Take this," she said.

"What is it?"

She told me what it was, and then she told me what to do with it.

"You really reckon this'll work?"

"It's the onny chance."

So I stuck it in my britches pocket and she give me a little poke. "Now, sonny, you best hurry and git home afore supper."

Nobody had to ask me twice — not with that chill wind moaning and groaning in the trees, and the dark creeping and crawling all around me.

I give her my much-obliged and lit out, leaving the Conjure Lady standing in front of the cave. Last I saw of her she was polishing her Coolidge button with a hunk of poison oak.

Then I was tearing through the woods, up the hill to the ridge and over. By the time I got to the clearing, it was pitch-dark, and when I waded the crick I could see the moonlight wiggling on the water. Hawks on the hover went flippy-flapping, but I didn't stop to heed. I made a beeline for the fence, up and over, then into the yard and through the back door.

Ma was standing at the stove holding a pot whilst Pa ladled up the soup. They looked downright pleasured to see me.

"Thank the Lord!" Ma said. "I was just fixing to send Pa after you."

"I come quick as I could."

"And none too soon," Pa told me. "We like to go clean out'n our heads, what with the ruckus and all."

"What kind of ruckus?"

"First off, Miz Francy. Folks in town told her about Grandpa passing on, so she done the neighborly thing — mixed up a mess of stew to ease our appeytite in time of sorrow. She come lollygagging up the walk, all rigged out in her Sunday go-to-meeting clothes, toting the bowl under her arm and looking like lard wouldn't melt in her mouth. Along about then she caught sight of Grandpa setting there on the porch, kind of smiling at her through the flies.

"Well, up went the bowl and down come the whole shebang. Looked like it was raining stew greens all over that fancy Sears and Roebuck dress. And then she turned and headed for kingdom come, letting out a whoop that'd peel the paint off a privy wall."

"That's sorrowful," I said.

"Save your grieving for worse," Pa told me. "Next thing you know, Bixbee showed up, honking his horn. Wouldn't come nigh Grandpa, nosiree — I had to traipse clear down to where he set in the hearse."

"What'd he want?"

"Said he'd come for the remains. And if we didn't cough them up right fast, he was aiming to take a trip over to the county seat first thing tomorrow morning to get hisself a injection."

"Injunction," Ma said, looking like she was ready to bust out with the bawls again. "Said it was a scandal and a shame to let Grandpa set around like this. What with the sun and the flies and all, he was fixing to have the Board of Health put us under quar-and-tine."

"What did Grandpa say?" I asked.

"Nary a peep. Ol' Bixbee gunned his hearse out of here, and Grandpa kep' right on rocking with Susie. She come in 'bout half hour ago, when the sun went down — says he's getting stiff as a board but won't pay it no heed. Just keeps asking what's to eat."

"That's good," I said. "On account of I got the very thing. The Conjure Lady give it to me for his supper."

"What is it — pizen?" Pa looked worried. "You know I'm a God-fearing man and I don't hold with such doings. How you 'spect to pizen him if he's already dead?"

"Ain't nothing of the sort," I said. "This here's what she sent."

And I pulled it out of my britches pocket and showed it to them.

"Now what in the name of kingdom come is that?" Ma asked.

I told her what it was, and what to do with it.

"Ain't never heard tell of such foolishness in all my born days!" Ma told me.

Pa looked troubled in his mind. "I knowed I shouldn't have let you go down to Spooky Hollow. Conjure Lady must be short of her marbles, putting you up to a thing like that."

"Reckon she knows what she's doing," I said. " 'Sides, I give all my savings for this here — eighty-seven cents, a Confederate quarter and my Coolidge button."

"Never you mind about no Coolidge button," Pa said. "I swiped it off'n a Yankee, anyway — one of them revenooers." He scratched his chin. "But hard money's something else. Mebbe we best give this notion a try."

"Now, Pa —" Ma said.

"You got any better plan?" Pa shook his head. "Way I see it, what with the Board of Health set to come a-snapping at our heels tomorrow, we got to take a chance."

Ma fetched a sigh that come clean up from her shoes, or would of if she'd been wearing any.

"All right, Jody," she told me. "You just put it out like the Conjure Lady said. Pa, you go fetch Susie and Grandpa. I'm about to dish up."

"You sure this'll do the trick?" Pa asked, looking at what I had in my hand.

"It'd better," I said. "It's all we got."

So Pa went out and I headed for the table, to do what the Conjure Lady had in mind.

Then Pa come back with sister Susie.

"Where's Grandpa?" Ma asked.

"Moving slow," Susie said. "Must be that Rigger Morris."

"No such thing." Grandpa come through the doorway, walking like a cockroach on a hot griddle. "I'm just a wee mite stiff."

"Stiff as a four-by-four board," Pa told him. "Upstairs in bed, that's where you ought to be, with a lily in your hand."

"Now don't start on that again," Grandpa said. "I told you I ain't dead so many times I'm blue in the face."

"You sure are," said sister Susie. "Ain't never seen nobody look any bluer."

And he was that — blue and bloated, kind of, but he paid it no heed. I recollected what Ma said about mebbe having to put up with

a skeleton at mealtime, and I sure yearned for the Conjure Lady's notion to work. It plumb had to, because Grandpa was getting deader by the minute.

But you wouldn't think so when he caught sight of the vittles on the table. He just stirred his stumps right over to his chair and plunked down.

"Well, now," Grandpa said. "You done yourself proud tonight, Addie. This here's my favorite — collards and catfish heads!"

He was all set to take a swipe at the platter when he up and noticed what was setting next to his plate.

"Great day in the morning!" he hollered. "What in tarnation's this?"

"Ain't nothing but a napkin," I said.

"But it's black?" Grandpa blinked. "Who ever heard tell of a black napkin?"

Pa looked at Ma. "We figger this here's kind of a special occasion," he said. "If you take my meaning—"

Grandpa fetched a snort. "Consarn you and your meaning! A black napkin? Never you fear, I know what you're hinting around at, but it ain't a-gonna work — nosiree, bub!"

And he filled his plate and dug in.

The rest of us just set there staring, first at Grandpa, then at each other.

"What'd I tell you?" Pa said to me, disgusted-like.

I shook my head. "Wait a spell."

"Better grab whilst you can git," Grandpa said. "I aim to eat me up a storm."

And he did. His arms was stiff and his fingers scarce had enough curl left to hold a fork and his jaw muscles worked extra hard — but he went right on eating. And talking.

"Dead, am I? Ain't never seen the day a body'd say a thing like that to me before, let alone kinfolk! Now could be I'm tolerable stubborn, but that don't signify I'm mean. I ain't about to make trouble for anyone, least of all my own flesh and blood. If I was truly dead and knowed it for a fact — why, I'd the first one to go right upstairs to my room and lie down forever. But you got to show me proof 'fore I do. That's the pure and simple of it — let me see some proof!"

"Grandpa," I said.

"What's the matter, sonny?"

"Begging your pardon, but you got collards dribbling all over your chin."

Grandpa put down his fork. "So they is. I thank you kindly."

And before he rightly knowed what he was doing, Grandpa wiped his mouth on the napkin.

When he finished he looked

down at it. He looked once and he looked twice. Then he just set the napkin down gentle-like, stood up from the table, and headed straight for the stairs.

"Good-by all," he said.

We heard him go clumping up the steps and down the hall into his room, and we heard the mattress sag when he laid down on his bed.

Then everything was quiet.

After a while Pa pushed his chair back and went upstairs. Nobody said a word until he come down again.

"Well?" Ma looked at him.

"Ain't nothing more to worry about," Pa said. "He's laid down his burden at last. Gone to glory, amen."

"Praise be!" Ma said. Then she looked at me and crooked a finger at the napkin. "Best get rid of that."

I went round and picked it up. Sister Susie give me a funny look. "Ain't nobody fixing to tell me what happened?" she asked.

I didn't answer — just toted the napkin out and dropped it deep down in the crick. Weren't no sense telling anybody the how of it, but the Conjure Lady had the right notion, after all. She knowed Grandpa'd get his proof — just as soon as he wiped his mouth.

Ain't nothing like a black napkin to show up a little ol' white maggot.

"I think he's gone soft!"

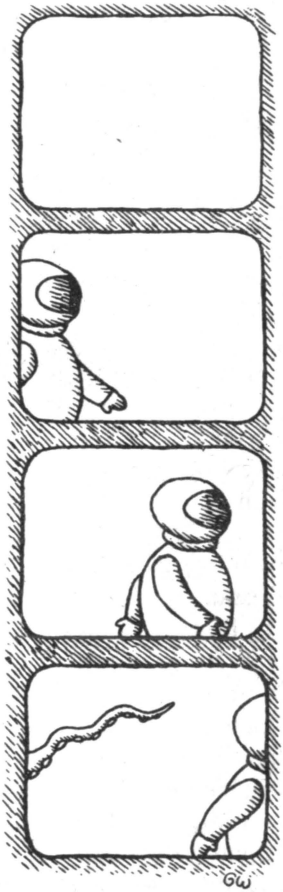
WATCH OUT FOR FALLING MEN (AND BLUEBIRDS)

BAIRD SEARLES

Films

One thing that filmmakers never seem to learn about science fiction is that it needs absolute coherent consistency. The science fiction person wants to know *why* and *how* something is happening; it is just not enough to show something extraordinary or supernatural (in the literal sense of the word — beyond the natural). It has to be justified and rationalized cleverly enough (with coherence and consistency) to make us suspend our disbelief. That is an integral part of the art of science fiction.

One of the reasons there haven't been any really satisfactory s/f films lately is that cinema has been moving in a very different direction. A film these days, to be taken seriously, must be oblique and evocative in its narrative. This can work very well when you are dealing with the mundane (in fact it became necessary when the movies had exhausted all the possibilities of straightforward storytelling), but when dealing with the non-mundane (i.e. s/f and the supernatural), one is left with a lot of surrealist imagery that does not satisfy that need for the unreal-made-real which seems to be a prime factor in



the make-up of the science fiction aficionado.

(This, incidentally, also applies to the written genre. Use of a style that is too mannered, fragmented, or "high" — in either sense — can totally do in a good science-fictional idea.)

There is also the fact that filmmakers go on the belief that the audience continues to regard the camera as a recorder of truth. Therefore, if you are *shown* something by the camera, it needs no explanation; explanations need words, which the film is considered not to be good at — leave words to literature, seems to be the philosophy. On one hand, I think this is naive; the public at this point in time is too film-sophisticated to regard everything they see as "real"; on the other, there are precious few science fiction concepts that can be transmitted by images alone.

All this is leading up to — and is necessary to — a discussion of Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth.* Roeg is a master exponent of the cinema of the incoherent; he has made an incoherent suspense thriller (*Performance* with Mick Jagger); an incoherent adventure-in-the-wilderness (*Walkabout*); an incoherent horror film (*Don't Look Now*); and now we have his incoherent science fiction movie.

It is based on Walter Tevis's novel, which I have not read, but which I gather from a reliable source to be one of those sincere mainstream (Tevis wrote *The Hustler*) attempts at taking a science fictional idea and making something not quite allegorical, but Meaningful, shall we say, out of it. The narrative of the film, so far as one can piece it qut from the jumbled screenplay and hints from one who has read the book, is as follows:

An alien comes to Earth and with pluck, luck, lots of gold rings, and detailed knowledge of Terran customs gained from watching TV, makes millions of dollars with his advanced scientific knowledge. He then devotes the energies of his industrial/financial empire to building a spaceship; it seems his world (and wife and kiddies) is dying for want of water. But he is prevented from accomplishing a rescue mission by Them (who is Them? The CIA? The FBI? The Mafia? The Government, which includes all of the above? Who knows? It's just Them.) because he has upset the economy with his advanced inventions.

After being held captive and tortured, he is let go and takes to drink and making records. *Fin.*

All of this is given to the audience as disjointedly as possible, with a little sex *here,* a little violence *there.* Rock star David

Bowie plays Newton (the hero's Earth name; we are never given his real name or where he comes from), and indeed *looks* like an alien masquerading as human (at one point he takes off his human drag and *really* looks alien — cat pupiled eyes and scaled skin — very effective). I admire Bowie's musical and theatrical skills, but any judgement of his acting will have to wait; his role here is directed and played all on one note.

We are never told how he gets here, for instance. He is shown at one point in flashback boarding what looks like an adobe trolley car on rails (you'd never get *me* up in one of those things) but whether that's his transportation to the spaceship or the spaceship itself is unclear — as is, to make a long critique short, the rest of the movie. All I was left with was some rather good images of alien wife and kiddies on their desert planet — rather like nice illustrations for a novel in a foreign language.

I made the mistake of being seduced into being optimistic about *The Bluebird* for several reasons. One was knowledge of the play and its almost infinite possibilities for fantasy spectacle. ("*Act III-Scene I. The Palace of NIGHT. A large and wonderful hall of an austere, rigid, metallic and sepulchral magnificence...*") The other was what seemed an interesting cast, and a director of vast reputation and experience, George Cukor.

What I forgot was that any film made for children will be made for the lowest common denominator of child and sprinkled with cutesy songs, and in this case, cutesy dances. That ambiguity which makes the great children's fantasies readable to adult fantasy lovers is invariably lost.

Whether *The Bluebird* was even meant for children is debatable. It was one of those turn-of-the-century stage spectacles, vastly allegorical but also a good straightforward quest (young brother and sister search for magical object, accompanied by enchanted companions and transported to strange realms by a wonder working artifact). There *are* a couple of moments in the movie that capture the magic. One shot of the Hall of Night seems to do it justice, but it lasts for about three seconds. Night is personified as a mysterious, majestic lady who is testily pragmatic when it comes down to who gets the bluebird (the object of the quest), and Jane Fonda carries this off rather well. The Kingdom of the Future, where all the upcoming generations are waiting to be born, is also nicely done, and then done in by the inevitable sweet little ditty. Otherwise, this Bluebird is a 20 million dollar turkey.

Marion Zimmer Bradley, who has been writing sf (including the popular "Darkover" series) for more than 20 years, offers a suspenseful drama about an off-Earth rescue.

Hero's Moon

by MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

That could be him now," Feniston said.

Young Rawlins bent to examine the whirling flickers on the radar screen, trying to distinguish any clear pattern in the "snow" and chaos of interference. "Yeah," he said at last, "or it could be another sunspot. I'm betting on the sunspot."

It was so quiet in the bubble-dome that the scrape of their shoes on the floor, the very brush of Feniston's starched tunic against his chair, sounded loud. That; and the soft mechanical beeping, burping, clicking, rattling and plinking of instruments; the background rattle and sputter of static from the screens and relays. But they lived with that, and they never heard it. Only some abrupt change, or the cessation of those mechanical tickings and pipings, would have been audible to them. They would have heard it instantly if one of those ticks, tocks, peeps, beeps or clucks had *not* sounded at its appointed split second. But not while each one sounded in its mechanical perfection.

Feniston was a neat straight man of fifty, his whole personality as combed and brushed and starched as his uniform, but the starch was beginning to show a pattern of thin fine cracks from tension and weariness. He didn't answer Rawlins, watching the younger man with an odd sense of detachment, as if neither of them were quite real any more. *Psych Section would tell me it's just fatigue. I'm not so sure.*

The events of the last few days, it seemed to Feniston, had worn a little of the new off the Rawlins kid. Rawlins still had his Earthside tan, and nothing could affect the bounce in his step, but he moved with a kind of hesitation that had never been there before, and there

was something new in his eyes. Not fear, not yet. But *something.*

And above their heads was a narrow, smoked-glass horizon, and outside all hell was raging.

There is no air on Charmides, and therefore no rain, no wind, no thunder. From time to time a small vibration beat up through the soles of their shoes, or there would be the tiniest possible brightening of the light in the dome. Otherwise, only the insane racing and flickering of their dials and screens, the epileptic jerking of the indicators, back and forth without any pattern, told them that there was a wild hell of electric storm raging outside. The fierce glare and the eternal, unstirring dust were unchanged. Earthmen think of storms in terms of roaring wind, noise, visual and sonic battering. *So it's hard to think of it as a storm. But there's nothing else to call it.* And that quiet hell outside had damped out the fragile electrical impulses which held relays together and had turned the bubble-dome, which was Relay Station Twelve, into a private universe no wider than a tomb.

And it is a tomb....

There was a third man in the tomb, but he didn't count. Dead men don't, and Rubichek was very, very dead indeed. He was draped with a sheet because he hadn't been much to look at even when he was alive; and after a four-hundred-pound rock had smashed down on his spacesuit, he was a lot less to look at. Even though he hadn't been alive when the rock smashed on him. He'd been fried alive first, when the insulation failed in his stormsuit.

Feniston turned his back on the draped and sheeted form and began to walk around the dome, pausing to make brief notations on a clipboard in his hand. Rawlins watched him with barely concealed rage, as he patiently worked his way around the perimeter, and finally exploded.

"Reading - on - this - instrument - made - impossible - by - electrical - interference. Reading - on - this - instrument - made - impossible - by - electrical — good God, sir, how many times in the last three days have you written that all down word for word? How many times have you made me write it all down, every twenty minutes? Every instrument, day or night, every twenty minutes — damn it, Feniston, *why?*"

"Rule book," Feniston said, knowing it would trigger an outburst, and it did. Rawlins swung around and told him in a loud voice what he could do with his censored, deleted and otherwise qualified rule book. Feniston listened, concealing a dismayed amusement at the kid's command of obscenities. *They've got some new expressions Earth-*

side. I always thought cussing was unoriginal. Rawlins finished by demanding: "Isn't there any paragraph something, section umpty-ump, rule whatsit, that tells you what to do with a dead man when you can't even get through to report his *corpse?*"

"As a matter of fact," Feniston said, putting the clipboard back into is cubbyhole, "there is. Section Nine-four Alpha. You preserve said corpse with all due attention to decency and the religious preferences of deceased as far as said preferences are known to you, unless such preservation shall endanger health, safety or morale, in which case the senior officer present shall at his personal discretion bury, burn or otherwise dispose of said corpse without further —"

"Oh, *damnation!*" shouted Rawlins, "you've got an answer for everything, every goddamn thing, and all the time Rubichek lying *dead,* just because of you and your forever-be-damned rule book—"

Feniston sighed, picked up pen and clipboard and returned to the meaningless task of checking his instruments. He thought, *poor Rubichek,* but it was an impersonal sadness. Neither of them had known the dead man more than a few hours; when the storm broke he'd been outside, servicing the air mechanism on his regular monthly rounds. Feniston was a little worried about the air system. Rubichek hadn't finished the servicing when he ran into trouble. And there were all those other Relay Stations he hadn't gotten to yet this month. *He'll never get to them, now. Poor Rubichek.*

And poor Rawlins. Poor Tommy. Like all the other bright-eyed kids, when they first got to the Alpha Centaurus system, all full of big-eyed wonder about their lifetime dream, and to run into something like this, his first assignment.

And the kid had been so excited, under a veneer of grown-up calm, about his first station in the Service. Feniston's bleak, disciplined face went gentle. *Like Mike.* Feniston and his son had discussed their plans, on his last furlough, two years ago. Mike had already wanted the Space Service himself. But his eyes weren't quite good enough. Good enough had to be just a little better than perfect, and Mike's eyes weren't, not quite. *So he followed the old man into Comm Section. And he's coming out this month on the* Astraea. *He won't be the first of the second-generation men in the Service. Not quite. But there aren't so many, at that.*

He let Rawlins pace the floor, though it got on his nerves. *There's time to be tough with kids, and a time to let them think they're getting away with something.*

Rawlins' outburst hadn't been exactly the way for a first-year man to talk to his senior, and discipline in the Section was not quite military, but close enough; on a planet like Charmides it had to be. So most of the time when Rawlins did it, Feniston slapped him down hard, the way he'd have done with Mike when his son was younger. But today, knowing that in some indefinable way the outburst had done them both good, he let Rawlins pace and snort for a while, then called a halt to it as naturally as he could.

"It's getting pretty bright in here. Want to adjust the darkeners?"

Rawlins went to manipulate the controls that adjusted the thickness and darkness of the opaque fluid between the two layers of the bubble-dome, shutting out the glare of midday. At the height of noon which lasted for thirteen and a half hours, Earth reckoning — the smoked glass and dark fluid would be reinforced by steel louvers, encasing the dome like an insect's carapace.

He's still mad. But not too mad to do what he's told. He knows my report this time will make or break him in Comm. So he's learning — slow, but he's learning — to keep his temper. And that's as it should be. You can't make it in the Section without control. Whether it makes sense by Earth standards or not.

"It's mealtime, Tom, but I want to get on the panel — it might clear for a minute, and I might be able to patch a message around by Seventeen and Four. Want to fix us something? Let's have some of the chocolate for a change, and break out some of that canned jam." It was a time, he knew, for small, morale-building luxuries. "I'm sick of that instant lye the Rations Board calls coffee."

Rawlins grinned. "You mean to tell me that after thirty years you can still tell what ration coffee tastes like?"

Later he took the panel so that Feniston could eat. The older man noticed that his face changed when he straddled the monitor bench, became grave, intent, *responsible.* The older man, spooning peach jam on a biscuit, watched him with genuine affection. *He'll make a good relay man, someday.*

"I'll eat as fast as I can, Tom, and get back on the board."

"Take your time." Rawlins did not take his eyes off the monitor. "No sense getting ulcers; you're hard enough to live with, as it is."

Feniston chuckled. "Hardly have time to get an ulcer now."

"Will you be sorry to retire, sir? Get back Earthside?"

"How do I know, yet? Thirty years is a long time."

"You ought to have had a

comfortable desk job, ten years ago, sir. Earthside, or at least Port Major."

Feniston set his cup down with a bang. "You think that's what I wanted? Sure, I could have had a desk job, or retired five years ago with full pension, but they're still short of qualified men, and they were glad I didn't start squawking to retire. And I went into debt to get Mike into technical school so he'd be ready for the Service." His thoughts ran a familiar channel. "I'll retire when he can come out and replace me. You know it's this month —"

"You told me," Rawlins reminded him, laughing, "half a dozen times. I'll be glad when that son of yours *does* get here."

Feniston laughed with him and spooned up the last of the jam. "I'll take the board now; you'd better get some sleep before it's time to go on shift again."

Rawlins had slept and returned, and the darkeners had been twice adjusted against the brightening day, when Rawlins at the monitor roused Feniston from a brief doze on the lounge in the dome.

"I think this is really it. Come and see, sir."

Feniston came barefoot across the cold tiles and blinked at the screen. "Something out there, yes," he said at last. "Try it on visual."

Rawlins moved knobs; blurred geometrical patterns chased one another across the TV monitor and cleared for a second into the litter of dust, rubble and rocks that was Outside. Then it dissolved into racing waveforms.

"Can't tell anything from that."

