To Fell a Tree

And this delightful herb whose living green
Fledges the river's lip on which we lean-
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely lip it springs unseen!
—THE RUBAIYAT

The First Day

Just before the treeman's lift began to rise, Strong swung it around so that his back would be toward the trunk. The less he saw of the tree during the initial phase of his ascent, the better. But the lift was little more than a triangular steel frame suspended vertically from a thread-thin winch cable, and before it had risen a hundred feet it swung back to its original position. Whether he liked it or not, the tree was going to be with him right from the start.

The trunk was about fifteen feet away. What it made Strong think of most was a cliff, a convex, living cliff, with bark-prominences eight to ten feet long and fissures three to four feet deep—an arboreal precipice rising into a green and majestic cloud of foliage.

He hadn't intended to look up, but his eyes had followed the sweep of the trunk of their own volition. Abruptly he lowered them. To reassure himself, he looked down into the shrinking village square at the familiar figures of his three companions.

Suhre and Blueskies were standing on one of the ancient burial mounds, smoking morning cigarettes. Strong was too high to see the expressions on their faces, but he knew that Suhre's stolid features were probably set in stubborn resentment and that Blueskies was probably wearing his "buffalo-look." Wright was about a hundred feet out from the base of the tree, operating the winch. His face would be essentially the same as it always was, a little pinched from worry, perhaps, but still embodying that strange mixture of gentleness and determination, still unmistakably a leader's face.

Strong raised his eyes to the houses surrounding the square. They were even more enchanting seen from above than from below. Omicron Ceti's red-gold radiance lay colorfully on chameleon rooftops, danced brightly on gingerbread facades. The nearer houses were empty now, of course—the village, within a three hundred yard radius of the tree, had been vacated and roped off—but looking at them, Strong got the fanciful impression that pixies had moved in during the night and were taking over the household chores while the villagers were away.

The thought amused him while it lasted, but it did not last long. The convoy of huge timber-carriers that moved into the square and parked in a long waiting line sent it scurrying.

Once again he confronted the tree. He was higher now, and the trunk should have become smaller. It had not—at least not perceptibly. It still resembled a convex cliff, and he felt more like a mountain climber than he did a treeman. Looking up, he saw the first limb. All he could think of was a horizontal sequoia growing on the vertical slope of a dendritic Everest.

Wright's crisp voice sounded over the tree-to-ground radio hookup, the receiver and minuscule batteries of which were attached to Strong's left ear lobe: "Seen any dryads yet?"

Strong tongued on the tiny transmitter attached to his lower lip. "Not yet."

"If you do, let me know."

"Like hell! That long blade of grass I drew gave me exclusive treerights, remember? Whatever I find up here is mine!" Wright laughed. "Just trying to help out."

"I don't need any help, thanks. What's my height?"

There was a pause. Strong watched the cigarette-size figure of Wright bend over the winch-control panel. Presently: "One hundred and sixty-seven feet. Another hundred and twenty more and you'll be

even with the first limb . . . How do you feel?"

"Not bad."

"Good. Let me know if anything goes wrong. The least little thing."

"Will do." Strong tongued off.

It was growing darker. No, not darker, Greener. The little sunlight that filtered down through the countless strata of foliage in a pale, chlorophyllic glow deepened in hue in ratio to his ascent. Tree-fright touched him, but he dispelled it by applying an antidote he'd learned in treeschool. The antidote was simple: *concentrate on something, anything at all.* He took inventory of the equipment attached to the basebar of the lift: tree-pegs, tree-rations, blankets; tree-tent, heating unit, peg-hammer; cable-caster, cutter, first-aid pack; climbing belt, saddle-rope, limb line (only the ringed end of the limb line was attached to the bar—the line itself trailed down to a dwindling coil at the tree's base), Timkin-unit, tree-tongs, canteen ...

At length the lift drew him into the lower foliage. He had expected the leaves to be huge, but they were small and delicate, reminiscent of the leaves of the lovely sugar maple that once had flourished on Earth. Presently he came opposite the first limb, and a flock of scarlet hahaha birds derided his arrival with a chorus of eldritch laughter. They circled around him several times, their little half-moons of eyes regarding him with seeming cynicism, then they spiraled out of sight into the upper branches.

The limb was like a ridge that had torn itself free from a mountain range to hover high above the village. Its branches were trees in their own right, each capable, were it to fall, of demolishing at least one of the houses the colonists loved so dearly.

Why, Strong wondered for the dozenth time, had the original inhabitants of Omicron Ceti 18's major continent built their villages around the bases of such arboreal monsters? The Advance Team had stated in its report that the natives, despite their ability to build beautiful houses, had really been very primitive. But even so, they should have realized the potential threat such massive trees could pose during an electrical storm; and most of all they should have realized that excessive shade encouraged dampness and that dampness was the forerunner of decay.

Clearly they had not. For, of all the villages they had built, the present one was the only one that had not rotted into noisome ruin, just as the present tree was the only one that had not contracted the hypothetical blight that had caused the others to wither away and die.

It was the Advance Team's contention that the natives had built their villages close to the trees because the trees were religious symbols. But, while the fact that they had migrated en masse to the "death-caves" in the northern barrens when the trees began to die certainly strengthened the contention, Strong still found it difficult to accept. The architecture o the houses suggested a practical as well as an artistic race of people, and a practical race of people would hardly commit self-genocide just because their religious symbols turned out to be susceptible to disease. Moreover, Strong had removed trees on a good many newly-opened planets, and he had seen the Advance Team proved wrong on quite a number of occasions.

The foliage was below him now, as well as above and around him. He was in a world apart, a hazy, greenish-gold world stippled with tree-flowers (the month was the Omicron Ceti 18 equivalent of June and the tree was in blossom), inhabited only by himself and the hahaha birds, and the insects that constituted their diet. He could see an occasional jigsaw-patch of the square through the intervening leaves, but that was all. Wright was out of sight; so were Suhre and Blueskies.

About fifteen feet below the limb over which he had made his original cable-cast, he told Wright to halt the winch. Then he detached the cable-caster from the base-bar, fitted the butt to his shoulder and started the lift swinging back and forth. He selected the highest limb he could see, one about eighty feet up, and at the extremity of one of his swings on the winch side of the tree, he aimed and squeezed the trigger.

It was like a spider spitting a filament of web. The gossamer cable drifted up and over the chosen limb, and its weighted end plummeted down through leaf and flower to dangle inches from his outstretched fingers. He caught it on the next swingback and, still swinging, pressed it against the apex of the lift-triangle till its microscopic fibers rooted themselves in the steel; then he snipped the "new" cable

free from the caster with his pocket-snips and returned the caster to the base-bar. Finally he increased the arc of his swing till he could grasp the original cable, which slanted down through the foliage to the winch. He held on to it long enough to squeeze together the two cables—the "old" and the "new"—till they automatically interspliced, and to sever the bypassed section.

The slack in the "new" cable caused the lift to drop several feet. He waited till the swing diminished sufficiently, then told Wright to start the winch again. The infinitesimal Timkens coating the thread-thin cable began rolling over the "new" limb, and the lift resumed its upward journey. Strong leaned back in his safety belt and lit a cigarette.

That was when he saw the dryad.

Or thought he did.

The trouble was, the dryad talk had been a big joke. The kind of a joke that springs up among men whose relationships with real women are confined to the brief intervals between assignments.

You didn't believe it, you told yourself; you knew damned well that no matter what tree you climbed on whatever planet, no lovely lady elf was going to come skipping down some leaf-trellised path and throw herself into your yearning arms. And yet all the while you were telling yourself that such a thing was never going to happen, you kept wondering in the dark outlands of your mind where common sense had never dared set foot, whether some day it *might* happen.

All during the voyage in from Earth and all during the ride from the spaceport to the village, they had tossed the joke back and forth. There was—if you took credence in Suhre's and Blueskies' and Wright's talk . . . and in his own talk too —at least one dryad living in the last giant tree on Omicron Ceti 18, and what a time they were going to have catching her!

All right, Strong thought. You saw her. Now let's see you catch her.

It had been the merest glimpse—no more than a suggestion of curves and color and fairy-face—and as the image faded from his retina, his conviction faded too. By the time the lift pulled him up into the bower where he'd thought she'd been, he was positive she would not be there. She was not.

He noticed that his hands were trembling. With an effort he steadied them. It was ridiculous to become upset over a prankish play of sunlight on leaf and limb, he told himself.

Then, at 475 feet, he thought he saw her again.

He had just checked his elevation with Wright when he happened to glance toward the trunk. She appeared to be leaning against the bark, her long leg braced on the limb he had just come abreast of. Tenuous of figure, pixyish of features, golden of hair. She couldn't have been over twenty feet away.

"Hold it," he told Wright in a low voice. When the lift stopped rising, he unfastened his safety belt and stepped out upon the limb. The dryad did not move.

He walked toward her slowly. Still she did not move. He rubbed his eyes to clear them, half-hoping she would not. She went on standing where she was, back propped against the trunk, long legs braced on the limb; immobile, statuesque. She wore a short tunic woven of leaves, held in place by a strap looped over her shoulder; delicate sandals, also woven of leaves, interlaced halfway to her calves. He began to think she was real. Then, without warning, she twinkled out of sight.

There was no other phrase for it. She did not walk away or run away or fly away. In the strict sense of the word, she did not even disappear. She was simply there one second and not there the next second.

