

Four In One

By Damon Knight

(1953)

George Meister had once seen the nervous system of a man--a display specimen, achieved by coating the smallest of the fibers until they were coarse enough to be seen, then dissolving all the unwanted tissue and replacing it with clear plastic. A marvelous job; that fellow on Torkas III had done it--what was his name? At any rate: having seen the specimen, Meister knew approximately what he himself must look like at the present moment.

Of course, there were distortions: for example, he was almost certain that the neurons between his visual center and his eyes had produced themselves by at least thirty centimeters. Also, no doubt, the system as a whole was curled up and spread out rather oddly, since the musculature it had originally controlled was gone; and he had noticed certain other changes which might or might not be reflected by gross structural differences. The fact remained that he--all that he could still call himself--was nothing more than a brain, a pair of eyes, a spinal cord, and a spray of neurons.

George closed his eyes for a second. It was a thing he had learned to do only recently, and he was

proud of it. That first long period, when he had had no control whatever, had been very bad, He had decided later that the paralysis had been due to the lingering effects of some anaesthetic--the agent, whatever it was, that had kept him unconscious while his body was being--Well.

Either that, or the neuron branches had simply not yet knitted firmly in their new positions. perhaps he could verify one or the other supposition at some future time. But at first, when he had only been able to see and not to move, knowing nothing beyond the moment when he had fallen face first into that mottled green and brown puddle of gelatin... that had been upsetting.

He wondered how the others were taking it. There were others, he knew, because occasionally he would feel a sudden acute pain down where his legs belonged, and at the same instant the motion of the landscape would stop with a jerk. That could only be same other brain, trapped like his, trying to move their common body in another direction.

Usually the pain stopped immediately, and George could go on sending messages down to the nerve endings which had formerly belonged to his fingers and toes, and the gelatinous body would keep on creeping slowly forward. When the pains continued, there was nothing to do but to stop moving until the other brain quit--in which case George would feel like an unwilling passenger in a very slow vehicle--or try to alter his own movements to coincide, or at least product: a vector with the other brain's.

He wondered who else had fallen in--Vivian Bellis? Major Gumbs? Miss McCarty? Or all three of them? There ought to be some way of finding out.

He tried looking down once more, and was rewarded with a blurry view of a long, narrow strip of mottled green and brown, moving very slowly forward along the dry stream bed they had been crossing for the last hour or more. Twigs and shreds of dry vegetable matter were stuck to the dusty, translucent surface.

He was improving; the last time, he had only been able to see the thinnest possible edge of his new body.

When he looked up again, the far edge of the stream bed was perceptibly closer. There was a cluster of stiff-looking, dark-brown vegetable shoots just beyond, on the rocky shoulder; George was aiming slightly to the left of it. It had been a plant very much like that one that he'd been reaching for when he lost his balance and got himself into this condition. He might as well have a good look at it, anyhow.

The plant would probably turn out to be of little interest. It would be out of all reason to expect every new life form to be a startling novelty; and George was convinced that he had already stumbled into the most interesting organism on this planet.

Something _meisterii_, he thought. He had not settled on a species name--he would have to learn more about it before he decided--but _meisterii_ certainly. It was his discovery, and nobody could take it away from him. Or unhappily--him away from it.

It was a really lovely organism, though. Primitive--less structure of its own than a jellyfish, and only on a planet with light surface gravity, like this one, could it ever have hauled itself up out of the sea. No brain, no nervous system at all, apparently. But it had the perfect survival mechanism. It simply let its rivals develop highly organized nervous tissue, sat in one place (looking exactly like a deposit of leaves and other clutter) until one of them fell into it, and then took all the benefit.

It wasn't parasitism, either; it was a true symbiosis, on a higher level than any other planet, so far as

George knew, had ever developed. The captive brain was nourished by the captor; wherefore it served the captive's interest to move the captor toward food and away from danger. _You steer me, I feed you._ It was fair.

They were close to the plant now, almost touching it. George inspected it; as he had thought, it was a common grass type, of no particular interest.

Now his body was tilting itself up a ridge he knew to be low, although from his eye level it looked tremendous. He climbed it laboriously and found himself looking down into still another gully. This could go on, no doubt, indefinitely. The question was, did he have any choice?

He looked at the shadows cast by the low-hanging sun, He was heading approximately northwest, or directly away from the encampment. He was only a few hundred meters away; even at a crawl, he could make the distance easily enough ... if he turned back.

He felt uneasy at the thought, and didn't know why. Then it struck him that his appearance was not obviously that of a human being in distress; the chances were that he looked rather more like a monster which had eaten and partially digested one or more people.

If he crawled into camp in his present condition, it was a certainty that he would be shot at before any questions were asked, and only a minor possibility that narcotic gas would be used instead of a machine rifle.

No, he decided, he was on the right course. The idea was to get away from camp so that he wouldn't be found by the relief party which was probably searching for him now. Get away, bury himself in the forest, and study his new body: find out how it worked and what he could do with it, whether there actually were others in it with him, and if so, if there was any way of opening communications with them.

It would take a long time, he thought, but he could do it, Limpily, like a puddle of mush oozing over the edge of a tablecloth, George started down into the gully.

The circumstances leading up to George's fall into the something _meisterii_ were, briefly, as follows:

Until as late as the mid-twenty-first century, a game invented by the ancient Japanese was still played by millions in the eastern hemisphere of Terra. The game was called _go_. Although its rules were almost childishly simple, its strategy included more permutations and was more difficult to master than that of chess.

Go was played, at the height of its development--just before the geological catastrophe that wiped out most of its devotees--on a board with nine hundred shallow holes, using small pill-shaped counters. At each turn, one of the two players placed a counter on the board, wherever he chose, the object being to capture as much territory as possible by surrounding it completely.

There were no other rules; and yet it had taken the Japanese almost a thousand years to work up to that thirty-by-thirty board, adding perhaps one rank and file per century. A hundred years was not too long to explore all the possibilities of that additional rank and file.

At the time George Meister fell into the gelatinous green-and-brown monster. toward the end of the twenty third century A.D., a kind of _go_ was being played in a three-dimensional field which contained more than ten billion positions. The galaxy was the board, the positions were star systems, men were the counters. The loser's penalty was annihilation.

The galaxy was in the process of being colonized by two opposing federations, In the early stages of this conflict, planets had been raided, bombs dropped, and a few battles had even been fought by fleets of spaceships. Later that haphazard sort of warfare became impossible. Robot fighters, carrying enough armament to blow each other into dust, were produced in trillions. In the space around the outer stars of a cluster belonging to one side or the other, they swarmed like minnows.

Within such a screen, planets were utterly safe from attack and from any interference with their commerce ... unless the enemy succeeded in colonizing enough of the circumambient star systems to set up and maintain a second screen outside the first. It was _go_, played for desperate stakes and under impossible conditions.

