

FULL CYCLE
Clifford D. Simak

1

THE LETTER sent the life of Amby Wilson crashing decorously down about his ears. It was a form affair, with the address typed in with a newer, blacker ribbon; it said:

Dr. Ambrose Wilson, Department of History

It is with regret that I must inform you the board of regents at their meeting this morning decided the university will cease to function at the end of the present term.

Contributing to the decision were the lack of funds and the progressive dwindling of the student body. You, of course, have been aware of the situation for some time, but nevertheless...

There was more of it, but Amby didn't read it. What still was left unread, he knew, would be no more than the grossest of platitudes.

It had been bound to happen.

The regents had hung on in the face of monstrous difficulties; the university was virtually deserted. The place that once had rung with life and pulsed with learning was now no better than a ghost school.

As the city was a ghost city.

And I a ghost; thought Amby.

He made an admission to himself, an admission he would not have made a day or hour ago: For thirty years or more he had lived in an unreal and unsubstantial world, clinging to the old, vague way of life as he first had known it. And to make that vague life the more substantial, he had banished to an intellectual outer limbo any valid consideration of the world beyond the city.

And good reason that he should, he thought; good and valid reason. What was outside the city had no link with this world of his. A nomad population—an almost alien people, who had built a neo-culture rich in decadence, concocted half of provincialism, half of old folk-tales.

There was nothing there, he thought, of any value to a man like him, nothing worth the consideration of a man like him. Here in this university he had kept alight a feeble glow of the old learning and the old tradition; now the light had flickered out and the learning and tradition would go down into the darkness.

And that, he knew, was no attitude for a historian to take; history was the truth and the seeking after truth. To gloss over, to ignore, to push away an eventful fact—no matter how distasteful—was not the way of history.

Now history had caught up with him and there were two alternatives. He could go out and face the world or he could hide from it. There was no compromise.

Amby picked up the letter between his fingertips, as if it might be something dead and left out in the sun too long. Carefully he dropped it in the wastebasket; then he got his old felt hat and clapped it on his head.

He marched out of the classroom without looking back.

2

When he got home, a scarecrow was perched on the front steps. When it saw him coming, it pulled itself together and got up. "Evening, Doc," it said.

"Good evening, Jake," said Amby.

"I was just fixing to go fishing," Jake told him.

Amby sat down carefully on the steps and shook his head. "Not tonight; don't feel up to it. They're closing down the university."

Jake sat down beside him and stared across the street at the city wilderness. "I suppose that ain't no big surprise to you."

"I've been expecting it," said Amby. "Nobody attends any more except some stuffy kids. All the nomies

go to their own universities, if that is what they call them. Although to tell you the honest truth, Jake, I can't see how schools like those could give them very much."

"Well, you're fixed all right, I guess," said Jake, consolingly. "You been working all these years; you probably been able to put away a little. Now with me it's 'different. We been living hand-to-mouth and we always will."

"I'm not too well fixed," said Amby, "but I'll get along somehow. I probably haven't too long left; I'm almost seventy."

"There was a day," said Jake, "when they had a law that paid a man to quit at sixty five. But the nomies threw that out, just like they did everything."

He picked up a short length of dead branch and dug ab-sentmindedly at the grass. "I always figured, someday I'd get me enough together so I could buy a trailer. You can't do a thing unless you got a trailer. It does beat all how times can change. I remember when I was a kid it was the man who owned a house that was all set for life. But now a house don't count for nothing. You got to have a trailer."

He got up in sections, stood with his rags fluttering in the wind, looking down at Amby. "You ain't changed your mind about that fishing, Doc?"

"I'm all beat out," said Amby.

"With you not working any more," Jake said, "us two can get in a powerful lot of hunting. The place is full of squirrels and the young rabbits will soon be big enough to eat. This fall there'll be a sight of coons. Now that you ain't working, I'll split the skins with you."

"You still can keep the skins," said Amby.

Jake stuck his thumbs into his waistband and spat upon the ground. "Might just as well spend your tune out in the woods as anywhere. Used to be a man could make some money if he was lucky at his prowling, but prowling now is just a waste of time. The places all have been worked over and it's getting so it's downright dangerous to go inside of them. You never know when something might give way and come down and hit you or when the floor will drop out from underneath you."

He hitched up his britches. "Remember that time we found the box with all the jewelry in it?"

Amby nodded. "I remember that; you almost got enough to buy the trailer that time."

"Ain't it a fact? It does beat all how a man can fritter cash away. I bought a new gun and a batch of cartridges and some clothes for the family—and God knows, we needed them—and a good supply of grub; and before I knew it there wasn't near enough left over to even think about a trailer. In the old days a man could have bought one on time. All he'd needed would be ten per cent to pay down on it. But you can't do that no more. There ain't even any banks. And no loan companies. Remember, Doc, when the place crawled with loan companies?"

"It all has changed," said Amby. "When I think back it can't seem possible."

But it was, of course.

The city was gone as an institution; the farms had become corporations and people no longer lived in houses—only the stuffies and the squatters.

And folks like me, thought Amby.

3

It was a crazy idea—a sign of old age and feeble-mindedness, perhaps. A man of sixty-eight, a man of competence and settled habits, did not go charging off on a wild adventure even if his world had crashed about his ears.

He tried to quit thinking of it, but he couldn't quit. He thought about it all the time that he cooked supper, and while he ate supper, and later when he washed the dishes.

With the dishes done, he went into the living room, carrying the kitchen lamp. He set the lamp on a table beside another lamp and lit the second lamp. Must be a sign a man's eyes are wearing out, he thought, when he needs two lamps to read by. But kerosene lamps, at best, were poor things; not like electricity.

He picked a book out of the shelves and settled down to read, but he couldn't read; he couldn't keep his mind on what he tried to read. He finally gave it up.

He took one of the lamps, walked to the fireplace and held it high so that the lamplight fell upon the painting there, And he wondered as he raised the lamp if she would smile at him tonight; he was fairly sure she would, for she was always ready with a tiny smile when he needed it the most.

He wasn't sure at first if she were smiling; then he saw she was, and he stood there looking at her and her smile.

There had been many tunes of late when he talked with her, for he remembered how ready she had always been to listen to him, how he had talked out his troubles and his triumphs—although, come to think of it, his triumphs had been few.

But he could not talk to her tonight; she would not understand. This world hi which he lived without her would seem to her so topsy-turvy as to be past all understanding. And if he tried to talk to her about it, she would be disturbed and troubled and he must not let that happen.

You'd think, he told himself, upbraiding himself, that I'd be content to leave well enough alone. I have a place to hide. I could live out my life in comfort and in safety. And that, he knew, was the way he wanted it to be.

But there was that nagging voice which talked inside his brain: You have jailed your task and jailed it willingly. You have shut your eyes and jailed. You have jailed by looking backwards. The true historian does not live in the past alone. He must use the past to understand the present; and he must know them both ij he is to see the trend toward the juture.

But I do not want to know the future, said the stubborn Dr. Ambrose Wilson.

And the nagging voice said: The juture is the only thing that is worth the knowing.

He stood silently, holding the lamp above his head, staring at the painting almost as if he expected it to speak, as if it might give a sign.

There wasn't any sign. There couldn't be a sign, he knew. It was no more than a painting of a woman, dead these thirty years. The sensed nearness, the old sharp memory, the smile upon the lips were in the heart and mind—not in the square of canvas with clever brush strokes that preserved across the years the bright illusion of a loved face.

He lowered the lamp and went back to his chair.

There was so much to say, he thought, and no one to say it to—although the house might listen if he talked to it as an ancient friend. It had been a friend, he thought. It had been lonely often with her no longer here—but not as lonely in the house as away from it, for the house was a part of her.

He was safe here, safe in this anachronistic house, safe in the abandoned city with its empty buildings; comfortable in this city gone back to wilderness, filled with squirrels and rabbits, colorful and fragrant now with the bloom of gone-wild lilacs and escaped daffodils, prowled by squatters who hunted the thickets of its lawns for game and prowled its crumbling structures to find some salvage they might sell.

Queer, he thought, the concepts upon which a culture might be founded, the fantastic acceptance standards which evolved hi each society.

Some forty years ago, the cleavage of the culture had first started; it had not come all at once, but quickly enough so that historically it must be regarded as an abrupt rather than a gradual cleavage.

It had been the Year of Crisis, he remembered, when the drums of fear had thudded through the land and a man had lam in bed, tensed and listening for the coming of the bomb, knowing even as he listened that he'd not hear it if it came.

Fear was the start of it, he thought; and what and where would be the end?

He sat huddled in his chair, cringing from the dark barbarism that lay beyond the city—an old man caught between the future and the past.

4

Jake said, "She's a beauty, Doc." He got up to walk around it once again.

"Yes, sir," he said, patting it, "She surely is a beauty. I don't think I can rightly say I ever saw a finer trailer. And I've seen lots of them."

"We may be doing a lot of traveling in it," Amby told him. "We want one that will stand up. The roads, I understand, aren't what they used to be. The nomies chisel on the road tax, and the government hasn't

got much money to keep the roads in shape."