Strong stood still. The exertion he had expended to gain the limb and walk along it had been negligible, and yet he was sweating. He could feel sweat on his cheeks and forehead and neck; he could feel it on his chest and back, and he could feel the sweated dampness of his tree-shirt.

He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He took one step backward. Another. The dryad did not re-materialize. There was a cluster of leaves where she had been, a patch of sunlight.

Wright's voice sounded in his eareceiver: "Everything all right?"

Strong hesitated a moment. "Everything's fine," he said presently. "Just doing a little reconnaissance."

"How's she look?"

"She—" He realized just in time that Wright was referring to the tree. He wiped his face again, wadded up the handkerchief and replaced it in his pocket. "She's big," he said, when he could trust his

voice. "Real big."

"We'll take her all right. We've had big ones before."

"Not this big we haven't."

"We'll take her anyway."

"I'll take her," Strong said.

Wright laughed. "Sure you will. But we'll be here to help you, just in case ... Ready to 'climb' again?"

"In a minute."

Strong hurried back to the lift. "Let her go," he said.

He had to cable-cast again at around 500 feet, and again at around 590. At about 650 the foliage thinned out temporarily and he was able to make a cast of better than one hundred and fifty feet. He sat back to enjoy the ride.

In the neighborhood of 700 feet, he dropped off his tree-tent, blankets and heating unit on a wide limb, and tied them down. The sleeping was always better in the big branches. As his height increased, he caught occasional glimpses of the village. Foliage below, but he could see the outermost ones, and beyond them the chemically enriched fields that stretched away to the horizon. The fields were at low ebb now—gold-stubbled with the tiny shoots of recently sown wheat, an endemic variety unequalled elsewhere in the galaxy. But by mid-summer the tide would be full and the colonists would reap another of the fabulous harvests that were turning them into first-generation millionaires.

He could see the specks of housewives puttering in backyards, and gyro-cars crawling like beetles through the streets. He could see children the apparent size of tad-poles swimming in one of the artificial lakes that were a feature of each block. All that was missing from the scene was a painter painting a house or a roofer repairing a roof. And for a good reason: *these* houses never ran down.

Or hadn't, up till now.

The wood and the carpentry that had gone into their construction was without parallel. Strong had been inside only one building—the native church that the colonists had converted into a hotel—but the owner, who was also mayor of the village, had assured him that the hotel, basically, was no more than a larger and more ornate counterpart of the other buildings. Strong had never seen such flawless woodwork before, such perfect paneling. Everything was in perfect balance, unified to a degree where it was impossible to tell where foundation and underpinning left off and floor and wall began.

Walls blended into windows and windows blended into walls. Stairways didn't simply descend: they rippled down like wood-grained rapids. As for artificial lighting, it emanated from the very wood itself.

The Advance Team, in classifying the natives as primitive, had based its conclusion largely—and perhaps stupidly, Strong thought—on the fact that they had not learned how to use metals till late in their ethnological tenure. But, the eagerness of the colonists to preserve the one remaining village (which the Department of Galactic Lands had permitted) indicated that the miracles the natives had been able to perform with wood more than compensated for the miracles they had been unable to perform with iron and bronze.

He made three more cable-casts before abandoning the lift, then, standing on the limb beneath the one over which he had made the final cast, he buckled on his climber's belt and attached the articles he would need to its snap-locks. Finally he transferred the end of the limbline from the base-bar to the snap-lock nearest his right hip.

His approximate height now was nine hundred and seventy feet, and the tree had tapered to the proportions of the long extinct American elm. He moved in on the limb to the trunk, fashioned a safety belt out of his saddle-rope and snubbed himself into "walking" position. Then, leaning back at a forty-five degree angle, he "walked" around the trunk till he could obtain a clear view of the overhead branches.

He chose a centrally located crotch, about seventeen feet up, for the limbline, then coiled the first nine or ten feet of the line into a lineman's loop and pulled up about thirty feet of slack. He had to turn sideways on the trunk to make the throw, but he got it off perfectly, and the coil, which comprised the nucleus of the loop, soared through the crotch and unwound down to where he could easily reach the ringed end.

He returned to the limb, untied his safety belt, and climbed the double line to the crotch. Omicron

Ceti 18's lighter gravity had reduced his 180 pounds Earth-weight to a feathery 157 ½: he did not even draw a deep breath.

After notifying Wright, he settled himself comfortably, detached the V-shaped Timken-unit from his belt and clamped it into place in the crotch. He opened the unit and laid the limb line over the near-frictionless bearings, then closed the unit and locked it. Although he could not see what was taking place on the ground, he knew that Wright was directing the relocating of the winch, the sinking of new winch-anchors, and the substitution of the limbline for the winch-cable. The winch-cable, unneeded for the moment, would be secured to the base of the tree by means of a tree-peg.

After testing the Timken-unit by pulling the limbline back and forth several times, Strong attached the tree-tongs to the line's ringed end. Then he looked around for a good saddle-crotch. He found one presently. It was about fifteen feet above him and its location promised him excellent access to the area he was concerned with—the section ninety feet down from the top of the tree where the limbs began exceeding the one hundred foot limit Wright had set as maximum crest-length.

After making the throw, he "snaked" the rope down till he could reach it, and tied his saddle. The instruction manual they gave you at treeschool had a lot to say about saddles: about the double bowline tied on the shorter length that provided you with a seat, and the tautline hitch—tied round the longer length with the slack from the bowline—that gave you maneuverability. The manual had a lot to say about saddle-technique, too: told you how to descend by putting your weight in the seat and exerting pressure on the top of the hitch; warned you always to feed the slack through the hitch after you climbed to a higher level or when you were walking in from a tonging. If you used it right, the manual said, your saddle was your best friend.

Strong didn't slip into the seat right away. He declared a ten-minute break instead. Leaning back in the limbline crotch, he tried to close his eyes; but the sun got in them, the sun and the leaves and the tree flowers, and the bright blue patches of sky.

The saddle-rope hung down like a silvery liana from the lofty crotch of his choosing, swayed gently in the morning breeze. The crotch was about twenty feet below the highest point of the tree, or over a thousand feet above the ground.

The figure was hard to assimilate. He had climbed a good many tall trees; some of them had even run as high as five hundred feet. But this one made them seem insignificant. This one was over a thousand feet high.

A thousand feet! ...

The swaying saddle-rope took on a new meaning. He reached over and touched its knurled surface. He glanced up along its double length. Almost before he knew it, he was climbing; hand over hand at first, then intertwining his feet in the rope and letting it glide between them as he raised his body, "standing" in it while he obtained new hand-holds. Enthusiasm joined his exertion; his blood coursed warmly through his body; his senses sang. He climbed leisurely, confidently. When he reached the crotch, he pulled himself into it and looked upward.

The trunk rose into a final bifurcation some ten feet above. He pressed the tiny studs that released the steel spurs contained in the insteps of his tree-boots and stood up. He placed his hands on the dark gray bark. At this height the trunk was less than a foot in diameter and was as smooth as a woman's throat. He raised his left foot and brought it down on an angle. Hard. The spur sank deep into the wood. He put his weight on his left foot and raised his right. He sank the second spur.

He began to climb.

Even if you closed your eyes, you could tell when you were nearing the top of a tree. Any tree. The crest swayed more and more as your height increased; the trunk grew smaller beneath your hands; the warmth of the sun intensified as the foliage thinned out around you; your heart beat in ever faster cadence ...

When he reached the final crotch, Strong slipped one leg through it and looked down upon the world.

The tree was a green cloud, seen from above now rather than from below—a vast green cloud that obscured most of the village. Only the outlying houses were visible along the lacy periphery. Beyond

them the "Great Wheat Sea"—as he had come to call it in his mind—rolled soundlessly away to the horizon.

"Archipelago" would have been a better metaphor than "sea." For there were "islands" wherever you looked. "Islands" of rotted villages, sometimes surmounted by the gaunt gray lighthouse of a dead tree, sometimes littered with the gray debris of a fallen one. "Islands" of storage bins built of durable steel-foil; "islands" of equipment sheds built of the same material and filled with the sowing-copters and lightweight combines the colonists had leased from the Department of Galactic Lands.

Nearer the village there were other, smaller "islands": the sewage disposal plant; the incinerator; the crematory. Finally there was the brand new "island" of the lumber mill, where the colonists hoped to salvage the wood from this tree.

In a way the tree would be a harvest in itself, for wood was dear on Omicron Ceti 18—almost as dear as it was on Earth. But they wouldn't be getting it for nothing, Strong thought; not if you figured the goodly sum they were going to have to shell out to Tree Killers, Inc. for the tree's removal.

He laughed. He had little sympathy for the colonists. He knew as well as Blueskies what they were doing to the soil, what Omicron Ceti 18 would look like half a century in the future. Sometimes he hated them

But he found it hard to hate them now. He found it difficult to hate at all, with the morning wind fluttering his tree-shirt and the morning sun fingering his face and the vast blue sky spread out around his shoulders and the whole world spread out beneath his feet.

He lit and smoked a cigarette, and it tasted good on the top of the world, in the wind and the alien sun. He smoked it down till it stung his fingers, then ground it out on the instep of his boot.

When he raised his hand, there was blood on his forefinger and thumb.

At first he thought he had cut himself, but when he wiped the blood away there was no sign of a cut or even a scratch. He frowned. Could he possibly have injured his foot? He leaned forward . . . and saw the redness of his instep and the bloody, dripping spur. He leaned farther forward . . . and saw the bloody trail his spurs had left on the smooth gray trunk. Finally he realized that it wasn't his blood at all

It was the tree's.