Everyone was in a hurry; everyone's ancestors for seven generations had been in a hurry. You got your education in a speeded-up, capsulized form. You mated early and bred frantically. And if you were assigned to an advance ecological team, as George was, you had to work without any decent preparation.

The sensible, the obvious thing to do in opening up a new planet with unknown life forms would have been to begin with at least ten years of immunological study conducted from the inside of a sealed station. After the worst bacteria and viruses had been licked, you might proceed to a little cautious field work and exploration. Finally--total elapsed time fifty years, say--the colonists would be shipped in.

There simply wasn't that much time.

Five hours after the landing, Meister's team had unloaded fabricators and set up barracks enough to house its two thousand, six hundred and twenty-eight members. An hour after that, Meister, Gumbs, Bellis and McCarty started out across the level cinder and ash left by the transport's tail jets to the nearest living vegetation, six hundred meters away. They were to trace a spiral path outward from the camp site to a distance of a thousand meters, and then return with their specimens--providing nothing too large and hungry to be stopped by a machine rifle had previously eaten them.

Meister, the biologist, was hung with collecting boxes to the point that his slender torso was totally invisible. Major Gumbs had a survival kit, binoculars and a machine rifle. Vivian Bellis, who knew exactly as much mineralogy as had been contained in the three-month course prescribed for her rating, and no more, carried a light rifle, a hammer and a specimen sack. Miss McCarty--no one knew her first name--had no scientific function. She was the group's Loyalty Monitor. She wore two squat pistols and a bandolier bristling with cartridges. Her only job was to blow the cranium off any team member caught using an unauthorized communicator, or in any other way behaving oddly.

All of them were heavily gloved and booted, and their heads were covered by globular helmets, sealed to their tunic collars. They breathed through filtered respirators, so finely meshed that--in theory--nothing larger than an oxygen molecule could get through.

On their second circuit of the camp, they had struck a low ridge and a series of short, steep gullies, most of them choked with the dusty-brown stalks of dead vegetation. As they started down into one of these, George, who was third in line--Crums leading, then Bellis, and McCarty behind George--stepped out onto a protruding slab of stone to examine a cluster of plant stalks rooted on its far side.

His weight was only a little more than twenty kilograms on this planet, and the slab looked as if it were firmly cemented into the wall of the gully. Just the same, he felt it shift under him as soon as his weight

was fully on it. He felt himself falling, shouted, and caught a flashing glimpse of Gumbs and Bellis, standing as if caught by a high-speed camera. He heard a rattling of stones as he went by. Then he saw what looked like a shabby blanket of leaves and dirt floating toward him, and he remembered thinking, *It looks like a soft landing, anyhow....* That was all, until he woke up feeling as if he had been prematurely buried, with no part of him alive but his eyes.

Much later, his frantic efforts to move had resulted in the first fractional success. From then on, his field of vision had moved fairly steadily forward, perhaps a meter in every fifty minutes, not counting the times when someone else's efforts had interfered with his own.

His conviction that nothing remained of the old George Meister except a nervous system was not supported by observation, but the evidence was regrettably strong. To begin with, the anaesthesia of the first hours had worn off, but his body was not reporting the position of the torso, head and four limbs he had formerly owned. He had, instead, a vague impression of being flattened and spread out over an enormous area. When he tried to move his fingers and toes, the response he got was so multiplied that he felt like a centipede. He had no sense of cramped muscles, such as would normally be expected after a long period of paralysis: and he was not breathing. Yet his brain was evidently being well supplied with food and oxygen; he felt clear-headed, at ease and healthy.

He wasn't hungry, either, although he had been using energy steadily for a long time. There were, he thought, two possible reasons for that, depending on how you looked at it ... one, that he wasn't hungry because he no longer had any stomach lining to contract; two, that he wasn't hungry because the organism he was riding in had been well nourished by the superfluous tissues George had contributed. ...

Two hours later, when the sun was setting, it began to rain. George saw the big, slow-falling drops and felt their dull impacts on his "skin." He didn't know whether rain would do him any damage or not, rather thought not, but crawled under a bush with large, fringed leaves just to be on the safe side. When the rain stopped it was dark, and he decided he might as well stay where he was until morning. He did not feel tired, and it occurred to him to wonder whether he still needed to sleep. He composed himself as well as he could to wait for the answer.

He was still wakeful after a long time had passed, but had made no progress toward deciding whether this answered the question or prevented it from being answered, when he saw a pair of dim lights coming slowly and erratically toward him.

George watched them with an attentiveness compounded of professional interest and apprehension. Gradually, as they came closer, he made out that the lights were attached to long, thin stalks which grew from an ambiguous shape below--either light organs, like those of some deep-sea fish, or simply luminescent eyes.

George noted a feeling of tension in himself which seemed to suggest that adrenalin or an equivalent was being released somewhere in his system. He promised himself to follow this lead at the first possible moment; meanwhile he had a more urgent problem to consider. Was this approaching organism the kind which the something *_meisterii_* ate, or the kind which devoured the something *_meisterii_*? If the latter, what would he do about it?

For the present, at any rate, sitting where he was seemed to be indicated. The body he inhabited made use of camouflage in its normal, or untenanted state, and was not equipped for speed. So George held still and watched, keeping his eyes half closed, while he considered the possible nature of the

approaching animal.

The fact that it was nocturnal, he told himself, meant nothing. Moths were nocturnal; so were bats--no, the devil with bats, they were carnivores.... The light-bearing creature came nearer, and George saw the faint gleam of a pair of long, narrow eyes below the two stalks. Then the creature opened its mouth.

It had a great many teeth.

George found himself crammed into some kind of crevice in a wall of rock, without any clear recollection of how he had got there. He remembered a flurry of branches as the creature sprang at him, and a moment's furious pain, and then nothing but vague, starlit glimpses of leaves and earth.

The thing was impossible. How had he got away?

He puzzled over it until dawn came, and then, looking down at himself, he saw something that had not been there before. Under the smooth edge of gelatinous flesh three or four projections of some kind were visible. It struck George that his sensation of contact with the stone underneath him had changed, too. He seemed to be standing on a number of tiny points instead of lying flat.

He flexed one of the projections experimentally, then thrust it out straight ahead of him. It was a lumpy, single jointed caricature of a finger--or a leg.

George lay still for a long time and thought about it with as much coherence as he could muster. Then he waggled the thing again. It was there, and so were all the others, as solid and real as the rest of him.

He moved forward experimentally, sending the same messages down to his finger-and-toe nerve ends as before. His body lurched out of the cranny with a swiftness that very nearly tumbled him down over the edge of a minor precipice.

Where he had crawled like a snail before, he now scuttled like an insect.

But how.... No doubt, in his terror when the thing with the teeth attacked, he had unconsciously tried to run as if he still had legs. Was that all there was to it?

