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INSTALLMENT PLAN

Clifford D. Simak

I

THE MISHAP came at dusk, as the last floater was settling down above the cargo dump, the eight small motors flickering bluey in the twilight. One instant it was floating level, a thousand feet above the ground, descending gently, with its cargo stacked upon it and the riding robots perched atop the cargo. The next instant it tilted as first one motor failed and then a second one. The load of cargo spilled and the riding robots with it.

The floater, unbalanced, became a screaming wheel, spinning crazily, that whipped in a tightening, raging spiral down upon the base.

Steve Sheridan tumbled from the pile of crates stacked outside his tent. A hundred yards away, the cargo hit with a thundering crash that could be heard and felt above the screaming of the floater. The crates and boxes came apart and the crushed and twisted merchandise spread into a broken mound.

Sheridan dived for the open tent flaps and, as he did, the floater hit, slicing into the radio shack, which had been set up less than an hour before. It tore a massive hole into the ground, half burying itself, throwing up a barrage of sand and gravel that bulleted across the area, drumming like a storm of sleet against the tent.

A pebble grazed Sheridan's forehead and he felt the blast of sand against his cheek. Then he was

inside the tent and scrambling for the transmog chest that stood beside the desk.

"Hezekiah!" he bawled. "Hezekiah, where are you!"

He fumbled his ring of keys and found the right one and got it in the lock. He twisted and the lid of the chest snapped open.

Outside, he could hear the pounding of running robot feet.

He thrust back the cover of the chest and began lifting out the compartments in which the transmogs were racked.

"Hezekiah!" he shouted.

For Hezekiah was the one who knew where all the transmogs were; he could lay his hands upon any of them that might be needed without having to hunt for it.

Behind Sheridan, the canvas rustled and Hezekiah came in with a rush. He brushed Sheridan to one side.

"Here, let me, sir," he said.

"We'll need some roboticists," said Sheridan. "Those boys must be smashed up fairly bad."

"Here they are. You better handle them, sir. You do it better than any one of us."

Sheridan took the thee transmogs and dropped them in the pocket of his jacket.

"I'm sorry there are no more, sir," Hezekiah said. "That is all we have."

"These will have to do," said Sheridan. "How about the radio shack? Was anyone in there?"

"I understand that it was quite empty. Silas had just stepped out of it. He was very lucky, sir."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Sheridan.

He ducked out of the tent and ran toward the mound of broken crates and boxes. Robots were swarming over it, digging frantically. As he ran, he saw them stoop and lift free a mass of tangled metal. They hauled it from the pile and carried it out and laid it on the ground and stood there looking at it.

Sheridan came up to the group that stood around the mass of metal.

"Abe," he panted, "did you get out both of them?"

Abraham turned around. "Not yet, Steve. Max is still in there."

Sheridan pushed his way through the crowd and dropped on his knees beside the mangled robot. The midsection, he saw, was so deeply dented that the front almost touched the back. The legs were limp and the arms were canted and locked at a crazy angle. The head was twisted and the crystal eyes were vacant.

"Lem," he whispered. "Lemuel, can you hear me?"

"No, he can't," said Abraham. "He's really busted up."

"I have roboticists in my pocket." Sheridan got to his feet "Three of them. Who wants a go at it? It'll have to be fast work."

"Count me in," Abraham said, "and Ebenezer there and..."

"Me, too," volunteered Joshua.

"We'll need tools," said Abraham. "We can't do a thing unless we have some tools."

"Here are the tools," Hezekiah called out, coming on the trot. "I knew you would need them."

"And light," said Joshua. "It's getting pretty dark, and from the looks of it, we'll be tinkering with his brain."

"We'll have to get him up someplace," declared Abraham, "so we can work on him. We can't with him lying on the ground."

"You can use the conference table," Sheridan suggested. "Hey, some of you guys," yelled Abraham, "get Lem over there on the conference table."

"We're digging here for Max," Gideon yelled back. "Do it yourself."

"We can't," bawled Abraham. "Steve is fixing to get our transmogs changed..."

"Sit down," ordered Sheridan. "I can't reach you standing up. And has someone got a light?"

"I have one, sir," said Hezekiah, at his elbow. He held out a flash.

"Turn it on those guys so I can get the transmogs in."

Three robots came stamping over and picked up the damaged Lemuel. They lugged him off toward the conference table.

In the light of the flash, Sheridan got out his keys, shuffled swiftly through them and found the one he wanted.

"Hold that light steady. I can't do this in the dark."

"Once you did," said Ebenezer. "Don't you remember, Steve? Out on Galanova. Except you couldn't see the labels and you got a missionary one into Ulysses when you thought you had a woodsman and he started preaching. Boy, was that a night!"

"Shut up," said Sheridan, "and hold still. How do you expect me to get these into you if you keep wiggling?"

He opened the almost invisible plate in the back of Ebenezer's skull and slid it quickly down, reached inside and found the spacehand transmog. With a quick twist, he jerked it out and dropped it in his pocket, then popped in the roboticist transmog, clicked it into place and drove it home. Then he shoved up the brain plate and heard it lock with a tiny click.

Swiftly he moved along. He had switched the transmogs in the other two almost as soon as Ebenezer had regained his feet and picked up the kit of tools.

"Come on, men," said Ebenezer. "We have work to do on Lem."

The three went striding off.

Sheridan looked around. Hezekiah and his light had disappeared, galloping off somewhere, more than likely, to see to something else.

The robots still were digging into the heap of merchandise. He ran around the pile to help them. He began pulling stuff from the pile and throwing it aside.

Beside him, Gideon asked: "What did you run into, Steve?"

"Huh?"

"Your face is bloody."

Sheridan put up his hand. His face was wet and sticky. "A piece of gravel must have hit me."

"Better have Hezekiah fix it."

"After Max is out," said Sheridan, going back to work.

They found Maximilian fifteen minutes later, at the bottom of the heap. His body was a total wreck, but he still could talk.

"It sure took you guys long enough," he said.

"Ah, dry up," Reuben said. "I think you engineered this so you could get a new body."

They hauled him out and skidded him along the ground.

Bits of broken arms and legs kept dropping off him. They plunked him on the ground and ran toward the radio shack.

Maximilian squalled after them: "Hey, come back! You can't just dump me here!"

Sheridan squatted down beside him. "Take it easy; Max. The floater hit the radio shack and there's trouble over there."

"Lemuel? How is Lemuel?"

"Not too good. The boys are working on him."

"I don't know what happened, Steve. We were going all right and all at once the floater bucked us off."

"Two of the motors failed," said Sheridan. "Just why, we'll probably never know, now that the floater's smashed. You sure you feel all right?"

"Positive. But don't let the fellows fool around. It would be just like them to hold out on a body. Just for laughs. Don't let them."

"You'll have one as soon as we can manage. I imagine Hezekiah is out running down spare bodies."

"It does beat all," said Maximilian. "Here we had all the cargo down - a billion dollars' worth of cargo and we hadn't broken -"

"That's the way it is, Max. You can't beat the averages."

Maximilian chuckled. "You human guys," he said. "You' always figure averages and have hunches and..."

Gideon came running out of the darkness. "Steve, we got to get those floater motors stopped. They're running wild. One of them might blow."

"But I thought you fellows -"

"Steve, it's more than a spacehand job. It needs a nuclear technician."

"Come with me."

"Hey!" yelled Maximilian.

"I'll be back," said Sheridan.

At the tent, there was no sign of Hezekiah. Sheridan dug wildly through the transmog chest. He finally located a nuclear technician transmog.

"I guess you're elected," he said to Gideon.

"Okay," the robot said. "But make it fast. One of those motors can blow and soak the entire area with radiation. It wouldn't bother us much, but it would be tough on you."

Sheridan clicked out the spacehand transmog, shoved the other in.

"Be seeing you," said Gideon, dashing from the tent. Sheridan stood staring at the scattered transmogs. Hezekiah will give me hell, he thought.

Napoleon walked into the tent. He had his white apron tucked into the belt. His white cook's hat was canted on his head.

"Steve," he asked, "how would you like a cold supper for tonight?"

"I guess it would be all right."

"That floater didn't only hit the shack. It also flattened the stove."

"A cold supper is fine. Will you do something for me?"

"V/hat is it?"

"Max is out there, scared and busted up and lonely. He'll feel better in the tent."

Napoleon went out, grumbling: "Me, a chef, lugging a guy..."

Sheridan began picking up the transmogs, trying to get them racked back in order once again.

Hezekiah returned. He helped pick up the transmogs, began rearranging them.

"Lemuel will be all right, sir," he assured Sheridan. "His nervous system was all tangled up and short-circuiting. They had to cut out great hunks of wiring. About all they have at the moment, sir, is a naked brain. It will take a while to get him back into a body and all hooked up correctly."

"We came out lucky, Hezekiah."

"I suppose you are right, sir. I imagine Napoleon told you about the stove."

Napoleon came in, dragging the wreckage that was Maximilian, and propped it against the desk.

"Anything else?" he asked with withering sarcasm.

"No, thank you, Nappy. That is all."

"Well," demanded Maximilian, "how about my body?"

"It will take a while," Sheridan told him. "The boys have their hands full with Lemuel. But he's going to be all right."

"That's fine," said Maximilian. "Lem is a damn good robot. It would be a shame to lose him."

"We don't lose many of you," Sheridan observed. "No," said Maximilian. "We're plenty tough. It takes a lot to destroy us."

"Sir," Hezekiah said, "you seem to be somewhat injured. Perhaps I should call in someone and put a medic transmog in him..."

"It's all right," said Sheridan. "Just a scratch. If you could find some water, so I could wash my face?"

"Certainly, sir. If it is only minor damage, perhaps I can patch you up."

He went to find the water.

"That Hezekiah is a good guy, too," said Maximilian, in an expansive mood. "Some of the boys think at times that he's a sort of sissy, but he comes through in an emergency."

"I couldn't get along without Hezekiah," Sheridan answered evenly. "We humans aren't rough and tough like you. We need someone to look after us. Hezekiah's job is in the very best tradition."

"Well, what's eating you?" asked Maximilian. "I said he was a good guy."

Hezekiah came back with a can of water and a towel. "Here's the water, sir. Gideon said to tell you the motors are okay. They have them all shut off."

"I guess that just about buttons it all up - if they're sure of Lemuel," Sheridan said.

"Sir, they seemed very sure."

"Well, fine," said Maximilian, with robotic confidence. "Tomorrow morning we can start on the selling job."

