

# **FUTURE EVES**

Great Science Fiction About Women by Women

Edited by

**Jean Marie Stine**

**A Futures-Past Science Fiction Classic**– Selected and Introduced by Jean Marie Stine

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## **CONTENTS**

Introduction

PART I: FROM THE 1920s – '30s

Conquest of Gola – Leslie F. Stone

Delilah – Margaretta W. Rea

The Man of Stone – Hazel Heald

PART II: FROM THE 1940s – '50s

Days of Darkness – Evelyn Goldstein

Alien Invasion – Marcia Kamien

Miss Millie's Rose – Joy Leache

The Goddess of Planet Delight – Betsy Curtis

Cocktails at Eight – Beth Elliott

The Last Day – Helen Clarkson

## INTRODUCTION

"Eve."

It's a name freighted with negative associations: Temptation. Sin. Deception. The fall of man. For some three or four thousand years, this venerable lady's name has been blackened in every way imaginable.

But, when the story is examined, a diametrically opposite picture emerges. For, old Eve did pretty well by humankind. To her, if the tale be accurate, we owe: Knowledge. Science. Progress. Long life. Physical comforts. Perhaps even freedom from tyranny (if this be the step-child of knowledge and progress).

Clearly, Mother Eve must have been a remarkable and courageous woman.

Nor did the gifts end with Eve's generation. Today's Eves, equally remarkable and courageous women, have given us: Anti-fungal antibiotics. Egalitarian relationship models. Eyeglasses. Consciousness of social justice. And, of course, much, much more.

But what of Future Eves—on Earth and among the Stars? What gifts will they bestow? Group consciousness? Immortality? Universal cheap power? A perfected economic and social system? Faster-than-light star drives?

There is no way to know, of course. But who is more qualified to give an educated guess than the women who write science fiction? It is into their stories we must peer if we wish a glimpse of the gifts future Eves may hold out to us. As futurists and feminists, they are in the best position to imagine the parts women may play and the contributions they may make in the world of tomorrow.

This anthology showcases nine classic tales by female science fiction writers, penned between 1926 (the publication of the first science fiction magazine) and 1960

(the dawn of modern SF), each featuring its own, unique future Eve. Although it is generally assumed that no – or few – women were writing science fiction during this period, research reveals a strikingly different picture. Recently a review was conducted of every issue of every SF magazine published from the debut first science fiction magazine in 1926 (*Amazing Stories*) and the modern age in SF magazine publishing in 1959 (when *Imagination*, the last pulp-influenced periodical went broke and the more literary, purse-sized magazines typical today became dominant). An unsuspected one hundred women contributed stories to their pages during those three and a half decades. Some researchers estimate the true number may well be twice that, as doubtless many women – believing, perhaps rightly, that their work would find readier acceptance – concealed their gender behind androgynous names, the anonymity of initials or beneath male pseudonyms.

Whatever names they may have chosen to write under, these pioneering women were so far ahead of most other women – and men – of their time that that they rightly deserve to be considered future Eves themselves. Take the cases of the nine writers represented here: Leslie F. Stone was so far ahead of her time that nothing like her novelette, "The Conquest of Gola" (1931), an encounter with Earth males told from the point-of-view of an alien matriarch, would be attempted again in science fiction until the work of Alice Sheldon (AKA James Tiptree, Jr.) in the 1970s. The scientific detective story is a subgenre of science fiction that flourished in the early 1900s with the adventures of Arthur B. Reeve's Craig Kennedy character; and Margarette Rea is one of the few women of the time to have, in "Delilah" (1933), written in the subgenre (in this instance utilizing the newly emergent science of "psychology"). Hazel Heald's novelette "The Man of Stone" is searingly feminist, all the more so since her heroine, like so many women of the time, takes her brutalized situation so much for granted; the title can be seen as having both a literal meaning and a metaphorical one in relation to the heart of the principle male character (Lovecraft fans are in for a real treat.) On a more modern note, Evelyn Goldsmith offers what is both a legitimate science fiction puzzle story and one of character in her "Days of Darkness" (1959) the tale of a spinster's encounter with an invisible, vampiric alien invader. Although "Alien Invasion" (1954) by Marcia Kamen is short, it is one many women will sympathize with – after all, what else is sex between a man and a woman? In "Miss Millie's Rose" (1959), Joy Leche manages what so few male science fiction writers of the era seemed able to do: portray a character whose psychology arises out of her own future world and not our own. Betsy Curtis is a deceptively mild name for someone able to produce a work like "The Goddess of Planet Delight," a short novel in the classic *Astounding* mode that mixes a sociological puzzle with pointed satire, high-adventure and romance in its story of a traveling salesman who has to stop over one night at... "Cocktails at Eight" seems a deceptively mild domestic comedy, until you realize what author Beth Elliot is saying about the children her heroine has produced. Finally, the unknown Helen Clarkson offers "The Last Day," a haunting poignant short-short so prophetic that, though chosen prior to 9/11, hits home all the harder in the aftermath of that horrendous tragedy. You will find an Eve of the future at the heart of each of these classic

science fiction stories about women by women.

Jean Marie Stine

1/9/2002

*Watch for the next Futures-Past/PageTurner E-Books release, and be sure to visit Future Sagas, our free on-line magazine of classic science fiction to see the original magazine illustrations for some of these stories, as well as forgotten fiction, rare covers, articles and illustrations, plus news of our forthcoming e-books. URL: <http://www.hometown.aol.com/pulplady/FUTURES.html/>*

## **PART I:**

FROM THE 1920s – '30s

### **THE CONQUEST OF GOLA**

Leslie F. Stone

(Wonder Stories, April 1931)

#### I.

HOLA, my daughters (sighed the Matriarch), it is true indeed,

I am the only living one upon Gola who remembers the invasion from Detaxal. I alone of all my generation survive to recall vividly the sights and scenes of that past era. And well it is that you come to me to hear by free communication of mind to mind, face to face with each other.

Ah, well I remember the surprise of that hour when through the mists that enshroud our lovely world, there swam the first of the great smooth cylinders of the Detaxalans, fifty tas in length, as glistening and silvery as the soil of our land, propelled by the man-things that on Detaxal are supreme even as we women are supreme on Gola.

In those bygone days, as now, Gola was enwrapped by her cloud mists that keep from us the terrific glare of the great star that glows like a malignant spirit out there in the darkness of the void. Only occasionally when a particularly great storm parts the mist of heaven do we see the wonders of the vast universe, but that does not prevent us, with our marvelous telescopes handed down to us from thousands of generations before us, from learning what lies across the dark seas of the outside.

Therefore we knew of the nine planets that encircle the great star and are subject to its rule. And so are we familiar enough with the surfaces of these planets to know why Gola should appear as a haven to their inhabitants who see in our cloud-enclosed mantle a sweet release from the blasting heat and blinding glare of the great sun.

So it was not strange at all to us to find that the people of Detaxal, the third planet of the sun, had arrived on our globe with a wish in their hearts to migrate here, and end their days out of reach of the blistering warmth that had come to be their lot on their own world.

Long ago we, too, might have gone on exploring expeditions to other worlds, other universes, but for what? Are we not happy here? We who have attained the greatest of civilizations within the confines of our own silvery world. Powerfully strong with our mighty force rays, we could subjugate all the universe, but why?

Are we not content with life as it is, with our lovely cities, our homes, our daughters, our gentle consorts? Why spend physical energy in combative strife for something we do not wish, when our mental processes carry us further and beyond the conquest of mere terrestrial exploitation?

On Detaxal it is different, for there the peoples, the ignoble male creatures, breed for physical prowess, leaving the development of their sciences, their philosophies, and the contemplation of the abstract to a chosen few. The greater part of the race faces forth to conquer, to lay waste, to struggle and fight as the animals do over a morsel of worthless territory. Of course we can see why they desired Gola with all its treasures, but we can thank Providence and ourselves that they did not succeed in "commercializing" us as they have the remainder of the universe with their ignoble Federation.

Ah yes, well I recall the hour when first they came, pushing cautiously through the cloud mists, seeking that which lay beneath. We of Gola were unwarned until the two cylinders hung directly above Tola, the greatest city of that time, which still lies in its ruins since that memorable day. But they have paid for it – paid for it well in thousands and tens of thousands of their men.

We were first apprised of their coming when the alarm from Tola was sent from the great beam station there, advising all to stand in readiness for an emergency. Geble, my mother, was then Queen of all Gola, and I was by her side in Morka, that pleasant seaside resort, where I shall soon travel to partake of its rejuvenating waters.

With us were four of Geble's consorts, sweet gentle males that gave Geble much pleasure in those free hours away from the worries of state. But when the word of the strangers' descent over our home city, Tola, came to us, all else was forgotten. With me at her side, Geble hastened to the beam station and there in the matter transmitter we dispatched our physical beings to the palace at Tola, and the next moment were staring upward at the two strange shapes etched against the clouds.

What the Detaxalan ships were waiting for we did not know then, but later we learned. Not grasping the meaning of our beam stations, the commanders of the ships considered the city below them entirely lacking in means of defense, and were conferring on the method of taking it without bloodshed on either side.

It was not long after our arrival in Tola that the first of the ships began to descend toward the great square before the palace. Geble watched without a word, her great mind already scanning the brains of those whom she found within the great machine. She transferred to my mind but a single thought as I stood there at her side and that with a sneer "Barbarians!"

Now the ship was settling in the square and after a few moments of hesitation, a circular doorway appeared at the side and four of the Detaxalans came through the opening. The square was empty but for themselves and their flyer, and we saw them looking about surveying the beautiful buildings on all sides. They seemed to recognize the palace for what it was and in one accord moved in our direction.

Then Geble left the window at which we stood and strode to the doorway opening upon the balcony that faced the square. The Detaxalans halted in their tracks when they saw her slender graceful form appear and removing the strange coverings they wore on their heads they each made a bow.

Again Geble sneered, for only the male-things of our world bow their heads, and so she recognized these visitors for what they were, nothing more than the despicable males of the species! And what creatures they were!

Imagine a short almost flat body set high upon two slender legs, the body tapering in the middle, several times as broad across as it is through the center, with two arms almost as long as the legs attached to the upper part of the torso. A small column-like neck of only a few inches divides the head of oval shape from the body, and in this head only are set the organs of sight, hearing, and scent. Their bodies were like a patchwork of a misguided nature.

Yes, strange as it is, my daughters, practically all of the creature's faculties had their base in the small ungainly head, and each organ was perforce pressed into serving for several functions. For instance, the breathing nostrils also served for scenting out odors, nor was this organ able to exclude any disagreeable odors that might come its way, but had to dispense to the brain both pleasant and unpleasant odors at the same time.

Then there was the mouth, set directly beneath the nose, and here again we had an

example of one organ doing the work of two, for the creature not only used the mouth with which to take in the food for its body, but it also used the mouth to enunciate the excruciatingly ugly sounds of its language.

Never before have I seen such a poorly organized body, so unlike our own highly developed organisms. How much nicer it is to be able to call forth any organ at will, and dispense with it when its usefulness is over! Instead these poor Detaxalans had to carry theirs about in physical being all the time so that always was the surface of their bodies entirely marred.

Yet that was not the only part of their ugliness, and proof of the lowliness of their origin, for whereas our fine bodies support themselves by muscular development, these poor creatures were dependent entirely upon a strange structure to keep them in their proper shape.

Imagine if you can a bony skeleton somewhat like the foundations upon which we build our edifices, laying stone and cement over the steel framework. But this skeleton instead is inside a body which the flesh, muscle and skin overlay. Everywhere in their bodies are these cartilaginous structures – hard, heavy, bony structures developed by the chemicals of the being for its use. Even the hands, feet and head of the creatures were underlaid with these bones – ugh, it was terrible when we dissected one of the fellows for study. I shudder to think of it.

Yet again there was still another feature of the Detaxalans that was equally as horrifying as the rest, namely their outer covering. As we viewed them for the first time out there in the square we discovered that parts of the body, that is the part of the head which they called the face, and the bony hands were entirely naked without any sort of covering, neither fur nor feathers, just the raw, pinkish-brown skin looking as if it had been recently plucked.

Later we found a few specimens that had a type of fur on the lower part of the face, but these were rare. And when they doffed the head coverings which we had first taken for some sort of natural covering, we saw that the top of the head was overlaid with a very fine fuzz of fur several inches long.

We did not know in the beginning that the strange covering on the bodies of the four men, green in color, was not a natural growth, but later discovered that such was the truth, and not only the face and hands were bare of fur, but the entire body, except for a fine sprinkling of hair that was scarcely visible except on the chest, was also bare. No wonder the poor things covered themselves with their awkward clothing. We arrived at the conclusion that their lack of fur had been brought about by the fact that always they had been exposed to the bright rays of the sun so that without the dampness of our own planet the fur had dried up and fallen away from the flesh!

Now thinking it over I suppose that we of Gola presented strange forms to the people of Detaxal with our fine circular bodies, rounded at the top, our short beautiful lower limbs with the circular foot pads, and our short round arms and hand

pads, flexible and muscular like rubber.

But how envious they must have been of our beautiful golden coats, our movable eyes, our power to scent, hear and touch with any part of the body, to absorb food and drink through any part of the body most convenient to us at any time. Oh yes, laugh though you may, without a doubt we were also freaks to those freakish Detaxalans. But no matter, let us return to the tale.

## II.

On recognizing our visitors for what they were, simple-minded males, Geble was chagrined at them for taking up her time, but they were strangers to our world and we Golans are always courteous. Geble began of course to try to communicate by thought transference, but strangely enough the fellows below did not catch a single thought. Instead, entirely unaware of Geble's overture to friendship, the leader commenced to speak to her in most outlandish manner, contorting the red lips of his mouth into various uncouth shapes and making sounds that fell upon our hearing so unpleasantly that we immediately closed our senses to them. And without a word Geble turned her back upon them, calling for Tanka, her personal secretary.

Tanka was instructed to welcome the Detaxalans while she herself turned to her own chambers to summon a half dozen of her council. When the council arrived she began to discuss with them the problem of extracting more of the precious tenix from the waters of the great inland lake of Notauch. Nothing whatever was said of the advent of the Detaxalans, for Geble had dismissed them from her mind as creatures not worthy of her thought.

In the meantime Tanka had gone forth to meet the four who of course could not converse with her. In accordance with the Queen's orders she led them indoors to the most informal receiving chamber and there had them served with food and drink which by the looks of the remains in the dishes they did not relish at all.

Leading them through the rooms of the lower floor of the palace she made a pretence of showing them everything which they duly surveyed. But they appeared to chafe at the manner in which they were being entertained.

The creatures even made an attempt through the primitive method of conversing by their arms to learn something of what they had seen, but Tanka was as supercilious as her mistress. When she thought they had had enough, she led them to the square and back to the door of their flyer, giving them their dismissal.

But the men were not ready to accept it. Instead they tried to express to Tanka their desire to meet the ruling head of Gola. Although their hand motions were perfectly inane and incomprehensible, Tanka could read what passed through their brains, and



understood more fully than they what lay in their minds. She shook her head and motioned that they were to embark in their flyer and be on their way back to their planet.

Again and again Detaxalans tried to explain what they wished, thinking Tanka did not understand. At last she impressed upon their savage minds that there was nothing for them but to depart, and disgruntled by her treatment they reentered their machine, closed its ponderous door and raised their ship to the level of its sister flyer. Several minutes passed and then, with thanksgiving, we saw them pass over the city.

Told of this, Geble laughed. "To think of mere man-things daring to attempt to force themselves upon us. What is the universe coming to? What were their women back home considering when they sent them to us? Have they developed too many males and think that we can find use for them?" she wanted to know.

"It is strange indeed," observed Yabo, one of the council members. "What did you find in the minds of these ignoble creatures, O August One?"

"Nothing of particular interest, a very low grade of intelligence, to be sure. There was no need of looking below the surface."

"It must have taken intelligence to build those ships."

"None aboard them did that. I don't question it but that their mothers built the ships for them as playthings, even as we give toys to our 'little ones,' you know. I recall that the ancients of our world perfected several types of space-flyers many ages ago!"

"Maybe those males do not have 'mothers' but instead they build the ships themselves. Maybe they are the stronger sex on their world!" This last was said by Suiki, the fifth consort of Geble, a pretty little male, rather young in years. No one had noticed his coming into the chamber, but now everyone showed surprise at his words.

"Impossible!" ejaculated Yabo.

Geble, however, laughed at the little chap's expression. "Suiki is a profound thinker," she observed, still laughing, and she drew him to her gently hugging him.

And with that the subject of the men from Detaxal was closed. It was reopened, however, several hours later when it was learned that instead of leaving Gola altogether the ships were seen one after another by the various cities of the planet as they circumnavigated it. It was rather annoying, for everywhere the cities' routines were broken up as the people dropped their work and studies to gaze at the cylinders.

Too, it was upsetting the morale of the males, for on learning that the two ships contained only creatures of their own sex they were becoming envious wishing for the same type of playthings for themselves.

Shut in, as they are, unable to grasp the profundities of our science and thought, the gentle, fun-loving males were always glad for a new diversion and this new method developed by the Detaxalans had intrigued them.

It was then that Geble decided it was high time to take matters into her own hands. Not knowing where the two ships were at the moment it was not difficult with the object-finder beam to discover their whereabouts, and then with the attractor to draw them to Tola magnetically. An ous later we had the pleasure of seeing the two ships rushing toward our city. When they arrived above it, power brought them down to the square again.

Again Tanka was sent out, and directed the commanders of the two ships to follow her in to the Queen. Knowing the futility of attempting to converse with them without mechanical aid, Geble caused to be brought her three of the ancient mechanical thought transformers that are only museum pieces to us but still workable. The two men were directed to place them on their heads while she donned the third. When this was done she ordered the creatures to depart immediately from Gola, telling them that she was tired of their play.

Watching the faces of the two I saw them frowning and shaking their heads. Of course I could read their thoughts as well as Geble without need of the transformers, since it was only for their benefit that these were used, so I heard the whole conversation, though I need only to give you the gist of it.

"We have no wish to leave your world as yet," the two had argued.

"You are disrupting the routine of our lives here," Geble told them, "and now that you've seen all that you can there is no need for you to stay longer. I insist that you leave immediately."

I saw one of the men smile, and thereupon he was the one who did all the talking. (I say "talking," for this he was actually doing, mouthing each one of his words although we understood his thoughts as they formed in his queer brain, so different from ours.)

"Listen here," he laughed, "I don't get the hang of you people at all. We came to Gola (he used some outlandish name of his own, but I use our name of course) with the express purpose of exploration and exploitation. We come as friends. Already we are in alliance with Damin (again the name for the fourth planet of our system was different, but I give the correct appellation), established commerce and trade, and now we are ready to offer you the chance to join our federation peaceably."

"What we have seen of this world is very favorable; there are good prospects for business here. There is no reason why you people as those of Damin and Detaxal can not enter into a nice business arrangement congenially. You have far more here to offer tourists, more than Damin. Why, except for your clouds this would be an ideal paradise for every man, woman and child on Detaxal and Damin to visit, and of course with our new cloud dispensers we could clear your atmosphere for you in

short order and keep it that way. Why, you'll make millions in the first year of your trade.

"Come now, allow us to discuss this with your ruler-king or whatever you call him. Women are all right in their place, but it takes the men to see the profit of a thing like this – you are a woman, aren't you?"

The first of his long speech, of course, was so much gibberish to us, with his prate of business arrangements, commerce and trade, tourists, profits, cloud dispersers and what not, but it was the last part of what he said that took my breath away, and you can imagine how it affected Geble. I could see straightway that she was intensely angered, and good reason too. By the looks of the silly fellow's face I could guess that he was getting the full purport of her thoughts. He began to shuffle his funny feet and a foolish grin pervaded his face.

"Sorry," he said, "if I insulted you – I didn't intend that, but I believed that man holds the same place here as he does on Detaxal and Damin, but I suppose it is just as possible for woman to be the ruling factor of a world as man is elsewhere."

That speech naturally made Geble more irate, and tearing off her thought transformer she left the room without another word. In a moment, however, Yabo appeared wearing the transformer in her place. Yabo had none of the beauty of my mother, for whereas Geble was slender and as straight as a rod, Yabo was obese, and her fat body overflowed until she looked like a large dumpy bundle of fat held together in her furry skin. She had very little dignity as she waddled toward the Detaxalans, but there was determination in her whole manner, and without preliminaries she began to scold the two as though they were her own consorts.

"There has been enough of this, my fine young men," she shot at them. "You've had your fun, and now it is time for you to return to your mothers and consorts. Shame on you for making up such miserable tales about yourselves. I have a good mind to take you home with me for a couple of days, and I'd put you in your places quick enough. The idea of men acting like you are!"

For a moment I thought the Detaxalans were going to cry by the faces they made, but instead they broke into laughter, such heathenish sounds as had never before been heard on Gola, and I listened in wonder instead of excluding it from my hearing, but the fellows sobered quickly enough at that, and the spokesman addressed the shocked Yabo.

"I see," said he, "it's impossible for your people and mine to arrive at an understanding peaceably. I'm sorry that you take us for children out on a spree, that you are accustomed to such a low type of men as is evidently your lot here."

"I have given you your chance to accept our terms without force, but since you refuse, under the orders of the Federation I will have to take you forcibly, for we are determined that Gola become one of us, if you like it or not. Then you will learn that we are not the children you believe us to be.

"You may go to your supercilious Queen now and advise her that we give you exactly ten hours in which to evacuate this city, for precisely on the hour we will lay this city in ruins. And if that does not suffice you, we will do the same with every other city on the planet! Remember, ten hours!"

And with that he took the mechanical thought transformer from his head and tossed it on the table. His companion did the same and the two of them strode out of the room and to their flyers which arose several thousand feet above Tola and remained there.

Hurrying in to Geble, Yabo told her what the Detaxalan had said. Geble was reclining on her couch and did not bother to raise herself.

"Childish prattle," she conceded and withdrew her red eyes on their movable stems into their pockets, paying no more heed to the threats of the men from Detaxal.

I, however, could not be as calm as my mother, and I was fearful that it was not childish prattle after all. Not knowing how long ten hours might be I did not wait, but crept up to the palace's beam station and set its dials so that the entire building and as much of the surrounding territory as it could cover were protected in the force zone.

Alas, that the same beam was not greater. But it had not been put there for defense, only for matter transference and whatever other peacetime methods we used. It was the means of proving just the same that it was also a very good defensive instrument, for just two ous later the hovering ships above let loose their powers of destruction, heavy explosives that entirely demolished all of Tola and its millions of people and only the palace royal of all that beauty was left standing!

Awakened from her nap by the terrific detonation, Geble came hurriedly to a window to view the ruin, and she was wild with grief at what she saw. Geble, however, saw that there was urgent need for action. She knew without my telling her what I had done to protect the palace. And though she showed no sign of appreciation, I knew that I had won a greater place in her regard than any other of her many daughters and would henceforth be her favorite as well as her successor.

Now, with me behind her, she hurried to the beam station and in a twinkling we were both in Tubia, the second greatest city of that time. Nor were we to be caught napping again, for Geble ordered all beam stations to throw out their zone forces while she herself manipulated one of Tubia's greatest power beams, attuning it to the emanations of the two Detaxalan flyers. In less than an ous the two ships were seen through the mists heading for Tubia. For a moment I grew fearful, but on realizing that they were after all in our grip, and the attractors held every living thing powerless against movement, I grew calm and watched them come over the city and the beam pull them to the ground.

With the beam still upon them, they lay supine on the ground without motion. Descending to the square Geble called for Ray C, and when the machine arrived she

herself directed the cutting of the hole in the side of the flyer and was the first to enter it with me immediately behind, as usual.

We were both astounded by what we saw of the great array of machinery within. But a glance told Geble all she wanted to know of their principles. She interested herself only in the men standing rigidly in whatever position our beam had caught them. Only the eyes of the creatures expressed their fright, poor things, unable to move so much as a hair while we moved among them untouched by the power of the beam because of the strength of our own minds.

They could have fought against it if they had known how, but their simple minds were too weak for such exercise.

Now glancing about among the stiff forms around us, of which there were one thousand, Geble picked out those of the males she desired for observation, choosing those she judged to be their finest specimens, those with much hair on their faces and having more girth than the others. These she ordered removed by several workers who followed us, and then we emerged again to the outdoors.

Using hand beam torches the picked specimens were kept immobile after they were out of reach of the greater beam and were borne into the laboratory of the building Geble had converted into her new palace. Geble and I followed, and she gave the order for the complete annihilation of the two powerless ships.

### III.

Thus ended the first foray of the people of Detaxal. And for the next two tels there was peace upon our globe again. In the laboratory the thirty who had been rescued from their ships were given thorough examinations both physically and mentally and we learned all there was to know about them. Hearing of the destruction of their ships, most of the creatures had become frightened and were quite docile in our hands. Those that were unruly were used in the dissecting room for the advancement of Golan knowledge.

After a complete study of them, which yielded little, we lost interest in them scientifically. Geble, however, found some pleasure in having the poor creatures around her and kept three of them in her own chambers so she could delve into their brains as she pleased. The others she doled out to her favorites as she saw fit.

One she gave to me to act as a slave or in what capacity I desired him, but my interest in him soon waned, especially since I had now come of age and was allowed to have two consorts of my own, and go about the business of bringing my daughters into the world.

My slave I called Jon and gave him complete freedom of my house. If only we had

foreseen what was coming we would have annihilated every one of them immediately! It did please me later to find that Jon was learning our language and finding a place in my household, making friends with my two shut-in consorts. But as I have said I paid little attention to him.

So life went on smoothly with scarcely a change after the destruction of the ships of Detaxal. But that did not mean we were unprepared for more. Geble reasoned that there would be more ships forthcoming when the Detaxalans found that their first two did not return. So, although it was sometimes inconvenient, the zones of force were kept upon our cities.

And Geble was right, for the day came when dozens of flyers descended upon Gola from Detaxal. But this time the zones of force did not hold them since the zones were not in operation!

And we were unwarned, for when they descended upon us, our world was sleeping, confident that our zones were our protection. The first indication that I had of trouble brewing was when, awakening, I found the ugly form of Jon bending over me. Surprised, for it was not his habit to arouse me, I started up only to find his arms about me, embracing me. And how strong he was! For the moment a new emotion swept me, for the first time I knew the pleasure to be had in the arms of a strong man, but that emotion was short lived, for I saw in the blue eyes of my slave that he had recognized the look in my eyes for what it was, and for the moment he was tender.

Later I was to grow angry when I thought of that expression of his, for his eyes filled with pity, pity for me! But pity did not stay, instead he grinned and the next instant he was binding me down to my couch with strong rope. Geble, I learned later, had been treated as I, as were the members of the council and every other woman in Gola!

That was what came of allowing our men to meet on common ground with the creatures from Detaxal, for a weak mind is open to seeds of rebellion and the Detaxalans had sown it well, promising dominance to the lesser creatures of Gola.

That, however, was only part of the plot on the part of the Detaxalans. They were determined not only to revenge those we had murdered, but also to gain mastery of our planet. Unnoticed by us they had constructed a machine which transmits sound as we transmit thought and by its means had communicated with their own world, advising them of the very hour to strike when all of Gola was slumbering. It was a masterful stroke, only they did not know the power of the mind of Gola – so much more ancient than theirs.

Lying there bound on my couch I was able to see out the window and, trembling with terror, I watched a half dozen Detaxalan flyers descend into Tubia, guessing that the same was happening in our other cities. I was truly frightened, for I did not have the brain of a Geble. I was young yet, and in fear I watched the hordes march

out of their machines, saw the thousands of our men join them.

Free from restraint, the shut-ins were having their holiday and how they cavorted out in the open, most of the time getting in the way of the freakish Detaxalans who were certainly taking over our city.

A half ous passed while I lay there watching, waiting in fear at the loss of what life we had led up to the present and trembled over what the future might be when the Detaxalans had infested us with commerce and trade, business propositions, tourists and all of their evil practices. It was then that I received the message from Geble, clear and definite, just as all the women of the globe received it, and hope returned to my heart.

There began that titanic struggle, the fight that won us victory over the simple-minded male weaklings below who had presumptuously dared to conquer us. The first indication was that the power of our combined mental concentration at Geble's orders was taking effect on the men of our own race. They tried to shake us off, but we knew we could bring them back to us.

At first the Detaxalans paid them no heed. They knew not what was happening until there came the wholesale retreat of the Golan men back to the buildings, back to the chambers from which they had escaped. Then grasping something of what was happening the already defeated invaders sought to retain their hold on our males. Our erstwhile captives sought to hold them with oratorical gestures, but of course we won. We saw our creatures return to us and unbind us.

Only the Detaxalans did not guess the significance of that, did not realize that inasmuch as we had conquered our own men, we could conquer them also. As they went about their work of making our city their own, establishing already their autocratic bureaus wherever they pleased, we began to concentrate upon them, hypnotizing them to return to the flyers that had disgorged them.

And soon they began to feel of our power, the weakest ones first, feeling the mental bewilderment creeping upon them. Their leaders, stronger in mind, knew nothing of this at first, but soon our terrible combined mental power was forced upon them also and they realized that their men were deserting them, crawling back to their ships! The leaders began to exhort them into new action, driving them physically. But our power gained on them and now we began to concentrate upon the leaders themselves. They were strong of will and they defied us, fought us, mind against mind, but of course it was useless. Their minds were not suited to the test they put themselves to, and after almost three ous of struggle, we of Gola were able to see victory ahead.

At last the leaders succumbed. Not a single Detaxalan was abroad in the avenues. They were within their flyers, held there by our combined wills, unable to act for themselves. It was then as easy for us to switch the zones of force upon them, subjugate them more securely and with the annihilator beam to disintegrate

completely every ship and man into nothingness! Thousands upon thousands died that day and Gola was indeed revenged.

Thus, my daughters, ended the second invasion of Gola.

Oh yes, more came from their planet to discover what had happened to their ships and their men, but we of Gola no longer hesitated, and they no sooner appeared beneath the mists than they too were annihilated until at last Detaxal gave up the thought of conquering our cloud-laden world. Perhaps in the future they will attempt it again, but we are always in readiness for them now, and our men – well, they are still the same ineffectual weaklings, my daughters...

## **DELILAH**

By Margaretta W. Rea

(Amazing Stories, January 1933)

### I.

AN "OH," half cry, half moan, came from the studio.

Miss Wormersley's spoon paused above her grapefruit. A second cry, more piercing, rose slowly, then fell and died tremblingly away.

A full minute of intense silence followed. Then Miss Wormersley rose calmly and left the room, her younger companion hurrying after her.

On the threshold of the studio they stopped. Before his big canvas stood the elder woman's nephew, rubbing his eyes as though he would brush away some terrible sight. Two big white spaces glared from the center of the canvas, but the rest appeared, to be finished. The artist's agonized gaze clung to the figure of a wolf in the lower left-hand corner. He stepped nearer, and reaching out a trembling hand touched the wolf's head. Instantly he drew back, and the same long cry of pain broke from him again.

The paint was wet.

The, young girl who had followed Miss Wormersley pushed into the room and hurried to the artist's side.

"What is it, Bert? What is the matter, dear?"



The artist clutched her to him roughly.

"My picture," he moaned, "my picture. Somebody else has been painting my picture."

"Is that all?" The intense relief in the tone showed that Miss Wormersley had feared something worse.