George thought of the carnivore again, and of the stalks supporting the organs which he had thought might be eyes. That would do as an experiment. He closed his own eyes and imagined them rising outward, imagined the mobile stalks growing growing.... He tried to convince himself that he had eyes like that, had always had them--that everyone who was anyone had eyes on stalks.

Surely, something was happening?

George opened his eyes again, and found himself looking straight down at the ground, getting a view so close up that it was blurred, out of focus. Impatiently, he tried to look up. All that happened was that his field of vision moved forward a matter of ten or twelve centimeters.

It was at this point that a voice shattered the stillness. It sounded like someone trying to shout through half a meter of lard. "Urghh! Lluhh! _Eeraghhr!_"

George leaped convulsively, executed a neat turn and swept his eyes around a good two hundred and forty degrees of arc. He saw nothing but rocks and lichens. On a closer inspection, it appeared that a small green-and-orange larva or grub of some kind was moving past him. George regarded it with

suspicion for a long moment, until the voice broke out again:

"Ellfff! Ellffneee!"

The voice, somewhat higher this time, came from behind. George whirled again, swept his mobile eyes around--

Around an impossible wide circuit. His eyes were on stalks, and they were mobile--whereas a moment ago he had been staring at the ground, unable to look up. George's brain clattered into high gear. He had grown stalks for his eyes, all right, but they'd been limp--just extensions of the jellylike mass of his body, without a stiffening cell structure or muscular tissue to move them. Then, when the voice had startled him, he'd got the stiffening and the muscles in a hurry.

That must have been what had happened the previous night. Probably the process would have been completed, but much more slowly, if he hadn't been frightened. A protective mechanism, obviously. As for the voice--George rotated once more, slowly, looking all around him. There was no question about it: he was alone. The voice, which had seemed to come from someone or something standing just behind him, must in fact have issued from his own body.

The voice started again, at a less frantic volume. It burred a few times, then said quite clearly in a high tenor, "Whass happen'? Wheh am I?"

George was floundering in a sea of bewilderment. He was in no condition to adapt quickly to more new circumstances, and when a large, desiccated lump fell from a nearby bush and bounced soundlessly to within a meter of him, he simply stared at it.

He looked at the hard-shelled object, and then at the laden bush from which it had dropped. Slowly, painfully, he worked his way through to a logical conclusion. The dried fruit had fallen without a sound. This was natural, because he had been totally deaf ever since his metamorphosis. But--he had heard a voice!

Ergo, hallucination, or telepathy.

The voice began again. "He-elp! Oh, dear, I wish someone would answer!"

Vivian Bellis. Gumbs, even if he affected that tenor voice, wouldn't say, "Oh, dear." Neither would McCarty.

George's shaken nerves were returning to normal. He thought intently, I get scared, grow legs. Bellis gets scared, grows a telepathic voice. That's reasonable, I guess--her first and only instinct would be to yell.

George tried to put himself into a yelling mood. He shut his eyes and imagined himself cooped up in a terrifyingly alien medium, without any control or knowledge of his predicament. He tried to shout: "Vivian!"

He kept on trying, while the girl's voice continued at intervals. Finally she stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence. George said, "Can you hear me?"

"Who's that--what do you want?"

"This is George Meister, Vivian. Can you understand what I'm saying?"

"What--"

George kept at it. His pseudo-voice, he judged, was a little garbled, just as Bellis's had been at first. At least the girl said, "Oh, George--I mean Mr. Meister! Oh, I've been so frightened. Where are you?"

George explained, apparently not very tactfully, because Bellis shrieked when he was through and then went back to burbling. George sighed, and said, "Is there anyone else on the premises? Major Gumbs? Miss McCarty?"

A few minutes later two sets of weird sounds began almost simultaneously. When they became coherent, it was no trouble to identify the voices. Gumbs, the big, red-faced professional soldier, shouted, "Why the hell don't you watch where you're going, Meister? If you hadn't started that rock slide we wouldn't be in this mess!"

Miss McCarty, who had had a seamed white face, a jutting jaw, and eyes the color of mud, said coldly, "Meister, all of this will be reported. All of it."

It appeared that only Meister and Gumbs had kept the use of their eyes. All four of them had some muscular control, though Gumbs was the only one who had made any serious attempt to interfere with George's locomotion. Miss McCarty, not to George's surprise, had managed to retain a pair of functioning ears.

But Bellis had been blind, deaf and dumb all through the afternoon and night. The only terminal sense organs she had been able to use had been those of the skin--the perceptrors of touch, heat and cold, and pain. She had heard nothing, seen nothing, but she had felt every leaf and stalk they had brushed against, the cold impact of every raindrop, and the pain of the toothy monster's bite. George's opinion of her went up several notches when he learned this. She had been terrified, but she hadn't been driven into hysteria or insanity.

It further appeared that nobody was doing any breathing, and nobody was aware of a heartbeat.

George would have liked nothing better than to continue this discussion, but the other three were united in believing that what had happened to them after they got in was of less importance than how they were going to get out.

"We can't get out," said George. "At least, I don't see any possibility of it in the present state of our knowledge. If we--"

"But we've got to get out!" said Vivian.

"We'll go back to camp," said McCarty coldly. "Immediately. And you'll explain to the Loyalty Committee why you didn't turn back as soon as you regained consciousness."

"That's right," Gumbs put in self-consciously, "If you can't do anything, Meister, maybe the other technical fellows can."

George patiently explained his theory of their probable reception by the guards at the camp. McCarty's

keen mind detected a flaw. "You grew legs, and stalks for your eyes, according to your own testimony. If you weren't lying you can also grow a mouth. We'll announce ourselves as we approach."

"That may not be easy," George told her. "We couldn't get along with just a mouth, we'd need teeth, tongue, hard and soft palates, lungs or the equivalent, vocal cords, and some kind of substitute for a diaphragm to power the whole business. I'm wondering if it's possible at all, because when Miss Bellis finally succeeded in making herself heard, it was by the method we're using now. She didn't--"

"You talk too much," said McCarty. "Major Gumbs, Miss Bellis, you and I will try to form a speaking apparatus. The first to succeed will receive a credit mark on his record. Commence."

George, being left out of the contest by implication, used his time in trying to restore his hearing. It seemed to him likely that the whatever-it-was meisterii had some sort of division-of-labor principle built into it, since Gumbs and he--the first two to fall in--had kept their sight without making any special effort in that direction, while matters like hearing and touch had been left for the latecomers. This was fine in principle, and George approved of it, but he didn't like the idea of Miss McCarty being the sole custodian of any part of the apparatus.

Even if he were able to persuade the other two to follow his lead--and at the moment this prospect seemed dim--McCarty was certain to be a holdout. And it might easily be vital to all of them, at some time in the near future, to have their hearing hooked into the circuit.

He was distracted at first by muttered comments between Gumbs and Vivian--"Getting anywhere?" "I don't think so. Are you?"--interspersed between yawps, humming sounds and other irritating noises as they tried unsuccessfully to switch over from mental to vocal communication. Finally McCarty snapped, "Be quiet. Concentrate on forming the necessary organs--don't bray like jackasses."

