

THE SPACEMAN'S VAN GOGH

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THE PLANET was so unimportant and so far out toward the rim that it didn't have a name, but just a code and number as a key to its position. The village had a name, but one that was impossible for a human to pronounce correctly.

- It cost a lot to get there. Well, not to get there, exactly, for all one did was poll there; but it cost a hunk of cash to have the co-ordinates set up for the polling. Because the planet was so far away, the computer had to do a top-notch job, correct to seven decimal points. Otherwise one took the chance of materializing a million miles off destination, hi the depths of space; or if you hit the planet, a thousand or so miles up; or worse yet, a couple hundred underneath the surface. Any one of which would be highly inconvenient, if not positively fatal.

There was no reason in the universe for anyone to go there—except Anson Lathrop. Lathrop had to go there because it was the place where Reuben Clay had died.

So he paid out a pocketful of cash to get himself indoctrinated to the planet's mores and speech, and a bucketful of cash to get his polling plotted—a two-way job, to get both there and back.

He arrived there just about midday, not at the village exactly, for even seven decimal points weren't good enough to land him squarely in it—but not more than twenty miles away, as it turned out, and no more than twelve feet off the ground.

He picked himself up and dusted himself off and was thankful for the knapsack that he wore, for he had landed on it and been cushioned from the fall.

The planet, or what he could see of it, was a dismal place. It was a cloudy day and he had trouble making out, so colorless was the land, where the horizon ended and the sky began. The ground was flat, a great plain unrelieved by trees or ridge, and covered here and there by patches of low brush.

He had landed near a path and in this he considered himself lucky, for he remembered from his indoctrination that the planet had no roads and not too many paths.

He hoisted his knapsack firmly into place and started down the path. In a mile or so he came to a signpost, badly weather-beaten, and while he wasn't too sure of the symbols, it seemed to indicate he was headed in the wrong direction. So he turned back, hoping fervently he had read the sign correctly.

He arrived at the village just as dusk was setting in, after a lonely hike during which he met no one except a strange and rather ferocious animal which sat erect to watch him pass, whistling at him all the while as if it were astounded at him.

Nor did he see much more when he reached the village. The village, as he had known it would, resembled nothing quite so much as one of the prairie dog towns which one could see in the western part of North America, back on his native Earth.

At the edge of the village he encountered plots of cultivated ground with strange crops growing in them; and working among some of these plots in the gathering darkness were little gnome-like figures. When he stopped and called to them, they merely stared at him for a moment and then went back to work.

He walked down the village's single street, which was little more than a well-travelled path, and tried to make some sense out of the entrances to the burrows, each of which was backed by a tumulus of the ground dug up in its excavation. Each mound looked almost exactly like every other mound and no burrow mouth seemed to have anything to distinguish it from any of the others.

Before some of the burrows tiny gnome-like figures played—children, he supposed—but at his approach they -scuttled rapidly inside and did not reappear.

He travelled the entire length of the street; and stand- ing there, he saw what he took to be a somewhat larger mound, some little distance off, surmounted by what appeared to be some sort of rude monument, a stubby spire that pointed upward like an accusing finger aimed toward the sky.

And that was a bit surprising, for there had been no mention hi his indoctrination—of monuments or of religious structures. Although, he realized, his indoctrination would be necessarily skimpy for a place like this; there was not a great deal known of the planet or its people.

Still, it might not be unreasonable to suppose that these gnomes might possess religion; here and there one still found patches of it. Sometimes it would be indigenous to the planet, and in other cases it would be survival transplantations from the planet Earth or from one of the other several systems where great religions once had nourished.

He turned around and went back down the street again and came to a halt in the middle of the village. No one came out to meet him, so he sat down in the middle of the path and waited. He took a lunch out of his knapsack, ate it, and drank water out of the vacuum bottle that he carried, and wondered why Reuben Clay had picked this dismal place in which to spend his final days.