"Nonsense," she said, laying a firm hand on her nephew's shoulder, "you did it yourself last night. I tell you, Bertram, if you don't learn to take your work more calmly, you'll land in the Insane Asylum and cheat poor Minna here out of a husband. Why, Minna and I know you were here in this very room all last evening. You've worked yourself up to such a pitch of nervous excitement you don't know what you do. How could anyone have gotten in here. I looked—"Minna's extended hand interrupted her. The side window of the studio was open. The artist's gaze still clung to his picture. "I couldn't have, Auntie, I couldn't have," he was saying in a beseeching voice. "I know I didn't. Oh my picture! and I've spent years to be able to do just that. Who could have done so perfectly just what I've longed and longed to do."

"Bertram, dear, listen," Minna entreated soothingly. "I saw you sitting here last night, just as you often do, on that little stool, studying your picture and chewing on a brush handle. See," she picked up a brush lying on the palette, "here's the very brush. Look, Miss Wormersley, the paint on it is wet, too, and just matches." She laughed tenderly in the artist's face, but he shook his head vaguely. The girl put her arms impulsively around him and drew him down beside her on the sofa.

Miss Wormersley turned from the open window to the wet canvas. She firmly believed her nephew had painted that wolf's head the night before, while she and Minna had been sitting in the living-room, but she couldn't understand the open window, and anything mysterious was distasteful to her. She mistrusted where she could not understand. She watched Minna, rumpling her nephew's hair with loving fingers while she called him a "dear old silly," and the aunt wished she could express her sympathy more plainly. But her prim nature made such a demonstration impossible. Minna would make him a good wife. It took an artist to understand an artist.

Meanwhile Bertram sat quietly submitting to his betrothed's endearments, but his aunt knew he was not satisfied with the explanation.

"You'd better brace up, Bertram," she said sharply, "and go to work. If you don't finish this picture what will Mrs. Beekman-Smythe say after all the money she has spent on your education?"

Minna jumped up and impulsively drew Miss Wormersley toward the big canvas.

"Isn't it splendid?" she exclaimed all aglow with enthusiasm. "Miss Wormersley, I've painted nothing but animals for five years and I know just how wonderful this is. See

the cold calculation in that wolf's eye. He wants that old ram as badly as the rest do, but he sees those two hunters leaving the woods, and he isn't going to take any chances."

Miss Wormersley looked on with mild appreciation, but she couldn't summon such real enthusiasm as Minna seemed to feel over the expression on an old wolf's face. Instead she straightened the girl's collar and rearranged a comb, so that it did its duty properly and held back the vagrant wisps that would curl around Minna's little pink ears. Miss Wormersley was an orderly soul, and she loved neatness more than all the animal pictures in the world.

"I guess you and Bert are well matched," she said, "if that was my piece of work I couldn't sit there and moan. I'd keep working 'till it was done. I can't abide my work staring me in the face unfinished."

She glanced toward her nephew to see if he responded to her suggestion, but it was of no use. The artist merely shook his head despondently. "It isn't mine," he said lifelessly. "I can't exhibit what isn't mine."

## II.

The following morning Miss Wormersley and Minna stood before Bert's big canvas. Amazement kept both silent for they knew the artist had not touched a brush to the big canvas during the preceding evening; yet, from where the second white space had been the day before, now glared a new wolf's head, the leader of the pack. Moreover, the paint was quite wet. Only one white space now remained.

"The window?" questioned Minna in an awed voice.

"Was open when I came down." Miss Wormersley spoke tartly. How the prosaic lady hated mysteries.

"But you locked it yourself," said the girl, "the last thing before we went to bed and Bertram had already gone up ahead of us."

Miss Wormersley nodded and held up a warning finger.

The artist shuffled into the room. He looked at the women first and then he saw the second finished head.

"I knew it," he groaned dropping onto the couch. "Somebody else is painting my picture."

"But how could they, dear? It can't be all spoiled." Minna would have tried to soothe away his fears, but Miss Wormersley had no time now for optimistic raving as she called it. She thrust a wire hairpin vigorously into the tight knob at the back of her

head and called the maid.

Lisbeth appeared at once stepping softly and glancing fearfully at the artist's dejected head and Minna's round eyes.

"Did you open that window this morning?"

"No, 'em."

"Or at any other time?"

"No, Miss Wormersley."

"Did you hear any noises in the night?"

"No 'em," hesitatingly.

"Sure?"

"No 'em, only—"

"What?"

"I hear Miss Sayre," timidly indicating Minna, "go to her room about two o'clock."

Miss Wormersley turned sharply towards Minna.

"I couldn't sleep," explained the girl, "and I did get up and put a cold cloth on the back of my neck, but I don't know what time that was."

The elder woman's tone softened a little as she turned back to the maid. "Did you hear anything else, Lisbeth?"

"Only Mr. Bertram snoring like he always does when he's overtired."

"That will do." Miss Wormersley looked helplessly at her nephew, then wonderingly at the girl he was engaged to marry. Minna seemed to slowly realize that Bertram's aunt was not satisfied with her explanation. She jumped up and laid her hand anxiously on Miss Wormersley's arm.

"You don't think I did it? That I'd meddle with Bert's wonderful picture, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know what to think." Much as Miss Wormersley had grown to care for the girl it was almost easier for her to suspect Minna of meddling and so have a straight explanation, than to grope among mysterious doings. She began mechanically wiping the dust from the smooth parts of the furniture. She always carried a dust-cloth in the pocket of her black sateen apron, and now in a moment of intense perplexity her nervousness drove her to an occupation that was second nature to her. She moved from chair to chair, to table, to couch arms, and window sill. Nobody spoke. Then she started absentmindedly about the room again, dusting the same articles a second time. She felt Minna's frightened eyes following her, but

with every labored breath which she heard her nephew draw, her heart hardened against the impulsive, affectionate girl.

Miss Wormersley had had the care of Bertram since his mother had died when he was four, and his good-for-nothing father had disappeared. She had trained, clothed, fed, and educated the boy till he was almost like her own. Then when he had shown a decided talent for drawing, she had given a reluctant consent for a rich patroness to pay for his education abroad.

The artistic temperament had been the ruin of the young man's father, and now it had brought the son to this.

Miss Wormersley had liked Minna from the first, and had invited the girl to pay her a visit. But if she had done this trick. Wasn't there a story somewhere of a painter's studio boy, who had finished a great picture of his master's in his absence, and done it well? She faced Minna suddenly.

"Lisbeth says you were up last night. Bertram has been teaching you some stroke of his till he said only day before yesterday you got it as well as he did. Is that stroke, or whatever you call it, in that head that's just been done?"

Minna nodded, then she pushed Miss Wormersley away and threw herself on her knees at Bertram's feet.

"Bert, Bert," she sobbed, pulling his hands from his face, and making him look at her. "You know I didn't touch your picture, you know I couldn't, don't you? Why, I love it just as much as you do, and the Exhibition only five days away."

The artist drew her hand from his face and laid his cheek against it. "I know, Minna, I know you didn't."

"See?" Minna raised her tearful face to Bertram's aunt, but there was no relenting there.

"Could she have?" Miss Wormersley's thin body swayed towards the lovers. Bertram had to answer.

"Why, no – maybe – I don't know. Perhaps you'd better telephone Mr. Brownell."

He slumped dejectedly into the corner of the sofa, and Minna stood as if turned to stone.

Miss Wormersley went to the telephone. She felt Mr. Brownell was just the one to appeal to. He was critic at the coming exhibition, and had always been friendly to Bertram. He would know just what to do. Her voice already showed her relief as she explained the matter very concisely over the wire, not hesitating to add her suspicions of Minna.

When she returned to the studio her nephew's face was hidden in his arms but Minna

had not moved.

"Mr. Brownell says he'll be down the first thing in the morning, and if he can he'll bring Mrs. Beekman-Smythe with him. He says not to touch the picture. You," the glance she gave Minna hurt, "had better leave Bertram to get over this as best he can. You'll have to stay here till Mr. Brownell says what you're to do."

### III.

The next morning Miss Wormersley looked from the dejected figures before her to the rain drizzling down outside. In the silences that followed her questions, it beat monotonously on the skylight above.

The artist was slumped in his usual corner, his high knees on a level with his chin, the chin resting on a crooked tie.

The big picture was finished.

The last white space on the canvas was filled. The center figure of the ram stood out strong and tense, as he defiantly faced the ravening pack, whose snarling jaws already drooled in anticipation of the juicy meal. His eyes were held by the leader. In horrible fascination the two gazed at each other; the wolf, luring, compelling, the ram terrified, but held against his will. The pack waited.

Before the canvas stood Minna drooping like a brilliant flower, that has been blasted just as it was about to bloom.

Miss Wormersley pointed a finger towards the ram's head. "Do you still deny your part in this?"

Minna could only shake her head hopelessly. She had no voice.

The elder woman looked disdainfully at the girl's untidy hair, then turned to the maid.

"You said you hear noises last night. What were they?"

Lisbeth wrenched her eyes from the picture and fastened them in awe upon her mistress. "I heard Miss Sayre moving about her room, and footsteps on the stairs."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I was afraid."

"Did you get up?"

"Yes 'em."

"What did you do?"

"I locked my door and crept back to bed."

Miss Wormersley sniffed. "Fraidy cat. Wish I'd heard it. Anything else?"

The maid hung back.

"Speak up. Tell everything you know."

"When I went to Miss Sayre's room this morning her bed hadn't been slept in."

"Is that all?"

"Yes 'em."

"You may go. Let Mr. Brownell in. Thank Heavens he's come. Sit up, Bertram, he's brought Mrs. Beekman-Smythe. Too bad to have to bring them out in such weather."

While she waited for Lisbeth to let in the callers, Miss Wormersley smoothed her apron and set the chairs straight. She picked up the artist's palette and laid it on the table.

"Did you say the chewed brush was missing?" she asked her nephew.

He raised his head and nodded, then let it sink disconsolately upon his breast.

"Guess it's not very far off," said his aunt looking pertinently toward Minna's drooping figure. The girl made no sign that she had heard. Miss Wormersley hastened to greet her visitors, but stiffened perceptibly as Mr. Brownell entered, and welcomed him with a cordial smile and a deprecating nod toward her nephew, who neither moved nor looked up. Mrs. Beekman-Smythe's greeting was warm but hasty; for her eyes had caught sight of the big canvas. She hurried to it and stood silently studying every detail, while Miss Wormersley rehearsed the events of the past three days to Mr. Brownell.

At first the critic seemed to pooh-pooh the seriousness of the situation just as she herself had done that first morning; but, as she finished her account of Lisbeth's testimony of that very day, he looked grave.

"He's not only lost his picture," continued "Miss Wormersley so that everyone in the studio could hear, "and you know he's lived for years just to paint that picture, but he counted on using the money it brought him to repay Mrs. Beekman-Smythe, and now who'll buy a picture when you can't say who painted it? Besides, the disappointment of being ruined by one you trusted." Mr. Brownell would have pushed this last aside, but Miss Wormersley was for facing the facts. "What else can we think? No one else knew except myself and Miss Sayre, and surely no one will accuse me. I never painted even a barn door."

Mrs. Beekman-Smythe now asked gently, "Why do you feel so sure Miss Sayre did this? Surely it's Bertram's style in every tiny detail."

"Yes, but we know, Miss Sayre and I, that Bertram did not touch that canvas either last evening or the evening before that. As to the night the first head was painted, he was here in the studio alone and neither Miss Sayre nor I noticed the picture when we went to bed. But last night and Tuesday night my nephew spent the entire evening in the living-room with us. I, myself, locked that window the last thing before I retired, and the space was empty on that canvas that we found filled the following morning. Miss Sayre knew just what my nephew hoped to portray on each face, and for two months he has been teaching her a certain stroke they both agree is used there. Besides, both nights my maid has heard Miss Sayre come upstairs, and at the same time she says she heard Bertram snoring. Then last night Miss Sayre's bed wasn't even slept in. She is the only one who could have done it."

"But the window?" put in Mrs. Beekman-Smythe.

Miss Wormersley shrugged impatiently. "An attempt to avert suspicion. And this morning one of the brushes is missing."

Mrs. Beekman-Smythe turned to Minna. She regarded the girl speculatively a few moments, and her expression softened. Miss Wormersley didn't wonder as she noted Minna's forlorn appearance.

Suddenly the art patroness went to the girl and held out her hand with a smile. Minna hesitated a second then placed her own in it eagerly. Her composure almost gave way at the warm pressure, then she left the room quickly. When she returned Miss Wormersley was showing Mr. Brownell one of the girl's own animal pictures. She was holding it so that the light fell full upon it, and was looking questioningly from the critic to the patroness. The critic examined it with care, glancing frequently towards the big canvas.

"No, no," he said, half aloud. "Well, I suppose it's possible, eh, Mrs. Beekman-Smythe; such things have been done under stress of great excitement. What do you say, Bert?"

He spoke twice before he was able to rouse the artist and then his only response was a look of misery and a murmured, "It isn't mine, it isn't mine, I can never paint again."

Mrs. Beekman-Smythe's eye filled with pity and she explained to Miss Wormersley that her nephew had lost faith in himself. "Too bad, too bad," she said, "it would have been better to have lost his picture altogether than to lose his self-confidence." Then to Mr. Brownell, "There's no one else who, you think, could have, I mean would be able, to paint that picture, is there?"

The critic stepped to the big canvas and studied it more closely.

"No," he finally said, "only Orlaf, the Russian. He is supposed to have made an exhaustive study of wolves, but this isn't his style at all."

He turned suddenly from the picture.

"Would it have won?" The question fell unwittingly from Mrs. Beekman-Smythe.

"It must have." There was no shadow of a doubt in the critic's tone. "I've never seen its equal. And now it's lost. It's an unknown, unless..." He looked from the artist's bowed head to the girl gazing disconsolately at the falling rain.

"Look here, my dear." He spoke kindly as he drew Minna from the window. "I didn't see you paint that picture, and the boy here knows he didn't. No one else that we know of could have, because you're the only one except Miss Wormersley and she doesn't paint, you're the only one who knew what Bertram had in his mind. Now won't you admit you were carried away with it? You love him, you've probably been in perfect sympathy with him, and watched his work. It may have been a clear case of inspiration on your part. Now why not collaborate with him? Let the picture be shown next week as the joint work of both of you. It will save his reputation. The picture will probably be sold for a fabulous sum, and you know," he lowered his voice and Mrs. Beekman-Smythe walked to the window to be out of hearing. "You know, we all do, that Bertram feels his honor is at stake here. He has counted on selling this picture to pay back Mrs. Beekman-Smythe. Isn't that so, Bert?"

The artist had straightened up and was listening.

"You'd be willing to collaborate with Miss Sayre? And you can understand how she might have been carried away with her enthusiasm for the picture, and worked on it without realizing what it meant to you till afterwards, can't you?"

Bertram nodded.

"And you, Minna, you must see what you should do in this."

The critic's kindly tone and his informal use of her first name, and most of all, the dumb entreaty in Bert's eyes were too much for Minna.

"I can't," she sobbed, "I can't. I didn't do it. I've never so much as touched a brush to Bert's picture, and I can't say I have." She turned towards Mrs. Beekman-Smythe, who was silently studying a small unfinished canvas of the big ram. The art patroness put her arm around the girl, and for several minutes they stood regarding that small picture and talking in low tones, until Mrs. Beekman-Smythe noticed the silence at the other end of the studio, and, pressing Minna's arm affectionately, left her and approached Miss Wormersley.

"I've been thinking Miss Wormersley, we'd better go and let matters straighten themselves out if they can. Don't worry, Bert, I know a man who will surely buy that picture anyway. You had better go abroad and travel for awhile then. Get back your strength and you'll feel anxious to take up your work again,"



She spoke kindly but the artist was not encouraged.

"I'll never paint again. It isn't mine. Somebody else can do, better than I can, what I have been studying for years."

#### IV.

That evening as Miss Wormersley was about to retire for the night the telephone rang and Mrs. Beekman-Smythe asked to speak to Bertram. The artist seemed scarcely able to hold the receiver still enough to listen, but when he had caught the first words his whole body grew tense.

"Oh, I can't," he replied in an agonized voice, "I can't." He paused and the tone that came over the wire sounded persuasive.

Miss Wormersley couldn't hear what it said. She glanced at Minna. The girl was leaning forward in her chair, her face intent, watching Bertram.

"I can't. I can't, not even for you," he exclaimed miserably and dropped the receiver.

His aunt went to him quickly and helped him from the room. When she returned Minna was still sitting on the edge of the chair, her eyes on the floor, her hands clasped tightly on her knee. A stranger would have thought her praying for her lips moved.

Miss Wormersley went at once to her and shook her violently. "And you're not yet satisfied with the misery you've caused. That boy will be a maniac if this keeps up."

She shook Minna again and the girl got to her feet clumsily. The elder woman continued her tirade.

"So that's what you got that woman to do. That's what you put her up to this morning, to ask him to paint that small canvas of the ram's head for her." With this Miss Wormersley shook her head so close to Minna that the girl backed away. She followed, and so backing and following they approached the door.

"As if he hadn't had enough of this infernal painting. You've not only spoiled his picture, you've ruined his life. You let him pour out to you all his aspirations, the dreams of years; you get him to teach you his wonderful stroke, and then you turn on him, and use what he's confided to you to ruin him. DELILAH. DELILAH."

The last word was hissed after Minna as she ran from the room.

#### V.

Shortly after midnight Miss Wormersley awoke suddenly.

She listened intently, raising herself quietly on her elbow and straining her eyes through the dark towards the hall door, from which a noise seemed to come. Bertram was snoring, but that was not what had awakened her.

She groped about for her slippers, then wrapping herself in a bathrobe she tip-toed into the hall. A soft light came through the window at the far end, which enabled her to see the outline of the stair railing and the doors on either side. Her nephew's was ajar, but Minna's was open wide. At the head of the stairs, she stopped short and gripped the rail.

A square of light illuminated the lower hall. It came from the studio. What could the girl be doing down there now? The picture was finished. There was nothing more to paint, nothing only the small canvas of the ram's head. She thought hard for a few seconds. Mrs. Beekman-Smythe had said she could sell the picture. Was Minna going to destroy it now she had it finished? The awful name she had called the girl earlier in the evening flashed into her mind, and she whispered it to herself with satisfaction, "Delilah," then again almost purring over the second syllable, "Delilah."

She was glad of the soft carpet on the stairs that muffled her tread as she crept down. She could hear Minna moving about the room below.

Stealthily, like a thief, Miss Wormersley stole along the hall to the studio door. Then she straightened up and took a deliberate look. Minna, completely dressed and wholly unconscious of any presence but her own, was apparently tidying up the room which had been left in some disorder after the morning's excitement. No one had had the heart to touch it. She placed the chairs back in their usual position and also straightened the afghan on the couch and the pillows. Then she picked up the small canvas of the ram's head, which Mrs. Beekman-Smythe had left standing near the window, and put it back against the opposite wall where it had stood the past few days. When this was done she looked about the room. Everything seemed to suit her. At last she went to the window, and craned her neck to see down the porch. Miss Wormersley fancied she could detect a smile on the girl's face, but perhaps it was only the uncertain light. Minna now unlocked the window and locked it again. The catch seemed to stick, and she worked it in and out several times till it moved more easily, and then she left it locked, only caught just enough so she could unfasten it with one finger.

As she turned back into the studio she put her hand in her pocket and drew out the chewed brush.

When Miss Wormersley saw this she took a step forward; but as she did so, a noise from behind arrested her. Someone was coming down the stairs, someone in pajamas. Through the dim light she could see the white legs. They came slowly but with perfect absurdity, and she knew he was coming to the studio. She glanced at

Minna and stepped behind the curtain across the hall. She'd let her nephew find his girl meddling with his work and that would settle the matter. It really couldn't have worked out better. She parted the curtain cautiously and peeked out just as Minna heard the steps in the hall. From her hiding-place Miss Wormersley could see the girl stop and listen. Then she hastily laid the chewed brush near the palette, and turned out the light.

The artist entered his studio. He made no effort to walk quietly. In fact, he stepped out boldly in spite of the almost complete darkness. In the very dim light from the skylight Miss Wormersley could see his long arm raised towards the electric switch overhead. When the light came on she saw Minna behind the big screen peeking through the crack between its sides.

The artist went directly to the porch window, unlocked and opened it as he always did before starting work in the summer time. Then he walked to the other side of the room and came back with the small canvas of the ram's head, which he placed on an easel in the usual position he used to work in during the day. Without a second's hesitation he took up his palette and the chewed brush and went to work.

Miss Wormersley crept across the hall to the studio door and would have entered had not Minna, who now caught sight of her, motioned frantically for her to keep back. She wondered, but waited. From where she stood, she could see the small canvas and that part of the big picture occupied by the ram. Her nephew stood with the large picture on his left. He worked quickly and positively. Not once did he turn towards the big picture yet the ram's head on the small canvas grew rapidly into an exact counterpart of the one on the big canvas. What did it all mean? He was like his old self again. Miss Wormersley had not realized how much the boy's welfare had meant to her, till she now saw him wrapped up in his work just as he used to be; and then contrasted that with the broken, unnerved man who had slumped all day in the corner of the sofa.

An hour passed. Still the picture grew. Miss Wormersley watched his work as she had never done before. How a single stroke changed the whole face of the ram. She was fascinated. She began to understand what Minna had meant when she raved about the marvelous expression he gave to his animal faces. The ram's terror communicated itself to her. She shuddered involuntarily.

Once her nephew stepped back and looked intently at his work. Then he turned so his aunt got a closer view of his own face, and she would have fallen at the revelation it gave her had she not steadied herself against the door jam. Suddenly she understood it all.

Her nephew was asleep. His eyes were wide open, but there was no doubt as far as she was concerned, they were sightless.

Minna motioned to her to remain quiet. She extended her arm across the closed sash of the window and beckoned. In a second Mr. Brownell appeared at the opening

followed by Mrs. Beekman-Smythe.

Probably the fresh air let in by the critic or a slight noise startled the artist. He stopped painting. The ram's head was almost complete. The artist's breath came with an effort and his body began to sway, but Minna was watching. She stepped quickly to his side, as the brush and palette rattled to the floor. Mr. Brownell slipped a chair behind him and they led him gently into it.

"Drink this, dear, and you'll feel better," said Minna tenderly holding a glass to his lips. He did as he was bid and grew slowly more conscious of his surroundings. Then the old trouble returned, and he began to moan. "My picture, oh, my picture. I'll never—"

"Stop, Bertram." Mr. Brownell's voice was sharp, and he gave the artist a shake. "Look up. You just painted this yourself in your sleep." He held the small canvas before him, but Bertram only looked at it blankly.

Mrs. Beekman-Smythe took his hand and began, to stroke it. "My dear boy, it's all your own work. You did it all in your sleep, didn't he, Miss Wormersley? And Minna has proved it to us. See, there's your palette. See the fresh paint on your fingers and there's your brush where you just dropped it."

The look of bewilderment began to pass slowly from the artist's face. Mrs. Beekman-Smythe held a second glass to his lips and he drained it more eagerly.

"Listen, Bertram," she said as the liquor braced him up, "you worked yourself into such a nervous condition that you hypnotized yourself. And although asleep your mind made you do what way down in your subconscious self you really wanted to do more than anything else."

"Yes, this," he answered, pointing to the small canvas, "but that?"

"Minna saw you paint the big one yourself night before last; but she wanted to prove beyond doubt to us and most of all to yourself, that it is all your own work. We've watched you paint this small head and it is absolutely exactly like the big one. There's no doubt at all, is there, Mr. Brownell? And Bertram, the application went this morning; Minna gave it to me to send, so the picture can go to the Exhibition under your own name. You've Minna to thank for all this."

The tears welled up into the artist's eyes. He could only hold out his hand to his betrothed, but the generous girl put her arm through Miss Wormersley's and drew her towards him, too.

The prim lady was prim no longer.

"How did you know?" she asked, boldly, wiping her eyes.

"I suspected," answered Minna, "for I knew no one else could have done it and followed his idea so closely. When the brush was missing I found it in his bed

before Lisbeth made it. Then that suggested the night work. Besides, there was no other time when he could have done it, so I watched."

The artist's eyes went from the big canvas to the little one. His long, sensitive fingers clasped and unclasped.

"It's mine," he whispered hoarsely, seizing Minna's arm and sinking his fingers into the soft flesh until the girl winced behind her cheerful smile. "It's all mine. I begin to remember. It's all mine. I can paint again."

## **THE MAN OF STONE**

by Hazel Heald

(Wonder Stories, October 1932)

### I.

#### THE STONE DOG

BEN Hayden was always a stubborn chap, and once he had heard about those strange statues in the upper Adirondacks, nothing could keep him from going to see them. I had been his closest acquaintance for years, and our Damon and Pythias friendship was inseparable at all times. So when Ben firmly decided to go – well, I had to trot along too, like a faithful collie.

"Jack," he said, "you know Henry Jackson, who was up in a shack beyond Lake Placid for that beastly spot in his lung? Well, he came back the other day nearly cured, but had a lot to say about some devilish queer conditions up there. He ran into the business all of a sudden and can't be sure yet that it's anything more than a case of bizarre sculpture; but just the same his uneasy impression sticks.

"It seems he was out hunting one day, and came across a cave with what looked like a dog in front of it. Just as he was expecting the dog to bark he looked again, and saw that the thing wasn't alive at all. It was a stone dog – but such a perfect image, down to the smallest whisker, that he couldn't decide whether it was a supernaturally clever statue or a petrified animal. He was almost afraid to touch it, but when he did he realized it was surely made of stone.

"After a while he nerved himself up to go in the cave – and there he got a still bigger jolt. Only a little way in there was another stone figure or what looked like it – but this time it was a man's. It lay on the floor, on its side, wore clothes, and had a

peculiar smile on its face. This time Henry didn't stop to do any touching, but beat it straight for the village, Mountain Top, you know. Of course he asked questions – but they did not get him very far. He found he was on a ticklish subject, for the natives only shook their heads, crossed their fingers, and muttered something about a 'Mad Dan' – whoever he was.

"It was too much for Jackson, so he came home weeks ahead of his planned time. He told me all about it because he knows how fond I am of strange things – and oddly enough, I was able to fish up a recollection that dovetailed pretty neatly with his yarn. Do you remember Arthur Wheeler, the sculptor who was such a realist that people began calling him nothing but a solid photographer? I think you knew him slightly. Well, as a matter of fact, he ended up in that part of the Adirondacks himself. Spent a lot of time there, and then dropped out of sight. Never heard from again. Now if stone statues that look like men and dogs are turning up around there, it looks to me as if they might be his work – no matter what the rustics say, or refuse to say, about them.

"Of course a fellow with Jackson's nerves might easily get flighty and disturbed over things like that: but I'd have done a lot of examining before running away.

"In fact, Jack, I'm going up there now to look things over – and you're coming along with me. It would mean a lot to find Wheeler – or any of his work. Anyhow, the mountain air will brace us both up."

So less than a week later, after a long train ride and a jolting bus trip through breathlessly exquisite scenery, we arrived at Mountain Top in the late, golden sunlight of a June evening. The village comprised only a few small houses, a hotel, and the general store at which our bus drew up; but we knew that the latter would probably prove a focus for such information. Surely enough, the usual group of idlers was gathered around the steps; and when we represented ourselves as health-seekers in search of lodgings they had many recommendations to offer.

Though we had not planned to do any investigating till the next day, Ben could not resist venturing some vague, cautious questions when he noticed the senile garrulousness of one of the ill-clad loafers. He felt, from Jackson's previous experience, that it would be useless to begin with references to the queer statues; but decided to mention Wheeler as one whom we had known, and in whose fate we consequently had a right to be interested.

The crowd seemed uneasy when Sam stopped his whittling and started talking, but they had slight occasion for alarm. Even this barefoot old Mountain decadent tightened up when he heard Wheeler's name, and only with difficulty could Ben get anything coherent out of him.

"Wheeler?" he had finally wheezed, "Oh, yeh – that feller as was all the time blastin' rocks and cuttin' 'em up into statues. So yew knowed him, hey? Wal, they ain't much we kin tell ye, and mebbe that's too much. He stayed out to Mad Dan's cabin in the

hills – but not so very long. Got so he wa'nt wanted no more... . by Dan, that is. Kinder soft-spoken and got around Dan's wife till the old devil took notice. Pretty sweet on her, I guess. But he took the trail sudden, and nobody's seen hide nor hair of him since. Dan must a told him sumthin' pretty plain – bad fieller to git agin ye, Dan is! Better keep away from thar, boys, for they ain't no good in that part of the hills. Dan's ben workin' up a worse and worse mood, and ain't seen about no more. Nor his wife, neither. Guess he's penned her up so's nobody else kin make eyes at her!"

As Sam resumed his whittling after a few more observations, Ben and I exchanged glances. Here, surely, was a new lead which deserved intensive following up. Deciding to lodge at the hotel, we settled ourselves as quickly as possible; planning for a plunge into the wild hilly country on the next day.

At sunrise we made our start, each bearing a knapsack laden with provisions and such tools as we thought we might need. The day before us had an almost stimulating air of invitation – through which only a faint undercurrent of the sinister ran. Our rough mountain road quickly became steep and winding, so that before long our feet ached considerably.

After about two miles we left the road – crossing a stone wall on our right near a great elm and striking off diagonally toward a steeper slope according to the chart and directions which Jackson had prepared for us. It was rough and briery traveling, but we knew that the cave could not be far off. In the end we came upon the aperture quite suddenly – a black, bush-grown crevice where the ground shot abruptly upward, and beside it, near a shallow rock pool, a small, still figure stood rigid – as if rivaling its own uncanny petrification.

It was a grey dog – or a dog's statue – and as our simultaneous gasp died away we scarcely knew what to think. Jackson had exaggerated nothing, and we could not believe that any sculptor's hand had succeeded in producing such perfection. Every hair of the animal's magnificent coat seemed distinct, and those on the back were bristled up as if some unknown thing had taken him unaware. Ben, at last half-kindly touching the delicate stony fur, gave vent to an exclamation.

"Good God, Jack, but this can't be any statue! Look at it – all the little details, and the way the hair lies! None of Wheeler's technique here! This is a real dog – though Heaven only knows how he ever got in this state. Just like stone – feel for yourself. Do you suppose there's any strange gas that sometimes comes out of the cave and does this to animal life? We ought to have looked more into the local legends. And if this is a real dog – or was a real dog – then that man inside must be the real thing too."

It was with a good deal of genuine solemnity – almost dread – that we finally crawled on hands and knees through the cave mouth, Ben leading. The narrowness looked hardly three feet, after which the grotto expanded in every direction to form a damp, twilight chamber floored with rubble and detritus. For a time we could make

out very little, but as we rose to our feet and strained our eyes we began slowly to descry a recumbent figure amidst the greater darkness ahead. Ben fumbled with his flashlight, but hesitated for a moment before turning it on the prostrate figure. We had little doubt that the stony thing was what had once been a man, and something in the thought unnerved us both.

When Ben at last sent forth the electric beam we saw that the object lay on its side, back toward us. It was clearly of the same material as the dog outside, but was dressed in the same moldering and unpetrified remains of rough sport clothing. Braced as we were for a shock, we approached quite calmly to examine the thing; Ben going around to the other side to glimpse the averted face. Neither of us could possibly have been prepared for what Ben saw when he flashed the light on those stony features. His cry was wholly excusable, and I could not help echoing it as I leaped to his side and shared the sight. Yet it was nothing hideous or intrinsically terrifying. It was merely a matter of recognition for beyond the least shadow of a doubt this chilly rock figure with its half-frightened, half-bitter expression had at one time been our old acquaintance, Arthur Wheeler.