"I imagine so," Sheridan said, standing over the can of water and taking off his jacket.

"This will be an easy one. We'll be all cleaned up and out of here in ninety days or less."

Sheridan shook his head. "No, Max. There's no such thing as an easy one."

He bent above the can and sloshed water on his face and head.

And that was true, he insisted to himself. An alien planet was an alien planet, no matter how you approached it. No matter how thorough the preliminary survey, no matter how astute the planning, there still would always be that lurking factor one could not foresee.

Maybe if a crew could stick to just one sort of job, he thought, it eventually might be possible to work out what amounted to a foolproof routine. But that was not the way it went when one worked for Central Trading.

Central Trading's interests ran to many different things.

Garson IV was sales. Next time it could just as well be a diplomatic mission or a health-engineering job. A man never knew what he and his crew of robots might be in for until he was handed his assignment.

He reached for the towel.

"You remember Carver VII?" he asked Maximilian.

"Sure, Steve. But that was just hard luck. It wasn't Ebenezer's fault he made that small mistake."

"Moving the wrong mountain is not a small mistake," Sheridan observed with pointed patience.

"That one goes right back to Central," Maximilian declared, with a show of outrage. "They had the blueprints labeled wrong..."

"Now let's hold it down," Sheridan advised. "It is past and done with. There's no sense in getting all riled up."

"Maybe so," said Maximilian, "but it burns me. Here we go and make ourselves a record no other team can touch. Then Central pulls this boner and pins the blame on us. I tell you, Central's got too big and clumsy."

And smug as well, thought Sheridan, but he didn't say it. Too big and too complacent in a lot of ways. Take this very planet, for example. Central should have sent a trading team out here many years ago, but instead had fumed and fussed around, had connived and schemed; they had appointed committees to delve into the situation and there had been occasional mention of it at the meetings of the board, but there had been nothing done until the matter had ground its way through the full and awesome maze of very proper channels.

A little competition, Sheridan told himself, was the very thing that Central needed most. Maybe, if there were another outfit out to get the business, Central Trading might finally rouse itself off its big, fat dignity.

Napoleon came clumping in and banged a plate and glass and bottle down upon the table. The plate was piled with cold cuts and sliced vegetables; the bottle contained beer. Sheridan looked surprised. "I didn't know we had beer."

"Neither did I," said Napoleon, "but I looked and there it was. Steve, it's getting so you never know what is going on."

Sheridan tossed away the towel and sat down at the desk. He poured a glass of beer.

"I'd offer you some of this," he told Maximilian, "except I know it would rust your guts."

Napoleon guffawed.

"Right as of this moment," Maximilian said, "I haven't any guts to speak of. Most of them dropped out."

Abraham came tramping briskly in. "I hear you have Max hidden out some place."

"Right here, Abe," called Maximilian eagerly.

"You certainly are a mess," said Abraham. "Here we were going fine until you two clowns gummed up the works."

"How is Lemuel?" asked Sheridan.

"He's all right," said Abraham. "The other two are working on him and they don't really need me. So I came hunting Max." He said to Napoleon, "Here, grab hold and help me get him to the table. We have

good light out there."

Grumbling, Napoleon lent a hand. "I've lugged him around half the night," he complained. "Let's not bother with him. Let's just toss him on the scrap heap."

"It would serve him right," Abraham agreed, with pretended wrath.

The two went out, carrying Maximilian between them. He still was dropping parts.

Hezekiah finished with the transmog chest, arranging all the transmogs neatly in their place. He closed the lid with some satisfaction.

"Now that we're alone," he said, "let me see your face." Sheridan' grunted at him through a mouth stuffed full of food.

Hezekiah looked him over. "Just a scratch on the forehead, but the left side of your face, sir, looks as if someone had sandpapered it. You are sure you don't want to transmog someone? A doctor should have a look at it."

"Just leave it as it is," said Sheridan. "It will be all right."

Gideon stuck his head between the tent flaps. "Hezekiah, Abe is raising hell about the body you found for Max. He says it's an old, rebuilt job. Have you got another one?"

"I can look and see," said Hezekiah. "It was sort of dark. There are several more. We can look them over."

He left with Gideon, and Sheridan was alone. He went on eating, mentally checking through the happenings of the evening. It had been hard luck, of course, but it could have been far worse. One had to expect accidents and headaches every now and then. After all, they had been downright lucky. Except for some lost time and a floater load of cargo, they had come out unscathed.

All in all, he assured himself, they'd made a good beginning. The cargo sled and ship were swinging in tight orbits, the cargo had been ferried down and on this small peninsula, jutting out into the lake, they had as much security as one might reasonably expect on any alien planet. The Garsonians, of course, were not belligerent, but even so one could never afford to skip security.

He finished eating and pushed the plate aside. He pulled a portfolio out of a stack of maps and paper work lying on the desk. Slowly he untied the tapes and slid the contents out. For the hundredth time, at least, he started going through the summary of reports brought back to Central Trading by the first two expeditions.

Man first had come to the planet more than twenty years ago to make a preliminary check, bringing

back field notes, photographs and samples. It had been mere routine; there had been no thorough or extensive survey. There had been no great hope nor expectation; it had been simply another job to do. Many planets were similarly spot-checked, and in nineteen out of twenty of them, nothing ever came of it.

But something very definite had come of it in the case of Garson IV.

The something was a tuber that appeared quite ordinary, pretty much, in fact, like an undersize, shriveled-up potato. Brought back by the survey among other odds and ends picked up on the planet, it had in its own good time been given routine examination and analysis by the products laboratory - with startling results.

From the podar, the tuber's native designation, had been derived a drug which had been given a long and agonizing name and had turned out to be the almost perfect tranquilizer. It appeared to have no untoward side-effects; it was not lethal if taken in too enthusiastic dosage; it was slightly habit-forming, a most attractive feature for all who might be concerned with the sale of it.

To a race vitally concerned with an increasing array of disorders traceable to tension, such a drug was a boon, indeed. For years, a search for such a tranquilizer had been carried on in the laboratories and here it suddenly was, a gift from a new-found planet.

Within an astonishingly short time, considering the deliberation with which Central Trading usually operated, a second expedition had been sent out to Carson IV, with the robotic team heavily transmogged as trade experts, psychologists and diplomatic functionaries. For two years the team had worked, with generally satisfactory results. When they had blasted off for Earth, they carried a cargo of the podars, a mass of meticulously gathered data and a trade agreement under which the Garsonians agreed to produce and store the podars against the day when another team should arrive to barter for them.

And that, thought Sheridan, is us.

And it was all right, of course, except that they were late by fifteen years.

For Central Trading, after many conferences, had decided to grow the podar on Earth. This, the economists had pointed out, would be far cheaper than making the long and expensive trips that would be necessary to import them from a distant planet. That it might leave the Garsonians holding the bag insofar as the trade agreement was concerned seemed not to have occurred to anyone at all. Although, considering the nature of the Garsonians, they probably had not been put out too greatly.

For the Garsonians were a shiftless tribe at best and it had been with some initial difficulty that the second team had been able to explain to them the mechanics and desirability of interstellar trade. Although, in fairness, it might be said of them that, once they understood it, they had been able to develop a creditable amount of eagerness to do business.

Podars had taken to the soil of Earth with commendable adaptiveness. They had grown bigger and better than they'd ever grown on their native planet. This was not surprising when one took into account the slap-dash brand of agriculture practiced by the Garsonians.

Using the tubers brought back by the second expedition for the initial crop, it required several years of growing before a sufficient supply of seed podars were harvested to justify commercial growing.

But finally that had come about and the first limited supply of the wonder drug had been processed and put on sale with wide advertising fanfare and an accompanying high price.

And all seemed well, indeed. Once again the farmers of the Earth had gained a new cash crop from an alien planet. Finally Man had the tranquillizer which he'd sought for years.

But as the years went by, some of the enthusiasm dimmed. For the drug made from the podars appeared to lose its potency. Either it had not been as good as first believed or there was some factor lacking in its cultivation on Earth.

The laboratories worked feverishly on the problem. The podars were planted in experimental plots on other planets in the hope that the soil or air or general characteristics there might supply the needed element - if missing element it were.

And Central Trading, in its ponderous, bureaucratic fashion, began preliminary plans for importation of the tubers, remembering belatedly, perhaps, the trade agreement signed many years before. But the plans were not pushed too rapidly, for any day, it was believed, the answer might be found that would save the crop for Earth.

But when the answer came, it ruled out Earth entirely; it ruled out, in fact, every place but the podar's native planet. For, the laboratories found, the continued potency of the drug relied to a large extent upon the chemical reaction of a protozoan which the podar plants nourished in their roots. And the protozoan flourished, apparently, on Garson IV alone.

So finally, after more than fifteen years, the third expedition had started out for Garson IV. And had landed and brought the cargo down and now was ready, in the morning, to start trading for the podars.

Sheridan flipped idly through the sheets from the portfolio. There was, he thought, actually no need to look at all the data once again. He knew it all by heart.

The canvas rustled and Hezekiah stepped into the tent. Sheridan looked up. "Good," he said, "you're back. Did you get Max fixed up?"

"We found a body, sir, that proved acceptable."

Sheridan pushed the pile of reports aside. "Hezekiah, what are your impressions?"

"Of the planet, sir?"

"Precisely."

"Well, it's those barns, sir. You saw them, sir, when we were coming down. I believe I mentioned them to you."

Sheridan nodded. "The second expedition taught the natives how to build them. To store the podars in."

"All of them painted red," the robot said. "Just like the barns we have on Christmas cards."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"They look a little weird, sir."

Sheridan laughed. "Weird or not, those barns will be the making of us. They must be crammed with podars. For fifteen years, the natives have been piling up their podars, more than likely wondering when we'd come to trade..."

"There were all those tiny villages," Hezekiah said, "and those big red barns in the village square. It looked, if you will pardon the observation, sir, like a combination of New England and Lower Slobbovia."

"Well, not quite Lower Slobbovia. Our Garsonian friends are not as bad as that. They may be somewhat shiftless and considerably scatterbrained, but they keep their villages neat and their houses spic and span."

He pulled a photograph from a pile of data records. "Here, take a look at this."

The photograph showed a village street, neat and orderly and quiet, with its rows of well-kept houses huddled underneath the shade trees. There were rows of gay flowers running along the roadway and there were people - little, happy, gnomelike people - walking in the road.

Hezekiah picked it up. "I will admit, sir, that they look fairly happy. Although, perhaps, not very smart."