"But I know I picked up something that doesn't belong there," Rawlins argued, "just this side of that pointed rock you always use for your sightings. Watch when it clears." They bent side by side in front of the screen, Rawlins fiddling with dials; then the TV screen cleared for an instant. It dissolved three seconds later, but Feniston's trained eyes had seen.

"Looks like a Twelve Bug, Tom."

Rawlins let out an explosive sigh. "Thank God!"

"So glad to have company? Even a Special Agent come trouble-shooting?"

"Sir, after the last few watches, with Rubichek there, I'd be glad to see a cop come to arrest me for his murder." Rawlins bit off the word and looked away from Feniston. "When will he get here?"

"No telling, in that thing." The Twelve Bug — Surface Individual Transit, Model Twelve-B in the Service manuals — was little more than a spacesuit equipped with caterpillar treads and a motor; they crawled along, powered by cheap

unprocessed crudes, residues from the mines all over the planet. "In good weather, twenty minutes."

But it was two hours before the little bubble-shaped vehicle crawled into the airlock and signaled. Since the lights downstairs were not working — the emergency generator covered only the minimum services without which no human could survive an instant on Charmides — Feniston went down with a handlamp. Through the thick glass of the decompression chamber, Feniston saw a tentacled monster emerge from the Twelve Bug and move toward the door. Heavy, overbalanced, it raised one arm, encased in the tool-tipped pressure gloves, to unfasten clamps and grommets; then a reassuringly human head emerged from the monster, a head with close-clipped graying hair, features lined by years of hard living, hard thinking, hard discipline. He handed the huge Dayside helmet to Rawlins, who had come down the hatch after Feniston.

"Jesus, what a trip!" He shook his head inside the collar of the suit, easing cramped muscles. "Lucky I had my Dayside helmet in the Bug, or my eyes would have been fried. When I started, I expected to get here before Centaurus was over the horizon. It's hell out there, did you know?"

"Glad you're safe, sir," Feniston said curtly. "My name is Feniston, senior in Relay Twelve Station —"

"Look, let me get the hell out of this straight jacket before you start spouting the formalities, do you mind?"

"As you wish," Feniston said stiffly. "Rawlins will help you out of your suit. One of us should be on the panel." He disappeared up the metal stairway; the stranger raised his eyes, but didn't comment. A chip still on his shoulder, Rawlins demanded, "What possessed you to leave Port Major on a day like this, sir?"

The man gave him a single clinical glance. "I didn't. I left before the storm hit Port Major."

"But — good God, sir, that means you've been seventy hours and a bit, on a five-hour run!"

"Right. And a Twelve Bug feels like a coffin from the inside. I'd appreciate a basic of water, a soft place to sit down, and something to eat beside Basic Nute pills."

Rawlins helped ease the man out of his spacesuit. "Make yourself at home, sir. My quarters are right through there. No showers since the main generator went off, but there's *some* hot water, and I'll fix you some food."

"Thanks." Out of his suit he was a tall, thin man of forty, in sweat-stained and filthy fatigues. "I'm Special Agent Martell — Paul

Martell, rank of major. And I'll take you up on all of that as soon as I finish checkover. Do you suppose your hospitality could run to a suit of clean clothes?" He started, with dragging movements, on the mandatory checkout for leaving a spacesuit — on an airless world like Charmides you never knew when you might have to jump right back into it. So you serviced it immediately, dumping disinfectant into body-waste units, checking airhoses, wiping rubber grommets with preservative. But Rawlins saw that the man could barely stand. "Go in and get cleaned up, Major," he said roughly. "I'll service the damn thing. Help yourself to anything that fits."

An hour later, bathed, shaved and dressed in some off-duty clothes of Rawlins', Major Martell lay stretched out on the sofa in the main dome, finishing his coffee.

"Before we get started, sir, what's the news from Port Major? We've been cut off for days," Feniston said. The major shook his head. "Not much. Remember, I've been on the road for days myself. Oh, the *Astraea* landed with a new load fresh from Earthside — greenest bunch of scared kids I ever saw. A bogey came within a few hundred feet of holing their shuttle, but before I left they were all on their feet and piling into Orientation One. By now, they're probably all on their way to their first stations — unless the storm hit Port Major before then."

Feniston did not even try to conceal his excitement. "Was my son among them? Michael Feniston, Junior?"

"Sorry. I just saw them in a clump, I didn't see any name labels. Is that your son?" He took the photocube from Feniston's desk and studied it a moment, then shook his head, frowning in a good-natured effort to remember. "Sorry. I seem to remember half a dozen of those lanky, dark-haired kids; I suppose he could have been there, but I couldn't say for sure." Feniston set down the cube. "Tough luck, this storm cutting you off just when he's coming in. Even if he tried to call you from Central, he'd have found that all the relays out this way have been cut off by the storm. Now you probably won't hear anything till he's settled down at his first station."

"Well, that's the way the breaks run," Feniston said, trying to conceal his disappointment. "Well, Major, I expect you want to make out your report on the accident."

It didn't take long. When Martell had finished, he put the sheet back over Rubichek, with impersonal sadness. "Poor devil. By the way, I checked with Records

before I left Port Major. He never did fill out a Form A-14. So there's no need to wait for transshipment space; we can go ahead and dispose of the body. I suppose your units will handle it here?"

"Oh, sure. Even without the main generator working." Feniston saw Rawlins flinch. "What's the matter, kid? Seem cold-blooded?"

"I thought at least he'd be shipped back to Port Major for burial!"

"Not unless his family had requested it in advance, or he had. Like I said, I checked. That's a damn silly law anyhow," Martell said, "using valuable cargo space on dead bodies that belong in the disposal units. Sop to public relations, that's all," Martell said. Feniston looked at him in agreement. After the unspoken condemnation that had blown like a stream of canned air, cold and sour, from Rawlins' direction for the last few days, it was good to have Martell's support. He saw the muscles move in Rawlins' throat, but the kid only cast a murderous glare at Feniston and bent to his work.

Disposal was a messy but, fortunately, a brief affair. Afterward they had supper in the dome, Feniston interrupting himself every few minutes to check the instruments. Rawlins ate little; Feniston, watching him with pity, wished there was something he could say.

Martell finally pushed back his chair, sighing. "I've made a pig of myself. You fellows in the domes live pretty well, don't you? Oh well, something pleasant against that beautiful trip I've got ahead of me. I wonder if I have time for a couple of hours sleep before I hit the road back? They say you can sleep in a Twelve Bug, but I wonder if the guy who put that in the manual had ever been in one?"

"Got my doubts about it." Feniston pulled down the clipboard and started on his rounds again. Rawlins sneered. "Sacred ritual under way again. You could write it without moving from your chair — nothing's working yet, and you know it."

"Can't tell till you try." Feniston moved a useless dial. "Major, why not stay till the storm clears? Start now, and you'll be three days on the road again; wait till it clears, and you can make it in five hours."

Rawlins' mouth twisted. "Wouldn't that be against your precious rule book?"

Feniston started to answer, but Martell, with one swift movement, rose and stood looking down at Rawlins. "All right, mister, out with it. What's that chip on your shoulder? You've been dying to say something ever since I got here. Say it, or shut up!"

Rawlins shot to his feet. He

swung from Feniston to Martell, with a trapped, desperate earnestness. "Damn it, we could have *saved* what's-his-name, Rubichek, that poor bastard we just cut up and put down the unit," he blurted, "We could have saved him, and we didn't! Feniston might just as well have killed him! The way I see it, Feniston murdered him!"

The dome was silent. Feniston heard, for the first time in years, the futile cricket chirps, bleeps, poops, ticks and tocks of his instruments. "Tom, I went all over that—"

"Wait." Martell held up his hand. "Let the kid have his say."

"Look, Major, I know I could have reached him. It was just a question of rigging a couple of tackles — we've got the equipment downstairs. Then we could have switched off the surface wiring for a few minutes and gone out in suits. Sir, I was on the tumbling team in college, I'm damn near a professional acrobat, even in a suit; I know I could have reached him. Feniston wouldn't have had to risk his precious neck —"

"It wasn't the risk, dammit —"

"Let the kid finish, Feniston."

"Since we'd both have been outside in suits, we could have cut out the gears in the air system and brought him up through the baffle. We would have had a fighting chance to get him up inside, and everything switched on again, before there was a direct hit —"

Martell held up his hand. "Spare me the details," he said. "I'm neither an electrician or a mechanic, and certainly no acrobat. I'll willingly concede that a proper rescue team could have reached the poor devil somehow. But you've said enough to convince me there was no negligence on your senior's part. Feniston, didn't you tell him why it wasn't possible to tamper with the dome mechanisms that way? And — how long have you been in Service, Rawlins? Surely you know the first rule is that both members must never be outside the dome at the same time —"

"Oh, the rules and regulations were coming out his ears," Rawlins said passionately, "but I thought all rules were off when there was a life at stake! And there was, here! Rubichek died because Feniston couldn't let go of his damn rule book for ten lousy minutes...."

Martell's mouth was set. Feniston started to speak, but Martell gestured him to silence. "And suppose you'd been killed too," he said, "and Feniston was left alone here with two dead bodies to put into the disposal instead of one?"

"But I *wouldn't* have been killed —" Rawlins swallowed hard. His voice stopped working. Fenis-

ton put a hand on his shoulder, but Rawlins shook it off. "I suppose if I'd been out there, you'd have let me lie there and fry?"

"I hope to God that decision never comes up," Feniston said steadily.

"But you would?"

"I'd have to. I'd hate it, but I'd have to." Feniston bit his lip. "You're not Earthside now, or in a nice safe dome on Mars. When you're out here, the first thing you learn is to live by the rule book. Or you don't live long enough to learn anything else." He turned away and went to the instrument panel, not looking back.

"Okay, dammit, so you'd let me lie there and fry! But suppose it was somebody you cared about! Your son, maybe? How'd you stick to your precious damn rule book then?"

Feniston did not turn round. He said, "They wouldn't let Mike and me *work* in the same dome. Just for that reason. There's just so much human nature can take."

Martell said, half aloud, "The Bronson kids. It was my first year out here."

Feniston nodded, not turning, remembering, trying not to remember. He said, "Yeah. I was on the wire that night. I was a junior then at Seventeen."

God, yes, the Bronsons. Dave and — what was his name, the little red-headed kid? Toby, that was it. Dave and Toby. Brothers. Not wanting to, his mind insisted in playing the tape again, obsessively; now he had started. The Bronsons had somehow, no one knew how they'd wangled it — *Section Twenty-two wasn't on the books then* — gotten assigned together to a dome. Feniston had been working the interdome relay the night Toby had gone out in his suit and somehow, God knows how, slid down a pile of rocks and broken his hip and — they found out later — his back. *He lay out there and screamed for hours. God knows why he never lost consciousness. Begging, pleading. Then he got delirious and started talking to Dave over his suitcom like they were little kids back home. Every dome down the line heard it. Hours. Days. Rescue One made it, about an hour after Toby stopped talking. And about ten minutes after Dave blew his brains out.*

The dome had been darkened to maximum now, and the steel louvers closed, turtleshell, over the relay station. Martell went to look over Feniston's shoulder at one of the TV monitors.

"Looks like it might be easing up, now."

"Not really," said Feniston, looking at the newly cleared screen. "It clears up for a minute or two at a time, then starts again; there's a

regular pulse to it. You can see Outside, if you want to, though."

"I don't guess the scenery's much to look at," Martell said, with a wry grin. "I think I'll get that sleep —"

"God almighty!" Rawlins jerked as if he had been stung, and pointed. "Feniston, look — by the big rock out there! I guess I must be coming unstuck, thinking everything in the screen is electrical interference! Do you see it?"

"I thought I did. Let me try to clear it up again —" for the maddening swirls had covered the monitor once again. Martell had dropped right out of their consciousness. Again they were a team, operating together at peak. "I think I've got it — I can't make it out. I thought it was a pile of rocks. Has there been another rockslide out there?"

"Maybe I'm crazy, sir, but I thought it looked like a crawler." They were kneeling side by side on the bench, systematically trying the TV monitors and the outside radar. "Look, that blip — try the signal channels, one by one, will you?"

Confusing sounds crackled and blipped in random, infuriating patterns. It was Rawlins who flipped the switch that made him jerk back his hand as if it had shocked him; through the random static a loud, frantic blasting, a scream, shattered the silence in the dome. Feniston knew that Rawlins' horrified face only reflected his own. He wet his lips. "God help us," he muttered.

"What is it, Mr. Feniston?" Martell's voice intruded on their consciousness, and Feniston said, "Rescue One Alert; Extreme Distress Signal, from the crawler out there. Loud and clear."

"Whatever's out there is in trouble, then?"

"Anything out there is in trouble by definition, Major, but that signal means extra-special trouble." Feniston was frantically trying the visuals again. "No damn good. Pull the louvers — put on your Dayside glasses first, dammit! Major, get your Dayside glasses on, or — with respect, sir — leave the dome. Get downstairs."

Moving fast, Rawlins obeyed, while the major, whipping on his Dayside glasses, squeezed his eyes against the hellish brightness.

"By the big peak — my God," Rawlins almost whispered. "Look at *that!*"

Across the glaring, unstirring dust of Charmides, they could see now; a metal craft lay tilted sidewise, tractor treads up-ended, like some monster insect spilled helplessly on its back. Feniston sucked in his breath.

"God, those poor devils!"

The fierce sheet-lightning, never slackening, came and went with a

searing glare. Feniston, his eyes watering, pushed the button that closed the steel louvers, feeling the comparative darkness with relief. He went to the transmitter and, without much hope, started sending. Voice reception would be drowned by static; this was the archaic dot-dash, electrical-pulse language, kept for just such emergencies. Static would probably drown it out too, but he had to try.

"Relay Station Twelve calling, crawler, calling crawler — come in, crawler...." He sent the message again and again, his nerves screaming with the relentless, automatic shrilling of the Extreme Distress Signal, which, preset, would keep blasting on all frequencies until someone answered it. It was a long time before the static gave them a returning trickle of weak dashes and dots. "Relay... need assistance.... crawler Fourteen-oh-nine, down in sector... need assist...."

"Crawler, we have your position, we can see you from the Relay Station. Can you make the dome? Have you spacesuits and ground equipment?" He waited, endlessly, for an answer that did not come. Rawlins fiddled with the receivers and managed to lower the Extreme Distress blast to an endurable ear level, making the joke all the new men thought was funny, about an extremely distressing signal. "Dammit, why don't they answer?"

"They may be answering, and the static cut out their answer," Feniston said. "Or, of course, there may not be anyone alive in there — or anyone in a condition to answer." Feniston went to the relief map of the surrounding terrain and marked the crawler's position in erasable crayon. "Those crawlers don't just turn over. Probably the cliff above the road crumbled, and everybody inside is smashed to hell."

"Then who answered your signal?" Martell asked, but it needed no answer. The answerer might now be unconscious or dead inside the smashed crawler, or think himself safer inside an insulated crawler than he would be trying to make it to the dome in an ordinary spacesuit. Feniston was trying bands again, hopelessly, one by one. Abruptly, like a special miracle, the static momentarily quieted, and from one band came the first human voice the men in the Relay Station had heard in days.

"This is Rescue One, Rescue One. This is a special emergency band; state the nature of your emergency or get off this frequency at once."

"Rescue One, this is Relay Station Twelve. There is a downed crawler directly visible from relay windows, emitting Extreme Distress

Signal. Inhabitants do not reply to call." Feniston went on, quickly reporting position, time and local conditions before the worsening storm should cut him off again. The voice at Rescue One said, "No crawler is scheduled to be within two kilometers of Relay Twelve, but someone may have been navigating on instruments that went out in the storm. We'll investigate when we can."

"How long?"

"No promises; we're snowed under here, and we have emergencies calling for help, men we know are alive. If you get any acknowledgment from them again, call us with the data. Otherwise, we'll assume they're dead or dying and leave them till we have the live ones rescued. Now get off this band, Relay Twelve, we're swamped. Rescue One, out."

Feniston watched young Rawlins pacing the floor, staring at the steel shutters. "Can't we do anything?"

"The young hero, raring to go again?" Martell frowned at Feniston. "Are you game for an extra hour on shift, Feniston? If you can run things awhile, I'll take Rawlins and go out. Maybe we can find out, at least, if there's anyone alive in there and get Rescue One to put them on a priority."

Feniston consulted he chronometer. "Oh, sure," he said, "I can work straight through Tom's shift, if I have to; mark it down as Emergency Status. Go ahead."

He heard them go clanging down the metal stairway and felt, suddenly, very old and tired. *They didn't even consider me for the rescue work. Oh, sure, it makes sense to pick the younger man.*

But it would have felt good, rules or no, to do the human thing for once. To get out there, all of us, leave the station to look after itself and fight the black glare for those men's lives....

And they didn't even ask me....

Time crawled by grimly, stretching minutes until they felt like quarter hours, and hours into days. Now and then Feniston put on dayside glasses and drew the shutters back, scanning the burning rocks for some sign of the two suited figures. Once he saw them, crawling slowly between two great rocks, then lost them again in the shadows.

He followed them a little while longer through the confused, flickering shadows of the TV monitor, then lost them once and for all. Time crawled on, stretched out and finally lost meaning and merged into eternity. Hours later, when the steel shutters had been drawn back and the dark fluid adjusted to opaque the dome, he heard a noise downstairs at the airlock, then dragging, uneven steps from the

hatchway. Rawlins, filthy and exhausted, hauled Martell into the dome.

"No good," muttered Martell, and slumped; Feniston sprang to help him into a chair, and he lay there collapsed, not moving. Rawlins, too, looked dead beat.

"Hell out there...," Martell whispered, "almost got fried by — close hits. Got within half a kilometer and I — slid. Pulled muscle — back. Hadn't been for the kid — still be lying out there."

Rawlins straddled a chair, his head slumped on the back. "Crawler's turned over — door jammed shut, need a torch to burn them out — I heard them hammering inside — alive, all right — later I'll take a torch and go back —"

Martell pulled himself painfully upright. A kind of respect was mingled with his annoyance. "You don't give up easy, do you?"

"Not with lives at stake. Hell, no, sir! You want to sit and watch them die?"

Martell groaned and lay back. "In my case it's academic; until that ligament in my back heals up, I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to catch hell from Central. A few hundred feet more, and you'd have had to leave me out there." He smiled grimly. "Feniston, the damn-fool kid half carried me in. Rawlins, I'm sorry, it was a good try, but there's nothing more we can do. We'll call in and tell Rescue One that they're alive in there and that we've done all we can."

Before Rawlins could muster the confused words that were gathering, Feniston explained it again, gently. "Tom, we don't have rescue facilities here. We've got to leave them for Rescue One. I know how you feel —"

"The hell you do!" Rawlins had gone white under the dirt on his face. "You don't know a goddamn thing about your stinking rule book!"

"Look," Martell said, "in the long run, regulations cover situations with the greatest good for the greatest number — and the least danger. Charmides is short of qualified men, but it's better for two men to die waiting for Rescue One to get around to them than for a well-meaning amateur to take a hand and have *three* corpses to bury."

The color had returned to Rawlins' face in irregular patches, and white showed all around the pupils of his eyes. "You damned — monsters," he all but screamed. "You stinking, inhuman —"

Feniston knew the kid was hysterical, but he, too, had had all he could take.

"That's enough, mister. Get down to your quarters and get some sleep. You go on shift again in two

hours. Damn it, that's an order. *Move!*"

Rawlins didn't move. Feniston thought, almost incredulous, *he's going to cry.* But he didn't. Finally he turned on his heel, and his feet clanged on the metal stairway.

Poor, damned fool of a kid....

Martell said it aloud. "Poor kid. Damn-fool kid."

Feniston covered his face with his hands. He finally said, mastering the curious pain, "He'll get over it."

"Yeah, I know. Someday he'll be just like all the rest of us, learn to line it up like double-entry bookkeeping. With reason, logic and good sense on one side, and common humanity on the other. And he'll even sleep nights after he learns it."

Feniston didn't look around at him. He only said, "There's some codeine in the medix box. I'd better get you some for your back, Major."

Martell dozed feverishly on the sofa; Feniston wearily went through the rounds at his panel. He was ready to drop; he had worked sixteen hours straight. At the end of the two hours' grace he had given Rawlins, he buzzed Rawlins' quarters, thinking longingly of a shave, some hot soup, and a good long sleep. *Yeah, I'm getting old. Where the hell is Rawlins?*

There was no answering buzz from below; Feniston swore, and Martell opened his eyes, started to sit up, winced and didn't. "Where's the kid? Still playing Achilles-sulking-in-his-tent?"

"Probably dead asleep," Feniston said slowly, "but this buzzer would wake up the Sphinx. Maybe it's gone out of service. With the main generator out, nothing works right." He was beginning to worry. In the Service, quarters had doors. On an airless world where you lived in domes, privacy meant sanity. But the doors had no locks. So if your junior went stir-crazy and tried to suicide, he couldn't lock himself in to finish the job.... he hit the buzzer hard and repeatedly, swore, clanged down the metal ladder and banged, hard, on Rawlins' door. "Rawlins! Hey — Tom, damn it, you're on-shift! Get the hell up here!"

He thrust open the door. The bed was dented, not slept in. Feniston retraced his steps, an awful suspicion growing on him.

His own quarters were bare and shipshape; the tiny galley empty and clean. Finally there was nowhere else to look, and Feniston's steps dragged as he turned toward the airlock room.

Empty, but the light glowed on the panel.

WHEN THIS LIGHT IS ON
SOMEONE IS *OUT.*
DO NOT FASTEN DOOR FROM
INSIDE.

And Rawlins' spacesuit was gone.

He didn't have to tell Martell what had happened. The major swore, unprintably. Feniston slumped.

"What could I have done? Short of putting him under arrest in advance?"

"I know, damn it," Martell muttered. "I couldn't be too rough on him. Damn kid saved my life."

"Well, it's out of our hands now." Feniston, shaking with fatigue, dropped on the bench. His body felt as if it was permanently molded to it. He pulled down the log and wrote down the time, adding: "Unable to assign panel to second officer account —" His handwriting, he noticed with the glassy clarity of a brain fatigued almost to breaking point, had gone illegible. He braced his hand and printed in block capitals: RAWLINS AWOL.

Martell said, "Feniston, you've been working sixteen hours straight. You'll keel over. Can I take the panel?"

"Good of you, sir. But — against regulations to let an outsider on the panel. I'll get some wakers from the medix box." He went and swallowed the drug, waiting for the burst of energy. *This is against regs too, except in emergencies. Well, we've got one hell of an emergency.*

I had such hopes for the kid. As if he was filling in for Mike. And for his own sake, too. For the time when I wasn't around any more.

Martell muttered, when he came back, "I wonder if he realized we'll have to send Rescue One after him too?"