Some instinct sent us staggering and crawling out of the cave, and down the tangled slope to a point whence we could not see the ominous stone dog. We hardly knew what to think, for our brains were churning with conjectures and apprehensions. Ben, who had known Wheeler well, was especially upset; and seemed to be piecing together some threads I had overlooked.

Again and again as we paused on the green slope he repeated "Poor Arthur, poor Arthur!" but not till he muttered the name "Mad Dan" did I recall the trouble into which, according to old Sam Poole, Wheeler had run just before his disappearance. Mad Dan, Ben implied, would doubtless be glad to see what had happened. For a moment it flashed over both of us that the jealous host might have been responsible for the sculptor's presence in this evil cave, but the thought went as quickly as it came.

The thing that puzzled us, most was to account for the phenomenon itself. What gaseous emanation or mineral vapor could have wrought this change in so relatively short a time was utterly beyond us. Normal petrification we know, is a slow chemical replacement process requiring vast ages for completion; yet here were two stone images which had been living things – or at least Wheeler had – only a few weeks before. Conjecture was useless. Clearly, nothing remained but to notify the authorities and let them guess what they might; and yet at the back of Ben's head that notion about Mad Dan still persisted. Anyhow, we clawed our way back to the road, but Ben did not turn toward the village, but looked along upward toward where old Sam had said Dan's cabin lay. It was the second house from the village, the ancient loafer had wheezed, and lay on the left far back from the road in a thick copse of scrub oaks. Before I knew it Ben was dragging me up the sandy highway past a dingy farmstead and into a region of increasing wildness.

It did not occur to me to protest, but I felt a certain sense of mounting menace as the



familiar marks of agriculture and civilization grew fewer and fewer. At last the beginning of a narrow, neglected path opened up on our left, while the peaked roof of a squalid, unpainted building showed itself beyond a sickly growth of half-dead trees. This, I knew, must be Mad Dan's cabin; and I wondered that Wheeler had ever chosen so unprepossessing a place for his headquarters. I dreaded to walk up that weedy, uninviting path, but could not lag behind when Ben strode determinedly along and began a vigorous rapping at the rickety, musty-smelling door.

There was no response to the knock, and something in its echoes sent a series of shivers through one. Ben, however, was quite unperturbed; and at once began to circle the house in quest of unlocked windows. The third that he tried – in the rear of the dismal cabin – proved capable of opening, and after a boost and a vigorous spring he was safely inside and helping me after him.

The room in which we landed was full of limestone and granite blocks, chiseling tools and clay models, and we realized at once that it was Wheeler's erstwhile studio. So far we had not met with any sign of life, but over everything hovered a damnably ominous dusty odor. On our left was an open door evidently leading to a kitchen on the chimney side of the house, and through this Ben started, intent on finding anything he could concerning his friend's last habitat. He was considerably ahead of me when he crossed the threshold, so that I could not see at first what brought him up short and wrung a low cry of horror from his lips.

In another moment, though, I did see – and repeated his cry as instinctively as I had done in the cave. For here in this cabin far from any subterranean depths which could breed strange gases and work strange imitations were two stony figures which I knew at once were no products of Arthur Wheeler's chisel. In a rude armchair before the fireplace, bound in position by the lash of a long rawhide whip, was the form of a man – unkempt, elderly, and with a look of fathomless horror on its evil, petrified face.

On the floor beside it lay a woman's figure; graceful, and with a face betokening considerable youth and beauty. Its expression seemed to be one of sardonic satisfaction, and near its out-flung right hand was a large tin pail, somewhat stained on the inside, as with a darkish sediment.

We made no move to approach these inexplicably petrified bodies, nor did we exchange any but the simplest conjectures. That this stony couple had been Mad Dan and his wife we could not well doubt, but how to account for their present condition was another matter. As we looked horrifiedly around we saw the suddenness with which the final development must have come – for everything about it seemed, despite a heavy coating of dust, to have been left in the midst of commonplace household activities.

The only exception to this rule of casualness was on the kitchen table; in whose cleared center, as if to attract attention, lay a thin, battered, blank-book weighted down by a sizable tin funnel. Crossing to read the thing, Ben saw that it was a kind

of diary or set of dated entries, written in a somewhat cramped and none too practiced hand. The very first words riveted my attention, and before ten seconds had elapsed he was breathlessly devouring the halting text – I avidly following as peered over his shoulder. As we read on – moving as we did so into the less loathsome atmosphere of the adjoining room – many obscure things became terribly clear to us, and we trembled with a mixture of complex emotions.

This is what we read – and what the coroner read later on. The public has seen a highly twisted and sensationalized version in the cheap newspapers, but not even that has more than a fraction of the genuine terror which the simple original held for us as we puzzled it out alone in that musty cabin among the wild hills, with two monstrous stone abnormalities lurking in the deathlike silence of the next room. When we had finished Ben pocketed the book with a gesture half of repulsion, and his first words were "Let's get out of here."

Silently and nervously we stumbled to the front of the house, unlocked the door, and began the long tramp back to the village. There were many statements to make and questions to answer in the days that followed, and I do not think that either Ben or I can ever shake off the effects of the whole harrowing experience. Neither can some of the local authorities and city reporters who flocked around – even though they burned a certain book and many papers found in attic boxes, and destroyed considerable apparatus in the deepest part of that sinister hillside cave. But here is the text itself.

## II.

### MAD DAN'S DIARY

"Nov. 5. My name is Daniel Morris. Around here they call me 'Mad Dan' because I believe in powers that nobody else believes in nowadays. When I go up on Thunder Hill to keep the Feast of the Foxes they think I am crazy – all except the back country folks that are afraid of me. They try to stop me from sacrificing the Black Goat at Hallow Eve, and always prevent my doing the Great Rite that would open the gate. They ought to know better, for they know I am a Van Kauran on my mother's side, and anybody this side of the Hudson can tell what the Van Kaurans have handed down. We come from Nicholas Van Kauran, the wizard, who was hanged in Wijtgaart in 1587, and everybody knows he had made the bargain with the Black Man.

"The soldiers never got his Book of Eibon when they burned his house, and his grandson, William Van Kauran, brought it over when he came to Rensselacrwyck and later crossed the river to Esopus. Ask anybody in Kingston or Hurley about what the William Van Kauran line could do to people that got in their way. Also, ask them if my uncle Hendrick didn't manage to keep hold of the Book of Eibon when

they ran him out of town and he went up the river to this place with his family.

"I am writing this and am going to keep on writing this – because I want people to know the truth after I am gone. Also, I am afraid I shall really go mad if I don't set things down in plain black and white. Everything is going against me, and if it keeps up I shall have to use the secrets in the Book and call in certain Powers. Three months ago that sculptor Arthur Wheeler came to Mountain Top, and they sent him up to me because I am the only man in the place who knows anything except farming, hunting, and fleecing summer boarders. The fellow seemed to be interested in what I had to say, and made a deal to stop here for \$13.00 a week with meals. I gave him the back room beside the kitchen for his lumps of stone and his chiseling, and arranged with Nate Williams to tend to his rock blasting and haul his big pieces with a drag and yoke of oxen.

"That was three months ago. Now I know why that cursed son of hell took so quick to the place. It wasn't my talk at all, but the looks of my wife Rose, who is Osborn Chandler's oldest girl. She is sixteen years younger than I am, and is always casting sheep's eyes at the fellows in town. But we always managed to get along fine enough till this dirty rat showed up, even if she did balk at helping me with the Rites on Roodmas and Hallowmass. I can see now that Wheeler is working on her feelings and getting her so fond of him that she hardly looks at me, and I suppose he'll try to elope with her sooner or later.

"But he works slow like all sly, polished dogs, and I've got plenty of time to think up what to do about it. They don't either of them know I suspect anything, but before long they'll both realize it doesn't pay to break up a Van Kauran's home. I promise them plenty of novelty in what I'll do.

"Nov. 25. Thanksgiving Day! That's a pretty good joke! But at that I'll have something to be thankful for when I finish what I've started. No question but that Wheeler is trying to steal my wife. For the time being, though, I'll let him keep on being a star boarder. Got the Book of Eibon down from Uncle Hendrik's old trunk in the attic last week, and am looking up something good which won't require sacrifices that I can't make around here. I want something that'll finish these two sneaking traitors, and at the same time get me into no trouble. If it has a twist of drama in it, so much the better. I've thought of calling in the emanation of Yoth, but that needs a child's blood and I must be careful about the neighbors. The Green Decay looks promising, but that would be a bit unpleasant for me as well as for them. I don't like certain sights and smells.

"Dec. 10. Eureka! I've got the very thing, at last! Revenge is sweet and this is the perfect climax! Wheeler, the sculptor – this is too good! Yes, indeed, that damned sneak is going to produce a statue that will sell quicker than any of the things he's been carving these past few weeks! A realist, eh? Well – the new statuary won't lack any realism! I found the formula in a manuscript insert opposite page 679 of the Book. From the handwriting I judge it was put there by my great-grandfather Bareut Picterse Van Kauran – the one who disappeared from New Paltz in 1839. La!

## Shubniggurath! The Goat With a Thousand Young!

"To be plain, I've found a way to turn those wretched rats into stone statues. It's absurdly simple, and really depends more on plain chemistry than on the Outer Powers. If I can get hold of the right stuff I can brew a drink that'll pass for homemade wine, and one swig ought to finish any ordinary being short of an elephant. What it amounts to is a kind of petrification infinitely speeded up. Shoots the whole system full of calcium and barium salts and replaces living cells with mineral matter so fast that nothing can stop it. It must have been one of those things my great-grandfather got at the Great Sabbat on Sugar-Loaf in the Catskills. Queer things used to go on there. Seems to me I heard of a man in New Paltz – Squire Hasbrouck – turned to stone or something like that in 1834. He was an enemy of the Van Kauran's. First thing I must do is order the five chemicals I need from Albany and Montreal. Plenty of time later to experiment. When everything is over I'll round up all the statues and sell them as Wheeler's work to pay for his overdue board bill! He always was a realist and an egoist – wouldn't it be natural for him to make a self-portrait in stone, and to use my wife for another model – as indeed he's really been doing for the past fortnight? Trust the dull public not to ask what quarry the queer stone came from!

"Dec. 25. Christmas. Peace on earth, and so forth! Those two swine are goggling at each other as if I didn't exist. They must think I'm deaf, dumb, and blind! Well, the barium sulphate and calcium chloride came from Albany last Thursday, and the acids, catslytics, and instruments are due from Montreal any day now. The mills of the gods – and all that! I'll do the work in Allen's Cave near the lower wood lot, and at the same time will be openly making some wine in the cellar here. There ought to be some excuse for offering a new drink – though it won't take much planning to fool those moonstruck nincompoops. The trouble will be to make Rose take wine, for she pretends not to like it. Any experiments that I make on animals will be down at the cave, and nobody ever thinks of going there in winter. I'll do some woodcutting to account for my time away. A small load or two brought in will keep him off the track.

"Jan. 20. It's harder work than I thought. A lot depends on the exact proportions. The stuff came from Montreal, but I had to send again for some better scales and an acetylene lamp. They're getting curious down at the village. Wish the express office weren't in Steenwyck's store. Am trying various mixtures on the sparrows that drink and bathe in the pool in front of the cave – when it's melted. Sometimes it kills them, but sometimes they fly away. Clearly, I've missed some important reaction. I suppose Rose and that upstart are making the most of my absence – but I can afford to let them. There can be no doubt of my success in the end.

"Feb. 11. Have got it at last! Put a fresh lot in the little pool – which is well melted today – and the first bird that drank toppled over as if he were shot. I picked him up a second later, and he was a perfect piece of stone, down to the smallest claws and feather. Not a muscle changed since he was poised for drinking, so he must have

died the instant any of the stuff got to his stomach. I didn't expect the petrification to come so soon. But a sparrow is a fair test of the way the thing would act with a large animal. I must get something bigger to try it on, for it must be the right strength when I give it to those swine. I guess Rose's dog Rex will do. I'll take him along the next time and say a timber wolf got him. She thinks a lot of him, and I shan't be sorry to give her something to sniffle over before the big reckoning. I must be careful where I keep this book. Rose sometimes pries around in the queerest places.

"Feb. 15. Getting warm! Tried it on Rex and it worked like a charm with only double the strength. I fixed the rock pool and got him to drink. He seemed to know something queer had hit him, for he bristled and growled, but he was a piece of stone before he could turn his head. The solution ought to have been stronger, and for a human being ought to be very much stronger. I think I'm getting the hang of it now, and am about ready for that cur Wheeler. The stuff seems to be tasteless, but to make sure I'll flavor it with the new wine I'm making up at the house. Wish I were surer about the tastelessness, so I could give it to Rose in water without trying to urge wine on her. I'll get the two separately – Wheeler out here and Rose at home. Have just fixed a strong solution and cleared away all strange objects in front of the cave. Rose whimpered like a puppy when I told her a wolf had got Rex, and Wheeler gurgled a lot of sympathy.

"March 1. R'yeh! Praise the Lord Tsathoggua! I've got that son of hell at last! Told him I'd found a new ledge of friable limestone down this way, and he trotted after me like the yellow cur he is! I had the wine-flavored stuff in a bottle on my hip, and he was glad of a swig when we got here. Gulped it down without a wink – and dropped in his tracks before you could count three. But he knows I've had my vengeance, for I made a face at him that he couldn't miss. I saw the look of understanding come into his face as he keeled over. In two minutes he was solid stone.

"I dragged him into the cave and put Rex's figure outside again. That bristling dog shape will help to scare people off. It's getting time for the spring hunters, and besides, there a damned 'lunger' named Jackson in a cabin over the hill who does a lot of snooping around in the snow. I wouldn't want my laboratory and storeroom to be found just yet! When I got home I told Rose that Wheeler had found a telegram at the village summoning him suddenly home. I don't know whether she believed me or not but it doesn't matter. For form's sake, I packed Wheeler's things and took them down the hill, telling her I was going to ship them after him. I put them in the dry well at the abandoned Rapelye place. Now for Rose!

"March 3. Can't get Rose to drink any wine. I hope that stuff is tasteless enough to go unnoticed in water. I tried it in tea and coffee, but it forms a precipitate and can't be used that way. If I use it in water I'll have to cut down the dose and trust to a more gradual action. Mr. and Mrs. Hoog dropped in this noon, and I had hard work keeping the conversation away from Wheeler's departure. It mustn't get around that we say he was called back to New York when everybody at the village knows no telegram came, and that he didn't leave on the bus. Rose is acting damned queer

about the whole thing. I'll have to pick a quarrel with her and keep her locked in the attic. The best way is to try to make her drink that doctored wine – and if she does give in, so much the better.

"March 7. Have started in on Rose. She wouldn't drink the wine so I took a whip to her and drove her up in the attic. She'll never come down alive. I pass her a platter of salty bread and salt meat, and a pail of slightly doctored water, twice a day. The salt food ought to make her drink a lot, and it can't be long before the action sets in. I don't like the way she shouts about Wheeler when I'm at the door. The rest of the time she is absolutely silent.

"March 9. It's damned peculiar how slow that stuff is in getting hold of Rose. I'll have to make it stronger – probably she'll never taste it with all the salt I've been feeding her. Well, if it doesn't get her there are plenty of other ways to fall back on. But I would like to carry the statue plan through! Went to the cave this morning and all is well there. I sometimes hear Rose's steps on the ceiling overhead, and I think they're getting more and more dragging. The stuff is certainly working, but it's too slow. Not strong enough. From now on I'll rapidly stiffen up the dose.

"March 11. It is very queer. She is still alive and moving. Tuesday night I heard her jiggling with a window, so went up and gave her a rawhiding. She acts more sullen than frightened, and her eyes look swollen. But she could never drop to the ground from that height and there's nowhere she could climb down. I have had dreams at night, for her slow, dragging pacing on the floor above gets on my nerves. Sometimes I think she works at the lock of the door.

"March 1. Still alive, despite all the strengthening of the dose. There's something queer about it. She crawls now, and doesn't pace very often. But the sound of her crawling is horrible. She rattles the windows, too, and fumbles with the door. I shall have to finish her off with the rawhide if this keeps up. I'm getting very sleepy. Wonder if Rose has got on her guard somehow. But she must be drinking the stuff. This sleepiness is abnormal – I think the strain is telling on me. I'm sleepy..."

(Here the cramped handwriting trails out in a vague scrawl, giving place to a note in a firmer, evidently feminine handwriting, indicative of great emotional tension.)

### III

#### ADDENDUM BY ROSE CHANDLER MORRIS

"March 16 - 4 A. M. This is added by Rose C. Morris, about to die. Please notify my father, Osborne E. Chandler, Route 2, Mountain Top, N. Y. I have just read what the beast has written. I felt sure he had killed Arthur Wheeler, but did not know how till I read this terrible notebook. Now I know what I escaped. I noticed the

water tasted queer, so took none after the first sip, I threw it all out of the window. That one sip has half paralyzed me, but I can still get about. The thirst was terrible, but I ate as little as possible of the salty food and was able to get a little water by setting some old pans and dishes that were up here under places where the roof leaked.

"There were two great rains. I thought he was trying to poison me, though I didn't know what the poison was like. What he has written about himself and me is a lie. We were never happy together and I think I married him only under one of those spells that he was able to lay on people. I guess he hypnotized both my father and me, for he was always hated and feared and suspected of dark dealings with the devil. My father once called him The Devil's Kin, and he was right.

"No one will ever know what I went through as his wife. It was not simply common cruelty – though God knows he was cruel enough, and beat me often with a leather whip. It was more – more than anyone in this age can ever understand. He was a monstrous creature, and practiced all sorts of hellish ceremonies handed down by his mother's people. He tried to make me help in the rites – and I don't dare even hint what they were. I would not, so he beat me. It would be blasphemy to tell what he tried to make me do. I can say he was a murderer even then, for I know what he sacrificed one night on Thunder Hill. He was surely the Devil's Kin. I tried four times to run away, but he always caught and beat me. Also, he had a sort of hold over my mind, and even over my father's mind.

"About Arthur Wheeler I have nothing to be ashamed of. We did come to love each other, but only in an honorable way. He gave me the first kind treatment I had ever had since leaving my father's, and meant to help me get out of the clutches of that fiend. He had several talks with my father, and was going to help me get out west. After my divorce we would have been married.

"Ever since that brute locked me in the attic I have planned to get out and finish him. I always kept the poison overnight in case I could escape and find him asleep and give it to him somehow. At first he waked easily when I worked on the lock of the door and tested the conditions at the windows, but later he began to get more tired and sleep sounder. I could always tell by his snoring when he was asleep.

"Tonight he was so fast asleep that I forced the lock without waking him. It was hard work getting downstairs with my partial paralysis, but I did. I found him here with the lamp burning – asleep at the table, where he had been writing in this book. In the corner was the long rawhide whip he had so often beaten me with. I used it to tie him to the chair so he could not move a muscle. I lashed his neck so that I could pour anything down his throat without his resisting.

"He waked up just as I was finishing and I guess he saw right off that he was done for. He shouted frightful things and tried to chant mystical formulas, but I choked him off with a dish towel from the sink. Then I saw this book he had been writing in, and stopped to read it. The shock was terrible, and I almost fainted four or five

times. My mind was not ready for such things. After that I talked to that fiend for two or three hours steady. I told him everything I had wanted to tell him through all the years I had been his slave, and a lot of other things that had to do with what I had read in this awful book.

"He looked almost purple when I was through, and I think he was half delirious. Then I got a funnel from the cupboard and jammed it into his mouth after taking out the gag. He knew what I was going to do, but was helpless. I had brought down the pail of poisoned water, and without a qualm, I poured a good half of it into the funnel.

"It must have been a very strong dose, for almost at once I saw that brute begin to stiffen and turn a dull stony grey. In ten minutes I knew he was solid stone. I could not bear to touch him, but the tin funnel clinked horribly when I pulled it out of his mouth. I wish I could have given that Kin of the Devil a more painful, lingering death, but surely this was the most appropriate he could have had.

"There is not much more to say. I am half-paralyzed, and with Arthur murdered I have nothing to live for. I shall make things complete by drinking the rest of the poison after placing this book where it will be found. In a quarter of an hour I shall be a stone statue. My only wish is to be buried beside the statue that was Arthur – when it is found in that cave where the fiend left it. Poor trusting Rex ought to lie at our feet. I do not care what becomes of that stone devil tied in the chair..."

## **PART II**

FROM THE 1940s-60s

### **DAYS OF DARKNESS**

Evelyn Goldstein

(Fantastic Stories, January 1960)

*"Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun. But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many..."*

Ecclesiastes, 11



MARTHA Otumn sat spare and erect beside the high poster bed. The open gilt-edged Bible she held trembled in her fragile blue-veined hands. She read to her semi-invalid sister in sharp crystal tones to detract from the noises outside – the pitch of a populace in flight

The gardener's cottage was set back from the road and sounds filtered through the closed windows like cricket murmurs from thick tall grass.

Zipporah's knotted fingers plucked nervously at the counterpane as though she knew this day was different.

Why is it, Martha pondered, that sick people and children sense discord, and respond with emotional affinity? Is it that excitement vibrates, pulling tension across the air like aggressively plucked harp strings? What else would make Zipporah glance toward the window so frequently?

Yet she could not possibly suspect the unholy Thing that had come upon the world. Or, if she gave it any thought it was with dismissal. Zipporah rarely listened with her mind to things that had no direct bearing upon herself or Martha. She would not read newspapers, and if any bulletin interrupted her soap-operas on the radio she muttered pettishly all through, never even hearing it, till her program resumed. Wars had left her untouched; elections meant nothing to her; disasters or jubinations were never acknowledged as existing. Her world was. herself and Martha and a retreat to fancy or memories of the beautiful days when Papa and Mama had been alive and Otumn Estates behind its tall hedges and wrought gates had been the social center of Otumville.

But Martha was all too well aware of the Terror that had come in a whirl of strange brightness almost two months ago and was detected on radarscope to have landed in a north section of the State of Washington. Investigators arriving at the beam-tracked site had found it a desolate wooded area with no sign of ground disturbance by any alien craft. Yet Something had arrived. For in a backwoods cottage belonging to two recluse brothers their bodies were discovered newly dead, their life blood drained and deep puncture marks in their chest. There was no evidence of any struggle. Implausibly it looked as though the victims had lain themselves down for a vampire's feast.

Witchcraft?

The rustling query went up, even as people, in an era of missiles and split atoms, laughed uneasily at themselves for asking.

Within a week a mountain guide's household of eight in the Blue Mountain region of Oregon met death the same way. Ten days later a hamlet in the Black Hill country was destroyed. Eleven victims. But one survivor! The escapee was an eleven year old boy who supplied the first description of the Invader.

"...like a big worm ... maybe four feet long... I saw it rising up over the tall corn. But

I didn't know then it had killed my pa and two brothers and the hired hands working in our field. I saw my pup-dog, ears drooping and tail tucked down, heading whining for the woods back of the house. I lit after him. All I could think was to save my dog from that Thing. I could see it had a bunch of small wings down its sides, and it stayed in one place, like a 'copter does, while its wings beat faster and faster till it was – well, gone – not flying or anything – just disappeared . . ."

The Space Leech, they called it after that. Or just LEECH in capital letters or italicized.

It struck again east of the Nebraska Bad Lands – fourteen this count. And after that, seventeen, still in a south-east moving direction. Two more people escaped and from them came further information which, in the summation, made for panic news.

The Leech was invisible, except when feeding. It could stupefy intended victims in the vicinity so they remained immobile while it went from one to the other till the hunger was abated. IT WAS GROWING!

Mankind's doom could be seen in this Feeder, that ate and grew and growing, must eat a greater number! Sparsely populated areas were ripe ground. The Government decreed a migration and the Exodus into cities was begun.

Martha had received a yellow circular yesterday. She knew state militias as well as Federal Troops had been assigned to a house to house evacuation. At any time they would be here. Her mind was going in frantic circles about how to circumvent the directive. An invader out of space seemed no real threat. But Zipporah's delicate physical condition and border line hysteria made unwise any sort of uprooting. And that was more immediate.

Even as Martha pondered, the problem was precipitated.

There was a knock on the door.

Martha sprang up. The Bible snapped closed and slid to the floor. She swept it onto her vacated chair and was at the door almost entirely in one motion.

It was a soldier standing respectfully there. "Ma'am," he touched his cap. Martha moved outside, closing the door behind her.

"Speak softly," she cautioned, "my sister is ill."

"Yes'm, folks down the village told me. We'll get an ambulance to help move her."

Martha shook her head. "We're not leaving the Estate."

"You can't stay here, Ma'am. They may have to bomb clean this area. Orders are to evacuate everyone." He was a very young corporal, and earnest, as the very young are earnest of their duties. And he was frightened too, with the fright of a child in the dark. But he was not alone in his fear, nor was it an unreasonable one. The Enemy

you cannot see is always the most terrifying.

"They won't bomb us," Martha told him. She was serene. She had no qualms on this score, and her eyes went about the land that was theirs.

"Otumn Estates can't die. It isn't like people. It's a tradition. It was built with the town, and the town still lives because of Otumn Lumber Mills." She did not add, "although it no longer belongs to us but was sold years ago to pay medical bills for Mama and Papa and Zipporah."

The soldier followed her gaze, taking in the seedy appearance of the grounds from the high ragged hedges that circled straggly lawns to Otumn House itself, boarded up, on the hilltop, like an emaciated patriarch, brooding because the mistresses had taken residence in the gardener's cottage down the gravel slope.

He thinks its old and neglected and worthless, Martha thought wistfully, but he never saw it as it used to be – when carriages from town drove to its gates; when the windows were wide and threw oblong light from crystal chandeliers over the dew-green lawns and curving driveway.

She longed to tell him how it once was – when Mama had been beautiful and Papa handsome. And Mama had never looked more beautiful than that night – forty years back when they had given a ball to announce Martha's engagement to young Dr. Archer Jones.

Mama always used to time her entrance when most guests had arrived so she could step out of her bedroom and stand, for a full dramatic moment at the head of the curving stairs from which she could be seen from the spacious hall and great arched living room. She used to wait for Papa to leave off conversing with guests and go quickly up to meet her, gallantly offering his arm. But Papa missed his cue this night. He was leaning over a lovely red-haired widow seated on the green settee. The widow, newly arrived in town had captured many a wandering fancy. But Mama had been proud to mention to some irate wives that Mr. Otumn never allowed a pretty face to turn his head. Now the scene froze her at the top of the stairs till she became aware of a few smirking faces. With a proud toss of her golden high-piled head she swept her full train over her arm and took the descent alone.

No one was clear whether her sharp pointed little slipper caught in her gown hem, or on a loose weave of carpet, or whether it was a misstep. Mama made a futile reach for the polished banister. Her fingers slid off with slender white slowness and Mama went down, tumbling, a silken thistle in a blown wind, to lay still, broken at the bottom.

Mama never walked again.

Mama grew twisted inside, like her useless legs. Her venom wilted everything it touched. It made a stooped, haunted man of Papa. It made the house close tight as a shriveled bud. Martha had been a pretty thing then, with aureate gold hair and great

lilac eyes. So different from Zipporah, a thin shy girl with pale coloring and pinched features. Zipporah wept ceaselessly because Mama who had always caressed her and called her 'little mouse' now used the same name with a tone of scorn.

Mama died ten bitter years later. And Papa was broken. The business had to be sold and it was Martha who had to see that they managed on the remaining capital.

Papa died a year after Mama, and the funeral fell on a storm wracked day. And when they returned from the grave after services they discovered Zipporah was gone.

She had run like some wild demented thing to the wood that used to be Otumn property. Hours later they found her huddled at a tree base, sodden and chilled. She was sick then, and sicker as the days went by. Rheumatic fever! And they were not sure she would live. But when the crisis passed she was a chronic invalid and holding to Martha as her bulwark and her strength.

In that quiet strength of hers Martha assured the corporal: "They won't bomb us."

"Not to be disrespectful, Ma'am, but you can't tell, since the Brass doesn't know themselves. They're going to stake out monkeys, chimps and even gorillas with electrodes fastened to them, and if anything unusual is recorded on the instruments they'll bomb every inch of the area."

"What makes them so sure it will come here?"

"Oh, they're not sure where It will come. But they've got some likely directions pinpointed. That's why they're clearing out every isolated house or farm in the areas of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia, and using monkeys as bait. We've got to get the people out. So Ma'am, please take together your valuables and we'll come back with an ambulance."

At the word 'valuables' Martha had an idea. "Young man," she said, we couldn't possibly take our valuables. There's Mama's what-not cupboard with the bone chinaware and cut crystal; and Marna's silver tea set and—"

"Ma'am, we'll board up the house so you needn't be afraid of looting. I'll get the okay from my lieutenant."

"All right. But remember we won't leave till we know it's all closed and safe."

As he strode away Martha caught the sound of movement in the house. From the corner of her eye she saw the pushed back curtain from the kitchen window nearest the door. She hurried into the house.

Zipporah was at the window, the hand crocheted bed jacket thrown carelessly over the long-sleeved, high necked nightdress. Her grey-black hair had come loose from the braids, and hung disheveled down to her waist. Her face was pinched with the white look of the ailing, and blue circled around the eyes. But the expression was bright with greed for excitement.

"That soldier," her bony hand clutched her sister's wrist, "what did he want? What did he say about boarding the house?"

"They have a company here on maneuvers," Martha lied glibly, "they think it best if we move out of here for a while – to a hotel in town. They would supply transportation."

Zipporah's eyes widened. "Leave the Estate?" Her words trembled at the blasphemy. "Did you tell them we wouldn't go?" She leaned forward anxiously, appraising her sister's face. "You don't want to go, Martha, do you? They might separate us. Papa said you shouldn't ever leave me. Papa said I was always the delicate one, even if you were the pretty one. You promised him when he was dying!"

Martha took the thin hand, urging her sister back to bed. She sat with her on the quilted comforter, arm about her shoulder. "Don't worry, dear. We won't leave. We'll fool them."

Zipporah's eyes lighted,

"Will we, Martha? How?"

"We'll let them board up the cottage. Then we'll tell them we'll bolt the door ourselves and go with our own doctor..."

"Dr. Archer?"

Martha winced at the malicious undertone. Zipporah always said his name with sly innuendo, never having forgiven her sister's prettiness. But Martha's dealings with the ill gave her endurance for the abrupt switches from unutterable gratitude to apathy to outright virulence.

Martha glossed over the barb: "But we won't really have to leave. And we must keep this secret between us, Zipporah. They must not suspect what we plan or they will move you to a hospital and me to a Shelter, and we would only see each other during visiting hours."

Zipporah pushed her fist into her mouth. A childish gesture that roused in Martha a well of maternal feeling. She kissed the wan cheek. "Don't worry. We'll never be separated. And we won't leave the Estate." She helped her sister back to bed. "Now I'll go down the road to see that the Corporal does the job right."

She caught up her shawl from the hook near the kitchen door, flung it over her shoulder and hurried down the gravel way to corroding iron gates set in stone pillars. One gate, torn from its top hinges by heavy gusts was solidly imbedded in the ground, and crawling vines had interwoven the scrolling. The other gate swung blindly in any wind, creaking like a gouty old man. Against this gate Martha leaned, pressing her face to the cold rough bars.

For a long time now there had been little use for the road that forked out of the main

street of Otumville and ran a mile through woodland to touch at the Estate gate, and curve seven rutted humped miles to the next town.

Today the road was jammed.