Sheridan got to his feet. "I think I'll go out and check around and see how things are going."

"Everything is all right, sir," said Hezekiah. "The boys have the wreckage cleared up. I'm sorry to have to tell you, sir, that not much of the cargo could be saved."

"From the looks of it, I'm surprised we could salvage any of it."

"Don't stay out too long," Hezekiah warned him. "You'll need a good night's sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day and you'll be out at the crack of dawn."

"I'll be right back," Sheridan promised and ducked out of the tent.

Batteries of camp lights had been erected and now held back the blackness of the night. The sound of hammering came from the chewed-up area where the floater had come down. There was no sign of the floater now and a gang of spacehand robots were busily going about the building of another radio shack. Another gang was erecting a pavilion tent above the conference table, where Abraham and his fellow roboticists still worked on Lemuel and Maximilian. And in front of the cook shack, Napoleon and Gideon were squatted down, busily shooting craps.

Sheridan saw that Napoleon had set up his outdoors stove again.

He walked over to them and they turned their heads and greeted him, then went back to their game.

Sheridan watched them for a while and then walked slowly off.

He shook his head in some bewilderment - a continuing bewilderment over this robotic fascination with all the games of chance. It was, he supposed, just one of the many things that a human being - any human being - would never understand.

For gambling seemed entirely pointless from a robotic point of view. They had no property, no money, no possessions. They had no need of any and they had no wish for any - and yet they gambled madly.

It might be, he told himself, no more than an aping of their fellow humans. By his very nature, a robot was barred effectively from participating in most of the human vices. But gambling was something that he could do as easily and perhaps more efficiently than any human could.

But what in the world, he wondered, did they get out of it? No gain, no profit, for there were no such things as gain or profit so far as a robot was concerned. Excitement, perhaps? An outlet for aggressiveness?

Or did they keep a phantom score within their mind - mentally chalking up their gains and loss - and did a heavy winner at a game of chance win a certain prestige that was not visible to Man, that might, in fact, be carefully hidden from a man?

A man, he thought, could never know his robots in their entirety and that might be as well - it would be an unfair act to strip the final shreds of individuality from a robot.

For if the robots owed much to Man - their conception and their manufacture and their life - by the same token Man owed as much, or even more, to robots.

Without the robots, Man could not have gone as far or fast, or as effectively, out into the Galaxy. Sheer lack of transportation for skilled manpower alone would have held his progress to a crawl.

But with the robots there was no shipping problem.

And with the transmogs there was likewise no shortage of the kind of brains and skills and techniques - as there would otherwise have been - necessary to cope with the many problems found on the far-flung planets.

He came to the edge of the camp area and stood, with the lights behind him, facing out into the dark from which came the sound of running waves and the faint moaning of the wind.

He tilted back his head and stared up at the sky and marveled once again, as he had marveled many other times on many other planets, at the sheer, devastating loneliness and alienness of unfamiliar stars.

Man pinned his orientation to such fragile things, he thought - to the way the stars were grouped, to how a flower might smell, to the color of a sunset.

But this, of course, was not entirely unfamiliar ground. Two human expeditions already had touched down. And now the third had come, bringing with it a cargo sled piled high with merchandise.

He swung around, away from the lake, and squinted at the area just beyond the camp and there the cargo was, piled in heaps and snugged down with tough plastic covers from which the starlight glinted. It lay upon the alien soil like a herd of humpbacked monsters bedded for the night.

There was no ship built that could handle that much cargo - no ship that could carry more than a dribble of the merchandise needed for interstellar trade.

For that purpose, there was the cargo sled.

The sled, set in an orbit around the planet of its origin, was loaded by a fleet of floaters, shuttling back and forth. Loaded, the sled was manned by robots and given the start on its long journey by the expedition ship. By the dint of the engines on the sled itself and the power of the expedition ship, the speed built up and up.

There was a tricky point when one reached the speed of light, but after that it became somewhat easier - although, for interstellar travel, there was need of speed many times in excess of the speed of light.

And so the sled sped on, following close behind the expedition ship, which served as a pilot craft

through that strange gray area where space and time were twisted into something other than normal space and time.

Without robots, the cargo sleds would have been impossible; no human crew could ride a cargo ship and maintain the continuous routine of inspection that was necessary.

Sheridan swung back toward the lake again and wondered if he could actually see the curling whiteness of the waves or if it were sheer imagination. The wind was moaning softly and the stranger stars were there, and out beyond the waters the natives huddled in their villages with the big red barns looming in the starlit village squares.

II

In the morning, the robots gathered around the conference table beneath the gay pavilion tent and Sheridan and Hezekiah lugged out the metal transmog boxes labeled SPECIAL-GARSON IV.

"Now I think," said Sheridan, "that we can get down to business, if you gentlemen will pay attention to me." He opened one of the transmog boxes. "In here, we have some transmogs tailor-made for the job that we're to do. Because we had prior knowledge of this planet, it was possible to fabricate this special set. So on this job we won't start from scratch, as we are often forced to do..."

"Cut out the speeches, Steve," yelled Reuben, "and let's get started with this business."

"Let him talk," said Abraham. "He certainly has the right to, just like any one of us."

"Thank you, Abe," Sheridan said.

"Go ahead," said Gideon. "Rube's just discharging excess voltage."

"These transmogs are basically sales transmogs, of course. They will provide you with the personality and all the techniques of a salesman. But, in addition to that, they contain as well all the data pertaining to the situation here and the language of the natives, plus a mass of planetary facts."

He unlocked another of the boxes and flipped back the lid. "Shall we get on with it?" he asked.

"Let's get going," demanded Reuben. "I'm tired of this spacehand transmog."

Sheridan made the rounds, with Hezekiah carrying the boxes for him.

Back at his starting point, he shoved aside the boxes, filled now with spacehand and other assorted transmogs. He faced the crew of salesmen.

"How do they feel?" he asked.

"They feel okay," said Lemuel. "You know, Steve, I never realized until now how dumb a spacehand is."

"Pay no attention to him," Abraham said, disgusted. "He always makes that crack."

Maximilian said soberly: "It shouldn't be too bad. These people have been acclimated to the idea of doing business with us. There should be no initial sales resistance. In fact, they may be anxious to start trading."

"Another thing," Douglas pointed out. "We have the kind of merchandise they've evinced interest in. We won't have to waste our time in extensive surveys to find out what they want."

"The market pattern seems to be a simple one," said Abraham judiciously. "There should be no complications. The principal thing, it would appear, is the setting of a proper rate of exchange - how many podars they must expect to pay for a shovel or a hoe or other items that we have."

"That will have to come," said Sheridan, "by a process of trial and error."

"We'll have to bargain hard," Lemuel said, "in order to establish a fictitious retail price, then let them have it wholesale. There are many times when that works effectively."

Abraham rose from his chair. "Let's get on with it. I suppose, Steve, that you will stay in camp."

Sheridan nodded. "I'll stay by the radio. I'll expect reports as soon as you can send them."

The robots got on with it. They scrubbed and polished one another until they fairly glittered. They brought out fancy dress hardware and secured it to themselves with magnetic clamps. There were colorful sashes and glistening rows of metals and large chunks of jewelry not entirely in the best of taste, but designed to impress the natives.

They got out their floaters and loaded up with samples from the cargo dump. Sheridan spread out a map and assigned each one a village. They checked their radios. They made sure they had their order boards.

By noon, they all were off.

Sheridan went back to the tent and sat down in his camp chair. He stared down the shelving beach to the lake, sparkling in the light of the noon-high sun.

Napoleon brought his lunch and hunkered down to talk, gathering his white cook's apron carefully in his lap so it would not touch the ground. He pushed his tall white cap to a rakish angle.

"How you got it figured, Steve?"

"You can never figure one beforehand," Sheridan told him. "The boys are all set for an easy time and I hope they have it. But this is an alien planet and I never bet on aliens."

"You look for any trouble?"

"I don't look for anything. I just sit and wait and hope feebly for the best. Once the reports start coming in..."

"If you worry so much, why not go out yourself?"

Sheridan shook his head. "Look at it this way, Nappy. I am not a salesman and this crew is. There'd be no sense in my going out. I'm not trained for it."

And, he thought, the fact of the matter was that he was not trained for anything. He was not a salesman and he was not a spacehand; he was not any of the things that the robots were or could be.

He was just a human, period, a necessary cog in a team of robots.

There was a law that said no robot or no group of robots could be assigned a task without human supervision, but that was not the whole of it. It was, rather, something innate in the robot makeup, not built into them, but something that was there and always might be there - the ever-present link between the robot and his human.

Sent out alone, a robot team would blunder and bog down, would in the end become unstuck entirely - would wind up worse than useless. With a human accompanying them, there was almost no end to their initiative and their capability.

It might, he thought, be their need of leadership, although in very truth the human member of the team sometimes showed little of that. It might be the necessity for some symbol of authority and yet, aside from their respect and consideration for their human, the robots actually bowed to no authority.

It was something deeper, Sheridan told himself, than mere leadership or mere authority. It was comparable to the affection and rapport which existed as an undying bond between a man and dog and yet it had no tinge of the god-worship associated with the dog.

He said to Napoleon: "How about yourself? Don't you ever hanker to go out? If you'd just say the word, you could."

"I like to cook," Napoleon stated. He dug at the ground with a metal finger. "I guess, Steve, you could say I'm pretty much an old retainer."

"A transmog would take care of that in a hurry."

"And then who'd cook for you? You know you're a lousy cook."

Sheridan ate his lunch and sat in his chair, staring at the lake, waiting for the first reports on the radio.

The job at last was started. All that had gone before - the loading of the cargo, the long haul out through space, the establishing of the orbits and the unshipping of the cargo - had been no more than preliminary to this very moment.

The job was finally started, but it was far from done. There would be months of work. There would be many problems and a thousand headaches. But they'd get it done, he told himself with a sure pride. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could stump this gang of his.

Late in the afternoon, Hezekiah came with the word:

"Abraham is calling, sir. It seems that there is trouble."

Sheridan leaped to his feet and ran to the shack. He pulled up a chair and reached for the headset. "That you, Abe? How is it going, boy?"

"Badly, Steve," said Abraham. "They aren't interested in doing business. They want the stuff, all right. You can see the way they look at it. But they aren't buying. You know what I think? I don't believe they have anything to trade."

"That's ridiculous, Abe! They've been growing podars all these years. The barns are crammed with them."