George settled down to his work, using the same technique he had found effective before. With his eyes shut, he imagined that the thing with all the teeth was approaching in darkness--tap; slither; tap; click. He wished valiantly for ears to catch the faint approaching sounds. After a long time he thought he was beginning to succeed--or were those mental sounds, unconsciously emitted by one of the other three? Click. Slither. Swish. Scrape.

George opened his eyes, genuinely alarmed. A hundred meters away, facing him across the shallow slope of rocky ground, was a uniformed man just emerging from a stand of black, bamboolike spears. As George raised his eye stalks, the man paused, stared back at him, then shouted and raised his rifle.

George ran. Instantly there was a babble of voices inside him, and the muscles of his "legs" went into wild spasms. "Run, dammit!" he said frantically. "There's a trooper with--"

The rifle went off with a deafening roar, and George felt a sudden hideous pain aft of his spine. Vivian Bellis screamed. The struggle for possession of their common legs stopped, and they scuttled full speed ahead for the cover of a nearby boulder. The rifle roared again, and George heard rock splinters screeching through the foliage overhead. Then they were plunging down the side of a gully, up the other slope, over a low hummock and into a forest of tall, bare-limbed trees.

George spotted a leaf-filled hollow and headed for it, fighting somebody "else's" desire to keep on running in a straight line. They plopped into the hollow and stayed there while three running men went past them, and for an hour afterward.

Vivian was moaning steadily. Raising his eye stalks cautiously, George was able to see that several jagged splinters of stone had penetrated the monster's gelatinous flesh near the far rim.... They had been very lucky. The shot had apparently been a near miss--accountable only on the grounds that the trooper had been shooting downhill at a moving target--and had shattered the boulder behind them.

Looking more closely, George observed something which excited his professional interest. The whole surface of the monster appeared to be in constant slow ferment: tiny pits opening and closing as if the flesh were boiling ... except that here the bubbles of air were not forcing their way outward, but were being engulfed at the surface and pressed down into the interior.

He could also see, deep under the mottled surface of the huge lens-shaped body, four vague clots of darkness which must be the living brains of Gumbs, Bellis, McCarty--and Meister.

Yes, there was one which was radially opposite his own eye-stalks. It was an odd thing, George reflected, to be looking at your own brain. No doubt you could get used to it in time.

The four dark spots were arranged close together in an almost perfect square at the center of the lens. The spinal cords, barely visible, crossed between them and rayed outward from the center.

Pattern, George thought. The thing was designed to make use of more than one nervous system. It arranged them in an orderly fashion, with the brains inward for greater protection--and perhaps for another reason. Perhaps there was even a provision for conscious cooperation among the passengers: a matrix that somehow promoted the growth of communication cells between the separate brains.... If that were so, it would account for their ready success with telepathy. George wished most acutely that he could get inside and find out.

Vivian's pain was diminishing. Hers was the brain opposite George's, and she had taken most of the effect of the rock splinters. But the fragments were sinking now, slowly, through the gelid substance of the monster's tissues. Watching carefully, George could see them move. When they got to the bottom, they would be excreted, no doubt--just as the indigestible parts of their clothing and equipment had been.

George wondered idly which of the remaining two brains was McCarty's and which Gumbs's. The answer was easy to find. To George's left, as he looked back toward the center of the mound, was a pair of blue eyes set flush with the surface. They had lids apparently grown from the monster's substance, but thickened and opaque.

To his right, George could make out two tiny openings, extending a few centimeters into the body, which could only be Miss McCarty's ears. George had an impulse to see if he could devise a method of dropping dirt into them.

Anyhow, the question of returning to camp had been settled, at least for the moment. McCarty said nothing more about growing a set of speech organs, although George was sure she herself was determined to keep on trying.

He didn't think she would succeed. Whatever the mechanism was by which these changes in bodily structure were accomplished, it seemed probable that amateurs like themselves could succeed only under the pressure of considerable emotional strain, and then only with comparatively simple tasks which involved one new structure at a time. And as he had already told McCarty, the speech organs in man

were extraordinarily diverse and complicated.

It occurred to George that the thing just might be done by creating a thin membrane to serve as a diaphragm, and an air chamber behind it, with a set of muscles to produce the necessary vibrations and modulate them. He kept the notion to himself.

He didn't want to go back. George was a rare bird: a scientist who was actually fitted for his work and loved it for its own sake. And at the moment he was sitting squarely in the middle of the most powerful research tool that had ever existed in his field: a protean organism, with the observer inside it, able to order its structure and watch the results; able to devise theories of function and test them on the tissues of what was effectively his own body--able to construct new organs, new adaptations to environment!

George saw himself at the point of an enormous cone of new knowledge; and some of the possibilities he glimpsed humbled and awed him.

He couldn't go back even if it were possible to do it without getting killed. If only he had fallen into the damned thing alone--No, then the others would have pulled him out and killed the monster.

There were, he felt, too many problems demanding solutions all at once. It was hard to concentrate; his mind kept slipping maddeningly out of focus.

Vivian, whose pain had stopped some time ago, began to wail again. Gumbs snapped at her. McCarty cursed both of them. George himself felt that he had had very nearly all he could take--cooped up with three idiots who had no more sense than to-

"Wait a minute," he said. "Do you all feel the same way? Irritable? Jumpy? As if you'd been working for sixty hours straight and were too tired to sleep?" "Stop talking like a video ad," Vivian said angrily. "Haven't we got enough trouble without--"

"We're hungry," George interrupted. "We didn't realize it, because we haven't got the organs that usually signal hunger. But the last thing this body ate was us, and that was at least twenty hours ago. We've got to find something to ingest."

"Good Lord, you're right," said Gumbs. "But if this thing only eats people--I mean to say--"

"It never met any people until we landed," George said curtly. "Any protein should do, but the only way we can find out is to try. The sooner we start, the better." He started off in what he hoped was the direction they had been following all along--directly away from camp. At least, he thought, if they put enough distance behind them, they might get thoroughly lost.

III

They moved out of the trees and down the long slope of a valley, over a wiry carpet of dead grasses, until they reached a watercourse in which a thin trickle was still flowing. Far down the bank, partly screened by clumps of skeletal shrubbery, George saw a group of animals that looked vaguely like miniature pigs. He told the others about it, and started cautiously in that direction.

"Which way is the wind blowing, Vivian?" he asked. "Can you feel it?"

She said, "No. I could before, when we were going downhill, but now I think we're facing into it."

"Good," said George. "We may be able to sneak up on them."

"But--we're not going to eat _animals,_ are we?"

"Yes, how about it, Meister?" Gumbs put in. "I don't say I'm a squeamish fellow, but after all--"

George, who felt a little squeamish himself--like all the others, he had been brought up on a diet of yeasts and synthetic protein--said testily, "What else can we do? You've got eyes--you can see that it's autumn here. Autumn after a hot summer, at that. Trees bare, streams dried up. We eat meat, or go without--unless you'd rather hunt for insects?"