All roads east were jammed. The populace was moving in panic waves, in cars, on foot, by bicycle, along every available avenue, clearing the isolated land of human food.

Martha watched the faces.

They came out of an overcast of birch, cypress, oak and beech. The leaves pocked the December features, barren of every emotion but urgency.

"...but, my God, if it's invisible, it might come at us now..."

"...how you soldier-boys so sure it won't come to cities?"

"What's holding up the line?"

"...Dickie, don't let go Mother's hand!"

"HURRY!"

Strident. Chattering. Terror terse. Fearful talkative.

And no one saw the beauty of the countryside. The spring loveliness that burst crimson, gold and emerald along the wooded path. Not one eye turned to touch a leaf or pluck a bloom. Only Martha saw Nature's portent. Flame blossomed azaleas were the burning bushes of this modern Exodus. But there was no Red Sea today between the Pursued and the Leech that was hunting.

Martha's gaze searched the throng, and the occasional staff car or jeep that slowly patrolled against the crowd. One car, non-military but with the license plates of a doctor forged against the melee, detached itself to ride to a stop at the gate where Martha stood. A man got out.

He was tall, white-haired, lean.

"Archer!" Martha came forward hands out-stretched.

He gripped her hands with the firm clasp of one who is more than a friend but – no longer a lover. He looked at Martha with keen gray eyes that had become very discerning of people, and mostly of her.

"You must leave here, Martha."

"I know." She was breathless. It was difficult to plan subterfuge on one who knew so well her habits, her thoughts. He knew her better perhaps than she did herself. Why did he look at her so piercingly? Did he guess the deception she planned? "I-I was looking for a corporal who said he'd have them board the cottage."

"No need for that."

"We won't leave unless we know it's all closed and safe!"

"No one's closing their shops or homes. There isn't a looter who'd chance death by invisible means."

She looked up the slope to the great house sealed up since they had moved to the cottage because their meager capital no longer covered the necessary heating for the big drafty rooms. Behind the boards the furniture stood sheeted in ghostly darkness, except where a slat, more carelessly nailed, let through a slit of day to pry at the dust and the cobwebs.

"If we go away the cottage must be closed. Just like the house."

He sighed. "Very well Martha. And I'll see to having Zipporah moved."

"No!" She had not meant her voice to be sharp. Did it really rise above the roar of wheels and the piercing blasts of horns. Surely it was her imagination that he looked more sharply at her. "They will make Zipporah real comfortable the corporal said, and I can ride with her. We don't mind waiting for the ambulance. Really."

"All right. Now let's take a look at that sister of yours."

He took her hand and they went up the path.

Dear Archer, he worried so about her, though he had never openly quarreled with her about things she deemed best for the family. No open quarrel – not since their last – thirty years ago...

In that severe first year when she realized her family's complete dependence upon her she had told him, "I may not be able to marry you for a long time, Archer. Perhaps not ever and I'd rather you consider yourself free – to court someone else."

"I won't give you up," he had stormed. "There's no reason why we can't get married and take care of your family too!"

"I wouldn't do that to you. It wouldn't be much of a marriage that way. My family needs me too desperately. They require all my time."

"I need you desperately!" Martha could still picture him standing, elbow on the mantle-shelf above which hung the gilt scrolled portrait of the family – Papa, Mama and Zipporah as a shrinking child of eight, and herself, at twelve, prettily demure in her best white, sitting legs tucked beneath her, in the foreground.

Archer had glanced at the portrait. "That's true to life," he had remarked cynically, "always at the feet of your family. Why don't you get up and stand away from them."

"But they need me!"

"And I need you too!"

"You're cruel! You tear me apart!"

"You tear yourself apart! You are your family! You are your mother's pain, and your father's helplessness and Zipporah's timidity! You feel so deeply for them that you aren't yourself anymore!" He had pulled her to face him. "Forget other people! Think of yourself!"

She had looked into his wretched face and became wretched with him. He caught the expression, and gently released her. His tone had been infinitely sad: "I'm sorry, Martha. You can't help what you are – a sounding-board for everyone's emotions. You're sorry for me when I'm sorry for myself. You're sick for the family when they are sick. I guess you'll go all through life being absorbed by other people."

He had left her. He married a plain girl from a good staid family in town. She made him a proper wife till her recent death. He had led a comfortable life, although there were no children, and the townsfolk whispered that in a loveless marriage there is no blessing. They always felt that he never fell out of love with Martha. And Martha, if there was any ache in her, exercised iron discipline which eventually strangled it.

She could regard him now in a light of respect, devoid of all passion. She could admire the gentleness and the surety with which he examined her sister. But her devotion and concern was for Zipporah whose pale eyes gleamed out of the white face. Martha's hands knotted over the bedposts. Surely Zipporah's barely concealed stimulation would be noticed.

The examination concluded, Martha followed Archer out to the kitchen. "Her pulse is very rapid today," he said in a low voice. Again he gave her that direct gaze.

Flustered Martha cried: "Maybe I should give her two of the yellow pills!"

A long time ago he had told Martha that only the pills helped sustain Zipporah. Excitement, without the pills at hand might be fatal. Neither he nor Martha took the chance of running low on supply.

"I'll leave you extras to keep on hand." He put a box on the kitchen table. "It might be wise to give her one before the ambulance arrives. And give her a white pill. It will make her sleep."

She accompanied him outside. On the step of the house he took both her hands, looking keenly into her face. "I know you don't think moving Zipporah is the best thing, but believe me the alternative might be worse. This Leech seeks lonely places and solitary people!"

"Why, Archer, what makes you think we won't leave! Although it seems to me there's an easier way of trapping this – creature – than uprooting people, and bombing half the land!"



"If there is another way, they don't know it."

"But they should have some sane theory! Not blind destruction!"

"They have some theory. They feel there is some connection between the three people who escaped which might give the answer!"

"Connection!" Martha said scornfully, "between an eleven year old boy, and a woman who just gave birth to a baby after twenty childless years of marriage, and an old bedridden man seeing through the window his grandson being killed by this Leech? What connection?"

"Well, certainly not age or sex. Not even blood type. They put them all through complete physical checks. And that leaves some psychological aberration—"

A canvas hooded truck, khaki colored and with army insignia rattled up. Boards protruded from the open back, and on the piles sat soldiers in fatigues. Out of the front seat jumped the young corporal. "We'd like to start boarding up now, Ma'am."

"Oh, yes, of course." Hastily she said to the doctor:

"Don't worry. We'll follow your instructions. Good-by!"

He went away and the men began their jobs. Martha went inside to sit with her sister. For a while the house rattled and rocked to the hammers. When it grew quiet, shadows lay thick piled in the interior. Martha brought out for the soldiers cool cider. They drank and went away. To the corporal Martha said, "We will be going with our own Dr. Archer Jones. Tell your commander he need not send the ambulance."

Quietly she closed the door, bolting it from inside, sat in the dark, in stillness at the bedside of her sister.

Almost two hours later they heard the tread of feet on the gravel. Someone knocked loudly at the door. "Everyone out?" a voice thundered. They heard the doorknob jiggle. "Guess the old ladies have been taken. That clears the district. Tell the jeeps to pull out. This town's clean."

Footsteps and voices receded. The jeeps roared. Their motors faded down the road. Silence settled a thick mantle over the Estate. Somewhere insects chirped and birds twittered. But that was all. For perhaps another fifteen minutes the sisters sat in absolute silence then Martha stole to the door. Cautiously she opened it. Light spilled into the room. It made her blink. She was surprised. So much had happened she was amazed to see that it was still mid-afternoon. The road was empty. Hush lay expectancy over the atmosphere.

The land was waiting.

Martha closed the door and went back to the dim bedroom. She took Mama's silver

candlesticks out of the what-not cupboard and selected two tapered candles from a box, cotton-batted to prevent cracking.

The room took on mellowness when she ignited the wicks and set them on the night tables at either side of the bed.

"There! That's comforting!" The gleaming candlesticks and tall candles brought back memories of social nights when tapers shone in the great hall and lit the huge dining table with its snowy cloth and sparkling porcelain. Zipporah saw the soft dreamy light of her sister's eyes, mistook it for reverie concerning the doctor, and gave a derisive snort. Martha started, and became all apology.

"You have pain, and I'm day-dreaming. Dr. Archer told me to give you extra pills because of all the unusual turmoil..."

Zipporah laughed harshly, and snuggled back against the pillows in the manner of a well-content cat. "No pills for me today, Martha. I'm too smart for you and your fine doctor!" One bony finger pointed to the night-table. On the table was the water pitcher, all murky and flecked with dissolved grains. Martha stood aghast.

"The pills!"

"I dumped them." Zipporah's giggle was malicious. "I heard the soldier say they might bomb the area."

"But—"

The invalid pulled herself to a higher position. Her eyes glared vindictively. "You and your doctor think you're so clever. But I know what you plan."

"Plan?"

"He wants me to take extra pills! Make me good and sleepy. Then you can run away with him. No one would know I'm alone and asleep in the house. All boarded up. They'll bomb ... fffttt... No one to tie you down anymore. Dear, patient, devoted Martha will be free for her lover – now that his wife is dead a full year!"

Martha looked wide-eyed at the spiteful face. Pity and love overwhelmed her so that she sank to her knees beside the bed, taking the wasted hand in hers. "Darling. I never planned to leave you. Archer is nothing to me or I to him, except friends. If I had wanted to leave you I would have – long ago. But you're my life. You need me, not he. You – the family – the House only – are important to me."

Sullenly Zipporah pulled out of the other's grasp. "I saw Archer holding hands with you outside."

Martha laughed. "He held hands with you when he was talking to you after the examination."

The remembrance cleared Zipporah's face. In a small girl voice she said: "I'm sorry I

dissolved all the pills."

Her hand went into her mouth. "Now I'll die! Oh, I'll die! Don't let me die!"

"Hush. Of course not. Just don't get upset. I'll phone for refills."

She went to the wall phone. She heard the hollowness of an unreceptive line. Sickly she remembered. The telephone circuits were closed. The town was deserted. Slowly she put back the receiver.

What to do? Zipporah must have the pills. She hurried back to the bedroom. "Zipporah. The regular phone lines have been closed during the maneuvers. I'll have to go into town for other pills. But I won't be gone long. Maybe one of those nice soldiers will give me a lift in a jeep."

They had never needed to drive. Twice a week a boy from the supermarket brought their standard order of food and supplies. Dr. Archer Jones took care of the medicines. The old family lawyer, Mr. Ellington handled all financial matters. On the occasions when Martha had to go to town for anything she phoned the depot for the taxi service.

The mile to town was a strenuous walk. She did not take it leisurely. At set spots along the way she came upon a tethered monkey or chimpanzee, and once glimpsed on a hill top a gorilla staked by a long chain. They chattered, or scolded as she passed, and she was stirred to pity for the scapegoats. "Poor things," she muttered, "Poor things." It made a kind of rhythm with her walking. She alternated with "Poor Zipporah" since the years had accustomed her every thought in direct relationship to her sister.

She came to the main street, and turned down a side street to the white house with the doctor's shingle. She knew every part of this house as well as her own. When Old Dr. Archer Jones had been alive and Papa's best friend she had often come here to play. And in these latter years when the old doctor had passed on leaving his practice to his son, she had come often to consult about Zipporah, or to pick up personally the medicines when an overload of calls made impossible Archer's stop-over at their place.

She hastened up the walk and rang the bell. Immediately she realized that habit had put her finger to the bell. Of course, the house was empty.

Weakly she leaned against the door. What to do, what to do? Archer was gone!

She moved along the porch to the side window. It was not fastened. She raised it and painfully clambered over the sill. She was in the ante-room. Without hesitation she went into the office. The glass and porcelain cabinet with its array of gleaming doctor's instruments was there, and underneath it the white drawers in which he kept pills, salves, tonics, tongue-depressors and even the famous lollipops for the children. She knew that on the second shelf to the right was the brown jar from

which the doctor refilled the little vial for Zipporah.

Eagerly Martha turned the cabinet knob. Locked! Despair settled over her. She shook it off. Without compunction she went through the door which led off to a side hall. The back of the house was given to the doctor's living quarters. With perfect familiarity she went into the neat kitchen. She pawed through a utility drawer under the Formica counter. None of the knives would be strong enough. She eyed the poultry shears for an indecisive moment. Just then she glimpsed the bright polish of the meat cleaver. Just the tool!

Back in the office with the cleaver she brought it forcefully against the plywood cabinet and the thin veneer splintered. Again and again till she had the needed opening.

There was the brown jar. She lifted it.

At that moment she became aware. There was an aura of malignancy. It seemed to weave like a cobra's head in a weird striking dance, seeking a bird to entice – to devour. Seeking. And with utter silence!

The chattering had stopped. Even the hum of insects had died. Vial in one hand, cleaver in other Martha went to the door. At the top step of the porch she saw down the street. At each spot where animals had been staked there was silence of paralysis.

"Zipporah," Martha whispered.

She began to run. All down the street and out onto the road she ran. Her shawl loosed from one shoulder, flew back, flapped to the pavement. Martha never was aware of it.

Zipporah. Zipporah. All Martha's concentration was on her sister. Clear before her rose the picture. Zipporah in bed. Zipporah alone. Afraid. Unprotected.

Martha raced. Her feet went up and down mechanically. Time and place were things not of her existence. Only one thing was real. Zipporah.

In times of stress the endocrine secretion of the body is greatest so that a person can perform feats beyond their normal ability. Martha's body took up her emotional need for endurance.

Yet it seemed an eternity before, gasping, she reached the Estate gates. She burst up the gravelled path. Into the cottage.

Zipporah was queerly still on the bed. The Leech was feeding .

\* \* \*

They were a strangely silent group around the four-poster bed. There was a four star general, and two aides, a tech-sergeant who had driven their jeep and Dr. Archer.

Their faces were pale. Seasoned fighters though most were they averted their faces from the region of the bed. Only Dr. Archer continued to look, and his gaze held that mixture of horror and compassion, and a dawning awareness that brought the questioning gaze of the others to him.

"You knew these sisters," the General said, "and you suspected something like this..."

"I suspected something, but not like this! I knew they had deceived me when I checked the Shelters and found no ambulance had brought them. And when your remote electro-cephalic instruments on the animals recorded complete inactivity I could not let you bomb – knowing they were still here. But I did not expect to find – this..." His voice broke on sorrow, but resumed in a moment with a determination to make them understand something he had realized.

"I know now your weapon against the Leech."

"Weapon? But, man, now there's no need–"

Dr. Archer turned weary eyes to the General. "We'll have to be watching the skies now. Perhaps this is some cosmic test to see how much humanity we humans have achieved over the milleniums."

"I don't understand."

"You saw the recordings of the instruments, Sir. All the primates had been gripped by some paralysis. Yet it is obvious that one was not. Why should this be? Why should one be unnoticed?"

"Unnoticed? An odd choice of word, Doctor."

"Not odd at all, Sir. Let us suppose the town is a barnyard. Into the barnyard comes a fox. The barnyard creatures flutter and set up a squawking and flutter their wings and try to run. The fox leaps from one to the other snapping necks. But just suppose one fowl is sleeping. Through all this ruckus the one creature sleeps, so quiet in its corner that the fox is unaware of its existence. And let us suppose this is not an ordinary barnyard but a place full of primates, and the fox not a fox but the Leech. And the squawkings and flutterings, of the people that guide the Leech is the sense of survival within us. In times of danger we are fearful. The will to survive is such an integral part of life that when a stimuli threatens our lives we think automatically with basic panic, 'How can I escape?' Now if, as I am supposing, the Leech is a creature tuned to the vital life-force personality, it sends out mental emanations which paralyze the victims whose raw emotions have betrayed them.

"But suppose we have people who never think of themselves – whose concern is outside their own persons. The Leech would not receive the personality emanations and would therefore, be totally unaware of the existence of such individuals.

"In the case of the survivors of the Leech's previous attacks each was concerned not

for his or her own safety, but for another's."

The doctor sighed. "Perhaps we must take heed of this primary warning: If the Leech is a forerunner of invasion from its kind, then the hopes of mankind lie in its selfless people. Survival will come through the love of one's neighbor over one's self!"

Huddled on the floor near the bed where her dead sister lay Martha did not comprehend or hear the words of the men about her. Eyes vacant, hands moving up and down with automatic precision she continued to hack away with the cleaver at the chitinous litter that was all that remained of the Leech from out of space...

## **ALIEN INVASION**

Marcia Kamien

(Universe Science Fiction, March 1954)

PAIN gripped Riva, pain worse than anything she had ever experienced before. It's true, she thought, it's all true. But her mind shrank away from the thought, leaving her a blank, save for the terrible pain.

Two doctors entered the room silently and when one of them spoke to her, it was with a start of surprise that she opened her eyes and saw, instead of a red wall of hurt, their kind faces, and beyond them, the window looking out upon the calm countryside.

"Riva," the doctor said, "tell me every time there is a pain."

"It's true, then," she whispered. The doctor nodded; and she whimpered a little. "But – how? Why?" The face above her where she lay on the hospital bed was still kind, but there was no answer in the eyes. Riva turned her head away.

How had it happened? Nine months before she had felt a strange sensation inside her, in the night. She had thought nothing of it. And then, the lump growing in her abdomen, growing steadily. But she, an unmarried woman, an intelligent scientist with no emotional ties...

However, there was life in her womb, life that would not be ignored ... life that squirmed and kicked inside her and demanded care. She had gone to the doctor; there were many tests. And then the gentle voice of the medical man, saying:

"And you're sure you have had no – ah – romantic interludes?"

"Absolutely positive!" she had snapped.

"In that case..." and his hands moved out expressively, "...I have no explanation for the fact that you will give birth in three or four months."

And that had been that. Now here she was in a Maternity Hospital waiting for whatever it was to be born. As she grimaced with pain and nodded to the waiting doctor, she turned her thoughts away from the horror that the child within her might not be a ... child.

"You must be awake. Answer me." The voice was strange cold, foreign.

Riva shuddered beneath the blankets and turned her face away from the voice. It would not be denied. "You can't escape me, Riva. Answer!" She raised her head, but there was no one in the room. She looked around wildly.

"You can't see me."

"Who are you?"

"Never mind who we are right now. The child lives?" It wasn't until then that she turned to look into the basket by her bed. Then she screamed.

"Hush, Riva," the voice commanded, but it was gentler now. "Tell me about the child. It lives, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Yes, it lived, it breathed ... but half monster! "How?" she whispered in agony.

"We are a scientifically advanced world. And we have ways. But a dying world, Riva. Strange diseases, taking our women from us. Terrible heat, burning our food, our live-stock.

"This is an experiment," the voice continued. "We cannot breathe your air. But a child, a mixture of your lungs and our lungs, might be able to survive. A child with our instincts. Do you understand?"

Riva nodded, then said: "Yes." She was beginning to understand. Aliens, coming to her world, in the form of their monster children. To take over this world.

"To take over," she murmured aloud, clenching her fists.

"No, Riva," the voice said, calmly and almost soft, "we don't want to take over. But a world that has gone so far, done so much, been so good. Ah, Riva, ours is a world which must not entirely die and be lost. We nova shortly. When you look up at the sky you will see us, burning like a bright, brief flame. And then we will be gone to eternity." The voice stopped for an instant and Riva thought, wonderingly, he speaks like a poet, this alien. He feels so strongly, but so gently.

"We will try to send books and films by rocket, but we can only guess if they will survive..." Again the alien broke off his train of thought and added, more briskly, "The child, Riva, is it female?"

She looked.

"Yes."

There was a sigh of relief. "Riva, there is not much time... Please listen to me. We chose you because of your intelligence. Because you would listen and perhaps, understand a little. She is not so different from you. Look at her closely and love her. You will love her, because she is yours!" Then, he added, "And mine, Riva. I am a great scientist. She will be very intelligent."

She was calmer now. The voice was still soft, calm and she thought – intelligent. She knew they would try this again, now; and that her own people would destroy these poor little creatures as soon as they were born, or maybe before. In the meantime, she would converse with the alien. As a scientist, she owed her people the information. And now she felt almost exhilarated and listened quietly while the alien man spoke to her and, later, left.

Then she turned and looked the infant over carefully. The poor thing was a mixture. It had her hair, her eyes ... but the mouth was misshapen and there was an arm missing and the skin was like the belly of a dead animal, so pale and colorless it was.

The doctor walked in a smiled, seeing her so calm.

"Ah then everything is peaceful." He glanced at the basket and cleared his throat carefully. "I must admit," he started, "I was amazed—"

"Aliens," she said shortly, "I don't know how they do it, but they could be stopped. I speak to one of them. I'll find out. They must be very intelligent."

The doctor touched the baby with a careful finger. "Poor deformed thing," he muttered. "You will try to forget this, Riva. We'll have it destroyed, now that these aliens – have made contact." He touched the child again.

Riva said nothing, looking down at the baby.

"Did they say who they are?" the doctor asked.

Riva looked at the infant, then the doctor, and took a deep breath. "Do not destroy that child."

The doctor's head came up with a jerk.

"No," she insisted. "That child is mine. Anyone else may do as they wish; I shall take a chance. Perhaps ... perhaps, she will be much like her – father."

The doctor stared at her. He spluttered. "Of course ... you're right ... of course..."

Riva smiled at him a little.

"Yes," she said, addressing the baby in the basket. "I shall take a chance on you,



little Half-One, on you and your world. And I shall call you by the name your father called himself. A strange name, but yours."

Rivals hand was soft on the infant's head.

"I name you," she said, ignoring the doctor, "Earthman." Then, she added, "And may you love the planet your father called Venus as much as I."

## **MISS MILLIE'S ROSE**

Joy Leche

(Fantastic Universe, May 1959)

GENERALLY speaking, we do not go in for publicity, but everyone is conscious of the trouble-shooting section of Inter-Galactic Custom just now. It was all over the new panels when we let that Coriann ceramic pass inspection at Marsport and it burnt down four square blocks.

We try to hush up our mistakes but we never apologize for them. We know that nobody can think of every possibility every time. Neither man nor machine can calculate the probability of disaster when a commodity is taken from one environment to another. We do the best we can, that's all.

Sometimes we slip, as we did on the ceramic, and sometimes we don't, as when the team at Venusport turned back that ancient art exhibit before the blue pigments changed to bright yellow. Venusian atmosphere does that to cobalt when it is suspended in certain oils.

Sometimes it ends in a draw, as in the case of Miss Millie's rose.

Miss Millie and her rose arrived on the Tuesday flight from Northwestern Terraport. It was only by the merest fluke that we ever saw the rose at all. Umpty-zillion types of roses have been planted in the gardens of Mars, with no ill effects other than the gnashed teeth of Terran rose fanciers. Roses do better here than on their native planet.

The fluke was that George Haskins, our most inefficient checker, had smashed his glasses while taking a shower on Monday. If he had seen it, he would have known it was a rose, and let it pass through.

"Carrie," he said, into the intercom mike.

"Yes, George," I said.

"I got a ole dame here with one of them Jap trees," he said in his most charming customs-shed manner.

I should have made him call Records and see if the ole dame's particular variety of Jap tree showed up on the lists of imports, but Sam and I had been doing Professor Phillips' beetles for two days, and I needed variety.

"Send her up, George."

"Wit da tree?"

"Yes, George," I said, and clicked off my mike. "That George should have been a video star," I told Sam. "Such wit, such grace of manner, such beauty."

Sam is the conscientious type. He went on trying to match a beetle to one of half a million colored photographs. "Beauty?" he said.

"The way that lock of hair, lonely as it is, contrives to fall into his face is devastating," I said. "He's sending up la ole dame. Put down your beetle, and put away the beetle book."

Sam shook his head at me. "You handle it alone," he said. "I want to finish this before I die."

"The museum said there was no hurry," I reminded him.

"That was three months ago," Sam said. "One of these days, Smeltzer will get a letter asking where they are. He'll come down here and find them in two Calofiz containers and a cookie jar. We'll be fired again."

"All right," I said. "Ruin your eyes on the beetles. I'll be happy to examine the tree."

"It ought to be here by now," said Sam, "unless it exploded in the grave shaft."

"I'll go out and have a look," I said, leaping from my chair.

"I admire your frankness," Sam said, squinting at the pincers of a purple beetle. "When you're bored, you let everyone know about it."

"I'm the soul of honesty," I said as I closed the door.

Halfway down the hall was a little old woman, walking from door to door, bending down to read the lettering on each one. She held a blue china dish in front of her, supporting it carefully with both hands. There was a purse under one arm and the strings of a flight case wrapped around the other. She was an exceedingly strange exhibit for Mars, which is a young people's planet. Most people live here for their working lives, and go to Terra or Luna when they retire. The old woman with the miniature tree was ninety at least, and that was presuming a life of hard work.

She had Terra written all over her. She was wearing a black coat with a fur collar,

which was highly impractical, since Terran furs become bald in a few weeks on Mars. Under the coat she was wearing a dress. Dresses are only worn for formal occasions on Mars, and indoor formal occasions at that. There is always a wind blowing on Mars, not strong, but terribly persistent. We wear pants. And hoods. She had on a hat of black pseudo-straw with a black feather on it.

Smeltzer does not like for the employees to go around shouting in the halls, since the Customs building is constructed of unadorned aero-granite, which sets up an echo unequalled in volume. So I set off toward the old woman, sounding like a regiment of cavalry coming down a paved highway. She didn't look up until I was almost on her, and the cavalry had been joined by a few light field pieces.

"Were you looking for the Special Examination Office?" I asked.

She stared at me over her glasses. "Speak up, young woman," she said coldly. "Open your mouth. Don't mumble."

"Yes, ma'am," I said automatically. I raised my voice a few decibels and had another try. "Are you looking for the Special Examination Office?"

The walls threw this all over the building. Smeltzer's door banged open, and that echoed too.

"Yes, I am," said the old woman.

I sent a mental apology upward, and shrieked, "Right this way, please."

"You needn't shout," said the old woman.

She walked ahead of me, feather waving, coat flapping.

This apparition thrust her china dish under Sam's nose. He looked up and dripped a beetle. "Uh-haw," said Sam, recovering slightly. "Miss Grovener will take care of you."

"Speak up, young man," said the old woman.

I touched her shoulder. "May I see the tree, please?" I shouted.

She turned those cutting blue eyes on me again, decided I was incompetent, and turned back to Sam.

He saved the situation by diving under his desk for the beetle. She had to show the tree to me.

It was a lovely little thing, gnarled and elderly as the old woman herself, reposing serenely in its blue china dish.

"It's a rose tree, isn't it?" I screamed.

Sam winced.

"Yes," she said shortly.

I got out a receipt form. "Your name?" I began loudly.

"Mildred Harfluer, she said, hanging onto the dish with one hand.

The form had reassured her. When Council agencies start filling out forms, the public feels that something is being done. "May I see your passport, please?"

She let go of the dish reluctantly, fished in her bag for the plasti-leather folder.

"On vacation," I said. I raised my voice. "Since you're here on vacation," I screamed, "why don't you leave the rose tree in quarantine until you're ready to leave?"

"It just says that about the vacation," said Mildred Harfluer, gripping the edge of the dish with both hands. "I really came to Mars to die."

I gagged over that one, but it didn't seem too unnatural for her to expect death before long. "You'll want it with you, then," I screamed.

She nodded emphatically, her feather waving above her head.

I was in for it. I buzzed Records for the books on Roses Imported to Mars. "What species is it?" I shouted hopefully.

"Miniabare," she said firmly.

I was stymied. "A miniature rose tree is unusual, isn't it?" I shouted, hoping to find out circuitously.

"I think it's the only one in existence," she said proudly. "It was started by my great-great-great grandfather" She grew more confidential. "He was a missionary to the Japanese."

I smiled brightly and went back to the receipt form. "You're from the U. S. N. A.," I said.

"Speak up, young woman."

"You're from the United States of North America," I repeated, louder.

"Vermont," said Mildred Harfluer.

Length of stay: indefinite, I wrote. Description of article: miniature rose tree in blue china bowl. Reason for retention: Terra import, species uncertain.

"Sam, that is, Mr. Graff, will identify your rose and O.K. it." I was getting hoarse. "Where will you be staying? We'll send you word when you can pick it up."

"I'll wait here," said Mildred Harfluer.

"But it may take all day today, and part of tomorrow," I screamed.

She wavered. "I've got to get some more batteries," she said. "I'll sign your paper, but I'll be back,"

She took her half of the identicket in a firm hand and trundled out.

"She has a hearing aid after all," I said. "Now we'll be able to reason with her."

"Want to bet?" Sam muttered. He was bent over the beetle book. His neck was red.

"Sam, are you angry?"

"No," said Sam slowly. "I just wonder what you have against Professor Phillips, and why you don't want his collection of Martiaq beetles to go to Terra."

"I'll do the rose," I said indignantly. "I wouldn't dream of taking you from your precious bugs."

"Beetles," said Sam, "are not bugs."

"It's pretty isn't it?" I said, touching a leaf of the rose tree with a fingernail.

"Ancient," said Sam.

"Don't you want to look at it?" I asked.

"No," said Sam quietly, turning red around the ears.

I memorized the leaf pattern of the little rose tree, and set to work industriously as soon as Records sent in the rose books. I had ruled out six possibilities when Mildred Harfluer came back.

"You see, Miss Harfluer," I said, "there are three books of plates to go through. You can't possibly..."

She picked up the rose tree and glared at me. "I'll wait," she said firmly.

I had to keep on going through the rose plates. I had looked through about half of the first book when the time came to leave. Sam put down the beetle he was working on, and reached for his windbreaker.

"Found five of the little devils," he said cheerfully. "It's been a good day."

"We go home now, Miss Harfluer," I said hopefully. "You see that I haven't found it yet. I'll keep trying tomorrow."

She started toward the door.

"You'll have to leave the rose here," I said apologetically.

"Then I'm staying with it," Mildred Harfluer said, sitting down with a plunk.

"We'll take good care of it," Sam said, helpfully.

"What do you know about miniature rose trees?" she demanded.

Sam hemmed and shut up.

"We are both biotechs," I said. "We'll see that it gets water and sun."

The ice-blue eyes went through me again. "And suppose it starts to grow?" she asked.

I shut up. Sam slipped out the door. I ran after him.

"Look, pal," I whispered, making the corridor hiss all around us, "you can't leave me here. I'm afraid I won't be able to get rid of her, and I can't leave her alone. She waited all day. She might wait all night."

"I'll send you some coffee and two cheese sandwiches" said Sam. "Sleep tight." He pulled his sleeve out of my hand and vanished down the grave shaft. "I'll relieve you in nine hours," his voice echoed back.

"Give my love to George on your way out," I called.

Smeltzer's door banged open, and I retreated into the office.

Mildred Harfluer and I glared at each other for a moment, and then I went back to the rose book. The last office doors banged. In the ensuing silence I could hear faint crashes as the porters went on smashing luggage. It was all very depressing.

Half an hour later the coffee and sandwiches arrived. I had hoped that the smell of food might starve Mildred out, but dear, thoughtful Sam had sent enough for two.

"Thank you, young woman," said Mildred Harfluer. She bit into a sandwich in a manner not quite ladylike enough to disguise her hunger.

"My name is Carrie," I said, the coffee warming my throat.

"You can call me Miss Millie," she said, unexpectedly gracious.

I smiled.

"I appreciate your working overtime, and all," she said. "I'm sorry to be stubborn about the rose, but it's important that I keep it with me."

"Oh! I don't think you're being stubborn," I said politely, biting into a sandwich. The cheese was a little older than Miss Millie and nearly as brittle.