"Their barn is all nailed up," said Abraham. "They have bars across the door and the windows boarded. When I tried to walk up to it, they acted sort of ugly."

"I'll be right out," decided Sheridan. "I want to look this over." He stood up and walked out of the shack. "Hezekiah, get the flier started. We're going out and have a talk with Abe. Nappy, you mind the radio. Call me at Abe's village if anything goes wrong."

"I'll stay right here beside it," Napoleon promised him.

Hezekiah brought the flier down in the village square, landing it beside the floater, still loaded with its merchandise.

Abraham strode over to them as soon as they were down. "I'm glad you came, Steve. They want me out of here. They don't want us around."

Sheridan climbed from the flyer and stood stiffly in the square. There was a sense of wrongness - a wrongness with the village and the People - something wrong and different.

There were a lot of natives standing around the square, lounging in the doorways and leaning against the trees. There was a group of them before the barred door of the massive barn that stood in the center of the square, as if they might be a guard assigned to protect the barn.

"When I first came down," said Abraham, "they crowded around the floater and stood looking at the stuff and you could see they could hardly keep their hands off it. I tried to talk to them, but they wouldn't talk too much, except to say that they were poor. Now all they do is just stand off and glare."

The barn was a monumental structure when gauged against the tiny houses of the village. It stood up foursquare and solid and entirely without ornament and it was an alien thing - alien of Earth. For, Sheridan realized, it was the same kind of barn that he had seen on the backwoods farms of Earth - the great hip-roof, the huge barn door, the ramp up to the door, and even the louvered cupola that rode astride the ridge-pole.

The man and the two robots stood in a pool of hostile silence and the lounging natives kept on staring at them and there was something decidedly wrong.

Sheridan turned slowly and glanced around the square and suddenly he knew what the wrongness was.

The place was shabby; it approached the downright squalid. The houses were neglected and no longer neat and the streets were littered. And the people were a piece with all the rest of it.

"Sir," said Hezekiah, "they are a sorry lot."

And they were all of that.

There was something in their faces that had a look of haunting and their shoulders stooped and there was fatigue upon them.

"I can't understand it," said the puzzled Abraham. "The data says they were a happy-go-lucky bunch, but look at them out there. Could the data have been wrong?"

"No, Abe. It's the people who have changed."

For there was no chance that the data could be wrong. It had been compiled by a competent team, one of the very best, and headed by a human who had long years of experience on many alien planets. The

team had spent two years on Garson IV and had made it very much its business to know this race inside out.

Something had happened to the people. They had somehow lost their gaiety and pride. They had let the houses go uncared for. They had allowed themselves to become a race of ragamuffins.

"You guys stay here," Sheridan said.

"You can't do it, sir," said Hezekiah in alarm.

"Watch yourself," warned Abraham.

Sheridan walked toward the barn. The group before it did not stir. He stopped six feet away.

Close up, they looked more gnomelike than they had appeared in the pictures brought back by the survey team. Little wizened gnomes, they were, but not happy gnomes at all. They were seedy-looking and there was resentment in them and perhaps a dash of hatred. They had a hangdog look and there were some among them who shuffled in discomfiture.

"I see you don't remember us," said Sheridan conversationally. "We were away too long, much longer than we had thought to be."

He was having, he feared, some trouble with the language. It was, in fact, not the easiest language in the Galaxy to handle. For a fleeting moment, he wished that there were some sort of transmog that could be slipped into the human brain. It would make moments like this so much easier.

"We remember you," said one of them in a sullen voice.

"That's wonderful," said Sheridan with forced enthusiasm. "Are you speaker for this village?"

Speaker because there was no leader, no chief - no government at all beyond a loose, haphazard talking over what daily problems they had, around the local equivalent of the general store, and occasional formless town meetings to decide what to do in their rare crises, but no officials to enforce the decisions.

"I can speak for them," the native said somewhat evasively. He shuffled slowly forward. "There were others like you who came many years ago."

"You were friends to them."

"We are friends to all."

"But special friends to them. To them you made the promise that you would keep the podars."

"Too long to keep the podars. The podars rot away."

"You had the barn to store them in."

"One podar rots. Soon there are two podars rotten. And then a hundred podars rotten. The barn is no good to keep them. No place is any good to keep them."

"But we - those others showed you what to do. You go through the podars and throw away the rotten ones. That way you keep the other podars good."

The native shrugged.. "Too hard to do. Takes too long."

"But not all the podars rotted. Surely you have some left."

The creature spread his hands. "We have bad seasons, friend. Too little rain, too much. It never comes out right. Our crop is always bad."

"But we have brought things to trade you for the podars. Many things you need. We had great trouble bringing them. We came from far away. It took us long to come."

"Too bad," the native said. "No podars. As you can see, we are very poor."

"But where have all the podars gone?"

"We," the man said stubbornly, "don't grow podars any more. We changed the podars into another crop. Too much bad luck with podars."

"But those plants out in the fields?"

"We do not call them podars."

"It doesn't matter what you call them. Are they podars or are they not?"

"We do not grow the podars." Sheridan turned on his heel and walked back to the robots. "No soap," he said. "Something's happened here. They gave me a poor-mouth story and finally, as a clincher, said they don't grow podars any more."

"But there are fields of podars," declared Abraham. "If the data's right, they've actually increased their acreage. I checked as I was coming in. They're growing more right now than they ever grew before."

"I know," said Sheridan. "It makes no sense at all. Hezekiah, maybe you should give base a call and find what's going on."

"One thing," Abraham pointed out. "What about this trade agreement that we have with them? Has it any force?"

Sheridan shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe we can wave it in their faces, just to see what happens. It might serve as a sort of psychological wedge a little later on, once we get them softened up a bit."

"If we get them softened up."

"This is our first day and this is only one village."

"You don't think we could use the agreement as a club?"

"Look, Abe, I'm not a lawyer, and we don't have a lawyer transmog along with us for a damned good reason - there isn't any legal setup whatever on this planet. But let's say we could haul them into a galactic court. Who signed for the planet? Some natives we picked as its representatives, not the natives themselves; their signing couldn't bind anything or anybody. The whole business of drawing up a contract was nothing but an impressive ceremony without any legal basis - it was just meant to awe the natives into doing business with us."

"But the second expedition must have figured it would work."

"Well, sure. The Garsonians have a considerable sense of morality - individually and as families. Can we make that sense of morality extend to bigger groups? That's our problem."

"That means we have to figure out an angle," said Abraham. "At least for this one village."

"If it's just this village," declared Sheridan, "we can let them sit and wait. We can get along without it."

But it wasn't just one village. It was all the rest of them, as well.

Hezekiah brought the news.

"Napoleon says everyone is having trouble," he announced. "No one sold a thing. From what he said, it's just like this all over."

"We better call in all the boys," said Sheridan. "This is a situation that needs some talking over. We'll have to plan a course of action. We can't go flying off at a dozen different angles."

"And we'd better pull up a hill of podars," Abraham suggested, "and see if they are podars or something else."

III

Sheridan inserted a chemist transmog into Ebenezer's brain case and Ebenezer ran off an analysis.

He reported to the sales conference seated around the table.

"There's just one difference," he said, "The podars that I analyzed ran a higher percentage of calenthropodensia - that's the drug used as a tranquilizer - than the podars that were brought in by the first and second expeditions. The factor is roughly ten per cent, although that might vary from one field to another, depending upon weather and soil conditions - I would suspect especially soil conditions."

"Then they lied," said Abraham, "when they said they weren't growing podars."

"By their own standards," observed Silas, "they might not have lied to us. You can't always spell out alien ethics - satisfactorily, that is - from the purely human viewpoint. Ebenezer says that the composition of the tuber has changed to some extent. Perhaps due to better cultivation, perhaps to better seed or to an abundance of rainfall or a heavier concentration of the protozoan in the soil - or maybe because of something the natives did deliberately to make it shift..."

"Si," said Gideon, "I don't see what you are getting at."

"Simply this. If they knew of the shift or change, it might have given them an excuse to change the podar name. Or their language or their rules of grammar might have demanded that they change it. Or they may have applied some verbal mumbo-jumbo so they would have an out. And it might even have been a matter of superstition. The native told Steve at the village that they'd had bad luck with podars. So perhaps they operated under the premise that if they changed the name, they likewise changed the luck."

"And this is ethical?"

"To them, it might be. You fellows have been around enough to know that the rest of the Galaxy seldom operates on what we view as logic or ethics."

"But I don't see," said Gideon, "why they'd want to change the name unless it was for the specific purpose of not trading with us - so they could tell us they weren't growing podars."

"I think that is exactly why they changed the name," Maximilian said. "It's all a piece with those nailed-up barns. They knew we had arrived. They could hardly have escaped knowing. We had clouds of floaters going up and down and they must have seen them."

"Back at that village," said Sheridan, "I had the distinct impression that they had some reluctance telling us they weren't growing podars. They had left it to the last, as if it were a final clincher they'd hoped they wouldn't have to use, a desperate, last-ditch argument when all the other excuses failed to do the trick and -"

"They're just trying to jack up the price," Lemuel interrupted in a flat tone.

Maximilian shook his head. "I don't think so. There was no price set to start with. How can you jack it up when you don't know what it is?"

"Whether there was a price or not," said Lemuel testily, "they still could create a situation where they could hold us up."

"There is another factor that might be to our advantage," Maximilian said. "If they changed the name so they'd have an excuse not to trade with us, that argues that the whole village feels a moral obligation and has to justify its refusal."

"You mean by that," said Sheridan, "that we can reason with them. Well, perhaps we can. I think at least we'll try."

"There's too much wrong," Douglas put in. "Too many things have changed. The new name for the podars and the nailed-up barns and the shabbiness of the villages and the people. The whole planet's gone to pot. It seems to me our job - the first job we do - is to find what happened here. Once we find that out, maybe we'd have a chance of selling."

"I'd like to see the inside of those barns," said Joshua.

"What have they got in there? Do you think there's any chance we might somehow get a look?"

"Nothing short of force," Abraham told him. "I have a hunch that while we're around, they'll guard them night and day."

"Force is out," said Sheridan. "All of you know what would happen to us if we used force short of self-defense against an alien people. The entire team would have its license taken away. You guys would spend the rest of your lives scrubbing out headquarters."

"Maybe we could just sneak around. Do some slick detective work."

"That's an idea, Josh," Sheridan said. "Hezekiah, do you know if we have some detective transmogs?"

"Not that I know of, sir. I have never heard of any team using them."

"Just as well," Abraham observed. "We'd have a hard time disguising ourselves."