Gumbs, shocked to the core, muttered for a while and then gave up.

Seen at closer range, the animals looked less porcine and even less appetizing than before. They had lean, segmented, pinkish-gray bodies, four short legs, flaring ears, and blunt scimitarlike snouts with which they were rooting in the ground, occasionally turning up something which they gulped, ears flapping.

George counted thirty Of them, grouped fairly closely in a little space of clear ground between the bushes and the river. They moved slowly, but their short legs looked powerful; he guessed that they could run when they had to.

He inched forward, keeping his eye stalks low, stopping instantly whenever one of the beasts looked up. Moving with increasing caution, he had got to within ten meters of the nearest when McCarty said abruptly:

"Meister, has it occurred to you to wonder just _how_ we are going to eat these animals?"

"Don't be foolish," he said irritably. "We'll--" He stopped.

Wait a minute--did the thing's normal method of assimilation stop as soon as it got a tenant? Were they Supposed to grow fangs and a gullet and all the rest of the apparatus? Impossible; they'd starve to death first. But on the other hand-- _damn_ this fuzzy-headed feeling--wouldn't it have to stop, to prevent the tenant from being digested with his first meal?

"Well?" McCarty demanded.

That was wrong, George knew but he couldn't say why; and it was a distinctly unpleasant thought. Or--even worse, suppose the meal became the tenant, and the tenant the meal?

The nearest animal's head went up, and four tiny red eyes stared directly at George. The floppy ears snapped to attention.

It was no time for speculation. "He's seen us!" George shouted mentally. "_Run!_"

The scene exploded into motion. One instant they were lying still in the prickly dry grass; the next they were Skimming at express-train speed across the ground, with the herd galloping away straight ahead of

them. The hams of the nearest beasts loomed up closer and closer, bounding furiously; then they had run it down and vaulted over it.

Casting an eye backward, George saw that it was lying motionless in the grass--unconscious or dead.

They ran down another one. _The anaesthetic,_ George thought lucidly. _One touch does it._ And another, and another. _Of course we can digest them,_ he thought with relief. _It has to be selective to begin with, or it couldn't have separated out our nervous tissue._

Four down. Six down. Three more together as the herd bunched between the last arm of the thicket and the steep river bank; then two that tried to double back; then four stragglers, one after the other.

The rest of the herd disappeared into the tall grass up the slope; but fifteen bodies were strewn behind them.

Taking no chances, George went back to the beginning of the line and edged the monster's body under the first carcass.

"Crouch down, Gumbs," he said. "We have to slide under it ... that's far enough. Leave the head hanging over."

"What for?" said the soldier.

"You don't want his brain in here with us, do you? We don't know how many this thing is equipped to take. It might even like this one better than one of ours. But I can't see it bothering to keep the rest of the nervous system, if we make sure not to eat the head--"

"Oh!" said Vivian faintly.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Bellis," George said contritely. "It shouldn't be too unpleasant, though, if we don't let it bother us. It isn't as if we had taste buds, or--"

"It's all right," she said. "Just please let's not talk about it."

"I should think not," Gumbs put in. "A little more tact, don't you think, Meister?"

Accepting this reproof, George turned his attention to the corpse that lay on the monster's glabrous surface, between his section and Gumbs's. It was sinking, just visibly, into the flesh. A cloud of opacity was spreading around it.

When it was almost gone, and the neck had been severed, they moved on to the next. This time, at George's suggestion, they took aboard two at once. Gradually their irritable mood faded; they began to feel at ease and cheerful, and George found it possible to think consecutively without having vital points slip out of his reach.

They were on their eighth and ninth courses, and George was happily engaged in an intricate chain of speculation as to the monster's circulatory system, when Miss McCarty broke a long silence to announce:

"I have now perfected a method by which we can return to camp safely. We will begin at once."

Startled and dismayed, George turned his eyes toward McCarty's quadrant of the monster, protruding from the rim was a stringy, jointed Something that looked like--yes, it was!--a grotesque but recognizable arm and hand. As he watched, the lumpy fingers fumbled with a blade of grass, tugged, uprooted it.

"Major Gumbs!" said McCarty. "It will be your task to locate the following articles, as quickly as possible. One. A surface suitable for writing. I suggest a large leaf, light in color, dry but not brittle. Or a tree from which a large section of bark can be easily peeled. Two. A pigment. No doubt you will be able to discover berries yielding suitable juice. If not, mud will do. Three. A twig or reed for use as a pen. When you have directed me to all these essential items, I will employ them to write a message outlining our predicament, we will read the result and point out any errors, which I will then correct. When the message is completed, we will return with it to the camp, approaching at night, and deposit it in a conspicuous place. We will retire until daybreak, and when the message has been read we will approach again. Begin, Major."

"Well, yes," said Gumbs, "that ought to work, except--I suppose you've worked out some system for holding the pen, Miss McCarty?"

"Fool," she replied, "I have made a hand, of course."

"Well, in that case, by all means. Let's see, I believe we might try this thicket first--" Their common body gave a lurch in that direction.

George held back. "Wait a minute," he said desperately. "Let's at least have the common sense to finish this meal before we go. There's no telling when we'll get another."

McCarty demanded, "How large are these creatures, Major?"

"Oh--about sixty centimeters long, I should say."

"And we have consumed nine of them, is that correct?" "Nearer eight," George said. "These two are only half gone."

"In Other words," McCarty said, "We have had two apiece. That should be ample. Don't you agree, Major?"

George said earnestly, "You're wrong, Miss McCarty. You're thinking in terms of human food requirements, whereas this organism has a different metabolic rate and at least three times the mass of four human beings. Look at it this way--the four of us together had a mass of about three hundred kilos, and yet twenty hours after this thing absorbed us, it was hungry again. Well, these animals wouldn't weigh much more than twenty kilos apiece at one G--and according to your scheme we've got to hold out until sometime after daybreak tomorrow."

"Something in that," Gumbs said. "Yes, on the whole, Miss McCarty, I think we had better forage while we can. It won't take us more than half an hour longer, at this rate."

"Very well. Be as quick as you can."

They moved on to the next pair of victims. George's brain was working furiously. It was no good arguing with McCarty, and Gumbs was not much better, but he had to try. If he could only convince

Gumbs, then Bellis would fall in with the majority--maybe. It was the only hope he had.

"Gumbs," he said, "have you given any thought to what's going to happen to us when we get back?"

"Not quite my line, you know. Leave that to the technical fellows like yourself."

"No, that isn't what I mean. Suppose you were the C.O. of this team, and four other people had fallen into this organism instead of us--"

"What, what? I don't follow."

George patiently repeated it.

"Yes, I see what you mean. And so--"

"What orders would you give?"