"It won't take long," Jake said confidently. "All we got to do is just kind of look around. In no time at all we'll find a camp that will take us in. Stands to reason there'll be one of them that could find a use for us."

He went over to the trailer and carefully wiped a spot of dust off its shiny surface with his ragged shirt sleeve.

"We ain't none of us scarcely slept a wink since you told us, Doc. Myrt, she can't understand it; she keeps saying to me, 'Why is Doc talcing us along? We ain't got no claim on him; all we been is neighbors.'"

"I'm a bit too old," said Amby, "to do it by myself. I have to have someone along to help out with the driving and the other chores. And you've been looking forward all these years to going trailering."

"That's a fact," admitted Jake. "Doc, you never spoke a truer word. I wanted it so bad I could almost taste it; and by the looks of it, so have all the rest of us. You ought to see the throwing away and packing that's going on over at the house. Myrt is plain beside herself. I tell you, Doc, it ain't no safe place to go until Myrt calms down a bit."

"Maybe I ought to do some packing myself," said Amby. "Not that there's much to do; I'll just leave the most of it behind."

But he didn't stir. He didn't want to face it.

It would be hard to leave his home—although that was old-fogey thinking, for there were no longer any homes. "Home" was a word out of an era left behind. "Home" was another nostalgic word for old men like him to mumble in their dim remembering. "Home" was the symbol of a static culture that had failed hi the scales of Man's survival. To put down roots, to stay and become encumbered by possessions—not only physical, but mental and traditional as well—was to die. To be mobile and forever poised on the edge of flight, to travel lean and gaunt, to shun encumbrances, was the price of freedom and life.

Full cycle, Amby thought—we have come full cycle. From tribe to city, now back to tribe again.

Jake came back from the trailer and sat down again. "Tell me, Doc; tell me honest now—why are you doing it? Not that I ain't glad you are, for otherwise I'd never in ah1 my born days get out of this here rat trap. But I can't somehow get it through my head why you are polling stakes. You ain't a young man, Doc, and ..."

"I know," said Amby; "maybe that's the reason. Not too much time left, and I have to make the best use of it I can."

"You're sitting pretty, Doc, and not a worry in the world. Now that you've retired, you could take it easy and have a lot of fun."

"I've got to find out," said Amby.

"Find out what?"

"I don't know; just what is happening, I guess."

They sat quietly, looking at the trailer in all its shining glory. From some distance down the street came the faint clatter of pots and pans and a suddenly raised voice.

Myrt still was busy packing.

5

The first evening they stopped at a deserted campsite across the road from an idle factory.

It was an extensive camp and it had the look of being occupied only recently, as if the trailers might have pulled out just a day or two before. There were fresh tire tracks in the dust; scraps of paper still blew about the area, and the ground beneath some of the water faucets still was damp.

Jake and Amby sat in the trailer's shade and looked at the silent buildings just across the road.

"Funny thing," said Jake, "about this place not running. Sign up there says it's a food processing plant. Breakfast food, looks like. Figure maybe it shut down because there wasn't any market for the stuff it makes?"

"That might be it," said Amby. "But seems there should be a market for breakfast cereal, at least some sort of market for it. Enough to keep it running, although maybe not at full capacity."

"Figure there was some kind of trouble?"

"No sign of it," said Amby. "Looks as if they just up and left."

"There's that big house up on the hill. Look, up that- away..."

"I see it now," said Amby.

"Might be where the stuffy lives."

"Could be."

"Wonder what it would be like to be a stuffy? Just sit and watch the cash come rolling in. Let other people work for you. Have everything you want. Never want for nothing."

"I imagine," Amby told him, "that the stuffies have their troubles, too."

"I'd like to have them kind of troubles. I'd just plumb love to have them kind of troubles for a year or two."

He spat on the ground and hauled himself erect. "Might go out and see if I could get me a rabbit or a squirrel," he said. "You feel like coming with me?"

Amby shook his head. "I'm a little tuckered out."

"Probably won't find nothing anyhow. Close to a camp like this, the game must be all cleaned out."

"After a while," said Amby, "when I'm rested up a bit, I might take a walk."

6

The house was a stuffy house, all right. One could almost smell the money of it. It was large and sprawling, very neatly kept, and surrounded by extensive grounds full of flowers and shrubs.

Amby sat down on a stone wall just outside the grounds and looked back the way he'd come. There below him lay the factory and the deserted camping grounds, with his trailer standing alone in the great level, trampled area. The road wound away to a far horizon, white in the summer sun, and there was nothing on it—not a single car or truck or trailer. And that, he thought, was not the way it had been. Once the roads had been crawling with machines.

But this was a different world than the one he'd known. It was a world that he'd ignored for more than thirty years, and it had grown alien in those thirty years. He had shut himself away from it and lost it; now that he sought it once again, he found it puzzling and at times a little terrifying.

A voice spoke behind him. "Good evening, sir."

Amby turned and saw the man—middle-aged or more, and the tweeds and pipe. Almost, he thought, like the age-old tradition of the English country squire.

"Good evening," Amby said. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all. I saw you camped down there; very glad to have you."

"My partner went out hunting, so I took a walk."

"You folks changing?"

"Changing?"

"Changing camps, I mean. There used to be a lot of it. Not much any more."

"You mean changing from one camp to another?"

"That's it. A process of settling down, I take it. Get dissatisfied with one setup, so go out and hunt another."

"By now," said Amby, "the shakedown period must be almost over. By now each man must have found his place."

The stuffy nodded. "Maybe that's the way it is. I don't know too much about it."

"Nor I," Amby told him. "We're just starting out. My university closed down, so I bought a trailer. My next door neighbors came along with me. This is our first day."

"I've often thought," said the man, "that it might be fun to do a little touring. When I was a boy we used to go on long motoring trips and visit different places; but there doesn't seem to be much of that any more. Used to be places where you could stop the night—motels, they called them. And every mile or so there were eating places and service stations where you could buy gasoline. Now the only place where you can get anything to eat or buy some gas, is at one of the camps; lots of times, I understand, they don't care to sell."

"But we aren't touring. We hope to join a camp."

The stuffy stared at ban for a moment, then he said: "I wouldn't have thought so, looking at you."

"You don't approve of it?"

"Don't mind me," the stuffy said. "Right at this moment, I'm a little sour on them. Just the other morning they all drove out on me. Closed down the plant. Left me sitting here."

He climbed up on the wall and sat down alongside Amby. "They wanted to take me over completely, you understand," he said, settling down to a minute recounting of it. "Under the existing contract they already ran the plant. They bought the raw materials and set up their own work schedules and kept up maintenance. They decided plant operation policy and set production schedules. I'd have had to ask their permission just to go down there and visit. But it wasn't enough for them. Do you know what they wanted?"

Amby shook his head.

"They wanted to take over marketing. That was all that I had left and they wanted to take that away from me. They were all set to shove me out completely. Pay me a percentage of the profit and cut me out entirely."

"Somehow," Amby said, "that doesn't sound quite fair."

"And when I refused to sign, they just packed up and left."

"A strike?"

"I suppose you could call it that. A most effective one."

"What do you do now?"

"Wait until another camp comes down the road. There'll be one along sometime. They'll see the plant standing idle, and if they're industrial and think they can handle it, they'll come up and see me. Maybe we can make a deal. Even if we can't, there'll be another camp along. There's always floating camps. Either that or swarms."

"Swarms?"

"Like bees, you know. A camp gets overcrowded. Too many to handle the contract that they have. So it up and swarms. Usually a bunch of young folks just starting out in life. A swarm is usually easier to deal with than the floaters. The floaters, often as not, are a bunch of radicals and malcontents who can't get along with anyone, while the youngsters in a swarm are anxious to get started at something of their own."

"That all sounds well enough," said Amby, "but how about the ones who left you? Could they afford just to pull stakes and go?"

"They're loaded," said the stuffy. "They worked here almost twenty years. They got a sinking fund that would choke a cow."

"I didn't know," said Amby.

There was so much, he thought, that he didn't know. Not only the thinking and the customs, but even a lot of the terminology was strange.

It had been different in the old days when there'd been a daily press; when a new phrase or a new thought became public property almost overnight; when the forces that shaped one's life were daily spread before one hi the black and white of print. But now there were no papers and no television. There still was radio, of course; but radio, he thought, was a poor medium to keep a man in touch; even so, it was not the kind of radio he'd known and he never listened to it.

There were no papers and no television, and that wasn't all by any means. There was no furniture, for there was no need of furniture in a trailer with everything built in. There were no rugs, no carpeting, no drapes. There were few luxury items, for there was no room for luxury items hi the confines of a trailer. There were no formal and no party clothes, for no one hi a trailer camp would dress —there was no room for an extensive wardrobe and the close communal life would discourage all formality. Such dress as there might be hi a trailer camp undoubtedly would run heavily to sportswear.