"If we had a volunteer," Lemuel said with some enthusiasm, "we could redesign him..."

"It would seem to me," said Silas, "that what we have to do is figure out all the different approaches that are possible. Then we can try each approach on a separate village till we latch onto one that works."

"Which presupposes," Maximilian pointed out, "that each village will react the same."

Silas said: "I would assume they would. After all, the culture is the same and their communications must be primitive. No village would know what was happening in another village until some little time had passed, which makes each village a perfectly isolated guinea pig for our little tests."

"Si, I think you're right," said Sheridan. "Somehow or other we have to find a way to break their sales resistance. I don't care what kind of prices we have to pay for the podars at the moment. I'd be willing to let them skin us alive to start with. Once we have them buying, we can squeeze down the price and come out even in the end. After all, the main thing is to get that cargo sled of ours loaded down with all the podars it can carry."

"All right," said Abraham. "Let's get to work."

They got to work. They spent the whole day at it. They mapped out the various sales approaches. They picked the villages where each one would be tried. Sheridan divided the robots into teams and assigned a team to each project. They worked out every detail. They left not a thing to chance.

Sheridan sat down to his supper table with the feeling that they had it made - if one of the approaches didn't work, another surely would. The trouble was that, as he saw it, they had done no planning. They had been so sure that this was an easy one that they had plunged ahead into straight selling without any thought upon the matter.

In the morning, the robots went out, full of confidence.

Abraham's crew had been assigned to a house-to-house campaign and they worked hard and conscientiously. They didn't miss a single house in the entire village. At every house, the answer had been no. Sometimes it was a firm but simple no; sometimes it was a door slammed in the face; at other times, it was a plea of poverty.

One thing was plain: Individual Garsonians could be cracked no more readily than Garsonians en masse.

Gideon and his crew tried the sample racket - handing out gift samples door to door with the understanding they would be back again to display their wares. The Garsonian householders weren't having any. They refused to take the samples.

Lemuel headed up the lottery project. A lottery, its proponents argued, appealed to basic greed. And this lottery had been rigged to carry maximum appeal. The price was as low as it could be set - one podar for a ticket. The list of prizes offered was just this side of fabulous. But the Garsonians, as it appeared, were not a greedy people. Not a ticket was sold.

And the funny thing about it - the unreasonable, maddening, impossible thing about it - was that the Garsonians seemed tempted.

"You could see them fighting it," Abraham reported at the conference that night. "You could see they wanted something we had for sale, but they'd steel themselves against it and they never weakened."

"We may have them on the very edge," said Lemuel. "Maybe just a little push is all it will take. Do you suppose we could start a whispering campaign? Maybe we could get it rumored that some other villages are buying right and left. That should weaken the resistance."

But Ebenezer was doubtful. "We have to dig down to causes. We have to find out what is behind this buyers' strike. It may be a very simple thing, if we only knew..."

Ebenezer took out a team to a distant village. They hauled along with them a pre-fabricated supermarket, which they set up in the village square. They racked their wares attractively. They loaded the place with glamor and excitement. They installed loud-speakers all over town to bellow out then bargains.

Abraham and Gideon headed up two talking-billboard crews. They ranged far and wide, setting up their billboards splashed with attractive color, and installing propaganda tapes.

Sheridan had transmogged Oliver and Silas into semantics experts and they had engineered the tapes - a careful, skillful job. They did not bear down too blatantly on the commercial angle, although it certainly was there. The tapes were cuddly in spots and candid in others. At all times, they rang with deep sincerity. They sang the praises of the Garsonians for the decent, upstanding folks they were; they preached pithy homilies on honesty and fairness and the keeping of contracts; they presented the visitors as a sort of cross between public benefactors and addle-pated nitwits who could easily be outsmarted;

The tapes ran day and night. They pelted the defenseless Garsonians with a smooth, sleek advertising - and the effects should have been devastating, since the Garsonians were entirely unfamiliar with any kind of advertising.

Lemuel stayed behind at base and tramped up and down the beach, with his hands clenched behind his back, thinking furiously. At times he stopped his pacing long enough to scribble frantic notes, jotting down ideas.

Lemuel was trying to arrive at some adaptation of an old sales gag that he felt sure would work if he

could only get it figured out - the ancient I-am-working-my-way-through-college wheeze.

Joshua and Thaddeus came to Sheridan for a pair of playwright transmogs. Sheridan said they had none, but Hezekiah, forever optimistic, ferreted into the bottom of the transmog chest. He came up with one transmog labeled auctioneer and another public speaker. They were the closest he could find.

Disgusted, the two rejected them and retired into seclusion, working desperately and as best they could on a medicine show routine.

For example, how did one write jokes for an alien people? What would they regard as funny? The off-color joke - oh, very fine, except that one would have to know in some detail the sexual life of the people it was aimed at. The mother-in-law joke - once again one would have to know; there were a lot of places where mothers-in-law were held in high regard, and other places where it was bad taste to even mention them. The dialect routine, of course, was strictly out, as it well deserved to be. Also, so far as the Garsonians were concerned, was the business slicker joke. The Garsonians were no commercial people; such a joke would sail clear above their heads.

But Joshua and Thaddeus, for all of that, were relatively undaunted. They requisitioned the files of data from Sheridan and spent hours poring over them, analyzing the various aspects of Garsonian life that might be safely written into their material. They made piles of notes. They drafted intricate charts showing relationships of Garsonian words and the maze of native social life. They wrote and rewrote and revised and polished. Eventually, they hammered out their script.

"There's nothing like a show," Joshua told Sheridan with conviction, "to loosen up a people. You get them feeling good and they lose their inhibitions. Besides, you have made them become somewhat indebted to you. You have entertained them and naturally they must feel the need to reciprocate."

"I hope it works" said Sheridan, somewhat doubtful and discouraged.

For nothing else was working.

In the distant village, the Garsonians had unbent sufficiently to visit the supermarket - to visit, not to buy. It almost seemed as if to them the market was some great museum or showplace. They would file down the aisles and goggle at the merchandise and at times reach out and touch it, but they didn't buy. They were, in fact, insulted if one suggested perhaps they'd like to buy.

In the other villages, the billboards had at first attracted wide attention. Crowds had gathered around them and had listened by the hour. But the novelty had worn off by now and they paid the tapes very little attention. And they still continued to ignore the robots. Even more pointedly, they ignored or rebuffed all attempts to sell.

It was disheartening.

Lemuel gave up his pacing and threw away his notes. He admitted he was licked. There was no way, on Garson IV, to adapt the idea of the college salesman.

Baldwin headed up a team that tried to get the whisper campaign started. The natives flatly disbelieved that any other village would go out and buy.

There remained the medicine show and Joshua and Thaddeus had a troupe rehearsing. The project was somewhat hampered by the fact that even Hezekiah could not dig up any actor transmogs, but, even so, they were doing well.

Despite the failure of everything they had tried, the robots kept going out to the villages, kept plugging away, kept on trying to sell, hoping that one day they would get a clue, a hint, an indication that might help them break the shell of reserve and obstinacy set up by the natives;

One day Gideon, out alone, radioed to base.

"There's something out here underneath a tree that you should take a look at," he told Sheridan.

"Something?"

"A different kind of being. It looks intelligent."

"A Garsonian?"

"Humanoid, all right, but it's no Garsonian."

"I'll be right out," said Sheridan. "You stay there so you can point it out to me."

"It has probably seen me," Gideon said, "but I did not approach it. I thought you might like first whack at it yourself."

As Gideon had said, the creature was sitting underneath a tree. It had a glittering cloth spread out and an ornate jug set out and was taking things out of a receptacle that probably was a hamper.

It was more attractively humanoid than the Garsonians. Its features were finely chiseled and its body had a look of lithe ranginess, it was dressed in the richest fabrics and was all decked out with jewels. It had a decided social air about it.

"Hello, friend," Sheridan said in Garsonian.

The creature seemed to understand him, but it smiled in a superior manner and seemed not to be too happy at Sheridan's intrusion.

"Perhaps," it finally said, "you have the time to sit down for a while."

Which, the way that it was put, was a plain and simple invitation for Sheridan to say no, he was sorry, but he hadn't and he must be getting on.

"Why, certainly," said Sheridan. "Thank you very much." He sat down and watched the creature continue to extract things from the hamper.

"It's slightly difficult," the creature told him, "for us to communicate in this barbaric language. But I suppose it's the best we can do. You do not happen to know Ballic, do you?"

"I'm sorry," said Sheridan. "I've never heard of it."

"I had thought you might. It is widely used."

"We can get along," said Sheridan quietly, "with the language native to this planet."

"Oh, certainly," agreed the creature. "I presume I'm not trespassing. If I am, of course -"

"Not at all. I'm glad to find you here."

"I would offer you some food, but I hesitate to do so. Your metabolism undoubtedly is not the same as mine. It should pain me to poison you."

Sheridan nodded to indicate his gratitude. The food indeed was tempting. All of it was packaged attractively and some of it looked so delectable that it set the mouth to watering.

"I often come here for..." The creature hunted for the Garsonian word and there wasn't any.

Sheridan tried to help him out. "I think in my language I would call it picnic."

"An eating-out-of-doors," the stranger said. "That is the nearest I can come in the language of our host."

"We have the same idea."

The creature brightened up considerably at this evidence of mutual understanding. "I think, my friend, that we have much in common. Perhaps I could leave some of this food with you and you could analyze it. Then the next time I come, you could join me."

Sheridan shook his head. "I doubt I'll stay much longer."

"Oh," the stranger said, and he seemed pleased at it. "So you're a transitory being, too. Wings passing

in the night. One hears a rustle and then the sound is gone forever."

"A most poetic thought," said Sheridan, "and a most descriptive one."

"Although," the creature said, "I come here fairly often. I've grown to love this planet. It is such a fine spot for an eating-out-of-doors. So restful and simple and unhurried. It is not cluttered up with activity and the people are so genuine, albeit somewhat dirty and very, very stupid. But I find it in my heart to love them for their lack of sophistication and their closeness to the soil and the clear-eyed view of life and their uncomplicated living of that life."

He halted his talk and cocked an eye at Sheridan.

"Don't you find it so, my friend?"

"Yes, of course I do," agreed Sheridan, rather hurriedly.

"There are so few places in the Galaxy," mourned the stranger, "where one can be alone in comfort. Oh, I do not mean alone entirely, or even physically. But an aloneness in the sense that there is space to live, that one is not pushed about by boundless, blind ambitions or smothered by the impact of other personalities. There are, of course, the lonely planets which are lonely only by the virtue of their being impossible for one to exist upon. These we must rule out."