Not that it would be out of keeping with the man. It was a humble place and Clay had been a humble man, known as the "Spaceman's Van Gogh" at one time. He had lived within himself rather than with the universe which surrounded him. He had not sought glory or acclaim, although he could have claimed them both—at times, indeed, it appeared that he might be running from them. Throughout his entire life there had been the sense of a man who hid away. Of a man who ran from something, or a man who ran after something—a seeking, searching man who never quite caught up with the thing he sought for. Lathrop shook his head. It was hard to know which sort Clay had been—a hunted man or hunter. If hunted, what had it been he feared? And if a hunter, what could it be he sought?

Lathrop heard a light scuffling in the path and turned his head to see that one of the gnome-like creatures was approaching him. The gnome was old, he saw. Its fur was gray and grizzled and when it came closer he saw the other marks of age upon it—the rheumy eyes, the wrinkled skin, the cragged bushiness of its eyebrows, the cramped stiffness of its hands.

It stopped and spoke to him and he puzzled out the language.

"Good seeing to you, sir." Not "sir," of course, but the nearest translation one could make.

"Good hearing," Lathrop said ceremoniously.

"Good sleeping."

"Good eating," Lathrop said.

Finally they both ran out of "goods."

The gnome stood in the path and had another long look at him. Then: "You are like the other one."

"Clay," said Lathrop.

"Younger," said the gnome.

"Younger," Lathrop admitted. "Not much younger."

"Just right," said the gnome, meaning it to be a diplomatic compliment.

"Thank you."

"Not sick."

"Healthy," Lathrop said.

"Clay was sick. Clay....." Not "died." More like

"discontinued" or possibly "ended," but the meaning was clear.

"I know that. I came to talk about him."

"Lived with us," said the gnome. "He (die?) with us."

How long ago? How did you ask how long? There was, Lathrop realized with something of a shock, no gnome-words for duration or measurement of time. A past, present and future tense, of course, but no word for measurement of either time or space.

"You" There was no word for buried. No word for grave.

"You planted him?" asked Lathrop.

He sensed the horror that his question raised. "We.... him."

Ate him? Lathrop wondered. Some of the ancient tribes of Earth and on other planets, too, ate their dead, thereby conferring tender honors on them.

But it was not eat.

Burned? Scaffolded? Exposed?

No, it was none of those.

"We him," the gnome insisted. "It was Ms wish. We loved him. We could do no less."

Lathrop bowed gratefully. "I am honored that you did."

That seemed to mollify the gnome. "He was a harmless one," said the gnome. Not exactly "harmless." Kind, perhaps. Uncruel. With certain connotations of soft-wittedness. Which was natural, of course, for in his nonconformity through lack of understanding, any alien must appear slightly soft-witted to another people.

As if he might have known what Lathrop was thinking, the gnome said, "We did not understand him. He had what he called a brushandpaints. He made streaks with them." Streaks?

Brushandpaints? Sure, brush and paints. Streaks? of course. For the people of this planet were colorblind. To them Clay's painting would be streaks. "He did that here?" "Yes. It here." "I wonder. Might I see it?" "Certainly," said the gnome. "If you follow me." They crossed the street and approached a burrow's mouth. Stooping, Lathrop followed down the tunnel. Ten or twelve feet down it became a room, a sort of earthen cave.

There was a light of a sort. Not too good a light, a soft, dim light that came from little heaps of glowing material piled in crude clay dishes placed about the burrow.

Foxfire, thought Lathrop. The phosphorescent light of rotting wood.

"There," said the gnome.

The painting leaned against one wall of the burrow, an alien square of color in this outlandish place. Under ordinary circumstances, the faint foxfire light would have been too feeble for one to see the painting, but the brush strokes on the canvas seemed to have a faint light of their own, so that the colors stood out like another world glimpsed through a window beyond the foxfire dimness.

As Lathrop looked at the propped-up square, the glowing quality seemed to become more pronounced, until the picture was quite clear in all its unfinished detail—and it was not a glow, Lathrop thought; it was a shiningness. And it was Clay. The painting, unfinished as it was, could not be mistaken. Even if one had not known that Clay had spent the last days of his life within this village, he still would have known that the work was Clay's. The clean outline was there, the authority of craftsmanship combined with the restrained quality, the masterly understatement, the careful detail and the keen sharp color. But there was something else as well—a certain happiness, a humble happiness that had no hint of triumph.