The foliage twinkled in the sun and the wind, and the trunk swayed lazily back and forth. And back and forth and back and forth

Sap!

He had begun to think that the word would never assert itself, that its false synonym would pre-empt his mind forever.

Sap . . .

It didn't *have* to be transparent. If the right pigments were present, it could be any color—any color under the sun. Purple. Green. Brown. Blue. Red—

Blood-red . . . .

There was no reason to assume that, simply because a certain characteristic was present in ordinary trees, it necessarily had to be present in this one. There was no arboreal law that said a tree's juice *had* to be colorless.

He began to feel better. Red sap, he thought. Wait'll I tell Wright!

But he didn't say a word about it to Wright when, a moment later, Wright contacted him.

"Almost ready?" Wright asked.

"Not—not quite. Doing a little reconnaissance."

"Quite a favorite occupation of yours this morning."

"In a way."

"Well, since you're going to keep the dryads all to yourself, I won't try to muscle in. Too high for a middle-aged treeman like myself to be climbing, anyway. The reason I called was to tell you we're knocking off for chow. I suggest you do the same."

"Will do," Strong said.

But he didn't. He had tree-rations in his pocket, but he had no appetite to go with them. Instead, he sat quietly in the crotch and smoked another cigarette, then he descended the trunk to the saddle-rope

crotch. Quite a bit of the sap got on his hands and he had to wipe it off on his handkerchief.

He retracted his spurs, intertwined his feet in the middle-rope and "skinned" down to the limbline-crotch. He paused there long enough to slip into his saddle, then he "burned" down to the end of the limbline, and attached the tongs to his belt. The first one hundred-footer was about twenty feet below him. He "burned" the rest of the way down to it, the limbline trailing behind him, and started walking out. The limb was quite large at its juncture with the trunk, but it tapered rapidly. When he judged he had covered two thirds of its length, he affixed the pointed tongs into the wood, adjusting them so that when the limbline tightened, they would get a firm bite on the limb.

The action had a calming effect, and when he tongued on his transmitter, he was his usual tree-self, and automatically lapsed into the mock-formal mode of address he and Wright sometimes used in their tree-to-ground exchanges:

"Ready when you are, Mr. Wright."

There was a pause. Then: "You don't believe in long noonings, do you, Mr. Strong?"

"Not when there's a tree the size of this one staring me in the face."

"I'll turn on the winch. Sound off when the slack is out."

"Will do, Mr. Wright."

In its present position the limbline straggled back along the limb to the trunk, then up the trunk to the limbline-crotch. When the winch went into action, it rose into a sagging arc ... a less pronounced arc ... a straight line. The limb quivered, creaked—

"Hold it, Mr. Wright."

He walked back to the trunk, feeding his saddle-slack through the tautline hitch. At the trunk, he put his weight into the seat and "burned" down till he was even with the underside of the limb. Then he leaned back in the saddle and drew his pistol-shaped cutter. He set the beam for ten feet and directed the muzzle at the bottom of the limb. He was about to squeeze the trigger when he caught a hint of curves and color on the periphery of his vision. He glanced out to where the limb's leaf-laden branches brushed the noonday sky

And saw the dryad.

"We're waiting for the word, Mr. Strong."

Strong swallowed. Sweat had run down from his forehead into his eyes. He wiped them on his shirtsleeve. He still saw the dryad.

She was half sitting, half reclining, on a bough too small to support her weight, and her wispy garment blended so flawlessly with her leafy surroundings that if it had not been for her pixy-face and golden limbs, and her gentle shock of yellow hair, he would have sworn he was not really seeing her at all; and even as it was, he almost would have sworn, because her face could have been a newly-opened flower, her limbs graceful patterns of golden wheat showing through the foliage, and her hair a handful of sunlight.

He wiped his eyes again. But she refused to disappear. He waved to her, feeling like a fool. She made no movement. He waved to her again, feeling even more like a fool. He tongued off his transmitter. "Get out of there!" he shouted. She paid no attention.

"What's the holdup, Strong?" Wright's impatience was evident both in his tone of voice and in his dropping of the mock-formal "Mr."

Listen, Strong said to himself: You've climbed hundreds of trees and there wasn't a single dryad in any of them. Not one. There's no such thing as a dryad. There never was such a thing. There never will be. In this tree or any other tree. And there's no more dryad out there on that limb than there's champagne in your canteen!

He forced his eyes back to the underside of the limb towards which his cutter still pointed. He forced himself to squeeze the trigger. A slit appeared in the wood; he could almost feel pain. He tongued on his transmitter. "Up," he said. The limbline twanged as it tightened; the limb sighed. He deepened the undercut. "Up," he said again. This time the limb rose perceptibly. "Now keep a steady strain, Mr. Wright," he said, and brought the invisible beam of the cutter slowly up through the wood tissue, freezing the molecular structure inch by inch. The limb rose up and back, separating from the stud. By the time he

finished the cut, it was hanging parallel to the trunk and was ready to be lowered.

"Take her down, Mr. Wright!"

"Will do, Mr. Strong!"

He remained where he was while the limb passed, severing the larger subsidiary branches so that there would be less chance of its hanging up. When the final section came opposite him, he scrutinized it closely. But he saw no sign of a dryad.

He noticed that his hands were trembling again, and looking past them he saw something that made them tremble more: the cutter-beam had temporarily frozen the stub, but the sun was shining full upon it now, and blood was already beginning to ooze from the wound

No, not blood. Sap. Red sap. My God, what was the matter with him? All the while he kept his eyes on the limbline so that he could notify Wright in case the limb became hung up. But the limb proved to be co-operative: it slipped smoothly through the lower branches and after a while, he heard Wright say, "She's down, Mr. Strong. I'm raising the line again." And then, in a shocked voice: "Did you cut yourself, Tom?"

"No," Strong said. "That's sap you're looking at."

"Sap! I'll be damned!" Then: "Suhre says it looks pink to him. Blueskies, though, says it's a deep crimson. What does it look like to you, Strong?"

"It looks like blood," Strong said. He swung around to the other side of the trunk, out of sight of the stub, and waited for the end of the line to come within reach. While he waited, he gave the next limb down a good reconnaissance, but he saw no dryad lurking in any of its bowers. By the time he was set-up for the next cut, some of his confidence had returned and he had half forgotten about the "blood."

And then the second limb began its downward journey, and he saw the new "blood" oozing from the new wound, and he was sick all over again. But not quite so sick this time: he was becoming inured.

He severed and sent four more limbs down in quick succession. He was lucky on all of them: not a single one became hung up. You *needed* luck when you delimbed a tree from the top down rather than from the bottom up and for that reason the top-to-bottom method was never used except in rare cases such as the present one, where the nearest houses were so close that the utmost care had to be taken in removing the lower, longer limbs. As the utmost care could not be taken if overhead growth interfered with their being drawn straight back against the trunk, the easier bottom-to-top method was out for Strong.

He was able to remove eight limbs before it became necessary to move the winch to the opposite side of the tree. After the winch-shift he removed eight more. An excellent afternoon's work in any treeman's book.

At quitting time Wright made the traditional offer: "Want to come down for the night?"

Strong made the traditional refusal: "Like hell!"

"The custom of staying in a tree till it's finished shouldn't apply to a tree the size of this one," Wright said.

"Just the same, it does," Strong said. "What's for chow?"

"The mayor's sending you over a special plate. I'll send it up in the lift. In the meantime, climb in, and as soon as we change cables, you can ride down as far as your tree-tent."

"Will do."

"We're going to sleep at the hotel. I'll keep my eareceiver on in case you need anything."

The mayor didn't arrive for half an hour, but the plate he brought proved to be worth waiting for. Strong had spent the time setting up his tree-tent, and he ate, now, sitting cross-legged before it. The sun had set, and the hahaha birds were wearing scarlet patterns in the foliage and screaming a raucous farewell to the day.

The air grew noticeably colder, and as soon as he finished eating, he got out his heating unit and turned it on. The manufacturers of outdoor heating units took a camper's morale as well as his physical comfort into consideration. This one was shaped like a small campfire and by adjusting a dial you could make its artificial sticks glow bright yellow, deep orange, or cherry-red. Strong chose cherry-red, and the heat emanating so cheerfully from the tiny atomic batteries drove away some of his loneliness.

After a while the moons—Omicron Ceti 18 had three of them—began to rise, and their constantly changing patterns on leaf and limb and flower had a lulling effect. The tree, in its new mood, was lovely. The hahaha birds had settled down for the night, and as there were no singing insects in the vicinity, the quiet was absolute.

It grew rapidly colder. When it was so cold he could see his breath, he withdrew into his tent and pulled his "campfire" into the triangular doorway. He sat there cross-legged in cherry-red solitude. He was very tired. Beyond the fire, the limb stretched out in silver-patterned splendor, and silver-etched leaves hung immobile in the windless night ...

He saw her only in fragments at first: an argent length of leg, a shimmering softness of arm; the darkness where her tunic covered her body; the silvery blur of her face. Finally the fragments drew together, and she was there in all her thin pale loveliness. She walked out of the shadows and sat down on the opposite side of the fire. Her face was much clearer now than it had been those other times—enchanting in its fairy-smallness of features and bluebird-brightness of eyes.

For a long while she did not speak, nor did he, and they sat there silently on either side of the fire, the night all around them, silver and silent and black. And then he said:

You were out there on the limb, weren't you? . . . And you were in the bower, too, and leaning against the trunk.