"I'm glad you see how important it is," she said.

"Would you mind telling me why it's so important?" I asked.

"If you won't think it odd," said Miss Millie doubtfully. "It's all true, every word."

"I'm sure it is."

She leaned forward a little and lowered her voice. "Well, my great-great-great grandfather died at age ninety-four," she said expressively.

I nodded, wondering where this would take us.

"He killed himself," she continued, dabbing at her mouth with her handkerchief, and taking a sip of coffee.

I choked on a piece of cheese.

"My great-great grandfather killed himself at ninety-six, my great grandfather at ninety-nine, my grandmother at one hundred and one, and my father at one hundred and two." She paused and looked at me. "I will be one hundred and six in four months."

I gasped. "Congratulations." That was all I could think of.

She hunched her shoulders secretively, and leaned farther forward. I leaned back. "I'm determined to die a natural death," she said. "I heard that heart cases on Mars have to go back to Terra to survive. I've had four attacks on Terra. Each one of them should have been fatal." She looked indignant. "Now I've come to Mars."

I assumed she was harmless. "How did you get by the medics?" I asked.

"My heart gets a little better after each attack," she said gloomily.

"Why don't you just let the rose tree die?" I said, with my best Alice in Wonderland logic.

"I want to beat the curse," she said, glaring at the rose.

"Isn't it suicide to come to Mars with a weak heart?"

She nodded. "We can't break away from it all at once," she said. "This way is a little better than a knife or a rope." She finished her sandwich and started in on the coffee in earnest. "You see, I've no one to leave it to – so it will go to a botanical garden. I don't want an innocent curator or attendant to be visited with the curse."

"A lot of people wouldn't think of immortality as a curse," I pointed out.

"When they got as old and creaky as I am, they would," she said. "I get weaker all the time. I'm deaf now, and soon will be blind and bedridden. If I ever break a bone, it will never heal."

The office seemed colder and darker. I felt sorry for Miss Millie, suffering under her imaginary curse. "What color are the blossoms?" I asked, pulling the rose book toward me.

"It has never bloomed," said Miss Millie.

She took the second book to Sam's desk. I worked as quickly as I could, still hoping to find the thing before Sam got there.

I finished the first book, and started through the third. Miss Millie was about a quarter through hers.

The night ship from Luna City came, shaking the building.

The rose kept vibrating after the rest of the room quieted down.

"It moves around like that sometimes," said Miss Millie. "Usually when it's in the sun."

I kept on with the plate comparison.

Sam came in about half an hour after that, needing a shave. The rose tree was still fluttering.

"You are an angel," I said, pushing an arm into my windbreaker.

"Have a bite before you go?" Sam held out a thermo-lunch.

"No thanks," I said. "What I want is sleep."

I was never so glad to lie down in my life.

Nine hours later, the rose tree, rose books and Miss Millie were gone. There was Sam, peering at the beetle book with red eyes. He needed a shave worse than ever.

"You identified it?" I said joyfully.

Sam shook his head. "It's not in the books," he said. "They've gone over to the bot lab to be tested."

"If she doesn't get some sleep soon, it'll kill her," I said.

"That's the idea, isn't it?" Sam said wearily.

"She told you about the rose tree?"

"And her great-great-great grandfather, who committed suicide at the age of ninety-six," Sam groaned, "and her grandfather who shot himself at the age of one hundred and one. And Miss Millie will be one hundred and six in four months."

"It was her grandmother," I said, "who shot herself."

Sam sighed.

"Look, Sam," I said. "She's awfully old, after all, and she's getting feeble. I feel sorry for her."

"Me, too," Sam admitted.



"You go home," I said. "I'll hold the fort."

"Hah!" said Sam. "The fort, maybe, but how about the beetles?"

"I swear by the sands of Mars," I said solemnly, "that I will do beetles all day long."

He didn't seem convinced, but he was too sleepy to resist.

I decided to fool him, and went at the beetles with vim. By lunch time, I had identified nine of the little beasts, two above the previous record for any one day, so I took my lunch, and Miss Millie's, over to the bot lab.

Somebody had loaned her a blanket, and she had set up housekeeping in the Ladies' Lounge. She was doing up her hair when I walked in. She looked as fresh as paint.

"How about some breakfast?" I asked.

"Thank you, Carrie," she said. "I woke up, and I must say, I had a wonderful sleep."

I set the tray on the table, and we fell to.

"How's the rose?" I asked.

"Fine," she said cheerfully. "It's in that next room, there. They brought in a chair for me. They've been working on it while I was asleep."

"They won't hurt it, I'm sure," I said.

She nodded. "I told them about it," she said confidently. "They know how important it is to me."

I recognized the fine hand of Fergusson in this. Fergusson is the Casanova of the Research Department. He can make any woman believe anything. I saw Miss Millie seated safely in his lair, and returned to the blessed beetles.

An hour later, I received a procession. Fergusson opened the door with a flourish, and handed over Miss Millie and her rose, together with his report.

"Such a nice young man," said Miss Millie, putting the rose in the sun on Sam's desk. "He had the couch brought over and put me in the Ladies' Lounge here, in case I wanted to lie down." She looked at me, smiling. "He said I would be out before closing time this evening. He said all you have to do is read his report and sign it. That won't take long, will it?"

"That depends on what's in the report," I said. "You'd better hang your coat up."

She looked at me suspiciously, but she put her coat in Sam's locker. She went over to his desk, and picked up a beetle.

I opened Fergusson's report. It was verbose and difficult. Fergusson fancies himself a poet.

I began to hear a whispering noise, and looked up, wondering if Miss Millie had started to talk to herself.

She was turning the pages of the beetle book, absorbed and anxious. The rose was rustling around in the sun.

I turned my head quickly, to see if the window was open. It wasn't, which cut out the possibility of a draft. All buildings on Mars are draft-proof, on account of the continual wind, and occasional accompanying dust. The rose was waving its leaves by itself.

I dove into the report. The sooner I finished it, the sooner Miss Millie and her rustling rose could pass out of my office and my life.

The whispering grew, until it sounded like the first grade when the teacher's back is turned.

"It never carried on like that before," said Miss Millie.

I turned my head. She looked worried. The rose was fluttering like a song bush in the Mars wind.

"I think I'll move it out of the sun," she said.

"The plant is so fragile that it moves in the slightest current of air," said Fergusson's report. "When even our most sensitive instruments can detect no motion, the plant in question rustles slightly."

"I know, Fergusson, I know," I thought.

On the shady side of the room, the rose rustled more loudly. All at once, the rustling coalesced.

"Miss Millie, Miss Millie," the rose whispered. "Miss Millie."

At this juncture, the intercom mike buzzed.

"Carrie," said George's voice. "I got a man down here, with a pitcher-thing from Corianna. We never imported nuttin like it before."

"Pitcher," I said hysterically. "What can a pitcher do? Let it go."

"You're da boss," said George.

I cut off the mike. Miss Millie looked like she was going to pass out. "Is it really talking?" she asked faintly.

"Miss Millie, Miss Millie," the rose whispered. "Miss Millie."

I nodded. "It sure is."

Her color began to come back. "I'm glad of that," she said. "I was afraid I was hearing things."

I was not relieved. I buzzed Fergusson. "What did you do to that rose tree?"

"Examined it," he said.

"Did you spray it, or inject it with anything?"

"No. Why?"

"No reason. I was just curious," I said. "Did you have any other plants in the lab?"

"Just the song bushes," he said. "Look, what's this all about?"

"Nothing, really," I said, my mind whirling around. Fergusson has been breeding song bushes for years, trying to get one that will reproduce a musical scale.

"I'll come up and see for myself," he threatened.

"Never mind," I said. "The rose tree has started to talk."

"Talk?"

"Listen." I held the mike down near the tree.

"Miss Millie, Miss Millie," whispered the tree.

"You being funny, Carrie?"

"Word of honor, it talks," I said. "You know how it rustles? Well, now it's rustling what you just heard."

"I'll be right up," said Fergusson.

"Oh, no you don't," I said. "It might have been the song bushes that got it started, and you're covered with stuff from them. We'd better wait until it quiets down, if it does."

"O. K.," said Fergusson. "Don't forget to keep me posted."

I switched off. The rose was still buzzing.

Miss Millie gathered herself together until she looked all stern New Englander, and bent over her head to the talkative house plant. "What do you want?" she demanded.

"Miss Millie, Miss Millie," the rose tree whispered, fading off into incoherencies.

"Maybe it just mimics speech, like a parrot," I said hopefully. A rose tree that mimics is not as awe-inspiring as a rose tree that talks.

"Miss Millie, Miss Millie," said the rose tree again, more clearly.

"What do you want?" Miss Millie sounded annoyed.

"Miss Millie," the tree whispered, "put me in the sun."

"There's one theory gone," I said.

"Please," the rose added.

"Do you think I should?"

"Please, Miss Millie," said the rose tree, getting louder. "I love the sun.

"It's going to knock all its leaves off, thrashing around like that," Miss Millie said.

"I guess you'd better put it back on Sam's desk."

She lifted the dish gingerly, keeping her hands and arms clear of the fluttering leaves, and set it in the sun.

The rose tree rustled happily. "Now I can sing aloud," it whispered. It began an eerie humming song about the sun, and running water, and the pleasure of being beautiful.

It was too Hans Christian Andersen for words. I called Sam.

When he got there, the rose was singing a song about night and the feeling of starlight on leaves.

"Good grief," Sam said. "How long has this been going on?"

"About an hour," I said. "It was with the song bushes down in the bot lab, and they may have stepped up its output."

"It always rustles in the sun," Miss Millie put in, "even when there isn't any wind, but it's never done anything like this before."

"Get Fergusson up here," said Sam.

"We're waiting for it to quiet down," I said. "Fergusson's always messing around with song bushes. If they caused the trouble, he'll make it worse."

"Ugh," said Sam.

"What are we going to do with it until it quiets down?" Miss Millie asked.

"Kill it?" I suggested. "Solve all our problems at once?"

"It's up to Miss Millie," Sam said firmly. He was pale around the eyes. "It's her rose."

The mike buzzed again. It was Smeltzer's office slave and whipping girl. Sam and I were wanted upstairs.

Smeltzer was red and sputtering. "Look out that window," he roared.

We gazed upon the valuable warehouses blazing in the sun.

"What happened?" asked Sam.

"That is the fault of you two incompetents," Smeltzer raged. "You let a Corianna ceramic through unchecked."

"George's pitcher," I said involuntarily.

Smeltzer turned on me. "So it was Carrie, this time. Dear little Carrie, shaking her merry curls, too busy to be bothered."

"What happened, exactly?" Sam asked, drawing fire to himself.

"The ceramic came into contact with some atigl spores, and ignited, with a medium-sized explosion," said Smeltzer, falsely calm. "A stevedore barely escaped with is life. Ten million credits worth of goods have been destroyed already, and the fire isn't under control yet." He glowered at me.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Smeltzer burst. "Sorry! So am I. So's the port authority. So's the Council," he screamed. "What were you doing that kept you too busy to look at that ceramic?"

"Reading a report on a miniature rose tree," I said. "New species. Terran import."

"Rose tree! Stars of the Cosmos."

"This rose tree is different." I said.

"It might be dangerous," Sam said.

"Indeed?" said Smeltzer, quietly, turning blue. "Has it threatened either of you?"

"No, sir," I said, "but it talks."

"And sings," Sam added miserably.

Smeltzer glared at us suspiciously.

"Honestly, Mr. Smeltzer," I said.

"I advise you both to visit a competent psycho-tech," Smeltzer said. "I expect to find your resignations on my desk tomorrow."

"Just let me use your intercom mike," I said.

Smeltzer waved a hand at it.

I buzzed Miss Millie. "Put the rose on," I said.

The rose was still singing.

"All right," said Smeltzer. "So you've got a singing rose bush..."

"Tree," said Sam.

"Rose bush," Smeltzer went on. "Maybe that's a reason for that bonfire, but it's not good enough. Singing and burning are two different things. You're still fired." He sounded mollified.

"Cheer up," I whispered to Sam in the hall. "He'll hire us again next week. He always does. We'll remind him of the way we tracked down the red clover poison." Red clover runs amuck on Mars and sucks up so much nitrogen that it's poisonous to native wild life.

"I know that" Sam said. "I'm wondering what will happen to Miss Millie and the rose tree until we can get back."

"We have to come in tomorrow anyway," I said. "He can't accept our resignations until he gets here."

The rose tree was humming softly and sweetly when we came in.

"It's going to sleep," Miss Millie whispered.

"Do you think we could send for Fergusson?" I asked.

Sam buzzed for Fergusson. "Dance barefoot through those song bushes for a while, and then come up here," he said.

The rose knew Fergusson was coming even before we heard his feet sending echoes through the hall. "I feel so beautiful, so strange, so happy," it sang. "I love the sun. I love the earth. I love."

"Mars," I said, "does wonderful things for roses."

Fergusson came in. "It seems to have learned some new words."

"It must be the song bushes that do it," Sam said.

"There you are, Miss Millie," I said. "You just have to keep your rose tree away from song bushes, unless you want it to talk."

"Would that be difficult?" Miss Millie asked.

"Song bushes are as prevalent on Mars as milkweed in Vermont."

"I don't know what I'm going to do," said Miss Millie. "I feel so tired and depressed; I'm just about ready to give up." Her Vermont look came back. "It's the rose," she said. "I'm not going to give in to it."

"We'll think of something," I said. "Won't we, Sam, Fergusson?"

"Oh, sure," said Sam.

"We're the experts."

"Well, I won't take my life, even if you can sing," said Miss Millie to her rose.

"Miss Millie," whispered the rose tree. "After all the ages I have lived, at last I'm going to bloom. I believed I didn't want to, but now I know I do."

"Does it answer questions?" Fergusson asked.

"We haven't asked it any," Sam said.

"It's not a Ouija board," I said.

"I don't mean that kind of question," said Fergusson. "What species are you?"

"Miss Millie, Miss Millie," said the tree. "Please bring me some clear water."

Miss Millie went out of the room, glass in hand.

"Let's kill it," I said. "She thinks it keeps her from dying. A short snort of alcohol instead of water will do it, and neither of them will know what happened."

Sam shook his head. "It's Miss Millie's rose."

"Miss Millie, bring me some clear water," said the tree. "I feel so harpy and so strange."

"Strange is the word," I said.

"I am going to flower," the rose whispered.

"Do you know what species you are?" Fergusson asked again.

"Miss Millie, some water," said the rose.

"Self-centered, isn't it?" said Sam.

Miss Millie came back in, and poured water into the blue china dish.

"Water, water," the rose tree hissed. It started to sing again.

"Not even a thank you," said Miss Millie,

"Let's see if we can finish those beetles before Smeltzer accepts our resignations," Sam said.

"Anything would be better than watching a rose tree sing," I said.

"I'll leave so it can quiet down again," said Fergusson.

"I feel so wonderful, so strange," it sang. "At last I am going to bloom."

"I wonder what will happen when it blooms," I said.

Miss Millie looked worried. "It never did it before."

"Flower, blossom, bloom," said the rose.

"Look," said Miss Millie. "It has a bud."

"Petal, stamen, pistol, calyx," sang the rose tree.

"Beetles," said Sam firmly.

During the afternoon, we identified three beetles, while the rose tree's song died away, and the bud grew and swelled. Miss Millie watched it.

At quitting time, she seemed calm and contented. "You young people run along home," she said. "I'll take the rose tree into the Ladies' Lounge and have a nice rest."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, indeed," said Miss Millie.

"We'll send you some supper," said Sam.

"Do that, please," said Miss Millie.

"That bud will open in the morning," said Sam, sealing his windbreaker.

"I do believe it will," said Miss Millie, pink and smiling.

"She's awfully pleased about the rose tree," I whispered in the grav shaft.

"She looks twenty years younger than when she came," Sam agreed.

"I wonder if she'll do anything foolish?" I said.

Sam shook his head. "She's got her curse beat," he said. "Let's go over to Magnus's for dinner."

"We'll send something for Miss Millie from there," I agreed. "Those cheese sandwiches last night were horrors."

Two hours after the next sunrise, I walked into the Ladies' Lounge. Miss Millie was lying on the couch under the window, covered with Fergusson's blanket. I ran toward her, frightened.

She was asleep, smiling and contented. On the table, in the full sunlight, was the blue dish, and the biggest blood red rose I have ever seen. The room was still. The rose tree's leaves were turning brown.



"Miss Millie," I said softly.

She opened her eyes. "Well, my dear?"

"What happened?"

Triumph shone around her. "I waited until the sun rose, and when it bloomed, I took the flower." She touched the rose. "Isn't it lovely?"

"It killed itself, blooming," I said.

Miss Millie nodded.

"Well," I said, recovering. "Now you can come and stay with me, and Sam and I will show you the wonders of Mars."

Miss Millie shook her head, smiling. "Thank you, dear," she said, "but I can't. I've got to go back to Terra. I'm a cardiac, you know."

## **THE GODDESS PLANET DELIGHT**

Betsy Curtis

(Planet Stories, May 1953)

### I.

WHEN the alarm signaled the first whiff of the atmosphere of the next planet on his route, Herl Hofner stopped chinning his strapping six-foot self and left the little gym.

Slipping into the swivel chair at the desk he clipped the pile of loose papers into an empty niche at the side of the desk, spun the chair to the instrument panel of the Krylla. Dialing with his left hand, he swept the bank for incoming signals while his right hand adjusted the microphone frequencies.

"Class M-for-Mary ship requesting permission to land. Do you have automatic beam landing device? Class M-for-Mary ship requesting permission to land. Do you have automatic beam landing?" His dial pointer swept back and forth.

"Come in, class M-for-Mary."

Herl's left hand moved to the auto-beam switch. "What band for M-for-Mary landing? What band for M-for-Mary landing?"

"Come in on seventy-three point eight, M-for-Mary. Come in on seventy-three point eight, M-for-Mary."

Herl's left hand now centered the needle neatly on the appropriate setting as his right pressed the stud for extending the wings with their powerful atmosphere motors; and he sank back into the chair cushions with a relieved sigh. This was still a civilized planet. He'd be able to get back maybe a month sooner than he'd expected after the most recent setback. Forty years, he frowned, was too long between visits from Galactic Central, even if Central had no responsibility for autonomous groupings. A lot could happen in forty years on these isolated planets. Unprecedented mutation leaving half the population deaf and dumb had made the last call a long and tedious one. But by the signs so far, this planet was still ticking along satisfactorily. With radio and radar and standard language, a spacer had all the comforts of civilization.

The speaker hummed into activity. "Please state vessel name, registration, number of crew, destination, and nature of business, M-for-Mary entering on band seventy-three point eight."

Herl grinned comfortably to himself. Familiar red tape had a homelike ring. "This is the Krylla, registered J-John five two L-Lomax one five on Earth Sol at headquarters of Galactic Coordination, on routine round trip of thirty planets carrying only Captain Herl Hofner, your sears-monkey, to governmental centers for trading coordination."

He heard the snort from the speaker before the bellow. "What in seven light years is a sears-monkey?" He could visualize the veritable bull of a man at the port control tower.

"Traditional term on Earth for a trading catalogue, now used to signify the man who carries it. I've got five hundred thousand feet of microfilm of the latest manufactured articles and raw materials and their descriptions and prices from about three thousand planets in the galaxy. Anything you need?"

"I don't know. Nobody tells me anything." A pause. "How long do you wish to remain on Delight?"

"That depends on what's needed and how long it takes me to find out. How long has the planet been called Delight? I have it listed as Geescow, or maybe that was my predecessor's idea of a joke."

"That was no joke. We only settled here eighty years ago and there was a little bug in the water that made the whole place stink like a garbage scow. We've got that pretty well cleaned up and renamed the place." Another pause. "Do you need hotel accommodations?"

Hotel. Herl felt his chin. He'd better redepil on the way down. Sears-monkeys were expected to go the local culture one better on everything to keep up Galactic Coordination's reputation. And he should wear the red dress uniform tunic and black

trousers. The more civilized they were, the harder they fell for a little routine glamour.

"How far is the port from the capital?"

"Not more'n ninety, hundred miles from the middle of town. Plenty of taxi service for the little bit of business we get here. Only twelve spaces and eighty-three jets registered for the whole planet."

Well, that explained the volubility of the control man. Evidently just busting for somebody to talk to. Not first-class security, being so gabby, but pleasant to come in out of the black to.

"I may need an office where I can place the samples. Can you get me something?"

"No. You gotta have a clearance permit to rent, a commercial visa, a set of ration cards for food ... do you need one for clothes? ... a transportation permit to hire a vehicle ... an application blank for the examination, an application for personal insurance, vehicle insurance, theft insurance, credit bonding, driver's license, secretarial assistance (will you need a secretary?), and the most important of the kaboodle, application for permission to make addition applications for permission."

"Luna! I don't expect to be here a couple of weeks at the most. I don't need clothes unless the ones I have are offensive to your planetary taboos; and I certainly don't need a secretary. Can't I just hire a cab and let the driver worry about the insurance and driver's license and all the rest of that stuff?" Herl mentally withdrew his grin at the comfort of red tape. "I can eat food from the ship if I have to."

"Can't unload any food without special permission two weeks in advance of unloading date to give time for federal inspection." The heavy voice was firm if regretful. "You'd better just pick up this book of forms and fill them out while you wait for clearance to enter the city."

"Clearance," Herl almost yelped. "How long will that take?"

"Depends. You might be able to get it in four, five hours if the video bands are fairly free. You're almost down now. Don't forget the 1.3 earth gravity. Buckle your belt: the field's jet-pitted and you're coming in on wheels. Be seeing you."

But Herl was still seeing him six hours later, sitting across a castered utility table from almost exactly the bull of a man he'd visualized ... about Herl's own height but broader all the way from shoulders to beam. Where he'd half expected a close-cropped head, however, the tower man, Saem Berry, wore his hair in ragged brown locks falling almost to his jacket collar.

Herl had looked up at him curiously in the midst of asking a question relevant to a three-page form describing his employment status and waiving unemployment compensation during his stay on Delight.

"Let my barbering permit lapse," admitted Berry, sheepishly. "Can't re-apply for six

more months, so I have to hack it off when it gets in my way."

"Earth months or Delight months?" Herl asked as he wrote.

"Delight months. That's about a year and a half, earth time." Saem Berry opened the desk drawer and took out a pair of office shears. Holding his head over the wastebasket he snipped off a few of the longer strands; then he sat up and replaced the shears. "Good thing I learned to shave myself."

Filling out forms and returning to the Krylla for a snack had taken only five of the six hours: waiting for vizor connections had taken the last hour along with a game, of tri-di chess to kill the time. Berry had been surprisingly uncommunicative about the state of Delight culture and technology.

"Better see it for yourself," he'd said. "I don't know half of what goes on in town, living way off here."

He had been politely curious about Herl and Herl's job.

"Go around from planet to planet and system to system selling stuff, eh?" He tilted his head at the captain. "What made a smart young fellow like you want to wander around the galaxy instead of settling down to a steady job and raising a family? Lot of money in it, or are you staying away from something you don't like?" he asked penetratingly.

Herl responded in kind. "Don't know as I ever thought of it just that way," he admitted. "I guess I like to see things getting tied together in some sort of organization. I like to see people getting what they want and need ... and I'm good at it. There's no great income in it. Maybe I just like going from place to place and seeing how things are there."

"Looking for something you need yourself, I'll bet. Got a girl?" the controlman grinned slyly.

"No girl," Herl grinned back. "Do the girls on Delight need a man like me? I might be able to arrange for a shipload."

Saem shook his head. "I've got a daughter," he said, "who yearns for far places ... marriageable gal ... I'm always on the lookout." He laughed. "That's the kind of thing she'd say, not me, the little brat."

"Do I have to get a special permit to take her to dinner?" Herl asked, just as the vizor connection was completed.

The major official in a conservative blue tunic, who looked like half the civil officers in the galaxy, peered apologetically out of the screen. "You can come right to my office in the city, Captain Hofner," he urged. "I'll get some of our leading men together to meet you at once. I understand you're a busy man. Uh ... have you all your applications filled out?"

The towerman assented quickly for Hofner. "Yes indeed, Mr. Commissioner. He's alone and planning to stay only a few weeks, so he didn't need most of the big ones like permanent housing or shopping assignment or resident tax registration and like that. Will you be sending a temporary driver for him till he's got his permit?"

"Oh, yes. I'll send a man out as soon as I can clear one."

Saem's tone was deferent. "Thank you, Mr. Commissioner." The connection was broken and the screen went dark. "Pretty obliging guy, Commissioner Crawford. He doesn't forget a thing. Never has. That's an impressive record." The controlman nodded his head; his hair swung down over his eyes; and he fumbled in the drawer for the scissors again. "Now I'd forget my head if it wasn't dogged down."

"It can't be that bad," Herl objected.

"Right again," the other admitted. "That's a joke around here at any rate. You can't afford to forget anything around here."

"I won't forget," smiled Herl.

"You'd better not. It would be awkward as hell if you did and got stuck here."

"They couldn't hold me here just for forgetting something. I'm an employee of Galactic Coordination, you know, and not a local citizen."

The brown locks swung from side to side. "I don't know but I wouldn't risk it. It might be a good many years, from what you tell me, before anybody came out from the Sol system looking for you if they're as understaffed as you say."

"I'll be careful, then." And Herl Hofner patted his pile of applications and turned back to the chess game.

## II.

THE DRIVER of the cabter was even less communicative about the state of things on Delight. Captain Hofner tried to get him to talk about what the planet might be able to use in the manufactured line but the young driver only pursed his lips and shook his head slowly and said, "I don't know a thing about it and I can't afford to be forgetting that I don't get paid for looking around and then griping about it. Commissioner Crawford will tell you what you want to know. He gets paid for it." And he would say no more.

Crawford sounded like quite the little despot. Herl shivered in the open cabter as it plowed through a thin cloud and turned, up the heating element in his scarlet uniform tunic. The driver seemed very thinly clad, but he gave no sign of being cold except for a whiteness around the lips and fingers.

"Don't you draw enough clothing ration here? Maybe Delight will be in the market for synthetic fabrics if you're short here."

The young man turned a look of fury on Hofner. "None of your damn business if I haven't got enough clothes and I wouldn't say, anything about it to Crawford either if you know what's good for you!"

Horner shrugged, and the silence held till after the cab had alighted on the outskirts of the city and proceeded through a number of blocks of moderate-sized residencies and stores. Realizing the probable public pride of the driver, Herl made no mention of the occasional fetid whiffs that blew through the cabter reminding him that Delight had once been called Geescow, but instead turned his attention to the city. The houses were brick or store boxes, solidly built, drab-colored, set behind lawns of silvery gray mossy looking stuff. Great trees lined the street at precise intervals: the pavement, though lightly serrated for friction, was as smooth as the newest roads on Earth. Hofner noticed that the cabter stopped automatically at certain intersections and was obviously equipped with a radar braking device. Technicians here might, have something to list in the catalogue.

Suddenly the driver stiffened in his seat, slammed on the cab's own brakes and swore simultaneously. "Those blankety blank damned irresponsible Eyefers!" He leaned out of the window and yelled, "Where in hell do you think you're going? Do you want to get killed?"

Hofner, who had been looking at tile buildings on his side of the street, looked out the front of the cab and saw a vacant-faced, middle-aged woman almost touching the bumper. She turned her head at the driver's voice, looked at him as if she hardly saw him, and walked slowly to the opposite curb. The driver pulled in his head and muttered under his breath, "They ought to declare an open season on Eyefers around here. They'd just as soon smash up a good cab as get killed."

"Eyefer?" Herl asked, hoping to get some crumb of information from the surly young man.

"Short for I fergot," answered his companion brusquely.

"I fergot what?"

The reply was bitterly sarcastic. "Fergot to get a license... Fergot to get the next ration card... Fergot to apply for compensation... I fergot to do practically anything but eat ... and be a drag on everybody else. I got three of them myself to look out for and if I don't look out I'll be going Eyefer myself and then what?"

"All right, then what?"

The young man clenched his teeth, thinned his lips. "There won't be any 'then what.' I'd hang myself."

Concealing his startlement, Herl asked as coolly as he could, "Tell me about these

Eyefers. We don't have them where I come from and I can't say I exactly understand the score."

"No Eyefers, huh. Ask Crawford." And the driver clenched his teeth again and drove on. Herl was unable to get anything more out of him until the cabter turned and drew up a long ramp into the side of a pretentious pseudo-Greek edifice that filled a whole block.

"Civil Building. Crawford's office is here. Straight ahead," he stopped the cabter beside a gateway in the railed concrete walkway paralleling the road, which apparently went clear through the building, "and take the fourth elevator to your right. Crawford has the whole sixth floor."

Herl grabbed his case full of credentials and applications, opened the door, and exited onto the walkway. He turned to thank the driver, but the cab was already gathering speed along the way.

## II.

He looked after the dwindling cabter a moment, then walked quickly along the concrete toward the elevators. To his left, a procession of assorted vehicles hurried in either direction through the tunnel. Occasional cabters, long-cars, and congyribles pulled up to openings in the railing to let out passengers who approached one or another of the elevator doors. Herl passed three clumps of people waiting for transportation to other floors and noticed that the panels beside the doors, which listed the offices to be found on the ninth, eighth, and seventh floors respectively, were all listings of headquarters of some sort of civil control ... health insurance, building permits, fire inspection, inoculations, etc.

There were both men and women among those waiting, most of them in what Earth would call informal dress (a pair of simple trousers and knitted shirt in gray or brown often topped off with a heavy furred cape or swathing cape-like coat); and most of them were much more warmly dressed than the driver of his cab. Apparently there was not such a shortage of heat-holding fabrics as he had assumed.

As he reached the fourth elevator, the door opened and the group was sucked into its recesses. Herl joined it and the doors closed. "Express to the sixth floor; face the rear of the car please," said the tinny voice from an overhead speaker. Twenty people stood glumly motionless as the car glided up with the faintest of vibrations but with a heavy pressure against the soles of Captain Hofner's feet.

A door opened at the rear of the elevator chamber and the crowd pushed out and spread wide in the large lobby ahead. Herl Hofner shifted his case to his left hand and looked around for some clue to the whereabouts of Crawford's office. That

worthy might have the whole floor, but he must have his particular sanctum at some particular place,

Most of the lobby was filled by comfortable looking upholstered couches and chairs, and these in turn were filled by what Herl judged to be a couple of hundred people talking, reading pamphlets, or glancing preoccupiedly through pages of forms that were like the ones he'd filled out earlier. In a chair near him, Herl saw an old man gazing blankly ahead and approached him.

"I wonder if you would be so good as to tell me where I could find Commissioner Crawford," he requested hopefully.

"What say?" the man blinked, and turned his gaze on the red uniform jacket at about the level of Herl's floating ribs.

"Where would I find Commissioner Crawford?"

"Down that way somewhere, I suppose." The man's voice was toneless as he indicated direction with one elbow.

Yes, almost at the corner of the room was a broad paneled door on which the stenciled name 'Mr. Commissioner A. G. Crawford' became legible as Herl approached it. He knocked briskly just below the letters; and the door swung slowly inward to admit him.

Inside sat a receptionist at a switchboard. She looked up at Herl's entrance; and he could see that she was a homely brunette with dull skin and a shapeless figure. Her glance at his trim scarlet uniform was approving and she said, "You're Captain Hofman from Galactic Information, aren't you?"

"Hofner, from Coordination," he corrected. "May I see the Commissioner? I believe he's expecting me."