Gumbs thought a moment. "Turn the thing over to the bio section, I suppose. What else?"

"You don't think you might order it destroyed as a possible menace?"

"Good Lord, I suppose I might. No, but you see, we'll be careful what we say in the note. We'll point out that we're a, valuable specimen, and so on. Handle with care." "All right," George said, "but suppose that works, then what? Since it is out of your line, I'll tell you. Nine chances out of ten, bio section will classify us as a possible enemy weapon. That means, first of all, that we'll go through a full-dress interrogation--and I don't have to tell you what that can be like."

"Major Gumbs," said McCarty stridently, "Meister will be executed for disloyalty at the first opportunity. You are forbidden to talk to him, under the same penalty."

"But she can't stop you from listening to me," George said tensely. "In the second place, Gumbs, they'll take samples. Without anaesthesia. And finally, they'll either destroy us just the same, or they'll send us back to the nearest strong point for more study. We will then be Federation property, Gumbs, in a top-secret category, and since nobody in Intelligence will ever dare to take the responsibility of clearing us, we'll stay there.

"Gumbs, this is a valuable specimen, but it will never do anybody any good if we go back to camp. Whatever we discover about it, even if it's knowledge that could save billions of lives, that will be top-secret too, and it'll never get past the walls of Intelligence... If you're still hoping that they can get you out of this, you're wrong. This isn't like limb grafts, your whole body has been destroyed. Gumbs, everything but your nervous system and your eyes. The only new body we'll get is the one we make ourselves. We've got to stay here and--and work this out ourselves."

"Major Gumbs," said McCarty, "I think we have wasted enough time. Begin your search for the materials I need."

For a moment Gumbs was silent, and their collective body did not move.

Then he said: "Yes, that was a leaf, a twig and a bunch of berries, wasn't it? Or mud. Miss McCarty, unofficially of course, there's one point I'd like your opinion on. Before we begin. That is to say, I daresay they'll be able to patch together some sort of bodies for us, don't you think? I mean, one

technical fellow says one thing, another says the opposite. Do you see what I'm driving at?"

George had been watching McCarty's new limb uneasily. It was flexing rhythmically and, he was almost certain, growing minutely larger. The fingers groped occasionally in the dry grass, plucking first a single blade, then two together, finally whole tuft. Now she said: "I have no opinion, Major. The question is irrelevant. Our duty is to return to camp. That is all we need to know.

"Oh, I quite agree with you there," said Gumbs. "And besides, there really isn't any alternative, is there?"

George, staring down at one of the fingerlike projections visible below the rim of the monster, was passionately willing it to turn into an arm. He had, he suspected, started much too late.

"The alternative," he said, "is simply to keep on going as we are. Even if the Federation holds this planet for a century, there'll be places on it that will never be explored. We'll be safe."

"I mean to say," added Gumbs as if he had only paused for thought, "a fellow can't very well cut himself off from civilization, can he?"

Again George felt a movement toward the thicket, again he resisted it. Then he found himself overpowered, as another set of muscles joined themselves to Gumbs's. Quivering, crabwise, the something *_meisterii_* moved half a meter. Then it stopped, straining.

And for the second time that day, George was forced to revise his opinion of Vivian Bellis.

"I believe you, Mr. Meister--George," she said. "I don't want to go back-. Tell me what you want me to do."

"You're doing beautifully now," George said after a speechless instant. "Except if you can grow an arm, I imagine that will be useful."

The struggle went on.

"Now we know where we are," said McCarty to Gumbs.

"Yes. Quite right."

"Major Gumbs," she said crisply, "you are opposite me, I believe?"

"Am I?" said Gumbs doubtfully.

"Never mind. I believe you are. Now: is Meister to your left or right?"

"Left. I know that, anyhow. Can see his eye stalks out of the corner of my eye."

"Very well." McCarty's arm rose, with a sharp-pointed fragment of rock clutched in the blobby fingers.

Horrified, George watched it bend backward across the curve of the monster's body. The long, knife-sharp point probed tentatively at the surface three centimeters short of the area over his brain. Then the fist made an abrupt up-and-down movement and a fierce stab of pain shot through him.

"Not quite long enough, I think," McCarty said. She flexed the arm, then brought it back to almost the

same Spot and stabbed again.

"No," she said thoughtfully. "It will take a little longer," then, "Major Gumbs, after my next attempt you will tell me if you notice any reaction in Meister's eye stalks." The pain was still throbbing along George's nerves. With one half-blinded eye he watched the embryonic arm that was growing, too slowly, under the rim; with the other, fascinated, he watched McCarty's arm lengthen slowly toward him.

It was growing visibly, he suddenly realized--but it wasn't getting any nearer. In fact, incredibly enough, it seemed to be losing ground.

The monster's flesh was flowing away under it, expanding in both directions.

McCarty stabbed again, with vicious strength. This time the pain was less acute.

"Major?" she said, "any result?"

"No," said Gumbs, "no, I think not. We seem to be moving forward a bit, though, Miss McCarty."

"A ridiculous error," she replied. "We are being forced _back._ Pay attention, Major."

"No, really," he protested. "That is to say, we're moving toward the thicket. Forward to me, backward to you."

"Major Gumbs, I am moving forward, you are moving back."

They were both right, George discovered: the monster's body was no longer circular, it was extending itself along the Gumbs-McCarty axis. A suggestion of concavity was becoming visible in the center. Below the surface, too, there was motion.

The four brains now formed an oblong, not a square.

The positions of the spinal cords had shifted. His own and Vivian's seemed to be about where they were, but Gumbs's now passed under McCarty's brain, and vice versa.

Having increased its mass by some two hundred kilos, the something _meisterii_ was fissioning into two individuals--and tidily separating its tenants, two to each. Gumbs and Meister in one, McCarty and Bellis in the other.

The next time it happened, he realized, each product of the fission would be reduced to one brain--and the time after that, one of the new individuals out of each pair would be a monster in the primary or untenanted state, quiescent, camouflaged, waiting to be stumbled over.

But that meant that, like the common amoeba, this fascinating organism was immortal. It never died, barring accidents; it simply grew and divided.

Not the tenants, though, unfortunately--their tissues would wear out and die.

Or would they? Human nervous tissue didn't proliferate as George's and Miss McCarty's had done; neither did _any_ human tissue build new cells fast enough to account for George's eye stalks or Miss McCarty's arm.

There was no question about it: none of that new tissue could possibly be human; it was all counterfeit, produced by the monster from its own substance according to the structural blueprints in the nearest genuine cells. And it was a perfect counterfeit: the new tissues knit with the old, neurones coupled with dendrites, muscles contracted or expanded on command. The imitation _worked._

And therefore, when nerve cells wore out, they could be replaced. Eventually the last human cell would go, the human tenant would have become totally monster--but "a difference that makes no difference is no difference." Effectively, the tenant would still be human--and he would be immortal.

Barring accidents. Or murder.