There were no banks or insurance firms or loan companies. Social security had gone down the drain. There was no use for banks or loan companies; the credit union setup, dating from the old trade unionism, would have replaced them on a tight communal basis. And an extension of the old union health and welfare fund, once again on a tight communal basis, had replaced any need of social security,

governmental welfare aid, or health insurance. And the war chest idea—once again grafted from unionism—had made each trailer camp an independent, self-sufficient governmental unit.

It worked all right, for there was little that a resident of a trailer camp could spend his money on. The old flytraps of entertainment; the need of expensive dress; the overhead of house furnishings—all had been wiped out. Thrift had become an enforced virtue—enforced by circumstance.

A man didn't even pay taxes any more—not to speak of, anyhow. State and local governments long ago had fallen by the wayside. There remained nothing but the federal government, and even the federal government had lost much of its control—as it must have known it would on that day of forty years ago. Ah* that need now be paid was a trifling defense tax, and a slightly heavier road tax, and the nomies screamed loud and lustily against the paying of the road tax.

"It's not like it used to be," said the stuffy. "This trade unionism got entirely out of hand."

"It was about all the people had to tie to," Amby told him. "It was the one surviving piece of logic, the one remaining solid thing that was left to them. Naturally, they embraced it; it took the place of government."

"The government should have done it differently," said the stuffy.

"They might have if we hadn't got so frightened. It was the fear that did it; it would have been all right if we hadn't got afraid."

Said the stuffy: "We'd been blown plumb to hell if we hadn't got afraid."

"Maybe so," said Amby. "I can remember how it happened. The order went out to decentralize, and I guess industry must have known a good deal more about what the situation was than the most of us; it got out and scattered, without any argument. Maybe they knew the government wasn't fooling and maybe they had some facts that weren't public knowledge. Although the public facts, as I remember them, ran rather to the grim side."

"I was just in my teens then," said the stuffy, "but I remember something of it. Real estate worth nothing. Couldn't sell city property at a fraction of its worth. And the workers couldn't stay there, for their jobs had moved away—away out in the country. Decentralization took in a lot of country. The big plants split up, some of them into a lot of smaller units and there had to be a lot of miles between each unit."

Amby nodded. "So there'd be no target big enough for anyone to waste a bomb on. Make it cost too much to wipe out an industry. Where one bomb would have done the job before, now it would take a hundred."

"I don't know," said the stuffy, still unwilling to concede. "Seems to me the government could have handled it a little differently instead of letting the thing run on the way it did."

"I suspect the government had a lot on its mind right then."

"Sure it had, but it had been in the housing business up to its ears before. Building all sorts of low-cost housing projects."

"It had the job of helping industry get those new plants set up. And the trailers solved the housing problem for the moment."

"I suppose," the stuffy said, "that was the way it was."

And that, of course, was the way it had been.

The workers had been forced to follow their jobs •—either follow them or starve. Unable to sell their houses in the cities when the bottom dropped out of the real estate market almost overnight, they compromised on trailers; and around each fractionated industry grew up a trailer camp.

They grew to like the trailer life, perhaps, or they were afraid to build another house for fear the same thing might happen yet again—even if some could afford to build another house, and there were a lot of them who couldn't. Or they may have become disillusioned and disgusted—it did not matter what. But the trailer life had caught on and stayed, and people who were not directly affected by decentralization had gradually drifted into the trailer camps, until even most of the villages stood empty.

The cult of possessions had been forsworn. The tribe sprang up again.

Fear had played its part and freedom.—the freedom from possessions, and the freedom to pick up and go without ever looking back—and unionism, too.

For the trailer movement had killed the huge trade union setup. Union bosses and business agents, who

had found it easy to control one huge union setup, found it a sheer impossibility to control the hundred scattered units into which each big local had been broken. But within each trailer camp a local brand of unionism had caught on with renewed force and significance. It had served to weld each camp into a solid and cohesive unit. It had made the union a thing close to each family's heart and interest. Unionism, interpreted in the terms of the people and their needs, had provided the tribal pattern needed to make the trailer system work.

"I'll say this much for them," the stuffy said. "They were an efficient bunch. They ran the plant better than I could have run it; they watched the costs and they were forever digging up shortcuts and improvements. During the twenty years they worked here they practically redesigned that plant. That's one of the things they pointed out to me in negotiations. But I told them they'd done it to protect their jobs, and that may have been the thing that made them sore enough to leave."

He tapped his pipe out on the wall. "You know," he said, "I'm not too sure but what I'm right. It'll more than likely take any new gang that moves in a month or so to figure out all the jack-leg contraptions that this bunch of mine rigged up. All I hope is that they don't start it up too quick and wreck the whole shebang."

He polished the bowl of his pipe abstractedly. "I don't know. I wish I could figure that tribe out—just for my peace of mind, if nothing else. They were good people and mostly sensible. They were hard workers and up to a month ago easy to get along with. They lived normal lives for the most part, but there were things about them I couldn't understand. Like the superstitions that grew up. They'd worked up a sizeable list of taboos, and they were hell on signs of exorcism and placation. Oh, sure, I know we used to do it—cross your fingers and spit over your left shoulder and all that sort of stuff—but with us it was all in fun. It was just horseplay with us. A sort of loving link with a past we were reluctant to give up. But these people, I swear, believed and lived by it."

"That," said Amby, "bears out my own belief that the culture has actually degenerated into the equivalent of tribalism, perhaps further than I thought. Your small, compact, enclosed social groups give rise to that sort of thing. In a more integrated culture, such notions are laughed out of existence; but in protected soil they take root and grow."

"The farm camps are the worst," the stuffy told him. "They have rainmaking mumbo-jumbo and crop magic and all the rest of it."

Amby nodded. "That makes sense. There's something about the enigma of the soil and seed that encourages mysticism. Remember the wealth of mythology that grew up around agriculture in prehistorical times—the fertility rites, and the lunar planting tables, and all the other fetishes."

He sat on the stone wall, staring off across the land; out of the dark unknown of the beginning of the race, he seemed to hear the stamp of calloused feet, the ritual chant, the scream of the sacrifice.

7

The next day, from the top of a high hill, they sighted the farm camp. It was located at the edge of a grove of trees a little distance from a row of elevators, and across the plains that stretched in all directions lay the gold-green fields.

"Now that's the kind of place I'd like to settle into," said Jake. "Good place to raise the kids and it stands to reason you wouldn't have to kill yourself with work. They do farming mostly with machinery and you'd just ride around, steering a tractor or a combine or a baler or something of the sort. Good healthful living, too, out in the sun and open air and you'd get to see some country, more than likely. When the harvest is done the whole kit and caboodle would just pull stakes and go somewhere else. Out to the southwest maybe for the lettuce or the other garden stuff, or out to the coast for fruit or maybe even south. I don't know if there's any winter farming in the south. Maybe you knew, Doc."

"No, I don't," said Amby.

He sat beside Jake and watched Jake drive; Jake, he admitted to himself, was a fine man at the wheel; a man felt safe and confident with Jake driving. He never went too fast; he took no chances, and he knew how to treat a car.

In the back seat the kids were raising a ruckus, and now Jake turned his attention to them. "If you

young'uns don't quiet down, I'm going to stop this here outfit and give you all a hiding. You kids know right well you wouldn't be raising all this rumpus if your Ma was with you instead of back there hi the trailer. She'd smack your ears for fair and she'd get you quietened down."

The kids paid no attention, went on with their scuffling.

"I been thinking," Jake said to Amby, his duty as a father now discharged, "that maybe this is the smartest thing you ever done. Maybe you should have done it sooner. Stands to reason an educated man like you won't have no trouble finding a good place in one of these here camps. Ain't likely they got many educated men and there's nothing, I've always said, like an education. Never got one myself and maybe that's why I set such a store by it. One of the things I hated back there hi the city was watching them kids run wild without a lick of learning. Myrt and me did the best we could, but neither of us know much more than our ABC's and we weren't proper teachers."

"They probably have schools in all the camps," said Amby. "I've never heard they had, but they have some sort of universities—and before anyone could go to college he'd have to have some sort of elementary education. I rather imagine we'll find the camps equipped with a fair communal program. A camp is a sort of mobile village and more than likely it would be run like one, with schools and hospitals and churches and all the other things you'd expect to find in towns—although all of them, I imagine, will have certain overtones of trade unionism. Culture is a strange thing, Jake, but it usually spells out to pretty much the same in the end result. Differing cultures are no more than different approaches to a common problem."

"I declare," said Jake, "it's a pleasure just to sit here and listen to all that lingo that you throw around. And the beauty of it is you sound just like you know what all them big words mean."

He swung the car off the highway onto the rutted road that ran up to the camp. He slowed to a crawl and they bumped along.

"Look at it," he said. "Ain't it a pretty sight. See all that washing hung out on the lines and those posies growing in the window boxes on the trailers and that little picket fence some of the folks have set up around the trailers, just like the yards back home. I wouldn't be none surprised, Doc, if we find these folks people just like us."

They reached the camp and swung out of the road, off to one side of the trailers. A crowd of children had gathered and stood watching them. A woman came to the door of one of the trailers and stood, leaning against the doorway, staring at them. Some dogs joined the children and sat down to scratch fleas.

Jake got out of the car. "Hello, kids," he said.