"I don't know what he thinks. Or *if* he thinks." Feniston hit the button. Miraculously, there was a clear channel. For once, Feniston wished there hadn't been. But he knew what he had to do, and he did it. His voice faltered a little as he reported Rawlins AWOL. *It's just fatigue,* he told himself. But he knew it wasn't.

Time wasn't time any more. Martell dozed, pain and codeine winning out over anxiety. Feniston stayed awake, half sick with the reaction from the wakers in his system, mingled with anger. Once he tried to pick up Rawlins on the TV monitor, but the bubble-dome's own revolving shadow cut off the light. Radar picked up a small, just-moving fleck that was about the right size for a man in a spacesuit. As the hours crawled by, Feniston's anger mingled with fear. Against his own will, something of the rage, the determination of Rawlins' fight with death got through to the older man.

He felt an atavistic, almost

savage approval as that little fleck crawled buglike across the screen. Every inch was a half mile nearer, across the crackling hell out there. A hazard surmounted. A margin of safety gained. It was a purely human reaction, logic aside, and Feniston didn't try to fight it. And as the little fleck neared the dome again on the return journey, for the first time in his thirty years Feniston forgot his panel checks. The last hundred feet were the worst. Feniston had exhausted his supply of desperation. He *breathed* with the flicker of light that was Rawlins on the radar. *Easy now... watch the rocks out there... if this was a house you'd be on the front lawn... he's going to make it back, by God he's going to make it....*

Roughly he went and shook Martell awake. "Open the shutters! Can you get him on visual?"

Martell hobbled to the control, groping for his Dayside glasses. "Can't see — oh, God, look what that crazy kid did! He took my Twelve Bug — wouldn't hold all of them, so he's adapted the crawler panel — they're *riding* on top of it! Rawlins and — one, two — three of the men from the crawler! On one damn Twelve Bug!"

Another charge against him, Unlawful use and adaptation....

"He's rigged a lightning deflector — yes, damn it, I know as well as you do... Feniston, my God, look at that crazy kid —"

"Told you he was a clever youngster," Feniston growled. But he didn't come and look. He didn't look at all.

And then it was over. Quietly, like an anticlimax, Feniston heard the airlock open, the hiss of the decompression room, and four men struggled up the steps into the dome. Rawlins and another man were carrying a third between them; the fourth man was limping, but he was on his feet. Feniston turned from the panel.

"Well, Tom!" It was welcome, grateful prayer of thanks, and unutterable weariness, all in one.

Rawlins smiled. His clothes clung like wet wash to his body. He wiped his face with a dripping sleeve and said blissfully, "I made it, sir."

The third man straightened. "Maydon, sir. I thought we'd had it for sure. He almost killed himself getting us out." He gestured to the man Rawlins had helped to carry, now lying inert on the sofa. "I thought sure the kid here wasn't going to make it, but now I guess he's got a chance."

Feniston said briefly, "I guess we can look after you all here until the men from Rescue One make it. Do any of you have a cert to fix a generator?"

"Yeah, me," Maydon said,

staring at Rawlins. "You mean *you're* not from Rescue One? Man, I want to shake your hand!"

Rawlins gleamed at Feniston as Maydon wrung his hand. "I told you I could do it, sir! Regulations be damned! I *told* you —"

Maydon stopped dead. He dropped Rawlins' hand and stared, saying slowly, "Hey, you mean —"

"Later, Maydon," Feniston said. "Go below, Rawlins."

"You damn old sourpuss," Rawlins burst out, *"All right* — so raise hell, raise hell because I walked all over your precious rule book. I saved three men's lives. Can't you get that through your damned thick head. I saved *three lives!* And will you have a look at this other kid here before he dies on us? Or is that against the rule book too?"

Feniston bent over the wounded man.

And froze there. *It's just an insane, obscene nightmare. And now, at last, after all this, I can wake up* —

But he didn't. Gripped by nightmare, paralyzed, Feniston saw the wounded man's face. Crushed and dirty and bloody, eyes closed in weakness and exhaustion, Feniston saw the face of his son Mike.

"No," Feniston said, thickly, "*No!* Oh, God, *Mike!*"

Rawlins was so near collapse himself that he absorbed the shock without surprise. "...glad," he mumbled, "heard nothing out of you for a month but Mike ...maybe take the curse off.... have a heart...."

Mike Feniston opened his eyes. To an impersonal watcher — if there were any — he would have been only a nice-looking kid of twenty or so, who should never have been brought all these millions of miles from Earth to be smashed and left to fry inside a broken crawler in the hell of Charmides. He looked at his father without curiosity, as if the last hours had held so many shocks that nothing could ever surprise him again.

"I made it, Dad," he whispered through bleeding lips, "only I goofed. Guess you won't be very proud of me, goofing up the works first thing...." he whispered, and died.

Rawlins' tears rolled down, unashamed, and fell on Mike's face. "God! I'm so sorry, sir, so sorry — I did my best — I'd have risked my life twice over —"

"You did just exactly that, didn't you?" Feniston let go of Mike's hand. It was cold, now, and limp. "Quite the hero."

"I was glad to do it, sir." Rawlins, for all his filth stood there, somehow shining. "I like to think anyone in the Service would have done the same thing."

He means it, Feniston thought. And realized for the first time how the old cliches could seem, somehow, new and meaningful, with bright new sharp edges on them. He breathed deep, feeling the hurt down where pain still had meaning, knowing that his next words would sear away that shining thing in the boy forever. He had never hated anything so much in his life.

"Major Martell, I request that you place Rawlins under arrest. Reasons: general lack of discipline, insubordination, direct defiance of an order, and unlawfully modifying equipment outside the regular field of his duty." His mouth was dry, empty of words. Martell's face was compassionate, but Feniston, floundering in his own pain, saw only Rawlins. The shine had gone out of the young hero's face; now he was just a beaten, exhausted kid.

"I — I — did I hear you right? Arrest? For saving a — for saving three lives?"

Martell rapped, "For risking your own life, almost making it four deaths, and unauthorized use of a Surface Transit Twelve-B. You were dumb and lucky, Rawlins. But out here you don't gamble on dumb luck, or heroics! Nobody gets a second chance out here, and you had yours!"

"I —" Rawlins looked around for something, someone, but there was only Martell, like a judgment of God. Feniston knew he would never forget that despairing sweep of Rawlins' head around the dome, as if appealing to a higher court for justice, before Martell took him by the arm, not unkindly.

"Better get below, mister. You'll be going back to Port Major

with me — and probably out on the *Astraea,* return trip to Earth."

Rawlins stumbled on the metal rung. "Okay," he muttered, and Feniston knew that the whole dead load of fatigue was finally caving in on the kid, crushing him at last. "Okay. All right if I get a little — little sleep first? I'm *dead.*"

And as he stumbled down the stairs, Feniston heard the sobs break out, thick, exhausted sobs of a hero beaten down to a whipped kid who still couldn't figure out what had hit him — and probably never would.

Blind with pain, Feniston turned to Maydon. "You're certified. You take the panel. Emergency," he muttered. He felt his face crumple as he looked down into the face of his dead son. Like Rawlins' dream, his own life had crumbled into the dust and rubble of that quiet hell that was Charmides. He pulled a blanket over Mike's face.

And they won't even let me stay here to die....

Mechanically, under the dimming glare, he adjusted the darkeners; the black sky of Charmides opened up, endless as space itself, over his head. He looked over his son's body into the blackness, but he didn't see it.

"I had two sons, really," he said in a hoarse, old man's voice, to no one in particular, "and today I lost them both."

He put his arm over his eyes. He would be very glad to get back to Earth.

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MARLBORO LIGHTS	13 mg.	0.8 mg.
RALEIGH EXTRA MILD	14 mg.	0.9 mg.
VICEROY EXTRA MILD	14 mg.	0.9 mg.
PARLIAMENT BOX	14 mg.	0.8 mg.
DORAL	15 mg.	1.0 mg.
PARLIAMENT KING SIZE	16 mg.	0.9 mg.
VICEROY	16 mg.	1.1 mg.
RALEIGH	16 mg.	1.1 mg.
VIRGINIA SLIMS	16 mg.	1.0 mg.
PARLIAMENT 100's	17 mg.	1.0 mg.
L&M BOX	17 mg.	1.1 mg.
SILVA THINS	17 mg.	1.3 mg.
MARLBORO BOX	17 mg.	1.0 mg.

Non-menthol Filter Brands	Tar	Nicotine
RALEIGH 100's	17 mg.	1.2 mg.
MARLBORO 100's	17 mg.	1.1 mg.
BENSON & HEDGES 100's	18 mg.	1.1 mg.
VICEROY 100's	18 mg.	1.2 mg.
MARLBORO KING SIZE	18 mg.	1.1 mg.
LARK	18 mg.	1.2 mg.
CAMEL FILTERS	18 mg.	1.2 mg.
EVE	18 mg.	1.2 mg.
WINSTON 100's	18 mg.	1.2 mg.
WINSTON BOX	18 mg.	1.2 mg.
CHESTERFIELD	19 mg.	1.2 mg.
LARK 100's	19 mg.	1.2 mg.
L&M KING SIZE	19 mg.	1.2 mg.
TAREYTON 100's	19 mg.	1.4 mg.
WINSTON KING SIZE	19 mg.	1.3 mg.
L&M 100's	19 mg.	1.3 mg.
PALL MALL 100's	19 mg.	1.4 mg.
TAREYTON	21 mg.	1.4 mg.

Source: FTC Report Apr. 1976
*By FTC Method

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

One of sf's finest fantasists returns ("The Ghastly Priest Doth Reign," March 1975) with a new tale of supernatural doings among the mountain people of the Southern Appalachians.

Where the Woodbine Twineth

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

After he'd helped wash and wipe the supper dishes, young Jess Warrick climbed the ladder to his loft over the cabin; and when he swung down again, his mother asked, "How come you're all dressed up, boy?"

He'd put on his new jeans and a clean hickory shirt, with the sleeves rolled up his strong brown arms. "I felt sticky in the clothes I chopped weeds in today," he said.

"Thought you swum in the fish pond before supper," spoke up his father from where by the table lamp he read Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin. No saying how many times Clay Warrick had been through that and all the other twenty books shelved on the fireboard. Clay Warrick was schooled, though he didn't let it hurt him.

"I still feel sticky," said Jess. "Reckon I'll go in again. It's a good moon up over Dogged Mountain."

He stood taller than his father, taller than his married brother George living four miles off in Sky Notch, taller than would have been air Warrick man if more had lived through the last fight with the Mair family fifty years back; taller than his grandsire Big Tobe, head of the Warrick clan, who'd died knifing it out with Burt Mair; taller than Big Tobe's two brothers and his son Bob; all of them tall but none as tall as Jess had got to be. His hair was Indian black; he had dark eyes and scooped-out tan cheeks and a straight nose. Girls through those parts of the mountains called him good looking.

"I'd not love to swim by strong moonlight," said Clay Warrick, but Jess made out like as if he didn't hear.

"The spring high's flowed off Walnut Creek," he said. "Water's clear enough there to show you a fish ten foot down."

"You be careful," warned his

mother, like as if Jess was only six insead of twenty.

"And don't stay out late, hear?" said Clay Warrick. "We got to work high on the hill field tomorrow."

Jess raised the wooden latch and stepped out into the shiny night. A bat grabbed a bug in front of him. Another flopped higher. Jess had heard his father tell that Lord Byron thought bats were bad luck. He strode past the mail box and along the dirt road. When he got to where his mother couldn't watch and see, he cut left up Dogged Mountain's slope, toward where the Warricks and the Mairs had butchered one another that long-ago night.

Maybe he'd nair know the whole truth of that battle, for none who'd fought it lived to tell of it. His grandmother used to moan out her sad notion, before she died when Jess was ten. His father hadn't been but seven at the time. Nor could air soul guess just why the two clans had fought to the last man. Their bad feelings had gone back to the start of things among these mountains.

So they'd got to shooting from behind trees and rail fences, nibbling off enemies here and there. Till the night Big Tobe Warrick pulled together his brothers and nephews and his oldest boy Bob and went with loaded guns toward where the Mairs lived. But the Mairs had got out that night too, and in a brushy hollow on Dogged Mountain they'd wiped one another out. Big Tobe got his hands on Burt Mair and they'd each chopped the other to death with hunting knives. Dead, they'd clung in such a grapple the neighbor folks who'd found them couldn't drag them apart. So while the ten others who'd been killed were carried off to family burying grounds, the two chiefs were buried right where they'd died, with no prayer for them. Old Mr. Sam Upchurch, the storekeeper and township trustee, had said drive a locust tree stake through both of them, to keep them from ever walking out and making fresh trouble. Dirt and rocks were heaped on them, and next week two preachers and the sheriff and the superior court judge had come round to beg the lady folks left alive in both families to swear peace and no more killing forever.

Peace was there, only once in a while at night there'd be a knock at a cabin door, and when you opened it, nobody came in. The hollow was named Lost Soul, and it grew up in the years with brush and with Virginia creeper and honeysuckle, two sorts of vines different folks call woodbine. No Mair and no Warrick air went near the place, except for Jess Warrick and, from the Mairs, a slim, tawny-haired girl named

Midge. Because there, they figured, neither bunch of their hating folks would pester them from loving one another.

In the bright moonlight Jess trotted along a path where cows grazed by day. His long legs ate up a mile of ground his feet knew. In his mind, all unasked, ran a song he'd used to hear his grandmother hum:

...Gone where the woodbine
twineth,
With the vine on the broken
wall,
'Neath the shade of the weeping willow
Where its drooping branches
fall...

Round the jaw of the slope, now, would be Lost Soul Hollow.

Somebody moved in front of him, somebody in a long, shiny-gray gown. His heart jumped. Midge must be coming to meet him.

But, "Jess?" half-sang a low voice not Midge's. "Jess Warrick? Why are you out tonight, as if I didn't already know."

Air soul in those mountains knew Haidee Bettisthorne's voice. Jess stopped and she winnowed toward him, Haidee Battisthorne folks called the witch-woman, moonbright and bright as the moon. She was as tall as Jess himself, and her fine proud shape showed through the gray dress. Her hair made a black shadow round her shoulders, her full dark mouth smiled, her eyes shone green like an animal's.

"So," she half-sang at him, "you break your family's rule and come to your grandsire's grave."

Witchcraft had told her he'd be out, the way it told her how to whisper corn dead in the field, hogs dead in the pen, or lame or blind you if you made her mad. "I didn't make that rule, Miss Haidee," he said.

Laughing, she stood before him, her green eyes digging into his dark ones. She was beautiful but, gentlemen, she was creepy. Jess wondered how old or how young she was.

"You know what they say walks here," she said. "Tracks have been seen. Sometimes the two hind feet, big and flat with claws. Sometimes the front feet too, marking the earth like hands. Ever wonder what makes them kind of tracks, Jess?"

He'd wondered. He'd seen the tracks, by light of day, more or less near woodbiney Lost Hollow. But he had made himself come there by night anyway.

"Some allow it's your dog," he said, and she laughed.

"It's mine, but it's not a dog." Her eyes glowed. "It does me errands, it fetches me news."

He wondered if she was funning him. But for once she sounded like the truth.

"Is Midge Mair worth coming here for?" Haidee Bettisthorne inquired him. "That little pan-of-milk girl?" Her green eyes ran up and down him like fingers. "I reckon you could do better than that, Jess."

Right then she looked no older than Jess, only smarter and another sight wickeder. "Good job I'm the only one know you two meet," she said. "A Warrick and a Mair. Else the two clans would fetch out to look at you with something in their hand besides a field glass."

"We're up to no harm," said Jess. "Not to one another nor yet to our folks either side."

An owl hallooed in a tree over them.

"You think you're in love," she said, like a charge in law court.

"Yessum. It's a natural thing, Miss Haidee."

"Don't call me Miss Haidee, you sound like a little boy with his school teacher." A lick of her lips. "Thought I might could teach you a thing or two at that."

She stirred her rich body inside the gown. "Maybe you want to be coaxed."

"I just want to get along this here trail."

"Well," and the moonlight spilled over her like pale fire, "why coax you? I have choice friends other places."

"I hear tell your sort goes in bands," said Jess, recollecting talk about witch covens.

"You sound scornful." She stood so close she almost touched against him. "Is that wise, Jess?"

"I don't claim much wisdom. I don't mean to say bad against you, just what I've heard tell for a fact."

"You're a fool," she smiled.

"We won't quarrel about that," said Jess. "Every day I try to be less of one, find out something new."

"Shall I teach you?" She was close. He smelled perfume of night flowers.

"No, ma'am, thank you anyway."

"You're not only a fool, Jess. You're afraid of me."

"I reckon I'd be twice foolish not to be kindly afraid of you," he agreed her.

"You don't have the sense to know what I could give you, or the nerve to take it," said Haidee Bettisthorne. "Good night."

She slid out of his way and he passed her, quick as he could set foot. She laughed behind him. The owl hallooed again, and off yonder, some direction, a slap-slap-slap like the echo of guns going off in the dark On the high ground to his left, a sense of things watching, figuring on him.

But he made the turn in the trail, and he saw Midge at the mouth of the dip of Lost Soul Hollow, saw her fair as an angel

with her tawny hair bright in the moon and her two hands lifting to him. They came together and their arms flew round one another.

She was small and slim against him like that. He thought, how real Midge is, how flesh and blood and how good. Her mouth lived against his, eager but not greedy, a love kiss. She drew back and looked at him.

"You're pale," she whispered.

"That's moonwash on my face. "Hark at me, Midge, I just saw Haidee Bettisthorne. She knows about us meeting."

"That old witch." Wide eyes in Midge's round face. "What'll she do?"

Jess felt they were being watched and harked at. "She allowed that our folks on both sides might fight again if they found us."

"That's no new thought to me. Why is she meddling, Jess?"

"Witch nature," he said. "Wanting to fetch on trouble. A witch is sworn to evil. I've heard tell of goings on up in Avery County, down at the sea towns. Haidee Bettisthorne's made a many folks miserable. Now she wants to start in on us."

"She can't, Jess. Witches don't prevail against a clean heart, and we both got that."

A tree, a weeping willow like in his grandmother's song, hung low to where they held each other at the hollow's edge, with down in the dark the place where their dead grandfathers lay buried and staked down. Not a comfortable tree, nor yet the bushes clumped in the moonlight, like things with heads betwixt hunched shoulders. Flecks of light made eyes in them. They looked to have snouts. The willow reached down branches, like arms with long twig fingers. It was embarrassing to be watched like that when you were with your true love.

"That's right, Midge," Jess said. "If there's evil on this earth, there must be good. We couldn't last a minute else."

"I wouldn't come here but to meet you," she said back. "Good and strong as you are. How long can we go on, Jess?"

He took hold of her smooth, round arms. "Let's not go on like this at all," he said all of a sudden. "Let's run off together."

"Off where?" she asked him, ready to go.

"Anywhere. I've got some money saved up. We'll take a bus, find a town where I can work. Hark, Midge, what if this is what our folks need? Us two loving one another, maybe softening up this old hate and madness, one family against the other?"

"When shall we go?" she asked him, ready.

"Right now." He made up his mind as he said it. "Tonight. Soon

as your folks are asleep, put on your best dress and shoes and take what you can bring that you'll need. Come back here and so will I. We'll head for the highway, to where we can flag that early-morning bus. Buy tickets to some big town where they can't seek us out."

Her kiss was strong and glad. "I'll be here," she said.

They left, two ways. It seemed the willow reached for them to hold them there, but that might have been moon shadows. And whatever watched them from around Lost Soul Hollow, it watched Jess as he went.

On the way home he thought something moved ahead of him, but couldn't be sure. In the cabin again, he made a big yawn and allowed he'd go up to bed. He got a few things together in the loft, a shirt and socks and some underwear to put in a croker sack, and he tied on a black tie and got a jacket and his Stetson hat. From behind a rafter he scooped the little purse that held maybe eighty dollars and some change. He wrote a note on a paper bag and left it on the pillow. Then he blew out the light and sat on the cot and waited and waited.

He heard his parents go to their room and saw the light die out from below. He kept waiting. They must be asleep now. He hiked up the loft window, slow and quiet, swung out of it into the tree behind, the way he used to when playing as a boy.

Down he climbed. Pod, the old mule, stamped in the shed, but the cows made nair sound. Jess moved quietly around the cabin and to the trail, taking the way he'd taken once tonight to meet Midge Mair.

Only now there'd come a fog of cloud in the sky, making the moon look like a dab of butter, and away off there he heard a noise, half like a laugh, half like a strangle. Following the trail, he looked up slope. He saw Haidee Bettisthorne, no missing the glow of her gray dress, and something with her. It was a dark shape, stood up before her with humped shoulders, its face close to hers, whatever face it had. Then it dropped down and moved beyond her on all fours. She said something to it as it went.

Jess felt glad he was going to leave that place, to some part of the world where he'd see no more of that witch-woman or that thing she said wasn't a dog.

On he went in the muggy night that had lost half its shine, his feet finding the way along for him. Around the turn up-slope, and there ahead was Lost Soul Hollow, all black in the gray ground, all full of woodbine and brush, and there was Midge.

"Jess!" she breathed hard at him. "Somebody's coming!"

"There sure enough is," he said, for up-slope behind her

moved black shapes, moved a string of black shapes, three or four. "Duck down in the hollow, quick."

"They're coming from below after you, Jess."

Then he looked round, and there were more black things, strung out and closing in from the other direction. For God's sake, what were they?

Whatever they were, both bunches hemmed him and Midge in there by Lost Soul Hollow. He pulled her down among the mess of brush and woodbine.

"You Warricks think you'll hide out on us?" bawled a voice from up the mountain. "Come out and fight like a man!"

"Ain't hiding no such thing!" came back another loud voice from down slope, and Jess knew it. "No Warrick air yet hid out from all the Mairs in the world!"

Now he knew. It wasn't witch stuff, it was real and it was mean. Midge's folks and his folks had come together there and meant to fight it out, though they'd sworn never to fight again. And Jess and Midge were at the hollow, betwixt the two clans.

"Wish I could get hold of me a gun," he said, out loud to himself.

"No guns," Midge wailed. "What did guns ever get for our folks but grief? If somebody's got to be shot, they can shoot me."

He grabbed her back from climbing out of the tangle of vines. "You stay down," he ordered, like as if he owned her. "I'll go up, I'll talk to them —"

If he could just have a club. He rummaged both hands amongst the vines and grabbed onto a stob there. It felt like a pick handle. He gave a twist and a yank, he rocked it to and fro. It came clear, like pulling up a big carrot. It was big enough to bat sense into a head with. "Stay here," he told Midge again and scrambled out of there, on his knees and one hand, the other holding that chunk of wood. On the ground above he stood up.

"Which Mair's that, daring me?" howled the voice he knew.

"It's me, P'," he called back.

"I hear a Warrick," came a yell from the up side. "Stand off, youins, I'm a-going to shoot."