"The Commissioner is in conference at the moment with some of the men he wants you to talk to. If you could wait in the lobby a few minutes, I'm sure he'll be ready to see you soon.

"Can't I wait in here?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied reluctantly. "It's a rule that no one can wait in the offices. They'd be filling the place to the ceiling if we let them get in this far. Not," she added with what she seemed to think was a fascinating smile, "that you'd try to get in ahead of your turn ... but some would."

Herl retreated with his case of papers to the lobby and took the nearest of two vacant chairs about fifteen feet from Crawford's door. He sat down and pulled a stilo and permanote pad from his breast pocket. Using his case as a writing desk he noted down several questions he wanted to ask somebody. There were vacant Planets in his catalogue; maybe he had a market for one of those: and while there



wasn't any commission on such a sale, there was usually a lot of kudos.

He glanced up at Crawford's door again, and a motion on his left drew his eye. There was someone in the chair next to him only ten feet away ... a woman, no, a girl.

The thought flitted through his mind that she was a quiet one to slip into the chair without his noticing. She was looking at him, and he turned his head to look directly at her.

Shock like a heavy charge of electricity gripped and tingled in him. This was no girl, it was a ... a ... a ... who knows what? Wrapped in a thin golden haze, she sat, as if the midst of an incandescent cloud, through which her face shone as if it, too, were illumined from inside. One bare arm lay along the upholstered arm of the chair, but not quite touching it, as though the cloud gave a little support; but the perfect arm was merely the lower frame for the exquisitely lovely face with its blue eyes that seemed to penetrate his awareness to its depths and the smile that smoothed his irritation at another tedious wait into nothingness.

Herl sat and regarded her a long instant, a foreverness of perhaps ten seconds. Then he came fumblingly to himself and smiled back at her. "Waiting for Crawford, too?" he asked lamely.

The tones of her voice were rippling water, a chord on a stringed instrument. "No."

Herl had a moment of ridiculous longing to stand up and see over the thick arm of the chair to find out what the rest of her looked like. Then embarrassment came and he lowered his eyes. "Excuse me," he apologized, "I'm a stranger to Delight. I didn't mean to pry."

The voice was two tones of a flute. "I know."

"By the uniform?" He raised his eyes again to look at hers.

"By everything." The smile faded, replaced by a look of sober gravity.

Questions raced through Herl's mind: who she was; what the cloud was; what she knew about him; even what she was wearing, for the cloud thickened near the shoulder and neck and he could glimpse only a few shining strands of waving amber hair through the concealing haze.

"You may ask me," she said.

"Ask you what?" he returned, surprised.

"Any of those questions. I will tell you."

Crawford's door opened and the receptionist came toward them. One thought rose imperatively in Herl's mind.

"Will you still be here when I come out?"

"No."

He grasped his case and got up. He could see now that she was literally wearing nothing but the half-concealing haze that left her and bare feet visible. "Will I ... I see you again?"

"Yes."

Herl turned his head toward the receptionist.

"Commissioner Crawford can see you now," she smirked.

He looked back to ask the vision when and how he would find her but the chair was as empty as when he came out of the office.

Confused, like a man suddenly awakened from a fascinating dream. Herl looked after the receptionist through the door and to the inner one. She returned to her switchboard and he went on to the door, which slid into the wall at approach. He gave his head a quick clearing shake and looked inside the long, austere, uncarpeted office, with its one window at the far end.

Directly ahead of him was a group of sitting on both sides of a long conference table ... little men, serious-faced, important, earnest. At the far end, a man faced ... a small, pleasant, but harried-looking, middle-aged man, almost bald. Herl identified his outline against the window as that of Commissioner Crawford of the vizor call.

"Come in, Captain Hofner," the Commissioner invited cordially.

Herl did so and looked curiously at the sober faces of the men at the table while the door slid shut behind him.

"Come and sit down," Crawford indicated with his palm the empty chair at Herl's end of the table. His voice was still mellow and cordial. "We are all ready to discuss your offers and see your samples. You will find at we are accustomed to doing business on Delight ... an agreeable feature of our culture, I think you'll find."

Herl smiled, pulled out the heavy chair and sat, pulling it back to the table as he did so. Promptness would indeed be a feature after working with those deaf mutes. He placed his case upon the table.

"I didn't bring the tapes and films with me from the ship, gentlemen," he apologized. "They seem to have exceeded the weight limit which I could bring into town without special permission. I suppose I shall have to have all these papers approved before I can show you what we have to sell." He opened the case and slipped out the stack of applications. "However, I can make a preliminary survey of your needs and what you have that you'd like an extra-planetary market for." He reached into his jacket pocket for stilo and pad.

A bell sounded beyond the door, which opened; and the receptionist stuck her head into the room.

"Miss Haulwell, would you be good enough to get a special messenger to take these papers around to the proper offices and get them stamped?" Crawford gestured to the stack. He scribbled on a pad by his hand, tore off the sheet and held it out.

"This will give my authorization for complete clearance.

The shapeless Miss Haulwell came meekly around the table and took the note, then returned to the other end to pick up the pile of applications, handling them almost reverently. "Yes, Commissioner. Will there be anything else, Commissioner?"

"No, not at the moment."

She retreated silently to her anteroom and the door closed.

Just as the door clicked shut, Herl saw the golden haze thickening slowly behind the seated Crawford ... thickening and then fading to nothing as if a cloud had changed its mind about coming into being. Staring beyond the man, Herl missed the beginning of the sentence, but picked it up before the meaning was lost.

"...have been discussing some of the things we need. We'd be interested in seeing any electronic calculating equipment developed in the last eighty years. And our requirements for reducing and storing records, particularly photographic records, have so far exceeded our production of file and development chemicals that we are definitely in the market for such ... or any different improved methods. That's right, isn't it, Mr. Jerrip? (Mr. Jerrip is our Commissioner of Records.)"

A man down the table on Herl's left nodded agreement.

"Exactly right, Mr. Commissioner." His tone was most respectful. Herl made a note on his pad. "Those are some of the most popular numbers in our new listing. What next?"

"Well, we've been discussing the matter of permitting the use of plastic housing materials and if we can come to some agreement, we may be in the market for some plastic formulae and construction plans."

One of the men on Hofner's right grunted an objection.

"Housing Commissioner Ferguson, he feels that as long as we can continue to supply the expressed demand, there is no need to plan any expansion.

Herl nodded agreeably toward Ferguson and suggested, "Since delivery on items like hot molds for plastics can't be guaranteed in less than ten earth years, you might like to see what we have and reconsider your needs in terms of the next fifty. Our department is trying to get us sears monkeys, around more often than that, but we can't be sure of doing it unless planet-hopping becomes a lot more popular with the boys of the galaxy."

Ferguson grunted again. "In fifty years we probably won't need anything but barracks for Eyefers."

Most of the men at the table laughed, little self-consciously, it seemed to Herl.

"How about those Eyefers?" Herl opened tentatively. "I don't quite understand them but I gather they're something of drag on your culture. We have a number of vacant planets. Would you be interested sending off a gang of them to colonize? Would they be interested in going?"

A tall man next to Ferguson spoke Crawford. "How about it, Bert? Would your household get along more smooth with about six less mouths to feed and six less backs to cover?"

A fat bearded man directly on Herl's left shook his head rapidly several times. "No, no, no!"

Crawford spoke noncommittally. "Commissioner Guildris of Health and Welfare objects!"

Guildris stood up. "I certainly do. Not only are the Eyefers hardly competent to colonize anything but the whole success of our cultural and genetic experiment hinges on their being here among us as an example of what we must avoid if we are to succeed as a people."

He sat down, plumph, on the air-cushion of his chair.

Crawford turned to Herl. "I can explain about the Eyefers while we are waiting for your things from the ship," he assured Herl. "They are really quite important in our scheme of things, as Guildris says."

Herl was startled. "You mean you're sending somebody for my things?" he wanted to know.

"Certainly, if you like. If you don't trust a man to get them, I'll go along with you and we can talk then."

Herl relaxed. "There may be a good many things you'll be interested in when you see the pictures," he said.

The members of the group suddenly seemed a little tense.

"For instance," Herl looked round the ring of faces so sober and intent, "how about entertainment and entertainers? There are nightclub bleepers, and grand opera troupes, carnivals, dancers, magicians, and bocko teams, theatrical companies, acrobats, and several thousand individual artists of various talents ... all good, or Galactic Coordination wouldn't be listing them. What's your preference, gentlemen?"

Commissioner Guildris rose again, a heavy frown on his heavy features. Looks of disapproval were obvious on several other faces also, although one or two

commissioners raised their eyebrows questioningly at Crawford.

"I would not presume, Captain Hofner," Guildris stated, "to condemn light entertainment for the peoples of the galaxy. It is, however, an occupation from which we have been able to shield our people for the time being. We have our own approved methods of relaxation and of temporary escape from the pressures of daily living; but these are mostly in the nature of solitary meditation and mechanical music."

Herl winced inwardly. These people would have been better approached by a non-humanoid robot than a red-blooded terran boy. Six feet six of healthy hungry handsome salesman was wasted here. And Guildris would hardly go off on an extended sermon to a machine.

But a human audience was fair game for the paunchy commissioner. "The danger to our citizens, you understand, is not in escapism, even though that may have its own dangers. It is in the approval and possible emulation of individuals ... individuals who, though talented, might not be truly fitted for survival here. We cannot tolerate ... I repeat, we cannot tolerate public distress and public pressure when a public figure fails in his civic duties. Entertainers would be loved. The public would want to forgive them their lapses. This we cannot have."

Herl glanced with a ghost of a smile at one of the men who had raised his eyebrows at Crawford. "No dancers?" he said.

"No dancers," Crawford replied firmly, without giving the other a chance to answer.

Herl returned equally firmly to his task. "And how do you plan to pay for what you buy ... by Galactic Credits ... by man hours of assigned labor ... or by barter? In other words, what do you want to sell among the stars?"

A suave looking man with oily hair and an oilier manner looked at Crawford. "May I, Mr. Commissioner?"

Crawford nodded. "Mr. Applegate, Commissioner of Raw Materials (and that includes labor of course) will answer that."

Applegate turned to smirk at Herl. "We have on Delight, Captain Hofner, a rich supply of natural fuels, several strains of high-oxygen producing plants, and a most remunerative taxation system. We can sell or barter or even pay for our few needs, whichever proves most satisfactory to Galactic Coordination. We have an untapped reservoir of unskilled labor in our Eyefers, whom we have heretofore avoided exploiting but whom we can use if it seems desirable for the good of our planet. Does that answer your question?"

Herl nodded, surprised that such a prosperous people hadn't gone straight to Coordination for what they wanted years before.

Guildris of Health and Welfare added, "We are most fortunate in being a completely

self-sustaining planet. In our abundance of natural foods and textile rawstuffs, we are probably capable of supporting twice our present numbers. That is why we are able to make progress with the great genetic experiment now in progress here. Because it works actual hardship on no one!" he added proudly.

Herl looked at Crawford. "I suppose this experiment will be one of the things you'll tell me about when we go to get my things?"

"Of course," he said blandly.

"Another matter you might be considering while we are getting the tapes and films," Herl offered, "is transport. Have you enough home-owned space tonnage to carry your exports and imports; or would you be interested in purchase, rental, or simple contract for haulage? You will get your orders much more quickly, I hardly have to tell you, if you use your own ships; but there are a number of haulage companies around the galaxy which would be very glad of your business. And if you cared to send a representative to the nearest coordination center, he could bring you our listings every couple of earth years and return with your orders, so that you could be in much closer touch with what the galaxy has to offer in the way of raw materials, manufactured goods, technological advance, and markets." Herl looked inquiringly around the table.

The rotund Guildris stood up again. "I believe I may speak for all of us when I say that we are not overly anxious for increased contact with the galaxy at this point in our social development. A great deal of thought by some of our wisest men," he bowed to his colleagues pompously, "has been expended on making Delight a self-sufficient independent unit for the most worthy of purposes, the eventual improvement of our race. In a few more generations, we may have something to offer the galaxy ... not to sell but to offer to the need of all other planets ... a strain of homo sapiens so selected as to be a hardy, keen, responsible and intelligent race of administrators and leaders of the galaxy. Because we have dedicated ourselves to this purpose, we must necessarily cut ourselves off from the pleasant interdependence of thriving trade until we are ready to market the noble fruits of our projected garden."

Guildris remained standing a moment, while a gentle handclapping from both sides of the table indicated that his remarks were, indeed, the opinion of all those present.

Herl kept a straight face with the greatest effort. Going to run the galaxy in a few generations were they? These little two-for-a-credit bureaucrats? Wanted a few little calculators to make themselves the final bosses of everything. He had seen a giant calculator ... an electronic multi-brain, with fifty men coding information for it, preparatory to making the selection of a minor planetary economic advisor. It would be an interesting day when these little men came to Earth to take over. All this flashed through his mind while Crawford was rising to his feet.

"We shall be perfectly satisfied," said Crawford genially, "to have delivery of our

small order made by any means you care to contract: but as you have heard, we are not interested in opening up Delight as a trade center, so we have no need for regular shipping service. Now I don't want to take these gentlemen's time with discussion of things they already know," he looked around the table, "so if that's all we can do now, I propose that we disband and meet again at sundown. That will give us two hours to go out to the ship and back. Are there any objections?"

The men were rising from their chairs.

Herl said, almost plaintively, "Doesn't anybody eat around here? Couldn't we add time for a meal?"

Crawford laughed. "I forgot you didn't have your ration card yet. Make that time one hour after dark. If your papers aren't cleared yet, I'll stand you to a meal."

Herl stood also, and the men filed past him, shaking his hand as they went. Six commissioners who had not spoken during the meeting added their names and positions. The last to go was a Commissioner of Psychology and Psychiatry, to whom Herl said, "I'd like to see you before I leave here, Commissioner. I think I've been having hallucinations."

The man halted, still holding Herl's hand. "What sort of visions, my boy?"

Herl grinned. "A pretty girl in a golden fog. Probably just the result of months alone in a spaceship."

The man signed, relieved. "Oh, just a goddess, a local phenomenon. Think nothing more of it. Commissioner Crawford will tell you all about that, too." He followed the others out.

A local phenomenon! Maybe that girl was the 'noble fruit' Guildris was talking about. If so, these people might have something after all.

### III.

Commissioner Crawford had gone to a desk in one corner of the conference room and was rummaging in one of the drawers. "Better hunt up my guest permit for restaurants," he began, when a two-tone chime sounded and the screen of a large vizer against the wall lit up. "Excuse me," he said, sitting down in the desk chair facing the video. "Crawford speaking," he said distinctly.

A young man with a narrow, pimply countenance and sparse lightish hair appeared on the screen. "Sub-commissioner Torrin of Highways and Vehicles," he identified himself.

"Yes, Mr. Torrin?"

"I have here a set of application papers with your request for special rapid-clearance," Torrin said accusingly, holding up the sheaf of papers which Herl recognized, although it was now much thinner than when he had relinquished it to Miss Haulwell.

"That is correct. Don't tell me something's been omitted. This is urgent, Torrin."

"Nothing has been omitted, Commissioner; but your note calls only for clearance on permits for a Captain Herl Hofner," Torrin said curtly.

"Still correct. So?"

"There is also an application for driver's license here for a Miss Agnes Haulwell, and I've leafed down through the rest of the forms and there are several more in her name: cooking fats and oils; crimp yarn textile clothing; limited individual rental housing ... and then there are others of the same type as requested for Captain Hofner. Did you mean to authorize these also? Is she accompanying Captain Hofner in his temporary stay here? If so, I hardly see why she should need a number of these."

Crawford groaned and replied ruefully, "Haulwell's my receptionist and secretary. Obviously going Eyefer and near-criminal as well. Very discerning of you to have caught it" He sighed. "She was a good secretary, though. Wonder where I'll get another."

Torrin requested coldly, "What shall I do with the applications?"

"Approve Captain Hofner's and send the rest of his on through. I'll get Haulwell's fraudulent forms from you tomorrow and put through her Eyefer status officially then. I'm too busy now."

"Thank you, Commissioner." The screen went black.

Crawford's face when he turned back to Herl was tired and disgruntled. "That's the third girl in a couple of years. They just have no consideration for their jobs. She was the best of the three, too." He riffled some more papers in the drawer and came up with a small green card.

"Why didn't you tell him you meant to add her name to your note?" Herl asked curiously. "You could have given her a scolding or something, couldn't you?"

"Oh no. You don't understand. She might have married and had children and I wouldn't have been able to say a thing, or I'd have been an accessory after the fact." He pressed a button on his desk. "Being Chief Commissioner of Delight is a responsible and tough job, Captain. But we owe it to our children's children to make them a hundred times as responsible and tough."

The door opened and Agnes Haulwell advanced a few steps into the room. "You wanted me, Commissioner?"



"Yes, Miss Haulwell. You may leave now and go home and pack your things. I'll phone Placement to get an assignment for you so you can go right there to turn in your permits when you've packed."

"P-placement, Commissioner?"

"Eyefer, placement, Miss Haulwell. Subcommissioner Torrin has just informed me about your having added a number of your personal applications to the rush approvals for Captain Hofer."

Agnes Haulwell turned pale, then began to tremble and burst into tears. "Oh, no, commissioner. I ... I couldn't. None ... well almost none of those permits has really lapsed ... I'm engaged ... I just can't," she sobbed, "I mustn't ... you can't ... oh, I'll go to detention or ... or ... temporary curtailment of privileges or anything, but you can't make me go Eyefer!" she wound up defiantly.

Crawford was seemingly regretful, gentle, "Had the housing permit lapsed? and the cooking fats? and the winter clothes?"

"Yes, but that was all. I forgot just those three. The others all had hours to run yet."

"I forgot, I forgot." Miss Haulwell, there's one thing you can't forget and that's that an adequate memory and constant attention is the mark of those fitted to survive.

"Now I'm very disappointed in you," his voice became more gentle as she sobbed anew, "but I would consider it a personal favor if you'd come in in the morning to show your successor how to operate the switchboard and doors and where the supplies are."

"Oh!" Miss Haulwell fairly shrieked and ran blubbering from the room.

Crawford said sadly to Hofner. "They never do come in tomorrow morning. It just shows they were Eyefer stuff from the beginning. I only wish we had some way of weeding them out before they reached adulthood, but we don't. Now let's go and eat. By the time we get back, your permits should be here."

The restaurant was in the basement.

Progress between tables had been slow as Commissioner Crawford acknowledged greetings from numerous small groups and introduced Captain Hofner. Finally, however, they were seated at a table for two at a corner of the yellow-brick walled room.

A brown-overalled waiter approached them.

"My guest permit," Crawford explained in loud clear tones, "is for cereal foods and fruit. But you're probably in the mood for breakfast anyway." He spoke to the waiter. "Bring him," he nodded at Herl, "one of your regular breakfasts. I'll have steak and mushrooms and mashed wathros ... and how's the bean puree to start

with? and enchil salad and the jollet pudding for dessert. We'll both drink morgin."

To Herl he added, "Do you want your cereal hot or cold?"

"Hot, I guess, for this weather," replied the ravenous captain.

"Very wise. Hot cereal for my guest. Here's the card."

The waiter took the card and scanned it carefully. "Cereal card. Very good, Commissioner." He departed on a zigzag course among the tables.

Herl was hungry and tired and furious at the commissioner for ordering a full and appetizing-sounding dinner, but he smiled a well-trained smile and got back to his business.

"This might be a good time for you to tell me about the Eyefers, Commissioner. According to Miss Haulwell, it doesn't seem a very desirable condition to be in; and yet you don't want them to leave the planet. What's the story?"

"I'll have to start at the beginning and rush through eighty Delight years of history to tell you ... that's about two hundred earth years.

"As you probably know, our people came here from Madrilune as volunteers to prevent overpopulation there. They were a picked group of urbanites accustomed to the benefits of social control and convinced that lack of sound economic policy integrated with the daily life of every citizen had been at the root of Madrilune's troubles. The shortages of basic necessities to be found on any raw planet were little greater here than they had been on crowded Madrilune – rationing was very strict and justice heavily enforced so that all might have their chance to survive.

"Delightites are hard workers; and in about twenty of our years there was an abundance of foodstuff, textiles, and housing; and, as Guildris told you, we're really most enviably situated,"

"What about all this rationing now?" Herl looked distastefully at the green card still lying on the table.

Crawford pocketed the card. "I'm coming to that," he replied.

"The Chief Commissioner at that time was a Buford Finchley; and the great experiment Guildris talked about was his idea. From the beginning here, there had been a certain small proportion of the population which consistently seemed unable to cope with the regulation of life which was necessary to a pioneer planet. Some of them starved when their private holdings failed; some of them became criminals when their families were exposed to want, leaving themselves and their families to be supported by the remainder of the population. When there was finally plenty of food and clothing and shelter for everybody and an end to the rationing system was proposed, the wise Commissioner Buford saw that such an end would put the weaker citizens at the mercy of the acquisitiveness of the stronger and threaten the

stronger by the latent criminality of the weaker. He reasoned that no one needs more than enough of the necessities of life and that submission to socially beneficial regimentation was the mark of the socially adapted, the fitted-to survive in a civilized age. So he began the present program of the most extensive control of the necessities and luxuries of life and the Eyefers were part of the natural result. They are the unfitted.

"They forget to apply for many of their types of rations: they forget the special ordinances for seasons and parts of the cities: they forget to re-register for all permits when they change their addresses: some of them even forget to earn enough to pay for both permits and food, and let the food go and get all the permits and have to be hospitalized for malnutrition ... they're Eyefers, too. They have a thousand excuses, but they all boil down to 'I fergot.'"

Herl objected, "But you don't segregate them as you would criminals."

"No, of course not. They haven't committed any crime, usually; and we have no intention of punishing them. They are simply recognized as incompetent to manage their own affairs, sterilized, and guardians appointed to look after and support them. We realize that we have no right to interfere between an individual and his personal goals unless that individual threatens the liberty of other individuals." Crawford spoke self-confidently but without any show of self-righteousness.

The waiter approached with a loaded tray and began to place the food on the table.

Herl kept his gaze from the bowl of steaming gruel before him and the tremendous steak before his companion. "You don't interfere with them ... you just take away their jobs and their motivations to be social and their obligations to be human beings?"

Crawford started to reply; the waiter put the last dishes on the table and departed; Herl continued speaking hurriedly.

"I don't mean to sound critical of your experiment when I don't know the whole story yet ... but I should think that Miss Haulwell's competence to manage her own affairs (since you say that she was the best of your last three secretaries) was hardly to be judged on the basis of one small set of lapses."

"I'll talk about that in a moment," Crawford said, rising. "But first if you'll just change places with me. I haven't been able to eat this sort of thing for years," he waved at the full dinner, "since a job like mine wrecks the digestion early. But I couldn't get the waiter in trouble, you know."

The men changed places, and Herl found his mood of violent opposition to the social system tempered somewhat by the pleasant prospect.

"For a man without a long experience of Eyefers, your reaction is more than justified," Crawford continued, frowning at his bowl of mush.

"But our experience had given us certain data. In the first place, when an individual goes Eyefer, it seems to be a symptom of a decreasing conviction of social responsibility. When the condition was first recognized, Eyeferers were merely placed under guardianship and their children's permits stamped to show that they were of Eyefer parentage and so were debarred from breeding with more select stock. However, Eyeferers tended to reproduce so rapidly and irresponsibly that there was danger of their becoming a parasitic burden too heavy for our normal population. That irresponsibility spread to other spheres of action as well ... they were careless about the property of their guardians ... if they held jobs still, they had little incentive to improve since they obviously could not manage their own moneys. Most of their children grew up to be twice as irresponsible as their parents, many of them never even applying for permits in the first place but merely sponging on their parents' guardians.

"Obviously this was no way to build a superior race, a socially adapted race. So we accepted the obvious solution. If Eyeferers wished to withdraw from social responsibility (as they must subconsciously do or they wouldn't forget), we insist that they go the whole way. Miss Haulwell wants to be an Eyefer, in spite of her surface training, or she wouldn't be one."

Herl nodded, cutting off another bite of the superb steak. The argument was certainly plausible, and he pushed back the uncomfortable thought that he should be quicker to see the flaws in it.

Lifting his gaze from his plate, however, he was confronted by the outline of Crawford against the warm golden radiance of a cloud half concealing the shining body of a man of such splendid proportions and so noble and sympathetic a countenance that Herl remained a moment as if paralyzed, his knife halfway through the steak. The shining man was shaking his head slowly, regretfully, as if to indicate his disagreement with Crawford's last remark.

Then Herl lifted his knife free of the meat and pointed with it over Crawford's shoulder. "Your friend here seems to have another opinion."

Crawford turned in his chair and looked up at the glowing face. "Have I said something wrong?" he asked the figure, conversationally.

The haze swirled around the long-limbed body and the man shook his head again. "You really believe it," said the man in the tones of a great bell. "It is not wrong to tell your belief."

"Will it interfere with my doing business with Captain Hofner?" Crawford wanted to know.

"No."

"Is there anything you want me to tell him? Something I've left unsaid?"

"No."

"Then run along and let us eat in peace, there's a good chap." Crawford's words were patronizing, his tone imploring

"Wait a minute!" Herl said sharply; but the haze seemed to be dwindling, the figure of the man evaporating before his eyes. More than anything he wanted to re-establish communication with the girl of the lobby chair.

"Want to ask him something?" queried the Commissioner. "I think I can find you another one after we're through eating. It's fairly easy to get them to come but only hard to get rid of them if you want them to go."

"Who are they and what are they?" demanded Herl.

"We call them gods. Not because we worship them, you understand, but because they're so damned beautiful and because they are, for all practical purposes, omniscient, omnipotent, and as omnipresent as they want to be. I said for all practical purposes; but they don't serve any practical purposes. They're a by-product of the Eyefers, as far as we know (and they're strangely closemouthed about that). I'll finish my story and you'll know as much as I do."

Herl drew a deep breath. If the goddess of the lobby were even partly human, he was going to have to know her a great deal better. He visualized her rounded smiling face, its look of utter awareness, her graceful arm. Galaxy women were not like this. It must be for this he'd stayed a bachelor.

Unable to admit aloud his desire and unable to look at Crawford when thinking of her, he went back to carving the steak, half listening to the exposition which Crawford continued.

"When people go Eyefer who already have children," the commissioner went on between sipped spoonfuls of gruel, "we have to institutionalize the kids. Sterilize them too, to protect the rest of us. You may even get the idea that we're a planet of petty puritans because we care more for our race than for particular children and because the mortality among scientists and artists was very high so that there are few such among us these days. However, we've taken care of the latter recently by appointing semi-guardians for the artists and scientists as soon as they announce their professions. The semi-guardians take care of all routines at their wards' expense. The architect of the Civil Center here," he waved a spoon around to indicate their environment, "is that gray-haired man over there. It justifies the change in rules."

"Why couldn't any rich man hire a semi-guardian' who would take care of the formalities for him?" Herl asked.

Crawford looked shocked. "That would be grossly unfair to the rest of the population," he insisted. "There is no particular advantage to a society to perpetuate

the strain of wealthy individuals; while we do need scientists and artists. But to get back to the story ... shortly after the sterilization program began, a noted psychologist went Eyefer and managed to get himself assigned by placement to the head of one of the children's asylums. He worked with the Eyefer children there and somehow the gods are the result. They have perfect recall, perfect bodies, telepathy, intuitive perception of the nature of matter, teleportation, and some precognition. Occasionally even today, a child disappears from one of the asylums and we have a new god or goddess. And there you are."

"Are they what Commissioner Guildris was talking about? The Galaxy will really be excited," Herl said eagerly.

"Heavens, no!" Crawford laughed heartily. "They wouldn't be any more use to you than they are to us. Their bodies are changed in some way so that they are nearly pure energy."

Herl had a tight sensation of loss, of incipient grief.

"They don't eat, they don't need clothes, they don't even reproduce. As far as we can discover, they have no motivations at all except that they seem to like to watch people doing things ... you could hardly call it curiosity. So ... since they have no motivations there's no way to get them to cooperate with society; they can't be bribed or threatened, paid or deprived. And yet they'd beat any calculator made if we just had some means of getting them to stay around while we put the problems. They answer any questions you can ask correctly; but there's no way we know of to get them to come around when we have the questions. Oh, you can go out and pretend to do some crazy thing when you have a problem with all the factors in your head. Maybe one of them will turn up and you can ask the question before he reads your mind and fades away ... and maybe you can't. So we call them gods and forget about them."

Calculators indeed, was Herl's inner reaction, as he tried to recapture the sensation of being completely understood which he had felt upstairs in the lobby. She had to be a woman, not a super-calculator. "But they're so beautiful, so perfect. There must be a reason for them," he insisted.

"That's the worst thing about them," admitted Crawford. "They make ordinary people look very drab and uninspired. The Eyefers actually have several cults which worship them; and I suppose that's a good thing. Keeps the Eyefers out of trouble. I never heard that they did anything for their worshippers, though."

Herl thought, "We'll see about that. I think I know what to ask, next time I get the chance." Aloud he added, "Don't go out of your way to get one for me to question ... but if one turns up, I am curious about some things."

"I see you're about through," noticed the commissioner. "Let's get back up and see if your papers have come."

#### IV.

Not only had Herl's permits come when they returned to the office, but so had an officer from Eyefer Placement who wanted to talk about Agnes Haulwell and a number of other cases. Herl had no difficulty in asking the commissioner to let him go to get his listings and films, when he assured Crawford that the latter's presence was not essential to the trip.

Crawford called for his cabter to take Herl out to the ship; and Herl started back for the elevator, stuffing his assorted cards and permit slips in various pockets about his person.

He scrutinized the lobby for centers of golden light as he passed, but there were no gods or goddesses to be seen there. There were none on the nearly empty elevator going down. There were none on his side of the walkway at the bottom, though he thought he glimpsed the glow far away on the other side just before his cab drew up beside him.

The driver was the same sulky young fellow who had brought him in. Herl settled for a silent ride to the port, looked in the window at the large wareshops, and low compact residences as they headed for open country where the cab could take off. The wind seemed a little fresher as well as much colder. There were few pedestrians to be seen in the chilly streets and those few seemed to be in a great hurry ... whether merely because of the cold or because the demands of life were so numerous, Herl could not tell. He wasn't even sure this might not be a time of eating or sleeping for many of the population. He turned his head to his companion. "What's the daily schedule here?" he asked. "I mean, what hours do stores and offices and families keep?"

"Stores and offices are open all day. Families have two ups: a day and a night. It depends on their jobs and such whether it's morning and first night with or afternoon and second half night."

"What do they do in their night ups?"

"Kids go to school same as day. Rest of us have night jobs ... mostly mining and factory work. My sister and I work in a viscose mill nights."

The cabter had arrived at a broad hardtop landing area. The driver turned in, raised the copter vanes and took off. Herl watched the bleak countryside drop away below. The air had the piercing dampness of coming snow.

It occurred to Herl suddenly that the driver had volunteered some personal information ... maybe he could get more.

"What's your name," he asked interestedly, turning to face the driver.

"Bill Haulwell."

"Oh, any relation to Agnes Haulwell?" Herl felt a little apprehensive.

"Brother."

Herl let the conversation drop right there. He'd have to fish for information roundabout. He watched miles of fields and pasture roll behind, noticed an isolated house, used that.

"Lonely sort of place to live," he pointed downward. "Don't suppose your people assign Eyeferers to live out so far."

"Some do. What's it to them where they live?"