He ate a little, daintily, and in a mincing manner. But he took a healthy snort from the ornate jug.

"This is excellent," said the creature, holding out the jug. "Are sure you do not want to chance it?"

"I think I'd better not."

"I suppose it's wise of you," the stranger admitted. "Life is not a thing that a person parts from without due consideration."

He had another drink, then put the jug down in his lap and sat there fondling it.

"Not that I am one," he said, "to extoll the virtue of living above all other things. Surely there must be other facets of the universal pattern that have as much to offer."

They spent a pleasant afternoon together.

When Sheridan went back to the flier, the creature had finished off the jug and was sprawled, happily pickled, among the litter of the picnic.

IV

Grasping at straws, Sheridan tried to fit the picnicking alien into the pattern, but there was no place where he'd fit.

Perhaps, after all, he was no more than what he seemed - a flitting dilettante with a passion for a lonely eating-out-of-doors and an addiction to the bottle.

Yet he knew the native language and he had said he came here often and that in itself was more than merely strange. With apparently the entire Galaxy in which to flit around, why should he gravitate to Garson IV, which, to the human eye, at least, was a most unprepossessing planet?

And another thing - how had he gotten here?

"Gideon," asked Sheridan, "did you see, by any chance, any sort of conveyance parked nearby that our friend could have traveled in?"

Gideon shook his head. "Now that you mention it, I am sure there wasn't. I would have noticed it."

"Has it occurred to you, sir," inquired Hezekiah, "that he may have mastered the ability of teleportation? It is not impossible. There was that race out on Pilico.."

"That's right," said Sheridan, "but the Pilicoans were good for no more than a mile or so at a time. You remember how they went popping along, like a jack rabbit making mile-long jumps, but making them so fast that you couldn't see him jump. This gent must have covered light-years. He asked me about a language that I never heard of. Indicated that it is widely spoken in at least some parts of the Galaxy."

"You are worrying yourself unduly, sir," cautioned Hezekiah. "We have more important things than this galivanting alien to trouble ourselves about."

"You're right," said Sheridan. "If we don't get this cargo moving, it will be my neck."

But he couldn't shake entirely the memory of the afternoon. He went back, in his mind, through the long and idle chatter and found, to his amazement, that it had been completely idle. So far as he could recall, the creature had told him nothing of itself. For three solid hours or more, it had talked almost continuously and in all that time had somehow managed to say exactly nothing.

That evening, when he brought the supper, Napoleon squatted down beside the chair, gathering his spotless apron neatly in his lap.

"We are in a bad way, aren't we?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose you could say we are."

"What will we do, Steve, if we can't move the stuff at all - if we can't get any podars?"

"Nappy," said Sheridan, "I've been trying very hard not to think of it."

But now that Napoleon had brought it up, he could well imagine the reaction of Central Trading if he should have to haul a billion-dollar cargo back intact. He could imagine, a bit more vividly, what might be said to him if he simply left it here and went back home without it.

No matter how he did it, he had to sell the cargo!

If he didn't, his career was in a sling.

Although there was more, he realized, than just his career at stake. The whole human race was involved.

There was a real and pressing need for the tranquilizer made from podar tubers. A search for such a drug had started centuries before and the need of it was underlined by the fact that through all those centuries the search had never faltered. It was something that Man needed badly - that Man, in fact, had needed badly since the very moment he'd become something more than animal.

And here, on this very planet, was the answer to that terrible human need - an answer denied and blocked by the stubbornness of a shiftless, dirty, backward people.

"If we only had this planet," he said, speaking more to himself than to Napoleon, "if we could only take it over, we could grow all the podars that we needed. We'd make it one big field and we'd grow a thousand times more podars than these natives ever grew."

"But we can't," Napoleon said. "It is against the law."

"Yes, Nappy, you are right. Very much against the law." For the Garsonians were intelligent - not startlingly so, but intelligent, at least, within the meaning of the law.

And you could do nothing that even hinted of force against an intelligent race. You couldn't even buy or lease their land, for the law would rule that in buying one would be dispossessing them of the inalienable rights of all alien intelligences.

You could work with them and teach them - that was very laudable. But the Garsonians were almost unteachable. You could barter with them if you were very careful that you did not cheat them too outrageously. But the Garsonians refused to barter.

"I don't know what we'll do," Sheridan told Napoleon. "How are we going to find a way?"

"I have a sort of suggestion. If we could introduce these natives to the intricacies of dice, we might finally get somewhere. We robots, as you probably know, are very good at it."

Sheridan choked on his coffee. He slowly and with great care set the cup down.

"Ordinarily," he told Napoleon solemnly, "I would frown upon such tactics. But with the situation as it stands, why don't you get some of the boys together and have a try at it?"

"Glad to do it, Steve."

"And... uh, Nappy..."

"Yes, Steve?"

"I presume you'd pick the best crap-shooters in the bunch."

"Naturally," said Napoleon, getting up and smoothing his apron.

Joshua and Thaddeus took their troupe to a distant village in entirely virgin territory, untouched by any of the earlier selling efforts, and put on the medicine show.

It was an unparalleled success. The natives rolled upon the ground, clutching at their bellies, helpless with laughter. They howled and gasped and wiped their streaming eyes. They pounded one another on the back in appreciation of the jokes. They'd never seen anything like it in all their lives - there had never been anything like it on all of Garson IV. And while they were weak with merriment, while they were still well-pleased, at the exact psychological moment when all their inhibitions should be down and all stubbornness and hostility be stilled, Joshua made the sales pitch.

The laughter stopped. The merriment went away. The audience simply stood and stared.

The troupe packed up and came trailing home, deep in despondency.

Sheridan sat in his tent and faced the bleak prospect. Outside the tent, the base was still as death. There was no happy talk or singing and no passing laughter. There was no neighborly tramping back and forth.

"Six weeks," Sheridan said bitterly to Hezekiah. "Six weeks and not a sale. We've done everything we can and we've not come even close."

He clenched his fist and hit the desk. "If we could only find what the trouble is! They want our

merchandise and still they refuse to buy. What is the holdup, Hezekiah? Can you think of anything?"

Hezekiah shook his head. "Nothing, sir. I'm stumped. We all are."

"They'll crucify me back at Central," Sheridan declared. "They'll nail me up and keep me as a horrible example for the next ten thousand years. There've been failures before, but none like this."

"I hesitate to say this, sir," said Hezekiah, "but we could take it on the lam. Maybe that's the answer. The boys would go along. Theoretically they're loyal to Central, but deep down at the bottom of it, it's you they're really loyal to. We could load up the cargo and that would give us capital and we'd have a good head start..."

"No," Sheridan said firmly. "We'll try a little longer and we may solve the situation. If not, I face the music."

He scraped his hand across his jaw.

"Maybe," he said, "Nappy and his crap-shooters can turn the trick for us. It's fantastic, sure, but stranger things have happened."

Napoleon and his pals came back, sheepish and depressed. "They beat the pants off us," the cook told Sheridan in awe. "Those boys are really naturals. But when we tried to pay our bets, they wouldn't take our stuff!"

"We have to try to arrange a powwow," said Sheridan, "and talk it out with them, although I hold little hope for it. Do you think, Napoleon, if we came clean and told them what a spot we're in, it would make a difference?"

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

"If they only had a government," observed Ebenezer, who had been a member of Napoleon's gambling team, "we might get somewhere with a powwow. Then you could talk with someone who represented the entire population. But this way you'll have to talk with each village separately and that will take forever."

"We can't help it, Eb," said Sheridan. "It's all we have left."

But before any powwow could be arranged, the podar harvest started. The natives toiled like beavers in the fields, digging up the tubers, stacking them to dry, packing them in carts and hauling them to the barns by sheer manpower, for the Garsonians had no draft animals.

They dug them up and hauled them to the barns, the very barns where they'd sworn that they had no podars.

But that was not to wonder at when one stopped to think of it, for the natives had also sworn that they grew no podars.

They did not open the big barn doors, as one would have normally expected them to do. They simply opened a tiny, man-size door set into a bigger door and took the podars in that way. And when any of the Earth party hove in sight, they quickly stationed a heavy guard around the entire square.

"We'd better let them be," Abraham advised Sheridan. "If we try to push them, we may have trouble in our lap."

So the robots pulled back to the base and waited for the harvest to end. Finally it was finished and Sheridan counseled lying low for a few days more to give the Garsonians a chance to settle back to their normal routine.

Then they went out again and this time Sheridan rode along, on one of the floaters with Abraham and Gideon.

The first village they came to lay quiet and lazy in the sun. There was not a creature stirring.

Abraham brought the floater down into the square and the three stepped off.

The square was empty and the place was silent - a deep and deathly silence.

Sheridan felt the skin crawling up his back, for there was a stealthy, unnatural menace in the noiseless emptiness.

"They may be laying for us," suggested Gideon. "I don't think so," said Abraham. "Basically they are peaceful."

They moved cautiously across the square and walked slowly down a street that opened from the square.

And still there was no living thing in sight. And stranger still - the doors of some of the houses stood open to the weather and the windows seemed to watch them out of blind eyes, with the colorful crude curtains gone.

"Perhaps," Gideon suggested, "they may have gone away to some harvest festival or something of that nature."

"They wouldn't leave their doors wide open, even for a day," declared Abraham. "I've lived with them for weeks and I've studied them. I know what they would do. They'd have closed the doors very carefully and tried them to be sure that they were closed."

"But maybe the wind...?"

"Not a chance," insisted Abraham. "One door, possibly. But I see four of them from here."

"Someone has to take a look," said Sheridan. "It might as well be me."

He turned in at a gate where one of the doors stood open and went slowly up the path. He halted at the threshold and peered in. The room beyond was empty. He stepped into the house and went from room to room and all the rooms were empty - not simply of the natives, but of everything. There was no furniture and the utensils and the tools were gone from hooks and racks. There was no scrap of clothing. There was nothing left behind. The house was dead and bare and empty, a shabby and abandoned thing discarded by its people.

He felt a sense of guilt creep into his soul. What if we drove them off? What if we hounded them until they'd rather flee than face us?

But that was ridiculous, he told himself. There must be some other reason for this incredibly complete mass exodus.

He went back down the walk. Abraham and Gideon went into other houses. All of them were empty.

"It may be this village only," suggested Gideon. "The rest may be quite normal."