"He did not finish it," said Lathrop. "He did not have the . . . (there was no word for tune). He (discontinued) before he finished it."

"His brushandpaints discontinued. He sat and looked at it."

So that was it. That was how it happened. Clay's paints had given out and there had been no place, no way—perhaps no time—in which he could have gotten more.

So Reuben Clay had sat in this burrow and looked at his last painting, knowing it was the last painting he would ever do, propped there against the wall, and had known the hopelessness of ever finishing the great canvas he had started. Although more than likely Clay had never thought of it as great. His paintings, for him, had never been more than an expression of himself. To him they had been something that lay inside himself waiting to be transferred into some expression that the universe could see, a sort of artistic communication from Clay to all his fellow creatures.

"Rest yourself," said the gnome. "You are tired."

"Thanks," said Lathrop.

He sat down on the hard-packed floor, with his back against the wall, opposite the painting.

"You knew him," said the gnome.

Lathrop shook his head.

"But you came seeking him."

"I sought word of him."

How could one, he wondered, explain to the little gnome what he sought in Clay, or why he'd tracked him down when all the universe forgot? How could one explain to these people, who were colorblind and more than likely had no conception of what a painting was—how could one explain the greatness that was Clay's? The technique that lived within his hands, the clean, quick sense of color, the almost unworldly ability to see a certain thing exactly as it was.

To see the truth and to reproduce that truth—not as a single facet of the truth, but the entire truth in its

right perspective and its precise color, and with its meaning and its mood pinpointed so precisely that one need but look to know.

That may have been why I sought him, thought Lathrop. That may be why I've spent twenty Earth years and a barrel of money to learn all the facts of him. The monograph I some day will write on him is no more than a faint attempt to rationalize my search for facts—the logic that is needed to justify a thing. But it was the truth, thought Lathrop. That's the final answer of what I sought in Clay—the truth that lay in him and in his painting. Because I, too, at one time worked in truth.

"It is magic," said the gnome, staring at the painting.

"Of a sort," said Lathrop. And that probably had been why, at first, they had accepted Clay, in the expectation that some of his magic might rub off on them. But not entirely, perhaps; certainly not toward the end. For Clay was not the sort of simple, unassuming man these simple creatures would respect and love.

They'd let him live among them, more than likely finally as one of them, probably without the thought of payment for his living space and food. He may have worked a little in the fields and he may have pattered up things, but he would have been essentially their guest, for no alien creature could fit himself economically into such a simple culture.

They had helped him through his final days and watched him in his dying and when he had finally died they'd done to him a certain act of high respect and honor.

What was that word again? He could not remember it. The indoctrination had been inadequate; there were word gaps and blank spaces and blind spots and that was wholly understandable in a place like this.

He saw the gnome was waiting for him to explain the magic, to explain it better than Clay had been able to explain it. Or maybe Clay had not attempted to explain, for they might not have asked him.

The gnome waited and hoped and that was all, for he " could not ask. You do not ask another race about the details of their magic,

"It is a ... (no word for representation, no word for picture) ... place that Clay saw. He tried to bring it back to life. He tried to tell you and I what he had seen. He tried to make us see it, too." "Magic," said the gnome.

Lathrop gave up. It was impossible. To the gnome it was simple magic. So be it—simple magic.

It was a valley with a brook that gurgled somberly and with massive trees and a deep wash of light that was more than sunlight lay over all of it. There was no living creature in it and that was typical, for Clay was a landscape artist without the need of people or of other creatures.

A happy place, thought Lathrop, but a solemn happiness. A place to run and laugh, but not to run too swiftly nor to laugh too loudly, for there was a lordly reverence implicit in the composition.

"He saw many places," Lathrop told the gnome. "He put many places on a (no word for canvas or board or plane) ... on a flat like that. Many different planets. He tried to catch the ... (no word for spirit) ... the way that each planet looked."