Jess was glad for the foggy night. Maybe it wouldn't be good aim against him. He hunched down a bit and heard scrambling below.

"I said stay down, Midge," he said, but it wasn't Midge coming up.

Two shapes climbed to the top beside him. Big men, flapping rags of clothes, making deep-breath noises. They held one another by the hand; they were both broad and near as tall as Jess, and he could see them.

Could see them in the dark

cloudiness, because there was some sort of fox-fire light on them, enough to see their faces. Their dark, crinkled faces, like tree bark, with teeth.

"Don't shoot," wailed one of them, in a woolly kind of voice, like as if his insides was full of the fog.

"Who's that talking?" snarled somebody from up there, and that must be Midge's father, a black shadow off there with the black shadow of a rifle slanting across in its hands.

"You know me, Lee," said the woolly voice. "You know me, Lee Mair, my son."

"Pa!" That was a wail. The Mairs had come close, but they'd stopped. The shape that had spoken moved out of the bushes toward them. It must have let go the other one's hand. The other one paced down-slope towards the Warrick bunch, pacing slowly, as if its knees and feet were sore. The soft light of it flickered.

Jess heard both sets of folks jabbering out things, but he couldn't make out what. The two things out of the hollow kept on the move, slow but steady, each headed for one of the clans. Looking this way and that, Jess saw them lift their arms up wide and high. Those arms were gaunt as bones, with old dark rags of sleeves falling away from them.

He made out that the two bunches who'd come after him and Midge, the Mairs and the Warricks, might could want to run, but neither was running. The two things came at the two families, and Jess heard the voices, moany sighs of voices. Somebody or other answered in a living voice, purely scared but talking. Then, and it was like long hours later, though it couldn't be that long, the two fox-fiery shapes turned and came back toward Lost Soul Hollow, each from its errand. All Jess could do was stand and wait for them to come in from the up side and the down side. He'd not done aught but stand and wait the whole while, with that stick in his hand.

Closer they came. Closer. He looked back and forth at them. They were dark in the crinkly faces, but their heads looked ashy white on top, with streaky strands of hair. Through their rags he thought he saw bones moving. They were close enough for him to hit them now, but he didn't hit. Back down in the hollow they went, each from his side, and amongst the brush and vines. Midge gave a whimper, as if she couldn't raise the breath to scream, and she came climbing up beside Jess.

"What were they?" she made out to say. "Oh, what —"

"Can't rightly say, Midge," he replied her, though he was beginning to guess.

Now those two bunches of folks came toward them. Jess and Midge stood and waited, and at last Jess hefted the club in his hand.

"Boy," he heard his father saying, "what you up to out here?"

"Come home, Midgie," said somebody from the other side. It had to be Lee Mair.

Both bunches came and stood at the sides of the hollow, looking across at one another and at Midge and Jess.

"If youins got to shoot, start shooting," said Clay Warrick. "I can't, not after what I was told just now."

"Nor me," said Lee Mair back. "The shooting's over and past."

Both of them started talking and others chimed in. Both crowds, the Mairs and the Warricks, had been told not to shoot. It was Tobe Warrick had told his family, and Burt Mair had told his.

"My pa said, him and Tobe Warrick had laid side by side, spiked together, for what felt like a million years," Midge's father said. "Told me, they'd learned to know one another, be friends. Said it was for us, the living ones, to be friends, too, start looking one another in the face."

"My pa told me the same," owned up Clay Warrick. "Said if we didn't, him and your pa would come back and see why not. And I don't want them to come back, never no more."

"Never no more," Lee Mair repeated him. The two fathers looked just then how Tobe Warrick and Burt Mair might could have looked, long ago, if somebody had made them listen to sense and reason.

"Hark at me one time," spoke up Jess. Tired-feeling, he leaned on his club. "How come youins both to be out here?"

"It was Haidee Bettisthorne," his father replied him. "Come and said Midge Mair was a-going to tole you off to where her folks could kill you."

"That's what she told us!" came out Lee Mair. "She swore up and down Jess was out to kill Midge, we'd better come save her."

"She lied to the both of us," said Clay Warrick. "Lee Mair, she wanted to get the shooting started all over. That's a witch way, making trouble and grief. Just for the making."

"We should ought to make Haidee Bettisthorne scarce and hard to find," said Jess's brother George, the first he'd said yet.

All of them started talking. How sorry they were they'd been mad with each other, how glad they were it hadn't come to bloodshed, how it was Haidee Bettisthorne's doing. Finally Jess drew a big breath of air into him and flung the club down on the ground.

"What's that, son?" his father inquired him, stooping for it. "I swanny, it's a piece of old locust tree, big as a fence post."

"I got it down there amongst the vines," said Jess.

"A stake driven there," said Midge softly. "That's what it was."

And that's what it had been. The locust stake, driven fifty years ago through Tobe Warrick and Burt Mair, where they'd died grappling one another, to keep them in their grave. The stake Jess had yanked out, to fight what fight he didn't rightly know. And it had turned them loose to come out and speak to their kinfolks, and now they'd gone back, and now maybe they were at rest.

Things turned out pretty much to the good. When Jess and Midge got married, Burt Mair gave the bride away and Clay Warrick stood up with his son. But nobody did aught about Haidee Bettisthorne. Because when folks went looking for her, she couldn't be found, ever again in those parts of the mountains. As to whatever helped her that wasn't her dog, it seems to be gone too, though once in a while somebody sees funny tracks. Funny, but not laughing-at funny.

QUASAR, QUASAR, BURNING BRIGHT!

Some months ago I received an unusual request. A charming young woman who had met me at a convention and had been impressed by my suave demeanor, wrote to tell me that her 25th birthday was approaching. Her best friend, as it happened, would be celebrating her 28th birthday on the very same day.

Would it be possible, she asked, to celebrate the day by taking me out to lunch at the Russian Tea Room?

I hesitated. I live in a constant atmosphere of looming deadlines and have made long speeches to anyone who will listen on the iniquity of people who are forever expecting me to have lunch with them when I desperately need to remain glued to the typewriter. Yet somehow, having lunch with two young women in order to help them celebrate their birthdays is quite different from having a business lunch, right? And besides the Russian Tea Room is one of my favorite restaurants, right?

So I finally agreed. All in good time, I got to the restaurant and found the two young women waiting for me. They clapped their little hands in glee and I sat down between them, feeling pretty gleeful

ISAAC ASIMOV

Science

myself. We had a very pleasant time indeed, talking, joking, laughing and, when dessert time came, I prepared to order my inevitable baklava.

The establishment, however, had somehow got the notion that a birthday was involved and they beat me to it. Two waiters came out with a cake bearing a candle. They sang "Happy Birthday to You" and placed the cake right in front of me.

I could see why they did so. If you yourself were to see a man in his late youth flanked on either side by an attractive young woman, and knew that there was a birthday involved, wouldn't you suppose it was the man who was getting a special birthday treat?

I don't like inaccuracy, however, so I smiled genially at the waiters and said. "No, no. It is the young women who are having the birthday. *I* am the birthday present."

The look of awed respect in the eyes of the waiters was beautiful to see. —But you know me. I just sat there trying to look modest.

The moral is that things are not always what they seem — which brings me to the subject of the article.

The first astronomer who tried to map the heavens and indicate the position of at least some of the various stars, was Hipparchus of Nicaea. He prepared a map about 130 B.C. in which he listed 1,080 stars, giving the celestial latitude and longitude of each, as best as they could be determined without either a telescope or a modern clock.

The positions of the stars were one of the two stellar properties that could be determined without modern instruments. The other was the relative brightness, and some stars, after all, are brighter than others. Hipparchus didn't neglect that fact.

He divided the stars into six classes. The first class included the twenty brightest stars in the sky. The second included stars dimmer than those, and the third stars that were still dimmer. Then there followed the fourth, fifth, and sixth class, the last of which included those stars just barely visible on a dark, Moonless night to a person with sharp vision.

Each class eventually came to be called a "magnitude," from the Latin word for "great." It was only natural to use that word, since throughout ancient and medieval times the stars were supposed to be all at the same distance, all stuck to the hard material of the "firmament" like luminous thumbtacks. It was almost as if they were tiny holes in the firmament through which the glorious light of heaven could be seen, and the difference in brightness would then depend on the size or greatness of the hole.

The brightest stars, therefore, were of the "first magnitude," the next brightest were of the "second magnitude" and so on.

Hipparchus's works did not survive into modern times, but nearly three centuries after his time, another astronomer, Claudius Ptolemy, published a survey of the astronomical knowledge of the day, based largely on Hipparchus's work. Ptolemy included Hipparchus's map, with some corrections, together with the notion of magnitudes. Since Ptolemy's work survived down to the present, we still retain the division of stars into magnitudes today.

The division of the stars into magnitudes was purely qualitative at first. Some first magnitude stars are clearly brighter than other first magnitude stars, but no account was taken of that. Nor did astronomers worry overmuch that the dimmest first-magnitude stars were not very much brighter than the brightest second-magnitude stars. There is, in fact, a continuous gradation of brightness among the stars, but the classification into discrete classes obscures that.

In the 1830s, attempts began to be made to improve on the Hipparchus/Ptolemy system, which was, by then, 2000 years old.

One pioneer was the English astronomer John Herschel, who was observing the southern stars from the Cape of Good Hope. In 1836, he devised an instrument which would produce a small image of the full Moon that could be brightened or dimmed by the manipulation of a lens. The image could then be made equal in brightness to the image of a particular star. In this way, Herschel could estimate the comparative brightensses of stars quite finely and could determine gradations smaller than a whole magnitude.

Using the full Moon, however, restricted the times when measurements could be made, and only the brighter stars could be measured since the dimmer ones were washed out in the Moonlight.

At about the same time a German astronomer, Carl August von Steinheil, had worked out a device that could bring into juxtaposition the images of two different stars, one of which could be dimmed or brightened to match the other. This was the birth of "stellar photometry," and, for the first time, magnitudes could be measured by objective instrument rather than by subjective estimation by eye alone.

Once this came to pass, it became important to determine the significance of magnitude. How does brightness change as one goes up or down the scale of magnitude?

To the eye, it seems that the change in brightness from each magnitude to the next is the same. One goes from first magnitude to sixth magnitude in equal steps.

But can these steps be represented as though we went up the number scale 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6? Was the sixth magnitude 1, the fifth magnitude 2, the fourth magnitude 3 and so on? Was a difference of one magnitude equivalent to a doubling of brightness, a difference of two magnitudes to a tripling, a difference of three magnitudes to a quadrupling, and so on? If that were so, brightness would increase up the steps of the magnitudes in equal increments and we would have an "arithmetic progression."

Steinheil did not think this was so. He thought the progression was by equal ratios. In other words, if the sixth-magnitude star was 1 and the fifth-magnitude was 2, the fourth-magnitude star would be 4, the third-magnitude star 8, the second-magnitude star 16, and the first-magnitude star, 32. This is a "logarithmic progression."

Steinheil was right and, as time went on, physiologists showed that the human senses, generally, work logarithmically. You can see this for yourself if you have a three-way light-bulb which has a 50, 100, and 150-watt set of levels. Switch from the 50 to the 100-watt level and there is a marked brightening. Pass on to the 150-watt level and the further brightening seems considerably less even though there has been another fifty-watt increase. Your visual sense detects a 100-percent increase in the first step and only a 50-percent increase in the second.

Similarly, you can easily tell the difference between a 1-pound weight and a 2-pound weight of the same dimensions by hefting them. You cannot easily distinguish between a 30-pound weight and a 31-pound weight in the same way even though the difference is still 1 pound. In the first case you are detecting a 100-percent difference; in the second you are failing to detect a 3-percent difference.

Of course, it would be too much to expect that a system of magnitudes chosen by eye by Hipparchus would happen to divide stars into groups each of which was just twice the brightness of the next group below. The ratio would be some less convenient value, surely.

In 1856, the English astronomer, Norman Robert Pogson, pointed out that the average first magnitude star is about a hundred times as bright as the average sixth magnitude star, judging by photometry. In order to make the five intervals between the magnitudes come out to just 100, we must make the ratio of each of the five intervals the fifth root of 100, which comes out to about 2.512. (In other words 2.512 X 2.512 X 2.512 X 2.512

x 2.512 x 2.512 is just about equal to 100.)

Therefore if you choose a magnitude of 1.0 in such a way that some of the traditional first-magnitude stars are brighter than that, and some dimmer, you can then proceed to work your way down by ratios of 2.512.

As photometers improved, astronomers could determine magnitudes to one decimal, and even, on occasion, could make a stab at the second decimal. The brighter of two stars separated by a tenth of a magnitude is about 1.1 times as bright than the dimmer one. The brighter of two stars separated by a hundredth of a magnitude is about 1.01 times as bright as the dimmer.

Using the new system, we no longer have to say that Pollux and Fomalhaut are both first-magnitude stars. Instead, we can say that Pollux has a magnitude of 1.16 and Fomalhaut a magnitude of 1.19. This means that Pollux, with the lower number, is brighter than Fomalhaut by 0.03 magnitudes.

We might say that we can call any star with a magnitude between 1.5 and 2.5 a second-magnitude star. Working our way downward from that, any star with a magnitude between 2.5 and 3.5 would be a third-magnitude star and so on. Stars with a magnitude between 5.5 and 6.5 would be sixth-magnitude stars and would belong to the class originally defined as the dimmest stars that could be seen.

By the time Pogson had worked out his magnitude scale, however, the sixth-magnitude stars were by no means the dimmest that could be seen. The telescope revealed far dimmer stars, and successive improvements of the instrument revealed still dimmer ones.

That didn't matter, however. By continuing to use that ratio of 2.512, we can have seventh-magnitude stars, eighth-magnitude stars, ninth-magnitude stars and so on, measuring each to as close a value as our instruments will allow us to.

The best contemporary telescopes will reveal stars as dim as the 20th magnitude if we place our eye to the eye-piece. If we place a photographic plate there instead and let the focused light accumulate we can detect stars down to the 24th magnitude.

That's not bad, really, since a 24th magnitude object is eighteen magnitudes dimmer than the dimmest object we can see with the unaided eye. By our logarithmic scale this means that the dimmest star the ancients could see is about 16 million (16,000,000) times as bright as the dimmest star *we* can see.

We started from the second magnitude a few paragrahps back and worked our way dimward. Let's start from there again and work our way brightward. If stars with magnitudes from 1.5 to 2.5 are second-magnitude, then stars with magnitudes from 0.5 to 1.5 are first magnitude.

But there are no less than eight stars with magnitudes lower than 0.5. What are they as far as magnitude is concerned? Some stars are even brighter than would be represented by a magnitude of 0.0 and must have their magnitudes expressed as negative numbers. Can we speak of the "zeroth-magnitude" and define it as lying between magnitudes from -0.5 to 0.5? There are six stars of the zeroth-magnitude ranging from Procyon with a magnitude of 0.38 to Alpha Centauri with a magnitude of -0.27.

There are even two stars with magnitudes beyond -0.5 and which, therefore, are of the "minus-first magnitude". They are Canopus with a magnitude of -0.72 and Sirius with a magnitude of -1.42.

Astronomers, however, can't break with tradition quite that far. They can bring themselves to go beyond Hipparchus's sixth magnitude but not beyond his first magnitude. The stars with magnitudes of less than 0.5, even Sirius, are all lumped together among the first-magnitude stars.

It means that the brightest traditional first-magnitude star, Sirius, is actually three magnitudes brighter than the dimmest traditional first-magnitude star, Castor, whose magnitude of 1.58 actually puts it just over the edge into the second magnitude. In terms of brightness, Sirius is about 16 times as bright as Castor and is about 15 billion (15,000,000,000) times as bright as the faintest star our telescope can show us.

Are there objects in the sky that are brighter than Sirius?

Certainly! Hipparchus restricted his magnitude classification to stars, but now that magnitudes have been reduced to numbers and ratios, astronomers can continue to move along the scale of negative numbers and up the level of brightness as far as they want to.

Thus, when the planet Jupiter is at its brightest, it reaches a magnitude of -2.5. No astronomer speaks of it as being the minus-second magnitude or of any named magnitude — but the number can be given. Then, Mars can reach a magnitude of -2.8, while Venus, the brightest jewel in the sky, can attain a magnitude of -4.3. At its brightest, Venus is about 15 times as bright as Sirius.

And even that doesn't represent the top. The Moon is far brighter even than Venus and at full Moon attains a total magnitude of -12.6. That means the full Moon is about 2,000 times as bright as Venus.

This leaves the Sun, whose magnitude is -26.91. The Sun is thus 525,000 times as bright as the full Moon, 1 billion (1,000,000,000) times as bright as Venus, 15 billion (15,000,000,000) times as bright as Sirius, and a quarter of a billion trillion (250,000,000,000,000,000,000) times as bright as the dimmest object the telescope will show us.

And since there is nothing brighter to see in the sky than the Sun, and nothing dimmer than the dimmest star the telescope can show us, we have reached the limit in both directions, having traversed a range of fifty-one magnitudes.

But, as I said in the introduction to this article, things are not always what they seem.

All these magnitudes I've been talking about are *apparent* magnitudes. The brightness of an object depends not only on how much light it emits, but also on how distant it is from us. An object that is actually extraordinarily dim in an absolute sense, like a hundred-watt light-bulb, can be placed just behind our shoulder and it can then be brighter to our eyes than the Moon is. On the other hand, a star that gives out much more light than the Sun can be so far away that not even a telescope will show it to us.

In order, then, to determine levels of *real* brightness, to measure the light an object *actually* emits — its "luminosity" — we must imagine that all the objects in question are at some fixed distance from us. The fixed distance has been selected (arbitrarily) as 10 parsecs (32.6 light-years).

Once the distance of any luminous object is known and its brightness at that distance is measured, we can calculate what its brightness would be at any other distance. The magnitude an object would have at 10 Parsecs is its "absolute magnitude."

Our Sun, for instance, is about 150,000,000 kilometers from us (1/200,000 of a parsec). Imagine it out to ten parsecs and you have increased its distance by 2 million (2,000,000) times. Its apparent brightness sinks by the square of that number, or 4 trillion (4,000,000,000,000) times. That means its brightness sinks by about thirty-one and a half magnitudes. Its absolute magnitude is about 4.7.

The Sun, seen from a distance of 10 parsecs, would be visible, but it would shine as a fairly dim and quite unremarkable star.

What about Sirius? It is already at a distance of 2.65 parsecs. If we imagined it out at 10 parsecs, its brightness would dim by nearly three magnitudes. Its absolute magnitude would be 1.3. It would no longer be

the brightest star in the sky, but it would still be a first-magnitude star.

The absolute magnitudes, which wipe out difference in distance as a factor, shows us that Sirius is about 23 times as luminous as the Sun. It emits 23 times as much light.

Sirius is far from the most luminous star there is, however. There are stars that do much better. Of all the first-magnitude stars, the most distant is Rigel, which is 165 parsecs away. It is only the seventh brightest star in the sky and is only 1/4 as bright as Sirius. Still, Rigel is over sixty times as far from us as Sirius is. To make so respectable a show from such a distance, Rigel must be very luminous.

And indeed it is. The absolute magnitude of Rigel is -6.2. Place it at a distance of 10 parsecs, and even though it would be at nearly four times the actual distance of Sirius, it would not only greatly outshine that star, it would shine even brighter than Venus, about six times as bright, in fact, Rigel is 1,000 times as luminous as Sirius and 23,000 times as luminous as the Sun.

Even Rigel isn't the record-holder. It is the most luminous star that we know of in our own Galaxy, but there are other galaxies. The Larger Magellanic Cloud is a kind of satellite-galaxy of our own and in it is a star called "S Doradus." It is too dim to see except with a telescope, but it is some 45,000 parsecs away and astronomers were astonished it was as bright as it was considering the distance. It turns out to have an absolute magnitude of -9.5. That makes it about 21 times as luminous as Rigel and nearly half a million times as luminous as our Sun.

If S Doradus were in place of our Sun, a planet circling it at 17 times the distance of Pluto would see it shine as brightly as we see our Sun shine.

S Doradus is the most luminous stable star that we know of; it emits more light day after day, century after century, than any other. Not all stars are stable, however. Occasionally, stars explode into "novas" and then gain luminosity sharply, if temporarily.

The size of the gain depends on the size of the star. The more massive the star, the more enormous the explosion. The really magnificent explosion of a "supernova" can bring a single massive star to an absolute magnitude, very briefly, of about -19.

For a brief time, such a supernova will be shining with a luminosity some 6,000 times as great as S Doradus and about 10 billion (10,000,000,000) times that of our Sun. Even at a distance of 10 parsecs, it will shine 360 times as brightly as the full Moon, though it would be only a thousandth as bright as the Sun.

Do we now have a record for luminosity?

Perhaps not. A supernova is only a single star. Might we not consider the luminosity of a group of stars?

A pair of stars, reasonably close together, looks like a single star from a distance. If both stars are of equal brightness the combination is 0.75 magnitudes brighter than either star singly.

Double stars are very common, and even triple and quadruple star systems are not exactly rare. In fact, stars exist in large clusters as well. There are about 125 known "globular clusters" associated with our Galaxy, and each contains anywhere from ten thousand to several hundred thousand stars, all densely packed together by the standards of our own stellar neighborhood.

Well, then, suppose we consider a globular cluster made up of a million stars, each with the luminosity of our Sun. We could calculate its absolute magnitude to be -10.3. Such an enormous cluster would be, nevertheless, merely twice as luminous as the single star S Doradus. A gigantic supernova can attain a luminosity equal to 3,000 times that of a large globular cluster. No globular cluster can, therefore, set a luminosity record.

A galaxy itself, however, has at its nucleus, the equivalent of a globular cluster of enormous size. The center of our own Galaxy is a densely packed globular cluster made up of a hundred billion stars. It's absolute magnitude can be calculated to be -22.8. (The rest of the galaxy, outside the nucleus, has a relatively sparse scattering of stars and if its luminosity is included, the overall value may reach -22.9.)

That looks like a new record. The galactic nucleus shines with a luminosity over three times that of a supernova at a peak. (Still, this is not a very great difference in luminosity, and when a gigantic supernova blazes out in a particular galaxy, it is quite likely to give out as much light, at its peak, as all the rest of the galaxy combined.)

Of course our Galaxy is not the largest there is. A large galaxy can easily be ten times the mass of our own and might have an absolute magnitude of -25.

There is a catch to this calculation of the absolute magnitudes of globular clusters and galaxies, however, for we are dealing with extended bodies. A large globular cluster could be up to 100 parsecs across, and a galactic nucleus can be up to 5,000 parsecs across. The absolute magnitude can be calculated, but it can't be experienced in the ordinary way.

If you imagined the central point of a globular cluster or of a galactic nucleus to be ten parsecs away, you would be *within* the object. You would see stars all about you, and you would not have the sense of a combined luminosity, anymore than you have it now in our own Galaxy.