But Gideon was wrong.

Back at the floater, they got in touch with base.

"I can't understand it," said Hezekiah, "I've had the same report from four other teams. I was about to call you, sir."

"You'd better get out every floater that you can," said Sheridan. "Check all the villages around. And keep a lookout for the people. They may be somewhere in the country. There's a possibility they're at a harvest festival."

"If they're at a festival, sir," asked Hezekiah, "why did they take their belongings? You don't take along your furniture when you attend a festival."

"I know," said Sheridan. "You put your finger on it. Get the boys out, will you?"

"There's just a possibility," Gideon offered, "that they are changing villages. Maybe there's a tribal law that says they have to build a new village every so often. It might have its roots in an ancient sanitation law that the camp must be moved at stated intervals."

"It could be that," Sheridan said wearily. "We'll have to wait and see."

Abraham thumbed a fist toward the barn.

Sheridan hesitated, then threw caution to the winds.

"Go ahead," he said.

Gideon stalked up the ramp and reached the door. He put out a hand and grasped one of the planks nailed across the door. He wrenched and there was an anguished shriek of tortured nails ripping from the wood and the board came free. Another plank came off and then another one and Gideon put his shoulder to the door and half of it swung open.

Inside, in the dimness of the barn, was the dull, massive shine of metal - a vast machine sitting on the driveway floor.

Sheridan stiffened with a cold, hollow sense of terror.

It was wrong, he thought. There could be no machine.

The Garsonians had no business having a machine. Their culture was entirely non-mechanical. The best they had achieved so far had been the hoe and wheel, and even yet they had not been able to put the hoe and wheel together to make themselves a plow.

They had had no machine when the second expedition left some fifteen years ago, and in those fifteen years they could not have spanned the gap. In those fifteen years, from all surface indications, they had not advanced an inch.

And yet the machine stood in the driveway of the barn.

It was a fair-sized cylinder, set on end and with a door in one side of it. The upper end of it terminated in a dome-shaped cap. Except for the door, it resembled very much a huge and snub-nosed bullet.

Interference, thought Sheridan. There had been someone here between the time the second expedition left and the third one had arrived.

"Gideon," he said.

"What is it, Steve?"

"Go back to base and bring the transmog chest. Tell Hezekiah to get my tent and all the other stuff over here as soon as he is able. Call some of the boys off reconnaissance. We have work to do."

There had been someone here, he thought - and most certainly there had. A very urbane creature who sat beneath a tree beside a spread-out picnic cloth, swigging at his jug and talking for three solid hours without saying anything at all!

V

The messenger from Central Trading brought his small ship down to one side of the village square, not far from where Sheridan's tent, was pitched. He slid back the visi-dome and climbed out of his seat.

He stood for a moment, shining in the sun, during which he straightened his SPECIAL COURIER badge, which had become askew upon his metal chest. Then he walked deliberately toward the barn, heading for Sheridan, who sat upon the ramp.

"You are Sheridan?" he asked.

Sheridan nodded, looking him over. He was a splendid thing.

"I had trouble finding you. Your base seems to be deserted."

"We ran into some difficulty," Sheridan said quietly.

"Not too serious, I trust I see your cargo is untouched."

"Let me put it this way - we haven't been bored."

"I see," the robot said, disappointed that an explanation was not immediately forthcoming. "My name is Tobias and I have a message for you."

"I'm listening."

Sometimes, Sheridan told himself, these headquarters robots needed taking down a peg or two.

"It is a verbal message. I can assure you that I am thoroughly briefed. I can answer any questions you may wish to ask."

"Please," said Sheridan. "The message first."

"Central Trading wishes to inform you that they have been offered the drug calenthropodensia in

virtually unlimited supply by a firm which describes itself as Galactic Enterprises. We would like to know if you can shed any light upon the matter."

"Galactic Enterprises," said Sheridan. "I've never heard of them."

"Neither has Central Trading. I don't mind telling you that we're considerably upset."

"I should imagine you would be."

Tobias squared his shoulders. "I have been instructed to point out to you that you were sent to Garson IV to obtain a cargo of podars, from which this drug is made, and that the assignment, in view of the preliminary work already done upon the planet, should not have been so difficult that -"

"Now, now," cautioned Sheridan. "Let us keep our shirts on. If it will quiet your conscience any, you may consider for the record that I have accepted the bawling out you're supposed to give me."

"But you -"

"I assume," said Sheridan, "that Galactic Enterprises is quoting a good stiff price on this drug of theirs."

"It's highway robbery. What Central Trading has sent me to find out -"

"Is whether I am going to bring in a cargo of podars. At the moment, I can't tell you."

"But I must take back my report!"

"Not right now, you aren't. I won't be able to make a report to you for several days at least. You'll have to wait."

"But my instructions are -"

"Suit yourself," Sheridan said sharply. "Wait for it or go back without it. I don't give a damn which you do."

He got up from the ramp and walked into the barn.

The robots, he saw, had finally pried or otherwise dislodged the cap from the big machine and had it on the side on the driveway floor, tilted to reveal the innards of it.

"Steve," said Abraham bitterly, "take a look at it."

Sheridan took a look. The inside of the cap was a mass of fused metal.

"There were some working parts in there," said Gideon, "but they have been destroyed."

Sheridan scratched his head. "Deliberately? A self-destruction relay?"

Abraham nodded. "They apparently were all finished with it. If we hadn't been here, I suppose they would have carted this machine and the rest of them back home, wherever that may be. But they couldn't take a chance of one of them falling in our hands. So they pressed the button or whatever they had to do and the entire works went pouf."

"But there are other machines. Apparently one in every barn."

"Probably just the same as this," said Lemuel, rising from his knees beside the cap.

"What's your guess?" asked Sheridan.

"A matter transference machine, a teleporter, whatever you want to call it," Abraham told him. "Not deduced, of course, from anything in the machine itself, but from the circumstances. Look at this barn. There's not a podar in it. Those podars went somewhere. This picnicking friend of yours -"

"They call themselves," said Sheridan, "Galactic Enterprises. A messenger just arrived. He says they offered Central Trading a deal on the podar drug."

"And now Central Trading," Abraham supplied, "enormously embarrassed and financially outraged, will pin the blame on us because we've delivered not a podar."

"I have no doubt of it," said Sheridan. "It all depends upon whether or not we can locate these native friends of ours."

"I would think that most unlikely," Gideon said. "Our reconnaissance showed all the villages empty throughout the entire planet. Do you suppose they might have left in these machines? If they'd transport podars, they'd probably transport people."

"Perhaps," said Lemuel, making a feeble joke, "everything that begins with the letter p."

"What are the chances of finding how they work?" asked Sheridan. "This is something that Central could make a lot of use of."

Abraham shook his head. "I can't tell you, Steve. Out of all these machines on the planet, which amounts to one in every barn, there is a certain mathematical chance that we might find one that was not destroyed."

"But even if we did," said Gideon, "there is an excellent chance that it would immediately destroy

itself if we tried to tamper with it."

"And if we don't find one that is not destroyed?"

"There is a chance," Lemuel admitted. "All of them would not destroy themselves to the same degree, of course. Nor would the pattern of destruction always be the same. From say, a thousand of them, you might be able to work out a good idea of what kind of machinery there was in the cone."

"And say we could find out what kind of machinery was there?"

"That's a hard one to answer, Steve," Abraham said. "Even if we had one complete and functioning, I honestly don't know if we could ferret out the principle to the point where we could duplicate it. You must remember that at no time has the human race come even close to something of this nature."

It made a withering sort of sense to Sheridan. Seeing a totally unfamiliar device work, even having it blueprinted in exact detail, would convey nothing whatever if the theoretical basis was missing. It was, completely, and there was a great deal less available here than a blueprint or even working model.

"They used those machines to transport the podars," he said, "and possibly to transport the people. And if that is true, it must be the people went voluntarily - we'd have known if there was force involved. Abe, can you tell me: Why would-the people go?" "I wouldn't know," said Abraham. "All I have now is a physicist transmog. Give me one on sociology and I'll wrestle with the problem."

There was a shout outside the barn and they whirled toward the door. Ebenezer was coming up the ramp and in his arms he carried a tiny, dangling form.

"It's one of them," gasped Gideon. "It's a native, sure enough!"

Ebenezer knelt and placed the little native tenderly on the floor. "I found him in the field. He was lying in a ditch. I'm afraid he's done for."

Sheridan stepped forward and bent above the native. It was an old man - any one of the thousands of old men he'd seen in the villages. The same leathery old face with the wind and weather wrinkles in it, the same shaggy brows shielding deep-sunk eyes, the same scraggly crop of whiskers, the same sense of forgotten shiftlessness and driven stubbornness.

"Left behind," said Ebenezer. "Left behind when all the others went. He must have fallen sick out in the field..."

"Get my canteen," Sheridan said. "It's hanging by the door."

The oldster opened his eyes and glanced around the circle of faces that stared down at him. He rubbed a hand across his face, leaving streaks of dirt.

"I fell," he mumbled. "I remember falling. I fell into a ditch."

"Here's the water, Steve," said Abraham.

Sheridan took it, lifted the old man and held him half upright against his chest. He tilted the canteen to the native's lips. The oldster drank unneatly, gulping at the water.

Some of it spilled, splashing down his whiskers to drip onto his belly.

Sheridan took the canteen away.

"Thank you," the native said and, Sheridan reflected, that was the first civil word to come their way from any of the natives.

The native rubbed his face again with a dirty claw. "The people all are gone?"

"All gone," said Sheridan.

"Too late," the old man said. "I would have made it if I hadn't fallen down. Perhaps they hunted for me..." His voice trailed off into nothingness.

"If you don't mind, sir," suggested Hezekiah, "I'll get a medic transmog."

"Perhaps you should," said Sheridan. "Although I doubt it'll do much good. He should have died days ago out there in the field."

"Steve," said Gideon, speaking softly, "a human doctor isn't too much use treating alien people. In time, if we had the time, we could find out about this fellow - something about his body chemistry and his metabolism. Then we could doctor him."

"That's right, Steve," Abraham said.

Sheridan shrugged. "All right then, Hezekiah. Forget about the transmog."

He laid the old man back on the floor again and got up off his knees. He sat on his heels and rocked slowly back and forth.

"Perhaps," he said to the native, "you'll answer one question. Where did all your people go?"

"In there," the native said, raising a feeble arm to point at the machine. "In there, and then they went away just as the harvest we gathered did."