"Magic," said the gnome. "His was powerful magic." The gnome moved to the far wall of the room and poked up a peat fire in a primitive stove fashioned out of mud. "You are hungry," said the gnome. "I ate."

"You must eat with us. The others will be coming. It is too dark to work."

"I will eat with you," said Lathrop.

For he must break the bread with them. He must be one of them if he were to carry out his mission. Perhaps not one of them as Clay had been one of them, but at least accepted. No matter what horrendous and disgusting thing should comprise the menu, he must eat with them.

But it was more than likely that the food would not be too bad. Roots and vegetables, for they had gardens. Pickled insects, maybe, and perhaps some alcoholic concoction he'd have to be a little careful with.

But no matter what it was, he would have to eat with them and sleep with them and be as friendly and as thoughtful as Clay had been thoughtful and friendly.

For they'd have things to tell him, data that he'd given up all hope of getting, the story of the final days of Reuben Qay. Perhaps even some clue to the mystifying "lost years," the years when Clay had dropped

completely out of sight.

He sat quietly, thinking of how the trail had come to an end, out near the edge of the galaxy, not too many light-years from this very place. For year on absorbing year he had followed Clay's trail from star to star, gathering data on the man, talking with those who'd known him, tracking down one by one the paintings he had made. And then the trail had ended. Qay had left a certain planet and no one knew where he'd gone; for years Lathrop had searched for some hint to where he'd gone, and had been close to giving up when he finally had found evidence that Clay had come to this place to die. But the evidence had strongly indicated that he had not come here directly from where the trail had stopped, but had spent several years at some other place. So there was still a gap in the story that he followed—a gap of lost years, how many years there was no way of knowing.

Perhaps here, in this village, he might get a clue to where Clay had spent those years. But, he told himself it could be no more than a clue. It could not be specific, for these little creatures had no concept of time or elsewhere.

More than likely the painting here in this burrow was in itself a clue. More than likely it was a painting of that unknown place Clay had visited before coming here to die. But if that were so, thought Lathrop, it was a slender hope, for one might spend three lifetimes—or more—combing planet after planet in the vain hope of recognizing the scene Clay had spread upon the canvas.

He watched the gnome busy at the stove, and there was no sound except the lonely whining of the wind in the chimney and at the tunnel's mouth. Lonely wind and empty moor and the little villages of heaped earth, here at the far edge of the galaxy, out in the rim of the mighty wheel of suns. How much do we know of it, he thought, this thing we call our galaxy, this blob of matter hurled out into the gulf of space by some mighty Fist? We do not know the beginning of it nor the end of it nor the reason for its being; we are blind creatures groping in the darkness for realities and the few realities we find we know as a blind man knows the things within his room, knowing them by the sense of touch alone. For hi the larger sense we all are as blind as he—all of us together, all the creatures living in the galaxy. And presumptuous and precocious despite our stumbling blindness, for before we know the galaxy we must know ourselves.

We do not understand ourselves, have no idea of the purpose of us. We have tried devices to explain ourselves, materialistic devices and spiritualistic devices and the application of pure logic, which was far from pure. And we have fooled ourselves, thought Lathrop. That is mostly what we've done. We have laughed at things we do not understand, substituting laughter for knowledge, using laughter as a shield against our ignorance, as a drug to still our sense of panic. Once we sought comfort in mysticism, fighting tooth and nail against the explanation of the mysticism, for only so long as it remained mysticism and unexplained could it comfort us. We once subscribed to faith and fought to keep the faith from becoming fact, because in our twisted thinking faith was stronger than the fact.

And are we any better now, he wondered, for having banished faith and mysticism, sending the old faiths and the old religions scurrying into hiding places against the snickers of a galaxy that believes in logic and pins its hope on nothing less than fact. A step, he thought—it is but a step, this advancement to the logic and the fact, this fetish for explaining. Some day, far distant, we may find another fact that will allow us to keep the logic and the fact, but will supply once again the comfort that we lost with faith.