In a way, she said. *In a way I was.*

And you live here in the tree

In a way, she said again. *In a way I do.* And then: *Why do Earthmen kill trees?*

He thought a moment. *For a variety of reasons, he said. If you're Blueskies, you kill them because killing them permits you to display one of the few heritages your race bequeathed you that the white man was unable to take away—your disdain for height. And yet all the while you're killing them, your Amerind soul writhes in self-hatred, because what you're doing to other lands is essentially the same as what the white man did to yours ... And if you're Suhre, you kill them because you were born with the soul of an ape, and killing them fulfills you the way painting fulfills an artist, the way creating fulfills a writer, the way composing fulfills a musician.*

And if you're you?

He discovered that he could not lie: *You kill them because you never grew up,* he said. *You kill them because you like to have ordinary men worship you and pat you on the back and buy you drinks. Because you like to have pretty girls turn around and look at you on the street. You kill them because shrewd outfits like Tree Killers, Inc. know your immaturity and the immaturity of the hundreds of others like you, and lure you by offering to provide you with a handsome green uniform, by sending you to treeschool and steeping you in false tradition, by retaining primitive methods of tree-removal because primitive methods make you seem almost like a demigod to someone watching from the ground, and almost like a man to yourself.*

Take us the Earthmen, she said, *the little Earthmen, that spoil the vineyard; for our vineyards are in blossom.*

You stole that from my mind, he said. *But you said it wrong. It's 'foxes,' not 'Earthmen.'*

Foxes have no frustrations. I said it right.

. . . Yes, he said, *you said it right.*

Now I must go. I must prepare for tomorrow. I'll be on every limb you cut. Every falling leaf will be my hand, every dying flower my face.

I'm sorry, he said.

I know, she said. *But the part of you that's sorry lives only in the night. It dies with every dawn.*

I'm tired, he said. *I'm terribly tired. I've got to sleep.*

Sleep then, little Earthman. By your little toy fire, in your little toy tent . . . Lie back, little Earthman, and cuddle up in your warm snug bed

Sleep . . .

The Second Day

The singing of hahaha birds awakened him, and when he crawled out of his tent, he saw them winging through arboreal archways and green corridors; through leaf-laced skylights, and foliaged windows pink with dawn.

He stood up on the limb, stretched his arms and filled his chest with the chill morning air. He tongued on his transmitter. "What's for breakfast, Mr. Wright?"

Wright's voice came back promptly: "Flapjacks, Mr. Strong. We're at table now, stashing them away like mad. But don't worry: the mayor's wife is whipping up a whole batch just for you ... Sleep good?"

"Not bad."

"Glad to hear it. You've got your work cut out for you today. Today you'll be getting some of the big ones. Line up any good dryads yet?"

"No. Forget the dryads and bring around the flapjacks, Mr. Wright."

"Will do, Mr. Strong."

After breakfast he broke camp and returned tent, blankets and heating unit to the lift. Then he rode the lift up to where he'd left off the preceding day. He had to lower both the saddle-rope and the limbline; the saddle rope because of its limited length, the limbline because its present crotch was, too high to permit maximum leverage. When he finished, he started out on the first limb of the day.

He paced off ninety feet and knelt and affixed the tongs. Then he told Wright to take up the limbline slack. Far below him he could see houses and backyards. At the edge of the square the timber-carriers were drawn up in a long line, ready to transport the new day's harvest to the mill.

When the line was taut, he told Wright to ease off, then he walked back to the trunk and got into delimbing position. He raised the cutter, pointed it. He touched the trigger.

I'll be on every limb

The dream rushed back around him and for a while he could not free himself. He looked out to the limb's end where the leaf-embroidered subsidiary branches twinkled in the sun and the wind. This time he was surprised when he did *not* see a dryad.

After a long while he brought his eyes back to where they belonged, and re-aimed the cutter. *For all men kill the thing they love,* he thought, and squeezed the trigger. *By all let this be heard.* "Take her up, Mr. Wright," he said.

When the limb was being lowered, he moved out of the way and severed the larger subsidiary branches as it passed. Most of them would hang up in the foliage below, but eventually they would end up on the ground as he worked his way down the tree. The end branches were too small to bother with and when they came opposite him, he turned away to inspect the next limb. Just before he did so, one of the soft leaves brushed his cheek.

It was like the touch of a woman's hand. He recoiled. He wiped his cheek furiously.

His fingers came away red.

It was some time before he realized that there had been blood—no, not blood, sap—on his fingers *before* he had wiped his cheek; but he was so shaken by then that the realization did little good, and the little good it did do was cancelled when he moved back to check the limbline and saw the "blood" welling out of the new stub.

For an insane moment all he could think of was the stump of a woman's arm.

Presently he became aware of a voice in his mind. "Tom," the voice said. "Tom! Are you all right, Tom?" It dawned on him that it was Wright's voice and that it wasn't in his mind at all, but emanating from his eareceiver.

"Yes?"

"I said, 'Are you all right?' "

"Yes . . . I'm all right."

"It took you long enough to answer! I wanted to tell you that the lumber mill superintendent just sent word that all the wood we've removed so far is half-rotten. He's afraid they won't be able to salvage any of it. So watch your step, and make sure your limbline crotches are solid."

"The tree looks healthy enough to me," Strong said.

"Maybe so, but don't trust it any further than you have to. It doesn't add up in more ways than one. I sent several samples of the sap to the village lab, and they say that in its crude state—that's before it goes through the photosynthesis process—it contains an unusually high concentration of nutrients, and in its elaborated stage—that's after it goes through the photosynthesis process—it consists of twice as many carbohydrates and twice as much oxygen as even a healthy thousand-foot tree needs to sustain itself. And not only that, they say that there's no pigment present that could possibly account for the sap's unusual color. So maybe we just imagine we're seeing `blood'."

"Or maybe the tree induces us to imagine we're seeing `blood,' " Strong said.

Wright laughed. "You've been consorting with too many dryads, Mr. Strong. Watch yourself now."

"Will do," Strong said, tonguing off.

He felt better. At least he wasn't the only one who was bothered by the "blood." The next cut did not bother him nearly so much, even though the stub "bled" profusely. He "burned" down to the next limb and started out upon it. Suddenly he felt something soft beneath his foot. Glancing down, he saw that he had stepped on a flower that had fallen either from the crest or from one of the limbs he had just removed. He stooped over and picked it up. It was crushed and its stem was broken, but even dying, it somehow managed to convey a poignant suggestion of a woman's face.

He attacked the tree, hoping that action would blunt his perceptions.

He worked furiously. Sap got on his hands and stained his clothing, but he forced himself to ignore it. He forced himself to ignore the tree-flowers, too, and the leaves that sometimes caressed his face. By noon he had cut his way down past the limb where he had spent the night, and above him nearly three hundred feet of stubbed trunk rose into the foliaged crest.

He made a few swift calculations: the crest represented about ninety feet; the distance from the ground to the first limb was two hundred and eighty-seven feet; he had de-limbed nearly three hundred feet. Roughly, then, he had about three hundred and fifty feet to go.

After a brief lunch of tree-rations, he went back to work. The sun was blistering now, and he missed the limbs and leaves that had shaded him yesterday. He had to keep moving his saddle-rope to lower and lower stub-crotches, but the length of the lower limbs made moving the limbline unnecessary. He was a little awed, despite himself, at their size. Even when you knew that the line you were using *couldn't* break, it was unnerving to watch so thin a cable pull a two- to three-hundred-foot limb from a horizontal to a vertical position and then support if while it was being lowered to the ground.

The tree "bled" more and more as his downward progress continued. The "blood" from the upper stubs kept dripping down into the lower branches, smearing limbs and leaves and making his work a nightmare of incarnadine fingers and red-splotched clothing. Several times he came close to giving up, but each time he reminded himself that if he did not finish the job, Suhre, who had drawn the second longest blade of grass, would; and somehow the thought of Suhre's insensitive fingers manipulating the cutter beam was even more unendurable than the "blood." So he persisted, and when the day was done, he had less than two hundred feet to go.

He pitched his tent on the topmost lower limb, some five hundred feet down from the crest, and asked Wright to send up water, soap and towels. When Wright complied, he stripped, soaped himself thoroughly, and rinsed the soap suds away. After drying himself, he washed out his clothes in the remaining water and hung them over the campfire. He felt better. When Wright sent up his supper—another special plate prepared by the mayor's wife—he ate cross-legged before his tent, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. By the time he finished, his clothes were dry, and he put them on. The stars came out.

He opened the thermo-cup of coffee that had accompanied his meal and smoked a cigarette between sips.

He wondered if she would come tonight.

The night grew chill. At length the first moon rose, and before long her two silvery sisters came too. Their argent radiance transformed the tree. The limb on which he sat seemed part of a huge configuration of limbs that formed the petals of a massive flower. And then he saw the stubbed and ugly trunk rising out

of the flower's center and the metaphorical illusion collapsed.

But he did not turn his eyes away. He stood up instead and faced the trunk and looked up at the cruel caricature he had created. Up, up he looked, to where the crest showed dark and lustrous against the sky, as lovely as a woman's hair ... There was a flower tucked in her hair, he noticed; a lonely flower glowing softly in the moonlight.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The flower was still there. It was an unusual flower, quite unlike the others: It bloomed just above the highest crotch—the crotch where he had first seen her blood.