They giggled shyly at him.

Jake's kids piled out of the back seat and stood hi a knot beside their father.

Myrt climbed down out of the trailer. She fanned herself with a piece of cardboard. "Well, I never," she declared.

They waited.

Finally an old man came around the end of one of the trailers and walked toward them. The kids parted their ranks to let him through. He walked slowly, with a cane to help him. "Something I can do for you, stranger?"

"We was just looking around," said Jake.

"Look all you want," the oldster told him.

He glanced at Amby, still sitting in the car. "Howdy, oldtimer."

"Howdy," said Amby.

"Looking for anything special, oldtimer?"

"I guess you could say we are looking for a job; we hope to find a camp that will take us on."

The old man shook his head. "We're pretty well full up. But you better talk to the business agent; he's the one to see."

He turned and yelled to the group of staring kids. "You kids go and hunt up Fred."

They scattered like frightened partridges.

"We don't get many folks like you any more," the old man said. "Years ago there were lots of them,

just drifting along, looking for whatever they could find. A lot of folks from the smaller towns and a lot of them DF's."

He saw the look of question on Amby's face.

"Displaced farmers," he said. "Ones who couldn't make a go of it and once they took off parity there were a lot of them. Maddest bunch you ever saw. Fighting mad, they were. Had come to count on parity; thought they had it coming to them. Figured the government had done them dirt and I suppose it had. But it did dirt to a lot of the rest of us as well. You couldn't bust things up the way they were busted up without someone getting hurt. And the way things were, you couldn't expect the government to keep on with all their programs. Had to simplify."

Amby nodded in agreement. "You couldn't maintain a top-heavy bureaucracy in a system that had become a technological tribal system."

"I guess you're right," the old man agreed in turn. "So far as the farmers were concerned, it didn't make much difference anyhow. The small land holdings were bound to disappear. The little fanner just couldn't make the grade. Agriculture was on its way toward corporate holdings even before D. C. Machinery was the thing that did it. You couldn't farm without machinery and it didn't pay to buy machinery to handle the few acres on the smaller farms."

He walked closer to the car and stroked one fender with a gnarled hand. "Good car you got here."

"Had it for a long time," Amby told him. "Took good care of it."

The old man brightened. "That's a rule we got around here, too. Everyone has to take good care of everything. Ain't like it was one time when, if you busted something, or it wore out, or you lost it, you could run down the corner and get another one. Pretty good camp that way. Young fellers spend a lot of their spare time dinging up the cars. You should see what they've done to some of them. Yes, sir, there's some of them cars they've made almost human."

He walked up to the open car window and leaned on the door. "Darn good camp," he said. "Anyway you look at it. We got the neatest crops around; and we take good good care of the soil; and that's worth a lot to the stuffy who owns the place. We been coming back to this same place every spring for almost twenty years. If someone beats us here, the stuffy won't even talk to them. He always waits for us. There ain't many camps, I can tell you, that can say as much. Of course, in the winter we wander around considerable but that's because we want to. There ain't a winter place we been we couldn't go back to anytime we wanted."

He eyed Amby speculatively. "You wouldn't know nothing about rain-making, now would you?"

"Some years ago I did some reading on what had been done about it," Amby told him. "Cloud seeding, they called it. But I forget what they used. Silver—something. Some kind of chemical."

"I don't know anything about this seeding," the old man said; "and I don't know if they use chemicals or not."

"Of course," he said, anxious not to be misunderstood, "we got a bunch of the finest rain-makers that you ever saw, but in this farming business you can't have too many of them. Better to have one or two too many than one or two too few."

He looked up at the sky. "We don't need no ram right now and it ain't right to use the power, of course, unless you have some need of it. I wish you'd come when we needed rain, for then you could stay over and see the boys in action. They put on quite a show. When they put on a dance everyone turns out to watch."

"I read somewhere once," said Amby, "about the Nava-hos. Or maybe it was the Hopis ..."

But the old man wasn't interested in Navahos or Hopis. "We got a fine crew of green-thumbers, too," he said. "I don't want to sound like bragging, but we got the finest crew ..."

The children came charging around the parked trailers, yelling. The old man swung around. "Here comes Fred."

Fred ambled toward them. He was a big man, bareheaded, with an unruly thatch of black hair, bushy eyebrows, a mouthful of white teeth. "Hello, folks," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Jake explained.

Fred scratched his head, embarrassed and perplexed. "We're full up right now; fact is, we're just on the

edge of swarming. I don't see how we can take on another family. Not unless you could offer something special."

"I'm handy at machinery," Jake told him; "I can drive anything."

"We got a lot of drivers. How about repair? Know anything about welding? Can you operate a lathe?"

"Well, no ..."

"We have to repair our own machines and keep them in top running shape. Sometimes we have to make parts to replace ones that have been broken. Just can't wait to get replacements from the factory, we're kind of jacks-of-all-trades around here. There's a lot more to it than driving. Anyone can drive. Even the women and the kids."

"Doc here," said Jake, "is an educated man. Was a professor at the university until the university shut down. Maybe you could find some use ..."

Fred cheered up. "You don't say. Not agronomy..."

"History," Amby told him, "I don't know anything but history."

"Now that's too bad," said Fred. "We could use an agronomist. We're trying to run some experimental plots, but we don't know too much about it. We don't seem to get nowhere."

The old man said to Amby: "The idea is to develop better strains. It's our stock in trade. One of our bargaining points. Each camp furnishes its own seed and you can get a better deal out of the stuffy if you have top-notch strains. We got a good durham, but we're working on corn now. If we could get some that matured ten days sooner, say ..."

"It sounds interesting," said Amby, "but I couldn't help you. I don't know a thing about it."

"I'd sure work hard," said Jake, "if you just gave me a chance. You wouldn't find a more willing worker in your entire camp."

"Sorry," the business agent told him. "We all are willing workers. If you're looking for a place your best bet would be a swarm. They might take you in. An old camp like us don't take newcomers as a rule; not unless they got something special."

"Well," said Jake, "I guess that's it."

He opened the door and got into the car. The kids swarmed into the back seat. Myrt climbed back into the trailer.

"Thanks," Jake said to the business agent. "Sorry we took up your time."

He swung the car around and bumped back to the road. He was silent for a long tune. Finally he spoke up. "What the hell," he asked, "is an agronomist?"

8

That was the way it was everywhere they went:

—Are you one of these cybernetic fellows? No? Too bad. We sure could use one of those cybernetic jerks.

—Too bad. We could use a chemist. Messing around with fuels. Don't know a thing except what we dig out. One of these days the boys will blow the whole camp plumb to hell.

—Now if you were a lifter. We could use a lifter.

—You know electronics, maybe. No? Too bad.

—History. Afraid we got no use for history.

—You know any medicine? Our Doc is getting old.

—Rocket engineer? We got some ideas. We need a guy like that.

—History? Nope. What would we do with history?

But there was a use for history, Amby told himself. "I know there is a use for it," he said. "It has always been a tool before. Now, suddenly, even in a raw, new society such as this, it could not have lost its purpose."

He lay in his sleeping bag and stared up at the sky.

Back home, he thought, it was already autumn; the leaves were turning and the city, in the blaze of autumn, he recalled, was a place of breathless beauty.

But here, deep in the south, it still was summer and there was a queer, lethargic feel to the deep green

of the foliage and the flint-hard blueness of the sky—as if the green and blue were stamped upon the land and would remain forever, a land where change had been outlawed and the matrix of existence had been hardcast beyond any chance of alteration.

The trailer loomed black against the sky; now that Jake and Myrt had quit their mumbling talk inside of it, he could hear the purling of the stream that lay just beyond the campsite. The campfire had died down until it was no more than a hint of rose in the whiteness of the ash, and from the edge of the woods a bird struck up a song—a mocking bird, he thought, although not so sweet a song as he had imagined a mocking bird would sing.

That was the way it was with everything, he thought. Nothing was the way you imagined it. Most often a thing would be less glamorous and more prosaic than one had imagined it; and then, suddenly, in some unexpected place one would encounter something that would root him to his tracks.

The camps, once he'd seen two or three of them, had fallen into pattern—good solid American, sound business-practice patterns; the peculiarities had ceased to be peculiarities once he had come to understand the reason for them.

Like the weekly military drills, for instance, and the regular war games, with every man-Jack of the camp going through maneuvers or working out his all seriousness, grimly, without any horseplay, a military problem—with the women and the children scattering like coveys of quail to seek out hiding places from imaginary foes.

And that was why, he knew, the federal government could get along on its trifling defense tax. For here, at hand, subject to instantaneous call, was a citizen soldiery that would fight a total, terrible war such as would rip to pieces and hunt down with frontier efficiency and Indian savagery any enemy that might land upon the continent. The federal government maintained the air force, supplied the weapons, conducted the military research and provided the overall command and planning. The people, down to the last and least of them, were the standing army, ready for instant mobilization, trained to hair-trigger readiness, and operative without a dime of federal cost.