The gnome had started cooking and it had a good smell to it. Almost an Earth smell. Maybe, after all, the eating would not be as bad as he had feared.

"You like Clay?" the gnome asked.

"Liked him. Sure, I liked him."

"No. No. You do like he? You make the streaks like he?"

Lathrop shook his head. "I do nothing now. I am (how did you say retired?).... My work is ended. Now I play (play, because there was no other word)."

"Play?"

"I work no more. I do now as I please. I learn of Clay's life and I (no word for write) ... I tell his life in streaks. Not those kind of streaks. Not the kind of streaks he made. A different kind of streaks."

When he had sat down he'd put his knapsack beside him. Now he drew it to his lap and opened it. He

took out the pad of paper and a pencil. "This kind of streaks," he said.

The gnome crossed the room to stand beside him.

Lathrop wrote on his pad: / was a whitherer. I used facts and logic to learn whither are we going. I was a seeker of truth.

"Those kind of streaks," he said. "I have made many streaks of Clay's life."

"Magic," said the gnome.

It was all down, thought Lathrop, all that he had learned of Clay. All but the missing years. All down in page after page of notes, waiting for the writing. Notes telling the strange story of a strange man who had wandered star to star, painting planet after planet, leaving his paintings strewn across the galaxy. A man who had wandered as if he might be seeking something other than new scenes to put upon his canvases. As if his canvases were no more than a passing whim, no more than a quaint and convenient device to earn the little money that he needed for food and polling plots, the money that enabled him to go on to system after system. Making no effort to retain any of his work, selling every bit of it or even, at times, simply walking off and leaving it behind.

Not that his paintings weren't good. They were—star-tlingly good. They were given honored places in many galleries, or what passed as galleries, on many different planets.

Clay had stayed for long at no place. He had always hurried on. As if there were a purpose or a plot which drove him from star to star.

And the sum total of the wandering, of the driven purpose, had ended here in this very burrow, no more than a hiding place against the wind and weather.

"Why?" asked the gnome. "Why make the streaks of Clay?"

"Why?" said Lathrop. "Why? I do not know!"

But the answer, not only of Clay's wandering, but of his following in Clay's tracks, might be within his grasp. Finally, after all the years of searching, he might find the answer here.

"Why do you streak?"

And how to answer that?

How had Clay answered? For they must have asked him, too. Not how, because you do not ask the how of magic. But why ... that was permissible. Not the secret of the magic, but the purpose of it.

"So we may know," said Lathrop, groping for the words, "So all of us may know, you and I and all the others on other stars may know what kind of being (man?) Clay was."

"He was (kind?). He was one of us. We loved him. That is all we need to know."

"All you may need," said Lathrop. "But not enough for others."

Although there probably would not be many who would read the monograph once he had written it. Only a pitiful few would take the time to read it, or even care to read it.

He thought: Now, finally, I know what I've known all along, but refused to admit I knew; that I'm not doing this for others, but for myself alone. And not for the sake of occupation, not for the sake of keeping busy in retirement, but for some deeper reason and for some greater need. For some factor or some sense, perhaps, that I missed before. For some need I do not even recognize. For some purpose that might astound me if I ever understood it.

The gnome went back to the stove and got on with the meal and Lathrop continued to sit with his back against the wall, realizing now the tiredness that was in him. He'd had a busy day. Polting was not difficult, actually seemed easy, but it took a lot out of a man. And, in addition to that, he'd walked twenty miles from his landing place to reach the village.

Polting might be easy, but it had not been easy to come by, for its development had been forced to wait upon the suspension of erroneous belief, had come only with the end of certain superstitions and the false screen of the prejudice set up to shield Man against his lack of knowledge. For if a man did not understand a thing, he called it a silly superstition and let it go at that. The human race could disregard a silly superstition and be quite easy in its mind, but it could not disregard a stubborn fact without a sense of guilt.

Shuffling footsteps came down the tunnel and four gnomes emerged into the burrow. They carried crude gardening tools and these they set against the wall, then stood silently in a row to stare at the man

sitting on the floor.