The moonlight grew brighter. He located the limbline-crotch up there, and followed the limbline down with his eyes to where he had secured it after the day's operations. He reached out and touched it and it felt good to his fingers, and presently he began climbing in the moonlight.

Up, up he went, his biceps knotting, his laterals swelling against his shirt. Up into moonlight, into magic. The lower branches dwindled into a silvery mass beneath him. When he came to the saddle-rope crotch, he pulled the rope free and coiled and slung it over his shoulder. He felt no tiredness, knew no shortness of breath. It wasn't until he reached the limb line-crotch that his arms became weary and his breathing rapid. He coiled a lineman's loop and threw it through a stub-crotch some fifteen feet above his head. Eight more throws brought him up to the original saddle-rope crotch. His chest was tight, and his swollen muscles throbbed with pain. He released his spurs and started up the final section of the trunk. When he reached the highest crotch, he saw her sitting on an overhead bough, and the flower was her face.

She made room for him on the bough, and he sat down beside her, and far below them the tree spread out like a huge upended umbrella, the lights of the village twinkling like colored raindrops along its leaf-embroidered edges. She was thinner, he saw, and paler, and there was a sadness in her eyes.

You tried to kill me, didn't you? he said, when his breath came back. *You didn't think I could make it up here.*

I knew you could make it, she said. *Tomorrow is when I'll kill you. Not tonight.*

How?

I—I don't know.

Why should you want to kill me? There are other trees—if not here, then in some other land.

For me there is only one, she said.

We always make jokes about dryads, he said. *Myself and the others. It's funny though: it never occurred to any of us that if there was such a thing as a dryad, we'd be the most logical people in the galaxy for her to hate.*

You don't understand, she said.

But I do understand. I know how I'd feel if I had a home of my own and somebody came around and started tearing it down.

It isn't really like that at all, she said.

Why isn't it like that? The tree is your home, isn't it? Do you live in it all alone?

. . . Yes, she said. *I'm all alone.*

I'm all alone, too, he said.

Not now, she said. *You're not alone now.*

No. Not now.

Moonlight washed down through the foliage, spattering their shoulders with silver drops. The Great Wheat Sea was silver now, instead of gold, and a dead tree in the distance showed like the silver mast of a sunken ship, its dead branches empty booms where foliage sails had fluttered, in summer sunlight and warm winds, on spring mornings when the first breeze came up, on autumn afternoons before the frosts ...

What did a dryad do, he wondered, when her tree died? *She dies, too,* she answered, before he had a chance to ask.

But why?

You wouldn't understand.

He was silent. Then: *Last night I thought I dreamed you. After I awoke this morning, I was sure I dreamed you.*

You had to think you dreamed me, she said. *Tomorrow you'll think you dreamed me again.*

No, he said.

Yes, she said. *You'll think so because you have to think so. If you think otherwise, you won't be able to kill the tree. You won't be able to stand the sight of the 'blood.' You won't be able to accept yourself as sane.*

Perhaps you're right.

I know I'm right, she said. *Horribly right. Tomorrow you'll ask yourself how there can possibly be such a thing as a dryad, especially one that speaks English, especially one that quotes poetry out of my mind; especially one that has the power to entice me into climbing over five hundred feet, at the risk of my life, just so I can sit on a moonlit limb talking to her.*

Come to think of it, how can there be? he said.

There, you see? It isn't even morning yet, and already you're beginning not to believe. You're beginning to think again that I'm nothing more than a play of light on leaves and limbs; that I'm nothing more than a romantic image out of your loneliness.

There's a way to tell, he said, and reached out to touch her. But she eluded his hand and moved farther out on the bough. He followed, and felt the bough sag beneath him.

Please don't, she said. *Please don't.* She moved farther away, so pale and thin now that he could hardly see her against the starred darkness of the sky.

I knew you weren't real he said. *You couldn't have been real.*

She did not answer. He strained his eyes—and saw leaf and shadow and moonlight, and nothing more. He started moving back toward the trunk, and suddenly he felt the bough bend beneath him and heard the sound of fibers parting. The bough did not break all at once. Instead it bent in toward the tree and he was able, just before it snapped free, to throw both his arms around the trunk and to cling there long enough to sink his spurs.

For a long time he did not move. He listened to the diminishing swish of the bough's passage, heard the prolonged whisper of its journey through the foliage far below, the faint thud as it hit the ground.

At last he started down. The descent was unreal, seemed endless.

He crawled into the tent and pulled the campfire in after him. His tiredness buzzed in his brain like a sleepy swarm of bees. He wanted desperately to have done with the tree. To hell with tradition, he thought. He'd finish the delimbing, then Suhre could take over.

But he knew he was lying in his teeth; that he'd never let Suhre touch a cutter beam to so much as a single branch. Felling *this* tree was no job for an ape. Felling *this* tree was a job for a man.

Presently he fell asleep, thinking of the last limb.

The Third Day

It was the last limb that nearly got him.

Noon had arrived by the time he had severed the others, and he stopped to eat. He had hardly any appetite. The tree, limbless and graceful for the first two hundred and eighty-seven feet, stubbed and grotesque for the next six hundred and forty-five, green and symmetrical for the remaining ninety, made him sick just to look at it. Only the thought of Suhre climbing into those dying branches made it possible for him to go on. If the thing you loved had to be killed, then it were best for you yourself to do it; for if mercy could be a part of murder, certainly a lover was best qualified to bestow it.

The first limb had finally become the last limb, and extended almost five hundred incongruous feet over the square and the village. After he finished eating, he started walking out on it. When he had paced off three hundred and thirty feet, he affixed the tongs. They were the largest pair the company owned, and, while light, were extremely unwieldy. But he finally got them set up the way he wanted them, and he paused a moment to rest.

The limb was narrow enough at this point for him to see over its edge. He had quite an audience:

Wright and Suhre and Blueskies of course, and the timber-carrier drivers; and in addition there were hundreds of colonists, clustered in the streets beyond the roped off area, looking up with wondering faces. Somehow their presence failed to give him the gratifying thrill amateur audiences usually gave him. Instead he found himself wondering what they would do if he were to drop the limb straight down. It would be good for at least a score of houses, and if he were to jump-cut it, it would be good for half that many more.

Abruptly he realized his apostasy and tongued on his transmitter: "Take her up, Mr. Wright."

The tightened limbline lent the effect of a suspension bridge supported by a single cable. He walked back to the trunk, and when he reached it, got into delimbing position. He drew and aimed his cutter. As he squeezed the trigger, a flock of hahaha birds erupted from the foliage at the limb's end. "Take her up some more, Mr. Wright."

The limb groaned, rose slightly. The hahaha birds flew three times around the trunk, then soared up into the crest and out of sight. He cut again. It was the sunward side of the tree, and the sap began to ooze out of the slit and trickle down the trunk. He shuddered, cut some more. "Keep a steady strain, Mr. Wright." The limb rose, inch by inch, foot by foot. Awesomely, monstrously. Some of the others had been giants; this one dwarfed them. "A little faster, Mr. Wright. She's twisting my way."

The limb steadied, rose back, back toward the trunk. He stole a glance below. Suhre and Blueskies had finished cutting the last limb he had sent down into sections small enough for the carrier-winches to handle, and were watching him intently. Wright was standing by the tree-winch, his eyes focused on the rising limb. The square down there had a reddish cast. So had the three men's clothing.

Strong wiped his face on his stained shirtsleeve and returned his attention to the cut. He tried to concentrate on it. The limb was almost perpendicular now, and the critical moment had arrived. He wiped his face again. Lord, the sun was hot! And there was no shade to protect him. No shade whatsoever. Not a vestige, not a mote, not an iota of shade . . .

He wondered what price tree-shade would bring if there were an acute shortage of it throughout the galaxy. And how would you sell it if you had some to sell? By the cubic foot? By the temperature? By the quality?

Good morning, madam I'm in the tree-shade business. I deal in rare tree-shades of all kinds: in willow-shade, oak-shade, appletree-shade, maple-shade, to name just a few. Today I'm running a special on a most unusual kind of tree-shade newly imported from Omicron Ceti 18. It's deep, dark, cool and refreshing–just the thing to relax you after a day in the sun–and it's positively the last of its kind on the market. You may think you know your tree-shades, madam, but you have never known a tree-shade like this one. Cool winds have blown through it, birds have sung in it, dryads have frolicked in it the day long—

"Strong!"

He came out of it like a swimmer coming out of the depths of the sea. The limb was swinging darkly towards him, twisting free from the stub along the uneven line of his undercut. He could hear the loud ripping of wood tissue and the grinding sound of bark against bark. He saw the "blood."

He tried to leap out of the way, but his legs had turned to lead and all he could do was watch the relentless approach and wait till those tons and tons of solid fiber broke completely free and descended upon him and blended his blood with their own.

He closed his eyes. *Tomorrow is when I'll kill you,* she had said. *Not tonight.* He heard the heavy *thungg* as the limbline tautened beneath the full weight of the limb, and he felt the tree shudder. But he knew no crushing impact, no scraping of smashed body against the trunk. He knew nothing but the darkness of his closed eyelids and the feeling that time had ceased to pass.

"Strong! For God's sake get out of there!"

He opened his eyes then. The limb, at the last moment, had swung the opposite way. Now it was swinging back. Life returned to his legs, and he scrambled and clawed his way around the trunk. The tree was still shuddering and he was unable to brace himself in his saddle, but he managed to cling to the bark-prominences till the shock-waves died away. Then he worked his way back around the trunk to where the limb was swinging gently back and forth on the end of the limb-line.