It was a setup, he realized now, having seen the war games and the drill, that would give pause to any potential enemy. It was something new in the science of warfare. Here stood a nation that presented no target worth the bomb that might be dropped upon it, fostering no cities to be seized and held, no industries which might be ravaged in their entirety, and with every male inhabitant between the ages of 16 and 70 a ready, willing fighter.

He lay there, pondering the many things he'd seen, the strangely familiar and the unfamiliar.

Like the folkways that had grown up within each camp, compounded of legend, superstition, magic, remembered teachings, minor hero-worship and all the other inevitable odds and ends of close communal living. And the folkways, he realized, were a part of the fierce, partisan loyalty of each man and woman for their own home camp. Out of this had arisen the fantastic rivalry, hard at times to understand, which existed among the camps, manifesting itself all the way from the bragging of the small fry to the stiff-necked refusal of camp leaders to share their knowledge or their secrets with any other camp. Hard to understand, all of it, until one saw in it the translation of the old tradition that had been the soul and body of American business practice.

A queer layout, thought Dr. Ambrose Wilson, lying in his sleeping bag in the depth of southern night—a queer layout, but a most effective one, and understandable within its terms of reference.

Understandable except for one thing—something on which he could not lay a finger. A feeling, perhaps, rather than a fact—a feeling that somewhere, somehow, underneath this whole new fabric of the neo-gypsy life, lay some new factor, vital and important, that one could sense but could never lay a name to.

He lay there, thinking of that new and vital factor, trying to sift out and winnow the impressions and the clues. But there was nothing tangible; nothing to reach out and grasp; nothing that one could identify. It was like chaff without a single grain, like smoke without a fire—it was something new and, like all the other things, perhaps, entirely understandable within its frame of reference. But where was the reference, he wondered.

They had come down across the land, following the great river, running north to south, and they'd

found many camps—crop camps with great acreages of grain and miles of growing corn; industrial camps with smoking chimneys and the clanking of machines; transportation camps with the pools of trucks and the fantastic operation of a vast freightage web; dairy camps with herds of cattle and the creameries and cheese factories where the milk was processed and the droves of hogs that were a sideline to the dairying; chicken camps; truck farming camps; mining camps; road maintenance camps; lumbering camps and all the others. And now and then the floaters and the swarms, wanderers like themselves, looking for a place.

Everywhere they'd gone it had been the same. A chorus of "too bad" resounding down the land, the swarms of staring children and the scratching dogs and the business agent saying there was nothing.

Some camps had been friendlier than others; hi some of these they'd stayed for a day or week to rest up from their travels, to overhaul the motor, to get the kinks out of their legs, to do some visiting.

In those camps he had walked about and talked, sitting in the sun or shade, as the time of day demanded; it had seemed at times he had got to know the people. But always, when it seemed that he had got to know them, he'd sense the subtle strangeness, the nebulous otherness, as if there were someone he could not see sitting in the circle, someone staring at him from some hidden spying spot, and he'd know then that there lay between him and these people a finely-spun fabric of forty years forgotten.

He listened to their radios, communal versions of the 1960 ham outfits, and heard the ghostly voices come in from other camps, some nearby, some a continent away, a network of weird communication on the village level. Gossip, mostly, but not entirely gossip, for some of it was official messages—the placing of an order for a ton of cheese or a truckload of hay, or the replacement for some broken machine part—or possibly the confirmation of a debt that one camp owed another for some merchandise or product, and oftentimes a strange shuffling of those debts from one camp to another, promise paying promise. And what of it was gossip had a special sense, imprinted with the almost unbelievable pattern of this fantastic culture which over night had walked out of its suburbia to embrace nomadism.

And always there was magic, a strangely gentle magic used for the good of people rather than their hurt. It was, he thought, as if the brownies and the fairies had come back again after their brief banishment from a materialistic world. There were quaint new ceremonies drawing from the quaintness of the old; there were good-luck charms and certain words to say; there was a resurgence of old and simple faith forgotten in the most recent of our yesterdays, an old and simple faith in certain childish things. And, perhaps, he thought, it is well that it is so.

But the most puzzling of all was the blending of the ancient magic and the old beliefs with an interest just as vital in modern technology—cybernetics going hand in hand with the good luck charm, the rain dance and agronomy crouching side by side.

All of it bothered him in more ways than one as he sought an understanding of it, tried to break down the pattern and graph it mentally on a historic chart sheet; for as often as the graph seemed to work out to some sensible system it would be knocked out of kilter by the realization he was working with no more than surface evidence.

There was always something missing—that sensed and vital factor.

They had traveled down the continent to a chorus of "too bad"; Jake, he knew, was a worried man, as he had every right to be. Lying hi his sleeping bag night after night, he'd listened to them talking—Jake and Myrt— when the kids had been asleep and he should have been. And while he'd taken care, out of decency, not to be close enough or listen hard enough to catch their actual words, he had gathered from the tones of their mumbling voices what they had talked about.

It was a shame, he thought; Jake's hopes had been so high and his confidence so great. It was a terrible thing, he told himself, to see a man lose his confidence, a little day by day—to see it drain away from him like blood-drip from a wound.

He stirred, settling his body into the sleeping bag, and shut his eyes against the stars. He felt sleep advance upon him like an ancient comforter; and in that hazy moment he had drifted from the world and yet not entirely lost it, he saw once again, idealized and beautiful, the painting that hung above the fireplace, with the lamplight falling on it.

The trailer was gone when he awoke.

He did not realize it at first, for he lay warm and comfortable, with the fresh wind of morning at his face, listening to the gladness of the birds from each tree and thicket, and the talking of the brook as it flowed among its pebbles.

He lay thinking how fine it was to be alive and vaguely wondering what the day would bring and thankful that he did not fear to meet it.

It was not until then that he saw the trailer was no longer there; he lay quietly for a moment, uncomprehending, before the force of what had happened slapped him in the face.

The first wave of panic washed over him and swiftly ebbed away—the cold fear of loneliness, the panic of desertion—retreating before the dull red glow of anger. He found his clothes inside the sleeping bag and swiftly scrambled out. Sitting on the bag to dress, he took in the scene and tried to reconstruct how it might have happened.

The camp lay just beyond a long dip in the road and he remembered how they had blocked the trailer's wheels against the slope of ground. More than likely Jake had simply taken away the blocks, released the brakes, and rolled down the hill, not starting the motor until well out of hearing.

He got up from the sleeping bag and walked numbly forward. Here were the stones they'd used to block the trailer and there the tracks of the tires straight across the dew.

And something else: Leaning against a tree was the .22 rifle that had been Jake's most prized possession and beside it an old and bulging haversack.

He knelt beside the tree and unstrapped the haversack. There were two cartons of matches, ten boxes of ammunition, his extra clothing, food, cooking and eating utensils, and an old raincoat.

He knelt there, looking at it all spread upon the ground and he felt the burning of the tears just behind his eyelids. Treachery, sure—but not entirely treacherous, for they'd not forgotten him. Thievery and desertion and the worst of bad intentions, yet Jake had left him the rifle that had been his good right arm.

Those mumbled conversations that he had listened to— could they have been plotting rather than just worried talk? And what if he had listened to the words rather than the mumble, what if he had crept and listened and learned what they were planning—what could he have done about it?

He repacked the haversack and carried it and the rifle to his sleeping bag. It would be a lot to carry, but he would take it slow and easy and he would get along. As a matter of fact, he consoled himself, he was not too badly off; he still had his billfold and the money that remained. He wondered, without caring much, how Jake, without a cent, would get gasoline and food when he needed it.

And he could hear Jake saying, in those mumbled nightly talks: "It's Doc. That's why they won't take us in. They take one look at him and know the day is not far off when he'll be a welfare charge. They aren't taking on someone who'll be a burden to them in a year or two."

Or: "It's Doc, I tell you, Myrt. He flings them big words around and they are scared of him. Figure he won't fit. Figure he is snooty. Now take us. We're common, ordinary folks. They'd take us like a shot if we weren't packing Doc."

Or: "Now us, we can do any kind of work, but Doc is specialized. We won't get nothing unless we cut loose from Doc."

Amby shook his head. It was funny, he thought, to what lengths a man would go once he got desperate enough. Gratitude and honor, even friendship, were frail barriers to the actions of despair.

And I, he asked himself. What do I do now?

Certainly not the first thing that had popped into his head—turning around and heading back for home. That would be impossible; in another month or so, snow would have fallen from the north and he would be unable to get through. If he decided to go home, he'd have to wait till spring.

There was one thing to do—continue southward, traveling as he had been traveling, but at a slower pace. There might even be some merit in it. He would be by himself and would have more time to think. And here was a situation that called for a lot of thinking, a lot of puzzling out. Somewhere, he knew, there had to be an answer and a key to that factor he had sensed within the camps. Once he had that factor, the history graph could be worked out, and he would have done the task he had set out to do.

He left the haversack and rifle on the sleeping bag and walked out to the road. He stood in the middle of it, looking first one way and then the other. It was a long and lonely road and he must travel it as lonely as the road. He'd never had a child, and of recent years he'd scarcely had a friend. Jake, he admitted now, had been his closest friend; but Jake was gone, cut off from him not only by the distance and the winding road, but by this act which now lay between them.