The old gnome said: "It is another one like Clay. He will stay with us."

They moved forward, the four of them, and stood in a semi-circle facing Lathrop. One of them asked the old gnome at the stove: "Will he stay here and die?" And another one said, "He is not close to dying, this one." There was anticipation in them.

"I will not die here," said Lathrop, uneasily. "We will....," said one of them, repeating that word which told what they had done with Clay when he had died, and he said it almost as if it were a bribe to make the human want to stay and die.

"Perhaps he would not want us to," said another one.

"Clay wanted us to do it. He may not feel like Clay."

There was horror in the burrow, a faint, flesh-creeping horror in the words they said and in the way they looked at him with anticipation.

The old gnome went to one corner of the burrow and came back with a bag. He set it down in front of Lathrop and tugged at the string which tied it, while all the others watched. And one could see that they watched with reverence and hope and that the opening of the bag was a great occasion—and that if there could be anything approaching solemnity in their squat bodies, they watched most solemnly.

The string finally came loose and the old gnome tilted the bag and grasped it by its bottom and emptied it upon the earthen floor. There were brushes and many tubes of paint, all but a few squeezed dry and a battered wallet and something else that the old gnome picked up from the floor and handed to the Earthman.

Lathrop stretched out his hand and took it and held it and looked at it and suddenly he knew what they had done to Clay, knew without question that great and final honor. Laughter gurgled in his throat—not laughter at the humor of it, for there was no humor, but laughter at the twisted values, at the cross-purposes of concepts, at wondering how, and knowing how the gnomes might have arrived at the conclusion which they reached in rendering to Clay the great and final honor.

He could see it even now as it might have happened—how they worked for days carrying the earth to make the mound he'd seen beyond the village, knowing that the end was nearing for this alien friend of theirs; how they must have searched far for timber in this land of little bushes, and having found it, brought it in upon many bended backs, since they did not know the wheel; and how they fitted it together, fumblingly, perhaps, with wooden pegs and laboriously bored-out holes, for they had no metal and they knew no carpentry.

And they did it all for the love that they bore Clay, and all their labor and their time had been as nothing in the glory of this thing they did so lovingly.

He looked at the crucifix and now it seemed that he understood what had seemed so strange of Clay—the eternal searching, the mad, feverish wandering from one star system to another, even in part, the superb artistry that spoke so clearly of a hidden, half-guessed truth behind the many truths he'd spoken with his brush.

For Clay had been a survival-member of that strange, gentle sect out of Earth's far antiquity; he had been one of those who, in this world of logic and of fact, had clung to the mysticism and the faith. Although for Clay, perhaps, the naked faith alone had not been enough, even as for him, Anson Lathrop, bare facts at times seemed not enough. And that he had never guessed this truth of Clay was easy to explain—one did not fling one's faith into the gigantic snicker of a Logic universe.

For both of them, perhaps, neither fact nor faith could stand alone, but each must have some leavening of the other.

Although that was wrong, Lathrop told himself. I do not need the faith. I worked for years with logic and with fact and that is all one needs. If there is other need, it lies in another as-yet-undiscovered fact or; we need not go back to faith.

Strip the faith and the mumbo-jumbo from the fact and you have something you can use. As Man long ago had stripped the disbelief and laughter from the poltergeist and had come up with the principle of polling, the fact and principle that moved a man from star to star as easily as in the ancient days he might walk down the street to his favorite bar.

Yet there could be no doubt that for Clay it had not worked that way, that with fact alone he could not have painted as he did, that it took the simple faith and the inner glow of that simple faith to give him the warmth and the dedication to make his paintings what they were.

And it had been the faith that had sent him on his search throughout the galaxy.

Lathrop looked at the painting and saw the simplicity and the dignity, the tenderness and the happiness and the sense of flooding light.

Exactly the kind of light, thought Lathrop, that had been so crudely drawn in the illustrations of those old books he had studied in his course on Earth's comparative religions. There had been, he remembered, one instructor who'd spent some time on the symbolism of the light.