"All right, Strong. That's all for you. I'm grounding you right now!"

Looking down, he saw Wright standing by the winch, hands on hips, gazing angrily up at him. Blueskies had taken over the winch-controls, and Suhre was buckling on his climber's belt. The limb was rapidly nearing the ground.

So I'm grounded, Strong thought.

He wondered why he didn't feel relieved. He'd wanted to be grounded, hadn't he?

He lay back in his saddle and looked up at his handiwork: at the macabre stubs and the disembodied crest. There was something beautiful about the crest, something unbearably beautiful. It was more gold than green, more like a woman's hair than limbs and leaves

"Did you hear me, Strong? I said you were grounded!"

Suddenly he thought of Suhre climbing up into those lovely golden tresses, defiling them with his brutal hands; raping them, destroying them. If it had been Blueskies he wouldn't have cared. But Suhre!

He lowered his eyes to the limbline-crotch. The last limb had reached the ground by now, and the limbline was no longer in motion. His eyes traced its silvery length down the trunk to where it hung several feet away, and he reached out and grasped it and climbed it to the top of the stub he had just created. He slipped out of his saddle, pulled the rope down, coiled and slung it over his shoulder

"I'm telling you for the last time, Strong!"

"To hell with you, Wright," Strong said. "This is *my* tree!"

He started up the limbline. Wright cursed him steadily for the first hundred feet, changed to a more conciliatory tone when he passed the halfway mark. Strong paid no attention. "All right, Tom," Wright said finally, "finish it then. But don't try to climb all the way to the crest. Use the lift."

"Shove the lift," Strong said.

He knew he was being unreasonable, but he didn't care. He wanted to climb; he wanted to use his strength; he wanted to hurt his body; he wanted to know pain. He began to know it some two hundred feet down from the limbline-crotch. By the time he reached the crotch he knew it well. But not as well as he wanted to know it, and, without pausing, he coiled a lineman's loop, threw it through an overhead stub-crotch, and continued his ascent. It took him three more throws to make the first crest-limb, and he pulled himself gratefully into leafsweet coolness. His muscles screamed and his lungs burned and his throat felt like caked mud.

When some of his strength returned, he drank sparingly from his canteen, then he lay quietly in the coolness, not thinking, not moving, not feeling. Vaguely he heard Wright's voice—"You're a damned fool, but you're a good treeman, Mr. Strong!" But he was too exhausted to answer.

Gradually the rest of his strength returned, and he stood up on the limb and smoked a cigarette. He looked up into the foliage, located his original saddle-rope crotch, and threw for it. From the crotch he began a systematic scrutiny of the crest. He didn't really expect to find her; but before he made the first topping he had to *know* that she wasn't there.

Hahaha birds eyed him with half-moon eyes. Tree-flowers bloomed in bowers. Sun-dappled leaves quivered in a little breeze.

He wanted to call out to her, but he didn't know her name. If she had a name. Funny he'd never thought to ask her. He stared at unusual twists of limbs, at unique patterns of leaves. He looked long at tree-flowers. If she was not here, she was nowhere

Unless, during the night, she had left the tree and hidden herself in one of the vacated houses. But he did not think she had. If she was real and not his fancy, she would never leave her tree; and if she wasn't real and was his fancy, she *couldn't* leave her tree.

Apparently she was neither: the crest was empty—empty of her flower-face, her leafy tunic, her wheat-hued length of leg and arm; her sunny hair. He sighed. He didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. He had dreaded finding her because if she'd been in the crest, he wouldn't have known what to do. But now he knew that he had dreaded *not* finding her, too.

"What are you doing up there, Mr. Strong? Saying good bye to your dryad?"

Startled, he looked down into the square. Wright and Suhre and Blueskies were a trio of almost indistinguishable specks. "Just looking her over, Mr. Wright," he said. "The crest, I mean. There's about

ninety feet of her, think you can handle that much all at once?"

"I'll take a chance, Mr. Strong. But I want the rest in fifty-foot sections, as long as the diameter of the trunk permits."

"Stand by then, Mr. Wright."

The crest, when it fell, seemed to bow goodbye to the sky. Hahaha birds erupted from it, streaked in a scarlet haze toward the horizon. It floated down to the ground like a green cloud, and the swish of its leaves was like the pattering of a thousand summer raindrops.

The tree shook like the shoulders of a woman sobbing.

"Well done, Mr. Strong," Wright said presently. "Now as nearly as I can estimate, you can get about eleven fifty-footers before the increasing diameter of the trunk rules them out. Then you'll have to take two one hundred-footers. If you drop them right, they shouldn't give us any trouble. That'll leave some two hundred feet for the base-cut, and you'll have to fell it so that the last fifty feet comes down in one of the village streets; we'll figure that out when you get down here. So in all, then, you've got fourteen more cuts to make. Think you can finish up today?"

Strong looked at his watch. "I doubt it, Mr. Wright."

"If you can, fine. If you can't, we've got all day tomorrow. Just don't take any chances, Mr. Strong."

The first fifty-footer nosed into the black soil of the square, paused a moment, then toppled on its side. The second followed in its wake—

And the third and the fourth—

It was funny, Strong thought, the way physical activity kept everything sane and in place. He found it hard to believe now that less than half an hour ago he had been looking for a dryad. That less than twenty-four hours ago he had been talking to one . . .

And the fifth and the sixth—

On the seventh, his pace began to slow. He was nearing the half-way mark and the diameter of the trunk had increased to nearly thirty feet. Snubbing himself to it was no longer possible, to get into topping position, he had to drive tree-pegs and run his improvised safety-belts through the slot in their end. But the slower pace gave Suhre and Blueskies a chance to cut the increasingly larger sections into suitable dimensions for the carriers. They had fallen behind; now they were beginning to catch up. The colonists, according to Wright, had given up hope of salvaging the wood and were piling it in a cleared area well away from the mill, preparatory to burning it.

Earlier in the afternoon a wind had sprung up. Now it began to die. The sun grew hotter; the tree "bled" more and more. Strong kept glancing down into the square. With its red-tinted grass and stub-gored sod, it had some of the aspects of a charnel house; but he was hungry for the feel of earth beneath his feet, and even "blood"-stained ground looked good to him.

He squinted repeatedly at the sun. He'd been in the tree nearly three days now, and did not relish spending another night in its branches. Or rather, in its stubs. But he had to admit after he finished the final fifty-footer, that he was going to have to. By then the sun was almost out of sight beyond the Great Wheat Sea, and he knew he couldn't possibly drop even the first hundred-footer before darkness fell.

The lowest stub upon which he now stood was roomy enough for twenty tree-tents. Wright cable-cast over it (the lift had been lowered earlier in the afternoon, and the winch-cable reeled in), and sent up his supplies and supper. Supper turned out to be another of the mayor's special plates. After setting up his tree-tent, Strong picked at the food indifferently; his appetite of yesterday was gone.

He was so tired that he didn't even wash–though Wright had sent up soap and water, too–and when he finished eating, he lay back on the coarse bark and watched the silver rising of the moons and the pale whispering into life of the stars. This time when she came, she tiptoed up and sat down beside him and gazed into his face with her blue sad eyes. The whiteness of her skin shocked him, and the thinness of her cheeks made him want to cry.

I looked for you this morning, he said. *I couldn't find you. Where do you go when you disappear?*

Nowhere, she said.

But you must go somewhere

You don't understand, she said.
No, he said. *I guess I don't. I guess I never will.*
Yes you will, she said. *Tomorrow you'll understand. Tomorrow will be too late.*
Tonight is too late. Yesterday was too late. It was too late before you even climbed into the tree.
Tell me, he said. *Are you a member of the race that built the village?*
In a way, she said.
How old are you?
I don't know, she said.
Did you help to build the village?
I built the village alone.
Now you're lying, he said.
I never lie, she said.
What happened to the original race?
They grew up. They ceased to be simple. They became complex and sophisticated, civilized. And as they became civilized, they began ridiculing the customs of the ancestors as being all ignorance and superstition, and they set up new customs. They made things of iron and bronze, and it took them less than one hundred years to destroy an ecological balance that not only had helped to keep them alive but had supplied them with a reason to live–a reason so strong that it was almost a life-force. When they discovered what they had done, they were horrified; but they made the discovery too late.
And so they died?
You've seen their villages.
Yes, I've seen their villages, he said. *And I've read in the Advance Team's report about the death-caves in the northern barrens into which they crawled with their children to die. But what about this village? They could have saved this one in the same way we are by removing the tree.*
She shook her head. *You still don't understand,* she said. *In order to receive, one must also give: that was the law they broke. Some of them broke it sooner than others, but eventually all of them broke it and had to pay the penalty.*
You're right, he said. *I don't understand.*
Tomorrow you will. Tomorrow everything will be clear.
Last night you tried to kill me, he said. *Why?*
I didn't try to kill you. You tried to kill yourself. Today was when I tried to kill you.
With the limb?
With the limb.
But how?
It doesn't matter. All that matters is, I didn't. Couldn't.
Where will you go tomorrow?
Why should you care where I go?
I do.
You couldn't possibly be in love with me
How do you know I couldn't be?
Because– Because
Because I don't think you're real?
You don't, do you? she said.
I don't know what to think, he said. Sometimes I think you are, some times I think you aren't.
I'm as real as you are, she said. *Though in a different way.*
He reached up abruptly, and touched her face. Her skin was soft and cold. As cold as moonlight, as soft as a flower. It wavered before his eyes; her whole body wavered. He sat up, turned towards her. She was light and shadow, leaf and flower; the scent of summer, the breath of night. He heard her voice. It was so faint he could hardly make out her words: *You shouldn't have done that. You should have*

accepted me for what I was. Now you've spoiled it. Now we must spend our last night together, alone.