He squared his shoulders, with an outward show of competence and bravery which he did not feel, and walked back to pick up the sleeping bag, the haversack and rifle.

10

It was a month later that he stumbled on the truckers camp, quite by accident.

It was coming on toward evening; he was on the lookout for a place to spend the night when he approached the intersection and saw the semi-trailer parked there.

A man was squatted beside a newly-lighted campfire, carefully feeding small sticks to the flame. A second man was unpacking what appeared to be a grub-box. A third was coming out of the woods with a bucket, probably carrying water from a nearby stream.

The man tending the fire saw Amby, and stood up. "Howdy, stranger," he called. "Looking for a place to camp?"

Amby nodded and approached the campfire. He took the haversack and sleeping bag off his shoulder and dropped them to the ground. "I'd be much obliged."

"Glad to have you," said the man. He hunkered down beside the fire again and went on nursing it. "Ordinarily we don't camp out for the night. We just stop long enough to cook a bite to eat, then hit the road again. We got a bunk in the job so one of us can sleep while another drives. Even Tom has got so he's pretty good at driving."

He nodded at the man who had brought in the water. "Tom ain't a trucker. He's a professor at a university, on a leave of absence."

Tom grinned across the fire at Amby. "Sabbatical."

"So am I," said Amby. "Mine is permanent."

"But tonight we'll make a night of it," went on the trucker. "I don't like the sound of the motor. She's heating up some, too. We'll have to tear it down."

"Tear it down right here?"

"Why not? Good a place as any."

"But..."

The trucker chuckled. "Well get along all right. Jim, my helper over there—he's a lifter. He'll just h'ist her out and bring her over to the fire and we'll tear her down."

Amby sat down by the fire. "I'm Amby Wilson," he said. "Just wandering around."

"Rambling far?"

"From up in Minnesota."

"Far piece of walking for a man your age."

"I came part of the way by car."

"Car break down on you?"

"My partner ran off with it."

"Now," the trucker said, judiciously, "that's what I'd call a lousy, lowdown trick."

"Jake didn't mean any harm; he just got panicky."

"You try to track him down?"

"What's the use of trying? There's no way that I can."

"You could get a tracer."

"What's a tracer?"

"Pop," the trucker asked, "where the hell you been?"

And it was a fair question, Amby admitted to himself.

"A tracer," said Tom, "is a telepath. A special kind of telepath. He can track down a mind and find it almost every time. A kind of human bloodhound. It's hard work and there aren't many of them; but as the

years go by we hope there will be more—and better."

A tracer is a telepath!

Just like that, without any warning.

A special kind of telepath—as if there might be many other kinds of them.

Amby sat hunched before the fire and looked cautiously around to catch the sheltered grin. But they were not grinning; they acted, he thought, as if this matter of a telepath was very commonplace.

Could it be that here, he wondered, within minutes after meeting them, these people had been the first to say the word that made some sense out of the welter of folklore and magic he'd encountered in the camps?

A tracer was a telepath; and a lifter might be a tele-porter; and a green-thumber very well might be someone who had an inherent, exaggerated sympathy and understanding for the world of living things.

Was this, then, the missing factor he had sought; the differentness sensed in the camps; the logic behind the rainmakers and all the other mumbo-jumbo that he had thought of as merely incidental to an enclosed social group?

He brought his hands together between his knees, locking his fingers together tightly, to keep from trembling. Good Lord, he thought, if this is it, so many things explained! If this is the answer that I sought, then here is a culture that is unbeatable!

Tom broke in upon his thinking. "You said you were on a sabbatical as well as I. A permanent one, you said. Are you a school man, too?"

"I was," said Amby, "but the university closed down. It was one of the old universities, and there was no money and not many students."

"You're looking for another school post?"

"I'd take anything; it seems that no one wants me."

"The schools are short on men. They would snap you up."

"You mean these trailer universities."

Tom nodded. "That is what I mean."

"You don't think much of them?" the trucker asked, his hackles rising.

"I don't know anything about them."

"They're good as any schools there ever were," the trucker said. "Don't let no one tell you different."

Amby hunched forward toward the fire, the many questions, the hope and fear bubbling in his mind. "This tracer business," he said. "You said a tracer was a special kind of telepath. Are there others—I mean, are there other possibilities?"

"Some," said Tom. "There seems to be a lot of special talent showing up these days. We catch a lot of them in the universities and we try to train them, but there isn't much that we can do. After all, how could you or I train a tele-path? How would you go about it? About the best that we can do is to encourage each one of them to use such talent as he has to the best advantage."

Amby shook his head, confused. "But I don't understand. Why do you have them now when we never used to have them?"

"Perhaps there may have been some of them before D. C. There must have been, for the abilities must have been there, latent, waiting for their chance. But maybe, before this, they never had a chance. Maybe they were—well, killed in the rush. Or the abilities that there were may have been smothered under the leveling influence of the educational system. There may have been some who had the talents, and were afraid to use them for fear of being different in a culture where differentness was something to point a finger at. And being afraid, they suppressed them, until they weren't bothered by them. And there may have been others who used their talents secretly to their own advantage. Can you imagine what a lawyer or a politician or a salesman could have done with telepathy?" "You believe this?"

"Well, not all of it. But the possibilities exist." "What do you believe, then?"

"Folks are smarter now," the trucker said.

"No, Ray, that isn't it at all. The people are the same. Perhaps there were special talents back before D. C., but I don't think they showed up as often as they show up now. We got rid of a lot of the old restrictions and conventionalities. We threw away a lot of the competition and the pressure when we left

the houses, and all the other things we had thought we couldn't get along without. We cut out the complexities. Now no one is breathing down our necks. We don't have to worry so much about keeping up with the man next door—because the man next door has become a friend and is no longer a yardstick of our social and economic station. We aren't trying to pack forty-eight hours of living into every twenty-four. Maybe we're giving ourselves the chance to develop what we missed before."

Jim, the helper, had hung a pot of coffee on a forged stick over the fire and now was cutting meat.

"Pork chops tonight," said Ray, the trucker. "We were passing by a farm camp this morning and there was this pig out hi the road and there wasn't nothing I could do ..."

"You almost wrecked the truck to get him."

"Now, that's a downright libel," Ray protested. "I did my level best to miss him."

Jim went on cutting chops, throwing them into a big frying pan as he sliced them off.

"If you're looking for a teaching job," said Tom, "all you got to do is go to one of the universities. There are a lot of them. Most of them not large."

"But where do I find them?"

"You'd have to ask around. They moved around a lot. Get tired of one place and go off to another. But you're lucky now. The south is full of them. Go north hi the spring, come south in the fall."

The trucker had settled back on his haunches and was building himself a cigaret. He lifted the paper to his mouth and licked it, twirling it in shape. He stuck it in his mouth and it drooped there limply while he hunted for a small twig from the fire to give himself a light.

"Tell you what," he said, "why don't you just come along with us? There's room for everyone. Bound to find a bunch of universities along the way. You can have your pick of them. Or you might take it La your mind to stick with us right out to the coast. Tom is going out there to see some shirt-tail relatives of his."

Tom nodded. "Sure. Why don't you come along."

"Ain't like it was in the old days," said the trucker. "My old man was a trucker then. You went hell-for-leather. You didn't stop for nothing—not even to be human. You just kept rolling."

"That was the way with all of us," said Amby.

"Now we take it easy," said the trucker. "We don't get there as fast, but we have a lot more fun and there ain't no one suffering if we're late a day or two."

Jim put the pan of chops on the bed of coals.

"It's a lot easier trucking, too," said Ray, "if you can get a lifter for a helper. Nothing to loading or unloading if you have a lifter. And if you get stuck in the mud, he can push you out. Jim here is the best lifter that I ever saw. He can lift that big job if he has to without any trouble. But you got to keep after him; he's the laziest mortal I ever saw."

Jim went on frying chops.

The trucker flipped the cigaret toward the fire and it landed hi the pan of chops. Almost immediately it rose out of them; described a tiny arc and fell into the coals.

Jim said: "Ray, you got to cut out things like that. Watch what you are doing. You wear me out just picking up behind you."

The trucker said to Amby, "How about joining up with us? You'd see a lot of country."

Amby shook his head. "I'll have to think about it."

But he was dissembling. He didn't have to think about it.

He knew he wasn't going.

11

He stood by the dead campfire at the intersection and waved goodbye to them, watching the semi-trailer disappear down the road in the early morning mist.

Then he bent down and picked up the haversack and the sleeping bag and slung them on his shoulder.

He felt within himself a strange urgency—a happy urgency. And it was fine to feel it once again after all these months. Fine again to know he had a job to do.

He stood for a moment, staring around at the camping grounds—the dead ash of the fire, the pile of unused wood, and the great spot on the ground where the grease from the motor of the truck soaked

slowly in the soil.

He would not have believed it, he knew, if he had not seen it done—seen Jim lift the motor from the truck once the bed bolts had been loosened, lift it and guide it to rest beside the fire without once laying hands upon it. Again he had watched the stubborn nuts that defied the wrench turn slowly and reluctantly without a tool upon them, then spin freely to rise free of the thread and deposit themselves neatly in a row.