Sheridan stayed squatting on the floor beside the stricken native.

Reuben brought in an armload of grass and wadded it beneath the native's head as a sort of pillow.

So the Garsonians had really gone away, Sheridan told himself, had up and left the planet. Had left it, using the machines that had been used to make delivery of the podars. And if Galactic Enterprises had machines like that, then they (whoever, wherever they might be) had a tremendous edge on Central Trading. For Central Trading's lumbering cargo sleds, snaking their laborious way across the light-years, could offer only feeble competition to machines like those.

He had thought, he remembered, the first day they had landed, that a little competition was exactly what Central Trading needed. And here was that competition - a competition that had not a hint of ethics. A competition that sneaked in behind Central Trading's back and grabbed the market that Central Trading needed - the market that Central could have cinched if it had not fooled around, if it had not been so sly and cynical about adapting the podar crop to Earth. Just where and how, he wondered, had Galactic Enterprises found out about the podars and the importance of the drug? Under what circumstances had they learned the exact time limit during which they could operate in the podar market without Central interference? And had they, perhaps, been slightly optimistic in regard to that time limit and gotten caught in a situation where they had been forced to destroy all those beautiful machines?

Sheridan chuckled quietly to himself. That destruction must have hurt them!

It wasn't hard, however, to imagine a hundred or a thousand ways in which they might have learned about the podar situation, for they were a charming people and really quite disarming. He would not be surprised if some of them might be operating secretly inside of Central Trading.

The native stirred. He reached out a skinny hand and tugged at the sleeve of Sheridan's jacket.

"Yes, what is it, friend?"

"You will stay with me?" the native begged. "These others here, they are not the same as you and..."

"I will stay with you," Sheridan promised.

"I think we'd better go," said Gideon. "Maybe we disturb him."

The robots walked quietly from the barn and left the two alone.

Reaching out, Sheridan put a hand on the native's brow. The flesh was clammy cold.

"Old friend," he said, "I think perhaps you owe me something."

The old man shook his head, rolling it slowly back and forth upon the pillow. And the fierce light of

stubbornness and a certain slyness came into his eyes.

"We don't owe you," he said. "We owed the other ones."

And that, of course, hadn't been what Sheridan had meant.

But there they lay - the words that told the story, the solution to the puzzle that was Garson IV.

"That was why you wouldn't trade with us," said Sheridan, talking to himself rather than to the old native on the floor.

"You were so deep in debt to these other people that you needed all the podars to pay off what you owed them?"

And that must have been the way it was. Now that he thought back on it, that supplied the one logical explanation for everything that happened. The reaction of the natives, the almost desperate sales resistance was exactly the kind of thing one would expect from people in debt up to their ears.

That was the reason, too, the houses had been so neglected and the clothes had been in rags. It accounted for the change from the happy-go-lucky shiftlessness to the beaten and defeated and driven attitude. So pushed, so hounded, so fearful that they could not meet the payments on the debt that they strained their every resource, drove themselves to ever harder work, squeezing from the soil every podar they could grow.

"That was it?" he demanded sharply. "That was the way it was?"

The native nodded with reluctance.

"They came along and offered such a bargain that you could not turn it down. For the machines, perhaps? For the machines to send you to other places?"

The native shook his head. "No, not the machines. We put the podars in the machines and the podars went away. That was how we paid."

"You were paying all these years?"

"That is right," the native said. Then he added, with a flash of pride: "But now we're all paid up."

"That is fine," said Sheridan. "It is good for a man to pay his debts."

"They took three years off the payments," said the native eagerly. "Was that not good of them?"

"I'm sure it was," said Sheridan, with some bitterness.

He squatted patiently on the floor, listening to the faint whisper of a wind blowing in the loft and the rasping breath of the dying native.

"But then your people used the machines to go away. Can't you tell me why?"

A racking cough shook the old man and his breath came in gasping sobs.

Sheridan felt a sense of shame in what he had to do. I should let him die in peace, he thought. I should not badger him. I should let him go in whatever dignity he can - not pushed and questioned to the final breath he draws.

But there was that last answer - the one Sheridan had to have.

Sheridan said gently: "But tell me, friend, what did you bargain for? What was it that you bought?"

He wondered if the native heard. There was no indication that he had.

"What did you buy?" Sheridan insisted.

"A planet," said the native.

"But you had a planet!"

"This one was different," the native told him in a feeble whisper. "This was a planet of immortality. Anyone who went there would never, never die."

Sheridan squatted stiffly in shocked and outraged silence. And from the silence came a whisper - a whisper still of faith and belief and pity that would haunt the human all his life.

"That was what I lost," the whisper said. "That was what I lost..."

Sheridan opened his hands and closed them, strangling the perfect throat and the winning smile, shutting off the cultured flow of words.

If I had him now, he thought, if I only had him now!

He remembered the spread-out picnic cloth and the ornate jug and the appetizing food, the smooth, slick gab and the assurance of the creature. And even the methodical business of getting very drunk so that their meeting could end without unpleasant questions or undue suspicion.

And the superior way in which he'd asked if the human might know Ballic, all the time, more than likely, being able to speak English himself.

Sly Central Trading finally had its competition. From this moment, Central Trading would be fighting with its back against the wall. For these jokers in Galactic Enterprises played dirty and for keeps.

The Garsonians had been naive fools, of course, but that was no true measure of Galactic Enterprises. They undoubtedly would select different kinds of bait for different kinds of fish, but the old never-never business of immortality might be deadly bait for even the most sophisticated if appropriately presented.

An utter lack of ethics and the transference machines were the trumps Galactic held.

What had really happened, he wondered, to all the people who had lived on this planet? Where had they really gone when they followed the podars into those machines?

Could the Galactic boys, by chance, have ferreted out a place where there would be a market for several million slaves?

Or had they simply planned to get the Garsonians out of the way as an effective means of cutting off the podar supply for Central Trading, thus insuring a ready and profitable sale for their supply of drugs?

Or had they lured the Garsonians away so they themselves could take over the planet?

And if that was the case - perhaps in any case - Galactic Enterprises definitely had lost this first encounter. Maybe, Sheridan told himself, they are really not so hot.

They gave us exactly what we need, he realized with a pleased jolt. They did us a favor!

Old blundering, pompous Central Trading had won the first round, after all.

He got to his feet and headed for the door. He hesitated and turned back to the native. "Maybe, friend," he said, "you were the lucky one." The native did not hear him.

Gideon was waiting at the door.

"How is he?" he asked.

"He's dead," Sheridan said. "I wonder if you'd arrange for burial."

"Of course," said Gideon. "You'll let me see the data. I'll have to bone up on the proper rites."

"But first do something else for me."

"Name it, Steve."

"You know this Tobias, the messenger that Central Trading sent? Find him and see that he doesn't leave."

Gideon grinned. "You may rest assured."

"Thank you," said Sheridan.

On his way to the tent, he passed the courier's ship. It was, he noted, a job that was built for speed - little more than an instrument board and seat tacked onto a powerful engine.

In a ship like that, he thought, a pilot could really make some time.

Almost to the tent, he met Hezekiah.

"Come along with me," he said. "I have a job for you." Inside the tent, he sat down in his chair and reached for a sheet of paper.

"Hezekiah," he said, "dig into that chest. Find the finest diplomatic transmog that we have."

"I know just where it is, sir," said Hezekiah, pawing through the chest.

He came out with the transmog and laid it on the desk.

"Hezekiah," said Sheridan, "listen to me carefully. Remember every word I say."

"Sir," replied Hezekiah, a little huffily, "I always listen carefully."

"I know you do. I have perfect faith and trust in you. That is why I'm sending you to Central."

"To Central, sir! You must be joking, surely. You know I cannot go. Sir, who would look after you? Who would see that you -"

"I can get along all right. You'll be coming back. And I'll still have Napoleon."

"But I don't want to go, sir!"

"Hezekiah, I must have someone I can trust. We'll put that transmog in you and -"

"But it will take me weeks, sir!"

"Not with the courier ship. You're going back instead of the courier. I'll write an authorization for you to represent me. It'll be as if I were there myself."

"But there is Abraham. Or Gideon. Or you could send any of the others..."

"It's you, Hezekiah. You are my oldest friend."

"Sir," said Hezekiah, straightening to attention, "what do you wish me to do?"

"You're to tell Central that Garson IV is now uninhabited. You're to say that such being the case, I'm possessing it formally in the name of Central Trading. Tell them I'll need reinforcements immediately because there is a possibility that Galactic Enterprises may try to take it from us. They're to send out one sled loaded with robots as an initial occupying and colonizing force, and another sledload of agricultural implements so we can start our farming. And every last podar that they have, for seed. And, Hezekiah..."

"Yes, sir?"

"That sledload of robots. They'd better be deactivated and knocked down. That way they can pile on more of them. We can assemble them here."

Hezekiah repressed a shudder. "I will tell them, sir."

"I am sorry, Hezekiah."

"It is quite all right, sir."

Sheridan finished writing out the authorization. "Tell Central Trading," he said, "that in time we'll turn this entire planet into one vast podar field. But they must not waste a minute. No committee sessions, no meetings of the board, no dawdling around. Keep right on their tail every blessed second."

"I will not let them rest, sir," Hezekiah assured him.

VI

The courier ship had disappeared from sight. Try as he might, Sheridan could catch no further glimpse of it.

Good old Hezekiah, he thought, he'll do the job. Central Trading will be wondering for weeks exactly what it was that hit them.

He tilted his head forward and rubbed his aching neck. He said to Gideon and Ebenezer: "You can get up off him now."

The two arose, grinning, from the prostrate form of Tobias. Tobias got up, outraged. "You'll hear of this," he said to Sheridan.

"Yes, I know," said Sheridan. "You hate my guts."

Abraham stepped forward, "What is next?" he asked.

"Well," Sheridan said, "I think we should all turn gleaners."

"Gleaners?"

"There are bound to be some podars that the natives missed. We'll need every one we can find for seed."

"But we're all physicists and mechanical engineers and chemists and other things like that. Surely you would not expect such distinguished specialists -"

"I think I can remedy that," said Sheridan. "I imagine we still can find those spacehand transmogs. They should serve until Central sends us some farmer units."

Tobias stepped forward and ranged himself alongside of Abraham. "As long as I must remain here, I demand to be of use. It's not in a robot's nature just to loaf around."

Sheridan slapped his hand against his jacket pocket, felt the bulge of the transmog he'd taken out of Hezekiah.

"I think," he told Tobias, "I have just the thing for you."