He dropped the crucifix and put out his hand and picked up some of the twisted tubes of oils.

The painting was unfinished, the gnome had said, because Clay had run out of paint, and there was truth in that, for the tubes were flattened and rolled up hard against the caps and one could see the imprint of the fingers that had applied the pressure to squeeze out the last drop of the precious oils.

He fled across the galaxy, thought Lathrop, and I tracked him down.

Even after he was dead I went on and tracked him down, sniffing along the cold trail he had left among the stars. And I tracked him because I loved him, not the man himself—for I did not know nor have any way to know what kind of man he was—but because I saw within his paintings something that all the critics missed. Something that called out to me. Deny it as I may, it may have been the ancient faith calling out to me. The faith that is missing now. The simple faith that long ago was killed by simple logic.

But he knew Clay now, Lathrop told himself. He knew him by the virtue of the tiny crucifix and by the symbol of the last great canvas and by the crude actuality of the mound that stood at the village end on this third rate planet.

And he knew why it had to be a third rate planet.

For there must be humility—even as in faith there had been humility, as there had never been in logic.

Lathrop could shut his eyes and see it—the somber clouds and the vast dreariness of the wastelands, the moors that swept on to foreverness, and the white figure on the cross and the crowd that stood beneath it, staring up at it, marked for all time by a thing they did not understand, a thing they could not understand, but a thing they had done out of utter kindness for one whose faith had touched them.

"Did he ever tell you," he asked the gnomes, "where he had been? Where he came from? Where he had been just before he came here."

They shook their heads at Lathrop. "He did not tell," they said.

Somewhere, thought Lathrop, where the trees grow like those trees in the painting. Where there was peace and dignity and tenderness—and the light.

Man had stripped the husk of superstition from the poltergeist and had found a kernel in the polling principle. Man had done the same with anti-gravity, and with telepathy, and many other things but he had not tried to strip the husks from faith to find the hidden kernel. For faith did not submit to investigation. Faith stood sufficient to itself and did not admit of fact.

What was faith and what the goal of faith? In the many tongues of ancient Earth, what had been the goal of those who subscribed to faith? Happy hunting ground, valhalla, heaven, the islands of the blest—how much faith, how much could be fact? One would not know unless he lived by faith alone and no being now, or very few, lived entirely by their faith.

But might there not be, in the last great reckoning of galactic life and knowledge another principle which would prove greater than either faith or fact—a principle as yet unknown, but only to be gained by aeons of intellectual evolution. Had Clay stumbled on that principle, a man who sought far ahead of time, who ran away from evolutionary knowledge and who, by that very virtue, would have grasped no more than a dim impression of the principle-to-come.

Faith had failed because it had been blinded by the shining glory of itself. Could fact as well have failed by the hard glitter of its being?

But abandoning both faith and fact, armed with a greater tool of discernment, might a man not seek and find the eventual glory and the goal for which life has grasped, knowing and unknowing, from the first faint stir of consciousness upon the myriad solar systems?

Lathrop found the tube of white and unscrewed the cap and squeezed the tube and a bit of oil came out, a tiny drop of oil. He held the tube steady in one hand and picked up a brush. Carefully he transferred the color to the brush.

He dropped the tube and walked across the burrow to the painting and squatted down and squinted at it in the feeble light, trying to make out the source of the flood of light.

Up in the left hand corner, just above the horizon, although he couldn't be entirely sure that he was right.

He extended the brush, then drew it back.

Yes, that must be it. A man would stand beneath the massive trees and face toward the light.

Careful now, he thought. Very, very careful. Just a faint suggestion, for it was mere symbolism. Just a hint of color. One stroke perpendicular and a shorter one at right angle, closer to the top.

The brush was awkward in his hand.

It touched the canvas and he pulled it back again.

It was a silly thing, he thought. A silly thing and crazy. And, besides, he couldn't do it. He didn't know how to do it. Even at his lightest touch, it would be crude and wrong. It would be desecration.

He let the brush drop from his fingers and watched it roll along the floor.

I tried, he said to Clay.