Once, long ago it seemed, he'd talked with a stuffy who had told him how efficiently a camp had run his plant, complaining all the while of how they'd rejiggered it until it would take any other camp a month at least to figure out the sheer mechanics of it.

Efficient! Good Lord, of course they were efficient! What new methods, what half-guessed new principles, he wondered, may have gone into that rejiggered plant?

All over the country, he wondered, how many new principles and methods might there be at work? But not regarded as new principles by the camps that had worked them out; regarded rather as trade secrets, as powerful points in bargaining, as tribal stock-in-trade. And in the whole country, he wondered, how many new talents might there be, how many applicable variations of those specific talents?

A new culture, he thought—an unbeatable culture if it only knew its strength, if it could be jarred out of its provincialism, if it could strip from its new abilities the veil of superstition. And that last, he knew, might be the toughest job of all; the magic had been used to cloak annoying ignorance and as an explanation for misunderstanding. It offered a simple and an easy explanation, and it might be hard to substitute in its stead the realization that at the moment there could be little actual knowledge and no complete understanding—only an acceptance and a patience against the day when it might be understood.

He walked over to the tree where he had leaned his rifle and picked it up. He swung it almost gayly in his hand and was astonished at the familiarity of it, almost as if it were a part of him, an extension of his hand.

And that was the way it was with these people and the possibilities. They'd gotten so accustomed to the magic, that it had become a part of everyday; they did not see the greatness of it.

The possibilities, once one thought of them, were fantastic. Develop the abilities and within another hundred years the sputtering radios would be gone, replaced by telepaths who would blanket the nation with a flexible network of communications that never would break down, that would be immune to atmospheric conditions—an intelligent, human system of communication without the inherent limitations of an electronic setup.

The trucks would be gone, too, with relays of tele-porters whisking shipments from coast to coast (and all points in between), fast and smooth and without a hitch and, once again, without regard to weather or to road conditions.

And that was only two facets of the picture. What of all the others—the known, the suspected, the now-impossible?

He walked from the campsite out to the road and stood for a moment, wondering. Where was that camp where they had asked if he was a rocket engineer? And where had been the camp that had been in the market for a chemist because the boys were fooling around with fuels? And where, he wondered, would he be able to pick up a lifter? And perhaps a good, all-purpose telepath.

It wasn't much, this thing he had in mind, he admitted to himself. But it was a start. "Give me ten years," he said. "Just ten years is all I ask."

But even if he had no more than two, he had to make a start. For if he made the start, then perhaps there'd be someone who would carry on. Someone had to make a start. Someone like himself, perhaps, who could look upon this neo-tribal world objectively and in the light of the historic past. And there may not be many of us left, he thought.

He might have a hard job selling them, he knew, but he thought he knew the pitch.

He set off up the road and he whistled as he went.

It wasn't much, but it would be spectacular if he could accomplish it. Once it had been done, it would be a thing that every camp would spy and scheme and cheat and steal to do.

And it would take something such as that, he knew, to knock some sense into their heads; to make

them see the possibilities; to set them to wondering how they might turn to use the other strange abilities which had blossomed here in the soil of a new society.

Now where was that camp where they'd been in need of a rocket engineer?

Up the road somewhere. Up the winding, lonely road that was no longer lonely.

Just up the road a piece. A hundred miles or two. Or was it more than that?

He jogged along, trying to remember. But it was hard to remember. There had been so many days and so many camps. A landmark, he thought—I was always good at landmarks.

But there had been too many landmarks, too.

12

He wandered up the road, stopping at the camps and the answer that he got became monotonous.

"Rockets? Hell, no! Who'd fool around with rockets?"

And he wondered: Had there ever been a camp where they'd said they could use a rocket engineer? Who would fool around with rockets? What would be the use of it?

The word went ahead of him, by telepath perhaps, by radio, by fast-running word of mouth, and he found himself a legend. He found them waiting for him, as if they had been expecting him, and they had a standard greeting that soon became a joke.

"You the gent who's looking for the rockets?"

But with their joking and the legend of him, he became one of them; and yet, even in becoming one of them, he still stood apart from them and saw the greatness that they missed, a greatness that they had to—had to—be awakened to. And a greatness that mere words and preaching would never make come alive for them.

He sat at the nightly communal gabfests, slept in those trailers that had room for an extra person, and helped at little tasks and listened to the yarning. And in turn did some yarning of his own. Time after time he felt again the strangeness and the otherness; but now that he recognized it, it did not disturb him—and sometimes, looking around the circle, he could spot the one who had it.

Lying in a bunk at night, before he went to sleep, he thought a lot about it and finally it all made sense to him.

These abilities had been with Man always, perhaps even from the caves, but then, as now, Man had not understood the power and so had not followed it. Rather he had followed along another path—ignoring mind for hand—and had built himself a wonderful and impressive and complex culture of machines. He'd built with his hands and with mighty labor the vast, complex machines which did what he might have done with the power of mind alone had he but chosen to do so. Rather he had hidden the mental power behind semantics of his own devising, and his seeking after intellectual status had laughed into disrepute the very thing he sought.

This thing which had happened, Amby told himself, was no quirk in the development of the race, but as sure and certain as the sun. It was no more than a returning to the path it had been intended all along that Man should follow. After centuries of stumbling, the human race once more was headed right again. And even if there had been no decentralization, no breakup of the culture, it would eventually have happened, for somewhere along the line of technology there must be a breakdown point. Machines could only get so big. There had to be an end somewhere to complexity, be it in machines or living.

Decentralization may have helped a little, might have hurried the process along by a thousand years or so, but that was all it amounted to.

And here once again Man had devised clever words—commonplace words—to dim the brightness of this frightening thing he could not understand. A teleporter was called a lifter; a telepath a tracer or a talker, the ability to follow worldliness a bit into the future was called second sight, while one who practiced it was usually called a peeker. And there were many other abilities, too—unrecognized or little better than half-guessed—all lumped under the general term of magic. But this did not matter greatly. A common and a homey word served just as well as correct terminology, and might even in the end lead to a readier acceptance. The thing that did matter greatly was that this time the abilities not be lost and not be pushed aside. Something would happen, something had to happen, to shock these people into a

realization of what they really had.

So he went from camp to camp and now there was no need to ask the question, for the question went before him.

He went along the roads, a legend, and now he heard of another legend, a man who went from camp to camp dispensing medicines and cures.

It was only a rumor at first, heard oftener and oftener; finally he found a camp where the healer had stopped no more than a week before. Sitting around a campfire that evening, he listened to the wonder of the healer.

"Mrs. Cooper complained for years," an old crone told him. "Was sickly all the time. Kept to her bed for days. Couldn't keep nothing on her stomach. Then she took one bottle of this stuff and you should see her now. Sprightly as a jay."

Across the fire an old man nodded gravely. "I had rheu-matiz," he said. "Just couldn't seem to shake it. Misery in my bones all the blessed time. The camp doc, he couldn't do a thing. Got a bottle of this stuff .."

He got up and danced a Umber jig to put across his point.

In not one camp, but twenty, the story was the same— of those who left their beds and walked; of miseries disappeared; of complaints gone overnight.

Another one of them, Amby told himself. Another piece of magic. A man with the art of healing at his fingertips. Where would it end, he wondered.

Then he met the healer.

He came on the deserted camp after dusk had fallen. It was just at the hour when the suppers should be over, and the dishes done, and people would be gathering to sit around and talk. But there was not a soul around the trailers—except a dog or two at the garbage cans—and the streets that ran between the trailers echoed in their emptiness.

He stood in the center of the camp, wondering if he should shout to attract attention, but he was afraid to shout. Slowly he wheeled about, watching narrowly for the slightest motion, for the first pinprick of wrongness. It was then he saw the flare of light at the south edge of the camp.

Advancing cautiously toward it, he caught the murmur of the crowd when he was still a good ways off. He hesitated for a moment, doubtful if he should intrude, then went slowly forward.

The crowd, he saw, was gathered at the edge of a grove just beyond the camp. They were squeezed into a close-packed knot before a solitary trailer. The scene was lighted by a half dozen flares thrust into the ground.

A man stood on the steps that led to the trailer's door, and his voice floated faintly to where Amby stood; but faint as the words might be, there was a familiar pattern to them. Amby stood there, thinking back to boyhood, and a small town he had not thought of for years, and the sound of banjo music and the running in the streets. It had been exciting, he remembered, and they'd talked of it for days. Old Lady Adams, he remembered, had sworn by the medicine she'd bought, and waited patiently for years for the medicine show to come back to town again so she could get some more. But it never came again.

He walked forward to the edge of the crowd and a woman turned her head to tell him, whispering fiercely, "It's him!", as if it might be the Lord Almighty. Then she went back to listening.

The man on the steps was in full spiel by this tune. He didn't talk so loud, but his voice carried and it had a quietness and a pompous, yet human, authority.