To be sure, we might use a million parsecs as the conventional distance in measuring luminosity, and then we could see that a large galaxy outshines any individual star under any circumstance. But then, all the objects seen at that distance would seem very dim and unimpressive.

If we want to look for a record beyond a supernova, then we must ask if there is anything that would look like a single object of reasonably small size at a distance of 10 parsecs and which would yet outshine a supernova from day to day, steadily.

There *is* an answer. What we call "quasars" are, apparently, galactic nuclei so condensed and so brilliant that they can be seen (telescopically) at distances of hundreds of millions of parsecs. No other object can be seen at such distances. A typical quasar is thought to be, perhaps, only half a parsec or so in diameter, and yet it shines with the luminosity of a hundred galaxies such as our own.

Half a parsec is a respectable diameter; it is about 12 million times the diameter of our Sun; it is over a thousand times the diameter of the orbit of Pluto. Place a quasar at a distance of 10 parsecs and its apparent diameter will be nearly 3° across. That is about six times the diameter of our Sun or full Moon, but we would still see it as a single blazing object.

The average quasar will then have an absolute magnitude of -28. It will shine, *even at the distance of ten parsecs,* about twice as brilliantly as the Sun does in our sky, even though the quasar is two million times as far away.

The question then arises as to what the brightest quasar might be. Each quasar tends to vary in brightness quite a bit from time to time. They appear in our telescopes as ordinary-seeming very dim stars (thanks to their great distance) and were photographed in past years long before they were known to be special. (The discovery was made through their emission of intense radio-wave emission.) If astronomers go back through past records, astonishing peaks of luminosity may show up.

In 1975, two astronomers, Lola J. Eachus and William Liller traced back quasar 3C279. It usually shines with an apparent magnitude of 18, but back in 1937 it briefly attained an apparent magnitude of 11.

To shine as brightly as the 11th-magnitude from a distance of about 2

billion parsecs is incredible, almost. At its peak, 3C279 shone with the light of over a thousand ordinary galaxies, and its absolute magnitude was calculated by Eachus and Liller to have reached a peak of -31.

Imagine 3C279 at a distance of 10 parsecs from us and it would shine with a brilliance of 40 times that of our Sun as we see it now.

A quasar such as 3C279 can reach a peak luminosity, then, a hundred trillion (100,000,000,000,000) times that of our Sun — or five hundred million (500,000,000) times that of S Doradus — or over sixty thousand times that of a vast supernova at its peak — or a thousand times that of our entire Galaxy taken as a unit.

And that's the record, as far as we know now.

COMING NEXT MONTH: SPECIAL DAMON KNIGHT ISSUE

The November issue will be the ninth in our series of special issues honoring a major writer of science fiction. This series began in 1962 (with a Theodore Sturgeon issue), and each of the special issues have become collector's items over the years. Next month we are pleased to present a special Damon Knight issue, honoring a man who is surely one of the major influences on this field: as short story writer and novelist, critic and editor.

Featured will be an extraordinary new story by Damon Knight entitled "I See You," an appreciation by Theodore Sturgeon, a Knight bibliography and a special cover by Ed Emshwiller. Don't miss the November issue, on sale October 5 (or send us the coupon on page 98).

Papa Schimmelhorn returns! In his first appearance since "Count Von Schimmelhorn and the Timy Pony" in our October 1974 25th anniversary issue, the colorful genius from New Haven is kidnapped by a spaceship womanned by . . .

The Ladies of Beetlegoose Nine

by R. BRETNOR

It is untrue that there was dancing in the streets when the people of New Haven heard that Papa Schimmelhorn had disappeared. A few biased parents may have rejoiced at the idea of sending their daughters safely back to work at Heinrich Luedesing's cuckoo clock factory, where he had been foreman. There may have been some celebrating by his male subordinates, who never had been able to compete with the masculine allure of his gigantic stature, bright blue eyes, and great white beard. And certain ministers did use his fate as a text for moral sermons in which there was more than a hint of jubilation.

The rest was mere malicious gossip. Many a modest maiden cried herself to sleep that night. Many a sprightly grass widow stained her lonely pillow with her tears. But the deepest sorrow was Heinrich Luedesing's, for he had lost a close friend, a jewel of an employee, and all his hopes of capturing the Grand Award, the Gold Medal of the forthcoming International Horological Exposition at Berne. For Papa Schimmelhorn had vanished within an hour after completing the world's most splendid cuckoo clock, an instrument of such perfection and complexity that even the directors of Patek-Phillipe had been expected to turn pea-green with envy at the sight of it.

Papa Schimmelhorn had vanished. Mama Schimmelhorn, for the first time in the more than sixty years of married life, had vanished with him. So had the perfect cuckoo clock. And so — though few were aware of it at the time — had Gustav-Adolf.

The exact chronology has never yet been set forth publicly, science and journalism alike having treated the Schimmelhorn accounts with unseemly levity. Therefore it is necessary to begin at the beginning

— namely on May 12th, at precisely 11:58 PM, Eastern Standard Time.

At that instant, the spaceship *Vilvilkuz Snar Tuhl-Y't* (which may be roughly translated as *Lovely-Madame Mother-President Vilvilu*) was hovering forty miles up over the center of New Haven. The male members of the crew were swabbing decks, twittering petty gossip at each other, and pretending to polish brass. Madame-Captain Groolu Hah, who had just succeeded in orienting the visible signal from the Intellectometer against its map-screen coordinates, was shouting orders at her excited staff in a beautiful bass voice. And Papa Schimmelhorn, in the loot and clutter of his basement workshop, was stepping back to regard his just-finished masterpiece.

Directly over his untidy bench, there was a gaudy poster showing as much as possible of a lady advertised as Ms. Prudence Pilgrim, who, wearing only a white Puritan bonnet, was the star performer at a topless-bottomless establishment called Horny Joe's.

Papa Schimmelhorn stepped back, gave the poster a sentimental glance, and pointed at the perfect cuckoo clock beside it.

"Look, Gustav-Adolf!" he cried out. "Chust like Herr Doktor Jung told me in Geneva, in der subconscience I am a chenius!"

On the bench, Gustav-Adolf placed a large striped paw on the pink catnip mouse he was dismembering, regarded the superclock disdainfully, and muttered "Maow!" to indicate it was inedible.

Paying no attention to this criticism, Papa Schimmelhorn feasted his eyes upon his handiwork. The clock was four feet high and three feet wide. Its architecture was in the grand tradition of Cuckoo - Clock - Chalet - With - Gingerbread. In addition to the big central dial, it sported Fahrenheit and Centigrade thermometers, a rainfall gauge, a perpetual calendar, two barometers, and a device telling simultaneously the phases of the moon and the most likely times to catch grunion. Leaves and tendrils twined around its carved facade, and around numerous svelte female figures, all in attitudes of extreme abandon, and all modeled with delightful frankness after Ms. Prudence Pilgrim in her working clothes.

"How beautiful!" sighed Papa Schimmelhorn. "Under der inside — zo many vheels und chewels und dinguses. But *ach!* Almost it iss tvelve o'clock. Now, Gustav-Adolf, you chust vait!"

As he spoke, the minute hand moved the last fraction of an inch toward the hour. There was a click.

The largest doors flew open to reveal a veritable choir of cuckoos.

The choir popped out and cuckooed in pretty counterpoint, and popped in again. Twelve times it repeated this performance, cleverly varying the theme and accompanied by a tiny glockenspiel. Papa Schimmelhorn winked at Gustav-Adolf. "Und now," he whispered, "comes der real McCoy."

The choir vanished. With a gentle *brrr-r-t*, the upper doors opened suddenly. There was revealed, in miniature, a sylvan scene — a painted backdrop of forests and snowy peaks, a wooden windlass over a rustic well. Grasping the handle, stood a chubby Alpine maid. Sidling up from behind her, around the well, came a smirking Alpine youth.

He came on tiptoe; he stretched out a hand; he gave the maiden an intimate and goosy pinch. The maiden shrieked; briefly she did the bumps; she started cranking at the windlass furiously. And the weights that ran the perfect cuckoo clock rose several inches, drawn upward by their chains.

"Zo cute!" chuckled Papa Schimmelhorn. "Der self-vinding comes from efery pinch. It iss perpetual motion, vhich no vun else invents. For poor old Heinrich, iss a nice surprise."

He removed the cuckoo clock, set the hands back an hour, and wrapped it, weights and all, in a discarded tartan bathrobe. "But Heinrich must vait vun more day," he remarked happily. "Tonight iss more important ve show to Prudie die lidtle ladies on der front who look like her."

He smiled to himself, imagining the nature of Ms. Pilgrim's reaction to this compliment. Then, in case it alone should prove inadequate, he dropped a bag of jelly beans into the pocket of his bright blue sports coat. Finally, he picked up the remains of the catnip mouse and hoisted twenty pounds of tough striped tomcat to his shoulder.

"Ve must be qviet like mices," he cautioned, looking regretfully at his 1922 Stanley Steamer touring car, painted British Racing Green, which he was redesigning to include an antigravity device. "If ve try to drife, Mama maybe hears. She iss a fine voman, Gustav-Adolf — only vith old ideas."

He was quite right. His wife's ideas regarding him were indeed old, dating back through six long decades of night-errantry. She had sensed that he was planning some new misdeed, and her suspicions had been thoroughly confirmed by a phone call from her friend Mrs. Hundhammer, the pastor's wife, who had heard about Ms. Prudence from Mrs. Heinrich Luedesing. At exactly 12:06 AM, when the

basement door clicked shut behind him, she rose from her chair in the living room, where she had been waiting.

Her stiff black dress creaking threateningly, she seized her black umbrella by the hilt and hefted it. "Anoder naked dancing girl!" she hissed. "Chust like der Vorld's Fair in 1915! It iss enough. Now I put a shtop!"

Breathing righteous indignation, she left the house and, clinging closely to concealing shadows, trailed her wayward spouse as cleverly as any private eye.

At 12:09 AM, twenty miles straight up, Madame-Captain Groolu Hah still stared incredulously at the Intellectometer's map-screen signal. "I can't believe it!" she growled, fuzzing with the fringe of peanut-butter hair allowed her by her rank. "Six-oh-oh-fourteen on the Thil scale — nobody's ever measured such a mind!" She frowned ferociously at a younger woman at the instrument's control panel. "Are you sure you didn't drop a stitch somewhere, Lieutenant?"

The younger woman lifted a gadget like a plastic buttonhook out of a maze of interlacing wires. She touched her single carroty spit-curl in salute. "Fragrant Madame," she replied respectfully, "I've checked the whole resistance network several times, and we're at exactly the right altitude for accuracy. Besides, this is a close-similarity planet; so there aren't any Gwip factors to interfere."

"I know that," snapped the captain. "The natives can't be anything but humanoid. That only makes it more peculiar. Don't you realize that the highest rating measured yet is *two*-five-five-eleven, and that was right at home?"

"C-could it be s-some sort of queer *male*-dominated world, F-Fragrant Madame?"

"Impossible! We've found only two, and their inhabitants were savages, as we expected. No, it's simply a superintellect down there — one that might actually be able to solve our problem for us. And that's what worries me. They may get angry at us and retaliate — and I don't like to think about the weapons they might have. We'll just have to go in and get back out again *fast*. I only hope we can catch her in the open, that's all."

Decisively, the captain hitched up her brassiere and half-apron. "Commander, is the landing segment ready?"

"Ready and womanned, Fragrant Madame," grunted a stocky brunette standing by a large open port. "We've transferred the *ifk*. We can come unstuck any time."

"And the snap-net?"

"Cocked and ready, Fragrant Madame."

"Very well — *prepare to cast off!*"

The brunette snapped to attention; she saluted by touching the thin pigtail hanging down over her left ear; turning smartly, she hoisted herself through the port.

Instantly, all was action. Junior officers repeated the command into intercom mouthpieces, and the men of the crew, giggling excitedly, scurried around to the orders of a brawny female bosun. Six of them hauled up an enormous round lid made of the same opaque yellow plastic as the hull of the ship. Four others brought things resembling giant-sized toothpaste tubes. Two more stood by with a large steaming kettle.

A bosun barked. Quickly, the toothpaste boys squeezed a brown viscous substance into the channel running around the projecting face of the port. The lads with the lid slapped it into position. Another bosun counted to twenty out loud. The kettle was emptied into a spout over the port; the spout was sealed with brown goo and a plug; and for a while the kettle's contents could be heard rumbling inside.

"Report!" snapped the Captain.

"Port sealed," answered a bosun.

"Landing segment, report!"

"Segment unstuck," sang out the commander.

The captain hesitated for an instant. Then she shrugged. "Might as well be killed for an *ooth* as a *sarlig*," she muttered. "*Landing segment away!*"

Quite unaware that she had just supervised an operation which would have given any Terrestrial designer of spaceships a full-blown neurosis, she began guiding the segment down to its rendezvous.

As it descended, Papa Schimmelhorn continued on his carefree way, never suspecting that his mind was acting like a beacon for strangers out of Space, or that Mama Schimmelhorn was following not more than half a block away. Therefore he felt free to give Gustav-Adolf the benefit of his experience of life and love.

"Zo, Gustav-Adolf," he began, "you vant to know vhy Prudie makes die young punks pay to vatch and aftervards she has a date with Papa Schimmelhorn?"

Gustav-Adolf, savoring the scent of a back-fence adversary on the warm night air, growled emphatically.

"Dot's der shpirit!" cried Papa Schimmelhorn. "You listen. I tell how I am full of vinegar at eighty years, und nodt like poor old Heinrich, vith no lead in der pencil.

Vhen I was tvelve—"

He described the precocious episode in detail. Then, blonde by blonde, brunette by plump brunette by plump brunette, he went on through the ardent fumblings of his adolescence, through the journeyman experiences of his young manhood, to the good, steady craftsmanship achieved in middle age.

By the time the landing segment reached fifty thousand feet, he had — both chronologically and on the ground — covered more than half the distance to Miss Prudence and was discussing the lush red-headed widow who had enlivened his several years as a janitor at the Geneva Institute for Higher Physics, where he had first discovered his scientific genius.

As the segment passed twenty thousand feet, he was explaining how an adventure with a female string quartet had revealed the full flowering of his masculinity at three score years and ten.

As it dropped down — ten thousand feet, five, one — and as his powerful strides took him deeper into the district of bars and adult bookstores and dubious hotels where Ms. Prudence did her nightly stint — he neatly inventoried his more recent triumphs.

Finally, the segment hovering a scant hundred feet above his head, and unaware that now behind him his wife was silently and swiftly closing in, he paused in the darkened parking lot behind Horny Joe's.

Quietly, the vessel overhead descended fifty feet — and quietly Mama Schimmelhorn advanced fifteen.

"Oh-ho-ho-ho!" he chuckled. "Gustav-Adolf, I giff you goot advice. To keep der vinegar vhen you are old—" He pulled the long, striped tail playfully. "—you must keep chasing pretty lidtle pussycats! Und now ve—"

"*Und now ve vhat?*" demanded Mama Schimmelhorn, as the sharp point of her umbrella caught him in the ribs. "You think you get avay again, *ha?* To shtay up late, und feel dot dancing girl vithout her clothes, und teach mein Gustav-Adolf dirty tricks?" She reapplied the point of her umbrella several times. "Right now I take you by der ear! Ve go shtrait ho—"

She never finished. Without a sound, the snap-net from the landing segment fell and enfolded them. It rose into the air. The segment swallowed it.

In the control room of the *Vilvilkuz Snar Tuhl-Y't,* the brilliant signal on the screen winked out. There was sudden silence. Captain and lieutenant glanced at each other apprehensively.

"Well, I — I guess that means

she's in the bag, ha-ha." The captain's laughter lacked enthusiasm.

"Y-yes, F-Fragrant Madame, I'm af-f-fraid it does," quavered the lieutenant. "Did *you* see what *I* saw j-just before we caught her — on the screen, I mean?"

"Those squiggles?"

"They — they didn't look like squiggles — not to *me.* They looked like regular s-signals. One of them was pretty high, too, by our standards — around two-four-four-something. And the other — well, I know you won't believe me, this being an alien planet, but it looked just like a *cat's!*"

"Nonsense!" asserted the captain, a little too loudly. "They were *squiggles,* that's all. And if they weren't, what of it? You aren't frightened of a cat, I hope — not with the ship as full of them as a husband shop."

"Of c-course not, Fragrant Madame. What worries me is that signal in between. It might belong to almost *anything* — maybe some horrible, h-hairy creature with great big t-tentacles!"

Involuntarily, the captain shivered a sign of unfeminine weakness that angered her. "Dammit, Lieutenant," she shouted, "do you want to get the men hysterical? Our problem's grave enough to warrant *any* risk. Besides, I'm taking all possible precautions. When the net's opened, we'll have the spray-guns ready. So *shut up* — that's an order!"

And she stamped off to attend to the purely military details of the reception.

Much has been, and still is being, written about the nature of a first contact with extraterrestrials. All of it is, of course, ridiculous — for the event, as it actually occurred, involved nothing more extraordinary than Papa and Mama Schimmelhorn, Gustav-Adolf, the complement of the spaceship *Vilvilkuz Snar Tuhl-Y't,* and an astounding assortment of emotions.

Though the commander in charge of the landing segment made the return trip in a hurry, she did not push her craft into any uncomfortable accelerations — an impossible procedure where *ifk* are the motive power. Including the time to glue-in and unseal the port, nearly twenty minutes elapsed before the net was finally deposited on the control-room floor.

Aboard ship, tension had mounted. The men were twitching and whimpering. The women, spray-guns ready, were watching the reopened port in grim silence. Twelve men and two bosuns stood near it, looking dismal.

"Net on its way!" came a voice from the port — and the base of the

net made its appearance.

"Look alive there!" shouted the captain.

Urged on by the bosuns, the twelve men seized the net — tightly woven, semi-rigid, like a drawn-out lobster-trap. For a moment it lay there, quivering and shaking and emitting blood-curdling noises.

"S-set it on end," the captain ordered.

Reluctantly, the little men obeyed.

"P-prepare to open it."

Six men laid trembling hands to a line fastened at one side of the snap-net; the other six grasped its counterpart.

The captain faced them, pale but brave.

As one woman, her officers primed their spray-guns; aimed them.

"N-now!" she cried.

Uttering a simultaneous and despairing sob, the crewmen pulled. Abruptly, the snap-net came apart. Its two sides separated and fell away. An awful hush descended on the room—

There, breathing fire, stood Mama Schimmelhorn. Her stiff black dress was rumpled; her small black hat was squashed. But her umbrella was still firmly in her hand. She was unbowed.

Behind her, Papa Schimmelhorn was in a sadder state. His jaw sagged loosely. Blood trickled down into his shredded beard from numerous lacerations which had enabled Gustav-Adolf to retain a perch atop his head. Clutching the bathrobe and its treasure to his breast, he seemed entirely unaware that now his friend — ears flat, teeth bared, and every hair erect — was making him a battlement from which to cry a terrible feline challenge to the worlds.

Aghast, all color draining from their faces, the alien crew stared straight at Mama Schimmelhorn. For just an instant, she stared right back. Then, nostrils flaring, she advanced a pace, and hammered her umbrella's point against the deck.

"More naked vomen!" she trumpeted.

Raising her weapon, she whirled on Papa Schimmelhorn. *"Ach,* you should be ashamed! For der old goat at more than eighty years vun at a time iss maybe nodt enough? I giff der lesson vith der bumbershoot—"

She saw his face. She stopped in midattack. She did a very careful double take. These women were certainly *not* dancing girls. They looked more like a bathing party of female Russian sergeants, painted by a Renoir without the glow and with a fragmentary and slightly surrealistic grudge against all hairdressers and the garment industry. They carried things like

fireplace bellows with coffee-pots attached, which they were pointing at her. Behind them, a swarm of swishy little men in colored frocks were peering out, and squeaking shrilly, and ducking back again.

The women were now booming out excited comments in a strange language she did not understand. So she ignored them. Her mind was putting two and two together rapidly —

An especially large commander was the first to find her voice. "L-look at her!" she gasped. "She has *c-clothes* on!"

"B-b-black clothes!" exclaimed another officer.

"All over!" cried a third. "And she has *all* her hair!"

They started talking all at once. *"She — she must be at least a Mother-President!"* "A-at *least!*" "And we — we've *kidnaped* her!" "Hoisted her in a net as if she was a — a *kreth* or something!" *"Look* at her!"

Mama Schimmelhorn shuffled the data she had available. She added memories of many an afternoon spent in the company of a grandnephew named Willie Fledermaus, aged twelve. The answer came to her. *"Shpacers!"* she told herself under her breath. "Und they are only vomen vith lidtle pipshqveak men, nodt octupuses like in die comic books!"

Her anger settled to a good white heat. *Zo maybe you are vashervomen from Chupiter or Mars?* she thought, rearing her head and standing even more stiffly than before. *Vell, you vatch oudt — efen vith lenses und die clefer tricks like in dot Kinseysons Report, you don'dt fool Mama Schimmelhorn! Villie had told me all aboudt—"*

"Look at her!" said the large commander, in awe. "She — she's absolutely *regal!* Mightn't she be a Mother-*Empress,* or something of the sort? I mean, with powers of life and death, and fleets of *warships,* like on Loog IV?"

"She's simply *furious!"* whispered a junior officer. "Oh, Fragrant Madame — wh-what'll we *do* with her?"

Prior to the opening of the net, the captain's worst apprehensions had been concerned with her quarry's stupendous intellect, but never had she imagined it combined with a supreme political authority. Now she was torn between the hazardous completion of her mission, the equally unpromising return of the dread personage to solid earth, and — rather vaguely — some deed of violence to rid her vessel once and for all of its unwelcome guests.

She hesitated — and her hand was forced. Like all the rest, the imaginative lieutenant at the Intellectometer had, until then,

had eyes only for the central, and female, figure in the tableau. Now, for the first time, she really noticed Papa Schimmelhorn. She goggled. "Look at that *thing!*" she screeched. "I — I *knew* it! *A hairy monster! It — it's been drinking blood!*"

A cry of horror rose.

"*Kill it!*" croaked the lieutenant, trying to aim her spray-gun around Mama Schimmelhorn.

The hairy monster stared at her stupidly. Gustav-Adolf, having descended to a shoulder, bared his fangs and hissed at everyone. And Mama Schimmelhorn, reacting instantly, adopted a technique she had used with great success against unfriendly dogs. She leveled her umbrella. She pressed the catch. Working it quickly back and forth, flapping the fabric in and out ahead of her, she moved relentlessly against the enemy.

"Put down der shqvirter!" came her dreadful voice.

The officers retreated hastily.