"Does it make any difference to a man's relatives when he goes Eyefer, other than his wife and children, I mean? Crawford told me some but not all about them," Herl added.

"Difference? They might as well have gone Eyefer themselves. They usually give a man's wife some heavy routine job no matter what she's been trained for. Say it's to keep her busy and take the mental strain off while she readjusts. Other relatives generally get the same. If they're close relatives they're suspected of being on the verge of Eyefer, since they're from the same stock; so all their permits come due within a month after. That's one reason I work so blamed hard on this job. Aggie's job means so much to her. She wants to get married, too; and she'd have a deuce of a lot of trouble with that if anything happened to me."

This long speech made Herl most uncomfortable. It wasn't any of his business to tell Bill that Aggie had gone Eyefer only an hour since. But maybe it would ease Bill's strain. If Bill was going to lose his job when he got back to town anyway, it wouldn't make any difference if he knew it now. Might even give him a chance to wrestle it out inside himself.

"Bill," he began as if it were to be another question.

"Yeah?"

"Miss Haulwell went Eyefer an hour ago. Commissioner Crawford told me."

Bill Haulwell's face went whiter than it was by nature. "You're kidding. And that's not the kind of joke I like," he said threateningly.

"It's no joke, I'm afraid." Bill scanned Herl's face, saw it grave, sympathetic. He then opened the door on his own side of the cabter and stepped out into the sky.

Herl found himself sliding over to the driver's seat, reaching for the loosely swinging door, peering down and out. Bill was a mere dwindling spot below. Herl slammed



the door shut by reflex action; then sat numbly nauseated. The cab flew on evenly.

Herl took a couple of very deep breaths to subdue the nausea and looked ahead to where the outline of the port tower was sharpening on the horizon. Cautiously he tried the controls of the cabter – up ... down, right ... left. He could manage it, he thought dully. He could find no lever, no button, no pedal with which to reduce or increase the forward speed, however. The brake pedal for surface control evoked no response in the air. The tower came nearer and the image of the dwindling, falling blob that had been Bill Haulwell faded from Herl's mind as he sought frantically for the mechanism to cut his speed for landing.

The tower rushed toward the cab ... and past. Herl set the cab into a tight circle a little smaller than the circumference of the landing area. Someone would notice him, someone would either signal him or, if the power were broadcast, let him down slowly with it he hoped. If the cab used its own fuel, that would have to run out with time. He circled and circled, counterclockwise.

There seemed to be no diminution of speed so he began to spiral down toward the ground. If he could hold the circle a few feet above the ground, someone might at least come out and shout instructions.

There was no sign from the tower that his approach had been noticed. He circled the Krylla several times, then circled the tower. The place seemed deserted in the growing twilight. He considered flying close to the ground and jumping out but rejected that thought as he remembered the towerman's remark about the pitting of the cinder surface ... and remembered the paved runway at the edge of the field from which the cabter had taken off on his trip to the city.

He headed for the runway in the direction from which he had originally taken off, coming down to let the wheels skim the smooth pavement. The cabter gathered speed rapidly as the end of the runway flung itself toward him. He raised the machine into the air missing the rough ground at the end of the way by scant feet.

Herl smiled grimly. Apparently power was somehow beamed at the runway. He circled over the weedy pasture-like space and a copse of small trees and headed back to the runway. Perhaps the power would be cut if one approached from this end. Again he lowered the cab till the wheels seemed but inches above the pavement ... and sure enough, the speed decreased. Slower and more slowly he went; but the far end of the runway approached all too rapidly. He tried to rise again, but the response of the cab was sluggish now. By lightning judgment, Herl knew that only a jump would save him from crashing with the cab among the weeds.

Those weeds swept toward him as he opened the door and rolled out, relaxing to meet the pavement sliding past.

There was no tearing bruising impact, no sound of the cab's crash. Herl opened his eyes suddenly to see, meaninglessly before him, the control panel of his own Krylla. He was sitting in his own pneumatic control chair.

A moment of dull wonder was replaced by a deep shuddering from shoulders to hips and a feeling that his legs and arms had turned to dough. His eyes regarded the shadow across the control panel without trying to comprehend it; but the golden light reflected on both sides of the shadow meant something. He turned to see the source ... and it was the goddess of the lobby.

She smiled reassuringly, and the smile seemed to flow through his veins and tingle along his nerves, pushing the numbness out and away. He was alive and eager and yet utterly peaceful for the duration of her smile. But as the corners of her mouth fell into a graver repose, his thoughts sped back through the moment of expected impact ... through the frantic struggle with the cabter ... through the moment of Haulwell's step from the door.

"Bill Haulwell," Herl mumbled, "he ... he's..."

"He's in his cab halfway back to the city to report to Eyefer Placement." The matter of fact words were sung in the triumphant cadence of the close of a vast chorale, rich and full.

"You saved him ... and me?" Herl asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Clear recitative explained, "He had not earned his death; he did not wish to die. No more had you."

Herl thought this over for a moment. Did no one die here till he was ready? Were the gods personal guardians? Was the presence of human life one of their conditions of being, one of their motivations? He started to speak, then hesitated as he remembered his conclusion that there were special ways of phrasing special questions for such beings as these. His mind tried in vain to block the consciousness of fear that she would leave him with his questions unasked ... and simply that she would leave him.

But the cloud still swirled and glowed with a million pinpoints of deep yellow incandescence. A sodium halo, Herl thought irrelevantly.

"Yes," she smiled again from her seat above the edge of the paper-cluttered desk. "It's like sodium. And we are not guardians. We do not care whether men live or die but we do ... enjoy ... their being glad about living or dying. I will not leave you till you are sorry." She stood and came near his chair.

Herl could not see that she walked in the air ... she was just nearer. He rose and put out his hands as if to take hers to assure himself that she would stay, but where his hands entered the cloud they disappeared and felt nothing. He withdrew his offered embrace and his hands reappeared.

"Sorry for what?" asked Herl's voice; and Herl's heart quickened and his breathing forced, as he grew afraid, to lose her and wild to keep her with him.

"Just sorry."

Regret was like a knife stab. He must lose her: a man couldn't go around rejoicing forever. Anger succeeded regret, and he accused her bitterly, "So that's why you do nothing for the poor Eyefers! Because they're sorry to be that way! When you could save the poor creatures even by picking them out of the air, it offends your sensibilities to save them from a little red tape. Is that kind or just?"

His voice sneered 'kind' and 'just' as his mind pictured 'sympathetic' and the 'best that men ought to receive.' He was angry for himself, for the Eyefers. His anger grew with the hurt to include all humanity betrayed by heartless beauty.

But a flood of intense living greenness washed through the control room, blotting out the walls and lapping against Herl's red tunic above the hip pockets, as if a strange sea rose about him to quench his anger. He repeated his last words, vaguely, enthralled by the green waves, "Is that kind or just?"

The green waves changed to living blue and he heard her voice like a distant bell. "No."

Herl had a sensation as if the blueness washed completely through him with a tingling coolness. Suddenly the room cleared and she was sitting on the edge of the table still. In Herl's mind lay fresh and clear the method he had planned hours ... or was it minutes ... earlier for communicating with this glowing girl-thing, exact, detailed, perfect questions for a perfect mind. His overwhelming intent to embrace her was put neatly to one side as on a shelf; his anger was as if it had never been.

"Do you have a name?" he looked coolly at her as if helping her fill out a questionnaire.

"Yes."

"What is it please?" he asked, firm, polite.

"Abigail."

Herl smothered a grin. There could be something unexotic about a goddess. "Can you offer data as well as supply data and computation on demand?" he wanted to know.

"Yes."

"Will you be good enough to do so hereafter when I ask you questions?"

"If you will indicate the limitations you wish on additional data," she replied gravely.

"Do you mean that there is so great a correlation between all extant data that you

would continue offering indefinitely if you were not arbitrarily limited?" he asked curiously, feeling an interior warmth of success. His method of communication was working indeed. Be explicit, he told himself.

"Yes."

Herl sneaked a mental look at his urge to kiss her. As when eating Crawford's steak, he found that he could forgive and forget a great deal when confronted with considerable pleasure in prospect.

He continued. "Will you decide and tell me what questions I ought to ask and what actions I ought to take and what limitations I should set on the data you have to offer?" Now he would have communication by the roots.

"No."

"Are you capable of doing so, Abigail?" A crucial question, asked almost in a whisper.

"No."

Grief more bitter than anger ran through his veins like corrosive poison. This was the wrong answer. She must be a machine-thing after all, he concluded ... limited, arbitrary, unhuman, incapable of loving him or being concerned for his welfare, incapable of sorting out good from bad or valuable from expedient.

He withdrew his eyes from her brightness and from her delicate features and from her rounded limbs and put his head in his hands. An agonized sigh broke from him. No human woman could keep from giving him good advice, particularly if she knew all the answers ... his mother never had avoided the responsibilities of knowledge. So she could have nothing human about her. She was just a thing.

"No ... no ... no," her music faded slowly away; and Herl looked to catch the faintest afterimage of the brilliance that had had centered on the table. That, too, was gone in an instant; and no presence or effects of a presence other than his own was visible before him.

He sat motionless in his supporting chair, his eyes staring unseeingly at brown table and black firm rockers and at the long blue chart roll hung behind the table and at the calculator keys in their neat meaningless ranks. In her absence, he felt compressed between the backward thrust of disillusion and emptiness and the forward pull of a tearing desire to be with her wherever she was. He would have done anything she wanted, gone anywhere, been anything – and there was nothing she wanted of him. He remained slumped, drained of purpose. Drained, he reflected, by a shiny machine more bound than he to commands and limitations. At any rate he did have a few minor purposes of his own.

## V.

He got up stiffly and reached for the locker handles, squeezed the metal, felt the latches withdraw, swung the doors open. Mechanically he took down the reels of film and wire from their pegs and laid them on squat pillars on the table top. Another locker yielded two black rectangular carrying cases with handles. Herl loaded the reels carefully into one case, checked the power pack in the base of the other case with leads to a test-board in one drawer of the table. Lifting both heavy cases, he started for the door.

The slightest clue of remembrance ting-tinged in his mind, and he returned to his chair and phoned the control tower.

"Class M ship Krylla on the field calling control tower," he bit off the words tensely.

"Control tower to Krylla; come in Krylla." The voice was high-pitched and boyish, obviously not Saem Berry.

"Did you see what became of the cabter that landed me here," Herl referred to the chronometer on his instrument panel, "ten minutes ago?"

"Cabter KZ-351 returned to Delight City."

"Can you call me another cabter to take me to the city?" At any rate, Herl thought, she really was powerful to be able to return an empty cabter. He had an amusing mental image of Abigail stretching an extra shining arm through the miles of air between the Krylla and where a shining hand supported the waiting and unconscious Bill Haulwell. He might learn some tricks from her yet.

All he had to do was find out why she had rescued him and Bill. After all, if she had no knowledge of valid selection of purposes, she must be controlled by some command, some exterior compulsion, like the familiar robots of earth, so carefully constructed with arbitrary functions and prohibitions built in. Time to compute on that later. The thought was rapid, finished before the answer came from the tower.

"I'll have to see your hired vehicle permit, if you have one." The thin voice was sarcastic and a bit suspicious.

"I'll come right to the tower with it. Over."

Grasping a case in each hand he left the ship and headed for the tower entrance. Almost there, the hum of an incoming copter made him turn and look at the runway. The copter landed neatly and, even from that distance, Herl could recognize the fur-coated figure of Commissioner Crawford getting out.

The Commissioner raised an arm and hailed Captain Hofner. "Hey!"

"Hey, yourself," Herl turned from the tower and strode toward the copter. "Did you

come for me?"

"Sure," yelled the Commissioner. Turning to look up and wave at the tower, he called, "It's all right, Alco. This is my guest." He halted and waited for Herl come up with him.

"Bill phoned me," began Crawford apologetically, "that he'd had the word about Agnes and dashed back to straighten out the driving job so someone else could take over." The two men walked side by side to the copter. "That was a very decent thing for him to do, even if it did leave you stranded out here ... so I came out for you. Find everything?"

"Oh I found everything, all right," Herl grinned wryly. "Did Bill tell you about Abigail?"

"Abigail?" asked Crawford. "I don't seem to remember the name."

"She saved me from getting hurt during the landing. A goddess. Bill was probably embarrassed to mention it. It was my own stupid fault."

Herl went around the copter to get in.

Crawford edged in behind the controls. "Bill probably wanted you to keep out of trouble. He knows that we are apt to look with considerable suspicion on people who have to be saved from their own foolish mistakes by superhuman agencies. That doesn't apply to you, of course, unless you're planning to settle and raise kids here." The perish-the-thought tone was obvious.

"Frankly, as an outsider," Herl said, "it seems to me that these gods and goddesses could be a very useful mechanism. I didn't mind missing a bad fall at all."

"And frankly, as a local citizen and an ordinary one at that, I think you were very lucky. You might even say that down underneath I'm just a bit jealous." The copter slid through the upper air. "I sometimes dream of having a chance to rescue some female not a tenth as luscious as a goddess."

Herl was surprised to hear the Commissioner snigger at his own remark. Surprised but not disgusted. Females less perfect than goddesses seemed to call for sniggers.

"Goddesses are only goddesses, but women are women," Herl commented dryly.

"Oh! You found that out already, did you?" Crawford looked admiringly at his companion. "You're a quick worker."

Hard bitterness surged through Herl. "I found out a lot of things. They're nothing, absolutely nothing but mechanism. I wonder you people haven't learned to use them in place of copters and television. They're probably even capable of sorting your population in infancy so you wouldn't have to go to the trouble of inventing a dozen new kinds of red tape a day which must annoy your normal citizens even while it

screens the adults."

"No ... no ... no," Crawford's descending cadence was oddly reminiscent of some other falling cadence of no's. "You've got both the gods and us all wrong, Captain Hofner. I don't know what you think you found out from this Abigail, but you must have misinterpreted it somewhere."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes indeed. Mechanisms are made ... made for somebody's use. Our best minds have never been able to find any use for these gifts. We can even use natural phenomena like rain and heat and wind and gravity and such because those things are governed by observable natural laws ... but the gods? No. Absolutely random in appearance; absolutely unpredictable in action. Whatever they are, it's not machines. Although," he added curiously, "I shall be most interested to learn how and why you think we could use them."

"Maybe I should sell you the secret. Selling is my business," suggested Herl.

"The commissioners will be most willing to buy ... if you have anything to sell," Crawford replied smoothly.

"You could use that childhood or prenatal screening, couldn't you?"

"Yes and no," answered Crawford. "That's another mistaken idea you have about us. What you think of as red tape invented purely for screening purposes is not so at all. It's an integral part of civilized life and social responsibility. We'd all be pleased to spare a portion of our children the strains of such a life if we could, but we have no intention of reverting to savagery ourselves just to avoid filling out a few miserable blanks at a few stated times."

"Oh, you like it?" Herl asked facetiously.

"We like halving cars and living in houses and driving in comparative safety and eating enough and not having people we've cheated or oppressed or maimed in unnecessary accidents whining around on our doorsteps making us feel guilty and miserable. We even like having occasional strangers like you around so we can tell them all about it and keep the beauties of civilization clear before our eyes, so to speak."

"You win," Herl laughed. "I don't know whether there's a galactic destiny ahead of your people, but as long as you're enjoying it so much, that hardly matters."

"I hoped you'd see it that way," the Commissioner said genially. "And as for the destiny, that'll take care of itself. Did you have quite a talk with the goddess?" he added curiously.

"Quite a talk, but brief. I've had some training in cybernetics ... that's how I was able to ask the right questions to find out that she was a machine."

Crawford smiled to himself. "Then," he said slyly, "our experts must have asked the right questions to find out that she wasn't."

Herl bit his tongue. "Maybe," he admitted. There was no object in telling Crawford all about his method or his discoveries, or he'd have nothing to sell. Not that he'd make the profit from such a sale but somebody in coordination would appreciate his cleverness in selling a planet something it already had and still being able to peddle the idea to somebody else. If he were really clever, he could take a few gods on with him to the places where they could do the most good. He certainly would enjoy looking at Abigail, for instance, for a few months before he unloaded her on a planet less fortunate than Delight. And, if he were sorry to leave her behind, she'd stay there the more gladly. If she wouldn't tell him what to do, obviously she would have to do what he told her.

The gray air of the planet seemed to be thickening as they landed and drove toward the Civil Building. A few more heavy-coated pedestrians were hastening along the walks, and a solid stream of small, listed vehicles poured along the street in the opposite direction. As Crawford's slowed automatically for an intersection, Herl noticed flakes of snow in the air.

"Is this early spring or late fall?" he asked without enthusiasm.

"This is the way it always is at this altitude," Crawford replied, surprised. "I've read about seasons, of course, but we don't have them here. Our foodstuff is mostly grown further south. Around here and to the north is mostly grazing and pelt land on the surface above the mines."

At this moment the vehicle pulled to a stop in the middle of a residential block; and Crawford growled, "What the...?"

Herl noticed that the opposing traffic had also halted. Then the air was split with the deafeningly raucous hooting of some great signal horn.

"Power's off! Emergency warning," Crawford shouted in Herl's ear. "Sit tight and see what happens!" He gestured to the line of opposing traffic from which passengers were popping out to run confusedly to the sidewalk. "They know better than that," he fumed.

Herl looked at the crowd gathering on his side of the carpter, then suddenly beyond it to the nearest house. Smoke was pouring out of two of the front windows. Some of the people from the vehicles were running toward the house, while the front door was flung open and two men and a woman came running out. Herl grabbed Crawford's arm. "Fire!" he yelled.

Crawford leaned across Herl to look. "Can't be serious," he bellowed. "Those places are practically fireproof. Inspected every two months."

Then he sounded puzzled and alarmed. "Where the devil are those three going?" and



he pointed to the people who had run from the house and who were still running fleetly along the edges of lawns in the direction faced by Crawford's carpter.

Herl opened the door and leaned out to watch. People were coming out of houses further down the street, a few at a time, to follow or precede the first three in the direction of the heart of the city.

Cries of "Fire!" could be heard on down the street. Flames showed through the windows of other houses. The people who had got to the sidewalks from their abandoned vehicles were moving hesitantly toward the houses, apparently confused by the flight of those within.

A man appeared in the doorway of the house from which the first three had come. "Hey!" he shouted at those stragglers nearest him, "some of you come in here and help me put out the fire!" Several men ran into the house behind him.

A few more single individuals ran by in the direction of the business district. Herl turned to his companion.

"It looks as though those first three set the fire and ran off," he shouted, puzzled. "What's up?"

Crawford put his hand on the door and shook his head. "Don't know, but I recognized one of those fellows who just passed us. Eyefer named Hanston. Used to be a clerk of mine. I'm going on down the line and see what's doing."

"Not without me," Herl stated. "I can't operate one of these things," he waved his hand at the carpter, "and you may need help." Commissioner Crawford hardly looked in condition for a long run.

"What about your things? Don't you want to keep an eye on them?"

"They'll be all right," Herl said flatly, knowing that he should never let them out of his sight outside his own ship ... that they would be impossible to replace without returning to Earth.

The older man slid out of his seat and jogged off down the middle of the street till the younger caught up with him. Together they ran toward the city.

Between the lined-up cars they could see fires in many of the houses they passed, and groups of people standing helplessly on sidewalks and lawns. None of the houses appeared to be actually on fire, but window draperies or something near the windows were blazing merrily. Through some casements, people could be seen aiming fire extinguishers at the flames or throwing water on them.

Crawford lumbered along rather slowly, Herl matched his pace. A young man running rapidly passed them from behind.

"Going to the Civil Building to see the fun?" he panted out as he passed.

"Sure," returned Herl, speeding up a little. "What's it all about?"

The young man looked back at Herl, seeming to notice the red tunic and drum cap for the first time. "If you don't know..." he gasped out, "you'd better stay back. It's the Eyefer Plan." He sprinted on and Herl turned back to wait for the Commissioner.

"It's something about the Eyefers," he told the trotting man as he fell into step beside him. "He said he was going to the Civil Building to see the fun, and he called it the Eyefer Plan."

"Can't imagine what ... that is," Crawford blurted out. "Keep going."

They passed dark shops and closed warehouses; the lines of cars were solid here and a tide of hurrying pedestrians on the sidewalks swept toward town. Runners threaded among them, men in shabby clothes, forlorn looking women pushing and stumbling ahead a little faster than the general pace. The center of the street where Herl and Crawford jogged on between the cars was almost deserted.

Crawford grasped Herl's sleeve and pulled him to a stop. "Look there!"

Herl looked where he pointed and saw the crowd milling about the door of a shop. A man and a woman stood in the doorway tossing fur coats out into the mob. Here and there a runner paused, grabbed up a coat where it fell on or near a pedestrian, and ran on.

Crawford climbed over the bumpers of a couple of cars and got to the sidewalks. Herl followed and joined him at the shop doorway in time to hear the Commissioner say, "See here, my man, those coats are not yours to give away, You're an Eyefer and you have no business at all here. Now get on home."

He grabbed the man's elbow to start him on his way ... and recognized him. "Good grief! Bill Haulwell!"

The woman in the doorway was Agnes. She laughed boisterously. "Get along home yourself, old man. We want coats so we take coats. Here, have one."

She threw a heavy fur coat over Crawford's head and as he tried to fight clear of its folds. Bill held it down like a bag and hoisted the small man along toward the edge of the crowd.

Herl caught him as he fell and pulled off the coat. Crawford threw it angrily on the ground. "You can't get away with this," he shouted. "The police will be here in a minute."

This time it was Bill who laughed. "They're all too busy at the Civil Building to bother with coats."

Agnes threw out a couple more coats which had been handed to her by somebody within the shop.

"Besides, they already have coats," she added.

"We'd better get out of this," Herl told Crawford, starting back across the cars.

"Yes," agreed the latter as he clambered up and over. "Better see what's happening downtown. Sounds drastic."

The pair ran on faster now. From ahead grew a trembling roar which swelled to a steady gentle thundering above which the alarm yapped and blatted. A ruddy glow silhouetted the bodies of the cars they were passing, and the center of the street was filling with runners. A few hundred yards brought them to where Herl could see the shape of the Civil Building and recognize the glow as fire spurting from the windows of the two top stories.

They stopped on the outskirts of an immense crowd circling the building. Great streams of water shot aloft from immense hoses; but the streams wobbled and wavered in a hundred directions as the nozzles shifted everywhere but at the building itself. Herl and Crawford were drenched twice before they could get close enough to see that the hoses were being battled for by gangs of Eyefers against the sturdy teams of firemen. The shouting and roar of the fire were so deafening that Herl and the Commissioner were well into the crowd before the words were comprehensible.

"Let em burn! Let the records burn! Let tell burn up!"

"The records!" Crawford gave out a kind of spluttering screech that made Herl turn in astonishment. "The records! My God! There won't be any laws ... any Eyefers ... any civilization if we lose the records!"

Herl thought the little man was going to faint, he trembled so violently. Then, suddenly, Crawford took a great gulping, breath, wrenched himself from Herl's supporting grasp and, pushing his way through the massed bodies, made for the cordon keeping the onlookers out of the danger zone. Herl pressed after him but reached the line only in time to see Crawford sidewise fifty feet ahead to elude a fireman and dashing for the gaping mouth of the vehicle tunnel through the building. Herl followed on the double, pointing ahead at the disappearing figure of the commissioner without trying to yell out his destination to the hindering firemen.

A greater shout went up as a piece of the top of the stone cornice fell from the top of the building to the pavement below with the crash of nearby blasting. Severed sections of hose blatted forth powerful torrents that swept firemen and mob along the street into a line of cars. Herl dodged among writhing pythons of hose toward the tunnel. Another surging shout heralded another cataclysmic deed of fire; and Herl looked up to see a piece of wall about twenty feet high falling slowly away from the building above him.

He closed his eyes and dashed forward. He felt the tremendous jar of the smashing stone force him to his knees, but no sound ... in fact all sound had faded to utter stillness.

"Struck deaf," he thought wonderingly and opened big eyes to find himself kneeling before the table in the silence of the Krylla, The bright warmth of Abigail shone before him where she sat several inches above the table top.

"Abigail," he shouted, scrambling to his feet. His voice rang through the small cabin, and he lowered it to suit his surroundings. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You were in danger," she replied pleasantly.

"So is Crawford. I've got to help him. Take me back!" he commanded.

"He's all right. No one will be hurt tonight who doesn't want to be hurt." Her voice was sweetly matter of fact.

"I don't believe it. The Eyefers have run wild! Crawford ran right into the building. He'll be killed. Take me back!" He pounded the table with his fist.

## VI.

He was back. The roar of the crowd and the fire and the hideous 'poot-poot-poot' of the alarm filled his consciousness. He was stumbling forward into the blackness of the tunnel under the building. He could see a man a hundred feet ahead scrambling up to the walkway, illuminated only by the glare from the tunnel mouth. Suddenly brightness bloomed beside the man and the golden form of a god cradled the man's body like a child, rose four or five feet into the air and faded abruptly into nothingness. The tunnel was dark and empty ahead.

Herl turned and strode back toward the mouth of the tunnel. Just under the sheltering edge he paused to look out at the mob and to judge whether another part of the building were about to fall.

The throng was now a series of rings of luridly red wild-faced beings linked together at the elbows, swaying this way and that, howling in unison, "Burn the records! No more Eyefers! Burn the records! No more Eyefers! "

Hovering over the heads of the chanters, Herl could see at least half a dozen great yellow lights which he took to be gods watching the doings.

"Some sense of humor," he said to himself. As he leaned out of the shelter to look up, the searing redness of the fire faded before his eyes to the cooler radiance of Abigail; and he was looking up at her where she hung near the ceiling of the Krylla's cabin.

"They don't think it's funny at all," she replied reproachfully, as if he had addressed his last remark to her. "They are simply preventing accidents. Being trampled to death is not really a joke." This in a minor cadence of muted violins.

"But don't the Eyefers intend death and destruction to the non-Eyefers? That fire is no joke, either."

"No one will be hurt, as I told you. The Eyefer Plan calls only for the destruction of the records. They burned all the individual permits they could find before they left the houses. Now they burn the files. Nobody could tell an Eyefer from anybody else without the papers; and papers burn." She sounded quite pleased.

"Are you gods in on this?" Herl sat frustratedly on the edge of the desk. "Why didn't you just vanish the papers years ago?"

"We only help when people are sure they know what they want to do. The Eyefers had to be ready. After that they will do as they please and as they can and must."

"But you are involved in this revolt somehow," he frowned, "and why should this uprising come just when I arrive?"

"You are a catalyst," she giggled, a peal of tiny sleigh bells, and drifted down toward the pilot chair. "And we are just preventing the Eyefers from being sorry for their plan as we prevented the civies from being sorry for theirs. The civies made a mistake and we are saving them from it." She laughed again. "They frown at people who are saved from their mistakes by supernatural agencies, so the Eyefers will save them."

Herl was ready to ask how he was a catalyst, but the words "supernatural agencies" reminded him of Crawford and his own cases resting on the stalled carpter.

"My cases," he said. "I've got to get them back here. Take me back again, Abby." His thought continued that he would get a chance to see more of the fight that had been brewing for decades.

"I'll bring them to you," she assented, resting lightly in the chair. "This isn't your squabble."

"But you said I was involved with as a catalyst at least."

"The reaction is self-sustaining now."

"But you don't know where the carpter is," he objected hopefully.

"You do ... so I do." The cases were on the table in front of him.

"What am I supposed to do now? Wait till Crawford calls to say all deals are off?" Herl remarked irritated. Who did the girl think she was, refusing like an over-solicitous mother to let him get back to the riot?

"Yes. Mr. Crawford won't be able to call you till the power is restored about noon tomorrow. And it will be months before he knows what he wants to order. What you do is your own will, of course. I can't penetrate that unless you can. I'm going back to the fire to help there. I'll see you again unless you decide to blast off before I

come back."

Herl grabbed for her bare shoulders where they shone a mere yard in front of him. "You're not going back without me!" he stormed but she was quietly gone before the sentence was complete, leaving him in the utter darkness of an unilluminated cabin.

He found the back of the chair, seated himself, touched the light switch. He was indeed alone in the cabin. The heavy cases sat smug on the motionless table. He felt numb, aware only of an unwillingness to move and of the futility of trying to get back to the city if he was only to find himself back in the Krylla if he did. "Damned interfering female," he muttered disgustedly, "I'll show her!" All he had to do, she'd said, was blast off. Why not?

He switched on the phone, still set for the control tower.

"Class M ship Krylla on the field, calling control tower," he articulated crisply. There was no response.

"Class M Ship," he repeated impatiently, "calling control tower. Come in tower!"

There was no carrier hum from his receiver. The thing seemed dead. He activated the view-screen above the instrument panel and adjusted the angle for a full sight of the tower.

The tower was there, all right, a black hulk against the slightly luminous night sky, unlighted, solid, a mere chunk of construction.

"Hah! Power's off, of course," Herl said aloud. Well, that meant nobody else would try to land here, so takeoff should be safe if he wanted to do his own manipulating out of the atmosphere.

But he'd have to leave some sort of message for Crawford, he realized. He swiveled the chair and regarded the cases of film and wire blankly. His job was coordination, not dashing off on a mad into space. He calculated quickly ... twenty-two, twenty-three hours till daylight; then maybe another ten hours or so till the power was restored and he could talk to Crawford ... if Crawford would talk to him ... if Crawford still had an power to negotiate extra-planetary purchases. And if Crawford didn't, he, Herl, would have to wait around till somebody did have the authority. Wait, wait, wait!

Every muscle in Herl's body seemed taut to the breaking point. He couldn't just sit and wait thirty-two hours for the privilege of waiting till the Eyefers formed a government and got ready to bargain! He jumped hopefully for an instant at the thought of walking the eighty miles to town. He could probably do that in thirty-two hours. Only to have that woman catch up to him when he was halfway there and plump him back into this ship.

A metallic clanging against the skin of the ship brought him to his feet. He moved to the inner lock door and opened it slowly, noiselessly. Maybe the Eyefers had got

control of the tower already!

Bang! Bang! The hammering continued. Not power hammering, more like knocking.

Herl let the outer lock open a fraction of an inch toward him. The voice from outside filled the lock with its bellow. "Hey! Anybody in here? Hey, Captain."

It was the tower man of the first long wait.

"What d'you want?" Herl asked suspiciously, shoulder against the lock door.

"It's Saem Berry. I need help. Power's off, Joe Alco's gone, and the mail ship is due in anytime. May try to land right on top of us! You got a radio!"

"Sure," Herl's suspicions faded. "Come in." He opened the lock wide and gave the heavy man a hand up. "Want me to try to contact the mail, huh?"

"Yeah. But you better let me talk to them." The towerman followed Herl to the chair, adding the necessary instructions for calling the mail ship.

Herl sat down and got to work.

Within five minutes the ship had been re-routed back to its last port of call and Herl and Saem were relaxing over cups of haffy Herl had opened in the galley. Saem tipped back in the pilot chair to reflect on the state of things in the city, which Herl had given him in bits and pieces as he relayed it to the oncoming mail ship.

"Well, Captain, I might as well get back to the tower and wait it out unless you're willing to have me here for company, that is. There's no other ship due till about morning."

"I'd be glad to have you stay," Herl said hesitantly, "but I haven't decided just what to do myself. I don't suppose Crawford and the commissioners will be in any position to trade now; and I'm not too hopeful about trying to deal with an irresponsible gang like those Eyefers. I could probably get back this way in, say, a couple of years when things have settled down and they know what they need." His voice was nonchalant, but with an undercurrent of eagerness for an excuse to be gone.