Miss McCarty was saying, "Major Gumbs, you are being ridiculous. The explanation is quite obvious. Unless you are deliberately deceiving me, for what reason I cannot imagine, then our efforts to move in opposing directions must be pulling this creature apart."

McCarty was evidently confused in her geometry. Let her stay that way--it would keep her off balance until the fission was complete. No, that was no good. George himself was out of her reach already, and getting farther~ away--but how about Bellis? Her brain and McCarty's were, if anything, closer together....

What to do? If he warned the girl, that would only draw McCarty's attention to her sooner. Unless he could misdirect her at the same time--

There wasn't much time left, he realized abruptly. If he was right in thinking that some physical linkage between the brains had occurred to make communication possible, those cells couldn't hold out much longer; the gap between the two pairs of brains was widening steadily.

"Vivian!" he said.

"Yes, George?"

Relieved, he said rapidly, "listen, we're not pulling this body apart, it's splitting. That's the way it reproduces. You and I will be in one half, Gumbs and McCarty in the other. If they don't give us any trouble, we can all go where we please--"

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

What a warm voice she had... "Yes," said George nervously, "but we may have to fight them; it's up to them. So grow an arm, Vivian."

"I'll try," she said doubtfully. "I don't know--"

McCarty's voice cut across hers. "Ah. Major Gumbs, Since you have eyes, it will be your task to see to it that those two do not escape. Meanwhile, I suggest that you, also, grow an arm."

"Doing my best," said Gumbs.

Puzzled, George glanced downward, past his own half formed arm: there, almost out of sight, was a fleshy bulge under Gumbs's section of the rim! The major had been working on it in secret, keeping it

hidden ... and it was already better developed than George's.

"Oh-oh," said Gumbs abruptly. "Look here, Miss McCarty, Meister's been leading you up the garden path. Look here, I mean, you and I aren't going to be in the same half. How could we be? We're on _opposite sides_ of the blasted thing. It's going to be you and Miss Bellis, me and Meister."

The monster was developing a definite waistline. The spinal cords had rotated, now, so that there was clear space between them in the center.

"Yes," said McCarty faintly. "_Thank_ you, Major Gumbs."

"George!" came Vivian's frightened voice, distant and weak. "What shall I do?"

"Grow an arm!" he shouted. There was no reply.

IV

Frozen, George watched McCarty's arm, the rock fragment still clutched at the end of it, rise into view and swing leftward at full stretch over the bubbling surface of the monster. He had time to see it bob up and viciously down again; time to think, _Still short, thank God--that's McCarty's right arm, it's farther from Vivian's brain than it was from mine;_ time, finally, to realize that: he could not possibly help her before McCarty lengthened the arm the few centimeters more that were necessary. The fission was not more than half complete; and he could no more move to where he wanted to be than a Siamese twin could walk around his brother.

Then his time was up. A flicker of motion warned him, and he looked back to see a lumpy, distorted pseudo-hand clutching for his eye stalks.

Instinctively he brought his own hand up, grasped the other's wrist and hung on desperately. It was half again the size of his, and so strongly muscled that although his leverage was better, he couldn't force it back or hold it away; he could only keep the system oscillating up and down, adding his strength to Gumbs's so that the mark was overshot.

Gumbs began to vary the force and rhythm of his movements, trying to catch him off guard. A thick finger brushed the base of one eye stalk.

"Sorry about this, Meister," said Gumbs's voice. "No hard feelings in it, on my side. Between us (oof) I don't fancy that McCarty woman much--but (ugh! almost had you that time) beggars can't be choosers. Ah. Way I see it, I've got to look after myself; mean to say (ugh) if I don't, who will? See what I mean?"

George did not reply. Astonishingly enough, he was no longer afraid, either for himself or for Vivian; he was angry. power from somewhere was surging into his arm; fiercely concentrating, he thought _Bigger! Stronger! Longer! More arm!_

The arm grew. Visibly it added substance to itself, it lengthened, thickened, bulged with muscle. So did Gumbs's.

He began another arm. So did Gumbs.

All around him the surface of the monster was bubbling violently. And George realized finally, the lenticular bulk of it was perceptibly shrinking. Its curious breathing system was inadequate; the thing was cannibalizing itself, destroying its own tissues to make up the difference.

How small could it get and still support two human tenants?

And which brain would it dispense with first?

He had no leisure to think about it. Scrabbling in the grass with his second hand, Gumbs had failed to find anything that would serve as a weapon; now, with a sudden lurch, he swung their entire body around.

The fission was complete.

That thought reminded George of Vivian and McCarty. He risked a split second's glance behind him, saw nothing but a featureless ovoid mound, and looked back in time to see Gumbs's half-grown right fist pluck a long, sharp pointed dead branch out of the grass. In the next instant the thing came whipping at his eyes.

The lip of the river bank was a meter away to the left. George made it in one abrupt surge. They slipped, tottered, hesitated, hands clutching wildly--and toppled, end over end, hurtling in a cloud of dust and pebbles down the breakneck slope to a meaty smash at the bottom.

The universe made one more giant turn around them and came to rest. Half blinded, George groped for the hold he had lost, found the wrist and seized it.

"Oh, Lord," said Gumbs's voice, "that's done me. I'm hurt, Meister. Go on, man, finish it, will you? Don't waste time."

George stared at him suspiciously, without relaxing his grip. "What's the matter with you?"

"I tell you I'm done," said Gumbs pettishly. "Paralyzed. I can't move."

They had fallen, George saw, onto a small boulder, one of many with which the river bed was strewn. This one was roughly conical; they were draped over it, and the blunt point was directly under Gumbs's spinal-cord, a few centimeters from the brain.

"Gumbs," he said, "that may not be as bad as you think. If I can show you it isn't, will you give up and put yourself under my orders?"

"How do you mean? My spine's crushed."

"Never mind that now. Will you or won't you?"

"Why, yes," said Gumbs. "That's very decent of you, Meister, matter of fact. You have my word, for what it's worth."

"All right," said George. Straining hard, he managed to get their body down off the boulder. Then he stared up at the slope down which they had tumbled. Too steep; he'd have to find an easier way back.

He turned and started off to eastward, paralleling the thin stream that still flowed in the center of the watercourse.

"What's up now?" Gumbs asked after a moment.

"We've got to find a way up to the top." George said impatiently. "I may still be able to help Vivian."

"Ah, yes. Afraid I was thinking about myself, Meister. If you don't mind telling me--"

She couldn't still be alive, George was thinking despondently, but if there were any small chance-- "You'll be all right," he said. "If you were still in your old body that would be a fatal injury, or permanently disabling, anyhow, but not in this thing. You can repair yourself as easily as you can grow a new limb."

"Good Lord," said Gumbs. "Stupid of me not to think of that. But look here, Meister, does that mean we were simply wasting our time trying to kill one another? I mean to say--"

"No. If you'd crushed my brain, I think the organism would have digested it, and that would be the end of me. But short of anything that drastic, I believe we're immortal."