"My friends," he was saying. "I'm just an ordinary man. I wouldn't have you think different. I wouldn't want to fool you by saying I was somebody, because in fact I ain't. I don't even talk so good. I ain't much good at grammar. But maybe there are a lot of the rest of you who don't know much grammar, either, and I guess the most of you can understand me; so it'll be all right. I'd like to come right down there in the crowd and talk to each one of you, face to face, but you can hear me better if I stand up here. I'm not trying to put on any airs by standing up here on these steps. I ain't trying to put myself above you.

"Now I've told you that I wouldn't fool you, not even for a minute. I'd rather cut my tongue out and throw it to the hogs than tell you a thing that wasn't true. So I ain't going to make no high-flown claims for this medicine of mine. I'm going to start right out by being honest with you. I'm going to tell you that I ain't

even a doctor. I never studied medicine. I don't know a thing about it. I just like to think of myself as a messenger—someone who is carrying good news.

"There's quite a story connected with this medicine and if you'll just hold still for a while I'd like to tell it to you. It goes a long ways back and some of it sounds almost unbelievable, but I wish you would believe me, for every word is true. First, I'll have to tell you about my old grandma. She's been dead these many years, God rest her. There never was a finer or a lander woman and I remember when I was just a lad ..."

Amby walked back from the crowd a ways and sat down limply on the ground.

The gall of the guy, he thought, the sheer impertinence!

When it was all over, when the last bottle had been sold, when the people had gone back to the camp and the medicine man was gathering up the flares, Amby rose and walked forwafd.

"Hello, Jake," he said.

13

Jake said, "Well, I tell you, Doc, I was kind of backed against the waU. We was down to nothing. No money for gasoline or grub and begging hadn't been so good. So I got to thinking, sort of desperate like. And I thought that just because a man's been honest all his life doesn't mean he has to keep on being honest. But for the life of me, I couldn't see how I could profit much even from dishonesty, except maybe stealing and that's too dangerous. Although I was ready to do most anything."

"I can believe that," Amby said.

"Aw, Doc," pleaded Jake, "What you keep pouring it on for? There ain't no sense of you staying sore. We was sorry right away we left you; we would have turned around right away and come back again, except that I was scared to. And, anyhow, it worked out all right."

He flipped the wheel a little to miss a rock lying in the road.

"Well, sir," he said, continuing with his story, "it does beat all how things will happen. Just when you figure you are sunk, something will turn up. We stopped along this river, you see, to try to catch some fish and the kids found an old dump there and got rooting around in it, the way kids will, you know. And they found a lot of bottles—four or five dozen of them—all of them alike. I imagine someone had hauled them out long ago and dumped them. I sat looking at those bottles, not having much of anything else to do, and I got to wondering if I had any use for them or if it would be just a waste of space hauling them along. Then all of a sudden it hit me just like that. They were all full of dirt and some of them were chipped, but we got them washed and polished up and ..."

"Tell me, what did you put in the bottles?"

"Well, Doc, I tell you honest, I just don't remember what I used for that first batch."

"Nothing medicinal, I take it."

"Doc, I wouldn't have the slightest notion of what goes into medicine. The only thing to be careful of is not to put in anything that will kill them or make them very sick. But you got to make it unpleasant or they won't think it's any good. Myrt, she fussed some about it to start with, but she's all right now. Especially since people claim the stuff is doing them some good, although how in the world it could I can't rightly figure out. Doc, how in the world could stuff like that be any good at all?"

"It isn't."

"But folks claim it helps. There was this one old geezer..."

"It's conditioned faith," said Amby. "They're living in a world of magic and they're ready to accept almost anything. They practically beg for miracles."

"You mean it's all in their heads?"

"Every bit of it. These people have lost their sophistication, or you'd never got away with it; they'll accept a thing like that on faith. They drink the stuff and expect so confidently it will help them that it really does. They haven't been battered since they were old enough to notice with high-power advertising claims. They haven't been fooled time after time by product claims. They haven't been gyped and lied to and cajoled and threatened. So they're ready to believe."

"So that's the way it is," said Jake. "I'm glad to know; I worried some about it."

The kids were scuffling hi the back seat and Jake chewed them out, but the kids went on scuffling. It was like old times again.

Amby settled back comfortably in the seat, watching the scenery go by. "You're sure you know where this camp is?"

"I can see it, Doc, just like it was yesterday. I remember it was funny those guys would need a rocket engineer."

He looked slantwise at Amby. "How come you're in such a lather to find this camp of theirs?"

"I got an idea," Amby told him.

"You know, Doc, I was thinking now that you're back we might team up together. You with your white hair and that big lingo that you use ..."

"Forget it," Amby said.

"There ain't no harm hi it," protested Jake. "We'd give them a show. That's what brought them out at first. It ain't like it used to be back before D. C., when there was television and the movies and baseball games and such. There ain't much entertainment now and they'd come out just to hear us talk."

Amby didn't answer.

It was good to be back again, he thought. He should be sore at Jake, but somehow he couldn't be. They'd all been so glad to see him—even the kids and Myrt—and they were trying so hard to make up for their deserting him.

And they'd do it all over again if the occasion ever arose where they thought it would be to their advantage; but in the meantime they were good people to be with, and they were heading where he'd wanted to go. He was satisfied. He wondered how long he would have had to hunt before he found the rocket camp if Jake had not turned up again. He wondered, vaguely, if he'd ever found it.

"You know," Jake said, "I been thinking it over and I might just run for congress. This medicine business has given me a lot of practice at public speaking and I know just the plank to run on—abolish this here road tax. I never heard anyone in all my life as burned up at anything as these folks are at the road tax."

"You couldn't run for congress," Amby told him. "You aren't a resident of any place. You don't belong to any camp."

"I never thought of that. Maybe I could join up with some camp long enough to ..."

"And you can't abolish the road tax if you want to keep the roads."

"Maybe you're right at that, Doc. But it does seem a shame these folks are pestered by the road tax. It sure has them upset."

He squinted at the dials on the instrument panel. "If we don't have any trouble," he said, "We'll be at that camp of yours by tomorrow evening."

14

They said, "It won't work." But that was one of the things he had known they'd say.

"It won't work if you don't co-operate," said Amby. "To do it you need fuel."

"We got fuel."

"Not good enough," said Amby; "not nearly good enough. This camp just down the road is working on some fuels."

"You want us to go down there with our hats hi hand and..."

"Not with your hats hi hand. You have something; they have something. Why don't you make a trade?"

They digested that, sitting in a circle under the big oak tree that grew hi the center of the camp. He watched them digesting it—the hard and puzzled faces, the shrewd, nineteenth-century Yankee faces, the grease-grimed hands folded hi their laps.

All around were the trailers with then" windowboxes and then- lines of washing, with the women-faces and the children-faces peering out of doors and windows, all being very silent; this was an important council, and they knew their place.

And beyond the trailers the great stacks of the farm machinery plant.

"I tell you, mister," said the business agent. "This rocket business is just a hobby with us. Some of the

boys found some books about it and read up a little and got interested. And in a little while the whole camp got interested. We do it like some other camps play baseball or hold shooting matches. We aren't hell-for-leather set on doing something with it. We're just having fun."

"But if you could use the rockets?"

"We ain't prejudiced against using them, but we got to think it through."

"You would need some afters."

"We've got lifters, mister; we got a lot of them. We pick up all we can. They cut down the operation costs, so we can afford to pay them what they ask. We use a lot of them in the assembly plant."

One of the younger men spoke up. "There's just one thing about it. Can a lifter lift himself?"

"Why couldn't he?"

"Well, you take a piece of pipe. You can pick it up without any trouble, say. But if you stand on it, you can tug your muscles out and you can't even budge it."

"A lifter can lift himself, all right," said the business agent. "We got one fellow hi assembly who rides around at work—on the pieces he is lifting. Claims it's faster that way."

"Well, all right, then," said Amby. "Put your lifter hi a trailer; he could lift it, couldn't he?"

The business agent nodded. "Easily."

"And handle it? Bring it down again without busting it all up?"

"Sure he could."

"But he couldn't move it far. How far would you say?"

"Five miles, maybe. Maybe even ten. It looks easy, sure, but there's a lot of work to it."

"But if you put rockets on the trailer, then all the lifter would have to do would be to keep it headed right. How hard would that be?"

"Well, I don't rightly know," the business agent said. "But I think it would be easy. He could keep it up all day."

"And if something happened? If a rocket burned out, say. He could bring it down to earth without smashing anything."

"I would say he could."

"What are we sitting here for, then?"

"Mister," asked the business agent, "what are you getting at?"

"Flying camps," said Amby "Can't you see it, man! Want to move somewhere else, or just go on vacation— why, the whole camp would take to the air and be there hi no time."

The business agent rubbed his chin. "I don't say it wouldn't work," he admitted. "My guess is that it would. But why should we bother? If we want to go somewhere else we got all the time there is. We ain't in any hurry."

"Yes," said another man, "just tell us one good reason."

"Why, the road tax," Amby said. "If you didn't use the roads, you wouldn't have to pay the tax."

In the utter silence he looked around the circle, and he knew he had them hooked.