"I wouldn't be in any hurry, son," Saem assured him, taking a deep swig of haffy. "I don't think the Eyefers will try to run things at all. Not only out of the habit, but they don't want to. They'd have everything to lose by not using the present trade and power set-ups. All they want is jobs and justice."

"And no questions asked?" Herl frowned. "You sound as if you approved of this revolt."

"Why not?" Saem demanded truculently. "I had a kid all trained to take over the second day shift ... best radioman I ever had. When his mother went Eyefer they jerked him out of here to a bobbin job in the mills so fast I had to work twenty-two

hours a day for a month before I got a replacement. I approve of anything that'll put a stop to such stupidity."

Herl squirmed, pursed his lips. "You think I'd better stay, then?"

"Well, why not wait for that goddess to come back? She'll have a report on what's going on and you can make up your mind then. She can give you better advice than I could." The shock-headed Saem set his empty cup down on the desk with a smack. "Got another of those?" he gestured at the cup.

"Blast the haffy, man! This calls for something better than that." Herl jumped down from the table. "I've got a bottle of bonded thiska for medicinal purposes. That'll shorten the wait!" He bounded past Saem through the galley door.

The towerman looked after him bewildered, watched him reach into a locker and bring out the plastic flask, saw him take down two small plastic beakers and come back past the doorway to perch jubilantly on the desk again holding out the flask invitingly. Saem looked at him questioningly.

"She said she wouldn't leave us as long as we're not sorry," Herl announced. "So let's get just as unsorry as this bottle will let us."

Saem approached the desk hesitantly. "What is that stuff," he asked, "something like beer?"

"Something, like beer, the man says!" chuckled Herl. "Yes, boy, something like beer, Here." He poured out a beaker full of amber thiska and handed it to Saem. "One for me." He poured out another beaker full. "To not being sorry," he raised his beaker and drained it.

Saem tasted his, then gulped also. "Whooeee! Something like beer, the man says," he echoed and passed back his beaker. "Did you offer this stuff to the commissioners?" he wanted to know.

"The silly old commissioners," Herl remarked archly, slopping out two more drinks. "Didn't want girlie shows ... don't like people to get mixed up with goddesses ... couldn't possibly appreciate bonded thiska. Didn't even offer them any." He drew a deep breath. Thiska couldn't work this fast on only one drink unless he were tired or upset. It must be thinking about Abigail that made him feel he had an antigravitor attached to his ears. Abigail!

"Here's to Abigail. May she never be sorry either!" he announced.

"Here's to Abby ... knows all, sees all, tells 'em nothing!" Saem downed his drink and moved over to the swivel chair, sat, held out his beaker.

"Say, Saem," Herl filled the extended beaker with deliberate care, "what kind of a wife would a girl make if a man never knew where she'd be next?"



"I dunno, son. Maybe you could anchor her at home with a pair of electromagnets." Saem laughed longer and louder than Herl expected, downed his beaker and held it out again.

Herl looked at the proffered container, narrowed his eyes and looked at Saem suspiciously. "That's about enough for you, Saem. You're beginning to get blurry."

Saem looked down at his extended arm. Sure enough, a golden haze was starting to form around the limb, a naked, rippling muscular, arm. He set his beaker with exaggerated precision on the edge of the desk and slapped at the offending haze. "Get back in there," he commanded. The haze cleared, the brown shirt sleeve regained complete opacity. "Nothing wrong with me," he announced firmly. "You must be seeing things. Give me another." He held up the beaker.

Herl shook his head and poured himself another. "I need this worse than you do. I'm the one that I ... need Abigail not to leave me ... myself and not you. You can get just as sorry as you like because then when she comes back she'll leave you and not me and that means she'll put you somewhere else. If I don't give you another drink, you'll be sorry and I'll have her all to myself ... do you follow me? Hurry up, Abigail!"

A flare exploded brilliantly by the galley door and it was Abigail. Her cloud of golden haze was forming into swirling tendrils which snapped into sparks at the ends.

Herl widened his eyes at the frequent revelation of thigh, of bosom.

Her voice was an angry pizzicato of steel strings. "Saem Berry! Dad! You're drunk! Get out of that matter this instant! The idea, Herl Hofner! Getting Dad drunk when he was supposed to be keeping you out of trouble!"

Her slender arm pointed accusingly at Saem. "Out of it!" she jangled, "or I'll leave you to do all the explaining."

Herl's gaze followed her gesture and he watched, trancelike, as the clothes of the transfiguring towerman disintegrated into wreaths of shining golden smoke which clung around a superb sculptured torso and swirled to leave a benign and thoughtful face regarding him with sympathetic, almost regretful amusement.

Saem's voice was the pedal tones of a great organ improvising in a minor key. "All that alcohol wasted when I put off the flesh," he sang at Abigail. "A new sensation, and you take it from me."

"You can go back to your tower and rematerialize with all that poison inside you, as soon as you've explained us and the rebellion to Herl. He doesn't trust me very much, yet," she chimed.

Herl shook his head and looked at Abigail and back at Saem. He blinked and straightened his spine and breathed deeply but they didn't change or go away.

Saem looked at him intently and, to Herl, the interior of the room was filled with the liquid blue of his first tête-à-tête with Abigail ... blue and green waves of coolness washing through him and then complete clarity and sharpness of outline of everything about him.

"I'll synthesize you another flask of iska," Saem apologized, "later."

Abigail relaxed her accusatory attitude, crossed her perfect legs and sat in the air at the level of the desk. "Now tell him quickly," she requested, "so he can leave if he wants to."

"Abby took one look at you and made up her mind," Saem said matter-of-factly, "partly because she'd like to travel and partly because most of us god-boys are younger than she and not ready to materialize and settle down ... and partly because ... well, she can tell you that herself."

"Oh?" Herl's clarity of mind did not prevent bewilderment at this sudden revelation. He looked at Abigail who smiled seraphically back.

"But she didn't want to miss the fun of the Eyefer revolution she'd been conniving at for years, so she had to precipitate that at once and get it over with."

"I see," said Herl, "what kind of catalyst I was." And he was beginning to.

"She was being quite literal when she told you she couldn't tell you what you ought to do. Your own morals and ethics are so far inside that she couldn't get at them without your full consent or hypnosis. But of course, like any other gal, she knew perfectly what she wanted you to do; and she did it."

"Aha," said Herl, whose grasp of the idea was sudden and complete.

"We can read formulated thoughts, of course, but not basic postulates unstated ... as long as we are composed of space, time, and energy and don't dabble in the slow stuff you call matter too much."

Herl looked at the shimmering Abigail keenly. "You mean to tell me that you can take on a matter body and give up sliding through my mind?" he demanded.

Abigail straightened her already straight posture. "If I want to," she replied coolly.

Saem chuckled in bull-fiddle tones. "If she wants a family she'll have to," he informed Herl. "The best babies are like the worst... they all have to be made out of matter."

Abigail's sodium haze deepened toward neon. "Dad!"

Her father's look became affectionate. "I don't know where you'd be if Mother and I hadn't settled down long ago with faked papers by the ream and started raising little pre-goddesses."

To Herl he said, "Mother's a somatic surgeon, specializing in the reversal of sterilization operations. That's one reason why they won't be able to tell Eyeferers from anybody else when the smoke clears. Oh," he added, remembering, "I forgot to ask about the little insurrection and whether you think Delightites will want to buy anything from this sears-monkey."

"You are a dear old Eyefer, Dad," Abigail laughed. "The excitement is still on, but Hanner and Treece are smoothing things down." She turned to Herl. "I hope it isn't a disappointment to you, but Delight won't need to buy anything for years. They're just about to find out that they can do anything they want to. You'll have to peddle your planets and your calculators and your dancing girls somewhere else ... where they're really needed."

And back to Saem, "You can go see the fire for yourself now, if you like."

"I guess that's my cue," Saem stood up a foot or so above the floor, extended his glowing hand. "Take care of my little girl and drop back this way sometime soon."

Not knowing what else to do, Herl reached for the hand and saw his own vanish into the cloud, felt nothing. "Goodbye, sir," he fumbled.

He withdrew his hand and said, "but..."

But Saem was just not there.

Abigail laughed sweet, musical.

Herl turned and saw her, a woman in a silky blue gown. A woman with red hair, not amber flames, a woman surrounded by a faint flowery scent, not incandescent sodium vapor. A woman standing shyly on the floor, not proudly seated on an airy throne.

He sprang down from the table and took her into his arms for a long long moment.

She drew away for an instant and laughed. "I thought I'd given up telepathy, dear, but I still seem to know just what you're thinking"

"And I know what I ought to do," he replied and did it.

## **COCKTAILS AT EIGHT**

Beth Elliott

(Fantastic Universe, March 1959)

WHEN the alarm buzzed briefly in Nan's ear, she was instantly awake with the excitement of the day bubbling in her. For a moment: she didn't remember why. The buzz sounded again and she reached up, touched the button in the headboard of the bed, shutting off the annoying sound. She slipped quickly out of bed, her feet seeking slippers on the warm plastic floor, recoiled slightly at the ever-present grit of sand. "Wonder how sand gets into the house when air can't get out," she thought.

Slipping on her robe she hurried into the kitchen, hoping this one morning the twins would sleep late. If they did she knew she could get a lot of the spreads made for the canapés. Just as she was thinking it she heard a muffled giggle from the kitchen. Apprehension touched her and she thought, "Oh no, not today!"

As she walked in Pat and Billy tried to hide the pie they were making and spilled it. Prepared cereal, glue, flour, sugar and with "Oh boys, not the cheese! Blue cheese from earth! I've been saving it for something special!"

"But Mommy it stinks. We didn't think you'd want it!"

"No matter what you thought of the cheese, you both know quite well that you weren't supposed to do this." She got some cloths and handed one to each boy. "Mop."

The two little boys struggled in vain with the mess. Finally she gave each upturned bottom a light swat. "All right I'll finish. Scoot. This, young men, had better not happen again. Next time I'll really spank you both."

The four-year old identical redheads scooted while Mommy thought of a good idea. Having tried her patience as much as they apparently thought safe, they played quietly until breakfast. Nan called her family as she began to put the hydroponically synthetic food on the table. Oats that weren't quite oats, eggs that weren't quite eggs and bacon that made no pretense of being bacon.

"You know dear," her husband Don said as he began to eat, "if our scientists hadn't tried to convince us this tastes like something it isn't, it would be damned good."

"Well why don't you think of some other names?" Nan asked.

"I know a good one," piped Bill. "The oatmeal looks like a whole bunch of cooked golags. Let's call it that."

"Golags, golags, golags," Pat began to chant experimentally.

"Oh boys," cried Nan with a woman's crawley feeling about the flat slug-like golags found under most of Mars' rocks.

"Mommy," protested Pat. "They're good. Dried in the sun and salted. We tried 'em."

"Hush now, both of you. And you get that smirk off your face, Don Kelman." She turned furiously toward her husband.

Don laughed but turned to the boys and said, "She's right boys. That isn't a very good breakfast subject. If you're through eating, run and play."

After they left, banging away enthusiastically at one another, Nan sat for a moment looking at the bowl in distaste, then pushed it away. "It was good," she said ruefully. "Oh well, I need to get busy anyway."

"Scared honey?"

She looked at her husband and smiled. "Scared silly! I shouldn't be. I've done enough entertaining, but this is the first cocktail party I've given in five years and this one is so important. We've just got to make Mr. Quenton see that you are the ideal man to head their sale of earth-made products on Mars."

"Now don't feel everything depends on this one evening. It doesn't. Relax and things will go better."

"Don't I wish I could!" Then their household robot, activated automatically at eight o'clock, came out of the closet. "Good heavens, here's Quezy! You'd better hurry or you'll be late for work."

As soon as Don left, Nan set the robot to work clearing the table. It was called Quezy for the obvious reason that it was from Lot QZ10672 and was designed to do the mechanical housework. This one was also instructed to keep one of its human perception cells in constant contact with the twins. Following instructions it began to put the dishes onto the washing cabinet. It pressed the button that should have begun the scraping, loading and washing. Instead the machine began to squeal shrilly. Nan quickly shut it off and opened it to check. There nestled in a bed of sand was a tin can. Muttering to herself about anyone who would have twins, especially four year old ones she began to take it apart to clean it. Thirty minutes later it was together and operating.

Nan finished just in time to referee a battle between the small boys. Exasperated though she was, she stopped what she was doing and settled their differences as much as possible, then dressed them to go outside and play. Stuffing children into snowsuits was nothing compared to the oxygen helmets necessary for play on Mars. Similar to a scuba diver's outfit, but very light in weight, the wearer draws oxygen only when he needs it. Even the very young colonists learned to operate one. Little supplementary air is needed so the tanks were quite light.

After seeing them safely into the yard, digging in the sand, Nan went back into the house, smiling to herself at the pretty picture their red heads made bent intently over what they were doing. She probably wouldn't have been so pleased if she had known what they were hatching. As she didn't, she went happily about directing the robot in its household duties.

Quezy had one fault. Unless one of the children cried it had no way of knowing that he was in danger though she could feel their presence. Therefore it didn't stop work

when Pat came in alone and ambled through the house to his room. After he had passed, the robot stood still suddenly.

"I think, ma'am, that Bill is in trouble." The robot sounded puzzled. "He cries but it seems so far away, yet he is in the yard." It started toward the front door.

"Pat," Nan called, "Where is Bill?"

"Oh," Pat came galloping back into the room. "I forgot to tell you. Our cave fell in. He's partly under it."

Nan snatched her helmet and followed the robot. There in the yard was Bill – at least the foot and leg part of Bill. The rest of him was buried under a pile of dirt. She began to dig frantically and Quezy efficiently. Terror clutched Nan, illogical terror because the angry thrashing of his legs indicated that Bill was fine. They had him out in a very few minutes and he was yelling lustily back of the face mask. He was red in the face from anger instead of blue from lack of oxygen.

"He pushed me in, Mommy! He wasn't supposed to! We were playing Hansel and Gretel. I was supposed to push him!" His voice rose in a wail. "Make him come back here and let me push him in!" Completely exasperated Nan swatted his bottom hard.

"Get into that house!" She reached Pat who had been standing uneasily at the front door and spun him around. "You are going to stay out of trouble if I have to lock you in your rooms. She put them in their bedrooms and removed their helmets a little unceremoniously, then closed the door on two woebegone little faces.

Nan and the robot went back to work with the muffled sobs of the boys distracting both of them. Quezy, with her built-in command to go to them when they were crying and Nan's conflicting one to leave them alone, was being driven toward neuroses. When the usually reliable machine dropped and broke a vase while dusting, Nan finally relented. "All right Quezy," she laughed ruefully, "Go get them. I'll get nothing out of you unless you do."

It hurried away and came back in a moment with the twins in tow. They both looked so repentant that Nan said, "I'm going to make some little cookies for tonight, boys. Want to come watch?" They did of course and were soon installed on stools on either side of their mother. Around and at her their nonsensical chatter flowed. She worked on, paying little attention to what they said. Nan moved away for a cookie sheet. She turned back just in time to see Bill tip up the Tabasco sauce bottle and shake it vigorously over the almost finished cookie dough.

"Oh no!" she screamed, set each boy down then scolded them furiously. "You will sit right here on these stools until I get your lunch ready. If you haven't eaten it in thirty minutes you are going to take a nap hungry."

True to her word she put them to bed and locked their door. They seemed to realize

that she had deactivated Quezy because after a few experimental yells they hushed and went to sleep. Nan remade the cookies while she waited for them to settle down, then turned the robot on. By the time the boys waked the preparations for the party were almost complete and the house clean except the living room.

She put them outside again, then turned to the robot. "Now. All we lack is dusting and waxing this room. Guess I should have waxed the floor yesterday but this Martian sand cuts it so badly it wouldn't have looked it today if I had. Let's move all the furniture into the hall. It'll be easier for you to do it that way."

They worked so hard that Nan felt even Quezy should be sweating just as everything was out and the equipment gathered, the robot stopped in that way which meant something was wrong. She stood a moment. "The boys are gone ma'am. One went out of my range one way and one the other. I must go hunt them."

Nan sighed. "Yes, of course. You will find them faster without me. I'll go ahead and finish here."

She went back to waxing, knowing that on Mars there was no real danger for the children. There were no open bodies of water – only swampy places that were probably once lakes – but none dangerous to children. Since there were no dangerous animals, the only real danger was that they might not be found before dark. No one could stay out over-night unprotected from the intense cold with any chance of survival. Quezy's ability at tracking the boys was so well proven that it didn't even occur to Nan that she might not get back with the boys in time.

Fifteen minutes later Quezy called in. "I have picked up their trail. They went out a little way in opposite directions, circled around and met again. Their oxygen helmets are by a rock half a mile from the house."

Panic touched Nan for the first time. "Their helmets! They will suffocate! They must have been kidnapped!"

"No, they are alone. They go without the helmets often out of the yard. They do not need them and never have."

"Good Lord! Why didn't they tell us? Or you?"

Quezy hesitated as if puzzled before answering. "The children knew that you would scold if they went out without them. They did not wish to be scolded. The last question I do not understand."

Nan rocked back on her heels and sat for a moment in silence. Being born on the planet apparently had made it possible for them to adjust to the atmosphere. She realized of course that Quezy must have thought she knew. A robot just wasn't equipped with the thought processes necessary to realize that if Nan did know she wouldn't bother making the boys wear them. Laughter rose in her at the thought of the effort those two must have made to keep her from knowing. Putting on and

adjusting an air helmet must have been hard work for a four-year old. "All right, Quezy, call again as soon as you find them. Have you touched them yet?"

"Yes, faintly. I can go much faster now that I have made contact and will probably reach them soon."

With Quezy on their trail Nan worked on without a trace of worry. There was a sense of urgency though, because the party was to start at 8:00. "Time's running out," she thought. "I've got to finish this room, bathe, dress and get the boys to bed before people begin to arrive. Oh golly, the boys have to be fed. I forgot about that. Quezy can do that when they get home. Wonder why she hasn't called." Just as that thought crossed her mind the living room speaker began to hunt.

"I have found them Ma'am. We will be home in about thirty minutes. I'll come at top speed."

Nan glanced out the window at the sun and fear touched her. "It's nearly down," she thought. "Five minutes after sundown and the temperature will drop to the point they will only live a few minutes." All thought of the plans for the night vanished as she realized how close it was going to be. "If only I had some way to go meet them. Living this far from neighbors, we just must have a second copter." Slow minutes passed. "I wonder if Quezy broke down."

She had finally reached the frantic point of deciding she would never see her babies again alive, when the door glowed alive in recognition of two blue-cold little boys and their robot. The second they were in the house they began to squirm. "Put us down, Quezy!" The robot stooped and deposited the small boys on the floor gently as if she felt the very human emotion of love. Grubby and affectionate the two came to their mother, trailing mud across the floor. Each one clutched in both hands some limp, once beautiful gieveva flowers, found only in Mars' rare swamps.

When she didn't move they both looked up a little uncertainty and held them up to her. "Here. Do you love us again?" asked Bill.

All the tension of the day dissolved like sugar in hot tea as Nan took a boy in each arm. "How very beautiful!" she cried. Don came in a few minutes later to find her hugging them and laughing. The boys joined her, not quite sure why, but willing to laugh anytime.

With Don's help the boys were soon bathed, fed and ready for bed and the muddy damage to the living room repaired. Bill and Pat saw their peace offering arranged in a place of honor by the couch. The flowers had brightened in water and hardly looked bedraggled at all. When the guests began to arrive the children were kissed and asleep, looking, with their sleep-damp hair and clean peaceful faces, as children do everywhere, be it Earth or Mars – deceptively like little angels.

The evening went beautifully, topped by the gievevas. Most of the group had never seen one before much less six in a cluster. As their guests began to leave, one turned



to Nan and said in admiration, "Your home runs so smoothly. How do you manage it with twins and still look so young and happy?"

Don put his arm around Nan and they both laughed. Then Nan said, "Trade secret, known only to efficient robots."

## **THE LAST DAY**

Helen Clarkson

(Satellite Science Fiction, April 1958)

NO ONE seemed to know why there was no wind in the hollow. It was a deep cup, walled on every side by dunes. Nothing grew at the sandy bottom but a few weeds and bayberry bushes.

Ted and I found the place one brisk August day, when we were walking along the top of the sand cliffs, looking at the wide, blue floor of ocean a hundred feet below. Up there, in wet bathing suits, we were chilled by a nagging little sea breeze. But when we slid down the sloping side of the hollow, there was no wind at all with only peace and sunny stillness.

The dunes rose all around us like ramparts, blocking out the sea and the roofs of the fishing village that were just visible from the cliff top. It was secret as the bottom of a well. We could see nothing beyond but the sky, where white clouds drifted against soft blue. We vowed at once that we would never tell any other summer people about this discovery.

We lay on our backs, watching the beach grass at the top, waving in the wind like long, green hair. Where we were, there was no wind at all. "Even the curls at the back of your neck are frozen," said Ted. "I wonder why?"

"Configuration," I said. "Like an echo. Chance has formed this hollow so the wind can't get into it."

"Watch that bird," said Ted.

He was a small, brown bird, his wings spread wide and motionless, planing down an air current like a tiny glider, but when he came to the air above the hollow, he lost momentum suddenly and his wings began to flutter in flight. Once beyond the hollow, he glided again.

"See?" said Ted. "Even above the hollow, there's no wind. He couldn't glide over it. He had to fly."

"I never did like the wind," I said. "It's an enemy. In a monsoon mood, it can kill you. In its milder moments, as a mistral or a foehn, it can drive you mad by its sheer monotony."

"Women never like the wind because he's a rude lover," said Ted. "He musses their hair, lifts their skirts and plasters their dresses to their bodies."

We got back to the village at sunset. Ted stopped at the wharf to buy fish from old Captain Baldwin. "I know that hollow," said the Captain. "Never has been any wind there, even in my grandfather's day. He used to call it the Hurricane's Eye. Said it had the queer, sudden hush you notice when the heart of a hurricane is right overhead. Said he didn't believe there was any other spot quite like it anywhere else in the world. He ought to have known, for he'd been all over the world. He was in the China trade."

After supper in our rented cottage, we turned on the radio. Things had been sounding bad for a long, long time, but tonight they sounded worse than usual.

Some chief of civilian defense wound up the broadcast. He said the important thing was to keep calm, no matter what happened. And to stay in the cellar, if you had a cellar. We didn't.

"Be sure not to look back at any sudden, big flashes of light on the horizon," he warned. "And don't come out of your cellar until you hear the all-clear. No scientist knows exactly what will happen when bombs of this type are dropped in quantity, but remember – radioactive dust will be carried anywhere that the wind can go."

Ted turned off the radio. "Remember Lot's wife?"

"Not in detail."

"Sodom was punished for its sins by fire from Heaven. Lot received divine warning and left the city beforehand with his wife and daughters. They were warned not to look back. Escape for thy life; look not behind thee ... lest thou be consumed ... The very words have a strangely prophetic ring today. Of course Lot's wife did look back and she was turned into a pillar of salt."

"I've been hearing about these bombs for a long time," I said. "But they will never be dropped. For the same reason that they never used poison gas in the second war: no one can tell beforehand just which way the wind will blow."

We were both wakeful that night. About two in the morning we saw the vast, insane flash, bright as sunlight, on the horizon. There was no time to look away. I shut my eyes, but I heard Ted jump up and pull down the shades. Later we felt a shock and heard a rumbling, like an earthquake. It was far away. The house trembled, but stood. And that was all, except that when we turned on the radio we couldn't get anything.

The village had never looked more peaceful than it did in this morning sunshine, but

quite a high wind kicked the blue surface of the bay into sparkling wavelets and filled the sails of the fishing fleet, as it rounded the point, coming in with a dawn catch.

"Got plenty of food here way," said Captain Baldwin.

Nobody said anything just then about radioactivity.

There were no newspapers that morning and no truck deliveries from the outside world. No weekend tourists came cruising up the road in cars choked with children and dogs and daddy's best suit swinging on a coat hanger. Nobody could get anything on radio or TV. Half the village had cars, but no one seemed to feel like driving down to the nearest town.

We all felt it was up to them to get news and supplies to us. But after two whole days had passed and still there was no word, Captain Baldwin got out his battered Ford and chugged down the highway. People who had families elsewhere gave him messages to take to the telegraph office. Say we're all right. Say everything is fine here."

He was back in an hour. There was no telegraph office. There was no town. Only rubble. No one volunteered to go farther afield.

"We were self-contained in pioneering days," said the Captain. "We can be self-contained again. We have farms and fishing boats. What more does anybody want?"

Villagers and summer people were drawn together now, like refugees on a raft, with a sort of false cheerfulness that masked panic. Only the doctor was grave. He was watching the flag on village green as it rattled in the high wind.

"They've got too much out there to worry about us," said the clergyman. "We'll just take care of ourselves and hope for the best until they're able to get things organized and get in touch with us again. You've plenty of medicines, haven't you, doctor?"

"Plenty of aspirin and penicillin," he answered, but I knew he was thinking of things that aspirin and penicillin couldn't cure.

There never was a more lovely summer. Just enough rain to keep things green. One golden day after another, as if Earth was trying to say to us: See how lovely I can be? Won't you be sorry to leave me?

But we had no time to think. There was so much to be done if we were to have food for the winter.

In September the lease on our cottage was up, but no one cared. The owner had been in New York in August, when we last heard from him. Now we had no idea what had become of him.

One morning the little rosebush in our garden put out a single, improbable rose, quite

out of season. It was an old-fashioned rose, deliciously fragrant and white, with the faintest blush of pink around its golden heart. Ted touched the silken petals with his fingertips and said gently: "The last rose of ... the last summer." That night the rose bush died though it was too early for frost.

The sea gulls were the next to go. We woke one morning to a stench of dead birds. They were heaped along the wharves, some floating in the water. Next it was the songbirds and little woods animals. I hadn't realized how many songbirds there were, but now I noticed the silence in the garden, especially at dawn and dusk. Finches and robins, hares and squirrels had ranged farther a field and nibbled less discriminately than we.

A great many of us were living largely on canned food now. After the gulls died, no one dared to eat fish and the fleet stayed in port.

People were beginning to be afraid of eggs and milk, so no one minded very much when the cows and chickens died.

Finally the slow, secret rot spread to human beings. First, the children, one by one, until mothers moved through the village numb or mad with shock. Then the rest of us.

Ted and Captain Baldwin were the last of the survivors to be stricken. The old Captain went quickly, but Ted lingered, going blind before he died. Why, we didn't know. There was no one to ask. The doctor had died long ago.

There came a cold, bright day in early winter when I was the only living thing in the village and its surrounding farms. Not a cricket chirped. Not even an ant crawled after the sugar I had spilled on the kitchen floor. There was only the earth itself and the sunlight and the wind that had never really ceased blowing since the bombs fell.

I wondered about the life I couldn't see with the viruses and germs. Had cholera and influenza died with the race they preyed upon? Was the whole earth now clinically sterile?

I remembered then the hollow Ted and I had found in August. It was too small to hold even one person with the food he would need for the winter, so we had not considered it as a possible refuge. But now I wanted to see it once again, so I walked out of the village, alone, as I would be now until the day of my own death.

From the top of the sand cliff I saw again the wide, blue floor of ocean, rippled like watered silk by the skimming wings of the wind. An ocean where there were no longer fish or clams or algae or anything alive. A dead sea on a dead planet.

I came to the hollow and slid down its sandy side to the bottom. Once again I lay on my back and watched white clouds drift across a soft blue sky, but there were no gulls now diving and gliding down air currents. I closed my eyes and tried to pretend that the last few months had never happened, that this was August, that Ted would

soon come to the rim of the hollow with a lunch basket full of fried chicken and an ice bucket of Chablis and we would feast in the sun and then walk back to the village for a supper of fresh fish and turn on the radio to get some music and hear the news of the world...

But I couldn't make myself believe it. The world was dead. There would never be any news again. I was alone here, perhaps alone in the whole world, and I wouldn't be alive much longer.

The world had died as Sodom died for its sins. Not sins of sensuality, but sins of pride and intolerance and cruelty. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. The command had been clear and simple for nearly two thousand years, but it had not been obeyed.

I was startled out of my wits by a rustling of leaves. Had the wind reached the hollow at last and stirred the bayberry bushes? Or was there one other of God's creatures alive in this vacuum? I opened my eyes. I saw nothing, but I heard a clear, sweet trill of song and then I saw him – the small, brown bird, perched, swaying, on a twig of bayberry.

The hollow that was too small to shield and feed a human being had shielded and fed one small bird, He must have found it by chance, or instinct, before it was too late and he had stayed long enough to survive until now, living on the seeds and berries that grew here uncontaminated by the wicked wind.

One bird alone, without a mate or a nest of eggs – the last bird of all singing to the last human being.

I sat and listened while he poured forth the most joyous song I have ever heard, as if he, too, had been lonely, as if he, too, were glad to see me. I could almost hear words: Isn't it lovely? The sun, the sea, the sky, the sand? Hasn't God been good to give us all this?

As I listened to his innocent joy, slowly, for the first time since the bombs fell, tears began to slip down my cheeks. For I was not innocent. I shared the guilt of all my species.

After a while I lay down to sleep in the only place in the whole world that was clean and windless.

*Finis*

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

LESLIE F. STONE was the leading woman writer of science fiction in the early days of magazine SF (the late 1920s to mid-1930s). Her work appeared in *Amazing*, *Astounding*, *Wonder Stories*, *Weird Tales* and others. Her most noted works were "The Conquest of Gola," "Women with Wings," "The Rape of the Solar System," and her celebrated novel of a woman who becomes the first astronaut by disguising herself as a man, *Out of the Void* .

MARGARETTA W. REA is said to have been a writer for detective and women's magazines. "Delilah" is her only story published in a science fiction magazine.

HAZEL HEALD was a member of H. P. Lovecraft's circle, and he is said to have been a sometime collaborator and polisher of her work. Although she had several stories published in *Weird Tales* and other publications, "The Man of Stone" was her sole appearance in a science fiction magazine.

EVELYN GOLDSTEIN published a half-dozen stories during the science fiction magazine boom of the mid-1950s, appearing in such publications as *Planet*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction* , and *Fantastic Universe* . She is best remembered for "Land Beyond the Flame," "Moonshine," "Hour of Surprise" and "The Vandal."

MARCIA KAMIEN is recorded as the author of a meager, but telling, trio of science fiction stories, all published in 1954. They are "Holiday," "A Little Child" and "Alien Invasion."

JOY LECHE's name appeared only three times in the science fiction magazines, all between 1959 and 1961. Her stories are "The Pity of the Wood," "Satisfaction Guaranteed" and "Miss Millie's Rose."

BETSY CURTIS was a school teacher who penned a handful of stories for science fiction magazines during the 1950s, and a very occasional one since then. A Peculiar People, generally considered her finest work, was selected for the Best Science Fiction Stories 1951.

BETH ELLIOT was the pseudonym of "a Santa Fe housewife" who apparently

wrote but a single science fiction story, "Cocktails at 8."

HELEN CLARKSON was the author of only one story for the science fiction magazines, as well as the SF novel, *The Last Day* . One source suggests the name is a pseudonym for Helen C. McCoy, the mystery novelist and first wife of Davis Dresser (Bret Halliday, creator of Mike Shayne). There is some external evidence to support this supposition, as *The Last Day* was published by Torquil Books, of which Ms McCoy was editor-in-chief at the time.

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