Whimpering a little, still trying frantically to draw a bead, the lieutenant stood her ground—

It was too much for the captain. She sprang. She seized the spray-gun and threw it to the floor. "You fool!" she yelled. "Do you want to kill us all? Look at her weapon — it's *mechanical!*"

There was a frightened echoing of the word; several more spray-guns clattered down.

The captain turned to Mama Schimmelhorn. She bowed repeatedly, trying to mock up an appeasing smile. Aside she said, "Th-that creature with her — it hasn't any t-tentacles that I can see — m-maybe it's not a monster after all — maybe it's just a huge, abnormal *man*—" She shuddered. "—it's p-probably quite tame — it's probably her *cat-bearer*, that's all—"

Mama Schimmelhorn did not smile back. She furled the big umbrella contemptuously. Somehow, she knew, she had gained the upper hand; now she was going to make the most of it. From her black handbag, she took her usually unneeded hearing aid. She raised its microphone to her lips. She gestured at the floor. "Ve go back down!" she announced imperiously. "Or right avay I call der Shpace Patrol!"

Then, so that none would miss the point, she grasped her bumbershoot firmly by the middle and, turning its needle nose toward the stars, traced out a violent, vertical trajectory. "*Whee-ee-eee* — BOOM!" she shouted, making Willie Fledermaus' favorite rocket noise. "BOOM! *Zap-za-zap-BANG!*"

Chaos erupted. "She — she's using a *communicator!*" yelped several voices simultaneously.

"She's going to call her warships!" cried several others. *"We — we'll be destroyed!"* mooed an enormous bosun fearfully.

The women milled about. The crewmen, bleating, ran blindly up and down, tripping each other and the officers.

The captain dropped to her knees in front of Mama Schimmelhorn. "Oh' *please*, Your Loveliness!" she begged. "Don't call your navy and — and have us all disintegrated. We didn't know you were a Mother-Empress. Really, we didn't. Why, if we had, we *never* would've kidnaped you like that — without your husbands and your retinue! We never even would've *thought* of it—"

She rattled on. The tumult died away. With bated breath, her officers watched for the Mother-Empress' response. The bosuns, as quietly as possible, started restoring order among the men. And Mama Schimmelhorn, frowning ferociously to cover her surprise, muttered, "Vhat iss — down on die knees and gobble-gobble-gobble in Rumanian? Maybe you think I vant to buy a vacuum shveeper made in Chupiter? Vell, I don'dt." Again, she pointed earthward. "Ve go back down! I giff you der address!"

"Most Radiant Madame! We'll take you back again if you insist — of course we will!" The captain pointed downward, nodded rapidly, and let her face express the utmost desolation and despair. "But *please* don't make us do it, Your Seductiveness. We need you desperately! We really do—" She pointed upward, opening her arms wide in a rapturous welcome. For a moment, she held the pose, then swiftly rearranged her features into their former hopelessness and, pointing at the cowering crewmen desperately, squeezed out a tear.

Though Mama Schimmelhorn understood immediately, she did not thaw. "Zo you haff troubles vith die lidtle men?" she remarked sarcastically. "Vhat iss — they shneak avay to play die tiddley-vinks? Und now, because you are too big und shtupid to fix up, you kidnatch me der discipline to teach, *nicht wahr?*" Again she hammered the umbrella's point against the deck. *"Now I go home!"*

"Shall we prepare the landing segment, Fragrant Madame?" asked a despondent voice. "For — for the return?"

The captain hesitated, finding the actual order hard to give — and suddenly all thought of orders was driven from her mind. From the great, gory figure of Papa Schimmelhorn came a metallic *click*. Immediately, he was the cynosure of all eyes. There was a fraction of a second's pause. Then, muted only slightly by the

bathrobe's folds, the plainsong of the cuckoo choir resounded through the room.

Still in a semicoma, Papa Schimmelhorn instinctively took action, as any craftsman will when he finds the proper functioning of his masterpiece obstructed by extraneous matter. Holding the clock aloft with one huge hand, he stripped away the bathrobe and let it fall.

Ms. Prudie Pilgrim had never achieved so stunning an effect. His audience gasped. It stood there spellbound as the *whir-r-r* and *click* announced the reopening of the door. It gasped again as the choir appeared, and sang, and popped in again.

This was repeated ten times more, and with each repetition the wonder grew. Then — *brrr-r-t* — the upper doors flew open upon the sylvan scene.

The audience did its best to gasp, and failed.

Smirking, the Alpine youth tiptoed around the well. The Alpine maiden twitched her little hips. The youth reached out his eager hand, and pinched—

And, as the maiden shrieked and did the bumps and cranked the windlass handle furiously, the personnel of the *Vilvilkuz Snar Tuhl-Y't* went simply wild. The blushing crewmen squealed and hid their eyes. Astounded cries and exclamations filled the air. It was a *mechanism!* It couldn't be! Impossible, incredible — but there it *was!* The little figure of the girl — completely *clothed!* What did it mean? How? Why? What? Where—?

"Why, it's a *zimdzig* rite!" The captain cried. "It *has* to be. That's why the *boy* is pinching *her.* That's why she's covered up so — so lasciviously! We — we mustn't give up *now!*"

Still on her knees, she turned on Mama Schimmelhorn the sort of look that any adequately early Mexican would have reserved for Mr. Quetzalcoatl fresh off the boat. She seized a long and hard Imperial hand in both of hers and fell to kissing it. Her officers, kneeling with her, added the chorus of their own appeals.

Mama Schimmelhorn pulled her hand away. Her temper flared. She marshaled all the scathing phrases which, in the past, she had employed against brash salesmen and feminine neighbors whose morality was suspect.

She had no chance to use them.

The sudden animation of the clock had wakened Papa Schimmelhorn. His mind had slipped back into gear, confronting him with the appalling fact of his abduction by lady wrestlers of unsurpassed ferocity and ugliness. It had imbued him with a great

yearning to escape; then, finding no instant way to satisfy this urge, it had reminded him of the waiting Prudence Pilgrim.

The synthesis of two such potent concepts was unfortunate. Papa Schimmelhorn lurched forward. He plucked at an Imperial sleeve.

"Mama!" he demanded peevishly. "Mama, you tell die lady friends to ledt me loose! It iss important. Vith my lidtle Prudie pussycat I haff a date!"

His listeners heard a great bass voice issuing from a body which, for all its size, was obviously male. They saw a mere man daring to lay impious hands on a most august female personage. The captain and her officers began to growl and mutter angrily. The little crewmen screamed like wounded rabbits and made vain efforts to escape.

Mama Schimmelhorn experienced a reaction less overt but equally profound. Reminded suddenly that her husband had not been snatched away from the pursuits of innocence, she recalled all those misdeeds Ms. Prudence so aptly sympolized.

Abruptly, she perceived that these large women had treated her with a respect indicative of keen discernment, gentle breeding, and the best intentions. Despite their strange apparel or lack of it, she saw they were responsible and sober citizens. And, as the bosuns took drastic and effective action, she realized that, whatever their trouble with the little men might be, it was not disciplinary. In short, their way of life looked as if it had much to recommend it.

Just as this dawned on her, Papa Schimmelhorn plucked at her arm again. "Hurry up, Mama. Get a viggle on!"

She whirled. "Shudt *up!* From now, remember who iss boss — *und* shpeak vhen you are maybe shpoken to — *und* do vhat you are told!" She punctuated these remarks with her umbrealla. Then, turning her back on him, she surveyed the kneeling women, the chastened little men. Smiling generously, she pointed heavenward and nodded several times. She patted the captain's tonsured scalp, and said, "Iss okay, shveetheart. Chust this vun time, Mama vill come mit."

Madame-Captain Groolu Hah let out a mighty shout of pure joy. Her officers all echoed her. The men emitted squaks of pleased alarm, and blushed, and sucked their thumbs excitedly.

"Oh, thank you, *thank* you, Dazzling Madame!" the captain bellowed. "Thank you, Your Glamorousness! You won't regret it, I promise you! We'll do our best to make you comfortable. My

quarters don't amount to much, but maybe if we fix them up they'll do. And you'll be waited on by senior officers. And you can have any of our husbands, even the nicest, most expensive ones—"

From Willie Fledermaus, Mama Schimmelhorn had learned a good deal about interplanetary protocol. She shushed the captain with a peremptory hand and indicated that she desired first something to sit upon and then writing instruments.

The captain beat her breast. "Oh, Your Radiancy! Forgive me! How *could* I have forgotten?" She poked a nearby lieutenant. "*You* — what's the big idea? Are you going to kneel there staring like a moonstruck man and let the Mother-Empress *stand* like that? Break out my best chair. Scramble!"

The lieutenant scrambled. A moment later, a squad of little men entered carrying a chair, and one of their fellows came panting up behind with a big sheet of greenish cardboard and what appeared to be a charcoal stick.

The chair looked as though its maker had been influenced by a bad dream of fuzzy sausages, but Mama Schimmelhorn allowed herself to be enthroned. She took the cardboard, propped it up, and drew a circle from which rays shot out. Holding it so all might see, she said with a proprietary pride, "Der Sun."

"Dayr-tzahn, dayr-*tzahn*," echoed the captain eagerly.

"Dayr-*tzahn*," repeated all her officers.

"You don'dt pronounce zo goot," said Mama Schimmelhorn. "But maybe you vill learn. Now vatch — I show die planets."

Swiftly, searching her memory of talks with Willie, she sketched in nine reasonably round orbits, gave each a blob to represent its incumbent sphere, and, speaking very clearly, announced their names as she came to them. She transposed Mars and Mercury, got Pludto, Chupiter, and Saturn all mixed up, and installed Trantor where Neptune should have been.

It seemed a little silly to her, but Willie had averred that something of the sort was *comme il faut* when good fellows from one planet and another got together, and so she went through with it. As she did so, one circumstance aroused her curiosity. When she came to the third planet from the Sun, all the big women bowed in unison, reminding her of all their previous signs of reverence. So, on finishing the list, she returned to it experimentally. She drew a little orbit and a moon. She repeated, "Earth."

"Yurr-ruth!" They bowed again.

She pointed at herself — they bowed even more profoundly than before.

She began to cogitate. *Me und der Earth — vot iss? Maybe they think I'm somevun else than Mama Schimmelhorn? Der vay they bow und shcrape — as if I vas die Empress Chosephine!*

Suddenly, she was inspired. *Und vhy nodt?* she thought. *Who knows der difference? Only Papa — und here he does nodt count.*

Curling her lip, she looked down at the diagram. Squarely and harshly, she put her right thumb down over the third planetary blob. "Dot's me!" she said.

Her listeners' foreheads almost touched the deck.

Vhy, chust imachine! thought Mama Schimmelhorn. She was delighted — not because she had achieved a perfect understanding with these members of an alien culture, but because now suddenly the full potentialities of the situation became apparent to her. Recalling the powers available to such relatively liberal potentates as Ivan the Terrible, Caligula, and Genghis Khan, she gave poor Papa Schimmelhorn a stony glance. *Zo,* she muttered, *shtill you vould like to chase die pretty pussycats? From now, vatch oudt! I send you to Siberia. I feed you to die lions in der zoo. Off vith der head!*

A look of Machiavellian cunning crossed her brow. *Und I too must vatch udt,* she told herself, *zo der big girls nefer know I am chust me, married to an old goat who von't shtay home. Mama, you must behafe like you vas Qveen of Shpain und Pordugal.*

She tapped her foot. The big girls looked at her. "Okay," she said, extending the cardboard and the pencil stick, "now show me vhere you liff."

Carefully, the captain peeled a layer of the board away. Then she too drew a sun, and orbits, and planetary blobs.

There were fourteen of them.

Mein gootness! thought Mama Schimmelhorn. *Anoder shtar — dot iss more far avay efen than Chupiter!* As her idea of stellar distances was vague, she wasn't too impressed.

The captain pointed to the star. "Yar'myut," she announced with pride. "Yar'myut." After a moment, observing no reaction, she repeated it a little anxiously. "*Yar'-myut?*"

"How shtupid!" Mama Schimmelhorn exclaimed. "Der name of your own shtar nodt to know!" She pointed to the star herself. "*Beetlegoose,*" she declared authoritatively.

The star was not Betelgeuse. It was, in fact, a small red-orange

star lying in quite an opposite direction. Betelgeuse, however, was the only astral name she could remember, and she suspected that it would do as well as any.

Dutifully, the big girls echoed, "Bittl-goordz."

"Dot's better," said Mama Schimmelhorn approvingly, and she went on to number all their planets from the inside outward, making them repeat each number after her. When they came to Nine, however, her pupils, with much enthusiasm and many pointings, identified it as their place of origin.

The discovery pleased her. "You see?" she said indulgently. "Zo simple! Now ve know all aboudt — you are die ladies from Beetlegoose Nine!"

"Bittl-goordz Naheen!" shouted the ladies happily.

"Dot's right — but shtill you don'dt pronounce. Maybe to learn der English you are nodt shmart enough. Vell, I learn to shpeak your langvidge anyhow. Iss easy, because I am a Shviss—"

She broke off. The captain had pulled away the second diagram and, with the utmost diffidence, was making motions indicative of the desire to draw. She gave permission graciously. "Zo, Lidtle Eva, you vant to tell me something? Go ahead."

With bold, broad strokes, the captain sketched what seemed to be the sections of a thick-cored tangerine. Swiftly, she scribbled lines cutting off the top third of the core and dividing each outer segment into three parts. She added several wiggles vaguely resembling companionways and hatches.

A spaceship like a grapefruidt on der inside! marveled Mama Schimmelhorn. *Villie should only see — ach, he vould nodt beliefe!*

The captain outlined her own quarters on the floor plan — one very large room with a figure to represent herself, and a smaller adjoining chamber inhabited by several little men. She showed herself moving into less commodious quarters. And she depicted Mama Schimmelhorn, complete with bumbershoot, installed within the premises so lately vacated. Then she indicated proudly that the new tenant was welcome to any little men who happen to be left around.

"There!" she whispered to her sister officers. "At any rate, she'll see our hospitality's completely civilized."

But Mama Schimmelhorn saw nothing of the sort. "Ridiculous!" she snapped. "You think you leafe der lidtle shqvirts behind zo Mama puts to bed and gifes der medicine? I show you who iss Qveen!"

She took the pencile stick. Quickly, she scratched out all the

little men. Crudely but unmistakably, she drew in Papa Schimmelhorn and Gustav-Adolf.

There were exclamations of astonishment — at the Imperial kindness in refusing to deprive her inferiors of their husbands even temporarily, at her courage in having her huge, hairy servitor quartered next to her, and at the peculiar customs of a world where such goings-on were unremarkable.

The captain thanked her volubly. "Of *course* your cat can have my husband-room, Most Tempting Madame," she declared, "and your — your cat-bearer can stay there too. You can control him if anybody can, I guess. Besides, I'm going to put my own sweet little Tuptup in there with him, to keep him company, and to call for hel — I mean, to be there just *in case*—"

A flurry of feet and a short-lived, gurgling scream told them that the small gentleman in question had been collared in attempting to escape his new assignment.

"Tuptup's really very brave," explained the captain. "At home, I let him go out in the dark all by himself. He'll be a little nervous right at first, and not be able to keep things on his stomach probably, but afterwards I'm sure they'll be good friends. And now there's — well, there's one more thing—"

She hesitated, blushing furiously.

"Shpeak up," urged Mama Schimmelhorn. "I am a married woman."

Pointing at Papa Schimmelhorn, the captain made it clear that trousers were unspeakably obscene by little Beetlegoosian standards. She sketched a sequence in which the pair in question was first removed and then exchanged for a decent and decorous colored frock.

Mama Schimmelhorn snickered — the idea appealed to her. She made appropriate motions of consent.

The captain barked her orders. The burly bosuns began converging on their prey. Gustav-Adolf quitted his perch, trotted over to Mama Schimmelhorn, leaped to her lap, and settled down to purr.

And Papa Schimmelhorn, warned by some occult instinct, tried unavailingly to edge away and made despairingly defiant noises in his beard.

The bosuns paused, looking to the Mother-Empress for encouragement.

She smiled at them. "I tell him to hold shtill," she said, "zo you can take der trousers off und put inshtead der lidtle petticoat. *Ach*, he vill look zo cute!"

Papa Schimmelhorn roared incoherently.

"Und do nodt argue," she

ordered him, gesturing at a large commander nearby. "Now giff der clock to Mrs. Elephant, zo no vun breaks it vhen der pants come off."

"Nein! NEIN! I vill nodt giff avay!" He stamped and spluttered; and the bosuns, obviously impressed, started to back off.

Mama Schimmelhorn hefted her umbrella. "You vant me to get tough? Nincompoop, better you listened more to Villie Fledermaus. Vhen in Rome, ve do like Romers do. Ve are going to visit vith die shpace ladies, who think I am a Qveen. They are Beetlegoosers."

The last word penetrated — but Papa Schimmelhorn assumed that it referred, not to a place of origin, but to some alien custom of unexampled quaintness and barbarity. He uttered a batrachian gulp, and passively allowed the commander to take the cuckoo clock.

After that, and once the bosuns had solved the mystery of the terrestrial zipper, the ceremony went forward smoothly. Many were the exclamations of wonder and astonishment at the sights revealed, and many the cries of mingled disappointment and relief when the Mother-Empress intervened to permit him to retain his shorts.

They removed his sports coat and his shirt, his socks and shoes. They measured him. A dozen little men came running in bearing bright bolts of cloth, which, with timorous twitters, they held against him for Mama Schimmelhorn's comparison. She considered each one carefully, wondering aloud whether it suited him and if Ms. Prudence would approve of it. Finally, she chose a Shocking Pink, with a rather toxic yellow for frills and edging. The cloth was spread out on the deck. The little men squeaked happily and crawled around it, busy with shears and glue. In no time at all, the frock was ready, and a pair of bosuns pulled it down over Papa Schimmelhorn's unresisting head.

Everyone looked pleased, and there were numerous comments on his improved appearance. Then the captain sang out a cheerful order, and Mama Schimmelhorn was hoisted — Gustav-Adolf, chair, and all — onto the broad shoulders of half a dozen officers. Three little men with nose flutes took up positions in front of her, immediately preceding the proud commander with the cuckoo clock. Papa Schimmelhorn, flanked by his bodyguard, was prodded into line. The captain signaled. The nose flutes tooted a gay, though slightly bronchial air. And the Mother-Empress was borne in triumph to her new quarters.

Sheer intelligence does not necessarily determine the rate at

which an organism adapts to its environment. Papa Schimmelhorn, with a mind several times as powerful as any previously measured in the known Universe, made no voluntary adaptations whatsoever during his first hours aboard the ship. Mama Schimmelhorn, much lower on the scale, started at once to plan how she could force the environment to adapt to her. But Gustav-Adolf, the measure of whose intellect was a mere squiggle, gave it a quick going-over, snarled at it a few times, and took to it like a duck to water.

He accompanied his mistress to the captain's quarters, containing a monstrous pancake of a bed, a lot of hairy-sausage furniture in bilious colors, and several badly tinted pin-up pictures of little men. Expressing his immediate disapproval of the local odors, he decided to explore. He mewed at the door leading to the anteroom and was not astonished when it opened automatically.

Before him he beheld a much smaller chamber, furnished only with five tiny cots and a huge portrait of the captain. Four of the cots had been pushed together to form a single couch against one wall, and on it, rocking his head between his hands and groaning miserably, sat Papa Schimmelhorn in his brand-new frock. The fifth cot was in a corner as far away as possible. Tied to it by a leg, and obviously in a state of abject terror, cringed a little man whose personality reminded Gustav-Adolf instantly of mice. His hackles rose. Stiff legged, he started stalking. The little man attempted to escape beneath the bed. Gustav-Adolf stopped and looked back over his shoulder to see if Papa Schimmelhorn would join in the sport. He waited for a minute. Then, discouraged by his friend's disinterest as well as by his quarry's lack of gumption, he shrugged disgustedly. Tail high, he went to the second door, mewed at it, and strode out into the passageway.

For some time, he had been aware that he was by no means the only cat aboard and had been following his nose toward the promise of feline fight and frolic. Now an odor assailed his nostrils which, though peculiarly anemic, could have originated only with another tomcat. He lowered his ears, swelled his tail, and assumed his best hungry-tiger pose.

"*Mum-um-um-blurk!*" he roared. "*Blah-h-row-ow-ooOH-ROW!*" which in Cat meant, "Ah, y' dirty bum! I'll beatcha brains out! I'll tear you limb from limb!"

He launched himself around the corner — straight into the midst of eight or a dozen tiny tomcats congregated around an alcove in the wall. Spitting, they took off

vertically; spitting, they hit the deck again; then, mewing pitifully, all but two fled. This unhappy pair — a yellow and a scrawny black-and-white — found themselves trapped within the alcove by Gustav-Adolf's massive bulk.

He regarded them in astonishment. "Huh!" he growled disgustedly. "Joov'nile delinquens! Punk kids playin' big. Y' pantywaists!" He bared his inch-long fangs. "Y' wanta fight?"

Neither of the pantywaists was tempted by this offer. "*Mew-mew-mew-mew!*" chattered the yellow one. "D-d-don't you *dare* touch me. Just don't you d-dare.!"

Gustave-Adolf waded in. A quick one-two to the chops sent the yellow tomcat sprawling. A hayrake set of claws scooped the black-and-white out of the alcove, hoisted him a foot into the air, and dropped him with a thud. Screeching, both vanished down the corridor.

He sent a disciplinary imprecation after them, brushed himself off, and investigated the alcove. It held a shallow plate filled with a thin shrimpy gruel, which the pantywaists apparently had been drinking. He wrinkled his nose at it, deeming it no proper diet for a red-blooded he-cat, and looked around.

In front of him, protruding from the wall, he saw a lever. His nose informed him that it had something to do with his own species; so experimentally he tapped it with a paw. At once, a large tray slid out, full of nice clean sand; and Gustav-Adolf, reminded of neglected matters, climbed in gratefully. After a while, having filled his excavation and kicked half the sand out onto the floor, he got out again. "What won't they think of next?" he thought admiringly.

His thought was answered by a growl. He whirled. Coming towards him, carrying a plump dead mouse and wearing an expression of the utmost arrogance, was the biggest female cat he had ever seen. She was a tortoiseshell, and he had always had a special yen for tortoiseshells; he looked her over much as his master would have eyed a king-sized chorus girl. Besides, seeing the mouse aroused his appetite. Leering, he sidled up to her. "Hi, chick!" he rumbled. "Gimme a bite, huh? C'mon — mebbe I'll make a pass atcha —"

The lady-cat, whose name in Beetlegoosian meant Lambie-pie, was the captain's favorite, and hen of the walk wherever she chose to go. She took one look, decided that here was a lad who definitely needed whittling down to size, placed her mouse carefully on the deck, and swung.