"Immortal," said Gumbs. "Good Lord.... That does rather put another face on it, doesn't it?"

The bank was becoming a little lower, and at one point, where the raw earth was thickly seeded with boulders, there was a talus slope that looked as if it could be climbed. George started up it.

"Meister," said Gumbs after a moment.

"What do you want?"

"You're right, you know--I'm getting some feeling back already.... Look here, Meister, is there anything this beast can't do? I mean, for instance, do you suppose we could put ourselves back together the way we were, with all the--appendages, and so on?"

"It's possible," George said curtly. It was a thought that had been in the back of his mind, but he didn't feel like discussing it with Gumbs just now. They were halfway up the slope.

"Well, in that case--" said Gumbs meditatively. "The thing has military possibilities, you know. Man who brought a thing like that direct to the War Department could write his own ticket, more or less."

"After we split up," George said, "you can do whatever you please."

"But, dammit," said Gumbs in an irritated tone, "that won't do."

"Why not?"

"Because," said Gumbs, "they might find you." His hands reached up abruptly, grasped a small boulder, and before George could stop him, pried it sidewise out of its socket in the earth.

The larger boulder above it trembled, dipped and leaned ponderously outward. George, directly underneath, found that he could move neither forward nor back.

"Sorry again," he heard Gumbs saying, with what sounded like genuine regret. "But you know the

Loyalty Committee. I simply can't take the chance."

The boulder seemed to take forever to fall. George tried twice more, with all his strength, to move out of its path. Then, instinctively, he put his arms up straight under it.

At the last possible instant he moved them to the left, away from the center of the toppling gray mass.

It struck.

George felt his arms breaking like twigs, and saw a looming grayness that blotted out the sky; he felt a sledgehammer impact that made the earth shudder beneath him.

He heard a splattering sound.

And he was still alive. That astonishing fact kept him fully occupied for a long time after the boulder had clattered its way down the slope into silence. Then, finally, he looked down to his right.

The resistance of his stiffened arms, even while they broke, had been barely enough to lever the falling body over, a distance of some thirty centimeters.... The right half of the monster was a flattened, shattered ruin. He could see a few flecks of pasty gray matter, melting now into green-brown translucence as the mass flowed slowly together again.

In twenty minutes the last remnants of a superfluous spinal cord had been reabsorbed, the monster had collected itself back into its normal lens shape, and George's pain was diminishing. In five minutes more his mended arms were strong enough to use. They were also more convincingly shaped and colored than before--the tendons, the fingernails, even the wrinkles of the skin were in good order. In ordinary circumstances this discovery would have left George happily bemused for hours; now, in his impatience, he barely noticed it. He climbed to the top of the bank.

Thirty meters away a humped green-brown body like his own lay motionless on the dry grass.

It contained, of course, only one brain. Whose?

McCarty's, almost certainly; Vivian hadn't had a chance.

But then how did it happen that there was no visible trace of McCarty's arm?

Unnerved, George walked around the creature for a closer inspection.

On the far side he encountered two dark-brown eyes, with an oddly unfinished appearance. They focused on him after an instant, and the whole body quivered slightly, moving toward him.

Vivian's eyes had been brown; George remembered them distinctly. Brown eyes with heavy dark lashes in a tapering slender face.... But did that prove anything? What color had McCarty's eyes been? He couldn't remember for certain.

There was only one way to find out. George moved closer, hoping fervently that the something _meisterii_ was at least advanced enough to conjugate, instead of trying to devour members of its own species....

The two bodies touched, clung and began to flow together. Watching, George saw the fissioning process reverse itself: from paired lenses the alien flesh melted into a slipper shape, to an ovoid, to lens shape again. His brain and the other drifted closer together, the spinal cords crossing at right angles.

And it was only then that he noticed an oddity about the other brain: it seemed to be lighter and larger than his, the outline a trifle sharper.

"Vivian?" he said doubtfully. "Is that you?" No answer. He tried again, and again. Finally:

"George! Oh, dear--I want to cry, but I can't seem to do it."

"No lachrymal glands," George said automatically. "Uh, Vivian?"

"Yes, George." That warm voice again....

"What happened to Miss McCarty? How did you--I mean, what happened?"

"I don't know. She's gone, isn't she? I haven't heard her for a long time."

"Yes," said George, "she's gone. You mean you don't _know?_ Tell me what you did."

"Well, I wanted to make an arm, because you told me to, but I didn't think I had time enough. So I made a skull instead. And those thing to cover my spine--"

"Vertebrae." _Now why,_ he thought dazedly, _didn't I think of that?_ "And then?" he said.

"I think I'm crying now," she said. "Yes, I am. It's such a relief. And then, after that, nothing. She was still hurting me, and I just lay here and thought how wonderful it would be if she weren't here with me. And then, after a while, she wasn't. Then I grew eyes to look for you."

The explanation, it seemed to George, was more perplexing than the enigma. Staring around in a vague search for enlightenment, he caught sight of something that had escaped his notice before. Two meters to his left, just visible in the grass, was a damp-looking grayish lump, with a suggestion of a stringy extension trailing off from it. .

There must, he decided suddenly, be some mechanism in the something _meisterii_ for disposing of tenants who failed to adapt themselves--brains that went into catatonia, or hysteria, or suicidal frenzy. An eviction clause.

Somehow, Vivian had managed to stimulate that mechanism--to convince the organism that McCarty's brain was not only superfluous but dangerous--"poisonous" was the word.

Miss McCarty---it was the final ignominy--had not been digested, but excreted.

By sunset, twelve hours later, they had made a good deal of progress. They had reached an understanding very agreeable to them both; they had hunted down another herd of the pseudo-pigs for their noon meal; and, for divergent reasons---on George's side because the monster's normal metabolism was grossly inefficient when it had to move quickly, and on Vivian's because she refused to believe that

any man could be attracted to her in her present condition--they had begun a serious attempt to reshape themselves.

The first trials were extraordinarily difficult, the rest surprisingly easy. Again and again they had to let themselves collapse back into amoeboid masses, victims of some omitted or malfunctioning organ; but each failure smoothed the road; eventually they were able to stand breathless but breathing, swaying but erect, face to face--two protean giants in the fortunate dimness, two sketches of self-created Man.

They had also put thirty kilometers between themselves and the Federation camp. Standing on the crest of a ridge and looking southward across the shallow valley, George could see a faint funereal glow: the mining machines chewing out metals to feed the fabricators that spawn a billion ships.

"We'll never go back, will we?" said Vivian.

"No," said George soberly. "They'll come to us, in time. We have lots of time. We're the future."

And one thing more, a Small thing, but important to George; it marked his sense of accomplishment, of one phase ended and a new one begun. He had finally completed the name of his discovery--not, as it turned anything *_meisterii_* at all. *_Spes hominis_* :

Man's hope.