So you weren't real after all, he said. *You were never real.* No answer.

But if you weren't real, I must have imagined you, he said. *And if I imagined you, how could you tell me things I didn't know?*

No answer.

He said: *You make what I'm doing seem like a crime. But it isn't a crime. When a tree becomes a menace to a community, it should be removed.*

No answer.

Just the same, I'd give anything if it didn't have to be this way, he said.

Silence.

Anything at all

The space beside him remained empty. He turned, finally, and crawled into his tent and drew his campfire in after him. His tiredness had turned him numb. He fumbled with his blankets with numb fingers, wrapped them around his numb body. He drew up his numb knees and hugged them with his numb arms.

"Anything at all," he murmured. "Anything at all . . ."

The Fourth Day

Sunlight seeping through the tent-wall awoke him. He kicked free of his blankets and crawled out into the morning. He saw no scarlet winging of hahaha birds; he heard no morning birdsong. The tree was silent in the sunlight. Empty. Dead.

No, not quite dead. A cluster of leaves and flowers grew green and white and lovely by the entrance of the tent. He could not beat to look at them.

He stood up on the stub and breathed deeply of the morning air. It was a gentle morning. Mist was rising from the Great Wheat Sea and a scattering of cirrus clouds hung in the bright blue sky like new-washed laundry. He walked to the end of the stub and looked down. Wright was oiling the winch. Suhre was cutting up the last fifty-footer. Blueskies was nowhere in sight.

"Why didn't you wake me, Mr. Wright?"

Wright looked up, located his face. "Thought you could stand a few extra winks, Mr. Strong."

"You thought correctly ... Where's the Amerind?"

"The buffalo caught up to him again. He's drowning them at the hotel bar."

A two-wheeled gyro-car pulled into the square and a plump man carrying a basket got out. The mayor, Strong thought. Breakfast. He waved, and the mayor waved back.

The contents of the basket proved to be ham and eggs and coffee. Strong ate hurriedly, then collapsed his tent, folded it, and sent it down on the lift along with his blankets and campfire. He got ready for the first cut. It would be considerably less than one hundred feet because the stub was centered on the three hundred foot mark. It came off perfectly, and he "burned" down in his saddle for the second. This one would have to go at least one hundred and twenty feet in order to leave the maximum of two hundred for the base-cut. He estimated the distance carefully.

After notching the section on the side Wright wanted the fall, he worked his way around toward the opposite side of the trunk, playing out his saddle-rope as he went. The bark-prominences and the fissures made the operation relatively simple, and he even paused now and then to look down into the square. The square was closer now than it had been for days, and it and the houses and the streets looked strange from his new perspective, as did the hordes of colonists watching from beyond the vacated area.

Wright informed him when he was directly opposite the center of the notch, and he drove a tree-peg. It took but a moment to transfer his saddle from the overhead stub-crotch to the peg-slot. He leaned back in the seat, braced his feet against one of the bark-prominences, and began the cut.

He began it gingerly. He was working with thousands of tons and the least miscalculation could bring

those thousands of tons down upon him. The trouble was, he had to cut above the tree-peg, and to do so he had to hold the cutter at arm's length above his head, at the same time keeping the line of the beam at right angles to the trunk.

It was a tricky operation and demanded good eyesight and excellent judgment. Ordinarily Strong possessed both, but today he was tired. He didn't have any idea quite how tired till he heard Wright shout.

It was the bark-prominences that had thrown him off. He realized that instantly. Instead of using the whole of the visible trunk in estimating his beam-angle, he had used only a limited area and the prominences in that area weren't true. However, the realization did him no good: the one hundred and twenty foot section was already toppling towards him, and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

It was like clinging to the face of a cliff and seeing the entire top section start falling outward in a slow but inevitable arc that would eventually enclose him between earthen jaws. The jaws were wood in this case, but the analogy was basically accurate: the fate of a gnat squeezed between two handfuls of earth differs but little from the fate of a gnat squeezed between two sticks.

He felt nothing; terror had not yet had time to take root. He watched wonderingly while the falling section blotted out the sun and turned the fissures between the bark-prominences into dark caves. He listened wonderingly to a voice that he was sure was emanating from his own brain, but which could not be emanating from his own brain because it was too sweet and poignant to have his mind as a source-place.

Into the fissure. Hurry!

He could not see her; he wasn't even sure it was her voice. But his body responded, squeezing itself into the nearest fissure, squirming back as far as it could go. Another second and the effort would have been wasted, for the moment his shoulder touched the backwall of the fissure, the upended butt of the section came thundering down tearing his tree-peg out by the steel roots; roaring, crashing, splintering, finally passing from sight.

The fissure filled with sunlight. Except for himself, it was empty.

Presently he heard the heavy *thud* as the section struck the ground. Another, more prolonged, *thud* followed, and he knew that it had landed head-on and then fallen lengthwise into the square. He waited almost hopefully for the sounds of splintering wood and breaking glass and the other sundry sounds houses make when a heavy object drops upon them, but he heard nothing.

The fissure had no floor. He was holding himself in position by pressing his knees against one wall while pressing his back against the other. Now he inched his way to the mouth and peered down into the square.

The section had landed on an angle, plowing a huge furrow in the earth, gouging out ancient burial artifacts and bits of human bones. Afterwards it had toppled back away from the nearer houses. Wright and Suhre were running up and down its length, looking for his mangled body. He heard himself laughing. He knew it was himself; not because he recognized his voice, but because there was no one else in the fissure. He laughed till his chest hurt and he could barely breathe, till there was no more hysteria left in him. Then, when his breath came back, he tongued on his transmitter and said: "Are you looking for me, Mr. Wright?"

Wright went rigid. He turned, looked up. Suhre followed suit. For a moment no one said a word. At last Wright raised his arm and wiped his face on his shirtsleeve. "All I got to say, Mr. Strong," he said, "is that you got a good dryad watching over you." And then: "Come down, man. Come down. I want to shake your hand!"

It got through to Strong finally that he *could* go down; that his work, except for the base-cut, was finished.

He pulled up his dangling tree-peg, re-drove it, and "burned" down the saddle-rope in fifty foot spurts. He cut the last spurt short, slipped out of the seat, and leaped the final few feet to the ground.

The sun was at meridian. He had been in the tree three and one half days.

Wright came up and shook his hand. So did Suhre. At length he became aware that he was shaking hands with a third party. The mayor had returned, bringing special plates for everybody this time plus a

set of collapsible tables and chairs.

"We'll never forget you, my boy," he was saying, his dew-lapped jaws jiggling. "We'll never forget you! I called a special meeting of the board last night on your behalf, and we voted unanimously to erect a statue of you in the square after the stump had been burned out. We're going to inscribe the words, 'The Man Who Saved Our Beloved Village' at its base. Quite a heroic inscription, don't you think? But it's no more than you deserve. However, today—tonight, I want to express my gratitude in a more tangible way. I want you—and your friends, too, of course—to be my guests at the hotel. Every thing will be on the house."

Suhre said: "I've been waiting to hear those words!" Wright said: "We'll be there." Strong didn't say anything. Finally the mayor released his hand, and the four of them sat down to dinner. Steaks brought all the way from the southern hemisphere, mushrooms imported from Omicron Ceti 14, tossed salad, green peas, fresh bread, apricot pie, coffee.

Strong forced the food down. He had no appetite. What he really wanted was a drink. Many drinks. But it was too soon. He still had one more cut to go. Then he could drink. Then he could help Blueskies drown the buffalo. On the house. "The Man Who Saved Our Beloved Village." Fill her up, bartender. Fill her up again. *I did not wear my scarlet cloak,* bartender. *For blood and wine are red,* bartender. *And blood and wine were on my hands when they found me with the dead, the poor dead woman whom I loved and murdered in her bed ...*

The mayor had an excellent appetite. His beloved village was safe now. Now he could sit by his fire and count his credits in peace. He wouldn't have to worry any more about the tree. Strong felt like the little Dutch boy who had thrust his hand in the hole in the dike and saved the burghers' houses from the sea.

He was glad when the meal was over, glad when Wright leaned back in his chair. "What do you say, Mr. Strong?" "I say let's get it over with, Mr. Wright."

They got up. The mayor took his table and chairs, climbed in his gyro-car and joined the other colonists beyond the danger area. The village sparkled in the sunlight. The streets looked as though they had just been scrubbed, and the houses with their elaborate decor, looked like gingerbread fresh from the oven. Strong stopped feeling like the little Dutch boy and started to feel like Jack the Giant-Killer. It was time to chop down the bean-stalk.

He took up his position at the base of the trunk and began the notch. Wright and Suhre stood just behind him. He cut the notch carefully so that the trunk could not fail to fall in the direction Wright had designated. He cut it deep and true, and when he finished, he knew the trunk would obey him. He walked around to its opposite side, Wright and Suhre following. No one spoke. It felt strange to be walking on solid ground. He kept expecting to feel the tug of the saddle-seat against his buttocks, the drag of the limb-line on his belt. The tips of his boots were red, he noticed. Red from the "blood"-drenched grass.