Gustav-Adolf was taken by

surprise. He staggered, ears ringing: and Lambie-pie, who had never needed more than one swing to settle any tomcat's hash, calmly started to retrieve her mouse.

This was a strategic error. Gustav-Adolf gathered every muscle. "*So ya wanta wrastle!*" he roared. "*Okay!*"

Instantly, he and Lambie-pie exploded into a traditional cat-fight pinwheel of flying fur, claws, teeth, and piercing screams. It was a new experience for her. Tough as she was, she had not been born aboard a Norwegian merchant ship, not trained in the martial arts by the waterfront cats of Glasgow and Marseilles and the dock rats of Port Said.

In a matter of moments, Gustav-Adolf had her down, the worse for wear by several patches of hide and a torn ear. "Say *uncle!*" he growled, through a mouthful of fur, and shifted his armed hind feet on her stomach.

"Uh-*uncle,*" echoed the outraged Lambie-pie.

Eyeing her, he let go his hold, and placed a proprietary paw on her mouse. "No hard feelin's, kid," he told her chivalrously.

He polished off the mouse, and she watched silently until the last tasty bit of it had disappeared. Gradually, a deep ancestral memory stirred within her; a strangely soft expression filled her yellow eyes. As he gave his face an after-luncheon wash, she began to purr; and when he rose and stretched himself she rumbled, "My, you're big and strong! *I* think you're *wonderful!*"

"Y' betcha boots," said Gustav-Adolf smugly. "That's how come I kin beatcha up with one paw tied behind m' back." He turned away. "Be good," he called back as he swaggered off, "and mebbe I'll make a pass atcha."

The balance of his day was as successful as its start. He attacked and scattered several groups of tiny tomcats. He met and vanquished three more females nearly as large as Lambie-pie, and captured two more mice, which he devoured at once. Feeling full and comfortable, he made his way back to the captain's quarters.

In the anteroom, Papa Schimmelhorn had not stirred from the edge of the assembled cots. On a stool before him reposed a bowl of the same gruel Gustav-Adolf had turned down so contemptously, and he was gazing at it with dull nausea even though Tuptup, across the room, was gulping his own portion greedily.

Gustav-Adolf's heart was touched. Leaping to his master's lap, he said hoarsely, "Look, chum, this joint's full of mice. Nice, fat ones! Want me to catch you one?"

But Papa Schimmelhorn, hearing only a few *mrrrows*, did not accept his offer. He kept on staring at the gruel, and presently a solitary tear dropped into it with a thin, shrimpy splash.

Though these events were to have far-reaching and profound effects, at the time they appeared momentous only to Gustav-Adolf and the feline microcosm in which he found himself. Papa Schimmelhorn did not profit by his example — he and the Beetlegoosian women continued to regard each other with fear and loathing. His diet improved, but only because the Mother-Empress, taking pity on his misery, occasionally sent him scraps and leavings from the rich meats that graced her table. And his boredom was sometimes tempered by conversation, but only because Tuptup, finally realizing the impossibility of escape, set about teaching him the simple dialect spoken by Beetlegoosian men.

Tuptup's frames of reference were very different from his roommate's. Even after he had conquered his initial fear to the point of being able to keep his dinner down, their intercourse was not without its strenuous moments, and one of these occurred when the ship was slightly more than three weeks on the way.

For some hours, Tuptup's nose had been out of joint. He had spent several minutes teaching Papa Schimmelhorn a game called *yuf*, a Beetlegoosian version of ticktacktoe, and Papa Schimmelhorn, quite abstractedly, had beaten him half a hundred games in a row. Then, adding injury to this insult, he had pestered him with silly questions about the ship and how it ran. Tuptup had told him peevishly that, for goodness' sake! it was the *ifk* that pulled it here and there, as everybody knew; and no, they weren't machines because they grew in pots and sort of quivered all the time; and anyhow he didn't want to talk about such dry old things just when he'd thought about the most exciting frock, and how that new commander's horrid second husband would turn pea-green with envy at the sight of it.

Papa Schimmelhorn was by no means his brave old self. His cheeks were drawn; a dismal and disoriented look was in his eye. Nevertheless, he could not let remarks like these pass unchallenged. "Chunior," he said, staring at Tuptup in renewed dismay, "vot haff die big palooka vomen done to you? You are nodt men; you are chust lidtle vorms."

Tuptup drew back, shocked. "*My!*" he exclaimed. "What a *dreadful* thing to say. I'll never, *never* speak to you again!"

And, for a good long while, he sat there worrying the edges of his ricebowl haircut, picking his nose daintily, and trying to think up something to put this — this *unnatural* creature in its proper place.

Finally, an idea came to him, and he reviewed it with scarcely suppressed titters of triumph. Preening himself, he looked again at Papa Schimmelhorn. "*I* came from Madame Ipilu's," he sniffed. "I suppose you're from one of those cheap department stores where they sell odds and ends?"

Papa Schimmelhorn frowned painfully. "Vhat do you mean?" he asked. "I nefer vork in a department shtore. Und vhat iss Madame Vhat's-der-name's, a bad house full mit naughty girls?"

"Madame Ipilu's," Tuptup informed him with a superior smirk, "is just our most expensive and exclusive husband shop, that's all. And I was higher priced than any other one they ever sold, except a few for people like the Mother-President. Dear Madame Ipilu told me so *herself.*" He saw that Papa Schimmelhorn was staring at him openmouthed. "She's *such* clever merchandiser. But then I guess it's more than you could understand, not being a really, truly husband, but just a poor old bargain-basement thing for carrying cats around."

Papa Schimmelhorn ignored the compliment. "You — you mean," he gasped, "die Beetle-goosers sell die men like lidtle poodle dogs?"

"There!" Tuptup simpered. "I knew you wouldn't understand. We're never sold at all like poodle dogs — not anymore. A really swanky husband shop like Madame Ipilu's caters to a very genteel trade. We go there when we're four and live in sweet little wire rooms right in the back, except of course when we're all tied together for airings or to go to school. You see —" He blushed a little bit. "—they have to guarantee that none of us has ever been, well — *touched.* You can't imagine just how nice it is. A high-class husband shop is a real home away from home. There's the sweetest song about it." He hummed a bar or two.

"I wish I was back in the window
At Madame Ipilu's with the boys.
I was tender and pure,
My sorrows were fewer-
Oh, I wish I was back with my toys!"

Tuptup actually sniffled as he sang the last line. Then, sighing, he asked abruptly, "Have you been altered?"

The question brought Papa Schimmelhorn up with a jerk. "Haff I been *vhat?*" he cried.

"Altered," said Tuptup sadly. "*You* know. I sometimes wish I had. Everyone says it hardly hurts at all, and after that they never bother you, and, well, you're sort of just a pet, and then they have to *keep* you, too. They can't just trade you in or anything." He sighed again. "It's like they say — there's more to marriage than getting compliments and wearing pretty clothes."

Suddenly, Papa Schimmelhorn remembered how enthusiastically receptive his wife had been to the mores of this strange society. Cold horror swept him. "Ch-chunior," he croaked, "dot iss against der law! Der police vould nodt allow!" A hideous picture came into his mind, of himself, fat, flaccid, indolent, purring grotesquely by the hearth. "*You mean in Beetlegoose Mama could take me like der tomcat to der vet, und — und—?*"

"Why would the police have anything to do with it, you *silly* thing? Of course she wouldn't take you to a vet. She'd take you to a doctor, and there'd be nurses there to hold you, naturally. But *I* don't think she'd even bother." Tuptup sneered. "Not even if you asked her *very* nicely."

Instinct screamed at Papa Schimmelhorn to crash the portal of the Mother-Empress' quarters, cast himself down in abject supplication, and beg that never, never never would she permit any such horrible happening. He stood erect, so violently that Tuptup, with a squeal, dived for the door. But, fortunately, instinct came up against the coldly analytical aspect of his mentality, which shouted just as loudly that Mama Schimmelhorn was drunk with power and that such a course, reminding her of all his guilty past, could be disastrous.

He slumped down again; and presently Tuptup peered in apprehensively and exclaimed, "Goodness me! What*ever* made you act that way. Anybody'd think you *didn't* want to be — altered, that is."

Papa Schimmelhorn shuddered. "Nonsense!" he dissembled hoarsely. "All — all my life I vant, vith no more vorries, only supper. I chust vas shcared they take me to der vet, l-like back on Earth. *Ach*, you should see vhat happens to poor Heinrich Luedesing—"

And he went on to elaborate an extremely gruesome and quite imaginary episode to which he attributed his employer's very real infirmity.

Tuptup was overwhelmed. "You poor, poor creature!" he cried out. "My, I'm glad *we're* civilized. Maybe we can arrange to have it done while you're here! I'll ask the captain when we—" He

colored prettily. "—when we're in *bed.* Then she can talk about it to your Mother-Empress." He pouted. "But you're going to have to be *polite* to me, more than you've been, or else I *won't.*"

Gagging, Papa Schimmelhorn thanked him for his solicitude. He allowed himself to be defeated in a game of *yuf.* Then he pointed out delicately that it might be perilous even to bring the matter up — for the Mother-Empress, with her undoubted force of character, might very well decide to change Beetlegoosian customs instead of yielding to them. This once again reduced Tuptup to a state of terror, and two more games had to be lost to pacify him. Then, with a serpentine cunning, Papa Schimmelhorn led the conversation away from such painful subjects to an infinitely more urgent one: exactly how did the *Vilvilkuz Snar Tuhl-Y't* run?

Little by little, he drew out the small store of information Tuptup had. He learned that *ifk* came from what Willie Fledermaus would have called an asteroid belt around Beetlegoose, that there was a girl *ifk* who got pointed sort of at where the ship was headed for, and several boy *ifk* in great big pots who, by doing their best to get to her, pulled it along.

Blushing, Tuptup added that boy *ifk* were absolutely *shameless,* chasing after the girl *ifk* that way — worse even than that awful new comander's second husband. And that was why the *ifk* were cared for by Lali, who was *retarded,* and by a little man named Pukpuk, whom he just couldn't *stand.*

"You ought to see the pair of them together." He simpered. "She looks just *horrid* — the ugly, stupid *thing.* She's never grown up really. So they won't let her cut her hair or wear a uniform or anything. And as for Pukpuk — *well!* He's every bit as *ifky* — that's what we call people who're silly and just not good for anything. He's sort of *womanish*—" Tuptup giggled indecently. "—all thick and rough and with big, bulgy *muscles.*"

Papa Schimmelhorn agreed diplomatically that the *ifk*-room gang sounded extremely undesirable. He tried a few more questions about how *ifk* were steered but, soon finding out that he had struck bottom where information was concerned, wisely put in a half hour asking Tuptup about the husband shop, hinting that he himself would have given anything for its advantages and generally behaving in a disgracefully un-Papa-Schimmelhornish way. The result of his servility was at least gratifying, for Tuptup, when he finally left to join his fellows for their evening meal, felt comfortably superior to his enormous roommate and therefore

filled with benevolence toward him.

After his departure, Papa Schimmelhorn sat without moving for an hour or so, head in his hands, sighing ponderously. Behind the portals of his gloom, however, his mind was working at unprecedented speed, brewing a plan. When the time came for him to rise, pick up Gustav-Adolf, and present himself at the Mother-Empress' apartment for what she disparagingly referred to as "der bowser-bag," this plan was virtually complete. He was determined to insinuate his way into the *ifk*-room, seize control of it, seal it off from the rest of the *Vilvilkuz Snar Tuhl-Y't*, and, at the *ifk* equivalent of an extended gallop, head straight back to Earth.

While Gustav-Adolf, who was privileged, feasted in the Presence, he waited patiently in the anteroom. When the bowser-bag, which actually consisted of an enormous covered plate and a bowl of savory soup, was handed out to him, he accepted it gratefully and humbly, and finally, when he returned the dishes, he first complimented the Mother-Empress on its quality and quantity and then compared it unfavorably to her own cooking back on Earth, trying to sound as fervid and sincere as he would have had he been addressing Ms. Prudence Pilgrim.

Mama Schimmelhorn regarded him suspiciously. Her motives in starting her food-relief program had not been just humanitarian. In her first week aboard, she had learned enough Beetlegoosian to understand the big girls when they explained the desperate plight behind her kidnaping, and she had needed only a few minutes to figure out its implications. It was simple. For nearly five years, not a single child had been conceived on Beetlegoose Nine — not only not a child but not a kitten. Suddenly, little men and little tomcats alike were sterile, and neither the civilization of their neighboring planet, Eight, nor those of the several other systems with which they were in contact had been of the least assistance to them. Hence the search for a superintellect. Mama Schimmelhorn realized immediately that the mind they had been measuring was not hers, and that her status at least, if not her person, would be imperiled if she failed. She also realized that, if worst came to worst, her husband's scientific genius could very well become her secret weapon. *From now I take no chances,* she told herself. *I feed you like back home, so der subconscience vorks vhen I giff orders — but I do nodt tell you vhy, or maybe you get too big again for der lidtle petticoat!* And she had

given strict instructions that, so far as her catbearer was concerned, the entire subject was to be classified Top Secret.

Now, *Vhat iss?* she thought. *Nefer you say nice things about mein cooking. You think it brings der bigger bowser-bag?* But she did not let her cynicism show. Partly for the benefit of the Beetlegoosian officers gathered round the throne, she glared down at him. "Shtand shtraight!" she barked. "Mit der stomach in und die heels together, like in der army! ... Ha! Dot iss bedter. I teach you how to tread die Mama-Empress! Now, vhat's der trouble?"

Papa Schimmelhorn fawned as cleverly as a man standing at strict attention can. He reaffirmed his previous compliments. But, he told her, on Earth he had always been an active man. He had always held down his full-time job, and even in his leisure hours he usually was busy in his basement.

"Vhen you are nodt chasing lidtle pussycats!" snorted Mama Schimmelhorn, but to herself she had to admit the basic truth of his assertions.

Here on the ship, however, he continued dismally, he was completely idle. All he could do was sit with Gustav-Adolf, listen to Tuptup, and play an occasional dull game of *yuf.* "I tell you, Mama—" he cried out.

"You shpeak to me, you say *Your Machesty!*"

"Mama, Your Machesty, I tell you doing nothing I cannot shtand! All I vant iss a lidtle job to pass der time — efen a Job no vun else vants to do." His tones became absolutely harrowing. "Obervise mein brain gets soft. Soon I become chust like Tuptup, and nodt as smart efen as Gustav-Adolf."

Mama Schimmelhorn's eyes narrowed. She did not think anything of the sort would happen. Still, the chance of her secret weapon being deactivated was one she did not want to take.

"I think aboudt it," she replied peremptorily. "I ask die big ladies if they haff vork maybe for a chanitor. Und now—" She pointed at the door. "Oudtside!"

Then, as her husband hastened to obey, abruptly she commanded, "Vait!" She spoke a word or two in Beetlegoosian to the captain, who touched her peanut-butter fringe and hustled off, to return moments later with Gustav-Adolf's catnip mouse.

"Catnip in der coat pocket iss too shtrong," she declared. "Meow, meow, meow all night long, efery cat on der ship, so I cannot shleep! Bedter you take avay und giff to Gustav-Adolf, so maybe he

eats up."

Papa Schimmelhorn received it humbly, secreted it in the one small pocket of his frock, and backed out ceremoniously. He found Tuptup waiting for him with some juicy gossip about the new commander's horrid second husband and played *yuf* with him until bedtime, again allowing him to win almost every game. Then he retired, to toss uneasily and dream dreadful dreams about being taken in a hamper to the vet's. As the doors were closed and Gustav-Adolf was spending the night on a cushion beside the Mother-Empress, the catnip mouse attracted no intruders, but when two bosuns wakened him rudely at an early hour, he was still groggy and red-eyed, and it took him a few painful moments to understand that his dreams had not come terribly true. The Mother-Empress, he was informed, had in her goodness spoken to the captain, and the captain, to oblige her, had issued orders assigning him to daily janitorial duty in the *ifk* room, where they would now escort him.

The bosuns waited while he slipped on his frock. They handed him a mop, a bucket, and a broom. While Tuptup twittered, asking him what*ever* had he *done* to merit such a punishment, he had the presence of mind to conceal his own delight with convincingly despairing groans. They marched him off, and as he progressed down the corridor, Gustav-Adolf, drawn by the scent of catnip, meowed loudly and fell in line behind him.

The *ifk* room occupied the lowest segment of the grapefruit's central core, and the eight male *ifk* who pulled the ship along occupied eight huge iron pots set in a circle at its center and securely bolted to the floor. A strange tension and vibration filled the air, and the bosuns made it clear immediately that they did not find the atmosphere congenial. They snapped their orders at him: he was to swab the deck, scrub the outside of the pots, police up after the *ifk*-room crew, behave himself, and keep out from under foot. Then they hurried out, banging the door behind them.

Papa Schimmelhorn did not even notice his new companions. He stood there goggling at the quivering *ifk*. They were vaguely mushroom-shaped, at least twelve feet high, at once crystalline, metallic, and disquietingly fleshy. Power radiated from them, and his subconcious, drawing on its extensive knowledge of higher physics, at once realized — even though of course he did not — that, as they strained after the girl *ifk* stationed so temptingly ahead of them, they were producing profound changes in the very fabric of

space-time. His subconscious did not tell him how they managed this, but it did inform him that the *ifk*-field not only made faster-than-light travel possible, but also provided the specious gravity that made it comfortable.

Filled with admiration, he patted one of them. "*Ach,* how vunderful!" he murmured sentimentally. "Alvays luff finds a vay!"

And, from behind his back, a warm contralto voice answered him, "I'm Lali. Most people think our *ifk* are horrid, but *I* think they're just beautiful, and so does Pukpuk. What did you say to them?"

Papa Schimmelhorn turned. Lali stood leaning against one of the iron pots, facing him. She was not like other Beetlegoosian women, Her size was indeed heroic, but her hair was thick and golden, she was beautifully rounded in all the proper places, her complexion was clear and creamy — all over. Wotan might very well have considered her a pretty little pussycat. Next to her stood a red-haired, pug-nosed little man a head taller than Tuptup and much more muscular.

But Papa Schimmelhorn's traumatic image of Beetlegoosian womanhood prevented him from really seeing her. "Vhat did I say?" he repeated mechanically. "I said luff alvays finds a vay. It iss an old saying on mein planet."

She clapped her hands delightedly. "I never thought of it like that! Pukpuk and I were worried when the bosuns told us about your working here. We thought you might turn out to be as fearsome and forbidding as your Mother-Empress, but now I *know* we're going to get along just beautifully."

Papa Schimmelhorn shuffled his feet in some embarrassment, smiled diffidently, and told them he vas glad to meet them, had lots of experience as a chanitor, and vould keep eferything neat und tidy.

They stared at him — at his beard, his great stature, his enormous hands — Lali in awe, Pukpuk in awe and envy. They asked to feel his muscles. They commented on Gustav-Adolf's size and probable ferocity. And Pukpuk proudly displayed his own biceps, which were dutifully admired.

By the time he had filled his bucket and set about his simple tasks, he felt that, all in all, his progress so far had been favorable. For the first time aboard the ship, he sensed that he was not in the company of instant enemies — and he determined to make the most of it.

Travel between the stars, even at the moderate faster-than-light velocities afforded by hale and

hearty *ifk*, is at best a tedious business, rather like a fair-weather passage to India around the Cape in sailing-ship days. There is almost nothing to do but make-work (which is one reason there are bosuns aboard a ship), and everybody gets on everybody else's nerves.

Papa Schimmelhorn, however, remained impervious to these influences, for his single-minded dedication to escaping the possible attentions of the veterinarian drove him to do his job with an efficiency that endeared him to his *ifky* cohorts, and he devoted every spare moment to learning everything he could about the *ifk*.

There wasn't much. Nobody aboard the ship really gave a hoot about how or why the *ifk* worked; it was enough that they provided motive power. Their pots were filled with a semiporous substance with a meteoric look to it, to which Lali and Pukpuk added a daily ration of assorted metals and minerals together with a little water to assure its diffusion, and this in turn encouraged a sparse growth of Beetlegoosian weeds in every pot. The strange thing was that the *ifk* did not exert any pull directly on the ship; instead, the field they generated seemed somehow to envelop it and all within it into a special little universe where every energy was concentrated on catching up with the lady *ifk* — there were hree of them — who, to Papa Schimmelhorn's dismal discouragement, were steerable only from the bridge. He made one plan after another, discarding each as totally impractical, but he did not give up, and gradually he began observing certain *ifk* characteristics which, even if of no apparent practical value to him, were intriguing.

For one thing, they seemed to recognize his presence. When he touched one of them or leaned against it, it suddenly would start to vibrate more intensely. Besides that, they fascinated Gustav-Adolf, who took one look at them, made the round of all their pots, arched his back, purred throatily, rubbed against their fleshy surfaces, and sprayed them pungently to inform the world that they were now his domain. They reacted to this treatment just as they did to Papa Schimmelhorn, and both Lali and Pukpuk commented that now the very air in the *ifk* room felt as though it was simply tingling with excitement.

Gustav-Adolf visited them several times a day, bringing his mice to devour there. Occasionally, he brought Lambie-pie with him on a guided tour, and once he upset Pukpuk and Lali by seducing her publicly and raucously in an *ifk*-pot. Besides that, he spent much time in the selfsame pot,

playing with his catnip mouse, rolling on it, and finally completing its destruction.

The weeks went by, and Papa Schimmelhorn's plans progressed not at all. However, a number of catnip seeds sprouted in the pot and burgeoned splendidly, producing plants very different from Earthside catnip but quite as erotically exhilarating to Gustav-Adolf. Their flowers, instead of being blue and small, were large and purple; their leaves were green and crunchy. Papa Schimmelhorn took to nibbling them; so did Pukpuk, and so did Lali, The vessel's little tomcats, displaying an unwonted temerity, started trying to evade Gustav-Adolf's watchful eye to reach them. And with one accord, the *ifk*-room crew said nothing about them to the officers, who did not notice them in their untidy camouflage of native weeds.

In the meantime, the Mother-Empress held her daily court, regaling the big women with fanciful tales of her rule on Earth, listening to their woes and problems, and looking at innumerable pictures of their planet — most of which, she admitted to herself, resembled the poorer sort of Southern California slurb set down in the arid center of West Texas. Had it not been for the still heady taste of absolute power, she would habe been horribly bored. As it was, she was beginning to miss the cozy gossip of her weekly kaffee-klatsches with Mrs. Hundhammer and her other friends, their sympathy at her recital of Papa Schimmelhorn's many misdeeds, and her own occasional triumphs when she succeeded in nipping one of his escapades in the bud. Sentimentally, she began to improve the quality of each evening's bowser-bag, actually going to the trouble of teaching one of the Beetlegoosian officers how to prepare his favorite *Wiener Schnitzel.*

Gradually, as his diet improved and in the congenial atmosphere of the *ifk* room, Papa Schimmelhorn's fears receded. He began to accept his failure to manipulate the *ifk* philosophically. His natural buoyancy of spirit returned. He sang as he plied his mop and broom. He joked with Pukpuk as they nibbled catnip. And then one day, inevitably, he noticed that Lali was very, very different from her sisters.

The awareness came to him abruptly. *Gott in Himmel!* he exclaimed to himself. *She iss chust like meine lidtle Prudence, only tvice as big. Maybe in bed she iss also tvice as clefer?* He nearly dropped his broom. Then, almost instantly, a vision of the wicker hamper and the veterinarian drove the thought away, and he was plunged once more into despond-

ency. Automatically, he picked a sprig of mutant catnip and began to munch it, and presently the vision, though it did not quite disappear, began to lose its force. As he again applied the broom, the likelihood of Mama Schimmelhorn subjecting him to such a fate began to seem more and more remote, and Lali's sumptuous curves to glow even more enticingly. For some hours then, the struggle between foretaste and foreboding continued to perturb him, with foretaste — reinforced by periodic nibbles at the catnip — eventually prevailing.

Before the bosuns escorted him off duty for the day, Papa Schimmelhorn had whispered sweetly into Lali's ear, had pinched and patted her invitingly round bottom at least twice, and had taken one or two other minor liberties. Lali, whose cultural background had not included huge, bearded, aggressive men, squealed coyly and fled behind an *ifk*-pot on each occasion, but it was obvious that his advances had not been actively resented. Her pulse and respiration definitely had quickened, and her temperature certainly had risen.

Feeling very much his old self again, Papa Schimmelhorn took special care to be more than ordinarily subservient to the Mother-Empress at handout time, and he prepared himself for bed by chewing a few tasty catnip leaves. His dreams, when finally he fell asleep, would have done credit to a much younger man in a much more secure environment — to the point where several times poor Tuptup wakened in alarm, thinking that the horrid new commander had burst into his bedchamber to deflower him.

On the morrow, he resumed his new campaign, proceeding tactfully and delicately to avoid alarming the young lady. He felt only minor twinges of his former fear, and these were invariably dispelled by a bite or two of catnip. "*Wunderbar!*" he would remark to Gustav-Adolf on these occasions. "Vhat a pity ve do nodt haff on Earth for poor old Heinrich!" However, he was much too preoccupied even to suspect the full power of what he had inadvertently created.

Almost a week went by before he was able to kiss Lali with all the skill and passion she deserved; and another ten days before he could tempt her into a private cubbyhole where he had thoughtfully installed a smuggled mattress. He timed the tryst for the luncheon hour, when Pukpuk always went up to the crewmen's mess, plied her with supercatnip, bowed her graciously into his bower, and—

And when things happened, they happened all at once.

For quite some time, he had been aware of Pukpuk only as a minor impediment in the background and had failed completely to observe the very obvious signs of jealousy displayed by his small companion or the ferocity with which he gnawed his catnip and bristled his red eyebrows. Nor did he know that Lali had made the error of taunting Pukpuk with her new conquest and that Pukpuk, consequently, instead of heading for the mess, had made a beeline for the Mother-Empress' hall of audience, swallowing his pride and picking up Tuptup on the way to help him get past any officers surrounding her. They made their entry at a singularly auspicious time. Mama Schimmelhorn, from her throne, was beaming serenely on the captain and her officers, who were almost capering with delight before her. On her lap, she had Lambie-pie, whom the captain had just placed there, after proclaiming the stupendous event that had just occurred.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you, Your Voluptuousness! You've solved our problem — at least part of it. Look at dear Lambie-pie! Oh, Your Delightfulness, she — *she's going to have kittens!*"

Mama Schimmelhorn had taken the tidings in her stride. "At home, it happens all der time," she told them, "but here iss different. Vell—" She smiled indulgently. "—probably it vas Gustav-Adolf, der naughty boy! By him, Mitzi Hundhammer's black-und-white kitty-cat alvays has six, und vunce sefen. He iss so big und shtrong!"

At that point, Tuptup whispered in the captain's ear, and the captain, looking horribly shocked, took Pukpuk aside and listened to his story. She conferred at length with her senior officers. Mama Schimmelhorn, aware that something had destroyed their festive mood, stared down at them enquiringly. Then the captain, abjectly, haltingly, and with many an apology, told her exactly what was going on.

Having been assured that her husband was on duty with by far the least attractive woman on the ship and that furthermore he was constantly being chaperoned by the pugnacious Pukpuk, she had never thought to question the assignment; and of course any visit by the Mother-Empress to the *ifk* room would have been unthinkable. Now, suddenly, she found herself again betrayed. Rage swept away her homesickness, her sentimental leniency toward him. She stood, upsetting Lambie-pie, who fled with a frightened mew. Never before — not even at her first appearance in the snap-net — had the captain and her officers beheld a sight so awe-inspiring. She raised

her black umbrella like a saber.

"Lead der vay!" she ordered.

She was at once obeyed. Without a word, the procession went out into the passageway. Silently, it descended down one companionway after another. At the door to the *ifk* room, she brushed aside her escort, and walked in.

Neither Papa Schimmelhorn nor Lali even realized that she was there until the point of her umbrella caught him in the ribs.

"Oudt from der closet!" came her terrible voice. "Again, anoder naked voman! Shtand *up!*"

As poor Lali squalled in fear, and while he did his best to get himself untangled, the umbrella kept up its wicked prodding.

"Pull down der petticoat!" commanded Mama Schimmelhorn. "Dirty old man, you should be ashamed!" She caught her first real glimpse of Lali. "So! Efen on Beetlegoose iss pretty pussycats! Vell, this time ve *fix!*"

With one final prod, she stepped back, gestured to the bosuns to take over, and swept majestically out of the room. The bosuns, assisted by their officers, leaped willingly to their duty; and Papa Schimmelhorn, ungently and ingloriously, was dragged off to his trial.

The trial was swift and merciless. Never in the history of Beetlegoosian civilization, explained the captain, had so dastardly a crime been perpetrated. Only during the *dzimdzig* rite were men permitted even to *pretend* to take an amatory initiative. It had been thus ever since their lawgiver, Lovely-Madame Mother-President Yeelil Huh — she who had first brewed the shrimpy gruel — had shown men their proper place in the scheme of things three hundred years before. And the Empress' cat-bearer had compounded his felony by assaulting Lali, who was really nothing more than a retarded child.

At this, the Mother-Empress snorted, but she did not interrupt.

The captain paused dramatically. She explained that she never would be so presumptuous as to recommend a proper punishment. However, she declared, if any of their own men ever so much as contemplated such a deed, purely as a precautionary measure she would at once have him altered.

Papa Schimmelhorn's knowledge of the language of the master sex was still imperfect, but this he understood. He bellowed hideously. He writhed and struggled in the bosun's grasp. He dropped down to his knees and begged for mercy, pleading incoherently and hysterically trying to think up effective arguments. What would Pastor

Hundhammer have to say of such a barbarity? he cried. And only think how all her friends vould shnicker because her husband now vas fat and lazy und—

Mama Schimmelhorn paid no attention. Smiling a cruel and calculating smile, she raised two fingers in a scissors gesture and said, "*Shnip!*"

"We don't have to wait till we get home, Your Gloriousness," the captain said. "My pharmacist's mate has done it lots of times on tomcats, and I'm sure she could manage perfectly. Shall we take him there right now?"

The Mother-Empress appeared to cogitate, while her husband, still on his knees, wept and pleaded. Finally, narrowing her eyes, she gave her verdict. "*Nein,*" she declared. "For now ve make him vait. He von't go any place. Ve haff him by die—" She broke off with a chilling laugh. "Anyhow, I haff for him anoder punishment....Shut up der yelling!" she ordered Papa Schimmelhorn. "Or else I giff der bumbershoot!"

The bosuns boxed his ears, and he subsided.

"Later ve take you to be fixed," she promised him. "First ve must do something for die big Beetlegooser vomen who haff been nice to me, und who haff troubles—"

Briefly, then, she outlined their problem, repeating its most important points to make sure he understood, and explaining how, though she herself had not solved the problem of Beetlegoosian sterility, her Gustav-Adolf had.

"Und so," she announced gloatingly, "I tell you vhat ve do. All your life you shtay avay at night and chase die naked vomen, *nicht wahr?* Und I haff heard how you said to Heinrich Luedesing how vunce in a while a lidtle piece vill keep you full mit vinegar, *nicht so?* Vell, on Beetlegoose iss a whole planet full of naked vomen, und you can get to vork, chust like mein Gustav-Adolf. You shtart at der top maybe, mit die Mama-President, und you vork down. Imachine — a billion naked vomen inshtead of chust vun lidtle piece! You vill be mein Piece Corps. I charge a fee, like Cousin Alois mit der bull."

It took some time for all the implications of her plan to penetrate, but when they did the effect was cataclysmic. Papa Schimmelhorn stared wildly at his captors, and his imagination multiplied them infinitely, showing each one uglier than her sisters. He moaned in anguish; he sobbed, shed tears by the bucketful, apologized for all his errors of the past, made any number of unlikely promises; he wrung his hands and tore his noble beard.

The Mother-Empress was unmoved. "I haff shpoken!" she

proclaimed royally. "Take him avay. Put him back in der room vith Tuptup, und tie him by der leg so he can't get avay!"

The bosuns dragged him off and, while Tuptup snickered and made rude remarks, manacled him securely to his bed.

The next six weeks were dreadful ones. Every day, Mama Schimmelhorn had him brought in to hear lengthy sermons on the nastiness of his behavior, with vivid instructions on how to perform his destined diplomatic role on their arrival. Every day, she reminded him unkindly of the other fate awaiting him. Even when she passed out his bowser-bag, which now contained only the coarsest fare, she explained that it was just to preserve his vinegar so that he might be a credit to her Piece Corps.

At night, his dreams alternated between hideous visions of the veterinarian and even more frightful ones of Beetlegoosian women, festooned with wisps of hair and scraps of clothing, cued up from dawn to dusk awaiting his attentions. During the endless days, Tuptup sneered at him openly, bringing his little cronies in to join the fun, and the big bosuns kept him under a hostile surveillance. Even when Pukpuk, conscience-striken at having been the instrument of his betrayal and downfall, took to dropping in with little presents of fresh catnip and, when they could be discreetly whispered, words of affection and concern from Lali, he was in no way heartened. Days passed before he even realized despairingly that his only hope of escaping the dark future lay in solving the problem of the little men's sterility — and that, fettered as he was, his chances of success were less than zero.

During those weeks, the only person who did not treat him with contempt was Pukpuk, who tiptoed in two or three times a week to cheer him with tidings from the *ifk* room: how he himself was getting thoroughly dissatisfied with the shrimpy gruel and how dear Lali was sharing her own rations with him; and how invigorating the catnip was; and how his muscles had been growing and hardening up; and, finally and triumphantly, how hair had actually started growing on his chest, just as Lali had said it grew on Papa Schimmelhorn's.

And Papa Schimmelhorn would listen to him, and munch the catnip, and — until he again realized the hopelessness of his predicament — would feel somewhat cheered, and would try to goose his subconscious into finding a solution to the problem.

The days and weeks dragged

by; the ship drove on toward its destination; and the Mother-Empress presided over a court which she found ever duller and more tedious — something she never would have admitted under the circumstances. Every few days, the captain announced joyously that another of her ship's cats were pregnant; Gustav-Adolf became the hero of the hour; and each feline pregnancy was held up as an object lesson for the unwilling Piece Corps.

Then, on the day before they were to make planetfall, the captain came before the throne in a state of unprecedented excitement and elation.

"Und now vhat iss?" enquired Mama Schimmelhorn, a little wearily. "Ve haff more kittens?"

"Oh, no, Your Lusciousness!" the captain cried ecstatically. "It's much, much more important! We *knew* you'd solve the problem for us — and not just with cats! It's Lali, that silly *ifk*-room girl! Your Magnificence, she's — *she's going to have a baby!*"

"She *vhat?*"

"She's going to have a baby — and it's the first one in years and years and years! *Oh,* Your Deliciousness — we owe it all to *you!*"

Mama Schimmelhorn stood up, her Piece Corps plans forgotten utterly. "But it iss nodt possible!" she whispered. "It iss six veeks, und ve vould haff known before. Also, he has been by der leg to der bed ge-tied. It cannodt be!"

The captain laughed. "*Dear* Mother-Empress, you're joking, aren't you? Of course, it couldn't have been your cat-bearer. It was that awful Pukpuk. They've both confessed it, and she's going to marry him. We ought to punish them, but it's really too important an occasion. I hope you'll tell us how you managed it."

Mama Schimmelhorn sat down again. Rolling with the punches, she smiled serenely. "I haff nodt said before," she declared, "because I am nodt sure it vorks. Now ve vait a lidtle vhile, und maybe vhen ve get to Beetlegoose I tell your Mama President." And to herself she said, *Ach, probably it iss Papa's chenius in der subconscience. Maybe if I am shmart I can make him tell vhat he has done to Lali und der lidtle man, so die big ladies shtill think it vas by me.*

She dismissed the captain and had Papa Schimmelhorn brought before her, where he was forced to kneel in all humility.

"*So!*" she said, giving him a look of malicious triumph. "Maybe you hear der news — how dot shtupid Lali now iss pregnant, und lidtle Herr Pukput iss der papa?"

He had heard, for Pukpuk had boasted of it, displaying a most un-Beetlegoosian *machismo.*

"Und you haff guessed maybe vhat it means, *nicht wahr?* Now iss no problem for die big vomen aboudt babies. Ve do nodt need a Piece Corps."

Papa Schimmelhorn nodded apprehensively.

"So ve cut der budget," she told him with a fiendish smile. "Und nodt chust der budget! Shtraight avay vhen ve land — to der vet's." Her fingers made the scissors gesture. "*Shnip!*"

Once again, her husband panicked. Once again, he begged and whined and pleaded, resorting to every emotional appeal — and all in vain.

Transfixing him with her Medusa stare, she said, "Giff me vun good reason why nodt? Maybe because Miss Prudence Pilgrim vould nodt like? Maybe some oder pretty lidtle pussycat?"

"Mama," he wept, "only listen! It iss nodt chust for me! About die big vomen und die babies shtill ve are nodt sure. Maybe der catnip vorks only for lidtle Pukpuk, und nodt for eferybody. Maybe for too many years die lidtle men haff eaten gruel mit shrimps. Maybe for them already iss too late!"

Ah-ha! said the Mother-Empress to herself. *From der catnip maus — so dot's der secret!* But she remained silent while he poured out his frantic story of the effect the *ifk* had had upon the catnip, and the effect the mutated plants had had upon the *ifk* and Pukpuk and the little tomcats. So upset was he that he did not even think to take credit for the scientific miracle — an oversight which she herself had no intention of repeating.

Finally she clapped her hands sharply to end the interview and signed to the bosuns to remove him. "Tomorrow, vhen ve get to Beetlegoose, ve see!" she announced ominously. "Maybe die Mama-President iss grateful, und giffs me a nice testimonial dinner."

Actually, the festivities honoring Mama Schimmelhorn and her scientific triumph lasted a full week. They opened with a Banquet of State at which long speeches were made by the Mother-President, a brawny lady with a harsh bass voice and more than the ghost of a mustache, and by many representatives of Beetlegoosian officialdom. The captain, newly promoted to flag rank, was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Yeelil Huh for discovering and bringing back the agent of their salvation and decorations were bestowed on all her officers. Gifts and honors without number were showered upon the Mother-Empress, chief of them being a large oil painting of a demure little man with nothing on stepping out of a seashell on the shore. (This,

Mama Schimmelhorn gave to the Salvation Army shortly after her return, and it ended up over the entrance to the men's room in a gay bar not far from Pennsylvania Avenue.) In an unprecedented public ceremony, Lali and Pukpuk were joined in matrimony, and Lali was formally declared to have at last achieved full womanhood.

Then Pukpuk and Papa Schimmelhorn and Gustav-Adolf were placed on exhibition for three days in the window of Madame Ipilu's swank husband shop, much to the chagrin of poor Tuptup. Pukpuk did his best to reassure his large benefactor, telling him that the Mother-Empress had told the captain definitely that she had no intention of subjecting him to surgery, but Papa Schimmelhorn would not be comforted until, on the third day, she herself informed him that, if he promised to be good as gold, he could return to Earth intact.

And Papa Schimmelhorn was very good indeed. He ignored completely the few pretty pussycats who, once in a long while, showed their faces in the surging throngs of huge women and wistful little men who came from every quarter of the planet to stare at him. He maintained an austere visage and practically sat on his hands on the occasions when Lali was brought in to greet her bridegroom. But after nightfall, when the window curtains had been drawn by Madame Ipilu in person, and once he and Pukpuk had eaten their supper, not of shrimpy gruel but of real woman's food — a point the Mother-Empress had generously insisted on — he revealed that even his harrowing experiences could not really quell his spirit.

"You listen, chunior," he would tell Pukpuk, as they munched their crispy catnip in the dark. "Eferything iss nodt ofer. Vhen I go back to Earth, you do chust like I say, und eat der catnip, und giff a lidtle maybe to your Lali. But you must safe die seeds und plant them eferyvhere. For Beetlegoose, you must become der Chonny Catnipseed. A few veeks und things begin to change, und someday maybe efen Tuptup gets hairs on der chest. But you be careful. Vhen die big ladies find out vhat really happens und dot die men all are becoming men again, probably they try to make catnip — how do you say it? — a subscription drug, so you get it only vhen they vant a baby. Und dot vay nobody has any fun."

Then he and Pukpuk would laugh themselves to sleep at the thought of their subversion and of the revolution it would bring about.

After four days, Mama Schimmelhorn found herself thoroughly bored with the unending round of

dull entertainments. By the fifth, she decided she'd go crazy if she had to attend even one more noisy doe party where little men did naughty things which reminded her of a summer she had spent as housemother at a school for more-or-less delinquent urchins. On the sixth, she announced her inflexible intention of returning home forthwith, which of course meant that she had to endure one more banquet (at which she presented the world's most perfect cuckoo clock to the Mother-President with her compliments). And on the seventh, she and her entourage re-embarked on the *Vilvilkuz Snar Tuhl Y't.*

The return trip took less than half the time the outward journey had. The *ifk* achieved an almost unbelievable acceleration, aided perhaps by the fact that each of their pots was now lush with mutant catnip. Lali and Pukpuk were still in charge of them, Lali having been given the brand new rank of chief engineer, suggested by the Mother-Empress as a reward for her approaching labor; and Papa Schimmelhorn, though he was still strictly confined to quarters, was allowed to entertain the happy couple under proper supervision.

Finally there came a day when the bosuns brought him his shirt and pants and jacket and ordered him to put them on. The ship was hovering squarely over the center of New Haven, and at the captain's orders a lifeboat, rather than the snap-net, had been made ready. The farewells said, and the gratitude expressed, were fervent and sincere, and many an invitation was extended to the Mother-Empress to visit Beetlegoose again.

"Next time you haff trouble mit die lidtle men, don'dt ask for help from Mama!" she declared, flourishing her umbrella as she stepped through the port. "Vunce iss too much!"

The boat descended swiftly. It deposited them just a half block from their residence, and Mama Schimmelhorn did not even wave as it took off.

"Nefer again!" she declared, prodding her husband with the point of the umbrella. "I haff enough nasty naked vomen monkeyshines!"

Papa Schimmelhorn assured her that he could not agree more fully, and he and Gustav-Adolf followed her docilely through the door.

Shaken by his experiences, he did not leave the house for a good three weeks except to go to work at Heinrich Luedesing's and, on Sundays, to worship at Pastor Hundhammer's church. His spare time he devoted to his workshop,

contriving parts for his Stanley Steamer's antigravity device.

Nobody believed them when they told of their adventures — nobody except Willie Fledermaus, who was too young to count. Even Heinrich Luedesing did not take the story seriously when he was presented with a flourishing sprig of mutant catnip in a pot and told that it was a sovereign specific for restoring lead to pencils.

Gradually, though, the painful past receded, and the vital juices in Papa Schimmelhorn's vast frame began to flow again until one evening, as he was nibbling catnip, he thought again of Ms. Pilgrim. "*Ach!*" he sighed. "Meine pretty lidtle pussycat. Maybe chust vunce I go to see her und make a lidtle date."

There was no time like the present. Carefully, he opened the well-oiled garage door. Upstairs, all was still. He started to tiptoe out—

And down the street came a vivid scarlet Stingray, its exhaust giving forth a full-throated masculine roar. At the wheel was a transformed Heinrich Luedesing, one arm around Ms. Prudence Pilgrim, who was cuddling up to him.

At that instant, without a sound, Mama Schimmelhorn came up behind her husband. She seized him cruelly by the ear. Her umbrella caught him painfully in the ribs.

"*So!*" she hissed. "Dirty old man! Vhere are you going?"

"I guess novhere," Papa Schimmelhorn answered meekly, gazing after the vanishing red Stingray.

"Okay, back inside!" she ordered, with a final poke of her umbrella; and he followed her obediently.

But he winked slyly at Gustav-Adolf as he did so. "You chust vait till ve get der antigrafity in der Stanley Shteamer!" he whispered.

Solution to Acrostic Puzzle in September issue.

(Cordwainer) Smith: "The Game of Rat and Dragon" — *Galaxy,* 1955

He woke her gently and took her into his arms. She humped her back luxuriously, stretched her claws, started to purr, thought better of it, and licked him on the wrist instead.

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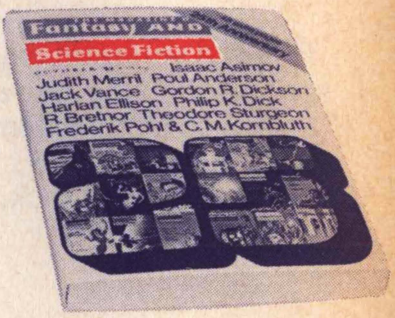

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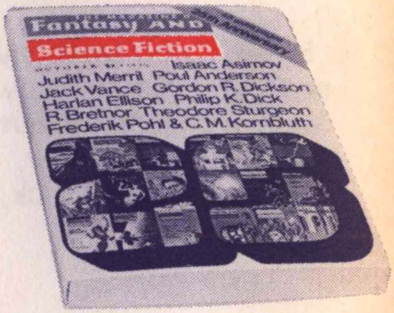

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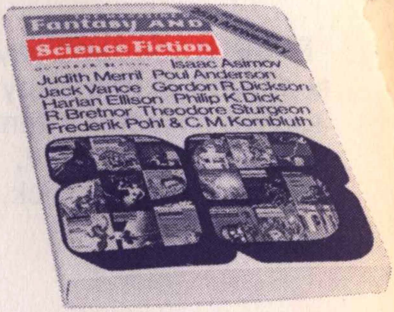

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