He took up his final position and raised his cutter. He squeezed the trigger. *The coward does it with a kiss,* he thought, *the treeman with a sword.* A slit appeared in the fissured trunk. Its edges began to redden. *The most modern of swords, manufactured in New America, Venus, and guaranteed never to become dull—*

Never to show mercy.

"Blood" ran down the bark, discoloring the grass. The invisible blade of the cutter swung back and forth and back and forth. The two hundred foot stub that once had been a tall proud tree shuddered. Slowly it began its passage to the ground.

There was the prolonged swishing sound of the descent; the thick and thunderous sound of the descent's end; the quick brief trembling of the earth ...

The surface of the massive stump grew bright red in the sunlight. Strong let the cutter fall to the ground. He circled the stump, stumbling now and then, till he came to the building-high length of the fallen stub. It had dropped just as he had wanted it to, its uppermost section landing neatly between two of the rows of houses. But he did not care about the houses any more. He had never cared about them really. He continued walking, gazing steadfastly at the ground. He found her presently, near the edge of the

square. He had known he would find her if he looked hard enough. She was sunlight and meadow flower, a transient pattern of grass. He could not see all of her—only her waist and breasts and arms and lovely dying face. The rest of her was crushed beneath the stub: her hips, her legs, her small, leaf-sandaled feet—"Forgive me," he said, and saw her smile and nod her head, and saw her die; and the grass come back, and the meadow flower, and the sun.

Epilogue

The man who had saved the beloved village placed his elbows on the bar that had once been an altar, in the hotel that had once been a church. "We've come to drown the buffalo, mayor," he said.

The mayor, who in honor of the occasion had taken over the duties of bartender, frowned.

"He means," Wright said, "that we'd like a round of drinks."

The mayor beamed. "May I recommend," he said, "our finest Martian bourbon, distilled from the choicest maize of the *Mare Erythraeum?"*

"Bring it forth from your cob-webbed crypt and we'll try it," Strong said.

"It's an excellent bourbon," Blueskies said, "but it won't drown buffalo. I've been on it all afternoon."

"You and your damned buffalo!" Suhre said.

The mayor set glasses before Wright and Strong and Suhre, and filled them from a golden bottle. "My glass is empty also," Blueskies said, and the mayor filled his, too.

The townfolk, out of deference, let the treemen have the bar to themselves. However, all the tables were occupied, and every so often one of the colonists would stand up and propose a toast, to Strong in particular, or to the treemen in general, and all of them—men and women alike—would stand up and cheer and empty their glasses.

"I wish they'd go home," Strong said. "I wish they'd leave me alone."

"They can't leave you alone," Wright said. "You're their new culture-god."

"Another bourbon, Mr. Strong?" the mayor asked.

"Many more," Strong said. "'To drug the memory of this insolence—'

"What insolence, Mr. Strong?"

"Yours for one, you little earthman, you. You fat contemptible little earthman!"

"You could see them coming out of the horizon beneath the cloud of the dust their hooves threw up," Blueskies said, "and they were beautiful in their shaggy majesty and as dark and magnificent as death."

"Take us the earthmen," Strong said, "the fat little earthmen, that spoil the vineyard; for our vineyards are in blossom—"

"Tom!" Wright said.

"May I take this opportunity to tender my resignation, Mr. Wright? I shall never murder another tree. I am finished with your putrescent profession!"

"Why, Tom?"

Strong did not answer. He looked down at his hands. Some of his bourbon had spilled on the bar and his fingers were wet and sticky. He raised his eyes to the backbar. The backbar was the rear wall of the reconverted native church and contained a number of exquisitely carved niches formerly used to display religious articles. The niches contained bottles of wine and whiskey now—all save one. That one contained a little doll.

Strong felt a throbbing in his temples. He pointed to the niche. "What—what kind of a doll is that, mayor?"

The mayor faced the backbar. "Oh, that. It's one of the carved figurines which the early natives used to keep over their hearths to protect their houses." He took the figurine out of the niche, carried it over to where Strong was standing, and set it on the bar. "Remarkable workmanship, don't you think, Mr. Strong? . . . Mr. Strong?"

Strong was staring at the figurine—at its graceful arms and long slim legs; at its small breasts and slender throat; at its pixy-face and yellow hair; at the green garment of delicately carved leaves adorning it.

"The correct term is 'fetish,' I believe," the mayor went on. "It was made in the image of their principal goddess. From the little we know of them, it appears that the early natives believed in her so fanatically that some of them even claimed to have seen her."

"In the tree?"

"Sometimes."

Strong reached out and touched the figurine. He picked it up tenderly. Its base was wet from the liquor he had spilled on the bar. "Then—then she must have been the Goddess of the Tree."

"Oh, no, Mr. Strong. She was the Goddess of the Hearth. The Home. The Advance Team was wrong in assuming that the trees were religious symbols. We've lived here long enough to understand how the natives really felt. It was their houses that they worshipped, not the trees."

"Goddess of the Hearth?" Strong said. "The Home? ... Then what was she doing in the tree?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Strong?"

"In the tree. I saw her in the tree."

"You're joking, Mr. Strong!"

"The hell I'm joking! She *was* the tree!" Strong brought his fist down on the bar as hard as he could. "She *was* the tree, and I killed her!"

"Get hold of yourself, Tom," Wright said. "Everybody's staring at you."

"I killed her inch by inch, foot by foot. I cut her down arm by arm, leg by leg. I *murdered* her!" Strong paused. Something was wrong. Something that should have happened had failed to happen. Then he saw the mayor staring at his fist, and he realized what the wrongness was.

When his fist had struck the bar, he should have felt pain. He had not. He saw why: his fist had not rebounded from the wood—it had sunk into the wood. It was as though the wood were rotten.

He raised his fist slowly. A decayed smell arose from the ragged dent it had made. The wood *was* rotten.

Goddess of the Hearth. The Home. The Village.

He swung away from the bar and made his way across the table-crowded floor to the street-wall. He threw his fist as hard as he could at the polished, exquisitely grained wood. His fist went through the wall.

He gripped the lower edge of the hole he had made, and pulled. A whole section of the wall broke free, fell to the floor. The stench of decay filled the room.

The colonists were watching with horrified eyes. Strong faced them. "Your whole hotel is rotting away," he said. "Your whole goddam village!"

He began to laugh. Wright came over and slapped his face. "Snap out of it, Tom!"

His laughter died. He took a deep breath, expelled it. "But don't you see it, Wright? The tree? The village? What does a species of tree capable of growing to that size need to perpetuate its growth and to maintain itself after it has attained its growth? Nourishment. Tons and tons of nourishment. And what kind of soil! Soil enriched by the wastes and the dead bodies, and irrigated by the artificial lakes and reservoirs that only a large community of human beings can provide.

"So what does such species of tree do? Over a period of centuries, maybe even millenia, it learns how to lure human beings to its side. How? By growing houses. That's right. By growing houses right out of its roots, lovely houses that human beings can't resist living in. You see it now, don't you, Wright? You see now, don't you, why the crude sap carried more nutrients than the tree needed, why the elaborated sap was so rich in oxygen and carbohydrates. The tree was trying to sustain more than just itself; it was trying to sustain the village, too. But it couldn't any longer—thanks to the eternal selfishness and the eternal stupidity of man."

Wright looked stunned. Strong took his arm and they walked back to the bar together. The faces of the colonists were like gray clay. The mayor was still staring at the ragged dent in the bar. "Aren't you going to buy the man who saved your beloved village another drink?" Strong asked.

The mayor did not move.

Wright said: "The ancients must have known about the ecological balance—and converted their knowledge to superstition. And it was the superstition, not the knowledge, that got handed down from

generation to generation. When the race matured, they did the same thing all races do when they grow up too fast: they completely disregarded superstition. And when they eventually learned how to use metals, they built sewage disposal systems and incinerators and crematories. They spurned whatever systems the trees had provided and they turned the ancient burial grounds at the trees' bases into community squares. They upset the ecological balance."

Strong said: "Without knowing it. And when they finally found out, it was too late to restore it. The trees had already begun to die, and when the first tree *did* die and the first village started to rot away, they were appalled. Probably the love of their houses had been inbred in them so strongly that without their houses they were lost. And apparently they couldn't even bear to see their houses die. That's why they migrated to the northern barrens. That's why they either starved or froze to death in the death-caves or committed mass-suicide ..."

Blueskies said: "Fifty million of them there were, the great, shaggy, magnificent beasts, dwelling on the fertile plains where now the Great North American Desert lies. And the grass that sustained them was green, and they returned the grass to the earth in their dung, and the grass grew green again. Fifty million! And when the white men finished the slaughter, five hundred remained."

Wright said: "This must have been one of the last villages to go 'modern.' Even so, the tree must have been dying for years before the colonists came. That's why the village is rotting away so fast now."

Strong said: "The tree's death accelerated the deterioration-process. There probably won't be a house standing in another month . . . But the tree might have lived another hundred years if they hadn't been so anxious to preserve their damned real estate. It takes a long time for a tree the size of that one to die ... And the color of the sap—I think I understand that now, too. Our consciences provided the pigment ... In a way, though, I think she ... I think it wanted to die."

Wright said: "The colonists will still exploit the land. But they'll have to live in mud huts while they're doing it." Strong said: "Perhaps I performed an act of mercy—" Suhre said: "What're you two talking about?"

Blueskies said: "Fifty million of them. *Fifty Million!"*